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As told to Max Freedman, 2668 words.

Tags: Performance, Music, Illustration, Collaboration, Process, Focus.

On the power of collective experience

[Christeene discusses caring for your body as a performer, working with others to figure out what's in your head, and tackling hard truths with a side of humor.](#)

Are there any rules you set for yourself in live performances or on record to ensure you're being as confrontational and bizarre as you'd like?

I have physical rules, before a performance, of preparing my body for the very strenuous push of force that comes from me. That is a strict regimen of stomach-crunching exercises. I've developed this rule that I have to do a three-minute plank, and if I don't succeed, and if I break the three minutes, then I will curse my entire show. That's some theater faggotry I carry with me.

In terms of my presence on stage, and my delivery of what's going on in my mind and life to the audience, I have to have somewhat of a clear channel, or picture, in my mind of the bases that are laid out between the songs I've chosen to sing that can address what's going on in my life in relation to the world, which I find usually is similar to what other people are going through in the world, a collective experience that's happening in the room. I try to lay some bases out...that we, as a people in that room, need to address, discuss, or just scream about.

Often, when I talk to creative folks, it's all about what's going on in their mind, but the body can really be part of it too. Can you talk more about that?

Doing these performances, and being this being that I am, the only thing I have is my body. That is the machine that will allow me to carry out this calling of mine that I've been brought here to do. In my early years, I was very destructive. I would leave shows covered in bruises from head to toe. My dancers and I, our choreography was almost violent.

I spent a good, probably five years, just annihilating my body physically with, also, the wild joys of having your drinks, and the nightlife. I never touched the heavy chemical drugs, but I dated Jack Daniels long enough to realize I was in a relationship similar to Tammy Wynette and George Jones, and I got the fuck out of that.

After about five years of hard abuse, I realized how important it was for me to maintain this machine that I have. We are given brilliant machines to work with, and I realized it was urgent for me to care for my machine so I could continue to explore this art that I want to create. I now enjoy pushing myself to the limits in a much healthier, more mature way.

What do you think you can achieve creatively in live spaces that you can't in your recordings and vice versa?

There's always a beautiful challenge to create the heat and energy of a live space in your music. During COVID, I was creating videos online that you would watch live. I had the dilemma of, how do I make this experience [for] these people at home? How will they feel this heat as though they're at a live show?

When I'm live, that's another world. That is a human exchange, that is a spiritual exchange, that is a demonic exchange. It is vital to the work I make. It is extremely different from the music videos you see

and the music you hear. It is raw, it is improvisational. It is in the moment, and it is heated.

The music experience in the studio takes a lot of discipline mentally for me. I try to close my eyes and really lose myself in that space as though I were in a live space, to really go into almost a trance with the music and with the producer.

The music itself is the archive, the immortality of it all. It's going to stay in this ether forever, so... that take you decide to use must have the connective force the live show has, in some way. I find it to be mental [and] spiritual, and nine times out of 10, if I can hit that target, then the music will reflect that live energy, and that live energy in the room will host on the power of that music.

You're big on collaboration, and the most distinctive drag queens are so often seen as the product of one person's mind. Can you talk about why collaboration matters to you, and how it shapes your work?

First off, I kind of don't—you said drag queen.

I was wondering if you do identify with that term, because a lot of media has described you as such, but I can also see why you wouldn't identify as that.

I don't. It has become such an easy box to put it all in, and I don't feel easy. "Drag," the term itself, has become very tricky for me. I took the term "drag terrorist" when I began because Vaginal Davis called herself that, and that's the only thing that made sense to me. I realize it's a headline, and it's a popular title.

Collaboration is one of the most enjoyable experiences in my artistic adventures. I am a show pony and a stage hog, and I love to pass the ball back and forth with another creative soul. I don't feel like I alone can fully realize what's in my head until I'm bouncing that ball with someone else who...understands or can teach me something new. So many of my projects, collaboratively speaking, have been a joy. With PJ Raval, who makes all the videos, we can get together and shit out so many ideas and storylines within a matter of minutes. We barely even speak to each other anymore. We just do it. It's almost telepathic. I strive for those relationships with my dancers and producers.

Collaboration is a very beautiful exchange. And as a single soul, since I don't take many lovers into my life, collaborations are some of the deepest relationships I have with people that I care about and respect artistically.

Your 2022 album *MIDNITE FUKK TRAIN* felt like a big change musically from your two albums before it. Why did that feel like the right creative choice? Can you talk about what big changes like that can do for your creative process?

I listen to my gut always, above and beyond anything. My gut was taking me toward the sounds of saxophones, my passion for volatile, dangerous, dark landscapes and soundscapes. I knew that feeling would only increase if I were to bring in musicians on top of these electronic soundscapes I'd been working on.

I'm a very patient soul, and I slowly started working with musicians over the past five years or so. I started hunting for saxophone players, and once I found them, everything began to click. We took [electronic] demos that had been produced in the studio, pre-band, and gave the demos to this collection of musicians I had brought together. They learned these songs off the electronic demos, which I thought was just brilliant.

And then, the songs took on these new lives. The band behind me creates such an enjoyable addictive force, and the music finally matches the way I feel inside, the way my head feels, the way my machine feels when it's kicking and thrashing, that saxophone wailing. *MIDNITE FUKK TRAIN* is the first time that the music meets the master, and now I am filled with that energy, and I want to pervert, explore, and manipulate it as far as I can go.

Why did this feel like the right time to start working with musicians? Does it have to do with what you said about music meeting the master?

Like I said, I'm an old theater faggot. I love cinematic experiences, and I love to see a family of musicians on a stage and that one person singing who can really bridle those horses and go to town.

I began to create this band before the lockdown happened, and I realized in the lockdown that I did not wish to come out of it carrying the identity and sounds I went into it with. I found it to be the opportune time to really push the button and work with these musicians, as we were coming out of lockdown, to create an entirely new sound and identity.

I [felt] that we had an obligation to create work, sound, visuals, whatever we create, to help everyone in this world who just went through all of that fuckery. That's what art's for. I'd be damned to come out of that experience singing and doing the same things I was doing before. It was the opportune time to activate these passions within me that my gut was talking about and to give people out there the fury to deal with what the fuck they just went through.

Your live performances and music have elements of both camp and confrontation. How do you walk the line between making serious points with your performance and taking the piss out of everything?

We all get served sugar-coated shit on a plate all day long, on television, in media. I really want to take the sugar off, serve you the turd, because we all know we're eating it. In the live shows I like to have conversations using rich, fantastical metaphors to address the very real things we're going through. Humor and camp are some of the most important medicines to serve with heavy shit. The way you make a baby eat veggies is you fly it around [like] an airplane and put it in the baby's mouth. They're laughing and then, boom, they're eating something they probably don't like.

I find that we are weary of the bombardment of the news cycles and the machinery. The only way we might look at things differently, or be able to process what's going on, is through fantastical metaphors and stories that can inspire people to look at what we're dealing with in a different way. That cannot be accomplished without humor, but it also cannot be accomplished without the shock and glare of raw nudity, sexuality, and ugliness, which I find to be quite beautiful on stage.

In addition to your live performances and music, you also create sketches and handwritten narratives. How do you give each of your creative outlets the amount of time and energy you think they deserve?

I think they deserve all my time and energy, and that can make the machine really break down sometimes. I try to listen to my gut, and I try to really glean off the natural, intuitive sense of what's going on.

I believe in a collective energy among us, especially living in New York. You know when New York is angry. You know when New York is happy. We are very connected in that way. I try to listen to my artistic channels in that way, and I try to incorporate them into each other. If I'm doing a show, maybe I'll draw at the merch booth. I try to combine them all and make them feed each other so they're not compartmentalized.

There's great beauty in allowing yourself not to be pigeonholed into one identity. There's such beauty in turning the whole machine on and trying to find the fluid release of all the things you're capable of that you're inspired to do. The hardest thing is making time for that, finding ways to turn it all off in the world, and understanding the importance and respect to give to those avenues and that time with yourself. It's a very hard thing for me to do right now.

In addition to musician and illustrator, what other labels might you give yourself?

Designer. I design all my clothing. The clothing I wear has gone through so many interesting evolutions or de-evolutions. I'm always very excited when I can feel the tingle of change coming, and I really start to listen to things in my closet and my body. Designing looks is very important to me, and the articles I choose hold a lot of power and magic over the years.

Painting is one of my favorite things that I can do because, as the saxophone kind of expresses my mental makeup, my painting really shows...I always like to say, I'm only 12 years old. I've only been around 12 to 13 years as Christeene, so I'm going into my adolescence now, my teenage years. My painting is really reflective of that feeling. I like to explore the different mediums of painting. I use acrylic mostly, but I want to fuck with oil. I like throwing all these different mediums on top of each other that don't belong.

I have dreams of cinema [and] creating films. I have visions of what a film would look like for myself and for people I care to share that experience with. I've slowly been taking baby steps toward that. I let it speak to me, and then I try to make room, and I'm a very patient soul. I don't have this need to get to it very quickly. I think it'll get to me first, and I'd rather sit and let it get to me before trying to rush to get to it.

In your writing, you often spell words in your own way. Instead of "the," you'll write "tha," and instead of "and," you'll write "an." How important is having your own language to your creative process?

So important. I like the struggle it gives to journalists. I love to do that. I love to fuck with all that. But I talk a certain way, and when you can read this dialect I have and kind of go into it, for anyone who cares about me or likes to be with me, it brings them a little closer. They can hear that voice, and it'll touch them in that special way, and I think it's very important for people to read it as they hear it, and to feel it. I like how I talk. It's where I'm from. It's a southern, woodsy, dirty language. I think it's as much of an important aspect of my identity as my clothes, my music, and my live shows.

That's everything I wanted to ask you today, but if there's anything else you wanted to say about creativity, or anything you wanted to add to any of my questions that you didn't quite get to say when I first asked them, I'll leave the floor to you.

I'm not on stage to give answers. I don't like artists to get up and act like a messiah with all the answers [or say] do it this way, and do it that way, and get this shit. To feed that baby the airplane spinach, you have to be on the same level as your audience and not be above or below them but with them, and share in that collective experience.

Christeene Recommends:

Watch René Laloux's Fantastic Planet, the original French version not the version the US screwed up with new music and edits and dubs.

Every mornin when u wake up grab some paper an a pen and write everything on ur mind non stop til u fill up at least four pages front n back.

Watch Jean Cocteau's The Blood of a Poet an see how much you can accomplish with a camera a mirror and a good imagination.

When ur walkin try to look up as much as you can at the tops of trees an buildings, up to tha skies and birds, and take a break from tha box you may be keepin yourself in.

Listen to Werner Herzog read his book called The Twilight World about the amazing Japanese soldier, Hiroo Onoda.

Name

Christeene

Vocation

performer, musician, illustrator

Fact

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