

2021 GRAMMY PREVIEW

'Put On Your Superhero Suit'

With soul-reviving dancefloor anthems and an imaginative, merch-mad rollout plan (jockstraps!), **LADY GAGA** figured out how to be a pop star in a year unlike any other

BY NOLAN FEENEY
PHOTOGRAPHED BY DJENEBA ADUAYOM



Lady Gaga photographed Sept. 3 at Line 204 in Los Angeles.

Styling by Nicola Formichetti
Jisoo Jang bodysuit, Bradley Sharpe dress, Jos It-Spain skirt, Demonia boots, Cecilio Castillo headpiece, Lance Victor Moore ring, Gasoline Glamour rings and body chains.



LADY GAGA LIKES TO JOKE that she has been quarantining since she was 21 years old — and like all the best jokes, it is funny and sad and a little too true. She turned that age in 2007; the following year, she released her debut album, *The Fame*, and soon her songs about faking your way into the fabulous life and the allure of the paparazzi became self-fulfilling prophecies. Leaving the house started to feel about as much fun as flinging herself into the sun. So earlier this year, as the coronavirus started to upend the world, she felt scared but also oddly well-equipped to handle life under lockdown. Around the second week of March, she decided to become a den mother to members of her team, who until this year had probably never imagined what it would be like to fear going outside and being around other humans.

She took in a handful of people at her Hollywood Hills compound, mostly the young women in her immediate day-to-day orbit whose crowded living situations, she worried, made them more vulnerable to COVID-19. Many others from her team — her manager, Bobby Campbell; her creative squad, the Haus of Gaga; her cosmetics brand, Haus Laboratories; her mental health nonprofit, the Born This Way Foundation — were scattered in different places. So, like millions of other Americans this spring, Gaga entered the remote workforce and a life of video meetings while, off-screen, she and her new housemates created something like a hippie compound straight out of the 1960s.

"Somebody'd go grocery shopping, the rest of us would clean the vegetables, then somebody would cook," Gaga says over Zoom one August afternoon, dressed in casual mermaid glam: turquoise hair, mint-chip nails, a chartreuse sweatshirt from her own merchandise line — even the CBD cigarette she's smoking is green. (She's a little sore from her MTV Video Music Awards performance, which aired the

previous day.) When they weren't working, Gaga and company spent a lot of time praying, playing board games and having big conversations about the state of the world and all the good things they wished for. "I run my team like a family," she says. "I don't run it like a staff."

This kind of communal living was probably not what she had pictured when, in February, she tweeted, "earth is cancelled," as a way of teasing her sixth studio album, *Chromatica*, named for a cyberpunk planet where kindness and equality triumph. ("It's not fake!" she says, pointing a finger at her webcam. "It's real! It's in my head!") But with crisis comes a kind of clarity, and Gaga knew what she had to do. She pushed back *Chromatica*'s original April 10 release date — fans had been waiting seven years for her to return to the dance-pop sound that made her famous, and they could wait a little longer. She also started pulling 16-hour days curating Global Citizen's *One World: Together at Home* TV special to support the World Health Organization, talking with producers and recruiting famous friends for performances. In conversation, Gaga is open and easygoing, but she has sudden moments of

like alien S&M gear and a piano shaped like a human brain, still felt like pop culture's most normal nine minutes in months. "That was the perfect example of how we wanted to execute art during a pandemic, which is: Let's make art that, 10 years from now, you'll forget it even happened during a pandemic, except for the fact that she's wearing a mask," says Campbell. "And even then, it's Gaga. She's been wearing masks her whole career."

Chromatica is her most critically acclaimed album in years, a ballad-free survey of dance-music history that spans elastic house beats, Studio 54 drama and '90s techno, with campy spoken-word breakdowns delivered in unclassifiable accents. But these songs are not purely escapism: With its message of resilience in the face of unrelenting blows, the Ariana Grande duet "Rain on Me" has become a theme song for a year that has seen a deadly pandemic, horrifying instances of police brutality, the erosion of democracy, new evidence of impending climate disasters and the arrival in the United States of something called murder hornets.

"One of the many things I've always admired is her ability to inject soulful humanity into the dance-music

kind of diva even your grandmother could love; 2016's *Joanne*, a country-rock detour that she's said sealed the deal for her 2017 Super Bowl halftime show performance; and the 2018 film *A Star Is Born*, a revelatory showcase for her acting skills that spawned the Academy Award-winning, Billboard Hot 100-topping Bradley Cooper duet, "Shallow." (The film's soundtrack has earned 2.7 million equivalent album units in the United States, according to Nielsen Music/MRC Data.)

Now, as dance-pop makes a

gradual return to the charts — with the disco revivals of Dua Lipa and Doja Cat and the urgent synth-pop

of The Weeknd's "Blinding Lights"

— Gaga remains one of its most bankable and influential talents.

Chromatica debuted at No. 1 on the

Billboard 200 with 274,000 equivalent album units in its first week, the seventh-best sales week this year so far. That figure includes 87.16 million on-demand streams — at the time the largest streaming week for a non-R&B, rap or Latin album in 2020.

With her chameleonic fashions,

artfully freaky videos and transcendent hooks, Gaga has quite literally created a template for the next generation of global superstars. The

"My existence in and of itself was a threat to me. I thought about really dark shit every single day."

—LADY GAGA

grave seriousness, particularly when discussing the ongoing pandemic. "It's really wrong for us to go, 'I'm uncomfortable [with wearing a mask] because I can't breathe,'" she says. "Give me a break. Show some respect for the people who are there for us when we dial 911."

If there is a pop star to lead us through this moment, it's Lady Gaga, who, with her fondness for "I" statements and the vocabulary of self-help, radiates the energy of your hip cousin who's training to be a life coach. ("Life is a series of skills, behaviors and emotions, strung together with thoughts," she says at one point, unfurling her arms beyond the boundaries of the screen.) During this year's surreal Video Music Awards, cobbled together via greenscreens and pretaped footage, Gaga performed a nine-minute medley that, despite involving what looked

oeuvre," says friend and collaborator Elton John, who guests on the tracey "Sine From Above." "You can feel the liberation in baring her soul so triumphantly on every track."

That's all bound to be reflected at the 2021 Grammys, where *Chromatica* and "Rain on Me" will likely receive nods in the Big Four categories. Gaga has 11 Grammys, though she has never won any of the general awards like song, record or album of the year. Since her last proper dance-pop album, 2013's divisive *ARTPOP*, the genre has waned in popularity, with many of its brightest stars embracing moodier, chiller sounds as streaming opened the door for hip-hop to dominate the charts. In that time, Gaga has withstood the changing tides of pop culture by achieving a rare ubiquity: There's 2014's *Cheek to Cheek*, a jazz album she recorded with Tony Bennett that made her the

members of Blackpink, the K-pop girl group she recruited for *Chromatica's* "Sour Candy," recall covering songs like "Poker Face" and "You and I" (two of Gaga's 17 career top 10 hits on the Hot 100) during their time as pop-star trainees in Seoul. "I remember we used to say to each other, 'Let's make this kind of great music someday,'" the group's Jisoo tells *Billboard*. Bandmate Jennie says she "cannot forget the feeling" of watching Gaga's "Telephone" video, a 10-minute murder epic co-starring Beyoncé, for the first time as a teen — and you can see that maximalist aesthetic reverberating today in K-pop and beyond.

What pop spectacles should look

like in 2020 is a question mark, as

COVID-19 and the nation's reckoning with systemic racism, sparked by more police killings of unarmed Black Americans this year, offer no





easy answers for how artists should use their platforms. But if there's a way to be of service, Gaga is up for the job. To make *Chromatica*, she had to pull herself out of one of the darkest places she has ever been, and she has a familiar message for anyone trying to do the same: Just dance — it's going to be OK. "When I see people struggling like they are right now," she says, "my brain goes, 'Put on your superhero suit. Let's go.'"

BEFORE SHE COULD GET to planet Chromatica, Lady Gaga first had to get off her porch. After her *Joanne* world tour, "I used to wake up every day and remember I was Lady Gaga — and then I would get depressed," she says. She was afraid of going outside. The idea of her every waking move being available for public consumption filled her with extreme dread. Gaga had, of course, been famous for some time, but she had never really dealt with these feelings. "I was peeling all the layers of the onion in therapy," she says, "so as you dig deeper, you get closer to the core, and the core of the onion stinks." Instead of working through the discomfort, she resisted it. She'd spend hours outside chain-smoking and crying, wondering why she couldn't flip the switch inside of her back on. She was drinking a lot, too: The "Rain on Me" refrain of "I'd rather be dry, but at least I'm alive," she has said, is also about using alcohol to numb herself. "My existence in and of itself was a threat to me," she explains. "I thought about really dark shit every single day."

When people around her would try to help — suggesting a change of scenery or some basic self-care — she'd often pull what she calls the Lady Gaga card: "It's the one where you go, 'I'm Lady Gaga, you don't understand what it feels like, I want to dress how I want and be who I am without people noticing, why does everybody have to notice, I'm so sad, I don't even know why anymore, why are you making me talk about it?'" (She doesn't do this anymore: "I gave that up in therapy.")

The producer BloodPop (Justin Bieber, Madonna), whom Gaga had gotten to know while working together on *Joanne*, was also coming over and trying to help in his own way: by coaxing her to make music in her downstairs studio. "We were like, 'Feeling creative always makes her happy, so let's put some studio time on the calendar,'" says Campbell. Gaga was not always eager. She and BloodPop would often spend

their first few hours together talking through what she was feeling. When she would finally march downstairs, the material came quickly and often drew directly from their conversations; as a result, the songs are more emotionally direct than almost anything in her catalog — snapshots of a pop star feeling her way through the fog. Even at her lowest, says Gaga, "I'm a savage when I want to write a pop song."

Many songs started out as simple piano tracks. To flesh them out, BloodPop brought in a small circle of collaborators, including French producer Tchami (who had worked on a few *ARTPOP* songs) and U.K.-born BURNS (Britney Spears, Ellie Goulding), who was inspired by the demos' raw sadness to reimagine them as thunderous dance anthems. "It's the crying-in-the-club thing — it's always the emotional dance records that connect the most," says BURNS. Unlike how most megawatt pop albums are assembled, the team worked extremely collaboratively, passing tracks back and forth and sharing production credits as they tried to find a sound that was neither too retro nor too on-trend. "Rain on Me" went through about six different basslines before BURNS cracked the code by interpolating a 1979 Gwen McCrae song; they also used a vintage Korg M1 synth to capture the plastic-y piano sound of '90s house records. "It felt almost like summer camp," says BloodPop of the tinkering stage. "We had N64s in every room."

Every time Gaga wrote a song, she would catch a glimpse of her old self. "I would cry and go, 'There it is — hi! How's it going? Why do you got to hide?'" she recalls. At times, it seemed like she was trying to summon that

version of Gaga directly through songwriting. "She almost takes on these spirits for every album, and it's very clear in the music," says BloodPop, adding that the stuttering vocals and "ooh la la" flourishes of "Plastic Doll" were an intentional callback to records like "Bad Romance." Throughout recording, BloodPop put up artwork around the studio — '80s New York club night posters, sci-fi imagery like that of *Alien* artist H.R. Giger — in the hopes of inspiring her. If he could get her up and dancing by the end of the night, that was a good day.

Little by little, she found her way back. "If there's one glimmer inside you, celebrate it," says Gaga. "When you find another one, celebrate it. One more? Call a friend: 'I did this today. I'm winning.'"

BOBBY CAMPBELL

remembers when he realized that the *Chromatica* release was not going to go according to plan. It was March 11, the day Gaga filmed a bunch of interviews with international journalists — and also the day Donald Trump announced widespread restrictions on travelers coming from Europe. Campbell, 35, is no stranger to chaos: He started managing Gaga in 2013, just after her split from ex-manager Troy Carter and mere days before she released *ARTPOP*. But this was something else. He had spent about 18 months putting together a campaign that Interscope Records chairman/CEO John Janick calls "one of the best rollouts planned for an album ever"; soon, Campbell remembers, "all these things were just evaporating before our eyes."

There would be no iHeartRadio Music Awards performance, no surprise Coachella set. Plans to shoot more music videos had to wait, and some brand campaigns were postponed. The team converted billboard space meant to advertise the album into thank-you messages for essential workers. "It was going to feel like a blockbuster movie coming out," says Campbell. Chucking an album out on the internet, surprise-release style, has never really appealed to an artist like Gaga, who always seemed to value reach above all else: 2011's *Born This Way* sold over a million copies in its first week thanks in part to an Amazon promotion that offered digital album downloads for 99 cents, which *Billboard* estimated accounted for 440,000 albums sold.

"[Our approach] is more conventional and traditional, but we still find it effective," says Campbell. There is no widely agreed-upon rulebook for what role entertainers, especially very famous white ladies,

THE TEAM

MANAGEMENT

MERMAID MUSIC

Bobby Campbell, manager
Bo O'Connor, day-to-day

LABEL

INTERSCOPE RECORDS

John Janick, chairman/CEO
Steve Berman, vice chairman
Adrian Amodeo, vp marketing

AGENT

CREATIVE ARTISTS AGENCY

Bryan Lourd, co-chairman

coming up with a Plan B proved challenging on multiple fronts. Safety was the top priority — the team hired its own COVID-19 compliance officers to supervise its efforts — but there was also the question of what felt right for Gaga and the music. "An album like *Chromatica* [is not] going to be promoted by her sitting behind a piano over Zoom in her house," says Campbell, chuckling. Gaga had hoped to do a long-form live performance of songs from *Chromatica* in May, but once unions prohibited production crews from working, they couldn't find a way to pull it off. In July, Gaga and Grande had planned a surprise performance of "Rain on Me" during a drive-through drag show in the Los Angeles area, but the appearance was canceled after the lack of social distancing at a Chainsmokers concert in New York's Hamptons region days earlier raised concerns. As Campbell puts it, "Plan B became Plan C, became Plan D."

At least one thing launched according to plan: the merchandise. Merch/album bundles are a part of many successful album campaigns in 2020, and they certainly aided *Chromatica*: 75% of its first-week unit total was in album sales, which included not only merch/album bundles sold through Gaga's website but also concert ticket/album offers (for her now-postponed Chromatica Ball stadium shows), traditional retail sales and digital downloads. (Interscope did not provide a more detailed breakdown or any sales figures related to merch.) But slapping a logo on a T-shirt this was not: Gaga and her team of art directors have created rain boots, umbrellas, pillows, thongs, jockstraps, blankets, soap, face masks and chokers, all in an effort to make fashionable, on-brand items her fans would actually want — and also poke fun at the whole practice: "It was just those fun moments of playing into the absurdity of what we were doing," says Campbell.

When *Chromatica* was eventually released on May 29, the timing felt serendipitous: Two months into stay-at-home life, songs like "Rain on Me" arrived like a balm. Earlier that week though, Minneapolis police had killed George Floyd, and by that weekend, protests against police brutality were taking place across the nation. Celebrating extravagant pop music suddenly didn't feel so appropriate anymore, so Gaga canceled a Twitter listening party scheduled for release day. "Our kindness is needed for the world today," she wrote.

There is no widely agreed-upon rulebook for what role entertainers, especially very famous white ladies,

should take in conversations about systemic racism. Over the past few months, Gaga's actions have included handing her Instagram over to different racial-justice nonprofits she has donated to; scrapping a speech she recorded for the *Dear Class of 2020* virtual commencement event and filming a new one addressing the protests; and writing a handful of mini-essays on social media that condemned anti-Black violence and called out Trump for "fueling a system that is already rooted in racism." But it's not hard to find pop fans who have taken to social media to note they wish she would say more.

she'd like to think they always have. What form that will take, Gaga isn't sure. She is wary of hollow gestures and virtue signaling — "I call that the Lindseys: the girls that protest and are taking pictures of themselves like, 'Look at me protesting!'" — but she is going to try to make her values even clearer: "To say that I would do it to make my show relevant? Absolutely not. I would do it to make my show *right*. I would do it to make my show *good*."

Gaga hasn't really started planning the Chromatica Ball. If 2020 has taught her anything, it's not to get ahead of herself. "I'm going to learn so much from now until

public. Yet Interscope's Janick says it works out in the long run: You don't get the hard reset of *Cheek to Cheek* without first getting the abrasive, over-the-top sounds of *ARTPOP*. And without *Cheek to Cheek*, you probably don't get *A Star Is Born*. (Bradley Cooper sought her out for the role of Ally after seeing her perform "La Vie en Rose" at a fundraiser.) "It's almost like she thought about all of this a decade in front of it," says Janick. "It feels like it was all plotted out."

Gaga herself says that courting audience expectations involves too much guesswork. "I have no idea what people think or don't think,"

"Do I believe Black lives matter? Yes. Do I believe this is going to get louder? Yes."

—LADY GAGA

Right now, she's trying to listen more than she talks while also trying to be clear about where she stands. "When you're born in this country, we all drink the poison that is white supremacy," she says. "I am in the process of learning and unlearning things I've been taught my whole life." It's a process she thinks benefits from time and care. "Social justice is not just a literacy, it's a lifestyle," she continues.

"What do I think about [posting] a black square? I think everybody has a different feeling about a black square. Do I think there's such a thing as performative activism? Yes. Do I think there's been true activism that's been very important and needed? Yes. Do I believe Black lives matter? Yes. Do I believe this is going to get louder? Yes. Do I believe it should? Yes."

She'd like to bring some of these conversations into her art. House music was pioneered by queer people of color, and Gaga and her collaborators have tried to showcase its history: Ahead of *Chromatica*, BloodPop and Burns put together a "Welcome to Chromatica" playlist of songs that inspired the sound of the album, including tracks by queer house innovators like Frankie Knuckles. She also recently commissioned a remix of the *Chromatica* track "Free Woman" from producer and transgender activist Honey Dijon. "All music is Black music," says Gaga. "That's just a fact."

She thinks these conversations will even inform her live show, too;

the day somebody tells me you can effectively social distance at a stadium," she says, slipping into the slow, calm delivery of a Mister Rogers monologue. "When that day comes, I'm going to build a show that's tailor-made with kindness. I've been through enough to tell you that even though we can't go onstage now, I know we will. It's painful, and it's hard and scary, but I promise we won't be six feet apart forever."

NEARLY JUNE, "RAIN ON Me" debuted at the top of the Hot 100 and became Gaga's fifth No. 1 single. She notched her first,

"Just Dance," over 11 years ago. This kind of chart longevity is rare for women in pop, who face a set of expectations perhaps best summed up by Taylor Swift in her Netflix documentary, *Miss Americana*. "The female artists that I know of have reinvented themselves 20 times more than the male artists — they have to, or else you're out of a job," says Swift. "Be new to us, be young to us, but only in a new way, and only the way we want. And reinvent yourself, but only in the way that we find to be equally comforting but also a challenge for you."

Maybe what has served Gaga well is the fact that she never bothered with fine-tuning her shape-shifting instincts in the first place. She has always taken them to the fullest and most extreme version of themselves, even at the risk of confounding the

she says, laughing. "I really don't have an actual perfect grasp on how I'm viewed." How will she know if she's giving audiences what they want? How do they know what *they* want? (She challenges the idea that *Joanne*, with its acoustic arrangements and lyrics about family, is more "normal" than *Chromatica*: "What's not kooky about wearing a pink hat and singing in a country accent and calling yourself another name?") "If you're an artist," she says, "and there is something you got to give, and you don't even know why, but you were born that way, focus on that. Because that thing can't be wrong."

She puts her hands on her head, fingers intertwined, and goes quiet for a moment. "I can't tell you what a comfort Fiona Apple has been during this time," she continues. Apple's latest, *Fetch the Bolt Cutters*, has been Gaga's constant soundtrack — when she's cooking, when she's alone — and it has provided her with another kind of artistic compass. She's been moved by the way it feels like there's no distance between Apple's music and her life. "I just reveled in the way that girl is so herself," she says. "Anybody that's going to tell me somebody is more relevant than Fiona Apple right now because they've got more followers on Instagram — I don't have their number." She starts flicking her fingers across her palm, making it rain invisible dollars. "That right there? That's culture."

Gaga spends a lot of our interview doing this: trying to define her value system and seemingly prove — to whom, exactly, is unclear — her own artist bona fides. She describes her career-spanning preoccupation with the darker side of fame as something God perhaps assigned her: "Maybe it will be Picasso and Matisse for me: the duality of Lady and Gaga, back and forth for decades as we explore cubism, i.e., electronic pop music, in many different forms — and sometimes jazz." (She says this calmly and sweetly, and in the moment it doesn't sound at all pretentious.) She mentions several times that Instagram is a fantasy you can't get too swept up in; how when she was starting out, she hustled to get shows in rooms with real people, not likes. (On the topic of Instagram vanity: "It's OK to post selfies — it's fun, I do it too — but make sure it's not the whole pie. You got to leave much more of the pizza open for all of that beautiful culture.")

At one point, Gaga spends about two minutes reciting and annotating the lyrics to "911," a *Chromatica* song about her antipsychotic medication, as if she is worried I'm not appreciating it enough. She punctuates each line with a little hand choreography: spinning her index fingers around her head, pushing an invisible force field around. "I mean, that's poetry," she says, smiling. "That's not, like, I'm in the club, there's lots of bottles/I'll have another, then bring the models."

Following her fixations is not always fun. It can be heavy, even painful, she says. But what better proof of her artistry, her humanity, than something she feels so compelled to get out of her system? She throws her hands up ecstatically. "What a privilege!" she says. "To be an artist for the world in 2020. What a year for a heart that bleeds."

Gaga shot a video for "911" in August and says she felt so alive making it, maybe more than at any other point during the making of *Chromatica*. It's a song about when your brain and your body feel at war with each other, and filming required her to revisit the kind of dark hole she was in when she wrote it. But she didn't slip back down; she shook it off and went back to work — back to pulling that thread as far as it could take her. "Freedom for me is when I can go to the darkest part of my heart, visit things that are hard and then leave them behind," she says just before saying goodbye. "Give them to the world, and spin all the pain into a puddle of gold." □

