

JA'S RULE: "I'll never forget what he said: 'When this becomes a chore, then you know it's time to reevaluate.' Luckily, it's still fun for me."

ashanti

Find out why this hip-hop princess isn't ready to be an independent woman just yet.

By Lauren Brown Photographs by Michael Wirth

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here are three things you should know about singer Ashanti Douglas. First, to her close friends and family, she's Shani.

Second, she talks about her life in two chapters—life before and life after she became "Ashanti." Third (and this is the single most important thing to know about this 24-year-old from Glen Cove, New York), her enormous, close-knit family is *always* around her—and if you want to get to know Ashanti, you'd better make nice with them. That's exactly what I realize the instant I step into Ashanti's trailer outside the Brookhaven Amphitheater in Farmingville, New York, where she was performing in September. *Dozens* of family members pop in and out—I meet her mom; dad; little sister, Shia; Aunt Mimi; and cousins Quinn and Rahmel. "A lot of my family is actually in the crowd," Ashanti tells me, explaining why I was introduced to so few of them! (*Few??*) "They like to see from the audience." But her family isn't just hanging around to provide moral support: Ashanti's cousin Quinn, for example, doubles as her assistant, while her mom, Tina, is also her manager—or *Momager*, as the nameplate around her neck declares. "The music industry is the most dirty, grimy, backstabbing, shark-eating industry to be in," Ashanti explains. "You have to surround yourself with ➔

genuine people that are going to look out for you and your well-being." Immediately it becomes clear that that's just what her family does: While we're hanging out backstage, I overhear Tina telling the family about Ashanti winning the part of Dorothy in the *Muppets' Wonderful Wizard of Oz* movie. "The role was supposed to go to Hilary Duff, but Shani went in to the audition and she just nailed it!" her mom says proudly. The family cheers with such excitement that I can't help but be proud of Ashanti for getting the part, too.

It was only three years ago that Shani went from being the girl who sang the hooks on Ja Rule's "Always on Time" and Fat Joe's "What's Luv?" to being Ashanti, the full-fledged star who put out two number-one albums back-to-back and won eight Billboard Music Awards, as well as a 2002 Grammy. On December 7, Ashanti will release her third album, *Concrete Rose*. But this time, she's dealing with a lot more pressure to succeed in an industry where the competition is fierce. It's no secret that Beyoncé Knowles, who won five Grammys in 2004, is now hip-hop's it girl, having effectively overthrown Ashanti's reign—and the new Destiny's Child album is being released about the same time as Ashanti's. "It's definitely a healthy competition, and I think it's motivating everyone to create hot music," Ashanti explains nonchalantly, showing that she's not worried about reclaiming her princess status. "I never went through an insecurity state, solely because I have such a strong family," she says. "My mom is one of those moms who says 'You're perfect, everything is perfect—nothing's wrong with you!'" Without missing a beat, Tina, who's standing right by us and listening to our conversation, chimes in: "Shani, you're perfect!"

all in the family

After Ashanti's performance, I expect to chat with her in private. But privacy with her is a privilege, and magazine writers like me don't know Ashanti or her family well enough to have earned that. So Tina suggests that I ride in the limo with them to finish my interview. When I mention my concern that Ashanti won't be able to talk as openly with nine relatives practically sitting on our laps, Tina swears it won't be a problem: "Anything you can ask Shani alone, you can ask in front of us!" she insists. "Hell, we can probably *answer* for her!"

Tina has always been heavily involved in nearly every aspect of Ashanti's life. But, her daughter explains, it used to be because she wanted to make sure Ashanti didn't get into trouble. "Oh, my gosh! My friends called her Five-O—that's the street term for the police!" Ashanti laughs. "Everyone knew my mom was overprotective—she used to do crazy things! . . . She'd show up at parties I went to. One time I was dancing with this guy, and I'm like getting my groove on, and here she comes! I look up, and she's got *my* clothes on, like a hat and jeans, so she was kind of fitting in, and I was like,

'Oh, my God!' And everybody was like, 'That's Five-O! Ashanti's mom is here!'" she recalls, with a giggle.

And when it comes to dating, the stories get even better! "Oh, she was so embarrassing," Ashanti says. "I remember I had this one boyfriend. I was 15 and he was like 16, and he had just got a car, and she would not let me ride with him in that car because she didn't think he could drive," she explains. "So she got in the car with him and just said, 'Drive! I wanna see how he can drive.' And I was so embarrassed. I was standing in front of my door like, 'Oh, no, she *didn't* just get in the car with him and leave.' I was scared at what she was saying to him—it was so crazy!"

Her mom's overprotectiveness when it comes to Ashanti's love life may explain why Ashanti is vague when I ask about her current dating situation. "To be honest," Ashanti says, "I've only had two boyfriends that I think were serious. The last one definitely sticks out. I thought I was in love—I probably was." She also makes it clear that there isn't any guy in her life right now—but that when she does start dating again, she wants it to be someone who's in the music business. "It's a little bit easier to date guys in the industry because they're not after your money," she explains. Then, just one day after she told me she hadn't had a boyfriend in two years, I read in a *New York Post* gossip column that Ashanti is dating Nelly! Although her reps deny it and will only confirm that they're friends, if it is true, she probably didn't divulge it because she's learned from past experience with her family to keep the men in her life on the down-low.

business arrangement

Even if Tina doesn't know every detail about Ashanti's love life, she's still watching out for her daughter—as her manager. "My mom plays hardball," Ashanti says. "You know, you don't expect certain things to come out of a pretty lady's mouth, but she's got to handle all that business—and it's all about not being walked on."

After an evening with the Douglas family, I truly understand why Ashanti is so tied to them that she still lives with them at the age of 24. (But when she tells me that, Tina quickly interjects, "Correction! We live with *her*. Our old house could fit in the living room of her new one.") As I get out of the car, Tina asks Ashanti's cousin Rahmel to walk with me. I insist that I'm okay on my own, but Tina is having none of it. And as Rahmel escorts me to my door, I realize just how nice it actually feels to have someone looking out for me—whether I think I need it or not. 17

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