

Jean Baylor née Norris, grew up in Rhode Island. She was part of [Zhané](#) (with Renee Neufville), a well-known suave duo from the 90s who created a sensation with their natural style and R&B/Soul sound. In other words, Zhané set themselves apart from the other groups of the era with their nice afros and soul style. This move was a key to their fame besides their musical talent. At the height of their success the group had huge hits like “

[Hey, Mr. D.J.](#)

”, one of the best hip-hop party anthems, and “Groove Thang.” They did the cover of several magazines such as

Essence

. The duo was part of Queen Latifah's Flavor Unit collective and earned a seven year contract with Motown in 1994. The duo worked with Naughty by Nature, De La Soul and were featured in movie soundtracks such as Higher Learning. Their debut CD,

Pronounced Jah-Nay

went gold and achieved Platinum status. Jean Norris and Renee Neufville (originally from Jamaica) met while studying music at Philadelphia's Temple University.

Mrs. Baylor currently records purpose driven R&B/Pop music. She is an all-round talented artist: a singer, songwriter, pianist and producer. Baylor, who got a deal with EMI Music Publishing has demonstrated her songwriting skills by penning songs for Mary J. Blige and Allure. She also wrote two songs which were featured on the great HBO special, "Disappearing Acts," starring Sanaa Lathan and Wesley Snipes. In addition, she wrote, produced (with Marcus Baylor), played the piano and sang *For A Reason* for the 2007 movie "Of Boys and Men" starring Robert Townsend, Angela Bassett and Victoria Rowell. Baylor's career also includes landing a coveted spot on the Sports Illustrated Campus/Music Match compilation targeted to over 15 million subscribers. Other highlights of Jean Baylor's career are writing and performing with the world-renowned, Grammy-award winning group, The Yellowjackets. She is featured on the song "Healing Waters" on the group's Grammy nominated Time Squared album, and co-wrote their single "The Hope" on their latest release, "Altered State".

Baylor released her debut solo album *Testimony: My Life Story*. It is a spiritual CD with soulful and lovely sounds that Baylor wrote and produced. The album is the soundtrack of Baylor's personal life. The lyricism of her latest album flows with a groovy sound. On a personal level, the songstress is married to musician Marcus Baylor who co-wrote the singer's debut album. He is the former drummer and percussionist of the acclaimed rhythm & jazz band The Yellowjackets. The couple wed in April 2002 and reside in the South Jersey area.

Mega Diversities

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Written by Patricia Turnier

Monday, 28 November 2011 17:05

had the pleasure to talk to Mrs. Baylor last July. She was very generous of her time. During the interview, we noticed that she has a great voice even when she speaks. She shared with us her experience in the music industry throughout the years and she spoke about her latest CD.

[Since this interview, it is important to note that Mrs. Baylor recently launched her first solo Christmas EP "Light Up The World" on itunes: <http://itunes.apple.com/us/album/light-up-the-world/id483262107>]

Patricia Turnier talks to Jean Baylor:

P.T. Growing up, which singers were you inspired by and why?

J.B. There are so many. Among them I can name Anita Baker. I love her voice, which is smooth, soothing, rich, velvety. Even her speaking is awesome. She has been the most influential artist for me for a long time. I love her music from the 80s, more specifically her albums such as *Rapture*, *Giving you the Best That I Got* which are amazing. I tried at the time to imitate her voice [Laughs].

Beyond her, I can name Chaka Khan, Whitney Houston, Luther Vandross, The Commodores, Lionel Richie, Stephanie Mills. The radio was hot in the 80s. I listened to black radio and pop radio: Duran Duran, Sting, The Police, Genesis, Chicago, U2 (for instance, their song *Pride (In the name of love)*, a tribute to MLK, was hot!). I was exposed to so many genres of music in my Junior high and high school years. I feel that I was very fortunate and I really appreciate this.

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P.T. Do you know what I miss from this era? We used to see females playing instruments. We hardly see this now.

J.B. You are so right [Laugh out loud]. Thank God for [Alicia Keys](#) ! [Laughs].

P.T. And [Esperanza Spalding](#) !

J.B. [Laughs]. We have India Arie who plays guitar but what you are saying is so true. There's a scarcity of female musicians in commercial music. The 80s was a generation of musicians. Even if she was around before the 80s, I can name Aretha who plays the piano. I saw her doing it in Detroit at her house. She sat and played. She was amazing. I was blessed to take piano lessons when I was younger. I can incorporate that in my performance. More importantly, I use it also as a writing tool. It is one of my greatest joys to compose my music.

P.T. You took two years to work on your debut solo album *Testimony: My Life Story*. How was your experience recording your first solo CD?

J.B. It was very interesting and enjoyable. Seeing that it was my first solo project, it was a discovery process. I had the freedom to do what I wanted and that was awesome. I always functioned before with a record label and it is my first experience as an indie artist. There was no pressure of any other sort. I just had to go to the studio and create music. Overall, I am glad that I started out in a group situation, especially with a friend, and now I can successfully make the transition into a solo career.

P.T. You feel free.

J.B. Exactly! It is pleasant to be creative and not being put in a box, confined. It is up to me to find a balance between the creativity and the marketing aspect of my career. I enjoy the flexibility as a solo artist on every level: from the creative process in the studio, to the performances on stage and decision making. For my solo project, I wrote the lyrics and took care of all the vocal arrangements. My husband produced most of the tracks

P.T. About not being in a box, I was impressed with your latest album to discover that you could play piano. I believe that, unfortunately, many artists are restrained to follow a certain formula and the public doesn't have the chance to see the variety of their talents. We hear also the actors who often complain about being typecast.

J.B. At the end of the day, for the movie and music industries with any type of media, what really counts is the dollars. I understand that from a business perspective. For instance when an artist had success, the companies want to recreate it by using the same formula. However, with this mindset there is always a lack of creativity and the art form suffers. For an artist who is very creative, this situation can really be difficult. I have to say also that there is a disadvantage for performers who put too much emphasis on their artistry. They forget the marketing side which is important and cannot be neglected. There is a balance to find. You have to please the public by delivering quality work if you want longevity and your work has to be profitable for the record label. The same goes for me. I don't want to be a creative artist who does not sell CDs. I also have to find the balance for gaining benefits. I want to add that I am very positive because I believe that now more than ever people all over the world can see the work of artists on the Internet. There is a big market out there and we have to take advantage of it.

P.T. I think that now more than ever the public will discover worldwide talents from many realms.

J.B. Absolutely!

P.T. What message do you want the public to take away from your debut solo album?

J.B. I want them to take away a sense of hope, inspiration and spiritual growth. I have songs which are meant to uplift the souls, minds and hearts of people. I want the listeners to have a positive experience from my album which can hopefully inspire them to improve their everyday lives.

P.T. You said to the media that your latest album tells your personal story authentically, in a creative and conceptual way. Can you elaborate on that?

J.B. Creatively and conceptually, my album really tells my personal story with lyrics of encouragement for the listeners. My songs are an extension of my life, straight from the heart. I wanted to reflect through music where I was in my life. Some of my songs are about making a change in your life when things are not working out (relationships and so on). I have a song called *Bye Bye*. Sometimes it is difficult to turn the page on some aspects of your life, but that is imperative to evolve and grow. You have to be ready and open to make that step which might be challenging. I am all about progress. I hate to be stagnant. I realise that change can be slow. Nevertheless, as long as you have the ability to breathe, you are able to do something to change your situation. When I talk to young people, I tell them that at the end of the day, you have to decide the kind of life you want to live and make sure you go after it. Some people stay in a situation and suffer because they don't see a solution to move forward. Some are scared, have insecurities and are unsure of themselves to make a change. I have singles in my album which reflect my spirituality. There are songs where I talk about my life when I was ready to do things God's way (based on the Bible). There was a time when I did things my way. I made all the decisions and I saw the results of that, which were not good.

P.T. Can you share with us the nuanced message of your first lovely single, "Morning Time"?

J.B. It is a song of encouragement. It seeks to inspire the listener to go forward. We all go through difficult times in life, with challenges.

Sometimes it can be very hard to stay focus and be hopeful when you are going through ordeals. It is important to find ways to get rid of negative thoughts. So, "Morning Time" talks about the joy which will come in the morning. It is based on a scripture in the Bible which says that if you make it through the night, God will find a way, or He will give you the understanding of how to do it. Sometimes the change will be for the better, but you have to make the decision to stick it out which can be difficult. I feel so bad for people who commit suicide, who succumbed to that emotion of hopelessness. Sometimes it is too much to bare or to hold on. You have to find a place of strength within you.

P.T. You know, I am not into slow songs, but I love "Morning Time".

J.B. [Laughs]. Well, thanks.

P.T. I did classical piano for a couple of years and I was amazed to hear your composition. It is really cool to discover your range of talent.

J.B. Wow, I am really moved to hear this. I wished I had practiced more when I started piano as a child. I didn't listen to my mom at the time. She used to lecture me [Laughs]. She used to say when you get older you will wish that you had practiced more and she was so right [Laughs].

P.T. I can definitely relate to that, I behaved the same way as a child also [Laughs].

P.T. Now, you are an Indie artist. What can you tell us about this new path?

J.B. [Laugh out loud]. It is not easy.

P.T. Is it the fact that you have to think of everything?

J.B. I don't mind being in charge of everything. I enjoy it with the leadership part. It is hard because it is a slower process. When you are involved with a major label, the money is already available; there is a structure with all the departments: the A&R (Artists & Repertoire) division, the production department, etc. They have their repertoire for photographers, makeup artists and so on. The performer has to just think about the artistic aspect of his/her work. As an independent, you have to think about all of this. You need a budget and it is a challenge to plan promotional tours overseas, etc. If you are with Motown for instance, they just pay everything for marketing in Japan.

However, it is noteworthy to mention that the promotional budget of a major label can come

from the artist's royalties. So, the record company invest in the performer and get their money back with the recoup. As an independent, you need to invest a lot more work and time. You don't necessarily have a team when you commence, you start from scratch. You have to be organised and disciplined. Despite the challenges, I enjoy my freedom for creativity and I love all parts of the process.

P.T. Do you think that it can be a catch 22 to be part of a major label because some artists are tied with contracts for years and when they want to leave they might have restraints such as not being able to use their pseudonyms or artists names, etc.?

J.B. There are advantages and disadvantages in both situations. You have to choose what best fits you. The digital world changed. Because of all the technological changes, some record companies are trying to get more from their singers with the 360 deal which allows them to have a portion of every artist's gains. It is like slavery. Now, they practically want to have 50% of everything: merchandise products (T-Shirts, hats, etc.), tours and so on. Before the income gained from tours was for the performers. Some labels used to even put money to finance the promotion of the tours. Now, the rules of the game are changing. Even the artists who are doing movies face dilemmas. Some record labels want a portion of their work in the film industry. It is a delicate situation because on one hand if the record company didn't develop the branding of the performer, other opportunities in different areas such as the movie industry would not materialize. But on the other, these people pay their agents to do this work and they invest personally by doing auditions while finding a way to set themselves apart from others to obtain the parts in Broadway plays/productions, films, etc.

P.T. Why do some record labels spend money on producing CDs which are not being marketed after?

J.B. The reason varies. Sometimes some record labels have a sink or swim policy mostly with new releases. When they put on the albums on the market, they wait to see which one will be on top without a big promotion and they let the others sink. Also, when the label has been sold to another entity, the staff can change and the new team doesn't have the same priorities to market the same artists as the former staff. Sometimes, people are doing favours for one another by promoting some artists and their interests or vision change afterward.

P.T. In the past, you penned for artists such as Mary J. Blige ("Not Looking", a duet with K-C) and Allure ("Without You" and "Lady"). Do you plan to write songs for other

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singers?

J.B. Yes, I would love to work with other singers but I stopped focusing on that for now. I prefer to write primarily for myself, but I would not mind to restart to penning for other artists in the future. I enjoyed working with performers. I had fun writing the song “Not Looking” for Mary J. Blige with the very talented producer Ike Lee. We worked also on “Without You” and “Lady” for Allure. In addition, I wrote for the HBO movie *Disappearing Acts*.

P.T. You penned these songs for the compelling movie *Disappearing Acts*: “Still a part of me” and “Just For My Baby” performed Melky Sedeck Jean. In the movie, when do we hear these specific singles?

J.B. The first song we hear it when the main character Zora (named after the writer Zora Neale Hurston) sings a cappella on her piano. The second single, we hear it in an intimate part of the movie and I won't get into the details [Laughs].

P.T. We know that since last winter you have been planning to go on tour. Can you elaborate on that?

J.B. I have been planning to go and we should start soon. Now, we spend a lot of time in the studio and we do shows locally between Philadelphia and NY. We are focusing on these areas: New Jersey, Washington D.C, etc. I am working on my first video as a solo artist for one of my new singles.

P.T. It has to be for "Morning Time"!

J.B. [Laugh out loud].

P.T. You have a performance video for this song but I think it would be great to have a video with a story.

J.B. [Laughs]. We'll have to see about that. The creation process of "Morning Time" was special. I was playing piano in Boston. My husband played at a very well-known jazz club called Scullers in this town. At the time, he was playing with the Grammy nominated band called The Yellowjackets. Not too far, I found a piano hotel and I started to improvise some stuff to keep myself busy. I began to play this song slowly and it sounded pretty. I then played it for my husband. The song was originally an up-tempo track. He loved it and said we have to use this song on acoustic slow motion. This is how "Morning Time" came to fruition. It became one of people's favourite. It is a surprise to notice that the public responded well to it.

P.T. Are there any future projects that you can share with the readers? You said to the media that you have an interest in exploring other areas of entertainment. Which ones?

J.B. Yes, I do. I am interested in film and TV as an actress. It is not because it is the thing to do [Laugh out loud].

P.T. Did you do theater in the past?

J.B. Yes, I did a lot of musical theater in junior high and high school. They had the theater musical every summer in the town that I lived. A guy called Barry Moore directed it. The kids participated in it. There were many parts to play: singing, dancing, talking, etc. It was a lot of fun to be polyvalent and do all these parts. We burned a lot of energy.

P.T. In the past, especially when musicals were a trend, it was a prerequisite for actors to act, dance and sing.

J.B. Definitely! As I said, I had to be involved in many artistic aspects in theaters and I always

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wanted to do more of that. My path took me to music, another passion of mine. Nevertheless, maybe now is the best time for my professional life to make the turning point. I will have to take acting classes, get an acting coach... I am all for it.

P.T. In your journey to be discovered, some doors were probably closed. What kept you motivated and encouraged to reach your dreams despite rejection?

J.B. It can be difficult and sometimes you feel like giving up. When music is your passion and your purpose, it becomes bigger than you. It is important to stick with your goals, not listen to naysayers and take things one day at a time. When it is a divine purpose, you just can't walk away from it. Trust me, I tried [Laughs]. It doesn't let you go, it takes you back in. Being on stage is one of my favourite joys in life. I feel at home when I perform. When you don't follow your heart or your path you can be dead inside. Since high school I was involved in music. At the time, I was part of a group and in a school choir. When I went to college, my parents thought that I would become an educator. Education was valued in my upbringing, I didn't grow up among performing artists so, for my surroundings, it wasn't the path they would have expected from me. In college, I majored in music studies (I took courses in jazz, etc.) and destiny brought me into the music industry.

P.T. If you could speak to Jean Norris in the early 90s (before you released your first album with Zhané) what advice and tips would you give to her regarding the music industry?

J.B. Oh God! [Laughs]. I would write to her an entire book I would pen a movie or a series (a volume 1 to 10) [Laugh out loud]. I would tell her to roll up her sleeves. [Silence]. I would say to her: find yourself, figure out who you are as a person and as a musician. I would tell her to get more familiar with the business side of the music industry, be more proactive and develop your personal career outside of the group. I would say to her: never be intimidated or be afraid of anyone. I would advise her to become the master of her domain and to control her own destiny as much as possible. I would say to her to do things in God's way. It happened to so many people to lose their soul in the music business. I would tell her to feel confident and to let her light shine regardless of the insecurities of others. Do not let anybody hold you back from your destiny!

P.T. This is beautiful.

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J.B. [Laughs]. These are all the things that I would tell her. I would add that I would let her know it is important to share and be generous. I am Christian and in the Bible, we find the colloquialism in verse Luke 12:48 where it is written “To whom much is given, much will be required.” Even when difficult situations occur, you will be OK. So, nothing should prevent you from giving.



P.T. Many young people think that it is not a necessity to get an education to be in the music industry. Unfortunately, many of them got trapped with royalty issues, bad record deals, etc. You went to university to study music. What advice do you have for the youth who do not see the importance of education?

J.B. Fortunately, I was raised in a home where education was valued and considered important. It was a must and there was no discussion about considering other options when it

was time to go to college. It was a natural thing to enter university. I believed this was the law until I was in the eighth grade [Laughs]. When I reached the eighth grade I realised that it wasn't the federal law, but it was the law in our home [Laugh out loud]. It is not a requirement to go to college to be successful in the music industry. However, you have to educate yourself for instance with books which cover royalty issues and so on. Donald S. Passman and Daylle Deanna Schwartz's books are excellent. It is important to get the updated version of these books or others (not more than five years) which talk about the music industry. In fact, for everybody even if you have a college degree, education doesn't stop there. Knowledge is power and freedom. It can protect you from being screwed by people who don't have your best interest at heart. It is really helpful in my domain to study business, marketing and the new technologies. An artist cannot only focus on the creative part of his work. Performers have to be their own entrepreneurs, this mindset is a must otherwise it will be a recipe for failure. These skills can be developed for whom it doesn't come naturally which was my case. It is also an asset to know how to market yourself. So, even if it is not a requirement to have a degree, to be part of the music industry I always say to people to go to school. If it doesn't work out, you don't have anything. You are stuck with nothing. You need a plan B otherwise you will have to start from scratch. So many people have been successful for a short period of time and what are they going to do after? Retire at 25 or 30? It is not realistic. In addition, even if you are in the music industry you can finally decide that you want to do something else. In this regard, having a diploma gives you options and an excellent foundation to go forward in life. If you have a BA, you can pursue with a Master's. People who want to remain in the music industry and wish to develop their entrepreneurial skills for instance can go to business schools.

A lot of young people are so excited to get a record deal and they know very little about the music industry. It is imperative to comprehend which area of the business is more profitable: songwriting, etc. In this regards, you have to know how copyrights and publishing work, especially if you had a hit song with heavy radio rotation. It is important as a songwriter to be part of one of these three associations: ASCAP, BMI or SESAC. You definitely need to have a global view of the business and understand how it works. In other words, you have to grasp the structure of a record company, the content of a typical music deal and so on. For your own interest, it is important to know how to invest your money especially when your career is not at its pinnacle. Too many times in the entertainment field, the income can be unstable so you need a safety net. It is also possible to educate yourself in the music business, by talking to experienced people you trust. You need to know about the politics and the economy surrounding the music industry, the roles of the players in this domain, their agendas, the etiquette, the unwritten rules, etc. The artistic part is as much important as the business part. To summarise, education is a life process for everybody. For the people involved in the music industry, they have to be versatile: learn how to read music, how to pen and compose songs if you can. Being polyvalent is the key for longevity, it will give you more options. It is an asset to be multifaceted in the music industry.

P.T. What issue means the most to you and why?

J.B. It is the Black community. Some inner cities are in such perilous state such as Chicago, Detroit, Baltimore and Philadelphia. Education went completely downhill in these cities. Everything is related to the economy of these areas. The citizens in these zones have little power to decide their future. They are not the ones who call the shots. In the suburbs where ownership prevails, the rules are different. So, I would say that my biggest issue is the economic empowerment of the citizens in urban areas. We can't be gentrified if we own the building. We have a lot to learn from Jewish people.

P.T. I totally agree with you!

J.B. They really operate with a kingdom mindset and with the way God commanded them. It is in the Bible. God told them: I will give you power to get wealth. You own your businesses and your properties; you build wealth with your family for the community. They obeyed that law and they prospered.

P.T. What message do you have for our readers?

J.B. I want to encourage the readers to try to be their best selves, to understand who they are and follow their path or their purpose in this world to make it better. When you follow your path, you are on your way to greatness.

P.T. Thank you for this great interview. It was an honour to interview you!

J.B. Thank you so much Patricia, I really enjoyed our conversation.

P.T. Well thank you for always representing us well. I never saw you dressed in a way that leaves little to the imagination for men [Laughs].

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J.B. This means a lot to me because I could not dress improperly, my mom would slap me [Laugh out loud]. Now, to be different it seems that you have to keep your clothes on [Laughs].

P.T. I need to say something before we end this interview. In the early 90s I loved the song “Hey, Mr. D.J” because of the beats but also because I was a DJ around that time in my school, so I could relate to the song. The guys applauded me when I started doing it because I was the only female DJ. The next semester many girls followed me.

J.B. [Laughs]. That’s funny!

P.T. So, thanks again and I wish you a lot more success in the future.

Jean Baylor’s official website : <http://www.ilovejeanbaylor.com>

Other useful links :

<http://www.twitter.com/jeanbaylor>

<http://www.facebook.com/jeanbaylor>