

Mary J. Blige: "The Help" Interview

By Kam Williams
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Mary J. Blige wrote and recorded an original song 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 six-time Grammy Award-winner, talks about what inspired her to compose "The Living Proof."

Kam Williams: Hi Mary, 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's 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. Instead of getting angry and emotional, she walked off and she forgave

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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: Yeah, 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, 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. She stood up for what she believed in 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 gotta 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 gotta get in. You gotta look at this character, look at this character and just become whatever she was. You gotta



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really dig in and get a coach. I gotta get a dialect coach to help with how she pronounced words and a piano coach.

KW: You talk about courage and that's what I thought about while watching *The Help*. Is there anything women can take from the movie and apply to their struggles today?

MJB: Yeah, 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 gonna 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.

MJB: You're very welcome.

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