



GQ FOR INDIA

This October marked the debut of reigning pop princess **Lady Gaga** in India, as the showstopper of the country's first-ever Formula 1 Grand Prix. The event was poised to be legendary. But was it? GQ weighs in
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The photo that unleashed several thousand tweets

THE PHOTO WAS PERFECT – not bad for a shot captured on an iPhone at the dizziest moment in the history of Delhi's nightlife, and not a minute before 3am either. It has all the charm of a candid picture, as if each of the three subjects was posing to a different brief: vampy or mushy? Vampy! No, mushy! Click. It has the arrangement of a Leibowitz portrait, telling the whole story on its own – it's a portrait of fame.

On the left is Arjun Rampal, the actor-model host who made the show possible. Now it's finally over, and he's slouching, shirt crumpled, nuzzling like a kitten. His eyes are starry with champagne and satisfaction. On the right is Shah Rukh Khan, indulging the camera, his body a chiselled cataract of dimple, jaw line, clavicle, pectoral. Under the rakish eyebrows is the

level, professional gaze of India's most photographed man. In between the two is Lady Gaga, the most famous pop star on the planet. It's all in place: the semi-crescent cleavage of a Hollywood goddess, and the bared teeth, claws and arched neck of a monster. She wears sunglasses, so it's hard to know what she's thinking.

The picture itself became a minor celebrity. It's been retweeted 11,000 times; it's been on TV. Lady Gaga linked to it with a tweet that read, "Screw Hollywood. It's all about Bollywood". That phrase had 300,000 Google hits a week later. The picture was taken at the last of three after-parties co-hosted by the Buddh International Formula 1 Circuit and the nightclub Lap. That afternoon, the circuit had successfully hosted India's first Grand Prix, but the

night was just as big. At a venue custom-built by the promoters of the race track, Lady Gaga delivered her first performance in India, and Bollywood was happy to be there. Fame met fame as never before in India. Luckily, someone took a photograph.

THERE ARE SO many ways to describe Lady Gaga – pop superstar, fashion provocateur, weirdo, gay icon, Mother Monster, video-artist, postmodern prophecy, Madonna Redux – that the safest way is to describe who she's not: Stefani Germanotta. Four years ago, Germanotta was a music-industry striver in New York City, whose name you *might* have noticed if you like reading the liner-notes of Pussycat Dolls albums, for whom she wrote songs. Germanotta longed for the big-time, →

but she didn't have a face that would deliver her to celebrity. What she did have was a great voice, the readiness and ability to recreate herself through vivid imagery and, eventually, some guidance from fame-gurus of an earlier era.

From the biographies of music legends like Prince, and the writings of Andy Warhol, Gaga derived the secret to fame: pure spectacle. She began writing catchy, reliable club hits, but packaged them with music videos so adventurous they're practically fashion violence. She shape-shifted from Madonna's "Express Yourself"-era bondage chic to sunglasses made of burning cigarettes and facial prosthetics that looked like subcutaneous horns. In live appearances, she wore dresses made of bubbles or raw meat, or lace gowns that seemed to grow into her face like an infection. When a rumour began that she was androgynous, she embraced it. She was a visual grenade in continuous explosion, blasting off the banality of the decade's previous pop stars. The world couldn't look away.

Gaga became a cyclone of success and fame, each feeding the other. Her first album, simply called *The Fame*, was the first debut in history to have four singles hit #1 on the Billboard Top 40. She's huge with teens, but also has deep followings among gay communities, the fashion world, club-goers, as well as in the world of near-mainstream pop-connoisseurs, the smart people who watch *Gossip Girl*. Gaga seems to exist at that point where the future overwhelms the present. That alone was a revolution for Delhi, where international rock stars usually come to play in the autumn of their careers, like Metallica was meant to do that weekend.

AS PROOF THAT pure spectacle has the power to hijack reality, Gaga would be the ideal figurehead for an extravaganza like F1, in a self-created urban landscape like Greater Noida. "I hadn't heard a lot of Lady Gaga, to be honest, but I could see my kids were into her," Arjun Rampal – who runs Lap along with restaurateur-to-the-stars AD Singh – told me. "But when I was reading about her, I found her quite iconic and amazing. It would be the perfect way to end something as spectacular as the race." For the final after-party, what

was on Rampal's mind was this: "That we should get somebody who's at the top right now. Not somebody who has travelled the whole world and whose last leg is India. Somebody of today. So I spoke to Sameer Gaur [from JPSI: real estate giants and the owners of the race-track], and I said listen, this one's going to cost... He really backed me, and after that we left no stone unturned."

'GAGA DOESN'T USUALLY PERFORM AT SUCH SELECT VENUES, BUT THE RIGHT KIND OF PEOPLE WOULD BE THERE'

The F1 licence fee alone had cost the Jaypee Group \$200 million, and land and building costs were another \$300 million. Sponsors needed to know that people would pay attention – and nobody draws attention like Gaga. Only she would be able to upstage Metallica, the noisy dinosaurs who were due to play for a rival property, F1 Rocks, just two nights before. Only her star-power could outshine the Amber Lounge, the travelling Grand Prix after-party that traditionally attracts the most celebrity attention.

On F1 weekend, Gaga's high-octane fame was fuelling a bigger machine, too. To get a glimpse of it, you didn't even have to watch the race. You only needed to cross the toll booth and head down the Delhi-Noida expressway in its direction. You'd speed through the half-built landscape of Jaypee Greens. The company has marketed this middle-of-nowhere development to upwardly mobile Indians as their slice of the metropolis. For those few weeks, while we waited for Gaga to perform there, the middle of nowhere became the centre of everything.

Her place in the scheme of UP politics probably didn't dawn on Lady Gaga, but she was looking at a bigger picture, too. Gaga hadn't flown to India to play for her fans – she'd flown here to *make* them. Fame is not the same as fans. Her organizers acknowledged that Gaga didn't have the fan-base here yet to make a stadium-concert tour possible – unlike Metallica. So her team had been quietly working to break into the market: Earlier this year, they authorized a series of remixes of Gaga tracks by *desi* DJs, including Panjabi MC and DJ Aqeel. Gaga had planned an India visit in November – all press meets, no shows – to promote her latest album, *Born This Way*. That's when Rampal roped her in.

"I'm happy she agreed – she doesn't usually perform at such select venues," Rampal told me. "But she also said that it was a nice opportunity, because the right kind of people would be there." It's all about Bollywood, remember? If her fame-comet from New York collided with a fame-comet from Mumbai, they were likely to explode in a rain of a million new fans.

After her arrival, Gaga's desire to win over Indians seemed earnest to the point of self-annihilation. At her press conference, in a pretty Naeem Khan dress and a tricolour-streaked bouffant, she seemed to be trying not to shock the gentle natives – even though shock is the whole point, Lady. "Her managers were being übercareful about the sensitivities and sensibilities of Indians," Koel Purie, a TV host who also spoke to Gaga, told me later. "It seemed really out of character." But with Shah Rukh interviewing her on TV, and Rampal crushing on her in public, the noise around her concert was amplified to deafening. A press-kit bragged about her 14 million Twitter followers, but by the time she'd landed in Delhi, she'd crossed 15 million. By the time she left a week later, she'd added 400,000 more.

IT WAS SO fabulous, you almost didn't notice when it stopped being a concert. Two weeks ahead, Lap announced that a ticket for Gaga's night would cost ₹40,000. In the grandstands, a table for eight would cost a cool ₹10 lakh. The news opened floodgates of teenage despair, but even in this, Gaga was trend-setting: A few weeks after her, →



REINVENTION

Gaga went from song writer to becoming the world's biggest pop sensation by repackaging herself



NAMASTE

Gaga was already looking to enter the Indian market before Rampal roped her in for the F1 weekend



Shakira would perform at a private party for KP Singh, chairman of another real estate giant, DLF.

In a profile in American *Vogue*, writer Jonathan Van Meter noted about Gaga's music: "It is as if each song were written for the express purpose of being belted – roared – in front of 20,000 people." In Delhi, Gaga would play for 1,000. I asked her about this when we met, and her reply was instant: "I would say that when there are 20,000 people, I try to engage the audience as if there are 15 people, and when there are 15 people, I try to engage them like there are 20,000." Then she laughed, "Ah ha ha", relaxing with each syllable. Gaga doesn't really have a poker face; she looked relieved at trapping a hard question and knocking it straight into the goal.

She wore a vampiric black dress by Maison Martin Margiela, with blonde hair curtaining across her eyes. She had put it on specifically for my interview. "I always do," she said, Lady-like. "I think it's polite." She was a picture of poise and immaculate styling. But the artist behind *The Fame Monster*, her second album, was morphing back into a sharp, grounded 25-year-old New Yorker, and some of the seams were showing. We spoke spontaneously, but her team had screened my questions – two were rejected, one redacted. In the question amended by her team, I'd asked how often Gaga had performed for an intimate, elite audience. The word "elite" was cut: she was too sensitive about not having a show for her regular fans.

Doing it for the fans is Gaga's most sacred principle – the fans are her mantra, her answer to every question. She calls them her "Little Monsters" and she is the "Mother Monster", nurturing their nervous rebellion and creative or sexual confusion. Purie told me she had asked Gaga what would make her "go Gaga". "She said, 'I want to do a free concert in a big, huge, open space in India, where everyone can just come.' I was thinking, 'That's amazing. But it's completely the opposite of what's going to happen.'"

IT HAD TO be the most exclusive event in Delhi this year, and the cocktail of Lady Gaga and Bollywood was a head-rush even for the most jaded high-roller.

Like a serial conjuring trick, the venue had been twice transformed: from tilled fields to a basketball arena, and now into a fantastical fever-dream – a Maharaja's *darbar* tent fused with a Campari ad-spot. "It should transport you," Rampal told me. "It should make you feel like you're in a different world." It did. Laser lights strafed the perfumed mist as pole-dancers swung round and round above our heads; aerial dancers bent themselves around hoops dangling from the ceiling.

'THE WHOLE POINT OF A GAGA CONCERT WAS TO GO CRAZY ALONG WITH THE MUSIC, BUT NO ONE MOVED'

Mostly, everyone was checking out everyone else. Later, the press releases would churn out the names of the famous: from Rubens Barrichello to Deepika Padukone, Shobhana Bhartia and Yuvraj Singh. Bollywood was being tallied by who *didn't* come (Hrithik Roshan reportedly had a slipped disc). Everybody was high on anticipation. Bottles of Johnnie Walker Gold Label skittered across the tabletops as glasses were drained, first champagne and then Scotch; everyone ended up mixing, waiting for the show to begin.

At 1.45am, the curtains finally went up, and there was Lady Gaga. Performing in India. The crowd flooded up like liquid in a tipped bottle, and for a moment I was distracted from the stage by a hundred tiny iPhone screens, ready to record. Gaga wore a pre-cut Tarun Tahiliani *sari*, a shimmery white number that wouldn't look out of place at a Diwali farmhouse party (although she later ripped the skirt off, leaving just the thong).

She sang five songs, shifting from a "Born This Way" pop routine to a gorgeous piano medley. Yet something critical wasn't happening. Nearly all the songs were from the new album, but nobody there had heard it. So when Gaga, pumping her hands, shouted "Sing it!", no one knew how; when she yelled, "Jump!", hardly anyone did. "The whole point of a Gaga concert was to go crazy along with the music," Purie said later, "But no one moved. No. One. Moved."

Breathing heavily, Gaga took to the piano, her first love. Her medley centred on "Marry The Night", the song's first-ever live performance, but it wasn't received with reverential silence. When a sitarist joined her to jam, folks at the rear had begun refilling their drinks.

Five hundred smiles were glazed by the time Gaga leapt to her feet for "Bad Romance" – and after that, it was over. There was applause while she took a bow. A guy shouted, "One more song!", but nobody picked up the chant. As Gaga strode to the wings and Rampal came out, urging the crowd to clap some more, I remembered the last question that was struck out from my interview: Does fame ever betray you?

THE LAP-BUDDH after-party needed Gaga's fame, and they got it. Gaga's promotional tour needed theirs, and she got it, too. As they raced towards each other, they whipped up a dust-storm of soundbites and images and re-tweets, but there hadn't been the magic that links a star to her true fans, the monster-worship. In the hushed stirring after the applause ended, it felt like all the people there were pawns being moved around in a larger game of fame and glory. We had waited for rapture, and when it didn't come, we shrugged. We could always say that we'd been there.

At the other end of the NCR, the ruins of the Metallica concert grounds told one story of what happens when fans are disappointed. In between, a couple thousand parental hearts melted at the disappointed whimpers of Little Monsters stuck in their bedrooms. And over in Greater Noida, pressed between Shah Rukh's deltoids and Rampal's dropped jaw, I imagine Lady Gaga began to think of her next concert here, having learnt something new about what fame can do, and what it cannot. ☹️