

CONFESSIONS OF A CHURCH GROUPIE: Lust and Lies in the Pulpit

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Mo'Nique
talks to **Jill Scott**
about self-love and
her open marriage

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MO'NIQUE'S NEW CHANCE

WITH A SECOND HELPING OF *MO'NIQUE'S F.A.T. CHANCE* AIRING THIS MONTH, TWO NEW BABIES, A COOKBOOK AND A NEW HUSBAND, MO'NIQUE TALKS WITH JILL SCOTT ABOUT HOW SHE'S ABLE TO LIVE LARGE



PHOTOGRAPHY BY GEORGE HOLZ

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HAPPILY EVER AFTER
Mo'Nique was photo-
graphed April 19, 2006,
in Malibu, California.

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ositioned center stage, Mo'Nique Imes is holding court as the curvy revolution is being televised—literally. July 15, the size 18, self-adoring actress, comedian, author, newlywed and mother of three sons (including 9-month-old twins) will crown Miss F.A.T. 2006—that's Fabulous And Thick—on the second two-hour special of *Mo'Nique's F.A.T. Chance* on cable television's Oxygen Network. Part beauty pageant, part self-esteem booster, the celebrity-judged competition, which shattered the channel's all-time ratings record last year, is the latest coup for the Baltimore-born Queen of Comedy, but not the last. Mo'Nique will star in next month's *Beerfest*, a comedy about a secret beer-drinking Olympics within Oktoberfest, and next will lend her voice to *Farce of the Penguins*, a spoof of *March of the Penguins*, the Oscar-winning documentary. She's also adding finishing touches to her carb-loving cookbook, *Skinny Cooks Can't Be Trusted*, due this fall (Amistad/HarperCollins), and to her yet-untitled Judy Blume-esque tween literature series.

For now, though, the thrice-wed 38-year-old is rediscovering love with her best friend, now husband, Sidney Hicks. Mo'Nique and Grammy Award-winning songstress-poet Jill Scott—each an admirer of the other and both fiercely secure in their own beings—recently sat down over lunch at Mo'Nique's San Fernando Valley home. Amid tears, high fives and contagious belly laughs, the two compared notes on the trials and triumphs of success, the delicate state of our community and how they've each learned to love life.

Jill Scott: Mo'Nique, I'm astounded by how you've been doing your royal thing out here in the Valley. You're unabashed about your beauty, your creativity and your talent, and you're unafraid. Are you enjoying the ride?

Mo'Nique: Every second. I've wanted to be famous since I was 3 years old. I've been on this path for a long time, even before the money came. I remember stepping onstage and thinking, *I'm about to tell these jokes and everybody's watching me*. That's my high. I'd do this for free.

Jill: I envy that. When I released my first album, I wasn't expecting anything and was freaked out when the world paid so much attention to me. I knew I was blessed, but I didn't understand why people were passing notes to me through bathroom stalls and showing up at my house. I'm better about getting that kind of attention now, but I wish I'd met you sooner because I really needed a hand.

Mo'Nique: Often we need our own private person for inspiration, and you are that person for me. I've played your song "Golden"

over and over again, and I promised myself that I'd live my life without apologies or regrets. When I look at you, I see myself and I'm proud. You come from such a beautiful place. Even before I saw you the first time, I knew you were a chunky girl. I could hear it in your voice. And then I saw you wearing that bush! [Laughs]

Jill: You must admit that our industry is culturally biased. Now that you've become a brand, how do you maintain and protect yourself from giving in to the pressure?

Mo'Nique: I'm just not buying into what's being sold. I believe that I'm a sex symbol, a movie star and an author. There's no special formula—I just simply believe that I am. And I love us, till the end. When I got the part in *Domino* with Keira Knightley, I had an agent say, "Congratulations. And no more junk!" Translation: no more Black movies. She thought she was validating me, but I take pride in every project I've done. I let her know that she was off the team and that she could send back my 10 percent of "junk" money.

I understand how the industry works, so my pressure doesn't come from Hollywood. For me the hardest part is dealing with family, especially when four out of eight calls are about money. I've wondered, *How many times do I have to say yes before it's okay to say no?* There's been a lot of resentment and pain because I didn't want people to say, "Umph, she's got that show, and now we can't call her!" I didn't want anyone to think I had changed. But I did. I had to.

Jill: Sometimes we, as Black people, don't want to grow with our lives. There's nothing wrong with wanting more for yourself, but you have to change your mentality, or you won't understand or appreciate what you have. Change is mandatory.

Mo'Nique: Yes, and if you embrace the *good-byes*, the great *hellos* will follow.

Jill: You're the most incredible woman I've ever met. Ever. You've gone through two divorces and your last husband took half your money, yet you're still open to, and believe in, love. So many women have calluses around their hearts, but here you are with a beautiful man who adores you.

Mo'Nique: My ex-husband, Mark, deserved that money. He gave up his life to move to Hollywood with me, and we lived in an apartment with mice. Then we had issues in our relationship, which is why we're no longer married. But I never thought I couldn't find love again.

I've known Sidney for twenty years, and yet when I watch him walk into a room, across the room and out of the room, I still think, *Wow*. He knows everything about me and tells me the >

"I don't mind exposing who I am. I'm not husband, and it feels good to wake up and



FAST FRIENDS
Jill Scott (left) and
Mo'Nique discuss the
joys of life and love.

scared to say that I'm on my third
feel him on my back or me on his.”

“I believe that I’m a sex symbol.”

truth, even when it’s painful. He has told me that I’m selfish in my listening. Now I’m working on paying attention when my friends are talking to me. Nobody else has said that to me—not my mother, not my father. I don’t know if anyone else would have told me that because they’re scared of getting written off, but I needed to hear it.

Jill: It’s important to laugh together, cuss each other out, and be honest with each other before you touch. Be friends.

Mo’Nique: I married my best friend. Sid and I don’t put a label on what works for us because it’s ours. But some people might say that we have an open relationship.

Jill: An open relationship is defined by sex outside of marriage.

Mo’Nique: Some people consider sex outside of marriage to be cheating, but I think you’re cheating when you lie and keep secrets. We’re honest with each other. If your husband, Lyzel, said, “Jill, I was dancing with this beautiful woman and then we kissed,” are you going to say, “Let’s talk about that” or “Go pack your s---”?

Jill: Lyzel and I made a pact that if there was ever anyone who took our breath away to the point where we had to have that person, we’d tell each other and happily walk away from our marriage. So in fifty years when I’m 84, I want to be able to look in the mirror and say, “I’ve never cheated on my husband.”

Mo’Nique: I’ll be able to say the same thing. When I’m 88—’cause I’m older than you—I’m going to look at you and say, “I never cheated either. Now, where are my teeth?!” [Laughs] I would never cheat on Sidney. I love him too much. If Sid said, “I’m going to have a drink with Pam,” I would be like, “Okay.” I’m not tripping off that.

Jill: You mean that you would tell him if you chose a different path because if you told him, then it wouldn’t be cheating?

Mo’Nique: Yes. I know who my man is. There’s never another man, not even my dad, who can compare to Sid.

Jill: It sounds cliché, but it’s so important for everyone to love themselves. Why is it that so many of us don’t?

Mo’Nique: I tell women to get a permanent black marker and write I DESERVE TO LOVE ME on their bathroom mirror and say it every day while they brush their teeth. It’s about conditioning. You must believe you’re worthy without anybody else saying it to you, because what if no one ever does?

When I was doing *Mo’Nique’s F.A.T. Chance*, people asked why I was promoting the idea that women should be unhealthy. I’ve never said, “Don’t be healthy.” But if you’re 375 pounds with high blood pressure and diabetes, should you hate yourself? No. If you turn on the TV late at night, every other commercial is about weight loss. How do you think it makes us feel to hear a size-

invisible woman with blond hair down her back say that we can look like her if we take this pill? That’s poison. I say love you, and give yourself 30 minutes a day to exercise and get healthy.

Jill: The level of envy and jealousy over what somebody else has—the hips, the breasts—is out of control.

Mo’Nique: We’re watching it unfold right now. So many times, we’re in the position of writing letters and begging for funding to help our children. We have megachurches with thousands of members, and it’s time we start to put \$5 in the plate, just for us, just for the community.

Jill: I agree. With that kind of funding coming in, there shouldn’t be a single Black child in America who cannot attend college.

Mo’Nique: Nor should our children be without books or computers. I don’t mean to take anything away from the Black church, but I do say, “Let’s save us.” Let’s save *all* of us.

I just wish I could squeeze all that I’m feeling into a bottle and give it to Whitney Houston. I want her to know that we love her in all her pain and addiction. Black women are strong, but it’s another thing when you’re a celebrity with a bunch of money and power. Whitney was the world’s princess, and she couldn’t let anyone see her problems. If we had to walk in her shoes, maybe we wouldn’t be so quick to say, “Girl, you know that’s a damn shame.” Nobody knows what life will throw our way. Any one of us could be Whitney tomorrow.

Jill: We can definitely see that something’s happening with Whitney. Everybody makes mistakes, but we can’t allow them to sit on our hearts. We have to forgive ourselves. Last question: What’s the difference between Mo’Nique at 18 and Mo’Nique at 38?

Mo’Nique: Wisdom, growth and the capacity to show my vulnerability. I’m an emotional person, and I don’t mind exposing who I am. I’m not scared to say that I’m on my third husband, and it feels good to wake up and feel him on my back or me on his. I love looking at my little twin boys, David and Jonathon, and then walking down the hall to see my 16-year-old son, Shalon. Life feels good. For the first time since I’ve had this thing called fame and wealth, I don’t feel guilty about it.

Jill: I wish you every molecule of love, happiness, fun and laughter. I wish you a beautiful life.

Mo’Nique: Back at you, sister. Back at you. □

Jill Scott is on tour this summer with the Sugar Water Festival; check sugarwaterfestival.com for tour dates

For exclusive behind-the-scenes footage of our photo shoot with Mo’Nique and Jill Scott, visit essence.com.



Angel in a Blue Dress