

Soul Sister

When CeCe Winans auditioned in a talent search as a child, she never dreamed God would use her to sing the gospel. Yet today she's using her platform to preach, too.

The room seems to light up when CeCe Winans, 39, takes the stage. It could be her congenial personality that brightens the atmosphere, or it could be her signature smile that endears her to throngs of concertgoers. Her smile is so near perfect, in fact, that Procter & Gamble hired her to do a commercial for Crest toothpaste. BellSouth and Kmart hired her to promote their products, too.

But beautiful teeth and market appeal don't drive people to their knees in reverence of God. Winans' ability to draw listeners into a deep encounter with the Father can only be explained in spiritual terms.

This woman has a God-given anointing for worship.

"I've always considered myself a worshiper," says Winans, whose family name has been synonymous with gospel music for decades. "The secret to my success, in every area of my life, is worship and praise to Him."

If releasing an album nearly every other year for more than two decades isn't proof of her success, then perhaps earning awards is. Winans has received six Grammys, 18 Doves, three Soul Train awards and other honors.

She's considered one of the most prominent Christian artists in the music business. She has appeared on Today, Good Morning America, The Oprah Winfrey Show and Entertainment Tonight.

Since 1985 she has cranked out six albums of her own, in addition to the seven albums she released with older brother Benjamin “BeBe” Winans. She has also recorded the hit “Count on Me” as a duo with mainstream pop vocalist Whitney Houston.

A native of Detroit, Priscilla Marie Winans was nicknamed “CeCe” by some of her siblings. She was born eighth in a clan of 10 kids. All of the children—who include older brothers David, Daniel, Michael, Ronald, Marvin, Carvin and Benjamin, and younger sisters Angie and Debbie—were taught to sing by their parents, Delores and David Sr., known in the gospel music world as Mom and Pop Winans.

All the Winans kids were raised in a strict home and attended a small Church of God in Christ (COGIC) congregation founded by CeCe’s grandfather. But she says today with no apologies that she appreciates her Pentecostal upbringing.

Because she grew up listening to anointed worship and praise, Winans is amazed when she meets Christians who are unaware of the power of worship. Her surprise prompted her to record *Throne Room*, a project that released last year. Unlike her previous albums, which are dominated by upbeat gospel and R&B, this one is almost completely devoted to worshipful hymns and choruses.

For Winans, it reflects her inner spirituality more than any other recording. It moves listeners beyond the surface and shows where this woman lives most of her life—in what she calls “the secret place” of God’s presence.

“The Lord put it on my heart to do a project that would encourage people to get into the secret place under the shadow

of His wings and make it a part of their lifestyle,” she told Charisma during an interview near Nashville, Tennessee, where she now lives.

Winans believes all Christians must start moving closer to that place of worship. If we don’t, she adds, we won’t be prepared to face the battles ahead.

“The times we’re living in are tough, and we’ve got to learn how to worship because that will be our refuge,” she insists. “If we will learn to worship, then we’ll be OK.”

Winans knows that Christian music actually can be distracting if it doesn’t have the right focus. She learned this firsthand during her younger years when she performed regularly on a glitzy set for Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker’s Praise the Lord TV show.

Winans does not want her music to distract or take the focus off Jesus. That’s why she considers her recent CD to be “different, pure and simple.”

The new priority she places on worship also indicates that this photogenic celebrity with the million-dollar smile has entered a new season marked by maturity and deeper passion for God. It’s just not enough today for her to entertain an audience. She wants to give them more of Jesus.

The Road to Success

When Winans was growing up, lots of kids in Detroit were running through the streets without adult supervision. Winans

was either in a church meeting or singing somewhere else.

Singing professionally by age 16, Winans says she never had a desire to do anything else. But landing a job with the Bakkers on Christian television shocked her. In the early 1980s, Howard McCrary, who had played and sung with Andraé Crouch, asked BeBe and CeCe to audition for Praise the Lord.

“It tripped me out,” she says. “That was my first introduction to any and everything—white people, different styles, television. Me and BeBe were the only little color there. We hadn’t planned on being a duet, but churches said, ‘We want those two little African American kids.’”

“BeBe didn’t make the first round of auditions,” CeCe jokingly reminds her brother at times. Excited about the possibility of singing for one of the premier Christian TV ministries, she told her brother he had to make it because her father would not allow his first-born daughter to move away from home and live alone.

“That Sunday we sang for Jim Bakker and he loved us,” she remembers. PTL hired BeBe and CeCe as singers and the two moved from Michigan to North Carolina.

They lived in Charlotte for the next three years.

Despite being from the city made famous by recording acts such as Diana Ross and the Supremes, Stevie Wonder and The Jackson 5—all of whom got their start at Detroit’s legendary Motown Records—Winans knows that worship involves a whole lot more than singing or skillful instrumentation.

“Worship is a lifestyle,” she says. “I believe people think that if they sing a song and hear something edifying they’ve experienced true worship. True worship is when your focus is on the Father and only the Father. It’s not about anything or anybody else.”

But it’s no wonder this former choirgirl who preferred to be in the shadows of her popular family while growing up is so passionate about what she does. A no-nonsense believer who harps on integrity every chance she gets, Winans wants to see the body of Christ stand for holiness and not forsake biblical truth.

The older she gets, in fact, the more intense she feels about the need for integrity in the church. Give her a microphone today and she might just preach rather than sing.

“It’s scary, sometimes, what I see in certain [churches when I travel], but I’ve learned that it’s God’s business. My job is to love and to pray,” she says. “When I see crazy things, it’s like, ‘God, if I see it I know You see it.’”

She believes the lack of character and integrity among some believers is because of a lack of reverence for God.

“We’ve lost the fear of the Lord. And when you lose your fear, you lose wisdom,” she explains. “I always examine my heart.”

Her conviction has been tested many times. Once, when the singer was asked to perform at a prestigious event at the White House, she was told that “the audience will be mixed with a lot of people, so we’d rather you not say anything about Jesus. ... We don’t want to offend people.”

She declined the invitation, telling the organizers: "You are offending me when you say that. That's who I am, and [He is] whom I represent."

Winans consented to sing after receiving a call from a representative who gave her the go-ahead to speak freely about her faith.

In the 1990s it was CeCe and BeBe's music that was considered too ambiguous. Some listeners didn't like the singers' hip style, preferring instead traditional gospel. The duo's musical tastes were too much like contemporary R&B for a Christian audience.

To others, the siblings' music represented a new generation of gospel. The two were overwhelmingly successful among many unbelievers, causing their music to cross over into mainstream America.

Today CeCe and BeBe have separate careers, however. She is releasing a pop-style CD next year and BeBe is promoting his most recent release.

Their early success with the Bakker's Praise the Lord program paved the way for the two to sing to the masses. Winans is grateful for the opportunities afforded her as a worshiper. But her decision to do a CD of mostly worship songs caused some to question whether she was undertaking a wise venture.

There are some people even in the Christian music industry who don't think worship sells. But Winans decided she wouldn't sell out to that opinion.

“There are many souls who depend on what I do,” she explains, noting that people of all ages have come to know the Lord in her concerts.

Objections from well-meaning Christians weren’t enough to convince Winans to abandon a project that would help believers stand strong in hard times. “I didn’t realize just how many people don’t know that worship is also a weapon,” she adds. “That is one reason Throne Room is important.”

The Singer Is a Preacher

In 2001, contemporary Christian and gospel music singers Steven Curtis Chapman, Yolanda Adams, Shirley Caesar and Winans, along with many others, performed for President and Mrs. Bush and a large audience at the White House. But to Winans, being recognized for her artistry can’t replace what she considers most important of all—her family.

“Family comes first,” says Winans, who has been married to Alvin Love for 20 years. “I can’t go out and minister and come home and [find out] my kids are crazy. You’ve got to take care of your family.” She stresses her point with some forceful language, calling it “backwards” and “not from God” when careers are placed before family.

After being in the music business for more than 23 years and even owning her own record label—PureSprings Gospel—the singer insists a lot of extras that aren’t important can distract people in ministry.

People would ask her in a way that made their questions more

like requests: "Are you going to this party? Meeting these people?"

"No," she would answer. "I've got babies to take care of. I've got a husband."

And if Christians are to have an impact on their families and in their communities, Winans insists they will have to be Spirit-led because the Holy Spirit convicts and teaches believers truth.

Winans' Pentecostal fervor continually boils under the surface. She sees things in black and white, and when Christians blur ethical or moral lines she can get riled.

"Jesus said, 'If you love Me you'll keep my commandments.' If you don't, you're a liar," she says bluntly. "The Word is so straight-up. All this stuff we try to cloud [the Bible with] is because people don't want to live right. It's as simple as that."

When asked about the high divorce rate in the country, Winans says marriage is "a choice" and each spouse must choose to stay married. She doesn't believe Christians have the right to give up on marriage.

"I've been married for 20 years, and it hasn't been easy. But I had to choose—do I love God more than I love myself?"

Her bold stance is tempered by a refreshing candor. This woman knows who she is, and she's honest about her weaknesses.

She continues: "I ask myself, 'CeCe, are you going to stay in this [marriage] and represent the Father, or are you going to get out?' I'm sorry, but people just don't want to die [to their selfishness].

"But there's forgiveness, thank God. If I end up divorced I'm wrong because God's Word is right. Surely He can make a marriage work, but we have to be willing to say, 'Yes, Lord.' Even when you're right, His way is still more right."

In addition to singing and being a wife, she is also a mom to two teenagers—Alvin III, 19, and Ashley, 17. Part of Winans' passion is to see young people become worshipers who are empowered by the Holy Spirit.

"We're going to get it if we don't start pouring into this generation. We must teach them how to be bold," she says. "They haven't seen enough examples of us being Christ-like in the world. Everybody else is coming out of the closet, and it seems like we're going into the closet."

That's partly the reason she helped found a ministry named My Sister's Keeper along with Kiwanis Hockett and Demetrus Stewart at Born Again Church, the Nashville congregation where Winans has been a member since 1992. My Sister's Keeper is a mentoring program designed to help pre-teen to college-age women become godly women.

"The ministry confronts real issues. We have former drug addicts, divorcees and teen moms in the group," says Stewart, who oversees the 6-year-old program. "The ladies need Jesus, and they need to know who God says they are."

In an effort to prepare for what God might call her to do next, Winans is gearing up to earn a college degree. In 2000, both Winans and husband Alvin completed a Ministry in Training program at their church. The two-year study prepared her for preaching and teaching the gospel. She senses that in addition to singing God is opening doors for her to minister the Word.

She already has a track record for preaching—even when audiences don't expect her to. At one concert this year, Winans learned that the pastor who was sponsoring the event at a large church had been promoting acceptance of homosexuality. So between songs, Winans boldly defended biblical sexuality—even though she knew the pastor was in the audience.

“My kids have seen me be a light in a dark world,” she says. “They've seen me go on whatever show and still magnify the Father. I tell them to have a relationship with the Father and go among the world and be the light.”

Ladies and gentlemen, meet the new CeCe Winans—the one who rocks religious boats and confronts sin like a prophet. This unassuming girl who started her career in a talent show knows that God has given her a big platform—and it is not just so she can entertain or enjoy celebrity.

Valerie G. Lowe is an associate editor with Charisma. She traveled to Nashville, Tennessee, to conduct this interview.