



SPECIAL FEATURE

REAL LOVE FOR MARY

WITH HER NEW ALBUM *DUE*, BLIGE'S ADMIRERS LOOK BACK AT HER PATH TO STARDOM

Expectations are high for Mary J. Blige's Dec. 18 release "Growing Pains," and if the reverence of her music industry peers is any indication, she is indeed on top of her game.

"Right now, as far as contemporary music, I would say she's the greatest singer out there," Interscope Geffen A&M Records chairman Jimmy Iovine says. "Her work ethic is extraordinary, and she's very clear on what her vision is yet open to a lot of input, which is also extraordinary."

Other illustrious Blige associates offer variations on Iovine's theme.

"She's the most evolved and most significant singer of popular music today," Geffen Records chairman Ron Fair says. "Her appeal is universal, and the combination of this God-given voice and the realness of how she interprets a song puts her in an unparalleled category."

Christopher Hicks plays an important A&R role for Blige as CEO of Noontime Music, as well as being senior VP/head of urban music at Warner/Chappell Music and senior VP of urban music at Atlantic Records. He echoes Fair's opinion: "Without sounding too over the top, she's probably the hardest-working artist I've ever been in contact with. She makes everything you give her much better—and she's a living icon, yet still the most humble person to work with, who makes the job not a job but

an event. I kid you not."

And then there's Elton John.

"I've been a fan since her first album, when she was a really rough hip-hop artist and something struck a chord with me," John says. "Her voice, for starters, was an amazing instrument, but there was something about her. I followed the interviews and she really was an angry girl—but something fascinated me about her. And then I met her and she was so shy, and I fell in love with her the moment I met her."

Perhaps producer Terry Lewis points to the essence of Blige: "She does everything from her heart—with passion."

"She's an incredible workaholic, Lewis continues. "She's a doer, not a talker, and always has an incredible concept and understanding of who she is and who she's been and who she's becoming—and that's really important, too."

Hence Blige's new album, "Growing Pains," the much-anticipated follow-up to her blockbuster 2005 album "The Breakthrough."

The Bronx-born Blige has been progressing in all facets of her extraordinary career since it began in 1989. That's when she signed to Andre Harrell's Uptown Records after label ex-

STARS

BY JIM BESSMAN

ecutives heard her cover of Anita Baker's "Rapture," which she recorded on a karaoke machine at a local shopping mall.

At first she sang backup for such local label artists as Father MC. But former intern and budding A&R executive Sean "Puffy" Combs

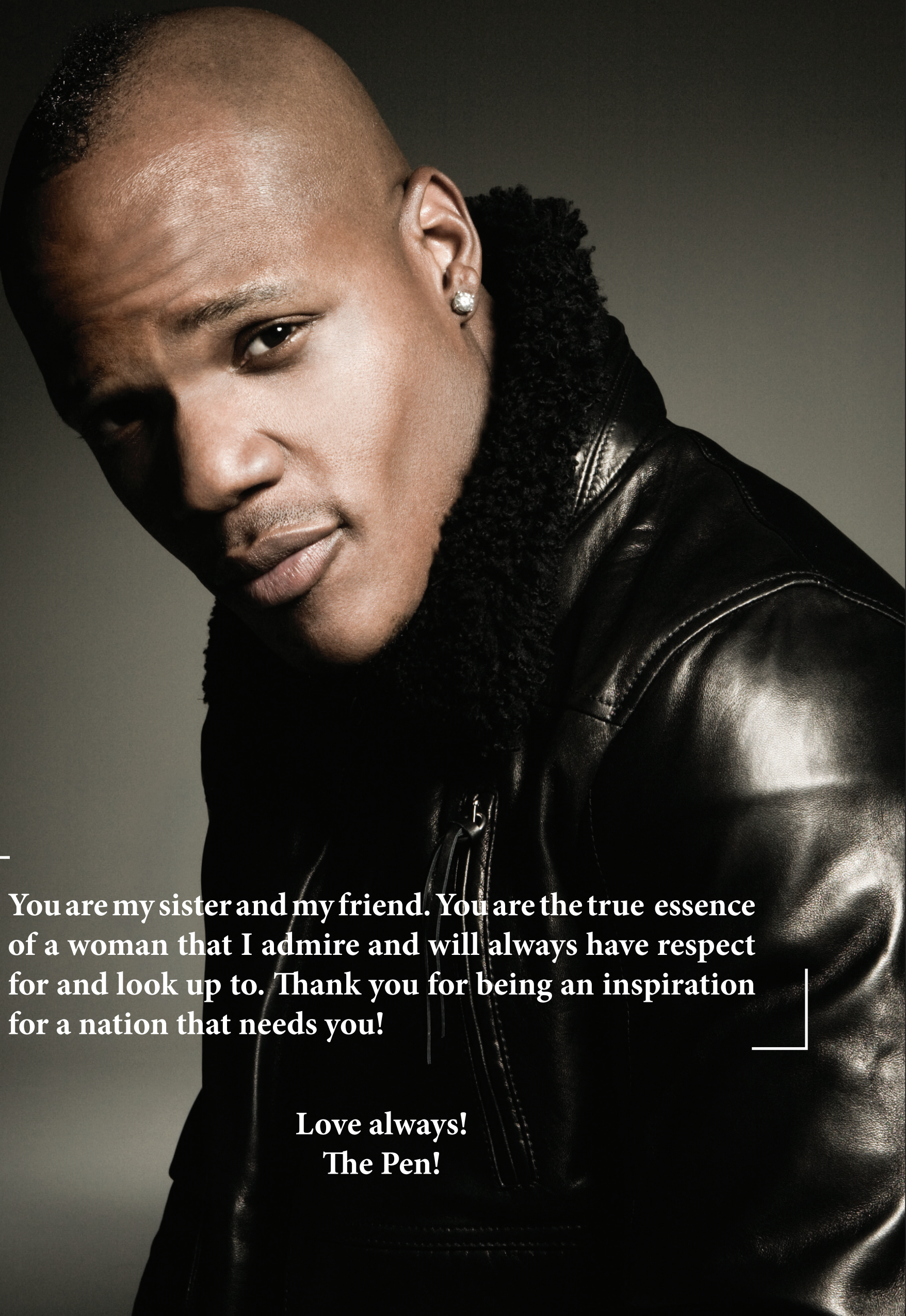
took a liking to her and extensively shaped her 1992 debut album "What's the 411?" from the production and songwriting sides.

"She burst on the scene," Geffen GM Jeff Harleston says, "and what made her so unique at the time, and what I would say contributes to her continued vitality, is creatively she was the first R&B singer to sing over what were considered to be hip-hop tracks, instead of [singing] smoothed-out R&B, which she does as well."

It was also a huge hit commercially, Harleston adds, "instantly connecting with fans because of her realism: She always says it exactly the way it is and has continued to do so musically and when she speaks."

"What's the 411?" earned Blige Soul Train Awards for best new artist and best R&B album, female. Its 1994 follow-up, "My Life," took the Soul Train Lady of Soul Award and album of the year by a solo female artist, as well as Billboard's R&B album of the year honor.

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You are my sister and my friend. You are the true essence of a woman that I admire and will always have respect for and look up to. Thank you for being an inspiration for a nation that needs you!

**Love always!
The Pen!**

[CONTENT]
CONTENT MUSIC GROUP

MJ,

I was trying to find the right word to describe you.

Icon – (noun) \ i-kän \ – One who is the object of great attention and devotion.

You are truly the very best.

Chris

FROM THE OFFICE OF CHRISTOPHER HICKS

20 MILLION ALBUMS SOLD • 6-TIME GRAMMY® WINNER

Mary,

YOU INSPIRE US
WITH YOUR
TALENT, DEDICATION AND TRIUMPHANT SPIRIT.

CONGRATULATIONS ON YOUR
CONTINUED SUCCESS!

LOVE,
DOUG
&

THE ENTIRE UNIVERSAL MUSIC GROUP FAMILY



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from >>p32 feeling during the Grammys: “Am I good enough for this; do I really deserve all this in my life?” But something in my head said, “Yes, you are. Now you’re forced to rapidly grow up in this area in order to achieve and get the things you want.” All this was in my poem and everything else I’d been writing.

I read everything to Ne-Yo. He came back with not only some of the words that were in my poem but with songs that matched up to where I’m going and where I’m at in my life. He’s such a sweet man, a gentleman who respects women. When I got a chance to sit down with him and talk . . . you know, men don’t usually relate to or understand women on that level. He just totally understood.

You also worked with Timbaland and reunited with Bryan-Michael Cox and the Clutch. What must a songwriter/producer bring to the table when working with you?

Writers definitely have to come with something that relates to where I’m at and where I’m going. It has to be like I’m [the one] writing when I’m writing with them.

Was any thought given to working again with Dr. Dre?

I’m fiending to work with him again. But he’s recording his new album, “Detox.” He hasn’t done his own album in a while, so he’s busy with that. And I understand about doing your own thing. But I’ll wait for him to do a remix, anything, no problem.

Does your alter ego Brook Lynn from “Enough Cryin” make another appearance?

She does. She doesn’t have a really great voice. But she actually sings on this song called “Nowhere Fast,” and she’s really pissed off. She’s singing for all the women who are in these long relationships and got all these kids by these men. And the men are walking out. She’s



MARY J. BLIGE and SEAN ‘DIDDY’ COMBS in October 2001 at a Los Angeles studio to remix the single ‘No More Drama,’ which peaked at No. 15 on The Billboard Hot 100.

telling them, “You ain’t going nowhere till you give me some child support, love or something.” It’s such a stretch, though, musically. But hot, lyrically. You have to hear it.

You’re on TV now with a car commercial and have done some occasional acting in the past. Now that you’ve conquered the music world, is acting the next frontier?

It’s my goal to do more acting if it works for me. I’m not trying to get into the film business just because I’m Mary J. Blige. I don’t want to make a fool of myself with everybody laughing and talking about me like a dog. I want to get it right [laughs]. A lot of scripts have come my way. It’s just about choosing the right one.

I actually went to read for a film role and could have gotten the part. It was for a director who, being new himself, didn’t want to take a chance on a new person. So he wanted to go with a more seasoned actress. But the feedback I got behind the scenes was that I was great at my reading. So the word is out that I can do this.

Was it a dramatic role?

Yes. I would have played the part of woman named Linda, whose husband was a crooked cop who got killed. In the **continued on >>p40**

DYNAMIC DUETS

Blige’s Take On Her Hitmaking Partners

Usher, Akon, Ludacris and Busta Rhymes are among the guests due to sing with Mary J. Blige on her new album, “Growing Pains.”

It turns out her favorite artists are just as big of fans of hers as she is of theirs.

“People will put in calls to my management, saying they want to work with me,” she says. “What’s strange is that a lot of these calls are from people whose work I love and they don’t even know it. So when they call, it’s like, ‘Wow, this is a blessing; a dream come true.’ ”

Among the duet partners on earlier recordings who have helped Blige realize her dreams:

LUDACRIS, “Runaway Love”: “Ludacris and I had a whole lot of chemistry on ‘Runaway Love.’ The people I choose to work with like him, George Michael [on Stevie Wonder’s “As”] and others are not full of themselves. They don’t have airs and don’t get on my nerves with that superstar stuff.”

METHOD MAN, “I’ll Be There for You/You’re All I Need to Get By”: “He is one of my all-time favorite duet partners. Method Man really cares about me. I’m like the little sister

he watches over. This duet was done during a time when we were having fun and just living any kind of way. But at the end of the day, Method Man was and is very supportive of Mary J. Blige.”

ARETHA FRANKLIN, “Don’t Waste My Time”: “My mother is also such a huge fan of hers that I had to bring her to the studio. She was like a little kid around Aretha [laughs]. But Aretha is the mother of all of us, and we respect her like that. She is beautiful, strong and not taking any prisoners. Aretha is coming for everything you’ve got.”

CHAKA KHAN, “Disrespectful”: “That’s my dog, let me tell you. I’ve loved my Chaka Khan ever since I was a kid. I must have bought the ‘Ask Rufus’ album at least 20 times because I would wear it out. I love her because she’s real and speaks her mind. She also reminds of my mother, because my mother makes me laugh like that.”

WYCLEF JEAN, “911”: “I don’t think he knows how funny he is. He’s got this great sense of humor. He’s like family as well; he always tells us what’s really going on. And he’s built to give you some kind of hit.”

COMMON, “Come Close to Me”: “Oh, my God. This is another one of my favorites. Common is really nice, mannerable, a gentleman.”

U2, “One”: “They’re great people. If I ever needed them for anything, I know I could call them. Most people will say a person can’t be that nice, but Bono truly is.” —Gail Mitchell



BLIGE, left, and KHAN

“ ‘No More Drama.’ That was the one where she finally summed it all up and started to turn her life around, kind of where she started to acknowledge where she was and try to make changes in her life—to do better and be better. It was the sum of everything she was going through, and I remember when we played it and gave her the concept, she said, ‘You guys know me so well,’ and I think that’s why her delivery of it is so powerful.”

—TERRY LEWIS, PRODUCER

“ ‘Be Happy.’ It’s the one that was probably the most impactful to me as far as back when I thought I was running her fan club from my studio. It was the first single from the second album—just a real simple song, and the formula of that record was to take great sample loops and have her do her thing over the top. I liked it because it’s one of the first attempts in her life lyrically where she could be happy and feel better about herself, when the rest of the album is sort of downbeat.”

—JIMMY JAM, PRODUCER

Dear Mary,

I am so happy for all of your success. No one deserves it more. Your drive is inspiring, your strength is unbreakable, and as far as your class goes...well darling, your class deserves a class of its own. I salute you as a queen.

But most of all I am proud to say that I lived in the time of a giant. I am proud say that I lived in the time of Mary J. Blige!

Love always,
JOHNTA



Johnta Austin.... A Brand Name

CONGRATULATIONS

*on this special occasion
celebrating your extraordinary
career and accomplishments.*

*We have had the pleasure
of working with you since
the beginning and look forward
to many more years in the future.*

*We wish you continued success
and the best of everything in life,
you certainly deserve it!*

ALAN HAYMON

and your friends at

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THE-DREAM



JAZZE PHA



KUK HARRELL



MARY

THANK YOU FOR THE PRIVILEGE OF
COLLABORATING WITH YOU ON THIS MASTERPIECE.

MANAGEMENT: MARK E. STEWART & JUDI ACOSTA-STEWART

[CONTENT]

DOING JUST FINE

MARY J. BLIGE TALKS TO BILLBOARD ABOUT GAINING SELF-AWARENESS THROUGH GROWING PAINS

BY GAIL MITCHELL

Everyone loves a good comeback story. And this time last year, Mary J. Blige was the central character in her own inspiring fable.

The husky-voiced Queen of Hip-Hop Soul was just days away from a career-crowning achievement: the artist with the most Grammy Award nominations (eight) for her 2005 studio album, "The Breakthrough." The aptly titled release, featuring the mega-hit "Be Without You," musically symbolized Blige's hard-won, years-long fight against the personal demons—a troubled childhood, drug addiction, an abusive relationship—that fueled the raw, painful honesty of her fan-winning artistry.

On the eve of flying to South Africa to begin promoting her December follow-up album, "Growing Pains," an ever-frank Blige shared her perspective on life after "The Breakthrough."

When you were recording "The Breakthrough," did you get a sixth sense that it was going to be *the* album?

Yes, I knew exactly what I had and that everything was going to work out because I had done the work. I had separated myself from depending on other people; my husband and I just depended on each other and on God. We just rocked out. It was us: back to back, laughing and fighting [laughs], and that's how we're doing this one. As many people as want to get involved now, we're like, "OK, that's cool. You can get involved." But at the end of the day, we're going to be the ones to do the rest of the work on this album.

Was it more or less intimidating going back into the studio after the success of "The Breakthrough?"

We were coming out of a valley, so to speak, with "The Breakthrough." Everyone had run away and turned their backs on us. And that was cool. We love them still, and we forgive them. But it's been easier doing "Growing Pains" because now you don't have anything to try to conquer. It's like you've accomplished everything you set out to do. You've done the hard work to be where you are. Now, though, you've got to work harder to deliver based on that confidence. Not that I was lax on anything or taking anything for granted because "The Breakthrough" did so well. I worked just as hard, maybe even harder, on this album.

Talk about your recording process.

I have to come from a place of honesty within myself. Not from a place that everyone is expecting to hear, like something already on the radio. I can't duplicate what everyone else is doing. That's almost like I'm comparing myself to other people, and I don't like to do that. So I sit and write down where I'm coming from at that time. I start writing based on my reality, then I pick songs based on my ear and the reality of what radio sounds like.

So I cross the two worlds with the youth of the situation where people just want to have a good time and not really listen to any content. But how do you get them to listen to something with content?

You give them great music.

They won't even know they're listening to content if they're listening to great music or great beats. That's how I go into it.

You went uptempo this time with first single "Just Fine." What was your reaction to the song when you first heard it in the studio?

It wasn't presented to me as a complete song initially. I had gone down to Atlanta to work with Tricky [Stewart], Dream and Jazze Pha. They began to play this keyboard part and then the drums. Then they explained to me, "We know what you're used to, but you'll be a part of a whole other party if you go with this record that we're about to make." I went back to my room and when I came back the next day,



MARY J. BLIGE performs Oct. 21 at the Grand West Arena at Grand West Casino in Cape Town, South Africa.

they had the whole song.

When I heard the beat, I was like, "OK, this is hot. This is making my body move, and I'm having fun." It sounded like something that needed to be more uplifting than "woe is me" [laughs]. So I tried to make the song about how I appreciate the good days I do have and where I'm at right now, even though I still have challenges. But some of my days are fine. That's what I wanted to say lyrically. People do enjoy the good days that they have and where they are in their lives. If they're asked how they're doing, most will say, "Just fine. I've got a job. I've got my health." So that's how that song came about.

Among your collaborators on this new project is Ne-Yo.

Ne-Yo is an incredible kid. He nailed everything. I began writing for this album in February around the time of the Grammys and the [Academy Award] parties. I started out with this concept of growing pains because that's how I was

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"I was part of the production [of "Be Without You"] that went on to become the longest-running No. 1 on Billboard's [R&B/hip-hop] chart—and that's, of course, a major, major thrill. And I conducted and arranged her performance of it at the Grammy Awards: It was a privilege for a music guy like myself to work with an artist of her stature who is also the most disciplined professional person I've ever worked with. To see somebody with that level of success working that hard and putting in the hours and doing the rehearsals and still be working like it's her first year is an inspiration."

—RON FAIR, CHAIRMAN,
Geffen Records

"'Real Love.' This is just classic, vintage Mary. I was in law school at Duke in January 1992 and went to her concert with a bunch of friends in Durham, N.C., and it was a true highlight of my law school experience."

—ANDREA NELSON MEIGS,
Blige's agent at
International Creative
Management



From left: BRYAN-MICHAEL COX, KENDU ISAACS, MARY J. BLIGE and JOHNTA AUSTIN in September 2006 at New York's Right Track Studios.

PRIDE AND PREJUDICE

Mary J. Blige Reveals Which Of Her Songs Are Closest To Her Heart

Every artist has favorite songs that define his or her career, and Mary J. Blige is no exception. Among her faves in a string of chart hits dating back to 1992 are "Love No Limit" and "My Life." However, four other titles immediately came to mind when Blige was asked which songs mean the most to her:

'YOU REMIND ME' (FROM 1992'S 'WHAT'S THE 411?')

"All I ever wanted to do was sing. I know this song doesn't have a lot of heavy content. But this was one of the first songs I wrote, so I call it my first baby, my first child. It makes me feel weird when I hear it. . . that song came out of me getting a record deal because of my singing in a little singing booth at a galleria mall."

'BE HAPPY' (1994'S 'MY LIFE')

"At that point, I wanted to really, really be happy because I needed to make a choice between life and death. And I didn't even realize I was writing that song as a choice between life and death until later in my life. The lyrics underscore that life can be what you make it. This is definitely an important song for me."

'NO MORE DRAMA' (2001'S 'NO MORE DRAMA')

"I didn't physically write this song, but it feels like I wrote it. It was what my entire life was. I was just tired, tired, tired of hurting so bad."

'BE WITHOUT YOU' (2005'S 'THE BREAKTHROUGH')

"The song marks a place where I never thought I would be: actually singing a beautiful love song about being with—not without—someone for the rest of my life."

—Gail Mitchell

from >>pXX "In many respects, it was her deepest, darkest record, but it did equally well, somewhere between 2 [million] and 3 million copies," Harleston says of the Combs-guided project. "Andre [Harrell] had crowned her 'the queen of hip-hop soul' and it stuck and really applied, but this really established her as an R&B singer."

So respected was Blige by now that Babyface included her among the likes of R&B divas Whitney Houston, Chaka Khan and Aretha Franklin on the 1995 "Waiting to Exhale" soundtrack, which yielded one of her biggest pop hits in the Grammy Award-nominated "Not Gon' Cry."

"She was crossing over from R&B to pop, and all the while, her profile was growing," Harleston says. "People were really reaching out to her."

She shared a Grammy the following year for best rap performance by a duo or group for her duet with Method Man on "I'll Be There for You/You're All I Need to Get By."

"She collaborated with rappers on her early records and in 'My Life,' then she graduated to 'Share My World' and grew even more," Harleston says, referring to Blige's 1997 MCA release.

After her live album "The Tour" in 1998, "Mary" followed in 1999, garnering a Soul Train Music Award for best R&B/soul album, female and Soul Train Lady of Soul Awards for R&B/soul album of the year, solo and R&B/soul or rap song of the year (for "All That I Can Say," which was produced by and featured Lauryn Hill).

"She had always written some, but with 'Mary,' she really started writing more and was much more involved in the A&R assembly and production," Harleston says. "She collaborated with Elton John on 'Deep Inside,' which sampled 'Bennie and the Jets' and took her in another direction."

Then in 2001 came "No More Drama," which debuted at No. 1 and went triple-platinum.

"Everything else had been at least double-platinum," Harleston says. "But this was really a peak for her in the sense that she was even more involved in assembling and producing. Dr. Dre gave her the 'Family Affair,' track, and she and her brother wrote to it and created her first No. 1 pop hit, and she rolled with it and the album sold 5 million worldwide, cracking her overseas. And the

title track was a big record."

The album earned five Grammy nominations but no wins. MCA then reissued the album in January 2002 with additional tracks that included "He Think I Don't Know," which did win a Grammy.

Blige continued touring and in 2003 appeared on Sting's "Sacred Love" album, winning another Grammy the following year for its duet "Whenever I Say Your Name." Her own next album, "Love & Life," reunited her with producer Combs and was accompanied by a label change to Geffen.

"It was the dip in her career," Harleston says. "It sold just a million, which is still significant, but was perceived as not her greatest work. . . [but] it was still Mary."

Now with new management in husband Kendu Isaacs—himself a musician/songwriter who was heavily involved in the creative process—she returned to the studio, emerging with the aptly titled "The Breakthrough" in 2005. Her seventh studio album was produced by a team of luminaries including Bryan-Michael Cox, Rodney Jerkins, will.i.am, Jam & Lewis, Dre & Vidal, Johnta Austin and Raphael Saadiq. It topped the charts and yielded her second No. 1 pop hit in "Be Without You" and won three Grammys out of eight nominations.

On the eve of the release of "Growing Pains," Andrea Nelson Meigs, Blige's talent agent at ICM, notes that with her immense following and coming off the success of her last album, Blige is perfectly positioned for a breakthrough of another sort.

"People see her as every girl's girl, every woman's woman," Meigs says. "Everyone can relate to her: She speaks openly of her ups and downs, and her career and personal life crosses color and gender and, frankly, age, because she has a huge younger audience as well as a more mature one."

To top it off, Blige has partnered with MAC Cosmetics on the AIDS awareness and fund-raising Viva Glam campaign, and she has been honored for community activism with Rock the Vote's Patrick Lippert Award.

"She's continued to evolve," Harleston says. "She sets a creative direction on everything she does, which allows her to sing from a certain place that drives home the realism, which is the big factor in why she's still so relevant."

BEST OF BLIGE

Billboard asked Mary J. Blige's collaborators and industry colleagues to tell us their favorite Blige song and what makes it special.

Quotes compiled by Jim Bessman.

"'No More Drama.' It's her 'Stairway to Heaven,' her 'Born to Run.' The song of hers that encompasses all the emotions in her life that her audience relates to.

—JIMMY IOVINE, CHAIRMAN, INTERSCOPE GEFEN A&M RECORDS

"I'm an in-depth Mary J. Blige fan, and she did 'You Gotta Believe' on 'My Life.' Music is a time stamp, and I was at an interesting point in my life then and it stuck with me. Even though it was never a single, it's definitely my favorite."

—CHRISTOPHER HICKS, SENIOR VP OF A&R AND HEAD OF URBAN MUSIC, WARNER/CHAPPELL

"'What's the 411?' 'Cause as a producer, she captures the true essence of everyday life."

—WYCLEF JEAN

Dear Mary,
It is a privilege
and an honor
to be a part
of your wonderful
career and life.

Allen Grubman Kenny Meiselas Sonya Guardo

from >>p36 role, I was mourning for my husband. So I had to go to dark places in my own life to do that. I remembered mourning over my cousin when he got killed; I remembered an abusive relationship. I had to rewind my life to play that role. The songs that made me go there were Roy Ayers' "Everybody Loves the Sunshine" and "Searching." Those were the songs I was playing heavily when those events were happening in my life. I really didn't like to go there, but I had to [for the reading]. I kept crying over and over when I was in the car afterward.

Getting back to music, what plans do you have for your Matriarch label?

Matriarch is up and running, and Dave Young will be the first artist up to bat. You'll be hearing from him soon. He's got a voice that's been missing in R&B. It's incredibly soulful: He's like our Donny [Hathaway] that we don't have, our Marvin Gaye, Sam Cooke, Tyrone Davis . . . He's an R&B baby from Los Angeles. He also writes songs. He wrote with me on "The Breakthrough" album: "No One Will Do," "Baggage" and "MJB da MVP."



Interscope Geffen A&M Records chairman JIMMY IOVINE and MARY J. BLIGE Jan. 11, 2006, at Blige's surprise birthday party.

Who is at the top of your wish list to still work with?

When and if I do a jazz album, I'd want to work with Anita Baker. I love her. She's got to know I'm a huge fan. There's also the possibility that I'd do a gospel album. Everyone always asks that question, and I believe I would.

Growing up, were gospel and jazz major musical influences?

Not really. It was more whatever was playing in my house. When I was a little girl, about 4 years old, I remember hearing "Everybody Loves the Sunshine." That's the reason why I know who Roy Ayers is. My father was a musician, a bass player, and he had a band. As a kid, you're looking at all this, listening to his band play every song you're hearing. From his end, it was all about everything from Parliament to the Grateful Dead. My mother was the soul chick. She had everything from Candi Staton and Gladys Knight to Dorothy Moore, Sam Cooke, Bobby Womack and Otis Redding. She'd be around the house singing all these songs.

When I was 5 years old, I remember listening to the radio and it seemed like the only radio stations around were the soft rock radio stations like WABC and WNBC, where you'd hear Marilyn McCoo [she breaks into "You Don't Have to Be a Star"] and "Sara Smile" [by Hall & Oates], all those kinds of songs.

So I got a mixture of stuff as a child. And as a teenager, hip-hop hit. I was able then to hang outside, and that's what was playing all around like the Sugar Hill Gang [starts mimicking beats]. Then Run-D.M.C. came, Rakim came, and then just everybody.

If you could use only one phrase or one word to describe the evolution of Mary J. Blige the artist, what would that be?

Then: Starting to wake up. Now: Aware [laughs].

Now that you're aware, what would you do differently if you were just starting out?

I would probably behave [laughs]. I can't change what I was because I didn't know any better. But if I'd have known then what I do now, I wouldn't have done any of that stupid stuff.

Wouldn't that have affected your music, given that it's derived from your life experiences?

That's true. But you know, showing up 10 hours late for an interview or not showing up at all? That doesn't have anything to do with anything. That's just stupidity. I wish I'd done that differently instead of [in a mimicking voice], "I'm not going. I'm hung over. I'm staying home" [laughs]. Meanwhile, you've got interviewers and all these people at photo shoots waiting for you who don't care about any of that. They're just there to do their jobs and you don't show up. And now you're difficult.

Early on, you were tagged "the Queen of Hip-Hop Soul." Do you ever tire of that moniker?

There's nothing I can do about it because it's something I've earned. I would never disrespect it. Hip-hop is not something that you ultimately hear. It's a culture we grew up in, and it became us. This is the way we think, walk and talk. There's a lot of intelligence in hip-hop.

A person doesn't have to slump all over, curse or act stupid to do hip-hop. Look at Erykah Badu, D'Angelo or Jill Scott. They live in that culture and you can hear it in their music. It's what others labeled neo-soul, but which is an extension of hip-hop/soul. Jill Scott carries herself pretty nice. You can hear in her music those hip-hop influences. It's where she comes from in her heart. A Tribe Called Quest gave us jazz influences. And the Jungle Brothers was another rap group I loved. If you knew who they were, then you were really a hip-hopper. They made you feel good about the culture.

What are your thoughts on the ongoing controversy about rap lyrics?

Honestly, it's not just a song's fault or a lyric's fault. Parental guidance is very key with everything that's going on. You can have your child listen to all that, but it's up to you to say, "Look, that's what they do, but this is what you're going to do. You can't knock or judge them for what they do. But as your parent, this is what I would like for you to do, and it's the right thing to do." It's society as a whole that's the problem. It's not about a song doing the killing or making women promiscuous.

So are children in your future?

I have two young stepchildren, who are 8 and 9. They are my children, and I have to nurture them. I don't have room or time right now for a baby. At the end of the day . . . I don't know. If it happens, it happens. But right now it's not something on my radar.

Do you ever get tired of people asking you to tell your story?

I never get tired, because for some reason, they're asking. Who knows why they're asking me? It might not always be because it's their job. What if, out of all those people asking that question, there is one person who needs help? I don't know which person it is who may be asking the question. So I have to have the patience to answer it. Apparently, people still want to know how I did it, how hard was it for me and how I'm sustaining.

When you first came to prominence, you were called the next Chaka Khan and Aretha Franklin. How did that make you feel?

If you go back in time and read every Mary J. Blige interview, I would not accept that. It's not something I'd be proud to say I am. I've always given respect to the people who have paved the way for me. But Chaka Khan is Chaka Khan and Aretha Franklin is Aretha Franklin. I can never, ever be them or do what they have done. There's no "next" after an Aretha or a Chaka. But I can definitely do what Mary J. Blige does, and I've been doing what I do for years.

Do you want to be singing at age 50 or 60?

I don't know. That's up to the people. If they request it, I'll be there. But I'm not going to force myself into their lives. ●●●

"I don't want to sound biased, but I would have to say 'Be Without You,' because it's near and dear to me. It got us both at a point where we were making a breakthrough in our lives—me breaking through as a producer and getting to the next level and making a record like that and finally being recognized for my whole body of work. We were both going through points in our lives where we needed a breakthrough."

—BRYAN-MICHAEL COX,
SONGWRITER/PRODUCER

"'My Life.' [It's] the title track from her second album. Why? It is one of the most melodically and vocally expressive recordings I have ever heard. It encapsulates Mary J. Blige, her world, her struggle and her achievement."

—JEFF HARLESTON, GM,
Geffen Records

"'I Found My Everything.' I love that song. She sang it for me at my 60th birthday party."

—ELTON JOHN