

BY ELIO IANACCI

## Rehab Rebel

British soul diva Amy Winehouse bursts pop music's perfect little bubble, bringing home the dark side of soul.

Amy Winehouse could not have planned a better single than "Rehab" to introduce herself to North American pop audiences. Talk about right time, right place – and right on-the-money lyrics. With a chorus tailor-made for down-and-out tabloid sensations like Lindsay Lohan, Britney Spears and Pete Doherty ("They tried to make me go to rehab and I said no, no, no!"), it's no wonder the UK-based soulstress is finally getting hair-raising praise and chart-topping props. And, yes, as reported a million times, this "Rehab" hit *is* about her previous management company wanting her to seek treatment for her bottle problems and, as of press day, the "no, no, no" response still sticks.

Winehouse's sophomore album, *Back to Black*, is sticking as well – to the public consciousness like a fly to molasses (even though her 2003 debut, *Frank*, went virtually unnoticed in North America). A cauldron of postmodern Motown soul, *Back to Black's* unlikely sound of a truly tormented heart has been able to prevail over sugary, happy-go-lucky radio fare. One listen to the album's sorrow-laden tracklist – which includes such songs as "You Know I'm No Good," "Tears Dry on Their Own" and the sweeping ballad "Love Is a Losing Game" – and you just know this is where Mary J Blige's pipes could have ended up had she not chanted the blues out of her dark "No More Drama" period.

Yet the grand miracle of Winehouse is that – by her own admission – she is no media darling, no self-proclaimed musical genius and, most importantly, "no pretentious twat" (her words, not ours). "I don't take myself that seriously," she explains over the phone while on tour in Nottingham, England, moments before stepping on stage. "I'm really not a very educated person. I'm really bad at giving interviews and I have no skill or desire to talk about myself. I'm sorry but it's true."

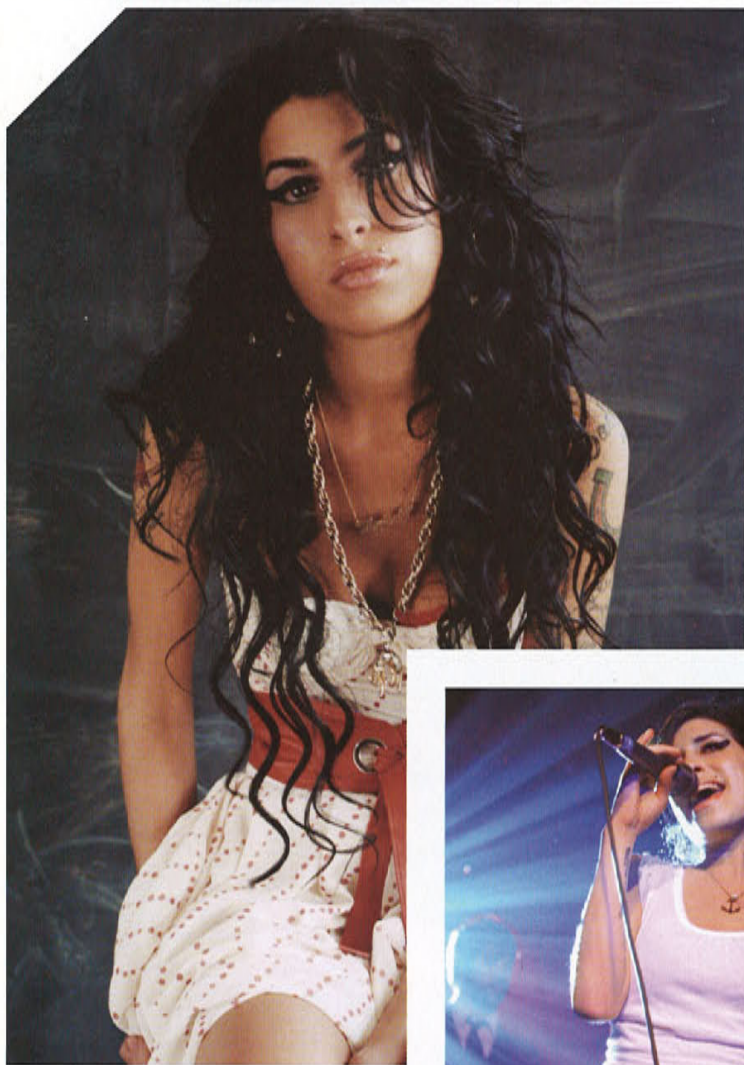
What's truest of all is Winehouse's divine talent and inspiration. Although she doesn't articulate the whys and hows of her love of '50s and '60s R&B ("uhmmm, it's just cool, okay?"), the 23-year-old does acknowledge the man who started her addiction to girl groups like The Shangri-Las and The Crystals. "Phil Spector is my favourite producer of that time. Full stop. The first soul record I heard while growing up was his Christmas album [*A Christmas Gift for You from Phil Spector*] with Darlene Love, The Ronettes and Bob B Soxx And The Blue Jeans. The Wall of Sound was incredible."

Phil Spector's 1963 holiday LP, one of Amy's faves, has long been considered the greatest rock and roll Christmas album of all time.





# Bad Girl Fave



"I love criticism and I always wore dark eyeliner and big hair, so I assume I look like a walking car crash anyway."

Reflecting the nostalgia of Spector's Wall of Sound, Winehouse's work sets itself apart from Spector's lovelorn popcorn tunes by the fact that Winehouse uses 0% innuendo inside and outside the studio and is 100% in-your-face and ballsy. She even told Bono to shut up during his acceptance speech at last year's Q magazine awards, and has collaborated with Ghostface Killah, a rapper rumoured to have thrown 50 Cent down a flight of stairs. Despite all that bravura, there is still a fine finesse to her vocal delivery and overall demeanour that makes the tragic magic.

Take, for example, the rather shocking-yet-chic track "Me & Mr Jones," where the cool Ms W croons the question "What kind of fuckery is this?" to her lover, supported by slick Vandellas-like backup vocalists. In the most demure of ways she goes on to annihilate her ex, purring out "No you ain't worth guest list / Plus one of all them girls you kiss" and ends up taking him back by the end of the song.

When it comes to describing Winehouse's look, it's just as retro unconventional as her sound. Teetering on skyscraper-high heels, she says the bouffant crown she sports lifts her spirits: "If you ever want to make me feel good when I am insecure, all you have to do

is say, 'Your hair is big,' and I'm very happy!" And what of all the obvious criticism that her style isn't exactly Fergilicious? "I don't care too much about my image," she responds. "I love criticism and I always wore dark eyeliner and big hair, so I assume I look like a walking car crash anyway."

It's a crash that music and celebrity blogs happily track day by day. Admirably, Winehouse isn't fazed by this scrutiny in the least: "I don't take note of [the Internet]. I just like making music that goes back to the time when we didn't have those kinds of conveniences. If you wanted to escape back then, you went to the drive-in movie theatre, not online. That's why I make atmospheric music. It has to be like a feature film all wrapped up in a song."

Unlike some of her contemporaries, who seem to relish their tabloid escapades almost as much as they do making music, Winehouse is a major new talent with true vocal prowess and an unmatched persona – a kind of postmodern Bette Davis to today's endless supply of Sandra Dees. Fasten your seat belts. It's going to be a bumpy – yet exhilarating – ride. ★



Winehouse performing at the 21st Annual SXSW Film & Music Festival in Austin, Texas, in March. Below, Winehouse hanging out with Mika and Perez Hilton at SXSW.



## GIGS

**THE MOD CLUB**  
Toronto  
Saturday + Sunday  
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**VIRGIN FESTIVAL**  
Toronto  
Island Park  
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