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*From the Baltimore Sun*

## Bald Britney exudes both sheer strength, sheer madness

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There's more buzz about pop star Britney Spears, and this time it's about a buzz of her own making -- a buzz cut, that is.

Britney's gone bald.

At a Los Angeles salon this past weekend, the singer apparently decided to shave off her locks, causing many observers to debate the state of her mental health.

Some have called the spontaneous shearing a cry for help. Others say the move might indicate the onset of a nervous breakdown. Then there are those who say the sudden baldness might be positive for Spears -- a step toward redefining herself and taking control of her seemingly unstable life.

She recently split from husband Kevin Federline on the heels of back-to-back births of baby boys. She's been criticized about her parenting, stalked by a scornful media, and hasn't recorded a CD in years.

And now this.

Whether self-empowerment or self-mutilation, experts agree: Spears' haircut says something.

"For women, hair is so significant," says Nancy O'Reilly, a clinical psychologist and founder of WomenSpeak.com, who says Spears' lack of hair was a hot topic at a luncheon for therapists yesterday.

"This is something we discussed, and actually the consensus around the table [was] we didn't see it necessarily as a cry for help at all. It's really almost a coming out for her. Let's face it, when you cut the pretty blond hair off, you say, 'Love me, not my hair. Love me, not my beauty. Love me, not my fame.'"

Maxwell Manning, a clinical instructor at the School of Social Work at the University of Maryland, Baltimore, agrees, saying Spears appears to be going through a transition period or a growth period, and shaving her hair is just an outward symbol.

"When people go through experiences like this, they are often trying to get a better handle on themselves and who they are and how they want to express themselves," Manning says. "They try different things to see how that feels."

Charlon Bobo, 42, knows exactly what Manning is talking about.

The Simi Valley, Calif., self-empowerment facilitator decided more than four years ago to go bald and says she has never

felt so good.

"It was an impulse that came to me one day, and it had to do with claiming my personal power," says Bobo, who now teaches other women how to do just that. "I see this multibillion-dollar beauty industry, and it wants women to feel badly about themselves. It wants to keep us consuming. It wants us to think there's this magic something, and if we just buy it then we'll be fulfilled and whole. [My decision] wasn't militant, but it was like, 'You know what? I'm good with me. I'm not here to please you visually.'"

Bobo says she gets varied reactions from people about her close cut, many negative, which is why she refuses to judge Spears.

"I know that this was the right thing for her, whatever her foundation was. Maybe she is in a crisis, I don't know. But I can have compassion for her as a fellow woman," Bobo says. "At that moment, for her, that was her moment of clarity."

Other observers say only one thing is clear about Spears' new look: The one-time golden girl of pop needs help.

"Her statement is glaring: She's obviously miserable about her entire life," says Dr. Gilda Carle, a psychotherapist who has been featured on The Oprah Winfrey Show.

Carle, who goes by Dr. Gilda, takes note of the many issues in Spears' life that might have contributed to the pop star's reaching a new low, including her pending divorce, stagnant music career and constant lampooning in the media.

"She's been put down over her choice of friends and her tacky undress code," Carle says. "She tried rehab for a day and left. She had nowhere else to go but to mutilate whatever remained of her insane image in a symbolic attempt to clean out the demons and start fresh."

Since Biblical times, Europeans have believed that women should have long hair, says Steve Zdatny, a hair historian and history professor at West Virginia University.

"So, when you see short hair, there's got to be something going on," says Zdatny, author of *Hairstyles and Fashion: A Hairdresser's History of Paris, 1910-1920*. "It's almost never the case that women cut their hair the way Britney Spears cut hers."

Spears, 25, is not the first female celebrity to appear in public with a military-style cut. In the 1990s, pop/rock star Sinéad O'Connor went bald and nary a critic complained. Actress Demi Moore proudly sported a buzz cut she got for a movie role and earned much praise for her "brave" look.

And when Melissa Etheridge performed at the Grammy Awards two years ago -- hairless after enduring treatments for breast cancer -- people cheered her strength.

But Spears is no O'Connor, experts are quick to point out.

"Demi Moore, Sinéad O'Connor and Melissa Etheridge all had brands as strong and talented women before their buzz cuts," says Vicki Kunkel, CEO of Leader Brand Strategists, an executive and celebrity branding company. "Britney's brand ... has been one of a lost and confused individual."

Indeed, since the haircut, Spears hasn't exuded a "bald, bold and beautiful" attitude. According to news reports, she has recently been spotted wearing wigs, both dark and blond.

UMB's Manning says it's too soon to tell whether Spears' impulsive decision to shave her head will ultimately be the nadir for the struggling new mother.

"Sometimes, when we go through these kinds of challenges, it actually makes us stronger," Manning says. "And sometimes they do challenge us to the point where we do things to ask for help."

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