

## ONITSHA: *Church Girl*

Onitsha is a rare and inspiring study in contrasts. Her debut album, ***Church Girl***, proves she is one of the brightest new stars in the firmament of contemporary inspirational music, and yet the concept of "star-tripping" is not even in her vocabulary. She and her acclaimed producer and co-writer, Shep Crawford (Whitney Houston, Kelly Price, Yolanda Adams), write song after song, each somehow managing to obey all the rules of great, accessible, popular music, while at the same time stretching—if not breaking altogether—every single one of them.

And at every turn throughout ***Church Girl***, Onitsha succeeds mightily and majestically at tearing down walls between musical genres, radio formats and—most significantly—the "us-and-them" mentality that has much too often, and for far too long, kept the Church and the world in their own separate corners of Creation.

**"My Life"** is easy, sturdy R&B/funk, that finds Onitsha unleashing mind-bending improvisations and riffs as if they were second nature, backed by a star-studded ensemble that includes Erica and Tina of Mary, Mary, Deborah Cox and CoCo of '90s R&B icons, SWV.

**"Don't Give Up"** struts a steady hip-hop groove that embodies the Onitsha sound, with its solid, punchy bottom end, and just enough instrumental color to add the right flavor; all making sure to leave *lots* of space for Onitsha and the ensemble to lay down vocals that are nothing less than stunning.

**"He Is"** takes a cool, retro-soul vibe—slinky wah-wah guitar and all—and melds it to a modern-to-the-minute rhythm section, yielding a best-of-both-worlds amalgam that is both compellingly original, and like all of Onitsha's work, relentlessly catchy, the way any great popular song should be.

Onitsha proudly shows her church roots in **"God Is On Your Side,"** which deftly and even ingeniously adds a touch of hip-hop rhythm and jazzy pop to the reverential Sunday morning spirit that lies at the heart of it all.

**"Search Me"** treads on turf that even long-standing gospel divas might fear to go, as the wonders of modern engineering yield a very modern-sounding mix of gospel matriarch Mahalia Jackson's original, classic recording, with Onitsha dueting with "The Queen." Presuming to traffic in such hallowed company is a bold, even risky move, and *any* serious gospel fan will tell you straight up that you *better* have the goods to deliver, or get out of town, and quickly. Never even presuming to out-sing the greatest of gospel greats, Onitsha simply, and with all due respect, just sings her parts in her own, natural, captivating and unaffected way, turning out a track that can't help but make any listener smile from here to next year.

Producer and co-writer Crawford has no trouble putting his finger on exactly what it was about Onitsha that made her stand out from the countless singers a hit producer hears, in the search for exciting and original new talent.

"Onitsha is a truly unique voice," he says. "I hear lots and *lots* of singers who can really sing. They've got all the runs and all the riffs, but they just don't have that extra 'something.' Think of all the classic singers, from James Cleveland, to Stevie Wonder...Gladys Knight. When their voices come on the radio, you immediately know who it is. That's the stuff legends are made of."

Onitsha, who laughingly refers to herself as “an L.A. girl, all the way,” was indeed born in Los Angeles and lived there her first ten years, at which time her parents divorced and she moved to Oklahoma, where her mother attended Bible college, until she was 15 and relocated, again and for good, to her original and-still home.

Onitsha came into the world as the newest entry into a long lineage of great singers, inheriting that same gift for music herself. Singing as long as she can remember, she in fact made her formal debut when she was three years old in a church musical production.

The utter uniqueness of **Church Girl** comes as no surprise when Onitsha reflects on the range and caliber of styles and music that surrounded her as a child. That repertoire was a mix of mainstream R&B and pop, and gospel, depending on which family member's house she was in at any given time. From relatives less steeped in the faith, she heard and absorbed all the major secular artists of the day, with Stevie Wonder particularly filling and spinning her young head. At home, where her mother ruled both the roost *and* the playlist on the family radio and stereo, gospel reigned supreme, with Onitsha today still citing gospel great Vanessa Bell Armstrong, with her stratospheric soprano and legendary vocal pyrotechnics, as having dramatically impacted her own artistic development.

Onitsha's first career thought as a teenager was to be a physician, until fate and William “Zack” Harmon, a musical friend of her father's who also happened to own a recording studio, intervened. Having heard Onitsha sing at churches and community events, he was staggered by the 16-year-old's very grown-up voice, and offered to do some demo recordings of her. They recorded several songs that Harmon played for an executive/friend at a major gospel label, who was equally impressed.

By the time Onitsha turned 17, she had logged the first two big-name credits of what would be a long list to come, as she was asked to record guest solos on two of the label's acts, Bryan Wilson, and the Mississippi Mass Children's Choir. Onitsha was hooked, and knew from that moment on that music was her life's calling. With her gaze toward the future firmly fixed, she literally never looked back and hardly even paused for breath. She eagerly dove into in every musical group, production and function offered by both her church and high school, including a four-voice “girl-group” with the name Harmony, aptly foreshadowing what would be a hallmark of her professional style and soul.

Upon her graduation, college seemed like a reasonable next step, but after only a year, Onitsha's destiny was exerting a strong, undeniable tug. High visibility in a popular community gospel choir started a word-of-mouth buzz about the young woman with the amazing voice, that soon found her singing constantly, with the choir as well as solo, throughout metro L.A. As 2000 rolled into 2001, Onitsha's phone was ringing off the hook with offers of background vocal work coming in from superstar acts, the first of which was gospel/mainstream crossover phenomenon, Mary, Mary. A year and a half with Mary, Mary led to work with more major artists including Deborah Cox, Ashanti, Jada Pinkett-Smith, and Destiny's Child, and a full-circle return to Mary, Mary whom she sang on spot dates during their 2005 tour and as later invited to be a part of their 2006 **Hero** Tour with Kirk Franklin as the headliner. Earlier this year, Onitsha was invited to perform on Christina Aguilera's upcoming release. Finally, if you ask Onitsha about a major highlight in her career, she would tell you without skipping a beat, singing on Stevie Wonder's latest release, A Time 2 Love and by personal request of Mr. Wonder, recording jingles for his Los Angeles based radio station.

But Onitsha, feeling once again the nudging of an Almighty hand, speaks with almost biblical eloquence when asked what comes next.

“It’s time for me to move into what He’s been preparing me for all my life,” she says. “I’ve been so blessed by all the doors He’s opened for me, and all the wonderful, amazingly talented people I’ve had a chance to work with, but there’s more I feel a need to do. I want to give people something to latch onto in my music that can really change their lives. “

“It’s a mission,” she concludes, “and I’m ready to undertake it, and to go wherever it takes me.”

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