

EXCLUSIVE



Spin, Spin, Sugar

FOUETTÉS. TURNTABLES. CHARACTERS.
TARYN MANNING KNOWS HOW TO SPIN IT

Words by Vanessa Pascale

Photo Credit: Kalvin Lazarte and Koury Angelo



EVERYTHING'S
GOING TO BE
ALRIGHT

BOB MARLEY IS LIKE A RELIGION TO HER. WHEN SHE CAN'T SLEEP, WHICH IS OFTEN AS SHE HAS INSOMNIA, SHE READS HIS QUOTES AND LISTENS TO HIS MUSIC. "HE JUST CALMS ME AND MAKES ME FEEL LIKE EVERYTHING IS GOING TO BE ALRIGHT," SHE GIGGLES.

Days before Christmas, it is decidedly frigid outside of The Bowery Hotel on the Lower East Side of Manhattan. A bundled up Taryn Manning enters the lobby lounge accompanied by a girlfriend, who is dropping her off from their day of shopping. Her diminutive 5'2" frame is enveloped in a leopard-print coat, her white blonde locks peak out from beneath a knit hat, and she is toting a black backpack nearly half her size. [The thirty-pound "DJ backpack" is always on her as she traverses the streets of New York. "I'm really strong. Everyone's like, 'You're like a ninja!' I can move real fast and slick. I move my way through shit," she tells me later on.] After a swift introduction, her friend leaves us. The lounge is brimming with hotel guests, making it impossible for us to post up on a preferred couch or near the fireplace, so we settle on the two arm chairs at a small table I'd occupied while I awaited her arrival.

Presently, the Los Angeles-based actress is residing in New York City wrapping up the second season of Netflix's highly acclaimed streaming series, *Orange Is the New Black*, loosely based on a memoir of the same name by Piper Kerman (played by Taylor Schilling, who received a Golden Globe nom for Best Actress in *OITNB*) on her fifteen-month prison sentence. Taryn is a part of a well-developed, brilliant ensemble cast comprised of, but not limited to, Laura Prepon, Kate Mulgrew, and Jason Biggs.

"It's all these different story lines. You have all different races, sizes, people, religious backgrounds, lesbians, correctional officers. My character [Tiffany "Pennsatucky" Doggett] is embellished a bit, just to make great TV. She is super radical, born-again Christian evangelist, ignorant, resourceful, racist, anti-gay...", Taryn tells me. "That's season one though. Now, we're in season two, which I'm not really allowed to talk about. But obviously, in shows, they start to morph." The waiter comes by and I suggest we order a cocktail. Taryn orders vodka with a splash of Sprite --which she scarcely touches, despite the fact that I swallow my vodka soda in a few gulps.

The last scene in season one shows Piper cornered by a vengeful, ready-to-kill-her, Doggett. In the final moments, the power struggle is reversed, with Piper on top of Doggett whaling away. The season two premiere date has yet to be released, leaving fans waiting with bated breath. [Post-interview, I immediately subscribed to Netflix and digested its 13 one-hour-long episodes in a couple of days.]

Taryn relocated to NYC for the first season of *OITNB*, returned home to L.A. during its hiatus and recently moved back to the Empire State for season two. "As actors, we go away to work. 'Going to work, I'll be back in three months.' As you get older, you realize that that's three months of your life... Since August till now, I've been living my life, making friends, meeting cute boys. I'm like, 'Maybe it's not going to be as easy to go back home.'" Exhausted by the bi-coastal commute, Taryn remained on the east coast for the holidays, to her mother's chagrin. "I just wanna chill. I guess I'm starting to like it," she says about living in NYC.

Looking to reclaim some peace and to escape from city life, escape from

playing such a mean-spirited, taxing character, Taryn planned a road trip to Connecticut with a male friend the day after our interview, which would include a stop by her father's resting place. (She had not been back since she was 14.) "I grew up back and forth because my parents divorced. My dad was always somewhere else. He lived in Connecticut. All his best friends were all the Red Skins of the late 70s, early 80s. A few of them contacted me, 'Let me tell you a story about your pops,' so I'm going to meet up for coffee and talk to some of my dad's old friends. I knew him till I was 14, but I wanna *know* my dad. Give me the real. I'm excited," she says chirpily. "I shed a little tear today with somebody 'cause they started to cry. I'm like, 'No, this is *great*. I'm excited.' I know he's not there, but it's paying homage."

I ask Taryn if her freshly bleached tresses are for *OITNB*. "It's for me. In the show, I wear my hair, here, I'll show you." She whips out her iPhone and finds a photo of herself in the ratty, multi-layered brunette wig. "When I do a role, I dive all the way in. But when I'm not working, I've gotta still be Taryn. And Taryn is a musician, a DJ. And I felt a little bit trapped in that character," she explains. Hired as a blonde, Taryn envisioned Doggett darker. Doggett looks slightly down-and-out with yellow, rotten teeth that she's self-conscious about (in the show). At the end of the day, Doggett was swallowing Taryn alive. "I just didn't feel pretty on the weekends," she confesses.

Do blondes have more fun? I ask. Perhaps. Having a "look" has always been Taryn's thing, as she has never truly revered herself as a "very pretty girl. I'm not going to be a babe, but I at least want to have a look." I have to disagree. Taryn is categorically attractive, I determine, as I study the actress' delicate facial features and large, doe-like eyes reminiscent of Precious Moments dolls. Genuinely surprised and flattered that her driver hit on her today, she claims that she never gets hit on. "It was really sweet. He kissed my hand. It just made me feel good," she says coyly. "I'm single and everything --not that I would do anything. I was like, 'Thank you.' I'll take it."

Whether it's the bombshell-blonde hair or not, who's to say? She corrects me, "punk-rock-blonde"—fitting, as she has the soul of a musician. Her first love has always been music. "It's innately inside of me. But if there was a learned love, it's acting, meaning it's become a love over time. It's not like I was born or hungry to act. But I was born to play music, straight up." To sate her passion for music, Taryn deejays when she is not filming and continues to write songs and work on her album.

In the early 2000s, her older brother Kellin and she formed an electro-pop band, BoomKAT. Kellin would join Taryn on movie sets and the two would jam out in her trailer between takes. Inquiring passerbyers would pop in to see what the commotion was about, which is how their songs landed on the soundtracks of numerous movies she has acted in [*8 Mile*] and others [*Italian Job* and *Mean Girls*].

When Taryn was 19, she was unexpectedly pulled from a dream role and replaced with what producers deemed a bigger star. This devastating incident catalyzed her change in path. “I was like, ‘You know what? My brother makes music. I play guitar. I was so depressed, I started writing poems, and my poems turned into songs... Eventually that turned into a record deal [with DreamWorks Records]. Basically quit acting. Got tatt’ed up. Rock star!” she squeaks. “It’s been awhile.” Their record was blowing up. While on tour (2004) in Japan, they received the call --it was over. DreamWorks Records went under. It was an incredibly devastating blow for both, especially Kellin, she tells me. But if Taryn has learned anything from show business, it’s that you must be “resilient” to survive. And *that* she is. While BoomKAT is not actively performing these days, the two continue to work at it. “We were on the phone today talking about music.”

Even in her film career, Taryn has been surrounded by a list of prominent musicians: Britney Spears, Eminem, Ludacris --and has connected with all of them. “I’m pretty easy, breezy. Easy, breezy --CoverGirl,” she laughs. When the Princess of Pop had her breakdown shortly after *Crossroads* came out, everyone hounded Taryn for a sound bite. “Nope,” she says proudly. “The Britney I met, such a sweetheart, wonderful. I am not even trying to be ass-kissey. I’m genuine. Never a diva. So grateful to be there. So nice to the whole cast. To be around that level of fame, at that time, was epic,” she recollects.

The same admiration and honor is felt to have worked with Eminem, or Marshall, to her. “So funny. So nice. So hot.” But the name that comes to mind, at least once a week, when she thinks about *8 Mile*, is Brittany Murphy. Taryn does not hold back in expressing her love for the late actress --particularly touched by a heartfelt letter Brittany wrote her when she arrived on set. Fondly referring to her as a gem and little angel heart, she gushes, “I’m grateful for her. I’d tell her all the time... I’ve always loved Brittany because she’s a little different, in the best way. A weirdo, in the best way. I loved her and miss her so much.” The two would often go out for the same roles, along with a circle of thespians, including Christina Ricci and Tara Reid, she tells me.

In Taryn’s widely recognized films, *8 Mile*, *Crossroads*, *Hustle & Flow*, she has been pigeonholed as the unfortunate, troubled counterpart. “Everyone thinks I’m like, some ignorant, trailer trash girl,” says Taryn, her voice stricken with a hint of defensiveness. “They’re not coming to me for other roles. People think we literally choose them, as if we’re just, ‘Oh, that one.’ It’s not like that. I’m fighting, even for the ones I get. Even if you get up to A-list, let’s say Natalie Portman, Anne Hathaway, Amy Adams... all those girls are fighting for a role. At every tier, we’re all fighting for a role. There are not a lot of roles.” But she’s not seeking sympathy; she has an optimistic outlook on it all. “I’m a working actor. If everyone on the outside wants to typecast me ‘cause they’re that myopic and narrow-minded --whatever. My dream has come true. I’m not a waitress. I have a nice house in L.A. and New York,” beams the sophisticate. Far from ignorant, Taryn speaks three languages, is world-traveled, and articulates herself very well.

What makes Taryn such an accomplished actress is her aptitude to relate to every character she takes on, enabling an authentic performance. “If you’re shoved into a room with ten people, sink or swim, you’re going to figure out how to adapt. There’s gotta be somebody in there that you can chat with. So, even if I’m so different from my character, I can still learn how to chat with this girl... I’m going to find that common ground.” She poignantly elicits sympathy for the disturbed characters she plays. Being able to move an audience has been a talent of Taryn’s since childhood.

As a prima ballerina growing up, (we were just as surprised as you to unearth this information from the tiny dancer), Taryn could evoke a range of emotion through dance. Her talent was so extraordinary that while at an ESPN-televised Orlando dance competition, she was offered a full ride scholarship to attend NYC’s prestigious Juilliard for ballet. The ballerina, who performed the remarkable succession of fouettés, “you know how there’s one dancer in the middle just killing it --that was me,” was bum-rushed by every college after her troupe won. Taryn passed on college as it was “not on her brain” at that time. “It’s so weird though, when I think, what would my life be? I wouldn’t be sitting here. There’s no way....”

She dabbled in acting during her years in dance, discovering the acting class whilst eavesdropping on fellow dance-mates. Her dedicated mother agreed to ferry her from San Diego to Burbank every Wednesday to participate in the reputable class that would produce a star-studded roster of actresses known today: Kirsten Dunst, Erika Christensen, and Evan Rachel Wood. Taryn identifies that her mother put her life aside to give her what she wanted, and is thankful for her sacrifices. “She always said I had champagne taste on a beer budget. ‘I want Espirit. I want Guess. I want Keds!’” Taryn remembers.

On the path to becoming a professional dancer, she moved to Hollywood after high school to dance. After a sampling of the intense, gossipy dance scene, Taryn concluded that this world was not for her, and began to heavily pursue acting. Working from the ground up, Taryn secured “extra” work in music videos for Metallica, The Goo Goo Dolls and a number of student films. She recounts the long road it took to obtain her SAG card and her relentless AD hounding. Her first real gig was a guest starring role on *The Practice*, which led to her film debut in *Crazy/Beautiful* (alongside acting classmate Kirsten Dunst) and a series of roles in major motion pictures and television.

Taryn longs to secure a role where she can showcase her dancing chops. “It’s not like it used to be but I can still definitely hold my own, and I’d love to be able to show it.” I tell her that I read that she wants to do a musical, to which she replies, “I would love to!” When her schedule permits, she plans to pursue that “100%.” “I just want to sing and dance. So bad. I want to dance. Rehearse. Stretch again. Ballet. Go back up on toe,” she says wistfully. But, right now, Taryn has her hands full.

In addition to *OITNB*, she has a recurring role on CBS’ *Hawaii Five-0*, which

IN THE JUNGLE,
THE CONCRETE
JUNGLE...

"HONESTLY, NEW YORK'S BEEN TOUGH FOR ME WITHOUT MY CAR --THAT LITTLE BIT OF PEACE I HAVE IN MY CAR WITH MUSIC. I KNOW I CAN WALK WITH MY EARBUDS IN AND ALL THAT, BUT I DON'T KNOW MY WAY AROUND. I'M NEW. I MISS NATURE A LOT. I LOVE SEEING THE STARS AND TREES, GRASS SO, IT'S A LITTLE ROUGH."

returned this past fall. Her fourth season with the show, she has enjoyed her time on the beautiful island so much that she is in the midst of buying a condo there. "I grew such a fond love for Hawaii and the whole culture... But I'm kinda like a super hippy at heart, and that place just brings it all out. You land and you're just like, Ahhh," she sighs. "I love it." She recently took the ten-hour flight to Hawaii, twice, to film, she tells me, as she pulls her coat on over her white fuzzy sweater. "I just got chilly," she assures me. "I'm not like, putting it on, 'Alright, let's wrap it up! I'm going to go, this is boring,'" she jokes. An hour has passed (the interview went off course and on tangents a few times, which happens when girls get to gabbing), so I wouldn't hold it against her if she really were trying to flee.

Not wanting to keep her much longer, I begin to wrap up the interview. We touch on a couple of other subjects (highlighted under Manning Up), before I ask her if there is anything she would like to add. She innocently answers, "I love animals a lot." The owner of an adorable pooch named Penguin, (she proudly shows me a photo on her phone), works with organizations like, Farm Sanctuary (<http://www.farmsanctuary.org>) and Best Friends Animal Society (<http://bestfriends.org>) that support and benefit animals. "Best Friends is a standup organization. They do what they say, and that's through a lot of research. To take this time, to have a little voice that I have, to get my little bit of fans to donate, it's like, Don't cheat them." She also lent a hand in raising money for pigs recently. "They don't really get a lot of attention and are just treated poorly. They're really intelligent, and awesome." She smiles.

Now, over an hour and a half in, I apologize for keeping her so long. "No, not at all, babe. I enjoyed it," she says, then compliments my purse. We snap a few photos by the fireplace, and walk out into the arctic air. She hugs me goodbye and says, "We should hangout sometime." Of course, I concur. **ML**

MANNING UP

NEW YEAR'S RESOLUTIONS

"I want to get super savvy on my computer 'cause I'm a DJ. I'm tired of calling up my DJ friends and being like, 'Hey, so how do I...? I want to be able to troubleshoot out of every situation... I'm good, but I want to be next level good. Really just controlling my Mac, making it my slave. Making my own music, own beats and not have to count on everyone else... I wanna do the whole shebang. I can make a beat. I just want to make a good beat. Getting better on piano. Honestly, making more time for my mom and my grandma 'cause of the inevitable. I've been really busy and into my life and I'm going to regret that, genuinely-- that's been really eating at me, 'cause that's truly what matters."

THE THIRTIES

"In your teens, you're kinda like, 'Yeeeeeaaahhh, fuck it!' and do your thing. Your early 20s, you're still kinda in it. Then all of a sudden, this massive insecurity comes over you, if you're in the business, maybe even out. Right around 25, you start seeing actresses or famous pop stars fucking with their faces way too soon. All of a sudden fear and doubt set in, because of rejection, life, breakups and heartbreak. Then, you hit your 30s, and you're like, 'I'm onto this' and you kinda go back to that 'I got this' again. I think that's why they say that we're in our sexual prime in our 30s. There's a wisdom that comes in, where you can sort things out in your mind better. You have more self-confidence."

WHAT'S ON TV?

"I watch a lot of documentaries. Don't go out. Everything, educational, religion. I love it. It's a thirst for knowledge. TV shows: *Breaking Bad*, *Homeland*, *Dexter*, I loved *Friends*. Growing up, *90210*. Honestly, if there's free time on my hands, I put music on. Sometimes, I'm sitting with my actor friends and they're just chat-chat-chatting about shows, and I'm like, 'Have you guys heard the new M83?' And they're just like, 'Who? Weirdo.' I'm a music nerd."

IPOD INHABITANTS

"Empire of the Sun. If I could be a backup singer in a band, it'd be in Empire of the Sun. Luke Steele, ahhh, I just love them. It's so easy, breezy. It has a throwback of 70s, like a little bit of ABBA, a little bit of Bee Gees, with a modern twist. It makes me so happy. All time favorite band: The Cure. Radiohead, Nirvana, Hole, then there's like crazy, R&B, MC Hammer, Cyndi Lauper, Prince, Michael Jackson. My father loved Motown. I grew up with tons of Motown."