

Simultaneously, Leo caught up with Maria and in front of those still watching ‘the show’ started beating on her, calling her every name in the book - Spanish and English combined. It was then that everybody realized this was not part of the act but a jealous Cuban out of control with rage and anger. Leo’s friends quickly pulled him off, saving Maria from further cuts and bruises, carrying him off screaming obscenities.

Dr. Alexander was in a state of shock, as was I. Thank god the rain was coming down so hard everybody left and I didn’t have to explain or apologize for the debacle. The fallout was severe though. Dr. Alexander, through the manager Tony, thought it best we cut back the shows. As much as he and everyone else enjoyed them, a lawsuit would be disastrous.

Leo later apologized, never really explaining what set him off. Maria still loved him and she shrugged off the condition of her battered body. We heard through the grapevine later that it was a jealous Maria who actually started the sordid affair after watching Leo and Candy’s torrid dance scene earlier.

One admirer, who was always at our Ocean Promenade fashion shows, was a handsome Italian designer from Milano who introduced himself to me simply as ‘Gianni’. He came by my cabana store occasionally and we would discuss the merit and beauty of different styles and designs - many, the ones I had in my store. As I related, my South Beach inventory included many original designs from the myriad of great stylists that worked with us back then: Burrey Olson, Michel Jacques, Ren Ellis, Clifford Olsen, Robert Warner, Charlotte, Arturo, Nigel and my original partner Michael with his cutting edge styles and designs. They were truly head and shoulders above anything else - just ask my Italian designer friend and soon to be neighbor, Gianni. “Maravilhoso Bill”, he would say in his intriguing thick accent. “Your pants are the best ever - so sexy - and design is all about sex. A woman is not going to spend 400 dollars on a pair of pants except for seduction”, he would philosophise. We would talk endlessly about this subject. He would never get tired of it. I did, however, and would finally have to excuse myself, making up some reason to leave my highly interesting friend.

It wasn’t until one day when I was in the Bal Harbor Shops Mall that I found out who he really was. I bumped into him getting out of his Mercedes in the parking lot and he said I must come and see his new shop. I questioned, “You have a shop here Gianni?” I thought all this time, he was an unknown aspiring designer. I wasn’t used to such modesty, especially from egocentric designers. It is usually, “My designs, My store, My styles.” All this time he was interested in ‘my work’. We walked into the Mall’s first floor. This was a quite impressive retail lineup of designer stores and right in the middle was a large beautifully decorated store with an incredible window display of chic colorful men’s and ladies’ garments. The ornate gold leaf window



lettering outlined boldly 'VERSACE'. I disbelievably blurted out, "You are Versace?" He replied, "Yes, you didn't know that Bill?"

I was obviously embarrassed but Gianni graciously made my guffaw seem like a minor thing, escorting me into his palacious store. This was a period for Versace that saw him do some overstated designs, something that only he could pull off and he did to the tune of millions of dollars.

Besides seeing Gianni at our Saturday show, I would also hobnob with him occasionally at the News Café just up Ocean Avenue a few art deco blocks. My friend Carolyn was part owner of this hip, funky and trendy coffee house. Spirited conversation was always coming forth from Gianni's table. Sadly and ironically, it was near here that several years later, poor Gianni was brutally gunned down by a lone, deranged admirer, thus snatching away far too soon one of the world's great designers.

During this period, Versace bought the venerable art deco hotel, The Amsterdam. I had stayed there a couple of nights before he took it over, when I first arrived in South Beach. Although highly unique, it was real funky at 20 dollars a night - so bad I had to 'upgrade' to the Tides Hotel just down the block. Gianni spent a fortune on the remodel and after it was finished it became his magnificent contribution to the South Beach Revival, together with his opulent abode and design studio. Unfortunately I was long gone from South Beach after the remodel and sadly missed the gala dinner parties and festivities that Gianni and his sister Donatella hosted. Years later, after his sad demise, I returned to South Beach and had an opportunity to tour the grounds. I paid homage to the great designer and tipped my hat to his efforts in bringing back life to the old Amsterdam Hotel.

Oh, the name of my shop in South Beach - no, not North Beach Leathers, but . . . yeah, you got it!

