



Stream the Electrifying Debut EP From New York Nightlife Fixture Richard Kennedy

“I’m driven by the desire to soften the image of black bodies in space. By creating vulnerable images and sounds of blackness, people will see something more true of what blackness is.”

By Michelle Lhoq Oct 22 2016, 12:00am



PHOTO BY ERIC JOHNSON

Back in March, I went to a party called Kwik in a Italian restaurant tucked deep in Bushwick, safely hidden from Resident Advisor listings. It felt like everything worth giving a fuck about in New York nightlife was in that small, dark room: in the back, over a crooked table lodged between twin speaker stacks, DJs flitted between dancehall, reggaeton, techno, rap, industrial, and other kitchen-sink productions, blowing out the system constantly—not that anybody cared. The sloping floor was rammed with queer people of color convulsing in collective catharsis, apathy giving way to earnest, libidinal joy.

The night was put together by Richard Kennedy, a New York-based singer and artist with deep roots in Brooklyn’s queer underground. On October 25, Kennedy is releasing his debut solo EP, *Open Wound In a Pool of Sharks*, on Sweat Equity, a New York label that’s become a sort of incubator for local club producers. Like the parties he frequently throws, *Open Wound* feels like more than the sum of its parts. Its six tracks of what Kennedy calls “noise-soul” are collaborations with daring DIY musicians like Jeremiah Meece, Stress, and Bottoms’ Michael Promassit, all of whom stretch Kennedy’s powerful voice in myriad directions; on “Mercy,” PAN affiliate Yves Tumor drenches them in ethereal piano chords and luscious reverb, while on “Living a Lie,” Light Asylum’s Bruno Coviello channels Kennedy’s angsty cries into noirish synth-pop perfection.

Below, Kennedy explains how the EP, which has been in the works for four years, charts his own journey through the New York party scene—and how the emotional turmoil, self-questioning, and heartbreak he grappled with along the way helped him find his own voice, and ultimately, perhaps, the chance for redemption.

THUMP: Let’s start with the EP title, *Open Wound In a Pool of Sharks*. It’s a really poetic, evocative phrase—how did you come up with it and what were you hoping to evoke?

The title *Open Wound in A Pool of Sharks* was inspired by this experience I had on the subway one morning. This man was screaming on the phone on a silent morning commute across the Williamsburg bridge about how he beat up some man. He kept screaming, “I was a shark, I was a shark; I told my grandma I could beat his ass!”

I am not a native New Yorker but I have lived here for ten years. New York inspires me now but it used to intimidate me. This EP was written over the course of about four years, and I started working on it at a confusing point in my New York life. Moving here alone with a big dream competing for space in a city saturated with so many incredible artists can be overwhelming. Sometimes I felt like I was the open wound, and I was trying to swim safely to shore, cautious of the sharks you must encounter along the way—not all dangerous, but all on their own hunt.

I completely feel that! The careerism in New York where everyone’s vying to get ahead can get really exhausting—or turn you into a cynical person. Can you tell me more about this confusing point in your life that served as the starting point for the EP?

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I moved to New York for the first time in 2004 to be in [the musical] *Fosse*, then moved for good in 2006 and early on appeared in both *West Side Story* and *Wicked*. I was getting all these huge jobs and making six figures at 23 years old, but I was always unsatisfied. I would cry every night at curtain call and feel so ungrateful. So on November 18, 2009, I quit my job and theatre altogether. I had surgery the following March on my shoulder, and started taking party photos. For two years, I drifted into a weird personal space where I partied too much and didn't work enough. I really explored who I was, fell in love twice, moved to LA three times, and so on. It wasn't all bad, but I was spiraling publicly and trying to find the drive and ambition I had before moving here.

Were the songs on this EP a way to cope or respond to this spiral?

Each track represents a different person or moment. For example, "Mercy" was written in Chicago after I got thrown out of the Banjee Report party I was hosting after 30 minutes for bundling in the open. Making this album taught me so much about myself, it was kind of scary at times. I wrote "Living A Lie" in response to exactly that. In the name of being "cool" or seeming not to care, I had begun to believe that I wanted a life on the fringe. One day I looked in the mirror and called bullshit on myself: "There's no telling the truth, when you're living a lie."

How does this EP connect to your other artistic/theatrical work, like *Black Rage*, earlier this year?

I consider myself a composer, whether it be a party, an opera, or an album, they are all driven by the same desire to soften the image of black bodies in space. I use music and performance as a way of preserving history and processing my experience. My album is a time capsule of emotions. I listen to it and learn new things about myself. I put my soul into everything I do, [all my work has] a shared DNA.

I'm intrigued by this idea of using art and music to "soften the image of black bodies in space." Can you expand on that a bit?

Being an assertive or aware black person can be difficult and alienating. Sometimes having opinions or standards can get you outcasted. Sometimes having sagging jeans and a hoodie can get you killed. The image of the black man in America is often vilified. Every day we all witness what is happening in the world, but to live it can be paralyzing. I've spent a lot of time thinking about how I could effect this in the subconscious. By creating vulnerable and tender images and sounds of blackness, I believe that people will begin to see possibility for something more true of what blackness is.

Let's talk about all your collaborators on the EP: Yves Tumor, Jeremiah Meece, Stress, Michael Prommasit from *Bottoms*, and *Light Asylum's* Bruno Coviello. It's such an interesting and diverse mix of people yet I feel like there is a connecting thread between all of you. Did you meet them in the Brooklyn music scene? Do you feel like you share a common ethos or musical vision?

Not all collaborators are Brooklyn-based but are frequent Brooklyn visitors. I started producing events and working seriously on music at a time when trap music was exploding. I was going nuts at trap raves and always feeling a bit left out. Trap music became numbing and it seemed everyone around me became very zombie-like.

I met Palm Trees (*VIOLENCE*), then Shanti (Yves Tumor), and they were making this music that was aggressive but super sensitive. I started booking these parties with these line-ups of gender fluid POC who were not necessarily making party music, but who definitely were rock stars. I don't want to take ownership for any scene or for anyone's definition of "sensitive." I just know that with these artists, and others like Sadaf, Don Christian, and Lafawndah, I felt something real. There's a group of people who really shifted New York out of total darkness. We created a space for ourselves to exist, and for people to come and experience something different. The world is just now figuring it out.

You've become a fixture in this queer POC underground scene you just described—even though this album is based on a super personal journey, do you feel like it's also inspired by your experiences in that scene?

Absolutely. My friends and my family are my great muses. The album deals with heartbreak and self-discovery, and without my community I'd be lost in the woods. I'm frustrated with love in the underground. A lot of the songs were written after nights out or on long mornings. I live my experience and my lifestyle from eyes open until eyes closed. Everything is connected.

Your music seems a bit different from *Sweat Equity's* previous releases. I associate them with left-field club cuts from local homies like JX Cannon, Akanbi and Teleself, while your EP is vocally-driven, has lots of melodic hooks, and isn't necessarily for the club. What drew you to release on this label?

I love the music they release and the artists they work with. I'm considering the sound [of my EP] "Soul Noise." I've known Dan [Creahan, *Sweat Equity* co-founder] for a while, and he has supported me since day one. I didn't want to release on a label I fit into or a label that I'd get lost in. *Sweat Equity* and Andrew Nerviano have been down and not asked me a lot of questions. They gave me time and space and that's the best gift on a first release an artist can ask for.

Now that your first solo release is out, what else you got coming up?

I'm working on a ballet set to Chino Amobi's "Airport Music for Black Folk," debuting my new opera "Comeuppance" at Signal Gallery, and finishing my MFA at Bard! I've started demos for my full-length album and I want to creative direct for other artist more in 2017. I'm loving life and I'm so excited and humbled to be able to share my music with the world!

Open Wound in a Pool of Sharks is out October 25 on *Sweat Equity*