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What can we learn from rapper and provocateur, Azealia Banks?

By Rob Dozier

“My name is Azealia Banks and I’m from New York City. Are you ready to have a good fuckin’ time?”

It’s no easy feat for an artist to distill down what they’re trying to do creatively and artistically in one line, but for Banks, making sure you know where she’s reppin, and just having a “good fuckin’ time,” does seem to hit the main points. It’s April 2015, and the Harlem-born rapper is kicking off her set on Coachella’s opening day, her second appearance at the California music festival, the first time being in 2012.

In the three-year gap between those performances, Banks had gone from promising rap neophyte to established artist, carving out a lane as someone willing to experiment with different sounds, pulling from hip-hop to house and dance music with three projects—a mixtape, *Fantasea*, an EP, *1991*, leading up to her first full-length album, *Broke With Expensive Taste*, all debuting to varying amounts of critical acclaim. She was at the height of her career.

But Banks’ music was only part of the picture. During this stretch, her public image was in shambles. She had signed a record deal, but was then dropped from said record deal after clashing with the label. And she was trailed by controversy, enduring harsh criticism for using a homophobic slur against celebrity news blogger Perez Hilton during a tiff on Twitter while engaging in similarly offensive and nasty tirades with former One Direction member Zayn Malik, and 14-year-old Disney star Skai Jackson, and plenty more. And even more consequentially, she’d gotten into a series of high-profile feuds with powerful people in the music industry, many of whom were her former collaborators—people like the producers Pharrell and Diplo and rapper T.I., to name a few. This all had left a dark cloud hanging over her burgeoning career, and it didn’t take long for drama and Azealia Banks to become synonymous.
This accumulation of ill will left Banks with something to prove at her second Coachella performance, this time on one of the festival’s main stages—that the music was still good enough to hang around, despite the spectacle.

In the set, she careened through her eclectic catalogue, putting on display all the things that make her such an exciting performer—her cool delivery over often rhythmically dense instrumentation, her ability to switch from syrupy vocal lines to hefty rhymes, and her propensity for packing enough ideas for four songs into one.

But it didn’t turn out to be the turnaround she needed, despite being described as “her most electrifying performance to date” by one Billboard writer. On the contrary, in the years since, Banks’ career has moved further in the opposite direction—positioning her now as cult figure as opposed to potential superstar. Banks is now thought of as an unhinged social media personality first, instead of the inventive musician she is.

But her erratic behavior, and the reaction to it, might tell us something about standards to which we hold our pop stars. And her position in the pop landscape suggests something about which artists can court controversy and not suffer consequences.

There’s a prevailing belief that artists operate on a different set of rules from the rest of us. In order to be truly creative, one can’t be shackled by the rules of decorum, or social contracts that govern other people. American artists dating back to Elvis and Janis Joplin, Madonna and Prince, Nirvana and N.W.A., all pushed popular music and culture forward in some way by deciding the rules that they were going to operate by. Either by the way they depicted or expressed sexuality or violence or a political position, they changed things for the artists that came behind them. And their disregard for what was expected of them is why we still remember them. Azealia Banks lives by these same rules.
In an extremely candid interview on Hot 97 in 2014 she laid it all out: “I’m a creative individual,” she said. “I have the right to think and say and do whatever the fuck I feel. You understand?”

In the field of her contemporaries, especially in hip-hop, she’s not alone in her thinking. The main throughline of rapper and producer Kanye West’s career, for example, has been him thinking and saying and doing whatever he feels—like when he said “George Bush doesn’t care about black people” on live television after Hurricane Katrina, or when he stormed on stage in righteous anger when Taylor Swift won the VMA for Best Video over Beyoncé, or his erratic use of social media. As much as his outbursts have gotten Kanye in trouble, if you’re a fan of his, it’s also part of what you love about him.

His outspoken nature has been a defining characteristic of West as an artist and as a public figure, and it’s only recently gotten in the way of his career. In 2018, as politics have dominated conversations around culture, his comments about slavery being a “choice,” and his persistent backing of Donald Trump which culminated in the two meeting in October, caused some to question their support of West. For the first time Yeezy, West’s sneaker line with Adidas, failed to sell out in the first day of their release, which some read as a sign his antics were having a material impact. But it wasn’t enough to derail him completely. He’s still one of the most influential and financially successful artists in the world, with his work spanning music and fashion putting his net worth at more than $140 million, and multiple albums he’s worked on this year have reached the top of the charts.

In 2018, our appetite for artists like West, who disregard all rules of decorum has only increased, and artists pushing the limits of what we’re willing to tolerate are only growing in number. Take the late rapper XXXTentacion, whose history of domestic abuse against his pregnant ex-girlfriend did not slow him down from being one of the most streamed artists of 2018, and New York rapper 6ix9ine, who has collabed with Nicki Minaj and Kanye West, after pleading guilty to having sexual interactions with an underage girl.
While stories aren’t entirely new in 2018, what changing is the perceived responsibility that’s now placed on pop stars, and how some artists feel at odds with such a burden. And we see playing out in real time who has the luxury of deviating from the mold of what a pop star should look and act like. Why can XXXTentacion have artists clamouring to appear on his posthumous album, but Azealia Banks is forced to largely work outside of the mechanism of the music industry? And why does claiming yourself as a fan of Banks carry a certain political baggage, that other artists don’t?

Azealia Banks was born and raised in Harlem, and took to performing at a young age, first in theater. As a teen, she found her way to the prestigious Fiorello H. Laguardia High School of Performing Arts otherwise known as the “Fame school” after it served as the setting for the 1980 film, *Fame*. It boasts other notable alumni like Nicki Minaj, Slick Rick and Jennifer Aniston. There, Banks studied acting for her first years of high school. In an interview with VICE’s Broadly, she said she always knew she would be famous.

But after a string of bad auditions and rejections made it seem that acting wasn’t her ticket, at the age of 16, Banks decided to try something else. At the time, she was dating a boy who would freestyle and rap with his friends, so she starting joining in. Soon she realized that she had a knack for rapping, so much so that she started trying to record her own music. Eventually she decided to leave high school to focus entirely on music.

Banks quickly advanced as an artist showing promise in her rhymes and ability to command a room, and started performing at clubs and parties around New York City. In her first year making music she recorded two tracks, “Gimme a Chance” and “Seventeen,” which she sent around to various artists and producers, catching the attention of American producer Diplo, who eventually aided her in signing a development deal with London-based label XL Recordings at 17. But after making a huge leap from indie artist to signing with a high-profile imprint, she left over
disagreements with the label and her producers after a few years of working with them with no major releases, a sign of what was to come.

But first came the release that put Azealia Banks on the map: she jolted hip-hop and the broader music industry to attention with the track "212" (a reference to the area code used in upper Manhattan), which was released at the end of 2011. It reached the top of the charts across Europe, and was certified Platinum in the UK, raising her profile beyond the New York hip-hop scene. She moved with a confidence that may not have seemed earned, but her swagger was convincing. "You could see I been that bitch since the pamper/And that I am that young sis, the beacon/The bitch who wants to compete..." She rapped with a confidence of a seasoned performer, because at just 21, she was one. And her unfettered use of language—notably her use of the word "cunt" 10 times on the track—made her stand out in a field of artists trying to make it in the mainstream. The track's popularity earned her another record deal with Interscope Records. For a moment, she was hip-hop's darling, despite characteristically, having no regard for what the gatekeepers of hip-hop thought of her.

But as her star was on the rise as one of hip-hop's most promising new talents, she was also started gaining a certain notoriety—with one inappropriate outburst after another—as volatile and self-righteous, petty and even cruel. Banks’ ability to bend and mold language to her will served her well as a lyricist, but in another way it held her back. Her ability to lob incisive insults at other celebrities and artists with much larger fanbases than her own has earned her the label of industry pariah, or even worse, villain. Rather than being known for her music, she became more widely known as a shit-starter. It’s what you hate or you love about her.

A few weeks back, I was at a housewarming party for a friend who escaped to Brooklyn from Ridgewood, Queens, anticipating next year’s L train shutdown. Most of the night they were busy floating around, so I found myself having to making small-talk with a few people I didn’t know, before finding an acquaintance I’d met briefly before. The
conversation drifted to what we did for work. They explained to me at length what their position was at the tech startup they worked at and I told them I was a writer, and that I was particularly interested in music. Naturally, the conversation drifted to who some of our favorite artists are, specifically in hip-hop.

I mentioned a few rappers off the top of my head—like Long Beach luminary Vince Staples and self-love guru Junglepussy. And then my mouth started to form the word “Azealia,” but something stopped me. Would this person even know who Azealia Banks is? And even if they did, their opinion of her probably isn’t a positive one. What will they think about me if I share my fandom? Will they think I somehow endorse her more inflammatory comments? It wasn’t the first time I’d been hesitant to share the fact that I’m a fan of Banks.

The conversation moved onto something else, and I didn’t bring it up again. But it did make me think about where that anxiety came from. In the past few years, a new standard has emerged by which we judge the moral characters of artists, usually referred to, snidely, as “cancel culture.”

If an artist does something problematic, like say, attacking a 14-year-old on Twitter, they get “cancelled”—meaning people, usually on social media, decide that they’re not worth supporting anymore. And if you defend them or still support them in some way, it’s perceived that you condone their bad behavior.

Comedian Kevin Hart was cancelled after homophobic tweets of his were unearthed, and had to step down from hosting the Oscars. Rita Ora was cancelled when she released a disingenuous song about kissing other girls. Kanye West wasn’t cancelled after he announced his support for Donald Trump, but his comments on slavery were enough to push him over the edge. Writer and director Lena Dunham could lead a team in “getting cancelled,” if it was a sport in the Olympics. And, Azealia Banks has been “cancelled” repeatedly.
It’s reflexical, but gratifying, to declare that someone isn’t even worth paying attention to anymore. And I would be lying if I said it doesn’t feel good to be sanctimonious, deeming who is or isn’t worth people’s time. But normally, that’s where the conversation ends.

The reality is, for a major artist like Lena Dunham or Kanye West, getting “cancelled” is just a blip on their radar. Kanye West still had a No. 1 album this year, and Lena Dunham is still on the hook for several major projects in production. One semi-thoughtful apology—or not—and a week later, we’ve all moved on to the next person who made a gaffe. Every artist and celebrity is aware how one misstep or offensive comment could have an effect on their career, so there’s a lot of tightrope walking, which, can lead to a feeling of disingenuousness. But this could be what makes Banks so refreshing to her fans: Her persona isn’t polished and it’s often problematic, but it feels real and authentic in a way that most other artists are not willing to do. And her music emerges from the same spirit.

In a 2013 interview with [V], a popular TV station in Australia, an interviewer asked Banks what it felt like to constantly be under scrutiny. She replied matter-of-factly, “I don’t care. Your problems with me are not my problems. Those are your problems.”

Popular art that feels dangerous or revelatory is increasingly rare. Banks’ willingness, or even compulsion, to ignore what people think of her, is central to her appeal. And it’s exciting to see a woman, specifically a black woman, so unconcerned with other people’s opinion of her, so committed to doing things on her own terms. By going to places where others stop short, her public persona feels truly transgressive.

Wesley Morris, a critic for the New York Times, wrote about this emerging standard of judging artist and how it stifles discussion of work and its true merits or shortcomings. He characterized it as the latest installment in, “The Morality Wars.” “It robs us of what is messy and tense and chaotic and extrajudicial about art,” he wrote in a “Should Art Be
"The risk should come from the art itself, the discomfort it can produce and whether it can transcend that discomfort."

The online discourse around the work has become an essential step in marketing it. In Kanye’s case, what better marketing strategy could there have been for ye, his solo 2018 album, than his publicity tour touting his support for Trump. And I'm sure at least some of the listens that brought XXXTentacion’s Skins to No. 1 were hate-listens.

But female artists, Banks included, that deviate from the traditional pop star image, opting for messier or less traditional messaging, don’t get the same benefit of the doubt. We aren't as patient with women that do things or make music that make us feel uncomfortable.

Azealia Banks is uncompromising. It’s what gotten her in so much trouble, but it’s also what make her music and her persona so intriguing. She has the musical talent that it would take to be a successful pop star, but she’s uninterested in making music to please, and her work benefits for it. Instead of dealing in trap sounds that dominate radio today, she often opts for house and more experimental production.

Banks is always willing to say what others may not be, often in an emotionally raw or “messy” way, but often she’s insightful, though her prickly delivery makes it hard to digest for some. In one of her more well-known feuds, she railed against Iggy Azalea, the white Australian rapper, who dominated 2014 with her single “Fancy.” Banks called the song “cultural smudging” because Azalea was nominated for a Grammy for Best Rap Album and she saw as Azalea stealing her culture and getting credit for it. However it was delivered, Banks’ criticism of Azalea was rooted in genuine grievances and spoke truth about systematic racism. In a interview with Hot 97 she broke down in tears about how worried she was about how Azalea’s success would make young black kids feel. It was a moment of emotional honesty most public figures would never give us.
There are precedents for Banks’ place in music, with her off-the-cuff statements and drive to stir the pot. There’s a history of women artists who have come up against barriers in the music industry for also being too “messy,” or difficult to work with or hard to swallow.

When British-Sri Lankan rapper M.I.A. first started releasing music in the early aughts, it was clear that she was unlike most popular musicians. Not only was her work sonically fresh—a patchwork of electroclash and grime and hip hop and sounds from around the globe, for which she received much praise—she was fiercely political, calling on her background as a refugee from Sri Lanka, and her views formed by the country’s civil war, which found itself all throughout her music. Her first album, *Arular*, in 2005, debuted to acclaim and criticism for accusations that she supported terrorism, which she vehemently denied. “Growin’ up, brewin’ up, guerilla gettin’ trained up/Look out, look out from over the rooftop,” she rapped on “Fire, Fire,” a lyric that helped stoked the fears around her politics.

Concurrently, following the release of his first album *The College Dropout* in 2004, Kanye West had a growing reputation as something of an agitator, comparing himself to figures like Michael Jackson, Leonardo da Vinci and God in addition to deeming himself the “voice of this generation,” only cementing his celebrity.

For M.I.A. though, the fascination with her as a sort of refugee pop star started to wane. Over time, she committed a series of gaffes—like when she asked why black pop stars were supporting the Black Lives Matter movement and not Muslim Lives Matter or Syrian Lives Matter, resulting in her being removed from Afropunk’s 2016 lineup, or the multiple times she’s threatened to leak her own music in protest of her label or the industry. And she found herself having to defend herself in media more and more and her authenticity was called into question. And an incident at the 2014 Super Bowl, where she flashed a middle finger during the Halftime show, landed her in legal trouble with the NFL, causing her to feel even more disillusioned with the music industry. Eventually
she started to lose much of her cultural capital, and while she continues to release music, her career has shrunk in scale. Much like Banks, she could not be easily digested as a personality, putting her at odds with the industry.

But in comparison to M.I.A and even West, Banks feels further on the spectrum of the animosity she elicits. Her history of flippantly using homophobic slurs on Twitter, launching the word “faggot,” at other celebrities or anyone issuing any public criticism of her, like one VICE writer who she launched a flurry of homophobic messages at after he criticized her for homophobia. Given her proximity to ballroom culture, borrowing slang and musical sensibilities, it worked to alienate a good portion of her fanbase, which is at least most vocally made up gay men.

As a queer person myself, I understand and support the choice for someone to stop supporting Banks for her behavior. But the judgement of art on purely on the basis of the moral soundness of the artist worries me, and it seems to be leveled at female artists much more than it does for male artists. R&B singer Chris Brown, can be forgiven for his history of domestic abuse and stalking of his exes, singer Rihanna and actress Karreuche Tran, with just an apology.

What would an arc of redemption look like for someone like Azealia Banks? Whether or not that’s something that she would be interested in, an artist’s responsibility shouldn’t be to be our moral guides, instead we should think of them as cartographers.

All kinds of artists are forced to grapple with these pressures, figuring out what they want to say and to whom they are responsible. Singer-songwriter Mitski isn’t someone normally associated with conflict, but she has shouldered the burden of being pressured to sanitize her music for wider acceptance, particularly as a woman. “We prop up artists as if they were politicians. Artists are often fucked-up people,” she said about her own struggles with living up to that standard in an interview with GQ this August. She’s notably cagey about her personal life, but is known for making music that’s impressively vulnerable and he’s struggled with fans categorizing her as a “sad girl” artist, minimizing
the emotional complexity of her work. “There’s a lot of push towards ‘correct’ art, art by outstanding citizens who are ‘perfect’ in every way, but we need artists that represent every emotion. Some of our emotions are destructive. It would be unhealthy if people didn’t have an outlet for sadness or anger.” There is no “correct” art to be made, in the same way that there is no correct way to be a person. Artists like M.I.A. and Mitski and even Banks, with their wildly different approaches, remind us with their music that an artist can show us the beauty of the human experience just as much as they can show us the darker, scarier sides as well. They can teach us something about ourselves by showing us their realities.

Banks has if anything, shown us who she is as a person through her work.

Now in 2018, Banks’ career feels like it’s in a bit of a reset. She’s working on a new album Fantasea II, with a new record label, eOne which is set to come out next year, on top of a Christmas EP, Icy Colors Change, which dropped in late 2018. She’s still touring internationally, outside of the festival circuit that she used to frequent. And out-of-left-field, in typical Azealia Banks fashion, she’s started a modestly successful cosmetics venture, CheapyXO, selling soaps and facial cleansers almost exclusively to her fans, the “Kunt Brigade,” who are as devoted to her as ever.

Superstardom may elude her, but Banks’ cult continues. The public has been slow to forgive and understand female artists like her. By tracking what happens next in her career, we may get a chance to see if that’s changing.