

wonder

THE GIRLFRIENDS ISSUE!

Wendy

PHOTOGRAPHY BY
DEREK BLANKS

**On TV, she
says the things
no one else will.
But what's
she like when
the spotlight
goes off?
Wendy Williams
invites you in**

BY JEANNINE AMBER

DEREK BLANKS FOR TANU ARTIST AGENCY, STYLIST, WOURI VICE FOR EPIPHANY ARTIST GROUP, INC., MAKEUP, MERRELL HOLLIS FOR MAKEUP FOREVER/KENBARBOZA.COM, HAIR, ANITWON JACKSON FOR KENBARBOZA.COM, SET DESIGNER, ERIC HOLLIS, MANICURIST, NETTIE DAVIS FOR OPUS BEAUTY, DIGITAL SERVICES PROVIDED BY CHAD J WILSON, FOR CLOTHING DETAILS, SEE WHERE TO BUY.

“When I was a teenager, all I wanted was to get out and make my mark on the world,” says Williams.



She

of big hair and bigger laughter is taking a seat on the set of her eponymous TV talk show. But as host Wendy Williams attempts to cross her legs in the chair, her dress bunches up. Someone else might solve the problem with a subtle tug. But not Williams. She rolls onto one hip, leans on the side of the chair for support, and pulls her dress out from under her.

“When some women cross their legs, they look so elegant,” Williams says to her audience, a disparate group including a trio of Black girls dressed like they’re going to the club and a set of elderly White women wearing cardigans. “Me, I got my big ol’ logs; they measure 40 inches long and it’s like, *whoomp!*” She leans in toward the audience with a conspiratorial nod. “My calves are half an inch bigger than my neck!” Then she throws her head back and laughs. The entire audience joins in, caught up in the just-us-girls confession.

For years, daytime talk shows have relied on Oprah’s winning formula of polite inquisitiveness and earnest sense of purpose. Williams, whose show is available in 95 percent of U.S. homes, has gone her own way, creating a model *The New York Times* called a “breakthrough in daytime programming.” Yes, there are breathless interviews with celebrities, musical performances and even the occasional dog trick, but the driving force behind Williams’s appeal is the connection she engenders between herself and her audience. She is just like us, she maintains, fascinated by the lifestyles of the rich and famous and obsessed with her own foibles.

Recently, an on-air assessment of a photo of John Travolta without his hairpiece (“Either way, he’s a good-looking man!”) quickly turned into a side note about her own penchant for wigs. “He broke the cardinal rule of a wiggy,” she says. “You never walk more than 25 inches away from the perimeter of your house without a wig. I have a walk-to-the-mailbox wig!” Williams’s constant stream of revelations about her hair, health, home life and even her past as a cocaine abuser brings us all into her inner sanctum. The implicit message is, here is a woman who will understand your failings; she’s far from perfect herself. And what’s more affirming than that?

“I know I make some people cringe,” admits Williams later. “But I also know my willingness to expose myself, warts and



all, is part of the reason people are drawn to me. With me there is no pretense. I’m the girlfriend in your head who’s got a few miles on her and will give you the best advice I can. With me, what you see is what you get.”

David Perler, executive producer on *The Wendy Williams Show*, says Williams’s audiences feels as though “they’re having a conversation with someone they’ve run into at the grocery store. Wendy is not part of that celebrity culture of trying to pretend you are something you’re not. Her type of honesty is rare on television.”

After only two years on the air, Williams, who currently has the third highest rated talk show among Black households after *The Oprah Winfrey Show* and *Maury*, is getting noticed by TV executives beyond the realm of daytime talk. In February it was announced that she would be a contestant on ABC’s *Dancing With the Stars*. In March she appeared on two episodes of the soap *One Life to Live*. And last month she premiered her new dating game show, *Love Triangle*, on GSN. “It’s my time,” she says. “I have my health; I have support at home. The time is right.”

LARGER THAN LIFE

Williams, 46, has just arrived at a sunny dance studio in northern New Jersey for her second rehearsal for *DWTS*. To her delight, Chaka Khan’s “I’m Every Woman” is playing over the speakers. Williams raises her arms above her head and

“ WITH ME, WHAT YOU SEE IS WHAT YOU GET. ”

spirals them, jazz-hands style, in a giant sunbeam of happiness. “Whoa...” she giggles. “This is my jam!”

Tony Dovolani, her dance partner and 11-season veteran of *DWTS*, tells Williams the designers have already begun work on her dress for the opening night.

“Does it have a lot of material?” she inquires.

“No,” he answers.

“Good!”

Williams, who thinks she looks best naked, is dressed for rehearsal in a black unitard, black leg warmers and what she calls her street wig, a longer, blonder, more “beachy” version of the wigs she wears on her show. “My hair is whisper thin,” she explains.

But as any regular viewer knows, Williams has given an assist to more than just her hair. She claims the body she was born with is “built like an eighth-grade boy’s.” The figure she has now resembles a superhero’s: tiny waist, flat stomach and long, shapely legs. “It’s exercise, good diet and plastic surgery,” she says, referring to the “Mommy Makeover” she had ten years ago, following the birth of her son. “I was artfully sculpted.” Williams, who stands 5 feet 11 inches, also treated herself to breast implants. Before surgery, her breasts were small and asymmetrical. They are now the size of two ripe cantaloupes. “My breasts are good,” she insists. “When I got my implants, I told the doctor I wanted double D’s. But I’ve noticed in my show’s wardrobe, my bras are G’s, H’s and F’s, depending on the style. I’m not going to get them reduced. In person, they fit my body. They do look a lot bigger on TV though.”

In the studio Dovolani has Williams sashaying across the floor and shimmying like the rent’s due. “If I did this on my show I’d be

canceled,” she exclaims. Suddenly, out of nowhere, Williams is in tears. For days she’s been telling her audience that she was going to bring home the first place disco ball trophy, and now it seems the prospect feels overwhelming. “I talked so much smack,” she says to Dovolani. “I said on *Good Morning America* we were going to win. And I want to win, Tony, I don’t want to just place.” She pauses, then adds with a grin, “Although placing is good!” Just as suddenly, she’s laughing and shimmying some more.

BACK IN THE DAY

Williams was raised in Ocean Township, a predominantly White community near the Jersey Shore. Her parents, Shirley and Tom, were both educators. In high school Williams didn’t always fit in. The Black girls called her White, while the White kids would freely use the N-word around her. “They’d say, ‘We don’t mean you, Wendy, we’re talking about them.’ Like really, are you serious?” she says, remembering the exchanges. “High school was like a science experiment to me. I was thinking, *Just wait until I get out into the world.*”

In her 2003 *New York Times* best-selling memoir, *Wendy’s Got the Heat* (Atria),

Williams refers to her ambition as “futuristic vision.” The ability to imagine the greatness that lay ahead propelled Williams from her first job as a college radio disc jockey at Northeastern University to host of the wildly

successful *The Wendy Williams Experience* radio program. The show was a no-holds-barred happening, featuring gossip and incendiary interviews with everyone from video vixens to Whitney Houston, who famously responded to Williams’s questions with a blast of expletive-laced fury. “If you put a live microphone in front



Williams’s memoir is a candid tale of addiction and ambition.

THIS PAGE: FROM LEFT: ASTRID STAWLARZ/GETTY IMAGES; CARIN BAER; ABC/BOB DAMICO. OPPOSITE PAGE: STILL, BARRY BLACK.

QUEEN OF ALL MEDIA

From radio to TV to *Dancing With the Stars*, Wendy Williams does it all



Blowing up the airwaves, Williams made a name for herself dishing dirt.



The *Wendy Williams Show* is international, airing in 54 countries.



On her *DWTS* partner, Tony Dovolani: “He’s patient.”



"I could go with a more conservative look with my natural hair in a nice little cut," says Williams. "But that's not my personality."

“ I’M THE GIRLFRIEND IN YOUR HEAD WHO’S GOT A FEW MILES ON HER AND WILL GIVE YOU THE BEST ADVICE I CAN. ”

of anyone four hours a day for 23 years of their life, they’re bound to piss somebody off,” Williams says of her time on air. Then in 2009 she left radio to focus on TV full-time. The same year she was inducted into the Radio Hall of Fame, becoming only the second African-American woman to receive the honor.

“Wendy has always been focused,” says her sister, Wanda Finnie. “Her feeling was, ‘One day I’m going to make it big.’ I recall her saying those words in 1982.” But while most celebrities become more guarded as their fame grows, Williams’s rise has had the opposite effect. The bigger her audience got, the more she seemed to share. “She thinks once you put yourself out there, it won’t come back to haunt you when you least expect it,” says Finnie. “She’s always felt that it was better not to hide things.” Williams’s policy of full disclosure isn’t always easy on the family. Finnie remembers when Williams announced on radio that Finnie had gone into labor. “She said I was on my way to the hospital to drop that load,” she recalls. “I was so embarrassed.”

“Wendy is very honest,” adds her mother, Shirley. “And it took some growth on my part to accept it, because I am not an open person. But over the years I’ve come to admire Wendy’s realness. I think it’s made her very close to her fans.”

LOVE YOURSELF

After rehearsal, Williams makes a quick stop at the supermarket. The checkout lady asks about her appearance on *One Life to Live*, and a man in the parking lot tells her she’s got his vote on *DWTS*. Williams thanks him as she loads her groceries—red and green bell peppers, ground beef, SunChips, Crystal Light and Frank’s hot sauce—into the back of her SUV and heads to her home deep in the suburbs of New Jersey. The house, which she decorated herself, is an eclectic mix of whimsy and glamour. There is a giant statue of Betty Boop by the kitchen table (Williams painted Betty’s skin chocolate brown) and more than a dozen chandeliers.

At home, Williams drops her giant Birkin bag at the door and heads straight to the kitchen, where her 10-year-old son, Kevin, Jr., is on the computer. Kevin was born after Williams suffered three miscarriages—the last two at 5 months, both girls. Now she says she’s thankful her only child is a boy. “I don’t know how I’d explain to a girl in an oversexualized society that Mommy has breast implants or had liposuction or a tummy tuck,” she says. “My son knows. He calls it, ‘Mommy cheated.’” She points to her son’s drawing hanging by the pantry door. “This is Kevin’s image of me.” The picture depicts two cartoon superheroes: a



Williams and her husband of 12 years, Kevin Hunter



Williams’s son, Kevin, Jr., is frequently discussed on her show.

voluptuous Supermom and her partner in crime, Wonderdad.

Williams’s husband, Kevin Hunter, is also her manager. While Williams says she couldn’t ask for a better business partner, she admits the arrangement has its drawbacks. “The business fights get very personal,” she says. “Kevin can criticize me like nobody else can. He can hurt my feelings real good. On the other hand, he’s also an executive producer on the show, so my job is to make the product great; his job is to propel it. When he screws up, then I can talk to him like I wouldn’t talk to another manager.” Williams pauses, then

adds with a laugh, “The only thing is, I can’t fire him, because that wouldn’t be so good.”

Williams says other than her husband, her closest friends are her mother and her sister, with whom she speaks daily, and a handful of other women she cares for. But when it comes to a very best friend, it turns out the woman so many think of as an imaginary BFF, is, in fact, more of a lone wolf.

“I’m my own best friend,” she says, sliding the stuffed peppers she made for dinner into the oven. “When I was young I didn’t have time for friends. I was on a career path. In fact, when young girls ask me for career advice, the first thing I tell them is to learn to make moves on your own. Your career is not guaranteed, your marriage is not guaranteed, your parents aren’t around forever. The only one you can truly count on is yourself. I feel very passionate about passing that along to young girls who look to Miss Wendy. We have to tell the truth to one another.” And that is why we keep tuning in. □

Jeannine Amber is the senior writer for ESSENCE.

FROM TOP: RAY TAMARRA/GETTY; WYATT COUNTS.