

A Conversation With The Queen of Hip Hop: Mary J. Blige

Written by Kam Williams

Saturday, 13 August 2011 02:20



[Mary Jane Blige](#) is a chanteuse-songwriter, record producer, actress and trailblazer. She started her career with Uptown Records in 1989; she became the company's youngest and first female artist to be signed. In 1992, the debut album *What's the 411* was released and became an instant worldwide success. She is the only performer in American history with Grammy Award wins in Pop, Rap, Gospel and R&B. She has recorded eight multi-platinum albums. She sold over 50 million albums and 15 million singles worldwide.

In 2001, [Mary J. Blige](#) performed "Do Nothin' Till You Hear From Me" for the Red Hot Organization's compilation album *Red Hot + Indigo*, a tribute to Duke Ellington, which raised

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money for various charities dedicated to increasing AIDS awareness and fighting the disease. In 2004 Mary J. Blige founded her own record label, Matriarch Records, distributed through Interscope. In late 2005, Blige landed the starring role in the upcoming Mtelevision films biopic on American singer/pianist [Nina Simone](#). The film is supposed to be released in 2012. In January 2009, Mary J. Blige performed for Mr. President Obama at his inauguration and at The Neighborhood Inaugural Ball in January 20, 2009. It is also important to note that Mary J. Blige does philanthropic work. On January 23, 2010, Blige released a track "Hard Times Come Again No More" with The Roots and performed it at the Hope for Haiti Now telethon. Blige also performed on BET's SOS Help For Haiti, singing "Gonna Make It" with Jazmine Sullivan and "One." Blige also participated in February 2010's We Are the World 25 for Haiti, singing the solo originally sung by Tina Turner in the original 1985 We Are The World version. On May 9, 2008, The Mary J. Blige and Steve Toute Foundation for the Advancement of Women Now, Inc. (FFAWN) was inaugurated. Its purpose is to inspire females to reach their full potential. The organization grants scholarships and programs which provide career development. In addition, Mary J. Blige's perfume "My Life" allows to send women from FFAWN to college. More specifically, \$1 from each purchase of "My Life" is donated to the foundation for the education of these females.

Mary J. Blige wrote and recorded an original song (released on July 5, 2011) for the soundtrack of "The Help" a film, which takes places in Mississippi in the early Sixties. Based on the best-seller of the same name by Kathryn Stockett, the movie chronicles the emotional journey of three very different women who embark on a secret writing project breaking societal rules and thereby putting themselves at risk.

Here, Blige, a nine-time Grammy Award-winner, talks about what inspired her to compose

"The Living Proof"

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Kam Williams talks to Mary J. Blige:

Kam Williams: Hi Mary [J. Blige], thanks for the time.

Mary J. Blige: Thank you.

KW: You're not old enough to remember the era in which *The Help* takes place. Did the events in the movie resonate with you anyway?

MJB: Well, it resonated with me because I do know what was happening. She [Viola Davis' character, Aibileen] is a survivor. She ended up surviving to be able to tell her story through her book. The only way she was gonna survive was through walking in love and forgiveness and that's the only way I survived is through walking in love and forgiving people. And that's what inspired the whole song. My Aunt Larruper was a maid when I was a child, and both my parents are from Savannah, Georgia. And they would ship us down South every summer, so we got a chance to see a little bit of the help. My aunt was one of those women and she worked for a wealthy white family that loved her to death, like really loved her and she raised their children just like Aibileen would say, too, to the little girl, "You're smart, you're kind, you're important." I believe my aunt was saying some of the same things to those children, so that's how I related to the film.

KW: I wonder whether young people today will fully understand that segregation was the norm back then and not just being made up for a movie.

MJB: I think everyone should understand the history the same way we had to go to school and read about George Washington. I believe this generation should know their history and they should know that the struggle is not over yet. For instance, you can't get the cover of a magazine if your skin is too dark.

KW: I would suspect that there are still two sides of the track in Mississippi today. What would you say to young people about where we are right now?

MJB: I guess I would point out how in the movie Aibileen forgave them for treating her badly.

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Instead of getting angry and emotional, she walked off and she forgave them. So, I would say see the film based on learning how to live, how to walk in love and forgiveness I hope. You know, that's basically what I would say to the kids.

KW: Is there also a sense of understanding whose shoulders they're standing on?

MJB: Yes, definitely. It's important for them to see how far we've come and it's also important for you to see the courage we had to have. Someone had to have the courage to say, "I'm gonna talk to save us all," and, of course, I would suggest they see it for that reason, too. Someone had to stand up and break the curse and the cycle so we could all have equal access to what we're supposed to enjoy in life.

KW: What made you decide to write a song for the film?

MJB: When I saw the film, I cried so much. I got angry. I went through so many different emotions but the thing that stood out to me the most is the courage that this woman had, the courage. Just based on that alone is what made me say, "I'm in." If she had been portrayed as whimpering, like "Oh, master this and that," and had simply conformed to the system that was trying to beat her down, I wouldn't have had anything to do with it. But she was like, "I'm gonna stand!" And not only that, there was someone with a white skin willing to help her.

KW: Will you still be playing Nina Simone in an upcoming film? What attracted you to that project?

MJB: Well, that film got pushed back to October. Nina Simone was not only a great artist, but an amazing woman. She had a lot of courage. She was an activist. She stood up for what she believed in (and that's where I can relate to her) but there was also a side of her that nobody saw, this human side which went through a lot. But yeah, that project's happening.

KW: How will you prepare for the role?

MJB: You need to do a lot of research. You have to go on line. I have a lot of YouTubes of her and I just watch her, study her, read about her, talk to different people about her, but mostly you have to get in. You need to look at this character and just become whatever she was. You have to really dig in and get a coach. I need a dialect coach to help me pronounce words. I also have to get a piano coach.

KW: You talk about courage and that's what I thought about while watching The Help. Is

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there anything women can take from the movie and apply to their struggles today?

MJB: Yes, I think women should band together to get us more respect in all the businesses that we're in because, you know, if we turn 40 we're nothing and nobody. We all should band together and just say we're not going to go down like that. I'm not going out like that and that's what Aibileen did. She said I'm not going out like that.

KW: Thanks again for the interview, [Mary \[J. Blige\]](#) .

MJB: You're very welcome.

To see a trailer for The Help, visit: <http://thehelpmovie.com/us/#s=videos&v=1>

To see Mary J. Blige's video for the movie, click here: www.youtube.com/v/Xwl4zsNteU8?version=3

List of awards and nominations received by Mary J. Blige

American Music Awards
ASCAP Awards
BET Awards
Billboard Awards
Golden Globe Awards
Grammy Awards
Lady of Soul Awards
MTV Europe Music Awards
MTV Video Music Awards
NAACP Awards
Satellite Awards
Soul Train Music Awards
Source Awards
Vibe Awards

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World Music Awards

Discography

1992: What's the 411?
1994: My Life
1997: Share My World
1999: Mary
2001: No More Drama
2003: Love & Life
2005: The Breakthrough
2007: Growing Pains
2009: Stronger with Each Tear
2011: My Life II: The Journey Continues

Filmography

Year Film & Television

1998 The Jamie Foxx Show
2001 Prison Song
2001 Angel: One More Road To Cross
2001 Strong Medicine
2007 Ghost Whisperer
2007 Entourage
2009 I Can Do Bad All By Myself
2009 30 Rock
2010 American Idol Guest judge/Herself
2012 Rock of Ages

Official Web site: www.mjblige.com

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About the author of this article: *Kam Williams* is a syndicated film and book critic who writes for 100+ publications around the U.S., Europe, Asia, Africa, Canada and the Caribbean. He pens for www.eurweb.com and so on. He is also a columnist for www.megadiversities.com. Some of Williams' articles are translated into Chinese. In 2008, he was voted most Outstanding Journalist of the Decade by the Disilgold Soul literary Review. Williams is an erudite jurist who hold a J.D from Boston University, an MA in English from Brown University, an M.B.A. from The Wharton School. Kam Williams can be reached at kwilliams@megadiversities.com.