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Frankie Beverly & Maze Tribute Album In The Works

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Gail Mitchell, L.A.

Gospel star Donald Lawrence and Grammy-nominated producer Rex Rideout are among the first collaborators to sign up for an all-star tribute album honoring legendary R&B group Maze, Billboard has learned exclusively. "I Wanna Thank You...An All-Star Tribute to Maze featuring Frankie Beverly" is being produced through Brantera Music Group Inc., headed by Beverly's son Anthony.

In addition to Lawrence, who is contributing a full-blown gospel version of Maze's 1984 track, "I Wanna Thank You," Anthony is currently negotiating with several other veteran and new artists from the R&B, gospel and jazz arenas. Rideout is serving as co-producer of the project, whose selections will include a cross section of memorable Maze tunes, among them: the No. 1 R&B hits "Back in Stride" and "Can't Get Over You," "Silky Soul," "Before I Let Go" and "Golden Time of Day."

Getting its big break in the early '70s as the backing band and opening act on a Marvin Gaye tour, Maze signed with Capitol and later segued to Warner Bros.. The group's first major R&B chart credit was 1977's "While I'm Alone" which peaked at No. 21.

"After 30 hit singles and 12 albums, I thought it was time to get this done," says Anthony, who doubles as the project's executive producer. "The group's longevity boils down to one word: real. My father is real about everything he does; that's what people love about Maze. And that's what I'm trying to bring off with this record, using live instruments and artists who exemplify—and have been influenced by what my father is about musically."

While distribution is still being discussed, Anthony plans to release the first single by Father's Day and follow with the album in August. A special commemorative DVD will also be produced, featuring interviews with the project participants as well as legendary R&B and jazz artists, current and former music executives and community leaders about the Maze legacy.

A tribute web site launches in mid-April at frankiebeverlytribute.com. Among its offerings: an ultimate Maze fan video contest with the winner participating in some of the album release events. Promotional tie-ins involving the tribute album will also take place in New Orleans at the Essence Music Festival. This year's festival (July 3-5) will conclude with a special icons tribute to Maze. The group has traditionally closed the festival since its 1995 inception.

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