



Whitney Houston  
at the "I Wanna  
Dance With  
Somebody"  
video shoot,  
New York City, 1987

# Whitney Houston

**EIGHT YEARS AFTER HER DEATH,  
SHE REMAINS ONE OF OUR MOST TALENTED AND  
POPULAR INTERPRETIVE VOCALISTS.**

*By Amy Linden*

**O**n January 27, 1991, Whitney Houston took the stage to sing “The Star-Spangled Banner” at the Super Bowl – the biggest platform in the world for an artist. That year brought an extra level of pressure. The U.S. had just entered the Persian Gulf War, with thousands of American soldiers deployed. More than ever, the artist tasked with the gig needed more than skills. The nation needed someone to literally and metaphorically rally the troops, tap into our collective nationalism, and entertain. Enter Whitney Houston.

Rocking a casual and yet fabulously chic tracksuit, tousled hair secured by a headband, and a lightly made-up face, Whitney delivered a version of the anthem that was, not surprisingly, technically perfect (as is standard with large-scale events, the vocals were prerecorded) and nakedly emotional. Backed by an orchestra, Whitney alternated between modulation and melisma, ending the performance by triumphantly punching her arms into the air. It was a vocal tour de force (and after its commercial release, a Number One single) that found the meeting place between soulful, sexy, and patriotic. It was the right moment at the right time. And Whitney owned it outright.

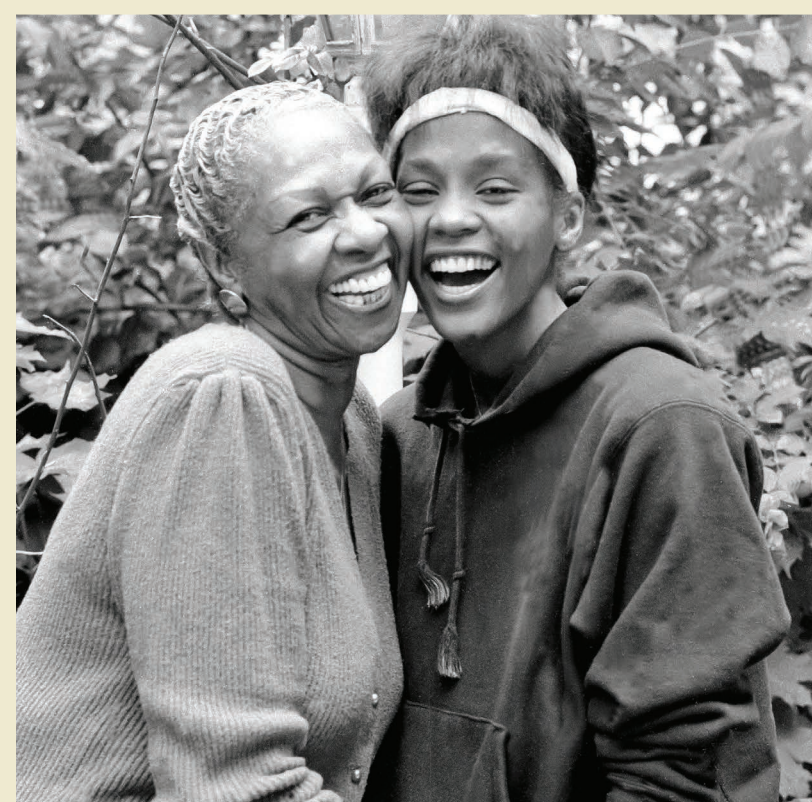
A year later, Whitney covered Dolly Parton’s “I Will Always Love You” as the pivotal song in the 1992 movie *The Bodyguard*, in which she starred. The song

became a blockbuster hit, spending a then record-setting fourteen weeks atop the *Billboard* chart and winning 1993’s Record of the Year and best female vocal at the Grammys. The film’s soundtrack (which also contained a house music inflected remake of Chaka Khan’s “I’m Every Woman”) sold over seventeen million copies and picked up the Grammy for Album of the Year. Whitney was no stranger to success, but “I Will Always Love You” was success on steroids. In 2012 *The Hollywood Reporter* called it “Whitney’s greatest moment and one of the greatest moments in American pop.” That sentiment was echoed six years later by *The Undeclared’s* Soraya Nadia McDonald, who observed, “Such was the power of Houston’s instrument that she could take a perfectly written song by Dolly Parton and not just appropriate it for her own devices but also convince anyone who heard her sing it that it was hers from the start.” It’s worth noting that few singers can cover Dolly *and* Francis Scott Key – two songwriters whose names are rarely in the same sentence. Whitney was one of those singers.

Whitney Houston was the total package: smart, gorgeous (she’d been a model before embarking on her music career), and blessed with elegance, presence, and just a hint of girl next door. Her wholesome image made her a marketing department’s dream, but that image would often be an albatross, as some



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Signing to Arista with Clive Davis, 1983; a Grammy for "Saving All My Love for You," 1986; a hug from Mom: with Cissy Houston in the backyard of their family home, West Orange, New Jersey, 1985.



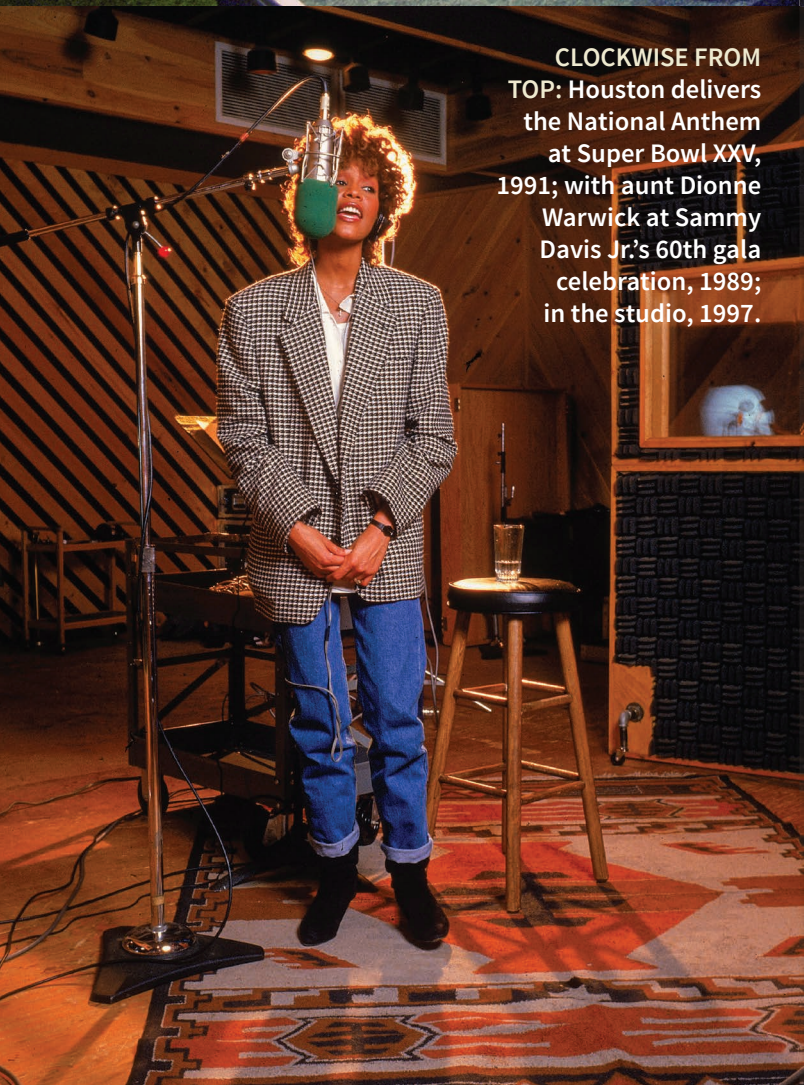


detractors would argue that Whitney played it too safe and lacked grit. That she was too pop.

Yet even so, there was no denying that above all else, Whitney Houston was a pure singer; in time that voice became *The Voice*. Throughout her spectacular but tragically short career, she served as a mono-monikered measuring stick – the singer with whom other singers were compared and wanted to be. Whitney was as iconic and dominant in her era as Aretha Franklin had been in hers, and an army of black, brown, and, yes, white girls got their start standing in front of the mirror, clutching their hair-brushes and singing along with “I Wanna Dance With Somebody (Who Loves Me).”

**Onstage at Radio City Music Hall,  
New York City, 1993**

Whitney was so influential that at the peak of her career – roughly spanning from the mid-eighties through the late nineties – most female pop/R&B singers existed either as a result of or in reaction to her: Mya, Pink, Christina Aguilera, Kelly Price, Faith Evans, Jill Scott, Mary J. Blige, Brandy, Monica, Lauryn Hill ... the list could go on. Even Mariah Carey, at the time Whitney’s biggest commercial rival, was initially marketed as Columbia Records’ own version of Whitney. In 2003 *Rolling Stone* named Whitney’s 1986 debut as one of the 500 Greatest Al-



CLOCKWISE FROM  
TOP: Houston delivers  
the National Anthem  
at Super Bowl XXV,  
1991; with aunt Dionne  
Warwick at Sammy  
Davis Jr.'s 60th gala  
celebration, 1989;  
in the studio, 1997.



# WHITNEY SERVED AS A MOHO-MOHOKERED MEASURING STICK —THE SINGER WITH WHOM OTHER SINGERS WERE COMPARED AND WANTED TO BE.

bums of All Time. Whitney is the only artist to garner seven consecutive Number One singles on the *Billboard* chart; has sold more than two hundred million records worldwide; and all of her catalogue has gone either diamond, multiplatinum, platinum, or gold.

Born on August 9, 1963, in Newark, New Jersey, Whitney Elizabeth Houston was the daughter of Cissy Houston, the legendary session singer and one third of the Sweet Inspirations. Even before she sang a note, Whitney had a pedigree: Her cousin was Dionne Warwick, and Aretha Franklin was an old family friend. She got her start young, singing in her mother's stage show. By 14 she was backing Lou Rawls and Chaka Khan. She also recorded with artists ranging from Teddy Pendergrass to Bill Laswell and Material. In 1983 she began a residency at an intimate Manhattan nightclub, and soon word of the teen's talent reached the ears of music executives, including an A&R rep at Arista who urged his boss, Clive Davis, to check Houston out. Davis inked Whitney to his label when she was 19.

Guided by Davis' sure hand and working with some of the top producers/writers in pop/R&B, Whitney Houston hit the ground running. Her 1985 self-titled debut climbed to the top of the *Billboard* chart and yielded three Number One singles, the mid-tempo "Saving All My Love for You," the inspirational anthem "Greatest Love of All" (previously recorded by pop/jazz guitarist George Benson), and the uptempo confection "How Will I Know." *Whitney Houston* became the first debut by a solo female artist to produce three chart-topping singles. The album would be certified diamond in 1999 and to date has sold over thirteen million copies.

In 1986 Whitney was nominated for four Grammys, including Album of the Year, and won Best Pop Vocal Performance, Female. Her sophomore album, *Whitney* (1987), proved that her initial success was no fluke. Similar in overall production and vibe as her debut, *Whitney* debuted at Number One on *Billboard* — the first time a woman had accomplished this. The multiplatinum album split the difference between sweeping ballads and danceable pop, yielding several hits: the Grammy-winning "I Wanna Dance With Somebody (Who Loves Me)," "Emotional," and "Didn't We Almost Have It All."

But for all of the staggering sales there were naysayers. Critics praised her voice but in the same breath complained that she was too polished and cautious and that her songs lacked attitude and edge. The unspoken implication was that Whitney wasn't living up to the preconceived notions of what a black artist should look and sound like. The concerns weren't just raised by the mainstream press. In 1988 and 1989 Whitney received a smattering of boos at the Soul Train Awards because some — in and out of the indus-

try — saw her as catering to a white audience. In a May 1991 *Ebony* feature, Whitney noted that she "didn't appreciate" the response but "I kind of write it off as ignorance."

She may have taken it in stride, but *I'm Your Baby Tonight* (1990) seemed designed with her detractors in mind. Working with producers Kenneth "Baby-face" Edmonds and LA Reid (then leading architects of black music), *I'm Your Baby*, with its harder beats, was a concerted effort to take her sound deeper into dance/R&B/pop and showcase a looser, sexier Whitney. Along with the title track — a chart-topper — the album featured a remake of "All the Man That I Need." Not incidentally it became Whitney's only album to chart higher R&B than pop.

Two years later she married superstar singer Bobby Brown, whose New Jack Swing/hip-hop grooves and swagger were in direct contrast with Whitney's musical persona. Whitney embraced marriage and motherhood — her daughter, Bobbi Kristina Brown, can be heard on the title track from the four-times platinum *My Love Is Your Love* (1998). In the past, Whitney had used hip-hop only sparingly, but now she teamed with a who's who of black music hit-makers including Missy Elliott, Rodney Jerkins, and Wyclef Jean. The hip-hop-influenced album also fea-





Live and loud at the  
2009 American Music  
Awards, Los Angeles

tured her more typical fare via “When You Believe,” a duet with Mariah Carey that won an Academy Award for best original song.

But her tumultuous marriage and apparent drug use had made her life the subject of tabloids, and the focus shifted from Whitney the artist to Whitney the public figure. Her fifth studio album, *Just Whitney* (2002), sold well but didn’t scale the heights of previous efforts.

After a seven-year hiatus and a very public battle with substance abuse, Whitney returned in 2009 with *I Look to You*. Time and her lifestyle had scuffed up her once-sparkling voice, but the new timbre suited songs such as the title track and the more uptempo collaboration with Swizz Beats and Alicia Keys. Marketed as a comeback, the album was greeted by strong reviews and solid sales figures, but it failed to match the success of her earlier work. Unbeknownst to her legions of fans, *I Look to You* would be Whitney’s farewell.

At the age of 48, Whitney tragically died on February 11, 2012, while in Los Angeles for Clive Davis’ annual Grammy gathering. The untimely death, which happened in her Beverly Hills hotel suite on the eve of her mentor’s party, and two days before the ultimate recording-industry awards show, cast a shadow over the celebrations and shook both her peers and millions of fans. The loss reverberates to this day.

But eight years after her death, Whitney’s influence lives on – in the work of superstars like Ariana Grande, Adele, and Beyoncé: Every time a vocalist gives it her all while keeping her cool; or takes another artist’s song and turns it into her own; or backs up the look with the sound. This is just a taste of what made Whitney Houston a once-in-a-lifetime performer, and of what she added to the rock & roll canon. She remains one of pop/R&B’s finest and most popular interpretive vocalists, and that is why we welcome her into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame’s class of 2020.

