

DEVONTÉ HYNES

BLOOD ORANGE
TEST ICICLES
LIGHTSPEED CHAMPION

“I’m aware, as a black musician, that I will never be seen on par with white people that do what I do,” Hynes told *Pitchfork* in 2016.

Nearly every interview promoting Devonté Hynes’ latest Blood Orange album, *Freetown Sound*, has something in common: its location. Washington Square Park is more than a setting for press; it’s a place of inspiration for Hynes—and even appears on his album. Hynes incorporates sound bites that he records daily, and ambient sounds can be heard in the songs throughout.

“I really like to be alone but surrounded by people,” Hynes reasons. The musician and producer likens visiting Washington Square Park to being in his own apartment or studio. “I get that same feeling,” he says. “It’s really comforting, the idea of finding mental isolation in an overflowing city.” And Hynes actively treats the park like a second home. “I’ll go to write, come up with melodies, production and video ideas,” he says. “I work there, and I read there.”

“I think part of it is that I never really had that kind of space growing up,” he continues. The child of a Guyanese mother and a Sierra Leonean father who immigrated to England, Hynes was raised in Essex, East London. “I obviously feel English,” he says. “But I spent my 20s in New York, so it’s almost like I came of age here. Now my memories of England are basically just that: memories.” Hynes feels “indebted to” New York, and his love for the



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Hynes has synesthesia, a neurological condition that causes the senses to blur. He told NPR that the sound at the top of the Empire State Building registers as a G-ninth and appears “slightly green” with “shades of gray.”



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city, flaws and all, is palpable. His relationship with the Big Apple extends over a decade. “When I first moved to New York, I lived in Williamsburg. Comparatively, now, it feels like a completely different place, and that’s happened in a relatively short period of time,” he reflects. But he discusses those changes cautiously: “I can’t work out if things are really changing or if I’m just older. It’s easy to point fingers, but maybe it’s just that I’m not in my 20s anymore.”

Hynes is a self-described “full-on tourist” and still visits what he calls “the classics”—the Met, Central Park, Carnegie Hall and the Empire State Building, to name a few—with regularity. Recently, he began exploring other cities, too.

In 2017, he participated in an artist-in-residence program at Numeroventi in Florence, which resulted in a piece titled *Suite Per il Servo Moro*, featuring cello, piano, horns and synth. “People make fun of me for it, but I’m really in love with Florence,” he says. “I can see myself spending a lot of time there.” He has also been traveling and working in Copenhagen, Los Angeles, Osaka and Tokyo. “I wouldn’t say that I’m running away from

New York,” he explains. “I’m just not being here. That’s kind of new for me, and it’s really enjoyable.”

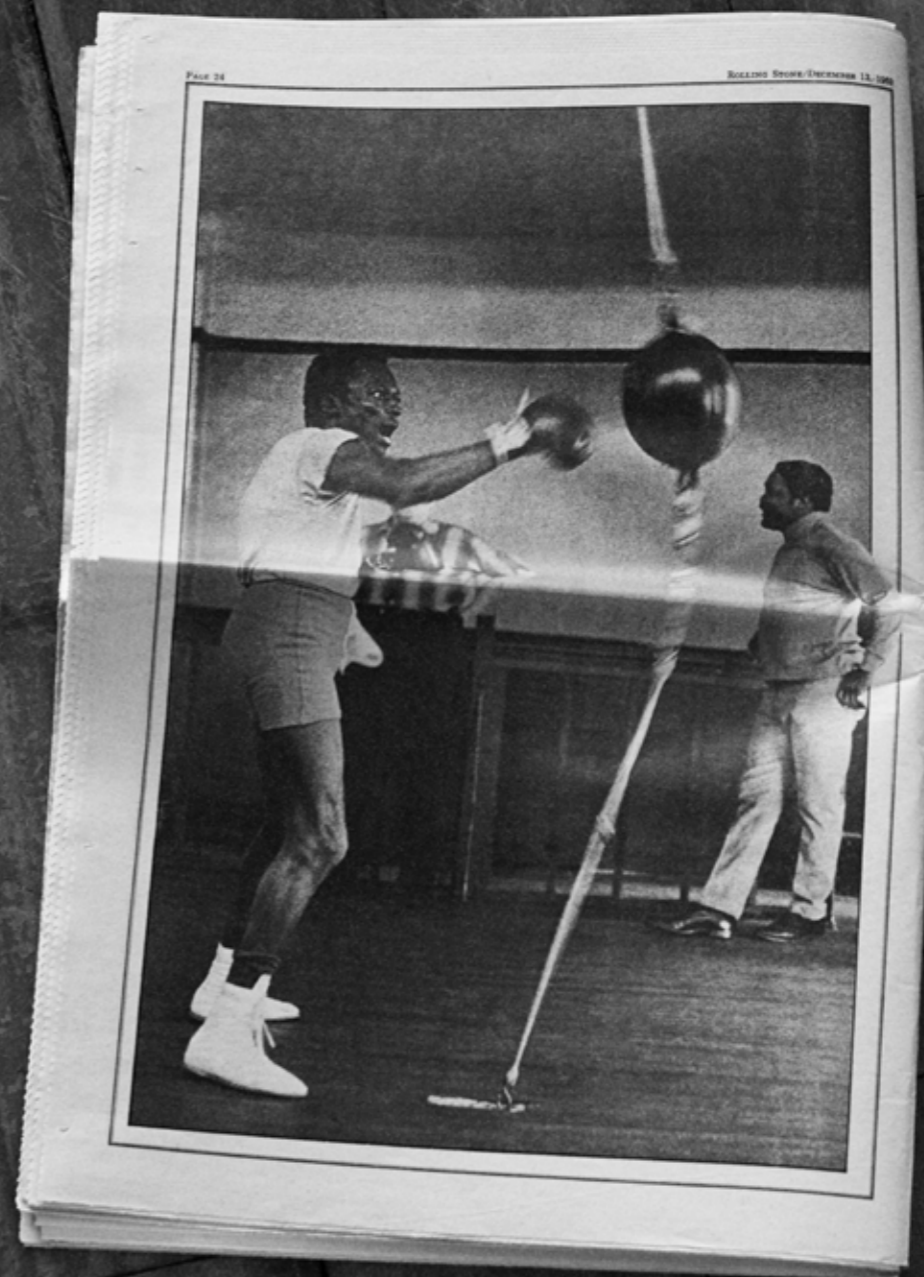
Hynes claims that he doesn’t have rituals—“I’m too frantic to ever stick to one,” he clarifies—but back in New York, he visits bookstores like The Strand and McNally Jackson at least four times per week. “For the first five years of living here, I was buying obsessively, but I had to slow down. Now I tend to browse more and pick the things that really speak to me.”

He reads fervently, and always multiple books at once. It is hard for him to name favorites, but he starts on his current reading list: *Reckless Daughter: A Portrait of Joni Mitchell*, Tennessee Williams’ *Moise and the World of Reason*, Susan Sontag: *The Complete Rolling Stone Interview* and *The Paris Review’s* collection of interviews.

“I treat books almost like music. At different times, or in different moods, I need different things,” he says. When Marlon James’ *A Brief History of Seven Killings* was published, for example, Hynes immediately started reading. “But it’s so dense that I had to give it a break. I was in Jamaica recording



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 Hynes has long found refuge in independent bookstores. McNally Jackson, a personal favorite of his, introduced an on-demand printing press in 2011 capable of producing fully bound books in minutes.





recently and fell back in the mood.” Hynes also watches “a disgusting amount of TV” and cites film as a major influence. “But I watch a lot of trash, too. My taste has no bounds,” he laughs.

Hynes’ influences shine through in his work. Ashlee Haze’s poem *For Colored Girls (The Missy Elliott Poem)*, an interview with writer Ta-Nehisi Coates and vocals from Malcolm McLaren are among the samples that appear under his Blood Orange moniker. He looks to a multitude of people, both inside the music industry and out, for inspiration. His list includes Alice Coltrane, Joan Didion, Joni Mitchell and Janet Mock, all of whom he admires for how they are “creating and moving through the world.” He stops short after naming a few more “because a lot of the people that I look up to aren’t necessarily the nicest people—like Miles Davis.

“I’m also a really big Kanye fan, which I know some people never admit,” he says. He reminisces on West’s seminal record *College Dropout*, which was released shortly after Hynes dropped out of school and took a janitor job at the British department store Marks & Spencer. “I would listen to it while I was working,” he remembers. “It really stuck with me, and even now, going through the years, it’s still inspirational.”

As an artist at Numero-venti’s residence program in Florence, Hynes stayed at the Palazzo Galli Tassi. The 16th-century palace near Santa Croce Square in the heart of Tuscany’s capital dates back to 1510.

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Meeting Solange Knowles, he says, is another standout moment in his career. “She was the first person who really put trust in me musically,” he admits. “She set the course to help me become myself a bit more.” Hynes helped to both produce and write for Solange’s debut EP, *True*, and was a featured artist on *A Seat at the Table*.

He has worked as a writer or producer, sometimes both, for a slew of other celebrated artists, including Carly Rae Jepsen, FKA twigs, Sky Ferreira and Kindness. He scored Gia Coppola’s film *Palo Alto*, contributed to David Byrne’s solo album *American Utopia* and in 2018 performed alongside Philip Glass at The Kennedy Center. Despite working with some of today’s most acclaimed cultural icons, he remains humble. Hynes enjoys the sense of community he has created at his Chinatown studio—“I like people to pass by, and I’ve always said that anyone can pass through.”

A composer, producer and singer, Hynes has a diverse set of musical talents, and it is evident that he is multifaceted as an artist more generally. He has written short stories, has drawn comics and is an amateur photographer. A Fujifilm point and shoot, Contax G2 and Yashica medium format are his cameras of choice, and he develops an average of seven rolls of film every two weeks. Though his images frequently appear on his Instagram account, no formal exhibitions are in the works. “One thing that can be a detriment to myself is that I grew up a huge fanboy of certain people and things,” he explains. “People of course have multiple channels, and nowadays that’s more natural, but I’m very aware that the main channel people understand me through is music. If I presented my photos, I would be a musician presenting photos, and that just cringes me out.” Regardless, Hynes continues to leave his footprint on the world of music and beyond.*

