FAU professor helped launch Whitney Houston's career

FAU professor Michael Zager discovered Whitney Houston's talent in the late 1970s

By Scott Travis

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Years before he created a commercial music program at Florida Atlantic University, Michael Zager started something else pretty special: the career of pop star Whitney Houston.

Houston, who died Saturday at the age of 48, first sang professionally in the late 1970s with a disco group called The Michael Zager Band. She was 15 when she performed her first solo, in the band's song, "Life's a Party." The tune never became a hit, but it became part of history.

The score and master tape are on display at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum in Cleveland.

Zager, who now serves as an eminent scholar in commercial music at FAU, is mourning Houston's death. He was close friends with Houston's family when he lived in Newark, N.J and still stays in touch with her mother, soul and gospel singer Cissy Houston. Zager produced several of Cissy Houston's albums in the late 1970s, and she would often bring Whitney with her to sessions.

The younger Houston was a quiet and shy girl and an amazing vocalist, Zager recalled.

"I just thought she was extraordinary," he said. "I'd never heard a child sing like that. You can never guess that anyone's going to become an icon, but I thought she definitely had a shot at making hit records."

Zager, who had worked with such artists as the Spinners and Luther Vandross, wanted to produce an album for Whitney Houston, but her mother said she was too young.

"I begged her for three years, and she kept saying no," Zager said.

Houston pursued modeling and acting for a couple of years before auditioning in 1983 for music executive Clive Davis, who guided her to superstardom. Zager has maintained a successful career composing, producing and arranging songs for artists and commercials over the years. FAU hired him in 2002 to start a commercial music degree program.

Inside his FAU office, alongside plaques of awards and gold records, is a picture of Houston and Zager together, taken in mid-1980s. Zager and his son, Jonathan, attended Houston's wedding to

Houston had other connections to South Florida as well. She owned a condo on Williams Island in Aventura, her family spent time in Coral Springs and her 1992 film "The Bodyguard" was filmed partly in Miami Beach. Brown was arrested on a DUI charge after an accident in Hollywood in 1996.

Zager watched with pride as Houston topped the charts with scores of No. 1 hits, including "The Greatest Love of All" and "I Will Always Love You."

"Opera singers admired her," he said. "She had this incredible natural feel that she got from the church. She was a beautiful girl who was believable."

But Zager said it was painful to watch her during the past decade, as substance abuse and other struggles ruined her career and her life.

Zager hadn't seen Houston since the 1990s. He attended Cissy Houston's 70th birthday party in 2003, but Whitney was noticeably absent, he said.

"When you're the focus of attention no matter where you are, 24/7, I think it can get to some people," he said. "It's the only reason I can imagine why she would get into drugs and alcohol. It doesn't make sense to me. She had everything."