

JILL SCOTT'S LONG WALK

The shy kid from North Philly has turned into a major diva—dueting with Aretha Franklin, opening for Sting, garnering Grammy nominations. But riding SEPTA may no longer be an option

BY SABRINA RUBIN ERDELY

TWO THINGS, TWO SIMPLE THINGS—THAT'S ALL Jill Scott wanted to accomplish during her three-week visit to Philadelphia in late March and early April. Was that so much to ask? The singer was returning home after the most exhilarating, bewildering eight-month journey of her life: a concert tour she'd begun in obscurity but ended as a star. It had all happened so fast—a blur of hotel rooms, airports, blinding stage lights, cheering audiences—that Scott was still trying to make sense of it all, to get used to the sight of her own pretty face beaming back at her from magazines, to be nonchalant at the sound of her own voice wafting from the radio. When, near the end of the trip, she had walked the red carpet at the Grammys, shyly mingling with Toni Braxton, Kid Rock and Busta Rhymes, she'd had to remind herself that she was one of *them* now, a celebrity.

In short, Jill Scott was ready to come home for a breather. She'd have three weeks in town, time enough to shake off the shell shock, hang out with her fiancé, enjoy her mother's fish-fry. And she planned to get two errands done. Number one, she needed to find a new place to live.

Not that she wasn't happy with her Fairmount apartment; it was just that ever since her debut album, *Who Is Jill Scott? Words and Sounds Vol. 1*, came out last summer, fans had been surprising her at her door. Number two, she needed to get her driver's license. Growing up in North Philly, Scott always relied on public transportation to get around. But the last time she'd hopped aboard a bus, everyone had stared—drinking in her familiar robust figure and pert nose, those lips framing her megawatt smile—and then accosted her for autographs. Scott had stumbled off at the wrong stop, shaken by the realization that SEPTA wasn't an option anymore.

So, that was the plan. Three weeks, two errands. Simple, right?

Not quite. Once in Philly, Scott's schedule developed a mind of its own. Her homecoming performance at the Tower Theater blossomed into a two-night engagement. A video shoot for her next single swallowed up a weekend. A gig in Colorado swept her away for the better part of a week. Even a press conference at Scott's elementary school, commemorating her donation of computers, took

an entire afternoon. On top of that, she was spending late nights in Old City's A Touch of Jazz studio, laying down tracks for her next album. She was also on deadline, penning a *New York Times* article in tribute to her hero, Aretha Franklin. Oh, right—then there were rehearsals for her VHI *Divas Live* concert alongside Aretha. Immediately after that concert, Scott's so-called respite would be over; she'd be jetting off for a month-long jaunt as the opening act for Sting's North American tour.

"I know, I know," Jill Scott murmurs into the phone from South Philly hair salon Duafet, getting her hair braided two days before leaving to record *Divas Live*. "These are *luxury* problems." They're the sorts of problems that arise when your album emerges from nowhere to go platinum and earn three Grammy nominations. Once known simply as the woman who wrote the hook for the Roots' 1999 smash "You Got Me"—and whose voice on that song was famously replaced by Erykah Badu's—Scott, 29, is now heralded as a leader of the "neo-soul" movement, along with heavyweights Macy Gray and Badu herself. Audiences have been captivated by her organic blend of funk, hip-hop, jazz, R&B and the spoken word, a sound that alternately soothes and stirs. Anchored by Scott's no-nonsense honesty yet buoyed by her emotional range, *Who Is Jill Scott?* is an intensely personal album that has connected with listeners—so deeply that some fans rush right up to her for a hug and a good cry.

No wonder fame has Jill Scott taken aback. "I didn't realize how much it all changes," she recounts in her soft, melodic voice. "I was a little unnerved by it at first. I'd go to the market and draw a crowd, and I was like, 'Hey, it's the same old me!'" Her dilemma is the classic struggle of the newly minted star: figuring out how to live in the public eye while preserving some privacy. But in Scott's case, the stakes are especially high, for her earthiness is a crucial part of her musical appeal. Now that she has rocketed from Neighborhood Girl to Next Big Thing, life has become a matter of making it all gel: how to rub elbows with Chris Rock, share a stage with Sting, appreciate the glitz and the glamour of it all, and *still* make it down to the DMV for that driver's test.

THE FADING ROWHOME WHERE JILL Scott grew up sits near the intersection of 23rd and Lehigh, in a dingy part of North Philly often described as a ghetto. It's also a community that can, when it chooses, act as intimately as a family, with neighbors keeping an eye on each others'

kids, old folks greeting passersby from porches, and men sweeping up in front of their houses before work. On this close-knit block of 23rd Street, the Scott home was a cozy, feminine one, with three generations of women living under one roof. (Jill's father was absent during her childhood, and an abusive stepfather whom she prefers not to discuss disappeared when she was five.) Her mother, Joyce Scott, managed to make ends meet through her mastery of odd jobs: sewing, plumbing, doing hair, cooking, refurbishing furniture. Together, Scott's mother and grandmother—both of whom still proudly reside in that rowhome—made their house a haven for Jill, an only child.

Jill Scott was born to sing. Just ask her mom. Joyce Scott always dreamed of becoming a singer herself, but there was one minor problem: "I can't hold a note," she admits with a laugh. But when it became evident that young Jill possessed musical skill, Joyce wasn't surprised: Clear-

Crying as she headed home after her last college class, Jill Scott prayed for her life's direction to reveal itself. As if in answer, her phone rang as she walked in the door.

ly, by sheer dint of will, she had passed her dreams along in the womb.

As a bright, outgoing girl in fluffy pig-tails, Jill Scott was captivated by both words and music. She was an early reader, at age six gathering the neighborhood kids onto the porch to hear her present Bible stories aloud. And for as long as she can remember, she would make up songs, as much for the pleasure of wordplay as for the melodies. Those songs, however, were performed strictly in secret. "I'd put on shows in my room—didn't want *anybody* to hear me sing," Scott says with a laugh. "My mother and grandmother would crunch up by the door to listen, and I'd get so mad!" Stretching her budget, Joyce did whatever she could to encourage her daughter. She provided a canvas to satisfy Jill's fleeting interest in painting, and even bought her a violin, which Jill played for one year. Joyce also indulged Jill's appetite for records, delivering Stevie Wonder, Manhattan Transfer, Barbra Streisand, Mozart, Gershwin and *The Wiz* on demand. Little Jill looked adorable as she danced and sang along, but inside, she was

churning with thought.

"Two revelations really hit me, listening to those albums," Scott recalls. "One was: Don't walk around thinking you're cute, 'cause you could fall and break your nose. Second was: Don't mimic anybody. Be who you are. If they like it, they like it. But do it *your way*." Her budding artist's outlook solidified in eighth grade at the Albert M. Greenfield school, when she was assigned a report on poetry. She randomly chose to write about Nikki Giovanni, and was shocked to discover that the poet, whom she had assumed was Italian, was an African-American woman. From then on—through her years at Girls' High, then as an education major at Temple—Scott always carried a notebook to organize her thoughts into verse.

Those verses, Scott found, tugged at her attention far more urgently than her college classes. In her junior year, she abruptly quit school. Crying as she headed home after her last class, Scott prayed for her life's direction to reveal itself. As if in answer, her phone rang as she walked in the door; it was a friend urging her to audition for an internship at the Walnut Street Theatre. She did, and was accepted. She spent the next year learning to act and, deliriously excited by the dramatic arts, followed up with an internship with the Arden Theatre. Scott began reading her poetry at the October Gallery, entering contests at the Uptown Theater, singing at Blue Moon Jazz club, and showing up anywhere there was an open mike. With each gig, she was developing her gentle voice into a truly musical instrument, rich with expression and cadence. "I love it when Jill speaks," says Ahmir "Questlove" Thompson of the Roots. "She has the most soothing, motherly voice this side of June Cleaver."

Thompson first saw Scott perform at a poetry slam at a West Philadelphia community center. As the members of the audience watched the bare stage expectantly, they were surprised by a woman's voice emanating from the back of the room. Scott was sauntering down the aisle, singing: "Every time I close my eyes, I wake up feeling so horny. ..." The crowd snickered; she was singing Jodeci's ridiculously cheesy R&B hit "Freeek'n You." But in Scott's care, it became a sensual fusion of song and spoken word, leaving the listeners rapt.

Before long, Scott joined a collective of artists who gathered weekly in Thompson's living room to jam until the wee hours—a soiree they dubbed "Black Lily." The intimate event attracted musicians, rappers and spoken-word artists from all over the city, and served as an incubator for a new generation of Philadelphia artists—Eve, Bilal, Beanie Sigel, Ursula Rucker. Eventually, by

popular demand, Black Lily moved to the Five Spot, where it remains a hallowed weekly event.

For Scott, Black Lily served as yet another place to expand her reputation, and sure enough, opportunities began opening up. She snagged a part in the touring cast of the hit musical *Rent*. She also met record producer "Jazzy" Jeff Townes, through a mutual friend, and began frequenting his Touch of Jazz Studio in Old City, eventually singing on Will Smith's album *Willennium* as well as on the soundtracks to *Wild Wild West*, *In Too Deep* and *The Wood*. Her friendship with Townes came in handy in other ways. When she needed a dress for a friend's wedding but was low on cash, Scott persuaded Townes to hire her to redecorate the studio lobby. "It didn't need it, but he let me do it," she recalls with a chuckle.

One night, the Roots invited Scott to their studio to help with some songwriting for their fourth album, *Things Fall Apart*. She presented the band with a tape of herself ad-libbing a hypnotic chorus: "If you are worried about where I've been or who I saw/ Or what club I went to with my homies/ Baby don't worry, you know that you got me." The Roots went straight to work on the song. "I knew instantly that we had our first hit," says Thompson. "I guess [record label] MCA was on fire about it, too, so much so that they were like, 'Let's get a bigger person to sing the hook!'" Hoping to guarantee the single's success, MCA insisted that Scott be replaced by the better-known Badu. "You Got Me" became one of 1999's most ubiquitous hits, launching the Roots from obscurity and winning them a Grammy for Best Rap Performance.

Jill Scott, feeling rather left out as she watched the Grammy telecast at the Trocadero, tried to take it in stride: "The first song you ever wrote won a Grammy, so stop trippin'!" She had nothing to worry about, having already been snapped up by then-new record label Hidden Beach, whose lead investor is Michael Jordan. "We were starting this label as a home for innovative artists who don't want to be confined in one box," says Hidden Beach founder Steve McKeever. "Jill personified what we were here to do." Scott hurried into the Touch of Jazz Studio—whose lobby she had polyurethaned to perfection—to begin working on her album with Jazzy Jeff.

Who Is Jill Scott? came together in a gush of creativity, swooping from driving funk to dreamy ballads to the airy ad-libbing of jazz. Scott's lyrics brimmed with themes basic and true—identity, vulnerability, sensuality, jealousy, hurt, pride—and freely furnished details about her life, from what she eats for breakfast (toast, two scrambled eggs, grits) to her soul connection with her

fiancé, graphic artist and DJ Lyzel Williams, whom she honors outright in "He Loves Me (Lyzel in E Flat)." The album's honest, personal nature made it stand out from the booty-call ditties climbing the R&B charts. Hidden Beach knew it was onto something good and rushed *Who Is Jill Scott?* to stores after a deliberately understated ad campaign. Says Steve McKeever, "The album spoke for itself. We knew it was gonna be big." But no one, certainly not Scott herself, had a clue just how big it would be.

JILL SCOTT WASN'T SURE HOW TO explain the otherworldly feeling that came over her each time she appeared onstage; she just went with it. Backed by an eight-piece band, she poured herself into each performance, richly rewarding fans packing venues throughout the U.S. and Europe. She created new variations of each song, bursting from her unadorned vocal style into downright operatic riffs. She deliv-

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ered monologues that were hilarious, serious, raunchy and moving, but always, ultimately, positive. "I want you all to know, it's real," she'd sing after an account of her bumbling search for love, flashing her engagement ring and sometimes wiping away tears. "Love is reeeal!" After emptying herself to an audience and taking her final bows, she would lurch blindly offstage, unable to see for a minute or so. Occasionally she would lose herself in a performance so completely that she would leave her body altogether, with no recollection afterward of what she'd said or done.

The concerts left her exhausted, but there was no time to pause. *Who Is Jill Scott?* had been selling so quickly that Hidden Beach had to press more copies within a couple of months. Scott's first two singles, the easy-flowing "Gettin' in the Way," and the joyous love song "A Long Walk," were getting serious airplay. Grateful for the positive reception, she tried to keep up with the grueling schedule. But inevitably, the pace took its toll. One frightening morning, she awoke to find she could barely hear out of her right ear. Doctors diagnosed it as "sudden deaf-

ness syndrome," brought on by stress and air travel, and ordered her to rest. Scott recovered, but the experience was a potent warning. "I decided that because I give so much, I need to do things to stay in touch with myself," she says firmly. "When I'm tired, I need to sleep. When I'm confused and upset and I need to cry, I cry."

As the week of the 2001 Grammy nominations approached, Scott tried to keep that lesson in mind. On the day they were to be announced, with expectations and tensions running high, she boarded a plane, alone, for Jamaica. "I knew my life was changing, and I needed to cry a little bit, by myself," she recalls. "I needed to pray and get grounded. 'Cause some shit was about to go down, and I wanted to be as prepared as possible." While she was on hiatus, Lyzel Williams called with the incredible news: She'd been nominated for three Grammys—Best Female R&B Vocal, Best R&B Song, and Best New Artist. Upon her return to the States, Scott found that she couldn't help but get swept up in the hype. Everyone was telling her she was the favorite: "I'm at Rite Aid buying my tampons, and I'm hearing, 'Oh yeah, girl, you gonna win at least two!'"

On Grammy night, February 21, 2001, Jill Scott appeared on the Staples Center stage before the biggest crowd she'd ever faced, performing with techno star Moby and, oddly, the Blue Man Group. They were a motley crew—Moby bald-headed and in jeans, three guys running around in face paint, and, in the center of it all, a regal-looking Scott aglitter with jewels. When the song, Moby's "Natural Blues," ended and the crowd leaped to its feet, Jill Scott flung her arms out wide, face radiant with pride. Immediately afterward, it was time for the Best New Artist award. With all the buildup, the winner seemed clear. And Scott wanted it—she could admit it to herself now. As pop stars Shakira and Richie Sambora announced the nominees—and as, in the audience, Steve McKeever and Jazzy Jeff held tightly to Joyce Scott's hands—Jill Scott stood onstage, beaming, waiting for what was hers.

And then she lost.

"I WAS SHOCKED, DEFINITELY SHOCKED that I didn't win," Scott says quietly. "I can't pretend it didn't hurt." She wasn't the only one surprised. Even though, just to be on the safe side, Hidden Beach had dubbed its Grammy after-party "Win Lose or Draw," no one *actually* thought Scott would lose all three categories. But once her friends, family and associates gathered at the party, they discovered they were in a celebratory mood after all—it was such a relief to have the whole thing over with. "We rocked like Al Gore did after *he* lost," says Steve

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McKeever, laughing. And while the loss stung, Scott came to realize that perhaps a taste of defeat was what she needed. "It snapped me back into reality," she admits.

Of course, it helps to have Scott's version of reality, one in which she's belting out "Freeway of Love" beside Aretha Franklin, then flying off to rendezvous with Sting. She's also working on her next album, a collection of children's songs called *Brown Baby Lullabies*, inspired by the birth of her new godchild—an unexpected choice for her follow-up, but Scott likes to keep people guessing. In fact, she wonders if she might abandon her singing career altogether, since, she explains, "My spirit is *not* the kind that stays with one thing." Ever a neighborhood girl, she speaks of wanting to return to Philadelphia and fulfill a dream she's had since her days at Temple—to run her own public school. She feels indebted to the neighborhood where she grew up—grateful for the grit that helped make her who she is—and wants to repay the community that nourished her. Jill Scott pictures her school as a colorful, magical place where kids would be encouraged and made to feel special.

So yes, Jill Scott plans on staying in Philadelphia, which is why she's adamant about being allowed to lead a regular life here. Just a few nights before her April hairdressing appointment, she pleaded with the Tower Theater audience: "I've got a single request for you. I'd like to keep Philly my home. So when you see me on the street, just say, 'Hey, Jill, what's up?' I want to keep on *living*. So I can keep on working for you." The crowd roared its agreement.

Thus, in the wake of that concert, when Jill Scott was given an afternoon break a few days before *Divas Live*, she decided to risk it: She would go shopping in Center City, just like any ordinary Philly resident might. But how to get there from her Fairmount home? She couldn't drive, since she hadn't had the time to get her license. Hiring a driver seemed silly. And she's not the type to call a cab. So with some trepidation, Jill Scott waited on the corner for the bus and—without oversized sunglasses, without a broad-brimmed hat hiding her famous face—climbed aboard.

"I actually did it!" she exclaims happily from her salon chair, breaking into a singsong. "I caught the bus, I went downtown, went to the bank, went to the market and bought chicken. I was just Jill, going shopping. Nobody noticed. It was beautiful," she trumpets. "Beeeeeautiful!"

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