

FABRIZIO FERRI: AND SO IT GOES

WHEN CONSIDERING THE MULTI-TALENTED FABRIZIO FERRI, it is wise to bear in mind his origins. Although he now lives in Milan and New York and the tiny volcanic island south of Sicily called Pantelleria, Ferri is a Roman born and bred.

Family and heritage count for much with the Romans; motherhood also, and that is not just another Motherhood statement. Their primary art form is the art of living, a medium wisely adopted by any nation whose empire has long since crumbled. As the Romans themselves demonstrated during the Fascist regime, any nation that momentarily forgets its true calling to revive some romantic notion of resurgent empire is bound to bite the dust yet again.

By finding their true selves once more, the Italian nation gained a new vitality and industry that made them leaders of style and taste, gave us fashion geniuses like Gianni Versace, impressed us with the design-led industrial might of Milan and Turin, and showed us an example of healthy living combined with sensual joy in the cuisine of southern Italy.

As an heir to all the best Italian culture has to offer, Ferri is far more than simply a fine photographer. Somehow he has managed to combine a career in fashion photography with entrepreneurialism – Ferri owns two of the biggest and best rental photo studios in the world, two restaurants named Braque, a line in functional yet stylish clothing named Industria Collection, a resort on Pantelleria – with a sideline in art, having written his first novel and published several photo books one of which also contains his first music CD.

To further overwhelm us, Ferri's antecedents are equally impressive. His father was an anti-Nazi partisan who later ran a think tank and served as a Communist member of parliament. His author mother ran the party's Department of Communications. One of Ferri's uncles was a senator,

president of the Latium region that encompasses Rome, and director of party newspaper *L'Unita*.

A Ferri grandfather also made the first Italian jazz record. According to Ferri, Italian communists held to their principles but believed in enterprise and private property as well, unlike their party brothers in other countries. Strangely, they held on to their sentimental attachment to the Soviet empire long after its moral and financial bankruptcy become obvious to the world, a charity basket case. Ferri himself has supported recent AIDS charities with book publications and fund raising events.

I had to wonder if all this activity and activism has taken its toll. On the night before our appointed interview Ferri had to fly out of London without notice or explanation, and failed to keep our subsequent phone interview appointments. These absences were explained away with a ruefully metaphoric shrug by his extremely pleasant staff, all women. I get the impression that Ferri's relationship with them is that of the naughty little ragazzo and they the indulgent aunts.

Ferri is renowned for both his size – a six-foot-four teddy bear – and his displays of affection his childhood nickname was Fish Kisses. “He once hugged his grandmother so hard he broke her rib,” relates Isabella Rossellini, who lived with Ferri for a time. “He's that warm and effusive. My family still asks why I didn't marry Fabrizio. He is amazingly charming, simple and hardworking, and he creates that atmosphere wherever he goes.”

The atmospherics extend to his Industria rental studio complexes. In an interview for the Milanese city magazine *Yes Please*, Ferri related the tale of how the studio in that city came about. “My work was really taking off and I needed some kind of structural support,” he said. “Should I set up a white studio or a black one? A daylight studio? Or something else? They were all necessary!”

“You have to decide if you want to use flash, warm lighting, projectors, daylight, etcetera, and anything I decided upon led to frustrations,” he continued. “I understood that I would have to have at least five studios. I opened the Superstudios on industrial criteria, and luckily my needs have turned out to be those of other people too. It was a wise investment, and a few years later I opened the same kind of structure in New York.”

So wise that the money rolls in by the millions, and easily underwrites Ferri's uncommissioned projects and high maintenance lifestyle. Photography has brought all

this to Ferri, but it was not originally a conscious career choice. "It all happened by pure chance really," he explained.

"When I was 17, a friend of mine had a darkroom he was crazy about but no interest in taking photographs, so he asked me to take some which he could then develop and print. I started taking photos with a political bent – something which no-one had done before then – and in 1969 I did a portrait of a baby on his fathers shoulders with the mother by his side during a demonstration march."

A journalist who was looking for an image representing the newly found involvement of the Italian family in politics saw my picture and he bought it. "I've never stopped taking photos from that day on," Ferri added redundantly. After this he worked a lot for the Communists, keeping it all in the family as it were. "My mother was one of my best clients," he admitted in conversation with *New York* magazine. "After years spent in the political arena, I realised that there was no commission market and that I was spending more time trying to sell the photos than actually taking them."

"So I moved into fashion, an area which does offer commissioned work. After numerous working visits to London, my portfolio had become quite heterogeneous, and when I turned up at the *Vogue* offices without an appointment, the art director was more than pleased with my work." That art director was the celebrated Terry Jones and the time was the mid-seventies when British *Vogue* was going through one of its innovative phases. Those were the days!

Jones had bestowed a rare freedom on *Vogue's* photographers, a star team to whom Ferri was the last and least well known addition. The others included David Bailey, Oliviero Toscani, Barry Lategan and Norman Parkinson. According to Ferri he was the funky fill-in who took the jobs the others considered beneath them. "It was the first time I had money," he says. "And basically I had a lot of fun. But my luck was to never become famous. I never got exposure. I was able to make all the mistakes I wanted."

Exposure in British *Vogue*, and Ferri's pictures of his girlfriend Rossellini led to jobs for Harrods and the other big London stores. Then came work for American *GQ* magazine, various of Italy's *Vogues*, and other fashion magazines, shooting every day. He followed his editors when they launched their own magazines – *Donna* and *Mondo Uomo*. When the cash flow and the ease his new studio brought allowed him to relax somewhat, Ferri started thinking about he was up to in his fashion work.

“I see beautiful girls lose their charm every day,” he explained to *New York* magazine. “They go into the dressing room and come out dressed, make-up, hair. They’ve lost their identity. They don’t know who they are, how they look, how they should behave in front of the camera.” Ferri Polaroided every girl who entered the studio, in the nude. This would inspire his subsequent work with the girl.

“Clothes, even a pair of jeans, can be a defence. I want to shoot a real portrait of this girl, and you better respect that portrait. Make her the subject of our story and not the object. Consideration. Respect. I’d finally managed to match my beliefs with my job.”

And so it goes.