

Between the passion and mammon

Pop

Alan Jackson meets
would-be jazzier,
Anita Baker.

BLESSED with a voice as delicious as any in popular music, Anita Baker knows her strengths and plays to them. Her music is tasteful and consummately well-performed, yet never dull. She may be unwilling to stray from what she perceives as her particular territory, the ballad, but it has no better exponent. Only those who recognise the jazz roots that inform her style have cause to be frustrated by the limitations she imposes upon herself.

In person, Detroit-based Baker is similarly low-key and unmannered, displaying none of the eccentricities or self-indulgences popular among soul divas. When performing, she appears elegant yet almost businesslike with her neat cocktail dresses and discreet jewellery.

Offstage she speaks generously and with informed passion about her influences, yet litters her conversation with industry-speak. It is as if her muse stands at one shoulder, her business adviser at the other.

Baker's early experiences within the recording business may be responsible for these conflicting loyalties. In 1983 she made her first album, *The Songstress*, for a small independent label set up by former Ariola executive Otis Smith. Stately, romantic and impeccably sung, it prompted and defined the 'Quiet Storm' format of US radio programming while placing upon her a heavy weight of critical expectation.

When, inevitably, major labels scrambled to sign her, the eccentric Smith not only declined to negotiate with them, but refused to allow Baker to record even for his own label for the remainder of a punishing contract. Effectively silenced



The careful diva: Baker has tempered the course of her considerable muse with sober business advice. / Photograph by Sue Adler.

for three years at a crucial point in her career, she was unable to start work on her breakthrough second album, 1986's *Rapture*, until protracted litigation by Elektra Records set her free.

'Yes, I'm a businesswoman — I'm 32 now, so I have to be,' she states. 'If one album sells five million copies and the next only three million, that says I've lost people along the way.'

'Although we artists get dressed up in our sparkly clothes and our sunshades, we worry. What did I do... what didn't I do? I want consistency, a steady audience that is going to be there for as long as I've got something to say.'

Yet despite needing the reassurance of multi-platinum sales, Baker has sidestepped the com-

promises some other black artists have been forced into by the pro-white bias of much US radio and TV: she shudders at the notion of using Eddie Van Halen guitar solos or suggestive videos to appeal to MTV audiences, even though she is angry at the network's failure to feature her music.

A new album, *Compositions*, due next month finds her relaxing within her self-imposed boundaries. Fans anxious for her to follow her jazz instincts will be cheered that, contrary to fashion, the vocal and rhythm tracks for the mainly self-written songs were recorded live, inspiring her most spontaneous studio performances to date.

They show her lifetime love of Sarah Vaughan and Nancy

Wilson more clearly than ever, yet her own warmth and directness continue to stamp her as an original rather than a copyist. Is it time for the label-fixated to reclassify Anita Baker as a jazz singer, pure and simple?

'Not until the jazz singers themselves say I am,' she protests. 'It's certainly what I aspire to, but I won't be one until Carmen MacRae says I am, because Carmen knows. Yes, she's been asked, and I can understand her reluctance, because even the most jazz-influenced songs I've done have a commerciality that will have to disappear. She knows it and I know it, so with each new project I struggle towards pleasing the ears of Carmen and Nancy.'

Baker concedes that she has

sufficient influence with her record company to insist on any direction she chooses, and that only her fear of losing sales prevents her from making a straight-ahead jazz vocal LP.

'I think it'll be time with my next album,' she smiles. 'I've watched Barbra Streisand go from standards to pop to Broadway to whatever she wants. I've watched Linda Ronstadt go from country to rock to soul to standards to Spanish-American and back again. So OK, I don't see why I can't diversify too, and it's up to me to do it in a way that won't make my current audience afraid or apprehensive. I think I can do it. I gotta do it.'

Anita Baker plays Wembley Arena on 15/16/17 June.

Alan Jackson On Anita Baker

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