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BRIANNA TONG

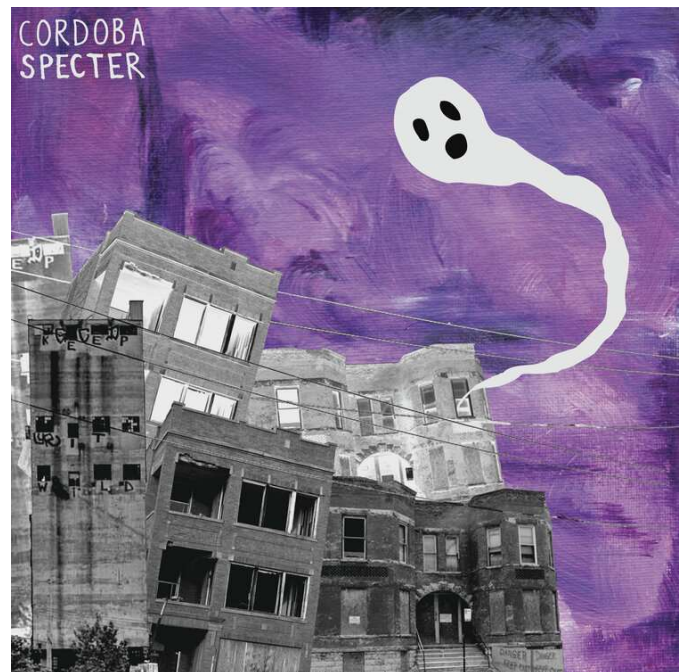




 : Sarah Elizabeth Larson

Multi-tasking is a way of life for Brianna Tong, the former community organizer turned librarian is a member of three bands, belongs to several organizations, and dabbles in crafts and graphic design in her down time. As the charismatic vocalist for

Cordoba, who released their debut full length *Specter* this month, after delaying the release due to covid, she was ready for the world to hear the record, “I was definitely excited to release this from our hands and let the world do what they will with it. It feels super good to have it out. We were playing these songs forever too. I think we recorded them last spring, but it might have even been before that.” A swirling haunt of



jazz laden tunes, *Specter* is a culmination of years of collaboration and hard work. Yet, covid hasn't slowed them down. "We've been writing new stuff in quarantine so I'm damn excited to think about the new songs."

As a member of Cordoba, Je'raf, and Bussy Kween Power Trip, protest music is at the heart of Tong's art; but it doesn't always come from a plain spoken place. "I lean more toward abstract lyrics. I used to listen to Circa Survive a lot, and they probably influenced that." And she has a tough time pinpointing where her poetic lyrics originate: "I feel like this varies all the time...I just write a lot of stuff sometimes, just random stuff that pops into my head, and go back through and sift through it.... I listen to Vocalo (91.1 on the radio) a lot and sometimes I'll hear a song, and won't even know who the song is by, but the lyrics are super dope and it influences how I'll think about lyrics next time."

Growing up in the suburbs of Delaware she was exposed to the music of Lauren Hill and Erykah Badu early in life and expanded into other genres, "I've been singing forever, and listened to a ton of different types of music growing up so there are all types of influences in there; from pop to, I would

listen to a lot of emo, punk, and metal to lots of R&B. A ton of stuff, hip-hop too.”



 : Kyle Land

After moving to Chicago to attend University of Chicago in 2011, Tong met bandmates Cam Cunningham and Zach Upton-Davis, “They were in a jazz band on campus...I randomly took a class from the jazz director, he’s a really dope musician, Mwata Bowden. Cam was playing in bands already with some folks, and I used to jam with them. Cam had met Zach through the jazz band. I started playing with them in 2013 maybe, or 2012. There were a lot of variations of groups of people we were playing with. Cordoba’s lineup was very different when we started.” Early versions of Cordoba slowly morphed into the tight sextet that is a fixture in the Chicago DIY and club scene.

Activism became a part of Tong’s life during school and led to a community organizer job after graduation, a position that furthered her multi-tasking expertise: “Organizing teaches

you a lot of different skills. Talking to press, doing graphic design, planning events, you get all types of experiences...like getting arrested for political reasons.” But after several years she grew disenfranchised with the non-profit sector, “Organizing jobs, every job, should be maximum forty hours a week. Especially if you are fighting for people to have better jobs, that are well paid and have benefits and shit. You should definitely be giving your staff clear hours and benefits and be well paid. The whole non-profit activism world can prey on people's drive to really want to do good. Make people work forever and burn them out really quick, which I saw happen a lot. And many of these orgs are still run by older white people, especially older white men, and all of the structural racism and sexism and classism we see out in the world pops up in the organization and that makes people leave and makes the organization not do the work they need to be doing. Sometimes you can get super tied to campaigns you are getting funded for so it's hard to stay tied to what's really going on.”

Tong grew frustrated with the way organizations have to scrape and claw to receive

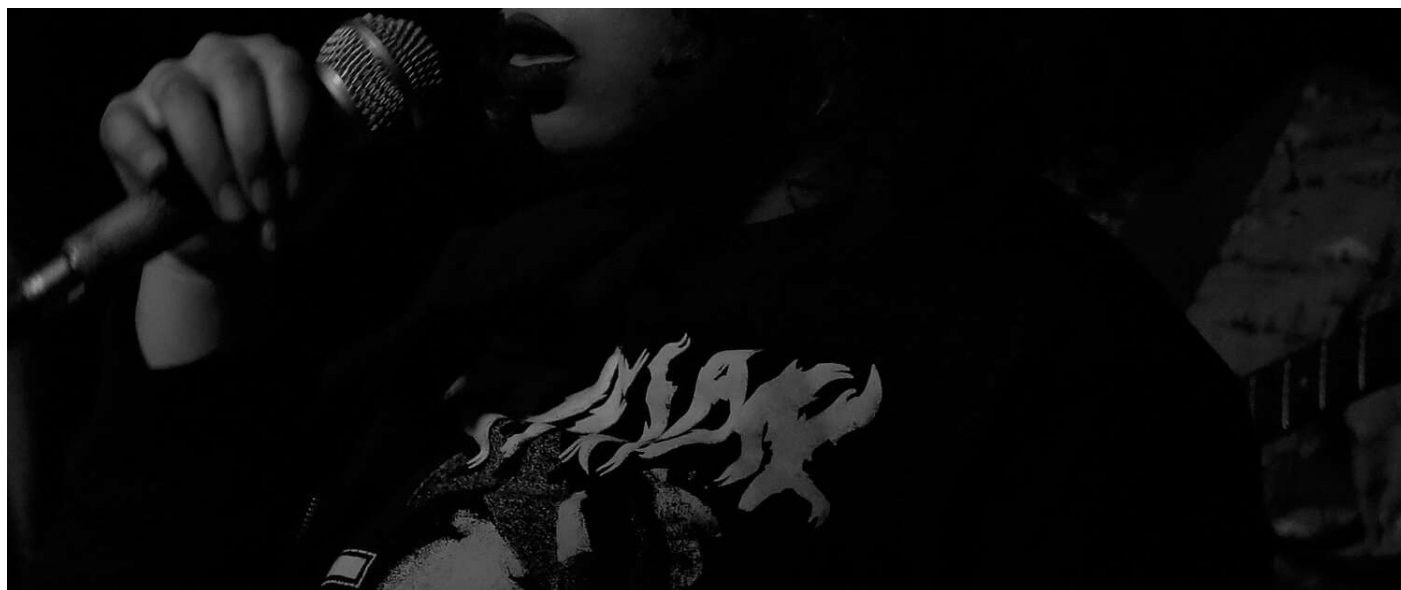


corporate funds: “The funding for a lot of organizations comes from large foundations. The way you get hundreds of thousands to millions of dollars is by being a rich person's family fund, or getting money out of corporations, but either way the money you are getting is probably controlled by people or businesses that do not have a real interest in structural change in our society or economy. That’s just one of the limitations, and it is what it is. There are ways we could do good work and use that money, but there are limitations there.” Though she still holds those that do the work in high esteem: “I obviously don’t want to say don’t get a check for organizing, cause it’s grueling ass work and I super respect that people can do that as a job, and we should have time for people to organize. But there are a lot of limitations that come from professionalizing organizing.”



 : Incandescent Audio





 : Kyle Land

Though protesting hasn't gone by the wayside, especially in the current movement. "I joined Black Lives Matter Chicago and got involved with some people I already knew from Chicago activism and organizing and some new folks, and got involved with a ton of different orgs and projects. Mostly my involvement recently has been going to protests and graphics. I'm still involved in a different way. My philosophy on organizing and how we change stuff has changed a lot." Something she saw reflected in the protests this summer: "I think in a way it's the broadest assortment of people who are doing things to fight the existing power structure and create a better world, a closer community, a place where people actually have the resources they need. People are doing all types of shit in service of that. There are a lot of ways to be

part of the movement. We might think of it as just people in the street marching in great numbers, but there are so many other ways. The mutual aid we saw start earlier this year is still going on, there is so much dope stuff in Chicago, is part of the movement too, actually providing our communities with stuff we need. Because we clearly see the government is not doing it.”

This summer also saw several prominent figures in the DIY scene be exposed for various allegations ranging from sexist comments to assault and rape. A subject that hits home for Tong and her bandmates, “It just sucks to see this in the scene where a lot of people have these values that ‘we don’t do that.’ We have a lot of men who would say they are aware of the problems of masculinity or toxic masculinity and still have this going on. But at the same time I’m not really surprised cause I feel like every scene deals with this. Even our scene where there are a lot of women and non-binary artists.” Though she admits it’s definitely a subject that



📷 : Kyle Land

should be addressed everywhere. “It’s hard to make rules and community agreements that actually change individual people’s behaviors. Especially behavior that mainly takes place in private. That’s just always been a question for me. How do we actually put an end to domestic violence and sexual assault, or abuse in any way?” A question she plans on addressing in the future: “It’s something we just have to fucking think about when we get back to playing shows.”

Then the election put some things into perspective for her, “I was really astounded at how many people in this country are super racist and down for white supremacy. Even if you think that’s not what it is, that’s what it is.” Like many, she finds the concept hard to accept: “We’ve had so much time in our lifetimes to realize who the fuck is running things and why we have the problems we do, and surprise, its not brown people and jews. It’s just not. If you don’t know that yet, I don’t know when you’re going to learn, maybe you won’t.”

However, Tong sees hope in the little things, “It’s really important to have things in life that bring you joy. I don’t know, it’s hard out there, I feel like everyone’s just like ‘take a bubble bath.’ But our world has caught fire, our country’s a trash heap

but what else can we do... We just have to take our little victories where we can, especially victories we've won in the street."

-Kyle Land

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