

LA MAIN ATTRACTION

Disco Queen, Djemila Khelfa

WORDS - CONSTANCE VICTORY

— **When** Andy Warhol declared Djemila Khelfa as “perfectly graphic, the prototype of the woman of the year 2000”, perhaps he was revering the independence and purity of her unrestricted nature, psychically perceiving that societal evolution would cultivate this brand of confidence in women. Djemila’s confidence, however, is a singular kind, relegated to those who define their own standards and steadfastly pursue them, irrespective of (in)congenial responses. At age 16, she left the lower middle class suburb of Minguettes, Lyon, and fled to Paris; within 2 years, Djemila’s attraction to music and night life culture led to a DJ residency at La Main Bleue, the most famously exclusive disco in Europe, and precursor to the legendary Palace disco. The year was 1977, and Djemila became France’s first female DJ.

To accurately describe her magnetism, one must curate an illustrious lexicon of contradictions; in her is an artful melange of masculine and feminine, strength and vulnerability, and provocation led by seductive prowess. She has intrepidly carved the kind of painterly existence of which bohemians dream, and rock musicians sing. It was her childhood exposure to soul and funk music, however, that guided her artistic naissance and mapped a gilded trajectory of success for her career in fashion and music. The allure of this existence is punctuated by serendipitous encounters with intellectuals—Michel Foucault and Guy Hocquenghem were among her trusted confidantes— artists and celebrated creatives.

Djemila is best articulated as an energetic force who elegantly counters societal norms. Without having studied fashion or working as a designer/stylist, she became Fashion Director of Facade magazine—the Parisian response to Warhol’s Interview— sharing glossy covers with Jack Nicholson, James Brown and Iggy Pop among many others. She has seamlessly traversed this course because fashion and music are wonderfully intertwined in her own sensory experience; soul and funk transmit the staccato energy that guides her creative expression. Her involvement in music has not only cultivated her professional lifeline, but it continues to leave a cultural imprint on high fashion catwalks. Malian designer Xuly Bet, Heidi Slimane and Karl Lagerfeld have all

OPPOSITE PAGE
DJEMILOVE PISCINE BLEUE SUPER NATURE FASHION

referenced Djemila as a muse within past collections, and her essence continues to captivate all those with whom she engages.

Amidst preparing for the book and film release of her upcoming documentary and corresponding memoirs, Djemila indulges After Nyne in her intrinsic experiences with funk music, and the colorful life that she has lived because of it.

Constance Victory: You were the resident DJ at La Main Bleue, arguably the most preeminent European disco of the late 1970's. Where would you place La Main on the spectrum of Paris nightlife?

Djemila Khelfa: La Main Bleue was one of the first clubs to open in the suburbs, in Montreuil. A shuttle made the return trip between the center of Paris and the nightclub. When La Main Bleue opened, it was the largest club in Europe, very particular. It had a futuristic aesthetic designed by Philippe Stark. This is especially where, for the first time in France, a real social mix had taken place. The workers, many African immigrants came to dance, but also people like Yves Saint Laurent, Andy Warhol, and Rainer Fassbinder. This is where it all started, before Le Palace and The Studio 54.

La Main's playlist largely consisted of African American funk/ Motown, and a large part of the

clientele were West African dandys. How much influence did soul and funk music have on your creative expression?

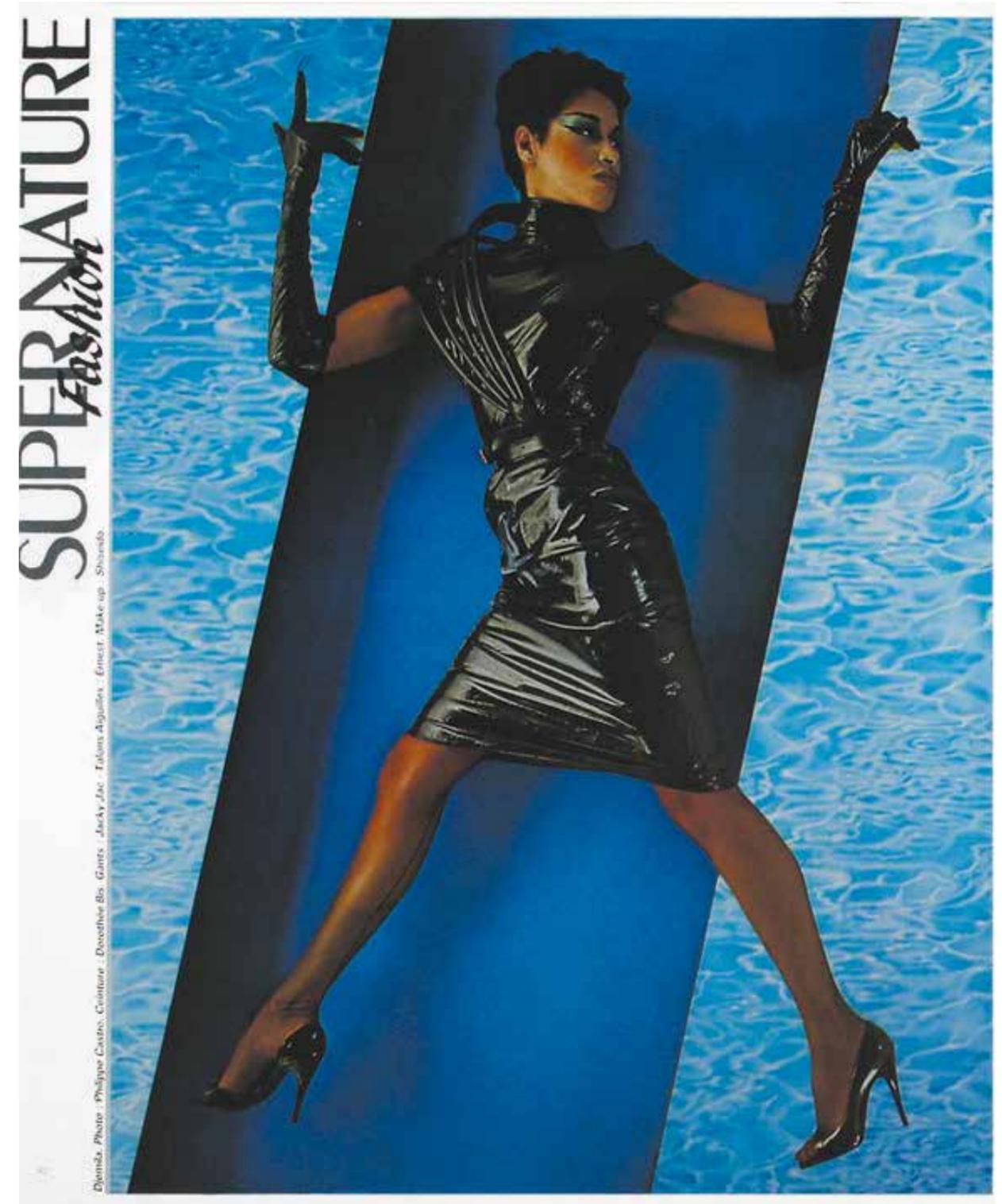
Black music made the link between rock and disco, and consequently unified the dancers in this place. Personally, it's a music that has always transported me.

It sounds like it was the language of your soul?

When I was seven, I listened to James Brown on the radio all night, hidden under the sheets. When I finally got to meet him, it was like finding a father. The accents of James Brown have always spoken Arabic to me.

That's a beautifully articulated perspective. You emerged at a time where there were no female DJ's in France. What inspired you to become a DJ? And at La Main Bleue?

I built myself with music. Lou Reed, Iggy Pop, ... I identified with them. I danced with Iggy Pop in an apartment, but it's another story... The Directors of La Main Bleue wanted to bring even more hip young Parisians to the nightclub, so my friend Paquita Paquin was asked to organize her birthday there. Paquita, who was a figure of Parisian nights, asked me to play the music alternately with Serge Kruger. This was the first



OPPOSITE PAGE
DJEMILOVE GET UP AND DANCE,
Patrick Swirk

time I deejayed.

And how did you use music to cultivate the vibe of the Club? One could say that the DJ holds the kind of wand that spell bounds the crowd.

Often, I played the same song twice in a row, like a trance, to unfold the hypnotic effect of the music. Sublime girls were dancing on studs. Lasers roamed the track. All this was new. Futuristic and sensual at the same time.

What aspect of La Mains ambiance do you believe generated the most magic of the experience?... Was there a tangible magic within the Club?

What participated in the magical aspect of the place—besides the exceptional music— was the imagination of the dancers. We'd get ready for hours before we go out, we stylized ourselves. Men called "les sapeurs", African dandies, invented crazy outfits. They may have been working on construction sites but they were princes at La Main Bleue.

Constance Victory: It sounds like a whole world was created through rhythm and grooves.

When we went up the stairs at the entrance, it was like going to the Cannes Film Festival.

How has the evolution of music and your years of deejaying impacted your creative insight?

Music gave me the taste of freedom. It was pure pleasure. I kept looking for that, but when I see what is happening today in fashion for example, at Celine in particular, I see our [fashion] looks [recreated] without the fun that came with it.

How has the evolution of music inspired the evolution of your lifestyle?

I stayed away a long time from the night. But for some time now, in Paris, I feel like it's coming back. I play music from time to time, at the Alcazar with Patrick Vidal for example. And I did some concerts, covers of Edith Piaff, Little Richard and Lou Reed.

If there's a song that's most kindred with your path, which would it be?

Lou Reed, "Take a walk on the wild side".

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