Brad Callahan on the perils of practicality

February 10, 2017 - Brad Callahan is a fashion designer based in NYC. He founded his label, BCALLA, in 2011.

As told to T. Cole Rachel, 3036 words.

Tags: Fashion, Inspiration, Beginnings, Collaboration.

Your work is what most people might describe as highly unconventional. Do you ever feel the pressure to make things that are more wearable, less crazy?

No. [*laughs*] I've found that most people don't want that from me. When I'm doing an event, like a pop-up shop or something, if I try to appeal to a consumer base and I'm making something really simple and straightforward, they'll come and shop my rack and be like, "This is great, but where's the crazy stuff? Where are the insane pieces?" They want the big things. They don't want a t-shirt from me, usually.

You've been designing and making clothes for a long time. At what point did you feel like people were really starting to get it, that this might be a viable career for you?

I guess it was when Azealia Banks had me make stuff for her a couple of years ago. She hired me to do the outfits for her tour. Once I got that gig, I paid off a bunch of credit card debt, rented a studio, bought a pattern drafting table, and never looked back. I was still doing a couple of days of retail, working at a boutique here and there. Then one day I realized that if I hustled for a day I could sell a dress for more than I was making hourly at a boutique. I just thought I'd rather do that. It didn't make sense to me to keep working retail.



Michael Burk

How did the Azealia thing happen? How did she find you?

A stylist, Contessa Stuto, was pulling looks for Azealia's Japan tour. She pulled a few looks from me. I didn't hear anything until about a year later when I got an email directly from Azealia saying, "I got this stuff from you and I really liked it. I want you to design my tour." It was a really crazy email to get.

How much does something like that help a designer?

People don't realize to what degree pop stars' image and identity is really created by stylists, so once you get on their radar a lot of other stuff starts to happen. I got into magazines, other people started wearing me, things really got rolling after that.

I know this is a question you get asked a lot if you design clothes, but what informs your aesthetic? Where does your particular sense of style come from?

Comic books. A *lot* of comic books. My brother was really into comic books, particularly female-fronted comic books from the '90s. He actually gave me his comic book collection for Christmas a couple of years ago because he knew I loved them. Seeing all of these super sexy women in crazy spandex outfits was a major thing for me, which is sort of obvious if you look at the clothes I make. The comic books led me to anime, which is also where I get a lot of my aesthetic, and that eventually led me to punk music which somehow led me to researching the club kids. There is a whole evolution that happened there. Plus, musically, the transition from punk rock to new romantic was very important for me.

In college I was always fighting with gender expression, wanting to be feminine but somehow also *not* feminine. Fashion was how I came to terms with that. Also, thankfully, I had a professor that turned me on to all the important gay films. He was like, "First you need to see this documentary on Leigh Bowery and then you need to see *Paris is Burning*. Start there."

Paris is Burning in particular left a big impression on me because it presented the idea that anyone can be a star. It was all about creating and shaping your own identity in whatever way you wanted to, so I really grabbed onto that idea and ran with it. I was one of those kids who came to New York from the Midwest with this vision of what I could do here, what I could be. So many kids who come here to be stars end up becoming major forces in the industry. I'm all about supporting that and lifting it up and wanting to be a part of their process and their story.

Fashion has such a weird identity in our culture. It's a very easy thing to parody, but most people have no idea the amount of work involved in being a designer or really understand the huge expense or difficulty involved in trying to launch your own line. Fashion itself also says a lot about the culture at any given time.

Fashion is totally about the zeitgeist. It's a really layered subject and much more meaningful than people tend to give it credit for. That's the reason why it gets so complicated, especially when you're talking about cultural references and what is too much and what lines do you not cross. I think about that stuff a lot. I do think about what the work is saying, what it is I'm trying to say, what point I'm trying to make.





Charles Ludeke

It would be interesting show a room full of fashion students some samples of your work and then ask, "What is this person expressing? What is this person's worldview as you interpret it through the things that they make?" Your work does present this very powerful, fanciful vision.

I like color, obviously. My work is about fun more than anything. Fantasy. I think fashion industry takes itself way too seriously, which is a common complaint. That's my rallying cry though: stop taking yourself so fucking seriously!

When I first moved to New York I didn't have any money to start a company or to do a collection. How I resolved that was to launch this tumblr called the BCALLA LOOKs PROJECT. Once a month I uploaded a new look accompanied with a custom music track from one of my friends who was a musician. It was 12 different musicians, 12 different models, but I worked continuously with the same photographer. The looks weren't for sale or anything, it was just to do it. I did it to get my name out there, to get these idea out there, to try and get some footing so I could launch a collection. It was also to make the point that anyone can have access to being a star, anyone can be a model. I chose people that weren't normally models and tried to get as much variety out there and to show that you can have fun with it without always having to worry about the bottom line.

That's kind of a blessing and a curse with my label, I'm not really concerned about sales. I'm way more impressed by something like Björk's swan dress, which actually had a huge cultural impact. We're still referencing that 20 years later. I think of Bob Mackie's gown for Cher that has been replicated by everyone on every red carpet, but that people hated at the time. To have that kind of cultural impact is more important to me than selling a t-shirt. I'm much more interested in those projects, much more interested in dressing the music video than having a store in the mall. That's really where I feel my brand belongs.



Christian Ferretti

I grew up in what I consider the golden age of music videos and I just love them; they communicated so much. I'm interested in that part of what fashion is and what fashion can do. I don't think fashion is just in the clothes, it's about music, it's about make-up, it's about hair, it's about people. You can't just shove someone in an outfit and call it a day. You can tell when it's not genuine.

Given the nature of your work, what do you imagine as being the ideal career path? How do you want your work to be seen and worn?

I look to people like Zaldy or The Blonds and the way they run their businesses. I also used to work for a designer that shared a studio with a swimwear designer who did all of her own production, all of her own sales. I really want to keep that business model which mean growing my studio, having my full-time sewers, pattern maker, all that stuff. But I want to continue to do bigger shows, musician tours, music videos, special projects. I could imagine that maybe I would license out my brand someday, but I don't think that's any time soon.

You've not shied away from controversy in showing your work. You created a porn video, which people can find linked on your website, to show off one of your previous collections, for example.

I go with whatever is working. I don't look a gift horse in the mouth. I met Colby Keller, a gay porn star, and he did a studio visit with me. We were talking and I said, "I would really love to see my clothes in a porn." I used to work in a sex store and we had this one porn that was called like "InSex" or something. It was this amazing fashion porn where they were all dressed in these insane fetish bug outfits and had dildos for stingers. It was crazy. It was insane to me that no one had done it in a real way because everybody watches porn. He hooked me up with a gay porn company called Cocky Boys and they made the film. It just made the most sense to get it out there, to really get in front of fashion people's faces without having to go through their gatekeepers. I found a backdoor. Pun intended.

What was the reception to it?

It's been really good, actually. It's crazy, too, because my peer group are in their 30s now and a lot of them are becoming teachers and they'll show it to their students in art school. I was getting a coffee the other day and a girl was like, "We just watched your porno in my class." It definitely has a cult following, which is the goal. It's cool. It doesn't follow me around as much as I thought it would. My work with Miley Cyrus has really overshadowed it in a lot of ways. It's fine that people reference the things I made for Miley Cyrus more than they do my fashion porno.



Fred Attenborough/Michael Burk

People are always going to be interested in clothing that's practical, comfortable, easy to wear, inexpensive. Can you imagine a time when wearing a latex top won't be such a crazy notion for someone's day to day life?

I think it depends. Not to get off topic, but I always used to get really annoyed with designers who dressed sloppily. Like, If you can't dress yourself how are you dressing other people? Then you start doing the work and you're in the studio and it's like, "This is a fuck-ton of work, and I need to move." A crazy look isn't always the most practical thing when you are physically working. Since then I've been more of a t-shirt and jeans kind of person. So I think that if you have a lifestyle that affords you to be able to dress crazy all the time and really go for it, then you absolutely should and that's amazing, but otherwise those items need to kept for special occasions just because of practicality. Ugh, that word! I also think it's one of those things that if you dress crazy, you dress crazy. It's a personal thing, it's not a trend thing. Either you want to do it or you don't. There's no ifs, ands, or buts about it. Some people are just totally committed to the looks. [*laughs*]

There will always people who thrive off of the attention of looking crazy, but for a lot of people it's something more akin to, "This is a natural expression of what I'm about. You're looking at it."

People always say, "Who are your customers?" And I say, "It's the attention seeker." But I also make it a point to try and wear my own stuff, especially the more crazy stuff every once in a while just to remember what I'm putting my clients in. I've gotten really comfortable with it myself, but it's another thing to say to someone, "Of course your ass is out! Of course! Whatever!" But then you forget that you have to have this confidence to go out into the world with your ass hanging out and be like, "I look great no matter what." It takes a lot. Usually you either are or you aren't that kind of person. My clients usually are. I have an intern and she shows up every day in full face, done hair, full look, platform shoes. She's at the sewing machine in her platforms.

I'd to see a day when everything isn't fast fashion. That's what I'm more interested in seeing. I think people… I don't want to say they lack creativity, it's just that they don't trust themselves. You can achieve amazing looks without spending a lot of money. You don't have to buy designer. You don't even, necessarily to make it yourself. It's just about hunting and choosing the right things and most people would rather go into H&M I guess. In my mom's generation everybody made their own clothes, but now it's more expensive to buy a pattern and fabric than it is to buy a cheap t-shirt or a simple dress. I know there is a time and place for everything, but I wish people weren't so hung up on practicality. Things can be comfortable without being totally joyless, which is the feeling I get from a long of 'comfortable' clothing.

Has your design process changed a lot since you first started?

I feel like I've learned a lot. You never really realize how much you've actually learned until you come across somebody who doesn't know as much. It's not until you start having interns and you're like, "What do you mean you don't know how to do that?" My actual process is just kind of all over the place, but I think the secret of my success is that I figured out how to make things move quickly, which is what needs to happen a lot in this industry. I get a lot of emails being like, "Oh, I need seven bodysuits in four days. They need to be showstoppers." You have to figure out what tricks you're going to use to make something look amazing but not actually be that much work. My pattern-making is really crazy.



Michael Burk

I've been working with the same sewer/seamstress for three years now so I don't use sketches—I go straight into final fabric. Basically, if I hand off what I was going to hand off to my seamstress to, say, someone in China, they wouldn't know what to do. It's really related to this one sewer that I have. She's been doing it for so many years now that she just knows that I want. She doesn't even speak English really, so it's a relationship based solely on design.

It's kind of amazing that you can have that kind of creative shorthand with someone.

Have you ever seen *The Day Before*? It's a documentary series about fashion designers and it shows all of these different designers as the prepare for a show. There is this amazing moment with Gaultier and he's talking to his head seamstress and he's like, "I just want this *shoop*, *shoop*, and a little bit of *foof*, *foof*," and she's like, "Okay!" And then she comes back three hours later and the dress is totally different and he's like, "Perfect!" Like, what? They've been working together for over 25 years.

Fashion schools are full of kids who want to make really crazy stuff, but I wonder if a lot of them feel shot down when they get internships with traditional designers who need them to design things that you could buy at the mall. What advice do you have for them?

I was lucky. When I was fresh out of school all of my internships were with small, weird designers. So every internship I had, I was in their apartment, I was hand-sewing something, so I got really into the process and saw what happens behind the scenes. One of them told me she would never wish this life on another person. The other one told me the smartest thing I could do was to quit fashion and go to dental school because then I'd be making 100k a year. I tell people just to make what they want and figure it out. I'd also tell kids to 1)Know your references, 2)Learn your stylists cause they are the key to the industry, and 3)Always ask for half up front. Learn as much as you can from everyone you work with and start small. It's a rough industry. It's a rough, rough fucking industry. But when you love it, you love it.

Brad Callahan recommends:

Literally any of the Galliano for Dior couture shows, 1999-2005

The Legend of Leigh Bowery should be required viewing for anyone in fashion

Róisín Murphy's full concert in Brussels (but really anything Róisín Murphy)

Any anime or manga by Clamp

X-ray Spex album *Germfree Adolescents*

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Vocation
Designer

Fact

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