

[ART & CULTURE]
MUSIC

GOSPEL OF KIM

SPIRITUAL SONGBIRD KIM BURRELL, WHO DOLES OUT AUDACIOUS ADVICE ON REALITY TV, IS HEADED BACK TO THE RECORDING STUDIO.

By Tara Seetharam | Photography by Andy Hemingway



WITH FRIENDS LIKE THESE...
Kim Burrell rose to gospel
fame after gaining recognition
from peers like Whitney
Houston and Harry Connick Jr.

Jazz-gospel singer Kim Burrell, a preacher's daughter whose personality is as boldy vibrant as her voice, found fame early on, after gospel legend the Rev. James Cleveland heard a recording of her singing at a local church. He invited the teen to sing on his choir's youth album, and from there, she nabbed a deal with Pearl Records—and a shot at greatness.

"You never really brace yourself to be best friends with Whitney Houston," says Burrell, whose unstoppable talent has attracted famous pals and collaborators such as Houston, Stevie Wonder, Missy Elliot and P. Diddy.

The Jersey Village native, now 41, has shaped her fame into an ambitious career that's ranged from Grammy-nominated albums to reality-TV stints. This year, Mama Kim, as her fans know her, will be back to scrutinize and mentor contestants on BET's *American Idol*-like show for rising gospel singers, *Sunday Best*. She's fielded some criticism for her harsh judging style, but the strong-willed artist, returning for her fifth round, says the tough feedback is offered with love. "I enjoy poring into these people's lives."

It's an occupational hazard with which one of her good friends, *Idol*'s Harry Connick Jr., has also contended. Since sharing the stage with Connick on his 2003 Christmas special, the two have performed together numerous times—including for Pope Benedict XVI at Yankee Stadium in 2008, and here at Jones Hall in November.

This spring, Burrell is also beginning work on her long-awaited sixth album, a project halted following the death of her mother. "The loss has rerouted my life all together," she says. She hopes to channel her emotion into a record with a "universal, widespread message" that transcends gospel. After all, her influences are diverse, from Sting and Chicago to young country heartthrob Hunter Hayes.

Burrell will also continue her work at Houston's Love & Liberty Fellowship Church, which she founded, and leading its national Ephesians 4 conference—a venue for preachers, teachers and gospel musicians to hone their craft under mentors. That leaves just enough time to squeeze in some games of Nintendo's Mario Brothers, care for her 11-year-old son ("such a little gentleman") and maybe find him a stepdad. "I pray that day will happen soon."