

STYLE SETTER JODY WATLEY

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Style Setter: Jody Watley

Diva Du Jour

Jody Watley talks chic with Elio Iannacci

When Chicago-born singer/soulstress Jody Watley embarked on a solo career back in 1987, it didn't take a genius to figure out she was going to be a trailblazer. At the height of MTV video pandemonium, Watley always stood apart from the schmaltz, fusing high-end chic with a *tres* cool street style. Her look has always matched her musical mandate perfectly (especially on her sophomore disc, 1989's *Larger Than Life*), mixing the sophistication of a cutting edge pop studio with the underground sounds of the many trend-making nightclubs she frequented. Besides the fact that she went on to sell over 20 million albums and won a Grammy of her own, she also was responsible for bringing cultural phenomenas like Vogueing to the limelight (she featured Vogueing in the video to her hit "Friends"—a decade before Madonna "discovered" the dance).



Luckily for the stylish set, Watley has stayed consistently on top of her game through the years mixing ready-to-wear and haute couture fashion sensibilities into almost every project she touches. Although much of her look and sound has changed in the past two decades, Watley has been able to traverse a number of musical genres (house, R&B, jazz and electro to name a few) with an ease and elegance that never seems forced or unsuitable. Her latest album, appropriately titled *The Makeover*, is a testament to the majestic empire she's built for herself. The disc's current single—a remarkable cover of Chic's disco track "I Want Your Love"—just finished topping the *Billboard* dance charts this summer and has given Watley a bonafide clubland classic. To celebrate yet another return to the charts, *Flare* asked the divine Ms. W a few questions about her past, present and incredibly chic future.

Flare: Covering Chic's "I Want Your Love" was a terrific idea. What is it about the disco band that made you such a fan?

JW: I was blown away by the international cosmopolitan flare they had. They wore Charles Jordan shoes and clothes by Halston. They had one of the best intros I've ever seen in concert. It was simple but great. The girls sashayed on stage with Nile Rodgers, Bernard Edwards and Tony Thompson. The guys had on the best suits and shoes ever. The girls were wearing outfits by designer Norman Kamali and had clutch bags. As they walked out, they set their clutch bags down and that's when the music started. It was great. It wasn't like razzle-dazzle, it just exuded the phrase, "let's go to work!" I loved it.

Flare: When you first started your solo career did you feel pressure to look a certain way for the sake of sales?

JW: The record company always wanted me to look more street. I would always say, "what does that mean?" For me, "street" should mean a reflection of who you really are. If I look back on it, I think they wanted something that was probably safer, and what some people would typically expect from a black singer. I don't want to use the word ghetto, because it has negative connotations, but you get the gist.

JW: I think so. Some people will wear things well and others will look like the garment is really wearing them. I think that's the difference. Style is something that cannot be taught. It's a natural, innate state of being. I see artists that probably have millions of dollars, and could probably have designers just giving them the best of the best, but they always look wrong!

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Flare: The lyrics on your new album kind of play with that same philosophy. Especially in the song "Makeover Superstar" where you sing: "It's not where you're from/it's where you're at." Do you write for an audience or for yourself?

JW: I write for me, selfishly. It's the only way I know how. I started writing poetry in Junior High school. When I write or even if I sing someone else's song, I have to be authentic. Lyrics are always snippets of how I really feel.

Flare: Since you are such a private person, what do you think of celebrities who are so public with their notoriety? Is it a big turn-off for you?

JW: It depends on how it's used. Friends of mine were having this Paris Hilton discussion, about how she doesn't think she should have gone to jail. Of course she should have gone. If you do something wrong, own it and take responsibility for it. Don't pass the buck. When it becomes a lead news story... it is really annoying. I don't think it's *really* news—its just pop culture gossip.

Flare: From hits like "Real Love" to your next single, "Beautiful Life," your lyrics seem to urge people to get their due respect on matters of life and love. Do you feel you've gained it or are you still struggling for it?

JW: Yes. It's hard won, but yes! I love "Beautiful Life" I actually have a version of it recorded with piano only. It is so emotional; I hope the radio plays it so everybody who is struggling can hear it.

Flare: So will the song be on your next album?

JW: Yes, actually. Sony is doing a CD series with a few artists, called *Ultimate Soul Live*, which will be coming out sometime this year. Mine will contain all the best live recordings that I've compiled. Ultimately I'd like to do a live DVD too, because Jody Watley live is the best part of what I do. The disc is really like *The Makeover Live* but some of my hits like "Looking For a New Love" and "Real Love" are on there but they are live and are arranged differently. They are actually better.

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Flare: Legendary fashion photographers such as Steven Meisel and Herb Ritts have photographed you. Looking back at all these photos from your body of work, were you pleased with the majority of visuals you produced?

JW: Well the one thing I will say is that I'm so proud to have come out of the eighties and have so many *great* photos. I guess I say the eighties in particular because there are so many bad images of other people that I see. I always say, "Thank God that I had a good sense of style," because I always want my photos to be timeless. My first cover for [debut disc] *Jody Watley*, was taken in black and white and I am just wearing a long sweater. Brigitte Bardot was what I told the photographer



to be inspired by.



Flare: What was your favorite shoot ever?

My favorite session would have to be Steven Meisel for *Larger Than Life*. I would always fight with the record company so that I could work with fashion photographers; I would never work with rock and roll photographers that primarily did music people, because I never wanted my pictures to look like those promo pictures! Francois Nars did the make-up for that—and that was pre-Nars cosmetics.

Flare: Diana Ross has always been one of your favorite singers—you've even done a version of her "Love Hangover" track on your new album. Why has she been such an inspiration?

JW: Well it definitely wasn't when she recorded that song "Muscles" (laughs). She lost me on that one. When I was little, no one else was looking like her and doing what she and the Supremes were doing. With her solo work, I just loved the photography and the simplicity of her voice. There's no loudness or over-singing. I think she gets a bad rap for her personal stuff, but her imaging is so iconic. No one used fashion to his or her advantage like her.