





LADY GAGA

ON THE RELEASE OF
HER NEW ALBUM,
THE INSCRUTABLE POP
PERFORMER REVEALS
HER MOST ARRESTING
CHARACTER YET: HERSELF.

BY DARRYL PINCKNEY
PHOTOGRAPHS BY COLLIER SCHORR
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VINTAGE TOP, \$38. QUALITYMENDING.CO. VINTAGE JEANS, TIFFANY & CO.
NECKLACES, \$425 (TOP) AND \$6,000; TIFFANY.COM. EARRINGS, LADY GAGA'S OWN

ONE AFTERNOON THIS PAST July, in the West Village, in Electric Lady Studios, Jimi Hendrix's old dream, I met Lady Gaga. She came up a flight of steps and was through the door almost before I could stand up, hugging me. She wore a black Mary Quant hat, and was dressed in a white T-shirt and crisp black jeans.

The 30-year-old performer was in New York, in this temple of music, recording her new album, "Joanne." She said we might as well begin by listening to some songs from it and led the way into an inner studio of large electronic boards and glass. She sat on a stool by one of the boards and plugged in her iPhone. A cameraman — she is making a documentary about the new project — filmed the whole time.

The first song she played, the lead single, "Perfect Illusion," is a driving, flat-out, dance-a-mess tune. A ballad followed, a tribute to her aunt Joanne, whom she never knew but was named for. (She was born Stefani Joanne Angelina Gemanotta.) Joanne died at age 19, of complications from lupus, and Gaga said, tears in her eyes as the touching song hung in the air, that her family never stopped grieving the loss.

To snap us out of it, she selected another upbeat number. Right off, she turned toward me and hit the air guitar, lip-syncing, rocking her shoulders. At one point, she was up on her Doc Martens, bopping, then thrashing around, a woman possessed. It is impossible to resist Gaga churning it up, maxing out, only a few feet away — and why would you want to? As with, it seems, every room she walks into, Gaga came into this one and put it all on the line. In her work, her trust is as vivid as the risks she takes.

Gaga, who grew up in New York, on the Upper West Side, was 13 years old and trying on clothes at a neighborhood boutique when the guy who ran the shop heard her singing to herself. He thought she had an amazing voice and suggested she reach out to his uncle, Don Lawrence, a vocal coach who'd worked with Christina Aguilera, Mick Jagger and Billy Joel. Gaga said she was shaking when they first spoke. Lawrence gave her an appointment. She sang Mariah Carey's "Hero" for him, and he told her that he would make room in his schedule for her, and give her a special rate, if she practiced every day. She promised she would.

They met on Wednesdays at 6 o'clock. At the end of each lesson, her voice was so warm, not just high in her throat, she recalled, but low and deep in her body. She would leave his studio and sing in the rotunda of his building because of the acoustics. On the walk home, she said, she was still "singing at the top of my lungs. I didn't care who could hear me, just singing, singing, singing, couldn't believe how good it felt. It was the most healing feeling in the world."

Seventeen years later, Lawrence is still putting her through her scales "like an army." He trained her for the

Oscars; he was there for her "Star-Spangled Banner" at Super Bowl 50; he was listening to her downstairs at Electric Lady Studios only two days before. Family is the most important thing in the world to Gaga, and Lawrence is family.

Global fame at the age of 22 is early, but not sudden, not if the will to get there possessed you as a child and had you standing at the top of the stairs singing the same song over and over, trying the patience of your family, who nevertheless understood and supported you. "I remember so clearly being just enamored and overwhelmed by the mystery of Judy Garland in 'The Wizard of Oz,' and her voice and her power as a performer," she said. "It used to make me cry, and even when I was really little I always wanted to be an actress." (As if fated, Gaga will star in Bradley Cooper's remake of "A Star Is Born," in the role previously played by Garland.)

To perform is not a need for her, it is a must: "My whole life is a theater piece." She doesn't remember herself as being different from her classmates, though she will concede that they may have felt it in her eagerness to practice, in her willingness to miss out on the fun, to be in almost every school show, the jazz band, to study piano, take ballet and tap classes. Her career answered them.

New York's various undergrounds can make for a disciplined apprenticeship, and Gaga takes pride in her earliest fan base of art, fashion and music students. ("My artpop could mean anything," a song of hers goes.) Her eclectic music videos are theatrical: full of depth, volume, costume and color; every move thought out to the edges of the frame. She has collaborated with Robert Wilson, master of avant-garde theater, making in 2013 the controversial video "Flying," in which she is bound nude and hoisted aloft. ("Do what you want with my body," she sang in another song. "You can't stop my voice.") In a series of video portraits, also from 2013, Wilson had Gaga portray, among other images from European painting, the head of John the Baptist on a charger.

And she keeps branching out; she can't see

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spending her life keeping up with the kids. “I wanted to become a woman,” she said of the album of jazz standards she released in 2014 with Tony Bennett. “My audience went, ‘Wait, why is she singing jazz? What’s going on?’ And then they went, ‘Oh, because she can. Because she loves it.’ And jazz, a music invented by the African-American community, is the greatest art form, I believe, to have ever come out of this country.” She knows the history, and what it means to be a white artist singing jazz, but when she was a kid she did not “process music in a racial way or in a gender way.” She was, she said, just listening.

Though she did not grow up a black girl, “I can feel and see the fear and the power of it,” she said. “The justice system is broken. I have seen what I’ve gone through with [the LGBT community], or what I feel I’ve gone through with them on a spiritual level. When there’s justice and change, you start to see the cleansing of the soul and that is what I want for people, and I hope it’s okay for me to say those things.”

Being a woman has given her perspective and a capacity for identification with marginalized groups. “I became obsessed with writing their stories in musical form,” said Gaga, who sings about fragility while kicking butt rhythmically. “It’s an endless proving of myself, that I really am a musician, that I have something to offer in the room. That women can be musicians, women can be rock stars, women can be more than an objectified idea of a pop star.”

Gaga chafed at her classical education in the arts because the call of pop and rock was already so strong in her — all along, the artist had been gathering. Lawrence encouraged her to write songs, which she admitted can be challenging. “I get blocked by my own trauma sometimes,” she said. “The darkness, the loop of negative thoughts on repeat, clamors and interferes with the music I hear in my head. When I’m making music, I can hear all the parts, all the instruments. I can hear what it should be.”

She remembered an interview with John Lennon in *Playboy*. He talked about how he couldn’t listen to some of the Beatles’ biggest records because the creative process had been so intense — to hear the music again took him back to the insanity. When she’s writing, she said, “You start to get into a zone — what I would also describe as a mindfulness. You have to be aware that there are unwanted things coming in, but there is clarity in there, too, and you have to find it.” Gaga is not interested in the romanticism of self-destruction, but she did learn something even more important from Lennon. “Nerve,” she said. “You just have to have nerve.” ■

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