

(interview)

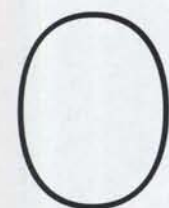
amy winehouse

A Mod Classic Steeped in the Blues

The Divine Miss Sassy of Modern Soul Goes "Back to Black."

By **Shane Kite**





One thing is clear: There

is no filter on Amy Winehouse. This talented, jazz-trained, guitar-playing singer-songwriter boils with emotions. Unguarded and frank onstage and off, Winehouse ranges from good-humored to dark, nervous to confident, fierce to fragile.

That volatile combo of sensitivity and uncensored angst has fed her art well, with two critically acclaimed albums as pleasing results. Her latest, the soulful, 1960s girl-group inspired *Back to Black*, scheduled for release in the U.S. in March, follows her more jazz-influenced 2003 debut, *Frank*, both of which went platinum in the U.K.

They solidified Winehouse's reputation as an artist with a voice and musical sensibilities beyond her years. Pegged to such timeless muses as Sarah Vaughan, Dinah Washington and Minnie Riperton, her sound is less "Nu soul" than "true soul," with Winehouse's North London moxie for spice.

She's often described, pretty accurately, as a winsome mix of Billy Holiday and Macy Gray, a comparison Winehouse detests.

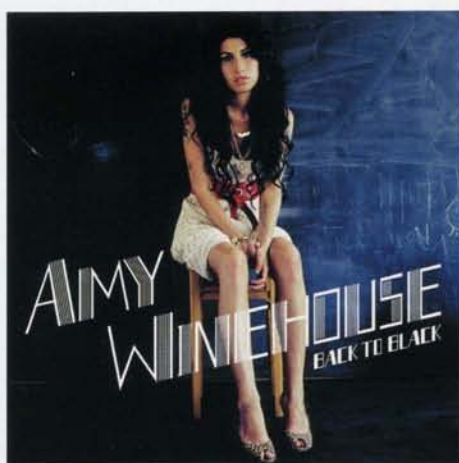
But her ability to merge the classic with the new—laying down jazz, blues and soul riffs as foundations for her intimately explicit, hip-hop influenced confessionals—has gained her worldwide attention, at least as much as her well-documented bouts with the bottle, which Winehouse describes on "Rehab," the first single off *Back to Black*.

She details her inability to attend a clean-up clinic to curtail her drinking habits, as advised by management, finding it loathsomely unsuitable to her style, time or common sense—"I ain't got 70 days... there's nothing you can teach me I can't learn from Mr. Hathaway..." That's Donny Hathaway. She walked out of an initial counseling session, fired her advisors, and wrote a hit song instead.

The Motown rhythm and Stax-style horns are as liberating as her lyrics. Picking her moments well, she bends notes, bounces above and weaves through a groove, channeling crescendos into warm vibrato finishes. To hear phrasing of such maturity, edge and soul emanate from this tiny, raven-haired, white Jewish Brit, all of 23 years old, is seductive, like a gin-soaked lingering nighttime: Spin these discs to draw down the evening and you spend a night with a lady who knows how to sing the blues.

Her fondness for the bottle has kept her top of mind in the British tabloids for much of the past year. Like her music, her drunken exploits show range, including Winehouse's heckling of U2 frontman Bono at the Q music awards in October. This, after a gig weeks prior when she punched a female fan who Winehouse said had disparaged her. One gets an inkling, though, the girl just wants to have fun.

When I meet her in the Manhattan offices of Universal, her label, just days after her first U.S. gig at Joe's Pub in New York, her softer side is at the fore, overshadowing the hellraising image. There's



a noticeable vulnerability about her, one she obviously doesn't choose—or is unable—to hide.

She greets me looking cozy, in a pair of jeans; black t-shirt cut low at the neck and short at the sleeves. She seems tiny without the heels and black evening dress of the previous night's gig, but for the giant bouffant of flaxen indigo bunched atop her head.

I notice the topless pin-up girl tattooed on her left arm, the pink dancing slippers on her feet—it's the beguiling aesthetic charm of a woman with a restless heart, the type that makes the soul-seeking pine and the rest jealous.

She apologizes for a stutter she's inexplicably picked up in recent months. "It'll go away in about five minutes. This happens whenever I first meet people... It's really fucking annoying, right when I really want to say something."

Winehouse is famished from the previous night's boozing. "Do you want fried or grilled?" a male assistant, shadowed by a receptionist asks her.

"I think the fried more. I've got a hangover. So fried food is good, innit?" The receptionist, she tells me, is from the same English town as her boyfriend Alex, a chef. "It's really crazy. Really cool actually."

Such childlike qualities come through onstage as well. During the gig, she struggled to explain the unvanquished ache that can accumulate from singing autobiographical songs that trigger painful memories still raw, to an audience that variously included Jay-Z, Mos Def and Mark Ronson—her co-producer on *Back to Black*, along with Nas collaborator Salaam Remi. Giving up the banter, she grabbed the Amaretto sour she had resting at an audience member's table in front, concluding in her chin-up but soft-spoken English lilt: "But we're alright."

As she told me later: "Basically I have to write songs about something bad that's happened to me, so I can look back and not think, 'Fucking hell. That was really horrible.' Make something good out of something bad, you know?"

As we spoke, "Back to Black" had just hit #1 on the U.K. album charts. Upon her return to London days later, Winehouse would receive a South

Bank Show award for best pop album, beating fellow Brit wunderkinds the Arctic Monkeys and a post-Pulp Jarvis Cocker. Favored to win a coveted Brit award for either U.K.'s best album or as best female artist, the recognition of her talent is a done deal across the pond. Scheduled to return stateside for a tour in March, conquering America is certainly her label's plan.

"I love that. It's like I'm Julius Caesar"—she puts her hand to her forehead and looks out into the distance—"Aho! I see land,... it's mine! No, no, no."

She smiles when I mention the street corner sass of "Sophisticated Boom-Boom," a 1965 B-side from the Shangri-Las—the harmonizing girl-group from Queens who influenced the making of *Back to Black*.

Winehouse filters the doo-wop sugar with minor-key resolves and her liberated Camden-girl lyrics—add the tempered Wall of Sound production and the result is a darker, richer, bluesier soul cocktail than that of "Frank." She chocks up the difference to chemistry.

"When I made my first album I was smoking a lot of weed and listening to a lot of hip-hop and I had this mentality of 'Fuck you! I don't need you.' When I wrote *Back to Black* I was drinking more, listening to a lot of sixties stuff, and I fell in love. It's more like 'I'll fucking die for you,... I'll rip my heart out and give it to you on a plate.' All that shit."

She's upfront about her drinking, saying the press hasn't exaggerated much: "I have a real problem with alcohol, I drink every night."

When asked if making art demands its maker be in pain, she says: "No. But it depends on what kind of artist you want to be. My boyfriend says I'm addicted to fucking heartbreak."

Even with the new love, the success?

"You know you can be lonely in a room full of fucking people."

Those blues alight on *Back to Black*. Hip-hop looms large—Winehouse wrote "Me and Mr. Jones" about Nas (ne Nasir Jones), the New York MC; she berates her boyfriend on the track about making her miss a Slick Rick gig. Brit ska creeps in. Dancehall horns reference The Specials and buttress the beat on "Just Friends."

Among new sounds she cites The Zutons, a London-based noise-blues band from Liverpool she digs. But Dinah, Minnie and Sarah V. burn at her core.

"I'm like a little old Jewish man in a young girl's body. I'm serious. A lot of stuff, I'm like, 'Is that cool? Do kids like it? Cool, it must be good.' You know, 'I don't know, is he good? Oh, okay.' I don't really listen to new stuff."

A genuine uniqueness seems the result. "I haven't got any kind of gameplan. That's what they do," Winehouse says, pointing out into the label's offices. "I just fucking play the guitar and write and sing these songs. You can't write what people would like to hear anyway. I write what I would like to sing and play, what I would like to put out as songs. Because they're from me."

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