

October 5, 2016 - serpentwithfeet is the musical nom de plume of singer/composer Josiah Wise. The first serpentwithfeet EP, *blisters*, features production courtesy of The Haxan Cloak and showcases Wise's operatic, otherworldly voice.



As told to T. Cole Rachel, 2483 words.

Tags: Music, Identity, Focus, Inspiration.

serpentwithfeet on gospel, queerness, and self

What was the first music you remember hearing as a kid?

This guy named Ron Kenoly. He was a CCM artist—Contemporary Christian Music. I remember him as this warm, friendly-seeming black guy who had this multi-racial mass choir. The band had flutes and chimes and saxophones and drums, literally just like everything. The videos that were out were very purple lights, very '90s. I don't really know much about the history of CCM, which I probably should, but I do remember that when I was growing up gospel music and Christian music were very big. I remember going to church in Baltimore and my parents would sit in the front rows because they were clergy. I couldn't sit in the front row with them, but I would sit one or two rows behind them and I would dance the entire time during praise and worship.

It was a very colorful group of people at our church and a very colorful band. There was a lot of color in the music. That is the first music I can remember listening to. We had a 100 voice choir. My brother played the congos. We had a flute player, a saxophonist, trumpet, drums, bass. It was huge. My church had a few thousand people. It was, I guess, what you would call a mega-church. We had two basketball courts and a swimming pool.

Your church sounds like it was fun.

Well, that's what it was for me. I know that's why I think about music the way that I do now because my introduction was that everything was large. We also got really dressed up to go to church. I'm picturing my mom getting ready for church. She never wore red lipstick because red was, like, *Jezebel*, but she would wear gold lipstick and gold eye shadow and she always wore lots of gold and sequins. I would wear my mom's sequins when she would let me.

For me church was always more about a performance than it was about God. I think people included God because that's what you did, that was the conversation, but what I saw was that these black people were performing. You know, everyone with their little bit of money. We had the best outfits and we weren't getting paid to be in the band or be in the choir but it was a grand performance and the audience was performing, too. I recently listened to some of that stuff on YouTube again and I still get the same feeling I got when I was five—I was dancing in the aisles, just loving it.

Were you allowed to listen to secular music?

In the early '90s we didn't have a computer—and most of my friends didn't either—and the internet wasn't a big thing yet, which is so fun to think about now. It was still easy to not be exposed to a lot of things. I was not allowed to have CDs for a very long time and when my mom finally started letting me have CDs, it was all Destiny's Child and Brandy.

I was a Brandy faggot and a Destiny's Child faggot growing up. I obviously loved their voices, but when *The Writing's On The Wall* came out, I remember where I was when I first listened to it. I was in the second grade and I was on spring break. I remember one of my cousins, who was even younger than me, came in and said, "Do you know 'No No No'?" I remember being hooked on that video. We didn't have cable tv at home so being at someone else's house was like paradise because I got to watch music videos and see what people were wearing. There was some kind of gender performance happening in those videos that I wasn't seeing in my house and I found that very interesting.

I lived a very sheltered life. I remember going into school and realizing that I wasn't "performing" right. All the kids were getting groomed for the world and learned how to perform their gender—that's what I like to call it—from the stuff they saw in music videos and on television. I had limited access to that, so when I went to school I was in shock and it was really traumatic... at least until I went to high school.

I was pretty unaware. I remember hearing and being a fan of Björk's music, but I'd never seen her videos, and didn't even know what she looked like. People would be like, "That Swan Dress!" and I was like, "What swan dress? I love 'Hidden Place'!" I didn't know what any of it meant. People would be talking about a new Jay-Z video and I wouldn't know what they were talking about. I didn't actually see "Big Pimpin'" for a very long time. I would only hear things and find out about things when I went to my cousin's house. My brother was 10 years older so he would sneak CDs and my mom wouldn't check on him as much, but she was tighter on me in some ways...maybe because I was younger? I don't know.

There are certain aesthetics of gospel music—particularly in the ways it is performed in the '80s and '90s—that read as very queer. There is something very showy, very peacock-ish about male gospel singers.

You know, he just died recently, but Daryl Coley was the original gospel queen. He's like the gay uncle that either always comes to Thanksgiving dinner alone or he's coming with his "friend" and everybody knows who that friend really is. We all know someone like that. Daryl Coley was an incredible singer, he did all the runs, he used to "Ooh, ooh," but with the neck in the hands and all the dramatic things and big gestures. He was an amazing singer and he was like the godfather of all the Brandys and Chris Browns. Everybody can thank him.

I think that's what R&B is. It's taking gospel and just saying *SEX*, you know? Or just not saying God. I think a lot of gospel singers are very self-involved, like in their performance. Again, they call it God and they call it a spiritual moment, but for me it's just you performed really well and you connected with us. I think just the language is different with R&B and the context is different, but it's the same thing. You see Kelly Price or Faith Evans or Brandy, or be more contemporary and listen to Beyoncé or Fantasia, that's what it is. Beyoncé is a church girl. She learned how to modify the stage and she's perfected it, but she's still very peacock-y and that's why she's so famous. I think gospel is very peculiar and very queer and very flamboyant. Nobody wants the slow, quiet gospel song.

It's interesting how musical traditions web back into history. Gospel music has gone through lots of interesting iterations. There are a lot of gospel singers who were obviously queer, but it seemed somehow allowable—or at least not talked about—because they are such incredible talents.

That's the thing. I don't really think the black community—or at least the black Christian community—is truly anti-gay. I don't necessarily know that I have proof of that, but that's been my experience. I think it's all about language and how you present. Maybe it's irrelevant, but I remember when I was growing up, realizing in college or maybe high school that people were gender policing me, but I don't know if they were really interested in if my dick was going in someone's butt. There were lots of queeny boys in high school, but because they were still inappropriate and cracked salacious jokes, they got a pass. Also, if you are a rough and harsh boy, then you get to pass.

I think in church it's similar. If you're just a queen without talent, you'll probably get played, but if you're the queen that can make everybody cry with your voice and you're doing all the church stuff, nobody's going to check you. The brothers are not going to kick it with you alone, but if you're doing their wife's hair and singing, they'll be like, "All right, brother. Good to meet you."

To say that there's something "spiritual" about the music you make now sounds reductive, but there is

obviously an undeniable gospel influence in your work.

I think about that when I look back at some of my music. There's definitely some religious or sacred things happening here. It's kind of corny maybe, but a lot of hip hop artists have taken these very obvious religious tropes and adopted them—replacing themselves with Jesus or imagining themselves on a cross or some other kind of church motif. I was also kind of explicitly doing that in the beginning, making my own version of gospel music. At some point I started to feel like everyone was doing that and I felt like it wasn't very creative. Ultimately I kind of had to accept that this is my history. I grew up in America. I am African American. I grew up in the black church. Sometimes playing with these kinds of sounds and ideas can be kind of a cliché, but I have always been about trying to rumple the cliché in some way.

Also, sometimes clichés are just the truth. I was a black boy that grew up and was gay and I like wearing glitter. It's not that crazy. It's nothing we haven't heard before. I have to accept that in some ways I'm cliché. I just had to work within that idea and be as authentic as I can be. There have been times that I've wanted to escape this identity. People say that you can't really run from who you are, but there were times when I was doing that. I was pretending to be what I thought was 'avant-garde' or trying to be more confrontational... but that is just not my natural cadence. I would like to think I'm more sophisticated than the sum of my influences since I have a music degree and I know a lot about music, but the truth is that I didn't start studying classical music until I was 14, not seriously anyway. Before that I was just listening to music in my house. The majority of my musical education before the age of 18 involved gospel. I was in church at least three times a week.

Fighting against one's own influences can be a hard thing to make sense of. It's easy to overthink those things.

I also think it's racist to think that the thing that comes naturally out of me is less important, but it's easy to internalize these different ideas and convince yourself of that. I think in this country we're really excited when white people sound black. Whereas a black woman who is dark-skinned and has an amazing gospel-y voice might not be praised in the same way as that white woman who *sounds* black. For black people it's not considered unusual to have that voice.

I think a lot of us black folks, we try to be different, but what does that even mean? I mean, we started rock music—all those things come from us too. Blues and rock, it all comes from us being on this land, being on this soil. It has always been a collaboration between European music and African music—that's how you get Dixieland, that's how you get jazz. It's like, now we have these brass instruments laying around because of the war, what we going to do with them? Oh, we're going to make Dixieland.

It goes back to the same reason why people prefer *Porgy and Bess*—which was written by two white men—but no one talks about Scott Joplin's operas—like *Treemonisha*—or Duke Ellington's operas or Mary Lou Williams' *Zodiac Suite*. Even in 2016, I still see people my age who aren't getting the praise they should because they aren't white and doing soul music, but because they're doing something that seems to come naturally. I think that's something that we have to take back—"This is what I do." We created these idioms. These are ours. It's something that I have to remind myself of all the time. I am part of a lineage and what I do is amazing. I'm not just a cliché.

serpentwithfeet recommends:

"After the Flood" by Brandy

Beloved by Toni Morrison

Bell Hooks' discussion "Moving from Pain to Power"

Diana Ross's 1983 performance in Central Park

Singing the hymn "It is Well With My Soul" while curating a new inner peace (#5 is an exercise / meditation)

A lot of artists have a very fraught relationship with their own work—either they can't go back and listen to it or it never feels finished or all they want to do is immediately move on to the next thing. How do you feel about that?

For me, it's definitely not that. I enjoy my music. I listen to myself, to be honest. Partially because I do enjoy what I make, but also because I'm interested in understanding my own habits. I feel like another thing—and this is me being super black again—but I feel there's always people outside of your culture that want to understand you better than you understand you, so I feel it's important to understand myself more than someone else understands me because there's always going to be somebody trying to tell me what I am.

I listen to myself and the idiosyncrasies in my voice and think, "Okay I could do this with my vibrato or I can maybe inflect this way." I'll listen to Nina Simone and think about what it was about her that made her so great. How did she create herself? Sometimes I'll think about how everything is performance and everything is fake. Everything is a construct, everything is a fabrication—including how we view ourselves. In the same way that our construction of masculinity or femininity and right or wrong is fabrication.

What continues to inspire me about gospel music is that it's so performative and what I do sometimes is almost like a caricature of performance. I'm always just trying to think of ways that I can push it. I want what I do to touch people in the same way that Nina Simone's "Sinnerman" touched me. I want them to be moved. Electrified. Maybe even freaked out.

Name

Serpentwithfeet

Vocation

Musician

Fact

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Photo by Samantha Marble