

The Power of Chan

Photography – Curtis Buchanan
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Chloé dress & jewellery

The first time I heard Cat Power's new record I got chills. It rolls in with *Wanderer* sung a cappella – a rich low call to you, that is part lullaby, part hymn and my first thought was, what a holy and beautiful sound, my second: Oh Joy! She's back.

Interview by Gemma Lacey

One of Chan's gifts has always been how she sings about the hardest things in life in a sensitive and nuanced way. Never has it felt more relevant. In hard times, her records serve as a comfort to so many. Meeting her, I find she's an incredibly warm and tender person and the care and feeling you sense in her songs is as palpable in real life. Her intention with this record was to "create a place of protection, serenity, and grounding, some kind of personal space for us not to leave the world, but to let us enter a deeper connection with whatever this life is." Because right now it seems we're all feeling like we have "that little voice inside us, that wants to scream our heads off and tell the truth".

There will be interviews around this record that focus on Chan leaving her longtime label, but to focus on music industry politics would take away from the real dialogue of creating this record, which is far more interesting.

This album is Chan is returning to herself. *Wanderer* is a truly pure expression of love and hope. In her own words, "The idea of the record is that with great love, comes great loss and there we are as humanity. We're alive and this is our life on this planet today and tomorrow. Going forward, but never abandoning our curious nature and our path to hopefully searching for the beauty in all this truth. A lot of truth is unavailable to us but we all know it, we see it, we smell it and try to uncover it, pull it out of people's

mouths who won't speak it or even out our own mouths to proclaim it, and try to find beauty there, because there's so much loss and pain."

Honesty and authenticity are strong currents in all her songs, from the raw beauty of *Nude as the News* to the grand swell of *The Greatest*, but it's expressed in her music in other ways. The often slow plinkity plonk of piano keys at the start of songs reflects her sense of playfulness too. This lightness is often overlooked, which is a shame because she's hilarious! Her British accent rivals my own, but she explains it's not just for humour but also a tactic she employs when, as a woman touring, she has to ask several times to get her needs met. It's a testament to her Southern manners that she has found a way to be so charming about it.

Even the often focused on erratic behaviour in articles for me seems out of context, Chan is a heart on her sleeve type person. Yet, she's refreshingly self-accepting and says the only time her vulnerability is an issue is when it's met with malevolence and then she might internalise, but there's also another part of her that says "Fuck you!".

This assurance also manifests in her process for songwriting, approaching it from a purely intuitive and instinctive place. "The way I craft a record is by being with songs and melodies in my mind and the ones I choose to record, are those that I feel have done their job as a song. Are they honest? Are they

genuine to me? Do they tell the story I want to tell? Do I feel anything? Does it feel the same as when I wrote it and if that is all honoured, then it becomes part of the album together."

That's not to say there's no finessing of her sound though, she compares it to tailoring. "Like a sleeve that's too baggy, I may decide to crop it and cinch the elbows tighter as I go. When I try to do a formula of a song structure it never works. I never feel my subconscious calm or relax." She cites John Coltrane's *Bessie's Blues* as a song that demonstrates the sense of depth or "honey to my beehive" that she searches for.

Her interactions with the world and her fans are not just through her music though, on social media she's vocal about vital issues almost daily and a champion of activists. Patti Smith once told her, "It's your responsibility as an artist to stand up if you believe in something."

Initially, this was overwhelming, "I was like, I'm trying to keep my head above water here. I don't know if I can handle that." Then she had a realisation, she might not be The Beastie Boys and able to save Tibet or tell the world about the Dalai Lama but she had "this stupid tool" that she could share stuff with, even if it was sometimes subject to censorship.

She's under no illusions about the impact though as she says, "When I see Kanye attempting to preach the gospel of love and uniting with Trump, for me that's taking a

"I earn my living from singing to people and to me that is a perfect world because I get life experience and I get to meet the world and that's a true gift."

horrendous wrong turn. It breaks everyone's heart, when we believe that spreading awareness will catch on like wildfire, it just isn't so." She also found many fans turned away and her account was subject to censorship which frustrated her. She had bigger plans for her activism but a friend's death and her pregnancy rerouted those "so that path I was on quickly came to a halt and I had to reassess my personal priorities." She says part of the problem with activism is people focusing on their immediate needs, but acknowledges how vital that is too. She's far from silent though, her Instagram posts pack a punch and it's rare she doesn't bring some important issue to the spotlight, often before you'd catch it on the news.

This insight is her gift and nowhere is that more evident than her lyrics, such as *Taking People*, where she manages to simultaneously reference the idea that taking a picture of someone can be compared to capturing their soul and explore how we, as people often train our focus in the wrong direction. "If I was a photographer, picture taking, beautiful people, I guess I'd make a mistake, cause I'd probably take a picture of you."

On *Wanderer*, her favourite song is *Me Voy* which translates as "I'm going". She wasn't sure if it would make the record because when she wrote it she was coming from

a very intense emotional place as she dealt with the loss of someone she loved very deeply. Now though, she loves the emotional resonance of it as she says it "has a real stable confidence, a closure that is essential in loss."

The record also includes a Rihanna cover, *Stay*, a song whose haunting lyrics could have been written by Chan herself. There's also an upbeat number in *You Get* which has a slow danceable groove. She's a fan of hip-hop and this shines through her work in the way she brings together multiple worlds through covers and the way she merges styles in her music.

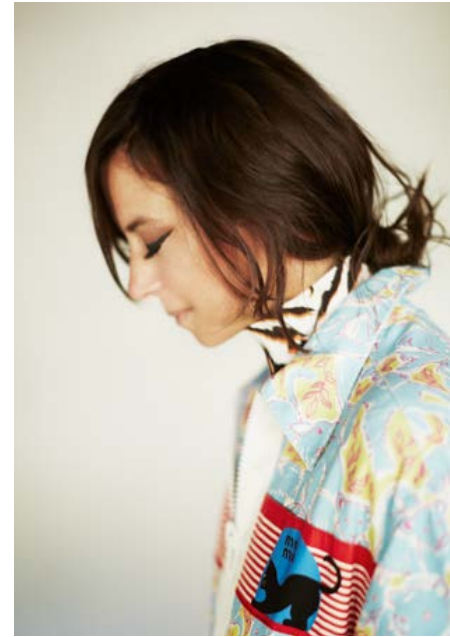
For her favourite hip-hop artists, she immediately cites Tupac for the "positive vibrancy of his storytelling and calibration of lyrical flow he delivers that in." She compares his style of rapping to the passion and energy with which Aretha Franklin sang. "It's almost gospel-ish in that it makes you feel good and aware and makes you feel. You feel positive and that's magic!" Through Biggie she finds comfort, "Everything is going to be OK when Biggie's rapping. It's fine because his voice is amazing and he has this calm energy."

She waxes lyrical on the real appeal of "razor sharp emotion in hip-hop that I enjoy because it speaks that truth which is what I search for as an artist and in life." This is a beacon for her, "You've got your

message, your realistic intentions, intensity and you've got soul. And soul, it has manners, grace, dignity, pride and a beat, a rhythm, a groove. It's like folk - it has a story. It's all-inclusive music."

That sense of inclusivity is what strikes me in talking to Chan, she radiates energy, passion and also compassion. She's also never shy to champion her female companions, Lana Del Rey "is an angel" whilst Natacha Ramsay-Levi of Chloé is someone who helped fortify strength in her. "I think that's what, as women, we need from each other. There isn't a whole bunch of arenas to communicate this love for one another and profound, almost dedication to each other, because of our mutual understanding and co-existing with the fucked up issues we have to deal with and navigate in society".

I ask her what she'd like people to take away from the record and the answer is a generous one, "A sense of personal freedom, empowerment, self-acceptance, self-validation, perseverance, a ton of shit I guess! Fortitude of self, that your story is relevant, your life experiences are valuable and your individual message that you can conjure from yourself can heal." This is *Cat Power* in a nutshell: inspiring, generous, warm-hearted, but not about to take any shit. Welcome back Chan, you got here right when we needed you.





Chloé dress & jewellery



Chan's own shirt

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