
In light of his new album, multi-award winning singer **JOHN LEGEND** talks with *Glass Man* about his rich musical upbringing, his vision for a better world, and the joy of family life

LEGEND IN HIS LIFETIME

Writer
CHARLIE NEWMAN
Photographer
KAT IRLIN
Stylist
Yael Quint

To accept the stage surname Legend, chosen for you by your peers in the early stages of your career, sounds like quite a bold move, but for John Stephens it was destiny. Cast your mind back to the tempestuous teenage years and it's unlikely that you were winning essay competitions musing on your future aspirations. Aged 15 John Legend wrote, "I envisage a successful musical career that will allow me to obtain high visibility in the community. This in turn will put me in a position of great influence which I will utilise in order to be an advocate for the advancements of blacks in America."

It's eerily accurate and leaves you feeling rather sheepish in comparison to your measly Dear Diary entries, but then again Legend's upbringing was far from conventional. The second of four children, Legend was raised in the small Midwestern town of Springfield, Ohio, where he was surrounded by music. His father, Ronald, played the drums at the

local Pentecostal church where his mother, Phyllis, was the choir director and his grandmother the organist. "I do not think I would be where I am today without my mother's and my grandmother's musical influence," he says. "They both encouraged me, they both taught me, they both mentored me. I was always at choir rehearsal with them and learning from them."

Aged four, he began classical training in the piano and later combined this with the gospel, taught by his grandmother after choir rehearsals, which he joined when he was seven. Aged 11, he began arranging choral music. While the music was essential to Legend's childhood, he's giving space for his two children to choose their own interests: "I'm open to whatever they're inspired to do, so we'll just wait and see ... I love bringing them to my shows and playing music in the car with them and just showing them how beautiful, powerful, inspiring, and fun music can be."



Blazer, shirt FENDI
Brooch CHANEL at VINTAGE GRACE

After being home-schooled from the age of 11, he was offered admission to Harvard at the tender age of 16 to read English before accepting a place at the University of Pennsylvania. “I think all of that performance, all of that rehearsing with other choir members, that made me more social and more connected to people than I would have been otherwise. Music was definitely my way of introducing myself to people, connecting with them, and giving me a type of social confidence that I may not have otherwise had.”

Indeed, Legend is somewhat of a connections expert. His “life changing” song, *All of Me* written in 2013 for his wife, model and TV personality Chrissy Teigen, left her in tears when Legend first played it to her. Teigen’s reaction is felt by the world too. *All Of Me* has been streamed online over four billion times and boasts more than two billion views on YouTube.

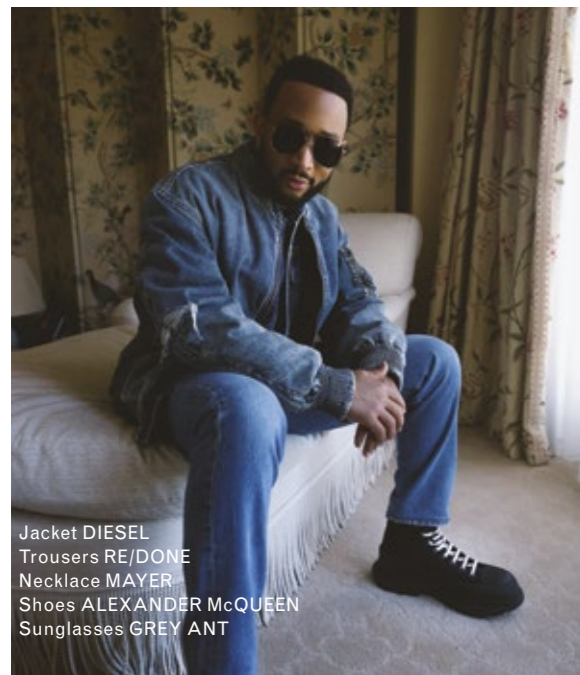
With two Emmys, 12 Grammys, one Oscar and one Tony award under his belt, Legend qualifies as one of the 16 prestigious EGOT members, alongside Andrew Lloyd Weber, Whoopi Goldberg and Audrey Hepburn. Whilst some people would perhaps rest on their laurels, Legend remains hungry. “I’ve won every award that I could possibly imagine winning so I don’t need that anymore. I’m just focused on trying to create the best art.” He acknowledges how his “biggest challenge” is continuing to make “relevant new music”, explaining, “I believe that no one owes me success. They don’t owe me listening to my music. I have to make it urgent and necessary for them. So that’s what I’m always trying to do and that’s what I’m trying to do with this new album. I have to prove myself every time.”

LEGEND, his first double album, gave him space to explore and reflect on all aspects of life, infused with an energising and uplifting beat. “I feel like this is a big moment for me. It’s a big statement of who I am and what I am musically, and I felt like self-titling, it felt like the right thing to do ... Now I feel like I’ve made a lot of progress toward living up to that name.”

Only a legend performs at three presidential inaugurations as he did for Barack Obama in 2009 and 2013, and Joe Biden in 2021, where he chose to cover Nina Simone’s *Feeling Good*. Only a legend could produce the vocals for an Aretha Franklin track late in her career.



Suit LOUIS VUITTON
Necklace PATRICIA VON MUSULIN
Ring MAYER



Jacket DIESEL
Trousers RE/DONE
Necklace MAYER
Shoes ALEXANDER McQUEEN
Sunglasses GREY ANT



Top RE/DONE
Blazer KENNETH COLE
Necklace PATRICIA VON MUSLIN



Shirt BOSSI
Top necklace ELI HALILI
Bottom necklace CHANEL at VINTAGE GRACE

Despite all his stratospheric success, Legend remains genuinely humble. “So much of my musical interest and my musical ability was inspired, encouraged and taught by my grandmother and my mother,” he asserts, before expressing gratitude to another female role model, Gloria Smith, his first piano teacher.

Legend’s love of music runs far beyond talent – it is his currency, his world. When writing songs, it is the music that draws out the lyrics: “It guides me to what I want to sing and what I want to say.” For someone whose career spans decades and genres, his enthusiasm is unwavering: “I’ve never really fallen out of love with the music business. I really enjoy it ... It’s fun, it’s creative, it’s collaborative and I love that.”

It was collaborations that catalysed Legend’s early career. During his studies, Legend featured on Lauryn Hill’s *Everything Is Everything* track. Fresh from his studies, he worked as a management consultant at Boston Consulting Group and was already earning more than his father ever had. But he was also working on his music and he had his sights on quickly signing a record deal. It took six years, to release his first solo album, *Get Lifted*, in 2004. “If you really believe that you have something special to offer as an artist, then you have to give it a chance, you have to work on it. You have to write; you have to develop your voice and keep working on it and you have to be persistent and push through all the ‘no’s’ and take it to ‘yes.’”

Legend did just this when he decided to leave his job and focus on his music, spending more time working with Kanye West, whom he had met in 2001. “He was starting to feature me on projects with the artists he was working with, and eventually, things started to blossom with Kanye’s solo career and I went on the road with him and quit working my day jobs.”

So, what does the man who’s achieved it all do next? First and foremost, he dreams of collaborating with Beyoncé, (whose song, *Love On Top*, was played repeatedly at Teigen and Legend’s wedding) and Kendrick Lamar. He would also like to ensure “that even with this era of streaming and all these other ways of reaching people, we’re not losing sight of the fact that music has to be created by someone and they deserve to get compensated”.

Here we get a glimpse of Legend's awareness for others, something he put into action in 2007 when he started the Show Me campaign that "works to end the school-to-prison pipeline and address systemic issues in our criminal justice system that disproportionately impact the poor, minorities and disadvantaged". He built on this further and launched the Free America campaign in 2015 which aims to reduce mass incarceration. Last year he created HUMANLEVEL, "a new initiative to uplift communities disproportionately impacted by institutionalised racism".

Legend is staying true to his 15-year-old word, displaying a level of community consciousness that is not often associated with fame.

His gathering of people as a force for good and raising their voices bleeds into all aspects of his life, whether that be his film production company Get Lifted, which recently debuted the documentary *Loudmouth* about the Reverend Al Sharpton at the Tribeca Film Festival, or his supporting role as a judge on the US version of *The Voice*. However, music remains central: "When it comes to the other things that I do professionally, music is by far the number one thing and the thing that I spend the most time on, put the most heart and love into."

In his philanthropic work, Legend says he wants to be influential, adding, "But I also want to make sure that I empower lots of really smart, talented people around me to do a lot of the research and heavy lifting that's involved in making our work successful. That leaves me more time to do what I really want to do, which is music most of all, along with being a good dad and being a good husband."

Music and family are evidently what sparks joy in Legend's life. There's a shift in gear when they are spoken about, a notable change in the tone of his voice. It's there when he casts his mind back to what music he was listening to growing up. He offers an enormous list, one too long to print but highlighting Stevie Wonder, Marvin Gaye, Nat King Cole and Lionel Richie as his inspirations – greats he now sits beside. The same too goes for

when talking about how "beautiful and fun" it is to travel with his family while on tour, stressing the importance of boundaries, "I make certain rules for myself and for my team to not over-schedule me, and to make sure I schedule enough time to spend with my kids and with my wife."

Wherever his interests take him, Legend has created a new narrative for the modern man. His vision would be "to have a stronger sense of love for our neighbours, a stronger sense of solidarity with each other, a stronger sense of democracy". To this, he adds, "Believing that each of our voices matters, and our votes matter, and our system should make sure that each voice can ring out and be heard and each vote can be counted. And each citizen can feel like they're included in our democracy and how our resources are allocated and prioritised. And that we look past all [of] the differences that we have with each other and see each other's humanity and value each other."

These are somewhat daunting ideas, but Legend breaks them down, reminding us that "you're only small and quiet if you think of yourself in the big global context. But if you think about going to local community organisations, going to town halls and having your voice heard, you're not small and quiet ... Start paying attention to what's happening in your community and seeing what you get excited about, and how you can help make a difference ... And getting involved locally means proportionately your voice is going to carry more weight, because you know, it's a smaller community, and you can make some noise".

We might not all be able to make the same quality of noise as Legend in the musical sense, but to quote Legend's musical godfather, Stevie Wonder, "When you're moving in the positive, your destination is the brightest star."

HUMANLEVEL.org
johnlegend.com
@letsfreeamerica
@getlifted
@johnlegend



Blazer GUCCI
Sunglasses AOI
Shirt BOSSI

Grooming PAM FARMER, Photography assistant ZACK HUGHES, Styling assistants CHRISTOPHER ASKARI-DEPATHY and SHANNON HOMAN, Talent JOHN LEGEND. Special thanks to The Peninsula Beverly Hills