

## **Kari Faux is the Real Deal**

### **A Little Rock rapper gets Lost en Los Angeles.**

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**ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE**

“I don’t want to cry,” says the young woman in the white T-shirt and cuffed skinny jeans.

In a modern but generic apartment, in a neighborhood of chain eateries and strip malls, she pulls her knees to her chest on the overstuffed loveseat, rolls her eyes at Audrey Hepburn frozen in high def across the coffee table, and dabs at a few frustrating drops.

The loveseat and the coffee table are so nondescript, it’s impossible to know if the one-bedroom comes furnished or if Kari Faux — a 23-year-old Little Rock-born rapper — picked them out. Perhaps they were chosen as backlash to her recent year in Los Angeles and the pressure that Faux felt there to have presence and style, to make a statement with everything she wore, said or did. (The spoken-word intro on her most recent album, *Lost en Los Angeles*, plays like a yoga class led by a neo-soul DJ: “Focus and breathe ... Prioritize and minimize ... Nothing is good or bad, but thinking makes it so.”)

The only personal touches in the living room are haphazardly strung holiday lights and a portable turntable resting on the flawless cream carpet. There’s also a stack of records — Marvin Gaye, Otis Redding, Herbie Hancock, the *Shaft* soundtrack. Someone (an intern, Faux thinks) has scrawled “Childish Gambino” on the turntable cover. It was sent from HBO to Donald Glover (comedian, former *30 Rock* writer, raps as Childish Gambino), then regifted to Faux.

Two years ago, Faux’s situation would have seemed like a latter-day fairytale. And it’s not that she’s not grateful. “I’m very grateful,” she says emphatically.

She’s grateful for the publishing deal that pays for this apartment. She’s grateful that she no longer works restaurant jobs. She’s grateful that she got to perform with House of Vans in Mexico and Hong Kong, and that *Lost en Los Angeles* is receiving online hype, to the tune of 10 relevant Google pages. But she’s also grateful to get to hang with her niece and nephews again and to record shop with her parents.

Kari Faux grew up Kari Johnson, surrendered by a teenage mother and adopted by a minister and her factory worker husband. After graduating from Central High School, Faux dropped out of an Atlanta art college, moved in with her parents and started making music with her best friend, Malik Flint, also known as “bLACK pARty.” The two have been close — artistically, romantically or otherwise — since they met at 16.

“SELL ME DREAMS UNTIL I’M LUCID” — LIE 2 MY FACE

In July 2014, Faux and Flint were working with other Little Rock artists to establish an all-ages hip-hop scene when Glover's manager, Fam Rothstein, stumbled upon Flint's Twitter posting of the Flint/Faux collaboration "No Small Talk." (The hook, "B\*\*\*\* I'm taking calls, no small talk," is lifted from Faux's friend Shandice Castro, who uses it conversationally.)

"The beat is simple. The bass line is lean," Rothstein says. "She wasn't over-exerting herself. ... It was catchy."

Rothstein passed the link to Glover, and a few months later, they visited Flint and Faux in Little Rock (Faux took them to Chick-fil-A) and invited the Arkansans to a huge event that Gambino played, the pioneering Southern hip-hop duo Outkast's Atlanta reunion show. Afterward, Gambino released the mixtape *STN MTN* (as in Stone Mountain, Ga.) with his remix of "No Small Talk."

Rothstein knew that he wanted to manage Faux when mega-star Drake also asked to remix the song. Faux turned him down.

"She wants to control her own future. ... She's not desperate. That solidified her being a real artist to me," Rothstein says.

Flint says, "Everyone wanted to remix 'No Small Talk.' What's going on, especially somebody that big, they're basically using [young artists'] energy for them to level up, and they couldn't care less what you do afterwards. It was a situation like, 'I could do this and it could be a cool moment,' but what would it mean in the long term?"

Faux puts it bluntly: "Gambino wanted to help me. Drake didn't."

In October 2014, Rothstein officially moved Faux and Flint to Los Angeles, where they spent most of their time in the trendy Glassell Park neighborhood, living in a house that serves as the headquarters for Wolf and Rothstein. (The agency is a division of Mick Management, which has a roster that includes Passion Pit and Tokyo Police Club, among others.)

Flint, a beat maker who formerly fronted the band Flint Eastwood, thrived. Often finding himself in studios or houses with instruments, he learned guitar, bass, keyboards and drums. (He plans to flaunt these skills on a *bLack pARty* album dropping this summer.) Faux found it difficult to live in a neighborhood with few black residents and plenty of Southern stereotypes.

"They think that we're hicks and that we use outhouses and ride cows to the store. ... Or they think it's still gang-banging in Little Rock, and that's stupid too. It's not like that anymore, guys. That was 20 years ago," she says.

Rothstein says Faux is “so much of herself that it felt uncomfortable” for her to be “surrounded by people trying to make a name off of not being themselves” — his shorthand for the entertainment industry.

But Faux describes Rothstein, Glover and their immediate co-horts (a crew of “writers, photographers and creative directors,” Rothstein says) as “family.” Rothstein says Faux and Flint are “essential members of the group,” offering a crucial perspective because of their youth. (The others are roughly a decade older.)

Faux did interviews with outlets such as *LA Weekly*, *XXLMag* and *Nylon*, in addition to writing and recording songs, but downtime made her nervous.

“L.A. can be very laid back and slow. It’s just kind of like, I’m in this big city and it’s boring. I shouldn’t be bored,” she says.

#### ‘LIVING LIFE IN THE DOMESTICATED WILD’ — LOST EN LOS ANGELES

*Lost en Los Angeles*, released last month, is a playfully mixed journey through slow-spiraling ’70s synth laced with jazz riffs, funk horns, trip hop and house beats. There’s also ’80s electropop, gritty, drawn-out trap and a tinge of an indigenous vibe (hand-drums, percussion). The 11 tracks bring to mind artists as diverse as Gangsta Boo, Erykah Badu, Bjork, Deee-Lite and Digable Planets. It’s sunshine, bouncy clubbing meets stubborn aplomb, fading into a smoggy haze of psychedelia and despondency.

“Pollution in my air/but I must consume/who really gives a f\*\*\* /cuz we’re all doomed,” Faux raps in “Nothing 2 Lose.” Other lyrics reference police brutality, broken relationships, drug abuse and “calls from Sallie Mae.” But depression, as filtered through Faux, is surprisingly danceable.

“Kari works off of feelings,” Rothstein says. “Everything’s like, ‘I want to party,’ or ‘I want to be sad,’ or ‘I want to talk about this relationship I have with my family.’ ... Beyond her music, you know how she feels at any given moment, because she’ll tell you.”

“Fantasy,” one of the album’s highlights, started as a journal entry. (“I’m no man’s fantasy/I didn’t plan to be/didn’t come with a set of instructions/so you don’t know how to handle me,” Faux chants over austere, funky drums and later, finger-snapping beats, an upright bass, horns and piano samples.)

“It can go either way, as in I’m no man’s fantasy, and I’m confident enough to not even care ... [or] I’m no man’s fantasy, I’m kind of insecure about it,” Faux says.

Once upon a time, Faux oozed self-assurance. Just before meeting Rothstein, on a trip to New York with Castro’s family, Faux asked around, got a name for a writer at VICE’s Noisy blog, took a train to Brooklyn and marched into the VICE offices. She hyped her

“No Small Talk” video so hard that staff agreed to premiere it, sight unseen. It was her first time in New York.

“In Little Rock, I thought I was the bomb,” Faux says. “Then I got to L.A. and I was like, whoa, these people are gorgeous. They’re tall. They’re like, put together. And it just took time to see that even though these people look this way ... [they] still feel kind of empty.” (“Even with the sunshine/my days are filled with gloom/my only friends/are the four walls of my room.”)

But for all the loneliness, confusion and soul-searching, Faux’s time meandering among cloudless sprawl was inspirational and educational. She was provided a per diem, sat in on writing sessions, hung around while Glover brainstormed ideas for his new FX series *Atlanta* and ultimately came away with a publishing contract, which means that Pulse Recordings pushes songs Faux has written to other artists and songs she has recorded to movie and TV producers.

“Being around Donald, seeing how a TV show comes to life, it’s like OK, I can do this. ... You just have to plan and execute,” Faux says.

Now Faux says she’s scripting a web series starring her cousin, which a friend from Conway will shoot: “We’re going to do this show about procrastination, and there’s going to be little skits, kind of like sketch comedy.”

She wants to branch out, try creative endeavors beyond music. Already she has the LELA (Lost En Los Angeles) Project, an online series of interviews with transplants who talk about their experiences learning a new place.

“I’M NOT SUPPOSED TO BE HERE, BUT I AM” — LOST

Upon returning to Little Rock, Faux realized that success comes with drawbacks. She feels isolated from many of her friends, “who still have the situations that they live in, and I don’t think they quite understand ... that I’m still very normal,” she says. “It’s kind of crazy because I’m like, damn, I thought nobody got me in L.A., but now no one gets me here either.”

In addition to the pressure she puts on herself because she’s “neurotic,” Faux fields the expectations of her managers and collaborators and, though she doesn’t mention it, strangers.

“She’s kind of polarizing. I’ve heard everything from remedial raps to genius. ... And I love that, because you have to pick a side,” Rothstein says.

If she’s not doing phone interviews (she had four the Friday before her album dropped), she says she’s making stuff, or “sitting at my computer, thinking about what I could be doing besides sitting there thinking about what I could be doing.”

She has learned to appreciate the time alone and the self-reliance she has gained. And she still often visits L.A., a city she managed to finally love just before it was time for her to go.

“I don’t think she struggles to be herself as much anymore, because she spent a year here and she understands Hollywood. She accepts it but she doesn’t have to be a part of it. She’s just here to work,” Rothstein says.

In March, her managers rented a Silver Lake neighborhood bar, and she performed *Lost en Los Angeles* from start to finish for select industry people and a handful of friends.

“Everybody [in L.A. and Little Rock] thought I dropped the ball, and I wasn’t doing anything, and I wasn’t making anything. ... Then I performed and they were like, ‘I get it,’” she says. “In that moment I was like, ‘Maybe I am doing the right thing.’”