Angel Olsen on controlling your image

December 20, 2016 - Angel Olsen is a singer, songwriter, and guitarist who's released three albums, most recently *My Woman*, which she produced with Justin Raisen. In the first two videos for the record ("Intern" and "Shut Up Kiss Me"), both directed by Olsen, she wore a silver wig. People talked about this a lot.

As told to Brandon Stosuy, 1801 words.

Tags: Music, Independence, Multi-tasking.

Everyone loved the silver wig I wore in the "Intern" and "Shut Up Kiss Me" videos. It's really curious to me.

I had the freedom to act out in those videos because I could control my editing. I was editing supervisor—so I could control my image—which was the whole reason why I wanted to do it in the first place. I had my own visions for these songs.

It's the director's vision most of time. Even when you're contributing—it's your song, but there's this push and pull. They have a vision for your image, which is complicated, because it's your song. It's an advertisement for your song. You should be in control of it.

Watching an artist give up control is like, "Well, you just worked so hard on your album and you might not care about music videos, but basically you're letting someone just do a free advertisement." It's not the same as a car commercial. It's more intense than a car commercial, because so-and-so wants you to do some weird shit with your hands, or wants you do something where you paint your face. That's going to be what you project as an artist, not what they project as a director.

It's the same way with music. Stewart [Bronaugh] who plays guitar with me started to play his own music; he's not playing with me anymore. It was so heartbreaking because he played on [my last album] *My Woman*, and I was like, "Why did you choose now as the time to leave?" He was like, "I didn't really choose it. I wanted to be on the record because I like your music and I wanted to be there for you. This way was my goodbye." Then I was like, I'd rather him do his own thing than have him be like, "I can't do my own thing because I'm working on Angel Olsen's music." That's the worst feeling. I'd hate to put that on a friend.



The wig to me was just me developing my own character. Whether or not that character was relevant, I thought it would be cool to separate myself if I'm going to do a narcissistic thing like direct, act, edit my song and my image in a video. Sometimes separating myself from the process is nice, and a wig was easier than hiring a stylist. A stylist keeps your hair consistent, but I didn't have a budget for a stylist, so I got a wig.

I also was like, "Oh, I really like rollerskating. I genuinely go rollerskating." I'm sure people saw it and thought I was *trying* to make a video, but I actually like roller skating. It's one of the things I like to do. When we were recording the record, I went rollerskating. It was right when David Bowie had passed away. At the rink there was a kind of rollerskating procession happening for Bowie. A funeral procession. They just played all Bowie. People dressed up as Bowie from different decades. That's when I thought of the video, or just the first idea of having a video. Doing a glam kind of look.

Honestly, the "Shut Up Kiss Me" idea came first. Then I was going to combine the two videos, but of course the label was like, "I'm sorry that you have this vision, but we need to separate the songs for the sake of the singles." I had to separate the songs, which changes the way everyone looks at an album. It was a hard decision to make even though the label was like, "This should be a no brainer." I was like, "Well, if we separate them, visually this is going to change the context." I guess I'll have to deal with that.

And, as far as the videos, the label was definitely like, "Oh we liked this edit more." It's so annoying. It's really annoying because it's like, you shouldn't even be a part of this. You're not a part of this song process. I guess I feel less protective of it because it's more of a short advertisement to me. But I do feel like from the beginning I've been a pain in their ass, just trying to get what I wanted the whole time. I've done well getting what I want and I think they know that. So far I've done okay. They've given me some leeway.

But they wanted me to do something really weird. I don't want to tell you because I don't want it to be published. They wanted me to add something to the video that was totally irrelevant. I laughed when I read the email. I was like, "Oh my god. Are you fucking kidding me?" No way that's going to happen. There's no way… like… you're not going to make me ruin this idea. They were just seeing it from this angle. Everybody has a different perspective on it in this game we're playing. They see one side, I see one side, my manager sees one side, my PR person sees one side, the audience sees another side. Everybody sees a different side of something in this process.

This is something I created, so don't fuck with it. Stop fucking with it. This is something you didn't create. They didn't think about the process. I don't think anyone really thinks about it being a vulnerable thing or a thing that's precious to you. People forget. You want to avoid this thing, because that thing works. Well, I want to disregard all of your decisions because you suggested all of these people who I think suck.

I had to learn to just be like, "Okay you're coming from this perspective where you think all these things are great that I hate." When you suggest something to me, I know that sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn't work, and that's okay.

I'm just a very particular person as you can probably tell just by talking to me. What I've realized is that I wasn't very particular in the past, but now I get upset and frustrated by

people doing things the wrong way or using my image in a weird way.

My plan now is to, without being an asshole, just be a little bit more assertive about the things I want and know what I want versus getting upset and disappointed. I think the label has actually been very lenient with me. I think that that's rare. I don't expect it to last forever. Maybe I'll do something that will bum them out some time… but I feel we're in good standing with each other. For the most part, they've been very supportive of these videos and very supportive of me.

I didn't even tell them when I wanted to make them. I was like, "I'm just going to do it. I'll spend my own money. If you want to pay me back later, that's fine. I want to do it because I want to make something beautiful. I'm not trying to get paid. This is my art that I'm trying to represent. I don't want to get paid for that. I just want to be supported for doing it." [My manager] ended up talking to them anyway, just to make sure they knew we were working on something because they kept suggesting people to work with and he had to be like, "Well she's going to do it herself." I wonder if there was a moment when they were like, "Oh are you sure that's going to be okay? Does she know how to do that?" I wouldn't blame them for going there because I had no experience. It was a learning process.

I ended up doing the wig thing and, of course, I was thinking all these poetic things about making a video. But I was very humbled by all the steps it took to complete these tasks, and see for the first time where maybe Zia [Anger] and Ashley [Connor] are coming from with editing and being like, "Whoa, this is fucking hard." You don't really get much pay back. Your pay back is knowing that you made something beautiful… even though at the end of the day someone is like, "What's up with the wig?" You know what I mean? When you're like, "Dude, David Bowie died, there were all these things, my friends and I went roller skating. I went roller skating on my birthday. I saw this man once who was in a wheelchair at the roller skating rink. The guy."

Just having this attachment to this thing and wanting to make fun of myself for being like, "Okay we're going to make a fake glamorous video of myself as though I'm like really famous and I'm at a festival and some kid is interviewing me." I'm going to go with that theme and then we're going to take it to a different level with this idea of the rollerskating and having a different character that was more brash and upfront.

I just thought about it in all these complicated ways. Not complicated ways, I guess, but I felt really strongly about it. That's how it is with music: you think about all these things. There's all this synchronicity that you know about, but then you release it into the world and people are like, "I miss your folk stuff." Go fuck yourself. You're missing the point dude. I am my folk stuff. I will always be my folk stuff. I will always be what I've made to people. You changing yourself or your art is always a thing.

The wig brings all this stuff together. It's a symbol. Is Angel Olsen becoming a performance artist? Is Angel changing? But just for the people who care. I don't think a million people care, but like the people who are my fans… it's just so funny to me. I want to fuck with them. I want them to be challenged by it because I need something to keep it interesting for me. I feel like I could write a dissertation on wigs… the change of the wig and how it represents a change but how it also doesn't represent a change. It's just a wig.

Angel Olsen recommends:

rollerskating
backgammon
white lilies
Elena Ferrantes catalogue
dry gin martinis
Chavela Vargas records
Bach fugues
Plato's *Symposium*
Edward Gorey animations
Lee Miller's photography
Bluets by Maggie Nelson

Name
Angel Olsen

Vocation
Musician

Fact

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Photo: Amanda Marsalis