

Flashback Interview: Jada Pinkett Smith on Her Life and Times

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CHICAGO – The person in the middle of The Slap seen around the world – upon Chris Rock by Will Smith at the 94th Academy Awards – was Will’s wife of 24 years, the actor and musician Jada Pinkett Smith. She had shaved her head due to a diagnosis of alopecia, and Chris Rock raised Will Smith’s ire by making a joke about Pinkett Smith appearing in “G.I. Jane 2,” a reference to her military grade style. Jada Pinkett Smith was photographed in 2008 by Joe Arce and interviewed in 2015 by Patrick McDonald of HollywoodChicago.com.

Jada Koren Pinkett was born in Baltimore, and was raised in an arts-oriented family headed by her mother and grandmother. She attended the Baltimore School for the Arts – with fellow student and close friend Tupac Shakur – and also attended the North Carolina School of Arts. She began her acting career in 1990.



Jada Pinkett Smith in Chicago, circa 2008

Photo credit: Joe Arce of Starstruck Foto for HollywoodChicago.com

Her first notable TV role was as Lena on “A Different World” in 1991, and three years later she got stellar notices for the film “A Low Down Dirty Shame.” In 1996, she appeared opposite Eddie Murphy in “The Nutty Professor,” and in 1997 married Will Smith ... who she had met on the set of “The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air.”

Pinkett Smith appeared with her husband in 2001’s biopic “Ali,” and was in the “Matrix Reloaded/Revolutions” sequels in 2003. Other notable film appearances include voice work in the “Madagascar” animated films (2005-2014), Magic Mike XXL (2015), Girls Trip (2017) and “The Matrix Resurrections” in 2021. In television, she recently had a recurring role on “Gotham” (2014-17) and the lead role in “Hawthorne” (2009-11).

Pinkett Smith is also known for her philanthropy, co-creating a family foundation with Will Smith and supporting various causes including the Lupus Foundation, PETA and her Baltimore School of Arts Alma Mater. She also had a notable music career, gaining Hot 100 traction on the charts with the 2006 debut album of her metal band, “Wicked Wisdom.”

In 2008, Photographer Joe Arce of HollywoodChicago.com captured the Exclusive Portrait (above) of Jada Pinkett Smith on the Red Carpet in Chicago. In 2015, Patrick McDonald of HollywoodChicago.com conducted the following interview ...

HollywoodChicago.com: What type of advice do you think your 'Magic Mike' character of Rome would give you about life if you had a conversation? What would you ask her, given what you understood about her background and who she is?

Jada Pinkett Smith: I don't know about advice, but I could definitely have a conversation with her, and I could learn a lot. Rome has had the freedom to explore in ways that I hadn't in my life. For example, I'd never even been to a male strip club before. So if Rome taught me anything, it's the exhilaration and connectivity in the participation with this type of show. I never even thought that was possible.

It was even about being there with all the women, and how I felt that every one of them were my girlfriend. Usually, that's not the case, women are tighter than that when in public. But here, we were free, and we were saying to each other 'isn't this awesome!' We had a good time, and also with this type of show, men and women were interacting, and it was safe, celebratory and responsible. Rome taught me that, otherwise I would have never known.

HollywoodChicago.com: What do you think the popularity of overt sexual films like 'Magic Mike XXL' and 'Fifty Shades of Gray' say about the state of American attitude toward sex?

Smith: I will speak for women, and I think they're in a place where they are ready to explore these ideas, and find their own personal relationship with those ideas – regarding sex and eroticism. 'Fifty Shades...' opened one door, 'Magic Mike' is about to open another.

Woman are now at a stage where they want to learn more about all this, because in many cases we aren't allowed to explore these topics. So I think women will continue to find those channels and paths, and explore the subject matter, in order to become more confident, and find their own self identity within that exploration.



Jada Pinkett Smith in 2015 as the Character Rome in 'Magic Mike XXL'

Photo credit: Warner Bros.

HollywoodChicago.com: Which of your early career experiences, say from 1990-1995, best prepared you for what came next when your career took off?

Smith: It was the idea of staying true, to never do things just for money. I used to get offers all the time, but I stayed true and connected to my own value systems. The minute that you start allowing that aspect of yourself to deteriorate, there can be serious trouble.

HollywoodChicago.com: Since you were raised in a matriarchal household by your mother and grandmother, and are self made, how did that background prepare you for the rigors of show business?

Smith: It was about self confidence. It was a very male dominated business when I first came into it, and because of that they were telling me to all kinds of things. There was a producer who told me once, while I was doing a movie, that he wanted me to pose for Playboy. I told him that's not happening. He told me that everybody was doing it, and said I wouldn't be a star otherwise. I told him, 'Dude, I couldn't care less.' It was just having that sense of self to know that I wouldn't be that girl.

HollywoodChicago.com: I'm so intrigued by your fronting of a metal band. As a lead singer myself, what responsibility do you feel about bringing the magic in representing a sound and a song for your bandmates?

Smith: One the reasons why I created Wicked Wisdom is because I'd always been a metal head, probably because I was black and female, and it wasn't really for me. Part of my purpose was being in a metal band was to reject that idea. Metal music is about breaking down all the boxes. That was a helluva box to try to break in that arena. [laughs]

But to me the idea was – within that scene – to open my eyes and expand those beautiful ideas. The music itself, the culture itself, is all about breaking the rules and breaking outside of the construct. In those breaking of the rules and construct, let's also see who is accepted within this art form. That was really the purpose.

HollywoodChicago.com: What piece of advice, that you have received in your journey as an actor and performer, do you honor every time you approach a role?

Smith: As far as the characters I develop, I just want to keep them as honest as possible. That deepens as I get more experience and grow as an artist. That's the aspect I've always tried to keep with me ... to keep it real.



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