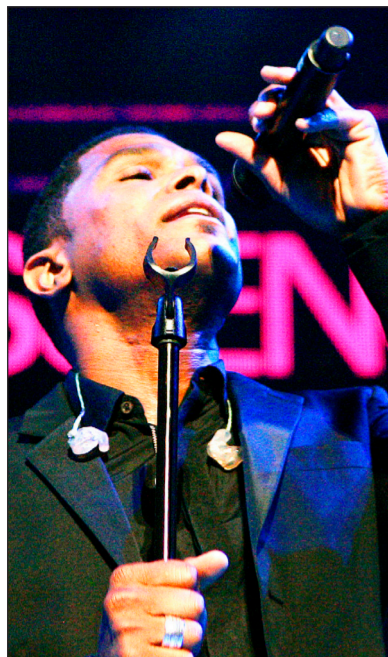


CULTURE

MONDAY, AUGUST 10, 2009



Above: Maxwell's *BLACKsummer'snight* hit No. 1 on the Billboard album chart. PHOTO: AP
Right: Gospel and soul singer Al Green performs at the Essence Music Festival in New Orleans last month. PHOTO: EPA



The quiet storm

No signifier of sincerity is left unexplored in the fantasy of domesticity that is K'Jon's *This Time*: soft, pensive piano; light, Spanish-inflected guitar; muted horns; pliant strings; and, at the song's end, a children's choir.

"Last night tried to get some snooze/Dreamed we was breaking up, we were through," he sings. "When I looked around you was gone/Found that a house is really not a home/When you're alone."

This Time is the second single from K'Jon's major-label debut, *I Get Around* (Universal Republic), one of this year's most promising R 'n' B albums and also one of its least expected. For the first time in recent memory the most vital new soul music addresses particularly adult concerns, with a particularly adult sound.

Nowhere is this style more clear than on *On the Ocean*, K'Jon's debut single, which has been on Billboard's Hot Adult R 'n' B Airplay chart for nearly six months. A dramatic exhale of a song, it's a palpable craving for something that, especially in a recession, is more erotic than love: financial stability.

"Every now and then, it feels like/My ship has gone and sailed away," K'Jon sings with just the faintest scrape of tension in his voice. "Now the tide is coming in, I see the waves flowing/Out there on the ocean, I know my ship is coming in." Behind him are misty new-age-esque walls of sound, plinking piano and the sounds of gurgling water. All the while K'Jon remains placid, never trying to overwhelm or be overwhelmed.

While the second half of *I Get Around* forgoes the ethereal in favor of tougher songs, that material is far less convincing. K'Jon is a grown-up, and he can't hide from that.

And he's not alone. Last month the soul perfectionist Maxwell returned

from an eight-year break with his fourth album, *BLACKsummer'snight* (Columbia); it sold more than 300,000 copies in its debut week to land atop the Billboard Hot 200 album chart, and it remains in the Top 3. Its commercial success is a testament to the timeless quality of Maxwell's sound, but it's also proof of a persistent, dormant audience for this style of music. (Similarly, when rumors of a new album from the lite-soul recluse Sade began circulating this year, anticipation ran unusually high.)

Both K'Jon and Maxwell represent a strain of R 'n' B that has remained blissfully ignorant of the rise and domination of hip-hop. In radio formatting terms, it's urban adult contemporary, a name that does this often vibrant and underappreciated subgenre no favors.

NEO-SOUL

For much of the last decade the format has been driven by neo-soul, though that movement has often felt like a conceptual offshoot of bohemian-minded rap. Adult soul, as practiced by Maxwell, K'Jon and others, borrows from classic soul in song structure and is preoccupied with more mature themes relevant to an older audience.

Twenty years ago some of these

Soul music is finding a new maturity in artists like K'Jon and Maxwell — and its old-fashioned wisdom is beginning to pop up in some unlikely places

BY JON CARAMANICA
NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE, NEW YORK

records might have been called "quiet storm," and nowadays there's overlap between smooth jazz, gospel and adult-oriented R 'n' B. Kem, who like K'Jon is from Detroit, has released a pair of albums, *Kemistry* and *Album II* (Motown), that have helped shape the genre's sound.

Additionally, particularly for artists from the Midwest, adult soul is the soundtrack to dance night. K'Jon cut his teeth singing on the Detroit ballroom circuit: his most recent independent album, which also featured *On the Ocean*, was called *The Ballroom Xplosion* (Up & Up).

Detroit ballroom is a sister style to Chicago stepping, a scene that was given national attention when R. Kelly began incorporating its gently sliding sounds into his own; the second half of the video for *On the Ocean* is a compelling advertisement for the Detroit style, with its intricate twirls and zigzag footwork.

Danceability isn't really a

requirement, though. Maxwell's first three albums prized meticulousness, each one a study in soft, floating soul. Part of his charm has always been his seeming effortlessness, his songs little more than whispered entreaties.

Parts of *BLACKsummer'snight* are similarly entrancing. On *Pretty Wings* he laments in precise darts: *Time will bring the real end of our trial*

One day there'll be no remnants, no trace

No residual feelings within you

One day you won't remember me.

And he begins *Cold* with one of the sharpest openers in any genre this year: "I'm eating crow, babe." All in all, they are the cries of someone who's seen too much.

But even though he hasn't strayed far from his template, this is Maxwell's least immersive album. In music this delicate, even slight disruption creates imbalance, and the orchestration on this album too

often punches through, overwhelming Maxwell's distinctive breathiness.

For years adult soul has been a hospitable landing pad for resurgent R 'n' B stars of earlier eras. The new jack swing star Al B. Sure! recently released a strong album, *Honey I'm Home* — which includes a sensual reading of Michael Jackson's song *The Lady in My Life* — on *Hidden Beach*, a label which has made grown-folks soul its mission.

RETROFITTED SOUND

This year the R 'n' B journeyman Avant had a hit with a tender cover of the lit-rock standard *Sailing* by Christopher Cross. And on recent albums 1990s R 'n' B stars like Ginuwine and Joe have retrofitted their sound, and their attitude, to suit an older crowd.

And adult soul is beginning to pop up in unlikely places. The rising rap star Drake has a hit with *Successful*, featuring Trey Songz and Lil' Wayne, which is, unwittingly, the sister song

to *On the Ocean*. Both are about firm resolve in reaching for goals that appear unattainable, and both are delivered with a wistful air.

"I want it all/That's why I strive for it," Drake raps. "I know that it's coming/I just hope that I'm alive for it."

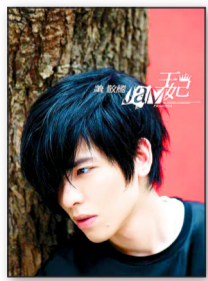
Drake is a natural rapper but perhaps an even more natural singer. On *So Far Gone*, his standout mixtape this year, he shuttled back and forth between the two, depending on the mood of the song. Some of his sharpest rhymes are on the subject of stealing other people's girlfriends, but his best singing is his most vulnerable, as on *Brand New*, the mixtape's closing song.

It's about failing to live up to your significant other's history, a sentiment all but unexpressed in hip-hop and almost as tough to uncover in R 'n' B. "It seems like everything I do, you're used to it/And I hate hearing stories about who you've been with," Drake sings in precise strokes of melancholy. "Feel like I'm in crazy competition with the past."

It's old-fashioned wisdom, something Bill Withers might have sung, and possibly Drake's true calling. Perhaps it also explains the old-man sweaters he's often spotted performing in.

TOP FIVE MANDARIN ALBUMS

JULY 24 TO JULY 30



1 Jam Hsiao (蕭敬騰) and *Princess* (王妃) with 25.92 percent of sales

2 Compilation album *Faith Map* with 16.03%

3 Nylon Chen (陳乃樂) and *Paradise* with 11.05%

4 Jerry Yan (言承旭) and *Freedom, Secret* (多出来的自由: 秘密自遊) with 5.6%

5 Ariel Lin (林依晨) and *Meeting Happiness* (幸福遇見) with 3.84%

ALBUM CHART COMPILED FROM G-MUSIC (WWW.G-MUSIC.COM.TW), BASED ON RETAIL SALES

PLANET POP



starring **Van Williams** as the crime fighter Britt Reid or the Green Hornet, and the late Chinese-American martial arts icon **Bruce Lee** as his sidekick, Kato.

While things keep getting better for The Chairman, **Michael Douglas**' son is headed firmly in the opposite direction. According to a criminal complaint made public last week in the US, **Cameron Douglas** traveled coast to coast dealing large quantities of methamphetamine before his arrest last month.

The complaint in federal court in Manhattan alleges that the younger Douglas was paid tens of thousands of US dollars trafficking the drug — referred to in transactions by the code words "pastry" or "bath salts" — since 2006. Cash and drugs were routinely exchanged through shippers like FedEx, the court papers said.

The 30-year-old son of the Oscar-winning actor was arrested July 28 at the trendy Hotel Gansevoort in Manhattan. His attorney, Nicholas DeFeis, declined to comment on Thursday.

The complaint drawn up by a Drug Enforcement Administration agent details allegations based on information provided by three unnamed crystal meth users and dealers. The users — including someone who once worked for Cameron Douglas — have pleaded guilty and agreed to cooperate with the investigation.

The complaint said that in one deal in 2006, a cooperator shipped cash under

a fake name to Douglas at a California hotel. A few days later, it said, Douglas delivered a pound (roughly half a kilogram) of methamphetamine to the cooperator at a Manhattan hotel.

In 2007, according to another cooperator, Douglas was paid US\$48,000 at a Manhattan apartment. The cooperator later received a pound of crystal meth through FedEx from Santa Barbara, California.

In June and July, negotiations for more drugs were secretly recorded on wiretaps of cell phones and a cooperator's hotel room in Manhattan.

Cameron Douglas, in one recording at the hotel, "acknowledged his prior history selling crystal meth" and "indicated that he continued to sell crystal meth." In a separate recorded phone conversation, investigators said he spoke of "sending out a pastry" to a cooperator, and also asked, "Did you get a chance to ... smell any of the salts or anything like that?" Cameron Douglas has acted in movies including 2003's *It Runs in the Family*, starring his father and grandfather Kirk Douglas.

He was previously arrested in California in 2007 on cocaine possession charges. His attorney then said the arresting officer didn't do his job properly.

Also busted on drug charges is Japanese actress **Noriko Sakai**, who turned herself in to Tokyo police and was arrested on Saturday evening, reports local broadcaster NHK.

The 38-year-old actress had been missing since her husband was arrested earlier this week for alleged drug possession.

Sakai, whose disappearance sparked a media frenzy in Japan and other Asian countries, was well-known throughout the region, especially in China, Hong Kong and Taiwan, because of her songs and TV dramas during the 1990s.

Tokyo police said on Saturday night they could not immediately confirm the report.

Sakai's husband, **Yuichi Takaso**, 41, was stopped in central Tokyo earlier in the week by police, who allegedly found drugs when they searched him, according to reports.

Questions concerning Sakai's whereabouts have dominated headlines since Takaso's arrest, with her mother-in-law asking police to search for her, and the president of her management agency holding a news conference and urging her not to go through the difficult time by herself.

Another thespian with drug issues, actor **Tom Sizemore**, has been arrested in Los Angeles for alleged domestic violence. Police spokesman Richard French says the 47-year-old, best known for his appearances in *Black Hawk Down* and *Saving Private Ryan*, was arrested on Wednesday night in downtown Los Angeles. French did not have details of the incident.

Jail records show Sizemore was released on Thursday morning. His bail had been set at US\$20,000.

Representatives for two agencies listed as representing Sizemore said they no longer did so.

Sizemore was convicted in 2003 of domestic violence involving his ex-girlfriend, former "Hollywood Madam"



Cameron Douglas: Has meth, will travel. PHOTO: AFP

Heidi Fleiss. He's also had a string of drug-related arrests in recent years.

"Anyone, Anyone? Bueller?"

American TV personality **Ben Stein** has been stripped of his Sunday *New York Times* business column because of his work as a pitchman for a credit monitoring company.

Stein famously played the part of a monotone economics teacher in *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*.

New York Times spokeswoman Catherine Mathis released a statement on Friday that said the newspaper decided it would not be appropriate for Stein to pitch for FreeScore.com while writing his column.

An e-mail requesting comment from the former host of Comedy Central's *Win Ben Stein's Money* quiz show was not immediately returned.

Earlier this year, Stein withdrew as the University of Vermont's commencement speaker over complaints about his critical views of evolution in favor of "intelligent design."