

## Houston has star potential but needs time to mature

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**WHITNEY HOUSTON** - At Berklee Performance Center with comic Rich Ceisler Sunday night.

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Whitney Houston has almost everything it takes to be a star. She's got the right voice (a rich, flexible soprano), the right look (she's a part-time fashion model) and the right connections (her mother is gospel star Cissy Houston of the Sweet Inspirations, and her first cousin is Dionne Warwick). She also has the audience: She had a No. 1 soul hit this year with "You Give Good Love," and she attracted two large houses (one full, one nearly full) to Berklee this week. Not bad for a 21-year-

old whose first album just came out this summer.

The one thing Houston lacks is a strong personality. Her Berklee show was often dazzling as she wrapped her voice around a dozen love ballads and soft-funk numbers. Onstage she's a model of cool elegance: She never talks or moves too much, and never gets too close to the audience. But one hopes for a bit of passion behind the elegance, a glimpse of fire with the ice. And Houston didn't always deliver. She gave her voice a workout but held back on warmth.

The problems came when she didn't pay attention to lyrics. When she sang "I'm Changing" (from the musical "Dreamgirls"), she pulled every vocal trick she could muster and built to a long,

showy finale. Her technique was impressive, but she sang everything at full force, ignoring the lyric's shifts between confidence and self-doubt. Far better were "Love Will Find a Way" (a sunny Lionel Richie tune) and "Saving My Love for You" (where Houston finally showed some emotion, playing the "other woman" in a love triangle).

The other rough spot was a set of three duets. On her album, Houston sings love songs with Teddy Pendergrass ("Hold Me") and Jermaine Jackson ("Nobody Loves Me like You Do" and "Take Good Care of My Heart"). Neither star was in town last weekend, so Houston sang all three tunes with her brother, Gary Garland. Their voices made a smooth blend, but

they had to soften the tunes' suggestive moods. Lyrics like "Hold me tonight, fill my life with pleasure" just weren't made for a brother and sister to sing together.

The hit "You Give Good Love" made a steamy finale, but Houston seemed like a promising talent who needs time to mature. With more heart and less showing off, she could be moving instead of merely impressive.

Local comic Rich Ceisler delivered a half-hour of rapid-fire gags, which failed only when he lapsed into questionable taste. High point: timely jabs at Hurricane Gloria and football star Doug Flutie. Low point: a joke about AIDS, not the best topic for humor.