



Walker Davis
Entertainment

REGINA BELLE

Love Forever Shines

It's not without some measure of fear and trepidation that gospel music puts checks and balances on reverse crossover artists. After all, for every general-market hopeful with pure, Christ-honoring motives, there's always a controversial artist—good-intentioned, but ultimately far from the integrity, character, and value system required to represent Jesus to the church and to the world.

Four-time GRAMMY®-winning R&B/Pop songstress Regina Belle is a different story. Even as the New Jersey native rode high in the urban charts throughout the '80s and '90s with such urban classics as "*Baby Come to Me*," "*Make It Like It Was*" and "*What Goes Around*," faith, churchgoing, and gospel music remained at the very core of her life in the spotlight. Today, Belle is a pastor's wife and minister of music at New Shield of Faith Ministries in Atlanta, where her husband, John S. Battle III, is senior pastor.

"I still went to church," says Belle, whose LOVE FOREVER SHINES, her lifetime-in-the-making gospel debut, is set to make a splash via Ruben Rodriguez' Pendulum Records with Walker Davis Entertainment and distributed by Fontana. "I carried it with me. I wasn't necessarily in a church because I traveled from city to city. But God is not something that you can box in a building. You have to take him with you. Even though I didn't have the understanding that I have now, He was still covering me even at that stage of the game."

LOVE FOREVER SHINES is a triumphant homage to God's faithfulness through it all, a testament to how His goodness and mercy followed the vocalist all the days of her life, from the cradle all the way through her decorated music career. Most importantly, the album is a tribute to the singer's gospel music heritage—14 songs that speak to the bedrock of Belle's faith, never more evident in the disc's stunning centerpiece, the stirring traditional first single, "*God Is Good*."

A precocious singer since a young age, Belle launched her music career with a bang when, as an 8-year-old, she performed her first church solo—a take-no-prisoners rendition of the gospel standard "*Don't Drive Your Mama Away*," originally by none other than Shirley Caesar, one of Belle's early influences. Such was Belle's talent that, by age 12, the budding songbird had her first professional gig, and, come high school, she received a full scholarship to attend the prestigious Manhattan School of Music.

Her stint at the school was instrumental in laying the groundwork for Belle's future endeavors. There, she was mentored by the tireless Inga Wolfe, a diligent voice teacher who believed in

Belle's unpolished gift so much that she was moved to tutor her in private. Unlike her musically inclined schoolmates, Belle actually had to work hard to bring out the best in her. "When I came into the school, I never really thought I was going to make it," Belle says.

While she cherishes the lessons learned there, something was amiss: the school's rigid music-only curriculum left her wanting something more, namely, a better grasp on her identity as a singer. "While that was a great experience, it was something that I really didn't want for four years of college," Belle says. "I wanted to have a broader sense of things. I wanted to get a broader idea of who I was...a better understanding of how the world works."

That desire to expand her horizons drove Belle to Rutgers University, where she majored in history and accounting, two careers she complemented with music courses at what is now the state college's famed Mason Gross School of the Arts. Once there, she was mentored by professors William Fielder and Kenny Barron, two greats who built on Belle's raw talent and previous schooling and provided the tools that prepared her for the national stage.

Only 12 credits shy of graduation, Belle got the break of her lifetime when she received a call to audition for the Manhattans, an R&B group that soon asked her to record a duet with them and be their opening act. "At that moment, it was like, goodbye school," says Belle with a laugh. "What I wanted to do was handed to me on a platter. All I had to do was walk through that door. I had to grow up real quick. That was my real training. The life work started to happen."

It wasn't long until Belle scored for herself a solo deal with Columbia Records, a successful partnership that yielded the albums *ALL BY MYSELF*, *STAY WITH ME*, *PASSION* and *REACHING BACK*. *STAY WITH ME*, in particular, catapulted Belle to the No. 1 slot of *Billboard's* Top R&B/Hip-Hop Albums tally, a feat driven in part by two chart-topping singles, "Baby Come to Me" and "Make It Like It Was"—the latter a soulful ballad originally passed on by the Winans.

The whirlwind of activity, accolades, and media attention eventually got the best of the singer, to the point that her gospel foundation was put on the backburner—no more testifying like Pastor Caesar anymore.

"I don't think it was time for gospel music," Belle explains. "I think that when God had me in a place to do gospel, that my life was going to be very different. I don't believe that the Lord just wanted for me to do a gospel album. He wanted it to be a testimony as to where I am in my life. He wanted to put me in a place where I could share things, intimate things with my audience, to help them get through."

"I know 10 years ago I wasn't ready for gospel. I had way too much pride for that. Maybe in confidence I would share with someone that I tripped up on some different things, but I wasn't going to tell that to anybody in public. But He put me in a place now where I'm not bound by that. I'm not bound by the things that I used to do because I don't do them anymore."

In a chapter that Belle isn't afraid to recount, the singer candidly tells of the time when, behind the scenes, she was dealing with demons of her own—brought about by her pride, her long days on the road, the limelight, and the lack of accountability. "I wasn't an alcoholic, but I drank socially," Belle says. "It came to a point when I really started having a little bit too much to drink."

Soon enough, hitting the bottle began to take a toll on other areas of Belle's life, eventually leading her to believe that it was she—not God—who was at the helm of her life. "I had a bad attitude—wanting things when I wanted them, not having a good attitude about life in general," Belle says. "I had money, and my money made me who I was."

Slowly but surely, God began smoothing Belle's rough edges, showing her that His power could be made perfect in even her darkest weakness—in her case, her ongoing bout with pride and self-sufficiency. "The Lord had to deal with me in that aspect because He allowed me to know that I needed a little bit more humility in my life, that everyday that I get to be on this planet is because of Him, not me," she says.

As soon as that realization hit her, brought about by the realization that she needed to model Christ for her own children, Belle says that, little by little, "the whole drinking issue, even socially, began to dwindle to nothing. It was a major turning in my life. I began to see differently. It was a serious awakening."

She continues: "That's when I really started to sit down and study the Word. All the sermons that I heard before were really just sermons that I heard—I had never really *received* the Word. I began to see not only who Christ was, but I also got a better understanding of who I was."

With her identity in Christ now firmly in place, Belle set out to record LOVE FOREVER SHINES, a disc that showcases her soulful, elegant alto set to the two styles that make up her musical persona: contemporary R&B and gospel music. Leave it to Belle to perform an early '90s quiet-storm number like the title track, only to switch gears and deliver a fiery, Sunday morning delight like the hand-clapper "*Can't Nobody*."

In the vein of great gospel storytellers, Belle recounts the story of the woman who touched the hem of Jesus' garment in the heartfelt "*Who Touched Me*," a song that slowly builds from a gently caressed keyboard to an impassioned cry of heart. That song is the perfect segue for one of LOVE FOREVER SHINES's early climaxes, the sprawling, take-it-to-the-old-school "*God Is Good*," a song that is both an acknowledgement of God's never-ending goodness and a testament to the influence Belle's grandfather had on the singer growing up.

Ultimately, Regina Belle wants to communicate both sides of the spectrum: that life is not just about the mountaintop experiences, but that it's also about the valley of the shadow of death, that dark place of despair where, above all, love forever shines.

"There's nothing on this side of this earth you can commit that you can't be saved from," Belle says. "There isn't anything Jesus didn't die for. That's one of the devil's greatest tricks—to make you feel that God won't own you. But that's a lie. God *will* own you. No matter what we do, he still owns us. If He did it for me, He'll do it for you."

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