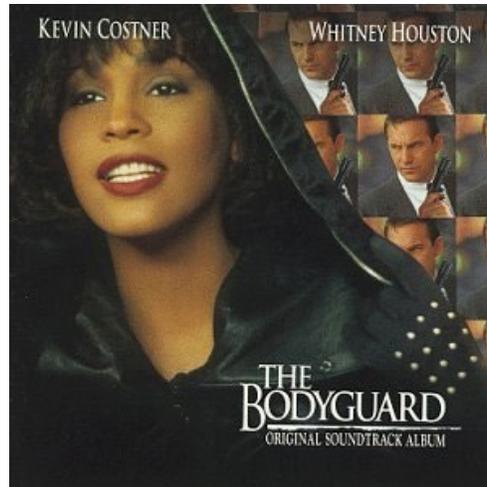


# “I Will Always Love You”--Whitney Houston (1992)

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Essay by Gerrick Kennedy (guest post)\*



*“The Bodyguard” soundtrack*

When we consider our love of Whitney Houston or our connection to her voice, there’s most certainly always a mention of her rendition of “The Star Spangled Banner” or “I Will Always Love You.” These are the untouchable moments that have vocally cemented Whitney as one of the greatest to ever stand in front of a microphone, and “I Will Always Love You” is her crown jewel.

But the record almost didn’t happen, actually. As the music for “The Bodyguard” was coming together in 1992, Kevin Costner had circled Jimmy Ruffin’s “What Becomes of the Brokenhearted” as the song Whitney would sing for the film’s climax. There was little excitement around the prospect of Whitney covering the Motown hit, and the idea was thwarted after Paul Young covered it for “Fried Green Tomatoes.” Costner, who was a music buff, then suggested “I Will Always Love You.” Dolly Parton had written the mournful tune back in 1973 about severing ties with her mentor and creative partner Porter Wagoner. It went to number one on the country charts and was one of the best-selling singles of 1974. Its success interested Elvis Presley, who wanted to cover it but demanded half of Parton’s publishing in exchange--which she obviously refused. Instead, Linda Ronstadt would cover it in 1975, and that’s the version producer David Foster sent to Whitney after Costner told him it was the perfect song (unaware that it was a Dolly Parton song). Costner had his own vision for the arrangement. This was to be the showstopper of the film, and he thought the ballad would be more affecting with an *a cappella* intro. Whitney’s voice, languid and searing, unaccompanied for nearly a minute. It was a tough sell. Neither Whitney’s label head Clive Davis nor Foster thought it would work. How would radio respond to a pop ballad that had no music behind the first verse? Foster agreed to try it Costner’s way, but planned on adding instruments later. He flew down to Miami, where Whitney was wrapping up filming to record the new version. The performance in the scene needed to feel authentic, so Whitney would be singing it live instead of lip-synching to the track. After hearing that Ronstadt’s version was what Whitney had learned, Dolly Parton made a call to David Foster and told him about the third verse left off Ronstadt’s cover. She read the lyrics to

him over the phone, and he ran into rehearsal and taught Whitney the rest, while working with the recording musicians hidden offstage.

The intro succeeds in its mission to create drama. Just the sound of her voice, crisp and immaculate, was, on its own, a wink at the fact that she was a peerless singer. Those first 45 seconds are tender and full of restraint, allowing the melancholy of Dolly's lyrics to land on the listener. "*If I should stay, I would only be in your way / So I'll go but I know, I'll think of you every step of the way,*" she sings before lifting off with the chorus. Taking her time with the first verse and allowing the words to gently unfurl is straight out of the church. She's not stretching out any of the words yet, but she's slowly building toward it. She's hooking you in and taking you on an emotional journey that climaxes with a complete knockout of runs and a melodramatic sax solo from Kirk Whalum, further driving home the song's bittersweet lyrics. "When she opened her mouth, I realized that Kevin Costner had come up with one of the greatest ideas in the history of movie music," David Foster wrote in his memoir "Hitman." "[Her mother, Cissy,] was standing right beside me in the ballroom, and she realized it, too. At one point, she turned to me and said: 'You know, you're witnessing greatness right now.' She was right."

It's really in the way Whitney manipulates her voice. There's a moment during "I Will Always Love You" where she stretches "I" for nearly six seconds. One letter, slowly dragged out far enough that her voice is able to move through multiple notes at her highest ranges. We know the technique as *melisma*, and the four minutes and 31 seconds of "I Will Always Love You" is a master class in its usage. The core of her DNA as a singer was control, but *melisma* was the secret sauce. She had an ability to swoop and dive and zig and zag with unflappable dexterity. Her manipulation of words is what brought meaning to her music. We *felt* every syllable Whitney sang because of the way she enunciated and added dramatic flair to words. It was especially impactful, of course, in her balladry. As gloriously over-the-top as "Greatest Love of All" is, we believe Whitney when she declares, "*I decided long ago, never to walk in anyone's shadows,*" because of the way she wraps her voice around the words and syllables. It's in the way she extends the "I" and "you" and the swelling inflections she places throughout "I Will Always Love You" or the floating runs in the last minute of "You Give Good Love" or the crescendo bridges and hooks that were the signature of her power ballads and what gave dance records like "If I Told You That," "I Wanna Dance with Somebody (Who Loves Me)," and "How Will I Know" their euphoric rush. When she brags, "*I've got the stuff that you want, I've got the thing that you need,*" on "Queen of the Night," we believe her the very same way we believe her when she's delivering an inspirational Olympic theme song like "One Moment in Time" or belting the anthem or assuring an old lover that she wishes them joy and happiness.

Whitney knew her voice was an instrument, and she was intentional in how she played it. Cissy teaching her how to access the depths of her vocal power was just half of the battle. Breath control was key, especially when singing across multiple ranges with crystal-clear clarity and force. She learned how to use her body to control her voice. "Heart, mind, guts," her mother taught her. This is best heard whenever she dipped in and out of melismatic singing like an acrobat tumbling across the mat. Her trick was zeroing in on particular syllables and vowels that allowed her to conserve the air she needed to sustain those colossal notes from her upper register. Whitney was most at ease when she was belting or in her midrange, where her prowess came most naturally. She harnessed a warm, velvety tone, and one of her hallmarks was mixing the

piercing belts of her head voice with the lush softness of her chest voice. Melismatic singing the way we heard it from Whitney is most responsible for shaping the central thesis of contemporary pop. It's a style that inspired Mariah Carey and Adele and Beyoncé and Ariana Grande, and countless "American Idol" and "Voice" contestants have tried to mimic it. Though Whitney is credited for the mainstream popularity of melismatic singing, it's not a technique she relied on exclusively. Whitney was an improvisational singer, something she took from singing songs of worship and praise in church. The choices she made vocally always came from her spirit, and she was always so intentional in the way she sang, which is why we typically revere her live showings more than her recordings, because she rarely performed a song the same way twice.

And yet, so much of our reading of Whitney's voice is informed by her struggles to maintain her full range after her "Bodyguard" peak. Whitney lost the ability to access her higher registers with the ease we were used to--the years of chain-smoking and drug use would be damaging enough, but it didn't help that she wasn't as disciplined when it came to maintaining her voice amid the grueling demands required by live singing. She was also getting older, and the voice is like any muscle; you have to condition it. The power you have at 25 won't be as easy to harness at 35 or 45, especially if you aren't taking care of yourself. Over time, as she struggled to access all the textures of her voice, both from the normal wear and tear that comes with time and from her own doing, Whitney grew more comfortable staying inside her lower ranges, which meant power ballads like "I Will Always Love You" or "Greatest Love of All" didn't have the same majestic feeling, as she continuously failed to deliver them with the soaring gusto the world was used to.

And that's the downfall of a voice like Whitney's. Because she was such a remarkably gifted vocalist, the appreciation of her voice is intrinsically tied to its command. There wasn't consideration for it outside of the highs she could reach. And that's a shame, given how intriguing the deeper, huskier parts of her voice can be. The mature, raspier voice on display in the twilight of her career didn't have the stratospheric range or the sparkling sheen of her youth. It was the voice of a woman who had lived--often with wild abandon, as we'd learn after "The Bodyguard." There are plenty of artists who have lost some of their voice from age or injury--Elton John, Bob Dylan, Joni Mitchell, Mick Jagger come to mind--but we embrace them for the way their voices have evolved over the years, because of their artistry. Since Whitney didn't always put pen to paper and write the lyrics she sang, or have a hand in producing the music, or have any real substantive dialogue with the public about what was going on with her, it was easy to paint her as an empty vessel: a one-of-a-kind singer wrapped in corporate gloss who made formulaic pop and lacked any artistic rigor or real connection to the music she made. No matter what she sang, one question always accompanied Whitney's music: Who *was* she? Who was the woman who made the candescent love songs that made us *feel*? But Whitney's voice was always revealing who she was--the pain she felt, the faith she had, the redemption she deeply yearned for, the love she was in search of. Whitney always sounded *alive*. She had a voice that was so full of the soul and meaning we searched for in her lyrics. Too bad we just didn't listen closely enough the first time around.

*Gerrick Kennedy is an award-winning journalist, cultural critic, and author based in Los Angeles. He's the author of "Parental Discretion Is Advised: The Rise of N.W.A and the Dawn*

*of Gangsta Rap” and “Didn't We Almost Have It All: In Defense of Whitney Houston,” from which this essay is excerpted.*

*(From “Didn't We Almost Have It All: In Defense of Whitney Houston” by Gerrick Kennedy, 2022 (Abrams).*

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