

Diane von Furstenberg

Two things have remained constant of the designer, hiker, author and cheerleader-in-chief: her ability to predict a cultural moment and the pure emotion of her work. Even as her stores shuttered and business blistered, she paused to pivot her legacy. *Vogue India* takes a closer look at the life and times of DVF. By **Akanksha Kamath**

“I’ve just finished a fabulous tai chi class,” comes a raspy voice from the other end of the line. At 73, Diane von Furstenberg’s days are longer than the hours that fill them. “My daily 45-minute swim isn’t until later, and I’ve finally found the missing piece to my jigsaw puzzle,” she tells me, as the countdown on our 20-minute phone call begins. We jump topics in the way her famous wrap dress has jumped generations. Von Furstenberg is one of those rare designers whose talent has long intersected with the spirit of an age.

The 2020 pandemic, however, changed a lot for the American brand. In June, it reported a 75 per cent reduction in employee strength, and the closure of 18 of its 19 global stores. Despite this, in a locked-down world, where labels are lamenting their losses, Von Furstenberg says, “This very strange period is forcing me to own it and focus on our true identity. I am very lucky to have an iconic product, the wrap dress, that has lasted for four decades. Our brand has a purpose and a message that caters to the woman in charge, and we’ve had a loyal customer following for many generations. For these reasons, I remain positive.”

Beyond her dress that made history (quite literally; it hangs in the halls of the Metropolitan Museum of Art), her legacy has spilled over to fostering emerging fashion talent as president of the Council of Fashion Designers of America (CFDA) and its chairperson for 13 years, supporting non-profit organisations making waves in women’s empowerment and launching a podcast channel, *InCharge* with DVF.

Currently at her country home in Georgia, USA, which she bought for herself at age 26 after the whopping success of the DVF wrap dress, the designer, grandmother and ultimate hype-girl, finds time to fine-tune her book, *Own It* (launching early next year), rethink the wrap and check in with the women who inform her world. We pose confessional questions to the designer, and her comebacks are loaded with insights and laced with nostalgia. >



“Women will be drawn to things that are timeless. Things you will never throw away because it’s a good friend”

INTO THE WORLD OF...



Clockwise: Paintings of women DVF admires decorate her New York studio; DVF and the wrap dress; At the top of Machu Picchu; Dressed up as the Statue of Liberty at the Met Gala, 2019; Unfiltered at 73; With the women winners of the DVF Awards 2020; With her friend, the artist Andy Warhol in 1977



What has this time of pause taught you?

“Well, it’s given me time to reflect. I have had three periods in my long career. I started at age 24 in the early 1970s as a young European princess who came to America with a suitcase full of dresses. I became successful early and lived the true American Dream. This part of my life I call Act I. A decade later, I sold or licenced most of the business. Back in Europe, I started a publishing house and lived the fantasy of being a writer’s muse. I returned to America to discover that my brand had deteriorated and lost all of its magic. In 1998, I started again. Once again, I became successful. I call this phase Act II, or ‘come-back kid’.

“Five years ago I felt it was time to prepare Act III, or my ‘legacy’. I hired the experienced management that I thought could grow an already global business. Unfortunately, that kind of business model was becoming irrelevant—huge wholesale accounts, outlet stores, heavy effort on accessories... For the first time ever, DVF stopped being profitable and lost a bit of its identity trying to be everything. This brings us to today. The coronavirus and the condi-

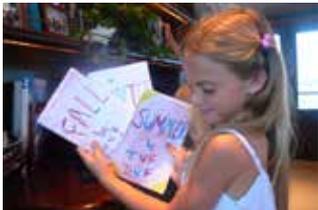
tion of the retail landscape has forced me to relook at my brand. That meant closing many stores, shrinking the team and focusing on international sales with a big emphasis on China and growing the successful online business.”

Are you excited about what the future may hold?

“In one way it has been hard and I had to part with a lot. But in another, it is exciting. I went back to the best creative director I ever had, Nathan Jenden, and with a tight young dynamic team including my granddaughter Talita von Furstenberg, I look forward to sharing my knowledge, experience, talent and connections to allow them to carry the brand into the future.”

Take us back to life in the 1970s.

“To be young in the ’70s was to be really lucky; we thought we had invented freedom. I had just moved to New York and it was dangerous and run-down. As a result, there were many artists residing in the city (because it was very cheap). There were musicals on Broadway, Studio 54, an exploding fashion scene... But no time is without its troubles. Soon, we had the AIDS epidemic.” >



Clockwise: Talita von Furstenberg wearing TVF for DVF; Celebrities in DVF; The jigsaw puzzle that passed her time in lockdown; DVF and TVF pore over mood boards and collection swatches; A young Talita envisioning a future collection for her grandmother's label



Priyanka Chopra Jonas



Paris Hilton and Nicky Rothschild



Michelle Obama



Kate Hudson

What are your life lessons at 73?

"I have lived so fully, I really should be a hundred and forty. I cannot hide a day of my life, and that is really the key to enjoying it. Even in difficult moments, you have to own it and remember that your most difficult moments become your legend, and very often, your best souvenirs.

"In 1974, I created the wrap dress. Well, people say I created it, but the truth is the wrap dress created me. I was 26 years old, and it made me feel so confident, and the more confident I was, the more confidence I could sell. The dress became a symbol of women's liberation."

Classics will dominate wardrobes in a new world. What makes the wrap dress one for the ages?

"A wrap dress is a dress that crosses over; it doesn't have buttons or zippers, it is flattering on the neckline, cinches the waist, and you can do so many things with it. I was lucky to come up with a shape that's so universal. In China, the *qipao* is timeless; in India it's the sari. Indian women completely under-

stand what I stand for. You love beautiful fabrics, silks and prints, and bright beautiful colours. You could live all your life with the same shape because you can alter it in so many ways."

What are your conversations with Talita like?

"I have five grandchildren, but Talita was the first, and the first is always a little special. When she was nine years old, I was going to Florence for ten days to do a fashion show at Palazzo Pitti. I told Talita she could come with me, but only if she worked. She came along and, the truth is, she did work. Talita has always wanted to do this. And I treated her like a grown-up. Her decision to be a designer and start TVF for DVF was a very natural thing."

Will this new era change a woman's wardrobe?

"I'd like to think that my contribution to a woman's wardrobe—and therefore my contribution to fashion—is to be your best friend when you open your closet. Women will be drawn to things that are timeless, things that have purpose. Something you will never throw away because it's a good friend. That, more than ever, is going to be the driving force." ■