

On learning along the way



Drag queen and musician Pattie Gonia discusses being okay with mistakes, finding the subject matter that moves you to make art, and stumbling through life in six-inch heels.

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As told to Max Freedman, 2729 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Drag](#), [Beginnings](#), [Collaboration](#), [Identity](#), [Politics](#).

How did you first decide that drag would be among your creative routes for talking about climate change and the environment?

I grew up as a queer kid in Nebraska, so from a very young age, people told me my queerness was wrong and that it was unnatural. That led to a lot of disconnection between myself as a queer person and the natural world. The narrative is often for queer people to run to big cities for acceptance, when in reality, what it often looks like for queer people is to run into the forest.

I took a little while to get there, but I eventually ran into the forest, had a quarter-life crisis, and started hiking and backpacking a lot. Through it all, I started wearing heels in the outdoors and doing this thing called Pattie Gonia. If you would've told me then that, now, it would be what it is, I would've told you you're batshit crazy.

Pattie, for me, is a lot about belief in self. Drag is a very healing part of my queerness. I spent a lot of my life trying to change who I was for other people, whether when I was in the closet or when I was out, trying to fit in with a lot of different gay male worlds, and none of it fit me. I feel very lucky to have drag as an art form that lets me express myself and find my people along the way.

Doing drag in this formal way of wearing makeup and a wig and expressing my femininity has led me to see that I've been in drag my whole life. I was in drag as a straight-passing closeted queer kid. I was in drag as a young professional trying to make it in the corporate world. Drag has been a continuation of coming out of the closet time and again. A lot of the time, we think about queerness as this before and after, when for me, it's getting to know pieces of myself, or accepting that nature is nothing but chaos, and I am nothing but change all the time.

It sounds like, when you were first starting drag, it helped you connect more with your true queer self. To what extent is that still happening today, all these years later?

Every day, every time I'm in drag, I'm reminded that my femininity is okay. I'm reminded that there are no binaries in this world. I'm also reminded about the queer concept in nature of camouflage, and how things camouflage and change to fit into, stand out in, or survive in an environment.

Camouflage is a really good analogy.

Yeah. Or should I say glamouflage?

Even better.

It's totally that, right? Drag is a performance art, so we're all our own forms of camouflage. At one time, my drag as a straight-passing person was more for my survival than it is now. Now, my drag is more for performance, but it's also for a deep connection to myself, and to remind myself that shape-shifting is all this world does.

In 2018, your drag videos started going viral and getting you the large platform you have now. How did you lean into those viral moments and decide to build your platform? How did you take it from "I do drag" to "I am starting to be very well-known"?

I had a deep sense of understanding at the beginning that drag, and doing and living life as Pattie, is for me, but it also had this crazy connection to people that I could have never imagined. That was almost from the beginning. And so, it's the constant artist conundrum of, do I do art for myself? Do I do art for others? What's for me? What isn't for me?

Early on, I had great mentors in my life, both people in the diverse outdoor community and other artists, who helped me realize that community-building, movement-building, and leaving a legacy is worth it. I've tried every step of the way to use virality to take these opportunities and not fuck it up. I do fuck it up. Life is constantly living and learning.

I want to make space for people, and the through-line of my art is space-making. No matter if it's drag or music, I want to make spaces where people feel celebrated [and] like they can be themselves. A lot of us don't have spaces to be who we are, and I want that, and a connection to nature, for everybody. I want my art to lead people outside into a connection to themselves.

When you said you fuck up—we all do, but it's easy to not talk about. I'm curious what you've learned from those fuck-ups.

I've done drag at the intersection of social and environmental justice, and you learn so much from so many people about what it looks like to do something rather than nothing. Oftentimes, we're so afraid to do something and mess up that we do nothing at all. I've really learned that—these are big heady words, but inaction is an active choice. I'd rather do something, mess up, own it, and move on than not do anything at all. There's a lot of people in this world that want to stand by and judge people on the sidelines, but I would rather be doing something and learning along the way.

It's also, like, this is how the world works, right? Nature tries to grow a branch over here, and then it's like, "Nope, the sunlight's over here." Nature isn't mad at itself for trying to grow this branch. It's like, "No, I'm going to pursue growth over here." There's a lot we can learn from a tree.

Has the fact that, maybe, for some people, you're seen as more outdoors and climate change first, then drag queen second, posed any challenges to how you do drag and find success?

Maybe people think of it as a disadvantage, but I'm like, "Babe, drag, at its roots, has always been rooted in activism, deeply." It's why I was created. It's silly to me that people might think that. They have an opportunity to learn about drag's roots, and I get to honor queer history by fighting for not just people, but this planet, through my drag.

That can get cheesy fast. I don't think of myself as this Captain America drag queen. I'm just like, this is what I care about. This is what I love. This is my niche that I get nerdy-excited about, and I feel really lucky that there's other nerds, granola gays, chaotic bisexuals, and straight-through hikers that love it, too.

I've learned that everyone does activism in different ways. A lot of people do activism just by living life as an out-and-proud, visible queer person. I want people to see that that's enough too. I will always want more from late-stage-capitalism America to remember why we're doing what we're doing and what there is to fight for.

I love that there's so many drag queens doing activism in different ways. I feel really thankful for the trans sisters of mine on *Drag Race* all the way to my friend Kyne who is advocating for math education through drag. There truly is something for everyone with drag, and I want every drag queen and queer person to know that there's shit to fight for.

Has your focus on the outdoors, the environment, and climate change helped or hindered you exploring other themes in your drag? Because in your music, you're not necessarily putting the environment first. "Made It Through the Night" is a queer unity ballad. It's not necessarily about the environment.

Yeah, totally. Or is it? Can we see ourselves and our humanity as part of, rather than apart from, nature? Truly, there's a lot to be said about the health of our human ecosystems and seeing ourselves as important and equal parts of a meadow, and maybe that song can be about that for people.

A sense of belonging is really important to nature. I want my music to reflect all my human experiences, and a lot of those are climate-based and outdoor-based, but also, a lot of them are rooted in queerness. A lot of them are just rooted in fun. I want there to be an invitation for anyone to pick up and fall in love with my music. That's why the song right before it, "Won't Give Up," the one I did with Yo-Yo and Quinn [Christopherson], is all about climate.

I also just do what feels right to me in the moment as an artist. Sometimes, that's about climate, and sometimes, I'm fired up to create a project around that. And sometimes, it's just about writing a song the gays can dance to in the club.

To what extent is your LGBTQ+ hiking group part of your creativity? Is there any way in which it ties into your drag, or is it something else entirely?

It's completely connected. I'm constantly learning and having my mind open to so many incredible human perspectives, and no doubt, that informs my art. It all feels like a big ecosystem. Sometimes, that ecosystem is very outdoors-based, but it's very human and natural in the fact that we're constantly learning, and our little molecules are bouncing off of one another.

A lot of people are like, "It's crazy that you do drag outdoors." I'm like, "Why would I not want to perform with Mother Nature as my backdrop?" Or they're like, "It's so crazy you take people outside." I'm like, "People do outdoor concerts all the time. We don't even question it." I'm just trying to do my thing my way.

Earlier, when you said you just put your heels on and went hiking, how literal was that? It sounds like it was very literal.

Incredibly literal. I packed these 10-pound high heels into this backpack and went backpacking up on the Continental Divide Trail at 13,000 feet. It was no joke. My drag back then looked very different than the drag I do now. Back then, it was kind of just heels, and now, I have some years under my belt and know how to paint a face.

It was an interesting look at how hard it is to give oneself time to hone a craft or learn new skills when we have the attention of the world beating at our door. I'm really thankful I gave myself time and space to figure it out in my own time. This is the most current iteration of my drag, and I'm really excited, through music, to break down that wall of drag in front of people's faces.

The way I will perform shows is, I'll start in full drag on stage, and then number by number, I'll take off different elements of the drag. There'll be a number without a wig on. Then, there'll be a number where I'm wiping my makeup off mid-look. By the end, I'll end as my different form of drag. There's some songs that I'm writing where I very much feel Pattie with them, and there are many songs I write that feel very Wyn [name/identity outside drag]. It's a play on pop culture, how much our pop icons are completely drag queens, and how much life's a show, babe.

I want to lean into all the different forms of drag in my life and identity and not feel confined to just performing [as Pattie]. I have a song that's about to come out called "That's God" about my deconstruction of a broken Christianity and reconstruction of faith around nature. That song, I completely perform out of drag. So who knows?

At what point do you realize a song is Pattie or Wyn? Is it an intentional choice, or does it just come to you?

I'm stumbling through life in six-inch heels. It reveals itself along the way. I have no problem performing songs in drag or out of drag. What feels important to me is to never feel like I'm hiding through drag. If anything, I'm revealing through drag. I think the time I can't hide is when I'm in drag, but I don't want to be stuck...as a performer [who] looks this one way. I want to chop and screw all of it. I want to do what feels right in the moment. So yeah, there's no definitive moment. The trail reveals itself. You've just got to walk down it.

When did you start writing songs?

I went to school for vocal performance. I studied in college and grew up singing, and music was my first passion. I played saxophone growing up. I feel like I've been writing songs [and] been around songwriting culture my whole life. I've been really fascinated by how songs form. I formally started writing songs last year when I started the music project under Pattie, but I feel like I've been writing melodies or thinking about words forever, in a way.

What is the value of collaboration to you? Where does it play into your work?

Collaboration is everything. There is no worthwhile piece of art I make that I do alone. I don't think that art is made in a vacuum. I prefer collaboration.

Nature is the best collaborator in this world. I view art and projects as meadows that you get to nurture together with the people involved. I want to create healthy ecosystems, healthy meadows, and then, good art comes from it.

How do you choose the folks in the meadow? Or are they already there?

I've been lucky throughout this music journey to know good people who know good people, and trust is a really hard thing to do in this world. We very rarely move at the speed of trust in this world. Capitalism wants us to move so quickly and to just produce, produce, produce and not build relationships first. Call me old-fashioned, but I want to know you before I'm going to make art with you. And I think that's paid off.

That was everything I wanted to ask you today, but if you have anything more to say about creativity, the floor is yours.

We need more queer art in this world, and queer people have always been at the forefront of art. I feel really excited for the challenge of doing music with drag in a way that hasn't been done before, in a way that feels true to me.

I look at the intersection of music and drag nowadays, and I love it. I'm glad the girls are out there doing their thing and making music for the club or for people to strut their stuff to. I have no doubt I'm going to write some music like that. But for me, drag is this campy, clowny expression, and it's so vulnerable and real and human, and I want to make music that covers that gamut and doesn't feel confined to a box.

When you do music, you get slotted into, "They do this kind of music." Our brains are designed to categorize things. A lot of the issues with our world are because of binaries and categorization. I want the freedom to make the music that feels right in the moment, to always make it queer and true to Pattie and Wyn.

There's so many people that have told me, from the music industry perspective, that no one will ever take drag

seriously in the music world. And I'm like, "Alright, game on." I'm doing this for me, and I'm excited that other people love it. I'm excited to have a whole new creative world where I get to learn. That's what was so exciting to me about drag. I want that to be my life for music as well.

Pattie Gonia Recommends:

Book Rec: [Why Fish Don't Exist](#) by Lulu Miller

Life advice: "If you feel dead inside, get the fuck outside"

Life advice: [Badger](#) Clear Zinc Sunscreen

Music Rec: [Sammy Rae & The Friends](#)

Show Rec: [Atsuko Okatsuka Comedy Special](#)

[Name](#)

Pattie Gonia

[Vocation](#)

drag queen and musician

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Pattie Gonia by Mitchell Overton