

# Confessions of a Radio Drama Queen

Love her. Hate her. Either way, Wendy Williams, the most notorious Black woman on the airwaves, says you're probably tuning in to her show. But what Ylonda Gault Caviness found most surprising is that this shock jock has a hustler's spirit mixed with some very traditional family values

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MARK MANN

It's a little after 3:00 p.m. on the East Coast, and Wendy Williams is, by now, too through. It's Advice Hour and the controversial syndicated radio host is taking a call from a South Carolina listener who wants to know if she should continue a relationship with her now-engaged baby daddy.

"Relationship?! You're the meaningless jump-off!" Wendy blasts. "He is marrying someone else. What the hell's wrong with you? Look, just move on, okay? Focus on your child and make sure you get that child support."

As is most of Wendy's counsel, this one scorches with candor and brevity. As if four words were one, she blithely says, "ThankYouByeBye," and goes to the scores of other callers awaiting her verdict on the state of their personal lives.

There has never been anything quite like *The Wendy Williams Experience* or its host. Turn any radio dial and you'll find your share of provocateurs, but Wendy is beyond bold. The show the fortysomething host broadcasts from New York to nearly a dozen cities across the country reaches 12 million listeners daily. Wendy, the self-proclaimed Queen of All Media, attracts a motley crew of homegirls, housewives, straight and gay men, lesbians, Buppies, hip-hop fans and working moms—who hang onto her every word. They're guaranteed a great laugh and an Oh-no-she-didn't question thrown at an assortment of celebrities and regular folks. >

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"I totally accept who I am," says Wendy Williams, controversial Queen of All Media.

**D**id you happen to hear her 2003 interview turned verbal smack-down with Whitney Houston? In addition to exposing a harsh side of America's most beloved pop diva—"Who the [bleep] do you think you're talking to?" the songstress responded to one of Wendy's questions—this now legendary "chat" catapulted the jock from cult status to a worldwide arena.

Still, the more fascinating stories Williams tends to divulge on air are about her own drama. She reveals the kind of nagging insecurities most people reserve for a therapist's couch, then allows us to laugh and cry at them all right along with her. Her bling, Bentley and boobs are not the adornments her middle-class parents—a card-carrying Alpha and an AKA—taught her to pursue. She wears size 11 shoes and is forthright about her "packaging." To put it mildly, girlfriend is not mad at the scalpel. She has had numerous plastic surgeries, including lipo-suction and a breast job. And

she hasn't ruled out additional procedures in the future.

After just a few moments with Wendy in person, it's evident there's a method behind the drama. It's good to be Wendy Williams right now. She's a two-time *New York Times* best-selling author set to release her first novel this month. Her long-running relationship with cable network VH1 has recently expanded to include a new series debuting in the fall. Most important to her is the "flagship," radio. Although her "comfortable" undisclosed salary allows her to buy what she wants and go where she loves, she now believes it's time for her to really get paid.

"I'm chasing my paper with a vengeance," she says in the Pink Room, her spacious, bubblegum-pink-walled WBLS-FM office 41 floors above New York's Park Avenue. "I do know I'm blessed, but I'm a Black woman in a man's world, and the financial validation is only just now starting to catch up to my popularity. No matter what, a woman has got to fight. We make 75 cents for every dollar a man rakes in. It's not fair!"

In 1997 the success she dreamed of as a child in Ocean Township, New Jersey, was nearly snatched away from her. That's when, after years of fueling DL rumors about the hip-hop world, Wendy says her honesty and let-it-rip antics didn't set well with folks in hip-hop or the powers-that-be at New York City's Hot 97 FM radio station. So Wendy bought out her contract and then landed what seemed to many an unspectacular gig at Philadelphia's Power 99. By 2001 she pulled the station's ratings out of the basement to the top spot. That's when WBLS came calling. Later that year she returned to the Big Apple and relaunched herself, this time bigger and bawdier than ever. Clearly those efforts to silence her were in vain.

She's a queen now, but Wendy felt less than royal when she was growing up. She recalls being a young girl who spent most of her time fantasizing about a life of "fabulosity." Sitting alone in her room, she would read magazines and plot her big, successful career.

"I was a total misfit," Wendy says of her firmly middle-class

## Money, Power, Respect

Back in the Pink Room, just before another high-octane show, she's gearing up for the release of her highly anticipated novel, *Drama Is Her Middle Name* (Harlem Moon), coauthored with Karen Hunter (no relation to Kevin). Wendy's initial foray into fiction is the first installment in a planned series. *Drama* moves fiercely as a ghetto-fabulous whodunit dripping with status labels and familiar characters. The story centers on Ritz Harper, a Wendy-esque gossiping diva of urban radio station WHOT. Fueled by an aching hunger to reach the top of the broadcast game, Ritz sacrifices her principles and ultimately gets taken down. But by whom?

"Ritz and I have a lot in common," Wendy Williams notes of her protagonist. "That competitive do-anything-to-succeed kind of hunger that drives her? I totally identify with that."

No kidding. In her office, her new CD, *Wendy Williams Brings the Heat*—a compilation of original songs from Jadakiss, Amerie and others her husband produced—is in view. On the coffee table rest several empty bottles of Georges Vesselle, a venerable champagne

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## Life in Suburbia

On a recent spring day Wendy and her 5-year-old son, Kevin—who trails her, doting and sweet—settle into a booth at a pancake house not far from her suburban New Jersey home. She's seemingly oblivious to the stares of the soccer moms and seniors enjoying their breakfast. Wendy's nearly six feet tall—mostly legs—and today black Lycra is hugging her frame every which way but loose. Her giant, double-D breasts are squeezed into a small black T-shirt. Honey-streaked hair extensions hang down her back.

"I'm pretty traditional—morals matter a lot to me," she says as she layers syrup over her Swiss cheese omelette. "It's just that I refuse to conform. I'd probably be more successful if I changed. But to hell with that!"

As her devoted listeners know, Williams has gone through many changes since she began her career years ago at a tiny radio station in St. Croix: She has battled a cocaine habit; endured a string of heartbreaking, late-term miscarriages before giving birth to her son in 2000; ended an ill-fated first marriage that lasted five months; and survived the infidelity of her current husband—while she was pregnant!

upbringing. While Tom and Shirley Williams shuttled her brother and sister between honor roll ceremonies, Jack & Jill events and cheerleading practice, Wendy stayed on the sidelines. She never even attended any proms.

"Deep inside I haven't changed," she says. "I love my life. I totally accept who I am."

As she digs into her turkey sausage, her supervixen trapings give way to another side. She reaches into her alligator handbag and unearths a Frogger miniarcade toy for her son to play with while she plants a loving kiss on his cheek.

Family is important to Wendy, who admits she'd be "unfulfilled" without Kevin Hunter, her husband, and their son. Wendy and Hunter—a former party promoter who appears "thugged out" on the outside, but whose business acumen Wendy credits for her growing empire—married in 1999. Soon after they met, nearly 12 years ago, he became her man and her manager. She says he "gets" her, and so does her son: "He knows the mommy who makes his breakfast and drives him to school is separate from the stiletto-wearing woman with the hair and boobs all over the place at work."

brand for which Wendy is a new partner. She hastens to add that she's not merely a figurehead. Wendy is working it. And if, along the way, people don't get her, she's all right with it. "I'm very judgmental," she admits. "So I understand when people look at me and say, 'She looks crazy.' I don't mind." In a conspiratorial tone she adds, "You know, a lot of people can't stand me." Then with that infectious, larger-than-life laugh, she adds, "But they listen anyway!" □

**Ylonda Gault Caviness is a frequent contributor to the magazine.**

