Strength, Courage, & Wisdom

India.Arie has been called everything in the book: Self-righteous. A head wrap-wearing phony. Oprah with a guitar.

August 22, 2006 By Tomika Anderson

A lone, spiritual songbird in a roost of materialistic chickenheads, her ethereal messages of self-love—though championed by fans—often try the patience of critics.

“People need to know they are loved,” the 30-year-old singer explains of her spiritual approach to *Testimony: Vol. 1, Life & Relationship*, her third album. “They need to know that their lives are worth something. I want my music to remind them of that.”

Fortunately, a higher calling helps to keep Arie’s shorn head up. As her lyrics profess, she is indeed not her hair—or any of that other image-obsessed nonsense. And at a time when HIV cases among blacks are at an all-time high and Africa’s plight is yet a blip on America’s emotional radar, Arie has embraced a cause much greater than herself.

The Heart of the Matter

A Goodwill Ambassador for UNICEF since 2004, the 12-time Grammy nominee has taken her message of self-worth across the globe. Returning from a four-year hiatus during which she bought a house, wrote new songs, spent quiet time with family and traveled to Africa, Arie recharged her batteries and found a renewed sense of purpose. “To be American of African descent and to understand that we’ve lived a very prosperous life, I feel like it’s a karmic duty—our spiritual path—to reach back to Africa,” she says. “When I was in South Africa, I got to meet Nelson Mandela. I asked him, ‘What do you want me to do [about HIV]?’ He said he wanted me to speak out boldly about AIDS and HIV so that we can seek to release the stigma,” she explains. “That’s why volume two will feature songs about Africa. I’ve got a song on it called ‘Get Up Off Your Ass.’ It’s a song [addressing] hip-hop artists [and the rest of] young black America. If you have an extra $300 in your pocket, do you know how much food that could buy somebody? Or medical supplies? It’s like, ‘Help people to live.’”

Sandee Borgman, chief of the Ambassador Program for U.S. Fund for UNICEF, singles out Arie for her ability to connect with young people—indeed, Arie is now one of the organization’s biggest secret weapons. “India touches them and communicates with them,” she says. “She brings hope, strength of character and commitment to them. She gives them the ability to empower themselves. The way that children in Kenya looked up to India was something magical. It’s that

chemistry—that light inside her—that gives her the ability to connect with youth all over the world."

Sonya Lockett, vice president of public affairs at Black Entertainment Television, agrees. She helped recruit India for an anti-AIDS public service announcement called "25 Heroes"—a decision that, she says, was a no-brainer. "India has really stepped up her game in traveling to Africa to see the damage firsthand. She's invaluable to us because when she speaks people listen."

Getting It Together

They listen, all right—to India's opinions on AIDS activism, self-improvement and, of course, her views on the stereotypes that have enslaved women in the music biz. Frustrated by years of not looking like the "average girl in the video," the Denver native decided to cut off her trademark locks in 2004. And in that ceremonial act, she unearthed the recipe for a hit song.

"Being a woman in the music industry—with all its stereotypical notions of beauty—can be really hard," she says of the inspiration for her latest single, "I Am Not My Hair." "People were more attached to my locks than what was in my mind! So in the years I was [away from the spotlight], I cut the locks off and wore microbraids down to [my butt]," she laughs. "Next it was Afro puffs, and then it was those little twists. Then I decided to take all that off. So I went to the bathroom one day with the clippers, and I didn't stop shaving until I was done."

Ready for Love

Rid of her hair woes, the singer, who has been a devout vegan for ten years, was free to focus on another source of pain—a recent breakup.

"I was in a relationship that just didn't work out," she says of the dissolution of her long-term union. "I keep telling people—there are things you just don't know about relationships until you've really allowed yourself to fall in love. Or until you've committed yourself to someone fully—like it's an open-ended relationship that just might not end.

"I've worked really hard to get to the point where I understand that relationships are about learning how to love better," she continues. "It's not about blaming anybody or becoming bitter. That's dumb!

That means you didn't get it. But if [in the end] you're a better person and you grew, then you got it."

Arie's favorite song on the album, "Good Mourning," is a musical portrait of that growth. Acoustically lush, it deals with the immediate aftermath of her breakup. On the song, Arie is melancholic yet hopeful about her prospects in the love department—just like she is outside the recording studio. "God will provide," she says confidently.

With a world tour booked later this fall and plans to pen a book based on her journal entries, Arie has never felt more optimistic. *Testimony's* status as the first No. 1 album of her career certainly

hints at karmic return for sending positive energy into the universe. In so doing, she’s captured a bigger audience for her artistry than her doubters ever dreamed.

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