

Hail Mary!

The Lady Miss Blige Leaves Behind the Drama on Latest Release

By Ian Drew



such gorgeous ballads as "2U," "In the Meantime," and "Testimony."

Meanwhile, songs like "Where I've Been," featuring raptress Eve, and an experimental spoken word poem entitled "Forever No More," give insight into Blige's tempestuous past and the challenges that have spurred the changes.

The one hilarious turn on the album comes in the form of "PMS," a clever reworking of Al Green's "Simply Beautiful" that finds Blige, with the help of Lenny Kravitz, bravely confronting the "worst part" of her womanhood. The blaring confessional is clearly another signal

of Blige's appraisal of everything that she will no longer tolerate.

No More Drama is certainly a pinnacle addition to the consistently building repertoire of an artist who is often cited as the Billie Holiday, Aretha Franklin or Chaka Khan of her generation.

Blige's delivery, like that of her outstanding predecessors, is often noted for its truth and gut-wrenching force in spite of tonal imperfections and occasional lapses in vocal prowess.

If each previous release has taught us to project ahead to guess if Blige will get herself out of this situation or that failed relationship, this release will at least make us no longer question how.

The latest of Mary J. Blige's six smash original studio albums is more than a declaration of redemption and a menagerie of the emotions that have made her the voice of a generation and a culture. *No More Drama* is also another example of Blige's seemingly effortless way of capturing the current general mindset upon each stunning release.

Blige explains, "I've had enough of the negativity in my life. I've had enough of the drama. It's really time to be appreciative of the good times even though we still have a bunch of drama going on. But that's not the focus."

It is sentiments like these that have made the long hailed Queen of Hip-Hop Soul an icon to many, especially gays and lesbians. The raw expressive nature of her voice and its underlying intent have long expressed the pain and repression that have endeared her to the masses even more than her edgy, drag queenesque style and strong involvement in numerous AIDS charities.

The evidence is all over *No More Drama*, an album that goes beyond the testimonial growth and struggles in previous efforts to bare her evolution into stronger and

more conscious pastures.

"Family Affair," the first single off the new album that is rapidly taking over the charts and the airways, is a glaring indication of where Blige is coming from now. Produced by longtime beatmeister Dr. Dre, the hit loudly proclaims Blige's intention to throw off the past and celebrate the present.

Despite the commandeered celebration, Blige's voice still hints at a few problems beyond the party that might have to be tended to later. The difference now is clearly that it will come fully on Mary's terms and when the diva is good and ready.

The "celebrate and forget the rest (for now)" ideology, reminiscent of Blige's 1992 multi-platinum debut *What's the 411?*, permeates many other songs on the album, including the funky "Dance for Me," the soaring "Flying Away," and the neo-soul gem "Beautiful Day."

But all of this does not necessarily indicate that Blige, who has subsequently earned the subtitle Queen of Pain during her decade long career, is ready to give up her reign quite yet. It is now more than apparent that even this will fall under Blige's own self-

appointed jurisdiction.

On the Jimmy Jam/Terry Lewis produced title cut, she clearly pronounces the changes in her mindset enough that it resonates through our own pasts. "I guess I liked the stress/ 'cause I was young and restless/but that was long ago/I don't want to cry no more," she warbles from her pronounced soul.

Other songs, like "Never Been," a collaboration with Missy Elliot, show Blige in a refreshed state of bliss that would have seemed unlikely coming from the gutted woman presented on her landmark 1994 release *My Life*.

This enduring sensitivity is further displayed on the second half of the album in

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