

“It’s not street enough or it is too sophisticated”

For the love of Jody

by Elio Iannacci

It’s our rite of passage. Boy loves Boy. Boy dumps Boy. Boy hears Diva. Diva schools Boy. Boy loves Diva. Such epic romances have emerged since the heyday of Maria Callas, continued through Marlene Dietrich’s reign and have lasted through all of Madonna’s infamous incarnations. High on the gay community’s much-beloved list is Grammy-winner Jody Watley, whose support of progressive pop and dance has changed music history. A woman of many firsts, Watley paved the dance floor with culture and class with releases such as her self-titled debut in 1987, *Larger Than Life* in 1989 and one of the first full-length remix albums ever made (“You Wanna Dance with Me?” also in 1989). Lest we forget, this woman even introduced vogue to the mainstream a decade before Madonna’s single came to light with the classic video for “Real Love.” She also started pairing up with clubland and gayland’s most beloved DJs (think David Morales, Junior Vasquez and now, in her latest gorgeous album, *Midnight Lounge*, she has Masters at Work) before it was cool to do so. Give up the love for the queen of cool, Ms. Jody Watley.

Let’s talk about some of your firsts. You were the first pop performer to introduce “vogue” to the mainstream. How did you discover it?

I had a background as a dancer, I was [voguing] in gay clubs long before it hit big. We called it catching the beat or posing. That inspiration was put into my videos for “Real Love” and “Friends.” It wasn’t until Madonna put out her record that it was called vogue.

You were also one of the first singers to release an inclusionary track called “When A Man Loves A Man” which coincided with a single off your *Intimacy* album in 1993. The song was originally recorded as “When A Man Loves A Woman.” It was the first song I heard in pop that directly spoke about gay love.

The record company was squeamish about it but I have a lot of gay friends. It was only right that we did a mix that spoke to part of my audience and it was done honestly. I am very aware of who my audience is.

Deborah Cox recently told me that “there is a horrible stigma that comes with being a woman who sings dance music.” Do you agree?

It does have an unfair stigma for some. Not progressive minded people. Some think of it as one-dimensional music but it has a culture on its own. Clubs are always packed. People always want to dance. There’s a difference between a more commercial dance track like “Believe” by Cher and my warm, house tune called “Whenever.”

Your videos have always provided an avenue for high-street fashion. What do you think of Madonna’s statements about being anti-fashion in *W* magazine?

Sorry, but Madonna is not anti-fashion. She says what she is doing in those pictures is not fashion? No way. It is also different for someone like Madonna. If you are a person of colour, you have to go up against people saying things like “it’s not street enough or it is too sophisticated,” like I did. Everything was a struggle. At the time, no one – black or white – was doing what I was doing with fashion. It is much easier now.

How much easier?

I imagine if *Vogue* or *Harper’s Bazaar* wanted to fly Eve or Mary J. Blige to a photo shoot, the record company would be all over it because they would understand the increase in the artist’s profile. I literally had to pay my own way – the record company wouldn’t get it.

Was it hard to choose fashion designers for your vision?

I didn’t even know what a stylist was! I’ve always been a fan of vintage work so a lot of my dresses were vintage; the rest, I designed on my own.

When I look at the fashion images from your videos, they are tasteful and not as dated.

My love of vintage fashion and photography inspired all that. I loved old Hollywood. Even my first CD was black and white. I wanted a classic Brigitte Bardot look. I worked with fashion photographers who tended to be more open-minded.

Speaking of Brigitte Bardot, she just wrote a book called *A Cry In the Silence*, which beckons the return of the guillotine for gays, among other minorities, in France.

She has some deep-rooted problems to entertain such a thought. It is horrible.

It’s a shame because she was a huge gay icon.

How awful. It is a blessing for me that I have touched the community just by living my dreams. I’ve seen people do me in drag – both bad and good – and not many people can say that they have made that kind of mark. She must have had a breakdown.

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