

LIBERATION

by CHRISTINA
AGUILERA

Liberation is a fitting title for the eighth studio album from multi-platinum superstar artist Christina Aguilera, given that freeing herself from other people's expectations is a significant theme that appears throughout the singer, songwriter, and actress's remarkable life and career. From surviving the domestic violence she and her mother endured at the hands of her father when Aguilera was a child, to freeing herself from the constraints of her teen-pop image by wresting creative control over her musical output with her blockbuster albums, the 4x-platinum, Grammy-winning *Stripped* and chart-topping, 3x-platinum, Grammy-winning *Back to Basics*, to the present, in which Aguilera is returning to music after serving as a judge on *The Voice* and acting in several movies and television shows.

"I just needed to get back to truth," she says of her first album since 2012's *Lotus*. "I felt like I was stuck, like when you can do something in your sleep and you're unmotivated by it and you need to take a reflective moment and look at how you got away from your passion and off your path. It's a big step to walk away from something that's comfortable, but it can also be liberating to say, 'Okay, I'm being true to myself now. I'm back to what I feel is my God-given purpose for being on this Earth.' I'm not a commentator. I'm an artist. I'm a creator. I like to inspire. And when I stop believing in something, I have to evaluate my integrity in the situation and get back to the root of my truth and purpose."

Aguilera announces her intention to "present the story I need to tell at this point in my life" with the album's first song, "Maria" — a Kanye West production that opens with the iconic line "How do you solve a problem like Maria?". It's not only a clever nod to *The Sound of Music* heroine who was considered too flighty for an austere life among the nuns at the Abbey, but also a sly wink at Aguilera's image as a 'difficult' woman because of her strong, opinionated nature. (Fun fact: 'Maria' is not only Aguilera's middle name, but the Julie Andrews' performance in the movie is what first inspired her to sing.) "Maria" is about getting back to that

little girl who just wants to feel alive and inspired to make music before the innocence and excitement start to fade because of all the other business-related factors,” Aguilera says. “It’s not that my love of music depreciated, but being a young girl in a world of older men who sometimes had ulterior motives, and having no say in my own creativity or expression was very isolating.”

Five billion combined worldwide streams, 36 million album equivalents sold, 30 *Billboard* Hot 100 hits (including five No. 1’s), and six Grammy Awards later, Aguilera is no longer in that disenfranchised position, and she harnesses her power to full effect on *Liberation*, calling in a cast of heavy-hitter collaborators, including songwriters Julia Michaels, Ilsey Juber, Tayla Parx, Justin Tranter, Teddy Geiger, and producers Kanye West, Che Pope, Mike Will Made-It, Anderson .Paak, Jon Bellion, Da Internz, MNEK, Kirby Lauryen, Ricky Reed, and Nick Britell (the Oscar-nominated composer of *Moonlight* and *The Big Short*) to help her fulfill her vision of an eclectic album that explores her love of soul and hip-hop. “I love collaborating,” she says. “I think it’s really apparent on all my records that I have always loved having creative energies around me and throwing ideas around.”

Liberation contains uplifting message songs (“Maria,” “Fall In Line”), vibey, feel-good songs (“Accelerate,” “Pipe,” “Sick of Sittin”), and relationship songs (“Twice,” “Masochist,” “Unless It’s With You,” “Deserve”). Of the unpredictable musical twists and turns on the Kanye West/Che Pope-produced “Accelerate,” featuring Ty Dolla \$ign and 2 Chainz, Aguilera says, “I heard it, and I was like, ‘This is so much fun!’ I love how the mood and energy of the song continues to shift and change from the opening of the drums and the feel of that raw energy coming off of that drum sound. All of a sudden, it’s a party.” Of the relationship songs, Aguilera says, “I think there’s a self-torture that comes with love. It’s inevitable. We all do it. I don’t think love is all about roses, white picket fences, and being picture-perfect. It’s about the highs and lows and having a moment of reflection where you ask, ‘Do I stick this out? What do I do?’ Those are the kind of love songs I am drawn to.”

Liberation arrives at a unique time in history when women around the world are speaking out and telling their stories of harassment and abuse via the #metoo movement and are actually being heard, making the defiant, empowerment anthem “Fall In Line” feel particularly prescient, though Aguilera wrote it a few years ago. “I’m big on sending a message of inspiration and getting other people out of their dark places and feeling that they have a voice, so this song was important to me,” she says. “It really contributes to the whole mood and spirit of standing up for yourself and resisting those who tell you that you don’t have any rights.”

The song, which features a commanding guest vocal from Demi Lovato, opens with a chorus of young female voices announcing what they want to be (screenwriter, journalist, superhero, singer, doctor, the boss, the President) and

demanding “I want to be heard, I will be heard, I will make myself heard,” while later in the song, a creepy, computerized male voice intones: “Shut your mouth / Stick your ass out for me / Who told you you’re allowed to think?”). “It definitely is an empowering, encouraging, and motivating message,” Aguilera says of “Fall in Line,” “and that’s important, especially right now.”

Since finding her creative voice on *Stripped*, Aguilera has wanted to connect with “those who maybe feel a little lost on their path, or their journey took them on a different route and they’re unsure about what to do,” she says. “I wanted to talk not only about my journey, but also deliver it in an honest way that connects with the soul. Everyone has their own version of ‘Maria’ — that little dreamer inside of them who might have to be put on hold because of kids, work, or family. So I hope that the album is a discovery of some kind for the listeners, as it was for me, and can be a form of release and independence and strength and inspiration to go out and find their own version of being liberated.”

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