

Mama Duke Musician Profile for Music Journalism Class

Two years ago, Mama Duke says she felt exhilarated: her entertainment career in Austin boomed seemingly limitlessly.

The rapper and songwriter says stage lights blinded her night after night when she performed her original music for Austinites. But that's not all Kori Mykel Roy used her skillset for in 2022.

Roy's effervescent and joyous personality began to set her apart from other local acts, giving her opportunities to hold a microphone and charm guests in animated voiceover gigs, hosting events and panels.

"The moment I was like 'she's here', was when I started getting booked for these other things [besides rapping]," she says. "But... that's when I got lost in the sauce."

The 37-year-old says she could merely talk to people for the same amount of time, work and money as a 45-minute musical performance she put hours of dedication into. Although fun, she says these gigs distracted from the calling she felt since middle school: songwriting and rapping.

"I didn't want to rehearse, I didn't want to come do my songs anymore. I loved to just come kick it with people," Roy says. "But then you look up a year later and you're like 'Where the music at, though?'"

By 2024, she wondered if fans felt Mama Duke to be unable to catapult beyond Austin. At this point, her debut 11-song LP, *Ballsy*, already celebrated its fourth birthday, released mid-pandemic.

That's when she says, while backstage when performing at Austin City Limits Music Festival this October, her iPhone vibrated in her pocket. A representative from a national network talent reality TV show spoke excitedly on the other line.

She's in, and filming starts in March.

"That lit a fire under my ass," she says. "That's when I was like 'Fuck these hostings, you've gotta get this bread.'"

This wide-scale opportunity prompted Roy's early November release of "Bloodstains": a catchy, moody pop beat paired with raw, techno vocals, creating a dark, yet danceable beat resembling The Weeknd's hits.

The songwriter says the emotionally-defenseless lyrics stemmed from poems she wrote in London two years prior while battling the heartbreak of a long-term relationship's end. She says she wanted to pair her vulnerable purge with edgy, dynamic production.

"I feel like I'm going to have to go commercial a little bit [on the show] and [perform pop] which is cool," she says. "But, you're not going to Google me [after this] and only bubbly shit comes up, because this is my core."

This core of hers festered and multiplied as the Austin icon grew up in South Texas, one of the only Black girls in a town "with more cows than people." A middle child of four, she struggled to navigate being what she calls "a triple whammy": Black, queer and female.

"I was in between worlds in a lot of ways," she says.

Rapping for her classmates in the 90s created a space for her to shine in school. The Palacios native says, with two feet planted on a rickety beige cafeteria table, wide-eyed kids surrounded her hanging on her every freestyled lyric as they tapped pencils to offer a beat. She says that attention fed her growing ego, leading her to start writing real poetic lyrics.

Jessica Hooper, the vibrant artist's current partner, met her in sixth grade and watched her artistry bloom since then even in love letters while they dated as teenagers.

"It's cool to watch her stories and the poetic nature she has brought to life in music for other people," Hooper says. "People fall in love with her."

When Roy moved to Austin in 2013 with her cousins in hopes of dedicating her life to music, club promoter and graphic designer Lolo Lavezzari spotted a Mama Duke on Instagram, rapping for her growing social media following.

"I reached out, and I told her even though I hadn't heard of her, everyone needed to hear about her," Lavezzari says.

She began to make flyers for and manage Roy, which helped Mama Duke gain traction in the Austin music scene, leading her to open up for hip-hop trio Naughty by Nature in her first performance for a crowd of about 3,000 people.

"Her lyrics are so dope and that caught me immediately," Mama Duke's first manager says. "I knew that girl was special and she has not disappointed. I'm waiting to be by her side when she gets nominated for a Grammy."

Roy attributes her success to innate uniqueness as a loud, confident woman songwriter. Still new and uncommon in the Austin rap scene, she faced struggles because of her standout qualities.

"You get on stage and guys are waiting for you to NOT be good versus being open-minded to you being good," she says. "I built this armor then that I've now learned to take off, because everybody's not out to get me."

Since Lavezzari's discovery, the performer's vivacious style made her a local household name. After the release of *Ballsy*, she won both Artist of the Year and Female Artist of the Year at the Austin Hip-hop Awards in 2021. Roy says she hopes with her upcoming television appearance, she can become recognized on a national scale.

"I want to be on for at least three episodes and we have viewings at Cheer Up Charlie's for all the queers to pull up," she says. "That's the goal: for my city to uplift me."

Hooper says Roy's laptop holds hundreds of files with gutting lyrics Hooper wishes could all be released. The Austin educator says she believes this upcoming television opportunity will broaden Roy's horizon to hopefully market some of her vaulted songs.

"She spreads into different aspects of music and art and my gosh, she lights up (a space)," Roy's partner says. "She makes everyone feel like they're the only person in the room."

The artist says her ability to work a room and make people laugh created space for her to expand into hosting to connect with the Austin community. Now, with upcoming network television on her radar, she hopes to keep doing all the things she loves, music included.

"If I just focus on music, I would excel in that, but I love doing all of this," she says. "In a year, I hope people can say that yeah, I dropped two singles, but I will also be the voice on Trolls 3 and wrote the song at the 52-minute mark. That's what I fucking want."