

PAPER

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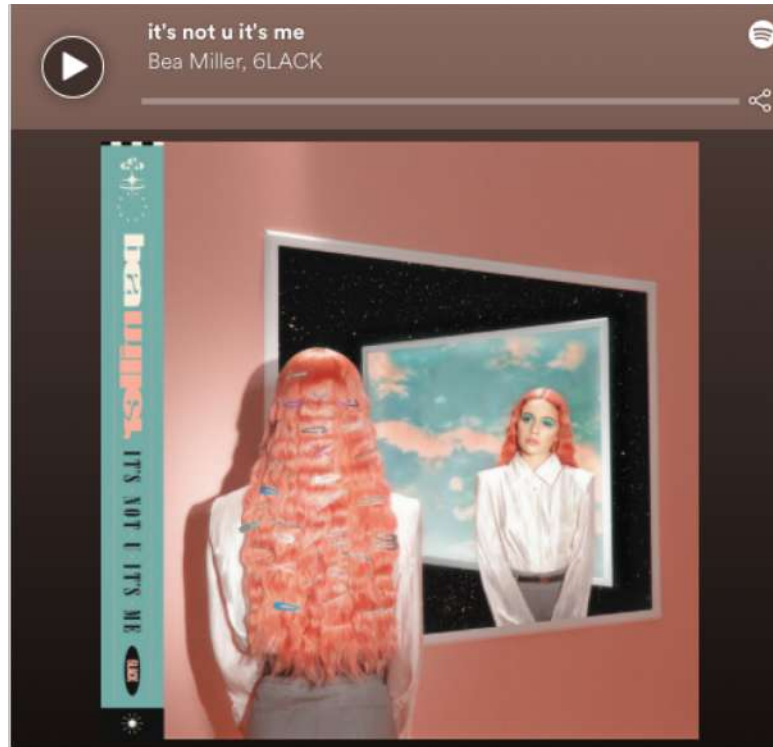


[Bea Miller](#) is the kind of young artist who makes you wonder why there are so many milquetoast industry plants drifting around in pop. Miller drifts nowhere. The 20-year-old force of nature and New Jersey-born daughter of two moms got herself onto the *X Factor* when she was 13. Seven years later, she's worked her way to writing and touring with her own brassy, exuberant bops, which balance sunny self-love and girl power, with vulnerable introspection.

Miller is almost upsettingly good at being a pop star: bouncing around stages in sparkly jumpsuits, never at a loss for words, keeping crowds hanging on every syllable of the honest, self-deprecating anecdotes she shares with every song. With her huge, throaty voice, she sings euphorically about masturbation, body positivity and not wanting to be someone's girlfriend, as well as about missing someone so much she can't breathe. Miller's songs take an optimistic but ferocious approach to the question of how it feels and what it means to be a young woman in 2019. Her incandescent attitude shines through on every song, including her most recent: a collab with 6LACK and irreverent self-love break-up song (in the spirit of "Thank U, Next) called "It's Not U It's Me."



Miller has had to fight to be the kind of gutsy, personality-driven pop star she's become. She spent her teen years instructed to sing generic love songs written by someone else, even though she begged to write on her own songs. But starting with her second album [Aurora](#), released last year (and she promises, to an even greater extent on forthcoming work) she's only singing songs that tell the truth. Following her sold-out show at Bowery Ballroom, *PAPER* sat down with Miller to talk about the journey of her career, prom, why the internet sucks, and the best advice Harry Styles ever gave her.



Do you get tired of being known for the *X Factor*?

Definitely. Those shows, they're good because they get people started — they got me started. But it can be really hard to separate yourself from them. It's difficult to be known for being on the *X Factor*, rather than what I've done after. Sometimes, it's a little brutal, like "I work hard. I wrote the song, and I did this thing and that performance. Why can't we talk about these things?" It was already seven years ago for me. It's definitely gotten better, now a lot of times people don't even bring it up and I'm just known for what I'm doing now. I definitely, definitely learned things there that were helpful when I was like, 13 or 14. But now that I'm older, and I've been doing this for a lot of years. I don't feel like super attached to it anymore. But obviously I wouldn't be here, if I hadn't done it, and I understand that.

You were 13 when you competed on *X Factor*. You're 20 years old now. What have been the big moments in between?

When I was 13 was when I was on *X Factor* and my vocal chords hemorrhaged so I had to be sent home. That's when one of your vocal chords, splits and starts bleeding, it's really brutal. I went home, I couldn't speak for a month, I couldn't do anything. I couldn't sing, hum, whisper, talk, do anything. I went to school with a whiteboard and I had to answer questions that way. So I healed and recovered, and got signed to label. I was 14 when we moved to California. We didn't have any money, so we lived with my uncle in Huntington Beach, which is like an hour and a half away from LA. That was rough having to drive to LA and back every single day.

So that was when I was 14, then, you know, between 14 and 15, I was recording my first album and just meeting people and running around going through the motions, trying to put myself out there and make myself known. I was young and really didn't know what's going on. One day I was this girl doing nothing in New Jersey and all sudden I was in California in studios and working with important people.

"You just gotta pay your dues."

Was retaining control over your work and image difficult, starting so young in the industry?

On my first album, it was difficult. I had just turned 15, I was totally new to the music industry. My team essentially said, "We've been doing this for longer than you, so we know what will work and what won't. And we want you to record the songs that these writers wrote that we think are hits." I was a very feisty 15-year-old, so that made me really upset. I was really angry and aggressive, I cut off all my hair, dyed it blue and was like, "Fuck you world." I was a very angry kid. I gave them a lot of of pushback, I really fought them on that and was like, "I'm going to write my own songs." I don't want to say somebody else's words. Eventually, we reached a compromise, where I told them I would sing songs that other people wrote, but only if I actually relate to them, only if I could really see them, as if they were my own truth. It was like I'm not gonna lie to people. Because it felt like lying to sing songs I didn't write. I was like, "I'm at least going to sing ones that hit me, that I understand and I can truthfully sing. And, I was like, "I want to write the next one," and they were like, "If you do this first album and listen to what we say, you can do what you want moving forward." Like you just gotta pay your dues.

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Since then, you've released your second album, *Aurora*. Did your label keep their word on letting you write it?

They kept their word on that. It's really cool, they really let me do what I wanted to do for the second album. I didn't really believe they would, but they meant it. I wrote the songs, I told them who I wanted to work with and who I didn't. There's only one song on all of *Aurora* that I didn't write. We were like, "You know what, this is a cool song. Let's just throw it in there." But every other one came from my brain. I had never fully been able to express my personal truth until then.

You moved to LA when were in middle school. Did you get the chance to go to high school?

I went to high school, but just for my mom, I really didn't care. I think it's important to stay in school, if you want to do something with your life that requires a deeper education. But I knew that I wanted to make music or movies or you know, do something... I actually wanted to be a director when I was a kid too. I knew that I was going to do something where I didn't need to know trigonometry. So I was like, "Mom I don't need to do this." Like, I already can pay my bills, dude. And it kind of crushed her. She wasn't like, "You have to do it. I just want you to graduate high school. It's important."

"I knew that I was going to do something where I didn't need to know trigonometry."

Do you ever wish you had the full high school experience? Prom and cafeterias and such.

I actually did go to prom! It was very important to me that I went to prom, even though it's stupid. I'm just a very sentimental person. Like, it's pretty cool that I get to do something with my life that a lot of people don't get to do. I think there is something special about the things that *everybody* does. It sometimes makes me really sad that that I don't have a lot of shared experiences with other young people. It can be really alienating and lonely. I remember I used to watch all my friends together in school, interact, like they would all laugh about so many things I didn't know about. They were all together every day, experiencing things and all the same drama and the same teachers. I always really felt like I was on the outside. So it was really important to me that, if I wasn't able to have most of those experiences — have a tight knit group of friends that really understood me — I would at least get to do a few high school things that everyone gets to do, that everybody understands. So prom was just this one thing that I could do that made me feel like I actually went to high school. I forced one of my friends from middle school — his name is Lucas, still one of my great friends to this day. And I was like "Lucas, I don't care if you have a girlfriend, I don't care if you have some girl you're going to bring, you're bringing me to prom. You are obligated as my best friend to take me to prom because I need this." I said that when we were in like eighth grade and he actually did it.

Did you wear a designer dress?

No! It was just like sparkly, super corny, over-the-top prom. We got the corsages, we did the whole thing. I was like, "I gotta have this one dumb experience that everyone gets." I'm really glad I did it.



I'm always curious about this with artists and celebrities. What is your relationship to the internet and social media like?

I fucking hate the internet. I hate it. I'm an old lady and I don't know anybody else my age who agrees with me on this. But I don't like talking to people on the phone. I don't like texting people. I don't like facetimeing people. If I'm on facetime I'm just sitting there like, on the inside, I want to explode. I just want to put my phone down and go do something else. Anything else. I'd rather be sitting on my couch doing nothing, being in that moment doing nothing. I don't like any of that stuff. I don't like cell phones. I don't like always being reachable.

As an artist, I don't like the fact that the internet brings this mindset of "we know you." I think it's really weird that people who I've never met, think that it's their place to speak on my life. I won't go on Twitter for a few days and when I come back people will have tweeted at me like 1000 times, "Where have you been, how could you not be talking to us?" And I'm like, "I was out living my life." I mean, it's cool that you can connect with so many people from far away so quickly, just all the same time. But I think that we abuse it. I don't think we use social media platforms for their original purpose. It's about bragging, it's about pretending your life is better than it is, and making other people feel bad because their life doesn't look as cool as yours does. It's about nitpicking people's lives and finding things that you don't like, rather than about actually connecting or togetherness. People also just take it too seriously. I don't think it matters. Real life matters. Put your phone away and just like that, it's gone. It's gone in an instant. How can something really matter that much if it disappears that easily?

Do you think you'd be happier if it all disappeared?

I've always fantasized about being a musician in the '90s. Or the '70s, because that was a great time for music. Before you had to have a big following on a social media platform in order for people to care about what you're doing. Sometimes people even ask me about my following before they ask me about my music, and that's really sad. I think it's cool that I can talk to all my fans and my friends who live far away that easily. But people live without it, so I think we don't really need it. Sometimes I fantasize about what it would be like to make music in a time where music spoke for itself and Instagram didn't speak for it.

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You're on tour right now. What has that been like?

You release music and it's weird, because you write it alone and only one or two other people in the entire world heard it. And then you release it, and you see the streams going up and there are people out there listening to it. But it doesn't seem real until you are with them and they're singing the words. There are people the world listening to my song so many times that they know the words, that I wrote when I was just sitting in a little room. It really makes it feel rewarding. It really makes it seem important. It's a good feeling.

So, *Aurora* came out last year. What is inspiring you right now?

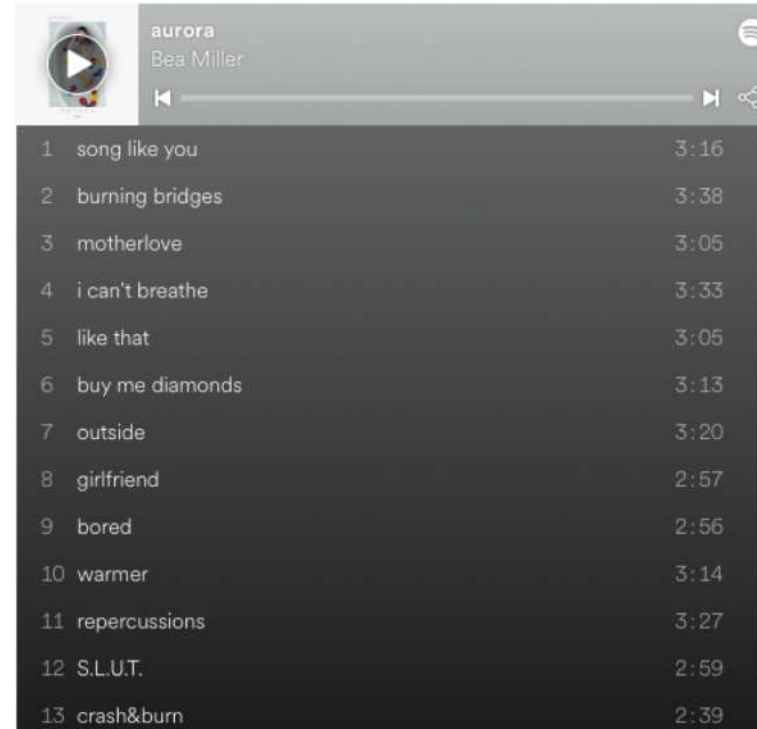
On *Aurora*, I was as truthful as I could be at the time, but I was younger. I wasn't as secure with myself. There were definitely a few things that I would cushion in my lyrics, where I would be extremely truthful. But I was also afraid of certain things. I was afraid of being 100,000%, literally word for word, what is going on in my life today. I would generalize it, I would speak my truth, but in a way that other people could insert their lives into it to where it wasn't super specific.

Pop is kind of this warfare between specificity and universality. How you kind of negotiate that?

With the new stuff, I still want to be relatable to people. But I'm being a lot more specific. I'm really proud of the music on *Aurora*, like I love it. It's not like I've gotten older and am like all that shit is corny. I'm really proud of that album. But I want to express myself even further for the new music. And when I was writing *Aurora*, sometimes I would ask my co-writer, I'd be like, "Is this too weird or specific?" If they were like, "Yeah, maybe," we would make it easier to swallow. With the new stuff, I'm working with people who want me to say exactly what I want, and they love it. I'll be like, "Is this too weird?" And they're like, "Maybe but, who cares? Let's just do it anyway." So with the new stuff that will be filtering in throughout the year, I've been telling specific, true stories about my life, which I don't hear very often in pop music. I always make sure the choruses are open-ended. But on the verses, I have the attitude, "You're a fan of me, you listen to my music, let me tell you a story about myself." I think some people will hate it. But that's fine, because there will be people will love it too. And I love it.

Do you read everything that's written about yourself?

No. Ohhhh no. The best advice anyone in this industry has ever given me is, not to read anything about yourself.



Who gave you that advice?

God I fucking hate saying this... because it makes me seem like a dick, but Harry Styles actually told me that. One Direction came from *X Factor UK*, so they came to our season. And I guess Harry just liked me, and he appeared in this hallway, like he came to say hi to me. Someone came to get me and was like, "Bea come here, Don't tell anybody." And then we walk into the hallway and Harry is standing there like, "Hey Bea!" It was crazy, it was really weird. That was a really crazy time in my life. But yeah, we spent quite a while talking and I think I told him — I was like, "I didn't know what I was doing — and I was like, "People just don't like my outfits, they don't like what I'm doing, they don't like my voice." And he was like, "Yo, never read what people say about you."

What's a question you get asked too much?

I get asked too much about other artists.

"I fantasize about what it would be like to make music in time where music spoke for itself and Instagram didn't speak for it."

Like who have you met, who do you want to collaborate with?

It's more like, "So you went on tour with this person? Is there any advice that they ever gave you that you can share with us?" I'm like, fucking ask them. I don't know!

Like they're fishing for a story about you and Selena Gomez or something?

Yes exactly! They want to find something where they can make the headline of the interview like "Selena Gomez said this to Bea Miller," and I'm like, "I don't know, y'all can talk to her"! Sometimes I feel like people just want to interview me just to get information about someone they care about more, which sucks... it's not a good feeling. I haven't gotten questions like that in a while, now that I'm doing my own tour, and my own thing. I get it, I'm not the most successful artist in the world. But it used to really bother me when that happened, I'd be like, "I'm here, ask me something about me!"

What's a question you wish people would ask you?

"How are you doing?" Nobody ever asks just, "How are you?" and actually wants to hear the real answer. I think a lot of artists and a lot of people need to be genuinely asked how they're doing and given the freedom to tell the truth in their answer.

Photos courtesy of Charlotte Rutherford