



OUR  
OBSESSION  
WITH  
IDRIS ELBA

THERE ARE FANTASY MEN, AND THEN THERE IS IDRIS ELBA, THE HOLLYWOOD HEARTTHROB WHO'S GOT A LEGION OF BLACK WOMEN WISHING HE WERE THEIRS. JEANNINE AMBER FALLS IN LOVE

PHOTOGRAPHY BY ANDERS OVERGAARD

STYLIST: PAMELA P. MACKLIN FOR UNLIMITED BRIDGE; GROOMER: MERRILL HOLLIS/WENBARBOZA.COM; BARBER: LARRY CHERRY; MANICURIST: WYRDITH LEON-McCORMACK FOR MEM DAWOREJON AT FORD ARTISTS; PROP STYLIST: SARA FOLDENAUER.

Idris Elba was photographed exclusively for ESSENCE, May 5, 2009, in Brooklyn.

On Idris, Banana Republic blazer, Thomas Pink shirt, Black Brown 1826 pants, John Hardy bracelet and David Yurman watch.

**IDRIS ELBA IS TOUCHING MY ARM.** He's telling me about *Legacy*, the small independent film he's getting ready to shoot in Glasgow, Scotland, in which he stars as an ex-soldier suffering from post-traumatic stress. He says, "I'm excited about it because it's real acting, you know what I mean?" I think maybe he's grabbed my arm for emphasis, to better make his point. But I can't tell for sure, because the moment he touches me, I get all tingly.

But can you really blame me? Of all the chocolate eye candy that sweetens the big screen—Morris Chestnut, Djimon Hounsou, Terrence Howard, Boris Kodjoe, Blair Underwood—this man, right here in front of me, is the fodder for more women's fantasies than a shopping spree at Bloomies.

Idris says he's actually very shy and that when he was growing up in East London, girls at school never told him he was fine. But now he's famous and living in America, and all that's changed. Staring at him across the table—the way he leans back in his seat with the easy grace of an athlete—I can imagine the scores of women who've swooned at the casual touch of his hand, the deep baritone of his voice, the sight of him sauntering across a room.

Even I, who've had the good fortune to meet some of the sexiest men in Hollywood, feel something different about Idris.

He possesses that mysterious charisma that can catapult an actor from leading man to sex symbol. Denzel had it, and before him Billy Dee Williams. Physically flawless and emotionally reserved, they convey a dignified sexuality, a breathtaking magnetism that, coupled with their talent, draws us to them like a flame.

And Idris's fire has never burned brighter. It's been only a week since *Obsessed*, the psychodrama in which he plays a businessman stalked by an office temp, hit number one at the box office. He's in the midst of a six-episode run on NBC's widely popular *The Office*. He's got three new films lined up, including *The Losers* with Zoe Saldana and *Takers*, an action flick about a bank heist gone wrong opposite Michael Ealy and T.I. And he's finally making time to indulge in his other passion—music—releasing an EP of four to six tracks, tentatively titled *King Amongst Kings*, later this year. (His first album, *Big Man*, was not commercially released.)

Still, I think there is a chance that what I am feeling, sitting across from Idris at a corner table in a restaurant in midtown Manhattan, is something else. Could it be that Idris and I have a *special connection*? And did I see a flicker in his eyes when he slid into his chair, glanced my way, and said in that charming British lilt of his, "Hello, what's your name again?" ▸

“There is something quite devious about my personality. I’ll be the upstanding gentleman. But behind closed doors, I want to let loose.”

Idris wears a Prada tuxedo shirt and Gucci watch. Tie and cuff links, stylist’s own.

### Why Stringer Bell Had to Die

Idris Elba is talking about his career: his versatility, his ability to do five different accents and the fact that he’s been in this game for 20 years. He worked in Britain mostly on television before moving to the United States 11 years ago. He says he’s aware that sometimes people get attached to the characters he plays. And sometimes they take it too far, expecting Idris and his character to be one and the same. This is especially true of his career-making turn as the dangerously ambitious Baltimore drug kingpin Stringer Bell, in HBO’s highly acclaimed series *The Wire*.

“Let me tell you something, all right?” he says, leaning forward. He’s 6 feet 3 and wearing a snug black V-neck sweater, the kind Simon Cowell wears—only on Idris, this sweater, and the way it hugs his gently sloping trapezoids, is a whole different story. I wonder if he works out a lot or if God just made him this way. The son of a Sierra Leonean father and Ghanaian mother, with his straight back and almond-shaped eyes, Idris, 36, looks like an American’s imagining of an African king.

“*The Wire* has just been rereleased in London,” he continues. “It’s getting a huge amount of press, and I’ve been working with Prince Charles’s charity, the Prince’s Trust, doing an anticrime campaign. We held this event where people got to watch an episode of *The Wire* and speak to yours truly. So a handful of mostly White English people came to see the great and notorious evil bastard Stringer Bell. But I walk in the room very much an English dude: I have an accent, I’ve got my glasses on, I look nothing like the guy. You could almost smell the ‘No, no!’ They were so disappointed. They wanted a hard dude to walk in there shooting, you know?”

Some of the people even asked whether he minded Stringer Bell dying. “I broke it down for them,” Idris says. “Stringer’s a drug dealer, feeding the community huge amounts of narcotics that kill them; why *should* he live? Because he’s sexy and smart and can

kill someone at whim?” Is *that* sexy? Even after I said all that you could still feel the air had moved out of the room because this was not Stringer standing there.”

But as much as his English fans were invested in the idea of Idris as a hardened gangster, their ardor is nothing compared with the fervor of his African-American female fans. (The day before our lunch, when I mentioned I’d be meeting Idris to a happily married friend while we watched our children play in the school yard, she suddenly turned her palms to the sky and moaned, “I *want* him.” She wasn’t the only one. A woman in the nail salon, another at the grocery store, my babysitter, even a guy down the hall, all sucked in their breath, *oooooh*, when I said his name.)

Idris says he knows a lot of the adulation is because of what he does for a living, that on film he’s often portraying men who are “doing well, looking good, and, in some cases, [being] larger than life.” Clearly Idris recognizes his appeal is part fantasy. What I’m not so sure he gets is that for many of us the fantasy existed long before we’d ever heard of Stringer Bell. Etched deep in our collective psyche is the notion of the Perfect Black Man: The brother who can handle his business in the bedroom, the boardroom or the streets. Simmering with alpha male masculinity, all he needs to complete him is a strong sister by his side. For women nurturing this fantasy, finding Idris Elba is like learning Santa Claus really does exist. Then all you want is to take a ride on his sleigh.

### If Idris Were Your Man

Idris Elba is talking about his music. He knows he’s going out on a limb with this singing business. “A lot of people are just getting over the fact that I’m not playing gangsters,” he says. “And now I’m singing. This is a new side of me I’m offering.” The album isn’t done yet, but I’ve heard one song, “Please Be True,” a reggae-inflected tune that features Idris crooning in a tender voice. It’s a sexy >

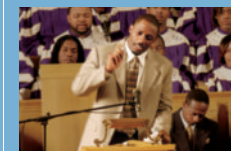
## UNDENIABLY DELICIOUS

When Idris Elba turns his swag on, we can’t help but watch. Five roles that had us glued to the screen



### THE WIRE (2002)

We took pleasure in Elba’s chiseled jaw, broad shoulders and all around fineness when he swaggered through Baltimore’s ‘hood as the cunning intellect of a drug operation. We hated what he did, but oh, yes, we did love watching him do it.



### THE GOSPEL (2005)

It seemed so wrong to lust while watching a Christian film, but we couldn’t help it. Elba played an ambitious minister who quoted scripture with ease, but it was the sight of him stripped down to an undershirt that made us catch the Holy Ghost.



### DADDY’S LITTLE GIRLS (2007)

Even as he rocked smeared coveralls and tan Timbs, Elba gave us a glimpse of his softer side as the adoring father of three precocious daughters. It took his costar Gabrielle Union half the film to fall in love, but he had us at hello.



### ROCKNROLLA (2008)

Until director Guy Ritchie cast him as a London gangster, adoring fans like us had no clue he wasn’t an around-the-way American boy. His crisp British diction paired with the deep rumble of his voice? It was new, different, sexy. We liked it.



### OBSESSED (2009)

Elba played a happily married man, but when he slipped into bed with Beyoncé, we all thought about breaking a commandment—specifically the one about coveting thy neighbor’s husband.

—DEMETRIA L. LUCAS

THE WIRE: HBO/COURTESY OF NEAL PETERS COLLECTION. THE GOSPEL: SCREEN GEMS/COURTESY OF NEAL PETERS COLLECTION. DADDY’S LITTLE GIRLS: LIONSGATE/COURTESY OF EVERETT COLLECTION. ROCKNROLLA: WARNER BROS./COURTESY OF NEAL PETERS COLLECTION. OBSESSED: SCREEN GEMS/COURTESY OF NEAL PETERS COLLECTION.

“I’d rather date someone who is regular. But what often happens is that she faces huge criticism.”

On Idris, a Giorgio Armani shirt, Robert Lee Morris ring and Gucci watch.

For details, see Where to Buy.

song, the kind of music that makes you want to rub up close to a man. “I like it,” I tell him. “Really?” he says, looking up at me from underneath those sleepy eyes, his face lighting up in a smile.

The angels are singing. *I made Idris Elba smile!*

Idris is excusing himself to go to the men’s room. “Do you mind?” he asks, getting out of his seat. I watch him walk away, a perfect isosceles triangle on long lean legs. I measure him with my eyes. His shoulders (a size 44 long jacket) look wide and strong, and his hips (a size 34 pant) are impossibly narrow. He turns the corner and I collapse my head on the table and clutch at my heart. The waiter asks me if I’m all right. “I’m in love,” I mumble.

Idris is back at the table. He’s sliding his fingers across his iPhone, showing me pictures of his 7-year-old daughter, Isan. “She’s my sweetheart,” he says. He’s divorced from the child’s mother and admits that at times it’s been a little tough. “It’s complicated when you once were an item and then you’ve got this child who is so untouched by the drama that you both had,” he says. “I understand how people get hurt and have arguments. But we work through it.”

Now we’re talking about the women he dates. “You see actors with models and actresses, and it’s so cliché,” he notes. “I’d rather date someone who’s regular. But what often happens is that she faces huge criticism like, ‘Why her? She’s Miss Ordinary.’” I nod my head, telepathically communicating to Idris that I can *totally* handle the criticism. Idris adds that he likes when a woman makes him feel needed. “Be an independent woman. I love that,” he says. “But at the same time don’t be ashamed to, you know, throw your toys on the floor and let me pick them up.”

Then he tells me the best thing of all. “There is something quite devious about my personality,” he confides with a sly grin. “I’ll do all the right things. I’ll be the upstanding gentleman. But behind closed doors, I want to let loose. As long as I know my secrets aren’t going to get out. You know what I mean?” *Of course I know what you mean, Idris Elba. Secrets. Our secrets. The ones we’re going to share when we’re finally alone.*

Idris is eyeing my dessert. It’s a velvety cheesecake with a delicious raspberry coulis inside. I’ve already taken a bite, but his fork is hovering expectantly over the plate. “That looks good,” he says. “Can I have some?” I watch his fork cut sideways through the soft cake, letting the sauce seep out. I rub my neck and look away. He keeps coming back until, bite by bite, the cake is gone. I don’t usually allow people to eat off my plate. I think it’s rude, and not particularly hygienic. But I know this isn’t really about the cake. It’s about our potential romance and a story we can one day tell our kids.

Without any warning, Idris gets up to leave. He says he has to make a phone call, has stuff to do. I tell him good-bye. *It’s okay, I think to myself. He has a photo shoot tomorrow. I’ll be there, too.*

### Fantasy Ride

The photographer is having a field day: Idris in a wet T-shirt. Idris in a suit and tie. Idris undoing the tie. Idris in a sweater, in a chair, on a sofa. Idris in slow motion, rolling up the sleeves of a white shirt. Idris fully clothed submerged in a tub of warm water.

Now Idris is changing out of his wet clothes, taking off his shirt. I silently exchange wide-eyed gasps with the stylists. Then he’s back in front of the camera, perched on a stool. I’m in another room

## DREAM LOVER

Two of Idris Elba’s former leading ladies kiss and tell

“Idris and I improvised our scenes. We were so prepared and comfortable that when it was time to shoot, it was effortless. We had a natural connection. He was so emotionally generous.” —*Obsessed* costar Beyoncé Knowles

“Idris is a real man, a gentleman. He’s a throwback to old Hollywood leading men and a pleasure to work with. Anytime you have an incredible talent paired with great looks and a kind heart, sign me up.” —*Daddy’s Little Girls* costar Gabrielle Union

—ANDREA ARTERBERY

staring at him through a glass window. He looks over at me. He sticks out his tongue. It’s as pink as a juicy piece of bubble gum. I turn away to catch my breath. That’s when I see her. She’s not with the magazine and she’s not with the makeup artist or the seamstress or the groomer. She’s not one of the photographer’s assistants. She walks by on four-inch heels, her toenails immaculately polished. She’s got a pretty face and body for days.

“His girlfriend,” someone whispers. “She’s from New Jersey.”

His girlfriend? As in...*girlfriend?*

“She’s really nice.”

I glance his way and then cast my eyes at my notebook, glaring at the page. He acts as if he doesn’t notice and strides past me in a blue velour bathrobe and flip-flops. “How’s it going?” he asks over his shoulder, not waiting for my reply.

The photo shoot wraps up, and I watch as my perfect fantasy leaves with his woman, publicist, manager and assistant in tow. Later, stepping into a taxi alone, I can’t help but reminisce. One minute Idris Elba was eating my cake. The next he was walking out of my life forever. If I’d known it was going to turn out this way, I would have saved his fork. □

Jeannine Amber is the senior writer for ESSENCE.

ESSENCE.com

Watch Idris Elba’s exclusive behind-the-scenes video at his ESSENCE cover shoot.

