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Transgender and Black, Looking for an Audience

Commodore Barry Park is an unappealing mid-sized space on most days. It sits next to Farragut Projects, tucked a few blocks away from Fort Greene Park and its neighboring brownstones. But today is Aug. 22, Day 1 of the Afropunk Music Festival. It’s 5 p.m—the hundreds of attendees gathered under the hot sun press against the barricade separating them from the empty main stage. No one wants to miss a moment of Ms. Lauryn Hill, who’s scheduled as the next performer.

But Ms. Lauryn Hill isn’t the performer who gets on stage next. Transgender activist Cherno Biko leads a cavalcade of fellow protesters on stage to speak out against the violence wrought against black transgender bodies. Shagaysia Diamond, a redhead dressed in all black, is one of the protesters on a stage that promotes freedom; the banners that border it reads, “NO HOMOPHOBIA NO FATPHOBIA NO TRANSPHOBIA.”

At 37 years old, Shagaysia Diamond isn’t used to large crowds. She’s visibly nervous as she stands next to the more assured poet J Mase III as they announce a list of demands for the trans community. J Mase III proclaims his (“Hire and pay black trans performers!”) while Diamond stumbles through hers (“Ensure that trans venues are…transfriendly. Ensure that venues are trans frrr-friendly. Sorry.”).

Whatever nervousness Diamond has dissipates when she performs two original songs, including a soulful a capella version of “I Am Her,” a song she wrote as she was transitioning at the age of 14. The song touches on her dark autobiography: “There’s an
outcast in everybody’s life and I am her.” After the performance audience cheers and Diamond is warmed.

“"I didn’t realize how many people had actually heard me sing until after I got off the stage,” Diamond would say later. “There were people walking up to me like, ‘Oh my god,’ That’s so awesome.” It’s a peak in her very young career. She’s just getting her career off the ground in her third year as a New York City resident.

The fact that Diamond is still alive is a blessing that’s too uncommon. The life expectancy of a black transgender woman is 35 years, according #BlackLivesMatter Co-Founder Alicia Garza. Transgender black women are being killed; in October, Zella Ziona became the 17th reported murder. Including other races, there’s been 23 transgender murders, an increase from last year’s 12. Twenty-one of them were of color.

While the rise of Caitlyn Jenner and Laverne Cox has renewed focus on transgender issues, the conditions of transgender life in America are still dire. According to Injustice at Every Turn, a survey published in 2011 by the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, transgenders were unemployed at twice the rate of the general population. The respondents to that survey were also four times as likely as the general population to have an annual household income of less than $10,000. That same year, the Williams Institute, a sect of the UCLA School of Law that focuses on sexual and gender identity law, estimated that there was about 700,000 Americans who identify as transgender. It’s a rough estimate partially because of how the fear of societal prejudice forces many to choose not to disclose their status.

Stats like these make it clear that Afropunk is a two-day reprieve for a need that ought to be a bare minimum 365 days a year: Spaces that embrace black transgender artists. Now, Shagaysia Diamond is trying to be the odds and make it as a black transgender artist.
Diamond smiles as she speaks and sometimes interrupts her thoughts with small fits of laughter. She’s nervous on stage but ebullient in person.

Her optimism clothes her prior trauma. Diamond spent her 20s in prison after convicted for armed robbery. Although she doesn’t into much detail regarding what she actually did, Diamond admits to committing the crime because she desperate to continue he transition process. The decade-long prison sentence sent her through a period of abject darkness. She spent her time as a recluse, staring at her fellow prisoners through her prison window as she fought depression. She wonders if she’ll ever sing the lyrics she wrote during those days; those words are traumatic triggers and are left unsaid.

Diamond has since been spending her 30s making up for time lost. In 2012, she moved to from Michigan to New York City for a fresh start and to kickstart a music career at an age where most artists — especially hip-hop artists and singers — continue with their prime creative years behind them. But New York City is unkind to most newcomers with artistic ambitions. Diamond is no exception; she spent her first few months living in shelters that she says is like another prison system.

Diamond settled down in a Brooklyn apartment for a while before moving up to another one in the Bronx’s Allerton neighborhood. It didn’t take long for the neighborhood to reveal its dangers to Diamond. Back in October, her apartment had still unpacked containers. There was still an NYPD marker across the street from her building’s entrance; someone was shot and killed the day before.

Still, there’s work to be done. It’s a Saturday afternoon on Halloween weekend and Diamond is sitting in a Lower East Side apartment kitchen with blunt in one hand and a
half-empty bottle of red dragonfruit-flavored Vitaminwater resting on the glass table. She’s laughing with friends: rapper Genuwine Beauty who made the sex transition last year (the two met during the taping of the Love and Hip-Hop: Hollywood reunion show) and their music producer Idris Swatts. After laughing as Swatts recounts a failed late-night rendezvous with a female friend, the trio migrates across the room to a recording booth the size of a large box.

It takes 30 minutes and a quick rehearsal before Diamond gets into the booth’s orange incandescence. With Swatts stationed at a laptop, the beat starts and Diamond sings the hook: “If I do it once/ You better believe it boy, I can do it twice.” She switches the pronoun upon repetition.

When she finishes, Swatts partially lifts his cap and scratch his hair before chiming in with some direction: “I feel like that was just a sound check. I really want to hear you go in.”

With a nod, she records the song again and then once more. The back-and-forth process continues until they finally emerge with “Betta believe it,” a slimy hip-hop-and-R&B blend backed by (Genuwine Beauty cites Mary J. Blige’s “Real Love” as an influence). It’s roughly mixed; the vocal level is markedly higher than the instrumental and Diamond is planning on redoing the track soon.

The genial studio sessions like this are not a commonality for Genuwine and Diamond. The Swatts session cost $30 per hour, a fraction of the amount for major label, denser production. The two aren’t working with much disposable income. After spending time in a Brooklyn shelter she likens to prison, Diamond made the move to a low-rent apartment in a high-risk neighborhood in the Bronx (in October, there was a shooting homicide that happened right across the street from her apartment building). Since moving to New York City this year, Genuwine has been living in a women’s shelter in midtown Manhattan.

Genuwine and Diamond aren’t strangers to discrimination, either. Genuwine has had her enthusiasm met with condescension.
“They dwell on you as if you’re nobody,” Genuwine says. “You’re just a guy in drag, a wig and all this stuff. They establish us as different people instead people who just do music period.”

Diamond says she’s had situations where she was shunned by potential collaborators once they learned she was transgender. A couple wanted her to fit an image, ignoring her personal story while pushing her to become some facsimile of Beyoncé or Nicki Minaj. One wanted her to outright hide who she was.

“There was another studio [a friend] tried to get me to go to. She was like, ‘You gotta dress like a boy in order to come,’” Diamond says. “I haven’t dressed as a boy in over 20 years, so to ask me to do something like that is insulting.”

Diamond and co. converse before recording.

Stan Lucas has been managing mainly “straight, hardcore hip-hop” artists, since 2006. The Atlanta resident has dated transgender, so he’s witnessed the abuse and struggles they go through firsthand.

There were transgender artists who approached Lucas about possibly managing them, but he hesitated out of fear of embarrassing his male clients. He finally took a chance on July 2014 before the fourth annual Atlanta Underground Music Awards. The event is regularly preluded by a weeklong events, and that year, Lucas decided to throw in an LGBT night that showcased the community’s artists. The performing artists approached Lucas after the performance to tell him they needed spaces like these.
It was enough feedback to inspire him to found the The Trans Entertainment Network, a label and artist management company. T.E.N.’s coming out party took place at a March showcase held at Atlanta’s Club Kryptonite. When Lucas saw that it was a packed house watching transgender singers, models and fashion designers, he believed T.E.N. had a shot at success. His motivation is a combination of capitalist ambition and empathy towards a silenced population.

“[Most] People don’t see a market in it,” Lucas says. "All you’re seeing is the drag queens. That’s what mainstream society sees. But me living in the world, I know what it is. That’s one of the things we’re gonna be bringing out and opening up: We’re gonna show that it’s not a joke or a freak show.”

It's hard to estimate exactly how many labels like T.E.N because of their limited online presence. In its gestation phase, T.E.N has the same problem. Its social media presence is still minute with its Facebook page sitting steady at just 250 likes. The numbers nor the odds do not deter Lucas’s ambition. T.E.N. also has just three artists under its banner: New Orleans rapper Keyanna Monae, New York City’s Scandelle, Nashville’s Giselle Nicole and Genuwine. (Shagaysia Diamond was a T.E.N. artist at one point. They split after Diamond became to busy to commit.)

“They need to help push it,” Lucas says, referring to his artists. “Because a lot of people are too embarrassed or are making it into a mockery type thing.”

The heteronormativity of mainstream culture is one of the biggest obstacles in T.E.N’s way, but there’s been some cracks in that barrier. A notable recent fissure came in July 4, 2012 when Frank Ocean posted a Tumblr letter where he admitted his first love was a man. Although he refused to label himself a bisexual, the revelation was by all accounts the first such declaration for mainstream modern R&B. His debut album, channel ORANGE, was released six days later to massive critical acclaim and solid commercial success.

There’s also been recent indie successes like openly gay rappers Cakes da Killa and Le1f. But all of the LGBT community’s strides in black mainstream music have been cisgender success. Going back a few decades, openly gay singer Sylvester, known as the Queen of Disco, is perhaps the closest we have to a black transgender success in popular music. Known for his androgynous appearance, gender ambivalent wardrobe
and falsetto singing style, Sylvester charted three Hot 100 hits — “Dance (Disco Heat),” “You Make Me Feel (Mighty Real)” and “I (Who Have Nothing)” — and became a unifying force under the disco lights before passing away from AIDS-related complications in 1988.

While the mainstream sphere hasn’t been breached since, there’s been ground broken in other genres. Jordana LeSesne, professionally known as 1.8.7, rose to fame in the mid-90s drum 'n' bass producer whose career halted after a brutal hate crime in 2000 left her with nerve damage. She’s scoring Laverne Cox’s upcoming Free CeCe documentary. In 2014, mezzo-soprano violinist Tona Brown became the first transgender woman of color to perform at Carnegie Hall. She’s proud of her achievement but is still well aware that success stories like hers are rare.

“I’m not the norm at all,” Brown says. “And there’s still a lot of struggles for me as well because people don’t know where to put me, what to do, how to market a transgender artist.”

However, the struggle isn’t just about giving transgender artists a platform. Record labels won’t invest unless they see a market for them. Sony Music, Columbia and Wilderness Media & Entertainment (founded by Logo network Founder Matt Farber) saw a loyal one worth an estimated $610 billion in annual buying power,” according to a press release. In 2006, the potential revenue inspired them to launch Music With a Twist, “the first major record label dedicated to identifying and developing lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, and transgender (LGBT) artists along with creating innovative music compilations with a distinctly gay ‘twist.’”

But it was clear the venture focused far more on getting LGBT audience than supporting LGBT acts. Out of the five albums it released, only one is by one of its LGBT signees: the indie rock band Gossip’s Music for Men, which unimpressively peaked at 164 on the Billboard 200. Besides that, there are two compilations — a soundtrack for The L Word and Revolutions, a hodgepodge showcase LGBT of potential Twist signees — and two Kathy Griffin comedy albums. Discogs.com, a database the keeps information on audio recordings, lists Griffin’s 2009 album Suckin’ It for the Holidays as its final release.
Another hurdle for T.E.N. is getting the means to push its mainstream ambitions. Odds such as anti-trans discrimination and high costs have prevented many of Lucas’s artists from getting much studio time. Some never been to a studio at all. Sometimes the cumulative effect those obstacles lead to internal doubts.

“They put up their own barriers,” Lucas says of his artists. “They’re quick to say what people won’t do: ‘Ain’t no studio gonna mess with us. Ain’t nobody gonna do this with us.’ And I’m saying you kind of put up all these obstacles before you persue it. Already you’re defeating it.”

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Shagaysia Diamond records a remix with Swatts' help.

Genuwine is still struggling to find her musical identity in a notoriously expensive city after moving from Virginia. She’s been doing music since she was 12 years old and has been influenced by the lyrically dense style of golden age hip-hop legends Nas and Queen Latifah.

Up until last year, she was professionally a male artist known as Reason. The inactive but still-accessible SoundCloud profile features songs that show a dedication to lyricism; he freestyles about a “life so complicated” and throws ribald, gender ambivalent punchlines over Childish Gambino’s “Bonfire” instrumental. Elsewhere, he’s throwing braggadocio over aggressive, trap-based production. Reason sounds confident but his voice is noticeably distorted and muffled.
It's the same deal as Genuwine Beauty: Amateur recording quality with an emphasis on lyrics. In the slight, southern drawl, Genuwine explains that the gender transition doesn't inform her recent music as much as her commercial hopes do. Her more recent SoundCloud additions feature her rhyming over instrumentals in tune with mainstream hip-hop’s direction: southern production (2004 throwback “Knuck If You Buck”), melodic minimalism (“Don't Panic) and a bit of Beyoncé (the “Drunk in Love” remix).

Genuwine would rather not make the shift toward commercial sounds — she calls it a “compromise.” New York City is filed with young hopefuls who’re looking to break into the mainstream sphere through that same compromise. But as a transgender artist, it’s a chance to become more accessible to a population that almost immediately discredits her voice: “They automatically think we’re freaks or we’re sex symbols.”

The music industry’s album sales are a fraction of what they were in its 2000 peak. With new talent acquisition budgets imploding these days, the only undeniable black female superstars are Minaj and Beyoncé, whose albums easily sell six figures in units. The conditions have forced record labels to take fewer risks and have driven aspiring artists to pop-rap mimicry without honing a distinctive musical identity.

Genuwine says she never went that far since golden age hip-hop remains her key influence. But she is aware of a more pronounced version of the Eddie Murphy effect: that crossover star that defies race and gender of which there can only be one. “You would have to have a mainstream lesbian, a mainstream bisexual, a mainstream gay person, and a mainstream transgender,” Genuwine says in her optimistic prognosis.

The Afropunk gig currently stands as Shagaysia Diamond’s largest audience. She usually performs at small venues and college campuses. On one rainy Wednesday night in October, she performs two songs in Harlem’s National Action Network center, a meeting space with a storefront exterior. This is an LGBT open mic attended by a crowd of about a dozen that includes fellow artists, activists and supporters. There are rows of empty burgundy chairs behind them. Like Afropunk, it’s a space that promotes freedom.

None of the studio limitations heard throughout Diamond’s catalog are present in person. Her singing talent is front-and-center in an a capella performance, and she especially shines in her second song, a cathartic, powerful rendition of the gospel hymn
"His Eye Is on the Sparrow." In this Harlem night, here she was baring her soul for whomever would listen.

Not every night is like this. Sometimes small-sized venues she performs at are filled with attendees. But the very existence of Shagaysia Diamond as a performer also works as a reminder that the prominence of Caitlyn Jenner and Lavern Cox is deeper than, “Are they making things better?” The transgender community is still forced to prove its humanity to a society that continuously discounts it. Against such odds, being a black transgender artist is a form of rebellion — and so is living.

Diamond performs for a small crowd at the National Action Network center.

Sources:

Injustice at Every Turn

Cherno Biko, Public Speaker 15:30 Interview

Tona Brown, Mezzo Soprano — 28:04 Interview

Shagaysia Diamond, Transgender rapper/singer — 20:52 , 22:47 Interview

Genuwine Beauty, Transgender rapper/singer — 23:33, 14:55 Interview

Stan Lucas, Trans Entertainment Network founder — 22:42 Interview

Jordana LeSesne a.k.a. 1.8.7., 23:05 Interview


