Janelle Monáe Biography

Singer Janelle Monáe began performing as a child and got her big break in 2005 when she was invited by Big Boi to perform on several OutKast tracks. She was later signed by producer Sean "Puffy" Combs to his Bad Boy Records label. In 2010 her debut full-length album, *The ArchAndroid*, rose to No. 17 on the Billboard U.S. album chart and received a Grammy nomination. She followed up with the sophomore album *The Electric Lady* (2013), which featured singers Prince and Erykah Badu. Monáe branched into film, appearing in *Moonlight* and *Hidden Figures* in 2016, before releasing her third album, *Dirty Computer*, in April 2018.

Janelle Monáe Robinson was born on December 1, 1985, in Kansas City, Kansas. Her mother was a janitor and her father was a garbage truck driver who struggled with drug addiction throughout Monáe's childhood. "I come from a very hard working-class family who make nothing into something," she says. Monáe's hardscrabble background and early understanding of the perils of drug addiction inspired her intense drive to succeed.

"I've never forgotten where I come from," she says. "It's crazy, but I really want to be the one to show everyone back home that it can be done. And not by selling drugs but by being passionate about the right thing—and the right things will come your way." She pays homage to her parents with a signature black-and-white tuxedo she wears for every performance. "I call it my uniform," she explained. "My mother was a janitor and my father collected trash, so I wear a uniform too."

From a very young age, Monáe distinguished herself as a highly artistic and intelligent child. She stood out as a singer at the local Baptist church and appeared in local productions of musicals such as *The Wiz* and *Cinderella*. In addition to singing and performing, Monáe was also a precocious young writer. She joined Kansas City's Coterie Theater Young Playwrights' Round Table and wrote several full-length plays and musicals. One script, completed when she was only 12 years old, told the story of a boy and girl who compete for the love of a plant—an idea inspired by Stevie Wonder's 1979 album *Journey Through the Secret Life of Plants*. "I was infatuated with photosynthesis," she offered by way of explanation.

After graduating from F.L. Schlagle High School in Kansas City, Monáe received a scholarship to study musical theater at the American Musical and Dramatic Academy in New York City, where she was the only black woman in her class. However, Monáe quickly dropped out of the Academy because she felt creatively stifled. "I wanted to write my own musicals," she recalled. "I didn't want to have to live vicariously through a character that had been played thousands of times—in a line with everybody wanting to play the same person."

After dropping out of school, Monáe moved to Atlanta, Georgia, where she lived in a boarding house with five other women and took a job working at an Office Depot. She self-produced a

demo CD entitled *Janelle Monáe: The Audition* and relentlessly toured local colleges to perform and promote her music. It was on one such tour that Monáe met two like-minded young songwriters, Chuck Lightning and Nate Wonder. The three of them soon founded the Wondaland Arts Society, a record label and artists' collective to promote innovative music and art.

Monáe's big break came in 2005, at the age of 20, when she performed Roberta Flack's "Killing Me Softly With His Song" at an open mic night. Big Boi, one half of the famous hip-hop duo OutKast, was in the audience and was thoroughly impressed with Monáe's performance. He featured Monáe on two tracks, "Time Will Reveal" and "Lettin' Go," from the hip-hop group Purple Ribbon All-Stars' album *Got Purp? Vol. II*, released later that year. A year later, in 2006, OutKast featured Monáe on two more songs, "Call the Law" and "In Your Dreams," from its popular and acclaimed album *Idlewild*.

After her work on Idlewild, Monáe set out to create her own music with the help of her two partners in the Wondaland Arts Society. Her 2007 EP, *Metropolis: Suite I (The Chase)*, attracted the attention of the famous producer Diddy (Sean "Puffy" Combs), who signed Monáe to his Bad Boy Records label and released and promoted the EP. In an interview with MTV, Diddy said, "I was looking for things that were different and innovative. Because if you're a leader in this industry you want to be helping to push it forward, and she's an artist that would help to push it forward." *Metropolis: Suite I (The Chase)* reached No. 115 on the Billboard Album Charts, and its lead single, "Many Moons," received a Grammy nomination for Best Urban/Alternative Performance.

In 2010, Monáe released her debut full-length album, *The ArchAndroid*, which peaked at No. 17 on the Billboard U.S. album chart and featured the singles "Cold War" and "Tightrope." Based loosely on the 1927 German expressionist film *Metropolis*, which depicts a dystopian futuristic world, *The ArchAndroid* is a concept album about a robot named Cindi Mayweather in the year 2719. The album is at once a futurist sci-fi story and an allegory of African-American history.

"The android represents a new form of the Other," she says. "And I believe we're going to be living in a world of androids by 2029. How will we all get along? Will we treat the android humanely? What type of society will it be when we're integrated? I've felt like the Other at certain points in my life. I felt like it was a universal language that we could all understand." *The ArchAndroid* received rave reviews and earned Monáe another Grammy nomination for Best Contemporary R&B Album.

With her beautiful and powerful voice and boundless creativity, Monáe became a rising star in contemporary R&B. After only having released her debut album, she received two Grammy nominations and counted Diddy, Big Boi, Bruno Mars, Prince and—reportedly—President

Barack Obama among her admirers. "People that worked in his campaign have told us he is very aware of me," she said of the president. "He's a fan."

In 2013, Monáe released her second album, *The Electric Lady*, which also received rave reviews. The album stays consistent with the theme of her debut, taking listeners on a musical journey alongside Cindi Mayweather. The album, which featured appearances by fellow respected R&B artists such as Miguel, Solange, Prince and Erykah Badu, did better than its popular predecessor, peaking at No. 5 on the Billboard Top 200. Monáe also gained recognition at the 2013 Billboard Women in Music event, having been given Billboard's Rising Star Award. She also made her debut as a musical guest on *Saturday Night Live* in October 2013.

Perhaps what most distinguishes Monáe from other young stars is her commitment to creating challenging music. "I feel like I do have a responsibility to the community," Monáe said. "The music that we create is to help free their minds and, whenever they feel oppressed, to keep them uplifted. We want the music and the vision that we have to be their choice of drug, if you will. So we need a manifesto. If we want to stay on message, we have to believe in what we're fighting for, and we do."

In February 2015, Monáe's label Wondaland Arts Society announced a joint venture with L.A. Reid's Epic Records to promote her artists, starting with the March release of *Wondaland Presents: The Eephus*, which features tracks by Jidenna, Roman, St. Beauty, Deep Cotton and Monáe. *Billboard* magazine called Monáe "a mini-mogul," recognizing her business acumen and artistry in running her own label.

In late February 2018, Monáe released two new singles, the Prince-influenced "Make Me Feel" and "Django Jane." Her next single, "PYNK," a collaboration with Grimes, debuted in April; a few weeks later, her long-awaited third studio album, *Dirty Computer*, was released and accompanied by a short film she called an "emotion picture."

Monáe later earned a Best Music Video Grammy nomination for "PYNK," as well as an Album of the Year nod for *Dirty Computer*. Although she didn't win in either category, she delivered one of the standout performances of the night at the 2019 awards ceremony.

Underscoring her sense of responsibility, Monáe delivered a powerful speech at the 2018 Grammys. "We come in peace but we mean business. And to those who would dare try to silence us. We offer two words: Time’s up," she said, referencing the movement for equality that rose in the wake of the sexual assault allegations roiling Hollywood.

"We say time’s up for pay inequality. Time’s up for discrimination. Time’s up for harassment of any kind. And time’s up for the abuse of power because you see it’s not just going on in

Hollywood, it’s not just going on in Washington, it’s right here in our industry. And just as we have the power to shape culture, we also have the power to undo the culture that doesn’t serve us well. So let’s work together."

Weeks later, Monáe addressed the longstanding rumors about her sexuality in an interview with *Rolling Stone*. She said that she considers herself to be pansexual, attracted to people regardless of gender identity.

"Being a queer Black woman in America, someone who has been in relationships with both men and women, I consider myself to be a free-a-- motherf-----," she explicitly told the magazine.

The Otherworldly Concept Albums of Janelle Monáe

The concept album is an extravagant obfuscation of what we imagine as the artist’s “self”—think of Pink Floyd’s comments on sanity in “The Dark Side of the Moon”; David Bowie adopting the costume of the alien androgyne Ziggy Stardust; George Clinton, the human kaleidoscope, and the extensive Funkadelic “Mothership” mythology. Historically, the concept album has suggested a detour in an artist’s œuvre, a one-off production that lands with attendant visuals, loaded with literary, cinematic, and historical references. (Set pieces from the Wu-Tang Clan have even spawned ancillary comics.) But the form has lately become a vaguer thing, and a requirement for the famous-beyond-comprehension artist, who, by performing some kind of thematic fiction, also performs an intimate reveal. When, in the cartoon video for the single “The Story of O. J.,” Jay-Z appears as the exasperated Jaybo, an update to the big-lipped Sambo, he wants us to remember that moguldom brings misery.

The thirty-two-year-old artist Janelle Monáe has taken the concept album to complex heights; by now, the most surprising thing she could do would be to perform as herself. A charismatic actor as well as a musician—her turns in “Hidden Figures” and “Moonlight” were quietly expert—she is cinematic in whatever she does. “Django, never Sambo,” she brags on the single “Django Jane,” one of two newly released tracks (with accompanying videos) from her forthcoming album, “Dirty Computer.” She calls her albums “emotion pictures,” and, consumed chronologically, the Monáe suite makes up a sparkling, occasionally convoluted space hip-hopera, inspired by Fritz Lang’s Marxist epic “Metropolis,” from 1927. Since her début EP, “Metropolis: Suite 1 (The Chase),” released in 2007, Monáe has performed as the post-human Cindi Mayweather—a “rock-star proficient” android who falls in love with the human Anthony Greendown. Dense liner notes and interjecting overtures on her projects describe a dystopia apparently of her own design: the literature from “The Electric Lady,” her 2013 album, tells us that “Janelle Monáe, Palace of the Dogs Patient #57821,” has received “secret compositions conveyed to her by the android hero Cindi Mayweather.” In interviews, Monáe sometimes

speaks as Cindi, at once evading and inviting questions. “The lesbian community has tried to claim me, but I only date androids,” she said, deadpan, to *Rolling Stone*, in 2010.

For a decade, Monáe has been a spokesperson: for black victims of police brutality, on her 2015 protest song “Hell You Talmbout”; for the independence of women artists, at the Grammys this January; for CoverGirl, since 2012, in commercials where her smiling, heart-shaped face looks like a post-Internet beauty ideal as created by an algorithm. And yet Monáe’s opaque mythmaking has also been met with some justified side-eyes, and some tedious crowing about black female authenticity. Was this suit-wearing, pompadour-crowned futurist a package masterminded by her label, Bad Boy Records, or a real soul prodigy?

Monáe—who for years performed in a “uniform,” variations of a black-and-white suit—grew up in Kansas City. Her father worked as a sanitation worker and her mother as a janitor. In high school, she wrote musicals—one about the miracles of photosynthesis, based on Stevie Wonder’s album “Journey Through the Secret Life of Plants,” from 1979. In Atlanta, just shy of her twenties, she worked at an Office Depot to finance her demo, “Audition,” which she self-released, in 2003. Atlanta’s ATLien futurists André 3000 and Big Boi both raved over her talent, and the latter ended up executive-producing “Metropolis.” What became clear, after the releases of “The ArchAndroid,” in 2010, and “Electric Lady,” in 2013, and after Monáe co-founded her own label and collective, WondaLand Arts Society, was the depth of her cultural and musical immersion. Monáe’s albums are passionate studies of the prophecies of Octavia Butler, the radical social criticism of Wonder, the lurching outsiderism of Bowie.

The risk of art pop is that the mélange will overpower the music. Monáe’s alien visions have sometimes felt like a de-rigueur, Afrofuturist pastiche. But when the balance is right—in the fists-up exhilaration of “Cold War,” or the “Total Eclipse of the Heart”-esque pining of “Primetime”—the formula is winning. Monáe sings; she raps; she dances; she writes. At the Boston House of Blues, in 2013, the night that the City Council declared October 16th “Janelle Monáe Day,” for her social activism, I watched the five-foot-tall artist complete a course of choreography that was more like a chain of stunts, all while maintaining an unnervingly spectacular vocal tone. Plenty of pop stars have incorporated Donna Haraway’s idea of the female cyborg, its indomitability, its performance and evasion of gender, into their aesthetics; Monáe is one of the few to give life to its perfection. A couple of summers ago, performing alongside the fellow-dandy Jidenna, her Wondaland label-mate, she oozed P-Funk intuition, barely pausing to breathe.

In 2010, after Monáe sent her album “The ArchAndroid” to Prince and Wonder for their opinions, Prince sought her out, becoming a mentor. He contributed to “Electric Lady” and, posthumously, provides the synth line on “Make Me Feel,” the stronger of the two singles from “Dirty Computer.” Like her idol, Monáe is a traditional showperson, hugely conscious of the power of symbols. Hers is the purest interpretation of the pop star as cipher—a human on whom misfits of race, of love, and of gender can project their own aspirational fictions. We’ve endured the titillations of Katy Perry kissing a girl, Madonna making out with Britney Spears, and Christina

Aguilera on the V.M.A. stage. But Monáe's response to the "speak your truth" dictate—the idea that artists are polemicists who must reveal whatever makes them "real"—continues to captivate. She won't answer questions about her sexuality in interviews, but in "Q.U.E.E.N.," from "Electric Lady," on which Monáe sings with Erykah Badu (whose own concept album involved embodying Lady "Amerykah"), Monáe teases, "Say, is it weird to like the way she wear her tights?" In the trailer for her latest "emotion picture," released earlier this month, we see Monáe in the arms of two lovers, one man, one woman. Monáe's personae draw on artists, from Bessie Smith to Freddie Mercury, who have communicated through metaphor, for self-protection, and through camp, for glamour.

It's the video for "Make Me Feel," her version of Prince's conversation starter "Controversy," that has caused the real stir online. "This is pure, unadulterated black bisexual happiness," a writer for Autostraddle, a queer feminist Web site, wrote. Until now, Monáe's universe has only obliquely featured sex; "Make Me Feel" is, to quote the lyrics, "an emotional, sexual bender," "powerful with a little bit of tender." Erotic strokes of guitar come in, accompanied by heavy whimpers. There's nothing robotic in this scenario: in the video, the thinker's pop star is all messy urges, prowling through a phalanx of swaying female legs. She grows crazed choosing between a male and a female paramour (the latter played by the actress Tessa Thompson). The critic Sasha Geffen beautifully identified the blue and magenta of the video as "bisexual lighting": "She plays multiple characters and checks herself out, a visual representation of the queer confusion that arises when you're not sure whether you want to sleep with someone or become them, or both," Geffen wrote. The video could have been Monáe's coming out—sexually, artistically—but she remains her own hall of mirrors. Everyone is eager to see her next reflection.

How Janelle Monáe Found Her Voice

On a hot December afternoon, the sky hazy from wildfires that raged just beyond the Los Angeles city limits, a handful of people gathered outside a nondescript Super 8 motel off Sunset Boulevard. Nearly all were dressed head to toe in black: elegant crepe shirts, fitted leather pants, wide-brimmed hats. The group made their way inside to the Girl at the White Horse, a discreet bar nestled in the space below the motel. Here, the air was still hazy — the synthetic kind, from a machine — and lights tinted the room pink and red, colors of the heart. Low vibrational tones, not unlike those coaxed out of Tibetan singing bowls, droned in the background.

As the sounds faded, the guests turned their attention to the eight women marching into the bar. Each wore aviators, leather jackets over black bodysuits and brightly colored tights. They struck dramatic poses — an arm flung over an eye, a hand on a cocked hip, a leg held askew — and paused as the singer Janelle Monáe strolled into the room and took her place in the middle. She was dressed in a studded motorcycle jacket over a white crop top, black palazzo pants, suspenders, a derby wool hat and mirrored sunglasses. A navel-length ombré rattail snaked over her shoulder. For a moment, she stood perfectly still, letting the room drink her in.

Monáe was presenting a preview of “Dirty Computer,” her first solo studio album in five years, and the anticipation was as palpable as the smoke filling the room. On an indiscernible cue, an apocalyptic electropop bop about partying in a dystopian world began to play: “I hear the sirens calling, and the bombs start falling, but it feels so good.” The women broke into choreographed moves — toe stands, neck rolls, Michael Jackson spins, footwork that summoned the Charleston and James Brown. Many artists now share new music via encrypted downloads, but Monáe insisted on introducing her songs live. After watching her for a few minutes, it became clear why. The room was mesmerized, feeding off the energy emitted by Monáe and her backup dancers. An oversize man in loafers aggressively played air guitar. Others bounced their shoulders, nodded their heads, shuffled their feet in a two-step. Few stood still.

The performance reached its peak on a song called “I Got the Juice.” During the chorus — a percussive trap riff that will be best appreciated blasting out of an expensive car stereo — Monáe dropped to her knees below a disco ball as her dancers swarmed around her, fanning her with large exaggerated motions, less to cool her off than to emphasize the white-hot intensity of her moves. While she gyrated on the ground, the women danced around her in a circular “Soul Train” line: They did the Milly Rock, spun in tight twirls, snapped their fingers, fanned themselves and their own behinds. As the song trilled its last few beats, Monáe and her dancers slowed, laughing and wiping their brows. The room burst into applause.

Monáe took a bow and picked up a microphone. “I just had a lot of fun,” she said. “I’m very excited about where we’re going this time.” Then she took a beat to breathe. Her body was still heaving from the dancing, but she suddenly looked grim, transformed from artist to activist. “This is the first time I’ve felt threatened and unsafe as a young black woman, growing up in America,” she said. “This is the first time that I released something with a lot of emotion. The people I love feel threatened. I’ve always understood the responsibility of an artist — but I feel it even greater now. And I don’t want to stay angry, but write and feel triumphant.”

Monáe released her official debut EP, “Metropolis,” in 2007, when she was just 21. The cover showed her head topped with an elaborate pompadour, attached to a robotic female torso in disrepair — frayed wires snaked out of arm sockets and beneath a breastplate. This was Cindi Mayweather, a time-traveling android whose story the album tells: After falling in love with a human named Anthony Greendown — a union forbidden by the legislation of their time — Mayweather is marked for disassembly, and a bounty is placed on her head. The album ranged from poppy dance songs like “Violet Stars, Happy Hunting” — which cleverly evokes the history of black fugitives with lines like “I’m a slave girl without a race” — to symphonic ballads like “Sincerely, Jane,” which begs for compassion for Mayweather’s plight, urging “daydreamers, please wake up.” “Metropolis” was “West Side Story” for the cyberage — instantly earning fans among R. & B. and psychedelic-rock listeners, not to mention young black girls like myself, who saw themselves equally in Pink Floyd and TLC and were hungry for narratives starring women who weren’t hypersexualized and perhaps even a bit nerdy.

The album earned Monáe a Grammy nomination for the song “Many Moons.” She would go on to collect five more nominations across two more albums, both of which starred her alter-ego, Mayweather. For years, Monáe remained safely cocooned within the character. “Cindi helps me talk more,” she said; through Mayweather, she could address things she didn’t feel comfortable talking about directly. “You can parallel the other in the android to being a black woman right now, to being a part of the L.G.B.T.Q. community,” she said. “What it feels like to be called a nigger by your oppressor.” Mayweather was a proxy for all the things about Monaé that made others uncomfortable, like her androgyny, her opaque sexual identity, her gender fluidity — her defiance of easy categorization.

But then Monáe shifted her attention to acting. She made her film debut as the de facto surrogate mother of a young black boy in “Moonlight,” which won the Oscar for Best Picture last year; she starred, with Octavia Spencer and Taraji P. Henson, in the blockbuster “Hidden Figures,” about early black female mathematicians. Fans wondered if she would commit to films, where she could attain a level of fame that can be elusive in music. But part of the reason she was slow to return, she told me, is that her mentor, Prince, died unexpectedly. They were working together closely on what would become “Dirty Computer.” “This was the person that I would literally call and talk to about sounds or: ‘How should I say this? Is this saying too much?’ I just never could imagine a time where I couldn’t pick up the phone or email him, and he’d contact me right back and we’d talk about all these things that I was unsure of.”

The music Monáe introduced on that dusty afternoon in Los Angeles marked her highly anticipated return. “Dirty Computer,” a celebratory ode to femininity and queer people, seems to signal a new era in her career: If in the past she seemed distant, using Mayweather to stand in for the real Monáe, she now seems ready to present herself to the public. “Right now I’m escaping the gravity of the labels that people have tried to place on me that have stopped my evolution,” she told me. “You have to go ahead and soar, and not be afraid to jump — and I’m jumping right now.”

Two months later, in February, I was in the back of an Uber, riding southwest toward a subdivision of Atlanta. After a pause at a security gate, the car drove through an upscale, predominantly black community, past typical suburban scenes — teenagers shooting hoops, people taking out their garbage, men working on their cars. I was heading to Wondaland Arts Society, Monáe’s creative headquarters. Its inspiration is Paisley Park, the elaborate compound outside Minneapolis that housed Prince’s rehearsal space, recording rooms, concert venue and countless parties. Several years ago, Monáe established the Wondaland label — one of the few black women to have a label of her own — and signed several acts, including the band St. Beauty (one member, Isis Valentino, was a backup singer for Monáe) and the singer and rapper Jidenna. The Wondaland artists often practice together and appear on one another’s albums. And the compound, where the artists often crash, has become a center of black culture in Atlanta. Much of “Black Panther” was shot in and around the city, and the cast held impromptu gatherings at Wondaland. At one, Chadwick Boseman whaled on the drums and Lupita N’yongo was hailed as the best dancer. They were among the first to hear “Dirty Computer,” and their approval gave Monáe’s confidence a boost. “I felt understood,” she told me. “I felt like, Man, these are people I admire and I respect, and they love this album. I have to finish it.”

Outside Wondaland, eight cars lined the long driveway, and staccato bursts floated from an open window upstairs. It sounded like band practice, a score being workshopped. I recognized the music from “Dirty Computer.” A Wondaland staff member named Kelly greeted me at the door and gave me a quick tour. From the outside, the house looked like any other Southern McMansion, but the entryway immediately suggested something different. Thick, leafy palm trees crowded the foyer so densely that I had to wrestle them to get through. A handwritten note asked guests to slip off their shoes. An archway was decorated with a dozen or so clocks, in different shapes and colors, their hands frozen at various times.

Before I went down to the sprawling lower level where Monáe and I would talk, I poked my head into a few of the rooms on the first floor, all filled with recording equipment and more luscious tropical plants. People seemed to be having casual meetings in many of them. There was a large wraparound kitchen, where a woman was chopping army quantities of vegetables. On the dining-room table, there was a chocolate cake surrounded by red and blue balloons, a bottle of sparkling rosé and a laserjet printout that read in block caps: “CONGRATULATIONS, YOU DIRTY COMPUTER.”

The stairs to the basement were covered with green turf, so that even as my eyes adjusted to the dimming light, my feet were receiving the pleasantly disorienting sensation of outdoors. Downstairs, there were tropical plants everywhere; brilliant orange-and-white fish swam in an expansive tank bathed in purple lights. I counted at least five keyboards, eight guitars, two drum kits, a piano, a cello, a trumpet and a saxophone. A stack of books piled on an end table included “Writing Better Lyrics,” “Sapiens,” “Zen Guitar” and “Built to Last,” a book on business management. There was a desk crowded with sound mixers and synthesizers, and a box set of Jimi Hendrix CDs. A minifridge was stocked with seltzer, wine and water, and a bottle of absinthe stood on the desk.

Monáe soundlessly padded into the room, clad in a velour caftan, gold earrings and rings to match. She was barefoot, her toes painted metallic silver. She had arrived from Los Angeles that morning, and tried to take a nap, but Jidenna, who was in town, woke her up with his practicing. Though she apologized for being tired, she was buoyant. It had been 24 hours since her first two singles — “Django Jane” and “Make Me Feel” — were released, and both were trending on social media. “I’m still nervous, obviously, but I’ll enjoy this moment,” she told me, as she arranged herself more comfortably on a chair next to the couch where I was sitting. “But I won’t drive myself nuts trying to preplan what people are going to say, what they’re going to think, even though it terrifies me — I just have to put my energy into finishing.”

Monáe, who is 32, told me that she has been circling the themes explored on “Dirty Computer” for at least a decade, but that earlier it felt safer to package herself in metaphors. “I knew I needed to make this album, and I put it off and put it off because the subject is Janelle Monáe.” She’s still having a conversation with herself, she said, about who she wants to be when she’s in the spotlight. The sanitized android version felt more accepted — and more acceptable — than her true self. The public, she explained, doesn’t really “know Janelle Monáe, and I felt like I didn’t really have to be her because they were fine with Cindi.” When Prince died in April 2016, she started to rethink how she would present herself. “I couldn’t fake being vulnerable. In terms of how I will be remembered, I have anxiety around that, like the whole concept about what I’ll be remembered for.”

At its core, “Dirty Computer” is a homage to women and the spectrum of sexual identities. The songs can be grouped into three loose categories: Reckoning, Celebration and Reclamation. “The first songs deal with realizing that this is how society sees me,” she said. “This is how I’m viewed. I’m a ‘dirty computer,’ it’s clear. I’m going to be pushed to the margins, outside margins, of the world.” “D’Jango Jane” is an ode to black power and pride that is also a dirge about the struggles that come with that heritage. The middle half of the album is a raucous party. “It’s like, O.K., these are the cards I’ve been dealt,” she said. These songs include “Make Me Feel” and “Pynk” — the sizzling, sex-drenched songs that titillated the internet when they were released earlier this year. The album winds down with an anthem about being an American, whose sound evokes Prince’s “Let’s Go Crazy,” with lyrics like “love me for who I am,” and “cross my heart and hope to die, I’m a big old piece of American pie.”

Monáe will release an extended musical film with the album that illustrates and complements “Dirty Computer.” The 50-minute “emotion picture,” as she calls it, follows a young woman, played by Monáe, on the run from an authoritarian government that hunts down so-called deviants and “cleans” them by erasing their memories. Those memories serve as the musical interludes (the videos) amid the drama — “Handmaid’s Tale” meets “San Junipero,” set in a desiccated “Mad Max” landscape. It follows a crew of young kids, mostly black, dancing and dodging capture. Longtime fans will recognize the parallels to Mayweather — which Monáe expects — but instead of focusing on a fictional male human lover, the object of her affection is the actress Tessa Thompson, with whom Monáe is frequently photographed in real life. A beautiful man whom she occasionally hugs and kisses makes appearances, but he feels like an afterthought. Plausible deniability. The star-crossed romance between Thompson and Monáe, and whether they will be separated or reunited, is the true narrative of the film.

Most popular music is so determinedly centered on heterosexual dynamics that any hint of same-sex interactions can feel revelatory, even radical, upon the first encounter. That’s the way it felt to me when I first watched Monáe’s film. The queer sexual interactions are refreshingly

explicit, and images throughout celebrate women. The video for the song “Pynk” is an extended appreciation of the female anatomy, with neon signs screaming, “[Expletive] Power,” and pink-frilled jumpsuits that wouldn’t look out of place in a Judy Chicago installation.

Already much of social media has speculated on the nature of Monáe and Thompson’s relationship, and this film — especially with scenes like Thompson poking her head from between the legs of Monáe’s pink vagina pantsuit — is certain to only inflame those rumors. The first time I saw the video for “Make Me Feel,” months before its YouTube release, I found it so sexually suggestive (Thompson appears throughout the song, fawning over Monáe, dancing with her, almost kissing her) that I immediately texted the woman I was dating at the time, “omg janelle might really be gay.” It felt as declarative as a coming-out could. And yet in person, Monáe would say only that she felt this was her coming-out as an advocate of women and queer issues. “I want it to be very clear that I’m an advocate for women,” she said. “I’m a girl’s girl, meaning I support women no matter what they choose to do. I’m proud when everybody is taking agency over their image and their bodies.” She told me that she wanted the album to be especially relevant to black women and queer women, for them to feel seen and heard in this album. “I felt that way when I listened to Lauryn Hill, as I was trying to find myself as a young woman, I felt that way when I listened to Stevie Wonder when I was trying to understand God more.”

These days, the culture seems more accepting and welcoming of queerness: Young actors and pop stars like Amandla Stenberg and Lady Gaga are identifying publicly as bisexual. Lena Waithe and her fiancée were recently photographed by Annie Leibovitz for Vanity Fair. And yet, nonheteronormative sexuality remains the last taboo. Monáe is media-savvy enough to protect herself from becoming tabloid fodder for publications that want to turn her personal life into spectacle or reduce her art to her sexuality. She told me repeatedly that she worried what her early fans and very religious and very Southern family would think. There’s little precedent for a black female celebrity at her level living openly as a lesbian in a gay relationship.

Monáe has spent a lifetime perfecting the art of being a pop star who isn’t a sexual object. Discretion is a survival strategy, a coping mechanism especially useful for black women living in the public eye. But she has now made an explicit album about sexual expression and identity that is somehow still shrouded in ambiguity. In 2018, empowerment isn’t a color — it’s a call to action. It’s Cardi B talking about how much she loves her vagina, not holding a neon sign explaining that she has one. On “Dirty Computer,” it still feels as if Monáe is deciding which version of herself to show the world — or that this is the tentative beginning of a larger reveal.

Monáe grew up in a large yet tight knit family in Kansas City, Kan., the kind with relatives in the double digits. Money was scarce, but they made do. Her parents worked in the service industry, her mother as a janitor and her stepfather as a postal worker. Her mother was a Baptist but didn’t mind when Monaé listened to racy R. & B. songs by groups like Jodeci or rappers like Tupac. Her great-grandmothers played organ in church and taught piano. Her biological father sang. She thinks he could have gotten a record deal if he hadn’t battled an addiction to crack. Her mother left him when Monáe was a toddler and remarried. He was in and out of prison Monáe’s entire childhood. “He’s sober now,” she told me, and the author of a memoir in which he writes about Monáe: “She always had this distinctive look in her eye that said: ‘I’m going to make it! No matter what!’ And I believed that she would.”

As a teenager, Monáe was enrolled in a young playwrights’ program and performed in talent showcases on the weekend, where she sang Lauryn Hill songs a cappella and usually won. She watched movies like “The Wiz” but struggled with the same question that all black children weaned on American pop culture eventually reckon with: Is this all there is?

After high school, she moved to New York to study musical theater at the American Musical and Dramatic Academy. She couldn’t afford to live on campus, so she shared a room at 140th and Amsterdam with an older cousin, who worked nights at the Post Office. They each took a shift sleeping while the other was at work or school and saw each other on the weekends. Her congregation supplied some funds, and Monáe did some work as a maid to make ends meet.

She spent the rest of her time in libraries, reading plays and practicing monologues. Her best friend was studying in Atlanta and regaled her with tales of wild parties and the camaraderie of black Greek life. “It was just more exciting than what I was doing,” she said. She liked the rigor and discipline of her school but worried she would lose her edge: “I didn’t want to sound, or look or feel like anybody else.” She made the decision to leave New York after a year and a half.

Monáe eventually settled in a boardinghouse that was directly across from the university center that contains all four of Atlanta’s historically black colleges: Clark Atlanta University, Spelman College, Morehouse College and the Morehouse School of Medicine. She went to Georgia State University’s Perimeter College to save money and began to write her own music. Atlanta in the early 2000s was a hotbed for musical innovation, with artists like OutKast spinning their eccentricities and distinct Southern identity into record deals and national fame. Monáe began experimenting with her own sound, performing around campus — in dorm rooms, at school events and, once, on the steps of the library. She made a CD called “The Audition” and sold it out of the trunk of her Mitsubishi Galant. She worked at Office Depot and during slow moments updated her Myspace page with new photos and music.

During this period, she met Mikael Moore, her longtime manager, and his classmates Chuck Lightning and Nate Wonder, who would eventually become close collaborators and form the backbone of all her creative efforts — writing songs with Monáe and directing her videos, which they continue to do. At an open-mic night, she met Antwan Patton, otherwise known as Big Boi, from OutKast. He invited her to contribute to “Got Purp? Vol. II,” a 2005 compilation album that featured artists of Dirty South rap like Goodie Mob and Bubba Sparxxx but few other women. She also appeared on the soundtrack for “Idlewild,” the 2006 musical film starring Patton and André Benjamin, or André 3000, Patton’s partner in OutKast.

Sean Combs, the producer also known as Puffy at the time, reached out to her after her work with Big Boi put her on his radar. Monáe had already taken a few meetings with record executives, and was disillusioned by those early encounters. They criticized her style, which then involved, sartorially, androgynous suits, and musically, operatic odes to her character Cindi Mayweather. During one performance, she noticed midsong, breathless and sweating from the effort of dancing and singing, an executive casually reading a magazine. “I cried,” she said. “I mean, I cried.” She made Puffy a deal: She had just finished “Metropolis.” She’d hear him out if he came to see her perform. “It was important to know if he was serious, that he was going to appreciate me and not try to change my live show or my music.” Combs halted filming on his reality show, “Making the Band” and flew down. He loved what he saw. “He said, let’s meet tomorrow and let’s talk,” Monáe recalled.

Combs told Monáe that he wanted to introduce her to a larger audience. “I knew I had to work with her,” he told me via email. “It was immediate. I just knew she was going to be important to music and culture. It was the same sort of feeling I had when I first heard Biggie or Mary J. Blige, and I wanted to help introduce this artist to the world.”

In 2008, Combs announced the signing of Monáe to his label, Bad Boy Records. They rereleased “Metropolis” and then followed up with “The ArchAndroid” in 2010 and “The Electric Lady” in 2013 (as well as “Dirty Computer”). Monáe went on tour with No Doubt and Bruno Mars and collaborated with Solange Knowles and Erykah Badu. She landed an endorsement with CoverGirl. She was being sent movie scripts. None moved her until she read the one for “Moonlight.”

Yesi Ramirez, the casting director on the movie, had flagged Monáe for the director Barry Jenkins, and they scheduled a screen test over Skype. When she appeared, her hair filled the frame, even more than her face. He was startled. “I wanted to call her Auntie. I was used to the pompadour, and this larger-than-life entity, the outer-space person that I’d seen live in Oakland with Erykah Badu, and I had to reconcile that person with this person before me,” he said. “We started talking, and it was very clear that she got it.”

During the beginning of production, Monáe lost a relative to gun violence. Jenkins felt that the story of Chiron, the boy whose life the movie follows as he matures, spoke to her because she

knew young men like him, lost and struggling to make sense of their sexuality — and understood the way strangers can raise you as much as your biological family can. “She felt it was important that someone like that be centered in a narrative,” Jenkins told me. “And whatever she could do to bring it to a larger light, she was down for.”

For Monáe, “Moonlight” and then “Hidden Figures” were a way to convey the message she has striven over and over to convey: recognition and validation for people overlooked by society. “I was, like, this is just another way to get out the message I’ve been trying to talk about for so [expletive] long that I feel like I don’t know if anybody is listening,” she told me. “You can show people better than you can tell them.”

Monáe, dressed in a Bella Freud ice-blue velvet suit, matching glitter eyeliner and perfectly matte red lips, walked to the front of the restaurant and picked up a microphone. “This room looks good,” she said. “You inspire me and encourage me to be a better woman and artist.” Earlier in her career, she said, she asked some label reps to recommend other female producers and creators she could work with. The list they provided stunned her. “It was so tiny,” she said. “I was upset.” To channel that anger, she said, she started her initiative to help women “cross-connect and open doors,” as she put it. “It gives everybody a seat at the table.”

Throughout my conversations with Monáe, she talked about her dedication to lifting up women. Some of that didn’t quite square with me — most of the crew that supports her creatively, spiritually, administratively seem to be men. But Monáe’s event felt like a mild insistence that she got it. This brunch seemed like a woman-centric version of a few rounds on the golf course — a space that emphasized the importance of networking, beyond film sets, parties and premieres as a means to lay the groundwork for future collaborations. Seeing her in that capacity reminded me that she’s still evolving into the woman she wants to be in the world and the role she wants to play.

A few years ago, the singer and actor Harry Belafonte was asked by a reporter for The Hollywood Reporter to comment on “members of minorities in Hollywood today.” Belafonte, a prominent civil rights activist who helped organize the 1963 March on Washington where the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. gave his “I Have a Dream” speech, took the opportunity to express frustration about what he perceived as the political malaise of celebrities. “I think one of the great abuses of this modern time is that we should have had such high-profile artists, powerful celebrities,” he said, “but they have turned their back on social responsibility.” Until recently, few publicly stepped in to fill the hole he named. In the past, Monáe shied away from anything that could potentially derail her career. “I used to be a lot more afraid of going off script,” she told me.

She emerged as an activist in August 2015, at a demonstration in Philadelphia she led in support of the local Black Lives Matter movement. There’s a photo of Monáe surrounded by most of the artists in the Wondaland collective: Jidenna, St. Beauty, Roman GianArthur, Chuck Lightning and the producer Nana Kwabena. Their mouths are open, midchant, and the look on their faces is determined. They are holding drums, signs, one another. For Monáe, the times were too urgent to ignore. Freddie Gray and Sandra Bland had recently died following controversial encounters with the police. She realized she had a voice that she could use. That she needed to use. A few days later, Monáe released the anthem “Hell You Talmbout,” which is less a song than a chant. At nearly seven minutes long, it calls out the names of black men and women who were victims of police brutality, followed by the urging to say their names. It was a significant moment in her career: She would no longer be cautious when it came to social responsibility. The song came out almost a year before Beyoncé’s breaking-chains “Freedom” or Solange Knowles’s primal scream on “A Seat at the Table.” A few months later, Ava DuVernay and Ryan Coogler gave a benefit concert in Flint, Mich., to raise money for the clean-water-deprived city that was also a boycott of the Oscars. Monáe performed alongside Stevie Wonder, Vic Mensa and Hannibal Buress. Monaé told me that in the past, she tended to write anthems for other people. “I don’t always live them, I don’t. And I’m learning more and more to live them, to make myself live them.”

Her highest-profile moment came with the 2017 presidential inauguration. Monáe was invited to speak — as well as sing — at the Women's March by Ginny Suss, a member of the organizing committee in charge of music. Suss wanted artists whose music reflected their personal politics. "When you look at the arc of her career, there has always been a moral core and ethical center to her music, that breaks down constructions of race and gender in our society," Suss told me. "It's a tool to imagine the world we want through the accessibility of pop music. Having her stand up and have that voice at the march was amazing."

Monáe had heard that Lucia McBath, the mother of Jordan Davis; Sybrina Fulton, the mother of Trayvon Martin; and Gwen Carr, the mother of Eric Garner, were going to be there, too, and she wanted to offer support. She herself was still reeling from the election, she added. "I just wanted to come and not only uplift, but I wanted to be uplifted, too." As she made her way backstage, she got a sense of the crowd for the first time. "I saw, like, tens of thousands — hundreds of thousands of women and men and people from all around the world, babies and Muslims and trans and L.G.B.T. folks," she recalled. "I was like, Oh, my God." She hadn't expected such a tremendous turnout, for so many people to care about what happens to women. The importance of the task hit her. But there was no privacy backstage, no place to prepare or gather her thoughts — just a communal room where the speakers were chatting and taking photographs. Monáe had no choice but to wing it. "That was just one of those moments where I was just, like, It might not come out right, but as long as your intentions are pure, as long as you're honest," she told me. She drew from the mixture of emotions stirred up by her recent role in "Hidden Figures," about female African-American mathematicians suffering from discrimination even as they performed pivotal jobs for the National Aeronautics and Space Administration during the American space race of the 1960s. "Everything that was going on in January felt like that era, when we're talking about a blatant war on women's rights."

She appeared calm as she addressed the enormous crowd. "Women will be hidden no more," she said. "We have names. We are complete human beings." For many people, the speech cast Monáe in a new light: she became more than a psychedelic Tim Burton character. The response galvanized her. "I just had to speak from my heart," she said. "Not a lot of artists do it."

This January, she took the stage at the Grammys, where she delivered a short speech to introduce the singer Kesha, who'd had a legal battle with her former producer Dr. Luke. A member of TimesUp, a Hollywood initiative to fight sexual harassment, Monáe wore its pin proudly on her black suit as she called out the music industry for its epidemic patterns of sexual harassment and assault. "We come in peace, but we mean business," she said to the crowd. "Just as we have the power to shape culture, we also have the power to undo the culture that does not serve us well."

In Atlanta, after our conversation at Wondaland, Monáe seemed to get a second wind. The band upstairs had resumed practicing for her forthcoming tour, and she wanted to check in on their progress. She invited me to join her. If the basement was where ideas began to gestate, then the room she led me to was where they were polished before leaving the house. It had a ballet barre and floor-to-ceiling mirrors. She disappeared for a few minutes before returning in black leggings and the same cropped moto jacket from the presentation in Los Angeles.

Monáe greeted everyone in her band — the drummer, keyboard player, guitarist and two backup singers — hugging them and taking a few moments to inquire about their health, their families, their side projects, before taking her position in front of them. She patted her pockets, searching for a missing item, which she spied on a speaker: mirrored sunglasses. She put them on and nodded to the band. They launched into "Make Me Feel" and then "I Got the Juice," and she ran through them a few times, losing herself a little more in the music during each performance.

Despite the accolades and Grammy nominations, Monáe has yet to achieve significant commercial success. If there's a moment that her entire discography has been building toward, it is right now, with this release. Her desire for a win shone nakedly. She sneaked coy peeks at me to see if I was paying attention. It was impossible to tear my eyes away, not to want for her what she so clearly wants for herself. At the completion of each song, Monáe would grin,

breathless. “That’s going to sound so good live,” she said, happily. But then the perfectionist came out again. She asked the band what else they had prepared. The sheepish answer came: Nothing. She paused, letting her displeasure seep out for few moments, just enough for them to know that they’d need to step it up. “Well, all right, then,” she replied. “Let’s go through them again.”

In all our encounters, Monáe seemed as if she was bracing herself for anything, including the worst — harsh reviews, irrelevancy, dismissals. But all that carefully maintained composure fell away as she twirled and dropped to her knees. Earlier, I asked her what she ultimately wanted: awards? Album sales? Money? She referred to Prince again: He was in that “free [expletive] category,” she said. “That’s where I want to be. That’s where I want to ultimately be.”

SOURCE 1 (Website) **TITLE:** Janelle Monáe Biography **DATE OF PUBLICATION:** August 25, 2020 **AUTHOR:** Biography.com Editors **WEBSITE:** Biography **URL:** https://www.biography.com/musician/janelle-monae
SOURCE 2 (Website) **TITLE:** The Otherworldly Concept Albums of Janelle Monáe **DATE OF PUBLICATION:** March 1, 2018 **AUTHOR:** Doreen St. Félix **WEBSITE:** The New Yorker **URL:** https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/the-otherworldly-concept-albums-of-janelle-monae
SOURCE 3 (Section from a Website) **TITLE OF PAGE:** How Janelle Monáe Found Her Voice **DATE OF PUBLICATION:** April 19, 2018 **AUTHOR:** Jenna Wortham **WEBSITE:** The New Yorker **URL:** https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/19/magazine/how-janelle-monae-found-her-voice.html