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TODAY EXCLUSIVE

THE RELUCTANT DIVA

SHE'S GOT HER MAN, A MAKEOVER AND A HELLUVA VOICE, BUT ALL CHRISTINA AGUILERA NEEDS IS BRIGHT RED LIPSTICK



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ALL 12 of her once-definitive body piercings are ancient history, as are the black dreads of the *Dirrty* and *Lady Marmalade* era. After all, Christina Aguilera doesn't need overt remnants of raunchy feminism anymore.

She is a happily married woman now and, admittedly, still fascinated by the size of the rock record producer hubby Jordan Bratman gave her during their wedding last November.

What's more, she has been singing a different tune of late – and has been dolling up differently, too.

Sporting a Bettie Page-goes-blond look at a recent press conference in London to promote her latest musical offering, *Back to Basics* – a double album largely inspired by vintage tracks from the 20s through to the 60s that hits store shelves today – Aguilera spoke passionately about her new “visual inspirations”.

“What I am going for with the bright red lipstick and the platinum blonde garb is the old screen sirens – the Jean Harlows, Veronica Lakes and Marilyn Monroes,” said Aguilera, 25.

The touchstones of the album are the likes of Billie Holiday, Otis Redding, Etta James and Ella Fitzgerald – whose songs the four-time Grammy award-winner called her “fun music when I was a little girl”.

But for those of you who think Aguilera is going from crass to class, be warned – such slander shall not be tolerated.

“Sexuality will always be a part of how

I express myself artistically,” she said emphatically. “It is important for me to feel empowered by sexuality, not bogged down by it.”

‘THIS IS MY **ING WIFE!’**

This so-called sexuality comes across loud and clear in the lyrics of her new album.

Nestled amid neo-classical songs such as *Ain't No Other Man* and *I Got Trouble* is the risqué club track *Still Dirrty*, in which Aguilera assures her fans that she has “still got the nasty in me, still got the dirty degree, still got that freak in me”.

Then, there's *Nasty Naughty Boy* that includes the rare poetry: “Now you better give me a little taste, put your icing on my cake.”

“It's a tongue-in-cheek way of saying that I am still going to be provocative,” said Aguilera – a former Mickey Mouse Club singer alongside Britney Spears and Justin Timberlake – who had her first hit single at age 18 with *Genie in a Bottle*.

“Marriage does not change that in any way. If anything, I've found a man who is proud of the fact that I have the balls to do what I do.”

Proud may be an understatement. The grapevine has it that during the couple's sunset wedding in Napa Valley, California, Aguilera was coaxed into singing a song – the Etta James classic, *At Last*.

When she finished her rendition, Bratman, 29 – ever the goofy dude from Riverdale, hardly believing his luck – ran onstage, hoisted Aguilera and with a yard-wide grin proclaimed: “This is my ****king wife!”

Looking back, however, Aguilera said the wedding was “a day of great growth”.

“I never really had a positive male role model in my life, no father figure. So, I had to grow up faster than others,” she said. Her mother, Shelly Fidler, separated from her abusive father Fausto Aguilera when the singer was six.

“The only day I missed having a father was on my wedding. I thought to myself: ‘Who is going to walk me down the aisle?’ It was then that I realised – I am.”

But in Bratman, Aguilera – or X-Tina, as she is sometimes known – found the first guy who treated her like she felt a woman should be treated.

“Not many men can handle a woman in the spotlight. He's a great guy. Most importantly, I believe he will not do what my father did.”

GETTING INTO THE ACT

This profound love for Bratman earned him a dedication, *Save Me From Myself*, on Aguilera's third studio album.

Segueing from the in-your-face sexuality of *Stripped* (2002) to *Back to Basics* – which boasts a classical jazz, blues and soul sound created through the use of string quartets and jazz horns among others – posed a major challenge for Aguilera, however.

She had to learn new singing techniques to come across as authentic.

“Most of the album consists of modern-day interpretations of the songs I drew inspiration from as a little girl,” said Aguilera. “To do them justice, each song demanded that I get into character. This meant I always went to studio with red lipstick on.”

For example, on the scratchy blues track *I Got Trouble*, Aguilera and her producer Linda Perry spent days figuring out how to produce a muffled sound.

“It required a fine blend of voice modulation and mixing mastery to recreate that 1960 magic,” she said. “*Back to Basics* has been in the making for a year-and-a-half and it has been a fun journey. I'm really proud of what we accomplished.”

The release of the album also coincides with “the happiest period of my life”.

“I'm in the best possible frame of mind ... the happiest I've ever been,” she said.

“Sometimes, domestic violence can weigh heavily on people for a lifetime. But I have been getting it out musically, which has also been therapeutic.”

NO PLAYBOY, JUST REAL ACTING

Aguilera is now set to criss-cross the United States and Europe over the next few months to promote the new album.

Interestingly, the release of *Back to Ba-*

sics also coincides with launch of Justin Timberlake's latest offering, *FutureSex/LoveSounds*.

So, can her fans expect another combined tour a la 2003's famous *Stripped* and *Justified* outing?

“It is very interesting that Justin's coming out with an album at the same time as me ... again!” said Aguilera with a laugh. “It's very odd and I swear that it is pure coincidence.”

“No, but he's a great guy ... a good old friend. We had a great tour last time and I'll be happy to see him a lot more. As of now, however, there are no talks of a combined tour.”

Those eager for a peek at the re-vamped Christina need look no further than the latest issue of the British edition of *GQ* magazine, which features steamy photos of the singer in old-Hollywood mode. But partly undressed is as far as she'll go.

“I'm not interested in *Playboy* at this point. I respect women and only do things that make me feel comfortable,” Aguilera said.

“It's just that there are so many rules, regulations and labels on women who express themselves sexually. The photo shoot was my way of putting it out that there I'm going to be free ... regardless of the labels that are out there.”

Hollywood is on the cards as well – but don't expect to see Aguilera at a cinema near you anytime soon.

“Yes, I am interested in doing a movie one day. Movies are like an art for me. But I want to take enough time to dedicate myself to it – find the right role and director,” she said.

“I don't want to play myself in a film. I want to – quote-unquote – act. That will be an interesting time for me.”

So, will being a diva suffice for now?

“I wouldn't necessarily use that word. I don't feel like a diva – most of the time I feel tired,” she said with a grin. “To me, a diva is a woman who knows what she wants.”

“But yes – I have always been in control of what I have done. I have always stood by every single thing that I have done. And you know what – I still do.”

WHAT I AM GOING FOR WITH THE BRIGHT RED LIPSTICK AND THE PLATINUM BLONDE GARB IS THE OLD SCREEN SIRENS — THE JEAN HARLOWS, VERONICA LAKES AND MARILYN MONROES.

— CHRISTINA AGUILERA



POPPED PRINCESSES

THEY might rule the roost, but these pop tarts have a habit of grabbing headlines for the wrong reasons, says ZUL OTHMAN.

BRITNEY SPEARS



Once pop music's reigning Lolita, things have gone downhill for the 24-year-old. Spears is now on a self-imposed hiatus and spends her time with son Sean and aspiring rapper/house husband Kevin Federline. Reports indicate a new album is slated for early 2007.

ASHLEE SIMPSON



Jessica Simpson's kid sister Ashlee just can't get a break. First the 21-year-old got caught lip-synching on a TV show. Then, her big screen effort *Undiscovered* became

one of the most panned debuts of 2005. Now she's in a another pickle: Recently she gave an interview saying she had “had it with Hollywood's twisted view of feminine beauty”. So, when she appeared in another article with a nose job coupled and hair extensions, feminists were not amused.

MARIAH CAREY



Despite garnering eight Grammy nominations for her latest album, *The Emancipation of Mimi*, Carey has had a tabloid-baiting career. The 34-year-old began by peddling sickly

sweet ballads before marrying her record label boss Tommy Mottola in 1993. A widely publicised divorce came in 1997. Then the trouble really started: In 2001, her semi-autobiographical movie *Glitter* became one of the year's biggest turkeys and the poor sales for the soundtrack got her fired from record label Virgin. It was too much for Carey, who had a breakdown soon after.