

Beyoncé wears a Chloé sheer dress and leggings, a Deborah Marquit bra, a Clara Kasavina collar necklace, Robert Lee Morris bangles and ring, DKNY Hosiery tights and Dsquared2 pumps.

HAIR: KIMBERLY RIMBLE/MARGARET MALDONADO AGENCY; MAKEUP: FRANCESCA TOLOT/LOUTIER AGENCY; MANICURIST: LISA LOOMIS/SHANIE MURRAY MANAGEMENT; PROPS: YDUST; ANDRE-HUEISE; SPECIAL THANKS TO GOWANUS INDUSTRIAL PARK, INC.; RED HOOK, BROOKLYN.

I AM LEGEND

In this era of the celebrity tell-all, Beyoncé has remained faithfully mum.

But on her new album and in our exclusive interview, she opens up about life in the spotlight and being Mrs. Shawn Carter

By Jeannine Amber

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MATT JONES STYLING BY AGNES CAMMOCK

Beyoncé has on a Prada halter top, sheer dress, ruffled belt, necklace and cuffs and a Stephen Dweck ring.

“What Jay and I have is real. It’s not about interviews or getting the right photo op. It’s real.”

There can’t be any place less glamorous than this abandoned factory overlooking the Gowanus Canal in Red Hook, Brooklyn, with its shattered windows, graffiti and debris. And yet here she is, the Queen B, flawlessly made up and balanced precariously on staggeringly high heels, waiting for her shot. The photographer adjusts his lens, and someone throws Jay-Z’s “Roc Boys” on the iPod. A slight smile crosses Beyoncé’s lips, and then she begins to move. It’s almost imperceptible: a slight shake of her head, a twitch of her hips. With another star this would be unremarkable, but with Beyoncé, who, last April, amid a cyclone of media speculation, allegedly married her longtime beau in a “secret” wedding, this might be the only glimpse into her personal life she’s willing to give. Six years into their romance, the two have *still* not publicly acknowledged the relationship. The photographer motions he’s ready, and Beyoncé freezes, chin down, shoulders back, eyes an impenetrable stare.

There have always been celebrities who’ve guarded their privacy. But Beyoncé, whose as-yet-untitled third studio album drops on November 18, takes it to new heights. While other stars have their wedding pictures splashed across the cover of magazines, Beyoncé’s fans were left to scour the Internet for scraps of information for months. And then, aha! A paparazzi *gotcha!* shot of her, shielding her face with her purse, and on her finger, what looked to be a wedding ring. The picture was such a coup that the finger in question was blown up to grainy proportions and circled with the caption: *The First Pic of Beyoncé Rocking Her Wedding Ring!* The photo was snagged a full four months after the unacknowledged nuptials. And still not a word from the bride.

This is the day of stars selling snaps of their newborns and, ad nauseam, sharing details about eating disorders, messy divorces and stints in rehab. Never before have we had such access to the private lives of celebrities, and no amount of information is ever enough. We want details of prenups, contents of grocery carts and close-ups of cellulite-dimpled behinds. “These days fans feel entitled to know everything,” says Natasha Eubanks, creator and editor of celebrity blog The YBF (TheYBF.com), which receives 400,000 page views a day. “So if we see a star on TV and they’re not talking, it’s like, ‘How dare you tell us we can’t have information? I’m gonna Google it right now and find out anyway!’”

Beyoncé’s publicist likens her client’s discretion to that of Prince, whose silence on private matters is legendary. But Prince had his heyday before YouTube and *US Weekly*. Times have changed, and depending on whom you ask, Beyoncé’s protection of her privacy is either a quaint throwback to a gentler time, or a misstep in the delicate dance between press, fans and fame.

“She’s tricky to write about,” says one media insider. “She never talks about herself, and those kinds of personal interviews are what readers want.”

But with a career that includes almost 25 million albums sold according to Nielsen SoundScan, sold-out world tours and legions of hysterically devoted fans, does Beyoncé really need to divulge the details of her engagement–marriage–honeymoon to hold our interest? Or is she that most rare artist for whom talent is actually enough? ▷

“I had to try [the song “If I Were a Boy”] because I remember Aretha Franklin said a great singer can sing anything and make it her own.”

Beyoncé is wearing a Salvatore Ferragamo gown, Tom Binns hoops, a Satya for S. King Collection cuff, a Stephen Dweck ring, DKNY Hosiery tights and Dsquared2 pumps.

MYSTERY GIRL

A few days after our Brooklyn photo shoot, Beyoncé arrives at a recording studio in Lower Manhattan, fresh-faced with no make-up, her hair pulled back in a bun, wearing a teal blue romper, and again with the heels—four-inch, rock-star, sequin-encrusted platform Giuseppe Zanottis. Around her neck are the strings of a red bikini. “I just flew in from the Hamptons,” she says breathlessly. “My hair is still wet from the pool!” She says she doesn’t own a house on Long Island’s exclusive shore, but won’t clarify in whose pool she took the dip. On her right hand, she wears a shimmering ring with a pale blue stone as big as a gum ball. A present, she allows. She won’t say from whom.

She’s polite and friendly, but the lines have been drawn. Interviewing Beyoncé, who has admitted she dislikes the process, is a little like talking to your mother about sex. There may be a pretense of open communication, but the subtext is clear: *Are you seriously going to ask me that?*

Beyoncé explains that for her, it’s about leaving something to the imagination. “I feel that especially now, with the Internet and paparazzi and camera phones, it’s so difficult to maintain mystery. And that’s so important,” she says, choosing her words. “Even in a relationship, I feel like not being that accessible is really important. If you think about Prince or Michael Jackson, or any superstars, you couldn’t see them when they got off their planes or when they got out of the pool and didn’t comb their hair. It’s great that people see that we’re not perfect. But it’s almost impossible to have superstars now, because people will never get enough. And it’s not even about my music. It’s about all the things that people imagine about me in their minds. But I can’t satisfy everyone.” She pauses, then adds, “I know that Jay and I probably do inspire people. And I appreciate people feeling proud. But this is the only way I’ve been able to stay sane, so why would I start talking now?”

While there may be something vaguely sympathetic about the Dilemma of the Modern Superstar as portrayed by Beyoncé, there is also something deliberately calculated about her silence. “[Not speaking about your personal life] controls your brand,” she says matter-of-factly. “It controls what you want to put out there and kind of forces people to talk about what you want to talk about.” Not surprising, like any driven woman, what she wants to talk about are her latest career challenges and how she has risen to meet them.

While Beyoncé’s acting has met with mixed reviews, she’s still giving it her best shot, appearing in two new films scheduled for release next year. In the psychological thriller *Obsessed*, which marks her first foray into the genre, she plays the wife of a man (Idris Elba) who’s being stalked by a woman at work. The role required her to have an out-and-out brawl with costar Ali Larter. “At first it was choreographed as more of a catfight,” she says with a laugh, “but we were like, ‘This is not how a woman would fight if she’s protecting her family.’ Now it’s very intense.” A greater challenge still was her turn as brash and bluesy, heroin-addicted singer Etta James, opposite Oscar winner Adrien Brody in *Cadillac Records*, the story of Chicago’s legendary Chess Records. And Beyoncé’s performance has at least one fan already. “I remember after *Monster’s Ball* thinking, *Halle’s going to get an Oscar nomination*,” says Beyoncé’s acting coach, Ivana Chubbuck, whose list of clients includes Berry, Charlize Theron and Terrence Howard. “I feel that way about Beyoncé in this film. I think there is going to be some Oscar buzz around her; she’s just that great.” ▷

Beyoncé, who prepared for the role by visiting drug addicts at a Brooklyn rehab facility, says she so lost herself in the character that for the first time as an actress she experienced the out-of-body high she feels onstage. “This was the first time I felt that naked and vulnerable acting,” she enthuses, remembering a particularly emotional take. “After I finished the scene, me, my mom, my acting coach, Angie [Beyoncé’s cousin and executive assistant], we were all just jumping up and down, like, ‘Oh, my God, that was *it!*’ ” The gritty role also influenced Beyoncé’s new album. “Etta expressed herself; she was bold,” the singer explains. “That inspired me to do things musically that no one else is doing.”

To wit, “If I Were a Boy,” a stripped-down track that features none of the vocal acrobatics for which the ten-time Grammy winner is famous. Instead, she delivers it in a vulnerable, almost childlike tone, accompanied on the bridge by little more than an acoustic guitar. It’s a radical departure from Beyoncé’s usual big horns and bigger beats, but perhaps a brilliant move. The song, with its indie vibe, has more crossover potential than anything Beyoncé’s done before. “It’s broad,” she agrees. “The producer wasn’t even going to play it for me because it didn’t sound like anything I’ve ever done. But I had to try it, because I remember Aretha Franklin said a great singer can sing anything and make it her own.”

Although only about ten tracks will be on the final CD, Beyoncé says she’s recorded 60. Forty of those songs are about love.

Wow. That must be very flattering to, uh...someone.

“There’s a balance.”

You mean the love is reciprocated?

“Yeah,” she says with a giggle. “Definitely.”

CROSSING THE LINE

“There’s something almost romantic about a celebrity imagining that in this 24-hour-news-cycle/reality-TV world she can hold on to a modicum of privacy at all,” says John Jackson, Jr., Ph.D., associate professor of communication and anthropology at the University of Pennsylvania. “In fact, Beyoncé walks a kind of tightrope. Fans care about celebrities they admire. They want to identify with them. But at the same time, they might turn on these same celebrities if they don’t share their private lives.”

For now, Beyoncé and Jay-Z’s relationship exists in that no-man’s-land where they won’t give us anything and we can’t get enough. The two are photographed in every imaginable place: on the streets, at a ball game, on a yacht floating in the wide-open sea. Although she doesn’t make a point of complaining, Beyoncé does recount one particularly harrowing experience: She was buying some shirts at American Apparel in Los Angeles, and as she was leaving the store, she was suddenly surrounded by more than 50 paparazzi. Her security man tried to restrain the mob, but one of them broke free, opened the car door, slipped inside, and started snapping pictures of the stunned singer. “I was shocked,” she says, “Like, *No he didn’t just open the door and get inside the car!*”

Her mother, Tina Knowles, bristles when reminded of the incident. “There are just so many instances of people crossing the line. You think you’re having a private time and there they are just popping out of nowhere. Just because you are a celebrity doesn’t mean you need to let people in on every detail of your private life,” she says, defending her daughter’s reserve. “Beyoncé gives one *thousand* percent as an entertainer. And I

think that’s what she wants to be known for. Jay said it very well: ‘There are some things you have to keep sacred.’ ”

Arguably the biggest indicator of whether Beyoncé can sustain this mystery act is her past success. No one in recent memory has attained her star status with such little personal revelation. In fact, the very notion of contemporary celebrity hinges on the illusion that stars have given us a backstage pass into their lives, especially if they’ve got an album to sell. Mariah, Usher and Janet all offered up pieces of themselves to coincide with their most recent releases. It’s part of the dance. But Beyoncé, lips tightly sealed, stands alone. Even so, her record sales—*B’Day* went triple platinum—brightly outshone them all.

“She’s the biggest name in R&B, and we don’t know anything about her,” says The YBF’s Eubanks. “Of course there are people who can’t connect to her because of that. But she gets away with it due to her talent. We wouldn’t put up with this from anyone else.”

Back at the studio, there is one other thing Beyoncé would like to add: All this hush-hush around her love life wasn’t her idea alone.

Did you and Jay make a deliberate decision not to talk?

“We decide *everything*.”

So you would need like a permission slip to speak to me about the wedding?

“[Laughing] My word is my word. What Jay and I have is real. It’s not about interviews or getting the right photo op. It’s real.”

I respect that. But still, this is ESSENCE....

Yes, this is ESSENCE, and maybe Beyoncé senses a slight adjustment is in order, that a small offering should be made. Because finally, with many long pauses, a few hands to the face and groans of “You’re gonna get me in trouble,” she gives us this: The wedding was very small and intimate. She’s not a “traditional woman” and all the hoopla of a big wedding just didn’t appeal to her. Besides, she’s been on the red carpet countless times, or, as she puts it, “It’s been my day so many days already.” All she wanted was something meaningful and authentic. She also didn’t want an engagement ring because, she says, “People put too much emphasis on that. It’s just material and it’s just silly to me.” Instead she has a wedding band that she took off to go swimming, which is why she’s not wearing it during the interview. (In early September the singer walked the red carpet with a diamond ring reportedly worth \$5 million, and again the blogs went nuts: “Finally Jay-Z buys Beyoncé a ring...six months after the wedding!” blared one.) The two also have matching tattoos of a Roman numeral four on their ring fingers, so that when she has to take off her band for work there will always be something there. (Beyoncé was born on September 4, Jay-Z was born December 4, and the couple wed on the fourth of April.)

She won’t give any details of the engagement (*Did he propose? Did his people call yours?*) except to say, “We’ve been together a long time. We always knew it would happen.” And children, of course. She wants them. Someday. After she’s made an album she considers a classic. She thinks this next album might be The One. □

Jeannine Amber is the senior writer for ESSENCE.

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Log on to see exclusive behind-the-scenes video of our cover shoot and a bonus photo. And join the discussion: Do you think Beyoncé should share more of her private life?



Beyoncé has on an Emporio Armani top and skirt, a Philippe Audibert sleeve, Stephen Webster earrings, a Frank Gehry for Tiffany & Co. bangle, an AND_i by Andreas Eberharter spiked bracelet and DKNY Hosiery tights.

For details, see Where to Buy.

“It’s impossible to have superstars now, because people will never get enough. I can’t satisfy everyone.”