

Jocelyn Cooper Talks Afropunk, The Triptych & D'Angelo (Interview)

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On Monday February 9th, Black Public Television's World channel will air Afropunk's The Triptych, a film showcasing the work of visual artists Wangechi Mutu, Sanford Biggers and Barron Claiborne. Terence Nance, who received critical acclaim for his 2012 feature, *An Oversimplification Of Her Beauty*, is the director of The Triptych. In its 12-year existence as a wormhole for Black creativity outside the mainstream, Afropunk has produced a film about Black punk rockers, the Afropunk Music Festival and the marketing and promoting of D'Angelo's *Black Messiah*. Claiborne is famous for his iconic hip-hop photography, more specifically, his styling of Biggie Smalls's famous crown portrait. Sanford Biggers's work engages spirituality, transformation and race; his 2003 Ghetto Bird Tunic was a pimped out feather coat designed to shield Black men from the police. And Wangechi Mutu's electric interdisciplinary meditations on Black women's bodies are known for their critique of globalization, colonialism and exoticism. Jocelyn Cooper, who has been on board with Afropunk for the last 5 years, co-produced The Triptych with Afropunk co-founder Matthew Morgan. She is also D'Angelo's longtime music publisher and in this interview Cooper discusses the film, Afropunk's cultural significance and the launching of *Black Messiah* after D'Angelo's closing performance at last year's festival.

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How did you choose Sanford Biggers, Wangechi Mutu and Barron Claiborne as the subjects of The Triptych?

Barron Claiborne is a dear friend and Sanford we knew for a number of years and Sanford and both Barron suggested Wangechi. They (the films) sort of lead into each other because they are friends and they are contemporaries. Barron has worked with both Wangechi and Sanford I believe and taken their portrait, it was just a natural focus. We also chose Wangechi because she's a woman and the three of them also live in New York. We thought it was the best way to kick off the series of films we'd like to do.

What is it about their work that speaks to the Afropunk creed where you wanted to make them the first faces of visual art series?

Definitely, they are some of the most outspoken artists and each of them has an amazing sense of history and culture. They bring an independence and they are folks who are highly motivated and intelligent and their work speaks to our community and what the ethos of Afropunk is. They were the obvious choices and I think they all love Terence Nance's work, he is the director and Barron co-directed. They enjoyed collaborating with Terence so it was an amazing natural fit.

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How did you end-up partnering with the National Black Programming Consortium?

We worked with 13 there's an amazing woman at 13 who's actually no longer there. She introduced us to Christian at the National Black Programming Consortium. Once we, understanding the history of Afropop and the programming and the artists they work with, it was the most exciting and amazing partnership we could imagine it's the best of both worlds. We really wanted the series to be on public television

and to collaborate with them just made it even better.

So what do you think created the catalyst for the AfroPunk movement/brand?

Iâ€™m someone who worked in mainstream music for a very long time and if you look at a lot of what larger corporations produce and what they push, what they put their money behind natural and organic creative people didnâ€™t have a voice. Matthew saw that and consciously focused on building that community and giving that community a voice. Itâ€™s just this gaping hole in culture and also the strong desire that both he and I have to making sure and giving voice to people of color and showing 360 degrees of who we are because that isnâ€™t represented in mainstream media.

Why do you think certain Black artists miss the radar in the music industry?

In this day and age itâ€™s a really interesting time because obviously internet has sort of leveled the playing field. If you are talented and work really hard and youâ€™re fortunate enough to build an audience, and you can perform well, you can have a really successful career in music or any form of culture because you can build an audience yourself you donâ€™t need a gatekeeper. And once you do that the mainstream distribution company will pick up on that. I donâ€™t know if thatâ€™s the case now of course it was 10 years ago when I was working at a real mainstream record company.

Has there ever been any talks to take the AfroPunk Festival on the road like a Black Lollapalooza or to make a film of it?

Yeah we are taking it on the road. We will be in Atlanta this year and we will be in Paris this year as well as Brooklyn. Weâ€™re hoping to take the tour to Oakland so weâ€™re going on the road. Weâ€™re doing a show in Chicago in June.

Have you in any small way seen the Afropunk brand or an artist

shifting the mainstream or having any kind of breakthrough to as they say the center?

Afropunk artists, however people define that, Afropunk for me is not a genre, but yes there are artists that have broken out of the culture and the community of what Afropunk is. Santigold is an artist you know Janelle Monae is an artist who would consider themselves Afropunk. There are older folks who are the pioneers. Da'Angelo has redefined himself as an Afropunk artist so you know he definitely does not see himself as a neo-soul artist at all. He's on Saturday Night Live and he's playing the guitar he's representing the rock side and a fusion of blues and soul and punk rock and all of the things that average folks would not recognize. We are definitely pushing the boundaries of culture and that bleeds over into mainstream culture.

Black Messiah's cover looks like a concert, a revival and a protest all at once.

That was intentional. We got involved because I am Da'Angelo's music publisher and have been since day one. Da'Angelo signed to Midnight Songs, which is my publishing company and I've worked with him since he was 17 when I signed him. And we have talked quite often about his hopes and his dreams about his music and his projects and he and Fifteen and RCA asked us to come on board and help with the marketing because he had a terrific time at the festival. And more importantly, for six years he had been looking at and getting inspired by Afropunk and loving the community online and he will probably speak more when he starts talking about the music about some of the bands he may have seen onsite. And then when he performed we had a moment on the punk rock stage this year at the festival. We wanted to set the record for having the most people with their hands up in protest because at that time the big marches started happening and that's where that photo came from it's an analog photo it's not a

digital one it was taken on an actual film camera and it was developed on film. You hit the nail on the head it symbolizes all of those things. Because D'Angelo's record is not a digital record it made sense on every level musically and lyrically and it just all came together in that moment, revival, protest, all of it. Knowing him and talking to him he's been influenced by everyone; Bob Marley, Black Merda George Clinton, by Mother's Finest.

Since you've been there since day one, what do you think of his progression as artist from *Brown Sugar* to *Black Messiah*?

You know what's interesting is he has not changed that much he's clearly the same person I met when he was 17 years old. He just read a lot more he's always been a serious guy I just don't think that is publicly what the world took away from *Voodoo*. Because you know his body was amazing but if you listen to what he's talked about in interviews he's a guy who has an amazing sense of what's going on in the world.

Going back to *The Triptych*, have you all already starting planning the next films feature other visual artists?

Yes, we've got half of our next film in the can We're already having conversations with some artists so the hope is we can continue the series and do a *Triptych* every year. And their sense of culture and pushing the button Sanford and Wangechi and Barron beauty, quite frankly I hope that that comes out in the film because they are three of the most intelligent, gifted, spectacular folks who push culture forward. I'm so proud of the work and I'm so proud to be associated with them.

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Is there anything you'd like to add in closing?

Yes, a big thank you to National Black Public Media and the National Black Programming Consortium I'm very grateful.

[Watch The Triptych Monday February 9th on the World Channel](#)

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