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Shu Uemura's Gina Brooke on Luck, Lashes and Life with Madonna

While you're reading this issue of *Make-Up Artist*, Gina Brooke is somewhere in Europe, making up Madonna on tour. Brooke, who also shuttles between New York, Los Angeles and Paris as Shu Uemura's artistic director, hasn't always had it so good. Not so long ago, she was a New York design student struggling to pay the rent. A week before she hit the road, Brooke told us how she has made her way in the make-up world—and how a moving company screw-up changed her life.

By Heather Wisner





Make-Up Artist: So you're about to tour with Madonna—where are you going and for how long?

Gina Brooke: I'll be gone for 10 weeks. We're going through Eastern Europe on the Sticky and Sweet tour. I'm very excited—as crazy as it is, it's always fun. This is my fourth world tour.

MA: How did you connect with Madonna?

GB: My manager Jordana sent her my portfolio and she hired me, just like that. At the time, she was looking for a new make-up artist. I've done a million videos with her, editorial, album tours. She loved the make-up in my portfolio. I hadn't done that many celebrities at the time, but Madonna doesn't care about a person having a reputation—if she likes them, she'll hire them.

MA: Did you study make-up or are you self-taught?

GB: I'm self-taught, but my mom and grandpa were painters. Had I known what make-up artists can make in this business, I would have gotten into it a lot earlier.



MA: I understand you started at the Fashion Institute of Technology.

GB: I was an aspiring fashion designer but I was always interested in photography and make-up. I was thinking, "What can I go into that doesn't require financial backing?" All through FIT I struggled to pay my rent and pay for my school ... A FIT model asked me to do her make-up for her book; I said I didn't really know how to do that but she said, "Oh, I love how you do your make-up. Just do on me what you do on yourself."

It had never occurred to me to be a make-up artist, but it was so much fun that when I was doing her make-up, I asked how much people get paid. She said it varied. Later, the photographer called me and asked me, "What's your rate?" I didn't have one, so I said "What's your budget?" After that I worked for six years nonstop, then lost everything and started over in a city I don't know, testing for people.

What happened was, I decided to keep my place in New York and have a small place in L.A. The day I was leaving from JFK, the moving company called and said, "You know that special box you had? We seem to have misplaced it." They lost my portfolio. That box was my entire career. I moved out to L.A., and two weeks before Sept. 11, I started calling New York photographers to get photos



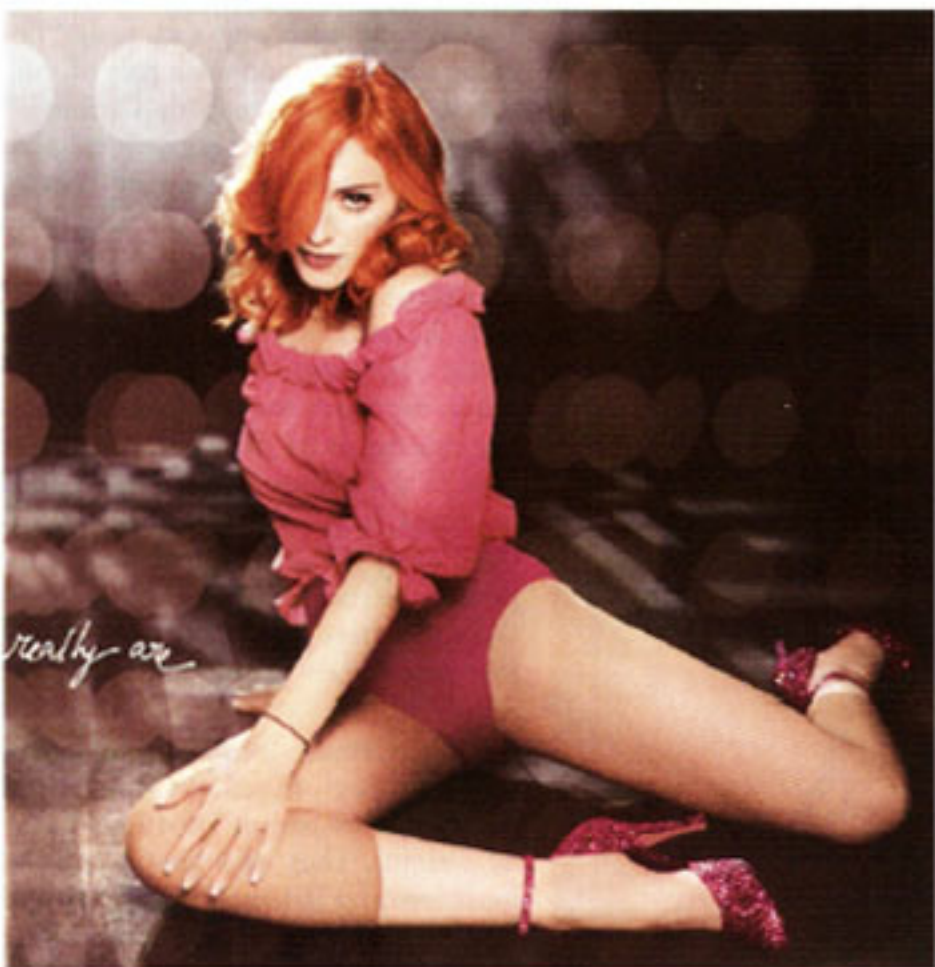
of my work, but then Sept. 11 hit and I couldn't ask them to send my photos. So I lived in L.A. for a year with no work. In New York, I had met so many people on shoots who said, "Call me when you're in L.A." When I got there, nobody called me back.

I found an old apartment that just happened to be Tom Cruise's old apartment; everybody said, "Oh, that apartment is so lucky." After I moved into the building, I met all these great people. The first guy I met was Ron McMillan, who owns a successful advertising agency in L.A. I asked him, "Do you know any photographers? I have to start over." He said,

"I actually know a guy who works with Herb Ritts." So I met Brian Bowen Smith and asked to test with him. He said he had a friend who was really cool and that we could do the test there. We drove to Pacific Palisades and when we got to the house, who opened the door but [model] Carolyn Murphy! We worked in the garage and got 30 pictures and that's the book that Madonna got. I did her make-up, we hit it off, and now it's been seven years.

MA: What are make-up kit essentials for a Madonna tour?

GB: [Shu Uemura] green tea cleansing oil, eyelash curler, face



Brooke (over) has worked with photographer Fredric Reshaw (top left) and Madonna; she also does research and product development for Shu Uemura.

Brooke has done editorial for *Vogue*, *Elle*, *W* and *GQ*, and print ads for Armani and Lanvin, among others. "I love creating storyboards and thinking up ideas," she said. "That's how I relax."



and eye masque and UV under base. I use Yves Saint Laurent mascara and Kiehl's body lotion. I just created two pairs of lashes which we'll mostly use for the tour: Farfellina, which is brown and black long, curled hair, even though it's synthetic, and Lavender Bloom, which is soft and layered and gives the illusion of deep aubergine—it really brings out the color of blue and green eyes. You can't really see the color of the lash, it just makes the eye pop. That's what being a make-up artist is all about—enhancing a woman's best attributes in a natural and subtle way.

MA: How did you get involved with Shu Uemura?

GB: I had called them before [working with Madonna] and said, "This line was one of the first things I purchased as a make-up artist and I have a real love for this line. I'd like to collaborate with you. I don't know on what, but something." They said, "OK, call us when you have an idea." When I got hired by Madonna, I was suddenly working with a woman who has explored artistic expression on every level. I thought, "What am I going to bring to the table?"



How am I going to be different?"

When I look at someone's face, I always look for their best attribute and try to bring it forward. Madonna has beautiful eyes, so I decided to make her a pair of custom lashes. I've always had a huge obsession with lashes. So I called the company and said, "I'm going to make Madonna a pair of custom lashes. Can I meet with [Uemura]?" He happened to be coming to L.A. to do an event with Neiman Marcus. We met and it was like speaking with the Dali Lama of make-up. I showed him some sketches and he came back with the most beautiful pair of lashes I had ever seen. They were made of mink; we didn't want to promote animal cruelty, so we used hair that minks shed in the winter. It wasn't a marketing thing, it was just a gift from me to [Madonna]. She loved them, then other people saw them and called about them. Oprah Winfrey loved them and ordered 200 pairs. Then people in Hollywood called.

Shu Uemura received so much attention they offered me a cosmetics contract at the end of 2004 to be artistic director. They have always had the most amazing lashes, so of course I'm going to go to my favorite company.

MA: What are your responsibilities with the company?

GB: Research and development and creating products. I'm also a spokesperson for the brand, so when magazines call, I educate them on what we're creating and coming out with. We were the first company to start a lash bar.

It was time to reinvent again when Madonna was coming out with *Confessions on a dance floor*, so I decided to take those mink lashes and apply real diamonds, so the light would reflect from her back into the audiences. I was at her house, getting her ready for the tour and asked her about it. She said, "Great, let's do it right now."

I didn't have a pack of diamonds in my case, so I called Taja Abitbol—she's a go-to person in New York if you need something done. I said, "I need you to come to Madonna's

light. I'm detail-oriented to a fault.

MA: What professional challenges do you face?

GB: Meeting people who want to be just as creative, and having the time to do it. It's not easy—if I'm not doing something for Shu, I'm working with a photographer. I'm always prepping for the next job; I love creating storyboards and thinking up ideas and inspiration. That's how I relax. I know that sounds manic and crazy, but on my down time, that's what I'm doing.

MA: What advice would you give to struggling make-up artists?

GB: Constantly experiment, always ask questions, always be humble and willing to learn, even at the height of your career,

That's what being a make-up artist is all about—enhancing a woman's best attributes in a natural and subtle way.

—Gina Brooke



house with a pack of 30 rose-cut, flat-back diamonds so that I can apply them to the lash." She brings them to the house on a Friday, Shabbat, when the diamond district is shut down. I don't know how she did it. She says, "Don't ask, just put them on" ... Madonna wore them in performance and on tour. I collaborated with Shu Uemura to make a limited-edition pair. They became the most expensive lashes ever created at \$10,000 per pair. It just goes to show you, there's a market for everything.

MA: How would you describe your working style?

GB: I'm very technical—I apply with brushes and if need be, blend with fingers. I always work with a magnifying glass and

and test on as many skin colorings as you can. Learn as much as you can about skin tones and lighting, which is really going to enhance your make-up. I've learned a lot through trial and error. I'm always trying to educate myself.

You know how they say blessings come in disguise? I really believe losing my book was a blessing. I went from being handed "Here, you're a make-up artist" to struggling and using up my savings. I'm very appreciative now, because I know what it's like to have no work. I see people at shoots who are high-maintenance, but I'm the opposite—I just do my job and I go. I'm grateful every day to be paid for something I love to do. Success can come to anyone—you just have to be true to your heart and get through the difficult times. **MA**