

# The making of a modern-day muse

# Venus

BY ELIZABETH RAHE

**"Her name is Venus...Ruler of the universe...Master of all turfs...  
Her serve is like lightning...She can be so exciting."**

The words come to musician Wyclef Jean during the filming of an episode of Sundance Channel's *Iconoclasts* with Venus Williams, and he writes *Venus (I'm Ready)*, an ode to the tennis star.

Photographer Koto Bolofo is so taken with Venus that he produces an art book of retro and modern portraits, titled simply *Venus*. "It was almost like he had this dream and I was in it," she said during the unveiling of the book last year in London.

Bolofo also shot a 16-page fashion layout featuring Venus for Italian *Marie Claire*. The Miami shoot was chronicled on CNN's *Revealed*, in a profile that illustrates her skill before the camera as well as her power on the court.

While the Palm Beach Gardens tennis icon is providing inspiration for the dreams of artists, there is no doubt she is also creating her own. She is tennis phenomenon, designer, businesswoman, crusader for gender equality, fashion model and now, it seems, muse. At age 29, Venus says she is "living the dream," and there's no end in sight. Playing tennis professionally since 1994, she is still winning, still drawing crowds, still getting endorsements. She is the face of POWERADE ZERO, and she promotes Wilson tennis gear. She and her sister Serena have appeared with Eli and Peyton Manning in Oreo Double Stuf Racing League commercials and in a tennis court eveningwear-and-stiletto layout for *Harper's Bazaar*.

At Wimbledon this summer, Venus plans to defend two titles. Last year she beat Serena for her fifth singles title there, and her seventh singles grand slam. She also managed the fastest women's serve ever recorded at the tournament, 127 mph. Then the two sisters copped their third doubles win at the All England Club. In August, they went on to claim doubles gold in the Beijing Olympics. In February Venus became the only active player to score 40 WTA Tour singles titles with a win in Dubai, followed by her 41st in Acapulco.

Photograph by Koto Bolofo





She made more headlines during the Dubai awards ceremony, when she mentioned Shahar Peer, the Israeli player who was denied entry into the United Arab Emirates for the tournament. Looking back, Venus is philosophical about the incident. "There are a lot of people before me who paved the way to give me the opportunities I have in tennis and in this country. It should be no problem for me to do the right thing." Afterward, Israeli player Andy Ram received a visa for the men's event in Dubai.

It is not the first time Venus has spoken out against a perceived injustice. She was instrumental in the WTA Tour campaign to gain pay equity for women at grand slam tournaments, meeting with officials and penning a compelling essay, which appeared in London's *The Times* just before Wimbledon 2006. The next summer, she was the first Wimbledon women's champion to benefit from the change, receiving the same purse as the men's winner, Roger Federer. Venus also works with the WTA Tour/United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) campaign to further gender equality and

Compton, Calif., where they once dodged stray gunfire. In 1991 the Williamses sent the girls to the Rick Macci International Tennis Academy, then in Haines City and later in Delray Beach. The Williams family moved with them, settling in Pompano Beach. Determined to keep the girls' lives in balance, Richard and Oracene also focused on education, character and faith.

"They gave us a great sense of family and unity. It's huge in our lives, a major staple," Venus says. "They made sure we had a great spiritual background. It makes you realize what things are important and what you're aiming for. It makes you a better person and gives you something to look forward to in the future."

Raised as a Jehovah's Witness, Venus says that faith and family are still foremost, helping her to navigate life's challenges, including the stresses of fame and top-level competition. Venus and Serena have held firm on an eight-year boycott of the Indian Wells, Calif., tournament, although it has affected their WTA rankings and their stake in year-end bonus money. In 2001, fans there booed the sisters after Venus pulled

her, I couldn't have achieved anything," she said in a *Shape* magazine article. "She's helped me believe in myself." Venus tells of one Wimbledon final in which she kept repeating Serena's advice to her, along with the mantra "I want to be like Serena; I want to win like Serena." It worked.

For her part, Serena says she has always wanted what her big sister had, and she often challenges her for it. As of this writing, the two had faced off in 20 major tournaments, with Serena evening the score at 10-10 during a semifinal match at the Sony Ericsson Open in Miami April 2. Serena speaks with admiration of Venus' quiet tenacity and focus, in tennis and in other pursuits, including finishing her associate's degree in fashion design.

With all the distractions of her professional life, it took her eight years to complete the degree at the Art Institute of Fort Lauderdale, taking much of the coursework online and via correspondence. "I would ask questions at every step because I hate making mistakes...I don't have time for mistakes," she says.

Upon her graduation, Andre West, chair of the fashion programs at The Art Institute of Fort Lauderdale, praised her accomplishments. "Venus has been a blessing to the department in so many ways, her drive and focus...is somewhere in the stratosphere. She has taken that same drive that she shows on the court all the way to the cutting table, sewing machine and computer."

That drive has been evident, indeed, in her business pursuits. In 2002 she opened her interior design firm, V Starr Interiors, based in Jupiter. She says she stays involved with her company and its clients. "I try to pick out a special piece for every single one."

In 2007 she launched her casual fashion line, EleVen with Steve & Barry's. However, the store declared Chapter 7 bankruptcy last year, and Venus is currently looking for another retailer. In the meantime, she continues to design her own tennis wear. Her classic-style Goddess Dress, which debuted at last year's Wimbledon, is now retired, she says. For Miami's Sony Ericsson Open, she wore a tie-dye pink and purple tennis dress with a multi-layer skirt effect. She first modeled the new creation while standing atop a car on Ocean Drive, volleying with British player Andy Murray to promote the tournament.

When Venus is on the road, 25-30 weeks a year, her life is a cavalcade of promotional appearances, interviews, photo shoots and tournaments. When she gets back to Palm Beach Gardens, she settles into the haven she shares with Serena, an expansive Spanish-style home in Ballen Isles, a private golf and tennis community. She also has an apartment on Brickell Avenue in Miami.



Venus Williams, wearing her newest fashion creation, plays car-top tennis on Miami's Ocean Drive to promote the Sony Ericsson Open in March.

promote the empowerment of women throughout the world.

"That's a big one," she says of her support for UNESCO's mission. "Hopefully, that will be around much longer than I am."

She credits her parents, Richard and Oracene, with planting the seeds of her confidence and discernment. "They taught us to believe in ourselves. They also taught us to think. We can think logically and make good decisions for ourselves... not just accept anything."

By now the story of Venus and Serena's upbringing is legendary, how their father planned to make them champions, teaching them to play tennis on public courts in

out of a semifinal match with her sister due to injury. Richard Williams claimed the crowd's reaction was racially motivated and vowed never to return.

Such challenges, however, pale in comparison to the loss the family experienced in 2003, when the oldest sister, Yetunde Price, was shot to death while riding in a car in the Compton area. It was not far from the courts where the girls had practiced in their early years.

Venus remains close to her parents, who divorced in 2002, to older half-sisters Isha and Lyndrea, and of course, to Serena. It is her youngest sister, she says, who inspires and challenges her on the court. "Without

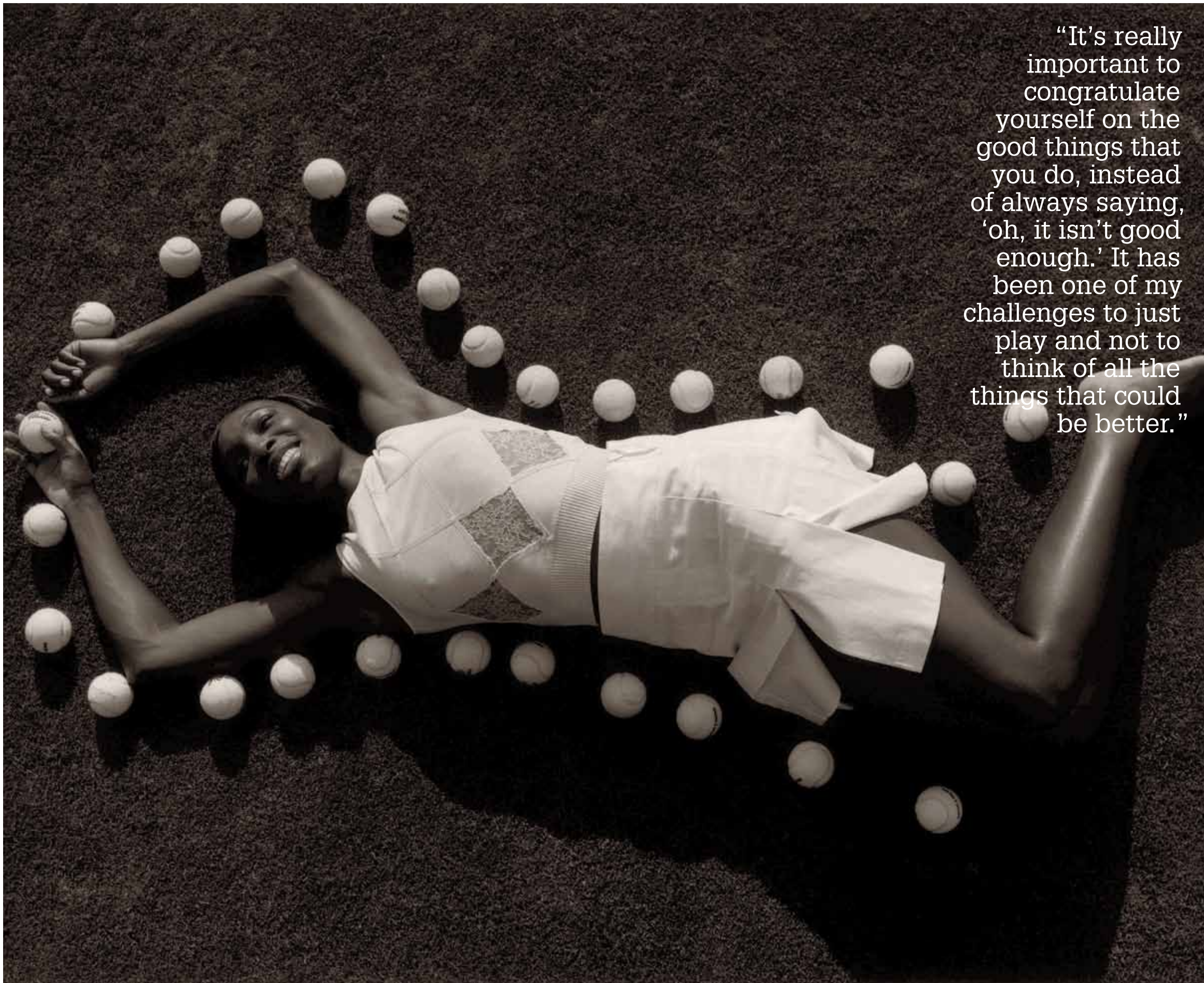


"There are a lot of people before me who paved the way to give me the opportunities I have in tennis and in this country. It should be no problem for me to do the right thing."

Photograph by Koto Bolofo

PHOTO BY CLIVE BRUNSKILL/GETTY IMAGES FOR SONY ERICSSON





“It’s really important to congratulate yourself on the good things that you do, instead of always saying, ‘oh, it isn’t good enough.’ It has been one of my challenges to just play and not to think of all the things that could be better.”

When she is not traveling, she focuses on unwinding and, of course, training. A typical day may include three hours of tennis work, an hour and a half in the gym and one to two hours for treatments and physical therapy.

“Whatever is hurting, I fix it. Then I get ready for the next day so I can fix something else,” she says. “I try to fit everything else in between the training.”

With her active lifestyle, Venus works more at keeping her calorie count up rather than trimming it. She does watch her sugar intake, however, as she reports in a WTA blog, eating pancakes but passing on the syrup. She stays hydrated with POWERADE when she’s playing. “I drink a lot the night before to get my body saturated. When I’m at home, I drink a lot of POWERADE ZERO, which has no calories. Even when I want something sweet, Zero takes away the urge.”

She makes time each day for Bible study. “It’s a big part of my life,” she says. In her free time she enjoys reading – she and Serena are currently hooked on fantasy novels – as well as dancing and music. She has been learning to play guitar and create music with Apple’s GarageBand program, but she aspires to learn Logic Studio. “Apparently, it’s pretty tough so I want to take a class on that,” she says.

Another focus of her attention is a 2-year-old Havanese dog named Harold, who travels with her whenever possible. “He was an impulse buy,” she says. “I was at the pet shop and he was just so cute.”

Venus has been dating golfer Hank Kuehne for the past couple years, and rumors of an engagement had surfaced last year. She declines to comment on the relationship, other than to state, plainly, “I am not engaged.” She once said she thought 30 was a target age for marriage, but there is no mention of that now. When asked what she sees herself doing in 10 years, she speaks of growing her clothing line and asks, “Now what Olympics would that be? I’ll be there, somewhere...getting another gold medal.”

As she looks back over nearly 15 years in professional tennis, she sees the strides she has made in weathering the storms and keeping perfectionist tendencies in perspective. “It’s really important to congratulate yourself on the good things that you do, instead of always saying, ‘oh, it isn’t good enough.’ It has been one of my challenges to just play and not to think of all the things that could be better.”

In a similar vein, she says her greatest challenge off the court has been to accept her limitations, but she sees more balance in recent years. “I love doing so many things, and I want to be good at everything I do. You’ve got to realize it’s not going to happen unless you get a clone. And the science is not at that level yet. And even if it was - who knows? - the clone probably would try to take over your identity,” she says, laughing. “You can see I’ve read too many science fiction books.”

Even in her singular form, Venus seems to be juggling her multifaceted life quite well. When asked about her proudest accomplishment, she laughs, “Not getting into trouble and making a fool of myself.” Given her impressive track record for minimizing unforced errors as well as capitalizing on opportunities, she may be serving up winners for years to come. Her plan, as she often says, is to just keep living the dream.

*Don’t stop. Even if you clash with the titans.*

*Don’t stop. I’ve seen the best get frightened.*

*Don’t stop. Her serve is like lightning.*

*Don’t stop. She can be so exciting.*

—Wyclef Jean