

March 6, 2017 - Jennifer Vanilla is the performance project of Becca Kauffman, a dancer, director, and video artist, who's a member of the Brooklyn indie band Ava Luna as well as a professional voice over artist.



As told to Brandon Stosuy, 2155 words.

Tags: Art, Music, Inspiration, Process, Independence.

# Becca Kauffman on becoming your own muse

## **Has it been difficult moving from music to performance art?**

The way that I joined the band was out of the blue. I never intended to be in a band. I consider my primary instrument to be performance. It's always been that way. I never expected to be in a band for seven years, and going... So it hasn't been a clunky transition for me. It's more like finally getting around to what I always intended to do, and getting more clarity on that.

## **Do you see your band as an extension of the performance, or the other way around?**

It has to be musical, up until the point that I get on stage. Then, that's when I find myself being most useful, or consider myself to be the most useful to the group. Every other step that comes before that is a little foreign to me, because it's not my normal practice. I would not call myself a musician. I play instruments out of necessity. I'm slowly developing more patience and earnest curiosity about instruments, but music has always been more of a vehicle for the performance. I can get a little antsy to get through it in order to perform.

I'm coming off of a week-long trip, where we were working on a new album. We went to our friend's family's beach house in Massachusetts during a series of snowstorms, set up our recording gear, and started playing. Up until this point we've been going really hard, consistently, always writing, always releasing something, always touring. We took a break for the first time. It was around the time that everyone started to turn 30. Coming back after having had time for all of us to digest the last seven years has been different. The writing process has become more collaborative.

Now that my Jennifer Vanilla persona is my primary concern, I'm trying to figure out where or if Jennifer fits into Ava Luna. I'm seeing if I can squeeze part of her spirit into the writing. This is a constant question I ask to stay motivated: How do I make it fun? How can I make this interesting for myself?

I think I want to stay true to Becca Kauffman in Ava Luna, but also relate to Jennifer Vanilla as a muse. Jennifer Vanilla was birthed to be a muse, that's part of her identity... but a muse to others. Over the course of time, I've realized she's also a muse to me. I can pull from her philosophy and apply it to my own life. One of her mottos is, "What would Jennifer do?" I have to ask myself that a lot.

You know how in Peter Pan, where they end up sewing a shadow? I think that part of what Jennifer Vanilla is, is a manifestation of the stage persona—an expansion and aura that grows around you when you're performing. There's so much magic in it. How do you harness that? You can't really take it home with you.

## **You do professional voice work for commercials. Do you view yourself as an actress? Do you see everything you do as one overall project?**

With voiceover work, commercially and professionally, I tend to keep that separate, but it's starting to bleed into my artwork. Now I'm considering, maybe it's okay that my agents know that I'm a huge freak. Maybe I don't have to keep that so separate after all. In the end, I would say I'm a performance artist, or an interdisciplinary artist, or a performer. I consider performance to be my primary tool, and then I use video and social media, to disseminate it, basically.

## **Would you ever do a voice job as Jennifer?**

I was thinking about that the other day. Episode two of *The Jennifer Vanilla Hour*, my public access show on Queen's Public Television, is entirely audio. The episode is called "Radio for Your Television." It's supposed to feel like one of those radio channels that you can tune into on cable, in the 800s. I took my image out of it, for the most part, and just wanted to use graphics, and expand Jennifer away from her image and into more of an aural experience.

There's something that I haven't introduced yet, I guess, which is the concept of LARPing, live action role playing, which has definitely factored into the Jennifer persona. I put on an experimental theatrical

production with some friends of mine called *LARP Castle*, that took place at a local bar in my neighborhood. It was a performance, but it was largely unscripted, and mostly structured around characters that we had chosen for ourselves. We were inspired by the idea of what we call "LARPing your own reality," shifting what's before you into something that's closer to your fantasy, by performing the action and thus changing the reality. It's sort of like, "powered by Jennifer Vanilla."

Jennifer may make minor cameos during a voiceover audition, but it would really just be to drum myself up. It's not necessarily a public announcement of Jennifer.

My goal is for everyone to have their own Jennifer. Jennifer's not really me, it's not a vehicle for my narcissism, though part of what she does is unapologetically self-advertise and co-opt the whole idea of branding, commercialism, merchandising, and capitalizing on her identity. I feel like there's so much shame that we all hold, so I use her as a third party to be able to do things that I myself can't necessarily do yet.

**Did you find that Jennifer Vanilla has forced you to come up with your own path?**

I think that's the only way that you can truly feel like you belong: If you create a space of your own design, that you naturally belong to, and build it from there. I started a coven with three friends who were in *LARP Castle*. We meet every other week, and perform some ceremonies, and talk about our work, and share new pieces. We have a poet, a video artist, a musician, and me. I think from there, starting a really small core community helps us all figure out a way to belong, and also make sense of everything else that we're involved in.

**How'd you come up with the name Jennifer Vanilla?**

I have a hobby of thinking up names and titles, plays on words and phonetically pleasing pairings, or phony punk monikers, or Americana-tinged spokespeople. Jokes, really. I used to stare out the window for long stretches of time on tour with Ava Luna and come up with first and last name combinations. Some were just small businesses we drove by: Ashley Furniture, Steve Grocery, and from there came Courtney Soap, Bobby Pin, Jean Jacquet, Chessica.

Jennifer Vanilla was on a list I had somewhere. I always wanted a glamorous stage name. I think it's necessary for the name I adopt onstage to be overt and aspirational; slightly cartoonish, open to interpretation, and an unabashed advertisement. I chose it because it was a blank slate: vanilla. Unflavored, fill in the blank, appealing in its versatility, intriguing or perhaps off-putting in its ambiguous sexual undertones. Yet heavily self-branded. She sounds like a product because she is a product. She's not really a person, she's an idea. She is very sensitive, though. Like any benevolent commercial entity, she provides you with what you didn't know you needed.

There's a lot of room for growth in the name. How are you supposed to know what to call something before you know what it is? Her identity fills out as she goes. It's open-ended enough that "Jennifer" becomes a circularly defined catch-all for her attitude and philosophy. "That's so Jennifer." "What Would Jennifer Do?" "Let's Jennifer the town Jennifer." The goal is for the term to become more and more expansive, inclusive, until we can all, at our best moments, identify as Jennifers. "Jennifer Vanilla" could be an off-brand Barbie doll, and she kind of is, in a way.

**Public access feels like a rich area for performance like this.**

I'm assuming there's a very small viewership of the show. Who watches public access, period? If they are watching it, it can't be anyone I know. I don't own a television. Most of the people I know don't, and I think most people my age in New York at least, who are creating things, are more internet based. It's satisfying to me to return to the original means of media, and whoever's living room it might broadcast into. That is an audience that I would like to reach, even for a fleeting moment.

I've always thought of YouTube as being the public access channel for the internet, the people's television. I like that it's social, but it's not social media. It's very narrowly defined content. It's all video, it's very simple. To me that feels like the newest and most important form of media, in relation to television, radio.

**In framing your work, and creating deadlines, is it useful having a public access slot?**

Totally. It's a lottery, which I threw my name in for. I called it *The Jennifer Vanilla Hour* on the application. A very long time, way before I knew that I was going to be doing Jennifer Vanilla full time. When I heard back, months later that I got chosen in the lottery, and that my show was called *The Jennifer Vanilla Hour*, I was like, how did I do that?

Now I have this monthly assignment. Every month I have to submit an hour's worth of material, which is also a far longer amount of time than I really anticipated. I don't know what I was thinking, but it's great. It's my one homework assignment per month. It forces me to look around, like okay, what do I have right now? What's going on? How can I shape what I'm thinking and doing into a concrete piece of media?

I'm very sentimental and reticent about externalizing a lot of my creative ideas, it makes me really uncomfortable and kind of depressed. It's a painful process that I try to avoid as much as possible, but I know that it must be done. This is a good, forceful way to get it out of me.

**Do you have any plans where you want Jennifer Vanilla to be a more mainstream figure, or are you happy to exist in public access venues and the local bar?**

My answer is under construction. As much as I am an advocate of creating your own scene, of course I desperately want to belong in one, too. I feel like I've tried out so many, and I'll be like, eh, no, eh, no, just not enough. I'm still trying to find it.

My next step is Downtown theater, and Performance Art with a capital P and A. I don't know if I qualify, but in terms of career, I quit my job in December. I'm just trying to do voiceover work. I just joined SAG-AFTRA, the union, because I got a national television spot for Swiffer. It's hard for me to not feel like I'm living not just double lives, but multiple lives here. Like I said before, it's hard for me to converge them, or decide whether or not that's the appropriate thing to do.

Part of the reason why I quit my job is because I wanted to light the fire to start taking my creative work more seriously, and maybe even try to make a connection between that and earning a living somehow. I've always had them be very, very separate. I work for money, and I do art for the art.

I'm collaborating right now with my friend Lorelei Ramirez, who's a comedian and performer from Brooklyn. We're basically working on a fantastical scenario in which voice over artists are these iconic diva-level celebrities who perform live at Madison Square Garden. We're building a comedy show around that, and pitching it to Comedy Central's Corporate Retreat, which is a show that they host at UCB. Even that I have hangups about. "I don't know, is this comedy?" It's very hard. When I perform in comedy, it's funny. When I perform in other places, it's funny, but at different moments. It's really just about what you call yourself, and what you call what you're doing. In the end I prefer to call it nothing at all. I prefer to call it an experience, because that's undeniable. If anyone wants an experience, I am available for hire.

Becca Kauffman recommends:

The Jennifer Vanilla Hour, episode 2

The Jennifer Vanilla Hour, episode 1

Robert Ashley, Perfect Lives

Possibly in Michigan by Cecelia Condit

Hail the New Puritan by Charles Atlas starring Michael Clark

Name

Becca Kauffman

Vocation

Performance Artist, Musician, Dancer

Fact

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Photo: Tonje Thilesen

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