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‘It Allows Them All to Freak Out’: Artist Sanford Biggers on Collaborating With Visionary Musicians to Form an ‘Afrofuturist Boy Band’

Acclaimed artist Sanford Biggers blends video, music, and performance to defy expectations in the collaborative project Moon Medicin.

Tim Schneider, April 5, 2019



Moon Medicin, Sanford Biggers's rotating-cast, multimedia performance ensemble. Courtesy of Sanford Biggers studio.

What happens when you combine a renowned multi-disciplinary artist whose work actively resists easy categorization, a rotating band of searingly talented musicians, a visual extravaganza stretching from custom-made costumes to expertly crafted video backdrops brimming with coded symbols, a brew of original songs and imaginative re-interpretations of contemporary classics, and a high-concept theme interrogating history, politics, and the way we live now?

If the artist in question is Sanford Biggers, then the answer is *Un-Televised Revolutions*, a boundary-detonating performance piece from his shape-shifting multimedia ensemble, Moon Medicin. Biggers is best known for his visual art, which seeks to disrupt traditional symbols of identity, spirituality, politics, history, and music (particularly hip-hop) using a diverse range of media and styles, from video installations to totemic sculptures to paintings on antebellum quilts.

Staged at the Kennedy Center on Thursday night, *Un-Televised Revolutions* saw Biggers and company process the influence of Sidney Lumet's indelible 1976 newsroom satire *Network* and the legendary 1938 radio dramatization of H.G. Wells's *War of the Worlds* into what the group labels "a multimedia state of the union address over breakbeats"—one that, by the way, also welcomed some audience participation.

If you're still not sure how to visualize all of the above, it's partly because Moon Medicin is designed to confound expectations. It illustrates the kind of magic that can happen when the art and music worlds collide in a way that offers freedom from the restrictive rules of both.

Speaking to artnet News the day before the one-night-only Kennedy Center performance, Biggers classified Moon Medicin as "an Afrofuturist boy band." But he cautioned that even that label is slippery, since not all members of the group identify as male—and all of them wear masks throughout the show, anyway.

"There's no quick and easy read to anything the band does," explains the artist. "It's all entangled in mystery and obfuscation."



Moon Medicin mid-performance. Image courtesy of the Kennedy Center.

Shoot for the Moon

The concept for Moon Medicin grew out of Biggers's long history as a musician and his desire to bring his visual art outside the confines of the studio. He regularly traveled from Chicago (where he was working toward his MFA) to New York on weekends in the late 1990s to play club gigs with Martin Luther McCoy and Saul Williams, two friends from his undergrad days at Morehouse who have gone on to acclaimed music careers in their own right.

Biggers later parlayed his continuing musical life into a kind of prototype of Moon Medicin for the Performa Biennial in 2007. There, he debuted *The Somethin' Suite*, in which McCoy, Williams, and a star-studded cast of fellow players collaborated with Biggers to present what he now calls a "deconstruction of a minstrel show." That ensemble performed periodically over the next several years, before Biggers reconfigured it as Moon Medicin for a performance at the Bass Museum during Art Basel Miami Beach in 2011.



Sanford Biggers, creative director and keyboardist of Moon Medicin. Photography by Jeannette Montgomery Barron. Courtesy of Sanford Biggers studio.

From the outset, Biggers has filled dual roles in Moon Medicin: playing keys and acting as creative director. “I have a hand in everything,” he says. “So I’ll come up with a framework, imagine a vignette, bounce ideas around with the group.” For instance, when it came time to adapt *Network*’s famous “I’m as mad as hell” monologue for *Un-Televised Revolutions*, Biggers had to consider every aspect: which music to play, who would perform it, how they would be costumed, what their video accompaniment should be.

About the imagery: As you might expect, the border between Biggers’s artworks and Moon Medicin’s visuals is perpetually in flux. The video backdrops are prevalent throughout each performance. Each one is usually constructed out of raw footage culled from the video artworks Biggers presents in a gallery context and found footage sourced from home videos, YouTube, and elsewhere. The artist says he thinks of them as “patchworks” that relate to the patchwork quilts sometimes appearing in his static artworks.

Biggers has also sometimes incorporated Moon Medicin’s costumes into sculpture and installation works. For example, after an opening-night performance at his 2016 Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit solo exhibition, he draped the ensemble’s masks, robes, and other accessories over a coat rack and left them on view in the gallery for the entirety of the exhibition.



Moon Medicin performing on the opening night of “Subjective Cosmology,” Sanford Biggers’s 2016 solo exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit. Image courtesy of Sanford Biggers studio.

Far From a One-Man Band

Still, don’t be misled by Biggers’s role as creative director. Collaboration is Moon Medicin’s foundation. The group is designed to morph as its cast rotates. Biggers

says that he's recently shifted to an "even more open-source method" of partnership, in which he'll simply call up friends and potential collaborators to solicit ideas for songs, images, gestures—anything that could add flavor and depth to the concept, even if the idea's source can't join on stage.

To illustrate Moon Medicin's evolution, Biggers mentions that *Un-Televised Revolutions* was partly shaped by the dramaturgy and blocking of celebrated theater and performance director Charlotte Brathwaite. Playing bass was André Cymone, one of Prince's closest friends since childhood, a crucial part of the Purple One's band in his early years, and an architect of the synthesizer-driven funk-rock now known as the Minneapolis Sound. Ten-time Grammy nominee Meshell Ndegeocello has also guested in past Moon Medicin performances.

The synergy between these cross-genre heroes feathers sonic meaning in with the visual concepts. Biggers offers an example: What does it mean to "real music heads" and the history-conscious when Moon Medicin mashes up the instrumental to Prince's *Controversy* with the lyrics to *Lift Every Voice and Sing*, "which was considered the black national anthem back in 1904"—especially while Cymone and Ndegeocello collaborate for the first time ever?



Moon Medicin, uncharacteristically unmasked during a performance. Image courtesy of the Kennedy Center.

In Biggers's mind, Moon Medicin's status as a kind of third way between the music industry and the art industry adds fire to the performances. "I honestly think that the music world for all these performing musicians is very bread and butter. You show up, you do a gig, you get paid or you don't get paid, you move on, and you do it again in another city," he says. But when Moon Medicin plays venues like the Kennedy Center or the Bass Museum, its members are "not under the same restrictions of the music world or the same restrictions of the art world, so it allows them all to freak out in a way they wouldn't otherwise be able to do."

Stew all that musical history together with the rich visuals and the resonant source material—Biggers calls *Network*, which critiques a toxic media culture and Cold War-era Kremlin-phobia, "one of the most prescient films ever made"—and yeah, it's a lot to sort through.

"Our goal," says Biggers, "is to do the same thing I try to do in my art practice: to eradicate historical amnesia and stimulate thought."