



Fire Proof

A DUI cost radio personality Porsche Foxx her job. Then her house burned down. Now she's back on the air—but will she be back on top?

FOR MOSES it was the burning bush. It came to Joseph in a dream. And Jonah heard it in the belly of a whale. Apparently God gets a kick out of speaking to people at the oddest times. For Stephanie Calhoun, it seems the middle of the street was as good a place as any for the Almighty to deliver an important message. She'd just lost her job as one of the most popular radio personalities in Atlanta. Now here she was, staring in disbelief at the charred remains of her prized five-bedroom home that had just burned down to the ground, when she says the man upstairs spoke to her. "He said, 'You'll either overcome this or you won't,'" she recalls. It might not seem that portentous a prophecy, but for Calhoun, known to Atlanta radio listeners

as "Porsche Foxx who rocks your box," it was a life-changing declaration.

"Here I am in the street having this conversation with God, and he says to me that 'you need to make a decision *right now*.' I thought for a minute, then I told him, 'I *will* overcome this,'" she says, tearing up at the memory. "I didn't really have a clue of how I was going to do it, at the time, but I made up my mind that I was going to beat this!"

Today it seems Foxx is living up to her street-side promise to herself, to God, and the thousands of fans who fancy her as Atlanta's BFF. After two and a half years under the radar, she reclaimed her coveted afternoon slot on top-rated V-103 this summer. The road back, however, has

been a tumultuous one filled with pain, embarrassment, self-exploration, and a whole lot of faith.

Three years ago, Foxx's career was at its peak. After years traveling the country with on-air jobs in Little Rock, Shreveport, Pittsburgh, and Houston, in 1998 she joined V-103 as the first woman to host an afternoon drive show. Accolades continued when she became the first female deejay in the state to achieve a number one rating in that time slot, and she consistently ranked either number one or number two in the market.

Her sassy and vivacious radio banter and slogan—"make your haters your motivators"—became a personal mantra for her fans. She garnered more popularity hosting signature special events including her popular "Meet Market," a mixer for singles, and her racy girls' night out featuring the Black Chippendales. Her community service work, which included collecting Christmas toys, coats, and school supplies for needy children, even led Governor Roy Barnes to proclaim June 6, 2000, "Porsche Foxx Day." In the 2003 "Best of Atlanta" issue, this magazine named her program "Best *Oprah* Alternative," declaring, "There's a whole lot to love about this show and its host."

Then, early on the morning of December 19, 2004, Foxx was arrested while driving home. According to DeKalb County Police, an officer patrolling I-285 around 2 a.m. observed Foxx driving "extremely slow and erratically" and pulled her over for showing "signs of extreme impairment." The officer reported that he found a small amount of marijuana in her purse. According to media reports, she told him that she'd had an alcoholic drink and had taken an anxiety medication prescribed by her doctor.

Foxx was taken to the DeKalb County jail, where she was charged with driving under the influence of alcohol, misdemeanor possession of less than an ounce of marijuana, and impeding the flow of traffic. A computer check revealed that she was driving with a suspended

license, driving an unregistered vehicle, and had no insurance. Foxx vehemently maintained her innocence. The next day she was released on \$4,025 bond—but a tempest was already brewing.

Foxx's mug shot was plastered across the front of *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution's* Metro section alongside the headline "DJ disputes DUI, drug reports."

To this day Foxx remains tight-lipped about the specifics of what happened on that December morning or thereafter. V-103 listeners were told that Foxx was on a "previously scheduled vacation" and several other DJs filled her time slot for weeks. By January she had been officially let go. On February 20, the roof of her half-a-million-dollar, two-story home erupted into flames. She and her white mini apricot poodle were not harmed, but the home was a loss. Investigators later ruled the accidental fire was caused by faulty wiring.

"For the first time in my life I felt my legs

breaking underneath me. It was so real. It was so scary. I was like, 'God, why is this happening to me?'" she says. "It looked like a dark tunnel with a dead-end sign at the end."

Foxx says the past two and a half years have been a rebuilding process—rebuilding her 6,500-square-foot home in a gated subdivision and, more importantly, rebuilding *herself* from the inside out. Away from the glare of celebrity, she lived in a temporary home and made ends meet doing voice-over and consulting work for other radio stations. She also spent a lot of time traveling and visiting her family. "This situation allowed me to put the brakes on a lot of stuff in my life and focus on me," she says. "I was able to put some things in perspective. I know this is something I needed to go through to get where I am today."

In August 2006, Foxx pleaded guilty in state criminal court, and two months later she was sentenced to thirty-six months of probation, fines, alcohol rehab, and 240

hours of community service. She quietly took her punishment and resurfaced publicly in June of this year when she officially announced her return on V-103's *Frank & Wanda Morning Show*. "I felt like I should apologize to the city first, particularly my fans, because the bad decision that I made affected them, too. I wanted to take responsibility for how and why I left," she says.

Foxx's return to the same station that let her go is unusual in the radio business. "When someone gets fired, it's a general rule of thumb that they find their second chance across the street—not the same place where they got fired from," notes radio industry analyst Frank Saxe, senior editor of *Inside Radio*, a nationally distributed daily radio industry newsletter. "Clearly Porsche is an exception to the rule. I wouldn't go as far as to say that it's never happened before, but it is unusual. I guess if Reverend [Al] Sharpton can forgive [Don] Imus and he can come back on the air, how can we ever say anybody's gone for good?"

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Clearly V-103 knows the advertisers and the audience that she brought in and they believe she's a great talent. Plus, America just loves a comeback story!"

Rick Caffey, senior vice president and market manager of CBS Radio Atlanta, which owns V-103, says he maintained contact with Foxx throughout her time off the air. "We always saw her as part of our family, but we just felt it was important for her to leave and go take care of her life," says Caffey, who was instrumental in rehiring Foxx. "We were happy when she got to the point where she had dealt with those important things in her life, and we're happy to have her back. Now she's another star in our already superstar lineup."

On Monday, July 9, at 10 a.m., Foxx officially signed on, humbly thanking the listeners for all their "love." That first week included a down-home breakfast at a Decatur Waffle House, a lavish party at a Midtown lounge that brought out some of

the city's top leaders, including City Council president Lisa Borders, and a celebrity-studded live broadcast from the Fox Sports Grill in Atlantic Station that featured rapper-turned-TV-star Eve and R&B crooners Jagged Edge.

In her short time back, Foxx has been connecting with her old fans and winning over some new ones. Her personal challenges seem to have humanized her in a way that has strengthened her bond with her listeners. It just may be the reason embattled Falcon Michael Vick decided to give her his first interview after he was indicted on federal charges related to dogfighting.

"As you know, I've been through some things, too. It's made me stronger, it's made me wiser, it's made me a better person," Foxx told a subdued Vick during the taped phone interview. "I can tell you a lot of love and prayers got me through my own situation."

"She is a living testimony to issues that a lot of people are dealing with," adds Caffey.

"The fact that she has bounced back from a tragic situation in her life resonates. We are all very proud of her. Is she out of the woods yet? No. But we are happy to be a part of her journey."

Foxx's fellow V-103 personality Frank Ski echoes the sentiment, saying, "Her return is a good move for her, and it's a good move for the station. Her story broadens her appeal. She's back on top because she did such a great job of ingraining herself into the community before what happened."

Foxx insists that now she's more grounded and spiritual—character traits that she says were worth developing through all of the tears. "Through this ordeal I was humiliated; no doubt my faith was tested," she says. "I felt stripped, but I didn't realize that I was in the caterpillar stage. I had no idea that one day I'd emerge as a beautiful butterfly." ■

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