

Michelle Williams Flies Solo and Soars

BY AVO YERMAGYAN

Sitting in a dimly lit studio surrounded by candles, with recording artist and actress Michelle Williams is a moving experience. Yet, as I listen to her record songs for her upcoming album, one thing is very different from the many recording sessions I've attended. No hair, no make-up, no photographers, no staff, no entourage. Just Michelle. You tend to forget from her hospitality and innate charm that until she left in 2005, she was a member of Destiny's Child, the biggest selling girl group of all time. And an artist who has won countless awards, including the Grammy, MTV Video Music, Soul Train, Billboard Music, American Music, Nickelodeon Kids Choice, NAACP Image, Brit, Mobo, Radio Disney Music, Radio Music, and the list goes on, and on, and on.

Here are a few moments from this thrilling evening with the artist, as she takes her first steps alone on her new solo R&B record and speaks of her plans to take the acting world by storm.

Avo: So you're back in the studio. How do you feel?

Michelle: I'm really excited. We are here at the Record Plant recording studio in West Hollywood, and I'm starting my third solo album, this one being my first R&B album. The first two were gospel records, so I'm making a transition solo-wise, although my start was R&B with Destiny's Child. This is going well, some great songs are being created, and you might get a sneak peak.

A: How does it feel to be taking a departure from Gospel music to R&B?

M: Gospel is in me, even in R&B. You can hear it in my voice. The soul is there. That's the great thing about gospel music, because all of the gospel greats just sang with so much soul. They either had pain to sing about or sung about the joy that came after they got through the pain. That's what



I'm going to sing about on this R&B record, joys, pains, and getting through them. People can see another side of me as well.

A: So you're just showing a different side of Michelle Williams?

M: Yes, I don't want to be put in a box. There is so much to Michelle Williams.

A: Years ago we met in a limo, thanks to Beyonce's mom Tina Knowles, at the American Music Awards. Sitting here with you today, years later, it seems as though you haven't changed. You are just as humble and gracious, if not more.

M: Yes (laughs), well you know I learned from Beyoncé and Kelly how good it is to keep some remnants of your family around, specially the ones that want to protect you and not take from you. You may be in La-La Land while they are like "Hold up chick!" It's the good thing about having family. It keeps you grounded.

A: Let's talk about Broadway. You starred in Elton John and Tom Rice's musical "Aida." How thrilling was that experience? Did you ever think you would star in a Broadway show?

M: You know, the closest I though I'd come to singing on Broadway was the MTV Studios (laughs) cause it's right there. Then when they told me about 'Aida,' I was like, "Wow, I am going after some great women (Heather Headley and Toni Braxton also appeared in the role). "Aida" was life changing for me, it's one of the greatest things I've done in my career. It taught me so much discipline, and I got to hang out with other kinds of people. To this day I'm still friends with some of the dancers.

A: Do you miss it?

M: Yes, I recently saw Usher in "Chicago" and I was telling him how jealous I was of him, because it just brought back so many memories. I miss that stability. I knew at 5:30 was my pickup, I knew

at 7:30 was curtain call, and then by 11-11:30 I was home. I loved having Mondays off, so I could go do girly stuff I needed to do (laughs). I hope that God allows me to do more Broadway.

A: I'm sure it is in your deck of cards.

M: I pray it is.

A: You had your TV debut in "Half and Half." It seems the acting bug bit you?

M: Yes, I was bit by the acting bug. I had the opportunity to be on "Half and Half," and I met with Yvette Lee Bowser, who's the writer of the show. She wanted me to play a record executive who has HIV. I was like cool, I'm not going to shy away from that topic because I know people who have HIV who are still living their dreams, and I've known some people who didn't survive it. I wanted to let people know, who are either living with it or are affected by it, that somehow this girl was sassy, she still had a good sense of humor, and she knew that she had to live. If we all knew we were going to die from something, what would we do?

A: Just keep on going?

M: Yes, she did and she ended up finding love. I loved the role, I made sure I did my research and made sure that I didn't offend anyone. After that, I got with a new acting coach Ivana Chubbock. She has changed my life completely, and I'm in her classes as we speak. I thank God for my natural gift, but I wanted to make sure I knew some of the technical stuff and am digging deeper. I didn't just want to get jobs just because of Destiny's Child, which is great, but I want people to be like "She's really an actress."

A: Who inspired and moved you growing up?

M: Artistically? Chaka Khan, Anita Baker, Sade and Whitney Houston. "I'll Be Your Baby Tonight," by Whitney Houston, was the first record I ever bought with my own money.

A: You recently worked on "Celebrity Duets." How was the experience?

M: "Celebrity Duets" was a lot of fun. It was cool to see actors and athletes singing.

A: It's interesting how you started singing in a church choir, continued with United Harmony, a gospel quartet, and most recently were a third of Destiny's Child. And now Michelle has stepped out by herself, all alone.

M: Yes.

A: No hands to hold.

M: No hands to hold.

A: No one to lean on, no one.

M: No one.

A: But yourself and God.

M: Yes, you have to show growth and how strong you are. People say, "Only the strong survive." We hated to leave each other and the group, but we still keep in touch. I heard Beyonce recently said that sometimes we used Destiny's Child as a crutch. That was our safety net; we knew if we felt someone would be there. But it is good that we're all growing up, doing what we want to do individually, and that's great.

A: Has the recording process been very different?

M: Yes, it's been different, because I have to do everything. Everything that I learned, everything that I've experienced with Destiny's Child, I'm using now in this session. How I pick my producers, the writing sessions, even how I record. I found a way to make it easy, make it fun, even when I'm by myself. I come in by myself, I don't have a big entourage of people. I come into work and leave.

A: You seem to be writing a lot on this new record. Are you?

M: I am writing, and that's important. There are two songs I didn't write on, with Mario Winans. Those songs were

written for me, and they say exactly what I wanted to say. The song I'm working on tonight is written by me.

A: What is it called?

M: Probably "Breakaway."

A: Judging from the words, it seems like an introspective record. Are you trying to find yourself in this music?

M: Everyday you learn something new about yourself. You have to be you. That's one thing I love about life. Life helps me so much in my music and my acting. It's therapy. I was telling a friend of mine, "All actors are crazy" (laughs). I realized we are all a little cuckoo, we all have some issues.

A: And it takes being okay with that in order to be comfortable going where you go in your work as a performer, right?

M: Yes, it makes you, you. This is really on my own terms. Basically I'm going to turn a record in. People tell you, "I think you need to go in this

direction or that." Nine times out of ten they may be right. But as you get older and you know your fan base is growing with you as you grow, you make your music as you feel at the time. I know they will be able to relate to my music.

A: What do you want your fans to feel and hear with this record?

M: I just want them to feel the realness coming from me.

A: Are you scared?

M: Yes. I'm just hoping they enjoy it and can learn from it. Hopefully there is something I say that makes someone feel like "I can do this."

A: Where do you get your strength?

M: I think when you ask for strength, to me you are asking for tests. And you have to pass those tests. I think I get my strength from mistakes I've made, things I said I shouldn't have said, actions I took I shouldn't have taken. You learn from those things which make you, you.

A: When will you stop?

M: Sometimes I say, if I get to a point where I can't tie my own shoes, I don't want it.

A: You are loved worldwide. Is it ever overwhelming?

M: It can be, but you can never get too much love.

A: Or too many gift bags?

M: Yes, it's all about the gift bags.

A: Seeing as there is so much turmoil in the world, how do you feel you affect this as an artist?

M: I think music helps in a lot of ways; it's universal and should bridge gaps. It's a beautiful world we live in. Since I moved to L.A., you see so many different people and cultures in one city, and people seem to be getting along. I think we need to put our egos aside. No race, no religion, no community and neither sex is greater.

A: Just common respect for all.

M: Yes. ■



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