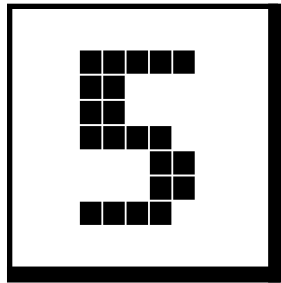


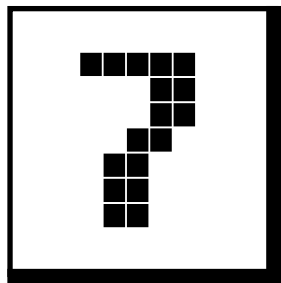
HOW I'M FEELING NOW

Charli XCX shares every step of her fourth album's conception with her online fanbase



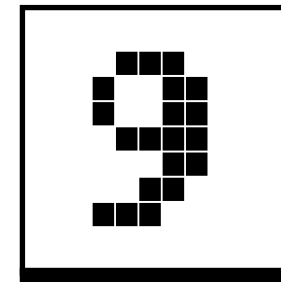
DIMMING DANCEFLOOR

Her transition from party music to the deeper stuff



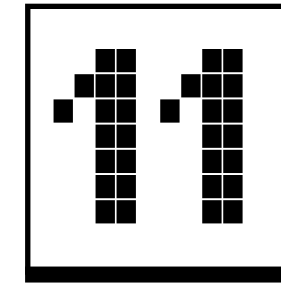
A SECOND TO BREATHE

The roots of XCX's workoholism & forward thinking



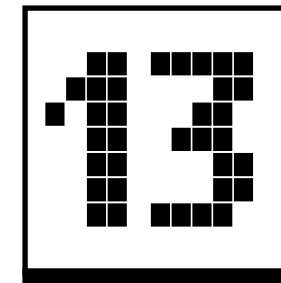
SIX WEEKS LATER

How quarantine has challenged Charli



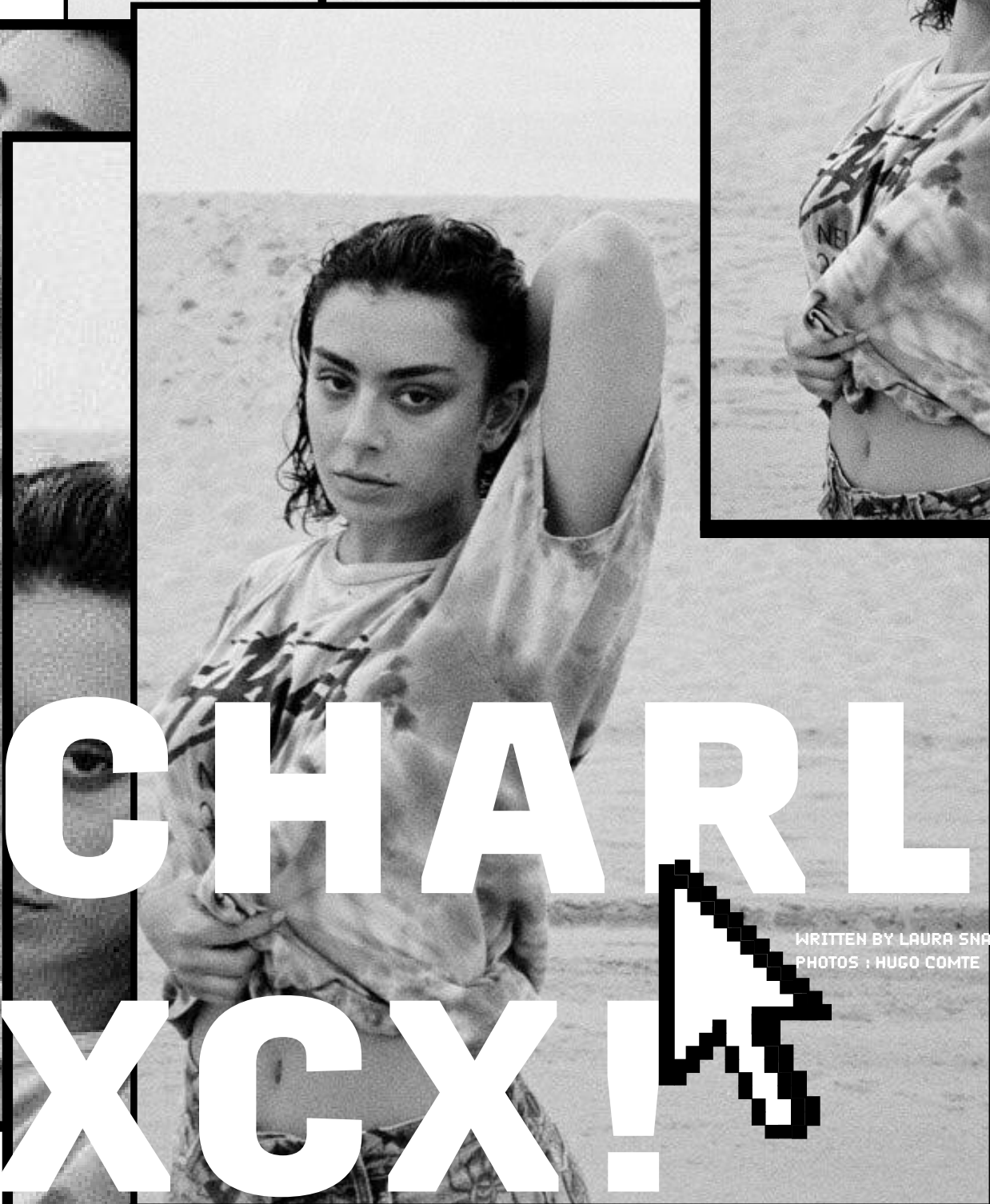
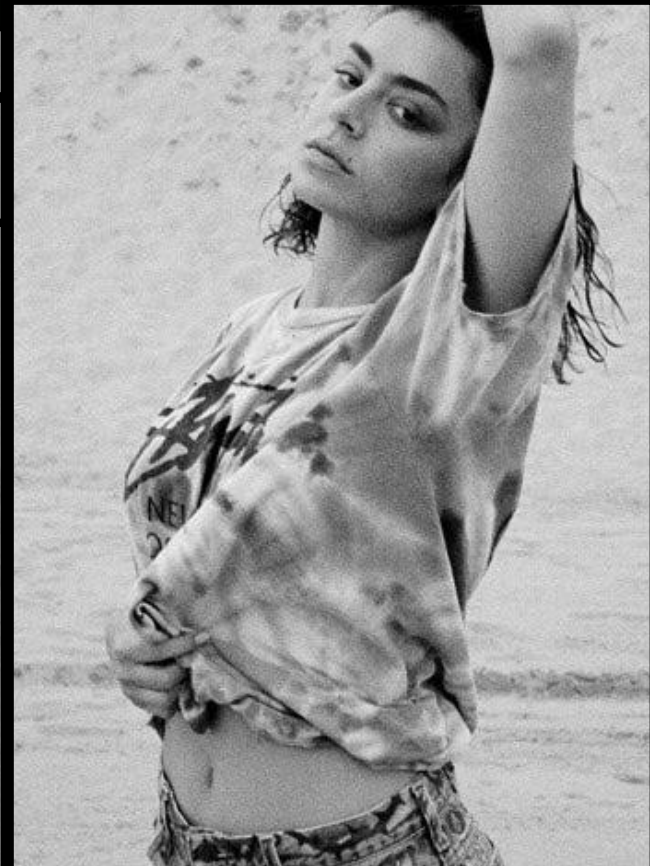
COME ON, BE HAPPY?

Pop's relationship with economic depression, political turbulence, and public mentality



NEW AGE POP

In the age of COVID-19, pop persists



WRITTEN BY LAURA SHAPES
PHOTOS : HUGO COMTE

Nineteen years post-Pop Idol, there is not much left to demystify about the way pop music is made. Fans follow the industry's movements as obsessively as football supporters do the Premier League; songwriters and producers have their own followings. There are podcasts where artists explain a song's path from genesis to completion. And yet, watching Charli XCX handwrite lyrics live on Instagram over the past few weeks, straight from her brain to her notebook to thousands of viewers, felt like a borderline masochistic degree of exposure – the equivalent of me livestreaming my way through every sentence of this piece. I'd rather walk down the street naked.

On 6 April, XCX – 27-year-old Cambridge-born Charlotte Aitchison announced she was making an entire album, *How I'm Feeling Now*, while in lockdown at home in Los Angeles. She would share every step: lyric-writing and video-shooting; progress-stalling allergic reactions; tearful late-night Instagram confessions that she thinks she expects too much of her collaborators (later deleted). Fans were given carte blanche to give feedback and contribute visuals. "Sometimes it's nerve-racking," she says, when I ask if this amount of openness makes her feel vulnerable. "Other times bad comments will sway me, but I need to roll with the punches.

Cabello (she co-wrote their monster hit *Señorita*). In 2018, she supported Taylor Swift on tour, commanding stadium singalongs to *Boom Clap*, and atypically swoony love song she wrote for the teen weepie *The Fault In Our Stars*.

Meanwhile, on nights off, Aitchison did solo shows at sweaty gay clubs, unleashing hedonistic ragers about pills and parties as she ricocheted around the stage like Keith Flint, all electric muckularity in Lycra and tulle. At times her career has looked like performance art about pop stardom, though she would reject that as overintellectualising. But it can get confusing: during a brief stint at the Slade School of Fine Art, she flummoxed her tutors by dancing to Justin Bieber while stuffing a hamburger down her pants.

“THE IDEA IS TO HAVE SOME KIND OF INTERESTING TENSION TO MAKE THE MUSIC FEEL DIFFERENT AND REPRESENTATIVE OF THE TIME WE'RE IN.”

As she writes *How I'm feeling now*, Aitchison is hosting open weekly Zoom conferences in which she asks famous friends (*Game Of Thrones'* Maisie Williams, Pussy Riot's Nadya Tolokonnikova) how they're coping and answers fans' question. She finishes one just before the interview, wrapping up with a thank you from an ebullient

It takes confidence to field so much input, but over a decade, Aitchison has built a career around her extreme multifacetedness. A pop ateur known for her abrasive bubblegum futurism, she has also scored mainstream hits featuring Lizzo and Rita Ora (*Blame It on Your Love, Doing It*), and written others for the likes of Shawn Mendes and Camila

sex performer named Sophie, and takes five minutes to fetch a jumper before reappearing in her office. This morning she worked until 3:30 am, before starting the conference at 9:30 am. She looks tired, rubbing her eyes and glancing at her phone: her brain is split in two,

she apologises. She had planned on pulling an all-nighter. “I had a bit of a freakout yesterday. I’ve only mixed two songs and it comes out in two weeks. I really have to go for it.” She has six more ideas, and plans to release a 10-track album. She could extend the deadline? “It’s not even an option—my inner guilt would spiral out of control.

Partying has been Aitchison’s biggest source of inspiration; no one is better at crystallizing the invincible highs or lonely lows of a night out. Now the dancefloors are dimmed, she has only the inside of her four mock-Tudor walls to play with. The entire household is hostage to the album: she lives with her two best friends from school, who are also her managers, and Huck Kwong, a videogame producer and her on-off boyfriend of seven years. “It’s a cult kind of vibe,” she admits. The lounge has become a recording studio. The artwork for her single *Forever* was photographed in her bedroom. She exercises and directs her own photoshoots (like this one) in the space outside. Lockdown is the longest she and Kwong have spent together, she says, and it’s been good to write about it.

When it comes to collaborating with fans, Aitchison says she has been surprised by the way they have gravitated towards the deeper stuff – not the parties and fast

cars. “I suppose I was always afraid to show that side of myself,” she she says. But sharing everything has its downsides: one day, she posted lyrics on Twitter and fans thought they were so bad, they were a joke. “Then I posted funny, fake lyrics to troll myself and they were like, ‘This is sick!’ I thought, ‘Oh no!’” (She didn’t use them.)

“IT’S BEEN WEIRD YELLING ABOUT MY RELATIONSHIP INTO A MICROPHONE WHILE MY BOYFRIEND’S IN THE OTHER ROOM, DOING A PUZZLE.”

A few weeks before lockdown, Aitchison had started therapy to unpick the roots of her workaholicism: *How I’m Feeling Now* is her sixth full-length album in seven years. She had been enjoying “slowing down, and being still and present at home. But the fact that I decided to do the album shows I couldn’t continue like that. I’m always forward, forward, forward,” she says, with the intensity of a general directing troops.



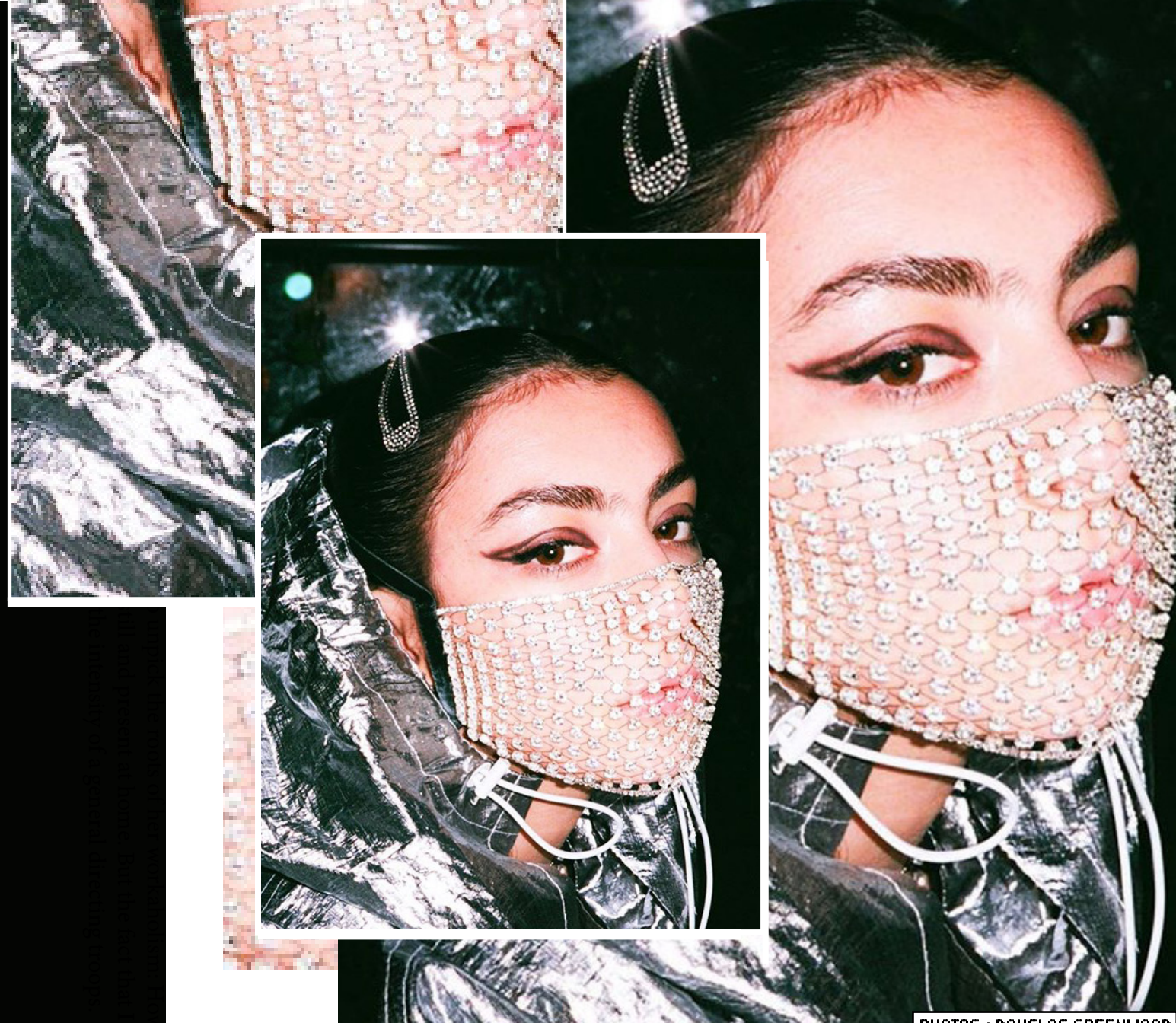
PHOTOS : CHARLI XCX

How did I learn that taking a second to breath is bad?



I’m trying UNLEARN that.”

Of course, nobody becomes a pop star to slack off these days; it’s more important than ever to maintain a constant presence on Spotify playlists and social media. Still, the 1975 frontman Matt Healy – whose recordings with Aitchison have yet to see the light of day – tells me she is on another level. “She just wants to work all the time. I’m bad, but she’s worse.” Collaborating with her is like “taking psychedelics,” he says: there are “rushes of madness and excitement, but you are left feeling rewarded, thankful and reflective. Although still drained.”



PHOTOS : DOUGLAS GREENWOOD

Aitchison thinks she inherited the guilt that comes with any downtime from her parents: her Scottish father was adopted into a working class family; her mother is a Ugandan Indian whose family was expelled by Idi Amin in the 1970s. They met at his club night: Jonwas a promoter, Shameera was a nurse and later a flight attendant. "They started from nothing and worked so hard to be able to give themselves a life they loved," says Aitchison, whose an only child. "Growing up around that has an effect on you." Still, he restlessness bothers her. "How did I learn that that taking a second to breathe is bad? I'm trying to unlearn that."

Aitchison's DIY ethos has been there since she started playing raves at 15. Her parents would drive her from their home in Bishop's Stortford to Hackney warehouses, where she shrieked about dinosaur sex in a peroxide wig while they waited to drive her home "Playing in those more underground environments, and being exposed to fashion and LGBTQ+ culture – that was the first time I felt truly inspired to my core," she says. "It was like I'd opened Pandora's box." She was signed by Atlantic Records off the back of those shows, and her early releases revamped a gothic pop that had lain dormant since the 1980s (think Shakespears Sister and Depeche Mode). Prior to the pandemic, she had mooted a tour of her 2013 debut album, True Romance. "It was one of the first things I really got stuck into – a lot of experimentation and figuring things out as they went along," she explains. "Kind of a similar time to now."

"THERE'S ALWAYS A MISCONCEPTION ABOUT FEMALE POP ARTISTS."

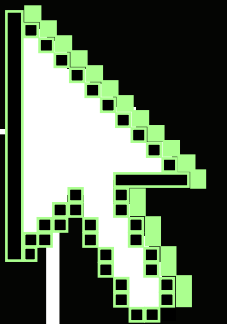
did they write their own songs?

do they have their own opinions?

did they really make that decision?

COMMENTS |

X



That first album was a critical success but not a commercial one – unlike 2012’s *I Love It*, a fantastically bratty song Aitchison gave to Swedish duo Icona Pop because she knew it didn’t suit her (she couldn’t picture the music video, her litmus test for what makes an XCX track). The song became a global smash after featuring on HBO’s *Girls*, and Aitchison was asked incessantly whether she regretted giving it away (for the thousandth time: no). She was also asked if she could write more of the same, and she could (Fancy, her 2014 collaboration with Australian rapper Iggy Azalea, was a US No 1 for seven weeks), but she hated the production line aspect. Pop’s boundaries were more rigid then, and critics were confused by Aitchison’s evident mainstream potential but preference for more experimental material: “Is Charli XCX a pop star?” one headline asked. She often asked herself the same question.

She put these frustrations into her 2014 album *Sucker*. But despite screaming, “Fuck you!” in the general direction of music execs on its title track, the album now sounds a bit like a boardroom’s idea of rebellion: naughty schoolgirl visuals, tame rock influences, references to the Rolling Stones. She moved on, releasing the 2016 EP *Vroom Vroom* and beginning to build her own mythology, namechecking herself and her collaborators in lyrics, ditching the cropped kilts for Matrix-worthy latex catsuits and sheer mesh. Hackneyed rock legends wouldn’t get a look-in now, would they? “It came with the confidence to know that people would get my references,” she says. “There’s probably, in all artists’ careers, this peak moment where you and your fanbase are so in line. I realised I didn’t need the Rolling Stones any more. I just needed me.”

These days, stardom no longer depends on mass exposure and mainstream success. Social media’s most vocal fans (especially queer pop fans) have crowned a class of cult acts who might once have been dismissed as flops: musicians fluent in pop’s aesthetic while not necessarily aspiring to its scale, such as Haim



PHOTOS COURTESY OF CHARLI XCX’S “CLAWS” MUSIC VIDEO

Christine and the Queens, and Carly Rae Jepsen – all of whom have collaborated with Aitchison. Her most recent album, 2019’s *Charli*, spawned two hits, with Troye Sivan and Lizzo, and this time, mainstream success felt more meaningful. “When I was younger, I didn’t know who I was – I wanted to fit in with the music I was making and the way I looked,” she explains. “Now I don’t feel that, and I think it speaks volumes for how the pop industry has changed.”

“I HAVE MORE CONFIDENCE IN THE FACT THAT I UNDERSTAND MY OWN ART BETTER THAN ANYONE ELSE.”

Her teenage wall of hair has given way to a dip-dyed bob (now growing out), and the diplomacy is new, too. There was a period when Aitchison and her label seemed constantly at loggerheads; she characterised them as too conservative for her quick

silver release pace. Is there still conflict? “If I say no, it makes it sound like there was in the past,” she says (though this is a matter of record). “Generally there’s less drama in my life, but I think that’s because I am more in control of my emotions and less frantic with the way I express myself. I have more confidence in the fact that I understand my own art better than anybody else. That keeps me level-headed.”

I ask about *CrossYou Out*, a song from the last album that she has said is about someone who “turned from my defender into my executioner.” Did she mean her former manager, Dave Bianchi, as fans have speculated? “That song... is definitely about change in my life,” she says, weighing her words. “Look, I don’t want to say anything bad about people I’ve worked with; it’s not my style. I will say that, with any relationship, there’s a point where it feels like a breakup.”

Usually, Aitchison says, she’s “not very easily impressed” by her work. But making *How I’m Feeling Now* has made her feel more generous towards herself. Producers she’s long admired but was too scared to ask to

(her of its communal spirit. I’m reminded of the top comment on her video for *Forever*, which is pieced together from personal clips fans have sent her: “OMG my dog is in this, she passed away 5 years ago but she lives on in this video <3.”) The weekend after the album comes out, Aitchison plans to stay in bed watching *The Sopranos* (she’s new to it). Maybe she’ll relax after that; probably she won’t. “After a week, I’ll be spinning out,” she says with a laugh. Still, she will travel less and record more at home. How about work less? “Possibly,” she says.

Our hour in Aitchison’s tight schedule is up. Later I check social media to see what she’s done with the rest of her day: she’s recorded an episode of her Beats 1 radio show, playing fans’ remixes of a new song, *Claws*; and performed for a French magazine’s Instagram, as well as worked on the album. A few days later, she unveils the *Claws* video, which shows her dancing against a variety of green-screened landscapes, along with a blank version for fans to edit in the background of their choice (inevitably, she tweets, she gets superimposed on to porn). *How I’m Feeling Now* already has one important legacy. Aitchison says she has been surprised by how fast her label have moved to get it out, and plans to release two more albums this year. Next time around, if they stall, she’s got this ace in her pocket to remind them that anything is possible: “No, guys, remember when we did that album in six weeks? No rules – let’s go.”

How I’m Feeling Now
is out now!





IN 1930, as America was sinking into an unprecedented economic depression, Harold Arlen and Ted Koehler wrote a jaunty pop song that invited listeners to “forget your troubles”, “get happy” and “chase all your cares away”. In a time of distress, the music offered a moment of reverie. “Get Happy” became one of the biggest hits of the era, and was later covered by stars including Judy Garland, Frank Sinatra and Ella Fitzgerald.

It is a trend that has been repeated during other recessions. Britain in the early 1970s was a drab place. The colourful idealism of the 1960s, with mass activism, psychedelic rock and Harold Wilson’s promises of the “white heat of technology”, had faded to shades of grey. The economy was in decline, with inflation eating into living standards and electricity usage curtailed by high oil prices. Bob Stanley, the author of “Yeah Yeah Yeah”, which chronicles the history of modern pop music, believes that pop responded by looking either forwards—to an imagined future of intergalactic exploration—or backwards, by repurposing the sounds of simpler, safer periods. David Bowie created Ziggy

Stardust, a bisexual pop star from light years away. Roxy Music, led by Bryan Ferry, experimented with basic synthesisers, while The Sweet sold records by drawing on the sac-

“ POP RESPONDED BY LOOKING EITHER **FORWARDS** - TO AN IMAGINED FUTURE OF INTERGALACTIC EXPLORATION - OR **BACKWARDS**, BY REPURPOSING THE SOUNDS OF SIMPLER SAFER PERIODS. ”

Stardust, a bisexual pop star from light years away. Roxy Music, led by Bryan Ferry, experimented with basic synthesisers, while The Sweet sold records by drawing on the saccharine bubblegum pop of the 1950s.



PHOTOS : ROBERT PLANCK

“FUTURE NOSTALGIA reflects pop’s ability



to entertain in
times of stress.”

PHOTOS : HANNA MOON

Forty years later, as the global economy careered into crisis, pop turned to escapism again. Songs by Katy Perry (“I Kissed a Girl,” “Last Friday Night”), Rihanna (“Cheers (Drink to That)”) and Ke\$ha (“TiKToK”) preached a hedonistic lifestyle of “maxing out your credit cards, getting black-out drunk,” says Simon Reynolds, a music journalist. In the first half of 2009 the Billboard chart in America was dominated by catchy pop: in total, Lady Gaga’s “Just Dance,” Flo Rida’s “Right Round” and the Black Eyed Peas’ “Boom Boom Pow” and “I Gotta Feeling” shared 35 weeks at the top of the chart. These songs were not rooted in the economic misery being endured by millions. Life was short, parties were fun, consequences were for tomorrow. At a time when life felt precarious and joblessness was rising, planning for the future did not make sense.

One of the many genres to emerge in its place was chillwave, “a sort of sun-baked synth-pop for underachievers,” according to Marc Hogan of Pitchfork, a music website. Chillwave’s defining recordings sounded foggy and glitchy; they conjured up images of bedroom producers twiddling knobs while fighting waves of inertia. “I found a job, I do it fine / Not what I want / But still I try,” sang one of the pioneers of chillwave, ToroY Moi, on his debut of 2011.

Over the next decade, pop continued to “luxuriate in melancholy,” according to Mr Hogan, citing the work of Drake, The Weeknd and Billie Eilish. The rise of casual employment, the impossibility of home ownership and the ascent of political populism all contributed to the subdued mood. But with the arrival of coronavirus, the mood could change again. The first great album of the pandemic is “Future Nostalgia” by Dua Lipa, a British pop singer (pictured), released on March 27th. During a live session on Instagram, Ms Lipa told fans that she was torn about releasing a party record during lockdown. The decision to go ahead—where others, notably Lady Gaga, hesitated—already seems a masterstroke.

“EVENTUALLY, THE
THRILL OF PARTYING
LIKE IT WAS THE LAST
NIGHT ON EARTH
WORE OFF.”

“Future Nostalgia” reflects pop’s ability to entertain in times of stress. It mines the history of electronic pop, from the propulsive “Hi-NRG” disco style popular in the early 1980s, evident in the track “Physical,” to the bassline borrowed from Chic, a disco band, in “Don’t Start Now.” Elsewhere, there are nods to Madonna, Prince and Giorgio Moroder. In this

way, the album is more nostalgia than future (even though the artwork features Ms Lipa dressed as a diner waitress, driving a vintage American car off into space). In the week of release, 10 of the 11 tracks on “Future Nostalgia” were in the top 100 most-streamed songs on Spotify. In these troubled times, Ms Lipa can help you chase your cares away.