

FOR LEIKELI47, PRIVACY IS PREFERENCE AND ACCESS IS A PRIVILEGE

“With the mask, you have no choice but to look me right in my eyes if you really want to know who I am.”



Louis "Panch" Perez

BY STARR ROCQUE

CULTURE

APRIL 20, 2022

Leikeli47 is in company with an elite group of rappers like the late MF DOOM and CASisDEAD who wear masks for a variety of reasons. When you are a part of such a distinguished collective, the mask becomes part of your allure. In Leikeli47's case, she wears a mask at all times because she's shy, and as a tool to encourage people to focus on her art. As I sit inside Champs Diner, a popular vegan eatery located in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, preparing for her arrival, I wonder what today's look will be, since she always coordinates masks with her outfits. When she arrives, the multi-hyphenate musician is low profile, wearing mostly black with some pops of white here and there — including a black and white custom Celine track jacket and a Celine ring from her recent collaboration with the brand, a gold two-finger name ring perched on top of neatly manicured fingers, two gold chains with respective prayer-hands and globe pendants, and a black Nike hijab.

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She doesn't order any food, nor does she drink any of the water that was placed on our table

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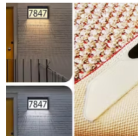
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and it clicks that it's early afternoon in the middle of Ramadan. I ask the obvious question about her religious practices and learn that she is Muslim, but she prefers not to talk about her religion. As for today's facial wear, it's form and function: she is double-masked with a black surgical mask on the bottom, and a black cloth mask by Patta, a black-owned Dutch streetwear brand, on top.

Her smiling chestnut-brown eyes convey a vulnerability that reveals another layer to her public persona. She is the rare artist who doesn't engage on social media beyond sharing her art, and even her own family and inner circle have only been privy to information on a need-to-know basis. When her career first began to blow up in 2017, many of her relatives didn't know that they had been hearing her songs in popular TV shows like *Insecure* and *Grownish*, or that she played festivals and arenas with the likes of Pharrell and Diplo. They know by now what she does for a living, but Leikeli47 still embraces sharing on her own time, even in a world that demands everything right now.



"I don't have to share everything, but I'm here. I'm always going to be here and I'm willing to grow that organically," she says. By way of a metaphor, she paints a picture of people using planes or helicopters to rush to the rooftop of a building, while she prefers to take the stairs. "There's that person that's just, one step, two step, and they're enjoying every moment of that journey they get to take to the top. It's fun. It's hard, but pushing yourself is how you learn how to be there for yourself."

This phase of her artistry and humanity is about honoring how far she has come, as well as her commitment to continued personal evolution — all of which affect how she shows up in her music, in person, and how she uses her mask beyond its surface aesthetic.

"You see how I came in here and just sat down and started talking? Once upon a time that wasn't doable for me," she says. "I am shy, but the mask has helped me to see people in a way that I want them to see me. With the mask, you have no choice but to do the human work, the heart work, and the brain work. You have no choice but to look me right in my eyes if you really want to know who I am and see my humanity."





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When it comes to her backstory, Leikeli47 is selective with what she shares: she was born in Virginia and later moved to Brooklyn, New York, but has also lived in other places that she doesn't reveal. She was raised primarily by her grandparents and sometimes her mother, and she was the youngest child, but she keeps her number of siblings private. But she speaks much more openly about her music. Her new album *Shape Up*, due for a May 13 release, is the final installment in a trilogy of LPs from the same storyline that started with 2017's *Wash & Set* and was followed up by *Acrylic* in 2018. On the surface, it's a collection of upbeat, genre-bending, ball culture-ready tunes that celebrate sass and self-assurance; but on a deeper level, it emphasizes the importance of Black safe spaces during a time of societal chaos.

"*Wash & Set* is a celebration of new growth — it's about not looking like what you're going through. With *Acrylic*, I really wanted to invite people into *our* spaces but I wanted to do it honestly. I wanted to showcase the beauty of where it is that we come from," says Leikeli47. "*Shape Up* is about the confidence I was fighting for. I used to have a certain perception of what confidence was, and that definition was never attractive. It doesn't have to be that I'm better than you. There's a balance to it. There's a way to be cocky and say 'I am better than,' but with love, and without seeking validation."

In an age where the concept of being better than someone often means making more money than the next person, being famous, or having more social media followers, Leikeli47's evolution is more about competing with herself.

"I've always wanted to be better than myself. These are things that *Shape Up* has helped me come to terms with," says Leikeli47. "A shape up might be the last thing you get after your hair is done and you go out, [but] before you go out into the world fully, you gotta be shaped up mentally and physically. ... I want people to hear this album and not be scared to be their 100 percent selves."

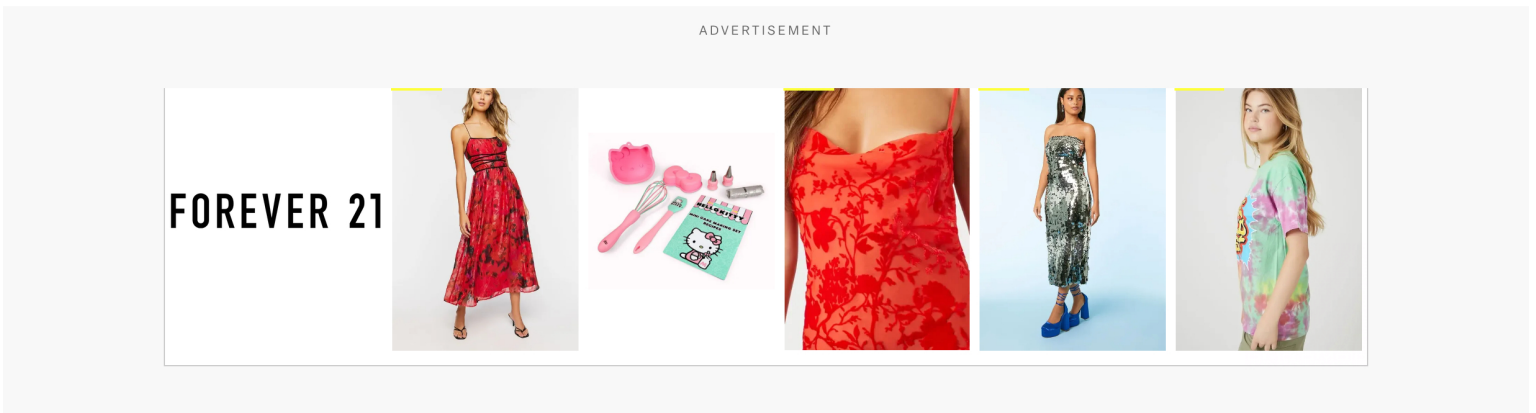


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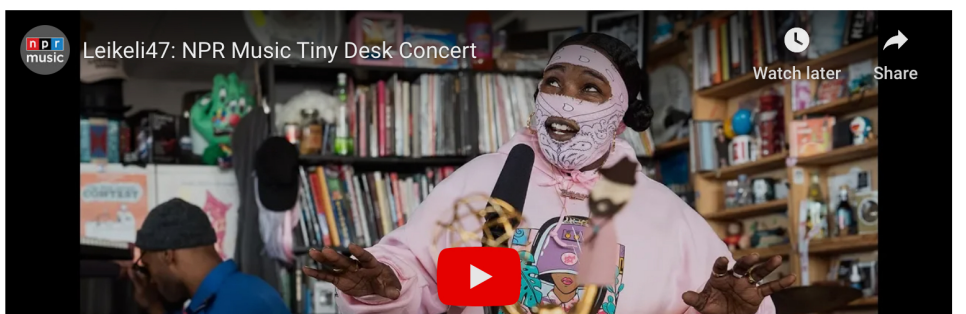


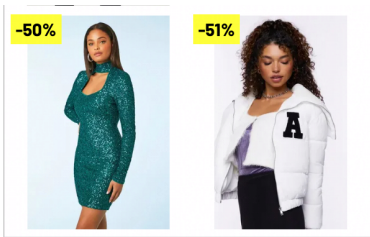
Shape Up is executive produced by Leikeli47's cousin and long-time collaborator, Harold Lilly (who has written songs for Beyoncé, Brandy, and Zayn Malik). Leikeli47 also flexes her usual writing and production skills in conjunction with other people she has worked with for years, like her co-captain Mike Barney, Bah (who has worked with Play and Lucky Daye), and more. The album's first three singles include "Chitty Bang," which was released in January, and featured in an iPhone 13 commercial and *EA Sports' Madden NFL 22*; "LL COOL J," short for "ladies love cool jewelry," which highlights 47's love of Black hip-hop fashion with nods to bling, white tees, and features a video cameo by Jordan designer Aleali May; and finally, there's "BITM," short for "bitch I'm the man," driven by a vogue-inducing beat ready for the ballroom.



She lights up when I ask her about "Jay Walk," the only guest feature on the album. It's another anthemic tune that's heavy on the boom, in honor of Miss J Alexander, runway coach extraordinaire. He can be heard discussing his influence on fashion throughout the song, and also encouraging *the girls* to own the room. Leikeli47 is cosigned by heavyweights like Jay-Z, Diplo, and more, and the stories of how she learned that any of these people admired her are always serendipitously organic. However, being singled out by a fashion icon at a New York Fashion Week event when you're new on the scene *and* keep your face covered is especially boast-worthy.

"He didn't know who I was, but he saw me and told me to come over. He said he loved my look and he told me 'pose like this,' 'I love this,' and 'don't do this.' He then said, 'Here's my number,' and we have been family ever since," explains Leikeli47. "I can't tell you what drew us to each other, but it was a beautiful thing. I wanted to highlight his contributions as a Black fashion icon, so that was definitely a fun moment."





As my time with 47 winds down, I try to get more cool stories out of her, or even bits and pieces of herself that she might be ready to share. She recounts performing “I Can’t Stand The Rain” in tribute to Missy Elliott, an artist she’s often compared to, at the 2018 Essence Women in Music event; while wearing a pink version of Missy’s classic garbage bag from the video. She shares that her stage name is a tribute to her two grandmothers, one who raised her and one she never got to know, and to the year that Jackie Robinson broke the color barrier in baseball. I eventually got comfortable enough to ask what her real name is — and that’s when her publicist, who had been quietly playing the background the entire time, perked up.

“I want to know, too, because even / don’t know,” he said.

Once my surprise wore off, I asked if her name was Hasben Jones since it’s the name I’ve seen consistently throughout her liner notes. It’s not. Hasben Jones is an alias. She did, however, tell us the first initial of her real first name, but off the record. Baby steps.