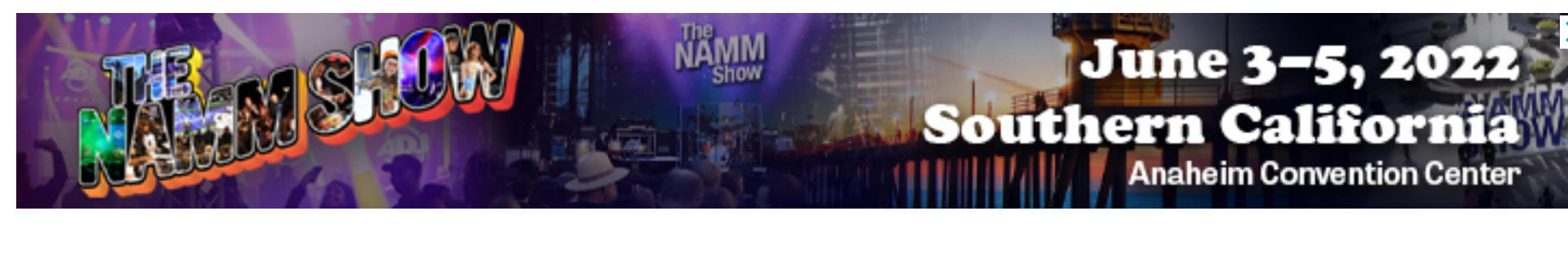


# MUSIC CONNECTION



Home Magazine Cover Stories Q&A With H.E.R.



## Q&A WITH H.E.R.

COVER STORIES, MAGAZINE / NOVEMBER 25, 2020 / BY MIGUEL COSTA

She has always been H.E.R. The native daughter of Vallejo, CA and a music prodigy. But something changed when Gabi Wilson decided to release new music under that anonymous three-letter acronym, because she won two Grammy Awards shortly thereafter. Grammy night (2019) was a moment in time when the world finally saw what the young songwriter envisioned for herself once she adopted an incognito persona behind a tinted pair of sunglasses. Her rise through the ranks of soul music became crystal clear. The self-titled, award-winning compilation album (H.E.R.) would go on to impact urban American culture and R&B music like no other unofficial studio album has since Drake dropped his classic mixtape *So Far Gone* back in 2009. Although H.E.R. won a Grammy for Best R&B Album in 2019, the music industry's true coronation of the songstress might have come one year prior, during a face-to-face encounter with Janet Jackson in London, a chance meeting when Janet Jackson revealed that the 23-year-old's music helped her get through a pregnancy.

She has always been H.E.R. The embodiment of two hardworking parents and a girl with an imagination that stretches far beyond the famed imagery of her trademark sunglasses. Wilson's identity has been revealed. She's a member. A social cause for African American women and a voice for Filipino communities. Recently, we spoke with H.E.R. about the social meaning behind her music, MBK Entertainment's role in her development as an artist, and the influence that she has had on both of the ethnic communities she belongs to.

**Music Connection:** Because of the pandemic this year, several recording artists have had to adapt to the way in which they release creative content. We noticed that you launched an original series called "Girls With Guitars" on Instagram Live back in April. You even aired a special edition of the show for Black Music Month in June. This was over six months ago. What have been the residual effects of this campaign and will you do it again next year?

**H.E.R.:** Oh definitely. It's really important for me to include other really dope creatives in things that I do. People need substance right now and they need music. Just something to get their minds off of a lot of the stuff that's been going on and I've been trying to do that in everything I do.

**MC:** Sheryl Crow appeared as a guest on episode 4 of "Girls With Guitars." What was it like playing the guitar with one of your heroes?

**H.E.R.:** Oh my gosh! It was crazy! She's a legend. I've had so many of my heroes on (the show), it's been unbelievable. "Girls With Guitars" started off as just me being in the house, kind of being bored and discovering how much I love Instagram Live. I started having girls on there and it became something so much bigger. It's been dope to see the response and to see who's wanted to (appear on the show as a guest). Also, it's been creating a platform for a lot of up-and-coming girls with guitars.

**MC:** Awesome! So, will there be a season two?

**H.E.R.:** Definitely. We're going to have to do it big!

**MC:** Now, you have your very own signature guitar with Fender. The Fender H.E.R. Stratocaster was released back in September (2020). How did that collaboration come about and how involved were you with the design?

**H.E.R.:** They let me pick everything, down to the (guitar) pickups. Everything! It started off with Fender creating my acrylic Strat (for a Grammy performance in 2019)...and the relationship just built over time. It was a dream come true when they came to me and said "we would love to collaborate." I was able to create my own Strat. It's what I started playing guitar on and it honestly meant the world to me. I am the first black female artist to create a Stratocaster. It's crazy. The goal is to inspire and I think this guitar is doing that.

**MC:** That's cool, because the Stratocaster was the first guitar that your Dad bought you, right? From the Guitar Center?

**H.E.R.:** Yeah, it was a black and white Stratocaster. So, it was a crazy full-circle moment.

**MC:** Back in February, I watched your performance of "Me and My Guitar" with a rapper named A Boogie Wit da Hoodie on *The Tonight Show*. You were playing rock & roll riffs on the electric guitar. I was blown away by your musicality. Which begs the question: Who's your favorite guitar player of all time? And if you could play in any rock band, past or present, which one do you think your style would mesh with the best?

**H.E.R.:** What? I don't know if I can answer that. That's really tough, but thank you. I was really nervous that day. That was the first day that I had to perform, playing the guitar for somebody (else) as opposed to me being the singer and the guitar player.

I don't know, honestly, Prince is definitely up there for me. But I love Eric Clapton, Eddie Van Halen and Jimi Hendrix. Those are some of my favorites. I would have loved to have played with Led Zeppelin or with Prince & The Revolution.

**MC:** About one year before that, you thrilled the national viewers with a riveting guitar solo during a live performance of "Anti" on the *MTV Music Video Awards* (2019). This song has such a strong social meaning about traditional beauty standards, but you've never officially released it as a single. Why is that?

**H.E.R.:** There's a lot of songs that I've performed and never released. I have songs like "Glory" that I performed for Fender (Signature Sessions) with my Stratocaster. There are certain songs that I just like to perform because they're really dope and they need to be heard in a certain way, maybe it'll be on my album. Maybe it'll be on a project. You never know.

**MC:** Speaking of performing new music on live TV, you premiered a song called "Hold On" on *Saturday Night Live* (an episode that aired on Oct. 24, 2020). What was it like working on the set of SNL with Adele (the host) during the pandemic? And how did you choose the music that you were going to perform that night?

**H.E.R.:** It was one of the most epic nights of my life. I think this is pretty much how it happened: I was in Jamaica working on a project that I am hopefully releasing soon and Adele was in Jamaica at the same time and we just so happened to be staying at the exact same resort. I found out that she was there and, long story short, we ended up meeting. And she said that she was a really big fan. And I told her I was a really big fan. We just built a relationship off of the Jamaica trip.

We started speaking over time and randomly, one night, she texted me and said, "Have you ever done SNL?" And I said, "No, but I hope to one day." I didn't think anything of it. But a few days later my team says to me "Adele wants you to do SNL when she hosts." I was freaking out. Adele said, "I was going to do SNL and there was no other artist that I wanted to perform while I was hosting." I thought that was really special. It made the night even more special, the fact that she said that and is a really big fan of my music. So when I picked the song (to perform on the show) I had just released my single "Damage," from my upcoming album and I really wanted to showcase that song.

"Hold On" is something that I had been working on for a year. It took me so long to write. I don't know why. I finally finished it maybe a week before my SNL performance and I decided, 'I think the song is really emotional and it needs to be my second performance (of the night), because it's very different from the first song that I'm going to perform.' And I got to showcase my Stratocaster!

**MC:** We heard that Janet Jackson approached you after your show in London and said that your music helped her get through her pregnancy. Who is the person most responsible for helping you develop the deeply emotional lyrics that you pour into your songwriting?

**H.E.R.:** Me. (laughs) I've worked with a lot of different collaborators. But I've always written songs that come from a personal place. Everything comes from me. I'm a huge diary-journal writer. And I think that shows in my lyrics.

**MC:** You often mention *Volume 1* when it comes to finding yourself as a recording artist. On a personal level, where does that EP rank among the other releases in your catalog and why?

**H.E.R.:** Rank? I couldn't tell you, I think everything represents a feeling and a time. I was 18 when my first EP came out, so I'm a different person now. Things change so much, I'm a different person than I was at 18, 19, even 21. There's a special place in my heart for each one of my songs. I love to live in my memories and I can always go back to my own music as the soundtrack for my own life.

**MC:** You've released five EPs in the past four years. Each of these releases has been met with critical acclaim. So, why is it that you haven't released a full-length album yet?

**H.E.R.:** Honestly? I don't know. Those were just supposed to be the introductions to who I am and what I do. You know? Obviously songs like "Hard Place" are much different from what you hear on *Volume 1* and *Volume 2*. I think they're just different versions of me.

Those first projects were for me to put out my music and see if they love the message, and it turns out people do. And two Grammys later, I'm working on my debut album. Which I guess isn't really going to be a debut, but it's going to be a combination of all these perspectives that I've built and that have grown over time.

**MC:** Tell us about your working relationship with your producers DJ Camper (David "Swagg R'celious" Harris) and Swag (Darhyl "Hey DJ" Camper Jr.). They worked on your first two EPs. Are they going to be working on your upcoming debut album?

**H.E.R.:** Yeah, I hope so, I've been working with Camper a lot. Swagg is like my big brother. I've been working with both of them since I was very young. They've been in my life for a long time. We enjoy working together. I hope so, we'll see.

**MC:** You've stated publicly that you'd like to work with Drake or Stevie Wonder. Will either of them be making an appearance on your debut album?

**H.E.R.:** We'll see. I've just been making music and having fun with a bunch of different people. Those are definitely my dream collabs. So, we'll see.

**MC:** What's a writing camp with H.E.R. like?

**H.E.R.:** It's mostly just a lot of talking. Some people will come up with the melodies that I like and I'll go in (the recording booth) and do my thing. It's a very intimate thing for me, it takes a while for me to open up to people that I haven't worked with before. But it's just good vibes and good conversation.

**MC:** You've often expressed the pride that you have for being a black woman in today's day and age. But you're also a Filipino American from the (San Francisco) Bay Area. A place where there's a thriving Filipino American community. What's the reception to your music been like among the Filipino American community back home?

**H.E.R.:** They've been supporting me from day one. With Filipinos, that's what they love—R&B. I saw that when I became the first black woman to own a festival, The Lights On Festival (a Live Nation event that took place in Concord, CA on Sept. 14, 2019). We sold out in 10 minutes. The whole Bay Area and people from all over the world came out. I'm proud to be from the Bay. It's always been a community and family vibe, being from the Bay. Having that foundation was really important in my success, growing and traveling the world. I always have that foundation, that family.

**MC:** While we're on the subject of traveling the world, are you planning any concerts in the Philippines once the pandemic is over? Perhaps in 2021?

**H.E.R.:** Definitely! That was definitely a part of my plans before they were cancelled. I definitely want to go to the Philippines and perform.

**MC:** I'm sure that'll make your Mom very happy.

**H.E.R.:** Absolutely!

**MC:** When you were a kid living in the Bay Area you joined a group called Pop Life with Kehlani and Zendaya. As the three of you have gotten older, you've all become superstars in your own right. What brought you all together back then? And what kind of impact did that experience have on your career path?

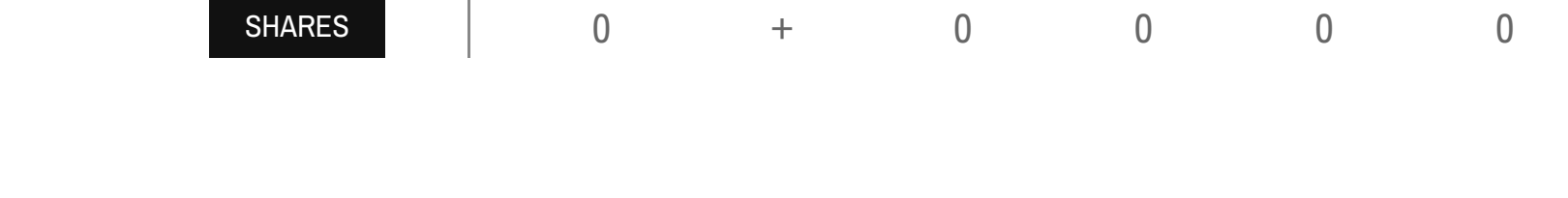
**H.E.R.:** I wouldn't call it a career at that age. I was just playing each other and performing. We were all from the Bay Area. Zendaya wasn't fully in the group, but we had met each other and had fun around that time. I'm thankful that I was able to play music at such a young age. And I was surrounded by music, being from the Bay Area, as was Zendaya, as was Kehlani. We were all surrounded by music all the time and we loved music. And that's how we ended up singing together or whatever it was at the time. I don't think it necessarily had an effect on my success but it had an effect on me as a person and a musician, just learning things so young.

**MC:** You've been signed to MBK Entertainment (for management) since you were a pre-teen. What kind of role has Jeff Robinson played in your evolution from Gabi Wilson to the artist known as H.E.R.?

**H.E.R.:** When it came to the evolution of me as an artist and me developing as a woman, he's helped me in this industry who's learning. Jeff has been a huge mentor for me. I've learned so much. He's helped me become the artist that I am today. He's shown me what to watch out for and he's really educated me in life and in music in this business that's so hard to navigate. He's also shown me a family environment. I've been working with MBK since I was 11 years old, they're like my family. We've always been there for each other from the very beginning.

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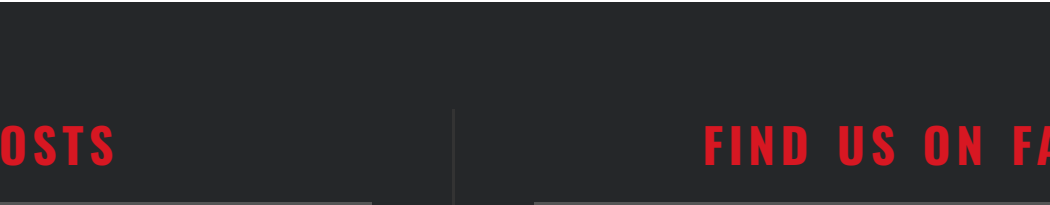
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**Miguel Costa**  
Miguel Costa is a writer and photographer with Music Connection. His tenure with the national magazine has allowed him to augment his passion for journalism, reporting and discovering new music. Miguel's articles span the genres of hard rock, hip-hop, R&B, Soul music, indie pop, punk rock, reggaeton, Latin rock, jazz and more. He thoroughly enjoys covering live events for recording artists who are signed to major record labels. As a journalist, Miguel looks forward to writing many more stories, while expanding upon his content and subject matter.

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