

WHITNEY HOUSTON

In the twenty-five years since she recorded her history-making debut album, Whitney Houston has become a superstar, a legend, an icon. One of the best-selling female artists of all time, she has sold over 140 million albums worldwide. She has been cited as an influence by the likes of Mariah Carey, Christina Aguilera, Jennifer Hudson, and Leona Lewis, and last year, *Rolling Stone* listed Houston as one of the "100 Greatest Singers of All Time."

But when her longtime mentor Clive Davis, currently Chief Creative Officer of Sony Music Entertainment Worldwide, first approached her about recording her first album since 2002's *Just Whitney*, Houston didn't think that she wanted to get back in the game.

"When Clive called me and said, 'Are you ready?,' I said, 'Ready for what?,'" she recalls. "I didn't particularly care for the way the industry was going or the music I was hearing. What I saw in the videos by most of the female artists—it was like, I'm just not doing that. I was raised in this business, I was raised in gospel singing, and I wasn't about to change what people loved about me."

"My career and my life moved very fast," she continues. "At that time I was just hitting my 40s, and I basically just wanted to be a mother and a homebody."

Fortunately, though, Davis was persistent—and the result, almost three years later, is the remarkable new album *I Look to You*. The disc matches Houston with some of the hottest writers and producers in pop and R&B (including R. Kelly, David Foster, Akon, Stargate, Alicia Keys and Swizz Beatz) for a set of songs full of her signature vocal power and passion. The album is built on a strong message of survival and perseverance, and reflects the hard-earned lessons of the high-profile personal challenges Houston has encountered in recent years.

A key song for the project was "Nothin' But Love," a propulsive dance groove co-produced by Fernando Garibay (Britney Spears, Lady GaGa). "If there was anything I wanted to say after some of the things I had gone through," Houston says, "it was that I had nothing but love, regardless of the situation. Maybe that's just the way I was raised, or maybe I had just gotten to the point of, it's all behind me now and I'm moving forward."

Davis, the album's Co-Producer, brought R. Kelly's composition "I Look to You" to Houston, and her reaction was instant—though she hadn't been given all the information. "I heard the song, and I loved that it was so short and sweet," she says. "And then I got to Chicago, and Robert told me there was still another verse to write and a bridge! So he stood there with me in the studio and wrote

the second verse right off the top of his head. He closed his eyes, we kinda leaned on each other. As he was singing, I was praying, and the words just came out."

The song (one of two Kelly contributed; he also delivered the defiantly funky "Salute") would go on to give the album its title, and she credits Davis with understanding what the lyrics would mean to her. "When Clive heard 'I Look to You,' because he knows my background in gospel, he knew that song would put it all in check for me," she says.

The relationship between Houston and Davis goes all the way back to 1983, when he signed the young artist to Arista Records. He oversaw the development and marketing of her thirteen-million-selling debut, *Whitney Houston*. After all these years, he remains so close to the singer that she refers to him as "my father in the industry."

"Clive and I are partners," says Houston. "He still loves music, still loves lyrics and melodies. He's one of the few people who still has that gift of knowing what song fits with what voice. Clive is able to go beyond the personality and see what's inside a person, what really motivates them."

"To be reunited with Whitney is so fulfilling," adds Davis. "The album provides the most exciting challenge I've ever had and whatever happens, I know it's very special. Its music and her voice will once again impact millions all over the world for many years to come."

Even with a few strong songs in motion, though, Houston still wasn't sure that she had found the direction she was looking for. Surprisingly, it's the most light-hearted moment on *I Look to You*—the disco-flavored roller-skating jam "Million Dollar Bill"—which she considers the turning point.

"I worked with Alicia Keys on that one," she says, "and it was probably the most fun, but it also felt like I was working with someone who understood me, who could relate to me, singer to singer. At that point, I knew that it was coming together, that this was the album that I wanted, and that it was going to get done after two-and-a-half years in the making."

Akon, another 21st-century hitmaker joined forces with Houston for "Like I Never Left." She notes that the singer was a favorite among the friends of her daughter, Bobbi Kristina; "they all had his songs as their ring tones," she says. Houston praises the "island feel" of Akon's work, and adds that when she heard "Like I Never Left," she thought, "that sounds like it could be an album title for me."

Perhaps the most memorable recording session came on the powerhouse ballad "I Didn't Know My Own Strength," written by Diane Warren. The song reunited Houston with producer David Foster, who worked with her on the incomparable soundtrack to the 1992 film *The Bodyguard*, one of the biggest-selling albums in history. Foster's home was damaged in the Malibu fires of 2007, and when Houston came in to record her vocal, he was working out of a small apartment.

"Basically, I recorded in an office, next to the bathroom, with some sheets up near the microphone," she says. "It was totally different from doing 'I Will Always Love You' in a beautiful studio, or 'I Learned From the Best' in David's beautiful home. But when I listened to my vocal, it was real, it was passionate—which is most unusual when you're singing next to a bathroom!

"I wasn't thinking only in terms of myself," she continues. "I was thinking about other people and other struggles. I thought about becoming a single mother, I thought about my mother, my cousin Dionne, my sisters-in-law. I thought about people with sicknesses, people who triumph in the face of adversity. The simplicity and strength that came out in my singing made me know how strong that song could be for a lot of people."

One of the most welcome elements of *I Look to You* is hearing Houston reconnecting with the dance floor and delivering uptempo songs with finesse and joy. Even the album's lone cover—Leon Russell's immortal "A Song For You," which has been recorded by greats from Ray Charles to the Carpenters to Donny Hathaway—begins at its traditional, stately pace but then breaks out into a celebratory, irresistible club beat.

Houston says that she enjoyed bringing that side of her singing out again, but that her heart will always be with the slower, more emotional numbers. "I love the uptempo songs, but I'm a balladeer," she says. "I can take a ballad and it gets in my heart, and I can understand where it's coming from."

Most of all, Whitney Houston believes that she is a link in a chain of vocal tradition, and that *I Look to You* is one more extension of the sounds she was raised with. "I hope that the gospel tradition in my voice—which is just my soul—that it comes out, and that it is heard and felt by those who come after me."



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