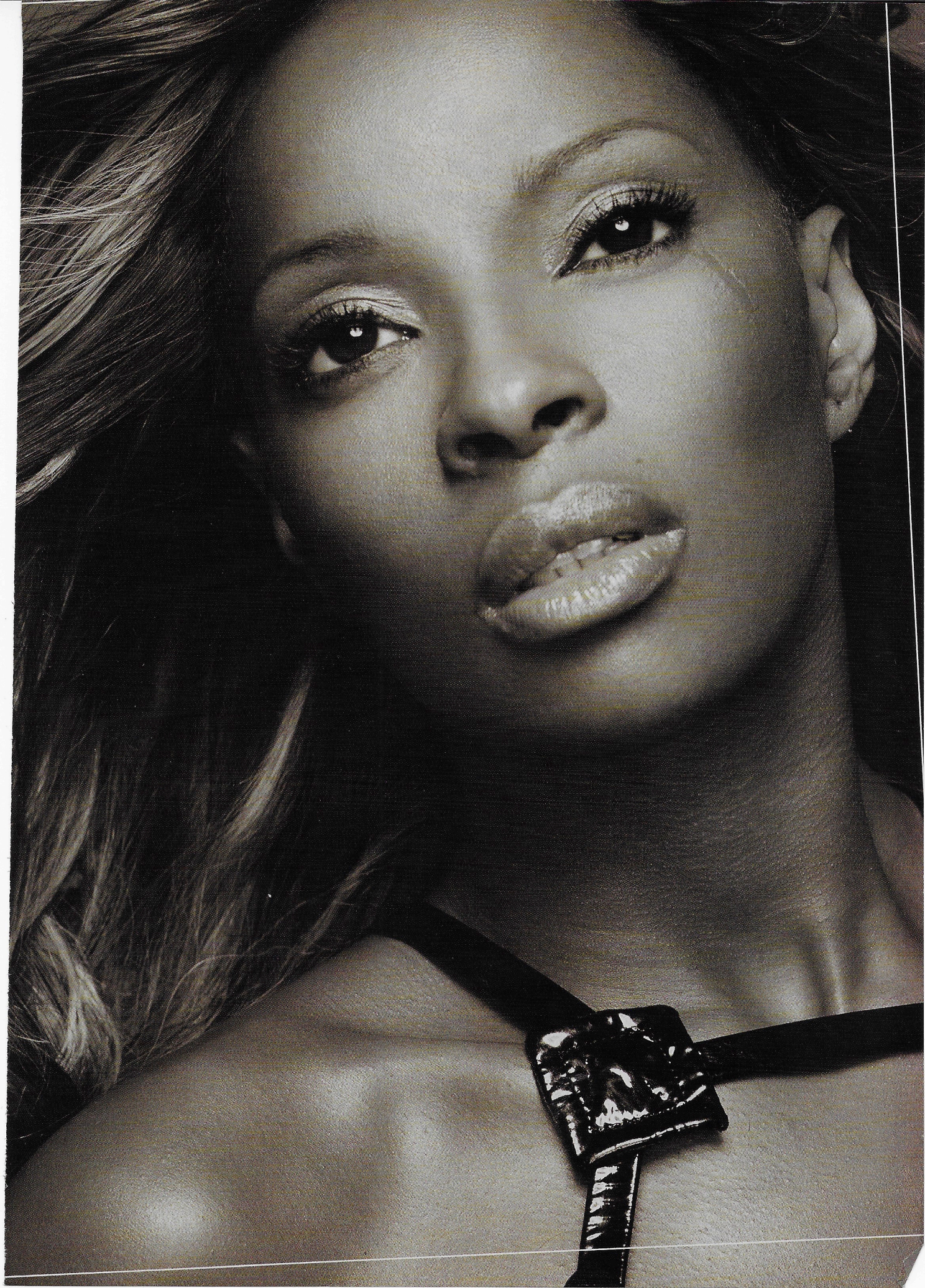
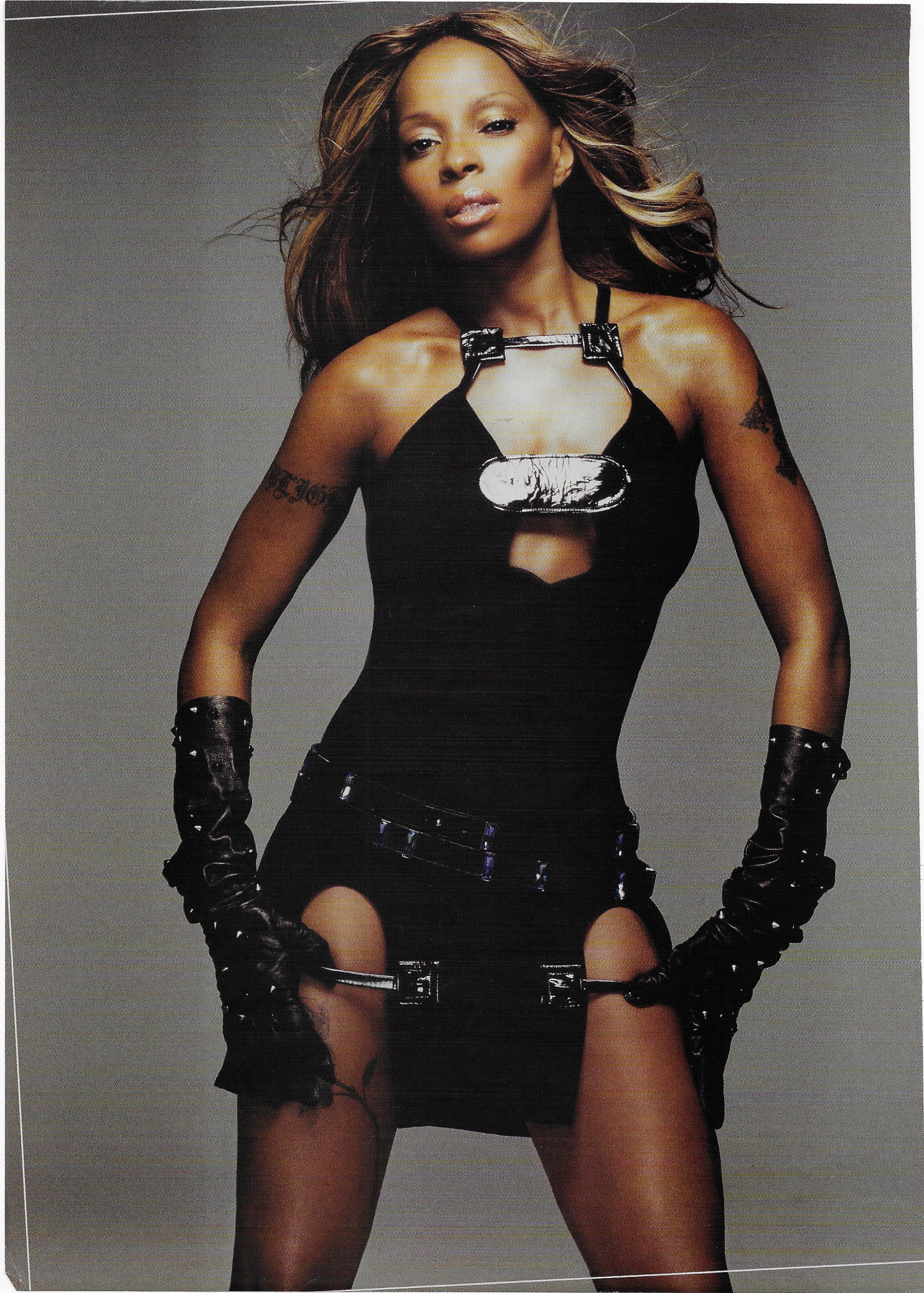


Keep On Movin'

WHAT DO YOU DO WHEN YOUR FANS LOVE TO HEAR YOUR MISERY, BUT ALL YOU REALLY WANT IS TO BE HAPPY? ASK MARY J. BLIGE, AND SHE'LL TELL YOU TO KEEP YOUR HEAD UP AND DON'T LET THE NAYSAYERS NIP AT YOUR HEELS. WE DON'T NEED NO HATER-ATION!

Interview *Paula T. Kenfroe* Images *Rod Spicer*





Mary J. Blige loves her life.

Three years sober, newly married to record producer Kendu Isaacs, the undisputed "Queen of Hip-Hop Soul" is happier than she's ever been before. But while her latest album, *Love & Life*, debuted at number one on *Billboard's* top 200 chart in August, selling 286,000 copies its first week out, Mary finds her career at a crossroads of sorts. Reuniting with her original producer, P. Diddy, Mary came with a sound that harkens back to 1992's *What's The 411?* The reception has been inconsistent. Considering the multi-platinum status attained by each of her five previous efforts, the album could even be considered a commercial disappointment. (Three months after its release, *Love & Life* had plummeted 157 spots down the chart, languishing at sales of 730,000.)

The first single, "Love @ 1st Sight" featuring Method Man, failed to recapture the magic of the duo's first pairing, the Grammy-winning classic "I'll Be There For You/You're All I Need To Get By," and the second single, "Ooh!" ran into trouble when its video made a quick disappearance from BET's rotation. Even devout fans reacted negatively. "The video wasn't up to Mary's standards," posted lelelurvsmjb on Mary's official website, mjbilige.com. "Mary got a lot of negative feedback when the video premiered. A lot of fans were saying that the video didn't suit the song at all. It didn't."

This past October, we caught up with a cold, tired Mary at the end of a very hectic press day in a Manhattan photography studio—far, far away from the tropical beaches of Hawaii, where she and Kendu had just been on a much-needed vacation. They were back

do concern myself with is making sure at the end of the day that there are other options that I have, and other things that I can do. I love doing music. But other things I can do—like making a movie or doing a clothing line. Just not being concerned about [sales figures], because that will drive you crazy.

Your "core audience." Who would you say makes up your "core audience"?

I think my core audience is... Ever since the *No More Drama* album, there's a lot of kids in there somewhere, I guess because of "Family Affair" and "Rainy Dayz." But my core audience ranges from 24 to, like, 32. Older folks, or, like, just goin' into their 30s—they get it. I guess the 18-to-24 crowd, which is the crowd that's out there right now—I don't know what you need to do to make a connection with them. I guess you hafta be really, really naked or really, really lost. One or the other. And I'm not doing either one of those things. They like things that pop like colors and tittie nipples. [Laughs.]

I've always appealed to a more mature crowd. Even when I was younger. I've always been an old person. I'm just an old soul.

That has staying power, though. My aunt is 46, and she still plays *Share My World*.

I think it's the honesty and the triumphs and the trials that come through my music. It's a lot going on, and it's always been a lot going on. That's why so many people can relate to me. Like, a lot of real folks are Mary J. Blige fans. It's not fluff. I've made a choice to be me, no matter how bad it hurts. And people probably see that.

In hindsight: Anything you would've done differently with the new album?

For this album, I don't think I would've done anything differently. No.

it, would come in and taste the whip cream a little bit. Just taste it, and if you hate it, you hate it. But people are not like that. They like what they like, and that's it.

You appeal to the Elton John audience and the Sting audience, too. There is a crossover appeal, no?

I think that there is a crossover appeal. But the mainstream audience likes what it likes. In all honesty, this album may be way too urban for them. That's what I've been hearing: "It's too urban." The Elton Johns and the Stings are not the ones saying that it's too urban. They like that stuff. But it's their fans that are probably saying, "That's a lil' too urban for me."

When Puff gave you the title "Queen of Hip-Hop Soul," did you feel like that was a big title to live up to?

To be quite honest with you, I didn't understand it. Like, *Who's she?* "The Queen of Hip-Hop Soul?" I didn't know. I didn't care. [Laughs.] I was always "Mary" to me. That thing has never affected me like that. You can take that title away and give it to 50 people. I can still make an album. I have a fan base that still wants to hear Mary J. Blige. **Whether she's doing hip-hop soul or not.** Right. Exactly.

What do you think of some of the young artists coming out now? For example, Ashanti, who's been given the title "The Princess of Hip-Hop Soul." Does that affect you in any way?

It doesn't affect me at all. I don't care about a title. This is not a fight. I am Mary J. Blige. Born Mary J. Blige, that's my name. I do what I do. **Are you still happy making music?**

I love making music. I'm really happy doing it—now more than ever.

“Back then, I didn't care whether it was right or wrong—

I just wanted enough money to go and have a drink and buy some furs. Now I have to make sure my home is my home. I gotta make sure I have money in the bank. I make sure that I'm stable here at the end of the day.”

in town for their first official photo shoot as a couple: posing together for the cover of *Essence's* annual "Love issue." (Remember Common and Erykah did it last year?)

Wearing a cream turtleneck sweater, fitted jeans, a cropped merlot leather jacket and matching boots, Mary rubbed her legs for warmth and discussed the challenges an R&B superstar faces in satisfying all the people all the time.

***Love & Life* is out. Are you pleased with it and how it's being received?**

I'm pleased with it. My core audience is happy with it, and that makes me happy.

How is the album selling?

It's doing pretty well. It's been out for three months, and it's at 700,000 sold, so it's doin' pretty good. I honestly don't care about [sales figures] like that. I mean, the industry itself is flatlined. It's something going on. So I can't really concern myself with that. What I

How was it teaming up with Puff again?

It was cool. It definitely took me back to what it was like working with him. It was a good learning experience watching him. It was good. As far as business is concerned, I respect him for making it so far.

Would you do it again?

I don't know if I'd do it again. I know it was supposed to be done this time around. But I don't wanna play it out. It was done. We did it. If it's supposed to go that way, then it will. But I doubt that it will.

Any particular reason?

There are so many other people that I'd love to work with. It's too many options to limit myself to working with just Puff... I have to give my fans what they like. I can't just... I kind of sacrificed a lot when I did this album with Puffy, because I have so many other fans now. New fans. And I just catered to the core that loved *What's The 411?* and that loved *My Life*. I was assuming that everyone else would try

[At this point, Kendu—a well-dressed man with light brown eyes—walks into the room and flops down next to Mary on the couch.]

Have you guys set a wedding date yet?

Kendu: Yup. It's gonna be August 14, 2003.

Oh, nice. Wait—that passed already...

Mary: The day of the blackout. [Laughs.]

Kendu: [Laughs] I'm just joking. But we did set a date.

Are you excited?

Mary: Yeah.

Nervous?

Mary: No, because it's not gonna be that big of a deal.

Kendu: It's not that big of a deal, boo-boo?

Mary: I mean, we're not doing it big like that.

Kendu: Oh, you mean the wedding is not that big of a deal.

Mary: Yeah. We're not doing it big like that. We're doing it as small as we can get it. If I could elope, I would.

Kendu: You can.



Mary: Then that's what I'm gonna do then.

[With an affectionate squeeze of Mary's shoulder, Kendu excuses himself and leaves.]

[Editor's note: On December 7th, as *Hip-Hop Soul* went to press, Kendu and Mary were wed in a private ceremony at their New Jersey home.]

Do you still listen to *What's The 411*? Do you think that was good for what it was, for that time? I listen to *What's The 411*? and definitely say that that was a good album. Even for that time. As miserable as my life was, it was good. I can't really listen to that one like I listen to everything else.

You're a different person now. You're happier.

From *What's The 411*? all the way until *No More Drama*, something had always been wrong. But things are not that bad anymore, because I really want it to be right. Back then, I didn't care whether it was right or wrong—I just wanted enough money to go and have a drink and buy some furs. Now I have to make sure my home is my home. I gotta make sure I have money in the bank. I make sure that I'm stable here at the end of the day.

As far as the drinking goes, when did you know enough was enough?

I think about the time when we were staying at the Four Seasons and I was really so drunk and hungover. And I'm watching Kendu standing around looking at me, and I'm cursing and I'm mad at him. I'm cursing at him, and I don't wanna hear this or that. I think it had a lot to do with him. I was turning him off. You know?

Yeah, seeing your man turned off can't be...

well, a lot of people—are not happy. That's why on the new album I have "Not Today," "It's A Wrap," "Press On," "Friends." It's a lot of songs on there that people are not taking heed to. I'd never, like, just because I'm cool right now, stop caring about the people. It's a lot of women that don't realize that they're worth a lot more than who they're with. I would definitely do a "Not Gon' Cry" again and be able to deliver it just as well. Because I've been there to a point where I can't forget.

Your last video was sort of avant-garde. It featured you chasing yourself?

Yeah. That was "Ooh!" "Ooh!" didn't come across as well. A lot of people didn't get it. The concept didn't come across the way we wanted it to. It's basically all of my old selves chasing me, telling me that I'm never gonna be happy. I have a fight with them and the whole thing.

That sounds fly to me.

I know. But a lot of people just don't get it. Everybody's not that deep. Basically they said it would have been a good video for another song. It didn't match "Ooh!" I guess "Ooh!" was supposed to be booty-shakin' and stuff. Like the one for "Love @ 1st Sight," or whatever.

More dancing.

Right. I chose this 'cause I felt it was the right thing to do. But obviously the fans, a lot of the fans, hated it. A lot of people really loved it, too.

How do you know that the fans hated it?

“A lot of people really hate me for this right now. But I have no choice. It's either death or life. And I'd die being miserable Mary. A lot of people, a lot of women, probably resent that. It's nothing I can do.”

I didn't want to hurt him anymore. He was too nice of a guy. Too sweet. Because I was brutal to him. Like walking in with my hair smelling like cigarette smoke and wine coming out of every pore. Horrible.

So when I saw him suffering, I was like, enough. I said, I'm not even gonna do this anymore. And one night I came back from doing a show at the Apollo, I was sober and he said, "I'm glad you came home sober, because I was getting ready to leave you." And I said, "Well, I'm sober, smell my breath." [Laughs.] Since that day...

Do you drink at all—even socially—now?

I mean, I don't do it 'cause it does nothing for me. If I chose to I could, because I've been alcohol-free for a long time. For about three years I've been clean.

Wow. Nothing?

Nothing. When I tried it again—back in like 2002—it just made me sleepy. So I said, This is wack. And if the wine makes me sleepy, what's next: liquor. So I said, Errr [sound of car brakes screeching]. I don't wanna go backwards.

Musically you seem to be transitioning from doing a bluesy version of hip-hop soul to doing happier songs. Would you still do a song like "Not Gon' Cry"—a real sad song?

I would still do a sad song. Most of my fans—

Because I go on the Internet, and I see what they're talking about.

Do you really check?

Yeah. I go check and see what they're saying. I'm not afraid to read what they say. And some of them say some really horrible things. To the point where you be like, 'Whoa. Let me go check that out about myself.' It's a lot of things I don't pay attention to. But if it's something I was already feeling weird about, and then they say something about it, then I'll check it.

Are you concerned that people won't embrace a happy Mary J. Blige, because they're...

A lot of people are not. A lot of people really hate me for this right now. But I have no choice. It's either death or life. And I'd die being miserable Mary. A lot of people, a lot of women, probably resent that. It's nothing I can do. Everything I've done, I've struggled to get this far. So I can give it to you. So we can grow together. But if you still wanna be 19... If you're a 40-year-old thinking like a 19-year-old—still going through the same things that you're going through—I can't do nothing for you. Because you can surely die. Stress can kill you. You can spiritually die and still be walking around, you know. ♦