

No ordinary life: Sade has moved from menswear to music charts



ELIO IANNACCI, SPECIAL TO NATIONAL POST | 12/06/02 | Last Updated: 12/06/01 12:56 PM ET

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Sade

Handout

Black turtleneck. Red lipstick. Slicked back ponytail. Hoop earrings. That's the signature look of Helen Folasade Adu — the singer known to most as Sade — and in a career spanning more than three decades it has inspired pop stars, rappers and fashion designers ranging from Adele and Drake to Karl Lagerfeld (the latter had a photo of the chanteuse pinned up in his office during his early days at Chanel). Yet Sade's attitude toward building her empire has little to do with what's outside her window. "I'm a bit of a hermit when I create. It's all done remotely and away from the rest of the world," the Nigerian-born talent says via phone from her home in the U.K. "The music and the [aesthetic] direction is very internal. It's made on my own time and my own watch, regardless of expectation."

Sade's self-proclaimed "slow-cooked, organic method" has made her notorious for making her admirers wait — sometimes more than a decade — for new material. In order to placate her legion of devotees craving more of what her last studio album — 2010's *Soldier of Love* — had to offer, she has just released a concert album/DVD called *Bring Me Home Live* with her eponymous band. Filmed by long-time collaborator Sophie Muller, a director best known for her work with Annie Lennox and Gwen Stefani, *Bring Me Home's* performance footage was captured during last year's world tour. Although the four-time Grammy winner has never blogged, friended or tweeted a day in her life and typically eschews doing press (in a decade, she's granted fewer than 15 interviews), Sade's tours and albums sell. In North America alone, her digital and CD sales have been reported as surpassing even Adele's epic numbers and she is counted as the biggest-selling British musician in the 2012 U.S. money list. In a fickle industry the secret to her continued rise, she says, is a combination of honesty and consistency.

"I have a fear of being trendy and I'm afraid of doing something someone else's way," Sade says of her process. "Music and fashion trends bore me and they don't realistically convey what is authentic or true to my own nature. In a way, what we do is not dateable because we're not attached to any sort of sub-culture or craze," she adds. "I was in the fashion arena years ago, so I know it is dictated by commerce and regurgitates itself quite a bit. I've grown accustomed to expressing myself away from those conventions."

The artist, 53, is especially able to comment on the culture of the runway because she worked on, around and for it in the early '80s, in the days before her breakout *Smooth Operator*. After attending London's St. Martin's College (whose alumni includes Alexander McQueen and Phoebe Philo) she "suffered" through a career as a model (a "tedious job"), a menswear designer and a stylist for new wave bands such as Spandau Ballet. "I'm glad music found me," she admits, "I don't know if I would have lasted in fashion. I thought it was more about being a business person than anything. I always saw myself as more of an artist than a clothing designer anyway."

Unlike many of her superstar peers, Sade didn't bother to look on the runway or turn to a famous design house to create her *Bring Me Home* wardrobe. Instead, she met up with long-time Maija Isola collaborator Andrea Previ, to create — from scratch — a rack of sleek, original outfits for the show. "I usually help design with [Previ]. We believe that costume should be a representation of emotion," she says of the vampy silver Ava Gardner-esque dress she wears to sing lush hits such as *No Ordinary Love*, and the update of her black silk turtleneck/hoop uniform worn during numbers such as *Kiss of Life*. "Our tastes for the tour evolved as a response to the feeling of each song, each set," she says, noting that she's followed the same sartorial path in past hits such as *Love Is Stronger Than Pride*, *Sweetest Taboo* and *Hang On to Your Love*. In those indelible hit videos, she popularized items such as the bolero jacket, the crisp Carolina Herrera white shirt and that staple of all super-ladies of the '80s — colourful leather gloves. "The mood is paramount and the clothes follow. For *Bring Me Home*, we wanted to try to break all the preformed and predestined ideas of what was going to happen onstage."

One thing Sade says she was adamant about was having a few menswear-inspired pieces to wear onstage while singing uptempo songs such as *Paradise*. "There is a teenage boy trapped inside me somewhere," the star laughs. "And it has to come out. There's a freedom to letting him run wild. It's natural for me to present that. I'm being truthful here. Physically I'm curvy and very female but in essence and in spirit, I'm a cowboy."

When the subject of today's Wild West-like music industry comes up — specifically the ongoing debate about whether marquee names from Generation Y are appropriating too much from Generation X's pop icons, Sade offers a provocative perspective.

"People always compare. With music, you can always do that because there is a limited palette," she says. "I happen to like the way Lady Gaga sticks her neck out and puts her personality into her work. She's more honest than Madonna. She's brave and I don't think there is necessarily anything wrong with referencing the past."

As for both the acclaim and criticism inspired by her own recordings, Sade is frank when defending her work. She is uncomfortable with the crown title of Queen of Quiet Storm bestowed upon her by countless urban radio stations and is perplexed by publications such as *The Guardian* that have claimed her band's brand of soul as being "bourgeois" (i.e. background music for dinner parties and cafés). "If I was more punk, more angry, more strong and complied with another format — one that most people would recognize much more, I would not be getting that type of thinking," she says. "I've never fallen into those obvious genres. I just don't comply

with any recognized cultural category and that makes some suspicious. Our band has always been about an emotional and understated visual beauty and I think there is a strength in that,” she says, pausing to ponder what her life would be like if she were to suddenly switch gears and go the Las Vegas-type route, à la Celine Dion or Bette Midler. “Oh, no, I can’t conform,” she says. “I’m not so desperate that I want to go through the expected motions and be like someone else.”

