On imagination without constraints



Designer Ramisha Sattar, creative director for Chappell Roan, discusses living in the mood board, shooting your shot, and how nothing is really out of reach.

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As told to Shy Watson, 2549 words.

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What does being a creative director entail on the day-to-day?

It’s a lot of making mood boards, like a professional Pinterest-er. And it’s a lot of world-building, so just working with the artists to figure out everything from the color story of the song to any little props or marketing assets you might see.

Your work requires so much collaboration.

I think if you’re working with someone who you enjoy working with, it doesn’t feel like work and it’s really fun. Because a lot of the day-to-day is just honestly being delusional and thinking as big as we can before we narrow it down to what the idea actually is. It’s a lot of silly mood-boarding. When Chappell (Roan) and I work together, we’ll just think of the most crazy ideas, and then we go from there.

So you dream big then narrow your ideas down to be more practical.

Yeah. It’s like imagination with no constraints. I feel like it’s the most important thing. And then figure out what they are as you come to understand the idea.

I was already familiar with your work, but I didn’t know it. I have the CHANI app and had seen your collage work before. Plus, I’m a huge fan of Chappell. I imagine the work of a creative director in general is anonymous. Does it feel freeing to be behind the curtain? Or does it feel like maybe you want to come out more?

Normally it is a very behind-the-scenes role, but Chappell does a great job giving everyone their flowers—she’s always shouting us out. But yeah, I think it takes the pressure off to get to design freely or vision board, or figure out what the concept is freely with her and to just know that she kills it every time. The delivery is always perfect.

Totally. Recently Chappell told CNN that you’re just as much responsible for Chappell Roan as she is. I assume that this statement speaks to the power of the collaboration between you two. Could you speak more on the work that’s required to launch such a star?

I think that it’s funny because we’re also best friends, so it doesn’t feel like work. It feels like, “Oh, my god, I got this crazy idea, FaceTime me,” and then we just giggle about it. But I do think it’s all just having a

really cohesive brand visual. That's really important for a pop star, and I think it's something that we were able to achieve even though there's so many different characters in the album. It's that concept where it's like, if people can make a Halloween costume out of you and people just instantly know who it is, that's how you know you have a brand vision.

I've seen so many Chappell costumes on my feed over the past week or two, and they're fabulous. I mean, people do a great job recreating them. I'm like, "Wait, is that Chappell? No, that's my friend."

I know. That's also the fun part of going to the shows. The fans are so creative. They'll come dressed to the tens with a very niche concept that we did in a music video, or something that we just did last week. I'm like, how did y'all do this so fast?

I know that you and Chappell are hoping for a Grammy nomination for album packaging. Could you walk us through the design of *The Rise and Fall of the Midwest Princess*?

Absolutely, yes. We always knew we wanted to do something really intricate, either with embossing or paper-cutting the vinyl. We want it to feel like those old story books that pop out or just vintage Victorian stationery where there's so much hand detailing, which obviously is hard to do when you're mass producing something. It's hard to get the handmade feel. So, we were like, the design really has to speak to it. And we also wanted to create it with room for the design to grow as we released different variants of the vinyl. Or maybe when we do the next album, we can tie it somehow into the first design. So we knew there would be more to come. But we created it together in a coffee shop. When we got all the album artwork back, the photography that Ryan (Clemens) did, we were like, these photos are too beautiful.

The photos are such strong standalones that we didn't want to design on top of it and write the album lyrics on it or the title track on the back. We didn't want to write—we wanted the album cover to just be the photo. We were like, it's perfect. It's stunning. And it's also very intricate where there's not a lot of negative space where we could easily just layer text on it. So, we were like, how do we want to go about still having that really handmade, intricate design, but not taking away from the image? So, we decided to do a little insert that you slide the vinyl into, which is where we created this design together of a theater. Because we've always said the world of the album starts on the stage, because her live performances are such an important part of the whole vision, which just speaks to how this past year everything has blown up after all the festivals. Everything started on the stage.

So, we knew we had to do a theater stage as the frame of the vinyl, and we sketched out some ideas together in a coffee shop, and then we came up with the final one, which we wanted to be 3D. We had some cool embossing ideas and stuff like that. And then from there, when we launched that one, we always knew we wanted to make paper dolls that eventually fans could buy, either with the vinyl or separately. We launched a set earlier this month, and it's all the different pieces in the outfits and little Easter eggs from this past year, because the album's been out for over a year.

But the world has just grown so much bigger than it was even last September when the record launched, because of the festivals, and the Tiny Desk concert, and all the other things. So, it was a great moment for us to do a little time capsule of one year into the album, like, here are these paper dolls, and to just celebrate everything that's happened in the past year. But that was our vision for the album. And because we are both very into crafting, giving the fans a little DIY kit so they could make something themselves was fun and special.

I know that you and Chappell are both gen Z, each in your mid-20s. What draws you to these more antiquated, old-timey forms like paper dolls, Victorian stationery, etc.

We both thrift a lot and we love going to estate sales. A lot of times we'll see things when we're out together thrifting, and we'll be like, "We could make that." It'll be the most intricate thing that we obviously we cannot make, but we're like, we could try. I also collect a lot of vintage stationery. And I think it's super cool how everything is done by hand, the intricate cut-outs and cool layers.

And as a collage artist, too, I love storytelling with old stationery. It's something that is lost in newer stationery, but also in book designs and other forms. I think things start to look a little more mass produced. So, we wanted to take a step back, take inspiration, and also celebrate old stationery, old movie tickets, old book covers, and bring that into the world of the album.

I imagine more intimate, less mass-produced designs feel more like a gift from the artist to the consumer.

Absolutely. We want it to feel like a work of art. Like the album, even if you don't ever open it, you can look at it and appreciate all the little details, but then when you open it, there's glitter that falls out. Also, I love snail mail. I love sending people gifts, and I'll never send or seal an envelope without sprinkling glitter in just because I think it's silly and cute and a fun little surprise. We wanted that to translate to the audience when they open it. They unbox and they see the handwritten text, all the little pieces that make someone feel like, "Oh, my gosh, someone packaged this for me." It feels like I'm opening a little present to myself from the artist.

I'm interested in the interplay of your inspiration. You're inspired by South Asian art and Arabic typography, but then you also find inspiration from vintage troll dolls, Dolly Parton, and other Americana icons. What is it about these worlds colliding that inspires you or brings about new energy?

I think it's so fun to pull from different places—it ensures that whatever you're creating is unique and fresh. If you pull a lot of inspiration from just one place, it's like you're just recreating that piece on your own, which is totally fine, but it's also fun to Frankenstein and take little pieces from different things that you like or that you pull inspiration from. I am always just saving things to a mood board, like, "Oh my gosh, wait, love that color combo or love that font." I love to work on a project and then remember something that I saved four years ago in a scrapbook then go back and find it, pull from it.

We've pulled a lot from different areas. I love to pull things from old toys, like the troll dolls, and ET. But then I also love mixing really Hollywood-like glam stuff with old country or just things that are really handmade. It's fun to find a mix between manufactured products and handmade objects. It makes for something special.

Is play something that's important in your work? It seems like it.

Totally. I love just printing out a collage kit and making something random whenever I feel like I'm blocked. That or doodling. I think that play is everything, which is why we did the paper dolls because we were like, "I feel like no one's crafting anymore, but it's having a Renaissance." We just wanted to give people something to play with. Because even if you don't think you're an artistic person or you're like, "I'm not good at making things," you don't have to be good at it to have fun with it. I think tactile art is something that people don't do in adulthood unless they make the effort to keep up the practice. But everyone loved art class in school. It's fun to just pick up a crayon and see what happens. But I think a lot of people don't get to do that with their day-to-day jobs or just forget that it's something you can do.

You're young and you've already had so many big clients. We've talked about CHANI and Chappell, but you've also worked for Spotify, Coachella, Urban Outfitters, and a lot of other household names. What do you credit for so much success so early on?

I think that it's all just being in the right place at the right time or meeting the right person, because I think everything leads to something else. Like, if I didn't go to that one party, I wouldn't have made that one friend who ended up introducing me to this one person. I got my start though working for *Rookie Mag* when I was a teenager. It was a magazine by Tavi Gevinson, who's a genius. She's only two years older than me, and everybody working there was teenagers. It was really cool to get to surround myself (virtually—it was online) with other creatives and get to look around and be like, "Oh, my gosh, wait. Anything's possible. We can actually do anything." Because now we're all older and it's fun to look around and see all the different jobs everyone has or the different gigs people get. It's like, wow, this all started from the portfolios we made when we were 14.

Were you still in Nebraska, where you grew up?

I had just moved to Dallas. I think it was 2013 or ‘14. I had been following Tavi and Rookie online on Tumblr and on Instagram. And then I emailed or DMed them, then I started making collages and illustrations for them. It was such a cool way to get to meet other like-minded teenagers that were also doing design, or writing, or whatever it was they were doing at Rookie. It felt like summer camp.

It sounds like you’re not afraid to reach out to people. Is that something that’s helped with your success?

For sure. I think the phrase “shooting your shot” is so silly, but I feel like every job I’ve ever gotten is somehow credited to Instagram, which is the most gen Z thing ever. That’s my LinkedIn. I’m never afraid to reach out, and I love when people reach out to me via DMs, or email, or whatever. I feel like everyone is just trying to create things together. It’s really fun being an artist online during this time.

Do you have any strict work habits or regimens that you abide by to get your workflow done? Your process sounds like it’s just magic.

Sometimes I need to go into a cave and become a hermit, but then I’ll come out with magic. Because sometimes I’ll find it too hard to think when I’m in a lot of meetings or at a lot of events. Occasionally I’ll just lock myself in my room and work really insane hours. Once I’m going, I have a hard time stopping. So, when I did all the animations for the festivals, I didn’t sleep for a week by choice because I was having a blast. I was like, I can’t stop now because I just got this idea! I work a bit like a troll under a bridge.

Incredible. What’s the most surprising thing you’ve realized along your creative path?

I think it’s that you can make anything and nobody really knows what they’re doing. But what gets the job done is just figuring it out and not being afraid to reach out to a friend who’s done something that you haven’t done and be like, “Wait, how do you do this? Any tips?” You’re living in the mood board. Nothing is out of reach.

Ramisha Sattar Recommends:

The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas, 1982 — The campiest movie ever!

Kokuyo Neon Crayons - My favorite crayons at the moment! They are so vibrant, and write so smooth!

Pipsticks Sticker Subscription - For the cutest stickers in your mailbox every month! ٩(□ˆ ᵕ ˆ)۵

Feelings: A story in Seasons by Manjit Thapp -The prettiest book by one of my favorite illustrators!

Jeffrey Campbell Sporty Flats - My go-to shoe!

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