

CREATIVE....



JEANIEUS

From being considered a 'cult classic' to gaining international haute couture stardom on the Paris catwalks, renowned creative director and stylist **Jeanie Annan-Lewin** had to find fashion, rather than being found in fashion like so many others. **Sabastian Cabrices** discovers how humble beginnings and a determination to change the narrative fed Jeanie's high creative IQ for a new post-pandemic world.





Photographer: Ellie Hemsley

It's 10am on a Saturday, and the international fashion set has just left a show in the Brera district of Milan. The streets are congested with photographers and fans straining to see their favourite celebrities and influencers. In the safety and privacy of a distant sidewalk, fashion visionary and stylist Jeanie Annan-Lewin stands puzzled, trying to work out which black car to hop into amongst the many lined up outside the show.

It's my first time seeing her in person after our Zoom call in late January. I run towards her and greet her with excitement. We're happy to finally meet in person, but still, neither of us can find our cars. "I came last minute, and suddenly I have all these shows. Milan is busy," she says, holding her phone up, trying to reach her driver. "I have Ermanno Scervino and then Ferragamo. Will you be at Ferragamo?" After verbally cross-checking our schedules, Jeanie finally found her car and headed to her next show. And I treated myself to breakfast.

For Annan-Lewin, it's been one busy moment after the next since 2020. That was the year she joined Perfect, first as a fashion director, then more recently as the magazine's creative director. Founded by industry legend Katie Grand, the new project marked Annan-Lewin's return to full-time work at a title after a long and hectic period of freelancing. In the interim, she styled covers for Harper's Bazaar US, editorials for i-D, campaigns for Nike and Converse, and numerous celebrities on the red carpet.

At the time of our initial Zoom call, she was fresh off the rollercoaster of styling her first haute couture show in Paris. "On the way there I couldn't believe it," she exclaims

in excitement. "I never thought it would happen." The collection that had captured her heart was for the highly anticipated couture debut of South Korean designer Sohee Park, better known as Miss Sohee. "I'm glad that people liked it," she says humbly, "I was really nervous." Not because this was the first time Miss Annan-Lewin had styled a show, you understand – she had previously worked with Yuhan Wang and Wesley Harriot for their collections. But this singular couture achievement came at a time when she was finally rekindling her relationship with career success.

"I've had quite an intense journey in the last three years," she says, "I've gone from being more of a 'cult classic' to suddenly being well-known and being asked to do things on a bigger scale." Immediately I stop to circle back to 'cult classic.' Was that how Annan-Lewin perceived herself, or was it a title bestowed upon her by others? "I had heard people giving it to me," she responds, "people who were in the know about fashion knew about me and the things that I'd done, but I wanted to be known on a much larger scale. At the time, I found it very frustrating. I wanted to be a creative that people had heard of."

As the creative director of Perfect, Annan-Lewin is now gaining the industry recognition her work has long deserved. But for her, it's something she knew would eventually come. "People are always preoccupied with being cool, but I always knew I was cool," she says (and I can confirm). Part of her new role involves being the champion for diversity she has always wanted to be and "making things a bit more inclusive across the board."



Perfect Magazine, issue 3. Photographer: Zhong Lin



Young Jeanie & family

With that in mind, to achieve the arresting imagery that has been the hallmark of her career so far, Annan-Lewin began to explore unrecognised communities and oft-overlooked faces in her mission to redefine the accepted standards of beauty and style. It should go without saying that developing the strategy took asking some tough internal questions and having some frank discussions. "We said, 'what if we talked about designers no-one's ever heard of? Or we talked to some kids in Ghana, Mexico, or South Asia who are taking amazing pictures? What if we reached out to people that just hadn't had the visibility they should have had?' It was interesting to start the process that way, and then obviously try to make it viable in terms of selling a magazine featuring luxury products."

The success and growing industry status Annan-Lewin is now enjoying doesn't make for easier background research, however. Apart from a few short interviews and panels, there's no fountain information about the woman behind the images springing forth from anywhere online. Which comes with the accompanying weight of expectation from the knowledge I would be writing what will turn out to be her first-ever full interview profile. "I'm honoured someone wants to deal with it," she jokes. It's more evidence of her vivacious soul, yet does perhaps also reveal she's still yet to come to terms with the kind of recognition associated her station? "I remember once someone came up to me on Oxford Street and asked me if I was Jeanie and I told them I wasn't; that they had confused me for someone else," she says, bursting into laughter and confirming the notion.

The humble outlook probably has a lot to do with her normal, 'non-fashion-y' beginnings. Jeanie Anan-Lewin grew up in south London in a loving home; the middle-ish child among four siblings. She happily recalls there was always someone singing and dancing around their house, and that she eagerly took part in school plays and productions. "We always had performers in the family, but none of us were fully encouraged to pursue it as a job or do anything kind of creative. It was just about getting any job, really." However, young Jeanie had other ideas.

She always knew that out of all of her siblings, she'd be the one to follow a creative path. "My brother works in film accounting, my sister works in customer service, and my other sister is a teacher. Normal jobs. So yeah, I was always snazzier."

At home by herself, she became obsessed with FashionTV; religiously watching the shows on a loop when no-one was around. "My mum would come in and be like, 'what are you doing?'," she remembers, "and I'd be there silently watching these tall, white, skinny models walking to and fro in bikinis, with wind machines going and soundtracks blaring. I'd just sit there staring at it. I always remember loving fashion and loving magazines, but not putting two and two together, yet still wanting to figure out whether I could tell stories via clothes." Surprisingly, whether she wanted to tell those stories as a fashion designer was never something she had to figure out. "I was never the person who was like, 'I want to make dresses.' I just knew that whatever it was that was going on, I needed to be part of it."

At age 13, Annan-Lewin's family home experienced the destabilising effects of divorce. The separation and living in different places over a short period significantly shaped her journey as a young adult. "We're a very loving family, but we're like most families who also have lots of challenges," she says. The relief from the turbulence that surrounded her of course came from fashion. "I looked at magazines, and fashion in general, as escapism. Because it was so far removed from how I was living." This was when the young Jeanie began to rapidly develop a deep fascination with creative imagery, and why it became her preferred way of interacting with the world in later life. She turned into a voracious magazine collector, hoarding copies of The Face, i-D, sometimes Dazed, and always Vogue. Always, always Vogue. "I spent a lot of time as a kid collecting magazines, journaling, making mood boards, and covering my exercise books with cut-outs from images and text." To date, these are the same rituals that she still performs. "It's how I communicate things."



New York Times T Magazine. Photographer: Lucie Rox

People are always preoccupied with being cool, but I always *knew* I was cool

Self Service magazine. With Katie Grand





Perfect Magazine, issue 3. Photographer: Zhong Lin



Perfect Magazine, issue 3. Photographer: Mark Luck Savage



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As a teenager Annan-Lewin was convinced her future was in fashion, but it wasn't always the first option she chose. Initially, art was the first diversion and she studied Art History at Newcastle University. "I wanted to be an art curator, but you need loads of money to do it. Nobody ever tells you that," she says. "I remember doing lots of internships and then realising that all the other interns were walking home – in central London – and I was getting two trains and a bus. At a certain point, I was like, 'Oh, it's because they're already rich. This isn't really gonna work for me'," she reveals about her decision to pursue her life in fashion instead. "Another highly elitist area, but a bit more realistic," she laughs.

The real dream started materialising at age 15 with an internship at a magazine and an assignment to the fashion cupboard – intern heaven or hell depending on the perspective. "I know this sounds illegal, but they kind of locked you in there for like two weeks to tidy this massive cupboard. So, you're just in there all day playing with random bits of clothes and props." While eating her lunchtime sandwich from this vantage point, she glanced across the hall to the Nova magazine offices and began to ponder her next move. "It was so serene," she recalls, "and everyone looked really cool, and a bit French. That's when I knew I wanted to make and be around magazines. I had no idea how to do it. Like, none whatsoever. I just stored it in my little memory bank and went on to do other things, like jobs in retail."

When she did eventually become a fashion assistant, Annan-Lewin soon found out that it involved a patience-testing amount of working for free, a concept her family couldn't wrap their heads around. Earning minimum wage and constantly having to support her fashion dream with other work didn't make things any easier. As time went on, she landed a few 'respectable' commercial and music video jobs that at least give her mother a notion of why her daughter was so driven in her pursuits. "Eventually, mum was like, 'Oh, you get paid to dress these people'," she says. "But, for a really long time, I remember she told people I worked at the dry cleaners, because I was always worried about clothes and making sure they were alright. That's all she heard from our conversations. And I didn't bother telling her otherwise for about two years."

Annan-Lewin arrived to intern at Tatler in 2003, "which was fab," she assures me. They weren't paying much, but alternative compensation came by way of the opportunities it afforded. "The editors there had lots of other jobs besides, so they'd always bring me along and pay me a crazy amount of money to do the bare minimum," she laughs. The Tatler era didn't last long, but it did put her in the right place to be spotted by the late Isabella Blow's taste-making eyes. "Assisting Isabella was an insane experience because I never thought she was paying attention to me. I thought that, to her, I was only one of 35 assistants," she says. "I didn't know she was taking me in as a person." Along with nurturing the young creative with the big dreams, Blow was also known for propelling the careers of luminaries such as Alexander McQueen and Sophie Dahl to cultural relevance. It would have been no small thing to have not only been properly 'seen' by those eyes, but also genuinely appreciated. "[Isabella's] references would often be art paintings, and I remember her saying: 'when I talk about this stuff, you're the only person who understands it. You get this whole thing 360'."

Despite Blow trying to dissuade Anna-Lewin from a career in fashion because she considered her 'too smart,' she nonetheless activated her network when she understood the young Jeanie wasn't for dissuading. "She rang all these amazing people and told them that I was really good. She rang Jefferson Hack at Dazed, she rang i-D and Pop, and said, 'I have this great girl who you should work with'," she remembers dearly. "It was a massive compliment that still follows me around today. It's

just it's really nice for someone like that to see you when you didn't think that you were being seen. It was really lovely." Blow's blessings and connections gave Annan-Lewin the confidence to venture into the freelance world to assist forward-thinking, breakout stylists, and even to try her luck with a stint on the mean streets of New York. But she didn't sync with or understand The Big Apple much. "No-one needs to have a cocktail dress," she proclaims.

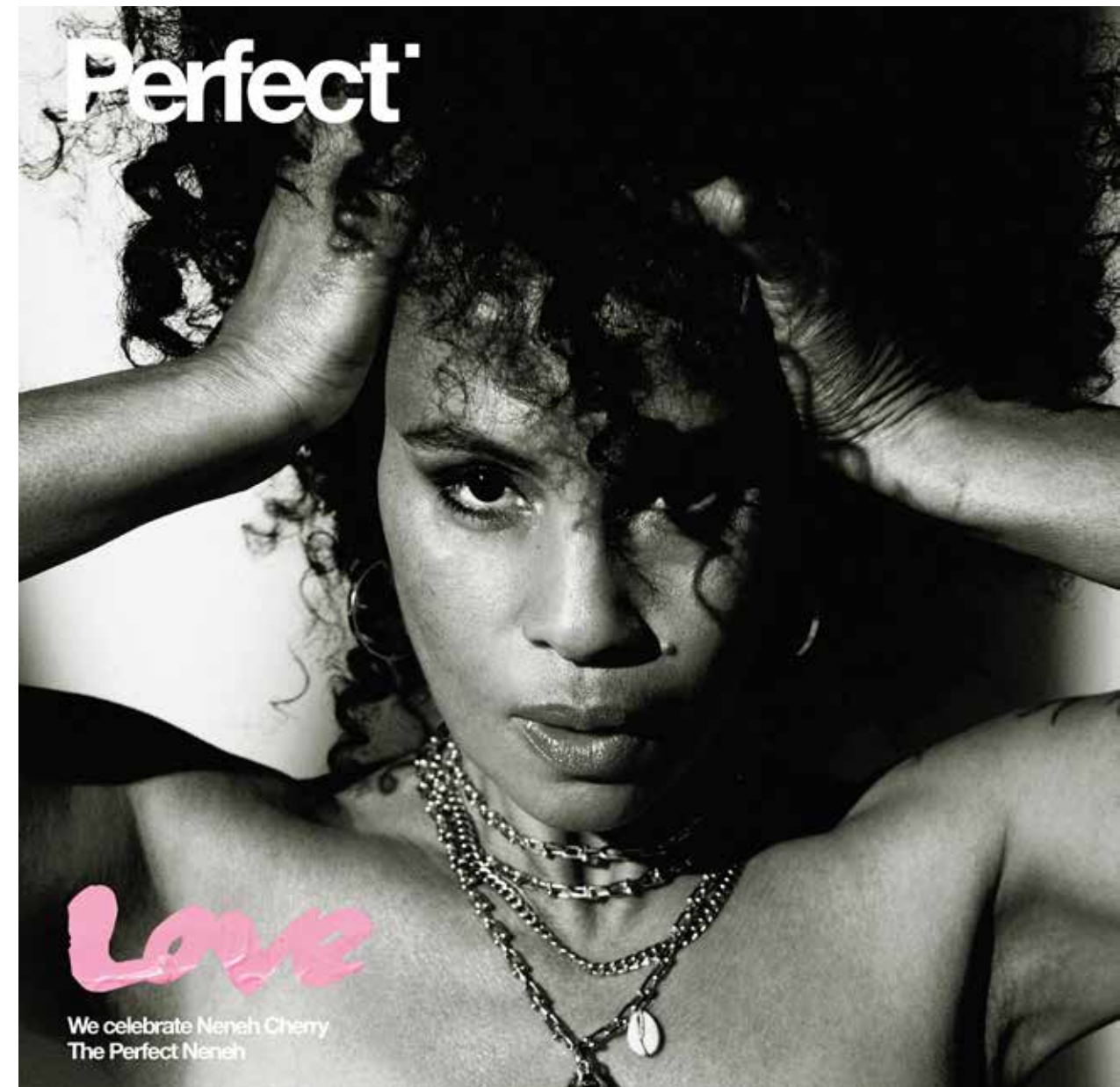
When she arrived back in London it was to assist on a few shoots for LOVE magazine, where she ended up staying for nearly two years. "The first issue I worked

on was the one where everybody was basically naked [Fashion Icons issue]," she says. "The girls – Naomi, Kate, Kristen, etc – were wearing these amazing high shoes, but they were essentially naked. When I brought the magazine home, my mum silently went through it and said, 'I've counted about 23 pieces of clothing so far in the entire thing. What fashion are you looking after? Everyone's naked! I don't know why you can't just come to Sunday dinner.' That was the last time we talked about what I did for a living for a while after that."

Annan-Lewin's time at LOVE eventually came to an end, "and the slog that came after it was really hard," she remembers. Although now well-connected, she was in the same mix as perhaps hundreds of others, all competing to get their work published with established fashion editors. "It was a time of constantly trying to make rent and also trying to get people to put you on editorials above the people that run the magazines. It was really hard. I found it quite difficult building my portfolio. You're emailing people every day and you either don't hear back, or it's just nothing but rejection."

The first career highlight came with her debut editorial published in i-D magazine. "That was the greatest moment of my entire life. I remember how excited I was the day I got it and how I thought it was going to change my life," she recalls. "But for my mum it was like, whatever. She only cared about the famous people." Mrs. Annan-Lewin was apparently easily star-struck; not in a way that discouraged her daughter's ambitions, but in a way that made her chuckle and roll her eyes instead. "I remember styling Little Mix and not wanting to tell anyone, but I told my mum. She told everybody about it, but not about me styling i-D. She wouldn't stop talking about me styling Little Mix."

As she began to climb the fashion ladder the pandemic became an unavoidable inflection point for the industry and, by default, her career. She was always certain of her capabilities as a stylist, as were a growing number of people in her orbit. But still, she saw how the opportunities didn't materialise for her the same way they sometimes miraculously did for many of her white contemporaries. "People that I'd assisted with, who were at the same level as me, were now fashion directors or beauty directors or,



Perfect Magazine, issue 3. Photographer: Zhong Lin

you know, doing these massive things. And I was still just trudging along. The problem was systemic racism, but nobody wanted to hear that. People thought I was just being angry." There were long and sometimes fraught conversations about what Annan-Lewin saw as the fundamental issue: the same names and faces picking the same names and faces. By taking such a forthright stance, she soon found people began to reach out, "which was good," she says, "but quite hard to wrap your head around when you realise that what was standing between you and the good bits was basically racism." Annan-Lewin herself is now the person with the decision-making authority. She's the one able to institutionalise the needed change – one shoot at a time. Whether it's by shooting plus-size models in high fashion rather than just nude, or giving a chance to work on set to someone who looks like her and her family, the determination to bring a new generation through behind her seems fundamental to her make-up. "How else are they going to get the experience they need to keep growing?"

Some of the experiences prospective interns and assistants might have on Annan-Lewin's sets these days includes the reimagining of some of the biggest names in culture and entertainment around today. Her celebrated work with global talent has elevated her to yet more heights, but there has always been a



Perfect Magazine film. Solve





Photographer: Hazel Gaskin for Burberry

I remember doing lots of internships and then realising that all the other interns were walking home – in central London – and I was getting two trains and a bus

Perfect Magazine, issue 4. Photographer: Liz Collins





The problem was systemic racism, but nobody wanted to hear that. People thought I was just being angry.



Perfect Magazine, issue 4. Photographer: Zhong Lin

very simple premise behind every plan she makes for these high-profile shoots: "I go through their pictures and say, 'what's missing?' and work from there." For Perfect's third issue, it was none other than Hollywood royalty Nicole Kidman who overseen by the Jeanieus eye. Naturally, the images of the real-life superheroine went viral when they came out. "I loved [those images] so much because she looked like a really strong, powerful woman, and I'd never seen pictures of her

like that before. It didn't feel clichéd, it didn't feel oversexualised, it just felt like someone who's got her shit together. That was really attractive to see. I want to create more moments like that."

The life of Jeanie Annan-Lewin has now come somewhat full circle. After trying her luck across the Atlantic for a time, she's now well-known over there for the incredible work she's doing over here. London made her and it's where she feels activated and energised,



Miss Sohee, Paris Fashion Week Couture, SS23

even if she does finds Paris more "financially viable." Her hometown is where she feels excited about fashion. When you hear her talk about her favourite subject, her eyes light up and she gets lost in it. And so you can't but help getting lost in it too. "I love Hed Mayner. And I love Glenn Martins; I think Y Project is really great. I'm a fan of Karoline Vitto too, because including plus sizes is really important. And Chopova Lowena; they have a great core identity to who they are. Telfar, I think

he's incredible. I just love the way he interacts with the community that he's built." It would be unwise to ask Annan-Lewin about fashion if you really didn't want to know about fashion. Jeanie's mother understands this much now too, which is why she is just as thrilled as the rest of us when new work from her daughter finally hits the shelves.

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