

Photo by Naomi Kaltman

MICHAEL BOLTON

the voice within

BY ALIZA DAVIDOVIT

His soft, kind eyes are as luring as a sky blue pool on a steamy, summer day. You want to jump in—you want to luxuriate in the kindness they extend. But the warning sign soon becomes apparent: “Private property, no trespassers allowed.”

If eyes are supposed to be the windows to the soul, Michael Bolton has drawn the shutters. Although a glow of the man comes through, they are, nonetheless, guarded, wise, discerning and savvy to the subjects of their scrutiny. If one desires to get to the essence of this singer/songwriter who has lyricized and vocalized humanity’s most profound emotions, it won’t be through his baby blues, but rather, his lips—the same manly lips that have kissed his three little girls good-night, the lips that have loved the world’s most beautiful women, the lips that have told critics to kiss off, and the lips that advocate for vital humanitarian causes. But Michael Bolton offers no lip service—and puts his money where his mouth is.

That being the case, Bolton has invested wisely. With indisputable talent, a love for singing, and a single-mindedness about his passion, his life’s course was set since childhood. At the age of 16, he abandoned his high school studies after signing a record deal with Epic. “I remember the contract had a big CBS logo on it,” Bolton recounts. “I really felt like I had made it.” But he had not quite yet. Although he recorded a few albums, his first hit came two decades later with the release of *Soul Provider*, which included favorites such as “How Am I Supposed to Live Without You,” “How Can We Be Lovers,” and “When I’m Back on My Feet Again.” “My overnight success took me 20 years of overnights,” Bolton says.

As the music industry began to believe in Bolton more and more—not only as a singer, but as a songwriter—he became certain of his choice to pursue a career and not his studies. Interestingly, this songwriter whose lyrics play trills upon the human

spirit, admits that as a young man, he would notice the limitations of his vocabulary when he'd meet with intellectuals. But today, at age 50, with the ease of an academic, his own conversation is often sprinkled with literary references and the teachings of Alexander Pope, Martin Luther King, Michel de Montaigne and other luminaries. The self-educated Bolton has no regrets or insecurities about cutting class permanently. "I don't feel there is anyone I can't have a very intelligent conversation with on any subject—short of nuclear fission," he says with a laugh. Although he doesn't dismiss the importance of education, he feels that success is usually the result of a person's character and not his or her degree. "Your intentions as a human being take you to the tools you need to become who you want to be and who you are," Bolton feels. He emphasizes that it's

not live to see the prescience of his words. Michael Bolton has since sold more than 52 million albums and singles

tions and upbringing and was not shown along with his famous Samson-like locks (which, incidentally, were auc-



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"Your intentions as a human being take you to the tools you need to become who you want to be and who you are."

more important that people educate themselves in areas that are self-gratifying and pay off for them.



Bolton's own area of emphasis has certainly paid off for him, and with his success echo the words his father spoke to him a long time ago. "One day you're going to be big! big! big!" Yet, as the struggling singer was dodging eviction notices through the lean years of his career, he often wondered if his father was right. And, indeed, "Father knew best." Sadly, Bolton's beloved father did

worldwide; he has reached platinum status 20 times in England, has won dozens of awards, including two Grammys for Best Male Vocalist. His songs have been broadcast over 5 million times, have filled 50,000 hours of airtime, which translates into more than 5.7 years of continuous playing. His talent has left its imprint not only on our hearts, but also on Hollywood's Walk of Fame.

Even having graced that illustrious sidewalk, Bolton's feet remain firmly on the ground. As he sits down to speak with *Lifestyles* at his Connecticut home, it becomes increasingly clear that his strength of character lies in his convic-

tioned off for charity for \$6,000.) The décor is elegant and simple unlike the ornate abodes of many famous musicians. The house shares the same grassy acreage as his half-million-dollar recording studio and offices. It's warm and homey and made even more so by the fact that his beautiful daughters are coming and going, opening the refrigerator and calling on the phone.

We conduct the interview at the long, hardwood dining room table, the same table he has showed up at every night to dine with his girls—Isa, Holly, and Taryn—no matter how busy his schedule or how pressing a meeting. As he interacts with his daughters, Bolton unravels before me and becomes less of the untouchable star and more of a human being, more of a dad.

Michael Bolton was born in New Haven, Connecticut, in 1954. Few know that this Nordic-looking heart-throb whose music rustles souls and facilitates seductions is the descendant of observant Jewish grandparents who

“Singing is my instrument and my way of inspiring people while I’m being inspired myself. That is what I am meant to do.”

kept a kosher home. The original family name was Bolotin. Although Bolton terms himself a “rebel Jew,” he says that he feels a sense of pride and strength that emanates from his heritage. “I feel some sort of ancient connection that seems to be innate in me.”

That connection wasn’t even shaken when Michael’s rabbi told his parents not to send the 13-year-old back to Sunday school until he could stop making jokes and start taking things seriously. But Bolton has an indefatigable sense of humor and 39 years have since passed—and he never returned to Hebrew school. “I was always sure I’d be the kid who’d get thrown out for betting on the dreidle,” he says laughingly.

Bolton, raised very liberal-minded, remembers having both a Christmas tree and a menorah in his house. As he reflected on his childhood Chanukah memories, goose bumps traveled down my arms when with that same soulful voice which belted out “When a Man Loves a Woman” and which put “Georgia on everyone’s mind,” Bolton recited the ancient Hebrew prayer: *“Barakh atah Adonai, Elokeynu, melekh ha-olam, asher keed’shanu b’meetzvotav v’tzeevanu l’had’lik neir shel Chanukah.”*

This music icon also remembers that as a young man, his house was often filled with politicians. While his father worked for the City of New Haven and helped politicians get reelected, his mother played the perfect hostess and also worked with women’s organizations. Bolton had never imagined then, as the city’s elite congregated on the wraparound porch of his

childhood home, that one day he, himself, would be dining in the White House and that Hillary Clinton would slip him a note asking whether the sax-playing president could join his band.

What has been Bolton’s “soul provider” are the good examples he saw at home and the enriching values he learned there. In the shadow of Connecticut’s discriminatory history against Jews, Bolton and his siblings were raised in a home where racism was not tolerated. “Speaking ill of another person because of their background or ethnicity just did not fly in my house,” Bolton says. “I’m grateful and proud that I was raised with those beliefs.”

It is because of his profound belief that all man are created equal that Bolton highlights his meeting with Coretta Scott King, the slain activist’s wife, as one of the special moments in his life. “I was compelled to tell her what an impact her late husband had on me,” Bolton shares. In turn, she invited him to the Martin Luther King Center and to join her in the 25th anniversary commemorating King’s death. “There are very few people who understand the hardships this woman has endured in her effort to guarantee civil rights for us all,” he says. Bolton has often visited the center with his daughters to further educate them about the history of civil rights in America. He has also received the Martin Luther King Jr. Award from the Congress of Racial Equality.

With that same open-mindedness, Bolton has explored many spiritual paths that departed from his own religion. At the age of 15, he began studying

Buddhism and in later years took a serious interest into ancient forms of Eastern practice and meditation. “I took paths that I thought made sense of everything,” he says. Today, Bolton feels that it doesn’t matter what the origin of a message is, but rather, the content of the message. “It has to resonate and ring true inside of me,” he philosophizes.

“Everything in life is a signal to tell you if you are on the right path or not.”

The star, who has himself been termed a demigod by adoring fans, says that he indeed believes in God. “I don’t want to piss Him off,” he says, only to rephrase it in less provoking terms, “I don’t want to get on the wrong side of the Creator.” Bolton says that he has his own personal relationship with the Almighty. “I have my own internal compass of what is a bad or wrong thing to do,” he shares. “I can never stray that much to be on the wrong side to incur His wrath.”

Nonetheless, it seems like God or some cosmic connection has been ringing Bolton’s phone off the hook as yet another friend calls to extol the study of Kabbalah. Who knows, perhaps Michael Bolton, as Madonna, will soon change his name to Moische and be “back on his feet again”—in prayer.

However, the balladeer already feels that he’s a cog in God’s plan. “Singing is my instrument and my way of inspiring people while I’m being inspired myself,” he says. “That is what I am meant to do.” He goes on to say that there are times when inspiring words just pass right through him as if they weren’t even coming from him. “Sometimes you just say something that someone else was meant to hear.”



One statement that was certainly meant for hearing was issued when Bolton told critics to “kiss his ass” when the bitter bunch booed him for winning a Grammy Award. Anguished by his

success, the more vindictive of the critics have often been hard on Bolton, while drowning in their own mediocrity and anonymity—not that *Lifestyles* would take sides between Bolton and the begrudging pack who delight in ruining careers while choking on their own acerbic multisyllabic slop.

Nonetheless, biting words have never stood in Bolton's way. Having a way with words himself, he has written over 100 songs for an impressive array of artists, such as Barbara Streisand ("We're Not Making Love Anymore"), Kiss ("Forever"), Joe Cocker ("Living Without Your Love"), Kenny Rogers ("Just The Thought of Losing You"), Cher ("I Found Someone"), Kenny G and Peabo Bryson ("By the Time This Night is Over"), and numerous others. Straying a bit from course, he has also written a children's book for Disney's Hyperion, *The Secret of the Lost Kingdom*.

This man of abundant creativity and energy has produced 19 albums. His magnificent 20th one will be released any day now and includes a compilation of new songs, greatest hits, live recordings and a few delightful surprises. He has also collaborated and performed with the world's greatest talent, such as Plácido Domingo, Percy Sledge, Patty LaBelle, Wynonna Judd, B.B. King, Renee Fleming, Elton John and Quincy Jones, to name but a few. He also sang the theme song, "Go the Distance," for Disney's animated film, *Hercules*.

Although Bolton has the highest regard for all the artists he's worked with, when writing "Steel Bars" with Bob Dylan, he couldn't stop thinking for the first hour, "Oh, my God, this is Bob Dylan." Bolton's eldest daughter asked her father, at the time, if he realized what an honor it was to be working with Dylan, to which he responded, "Oh, yes, I am completely aware." Another of his highlights was singing with Ray Charles, whom Bolton con-

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Photo by Taryn Bolton

Bolton with *Lifestyles* Political and Society Editor, Aliza Davidovitch.

tinues to say was his biggest vocal influence. He eventually inducted Ray Charles into the Jazz Hall of Fame. And though the legendary Charles passed away in June of this year, his legacy lives on in his own works and also in the sounds of Michael Bolton.

The works of Otis Redding also live on in Bolton. In 1988 Bolton released a re-recording of Redding's "Dock of the Bay," with one minor problem: Radio stations refused to play it. They questioned why anyone should have to redo the legendary song. It was only when Redding's widow, Zelma, came to Bolton's defense saying that his rendition was her alltime favorite version and that it had brought tears to her eyes, that Bolton's version was given the chance it deserved and in turn became a smash hit.

But of all his collaborations, few left the singer trembling as did his one with

Luciano Pavarotti. "My knees were shaking the first time we sang at a rehearsal together," Bolton confesses. He says it was a life-altering experience for him. After that, he told a reporter that he was blown away by the control and range he was hearing. "I'm listening to Pavarotti, thinking, 'What the hell have I been doing with my voice all these years? Why haven't I taken my voice as far as I can take it as an instrument?'" Subsequently, Bolton began to study opera and has since put out the seductive *My Secret Passions: The Arias*, a CD which gives an eclectic sampling of the world's greatest operas. Now he can tell critics to shove it in Italian, too.

This multitasking man says that from all his works, he loves performing before his audiences most of all. And if Whoopi Goldberg is correct, it is indeed a mutually rewarding experience between the star and his spectators.

After one particular performance, Bolton asked Whoopi backstage, "How did I do?" With her characteristic candor, she replied, "Michael, there's not a dry seat in the house."



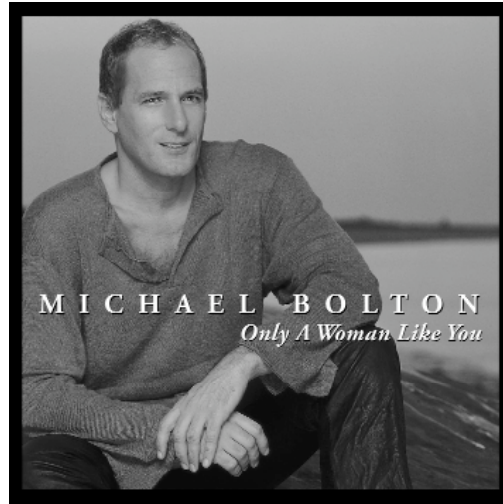
It is because Bolton can indeed bring out the best in people that he is now trying to syndicate his own talk show with a target audience of females aged 25–54. The show would deal with specific issues that relate to women and also include some entertainment. The potential talk show host looks up to his good friend Oprah as his hero. "She is so rare in continuously producing powerful, positive and important social and personal impact programs for people all over the world," he says. "I am in constant awe of this great soul."

As for his own qualities, Bolton feels he would be very good in that format because people feel very comfortable talking to him. "I have found that people find themselves talking to me about things that they never spoke about to anyone outside of therapy," he says.

Michael Bolton, however, is not one to just talk about women's issues. When he loves a woman, he'll do much more than just "sleep out in the rain"—he sets up foundations. In 1993, he established the Michael Bolton Charities with the goal of assisting women and children who are victims of domestic violence, street violence and poverty. He has met with top level government officials, including John Ashcroft, to lobby for women's rights.

Bolton was incensed when he found out that the Violence Against Women Act (WAVA) passed in 1994 was set to expire. That expiration would mean the end of crucial funding for domestic violence victims, including shelters and the national domestic hot-

line, which receives 15,000 calls per month. He has since joined forces with the National Coalition Against Domestic Violence and is also currently working on a documentary film with Lifetime. And though Bolton by no means wishes to diminish the gravity of the word "ter-



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rorism," he wishes our government would concern itself with the "terrorism" that is taking place behind closed doors in this country.

His charities, in conjunction with Connecticut's former governor, have also created "Safe Space," a danger-free environment for youth with an aim to foster self-esteem, leadership skills, job training and awareness of social issues.

He also raises money for a variety of charities through his softball team, the Bolton Bombers. But his team hardly "bombs," they actually beat Michael Jordan's team, Air Force. Jordan himself had to hand over the victory trophy. How could his team possibly strike out when it had the likes of Joe

DiMaggio sitting in its dugout and cheering it on? DiMaggio often attended the Bombers fundraising games. On one occasion, as DiMaggio walked toward the dugout, the crowd began to recognize the tall, elegant figure walking across the field and erupted into a thunderous ovation. DiMaggio waved back to the roaring spectators and then turned to Bolton with a deadpan expression and said, "Gee, Mike, they really like you here."

And though Bolton plays third base for the Bombers, he has also made home runs with some of the world's most beautiful women, including Ashley Judd and Naomi Campbell. But it seems that for the moment, the most important women in this divorced artist's life are his three girls, one who is soon to be married. When asked how he'd feel if his girls brought

home a guy like him, Bolton lets out a hearty laugh and says he probably wouldn't recognize himself if he saw himself. But he feels what's most important is that his girls find men who inspire them and awaken them.

As for Bolton himself, he never "awakes" alone. Always with him is that faceless, restless Muse that has stirred the depths of his being:

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