

Phenomenal Caribbean People

HEATHER HEADLEY

By
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She has kissed the lips of excellence but a passionate love affair with magnificence awaits her.

Her smile bewitches and bemuses. It is full and wide, lighting up her face and the room. Her laugh comes from deep within and bubbles up, filling your ear with a joyful noise. She speaks and her voice reminds you of satin or maybe silk, causing you to not just hear but listen. Soulful eyes look into you, pulling you into the warmth and authenticity that is, Heather Headley.

Oh and she can sing too.

When I first heard her CD, I was in my jeep trundling along to the park going for an early morning bike ride. “**He Is**” reached out, gently touched my soul and whispered “Hold on, Heather wants to sing.” The bike ride never happened. Instead, I parked in a quiet little spot facing the softly flowing Mill Creek in North East Ohio and let Heather do what Heather does so well.

“**This is Who I Am**” is her first CD and I dearly hope she has more in her heart to share with us. The album went gold in record time.

Heather Headley was born at San Fernando Hospital, Trinidad on October 5th. She grew up in Barataria with her younger brother, Iric Junior, her mom, Hannah and dad, Iric Senior. She attended Barataria Anglican School, St. Ursula’s School in Port of Spain and then St. George’s College. I caught up with this busy young lady in New York City and from the moment we sat down to chat, I knew this was no passing talent or latest craze.

There is something different about this actress, singer, model – no wait I take that back. There are a *whole lot* of things different about this girl. We’ve all heard the stories about what talent coupled with success can do to you so I didn’t know quite what to expect when I was ushered into her ‘quiet room’ minutes before her scheduled interview with BET. As I trailed behind a truck sized security guard, I formed and reformed preconceptions. *oh lawd...I hope she’s not some chupidy. I’d have to ask banal questions and end up doing a story that would be better suited to some syrupy scandal rag. Oh no! What if she’s one of those one-word response people? Shoot, then I’d have a 90 minute tape to fill with the sound of my own voice.*

I was shown into the room. Heather was there, her long, slim body draped along a divan while she relaxed with her team. *Well, this is it Nathalie.* I thought to myself. *Let’s see who we have here.*

She stood up immediately and shook my hand. Within seconds, I felt as if I had stopped by a good friend’s place and we were catching up on old times. Put two Caribbean females in a room and three things happen.

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First, we drop whichever accent we've learned over the years we were away from the islands. Then we precede every sentence with "girl!" After a little while, we move on to "do you know so and so...?"

I watched Heather do her BET interview. She was relaxed and the camera loved her movements and presence. She put the interviewer and crew at ease with that smile and ready wit. Afterwards, we headed back to her hotel. Her personal assistant, Shannon Cogen, led Heather and I to a quiet little corner and left us. We tossed ourselves onto a deep, soft couch and really began to talk.

"Tired?" I asked.

"I was, but I'm ok now. The energy from these things jazzes me right up, recharges me...know what I mean? I'll grab a power nap later and then head out to rehearsals."

Heather and I chatted a bit about her hectic schedule. There were concerts, rehearsals, a project with the legendary Faye Dunaway, videos, photo sessions and interviews. Naturally, I was interested in her accolades and triumphs, but more than that, I wanted to know who Heather was. I didn't want to 'report' a story, I wanted to bring my **SHE Caribbean** readers a little bit of the real Heather. To allow them a peek at the person behind the amazing voice.

We talked about back home, growing up with parents who were both pastors, about knowing she could sing and yet not knowing that she could sing. "Hedda have a nice voice eh?" meant what exactly? Heather had had no voice lessons, no formal training, apart from piano lessons, until she was almost eighteen.

"Singing was a fantasy for me since I was two years old. We used to live over the church back then. I would go downstairs, close all the louvers and sing. It got so hot, the church was like a sauna. Everybody else was outside running and playing but I didn't care. I would stay there and peck away at the piano and listen to my voice, never thinking I had talent, just knowing I loved to sing."

At age 15, Heather and her family moved to Fort Wayne, Indiana. Heather later moved to Evanston, Illinois where she attended North Western Communications and Musical Chicago. These places bore little one of the strengths of the Caribbean wherever they go.



University to study Theatre. She now lives in resemblance to Trinidad, but people is their ability to adapt



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“What makes you happy, Heather?”

“My guy.” A slow, wide smile crept across her face. “Brian and I had been dating for over two years. We’ve known each other about five years before that. We got engaged a little while ago. He’s a great guy and a really decent human being. He’s working right now on a building project in Chicago for inner city children. He feels so strongly about giving back. I feel blessed to have him in my life, to be able to sing and do all the things a girl dreams of doing.”

We talked more about Brian. After all, a woman in love is a beautiful thing. Heather literally glowed. Too often we hear only the tales of horror; the sob stories about who left who, who’s creeping and why men are monsters. I had my own sweetie to crow about so Heather and I giggled and dished about our fellas. Yes, good men actually do exist, it’s not a myth. They make you act really silly sometimes, but they also make you brave, giving you added confidence to try new things and reach for the heavens knowing there’s someone there who has nothing but love and support for you. They don’t make you, they make you more. Brian isn’t a West Indian but has not only fallen in love with one of our pride and joys, but has fallen in love with the region and culture.

“I think Brian wants to rewrite my wedding vows to say something like “I Heather, take you Brian to love, honour and cook curry!”

Heather and I went into peals of laughter when we started talking about the food and delicacies back home.

“I don’t drink at all but when my Auntie Brenda makes her rum cake I can’t get enough!

Nobody believes me when I tell them you can get drunk on cake!”

“Are there times when you’re low, Heather? Things hurt a little?”

Heather nods and curls up deeper into the couch, a thoughtful sigh escapes her. “Yes girl. Sometimes in the wee hours when I can’t sleep. Maybe the day was a mean one and I’m too wired to rest. Thoughts come. I lost a dear friend not too long ago. She drowned. She had everything going for her. It frightened me so much. I think about how young she was and I am afraid that maybe I won’t be around long enough to do all those things I want to do. I have this fear that I won’t be around to see my children or grandbabies or visit places I’ve always wanted to see or finish the things I’ve started. She reminded me of our mortality. Life is so unpredictable and you never really know what will come next.”

“I have a fear of Heather. I am my worse critic. I put expectations on myself and I’m not satisfied unless I achieve it. I am a perfectionist. I don’t throw diva fits though!”



“There’s one regret that goes back a long time.” Heather’s eyes softened and became distant as she wandered back to that day. “The day of my common entrance exam. I was all dressed neatly. My hair done with those millions of ribbons and clips that our mothers loved so much in those days. Mummy had bought me a gold bracelet. You know the ones little girls wore back then? Well I was out on the playground later that day and I lost it. I still get sad when I think about that. It had my name engraved on it and was very special to me. I looked at my wrist at it was gone. I think about that little bracelet. Maybe if someone reads this and knows something about it, they will call you to get a message to me.”



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I promised my new friend that I would let the readers know. Sometimes we forget that all of us, even the ones winging their way to the top have little things, little precious things in their lives that mean so much.

Heather likes doing her laundry. She politely declined when I offered to bring over all my stuff but we agreed that simple task is soothing. The smell of the detergent, the ordinary task of fluffing and folding allows the mind to drift and unravel things while still accomplishing this little chore.

“I want to get back to my home and take care of these little things, water my poor plants, go pick up some groceries, y’know? Simple things that don’t require much but keep you grounded in the here and now.”

What do you want your systahs in the Caribbean to know, Heather?

“I want to tell her that she is beautiful. Regardless of race or size or colour. She sways and moves with such unselfconscious rhythm and grace. We have all these talents and can be anything we want to be. The Caribbean Woman is an interesting woman. She knows royalty, she knows the ordinary life. She’s seen it all. I grew up around women, we are a very matriarchal family. The Caribbean Woman is strong and simply amazing.”

Heather has a respectable number of milestones along her road of success. She starred in Elton John’s and Tim Rice’s Broadway production of AIDA which earned her a Tony Award. Heather has appeared in Ragtime and she was the feisty

and riveting voice of “Nala” in The Lion King. Heather is with the RCA Music Group. Her amazing CD, “This is Who I am”, was produced by the legends, Jimmy Jam and Terry Lewis. It was a joy speaking with this bright and personable daughter of the Caribbean. Few artists truly earn the title of a ‘star’ but I felt I was indeed in the presence of precisely that – an original, a one of a kind. I’m keeping an eye on this incredible talent and expect to see much more of her.

We’re proud of you **Hedda!**





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