



EXCLUSIVE: Ballerina Michaela DePrince on Her Personal Journey to 'Freedom' in Beyonce's 'Lemonade'

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Photo: Getty Images

Michaela DePrince has found freedom at last.

Dressed in a vintage white dress, flower crown and nude-colored pointe shoes, she's the beautiful, fascinating ballerina that graces the stage during the "Freedom" sequence in [Beyoncé's](#) visual album, *Lemonade*.

Ever since Beyoncé debuted the track during a [one-hour special on HBO](#) last month, the internet has been buzzing about the [powerful cameos](#) the 34-year-old singer enlisted to help tell her haunting tale. And the Sierra Leone-born professional ballet dancer's empowering performance, complete with flawless arabesques, perfect extensions and *Swan Lake*-inspired arm movements, was nothing short of amazing. Her own story may explain why.



8 Powerful Cameos in Beyonce's 'Lemonade': Serena Williams, Zendaya and More!

DePrince, 21, was personally contacted by Beyoncé, who sent the professional dancer a message by using the 'contact me' feature on her website.

"When my mom saw the message from Beyoncé, she forwarded it to me, but I thought it was a joke," DePrince tells ET, reflecting on the moment she discovered she would be featured in the pop star's visual album. "However, I passed it on to my agent, just in case. And sure enough, it was the real thing!"

Before she knew it, DePrince found herself on a plantation in New Orleans, Louisiana, for two days of choreographing on the spot and meeting one of her idols.

"She turned out to be friendly, warm, caring and down-to-earth -- not at all a diva!" DePrince reveals. "She even told me, 'It's such an honor to have you here.' But [I told her] the honor was all mine. I so admire her genius and creativity."

When it came to creating a dance for "Freedom," Beyoncé and her team left the creative decisions up to DePrince.

"The director [Kahlil Joseph] gave me music to listen to, and about three minutes later, he had me dance to it," she remembers. "I improvised, choreographing the dance on the spot. I needed three takes. When I saw the final *Lemonade* video, it was fun to see my name on the credits for choreography."



Photo: Parkwood Entertainment

Beyoncé obviously loved DePrince's work, but there was another person on the set that may have felt even more inspired -- Bey and Jay Z's 4-year-old daughter, [Blue Ivy](#).

"I talked with the mothers [who were] present [on set], met Jay Z, but best of all, I talked to Blue Ivy," she recalls. "She showed me that she had learned the five ballet positions. She reminded me of my niece."

While on the *Lemonade* set, DePrince -- who was born with vitiligo, a disorder that causes the loss of skin color in blotches -- also got to meet some of the other well-known females who made cameos. One of them was former *America's Next Top Model* contestant [Winnie Harlow](#), who, like DePrince, was born with the skin condition.

"Meeting Winnie Harlow was such a moving experience," she says, "because she understands what it means to have other kids stare at you because you are a spotted child."

Receiving stares from kids and strangers was just one small part of what DePrince's life was like growing up. Her personal journey, from an orphan to a professional ballerina with the Dutch National Ballet, is a chilling one.

Born in war-ridden Sierra Leone in 1995, DePrince dealt with abuse, starvation and the tragic death of both of her parents. People in her village even dubbed her a "devil child" because of the spots on her skin. The pain and prejudice she suffered is detailed in her memoir, *Taking Flight: From War Orphan to Star Ballerina*, which she co-wrote with her adoptive mother, Elaine. While living in an orphanage, DePrince was venturing outside when a magazine, swept by the wind, landed in her possession. The cover featured an elegant ballerina, dressed in a pastel-colored tutu and posing en pointe. That's the exact moment DePrince knew she would someday take center stage.

"Probably the best thing to happen in my life, short of my adoption, was that dirty and very old magazine that blew into my face while I waited at the orphanage gate," DePrince, who eventually moved to the U.S. when she was four years old, remembers. "I was instantly smitten by the ballet dancer on the cover. Sometimes I wonder what would have happened if a woman doctor or judge had been on the cover. Would I have gone to medical school or law school? But it was a ballerina, and as soon as someone explained to me what she was doing, I was certain that I wanted to do that, too."



Photo: Michaela DePrince

And that's exactly what she did, becoming the youngest principal dancer for the Dance Theater of Harlem, thanks to the constant support from her adoptive parents, Elaine and Charles.

"Both mom *and* dad taught [my sisters and I] to be strong, self-reliant women -- feminists of the right type," DePrince shares. "So I could not have been happier to participate in [Beyoncé's project]. And how great to dance to the song, 'Freedom.'"

Since finding her own freedom, she's taken it upon herself to help inspire others looking to follow in her footsteps and break down racial barriers in the world of dance today, two acts fellow dancer (and [first black principal dancer](#) of the American Ballet Theatre company) [Misty Copeland](#) also believes in.

"It is reassuring to have comrades in arms when knocking down barriers," DePrince explains. "I think that there are other young, powerful females besides Misty and me whose presence on the stages of the world will affect change."

"You cannot help but watch ballet dancers like Precious Adams without realizing that a classical ballerina *can* be black," she continues. "However, talking about this isn't all that's needed. Studying ballet is an expensive endeavor. I know I could never have done it without the generosity and sacrifice of my parents, but not all kids are that lucky. Young black dancers need scholarships that cover lessons and attire."

DePrince hopes that she can help young girls make their dreams a reality by visiting ballet schools in economically deprived areas and teaching classes free of charge. She is also an ambassador for War Child Netherlands, and sponsors a child from Sierra Leone through ChildFund International.

"I not only hope to inspire the next generation of ballerinas, I want to reach out to young people who are facing adversity in their lives," she says. "I speak publicly about my own life, dreams and struggles so that children can hear that it is possible to overcome their own difficulties. Ultimately, I would like to start a school that brings ballet and other arts to Sierra Leone."

DePrince has clearly had her ups and downs, but no matter what, she's always found the inner strength to keep her chin held high, and gracefully dance her way through anything life throws at her. Life served DePrince lemons, and she made *Lemonade*.