AWARD-WINNING MUSIC AND FILM STAR

 

By Shola Adenekan

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The African American singer Whitney Houston who has died aged 48, was arguably one of the greatest female musicians that ever lived. She was a tormented but great talent who influenced a generation of artistes who came after her.

Houston sold over 200 million albums and singles around the world in a career that spanned almost three decades. She was the most awarded female artist of all time, according to Guinness World Records, with two Emmy Awards, six Grammy Awards, 30 Billboard Music Awards, 22 American Music Awards, among a total of 415 career awards as of 2010. She held the all-time record for the most [American Music Awards](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_Music_Award#Artists_that_won_the_most_in_a_single_year) of any single artist and shared the record with Michael Jackson for the most AMAs ever won in a single year with 8 wins in 1994.Houston won a record [11 Billboard Music Awards](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Billboard_Music_Award#Most_awards_in_one_year) at its 4th ceremony in 1993. She also had the record for [the most WMAs won in a single year](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/World_Music_Awards#Most_WMAs_won_in_a_single_year), winning five Awards at the 6th World Music Awards in 1994.

Although she had a background in gospel music, Houston courted the mainstream at the start of her solo career.

The New York Times wrote that Houston "possesses one of her generation's most powerful gospel-trained voices, but she eschews many of the churchier mannerisms of her forerunners. She uses ornamental gospel phrasing only sparingly, and instead of projecting an earthy, tearful vulnerability, communicates cool self-assurance and strength, building pop ballads to majestic, sustained peaks of intensity."

But this strategy also drew fierce criticism from a section of Black America, who thought that she betrayed her black roots in order to win over White America . The criticism would become a constant refrain through much of her career. She was even booed during the "Soul Train Awards" in 1989.

"Sometimes it gets down to that, you know?" she told Katie Couric in 1996. "You're not black enough for them. I don't know. You're not R&B enough. You're very pop. The white audience has taken you away from them."

But the strategy proved an instant hit in the 1980s in an industry that was craving a new clean-cut star different from the much raunchier Madonna. With the success of her first two albums, Houston was undoubtedly an international crossover superstar, the most prominent since [Michael Jackson](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Michael_Jackson), appealing to all demographics.

She also successfully parlayed her music talent onto the big screen as a lead actress in films that included *The Bodyguard*, *Waiting to Exhale*, *Cinderella*, and *The Preacher's Wife*. She won several awards and critical acclaims in her role in some of these films.

Whitney Elizabeth Houston was born in Newark, New Jersey, USA, on August 9, 1963, to a middle class family. Her mother Cissy, was a gospel singer, and her father John Russell was an army officer who became a music record executive. Apart from her mother, as a child she was surrounded by notable music talent. Her cousin was the legendary Dionne Warwick and another cousin was Dee-Dee Warwick. In addition, her godmother was another music legend Aretha Franklin. These talented relatives influenced Houston right from an earlier age in addition to the music of Chaka Khan, Roberta Flack and Gladys Knight.

Houston often followed her mother around the nightclubs at which she sand, and at age 14 became a backup singer on the [Michael Zager Band](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Michael_Zager_Band)'s single "Life's a Party." Zager subsequently offered to obtain a recording contract for the young singer, but Cissy declined, wanting her daughter to finish school first.

A year later, Houston was a back-up singer for Chaka Khan and sang on the track "I'm Every Woman". After high school in East Orange, New Jersey, Houston worked as a fashion model after an agent noticed her striking beauty while she was singing with her mother New York's Carnegie Hall.  She was one of the first Black women to grace the cover of Seventeen magazine. She also appeared on the cover of other notable magazines including Ebony, Cosmopolitan, Glamour and Young Miss.

Clive Davis, the highly influential owner of Arista Records who had managed the career of previous generations of African American artistes such as Ray Charles and Teddy Pendergrass, noted Houston's outstanding talent in 1983, and immediately offered her a recording contract.

Houston's first taste of the big time happened a year later in a duet with Pendergrass on the track "[Hold Me](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hold_Me_%28Teddy_Pendergrass_%26_Whitney_Houston_song%29)", which featured on his album, [*Love Language*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Love_Language). But it was in 1985 that Houston scored a solo hit with self-titled debut album Whitney Houston, with Rolling Stone magazine calling her "one of the most exciting new voices in years" while *The New York Times* called the album "an impressive, musically conservative showcase for an exceptional vocal talent."

The album won Houston several awards between 1986 and 1987, including seven American Music Awards, an Emmy and an MTV Video Music Award.

Although her music career continued to blossom, Houston found time to do charitable deeds and gave back to the community. She supported the campaign against apartheid in South Africa by refusing to have dealings with any organisations with connection to the then racist white South African government. In 1989, Houston formed The Whitney Houston Foundation For Children, a non-profit organization that raised funds for the needs of children around the world.

In July 18, 1992, Houston married fellow superstar Bobby Brown. But many critics argued that the marriage marked the start of the end of a highly promising career for Houston. Brown, a sex symbol had a reputation as a non-conformist at the time as he was rumoured to be involved in hard drugs and wild partying. Others saw the marriage of Houston's attempt to refute critics who had suggested she was not Black enough. In the years following their marriage Brown would be arrested several times, on charges ranging from DUI to failure to pay child support.

But Houston said their true personalities were not as far apart as people may have believed.

"When you love, you love. I mean, do you stop loving somebody because you have different images? You know, Bobby and I basically come from the same place," she told Rolling Stone in 1993. "You see somebody, and you deal with their image, that's their image. It's part of them, it's not the whole picture. I am not always in a sequined gown. I am nobody's angel. I can get down and dirty. I can get raunchy."

The marriage however had its successes, the couple had a child together and it was also at this period that Houston's film career took off. In 1992, she starred in her first film role was in [*The Bodyguard*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Bodyguard), alongside [Kevin Costner](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kevin_Costner). Houston played Rachel Marron, a Black music star who is stalked by a crazed fan and hires a white bodyguard to protect her. *USA Today* listed it as one of the 25 most memorable cinematic moments of the last 25 years in 2007.The movie was also notable for not mentioning or needing to explain its interracial aspect of the relationship between the two leading characters.

In 1995, Houston starred alongside [Angela Bassett](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Angela_Bassett), [Loretta Devine](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Loretta_Devine), and [Lela Rochon](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lela_Rochon) in her second film [*Waiting to Exhale*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Waiting_to_Exhale), a motion picture about four African-American women struggling with relationships. Houston played the lead character Savannah Jackson, a TV producer in love with a married man. She said she opted for the role because she saw the film as "a breakthrough for the image of black women because it presents them both as professionals and as caring mothers." After opening at number one and grossing $67 million in the US at the box office and $81 million worldwide. Some critics pointed out it proved that a movie primarily targeting a black audience can cross over to success, while paving the way for other all-black movies such as [*How Stella Got Her Groove Back*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/How_Stella_Got_Her_Groove_Back) and the [Tyler Perry](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tyler_Perry) movies that have become popular in the 2000s.

Houston's illustrious career started to spiral out of control from the late 1990s in what many suggested was caused by Brown's bad influence.  But in a 2002 interview with [Diane Sawyer](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Diane_Sawyer) Houston denied the drug rumours and replied, "First of all, let's get one thing straight. [Crack](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Crack_cocaine) is cheap. I make too much money to ever smoke crack. Let's get that straight. Okay? We don't do crack. We don't do that. Crack is wack." The line was from Keith Haring's mural which was painted in 1986 on the handball court at 128th Street and 2nd Avenue. Houston did, however, admit to using other substances after that interview.

After years of controversy and turmoil, Houston and Brown's marriage ended on April 24, 2007, with Houston granted custody of the couple's daughter Bobbi Kristina.

Houston's last album was [*I Look to You*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/I_Look_to_You), released on August 2009, which entered the [Billboard 200](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Billboard_200) at No. 1, with Houston's best opening-week sales of 305,000 copies, marking Houston's first number one album since *The Bodyguard*, and Houston's first studio album to reach number one since 1987's [*Whitney*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Whitney_%28album%29). Houston gave her first interview in seven years, appearing on Oprah Winfrey's season premiere on September 2009. The interview was billed as "the most anticipated music interview of the decade”.The interview was so candid that Whitney admitted using drugs with former husband Brown, who she said "laced marijuana with rock cocaine."

Houston also appeared on European television programs to promote the album. She performed the song "I Look to You" on the German television show *Wetten Dass.* Three days later, she performed the same track and another track “[Million Dollar Bill](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Million_Dollar_Bill)”, on the French television show Le Grand Journal. Houston also promoted the album in the UK by appearing as guest mentor on Simon Cowell's [*The X Factor*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_X_Factor_%28UK_series_6%29). She performed "Million Dollar Bill" on the following day's results show, completing the song even as a strap in the back of her dress popped open two minutes into the performance. She later commented that she "sang [herself] out of [her] clothes."

Houston's personal demons also affected the world tour that was supposed to fully re-launch her music career to fans across the globe. She was also to mark a return to the big screen in the remake of the classic movie "Sparkle." Filming on the movie, starring former "American Idol" winner Jordin Sparks, was recently concluded. In recent days, Houston was reported to be dating the musician Ray J.

She died on Saturday, February 11, 2012, in Beverley Hills, California, USA. She is survived by her mother Cissy and daughter Bobbi Kristina.