



ARTISTS TO WATCH: XENIA MANASSEH

JULY 26, 2019 SHISHI WANJ

Xenia Manasseh is a fast rising star who moves between Nairobi and different states in America making and writing music that is nothing short of warm and unique. She has been a lover of music and dance since she was a little kid and below you'll find out just how a last minute leap of faith entirely shifted her life for the better.





First things first, I know a lot of people say this wrong, so tell us how we should spell and pronounce your name?

All the time! Lol. But I'm used to it. It's the beginning that confuses people. Xe is pronounced like the Xe in Xenon or Zee, I would write it out as Zee-knee-a, hope that helps! I tell people to call me Xe if it makes it easier for them!

When did you get into music and how would describe your style so far?

I got into music when I was a kid, picked up several instruments (piano, guitar, drums and bass) plus I sang all the time but I didn't take it seriously until the year I was going to uni, that's when I was like "oh wow, I'm really doing this". I have a neo-soul, R&B background but I haven't limited myself to just writing within those genres, so I have no idea how I'd actually describe my style, good question!

"IT'S ALWAYS BEEN IMPORTANT TO ME TO SOUND JUST LIKE THE RECORD"

Can you remember the first song you fell in love with? Why that song?

Whew, I have no idea. I remember always singing "I Miss You – Aaliyah" (RIP), Celine Dion - I'm alive, Doo Woop - Lauryn Hill, and Ninanoki – Nameless. Ha! I just remember those songs being a huge part of my life as a kid.

'NIAMBIE', produced by MOMBRU, became a fast fan favourite Was it a reaction you were anticipating or did it catch you by surprise?

Definitely not the reaction I was expecting at all! I just create based on what I'm feeling and when I wrote 'Niambie' it was just me trying to see if it was something I can do. It was at a point where I had studio sessions pretty much every day so I was just writing and writing and when I initially began trying to write it everything was in english, then MOMBRU suggested that I ditch that idea and try do something in swahili and I was like "why not" and ended up writing the first half of the song not even thinking it was something I'd come back to and here we are. What's surprising me even more is that it has been received more outside of Kenya and especially by my non-Swahili speaking friends that send me videos of them listening and singing along. I think is so, so cool and way beyond anything I could've ever imagined.



Photo courtesy of: [Drew Harmony](#)

How would you describe that first feeling of recording and hearing your first song in studio?

Man! It is one of the best feelings to me. Before I recorded my first song on my own I had started doing features for my brother [Phenom V](#), super talented rapper out of Boston, doing that gave me the confidence to be in the studio because I would get in the booth and freeze up a little bit and the more I worked with him, I got to familiarize myself with the whole process. We would get in the studio and he would knock out a whole song in 2 takes and I'd sit there like, I hope I don't let him down, so by the time I recorded my first song in June 2016 and heard it played back I was like WOW, I want to do this for the rest of my life!!! Funny enough I haven't even released that song, which is actually featuring Phenom V, I listen to it every now and then thinking about just randomly dropping it.

What would you say was the thing that made you officially decide to pursue music as a full time career?

No idea. I spent all of high school gearing myself towards a career in law then when it came time to apply for college, I only applied to two music schools. Somewhere along the line music just became more appealing to me and I just wanted to do something that would make me happy. Got into both schools, got a scholarship and 5 years later, here I am with a degree in Music Business/Management from Berklee College of Music.

Wow, that's amazing! So how would you describe the process and journey of getting into Berklee and your time spent there? Was it everything you ever dreamed of?

It *really* was a last minute decision to apply to music school. I got accepted into the school after my first audition but I needed a scholarship in order to attend. I auditioned during their second wave of auditions that year and was awarded a full tuition scholarship and was able to start on time. Every new place comes with its challenges but I grew so much from being around all those musicians. You go to a show, someone does something crazy musically, and everyone in the room gets it, I lowkey miss that. I try not to geek out too much these days haha. I met some of the most talented people, who are out in the world doing amazing things and playing/singing/writing and producing for some of our favorite artists and I'm just following in those footsteps.

“I JUST WANTED TO DO SOMETHING THAT WOULD MAKE ME HAPPY”

How is making music abroad different from making music at home according to your process of creating

The only major difference for me is that here I am writing and making music mostly in my bedroom. As opposed to in Atlanta where I was literally going to the studio almost every day of the week and going home to relax. It's hard not to get too comfortable in your bedroom. My process is also never the same, sometimes words just come to me, sometimes I freestyle and piece things together, sometimes I have melodies first, sometimes I come up with stuff and ask for a beat to be made around it, luckily I can do all those things wherever I am.

So let's talk music. What songs have been on rotation for you so far this season/year?

Favorites are so hard! I've been trying to discover a lot of the African music I have been missing out on, but that's a tough one. My recently played on Apple Music includes: Karun, Shekhinah, Distruction Boyz, Alex Isley, WSTRN, Tellaman, H.E.R, Rema, Kendrick Lamar, Doja Cat, Koffee. I went down the list lol but I listen to all kinds of things.

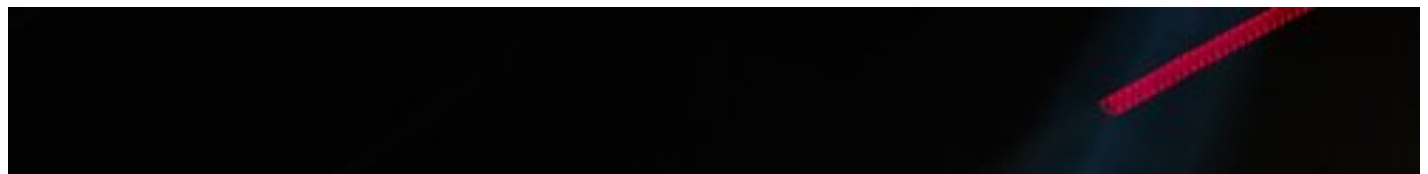




Photo courtesy of: [Muze Club](#)

What projects should we be looking out for from you?

My EP is on the way! It is mixed and almost completely mastered. I had initially planned to release it in August, but I want to push it back a little further. While I've been home I have also tried to do more collabs with people here, I have worked with Sichangi, Ukweli, Hiribae, Taio and I'm slowly expanding that group of people.

When it comes to performing, do you have a preference between singing live in studio and singing live in front of an audience ?

I love both. It's always been important to me to sound just like the record. When I was a kid I used to look up the live performances of all my favorite artists and knew I never wanted to sound different from what I put out into the world. Plus I have danced my entire life so I've always had dreams of being up on stage singing and dancing my heart out.

What are your highlight life moments so far in pursuing music and what more are you looking forward to?

Hearing my music on the radio, at the club, at events even when I'm not present, mind blowing every single time. As much as I believe in myself, that support from other people strangers and friends is the best thing I could ask for. My current job, songwriting in Atlanta is still super unreal to me. Writing songs for placement and working with people that are respected in the industry. Being asked to audition for tours and tv shows that I used to watch thinking I'd never get the opportunity. I'm loving the support us women in the industry are giving each other lately, I'm looking forward to what that brings in the future. Looking forward to putting my EP out so I'm not the only one listening to it anymore. More collaborations. More music.

Below are some links to Xenia's music and social media pages where you can find out what she's up to as we await the EP.

['Don't Go' single](#)

[Soundcloud](#)

[Spotify](#)

[Instagram](#)

[Twitter](#)

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