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**HOME
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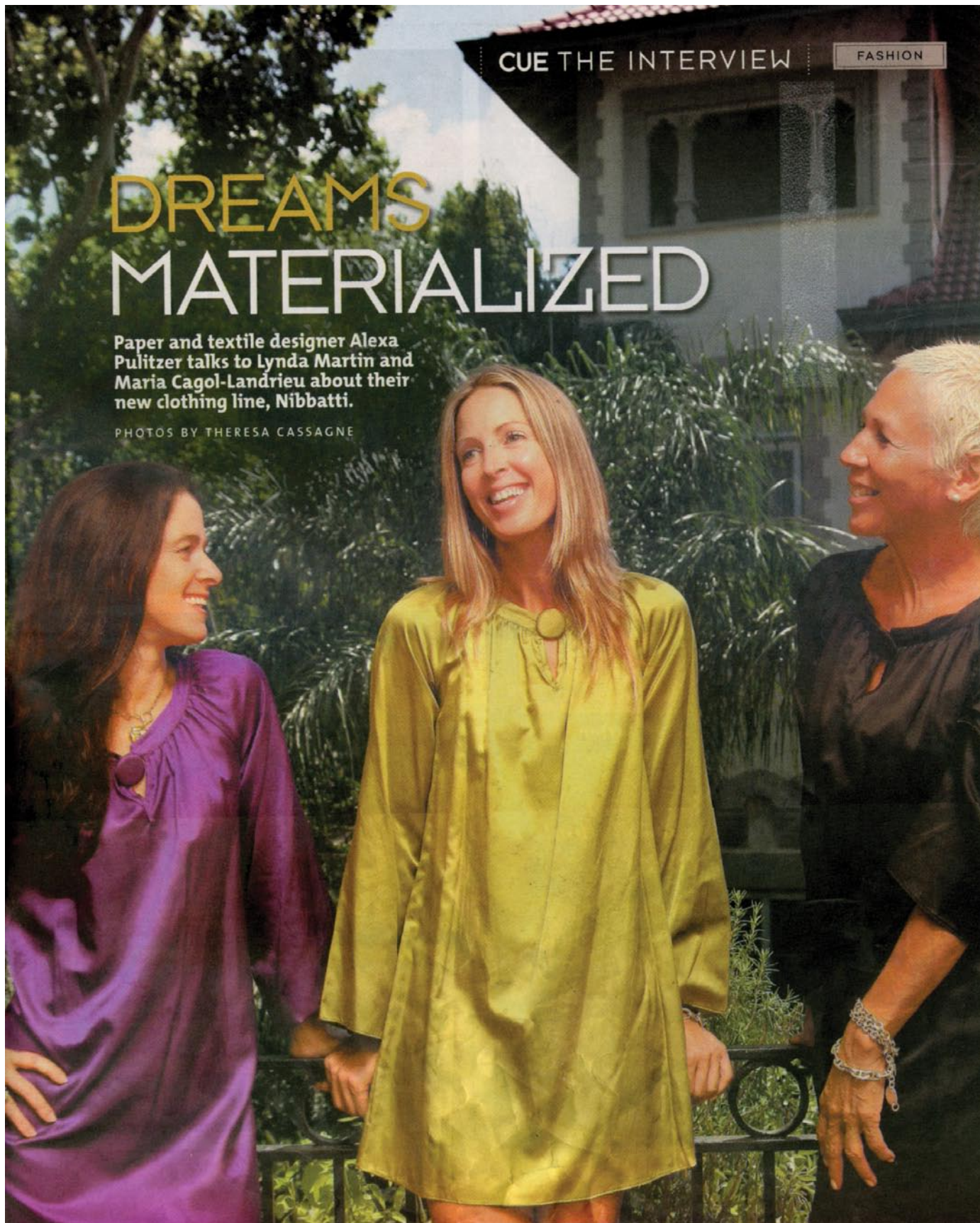
CUE THE INTERVIEW

FASHION

DREAMS MATERIALIZED

Paper and textile designer Alexa Pulitzer talks to Lynda Martin and Maria Cagol-Landrieu about their new clothing line, Nibbatti.

PHOTOS BY THERESA CASSAGNE



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FASHION

ALEXA PULTIZER:

How did you and Lynda meet?

MARIA CAGOL-LANDRIEU:

We met a long time ago when I had my store (Maria Cagol) on Chartres Street in the French Quarter.

LYNDA MARTIN:

I lived on Dumaine at that time, and I remember when they started building out the space. I didn't have off-street parking so I would park on the corner of Chartres and Madison. Each night I watched the transformation of this little corner boutique. And then one night I came home and there were two beautiful couture dresses hanging in the window.

MC: She walked into the store one day and told me about *Gambit* (where Martin worked before Katrina). I said you know what, I'm not ready to advertise because I just opened. But whenever I am, I'll call you. And she left her card.

LM: Before the storm, I was the national sales rep for *Gambit Weekly*. Hard to believe I was one



LYNDA MARTIN DEMONSTRATES THE BEAUTY OF "THE BEAST" COAT BY NIBBATTI.

"[THE NIBBATTI] CUSTOMER HAS AN APPRECIATION FOR CLASSIC SILHOUETTES WITH A MODERN EDGE. THEY ARE ATTRACTED TO STYLE WITH A SENSE OF EASE AND DRESSES THAT CAN TAKE YOU FROM DAY TO NIGHT AND BE WORN WITH FLIP-FLOPS OR HEELS. IT'S ALL ABOUT INCORPORATING OUR CLOTHING INTO THEIR LIFESTYLE."

—Lynda Martin

month shy of my 16-year anniversary. I wasn't known as Lynda Martin; I was known as Lynda Gambit.

MC: It's true. In my Rolodex I used to have her as Lynda Gambit. And the day that I was going to call her, she called me and so she came by. We started talking and talking for hours about everything else but ...

LM: ... but advertising. We talked about travel and life.

MC: We became such great friends, you know.

AP: You've traveled a lot together?

MC: Yes, to China, the Caribbean, Mexico and Central America.

AP: How did you end up in Miami after the storm? What made you decide to leave instead of returning to New Orleans?

LM: Right after the storm, we thought *Gambit* might not reopen for at least a year. Accepting the reality that my life had to change, I got in my car and started driving around the country from friend to friend and city to city. Eventually I ended up staying with a friend of mine in Miami. Her landlord walked up to me one day and said, "I know that you are from New Orleans and not sure what you are going to do. There is a studio available. If you want it, it's yours." I took it as a sign, and that was my beginning in Miami.

MC: Arriving in Miami was an "accident" for me. A few weeks after Katrina, a good friend called and invited me to visit her while waiting for things in New Orleans to get better. And in between the sun and the beach, time was passing and the holidays were coming. ... Then I got a phone call and it was a job offer in Miami. So it was time to buy a car and get a real place to live. South Beach was the perfect place for me.

AP: Besides the obvious ethnic differences, what are the some differences between working in Miami versus New Orleans?

LM: The biggest difference is the home-court advantage and the sense of connectedness. In New Orleans, if you need something done, you are only a phone call away from making it happen if you can't do it yourself. You know the strengths, weaknesses and motives of most of the cast of characters that you deal with. If you don't, the one-call rule comes into play, and then you have a better understanding of the situation. In Miami, I have had to rely on instinct and the kindness of strangers. It's been about letting go of fear, putting myself out there and coming up with plan B, C and D if plan A should not work.

AP: You always wanted to have your own creative business. How did you

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LEFT TO RIGHT: LYNDA MARTIN, ALEXA PULITZER AND MARIA CAGOL-ANDRIEU AT PULITZER'S HOME

"AFTER KATRINA, I WAS KICKED OUT OF MY COMFORT ZONE AND FORCED TO START OVER, SO I DECIDED TO GO FOR A DREAM. IT WAS AS SIMPLE AS DECIDING AND THEN JUST GOING FOR IT."

— Lynda Martin

finally decide upon going into the highly competitive fashion industry?

LM: Maria and I had talked about creating this business over 10 years ago. After Katrina, I was kicked out of my comfort zone and forced to start over, so I decided to go for a dream. It was as simple as deciding and then just going for it. We knocked on doors of fabric vendors, pattern makers, cutters, markers, graders and factory owners. We would talk to anyone who would talk to us and still do. It's been about networking. While I have no formal training in the fashion industry, I have a lot of experience in business in general. It's about applying the principles of what you know and surrounding yourself with good people to cover what you don't, all while continuing to read, absorb and educate yourself as much as possible to close in the gaps. Maria's 20 years of experience in the fashion world of selling and owning a high-end boutique in New Orleans complement this mix. I believe that you can do anything. It just takes the desire, dedication and will.

AP: You are in business with an old friend. What are each of your strengths and weaknesses?

MC: Well, I think Lynda is a very strong go-getter, and she is amazing in sales. She works nonstop! I am more of the right brain. I am more creative than anything.

LM: Maria's many years of experience in the fashion industry both in America and abroad has been a great help to our business. She is fluent in Spanish, so her ability to communicate in the production world saves the day. All of our manufacturing is done in Miami, but English is not the dominant language.

AP: How did you come up with the name Nibbatti?

MC: We both wanted a name that related to new beginnings. We (looked in) a Buddhist dictionary and found the word *nibbatti*, a Buddhist term for rebirth. We liked the sound of it, and our company was named.

AP: Describe the Nibbatti customer.

MC: Our customer is all ranges of ages — anyone that

likes the beauty of simplicity.

LM: Right. I'd say our customer has an appreciation for classic silhouettes with a modern edge. They are attracted to style with a sense of ease and dresses that can take you from day to night and be worn with flip-flops or heels. It's all about incorporating our clothing into their lifestyle.

AP: How many collections do you do each year?

LM: We will produce four. So far, we have sold spring/summer '08 and fall/winter '09. Resort and holiday are just around the corner.

AP: What do you love about your new fall/winter collection?

LM: Besides the designs, I really love the fabrics. The washable suedes and faux furs are my favorites and have made designing this collection a lot of fun. We had the opportunity to introduce some muted colors like parsley, sable and honey, which add life to the doldrums of winter.

MC: Our International Girl dress and Tame the Beast coat are my favorites.

AP: What is the timeline from concept to ship date on an average collection?

MC: About eight to 10 weeks.

AP: What have been the biggest challenges/obstacles in starting your own fashion business and brand?

MC: Everything! New to the city of Miami, we didn't know many people there. We had no connections. And people in Miami have a totally different concept of fashion. We had to act quickly or it would have been too scary to start. We just jumped on it and went with the flow.

LM: I think there is a learning curve in every industry. Since we didn't have a database of pattern makers, markers, graders and manufacturers, etc., assembling a competent production team had its challenges, but

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LEFT: THE INTERNATIONAL GIRL DRESS BY NIBBATTI; RIGHT: THE TIME OFF DRESS (FAR LEFT AND RIGHT) AND THE WINTER WONDERLAND DRESS (TWO IN CENTER)

ABOUT NIBBATTI

Look for Nibbatti at Ah-Ha, Angelique, Azby's, Hemline and Shoefly in New Orleans; Chatta Box and EM's in Metairie; and Re'Elle and Eros on the Northshore. For more information about Nibbatti, visit www.nibbatti.com or email lynda@nibbatti.com or maria@nibbatti.com.

ABOUT ALEXA PULTIZER

Designer Alexa Pulitzer's New Orleans-inspired pads, notes and jotters (made from recycled paper) are available for purchase at the Historic New Orleans Collection, Adlers, Nadine Blake, Williamson Interiors/La Vieille Maison, RSVP Stationers, Scriptura and Rose Lynn Hallmark as well as online at www.b-native.com and www.adlersjewelry.com. Pulitzer creates custom invitations, social correspondence, calling cards, cocktail napkins, cups, T-shirts, logos and business identities, textiles, and product packaging. To learn more, visit www.alexapulitzer.com, call 945-4843 or email Alexa@alexapulitzer.com.

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persistence created great relationships. The second biggest challenge is distribution. Finding the right showrooms and salespeople to help build our brand is key, and we are searching for great fits.

AP: What would you do over?

LM: In an ideal world, I would have started with more capital. Although being in a position where we needed to be cash-flow conscious prevents us from making costly mistakes. Guess there are two ways to look at it.

AP: I am and hope to always be pro-U.S.A. manufacturing. Are you manufacturing your collection in America?

LM: Like you, Maria and I are both big proponents of manufacturing in the U.S.A., and all of our garments are produced in America. In the short time that we have been in this business, it's frustrating and heartbreaking to see so many factories struggling or going out of business due to overseas production.

AP: Are there any work ethics or attitude differences between cities or regional areas that you have noticed when traveling around selling your collection?

LM: Since the majority of our sales have been in the Southeast, Southern hospitality has resonated pretty loudly, but we've been

blessed all across the board with attracting great clients.

AP: How many miles have you put on your car driving around America selling your collection?

LM: I've lost count at this point. If I'm not in a plane, then I am in a car. This entire process has been so grass-roots. One boutique likes the line, makes a recommendation to call on a friend's stores in another city or state and before I know it, I'm there. It's all about distribution at this point, and I guess this is the way it will be until we have showrooms covering all the markets.

AP: What's the best advice a stranger in the fashion business has offered you?

LM: Here's a better question: what advice would you — as an entrepreneur and designer — give us for our business?

AP: Today business moves so quickly, and I am constantly responding to urgent needs and putting out fires. Last holiday, I missed a serious trend because I was not focused earlier in planning for the season. I now keep a notebook of my creative ideas. Take note of your missed opportunities and make sure you have a way to remind yourself — when the time is right — to prepare for the next season. For example, I have a trunk show coming up. There are plenty of things that I could have made for the show that's

only three days away, but it's too late now. So I'm writing down the things that I should have done so that when I have my next show, I'll have the ideas at hand.

LM: We do that, and actually sometimes there are styles that are not quite perfectly tweaked. We know that we're onto something, but we've run out of time for that season. So it's in the little pile of all right, next collection maybe we can resurrect this.

AP: What did you realize about *New Orleans after leaving it?*

LM: How blessed I was to be able to spend the first half of my life here. New Orleanians approach life with an incredible spirit, sense of humor and an armor of resiliency. I have to say, these traits have all come in handy over the last few years.

AP: Besides your family or your friends, what do you most miss about New Orleans?

LM: Eating po-boys, running and rollerblading in Audubon Park. I miss the summer nights of strolling in the French Quarter, going to my favorite restaurants. I miss my French Quarter home.

LM: I miss having random exchanges with familiar faces on any given day, second lining down city streets, the food, the music and my costume box — actually all three costume boxes. [C]



THE HUEY LEWIS WRAP DRESS BY NIBBATTI