

BLACK MUSIC MONTH

LUTHER VANDROSS Tells What Inspires Him As Songwriter And Entertainer

By CLARENCE WALDRON

Talking to Luther Vandross is like talking to your brother or cousin. The pop-soul balladeer whose new hit album *The Night I Fell in Love*, has already gone platinum, comes across as warm, honest and as sensitive as his music.

The 34-year-old New York native who grew up in the projects in lower Manhattan, loves to talk about what and who inspired him to become a hit recording artist, songwriter and producer.

He says it was his childhood fascination with female recording artists that first made him want to become a singer. "There's noth-



Soulful singer Luther Vandross, who is currently on a sizzling 45-city tour, says he was inspired by many female vocalists.

ing like the Black female voice," he declares. "I never wanted to question it. It's like you don't question your favorite color. Why do you like purple? It's hard to answer, it's an intangible thing."

He recalls falling in love with the sounds of Dionne Warwick, Aretha Franklin and Diana Ross, the Sweet Inspirations, the Shirelles and other top female recording artists. "I acknowledged what Stevie Wonder, Donny Hathaway, Tony Bennett and all the fabulous male singers did, but that's not what aroused my artistic libido." He notes however that as an artist what inspires him is "good music, period, no matter where it comes from."

And the first time he heard the good music of Dionne Warwick, in

Vandross produced Dionne Warwick's hit album How Many Times Can We Say Goodbye and lists her as one of his closest friends.

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concert at the famed Brooklyn Fox Theater, in 1963, he vowed to become a singer. "She wiped me out," he exclaims. "She knocked me down with that tone quality. That's when I made the decision to sing. I wanted to do to somebody what she did to me."

Living a dream come true, Vandross has been inspired to produce hit records for his favorite divas. He produced Dionne's 1983 hit album *How Many Times Can We Say Goodbye*, which featured a duet between the two of them on the title track, and Aretha Franklin's much-heralded albums *Jump To It* and *Get It Right*.

"I learned a lot from loving and admiring people like Aretha," Vandross says. He first met Aretha several years ago when he opened her show in Washington D.C. "At first I was very scared. You know, the legend precedes the body with her. I was a nervous wreck when I went to her room. She was standing there and on that particular day she had on a burgundy and gold gown," he

Vandross and "Queen of Soul" Aretha Franklin perform hit tune Jump to It, which he penned for her. "I learned a lot from loving and admiring people like Aretha," he says.



recalls. "It was one of those gowns like from *The King and I*. So she looked very majestic."

He says he also wants to produce an album for his other supreme favorite, legendary Diana Ross. "I love her to death. She's so friendly." They talked about the possibility of him producing her next album backstage during the recent "Motown Returns to the Apollo" TV special, Vandross said. "She called me to her dressing room," he recalls excitedly. "She had my album (*The Night I Fell in Love*) in her hand. That made my day, made my month."

And Vandross also says he gets a lot of inspiration from his songwriting-producing partners, Marcus Miller and jazz great Nat Adderley's son, Nat Adderley Jr., who have helped him earn one platinum album after another. "I grew up with Nat from an early age. We met at the Apollo, rehearsing for the Listen, My Brother Group, which the Apollo Theater owners sponsored.

"I always respected Nat's fa-

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Vandross brings down the house as he performs his show-stopping rendition of Dionne Warwick's classic A House is Not A Home.

Vandross performs the hit duet If This World Were Mine with one of his favorite singers, Cheryl Lynn, and is later congratulated by entertainers Leslie Uggams and Debbie Allen after a terrific performance.



Vandross Inspired By Fans

ther. Nat was the little genius of the bunch of us, even at an early age. I guess being with his daddy and stuff and talking that B flat, F sharp talk, Nat always knew music, even at age 13. It's good to have people around you who you knew when you were really young. He's great."

Vandross met Miller while touring as a backup vocalist for Roberta Flack in 1978. "We started writing together. It worked out good. Our personalities are very compatible."

Vandross says he is enjoying his fame and success these days and says he gets even more inspiration from his fans. "I enjoy talking to the people. They are the ones who buy the records and give me the confidence to make the music, so there is nothing but enjoyment

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Vandross watches his favorite soap opera "All My Children" during a visit at the Johnson Publishing Company in Chicago. He may branch out into acting.

Would Rather Sing

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in dealing with the public for me." Asked which hat he prefers; singer, songwriter or producer, Vandross replies, "If I had to choose one, I would have to pick singer. I would much rather sing someone else's songs than to write for someone else. I think I would be more comfortable singing. It's more expression for me that way."

Vandross plans to include his mother Mary Ida Vandross and two sisters Pat and Ann in his upcoming *It's Over Now* video. He credits his mother as the first one who encouraged him to pursue a career in music and lists her as his number one fan. "Her influence was incredible," he recalls, "but in a very subliminal way. My brother (Anthony) would get a bicycle for Christmas, I would get Aretha Franklin records."

And with his phenomenal success comes the luxury of being friends with people like Dionne Warwick, Aretha Franklin and

Diana Ross who he once dreamed about as a child. But he says he is keeping it all in perspective. "Sometimes I look around and I say 'Oh, check it out. I'm sitting here, Diana Ross is on the telephone, there's a message from Dionne Warwick,' I mean this is amazing, but that wasn't what I was gearing for. Although I was trying to make records and trying to get ahead, I wasn't doing it trying to be famous, I just wanted to be good at it. I wanted to be respected." He reveals however, that one of his favorite pastimes is playing Pac Man with Dionne at his New York City duplex penthouse. "I issue a public challenge to Dionne Warwick for a Ms. Pac Man tournament," he declares. "The winner will sing a song at the other's concert, at a place chosen by the winner."

Looking forward to more challenges to conquer, he wants to try his hand at acting. "The idea makes me nervous, but it is something I want to do. Small things I can handle. I would prefer nighttime shows to appear on," he says.

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