

## I AM NEW JERSEY

Livingston music producer got crowds going 'Gaga'



# Hit-maker

By Lisa Rose  
STAR-LEDGER STAFF

As a composer-producer, Rob Fusari helped guide Lady Gaga to the top of the charts and co-wrote such inescapable songs as “Bootylicious” by Destiny’s Child and “Wild Wild West” by Will Smith.

He doesn’t reign over a studio gleaming with gold and platinum. His workspace is a converted doctor’s office in Newark. His shiny records, encased in glass, are slanted on the floor against the wall. The medical sign remains out front.

Fusari mentors new artists and dreams up pop hooks for smash singles, working behind the scenes in New Jersey. The Livingston native and resident opts to write and record in his home state, away from the hype and clamor of New York and the Sunset Strip.

“I’m just a regular guy,” says Fusari, 41. “I’m a Jersey guy. I’m not an awards guy. I was in Los Angeles for two years, but I wanted to come home. I knew that I could do music here.”

Other hits with Fusari’s electro-pop stamp include “Love That Man” by Whitney Houston, “In This Skin” by Jessica Simpson and “Train on A Track” by Kelly Rowland. All of that, however, has been eclipsed by Lady Gaga.

The outlandish songstress was a jam-band-loving New York University student named Stefani Germanotta when she started collaborating with the producer in 2006. A number of the tunes rooted in Fusari’s old Parsippany studio are on her debut album, “The Fame,” including “Paparazzi” and “Beautiful, Dirty, Rich.”

After months in the lab with Fusari, Gaga began gravitating toward the performance-art scene in New York. Her fusion of commercial sound and provocative visuals have earned her both mainstream popularity and a passionate cult following.

## A BEWILDERED TUTOR

Even though Fusari appreciates the imagination behind Gaga’s pan-galactic look and persona, he often finds himself bewildered by her theatrics.

“She’s way deeper than me from the conceptual part of things,” says Fusari, who still speaks to Gaga occasionally. He attended one of her sold-out shows at Radio City Music Hall last month.

“It’s over my head,” Fusari continues. “I’m not getting why she performs ‘Paparazzi’ with the two dancers holding the bar over her and she’s tied to it from the hair. I don’t understand what it means.”

Ironically, early on, Fusari encouraged Gaga to be more adventurous with her wardrobe. “One day, she came to the studio wearing ripped jeans, looking plain Jane,” says Fusari’s life partner of seven years and business manager, Jayne DiGregorio, a photographer who shot Gaga’s first publicity pictures in Livingston.

“Rob’s like, ‘I don’t want you ever to come to the studio looking like that again. If you want stardom, you have to start living it.’ He used the example of Prince. ‘Prince would not go to the store in sweatpants.’”

When Gaga’s album, “The Fame,” earned a dance category Grammy, Fusari shared the honor as one of the producers. He didn’t attend the ceremony but watched it on TV. It was a thrill for him to see Gaga jam with Elton John, even though he knew about the duet in advance.

“All you need onstage is her and a piano,” he explains. “Her emotion is undeniable when she sits and sings. Elton John, after all this time, can still come out and play piano on the Grammys. He can do that for the rest of his life. Donna Summer can’t do that. Stefani is going to last because she’s a real musician.”

## TALENT SCOUT

Fusari models himself after old-school showbiz impresarios, scouting and developing new talent. Bassist Tom Kafafian is one of his discoveries. Not only did the West Milford native back Gaga in the Parsippany studio, he also toured overseas with her last year.

Fusari phoned the bassist after seeing him perform on open-mike night at Krogh’s in Sparta. Kafafian was struggling with classes at Bloomsburg University in Pennsylvania when he heard from the producer.

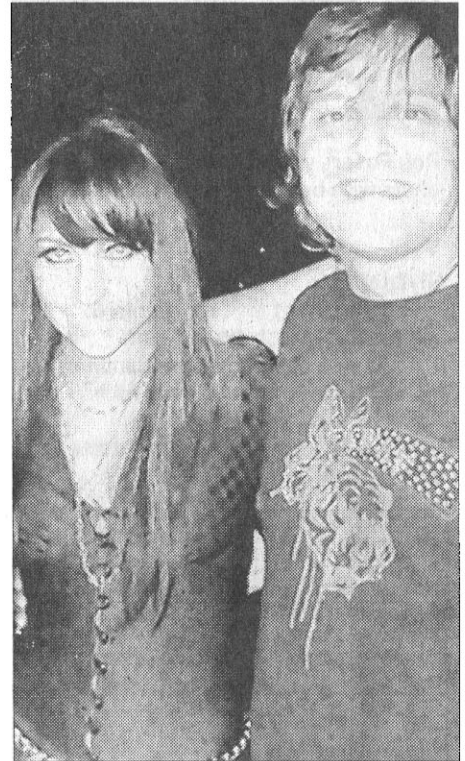


PHOTO BY JAYNE DIGREGORIO

Lady Gaga poses with Rob Fusari, who produced and co-wrote many of the pop star’s early songs.

“I was failing out,” Kafafian explains. “Rob calls me and says, ‘I saw you play, and I thought you were great. I’m a producer that’s interested in finding an artist. When can you come in?’ It took me about two hours and 40 minutes to get home, so I said, ‘I can be there in three hours.’ That’s how it started.”

Fusari was a piano prodigy. At the age of 7, he began lessons with a teacher named Miss Chappenilli, who would hit his wrist with a pencil tip if he missed a note. His parents invested in a black baby grand and, within a year, he was participating in contests. For three consecutive years, he won

a New Jersey Music Education Council tournament and, as champ, played recitals at Carnegie Hall.

"Honestly, it was kind of stressful," he says. "I'm like, 'I should be outside throwing snowballs at cars, and instead I've got to go to Carnegie Hall.'"

### IN HIS BLOOD

Fusari inherited a flair for song from his mother, Anne, who aspired to become a singer like Connie Francis. Unfortunately, Anne's dad didn't approve.

"He went to one of her shows," Fusari says. "She was sitting on the trumpet player's lap and her father lost his mind, and he pulled her by her hair out of the club. That was the beginning and the end of her career."

His first concert was the Kinks at Brendan Byrne Arena (now the Izod Center). His musical heroes were Rush, Journey, Toto and Genesis. He won battle-of-the-bands contests at Livingston High School, playing keyboards with groups called Tempest and Freeze.

"Freeze would cover Rush, Kansas, all of these intricate songs that no other band would attempt," Fusari says. "I spent two months learning the organ solo for 'Carry on My Wayward Son.' The girls loved it, and it was a great icebreaker, but at that point, it still was a hobby."

There were no other musicians in the Fusari household. Rob's father, Charlie, was a prizefighter-turned-liquor-salesman. His older brothers, Charlie and Mark, both became business owners. When Fusari was 17, his dad died of cancer.

"His last advice to me was to leave the music behind," Fusari says. "He told me that I should get on with my life and try to do something real."

Fusari earned a degree in music management from William Paterson University, but couldn't find a job in the field, so a family friend got him hired at a computer consulting firm in Parsippany. He was living at home, writing love songs in his cubicle and commuting to Newark after work to help out at a hip-hop recording studio.

Cashing a bond from his grandmother, he purchased equipment to mix music at home, piling egg cartons along the walls to soundproof the basement and hanging a mirror to make the space less claustrophobic.

### FAVORITE COMPOSER:

"I always gravitated toward Beethoven. I liked the contrast. The music would be pretty and then it would go into some frantic elements. I liked the more mysterious feeling of his work."

### TUNING IN:

"I started to realize maybe I do have an ear for songwriting when I would hear a song on the radio and I would be thinking to myself, 'Wow, this would have been so great if they had gone here or the hook would have been great if they did this.'"

### THE PRODUCER:

"Quincy Jones was a big influence. I got in on the R&B wave that was happening in the late '90s. Rock was kind of dead at that point. I was trying to do more rock stuff, but I couldn't get arrested."

### LADY GAGA'S MASS APPEAL:

"She's bringing to the stage something that people have been missing, that energy. Everything has gotten so polished over the years with editing and recording software that it loses what the Led Zeppelins of the world used to do. I think she's bringing back that element of performance."

### FATEFUL MEETING

Fusari's fortunes changed after he met industry bigwig Vincent Herbert. The producer, along with a local songwriter named Calvin Gaines, visited Fusari's basement headquarters and asked to hear his latest track.

Herbert took a cassette and, that night, called Fusari to tell him that he wanted to cut the record with four girls from Texas called Destiny's Child. Soon after, Beyoncé and company were in the sound booth singing what became their debut hit, "No, No, No."

Fusari tallied four tunes with Destiny's Child, including the signature, "Bootylicious."

"That song started as a track that Beyoncé ran with and did most of the lyrics to," Fusari explains. "Honestly, I thought she ruined my track."

A week-long visit to Los Angeles sprawled into a two-year stay. Fusari put everything on hold, including his engagement to a Jersey girl, as he delivered beats

and melodies for Herbert to shop. It became a grind, so he returned to the Garden State and started fresh on his own.

"The week I got back, I was calling everybody," Fusari says. "I called Will Smith's manager and he ended up calling me back, 'Will's doing this movie and he needs a song,' and that was 'Wild Wild West.'"

The outlaw anthem, built around a sample of "I Wish" by Stevie Wonder, became a No. 1 hit. Then the movie, "Wild Wild West," was released.

"When we were recording with Will, he was going on about how great the film was," Fusari says. "He got me amped to see it. I went opening night in Jersey. There were three people in the theater. The movie ends and here come the credits. They left my name off."

### AN AUSPICIOUS RETURN

Had Fusari stayed in Los Angeles, he would not have crossed paths with Germanotta. In 2006, a friend called him from a downtown Manhattan club to recommend a singer-songwriter who was performing there. She took the bus from New York to meet Fusari and Kafarian in Parsippany. Thus began a year-plus of writing and refining, yielding some 40 songs — most of them unreleased.

"At one point, we considered starting a band together," says Kafarian. "We didn't know what we were doing. We were just making music. No egos, no nothing. It was actually a whole lot of fun."

They shaped a sound featuring Germanotta's chirpy vocals laced around melodies straight out of the mop-top '60s.

“When she was really feeling it, she would bump up against the console like a rocker bumps against a drum kit,” Fusari explains. “I was worried that she’d knock it over. She would get that movement, that jerky energy.”

Fusari saw Germanotta as a female Freddie Mercury and her stage name evolved out of the Queen hit, “Radio Ga Ga.” Kafafian says that during a London stint last year, there were plans for Queen guitarist Brian May to take the stage with Gaga and perform her namesake song, which still could happen at some point.

After building up her repertoire in Parsippany, Gaga started experimenting as a live performer, appearing in a burlesque revue with a deejay named Lady Starlight. Once Gaga started fetishizing herself, Fusari felt the sexuality was overshadowing the songwriting and he began drifting out of her orbit. She was signed to Streamline/Interscope in 2007 and took off from there.

“It was hard to let go,” says Fusari. “I still feel like she’s my artist, but she’s a different artist now. It’s a tricky balance because you want them to grow and evolve.”

He shuttered the Parsippany studio after Gaga left. The summer her breakthrough hit, “Just Dance,” was released, Fusari’s other protégé committed suicide. She was a teen vocalist named Lina Morgana, whose song collection included a tune called “Wunderland” that was penned by Fusari and Gaga.

“I came back to the studio from Lina’s funeral and I was like, ‘I can’t be here anymore,’” Fusari says. “It felt empty. Between Lina and Stef, everything good and bad that went on, it was time to move.”

Nowadays, he is developing an artist from Oregon named Return Baby, whose style is described as “The Postal Service meets the Beatles.”

“People think you have a hit and everything falls into place,” Fusari says. “But you have to keep starting over. The real producers who just do records, and they’re not in the spotlight like Puffy or Timbaland, they have to be reborn again and again. That’s what the passion is, the hunger.”

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*— Rob Fusari*



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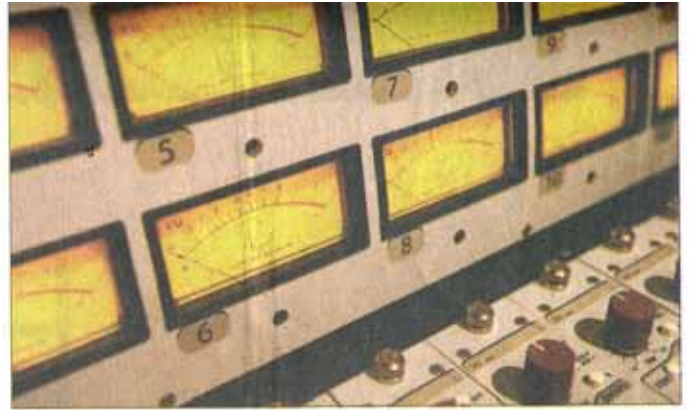
**Rob Fusari works on a song at his studio in Newark. Below right, some of the recording equipment that fills Fusari's studio.**

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PHOTOS COURTESY OF ROB FUSARI

The future producer began piano lessons at an early age.



MITSU YASUKAWA/THE STAR-LEDGER



Winning a statewide competition three years in a row led the young piano prodigy to a performance at Carnegie Hall.



MITSU YASUKAWA/THE STAR-LEDGER

Rob Fusari, who has worked with Lady Gaga, Destiny's Child and Will Smith, among others, chats with bassist Tommy Kafatian during a break at his studio in Newark earlier this month.