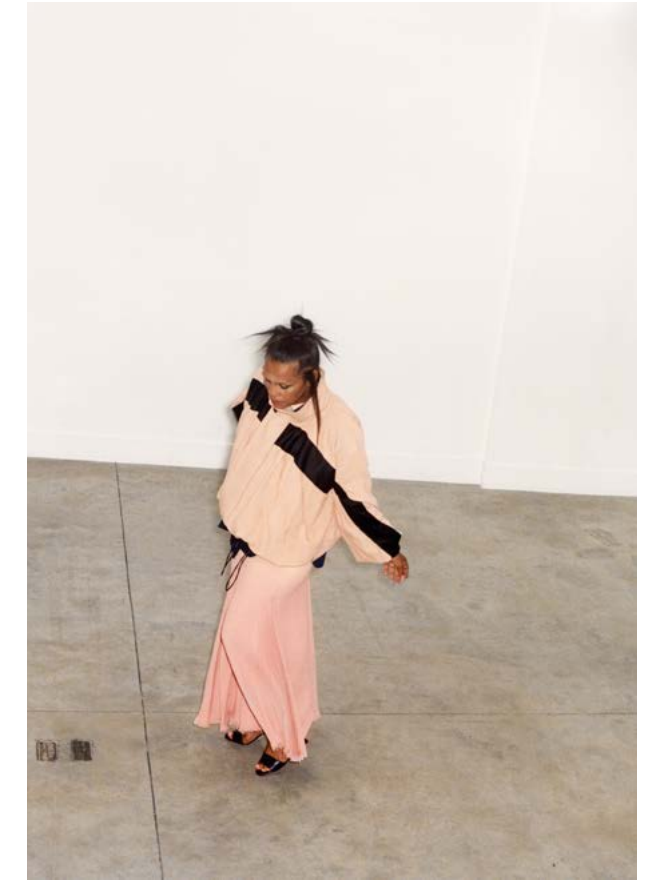


Neneh Cherry — A Woman's World

Photography — James Robjant
Styling — Hamish Wirgman



Prada jacket, Boucheron necklace & rings



This page: Andreas Kronthaler for Vivienne Westwood jacket, Lemaire shirt, Marni dress, Manolo Blahnik shoes, Van Cleef & Arpels bracelet & ring
Opposite page: Acne jacket, top & skirt, Lemaire shirt, Anderson and Co tie, Shaun Leane earrings



Louis Vuitton jacket, Marques Almeida dress, Anderson and Co tie, Diana Strang belt, Ara Vartanian earring

There's always been a magnetism about Neneh Cherry that's never waned, driven by a fierce femininity and emotional complexity that makes her so relatable. Back in the spotlight with *Versions*, where some of her most iconic work is being reworked by a host of new female artists, we find she still has a lot to say about art, inspiration and being a woman driven by a unique power she alone possesses.

Interview by Gemma Lacey

Music has been part of Neneh Cherry's life for as long as she can remember, starting with touring with stepdad Don Cherry as a teen. But it's her own curiosity and willingness to collaborate that saw her launch her own career, starting with a stint in The Slits, a pivotal moment for her. "It was a pretty magical experience and I was completely blown away watching them play every night, watching Tessa and listening to Ari and Viv, they were just so strong and unusual and it was just so cool."

The fact that The Slits were all female also made a strong impression on Neneh, setting the tone for her incredible career. "It changed me, being a woman and then watching a band of these amazing young women. I was only 15, so I was super impressionable." On that tour she and Ari became inseparable, living together in London, sharing clothes, and absorbing what was happening at the time. "There was definitely a shift out of what had been a punk scene into all the sort of various bands and people we were listening to and discovering and exploring further sounds like reggae and the whole sound system culture."

We discuss how and why she was so receptive to that and she immediately credits her upbringing.

"I grew up in a world where there was a limitless space around creativity and improvisation played a huge part in that. But also study – I feel very thankful that I grew up in an environment where yes, there was freedom and it was sought after, where inspiration and passion were taken very seriously, but there was also a serious process and a lot of time was put into study and understanding different sounds that came from within the different cultures and then making them your own."

For her, the study and discovery of that world is "An endless journey. That's something that you can continue playing with and experimenting and kind of flexing, you know? I think that I definitely have that with me." Even when she was less prolific and was asked, "Why didn't you make an album for 17 years?", she says much of that creative block came from "feeling restricted and having an incredible sense of needing to be freer and wanting to let go and getting caught in a kind of a Catch-22 where I was kind of overthinking this sort of weird obligation that wasn't really an obligation. Getting caught up in the end product of what I was producing and where it was gonna go and being a bit over-cautious by thinking there was an expectation of me."

Creative blocks are common and I ask how she found her way out of that rut. "I wasn't necessarily thinking about them as problems, but I think there were issues that got in the way of being in that space where you shouldn't have to think that everything has to be perfect and that mistakes can be made," she says. "It's not just about producing seamlessly perfect records and I think I've always belonged in a more experimental lane. So I just got really into collaborating and working on other projects."

Collaboration and experimentation were her exit routes from creative frustration but also giving herself the space to create work that was personally and emotionally motivated. "A couple of years after my mother died I made a record which was definitely hanging out in the kind of improvised free jazz land but it was also in a way a pop record and most of the material was versions of other songs by artists like Suicide and Iggy Pop." For her, working with established material was freeing. "We were harnessed by the fact that they had these sorts of forms and something happened, like I remembered how to be myself again, in another dimension and that catapulted me into what I've been continuing with for the last



This page: Rick Owens coat & dress, Shaun Leane bracelet, stylist's own tie
Opposite page: Andreas Kronthaler for Vivienne Westwood jacket, Van Cleef & Arpels ring



10 years." For her, inspiration is something she has to be open to. "I don't own it, but for me it's such a big part of the magic, but I'm also a strong believer in that you have to work for it to deserve it."

She's also passionate about moving her work forward. "I think I'm kind of allergic to over-repeating. I think there are certain things in your process in life that you have to repeat, but I'm also allergic to relying on repetition and therefore not pushing the boat out or experimenting or just leaving yourself open to the elements." For her, so much of the good creative work comes from showing up and doing the work. "I think that happens a lot when I'm performing, whether it's on stage or in a studio singing, and maybe I do a take of singing something in a certain way and I'll think as I come through it, 'Oh shit. That actually sounded okay. Let's do another take.'"

When speaking of her work today, it's from a place of gratitude and observance. "I don't wanna be over-reflective, but I have a few things under my belt, so I can also appreciate how important certain things have been in my life. That time where I was a part of The Slits family, but I also became a part of the band, that was so wonderful and there was a huge lesson in all of these things, you know, it's a trip."

Her next trip has been creating *Versions* and it's one of her creative examples of collaboration. She also truly loves and celebrates other female artists. "We keep each other alive. Women have always been my biggest influences, and these artists, like Robyn, Greentea Peng and Kelsey Lu, you know, they're my sisters." She describes how this project has nourished her. "They feed

me, you know, their spirits, what they're seeing and what they're making and feeling really touches me. I feel a connection and it's a very important, powerful exchange of faith. Because I feel sometimes I hear somebody's song and I'm like, 'Thank fuck, you just almost saved my life.'"

For Neneh, that's the real gift of this work. "That's what inspiration is and that is what we can give to each other". She likens it to Paul Newman's character, Brick, in *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* who says, "He drinks to get the click in his head." For her, these relationships provide her inspiration and spark. "I think it's been such a gorgeous experience to just sit around and think of all the most glorious women around doing great things and to ask them if they would take part in this funny little project and nearly everyone finding that they had the time and wanted to, and now it's an actual body of work."

We speak about the recent changes in the entertainment industry for women following 'Me Too' and she's refreshingly blunt. "I guess it's a work in progress? I mean, it's fucked, isn't it? We're talking about celebrating womanhood and we know that there are so many amazing women doing amazing things, but women are still over-sexualised in the wrong way in too many ways, in too many places, in too many things."

Within this though, there's space for celebration but also work to be done, "We can't take our eyes off the button and sometimes I find it triggering and exhausting. But I also think that what we are all learning from what's been happening in the world, particularly over the last, you know, five plus years is that we

have to listen and we have to pay attention. We have to be aware of all of the many layers of injustice and inequalities and racism. We have to rise above these kinds of trenches. Sometimes I feel like people just wanna scream about things and be angry. And I think that yes, we have that there, we have to fight for shit, but we have to love one another through it and I don't wanna sound like fucking depressing, but we've got a long way to go."

For her, the answer lies in protecting ourselves. "You have to protect your shit because if you don't keep it safe, hold your head high and keep your shit together and don't let 'em change you, keep your moon shine strong." Some of her strength comes from leaning into her femininity. "Being a woman is absolutely beautiful, but it's incredibly complicated, because of the world that we live in and the way that we see ourselves and the things that we struggle with," she says.

The evolution of this sense of womanhood has been the ability to see the world through the eyes of her children. "My children who are now fully formed, amazing women, we have deep exchanges and the relationships that I have with them are also based on deep friendship and it's very powerful." In this way, her kids fuel her optimism. "My mum used to say about me and my brother that it's the best work she ever did and I have to admit that I copy that." I ask what advice she gives her kids when they're having a tough day and she's simple and to the point. "I mean, it sounds fucking wack, but trust your instinct. Listen to yourself. Don't fucking give up and if you're having a really shit day, tell someone and know that it's gonna get better."



Bottega Veneta dress & boots



This page: Stanly Bryan top, Tiffany & Co necklace & earrings
Opposite page: Rick Owens coat & dress, Shaun Leane bracelet & earrings, stylist's own tie

Makeup: Bari Khalique using CHANEL Les 4 Ombres Tweed & CHANEL Le Lift Pro
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