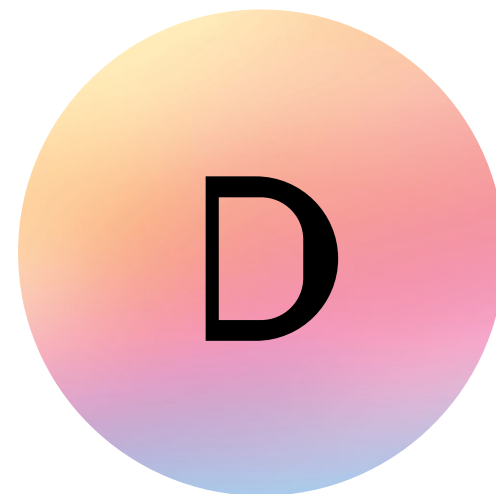




● Madonna wore a jewel-encrusted body suit during a photo shoot with Steven Meisel for her two main 1992 projects, fifth studio album *Erotica* and adults-only *Sex* book. This image became reproduced on posters and even cardboard cutouts.

BREAK I N G B O NDAGE

FROM
EROTICA TO
MATERNITY,
THE '90S
WERE A WILD
RIDE FOR
MADONNA
By Maria Speidel



Divorce can make people do all sorts of unexpected things: get tattoos, burn their wedding pictures, hike the whole Pacific Crest Trail. In the aftermath of her marriage to Sean Penn, Madonna (being Madonna) hightailed it to Miami and worked on a photography book called *Sex*. Starring herself, the tome featured 128 pages of provocative nudes — including the now-famous portrait of her hitchhiking naked — and relationship advice. It was spiral bound between two sheets of aluminum. She cut a companion album, *Erotica*, and edited video footage from the book's saucy photo shoots (S&M, bondage gear, threesomes, famous friends like Vanilla Spice, Big Daddy Kane, Isabella Rossellini and Naomi Campbell) into a video for the title song. Having learned its lesson from not showing a Madonna video at all, MTV aired “*Erotica*” — but only after midnight.



The multi-media efforts began in October 1992 with a louche party in Manhattan's meatpacking district. Madonna swanned in late wearing a very low-cut dirndl dress and clutching a toy lamb. Cue the outrage.

“The fact that a woman of her stature would depict herself in erotic scenarios was unheard of,” explained writer Mary Gabriel in her 2023 biography, *Madonna: A Rebel Life*. During this period, she wrote, Madonna was channeling a particular muse: Dita Parlo, a Weimar-era German actor. “My name is Dita. I’ll be your Mistress tonight,” Madonna says in the “*Erotica*” video, where she sports a black Lone Rangeresque mask, a gold tooth and fingernails filed to menacing points. There is also a whip.

Though the album garnered praise, the book was dismissed. “After the sadomasochism in the



“I don’t think anyone else needs to do a photo essay on erotica,” Meisel told *Vanity Fair* in October 1992 of his work with Madonna on *Sex* (above inset). Look-a-likes such as Sarah Lee (above, at a London bookstore) helped publicize the book.

Who’s that girl? The one holding a pile of *Sex* books above is a Madonna doppelgänger, sporting a look much like the one the real airport-bound icon (inset) wore when she appeared on Jonathan Ross’ Channel 4 talk show in London on Oct. 13, 1992. A week later, 750,000 copies of the coffee table book, selling for \$50 each, went on sale across the globe.



'Express Yourself' video, the bisexuality in 'Justify My Love' and the oral-sex-with-a-bottle game in the movie 'Truth or Dare,' where can Madonna go, anyway?" *The New York Times* wrote, accusing her of repeating herself. "By now even her sex dreams seem familiar."

It is worth noting that this ultimate chest-baring (and soul-baring) came near the height of the AIDS crisis, when Madonna was losing friends and co-workers to the then-mysterious and lethal disease mainly affecting gay men. A leader in promoting awareness, Madonna dedicated songs to victims like her old Michigan dance teacher, Christopher Flynn, during 1993's *The Girlie Show* Tour.

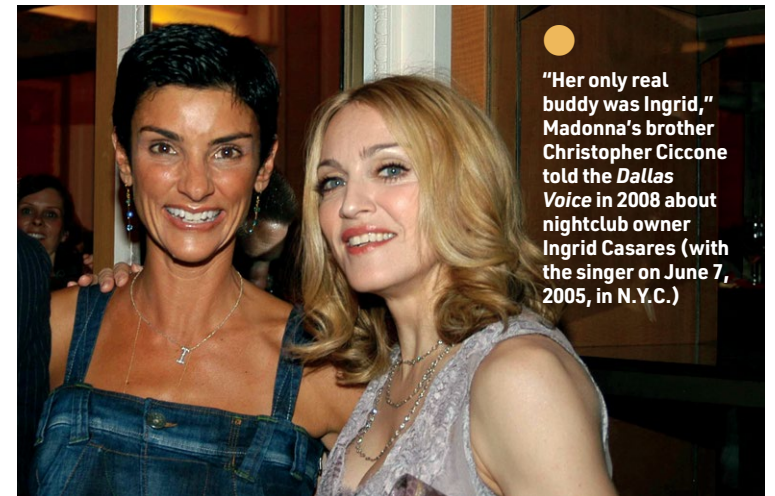
Subsequent videos from *Erotica* explored divergent, albeit tamer, looks. "Deeper and Deeper" was an homage to '70s disco, with the singer in a purple feather boa and lacy dress with no eyebrows. (Sofia Coppola and Debi Mazar have cameos.) "Rain" came down with a distinctly contemporary look — Madonna sported a brunette pixie and clean-cut, filmy minimalist pieces, skirts and tops, as Japanese composer Ryuichi Sakamoto directed her. "Take a Bow" was a retro Spanish bullfighting fantasy with her blond tresses looking *Evita*-esque. Madonna referenced these established tropes of Dita, '70s disco queen and modern sex goddess in the subsequent 1993 *The Girlie Show* Tour and MTV Video Music Awards appearances.

Her personal life in this era was less programmed. Tabloids captured Madonna in funky streetwear with several love interests. There was a short-lived relationship with Vanilla Ice, a three-year affair with bodyguard Jimmy Albright and an intense friendship with nightclub owner Ingrid Casares. She also dated Tupac Shakur and Dennis Rodman, who recently told a radio show she had promised him \$20 million if they had a baby together. Then came personal trainer Carlos Leon, a constant in her life for several years and the father of her first child, Lourdes Maria Ciccone Leon. As Madonna told *People* magazine after Lourdes' birth in October 1996, "This is the greatest miracle of my life."

Three months later, with Leon by her side and her new-mom boobs poured into a black Dolce & Gabbana bustier dress, a radiant Madonna accepted a best actress Golden Globe for *Evita*, the movie that also yielded a hit with "Don't Cry for Me Argentina." Her



While Carlos Leon attended the Golden Globe Awards in L.A. with Madonna on Jan. 19, 1997 (right), where she won Best Actress in a Musical or Comedy for *Evita*, the pair would split by May. However, they remained friends and coparents to daughter Lourdes, nicknamed Lola (above, who turned six a few days before going to a gala for the opening of a Versace exhibit at London's Victoria & Albert museum in October 2002).



"Her only real buddy was Ingrid," Madonna's brother Christopher Ciccone told the *Dallas Voice* in 2008 about nightclub owner Ingrid Casares (with the singer on June 7, 2005, in N.Y.C.)

luminosity belied her struggles.

Wearing clothes. Not wearing clothes. Publicly, Madonna does it all with aplomb. But in 2016, after receiving the Woman of the Year Award from *Billboard* magazine, she revealed the back story of the *Sex* and *Erotica* era. "Everything I read about myself was damning. I was called a whore and a witch. One headline compared me to Satan," she said. "This was the first time that I truly understood that women did not have the same freedom as men.

"I remember feeling paralyzed. It took me a while to pull myself together and get on with my creative life," she added, fighting back tears. "To get on with my life." And then she threw it back to the doubters and the naysayers: "To everyone who gave me hell and said I could not, that I would not, that I must not, your resistance made me stronger, made me push harder, made me the fighter that I am today, made me the woman that I am today, so thank you." *



● In 1993, Madonna came in like a wrecking (disco) ball for her global tour, The Girlie Show, with costumes designed by Dolce & Gabbana. Working with her, Stefano Gabbana told U.K. newspaper *The Evening Standard* in 2012, is "challenging and very exciting. She is always involved and is never afraid to say what she thinks."



● Of working with photographer Meisel, who captured this famous image of Madonna used in *Truth or Dare*, the singer told *Vogue* in April 2009, "He treated each photo shoot like it was a small film and insisted that we create a character each time we worked but then would make fun of the archetypes we created. He was the first person to introduce me to the idea of reinvention."



Cynthia Flint designed the costumes for the 1992 comedy, including Madonna's baseball uniform.



A LEAGUE OF THEIR OWN

Taking a small role in Penny Marshall's bittersweet baseball comedy *A League of Their Own* (1992) was a smart move for Madonna. By joining a talented ensemble that included Geena Davis, Lori Petty, Rosie O'Donnell and Tom Hanks, the spotlight wasn't just on her. As "All the Way" Mae Mordabito, Madonna hit a home run, providing some sass as the Rockford Peaches go from laughingstock to All-American Girls Professional Baseball League contenders. Madonna also sang "This Used to Be My Playground" on the film's soundtrack.

The '90s was the decade of the glossy erotic thriller (think Sharon Stone in 1992's *Basic Instinct* (1992), *Wild Things* (1998) with Neve Campbell and Denise Richards, and *Bound* (1996) with Jennifer Tilly and Gina Gershon). Madonna contributed to the genre by waxing lyrical in the kinky courtroom drama *Body of Evidence* (1993), but the film was a critical and box office failure, with many citing her torrid sex scenes with Willem Dafoe as laughable. Released in the U.S. the year after had she exposed all with her *Erotica* album and *Sex* book, perhaps some felt that Madonna had already revealed too much.

She spent the rest of the decade collaborating with a host of fiercely independent film directors. She sank into the darkest recesses

MOVIE MADONNA

Madonna is covered up (for now) in a thriller...



BODY OF EVIDENCE

...but unravels with James Russo (left) and Harvey Keitel in a drama...



DANGEROUS GAME

...and gets witchy with Alicia Witt in a comedy.

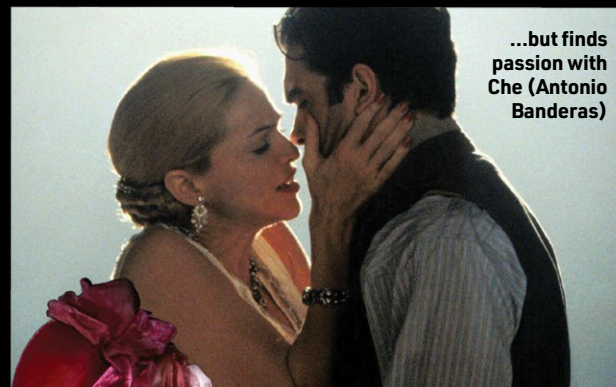


FOUR ROOMS

Eva may be married to Juan Perón (Jonathan Pryce)...



...but finds passion with Che (Antonio Banderas)



EVITA

of a squalid Hollywood in Abel Ferrara's *Dangerous Game* (1993), serenaded Harvey Keitel as a singing telegram in Wayne Wang and Paul Auster's *Blue in the Face* (1995), bewitched audiences in the Allison Anders-directed segment of *Four Rooms* (1995) and made a cameo as Boss No. 3 in Spike Lee's phone-sex comedy, *Girl 6* (1996).

A far classier affair was Alan Parker's adaptation of the Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice musical *Evita* (1996). Madonna starred as Eva Perón, the Argentinian politician and activist who shortly before her death was given the title "Spiritual Leader of the Nation." The musical, co-written by Oliver Stone and also starring Antonio Banderas as Ché and Jonathan Pryce as Juan Perón, was a labor of love for the singer. She pushed hard for the role that Michelle Pfeiffer, Glenn Close and Meryl Streep were also considered for.

Resplendent in outfits by costume designer Penny Rose, who was given special access to Perón's wardrobe in Argentina, Madonna gave one of her finest performances, ensuring there wasn't a dry eye in the house when she sang "Don't Cry for Me Argentina." "I think that she must have felt incredibly loved," she said of her character while talking to film critic Roger Ebert. "I think she must have felt a real sense of victory, of accomplishment. When you spend your entire life having people say you'll never amount to anything or you're no good or you don't have what it takes, to finally have achieved what she achieved must have been the ultimate revenge."

— David Michael Brown

While Madonna, as Perón in the film, delivered "Don't Cry For Me Argentina" in a costume by designer Penny Rose (right), she attended the gala premiere in L.A. wearing a Versace dress with floral embellishments on Dec. 14, 1996 (left).

