

Mykki Blanco on trusting your own talent



November 17, 2016 - Mykki Blanco is the performance persona and creative nom de plume of Michael Quattlebaum Jr., who has been releasing mixtapes and EPs under the auspices of Mykki Blanco since 2011. This fall Blanco released Mykki, her official debut album. In addition to a series of kaleidoscopic new videos to support the record, Blanco also recently released a recording of *I Want a Dyke for President*--a poem by the artist and AIDS activist Zoe Leonard.

As told to T. Cole Rachel, 3026 words.

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

Your new record, Mykki, came out this fall, but it seems odd to keep referring to this as your debut album since you've been making music and performing for a long time.

I don't really have any shame about saying this. I'm a performer and an entertainer who's had to really learn how to be a musician. When I started Mykki Blanco, it was literally a performance art project. Before Mykki Blanco, I had a book published, *From the Silence of Duchamp to the Noise of Boys*. I was identifying myself more as this poet. I was trying to play around with noise rock stuff, but it was all in this performance art context. It was me trying to be this performance artist who could learn how to somehow document or make work that could then be collected.

That was where my mind was at. I went to the Art Institute, dropped out. I went to Parsons, dropped out. I had started a performance art collective when I was 16 in North Carolina. Music industry stuff, booking agents, managers, PR-I didn't know anything about any of those things. I didn't know anything about touring. I didn't know anything. We're talking about someone who was 25 and had literally always been this weird performance art freak. Then all of a sudden, the Mykki Blanco project manifests into me actually making real hip hop songs, and then performing them and still not having any idea about what it could become. When I began to think about it, the first thing I thought was, "Oh well, maybe I'll be like a Laurie Anderson. It will just be art, art, art, art."

It wasn't until I got my first booking agent and I did my first tour that I was like, "Oh, wait a minute, this is like rock and roll. This is okay. I think I could like this." Only then through the touring did I start to feel good. Like, let me now maybe learn how to become a musician. I would say that my previous releases were also conceptually driven. It was like, *Mykki Blanco & the Mutant Angels*, that release was directly off of when I was still doing so much of my spoken word poetry stuff. It's completely unlistenable, so much noise and spoken word and weird shit.

The *Cosmic Angel* mixtape is when I started to work with producers. I had that random whirlwind year where people latched on to what I was doing. I was experiencing all this press, all this attention, but still approaching everything in my head as if I was a conceptual artist, not considering myself a rapper, not wanting to be pinned into any of these things. Then I just rode the wave. To be honest with you, the idea of an album those first two years was not really important to me. I was like, "Who needs to do an album?" I'd release these little mini projects, do a single, do a really great music video and then I would tour and I make money. And that's it.

The reason why I wasn't able to come out with an album sooner was because I had no infrastructure. I had no money. I had these tours that I was locked into. It wasn't as if I was just waiting to record an album. At one point I thought I wanted to leave the music industry entirely. Then, because I was just so tired of living in the shadows about having HIV, I came out as being HIV positive. The only other examples of someone doing that in my lifetime was back in the '90s when I was a kid. At that time you would have been publicly shunned, or people would have given you this weird pity party, and then moved on. I naturally assumed, since that was all I knew of how society treats someone who comes out in public HIV positive, that the exact same thing was going to happen to me. Also I was just like, no album, no more Mykki Blanco.

The week before I came out with that announcement I was looking at liberal arts colleges. I was like, you know, maybe I'll do one more big tour, save my money, and then go to school. Maybe Mykki Blanco was just this really awesome project that happened and it's over now. I'm going to do something that I always wanted to do, which was to go and study journalism. I'll do this, this is what I'll do. My whole entire life, there's been something about me where I have a really good fight or flight response. If I'm ever in a crisis situation, maybe it comes from experiencing trauma, but I know that I'm someone where if something burns to the ground, I can get up and go somewhere else and completely start over. I have no fear of that. I know that if I literally lost everything, with 20 bucks I could go somewhere and make it fucking work. I know that about myself. I've always been that way. This can also be a problem--and I'm trying to mature out of this way of thinking--where if something went wrong I was quick to say fuck this, fuck everything, I'm out. It was too easy for me to do that, actually.

I also always have this fascination with how many lifetimes you can live in one lifetime. Growing up I always really admired people that could be a musician as well as a director or an actor or a fucking farmer or something. Do you know what I mean? Or when you hear these stories about the Beatniks and how they were also sailors and merchant marines. It seems like at one point in history everyone was a fucking merchant marine. I was into the mythology of these things--people who could be many things simultaneously.

To concretely answer your question--when I was at my breaking point, cosmically out of the blue, I was contacted by a label who wanted me to put out an album. That was in 2015, and they didn't rush me. They let me take my time. They could tell I was frazzled and jarred and not in the right headspace to create an album at that time. Over the course of 7 months, in Paris and in Chicago, I created my album. This album is the first time that I've ever had time, where I wasn't looking over my shoulders at what show date I had, at what money I was going to make to facilitate this next thing. Where I didn't have to hustle and bustle to get it done. I actually had the creative freedom that so many mainstream artists naturally have to work, to create.

Do you see a distinction between how you think of yourself as a person and "Mykki Blanco"? Does Mykki function as a kind of persona that allows you to express yourself, to say things you might not otherwise be able to say?

In the beginning I think it would have probably been beneficial if I had just stuck to this very strict script. The first community that embraced me was the fashion community in New York City. In the beginning, I remember, especially in the queer community, people wanted to see Mykki Blanco always in drag. I was doing untraditional drag. I had access to designer clothes. The very first incarnation of Mykki Blanco as an actual musician or entertainer was this very downtown "it" girl thing. But really quickly I started to feel so boxed in. I always had this yearning to know that I was more than that. I remember doing all the fashion stuff first, and playing the opening parties and doing this and doing that. Then I was like, "you know what, if I get boxed into this, people aren't going to understand that I'm this visceral performer." I remember the day that I said, "I'm no longer going to be glamorous Mykki." I'm going to be the mutant. That is when things became dark. That's when I had the video where I had that octopus in my mouth and where I'm on the beach and I'm all wet, and I'm in drag, but it's not pretty drag, it's monstrous. I didn't want people to just think that Mykki Blanco was a drag persona. I wanted them to understand that it's a stage name, and that I am also Michael, and this can be a mutual persona relationship.

Eventually I remember feeling--as far as my persona--that I was so tired of people talking to me about queer this and queer that. I was so tired of it always being this male/female dichotomy. I just wanted to be able to make work outside of those gender conversations. Then I made that track "Initiation" where I rap entirely in Latin. Then we do a video and I'm completely alien. I have two heads. It's not about gender. After that I did the video where I wanted to be a lesbian. I wanted to have my love interest be two women. What I've always tried to do with each video--and each visual representation that I have--is to create something that I feel that I've never seen. One of my concrete mission statements now is that I want to inject the mainstream with as many radical queer ideas as possible. That's the community that I come from. That's the community that I feel I represent. Those are where my roots lie.

It's kind of shocking how many of the things that were considered taboo back in 2012 have become relatively mainstream.

We've had gay marriage. We've had Laverne Cox making all these strides for trans people. We've had the Caitlin Jenner moment. So many major moments for our community. People used to always ask me about how I fit in with hip hop audiences or do I get shunned at rap shows. They used to try to mythologize me and create this romantic idea, like I was some struggling artist in hip hop. That's never been my story. I'm an entertainer who found a niche, and then, with some other artists, created a sub-genre of hip hop. We created our own fans, our own revenue streams. We sold out our own shows. This idea of Mykki Blanco being a struggling hip hop artist facing unacceptance--that is a romantic fiction that has never happened. I'm someone who actually figured out, through my own independent infrastructure, how to tour internationally, make money, and build a fanbase. To be honest--and I'm not even trying to sound arrogant--but sometimes when I do something or make something, I'll often think, "Why hasn't anyone thought about doing this before?"

There is a certain punk rock ethos to your work. The way you approach the fluidity of gender and your openness about your own HIV status strike me as pretty revolutionary.

I knew what I was doing was something original and that people were responding to it. People would tell me that they'd never seen anything like what I was doing, which was cool. Then I'd start to see these other artists who had a much more mainstream sound starting to take these things from the underground—the world I was actually a part of—and feeling like, "I've never seen you at any of our parties, I've never seen you at a show, but you're trying to market this aesthetic as your own?" For a while I got really caught up in the mentality of feeling like an outsider—needing to feel like the outsider—and letting that make me feel like I was less than, like it was always my job to rebel against the mediocrity.

One of the things that happens is that, especially if you're talking to the audience, you don't want to come off as bitter. You also don't want to put out this energy that says, "Oh, actually I'm an artist who feels like I deserve more, and I'm insecure about it, and I'm going to let that be my schtick." I didn't ever want to go down that road. I think I experienced this turning point where I realized it's okay if you don't become a celebrity. I remember in the beginning I didn't care about that stuff. In the beginning I was like, this is like my art project come to life, so I'm going to continue to just have fun with it and not give a fuck. Then I started to give a fuck. Because then I started to encounter more people in the industry... and it wasn't the right kind of people.

It's not like my situation now where I have an idea, and for the most part my label accepts it, will support it, and then will help facilitate it. Before then it was bad, everyone telling you what you should do differently, how you should change. I remember when I performed at South by Southwest very early on. Because that is such a straight music environment, I didn't really perform in drag. I remember I wore black lipstick. It was more of this androgynous thing. I remember the gay kids that saw me, I'll never forget this, one of them was like, "Why aren't you performing how you usually would?" It's because I'm not trying to get booed off stage at this straight hip hop showcase that you have plugged me into at South by Southwest. I had to realize that it wasn't always easy. Decisions about how to present yourself and where to present yourself are complicated.

I experienced so much homophobia in the beginning. Everyone always loves to paint pop music as being so inclusive. Just because these female pop stars in the past have used the pink dollar to their advantage, everyone loves to paint pop music as the most un-homophobic, accepting genre that's ever existed. They always like to demonize hip hop as being the most homophobic because the use of the word "faggot" in the lyrics, but pop music is just as fucking homophobic. When you are the inside of the infrastructure of who represents and creates these pop stars, when you begin to understand that money drives everything with these people, it's awful. If you can handle it, if you can bear it, then hopefully you can get over the hump. Once I realized, "Oh, it's like this?" I had to rethink things. You understand when it's just business and when it isn't. You may not understand what Mykki Blanco is, or you may not even understand the community I come from, but you're going to be my booking agent because you know I can book a show, and I can perform a show, and I can get you paid. When I began to understand the mechanics to that side of the business it used to depress me, but then a change happened in me, and I think this is when I realized I have a platform. I realized, okay, you are actually a working artist. I never want to say, I'm only limited to this, or I can't be this, or I can't expand or grow, or I can't influence. I never want to put that limit on myself.

Mykki Blanco's Five Suggestions For Life:

- Use Sage
- Eat Raw Garlic
- Drink Wheatgrass
- Swim in the Mediterranean
- Get Pedicures frequently

I have done a few projects now, and I now know that the strength that you create—the quality of the work that you create—that's what creates the notoriety around you. Yeah, sure, you could hang out with Jaden Smith, or Kendall Jenner, or you could attend a Bieber after party and hobnob in L.A. and do that, and that works too, because all we're talking about is relationships and people liking each other and then wanting to help each other because they like each other. But, if you're not in that world, and you're not in that sphere, instead of trying to claw your way there, just make really good art and good music and go that route. When I realized that I suddenly felt more comfortable and I've seen my own insecurity wane.

I realize now, as long as I humble myself, that the work that I've made, and the work that I do has a place. It's not for me to judge it in this hierarchy of, "Oh, I'm an important queer artist," or this or that. It is for me to understand what my power is—to own that and feel empowered by it. I'm still living in a world that wants to reject a lot of my identity. I can have the strength to not buckle. To know now that I have a platform, I have a place, to keep working, don't give up, don't give up. Keep going. Just keep making the work. I think that brings me back to where I began in theater and performance art. The more that I can entertain that mindset in this industry, it's a good thing.

Name

Mykki Blanco

Vocation

Musician, Rapper, Poet, Performance Artist

Fact

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