Morgan James has a voice that needs to be heard, even when she was just a fifth grader belting out standards on a karaoke machine. After her grandmother heard her sing, the matriarch footed the bill for James' voice lessons, positive that her granddaughter had the mysterious *it*. And, despite the sometimes treacherous terrain of the music industry, James has never tired in her quest. Whether it's tussling with unimaginative label executives, covering and *owning* songs by the likes of the Beatles, or casting a woman as Jesus, James has carved out an enviable career, always on her own terms.

James has a particular taste for inserting herself into men's spaces, twisting hyper-masculine songs to her will and changing their meanings in the process. That feminist lens is brought to the forefront in her most recent project, *Soul Remains the Same,* which reinterprets tracks from the likes of AC/DC, the Stone Temple Pilots, and Pearl Jam. "Something I've always loved, and I've done throughout my career, is sing songs that are not just written by men, but especially made for men," she says. "And make them my own."

Soul Remains the Same transforms the testosterone-soaked '80s and '90s radio classics of her youth into poignant, soulful, and deeply personal covers. "I don't try to change something to be clever. I don't want to change something that's already great," James says. "But sometimes I'll hear a song and think to myself, 'This would be amazing with horns, or what would this sound like with a choir or a B3?'" James picked which tracks to cover after a road trip on which she and her husband were belting along to some old favorites, resulting in sexy, bold versions of cuts like Whitesnake's "Is This Love" and a deliciously moody version of the Smashing Pumpkins' "Tonight, Tonight."

James' journey from karaoke kid to prolific singer-songwriter didn't follow an easy path. Raised on both musical theater and Laurel Canyon bards, she applied to Juilliard at 17, and was waitlisted before finally getting in. "I guess I had something a little different that they saw in me," she says. After studying opera and getting her BA in music and voice, James set her sights on Broadway, landing a part in *The Addams Family* on Broadway in 2010 with Nathan Lane and Bebe Neuwirth.

While treading the boards, James started performing solo at New York City venues like Birdland and (Le) Poisson Rouge, and taking meetings with every label in New York to no avail. Folks

often wanted to jam her into roles that didn't fit, as labels are wont to do with female musicians. She bristled at that. But while appearing in *Motown: The Musical* in 2013, the legendary producer Barry Gordy Jr. became her mentor. "I was a star in his eyes," James says. "Mr. Gordy is the one that encouraged me to write, to go deeper and find my sound, to stay true to my sound, no matter what anybody else thought or anybody else said."

Gordy then facilitated a deal with Epic Records, where she dropped both a collection of Nina Simone covers in 2012 (*Morgan James Live: A Celebration of Nina Simone*) and her first original studio album, *Hunter*, in 2014. The iconic artist Prince even gave his blessing for her to cover his 2004 track, "Call My Name" — which she flipped with alacrity into an ethereal slow jam.

Since 2017, James has released both original music and cover records (the Beatles, Joni Mitchell) independently. "Every artist that I admire has covered other artists," she says of her affinity for reinterpreting classics. "Even before I started writing music, I was an interpreter of songs. I make an original album pretty much every other year. And on the off years, I like to do a creative project." For example, back in 2020, James teamed up with the likes of Cynthia Erivo and Ledisi for her own feminist take on *Jesus Christ Superstar*. "The whole concept came to me in a dream," she says. "It was not an easy project to accomplish. But, in the end, I think what we made is truly remarkable. There are no musicals where this many women get this many great parts. So that's why I wanted an entirely female team and orchestra." James has also amassed a legion of fans via her YouTube channel and collaborations with collective Postmodern Jukebox — and garnered her share of praise for her original work. In fact, *The New York Times* previously extolled her as a "phenomenal talent whose feel for classic soul music is bone deep… This woman is on fire."

"I've known, from day one of my journey, that I would have to fight every step of the way," James says now, ahead of the release of *Soul Remains the Same.* "But that is the part of my story — it's not something I want to erase. It's something I celebrate."

SHORT BIO

Morgan James has a voice that needs to be heard, even when she was just a fifth grader belting out standards on a karaoke machine. Whether it's tussling with unimaginative label executives, covering and owning songs by the likes of the Beatles, or casting a woman as Jesus, James has carved out an enviable career, always on her own terms.

James' journey from karaoke kid to prolific singer-songwriter didn't follow an easy path. Raised on both musical theater and Laurel Canyon bards, she applied to Juilliard at 17, and was waitlisted before finally getting in. After studying opera and getting her BA in music and voice, she set her sights on Broadway, landing a part in *The Addams Family* on Broadway in 2010. After a brief stint with Epic Records — where she dropped both a collection of Nina Simone covers in 2012 (*Morgan James Live: A Celebration of Nina Simone*) and her first original studio album, *Hunter*, in 2014 — she struck out on her own, releasing both covers and originals at a rapid clip.

James has a particular taste for inserting herself into men's spaces, twisting hyper-masculine songs to her will and changing their meanings in the process. That feminist lens is brought to the forefront in her most recent project, *Soul Remains the Same*, which reinterprets tracks from the likes of AC/DC, the Stone Temple Pilots, and Pearl Jam.

"I've known, from day one of my journey, that I would have to fight every step of the way," James says now, ahead of the release. "But that is the part of my story — it's not something I want to erase. It's something I celebrate."