

Mary Jane Blige, ca. 1997



PERFORMER

MARY J. BLIGE

THE QUEEN OF HIP-HOP
SOUL HAS CRAFTED AN INDELIBLE
SOUND ALL HER OWN.

BY DAPHNE A. BROOKS

Calling singer, songwriter, rapper, Oscar-nominated actor, producer, nine-time Grammy winner Mary J. Blige the voice of a generation means acknowledging a rarely recognized fact. That those Black girls – especially the ones who had to find ways of surviving the cruelties of the city, those girls born in the shadow of an unfinished freedom struggle movement and its unmerciful backlash, the ones who bore witness firsthand to the brutalities wrought by stifled opportunities and broken promises – were not only worthy of our attention but also deserved a voice that could capture the complex depths of their humanity, their sorrows, and their longings.

Almost on a lark, a teenage Mary Jane Blige would step into that role in 1988, effectively changing the course of hip-hop and R&B history. All of 18, she and some friends visited the Galleria Mall in White Plains, New York, near her hometown of Yonkers, and Blige, ever the round-the-way songbird, decided to lay down a track at a karaoke-style recording booth. Leaning into a powerful and confident version of quiet storm empress and her idol Anita Baker's "Caught Up in the Rapture," Blige made a demo that eventually, through a family friend, found its way to Uptown Records CEO and legendary hitmaker Andre Harrell. On the surface, one could say that a "hood Cinderella" story was in the making.

But the woman born Mary Jane Blige on January 11,

1971, in the Bronx and raised in the Schlobohm (aka "Slow Bomb") Housing Projects, has been telling us all along – from her meteoric 1992 debut, *What's the 411?*, through her luminous 2022 release, *Good Morning Gorgeous* – that life is not a fairy tale and that her many triumphs were entangled in pains she boldly and fearlessly took up as the centerpiece of her riveting songbook.

The one and only Queen of Hip-Hop Soul's path to crafting an indelible sound all her own – that had never been heard before when she broke through in the early 1990s – started at home. She and sister LaTonya would rifle through their jazz musician father Thomas Blige's record collection (a heady mélange of funk and rock & roll). Her mother, Cora, a nurse who would ultimately raise the Blige children as a single mom, sang constantly around the house, keeping harmony with the icons: Mavis and the Staple Singers, Gladys, Aretha. The music of these geniuses became the portal through which a young Mary J. could build a world outside a suffocating everyday environment where dreaming, as she once described, was off limits.

When she opened her mouth to sing, she sounded the torment and angst that was hers to tell, echoing her forebears: daring blues queens (Bessie Smith, Ma Rainey) and their brilliant jazz heirs (Billie Holiday, Nina Simone) whose truth-telling musicality transformed them into vessels of soul-baring testimony for the communities



**CLOCKWISE FROM
TOP LEFT:**

**Outside the Arie
Crown Theater,
Chicago, 1992;
winning at the
Grammy Awards,
Los Angeles, 1998;
reaching to the
crowds, Hamburg,
Germany, 1997.**



who loved them so. Her out-of-the-gate vocals – called by fans and admirers “raw,” “unapologetic,” “dark,” “weighty,” “raspy, gutter,” and “ghetto” – wed the R&B of her mother’s generation with the hip-hop of her own. When Harrell tapped Sean “P. Diddy” Combs to serve as a key producer and shaper of her initial sound, that new genre – hip-hop soul – was born. This was music for the B-girl sisters, who came up loving rap – but too rarely heard themselves as protagonists in the joints getting the most airplay on street corner boomboxes. Here was an artist capable of fluidly riding this infectious blend of lush R&B production infused with New Jack Beats – and with tenacity and verve. *What’s the 411?* yielded five hits: “You Remind Me,” “Real Love,” “Reminisce,” an assured cover of Rufus’ “Sweet Thing,” and “Love No Limit,”

marking the arrival of a superstar talent that captured the imagination of sisters looking for a songstress who brought the hood into the studio.

It would’ve been so easy to stick to that winning formula. But 1994’s sophomore effort, *My Life*, took a striking turn inward, showcasing Blige’s gift for frank, unvarnished lyricism and stirring, minor-key emotiveness that hit a nerve with listeners. She described it as her “most important” and “darkest” effort, a brave and brooding statement that voiced the agony of clinical depression and the menacing black hole of substance abuse. These were the conditions under which Blige recorded *My Life*, though her openness about this period’s turmoil would grow in the years following its release. But listen closely to this sprawling, melancholic effort, and you’ll catch the spirit of a woman in

**CLOCKWISE
FROM LEFT:**

**At the Sounds & Vision concert, 1997;
with Missy Elliott,
post-VMA Awards
Party, 2002; with
Beyoncé at the 49th
Annual Grammy
Awards, 2007.**



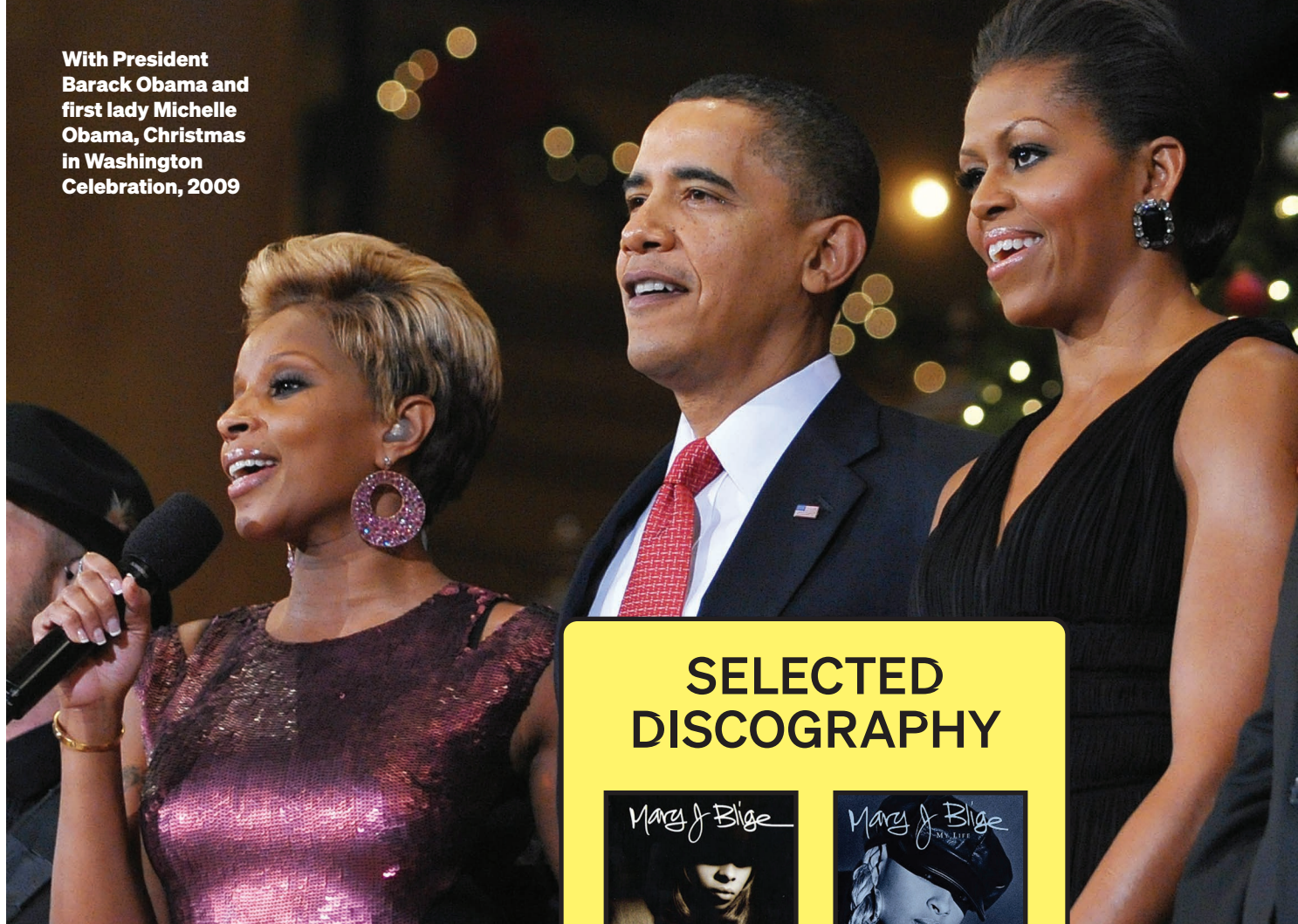
trouble who unleashes an arresting moan and wordless anguish reminiscent of those 1920s blues divas.

Unafraid to tap into sharpness and dissonance on *My Life*, Blige took listeners to the very edge of her burdens, setting her end-of-the-twentieth-century tales of heartache to the music of her childhood – Rick James, Isaac Hayes, Roy Ayers – and lighting the way for the nostalgic neo-soul sounds just about to jump off in the mid-nineties. There was a profound intimacy to this approach, akin to listening to Blige riff along with the classics and watching her turn Ayers' psychedelic soul cosmos, "Everybody Loves the Sunshine," into a title track meditation on the scale of her woe and weariness as well as her faith in the power to change. Her insistence on speaking truth to power, encouraging her listeners

to explore "what's on your mind" so as to "find in time / That all the negative energy . . . will all cease . . ." quickly earned her vaunted status – critic Ernest Hardy called her the "hood Oprah." Throughout her career, Blige has actively used her music to ease the suffering of her fans, creating and putting her songs to work as plain-spoken problem-solving and balms for the least loved, the least remembered – as Toni Morrison deemed them in her novel *The Bluest Eye*.

Growth and self-realization are major tools of survival in Blige's arsenal. On a track like the Babyface joint "Not Gon' Cry," a searing smash featured on her 1997 album, *Share My World*, as well as the *Waiting to Exhale* soundtrack, Blige dissects with surgical precision the micro-injuries countenanced by a wife betrayed,

With President Barack Obama and first lady Michelle Obama, Christmas in Washington Celebration, 2009



reaching a crescendo (“I shoulda left your ass a long time ago!”) that blows up like the family car Angela Bassett famously torches in the film. Growth defines Blige, who took a big leap in 1999 with the critically acclaimed *Mary*, a warm and sensual record that moved away from her hip-hop soul roots and toward the innovations of neo-soul crate-digging and sonic memory work her earlier records had helped to ignite. With collabos featuring Lauryn Hill and inspired samples of everything from Stevie’s “Pastime Paradise” to Elton’s “Bennie and the Jets,” Mary showed further signs of her range, as she did on 2001’s *No More Drama*, which interwove the beats of her early work with her expanding love for a deliciously smooth and retro vibe. With the Dr. Dre-produced worldwide smash “Family Affair,” an electric-slide banger for the ages, Blige got us moving en masse, while the title track’s clever sample of *The Young and the Restless* theme showed how inextricably linked her music is with popular culture (so much so that, come 2023, Blige executive produced two Lifetime Network television films inspired by two of her own songs: “Real Love” and “Strength of a Woman”).

With 2005’s astonishing *The Breakthrough*, she achieved a new level of flow and nuance – “a more self-actualized Mary J. Blige,” as critic Clover Hope noted. Her rap alter-ego, Brook Lynn, makes an appearance (as she does across several of Blige’s albums), laying down “MJB da MVP” with help from 50 Cent, a hot braggadocio track with heart. The chart-topping “Be Without You,” with its irresistible piano hook, and the electrifying “About You,” which made haunting and inventive use of an iconic song by Nina Simone, sealed the deal on an album critics hailed for both its eclecticism and seamlessness.

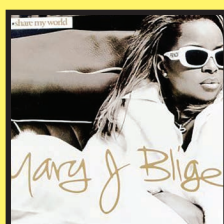
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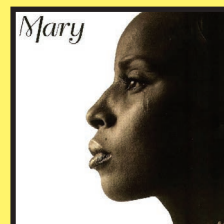
What's the 411?
1992 (Uptown/MCA)



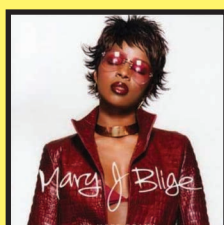
My Life
1994 (Uptown/MCA)



Share My World
1997
(MCA/Universal)



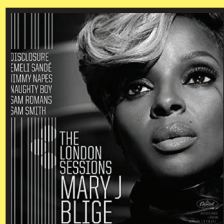
Mary
1999 (MCA)



No More Drama
2001 (MCA)



The Breakthrough
2005 (Matriarch/Geffen)



The London Sessions
2014
(Capitol/Matriarch)

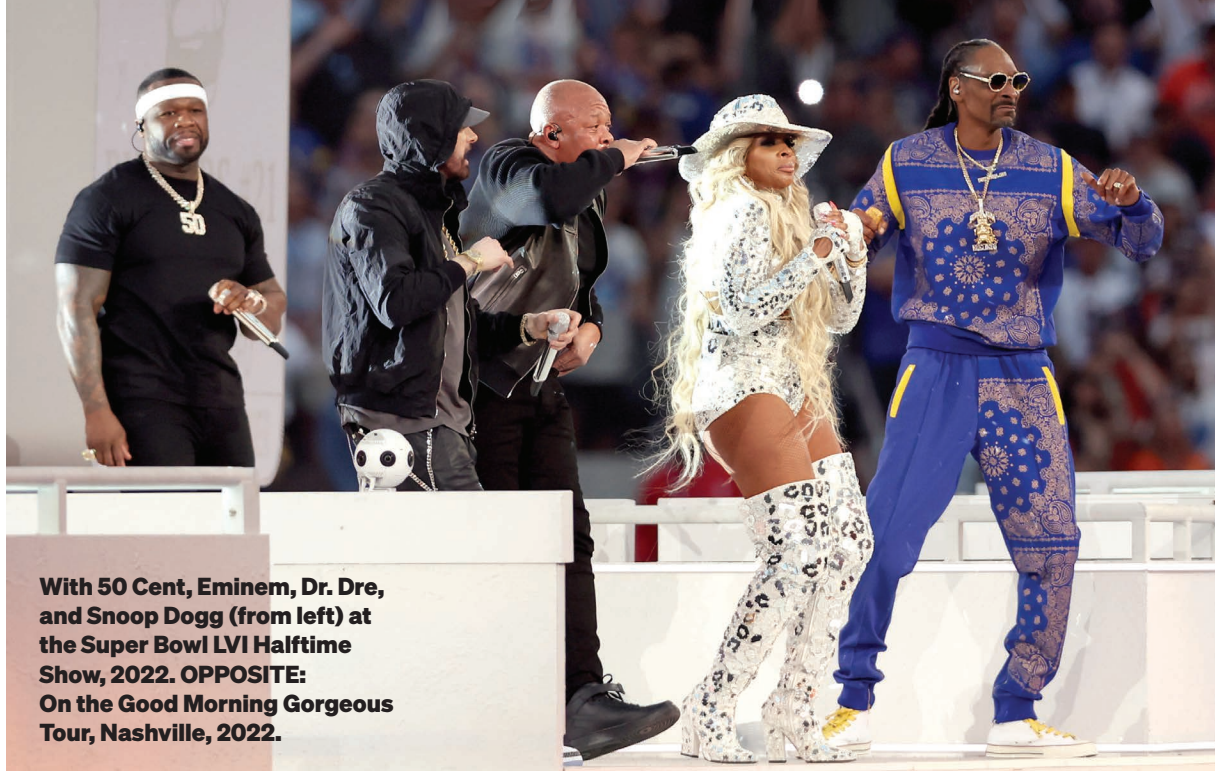


Good Morning Gorgeous
2022 (300/Mary Jane)



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: At the Obama Inaugural Celebration, Washington, D.C., 2009; with Chaka Khan at VH1 Divas Duets, Las Vegas, 2003; at the 90th Annual Academy Awards, Hollywood, 2018; with Whitney Houston at Divas Live, Beacon Theatre, New York City, 1999; duetting with Smokey Robinson, Los Angeles, 2001.





With 50 Cent, Eminem, Dr. Dre, and Snoop Dogg (from left) at the Super Bowl LVI Halftime Show, 2022. OPPOSITE: On the Good Morning Gorgeous Tour, Nashville, 2022.

But no track spoke more to Blige's diverse palette on *The Breakthrough* than her cover of U2's "One," a slow-burning rock & roll ballad drenched in *Exile on Main St.* meets *Beggars Banquet* guitar riffs, a parable about fractured relationships and desperate attempts to reconcile. Partnering with U2, she recorded a track that wholly reimagined the song for 2005 America. Having performed a gut-wrenching version with the band on the *Shelter From the Storm: A Concert for the Gulf Coast* telethon earlier that year, Blige had already laid claim to this anthem, reinhabiting it in her aching duet with Bono as a haunting meditation on Hurricane Katrina's catastrophe of neglect and displacement, suffered most acutely by Gulf Coast Black women. In that captivating performance, Blige became our "One," the artist who could bring the pain and voice the bottomless hurt of women literally left behind by leaders who failed them.

And so she kept stretching and bending the arc of the Mary J. sound. Think of what the collabos have opened up for her. A masterful duet partner whose dazzling performance of "I Used to Love Him" with friend Lauryn Hill on the magisterial *Miseducation of Lauryn Hill* album set a new standard for the modern pop music team-up, Blige has repeatedly shown her versatility. She has matched up with a roll call of greats – from hip-hop (Method Man to Eve, Nas to Jay-Z, Anderson .Paak and DJ Khaled to Dr. Dre), rock & roll (Eric Clapton to Sting, Elton John to Bryan Adams, plus Zeppelin covers accompanied by Steve Vai, Travis Barker, and Randy Jackson), pop (George Michael), jazz (George Benson), and vintage soul (Aretha). She keeps evolving, reaching new levels of effervescence and buoyancy while holding onto her gift for candid balladeering on albums like 2007's *Growing Pains* and 2009's *Stronger With Each Tear* (which finds young hip-hop and R&B brothers Drake, T.I., Ne-Yo, and Trey Songz lining up to vibe with her royal badness). The stunner "Color," from the soundtrack to the film *Precious*, shows off her dramatic range as a vocalist and her ability to convey dimensions of tenderness. When she revisited her second album with a 2011 sequel – the grounded *My Life . . . the Journey Continues (Act 1)* – she'd reached an-

other turning point. Beckoned by the U.K. soulster Sam Smith, English electronic duo Disclosure, and Scottish-Zambian singer-songwriter Emeli Sande, among others, to cross the pond, Blige embarked on a fresh adventure. Surrounded by a generation of British young ones who'd grown up on her music, she recorded 2014's *The London Sessions*, an album that moves from retro soul-inflected doo-wop ("Therapy") to four-on-the-floor ecstasism ("Right Now," "Nobody But You") and cinematic love songs ("Worth My Time"). The music nods to the British retro soul boom led by Amy Winehouse and Adele and reminds listeners of the one who set off modern soul experimentation at the turn of the century.

All of this creative flourishing and risk-taking spilled over from music into acting as Blige built her chops on TV and in indies and big budget films (*Rock of Ages* with Tom Cruise). The result was Black queer feminist filmmaker Dee Rees' *Mudbound*, a 2017 interracial epic: Blige starred as the matriarch of a sharecropping family caught up in Jim Crow disaster. For her work, Blige became the first performer ever nominated for an Oscar in the same year for both acting (for Best Supporting Actress) and original song (for "Mighty River").

Strength of a Woman (2017) found Blige teaming up again with peer Missy Elliott and one of her many formidable descendants, Jazmine Sullivan, to make an album that critic Jon Caramanica characterized as moving "like a forest fire: ruthless, wide-ranging, and blunt." With 2022's *Good Morning Gorgeous*, a loose and jubilant study in Black joy ("I wake up every morning and tell myself," she sings on the hypnotic title track featuring H.E.R., "sometimes you gotta look in the mirror and say / 'Good morning gorgeous'"), the Queen of Hip-Hop Soul – who so often had been described by critics as wearing a crown of pain – has taken her fans all the way from the hard and tumultuous Yonkers nineties into the twenty-first century land of sumptuous dreams. These are the dreams she felt forbidden to have as a child, in which she shimmers like the midnight star she's always been, the one who has guided us after all these years to the fact of our own precious worth and iridescent beauty.

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