

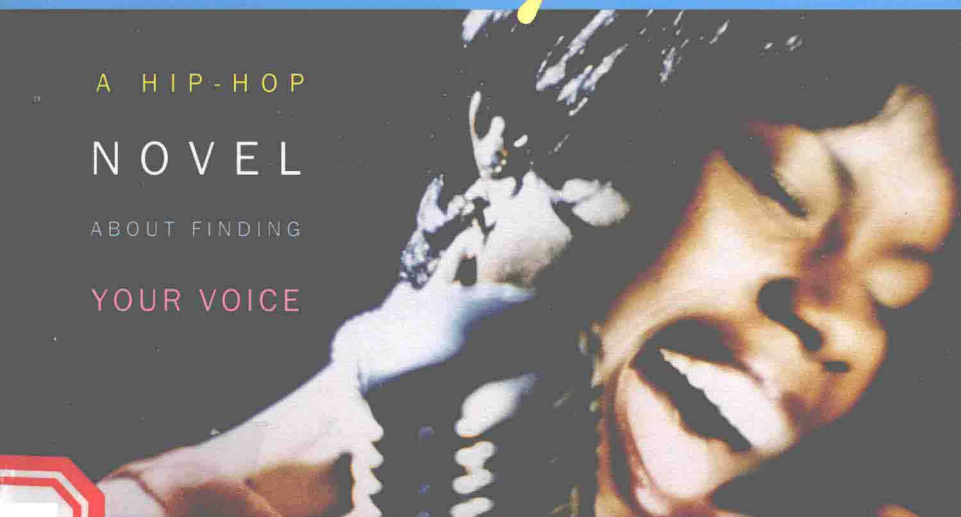
My Fine Lady

A HIP-HOP

NOVEL

ABOUT FINDING

YOUR VOICE



Yolanda
Joe

BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF

BE'S BY GOLLY WOW

My Fine Lady

Yolanda Joe



A PLUME BOOK

PLUME

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Yolanda Joe is the bestselling author of *The Hatwearer’s Lesson* (available from Plume); *Bebe’s By Golly Wow*; *He Say, She Say*; *Falling Leaves of Ivy*; and *This Just In*. A former television and radio producer, she is also a mystery author under the pen name Ardella Garland. A graduate of Yale and the Columbia School of Journalism, she lives in Chicago.

Visit www.YolandaJoe.com

FOR MY NEPHEWS . . . DONALD AND DEVON . . .
WHO WILL ALWAYS HAVE MY LOVE AND MY PRAYERS

Thanks to my wonderful editor Laurie for her insight and her patience. You worked me for real this time, girl! I appreciate it.

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And lastly, to all of the above, MUCH LOVE.

Prologue

Where does the hope for love begin?

In the heart? Where our insides are shaped like honeycombs with people buzzing in and out, turning our emotions into a syrupy sweet that drips out for us to taste?

Or is it in the mind? Where emotion sticks and stains like paint splatter against walls of doubt?

For nine-year-old Imani, it began both in her heart and in her mind. It was 1988, in a Maryland town that was the urban seam between Baltimore and D.C.

Imani was sitting on the front steps of her best friend's house with the other little girls in their downtown neighborhood. Imani had her ankles crossed and her knees up, needle-thin legs knitting the air. Her reddish-brown hair was unraveled and being tamed into long, even rows. Imani's best friend Shari was doing the braiding. A little boy named Taz stopped by to tease.

"How come your hair's always standing on top of your head? How come?"

"How come your stomach's always growling? I can hardly think in school 'cause your stomach's always growling."

All the girls laughed.

Taz was embarrassed. "Maybe you're just stupid."

Shari tugged on Imani's braids. "You gonna take that?"

Imani bolted off the steps and pushed Taz.

Taz wasn't about to be punked either. So he pushed her back.

Imani fell to the ground and bumped her elbow.

Shari dropped her comb, lunged off the steps, and slapped Taz upside his head.

Taz didn't want any part of Shari. She was two years older and, at age eleven, bigger and badder. But Taz knew someone bigger and badder than her. He threatened, "I'm telling Biggie."

"Biggie's your friend but he's my big brother, remember? How you gonna get Biggie on me? We family—*something you don't know nothing about.*"

Taz was really hurt now. Everybody knew he lived in the group home up the street. Why did Shari have to broadcast it? And he didn't mean to push Imani that hard. He didn't. Now she'd never like him. Never.

"Tell Imani you're sorry, Taz."

He shook his head no.

"Sorry didn't do it. He did," Imani yelled as she got up from the ground, tears streaming down her cheeks. "And he did it on purpose."

"Well, Taz," Shari reasoned, "you gotta give her something."

"Why, Shari?"

"'Cause that's the way it goes. When a boy hurts a girl he's gotta give her something. That's what my mama says."

Imani dried her eyes. "Something like what?"

"Like flowers."

"I don't want no flowers."

Shari thought a second then whispered in Imani's ear. Imani blushed. "*I don't want none of that neither.*"

"Well my mama likes it."

"How do you know?"

"I heard her through the door hollering, '*Don't stop. Don't stop.*'"

The girls laughed.

Taz took off running. "I'll get you something good. I promise."

"But you don't know what I like!" Imani yelled after him.

"Imani, don't waste your time on that silly boy."

"I'm not. I don't like Taz."

As soon as Imani said that, a familiar voice came riding the wind. It was her father calling her from across the street. Imani saw the outline of his stout body. The down-and-out musician had his horn in one hand and was waving her home with the other hand.

"Aww shoot. I gotta go practice the piano."

"Skip it and come jump rope."

"Can't. See ya, Shari. Hey, don't forget we're sneaking out Saturday. Don't fake me out."

"I already told you, Imani, I'm in."

But at home Imani wanted out. She tried to talk her father Maceo into letting her skip piano practice.

"C'mon, Daddy, please? It's nice outside."

Her father Maceo was old school. He'd been born in the South and left home when he was sixteen to play with a band. The group traveled the single-lane highways of the delta, headlining joints in the backwoods where the crickets played the bass line. Maceo learned a lot about music and about life.

"I like any kind of music; you know that, Imani. But I promised your mama that I'd make sure you learned piano. That woman loved the sound of a piano."

Maceo knew he was slick. He knew that anytime he *really* wanted Imani to do something, all he had to do was say her mother did it or liked it. Imani never really knew her mother. A little girl like that would always want to latch on to something of her mom's . . . her likes . . . dislikes . . . maybe even her dreams.

Maceo missed his wife something fierce. She died when Imani was three from a sudden heart attack and lingering hard times.

They'd met fifteen years before, on Easter. The band had broken up. Maceo decided to take a part-time job playing for a little church in town. He had no intentions of staying. But you know love and its crazy ways. Love will make intentions grow roots.

The super soprano with the heavenly pipes was named Mae. Maceo just adored her gorgeous voice and her big pretty eyes. A shy but engaging personality sealed the deal. When Maceo looked at Imani now, he saw Mae's eyes and that same undeveloped talent. "What did I say about music, Imani? It's gotta be worked. So work."

Imani opened the songbook and her tiny shoulders slumped.

"Put in one hour. I'll be upstairs listening."

And drinking more than you're listening, Imani thought.

Imani began to play, hitting a foul note about every three or four keys. She'd much rather be listening to Salt 'n Pepa or Run DMC.

"Hey, Imani!"

Imani turned around and there was Taz at the window screen. He held up a lollipop.

Imani slid off the piano bench, happy for a reason to get away. She wanted the lollipop bad too—it was one of those big, swirled, multiflavored kinds. But the junior diva decided to give Taz a little attitude first. "Is that all you gonna give me?"

Taz heard Biggie say a true player always told a woman to take it or leave it *and she never left it.*

"Take it or leave it."

Imani took it.

"I don't hear nothing!" Maceo called out from upstairs. "Don't make me come down there."

Imani cocked her head to the side and twisted her lips. "See ya, Taz. I gotta go practice the stupid piano."

"I like piano."

"I don't. It's keeping me from playing."

"I could practice for you. Then we'd be cool about the pushing down thing."

Imani liked the idea. "For real?"

"Yeah."

"Okay. All you gotta do is play the first three songs in the songbook over and over again."

"That's it?"

"Oh and mess up a lot. I'll be back in an hour."

Imani lifted the screen and Taz crawled through the window.

Taz had taught himself to play by ear. It was a wonder, considering the kid boomeranged from one foster home to another with very little comfort or stability. He did live with a nice family once but unfortunately wasn't able to stay with them for very long. That family had an old piano in the basement. Taz was able to learn notes and tunes by listening to the radio. He took that knowledge and ran with it.

Taz began to make up songs. Raps. He loved rap music the best. The nice family hated to see Taz go to another foster home but they were moving out of state. Taz sulked when he found out, but didn't cry. After years of rejection, he was all cried out. The nice family gave him a Sony Walkman as a going-away present. He kept it under his pillow and listened to it at night. The music became a lullaby that chased away his loneliness.

Taz played the piano now, messing up for the first thirty minutes just like Imani said to do. Then he just forgot where he was and why. Taz began to play a song he heard on the radio. A Michael Jackson song. It had a booming beat he loved. Taz pounded the bass line on the piano and twinkled the keys.

He played and played . . . all the while he heard the pop star singing in his head . . . *Beat it . . . boom-dah-dee-dah boom-boom-daboom . . . boom-dah-dee-dah boom-boom-daboom . . .*

Outside, Imani was having a good old time playing with Shari and the girls. She was jumping double-dutch. Imani was in the middle of the rope, making up her own rhymes, jamming, her

feet pounding the gravel pavement. Without warning, Imani's playmates dropped their rope ends and ran. Imani tumbled to the ground.

"Hey," she said jumping up with her hands on her hips like the little Sally Walker she was. "I turned for y'all. Come back here!"

Imani bent down to pick up the rope. She saw shoes. She'd know those shoes anywhere—a pair of dirty Nikes and a pair of black leather loafers with both heels on a flat.

Her throat went dry, but her eyes had to look.

Maceo had Taz by the back of the shirt so he couldn't run. Quiet as it's kept, she would've tried to run too if she had somewhere to go.

Maceo fussed at Imani all the way home, shaking her arm and fussing. He dragged Taz along; letting him know he was about one inch off his ass too.

Imani sat on the piano bench near tears.

"Don't start that crying or I'll give you something to cry about."

Imani sucked in air like she was drowning, her chest heaving, trying not to let a single tear fall.

Maceo took a drink out of the flask he kept in his back pocket. He drank and sized Taz up. "You're new around here. How old are you?"

"Nine. Me and Imani in the same grade."

"And y'all in the same trouble." Maceo took another long drink.

"I didn't do nothing."

"You ah story. It was all your idea, Taz."

"I didn't do nothing."

"Both of y'all, shut up. There's enough wrong to go around."

Taz's stomach growled.

"You hungry, son?"

"No."

"Daddy, they don't feed him half the time. He's a foster kid."

Taz hated her for saying that. For giving voice to the thing that he despised being most—a child that the world didn't value or love.

Maceo thought before taking another swig. "Tell you what, son . . ."

"Taz. My name is Taz."

"Okay, Taz. I'm gonna give you a job. I'll trade you dinner every night, starting tonight, if you come by here in the evening and give Imani piano lessons."

Taz acted like he was mulling the proposition over. He asked, "Can you cook?"

"Boy, I cook the best red beans and rice on the Maryland side of N'Orleans."

Maceo scooped Taz up—he almost cringed when he felt the boy's bony rib cage—and sat him down on the piano bench next to Imani. Taz put bass in his voice. "Okay, I'm the teacher. You play lousy, so from now on you need to practice two hours a day."

"Daddy!"

"Let Taz show you."

And from those lessons, the children's relationship would grow and grow, and so, too, would their dreams.

Children are blessed because they can dream with their eyes wide open.

That Saturday, Shari and Imani crept out of the house into the night just liked they'd planned. They rode their bikes to the secret spot far from home, their home where the streets are littered with garbage and the mailboxes are filled with government checks. Poor but proud, the neighborhood loved and cherished its children, children like Imani and Shari.

The two downtown girls went uptown, stopping outside the fence, which bordered a historically black university. Imani and Shari sat on the fence near a window.

Inside, the alumni charity ball was being held. The two little girls had ridden their bikes to see . . . to see the beautiful black women of various shades gowned in spectacular colors as they emerged from the limos and the Lincolns, latched on to the arms of tuxedoed black men.

Elegant. Glamorous. Magical. To the girls it seemed as if the pages of *Essence* magazine had come alive.

"Shari," Imani said to her best friend, "it's my turn to sit the closest."

They swapped places and Imani watched mesmerized, the moonlight dancing along the roots of her hair. Her heart leaped with excitement as she watched the women and men laugh and dance inside the ball. Imani gazed and whispered, "Someday . . . Someday . . ."

Children are blessed because they can dream with their eyes wide open.

Chapter One

Imani grew into a young woman who desired to be a star in the world and an endless torch in her lover's heart. Those conjoined dreams made up the center of her flower and its petals are all life's possibilities.

Imani's voice was velvet on fire. Her brown skin was minted copper by the sun. For her, the world was music. For her, the lover was Taz.

She glanced at him now from the stage of the underground music club. One look and Imani swallowed her nervousness and began to dance on magic legs.

Taz matched each of her fantasy moves step for step. Rugged hips rolled inside his baggy jeans. The hands that stroked her neck and back beneath the sheets now swung on beat at his sides. Taz's dark and brooding eyes focused with a hint of light. Why? Because he was turned on by the sight of Imani performing his music.

"If the world loved me, I'd bring it to its knees . . .

Making it my niggah, doin' as I pleased . . ."

Imani rapped his songs because Taz found unspeakable joy in beats and rhymes. She gave them voice, a voice that called out to their world.

Their world was right there, front and fabulous. Young men and women were jammed up against the stage. They let the grits meet the gravy, baby. They did their natural-born thing. Up against the wall. Up against other bodies. Up against the world hating on them with a passion. But it didn't matter. Because no matter what, they were still glorious.

It was a freeze-frame *I don't give a damn to the world*. It meant, *I'm getting my groove on whether you like it or not*. Because at that very moment, a generation's story was being sermonized onstage; the words were etched in culture, commandments of lifestyle documenting what it is to be inner-city hip and hopeless, fearless and fine.

Imani was *serious*; blowtorching out her rap the way ministers preach fire and brimstone from the Bible. The hip-hop congregation was digging on her sermon. But in his head Taz heard the gospel according to his critics. They had surfaced to the big time while Taz struggled.

Yo-yo-yo Taz. Your girl got skills no doubt. Makes your rhymes sound better than they are. But you gotta get harder, dog, if you wanna make it out of here. Your sound is too wangsta—wanna-be gangsta.

Nothing can bring down a person's mood faster than the thought of a bunch of folks hating on their dream. Pleased with Imani's performance, but not the fact that she went on first, or the chump change the club owner paid, the couple got in Taz's beat-up car and rode over to Lover's Leap to unwind. Imani tried to tighten up Taz's unhinged spirits.

"Baby, we're gonna make it. Stop worrying, hear? I don't care what nobody else says, we're gonna make it."

Taz smiled. Then he drew Imani to him. Taz pressed his tight muscular body up against hers. He kissed her passionately before stopping to whisper in her ear, "I wanna be with you. I