

Some party girls not only turn heads but set minds a-clicking: *Who made that dress?* (The answer: Nobody you'd recognize.)

the great unknown

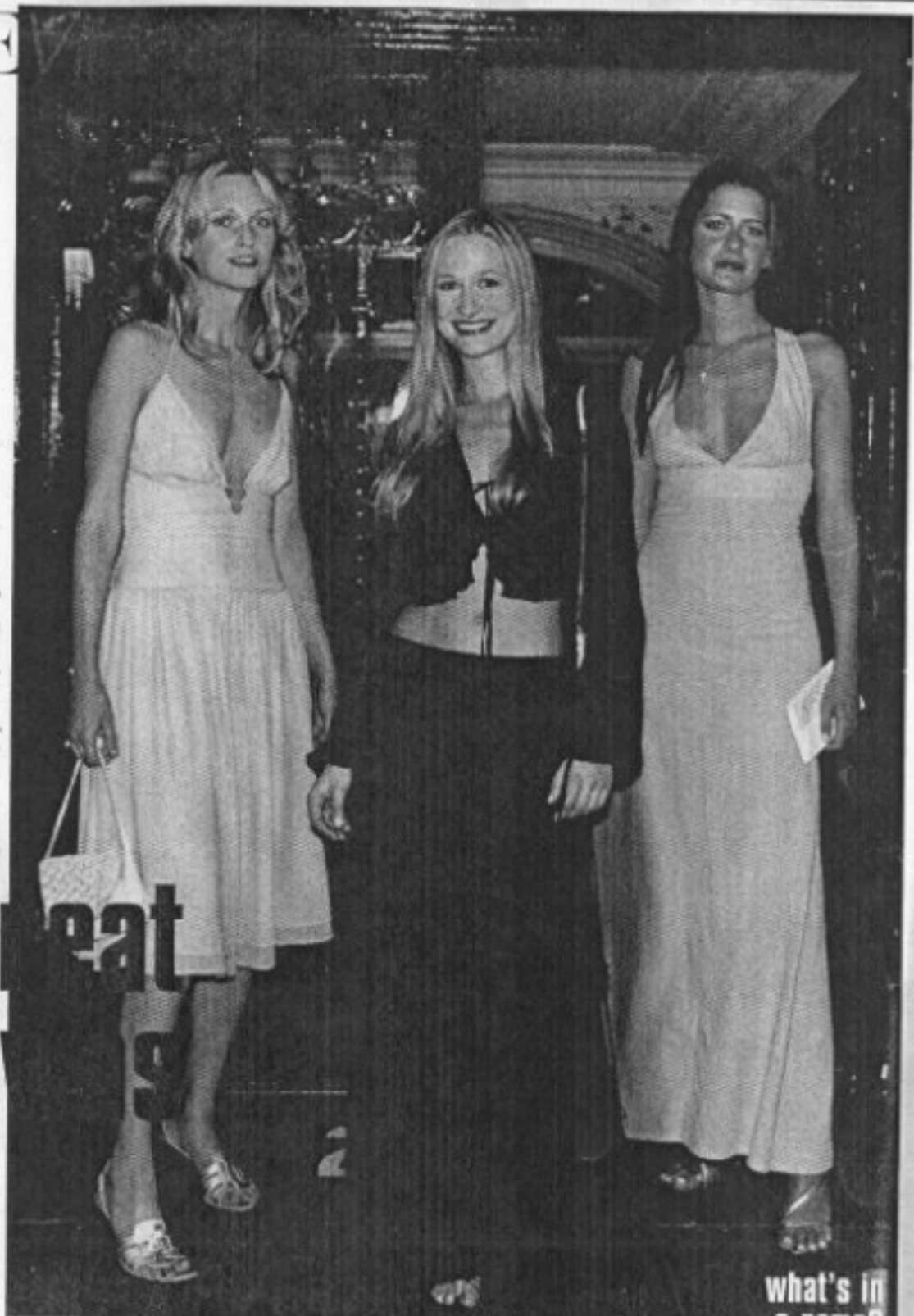
T rue story. During fall 2002 fashion week in New York, a comely showroom assistant, despairing over the fact that she had nothing fabulous to wear to the shows, borrowed a black cotton frock from the racks of samples hanging in her boss's office. On one of the most sweltering days of the week, when everyone else was looking wilted and wan, she wore the fresh little number to the

tents at Bryant Park, where she was working as an usherette. Immediately, the talk began.

"Do you see that dress?" one *Vogue* editor asked another, pointing at the young woman seating invitees across the catwalk. "Wow, look at that!" exclaimed another, her outstretched arm following the pin-tucked, low-cut, full-skirted confection up and down the

aisles of seats as the lights began to dim. "Where did she get that dress?"

After the show, speculation: Was it Helmut Lang? No, the skirt was a bit too flounced. Was it Prada? Not that anyone could remember. No one could place this anonymous dress. And that, of course, was *view* ▶ 314



what's in a name?

a major factor in its appeal.

Once the mystery designer was revealed (more on that later), the dress in question was promptly snatched up, in all three colors, by five different *Vogue* editors and later spotted on two up-and-coming indie actresses and an in-the-know Chelsea gallery owner.

The moral of this fashion fairy tale: These days, when just about anyone who watches MTV or reads style magazines can spot last season's Chanel boot at 50 paces, there's something incredibly chic about wearing a completely unplaceable piece. After all, isn't it the goal of every woman who really cares about clothes to create a sensation? And isn't that impossible when the outfit you are wearing has already been burned into the brain of every person in the room?

This same allure—wearing a dress that friends recognize as *yours*, rather than Balenciaga's—is what fuels the vintage craze, too. More and more, we're looking for clothes that we can make our own.

The designers behind such fabulously unrecognizable creations are an elusive lot. They love clothes but don't seem interested in taking part in the grand fashion machine that turns designers into household names. They don't advertise or push for publicity. They have limited production runs and are more than content with less than ubiquitous distribution. They develop discreet followings. Theirs become the clothes that knowing editors mix with season-defining big-name pieces.

But all this insider action is not entirely fair to the rest of world, now, is it? In the interest of great style for all, let the revelations begin.

First of all, back to the aforementioned black dress. The woman who made it is a 31-year-old, six-foot-three college professor turned fashion designer named Julia Neaman. She's obsessive about cut and quality, cites Sartre as a design influence, and, until two years ago, had no idea who Tom Ford was. The clothes she creates under her year-old label, Julia, are best described as intellectually sexy. You won't see any microminis or skintight tops. What you will find are librarian-inspired shirts that just happen to be missing all of

their top buttons and dresses that look like doll outfits sized for grown-ups. It's Lolita all the way.

Neaman's interests extend far beyond fashion: She paints, holds a master's in public health from Columbia, a master's from NYU in philosophy (which she still teaches, despite her growing business), and she even attended law school "for about a day and a half." But one thing she has no interest in, it seems, is becoming a player. Despite the fact that Chloë Sevigny, Natasha Lyonne, and Sarah Jessica Parker wear her clothes, despite the fact that her signature wasp-waist blouses continually sell out at Barneys, she remains just aloof enough to retain her "dress by anonymous" status.

"I can't even picture having a fashion show," she says. "It feels weird. That kind of spectacle is just not appealing."

Jodi Arnold is a 30-something Alabama-born, New York-based redhead who designs Mint, a line full of flirty dresses, vintage-inspired jackets, and punky T-shirts. She shares Neaman's retiring sentiments. Self-promotion is not this polite southerner's glass of iced tea. She'd rather be at home with her two

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cocker spaniels than at a fancy fashion fete—but that's not to say she wouldn't know how to dress for one. Arnold makes perfect partywear. There are dandelion-print dresses in floaty chiffon, black lace cocktail dresses with satin trim, and fitted Victorian jackets to keep things from getting too precious or ethereal. It's all slightly vintage-inspired, a bit "girl from Birmingham hits the big city." And, of course, it's incredibly hard to place. According to Arnold, that's the point exactly.

"Even in high school I never wanted what everybody else had," she says. "I've always made my own stuff or bought old clothes and done something to them to make them special. That's my challenge now as a designer, to figure out a way to make my clothes look handmade."

Arnold's current resort collection was inspired by some twenties dresses that she saw at a flea market. "They just

looked so washed and worn," she says. "Like clothes that some long-ago woman had truly made her own."

another way to ensure your anonymous status? Stay as far away from Seventh Avenue as possible. When Beverly Klein and Theresa McAllen set up their design studio in Los Angeles, they were more concerned with having a great view than with building a big reputation. "It wasn't just about the clothes," says Klein, sounding very West Coast. "We needed to be in an environment where we could let things flow."

Their two-and-a-half-year-old line, Tree, radiates this good-vibrations feel. The partners-in-design make the kind of clothes that look best with bare feet: gauzy, embroidered dresses that suit the sort of Topanga Canyon party where gardenias float in the swimming pool. Many of their creations—in purples, teals, and blues shot through with

Lurex embroidery—look like they've been carried back from a surfing vacation in Goa. It's not surprising, then, that nouvelle bohemians like Amber Valletta, Leelee Sobieski, and Sheryl Crow are fans.

So how has Tree managed to fly beneath the fashion radar, given its many famous mannequins? Somehow, it looks entirely different depending on who's wearing it. The secret, according to McAllen, is in the fit. "We do a lot of draping," says McAllen. "And we often cut on the bias, so it wears really well."

And though the clothes appear relatively unstructured on the hanger, put them on and you'll realize that's not the case. "We start a lot of our stuff from the corset and deconstruct from there," says Klein, who says she learned how to "build" a dress while working on period films as a costumer. "We put the emphasis on the woman's torso," she adds. And, after all, even in Hollywood, the human body is the ultimate one-of-a-kind.—J.C. view 316