

The Queen gets glam. "To me, it's all about taking a chance," she says.

HOW DANA BECAME QUEEN

As a child, Dana Owens was doted on by her creative and adventurous family. The woman who became Queen Latifah looks back on an urban fairy tale in which a scrappy tomboy from Newark grew up to reign as hip-hop and Hollywood royalty

BY JEANNINE AMBER | PHOTOGRAPHY BY MATTHEW ROLSTON

In the thirty-fifth-floor lounge of one of the most exclusive hotels in Manhattan—where cocktails cost \$19 and the panoramic view sweeps over the treetops of Central Park—sits a quartet of Saudi princesses shrouded in hijabs, a trio of thin Japanese tourists perfectly turned out in Chanel, a pair of elegantly suited Italian businessmen and a young couple whispering in French and kissing like no one is watching. Amid the rustle of foreign money, in a low-slung booth by the floor-to-ceiling windows, sits a lone woman nursing a take-out coffee from Starbucks. Despite being dressed in faded gray jeans, a plain cardigan and unlaced boots and wearing no makeup, she exudes an easy poise that says, *I belong here*. On her left pinkie is a sparkly cocktail ring the size of a golf ball. It is the adornment of royalty. This is the Queen.

For more than 20 years we've been spectators to the ascension of Queen Latifah. Rising from the streets of Newark, New Jersey, to the pinnacle of the entertainment industry, she is hyphenated to the extreme: Actor-singer-rapper-producer-spokesmodel-fashion designer, and even perfumer. With seven studio albums and more than 30 films to her name, she is one of the world's most recognizable stars. The only full-figured woman of color ever to become the face of CoverGirl, she assumed design duties for HSN's Queen collection of clothing, accessories and fragrances

last year. "A lot of manufacturers don't respect the curvaceous woman," she says. "They don't respect our dollar or our shape. Working with HSN has been such a great partnership. I'm happy to be able to make women's clothing I really like. We've made sure the shape is right, the length is right, the colors are right. Everything in the line is something I would wear myself. It's the same way I developed the fragrance. It had to be something I would wear."

Latifah seems as happy exercising her creative muscles behind the scenes as she is in front of the camera. She donned an executive producer cap to deliver the BET sitcom *Let's Stay Together* and VH1's Atlanta-based girlfriend dramedy, *Single Ladies*, which has been picked up for a second season (without costar Stacey Dash, who left the show last summer). And this month fans will see Latifah return to the big screen when she plays the hardworking mother and gospel choir director Vi Rose Hill in the musical *Joyful Noise*. "Vi is raising two teenage children by herself and she's doing the best she can," says Latifah, who has a pivotal scene with her on-screen daughter, played by Keke Palmer. "Vi has hit her breaking point, and I worked with the director to tweak that scene to include things my mama or my aunts would have said, like, 'Get your narrow ass in that room!' That's something Black women say. You know, Vi's child is giving her back talk, not realizing the pressure her mother is under, and I think a lot of parents, particularly mothers, will relate." ▸

WARDROBE STYLING: TIMOTHY SNELL/TIMPY, INC.; HAIR: LAQIA MERRIVEATHER; MAKEUP: SAM FINE/FASHIONFAIR.COM; USING FASHION FAIR COSMETICS; MANICURE: NINILE/NINILE'S NAILS; PROP STYLING: ERIC HOLLIS;

The film, which costars country and western singer Dolly Parton, is chock-full of musical numbers, including one of the most exhilarating finales to hit the big screen in years. "This movie is so positive," says Latifah, who co-executive-produced the film. "We need an uplifting American movie, especially with everything that's going on in the world."

Latifah also recently inked a deal to host a daytime talk show, which will be produced by Overbrook, the production company owned by longtime friends Will and Jada Smith. "When Oprah ended her show, people were coming out of the woodwork, offering 20 million, 30 million dollars for me to do a talk show," Latifah says. "It was ridiculous money, but I turned it down. To me it's not about the money. It's about the partnership. Between my company and Will and Jada's company I know we can do something really great."

What destines a woman for this kind of success? There's ambition and drive, to be sure. But we've heard that story before. We know that at barely 18, Latifah joined forces with her partner Shakim Compere to form one of the first hip-hop management companies, Flavor Unit, overseeing the careers of Naughty by Nature, Terrence Howard, the hip-hop duo Outkast and others. At its height the company repped 11 gold and platinum acts. Now, at 41, Latifah owns her own soundstage, Flavor Unit Studios, a sprawling property in Miami, where Cam'ron and Ving Rhames just finished shooting their upcoming crime drama, *Percentage*. Latifah is a producer on the project.

For more than 20 years Latifah's career has been characterized by her apparently inexhaustible capacity to claim new territory, to master new skills, to do things that others never dare to try. But who instilled in a young Latifah the gift of seeing the possible in the impossible? Who nurtured her creativity, fostered her grace, let her see what fearlessness looks like? To really understand what drives Latifah, you need to get to know a girl named Dana. You need to go back more than 30 years to a sunny apartment in Newark.

A FEARLESS LITTLE SISTER

Latifah is 3 years old. She lives with her police officer father and art teacher mother in a bright eighteenth-floor apartment of a building in Newark, New Jersey. She and her 5-year-old brother, Lance, have their faces pressed against the window and they are wondering about gravity. Specifically, they are wondering what will happen if they drop an egg out of the window. "There was no one under us," Latifah recalls. "We just wanted to see how long it would take for an egg to fall that far and splat. We were fascinated." So fascinated that, after the eggs, they decided to drop their shoes. Not a pair, just a bunch of single sneakers. They might have moved on to other objects had their mother not come walking up the block and spied on the sidewalk an assemblage of children's footwear that she recognized as belonging to her two. "Of course, we got in trouble," Latifah says, laughing.

Dana looked up to her big brother. He made everything seem exciting. For him, she would do almost anything. "My brother

was a thinker," Latifah remembers. "He was a chess player and was always taking things like the radio apart to see how they worked. This is how much of a thinker he was: I remember him waking me up in the middle of the night. I couldn't have been more than 4 years old. We go into the living room and my brother, who was 6, reaches inside my father's leather jacket. He takes out our father's cigarettes, gets out his lighter, lights the cigarette, takes a pull, coughs, gives me the cigarette, I take a pull, I cough, then he puts the cigarette out, puts everything just where it was, and we go back to sleep. I don't know how long my brother had been doing this. But I'm sure he came to get me so if we got caught, he could blame it on me."

The children's mother, Rita Owens, laughs when she hears of the midnight excursion to the living room. "That is exactly what would have happened," she says. "Dana was so innocent. She would admit to everything. One morning the children decided to paint my pale yellow and white bathroom with their father's black shoe polish. Dana woke me up covered in polish wanting to show me her masterpiece."

It was Lance who taught Dana to be adventurous, to never say no, to find the joy and risk in everyday life. "Dana learned from her brother that life was to be experienced fully," her mother reflects. "They would try anything; nothing was off-limits. She still has that excitement about trying new things."

HER MOTHER'S SPARK

The apartment on High Street was filled with music. "We had a record player that was always going with soul and rock," recalls Latifah. "And there were all kinds of instruments, bongos and shakers and tambourines and guitars. My parents divorced when I was 8, but before that they would invite people over and they'd be drumming. I didn't know at the time some of them were the Black Panthers. I just thought it was a good vibe. And my mother was so creative; she was really fascinated by her children. It's like she studied us and watched how we did things and really tried to expose us to different experiences to spark our creativity."

Rita says she worked hard to involve her children in the arts. Supplies were always in the house for painting and drawing. And when they got older, there were guitar and dance lessons. "When friends would come over to play music, we would let the kids play tambourine or drums or whatever they wanted. I was an art educator and their father was very musically oriented. There was always jazz and Latin music playing in the house, and I was constantly trying to find activities I could afford to expose the children to culture."

Rap pioneer MC Lyte met Latifah at a music conference in the late eighties. "Right from the start, we were inseparable," recalls Lyte, who now hosts syndicated radio program *Café Mocha*. "She had this vibrancy. She would just burst into song, or if she was telling a story she would break into an English accent," she says. "Artistically, Latifah was free. She just did whatever she wanted to do. So much of that is because of her mother. Her mother gave her wings to fly. It's as though she said, 'These are the facts; now go ahead, baby, make it work.'"

Back in the Day

The daughter of a teacher and a cop from Newark turned her dreams into megastardom



Dana won Most Popular as a high school senior in 1987.



Dana's mother, Rita, taught her daughter to be unafraid.



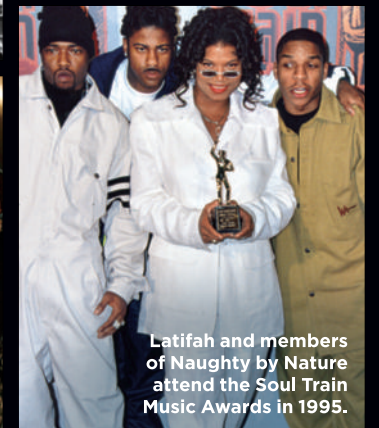
Latifah adored brother Lance, who died in 1992.



Dana rocks it on the ball court.



Latifah takes parents Rita and Lance to the 2006 premiere of *Last Holiday*.



Latifah and members of Naughty by Nature attend the Soul Train Music Awards in 1995.



By early 1990 the Queen had arrived.



The future star leans on her brother's shoulder in 1980.



In 1989 Latifah and Jay-Z were stars on the rise.



Latifah hangs with Kid Capri and Tupac in 1990.



Jazzy Joyce, Peaches, MC Lyte, Michie Mee, Latifah and Monie Love gather in New York City in 1988.

TOP TO BOTTOM: FROM LEFT: SPLASH NEWS; GLOBE PHOTOS/ZUMA PRESS; AL PEREIRA/MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES; ERNIE PANICCIOLI/RETNA; COURTESY OF QUEEN LATIFAH; MIKE DERER/AP PHOTOS; COURTESY OF QUEEN LATIFAH (2); MILAN RYBA/TIME & LIFE PICTURES/GETTY IMAGES; AL PEREIRA/MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVE/GETTY IMAGES; ERNIE PANICCIOLI/RETNA.

Latifah's young life was bright and filled with promise but there were also hard days. In 1992 her brother Lance, who had followed in his father's footsteps to become a police officer, was killed in a motorcycle accident. He was 24 years old. It was music that helped Latifah heal. "She was in a very, very dark place," her mother says. "It's the only time I've ever been worried about her. And then one night she called me from the studio. She said she'd written a song called 'Winki's Theme.'" Winki was the pet name Rita had given her son when he was a newborn, because he looked as though he was winking at her. "Dana came home and played that song for me and I was

floored. It captured everything she had been feeling. Writing that song was the beginning of her being able to be creative again." The song, a fusion of jazz, hip-hop and angst, would appear on the artist's third album, 1993's *Black Reign*.

Latifah, whose last two albums have been collections of jazz and pop standards, says she's currently working on a live album, due out sometime next summer. "I noticed that every time I performed live, the songs would be so much better than in the studio," she says. "I've just gotten more comfortable singing onstage. I'm really excited to capture that on an album." ▸

THE SUPERHERO'S DAUGHTER

Back when Latifah was 10, her mother often took her to visit her aunt and uncle over on 15th Street in East Orange, New Jersey. There were a lot of kids on the block, including Vinnie Brown, who would go on to become one of Latifah's lifelong friends and a member of the classic rap trio Naughty by Nature, the first group signed to Flavor Unit Management in 1989. "I remember when I first met Latifah," says Brown, whose group released a twentieth anniversary album, *Anthem Inc.*, last month. (The CD features a collaboration with Latifah.) "She was a tomboy who always had a basketball with her, and she was no joke. You just knew she was not to be messed with. She had this majestic aura, even then."

Latifah, who remains close to both her parents, credits her mother with giving her the skills to be at ease in any social situation, but it was her father who showed her what raw courage looks like. Lance Owens, Sr., was a man's man. He bought his young children guns, a gold-plated .38 for his son and a German Luger for his daughter. "There were no firing pins in them," remembers Latifah. "But they were real guns, and my father was like, 'Hold it like this; this is how you shoot.' I was 5 years old. When my mother found out, she threw the guns away." Her father pushed the limits in other ways too. One time, says Latifah, he took his children to a stretch of closed highway and gunned his Jaguar just so the kids could feel the thrill. "We were like, 'Go, Daddy; go, Daddy, go!'" she remembers. "At that moment, there was not a better person on earth than our father. Of course, 'Don't tell your mother' was part of the deal. Dads are dads: They do things with kids that mamas don't know about."

Every Thursday, when Lance, Sr., got paid, the family would go out for Chinese food and to see a karate flick. Latifah remembers one time the family was driving home from the movies and stopped at a red light. "We looked out the window and saw a man with two women. He kept slapping one of them. My brother and I were like, 'Get him, Daddy! Get him!' And my father gets out of the car. I'm sure he put on the bells and whistles for us, and he walks over and yells, 'Freeze!' with the wide stance. And he yells at the man, 'Get against the wall; what's the matter with you treating a lady like that?'" Their father cornered the man, allowing the women to leave the scene. "My brother and I were in the car cheering," Latifah says. "The next day at school we told everybody what he did. It was like he was a superhero."

Years later it was Latifah's turn to be the hero. She was 22 and living in a town house in Jersey City when she woke up in the middle of the night to the sounds of a commotion on the street below. "I could hear someone screaming for help," she recalls. Latifah's brother had just graduated from the police academy, and earlier that day she'd gone with him to a shooting range for target practice. She'd removed the clip for the drive home, and now she quickly grabbed the unloaded weapon and ran downstairs. "When I got in the street, I could see a man was getting robbed," she says. "There was blood everywhere. I'm like, 'Yo! Leave him

alone.'" The assailant appeared to be high on crack, she recalls, his eyes lit up like silver dollars. But he recognized the rap star. "He looked at me and says, 'Come on, Latifah, let me just get this.' Like I should let him rob this guy," she says. "Then he starts walking toward me. I told him to stop, but he kept walking, so I smacked him right in the head with the gun. Man, was he mad."

Shortly after, the police and ambulance arrived. "The thing is," says Latifah incredulously, "I know a lot of other people must have heard this man screaming for help and nobody else came out. My father taught us that you have to do something when somebody needs help. Be a good guy, not a bad guy."

THE QUEEN OF COURAGE

People give Newark too much credit when they talk about what made Latifah the way she is," says hip-hop legend Eric B, who's known Latifah for more than 20 years. "Maybe Newark taught her to be tough, but Latifah is who she is because of the way her family raised her."

The lessons she's learned, the life she's led and the people she's loved have all brought Dana Owens to a singular realization about what drives her. "To me," she says, "it's all about taking a chance. Just today my bodyguard and I were talking about perseverance. He and I have been friends since I was 12 years old. And we were talking about not giving up, believing in yourself and not listening to what critics have to say. If you believe in something and are willing to put the work into it, you have to ignore the naysayers."

And that's just what Latifah has done. She stormed the male bastion of hip-hop when she was still in her teens. Long before Sean Combs, Jay-Z and 50 Cent became known as rapper-entrepreneurs, Latifah created the mold. She portrayed a leading love interest on film when Hollywood said pretty had to be thin, and repped a cosmetic company before anyone knew for sure that mainstream America would find a curvaceous woman of color beautiful. She's a maverick, a pioneer, an innovator and a star. "My favorite thing about Latifah is her ability to always transform and soar," says singer Alicia Keys, a longtime friend. "She is living her destiny, and she is kind and giving and can make you laugh and laugh. She's totally her own magnificent self."

Of course, there have been moments when Latifah has taken a gamble and things didn't work out. Not immediately, anyway. "I remember the critics smashed my TV series *Living Single*," she says. "But we stuck with it and years later everybody loved the show." It was just one more lesson in trusting her visions and pushing for the win. "From the time I decided to become a rapper and get a record deal and have a management company, there have been doubters, people who didn't get it," she says. "If we had listened to them, we never would've tried half the things we did. But we didn't listen, so here we are 20 years later. You believe in yourself and put your mind and your soul into it. I've been around that kind of fearlessness all my life." □

Jeannine Amber is the senior writer for this magazine.



"People say I'm going to be the next Oprah," Latifah says. "No. Oprah is still Oprah. I'll be the next me. I feel like there's always a lane for me as long as I'm true to myself."

For clothing details, see Where to Buy.