



SONGS IN THE KEY OF LIFE. Clark in her Old Pasadena studio.

Lady Brings The Grooves

From her hitmaking laboratory in Pasadena, Tena Clark is living her dream

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▼ **STEP INSIDE TENA CLARK'S OFFICE** IN OLD PASADENA AND THE FIRST THING YOU'LL NOTICE (AFTER ALL THE GOLD AND PLATINUM RECORDS ON THE WALLS, THAT IS) IS THE SHINY FIREMAN'S POLE IN THE CORNER. IT'S A NICE TOUCH—AFTER ALL, THE BUILDING IS THE HISTORIC 1889 FIREHOUSE—BUT SHE DIDN'T KEEP THE POLE THERE FOR DECORATION. "OH, I USE IT," SAYS CLARK,

and it's easy to believe her: She's been on the fast track her whole life, hurtling from the swampy Mississippi backwaters to the bright lights of Hollywood, smashing her way through more than a couple glass ceilings along the way. "Glass ceilings? Make that concrete ceilings," says Clark, one of the leading songwriters and music producers in R&B, beloved by divas from Dionne Warwick to Chaka Khan. In March, Hillary Clinton stepped onstage at the International Women of Courage Awards to a tune that Clark penned just for her.

Clark tells her remarkable life story in a warm Southern drawl, and even though we're in Pasadena, all that's missing is a mint julep and a blues guitar. Born into a wealthy oil family in Mississippi, she was always drawn to music even though her father didn't approve. Her mother, a former big band songwriter, encouraged the young Tena to follow her dream, and age 10 she started playing the drums. She formed her first band at 11 and wrote her first song at 12, a bittersweet number about impossible love. Before long, Tena was

traveling to New Orleans, performing in blues and jazz clubs.

Soon she started sending tapes of her music to lyricist Hal David, Burt Bacharach's songwriting partner. To her amazement, her hero wrote back, with notes and encouragement. Hal David became her first mentor; her second was none other than Stevie Wonder, who invited her to work in his L.A. studio after meeting her at a recording studio in Bogalusa, Louisiana. "I've always been determined, but I had some amazing luck, too," she acknowledges.

In the 1980s, Clark switched her focus from performing to songwriting for movies. "No matter how good I was at drumming, people would say, 'Gosh, you are really great, for a girl.' And I said, 'I don't want to be great for a girl, I want to be just great!'"

She got her big Hollywood break after cornering a film music supervisor in a Nashville parking lot—which resulted in one of Clark's songs becoming the theme to *Police Academy III*. A lucrative career in movies would follow, but Clark wanted to write songs for pop singers. Her first hit came in 1987, Dionne Warwick's "Reservations for Two." Clark also wanted to produce—but came up against a few roadblocks. "I was writing songs for every black artist imaginable, I had a production deal at Motown, but nobody would let me produce anything!" Clark recalls. "Why? They didn't believe a woman was technically able to produce." The late R&B singer Vesta Williams insisted that Clark produce her album, though, and together they wrote and recorded her hit *Congratulations*. Yet again, Tena Clark had proved everyone wrong.

In 1997 she founded her music company DMI, setting up base-camp in Pasadena, and building a kind of musical Willy Wonka's factory in the old firehouse, writing and recording hits for everyone from LeAnn Rimes to Aretha Franklin. Clark also writes musical themes for NASA, and even the Presidential aircraft, Air Force One. It's fitting, since politics is among her greatest interests. In fact, don't be surprised if you see her sliding down that fireman's pole and into office one day soon. "I've never wavered from my passion, and it's been a great ride," she says of her musical career. "But now it's time to help make things better."