

MARY J. BLIGE

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Back from the brink

Barry White

Loves to love you, baby

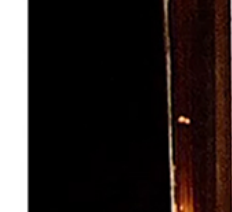
Ini Kamoze

Hotstepper on top

Bone Thugs 'N' Harmony
Craig Mack
Supermodel Tyra
Too Short
Jason Kidd



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At the tender age of 21, Mary J. Blige went from around-the-way girl to mean queen of hip hop soul. Now she's back (without the attitude), and all she really wants is to be happy. By Emil Wilbekin. Photographs by Miles Aldridge

The buzz is on. Phones keep ringing, and everybody's talking about the same thing. She's back, and the hip hop hot line is overheating. "I heard she gained 75 pounds," says one voice. "Did she have a baby?" asks another. "Have you heard the new single?" asks still another. "I hear she's on some Anita Baker shit." But in the end, every conversation leads to the same question: "Are you going to Mary's party tonight?"

Outside the Hit Factory, a recording studio in Midtown Manhattan, a throng of journalists, photographers, and hip hop heads tries to push up inside Mary's party, but the white woman at the door and the burly brother behind her are turning people away. Five floors above,

it's strictly A-list, with SWV, Zhané, and megaproducer Jermaine Dupri in the house. A trio of platinum blond B-girls hang by the bar, surrounded by an admiring crowd. At the center of attention stands Mary J. Blige in all her ghetto glamour. She wears a tuff-colored leather suit and a bleached shag cut like the one Florence Henderson used to sport on *The Brady Bunch*. And she looks phat—not fat.

As "I Love You," a ballad from her new album, *My Life*, fills the room, Mary bops around with a champagne glass in her hand like she's at a block party, almost too excited. But as long as she's taking care of business, what's wrong with having a little fun? Andre Harrell, who signed Mary to his label, Uptown Records, and Sean "Puffy" Combs, Mary's producer, comanager, and mentor, watch their protégée from across the room. "Hi. How you doin'," she says over and over, shaking hands. "Nice to meet you. Thank you for comin'."

This is the new and improved Mary J. Blige. Gone are the temper tantrums, waves of depression, and stank attitude. It's been two years since her double-platinum debut album, *What's the 411?*, hit *Billboard's* pop Top 10, and a year since her full-length remix album blew up the spot. Mary is 24 years old now, she's in love (with K-Ci Hailey from Jodeci), and she's ready to move on. No more playing the banji-bitch role. The title of her new single, "Be Happy," tells you all you need to know.

This around-the-way girl from the projects of Yonkers, N.Y., sparked the world with her distinctive brand of new jack swing. With a little help from Puffy, she fashioned herself as a seductive soul siren who was hard and feminine at the same time. The secret of Mary's success may lie in this ability to effortlessly combine opposites. It's more than just singing "that smooth shit" over a breakbeat or getting shout-outs from dope MCs on an R&B album. The Queen of Hip Hop Soul has to be someone who can sing about all of this generation's dashed hopes and fallen heroes, somebody who could sum up all the joy, pain, and love in one song that everybody understands.

She called her album *My Life* because it is just that: Mary singing from the heart about love, loss, and finally, happiness. When she was 15, "If you looked at my life and see what I've seen," she sits up in her chair, "I know people I didn't think cared." "I know it is hard, but we will get by," there's no doubting her. Mary sounds like one of us. She's no gangsta bitch, but hearing her sing, you know she's learned a few hard lessons in her life. Song by soulful song, she empowers herself, overcoming her insecurities by sharing them. She serves the warm-hearted ghetto flavor Thelma gave us on *Good Times*, not the usual pitiful posturing perpetuated in the name of "realness."

When asked about influences, Mary speaks of black music icons from another generation: Stevie Wonder, the Isley Brothers, Gladys Knight, Shirley Muhammad, Al Green. "My mother listens to all this stuff," she says, "so I listen to it." There is some new music on Mary's playlist: K-Ci's remake of Bobby Womack's "If You Think You're Lonely Now," the new albums by her remix partners Craig Mack and Biggie, and Brandy's "I Wanna Be Down." The sound that you hear when Mary opens her mouth is all this accumulated soul, orchestrated for a new generation.

Two years ago, though, she didn't seem ready to be the voice of a nation. Everybody's heard about Mary doing shows—and not just onstage. The stories of tardiness, cancellations, and general lack of professionalism are endless. Mary was eight hours late to one magazine photo shoot, and threw it and walked out of at least one more. She conducted interviews where she did as much drinking as talking and acted like a zombie on national television. Then there was the concert in London where she was so out of it the crowd booed her off the stage. All this may sound like fabulous diva drama, but for a young artist, it's more like a plain ol' bad attitude. But nobody ever said overnight success would be easy.

"I think the whole experience was overwhelming for her," says Harrell. "She wasn't ready to be under the microscope in that fashion. Two things can happen when you put people in that kind of light before they are emotionally and mentally prepared to handle it. They either lash out at you, or else they totally withdraw from you." With Mary, Harrell says, there were actually cases of both. "But I think now she's found her com-

fort zone. More important, she realizes in herself that she truly is the star people think she is."

Star or not, Mary says her problems were not just caused by inexperience. "Her deal was right, everything was wrong with my management," she says of her nothing with Uptown (which was formerly both her label and her management company). "A lot of promises was bein' made. I had my hopes on them, my family had hopes on them. It was makin' me sad when they couldn't get what they wanted." Mary's management problems now seem to be a nonissue, for her at least.

It has been reported that she's now managed by Suge Knight (the G behind Dre, Snoop, and the rest of Death Row's gangsta rap royalty). Harrell refuses to discuss rumors that Death Row used physical intimidation to spring Mary and Jodeci from their Uptown management contracts (though Uptown Entertainment's reception area is now staffed by Fruit of Islam security). He says Uptown alumni Puffy and Steve Lucas are Mary's managers. And what about Suge? "I think she decided not to work with him," Harrell answers. "On the album credits it says Sean 'Puffy' Combs and Steve Lucas. That's who I call."

Puffy says, "Me and Suge, we close. There were no problems or anything like that. He was, like, 'Yo, Puff brother, if you need me, it's all good.' But no, he's not her manager." A spokesman for Knight calls him a "consultant," but Mary may have come closer to the mark when she described him to *Newsweek* as "that guy in the movies who goes around getting the bad people—Charles Bronson, right?"

It's a new day for Mary, about a week after the shooting party, and she's just back from listening to the "Be Happy" video in the Arizona desert. With Method Man pumping on the sound system, her black Lincoln Town Car drops her and Taurean, her 308-pound bodyguard, at the offices of Double XXposure, a public relations firm where Ms. Blige has just finished a 24-week artist development course.

Angelo Ellerbee, the company's president, coached her on interviewing techniques, personal finance, etiquette, and diction. "When her first record came out, I knew she wasn't prepared," says Ellerbee. "I would hear all the stories and say, 'Why do all you people talk about this girl and you won't deal with it? *Tid!ber!*' When I met her, I said, 'I am the person who dogged you. I did it because kids love you and you gotta be a role model.'" Mary credits Angelo's "tough love" for helping to turn her around. "He gave me a totally new kind of life," she says. "There was a time when I wouldn't read nothin'," says the 11th-grade dropout (who eventually got her GED).

Ellerbee had her read books like *Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God** and Donald S. Passman's *All You Need to Know About the Music Business*. Today she's returned to Double XXposure for a *Fear* magazine photo shoot. Mary just seems to feel comfortable here. Angelo taught her how to deal with people, but she also learned how to deal with herself. "You can't pay attention to the negative," she says. "Or it never goes away. Every time I go to Angelo's, I feel free. So I learned to be like that every day."

After the shoot, Mary's limo drops her at the Parker Meridien Hotel. In the bar, sipping a Midori sour on the rocks, she talks about her metamorphosis. "I was nodding off, going to sleep [earlier at the shoot], but I snapped out of it. I just spoke to that man, you know, I spoke to the Lord. I asked him to take the sleepiness away and give me what I need to get through the shoot. And he gave it to me."

"I definitely feel like I came a long way from where I was before," she continues, her green cocktail barely touched, "because I was a savage. And when I say I was a savage, trust me." (Some things she won't discuss, like the scar under her left eye.) The thing that changed her, she says, was "wanting to learn, wanting to be somebody. The knowing that what my gift is and wanting to carry that out. I was afraid to let people see my real feelings. This album wrote my own lyrics; since they are her words this time out, she expresses them with more feeling. Her voice still has that trademark overmodulated sound, but it is smoother now, more confident. "When she sings 'I'm Goin' Down' (the Rose Royce song from the 1976 *Car Wash* soundtrack), her delivery is more

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powerful than ever. "On this album I wanted to feel younger," Mary explains. She says some of the tracks remind her of her jazz-musician father (who taught her to harmonize, but left when she was four) or of being seven years old, singing at the House of Prayer Pentecostal Church—in short, times when she was happy. "We used to go to church all night," Mary recalls. "Everybody would be real good to us. I miss that."

"It was always a deep kinda kid," she says, pushing her drink away. "Right now, I'm having more fun than I've ever had in my life. It's good to be a happy camper. I used to be down-and-out. That's all I was, just sad. And for what? It takes so much energy to be negative." She now puts that energy to better use, propelling her career forward, living life more fully, doing the things young sisters dream of but so seldom experience.

Mary rolls into New York's Kennedy Airport totally exhausted. After being photographed for *Hope Hair* and doing a *Boyz n the City* shoot the day before, she had to get up early this morning to be in the wedding of her older sister, LaTonya, in Yonkers. Mary and LaTonya have always stayed close. Without a father at home, they used to take care of each other while their mother, Cora, worked as a nurse. As the maid of honor, Mary wears an emerald green evening dress and pumps. After the ceremony, as she made her way to a red limo, she was mobbed for autographs. "It was all my old friends," she says with a smile. "Even people I didn't think cared."

But now she's off to Los Angeles for a taping of MTV's *Billboard* *Variety Show*. After hotel check-in, the first order of business is to go. Mary's all alone. So she, Taurean, and hair and makeup artist Elaine George jump into another limo and head for Lawndale. Dominique DiPrima's hip hop news program, *Street Science*, is on the radio. The topic is "Studio Gangstas." Dominique, Easy E, Coolio, and MC Eiht are speaking their minds, and all this talk of "keeping it real" gets Mary talking about all the low-budget knockoffs (like SWV, Jade, and Xscape) who burst onto the scene after *What's the 411?* "I feel like they went out there and they did their thing and they won with it. But the only thing that's going to last for a long time is the real," she says. "Like they said on the radio, it's gotta be real or nothing. If people find out it's some fake bubble gum shit..." She sucks her teeth. "They know when you're frontin' and when you're not."

The car pulls up to the Top Line Nails salon. Elaine is sure nobody will recognize Mary here—this is where she takes her clients Salt-N-Pepa. Tiffany, a young Korean manicurist, soaks Mary's feet in sudsy water and then starts to clip and peel off the false nails. This is very Mary. In classic black-girl fashion, she's as comfortable showing off on-stage as she is picking from fake "designer" nails glued onto big emery boards. "I don't

have to be a glamour girl everywhere," she says, then realizes that the manicurist has put six-inch curls of acrylic on her fingers. "Wait a minute," she gasps. "I'm not trying to do the claw."

"No, no, no, we cut down," Tiffany assures her, asking what color polish she wants. Mary digs into her purse and pulls out a bottle of Chanel fingernail polish, still in the box with the \$18 price tag on the back. It's Rouge Noir Vamp, "my favorite color."

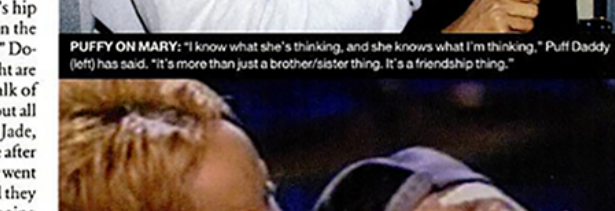
If you want to understand a woman, look at her fingernails. Mary's are long, kinda curled over, and painted a deep, sexy color with a sultry French name. All this allure begs the question of whom Mary's trying to romance. New songs like "You Bring Me Joy," "I Never Wanna Live Without You," and "The Only Woman" certainly sound like they were written by a woman in love. And Mary says she is. "K-Ci's my friend, and I love him dearly," she says, showing a gold "friendship ring" with a good-sized rock on her left ring finger. "He makes me feel good. He makes me feel like he's there. I like, you know, talkin' to one of my girlfriends. We just be stin' around, talkin'. We share things like maybe old people that is 60 and married." She laughs. "It's real, man."

Nail mission accomplished, Mary and company pile back into the limo to grab some jerk chicken and return to the hotel before taping. The radio plays "Ladies Night" by Kool & the Gang. Mary hangs her hands out the car window so her nails can dry. As the limo zooms across a Los Angeles freeway, nails in the wind, the DJ mixes in a sample of a voice repeating "I'm the ultimate." It's the perfect soundtrack for a festively dipped diva on the move.

The MTV sound studio in Hollywood is a huge building filled with electronic equipment, cameras, and cords. It's also freezing cold. Mary and her entourage arrive with all their luggage, hoping to catch the red-eye flight and be home tomorrow morning. But the Bill Bellamy show starts taping at 8:00 p.m. and the flight leaves at 10:00 p.m.

It's time for Mary to try a run-through. Chucki Booker, who was musical director for Janet Jackson's Rhythm Nation tour, cues up the band's bhryms hot tea with honey and lemon as a funky bass-and-strings version of "Be Happy" plays. Suddenly, in a voice that's even more powerful in person than on wax, Mary belts out, "How can I love somebody else / If I can't love myself enough?" She's dope, but the backup singers are off. The producer wants to try again.

"Just feel it, go with it," Mary tells the singers, waving her arms. After she harmonizes with them, they're ready to try again. The band starts up, and Mary flows down. "That beat is phat," says Bellamy, dancing around backstage. "It's going to make the crowd want to get up." But the backup



TRUE B-GIRL FLAVOR: In the video for "You Don't Have to Worry," the single from the Who's the Man? soundtrack, Mary flexed her vocal muscles. PUFFY ON MARY: "I know what she's thinking, and she knows what I'm thinking." Puff Daddy (left) has said, "It's more than just a brother/sister thing. It's a friendship thing." REAL LOVE: Mary and Jodeci's K-Ci sang the touching duet "I Don't Want to Do Anything" on MTV's *Uptown* (right) in 1993.

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singers still aren't quite right. Without missing a single note of her lead, Mary walks over, gives them a scolding look, and sings their part along with them. Afterward, Mary takes the women into her dressing room and drills them for 45 minutes.

"You'll never survive, being weak as a woman in this business," she says later, "because it's dominated by men. That's how people like Aretha Franklin lasted—and they're still around. They wasn't havin' it, you know?" By now, things are running late. It's 8:45, and Lucas is worried about catching the flight. Mary is fifth on the lineup, which also includes Rosie Perez, *Boyz n the City* Yasmine Bleeth, and Coolio. Two Chinese contortionists from a traveling circus called Cirque du Soleil are scheduled to go on before Mary, but Lucas manages to get her bumped up on the schedule.

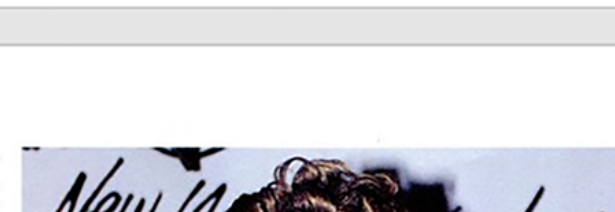
Chucki strikes up the band, and the crowd goes wild as Mary walks onstage in an iridescent blue military uniform, knee-high boots, and a blue velvet po'boy cap. After thanking her audience, Mary gets down to business—rolling B-boy-style, blowing that voice like nobody's business. At one point, the backup singers mess up and Mary rolls her eyes. But when she finishes, the room is vibrating with energy.

Still, Mary can't leave until the techni-

cians give the go-ahead. She waits backstage, not sure how it went. The assistant producer confirms her fears: The sound was off, and the cameras couldn't see her face because her hat was pulled down so low. "If you're okay with it, you can go," he says, "but we'd like to do it again." Mary stands there contemplating. "Can we do it again?" she asks Lucas. "Whatever you want," he says. "Let's do it again."

This time when the music starts, Mary bops out hard and gives it all she's got. She pimps across the stage like camera out of *Superfly*, looks into the camera, and pushes her hat back so you can see those glossy lips sing. The audience is on its feet, and Rosie Perez is in front, screaming, "You go, girl!" When it's over, Mary walks off the stage, asking how it went. "Flawless," "I see." "We got it," the producer yells. "You can go."

It's all good, except that the second take cost her 20 minutes. The red-eye is out. "That's okay," Mary says, laughing. "Now we have time to find where those backup singers live." She's kidding, of course; that's the old Mary talking. It may be easier to catch the red-eye, to take a day off, to sleepwalk through interviews and act salty—but now she knows it's not supposed to be easy. "I'm trying," she says, "to do the best that Mary can do."



GHETTO PRINCESS: In 1993 Mary's "What's the 411?" garnered the New York Music Award, NAACP Image Award, and Soul Train Award.

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