



Aaliyah: More Than a Woman

By Christopher John Farley

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Aaliyah Dana Haughton was that music business rarity: a teen idol who transformed herself into a critically acclaimed hip-hop soul artist, a singer who successfully made the transition to actress, and a beautiful woman who never let the trappings of celebrity go to her head. Following her impressive debut at age 14 with the album *Age Ain't Nothin' but a Number*, Aaliyah raised the bar with her hugely influential and bestselling follow-up, *One in a Million*. She then took her talents to Hollywood, starring in the action thriller *Romeo Must Die* and the highly anticipated horror film *The Queen of the Damned*. But soon after the release of her third album in the summer of 2001, Aaliyah's life was cut short in a tragic plane crash.

Here is the inspirational story of the star *The Washington Post* dubbed "Hip-Hop's Lady Di" -- a woman who, by the time of her death at age twenty-two, touched legions of fans around the world with her haunting voice and gentle spirit.

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Aaliyah: More Than a Woman By Christopher John Farley Bibliography

- Rank: #2698207 in Books
- Published on: 2001-12-01
- Released on: 2001-12-01
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 6.75" h x .58" w x 4.19" l, .24 pounds
- Binding: Mass Market Paperback
- 208 pages

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Editorial Review

Review

Beyonce Knowles of Destiny's Child Aaliyah was an angel.

About the Author

Christopher John Farley, a graduate of Harvard University, is the music critic for *Time* magazine, and interviewed Aaliyah shortly before the accident that claimed her life. He is also the author of the novel *My Favorite War*. He lives in New York City.

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Chapter One: Rock the Boat

She was always a hard worker. Always. That was just her.

-- Timbaland, Aaliyah's longtime producer

The weather said nothing.

It was another perfect day on Abaco, a tiny island in the Bahamas about 200 miles northeast of Miami. The weather was warm, the sky was smiling and so was *Aaliyah*. She had every reason to be happy. The young singer's new album, the self-titled *Aaliyah*, was a hit. It had debuted high on the *Billboard* charts and had received rave reviews from the likes of *TIME*, *Spin*, and *Vibe* magazines. The veteran music publication *Rolling Stone* had given the new CD four stars, declaring that "on *Aaliyah*, a near-flawless declaration of strength and independence, she ups the ante for herself and her contemporaries -- as well as her musical heroes. *Aaliyah* is *Control*, *Velvet Rope*, and *Jagged Little Pill* all rolled into one."

Aaliyah had other reasons to be happy as well. Recently, she had secretly become engaged to Damon Dash, the co-CEO of Roc-a-Fella records, a leading hip-hop label and the home to Jay-Z and a number of other top rappers. The pair had refused to comment on their relationship to the press, but it was an open secret among their friends and close fans. Dash and Aaliyah were often seen out on the town, sometimes in Harlem, sometimes in the Hamptons, always smiling, laughing, clearly enjoying one another's company. Their engagement wasn't formal -- few things are in the hip-hop world -- but Dash planned on marrying his new sweetheart as soon as time opened up in her busy schedule for them to do it up right. Meanwhile, they were living the life, having a good time: the newest prince and princess of hip-hop nightlife.

Aaliyah's schedule, however, was punishing. She had long ago set her sights on being a total entertainer -- a star of both concert stages and movie screens -- and the commitment required sacrifice. She was now working hard to make sure her new album had a long shelf life and had come to the Bahamas to film a video for her latest single, a song titled "Rock the Boat." Filming for the video kicked off in Miami on August 22nd, and it required some difficult underwater shots. After that part of the shoot, Aaliyah and about a dozen of her associates flew down to the Bahamas to complete the project.

It was a loose-knit, jovial group. Everybody was working hard, but everyone was having a good time. Gina Smith, 30, born in Fort Worth, Texas but living in New Jersey, had recently come on board Team Aaliyah as product manager for Aaliyah's label, Blackground Records. Aaliyah had called Smith herself when she got the job, which entailed living, breathing, and sleeping Aaliyah's music and making sure it got a deserving

amount of publicity from the press and attention from radio stations. Smith worked in New York, but never lost her southern courtliness.

Then there was Eric Foreman, 29, of Hollywood, who was Aaliyah's hairstylist. He was known as a funny man, the kind of guy that kept everybody laughing; the kind of guy who, one wild night in Atlanta, climbed up on stage at a club and performed his own all-in-fun, impromptu strip tease that was, by one report, far more entertaining than anything else on stage that evening.

There was also makeup artist Christopher Maldonado, 32, of New York. He wasn't the regular makeup guy, but he was best friends with Aaliyah's makeup artist who, while tied up in Europe with Macy Gray, had dispatched his pal Maldonado to fill his slot. Maldonado was the opposite of Foreman: He was laid back and calm, always collected, never excited, taking life as it comes. He liked to party as much as the next guy, but he was always cool about it.

Protecting Aaliyah was her 6-foot 8-inch, 300-pound bodyguard Scott Gallin, 41, of Pompano Beach, Florida. Gallin was a big guy, but was, by all accounts, a friendly and caring one as well. He was a divorced dad who had custody of his 15-year-old son, Lyle, to whom he was devoted. He had worked as a bouncer in various joints around South Florida, but he was an aspiring actor as well, and had appeared in small roles in the movies **Any Given Sunday** and *Holy Man*. As a bodyguard he was in high demand -- Ricky Martin, Madonna, and Rosie O'Donnell had used his services in the past. He was the kind of full-service, beyond-the-call-of-duty bodyguard who, if the client was out of town, would call up the client's spouse, just to make sure they were okay. Right now he was totally focused on his current employer, Aaliyah. Nothing bad would happen to her as long as he could help it.

So with that cast of characters, the shoot was bound to be a good time. What's not to enjoy about being in the Bahamas on a beautiful day? What's not to love about dancing on a 72-foot catamaran as it glides through clear Caribbean waters? You can feel the joy when you see scenes of the video: Aaliyah's on a beach, the ocean stretched out behind her; Aaliyah wearing a sexy red top, and dancing slyly, suggestively, playfully before the cameras. "It was a fun shoot," said Annie Russell, a local taxi operator who organized a squad of drivers to assist the video crew. "Everybody in that group was getting along fine, like they loved one another." The first day Aaliyah arrived, she and Gallin asked Russell where they could rent some motorscooters. Clearly work and play were going to mix on this trip.

The video was helmed by one of the best directors in the business: Hype Williams. When you wanted a hit video, when you wanted a clip that the suburbs would groove to but the streets would respect, you signed up Hype. In the past, Williams had worked with Busta Rhymes, the Notorious B.I.G., and Missy "Misdemeanor" Elliott. That video with Missy Elliott in the puffy costume? ("Supa Dupa Fly [The Rain]" if you don't know). That's Hype. That video with Sean "P. Diddy" Combs in the shiny suit? ("Been Around the World"). That's Hype.

Work started that day around 10 A.M. The video went off like any other. Lots of stops and starts. Lots of makeup touch-ups. Lots of adjustments to the lighting. Aaliyah never complained. That wasn't her style. "Lots of people in this business are hard to work with," says one publicist who worked with Aaliyah. "She's always professional. She's always, what do you need me to do, how can I help. She never takes a star trip. She's an angel. She's like an angel sent down to earth." That day, Aaliyah was in nearly all of the shots: after all, it was her video. But instead of retiring to her cabin after her scene, she would stay and watch the other shots, observing the process and supporting everyone else.

Around 2 P.M. everyone broke for lunch. Around 5 P.M. they were all done. Aaliyah washed off her makeup

and prepared to leave. She signed a few autographs and then got into a cab. "Bye! See you all later!" she cheerfully called out to Russell and a few of the others who had come to say their farewells.

And why shouldn't she have been happy? She had work to do, but it was work she loved. She had commitments to keep back in the States, but she was looking forward to keeping them. She had cool music in the works, including a collaboration with hip-hop/folk star Beck called "I Am Music" that her longtime creative partner, Timbaland, was producing. Her movie career was taking off. She had recently finished filming *The Queen of the Damned*, a movie based on the Anne Rice novel. The big screen adaptation starred Aaliyah as the title character, an ancient -- but eternally youthful -- vampire. She had also signed on to star in not just one, but two sequels to the action franchise *The Matrix*. She was set to take some martial arts training and then fly down to Australia to begin filming.

But even before that she had a date with MTV. She was going to be a presenter at the upcoming MTV Video Music Awards. It was the party everyone wanted to be at -- U2, OutKast, No Doubt, Nelly, Janet Jackson, they were all scheduled to be there. Aaliyah just wanted to get back to Florida and then New York City so she could hook up with Dash, chill for a little bit, and then start doing the things she needed to do. The first order of business, however, was to get off Abaco and out of the Bahamas. She'd had a good time, but now it was time to roll.

Aaliyah, along with Maldonado, Smith, Foreman, Gallin, three other passengers, and the pilot, Luis Morales III, boarded a twin-engine Cessna 402B.

The plane rolled down the runway.

It was Saturday, August 25, 2001.

It was a warm day. The sky was smiling.

Disaster was moments away.

The weather said nothing.

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Users Review

From reader reviews:

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