

Joss Stone: It's my life and I'm taking charge

by *George_Varga*

Joss Stone turned 20 last month, but her position as one of the most popular female singers in the world has been a matter of record since 2003.

That's when her acclaimed debut album, released when she was barely 16 and mostly recorded when she was just 14, made this precociously gifted singer an international phenomenon. It also made her an unlikely champion of the vintage soul and funk music her parents often listened to at home while she was growing up.

Joss Stone Blessed with a vibrant, old-school voice that made her sound a lot more like Aretha Franklin in the 1960s than a gangly, blond-haired teenager from the pastoral countryside of Devon, England, Stone ignited almost instantly. Her first two albums, 2003's retro-fueled "The Soul Sessions" and 2004's somewhat more contemporary "Mind, Body & Soul," sold 7.5 million copies worldwide.

A young emulator, not an innovator, she isn't nearly as great as Franklin. Then again, who is? But Stone sounded remarkably more mature and experienced than her age. And she wisely refrained from the bludgeoning vocal pyrotechnics too many young singers sadly now favor in this era of "American Idol" histrionics.

"I don't show off," Stone affirmed from a recent tour stop in Los Angeles. "It's very self-indulgent if you do."

In 2005, she succeeded "Sex in the City" star Sarah Jessica Parker as the celebrity spokeswoman for the Gap, although Stone's behind was apparently replaced in Gap ads by a more, um, ample bottom. "That's not my bum, I promise," the photogenic singer said at the time. "Apparently, I need a J.Lo bum."

Her third album, "Introducing Joss Stone," which features cameos by Lauryn Hill and rapper Common, debuted in late March at No. 2 on the national Billboard charts. That's the highest debut by any female artist from the United Kingdom since Billboard began using Nielsen SoundScan in 1992 to track album sales. Now ranked at No. 16, it was certified gold on May 3 for reaching the 500,000 sales mark.

It is the first of her albums for which she wrote or co-wrote all of the songs. It's also the first to reflect her musical vision, not that of her producers or record company, which preferred to have her focus on vintage hits by Franklin, the Isley Brothers, Joe Simon and veteran R&B vocalist Betty Wright (who co-produced and sang on "The Soul Sessions").

"I was allowed to comment, but I wasn't allowed to change anything," Stone recalled of her debut album. "It wasn't like I was telling them what to do. It was other way around, which was fine with me, because I was 15.

"So I sat down, shut up, and listened, although I always voiced my opinions. This time I can like my album. Because it's my opinion that counts. And if anybody questions me, they can (expletive) off, because it's my life."

That it is. And her new album's title, "Introducing Joss Stone," was chosen specifically to reflect the artistic change and independence she says she has finally achieved.

"It's so obvious how I've moved on and grown, and that I'm not sticking to one thing, which is boring to me," said Stone, who makes her overdue area debut Saturday at Viejas Concerts in the Park in Alpine.

"I'll go around to all these different countries and I get all these funny questions. The worst one is: 'So, Joss, why did you change?' And I'll be like: 'What the (expletive) did you expect me to do?' I was 15 when I started, and now I'm 20. If I didn't change there'd be something physically wrong with me and I'd have to go to the hospital."

A seasoned performer, Stone has shared concert stages with everyone from James Brown and the Rolling Stones to Patti Labelle and John Mayer. On July 1, she'll appear at London's massive Wembley Stadium as part of the "Concert for Diana" tribute, along with Elton John, Kanye West, Bryan Ferry, Duran Duran, Pharell Williams and at least 10 other top artists.

Stone, who performed to an audience of 200,000 as part of 2005's Live 8 concert in London's Hyde Park, is no stranger to big gigs. But she acknowledges that a lot has changed since her first tour four years ago.

"To be honest, in the beginning - when I was 16 and first put my band together - I was very shy," said said. "My musical director at the time said: 'You have to lead us.' And, at that age, I was like: 'No, I can't! I don't know how to do that. How about you lead the band for a while, and I'll learn?'"

"So that's what happened - he led and I learned. Now it's flipped and I know how to show them and have more confidence how to do it. I'm the first person to say 'I don't know how to do that.' But I have a very clear vision in my head."

Stone, who is the proud owner of a poodle named Dusty Springfield, laughed when asked how much she improvises during her concerts.

"Oh, my god! Every single day I sing differently," she said. "Not once have I ever sung it the same, because I can't remember it. But that's not the point, is it? I'm not a really choreographed person, because it doesn't suit me to be that way."

"When I get on stage I do whatever I feel like. We have a set list, but then - however my voice is playing - we'll change it. I kind of make it up as we go along. I love to write and I love to sing. I think I have to work mostly on musically understanding it. Because I can sing to somebody what I want to hear on the bass or keyboards, but I can't tell them what the notes are and I'd really love to do that. That's why I love my band. They understand me."

Stone has discovered one unexpected drawback to her success, despite the fact that she's young, rich and beautiful - or, perhaps, because she is young, rich and beautiful - men tend to be intimidated by her.

"They are intimidated, but that is an inner issue with them and it is kind of irritating," said Stone, who is nearly 6 feet tall without heels.

"At the end of the day, I'm a normal girl who is making a name for herself. And that's what it is: I'm making some noise. A lot of people happen to like it, and that's nice and I love it. But how does that make me scary? I don't know why it does. It wouldn't scare me, but that's because this is my life and I've never been in another position. This has been my first and only job since I was 14, so I'm a very lucky girl.

"But if guys are intimidated by me, well (expletive) it!"

Copley News Service

Two for the CD player

Joss Stone was discovered at 14 after performing Donna Summer's 1980 hit "On the Radio" on the BBC-TV talent show "Junior Star for a Night" in her native England. Today, she counts Lauryn Hill, D'Angelo and India.Arie among her favorites. But her biggest musical influences, which date back to the 1960s, include Aretha Franklin, Otis Redding and Dusty Springfield.

Here's a look at two of her favorite artists and albums, which Stone (real name: Joscelyn Stoker) suggests fans of her music should get to find out about more her musical roots. "I'd get the greatest hits albums because I was too young to know the 'album-albums' to get," she recalled.

- Artist: ARETHA FRANKLIN

- Suggested album: "Respect: The Very Best of Aretha Franklin" (Atlantic)

- Download these: "Respect," "Chain of Fools," "I Never Loved a Man (the Way I Love You.)"

- The lowdown: Features 43 songs spanning four decades by the fabled Queen of Soul. Nearly every cut sounds as soulful today as it did back in the day. Franklin is now auditioning cast members for a potential Broadway musical about her life.

- Stone: "I was 10 when I got this. It has 'Ain't No Way,' 'A Rose Is Still a Rose' and 'Son of a Preacher Man.' It's the best."

- Artist: OTIS REDDING

- Suggested album: "Dreams to Remember: The Ultimate Otis Redding Anthology" (WEA)

- Download these: "Mr. Pitiful," "I've Got Dreams to Remember," "Try a Little Tenderness."

- The lowdown: This 50-song, two-CD set amply mixes Redding's hits with equally rousing album cuts. It strikes a good balance between the two volume "The Very Best of Otis Redding" and the four-CD "Otis! The Definitive Otis Redding." The Georgia-bred singer, who died in a 1967 plane crash at the age of 26, continues to be an influential force in rock and R&B.

- Stone: "Man! When I listen to Otis and Marvin Gaye, with those kind of voices, they make you fall in love with them. If either of them rose from the dead and came into this room and asked me to marry them, I'd say: 'Yes. Of course!' Because the music they created just affects me ridiculously. And there aren't many people today who do that."

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