



Kirk Franklin “Hero”

If its one thing that Kirk Franklin understands, it is that soul and gospel have always been a part of the same close-knit family. Yet, since the release of his self-titled debut in 1993, Franklin proved himself a pioneer when he sprinkled a taste of hip-hop in the mix. In his bold attempt to broaden the range of the traditional gospel audience, Kirk Franklin was willing to take heat from the naysayers as long as it didn't get in the way of delivering his message. “For me, it's all about spreading love through the words of the Lord,” Kirk Franklin proclaims. “From my first songs to present day, that has been my primary mission.”

On *Hero*, this self-proclaimed “church boy” from Dallas, has once again created a revolutionary collection of material that merges the secular and spiritual for a beautiful musical experience. “Right now, with so many crazy things happening in the world, we are all looking for a savior,” Franklin says. “We have lost hope in our government, in our families and our marriages. Certainly we need a hero now more than ever, and that hero is Jesus.” Working with a range of artists including Stevie Wonder, Fred Hammond and Yolanda Adams, *Hero* will have you tapping your feet and counting your blessings.

On the first release on his newly launched boutique label, Fo Yo Soul Entertainment, in a joint venture with Zomba/Jive, Franklin is determined to make a difference in the musical arena. “I want the music on my label to be as unique as the old Motown days,” he says. “I'm not trying to produce ready-made microwave music. The danger with contemporary gospel is that it can sometimes sound contrived and that is something I'm trying not to do.”

Sampling the classic soul of Patrice Rushen's “Haven't You Heard,” the first single from *Hero* is the bounce-ready throwback “Looking for You.” Sounding like a group of angels soaring over mighty clouds, Franklin pilots his ensemble through a joyful song that will have the listener tapping feet and clapping their hands. “I was doing a few concerts in Brazil last year when I heard the Patrice Rushen song on the radio,” Franklin remembers. “I decided then to use the groove and beat to create a new song that could motivate folks in a positive way.”

Though “Looking for You” is the light side of Kirk Franklin, the part-time youth pastor has no problem talking about his struggles and turbulent personal journey. As the minor keys of the piano trickle in the background at the beginning of the heart wrenching “Let It Go,” Franklin raps about the trials

and tribulations that have marked his short 35 years. From tales of being abandoned by his mother at the age of four and being separated from his sister to his battles with low self-esteem and pornography, "Let It Go" has the aura of Tupac backed by the wisdom of a minister. "Living in the world is a song," he says. "And I'm trying to put that world in my songs. Still, no matter how bleak "Let It Go" might be, there is always hope if you want it."

Teaming with his musical muse Stevie Wonder on "Why," Franklin has created one of his most endearing compositions. "What can I say," Franklin laughs. "Working with Stevie was both a humbling experience and the chance of a lifetime. Producing someone you've respected since childhood is rare, and I was determined that we would do something powerful." With a seventies vibe, but a 2005 sensibility, "Why" is a wonderland of musical emotions. "I feel one of my responsibilities as an artist is to help people feel good and be hopeful," Franklin insists. Indeed, "Why" is the perfect remedy when life starts to ail you.

A musical triumph of epic proportions, the title track chronicles the journey of mankind from destitution and depravity to redemption and restoration, celebrating Jesus Christ as the ultimate "hero" who saved the day. Complete with an a riveting orchestral arrangement, "Hero" packs all the punch of a two-hour movie score into a five minute, twenty second grand opus that also features a riveting guest vocal by Dorinda Clark-Cole of the legendary Clark Sisters.

Gliding along an instantly classic piano riff and warm acoustic arrangement, "Imagine Me" finds Franklin declaring liberty from things that have kept him imprisoned and choosing freedom in Christ instead. "I remember at 13 years old hearing my mother say that she didn't want me, that she wanted an abortion," Franklin says of powerful lyrics such as "imagine me / over what my momma said / and healed from what my daddy did / I want to live / and not read that page again". Sure to be an anthem of empowerment to anyone who has struggled to overcome insecurity, low self-esteem or a rocky past, "Imagine Me" encourages the listener to see themselves through the eyes of God and imagine being totally free from the things that have kept them bound.

Another stand-out song on *Hero* is "Could've Been Me", a high-octane extravaganza which features Franklin's Gospel contemporaries J. Moss and Tye Tribbett. Intricately laced with a bumping bass line, saucy Hammond B-3 runs and spicy percussion, the track is punctuated with a fiery horn section, quickly transforming the song into one of the funkier gospel songs ever performed. "I wanted 'Could've Been Me' to have that fire and energy. I've taken heat in the past, because of some of my musical choices, but as long as my words are pure, I'm not worried."

As a return to form, not only has Kirk Franklin crafted one of the best albums of his career, but one that will go down as a Gospel Music landmark for generations to come.