

People Daily: interview answers

Written answers by Anouschka to questions from People Daily (Kenya). Spelling lightly tidied; wording is hers.

Why did you study political science?

I studied political science because my father did not believe I should be an artist. He told me one day when I was about ten years old, as I was drawing a picture, "That's nice and fun and everything, but that is not something you can do in life. You do not have what it takes to make it in a creative field." He wanted me to marry a nice educated man and study something that could give me a reliable, prestigious job, like a doctor, lawyer or economist. I did not like cutting up dead frogs in biology, and I flunked macroeconomics. In fact, my professor had to personally call my Dad in for an appointment and tell him "This really isn't her thing", before my dad would let that one go. But I was interested in becoming a lawyer and/or journalist, so Political Science was the logical academic major for that. Besides, I have always been extremely interested in current affairs and development theory. Later in life, I have worked as Acting Chancellor of the Swedish Consulate with diplomats and as a reporter. Ironically, it turns out I am also good at business; I have made money on real estate.

How relevant are your studies now with music?

The studies are perfectly relevant because they have made me well-rounded and instilled a curiosity in me to analyze and understand things. A good songwriter is someone who looks for the nugget of truth that can resonate on a universal level, just like a lawyer or journalist. An educated artist is an artist with more depth and perception in general. The more we know about the world around us, the more we can serve to inspire and educate others. As a role model and activist, my studies enable me to be well-versed and argue my opinion even with academics.

At what age did you realize that you could sing, and how did you nurture the talent?

I thought I could sing as a child because, as children, we do not have filters of judgement and self-awareness. Once I was at Berklee in the presence of world class singers, I realized that I am not a vocalist and never will be. I don't have a Mariah Carey or an Ella Fitzgerald jazz voice. It is unfair to compare a singer songwriter who is also playing an instrument to someone who is focused purely on vocals. I made peace with the fact that my voice has its limitations and have worked hard instead to optimize the voice I do have and to develop my personal style.

What inspired your song Dying to Be Free, and how did you feel being awarded, and when the song was used in the campaign?

I have a deep love for animals, we learn about unconditional love from them and of being true to our nature. Nature has symmetry and seeks its own equilibrium. As far as I am concerned, that is where you see God in action because some force had to design such a perfectly balanced system. Yet, we can be so arrogant and work against this inherent harmony. Original African environmentalism worked with nature, not against it. It is a deeply spiritual experience for me to be in the bush or wilderness and I am honored to speak out to advocate protectionism and preserving nature and wildlife for tomorrow's children. Wildlife is a tremendous economic resource for eco tourism and can sustain many

villages when done correctly. Trophy hunting is an inherited colonial sport and does not trickle down for a sustainable economy. Often trophy hunters hire outside trackers and poachers are paid pennies if at all. Now why would any modern country let more destroy its resources?

I had just been captivated by the story of the Knysna elephants in Knysna, South Africa. It was said they had all been killed but for one lone Matriarch who roamed in grief and went mad until she died, the last of her subspecies. Elephants mourn deeply just like us. I was so saddened by the image of her grief and that they were now extinct due to hunting. With tears in my eyes I googled Knysna elephants. I found a man who claimed there might still be some living but that they were so shy of humans now that they were never seen. Right where the article was to summarize the research as to whether there were any remaining, the sentence stopped! That man turned out to be one of South Africa's most prominent authors, researchers and activists: Gareth Patterson. Having no idea who he was, I wrote an angry email to him. "Hey I read your article but you never concluded anything! So ARE they still alive or not?"

He wrote back that I had stumbled onto an old site and we started a friendly exchange. He sent me his book "Dying to Be Free" and asked me to write a song about it since no one had ever written a song about trophy hunting. There was no money involved. I worked for free and saved up to do a pocket friendly recording. The lyrics are based on the true story of the Dark Lioness who was murdered by being shot repeatedly against an electric fence in front of her young cubs. The footage was smuggled out and Gareth and others worked under death threats to expose the canned lion hunting industry in South Africa. He warned me, "When you read the book you will see some very dark places and you will cry." He was right. I cried a lot while writing that song. When they chose it for the campaign as thanks for all my efforts, I was so happy because I got recognition and because the message was finally out there.

Which musicians inspire you?

I am honestly inspired by almost anything, but a huge fan of jazz and blues vocal styles. Since 2013, Kenya has slowly been inspiring me more and more with musical influences. I am also extremely inspired by some chill urban music. I look to create my own blend, my own signature style and sound.

What inspired your latest song Shine, and how were you chosen to showcase at Midem?

Kenyans are some of the hardest working and patient people I know. I was outside the Sarit Centre one day and I saw a man begging. He walks on all fours with elongated arms and short legs, like a dog. Yet he smiles. Yet he gets up every morning. I asked myself "What was his dream? Did he dream of becoming a doctor, a pilot, an Olympic runner? What is his dream today? Is it to stand straight for just a few hours to know that feeling like the rest of us?" I realized how dreams of love and fame are luxuries. How so many people are invisible in society and yet they manage to rise every morning and smile, because they have a light. We all have a light we wish to shine for our short time on earth. I want my song to inspire people to be authentic, grateful and compassionate.

Your connection with Kenya. What is the reception of your music in Kenya as opposed to the US?

I have had success in other countries like the US and Europe with airplay, live performances and awards, however I feel Kenya has been the first country to truly embrace me, my music and journey the most. I think this may be because I am more unique in Kenya and because I was the first westerner to fuse Kiswahili, English and local beats with western songwriting. I also think it was somehow the plan of the universe. I don't know why but I am very grateful.

How different is the industry in both countries?

Very! First of all, reputation is king overseas. If you have bad marks on your track record, people won't work with you. The first quality people look for is competence. In Kenya I see people treating others so badly, cheating them out of money and yet they still work together! In the USA you would be fired and your career would end.

Another thing is the payola system. Payola (pay for play) has been around forever everywhere in the music industry. The labels in the states would pay stations for high rotation. That is often how hits are made. But I do think you have to deliver the goods to some extent in the states. Labels won't stake their reputation on an awful artist no matter how many millions they're able to pay. Mediocre yes, but awful? No. I feel like the bribing system in Kenya is different because it will actually play pure shit with a straight face because people do not seem to care about reputation the same way. An audience is not stupid. They know when they hear quality and when they hear something substandard. You can only mold their ears for so long with top rotation, and lack of record sales typically prove that. I feel it's ok to offer someone a pocket friendly lunch or a drink as a gesture of thanks for a great interview but I do not participate in pay for play of large sums because I stand with artists for an industry that rewards hard work and talent, not money!

Collabos are big in Kenya but overseas you have more leverage as an artist if you are a prolific writer and own your own catalogue. Collabos are not always a good idea. You really have to have good chemistry and vibe to produce quality. More artists overseas are also producers and independent, meaning they run their own careers while outsourcing services. Many women overseas these days are doing their own thing; in Kenya women artists are still sorely under-educated in multifaceted areas like arranging, composing and producing.

Age is a huge factor in the states. I remember I was approached by a very established producer who wanted to sign me when I was 31 but the minute he heard I was 31, he lost interest. Many times I was told to lie. But why do we women always have to feel so much shame for who we are? We are not beautiful enough, our breasts are not perky enough, our wrinkles are ugly, our teeth are not white enough, etc etc. You look at some of the male artists with pot bellies, balding spots, bad skin, bad teeth, addictions galore and people say "Ohh he's so talented and sexy and misunderstood." Oh PLEASE!!!

In Sweden I was told by another label that after 24 you're old as a female artist and cannot get signed. Men don't have the same problem. Sigh. In Kenya people celebrate experience and wisdom in a whole other way. I think it is because people in Kenya dance at any age. Thank you!

What are the achievements you are proud of in your music journey?

The biggest achievement I have is that I have remained persistent with my integrity and good character intact. Trust me, I have been around a lot of lewd industry men, shady dealing, and drugs and addiction. At the end of the day, I may not always have done things

smoothly (I can get emotional and hurt) but I have always played fair with everyone and been able to look myself in the mirror at the end of the day and say, "I'm ok. I did not compromise my creative vision or personal principles. I didn't sell my soul. Amen."

The awards you have won, and how have they boosted your career?

I view awards as a way to gauge that you still have your writing chops in working order. They help put your name on the map and are a dictionary tool in promotion as an artist.

What is your music all about? What inspires it, and in what genre?

The genre is technically singer-songwriter. However I am unique in my versatility. I borrow influences from jazz, blues, rock, even reggae and East African nowadays!

Lastly, advice to upcoming artists?

Learn the craft and play fair with everyone. Stay true. You get what you put in. Hustle like crazy and don't ever let anyone tell you you aren't good enough. Ladies, I am all for being sexy but sexy is a state of mind, a presence. The more skin you show the more you're saying you don't believe in yourself that you can deliver the musical goods. It's getting redundant. If I see another ass grind my ears switch off. Typically guys will tell you sex sells because they control the industry and want to see you naked and keep you in a subservient sexualized position. It is a form of disempowering you. Tell them you'll wear almost nothing only if they do too! I'm cool with that!