

ERYKAH BADU Biography

When an artist so thoroughly changes the rules that she makes it hard to remember what it was like before she was on the scene, it's safe to say that she can be called "definitive."

With her third album, "Mama's Gun," Motown artist Erykah Badu is again defining the highest creative potential of music.

Erykah Badu fuses the jazz, R&B and hip-hop influences of a lifetime, and does so not only with her voice, but with many talents: writing, producing, directing, poetry, dance, drama, and visual arts.

The leadoff single from the album, "Bag Lady," and her self-directed video clip have returned her to the No. 1 position in sales and airplay in advance of the album release, serving notice that Erykah would not miss clearing the bar that she herself raised.

Deeply spiritual and rhythmically banging uplifting yet grounded, sensitive and sensual, it's one more example of the multi-faceted expression we value in her. To her fans, peers and even to numerous of her own artistic idols, Badu is a new icon because her work has proven not merely entertaining, but empowering.

Badu's debut album, "Baduizm" (Kedar/Universal, 1997) was both a personal triumph and a landmark for R&B: entering the national album chart at No. 2, it was the highest debut of a new female artist to that date, and it heralded a talent that was fully-formed and mature, yet obviously destined to grow even more.

"While writing and creating this music, I continued to build myself as a person, as a woman and as an African-American," Badu said that year. "I wanted to share these experiences with everyone." Her love of creativity and her belief in herself were palpable, and these qualities proved to be every bit as irresistibly magnetic as the hit songs that came off the album one by one.

"On and On" was a perfect career-framing opening shot. The song drew immediate vocal comparisons to Billie Holiday, and the video, a play on scenes from "The Color Purple," introduced a visual and personal style so coherent that no one could mistake it for mere packaging, and a sense of dramatic timing so obvious that we felt sure we'd see her on the big screen sometime soon.

Badu called upon her diverse training in theatre, dance and art-as well as her own sociopolitical and philosophical consciousness-to direct the succeeding videos, "Next Lifetime," and "Other Side of the Game," with results that were by turns emotional and imaginative, and playful, yet heartfelt.

Her voice resonated universally in a marketplace that had become so severely polarized by age that few records were being heard by both young and old.

Organic and undeniable, "Baduizm" sold a million copies within two months of its February 1997 release, out of an eventual 3 million. Just as quickly, her stage impact on the Smokin' Grooves Tour and Lilith Fair so excited her new following that, within months of Baduizm's release, Badu followed up with "Live!" (Kedar/Universal, 1997) selling an astonishing 2 million copies, sparked by a lightning rod of a song. "Tyrone."

Improvised by Badu during a swing through London, "Tyrone" demonstrated a screenwriter's ability to elicit an off-the-hook response from the audience.

As the statistics built up, the awards followed: two Grammy's (Best R&B Album and Female R&B Vocal Performance), four Soul Train Awards, four Soul Train Lady of Soul Awards, two NAACP Image Awards and an American Music Award in the first year; and in 2000, a return visit to the Grammy podium with longtime collaborators The Roots.

But the ripple effects inside the community were equally important. Badu's work issued an implicit call to every singer, rapper and musician to address the higher self, and that call has been answered by many, transforming the landscape of music, and bridging what, early in the Nineties, looked like insurmountable gaps among both listeners and musicmakers. "I think and sing about what rap MCs rap about," she told London's dotmusic website.

Born in 1972 in Dallas, where she continues to make her home base, Erykah performed onstage at age four with her mother, Kolleen Wright, a professional actress, and wrote her first song at seven on an old piano her grandmother bought for her.

In adolescence, she was encouraged in voice, dance and art, all the while absorbing the R&B music of the 60's and 70's, and the emerging hip-hop culture. At Booker T. Washington High, an arts-oriented magnet school, she had regular spot rapping on a local hip-hop radio show, tagged "Apples."

Then, seizing her own self-hood, she renamed herself entirely, changing her name from Erica Wright to Erykah Badu, "-kah" for the 'inner-self' and "ba-du," after the scat singing of the great jazz vocalists.

Badu entered Grambling State University in Louisiana as a theatre studies major, but returned to Dallas to make her way in music, working jobs as a dance and drama teacher and coffee house waitress. Teaming with her cousin, Robert "Free" Bradford, they performed as the hip-hop duo Erykah Free.

A chance meeting with a manager while working on a local film led to regular live work, opening for hip-hop's top names. Their 19-song demo attracted major label interest, but an opening spot with D'Angelo put Badu in touch with D'Angelo's manager and now Motown president, Kedar Massenburg, with whom she ultimately signed a solo recording deal. While mounting the landmarks and accomplishments of a whirlwind four years, Erykah gave birth to Seven Sirius, her son with OutKast member Dre (Andre Benjamin), at home with Andre, her mother and sisters on the same day that her live album was released.

Although her second studio album was delayed repeatedly, Badu's live appearance and regular guesting on record kept her high in the public consciousness.

Since appearing in D'Angelo's "Lady" video, and duetting with him on "Your Precious Love" for the "High School High" soundtrack. Badu also contributed to the song scores of "Eve's Bayou" ("A Child With the Blues"). "Hav Plenty" ("Ye Yo") and "Bamboozled" (Chaka Khan's "Hollywood," and duet with Common, "The Light").

Most recently Badu can be found duetting with Guru on the track "Plenty" on his latest release, "Street Soul." Her collaboration with the Roots, "You Got Me," was the song of spring/summer 1999, and won Badu her third Grammy, Best Rap Performance by a Duo or Group, in 2000.

Badu's commanding on-screen presence, apparent from the first viewing of "On and On," was repeatedly confirmed by her subsequent acting roles: cameos on the daytime drama "One Life To Live" and "Blues Brothers 2000" and especially her moving, honest work in "The Cider House Rules."

Much has been said about Badu's brilliant synthesis of styles, from Billie Holiday and Bessie Smith to Marvin Gaye, Curtis Mayfield and Chaka Khan. "There are millions and millions of atoms of their music in my music," Badu told The Dallas Morning news, explaining to dotmusic: "It's not nostalgic; it's real for me." And besides, she jubilantly added, "Chaka Khan gave her approval (of Badu's dynamic revival of Khan's 'Stay'), so it don't matter what nobody else say now!

But another of music's trailblazers, Roberta Flack, zeroed in on the nature of Badu's own role modeling in Essence: "I love the fact that her voice is unique... a very wonderful way to express herself without doing what someone else has done." It was Badu's setting of high standards, and her manifesting of an artistic vision so complete, idiosyncratic and satisfying, that stood as an encouragement to other artists not to copy her, but to amplify their own unique voices.

The long-awaited “Mama’s Gun” reflects not a “re-invention” in the calculatedly self-conscious, marketing-driven sense that Hollywood or the music industry at large might use the term, but, quite simply, growth, evolution, learning. “This is my gift, my baby, my art,” Badu told BET. “Power comes with creativity because the innovator is the one who is remembered.” If, as Marvin Gaye once said, “What a person is, he brings with him when he comes to music,” then the growing talent, experience and insight of Erykah Badu will be continual pleasure, amazement and challenge to us all.