

# Grimes



Montreal electro-pop prodigy Claire Boucher on her quest for  
pure aesthetics.

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INTERVIEW

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*Photos by Tommy Chase Lucas*

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Even by the loosest of downtown New York standards, Claire Boucher looks pretty out-there standing atop the Standard East Village hotel late on a Friday afternoon in January. The 23-year-old electro-pop singer/producer who goes by Grimes flew down from Montreal for just a few hours to pose for a spread in *V* magazine, and a section of her hair has been molded into a neon-green spike that runs down the side of her face. The rest of her ensemble consists of an oversized leopard-print dress, black tights, and too-small sandals; think day-glo punk elf. The shoot features two other musicians, Iggy Azalea-- the Australian rapper of YouTube-viral "P.U.\$\$.Y." notoriety-- and Cody Critcheloe of New York neo-disco act SSION, and everyone looks appropriately bored milling around the hotel penthouse. Everyone but Boucher, who is fidgeting inside her puffy winter coat and flashing me a loaded grin that says: "I'm getting a big kick out of this," and "sorry it's taking so long," and "I'm fucking freezing."

Boucher, who has been approached to appear in *Vogue*, too, has grown accustomed to high-end photo shoots in recent months. "I don't care about looking good in the magazine," she tells me later. "In fact, I look like an Oompa-Loompa. But I like the idea of a culture of pure aesthetics. It feels like a video game." Listening to her new album, *Visions*-- out next week via 4AD-- this approach becomes even more apparent. The record is an expert execution of hyper-digital sound that takes glitchy and glossy to the extreme: Using a couple of vocal pedals, a sampler, a Juno-G keyboard, and GarageBand, Boucher pumps 1980s bubblegum-pop vibes through a series of futuristic filters, topping everything with extraterrestrial vocals. Video games would be lucky to have her.

*"I approach music-- and this sounds crazy-- as though I'm Phil Spector, and I'm cranking out these pop stars and forcing them to do all this crazy stuff-- except they're all me."*

Pitchfork: I feel like there's something patently feminine about the way *Visions* sounds.

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Claire Boucher: I hope not. I don't want to think it's patently girly. Vocally it is, because that's where my capabilities lie, and my influences as far as pop goes are female stars. But production-wise and instrumentally, my biggest influences are primarily men: Aphex Twin, the Dungeon Family, OutKast, that kind of shit.

I also feel like those [gender] lines are changing. A couple of years ago, it wasn't nearly as OK for guys to like girly-sounding music. But all of a sudden a lot of my guys friends who would like have been really disdainful of female singers are way more accepting. My brothers' friends are all basketball jock-bros, and they really like Lykke Li and Robyn.

I grew up with four brothers, and in the back of my head I feel pretty masculine. It's always funny when I hear recordings of my voice, because it's so deep when I hear it in my head. And in any given situation with a group of women, I'll always take on a really masculine role. I approach music-- and this sounds crazy-- as though I'm Phil Spector, and I'm cranking out these pop stars and forcing them to do all this crazy stuff-- except they're all me. But I'm not, like, transgendered. *[laughs]*

**Pitchfork:** Seems pretty complicated.

CB: I have a really weird relationship with myself where I'll say, "Do it, do it!" and then, "I don't want to do it anymore, I hate photo shoots, I'm so tired of this!" Or, "I wrote a song, and you're gonna sing it!" then, "I can't hit the note." I want to be a behind-the-scenes producer. I really hate being in front of people. But I'm also obsessed with becoming a pop star.

*"When Regis grabbed Nicki Minaj's ass on TV, she just giggled. I was like, 'What the fuck! Come on! Punch him in the face!'"*

**Pitchfork:** It seems that female artists within the indiesphere are subject to a lot of the same things that mainstream pop artists are. Lykke Li has a modeling contract, for example.

CB: I mean, they're all fucking beautiful. Ugly girls generally don't become successful in music. And it sucks because it's a standard that just exists.

**Pitchfork: Do you want to push back against that at all? Obviously people like the way you look. But how do you feel about the idea of being sexualized?**

CB: If that happened, it wouldn't be because I was wearing sexy clothes, because I look like a baby. But music is an inherently sexual thing. If something sexual is going to be expressed, it's going to be in my music. You should be able to be in your underwear if you want, but it's going to change the way people perceive you. I think a lot of music that's really innovative is not even considered because it was made by people who had a sexual image. And people assume that it's a commodified thing, so it can't be "indie."

Though I can't say that I respect the gender politics of some of the female artists I like the most. When Regis [Philbin] grabbed Nicki Minaj's ass on TV, she just giggled. I was like, "What the fuck! Come on! Punch him in the face!" Up until that point I'd thought, "Wow, Nicki Minaj is a bad bitch. Sick."



**Pitchfork: Your voice covers so many different styles, tones, and forms throughout *Visions*. How do you see its role within your music?**

CB: I definitely see the voice as an instrument: It makes great drums, great synth pads, great everything. Vocals can be so many things, like, "Hey, I'm Michael Jackson, and this is my iconic voice," or a choir of people sounding like Mozart's *Requiem*. Mariah Carey is my favorite singer because her voice sounds utterly groundless. It's not even a human voice; it almost sounds mechanical.

**Pitchfork: How did you first get into Mariah?**

CB: In 2007 or 2008, I started listening to R&B on this road trip with my dad because we couldn't agree on anything else. I smoked weed and listened to "Fantasy" and felt something I'd never felt before [laughs]-- yeah, that

makes me sound so ignorant. But then I slowly started gravitating more toward female singers, because I was able to relate. In medieval Christian thought, it was assumed that the better you were as a singer, the purer your heart was. I don't necessarily think that's true, but Mariah Carey has the voice of someone who has never done evil.

*"Just because something might not have a deep philosophical meaning doesn't mean it's not important or relevant."*

**Pitchfork:** It can be tough to make out the lyrics in your songs. How do you write them?

CB: I usually produce loops and then try to create lyrics that have meaning to me, but I also work in terms of enunciation. "Ah" and "ooh" are very different, and I need it to be the right way. I want to say my life inspires my lyrics, but I also try to abstract them as much as possible because I don't want to refer to my life explicitly. I'm definitely really embarrassed by my lyrics.

I give myself shit: "What are you doing? What is all this random babble? Is music anything besides something that feels good?" If that's all it is, that's great, but now I'm a musician and I want it to be more than just random babble. A lot of this record is about the fact that I've given up everything else-- all the relationships in my life, my home-- to do this.

The song "Vowels = space and time" was actually me angrily writing about the fact that people were always getting on me for not writing songs about things. It's based on a theory from Russian Zaum philosophy, which is this weird, obscure pre-Dada early-1900s surrealist group that believed language was

false because vocal expression had inherent emotional meanings or qualities. I was like, "This justifies my other records!" [laughs]

**Pitchfork:** I like when I can make out specifics in your lyrics. There's one bit on "Skin" that stands out: "I know you're faced with something that could consume you completely/ Soft skin/ You touch me once again and somehow it stings/ Because I know it is the end."

CB: That's about being in love with someone who's ultimately too caught up in their own shit. I wrote "Skin" for one person and one person only. It's one thing to make a song that you feel really good about, but sometimes you don't actually want anyone to hear it. I can't listen to my own music when someone else is in the room.



Oblivion — Grimes

Via Pitchfork

**Pitchfork:** The internet makes it pretty easy to discover cool things and curate them as influences. Are you worried about coming across as merely topical?

CB: My great fear is that I'm the ultimate shallow person. I think about this kind of thing a lot, and about this phenomenon in our culture where people identify themselves with their interests. I've been trying not to think about it too much. It used to really upset me when people called me "witch house." And then one day I thought, "But I did make a witch house record, whether I like it or not. Boo-hoo."

Instead of thinking about whether or not I'm credited with really liking K-pop first or following a trend or whatever-- fuck it. Let it go. It's not important. I

feel like all of these people are always competing to be the first person who knows the most about the most obscure things, but it's all great stuff that everyone should take part in. I love going through people's Tumblrs. It's people just reveling in all the beauty that the internet is bringing forth for everyone to see. Just because something might not have a deep philosophical meaning doesn't mean it's not important or relevant.



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