

SPECIAL HOLIDAY EDITION UPDATES ON HAIR & BEAUTY

BLACK ELEGANCE

BE

Lifestyles Of Today's Black Woman

PATTI LABELLE
PUTTING HER
BEST FOOTWEAR
FORWARD

VANESSA WILLIAMS OF

SOUL FOOD

HER RECIPES FOR
SUCCESS, LOVE, & LIFE

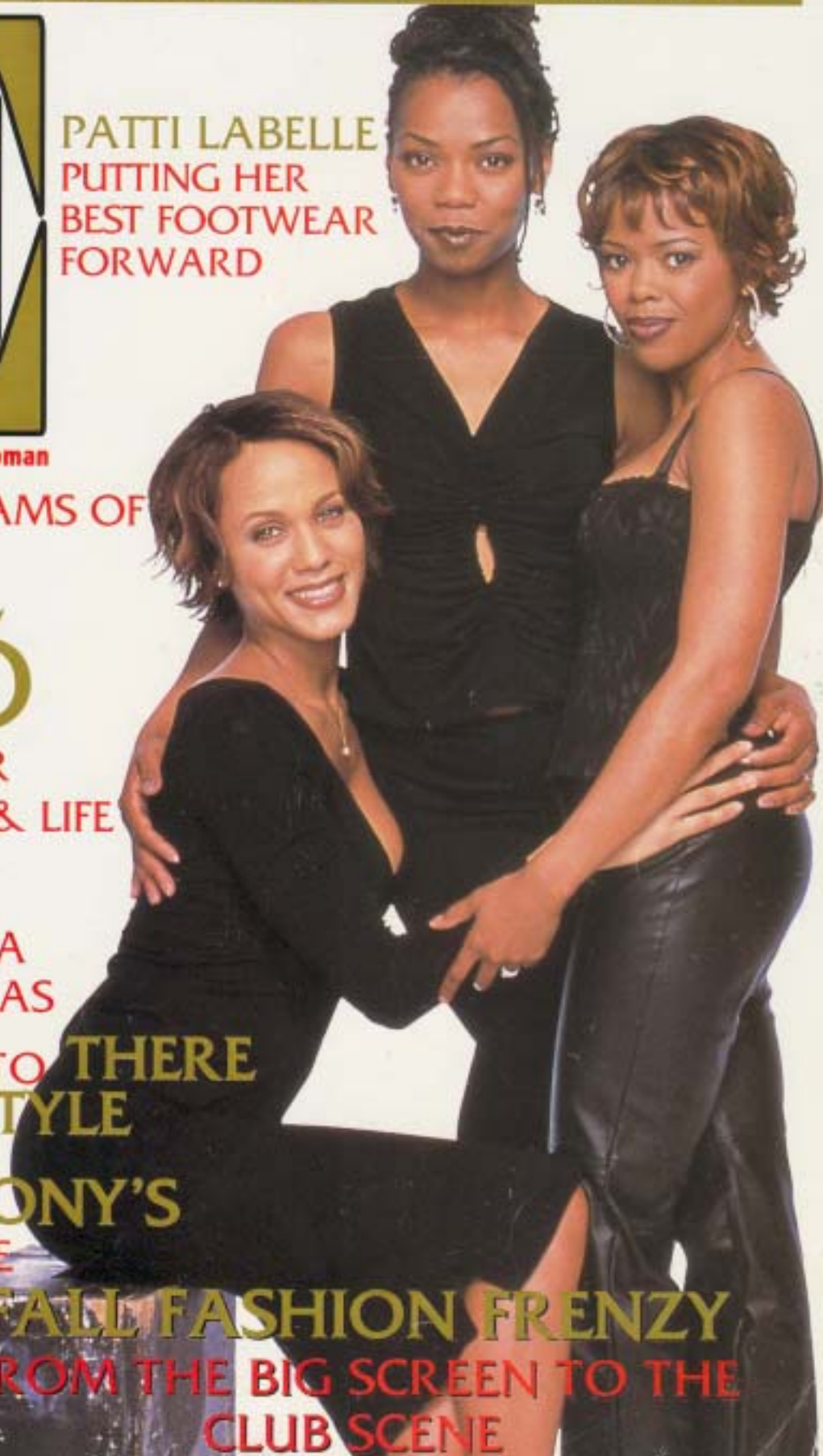
12 DAYS OF A
SEXY CHRISTMAS

FROM HAIR TO THERE
GET SET FOR STYLE

FLO ANTHONY'S
CELEBRITY SCENE



FALL FASHION FRENZY
FROM THE BIG SCREEN TO THE
CLUB SCENE



BE CLOSEUP vanessa williams

ONE SOULFUL LADY


By Lisa Degnen

Vanessa Williams is an actress whose star is definitely skyrocketing. She recently earned her third NAACP Image Award nomination for her role as spirited "Maxine" on Showtime's *Soul Food* - the highest rated show on that cable network. On TV, she first came to fame as the first (and only) African American lead on *Melrose Place*. From there, she landed a stint as the ambitious "Dr. Grace Carr" on *Chicago Hope*. Beyond her small-screen successes, Williams has also maintained a rather happening film career, appearing in such movies as *Candy Man*, *D.R.O.P. Squad* and *New Jack City*. This year she'll be seen in the romantic comedy, *Punks*, which focuses on four friends... all gay men. The talented and beautiful actress plays the unsuspecting girlfriend of one of the male characters who discovers that he has a preference for men. Now add to the mix, the original songs and poetry she is writing for her debut album, and it becomes obvious why Vanessa Williams is one of the most sought after young talents in the business.

With such a busy career, one might think that Williams simply wouldn't have time to be like her character - the heart and soul of a family. Not true, says the 32-year-old actress. "Family is everything to me and I think this show helps me stay connected to that part of myself."

Williams is married to manager/producer Andre Wiseman and is the mother of a four-year-old son, Omar. Family has always been an important part of her life, mainly because she came close to losing it. Born and raised in New York City, Williams' young life was thrown into turmoil when, at the age of ten, her single-mother died of cancer.





the cast of
soul food

Vanessa and her three brothers went to live with their maternal grandmother. "It's hard to explain", she says with tears in her eyes, "you can heal, but you can never quite recover. In a lot of ways I am still close to that 10-year old girl. You never completely feel grounded. I can't just call up my mom whenever I want to and that's never easy. I think when you are an adult, you know people who have died and while it's never easy to lose a parent at any age, it's easier to understand. But as a kid, you can't really fathom what's going on. When my mom first went into the hospital, I remember thinking how fun it would be visiting her there. I miss her so much."

During this season, Williams is particularly touched by cherished memories. "My mother died in March and the last Christmas before that, she was in the hospital," she remembers. "I have written a story about how extraordinary my grandmother was. My mother was so sick that my grandmother sat all of us down and explained that Santa just wasn't going to come to our house that year. So, we went to bed that night kind of sad. The next morning I said to my brother, 'you know, let's go and check anyway. Maybe he came after all'. And when we went into the living room, there were toys for all of us. Somehow, my grandmother managed to pull Christmas out of a hat for all of us. It's a very special memory for me. We took our gifts over to the hospital to show them to my mom. We set up a little tree for her there. I think about her a lot this time of year."

Now that she, too, is a mother, Williams is busy making holiday memories for her own child. "I am a holiday person, that's for sure," she says with a laugh. "I always throw a big Kwanzaa party. The last one was in my new

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house in Los Angeles and I had a big tree in the house - which of course I discarded ecologically."

"My son was in such joy", she continues. "We decorated the tree together and it was really creative and fun. I let him put things on that he liked, so we'd string up Legos and Hot Wheel cars next to those beautiful bulbs I got at the half price sale at Blooming's last year."

The cast also becomes an extended part of her family around the holidays. "I love that I finally have sisters!" she says of her castmates. Because everyone tends to be away from their own families, they will often gather together for special occasions. A devoted vegan for ten

years, (who doesn't eat meat or dairy products), Williams brings creative vegetarian soul food to the table. "I make a great soy duck. I make barbecue and no-bone collard greens." Her husband and son are also vegans, so it's not difficult to stay on track. But Williams admits that around the holidays, it's very hard to resist a good dish of macaroni and cheese. "The soy cheese isn't always as good as the real thing and sometimes I'll just have to have a little bit."

Williams says she loves that Maxine is the one who holds the family together on the show. The cast is overwhelmed by hundreds of grateful letters from fans who connect with its storylines.

"I think people were hungry for a show

like this," says Vanessa, who is also a spokesperson for The March of Dimes. "I think it shows a complex depiction of my life and the lives of a lot of African Americans. Last season, there was a lot of discussion of sexuality and it was interesting because I didn't see a lot of that growing up. You never saw black people expressing affection on TV - or at least I didn't. I thought that was what white people did. It's so nice to see ourselves portrayed as fully human. And I think that's what's attracting an audience that's not just African American."

"When I saw the *Joy Luck Club*, it made me realize how similar I was in many ways to Asian women. The food and the clothes may be different, but the strug-



gies are the same. I think that is what is attracting people of all races to our show."

"When people recognize me on the street, they are telling me that the show is making them connect more with their own families. They are getting on the phone and calling their own sisters. How much more can you ask than that?"

With fans gaining a renewed appetite for close friends and family, you couldn't possibly ask for more. It sounds like *Soul Food* is hitting the spot.

