

The Music Issue

SWITCHING
LANESS WITH
ST. VINCENT

Photographs by Scandeborgs

By Molly Young



WARNING: STAY ALERT!
OTHERWISE, ST. VINCENT'S
SHAPE-SHIFTING MUSIC AND
DARING PERFORMANCES WILL
LEAVE YOU IN THE DUST.

Styled by Mobolaji Dawodu

ON

A COLD RECENT night in Brooklyn, St. Vincent appeared onstage in a Saint Laurent smoking jacket to much clapping and hooting, gave the crowd a deadpan look, and said, "Without being reductive, I'd like to say that we haven't actually done anything yet." Pause. "So let's do something."

She launched into a cover of Lou Reed's "Perfect Day": an arty torch-song version that made you really wonder whom she was thinking about when she sang it. This was the elusive chanteuse version of St. Vincent, at least 80 percent leg, with slicked-back hair and pale, pale skin. She belted, sipped

from a tumbler of tequila ("Oh, Christ on a cracker, that's strong"), executed little feints and pounces, flung the mic cord away from herself like a filthy sock, and spat on the stage a bunch of times. Nine parts Judy Garland, one part GG Allin.

If the Garland-Allin combination suggests that St. Vincent is an acquired taste, she's one that has been acquired by a wide range of fans. The crowd in Brooklyn included young women with Haircuts in pastel fur and guys with beards of widely varying intentionality. There was a woman of at least 90 years and a Hasidic guy in a tall hat, which was too bad for whoever sat behind him. There were models, full nuclear families, and even a solitary frat bro. St. Vincent brings people together.

If you chart the career of Annie Clark, which is St. Vincent's civilian name, you will see what start-up founders and venture capitalists call "hockey-stick growth." That is, a line that moves steadily in a

northeast direction until it hits an "inflection point" and shoots steeply upward. It's called hockey-stick growth because...it looks like a hockey stick.

The toe of the stick starts with *Marry Me*, Clark's debut solo album, which came out a decade ago and established a few things that would become essential St. Vincent traits: her ability to play a zillion instruments (she's credited on the album with everything from dulcimer to vibraphone), her highbrow streak (Shakespeare citations), her goofy streak ("Marry me!" is an *Arrested Development* bit), and her oceanic library of musical references (Kate Bush, Steve Reich, uh...D'Angelo!). The blade of the stick is her next four albums, one of them a collaboration with David Byrne, all of them confirming her presence as an enigma of indie pop and a guitar genius. The stick of the stick took a non-musical detour in 2016, when Clark was photographed canoodling with (now ex-) girlfriend Cara Delevingne at Taylor Swift's mansion, followed a few months later by pictures of Clark holding hands with Kristen Stewart. That brought her to the realm of mainstream paparazzi-pictures-in-the-*Daily-Mail* celebrity. Finally, the top of the stick is *Masseduction*, the 2017 album she co-produced with Jack Antonoff, which revealed St. Vincent to be not only experimental and beguiling but capable of turning out incorrigible bangers.

Masseduction made the case that Clark could be as much a pop star as someone like Sia or Nicki Minaj—a performer whose idiosyncrasies didn't have to be tamped down for mainstream success but could actually be amplified. The artist Bruce Nauman once said he made work that was like "going up the stairs in the dark and either having an extra stair that you didn't expect or not having one that you thought was going to be there." The idea applies to *Masseduction*: Into the familiar form of a pop song Clark introduces surprising missteps, unexpected additions and subtractions. The album reached No. 10 on the Billboard 200. The David Bowie comparisons got louder.

This past fall, she released *MassEducation* (not quite the same title; note the addition of the letter *a*), which turned a dozen of the tracks into stripped-down piano songs. Although technically off duty after being on tour for



II<<

OPENING PAGES

jacket (men's)
\$4,900
pants (men's)
\$2,300

Dior Men

shoes
Christian Louboutin

rings
(throughout)
Cartier

II<

THIS PAGE

dress
Balmain

▶II

OPPOSITE PAGE

coat (men's)
\$8,475
Versace

shoes
Christian Louboutin

tights
Wolford





nearly all of 2018, Clark has been performing the reduced songs here and there in small venues with her collaborator, the composer and pianist Thomas Bartlett. Whereas the *Masseduction* tour involved a lot of latex, neon, choreographed sex-robot dance moves, and LED screens, these recent shows have been comparatively austere. When she performed in Brooklyn, the stage was empty, aside from a piano and a side table. There were blue lights, a little piped-in fog for atmosphere, and that was it. It looked like an

early-'90s magazine ad for premium liquor: art-directed, yes, but not to the degree that it Pinterested itself.

The performance was similarly informal. Midway through one song, Clark forgot the lyrics and halted. "It takes a different energy to be performing [than] to sit in your sweat-pants watching *Babylon Berlin*," she said. "Wherever I am, I completely forget the past, and I'm like, 'This is now.' And sometimes this means forgetting song lyrics. So, if you will... tell me what the second fucking verse is."

CLARK HAS ONLY a decade in the public eye behind her, but she's accomplished a good amount of shape-shifting. An openness to the full range of human expression, in fact, is kind of a requirement for being a St. Vincent fan. This is a person who has appeared in the front row at Chanel and also a person who played a gig dressed as a toilet, a person profiled in *Vogue* and on the cover of *Guitar World*.

The day before her Brooklyn show, I sat with Clark to find out what it's like to be utterly unstructured, time-wise, after a long

"I had the best weekend last weekend. I woke up and did hot Pilates, and then I got a bunch of new modular synths, and I set 'em up, and I spent ten hours with modular synths. Plugging things in. *What happens when I do this?* I'm unburdened by a full understanding of what's going on, so I'm very willing to experiment."

Like a child?

"Exactly. Did you ever get those electronics kits as a kid for like 20 bucks from RadioShack? Where you connect this wire to that one and a light bulb turns on? It's very much like that."

exactly the thing that is most special about you: Is there anything a person could possibly want more? Is this why Annie Clark glows? Or is it because she's super pale? Or was it because there was a sound coming through the window where we sat that sounded thrillingly familiar?

"Is Amy Sedaris running by?" Clark asked, her spine straightening. A man with a boom mic was visible on the sidewalk outside. Another guy in a baseball cap issued instructions to someone beyond the window. Someone said "*Action!*" and a figure in vampire makeup and a clown wig streaked

"I CAN'T THINK OF ANYBODY WHERE I GO, — 'WHAT'S GREAT ABOUT THAT ARTIST IS THEIR CONSISTENCY.'"

There's an element of chaos, she said, that makes synth noodling a neat way to stumble on melodies that she might not have consciously assembled. She played with the synths by herself all day. "I don't stop, necessarily," she said, reflecting on what the idea of "vacation" means to someone for whom "job" and "things I love to do" happen to overlap more or less exactly. "I just get to do other things that are really fun. I'm in control of my time." She had plans to see a show at the New Museum, read books, play music and see movies alone, always sitting on the aisle so she could make a quick escape if necessary. But she will probably

keep working. St. Vincent doesn't have *hobbies*.

When it manifests in a person, this synergy between life and work is an almost physically perceptible quality, like having brown eyes or one leg or being beautiful. Like beauty, it's a result of luck, and a quality that can invoke total despair in people who aren't themselves allotted it. This isn't to say that Clark's career is a stroke of unearned fortune but that her skills and character and era and influences have collided into a perfect storm of realized talent. And to have talent and realize that talent and then be beloved by thousands for

across the sidewalk. Someone said "*Cut!*" and Clark zipped over for a look. It was, in fact, Amy Sedaris, her clown wig bobbing in the 44-degree breeze. The mic operator was gagging with laughter. It seemed like a good omen, this sighting, like the New York City version of Groundhog Day: If an Amy Sedaris streaks across your sight line in vampire makeup, spring will arrive early.

ANOTHER THING Clark does when off tour is absorb all the input that she misses when she's locked into performance mode. On a Monday afternoon, she met artist Lisa Yuskavage at an exhibition of her paintings at the David Zwirner gallery in Chelsea. Yuskavage was part of a mini-boom of figurative painting in the '90s, turning out portraits of *Penthouse* centerfolds and giant-juggled babes with Rembrandt-esque skill. It made sense that Clark wanted to meet her: Both women make art about the inner lives of female figures, both are sorcerers of technique, both are theatrical but introspective, both have incendiary style. The gallery was a white cube, skylit, with paintings around the perimeter. Yuskavage and Clark wandered through at a pace exclusive to walking tours of cultural spaces, which is to say a few steps every 10 to 15 seconds with pauses between for the proper amount of motionless appreciation.

The paintings were small, all about the size of a human head, and featured a lot of nipples, tufted pudenda, tan lines, majestic asses, and protruding tongues. "I like the idea of possessing (*continued on page 97*)

II◀
blazer (men's)
\$1,125
Paul Smith

hair by
pamela neal
for exclusive
artists
management.
makeup by
hinako at the
wall group
using marc
jacobs beauty.
manicure by
naoko saita
for priti nyc.
set design
by shelley
burgon at
the magnet
agency.
produced by
carisa barah
at small
battles.

stretch of knowing a year in advance that she had to be in, like, Denmark on July 4 and couldn't make plans with friends.

"I've been off tour now for three weeks," she said. "When I say 'off,' I mean I didn't *have* to travel."

This doesn't mean she hasn't traveled—she went to L.A. to get in the studio with Sleater-Kinney and also hopped down to Texas, where she grew up—just that she hasn't been contractually obligated to travel. What else did she do on her mini-vacation?



CONTINUED FROM PAGE 73

something by painting it,” Yuskavage said. “That’s the way I understand the world. Like a dog licking something.”

Clark looked at the works with the expression people make when they’re meditating. She was wearing elfin boots, black pants, and a shirt with a print that I can only describe as “funky”—“funky” being an adjective that looks good on very few people, St. Vincent being one of them—and sipped from a cup of espresso furnished by a gallery minion. After she finished the drink, there was a moment when she looked blankly at the saucer, unsure what to do with it, and then stuck it in the breast pocket of her funky shirt for the rest of the tour.

A painting called *Sweetpuss* featured a bubble-butted blonde in beaded panties with nipples so upwardly erect they actually resembled little boners. Yuskavage based the underwear on a pair of real underwear that she’d constructed herself from colored balls and string. “I’ve got the beaded panties if you ever need ’em,” she said to Clark. “They might fit you. They’re *tiny*.”

“I’m picturing you going to the Garment District,” Clark said.

“There was a lot of going to the Garment District.”

As they completed their lap around the white cube, Clark interjected with questions—*what year was this? were you considering getting into film? how long did these sittings take? what does “mise-en-scène” mean?*—but mainly listened. And she is a good listener: an inquisitive head tilter, an encouraging nodder, a non-fidgeter, a maker of eye contact. She found analogues between painting and music. When Yuskavage mourned the death of lead white paint (due to its poisonous qualities, although, as the artist pointed out, “It’s not that big a

deal to not get lead poisoning; just don’t eat the paint”), Clark compared it to recording’s transition from tape to digital.

“Back in the day, if you wanted to hear something really reverberant”—she clapped; it reverberated—“you’d have to be in a room like this and record it, or make a reverb chamber,” Clark said. “Now we have digital plug-ins where you can say, ‘Oh, I want the acoustic resonance of the Sistine Chapel.’ Great. Somebody’s gone and sampled that and created an algorithm that sounds like you’re in the Sistine Chapel.”

Lately, she said, she’s been way more into devices that betray their imperfections. That are slightly out of tune, or capable of messing up, or less forgiving of human intervention. “Air moving through a room,” Clark said. “That’s what’s interesting to me.”

They kept pacing. The paintings on the wall evolved. Conversation turned to what happens when you grow as an artist and people respond by flipping out.

“I always find it interesting when someone wants you to go back to ‘when you were good,’” Yuskavage said. “*This is why we liked you.*”

“I can’t think of anybody where I go, ‘What’s great about that artist is their consistency,’” Clark said. “Anything that stays the same for too long dies. It fails to capture people’s imagination.”

They were identifying a problem with fans, of course, not with themselves. It was an implicit identification, because performers aren’t permitted to critique their audiences, and it was definitely the artistic equivalent of a First World problem—an issue that arises only when you’re so resplendent with talent that you not only nail something enough to attract adoration but nail it hard enough to get personally bored and move on—but it was still valid. They were talking about the kind of fan who clings to a specific tree when he or she could be roaming through a whole forest. In St. Vincent’s case, a forest of prog-rock thickets and jazzy roots and orchestral brambles and mournful-ballad underlayers, all of it sprouting and molting under a prodigious pop canopy. They were talking about the strange phenomenon of people getting mad at you for surprising them. Even if the surprise is great. ❧

MOLLY YOUNG is a writer living in New York City. She wrote about Donatella Versace in the April 2018 issue of GQ.

GQ IS A REGISTERED TRADEMARK OF ADVANCE MAGAZINE PUBLISHERS INC.
COPYRIGHT © 2019 CONDÉ NAST. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. PRINTED IN THE U.S.A.

VOLUME 89, NO. 1. GQ (ISSN 0016-6979) is published monthly (except for combined issues in December/January) by Condé Nast, which is a division of Advance Magazine Publishers Inc. PRINCIPAL OFFICE: Condé Nast, One World Trade Center, New York, NY 10007. Robert A. Sauerberg, Jr., President & Chief Executive Officer; David E. Geithner, Chief Financial Officer; Pamela Drucker Mann, Chief Revenue & Marketing Officer. Periodicals postage paid at New York, NY, and at additional mailing offices. Canada Post Publications Mail Agreement No. 40644503. Canadian Goods and Services Tax Registration No. 123242885-RT0001.

POSTMASTER: SEND ALL UAA TO CFS (SEE DMM 507.1.5.2); NON-POSTAL AND MILITARY FACILITIES: Send address corrections to GQ, P.O. Box 37617, Boone, IA 50037-0717. FOR SUBSCRIPTIONS, ADDRESS CHANGES, ADJUSTMENTS, OR BACK ISSUE INQUIRIES: Please write to GQ, P.O. Box 37617, Boone, IA 50037-0717, call 800-289-9330, or e-mail subscriptions@gq.com. Please give both new and old addresses as printed on most recent label. First copy of new subscription will be mailed within eight weeks after receipt of order. Address all editorial, business, and production correspondence to GQ Magazine, One World Trade Center, New York, NY 10007. For reprints, please e-mail reprints@condenast.com or call Wright’s Media, 877-652-5295. For re-use permissions, please e-mail contentlicensing@condenast.com or call 800-897-8666. Visit us online at www.gq.com. To subscribe to other Condé Nast magazines on the World Wide Web, visit www.condenastdigital.com. Occasionally, we make our subscriber list available to carefully screened companies that offer products and services that we believe would interest our readers. If you do not want to receive these offers and/or information, please advise us at P.O. Box 37617, Boone, IA 50037-0717 or call 800-289-9330.

GQ IS NOT RESPONSIBLE FOR THE RETURN OR LOSS OF, OR FOR DAMAGE OR ANY OTHER INJURY TO, UNSOLICITED MANUSCRIPTS, UNSOLICITED ARTWORK (INCLUDING, BUT NOT LIMITED TO, DRAWINGS, PHOTOGRAPHS, AND TRANSPARENCIES), OR ANY OTHER UNSOLICITED MATERIALS. THOSE SUBMITTING MANUSCRIPTS, PHOTOGRAPHS, ARTWORK, OR OTHER MATERIALS FOR CONSIDERATION SHOULD NOT SEND ORIGINALS, UNLESS SPECIFICALLY REQUESTED TO DO SO BY GQ IN WRITING. MANUSCRIPTS, PHOTOGRAPHS, AND OTHER MATERIALS SUBMITTED MUST BE ACCOMPANIED BY A SELF-ADDRESSED STAMPED ENVELOPE.