

FASHION FEATURE

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LITTLE MISS

M YRIAM

When you've got one of the Arab world's most beautiful stars to style, just a sprinkling of glamour goes a long way. And so when *Enigma* decided to fly Lebanese pop-sensation Myriam Faris to London for an exclusive fashion story, it wasn't too hard to transform her from the simple and sassy sweetheart the Arab world knows and loves, into a breathtaking dramatic diva of truly fabulous proportions. And having chatted, gossiped and most importantly shopped with the superstar, Senior Editor Amy Mowafi discovered that beneath the 'sweet as pie' exterior, lies a girl who knows exactly what she's doing and precisely what she wants. This is Myriam as you've never seen her before!

Jacket by Chanel;
Hot pants by Chanel;
Tights available at Falke;
Jewellery by Dior





Coat by Burberry;
Pants by Dior;
Multi-coloured earrings & ring by Chatila;
Floral ring by Chanel

I

t's mid-afternoon and an oppressive grey has descended upon London. The damp and drizzle does little to deter Myriam Faris who is striding down Oxford Street in large Dior sunglasses while her manager films the scene. "It's for my mum," she explains. "I always make a video for her whenever I travel." And then she suddenly spots the mammoth Top Shop store and within moments we're knee-deep in funky fashions. "I like designer clothes more, like Versace, Cavalli, Dior and Chloe" she says. "But my sister loves all this stuff." Scrummaging through rows of colourful clothes, Myriam could pass for

a typical teenager on the hunt for a bargain. It's only the hair that makes shoppers do a double take – the wild auburn curls careering wilfully in every direction, bouncing atop a body of devastatingly perfect and petite proportions. The British may be oblivious that they have an Arab star in their midst, but they're seemingly not oblivious to her star-quality; to the charisma which Myriam is often at pains to point out "is the most important thing. You can be talented or beautiful, but without charisma you're nothing. It's the charisma that makes you famous."

Of course with great fame, comes great...well, aloofness. Her star is in the ascendance and she knows it. She can make her demands and get away with it. At the *Enigma* photo shoot, when she doesn't like the shoes we've chosen, she doesn't wear the shoes we've chosen. No amount of gentle persuasion will change that. "The heels are too sparkly," she says. "I don't think they work, I much prefer the sandals. I'll wear the sandals." But train a camera on her, and she is instantaneously transformed into the consummate professional, sparkling and glittering all over the place; all wicked winks, flirty flicks of the hair, pretty pouts and succinct sound-bites. Supply her with an audience or some fawning fans and she oozes the signature sweetness that has had the Arab world on their knees ever since she skipped her way – all sugar and little spice – onto our screens in 2003 with the video for her debut single *Ana Wel Shoq (Me and Desire)*. When a group of young Saudi girls realise they are sharing the Top Shop changing rooms with their favourite Lebanese singer, she focuses her big brown sparkling eyes on them; lavishing them with smiles, signatures and lashings of star-attention. They are beside themselves with excitement.

Myriam is used to the attention; she thrives on it. She has after all been vying for it ever since she was knee-high to a microphone. "I was singing before I could even talk," she says the night before our shoot, looking terribly tiny in the grand surrounds of London's Langham Hotel. "You could tell when I was a child that I was going to be a star. I'd wear high-heels and makeup and sing and dance around the house all the time." And so, as the now famous story goes, the feisty five-year-old was enrolled in ballet classes, where all that self-assured talent finally found the first of many outlets to come. "There were 13 and 14-year-olds in my class, but the teacher would make me stand at the front of the room and ask the other students to copy me. 'Do it just like Myriam,' she'd tell them." From that point onwards Myriam became *that* girl; the one who got all the attention,

received the loudest applause and inevitably walked away with all the prizes. "When it came to any artistic extra-curricular activity at school, everyone knew I'd take the lead," she says, not immodestly but simply as a statement of fact. "I'd always end up being the solo." And so, just as inevitably, at nine years of age, Myriam walked away with the first prize in an oriental-dance competition on hit Lebanese TV show *Al-Mawahib Al-Saghira (Young Talents)*. At 16 she sashayed away with the top prize at the high-profile Lebanese Song Festival and a year later ensured millions across the Arab world knew she was destined for stardom when she was showered with praise on blockbuster talent-spotting TV show *Studio-El-Fan*, singing and dancing her way to first place. She could have taken her 15 minutes of televised fame and run with it, but the pop world is littered with TV talent show casualties and Myriam refused to be the next. Instead she opted to study at the Lebanese National Conservatory of Music. "These types of shows are just the beginning of the story, not the end," she says. "You have to go through so much more to really become a star and education is one of those things. It's so important to study your craft."

Of course, her experiences are of the formulaic 'I-grew-up-in-front-of-an-audience' variety, a typical 'stage-kid' with all the resulting personality trappings. Away from the cameras and questions she is quiet; calm and nonchalant amidst the chaos of preparations that surround her. She may be the focus of our attention, but her mind is elsewhere. She is used to people tugging at her hair, making up her face and clawing at her persona. I ask her later what she's thinking about. "I worry a lot," she says. "About everything and anything, from my dress to my next album...there's a lot that keeps me up at night."

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Her next and third album, slated for release this summer, and in production this month, already has the Arab world's biggest record companies clamouring at her door. With Music Master International (MMI), the company that discovered her, having decided to simply focus on distribution, the doors are now wide open for a profitable piece of Myriam. Rotana, Good News and Alam El Phan have all put in their bids. On the surface Myriam might seem disinterested in the workings of the media machine, "I guess that's all up to my managers," she says sighing. But, this is a young woman – who despite the pretence of adorable


innocence – knows exactly what she's doing and exactly what she wants; a 23-year-old who has an inherent understanding of what Arab audiences need, and how to give it to them.

When MMI first took her under their wings, their first instinct was to sensualise her; to squeeze her into the sexy, sultry over-the-top mould created by her luscious Lebanese pop cohorts. Myriam refused, stubbornly insistent on playing it natural. Her first video saw her practicing ballet, playing with her cat, and generally being very normal, in jeans and a T-shirt. And, most 'shocking' of all, her natural Arab curls had not been straightened out and preened to perfection. "Arab girls have this thing where they just can't leave the house without being fully made-up, and Arab stars just encourage that," she says. "I wanted to do the opposite, to turn that rule on its head. I love girls to look natural, I love simple clothes. I love myself just the way I am. I might not have the perfect nose, but it's my nose and it's part of who I am. So it was important to show that in►

Dress by YSL available at Browns;
Tights available at Falke;
Bag by Chanel;
Jewellery by Avakian




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“People can tell that all I want to do is sing, dance and have fun. I’m not trying to be sexy or attract the wrong type of attention”

Dress by Chanel;
Jewellery by Chatila



Dress by Maria Grachvogel;
Jewellery by Avakian

Silk & satin dress by Armani Collezioni;
Arabesque diamond necklace and cosmos blue watch with diamonds by Chanel Fine Jewellery;
Swarovski crystal handbag by Kruszynska;
'Medina' shoes by Gina Couture

my videos.” Of course it worked. The cute and accessible look has become her calling card, and immediately differentiated her in an ostentatious industry. In the video for 2005’s *Nadini (Call Me)*, the title single off her second album, she wore a T-shirt she designed herself, emblazoned with the flags of the Arab world. Her ‘people’ were wary...the press latched onto it...and loved it. Reams of coverage were devoted to the ‘meaning behind the T-shirt’. And cloying and naïve as that ‘meaning’ might have been – ‘we should all learn to love each other’ – it served to frame her as a girl with something to say.

As a result, she is one of the few Arab pop starlets who have succeeded in avoiding the conservative backlash experienced by the likes of Nancy Agram and Ruby. Few have accused her of being overtly sexual and, try as they might, the Arab media has failed to unearth a whisper of scandal. “The camera is the smartest inanimate object in the world,” she says. “From the moment it’s focused on you, it can read everything you’re thinking. So people can see that all I’m trying to do is sing, dance and have fun. I have no other agendas. It’s clear I’m not trying to be sexy or make guys think of me in ‘that’ way. Sure, I love fashion and love to wear cute clothes, but that’s all it is...clothes.” No doubt, it’s her much-lauded attachment to home and hearth that keeps her unusually sensible and grounded. She has now travelled the world, been invited to the hottest parties, played at the biggest concerts in the region, but she refuses to leave her parents’ home and whenever she has a single moment to herself, home is exactly where you’ll find her. Her mother, a fashion designer, and her two sisters are her “best friends in the whole world” and she refuses to befriend anyone from the pop establishment. “My closest friends are the same ones I grew up with,” she says. “I can count them on one hand and they are enough for me. I know they genuinely love me, and wish me the best and pray for my success. When it comes to other pop stars, I’ll be nice and polite and wish them luck if we’re working together, but that’s it. I don’t like to get too close or too personal. What they do outside of work is not my business.” Meanwhile her older sister – who wrote the lyrics of smash hit *Haklek Rahtak (I’ll Give You Sleepless Nights)* and both the music and lyrics on several songs on her upcoming third album – travels everywhere with her. Her mother has been known to do her stage and video styling, designing many of the outfits herself. And – as she keeps telling the press – nothing in the world makes her happier than when her parents say they’re proud of her.

It’s little wonder the Arab world simply adores her...that girl-next-door persona and oft-banded family values play right into traditional sensibilities, while that much-talked about and intoxicating combination of sassy sexiness and wide-eyed innocence satisfies the Arab desire for untouchable westernised pop-idols. All the girls want to be her, all the boys want to marry her, and every generation loves her. The results are plain to see – in 2004, she nabbed the *Horeyat* magazine award for Best Video Clip and Best Female Young Artist, her two albums have become best-sellers all over the Arab world, she has become the ‘face’ of Vodafone, and MTV recently asked her to be the first Arab artist to feature on their prime-time music show *Motolert*. An exclusive after-shoot party at the Cairo Jazz Club in Egypt had hundreds of near riotous fans clamouring at the doors to catch a glimpse of the pint-sized pop sensation.

Of course, one can’t sit and have a chat with the irresistible Myriam Faris and not talk about ‘boys’. And, brave be the Arab man who takes on a suc-

cessful, sexy and fiercely ambitious public-persona, but Myriam is not planning to settle down anytime soon. “It would take a very special kind of man to get my attention,” she says. “It would be very hard for anyone to force me to shift my focus away from work to a relationship. That man would have to be confident, kind and very successful. I need a man who is sure enough of himself to support my work rather than be intimidated by it. I’m not prepared to give up my career. If you allow a man to put a single condition on your life, you’re going to end up giving in to everything. I am so lucky that my parents have always supported and encouraged everything I do. They are very proud of me, so the man I am with would have to feel the same.” And on the rare occasions that she does find herself in a relationship, Myriam is the type to “give, give and give”.

Wise words for one so young, but either way, her sense of responsibility to her “art” puts the “marriage and three kids” scenario a long way away. Nothing gets between Myriam and her work. When I ask her about the most important lesson life has taught her, the reply is immediate. “I was getting ready for a huge concert in Beirut when I found out my mum had an accident in the street. I dropped everything and rushed to the hospital. Even though she was very badly hurt, she was so angry at me for coming and said I had to leave immediately to make it in time for my concert. She insisted her accident has nothing to do with my fans, that it’s not their problem, and that I have a commitment to my audience and the concert’s organisers. I learnt that whatever is happening, nothing should take me away from work. And that was my mother! And of course nothing in the world is more important to me than my mother. But at that moment I understood what it takes to be professional.”

Her first taste of the fame which would soon take over her life, came just two weeks after the release of her first self-titled album. Invited to sing at a wedding in Alexandria, she landed at Cairo airport to a frenzy of fans and “absolute mayhem”. Having assumed she would slip in unnoticed, the car journey to Alex shed light on the reason for her seemingly overnight popularity. Her debut single was playing every 15 minutes on Cairo’s number one radio station Nogoum FM. “I couldn’t believe it,” she says. “And when I got to the wedding, everyone knew all the songs on my album. I posed with over 1,500 people that night. I’ll never ever forget it!” The intervening years have provided her with plenty more unforgettable moments; from the filming of 2004’s *Nadini* at the Théâtre du Gymnase Marie Bell in Paris to her whirlwind schedule of concerts in every major Arab city. “One minute I’m in Dubai, the next I’m in Jordan, but I love being on stage and I love, love, love what I do. I just did a huge concert in Kuwait and that was one of my proudest moments. I was performing alongside Najwa Karam, Fadl Shaker and Nancy Agram – all the biggest stars in the Arab world – and yet when I got on stage I wasn’t able to say a thing for five whole minutes because everyone kept clapping and clapping.”

And yet the pitfalls of fame may be starting to get to her – “I have no privacy anymore, no space or time to myself, without thinking and knowing people are watching.” But the attention she’s always wanted and needed shows no sign of letting up any time soon. Whether she is able to endure in this notoriously fickle industry remains to be seen. There will come a point in the not so distant future when she will have to hang up the cute ballet shoes and prove to the Arab world that she has staying power; that the loveable gregarious girl can become an all-grown-up woman who is still capable of capturing the region’s imagination. But then, Little Miss Myriam is a girl who is used to getting her own way. ■

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Dress by Maria Grachvogel;
Jewellery by De Beers

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