



Still from Beyoncé's 'XO'/Parkwood and Columbia



Vivian Lee
Apr 20, 2020



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COLUMNING | HERE IS A SONG

On the Songs That Make You Feel

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Still from Beyoncé's 'XO'/Parkwood and Columbia

COLUMNING | HERE IS A SONG

On the Songs That Make You Feel Strong

"Sexy Results" was my go-to walking anthem. If I was a baseball player, this would have been my entrance song.

This is Here is A Song, a column by Vivian Lee on music and culture.

I spend a lot of my time walking around with headphones in. At first, in early middle school, it was a tape player that I begged my parents to buy me when we were on our annual visit to Hong Kong. Then, it was an anti-skip CD player, designed to look heavy-duty with bright yellow clasps and a black rubber protection wrap.

When I graduated high school, one of my uncles gave me my first and only iPod. It was the U2-collaborated iPod, which meant it was black with the bright red wheel, and *all* of their signatures etched on the back. I was by no means a U2 fan then (or now). But my uncle thought the color combination was eye-catching and I am not one to turn down a free gift.

I took my iPod with me to college. Without fail, I would play Death From Above 1979's 2004 album *You're a Woman, I'm a Machine* at a certain moment so that, by the time I walked up the steps from my apartment to Ring Road, the main circular drag on campus, I would be walking to the song "Sexy Results," the last track on the album. I would then replay it over and over until I got to class. "Sexy Results" was my go-to walking anthem. If I was a baseball player, this would have been my entrance song.

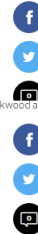
The bass line introduces the song. It hangs in the air, thick and loud. Sebastien Grainger whisper-sings in French and then the rest of the song kicks in. The song is flirty; it lays out different scenarios in which *sexy results* can occur. "Sexy Results" was also the complete opposite of me as a person. I was more or less an inexperienced square (I grew up very Catholic), but something about listening to the song, about walking to the heavy drum beats in-step across campus, made me feel like I could really take on the day. It made me feel sexy and strong, even though what that meant varied depending on my mood.

For a long time, I believed being "sexy" was being able to attract the attention you wanted just by your femininity—a femininity that was strictly binary and tied to sex and sex appeal. And because the feeling of being "sexy" was tied to this singular idea, I shied away from it because I grew up with virginity as a virtue. I grew up a child of immigrants not wanting to make waves, so I was ashamed of spending time even thinking about how I might go about projecting "sexy," since it would distract others from who, supposedly, I truly was.

Being "sexy" was only a secret *feeling* to me. I shied away from exploring what it meant to *be* sexy, to dress "sexy," to explore what my version of "sexy" could mean. I was embarrassed about how I could embrace this entire word.

Denying myself this exploration further complicated my relationship towards my body: an entity I purposely did not put much thought into until I had to. I am sure if you ask almost anyone, they would also say that they have a complex bond with their bodies. There are days when nothing feels or looks or acts right. My body aches when it rains, when I sleep in a weird position. Sometimes, a dress fits me super well. Then I wear it again a few months (or even just weeks) later and it becomes an alien thing on me.

But my biggest problem was how the world reacted to my body.



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Vivian Lee



On the Nature of



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I have been followed by strange men; groped by them; witnessed someone masturbating in front of me on the subway, on the subway platform, on the grass next to the Eiffel Tower; been catcalled and screamed at and threatened with rape. In elementary school, a stranger in my father's work building asked if I wanted to follow him to his office because he had candy. In middle school, another stranger on the street asked me if I wanted to get in his car because he had toys.

The space I take physically becomes more and more precious.

A few years ago, in an attempt to learn to utilize space and reconnect with my body, I convinced a few colleagues to take a Beyoncé dance class with me. Both “Countdown” and “Single Ladies” were full by the time we signed up, of course, so we decided to do “XO.” While we didn't expect a high-intensity workout, we thought the slow song would at least have easier choreography.

Our instructor was an effusive teacher, smiling at us through the floor-to-ceiling mirror, winking after every move. “It's a sexy love song,” he said to our group of twenty-something women wearing various athletic wear. “So you should channel sexy.”

My body went on high alert. I had been grappling with what channeling “sexy” meant for so long. Here I was, in a nondescript midtown building after work, having to figure it out in real time. I thought I had signed up for a workout class disguised as a dance class, a class to get my heart rate up while learning a few new dance steps—but this was something entirely different. This class was telling me to confront something I had tried to avoid for so long.

At the first notes of the song, I admired the women around me who fell into poses that I saw as feminine, beautiful, sexy. I had spent my entire life pretending I wasn't any of these things because I was too scared people would make fun of me for even trying to touch an idealized sense of power and femininity. I embraced the idea that I was Daria, that I was Lindsay Weir from *Freaks and Geeks*. I was just . . . not sexy.

While I realized no one was judging me in this studio—and our dance instructor kept reminding us we were here *for ourselves*—I had a hard time grappling with this concept anyway.

If you know me personally, you know I love a plan. So when we were taught the intricate hand motions in the choreography, I happily did them. There were steps, processes, a right and a wrong. However, the posing, the gentle elegance we were to exude, the slow, sensual walk towards the front of the classroom in time to the beginning of “XO”—I had purposely avoided doing all of it with the rest of the class, hanging behind.

In an effort to learn to take up space, I ended up shrinking. I was so worried people would laugh at me for wanting to embrace all of these things that I denied myself the pleasure of learning. I didn't even let myself look around and see if others were struggling, or were trying and decided to go for it. I didn't even try to see if anyone was *looking* at me to try to justify my worries. I just stared at myself in the mirror, motionless, robotic, nervously giggling to mask my unease.

Leaving the class left me with a lot of questions, but also a willingness to explore. I had started seeing a therapist at this time. She had made me try to reframe a lot of mental roadblocks and I realized this was another roadblock. While I cannot control how people react to my body, I could reframe how I moved in the world. I started to really think about what that meant in every interaction.

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Sometimes it was infuriating, like when someone renders me invisible in public—like when a man wouldn't move to give me space, making me walk on the road in traffic. Sometimes it was joyful, like when “Sexy Results” comes up on shuffle on my phone on my way to work and I think back at the pleasure of strutting on campus, stomping again in beat on the pavement.

There are many ways to demand attention, to be alluring, to embrace femininity and I am learning by example from my friends on how being sexy varies by person. As I get older, I am becoming more comfortable with what it means for me to be sexy because I have started to reframe it as an appreciation of how my body works so hard to keep me alive, to keep me moving, to let me dance in my bedroom, to walk for hours.

Recently, I have started swimming again. I like the gentle reminder of feeling all of my muscles working together to push me forward, inch by inch. I like feeling weightless, feeling all of my body. I

like to climb backwards into the end lane, letting my body adjust to the temperature of the water, letting my tight bathing suit relax just a little once it's wet. The only things I hear are my breathing and the splashing. The air changes when my head bobs in and out of the water.

I go in the morning when it's mostly senior citizens, mostly women. At that hour, the pool has a sort of hushed reverence about it. I am surrounded by bodies decades older than mine, bodies that have touched and seen and felt more than I have in my three decades on earth, bodies who have contended with the idea of power, movement, femininity, and sexuality far longer than I have.

Their bodies are soft, taut, mottled, spotless. They propel forward with more ease and certainty than me, a certainty I am slowly gaining. They swim, and I swim in tandem, in the next lane over.



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Vivian Lee is a book editor and writer based in New York. Her work can be found in The Los Angeles Times, Eater, The Rumpus, and more. Follow her on Twitter @vivianwlee or on the internet at vivianwlee.com.

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