

Skin is facing The Painful Truth

ELLA GAUCI talks to the queer icon about trans rights and her new album and legendary career

Deborah Anne Dyer would religiously walk past the same skate park in Brixton on the way to school every day. She “grew up” on the movement of skaters practising ollies, heelflips and slides. It was just one of the places she was first introduced to the beautiful cacophony of music genres that were sprouting up in London. From a young age, music was Deborah’s entire life and she initially had dreams of being a pianist. One thing was certain: she wanted to spend the rest of her life making music.

Fast forward to 2025 and I’m walking past that very same skate park with her voice reverberating through my body. There are a few kids who have braved the cold to come out and, inevitably, fall off their boards. They don’t know that I’m experiencing something of an out-of-body experience as Skunk Anansie’s latest album, *The Painful Truth*, courses through my body. I don’t have much time to get existential as I head to the tube to meet Deborah – or, as most of the world knows her, Skin.

Donning an effortlessly chic beanie and puffer jacket, Skin is the epitome of cool. She gasps in excitement when I say that I live only a few minutes down the road from her local hangout spot. Despite being the face of the Britrock movement, Skin’s wide smile and warmth make me feel a lot less nervous. She may be one of Britain’s most incredible performers, but I realise pretty quickly that she’s still got some of that childlike wonder, the wonder that has pushed her forward for three decades now.

Frontwoman for the legendary band Skunk Anansie, Skin gave the nineties and noughties a sound to beat their thumping hearts to. Formed in 1994, Skunk Anansie would go on to sell over five million records worldwide, tour with icons

like David Bowie and Lenny Kravitz, and perform around the world. They made history time and time again with their sound, with Skin even becoming the first Black woman to headline Glastonbury with their awe-defying 1999 performance. Three decades on from their inception, Skunk Anansie is still going

“I’ve done some crazy shit”

strong with their latest release.

While songs like *Hedonism* and *Weak* shot the band into the charts with their devil-may-care attitude, the tracks on their seventh studio album are born from a place of careful consideration. Confronted by the difficulties of Covid-19 and losing their manager, Skin reveals to me that these new songs were the product of introspection.

“We actually sat down and did a lot of thinking about who we were,” she recalls. “We’ve had a very rough five years, I’ll be honest. It’s been very hard. At one point we thought we would not make it and that would be the end of the band. We had to look

at the painful truth of who we were.”

Boasting tracks like *An Artist Is An Artist*, this new album dives into everything from ageism, digital culture and authenticity. Known for her iconic looks and lyrics, Skin has never struggled much with being herself. But in the age of influencers and social media, she worries that we’re losing touch with who we are. “I think that one of the most radical things you can do is really not go with the masses. It’s really difficult to find your authenticity in a fake world,” she laments. “People see me as very confrontational because someone like me shouldn’t have a strong voice. I feel that it’s really important to hold onto your authenticity.”

After listening to the album’s lead single, it’s clear that Skunk Anansie will never compromise on their sound. With 30 years of collaboration under their belt, Skin and her bandmates – Cass, Ace and Mark – are still keen to experiment. Despite venturing into new artistic fields, the sound of Skunk Anansie is still as distinctive as ever. “As long as you have us four, you’re going to have the sound of Skunk Anansie. We don’t really worry about it,” she says. “One of the things that we decided early on in our career is to never have an album of 12 songs that are the same. Sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn’t. Experimenting is the fun.”

With a ridiculously impressive career under her belt, it’s inspiring to see the fire in Skin is still very much alive. When I ask what have been some of the biggest pinch-me moments, she takes a minute to think. Skunk Anansie’s headline set at Glastonbury in 1999 is, of course, up there. It doesn’t get much bigger than crowdsurfing on a sea of people who are all screaming the lyrics to your songs. But she also tells me other wild stories, including one where she met the Dalai Lama. “Also hanging out >>



Photos: Rob O'Connor



“Trans rights are our rights. If they’re going for those people, they’ll go for you too”

» with Nina Simone, who was the first record I ever bought. I’ve done some crazy shit,” she exclaims.

Throughout her career, Skin has always been incredibly open about her queerness. Despite coming into fame at a time when rockstars were almost always cis, straight, white men, Skin’s resilience is astounding. She laughs when I ask what it was

like being queer at that time. She immediately begins to talk about the wild nights out in London she used to go on to find her community, some of which involved heading into the backseats of cars to attend raves in fields. After struggling to find a scene for Black lesbians, she went out and created one. “We found our family,” she smiles. “That’s where we got our

culture from.”

Today we’re lucky to see a more welcoming environment for queer artists of all genres. Skin finds joy in seeing how easily people are able to find community now. “Being queer isn’t the big, huge, dark stain that it used to be,” she tells me. But at the same time, she is worried. Our interview has fallen the day after Donald Trump’s harrowing inauguration, and I can tell that lingers over everything she says. “People need to know that they have to keep fighting,” she says firmly. “We have to remember that the fight is for everybody. We all have to support other people. The fight is by no means over.”

In particular, in the wake of Trump’s anti-trans tirades, Skin is quick to talk about the vital need to support the trans community. “We’re at a very scary point in history. I think we’re going in the wrong direction,” she says. “We have to remember that trans rights are our rights. We’re all in the same boat. If they’re going for those people, they’ll go for you too.”

Regardless of the terrifying world around her, Skin stands stoically firm in her commitment to use her voice for good. She speaks passionately about her decision to vote Green in the 2024 UK election. “I’ve always used my platform to speak my mind,” she tells me. Whether it be the 2016 Brexit referendum or the election of Giorgia Meloni as prime minister of Italy, which led to lesbian mothers being removed from their children’s birth certificates, Skin is conscious that she has a duty to speak when others may be afraid to.

There is something undeniably electric about Skin. Her passion for life is truly infectious. As we talk about what her younger self would think seeing her now, it becomes clear that it is the music that has always driven her forward. “People don’t really get to earn money out of their hobbies,” she laughs. “I’d be very proud of myself. Getting to do music every day is the definition of success. It’s not about how much money you make or about having friends in high places. It’s waking up every day and knowing it’s going to be a good one,” she concludes. **D**

The Painful Truth is out 23 May. Pre-order now