

DIANA ROSS

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More and more, Diana Ross's concerts and albums are not a showcase for singing. There is plenty of performance, plenty of production, she is still good value — but singing is only one of the ingredients, and not necessarily the most impressive. Concerts and albums — she seems to have abandoned her film career — are now ecstatic celebrations of the myth and magic of Diana Ross.

Her voice of course is still at the heart of things. The qualities of the voice are both what made her a star, gave her that particular quality that caught on, and what made her a 'cross-over' figure, appealing equally to black and white audiences. It combines opposite vocal textures that are also the different textures of the traditions of black and white popular song. It has the fragile, cut-glass sweetness of soprano singers like Deanna Durbin or Moira Anderson, but also the funkiness of other Motown singers, Mary Wells or Gladys Knight. It has the vocal 'purity' of white song, but is also

capable of all the 'dirty' notes as well, all the notes which the straitjacket of the whole tonal system has outlawed as flirty. Being a combination of textures, a cross-over sound, she doesn't exploit these vocal traditions to the full. She never has the coloratura precision and brilliance of the sopranos, and doesn't explore the expressive range of blues and soul — she never rasps and growls like Millie Jackson, never takes Billie Holliday's rhythmic risks, never evokes the gospel of Aretha Franklin. But her voice has other qualities that also fix her star image.

It is an almost unreal voice. The opening of *Remember Me* — 'My baby, see you around' — is ethereal, coming from nowhere, the echo chamber enhancing just that funky purity I've tried to describe. You can't quite believe anyone could sing like that. Donna Summer's early albums may have something of it, but cruder, more obviously sexual. The unreality of the voice is part of the magic of the act, one that is always reinforced by production. The album covers nearly always use soft focus, deliberate blurring, often with coloured smoke to enhance the effect; she is not pho-



tographed in any kind of concrete space, let alone any particular place; the clothes are in no way the clothes anyone would wear about the place. The shows often start with a series of such albums cover images of her flashed up on a curtain; one of these freezes, and Ross walks out of it in the same costume as in the photograph. With her voice, her whole act is unreal, a fantasy.

The other important quality of the voice is its 'femininity'. I don't mean femaleness — there is nothing intrinsically female about a high, delicate, but funky voice; but sex roles insist that there is something feminine about a vocal style that involves a range of devices such as: wordless cooing (the opening of *Baby Love*), kittenish yelps (the climax of *Ain't No Mountain High Enough*), supplicant whispers (the bridge passages of *Touch Me in the Morning*), fragile screams of delight (throughout the concerts). And it is these feminine, and basically non-singing, qualities that have become so important as her career has developed.

The concerts, in particular, often have rather little in the way of sustained singing. What we get are endless reminders of past hits, snatches of *Where Did Our Love go?*, *I'm Still Waiting*, *Inside Out*, which evoke different moments in her career, but which are not fully sung through or reworked musically. Like the albums, much of the musical element is Diana cooing and yelping to consummately orchestrated disco. Her voice is often swallowed up in the strings and saxes, and then also in the fabulous costume changes and overwhelming lighting effects. Those bits of songs, those reminders of Diana Ross as a Supreme, Diana Ross in *Lady Sings the Blues*, Diana Ross as 'The Boss', are all swept up in a generalised celebration of Ross, star.

But then just what is Diana Ross, what is being celebrated? Above all, she is a success. She is the only female black star whose name can be mentioned in the same breath as Frank Sinatra or Barbra Streisand — whose albums are always top best sellers, who is considered a big enough star to play at the top night clubs in Las Vegas and Atlantic City, who is, in other words, a one-hundred-per-cent certifiable star, with all the guaranteed profitability that implies. Billie Holiday, Ella Fitzgerald, Lena Home, Donna Summer — none have quite made it so unarguably (whatever dispute there may be about their relative talents). Diana Ross is the epitome of something more characteristic of progressive directions in the USA than in Europe. She has been carried along on a tide of black and feminist agitation and unrest that has not wanted to change society

but to buy into, on fully equal terms, the goodies that white, male society already enjoys. Success has always been presented as one of the mainstream American goals of life — but the successful were not just any old Americans, but white male Americans. But just because success was presented as a general human goal, other — black, female — people could demand that they be a part of it. Diana Ross is one of the most spectacular examples of someone who has been allowed to be a success, and not just in the marginalised spaces always permitted black artistes — the obscurity of jazz ('the devil's music'), the supporting, servant roles in films, the chorus parts and speciality acts inserted into shows — but in the real mainstream of American popular entertainment.

At one level, we (Europeans) underestimate the force and importance of this form of social change. We fail to see the degree to which the USA is a more open society than any Western European country, that black people and women can get on to an extent unimaginable over here. And if, with our excellent political hats on, our misgivings are based on our realising that such successes are still founded upon a system that must perpetuate inequality and oppression, I also detect a certain world-weary distaste for material pleasure, for commerce, for the paltriness of glamour and glitter, feelings that we inherit from an essentially aristocratic sensibility.

But of course we are right to be uneasy. Recent surveys show that the situation of black people as a whole in the USA has got worse in the past ten years, not better, despite some spectacular cosmetic jobs of promotion. Ross epitomises a success that is still out of reach of most black people or women (or indeed of working class white men). But isn't that part of her act, too?

The sheer ecstasy of the whole Diana Ross thing is an outrageous revelling in what success could feel like, but not how to achieve it. The sexual imagery of the songs is often that of 'surrender' (evoked equally for men and women), and that is also what the experience of success is in the Ross shows — giving yourself up to the intoxication of worldly acclaim, of sensuous delight, of luxuriating passivity. These are real material pleasures, there is nothing wrong or strange in wanting them, but aren't they so excessively realised in the Diana Ross show that you can't believe in them as other than a gorgeous fantasy? The unreality of the voice, the insubstantial shimmer of the costumes, the fantastic orchestration — did anyone ever believe this was anything but a dream of how life could be more beautiful, not how it

really was?

One of the high points in the show is the *Reach Out and Touch* number. Diana goes into the audience and clasps hands with them, and then gets them all holding hands with whoever they are sitting next to, as she speaks, sings, coos, 'Reach out and touch, somebody's hand, Make this world a better place, If you can.' Surely no-one ever believed that's all you had to do, or that Diana was really going to lead us into a better world. But for a moment the ecstasy of success is linked to the joy of community, of feeling yourself part of a huge group of people bent on goodwill. We get to expe-

rience what a good feeling that is, even when we know we are only in the theatre experiencing it fleetingly.

I don't say listening to Diana Ross and reaching, out and touching at her shows would make anyone join a movement to change the world; but at least it vividly expresses the pleasures of a better world. That goes along with the competitiveness of the success motif and the passivity of the femininity motif — no pleasures in this world are ideologically unalloyed. But with Diana, why not enjoy the best and forget the rest? There's nothing else quite like her around. •