

Faith Evans would like to be known simply as a singer. But for much of her career, her formidable voice has been drowned out by the noisy plot and characters that have crowded her life.

She is, after all, the woman who married legendary hip-hop rap artist Biggie Smalls (The Notorious B.I.G.) two months after meeting him in 1995,

Faith had a son, Christopher, with Notorious B.I.G.. She became the wronged party in an affair between her husband and hip-hop female rapper Lil' Kim, and was blamed for causing the war between East Coast and West Coast rappers to escalate due to her later mysterious association with west coast rap icon Tupac Shakur.

Those events turned Faith Evans' life into a virtual nexus of hip-hop rumor and innuendo. Mary J. Blige may be known as R&B's drama queen, but Evans is the one who has truly lived The Life.

"My associations certainly overshadowed my talent for a long time," the 31-year-old singer admits. "[They are] a key part of my story. But I've worked really hard to reverse that."

Now, Evans may have her best shot yet. In the last few years, she left the label that linked her to her controversial past - Puff Daddy's Bad Boy Records - and signed with Capitol Records, where she's the sole R&B star. "It's great," she says. "There's only me."

Evans has risen to the occasion by recording "The First Lady" - her first album in four years and by far the best of her career. Hitting stores this week, it features firmer songs, more assured vocals and smarter arrangements than Evans' three previous works. By combining old soul elements with contemporary R&B and pop flourishes, Evans has created a sound that's rooted in history, yet fresh.

She credits her new verve to her time away from the spotlight. "I had time to live," she says. "I

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didn't want to rush the album. It was wide open for me to set the tone."

In the writing of the album, Evans was partly inspired by country music. "I listened to Waylon [Jennings] and Dolly [Parton]," she explains. "I like how country writers aren't afraid to be honest, to tell their stories."

Evans tells her story most openly in "Again." It talks about an incident last year in which she and her husband/manager of seven years, Todd Russaw, were arrested for marijuana and cocaine possession after being pulled over for a traffic violation when they were living in Atlanta. They pleaded guilty and entered a 13-week rehab program.

As a result, Evans found herself being painted by the media as a woman with a substance problem. She says that's not true, and that she entered the plea on her lawyer's advice to avoid a protracted battle. "The system worked - eventually," she says, "because [the charge is] no longer on our record."

Evans was especially anxious to put the arrest behind her because she had signed her deal with Capitol the very day it occurred. Though Evans says she maintains a good relationship with Puff Daddy, she wanted to get off his label because "Puff had a lot going on. I applaud his success but my last album got caught up in his label negotiations, and I felt like I put a lot of work into that album, and I didn't feel it got the attention it deserved from the man who signed me."

She says she's grateful to Puff Daddy for letting her go even though she was still under contract to him. Her new album features one track, "Hope," that recalls "Missing You," the song Puffy produced for her that became her biggest hit. Both songs pine for murdered loved ones. The line about "wishing bullets could reverse" made Evans think of Smalls, which she often does.

"I have an extension of that legacy in my son," she explains. "Aside from our child, Biggie left an indelible mark on our generation of music. I'm always going to have to respect that."

It makes Evans bristle, however, that some people regard her as the source of the beef

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between the legendary rap artists Biggie and Tupac. Tupac Shakur claimed he had an affair with Evans, which she denies. "It's not the first time that happened to me - to get lied on," she says. "But God knows the truth. And I know the truth."

She may tell it one day in an autobiography. But for now, Evans is reveling in her more private role as a mother of three.

The very name of her CD, "The First Lady," expresses a certain reserve. It was inspired by the dignity of presidential wives like Jackie Kennedy.

"You know, those first ladies go through all kinds of scandals, but they don't hold press conferences and tell you what's going on," Evans says. "I have respect for that. Everybody doesn't need to know every aspect of my life."

Especially since her singing reveals something much more substantial.

In the last few years, the once full-figured Faith Evans has lost more than 50 pounds. How'd she do it?

"It didn't happen overnight. I went through different diet plans - the salad and fish diet, the veggie-juice diet. But mostly, I had a trainer and I work out three or four times a week. I do an hour to two hours of cardio and then an hour of weight training. I also run the stairs near where I live in Santa Monica three times a week. It's a job to maintain it, but it's fun at this point. Now, I just eat healthy rather than diet. If I have something fatty, I feel guilty and work out more.

"It takes effort but I get a lot more whistles, more woo-woos, these days - even when they don't know it's me. And that feels great."

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