Madonna, Institution and Rebel, but Not Quite the Diva of Old

By LYNETTE HOLLOWAY

This is how the music world is changing: Madonna, who has been a pop diva for two decades, may be looking at the final stages of a long career.

She crashed and burned last year in the movie "Swept Away," a project with her husband, Guy Ritchie, who directed the film. And her most recent albums, with their underground European techno beats, have failed to capture audiences anywhere near the size of those that bought her earlier albums. She has sold about $200 million in CD's and other products throughout her 20-year career.

"Music," released in 2000, has sold 2.9 million copies and "Ray of Light," released in 1998, has sold 3.7 million copies, compared with "Like a Virgin," which has sold more than 10 million copies since its release in 1984, according to Nielsen Sound-Scan, which tracks album sales, and the Recording Industry Association of America, which certifies sales.

Madonna's label, Maverick/Warner Brothers Records, which is owned by AOL Time Warner, desperately needs a hit. Its market share has fallen to 4.74 percent, from 6.74 percent a year earlier, according to SoundScan. Record companies over all are racing to deliver hit albums at a time when record sales are rapidly declining. Industry executives blame Internet file-sharing and counterfeiting for the
sharing and counterfeiting for the decline, while consumers complain of a lack of exciting new talent and uninspired music from older artists.

To sell records, many record labels are turning to the younger female pop artists, like Gwen Stefani of No Doubt, Avril Lavigne and Christina Aguilera, who dominate the music world, making Madonna appear less and less commercially relevant these days.

So the release of her 10th album, coming in three weeks, is anticipated with nervousness by her friends and her record label and with smug condescension by those who would like to see her fail.

The album, "American Life," which tells the story of her climb to the top of the entertainment industry, is scheduled to be released on April 22 and delivers a melodic, but spare sound that is different from her previous works, said her longtime spokeswoman, Liz Rosenberg.

The album has some tracks that sound like vintage Madonna dance music and a few surprises, like Madonna rapping and playing the guitar. The marketing has an even bigger surprise, one that has already sparked debate on the Internet. The video for the first single, "American Life," portrays her as a "superhero military figure," satirizing the macho mystique of war.

Last month, The Drudge Report called the video one of "the most shocking antiwar, anti-Bush statements yet to come from the show business industry, complete with images of Iraqi children and bloody limbs."

Ms. Rosenberg has denied that the video is anti-Bush, adding that there are no pictures of Iraqi children or bloody images in the video. The video, which was still being edited last week, will be introduced on VH1 on Wednesday. The label is working with America Online to promote the album.

The song, which was released to Top 40's radio stations nationwide last week, made it onto the playlists of most major radio stations. But it has been so long since Madonna has had a hit that radio stations are wondering if listeners want to hear her new material.

"Radio is still searching for her relevance," said Robert P.
Burke, vice president and managing director at Friday Morning Quarterback, a radio trade publication. "There is some question of how much she appeals to kids. But she deserves the benefit of the doubt. Every time Madonna does something, she makes news, and program directors add her to their playlists to be on board, upfront if something happens."

Music promoters say that marketing Madonna to teenagers and young adults is difficult because most people in those age groups do not like to listen to the same music their parents do. Madonna, 44, is the same age or older than the parents of the target demographic of most record companies, they say. Her fan base is now made up mostly of people older than 25 and gay listeners, though she has retained a large international following. (She lives in Britain with her two young children and Mr. Ritchie.)

Her somewhat older audience poses a problem because the biggest consumers of CD's are between the ages of 11 to 25, and they are more apt to buy records by artists like Ms. Lavigne, Ms. Aguilera and Pink, who have far surpassed Madonna in record sales. An album by Ms. Lavigne, "Let Go," released last June by BMG's Arista Records, has sold 5.1 million copies so far, according to SoundScan. Ms. Aguilera's album "Stripped," released last October by BMG's RCA Records, has already sold 2.2 million copies, according to SoundScan.

"People will pay attention to Madonna's new album when it comes out," Judy McGrath, president of MTV Networks Music Group, said. "They will be interested and curious. But I'm not sure that 17-year-olds will go out and buy her CD. And that's the audience she really needs to capture."

But Chuck Klosterman, a senior writer for Spin, said that Madonna's status is no longer connected to music or sales.

"She has transcended the role of being a musical artist," he said. "This record coming out is really just a vehicle to reintroduce her presence into the cultural bloodstream. She is no longer in a position to be a commercial juggernaut."

Still, Madonna is the master of reinvention. Just when people are ready to count her out, she jumps back in the game. She set an example for today's young female artists by taking charge of her career and flaunting her independence. She leapt onto the cultural stage in 1985 at
independence. She leapt onto the cultural stage in 1985 at the MTV Music Video Awards when she lip-synched "Like a Virgin" while writhing on the floor in a thrift-store wedding dress. Many young women have followed in her path, including Ms. Aguilera and Pink. And by making overt sexuality part of her act, she even paved the way for hip-hop artists like Lil' Kim, who made waves by going nearly topless to the MTV awards.

Madonna remains a formidable businesswoman as co-chairwoman of Maverick/Warner Brothers Records, a joint venture. The 19-year-old Grammy winner Michelle Branch is signed to the label. Madonna has outlasted most music stars who are her contemporaries, including Whitney Houston, Michael Jackson, Cyndi Lauper, George Michael and Bobby Brown. And her die-hard fans will still pack a stadium to see a performance.

In 2001, even though touring musical acts in general were experiencing a downturn in audiences, Madonna played to 500,000 fans on a sold-out, 48-date North American tour, that grossed more than $100 million, Ms. Rosenberg said.

Ms. Rosenberg said that Madonna would always have a place in pop culture. She recently wrote a series of children's books for Penguin Books.

"People are always interested in what she does," Ms. Rosenberg said. "She has had an unprecedented success as a musical artist. I don't know anyone else who has accomplished what she has. Her staying power is there. She has interesting and provocative things to say. She is not afraid."

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