

Junglepussey

Katie Beswick

Shayna McHayle is Junglepussey, the straight-talking rapper who, when I ask her to introduce her latest album, *JP4*, for readers who might be interested to know more about the story behind the project, is silent for a very long time. Eventually, she exhales, laughs softly to herself and tells me, in clipped, serious tones, “You can say *JP4* is pretty much uninterrupted expression from me, a super-talented Brooklyn artist.” It’s a totally Junglepussey answer, both in its brevity and in the self-confidence of its delivery. Like all good writers, McHayle wastes no words. And like all good rappers, she can really deliver a line. On her tracks, the slick sharpness of her flow works to present lyrics that are funny, mundane and heart-breaking in equal turns. On ‘Morning Rock’ she’s at a lover’s house the morning after an uninspiring night before, “What a waste of toothpaste,” she spits, “Brushing my teeth only to smile in your face.” The slow, surreal ‘Arugula’ sees her similarly confront a disappointing love interest, “Acting funny in front me round your work folk/You don’t miss me, you just know I want my back broke.”

She can’t help, she says, being who she is, no matter what anyone thinks of it. “I mean. It’s not even an attitude, it’s just how it is. It’s just how I am. It’s just innate. I just have to be me, and I know I cannot give people what they think [they want] of me. I just can’t. I don’t know how to. Even if I’m like ‘oh that’s what they want’ I’m just so far away from that, always.”

McHayle tells me she has always had a strong sense of herself, and understood the image she presents to the world. There was no choice but to

embrace idiosyncrasies that made her the focus of attention as a teenager, both in her work and her personal style. “Anything I do you’re gonna look at regardless. I’m a tall black woman, whatever I do, whatever I put on, is gonna get stares. Am I just gonna hide myself so everybody doesn’t feel the need to stare?”

“I really just had a good strong sense of self when I was younger. Always been super creative. I never felt, like if I would see a celebrity or watch award shows, I would never feel that those people were any different from me. I remember always just feeling equally able to access the things that people try to say I can’t access. So, I always just felt cool, literally. In high school — in junior high I wore a uniform — but once I went to high school in Manhattan and I got to wear whatever I want, I had a red mohawk, I had blue a mohawk. I didn’t care about anything else, I just felt like a star already.”

Growing up in New York, I say, I imagine you weren’t alone in carving out an eccentric style for yourself. “This is like 2004, lower east side Manhattan,” she reminds me. “It wasn’t what it is now. Now is like so much, it’s even more...I don’t know. New York always had style but now it has a lot more. Because of social media and stuff, people are exposed to so much more options. I used to get stared at sooo much in the street, on the train everywhere — when I was back home in Brooklyn, wherever. Like, stared at, harassed, called names. It was not a fun experience. And I remember earlier in college, I went to FIT and studied fashion merchandising. And at FIT also like, nobody there had style. Everybody’s style was so trash, and it was just so sad. I remember being like, ‘we live in New York, this is FIT, and y’all coming to school in flip flops and skinny jeans. What?’”

You get the sense that Junglepussey is used to people disappointing her. At one point during our interview, I ask how she chooses her collaborators (there are

collabs on the new album with Gangsterboo and Ian Isaiah), and she tells me they have to have similar socio-political beliefs. Like, who? I ask. How would you go about assessing that? 'I don't know,' she sighs, as if she's really had enough of my shit, and everybody else's. 'People suck in general.'

Perhaps that's why she hasn't been particularly phased by the pandemic and its attendant social restrictions. "I was never really social anyway," she shrugs. "I guess when I was younger of course I used to go out and party, but as I got older, if I'm not having a show, or it's not a friend's show — you know I used to love to go to live shows. But now that's not [an option], nothing much has changed, nothing much has changed except for the germs."

So, you're not in a hurry to get back to normal then? I ask her. The question seems to annoy her, and I guess I can see why, given the way the pandemic has exposed the injustices and inequalities we've all been living with for a long time, but especially Black Americans. "Get back to what?" She asks. "What was normal about before? I don't know why everybody's so obsessed with the past as if it was so beautifully perfect. We were just so oblivious to so much. I want to continue moving forward in the truth and uncovering all the truths we need to make this world a place where our children can live fruitful lives."

And besides, she reminds me, there's nothing she can do about a global pandemic except get on with her life. "I can't let it consume me too much. I'm not trying to hide or run from it, but it's important for me to build my own world, have my spaceship where I can go and get away. Like hell no I'm not going to be consumed by this and neither is my work — but, I'm not gonna hide or run from it. I am gonna be honest with my emotions, but this shit can't consume me because it's not my fault."

So, back to the album:

JP4 is the super-talented artist Junglepussey's fourth project, following the 2014 mixtape *Satisfaction Guaranteed*, and the albums *Pregnant with Success* (2015) and *JP3* (2018). But whereas those projects evolved fairly quickly, *JP4* has had a longer gestation, developing over five years until finally, once the pandemic hit, McHayle had the time to bring the tracks together into something coherent. Still, although all the work on the album was recorded before this year, there are places where it seems to have been written from the perspective of right now. The opener, 'Bad News', might be an anthem for 2020, with its bleak, futuristic sound ("looking back at my ass/Moving on/On my own, on my own, on my own....I got bad news/But it's all true").

Was it hard, I asked her, taking so long over this album? "It didn't take long," She corrects me. 'It didn't take long at all. There was no rush. No time limit. There were no consequences if I didn't put it out. It was the right timing. Definitely."

Yes, but in comparison to the other works, five years was a long time, right?, I say. She must have been writing this alongside those other works. Was that a challenge? "I aware of it, yeah. As I'm making *Pregnant with Success* and *JP3*. Very much I was writing *JP4* through experience, through living and recording things, but also feeling like it just wasn't the time. It wasn't the time to share it. But being very happy sharing *Pregnant with Success* and *JP3* knowing that those were important moments as well. But also just giving *JP4* that space to fill up that cup that I knew it would be."

And was it the right decision? "I'm super proud," she says. "I'm happy to be sharing a body of work like this at 28 years old...in this climate. I think the world should be grateful as well, because it is a treat to hear something like this this year.

It's not easy being creative in this climate, but I just knew that I had to make something out of nothing. I had to make something without really knowing what would come of it and I'm happy I did."

There are no nerves around the reception of the album either – at least, none she's willing to admit to. "I really, I don't know, I'm not really concerned with the music industry in the grand scheme of things. It's like, they don't want to appreciate my art that's fine. There's so much more people that do. And I find so much peace in just celebrating those people and giving my love to those people and to hell with everybody else." In any case, the promotion's going to need to be pretty low-key, given the restrictions on live events right now. "We can't plan something nobody's gonna come to, right? People can't come [to live shows]." The line goes quiet for a bit. "We're all just waiting on the world to change, ok?"