

Beth Hart: 'I Know What Makes Me Connect to My Music'

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"I do not consider myself a political writer at all," says Hart. Photo: Mona Nordøy/Press Image

Los Angeles based singer-songwriter Beth Hart is visiting India for the first time and will play two shows in Bengaluru. *Rolling Stone India* caught up with her as she prepares for her trip. In an interview, we found Hart to be frank, open and very honest in sharing her views with us. What came through was her commitment, both in her song writing and her singing to telling the truth. Indian audiences can be assured of a sincere, honest connect with this singer and her music, as her views are fueled by the passion she puts into the writing of her songs. Here is our conversation with the singer-songwriter.

Your albums *Fire on the Floor* and *Live in Amsterdam* seem to have caught the imagination of this generation of listeners. To what do you attribute this special connect you have achieved across a spectrum of the audience, which has enormous choices for a variety of music to choose from?

I never want to be presumptuous to assume why anybody connects with my music – as you say, so much to choose from. But I know what makes me connect to my music – it is knowing that I am not alone in my feelings and my thoughts. If I love Etta James, it's not just the voice and it's not just the song but it's the energy that connects me to her, so if she is strong, I can be strong too and if she is sad, I know I am not alone, or if she is joyous, I can connect with that joy. That's what connects me to singers. Yesterday, it was before I was going on stage, I wasn't feeling very confident so I put on live, Dinah Washington – it's not just her singing but it's some incredible musicians in her recordings, especially in her live shows. There is something about live albums that I enjoy so much more than studio albums from all of my favorite artists. When I am listening to them live, I get to connect so much more to their truth, than in studio albums.

Do you think it is more difficult to reach listeners who, these days, have any and all music available so easily through technology?

You know, I don't even think along those lines! I think that I would be in trouble if I thought along those lines, if I tried to analyze the music business and why people buy albums or come to shows to hear me. I don't think it's my place to go there. That has nothing to do with art. My job is to work at song writing and singing and telling the truth in song writing. My job is to be courageous enough to go on stage and tell the truth, the same truth that's gone into my song writing. You know, being a human being it's natural to be insecure – and when you are a performer, there is going to be even more insecurity. That's why there is the need to get the applause, get the connect to consistently remind you that you're not 'no good,' that you're part of the human race and that you are a somebody. That's at the core of almost all performing artists. Let's face it, if it's just about the music, you could stay at home and make music but there is the need to perform for people to remind you that you are not alone. Of course I can't speak for other artists but this is my little philosophy on it. So I am not going to think about how I can reach more audiences; I think of writing by digging deep under all those layers of denial and under all that false sense of security.

Most contemporary music owes its roots somehow to the blues – whether jazz, rock, swing or R&B. The British rock movement from the 60s was heavily influenced by people like Muddy Waters. They adapted these roots for their own music. In which way have you taken the traditional blues for molding your music?

Well, I don't consider myself a blues singer! Throughout my career, I have written in many different genres and directions in what I call singer-songwriter music. Songs like "Leave The Light On" or "L.A. Song" are just story telling songs. I go into blues or jazz, gospel, soul music, rock n' roll, old school rock n' roll, soul rock n' roll, so many directions. It just boils down to growing up, being turned on to a lot of great music, a lot of great artists from different genres from a lot of people from family, friends, teachers. It's only natural I am influenced by what I heard. The only way to be an inventor of music or your own genre of music is either be so suppressed that you don't hear any other outside influence – some form of serious suppression, but that wasn't my case. I was influenced by a lot of artists. I think that answers your question.



"I have written in many different genres and directions in what I call singer-songwriter music," says Hart. Photo: Mona Nordøy/Press Image

Music has been a terrific vehicle for protest, social and even political messages. In particular, the U.S. has encouraged this type of expression – Bob Dylan, Joan Baez and others in their anti war protest songs in the mid Sixties exemplify this. Has this 'freedom of expression' in American music been a factor in your lyrics?

I do not consider myself a political writer at all. If you grow up during war – Dylan and Baez were young during the Vietnam war and what's going on around you is going to affect your feelings and emotions – so that's what will come through your writing. For me what came about was that there was a lot of mental illness in my family. There was a lot of abandonment, a lot of drug addiction, my sister died of AIDS which she got from a needle, so it's natural that my narratives have a lot to do with the struggle, connection to God, feelings of worthlessness, shame etc. But there's a lot of hope in it too because if there wasn't hope, I'd be dead! So as much as a dark side of me exists, there is also a very strong light side, which has kept me alive so far and that's going to be what I write about.

The name of your album *Don't Explain* suggests a connection with the great jazz singer Billie Holiday, who sang this song. In the rich spectrum of American women singers – from Bessie Smith and Billie Holiday through to Aretha Franklin and so many in between, a fine tradition has been established. Are you a continuation of this tradition?

I'm not black so I don't know how to come from that place, dealing with slavery as they dealt with it, of course. I remember hearing the song "Strange Fruit" as a little girl with my mother who was a massive Billie Holiday fan. There was something about the song "Don't Explain" – that's because my father left my mother for another woman. So I really connected to someone who was dishonored but you love them so much you swallow it. So that's a song I am connected to. But you ask, am I a continuation of this tradition of vocalists and I would say no.

Who have been your influences and inspirations in the style you have developed?

I have a lot of influences – Billie Holiday, Aretha Franklin, Otis Reading, Bob Marley, Black Flag, Black Sabbath, Ozzie Osborne, Rush, Led Zepplin, Carole King, Ricky Lee Jones, James Taylor, The Eagles, I love Latin music, native American music, all Classical music, Dinah Washington, Ella Fitzgerald and then some!

Your popularity internationally, particularly in Australia and Europe is remarkable. Do you think the audiences in these countries react differently to audiences in the US?

I don't, I really don't. Why you connect with certain audiences isn't like it sounds on paper. A big part of connecting with people comes from the label we record with or some promotion that get you to those audiences. In the early part of my career, I was promoted by my label on the East coast of the U.S. and in Africa – so that's where I connected with the audiences. My second label promoted me in Australia and parts

of Europe and then in the U.S. I then screwed up my whole career with drugs and alcohol and illness and I was dropped by them and I didn't have a career for a year when I was trying to recover and get back. When I was back, nobody would touch me in the U.S. But I was accepted to perform in New Zealand and in Holland and that was it. It was a slow rebuilding process, very slow. It took me a number of years. Then my label just happened to open a new label in the U.S. so I have been doing the U.S. these last couple of years.

What do you see as trends on the American scene in the near future?

I don't know what's going on because I am on the road a lot. I don't listen to the radio. When I'm home, I'm writing or cooking or gardening or hanging out with friends. I think the music comes from some pocket of the world where there's some suppression going on and a group of people get together and they create a new sound and if they are lucky enough and it makes some buzz then the labels push it and it becomes the new scene. Anyway that's just my opinion.

Your music has become a powerful medium for communication; simply put, you sing something, we just listen. There is some magnetism in your voice and expression. Thank you for that.

Awww! That's nice of you to say!

From *Rolling Stone India*, thank you for taking this time to react to our questions.

You're very welcome. Thank you for interviewing me. I so look forward to coming to India. I am the biggest fan of Indian food ever and I love all the colors and all the movies that I have seen. I am so excited. I think I'm going to cry when I arrive in India!

Beth Hart will play two shows in Bengaluru this April. Details below:

April 21st at Windmills Craftworks, Bengaluru

April 22nd at St.John's Auditorium, Bengaluru

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