

Nation mourns R&B star

*Grammy
nominee
had budding
film career*

By Shonda McClain-Hill
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Like Otis Redding and Tupac Shakur before her, success and death came early for R&B singer and actress Aaliyah. A career that began at the age of 6 came to a tragic end Saturday, when the 22-year-old entertainer was killed, along with eight others, after a small plane crashed Saturday in the Bahamas.

Aaliyah and the others in her party had just completed the filming of her music video, "Rock the Boat," directed by Hype Williams, who was not on board the plane, according to her official Web site. Their plane was bound for Opa-locka, Fla., in clear weather when it went down in swampland on Abaco Island, about 200 feet from the end of the runway at Marsh Harbour airport.

Investigators are still searching for clues as to why the twin-engine Cessna went down.

A statement released Sunday by the singer's publicist PMK, said: "Aaliyah's family is devastated at the loss of their loving daughter and sister. Their hearts go out to those families who also lost their loved ones in this tragic accident."

She is survived by her mother, father and brother.

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R&B star Aaliyah dies in plane crash

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News of Aaliyah's death sent shock waves throughout the entertainment industry.

Grammy-winning producer Quincy Jones, 68, was devastated by the tragedy. "She was like one of my daughters, she was one of the sweetest girls in the world. She vacationed with my family and I in Fiji. I loved and respected her and I am absolutely devastated."

The news also hit hard with fans in Philadelphia.

Hundreds of music-lovers and weekend party revelers were packed into the Brave New World nightclub in Center City early Sunday morning, when disc jockeys from WUSL-Power 99 FM, which on Saturday nights broadcasts live from the club at 7th and Arch streets, announced at around 1:45 a.m., that Aaliyah had died in a plane crash.

Saying, "it's not been a good night," the deejays turned off the dance music and asked for a moment of silence for the young singer.

The announcement quickly changed the mood of the night, as the dance floor that had been filled with shoulder-to-shoulder dancers began to thin, and one of the club's two gyrating, scantily clad dancers in the cage above of the crowded dance floor, slumped to the floor of the platform.

Most of the crowd, clearly stunned, dispersed even before the night began winding down shortly before 2:30 a.m.

A native of New York City and resident of Detroit, Aaliyah was one of the few entertainers to successfully bridge the gap between singing and acting and



R&B singer and actress Aaliyah poses for a photo in New York on May 9, 2001. — AP PHOTO/JIM COOPER

was on the cusp of superstardom. Her debut album sold more than 1 million copies, she had two Grammy nominations under her belt, and her first foray into the movies yielded a surprise hit. She was scheduled to be a presenter at the 2001 MTV Awards on Sept. 6, in New York and she had completed initial filming for "The Matrix II" in Los Angeles last month, for which she plays a character named "Zee." She was scheduled to fly to Australia in September to complete principal photography.

Born Aaliyah Dani Haughton on Jan. 16, 1979, in Brooklyn, to Diane and Michael Haughton, success came early to the young star, who moved to Detroit when she was five. Aaliyah, which means "highest, most exalted one" in Swahili, made her stage debut as an orphan in a production of "Annie" at the age of 6.

"I was an orphan, I had one little line," she recalled. "But what I loved about it was just putting the

production together, being in the chorus, learning the routines, singing, and doing a little bit of acting."

Years later, she would get the same thrill from concert touring.

"That's the best part for me," she said in a recent interview on Power-99. "Getting on that tour bus, getting on the stage, interacting with the fans, putting on a major show, I absolutely love it."

When she was 11, her uncle, Barry Hankerson, was married to soul singer Gladys Knight, who invited Aaliyah to perform with her during a five-night stint in Las Vegas.

Aaliyah struck a licensing deal as a teen-ager after Hankerson formed Blackground Records, which is part of Virgin Records. She came to national attention as part of the "new Jill swing" movement in the mid-90s in which female artists were fusing R&B vocals with hip hop beats. Her debut album, "Age Ain't Nothing But A Number," was released in 1994 — when she was 15 — and was produced by her mentor, R&B singer and writer R. Kelly, whom she allegedly wed without her parents consent that same year. That platinum selling album, which spawned the hits "Back & Forth" and "At Your Best (You Are Love)" was a major success. The marriage was less so. It was annulled shortly thereafter.

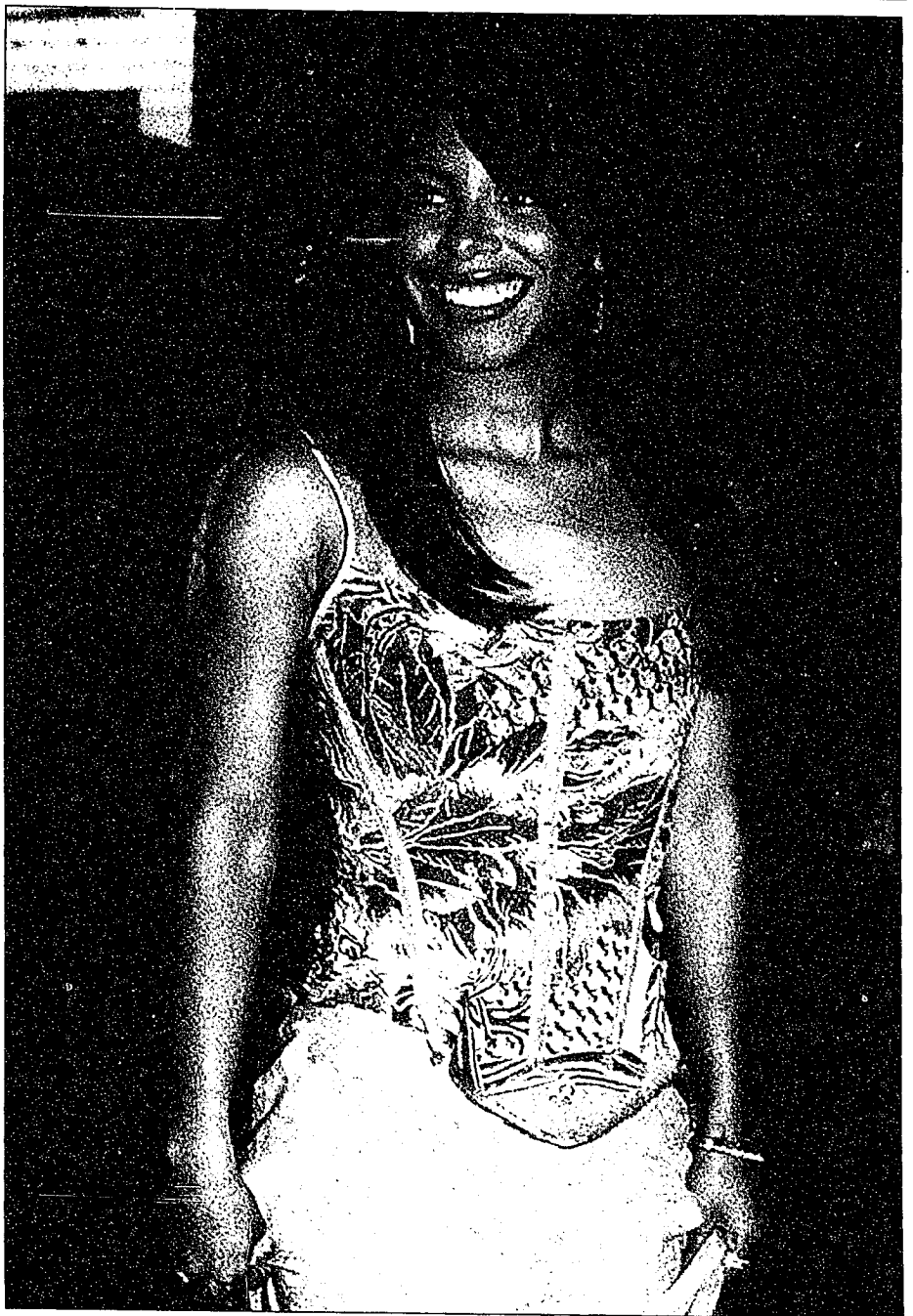
The singer's low-slung pants and midriff-baring tops, coupled with her suggestive lyrics raised interest and some eyebrows, but she dismissed all of that.

"I didn't feel I was too mature," she said. "I felt for my age, I was just right. Yeah, it was a bit sexy, but that was just me, and I'm not going to deny being a little bit sexy, I think it's a wonderful thing."

A perfectionist at an early age, Aaliyah maintained a 4.0 grade point average as a student at Detroit High School of the Performing Arts, where she majored in dance.

"She was a nice young lady," Detroit Public Schools spokesman Stan Childress said. "She was a straight-A student and an outstanding citizen."

Aaliyah's parents, who also managed her blossoming career, made sure she had as normal a childhood as possible, despite the distraction of constant travel and celebrity. The svelte singer said in a recent interview that she attended her prom and had a "sweet 16" party, as well as hung out with her friends to stay grounded.



R&B singer and actress Aaliyah arrives for the 2001 Essence Awards in this April 27, 2001 file photo, at New York's Madison Square Garden. — AP FILE PHOTO/DARA ARIJEVI

In 1996, Aaliyah released her sophomore effort, "One In A Million," which was produced by Timbaland (Tim Mosely). The album went double platinum with the help of guest appearances by Missy Elliott and the single, "If Your Girl Only Knew."

The singer, who had an affinity for snakes, also lent her sultry vocals to the movie soundtracks of "Anastasia," "Next Friday," "Music of the Heart," "Sunset Park," and "Dr. Dolittle," which included the Grammy nominated hit, "Are You That Somebody."

A budding actress, Aaliyah made her film debut in last year's sleeper hit "Romeo Must Die," opposite

Chinese martial arts legend Jet Li. Her song, "Try Again," from the movie's soundtrack, earned a Grammy nomination this year for best female R&B vocalist. Good reviews of her acting led to roles in the upcoming sequels to the high-tech thriller "The Matrix," with Keanu Reeves and she recently finished filming the big-screen adaptation of Anne Rice's "Queen of the Damned," where she plays a 6,000-year-old vampire.

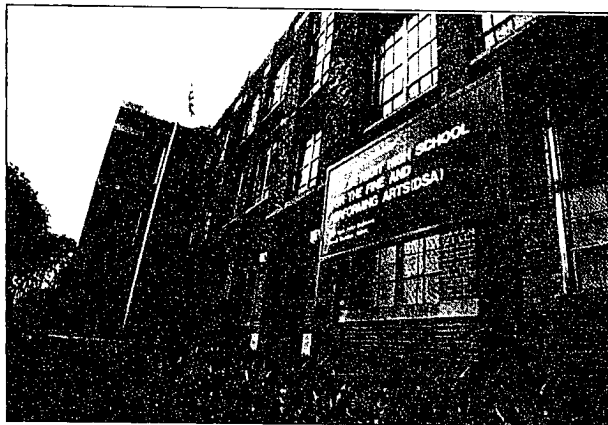
In July, Aaliyah released her third album, the self-titled "Aaliyah," which debuted at No. 2 on Billboard's Top 200.

Although her life seemed charmed, Aaliyah alluded to

growing pains and struggles.

"The hardest part about being in this business is...the fact that your life isn't your own anymore," she said. Aaliyah always maintained that she wanted to be a well-rounded entertainer like her idols Sammy Davis, Jr. and Fred Astaire. "I was trained since I was a little girl to be able to do it all," she said in a recent interview. "I want to be looked at as an entertainer, not just a singer, not just an actor. When I'm gone, when I'm not here anymore, I would like for my name to be amongst those legends, that's what I'm working towards."

The Associated Press contributed to this story.



Aaliyah studied at the Detroit High School for Fine and Performing Arts and struck a licensing deal as a teen-ager after her uncle, Barry Hankerson, formed Blackground Records. — AP PHOTO/SCULSACCA