

JENNIFER HOLLIDAY

NEW AND *FRESH* EVERY TIME

by randy hope

More than two decades after she starred in the hit Broadway musical *Dreamgirls*, Jennifer Holliday, whose heart-wrenching rendition of the show stopping torch-song ballad, "And I Am Telling You I'm Not Going" is a woman with a voice that has evolved into what is arguably one of the greatest female voices of rhythm and blues. Holliday continues to inspire a whole new generation of admirers of all ages as a vocal powerhouse, whose passionate, throaty and soulful style touches hearts and leaves audiences' spirits soaring high. *The Rage Monthly* caught up with the Tony and two-time Grammy Award winner, who's set to take the stage with the San Diego Symphony just in time for Valentine's Day, where she'll undoubtedly bring down the house with her signature song and spine-tingling style.

What does 2012 hold for Jennifer Holliday?

Well, 2012, it holds new hope for me and it's actually going to be one of my best years ever...I hope I show up for it myself, because it's going to be a good one! I'm very excited. I gotta' make sure I enter when they pull the curtain on 2012, because I would like to be on that stage. So that's how we put it—like that! (chuckles)

You currently live in Atlanta and are originally from Houston. Your warm and welcoming southern hospitality comes through—both on the phone and on stage. I witnessed it for myself in 2009, the style you command and the special rapport you have with the audience.

Aww, thank you - thank you!

How was it for a young girl to go from Houston, Texas to go to the bright lights of Broadway?

Well, I think at that time being as young as I was and in a big city like that, I'd never seen anything like it. I really didn't even know what Broadway was, you know? Of course, to go from Texas, where you have fields of greenness and all that kind of stuff, to this concrete city with a lot of action, a lot of nightlife and things I had never seen before, it was a lot to take in at one time.

I could only imagine. You hit Broadway and the next thing you know, you're starring as Effie in *Dreamgirls*, a role that won you the Tony Award. What a great accomplishment. How did the little girl from Texas feel about that?

You're talkin' 'bout 30 years ago and I don't really know what else it could be compared to.

Well, yeah, I've reprised the role every five years. I've done it for the Theatre of the Stars, an Atlanta-based company, but on the road. Mmm hmm, last time I did it was in 2007, here in Atlanta at the Fox Theatre.

Each time you reprise the role, is it like you're stepping back in time for yourself? Do you bring something new to the role each time?

I don't know if I try to bring something new to the role, because

of the fact that Effie has to star as an innocent young person. So the best thing that I could do in terms of bringing something new to the role is with the singing more. It's really not a role that you want to try something new with. The thing I find I have to do challenges my ability as an actress. I must keep Effie innocent and make the audience believe it is Effie, even though who they see is a woman.

You've had many fans who have remained faithful to you since your first performance in *Dreamgirls* on Broadway. When the production came to life on the big screen, what was it like for you to have the work you paved the way for give life to new generation of fans for *Dreamgirls* and for you?

Well, I'm very grateful that it was brought into the 21st century and you're right, I have a lot of new young fans. It's very exciting for me!

You've collaborated with so many artists, who's been the most influential in your career?


In terms of artists in general, it would have to be Aretha Franklin who has influenced my life the most. Mainly because when I was growing up, she was a household name and I loved her. She came from the church and I came from the church. That's pretty much how music was defined for me, though Aretha Franklin.

You couldn't have had a better role model than Aretha.

Thank you.

I heard you say in the past that you don't just want to be known for your music. You want people to get to know you for the real you—a human—and that your music is just an extension of who you are. So who is the real Jennifer Holliday?

Well, I don't really know if there's a difference between the music and me—mainly because I haven't really recorded a lot of music over my time. What I have tried to do I think, is close to me. I think that it is close to me, because I've tried to sing what's real and what's honest. I think that as I've gotten older and began to do my



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concerts, I'm able to talk more about myself and insert that. So I think that who I am is defined through the music in my life as I am now. You know?

Right. And you recently turned 50, which is a milestone for many people. What impact has that had on your life?

Well, not a lot changed for me at 50. The most that a person gets out of it, I think, is that you become a lot more secure in terms of what you want out of your life—for the rest of your life, you know? You kinda go, "Okay, I'm not gonna do that anymore," or "I'm not gonna take that anymore," or "That foolishness, I'm not doing that anymore." It's sort of like that. I think that's the only thing that turning 50 does for you is make you be able to put your foot down. Other than that, life doesn't change so much.

And how old are you?

I'm actually 32...

Oh bless your heart. You're a young thang! (laughs)

Indeed... I am, I am. But I can't wait for those milestones.

And "they" told you to interview me?

(Laughs) Actually, I wanted to interview you! Like I said, I saw you with the San Diego Symphony a few years ago and looked forward to this interview.

I appreciate that.

I know that you're not afraid to step out there while on stage and share your heart with the audience. You're a fervent advocate for mental health issues and erasing the stigma that surrounds such topics as depression and teen suicide. Do you mind sharing your story with our readers?

Not at all. I suffered many years from clinical depression and it was several years before I even knew what it was. You know, back then, 30 years ago, we didn't know

what it was. Also, because I was an entertainer a lot of people thought I had mood swings and likewise I did so myself. I thought, "Well okay, I guess I'm just moody." As I got older, I realized it was something more and that's when I got professional help and then diagnosed. So my thing is the reason I advocate, it is to educate. I want people to know not to be afraid to get up and not to be ashamed that you have some challenges. That doesn't mean that you're not capable of being a part of society or functioning for your life as a whole. So really, that's why I'm vocal about it. I don't want people to commit suicide. That's the main thing really, if depression didn't lead to suicide for so many, then maybe I wouldn't speak up but it does and a lot of people take their lives.

Unfortunately they do. I've actually had suicide touch my life and I've lost some pretty close people who I love that way. It should never get so low for a person.

Oh, you're right. I'm so sorry to hear you've lost loved ones like that.

Thank you. Speaking of love... You're going to be in San Diego for Valentine's Day. Undoubtedly your performance will uplift the spirits of the many lovers in the audience.

Yes, I'll be there for Valentine's Day. "A Romance With Broadway's Best," is the theme and what Marvin [Hamlisch, conductor] of the symphony is calling the show. I'm excited!

Your fans are excited to have you here. I've interviewed Marvin before and know he's a great guy, but what's it like to work with him in a show?

Yeah, he's a funny guy! (Laughs) But what I really appreciate about Marvin is that he's embracing diversity by having me there. I work with him a lot actually and it's just wonderful because it allows me to include my own people. It's an opportunity to come to the symphony and see one of their own, and I appreciate it. I don't even know how to explain it—trying not to make it an issue—but in a way it is an issue. You know?

I definitely agree. There's clearly a cultural barrier in the arts—especially when it comes to performing arts—which I believe can be found across many cultures.

I'm not trying to complain, just trying to say that what Marvin has done by allowing me time. It has allowed me to bring people who would never get a chance to come to the symphony, they will come. It just does my heart so good and overwhelms me. I'm so grateful to him for that more than anything. I appreciate that he will not just embrace me, but embrace my people as well.

That's wonderful. What a wonderful opportunity for you to be the vessel who introduces so many people to the symphony.

Oh it is, it is. It just does so much and is uplifting, for me myself, to be able to do that.

Speaking of uplifting, I must tell you that your outgoing voicemail message is something special.

Awe, thank you! Well I'm so glad it brought you inspiration. A lot of people, when I answer, are disappointed. They're like "Aww, I didn't get your voicemail." So I tell them, "Oh, so then you want me to hang up and you call the message?" (laughs) Anytime you yourself need a little cheer you can just text me and say, "I'm gonna call you to hear your voicemail, don't pick up!" (laughs)

(Laughs) Thank you, I just may do that! I look forward to seeing you in February.

I look forward to being there. It was very nice talking to you.

Happy New Year!

Love is in the air, as **Jennifer Holliday** performs with Hugh Panaro, from Broadway's *Phantom* and the San Diego Symphony for *A Valentine Romance With Broadway's Best*. The Winter Pops Concert takes place on **Friday, February 10 and Saturday, February 11** at the Copley Symphony Hall, 750 B Street in Downtown San Diego. Tickets range from \$20 to \$80. To purchase tickets and for more information, visit sandiegosymphony.org.