



After playing televangelist Tammy Faye Messner, Jessica Chastain won her first Oscar. Now, as she takes on country star Tammy Wynette, she reveals why winning doesn't change a thing

Comedian Jon Stewart used to joke that fame in Hollywood is like a nightclub with increasingly exclusive VIP rooms, one after another, leading ultimately to the final velvet rope, beyond which Jack Nicholson sat alone, having a party all by himself. Jessica Chastain can relate, she says, at least in one way. After winning the Academy Award for Best Actress in *The Eyes of Tammy Faye* earlier this year, she went to a few parties but says, "Parties aren't really my thing." She would often just sit and people watch, which she loves to do. "I'm quite shy in groups of people," she says. At one party where she had parked herself on a quiet couch for the duration, the host came over and asked her if he could introduce her to the other guests. "And I was like, I'm good here," she says. "He was so sweet, and then he goes, 'There's one other person who comes to my party and sits exactly where you are, and they never moved: Jack Nicholson.'"



Wallflower or not, Chastain has a majestic screen presence that made for a very splashy entrance to the collective consciousness in 2011, eight years after she had graduated from the acting school at Juilliard, with an incredible run of films including Terrence Malick's Palme d'Or winner, *The Tree of Life*, and *The Help*, for which Chastain received her first Oscar nomination, for Best Supporting Actress. The following year, playing a fictionalized CIA analyst on the hunt for Osama bin Laden in Kathryn Bigelow's *Zero Dark Thirty*, Chastain introduced us to the zeal and determination that have become signatures of her characters in the time since. Hers is a massive, concussive performance as the heroic and tarnished leader of Team America, effectively, for which she received a Golden Globe for Best Actress and her first Oscar nomination for the same category—in a film that has gone on to become one of the most talked about and second-guessed American films since 9/11. None of which is incidental to Chastain, who has said that filmmaking is a political act, a line she attributes to Jean-Luc Godard. And, incidentally, when I begin to ask how we ought to think about *Zero Dark Thirty* now—about whether the film should be diminished in our estimation by claims that it is an instrument of CIA propaganda and misrepresents the effectiveness (and so endorses the cost benefits of) torture—

Chastain wants me to know that those lines of thinking were introduced to the discourse by a competitor in that year's Oscars race, someone involved in a competing campaign who she says is no longer in the industry. "I know about the criticism, and I disagree with it," she says. I also seem to remember the film being recognized as a watershed for women in Hollywood: produced by Megan Ellison's Annapurna Pictures, directed by Bigelow, and with Chastain front and center. But, she says, "it wasn't marketed that way at all. I wasn't even on the poster."

*"I like to meditate, do yoga. That to me is a luxury, because in my job it's the opposite of quiet"*



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This, of course, is astonishing now, especially knowing just how deep in the nesting club of fame and power Chastain is. It's a position she has been using both to make the kinds of films she'd like to see and to center women in the kinds of movies that have historically ignored them (as stars and as an audience). This year we finally got to see *The 355*, a film Chastain co-produced that is not unlike the action thrillers *Taken* or *John Wick*, which created booming second acts for craggy middle-aged male movies stars—though *The 355* stars Chastain, Diane Kruger, Fan Bingbing, Lupita Nyong'o and Penélope Cruz as the superspies. It, and they, kick a lot of ass, both on screen and, as Chastain says, in the real-life boardrooms behind the scenes. "I had the idea [for the film] right around the time of the MeToo movement and Time's Up," Chastain says now. "When this industry had been, for years, discarding women at a certain age and determining whether or not they were sexually desirable, and they were more ornaments than artists. And I was like, 'Well, what happens if they're actually the bosses? What happens if they are the ones in charge of the films?' And by creating the structure of selling the film and making the film, I took the power out of some guy sitting in an office building somewhere and put it in the artist's hands. And it actually was an easy thing to do. I mean, it was a lot of work, but more movies can be made like that. And more actors and actresses in particular should be making movies like that—where they have ownership in their work."

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To further illustrate the point, she brings up the example of Charlie Chaplin's United Artists, a filmmaker-founded and -owned studio that became a powerful force in the industry, making and selling Chaplin's films, among others. "They took [the power] and put it in their own hands," Chastain says. "And any kind of coalition where you sell foreign rights, you are the studio then. Your value is your name and what you've done. And now you're an owner of it. You haven't just been a technician for hire. You are an owner." Chastain's company is bringing out *Mother's Instinct*, a thriller in which she and Anne Hathaway co-star, and the miniseries *George & Tammy*, in which she and Michael Shannon play the country singers George Jones and Tammy Wynette. Known as the first lady of country music, Wynette in her prime had the kind of five-story-tall hairdo and massive persona that might have been the stuff of camp in television biopics of yore. But knowing just how humanely and intensely Chastain approached the last real-life Tammy she had portrayed, we reckon the singer, most famous for crooning "Stand By Your Man," is in the best hands imaginable. (She is also the co-lead in a fictionalized account of the serial killer Charles Cullen, played by Eddie Redmayne, in *The Good Nurse* on Netflix.)



*The Eyes of Tammy Faye* had been a passion project of Chastain's for a decade, and her performance earned her a third Oscar nomination, and her first trophy, earlier this year. At my request, she takes a moment to think about that fact: that she is the reigning Academy Award winner for Best Actress. And quite quickly she waves it away, ready to get back to work—though she does allow that the award means a lot to her family. “Winning this year is so nice because my family has worked so hard,” she says. “They’ve seen me want to do this since I was a little kid. And to have that global recognition, especially for a project that I secured the rights for 10 years ago, it was a big deal. But in terms of my trajectory as an actress, it doesn’t really go, ‘Oh, now I have these new opportunities.’” She still gets the same scripts. She is still the little girl who wanted to be an actress as far back as she can remember, who, she says, felt she was in possession of a surplus of emotion or a facility to access them. And I like to imagine her as an elementary school student in the golden glow of California sun, rounding up her childhood schoolmates to put on performances...



Chastain grew up in Sacramento. She characterizes her childhood as “tough” and later says, “We were very poor.” She does not elaborate, and the way she doesn’t speak seems to speak very loudly. It has been mentioned that she and her late father were estranged, that she and her siblings and mother struggled to afford food, and that she lost a sister to suicide nearly two decades ago—so maybe no more needs to be said. She speaks with some awe about how difficult it must have been for her mother, and says she is incredibly grateful for the experiences she’s had, for the perspective her life has given her. We wonder aloud about how her early life may have shaped her, both as a person and as an artist, tuning her instrument. And the way she describes it, her childhood, the austerity and challenges and her feelings of isolation then, she says, made her very sensitive to other people’s energy, the way you would be if others pose potential threats. Like an empath, or an actor, she is very absorbent of other people’s energy. And, she says, “I believe that porousness comes from a sense of ... I go into a room and I’m immediately like, ‘Is there an element of danger in this room?’”

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JESSICA CHASTAIN



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Chastain remembers a time early in her life when she was living in Santa Monica, near Third Street Promenade, when she felt so intensely her thrill at the work of acting, how much she wanted to make a living doing it, on stage and screen. And she talks about returning there some time later, when she could hardly go around on the street without being recognized, and standing in front of the building that she once called home. She could feel all the feelings come rushing back. There is a wonderful mix of humility and pride as she tells this story, a California girl made good. Really, really good.

Chastain lives in New York with her husband, Gian Luca Passi de Preposulo, an Italian fashion executive (and an Italian count). She has called the city home ever since winning the Robin Williams-funded scholarship to Juilliard, where she befriended, among others, her frequent collaborator and viral clip co-star Oscar Isaac. When Chastain does return to the Golden State, it is mostly to L.A. for work and to its surrounding mountains for relaxation. “I’m a huge fan of spas,” she says, “and I love hiking.” She has spent time at The Ranch Malibu, a wellness retreat, and similarly loves the health spa Lanserhof in Austria. “I love quiet,” she says. “I like to meditate, do yoga. That to me is a luxury, because in my job it’s the opposite of quiet. It’s chaos.”