



NO ORDINARY
LOVE

Text by Blaine Skrainka
Photography by Ellen von Unwerth
Styling by Guillaume Boulez

When I trust you we can do it with the lights on." She whispers over an off-kilter bass, downtempo beat. Still, it feels manic. Like deep breaths in conflict with shallow thumps of the heart just before falling into bed.

FKA twigs follows in the footsteps of R&B's matriarchs: the sensuality of Sade, the imperial presence of Grace Jones, and the spirit of Aaliyah. Tahliah Barnett is something different, though. She goes by FKA—*formerly known as*—twigs, a nickname, written in lowercase, that alludes to the way her body audibly pops as she bends. She is petite, though one might expect to witness a presence larger-than-life with only legend to serve expectation. Surrealist music videos and dramatic magazine covers paint a demigod. From the corners of the Internet, the 26-year-old Londoner's haunting sound samplings and vivid imagery garnered curiosity from custodians of style on both sides of the Atlantic. Her particular derivation of contemporary R&B—an intimate slow burn—stands in contrast to the aural leaps of her chart-topping peers. This summer will see the release of her debut full-length album, *LPI*—ten tracks that take listeners behind closed doors and into the shadows.

Tahliah Barnett was raised near Gloucestershire on the southwest English countryside. Her creative outpourings were bolstered by her parents and community alike. "When I was younger, I thought I was lacking because I didn't grow up in a city. Now I'm quite grateful that my life references are something different," she says. From gender-bending as Mrs. Doubtfire to dressing herself as Jane Fonda—in altered school tights with "thong bum, crop top, sweat bands" and all—Barnett enjoyed transforming into characters through costume. In the living room she staged a showcase of cardio exercises, pretending to star in music videos. She stood on chairs and struck poses and was met with smiles from her parents. "It turned into a really weird sort of little photo shoot," she recalls with blushed cheeks. On another occasion, the girl decided to live as feline. Her mother made her a cat mask adorned with sequins. "We'd sit on the floor together, and she'd make me a tail. I'd be a cat for the whole weekend and have my water out of a bowl. My mum would just go along with it," she says, paying tribute to her mother's creativity and encouraging nature.

"I didn't grow up with lots of money, or the newest toy, and I couldn't always go on the school ski trip or to France on half-term. But through all of that, my mum and dad instilled into me that you can do whatever you want, and everything I did they said was amazing."

As a teen, Barnett frequented U.K. youth clubs, community centers that provide recreational and creative programs for low-income families. Today, pervasive fiscal austerity measures on behalf of the national government have shuttered social services across the board, including funding cuts to youth clubs. Barnett laments, "A lot of underprivileged kids were really excited about writing music in studios or taking dance class. When they cut the money, it meant that those things stopped literally within two months. It was so sad."

"My WILD Wish is that the government would put money back into supporting young people," she says. "Maybe if I hadn't gone into a youth club when I was sixteen, with a really low-budget studio, if I hadn't been encouraged to start writing, maybe I wouldn't be here now."

At twenty-one, she signed on as a youth worker hoping to embolden younger creative minds to write their own songs. It was at this same time that she began find her own path and sound. "It was terrible," she remembers, "I don't think my music was very good, and I don't think I was a particularly good songwriter either."

She had been seriously, but quietly, putting together tracks and visual concepts since at least the age of nineteen, but it wasn't until just before her twenty-fifth birthday that any material was released. "It was a silent thing. It was secret," she says.

Initially, Barnett was largely reliant on others to produce her music. Results were mixed and often in conflict with her idiosyncratic minimalism. "I found that I would like it to a point, but the producer would then beef it up and I would start hating the song," she tells. "I had a lot of tiffs with producers because I'm very particular." She grew weary of engineers using generic sounds across disparate artists. "I found that it can show a real lack of understanding and originality." In the studio, she would direct arrangements, "Mix up that synth; put on an automated filter; change the velocity of the sound. And they'd say, *Yeah yeah yeah*, but I knew enough to know nothing had actually been done." She became tired of the faint condescension. "When you have a vocalist, a young girl, waltzing in a studio, really knowing what she wants, people feel intimidated. I'm soft-spoken, but someone can look in my eye and know that I know what I want and know that I know what I'm talking about," she says.

PREVIOUS PAGE:
FKA twigs wears bra by TRES BONJOUR at Mise En Cage-Paris,
cuffs by BARBARA BUI and her own jewelry throughout the shoot.



FKA twigs wears bra by CHROMAT at Mise En Cage-Paris,
skirt by TODD LYNN and shoes by AZZEDINE ALAIA.

FKA twigs wears a top made by her mother, skirt by MANISH ARORA and earrings (worn in hair) by EK THONGPRASERT.



“Vulnerability is strong, and vulnerability is sexy.”



FKA twigs wears a top made by her mother and trousers by MCQ BY ALEXANDER MCQUEEN.





Three years ago things turned as she began working with a producer called Tic from her record label, Young Turks. "He understood the space I wanted in my music. He understood the feeling that I was trying to get across," Barnett says. With a narrower and affirmed vision of her own eccentricity, she kept on. She tapped producers that were more adept at understanding her ideas and her ways of expressing them. For *EP2*, she collaborated with Arca, a producer that is credited for his part on Kanye West's *Yeezus*. More recently she gives nods to Sampha and Paul Epworth for their enlightened sense of collaboration and support. They "let me play all their instruments and run rampant in their studio," she grins. These days, the "last phase," as she calls it, is one of near autonomy in the studio. She'll be at the computer until the dawn breaks, manipulating sounds, clarifying intentions. "At times it would be so frustrating because I would be working alone, and computers mess up for no reason. It was really hard, but I called up my bandmate Cy An, and I just said to him, *Look*, I really want to do this. I could ring him at three o'clock in the morning if I needed to." She confesses that it would have been impossible to finish the record she wanted without him. "It's a testament to him, his lack of ego, and his willingness to be an amazing friend."

Still, the advanced technicalities of production remain new territory. With infinite options provided by today's computer software, one is apt to get lost in an uncharted, virtual netherworld. "Well, I love the wormhole I don't get scared," she says. "It's where you make mistakes, and where you make mistakes is where you find sounds, which is so beautiful." She will write a song in just fifteen minutes, but can spend months in adjustment. "You put an effect on something, or click on the wrong effect, and before you know it there is a sound ping-ponging off every speaker and going crazy." It may not result in what she set out to find, but for her, the process is magic. She describes it as a pure exercise in sound. "I think it's quite a sonic exploration. I connect with my body, but I connect with sound much more. My body fits into it afterwards." She adds, "Sometimes if I'm not sure about a drum rhythm or the swing of the thing I get up and I'll have a little dance to see how it feels." Production is the fine crafting of raw takes, and when she hears nothing more requiring alteration, she lets go. "Once I sign off on something, I sign off. I don't torture myself."

Barnett, who studied dance since the age of six, had given it up for years after a lifetime of practice. Recently she's rediscovered the art, even occasionally dropping in on a class at the Central School of Ballet in London. "It's quite refreshing to be hands-down the worst person in the class," she says with a humble smile. Finding herself a sudden pop counter-culture icon as FKA twigs, Barnett actually enjoys the gentle humiliation provided by ballet instructors as a way to stay grounded. "They'll always call you out. I quite like that sort of contrast." If ballet serves as disciplined conditioning, jazz and contemporary dance provide more passionate outlets. "They're not so soul-destroying," she quips. Lately she's been exploring waacking and voguing, stylized choreographies that rely on dramatic arm movements, and krumping, an improvisational form of street dance that she describes as the contemporary of hip hop. "It's spontaneous, very expressive. It comes from aggression and frustration," she explains. "But within that you can find elation. You breathe and pump yourself up by taking in energy." With facial expressions and body gestures, dancers direct the

room's attention. "You talk with your hands. You jab, and within the jab you say what you want. You can use each other to get energy. You can go up to someone and take their energy, then throw their energy on the floor."

The shadowy tension often felt on FKA twigs' audio and visual projects stands in contrast to Barnett's calm and confident personality. "Maybe in the past," she confides, "I was drawn towards dark energy, especially during my teenage years. I'd almost enjoy falling into the black hole of death with people, being sucked up in all of their issues. I'm too old for it now." Still, she describes her music as wholly autobiographical. In fact, she presses, not a single person has written a melody or a lyric other than herself. "I feel like if someone else wrote a lyric for me, it's like I'm lying because they told me to sing a word." She refuses to question the dangers of exposing oneself through art.

"I think vulnerability is strong, and vulnerability is sexy as well. The more in touch you are with your emotions, the more vulnerable at times you will feel, but if you can accept that, if you can face it and put it on the table, in many ways you are stronger than people that would never dare to put themselves out there. What is there to be scared of really?"

Still, she faces obstacles. She calls to reference *I Find No Peace* by the poet Wyatt, which holds a line that reads: "I love another, and thus I hate myself." Barnett reveals this an unofficial subtitle to her debut full-length, minimally titled, *LPI*.

"I loved my music, and I loved it so much that I wanted to serve my music. To go through those times where it's so frustrating because you can't do something. When you do that, you realize how much you have to learn, and it makes you hate yourself."

For Barnett, art fully reflects life.

"Or it could be a lover. Sometimes when you really truly give yourself to somebody, it can completely backfire and you just end up feeling really insecure, really paranoid, jealous, and ugly. It's from loving someone. If that person isn't right for you, all those positive emotions that you are trying to put on someone can end up negatively projected back onto yourself. Then you hate yourself for it. You're searching for something to make you feel good and to be a better person, but you realize how far away you are from being your best self."

Through sonic exploration and lyrical confession, it might seem as if Barnett has discovered herself through music, but she hesitates to intellectualize the process. "There's no such thing as *finding yourself*," she assures, "I don't really believe in that creative psychobabble." She maintains that one always knows their complete self, but that we must constantly learn to battle forces that serve to knock the mind off-center. "The more music that I put out and the more material that I do, the more I'm completely certain of who I am and the type of person I want to be and what I have to give." She holds a steady line, "I can't be shaken anymore, by anyone. I've got to that point in my life that if you're not a good person, and you can't make me feel good with love and life, then *fuck off*, basically."

FKA twigs wears dress by CARVEN
and belt by AZZEDINE ALAIA
OPPOSITE PAGE:
FKA twigs wears dress by ANTHONY VACCARELLO
and shoes by AZZEDINE ALAIA.



Artistic Director: Karen Clarkson
Hair stylist: Soichi @ Saint Luke
Makeup artist: Laura Dominique @ Streeters
Manicurist: Imarni @ Saint Luke
Digital Operator: Ryan O'Toole
Production: Paul Hunt and Carmel Reeves @ JN Production London
Photographer's assistants: Stan Rey-Grange and Charlie Ryan
Stylist's assistants: Noemie Ferre and Cressida Jade