



India.Arie Finds the Divine within Herself

Artistically and Spiritually, the Soulbird Soars

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Merriam-Webster defines “soul” as “the spiritual part of a person that is believed to give life to the body and in many religions is believed to live forever.” But while the definition seems tidy enough, India.Arie disagrees. For her the soul is not *part* of a person: one does not *have* a soul, one *is* a soul. Thus, one is also divine and that divinity (whether you call it God, the universe or Allah) informs a person—the soul—not only from the heavens outside but from within.

The challenges in exploring such a spiritual landscape within a mainstream album runs considerable risk of audience alienation, be it from heavy-handedness and self-righteousness to cheesiness, doling out vague life lessons. But *Songversation*, Arie's first album in four years, does none of that. By sparingly placing connected, non-dogmatic nuggets of wisdom, it masterfully opens a spiritual dialogue examining the divine in all aspects of life, from sensuality (the thumping first single "Cocoa Butter") to creating community ("Brother's Keeper") to nature ("Moved by You"). But ultimately Arie wants her audience to see the divine connectedness upon which all that rests: the divine connectedness to one's self. She captures this belief perfectly on *Songversation's* atmospheric, anthemic centerpiece "Soulbird Rise:"

*I will no longer be defined by
What someone else believes that I am
And now that I have dropped the weight
I am light as a feather
It's time to elevate
Soulbird rise, lift your eyes
Spread your wings and prepare to fly
This is the moment of your life
Go ahead and fly*

Recounting the song's creation, Arie speaks with a calm, silky smoothness rivaling a good yoga instructor. "I was two months into working on *Songversation*," she remembers. "I was just writing songs that were simple, simple for me to process—easy, breezy, light. Songs like "Cocoa Butter"...Then it was time to start working on the production." Surprisingly, Arie says the production has always been the part of her music where she's been the most dissatisfied. And, in this particular case with her "easy, breezy" songs, she was not liking the bass and drums. "I had to have a hard conversation with my songwriting partner [Shannon Sanders]," she says. "And I had told him 'I am taking these songs to L.A. and going to get someone else to figure out these drums.' He didn't like it but, I mean, it's what needed to be done, because I can't have an album I'm embarrassed by."

On two days' notice, Arie flew to L.A. and stayed in the studio, not sleeping until she got the sounds she wanted. To reward herself she took a break from the studio work for a week and traveled to the Pacific Northwest. "I got there the first day and just slept all day," she says with a sigh. "I would open my eyes and it would be just a little bit darker and then the next day I would open my eyes and it was night time...I woke up the next day and I just wanted to write a song. I put my guitar in an alternate string just to give myself some fresh ideas and I wrote 'Soulbird Rise,' sitting in the bed all day, in a cottage, on the water." The idyllic setting and nauseating ease with which songs seem to come out of Arie is deceptive, though. "Soulbird Rise" actually came as a delayed reaction to a journey that began with the soul known as India. Arie in tatters, flying low and yearning for calmer skies—so much so that she contemplated leaving the music business for good.

Musically, India. Arie first took flight in Atlanta, her home since age 12. The city opened her to new heights and perspectives, specifically her involvement in the Groovement / Earth Seed, a progressive alternative black music collective focused on soul music. Atlanta, she says, spoiled her musically and led to the realization that music was her life's work. She set that notion skyrocketing when, at 24-years-old, she released self-awareness (and self-appreciation) anthem "Video" off her debut album *Acoustic Soul*. In the song's refreshing music video, she begged us to ride our bicycle alongside her towards freedom from society's binding beauty conventions. Millions did, making her both a star and a role model in the process.

Acoustic Soul earned Arie a whopping seven Grammy award nominations, all of which she notoriously lost. But she went on to record three commercially-successful albums that later netted her three Grammys, including one in 2010 for "Pearls"—a Sade cover off 2009's *Testimony: Volume 2, Love and Politics*. Accepting her award, Arie shimmered in a black gown made by her mother Joyce. Onstage, she radiated ebullience, coming to the mic laughing. In between sighs of relief and squeals of delight she thanked her mom and all the industry professionals who'd aided her in achieving that savory moment. Off stage, though, she was in the process of rebuilding a life that, in the previous year, had looked far less happy and secure. It does take a village to create and sustain a successful, Grammy-winning artist, but all those managers, lawyers, label staff and, yes, blood family's investments—both emotionally and financially—come with their ideas, opinions and feelings of entitlement to an artist's life. Away from the lights and cameras, Arie had realized she had let *her* life get away from her.

"I had given my power away in so many different areas," she says honestly. "It's funny because we use these terminologies—you don't really know what they mean until you go through it. With me what giving your power away means is giving someone or something else the power to define you. And you believe the definition. So I was believing the definition of what I was supposed to do and how I was supposed to do it. How I was supposed to approach even my personal relationships, how I was supposed to live, where I am supposed to be living, the house I was supposed to be living in, my lifestyle. I was allowing myself to be defined by things other than my own truth. And I looked up and I was living this..."

She pauses and chuckles.

"Have you ever heard the saying 'A camel is a horse designed by committee?' Right. My life just looked weird. I was like whose life is this?"

With that admission, 2009 saw Arie begin to cleanse her life. She stopped performing and fired her business team including manager Noreen Nalli, which resulted in a nasty lawsuit. So fed up with the industry's often ruthless focus on commerciality over creativity, Arie wasn't sure she'd return to the music business. But she did continue making music, specifically a "world music project" aptly titled *Open Door*. The skies seemed to open and with *Open Door's* creative wind at her back, Arie traveled from Atlanta to the Middle East, recording in Hebrew, experimenting with old world sounds and collaborating with Israeli artist Idan Raichel. The experience served as salvation, sparking her creative connection to God and repositioning her mentally on what she thought was the right path—so much so that she invested three years and her own money into it.

But the skies can switch from fanciful to dark quickly. *Open Door* became mired in disagreements between her and her business team. "I was standing in my living room one day and I had an epiphany," she says. "It just hit me, like, this is that lesson again. Are you going to keep going and let everyone take your power [and] give your power away or are you going to say 'stop' because you know that it honors you and then have faith that something better is on the other side of doing the right thing. I don't know the exact way to say this, it might sound a bit odd, but it was almost like God had to speak directly to me: 'This is the lesson, what are you going to do?' I had [come] all this way, learned all this big lesson, now here it is in action, are you going to be able to just walk away from the things you know don't serve you or are you going to give your power away? My "Soulbird Rise" moment was when I shelved *Open Door*, took the weekend to cry, and then on Monday I said I'm going to make another album and I'm going to start now."

A few weeks after our interview, a sold-out crowd piles into the warm, caramel-colored walls of Atlanta's Cobb Energy Center. Above the stage a quote by Eleanor Roosevelt flashes on a screen: "It is better to light a candle than to curse the darkness." Amid claps, hoots and hollers, Arie, barefoot, walks onstage in a flowing white dress (again made by her mother). She pointedly instructs the sold-out crowd, "I want you to watch with your eyes, watch with your ears, and watch with your heart. *Songversation* is about breakdown, breakthrough, break the shell, elevate, fly"

With "Video" Arie has since admitted that her younger self struggled to always live the song's message and was, instead, striving to achieve it. That woman struggled to make music on her terms, sometimes bowing to industry expectations, sometimes not. But the woman onstage tonight seems devoid of any timidity. Instead she weaves through her hits and new material with an emotional and physical abandon not previously seen, routinely stopping to sway and twirl—move however the music moves her. "This is the first album I've ever done where I just listen to it, you know, like in the car, I just play it." she tells me during our initial chat. "I'm not trying to study the mixes, see what's going on with parts I would change. I just listen to it. I've never done that with any of my other albums. I'm not exactly sure what that is, but I know I've reached a certain level as a producer and a musician and a person who's able to speak their truth.

“My chosen fundamental tenant as a songwriter is to consciously...”

She catches herself.

“I’m sorry, it’s to *responsibly* use what I believe to be the power of the word and the power of sound and, of course, the great power inherent in blending the two...And so my fundamental tenant is to be responsible with that energy and that spiritual conversation...But, you know, my music and myself as an artist, my lifestyle, everything is all inextricably tied to God and my spiritual views. I’m not interested in making gospel or religious music per se. [But] I do want to make music that talks about basic spiritual truths like ‘be kind to your neighbor’ and things like that. So, that’s what I love to do.”

Back onstage she closes the concert with “Soulbird Rise” and by now the audience knows that the first line, “I believe in open doors,” contains special resonance for Arie. But by this point, it has special resonance for every audience member too—we’ve all inserted whatever lost dreams or secret pain we have in place of Arie’s *Open Door*. Arms throughout the auditorium stretch to the sky, everyone united by pain, but now elevated by hope. While dreams certainly come true (which Arie is a testament), they can also come false. Arie can testify to that now too. But false dreams—and the acceptance of them—break open new possibilities. With *Songversation* the soulbird that is India.Arie has not simply elevated and flown. She has soared.

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