

Music Notes

The Wainwright stuff



By MICHAEL GILTZ

If music critics were more powerful, pop singer/songwriter Rufus Wainwright would have a triple-platinum album by now. Instead, his self-titled debut on DreamWorks Records has sold only 35,000 copies — about one for every adoring review and profile he's received. And the two years he spent recording the album has left him saddled with debt.

But it doesn't really bother the 25-year-old, who played the Supper Club last Wednesday. "I like it in a weird way. It's a challenge to try and make money in the music industry."

That pursuit has also challenged his parents. His father is Loudon Wainwright III, an erstwhile bit player on the TV series "M*A*S*H" and a troubador with 16 albums and a cult audience to his credit. And his mom is Kate of Kate and Anna McGarrigle, one of the most acclaimed folk-pop duos of the last few decades. Yet, neither parent has ever been within shouting distance of a hit.

"I don't know how my mother did it," says Wainwright, whose parents divorced when he was very young. "It's amazing because she's been in this business for a long time and she never made any money. She hardly ever toured; her records hardly sold at all.

Singer follows his family into obscurity

But I had a great childhood — not luxurious or anything, but definitely above average."

Residual checks from "M*A*S*H" came in handy, and a Nike ad his dad worked on ("It was something about golf," he says) helped put him through boarding school, a place immortalized in his single "Millbrook."

It must have been at Millbrook where Wainwright learned history, because his charmingly idiosyncratic debut owes a debt to Americana, much in the manner of Stephen Foster and George Gershwin. But his parents' musical history — in the form of critical hosannas and commercial obscurity — may not repeat itself in junior's case. So many critics' polls, including those in Rolling Stone, Spin and Entertainment Weekly, have touted Wainwright's CD, that it's been given new life. And capitalizing on that, Wainwright has just filmed a video for "April Fools," his likeliest hit single. He's also taped an episode of MTV's "120 Minutes," which

airs at midnight on March 28, and is auditioning musicians for another round of club dates.

"It's bizarre," says Wainwright, "because my body knows that I'm going to go on tour for three months, yet I stay in my hotel a lot — not going out, eating a lot of chocolate."

His body has responded more positively in other ways to the constant performing. "My voice is a lot better now after touring so much and being on the road," he says. "For instance, 'Imaginary Love' [the sweepingly romantic tune that closes the album], that song — when I first recorded it — I lost my voice for two days. It was really challenging, and now I sing it every night."

Other facets of his life have improved, too. The openly gay Wainwright made hay of unrequited love on many of his debut album's best tracks and readily admits, "I can't write those songs about, 'And I love you cause you're there and we're together.' I like, 'I love you because ... you're not there.'"

Still, a touch of fame has definitely improved his social life. "It's gotten a lot better lately," says Wainwright. But isn't he worried about groupies? "Yeah, you have to second-guess them," Wainwright laughs, "but, then, they ought to second-guess you, too."

Critically acclaimed, audience-deprived.