

Soul of Norwalk

Fresh from the legendary Apollo Theater, Omar Wilson returns home



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Promotional Photo

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The green room of the Apollo Theater can be intimidating on amateur night. Self-described "aggressive soul" singer Omar Wilson remembers his first time there as one of the most nerve-wracking experiences of his life. "While we were in the green room, Sandman" — a character who ousts performers from the stage — "was downstairs tap-dancing around like, 'Are you going up next? Hope I don't see ya!' Then you get some girl coming down and she just got booed off and she's crying, and I'm like, 'Aw, they have no remorse. If they can cry off Little Miss Sunshine then I'm done.'" Wilson wasn't done. In fact, the Norwalk native wowed the crowd with a rendition of Donny Hathaway's "A Song for You" and was invited back to amateur night two more times. Finally he performed on the nationally syndicated "Showtime at the Apollo." "That was, still up to date, probably one of the hardest shows I've ever done, but at the same time one of the most rewarding," he says, sounding exasperated, as if he just relived the entire experience all over again. "I learned so much about soul music in that building."

Since his baptism by fire at the Apollo, Wilson has gone on to open for such R&B luminaries as Boyz II Men and Aaron Neville. "I came off stage and [Neville] pulled me to the side and said he had come out of his trailer because he'd heard me singing, and that I reminded him of somebody from his era," Wilson recalls. "It was like, wow, this is like one of the founding fathers of soul music right here. He's been singing as long as I've been alive, so for him to give me an accolade like that was tremendous for me." Of course, it hasn't always been big shows at legendary venues for Wilson.

His singing career began at Calvary Baptist Church in Norwalk, where he had his first solo at seven years old. As a teenager, he moved to North Carolina. Wilson says making that move was the toughest decision he's ever made, because it meant he had to leave his newborn daughter. "I guess that was my first big test to prove that I'm willing to do whatever I need to solidify my family's future and do something that's gonna last forever," he says. Wilson bounced around the country, never staying in any spot for more than a handful of months. The traveling, though it put a strain on some of his personal relationships, had a hugely positive effect on his music. "That was really my first big inspiration in music," he explains. "The people, places and things, seeing what was going on, watching someone go through something, whether it was good, bad, or indifferent."

He adds, "My songs don't always have happy endings, but at the end of the day, it's reality. Somebody's living that life, somebody's going through that. So if I could at least touch on, or make that person feel comfortable that I understand, or that I appreciate, or that I'm willing to speak upon the things that they're going through, it just really ties everybody in and makes them feel like they're a part of my music." Major names are starting to take notice. Last month, Wilson traveled to Atlanta to record with Angie Stone. The finished product is a song titled "Know You Better." Wilson hopes to use it as the first single off of his as-of-yet-untitled 2009 album. Previously he released a mixtape titled Pieces of the Product. In a bit of joyful irony, just when it seems Wilson's life would be at the pinnacle of craziness, he's the most settled he's been in years. He's returned to Norwalk and is a full time husband and father. He's added a son to his family, and he takes great pride in his ability to juggle the responsibilities of being both a family man and a recording artist. "It helps me grow with my music," he says, "because it gives me so much more to write about ... It's a lot of different hats, it's a lot of different situations, but I definitely have no complaints. I'm blessed to be in the position that I'm in."