

Maverick/Warner Bros. With the exception of "Fool Of Me," "May This Be Love," and "Wasted Time," the new set offers singularly titled, self-explanatory songs like "Faithful," "Loyalty," and "Satisfy." "It's love, love, love... trying to understand it better and share some of my experiences with other people," says Me'Shell, whose music neither masks nor exploits her bisexuality. Instead, the album capitalizes on the "emotional debris strewn behind when love leaves." Produced by Craig Street, the very same one who produced a k.d. lang masterpiece, the album also includes the handiwork of fellow bassists Wendy Melvoin and Lisa Coleman, perhaps best recognized for their work with the Revolution, you know, along with that guy who used to be known as Prince. Don't ask her if she cares about catering to a target audience. She doesn't.

"I make music for everybody, whoever is open-minded. Open your ears, open your heart," she says.

Born in Berlin, Germany, and later raised in Washington, D.C., Me'Shell made her musical debut with Plantation Lullabies in 1993. That ground-breaking album garnered her four Grammy nominations for Best R&B Album, Best R&B Song ("If That's Your Boyfriend (He Wasn't Last Night)"), Best R&B Vocal (same song), and Best Pop Vocal Collaboration with John Cougar Mellencamp. Her sophomore set in 1996, Peace Beyond Passion, featured her own spin on a cover of the Bill Withers classic, "Who Is He and What Is He to You?" But other songs from the album made people stand up and take notice that she wasn't just some fly-by-night surface singer. Songs like "Deuteronomy: Niggerman" and "Leviticus: Faggot" gave insight into a mind that explores not only religion, racism, spirituality and hypocrisy, but struggle and romance.

"The Black experience is vast," Me'Shell says of her writing style. "There's so much to write about. I'm just a piece of that. I think we all write from our heart."

Now that she's famous, Me'Shell says she doesn't financially support any one charity. But as a musician, she's finds the meager support for school music departments disheartening. "Our schools are really in a bad place to be, because the powers that be are more apt to fund sports programs in Black communities than music. Hopefully it's something that will change," she says. But just because she's not funneling album proceeds into her favorite cause (she's got a 10-year-old son to support herself) in no way means she's not doing her share, like visiting kids in music classes.

"I just go out and hang out with kids," Me'Shell says. "I go and hang out, and talk and try and tell them that what they see in music videos - these cars and stuff - that the artists don't own it, that it's all rented. That's how I give back. I just hang everywhere, and try to give to the people who don't know me. That's more important - to get to people of color who don't have access to anything."

One of the tips she gives to young, aspiring musicians is to listen to a mixture of music. "Listen to everything, not just hip-hop. That's what makes a great musician," she suggests. Other words of wisdom include encouraging them to maintain their individuality. "Cultivate the positive and beautiful thing within yourself. It's individuality that's going to keep the world interesting," she tells them.

But in this era of the quick hit and fast money, the words "creativity" and "loyalty" no longer fit in the same sentence when it comes to record labels. And with the exception of a few, chosen artists, Me'Shell's angst about the industry's misplaced priorities isn't likely to abate anytime soon. "It's basically all compelled by money. I think record companies want something that sells and is easily digestible," she said. "It's all about