

The unstoppable Lianne La Havas

She stormed the charts with her debut release in 2012, and her 2015 album, *Blood*, had critics comparing her to Aretha Franklin. No wonder Coldplay came knocking

By NIKI BROWES

Photographer CHARLIE GRAY

Deputy Fashion Editor POPPY ROCK

Gucci dress £3,680

To say Lianne La Havas casts a striking presence when I first spot her at our shoot is putting it mildly. Wearing an off-the-shoulder metallic brocade blouse and floor-length skirt by Johanna Ortiz, her posture and eye contact holler strength, poise and confidence. I'm surprised by how tall she is, too, until she daintily steps off the box she's been standing on. When we say hello and shake hands, her smile radiates star power.

That she's wearing the Colombian designer is appropriate. She's just got back from South America, where she's been touring with Coldplay. The group approached her after listening to her second album, 2015's *Blood*, and its standout first single "Unstoppable", both of which received glowing reviews; *Rolling Stone* called her a "cosmic soul queen", while *The Guardian* praised her "wonderfully expressive vocals".

She dreamily lists the cities they played – Lima, Rio and Santiago – but says Bogotá was her favourite. Despite being a big deal herself – her 2012 debut album *Is Your Love Big Enough?* was named iTunes Album of the Year, and Prince played a gig in her living room in London in 2014 (more on that later) – she can't hide her delight at touring the world with one of the biggest bands ever. "I got a call from my manager, and he said, 'Um, so, Coldplay would like your email address,' I was like, 'Okaaay'. The next thing I knew, there was a message from the band themselves saying they'd heard my new album, and asking if I'd consider playing some shows with them this year. They were like, 'It's fine if you're busy, but we'd really like it if you could.' I screamed, whooped, did a little dance and even took a screenshot of their email."

Growing up in Streatham, south London, La Havas was mostly raised by her maternal grandparents while her parents worked full time. (Her Jamaican mother was a postwoman and her Greek dad was a bus driver. They separated when she was two years old.) "My grandparents were like my mates," she explains, and her mum lived just a few streets away. Meanwhile, dad was a big influence on her musical education; he taught her how to play the piano and guitar,

and she was a permanent fixture in the school choir. A child of the digital age, she continued her guitar training by watching YouTube tutorials and began uploading her music to MySpace. After a stint as a backing singer for Paloma Faith, she landed a record deal. She was just 22 when *Is Your Love Big Enough?* – featuring a range of influences



"I screamed, whooped, did a little dance and even took a screenshot of their email"

including jazz, bossa nova and drum and bass – was released to critical acclaim.

In an age when female pop stars are criticised for being too sexy, unusually, La Havas' record label, Warner Bros, wanted her to cover up. "I remember doing a fitting for a video, and a representative was there from the label. They seemed to have a problem with me showing my arms, chest and back," she recalls. "They were uncomfortable with it." On reflection, La Havas believes her signature styling (think buttoned-up collars and skirts fitted to the knee) helps to keep the attention on what matters: her musicianship.

Today, she's wearing a street-smart look, made all the stronger by her toned physique, something she attributes to running (in Primrose Hill – she has a flat in the area) and her vegan diet. "I've been vegan on and off for

a year and a half, but fully on it for six months now. Initially, I tried it to see if I could control my weight that way, but there were other factors that attracted me to it – for example, I enjoy cooking and experimenting. Now I love the way it makes me feel."

She's all but given up alcohol, too. "I used to drink before I went on stage. Then I started wondering what performing would be like if I *didn't* have a drink, and tried it on my solo tour in February. It was amazing. It was that feeling of enjoying the nerves and the butterflies, and getting really excited. I *used* the tension. Now, there's no barrier between the audience and me. I'm really into it."

La Havas is open and engaging; she's fun to be around. But she flinches when I bring up Prince. She features on the Purple One's 2014 album *Art Official Age*, and that year, he performed to a private audience of three lucky journalists in La Havas' front room in Leyton; the superstar's catering request consisted of sandwiches from Sainsbury's. Afterwards, he took her to Camden's Electric Ballroom for an invite-only gig. His untimely death is still hard for fans to comprehend; what it must feel like for his friends is hard to imagine.

"It's terrible," she says. "It was very weird, and it still is. I feel lucky and privileged to have been someone he liked. I remember that point when we went from acquaintances to friends, and I – like everyone he came into contact with – felt very lucky and happy in his company. He was a very special man." I suggest that in *Art Official Age* she has a record of their friendship. She nods quickly before adding, "I just hope he was happy."

Happiness for La Havas is "an excellent house party or club night, but not necessarily with pumping beats. My friend puts on a night in Shoreditch where they play '90s and noughties R&B, hip-hop and soul. Try and keep me off the dance floor". She's also coupled up with sound engineer boyfriend Ben Baptie, whom she met in the studio "pressing buttons and stuff". She says that, while they're very happy, they aren't living together. "I'd only just moved into my flat when we met, and I want to enjoy living on my own for a bit," she says. "I love it. I used to enjoy people being around all the time, but now that I'm performing regularly, I like my home to be a little sanctuary." ■

La Havas is appearing at the Wilderness Festival, 4th to 7th August

Niki Browes is associate editor of InStyle magazine



THIS PAGE Johanna Ortiz top £699 and skirt £2,250; jewellery La Havas' own; **OPPOSITE PAGE** Burberry Prorsum top £1,795

Hair **JORDAN BRUMANT** at RnD Creatives
Make-up **KENNETH SOH** at Frank Agency using Tom Ford Beauty
Manicurist **ZARRA CELIK** at LMC Worldwide using Tom Ford Beauty
Photographer's Assistant **CAMERON SMITH**

Available from Designer Collections, Eveningwear and Superbrands, First Floor; and harrods.com ■