Faith And Strength

Faith Evans has survived hip-hop widowhood, industry ups and downs and drug rumors. Now she's back, with a hot new album, The First Lady, and a body in fighting form. Tracy Hopkins gets the secrets to the singer's sleek new silhouette

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In an industry where vocal talent often takes a backseat to a bootylicious image, how can a seasoned R&B diva like Faith Evans compete with svelte starlets like Ciara and Beyoncé? "It was a hard lesson to learn," Evans says. "You can't just be a good singer or songwriter. You have to have the total package and be mentally prepared for the facts of life."

In Evans' case, the facts of life have included some harsh realities. There was the unsolved 1997 murder of her husband, Christopher Wallace, a.k.a. multiplatinum rap superstar Notorious B.I.G. There was her parting with both her label, Bad Boy Entertainment, and the impresario who had launched her career, Sean "P. Diddy" Combs. More recently, in January 2004, she and her husband and manager Todd Russaw were arrested on charges of drug possession. (The case did not go to court because Evans and Russaw agreed to attend a 13-week abuse-prevention program.)

INSPIRATION AND PIERSPIRATION

Rather than bury her head in a box of Dunkin' Donuts, the classically trained vocalist whipped herself into shape "creatively, physically and mentally." And prior to the release of her fourth and latest album, 2005's The First Lady, Evans emerged looking thinner and fitter than ever. "I felt like I needed and wanted to do it," she says of her dramatic, 65-pound weight loss. "I was in limbo career-wise, and I had so much time on my hands that I really got fanatical about working out."

Her inspiration came while living in Atlanta and watching the fitness habits of her not-so-desperate housewife neighbors. "I saw all those older ladies living out in Atlanta who had money, and they didn't have much to do during the day," recalls Evans, who considers herself more of a homebody than a red-carpet darling. "And they were running and jogging and looking superfit. I was like, 'That's how I want to be when I get that age.' It affected my whole attitude."

To accomplish her fitness goals—number one on the list was flattening her tummy—Evans and husband Russaw became workout buddies. Next came a personal trainer, Angie Denkins, who put her on a rigorous workout regimen (see "The Faith-Based Workout," below). "It was a challenge. I never focused on trying to get my body fit," says Evans. "I got into it gradually. [Then] I started to

like how I felt. And this was way before I could see how I was going to look."

Over the course of four years, she slimmed down from a curvy size 14 to a taut and toned size 6. "Sometimes a 4, depending on the designer," she adds. (Evans vigorously denies the rumors that she lost weight due to drug use.)

HOW SHE DID IT

The key to the Florida native's enviable results, explains Denkins, was Evans' commitment to a strenuous total-body workout of cardio (running outside and on the treadmill), core strength (Pilates) and weight training. Evans has made so much progress that she now plans to make a fitness video.

"I've always been pregnant or out promoting a record right after having a baby. So I've literally been seen with my ups and downs in [weight]," explains the mother of three. "Some women gain weight when they have kids. I didn't do everything I could to change that right away."

Evans also curbed her enthusiasm for junk food and started eating fish, vegetables and seaweed salad and drinking lots of water and fresh vegetable juices. "She looks fabulous," says Denkins. "She has worked so hard and come so far."

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