



ART OF

LOVED

Tapping into your natural talents is a gift to the world. To do it alongside a soul mate is downright magical. Meet four couples who have discovered that building creative careers together can lead to a masterpiece: **a solid marriage**

Life and dance partners Glenn and Linda Sims perform around the world.

ANDREW ECCLES

The Dancers Glenn & Linda Sims Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater

Married 1.5.2001

It was Linda Celeste's legs that first caught Glenn Sims's gaze 16 years ago. "I remember looking at her amazing calves," Glenn, now 38, recalls, "and it changing my whole life." That day back in 1997 was Glenn's first rehearsal with Alvin Ailey, the preeminent African-American dance company—and the first time he met his future wife, who had joined the troupe a year earlier. After that fateful rehearsal, Glenn and Linda walked together to New York's 59th Street train station, forging a sweet friendship. Still, it would take time—and a *my cliente* turn on the dance floor—before sparks officially flew, at least on her part. "I thought of him as just a friend," Linda, 37, admits. "He was a great listener and we would laugh at the same things."

While touring internationally with the company, the two drew closer. They both loved dance, of course, but also discovered they had many mutual acquaintances and a shared passion for food and music. Their friendship got a jolt of something more when they visited a salsa club while touring in Europe in 1998. It was on that dance floor that Linda started looking at Glenn differently. She had no idea he could salsa and merengue—and keep up with her! "It turned me on," she says with a laugh. "Salsa brought us together."

The two began dating but chose not to broadcast it to the others at Ailey. "I wanted to keep work separate and keep my business my business," Linda says. "So at rehearsals we'd be in work mode, which meant no smooching or holding hands. But we would still talk, laugh and sit together." It wasn't until they decided to get married three years later that they finally told their colleagues about their romance.

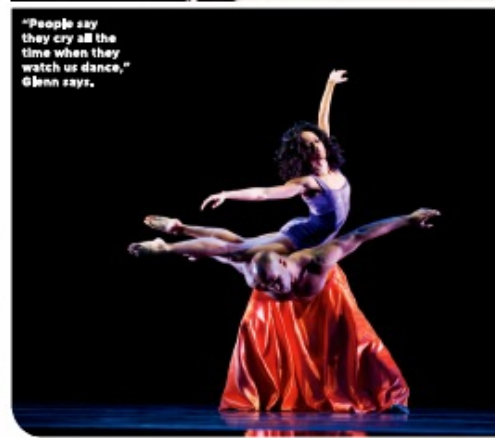
Because of their intense performance schedule, the couple planned their nuptials to take place during their January break before Glenn even proposed. But Glenn still wanted to formally pop the question to his leading lady. Two weeks before their wedding, Glenn got up early one morning as Linda slept. He created a trail of rose petals from the bed to the bathroom, drew her a bath, broke out strawberries and champagne, and laid out a collection of love poems. Linda awoke completely surprised by his romantic gestures. After reading "To Love Someone Is Life's Greatest Gift" by Teresa M. Reiches and serving his homemade cinnamon-raisin French toast, Glenn gave Linda a single rose with her engagement ring hidden in the petals, while she sat on the couch in pajamas with a head full of rollers.

"I found it so romantic and beautiful," Linda remembers. "For me the proposal was genuine. It didn't have to be grand, as long as it came from the heart."

Fourteen years later, the duo is still dancing. They now perform several pieces during the Ailey season, and onstage their chemistry is palpable and captivating. "When we dance together, there's a sense of trust. There is a whole other artistry that opens up because the love is already there," says Linda. As leadership transitioned at the dance company, the couple continued to be matched as partners, even by directors



The couple met on Glenn's first day as an Ailey dancer in 1997. Sparks flew once they hit the dance floor.



"People say they cry all the time when they watch us dance," Glenn says.

and choreographers who didn't know they were married. "We have both spent our careers dancing with other people where you have to draw more out," Glenn says, "but if you're already comfortable with someone, you can really be yourself. People say they cry all the time when they watch us dance."

Sharing the same employer with your spouse can seem challenging to many. But for Linda and Glenn, working and dancing together has given their partnership a rock-solid foundation and deepened their love. "When you're going back and forth with the same schedules, you sometimes forget that this person was your friend before you said 'I do' and before you went on this entire journey together," says Glenn. "I have to remind myself that not only is Linda my wife and my coworker, but she's also my friend." Adds Linda: "There is no script to marriage, and it takes a lot of work. It's about communication and remembering how you met. And keep rekindling the spark: Get some sexy pumps!" —LaShieka Purvis Hunter >

FROM TOP: DWANA SWALLOW; NINA KIELLE.



After four critically acclaimed albums and six kids, Aja and Fatin find that their love is still in tune.

The duo sang at the Brooklyn Academy of Music's 2011 Tribute to Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

The Hitmakers Aja & Fatin Dantzler Kindred the Family Soul

Married 9.19.1998

In 1998 Aja Graydon was 19 and a budding singer when she met Philadelphia songwriter and producer Fatin Dantzler, then 24, at a New York recording studio. The D.C. native was introduced to Fatin so he could help with her solo album. "It was a pretty boring introduction," Aja remembers. "We were just sitting there trying to write songs." Despite the dull first encounter, a deep connection formed as they worked side by side. The pair courted for only eight months before getting married a week before Aja's twentieth birthday.

So what made Fatin The One? "One day he was eating a Twix and offered me a piece. I told him he didn't have enough for me and he said, 'If there's enough for one, there's enough for two,'" Aja says. "At that moment, I saw him as someone with unique values. He immediately made me a priority."

Fatin saw it as destiny that he and Aja connected while trying to start their music careers. "We had a lot in common and talked about everything," he says. "I remember waking up one morning before taking her to the train to go home. I didn't want her to leave and asked her to marry me. I wanted to be with her forever."

Family members bristled at their decision to wed so quickly. "Everyone thought we were rushing," Aja says. When it was evident the pair were serious, their families gave their support.

After marrying, the couple soon became pregnant with their first child. With the instability of the music industry and a baby

on the way, they put their music careers on hold. Fatin got a job at an appliance store, where he was employee of the month twice before the company had to cut staff. The couple took Fatin's downsizing as a sign to focus on their love of music and make it together as R&B duo Kindred the Family Soul. "We were brave," Aja says. "Every major move we took, we took together in faith."

That faith paid off, as the pair garnered major success and a solid fan base with their passionate, candid love songs. They've released four critically acclaimed albums, raised six kids (ages 3 to 14), and even serenaded First Lady Michelle Obama with the national anthem at a 2011 Philadelphia campaign event. ("She told us she was a fan of our music," Fatin recalls.) Though fame would have taxed some relationships, it has only brought Aja and Fatin closer. "Our union has become stronger because of how open we are about our successes and struggles," Aja says.

Balancing music careers and parenting isn't always easy or conventional—their daughter Nina, for example, took her first steps in a radio station—but the two have found their groove. "When working parents travel, there's usually one parent who's

on the road [at a time], but for us it's both," Aja says. The couple make sure they're never away for extended periods. And they've officially locked in the Kindred clan at six kids, following Fatin's vasectomy.

The Dantzlers make important decisions together, finish each other's sentences, and laugh hard and loud. But the laughs turn to tears when they talk about their music. "House of Love" makes me cry every time I listen to it—it really is a biography of us," Aja says of the ballad from Kindred's first album. And any opportunity they have to sing together is a joy. Says Fatin, "Performing our songs is very therapeutic for our relationship, because we're constantly singing to each other about the best parts of our love." —L.P.H.

The Collectors Bernard & Shirley Kinsey The Kinsey Collection

Married 2.11.1967

What's the secret to being happily married for 47 years? According to Bernard and Shirley Kinsey, it's simple: dedication. For close to five decades, the Los Angeles-based couple have been committed not only to each other but also to gathering a rich and profoundly stirring collection of art and artifacts, chronicling African-American history and culture from the 1600's until today.

The couple met in the early 1960's as teenagers on the campus of Florida A&M University shortly after Shirley, a civil rights activist, was released from jail for demonstrating in Tallahassee. They walked down the aisle in 1967 after four years of dating and soon moved to Los Angeles for Bernard's new job as a park ranger and Shirley's as a teacher. They knew almost no one in California, which made them rely heavily on each other.

"Traveling helps us keep the romantic part of our relationship going."

—Bernard Kinsey

"Having to come to a strange place with no friends or family was the best thing to ever happen to Shirley and me," says Bernard. They also shared a dream—to see the world—and delayed having children to do so. Soon the couple who arrived in California with just \$26 were filling up their passports. Their serious saving habit—Shirley fashioned her own clothes, and gave herself and her husband haircuts—allowed them the freedom to travel and, later, invest in a new passion.

On the many trips they took across the country and abroad, Bernard and Shirley began collecting trinkets (war beads from Greece) and tokens (sand from Brazil) to bring back with them. Neither had grown up with art, other than the standard Jesus portrait typical in Black homes at that time, but together they developed

a love for beautiful and historic creations. The birth of their son, Khalil, in 1977, three weeks after *Roots* first aired, inspired them to hone their interest. "That made us realize we had learned so much about other cultures but didn't know enough about our own," Shirley says. "Now with a child, we needed to give him a background on his history. That steered us down the path of African-American art."

Shirley remembers their first big purchase: the painting "High Aspirations" by Ernie Barnes, the artist behind all of JJ's work on the 1970's sitcom *Good Times*. Bernard, by that time a branch manager for Xerox, began giving prints of the painting instead of plaques to high-achieving employees at his job. "We were trying to educate folks about our culture back then and didn't even know it," Shirley remembers.

In 2005 the *Los Angeles Times* published a story on the couple's Pacific Palisades home with 15 images, and soon the California African American Museum asked to showcase their pieces. The response propelled the couple to become serious collectors, and the rest is, well, art history.

Today the Kinsey Collection is one of the largest private assemblages of African-American art. It has been

shown in 15 museums across the country, including the Smithsonian, and has sparked a coffee-table book as well as the online film series *Untold Stories: Our Inspired History*. It honors the one hundred fiftieth anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation and was produced by Wells Fargo. In 2013 the Kinseys' exhibition featuring a portion of their collection went on display at Walt Disney World's Epcot Center—the first time that theme park has ever showcased the work of an African-American family—and it will remain there until 2015.

They recently celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of their first meeting with a trip to the Greek isles. "Traveling helps us keep the romantic part of our relationship going," Bernard says. —L.P.H. >

The Kinseys' magnificent art collection started in their home (far right) and led to a coffee-table book (bottom center).



The Producers Mara Brock & Salim Akil Akil Productions

Married 4.24.1999

Art often imitates life. And the love story of Salim Akil and Mara Brock-Akil, creator of *Girlfriends*, *The Game* and *Being Mary Jane*, could be its own movie.

They met in the late 1990s, when Salim's friend was interested in Mara and took him to check her out at the Los Angeles writers' café she frequented. They shared a short hello. A year later Salim was walking down the street with that same friend when they spotted Mara. The friend was now in a serious relationship, so Mara was fair game. Salim walked up to her and invited her on a date: a one-night-only jazz performance of the Pulitzer-winning *Blood on the Fields* by Wynton Marsalis in two weeks.

Two days before the concert, on January 27, 1997, they had dinner together. "I fell in love with him that night," Mara says. Both writers, jazz lovers and Muslims, they connected over many topics, from growing up with single mothers to following their creative dreams. As they prepared to part at 4 A.M., Salim reminded Mara it had been a year since they met. He asked her what would she say if they were parting in another year. "She got tears in her eyes," he recalls. "She said, 'I would say that I love you.' I said, 'Well, I love you, too, so can we cut the bulls— and get about the business of living a life together?'"

At the time, Mara was a writer for *Moesha* and Salim was a writer for the movie *Drylongso*, which played at the Sundance Film Festival. However, finances were still playing catch-up with their talents. One night Mara prepared to take Salim home ("My car was broke down—it didn't even have a window on the driver's side," he chimes in), and the idea of being apart became too much to bear. "I told him

how much I loved him and did not want to spend my life without him," she says. "And so I asked him to marry me."

As life partners, the duo often trade work advice on new projects. "We are each other's secret weapon," Mara says. After an executive joked they were a combo deal, the newlyweds formed their production company, Akil Productions. Salim officially came aboard Mara's hit series *Girlfriends* in 2003 and directed the memorable season three finale (Toni's wedding). Though the creative partners understand each other more than most, they still set boundaries when working together. "On her project she is the boss; on my project I'm the boss," says Salim, who has also directed the movies *Sparkle* and *Jumping the Broom*. As their plates have gotten fuller—including their BRT production deal, Salim's upcoming series with HBO and a new joint film project in the mix—the two have turned their creativity to scheduling time together. "If it means that I'm in Toronto and she's in L.A. and we have to meet in New York, we do that," Salim says. "Whatever we need to do to maintain our friendship and relationship, we do." They're also adamant about not bringing work into their home, wrapping up business calls in the driveway before walking through the door.

The Akils have two young sons together and have strong relationships with the now-adult children Salim fathered as a teen. "Mara has helped me with the stress and guilt I felt in not being able to do more for them when they were children," says Salim, whose oldest son recently finished working with them on the new season of *The Game*.

Funny enough, two weeks before meeting Salim, Mara declared she wouldn't want to date a man with kids. "The lesson in that is, tell God your plans, and He will laugh and send you everything you need in a package you said you didn't want," she says. "I'm glad that my mother taught me to see the individual, because I would have missed out on this man who saved my life." —Charreah K. Jackson □



"We are each other's secret weapon," Mara says. She and Salim took home a 2012 NAACP Image Award for Outstanding Writing (right).



FROM LEFT: COURTESY OF SUBJECT; URBANMY/HEATHWY/LONDON



The Akils are aglow on the day of their wedding in 1999, held at their California home.

"What's been successful for us is we keep defining for ourselves what our life should look like personally, professionally and spiritually. If you compare yourself to other people, then you get distracted and can't see your own blessings."

—Mara Brock-Akil



For tips on keeping your relationship hot from the Akils and other couples, visit ESSENCE.COM/MAKINGITWORK.