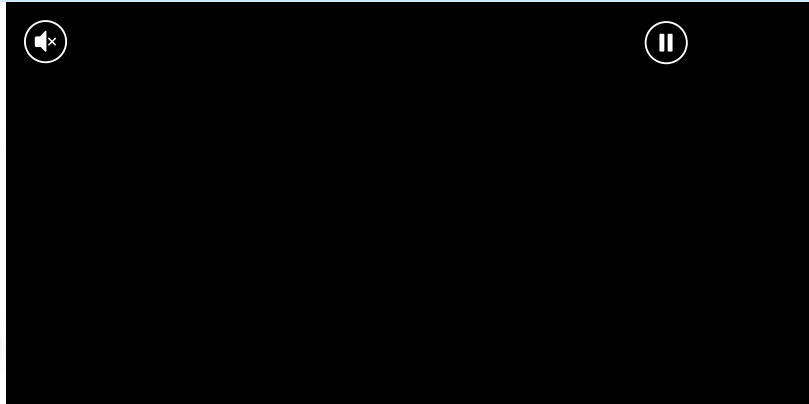


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We Asked Black Queer Icons to Share Their Dreams for the Future

We asked Shamir, Honey Dijon, Mykki Blanco, Shangela, and more to reflect on their lives, communities, and legacies.

BY TAYLOR CRUMPTON

February 28, 2020





To be Black and queer in 2020 is a contradictory experience. Black queer narratives are more prominent in popular culture than ever, all while an epidemic of violence rages against Black trans women and the broader trauma and violence experienced by our community goes ignored in mainstream media. As we transition into a new decade, it's a pivotal time to reflect on the progress we've seen over the past few decades, and the work that remains to be done to see the liberation of all Black queer people.

To celebrate Black History Month, *them.* asked 12 Black queer public figures to reflect on their lives, communities, and legacies. From musicians and DJs to actors, performers, and more, each took the opportunity to tell us how being Black and queer in America has shaped how they view the world, their hopes for our future, and the legacy they hope to leave behind for future generations.

Shamir

When did you first realize that you identified as a member of the LGBTQ+ community?

Unofficially, when I got called gay for the first time in 2nd grade. Officially, when I realized I had a crush on Marshall from *How I Met Your Mother*.

As you grew up, how did you form a relationship with the various facets of your identity?

I think by coming to terms with the traumas I've faced because of it, and not resenting my queerness because of it.

How has your Black queer identity shaped you in your career? In life?

I mean, it's major. I wouldn't still be doing music if there were more Black queer artists doing things that are similar to what I'm doing. There are some... but not enough. I'm just trying to be the change in the world I wanna see.

Where do you believe the future of Black LGBTQ+ expression is heading?

I see us becoming mainstream in a really big way. The fact that a show like *American Housewife* has a recurring Black queer character is insane to think about.

If you could speak to any Black queer individual, who would it be and why?

Sister Rosetta Tharpe. Why, you ask? 'Cuz she, like, invented rock and roll... so... yeah!

What do you want your legacy to be as a Black queer individual?

That I always did what I wanted to do, even if it disrupted other people's narrow ideas of how a Black queer artist should "be."

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Honey Dijon Ricardo Gomes

Honey Dijon

What's your perspective on how Black identity has been embraced in popular culture?

Popular culture seems to focus on one narrative of Black identity, when there are many. Most stories tend to focus on heteronormative stereotypes, entertainment, or slavery. While it's important that these stories be told, we need to expand what Black identity looks like. Where are the stories on transgender sexuality and love, lesbian politicians, non-binary scientists, or queer designers, engineers, writers, and musicians? Black people have never and will never have one narrative when it comes to our identity. Our culture is too rich.

Where do you believe the future of Black LGBTQ+ expression is heading?

There is still so much work to do. It's vital that mainstream society recognizes the epidemic of violence against queer and trans people and the Black community. However, there are many people within the community that are doing great work in humanitarian causes and the arts. We need more mirrors of affirmation that show positive images of Black LGBTQ+ people as well as human rights issues. Ballroom culture seems to be resonating within mainstream culture at the moment, and that is important, but

we need more political activism in our community so that our human rights are legally protected.

What do you want your legacy to be as a Black queer individual?

I hope that by living authentically and unapologetically, I can inspire others to have the courage to utilize their voice to its fullest potential – to make change and to show the world how much we contribute to it, and that our bodies have just as much value as any other human being on this planet.

Lazarus Lynch Courtesy of Lazarus Lynch

Lazarus Lynch

As you grew up, how did you form a relationship with the various facets of your identity?

My relationship with queerness is constantly evolving. I am always learning how to love myself, every single day, in both simple and big ways. For example, showing up for myself in tender ways rather than with a tone of judgement has helped me in accepting and loving myself. I think I've come to a place in my life where I understand that I get to make the choices about my own life that make me happy. And while those choices may disappoint some people, if my intentions are good and to be at peace with myself, I have nothing to worry about. I mean, it's easier said than done, but once you get to that place, there is no greater freedom.

How has your Black queer identity shaped you in your career? In life?

I think about my Blackness and my queerness as two of my greatest superpowers. I don't know how not to be either one of them. That said, I don't think it's my Blackness or queerness that has shaped my life; I think it was learning how to be free in my Blackness and queerness that has shaped my life. It's funny; when I released my cookbook *Son of a Southern Chef* last June, the press kept referring to the book as “queer.” I never intended that or planned that; it just was. Being

Black and queer is an honor. I don't see it as suffering or taking up a hideous cross anymore. Life is too brief to give a damn. I think about my Black gay ancestors; I stand, sit, and kneel on their shoulders; I am always supported by them and by my faith.

If you could speak to any Black queer individual, who would it be and why?

Langston Hughes. I'd love to know how his mind worked and possibly write a song with his poems. Or James Baldwin — I wouldn't know where to start, but that man was a legend. He thought about everything so deeply. I would love to just hang and make him a meal.

What do you want your legacy to be as a Black queer individual?

I want that all Black Queer people find peace within themselves to live out loud, boldly, lovingly, and gracefully. If I could leave any mark on this earth that inspires Black Queer people to do that, that would be a great legacy.

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Rahne Jones Courtesy of Rahne Jones

Rahne Jones

How has your Black queer identity shaped you in your career? In life?

None of these identities are all of me. I'm more than my gender, I'm more than my race, and I am more than my sexuality. But the experiences that I have with each of these identities has made me who I am today and has given me the strength to live in my truth, whether working in an office, on set, or walking

down the street.

Where do you believe the future of Black LGBTQ+ expression is heading?

I believe that we've made some progress. We're seeing more stories that don't revolve around the white male gaze, but much more is needed. It's important to show that the LGBTQ+ community is extremely diverse and therefore our stories are diverse. It would be a disservice to the community and the public at large to present only a fraction of the LGBTQ+ experience.

If you could speak to any Black queer individual, who would it be and why?

Gladys Bentley. I find her story fascinating. She was a Black, masculine-presenting lesbian entertainer in the 1920s and '30s. The bravery that took is astounding. Her movie should be made!

What do you want your legacy to be as a Black queer individual?

I want my legacy to be that I was unapologetically myself, and that maybe I can inspire other people to be unapologetically themselves, too.

Brian Michael Smith Rodin Eckenroth/Getty Images

Brian Michael Smith

How has your Black queer identity shaped you in your career? In life?

I grew up watching a lot of TV and movies, and I recognize the power media holds on how we perceive ourselves and the world around us. A lot of what I believed about myself, good and bad, came from these characters I grew up with. I know that if I had seen someone who was Black and transmasculine, if I had heard the language, had seen someone like me finding their purpose, finding acceptance, I wouldn't have struggled for as long as I had to. I remember how affirming and freeing it was for me to see a Black trans woman acting in a highly acclaimed TV show as a whole person and not just some

victim or cliché. As an actor and an artist, I want my work to be that affirmation, that North Star to other Black and/or queer people.

Where do you believe the future of Black LGBTQ+ expression is heading?

I see it expanding and elevating genres that have been previously devoid of Black queer representation. I see it permeating sci-fi, rom coms, comics/graphic novels and more until it's no longer something that is considered edgy or a diversity check.

What do you want your legacy to be as a Black queer individual?

I would like my legacy to show what is possible for us, particularly as Black trans men. That we are here, we are multi-faceted, and that we can utilize our privilege and understanding to improve the lives of others in our community and beyond.

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Mykki Blanco Han Myung Gu

Mykki Blanco

How has your Black queer identity shaped you in your career? In life?

I'm so proud of being both Black and queer. Being from America, a deeply racist country with an extremely divided history where time and again our society has tried to break, destroy and disenfranchise both Black and queer people, I would say thriving in the midst of all of THAT — not just surviving it, but thriving within it and shedding mass cultural PTSD — is a triumph. We're extremely

resilient.

If you could speak to any Black queer individual, who would it be and why?

Living, it would be Oprah Winfrey and bell hooks; dead it would be James Baldwin and Josephine Baker - I aspire to someday reach that same level of greatness, integrity and gratitude.

What do you want your legacy to be as a Black queer individual?

I'm a working artist. I'm very grateful and lucky to be a working artist, to have ideas that come from my imagination and then execute them for the public and receive criticism, and praise, encouragement and support for my imagination and the things that come out of it. It is a wonderful life and I'm so grateful this world believes in me enough to allow me to live it. Someone else will write my legacy when I'm dead!

Donte Colley Savanna Ruedy

Donte Colley

How has your Black queer identity shaped you in your career? In life?

My Blackness has definitely shaped my career and life, and I had to learn that very early. It is sad when opportunities are lost because ultimately the person that is caucasian is "more relatable." It's helped me build armor. To deflect anything that tries to hurt me personally. I came to the realization that "no" doesn't necessarily mean "no" when it comes to business and in life. It means "next opportunity." Not everything is meant for you on your journey. Sometimes it's better off that way. There will always be things that unravel and reveal themselves when it's their time. Patience and consistency is key. But I do want to see more people like me across all forms of media. I want to see more people of color in general.

Where do you believe the future of Black LGBTQ+ expression is heading?

We need more of it at the forefront. Our community has a history of struggling to share the most vulnerable parts of ourselves, and we need to be open to sharing more. Allowing conversations around mental health and self-expression to continue. In the past and very much still in the present, it wasn't considered "strong" of you to share the pieces of yourself that weigh heavily on your spirit. Many individuals don't realize that by sharing, you are actually alleviating so much. You never know what impact you could have on someone, especially someone close to you, just by vocalizing how you feel. If you could help at least one person climb one step into the light, I think that's what matters most. We matter, our voices matter, and I hope whoever comes across this knows that they matter, too.

What do you want your legacy to be as a Black queer individual?

We're all destined to do amazing things in this life. I hope that whatever I do or put out into the universe would impact someone to make them feel good about themselves.

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Basit Spencer Ostrander

Basit

What's your perspective on how Black identity has been embraced in popular culture?

Black people have always been out here being great, and we are currently in a time where more Black

queers are sharing and claiming space in popular culture, which has led to an increase in Black queer representation. I don't think there is a new embracement of Black culture, but there has been an increase in Black queer visibility that will hopefully inspire future generations.

If you could speak to any Black queer individual, who would it be and why?

It would probably have to be Billy Porter. I admire Billy's tenacity and I believe we radiate at a similar frequency. As an artist I would like to have a better understanding of how Billy was able to become a household name in an industry that does not typically celebrate visibly queer Black people, and learn more about the challenges they had to overcome.

What do you want your legacy to be as a Black queer individual?

I hope my legacy is one of spreading joy and shedding light. I want to be remembered as a beacon in dark times, and as a voice for the voiceless. I want my legacy to empower those facing adversity to celebrate and bask in their unique and authentic beauty. Ideally I would like for my legacy to live on like a feel-good love song.

Wade Davis Katie Simmons-Barth

Wade Davis

What's your perspective on how Black identity has been embraced in popular culture?

This is a hard question to answer, because while there are Black identities, Blackness is not singular or static. And that's part of the problem. Non-Black folks need to believe they are embracing Black identity by attempting to replicate an identity that's acceptable in the moment, without understanding that they are actually flattening what it means to be Black by making it monolithic and singular. As long as people believe Blackness is something to be mimicked and/or embraced, they will always be doing

the exact opposite.

Where do you believe the future of Black LGBTQ+ expression is heading?

I believe it is colliding with the status quo or historically normative ways of existing. Being LGBTQ+, at the moment, means to be “the other,” and that means we are on the outside – which in some ways is good, because as long as we exist and keep demanding that others share power we will ensure that our current norms of identity and orientation never become stagnant and allow more folks in.

What do you want your legacy to be as a Black queer individual?

I don't know if I care so much about legacy. Then again, not answering the question feels like I'm trying too hard to be above it all. I guess I want to be remembered as someone whose journey toward self-love and acceptance was done in public, and allowed other Black queer folks to trust in the idea that vulnerability is a strength and courage is a necessity.

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Big Freedia Brad Herbert

Big Freedia

How has your Black queer identity shaped you in your career? In life?

Well, it's part of my brand, so I think it's helped me a lot. I hope younger people look up to me and feel safer in being themselves.

If you could speak to any Black queer individual, who would it be and why?

It'd be a kid somewhere living on the streets who feels hopeless, so I could tell to keep going and be proud of who they are.

What do you want your legacy to be as a Black queer individual?

That I was part of bringing Black LGBTQ+ culture into the mainstream.

Shangela Taylor Miller

Shangela

When did you first realize that you identified as a member of the LGBTQ+ community?

I don't remember the exact age, but I know from the moment I put on my mom's heels and pranced around to RuPaul's *Supermodel of the World* that I was for sure a gayby.

As you grew up, how did you form a relationship with the various facets of your identity?

The more I got to know myself, the more I began to realize how much I enjoyed every part of who I was, and I continue to work to unashamedly share those parts with the world.

What's your perspective on how Black identity has been embraced in popular culture? HALLELOO!

Black culture is something that has always had a strong impact on other cultures around the world, and it's time that it starts being recognized and celebrated.

If you could speak to any Black queer individual, who would it be and why?

I would love to talk with Marsha P. Johnson, to hear about her struggles in Black queer communities in earlier decades and hear her thoughts on where we are today and how we can do better.

What do you want your legacy to be as a Black queer individual?

I want my legacy to be about never giving up and how much you can create in your life, even if you

don't start with much. My legacy will be about hustling, hard work, and bringing smiles to other people's lives.

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ericka Hart Courtesy of Ericka Hart

Ericka Hart

As you grew up, how did you form a relationship with the various facets of your identity?

My Blackness and my queerness have always occurred to me as one in the same. There is a lot of Black scholarship and Black intellectual thought developed by Black trans and queer folks around the inextricable link between the two, but the way I've experienced it is normalizing for myself that who I am is not wrong. No one comes out of the womb and into an anti-Black and homophobic society believing that being queer is normal, so I've had to normalize who I am for myself, had to stop worrying about being judged or wanting to look like a cast member of the L-Word or a white queer person and really tap into the fact that Black queer people who don't subscribe to inherited notions of gender have existed since the beginning of time.

What's your perspective on how Black identity has been embraced in popular culture?

I don't think anybody is embracing Black culture insomuch as they're taking from it and using it for personal monetary gain, then the moment it ceases to be profitable they discard it. You see mainstream examples of this with white pop cultural figures like Arianna Grande, Billie Eilish, and Miley

Cyrus, but it's a certainly a historical trend – for example, the co-opting of Black queer and trans ballroom and house culture by the corporate fashion industry in the '80s and '90s.

What do you want your legacy to be as a Black queer individual?

I want my legacy to be that I helped usher in reparations for Black people in America, that I helped destroy some deleterious institution or another, and saved a whole lot of lives while having a few babies, a garden, and getting married again.

Elah Hale

Elah Hale Natalie O. Moore

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When did you first realize that you identified as a member of the LGBTQ+ community?

There isn't one specific memory of my realizing my queerness. But I do remember being seven or eight on the playground and a girl asking me "Are you gay?" and realizing that not everyone is gay. Being raised around and by queer people my entire life, queerness was never foreign, strange, wrong, or different to me. It just didn't feel like it mattered and I could just be.

As you grew up, how did you form a relationship with the various facets of your identity?

As I grew up and began to navigate more queer-centered spaces, I realized the privilege and power I had in being accepted by my family and never having to come out. The world isn't as simple as this

and it's not the experience of most people with complex identities.

Where do you believe the future of Black LGBTQ+ expression is heading?

I mean, obviously, I want the gays to go to space. We are all striving for a more Black- and queer-inclusive world. Hopefully, the future will allow for Black queer expression to be whatever the fuck it wants to be.

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