



MUSIC

Britney's implosion her 'Prerogative'

Singer releases a greatest hits album as her image takes a beating

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"My prerogative right now is to just chill & let all of the other overexposed blondes on the cover of Us Weekly be your entertainment . . . GOOD LUCK GIRLS!! I'm sorry that my life seemed like it was all over the place the past 2 years, it's probably because IT WAS!"

-- Britney Spears' recent letter to fans posted on her official Web site, www.britneyspears.com

It's not your imagination. Britney Spears is getting weirder. Consider the evidence: The brief, ill-considered Las Vegas marriage. The faux flirtation with Madonna. The tacky, futuristic videos. That week she dated Colin Farrell.

And those were the good times. Over the past eight months or so, Spears has devolved from an iconic pop star with a medium-grade image problem to a late-night talk-show punch line with a weakness for male backup dancers and a career on orange alert.

Again, consider the evidence: The canceled summer tour. Husband Kevin Federline. The steady diet of Cheetos and Red Bull. The much-photographed barefoot trips to gas station restrooms. A recent paparazzi photo of Spears wearing pimple cream, a stained tank top and a trucker hat while appearing to pick her nose pretty much sums up the second half of 2004.

Journalist Carrie Borzillo-Vrenna, who covers Spears for Us Weekly, attributes the singer's personal and professional downswing to a confluence of factors, including youthful rebellion, ineffectual advisers, general bad taste and a heaping helping of schadenfreude.

"Another big factor is plain old immaturity," Borzillo-Vrenna says. "She's always been a little spoiled and a little uneducated and surrounded by the same kind of people. I think two or three years from now she's going to look back on this and be so embarrassed."

Some undeniable hits

It was not always thus. The release Tuesday of Spears' "Greatest Hits: My Prerogative" (Jive) serves as a reminder that she has made good records, although

not lately. With a few indelible hits ("Oops . . . I Did It Again," "I'm A Slave 4 U," ". . . Baby One More Time"), several guilty pleasures ("Lucky," "Toxic") and a whole lot of remixes, non-hits and assorted other filler, "My Prerogative" is both a cynical exercise in record contract-fulfillment and an impressive collection of pop songs.

The title track, a strident, supremely awful cover of Bobby Brown's "My Prerogative," is the latest in Spears' long line of musical declarations of independence. It's also a telling reminder that, unlike Madonna, whose canny manipulation of any number of political, sexual and cultural hot buttons has ensured her continuing survival, Spears has sounded only one theme -- sexual autonomy -- throughout her career.

And unlike Madonna, Gwen Stefani or even Christina Aguilera, who has improbably morphed from a B-level vixen with a fondness for leather chaps to a primly clad domestic violence activist, Spears has shown little interest in either personal or professional reinvention. While Aguilera's last album featured grown-up forays into rock and soul, Spears has largely avoided musical experimentation, the occasional funk- or electronica-inflected club track excepted.

Spears' career is clearly in need of resuscitation, though the singer herself doesn't seem to think so.

"I think she's reached the point where she doesn't care what other people think," says Michelle Sterling, an etiquette and fashion consultant for Global Image Group. "A person needs to want help."

Ask any music industry expert what Spears can do to jump-start her flagging career, and you'll likely get the same answer: Take a long break. Oh, and come back as somebody else. Preferably Stefani. Like Madonna, Stefani has a history of savvy musical, sartorial and even romantic alliances that Spears would be wise to emulate.

John Babbitt, an artist manager who used to work with Courtney Love's band, Hole, agrees Spears needs to align herself with cutting-edge fashion stylists and remix artists. "If she looks to her role model Madonna and doesn't take herself too seriously [she should be fine,] Babbitt says, "as long as she keeps her looks. She's let herself go in general. . . . She's either going to have to come back looking great and with amazing tracks, or she could continue to spiral out of control."

Personnel changes in order.

Sterling thinks the singer might want to make a few personnel changes closer to home.

"My first reaction would be to get rid of her man," she says. "He's not exactly what anyone would call "a winner" -- hardly a prince charming for this pop princess. She's a bit lost as an individual. She needs to regroup and find herself."

Sterling also suggests Spears follow the lead of tiny style icons Mary-Kate and Ashley Olsen; more Marc Jacobs, in other words, less Wet Seal.

"She's not beyond help," Sterling says. "She just needs a little guidance."

Ruben Garay, who founded the popular fan site WorldofBritney.com, says the fans

he's spoken with are tolerant of Federline but less understanding when it comes to Spears' perceived slighting of her audience, from a missed appearance at her summer camp for underprivileged children to the questionable timing of her "Letter of Truth," which seemed more like a thinly veiled plug for her "Greatest Hits" than a heartfelt missive to her audience.

He also points to the glaring disconnect between the singer's public persona -- the perfectly groomed Britney hawking her new perfume, or the virginal Britney of 2002 -- and her unkempt, real-life equivalent.

"You realize how huge a difference there is between those two characters," Garay says. "For someone who's been a fan of hers for a long time, it's kind of like you've been had."

Though each of Spears' albums has sold less than the one before, it's unclear to what extent, if any, her behavior has affected her popularity. Most of her better-behaved teen pop contemporaries have suffered similar declines, thanks to aging 'tween audiences and shifting popular tastes. Spears' behemoth, uniquely broad appeal is unlikely to be dented by declining record sales, anyway; the less successful she is, the more famous she seems to become.

"She's always been a big newsstand seller for us and someone who's been interesting for a variety of reasons," says Laura Morgan, entertainment director of Teen People. "She seems to be a hit with 'tween girls, teenagers, men, housewives. There's a Britney everyone can like."

Morgan suggests fans might even prefer the new, imperfect Britney.

"Our readers have supported her for a long time, and they tend to be very loyal. Teens are more understanding than adults that she's a young girl and young girls go through changes."

Spears reportedly plans to take a lengthy break in 2005, and has publicly expressed a desire to have children. Though there's disagreement about whether motherhood will soften her image or provide her career with its final coffin nail, any sort of extended hiatus couldn't hurt.

"It's a great chance for her to take a break and then come back with something really strong," says Morgan. "I don't think any of us are done with her yet."

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Wanted: One overexposed blond (OK, a brunet will do in a pinch)

In the almost six years since Britney Spears released her first album, contenders for her throne have come and gone. The latest crop of divas may or may not give Spears, who has survived the arrival of Christina, Avril, Jessica and Beyonce, any sleepless nights. A look at six up-and-coming rivals:

LINDSAY LOHAN

Bad news for Britney: Teen actress Lohan, who is slated to release her debut album in early December, is already almost as famous as Spears. And her broad-based,

mass-market appeal is similar to Spears' in her heyday.

Good news for Britney: Lohan may or may not have any actual singing ability; so far no one's noticed. Famed for her prodigious partying, Lohan seems poised for a Britney-style meltdown of her own.

MANDY MOORE

Bad news for Britney: Another double-threat actress/singer, Moore is known for doing things Spears would never do, like acting in indie movies and dressing tastefully. Compliant and immaculate, Moore is an exemplar of refinement and good breeding.

Good news for Britney: Moore's albums have only been moderately successful; her real future may lie in films. A rumored relationship with Counting Crows' Adam Duritz might make America rethink the whole refinement and good breeding thing.

KELLY CLARKSON

Bad news for Britney: Former American Idol winner Clarkson has actual talent and is scandal-free, at least so far.

Good news for Britney: Despite respectable sales for her debut, Clarkson hasn't yet managed to spark the media's collective imagination the way Spears has. Plus, she's a little dull. The fate of her next album, due Nov. 30, will likely tell the tale.

HILARY DUFF

Bad news for Britney: Another actress-turned-singer, Duff is a multiplatinum recording artist and, equally remarkably, a proven concert draw. A reputed relationship with a member of alt-pop band Good Charlotte gives her a TRL-style edginess, and her new makeup line suggests an alarming, J. Lo-like ability to multitask.

Good news for Britney: Duff is unlikely to have a lengthy musical career, and her perky hall monitor persona can be a little irritating.

PARIS HILTON

Bad news for Britney: America can only stomach one lurid blond pop star at a time, and it could be Hilton's turn.

Good news for Britney: Even by 2004's loose standards, Hilton, whose much-rumored CD has yet to be released, lacks any discernible musical talent. And her tabloid adventures and Internet infamy make Spears' worst moments seem like Sunday at church.

ASHLEE SIMPSON

Bad news for Britney: Simpson's debut album sold more copies in two months than Spears' latest studio album, "In the Zone," sold in a year. Plus, Simpson has her own MTV reality show, something Spears reportedly covets.

Good news for Britney: Simpson's recent "Saturday Night Live" lip-sync debacle might signal the end of her career.

-- Allison Stewart

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