

India.Arie

with Shift Network Founder Stephen Dinan

Stephen: Well greetings everyone, and I'm here with a truly special guest named India.Arie. She probably needs little introduction for all of you listening, but she's an amazing, amazing artist who has sold 10 million records worldwide and won four Grammys, really sharing music from her soul. And her new album, SongVersation: Medicine, is truly medicine for our soul. So we're delighted to have you here, India, and share a little bit about the inspiration and the impact of this beautiful piece of musical medicine for all of us. So thank you for being here.

India: Thank you for having. Thank you for saying I need little introduction.

Stephen: Well, that's for sure. So let's talk, the name itself sort of invites intriguing conversation really. It's not about you as an artist but it's about a dialog that opens with listeners. So, "SongVersation"; it's an interesting title. What does that mean to you, "Songversation"?

India: Yes. So "Songversation" is essentially, at its essence, it's a performance and communication paradigm. And I created it because, after being in the music industry for 10 years, I got burned out and I decided I was going to retire, and in that year of retirement I realized that I had taken a chance on everything except for my truth. So I just dug deep to discover what my truth was. And as far as being a performer and a communicator, I gave my truth that name, "SongVersation."

So in performance I, you know, we're on a show like yours so I guess I can say this, but a lot of us are learning that as more introverted people and empaths that deeper connection is less draining than the surface talk. And so for me when I got on stage, SongVersation is the equivalent of a deeper connection as supposed to a surface talk as a performer. So I speak and I sing, and I open the audience to interact, and not just watch me but to be together and create a moment. And as a communication paradigm, SongVersation is just the way I created to be on stage or be with people and be myself, whatever that is in that moment.

Stephen: Beautiful. I know you wrote this album for a friend who's going through a dark night of the soul, which is a term that those of us who have been on the spiritual path are very familiar with, and it's no easy thing to navigate. So, I'd love for you to share about, maybe a little bit of the inspiration and how you can really see music as a vehicle for helping us through these really dark passages sometimes that we need to go through.

India: Yes. So, I just explained what "SongVersation" is. And so "SongVersation: Medicine," again, it's about communication and connection. And so, my godmother was going through cancer treatment, and then in the process of the cancer treatment she had deterioration of her hipbone. So in addition to having to go through all the cancer treatment she had to get extra surgeries to restore her hips. And I just kept thinking, like, what can I offer her? You know, like you can only say "I'm sorry" and "I'm thinking of you" so much, and for me, music is my offering to myself and to the world.

And so I wrote some songs for her. And they came out as chants and as ... Some of them are conventional song structure and some of them are chants. And I just would now, with where we are in the world and with so much being exposed about how a lot of humanity is thinking and feeling, through our political process and all the fear we're feeling, just as individuals and a lot of people are looking for a deeper meaning in life now, people who were never that way before. I wanted to just put this out and that I created with intention of all that love and healing for my godmother, and to put it out in hopes that other people would be able to feel it to. And I don't presume that I can do that for anyone, I just want to try. Because that's what I want to do with my life. So I released SongVersation: Medicine with that intention.

And it's really cool because I'm seeing on my social media that people are receiving it that way. So I think of course naming it "Medicine" with that intention of wanting people to look at it through that lens, and to see if it can feel that way for them, I think has helped. And also I'm celebrating because I've come a long way to be a person who would say something like "Medicine" as a title for an album because again, for those first 10 years of my career, I felt like I was stifled in my expression. So to be able to call something "SongVersation: Medicine" is my own healing. And I'm loving the way that people are receiving it. Like it's just what I wanted people to feel.

Stephen: Wow. Well I love the tenderness and beauty in the album and I can really feel how, as you said, you're kind of evolving into the next level of your artistry. It's more and more naked and more and more truth coming through. And I want to ask you a little bit about one song that's particularly poignant and powerful, the song "Breathe" ...

India: Oh.

Stephen: Which is dedicated to Eric Garner, who died at the hands of police and as a result of choking, and you dedicated this in solidarity with Black Lives Matters. And I think what's interesting for me in listening to it is that it's very courageous to take this on, and you also, there's a way in which you're taking an injustice and

universalizing the suffering in a way, while also having kind of an uplifting, hopeful quality to it was well, which I thought was quite remarkable.

India: Thank you.

Stephen: So I'd love for you to share more about that song and how it moved you and how it's being received.

India: Thank you, for everything that you just said. The song "Breathe," yes, Eric Garner; yes, Black Lives Matter. But also, as you know, like on a spiritual level, to breathe is to know you're alive. And I wrote it in celebration of life and remembering what it means to be alive in a time when so many people are struggling just to be alive. And I think, you just called it courageous, and at the time that I wrote it I didn't see it that way; I saw it as just ... I always pray for my songs. Like literally when I sit down, I stretch first, and then I do a short meditation and then I pray for what I want the song to be able to do.

And with "Breathe" I just wanted to, again, like uplift people, to stand in solidarity with Black Lives Matter, to stand in solidarity with the black community and the world community who are now so angered over the revelation of how black people and black men have always been treated. Like, the revelation of it; it's been there but now we're seeing. And I let the words come out and, you know, be what they wanted to be. When I was done with it, I realized that it was a very bold statement. But I stand behind it, and what I love about music is that it has a magical power, it's like, what's that saying? "The sugar that makes the medicine go down"?

Stephen: Yeah, that's a good choice. "The spoonful of sugar that makes the medicine go down."

India: "Medicine go down," right. And so for me, "Breathe" is that, the spoonful of sugar that makes the medicine go down.

Stephen: Nice.

India: And I think that also, you didn't ask me this and I think it would take maybe like a singer to understand what I'm saying, or even an artist, but a lot of times I think that artists strive for where it's a marriage of your process and your product. And so for me, the way that I sing that song, it has so many rapid-fire words and I move really fast like this is really fast it's moving like that. And I have to breathe consciously to sing it. There's that element of it to. But that's kind of like an internal process thing.

Stephen: One thing you started to share a bit about there and I feel you are really making more and more explicit in your work is music as a spiritual practice and a path. And I know you're intending for this album to be an adjunct or catalyst for people's deepening spiritual practice itself, whether that's prayer or meditation or yoga. I'd love for you to share a little bit about that, and it connects with the theme of medicine, that's its like in a way, making more explicit something that most of us have been drawn to music for anyway, but it's like really making it a conscious spiritual practice.

India: Yeah. Well, my entire career, my first album came out in 2001, and I went to the Grammys that year and I had this really painful experience, where I was nominated for seven Grammys and then didn't win any. And so it ended up being like this big conversation in the music industry for many years, you know, about the politics of race and sexism and how it all plays out in the political nature of the music industry. Like, that night symbolized that, inside of the music industry as a whole, for a long time.

And so after that night, I created a mission statement to remind myself of what I really wanted to do with my life. I never thought I would be an artist who would be nominated for Grammys and sell millions of copies. I'm happy that it's happened, in hindsight, but that's not what my goal was. And so my mission statement was to remind me of my goal. And my mission statement for almost 20 years has been "to spread love, healing, peace, and joy through the power of words and music." And so that for me was always an internal conversation, and I would never really say it to people and I would hold it to myself because I was told that's what was best.

And now, like you said, making it more explicit, I do that because I've just grown into myself. I was 23 when my first album came out; I'm 41 now. So I've grown into myself and it's been a hard one, empowerment, to learn to just be myself and be my truth and be authentic and speak my truth. Because I learned that era when I thought I was going to retire, I was very sick. Not very sick, it wasn't life or death, but at the time I didn't know if it was life or death. I was just sick, and I was in a lot of pain in my body and I had ulcers and adrenal fatigue, and my voice was going in and out and my face was broken out with rashes, like I was just sick in a lot of places in my body. Like a lot of dis-ease.

And, I traced that back to not being authentic in my life. And so, knowing the pain of lack of authenticity has taught me to know the power of it. And for me, music is at its best a healing modality. And so, I am making it more explicit. Because it's me. I come from many, many generations of singers and evangelists, and anybody who's ever been to a church, you know like the best preachers also

are great singers. And so my great-grandmother was an evangelist, my grandfather, just, lots of people in my family.

I knew my great-grandmother; she died at 100 years old, just in 2011. So I knew her very well, and I know the legacy I come from very well. And for me, again, like your first question about what is a "SongVersation"? That communication paradigm, that is my version of standing in my legacy. And so, SongVersation: Medicine is that. Ten years ago I would have never dreamed, there's a song on SongVersation: Medicine called "Light of the Holy Spirit." And I don't categorize myself as a Christian. I am not religious; I am more spiritual. But I do come from a Christian background. And so, I would have never said the word "holy spirit" on an album, ever. I would have been too afraid, and too afraid to explain to people what I meant and all that. And now with SongVersation: Medicine it's all over it. You see I'm very easy to speak about my philosophies and the way I see things.

So, music as medicine for me my most fulfilling expression. And I think it's what I was born to do; it's what my grandmother did, what my great-grandmother did, what my grandfather did. It's what my mother did. And so for me it's just what I was born to do.

Stephen: Wow.

India: And watching people respond the way that they are, it's only been out for two weeks. So watching people respond the way they are on my social media is very, very fulfilling for me. Because I didn't just take a chance; I took a chance and it's working.

Stephen: Beautiful. Well, I know you've got a lot on your plate with this new album out, and I just want to say, you are medicine, your songs are medicine. I love the vulnerability, the truthfulness. My beloved wife and I have listened to your album so many times when we ...

India: Thank you.

Stephen: Tender-sweet love places of, you know, loving each other, and I feel like by you standing so vulnerable to spirit and letting the prayers move through you and letting the beauty and the artistry move you, you touch so many lives, so deep bow of gratitude.

India: Thank you.

Stephen: And thank you for this beautiful album. And everybody listen. Go out and buy it, savor it.

India: Thank you. Thank you.

Stephen: Let it open you to the spirit moving through you and the blessed light that you are, so, thank you.

India: Can I tell you one last thing?

Stephen: Sure.

India: My website.

Stephen: Go for it.

India: It's called "Soulbird.com." S-o-u-l-b-i-r-d dot-com. And you can see the album there. Of course you can buy it on iTunes and everywhere else. And there's also a companion to the SongVersetion: Medicine album called "The SongVersetion Practice Journal." And you can find that, read about it and everything, also on my website.

Stephen: Awesome. Well thank you India. Deep bow of gratitude; you are a blessing.

India: Thank you to you too. Thank you back to you.

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