



Gladys Knight

FROM 'FAITH CHILD' TO MUSIC LEGEND BY CORY ALBERTSON

On 1973's "Midnight Train to Georgia," Gladys Knight—backed by the "whooh whooh" train sounds of the Pips—famously declared "I'd rather live in his world, than live without him in mine." Thankfully our world has never been faced with such a choice with regards to Knight. From her hometown debut at age four with Atlanta's Mount Moriah Baptist Church Choir to her current residency at age 67 at the famed Tropicana in Las Vegas, Knight's husky, soulful alto has never been far from our ears. Alongside the Pips from 1952 to 1987, she became a superstar with hits like "If I Were Your Woman" and "I Heard It Through the Grapevine" (which was their hit first before Marvin Gaye's version). Since then she's only cemented her legendary status, going solo and winning four Grammys including one for "That's What Friends Are For," her classic collaboration with

Dionne Warwick, Stevie Wonder and Elton John.

This summer Knight plans to release a new as-yet-untitled studio album, her first since 2006's exquisite jazz tribute *Before Me*. For the new album, Knight has reteamed with American Idol judge Randy Jackson who also produced 2001's Grammy-winning *At Last*. The upcoming set promises fresh takes on classics alongside new material, all with the goal of situating the Rock and Roll Hall of Famer's time-tested vocals with today's R&B beats. Just mentioning the project turns Knight's soothing, motherly drawl into an excited squeal: "I'm so excited about it because it's been a while, you know!" On her day off from performing at the Tropicana, we caught up with Knight to chat about the new album, how her faith impacts her view of success and the enduring message of "Midnight Train to Georgia."



It's been five years since your last album. How would you describe this new one?

Well, what I always try to do is to stay current as much as I can without losing myself and the sound that [everyone has] embraced for so many years. But there are so many new beats and so many new sounds as far as the music itself is concerned and a lot of people are kind of shy about going to that. Well, we got some really nice sounds [on this album]. I'm working with some really wonderful young people. Randy Jackson, who definitely has his ear on what's going on in music today, is a friend and has been working with me for many, many years. Leon Silva is one of my major producers on this, but his son, Little Leon, is in the music industry as well and he is really as brilliant or more brilliant than his dad... We've captured some old things like "I (Who Have Nothing)" and just made them a whole different song just because of the treatment that they put to it. Everybody in the world has recorded that song and it's one that I've always loved. They've done some amazing things with it and I'm really excited about that one.

I've always been concerned about song content. That's what I choose my material by. Because if I don't believe it before I perform it or sing it, then you won't believe it, you know what I'm saying? It's like you've got to be real with your music so I need to do something that I totally can relate to as far as the music is concerned.

I did a CBS special the other day and everyone was just sitting around while I was getting dressed, so I played a couple of the [new songs] for them and they were saying, "Well, who is that?" [Laughs] I have a fresher sound evidently because of the music that I'm doing. We also have this one song that I really love called "Old School." It's really a fun one, but it's so now—I mean any of the youngsters can sing it right now. I even have a little rap section in the middle of it, you know, not trying to be them, but the flow with the song so warranted that. As long as it's clean I don't have a problem with rap. My brother Bubba joined me on it—one of the Pips—and it's really, really fun. And we did a lot of the wonderful, just beautiful ballad things... "All in Due Time" also is one of my favorites. It's more of a message ballad about today's world and what we would do to get some of the things we desire—[that] there's a way to do that without hurting someone or even killing someone like the young people get around to today. It's really, really a sweet song telling them here's another way that, all in due time, good things will happen.

Do you find yourself relating to song content differently now than, say, when you were a young woman starting out with the Pips?

No, I've always been concerned about song content. That's what I—used to and I still do—choose my material by. Because if I don't believe it before I perform it or sing it, then you won't believe it, you know what I'm saying? It's like you've got to be real with your music so I need to do something that I totally can relate to as far as the music is concerned. That's what I liked about "Old School." It's talking about my time, but it's in a new way, alright? [With] "All in Due Time," I'm always going to have a message because I love people so much—so much. If you've got something you want to tell me, tell me about it and let me stay up about it in my life, you know?

In addition to the new album, you have a new show, *A Mic and a Light at the Tropicana* in Las Vegas, which I hear is fantastic.

Awwww, thank you. I'm so excited! Do you know what a dream come true that is for me? Not because I wanted my name up in lights. But I have been out here so long. And to represent my era, my group, and the people that came before me that made it possible for me to be here, that never had this honor. I share it with all of them—with all of them—and [with] people of color everywhere as well as all the other people that come to this theater—The Gladys Knight Theater—to be entertained. It's everybody's theater.

That truly is amazing because so many African American performers in the 1930s through to the '50s—Sammy Davis, Jr., Nat King Cole—they couldn't even stay in the hotels they performed in. And now you have a theater named after you.

Absolutely. And I'm honored because I was chosen to have this representation for everybody. Not by just somebody giving it to me, but I just feel like [God] meant for that to be part of my path. So, yeah, I'm really excited.

You've lived in Vegas for many years now and you seem very comfortable there. What is it about Vegas that made you want to settle there?

Well, to tell the honest truth, it was my kids that brought me here, outside of my entertainment [ventures]. We had been playing here for many years before I moved here. And when I got ready to make a personal change in my life, I asked the kids, I said, "Out of all the places that we've been, because you know Mommy's got to work, where would you like to live, because I'm leaving here." And they unanimously said, "Las Vegas" [laughs]. I think my mom had something to do with that because she came out in the early '70s to see us perform...and she just kind of fell in love with this place. Every year after that, she started bringing [my] kids out here on summer vacation. They would stay in a hotel and then, eventually, she leased a house—it was Phyllis Diller's old house. So [my kids] kind of felt that they knew the place and she had already scouted schools and everything, you know. So that's how I got to Las Vegas.

"All in Due Time" also is one of my favorites. It's more of a message ballad about today's world and what we would do to get some of the things we desire—[that] there's a way to do that without hurting someone or even killing someone like the young people get around to today. It's really, really a sweet song telling them here's another way that, all in due time, good things will happen.

I can't talk to you and not touch on "Midnight Train to Georgia." Can you believe it's been almost 40 years since that song came out?

You know what, I was telling somebody that the other night because they were asking me about my show and how many times [I've performed it]. I said, "I can't tell you." Just think about the years and put it together—I work all the time. And you can do



that number just about for yourself. I tried [to change it up] twice, you know, like, after you do a song for so long—not that you get tired of it, but you just want a variety of things so people won't guess what you're going to be doing. The song was the biggest we've ever had, so usually we would close with it. So, I tried not doing it a couple of times. Oh, no, that didn't work. That was a catastrophe. Then I tried moving it up in the show. That didn't work. So it's a closer.

A lot of the songs you cut with the Pips, including "Midnight Train to Georgia," were written by Jim Weatherly, who was largely thought of as a country music singer / songwriter. Were you a fan of country music?

Oh, without a doubt. Without a doubt, I love country music with all my heart. I've done so much country music it's not even funny. They should have me on their radio play[ist]. [Laughs] You know Jim has been writing for us for many, many years. There are so many other songs, even just album cuts of things that we've done of Jim's that I just love. You know "Storms of Troubled Times" [from 1973's *Imagination*] is one of my mom's favorites. "Need to Be," which was in Tyler Perry's movie [*I Can Do Bad All by Myself*] that I just did a year and a half ago—that's a Jim Weatherly song and another one of my favorites. So, yes, I've loved country music because of the way they tell nice stories.

I knew there was a tiny bit of twang in your voice somewhere!

[Laughs] I love that! I love that. I've got to keep that.

I love country music with all my heart. I've done so much country music it's not even funny. They should have me on their radio playlist.

You were 17 when you had your first hit "Every Beat of My Heart" and so, when you look back on the success you've achieved, does it look like what you thought it would look like then?

Let me tell you, if I can explain it this way. I think I was my mother's faith child, you know what I mean? When she, my dad and my grandmother—my family—taught us about being spiritual and being right in our lives before we do anything, being the kind of people we were supposed to be, I think I was the one who was the most into that. So when I prayed for something or asked what I was supposed to do and I accepted it, I just had faith that it was going to be all that it was supposed to be. So, yes, I think wherever I was led, as far as the spirit and God is concerned, I accepted it at that and knew that He was going to do something wonderful for me. And I never wanted a lot. I wanted a clean house. I didn't have to have a big mansion, you know what I mean? I wanted a nice car. I didn't have to have nine or 10 of them or the best of them, you know? So, yes, it's all, and more, that I dreamed about. And sometimes I feel like, OK Lord, what is this? Am I *really* deserving of this? You know, to still be here 64 years later and being successful at it and still making music that people like and still being able to perform and be with these [audiences] that you know, without a doubt, that I love so very much. **gM**