

I'm very gassy," says Tyra Banks, telling Janet Jackson about her irritable-bowel syndrome. "But I feel like I can telegraph my farts. . . . If it is going to be funky I'll let it out and I'll be like 'Dang! Who did that?'"

It's another day on the set of *The Tyra Banks Show*.

Stunning Tyra, wearing boots and jeans, a black vest cuddling her famous Victoria's Secret cleavage, and a lustrous weave—"It's looking hot," she observed of herself before the show—starts peppering Janet with "20 Questions You've Never Been Asked."

"Have you ever faked an orgasm?" Tyra says.

"On every album," Janet purrs.

"You go, Ms. Jackson!" someone screams, and the audience—multi-ethnic young women also in boots and jeans, some of whom have flown clear across the country to see Tyra here at the CBS Television City studios, in L.A.—erupts with the sound of wild girl bonding, clapping, woo-hooing.

Tyra flashes her fierce, feline smile.

America is having a Tyra moment. From the daily girl party of *The Tyra Banks Show* to the weekly bitchfest of her other program, *America's Next Top Model*, it feels like Tyra, Tyra, Tyra all the time.

"She connects with women on a very visceral level," says Hilary Estey McLoughlin, president of Telepictures, the division of Time Warner which syndicates and co-owns *The Tyra Banks Show* along with Tyra's own Bankable Productions. "She plays against type for a model, and it's, like, fascinating to watch."

"She's a fantastic producer," says Benny Medina, Tyra's power manager. (He guided the early careers of Will Smith, Diddy, and J.Lo and now also manages Mariah Carey and Nicole Richie.) "We're owning 18-to-39"—the most coveted female demographic—"knocking it out of the park. I think Tyra is the future of talk for this generation."

If, 10 years ago, America's real top models had participated in a competition to see who would be America's Next Top Entertainment Mogul, probably few would have bet on Tyra Banks. Then 23, she had just come into her own as a model, having appeared on the covers of *Sports Illustrated's* Swimsuit Issue and *GQ*—the first black woman to do either. In 1997 she received modeling's Michael Award for "Supermodel of the Year."

The front-runner would have no doubt been Cindy Crawford—"a role model," Tyra says demurely—who by 1989 had already moved from the runway to TV as host of MTV's *House of Style*. But "Cindy" is now a Malibu mom. "Kate" (Moss) remains one of the top

models in the world but is still "just" a model. And "Naomi" (Campbell), Tyra's onetime nemesis (their rivalry rated No. 16 on *E!'s 30 Most Outrageous Celebrity Feuds*), though still modeling too, is beset by so many legal battles involving charges of assault that she has taken to wearing a T-shirt that says, NAOMI HIT ME . . . AND I LOVED IT.

Meanwhile, Tyra has become America's new best girlfriend, sparking the inevitable comparison to Oprah. "That's my mama!" Tyra protests loyally at the buzz. She was a "youth correspondent" on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* between 1999 and 2000, and considers the still-reigning queen of daytime a mentor. "I've learned the most from watching her," she tells me. "And Charlie Rose."

"What are you insecure about?" she asks Janet, near the end of their interview. She clearly studied hard at Oprah University.

"I never found myself attractive," says Jackson. (She has a new, svelte body to show off and a new album—*20 Y.O.*—coming out, and looks luminous in a skintight black dress.) "I looked in the mirror and I immediately started crying."

"Well, I think you're absolutely beautiful," says Tyra with a reassuring squeeze. Janet smiles gratefully. Tyra's audience goes crazy.

"She's down-home," a woman from Minneapolis says of Tyra, after the show. "She's someone I could hang out with."

One morning, early, before a day of taping shows, Tyra arrives at La Conversation, a café in West Hollywood. She's wearing yoga pants, a Windbreaker, a tight black scarf on her head—the first two are freebies, she tells me. "I'm cheap," she's often said on her show.

Her income last year was reportedly \$18 million. Her Bankable Productions also owns 25 percent of *America's Next Top Model*, which is currently

syndicated in 110 countries around the globe, but she won't reveal her net worth. "Sometimes I feel guilty for how much money I have," she tells me.

She grew up middle-class in L.A.—her mom was a medical photographer, her dad a computer consultant—and now lives alone in an apartment in Beverly Hills. No boyfriend at the moment. "I swear, I swear, I swear."

She orders and eats a full plate of pancakes, sausage, and eggs as we chat. "Food," she says, "is like really, really important to me." Although narrow-bodied and slim, she is, as she often reminds fans, 30 pounds heavier than the average model, with a perfect ice-cream scoop of a behind. She's said she has "issues" with it.

"I have had cellulite for so long," she shared on her blog, at tyrashow.com. "I HATE IT!!! Back in my modeling days, I'd be on the set with Gisele Bündchen and she'd be in a G-string with smooth thighs and a muscle booty and I'd be sooooo jealous. She'd jump up and down and her booty still wouldn't

FOR EXCLUSIVE VIDEO FROM THE TYRA BANKS PHOTO SHOOT, GO TO [VF.COM](http://VF.COM).

LEFT: DRESS BY OSCAR DE LA RENTA; SHOES BY MANOLO BLAHNIK. RIGHT: DRESS BY MOSCHINO; SLEEP MASK BY MARY GREEN. FOR DETAILS, SEE CREDITS PAGE

## Tyra Banks

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 170 dimple up!" On one episode of *The Tyra Banks Show* Tyra even bared her own "dimple booty" (in black panties) to show her audience it wasn't flawless.

"I want the shows to provide social commentary," she tells me over breakfast. "The shows I'm producing aren't just hair and makeup and 'Oh, your heart is broken'—it's racism and inter-racial dating. One thing is beauty and body image.... I feel like it's my responsibility to do something about it because I was in fashion for so long projecting an image that's so hard to live up to. An image that is manipulated and tweaked.

"I feel like I have a responsibility. I really, really do. I don't even know if I have a choice—it's just like this is what I'm supposed to do.

And I try to be as naked with my guests as possible. I try to show them what I look like without my makeup, and it's quite different.

"I even touched up myself a little bit for you so you wouldn't be like, Oh, she walked in here, she had dark circles under her eyes."

Her green-green eyes still look tired. She does 185 shows a year.

In one episode of *The Tyra Banks Show*, entitled "My Breasts Are a Burden," a Beverly Hills plastic surgeon gave women breast exams "to see what he could do to help." In another episode, Tyra herself underwent a sonogram to "put a decisive end to the rumors" that she had breast implants. "I got fake hair, y'all. I got fake eyelashes," she told viewers.

In another episode, "Panty Party," Tyra and her audience exuberantly stripped down to their bras and panties (a scene you probably won't see on *Oprah*) to get an "expert's" advice on their underwear selection. "The va-jay-jay"—vagina—has "gotta... breathe!" counsels the *Tyra Banks Show* Web site.

"I really do like going undercover," she says of the shows where she has posed as a fat woman, a homeless person, a stripper (although she wouldn't strip), and a man. "We'll do a lot of things with social experiments. So it's more social commentary right now," she says again.

Tyra is on a "mission," she says. She even

has a "Mission Statement," which her Endeavor agent, Nancy Josephson, later e-mails to me: "It's important to make people feel good, to show compassion, to be uplifting," it says, which all seems rather at odds with the message of *America's Next Top Model*, still Tyra's more successful show.

*America's Next Top Model*, which Tyra brought to UPN in 2003, was the flagship program for the launch of the CW network (created through a merger of UPN and the WB last year). If you happen to have missed it, unlike untold millions from Minneapolis to Malaysia, it's a reality-style competition in which a group of aspiring young models, handpicked by Tyra, live together in a stylish residence (decorated by Tyra with blown-up photographs of Tyra everywhere) and compete in a series of grueling and often humiliating challenges (posing with live snakes, or in freezing water, or naked), conceived of by Tyra, after which they are evaluated by a panel of judges, helmed by Tyra, with the goal of becoming... the next Tyra.

The Tyra of *A.N.T.M.* is an exacting diva styled in heavy makeup and *Dynasty*-ish getups for whom greatness in modeling is something akin to virtuosity in piano playing. And she is Vladimir Horowitz. She has told young models, "The texture of your skin

needs a lot of work,” or “You look like Miss July,” or, shudder, “a pinup.” “Where is the self-esteem?”

“I can explain the whole dichotomy,” Tyra tells me. “I have meetings with my team”—“Team Tyra,” she calls them: her manager, agent, publicist, and producers—“all the time, saying, There’s a Nighttime Tyra and there’s a Daytime Tyra. The Daytime Tyra is who I am. It’s me, kinda. I mean, I have three hours of hair and makeup, but it’s me. I’m tough sometimes, I’m warm, I’m uplifting women. That’s my cause, that’s my ‘why I think I’m here’—to do that.

“And then there’s the Nighttime Tyra. The Nighttime Tyra is a character,” she says. “A character that has been created over time—by me. Nobody told me to act that way, talk that way.”

“Congratulations” is one of her famous taglines, always delivered with an enigmatic smirk. “You’re still in the running to become America’s Next Top Model.”

“You must pack your bags and immediately go home” is another, leveled like a decree, as contestants are eliminated.

“I have meetings, saying, One is not me and one is—what the hell am I gonna do?” says Tyra, who seems genuinely perplexed. “I have a hit show, but that’s not me. That’s a character!”

“Doesn’t it make you, in cultural terms, like a vitamin that smokes?,” I ask, arriving at an awkward metaphor.

But she says, “YES. I am a vitamin that smokes. I’ve never even heard that before, but, yes, it is that. And that is the biggest struggle for me.”

I ask her about a moment on *A.N.T.M.*’s Cycle Four—now a popular clip on YouTube—where she went to town on Tiffany Richardson, a black single mother from Miami whom Tyra caught giggling after Tiffany was eliminated for “not trying hard enough.”

“I have never in my life yelled at a girl like this!” Nighttime Tyra screamed, head rolling, Jennifer Aniston-ish wig swinging. “When my mother yelled like this it’s because she loves me!

“I was rooting for you!” Tantrum Tyra went on. “We were all rooting for you! How dare you! You rolling your eyes and you act like you heard it all before. You don’t know where the hell I come from. You have no idea what I been through. But I’m not a victim! I grow from it and I learn!”

The other models looked on like trembling bunnies. Tiffany wept.

“But that’s not even my temperament,” Tyra tells me. “When I did that on *Top Model*, I was so exhausted. I was at my breaking point with exhaustion, and at that time I was so invested in the girls personally, invested in their lives and making them better people. . . . I get so invested, so crazy invested, in these girls.”

She says she used to have contestants come over to her apartment, to hang out, until her producers advised against it. “Whenever a girl was sent home,” she says, “I used to go to her hotel room and talk to her for an hour . . .

“Sometimes on *Top Model* we wrap at three o’clock in the morning and then I’d have to wait for her to go to the hotel room, pack her bags. I would talk to her for an hour and hold her hand and give her advice. Then, after a while, my people told me, Tyra, you can’t do this. We have therapists here that are doing this, you know. You can’t. And I was like, O.K.!

“I have to detach myself and I’ve detached myself a lot in order to survive.”

But why does she think she was spending so much time with these axed *Top Model* girls? “It’s like I have to make sure she’s O.K.,” Tyra explains. “I felt like I created this show, I plucked this girl out of her obscure life and put her here, and it is my responsibility to make sure that she’s successful.”

As some have modestly been, going on to middling modeling careers. And those who haven’t have inspired a new reality show, now in development at Tyra’s Bankable Productions; called *The Glamorous Life*, it’s about what happens to a *Top Model* loser after she goes back to her “obscure life.”

“It’s a really fun idea,” said Tyra’s agent, Nancy Josephson.

**T**here was a very famous makeup artist,” Tyra tells me that evening over dinner at Cut, the steak house in the Beverly Wilshire Hotel. It’s the end of a long day and she’s taped two shows, the one with Janet Jackson and one with Hilary Duff, with whom she made perfume.

“And he said, ‘I would see you backstage at fashion shows, and you were there, but you were always somewhere else in your head.’ And then he referred to my career now, and he goes, ‘Now I see where you were. You were saying, This is temporary. I have a dream, I have a plan. I get it now. I understand why you seem so focused.’”

She flew to Paris alone when she was just 17. She’d graduated from a Catholic high school and been accepted to Loyola Marymount University, in L.A., where she planned to major in film. She gave herself a year to make it as a model. Why did she want to model? “In 11th grade, this girl told me I should model, and I thought she was crazy,” she says.

At 16, she’d shot up to five feet eleven inches, at 110 pounds. “I went from mean girl to freak,” she says. “I used to be a mean girl. Mean as hell. I was a bully. My brother”—Devin, 39, now an air-force captain soon to be deployed to Iraq—“and I had sibling rivalry, and he was bigger than me, so when I went to school I had to get my power back. I was the leader. And then I became a freak.

“During the Ethiopian famine, when I lost all the weight, they called me ‘Ethiopia.’”

But then, within a few months in Paris—despite the obstacles presented by an industry which still discriminates against women of color—she was working nonstop, “having fittings with Karl Lagerfeld, Chanel, Yves Saint Laurent—all that. My roommate would look at me like, Oh you bitch!”

**A**t a time when Paris modeling was a hotbed of drinking and drugs (not unlike now) and wild nights at the Les Bains Douches nightclub, Tyra was always in bed by 10.

“I was a good girl,” she says. Her best friend was the model (now actress) Rebecca Romijn. “My era was Kate Moss, Amber Valletta, Shalom Harlow,” she says, “but I didn’t really hang out with those girls, never did.”

She claims never to have taken a sip of alcohol except for the “neck of a wine cooler” when she was 12, never to have smoked a cigarette or done any drugs.

“How do you unwind?,” I ask her. “What do you do for you?”

“I don’t know. Nothing,” Tyra says after a moment, shrugging. “Maya Angelou asked me the same thing; she said, ‘My God, what do you do for yourself?’ I just work.”

She has stayed out of the limelight as far as her relationships go. “You’re never going to see me coming out of the club at two A.M. with my weave all hanging off, getting in somebody’s car,” she says.

Between ages 19 and 20 she dated director John Singleton, who cast her in *Higher Learning* (1995). “He was very encouraging,” she says, but she won’t discuss their breakup. For three years she had a relationship with Philadelphia 76ers power forward Chris Webber (they broke up in 2004), but has suggested on her talk show there were problems with sports groupies.

Her friends tend to be people from her school days. “I get insecure around fabulous people,” she says. She goes home every night and prepares for the next day of work. She finally got a chef, although she was loath to (too expensive), but all she was eating was “popcorn and Tang. I ate it so much that my tongue started to burn.”

“And what about sex, Tyra,” I ask, emulating Daytime Tyra. “Everybody needs to have sex.”

There’s a long, long pause. Tyra doesn’t answer. She just laughs.

“I’ve had such a hard time dating,” she says. “The more successful I get, the less interested guys are. They just keep asking me these questions like ‘You’re a mogul now, huh? Damn.’ Like successful men. Like ‘I read how much money you’re making. That’s really—whoa. You’re on TV every day? Like, really influencing people?’”

She frowns. “When I got this talk show,”

# Tyra Banks

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she says, "I was like, Oh my God, it's going to be so much easier now because they're going to see my personality and see that I'm normal and goofy and fart, and so I'll knock down that veneer of the supermodel."

She pauses for emphasis. "It's worse ... I always tell a guy that I'm dating: I don't need you, I want you. But a lot of them are like"—alarmed face—"I want you to need me. I don't want you to want me!"

I think, but don't say, that maybe Tyra's true romance now is with the young women of America.

She says, of her audience, "I'm trying to get them interested in issues. Things that affect their future, you know? My talk show has totally changed me and opened me. I used to just be about being a good role model and helping women, but I didn't realize in the vast way that I could do it. It's made me more aware.

"I'm addicted to Jon Stewart now!" she says. "And I even watch Bill O'Reilly. And I would never in a million years watch that stuff. I wasn't an idiot, where I was totally closed off, but this has just really opened my eyes.

"You don't understand," Tyra says. "Just a year ago I was a model, you know what I'm saying? Walking down the runway in my

friggin' panties for Victoria's Secret." (She officially retired in 2005.) "And now *Time* magazine is saying I'm one of the most influential people in the world?" She mugs as if taken aback.

"I've definitely grown up this year," says Tyra. "I'm feeling like more of a woman. I don't know if I felt like a woman before I started this talk show. I had this girl thing. But with this show, I'm like, You know what? I'm not a girl. I'm a woman and I need to start acting like one, start opening my eyes to the world."

And with that, she gets into her chauffeured car and goes home.

She says she still has a lot of work to do. □

