

## Cover Story



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## Houston Saves Her Talent For Debut

By Peter Holden

LOS ANGELES — Whitney Houston's amazing rise to major artist status in the past nine months seems like one of those rare fast starts for a singer. It is the kind of a start which often ends up being the proverbial flash-in-the-pan. Yet Whitney Houston has been working up to this time, literally, for years.

The young vocalist's double-platinum Arista solo debut LP has already spawned two #1 hit singles, "You Give Good Love To Me" and "Saving All My Love For You," and these two sweetly moving ballads have been followed up by the release of the upbeat "How Will I Know," firmly establishing her as one of the year's top B/C and pop vocalists. As a live performer, Houston has gone from showcasing venues such as the Roxy, to headlining the Universal Amphitheatre, a transformation which has not fazed her at all. Her tasteful, polished live shows, impeccable vocal control and excellent song choice have left Houston as one of the few new artists of 1985 which are sure to be around for years to come.

Yet it is Houston's previous experience as a singer with her mother, gospel legend, Cissy Houston, her own close ties to gospel music, experience in front of the camera as a successful model, and unwavering love for her family which have made it possible for the young singer to rise to the occasion and carry it all off as a true professional.

"I started singing with my mother on the road when I was 15," Houston recalls, "I was just backup singer, doing the things that I had learned in church. After a while, she gave me a song to sing in the show, and then two songs, and then three and four, and I just got better and more polished. Finally she just said, 'well, you're able to do it on your own now!' " Though a modelling career sidetracked her solo musical debut, when the time was right, Arista's Clive Davis signed the young singer up. "I signed the contract, and when the heat was on I just went out and did it on my own — you can only learn something by doing it, and that's what I did."

One of the main things that is apparent on "Whitney Houston" and its first two ballad singles is that Houston is a *vocalist* — not a dance artist or a pop singer. "I do love to sing slower types of ballads and love songs, I'm very partial to them," she says, "and I didn't set out to specifically be a dance music singer. But I do love uptempo things too. Actually, it doesn't matter if its a fast song or a ballad, as long as the song says something that

means something." Though Houston's live show is highlighted by versions of her duets with Teddy Pendergrass ("Hold Me") and Jermaine Jackson ("Take Good Care Of My Love") — performed exquisitely with brother Gary Garland — as well as her hits, it is songs like Michael Masser's "The Greatest Love Of All" which bring Houston to her greatest vocal and emotional peak. "I've been doing that song for years, long before I ever met Michael," Houston points out, "and when we were recording the album I had the advantage of saying whether I wanted to do a song or not. The songs have to mean something to me."

Her poise and confidence on stage is readily apparent, and it is most obvious when she shifts the phrasing on her biggest hit "Saving All My Love For You" completely around, a move which throws some fans off and would be considered a serious risk by less sure young singers. Houston's comments, "entertainers often run into people who ask, 'why didn't you sing it like we heard it on the record?' But I'm a part of the public too, and I know that it is difficult to sound just like the record, and performing live is a totally different thing. You can do whatever you want!"

Yet the shift from club dates to large arena performances does put some strain on a performer, especially when the shift happens within a period of months. "Once it did happen, it happened fast," she says, "and basically I just have to take care of myself a little more. I'm lucky because I am able to have some of my family around while I tour and that makes it easier. And I've also learned how to pace myself a little better. When you first start out, you think 'let's go for it!' but after doing a few dates you realize that it is important to take it easy."

From the smoothness with which her career has taken off, Houston seems to have taken it quite easily, though her schedule is as busy as ever. Her current tour ends with a date at the Apollo Theatre, and after a short vacation the singer will be back in the studio. Coming from such a talented family — her cousins include Dionne Warwick — Houston's rise is indeed auspicious and as her recent Amphitheatre show demonstrated, her strength comes from her roots: her family and gospel music. The show ended with Houston, her mother and brother on stage all singing "We Are A Family" from the show *Dreamgirls*. A testimony which is evidence of the sincerity and vision of Whitney Houston.

## EAST COASTINGS

Paul Iorio, New York

**UNSPEAKABLE ACTS, UNNATURAL PRACTICES** — The Replacements have the best bad reputation in the business. Unfortunately, that attracts more than just fans to their shows. "The police show up all the time now," says lead singer **Paul Westerberg**. "Every other night they're there. (Bassist) **Tommy (Stinson)** was arrested before one show. And they had to shut down another one in Houston because I couldn't stand up." What unspeakable acts and unnatural practices have earned them this treatment? "Well (guitarist) **Bob (Stinson)** plays naked on occasion. Believe me it's nothing to look at but it's fun to see the crowd gasp a little and have fun. We play in tune sometimes; that's an accomplishment.

I might even play piano with my dick — and you can quote me on that." Westerberg is a quotable kind of a guy, especially when he pens such thrash trash classics as "Unsatisfied" and "Seen Your Video" from "Let It Be" and "Hold My Life" and "Here Comes a Regular" from their new Sire LP "Tim." He quotes from various musical genres the way **Steven Spielberg** quotes from film. "We can play all genres with stab-in-the-dark closeness. We're masters of nothing and we figure that rather than playing one style bad we play several styles kind of bad. I'm bored by a band that plays in just one style. The **Ramones** even bore me a little." This is coming



**KID CREOLE TO PLAY CARNEGIE** — Sire recording artists Kid Creole and the Coconuts will play Carnegie Hall on December 26.

from a guy who just had his new LP produced by ex-Ramone **Tommy Erdelyi**. "Tommy was a cool guy. We expected him to be a fireball, a fast-talking loudmouth or something but he's very shy and inhibited." As musically varied as "Tim" is, in concert they don't even use an acoustic guitar. "I wish we could get together enough to buy one," he says. "We'd try anything. I'd like to have a hit single just to see what it feels like. If it's no fun then so what?" One thing they don't want to try though is film or video. "We don't want ourselves to be on film. We don't like the way we look. As far as faking, pretending or acting something, that's a long way from where we are," says Westerberg.

**AGING IS THE PRICE OF BEGINNING** — The summer of punk happened because people were tired of watching their older brothers and sisters walking around the house naked thinking it was still the summer of love. It's cold out there, they said. Put on some clothes. Pare down those songs. New wave went on to popularize and sanitize this sensibility. But 10 years after, those bands aren't so new any more. Testament to this is the recent crop of greatest hits packages from artists who bloomed in the late-'70s, like **Elvis Costello**, **Nick Lowe** and the **Ramones**. "The Cars Greatest Hits" adds to this list, and keyboardist **Greg Hawkes** talked to *East Coastings* about the band's early days: "The most exciting thing from that time was in late '77, just prior to getting the record deal, when we were still playing the Rat in Boston and the crowds got bigger every week. Then, after the album came out, seeing how long it stayed on the charts. That was unbelievable." Though Hawkes regards that first LP highly, it's not his favorite. "At this point I'd say our best record is 'Heartbeat City.' Right below that is probably the first one. My least favorite is probably 'Candy-O.'" Though few if any musicians can get that keyboard sound that drives the Cars beyond the boundaries of conventional pop, Hawkes remains modest. "The Cars are still a really pop band," he says while citing "Drive" as embodying the broad-based pop appeal they continue to strive for.



**THE CARS** — The Cars have just released "The Cars Greatest Hits" on Elektra.

**EAST CLUBBINGS** — Adam Ant (Epic) headlined Radio City Nov. 24 and the female screech quotient was even higher than at **Sting's** recent show here. The guy exudes an easy charisma and sexuality that someone like **Paul King** can only dream of, as he leaps and kicks his way through oldies like "Ant Music" and newies like "Viva Le Rock." . . . East village tape loop meisters **They Might Be Giants** gave a spirited performance (Irving Plaza, Nov. 21) suggesting that they might indeed be giants, albeit unlikely ones . . . **Maze**, fronted by singer **Frankie Beverly**, brought its brand of easy-going, gospel-influenced

pop to the Beacon Theatre Nov. 28 . . . *Unheard Music*, a documentary on **X**, was screened Dec. 2 and is slated for January release.