

Jennifer Herrema on making stuff and never giving a fuck



February 8, 2017 - Jennifer Herrema is an American musician, designer, and style icon who is best known for being one half of infamous rock band Royal Trux. In addition to playing in her own band, Black Bananas, Herrema hosts her own Dublab radio show ("The Banana Question") and has a series of ongoing fashion collaborations happening with Feathered Fish and Hysterick Glamour. In addition to playing shows, Royal Trux will release a live album later this year.

As told to T. Cole Rachel, 2687 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Fashion](#), [Independence](#), [Inspiration](#).

You do a little bit of everything—make music, design clothes and jewelry, do a radio show, make visual art. Am I forgetting anything?

Yeah, I'm doing tons. Like, I only slept two hours last night, which is fucked up and not unusual for me, but this time it was because I did reflexology and it made me really wired. So, yeah, my brain is kind of fucked today. What else am I doing? Well, last year I made a "movie"—please include quotation marks—with Ariel Pink for Flaunt magazine. They were just like, "Hey! Will you make a movie for us, and we will use stills from it for the next issue?" and I was like, "Yeah, okay." I've done stuff with them in the past where they were like, "Do whatever you want" and I like that. I like doing whatever I want. So I got all of these people from LA, running the gamut from pro surfers to strippers to musicians, a total mishmash of about 18 different people coming in from different places. It was a big production down at my studios. It was the first time I'd ever directed anything.

I don't even do our videos, normally. I steer clear of music videos. I make the music, and whenever somebody wants to do a video, I'm like, "Okay, it's yours go do it, just make sure I like it cause if I don't like it then you gotta change it." I usually just give somebody carte blanche to do whatever they want. I ask them, "What does the song say to you? Okay go ahead," you know? So this is like the first film-related visual thing, from start to finish, that I've done on my own. I'm really stoked on it. I like doing stuff I've never done before and if you put yourself out there in the world as someone who is willing to try weird shit, eventually someone will ask you to.

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Other than that, I'm supposed to turn in artwork for the new Black Bananas 7" today. I was supposed to turn it in this morning and I haven't even done it. So I gotta do that. I'm supposed to turn in artwork for the new Royal

Trux live album, and I was supposed to do that last week and I haven't finished that. So yeah, I got tons of stuff. I'm also working on this movie script with my friend right now. I'm all over the map. I've got my radio show next week I have to start working on. It's kind of unusual for me to have this many things overlapping. I kinda work slowly and on my own time, that's the way I like to work. Although, I kinda only *really* get shit done when I'm pressed up against the wall. So yeah it's interesting to have like five different, very distinct, things going on all at the same time.

You recently reformed your old band, Royal Trux, and started playing shows again. How does it feel to resurrect a creative endeavor like that after you'd been away from it for so long?

It's pretty weird because in the back of my head I was like, "It's just going to be the same as it always was, because I'm the same as I always was." I was pretty sure Neil was going to be the same. It was pretty awesome, you know? After thirteen years I'm sitting at the studio and then Neil just comes walking in the door. It looked the same, sounded the same, and we still work the same. It was really terrific. It was such a weird thing because my studio is in Costa Mesa, which is like a suburb. And where we played, that first big reunion show, was about five blocks from my studio in the suburbs. It wasn't even in LA, it was by my studio. It was so weird, like total kismet strangeness. But yeah it's been a good experience, working with Neil. The communication is totally opened up now, like where we actually text each other. I didn't even know where he lived or his phone number for many years. I hadn't even spoken to him in years. And now it's all open and it's the same, in a good way. He is a lot like me in many ways, and also very different than me in many ways but in so much as that he's got a strong personality and he pretty much sticks to his guns, so we are pretty much the same two people. Only smarter now.

As you get older, one would hope that some of those personality issues eventually fall to the wayside. Did it feel weird at all to get back into all of that old material?

I think we were both pleasantly surprised at how positive everything was. About a year ago I started digging out old boxes and I found these huge boxes of old fan mail, back when when people used to write letters to bands. I have boxes and boxes of them. Inside one of them were these two dolls made of drumsticks and I remembered them from when we got them so many years ago. So, I put them up on the wall and I found the letter that came with them, which I'd never really looked at before. Turns out the letter was from Cody Critcheloe—the guy who records as SSION—and he had sent it to us, like, 20 years ago when he was a kid in Kansas City. He is someone that I know now—like, I just did vocals on his album a few weeks ago. It was some weird kismet thing. It's kind of awesome how these things just come back around. That probably wouldn't have happened if the band hadn't reformed. It makes me feel like I'm doing something right.

One of the best things about Royal Trux, and this is kind of true of everything you've done since, is that there was a sense that you guys truly gave zero fucks. It was clear that you weren't really worried about whether or not people liked it.

(laughs) Yeah, yeah, it's true. We started when we were really young. I was younger than everyone else. I moved to New York when I was 16 and started playing with Neil and Pussy Galore. We'd see other bands playing around—Sonic Youth, White Zombie—but they were all people who seemed a little more established in life than we were. Like, they had a life already, a *thing*, and watching that was really interesting but it also kinda put me off. I just remember very well being like, "Ok, well that's all cool but I don't wanna do that." I just knew I didn't want to do *anything* like that, not even musically. I think it had to do with having grown up in a big city and wanting to maintain some isolation or singularity in the midst of chaos and not follow a path that I saw very clearly and distinctly as something people before me in music had already taken. It wasn't even like I considered myself a musician, I just considered myself an artist. I didn't want to do any one particular type of thing.

So when Neil and I got together we really were each other's best and only friends. Like, we knew other people but we only spent time together except when he had to do Pussy Galore rehearsals or go on tour. But it was just us. So we kind of created this world where we found our strengths in each other. Like we knew if we both were into it, then it was cool, it was good. We knew people said that we sucked and all that stuff, but we were strong enough to not let any of that get to us, even early on, because we had each other. Usually when you're younger, you're kind of like, "Ughh!" and take things personally or you might get insecure, but we weren't. I'm pretty

sure that nothing would've turned out the same if we hadn't had each other, if we hadn't met each other. The strength in the two of us was really that we truly didn't care. We were just like, "Nope, don't give a fuck, and don't fucking look at me funny." So yeah. And that's kinda how you should be if you're an artist of any sort.

How did that carry over into the rest of your career? After Royal Trux ended you continued to do music, but fashion people also gravitated towards you as well—your own personal aesthetic became a thing that people started to try and emulate. I always thought that was such a testament to your having such a strong identity, it remained totally immutable.

Yeah, it's kinda like I found a way to live that just allowed me to stay true to my vision, as it were. I think the last time I wore a fancy dress was when I was nine and at the time I loved it because pink was my favorite color and I wanted to be a ballerina. I always loved fashion and clothes, but my style changed pretty radically when I got a little older.

I grew up in all black neighborhoods, it was just like total hip-hop, it was door knocker earrings, Adidas, all of that. All the coolest stuff. I had to go like a million miles away to go to school, and so I remember even when I was very young I would want to wear adult clothes. I never wanted to be a kid, you know? Fuck that. After the ballet, and pink dress, it was over. I was like, "I want to dress like an adult." I experimented with things. I just knew what was right. I remember one time my friend had the coolest Norma Kamali dress, I think it was like 8th grade or something. I just thought it was so cool but I put it on and I knew this isn't for me. You just know, like, this is really rad but it's just not for me. I think I got a grasp for that really early on and just viewed that as a guiding force for pretty much everything in my life.

Nothing has ever been as important to me as health, love and independence.

I remember in the early '90s being in Seattle and a lady from *Vogue* was coming to our show. She was like, "Oh, where do you shop?" And I said The Sports Authority because I was wearing a Champion hoodie with fur that I put on it and Nike Air Force Ones that I had made into platforms. So I was like, "That is really where I shop, The Sports Authority." Then I'm all of the sudden doing a line for a sportswear company... sports! Later on I did a design thing with Volcom for five years, which was a lot of jeans. Again, just based on my own style, shit I would wear myself. From the beginning I wanted it to be unisex, and that was way too strange to even consider at the time. Luckily, the woman who was the head of marketing has her own lingerie line now with her twin sister, so she contacted me several months ago and was like, "You know that unisex thing you wanted to do," I was like, "Yeah," and she was like, "Well we want to fund it... let's do it." All of this stuff happened in a way that felt really natural, you know? It all felt like an offshoot of me just being myself, doing my thing. When people ask me for advice I never know exactly what to tell them, but if the question is, "What should I do?" the answer is always, "Whatever you fucking want." That's where true happiness comes from, I think. It's pretty simple.

What does it mean to be creatively independent, to do whatever you want?

It's kind of like everything to me. I don't like to be told what to do, even if it's the right thing. (Laughs) You know, it's like, don't tell me the *right* thing to do cause I will definitely do the *wrong* thing. I think I'm a "cut off my nose off to spite my face" kind of person sometimes. Having to answer to somebody or live up to somebody else's standards, or—even worse—to create things because you are obligated to, that has never really appealed to me. I already know I'm not going to be good at that, so I'm not going to ever allow that. You know? I always knew that so I had to just play it my own way or else I wouldn't be happy.

And then that ends up being the thing people love about you.

It's super cool. I mean it's not easy, but I've been very fortunate. There are so many different things that could've made it much harder for me to do what I do. I mean, I would've done my own thing just the same but I can only imagine. Even as a kid I never understood what is it that grown-ups do. How do they make money to buy a house? Why do they have these children, that they have to pay to send to school? So I guess I always knew that kind of life wasn't for me. Nothing has ever been as important to me, ever, as health and love. Like that's about it... Health and love and independence. Because I don't give a shit about money.

Actually, strangely, when I was like fifteen, Neil and I were doing a lot of acid at the time, and I was like, "I want to live under a bridge." Like I really did, I had this whole scenario. I was going to create this fort and we were going to live in it and it was going to be the greatest thing. I was all about it... when I was tripping, anyway. I'm not saying I want to do that now, but I still don't really care about money. I mean I've slept in shelters and shit, you know, it sucks but you get through... You just do what you gotta do, you know? Luckily I've got Kurt, my husband, and he kind of balances me out because I'm terrible with money. But, I'll just go crazy and buy him gifts all the time. He's like, "Okay give me that credit card." But it's not like I have a family to take care of. I own my house, I bought it. I was broke after purchasing it but I don't have a mortgage, I don't have car payments, so whatever. Fuck retirement, I don't care. I always knew that that's the way it's going to be. I'm just gonna keep making my shit and whatever happens will happen. Hopefully it will be cool.

Here is a list of things that have informed my life by Jennifer Herrema:

The Rolling Stones

Funkadelic

Folk art

All illicit and RX drugs

Sports - Steelers, Raiders, Cowboys, Jaguars, Falcons, Orioles, Cosmos, Bullets, Knicks, Hornets

Henry Miller

Albert Camus

*Herbs and supplements

*Fritz Scholder

Cassette tapes

Duct tape

The Little Girl Who Lived Down The Lane

The Gaia Hypothesis

George Bellows

Susan Rothenberg

The color pink

Cats

Art Bell

"Merry Go Round" by Keith Sweat

Name

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Vocation

Musician, Designer, Artist

Fact

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