

MODERN

For anyone who falls in love everyday Amy Winehouse, Soul Princess

When you look at photos of Amy Winehouse, the new wonder voice from Great Britain you see a petite 24-year old woman with backcombed black hair and a mass of tattoos. Photos of her in the press often reveal the singer in a pretty awful state. There is certainly enough about Ms. Winehouse to make the headlines: Alcohol, drugs, punch-ups, insults, cancelled concerts. When her management company wanted to send her to rehab, she simply fired it – and wrote a song about it: “Rehab”. She prefers to undergo therapy her way. In fact she prefers to do everything her way.

“I try to be a good girl most of the time. It takes a certain amount of effort.”

Amy, who founded an amateur rap duo called “Sweet ’n’ Sour” (she was the “sour” part) at the age of 10, was given her first guitar when she was 13. To begin with at home in south London she grew up surrounded by jazz. Some of her uncles on her mother’s side of the family are professional jazz musicians, her grandmother on her father’s side was once in a relationship with the British jazz legend Ronnie Scott. At home she immersed herself in the sound of the great singers in her father’s (a taxi driver) and her mother’s (a chemist) record collection: Dinah Washington, Ella Fitzgerald, Frank Sinatra, as well as Carole King and James Taylor, to name just a few. As a teenager she was drawn to acts such as TLC, Salt-N-Pepa, and other American R&B and hip-hop artists of the time.

“I’ve loved hip-hop ever since I was 14. Of course something like that leaves its mark. Anyway, Ghostface Killah is on my album – when he asked I almost freaked.”

At the age of 16 she was working as a professional singer, a friend having given a record company a demo tape of her. The potential in her unique voice was very quickly spotted, a voice that moves elegantly between the past and the present. She is often compared with artists such as Billie Holiday and Sarah Vaughan, Macy Gray and Lauryn Hill. Two years later she had already landed a record contract. In 2003 her debut album “Frank” went Platinum. In early 2007 the celebrated follow-up “Back to Black” was high up in all the charts. And in February she was voted Best British Artist of the Year at this year’s Brit Awards.

“I’m honest. I don’t lead a perfect life. I drink too much, I don’t eat enough, I have my weird phases. But I don’t pretend to anyone.”

At the age of 12 she went to the Sylvia Young Theatre School – and was expelled after a year. The reason: She could not adapt. Adapting, conforming, not taking risks, dutifully using every type of cliché, that is how chart topers normally go about things. Not Amy.

Not pretending to anyone, being, being authentic, honest. Can there be any type of music that lends itself better than Soul? And Amy Winehouse builds on precisely this on her current album “Back to Black”. For her, Soul is the most honest music in the world, because it has something for everyone. It is about everyday things, she says.

“I’m most productive when I’m in love or have just fallen out of love and am trying to sort my life out again. Everything I have ever written is about my life, all my songs are autobiographical.”

She has written almost all the songs herself. She went into the studio with her acoustic guitar and just wrote them. That was something new for her, having previously only ever composed at home, yet the songs just kept on coming.

“I like writing about the relationship between two people. I like bittersweet songs.”

So bittersweet symphonies. Hardly surprising if you think about how much she adored the 60s girl groups The Shangri-Las and The Ronettes. Their songs were often also about dramatic love affairs that were bound to fail, not unlike the feelings Amy sings about with astonishing maturity. An expert in heartache at 24?

“I was always interested in feelings. Because I know just how much a song can help me when I am down. I just have to write and perform a song, and all these awful feelings just disappear. I always know myself best of all when I’ve just written a song.”

Putting her feelings into songs is something Amy Winehouse does perfectly. “Back to Black” is one of those albums that are accomplished through and through. Despite hints of retro in the sound catchy melodies are given current, finely crafted texts that use the language of hip-hop, are direct and witty, while also going straight to the heart. In doing so the controversial songwriter always gets the mood of the times just right. Going back to black certainly proved worthwhile.

“If anybody else had made these records I would have been damn jealous.”

Aretha Franklin is the undisputed “Queen of Soul”. But who knows, perhaps a Princess is growing up here that could prove to be a worthy successor.

Matthias Westerweller



Photography: Bryan Adams