

JAZMINE SULLIVAN

What's in a name? Well, if the name happens to include a reference to a musical genre, it could mean a whole lot. Jazmine Sullivan's mother remembers having a sense that the child she was carrying twenty-one years ago was born to sing and as a lover of jazz, she named her daughter accordingly. While there are elements of jazz in her phrasing - sultry shades of great vocalists like Phyllis Hyman and Sarah Vaughan; replete with a delivery that has often been compared to the likes of Lauryn Hill and Mary J. Blige, the Philadelphia-born Jazmine is very much an artist for today as her exciting first J Records' album, *Fearless*, illustrates.

Championed by the likes of Stevie Wonder, Missy Elliott, Faith Evans, and (fellow Philadelphians) Kindred among others, the statuesque and beautiful Jazmine is all at once smart, sassy, insightful, down to earth and very real. As the primary songwriter on *Fearless*, Jazmine brings her own experiences and observations on life and love with vivid storytelling imagery to her songs. Producers include Salaam Remi, Dirty Harry, Jack Splash, Stargate and Missy Elliott who - with Lamb - produced the first infectious single, "Need U Bad." Says Jazmine, "I wasn't familiar with reggae but Missy said 'Let's try this out!' So I wrote to the track as soon as I heard it and then Missy brought in Pepa from Salt-N-Pepa to do the chant." The resulting track became a newfound hit at radio and quickly established Jazmine as a fresh voice for the summer music scene and beyond.

The unusual flamenco-flavored "Bust Your Windows," produced by Remi begs an obvious question: "Did I actually do that? Maybe... Maybe not!" Jazmine smiles. The soulful standout "In Love With Another Man" is delivered with heartfelt honesty: "It's not something I went through personally, however, it is an honest song that I felt needed to be told. You often hear of the man being the heartbreaker in songs but their hearts get broken too." The quirky, unusually-titled "Lions, Tigers & Bears" (also produced by Remi who employed a full orchestra for the session) conjures up a world of images. It was inspired by Jazmine's portrayal of Dorothy in "The Wiz" during her childhood. "My life has been all about music for such a long time that the thought of love was frightening. I knew the world of music but that other world of love was scary, new to me. It's really about being afraid of love."

Jazmine's distinctive vocal style was nurtured by early years singing in church. At age five, she was singing in the children's choir, a few years later with the adults. Jazmine's exposure to secular music was initially limited, "I was doing solos in church and someone wanted me to sign to a gospel label when I was eleven but I wasn't ready to do that," she recalls. "Then when McDonald's had a competition for kids in major cities, I got a chance to perform 'Accept What God Allows' on 'Showtime at the Apollo' and the audience responded really well."

Soon after, Jazmine decided that she wanted to sing secular music so her mother started schooling her in classic R&B. "She played me Aretha, Stevie, Donny Hathaway, Phyllis Hyman. This was during the age of hip-hop so I wasn't into it at first but I soon began to appreciate it." But clear about her love for music and singing, Jazmine began looking for local places in Philadelphia to perform. One of her first stops was Black Lily, a musical collective started by The Jazzyfastnastees in the mid-to-late '90s when Philly was birthing

a whole movement of new artists including Jill Scott, The Roots, Floetry and Kindred. "It was booming," recalls Jazmine. "I started singing with a live band, old school songs like Sly's 'Thank You For Lettin' Me Be Myself' and Marvin's 'What's Going On.'

It was through performances at Black Lily that Jazmine, along with Kindred, got a chance to perform with the legendary Stevie Wonder. "Fatin and Aja were going to see Stevie and they invited me. He really took to me especially after he heard me sing his song, 'These Three Words.' He enjoyed the performance so much that he began to sing with me as we got into a jam session, taking turns riffing. It was so much fun and an experience that I'll never forget!" That impromptu performance led to Jazmine's appearance on Wonder's annual "Toys for Tots" show in Los Angeles with Kirk Franklin, Jill Scott and others. Word of mouth of Jazmine's amazing vocal talents quickly spread but it was a re-encounter with Missy Elliott, who took Jazmine into a Miami studio with partner Timbaland, which made various records labels pay attention.

After hearing Jazmine's "In Love With Another Man" (produced by Philly's Anthony Bell), Peter Edge at J Records reacted and subsequently, Jazmine spent a year preparing for what would be her first face-to-face meeting with J's Clive Davis. "I knew my record had to be different," she says. "That's when I started developing my own writing style. I have a big imagination so that helped." When Jazmine had gathered enough material, A&R executive Edge set up the crucial audition with Davis. "After I finished singing, he said, 'Welcome to the family!'"

Taking time to write material for her all-important debut set, Jazmine explains her approach to songwriting: "It's about empowering young women. I'm 21 years old, just coming into womanhood and if you push me around, I'm gonna push you right back! But writing is just one dimension of who I am. There are many different facets of me."

Those "facets" are illustrated on a debut album which Jazmine describes as "honest, with a particular point of view." "*Fearless* embodies my state of mind right now. I'm 21, confident, fearless of being honest in my songwriting and musically not afraid to try different things." Honing her craft and developing a distinctive writing style, she's come up with an album that is both soul-satisfying and accessible; a record that's sure to win her a solid following with music buyers who like their music uninhibited and always real.

