

The Legendary Peaches

If there's one thing that Merrill Nisker (aka Peaches) has been expert at throughout her 20-year career, it's predicting the future. A DIY punk at heart and most famed for her anthem 'Fuck The Pain Away', she called her second album 'The Teaches Of Peaches' in 2000. That title may as well have been the mantra for her whole purpose on Earth. Today at her local coffee shop in East Hollywood, she's candid when it comes to owning her successes, reeling off a list of pop royalty she knows she's inspired; from Madonna, Britney Spears and Christina Aguilera through to modern day hit-making rebels such as Tove Lo and Charli XCX.

Revolutionising her own approach to rock music, she experimented with electronics and drum machines, becoming instrumental to the birth of electroclash in the early 2000s. Not only did her music make an indelible mark on the sound of future stars, it was her self-producing approach that opened doors to those who have been pushed to the fringes, ie, women and the queer community. Often praised and vilified for her politicised visual art, Peaches was always ahead of her time. It shouldn't have come as a surprise that the night before this interview we bumped into Peaches at an afterparty for a Yeah Yeah Yeahs gig. She's still on the scene. Romy Madeley-Croft of The XX, Kristen Stewart, even Karen O herself were all trying to steal a moment with the outspoken legend. Today, she looks likes she's recovering from a heady evening...

Is Karen O someone you've known for a while?

Yeah! We met way back. I started a few years before her, then I heard 'Fever To Tell'. We'd meet each other drunk at after parties, whatever. We'd high-five each other like, 'Yeah, we're doing it!'

You established Peaches as a solo entity after you discovered the Roland MC-505. Did that machine change your life?

Yeah, but before Peaches I knew a girl who played bass and I thought, 'Let's make an all-girl band.' She had a male neighbour who had a drumkit. She also had a crush on this other guy. I was like, 'I don't fucking play with guys.' I was pissed off. Anyway, we had a jam set up. I walked in with an attitude, I didn't even say hi. Then we all smoked a big joint and started playing. One of the guys said, 'You play guitar like Joey Santiago' and I love The Pixies. We were so high. There was so much sexual tension. We sang about each other. We sang whatever came out of our mouths. We went out for coffee afterwards and we said, 'We need to call ourselves The Shit because we are the fucking shit.'

So that's when you re-named yourself Peaches for that band, after a Nina Simone song?

Yeah. Funny, I didn't think I had any of the same struggles as Nina Simone. I didn't think about the implications of pornography or this problematic Southern Black name. I just liked it. That's when 'Peaches' started. I jammed with friends but people were moving away. So I went into a music shop and I saw this machine [the Roland MC-505]. It could be drums and bass and lead sounds. I thought, 'Wow, I can be the whole Shit!' I bought it out of necessity. I didn't even fucking know what Detroit house was. When I listen back now I'm like, 'Those are the same 808s.' Back then, those were just the coolest sounds I found on it.

Were there performers you looked to for inspiration?

Salt N Pepa. I was listening to early Daft Punk when it was rock. Iggy Pop, too. I loved hip-hop's directness. In no way did I think I'd be a rapper. I'm not a rapper. I speak-sing, which came from Chrissie Hynde. I loved the way she sang. Not like a Celine Dion 'I'm gonna hit all these notes' way. I fucking love power ballads though. They're my fucking life.

What's your favourite?

Oh. 'Total Eclipse Of The Heart'. have a whole show of power ballads. I can fucking nail them.

You toured the UK in the early 2000s and allegedly lived with Elastica's Justine Frischmann and M.I.A....

No, they lived together but we used to all hang out. Justine called to invite me on tour with her in America. In Chicago we played and the critics' wrote, 'That's the worst show we've ever seen'. We didn't care, we loved it. M.I.A. was there as a videographer. She went [adopts British accent], 'What is that machine? What you do is so cool.' So I said to her, 'You should just try it, it's so fucking easy.'

You've continuously transgressed boundaries with your art. What do you make of the likes of Charli XCX and Tove Lo who are using videos to divert attention from the male gaze?

I love Charli. She said to me, 'You gave me my first show!' It was 2008. I played at the Royal Festival Hall. I wanted her to open up. She was 15, her parents had to chaperone. She wore blue wigs and big heels, she was like a drag queen — cutesy, almost anime — and she was singing about Battlestar Galactica. She was making all her own beats and I thought she was amazing. I remember she emailed me when she was in Berlin opening for Slough Bells and I read it thinking, 'Someone's started doing drugs and having sex! Whoa! And Tove Lo... I always loved that 'high all the time' song ['Habits (Stay High)'].

Have you seen her new music video for 'Disco Tits'?

With the puppet? She's not being super pretty. She's saying, 'I wanna do drugs. I wanna have sex.' Good.

Do you feel grateful for being ahead of your time or was it quite an isolating experience?

Oh I'm so grateful. I'm also grateful I came before YouTube. The interesting thing about 'Fuck The Pain Away' is that there was no TV, no radio, no internet, and it still made the impact, and in all areas I was into; from Madonna to Beastie Boys to Arthur Baker. They were all contacting me. All the child stars who were finding their adulthood cited me: Britney, Christina Aguilera, or Avril Lavigne, who completely ripped off my song. I did a track with P!nk [called 'Oh My God']. It was like their college moment.

What was your version of that? Who helped you discover who you wanted to become?

The Violent Femmes. They'll be classic forever.

What do you make of Taylor Swift's new song 'Look What You Made Me Do'? Critics have said it's reminiscent of you...

A part of it is but the other part I would never [write]... What do I do about it? It's justifiable as a beat because it's so minimal. They probably said, 'It's so minimal, how is she gonna sue?' Have you heard the Avril Lavigne one? [I Don't Have To Try]. I don't even remember what it was called but it's the exact same beat for 20 seconds.

Considering you've had such an influence on pop music, what do you want from pop now?

It's a mess, isn't it? It's too safe. The first thing people say is that something isn't suitable for work. Who fucking cares? Go home, then. People get scared now too. Being scared is awesome — what do you want from music? People will come up to me after a set and say, 'That was a lot of fun!' And I'm like, 'Duh!'

You've been a voice for gender fluidity, sexual liberation, queerness... are you concerned it's become too topical and trendy recently?

Yeah it's rough out there. I want trans rights to be seen for what they really mean — proper healthcare. I don't want it to just be the basis for another reality show. You want new languages and new systems, and that doesn't happen overnight. I try very hard and I always have to be sensitive. If I look at the 'Impeach My Bush' album cover now it's embarrassing that I have a glitter burka on. Can I take that back?

What do you make of so many popstars wielding politics now?

It's so not how it was. I remember when M.I.A. came out it was like, 'Yes finally!' Now it happens but they're not actually singing about it. That was always my beef. If you're gonna wave a flag, then get into it, or are you just using it? Let's see what happens with Miley Cyrus. I haven't heard this new album but it looks cute. It looks like Grease or something.

What does it mean to be punk now?

Just to fucking do your shit. It's not about having a bad attitude. Do what you feel you really need to do, not the shit other people are doing.

Words by Eve Barlow