

...and Baby Makes

With a string of lead movie roles under her belt and on the eve of a new album, Jill Scott opens up to **Jeannine Amber** about the difficult road that led her to single motherhood, the sister circle that helps her get by and the perfect life she enjoys today

PHOTOGRAPHY BY YU TSAI

Jill Scott dances with her baby. She sings to him, coos to him, rocks him, and puts her face up close to his. *Nook nook*, she whispers in his ear; they speak a private language. This baby, a little boy named Jett, has big, wide eyes and a deep, soulful stare. He loves listening to Marvin Gaye and crawling under the furniture, like he's doing right now, making his way across the living room, around the legs of the coffee table, to his mama, who is curled up in the corner of her sofa barefoot, wearing jeans and a comfy T-shirt and no makeup. He grins and sticks a thumb in his mouth. She smiles. He giggles.

Jill Scott—the woman who has provided the sultry sound track to our lives since her double-platinum debut album, *Who Is Jill Scott?*, was released a decade ago—is in the thick of mommy love. Not coincidentally, she's also enjoying a career high. In February she won critical acclaim for her turn as a recovering alcoholic in Lifetime Movie Network's *Sins of the Mother*. Last month she starred in Tyler Perry's *Why Did I Get Married Too?* opposite Janet Jackson and Cicely Tyson. This month she kicks off a 20-city arena tour with fellow Grammy winner Maxwell. And later this summer she drops her fourth studio album, *The Light of the Sun*, a release she says best expresses who she is. "Since I've had my son, I feel like there's a stitch of lava in my spine," she reflects. "I feel like I can do anything."

This dream life Scott has now, full of power and promise, came to her through the real-life alchemy of mixed emotions and unexpected >



STYLIST: MARIO WILSON/KENBARBOZA.COM. HAIR: MARCIA HAMILTON/KENBARBOZA.COM. MAKEUP: ERIC FERRELL/DION PERONNEAU-MANICURIST. VON-CHRISTMAS/KARLEE ARTIST. PROP STYLIST: ERIC HOLLIS. FOR CLOTHING DETAILS, SEE WHERE TO BUY.

Jill Scott was photographed exclusively for ESSENCE, January 25, 2010, in Los Angeles.

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circumstances: There were prayers followed by dashed expectations. Then excitement eclipsed almost completely by panic.

Let's start with the prayers. She asked God for a baby; she wanted one so badly. But before the prayers that said, *Please, God, please*, were the ones that said, *Please, God, not yet*. She was 14 and the pain each month was unbearable. Like doubling-over-and-crying-out-for-relief bad. "I asked God fervently to take away my period and bring it back whenever he wanted me to have a child," she says. Month by month her cycle diminished. "It went from every month to every three months, to once a year, to not at all," she remembers. "That meant that I didn't ovulate." Even though Jill had asked for this, she knew it wasn't normal. So she went to doctors. Several counseled her to have a hysterectomy. "When you are broke in the inner city and going to a clinic, that's the suggestion," she says. "They said it like it was just such common sense. But they'd told the same thing to my mother, that she couldn't have kids, and then she had me."

So Jill rejected the doctors' suggestions and instead waited until she was married, in 2001, to a graphic designer she'd known for years. She figured this must be the time for a baby. Again, she prayed. *God? Are you listening? I'm ready*. "I was like, 'I'm old,'" she recalls. "I'm 31, I'm 32, I'm 33. *C'mon, it's time, right?* But it wasn't." And then, after five years together, the marriage began to falter in the shadow of her blossoming career. After a two-year separation, the divorce became final in 2007. It wasn't long before Jill Scott, now 38, met someone new.

hope floats

Jill was on tour. He played drums. John Roberts works with a lot of folks: Prince, Janet Jackson and, most recently, as part of the house band for the television show of Jill's good friend Mo'Nique. But at that time, in the fall of 2007, he played for Jill.

They were together in a whirl of tour buses and hotel rooms, in London, in Paris, for late nights on steamy stages, with Jill's sweet voice and his steady beat. Who wouldn't fall in love in a situation like that?

He gave her a ring, and in front of an audience at New York's Carnegie Hall they shared a long kiss and announced to the world that this was for real and they planned to marry. Again Scott thought, *This must be the time for the baby*. Again she called out to God. "John and I used to pray about a child all the time," she says. "When we ate dinner, we thanked God for our baby. When we went to church, we thanked God for our baby. Whenever we'd thank God for this, that or the other, we'd thank God for the baby."

John says now that he really didn't want to rush into the baby thing. And he had good reason: He already had three children, now ages 18, 12, and 5, with three different mothers. "I didn't want to go that route again," he says. "I told Jill if I was ever going to have another child, I wanted to be married first." But they were in la-la land, making music and making love, and all the while Jill was carrying that heavy yearning for a baby. Still, her irregular cycles made the prospect seem unlikely. She

thought maybe *this* was God's plan. He had given her so many blessings already, maybe she wasn't destined to be a mother. She struggled to accept that possibility, but never stopped praying. *Please, please, please, please*. Reflecting on it now, she calls that period of her life "really unbalanced."

Meanwhile, her career was thriving. She had signed on as the star of the HBO and BBC joint effort, *The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency*, a good-natured series about a woman in Botswana who solves mysteries. (The program garnered much critical praise and was received with such pride in Botswana that, much to her delight, the country issued postage stamps adorned with Jill's likeness.)

As excited as she was, a few days before she was scheduled to go to Botswana to film the series, Jill got the feeling that something was very wrong. "When I would lie down, I felt as though someone was pushing me down into the mattress," she recalls. "I was so tired and so dizzy." She feared she might have cancer, so she went to the doctor, asked for blood tests, and began to mentally prepare. "In case I had to go for chemotherapy," she says, "I was thinking, *I still want to live*."

The doctor's receptionist called her at 10:00 A.M. the following day. Her flight was at noon. Jill braced herself, and then the woman started singing, "You're gonna be a mommy." Jill just froze, because how could this be? Then she remembered that HBO and an entire crew were waiting on her in Africa. She called her agent and her assistant and her everybody, and told them, "I need a day!" She thought, *I have to see the doctor and get some vitamins*. But first she called John.

"I had to tell him, 'You did it; you're a hero!'" she says. Jill was in such a daze that she doesn't even remember his response.

pregnant pause

No matter how wanted, prayed for or dreamed about it is, a pregnancy changes everything between a man and a woman. The relationships hardest hit are the ones born of fantasy. Suddenly there is nothing to do but look at the other person through the prism of "for the rest of our lives" and wonder. About everything.

John says he knew when he visited Jill in Botswana that things had taken a turn for the worse. "We were trying our best, but it wasn't working out," he says. One might surmise that Jill—in her first trimester of pregnancy, shooting 16-hour days in the 104 degree Botswana heat and with morning sickness that had her vomiting in the middle of scenes—was more than a little irritable. "It was a challenge," she admits. "I was agitated. I cried a lot."

For John, this cold splash of reality was not what he'd bargained for. "We had good times on the road, touring, playing, living our dream," he says. "But when it was time to come off the road, things weren't like the fantasy. It was...difficult."

And so, with neither of them happy, the pair split up.

Jill refuses to bad-mouth her ex. "I don't want any wars," she says. "I hope he'll forgive me for any and everything that I've done, and I forgive him for any and everything that he's done. At the core of >

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"I feel driven and smarter," says Jill about how motherhood changed her. "I definitely feel like a lion."



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it all, I think he's a good person, but that's not my bag anymore."

Scott finished shooting in Botswana and returned to Los Angeles a six-months-pregnant single mother-to-be. She settled into a newly purchased home in a quiet L.A. enclave where her neighbors' homes are outlined by actual white picket fences.

This wasn't going to be Jill's first experience with a female-headed household; she had been raised by a loving and attentive single mother. But, she maintains, her relationship with her father was solid. "He was always present," she says. "It was just a phone call and he was on his way." She hopes for Jett to have the same closeness with his father. "I don't want John to feel funny walking through my door to see his son."

Still, she says, this wasn't the plan. "You know, I've read things about myself on the Internet where people are saying, 'Oh, here's another single mother trying to make it seem okay.' But I'm not jumping up and down about being a woman in the house alone with a young boy. This is not what I wanted. This is not what John wanted. But it is the way it is. And besides, why would we be in the house and be unhappy? Then what would I be teaching my son? To settle? Why would I ever do that?"

John, who lives in Atlanta, says he visits as often as he can.

sister soldiers

Jill wants to make one thing clear: If by "single mother" you mean a woman struggling on her own, then she most certainly is not that. She's surrounded, embraced and supported by a group of women she calls her soldiers.

"I want to give a shout-out!" she says with a laugh and starts naming names: Mo'Nique, Erykah Badu, fan turned friend Jennifer Austin (who remembers seeing "fear" in Jill's eyes when she first came home with her baby) and the list goes on. Jill says these women ushered her from "scared girl to Mommy Woman."

"I felt completely overwhelmed by being a mom," she says. "I always wanted it, but when I actually got it, it was so much more than I had anticipated. I was so sleep-deprived. I was walking into walls, tripping over my own feet. I almost fell down those steps." She gestures to the curving staircase leading up to her second floor. "I was like, *I don't know if I'm gonna make it!*"

Mo'Nique chuckles as she remembers Jill's early days as a mother. "Jill's a trooper," says the actress. "But [just like with any new mother] when you're used to getting up, doing whatever you want, the challenge becomes, *Oh, wait a minute. Did I just make plans? Oh, I'm trippin'*. The second that baby is here, every day changes. The challenge is balance."

Mo'Nique is talking about the tipping point where wishing for motherhood gives way to surrendering to it. Jill found that surrender, difficult as it is, can bring many rewards: strength, a sense of purpose and even a certain freedom in her music.

"I've never done anything like this before," she says of her recording process on *The Light of the Sun*. "Normally I'll come to the studio with lyrics and an idea of how it should sound and we'll work it out. This time I got together a few musicians I really appreciate working with, and we'd just go into the studio and close our eyes and hit 'record.' I don't know what I'm gonna say or sing or in what key. We're just playing. But it's not a jam session, because it feels so focused. It's like making love in the dark. I haven't written a lyric. I've just been spittin', for lack of a better phrase, and afterward I'm shocked by what I said."

Witness the nine-minute-plus opus, "Le Boom Vent Suite," on which Jill emotes about a love affair gone awry. "Oh, I'm venting," she says. "It's one of those, 'I tried; I made every attempt; and I can't do it anymore, so I'm moving on.' It came out so freely and honestly. Usually my sense of responsibility will stop me and say, *You have to be mindful and take other people's feelings into account, but I decided, I'm just gonna let this rock.*"

"I feel strong," she continues, reflecting on the transformation motherhood has brought. "This entire experience—from the divorce to meeting someone new and falling in love to having an engagement fall apart in the middle of planning a wedding and getting pregnant in the middle of that—has made me a better person than I've ever been. I've always liked and appreciated myself, but now it's deeper and stronger and I like it." She smiles and thinks for a moment. "Really," she says, "I wouldn't change a thing." □

Jeannine Amber is the senior writer for this magazine.



Jill with 9-month-old Jett. "I need to see his face. I need to feel his hands in my hand."



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