



FLORENCE & THE FAME MACHINE

*Florence Welch opens up on music,
mysticism and bonding with Karl Lagerfeld.
ELIO IANNACCI talks to rock 'n' roll's next legend*

WATCHING FLORENCE WELCH SING LIVE is like watching a flame dance on a candle. She twirls like a haunted spirit, coiling her slim six-foot frame without inhibition. The 25-year-old does not simply perform; she transforms.

On and offstage, Florence + the Machine—the band she fronts, which includes a rotating roster of up to seven other U.K.-based musicians—pride themselves on producing transcendental experiences. Which is why they named their latest album, *Ceremonials*, after an inspiring 1970s art installation Welch saw and just couldn't shake. The band's new disc boasts grand symphonies, powerful gospel choirs and gutsy choruses—anthems that suggest Welch is chanting or casting spells in the studio.

"A lot of the new songs sound like exorcisms," she says via phone from the U.K. "I'm always aiming for that feeling you get when you're out of your body. That's the reason you keep doing it—to go into the escape and lose yourself; that feeling of living completely in the moment."

As legend has it, the band's first album, 2009's Grammy-nominated *Lungs*, was Welch's breakup

album—written during her first split from *Dazed & Confused* magazine's literary editor, Stuart Hammond.

"I wrote the songs when I was dealing with big worries, big fears, and it was quite cathartic," she says of *Lungs*, alluding to the pressures of turning out hits as potent as "You've Got the Love" and "Dog Days Are Over." "I wanted to take that familiar feeling of creeping depression and embrace it, and turn it into a happy tune as a way of dealing with it...In order to say something to one person, you have to sing it to a couple of thousand people for it to become real."

However, *Ceremonials* doesn't quite pick up where the heartbreak left off. Instead, the new project holds a stack of tracks that focus on Welch's inner turmoil. Aside from the personal issues addressed in orchestra-heavy cuts such as "Breaking Down" and the band's current chart-climber "Shake It Out," Welch found a handful of stylish muses to help pilot her paranormal pop. For example, while creating one of the disc's first singles, a mesmerizing track called >

"What the Water Gave Me," Welch pinched the title of the tune from the name of Frida Kahlo's most enigmatic painting.

"She didn't paint her dreams; she painted her reality," Welch says of the Mexican artist. "Her style is so iconic. I see her look as modern romantic traditionalism in hyper-colour."

Also tacked onto the *Ceremonials* mood board was yet another historic figure and one of the first champions of the menswear-as-womenswear movement: Joan of Arc. "The song 'Only If For a Night' made me think of Joan of Arc," Welch recalls. "It sounded like a medieval battle cry—like thundering hooves and swords crashing."

This isn't the first time Welch has felt akin to risk-takers. One of her major style influences was her former English teacher—a woman who wore crushed velvet gowns to work—as well as Elizabeth Taylor and the tragic romantic heroine of Lord Alfred Tennyson's *The Lady of Shalott*.

Much like her unconventional style idols, Welch makes bold red carpet choices that stay true to her personal vision. When she wore a Givenchy couture buff tulle gown at the Grammys (which, due to its swan appliqué, was compared to Björk's famous Oscar swan dress), Welch was thrown on a number of tabloids' "worst dressed" lists. The fashion world, however, was over the moon about her couture choice and praised her for pushing the envelope.

"I never fit in anywhere," Welch says nonchalantly. "It was wonderful to be embraced by the fashion community, but I never had to compromise myself. I'm very lucky in that sense. People can say a million bad things about wearing that Givenchy dress and I would not care! I was so lucky to have on something so beautiful that day. If you know yourself and you know what you like then don't worry about it."

What Welch does concern herself with is making sure her visuals reflect her verses. Her band's melodies consistently mix harpsichord with guitar chord and blend the sound of the Middle Ages with New Age lyrics and high-tech production. Taking a page right out of her mother's book (Evelyn Welch, a professor, wrote a book about the customs around shopping in the 1400s–1600s), Welch's style often references eras past. With a closet that includes staples such as long, drapery Victoriana hippie frocks, heavy doses of fringe and frilled dresses, and a series of high-collared shirts and lace-trimmed skirts, many would think Welch is working part-time as a Renaissance fair vendor. Yet much of her consignment store finds—and big-name label purchases—are worn in such a modern way that Welch has gone on to inspire two of the biggest fashion houses in the world.

Gucci's creative director, Frida Giannini, was

so taken after watching the crimson-crowned singer perform, she used Welch's Lady Macbeth-goes-to-the-M.A.C counter look as inspiration for her Fall '11 collection. The clothes were so completely Welch that the singer then worked with Giannini to adapt many of Gucci's pieces for Florence + the Machine's most recent world tour.

"We didn't have to change it that much—we added a lot of capes to the outfits though," Welch recalls. "There were these beautiful floral boleros and detachable sleeves. It was as if the dresses were doing a performance of their own the whole time. The fabric was so light that with any gust of air, a dress would be pirouetting behind me."

For Chanel's Spring '12 collection, Karl Lagerfeld one-upped Giannini by inviting Welch to sing "What the Water Gave Me" during his Paris catwalk presentation. Florence (sans Machine) played the role of Botticelli's Venus, performing in a half shell as an army of top models such as Freja Beha Erichsen strutted by.

Of her experience with the Kaiser, Welch says she was completely spellbound. "I did an interview with him and felt so out of my depth intellectually—he knows so much about everything!" she says. "He was surprising because from an outsider's perspective, he's always with the sunglasses and his uniform so you'd think he wouldn't be the warmest person, but he is." The admiration is mutual. "She is my favourite singer for the moment," Lagerfeld said following Chanel's show at the Grand Palais. "She looks like a great English lady, and is in fact a very funny young girl."

Beyond chumming with top designers, Welch has been planning the new looks that will accompany the evolved sound of *Ceremonials*. "We're moving into the New Romantics, '30s art deco style and paintings by the [Polish] artist Tamara de Lempicka, as well as portraits by Cecil Beaton," she says. When prompted to explain the move from fairy tales to flappers, Welch is quick to respond in a higher-pitched English schoolmarm's voice: "It's perhaps because I'm becoming more of a lady," she says, laughing.

Her look is not the only noticeable change in Welch. "I'm figuring out what my attitude is towards love and the future and growing up," she says of her personal evolution from *Lungs* to *Ceremonials*. "I feel less desperate and more introspective. Am I ready to settle down completely? Do I want to be safe or do I want to be free? Where do I stand on these things?" These types of internal dialogues have put forth a whole new side of Welch many have yet to see. A side that champions change, uncertainty and the idea that life is less about having all the right answers and more about posing all the right questions. □



FLARE *was there*
BIRTH OF VENUS
THE EVENT: Chanel's Spring '12 ready-to-wear show

Karl Lagerfeld imagined the cavernous Grand Palais in Paris below sea level, with a set of giant lacquered white sea horses, coral and fish. As a close to the spectacle, Florence Welch, dressed as a couture mermaid, appeared in a white shell—think Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus*—to sing her hit "What the Water Gave Me."

It was such an honour to perform for Chanel at the Grand Palais. I will be eternally grateful to Karl for fulfilling my childhood dreams of becoming a mermaid. The depths of his creativity are as boundless as the ocean he created, filled with such beautiful creatures. —Florence Welch