



AP PHOTO/POLAROID

LADY GAGA

SLEPT HERE

A DIVA'S SOUTH FLORIDA HISTORY REFLECTS A POP FAIRY TALE

BY ELIZABETH RAHE

It was on the rooftop of the Raleigh Hotel that South Florida caught an early glimpse of Lady Gaga. A YouTube video captures the budding pop diva with two female back-up dancers singing and slinking through several soon-to-be hits as part of the 2008 Winter Music Conference. With Miami Beach waves rolling in the background, the wind-blown performance reveals her promise – her powerful voice, catchy dance tunes, go-go dancer moves and a glimmer of the fashion spectacle she would become...in the form of self-styled mirrored “disco panties.”

From those early club performance days to her big-production Monster Ball Tour, South Florida has served as a stepping stone in her career. Over the past several years she has graced a number of Fort Lauderdale and Miami music venues and nightspots, and her visits reflect the stages in her rocket rise to superstardom.

Today Gaga is a five-time Grammy-winning pop juggernaut, over-the-top performer, outrageous style icon and outspoken supporter of gay rights. In just three years, she has sold more than 15 million albums and 51 million singles. *Forbes* predicts she will earn \$100 million this year, based on her Monster Ball Tour – which plays BankAtlantic Center in Sunrise April 12 and AmericanAirlines Arena in Miami April 13 – and her highly anticipated album, *Born this Way*, due in May. Her single of

Lady Gaga poses with her Polaroid portrait at the MIT Art Museum in Boston in July 2010. She is creative director for the iconic brand.

the same name, an ode to self-acceptance that references gays, the disabled and various racial groups, was released in February, with this feel-good chorus:

*I'm beautiful in my way
'Cause God makes no mistakes
I'm on the right track baby
I was born this way*

Lady Gaga was born Stefani Germanotta on March 28, 1986, and raised in New York City, studying piano and dance from age 4 and eventually working with a renowned vocal coach. By 14, with her parents' help, she was singing and playing her own piano ballads at club open-mike nights. She graduated from the highly regarded Convent of the Sacred Heart in Manhattan and attended Tisch School of the Arts at NYU, dropping out after a year to pursue her dream. Deriving her stage name from the Queen song *Radio Ga-Ga*, she performed in a '70s-style pop/rock burlesque show in New York clubs before signing with Interscope Records in 2007.

'I love Miami...everybody's fabulous'

She was still a little-known singer/songwriter in March 2008 when she played the Winter Music Conference in Miami, a massive global music fest that draws performers, DJs and music industry bigwigs for five days of concerts, parties and schmoozing. Only 22 years old, Gaga was on the verge of hitting it big. Her single *Just Dance* would soon be released, and she was set to shoot the music video in a few days.

"I love Miami. It's sunny, everybody's fabulous and skinny and tan, yummy," the bubbly performer told an interviewer. She also spoke about her songwriting ability – "I wrote it in, like, 30 seconds" – about her involvement in all aspects of her art and even about the disco-mirrored clothing she hoped to market. "One day at a time, one sequin at a time, changing the world," she said, expressing – even at that early stage – her confidence and ambition.

She appeared at Score, a nightclub in Miami Beach, as part of an Interscope Records showcase. General Manager Luis Morera well remembers when Gaga was rehearsing for her show. His staff was doing some minor construction and everyone just stopped and stared. "Who is this girl, and where did she come from? I thought, oh my God, she is going to be big," he says. He recalls that she drank tea, but she was not yet carrying the china teacup and saucer that would become a frequent accessory. "Her birthday was the next day, so after the performance they brought her a disco-ball cake," he says.

When she returned to Score on May 27 for a *Just Dance* release party, the single was already a club hit, on its way to topping charts around the globe – and the crowd definitely knew who she was, Morera says. Wearing a disco-mirrored

bikini, crystal-encrusted sunglasses and carrying her glowing crystal-topped "disco stick," she made an entrance through a cloud of fog and sang and danced her way through *Just Dance*, *Paparazzi* and *Eh, Eh*. "She was interacting with the crowd...It was a very good show," Morera says.

Gaga made another stop that Memorial Day weekend, at Bill's Filling Station in Wilton Manors, and asked if she could perform.

"It was one of those spur-of-the-moment things," says Jackson Padgett, co-owner with Mark Negrete of Bill's as well as Georgie's Alibi Bar & Grill across the street. "She said, 'Hi, my name is Stefani. I'm known as Lady Gaga, and I really would like to do a new song I have,'" Padgett says. Although they did not know who she was, they agreed. "She came out with her dancers and put on a show-stopping performance. Afterward she stayed and played. She was so kind and sweet to the customers."

A short time later, Padgett and Negrete were surprised to see the songstress performing *Just Dance* during the Miss Universe swimsuit competition on television. When her first album, *The Fame*, came out in August, she sent a signed CD expressing her thanks to "the boys at Alibi and Bill's," Padgett says. "She turned out to be such an incredible lady."

In September 2008 Gaga released her second single, *Poker Face*, a dance-pop tune that alludes to her bisexuality. It was destined to be bigger than *Just Dance*, winning a Grammy in 2010 for Best Dance Recording.

From New Kids to Gaga Revolution

She returned to South Florida on Nov. 1, 2008, opening for New Kids on the Block when their tour played the BankAtlantic Center, and she would return to the arena Dec. 13 for the Y100 Jingle Ball. At first deemed not pretty enough to be a pop star, she wrote for other artists, including New Kids, Pussycat Dolls and Britney Spears before Interscope recognized her potential.

KEVIN WINTER/GETTY IMAGES

“I love Miami. It's sunny, everybody's fabulous and skinny and tan, yummy.”



Monster show
Lady Gaga's Monster Ball Tour plays BankAtlantic Center in Sunrise April 12 and AmericanAirlines Arena in Miami April 13. Contact Ticketmaster, 800-745-3000 or www.ticketmaster.com.

Lady Gaga emerges from her incubation vessel to perform *Born This Way* at the 53rd Grammy Awards in February.



JOHNNY LOUIS

The Fame Ball Tour plays Revolution Live in Fort Lauderdale in April 2009.



COURTESY STEPHEN R. LANG, MARK MAGAZINE

Gaga and her dancers hit Bill's Filling Station in Wilton Manors in May 2008.



SETH BROWARNIK/WORLDEYE.COM

The pop diva rings in 2010 at the Fontainebleau Miami Beach.



JOHNNY LOUIS

Watch video of Lady Gaga's South Florida appearances, including her rooftop performance at the Raleigh Hotel in South Beach, at www.cityandshore.com/people.html

Lady Gaga rocks the Y100 Jingle Ball at BankAtlantic Center December 2008.

“I want people to walk around delusional about how great they can be – and then to fight so hard for it every day that the lie becomes the truth.”

Around this time Jeff John, managing partner of Fort Lauderdale's Revolution Live entertainment venue, booked Gaga's Fame Ball Tour for April 8, 2009. If he had waited any longer, he might not have succeeded in getting her for his 1,300-patron concert space.

“We were sold out by New Year's,” John says. “She was phenomenal. She had set changes, outfit changes. She was great with the crowd. It was a real good night. She went from our venue to arenas.”

Indeed, her popularity – as well as her notoriety – was exploding. The Fame Ball Tour played 69 dates around the world from March through September 2009. In June she was on the cover of *Rolling Stone* magazine, wearing a transparent costume made of strategically placed bubbles. “I operate from a place of delusion – that's what the Fame is all about,” she told writer Brian Hiatt. “I want people to walk around delusional about how great they can be – and then to fight so hard for it every day that the lie becomes the truth.”

Self-empowerment and personal fulfillment are prevalent themes for Gaga. She says she felt like a freak growing up and relates to that factor in her fans – her Little Monsters. Onstage, she has preached that they should never let anyone tell them they aren't pretty enough or skinny enough or good enough – all criticisms she says she heard at the start of her career. The tactic inspires immense dedication in her fans, who salute Gaga with “paws up,” their hands raised like monster claws. She has mastered the art of social media

mass intimacy with her fans, communicating regularly via Twitter, where she has a record 8 million-plus followers, and Facebook.

Gaga won Best New Artist at the 2009 MTV Video Music Awards in September but also grabbed headlines for her blood-soaked performance of *Paparazzi*, a song about her struggle with fame. In November she released *The Fame Monster*, depicting fears she had faced on tour. It features *Bad Romance*, her fifth top-10 U.S. single, bolstered by a high-shock-value video that channels Madonna – the artist she is most often compared with – and Michael Jackson. The lingerie-laced plot features Gaga getting kidnapped by wicked supermodels, forced to drink Nemiroff vodka and then sold to a Russian mobster, who goes up in flames on her bed. Gaga ends up calmly smoking a cigarette in a smoldering bed next to a skeleton as her bra erupts in fireworks.

Controversy over her explicit music videos, including criticism over blatant product placement and charges of abusing religious symbols, have only fanned interest, making Gaga the first artist to attain one billion views on YouTube (in 2010).

Despite her provocative tactics, Gaga told Barbara Walters that the greatest misconception about her is that she is artificial and attention-seeking. “The truth is that every bit of me is devoted to love and art, and I aspire to try to be a teacher to my young fans...who feel just like how I felt when I was younger,” she said on Walters' *10 Most*

Fascinating People of 2009. In true chameleon fashion, she appeared in a conservative Chanel suit, reflecting her interviewer – she would later wear a tie and suspenders for a Larry King interview.

Ringin' in a Monster of a tour

Needless to say, by the time Gaga returned to South Florida Dec. 31, 2009, with her Monster Ball Tour, she had turned fame into phenomenon. She played two sold-out shows at Miami's Knight Center and rang in the new year on the Fontainebleau Miami Beach pool deck. The *New York Post* had deemed it the hottest ticket in the country, with prices from \$475 to \$25,000, and Gaga bunked in the five-bedroom Fontainebleau penthouse, complete with private pool and ocean view.

She also made a return visit to Score nightclub, sporting yellow hair and a black bustier costume with fishnet hose and no pants – a Gaga standard. Accompanied by her friend, gossip maven Perez Hilton, her manager and two body guards, she addressed the super-charged crowd from the mezzanine level, saying, “In 2010, Little Monsters, may all your pains be champagnes,” and finished with a few bars of *Bad Romance*. “She stayed for a good hour at the club dancing and greeting people,” Morera says. No longer able to slip under the radar, Gaga left with her security escort, to the flash of paparazzi cameras.

She continued to tour and make headlines in 2010, being named one of *Time* magazine's most influential people and

racking up two Grammys and eight MTV Video Music Awards. She wore a raw-meat dress as she accepted her VMA Video of the Year award. Why? “For me it says if we don't fight for our rights, pretty soon we're going to have as much rights as the meat on our own bones. And I am not a piece of meat,” she explained to vegan Ellen DeGeneres.

With Gaga, who says she art directs every aspect of her life, there is always a message to the medium. This February she arrived at the Grammy Awards incubating in a giant translucent egg. She hatched on stage – garbed in see-through yellow with horns on her forehead and shoulders – to perform *Born This Way* with a contingent of dancers and a pipe-organ solo. She later explained the performance as a metaphor for the birthing of a new race of people that would be free from prejudice. She won three more Grammys, and a week later she was on tour again, playing 41 concerts in 76 days, including the two back-to-back South Florida shows.

There's no word on whether Lady Gaga will return to her old haunts this time around. Score's Luis Morera is realistic about the possibility. “She is such a big artist now, I don't know if her agent will let her. There's always the paparazzi...Everybody has their eyes on her.” ▲