



2X Grammy Award Winner Gloria Gaynor Still Loves a Challenge

Transcript

MADDIE ORTON (00:02):

I am Maddie Orton, and you are listening to the Jersey Arts podcast. Gloria Gainor is best known as the Queen of Disco with her mega hit dance anthem, "I Will Survive." But this Jersey girl has never stopped taking risks and building on her success. Gainor has appeared on TV shows performed on Broadway, competed on the Masked Singer, written two books, lent her voice to various causes, and earned her B.S. in psychology and an honorary doctorate in music. She was inducted into the New Jersey Hall of Fame, the Dance Hall of Fame, and has won two Grammy awards. First in 1980 for "I Will Survive" and again in 2020 for Best Roots Gospel album with testimony. Most recently, a documentary on her life called "Gloria Gainor: I Will Survive" premiered at the 2023 Tribeca Film Festival, and up next she'll be singing at Bergen Performing Arts Center on September 16th. It was my absolute pleasure to chat with the music legend about growing up in New Jersey, how she got her big break, the legacy of disco and her many projects. Without further ado, here's my interview with Gloria Gainor.

MADDIE ORTON (01:13):

Gloria Gainor, thank you so much for joining me today.

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GLORIA GAYNOR (01:16):

Thank you. It's my great pleasure.

MADDIE ORTON (01:19):

You're such an incredible talent and icon, not just of the music scene, but also as a fellow Jersey girl.

GLORIA GAYNOR (1:25):

Yes!

MADDIE ORTON (1:27):

Member of the New Jersey Hall of Fame, born in Newark, and you've recently moved to Englewood Cliffs, right?

GLORIA GAYNOR (01:32):

Yes, that's right.

MADDIE ORTON (01:34):

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So what is it about the Garden State that's kept you so connected to it?

GLORIA GAYNOR (01:38):

Well, family for one, and my mother used to say it's the water. Fun fact.

MADDIE ORTON (01:48):

In a good way? The water in a good way or in like...

GLORIA GAYNOR (01:51):

In a good way! The drinking water. Because you go to a lot of places, you don't like the taste of the drinking water, and that's because of the natural resources that are in that area that get into the water.

MADDIE ORTON (02:05):

To me, having just gone to the beach last weekend, I feel like the Garden State water keeps me here too. I never want to be too far from the shore.

GLORIA GAYNOR (02:13):

Oh yeah, I know. I love it. We used to go to the shore all the time.

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MADDIE ORTON (02:17):

Where would you go?

GLORIA GAYNOR (02:18):

We went to Asbury Park, Atlantic City.

MADDIE ORTON (02:23):

Oh, that's the best. And I know you came from a musical family. Tell me a little bit about your music education growing up.

GLORIA GAYNOR (02:30):

Well, I always say I was educated by the greats because we were poor and I couldn't afford to go to any school or a music teacher, but I learned from the likes of Nat King Cole and Sarah Vaughn and Ella Fitzgerald and Nancy Wilson and all of those great singers. Nat King Cole, I always say taught me diction. Nat King Cole and Frank Sinatra taught me diction. Sarah Vaughn and Nancy Wilson taught me phrasing things that people don't really think about in singing today, and so I feel honored that I had those people to learn from.

MADDIE ORTON (03:06):

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It's funny actually, because a handful of those people are also Jersey people, right? Sarah Vaughn, Frank Sinatra.

GLORIA GAYNOR (03:13):

Yes. I hadn't thought of that. Yeah.

MADDIE ORTON (03:14):

I think there maybe there's something in the water actually that creates that many people coming out of Jersey. I love that. So how did you start honing your craft? Were you listening to those records and trying to...

GLORIA GAYNOR (03:26):

Listening to them and learning what I felt they had to offer. Like I say, I did learn diction from Nat King Cole and Frank Sinatra. I learned phrasing from them both. I learned phrasing also from Ella Fitzgerald and Gloria Lynn and Nancy Wilson, and I stretched my range by listening to and trying to reach the notes of Barbara Streisand, and so these are the things that I thought were important to singing, because I really hate it when I hear a song that I like, but I can't understand the words or when the artist seems to be not making enough of what the song is actually about.

MADDIE ORTON (04:09):

That's so interesting.

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GLORIA GAYNOR (04:10):

So I always say if people are not going to understand your words and they're not going to get what you're talking about, you might as well be a hummingbird Using words if nobody understands them.

MADDIE ORTON (04:22):

But you're right. I mean, it's funny specifically, I grew up on a lot of Ella Fitzgerald and Frank Sinatra specifically.

GLORIA GAYNOR (4:29):

Oh, interesting.

MADDIE ORTON (4:32):

I'm a musical theater nerd myself. So there's a lot of crossover there, I think with American standards and stuff, but they both, you're right, make such meals out of the lyrics that it's just so lovely to listen to. So were you walking around and singing? I mean, you had a family of musicians, so were people saying we need to get her in front of somebody, or were they like, this is a hard career, don't do this?

GLORIA GAYNOR (04:58):

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No, I grew up with five brothers who also sang. They never got to sing professionally, but they sang around the house. They sang around the neighborhood. They sang in school, and I didn't sing with them because I was a girl, and so nobody even knew I could sing.

MADDIE ORTON (05:14):

I can't imagine that, okay.

GLORIA GAYNOR (05:16):

They didn't even know I could sing and I wanted to be heard. The way that I got discovered was that I was working at Bamberger's department store, met a girl there. We became friends. I eventually became her daughter's godmother, and one day she called me. I was on my first day of vacation, and she called and asked me could I come and babysit for my goddaughter because the babysitter had not shown up. So I said, well, I'm not going anywhere for my vacation so I can come for the two weeks, but you'll have to get somebody else after that. I went and the first day I was there, I heard somebody walking in the apartment upstairs. Well, I just wanted somebody to hear me sing. I didn't looking for accolades or applause or anything. I just wanted somebody to hear me. So I began to follow that person's footsteps.

MADDIE ORTON (06:10):

Oh my gosh.

GLORIA GAYNOR (06:11):

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And when they would stop, I would stop and sing, and I did that every day for the two weeks that I was there. A couple of weeks later, my brother and I are going, we went to a movie and on the way home we passed by a club, a nightclub, and I saw the name of the group that was performing and I said, I heard they were good. Let's go in and see them. We went in and as I was sitting there, someone went up on the stage. I took the microphone from the band and said, ladies and gentlemen, we have a young lady in the audience. She's got a wonderful voice. Don't know her name, her last name, but her first name is Gloria. Maybe if we get a good round of applause, we can get her up to do a number. And he's looking at me and I am petrified. I always say, first I was afraid I was petrified, but I went, because this is something I had been longing for.

GLORIA GAYNOR (7:03):

I went up and they asked me what did I want to sing? Well, while I was sitting there, they had played "Save Your Love For Me" by Nancy Wilson, and I knew that song. So I told them I wanted to sing that. So they played it and I sang it. I got a standing ovation and they come to me afterwards and ask me if I can come and sing with them.

MADDIE ORTON (07:23):

Did they know who you were?

GLORIA GAYNOR (07:25):

Exactly? They had a singer that she was delinquent. And so I asked them that, how did you know that I could sing? And it turns out that the club owner was the person whose footsteps I'd been singing to.

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MADDIE ORTON (7:39):

Stop it! And you didn't know this?

GLORIA GAYNOR (07:43):

This is a God moment. No, I had no idea. I had never seen him.

MADDIE ORTON (07:47):

Oh my God.

GLORIA GAYNOR (07:48):

The way he saw me was that one day, he told me one day I was leaving the building and my girlfriend called me out the window, and so he went to the window to see who she was calling, and when I turned around, he saw what I looked like. He got my name, when she called me, and then when he saw me come into the club, he went to the band and told him about me. He'd been hearing me sing for two weeks.

MADDIE ORTON (08:07):

Oh my God, I'm going to start singing so loudly in my apartment today just in case. That's amazing. And you were signed by Clive Davis, right? Was that the first person who really launched you to the next level?

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GLORIA GAYNOR (08:21):

He signed me to my first record contract, yeah.

MADDIE ORTON (08:24):

And he has quite the reputation, obviously, for being somebody who just understood amazing voices and talents, but also was supposed to be a really nice guy.

GLORIA GAYNOR (08:33):

He was very, very nice. He had me come three times and I'm like, this guy just likes my voice because there's no way the president of a record company needs to hear me three times to determine whether or not I could sing.

MADDIE ORTON (08:45):

Three times to audition? That must've been so nerve wracking.

GLORIA GAYNOR (08:48):

Well, it was nerve wracking the second time, the third time, I'm like, "okay, what's up?"

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MADDIE ORTON (08:53):

Is that just what his style was?

GLORIA GAYNOR (08:55):

I have no idea. I just know that he finally signed to me to Columbia Records, and then he left.

GLORIA GAYNOR (09:02):

And I was not signed to him. I was signed to the company, so I was left there, and so it took a while for me to take off. Eventually, Bruce Greenberg from it was MGM. He was at MGM, and he heard my song that I recorded at Columbia and decided he wanted me on his label, and they came and that signed. I'll never forget running, running across New York to get the contract before because it was like, if you don't get this contract signed by seven o'clock or something, oh my gosh, the deal is done. And I had to run. Some reason they didn't get it to us, and at the last minute I was running across New York to get, oh my gosh, contract back to 7th Avenue.

MADDIE ORTON (09:49):

That's amazing. That's such one of those early career stories where it's just so crazy to think about now and then you are obviously mega hit, "I Will Survive," just totally launches your career and that album where people are just sort of listening to it in its entirety, which is unprecedented, right?

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GLORIA GAYNOR (10:09):

Yeah, absolutely. It was. It definitely was. Now, I loved the idea. Tom Moulton, the great mixologist, came up with that idea, and I loved it because I love dancing and one five-minute record was never enough for me. I loved that.

MADDIE ORTON (10:27):

The album is entirely just music straight through that you can play without having to lift the record.

GLORIA GAYNOR (10:32):

And the other reason why I thought that was a great idea was I was thinking about the DJs. They're in these tiny little booths and they play and they have to keep playing these records when they need a break. Whenever they need a break, they're going to put on my record.

MADDIE ORTON (10:46):

That's so smart. I love that. And you talked about performing, "I Will Survive" on the catwalk at Studio 54, which I just can't even imagine. That's like being the epicenter of the epicenter of disco. What was that like?

GLORIA GAYNOR (11:05):

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It was awesome. It was really, really great. I'll never forget because Julio Iglesias was in town and he had come to Studio 54 where they knew he was coming. They expected him to sing, but he wouldn't sing. So I happened to be there that night. I wasn't performing. I just happened to be there, and I went and I told him that he won't sing. I'll sing, and I did "I Will Survive." I just felt like the reigning queen over because I was on the catwalk and very few artists dared go on the catwalk.

MADDIE ORTON (11:37):

Really? Why is that?

GLORIA GAYNOR (11:38):

Because it's dangerous!

MADDIE ORTON (11:38):

Yeah, I mean, that makes sense.

GLORIA GAYNOR (11:41):

So I went up on the catwalk and I was singing, I was surviving, and then I sang it in Spanish, which of course a lot of people who were there were Latin because...

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MADDIE ORTON (11:53):

Oh, they were there for...

GLORIA GAYNOR (11:54):

Julio Iglesias.

MADDIE ORTON (11:56):

Yeah. Oh my gosh.

GLORIA GAYNOR (11:58):

So that just added to my ability to take his place.

MADDIE ORTON (12:02):

Also, what a note to all of the performers out there, which is just always be ready. Yeah.

GLORIA GAYNOR (12:08):

Yeah. Well, I learned that in church.

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MADDIE ORTON (12:11):

Wait, in church? Why? In church?

GLORIA GAYNOR (12:13):

Because my pastor teaches be prepared.

MADDIE ORTON (12:17):

Yeah. Yeah. It's true. I mean, I think that, I assume for performers, a big part of that is I would say most of it is talent, but probably a huge chunk of that is timing and luck.

GLORIA GAYNOR (12:28):

Oh, yeah. Be prepared.

MADDIE ORTON (12:37):

I'm a big fan of disco myself. I grew up on the music and my parents actually taught me how to hustle in our family room.

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GLORIA GAYNOR (12:43):

Oh, great! I love it!

MADDIE ORTON (12:46):

Yeah, I love it. And I think to me, in terms of the legacy of disco, I think about how it celebrated voices in black and brown communities and queer communities that maybe weren't previously going as mainstream. And clearly, your song "I Will Survive" was preserved by the Library of Congress, which wow. What do you see the legacy of disco in our culture as being?

GLORIA GAYNOR (13:11):

Something that most people don't seem to recognize. Disco music is the only music in the history of music ever to bring together people from every race, creed, color, nationality, and age group.

MADDIE ORTON (13:25):

I love that.

GLORIA GAYNOR (13:26):

And it's true.

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MADDIE ORTON (13:28):

And that I'm sure was very special at the time and very different from what was happening.

GLORIA GAYNOR (13:33):

No music has ever done that. Every music has pockets of people that it appeals to. This music appealed to everyone.

MADDIE ORTON (13:41):

Do you think that's part of why sort of the massive pushback happened? The disco sucks pushback?

GLORIA GAYNOR (13:48):

Absolutely. It was getting too big. It was negatively affecting the bottom line of too many people also. At least they thought that. They thought that, which to me was so stupid. Nobody only likes one kind of music.

MADDIE ORTON (14:02):

No, that's so true. I mean, I also wonder if it came from maybe sort of like a homophobia or racist kind of place of whatever that is, being uncomfortable with seeing such a celebration of different cultures that way.

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GLORIA GAYNOR (14:18):

Maybe, could be.

MADDIE ORTON (14:19):

Was that a shock when it happened?

GLORIA GAYNOR (14:23):

It was a shock to me. I thought it was the dumbest thing I'd ever heard of. I mean, you go out there and you burn all of these records. Explain to me why you had them to start with if you didn't like the music.

MADDIE ORTON (14:32):

Yeah, it's so true. Also, how do you not love disco? I cannot not dance when I hear that music. I just love it so much. So you have been involved in so many different facets of the entertainment industry, and it's just honestly incredible to me. I'm just going to list some off here. You've done TV, you've written books, you've performed on Broadway. You recently performed on The Mask Singer. You won a Grammy in 2020 for your gospel album "Testimony," and then somewhere in there you found the time to earn your degree in psychology. I'm always kind of scared to try new things myself, especially professionally. How do you stay so motivated and also so fearless in trying new things?

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GLORIA GAYNOR (15:24):

That's a very good question. I don't know. I just, see something I like or something I want to do, and I just go for it. I figure my mother used to say nothing beats a child, but a failure.

MADDIE ORTON (15:37):

That's interesting.

GLORIA GAYNOR (15:38):

I mean, you can't win if you can't fail if you don't try, but you can't win if you don't try.

MADDIE ORTON (15:44):

Do you feel that sort of fear when you try something new? Or are you just invigorated?

GLORIA GAYNOR (15:49):

No, I don't know. I don't really feel fear. I feel the invigorated kind of even maybe a little scintillated by the fact that I could miss it, miss the mark.

MADDIE ORTON (16:03):

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I don't relate to that, but that sounds very healthy. I like that. But I think that's great.

GLORIA GAYNOR (16:09):

I always remember the story. One thing that has inspired me throughout my life is the story of Jackie Robinson, how he had the most strikes of any baseball player because he hit at everything.

MADDIE ORTON (16:25):

Wow.

GLORIA GAYNOR (16:26):

He swung at everything. So he had the most hits.

MADDIE ORTON (16:30):

Yeah. And what is it? You lose a hundred percent of the shots you don't take. Right. I mean, I guess I'm crossing sports metaphors here, but...

GLORIA GAYNOR (16:37):

Yeah, but that's true.

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MADDIE ORTON (16:37):

Yeah. Wow. I love that. That's great.

GLORIA GAYNOR (16:40):

What is the other one? If you aim at nothing, you'll hit it every time.

MADDIE ORTON (16:44):

Oh, man. So of all of these things that you've tried, what has been the most surprising thing that you've found that you really love?

GLORIA GAYNOR (16:53):

One thing people don't really know about me is that I am more passionate about dancing than singing.

MADDIE ORTON (17:00):

Than about singing. Really?

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GLORIA GAYNOR (17:02):

Yeah. I mean, I've seen dancing that made me cry. I've never heard anybody sing that made me cry. Yeah, I don't know. It just touches some place in me that nothing else touches.

MADDIE ORTON (17:14):

That's beautiful. What kind of dance do you like?

GLORIA GAYNOR (17:17):

I love all kinds of dancing, but I love ballet. I love interpretive dancing. I love jazz dancing. I love hip hop dancing. I just love dancing.

MADDIE ORTON (17:29):

So to be inaugurated into the dance music hall of fame must have just been so meaningful.

GLORIA GAYNOR (17:34):

Yeah. Yeah.

MADDIE ORTON (17:41):

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You have a concert coming up at Bergen PAC on September 16th. What can people expect from your song selections and from that experience?

GLORIA GAYNOR (17:49):

Something old, something new, something borrowed. Nothing blue.

MADDIE ORTON (17:54):

Nothing blue. That's fabulous. You also just had the world premiere of your documentary, "Gloria Gaynor: I Will Survive" at the Tribeca Film Festival in June. Tell me a little bit about that.

GLORIA GAYNOR (18:06):

Well, it was so many years in the making, seven or eight years in the making, and we traveled all over the world doing parts of it, and we just had a great time. It was quite cathartic doing it, bringing back old things and seeing where I had grown and what had come out of my trials and tribulations, and it was a wonderful, wonderful experience, and I'm so glad that I did it. And I mean, I hope that it does very, very well, but it did well for me if it doesn't do well for anybody else.

MADDIE ORTON (18:47):

Oh, I love that. What was the inspiration behind doing the project? What made you want to do that?

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GLORIA GAYNOR (18:52):

Well, the producer came and asked me to do it. I would've never thought of doing it. I didn't know that my life was interesting enough for anybody to be interested in. I think you don't ever think your life is interesting. You always think everybody else's life is interesting.

MADDIE ORTON (19:09):

I don't know. I've been reading about you and I think your life is pretty interesting.

GLORIA GAYNOR (19:15):

But she came and asked me to do it, and I was like, okay, sure. Why not?

MADDIE ORTON (19:20):

Wow, that's great. So what does the documentary cover?

GLORIA GAYNOR (19:25):

The biggest part of it is the struggle that I had being accepted to do a gospel album because I was the disco queen and nobody wanted to hear from me in the gospel field.

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MADDIE ORTON (19:43):

Wow. That really surprises me.

GLORIA GAYNOR (19:45):

No record company. Because "she's a disco singer. What does she know about gospel? What does she know about God?"

MADDIE ORTON (19:51):

Wow.

GLORIA GAYNOR (19:52):

So yeah, it was quite a struggle and I'm very happy. Not only that I managed to do it. I mean, I financed the whole thing myself, but not only that I managed to do it, but that it was so well received by the entertainment industry.

MADDIE ORTON (20:08):

Yeah, I mean, a Grammy is pretty good. That's fantastic. Well, I can't wait to see it when I'm able to see it, and I'm so excited for your upcoming Bergen PAC concert.

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GLORIA GAYNOR (20:19):

Thank you. I'm looking forward to that. Nothing like singing for your homies.

MADDIE ORTON (20:22):

Thank you so much for giving me your time today. It was such a pleasure.

GLORIA GAYNOR (20:25):

My pleasure. Thank you so much for your interest.

MADDIE ORTON (20:31):

Gloria Gaynor will perform at Bergen PAC on Saturday, September 16th. For more information, visit bergenPAC.org. If you'd liked this episode, be sure to give us a review, subscribe and tell your friends a transcript of this podcast as well as links to related content and more about the arts in New Jersey can be found on JerseyArts.com. The Jersey Arts Podcast is presented by ArtPride New Jersey, advancing a state of creativity since 1986. The show is co-founded by and currently supported by funds from the New Jersey State Council on the Arts with additional support from the National Endowment for the Arts. This episode was hosted, produced, and edited by yours Truly, Maddie Orton. Executive producers are Jim Atkinson and Cie Stroud. Special thanks to the one and only Gloria Gaynor. I'm Maddie Orton for the Jersey Arts Podcast. Thanks for listening.

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