

TINY & MIGHTY

Singer Janelle Monáe may be five feet tall, but everything else—the look, the hair, the talent—is larger than life. Photographed by Steven Klein.

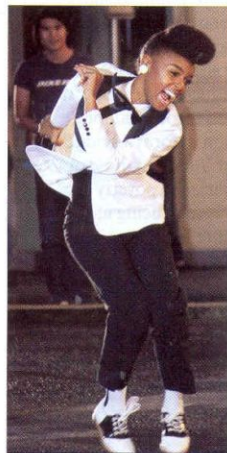
Somewhere in Atlanta, in a mid-century bungalow on a leafy lane, Janelle Monáe has only one thing on her mind: What should the well-dressed twenty-eighth-century Alpha Platinum 9000 android be wearing these days? The 24-year-old singer with the soulful voice that has the sweet tone of an earlier era needs to know because this android is her futuristic avatar Cindi Mayweather, the inspiration (and cover star) for Monáe's debut album, *The Arch Android*. It's not as if Monáe can just drive on over to Jeffrey at Phipps Plaza on Peachtree Road and find something that says, "This is so 2710." Which is why she is visiting two costumer friends of hers, Jeff Gillies and Randie Saxxon, to discuss the crucial question of the Look. Usually she doesn't have to give much thought to her own look, because she adheres to it with a fierce commitment. Monáe, who stands five feet tall from the tip of her elaborate quiff updo—"You might call it a pompadour, but I call it a Monáe"—to the toes of her size 7 George Esquivel spectators, is nearly always, onstage or off-, in a James Brown-ian "Get Up Offa That Thing" tux. "I want to look timeless," she says, rationalizing her rigorous dress code. "I want to be able to look at images of myself over the years and not be able to date them. Plus," she adds, "you can get in anywhere wearing a tuxedo."

But with Mayweather's future looking tuxless, Monáe, Gillies, and Saxxon consider what the Look could possibly look like. Monáe wants something "regal, warrior-like." The designers decide on a draped lamé dress that will be worn under

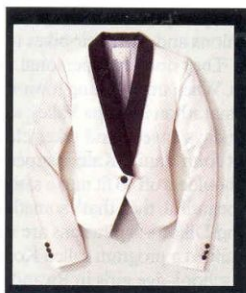
a metallic exoskeleton that Jesse J. Clarkson, a model-maker who worked on *Batman: The Dark Knight*, is creating. Accessories include a Fritz Lang *Metropolis* cityscape crown and a pair of eight-inch platforms. (A rare and dramatic foray into heel elevation for her; normally, she lives and performs in saddle oxfords.) With the Look finalized, Monáe can concentrate on seeing some of the pieces Gillies and Saxxon have just finished making for her. They've known one another for about three years, ever since they worked on an Atlanta Ballet performance piece called *Big*. Now Gillies and Saxxon pretty much make all her clothes, as Monáe finds shopping a chore because of her size—"It's hard for me to find things that fit right, and besides, I am not into spending eight hours hunting for them"—and because of her exacting sense of what works for her. "I like to think of my body as a canvas," she says, "and I don't like my clothes to make the picture too busy."

She shops only for what she doesn't have custom-made: crisp cotton shirts (Anne Fontaine, J.Crew, and her favorite, Ralph Lauren, whom she refers to by her nickname for him, "That Guy"); riding boots from That Guy; and George Esquivel shoes, buying five or six pairs at a time because "I panic I'll miss out. He makes only about 100 pairs of each style." Everything is black or white or both, and it has been that way for years, ever since she left her native Kansas City, Kansas, at seventeen to study musical theater in New York before moving to Atlanta five years ago. "It centers me," she says of the strict palette. "And it lets the colors in my personality come out." (She

Graphic Notes



IN BLACK AND WHITE Monáe (above) likes to keep her style in high contrast with tuxedo jackets (Boy by Band of Outsiders, \$1,030; Barneys New York stores) and her Ralph Lauren Collection riding boots.



REMIXING HER LOOK Bow ties (her favorite was a gift from Erykah Badu; this from Wuyork, \$225; 415/290-4379); vintage brooches from her aunts to wear on a headband; Gucci Rush, \$50; sephora.com; and M.A.C. Mineralize Skinfinish in Comfort, \$28; maccosmetics.com.



WHAT ROCKS HER Hendrix-like jodhpurs and velvet cape from Gillies & Saxxon; Ralph Lauren Purple Label Gatsby shades, \$400; Ralph Lauren stores.



just saw *Coco Before Chanel*, and she loved Mlle's disciplined commitment to the very same color scheme: "That would have been me back then," she says, laughing.) Her most recent purchase is the five pairs of tux pants that Gillies and Saxxon made for her. "The high waistline is good; it elongates my legs," she says, holding them up against her. "But you know, I do like being short. A lot of my favorite artists are short. James Brown. Prince." "And like them," Saxxon says, barely raising an eyebrow, "you might be a little larger than life, too."

That's the thing about Monáe. In the end, her stature is really nothing more to her than physical size. It doesn't dictate how she sees the world. Whether she is in one of her suits or dressed for seven centuries from now, there is a kind of comic-book-superhero approach to how she dresses, simply because she is enthralled by the idea of making herself and the world around her that much larger than life. After meeting with her designer friends, Monáe headed over to one of the few stores she regularly visits, No Mas!, a Mexican furniture emporium/cantina; think Guillermo del Toro art-directing ABC Carpet & Home. She was looking for new furniture for her record label's HQ. Everything she was drawn to might have dwarfed her—a tooled-leather sofa edged in brass studs, a pair of gargantuan antique wooden doors that she admired because "they could have come from a castle"—but they spoke to her preference for the heroically scaled. And it's when you listen to her music that you can really see just how epic Monáe's vision is. Stick with me here, but the only way to describe *The Arch Android* (out next month) goes something like this: Prince and Stevie Wonder collaborating on a suite of by turns positive and poignant songs that mix "A Day in the Life," by the Beatles, with the sound track of the 1954 sci-fi movie *Forbidden Planet*. Then all that audacious aural gorgeousness is lavished with electronic beats and strings courtesy of the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra. It's staggering in its ambition, and even more staggering that it came out of such a young singer. Monáe made the album with her longtime musical collaborators Chuck Lightning and Nate "Rocket" Wonder, collectively known as the Wondaland Arts Society, and it also features contributions from Sean Combs and fellow Atlantan Antwan "Big Boi" Patton of OutKast. There are plans to make videos to accompany every song. And a tour—with Monáe performing in the Look, each and every night.

Having seen her rehearse at the Zac Recording studio, I can hardly imagine her doing the frenetic dancing she does onstage in Cindi Mayweather's getup (though that headdress would definitely keep the Monáe in place). Her routines are part "Sex Machine," part high-impact workout, and all come from her own spontaneous choreography. Still, she is fit enough for the exertion, even if she says that when she dances so much, "I start sweating like I am possessed by the Holy Ghost." To cope with the demands of her performances, she prefers to skip the gym in favor of horseback riding and following the Insanity Workout, which she and her band have taken to doing as a warmup before they go onstage. "I've come to enjoy the mental challenge of taking my body way beyond its limits," she says. With Monáe, that sounds as much a statement about her life as it is about her fancy footwork. —MARK HOLGATE

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ALREADY WAY AHEAD

Long before Junya Watanabe sent out suits and towering head wraps on his spring 2010 runway, Janelle Monáe (*right*) was wearing the look. Junya Watanabe Comme des Garçons jacket (\$1,460), shirt (\$495), pants (\$610), and shoes; Comme des Garçons, NYC. Hair, Duffy for Tommy Guns NY; makeup, Kabuki at Kabukimagic for Dior Beauty. Set design, Mary Howard. Details, see In This Issue.

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