

Equal Time with the Empress of Soul

Written by Kam Williams

The great ones endure, and Gladys Knight is a testament to that sage maxim. Over the last half-century, this seven-time Grammy-winner has enjoyed #1 hits in pop, R&B and Adult Contemporary, and has triumphed in film, on television and in concert.

Revered as The Empress of Soul, Gladys is currently basking in the glow of the critical acclaim for her latest album, "Before Me," a tribute to great legends like Ella, Duke, Billie, Lena. She has also recently released a couple of collaborations with the 100-member Saints Unified Voices gospel choir, with whom she landed the "Best Gospel/Choir Album" Grammy.

Knight was awarded yet another Grammy for her duet with the late Ray Charles on his posthumous album "Genius Loves Company," specifically for "Heaven Help Us All," and her "At Last" solo album earned a Grammy for "Best Traditional R&B Vocal Album." Furthermore, her recent four-year run at the Flamingo in Las Vegas was hailed "the number-one show on the Strip" by the Las Vegas Review-Journal.

The Georgia-born icon began performing Gospel music at the age of four and won the grand prize on television's "Ted Mack's Amateur Hour" just three years later. She met with phenomenal success throughout the 60s, 70s and 80s with "Gladys Knight & The Pips", including several Grammys while registering numerous Top 10 hits, perhaps most memorably, "Midnight Train to Georgia. Over the course of her illustrious career, Gladys has recorded nearly 40 albums, earned a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame, and been inducted into the Rock 'N' Roll Hall of Fame.

Here, she talks about her life and about her co-starring role as Wanda in Tyler Perry's new movie, "I Can Do Bad All by Myself."

Kam Williams: Gladys, thanks so much for the time.

Gladys Knight: Not a problem, Kam.

KW: The first time I met you was on an airplane back in the Seventies.

GK: Oh really?

KW: Yes, and you were quite gracious in speaking to me briefly and signed an autograph. I appreciated your making that encounter a special moment I'd remember for the rest of my life. But I wonder what it is like on the other end, and whether always being approached by fans has been a burden for you.

GK: No, I'm just me. I never get any further past that than that. I'm a people lover. I love interacting with different people as I meet them, and I think people are one of God's greatest creations, I really do. They're interesting and intriguing.

KW: What interested you in doing "I Can Do Bad All by Myself" and working with Tyler?

GK: Mr. Perry? Mr. Perry called me up and said, "Gladys, I'm sending you a script. I have a part

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I need you to do.” [Laughs]

KW: This is his most music-driven movie so far.

GK: Yeah, it is. How about that! And it was really fun making this movie, too, although I was nervous about it in the beginning, because I didn't feel I had enough experience to pull it off. I didn't want to disappoint him, since he had so much faith in me. In fact, I almost said “no.”

KW: Really?

GK: Yeah, because looking at the rest of the cast, I knew that they were great. Taraji [Henson] was up for an Academy Award, and Adam [Rodriguez] is doing so well with his series [CSI: Miami], and I just didn't know whether I would measure up.

KW: Well, you did a terrific job in the film, including delivering a couple of powerful singing performances. Who picked the songs, you or Tyler?

GK: Tyler and I discussed it, after we finished working out my role. He said he wanted me to sing, but that we'd discuss it later. When he called me back, he asked me, “What do you want to do?” I said, “I don't know, because I haven't given it any thought. I thought you were going to pick one.” He started laughing, and said, “Okay, you make a list, and I'll make a list. We'll put 'em together, and out of that we ought to be able to choose.”

KW: Your first one was a solo rendition of “The Need to Be” by Jim Weatherly who also wrote “Midnight Train to Georgia” which played a big part in your career.

GK: Absolutely!

KW: How did you come to settle on that tune?

GK: Most people who ask me what's my favorite song, expect that it's “Midnight Train” or “Neither One of Us.” But actually, it's always kinda' been “The Need to Be” because of what it says. I love the way that song was written, I love the melody, I love everything about it. So, I presented it to Tyler, and he called me back, and said, “That's the one!”

KW: You also did a beautiful duet with Marvin Winans on a song he wrote. How did you like playing his wife Wilma, a church elder?

GK: I loved her, because I knew her from my childhood. So, I had something to draw on for my character. I just brought all those little ladies, even the weight thing. I was worrying about going on the screen looking a little heavy. I wanted to be fit, but Tyler started laughing again, and said, “Girl, come on down here, you're right for the part.” And when I thought about it, I had to admit that back in the days, the church ladies who held those positions weren't glamour girls. They were nurturing and kinda portly, and dressed kinda basic as they linked between the church and the community. So, they were who I drew on.

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KW: Well, watching you certainly took me back to my childhood.

GK: Yeah! Come on, now!

KW: You also performed at Oprah's Gospel Brunch. I only wish I could have been there to witness it live. I must watch that video at least once month.

GK: There you go!

KW: What was it like being there?

[<http://www.kewego.co.uk/video/iLyROoafYJA0.html>]

GK: It was awesome! It really, really, really was. Yes it was!

KW: I always thought you were from Atlanta. But your Wikipedia page says you were born in Loachapoka, Alabama.

GK: [Squeals, laughing] That's not true. That is not true. I was born at Grady Hospital in Atlanta, Georgia to Elizabeth and Merald Knight, Sr.

KW: You better have somebody correct that right away. In your autobiography, "Between Each Line of Pain and Glory," you said, "I have seen it all, to be sure, but rarely participated in it." What did you mean by that?

GK: Well, there have been so many different sides to our industry. Some of them not so good. The drugs, the partying, the alcohol, and the bad behavior in the way we treat each other. The cheating... ugh! Over the years, I have definitely not participated in those things. That's what I meant.

KW: I asked my readers to send in questions for you, and I couldn't believe how many prefaced their remarks by saying how much they love you. Marcia Evans says you are her all-time favorite artist. She saw you last year at the Westbury Music Fair, and was wondering whether you've ever sung "I Will Survive" at one of your shows?

GK: I sure have. As a matter of fact, sometimes I'll close with it, because it has such a great message and the tempo is really, really fun, and leaves everybody on an up-note.

KW: Irene Smalls says Gladys Knight is one of my favorites. Please ask her, how has hip-hop changed the nature of black music?

GK: [LOL] Well, it's been good as far as giving young artists an opportunity to get out there. But, it's been bad, in my opinion, as far as the quality of the music and the stories that they tell. It's one thing to be raw about your history, but they took it to another level and it became vulgar. It has not elevated our industry musically, and it definitely has not elevated us as African-Americans, because we show disrespect for our partners, men and women. I believe we have lowered our self-esteem with these performances and presentations.

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KW: Renee Peterson says she loves your hit song 'Love Overboard.'

GK: Hey!

KW: She asks, which of the many musical geniuses you worked with did you enjoy collaborating with the most?

GK: I get something different from everybody I work with. Would you believe that Sammy Davis, Jr. taught me how to sing a ballad? "You can be in an arena," he said, "and you should be able to hold their attention. And it worked!" Marvin Gaye... Stevie Wonder... you name 'em, and we've worked with 'em.

KW: Rose asks, will you be coming to West Palm Beach, Florida in the near future?

GK: Yeah, I hope so, when we come off this European tour. I haven't been there for a while, and I loved it when I was there. I will certainly request that West Palm Beach be one of our stops.

KW: Is there any question no one ever asks you, that you wish someone would?

GK: No, I heard 'em, all. [LOL]

KW: The Tasha Smith question: Are you ever afraid?

GK: Of course! And you should be. That's part of your life lesson to be afraid. The bigger question is how you deal with being afraid. Do you have to summon courage or something else to live with that fear without letting it take you over?

KW: The Columbus Short question: Are you happy?

GK: Yes! I have a wonderful family! I have the most beautiful, wonderful husband [William McDowell]. After all these years, I can finally say that. I have wonderful children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren. My brother [Bubba] and my sister [Brenda] love me and support me and we still get a chance to work together. I have the people who still buy a ticket to see me entertain them. That is quite an honor to me. So, what else could you want for?

KW: Jackie Schatz asks why you named your son Jomo and your daughter Kenya? Let me guess, after Jomo Kenyatta!

GK: [Laughs] That's right!

KW: Teri Emerson would like to know, when was the last time you had a good laugh?

GK: Just a few minutes ago, laughing at Tyler.

KW: "Realtor to the Stars" Jimmy Bayan was wondering, where in L.A. you live?

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GK: I don't live in L.A. I live in Las Vegas.

KW: The bookworm Troy Johnson question: What was the last book you read?

GK: A book on the ups and down and ins and outs of cholesterol.

KW: The music maven Heather Covington question: What music are you listening to nowadays?

GK: I listen to everything. This morning I was listening to the soundtrack of Forrest Gump. It's beautiful!

KW: When you look in the mirror, what do you see?

GK: A child of God.

KW: What is your favorite dish to cook?

GK: My squash casserole, and my sweet potato casserole.

KW: The Flex Alexander question: How did you get through the tough times?

GK: With prayer and my family. The support of my mom when she was here, my husband and children now, and even my fans have brought me through certain challenges.

KW: Bus driver Kevin Kenna says, a white guy from Philly wants to know what a Pip is.

GK: Technically it's a seed. We were the seeds that went into the making of a song.

KW: Attorney Bernadette asks if you get sick of people asking, where are the Pips?

GK: No, because it was family [her brother and two cousins], and we were together over 40 years. So, it was really like leaving a marriage, but we all needed to grow. And there were things I wanted to do, that I couldn't do inside of that structure.

KW: Thanks again for the honor of speaking with you, Gladys, and best of luck with everything.

GK: Why, thank you so much, I've enjoyed talking to you.

To purchase a copy of Gladys Knight's autobiography "Between Each Line of Pain and Glory." visit:

<http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/142236173X?ie=UTF8&tag=thslfofire-20&linkCode=as2&camp=1789&creative=390957&creativeASIN=142236173X>

To see Gladys Knight and other legends perform at Oprah's Gospel Brunch, visit: <http://www.kewego.co.uk/video/iLyROoafYJA0.html>

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To see a trailer for I Can Do Bad All by Myself, visit:

http://www.apple.com/trailers/lions_gate/icandobadallbymyself/large.html