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**TELFAR**

MARTINE ROSE OYINDA DEV HYNES BBYMUTHA RAVYN LENAÉ

BY AMBER ALSTON

# JUNGLEPUSSY

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Top by Pyer Moss,  
Shorts by Nanushka

Junglepussy is challenging assumptions about black women in music using 140 characters or less.

Tall and graceful, Junglepussy seemed at home as she posed in a pink afro and designer threads on set. Though quiet, the 27-year old rapper, who has been vocal about her struggles with imposter syndrome and self-image, maintained a confident reserve. The following day, she posted a photo to Instagram: a tight shot of her sheer Calvin Klein panties stuffed with loose scraps of pink curls that she nabbed from the hair team. She is, at all times, harmonizing conscious poise and outlandish humor. "I used to think one day I would run out of jokes and feared what would happen if I wasn't funny anymore," she tells me candidly on the phone a few days prior to her shoot. "Somehow, all these years later, people are still entertained."

Six years after releasing her first jab-heavy tracks on Youtube, the Brooklyn-born artist has no shortage of jokes. Her most recent album, JP3 delivers a self-actualized response to her first two projects—2014's *Satisfaction Guaranteed* and 2015's *Pregnant with Success*. The album is awash with social commentary, but her most urgent messages are sandwiched between gut-busting lyrics. "*Stank attitude, bad allergies, might embarrass you; Make your granny see me at your barbecue; Pop a Plan B, stop the family, your father not cute,*" she rhymes, on the topic of contraceptive options in the grocery store inspired tune "Trader Joe's." Across the album's sultry, grind-worthy tracks, Junglepussy explores systematic racism, gender dynamics and intimacy with a quick-witted cool.

If music is her church, then the internet is her pulpit — a place where she dishes out amusing anecdotes about everything from veganism and colorism to the trials of finding a man who isn't full of shit. "Sometimes I write my tweets and lyrics on the same piece of paper," she adds. "There are some tweets that I've made lyrics and some lyrics that I think would do better as posts." From her perch, she does work commonly reserved for professional comedians: using humor to shine a light on the barriers surrounding her while simultaneously knocking them down.

"Black women in the industry are overworked, overlooked, underpaid and under-respected," she tells me with conviction. "I learned that the odds are always against me. I'm not light skinned, I'm a black-looking woman, and people can't take it. They think it's not controversial enough. They want someone who has all of me without looking like me."

Junglepussy touches on the music industry's preoccupation with color throughout our interview. While she acknowledges that some dark skinned artists have made strides in the last few years, she



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remains fully aware that artists with lighter skin win more fanfare from the public and the industry alike.

“If I was light skinned people would find the things I say sexy,” she says candidly. “But because I’m not, I come off as offensive. Men will actually message me to say that I made them feel some type of way. Okay, I hurt your little feelings, but the same men treat women like that every day. It’s like they’re completely unaware of what they’re doing. Take someone like Cardi B. I’m not mad at her and it’s not her fault; it’s institutional racism, it’s profiting off of blackness without black bodies or communal respect. It’s so unfortunate, but what am I supposed to do, shut up?”

Blunt, animated, and unapologetic, Junglepussy posts to Twitter multiple times a day and invites viewers along even as she gets racially profiled on a train in Europe and criticized for wearing a wig by a demeaning masseuse. Writing in all caps, she treats negative occurrences with the same urgency as her tour dates and acting debut -- after all, they are all part of her everyday life. “It comes from a combination of being on the internet during the AIM and Myspace days and having a mother who made me handwrite my reasons for wanting something,” she expresses. “When I wanted a new cell phone or something, she would tell me to write her a letter. So I’m used to spelling out the things I want people to consider.”

On Instagram, her point of view is given texture. Like most artists, her homepage is a trophy shelf of her best fashion moments and interactions with family and friends. You’ll find her rocking Asai and Telfar and any one of her wigs. But for every dolled-up picture, there is a shot of her with her hair wrapped up or her goofing off without makeup. In the live feature, we frequently see her alone in bed thinking aloud. On the eve of our conversation, she logged on barefaced and in a hoodie to talk about the unique annoyance of “dusty niggas” and the revelation that she might be asexual. Part of an industry that tells black women they must satisfy the male gaze at all times to stay relevant, her nonchalant attitude about posting with her durag on feels comforting. To those who dare be critical, she often beats them to the punch with sly jokes about her chosen look (like the decision to call the style beneath her wigs “Travis Scott Braids”).

Her balance of animation and awareness has made Junglepussy an icon to the hoards of teens and twenty-somethings looking for guidance from someone who feels like an admittedly faulted cousin rather than an authoritative figure. They pledge their allegiance to her doctrine in the form of shirts featuring such tweets as, “WHY WOULD I CARE TO BE LIKED BY TERRIBLE PPL WITH BAD TASTE [?!]” and selfies with her positive-affirmation filled calendar tacked to their wall. Despite the fanfare (which she happily retweets), she confesses that she never set out to be anything other than herself.

“People say [that I’m a wellness expert] but I have never told people how to live,” she adds. “I share my experiences with the world. I never knew that I was practicing self-love or any of the terms they use for click-bait. I was just raised to take care of myself, to want better, to eat the best foods that I can, and it’s spilling over. I’m still learning, but I’m glad my fans are taking something from these experiences, [and] especially black people because we have a complicated relationship with health.”

Born in Brooklyn to Trinidadian and Jamaican parents, Junglepussy (née Shayla McHale), was raised in a family that valued self-love above all else. She recalls being met with disgust when she requested McDonald’s as a child and the nutritionally rebellious phase she went through after graduating high school at 16. “I was deeply influenced by my mom, my grandparents, and my father. Maybe it’s just a West Indian thing,” she says in a noticeably softened voice. “We love to eat well and live life. To do that you have to take care of yourself. When you take care of yourself, you’re able to take care of others around you.”

At this stage in her life, wellness is paramount. She raps about juicing, is always on the hunt for vegan makeup brands and has an obsession with the aforementioned healthy grocery store chain, Trader Joe’s. To the music industry, it makes her hard to categorize. But her ascendance as an unorthodox wellness idol has allowed her to venture into spaces traditionally divorced from black women and rap. She’s been courted by Columbia University to give a talk about self-love, and Harvard to provide lectures on healthy living. Last year, she was given the nod of approval from foodie news out-



Top by Pyer Moss,  
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lets like *Bonappetit* (the only female rapper to be featured recently) and; successfully launched a line of natural Junglepussy Juices. She's refuted the idea that green-living is for white, wealthy people with unique access.

"Everybody takes something away from [my messages] not just black girls. But my fellow black girls need to see somebody like me discussing [wellness]," she adds before going into her preferred routine. "I'm into deep breathing, writing, continuous creation, and finding other ways to express myself without feeling like just because I am a black artist, I have to speak about this one thing. I make it a point to discuss black women I look up to, really successful people in general. I've become serious about the voices around me because it's easy to go on your phone and get so many opinions from terrible people, and if you allow them to get into your head you'll believe it too. So I've built my own world because no one else is looking out for me, especially as a black woman!"

Junglepussy's multiplicity has put her in the company of hip hop's most transcendent female MCs. The young rapper, who admits to initial trepidation when she released her first songs on YouTube six years ago, now tells me, "I had a show with Megan Thee Stallion and Asian Doll last night. When I came the week before, I did a show with Cupcakke and Trina." While she's been a vocal critic of the commercialization and Eurocentric leanings of the current girl-power movement, Junglepussy has found power in being billed with other disruptive performers. For example, Chicago rapper Cupcakke mixes sexual comedy with LGBTQ+ support, while Megan Thee Stallion discusses the perks of college, twerking and anime.

Circling the ecosystems made famous by Lil' Kim and Nicki Minaj, their distinct brand of female rap is sex-positive, unapologetic and willing to take men, who have failed to please them emotionally or physically, to task. Moreover, it undermines the industry's impulse to paint black women in rap as one thing. "Female empowerment is embedded in our shows. It's reeking out of my lyrics," she tells me.

Junglepussy has proven to be so prolific that even Hollywood has caught the scent. Last year she was cast in the film, *Support the Girls* with Regina Hall. The film was included on President Obama's highly-shared list of top movies of 2018, has a 93% rating on Rotten Tomatoes, scored nomination from Independent Spirit Awards and Gotham Independent Film Awards, and won a New York Film Critics Circle Award. The film features Junglepussy as a waitress at a Hooters-like locale. She experiences racism under the "only one black girl per-shift" rule and is overlooked in favor of her white co-workers by the male clientele. The role earned her praise-worthy chatter across social media and even saw her named Oscar-worthy by *Pitchfork*.

"I realized that music is a service industry job as well. Peo-

ple expect things from musicians -- the music, the videos. The touching also resonated with me because when you're a public figure, people assume they have claim over your body. I also loved playing Danielle because she spoke out about the racial injustices [in] the workplace."

The role has also encouraged Junglepussy to find new ways to flex her acting chops. She created a video ecosystem she refers to as JPTV, that consists of videos she writes, shoots and acts in. The videos are campy and see her as different characters including Sean, a bearded man in a durag and Brown Sunshine Tarot, the tarot card reader.

"Aside from music I see myself doing more acting and more writing. My new music video and all my videos from now on will be JPTV, my own world. I can act in it, I can share my music in it, and it makes me feel comfortable and limitless. I've found a way to mesh all my worlds and all my interests into one."

One such interest is fashion. She's become an industry darling with and taste for '90s-esque finds and contemporary indie designer goods, who has appeared on Barneys catalogs among other things. "Every time I wear clothes I'm stopping traffic," she raps on the JP3 opener "State of the Union." Recently Instagrammed looks include a neon 2-piece with a matching bucket hat and the furry black boa wrapped around a painted nipple she rocked at the fall/winter 2019 Gypsy Sport show. She's also become known for her unmistakable collection of wigs.

"My favorite [wig] is the blonde rainbow -- that's my babyyyy," she sings. "I've always had colored hair from high school through college and even when I started my music career. Most of the women in my family have blonde hair, and I wanted to break away from that. But living in New York, being tall and black, that sort of thing draws attention."

Since her debut, she's worn her hair pink, multi-colored, bone straight, curly, styled and wrapped up. Her hair has become her veil -- an easily identifiable symbol that simultaneously allows her to hide her inner self when necessary.

"When I started to put myself online I didn't want to be noticed. I went through this black hair phase immediately after I dropped *Pregnant with Success*. But that disturbed my sense of self, and I had to wonder why I was trying to disappear."

As she charts a new path in her music and acting careers, Junglepussy has blurred the lines drawn around black women in music. Using the internet as her platform, she has created a visual and text-driven manifesto that encourages healthy eating, mental soundness and the art of not giving a fuck.

"Once upon a time I learned to stop shrinking myself. You have to claim your power; watering yourself down isn't helpful to anybody."

Dress by MSGM, Shoes by MSGM

