

Katrina Willis

HIT SONGWRITER



Katrina Willis has written songs for R&B's biggest and brightest stars—artists like The Temptations, Aretha Franklin, and Luther Vandross. But while she grew up surrounded by music at church and at home, this self-taught pianist, guitarist, and producer had never thought of making a living at it. In fact, she was a pre-med major! Katrina's musical epiphany came when she penned her first song, "For Love of You": "I realized that I could write something that at least sounded good to me." In pursuit of her newfound calling, she produced a demo tape, wowing an artist-management team that, in turn, promised to make her the "female Babyface: singer/songwriting/producer extraordinaire." Katrina signed a management deal with high hopes. Unfortunately, she says, "I was put on the back burner [laughs]. It was horrible, but doors started to open for my writing. So I focused on honing that craft to see where it could take me." Turns out, it took her pretty far!

By Veronica Dominguez

How did songwriting become your profession?

I got out of my management deal and got a publishing deal through Aircontrol/EMI, which is the publishing arm of So So Def Recording. The publishing rep at the time, Leotis Clyburn, introduced me to Lil' Jon, who was an A&R rep for So So Def and put soundtracks together. I worked with him and ended up co-writing—with an artist named Lathun Grady—a song placed on the *So So Def Bass All-Stars, Volume 3* soundtrack.

Tell us about how some of your other song placements happened.

I had a song called "Liar, Liar," which I co-wrote with producer

called "I'm Here." It was the first single off their album *Ear-Resistible*. After that, I worked with Charlie Wilson and Chanté Moore. At the time, I was working very closely with a production camp called RedZone and was constantly in the studio. Whoever came in [to record] was going to hear a Katrina Willis song [laughs]. And so a lot of opportunities came from my just being there and doing my work.

How do you write songs?

It can start with lyrics, with a melody, or with sitting at the piano and just playing some chord patterns and putting words to them. Or with Luther, for instance, a producer gave me a track, and I tried to pattern the melody and the lyrics around how Luther would say and sing it. But it always starts with my

own feelings, and then I try to transfer that to whomever I'd

and they happened to like it. It's easier, though, to write for a person who's right in front of you telling you what's going on in their life.

What's difficult about a songwriting career?

The difficulty is with the politics of getting a song placed and making a song marketable so an A&R rep will listen to it and consider it for an artist. When companies are looking for material for a young artist, they aren't going to listen to my songs, even though they may be great songs, because my niche is adult contemporary R&B. I'm don't try to write for an Ashanti-type, because when I try, those songs never get played. I write for artists like Aretha. It's rare for record companies to look for my songs. That's why I decided to finally make my own record [*K. Willis and the Collection*]. I used the money I made from songwriting and made the album independently so I could put out the type of record I wanted to make. Now I'm taking a break from writing songs and promoting them for a while. BY JAY

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Anthony Denton, on *The Best Man* soundtrack. Then the Temptations recorded a song that one of my production partners and I wrote

like the song to go to. The Temptations song "I'm Here" wasn't intended for them, but I thought it was a great song for a male voice,