

Gladys Knight *Before Me*

Back in 1974, **Gladys Knight** — a woman in possession of one of the most instantly recognizable and loved voices in popular music — stepped away from her group **The Pips** for a solo medley of “Try to Remember/The Way We Were” with orchestra. This version, recorded live at the Pine Knob Theatre in Detroit for the tellingly-titled album *I Feel a Song*, is famous for many reasons, not the least of which is Knight’s spoken preamble that finds her musing on nostalgia and “the good old days.” “Oh, why does it seem that the past is always better?” she queried that evening. Thirty-two years later, the lady who can plumb misty watercolor depths of emotion from any lucky song she chooses to sing, shifts her focus to gems from the golden era of song on her Verve Records debut, ***Before Me***.

When a woman like Gladys Knight, who has been setting her own high musical standards for five decades, turns her attention to the classics that inspired her, the listener is in for a once-in-a-lifetime experience. Recorded in New York and Los Angeles and helmed by Grammy®-winning master producers **Tommy LiPuma** (Diana Krall, Natalie Cole, Al Jarreau, George Benson, and João Gilberto) and **Phil Ramone** (Frank Sinatra, Ray Charles, Barbra Streisand, Johnny Mathis and Tony Bennett), ***Before Me*** is nothing less than a landmark recording for Ms. Knight, offering a lingering look into the very fabric of her being. To hear her interpret this timeless material — from the righteous blues of “God Bless the Child” and a bossa-nova kissed “The Man I Love” to the spirit-sending “Come Sunday” and the grippingly soulful “I’ve Got it Bad (and That Ain’t Good)” — is to witness a woman gracefully rising to the challenge and caliber of not only American songcraft’s finest hours, but also the African-American legacy of excellence in the face of fierce adversity.

“As I was getting this music together,” Ms Knight reflects, “the title, ***Before Me***, just rang in my head. I was moved to make reference to those glorious performers that set the pace for me to be a part of this industry — from the great ladies of song **Ella Fitzgerald, Sarah Vaughan, Lena Horne, Dinah Washington, Nina Simone,** and **Mahalia Jackson** to supremely talented gentlemen such as **Duke Ellington, Count Basie,** and **Sammy Davis, Jr.** These people made great strides not just with their music, but because of who they were as people. I salute these wonderful artists that set it up for me to do the extraordinary music that makes up ***Before Me***. It’s been an awesome journey.”

More than iconic figures, those influential artists were people Gladys Knight encountered and with whom she interacted on her career path — a path that started at the impressionable age of four. “Coming up, I was an artist who wanted to watch, listen and learn,” she states. “We had such wonderful people to look up to. They gave their all with love and respect for what they did in spite of society’s

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shortcomings at that time. They were willing to plow on through just to get to the stage and give you what was inside of them. When the Pips and I first started singing, we adopted our principles and philosophies at their hands. And, because I started so young, I had the chance to be on the tail-end of the lifestyle that they lived. For example, I witnessed segregation for the first time when I left home with the Pips. We weren't allowed to stay in hotels. We had to do rooming houses. But I am so grateful for the blessing of being born during that time to appreciate the richness of character and spirit it instilled."

Though the jazz slant of ***Before Me*** is a far cry from Ms. Knight's soul-pop smashes "Midnight Train to Georgia," "If I Were Your Woman," "Love Overboard" and the oft-covered "Neither One of Us (Wants to Be the First to Say Goodbye)," it is one that actually stretches back to the early days of her career as well as the origin of this very special CD. "When I was in high school," she shares, "a trumpeter named **Lloyd Terry** asked me to be the vocalist for his band. Now, I had heard jazz before, but I hadn't *studied* it. Lloyd gave me wonderful music to do so: Ella, Sarah, Oscar Peterson, Cannonball Adderley, and Dizzy Gillespie. Over the years after I'd had success, Lloyd would stay on me, saying, 'You should do the music we used to do! You have such a feel for it.' About a year and a half ago, I finally said yes and he began making some arrangements. But, as the Lord would have it, he didn't make it to this time."

However, the seeds of a fresh direction for Ms. Knight were planted and being nurtured by another intriguing concept. "My longtime friend and former manager **Ron Weisner** and I had been having conversations about doing an album called *The Great Ladies of Song*," she continues, "so I figured we could tie the two together." That Ms. Knight would come to Verve was a sweet cherry on top, for Billie and Ella recorded some of their finest work for the legendary jazz label and the Verve Music Group catalog is also home to a wealth of distinguished recordings by Sarah, Dinah, and Nina. Fittingly, producers LiPuma and Ramone have surrounded Knight with the cream of the jazz universe, including arrangers **Billy Childs** and **John Clayton**, plus musicians such as saxophonist **David "Fathead" Newman**, keyboardist **Joe Sample**, trumpeters **Roy Hargrove** and **Chris Botti**, and guitarists **Russell Malone** and **Anthony Wilson** and **The Clayton Hamilton Jazz Orchestra**. Ms. Knight marvels. "That (Verve President and CEO) **Ron Goldstein** and my new Verve family have given me the top drawer of everything to do this album is a statement of love and respect. They have not half-stepped! It has been the most rewarding recording experience I can remember. There was magic in this music from day one."

Sharing her process for selecting the twelve songs that comprise ***Before Me***, Gladys Knight relates, "Ron Weisner is a collector. He sent me complete sets on everybody! Then one afternoon in my exercise/music room, I spread the CDs out and went through them one by one, making lists of all the songs that touched me. I presented a list; Ron presented a list; and when Phil and Tommy came on board, they presented their lists. Between all of us (and a third producer/arranger, **Benjamin Wright**, whose work will be in a proposed second edition), that's how it was done."

Knight works wonders with these well-worn classics, leading one to ponder her method for getting "inside" of a lyric. "First of all," she explains, "I want to know what the content is. I cannot do a song that I don't believe in or that goes against my character. Then I listen for how the melodies lie with the lyric. If a melody stirs

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me in my heart spiritually, then I'm ready to go with it. One thing I love about music is that different people hear it in different ways, applying it to areas of their life according to what they need, want or feel. If a song's been done a thousand times before, I try to bring something else to it in my interpretation, especially in the ad libs. The thing that is so phenomenal about these songs is that they are so real, they apply to life at anytime: yesterday, today and, I'm sure, tomorrow. They were such well-written slices of life."

Knight's singular approach is apparent from song one, a punchy John Clayton arrangement of the **Duke Ellington** standard "Do Nothing Till You Hear From Me." Check her out on the coda vamp, infusing the lyric with attitude to spare. "I thought the storyline was so cute, but I wanted to flip it a bit," she chuckles. "We're not doing so good right now, but I am faithful to you. Don't go messin' up, now, so I can't come back!" She found similar thematic material to mine in another Ellington gem, "I've Got It Bad (and That Ain't Good)," "I love the twist of the words in that title. In this song, you're *really* in love. That's not a good thing 'when ain't nobody caring about you like you care about them!'"

Knight waxes more femininely philosophical about "Someone to Watch Over Me," which received a lovely chamber orchestra arrangement from Billy Childs. "Though society has changed over the years and women have become more self-sufficient, that's still a dream in our hearts — to have someone to watch over us. I bow to **George and Ira Gershwin** who wedded these words to such beautiful music." Meanwhile, another classic sent Knight down memory lane. "'But Not for Me' is kind of a self-pity thing," she reasons, "but folks feel like that sometimes. I started working with The Pips at eight years old, so I grew up on the road. When it came time to date, wasn't nobody talking to me! Come to find out later that the Pips had been threatening everybody! I started to think that something was wrong with me. I always carried myself as a lady so guys would respect me. But being young, you want to feel like you have it going on, too! So I could really relate to that song."

The chestnut "Since I Fell for You" — written in 1948 by Buddy Johnson and recorded by Dinah Washington years before Lenny Welch had the big hit with it in 1963 — was cut from a different cloth than the other material on the CD. Yet it, too, whisked Knight back to precious memories. "When I walked in the studio that morning," she remembers, "Tommy asked me, 'Do you know 'Fathead' (as in saxophonist/flautist **David "Fathead" Newman**)? Well, he knows you.' As he shook my hand I thought, 'Here is a legend I've been hearing about since before high school. My deceased husband — Jimmy Newman, also a saxophonist — talked about him all the time. Standing in the same room with this man was mind-boggling. He was so mellow, so right for the project."

As powerful as the songs themselves were, it was the ladies who originally sang them who provided the most bottomless well of inspiration for Knight through the making of **Before Me**. Knight had personal encounters with almost all of them, beginning with Ms. **Lena Horne**. "The great Horne," Knight sighs, "one of the most beautiful women I have ever seen. When I saw her sing 'Stormy Weather' in the movie (of the same name), she was so dramatic. I was a little girl, but she impressed me even then. I was enamored with her whole persona — the way she carried herself. From day one I remember my

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mom talking about being classy with good character and morals . . . the presentation of who you are.

Lena epitomized that for me. Older folks I grew up with knew Lena and told me about the prejudices she faced. Beautiful as she was, she had her trials and tribulations, too. But you always knew she was a lady from the way she held her head. That's the picture I had in mind when I sang that song. Lena and I performed on the same stage a couple of times. She was even more beautiful in her older age."

Gladys had a powerful yet quite different meeting with the great **Dinah Washington**. "When the Pips and I got started in the '50s, we won a talent show in Atlanta and became an immediate local hit. When Dinah came to town, she played the Club Casino which asked us to be on the show. When we went to rehearsal that day, there she sat. I heard her before I saw her with that big booming voice . . . and she was 'gettin' somebody told!' I said, 'Who is that lady?' They said Dinah Washington and I went, 'Oooo!!' I was afraid of that woman! But we were all in awe. We did our show then sat at our little table to watch her perform. It was electric! Every time I sing 'This Bitter Earth,' I see her." Not long after, young Gladys also encountered "Sassy" **Sarah Vaughan**. "We were just coming off of (the nationally televised) **Ted Mack's Original Amateur Hour** when we saw her play at a club in Atlanta. She was standing elegantly at the mic singing "My Funny Valentine" wearing an off-the-shoulder dress in red and white satin with hearts all over and a little train. I'll never forget it."

The one great that Gladys did not meet in her lifetime was **Billie Holiday**, to whom she pays homage in three numbers on **Before Me**. "Billie was such a stylist," Knight reflects. "Nobody does a song like 'Lady Day.' She had the most unique voice. 'Is it pretty or not pretty?' It didn't matter. You just knew you were touched by it. You felt her pain every time she opened her mouth. It didn't have to be a sad song. Folks told me she possessed a mesmerizing aura when she stepped on that stage. Her trials and tribulations was the life she was given, but her music was extraordinary. 'Good Morning Heartache' may be full of pain but it's also very clever. Talking to the blues — what a unique concept. I like that storyline. It's a picture of fortitude, determination and perseverance. And I have a very special place in my heart for 'The Man I Love'."

Perhaps most special of the Holiday tributes is "God Bless the Child," a cautionary blues classic that "Lady Day" had a hand in composing. It's a piece that is certainly not new to Gladys Knight. "This is the song I chose to do on *The Muppet Show* with 'Fozzy Bear' on piano," she confesses with a burst of infectious laughter. "I mean he was wearing it out on that piano! I was nostalgic about that when we put it on this album. It's one of my favorite songs. The message is so relevant. It promotes a work ethic! You can't get something for nothing. Hopefully, everyone will have people that love and support them . . . but you need to get up, get out, and get a job!"

Saving the best for last, Ms. Knight waxes absolutely reverential in memory of her friend **Ella Fitzgerald**. "She was my favorite," Knight begins. "Not just for her music, but as a human being. She was the sweetest, most humble lady. If I wanted to be like anybody, it was her. With all the talent she had, she was never over the top about anything. She would come to my dressing room if I didn't know she was

there, just to say, 'Hey baby!' She always told me to call her Ella, but in my heart she was

always Ms. Fitzgerald, because that's the way I was raised. It was the most wonderful experience that I got the chance to meet and know that lady."

Though Ms Knight was intimately familiar with most of the selections on ***Before Me***, aspects of two offered her new discoveries. The first came in the dreamy "I'll Be Seeing You." "That one was from a movie," she says, "but in all the times that I heard this song, I never knew the intro. I do a lot of spiels in my shows that tie songs together, so I felt right at home doing this one." The second revelation was a much more profound one: the song "Come Sunday" from the sacred works of Duke Ellington, originally made popular by gospel royalty **Mahalia Jackson**. "I don't know how many people realize this, but on just about every album the Pips and I did, we included a spiritual or gospel piece. That's just who we are . . . if He can't go, we can't go! Tommy LiPuma suggested this piece to me. The song states that if we can't live the way we should everyday, at least start with Sunday. I am such a hands-on person when it comes to my work, my music and performance. I've got something to say about everything! But on this one, I backed up and let the spirit move. For this song to come to me and become a part of this project filled my heart with joy. John Clayton's arrangement is awesome."

Awesome is also a fitting adjective for the life and career of Atlanta-born Gladys Knight. Singing professionally since the age of four, her first big break came after winning first place in the children's competition on *Ted Mack's Original Amateur Hour* with her group The Pips, which eventually consisted of her brother **Merald "Bubba" Knight** and cousins **William Guest** and **Edwin Patten**. The Pips scored their first R&B chart-topper, "Every Beat of My Heart", in the spring of 1961. After a few rollercoaster years, the quartet was signed to **Motown's** Soul label and began a string of hits that took them into the '70s including the original version of "I Heard it Through the Grapevine," "If I Were Your Woman," "I Don't Want To Do Wrong" and "Neither One of Us." Label switches through the '70s and '80s took Gladys Knight & The Pips to Buddah, Columbia, and MCA Records while they racked up top concert engagements, their own television variety show, three Grammy® awards and a plethora of other accolades.

All the while, Gladys Knight herself branched into several avenues of entertainment including a starring role in the film *Pipe Dreams* and a co-starring role in the TV series *Charlie & Co.* with comedian **Flip Wilson**. She won another Grammy® as a participant on the poignant **Dionne Warwick & Friends'** (with **Stevie Wonder** and **Elton John**) "That's What Friends Are For" (all proceeds from which benefited AMFAR: the American Federation for AIDS Research). She recorded her first solo album, *Miss Gladys Knight: One and Only*, in 1978 which was not followed up until 1989 when she kicked off a solo career in earnest, singing the soul-shattering theme from the **James Bond** film *License to Kill*, leading to the acclaimed albums *Good Woman* (1991), *Just for You* (1994), and *Next Time* (1995). *At Last* (2001) won her another Grammy® award, for Best Traditional R&B Vocal Performance and the gospel album *One Voice* (2005) with her Saints Unified Voices choir also won a Grammy® for Best Gospel Choir/Chorus Album. She has been a consistently popular recording and concert attraction, recent performances including an acclaimed tour with fellow Motown veteran **Smokey Robinson** as well as a groundbreaking four-year stand at the Flamingo Hotel in Las Vegas. She also penned her Hyperion Press autobiography *Between Each Line of Pain and Glory* (the title taken from a line in her classic ballad "You're the Best Thing That Ever Happened to Me").

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Also dear to her heart is her annual birthday concert which raises funds for the diabetes research charity **The Elizabeth Knight Fund** (named after her mother). Beloved by her peers, Ms Knight has participated as a featured guest on several intriguing collaboration projects, including *Bridge to Havana* [her hit duet “Feeling Good (Vacilon)” with Cuban star **Edesio Alejandro**], and duets projects with a genre-crossing list of friends that includes **B.B. King, Frank Sinatra, Shirley Caesar, Tom Jones, Kenny G, Vince Gill, Chris Botti**, and the multiple Grammy®-winning **Ray Charles** project, *Genius Loves Company*.

Amazingly, Gladys Knight has held fast to her passion for music. “I love anything that gets me to the people. I love being a part of their lives, helping them musically express themselves, to be uplifted . . . whatever they need.” That artistic fulfillment can be found in Ms. Knight’s latest one from the heart, ***Before Me***. “This album is a labor of love for so many people,” she concludes, “for my son Jimmy Newman, Jr. who, before he died, was fighting for the opportunity for me to have this type of creative freedom. I dedicate this to people like **Lloyd Terry, Cholly Atkins** and, most of all, my mom. If I do say so myself, ***Before Me*** is the best music I've ever done on record.