



A STAR IS BORN

More than 20 years after its controversial beginnings, Thierry Mugler's Angel still polarizes, even as one of the most popular scents in the world.

BY MISHAL CAZMI

HOW DO YOU explain the success of a fragrance that seemed destined to fail from the very beginning? When Angel by Thierry Mugler launched in 1992, it broke all the rules, from the bottle to the colour of the scent and its formulation. But Angel didn't fail: It went on to become one of the best-selling fragrances in the world. And that's why I am in Paris, sitting across the table from Georgia May Jagger—model, daughter of Mick Jagger and Jerry Hall and new face of Angel—to celebrate a new era for Mugler, which includes the appointment of designer David Koma. For Georgia, the perfume is a family affair. Her mother was the spokesmodel for Angel from 1995 to 1997 and one of Mugler's favourite muses. "I remember smelling [the scent] in her room. Even years after she did the campaign, she had the bottle on her dressing table," says Jagger. "I never imagined I would become an Angel."

Angel began as an idea in the famously twisted mind of French fashion designer and couturier Thierry Mugler. On a fashion spectrum that boasted everything from prudent and proper to outlandish and perverse, Mugler occupied the extreme end of the latter, alongside designers Alexander McQueen, John Galliano and Jean Paul Gaultier. His dresses were often controversial and always theatrical, with motorcycle breastplates, exaggerated hourglass silhouettes and fetishized latex.

For his premiere perfume, Mugler wanted a never-done-before star-shaped flacon. No one was willing to take on the expensive enterprise (when the team finally found a glass-maker willing to make it, it took a year and a half to bring the design to life), but Mugler was fixated on the silhouette. He wore a star-shaped ring, reportedly sports a star tattoo and sewed star-shaped buttons onto some of his wares. As a young boy in Strasbourg, he'd gaze out at the twinkling stars, which symbolized his dreams and aspirations. And so the bottle was realized, long before Gaultier's bust-shaped *Le Male* and Viktor & Rolf's grenade-shaped *Flowerbomb*.

Then there was the colour of the juice. Mugler wanted a specific tint of blue at a time when eaux were generally amber-tinged. Even the name, Angel, seemed cheesy and contrary to the avant-garde fashion house, conjuring up images of cartoonish chubby-cheeked cherubs and Hallmark greeting cards. They went with it anyway.

But the scent itself was the real head-scratcher. It was the first gourmand oriental, leading to an entirely new fragrance subcategory of orientals infused with food notes like chocolate and marzipan. A candied trail of gourmand scents soon followed, and Angel became an olfactory success. Olivier Cresp, the nose behind it, initially had other ideas for the scent, which began as a vanilla and patchouli concoction. When nothing worked, Vera Strübi, then president of →

FACE OF AN ANGEL

Christophe de Lataillade, creative director of Clarins Fragrance Group, on the women of Angel.



Georgia May Jagger, 2014

"You can see what she has inherited from both her father and her mother. She's definitely rock 'n' roll—that's her father. But she's immensely feminine and glamorous, and that can only be her mother, of course."

Eva Mendes, 2011

"Eva had to be put into the mood for each set, so she'd make music selections in advance. She would have the music played over and over again for the scene, and it inspired everyone and put us in the mood. When she was in the sky, she played 'Moon River.' After we finished the production, everyone kept listening to the music."



Naomi Watts, 2008

"Eight thousand bottles of Angel were shipped to the studios in Hollywood [for the shoot]. It took three days to assemble them. When Naomi lay down, we had to add more. She couldn't move for hours because she was circled by spiky glass."



Jerry Hall, 1995

"In White Sands, she arrived in a huge white limousine in the desert from I don't even know where. Perhaps Texas, because she's from there. One evening, we went to do some tests. She had her hair and makeup done, and she put on the dress. She just threw herself in the sand and she was queen of the world."



Many loathed it and few embraced it, but you could instantly identify the woman who loved and wore it.

Thierry Mugler Parfums, decided to involve Mugler and devised a meeting between perfumer and designer.

"The first time I met him, I felt like a psychiatrist sitting on a chair and listening to someone on my sofa," Cresp recalls in the plush lobby of the Royal Monceau hotel. The two talked about Mugler's childhood memories of Strasbourg, his approach to fashion and recollections of his grandmother making pastries. The conversation led Cresp to consider introducing a sweet element to the scent. Enter pralines and chocolate.

Angel's mix of candy and patchouli was a game changer. Today, Cresp compares the formula to Coca Cola in its balance of sweetness and acidity. Perfume critic Chandler Burr also likened Angel to Coke's recipe of "overdosed sugar juxtaposed on a superacid taste." In this case, the cavity-inducing sweet notes were tempered with patchouli sourced from Indonesia. The fragrance was controversial, with nary a flower in sight. Many loathed it and few embraced it, but you could instantly identify the woman who loved and wore it.

In 1992, Angel launched not with a bang but with a whisper. But here's what it did get right: Its selective advertising (read: virtually nonexistent) and limited audience (it was initially launched only in France) meant the brand concentrated on what really mattered, which was the story of Angel.

Mugler cultivated a relationship between the perfume and the women who bought it. Each bottle came with a card that allowed women to write back with their impressions of the scent. One woman who did was Sandrine Groslier, who would go on to become the president of Clarins Fragrance Group, responsible for Thierry Mugler fragrances. "I was 19 at the time," she recalls. "I remember the first day I opened the box and found the envelope. I sent back a letter, and they sent me samples. No one was doing that at the time."

The brand also chose the right spokeswomen to embody the Angel woman, starting with Estelle Lefébure, a French model and actress, and following with Hall, Naomi Watts, Eva Mendes and now Jagger, the daughter of arguably the most iconic muse for the brand. When I ask Christophe de Lataillade, creative director of Clarins Fragrance Group, what the muses had in common, he pauses and says, "Naomi was introspective, Eva was flamboyant, Estelle was the Parisian woman. You have pretty much a world of different femininities in Angel."

Perhaps Angel's greatest appeal was its enigmatic image. "It's like a puzzle. You're given some parts and you have to put it all together to understand the brand," says Groslier. "Angel is such a complex fragrance. It's full of surprises," adds de Lataillade. "If you look at it, it's a blue star, so you would imagine something rather cold inside, but it's the opposite." And the scent is emblematic of its creator. "In his fashion, [Thierry] would have a woman arrive in a black coat, and when she would drop the coat, it would be completely different."

Twenty-two years later, Angel is still a head-turner, still polarizing and still one of the top 10 fragrances in the world. As for the house of Mugler, David Koma made his long-awaited runway debut at Paris Fashion Week. His spring 2015 collection has some of Thierry's flourishes but is decidedly pared down and, dare I say, more wearable

for the modern era. Georgia May Jagger walks the show, metaphorically carrying the torch for the scent and her mother. What remains unchanged is Angel. It's why the fragrance itself won't be getting a makeover to commemorate this

new beginning. Instead, Thierry Mugler, the brand, will introduce a new star-shaped bottle in early 2015. Consider it a collector's item for Angel lovers. Why mess with a good thing? ☺

Thierry Mugler Angel Eau de Parfum, \$80 for 25 ml.