

How Sweet Yolanda!

Written by Kam Williams, The “How Sweet the Sound” Interview



Ever since her late-Eighties debut, “Just as I Am,” Yolanda Adams has triumphantly carried the torch for contemporary gospel and inspirational music via a dozen glorious albums. Stunningly beautiful, exceptionally educated, filled with the spirit and blessed with one of the most powerful voices in any genre of music, this former schoolteacher is a stately beacon of God’s light.

Born in Houston on August 27, 1961, Yolanda has earned numerous accolades for her shining efforts, including the first American Music Award for Contemporary Gospel Artist and four Gospel Music Association Dove Awards. Among the highlights of her career was winning five Grammy Awards which includes 1999’s Best Contemporary Soul Gospel Album for “Mountain High...Valley Low” featuring her crossover breakthrough hit “Open My Heart,” and 2005’s Best Gospel Song, co-written by Ms. Adams herself, “Be Blessed.”

Christened “The First Lady of Modern Gospel,” Yolanda’s pioneering blend of gospel with R&B infused with a touch of jazz continues to inspire her fans and transform the musical landscape. “The Yolanda Adams Morning Show” can currently be heard on radio stations all across the country.

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Most of Yolanda’s fans know that she was once a schoolteacher; less known is the fact that she earned her college degree in Radio/Television Broadcasting. Joined by her distinguished co-hosts, the hilarious Marcus Wiley, and insightful Anthony Valary, Yolanda’s show is all about waking up in the sandbox every morning and having F-U-N!

“We have a great morning show,” Yolanda says, beaming. “It’s not a gospel show or an inspirational show, but a versatile program. I wanted to create a clean, alternative morning show for people of faith.

Faith, Love, Forgiveness, Protection and Praise! These are just five of the ten gifts explored in Yolanda Adams new power-filled inaugural book, “Points of Power.” Inspired by the Points of Power segment from her morning show, Yolanda reveals her own personal experiences to show how the Bible will enlighten readers and provide them with insight and understanding to respond positively to life’s challenges. “Points of Power” provides the tools, the wisdom and spiritual guidance for living a praise-filled, prayerful, and joyful life.

Here, she talks about her life and career, and about hosting Verizon’s “How Sweet the Sound,” the country’s most prestigious gospel music celebration and competition. Now, in its fifth year of celebrating the community and the power of gospel music, “How Sweet the Sound’s” national finale will be staged in New York on November 4th at the Barclays Center in Brooklyn.

Kam Williams: Hi Yolanda, I’m honored to have this opportunity to speak with you.

Yolanda Adams: It’s great to talk to you, Kam.

KW: What interested you in How Sweet the Sound?

YA: First of all, it gave me an opportunity to spend time with my great friends Donald Lawrence, CeCe Winans, Erica Campbell, Fred Hammond and Hezekiah Walker. Whenever we can hang out, it’s wonderful. Unless we’re on tour together, we usually don’t have a lot of opportunities to see each other, other than at something special like award shows. So, I was excited to do this.

KW: What’s it been like judging How Sweet the Sound? Is it similar to the job you do on BET’s Sunday Best?

YA: No, I actually co-hosted with Donald this year. So, I didn’t have to face the difficult challenge of judging these great choirs.

KW: Do you care to share which choir you think is going to win?

YA: The crazy part is that the finalists are the top choirs from all of the cities that we chose. So, there are no duds left in this selection of choirs. These really are just the cream of the crop, the best choirs in the U.S.

KW: How is picking the best Gospel group different from picking the best singer from a show like American Idol or The Voice?

YA: The only difference is whether you can feel the heart of the song, the heart of what they’re trying to convey. You still have to be professional. The choir’s moves still have to be in sync. So, you’re looking at the same criteria you’d find on American Idol or Sunday Best.

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KW: I told my readers I'd be interviewing you, so I'm going to mix-in their questions with some of my own. Larry Greenberg says, I just listened to "Victory" and I was truly blown away and inspired. Do you mind if I listen to it every time I start a new project?

YA: Not at all. Thank you so much, Larry. I appreciate it. [Laughs]

KW: Harriet Pakula-Teweles asks: Which of your songs has the most personal meaning for you?

YA: That's like asking: Which of your children is the most precious? When I write a song, it comes from the heart and is based on a specific experience. You can't really say that one experience is greater than another, because all of your experiences take you through life on this journey.

KW: Harriet also asks: Which one do you think has the biggest emotional impact on your audience?

YA: Wow! I have no idea. Some days it may be "Just a Prayer Away." Some audiences want "Victory," like Larry. Others want "The Battle Is the Lord's." I have so many songs that have impacted people in different ways. "Fragile Heart" is one that really took off years ago in South Africa when I had 20,000 people singing along with me.

KW: Finally, Harriet asks: Do you ever feel that the spiritual essence of a Gospel song's message is transformed when you sing in a secular arena instead of a church?

YA: No. No. Unh-uh. The message is still the same. The delivery is still the same. You have to understand that everyone has a heart, and when it hits, the emotion is there.

KW: Editor/Legist Patricia Turnier says: You have a great voice. Have you ever sung in French?

YA: Thank you very much. No, I haven't, but we are definitely looking at doing an album in French, and another one in Spanish.

KW: Patricia would also like to know if you are interested in writing your autobiography.

YA: Nah, not yet. I don't think it's time yet. I still have a few more things I want to accomplish first. Maybe in another ten years.

KW: Lastly, Patricia's says: You served as spokesperson for Operation Rebound, a program that addressed the concern of inner-city schoolchildren. Many young people want to make it in the music business and do not see the value of education. You worked in the past as a schoolteacher while you were modeling. Can you share with us the importance of education and how it helped you in the music business?

YA: Education helps you to be a well-rounded person, period. It teaches you how to take in information and data, process it, and use it for life building. Education was key in my family. You were going to college. Unfortunately, I think what's happening nowadays is that many young people think they don't need to avail themselves of higher education because a lot of music stars left high school before graduating. Kam, you and I both know that you can be hot today in the music business and then nobody knows who you are tomorrow. So, you always have to have a good education. I am a stickler for that.

KW: And some of those rappers are college-educated.

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YA: Yeah, nobody talks about how Puffy went to Howard University or about Lil Wayne attending the University of Houston. All the young kids know is what they see on the videos. They don't realize that these guys have taken managerial and business courses, and know how to brand and how to market themselves. They're very smart.

KW: The music maven Heather Covington question: What was the last song you listened to?

YA: Kim Burrell's "Sweeter." That was the last one we played before signing off today. <http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/B004XLZVT2/ref=nosim/thslfofire-20>

KW: The Tasha Smith question: Are you ever afraid?

YA: I know Tasha very well. She's so fearless, I would never see her as afraid. Fear? Wow! I don't call it fear. I call it awareness. I only think fear comes when you're unsure or in danger, but I've never been put in a dangerous situation.

KW: The Columbus Short question: Are you happy?

YA: Oh, yes!

KW: The Teri Emerson question: When was the last time you had a good laugh?

YA: About fifteen minutes ago with my daughter. She's hilarious! [LOL]

KW: What is your guiltiest pleasure?

YA: My guiltiest pleasure must be watching Ru Paul's Drag U.

KW: The bookworm Troy Johnson question: What was the last book you read?

YA: The Law of Confession by Bill Winston. <http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/1606834088/ref=nosim/thslfofire-20>

KW: What is your favorite dish to cook?

YA: Omigosh! Kam, I just love to cook. Some of my favorites are sautéed kale, shrimp scampi and lobster risotto.

KW: The Sanaa Lathan question: What excites you?

YA: Wow! That's a great question. New challenges, especially doing things that people think are impossible for a Gospel artist.

KW: The Uduak Oduok question: Who is your favorite clothes designer?

YA: Me! I have my own fashion line that can be found at <http://yolandaadamslive.com/ya-collection.com/>. I also definitely like Mark Bouwer, Donna Karan and Kevan Hall, and I've really been into Etro these days.

KW: Dante Lee, author of "Black Business Secrets," asks: What was the best business decision you ever made, and what was the worst?

YA: My best was to own everything that belongs to me. My worst was once making a spur of the moment decision because I needed the money.

KW: When you look in the mirror, what do you see?

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YA: I see a very happy mom who is in love with life and in love.

KW: If you could have one wish instantly granted, what would that be for?

YA: I know everybody says world peace but, seriously, world peace. I really wish we could have world peace.

KW: The Kerry Washington question: If you were an animal, what animal would you be?

YA: Probably an eagle. I respect the eagle so much.

KW: The Ling-Ju Yen question: What is your earliest childhood memory?

YA: Having lots of fun and laughter in the house with my mom, dad and siblings. I didn't grow up in one of those restrictive Christian households where you couldn't do this or that. We were brought up with a great collection of good morals and good values, but we also had fun. We'd go to church on Sunday, but then have ice cream, roller skate or play in the park afterwards.

KW: The Melissa Harris-Perry question How did your first big heartbreak impact who you are as a person?

YA: Guess that would've had to be in the third grade when Michael Gray said he didn't like me. [Laughs] It was puppy love, and the pain of the rejection left me convinced I was never going to share my feelings with anybody ever again.

KW: The Judyth Piazza question: What key quality do you believe all successful people share?

YA: Determination!

KW: The Michael Ealy question: If you could meet any historical figure, who would it be?

YA: Mahalia Jackson.

KW: Attorney Bernadette Beekman asks: What is your favorite charity?

YA: I have several. I love St. Jude's and The Children's Defense Fund. And I have my own, The Voice of an Angel Foundation. We mentor kids from 9th grade all the way through college.

KW: What advice do you have for anyone who wants to follow in your footsteps?

YA: Hone your craft, study the history of the music, and sing anywhere that you can.

KW: What was it like to be invited to participate in Oprah's Legends Ball?

YA: It was amazing! First of all, I felt quite honored to be acknowledged as one of the younguns with Shirley Caesar serving as my legend. Oprah was very adamant that she wanted to celebrate the people who had made a difference in her life. I had no idea that I had impacted her that deeply. My invitation came at one of the lowest points of my life. No one knows this, so you're getting an exclusive, Kam. I was going through a divorce proceeding. And then to get an invitation saying that you've made a difference in someone else's life when your own is going down the tubes relationship and family-wise, can you imagine where I was in that space? So, I had to make a decision, do I go, even though I might not feel up to participating, knowing what's going on at home with the

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lawyers? How do I deal with this? Then a soft voice whispered to me, "Go, and be blessed!" And I was like, "Okay, I'm going." It was the best decision I could have ever made, because there were so many wonderful women there who had impacted my life since I was a little girl: Dionne Warwick, Leontyne Price, Nancy Wilson, Shirley Caesar, Gladys Knight, and many others. It was almost as if Oprah knew how they had affected my life. I was just overwhelmed! God told me to dream bigger that day. And listen, Kam, I have not let go of that. I am trying to do everything I possibly can and I don't do anything that I don't absolutely love. Isn't that a great place to be?

KW: Absolutely! How did the mike come to be passed during the Gospel brunch?

YA: BeBe Winans has this knack for getting people to sing when they're supposed to be on vacation. [LOL] And he's very persuasive. He's such a great friend. Everybody loves BeBe Winans. He just started passing the mike and seven or eight people sang.

KW: The Tavis Smiley question: How do you want to be remembered?

YA: Wow! I want to be remembered as a person who loved and cared for people and who genuinely wanted the best for them. As a nice all-around person. That is my goal for my daughter. I've been teaching her that since she was in the womb. People deserve your kindness. They deserve your best. If you're giving them less than that, it's almost like you're robbing God of the chance to show who He is.

KW: Thanks for such a great interview, Yolanda. It actually gave me goose bumps.

YA: Thank you, Kam. You're so sweet. You have a wonderful day.

To see Yolanda participating in Oprah's Gospel Brunch, visit: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QNmIW5hKV5E>

To see Yolanda singing Victory, visit: http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_detailpage&v=B3mINTjVyEw

To see the How Sweet the Sound Trailer, visit: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oQHBTpfpHhE>