

A SONG FOR YOU

By Rachelle Q. Ayuyang

A Hit: Songwriter Kenny Lerum is cruising toward bigger things after the success of his ballad, "For You," from R&B singer Kenny Lattimore's debut album.

The goal of acting, Laurence Olivier once said, is "to teach the human heart knowledge of itself." Filipino American composer Kenny Lerum could make the same case for songwriting. The words and melody of his ballad "For You" captured the hearts of millions of hopeless romantics and, more significantly, snagged for singing sensation Kenny Lattimore a Grammy nomination this year for Best R&B male performance.

Since "For You" was released as the title track of Lattimore's 1996 album, lovers everywhere have made it their anthem. "Six months ago or so, on the TV show 'Vibe' a couple won a trip to Hawaii, and Kenny Lattimore sang the song for them," says Lerum's wife and business partner Ellen. The couple, deeply affected, gushed that the song meant so much to them. Ellen, 29, can relate. After all, her husband composed it for her for their wedding in 1995. "For You" embodied the depth of their relationship, which started in

1986 when they were students at Berklee College of Music in Boston, Massachusetts.

"We've known each other for so long," she says. "It was a culmination of everything we've been through as far as the music industry, our lives and struggles to get to where we are."

Lerum believes it was divine inspiration that helped him compose the song in a day. "It came from no one else but Him above. That's how easy it was for me to write it," he says.

Finding the right vocalist was also a cinch. It had to be Kenny Lattimore, Lerum's high school friend, whom he accompanied on keyboards at choirs, competitions, talent shows and, later, political fund-raisers. "I al-

ways wanted to hear a big voice on this song," says the soft-spoken Lerum, "and there was no one else I could think of but Kenny."

Lerum's parents, Natividad and the late Beato, exposed him to classical, Broadway and jazz records. At the age of seven, he started playing classical piano. "As soon as I started playing, I knew I would end up in a creative profession," he says.

By the fourth grade, he had picked up the guitar and violin. A year later, Lerum found his calling.

"Our class was making a short 8mm film project, and I was asked to write a bit of music to it," he recalls. "It turned out nice, and at that moment I knew I wanted to be a composer."

Washington, D.C.-born Lerum was also influenced by R&B radio, listening to such acts as Funkadelic, Cameo and Earth, Wind and Fire. While his childhood was relatively problem-free, it wasn't always easy growing up a Filipino American in Prince George's County. "It was difficult to find my place," Lerum admits. "Music was

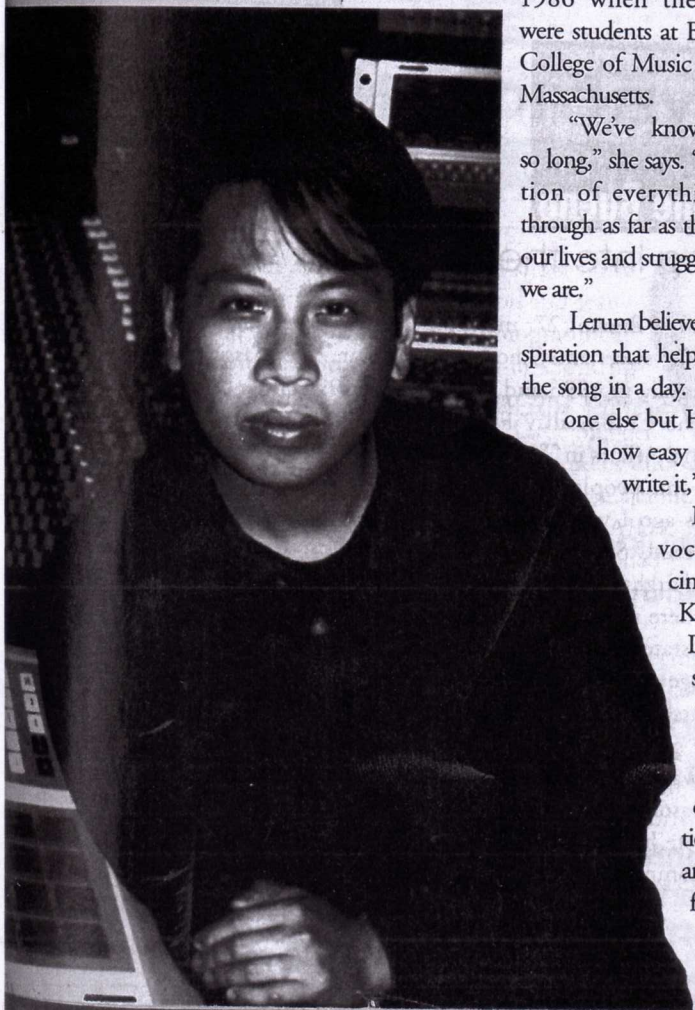
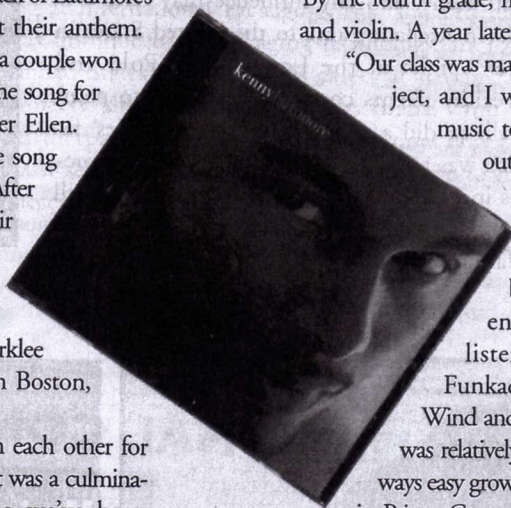
my therapy. I was teased in school for being such-and-such and Asian. The piano helped me express what was inside of me, and I still do that. Music was my solace."

After high school, Lerum attended the Peabody Conservatory of Music in Baltimore, Maryland as a composition student in 1985. "I learned a lot about composition technique," he says, "but I felt stifled because I couldn't do any pop and R&B songwriting. It was frowned upon."

A year later, he transferred to Berklee College of Music as a songwriting major with piano as his principal instrument. In May 1988, his composition was named best song in the school's annual songwriter's competition. A year later, he graduated with a bachelor's degree.

Ellen graduated a year after him and followed him to Maryland. While she and Lerum had day jobs, they spent the evenings meeting with writers in the music industry, often into the wee hours of the morning. "From 1990 to 1993, we were working to get our studio together and to make sure we could support our music," says Ellen. "If you persevere and really love what you're doing, the sacrifices are okay."

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In 1993, they moved their music publishing and production company, Inward Momentum Music, to New York, where most people in the music business are based. Things began to happen when Lattimore also moved to the New York area a couple of years later.

The 1997 hit "For You" peaked at number six in the R&B singles chart and number eight in R&B sales. Lattimore's album stayed at the top for eight weeks in the Retail & Radio urban adult contemporary and R&B adult charts and was tops for two weeks in the Billboard Heatseekers Album charts. Lerum also wrote "Can't Get Enough," which Lattimore sang, for the "Love Jones" movie soundtrack in 1997.

Lerum says of his partnership with Lattimore: "He's more than a contact. He's one of my best buddies. He helped me understand this business. When I have questions, he's there for me."

After close to 10 years in the music business, Lerum has learned some important lessons. "It's good to have an open mind," he advises. "I've met a lot of people who are self-taught and incredible musicians. As long as you have an innate ability, you can always turn it into something."

Ellen and Lerum can now pick and choose their projects and collaborators. They hired a management team to deal with writers, producers and artists. Lerum has worked with such writers and producers as Barry J. Eastmond (Anita Baker, Brandy, Freddie Jackson), Bobby Wooten (Keith Sweat), Larry Loftin (Patti LaBelle, Anointed) and Herb Middleton (Faith Evans, Mary J. Blige, SWV). He's currently writing songs for the soundtrack of the hit television show, "Touched by an Angel." He eventually wants to venture into film and develop a musical with an Asian American angle.

With mainstream success and the promise of more to come, Lerum has never forgotten his roots. He and Ellen performed at an event for a Filipino fashion designer in New York and played original compositions and covers of pop songs at Philippine Independence celebrations.

Lerum is interested in more than appealing to love's vanities. He wants his music to explore other mysteries of the human heart and touch people even more profoundly. "Music is now more of a communication tool," he says. "If as a Filipino and an Asian I can have a positive role, that's great." ■

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