

= Maxwell 's Urban Hang Suite =

Maxwell 's Urban Hang Suite is the debut album by American R & B recording artist Maxwell , released on April 2 , 1996 , by Columbia Records . He worked on the album between 1994 and 1995 at Electric Lady Studios , RPM , Sorcerer , and Chung King Studios in New York City , and CRC Studios in Chicago . The record 's music features a mellow , groove @-@ based sound with elements of funk , jazz , smooth soul , and quiet storm . A concept album , Maxwell 's Urban Hang Suite was composed as a song cycle that focuses on an adult romance , based in part on Maxwell 's personal experiences .

Although Maxwell 's Urban Hang Suite was not an immediate commercial success , it was helped by the release of its second single " Ascension (Don 't Ever Wonder) " . Eventually becoming a million @-@ seller , the album was also a success with critics , who praised it as a departure from the mainstream , hip hop @-@ oriented R & B of the time , while earning Maxwell several accolades and comparisons to soul singers of the past , particularly Marvin Gaye and Prince .

The success of Maxwell 's Urban Hang Suite elevated Maxwell 's reputation to that of a sex symbol and a notable performer in the music industry . He was credited with shaping the " neo soul " movement of musicians that rose to prominence during the late 1990s . Along with D 'Angelo 's Brown Sugar (1995) and Erykah Badu 's Baduizm (1997) , the album provided commercial exposure to neo soul and has since been cited by several critics as Maxwell 's greatest work .

= = Background and recording = =

After receiving a low @-@ cost Casio keyboard from a friend , Brooklyn , New York @-@ native Maxwell began composing material at age 17 . Raised in the borough 's East New York @-@ section , Maxwell 's previous musical experience included his beginnings as a singer in the congregation of his Baptist church , which had become an integral part of his life after the death of his father in a plane crash . Already a fan of what he described as " jheri curl soul " , which was the trademark of early 1980s R & B acts such as Patrice Rushen , S.O.S. Band and Rose Royce , Maxwell began to teach himself to play a variety of instruments . According to him , the R & B of the early 1980s contained " the perfect combination of computerized instrumentation with a live feel " , and that the genre 's dynamics later became lost due to the influence of hip hop on R & B. Despite facing ridicule from classmates for being shy and awkward , he progressed and continued to develop his musical abilities .

At 19 , Maxwell began performing throughout the New York club circuit while supporting himself by waiting tables during the day . He was able to gain access to a 24 track recording studio and started to record songs for a demo tape , which he circulated among his friends . The demo engendered interest , and his official debut concert performance at Manhattan nightclub Nell 's drew a crowd . During the next two years , Maxwell wrote and recorded over three hundred songs and played frequently at small venues throughout New York City . Maxwell 's performances continued to draw interest and increase the buzz about him , and he was called " the next Prince " by a writer from Vibe magazine who attended one of his shows . After earning a considerable reputation , Maxwell signed a recording contract with Columbia Records in 1994 . He adopted his middle name as a moniker out of respect for his family 's privacy .

Maxwell recorded his debut album between 1994 and 1995 at Electric Lady Studios , RPM Studios , Sorcerer Studios and Chung King Studios in New York City , and at CRC Studios in Chicago , Illinois . Maxwell 's Urban Hang Suite was produced primarily by Peter Mokran , who was credited as P.M. , and Maxwell , who was credited as " MUSZE " , a play on the word muse . Columbia executives reluctantly gave Maxwell creative freedom in his contract and were hesitant to allow him produce the album alone . They assigned Chicago @-@ based , English producer and multi @-@ instrumentalist Stuart Matthewman to the project , but he only produced the first few tracks . Matthewman had previously worked with English R & B and jazz group Sade . During the recording sessions , Maxwell worked extensively with collaborators , including Matthewman , soul singer @-@ songwriter Leon Ware , and funk guitarist Melvin " Wah @-@ Wah Watson " Ragin . Prior to working

with Maxwell , Ware and Ragin were collaborators of soul musician Marvin Gaye ; Ware had produced and composed most of Gaye 's tenth album I Want You (1976) .

Production assistance and instrumentation from such veteran session musicians contributed significantly to Urban Hang Suite 's vintage overtones and classic R & B influences . Matthewman and Maxwell played several instruments during recording for the album , including guitar , drums , saxophone , bass , and keyboards . They also composed three of the album 's eleven tracks together . After the recording sessions ended in March 1995 , Urban Hang Suite was mixed by P.M. (Peter Mokran) and audio engineer Mike Pela , after which it was mastered by Tom Coyne at Sterling Sound in New York City .

= = Music and lyrics = =

Although one of his earliest influences was early 1980s urban R & B , Maxwell 's Urban Hang Suite was inspired by the sounds and themes of classic soul artists such as Marvin Gaye , Curtis Mayfield , Barry White , Stevie Wonder and Prince . According to Prince biographer Alex Hahn , Maxwell adopts the singer 's sound and style , particularly from songs such as " Do Me , Baby " (1982) and " Pink Cashmere " (1993) , while The New York Times 's Amy Linden said that he " melds a soft @-@ spoken singing style with the fluid , spacious grooves often associated with the cocktail funk of Sade " . Critics have also noted Maxwell 's falsetto singing voice , and the music 's atmospheric , funky instrumentation , featuring mellow horns , wah wah guitar , Rhodes piano and deep , articulate bass lines . The tempo of the songs slowly diminishes through the course of the album 's songs . One critic attributes the tempo decrease to Stuart Matthewman 's production . The album contains elements of funk , jazz , contemporary R & B and quiet storm , and it is mostly composed of sexual balladry and slow jams .

A concept album , Maxwell 's Urban Hang Suite features song cycle that focuses on an adult romance from first encounter to its dramatic conclusion . Over the course of the album , Maxwell details a single passionate encounter . Throughout , it examines the concept with lyrical themes of love , sex and spirituality , as well as issues such as commitment , marriage and monogamy . Maxwell has described the themes and his thoughts on romance as " idealistic " on Urban Hang Suite . Rolling Stone editor David Fricke compared the album 's concept to that of Marvin Gaye 's 1978 record Here , My Dear , which dealt with his divorce , saying that Maxwell 's Urban Hang Suite had been reworked as a treatise on monogamy . The album has been noted for the sincerity of Maxwell 's lyrics , which depict a man 's weakness and vulnerability to a woman 's love . In an interview with music journalist Mark Coleman , Maxwell cited his respect for African @-@ American women as the inspiration for the respectful nature of his lyrics towards women . Maxwell told Interview 's Dimitri Ehrlich that his main muse for Urban Hang Suite was women , and further elaborated on his inspiration , stating :

Maxwell also cited his grandmother and other West Indian women he knows as the inspiration behind his romantic notions . Music journalists inferred that the album was inspired by or based on an unsuccessful affair in Maxwell 's life . Maxwell said in an interview , " I 'm so innately romantic and always have been , and I went through this particular romantic experience and based my album on that " . The album 's liner notes have a dedication from Maxwell to his " musze " , stating " I could never have done this without you " .

The album opens with an instrumental track , " The Urban Theme " , which begins with the sound of a stylus dropping on a vinyl record . The track 's prominent funk sound is reminiscent of the music of the Brand New Heavies . " Welcome " features the album 's prominent sexual vibe , and contains a quiet storm sound and saxophone . The two opening tracks both contain prominent funk influence . Roni Sarig wrote that their " early ' 80s full @-@ band R & B and jazz pop grooves are reminiscent of Maze 's brightest days and Steely Dan 's coolest nights . " The funk @-@ influenced " Sumthin ' Sumthin ' " , which was co @-@ written by Leon Ware , contains a strong , rhythmically tight groove created by the implementation of the " pocket " bass technique . Co @-@ written by songwriter Itaal Shur , " Ascension (Don 't Ever Wonder) " opens with a funky groove and bass line , and features a forceful rhythm and rough funk sound . The song contains strong gospel overtones with references

to God in the lyrics . The song has been covered by gospel artists such as Londa Larmond and LaShun Pace .

Cited by Blender magazine as one of the " Greatest Make @-@ Out Songs of All Time " , " ... Til the Cops Come Knockin ' " contains sexually explicit lyrics and a slower tempo than its preceding tracks . It also contains the sound of distant sirens and " grinding porn @-@ movie " guitar licks . The songs " Whenever Wherever Whatever " and " Lonely 's the Only Company (I & II) " are ballads that contain themes of vulnerability to love . " Suitelady (The Proposal Jam) " completes the album 's concept of monogamy with lyrics depicting a marriage proposal from Maxwell . Maxwell 's Urban Hang Suite closes with the instrumental track " The Suite Theme " . While the length of the track is listed as 13 : 47 minutes , the song ends after 6 : 00 minutes , followed by a period of silence , before resuming with a hidden track , which consists of 1 : 41 minutes of an instrumental version of " ... Til the Cops Come Knockin ' " .

= = Release and reception = =

After Maxwell 's Urban Hang Suite was completed , the finished recordings were presented to Columbia Records in mid 1995 . It was shelved for nearly a year , because of issues with Columbia 's management , the label 's extensive reorganization , and record executives ' doubts regarding the album 's commercial potential . The marketplace dominance of hip hop soul in 1995 was in contrast with Maxwell 's monogamous themes and older soul influences , which Columbia worried would be interpreted as old @-@ fashioned . The label 's executives also feared that his romantic concept and image would not appeal to listeners . Maxwell made matters worse by refusing to allow his picture to be placed on the album 's front cover ; instead he preferred to have the track listing and other information he felt was more important about the album in place of his photo . Regarding the cover , Maxwell later said " I wanted people to have the facts : the title , the selections and the fact that you had to basically buy it . I wanted people to come to the music and not base any opinion on the image " . Columbia reached a compromise with Maxwell and used a promotional shot of him as the back cover . The album 's front cover art also features a picture of a pair of golden women 's shoes on the floor of a hotel room , with the bar coding prominently displayed . In the period before its release , Maxwell wrote and demoed songs for a subsequent studio album , and embarked on an African American college tour with Groove Theory and the Fugees .

Released on April 2 , 1996 , Maxwell 's Urban Hang Suite was slow to obtain commercial interest . On April 20 , it made its chart debut at number 38 on the Top R & B / Hip @-@ Hop Albums in the United States . The gold @-@ certified single " Ascension (Don 't Ever Wonder) " , which had shipped 500 @,@ 000 copies in the US by October , was considered by music journalists to be a significant factor in consumers ' increased interest in the album . On September 17 , Maxwell 's Urban Hang Suite was certified gold by the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) . By 1997 , the album had shipped one million copies , earning platinum status from the RIAA . It spent seventy @-@ eight weeks on the Billboard 200 albums chart , while becoming a Top 30 chart hit in the United Kingdom . In 2002 , it was certified double platinum , and by 2008 , it stood as Maxwell 's best @-@ selling album , having sold 1 @,@ 790 @,@ 000 copies , according to Nielsen SoundScan .

Maxwell 's Urban Hang Suite received positive reviews from critics . It was called a " masterpiece " by several reviewers who viewed it as a departure from the mainstream , hip hop @-@ oriented R & B of the time . Maxwell was also compared to soul singers of the 1960s and 1970s . Writing for Vibe , OJ Lima said the record was a " refreshing detour from hump @-@ bouncin ' ' 90s R & B " , while Dimitri Ehrlich from Entertainment Weekly wrote that Maxwell " smooths hip @-@ hop 's and soul 's edges , proving that black dance music doesn 't automatically mean ghetto culture . " Jim Farber of the New York Daily News called it " one of the few modern sex albums to offer a sense of succor " , and Urban Latino hailed it as " one of the most soulful releases of the year " , writing that Maxwell exhibited " the soul of Curtis Mayfield , the poetics of Beni More and the stage presence of Michael Jackson , pre @-@ Thriller " . In American Visions , Michael George wrote , " In an age where young , black artists are criticized (often rightly so) for misogynistic lyrics , Maxwell 's focus on

commitment is refreshing . But more important , he can flat @-@ out sing . " In The Rolling Stone Album Guide (2004) , Arion Berger later said , " [Maxwell 's] laid @-@ back romanticism has heat at its core and a powerful groove that grounds the music : By varying the push of the beat but retaining the central mellow vibe , Maxwell creates a sound as felicitous on headphones as it is in the bedroom . " Peter Shapiro was more critical , panning Maxwell 's lyrics and calling the album an " overly mannered pastiche of early 70s soul ... all style and no substance " . In The Village Voice , Robert Christgau rated the album a " dud " , indicating " a bad record whose details rarely merit further thought " .

At the end of 1996 , Maxwell 's Urban Hang Suite named one of the year 's 10 best albums in lists published by Rolling Stone , Time , and USA Today . It was named the 20th best album of 1996 in the Pazz and Jop , an annual poll of American critics nationwide , published by The Village Voice . For the record , Maxwell was nominated for the 1997 Grammy Award for Best R & B Album , received three NAACP Image Award nominations , and wins in the categories of Best Male R & B / Soul Album and Best Male R & B / Soul Single (for " Ascension ") , as well as Best R & B / Soul or Rap New Artist , for the 1997 Soul Train Awards . That year , Rolling Stone voted him Best R & B Artist . The album 's success also earned Maxwell his own MTV Unplugged special , which was a popular measure of mainstream success for recording artists in the 1990s . Nick Coleman from The Independent later cited Maxwell 's Urban Hang Suite as the " sexiest record of 1996 " , while Q magazine called it " one of the very best R & B records of the ' 90s . " Stylus Magazine ranked it at number six on their list of the Top Ten Albums from 1996 . The album was also included in the book 1001 Albums You Must Hear Before You Die .

= = Legacy = =

Along with musicians D 'Angelo and Erykah Badu , Maxwell was credited with helping to shape the " neo soul " movement that rose to prominence during the late 1990s . Along with D 'Angelo 's Brown Sugar (1995) and Badu 's Baduizm (1997) , Urban Hang Suite has been recognized by writers for beginning neo soul 's popularity and helping the genre obtain commercial visibility . However , in contrast to D 'Angelo , Maxwell was more conventional in his approach on his debut album . The term " neo soul " was penned in the late 1990s by record executive Kedar Massenburg , who managed both D 'Angelo and Erykah Badu . According to Shapiro , the term itself refers to a musical style that obtains its influence from more classical styles , and bohemian musicians seeking a soul revival , while setting themselves apart from the more contemporary sounds of their mainstream R & B counterparts . In commenting on the " new soul revival " in music , Maxwell told Entertainment Weekly in 1997 that " everything out there musically was inspired or influenced by something from the past . It 's not about creating some super @-@ fresh new thing . If it doesn 't lend itself to your history , how is it going to extend to your future ? " According to Kerika Fields , Maxwell received an overwhelmingly positive reaction to his debut album from music listeners due to their weariness of contemporary black music 's predictability .

Maxwell 's role in writing and producing the album exhibited a level of artistic control by an R & B artist that was uncommon in the recording industry at the time . On Maxwell 's emergence with Urban Hang Suite , writer Carol Brennan cited him , along with the Fugees , D 'Angelo and Tony Rich , as neo soul musicians that " exhibited the identifying characteristics of this new breed of R & B artists : lyrics that give voice to intense personal expression , creative control over the music , and a unexpectedly successful debut . " In his book A Change Is Gonna Come : Music , Race & the Soul of America (2006) , Craig Hansen Werner lists Maxwell 's Urban Hang Suite as important in neo soul , including it along with R. Kelly 's R. (1998) , D 'Angelo 's Voodoo (2000) , the Young Disciples ' Road to Freedom (1991) , Aaliyah 's self @-@ titled final release (2001) , Faith Evans ' Keep the Faith (1998) and " anything by Seal " as among " the starter kit " for the genre . In Songs in the Key of Black Life : A Rhythm and Blues Nation (2003) , writer Mark Anthony Neal cited the album as one of the most popular of neo soul recordings , along with Musiq Soulchild 's Aijuswanaseing (2000) and India.Arie 's Acoustic Soul (2001) , that helped to redefine the boundaries and contours of black pop and R & B.

The unexpected commercial and critical success of Maxwell 's Urban Hang Suite helped establish Maxwell as a serious performer in the music industry . He was described by critics as " part of a new generation of smooth soul crooners " , and he obtained a reputation among fans as a sex symbol , which according to one journalist , was due to his " wild " afro and " extravagant cheekbones " . His concert performances in promotion of the album attracted many female fans . One sold @-@ out concert at New York City 's Radio City Music Hall was praised by Rolling Stone , who compared him to R & B singers such as Gaye , Prince , Frankie Beverly , and Luther Vandross . The magazine highlighted Maxwell 's showmanship , " down @-@ to @-@ earth " attitude and body movements including dropping down to his knees , swiveling his hips in a " slow grind " , and crawling across the stage while singing . Essence writer Jeannine Amber compared his stage presence to Teddy Pendergrass . According to some journalists , Maxwell 's appeal to female fans was due to the respectful and sincere nature of his lyrics regarding women . In Contemporary Musician (1998) , Mary Alice Adams examined the personal impact of his debut album on listeners :

Maxwell 's following studio albums were received less enthusiastically by critics , who were more critical of his songwriting on his next two studio albums , Embrya (1998) and Now (2001) . Maxwell 's Urban Hang Suite has since been cited by several critics as his best album , including Stephen Cook from AllMusic , who said it was " destined to become a classic contemporary R & B disc " .

= = Track listing = =

= = Personnel = =

Credits for Maxwell 's Urban Hang Suite adapted from liner notes .

= = Charts = =

= = = Weekly charts = = =

= = = Year @-@ end charts = = =

= = Certifications = =