

FEATURE

ESNAVI

[Pronounced Es-Nah-vee]



Interview By Corey Andrew

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- Esnavi

For those of you old enough to remember the R&B acts of the 1990's you'll recall that almost in an instant there was a sudden barrage on the scene of young black female artists whose lyrics declared men invalid if those men could not contribute to the financial demands of paying for girl's hair appointments, taking her out on unlimited shopping sprees and even buying her a brand new car. Though common, these were not empowering messages by any stretch of the imagination with the exception perhaps of Destiny's Child, whose classic song, "Bills Bills Bills" remains arguably one of the most liberating songs for women of its era.

Bursting through this one dimensional message of male dependency, a new movement was emerging; a musical movement in the mid 90's that Kadar Massenberg of Motown Records termed "neo soul" and it birthed a new empowered female R&B voice through the likes of Jill Scott, Erykah Badu, India Arie, Grenique, Goapele, and former Brownstown front woman, Kina who found solo success with her Tina Turner-esque hit single, "Girl from the Gutter".

I caught up with her in New York City for an afternoon Q&A and got to discover first hand why this velvet voiced young lady of R&B is a major force to be reckoned with.

With so much more in the world for female artists to consider as inspiration in their music other than some man paying for their Manolos and manicures, it was disheartening not to see many of the artists stated above hit the heights of some of their more glossy pop music counter parts. Most notably, the deeply insightful India Arie was for a moment R&B's neo soul "it girl" - but that seemed to quickly fizzle after she lost every Grammy award to Alicia Keys that year.

By 2001 the female neo soul genre seemed to hit its crescendo with a catapulted Jill Scott landing in heavy rotation on radio across the US, winning multiple Grammy awards and now today having emerged as a major film actress. Otherwise, despite the initial jump-off and acknowledgement of the genre, the female neo soul stage seemed to go silent through much of the early 2000's...that is until now.

With a new generation of classy, intellectual, self-assured female R&B talents at the helm, our ears are once again blessed to have received brilliant substance delivered through spectacular vessels like Ledesi, Janelle Monae, Jazmine

Sullivan, Esperanza Spalding and a few more standouts like the sultry voiced, doe eyed, story telling vocalist known prophetically as Esnavi (pronounced Es-Nah-vee).

CA: First, I'd like to ask you about your name, ESNAVI, what does it mean?

Esnavi means Eclectic, Soulful, Natural, Authentic, Vivacious and Intriguing. It defines my spirit and essence as an artist.

CA: When did you realize you had a voice and wanted to be a musical performer?

I discovered I could sing in high school but it wasn't until after I graduated from college that I realized I wanted to be a performer and couldn't see myself pursuing anything else.

CA: New York is one of the toughest cities in the world to survive in, especially for artists. You're originally from Milwaukee but you've been living in Harlem for a couple of years, doing your thing and pursuing your dreams in the music industry. *What's it like as a young female artist living in this exciting but often overwhelming metropolis? I mean is it as fun as Carrie and the girls made it look on Sex in The City?*

New York is no joke. The cost of living and lifestyle is not cut out for everyone. I was open and willing to adjust and



compromise a lot of things, to become acclimated to the New York City way of life. And that willingness has been well worth it both personally and professionally. So yes, I've had some amazing life experiences that are definitely on par with the SATC girls, but I've also endured many struggles and discontentment as well. But overall, I have taken advantage of New York being the land of opportunity and I'm glad I made the move here. There is no city like this in the world!

CA: Your debut CD is very cleverly titled, Exit E and it's a prolific soul/rock fusion of 16 songs that really take the listener on a journey. Did you write/ produce all the songs yourself? What was the inspiration behind the project?

I wrote all of the song lyrics, and Michel Kunz composed/produced all of the songs. I was inspired by what was happening in my life while working on the album.

It is a true testament of my feelings, thoughts, and life experiences. I realized while working on it that life is a journey and the things we go through are all a part of that. As the music and song lyrics came together, I felt EXIT E was a perfect title to describe the album as musically you're taken on a journey, and lyrically I'm taking you on my journey of love and life.

CA: The video for the first single from Exit E is, "Unexpected Love." It's really beautiful, and goes perfectly with the sexy and seductive vibe of the song. It's gotten great support from VH1 Soul and on Centric's Hot 10 Countdown. As an independent artist it's not easy to get video play from major music channels. Why do you think your video was able to break through?
Thank you. The song had become a certified Top 40 Hit on the Urban Contemporary Adult Charts, so it was being very well received on radio stations across the country and the video was appealing to the networks.

CA: From what I've witnessed, not only are you driven but you really work hard on your craft. Whereas many vocalists don't actually write their own songs - you do! Is this incidental or do you think it's important for a recording artist to be involved in the songwriting process? If so, why?

Some people are just meant to sing and others are just meant to write, then you have those that are

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meant to do both. I'm glad I'm a part of that group. Being involved in the songwriting process is a great way to express yourself, what you feel, what you believe. I think that all artists should want to, at some point, be involved in that process even if they don't have the skills to write/arrange on their own. Songwriting is the foundation for my artistry. Through songwriting, I'm able to fulfill my purpose of touching people with my words. So I am blessed in that regard and thankful that I have that ability.

CA: Not limited to just vocalists, who or what are some of your biggest musical influences?

The Who's: Stevie Wonder & Prince -- The What's: The Universe and my feelings.

CA: Like any artist who comes to NYC to pursue their dreams in music, you've had to "pay your dues" as they say by performing at many of the local venues around town. You've played Apollo, BAM (Brooklyn Academy Of Music), Blue Note Jazz Club and S.O.B.'s Sol Village to name a few but in 2011 you performed for over 200,000 people at the Taste Of Soul Music Festival in Los Angeles along with headliners Tyrese, Lenny Williams, and Johnny Gill. That sounds like an incredible lineup. How did it feel to perform in front of such a large audience and how does it compare to performing in smaller venues?

It made me feel like I had arrived. I was on stage with some of the artists I grew up listening to, and being able to perform on that level in front of so many people was major for me. It was powerful. Smaller venues are great because of the intimacy and connection you can have with the audience. But as of today no other venue can compare to the feeling I had performing in front of over 200,000 people.

CA: Today we see so many artists branching out beyond their music careers, like 50 Cent with his brand - Vitamin Water, Rihanna launched a successful Totes Umbrella Line, and of course J-Lo, Mariah, Beyonce' and Mary J all have clothing lines. Having said that, congratulations on your endorsement as the first African-American face for Alison Raffaele Cosmetics, which is carried nationwide in Duane Reade/Walgreens stores. How did that deal come about and what are your personal thoughts about "Esnavi" emerging as a brand beyond music?

Alison Raffaele was launching her 'Live Beautiful' campaign for her line and was looking for women that were living her mantra, in which she expresses her professional understanding that a woman's true beauty must come from within, and that it is best expressed through the pursuit of her dreams. A friend referred her to me and she felt that my story fit the mantra and that my skin was a perfect match to represent the African-American shades. As far as emerging my brand beyond my music, I have continued to stay relevant in the beauty world by recently launching another campaign, in which I have my very own limited edition nail collection entitled ESNAVI LIVE with DazzleDry by VB Cosmetics. The collection offers three colors, which are named after songs on EXIT E. With that, I've also taken the responsibility to engage in a much healthier lifestyle. Being the face of two beauty campaigns made me realize that health and beauty go hand in hand and began committing myself to a life changing eating and workout program. My workout efforts are paying off and living in a healthier body has definitely helped to increase the confidence I already had in myself. It sure feels good to not HAVE to wear a Spanx every time I walk out of the house! As I am now focused on expanding my brand, feeling my best and looking my best is extremely important.

CA: Wow, you are definitely making moves, even popping up on TV recently. Didn't I see you on the TLC show Starter Wives?

Yes you did if you looked closely. I made a rather quick cameo during a dating scene on one of the first episodes.

CA: Lawd knows, I can't keep up with you (laughing). You are definitely making moves! Have you done any other TV appearances I might have missed?

Possibly, I also sang on VH1 Mob Wives during Ramona Rizzo's grandfather's memorial this past season. Most recently, I also made another quick appearance on MTV's Wild N' Out on the episode featuring Kevin Hart. And this fall, I will also be performing on another reality show, but you'll have to stay tuned for those details.

CA: So changing gears a bit, I know a lot of ladies out there will be interested to know that you recently opened for Grammy-nominated recording artist, Eric Benet, for a sold-out show at The Jefferson Center in Virginia. That's major! Ironically he appeared as a cover story for FitFigures Magazine last year. In past years Eric publicly