

SANTIGOLD

DJ LYNNÉE DENISE

ILLUSTRATION BY LINDSEY BAILEY

The Philly-born, punk-schooled singer, songwriter, and producer Santigold comes from a lineage of fierce, independent, business-savvy, cutting-edge, socially conscious women who find a way to produce and not be (publicly) swallowed up by the by-products of success. Her fifteen-year presence in the music industry is no small thing, and when you check her ghostwriting credentials you'll see she's written for many of your favorite artists (Lily Allen, Ashlee Simpson, and Blaqstarr, to name a few). As a DJ, I'm a witness to her maturation, her growing global presence, and her interdisciplinary approach to the arts. Santigold embodies voices of the unsung.

Santi White was born and raised in Philadelphia, where her ear caught wind of the regional rhythm for which Philly is known. Not only was she within listening range of the Philadelphia soul sound and the masterful ministers of dance-floor activism (Gamble and Huff); she grew up alongside the burgeoning Soulquarian movement, a Questlove-led crew heralded as the founders of the annoyingly misnamed neo-soul music.

Santigold is a formally trained musician. She took her Philly soul education to one of the nation's most prestigious music schools, Wesleyan University, and double majored in African American studies and music. Significantly, sonic cultural

knowledge and intellectual curiosity show up in her vocal arrangements, drum patterns, and lyrics. Equally curious is the fact that she dropped out of college to become an A&R rep for Epic Records—a partial nod to her do-it-yourself punk roots, choosing the alternative route to her future.

Between 2003 and 2005 White worked with Bad Brains bassist Darryl Jenifer, placing herself in direct conversation with black punk (pre-Afro-punk) royalty. Santigold was the founding member and lead singer for the Philly-based punk band Stiffed, and she and Jenifer co-produced the band's two albums. This moment is significant due to the fact that black women have existed on the margins of punk music and culture for years. With her work with Stiffed we can trace Santi's footprints to NYC's and Philly's early 2000s underground punk and post-punk scene. Both Stiffed albums, *Sex Sells* (2003) and *Burned Again* (2005), are now part of a black punk archives that should be excavated.

It was on the East Coast punk scene where she was courted by London-based independent label Lizard King Records. This wouldn't be the first time that the UK, while poking their heads into American underground culture, would find some of our brightest; see N'dea Davenport, Jhelisa, Carleen Anderson, and early Detroit techno pioneers for proof. The UK soul scene (Soul II Soul, Massive

Attack, D'Influence, etc.) drew influences from diasporic Caribbean riddims, continental African polyrhythms, and black American funk. Santigold fits well within this tradition—this transnational artists community. By 2006, she was offered a solo contract by Lizard King.

When she finally dropped *Santogold* in 2008, she had staying power and exciting force behind her creative process. The album introduced us to the experimental nu-dub sounds of producer Diplo and pulled off that hard-to-achieve mature blend of electronic music and the “one drop,” a style of reggae described by Louis Chude-Sokei as dropping out the beat on the dominant 1 and 3 beats in 4/4 time, so that you begin your rhythm with absence. These musical devices were then accentuated by an unexpected black woman's new wave voice floating between and on top.

Santigold didn't rush into her next album, showing her to be a student of the school of Sade, who averaged a new album every two to four years. And I say yes! Let it marinate, experience life, take your time, do it right. By the time Santigold's *Master of My Make Believe* dropped on March 1, 2012, the second album was indeed a demonstration of artistic investment. She made bold musical decisions, pushing in the direction of a fusion that seems to draw on everything from the Talking Heads to the vocal antics of Poly Styrene. What came through most was Santigold's signature ability to deliver cross-pollinated music with measurable confidence.

When Santigold released her third studio album, *99¢*, in 2016, it sent me to Joan Armatrading and from there Grace Jones. In the retrospective glance, I found a thread—a shared dance on the

lines that connect UK new wave to roots reggae and Caribbean punk—musical elements of the Black Atlantic coupled with rhythmic traces of migration. I understand Santigold and her place in music to be somewhat of an anomaly, but only when juxtaposed against pop artists who shine bright under the light of America's marketable musical mediocrity. Santigold has been functioning at capacity in an underworld—a world that must be sought out and unearthed, an underworld without super video budgets and automatic radio play, where ticket prices do not exceed that of a car note.

I'd like to challenge readers to think of Santigold as a variation of Beyoncé, or better yet, think of them as variations of each other. While the two are read as opposite, it's only because we're not given much of an opportunity to interface with the large number of multifaceted black women who make music. I would argue that both women stand in their craft with high levels of artistic integrity and did so for at least a decade before being “discovered.” Both women have a clear commitment to the mastery of technical skills. And while the distinctions between the two are worth investigation, I'm moved by their collective drive and the evolutionary aspect of their respective practices. The fine tuning of every part of their projects is largely ignored because they are black women. People get real stingy when assigning the title genius to these particular bodies,

PLAYLIST

WITH STIFFED:

“Hold Tight,” 2005, *Burned Again*

WITH RES:

“Golden Boys,” 2001, on *Res's How I Do*

SOLO:

“You'll Find a Way,” 2008, *Santogold*

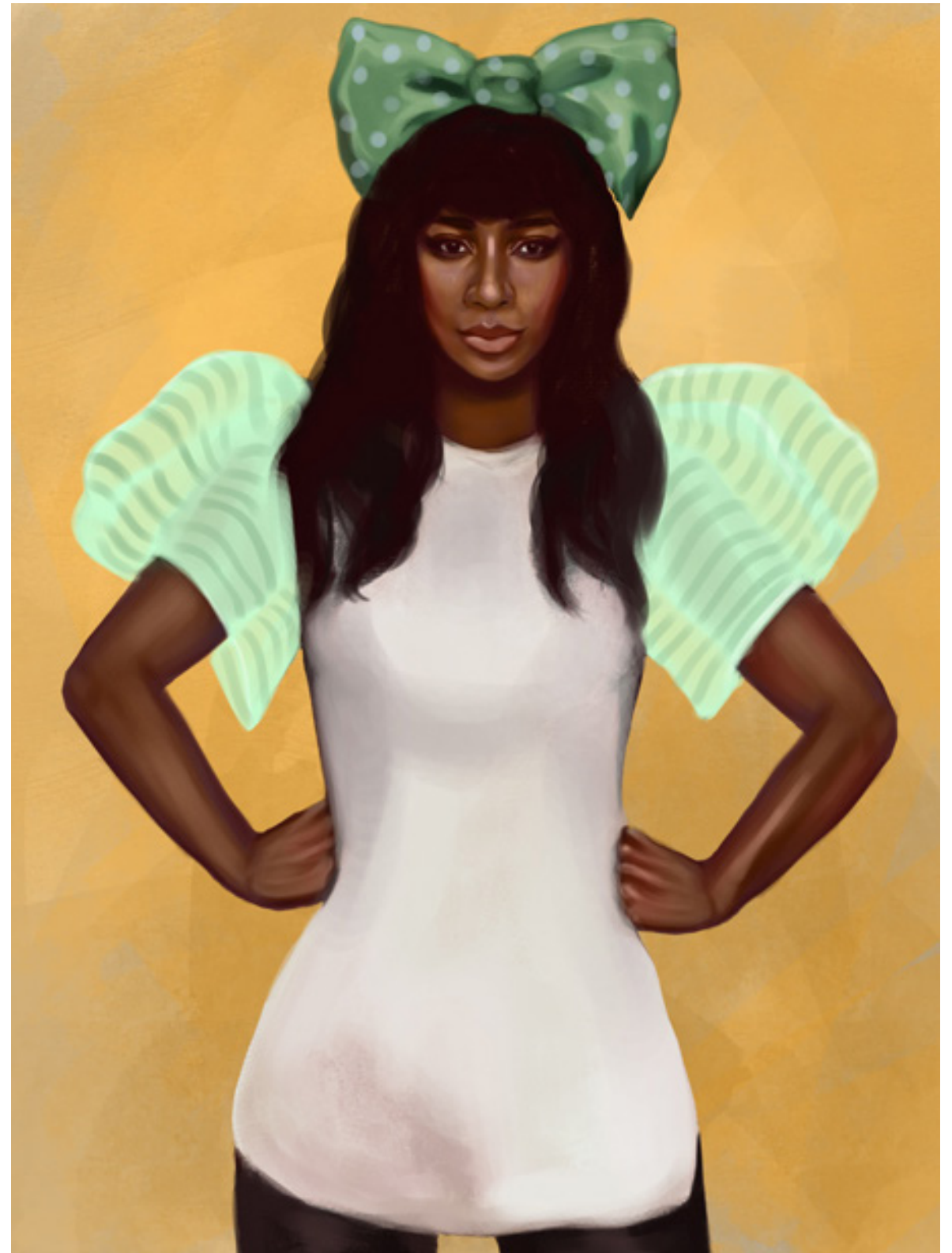
“Creator,” 2008, *Santogold*

“Disparate Youth,” 2012, *Master of My Make-Believe*

“This Isn't Our Parade,” 2012, *Master of My Make-Believe*

“Walking in a Circle,” 2016, 99¢

“Run the Races,” 2016, 99¢



and too generous in framing their work as naturally good versus ruthlessly perfected.

Collectively, Bey and Santigold's work share impact—different scales of impact, but recognizable impact. That said, Beyoncé doesn't have to be the standard against which all black women are measured. I am very aware of her hyperexposure, but the comparison between the two felt like an out-

landish and therefore exciting way to think about how even the most visible black women are unseen.

Santigold is one of those artists who is vulnerable to the belief that hers is not black music, but from my gatekeeping position, my work here is to place her where she belongs, squarely between the tradition and the future of black music. ■