

## >Anthony Hamilton *Now's the Time*

**A**nthony Hamilton sinks back onto the daybed in his Harlem basement apartment, inhaling a deep whiff of incense, and admits he's feeling strong. "I'm comfortable," he says. "'Cause I know it's my turn."

He may sound cocky, but given that stardom has played hide-and-seek with Hamilton for 10 years, his current confidence shouldn't be taken lightly. He's always had the stirring velvety voice, but now he has an addictive debut, *Comin' From Where I'm From*, to match, and finally, a record label, So So Def/Arista, that believes in him.

Hamilton, 29, is a former barber from North Carolina and says he was inspired by everyone from "the wings on the street in Charlotte to Aretha Franklin and James Taylor." He's been touted as the Next Big Thing for years, signing with one label after another, only to see his career circle and crash like a runaway kite each time. "I was like, Is it me? Is it my music?" he says.

He raised his profile by backing D'Angelo on 2000's Voodoo tour, but then Hamilton's record company went under.

Good fortune finally arrived when his catchy hook for Nappy Roots' "Po' Folks" produced a Grammy-nominated smash, leading to another break singing on 2Pac's posthumous "Thugz Mansion."

But Atlantic, his next label, still couldn't figure out what to do with him. Then, at the Grammy brunch this past February, he was asked to perform for a packed house that included Prince, Roberta Flack, and Alicia Keys. "Ten years was bottled up inside me, and I was angry," he says. "I wanted to use that mike to punish them. I wanted to show, 'Y'all are sleepin'. And I'm going to make you pay.'"

Jermaine Dupri's father, sitting in the audience, speed-dialed his son in Atlanta and told him, "If you don't meet with this guy, you're stupid." "So I met him," says Dupri. "From the songs I heard, I thought he was too good to be true. I ran into LA [Reid]'s office to say, 'I'm going to sign this guy today.'"

Dupri did just that, and things are finally coming together. "My music is real authentic soul," Hamilton says. "It's pure. I hope and pray that people feel good about it."

Michael Callahan

