

January 13, 2017 - M. Lamar is an artist, composer, operatic soprano, and self-described "Negrogothic devil-worshipping black man in the blues tradition" who identifies as queer. His work encompasses opera, metal, performance art, video, sculpture, and various types of writing. He is currently presenting his monodrama, "Funeral Doom Spiritual," co-composed with electronics by Liturgy frontman, Hunter Hunt-Hendrix, as part of the fifth annual Prototype Festival in New York City.



As told to T. Cole Rachel, 2721 words.

Tags: Music, Art, Beginnings, Inspiration.

M. Lamar on being your own genre

Your work is unusual in that it combines a number of things that people might not think of as naturally going together—performance art, opera, black metal, queer theory, film. How did you develop your aesthetic?

It all feels very normal for me. These things just happen. Like, you are just in the world, living, and making work and your vision slowly reveals itself. I went to a variety of art schools—the San Francisco Art Institute for undergraduate, then to Yale for graduate school to study sculpture, which I dropped out from. I was like, "Okay, this is really stupid. The art world is a gross, disgusting place with all these awful white people who are super opportunistic and I'm just not feeling it." So I dropped out and moved back to San Francisco and started a band. My aesthetic really started to develop through that. I was writing the music and the lyrics and I became interested in this horror sensibility. It developed into this goth/metal thing but was also very much about race. I always saw the race question as this horrific story that was never being addressed by any of the bands I was interested in. I thought it would be interesting to tackle the race thing and also pair it with this very operatic singing.

I always sang, even when I was in art school. I went to a fine arts high school when I was a kid. I didn't have any friends in the art department, but somehow I ended up as an art major at the Alabama School of Fine Arts in Birmingham. All my friends did music. They were either piano players or opera singers. My best friend was an incredible woman, a soprano with a huge voice. And we are in Birmingham, which is just funny because I'm also hanging out with all of the punks—all the punk goth kids. All my friends in school were classical musicians, and all my friends outside of school were these goth metal punk kids. So I thought when I started the band there needed to be a marriage of all these things.

The first song I wrote was called "Plantation Mistress" and it was a horror thing, a grave-robbing negress beheading people, scalping corpses. I was interested in revenge fantasy stuff about race and no one was writing music like that. There was a hole there. And it was funny to be doing that in the metal/goth scene, which was mostly white people. Black people were always there too, but we weren't at the center of any of it in terms of our stories.

Goth culture is, of course, everywhere, but they take it to a whole new level in the South. Why is that?

Gothy bands have always been big in the South because of the Christian thing. There's always a need to rebel against that. So yeah the South is big for metal and goth. It's still one of the biggest places for that stuff. And professional wrestling. The opera thing was always more of a private love of mine, even though all my friends were classical music people. Even now the people I hang out with seem to exist in these worlds—people like Hunter Hunt-Hendrix, who's had all this classical training but is really into metal. All my friends tend to be these people who have deep roots in some underground DIY punk metal goth noise scene but also have a classical background. There are more of us than you would imagine.

The punk scene, while being resoundingly anti-establishment, can also be intensely heteronormative if not outright homophobic. Your work really pushes against that.

I moved here 10 years ago and before that I lived in San Francisco, and there was an intense queer punk scene there. I mean, everyone I knew was in a band and were queer in some way. Like we aren't just talking gay, they were trans and/or gender non-conforming, in a very fucked up punk-looking way. This, in a way, was the scene I grew up in—both in Alabama and San Francisco. So I wouldn't associate the punk scene with the oppressive heteronormative thing. I was in a mosh pit just making out with boys and girls and it was always grope-y and hot and messy, so that was a really big deal for me. We were all weirdos. I'd come from a world of strange people, so it felt very natural to me. I always found my people, you know?

To me, the mainstreaming of homosexuality is about people trying to be "normal" and I'm just like, who wants to do that? I want to grow old as a weirdo, as a strange person. I don't want to become normal or conventional or palatable. I mean, a 401k wouldn't be a bad thing to have, but not if you have to erase your identity to have it.

One of the stories that I love—I was just thinking of this as I was walking here—is about when Ozzy Osbourne got his star on Hollywood walk of fame. Marilyn Manson was there presenting and he said like, “What I love about Ozzy is that he has been very successful but remained insane.” I love the idea that you can excel at being a weirdo. Like, he’s a really high achieving strange person. He’s not conforming to anything. All the conversations about transgender this or that or the other right now often feel like people now being allowed to just be strange. There is this pressure to identify as something. But I’m also really connected to underground culture, goth, punk, metal, and in terms of what my identity is that’s a really huge part of it, so I also understand it.

Why was moving to New York so important to your work?

I had lots of different voice teachers in San Francisco, but I couldn’t find the right one where the training was going to be good enough to help me excel in some way. So I heard about this voice teacher in New York. I visited here and had a lesson with him. I recorded it and took it back to my voice teacher in San Francisco, played it for him and he was like, “You need to move to New York.” Since I am a male soprano, I needed to find someone who specifically understood the way my voice works. The person I study with, Ira Siff, is a really good teacher. He also helps lots of random rock singers who don’t know how to properly sing and does wonders for them.

For a long time I’d had this need to be in a confrontational rock band, but eventually a need to make a more intimate kind of music emerged. All of these things coincided. I became more interested in doing solo things versus being in a band, plus I’d found this teacher who could help me. It was a moment to take a leap of faith for my work. I felt like there was such a history for avant-garde music in New York City—things like freak jazz, Laurie Anderson, whatever—it just seemed like the place to be with me wanting to make this weird solo music. Plus, I really wanted to work with my voice teacher. I needed someone who could help me be as bulletproof as I could possibly be.

That was nearly 10 years ago, but I still work with him. I’m really committed to training. The voice always changes over the course of a life, you never stop working on it. I think of someone like Diamanda Galas, she’s 61 and is still training intensely. The voice is always changing, particularly if you are trying to do something technically that’s a little more elevated. You have to train and be disciplined about that.

So, yeah, coming to New York was about the training and wanting to immerse myself in a particular kind of music history and be a part of the New York underground scene. Also, San Francisco got small. It’s a small town. And if you are committed to your work, you go where the energy is.

Was it difficult to find people who got what you were doing?

I think that if what you are doing is powerful you can do it in front of anybody. When I first got here all of my first shows were at Sidewalk Cafe on Avenue A and 6th, which was kind of a terrible place. It was somehow still associated with the anti-folk scene and I was never an anti-folk person, I just needed a room to play in. There was a spot in Brooklyn I would play at a lot too because they had a piano. It was just me getting into the groove of this new thing. It was 2006 so I had only been doing solo shows for a year. It was through Sidewalk that I got my legs in terms of what this project was. Then I did a residency in 2010 and started developing these long form pieces. That’s when it started to come in to what it is now. It was really about trying to do longer pieces—like a piece that’s half an hour or 5 minutes or an hour—that’s when it started to grow and change. You just have to find places where it feels safe to do that.

I come from a DIY place, so I think that if I’m making really powerful work I can be anywhere. I’ve played shows with metal bands, punk bands, noise bands. I’ll sometimes do these big shows, sort of like the ones I’m doing with Hunter, where we’ll play with an ensemble and it’s a whole production. So now I’ll get asked to do these bigger things, but I’ll also still do DIY shows in people’s houses and basements. I do those all the time, mostly because I love that scene and that’s where I really feel like I’m located.

There’s no money doing that so that’s why you have to do the other stuff. As far as where my heart is, it’s really in those basements and those punk houses. I played one in Bushwick in a tiny little living room and it was my favorite show I did all year. It was so intimate. I played for like half an hour, a continuous piece and people were jamming in that tiny little living room. It was beautiful and really special. Those are my people—gutter punks. The kid who asked me to play that house show for example, he’s black and one of those traveling kids who live anywhere but is really into reparations for Native American and black people, that’s their project. I feel really lucky that as I’ve gotten more attention I still have a connection to that scene and those people are still asking me to play shows. I like the idea that you can do lots of things, that you can play bigger shows and do larger projects and still keep a foothold in the community that helped make you and support you. They don’t have to cancel each other out.

Your work spreads out in many directions—there are the musical collaborations, but you’re also making visual art, doing installations, making films, writing books—where is all of this going? And how do you manage all of it?

One of the things I’m really interested in is working with a guitar player. I love Stephen O’Malley and Sunn O))) and everything they’re doing. I’m interested in their use of harmonics and I’d really love play with trying to sing that way. I’m working on new music that involves different kinds of feedback and I’m taking inspiration from a lot of pagan texts.

I think ultimately my work is about a free liberated consciousness that comes from people like Sun-Ra. There's a Sun Ra quote that's like, "I don't deal with freedom I deal with discipline." Which I think was him responding to people thinking he was involved in the free jazz thing. But I also think he was talking about watching all these black people that were obsessed with freedom—Martin Luther King, Malcolm X—die. Then contrasting that to this thing that is very disciplined and thinking about what discipline looks like. To me Sun Ra represents the epitome of black transcendence, black existentialism. I think of people like Ornette Coleman, John Coltrane, Cecil Taylor, Sun Ra. They are all philosophers as well as musicians. I want to blend this very African American thing with this German thing. I'm interested in European history and opera. Ultimately for me it is a spiritual journey that is about some sort of transcendence. Everything feeds back into that. I've always been interested in these sort of underground, transgressive artists... so I basically aspire to be one of those.

I love talking about what I do and I love talking about myself. As long as people are willing to keep an open mind, I'm happy to put myself out there. It's something I think about a lot, particularly when people ask me "What are you? What do you make? What are you doing?" When you think about the way so much African American art and culture gets appropriated and then sort of just disappears, being somehow illegible actually helps you. Journalists will often try to lump me into the same category as people like Mykki Blanco or Lelf—people doing queer hip hop and stuff like that—and that is not where I am coming from. I don't really fit into any kind of established thing. What I refer to as "Negrogothic" in my work is sort of my own kind of movement. People always want to try and understand you in light of something else, but that doesn't really work for me. I want you to understand me on my own terms, that's the whole idea. I am my own genre. That's the point. I think you have to try and follow your own inspirations wherever they might lead you and trust that you'll find your people, but mostly you just have to do your own thing.

I want people to grapple with the specificity of this particular human being—me—and hopefully that will encourage them to deal with the specificity of other human beings as well. Self-construction is this thing that you have to cultivate—through reading, through studying, through exposing yourself to lots of different things—and I think the music and the art that I make are ultimately just mirrors of that evolution.

M. Lamar recommends:

James Cone's book *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* has been essential to me developing the ideas behind my work. The lynching image inside of an inverted cross is something that I want to wear forever around my neck much like Christians wear a crucifixion.

Bell Hooks' book *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity* has been an essential text for me in terms of historicizing black male sexuality in White Supremacy.

The soaring soprano voice of Leontyne Price has been life sustaining for me. The way that she lives above the treble clef inside the ledger lines has been a warm embrace in my darkest moments.

Diamanda Galas is simply one of the greatest singers to ever live. This performance of her original composition "Judgement Day" has everything I love about her. It has her singular piano style and that other worldly voice cutting through souls like a switchblade.

Cecil Taylor for me represents the highest point in American music history. He along with Ornette Coleman, Sun Ra, and John Coltrane embody black transcendence, black philosophy and existential striving of the highest order.

Name

M. Lamar

Vocation

Artist, Musician

Fact

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