

Interview: Jordin Sparks Moves to the Spotlight in ‘Sparkle’

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CHICAGO – Stepping up from American Idol winner to a major film lead role looks smooth and easy for Jordin Sparks. She won Idol in 2007, released a couple of multi-platinum albums, and now plays the title character in “Sparkle,” which also has the final on-screen performance of Whitney Houston. It all seems natural for this major talent.

Sparks was born in Phoenix, Arizona, and her father is former pro footballer Phillippi Sparks. While her Dad played football for the New York Giants, she grew up in New Jersey. Before winning American Idol, she also won various competitions such as Coca-Cola’s Rising Star, America’s Most Talented Kids and Colgate Country Showdown. She had auditioned twice for American Idol the year before she won it, and got her ticket to the Hollywood portion of the show after winning Arizona Idol in 2007.



Jordin Sparks Portrays Sparkle and Whitney Houston is her Mother Emma in ‘Sparkle’
Photo credit: Alicia Gbur for Stage 6 Films

HollywoodChicago.com had a phone interview with Jordin Sparks, in which she talks about her latest film role, working with Whitney Houston and how her generation is perpetuating necessary change.

HollywoodChicago.com: You are playing a young woman from another era and generation. In your own research, what did you want to get right about the character of Sparkle in the context of being an African-American woman in late 1960s Detroit?

Jordin Sparks The original ‘Sparkle’ [1976] was based in the 1950s, and when they moved our version to the 1960s, there was so much more that came with it. There was so much happening during that time – the fashions, the music and the politics associated with the civil rights movement. I was really excited to be transported back to that time.

Salim [Akil, the director] and Mara [Brock Akil, the screenwriter] really wanted to empower the women, and you can see that in the finished product. But the women are also a bit different because they are better off, they live in a nice neighborhood and that is different from having a

struggle due to poverty.

For my character, the clothes helped to get me into the 1960s mindset. The women in that family was dressed to the nines, and manners were really important. The core of how you acted both in and outside the house was reflected in how we dressed. It was cultural, and the appearances mattered. I also liked the quiet dignity that Irene Cara gave the character in the original ‘Sparkle,’ but also the character is part of my story, so I also wanted her to be spunky and mischievous.

HollywoodChicago.com: Of course, with Whitney Houston’s passing, there has been an extraordinary amount of attention given to the film. Where were you when you heard the news, and what was the first thing you thought about in regard to Whitney in your life?

Sparks: I was in Los Angeles when she passed. What I was getting ready to meet up with her and walk the red carpet for the movie. I was walking to my room to change into my dress, and my publicist knocked on the door and told me that Whitney was gone. I couldn’t comprehend it at first, thinking she didn’t want to do the red carpet or something, but my publicist then said she passed. I lost all thought, movement and reaction. I lost it, I didn’t know what to do.

I kept denying it, even though it started to be on the news. My publicist had all her phones ringing, they were calling to get a reaction. I couldn’t do it. I shut myself off and secluded myself for a month. The last time I saw her, though, she was happy and excited that something she’d been working on for ten plus years was finally done, so it’s really bittersweet that she is not here now, because her performance is such a gift to her fans.

HollywoodChicago.com: Since you did some research regarding ‘being discovered’ in the late 1960s, and you were discovered post the millennium, what advantages do you think you have as a working singer now and how do you think the singers of the 1960s era had more of a advantage over the singers now?

Sparks: I think back then it was obviously harder regarding how the world worked, and how it looked at people of color. As far as talent is concerned, you had to have real talent back then and you had to work your butt off to keep it together and make it work. Tour buses were not the same, they weren’t the glamorous or tricked-out like today, they were buses that you sat in and worked together on. That was one of the things I loved about Motown, all of the artists were working together. That was amazing.

And then there is the longevity. There are artists that we’re still listening to and love, that released their songs back then. I think that’s rare now. Because of YouTube, social media and the internet, you can put something out there and get ‘discovered,’ blast off, but it’s fleeting. The longevity is the difference. You still need the mindset for the work today, because it all isn’t glitz and glamor, but it never has been. It’s never been an easy thing to be in the music industry. In terms of making things last and having longevity, it’s a lot harder now, because we’re in a generation that wants things now. You have to keep making product, because it turns over quickly and tastes change quickly.



Jordin Sparks Strikes a Luxurious Pose in “Sparkle”
Photo credit: Alicia Gbur for Stage 6 Films

HollywoodChicago.com: You play an African American woman in the era of Dr. Martin Luther King, and you sung to the first African American president in history. When you look at that 40 year gap, and the progress that America has made in our race relations, how far do you think we have come, and how much farther do we have to go?

Sparks: I think we’ve come so far. When you think about the time of Sparkle, in the 1960s, it was not okay for couples to be mixed. My mother is white, and my Dad is black. I grew up in a mixed family and I literally don’t see color. I grew up having family of all different shades. So for me, to know that actually happened in the 1960s – and that it was wrong – it stirs something up in my spirit. How can love, in all different

ways, be wrong?

I feel like we’re moving in the right direction. It’s so amazing we have a president of color, who was voted in. He’s been so sweet to me, the last time I saw him he knew me by name. [laughs] It was really crazy. It was an honor to sing for a president, no matter what color they are.

I think we’ve come a very long way, and we have a long way to go. There are still some places that do not accept the mixing of all the beautiful colors. There are stereotypes and different things that we really need to let go. That will come with time. My generation and the generation after me are growing up in a world where the colors are mixed, so with time we won’t be able to see color anymore, we’ll all have some sort of mixed background. As long as we’re moving in the right direction – as I think we are – it’s all good.

HollywoodChicago.com: Did you, like President Obama, reach a point in your life where you felt like you had to self-identify yourself, or doesn’t that matter anymore in your generation?

Sparks: For me, it was a huge deal, because I knew there had never been a president of color before. But at the same time, I think I was in the generation that began to not see color. I know it’s important and huge in our history. For me, I was just myself, and my mixed background is normal. I feel like that’s how the generations after me will see it as well. Time will propel things forward, and there is nowhere to go but forward.

Jordin Sparks portrays the title character in “Sparkle,” opening everywhere on August 17th. Featuring Jordin Sparks, Whitney Houston, Derek Luke, Mike Epps, Carmen Ejogo, Tika Sumpter, Omari Hardwick and Cee-Lo Green. Screenplay by Mara Brock Akil. Directed by Salim Akil. Rated “PG-13”



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