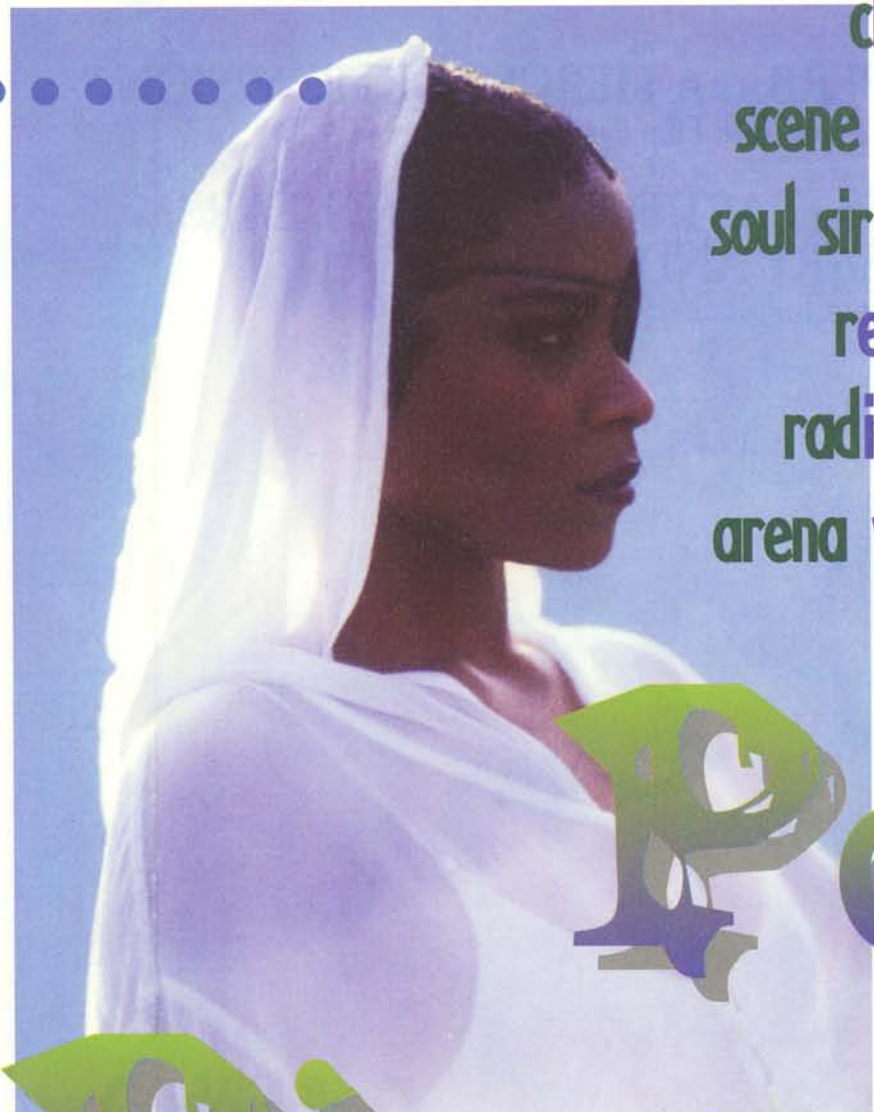


Influenced by the
chaotic music
scene of the '80s,
soul siren Gabrielle
re-enters the
radio and video
arena with musical
mutiny.



POP Piratee

by Elio Iannacci

Slumming comfortably into a lounge chair at Toronto's Royal York Hotel, singer/songwriter Gabrielle looks as though she chooses her outfits as wisely as she chooses her songs. "I like things that are comfortable and simple, but at the same time very beautiful," she purrs as she crosses her



left pin-striped pant leg to reveal the Prada insignia on the sole of her shoe. Gabrielle is wrapped head to toe in class. Her posture demure, her expressions are never too loud and her feline sunglasses do not so much as jiggle when she extends her hand for a typically British hello.

But don't be fooled, just because Gabrielle's edge is not as imposing (or as predictable) as the next pop princess, this Eartha Kitt replica is like a jungle cat in an Armani suit ready to pounce when the moment is right. "When I'm coming you're gonna see me coming. I'm going to make sure you see me coming! You're going to film me coming!"

"From a very early age I was always interested in music—I listened to my parents' old Motown records like Michael Jackson, Diana Ross and the Supremes and all that kind of stuff, good stuff, tried to emulate them, couldn't. [I wondered] why can't I ever sing like that?" says Gabrielle, who has taken a different route than contemporaries Ce Ce Penniston and Crystal Waters by tackling and redefining the untouched genre of Motown. By risking critics bombing her for misinterpretation, Gabrielle was relieved to prove her-

self once again. "Give Me A Little More Time" (her first release from her current disc) has just finished topping UK charts, leading a cool reign in the #1 position and is now climbing the North American charts.

When talking to Gabrielle, it is hard to believe that at the tender age of 26 she has already picked up the coveted British Music Award for Best Newcomer (won this year by Oasis), sold almost a million copies from her debut album *Find Your Way* and taken time out to have a baby. All of this occurred in the span of three short years. It is also a surprise that she has been able to keep herself high on the hip list with an extensive line-up of club dates and concerts all over the international gay circuit.

Born and raised in London's south side, Gabrielle has grown from singing Luther Vandross songs in seedy nightclubs to garnering international success with her well-known hit "Dreams." She comments on what this success has taught her: "People can build you up and knock you down and I think if you are 'just yourself' people can accept you and they're either going to love you or hate you, but you have to be happy within."

After learning this, Gabrielle decided to try to hook the charts once more with her newest release, entitled simply *Gabrielle*, (self titled because according to her it is "more about being me and less about being something I'm not").

By creating her own musical agenda, Gabrielle heads into a direction where she asks, "Where can they place it? Who do I sound like? No one today, maybe."

Elio Iannacci: When did you start writing your own songs?

Gabrielle: At the age of 14, I wrote my first song, very much influenced by pop music, soul music. It was only natural, simply because my English class had been doing poetry and I was never interested in the poems. I mean, they were beautiful poems by these great poets [but they] were never relevant to my life. The day the teacher said, 'you can actually do your own poem today', I started writing my own poems and turning them into songs.

You're known for doing a lot of gay press. Why is that?

Should I refuse when they want an interview? [I] always find the interviews are much more interesting. But also, it's just that people interview me and I really don't distinguish the gay press—although, you know, I always find that the interviews are a bit more relaxed, a bit more

cool, less up themselves, just more fun to chat to. [They get] more gossip from me. Apparently the gay scene has kind of embraced me, they enjoy my music, I think it's brilliant! I always swear to God that I think I'm coming back as a gay man because I swear you have more fun.

I was flipping through an old issue of Gay Times and came across a great photo of you and Mr. Gay U.K.

It was at G-A-Y Historia. I was doing a gig there and [someone said], 'how would you like to be photographed with Mr. Gay U.K.?' and I was like, 'of course!'. I was wondering whether or not he would want to be photographed with me. I'm sure there's some nice boys or gents he'd prefer to be photographed with and so that was it really. I didn't get a chance to judge the competition. [That] would have been fun.

How is the British gay scene?

I always think that the male gay scene dominates. Whenever I do clubs, it's always the men who invite me, never the women.



Which are the best gay clubs in Britain?

Heaven and a few other places [like] Bridge. Heaven is where they all dress up. I'm actually scared to go in there. Those girls—guys really—look better than me!

"Give Me A Little More Time" is a take on Motown. What inspired you, besides the Supremes era, when you were penning this song, as well as the rest of the album Gabrielle?

When I recorded this album, I was very pregnant and so I thought it was more about me and Gabrielle trying less to be like somebody else or to go with the kind

of trend of what's happening and more about being comfortable with myself and going with the flow of what's in me and what I feel comfortable doing. That's when we came up with this album, which is a mixture of old soul and a bit of pop thrown in. It's got that kind of feel, a soul/pop vibe. That's what it was about, me not trying to say that this is the concept, this is what I wanna be, it was just about saying, 'I want to be myself.' The end result was this kind of music.

I want to find out what "There She Goes" is all about? Who is she?

(Laughs) Let me tell you, my mom swears it's about her. I say no. But I think everyone knows somebody [like her]. It is about a few people I've met who have been full of aspiration and you see that glint in their eye, that sparkle—you always knew or felt that they were destined for greater things and then the next time you meet them, a few years down the line that spark is gone. That zest and energy that you wanted to steal from them is almost not there anymore. It's about friends of mine whom I've known who I haven't seen for ages and when I do see them it's like they've got children, but children are not supposed to hinder [you] and you're still supposed to do the things you want in life. "There She Goes" [is about them] always talking about what they want to do, but they never quite get there. I felt that there was always a little bit of that in me when I was younger. I'd be having these dreams and there was almost a point where I wasn't going to go for it because everybody was saying, 'no, you be this, you can't be that'. So that spark almost went out on me. I feel that if it wasn't for my mother, I pretty much wouldn't be here today. That song is for all those people who are still saying 'tomorrow, maybe tomorrow.'

Speaking of "Dreams", that was the title of your hit song that propelled you into international success. What is the most important lesson you've learned from this success?

You have to be happy within. It's even down to being gay. I've got a friend—she was thinking of leading a 'straight life' just for her family to accept her. If that's not within you, then you're not happy.

By mixing R&B with pop, were you concerned with being pigeon-holed as 'watered down'?

When I came into [the music industry] I never labeled myself because nobody knew what I was. Everyone else was

pigeon-holing me so I thought, 'let them get themselves in a muddle, let me just get on with what I know', which is making my music! My music is a bit of pop and a bit of soul and, well, put it where you want to.

Why do you think gender-bending is more accepted in pop than being openly gay?

It's more visual to have a gender-bending man like RuPaul doing his stuff. Having a guy dressing as a woman—well look, RuPaul got the M.A.C. deal,...a female [didn't]. It must have pissed a lot of people off. I think it is more acceptable, but I don't know why. Maybe because it's fashion, it's glamorous and it's how it

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used to be in the early days of dressing up. Maybe it's the fact that it is visual and it gets everyone interested, 'Can we get RuPaul in a Versace dress?', 'Yes we could', 'That would look great.' Look what's on the stage now. Androgynous dressing, female impersonators. It's cool.

What does sexuality mean to you?

It just means being comfortable with yourself really. I don't think it's a big issue, although other people do think it's a big issue but I just think people as a whole should stop being so concerned about what other people's sexuality is and just be comfortable with themselves. I find the people more interested in your business are pretty much the ones most screwed up about their own. If you choose to be gay, I don't think we should make a big deal out of it but I guess it's something that will be discussed because a lot of people do have problems with sexuality, but that's their problem.

Motherhood has played a pivotal role in your writing. What other things have had an impact on your lyrics?

Personal experiences, things that have happened to me. The type of relationships I've had have totally made me reassess myself now. My songs—when I look at them, especially their lyrical content, I find that a lot of the songs are talking about closing doors in a sense like in "Our Love Is Over" or "Baby I've Changed", it's like starting anew. The pregnancy, the break-up with the father of my child and a few things that have happened which, in a way, pretty well worked out for the best.

You've said that you admire Seal a great deal. Who would you like to collaborate with, besides him?

I'm getting the chance to record with a group called East 17. I'm actually flying back to London to do a video with them. I'd say George Michael, probably Lenny Kravitz and a new singer called Maxwell. I would have said Oasis, just for a laugh.

Madonna is quoted as saying "All women want power". Do you agree?

Possibly. I want power. I'm a big personality and quite a big girl. Maybe that has to do with the fact that it is definitely a man's world, really a lot of them—[with] the exception of gay men—couldn't function without good women. And for the gay men, you wouldn't be here without a woman. A lot of women do want power. I don't think it has to be a masculine thing.

Speaking of Madonna, she's been accused of ripping-off the sights and sounds of the gay community (i.e. Vogue) without ever giving back. What has been your effort to give back to the gay community?

Every time I'd be invited to Gay Pride I'd do it. There was one year I couldn't do it because I just had a baby, but it's like 'just make sure you invite me next year.' I don't do [public appearances] but I will do the gay venues simply because when I get there everyone is enjoying themselves and I feed off their energy because this is what it's all about. Nobody's sitting there beating each other up like fools in the club, they're getting down. I just feel they give me something and I like to think it's a reciprocal thing, it's not just one way. Any gay events, I'll be the first one there. ♦

Elio Iannacci is ICON's music writer/critic.