

Emphasizing all of the influences in a new performer's work is not the usual way of introducing them to the public, but in Sonya Vetra's case, it's worth making an exception. Listening to her self-titled CD/EP is like tasting a long-simmering gumbo that gives a hint of Chrissy Hynde in one mouthful, Lenny Kravitz, Black Crowes and Otis Redding in another and PM Dawn and Shawn Colvin in the next.

This is not to say that Vetra (pronounced "vee-trah") does not have her own original voice. What she is doing is creating music that crosses many boundaries. Thus far, it has served her well as she ventures where few black women in recent memory have dared to tread - staking an unapologetic claim as a pop artist with something to say.

Her approach has landed her a distribution deal through Red Eye Distribution, won her Best Pop Song for "Best Revenge" at the 1998 Georgia Music Industry Association (GMIA) Awards and has brought about invitations to play at venues ranging from The Dark Horse Tavern and Chocolate Soul at the Masquerade Music Park to SESAC's acoustic writers' showcase at the Bitter End in New York.

Her all-embracing musical taste is typified by her reaction to the DJs at one of Atlanta's urban/R&B/rap radio stations prior to last February's Grammy Awards who had only a vague notion of who Shawn Mullins was. "I was amazed because it's not like this is New York or L.A. where there are so many people breaking out onto the national music scene that you can forget who they are. (I couldn't believe that) in a city this size the divide could be that wide and people could be so unaware of each other." Keep in mind that she was equally dismayed by the pop/rock/alternative stations' lack of awareness of Monica and Lauryn Hill.

Although she did not set out intending to preach the virtues of all good music regardless of genre, it was probably inevitable. Growing up in Covington, GA, she began keeping a notebook of ideas and calling herself a songwriter at age 13. She sang in the gospel choir, played Gershwin in the school band and listened to Michael Jackson, Barry Manilow, U2, Stevie Wonder, Aretha Franklin, Al Green and David Bowie. At the same time, she worked at the local radio station (WGFS) that played everything from Mighty Clouds of Joy to Randy Travis.

Years later, mutual acquaintances in Atlanta referred her to producer Jeep of Crash! Bang! Wallop! Studio (who co-wrote 3 of the EP's 6 songs). Having worked together for the past 2 1/2 years, he was attracted to the diverse elements of Vetra's unique musical voice. In spite of his enthusiasm for what she's doing, though, he realizes that she may face an uphill battle in the commercial music

world. Before she finds a niche in the U.S., "it might take exposure in Europe and Australia, places where people are a little less judgmental about race and stereotypes aren't quite so obvious," he says, as was the case with artists like Seal and Lenny Kravitz.

There is a luxury to being a developing artist in Atlanta in that the market is a sheltered one. Vetra was able to put out her CD, gather feedback and then continue working with Jeep to hone her product. In New York, Los Angeles or London it's all or nothing: artists go directly to labels where they are either swept up in the marketing machine or unceremoniously dumped by the side of the road. For Vetra, the goal is to finish her full length CD which now includes a new song, "Allies," on which she is joined by Shawn Mullins, as well as a guitar-driven cover of the disco hit "I Love the Nightlife."

So exactly what is the CD/EP like? It's a collection of 5 studio and 2 live acoustic tracks, one of which - the GMIA winner "Best Revenge" - appears in both formats. The opening track, "I'm Coming Closer," uses the deceptively simple lyric device of repeating similar phrases throughout the verses ("I don't know if I'm as tough as I seem to be," "I don't know if I'm as fine as I fantasize to be," "I don't know if I'm... etc.). The technique conveys bravado and insecurity simultaneously while in subsequent listenings, the lyrics' simplicity seems to

the Music
UP
Southern

with Sonya Vetra
by Jeff Silver



suggest deeper meanings than those taken in the first time through.

"Brand New Religion" is classic, laid back, steamy southern rock and is followed by "Everybody's Looking For...?" which manages to showcase Vetra's style of using humor to make a point ("Maybe if my butt was a little smaller/Do you think I would be happy then?").

"Won't Make You Sick" is the off-center title for a radio friendly tune that just "...wants to make you dance." Along with "The Best Revenge," these two tunes are the best examples of how Jeep and Vetra have combined forces to create a hip, accessible framework (that radio should appreciate) while retaining a musical edge and integrity that doesn't "talk down" to the listener.

When asked what her immediate plans are, Vetra answers, "Finish the record, and city by city - conquer the world. That's my short-term strategy." Spoken like a true pop star of the new millennium.