

## “My Life”--Mary J. Blige (1994)

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Essay by Danny Alexander (guest post)\*



In the summer of 1992, 21-year-old Mary J. Blige released her first album, “What’s the 411?” A flurry of promotion from her label Uptown Records accompanied the release because Blige was key to Sean “Puffy” Combs’ plan to establish his importance as a producer and because label head Andre Harrell had already declared Blige the “Queen of Hip Hop Soul.” Fortunately, Blige released a strong debut, her powerful vocals selling a variety of infectious hip hop/R&B singles. Still, it took her second album, released two years later, for Blige to truly inhabit the royal title Harrell bestowed on her, wedding the highest aims of popular music with the latest innovations in sound.

With its woodwind, piano, and string accompaniment, the album’s opener “Mary Jane (All Night Long)” calls to mind the dramatic break from the Motown sound Marvin Gaye made with 1971’s concept record “What’s Going On,” which Blige underscores with the album’s third cut “Marvin Interlude.” Born in ’71 herself, Blige grew up on the kind of symphonic soul that would emerge with Gaye’s concept-driven output throughout the ‘70s and those works parallels the works of Isaac Hayes, out of Memphis, and Curtis Mayfield, out of Chicago, both artists sampled on her “My Life” record. Additionally, all of “My Life” has the cinematic sweep of the Philly Soul records pioneered by Kenneth Gamble and Leon Huff.

Soul was Blige’s mother’s genre, and young Mary grew up earning the spiritual chops essential to that music by singing in her mother’s Pentecostal church. At the same time, Blige built the title track of “My Life” around Roy Ayers’ “Everybody Loves the Sunshine,” a favorite of her jazz bassist father’s that broke down boundaries between soul, jazz, and funk. Seamlessly synthesizing her roots with the hip hop of her own era, Blige’s sophomore album eradicates boundaries between genres and allows Blige to shine in a distinctly mature and groundbreaking way.

An ambitious, unified statement, “My Life” documents the struggle of a woman surviving a troubled relationship by finding new layers to who she is. The record lays the foundation for an over three-decade’s long career, crafting 15 studio albums (sixteen if we count her soundtrack to the romantic-comedy “Think Like a Man Too”) that have sold over 50 million copies. “My

Life's" triumph established Blige as a unique and formidable artist already growing beyond the limits of producer Sean Combs' influence.

The timing was right for such a bold statement by a woman in popular music. A historically unprecedented movement of women (in all genres of music but particularly evident in hip hop and R&B) filled the pop charts in numbers roughly equivalent to men, with black women responsible for twice as many hits as at the height of the "girl group era" 30 years before. As in that previous era, many of the artists (women like Sade, Toni Braxton, and Whitney Houston) appealed to an adult contemporary audience while artists like TLC, Monica, and Aaliyah were remarkably young themselves and targeting audiences close to their ages. With "My Life," Blige managed to build in both directions. The album stayed at #1 on the Billboard R&B chart for a week longer than its predecessor and on the overall pop album chart three times as long.

Key to "My Life's" unified vision is the heightened role of Blige as a songwriter. Aside from a short musical interlude by rapper Keith Murray and a song by her on-again, off-again boyfriend K-Ci Hailey, Blige wrote the vast majority of the album's lyrics. The audience who enjoyed "What's the 411?" was now challenged to respond at a deeper, more personal and vulnerable level to "My Life's" continuous, intense introspection.

She also found an ally who could help her achieve her musical ambitions in a new producer Combs hired. A fan of her first album with a sense of what more she wanted and needed, Charles "Chucky" Thompson was brought on to produce the record. A multi-instrumentalist from DC with a background in that city's Go-go music (he had played with Go-go Godfather Chuck Brown's band The Soul Searchers), Thompson brought a seamless punch to the music, blending samples and live instrumentals so naturally, the distinctions are imperceptible.

Thompson and Blige bonded over their interest in a wide variety of sounds. Almost magically serendipitous, the Roy Ayers record Blige's father played when she was growing up made its way into Thompson's audition tracks for "My Life" before the two even met much less talked about working together. It seems noteworthy that, after the middle-third cover of the Los Angeles band Rose Royce's "I'm Goin' Down," the album begins to integrate the high, sustained keyboard sounds typical of LA's early 90's gangsta rap. Like everything about "My Life," this instrumentation is purposeful on multiple levels. The album has turned a dark corner with a relationship unraveling, and those high, lonesome keyboard notes evoke the kinds of fears that settle in when the rest of the world is sleeping. In the end, Thompson played every instrument on 14 of the album's 17 cuts and contributed instrumentation to all of them.

But Blige was in charge. In an interview with this writer, Thompson recalled how hard Blige worked to get everything exactly as she wanted it: "On 'I Never Want to Live Without You,' she got real emotional when we were making that record. I could hear her crying in the booth, but she wouldn't stop. Even though she was going through what she was going through, she was still professional, she was still an artist. She just pushed through. There was a lot of stuff that we had to go back and do other takes, that she wanted to re-sing. It was mostly her saying 'keep that' and 'let's take it back' to get that vibe she captured on the record."

The seamless sustained vision of the record has everything to do with the intense devotion Mary J. Blige's fan base has to it. Even the length of the record sets it apart. The new digital medium of the CD came with expectations of a longer run time. While Marvin Gaye's masterpiece "What's Goin' On" is less than 35 minutes long, Mary J. Blige's "My Life" is well over an hour, over ten minutes longer than even her CD-era debut. Though many early CDs are filled with skits and filler, that's not true of "My Life." Even Combs' phone call to Blige at the beginning and the Keith Murray interlude total no more than a minute-long break from the album's central focus.

Blige's top selling records would come later, but this is the record that earned her the loyal fan base that would only grow over the next 30 years. Blige has too remained loyal to that base and the aesthetic that ties her to her base. At the heart of it all, Blige sings to and for working class black women, and the conviction with which she delivers lines like the title track's "*I know we are all struggling... but we will get by*" erases the line between artist and audience, offering solidarity and hope. Even if it didn't contain countless layers of nuanced beauty, that core sentiment would make "My Life" an extraordinary achievement by a singularly important artist.

*Kansas City-based music journalist Danny Alexander served as associate editor of the music and politics newsletter "Rock & Rap Confidential" for close to three decades, and he has recently launched a newsletter at Substack, "Working on a Miracle." In 2016, Alexander published "Real Love, No Drama: The Music of Mary J. Blige" (University of Texas Press), and in 2023, he co-edited an anthology of Dave Marsh's work "Kick Out the Jams: Jibes, Barbs, Tributes, and Rallying Cries from 35 Years of Music Writing" (Simon & Schuster).*

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