



Pride, Pynk and Prince

Janelle Monáe's Castlefield Bowl extravaganza is sure to be a highlight of MIF19. Elizabeth Aubrey takes a look at what to expect



Janelle Monáe: 'a genre-defying fusion of blues, electro, R&B, rap and futurism'. Above: performing live in New York City, September 2018. JUNO; KEVIN MAZUR/GETTY

A celebration of Dirty Computers

The last time Janelle Monáe visited Manchester, in September 2018, the 33-year-old Prince protege delivered a powerful statement of intent: "We all need to embrace who we are, even if it makes others feel uncomfortable." Celebrating difference via flesh-and-blood humanity, Monáe dispensed with the flawless futurism of her fictional android alter ego, Cindi Mayweather - a Bowie-like persona who'd graced her music since her Fritz Lang-inspired 2007 debut, *Metropolis*. "I didn't want to talk about the Janelle Monáe in therapy," the musician said last year, admitting she'd still prefer to be the "cybergirl without a face".

On *Dirty Computer*, however, Monáe underwent a creative about turn, encouraging her listeners to view themselves and others through unfiltered lenses, dispensing with damaging ideals of perfection. "I'm going to make you empathise with dirty computers all around the world," she declared. In letting go of her alter ego, Monáe resonated more with audiences and her gigs became a beacon for inclusivity.

Pynk is the new black (and white)

Some of the loudest audience gasps prompted by Monáe's live shows last year came thanks to the appearance of the now famed "vagina pants" from her *Pynk* video. Described by one writer as "chaps reconfigured with hot-pink labia", the Duran Lantink-designed creation became the visual manifestation of her cry on *Django Jane*: "Let the vagina have a monologue!"

As anti-patriarchal statements go in music, this was one of the boldest in recent years - perhaps unsurprising for an artist whose outfits have often favoured politics over fashion. Prior to *Pynk*, Monáe frequently adopted a black and white uniform in homage to her working-class Kansas roots and the jobs of her parents.

Janelle Monáe means business

When it comes to female empowerment, few artists are leading the conversation as vociferously as Monáe. Before #MeToo, she started *Fem the Future* - a collective designed to support women in the arts - and at last year's Grammys, Monáe delivered a formidable message

Janelle Monáe

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demanding gender equality. "We come in peace, but we mean business," she asserted. The philosophy translates into her live shows, where gender and women's rights are central, and her lyrics. "This pussy grabs you back," she bellows on her anti-Trump moment, *I Got the Juice*.

Purple still reigns

"It's a difficult thing to lose your mentor in the middle of a journey they had been a part of," Monáe said of Prince's passing in 2016. Although the extent of Prince's work on *Dirty Computer* isn't fully known, his influence clearly abounds. Whether it be via the Kiss-like sexy funk of *Make Me Feel* or her genre-defying fusion of blues, electro, R&B, rap and futurism, it's hard not to hear echoes of the *Purple One* throughout. Live, Monáe is careful never to perform a clumsy Prince pastiche; hers is only ever a thoughtful homage. "The most powerful thing he could do was give us the brushes to paint with," Monáe collaborator Chuck Lightning said of Prince's influence on *Dirty Computer*. It's hard not to think of Monáe as his rightful heir.

The Q.U.E.E.N. on her throne

"Let the rumours be true," Monáe declared on *Don't Judge Me*, a track that backs up her announcement that she now identifies as pansexual. While rumours of her sexuality had attracted wild speculation for years, Monáe's coming out was at first quiet, later celebratory: she appeared on a golden throne singing *Q.U.E.E.N.* (which stands for *Queer, Untouchables, Emigrants, Excommunicated, Negroid*), from 2013's *Electric Lady* album.

"Where are my queens?" she demands to know during her live performances, seemingly encouraging *Pride*, a mass coming out and a simultaneous celebration of all the females in attendance. Monáe explores the intersectionality of alternate selves in terms of gender, class, sexuality and race through her music, while also examining the inequalities each may face.

Footage of political struggles play in the background alongside songs such as *Hell You Talmbout*, a 2015 treatise on African-American victims of racial violence or police brutality. "Don't try to take my country, I will defend my land," Monáe sings on *Americans*, meanwhile, a defiant artistic statement on the Trump-era treatment of those on the periphery. ●