



ESSENCE

## Grammy-Winning Singer H.E.R. Has Bright Days Ahead

BY JEANNINE AMBER · ESSENCE · JUNE 13, 2019

GRAMMY-WINNING SINGER H.E.R.—IN THE SEASON’S BEST NEW SHADES—KEEPS R&B ABLAZE WITH UNMATCHED ARTISTRY.

Gabriella Wilson, the singer–songwriter phenom, who goes by the moniker H.E.R. (an acronym for Having Everything Revealed), was not having a good morning. She was in Houston, a month into her 2018 *I Used to Know Her* tour, and trying to get a little extra sleep. But suddenly her team was filing into her hotel room—the band, the back-up singers, the road crew. They’d been summoned for an emergency meeting by H.E.R.’s longtime manager, Jeff Robinson, who was standing with his arms crossed, looking not at all pleased.

“Something’s happened,” Robinson said gruffly. “And it’s gonna be all over the news.”

He paused and shook his head. “This changes everything.”

Robinson glanced at H.E.R., whom he’d worked with since she first burst on the scene as an adorbs 10-year-old prodigy playing piano and singing Alicia Keys’ “No One” on the *Today* show. Robinson glared at the musicians in the room and exhaled angrily, milking this moment for all it was worth.

“Me?” H.E.R. asked anxiously, taking the bait. “Did I do something?”



PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOSHUA PESTKA

Satisfied with his prank, Robinson broke into a wide grin and declared: “Yeah, you did. You just got nominated for five Grammy Awards!”

As the team erupted in cheers, H.E.R. stared at her manager in disbelief: “Are...you...serious?”

She had good reason to be stunned. At 22, H.E.R. doesn’t even have a full album to her name. In fact, her Grammy noms, which included not only Best New Artist, but also Best R&B Album and Album of the Year, were based on the strength of H.E.R., a 21-song compilation of two previously released EPs plus some additional tracks.

It was an industry upset, but one *Vulture* lauded as an “exciting” step in the right direction. That’s because H.E.R. is more than an extraordinary talent who plays bass, guitar, piano and drums. Music critics and fans hail H.E.R. as the woman who might single-handedly bring deep, authentic, all-the-way-in-your-feelings R&B back to life.

“H.E.R. exemplifies what true musicianship is,” says Scottie Beam, co-host of Revolt TV’s *State of the Culture* and creator of the wildly popular #ListenToBlackWomen, Literally playlist on Apple Music. “From her pen to her voice, she is showing everyone how it’s really done.”

Like the R&B greats who came before her, the singer deftly explores the full range of human emotions, traversing love and longing, heartache and joy with the sure-footedness of a seasoned performer. But it’s her dreamy yet defiantly confident vocals laid over hypnotic melodies that truly puts H.E.R. in a class of her own.

Manager Robinson—no stranger to musical genius, he managed Alicia Keys for more than a decade—credits H.E.R.’s sound to her musical eclecticism.

“You’ll find her in her dressing room listening to The Doors, Coldplay, The O’Jays, The Stylistics, Mary J. Blige, Lauryn Hill and Alicia,” he says. “She listens to it all. It’s about good music. That’s how it should be.”

H.E.R. was steeped in music from an early age.

“I really didn’t have any formal training,” she says from the back of a car leaving London’s O2 Arena, where she just opened for Childish Gambino, performing before a crowd of 20,000. “My dad is a musician. His band rehearsed in our living room. Sometimes I would sneak in while they were taking a break and play on the drums, piano, guitar and bass. I kind of found my way. And my father taught me how to play the blues.”

“To live your truth and sing your truth, that defines success,” she adds. “I think a lot of people are getting back to that real, honest music. That’s what R&B is. It’s raw.”

H.E.R. puts a premium on authenticity. She wants her fans to connect with the art, not her look. In 2016, the Bay Area native released her debut EP, H.E.R., Vol. 1, with a deliberate plan to keep her identity hidden. When her record label sent music out to reporters, it didn’t include press photos, a bio or even H.E.R.’s real name. Internet sleuths eventually noticed that a cover of Drake’s “Jungle” recorded in 2015 under “Gabi Wilson” also appeared on H.E.R.’s EP. Mystery solved.

“***We care more about looks, popularity and followers than about real music, and I wanted to get away from that.***”



PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOSHUA PESTKA



PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOSHUA PESTKA

“We live in an era of social media,” says H.E.R., explaining why she tried to opt for anonymity. “We care more about looks, popularity and followers than about real music. And I wanted to get away from that. I just love music, and that’s what I want people to see and respect.”

And respect it they did. Ten days after her EP dropped, H.E.R.’s songs had already been played 80,000 times on SoundCloud. Alicia Keys tweeted out support, and in early 2017 Rihanna used H.E.R.’s dreamy single “Focus” as the sound track to a mesmerizing Instagram video featuring RiRi’s hair blowing in slow-mo. The post was viewed 5 million times, catapulting H.E.R. into the stratosphere.

In less than three years, H.E.R. has accomplished more than many artists do in a lifetime. She’s taken home two Grammys—including the coveted award for Best R&B Album—and released chart-topping records, most notably the dizzyingly beautiful “Best Part” collab with Daniel Caesar, which garnered H.E.R. the second Grammy. She’s also set to perform at the 25th anniversary Essence Festival. And yet, ask H.E.R. about her standout moment from the past few whirlwind years, and she will tell you this: “A girl, she came up to me after a show and said, ‘You saved me.’ She told me that she’d been thinking of ending her life, but my songs helped her realize her worth. When I heard that, I almost cried. Like, wow, my music is necessary. I’m doing something right.”



PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOSHUA PESTKA