

IN CONVERSATION WITH DORIAN ELECTRA

Interviewed By Chris Erik Thomas

Years before Dorian Electra became Dorian Electra, they were just another New York club kid, sweaty and dancing at a party called Holy Mountain. As the most extravagant queer rager you could find without leaving Manhattan, it was the go-to party for a generation of queer kids trying to figure themselves out, or at least dance until dawn. It was here that I first met Dorian. They had long, blonde hair with sharp bangs, and I was wearing what I can only describe as a Frankensteinian freakshow of fashion moment: a tight, white plain T-shirt adorned with a dead-eyed, baby doll head stitched into the direct centre of the chest. They came to me, remarked on the shirt, took a photo, and that was that. Another odd, exciting encounter half-remembered in the blur of our lives.

So much changed in the years after that chance meeting. As the club that used to host the party became rubble, crushed underneath the weight of newly built condos, the club kid I met that night transformed into Dorian Electra, the experimental pop star. In a little over a decade, they've carved out a name for themselves as one of the most beautifully bizarre artists in the genre. They've released collaborations with the likes of Charli XCX, Rebecca Black, Mykki Blanco, and Pussy Riot, and written tracks about everything from economic theory and philosophical thought experiments to queer theory and the history of the clitoris.

They've become a maestro of distilling complicated topics into elevated pop music, wrapping each track in pulsing beats fit for the kind of dance floors we met on so many years ago. As they sat in the passenger seat of a car gliding through Los Angeles, I called them up to talk about where their love for music originated, how the pandemic has altered their artistry, and the Italian learning method which has guided their life.

When you were a kid, was there anything in particular that made you want to create art?

DE: I loved music videos. I grew up loving music and loved performing. My mom used to do musical theatre, and my dad was in a rock cover band. They were both big fans of rock and pop music. I found that I could combine my interests in visuals, fashion,

and art by making music. It was a path that made sense, but only after a certain point.

I started messing around with music when I was a freshman in high school. The first thing I started doing was making songs for book reports. There were assignments where we could choose whatever we wanted to do for a book report. I would always do songs, and then I started doing songs and videos together; I would take existing music and cut it or take a song and do a parody version of it for a school project.

That was really where I realized that writing a song is even harder than writing a complex essay about a topic, because you have to boil it down to the bare essentials. That requires more understanding, at a higher level sometimes, than being able to throw a bunch of jargon into a really long essay.

Your high school practised the Montessori method of education. How did that impact you?

DE: I attribute so much of who I am and my whole experience in life to that learning method. I have ADHD and I struggled a lot in school as a kid. When I was really little, I felt like, "oh, maybe I wasn't as smart as other kids," because I couldn't focus, or get my work done. I was getting in trouble for talking a lot and distracting other kids. The Montessori method was developed by this woman, Maria Montessori, in Italy in the '40s. It was developed to teach kids who had learning differences, learning disabilities, and developmental challenges.

At the time, there weren't systems in place for people with learning differences, and so she developed this system and realized that she could apply this way of learning to anybody. The whole philosophy behind it is that learning should be motivated by the individual child. It should appeal to every human's natural curiosity and wonder, and sense of self-worth or motivation. As opposed to traditional schooling, which, a lot of times, is based on a series of rewards coming from an authority figure who gives a grade to you and gives you approval or disapproval.

The whole goal of Montessori is to create lifelong learners. It gave me a sense that I wasn't really at school to please my parents, or I wasn't there to please the teachers. If I want something to happen, I have to take the initiative to do it. It's stuff that I still think about all the time, and I think it's shaped my worldview in so many ways.

The most important thing with art is for it to be accessible to anybody.

Your music has dealt with philosophy, economics, gender theory, and all these different topics throughout your career. What made you choose the pop music genre for producing music?

DE: I chose pop music because, number one, I love it, but number two, it's accessible. The most important thing with art — at least for what I'm trying to do — is for it to be accessible to anybody. My goal is that even if you don't speak the language of the lyrics that I'm singing, you can still get something out of the visuals and the music. I want to create something that anybody can enjoy on many different levels. You can tune it out

in the background or be poring over the lyrics and analyzing it.

Accessibility is the biggest thing, because I don't like how insular some parts of the art world can be. That's what I love about pop music. It's just like, "let's make something that people think is sick and want to dance to." It's so immediate and direct.

I think the only elitism that comes into pop music is

people pretending that they are "above" pop music. It's so sad.

DE: Totally. I did that for many years. I was that high school music snob. My dad, for example, always loved Madonna. When he met my mom, my mom was like, "Oh, I'm into other music," and thought that was low brow at first. Now my mom is a huge Madonna fan and loves her so much. I had the same experience. I remember my dad tried to get me into Kesha in 2009. I didn't fully embrace pop music until 2010 or 2011, after my first year in college.

I didn't embrace pop music when I was younger because I was still trying to be straight, and I thought straight boys didn't like pop music. I missed The Backstreet Boys and NSYNC stage. I was listening to a lot of rap and hip-hop and trying to go in this different direction, but then realized that, actually, pop music is fantastic.

DE: That's so interesting. It's funny because, in my brain, I lump together all of the rap and hip-hop that was popular in middle school and high school because it was playing on the radio. I really liked 50 Cent and found those songs so amazing musically, but I had to be like, "I like this ironically," or "I like Katy Perry ironically." Then my friend was like, "I think you like it genuinely. There's nothing wrong with that." A year later, I was like, "oh fuck, you are so right."

People also attach a sense of vapidness to pop music, but you've shown that it can also be about all of these serious topics. If people want to learn about gender politics and don't want to read a dry article or an academic book, they can listen to your songs.

DE: Totally. I mean, especially with the gender stuff, I've never read much gender theory. I've read more about how gender has been viewed throughout history — the changing views in the scientific community and historically and all this shit. But I haven't read much on the philosophy of gender because I could never get through it. Honestly, I found it boring. I can't understand a lot of it, but I think it's actually intuitive to

people at the end of the day. I feel like people are born being more gender-fluid, and then we're socialized into gender roles. If I can verbalize that or put that into a visual, I can help people see that there are different ways of presenting gender. It doesn't have to be an academic thesis.



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Is there any overarching message that you want to convey through your work?

DE: Even if somebody doesn't like what they see or hear from my music or videos, I hope they walk away rethinking some of the themes around politics, or gender, or fashion, or anything really. What you've seen in your own life doesn't always have to be the way that it has to be.

The concept behind this edition of the magazine is genesis. One of the definitions that struck me is: "The origin or coming into being of something." How does the concept of genesis fit into your work?

DE: In a really broad sense, I feel like I'm always changing and always growing. Everything is always changing. When something ends, or an opportunity is not available, I try to see it as a new opportunity. I know we're talking about the beginning of something, but recently I've been thinking about the ending of things — especially with the COVID-19 pandemic. My tour got cancelled. I couldn't do this, or I couldn't do that. There are so many negatives, and we get used to defining ourselves by what we're lacking, but when all these things end in our life, it can also be the beginning of something else. We have to consciously create those opportunities. I'm much happier when I'm thinking about things that way.

How has the pandemic altered your creative process?

DE: It's definitely a lot harder to make music, because I'm used to making music collaboratively with people in the same room. It's not easy to do it on Zoom; it's very exhausting, but it's something I had to learn to do. There are benefits to it, too. It's been cool to do DJ sets online and to be able to engage with fans in that way, but then also to change my relationship with social media. To be off of it a lot more than I was in the past. It feels nice to be in control of that. I'm sure a lot of people have been struggling with social media addiction during this time, but I guess I feel grateful that I'm finding a nice balance that works for me.

The pandemic also shut a chapter on all of our lives; everything will be different after this ends. The post-pandemic era is going to be an entirely new kind of genesis.

DE: Totally. Now I have so much more time, so I have to think about what I can do now that I wasn't able to do before.

Is there any project you've done in that last year that you're particularly proud of? Or that signals a new direction for you?

DE: All of the visuals for My Agenda were done by me and my creative partner, Weston Allen, with just an iPhone. We didn't rent any studios or anything like that; we just did it in a random room. We pretty much DIYed it, and I was really happy with how so much of that turned out, because that rawness was really important to the aesthetic and the themes of the project. It felt nice because it reminded me that we don't always need all of this other stuff to make something powerful and potent. With a shift in perspective, we can turn the idea that we can't go anywhere and can't do anything into a whole visual world.

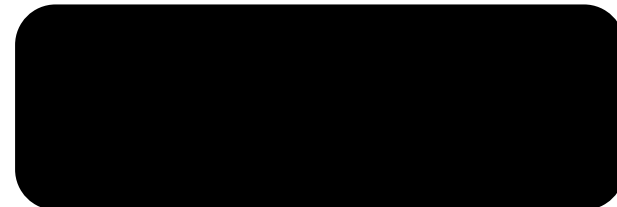
It also sends the message that you don't need a lot of money to create something powerful.

DE: Absolutely. The money aspect is a huge part of it. Some of my favourite stuff that I've seen recently is super DIY. People are just making stuff in their room. I mean, that's where the music is being made nowadays — at least in the scene that my friends and I are in. It's very refreshing to acknowledge that and celebrate it.

Do you feel you've grown a lot as an artist in this past year in ways that you wouldn't have without the pandemic shutting things down?

DE: Yeah, I've gotten back to my DIY roots in many ways — especially having to film music videos on our old iPhone and stuff that. I think that's good, because I've been able to experience what it was like before I had more of a team to work on stuff with, having

to do everything yourself. It's refreshing, because sometimes productions can be so bloated. It's nice to be working with your hands. I've always done my own styling, but I started decorating my clothing and adding elements to it, and I have to do my own makeup. It's been cool in that way.





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Going back to your roots can also make you reevaluate why you're creating art in the first place. If someone were to ask you why you create art, do you think your answer has changed in the last year?

DE: Not drastically. It's been reinforced in a lot of ways, which feels good. A lot of how I think about my art comes from how I was thinking about making educational music videos. I had to think about what's going to be meaningful to an audience. What's going to be relevant to people? What is a topic that people are curious about, but it may be something that people aren't talking about that I can add something different to? How are you going to stand out in a sea of all of this other content? I had to think about all of those things both from a marketing perspective and from a perspective of what can I make that will be meaningful and, hopefully, resonate with people?

For example, when I was making songs about gender, I felt it was a really interesting time where all of these conversations were becoming a bit more mainstream. I was hoping that it resonated with people because it's also what I was feeling personally and thinking about, but I had to find that middle ground between things that are meaningful to me and meaningful to other people. What gives me meaning and motivation is being able to think about the political climate and other things that are going on and try to make things that are relevant perspectives to that.

It's not just about me and what's going on in my life. That's a valid thing for anyone to make art about, but I've always been more self-conscious about it. Do people want to hear what's going on in my daily life? That's going to be boring as fuck or

weird. Like, "okay, I wake up, I try to convince myself to take a shower. I look in the fridge, and I'm way too lazy to cook anything, so I make some microwavable frozen meal."

Maybe I will sing about that at some point, and I'm sure people would find that relatable too, but I'd rather write about incels and 4chan and the weird toxic internet culture which led to Trump's election. All of that shit is so fascinating to me and so important to talk about. When there is something people aren't talking about that I feel is important, that's what motivates me to make my art.



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