

INNER BEAT

SIEDAH GARRETT

SONGS IN THE KEY OF A LIFE WELL LIVED

INTERVIEWED BY PETER MELNICK

I sat down to interview Siedah Garrett in mid-February, encountering a woman of tremendous heart with a fascinating story to tell. Garrett is a Grammy-winning, twice-Oscar-nominated songwriter, whose songs have been recorded by a staggering array of artists including Aretha Franklin, Diana Ross, Earth Wind & Fire, Ray Charles, the Pointer Sisters, Donna Summer, Dionne Warwick, Patti Austin, Roberta Flack, Al Jarreau, Miles Davis, and even Ella Fitzgerald. An acclaimed singer herself, Garrett appeared as a featured vocalist with Michael Jackson on his *Dangerous World* tour, and has also toured with Madonna, Sérgio Mendes, and with her mentor, Quincy Jones. The song she co-wrote for Jennifer Hudson to perform in the film version of *Dreamgirls* ("Love You I Do"), along with her contribution to the 2023 film adaptation of *The Color Purple*, led to her present focus on musical theater projects. Two of her songs are featured in the Broadway hit *MJ the Musical*, and she is currently collaborating on a musical adaptation of the Will Smith film *The Pursuit of Happyness*. For all that, she is perhaps best known for the "Man in the Mirror," a song she co-authored with Glen Ballard that became a huge hit for Jackson on the *Bad* album. Jackson's impact on Garrett's life extends beyond even the huge success of the song, however. She met her husband, Erik Nuri, a former vice president of A&R at RCA and Arista Records, on the Sunday after Jackson's death in June 2009, when she performed "Man in the Mirror" at services at the Agape International Spiritual Center in Los Angeles in Jackson's memory. Garrett and Nuri married in 2014, and today he also serves as her manager.



(L-R): STEVIE WONDER and
SIEDAH GARRETT



(L-R): SIEDAH GARRETT and JAMIE FOXX



SIEDAH GARRETT with her
DREAMGIRLS Grammy Award
DREAMGIRLS soundtrack album cover



SIEDAH GARRETT; Photo by Sandrine Lee



SEIDAH GARRETT standing by platinum awards she's won for Michael Jackson's **BAD**; Photo by Erik Nuri

SCORE: *I'd like to start off by asking you about the world you grew up in—who your parents were, what their values were, what defined them as people.*

Siedah: My parents met when they were in high school, and got married very young. They divorced when my sister and I were 5 and 6, and my father left, completely. My mother had him arrested at one point for non-payment of child support.

I'm the oldest, and we grew up living with my

mom, moving *all* over Los Angeles. And when I say that, I literally mean all over! My mother had a bit of an aversion to paying rent, so we moved every nine months. She would pay the first and last month's rent to get into the apartment, and the landlord never knew that was going to be *their* first and last. [laughs] She was very skilled at working the tenant-landlord laws in her favor.

Living like that with my mom was both good and bad. The bad part was that I was always the new kid in school, always arriving in

the middle of the semester. I do not easily forge friendships or relationships, because in my youth, I thought it pointless to do so, knowing we would soon move away. But the good part, the true beauty of living with my mom, was that change was a given in my life. Now, as an adult, I flow easily with change.

SCORE: *It must have been really tough for you.*

Siedah: Or a gift. I became the antithesis of what I saw in her, growing up. I'll never have

a bill collector come after me. My credit is excellent because hers was not. My word is my bond, because hers was not. I go out of my way to help people, because she did not.

I spent the happiest part of my childhood in Compton with my paternal grandmother, and I'm just so grateful, having had her as part of my life. She came over to my mom's house at one point, when the gas and electricity had been turned off for non-payment. She said to my mom, "If you don't let me take these kids, *tonight*, I'm going to call child protective services in the morning, and they'll be taken away from you!" My mother acquiesced and allowed us to live with my grandmother, where there was an abundance of love, food, and stability. Happiest time in my life!

SCORE: *When in childhood did you begin to really feel music?*

Siedah: My mother's father was a Baptist deacon. When I was little, she would, like, surprise him and show up at his church, looking to get attention for herself, as in, "Look who's visiting our church this afternoon: my daughter Doris!" She would bring me up to sing a song. And when I finished singing, people would say, "Your daughter is such a good singer!" But it really hit me in junior high school. There was this geeky guy who played guitar, who wanted to be in the school's talent show, but he knew he'd get booed off the stage if he just went up and played guitar. He asked me, "Would you sing this Stevie Wonder duet with me?" It was "You Are the Sunshine of My Life." We won! Overnight I went from, "Who's that weird new girl?" to, "Hey, you're the one who won the talent contest!" That's when I knew that I had something. I had a gift.

There was a girl who was a singer, and her brother and uncle were musicians. They, along with a couple of cousins, were a family band. She loved Chaka Khan. She wanted to sing Chaka songs, and she needed another singer to do harmonies with her. So, one day, after school, I auditioned for her, after having learned every Chaka song! Chaka was my first vocal teacher. We called ourselves Black Velvet and Satin Soul. My mother knew that I treasured rehearsal with this group, and she would lord it over me, taking that privilege away from me as punishment when she deemed necessary. I think that's why music became so precious to me. It was my escape.

My mother, who was a wallpaper hanger at that time, was working in the home of hit R&B/gospel artist D.J. Rogers. She introduced me to him, and I auditioned for him at his home, after which, although I was only a teen, he hired me to record background vocals on what would be his new album. It was fun, and two weeks later, I got a check! I was hooked!

SCORE: *I read somewhere that you have perfect pitch.*

Siedah: I do not.

SCORE: *Never mind, you do just fine without it! But you know you've got a special talent.*

Siedah: That's for others to say. I have a passion that I love pursuing.

SCORE: *Okay. That's called humility.*

TOP: SIEDAH GARRETT *singing at the Special Olympics World Games*
SIEDAH GARRETT *at age 2; SIEDAH GARRETT in her home, at the piano;*
Photos courtesy of Siedah Garrett



“Well, I’ve lived longer. I’ve learned a bit more. And I’ve written a lot more songs. I think the more you do something, the better you get at it, you know?”

—Siedah Garrett



(L-R): SIEDAH GARRETT and GLEN BALLARD

Siedah: [Very quietly.] Thank you.

SCORE: *At some point it's important to be able to own it...*

Siedah: Maybe I'll grow into that. [She laughs: maybe she won't...]

SCORE: *There's also a difference between musical self-confidence, and self-love. Do you feel good about who you are?*

Siedah: Absolutely. Especially from whence I came. I feel that with that kind of upbringing I should not have been as successful as I am today.

SCORE: *That's actually a big deal. You must have been gifted with something powerful from within that allowed you to come through your childhood with such strength. Something apart from your talent.*

Siedah: I'm still trying to make it through... [She smiles, softly.] When it comes to my work, I guess I just do what I'm feeling. I do what comes to mind and to my soul when I'm in that space, the writing space. I'm always jotting down a line or two here and there. That's how I got the concept for the title "Man in the Mirror." I happened to hear that phrase as I overheard someone else's telephone conversation. It caught my attention, so I jotted it down in my book. I just try to be open to the muse whenever she decides to arrive.

SCORE: *For you, is lyric writing fast?*

Siedah: Sometimes, yes. I've been told I'm quicker than most lyricists. But there is also the school of getting down your initial ideas, and then honing each line to make that line the best it could be. I try to do a little bit of both. One of the most valuable lessons taught to me by my mentor, Quincy Jones, was that the best songwriters are re-writers.

SCORE: *Did you have any formal training, or were all your teachers the people you listened to, and you figured it out for yourself?*

Siedah: Mostly the latter. When I toured with Michael, he sent me to his vocal coach, which was a disaster. I tried taking music courses in high school and some college. It felt more like math than creativity to me, but I wish that I had the forethought to have taken music much more seriously, at an early age. Even today, I would be hired for more recording session work if I knew how to read music, but I just never learned.

SCORE: *You first came to Quincy's attention as a singer. But when he signed you as part of a group, your contract had songwriting obligations.*

Siedah: I was not a songwriter, and never imagined myself as one. I was forced to become a songwriter, because the other three guys in the group had signed their contracts and put them on Quincy's desk. He said, "Where's Siedah's contract?"

[Doing a bandmate's voice.] "Oh, she doesn't want to sign the publishing. She just wants the artist deal."

They later told me that Quincy said, "You either all sign, or nobody signs."

Next thing I know... [She bangs on the table several times, the sound of someone knocking on her door.] "SIEDAH! Girl, you better sign this damn contract!" So, when three large Black men suggest you sign...you sign! And I signed the publishing contract along with the group artist contract, and immediately began studying the craft of songwriting. Two years into this contract, our first project was Sidney Poitier's directorial debut, a film called *Fast Forward*. It pretty much did—it just came and went. But there was a song from that short-lived film called "Do You Want It Right Now?" Jellybean Benitez produced it, and Warner Bros. released it. It became a number-one dance record in *Billboard*, and a dance club hit.

SCORE: *The songs you wrote in the early days are different from the ones you are most famous for, like "Man in the Mirror," and your Grammy-winning, Oscar-nominated song from Dreamgirls, "Love You I Do." I know it's the same songwriter—I'm talking to her—but you evolved so much from your early contract writer days to writing songs that are powerful and aspirational.*

Siedah: Well, I've lived longer. I've learned a bit more. And I've written a lot more songs. I think the more you do something, the better you get at it, you know? Plus, in the early days, I became the go-to demo singer. So I learned a lot just by working with hit producers and songwriters, and studying their creative process.

SCORE: *When you were writing those early songs, what were your ambitions and drives?*

Siedah: My sole goal, at that time, was to fulfill my contractual agreement! Let's say the contract read that I owe "12 songs in a year." Not being an instrumentalist, I always had a co-writer. That meant the most I could deliver at one time was 50% of a song, so I had to write at least 24 songs to fulfill my contractual obligation. Also, let me tell you, there is nothing like the feeling of hearing one of your songs playing on the radio!

SCORE: *When you write a song today, what impels you?*

Siedah: These days, I'm focusing on writing for musical theater. What inspires me is the scene that I'm writing the song for. Bill Condon, who directed *Dreamgirls*, told me he wanted a lyricist who could paint pictures with their words, someone whose words become the third actor in the scene. For my Oscar-nominated song "Real in Rio," my charge was to write English lyrics that sounded like the original Portuguese, without being a literal translation. For the song I recently co-wrote for *The Color Purple*, I was brought in to try and fill the huge gap that the late, great Allee



TOP (L-R): SIEDAH GARRETT and JENNIFER HUDSON
MIDDLE (L-R): TAYLOR SWIFT and SIEDAH GARRETT
RIGHT (L-R): SIEDAH GARRETT and PAUL MCCARTNEY;
Photos courtesy of Siedah Garrett

Willis left when she passed, to update a song from the Broadway production. And to infuse a bit more Black-female sensibilities into the lyrics.

SCORE: *Writing for musical theater, the story you're telling gives you your direction, and the truths you tell come through the prism of that character. But when you write, say, "The New Frontier (Say Their Names)," your song about the murders of Black people at the hands of the police, you're telling your own truth. Does that scratch a different itch?*

Siedah: I would say it's all from the same well. I guess it depends on how deep you dig.

SCORE: *Is songwriting ever about making sense of your own life?*

Siedah: I would say yes. For example, I recently wrote a song titled "A Father's Love," which speaks to growing up without my dad. One verse goes, "Against the odds, I made it through. It's all for me forgiving you. Nobody thought that I would be anything. I had to make it on my own. Now I'm a woman fully grown. Still worthy of a father's love."

SCORE: *You've won a Grammy, been Oscar-nominated twice, co-authored a huge Michael Jackson hit. Do you feel successful?*

Siedah: [She whispers the next two words.] I don't. I feel that I've had success. But we live in a world where you're only as good as the last thing you've done. I feel that I had the potential and opportunities to become a much more successful recording artist, but I guess that just wasn't in the cards for me at that time.

SCORE: *So what defines success to you?*

Siedah: Being able to continue to live in the manner to which you have become accustomed, and to manifest your full potential. And being able to use your platform, your reach, to help others.

SCORE: *That's two very different things. One is about making the kind of money that allows you to feel comfortable and safe in the world. The other is about actually being a part of the world in a fluid way, giving as well as receiving. Let's start with the money part, which is a very personal subject. Everybody relates to it differently.*

Siedah: Growing up, I lived with no money,

with bills not being paid. I don't want to be without. Been there. Done that!

SCORE: *I don't care how talented a person is—no one gets where you are without drive. You have to put yourself in the right places to meet the people who can make it happen for you. It takes drive to figure out how to navigate that part of the world. And making money is a big part of that, right? Money and drive are intertwined.*

Siedah: I think money's a huge part of it, yeah, definitely. The money I've made allows me to live comfortably without mundane distractions, so I can focus on my creativity. It also gives me the freedom to travel and be inspired by other cultures, and to explore my other interests, which are often not income producing, but bring so much joy and serenity into my life.

SCORE: *Any other things contribute to your drive? Is there, "I need to show the world..."*

Siedah: No, I need to show *myself*. Because in my family I was never expected to be anyone or do anything. Nobody knew I was going to be "the Siedah Garrett!" I became something to them when Quincy Jones and Michael Jackson introduced me to the world as something special.

SCORE: *The second part of your answer is about your ability to give to the world.*

Siedah: Even if the outreach is only to the extent of your immediate family, that's a good thing. But there are charities and organizations that I lend my name to and I will work for, to help promote whatever. I do things for the Race to Erase MS Foundation a lot. Also, I enjoy writing theme songs for charities and special events, and have previously done so for the Special Olympics World Games, the World Expo, Autism Speaks, American Idol Gives Back, among other fundraising efforts.

SCORE: *You're living with MS yourself. How did the diagnosis hit you?*

Siedah: Initially, it was hard-hitting, 'cause the only thing I saw was Richard Pryor and how crippling his disease was. I thought that's what MS is, for everybody. But if you gotta have MS, I must say I have the sexiest form of it! [laughs] My symptoms are relatively mild, so I have a pretty normal, healthy life. I take a pill every day that reduces the

tingling and numbing in my fingertips, and the frequency of attacks to my nervous system that sometimes partially paralyze my feet and legs. But listen, I'm fortunate not to be in a wheelchair. Not to have to use a cane. I'm happy that people can't look at me and say, "Oh my gosh, she's really sick. She has a debilitating disease that has no cure." When you look at me, you don't see that. But that's what's happening. I'm just in awe that it's not as difficult for me as it can be for others. I feel lucky in that way. I'll just [she knocks three times on the nearby table] knock on some wood real quick. Right now, MS is my b****!

SCORE: *If success is about what you do in your professional life, what is the measure of a life well lived, in the bigger picture?*

Siedah: A life well lived is, in my humble opinion, fully expressed gratitude. Being grateful for all that you have, and being thankful for all that you will be given. A kind of pre-thanks.

SCORE: *All that you will be given, I love that. Looking to the future, are there things that you haven't done yet that you're looking to do?*

Siedah: I'm always trying to keep myself relevant in an industry that's in constant flux. I want to be the go-to Broadway lyricist now—that's my new goal. I want to be the one who gets called first for this project or that project, because of the quality of the work I've already done, but also for a reputation of being fast, easy to work with, and delivering on time.

I'm also about to spend some time in Nashville. I've been invited as a special guest to the annual festival of the Nashville Songwriters Association International, and I'll explore writing for country artists with Nashville writers. Nashville is known as the storytelling capital of the U.S., and I'm really, really interested in how that whole process works, looking to forge some great relationships with producers and songwriters of that genre.

[At this point, Erik pokes his head in the room to tell us it's time to wind things up. The couple are off to attend a special performance of 44 - *THE unOFFICIAL, unSANCTIONED OBAMA MUSICAL* in a little while, and they're going to need time to get ready.]

SCORE: *Lunging for the finish line here... If you could whisper in the ear of your*

"I'm fortunate not to be in a wheelchair. Not to have to use a cane. I'm happy that people can't look at me and say, 'Oh my gosh, she's really sick. She has a debilitating disease that has no cure.' When you look at me, you don't see that. But that's what's happening. I'm just in awe that it's not as difficult for me as it can be for others."

—Siedah Garrett

childhood self—Little Girl You before you became Siedah—and give her something powerful to help her make sense of her life, what would you tell her?

Siedah: Well, there's a line in the film *Gods and Monsters*. The lead actor, Ian McKellen, says—and this is how I summed up my whole childhood with my mother and my sister—he says, "I feel like a giraffe who's been given to a family of farmers who don't know what to do with the creature." I don't know if that answers your question.

SCORE: *It almost does. So what would you say to your childhood self?*

Siedah: "Don't worry. Keep being you. The world will catch up."

SCORE: *I have a feeling you'll always be one step ahead of the world—what a great place to be! This has been an absolute delight for me, and I'm sure will be for our readers as well. Thank you, Siedah Garrett!*

CLOCKWISE (L-R): SIEDAH GARRETT and QUINCY JONES; (L-R): SIEDAH GARRETT and STEVEN SPIELBERG; SIEDAH GARRETT standing near some of the pieces she has knitted. (L-R): SIEDAH GARRETT recording with MICHAEL JACKSON; (L-R): MADONNA and SIEDAH GARRETT; (L-R): SMOKEY ROBINSON, SIEDAH GARRETT, and BERRY GORDY JR. Photos courtesy of Siedah Garrett

