

VERSACE to the MAX

Donatella Versace is bringing the glossy sheen back to her family's fabulous heritage
BY ELIO IANNACCI



the typical posse of diehard minimalists—the Kleins and Armanis of the world—it seemed like you couldn't swing an animal print tote on the catwalk without hitting something that seemed Versace-esque.

A new generation of rule-breaking designers is tapping into the provocative power Versace has cultivated for 33 years. For example, Nicola Formichetti, the visionary behind the revamping of Mugler, cooked up a futuristic video in the spirit of Gianni Versace's erotic photo book of '95—*Men Without Ties*—for his Mugler menswear advertising campaign (titled *Brothers of Arcadia*).

Givenchy's much-lauded creative director Riccardo Tisci recently defined his latest collection as "very Donatella." Tisci was so enamored by the blond bombshell that he pretty much begged to dress her when he was interviewing her for *Interview* magazine. Yet the truest sign of the Versace effect in fashion is that H&M, the Swedish fast-fashion chain, signed up Donatella for their latest collaboration, due in stores worldwide this month.

Pairing up with the mass retailer was something Donatella needed time to come to grips with. Several years ago she told a journalist from *New York Magazine* that she had no interest in designing for the masses as she felt it would "confuse the Versace brand."

"That was three years ago," she explains when asked about her change of heart. "It was absolutely the right decision then. At the time I was consolidating Versace as a luxury brand for the 21st century. Now that has been achieved, it feels the right moment to collaborate on a special collection with H&M."

One look at the new line may bring tears to the eyes of many long-time, devoted Versace fans. The collection, which Donatella says is inspired heavily from "pieces from iconic moments" in the Versace archive, looks like an homage to her big brother, Gianni, the founder of Versace, who was murdered in 1997.

Filled with the kind of high-voltage outfits Gianni was known for, the H&M collection combines gold studs with leather, shimmery dresses with Greco-Roman sun motifs and vibrant, palm-tree patterned T-shirts. It's a palette that reflects the decor of Gianni's former American palazzo in South Beach, Miami, and exudes the spirit of his sunniest—and sexiest—period of work from 1993 to 1995.

The signature collections under the family name that Donatella is responsible for and dutifully supervises >



T ALL STARTED WITH A SIMPLE PROCLAMATION BY LADY GAGA:

"I'm having a love affair with Donatella." Moments before performing on *Germany's Next Top Model* in June, the chart-topping superstar was asked, yet again, to explain her choice of outfit. Instead of giving her usual long-winded diatribe about her state of dress, Gaga declared she was wearing Versace and would continue to do so exclusively for the next two months.

What followed was a monsoon of tweets and blogs with that 24-karat gold sound bite—a moment that eventually went on to spike Versace sales and instigate as much press as a Kardashian wedding.

Yet Gaga—and the bulk of her 40 million-plus Facebook fans—aren't the only ones currently crushing on the 56-year-old Italian fashion designer. An obvious love for Donatella, Versace's creative director, and her supremely sexy cuts was witnessed on the Fall '11 runways. Beyond



LADY GAGA
IN VERSACE
JULY 2011

H&M'S PICKS
INCLUDE
HOME
DECOR



or designs herself (Versus is now designed by Christopher Kane) spell out her love of status quo-shaking.



VERSACE
FOR H&M

On top of her deep affection for ballsy rock and pop icons (she names Madonna and Lady Gaga as the quintessential "role models for our times" and praises "their fearlessness and their belief in freedom of expression"), she is fuelled by fashion personalities who, like her, refuse to play by the rules.

"It was so inspiring to see how Nicola Formichetti works with Lady Gaga when she wore vintage Versace in the video for 'The Edge Of Glory,'" she explains. "What [Tisci and Formichetti] possess is an understanding of the freedom and possibilities of fashion, and how it is important to push fashion as far as you can. I'm sure Gianni would have loved their work."

Donatella's own rebellious relationship with convention—which has gone on to inspire everything from wannabes (many high-profile designers have been called out by critics for being

the Coles Notes versions of Versace) to hilarious *Saturday Night Live* spoofs (Donatella called Maya Rudolph after seeing the comedienne play her to advise her to wear real jewellery)—started at an early age.

Her iconic aesthetic—a Barbie-meets-Blondie-meets-Barbarella look—has been a work in progress. As a girl, Donatella started deep tanning and dyeing her hair extreme shades, shocking her neighbours in her Italian hometown of Reggio di Calabria. With her stylish brother encouraging her to take risks, Donatella often wore rock-inspired ensembles and took beauty cues from Cleopatra, which reportedly resulted in a school suspension.

"When I was a teenager," Donatella recalls, "I already

wore black fitted clothes. I knew exactly how I wanted to dress, and have done so ever since. I don't think I'd listen to anyone who was going to tell me how to dress, then or now." Donatella became absorbed into Gianni's business as she grew older. The lifestyle her brother offered was the passport she needed to escape to Milan, where she thrived.

Aside from being his soundboard, muse and assistant—before designing their diffusion line Versus, she supported her brother by dressing the models for his shows—Donatella also became part of the core of Versace's super social network. She was the party girl Gianni loved to have around so much that she was once described by *The New Yorker* as "the gay man's version of the trophy wife—the trophy sister." Yet with her play-hard philosophy came a work-hard attitude.

"Donatella is a phenomenon," claims Blondie front-woman Deborah Harry via phone from New York. "She has this sophistication. There is a thing about stylish Italian women that is so extraordinary that she [represents]. I could not actually believe that when she took over for Gianni, that she was actually doing it—and doing it very beautifully."

According to Deborah Ball, author of the biographical bestseller *House of Versace*, Donatella was actually the catalyst behind many of Versace's most noted triumphs during Gianni's reign. This includes associating the brand with A-list celebrities and kick-starting the supermodel explosion of the '90s when she reportedly pushed him to hire the top-tier girls—Naomi Campbell, Christy Turlington and Linda Evangelista—to walk the Versace catwalk.

After Gianni's death—and the decline of the supermodel era—Donatella started losing steam. Her name and credibility in the late '90s and throughout the new millennium (save for moments such as Jennifer Lopez's famous Versace Grammy dress) suffered due to personal problems. Allegra, her now-24-year-old daughter, was left 50 percent of the Versace business by Gianni (she has since reportedly been treated for anorexia and distanced herself from the family brands), while her brother Santo was left 30 percent and Donatella was given just 20 percent.

Donatella booked herself into rehab for cocaine addiction in 2004 and rumours about the label's demise began to fly. Yet, she fought her demons and has been slowly but surely re-energizing her brands. Examples of this can be seen in the beauty of Versace's current fall collection—which modernized the baroque DNA of the past into luxe, box-pleated python skirts and sleek cadet jackets. PR-wise, Donatella is still aligning herself with pop culture's Herculean celebs to bring the sheen back to the label. "Classicism was one of Gianni's great passions, and the myths of Versace keep building as we move forward in the 21st century," she says of her ongoing business strategy. "What is so interesting about [our] mythology is that it builds and renews, so that the modern icons who wear Versace today, like Angelina Jolie, Jennifer Lopez or Lady Gaga, become part of that mythology."

For the first time in years, Donatella's plan to rebuild the Versace empire is on a fast track. With the H&M collaboration and major love from the world's hottest pop star, the legendary Versace clan is coming back in a blaze of glory. □