

Michele Thomas is an American jazz musician, vocalist and songwriter from Chicago, IL. From growing up singing in church, to co-founding North Park University's gospel choir, to performing and teaching in Scandinavia, and then carrying that skill back to her hometown, Michele Thomas and her talents have carried her through a fantastic array of experiences within the massive world that is, music. By combining her gospel background with her deep love of jazz and appreciation for contemporary soul and R&B, Michele has crafted a sound that doesn't conform to one genre, but rather elegantly evokes the elements that make these genres so dynamic.

Michele's life and career began and grew in Chicago, Illinois. Born the daughter of a Pentecostal preacher in the Church of God In Christ, Michele grew up on a steady diet of gospel music. The impact it had on her, even at a young age was profound. As she recalls:

"I remember as a little girl listening to a gospel record of Vanessa Bell Armstrong, holding the record jacket and just crying as I listened to her sing. Her voice made me want to be more in my life. Music can go deeper than just your surface emotion and actually change minds and hearts."

These feelings, along with her innate talents, led to Michele arranging and conducting her church's choir while she was still in her preteen years. Her continued cultivation of those skills rewarded her with a position in the Chicago All-City choir and a scholarship to the Sherwood Conservatory of Music. Ultimately this led to Michele attending the aforementioned North Park University, graduating with a B.A. in music, and establishing their gospel choir. Her contributions there have been acknowledged through the years and on the 15th anniversary of the choir's founding she was invited back to perform with prominent gospel musician, Richard Smallwood.

Michele's cultivation of the choir program caught the eyes of others and in 1996 and 1998, she was invited to Sweden to help teach and perform gospel music to her audiences. The educational aspect of her career continued on state side as for nearly a decade, Michele has been working at her own lesson studio, the Soulstream Music Studio of Contemporary Voice. Thanks to her work in conducting choirs and arranging vocal parts, even dating back to her childhood, Michele had essentially been teaching for most of her life, and the studio was just a continuation of that. By offering private lessons, Michele could really help bring out a singer's individuality while also opening herself up to the community.

Community has always played a large part in Michele's life, at church, at university, at home, and at her studio. Over the last several years, her studio has helped raise money for The Firehouse Community Arts Center, an organization on Chicago's west side that offers creative arts programs to the youth. This kind of opportunity wasn't available to Michele as a child, and due to numerous public school closings in that region of the city, many children would have even less opportunity than she did if not for this non-profit group.

As is so often the unfortunate case, one of the reasons why Michele has such a deep understanding and appreciation for community is because of the losses she's suffered in her life,

namely the deaths of her mother and older sister. Even something as tragic as death and loss can foster a feeling of togetherness, sometimes in unexpected ways. As Michele tells it:

“I was asked to sing a gospel hymn for a family who was in the waiting room of a hospital because their mother was dying and they needed some encouragement. The thing is, I was there because my mother was dying too, but I still sang for them. Situations like these have taught me to have reverence for my gift and know the catharsis that music can bring to people’s lives.”

Community is also what propelled Michele’s history of performance in the Chicago jazz club scene. A local tavern named Big Joe’s 2 & 6 Pub would host some jam sessions every Sunday night, and upon recommendation from a friend, Michele went on stage to sing with the band and cemented Big Joe’s as her regular haunt. Several years later, while attending a jazz workshop in Amherst, MA, Michele spoke with noted jazz singer Sheila Jordan, and asked her for advice on what a young singer could do to build success in Chicago. Sheila referred her to a place called the Green Mill and its owner, Dave. As it turns out, Dave and Big Joe knew each other very well and Dave had been trying to get Michele’s contact information from him for some time. A beautiful example of how even a large community can form a tightly knit family.

Michele’s performances, like her music itself, are deep and emotional. Not only does she blend the genres of jazz and soul together with elements of folk, but she uses her voice and songwriting to stir something deeper within people, causing them to engage the lyric and the beat simultaneously. When you look at some of her favorite artists, you begin to see more clearly how her sound has developed. Michele has been compared to other powerful African-American singers such as Ella Fitzgerald, Dianne Reeves, Cassandra Wilson, and Anita Baker, but she also draws inspiration from Kurt Elling, James Taylor, and Sting.

In between all of her teaching, mentoring, and performing, Michele has found time to record two albums with the help of some of Chicago’s finest session musicians including her husband, Darren Scorza on drums and producing. Joining them are guitarist Neal Alger, bassist Bob Lovecchio, and Matt Nelson on piano. Her first album, *I’ll Take Romance*, was very well received with Asha Brodie of JazzReview.com stating:

“Indeed, if larks could record CDs, they’d sound like Michele. She has a style that is joyful and soulful, her love for jazz music emanates through her scats and song phrasing.”

Other musicians have taken note of Michele’s sound as well with Warner Bros. recording artist Kevin Mahogany saying, *“Best singer by far! Great feeling! Great voice! I’m in love!”* And Grammy award winning jazz artist Yusef Lateef commenting that, *“(She) has her own vocal sound, which is beautiful by the Grace of God.”*

Messenger is Michele’s most recent album and serves as a tribute to Stevie Wonder and the power of his music and songwriting. It also continues to display Michele’s talent for outfitting existing jazz instrumentals with original lyrics, paying homage to the composers and musicians she admires, while simultaneously displaying her vocal flare; take for example her rendition of

Hal Galper's "Triple Play."

Whether in her studio, on stage in a jazz club, or in the recording booth, Michele Thomas brings an amazing level of energy, passion, and emotion to everything she does. The substance behind her songs not only can inspire you to move your head and tap your feet, but to think about the nature of what makes life such a wonderful and rewarding challenge. Music is a powerful force whether it draws inspiration from gospel or the shared human experience and Michele Thomas aims to channel that energy into your heart, mind, and soul.