



Idina Menzel steps out on her own

## The Best New Artist You Don't Know You Know

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There is a good chance you've heard "Defying Gravity" from Broadway musical "Wicked"—perhaps your kids downloaded it, or you heard it on that MovieTunes CD that plays in theaters before movies start, or maybe you've even been passed by a car blasting it. And if you have kids, there's also a better-than-average chance that you've seen the movie "Enchanted." So you're probably familiar with Idina Menzel, even though you may not know her by name. You will soon.

After more than a decade of fame for performing other people's material (she won a Tony Award for her co-starring role in "Wicked" and was nominated for a Tony for "Rent"), Menzel is coming out with original material in the form of the solo CD "I Stand," which hits stores Jan. 29. Her debut single, "Brave," is Going for Adds at AC the previous day.

Admitting that it's pretty terrifying to step out from behind the green makeup that she wore nightly in "Wicked" and do her own material, Menzel is ready to express herself and says a lot of the new album reflects the search for her own voice.

"It's hard when you're a pretty versatile per-



former to find that, because you can spend many years taking direction and playing so many different roles," she says. "I'm classically trained, and I also sang at weddings and bar mitzvahs, so I learned from an early age to be able to sing many different types of music. You add in the actress component, and there's all these different areas where I can express myself. It's taken me longer to figure out how to combine them and come up with a recipe that feels unique and most like myself."

Working with Grammy Award-nominated producer Glen Ballard, Menzel and the Warner Bros. team took two years to put together "I Stand." Warner Bros. COO Diarmuid Quinn, who has known Menzel since the mid-'90s and is personally involved in the project, says he was willing to put in the time and effort to see things through.

"The day after I saw 'Wicked,' I sat down with her and said, 'If you want to really sing and let that voice go, I'm in. That's what you should be doing. You have one of the greatest talents and voices around,'" Quinn says.

After recording some material with Ballard, Menzel went to London to reprise her Broadway role in "Wicked," and the experience apparently invigorated her: She came back with new material that Quinn felt was the best she'd written.

"Today, the odds are so stacked against us—you have to provide quality, and you can't just put a couple of songs into the marketplace and hope you sell an album," Quinn says. "We were pretty ruthless and meticulous about making sure every song was great. She had the patience and was a



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gem about listening and taking time and working with Glen. It took time and craft, but it's finally come to an intersection of all of her talents."

Menzel says "I Stand" is not just about her voice, but the inner struggles of what she believes in, an exploration of where she is in life and what she stands for. "I was flying back from New York to go to the studio with

Glen, and I had a melody in my head and kept singing those words, 'I stand,'" she says. "I asked myself, 'What is this? I'm not a preachy kind of person, and I'm not Bono or Angelina Jolie, but I want to do something special with my life and contribute to this world.'"

So far, the feedback she's getting on the album has been encouraging. "People are saying it's uplifting and has a hopeful sound, which is funny, because when I sit down to write these things, I'm usually in a bad place and need to use my songs as a way to give myself hope," Menzel says with a laugh. "I'm glad they don't come out as these morbid, Pink Floyd-esque songs—they have more of an uplifting tone, chord-wise and lyrically."

And it's not just her Broadway fans who have been supportive of her latest endeavor: Menzel got a positive reception when she played a WLTW (Lite FM)/New York show in September at Madison Square Garden. Quinn says that when WLTW PD/Clear Channel senior VP of AC programming "Jim Ryan first heard a demo of 'Brave' about seven months ago, he said, 'I've got to have that, who is that?'"

"I firmly believe the songs stand up on their own, and I think some people will be surprised," Quinn adds. "There have been a lot of people who said that it's not what they expected because they thought it would be very theatrical—but they love it."

Menzel has thrown herself into supporting this project and has no plans to do movies or shows while she's promoting the album, but she isn't turning her back on her past.

"The 'Wicked' experience was the most rewarding and exhilarating of my life so far," she says. "It changed me as a person, it made me grow as a performer, it resonated with young people in a way that is so important and really allowed me to connect with the fans in a special way. That and 'Rent' have those strong themes for a younger generation, and I feel really fortunate to have been a part of those two original musicals that say so much to young people and those who don't fit in as easily about finding their own truth and identity.

"We're all here to keep evolving and becoming better human beings. I feel like the projects I've been a part of have helped me to figure that out for myself." However, she adds, with the new album, "it is nice that people will be able to recognize me by name and not character." **R&R**