

STONE

young
Gifted &

by cory ALbertson
photo by
roger moenks

On this wet, cloudy summer day in Midtown Manhattan, Joss Stone provides her own sunshine. A blonde, bohemian beacon, she's curled up in a white leather chair at EMI Records' sterile offices. Her new CD, *Mind, Body, and Soul*, comes out soon, as evidenced by the label executives and assistants constantly swirling around her like vultures during the interview. It's been a year since Stone's debut, *The Soul Sessions*, and her label's hungry to duplicate the album's success.

But the feeding will have to wait because, today, business has taken a backseat to more important matters.

"Did you see him?" Stone asks shyly.

Who?

"Beau."

Like any 17-year-old, she's eager to show off her boyfriend. So eager, in fact, she stops describing him, deciding words couldn't possibly do him justice. Springing out of her chair, she goes to search.

"I don't see him," she says, her frown fading quickly. "He's so cute."

Still, she remembers the task at hand. She's supposed to be discussing her musical journey, which lately has sparked some rather polarizing labels. Most notably, she's been described as a reincarnated 50-year-old black singer with "a body like Britney"—as one recent headline read.

"Body like Britney," she repeats with a puzzled look. "That's bullshit. I do not have a body like Britney. I wish I did, thank you Jesus, but no! People have to see me in a bikini."

And the reincarnation theory?

"I just think I'm me," she says quietly.

At first glance, the story of a white, English teenager who can tackle (and beat to a pulp) American Soul music does sound suspicious. It stinks of record-label gimmickry; the clever work of a hotshot publicist. But that voice is unmistakably genuine—oozing emotion from, well, no one really knows. Stone's sarcastic reply to the oft-asked question is that it comes from her voice box.

No matter its origins, her youthful exuberance—oddly juxtaposed with music deeply ingrained in American popular culture—accounts for much of her appeal. The Soul and Funk kingdoms have been sparse in breakthrough talent, with no one really coming close to the Royal Courts held by the likes of Aretha Franklin, Curtis Mayfield and George Clinton. But Stone's angelic face and overpowering voice are causing a stir—allowing her to bridge the gap for a genre ripe for an MTV makeover. After all, it's doubtful you'll catch Franklin or Clinton referring to Hummers and iPods in any of their new material.

Growing up in Devon, England, her first brush with fame came from an entirely different genre—disco. In 2001, she appeared on *Star for a Night*, a BBC talent show, belting out Donna Summer's "On the Radio." She won, giving her confidence to head to New York City. Soon after, Steve Greenberg, president of S-Curve records, offered her a deal. Originally, the plan was to release an entire album of music co-written by Stone, but Greenberg felt an introduction to Soul—for new listeners—was more appropriate. "I'm glad that I did just straight-up old school, because I really like that," she says. "*The Soul Sessions* are like a 'thank you' to the people that

inspired me to do this."

Most of England and many in the U.S. responded in kind. *Sessions* sold 2.2 million copies, bringing acclaim and support from many industry legends. Last year Stone was handpicked by Elton John to perform at his annual Oscar party. Sting, in attendance, was so wowed by her voice, he tapped her for the opening act of his European tour. Even Lenny Kravitz has been calling, looking to co-write a song.

"I spoke to him the other day on the phone. I called him 'baby.' I was so embarrassed. I thought it was my boyfriend. Beau put down the phone. He was like, 'OK, baby, I'll call you back in two seconds.' The phone rings, but all of my calls are unknown. I was like, 'Hey baby!' And he was like, 'Hello.' I said 'Oh, this isn't Beau, is it?' He was like, 'No this is Lenny.' It was funny."

Her support hasn't been limited to admirers. Greenberg used key players—mostly from the Miami soul scene—including songstress Betty Wright and musicians Little Beaver and Timmy Thomas to add to *Sessions'* authenticity. With such amazing musical talent, some might be inspired to pick up an instrument and jam with the greats, but not Stone.

"I'm crap," she laughs. "Really bad."

Before her work with Thomas and Beaver she did try piano.

"Didn't work out."

And then guitar.

"That didn't work out, either. So, now, I've decided I'm just gonna' sing, because it's something I don't have to learn. It's just there."

As with *Sessions*, she enlisted the help of a few distinguished guests for *Mind*. Nile Rodgers added guitar to the first single, the eat-shit anthem "You Had Me," while Neo-soul artist Angie Stone contributes her Rhodes expertise on "Security"—an uplifting response to 9/11. And after a short phone conversation, fellow Brit Beth Gibbons, of Portishead, was inspired to write the groovy "Killing Time."

But even with these names in the credits, Stone counters, "It's all on me." For *Mind*, she has recorded all original material—co-writing 11 of the 14 tracks. "I'm very nervous, because, I didn't write the last one," she says. "They like my voice and they like other people's stuff, other people's songs, which is great and everything until I come out with my songs and [I'm] like 'Do you like those?' It's very scary. You just have to deal with it, you know. Being scared doesn't stop me. It never has and it never will. That's not my personality. If I'm scared of something and I kind of don't want to do it, I'll do it more so than I would have."

Stone is confident, but realizes she's bound to make some mistakes. The first one to pop into her head, which many will disagree with, came with *The Soul Sessions*. "I wish I didn't do Aretha Franklin," she says of covering the soul legend's "All the King's Horses." "She's amazing. What idiot, what

kind of fool does something like that, you know?"

On *Mind*, she lets listeners know her faults right away, in the form of the laidback lead track "Right To Be Wrong."

Got a right to be wrong / My mistakes will make me strong / I'm steppin out into the great unknown / I'm feeling wings though I've never flown / I got a mind of my own / I'm flesh and blood / See, I'm not made of stone.

"I am wrong quite a lot of the time," she admits. "But don't hate me for it, please, because I'm only a little girl at the end of the day. When you make the mistake twice, then you're an idiot. You make it once, then, so what. You make a mistake—just, you know, learn. So, I'm learning right now."

Perhaps her biggest teacher is Wright, who has taken Stone under her wing from the day they met. Wright was a fixture on the early '70s R&B and Soul scenes, best known for her confident vocals on songs like the hit "Clean Up Woman." Clearly, Stone looks up to her as a kind of personal fairy godmother of soul. "Just being in her energy you learn stuff and you don't even know it. The thing is, people are like, 'So what is the best advice that she gave you?' She always gives me advice. She's a beautiful soul, you know? Forget that she can sing. So what? She's a good a person."

Wright co-produced *Sessions* as well as *Mind* and shares co-writing duties on five tracks. Stone notes that, while the ideas for her songs are spontaneous, the actual process of writing *Mind* was much more strategic—a training ground for the new soul child on the block. She's quick to point out, though, that she writes entire songs by herself "all the time," but has only recently gathered the nerve to show anyone her work.

"It's embarrassing when it's just me," she says of the only song she's revealed, "Daniel." And, like most creative people, she's her own worst critic.

"I only like it because it's about my brother. I don't actually like the song." However, she vows "Daniel" and other solo Stone creations will surface on her third album.

For now, the emotions surrounding her current project are her main focus (besides Beau, of course). "I want [listeners] to feel something. Even if it's hate, you know. I don't want them to be, like, 'Oh it's OK.' That would really upset me if a person was like, 'It's alright.' I want them to love it, hate it, cry, laugh. I don't know—something."

"And I don't care if people don't buy it in shops. I know my record company would kill me for saying that, but I just want them to hear it. I don't really want too much... really."

While *The Soul Sessions* showcased her mature voice and played on the uniqueness of her background, *Mind, Body, and Soul* puts Stone's personal side increasingly in the spotlight. "I feel the pressure, but I don't take any notice of it, because I'm not perfect," she says. "I don't want to be perfect."

It's inevitable that, as her visibility grows so will the headlines speculating on the origins of her voice, or touting her image with comparisons to her blonde, pop contemporaries. Colleagues who are ...

"Perfect," Stone announces. "Like Barbie Dolls."

So, when *Blender* comes knocking on her publicist's door looking for a bikini (if that) cover shoot?

"I will never do that. I'll pose on the cover in, like, clothes," she says. Her fluid thought pattern migrates between a seasoned pro and the teenager she is. After her declaration, she tempers it with a more practical reason.






"I would get cold."

Her statement is comforting—the starving industry hasn't yet picked apart her innocence. As she said earlier, she's still a little girl at the end of the day. A label that actually fits. **D**

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