

Time to Believe, Time to Expect: The first Black female GMA artist of the year, CeCe Winans has lived a career blessing the body of Christ—and is believing for a new season of revival

Mega-influencer CeCe Winans is challenging people across the world to believe for what may seem impossible. “Believe for It,” the title song of her album by the same name, has become a theme song for a post-pandemic world recovering from widespread loss, division and discouragement.

The “Believe for It” song is both a soulful prayer and a bold proclamation of faith, as the most-awarded and highest-selling female gospel artist of all time sings, “Move the immovable/ Break the unbreakable/ God, we believe/ God, we believe for it/ From the impossible, we’ll see a miracle/ God, we believe/ God, we believe for it.”

The song and album release in March 2021 spawned a rapidly expanding community of people daring to believe for breakthrough and breakout in their own lives, in their communities and around the world. The song that was released as the second single from her first-ever live album took multiple Grammy and GMA Dove nominations and awards in 2021 and 2022.

Describing the call to faith and action conveyed by the original song she wrote during the pandemic in 2020 with Kyle Lee, Mitch Wong and Dwan Hill, the 58-year-old says it’s time

to stand strong and move forward.

“It’s time to believe that you can make it, to believe that you can achieve what is in your heart,” she tells viewers of *The Story Behind the Song*. “It is time to believe for wholeness and healing for yourself, your family and your community. It’s time to believe for unity.”

Christian ministry leaders and music producers alike concur that a lifetime of earning widespread credibility as a woman of faith and prayer paved the way for Winans to serve as a messenger of hope during these trying times. “In music and in life, she has been taken to places in God where most people have not been—and yet she leads in incredible humility,” says Lee, co-writer and producer of “Believe for It.”

Making History

Priscilla Marie Winans, “CeCe,” is making history. In the ’80s and early ’90s, as part of the brother-sister duo BeBe and CeCe, she was one of the first Black artists to receive significant airtime on contemporary Christian radio stations.

A solo artist since 1996, she became the most-decorated Grammy gospel singer of all time in 2022 and fourth most Grammy-awarded woman of all time. To date, she has 15 Grammy Awards and 31 Grammy nominations, making history again in 2022 when she became the first Black female gospel singer in history to receive the GMA Dove Award for Artist of the Year.

She brought the GMA Dove Awards’ audience to tears when she sang a portion of “To God Be the Glory” in lieu of an acceptance speech. “I was in shock, and the only thing that flooded my mind was, ‘To God be the Glory,’ and so that’s the only thing that came out,” Winans says, pointing out that she had received three other GMA Dove Awards the previous year and was surprised when her name was called for both Song of the Year and Artist of the Year.

“Well, I think it’s a step, a step in the right direction,” she says in an interview with Religion News Service, speaking about the state of the contemporary Christian music industry and her status as the first Black female soloist to receive Artist of the Year honors. “And hopefully, it’s encouraging to see more diversity in our industry occupying all the different levels of award.”

“I know there are extremely talented young people who are coming after me that will deserve that spot,” Winans adds. “And I feel good about that door being open so others can walk through as well.”

Her remarkable award achievements also include 28 Dove Awards, 16 Stellar Awards, seven NAACP Image Awards and many others. As a duo, BeBe and CeCe Winans’ awards include three Grammy Awards, nine Dove Awards, two NAACP Image awards, two Soul Train Music Awards, numerous Stellar Awards, three gold albums and one platinum album.

Imparting Hope

After the song and album release, “Believe for It” rapidly became the prayer and declaration of a wide cross-section of people who were still suffering after the pandemic.

“It’s bigger than a record, it’s a theme that I really want people to embrace—people who believe in God and people who might not ever go to church,” Winans says. “I believe that hope is needed, and I want to impart this into the hearts of people everywhere.”

The timing and the message created explosive demand for both the song and the album. “‘Believe for It’” is a song with a message that is meant for the time in which we live,” says Howard Dukes of SoulTracks.

The album, a compilation of 12 tracks that highlight some of the biggest songs in Christian music today, quickly rose to

the No. 1 spot on four different Billboard gospel charts and remained there for seven consecutive weeks. Winans' celebration of its popularity maintains her focus on the Good News. "I celebrate reaching Top 10 and millions of views the videos have received—not because it elevates me in any way—but because the songs promote the truth of the gospel and the hope we have in Christ," she says.

By August 2021, the U.S. on-demand streams for the song surpassed the 13 million cyber count, and the album was over 41 million and increasing daily, reports the online gospel music platform Coghive. "People were ready to celebrate, they were ready to worship again, they were ready to praise God," Winans tells RNS about why the time was right for "Believe for It." "I believe this record really encouraged people to believe again, to take out their faith, to wipe off their dreams."

A 20-city concert tour—her first in over a decade—in the fall of 2022 and carrying over into the spring of 2023, exceeded Winans' expectations. During an informal sit-down with her mother, who lives in Detroit, and her daughter, Ashley Rose Phillips, on the 2022 *CeCe Winans Generations Thanksgiving Special*, she describes the concert appearances as powerful times of worship.

"Everybody came out ready for worship," she says. "It wasn't a concert; it was a service. I was worried my voice was going to go out. But in most of the concerts everybody sang the songs for me. ... My prayer is that the Lord would be glorified, and that the world would come to know who He is."

The rallying message that reached across multiple communication channels has birthed, ignited and expanded a "Believe for It" community. "Praying for your neighbor with the same intensity that you are praying for yourself" is connecting an online community of people who are cautiously stepping out of isolation.

The BFI community defines “neighbor” as anyone around the world who is in need. The expansion of the word’s meaning hit home for her during the pandemic, Winans says, telling AARP Sisters that “love others better” is one of her personal goals during this new season.

Belief for healing, family reconciliation, freedom from addiction, financial breakthrough, world peace, holy boldness, restored marriages and hope are the primary concerns posted by online followers who respond to Winans’ invitation to “Tell us what you are believing for and join the CeCe Winans #BelieveForItChallenge Family.” One of many messages of hope Winans shares through BFI communication channels is that you can expect life to get better when you say yes to God’s will.

Passing on Faith

Generations, a regularly scheduled program hosted by Winans and launched on YouTube in 2021, was inspired by the relationships she forged with young adults at Nashville Life Church. She and her husband of 38 years, Alvin Love II, founded the church in 2010, watching it grow from a Bible study in their home to a multigenerational, multiethnic church of more than 400 attendees. The husband-and-wife pastoral team discovered that people, especially young adults, needed parental figures who model and guide them in the ways of the Lord.

Generations, with its welcoming set design and heartwarming tone, allows Winans to model healthy home life, where important issues and concerns are discussed in a casual and loving way. She speaks from her life experience and commitment to pass on her faith to the next generation.

Her daughter, who lives in Nashville with her husband, Kenny Phillips, is a regular program guest. The couple married in September 2017 and welcomed their first child, son Wyatt Thomas Phillips, in 2020.

During the show's 2022 Thanksgiving special, Phillips shared the news of another pregnancy, announcing, "It's a girl!" and that her due date is in spring 2023. Winans, the soon-to-be grandmother of two, was visibly elated. She often describes how her grandson is one of the greatest highlights of her life.

"Passing on faith, while a sacred responsibility, is not complicated," Winans writes in her book released in November 2022, *Believe for It: Passing on Faith to the Next Generation*. Although she has written three other books over the years, it has been more than 10 years since her last release. A book tour, including interviews on nationally syndicated television talk shows, has generated excitement about believing for breakthrough and passing on faith to others.

"As we take what has been handed down to us and walk in relationship with Christ, we naturally invite others to experience the Lord's goodness," she writes. "We set the blueprint they can follow. As they watch us go through the ups and downs of life, biblical principles come alive."

Encouraging Families

At first glance, one may assume that the Winans family of legendary music artists, known to many as "The First Family of Gospel," was the product of a long generational line of seamless Christian bliss. CeCe was the first girl born after seven boys in a family of 10 children, all of whom were raised under the watchful eye and loving encouragement of a family and church that soaked them in the Word of God and created a safe harbor for them.

What may come as a surprise, however, is that parents David and Delores Winans were both from broken homes. In fact, David's parents were never married, and when he was born, he received the last name of his mother, Laura Glenn.

The change of last name for the nuclear family of 12 from

Glenn to Winans came about when, before he died, David Winans' grandfather asked him to change his last name so that the Winans family name would "remain on this earth."

Even though his father was not involved in his life, David was close to his grandfather and initiated the name change right away. CeCe was the first in the line of 10 children to be given the Winans name at birth, with her two younger sisters following suit. Their seven older brothers all became Winanses at the courthouse.

David "Pop" Winans was one of the founding fathers of American gospel music. He and Delores "Mom" Winans made music and attending the church his grandfather founded in Detroit, Michigan, a top priority in family life.

Early on, David Winans' grandfather prophesied that his family would spread the gospel around the world through singing. His prophecy was fulfilled through all of the children, and even their parents, individually or as various groups comprised of family members.

CeCe uses her own generational story to illustrate what can happen when two parents commit from the start of their marriage to keep Jesus Christ at the center of their home. During a recent sermon, she describes her mother's fierce commitment to ensuring that her 10 children were in every church service each week.

"I saw my mother cook and clean and work outside the house and [still] make sure we were in Sunday school and church [on Sundays] and back again on Tuesdays and Fridays," she says. "[She would say], 'Bring your homework, sit in the back row. I don't care if you go to sleep, the presence of God will saturate your body even when you're unconscious.'"

CeCe also shares stories of her own ups and downs as a wife and mother to encourage parents, grandparents and mentors to be faithful to use all of the spiritual and biblical tools

that are readily available to them. “No matter the condition of your family of origin or your current situation, passing on faith to the next generation is possible,” she says. “Establishing a loving, faithful household centered on Christ is not out of reach!”

Sharing Struggles

CeCe’s humility and transparency also extend to speaking publicly about her personal struggle when her son, Alvin Love III, was in a crisis of faith and moved to Australia, presumably to get as far away from his parents and their church as possible.

In an interview with Premier Gospel, she says her heart broke when her eldest son decided to break away. Maternal alarm bells had already been going off before he left, she says, noting her concern about things he was saying and some of the young people with whom he was associating.

CeCe would later learn that before he left, her son had told God that he would go with whomever got to him first—either God or the devil. Thankfully, God intervened. The person who picked him up from the airport in Sydney was enrolled in Bible college and bubbling over with stories of miraculous encounters with God.

“I spent time on my knees crying to God to bring [Alvin III] back home,” she says. “Then one day, I got a call from my son in Melbourne, Australia. He had encountered God and wanted to let me know that God was real.”

After hearing the testimonies and experiencing the presence of God in a fresh way himself, Love III returned home after eight months with renewed faith and passion to share the gospel with others. More than a decade later, at 36, he serves as the lead pastor of the church his parents founded.

The day before marrying his bride, Jasmine San Martin, on Nov.

12, 2022, he celebrated her on Instagram in a way that exhibited his faith behind his choices: "Tomorrow, I get to laugh with this beauty for the rest of my life. Her ability to hear from God and obey Him when it's hard is my favorite thing about her."

CeCe and her husband, now 71, are still active in ministry alongside their son at New Life Church. In fact, she refers to her husband as her "pastor at home" and to her son as her "pastor at church." In a Mother's Day message, she describes her husband as a man who loves her and her children well.

"My pastor at home, after 38 years, I still like the guy," she says. "He lives up to his name [Love], and I am so grateful that I have a husband who has loved me well and continues to love me and loves his children. And so I honor you."

Renee DeLoriea is a freelance writer based in Nashville, Tennessee. The second leg of CeCe Winans' "Believe For It Tour" kicks off Thursday, Mar. 9, 2023.