

Janelle Monáe

Born: December 1, 1985

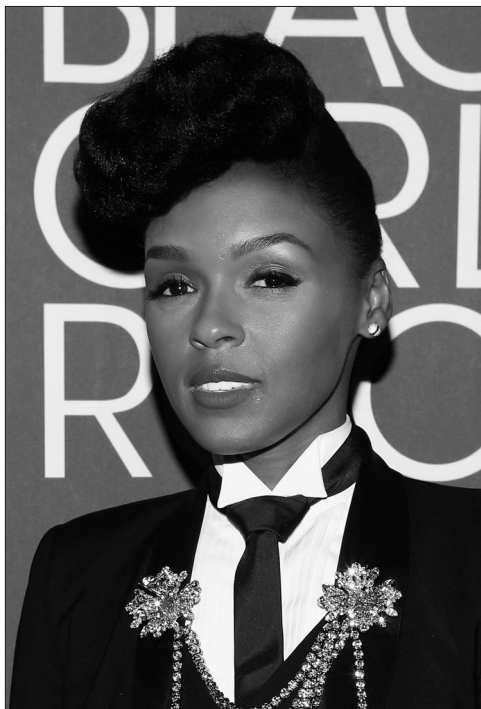
Occupation: American R & B/soul musician

The futuristic, multigenre stylings of performer Janelle Monáe defy all available description. The twenty-seven-year-old singer, musician, composer, and record producer baffled then charmed then completely blew audiences and critics away with her 2010 debut album *The ArchAndroid* (*Suites II and III*). Her fans include Prince, Stevie Wonder (her own idol), Erykah Badu, and First Lady Michelle Obama—who included Monáe’s hit single “Tightrope” on her workout playlist.

Monáe is noted for her clothing and overall look—she frequently wears what she calls a “uniform” of a black and white tuxedo and her signature hairstyle is a pompadour. This plays into her futuristic and science-fiction-influenced work in her music—*ArchAndroid* and her 2007 EP *Metropolis: Suite I (The Chase)*—as well as her performances and persona.

Monáe’s alter ego is a time-traveling android named Cindi Mayweather. In the year 2719, Mayweather has come to set people free from discrimination, but she is persecuted in the dystopian city of Metropolis for having human emotions. Unlike the alter egos of other artists, which usually herald a change in dress or musical genre, the more sophisticated Cindi Mayweather story functions as an allegory for racial, sexual, and class discrimination. But Monáe also insists that the story is a preemptive call for the equality of androids—she is a fan of futurist and Google executive, Ray Kurzweil, who predicts androids will not be the stuff of fiction for much longer.

Monáe has been nominated for a handful of Grammy Awards and, in 2013, she won song of the year, for “We Are Young,” a collaboration with the indie pop band Fun., with whom she had once toured. Her tour mates and collaborators are an eclectic bunch that includes musician and poet Saul Williams and indie rock band Of Montreal. She has also toured with Prince and No Doubt. Monáe herself has been compared to Lauryn Hill, David Bowie, James Brown, and Grace Jones—though she does not like to be defined by comparisons, however flattering.



Getty Images for BET

Her genre- and gender-bending choices are all specifically cultivated to be forward-looking. “I [want] a new energy to be out there,” she told Greg Kot for the *Chicago Tribune* (26 May 2010), “to focus on new ideas, and the future.”

EARLY LIFE AND EDUCATION

Janelle Monáe Robinson was born in Kansas City, Kansas, on December 1, 1985. She grew up in a tough neighborhood where her mother worked as a janitor and her father, Michael Robinson Summers, collected trash and drove a truck. He also struggled with a crack cocaine addiction during Monáe’s childhood. He is clean now, but the remembrance continues to affect her outlook and Monáe does not do drugs. “I consider myself the drug,” she told Kot. “It could’ve easily been the other way around, I could’ve easily been a product of my environment and played the victim. But I consider myself a thriver.”

Monáe’s extended family also played a significant role in her upbringing. She grew up watching old episodes of *The Twilight Zone* and Alfred Hitchcock movies with her grandmother; she also sang in the church choir with her father’s aunt. Monáe comes from a musical family, but those around her realized that she was extraordinarily gifted at an early age. (Money she earned from singing competitions made her a breadwinner early on.) Summers told Danny Alexander for the *Kansas City Pitch* (21 Oct. 2010), that if the choir was having a hard time hitting a certain note, his aunt would say, “Janelle, hit that note for me, because she knew she could always do it.”

Growing up, Monáe performed in musicals like *Cinderella* and *The Wiz*, but she also began writing her own musicals with the Coterie Theatre’s Young Playwrights’ Roundtable. One play that she wrote at the age of eleven or twelve was about a boy and girl falling in love with a plant, inspired by Stevie Wonder’s soundtrack for the 1979 documentary *Journey through the Secret Life of Plants*. “She always had her own way of doing things,” her aunt Loretta told Alexander.

Monáe attended F. L. Schlegle High School, where she continued to act. She and her friend Kinshasa Smith formed a singing duo; they won talent shows and played open mic nights at Kansas City haunts like the Blue Room and the Gem Theater. By the time she graduated, Monáe wanted to be on Broadway. She auditioned for the American Musical and Dramatic Academy (AMDA) in New York City and won a scholarship. There, she studied with vocal coaches and took classes in tap, jazz, and ballet, but soon became disillusioned with the future she saw before her. “I would go and watch the Broadway shows, and I’m African-American, and it’s sad, but you get typecast,” she told Nadia Pflaum for the *Kansas City Pitch* (4 May 2006). “So you go to an audition, and they go, ‘Oh, it’s an African-American girl.’ You have *The Lion King*. You have *The Wiz*, if it came back out. *Aida*. Those roles are cool, but so many people have done them. So what’s new?”

WONDALAND ARTS SOCIETY

So, Monáe made a risky decision. She dropped her scholarship, packed her bags, and headed to Atlanta, Georgia. She was partly inspired by the band OutKast, who

got their start in the city. She moved in with her cousins and then into a boarding-house, and worked at Office Depot. Monáe began performing at Clark, Morehouse, and Spelman universities. “I literally did dorm room lounge tours,” she told a reporter for the *Soul Train* website (18 Sept. 2012). After many months she recorded the songs she had written and, with a little money from her mother, pressed nearly two hundred CDs. To her surprise and delight, she sold them all at her next show.

During her college tours, Monáe met a number of like-minded artists including writer/producers Chuck Lightning and Nate Wonder. “It was a Matrix moment where we all locked eyes and it was almost like we were meant to be on the same team,” she told Dorian Lynskey for the *London Guardian* (26 Aug. 2010). “We wanted to create a different blueprint.” Together, the group—which includes visual artists and graphic novelists—formed a collective called the Wondaland Arts Society. The group also formed a record label of the same name.

One night, Monáe performed at an open mic at a now-closed club called Justin’s owned by Sean “Diddy” Combs. She sang Roberta Flack’s “Killing Me Softly” and received a standing ovation. Monáe did not realize it while she was performing, but rapper and producer Big Boi was watching her in the front row. When she left the stage, he grabbed her arm and told her that he wanted to sign her to Purple Ribbon Records, his new label. It was an offer any nineteen-year-old aspiring star would kill for, but Monáe was cautious; she did not want to jeopardize the control she had over her creative future. She eventually signed onto the label after she had explained her larger vision and asserting that she and Wondaland would remain firmly in control.

Monáe’s first introduction to a larger audience was in 2005 on the Big Boi produced compilation *Got Purp? Volume 2*. He included her song, “Lettin’ Go,” which she wrote when she got fired from Office Depot after responding to an e-mail from a fan. In 2006, OutKast featured her on two songs on the *Idlewild* movie soundtrack. Through it all, Monáe was honing her image and enjoying a growing fan base on Facebook and MySpace. Diddy himself contacted her through the latter, eventually signing her to a distribution deal with his own Bad Boy Records. He later said that it was one of the most important signings of his career.

METROPOLIS

In 2007, Monáe cut her first EP: *Metropolis: Suite I (The Chase)*. Several record executives suggested changes to the seven-track album, so Monáe and Wondaland decided to release the album themselves online. “The record execs were not connected to the people,” she explained to Lynskey. “They didn’t know, they still don’t know, what the people want.” Monáe was rewarded for her diligence and was nominated for a Grammy Award for best urban/alternative performance for the song “Many Moons” in 2008. For the album as a unit, she was inspired by the silent German film *Metropolis* (1927), directed by Fritz Lang, which takes place in a future society sharply divided by class. “I started noticing similarities between the characters in the movie and myself, as well as the environment that I grew up in,” she told Brian Davis for *Concrete Loop* (5 June 2006). “In the movie you have the

'have's,' who live this good and care-free life and then on the opposite side, you have the 'have-not's,' who are kept underground and struggle to rise to the top." Monáe is not the first artist to illustrate present-day problems, particularly the oppression of African Americans, with science fiction scenarios. She is inspired by the work of Afro-futurists like jazz impresario Sun Ra.

Monáe was also inspired by the 1932 Aldous Huxley novel *Brave New World*, as well as the work of science fiction writers like Octavia Butler and Isaac Asimov. But after *Metropolis* was released, her narratives broadened and deepened to include the paintings of Salvador Dali and visions from her own dreams. Often times, Monáe would wake in the middle of the night to record bits on her iPhone. Her process can sound a bit mystical at times—she says she “sees” songs in colors—but was certainly methodical about the music that would be included in *Suites II and III*. Even after the buzz she received from her Grammy nomination, Monáe wanted to take her time creating. “My goal was not to become an overnight success,” she told Bernadette McNulty for the London *Daily Telegraph* (26 June 2010). “You have to be ready and prepared and I took the time to complete my album and grow, to fully understand my purpose as an artist and to hone my craft.”

“THE ANDROID HAS LANDED”

The time she took completing *The ArchAndroid (Suites II and III)* with Wondaland certainly paid off. In his review, Seth Colter Walls of *Newsweek* (7 June 2010) called Monáe “a singer so exciting that writers are flipping deep into their adulation thesauruses looking for new ways to express the opinion.” The eighteen-track album is a wild journey through a landscape of funk, pop, hip-hop, psychedelic rock, soul, jazz, R & B, and folk, with a touch of Broadway as well. But the record flows together almost as one seventy-minute track though it includes cameos by Big Boi, Of Montreal, and Saul Williams. She even samples composer Claude Debussy’s “Clair de Lune.” She calls the concept album as an “emotion picture,” and the album has lived up to that description. *Pitchfork*’s reviewer Matthew Peretua wrote (20 May 2010): “The first listen is mostly about being wowed by the very existence of the fabulously talented young singer and her over-the-top record; every subsequent spin reveals the depths of her achievement.”

ArchAndroid was released on May 18, 2010. That night Monáe appeared on the *Late Show with David Letterman* performing her hit single “Tightrope.” A rarity for late night musical performances, *Pitchfork* wrote a separate article about it, labeling it a must-see. Decked out in her uniform, Monáe wailed and moved like a petite James Brown. Backed by a full band, she showed off her signature

“I want to redefine how a woman can dress, how she can wear her hair. It’s sad when you feel you have to change who you are to get your voice out there. We can have a better, happier society when people are accepted for who they are.”

one-legged mashed potato in her saddle shoes, proving that she was a performer to be reckoned with. At the end of her performance, Diddy came out from backstage and bowed at her feet.

ArchAndroid was nominated for a Grammy for best contemporary R & B album in 2011; “Tightrope” was nominated for best urban/alternative performance.

ARTISTIC AND BUSINESS PURSUITS

Monáe is currently working on the fourth suite of *Metropolis*, as well as a Wondaland Broadway musical and a graphic novel. In addition to her musical projects and performances, Monáe’s appearances as a spokesperson have kept her busy. In 2012 she partnered with the digital company Sonos to appear in its commercials; she became a spokesperson for Cover Girl cosmetics that year as well. She has also appeared in commercials for the Gap clothing retail store and for Coca-Cola.

PERSONAL LIFE

Monáe frequently wears a variation on a fitted black and white tuxedo—an outfit she calls her uniform. The look is inspired by film star Marlene Dietrich, but the consistency with which she wears it is a tribute, she told Rebecca Milzoff for *New York Magazine* (16 May 2010), “[to] my mother, who was a janitor, and my father, who drove trash trucks. It pays homage to how they put on a uniform every day and turned something into nothing.” Her job might be more glamorous, she adds, but she does the same. Her signature up-do hairstyle is similarly consistent. “Some people call it a pompadour or a wompadour,” she told Milzoff, “but it’s a Monáe.” Her androgynous uniform is more than a fashion choice. She has said that she wants to show young girls that they do not have to dress a certain way to be cool. “I want to redefine how a woman can dress, how she can wear her hair,” she told Kot. “It’s sad when you feel you have to change who you are to get your voice out there. We can have a better, happier society when people are accepted for who they are.”

The uniform also fits neatly into her larger concept, the science fiction scenario that drives *ArchAndroid* and *Metropolis: Suite I (The Chase)*, as well as the persona of time-traveling android Cindi Mayweather. Monáe also, for better or worse, is known to keep up the Mayweather story in interviews. She told McNulty of her timeless tux: “I am a time traveler so I don’t want my clothes to date me.”

Monáe is also unapologetic about her political beliefs. She recorded a public service announcement about healthcare and education during the 2008 presidential election, and has performed at several campaign and White House functions for President Barack Obama in the past. She also hopes to open a performing arts school for disadvantaged youth in Kansas City in the future. As far as her romantic life, when asked about dating—several reporters have asked if she was gay—she told one reporter that she dates only androids.

SUGGESTED READING

Alexander, Danny. “Janelle Monáe’s Roots in One of Kansas City’s Most Historic—and Troubled—Neighborhoods.” *Kansas City Pitch*. Kansas City Pitch, 21 Oct. 2010. Web. 19 Mar. 2013.

Davis, Brian. “CL Exclusive Interview with Janelle Monáe.” *Concrete Loop*. ConcreteLoop Media, 5 June 2006. Web. 18 Mar. 2013.

Kot, Greg. “Janelle Monáe, the Interview: ‘I Identify with Androids.’” *Chicago Tribune*. Tribune Interactive, 26 May 2010. Web. 19 Mar. 2013.

Lynskey, Dorian. “Janelle Monáe: Sister from Another Planet.” *Guardian* (London). Guardian News and Media, 26 Aug. 2010. Web. 19 Mar. 2013.

McNulty, Bernadette. “The Android Has Landed.” *Telegraph* (London). Telegraph Media, 26 June 2010. Web. 18 Mar. 2013.

Pflaum, Nadia. “She’s On It.” *Kansas City Pitch*. Kansas City Pitch, 4 May 2006. Web. 19 Mar. 2013.

Walls, Seth Colter. “Pop Goes the Art House.” *Newsweek* 7 June 2010: 52–53. Print.

—Molly Hagan

Matt Mullenweg

Born: January 11, 1984

Occupation: Internet entrepreneur and web developer

Based on his background and childhood, it seems as if Matt Mullenweg was born to be an Internet mogul. The son of a computer programmer, Mullenweg developed a fascination with computers from a very early age and wasted no time in pursuing his newfound interest. From the time he was in middle school, Mullenweg was already knowledgeable enough to volunteer his services as an amateur computer repairman and had begun to tinker with programming. Just before finishing high school, Mullenweg got into the new field of blogging as a way to share his photography hobby with friends and family. This decision put him on the career path that led to him becoming one of the world’s leading Internet entrepreneurs and a multimillionaire businessman.



AFP/Getty Images