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NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 2014

SUGGESTED RETAIL PRICE \$4.50



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Magazine

India.Arie Sounds Off: Music at Its Best Is Prayer



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Listening in With ...



India.Arie

Sound *Affects*

Katy Koontz: You've always shared empowering spiritual messages in your music, so did your spirituality deepen during your time away, or did you just decide to focus more on it?

India.Arie: I grew up in both Baptist and Pentecostal churches, but even then my parents were more about wanting us to have a relationship with God than being dogmatic. That changed a bit when my father became a pastor, but I was already in my mid- to late teens, and by that time, I was shaping my own beliefs based on what I felt in my soul.

So when I took that time off, I got stronger and more mature, and so of course my spirituality got even deeper than it already was. A big part of that spiritual maturing was that I had more trust—I realized I could just sing the things I wanted to sing and that it would work out.

KK: It sounds like you were really able to relax into that trust and go with the flow.

I.A.: When I'm in the flow, I honor it, because I know how easy it is to fall out of it. So even if I'm scared to say something, I do it, because it's like that saying, "Why ask God for directions if you're not willing to move your feet?" I know I have to do what I hear, or I suffer. I get my butt kicked! There's never an easy way out of that.

But when I say I had more trust, I don't mean I had trust that things would be great. I mean I trusted that I would be able to deal with whatever happened and that choosing that path would work for me, even if it didn't work for the people around me—or even if it made things a bit harder, which it did, because *SongVersation* is the least-selling album I've ever done. But it's also the most creative and fulfilling album I've ever done—by far!

KK: How would you describe your spiritual practice?

I.A.: Prayer, meditation, movement, and music. I never said that before, but that is how I'd describe it. And one more thing: reading.

KK: What kind of movement?

I.A.: Mainly yoga and dance. But even deeper than that, it's the beauty of being in a place in my life where I have figured out what my physical language is. I spent most of my life living in my head, so dropping

I.A.: I haven't spoken about this often, but the best way to describe it is to say that my spiritual mentor, who's been in my life since I was 19, taught me how to understand my own language of meditation. And it works—I get clarity, and I get answers, and I get songs and lyrics. I get whatever I need when I need it. He called it increasing my inner vision, and because I love Stevie Wonder, I call it my "innervision," playing off of the name of his *Innervisions* album. My innervision has guided every choice I've made in my life. Every big decision, every song—it all comes from that place.

Grammy Award-winning singer/songwriter **India.Arie**, now 39, became a sensation in her late 20s when her debut album, *Acoustic Soul*, went double platinum in 2001. In the next eight years, she cut three more albums and saw her total worldwide album sales reach 10 million. Her unique sound—described as R&B, folk, neo-soul, and combinations thereof—garnered her four Grammys. But in 2009, a frustrated Arie walked away from the industry with no promises to return. Fortunately, her hiatus ended in the spring of 2013 with the release of her fifth and newest album, *SongVersation*, which makes several strong spiritual statements. *Unity Magazine* editor **Katy Koontz** spoke with the artist about her unapologetic passion for spirituality and the power of sound to raise consciousness.

down into my body and learning how I love to move is wonderful. I love when I'm doing yoga and I feel emotions releasing as I'm rolling through the balls of my feet. I celebrate that because I was disconnected from my body for so long—until I was in my early 30s. I gained all this weight and then in the process of getting the weight off, I started really feeling my body. I was never a dancer before—I was too shy—but now I dance all the time. I have a ballet bar in my living room.

KK: What kind of meditation do you practice?

KK: What feedback have industry executives and peers shared about the shift you made with *SongVersation*?

I.A.: I don't think industry executives know enough about who I really am to perceive it as a shift. I was always too esoteric and too different—too hard to put in a box, and I still am. They don't see me. I don't mean to sound negative, it's just true. For them, it's not about the craft; it's just about how much you can sell.

The consensus from my peers was, "This is so *brave*." Then Stevie Wonder called and

said, “The whole family is together and we are all listening to your album, and this is the best one.” Having *him say that* just meant everything to me. It was *huge!* He said, “Aisha’s favorite one is this, and Kwame’s favorite one is that.” I care more about his opinion of my music than almost anyone, next to my mom, because I love the way he brings spiritual messages inside of a joyful sound.

The most amazing response, though, was from the audiences, and the song they talk about most is “I Am Light.”

KK: I love that song! It’s a centering song.

I.A.: Yes! That’s my favorite cut on the whole album, and it’s the first song I sing when I go out on stage because it centers me and it seems to center the audience. Everyone screams at the top of their lungs when I walk out, but when I sing “I Am Light,” they’re always 100 percent pin-drop quiet.

KK: That song is so simple, yet so powerful: “I am not the mistakes I have made or any of the things that caused me pain,” “I am not the voices in my head,” “I’m not my age, I am not my race,” “I am light.” Those three words say it all.

I.A.: The truth generally is simple. Before I start writing, I pray my intentions for what I want the song to feel like or what I want to be able to do in the world with it. The day I wrote that song was 12/12/12, and I said to myself, *I want to write a song today that will help people see the truth of who they really are and that will remind me of who I am too.* So I started writing it, and then the voices in my head started telling me, *I am light? Really? People are going to*

say this and they’re going to say that ... It took me a while to quiet that stuff.

KK: In “One,” you sing, “Some say God’s a him and still many believe that he is a her. Does God live in our hearts, or is she somewhere out there in the universe?” Did you catch any heat for suggesting that some people see God as female?

I.A.: Not so far. And really, what I’m suggesting is that it doesn’t matter what you call God. When I sing that song live, people start holding hands, as if they’re thinking, *That’s right, that’s right! We are one!* They shout out, “Yes!” and clap in the middle. It’s cool.

KK: What is it about music that makes it so effective for reaching people on a spiritual level like that?

I.A.: I think our subtle body—the eternal part of us that extends beyond our physical body—is affected by the vibration of sound. Sound actually moves the subtle body—it shakes it. Sound can make that subtle body grow or shrink or heal. To me, that’s what prayer is too. Prayer is a sound; it’s an incantation. In my opinion, music at its best is prayer. And when there are lyrics, the words affect thought patterns and consciousness. They’re so powerful, both in positive ways and obviously in negative ways too.

KK: Speaking of that, what do you think about the energetic effect of today’s increasingly violent and misogynistic lyrics—particularly in rap music?

I.A.: The way we’re using that very powerful, impactful, sacred thing that we call sound is a lot of the reason why our kids are in trouble. It makes me so mad because it teaches people to think that way, and so then that’s what people are hungry for, and so then the music industry creates more of that. It just keeps feeding on itself.

I have always been on that journey of how to shift the consciousness of people so that they’re hungry for something

Your scars signify that you went through stuff and you healed from it—that’s what makes a person wise and mature.

else—to spread love, healing, peace, and joy through the power of words and music.

I can’t count how many times I have seen young people come into the business, and then their natural inclination shifts to accommodate what is more commercial. Their energy and all that magic they had is gone. It happens *all the time.* I get it, it’s a business. But I have learned to define success by how true I am to myself and how accurately I can put how I feel about something into a song. I used to be afraid to say certain things, but now there’s nothing that I believe spiritually that I can’t write a song about. In fact, when I wrote “One,” I thought, *I’m going to write a song that has everything that I was always afraid to say all in one song.*

KK: So what does it feel like to sing that?

I.A.: Like I’m coming alive. My spirituality is the center of my life, but my life’s passion is my music, and to have any fear around that feels like being caged. I took those four years off because I began to feel horrible, and I thought, *There has to be something better than this.* I needed to remember who I was outside of who people kept telling me I was. For a while, their distorted vision of who I was worked for me, but then it started to feel stifling. I wasn’t able to grow because they couldn’t accept that I was a lot more than the way they saw me. I also got tired of putting myself in situations where I had to live up to some expectation that was never mine.

KK: So how did you approach your time off?

Peace is not when everything is okay; it’s when you accept where you are.

I.A.: In the beginning, I started thinking, *Who really am I as a performer?* I'm not up there to sing and dance and get everybody to clap their hands. Those things are fun, but that's not who I see myself as. It took me a month of constant thinking until the word *songversation* finally came through. So when I get on stage now, I tell the audience, "This is not a concert. This is a songversation," and then I proceed to do it so they can see what it is because it's a word I made up. For me, it's equal parts spiritual conversation and singing.

I don't see myself as a teacher so much as a person who has a lot to say. That's just my nature—I love to read, I journal obsessively, and I think a lot. I used to feel like when I was in concert, I had to squeeze out everything I wanted to say really fast and then sing, because I felt guilty—like hearing me talk is not what people came for.

So during this time away, I created this moniker and this new show. And in May last year, I participated in an event called "Our Inner Lives: Spirit, Faith and Action" in New York City. It was my first time singing the songs on *SongVersation* in front of an audience—and they gave me a standing ovation after every song. I cried so hard that I cried my eyelashes off! I had been through so much to be able to

speak all these messages and speak my truth. I had come so far, and they kept responding with so much enthusiasm.

KK: Was it scary making the decision to step away?

I.A.: Loving my music as much as I do made it easier because I'm so protective of my creative self. I don't have kids, so this is what matters most to me. The impetus for growth is right there. It's not like I'm going to be able to say, "No, I don't want to grow." That doesn't even sound *possible*.

KK: Even knowing growth is often painful?

I.A.: I used to think that avoiding pain was what you were supposed to do. But sometimes life is going to hurt—I get that now. I don't *want* to walk into painful situations but I know that inside of anything we care about, there's going to be things that cause pain. So let's live life and deal with the pain when it comes—and feel blessed that we care that much about something.

When I say I had more trust, I don't mean I had trust that things would be great. I mean I trusted that I would be able to deal with whatever happened.

Your scars signify that you went through stuff and you healed from it—that's what makes a person wise and mature. I understand that because I have my own scars now, and I love them. I never want to go back to any age I was before. I like the age where I am now, and I hope I keep saying that 'til the day I die because that means I'm accepting my life as it is. That's peace. Peace is not when everything is okay; it's when you accept where you are.

KK: That would make a great song.

I.A.: It would, actually—you're right. I'm writing that down right now! 🌍

