

“I’m So Much More Than A Pop Star”

Charli XCX sees herself as a revolutionary force, and so do the fans who stream her synth-pop anthems in their millions. **Eve Barlow** steps into her LA mansion and hears the masterplan.

Photography: Rachael Wright

California dreaming:
Charli XCX, aka
Charlotte Emma
Aitchison, at home in
LA, 17 July, 2019.



If you're in the Beachwood Canyon area of Los Angeles

and you spot an English-looking house somewhere beneath the Hollywood sign, it's probably the one belonging to Britain's best pop expat, Charli XCX. Her Tudor manor is an oasis amid LA celebrity culture. It's the type of house you'd imagine Eddy and Patsy gatecrashing in an Absolutely Fabulous spin-off; often filled with glamorous oddballs, playing host to infamous house parties that unite all manner of musicians, fashionistas, actors and the type of people who still look good on dancefloors at 5am. There's a cardboard cut-out of a black and pink cow in the garden, a neon palm tree in the living room, a refrigerator stocked with canned cocktails and window boxes of fake flowers descending over the outdoor patio. "Oh, they're fucking AWFUL," she screams,



Flip your wig: supporting Peaches, the Royal Festival Hall, London, 2009.



CHARLI XCX

Purple reign: Charli XCX performs at The Globe Theater, Los Angeles, 30 November, 2018.

taking a seat beneath them. "We put them in a year ago. We never took them out. We hate them. I hate them."

Today, HQ is quiet. Charli XCX, born Charlotte Emma Aitchison, is a 24/7 powerhouse and works as hard as she parties. During interviews, she's both a good laugh and seriously alert. Aitchison's team (two British 20-somethings named Twiggy and Sam) are tending to business in the dining room. They're her best friends from Hertfordshire – they've all known each other since they were 11. Aitchison, 27, is

finishing her second task today: an afternoon-long photoshoot for a magazine called Puss Puss that usually features cats. She's wearing a cream suit that gives her an air of CEO, except a CEO in platform trainers with nothing but a Nike sports bra under her blazer. She smells of sandalwood and cigarettes. Since Q is her final appointment, she's rummaging in the freezer for a cube of ice to dunk in her rosé.

This morning, Aitchison released a new single titled Gone, which features Christine And The Queens (aka Chris). It captures the

GETTY

qualities of both artists without taking away from either of them. Like most of Charli XCX's latest releases, Gone is couched in hard, restricted beats that sound like firecrackers going off in a steel container. But amid its dancefloor-ready cadence, Gone is a cry for connection. Chris's capacity for barefaced truth-telling has lent Aitchison what could be her most triumphant moment yet. Often her releases come as a surprise, involving eye-opening guest spots, and music videos that are catnip for GIF makers. Today it was all three.

"Sometimes I feel insecure, paranoid, totally isolated. People feel that whether they're pop stars or not."

"Do you mind if I eat? I haven't eaten since breakfast," she says, mouth full, puffing on a cigarette. "I feel good about this song. It's my favourite song I've ever made." For Aitchison, collaborations aren't about cold monopolising of industry connects. Consistently she's said that she's never cared for record sales. She sees collaborations as turning friendships into art – a profit is a bonus. "Working with Chris has been so fun," she says. "It felt like I'd known her for years. There were no boundaries. Everyone was as free as possible." You see the ease of >>

Charli's Gang

The singer breaks down some of the artists she worked with on her third album, Charli.

CHARLI XCX

“I know so many pop artists who have really saved pop. I’m not saying I’m the only one. But I’m one of them.”

techno song, with no vocals,” she laughs. “We need to figure that out.”

Aitchison sees these team-ups as more than a mutually beneficial transaction. “For so long, collaboration has been a marketing tool to gain the benefit of both fanbases,” she explains. “My collaborations are genuine and personal. It’s never about bringing them into my world. I don’t want them to do something Charli-esque. I want them to do *them*. My collaborators make my sound,” she says. “They bring their language and their little ad libs. That’s what makes it unique.”

She’s particularly proud of working with Sky Ferreira. The elusive LA synth-popper barely works with anyone, besides David Lynch. How did she get her on the record? She tries to swallow some lettuce.

“I sort of wonder the same thing. How did I get Sky?” she asks herself. “I had her number. I basically texted her. Not expecting a response. And she replied. I was like, ‘Oh my God! Fuck! I can’t believe it!’” After Ferreira had laid down vocals in the studio things went quiet. “I thought, ‘Oh no, I’m the girl who lost Sky Ferreira. I’m that girl. Fuck fuck fuck fuck!’” Eventually Ferreira reappeared. Aitchison drops to a whisper, still in gleeful shock. “I knew people would freak out about that.”

Aitchison grew up an only child in Essex, the daughter of a Ugandan immigrant and a Scottish businessman. She started writing songs at the age of 14, and made an album. It was called 14. The name Charli XCX comes from the MSN Messenger handle she had and it stuck after she was invited to play raves in London by a promoter. She was underage, her parents driving her there and back. Aitchison considers her story “quite weird” and unlike anyone else’s she can think of.

“I came out young, made an album that literally 10 people heard,” she says. Ten people? “Well, a 1000 people? It wasn’t a platinum-selling album.” That record – True Romance – was made on her first visits to LA and released when she was 21. Thereafter Aitchison wrote Top 10 international hit I Love It, recorded by Swedish duo Icona Pop. She had two global smashes of her own: Boom Clap and Fancy, which featured rapper Iggy Azalea. “Then I totally fell off,” she says. “In terms of the commercial pop star I was supposed to become.” She made follow-up album Sucker in a state of confusion.

“I tried to do a more punk-ish thing. In hindsight I’m not sure I did it right.” The album sounded more like Republica or

condition – about loneliness. On Gone, she sings about feeling unwelcome among others: “I feel so unstable, fucking hate these people, how they’re making me feel lately.” When discussing their collaboration, Aitchison and Chris shared their experiences of being in packed rooms. “I get anxious a lot,” says Aitchison, still grazing. “Especially when I have to be ‘on’ as a pop star, or whatever. Sometimes I feel insecure, paranoid, totally isolated. People feel that, whether they’re pop stars or not. Chris and I were talking about times where we felt like, ‘Fuck! So alone, so afraid.’” Chris wrote the lyrics. Aitchison wanted to sound like the French singer so it would feel like they’re in it together.

In a way, these collaborations are the fuel for her success. In the past year she’s released songs with Troye Sivan (1999), Diplo (Spicy), Tove Lo (Bitches), and even South Korean megastars BTS. She was one of the writers of UK Number 1 single Señorita for Shawn Mendes and Camilla Cabello. She’s also written for Blondie and Britney Spears. In her self-directed video for single Boys, she recruited famous male pals instead of appearing herself. Those included: Will.i.am, Mac DeMarco, Carl Barât from The Libertines, a Jonas brother, Stormzy and Ezra Koenig brushing his teeth.

She has an army of fans (known as her “Angels”) who herald her as the future of pop and she has an acute read on what they want. Her forthcoming third album is simply titled Charli. Collaborators on the tracklist range from rapper Lizzo, rock trio HAIM, avant-pop performer Sky Ferreira and indie-pop darling Clairo. It’s an embarrassment of riches, so much so that Aitchison reveals she did a song with Grimes that didn’t even make the final cut. “We’d made a five-minute

their chemistry in the video. The plan was to choreograph it but Aitchison knows her limitations. She’s a pop star, a hitmaker for hire, a shrewd businesswoman. But she’s not a dancer? “Guys, I can’t learn choreography, are you joking? I’m not gonna stand next to Chris and, like, do a dance. She’s incredible. I just flail my arm over and over again!”

Over the course of two albums, four mixtapes and a raft of one-off singles, Aitchison’s songs have tended more towards aspirational abandon and partying. Gone is an inquisitive tune about the human

Give ‘em enough rope: Charli with Chris; (far left, top) on the cover of V Magazine with Grimes and Sky Ferreira.

Christine And The Queens

“I feel so close with Chris. Whether she realises or not, she’s taught me a lot just by the way that we talk. The other day we were talking about queerness and it’s so interesting for me to continuously learn about that. We were talking about how we fit into the pop space as artists, about romance, about what’s going on with our lives.”

Sky Ferreira

“She does her own thing. She’s totally on her own wavelength. The music that she makes is pretty incomparable to other female pop. I don’t consider her to be pop. She’s morphed into this person she was always destined to be. From the few times we’ve hung out, Sky is very specific about what she will and won’t do. She knows what she likes, what she doesn’t like. She has a very good eye. She knows what’s right for her. She takes her time.”

Tommy Cash

“His presence is so effervescent. When I’m around him I start using words he uses. He texted me once saying, ‘Kaboom!’ And then I kept saying, ‘Kaboom!’ for a month after. When anyone said anything I’d be like, ‘Yeah, kaboom!’ I can’t pull it off so I stopped.”

HAIM

“The song we did isn’t something I’ve ever heard them do. There’s no guitars, no live instrumentation, but I feel like the vocal melodies are quite them. Me and AG Cook rented this house, turned it into a studio and they came by. I’d been to the dentist that day so the whole side of my face was numb. I’d already recorded my vocals. I couldn’t really talk. We were co-writing. I was trying to suggest lyrics and melodies but I couldn’t. I was like, ‘mm-he-hoo-ha-ho.’ I had told them I’d been to the dentist. They didn’t think I was having a stroke.”

ALEX LAKE, ANGELA STEPHENSON

Shampoo than anything Top 40 in 2014. She realised she was making music she wouldn't listen to. "That happens on major labels. You get trapped. 'Oh, *that* works, do it again!' 'You're pop now, go make pop records!' So you're like, 'Oh shit, yeah, because I like this level of success.'" Did it fulfil her artistically? "In parts, yes," she says. "But in parts, no."

During that time, I interviewed Aitchison in Las Vegas. She was at her lowest ebb. She was taking control of her career but her efforts also looked to be always falling on deaf ears. Despite being signed to a major, she spoke like an anti-capitalist, uninterested in the idea of art as a product, but one who knew how to sell. She was playing second fiddle to other artists on her label's roster, chasing big hits she already had. She was tired. "You can go crazy doing shit that you don't wanna do," she reflects now. Weeks later she pulled out of a tour she was on with Jack Antonoff's band Bleachers. "I was so depressed," she says. "I was hating everything."

But Aitchison doesn't regret her trio of hits. They bought this house and another back in England. More importantly, they bought her agency. People took her seriously as a songwriter. "The songs changed my life. They've enabled me to continue working the way I want," she says. "I learned so much about myself." She learned it alone. "From the age of 16 to 19, I desperately wanted a crew," she says. "I wanted to be a part of a scene. I was living in my parents' house, making music, going to school in the countryside. I'd be on MySpace looking at [*French record label*] Ed Banger's page thinking, 'They're so cool doing club nights together.' That excited me."

Around the time of Sucker's release in 2014, Aitchison moved to LA. A little thereafter she discovered the London record label and collective, PC Music. She met their head, producer AG Cook, and was so impressed by his noise-laden approach, obsession with subverting cheesy pop and disdaining convention that she poached him for herself. He became Charli XCX's creative director and musical right-hand man, the first person she could trust entirely with her vision. They took Cook's collaboration-heavy world of PC Music and melded it with Aitchison's impeccable talent for hooks. "We have a really fast way of working. We bang out loads of ideas," she says. They released two mixtapes, Number 1 Angel and Pop 2,



Make ours a treble: the Charli albums (from top) *True Romance* (2013); *Sucker* (2014); *Charli* (2019).

in 2017 and were praised as much for the songs as for the method. Aitchison had never been happier or more connected to her audience. She'd never felt more secure.

"It takes a long time to build a solid base," she nods. "Especially when you're a control freak like I am."

She runs a tight ship, with people she knew before "fame". "I don't want people making random creative decisions for me," she says. "Absolutely not." The approach to making this third album was no different from that of the mixtapes. Yet there's something about Aitchison that feels more patient now, like she's no longer running out of time while trying to become a different kind of pop star. She admits that the reason she didn't put an album out for five years is because she didn't feel confident that people wanted one. The mixtapes reassured her. "I

have a really unique and important voice. I'm ready to open that up, you know? And I'm so much more than a pop star. With Sucker, I thought, 'Fuck! If I don't have another Boom Clap everything's over.' Even if I never made a song anyone liked ever again, there are so many other

things I want to do now: directing videos, songwriting for other people, there's so much I feel creatively satisfied with."

There's also the rebel in her. In conversation, she's easy to like, but she's also not trying to be liked. She doesn't want to give the people what they want. "I *don't* love doing what people expect of me, even if it's probably the right thing," she says. "I'd rather do the other thing to annoy someone a little bit. That's been a big part of my career: how can I kind of annoy someone a bit? That sounds counterproductive, but the Sex Pistols weren't trying to sell records to parents. There's a bit of that ethos lost in pop now."

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Things are looking up: Charli XCX moves into her "mature" phase.

Parts of the process still infuriate Aitchison. She doesn't always enjoy being sold. She hates acting ("actual acting... I cry, I have breakdowns"). Then there's radio promo, which she insists is beyond outdated in the streaming era.

"I fucking hate doing radio promo," she exclaims. "You don't need to go around and be like, 'Hey! This is Charli XCX on K104.9-three million.' NO! I don't give a fuck. The person I'm talking to doesn't give a fuck. They're probably spelling my name with an 'e' on the end. Why are we putting time and money into this?"

Rants are part of her appeal. She's called her label out on Twitter, and shared her best and worst states as they happen on social media. Her Instagram is a hybrid of self-confident bikini poses juxtaposed with unfiltered morning selfies and moments of existential crisis. "As I've grown up more I've begun to understand my emotions," she says. "It's OK to be an emotional wreck sometimes. I don't wanna sedate it or try to convince myself that I'm OK if I'm not."

She says that she's found a happy place that's less about commercial success and more about respect. "I've always wanted to be an artist that other artists respect," she states. "I know that I probably shouldn't care what people think. But you fucking do, you're an artist. Whether it's your peers, your friends, your fans, journalists, you care. As artists our egos get bruised, we're very volatile people even when we're at our most strong." Her biggest achievement now is that she's proud of herself. "If I died tomorrow..." she says, touching her wine glass. "Touch wood I won't, but if I did I'd be like, 'Cool, I did shit that will be written about. Great.'"

Hence the self-titled album, with its naked album art. It's a rebirth. It's almost like a debut. It's a nod to those who believe Aitchison is pop's biggest superstar. "It does have hints of this religious iconography," she smirks. "I always tweet about being the saviour of pop. I know so many pop artists who have really saved pop, from Ariana [*Grande*] to Lorde to fucking whoever. I'm not saying I'm the only one. But I'm one of them. I'm at the table. We're having the supper *together*." There's a clear difference between the successes of Lorde, Grande and Aitchison, but Aitchison's followers treat her indisputably as the host of that supper.

"This is what I do," she says plainly of her approach to pop stardom. "These are the songs I sing. This is the shit I write about. If you like it, great. If you don't, that's also OK. But, like, you don't have good taste."

Don't argue with the connoisseur.