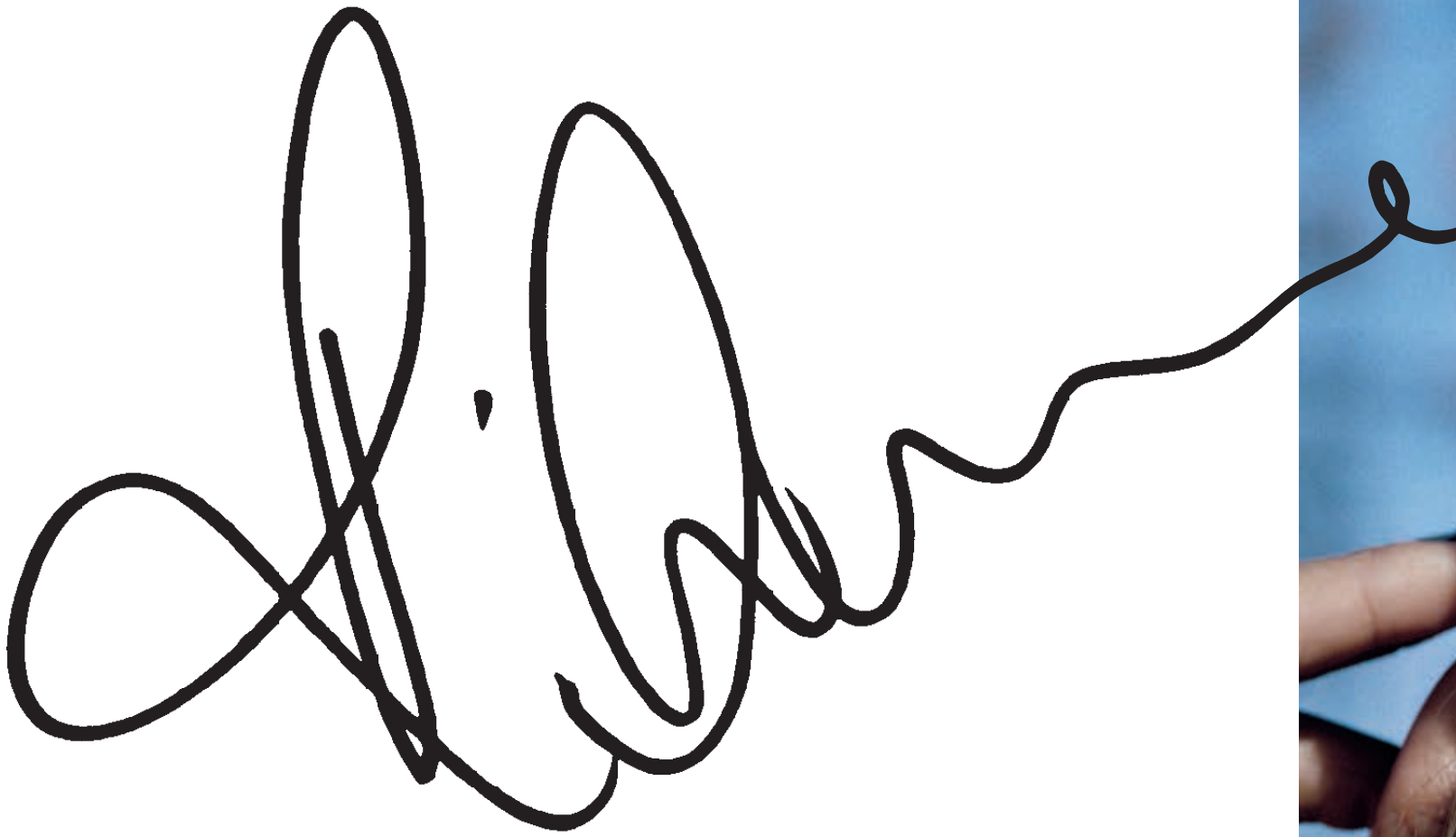


vogue

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The party season beckons and fashion's spotlight turns to the magic of show-off eveningwear. Whatever the silhouette – big-skirted and wasp-waisted or fearlessly slit up to there – the focus is now on hemlines. Embrace the super length in swathes of rich satin and lace, or wow in slippery silks and razzle-dazzle sequins. Who better than Rihanna, the ultimate style chameleon, to prove the power of change?

TURN
UP THE
VOLUME



Princess Riri, superstar turned global phenomenon, has conquered the world with her “personal swagger”. Christa D’Souza meets a platinum lady as she adopts a new, grown-up glamour for Vogue. Photographs by Alasdair McLellan

house of Fraser, Oxford Street, on a late, sticky Friday afternoon. For four hours now, Rihanna – hot off the plane from Norway and in town to promote her fragrance, Reb'l Fleur – has been on her feet, meeting and greeting her fans. As hit after hypnotic, insistent hit of hers pumps over the sound system – “What’s My Name?”, “Rude Boy” and, of course, “Umbrella” – a line of fans snaking right from one end of the store to the other waits obediently to be called on to the podium. As always, she has her loyal crew watching over her, among them her best friend from Barbados, Melissa

Forde, her right-hand woman, Jennifer Rosales, and her deceptively laidback manager, Jay Brown. Sporting tumbling auburn curls, a green feathered two-piece by Antonio Berardi, and teetering, flesh-coloured Louboutins, Rihanna is taller – much taller – than you’d expect. At 5ft 10in in heels, she’s almost model height, and towers benevolently, like Big Bird, over each and every one of her fans. “Aww, thank you so *much*,” she says in that gracious Bajan lilt, as yet another large carrier bag containing a gift is tremulously handed to her.

Hundreds of people get on that podium, including some staff from the Barbadian Embassy > 173



Bonnie and Clyde blonde, but *all* Rihanna. "I had to get through a lot of ups and downs – big downs – to get where I am."
Wool beret, £150, Giorgio Armani. Hair: Ursula Stephen. Make-up: Hannah Murray. Nails: Barbara Warner. Production: Joy Asbury Productions. Set design: Gille Mills. **Fashion editor:** Kate Phelan



*“Whatever my
mojo tells me,
that’s what I’m
going to do”*

Rihanna’s passion was always to perform.
“All those divas, Mariah Carey, Janet Jackson,
Whitney Houston – they were my heroines.”
Double-faced wool jacket and body all-in-one,
£479. Leather brogues, £429. Both Emporio
Armani. Wool beret, £150, Giorgio Armani.
Opposite, top left: patent-leather shoes,
to order, Giorgio Armani Privé

(Rihanna is the island's Ambassador for Youth & Culture), each of them (I'm listening carefully) getting their own personal message – no pump handles here. But for a couple of bathroom and water breaks, she hasn't stopped, and there is no sign of her wilting. Still, it is dreadfully hot, those Louboutins are awfully high, the line does seem to be endless, and one can't help being reminded for an instant of that film *They Shoot Horses, Don't They?*. "Meh," shrugs Jason, her burly tour manager. "She's got the energy of a... 23-year-old. She's fine."

Eventually the gift-giving, and the high-fiving, and the picking up of babies (and the comforting – for a few fans are shuddering in helpless tears) has to come to an end. "Right," sighs Jay Brown, who is coming down with the flu, "let's go eat", and immediately Rihanna, her entourage and I are whooshed out back and up the stairs where a fleet of silver limos (and another whole bank of fans and paparazzi) is waiting. "I fuckin' love you, Rihanna!" screams one hysterical woman before flinging herself over the cordon into the arms, thankfully, of security. By the time Rihanna is shepherded into the safety of a backseat, the crowd has turned feral, beating on the car windows, throwing themselves on the bonnet demanding to be let in. "And this was actually quite a relaxing day..." giggles Jennifer Rosales as we screech our way across Oxford Street, a pack of fans still frantically trailing our wake.

Rihanna. Or Princess Riri, as her fans call her. Could there be a cooler, hotter, more badass human being alive on the earth right now? Could there be – with that caramel skin and those emerald eyes and that high, almost foetal forehead – one more perfectly formed? Mix Beyoncé with Grace Kelly with Aladdin Sane with a little bit of Bratz doll, and there you have it. Not so much a "black Madonna" (what she wanted to be as a girl growing up in Barbados) as a real-life avatar for the twenty-first century. Then there is that flat, tough, utterly mesmerising voice. With over 60 million singles and 20 million albums sold; with seven million followers on Twitter and more than 40.5 million on Facebook (that's more than Lady Gaga, as any member of Rihanna's hardcore fan club, Rihanna Navy, would tell you), she's not just a superstar anymore, she's a proper, freaky phenomenon. Let's not forget, either, her new role as the face of Emporio Armani underwear and jeans. Or her debut performance in *Battleship*, the \$200-million action feature in which she plays, alongside Liam Neeson, naval officer Cora Raikes.

"Yeah, it was funny, there was this one scene where I'm coming out of the sea and

he [director Peter Berg] made me keep my hat on 'cause he said I looked too good!"

As Kanye West, one of her many, many celebrity admirers and collaborators, once rhetorically mused: "...just to have that level of power. How do you deal with it? No woman should have that power."

It's 9.30pm, and I am in Nozomi, one of Rihanna's favourite restaurants in London (along with Ochi Caribbean Takeaway on the



Uxbridge Road). "I hate sushi," she says, wrinkling that delicate little nose at the maki rolls, "but I'm learning bit by bit to like it." Though not today. She hasn't eaten properly for five days, so she's sticking with what she knows: American strip steak and rice. "Excuse me, sir? Can I have a knife and fork? I think I might have dropped mine on the floor."

Having already kept the rest of the table waiting a good two hours while she went

back to her Savoy suite to change – and why not? – she is now wearing jeans ("J Brand? No, honey, Armani, of course!"), a simple Alexander Wang T-shirt and a rather demure mustard-coloured coat by Acne. After that whole futuristic, structured "overly shoulder-padded shit", she explains she's into a more ladylike look, hence the Breck girl curls as opposed to the shaved sides and quiff or the cherry bomb mane I expected. She might be going back to being a redhead "because the fans haven't quite

"I don't ever want to be a theme, because then it belongs to someone"

got used to it yet" but, like every decision concerning Rihanna's hair, it won't be made just by her but by vote, probably around one of Roc Nation's conference tables. (Roc Nation is the management entertainment label started by Jay-Z that also takes care of Beyoncé and Willow Smith, among others.) There are also high-level talks about her going *Bonnie and Clyde* blonde, like in these pictures (they are hair extensions, obviously). "But I don't ever want to be a theme," says Rihanna, "because then it belongs to someone, and that's not right. I want to cultivate something that's part of my personal swagger – whatever my mojo tells me, that's what I'm going to do..."

That very *sui generis*, rather sophisticated "swagger", as she calls it, incorporates quite a few British designers. Mark Fast, for example, whom she wore to her birthday party in February (a wild extravaganza attended by 300 close friends, including Snoop Dogg, Zac Efron, Ryan Phillippe and Mr and Mrs Shawn "Jay-Z" Carter). Then there's Giles Deacon, whom she wore to the Brits, and Stella McCartney, whom she wore to the Met Ball (along with a waist-length cherry bomb plait), and who has subsequently become a personal friend. "She's so much fun and so inspiring, I adore her." She adores Christopher Kane, too. "Oh my God, when I first woke up to him with that collection he did with the gorillas? I was, like, who on earth is making this perfect shit? He is the *best!*"

Feminine then, with a little bit of an edge – like the delicate gold "fuck you" necklace she usually wears, but not, I notice, tonight.

"Aww, I can't believe you know about that!" she says, tipping me playfully > 254

on the shoulder with those dark plum talons. “I also have one that says ‘cunt’.”

Say again?

“Yeah, it’s funny, that word is so offensive to everyone in the world *except* for Bajans. You know African-Americans use the n-word to their brothers? Well, that’s the way we use the c-word. When I first came here, I was saying it like it was nothing, like, ‘Hey, cunt’, until my make-up artist finally had to tell me to stop. I just never knew.”

Rihanna was born 23 years ago in Bridgetown, Barbados. One of three (she has two younger brothers, Rajad and Rorrey), Robyn Rihanna Fenty is the product of a broken marriage; her parents, Monica Braithwaite and Ronald Fenty, a former crack addict, divorced when she was 14. “I saw too much,” she says, taking a sip from her glass of Gavi di Gavi. “I was way too mature for my age. I guess that was why I became rebellious. That’s what my mother thinks anyway...”

Teased for being light skinned (her father is half white), and dismissive of girls of her own age – “I was one of the boys,” she shrugs, “I never saw the need for having girlfriends until I met Melissa. Melissa taught me how to be a girl” – Robyn did not particularly enjoy school. “I was really interested in grammar, like memorising tenses and conjunctions, and all that, but at school I was, like, why do we have to learn English when we speak the language?”

Her passion was to perform. “All those divas, Mariah Carey, Janet Jackson, Whitney Houston – they were my heroines.” And developing her own personal, somewhat androgynous “swagger”. When all the other girls were in frills and heels, she was dressing in Puma and Adidas and polo shirts with the collar turned up. At one point, she and a friend enrolled in Cadet Camp, where you do 1,000 push-ups before breakfast and get yelled at by a drill sergeant. Aged 15, she formed a band with two other girls and then, as luck would have it, was introduced by the mother of a friend to producer and songwriter Evan Rogers who happened to be holidaying in Barbados at the time. By the age of 16, she and Monica were ferrying back and forth to Rogers’s family home in Stamford, Connecticut, Rihanna often still in her school uniform, to cut a demo.

Jay Brown remembers the first time she came to audition with Jay-Z, then his boss at Def Jam records. “When I first met Rihanna in person she walked into Jay-Z’s office,” he recalls, “and she started to sing. From that moment, I knew she had the potential to be a star. That’s where our history started to begin.” As Jay-Z told *American Vogue*: “She had this look in her eyes, this determination that could just freeze a room.”

Jay Brown, Jay-Z and Tyran “Ty-Ty” Smith (the third partner at Roc Nation) – Rihanna calls them her “gangsta guardian angels”. Like surrogate fathers? “Oh yes, definitely. Although actually, maybe they are more like big brothers because, with fathers, at least they let their daughters go a little. Big brothers, they *never* do!”

“I think that she knows we really care for her outside of music,” says Ty-Ty, a childhood friend of Jay-Z’s who was there at the very first audition, has worked on every single one of Rihanna’s albums and, as I later find out, was once arrested on third-degree assault charges for pepper-spraying hip-hop star R Kelly. “We don’t do anything unless it’s in her best interests. Period. We really love her. Like she’s our own little sister. Or even our daughter, you know what I’m saying? And she knows it.”

You wouldn’t want to mess with Rihanna. Which leads, tenuously, to that infamous night before the Grammys two and a half years ago when she was assaulted by her former boyfriend Chris Brown. She’s done all her public emoting about that, been on *Diane Sawyer*, been on *Oprah*, been on *Tyra*, and yes, it was awful, but as the tattoo inked on her chest reads (her favourite tattoo, as it happens): “Never a failure, always a lesson.” As for those provocative – some may say bordering on the sociopathic – videos she has put out since? Like the one for “Man Down”, where she shoots a guy for sexually abusing her? Or, indeed, the one for other worldwide hit “S&M”, where she gets tied up and then taped to the wall with clingfilm? She’s not an apologist.

“That’s not me, that’s a part I play,” she insists steadily. “You know, like it’s a piece of art, with all these toys and textures to play with...”

“See, people – especially white people – they want me to be a role model just because of the life I lead. The things I say in my songs, they expect it of me and [being a role model] became more of my job than I wanted it to be. But no, I just want to make music. That’s it.

“Look, God doesn’t give any more than you can handle,” she goes on. “I had to get through a lot of ups and downs – *big* downs – and a lot of trial and error to get where I am now. You know, I’ve tried so many things, I’ve gone through the stage of having other people decide for me. Now I don’t have anyone else decide for me. I have a lot of clarity in my life now, more than ever before. And it’s nice being myself.”

The joint is now packed, and “Only Girl (In the World)”, her hit of last year, is pumping relentlessly out of the sound system. As two trembling blondes approach the table to

pay their respects, Rihanna’s man-mountain-like bodyguards are suddenly hovering menacingly behind them, wordlessly wondering if Rihanna wants them removed.

“Aww, no problem, it’s fine, thank you so *much*,” she says, extending an arm, earnest and gracious as ever, before adding when the girlies are back at their table, “Hey, they’ll never be real with you if you’re not real with them, right?”

As yet more maki rolls and mojitos and wine are brought to the table, we talk about her future plans. How, after this weekend’s V Festival gig she, Melissa and Jennifer have hired a mega yacht to sail round the South of France for a week. Just a week because then she is back in the recording studio finishing off the sixth album. The holiday is sort of a girl’s thing – her trainer, Ary Nuñez, a karate expert, has been invited, though as a friend not an employee, as Jennifer makes clear. Jennifer, as usual, has taken care of every single detail. Like making sure there are enough Oreos, Reese’s Pieces and Cheetos on board. And maybe some tequila. “Well,” says Jennifer, “she works hard, she parties hard, she needs some release.”

Relationship wise, she’s single right now. Which is nice. (Last year she briefly dated the baseball player Matt Kemp.) Well, kind of. “I mean, it is in one way because a relationship can feel like a chore, and that’s not good. That’s not what I need. I need an escape because this job is way too much anyway. So when I say it’s nice, it’s nice not having to babysit. *However*, it’s a pain in the ass coming home alone after work to lay in a hotel bed with nobody to get you up unless it’s work related. But it makes no sense starting something you are going to stop, so I’m not rushing anything...”

As for the babies thing? Yes, yes, obviously she wants them at some point, she absolutely adores children, ideally in Barbados where she has recently purchased a large plot of land. For the moment, though, home is an apartment in LA (she used to have a house, which she bought from Jay Brown’s sister, but it was too spread out, too large – “I need everything right *there*”) with spectacular views, a chandelier shaped like a gun and a baby grand piano which she doesn’t yet know how to play but likes to have there for decoration.

There’s talk of going to Mahiki, Rihanna’s other favourite place in London, but I’m flagging, and make a move to leave. “Whaaaat, so early?” says Rihanna, rising from the banquettes with some difficulty because we are wedged in so tightly. “But that was fun!”

Nice girl. Nice manners. I do so hope she gets some rest. ■