



Make-up by Abbie May.  
Photography by Ben McQuaide.

# IZZY B. PHILLIPS

Within the world of modern music, nonconformists are somewhat hard to come by. Some might even say they are a rare species. But in **Black Honey's** Izzy B. Phillips, we might just have found a visionary willing to push the popular art form to the periphery.

WORDS BY GEORGE HENRY KING

It may be a bleak, midweek afternoon in the south of London, but concept-driven musician Izzy B. Phillips - situated on the top floor of a converted Brixton flat - isn't about to let her unique and boundary-defying style mimic the dreary trend of today's weather. Being the visionary mastermind behind Black Honey - a rock band whose musical output and cinematic aesthetic is as much Tarantino as it is Wes Anderson - Phillips understands the importance of keeping up both the imagery and the narrative of the Black Honey story; so deviating from the script isn't an option.

Her obsession with cult movies, disdain for social media and longing for the tangibility of bygone eras, casts Phillips as the bohemian type, a nonconformist, and an artist. She spends most days feeling as if she is the star in her own movie, a movie in which the cameras are constantly rolling, despite not actually being there at all. It's a feeling of disconnection that she will openly admit herself, and one that she appears to adhere to - rain or shine.

Phillips' Debbie Harry-blond locks, for example, exude an air of Hollywood, whilst her orange-tinted sunglasses - taken straight from the bridge of Hunter S. Thompson's narcotic-stuffed nose - impose a vintage-tinged filter on the reality that festers beyond the lens. The lack of distinction between what's real and what isn't with Phillips is at times a balancing act; so you'd be forgiven for wondering how much of the plot she believes to be real, when she plays the lead character in a Black Honey music video.

Quite simply, she's remarkably fascinating; a next-level creative that completely immerses herself in her art. But escapism, however self-inflicted, doesn't last forever, and every so often, excrements from the non-fiction world can bleed into the silver-screen state that Phillips often finds herself in.

"I got egged for wearing flares," she unashamedly admits as she repositions her shades. "I still get people following me

around just because I dress differently. You have to have a self-masochistic mindset to put yourself in a position where you can be criticised for the way you dress or the way you think. The way you dress ultimately says a lot about your mind and how you see things differently."

Phillips grew up in Crawley, "where The Cure are from," she excitedly states, but moved to Brighton in search of a more diversity-accepting stomping ground - and because "all creatives in the South of England gravitate towards Brighton."

Before long, she found her people - people who not only celebrated her for being different, but who also expected and encouraged her to challenge the norm. Her transition from being a waitress in an American diner to being a cult icon for the jilted generation, however, wasn't quite as smooth.

The creative urge that she had harnessed and so frequently exercised for her entire life, was still as prevalent and as eager to now tunnel itself into a new challenge, but translating that into success within the music industry wasn't easy.

Armed with a ton of songs, Phillips countlessly tried to join local bands, but her lack of ability on the electric guitar was a massive hurdle - one she had to prove she could overcome. As she puts it, trying to join a band "was like asking four boys to go on a date with you at the same time."

For Phillips, not having the tools or skills to materialise the abundance of creative ideas and songs that were bubbling away inside her jam-packed headspace, led to a feeling of frustration; a feeling that completely juxtaposed the happiness she had found in moving to her new home.

Eventually, after being in and out of a number of shoddy bands in which she "didn't really take the reigns," Phillips formed Black Honey in retaliation to the oversaturated Brighton grunge scene. "Every band was doing their version of the Pixies," she informs me, and so the

gig circuit's imitating nature at that point actually ended up being the very factor that led Phillips to form a band; a band that would walk its own path and consistently explore, in great depths, the possibilities of visual and musical alignment.

This exploration first came in the form of the group's lead track, 'Teenager'. In order to prevent people and record labels from judging them purely on their appearance, the band decided to simply upload the song with its accompanying artwork and let the Internet, and intrigue, do the rest. It paid off. Before long, a certain degree of hype started to circulate Black Honey - a hype which was as much a result of the quality of their music, as it was the sense of enigma, myth and secrecy surrounding the release. For a while, Black Honey was considered a 'secret band'. There were no press releases and no images of the band members, and the only way to find out more information was to text the mobile number that they published alongside their debut output.

Now, however, the secret is out. Major festival appearances at the likes of Glastonbury and Reading have severely boosted their popularity and support shows with Royal Blood have well and truly unveiled the identities of the previously confidential. Unsurprisingly, Phillips is thankful for the level of attention that her band is now starting to receive, but she assures me that fame isn't what she's chasing, and there's still a part of her that wishes Black Honey was still the riddle that it started out as.

"I don't want to be famous, I don't think my mental health or I could hack it. So, I loved being a secret band because it was the only small time in my life where I feel like people judged us purely on our music. I want to be a star in my own field and I want to write a song that sets the world on fire, but I believe you can be a star without being famous. If you want to be famous, it's way easier to be that, than be a star."

The immediacy of the Internet and social media undeniably played a big part in building the initially allusive nature and



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mystery of Black Honey, but Phillips admits to being both weary and terrified of the potentially unstoppable power it could one day possess (“It’s a mind field isn’t it? It’s a rollercoaster that’s completely out of control.”) The arrival of the digital age may have paved the way for more convenient ways in which to consume music, but in doing so eradicated the sense of intimacy often associated with physical formats. It catalysed the extinction of a vinyl record’s warm crackle and ploughed through our not quite as romantic relationship with the CD. Gone are the days in which we’d lend records to friends and queue outside HMV at 6am to be the first to get our hands on our favourite band’s new album - and Phillips isn’t okay with that.

“I crave a time when you could take a record round to your friends house and be like ‘listen to this record I’ve just discovered it’ and you’d share that moment with your best friend and you’d bond over it and that magic is something that you’d rarely get now. I mean, can you imagine a world where everything wasn’t photographed? We’re all collector maniacs and the Internet is completely harvesting that instinct within us. We have to take photos of fucking everything - if there’s not a photo, it didn’t happen.”

Despite no shortage of offers after ‘Teenager’ started circulating the online world, Black Honey boldly opted against signing a record deal in favour of starting up their own record label - the Pulp Fiction-referencing, Foxfive Records. This meant the band wouldn’t have to “sign our rights away,” and most importantly, complete creative control would remain in the hands of Phillips and her Black Honey counterparts: Chris, Tommy and Tom. Most bands would snap up a record deal without a second thought. Most bands even think that getting signed is the be-all and end-all; the surefire way to success and riches. But Black Honey aren’t ‘most bands’ and their strong, yet equally as delicate vision is one that a major label wouldn’t be able to tamper with, without completely stripping it of its authenticity and genius. Their entirely DIY ethos and self-sufficiency, however, is

for some people at least, hard to grasp.

“People come up to me and say ‘who’s you’re product manager? Who’s your art director?’ And I’m like, ‘it’s all fucking us! It’s us four people!’ People think we have got this big major label shafting money down us - people can’t believe that we’re not signed. They’re blown away by it, but I wouldn’t want to be fucking signed. Why would I want someone to tell me what to do, or how to sing or how to direct it? I know better than anyone else how this should be run.”

Not signing with a major label means Phillips and Black Honey are regularly faced with financial insecurity. All of the band’s ventures and releases are self-funded; any money they do make from merchandise sales or paid gigs instantly goes straight back into the marketing of the band - not their own pockets. Not only that, despite now being of a certain calibre of band - one that is frequently invited to dazzle crowds on the top stages at some of the UK’s most renowned festivals - all four members of Black Honey still currently have full time jobs.

Phillips is a creative director for a vinyl label and often works in the band van during the journey between shows. Her previous job, however, wasn’t as lenient when it came to allowing her time off in order for her to pursue a musical career.

Tasked with managing the artistic direction of a vintage clothes shop, Phillips’ role wasn’t particularly flexible, and so if she missed certain shifts, she would get fired. So, after most shows - especially the ones up North - the band would have to drive throughout the night in order to get Phillips through the door of her workplace the next morning. As she worked during the day, the other members of the band would spend most of their time sleeping, before having to do it all over again. It was a tough period for Black Honey; a bleak and tiresome period that saw the band conform to a sleep-deprived and somewhat unsociable lifestyle - the lifestyle of a DIY, unsigned band fuelled only by the level of dedication

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they have to their craft and their love of an art form. And Phillips wouldn't change a thing.

"We work really hard to keep this band going. We scrub the deck for this band and we have done for years, but I wouldn't change a second of that - I would do it all again in a heartbeat. It's hard to hear bands complain when they are signed, because if you want it enough or you love your art form enough, then you don't need time off."

During an interview earlier in the year, one of Phillips' band mates brazenly claimed that 2017 would be the year in which they will write songs that will change their lives. But as we approach the tail end of the year, we find ourselves, as fans and as writers, still unequipped with the group's long-awaited and constantly asked about debut album. The release of 'Somebody Better' - arguably their biggest single to date - may have catapulted them to another level following its release in March, but an LP's worth of material will be the true test of whether or not such life-changing songs have come to fruition. But despite being pestered and interrogated by nearly every interviewer she has come into contact with since Black Honey first broke onto the scene, Phillips is unwilling to buckle under peer pressure and release an album for the sake of it.

"I would have loved to of put an album out already, but by the same token I almost don't want to. We've already got hundreds of songs, but we need to do what's right for us to make the best piece of work that we can make and when so much is happening it just feels so stupid to rush that. The magic that can happen tomorrow is so worth holding an album back for. They [better

songs] are on the tip of my tongue all the time at the moment. I want to sometimes smack my head against a wall to try and get them out because I feel like I've got something burning up inside me that I need to get out."

Just before Phillips goes off to confidently pose for our cameras - playing out the final scene of today's movie in convicting and effortless fashion - I ask her exactly what she wants and hopes to achieve with Black Honey. Fame, as we know, is irrelevant. Appreciation in her own field is sought after. But Phillips wants more than just admiration. She wants to offer an experience. She wants to help someone. She wants to make a young girl pick up a guitar and form a band. She wants to be an icon. She wants to inspire. She wants to write a concept album and a screenplay. She wants to direct a movie. She wants to do it all.

"I want to do everything. I want to see the world, I want to play massive shows and I want teenagers to lose their virginity to my songs. Black Honey is a live show, an art piece, a video, a song, an experience and a form of escapism. It's an all-encompassing piece. It's my way of processing the shit in my life, so if I do that well enough then that should help someone else with their shit."

Phillips' burning sense of ambition may at times be similar to that of a Hollywood movie's dreaming protagonist, but if anyone is going make something that appears to be only achievable in fiction, a reality, then it will be Izzy B. Phillips: the far-sighted, innovative orchestrator of Black Honey. ■



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