

# WHITNEY HOUSTON

**E**ARLY IN THE EVENING OF FEBRUARY 7TH, Whitney Houston was ready to reclaim her place in music. Wearing black pants and a matching black sweater, she rolled into producer Harvey Mason Jr.'s North Hollywood studio with her sister-in-law and manager Patricia Houston.

Whitney had just finished filming a role in an upcoming movie, *Sparkle*, and tonight she would lay down her part for a song on its soundtrack, "Celebrate," a duet with co-star Jordin Sparks written by R. Kelly. ¶ After singing a few warm-up scales, Houston hit the mic. Her voice was no longer the brawny, octave-

spanning instrument heard on her platinum hits of the Eighties and Nineties. She'd already spent several days with Mason working on her part, and still wasn't finished. "Whitney had days when she sounded amazing; she had days when she sounded decent; and she had days when she sounded not so great," Mason says. "But she was really working to improve." This session was better than most; after she'd taken her last pass, Houston excitedly asked Mason, "You got it, you got it?" When Mason told her he did, she exclaimed, "Now play it!" The two danced in front of the speakers as the booming party anthem shook the studio. For a short while, the troubles that had plagued Houston for more than a decade evaporated.

*Sparkle*, a remake of a 1976 music-business cautionary tale, would mark Houston's return to the big screen for the first time in 16 years; she was cast as the mother of a fledgling singer, played by Sparks. As a teenager, Houston had loved the original movie, which followed an R&B trio — one member with

drunk. She made a surprise appearance at a press conference hosted by her mentor, Clive Davis, smelling of cigarettes and alcohol. On Saturday, February 11th, Houston was planning to attend Davis' annual pre-Grammy party at the Beverly Hilton, where she was also staying. She'd flown in from her home in Alpharetta, Georgia, for the party and to work on the *Sparkle* songs. But later that afternoon, after she'd spent an inordinate amount of time in the bathroom of her fourth-floor room, members of her entourage burst in to find her submerged in her bathtub. Houston was declared dead at age 48. At press time, the cause of death was still undetermined, since toxicology reports haven't yet been released, but Beverly Hills detectives announced that a small amount of prescription drugs, which reportedly included Xanax, were discovered in her room.

Diligent professional one moment, wild child the next: Those were the opposing sides of Houston in her last days — and, it turns out, much of her life.

of her cousin Dionne [Warwick understood all those pretty-as-a-pink-bubblegum-pop hits from Burt Bacharach," says Michael Walden, one of Houston's producers. "But because she was from the era of Michael Jackson and Madonna, she had soul in those rhythms. She had both and she was so damn gorgeous. You say no to her."

But after she peaked with her version of "The Star-Spangled Banner" in 1992's *The Bodyguard*, her fame, as, year by year, Houston's demons revealed to the world: Her voice, once powerful, now faltering. Her eyes, once clear, now clouded. Her looks, once radiant, now faded. Her voice, once powerful, now faltering. Her eyes, once clear, now clouded. Her looks, once radiant, now faded.

People who worked with her said it was hard to comprehend her death. A lot of us talked about that, and we could come up with an answer. Gerry Griffith, the A&R man who brought Houston to Davis' attention around 1985, said, "Where is that rebellion coming from? It didn't come out for a while." When it came out in force, nearly destroying her personal life, career and music.

**F**ROM THE START, Whitney Houston was a child prodigy. At the church and the church socials, her mother, Cissy, was a New Jersey-born soprano who sang backup on classic soul records by Franklin ("Ain't No Way Back Now") and Van Morrison ("Brown Paper Girl"), and toured with Elvis Presley (she was a member of the Sweet Inspirations). Her cousin Warwick had moved over to pop in the Sixties and Seventies with hits like "Walk On By" and "I

