

LEGEND

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It's a party. It's a celebration.

And it's an accurate reflection of how the song has exploded on the scene, putting Mr. Legend — already a six-time Grammy Award-winner — into another musical stratosphere.

"This is my first big club hit," Mr. Legend says. "It's actually the biggest hit of my career, to this point. It's something different and it's something fresh for me, but I feel that when you see it in my show, it all fits together."

Mr. Legend, who kicked off his tour in Michigan on June 27, plays the Barbara B. Mann Performing Arts Hall July 8. Opening acts are India.Arie and Mr. Legend's brother, Vaughn Anthony. India.Arie's latest album, "Testimony: Vol. 2, Love & Politics," debuted at No. 3 on Billboard charts.

More than just piano

Is he making a statement by slamming a cover down on the piano?

"It's a visual way of kind of shaking things up a bit," he says, "because I knew the song was so different from 'Ordinary People,' which was my biggest hit before 'Green Light.' And since I was known so much for that, we thought that we would play with that image and slam the piano (cover) down. But no, I have not rejected the piano, and you will certainly hear it at my show."

The song is the first single from his latest album, "Evolver." The CD has a different feel to it than his two previous studio albums, "Get Lifted" and "Once Again."

It contains a few piano-driven songs, but "we tried some different things, and the songs were feeling good the way they were," he says. "I don't feel the piano has to be on every song. It's just another instrument, at the end of the day. You're just trying to create the right colors for the right song, make it sound the way you want it to sound. And sometimes it's appropriate, and sometimes it's not."

He's touring with three vocalists, three horn players, and a four-piece rhythm section. And yes, a piano.

"I'm excited about the tour; I think it's going to be my best tour yet," he says. "I think the band is better than ever. I'm more confident and comfortable than ever as a performer. It's going to be real soulful and energetic and it's going to be a lot of fun for me."

The title, "Evolver," not only refers to him as an individual but to the CD's different sound. "I'm continuing to grow and experiment as an artist, and every album is a process of discovery in a way, a process of growth. And that's where the title comes from."

When released, "Evolver" debuted as the No. 4 album in the Billboard Top 200 Album chart. It's No. 1 on three charts: America's R&B Album chart, the Album Retailer chart and the Digital Albums chart. "Green Light" hit the Top 5 on Urban Mainstream Radio and was in the Rhythmic Top 40 radio chart.

A self-fulfilling prophecy

Born John Stephens, he was nicknamed Legend by a friend, the spoken word poet J Ivy. The name stuck with his circle of friends and co-creators, so he used it as a stage name.

It's becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy.

"Well, sometimes you have to speak things into existence and then go out and make them happen," Mr. Legend says. "So I'm in the process of going out to make it happen."

He was named one of Time magazine's 100 people of 2009. Quincy Jones, who authored the magazine's piece, wrote, "At this point in his career, he reminds me of a young Donny Hathaway, and I have no doubt that as he continues to grow, he will become as artistically and socially significant as Marvin Gaye,

Curtis Mayfield and Stevie Wonder. He is a genius, and we've only seen the tip of the iceberg."

Before he released his own debut album in 2004, Legend had sung on hits for others, including Jay-Z and Alicia Keys. He played piano for Lauryn Hill on "Everything is Everything."

When he released his own "Get Lifted," he was nominated for eight Grammys. He won three, including "Best R&B Album" and "Best New Artist."

He continues to make good on his initial musical promise.

Songwriting is a deliberate activity for him, he says.

"I do have ideas that just come to me randomly, but usually, when I write a song, it's because I've chosen at that moment that I'm going to set aside some time to write some music," he says. "It's a discipline. It's a process. I think all great songwriters and prolific songwriters are so because they've developed a pattern and a process of doing it, and they discipline themselves to sit down and do it at certain times. It's not just a fleeting moment of inspiration, it's a choice to write."

And collaborating with others is again a choice, he says. "We decide to come together and sit together and we say, 'Let's go in and write a song.' And that collaboration, if you work at it and have an open spirit and a constructive mentality going into it, then you can usually come out with something good."

A lifetime of singing

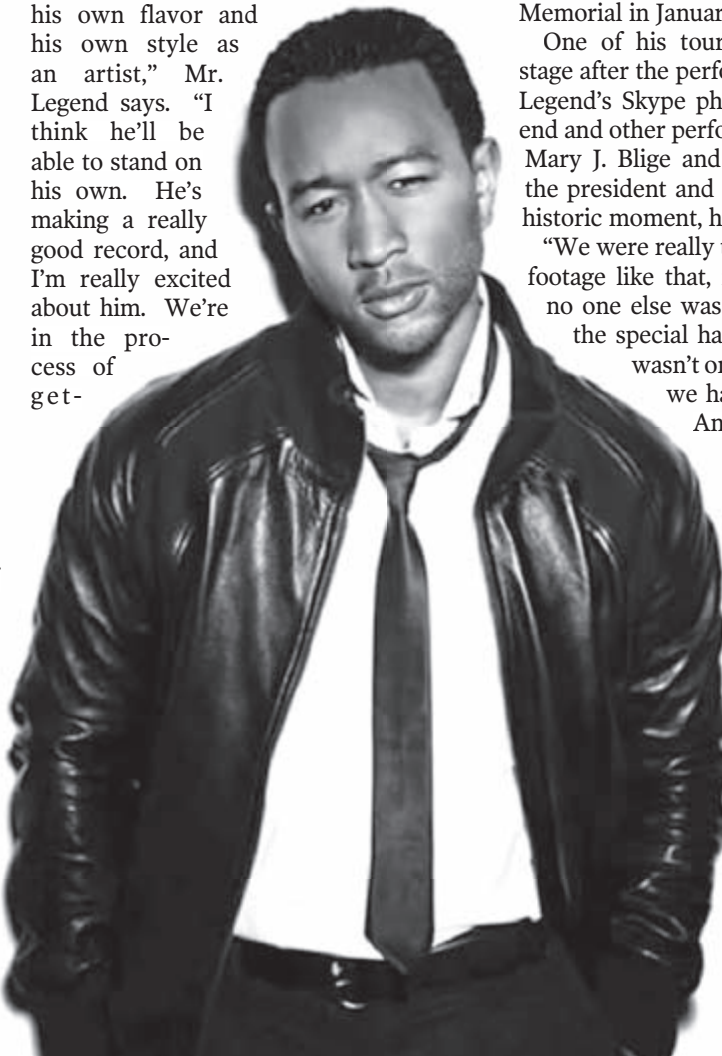
Though he's collaborated with many and sung duets with many, including, on the most recent album, Andre 3000, Brandy, Estelle and Kanye West, there are still those he'd like to work with: Beyonce, Amy Whitehouse, Fiest and Lil Wayne, just to name a few.

He's started his own label, HomeSchool Records. His first artist was British singer and rapper Estelle, who released "Shine." (Mr. Legend shows up in a cameo in her music video, "American Boy," which features Kanye West.)

"I believed that she deserved to be heard," Mr. Legend says. "And as a fan, she represented an artist that I wanted to hear more of. I felt like I could help her become successful."

The next artist on his label will be his younger brother, R&B singer Vaughn Anthony, who's one of the opening acts on the tour.

"We have a similar voice, and in some ways, he reminds you of me, but he has his own flavor and his own style as an artist," Mr. Legend says. "I think he'll be able to stand on his own. He's making a really good record, and I'm really excited about him. We're in the process of get-



If you go

>>John Legend in concert, with India.Arie and Vaughn Anthony opening

>>When: 7:30 p.m. July 8

>>Where: The Barbara B. Mann Performing Arts Hall, 8099 College Parkway, Fort Myers

>>Cost: \$78, \$62, \$52

>>Information: Call 481-4849

ting a distribution deal hammered out for him."

Most of the album's recorded, he says, and some singles are ready, waiting for the deal to be finalized. According to Billboard magazine, the first single will be "In Your Shoes," which Mr. Legend co-wrote and can already be seen on YouTube.

Mr. Legend was playing piano at age 4, and at 7 began performing with his church choir. You can hear the gospel influences in his music, especially on his debut album, "Get Lifted," but also an old school R&B groove.

"I listened to gospel, and listened to classic R&B, like Motown, sounds of Philadelphia, Al Green and even old artists like Nat King Cole and Frank Sinatra, people like that, the kind of classic so-called crooners of the era, when that was popular music," he says. That's what gave him his classic sensibility.

"I think some kids just have an old soul, and I probably have that. It probably was what drew me to that kind of music," he says.

It wasn't exactly what everyone else was listening to in the mid-80s, but he didn't catch flack for it while growing up.

"I wasn't teased when I was a kid, even though I was a little nerdier than most kids," he says. "But I think my singing always was my saving grace, it made me cooler."

He considered himself a nerd because he was a straight-A student and skipped a couple grades.

"I was a bit nerdy. And I don't say that in a bad way, I think it was a good thing... I was saying before in an interview that it's kind of a good time for black nerds, these days," he says, referring to President Obama.

He laughs.

"We haven't always been in vogue, and I think it's a good time for us right now!"

Mr. Legend not only performed at the Democratic National Convention but at the Inaugural Celebration at the Lincoln Memorial in January.

One of his tour managers hopped on stage after the performance, and, using Mr. Legend's Skype phone, captured Mr. Legend and other performers such as Beyonce, Mary J. Blige and James Taylor meeting the president and First Family. It was an historic moment, he says.

"We were really the only people that had footage like that, from on stage, because no one else was that close. It was after the special had already ended, and it wasn't on television any more, so we had really special access. And it was pretty cool.

"All of it was pretty incredible. It was like: we're a part of history. And particularly that day. Because so many great artists were there, and we were all star-struck about the president. I had met him a few times before, but it was exciting to be there at that moment."

Sage advice

This May, Mr. Legend, who graduated from the University of Pennsylvania 10 years ago, gave the commencement speech.

John Legend on Michael Jackson

Like the rest of the world, John Legend was stunned to learn of Michael Jackson's untimely death.

"It just came out of nowhere, in a number of ways," he says. "You could tell his health was deteriorating, but you didn't expect at any point that he was going to die at this young of an age. He was getting ready for the comeback tour. It's really sad."

Mr. Legend had written a song for him, slated for Mr. Jackson's upcoming album.

"We had gotten together a couple of times. I hadn't actually worked with him yet," Mr. Legend says. "We had talked about doing it, but we had never gotten to work together. And I don't even think the album was a focus for him at this point, because he was focused on putting the show together."

"I don't know if they completely shelved it or what they decided to do with the recording project, but it's a moot point, I guess, now. I don't know how much he had recorded." ■

"I wanted to say something to the students at Penn to try to really focus their mind on what it meant to be a real leader, and to make a real difference in the world, and be a force for good in the world," Mr. Legend says. "And I wanted to focus on the idea of truth, and what it means to speak the truth and what it means to seek the truth, and tying that to being soulful. That's really what the speech was all about, and I think it was effective and hit home for a lot of them. And hopefully it will inspire them to live a good life."

As part of his speech, Mr. Legend talks about the lies told to the American people about the Iraq War, about weapons of mass-destruction and about credit-default swaps.

"There isn't a single answer," he said to them. "But there is always the truth. Now, I don't assume that the truth is commonly found. Like its bedfellows of democracy and justice, I believe it is quite rare to find. It is born through process. It is gained through questioning. It is found in listening. It's about accepting that complex problems require complicated solutions."

He also talked to them about soul, saying it's not limited to a specific genre of music, that Fiona Apple, the Beatles, Bruce Springsteen, Lil Wayne, and Frank Sinatra can all be soulful.

"Soul is about authenticity," he told them. "Soul is about finding things in your life that are real and pure, the things that you know are at your core, the things you were put on this earth to do, the moments when sound and silence come together."

"I think we're all in pursuit of that," he says. "It's not something you accomplish, it's something you pursue. And so when I was thinking about, what do I want to say to these kids? I was thinking about it for a while, leading up to it, and I was excited, because this was my alma mater... this is my first big high-profile speech at a prestigious university, and I wanted to say something that was really something that would hopefully really minister to the kids. And that's what I thought of, the idea of truth, and pursuing it, and speaking it."

"(In my songs) I try to approach the subjects I talk about with a sense of candor and openness and vulnerability. And I want the music to feel true, always. Not contrived, but something that makes sense, that feels right." ■