

A Conversation With Avery Sunshine (Interview)



“There’s something about the vibration of music that brings you back to the spirit.”

Avery Sunshine’s burnished soul that is slowly rising from its submerged status is one of 2010’s biggest secrets. The singer, songwriter and keyboardist who has made Atlanta home for almost two decades belts her tunes with a sensual ferocity straight out of R&B’s inception at the crossroads of blues, meter and gospel. It is the classic contradiction of several soul giants to split the fever between flesh and faith. But Sunshine has no conflict because to her God’s omnipotence denies any divide. Unlike the tugs-of-war that Marvin Gaye, Prince and Al Green battled for years and resulted in their seminal works, Sunshine’s music acknowledges the tangible world without guilt to the spirit. The choir director and would-be sitcom actress from Pennsylvania produced a singular debut that has been an exciting ride for online soul fanatics that only started earlier this year. She has charted well on iTunes and is currently touring the east coast now that her run with *I Dream*, a musical about Dr. King has ended. Affable and smart, Ms. Sunshine is ardent about living as a working musician forever and doing some serious shoe shopping in between taking on the world.

How did you become an artist?

I had moved down to Atlanta to attend Spelman College and major in piano. I was directing choirs and I was always performing but being an artist that happened after I graduated. Once I got out of school I started writing music

and through my closest friend in the world sheâ€™s a Spelmanite as well. She was a vocal major and I was a piano major and she would sing and I would play and we just started writing music and we decided to start a group called Daisy Rue compiled of her motherâ€™s name and my motherâ€™s name. She ended-up leaving to go on Broadway and do *Rent*. That left me here and Iâ€™m telling you if she hadnâ€™t left I donâ€™t know what I would have been doing. Of course I was heartbroken it really pushed me into taking life seriously and becoming an artist and next thing I know seven eight years later here we are. You know how stuff will happen to you and youâ€™re upset and the way it happened but you know I guess thatâ€™s why weâ€™re not God. I had no idea that it would become Iâ€™m happy it turned out the way it did Iâ€™m so happy.

What happened in your life that made you want to be a music major? It sounds like even though you didnâ€™t know you would become an artist you already kind of knew you wanted to do music for a living?

I remember I was eight years old. I was in Catholic school. And one of the girls at the school, her name was Talayah Ford. I will never forget it, she played piano. I told my mom â€œYou know I want to play the piano.â€ It was just like that she was like â€œNow look Denise the piano is not going to be sitting around the house collecting dust because if we get it youâ€™re going to play it.â€ I was like â€œOK, cool.â€ They got the piano and got me a teacher and that was it. By the time I was 13, I was directing choirs and playing for churches. By the time I was 18 I had a different denomination every week that I was playing for. Neither of my parents are musicians theyâ€™re lovers of music but my older brother is a musician, conductor, great vocalist. The rest of the family, no not really. It really was the God in me that reached out for that. Let me you tell you many a day I was like â€œIâ€™m not doing this.â€ But thank God I have been able to sustain my family because of music. I always felt that I was fortunate

to know what I wanted to do. I didn't know that was what I wanted to do but I always knew when I was playing music or singing that I always felt like I was at home. And I say that because I look at so many of my friends who are the same age as me who are like "I don't know what I'm going to do." Not that it's a bad thing we're in our 30's we're not old but I've always, I guess I always knew I was supposed to do it even in my ignorance.

[youtube]Ew6Hx076Zo4[/youtube]

I know you are the director of a few choirs and have been for a long time. How did you get into directing choirs and why did you choose to do something secular to start your recording career instead of gospel music? You don't sound like you're overly religious.

No. Not at all. I try not to make that a big deal. That is so not where God is. To me God is not in religion that's us we do that. I don't know what my music is I don't know what to call it. God is weaved throughout the whole album in all of the music. There is no separation between church and state. God is in all of it even when I'm angry even when I'm off God is still there God is still present. I think that my exposure to all of those different denominations I saw so many contradictions and so many different ways to worship and to know God. I've been struggling with how to contain it because I don't want to alienate anybody by what I say. I will say this though, I feel like religion can alienate I do feel like that. So rather than do that "I'm a Christian Jesus is the only way" when you look at how many people really know about Jesus.

People were offended when Michael Jackson died and somebody said, "He was more popular than Jesus." Some people were offended but the truth of the matter is he was.

When you look at the population of Christians in the world it can't be the only way. There's different avenues to God I believe. I think that we make God small when we say there's only one way that's why I try not to focus on religion. I try to focus on having a relationship with God and I want my music to do that. If that means I'm being real about whatever it is I'm not covering anything up. Yes I've been divorced I didn't do the right thing in my marriage I was off, crazy, did some special stuff yes that's who I am and God still loves me. I'm sorry I'm kind of passionate about that can you tell? I'm trying to find my way with it because I want my children to be free and liberated enough that they don't feel that I've got to choose that I've got to be Baptist or Buddhist. No, you work on a relationship with God and however you're able to see God for yourself then you do that. It's hard because I work in the church so we're always having conversations about it. Don't make the church God the church is not God to tell you the truth if I made church God I'd be messed up.

How did you get started as a church musician?

My aunt turned me onto my first church gig was at a Catholic church and I made \$175 for an hour and I was hooked I was done. Do you hear me? I was done that was it I was 13 and I'm 35. I bought my first car when I was living with my parents. I think it may have been an interesting way for God to maybe keep me focused on one thing. "You know I can get her if I dangle some money I'll keep her around in that way." I said to my mother I said "Mom if I didn't get paid I would not go to church." "Don't you say that don't you say that to me." I was like "I'm for real." At any rate I am glad because there is something that I do appreciate and that is the fellowship and community. While I can talk about all the negative stuff I am glad that we had that base you know moving from Chester, PA outside of Philly down to Atlanta I was by myself when I came to school.

But being able to be part of a church family Zion Hill Baptist Church Iâ€™ve been the Zion Hill choir director since 1996 Iâ€™ve been there 14 years. And theyâ€™ve hung with me through touring and whatever else. So thatâ€™s how I got into it and I fully admit it!

[youtube]d3ihpTs66uA[/youtube]

How often do you write and create?

I feel like I go through phases where I canâ€™t help but write every moment in the car stoplight you know Iâ€™m in service in between songs Iâ€™m writing on my iPhone. I will say this, I love my iPhone for that I found myself running off to the car during service and writing. At my childrenâ€™s school during programs terrible to admit you know Iâ€™m fully paying attention and Iâ€™m writing a song. And then my partner Dana Johnson, heâ€™s always writing. And then we went through this thing when I wasnâ€™t writing he would stimulate my juices like hey â€œI got a little piece of something here do something with itâ€ but yeah right now I havenâ€™t written a lot since the album. Thereâ€™s so much going on but Iâ€™m ready to do that Iâ€™m ready to get back at it. Iâ€™ve been trying a little bit some of the stuff Iâ€™ve done itâ€™s been kind of bunk so Iâ€™ll leave that alone it donâ€™t sound good!

Can you tell me the story behind â€œToday?â€

Wow. Yes. My blessed husband. My ex-husband. You know stuff will happen you know today nothing seems to be going my way everything absolutely everything that can be off is off right now. My relationships are crazy, you know the IRS wants some money, the babyâ€™s daddy didn't put the child support payment in the account when he was supposed to so my checks have bounced which means I am tore up today. The other part of the song is you know what yes I know the one I know God who said Iâ€™d be safe from all harm but let me tell you that real part of me the stuff that I see I let that affect me. And I forget

that this stuff is not even really real you know itâ€™s just I have to believe what I donâ€™t see I have to believe that everything is going to be OK. Even when Iâ€™m doing a lot of stuff to make stuff bad or jacked-up for myself itâ€™s still going to be OK. The human part you deal with what you can see and what you can taste and you suppress the spiritual side that says what a minute youâ€™re going to be alright. So thatâ€™s where that came from whatever it was the IRS, my boss is getting on my nerves I ainâ€™t gonâ€™ be coming in doing 15 services you want me to sing and slide underneath the piano I ainâ€™t doing all that! So I know people can relate to that youâ€™re having one of those days when everything is just jacked-up and you feel some people canâ€™t take it deep depression theyâ€™re on medication for it. I say talk about it get it out thatâ€™s part of my therapy and itâ€™s funny what Iâ€™m going through now Iâ€™ll put a song like that on and listen to it and itâ€™ll make me laugh. Itâ€™s a reminder that everything is going to be OK. Back then I was troubling about that a couple of months ago and all that I was tripping about has been taken care of. You know itâ€™s a reminder that itâ€™s going to be alright itâ€™s going to be OK.

[youtube]8AJ5Ris7XZo[/youtube]

In what ways do you feel music is a spiritually sustaining force?

This may seem not well thought out but thereâ€™s something about the vibration of music that brings you back to the spirit.

Letâ€™s be real now as the story is told Lucifer was the chief musician before he fell.

Music was so important music was such a force that it almost was in competition it was revered so how can I say this I wish I could pull up the scripture now and talk about Lucifer

himself being the instrument. His body being the drum his lips being a horn for God to have an angel that is music is the personification of music like it was something versed out of spirituality. And it was so powerful that poor Lucifer was like "They won't be praying with you they'll be praying with me I can control fate." With that in mind it is that strong force I think about the music fraternity for women that I pledged when I was in college Sigma Alpha Iota and our little emblem of the pipe and the types of pan that people would follow. You'd be doing anything rocking clothes or something but when you made a pipe even with The Little Pigs the wolf would be playing the flute and the pigs start dancing and following him there's something about music that's undeniably spiritual that is God and you know that's just it. With lyrics or without lyrics instruments that's just God in a pure form that tells you can I tell you I have an atheist who follows me on Twitter. I was like does he know that I love the Lord? He's like, "I just love your music." Isn't that crazy? I don't even know how to verbalize how that makes me feel it lets me know that it's bigger than me this thing is much larger than me. He can be just as sweet as he can be on Facebook and you can tell in the intro about him I try to read up on the people that follow me I try my best to communicate with everybody. People think enough of me to tell me that they like it I like to respond and learn a little bit about them I read his intro "atheist" I was like does he know? Maybe he doesn't. But it doesn't matter that God in the music is still it reaches. I've said a mouthful.

What are you guys going to do with all those songs leftover from the project?

We're going to do another album we are not going to wait. We're going to put it out cause the truth of the matter is I want to be able to perform for the rest of my life. And I want to be able to sing music that I have written and other music

that I love for the rest of my life. If these albums donâ€™t do anything I wanna be able to perform thatâ€™s where I feel thereâ€™s a couple of places somebody asked me â€œWhere do you feel at home?â€ Wherever my children are and wherever thereâ€™s a stage and a piano thatâ€™s where I feel at home and I want to be able to do that until I canâ€™t do it anymore. So yes weâ€™re gonna keep putting music out there so Iâ€™ll have stuff to sing.

Who are your musical idols?

I have to say The Clark Sisters. Twinkie Clark clearly because sheâ€™s an incredible writer, organist, pianist, another is Kim Burrell, Patrice Rushen some of the men Donny Hathaway of course Michael McDonald, Whitney Houston, Gladys Knight, Aretha Franklin I try to put Aretha in my show absolutely. Earth, Wind & Fire anybody that was I will say this about my parents they always listened to rich music. My mother had me listening to whoâ€™s the organistâ€™s name? I canâ€™t remember whatever the case is mom had me listening to *Bitches Brew*, uh whatâ€™s his name he was married to Cicely Tyson?

Miles Davis.

Miles Davis Miles Davis she had me listen to that album so you know they always had good music going. I mean like The Whispers, Maze they express and have such musicality something about that whole band thing too that is magic. I would like to do an album with just me and a band not just me and my partner Dana. And whatever comes up comes out and thatâ€™s what weâ€™re gonna do. Thereâ€™s some magic about feeding off each other even that thing about the church that community thing we need each other. Can I tell you right now who Iâ€™m inspired by?

[youtube]XYHeLz3SQN4[/youtube]

Of course.

Trey Songz. Iâ€™m inspired by his hustle he is on it. I love Miley Cyrus my kids got me listening to her and Justin Bieber. My kids keep me grounded like â€œMom listen to this.â€ A musician Iâ€™ve been listening to his name is DeWayne Woods. I donâ€™t know if you remember you ever heard a song called â€œLet Go Let Godâ€ it did really really well on the gospel charts and heâ€™s just such an amazing musician and I canâ€™t take that out of my CD player. Thatâ€™s in there a classical singer in there by the name of Sherri Seiden whoâ€™s doing a show with me here at The Alliance *I Dream* her CD. This dude named Bennie Sings heâ€™s really good heâ€™s got this different kind of feel. Definitely Daniel Moore heâ€™s great heâ€™s on three or four tunes on my album heâ€™s got his own album coming out and he plays for The Moâ€™Nique Show heâ€™s the one on there with the locks. OK Brandyâ€™s last album let me have it sheâ€™s got a tune on there itâ€™s called â€œA Capellaâ€ she let us have it. Thatâ€™s the stuff Iâ€™ve been listening to lately.

Can you tell me about the [*I Dream*](#) musical youâ€™ve been cast in?

An amazing experience from the beginning Iâ€™ve been working at the historic Ebenezer Baptist Church for four or five years now they didnâ€™t have a minister of music until maybe three years ago. A lot of requests and stuff they would get would sometimes would fall between the cracks because they didnâ€™t really have anybody to really deal with it. A guy by the name of Keith Williams came down to be the Director of Worship Arts. Well a phonecall came through about a year and a half ago by a man named Douglas Tappin from England like â€œListen Iâ€™m doing this play about Martin Luther King we need to come to Atlanta first to see what yaâ€™ll got going on.â€ Hooked-up with Keith, Keith called me and was like â€œHey I need you to come and sing these songs for the session .â€ I was like OK no big deal yeah you get a few dollars you hear me with the money again not that Iâ€™m money hungry I love music I was

sure no big deal Iâ€™ll do it. I sang the song and the producers were there named Cedric Perrier and Douglas Tappin heâ€™s like â€œYouâ€™re Rosa Parks now sing it againâ€ I was like oh I sang it and recorded it and it was great.

[youtube]wL-pxk35EcA[/youtube]

Seven months later Keith called me back â€œDenise we want you to learn another song and we want you to perform it in front of some people.â€ I was like sure no big deal so I did it again and they called again all the time they had been working on this play I didnâ€™t know what it was they didnâ€™t say anything to me about it I didnâ€™t know what the deal was. â€œWe want you to learn a few more tunesâ€ so the last time they called me â€œWe need you to learn three more songs for a presentation in LA. we want you to go present it to some people out in L.A.â€ I said cool so I get out there and the people they wanted it presented to were Chaka frigginâ€™ Khan and 30 of her friends. So again Iâ€™m like God thank you God takes care of everybody but I think heâ€™s got special favor for babies and fools and Iâ€™m a fool sometime and I thank God for watching over me and I didnâ€™t know what I was doing. Anyways get there Chaka Khan and some of the most amazing musicians in the frickinâ€™ world Bluey from Incognito, Greg Phillinganes, Nathan East these are the people that were there for the presentation. And of course my head popped off 15 times. I thought oh my God I donâ€™t know how Iâ€™m going to do this again I had no idea there was going to be a play that I was involved in I thought I was just doing a presentation.

I tell you I got the greatest compliment I could ever get from Chaka Khan when I finished singing she jumped up she walked over to me and hugged me and said â€œBitch I oughtta bitch-slap you!â€

I didnâ€™t know whether to run or to cry but I know it was a compliment I took it in that way and Iâ€™m grateful to God for

the experience and she was a delight. So at any rate it turns out she was one of the executive producers for *I Dream* the musical and that weekend I was offered the role of Grandma and of course I accepted absolutely Iâ€™ll do it. It happened the same time my album was being released yes Iâ€™ll do it and that was it. Clearly the piece is about Martin Luther King unlike a lot of stuff that you would see done itâ€™s very opera-like, contemporary and amazing. We got DeMetria McKinney from Tyler Perryâ€™s *House Of Payne* sheâ€™s Coretta Scott. Quentin Earl Darrington he is amazing as Martin Luther King Jasmine Guy is our director. It has turned out to be an amazing experience just memorable parts of MLK when his house was bombed. They show Coretta longing for him and needing him home and some of it is fiction itâ€™s not all because itâ€™s a play you canâ€™t have everything in there but it makes sense the storyline is great. What was amazing was the opening night for his daughter Bernice to be there his sister Christine Farris and some of the other family members to witness this to see them watch us itâ€™s amazing. We did a private showing for just the family I could hardly get through it looking at his sister and daughter. Iâ€™m singing about something Iâ€™ve been told about something that they know about kind of heartbreaking but nonetheless an honor.

[youtube]ODKddsJqmo0[/youtube]

Whatâ€™s next?

Getting on the road and whatever else God has for me clearly. Start touring Iâ€™m going to tell you this is my *Bucket List*. First thing on my *Bucket List* is Iâ€™ve gotta get on *Saturday Night Live* I donâ€™t know how thatâ€™s going to happen but I wanna be on there I wanna do some sketches. Second thing is to tour wherever in the world I can get I wanna get make sure Iâ€™m in Italy and I wanna go to Australia Iâ€™ve been to Japan a couple of times I wanna get back there. Next thing on the *Bucket List* I want a sitcom and I have an app on my phone called Bergdorf and Goodman and you can go to that app on the

iPhone everyday there's a new shoe and yesterday there was a shoe for \$1003.00 and one of these days very soon I want to be able press buy I want to press buy I don't have to do it a whole bunch of times but one time I want to be able to do that. One of the things on the *Bucket List* I've already done my parents sold their house and moved down to ATL with me so me, my mom and the kids are here in our little house. Everybody has their own bedroom and we are excited so that happened I wanted them closer and they made it happen. I'm going to yield to whatever God has and keep it moving.