

On finding your way



Producer, model, and trans activist Massima Bell discusses openness, knowing your boundaries, and the role of collaboration in continued inspiration.

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As told to Cat Woods, 2728 words.

Tags: [Culture](#), [Music](#), [Curation](#), [Dance](#), [Fashion](#), [Identity](#), [Process](#), [Collaboration](#).

You live in Los Angeles now, where you've been for three years. Can you tell me about being born and raised in Iowa and the experience of discovering your love for movement as a first love? Was that encouraged in your family and community?

I was born on a farm about 15 minutes outside of Iowa City. My dad still lives on that farm and so I still get to go back there and a lot of my family is out there. I grew up kind of all over the US with my mom because my parents divorced when I was quite young. So my experience of Iowa itself was mostly in relation to taking trips out there and spending downtime on the farm, in the fields.

In terms of movement, my mom really likes ballet and so I did have the experience of taking some classes when I was in middle school, but then with trying to figure out my gender and sexuality and stuff towards the end of middle school and high school, I just kind of shut down physically in my body in terms of wanting to be in that kind of creative movement at all. It wasn't until I moved to New York City for college when I was 17 that I had the space to re-evaluate what I wanted to spend my time doing, what I wanted to explore, and I decided to just start taking classes at the dance program of Hunter College.

My understanding is that you moved to New York at 17, so that seems to be where you got engaged with music, trans activism, acting, and modeling. Was EmergeNYC a big part of that?

Oh, yeah. That was a program that I was a part of right after I graduated from college. Around that time, I was very much figuring out how I wanted to deal with my own [gender] transition, and to own the way that I needed to relate to the world.

[The EmergeNYC] program was definitely a big stepping stone for me to start to think about the ways that my presence in the world could do things to change it. Or, to use my art practice, that was centered in movement at the time, to try to really affect people with the way that I use my body and put my body in a public space, because we did public performances and staged performances, too.

At that time, I was thinking a lot about the way that trans bodies get dehumanized in daily interactions. In that program, I was trying to figure out how to use my body, just make my body be in public, in a way that was a response to that dehumanization. I wanted to stop people in their tracks to [push them to] consider the way that they would register a body that they perceive as male, but it's engaging in feminine truth.

What sort of timeframe are we looking at for those performances, early 2000s?

That was 2014 and 2015. Then, the trajectory of my life did change a lot where I got wrapped up in dealing with my transition, and getting these surgeries that I needed to feel in my body. It was after getting those gender-

affirming surgeries, and needing to take a break for months from life basically, because of recovery time and things like that.

I ended up shifting a lot of the way that my life was structured, and I ended up randomly getting connected to this Mother [Agency, NYC] agent, Timothy Rosado, who I had met through someone else who was part of that EmergeNYC program. And Timothy asked me, "Do you want me to act as your agent, and help you model or something like that?" And I was just so raw and unsure of myself at that point in my life. I was just like, "Okay, I'll just do whatever. This seems like a thing that I shouldn't pass up the opportunity to try." So, modeling became my main work and thing that I was known for.

I know that you went to New York to dance initially, and you got involved in the public performances, then you went through the transition and modeling entered the picture. At what point did music enter the picture, because I'm going to ask about TRANSA?

I have always played music, and always loved music, and that's always been a part of my life from when I was very little. When I was living in New York, which was up until 2020, I would go to things, and I had a lot of friends and community who made music, and stuff like that.

I've put so much of my heart into this huge musical project that is TRANSA. That happened because I had all this space and time in my life around 2020 and 2021 where I was not in the daily grind of New York, and I had time to consider working with Red Hot [Organization] and with [executive director of Red Hot and co-producer on TRANSA] Dust [Reid] specifically, who asked me to work with them on this project, TRANSA.

How did it begin? Was it an email, or a phone call, or a text? And had you worked with Dust on anything before that?

We met on this short film shoot [in 2020]. I was in this short film [City Bird] about the idea of returning to nature, and connecting with a sense of ourselves beyond just being in the grind of city life. That was on NOWNESS [in 2021], and Dust was friends with the filmmakers. He was on set as a playlist and vibes curator. It was really cute actually, because that whole day I was just talking with Dust about the beauty of the music that they had put together, and a lot of the songs were from artists that were my favorite artists. It was people like Beverly Glenn Copeland, who ended up as one of the key pillars of TRANSA, that we connected on really deeply.

So, we met on that and then stayed in touch. It was in the beginning of 2021, after the passing of [music producer, and trans activist] SOPHIE, that Dust reached out to me and was like, "Hey, I've had the idea of doing something that relates to the trans community through Red Hot." Dust had made a project with Red Hot before and just reached out to me to see if I would want to concept this thing with them, and pitch this to Red Hot, and try to make it with them. In the beginning of 2021, we started working on that.

How do you like to work on artistic projects? Are you naturally a collaborator or do you like having control over every aspect? And on top of that, how do you deal with conflicting ideas or plans?

I love collaborating. I think that, in my life, I've had the experience of having a really strong, almost spiritual vision of something that I want to make, or that I need to see happen in the world. I've often been through a kind of meditative listening to my inner heart, and that's been a defining process for me.

In the context of working on this project, I spent a lot of time thinking about it in that same meditative way, but it was this different experience of going in with Dust initially, to kind of concept this whole thing out, and ultimately to do that kind of collaborative work.

In the process of making this project, we really wanted all the music that we asked for, from specifically the trans artists that we asked, on the project to be something that came from their dreams, and hopes, and desires. So, it was a lot of working with them to just make a dream happen, which is such a beautiful process.

Once you and Dust committed to *TRANSA*, how did you approach artists? And if any of them said no, was it difficult not to take that personally?

Doing something like this is such a crazy, unique thing to be working on, where you're doing all these levels of outreach and communication, and trying to field things to so many different artists. Our approach with each artist was to have a different way that we thought would be best to approach them. [We might do that] through personal connections we had to each artist, or where we had certain kind of connections to different parts of artists' management, or teams, or things like that. For every artist, it was a different tactic. We did have to be tactical about this project, because it's hard to convince management, teams, and people who are trying to make money that it's meant to be raising awareness about, and supporting, trans people. That's the reality of being an artist in capitalism, where it's hard to get enthusiasm about a non-profit project.

What was your hit rate like? Were there many people who said no?

For the most part, we actually had a lot of "yes's," and you can see evidence by the sheer breadth and scope of the project, which is amazing. We did get definite "no's", which a lot of the time were [teams or managers] saying that "this person's not available," or "they'd love to, but they don't have the time," which is fine.

I'm familiar with that as a freelance writer, I assure you.

Oh my god, I'm sure. But it is interesting to think about that in this context where we are asking for something that is related to an—unfortunately—controversial topic, in some way. It was hard not to sometimes think about the reasonings behind why certain artists might not be available, and we did actually have some notes from trans artists, too, who didn't want to be part of a project that really centered around transness, which is totally so understandable because I've been in places in my life where I didn't want to talk about, or relate things, to my transness because it can be really vulnerable and kind of a difficult thing to talk about at times.

And I would assume that people don't want to contain their identity right down to this one aspect of who they are.

Right. Yes. But, in my thinking, or in my feeling, at least in the way that I relate to it personally, that aspect of my identity has been this really beautiful font of creativity and connection, and one of the most magical things that I am so grateful for, ultimately.

Dust is older than you. He's had a longer career. What did you learn from him during the years of working together?

I appreciate you bringing it up because I think I've thought a lot about how, in the context of the music industry, it is still in many ways a guy's club. It is an industry that has historically been really dominated both by men in general, but also by a kind of paternalistic attitude towards women, specifically, and this way of talking down to women. I am so grateful to have had Dust help me learn how to navigate all these peculiarities and specificities of the music industry.

How heavily were you involved in the technical elements and were there practical skills as far as production and making a music album that were new to you? How'd you go with that?

I have some degree of experience with running live sound, and these different things that are part of the technical side of the industry. I hadn't gotten the opportunity to be in a professional, very well set-up recording studio before. And so that has been a beautiful thing to be able to be brought into as part of this project. I think that is something that a lot of specifically trans artists, and artists who don't have a lot of resources, or are marginalized in different ways, often have a lot of trouble just being able to be in rooms like that, where you have a \$10,000 piece of recording equipment that creates this beautiful sound.

What skills or methods, maybe it's something relating to time management or ways of communicating or dealing with

conflict, did you absorb during those years of working on *TRANSA* with so many artists who would've had, I assume, really different approaches to making music or working with other people? And in addition, were those skills something that you were able to use in modeling and acting?

I think one of the big things that I've learned over the years of working on this project, in terms of communication, is to approach everyone with a lot of grace about what they're coming to the table with. I mean, you never know what is going on with the process of an artist trying to make a recording happen, in terms of things being delayed, or difficult, or things like that. I had to accept that, in some ways, in working with so many different people, my communication wouldn't be perfect.

And, particularly in working on something that is meant to be this celebration of trans people, and this nonprofit venture, I wanted to take the utmost care with every little bit of communication that I could.

I've tried to do that, but I've also had to be able to let go in some ways, and be like, "I am trying very hard with how I handle communication with a hundred different artists." You can't be perfect, and I think I've learned that that's something that comes with working on a larger-scale project. It's not something that I've necessarily reconciled in myself.

Things will be late, and deadlines will get missed, but I think the thing that makes it harder for me is that I'm on this project as a trans person who is very familiar with the ways that any kind of media industry is very quick to exploit and discard trans people. I know we're not doing that in working on this project. I know that everyone who's touched this project has given so much of their heart to it, but I also know that none of us are perfect, and we will miss an email, or something will happen that we weren't able to figure out in time for making a recording happen, or we didn't have the right outreach to the right artists at the right time.

Massima Bell Recommends:

The Territory, a documentary from 2022 that focuses on the fight of the Uru-eu-wau-wau people of the Amazon rainforest against white settlers. In the middle of filming, COVID hits and the Uru-eu-wau-wau themselves take over the cinematography out of necessity, and what results is the most powerful example I've seen of taking control of your own narrative and flipping the usual Western documentary script.

The Faggots & Their Friends Between Revolutions by Larry Mitchell, illustrations by Ned Asta, a gay manifesto emerging from communal living in the 1970s that takes you into a fairytale polemic of a new way of life molded in the husk of American empire. *The blueprint of possibility.*

Jackie Shane Live – It is a tremendous gift to the world that this most transcendent soul singer, Jackie Shane, recorded this live album in 1967, and in these nine songs you can hear her spirit soar—at a time when it was unthinkable to be out as a trans person.

El secreto del río (*The Secret of the River*, 2024) – A beautiful new Mexican drama on Netflix that revolves around a young trans kid and her relationship to the muxes of Oaxaca, beautifully shot and tenderly told.

Woman and Nature – Reconciliation between humanity and nature won't be possible until we reckon with the legacy of patriarchy and its disembowelment of (feminine) spirit in every aspect of our society, infused in all the technologies that structure it, from strip mining to the speculum, and in this seminal feminist text from 1978, Susan Griffin lays out in an epic prose poem the intimate connection between women and nature.

Name

Massima Bell

Vocation

music producer, model, dancer, actor, tattooist, trans activist

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