

On keeping it simple



Photographer Aabid Youssef discusses documenting the underground, portraiture as a collaboration, and ending a shoot when he knows he's done.

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As told to Lauren Spear, 2118 words.

Tags: [Photography](#), [Music](#), [Collaboration](#), [Inspiration](#), [Process](#), [Production](#), [Focus](#).

Something I really like about your work is how strongly it reflects Montreal. You've photographed so many musicians in the city, whether at shows or in your studio, and it really captures that scene. Was there ever a conscious decision to document your community and youth culture in general? What was your entry point?

It's definitely a bit of a concerted effort. There's such an overwhelming amount of talent in the city, and I feel like it needs to be honored and documented. Over time, I think people will realize how special it was that all these artists were in the same place at the same moment, creating so much incredible work. In a way, it feels like a responsibility to make sure it doesn't go to waste and is captured visually. At the same time, I'm really just documenting what's already happening. Everyone has their own kind of magic.

Mainstream culture can feel overbearing, and because of that, some people don't always get the chance to showcase their voices. For me, photography is a way of redirecting the spotlight—even within my own small world—toward people who are doing something countercultural or genuinely interesting, whether it's their look or their sound. If I can highlight that and support them in any way, then why not?



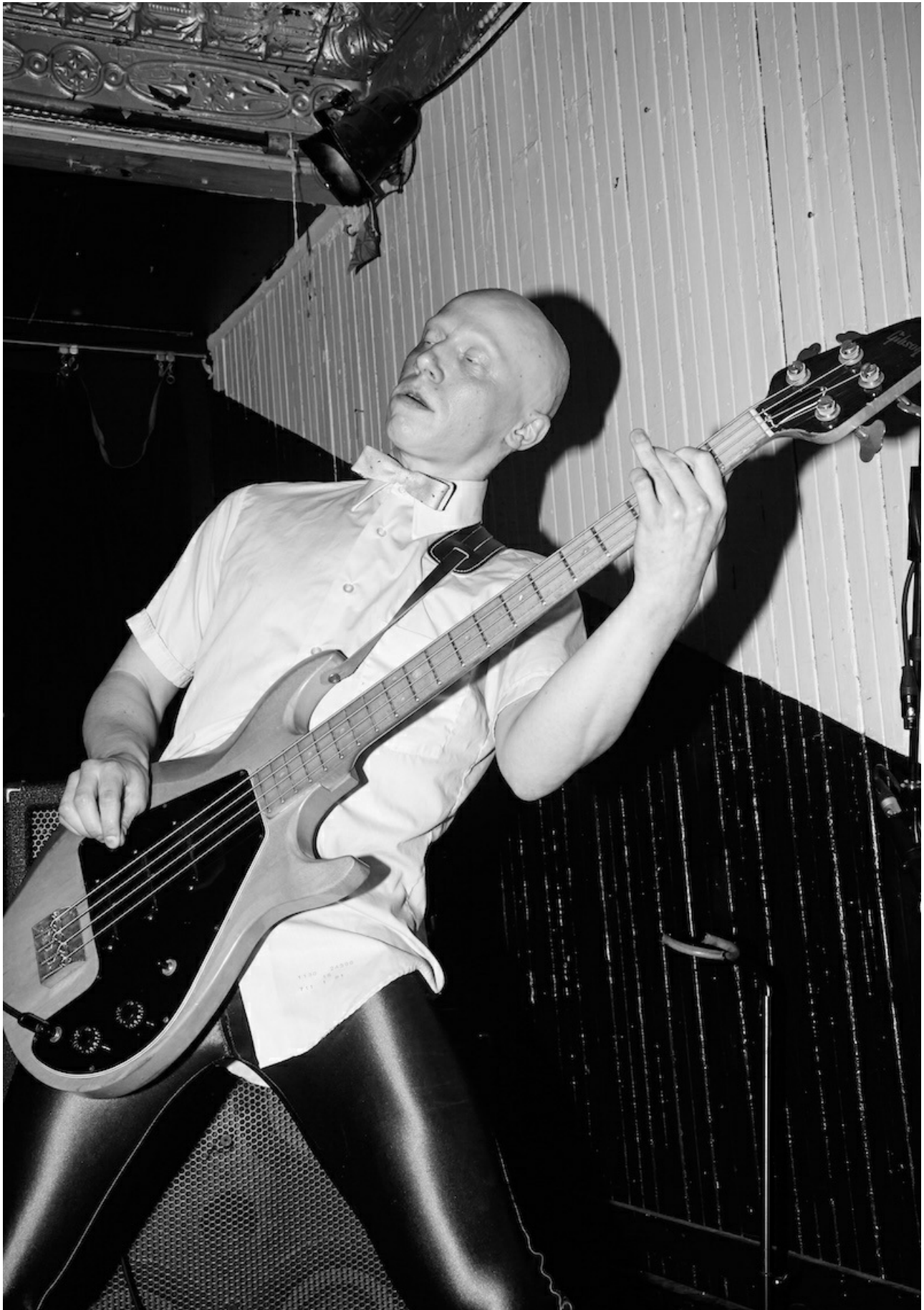
Justine Lacoste

Your studio work has such a distinct style: often black-and-white and with strong contrast. Your live show photography, on the other hand, feels much more kinetic, with performers caught in such expressive moments. How do you approach each of those environments, and what are you trying to capture in each?

In the studio, I try to create an environment where the subject feels completely comfortable. I'm not looking to change who they are, but to document the essence of their personality—whatever makes them unique. With live photos, there's already so much energy on stage, and I'm just trying to capture that. Using flash helps me lock in those moments and really emphasize the intensity of the performance. On stage, that's who they are in that moment, how they express themselves. In the studio, it's different; they're not in that same headspace, so I'm not trying to force it. That's why my photos aren't overly posed or performative. I like to strip things back, keep it simple, and make the image as straightforward as possible. It's about showing who the person is, capturing their energy, and getting to the most honest version of them without too much getting in the way.

I feel like your studio portraits are incredibly intimate, both in the expressions you capture and in the level of detail. You can notice the smallest things, like someone's lipstick or the texture of wet hair. There's a kind of clarity that really draws you in.

They're definitely very intimate sessions, and that's intentional. I generally try to avoid a lot of noise, whether that's other people or competing personalities. The sessions are usually quite quick, but I'm focused on connecting with the person. I want to capture as much detail as possible, which is where the sharpness comes in. I shoot in black and white because I don't want the image to be influenced by anything else. It's really about removing that extra noise. Sometimes I see color as adding too much to a photo, so this is a way of breaking things down to their most basic visual elements, while also focusing on the emotion of who the person is. That's why the setup is very simple and fairly consistent across everyone I photograph. Technical aspects matter, of course, but they're not the most important part. It's really about emotional honesty.





Danny Pretzel

How did you develop the ability to make people feel comfortable? Is it something that shows up in other areas of your life?

It's been a couple of decades of just shooting, and that understanding develops over time. As you get older, you learn better ways to interact with people and how to genuinely put them at ease. I also keep the sessions short for that reason. I want the experience to be fun. It's not about having someone in the studio for three or four hours until their energy drains. It's about being efficient and valuing their time. People can sense that, and they leave feeling like they were photographed beautifully.

Over time, I've realized that brevity and simplicity produce the best results. From assisting and working on other shoots, I've seen how energy can dip throughout a long day. So now I keep it concise—less noise, less fluff. One light, one studio, one subject. That's the approach that consistently works.

Do you listen to anything while shooting? Do you play music in the studio?

I usually play whatever I'm into at the moment. Nothing too distracting, just something that matches the mood I'm trying to create while shooting.

When you're shooting digitally and scrolling through a lot of images, what do you look for in a photo?

The right moment is when someone is really connecting with the camera. It's a combination of lighting, expression, and pose. When those three come together, it creates the perfect triangle.



Aidan

As a musician yourself, what is it like being on the other side of the lens?

It was a very interesting transition, going in front of people and performing. Definitely fun and very rewarding. Attending and photographing so many shows has, in a way, influenced my experience of being on stage. We haven't performed many times, but on the occasions we have and had photographs taken of us, I've been very happy with the results. I think it helps that we put thought into how we want to be perceived and how we want to look on stage. That's part of the fun for us—creating a little world and playing with all the references we like.

What are some of those references?

For my bandmate Alex Jung and myself, inspiration can come from anywhere. It could be any music we love, from Prince to The Clash, or even a perfume or an outfit we notice. Anything has the potential to spark a creative

idea for a song or shape how we want to perform.

What perfume?

Funny enough, when we started the project and came up with the name Crescendo, we discovered there's actually a perfume called Crescendo. I thought, "I need to smell that," though the remaining bottle is probably long expired.

We pull references from cinema, music, and fashion. That's really how Alex and I develop ideas. The internet throws so much at you, so it's fun to pick through it, see what resonates, and translate that into music while having fun with it.

Would you say you have developed a persona for this project?

I definitely feel like we're presenting ourselves in a way that matches the music. There's a level of performance to it, though we haven't gone as far as creating entirely separate personas, because that starts to feel very pop star. Still, there's thought behind it. As a photographer, I understand the importance of presentation, and the look of a project has to be considered carefully.



Marlaena

Can you talk a bit about making music videos? You have one coming out soon, right?

Yeah! I worked on a second video with the band Hush. It was really fun collaborating with them and developing the concept. The idea and execution were a joint effort between one of the band members, Paige, and myself. They put a lot of trust in me to deliver the final result.

I'd say it's similar to what I do with photography, but in a different way. In a music video, I focus on being emotionally true to the song. My usual stark, black-and-white style doesn't always fit, so it's more about capturing the emotion accurately. The best music videos, to me, enhance the song. I want people to watch it and then be excited to hear the track again, without changing the meaning or vibe too much.

As a photographer, do you mostly work alone?

Generally, I work pretty solo, because I'm going for a very personal feeling. If a project is bigger or there are a lot of people involved, I might get some help in the studio. But if it's just one or two people, I usually keep it solo so the subject isn't distracted. I want the session to feel as personal as possible, and I find that really helps. It comes through in the shots. When I'm photographing someone in that setting, I can often see their guard drop as they relax into it. It also reduces anything that could get in the way, like technical issues or other distractions. By simplifying things, I make sure nothing interferes with that focused, almost sacred moment between me and my subject.

What other challenges come up other than distractions in the moment? Is there anything that you feel you constantly have to contend with?

Earlier in my career, the biggest challenge was developing an understanding of the technical process. At the start, it was about learning to simplify and pare things down again and again. The more I shot, the better I understood the moment when an image was truly captured and that overshooting can be counterproductive. It's about finding the right balance between capturing enough and taking too much, and that's something I've only learned over time.

When you know you have it, do you end the shoot?

Yes.

Do you feel like your subject often agrees with you?

I think they're actually always in agreement. So far, everyone's happy!



Sean Nicholas Savage

What do you hope people feel when they encounter your work?

I like to imagine viewers being drawn to the person in the portrait, rather than thinking about the photographer. I picture them focusing on the moment, on who this person is, the story, and the emotion being captured. A very visceral reaction is what I hope for. The best outcome is someone getting completely absorbed in the photo, intrigued by it—and if it also brings more attention to the person I'm photographing, that's even better.

It seems like your whole practice is about making others feel seen, giving them attention, and shining a spotlight on them. I'm curious, if someone were to photograph you the way you photograph others, what do you think that would look like?

When being photographed, I'd be very aware of all the elements. I would need to establish the same level of trust I try to create with my subjects. Otherwise, I'd start overthinking all the details—the set, the lighting, everything. I can imagine how it might look, but I think it could be a challenge I would have to face in order to just be present in the moment.

You're very generous as an artist in this community, always welcoming people in and giving others a platform. I hope you feel that same energy reflected in your own project.

I always feel that in all my photographs, especially because of my specific approach. There's a lot of myself in every photo. So I'm always thinking, "No, it's really about the artist now." Choosing to shoot in black and white, focusing on emotion, and working in this manner is all about capturing the magic of what makes this person unique and shining the light on them. It becomes a collaboration between us. Their presence and personality combine with me photographing them, and then the photo just takes on a life of its own. People look at it and feel whatever they want to feel.

Aabid Youssef recommends:

Maximum Exposure. A singular voice translating today via the hypnotic records, words and visuals of Tony Price.

Pierluigi Giombini in studio. One of my favourite modern pop composers performing Gazebo's 1984 track "Lunatic" on piano and synth with a miniature bust of Bach approving.

Alix Fernz. A dear friend and a seminal figure in the Montreal underground. Two incredible back-to-back albums that are only eclipsed by his humility and grace.

Shelby Fenlon. One of the best photographers working today. In a short time she has developed a visual language so self assured and confident while remaining beautifully understated.

Angelo Mallia, "Hideaway."

Name

Aabid Youssef

Vocation

photographer

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