

R&B Romeo

Mario matures as a singer with seductive "Let Me Love You," No. 1 on the Billboard chart.

By Tracy E. Hopkins

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NEW YORK - "Turning Point" is more than the title of Mario's sophomore CD. Now 18, the R&B crooner is making the transition from boyhood to manhood.

These days, his physique is unexpectedly buff and his haircut is surprisingly low - gone are the trademark cornrows he sang fondly about on "Braid My Hair" from his debut album. But during a photo shoot, Mario's still playful enough to take a dip in the indoor pool at a posh New York City hotel.

"You have to change things in your life to get to the next level," he later says, lounging poolside on a blustery December afternoon.

Mario's appearance isn't the only noticeable change. "Turning Point" departs from the puppy love of his first album, like "Just a Friend 2002." Now he's moved on to seductive songs like "Let Me Love You" - currently residing at No. 1 on the Billboard chart - and the autobiographical "18," featuring J Records labelmate Cassidy.

"With my first album, I had a lot of young fans. People said, 'He's cute, I'm going to get this album for my little sister,' " Mario said. "With this album, I hope they say, 'He's cute. I'm going to get this album for myself and a copy for my little sister, too.' "

Mario co-wrote several songs on the new album, which gives listeners a peek into his private life. "A lot of my fans ask if I have a girlfriend, what it's like going to school and being an artist and what it's like being so young and taking on all this responsibility," he said. "I'm able to talk about these things on my record."

Born in Baltimore, Md., Mario Barrett honed his chops singing in church, talent shows and the barbershop.

"I would go to get my hair cut and my mom would tell me to sing for the customers. All the dudes would give me a couple dollars, and I really thought I was doing something," he says. "That's when I realized that singing was what I wanted to do."

While performing at a college talent show, an 11-year-old Mario was discovered by Troy Patterson, who later became his manager. At age 14, Mario relocated to New Jersey and lived with Patterson. A year later, he was signed to J Records after singing Boyz II Men's "I'll Make Love to You" for label CEO Clive Davis.

During the two years since his eponymous debut album was released, Mario attended high school in New Jersey - where his peers nicknamed him "Country Grammar" because of his Southern dialect - and found his niche as a recording artist.

"I worked with some of the same producers as other artists, but I also have songs on my album that only I would do," he says of "Turning Point," which features tracks by Scott Storch and Lil Jon. "Just give me a microphone, and I guarantee I'll touch somebody."

Jadakiss, who appears on the "Let Me Love You" remix with T.I., believes Mario could follow in another young R&B star's footsteps.

"Mario has something special. In the next 10 years, I could see him being like Usher," the rapper said. "He's a hard worker, and he's only gonna get better."

Fellow teen soul singer Ciara is also a fan: "Mario's voice is one of a kind."

The 19-year old Atlanta belle also commends her friend on his new look. "A lot of the girls love it, so that's what's up," she said. "Good move, Mario."