

“Enjoy all the sounds in the world”

At last, soul prodigy Joss Stone has grown up to match the size of her voice. When her debut album “The Soul Sessions” hit the Top 40 album charts in seven major markets, Joscelyn Eve Stoker aka Joss Stone was just sixteen years old. While we have gotten used to teenage stardom in Hollywood films, on television and in the fast-paced world of Top 40 radio in its 21st century incarnation, this young singer took to the stage to make a big and lasting impact. Ironically, she was first discovered – at age fourteen – as a candidate in the BBC talent show “Stars For A Night”. Her song? Aretha Franklin’s “(You Make Me Feel) Like A Natural Woman”.

Aretha Franklin remains the one and only duet partner of her dreams, although it was Donna Summer’s “On The Radio”, which convinced record exec Steve Greenberg to sign Joss Stone on the spot. “The Soul Sessions” was merely a warm-up, a bunch of cover versions recorded with an awesome and incredibly young singer and a team of ace musicians in just four days. This collection was released as a prequel to a great career about which none of the people involved ever seems to have had any doubt or second thoughts. Joss came, sang and conquered... Her ‘real’ debut album, “MIND, BODY and SOUL”, with 11 of 14 songs co-written by Ms Stone, followed within less than a year’s time and went straight to Number One in the British charts. And so the story goes on and on...

Or does it? The soul singer, new and improved 2007 model, is currently touting her latest work, “Introducing Joss Stone”, which could very well be meant to be her third debut album – and not only because of its somewhat incongruous title. What “introducing” means, in her own words, is that “I grew up. I was 14 and now I’m almost 20”. She has outgrown her mom’s record collection, and her self-confidence has dramatically improved. “Joss The Boss” is just one of the more recent and more obvious headlines.

The sight and sounds of “Joss The Boss”

Visually, the former Hippie look was replaced by a more spectacular, almost diva-like appearance, although the peace sign is still omnipresent on the album art and part of a body painting which graces the singer’s body on some photos. Sonically though, there is nothing old-fashioned on the album produced by Raphael Saadiq, who has been called the intelligent listeners’ R&B producer. Joss was clearly impressed and delighted by the man who had previously worked with Mary J. Blige, The Roots, Macy Gray and Snoop Dogg, to name but a few. “I met Raphael in the studio. He’s very, very talented. It was quite refreshing to work with someone who actually listened and helped me to get out what I needed musically.” Together, Saadiq and Stone managed to re-create what Saadiq attempted on his own solo album Instant Vintage, a rich musical sound that is shiny and smooth on the surface, state of the art in technical terms and yet reminiscent of so many other

“vintage” sounds, in its soulful essence and crackling resonance – from Gospel to Motown, from Northern Soul to early eighties Hip Hop. Even traces of Burt Bacharach, the greatest lounge lizard of all, can be heard from a distance. So yes, “change is a positive thing”, as Joss Stone emphasizes, and her album is very much about “change”. And yet – as UK football legend Vinnie Jones says in the album’s bold spoken word intro – “the players change, but the song remains the same”.

Poetry with a beat

Joss Stone herself couldn’t be happier with the sound of Joss Stone 2.0: “This album was much less difficult because I loved it; I loved every single note that was played, so it was easy.” What is truly striking is the way in which this musical microcosm indeed sounds like an “easy” contemporary blend of styles which have not always mixed so well. The omnipresence of Hip Hop beats, for example, is never annoying, and the idiosyncrasies of Stone’s singing voice – husky, throaty and sometimes almost too ‘acrobatic’ – hardly ever sound mannered within the confines of Raphael Saadiq’s beat boutique.

The song “Tell me ‘bout it” (and the videoclip that promotes it) is heavily inspired by the aesthetics of the seminal documentary film “Wild Style”, which introduced Hip Hop culture to the uninitiated youth of 1983, four years before our heroine was born. The soulstress is inspired but unfazed by the ghosts of the past. According to Stone, “Hip-hop is another form of art. It’s a much more felt form of poetry with a beat. It’s brilliant. I love it.”

Ultimately, the educated bystander cannot help but conclude that Joss Stone has an amazingly grown-up taste and the good sense of pursuing the right people for the right reasons: In order to coax her idol Lauryn Hill (The Fugees) into contributing a few rhymes to her record, Stone reportedly called Hill’s mother almost daily for over a month and ultimately succeeded. Small wonder that the song “Music”, result of this cooperative effort, is, according to Stone, “close to my heart on a beautiful level.” Another strong piece on the album is as important to her, but for different reasons: “‘What Were We Thinking’ is close to my heart on a personal level; not so beautiful, but painful.” There is another topic that will trigger a conscious and conscientious response from the jaunty superstar, and that involves the sense and the culture of hearing: “Being able to hear means that you can enjoy all the sounds of the world... the birds in the trees, to the waves of the ocean, to the beautiful music that people make.” The thought of losing this most important “tool” in a musician’s box can trigger primal fears in any music professional: “I don’t want to imagine it. I’d be lost.” That is why Joss Stone is lending her voice to the Hear the World initiative by Phonak. The initiative raises awareness for the topic of hearing and hearing loss.

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Photography: Bryan Adams

