

ATL'S MOST INSPIRING STORIES

A DANCER'S STRENGTH

CHOOSING AN EPIC PATH

JULY 24, 2019

Meet Xenia Manasseh



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Today we'd like to introduce you to Xenia Manasseh.

Xenia, let's start with your story. We'd love to hear how you got started and how the journey has been so far.

I was born and raised in Nairobi, Kenya and I am of Kenyan, Ugandan and Malawian descent. I am 22-years old and am currently pursuing songwriting and being a full-time artist. As a child, I loved music, tried to pick up as many instruments as possible starting with piano then drums then guitar and then in college I picked up the bass guitar. Aside from that, I always sang and frequently participated in the Kenya National Music Festivals from age 8-15 where I received several awards for placing 1st in the country for both singing and piano. In high school, I still participated in as many music-related activities as possible but music took a backseat while my studies were at the forefront as I was convinced I wanted to pursue a career in Law. While in high school, I became the head of the choir and I helped create some of the arrangements that we performed at shows, as well as co-write several original songs that they still perform to date.

CONNECT



At the end of high school, after doing everything that would lead me towards a career in Law, when it came time to apply to college I only applied to two music schools and ended up getting accepted to both and I took that as confirmation that this is what I was supposed to do. Of the two schools I applied to, Berklee College of Music was my first choice as it is ranked the best school for jazz and contemporary music in the world. I was accepted in January 2014, during my last semester of high school but was not accepted with a scholarship. Upon graduating in May I had been working on setting up a second audition that was just for the scholarship as without it it would have been impossible to attend the school. I ended up auditioning in June 2014 and was notified that I received a full-tuition scholarship three weeks before the Fall term began and that is how I ended up in Boston.

I started at Berklee in August 2014 and pursued a degree in Music Business/Management with a concentration in entrepreneurship. It is very difficult to be in a place where you are surrounded by greatness and to not grow yourself. The vocal growth I experienced within my first two years at Berklee alone is still remarkable to me. I was 1 out of 5 Kenyans at the school all of whom happen to be women and together we learned so much from each other while maintaining our connection to home. Two years later in June 2016, I was pushed to begin songwriting again after my apartment burned down and I ended up losing most of my belongings. This became a period of immense growth for me and I finally rediscovered my passion for songwriting after not being able to write for about 5-6 years. The following year I was blessed to perform at The Essence Festival 2017 with my best friend Mayah Dyson who performed in one of the Superlounes, we visited Atlanta shortly after and from then on made frequent visits as I knew it was where I would want to relocate to after graduating.

While at Berklee I also had the opportunity to sing backgrounds for Crissy Collins (of Beyoncé's MAMAs), Gloria Estefan as well as sing lead for Beyoncé's Original Band while they had their own tour. I graduated in May 2018 and relocated to Atlanta 2 weeks later where I began my internship at Native North under Natalie Lauren. Two months later, I was finally connected to a producer who was my friend's cousin. It turned out to be now Grammy award-winning Keyz of the production duo Ayo and Keyz. The two started a label called The UpperClass Men Group and I had my first session with them as a songwriter in July. The first song we worked on ended up being my most recent single, and after our first session they called me back to work with them every week afterward. By the end of the year I had worked on about 70 songs with them and it revealed to me how passionate I am about songwriting and honestly, that it was something I was actually good at! It honestly still doesn't feel real to me!

Overall, has it been relatively smooth? If not, what were some of the struggles along the way?

It has definitely not been a smooth road. As mentioned, halfway through college the apartment I was living in burned down, I was lucky I wasn't home because the fire started in my room, so I lost everything in my room which included my laptop, equipment, clothes, passport, pictures so much that can't be recovered, but it really did push me to really find myself and do what I am passionate about. I didn't declare a major in Songwriting when I got to Berklee because I lacked the confidence and didn't believe I had what it took to be able to pursue it as a career, but that changed everything. After actually losing so much, what could I lose from writing songs and doing something I love.

Being away from home was also challenging at times, not being able to go home as often as my friends but it was something I had been used to since high school since I went to a boarding school but I was still in a place I considered home and not thousands of miles away.

Relocating to Atlanta was also challenging because it was a new place to explore and it's always a bit scary when you are in a new place because you never really know how long it will take you to find a balance and get your feet on the ground.

We'd love to hear more about your work and what you are currently focused on. What else should we know?

I am currently pursuing a career being a full-time artist as well as being a songwriter. I would say at the moment I am known for both my music and songwriting however at home I am known for my music and in Atlanta I am known more for songwriting. I think what sets me apart from others is firstly, where I'm from. I haven't met a lot of Kenyan female songwriters fully pursuing this career or in the places I have managed to get to. I am hoping to change this because although I haven't seen a lot of them with the same opportunities I have received, I do know a lot of talented female and male Kenyan and African songwriters. I am proudly Kenyan and proud to be accepted into a world I never thought I'd be a part of, what used to seem like it could only be a dream is real and it's only getting better.

What is "success" or "successful" for you?

Success to me will be once my achievements allow me to help others receive the same opportunities as me. I believe we are all here to serve and to help others and once I am able to create or provide the same platforms for others then I will consider myself successful. There are too many talented people in the world lacking access to platforms that will allow them to be recognized and then build for

themselves. I don't aspire to only provide service through music but to be able to help my community in general and that is my definition of success.

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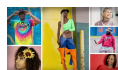
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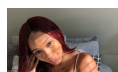
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