
The Quiet Power of a Drama Queen

Janet Jackson speaks candidly about her life, her career and her causes in *Instinct's* gay press exclusive

BY • MIKE WOOD

TO HEAR HER SPEAK you wouldn't think Janet Jackson was a Grammy-winning, Oscar-nominated superstar. Her soft voice belies the fact that she is a triple-threat powerhouse (actress, singer, philanthropist) and burgeoning author. She has become an icon—not just for the gay community—but for millions of fans worldwide. When I tell her that she will be only the fourth female to appear solo on *Instinct's* cover in our 13-year history, she takes it in and sounds slightly shocked if not humbled. "My goodness. Wow. That's such an honor for me. It's a very sweet thing to be looked at with such esteem by the gay community."

Ms. Jackson humbled by little old *Instinct*? Girl, please! What's not to love, right? She's gracious, she's gorgeous and she is a true friend to the LGBT community and our causes. Janet is a pop goddess and actress who doesn't even mind being called a diva. "It doesn't have negative connotation for me," she says during our exclusive gay press interview, "It really doesn't."

Her voice is so slight and so tender you might think

her too timid to speak her mind, but make no mistake, Janet Jackson has a lot to say. And although she leads a very private life—despite tabloids' attempts to keep her in the public eye—she wants to be heard on items that matter to her most. She also isn't afraid to let her defenses down when taking on emotionally charged roles, like those in a pair of 2010 films where she says she had to draw from her past and her own pain to do her best work.

"I took a break from music, and I went back home, I guess you could say, to my acting. I just dove in this year," she says. Dive in indeed. Her formidable performances in this year's *Why Did I Get Married Too?* and *For Colored Girls* currently have Oscar's tongue wagging. The first for Janet's original song, "Nothing," (she was nominated before for *Poetic Justice's* original song "Again" in 1993), but it's the latter film's accolades she's receiving for her acting that might surprise most because the pop sensation could find herself sitting in the Kodak Theatre in February 2011 nominated for Best Actress.

"I want to really let people know that acting is

PHOTO: TIM FALLEN



something I'm very serious about. I think a lot of people think, 'Oh, she's just doing this for fun. Janet will just take this acting job over there.' But, no. It's something that I really, truly love. And it was my first love."

She may be known by most for her music, but the multi-hyphenate star confides that the stage and screen are held closest to her heart. "It's what I started doing first. People think I started singing first, but I didn't. I was acting first. I didn't sing professionally until I was 14, and I did *Good Times* when I was 10."

Janet has come a long way since her adorably precocious days on *Good Times*. Her tour-de-force roles in both 2010 films show her range and a real willingness on her part to dig deep to tap into her own raw emotions. She sees this as therapeutic for her as a person and necessary as an actor. "It's cathartic for me," she admits. "You have to be willing to show your vulnerabilities. If you really want to take this seriously as an actor, I don't see how you could do it without doing that."

Her role in *For Colored Girls* came to her while she was least expecting it, and in fact, she was admittedly oblivious to the fact that the film's director, Tyler Perry, had ulterior motives when he invited her to a performance of the play the film is based on (*For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When The Rainbow Is Enuf*) while the two were in Atlanta. "I remembered it from when I was a kid, but I never went to see it," Janet says. "So Tyler invited me to see the play and we talked about it, and I just thought it was two friends hanging out, you know...go to a play, take the night off...and then he told me *after the play* that they wanted him to direct this film, one based on the play. And I said, 'Well, that's cool' and he said, 'Well, you know if I do this, I want you as one of the characters.'"

Janet remembers being taken off-guard, a bit excited, a little nervous, but ultimately all in a good way. "I looked at him and I said, 'Is that why you invited me out? I thought you just wanted to hang out?'" Her soft laugh permeates the memory as she retells it.

"He said he didn't know which character just yet, but then [months later] he had written the script and he decided he wanted me to be Red. And that's how it all started."

I ask her if she saw herself as Red when she sat with Perry in that theater in Atlanta to watch the show, and she becomes uncharacteristically loud but her laugh still soft. "No, I wasn't even thinking in those terms at all. I was just sitting there watching, enjoying this play!"

Despite what some in LGBT circles considered a controversial plot point in the film concerning the stigma of African-American men on the down low, HIV and homophobia in the black community, the gays lined up in droves with our best girlfriends—as did the rest of the country—to see *For Colored Girls* when it opened in early November 2010. The film grossed almost \$20 million in its first weekend (recouping nearly the entirety of its \$21 million budget). What the gay audience might relate to in a film primarily about the female, African-American experience may not be immediately apparent, but Janet is quick to point out that these characters' stories may not be all that different than those in all our lives. "I think these characters are just so interesting. They're really diverse women

"There's nothing to be ashamed of. To not be able to be your true you is heartbreaking. You should never hide who you are."

and I think you—I think everyone—will find somebody that you know there even if you don't find yourself. And it's intense."

And all that Oscar buzz? Janet's pause is the longest it's been in this interview. "You know, I don't pay attention."

"It'll make you crazy if you do, right?" I lead her on.

"Exactly!" she agrees with an exalted breath. "It really does. I think it's cool. It's very, very cool, but that's as far as I'll let myself go with it. I let it go after that. I mean, yes,

wouldn't it be great? Yeah, it'd be great. But I can't focus on that at all."

What Janet does want to focus on is her commitment to LGBT causes. The eerily serendipitous title of the play her latest film is based on (*For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When The Rainbow Is Enuf*) turns our conversation to this past fall's tragedies of gay youth going beyond the consideration of suicide and following through with taking their own lives. "My heart might relate to in a film primarily about the female, African-American experience may not be immediately apparent, but Janet is quick to point out that these characters' stories may not be all that different than those in all our lives. "I think these characters are just so interesting. They're really diverse women

Janet goes on to talk about a former makeup artist she worked with who familiarized the star with the Trevor Project and its work to help gay or questioning youth who might be confused or contemplating suicide. "What a beautiful thing," she says simply. "What a beautiful thing to have a place where you can go where you can truly be yourself. Not be judged. Not be bullied. Not be teased. Any of that. To really connect."

Janet has connected with the gay community on so many levels—through her music and through her philanthropic efforts with organizations like AIDS Project Los Angeles and amFAR. She has received numerous awards from our community including the Human Rights Campaign's 2005 Humanitarian Award and GLAAD's Vanguard Award in 2008 for increasing the visibility and understanding of the LGBT community in mass media. She has always been vocal about her support for AIDS advocacy groups and has been a dedicated spokesperson on our behalf, but she knows our work is not done when it comes to HIV/AIDS education. "I think we need more and more people talking about it. And we need it from people that we look up to, that kids look up to. And not just people in the entertainment business or athletes, but people in the communities."

She knows it's important to put a face to the cause—and not just a famous face. "I think it takes going to your friends and saying, 'Look, we need your help. This is what's truly going on. You don't have to be gay. A lot of people think you have to be gay in order for [HIV/AIDS] to affect you. And you don't. It can affect anyone. It can affect you.' We need as many people as possible talking about this, and talking about it openly, to make a difference."



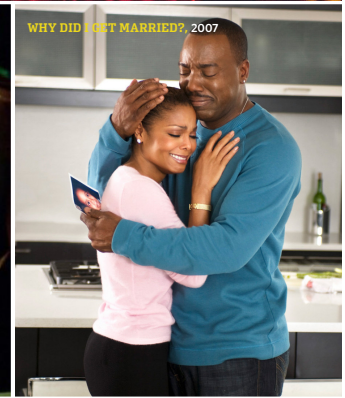
NUTTY PROFESSOR II, 2000



FOR COLORED GIRLS, 2010



POETIC JUSTICE, 1993



WHY DID I GET MARRIED?, 2007



GOOD TIMES, 1977



WHY DID I GET MARRIED TOO?, 2010

Janet's music has made a difference in the lives of millions of fans and she's moved generations of them—both literally and figuratively—for three decades with her messages about homophobia, female empowerment (yes, we gays can relate), and racial and gender equality. She wrote her 1997 song "Together Again" to honor and celebrate her friends who died from AIDS (the track's proceeds were donated to amFAR); the song was a huge hit and it quickly became an anthem for the AIDS movement in our community. "There's one thing that definitely stays the same [in my music] and it's my feelings about racism and prejudice. That's something that will always remain important for me to talk about."

Does this mean we can anticipate a new Janet album on the horizon?

"Next year I've decided to take some time to get back to my music," she says. "Exactly when, I don't know. But I will make some time."

As a multi-hyphenate singer-performer-actress-author one has to wonder if her passions are changing over time, or if one field calls to her most. She laughs and admits she likes to concentrate on one thing at a time whenever possible. "I've really never been a multi-tasker...but I've had to become more and more of a multi-tasker. I have no choice in this day and age, right?"

Up next is her first foray into the literary world with her debut title, *True You* (January 2011), a nutrition and self-help book that delves into her personal struggles with weight and self-esteem. But why did the very private Janet decide to write this book, and why now? "People wanted to know how I did it. That's the long and the short of it. And not just the nutrition aspect of it but I really get into what the issue stemmed from to begin with, which is going back into my childhood. I wanted kids who have similar issues to be able to pick up this book because it talks about self-esteem, which was a big part of it for me. And for them to be able to relate and to know they can open up—I kept things inside—and talk. That's the best way to go about it."

She reflects back to our earlier

conversation about the gay teen suicides: "It's like the same thing in your community. Those kids who took their own lives kept all that bottled up inside. They need to open up. They need to have someone they can go to and feel safe and speak about how they're feeling and not feel ashamed in any way. There's nothing to be your true you is heartbreaking. You should never hide who you are."

Janet has often had to hide—from the paparazzi's lens—and shield herself from the spotlight when its glare has become too harsh. Growing up in a famous family has come with its own set of perils, and controversy and scandal have often plagued the star. There was her then-controversial *Rolling Stone* cover in 1993 when two hands (her then husband's) were all that covered her breasts; years later there was the infamous 2004 Super Bowl "incident," and in 2009 the death of her brother, Michael.

When the limelight feels too intrusive, Janet tries to escape from the pressure. "I like to get away a great deal," she confides. "I love to go to the islands. I like to be with my family. I love to travel. I love the ocean and being by the water. That relaxes me. And that allows my mind to relax, for me to truly think," she says sweetly, calmly.

I ask her to pretend she's by the ocean and to think of the one thing—just one thing—she wants to say to her gay fans.

"That's not fair," she laughs. "There are so many things. Okay, as corny as it sounds, but it's the truth: peace. Peace in this world. Peace for them. For bigotry and all that ugliness to go away."

I ask my last question: "Do you have a New Year's resolution? If so, Janet, what is it?"

"I really haven't thought about that yet. I'm sorry to say that to you," she says sincerely. But then she comes back, "Well, for me, there's one that's constant every year, and that's that I'm always trying to be a better person."

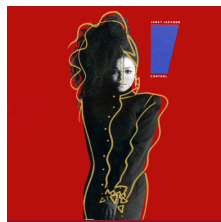
A great resolution for us all for sure. But, we've got no complaints. We'll take our ally and our diva, Ms. Jackson, just the way she is.



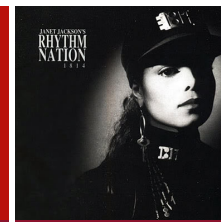
JANET JACKSON, 1982



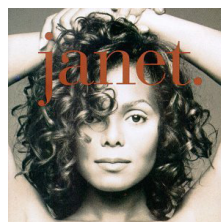
DREAM STREET, 1984



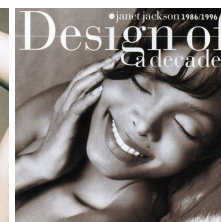
CONTROL, 1986



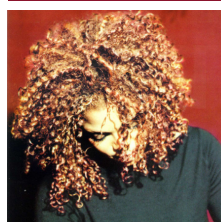
RHYTHM NATION 1814, 1989



JANET, 1993



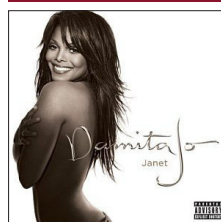
DESIGN OF A DECADE, 1995



THE VELVET ROPE, 1997



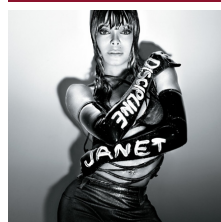
ALL FOR YOU, 2001



DAMITA JO, 2004



20 Y.O., 2006



DISCIPLINE, 2008



NUMBER ONES, 2009