



SOUTH AFRICA

GENTLEMEN'S QUARTERLY

KICK BACK

with

RICHARD MADDEN

AND
TODAY'S
COOLEST
CREATORS

ANTHONY
HAMILTON

NIQUITA
BENTO

SAL
MASEKELA

AND
MORE

HOW TO
GET
YOUR
MIND
RIGHT



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Grammy Award-winning singer-songwriter Anthony Hamilton has, over several decades, cemented his reputation as one of the most influential R&B artists of our time. We sat down with him during his recent trip to South Africa to learn more about the man who makes gritty, soulful magic from music.

• **ANTHONY HAMILTON'S LAUGH** is just as resonant, as viscous, as his singing voice. It's all I can focus on as he sits across from me on a studio couch in Cape Town, chuckling while he reminisces about the time Elton John called him to express appreciation for his work. The punchline? Hamilton addressed Elton as 'Mr. John' – a carryover from his Southern upbringing, and, apparently, something one just doesn't do. 'Wow,' he says, suddenly pensive, 'just sitting here thinking about that phone call...I've been pretty blessed, pretty fortunate.'

Blessed is part of it, sure. But so is serious natural talent and decades of grind. Since the 48-year-old R&B king was first picked up in 1992 by producer Mark Sparks while working as a 'singing barber' in his hometown of Charlotte, North Carolina, he has worked tirelessly at delivering music that people can relate to. Music we can believe in. 'Everything that I write about... I've lived it, I've seen it, and people identify with what's real and true,' he explains. This is what sits at the heart of the draw of tracks like 'Charlene' from *Comin' From Where I'm From*, the platinum-selling 2003 album that first got everyone listening; 'Pray For Me' from 2011's *Back To Love*; and 'Walk In My Shoes' from 2016's *What I'm Feelin'*. They are, in Hamilton's own words, 'stories that have real pain and bandages on them, and also real joy.'

What's most remarkable about the singer-songwriter is that he's managed, through all the tours and record deals, to hold tight to his own voice, his own alluringly gritty style of soul, while also dipping into other genres and partnering with artists across the spectrum. 'I enjoy collaborating with others. It's something I've been doing for a long time, and I think it's part of what keeps me relevant,' he says, smiling as he rattles off a list of names to me – one that reads like a Hall of Fame membership register: Carlos Santana, Buddy Guy, Jadakiss, John Rich (Big & Rich), and 2Pac. He sang 'Freedom' with Elayna Boynton for Quentin Tarantino's *Django Unchained*, won a Grammy (one of 18 he's been nominated for so far) with Al Green for the duet 'You've Got The Love I Need', and even released a Christmas album with the help of Chaka Khan and Gavin DeGraw.

And now, Hamilton is itching to team up with a few South African musicians, too. Just days before our chat, he performed at North West's Mahika Mahikeng Cultural Music

Festival to a crowd of 13 000 – an experience he describes as 'beautiful' – and got to watch some of our local players in action. 'Your artists are dope,' he says, calling out Cassper Nyovest, Lira, Zonke and Amanda Black specifically. 'I think they have a lot to offer.' The singer speaks fondly about South Africa in general. 'There are lots of people who look like me here, who appreciate me, who know the world I come from.' He's looking at launching a range of lotions, perfumes, body washes and sprays geared at women on local soil, and plans to plough a portion of the proceeds back into social upliftment projects here.

That's just one of the many things he has going on at the moment, though. There's also his new hat line, House of Fedoras, which, at the time of writing, is in the final design phase. 'I love hats,' he says, before I even get a chance to ask what inspired the collection. 'I love how you can switch between colours and shapes and express yourself in a totally different way.' Plus, he adds, 'people are always complimenting me on my hats. They always want to wear them, they want to take them off my head, and I'm like, "no!", so I'm creating something for them.'

Anyone who knows Hamilton will know that headgear is a signature component of his on-stage aesthetic, which, for the most part, has always been less of a curated act, more of a reflection of the real Anthony. 'A while back they tried to put me in some shiny suits, but that just wasn't me.' He tells me a story about the time he performed at the 2003 Grammy Sunday Brunch. 'I remember the room: it was Kanye West, Prince, Alicia Keys and Kimora Lee, who stared at me and said, "You have a nice look". It was around then that I'd started wearing my trucker look, and there was no going back. From then on, I just felt good about not concentrating on my image

and letting the raw me come out.' All that said, Hamilton is aware that style is always a choice, one that's inevitably played a part in his success. 'It gives the book a cover. It makes the story believable. If I want to show people that I am my music, what better way to do it than swag the hell out?'

Getting back to his music, the singer-songwriter divulges a few details about what has to be his most exciting development: the new album he plans to drop in early- to mid-2019. This one's set to be a little different, he says. 'I'm using it to talk about some stuff that's going on in the world – instances of injustice, to people of colour, poor people. I have children who are growing up in this world [Hamilton has six sons], so I need to change as many minds and hearts as I can.' Police brutality and abuse of women are two themes he says he'll touch on. But he assures me that there'll be lighter content, too – feel-good tracks for easy evening listening. 'You can't have a whole album about those sort of issues. You've got to spread it out a bit. So I'll put some of my thoughts on the record, some on Twitter, some on Instagram, and I'll >>

'People look at you like you're an alien when you're an entertainer, but I try to tell them, I'm just a man'



‘R&B is the core of who I am. I enjoy working with others, but what I give them is always going to be authentic Anthony Hamilton’

take some to the barber shop – you can talk about anything in a barber shop.’

Navigating social media and the constant gaze of the public is one of several challenges the musician has to deal with daily. Because, as he says, when you’re as high-profile as he is, ‘you’re never off’. He’s also had to face a struggle many artists are all too familiar with: the reality of life on the road and the damage it does to personal relationships. In 2015 his 10-year marriage to Tarsha McMillian Hamilton ended in divorce – in part the consequence of being ‘gone more and more’.

But for Hamilton, it’s critical he keeps the focus on his craft, so he puts his head down, reminds himself of why he does what he does, and keeps on moving. ‘You’ve just got to keep walking,’ he asserts. ‘No matter how tired your feet get, you soak ‘em in Epsom salt, get up the next day, put on a clean pair of socks and them same working boots, and you keep at it.’ Consistency is the key to his success, he believes, so he’s intent on continuing to deliver something that is, he summarises with a smile, ‘bona fide Anthony Hamilton... with a touch of heartbreak and a side order of “I made it through”’. And there’s that laugh again. ✕

- DAYLE KAVONIC

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