

# Vanessa Williams erasing

In her first action movie, *Eraser*, the multit talented star plays a character who wipes out her own identity. Sometimes, the dethroned Miss America says, she'd like to do that in reality as well. A McCALL's exclusive.

BY SHERYL KAHN



# the past

**C**onnecting with Vanessa Williams isn't easy. It takes several days of playing phone tag and tracking her from coast to coast, from recording studio to movie set, before the 33-year-old singer-actress settles down for an interview in her trailer on the set of *Eraser*, the new movie she's filming with Arnold Schwarzenegger.

"Okay, I can talk now," she says, adding defensively, "I've been very busy—I really wasn't trying to avoid you."

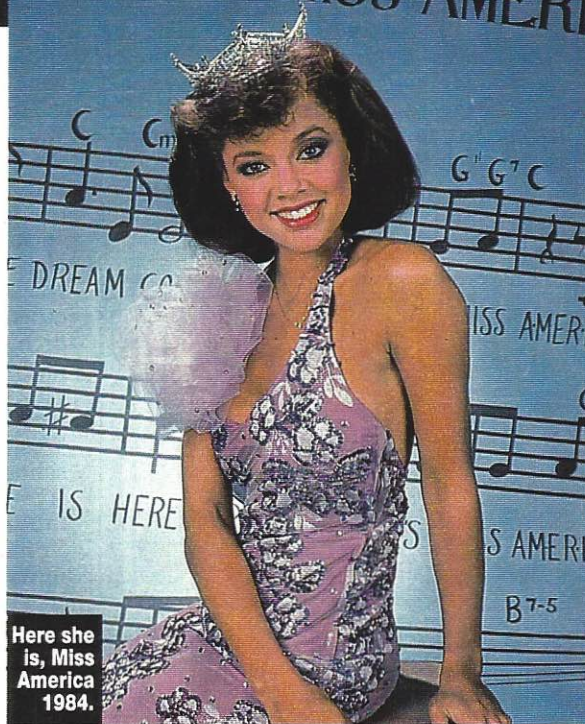
But in conversation with her, you can't help wondering if that wasn't *exactly* what she was trying to do. She answers all questions tentatively, carefully formulating what she will say and how she will say it, always conscious that her words might wind up making headlines. And when the topic turns personal, she suddenly becomes very, very cool.

"I'm cautious," she explains. "I'm always very careful with how I handle the press, the way I want to be perceived—that's something I've learned from experience."

"Experience" was the national scandal that broke 12 years ago this month; during Williams's reign as the first black Miss America, *Penthouse* magazine published nude photographs of her posing with another woman.

Pageant officials asked Williams to relinquish her title. Publicly humiliated, Williams reluctantly abdicated the throne.

With the scandal so many years behind her—and with so many successes under her belt since



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then—Williams should be able to forgive and forget. But she can't because the press won't let her.

"It's such old news," she says, slightly annoyed. "Yet even now, it comes up in interviews. It hurt me, it hurt the people around me. I think the past should be just that—past."

#### **Saving the best for last: Mixing movies, music and motherhood**

These days, Williams would rather focus on the present and future. She's come a long way from the pageant runway. She's recorded several hit songs (among them, "Save the Best for Last," "The Sweetest Days" and "Colors of the Wind"), and in 1994 she made her Broadway debut in *Kiss of the Spider Woman*. Williams also starred in a TV remake of *Bye, Bye, Birdie*

and is now costarring in *Eraser*, a thriller that's due out this month.

"I've done a great deal, but I want to do more," she says. "I don't let things stand in my way. I am a strong person, and I believe that what I've had to go through in the course of my life has made me that way."

But like her *Eraser* character, who disappears into the witness-protection program, Williams sometimes yearns to wipe out her identity and start over.

"Everyone wishes they could erase their mistakes, but that's not how life works," she says. "Would I if I could? Sure. There are times when I wonder, 'Had I taken another path, would I be happier? If I'd just graduated from college and gone to New York instead of doing the Miss America pageant?'"

She copes with these feelings by keeping a journal. "I write down my goals," she says. "I think that's a very positive, constructive way to put your life in perspective—where you are and where you're going. I would've liked not to have gone through what I did, but I still believe that eventually I would have been in the same place that I am now, as a performer. That's my fate."

Fate, she also believes, brought her and her husband, Ramon Hervey II, together 12 years ago—and it appears to now be gradually tearing them apart. "When I first met him, he was my publicist," she explains. They continued to work together after they married in 1987, and Hervey eventually became her manager. There have been rumors that their relationship is on the rocks, but Williams will neither confirm nor deny them.

"We stopped working together as of April 1" is all she will offer. "It's difficult to work with some- ▶