

**A**s career highlights go, this might have been a surreal dream: getting spanked on the bum by Madonna before 15,000 fans, then being rewarded, and told to improvise, with a banana. But the proof is there on YouTube, in footage shot at Paris's Bercy Stadium, a clip remarkable not just for its high entertainment value but for the poise, skills and good humour of special guest Héloïse Lettissier, aka Christine and the Queens, aka – as of the last few months – Chris.

"I was so impressed by this immense power Madonna has," says Chris, 30, of her 2015 cameo, made when on the brink of international fame, her cult status pounced on by the Queen of Pop, a notorious gatekeeper of hot new talent.

"I was terrified but I fed off the sensation," she continues, perched on a couch in the living room of her Paris apartment. "I could do nothing but surrender."

Fans of Christine and the Queens continue to surrender in increasingly large numbers, charmed by an audiovisual package that includes classy stage sets, a tightly choreographed ensemble of six dancers and fiercely catchy tunes sung, songbird-like, in English and French, and driven by synths, samples, Prince-style funk, a mission to interrogate gender and a love for Jacksons Michael and Janet.

"I am a tiny, horny, angry, nervous, joyful, wanting thing, full of desires I want to explore," declared Chris during her recent sold-out residency at London's Eventim Apollo, midway through a show she is bringing to Australia – including a headline slot at the WOMADelaide festival – next month. Between international smash hits such as *iT* ("I'm a man now," she sing-teases) and *Tilted*, with its sparkling flutes and mechanical breaths, Chris engaged in a spot of silent theatrics with her dancers, repeatedly failing to squeeze herself into their circle. "I've been trying to fit in, and it was exhausting," she announced, grinning, before flouncing away. "So I stopped trying. I feel much better now."

Lithe and handsome, given to wearing loose suits, flowing unbuttoned shirts and white socks-and-loafers à la Michael Jackson, Chris/Christine rode the Zeitgeist into a mainstream ready to consider notions of gender fluidity in ways previously dismissed as marginal, taboo.

Her electro-pop-laden debut, 2015's *Chaleur Humaine* (*Human Warmth*), was a freedom-loving ode to being yourself, presented by an artist whose own struggle with feelings of loneliness were laid bare, albeit leavened with a playfulness that included earwormy choruses and samples of Chaka Khan.

Chris was big in France for ages before the rest of the world caught on. Early EPs including 2012's *Miséricorde* and 2013's *Nuit 17 à 52*, along with support slots that invariably saw her upstage the main act, got people double taking. She scooped best newcomer awards. Her tunes crept up the French charts. Then came *Chaleur Humaine*, that spanking by Madonna (who she repaid by, er, jousting with aforementioned banana) and a decision to re-record her songs in English, in detailed translations that lost none of their poetic lyricism.

Then no one could get enough of the uber-talented French performer with the flashing eyes and floppy fringe. She appeared on Graham Norton and *The Tonight Show* and was recruited by Elton John to perform with him at the iTunes festival in London ("She blew me away not just musically but visually,"



# QUEEN *of* FRANCE

Classy stage sets, tight choreography and catchy tunes with lyrics about gender and sexuality are set to make Christine and the Queens – now just Chris – a WOMAD hit

WORDS JANE CORNWELL  
PICTURE JAMIE MORGAN

said Sir Elton, introducing, "she's an incredible artist who is becoming a global star"), duetting on John's classic hit *Tiny Dancer*. *iT* was played on the credits of an episode of the HBO comedy drama series, *Girls*. She sold a million albums worldwide. "This is a free zone," she hollered to the thousands dancing in the rain at the 2016 Glastonbury Festival, in a gig widely held to be superstar launching.

**F**ame, however, brought more isolation. And misunderstanding: Christine and the Queens was held up as a poster girl for the queering of the mainstream, as her honesty was appropriated, bent into other's agendas. She agrees when I call her a reluctant spokesperson. "You've just given me an image of someone mumbling into a mic and backing away," says the former introvert, laughing her ready laugh. "I guess I'm wary of being put under plastic as 'the gender girl'. As someone who is interested in queering things up. I think it's important to talk about these things but not to sugar-coat them for the sake of entertainment."

She pauses, sighs. "Sometimes interviewers don't even ask me about the music anymore. I just get personal stuff like, 'Okay, so you're a pansexual! Did you invent this?' And I'm like, 'Er, no. Maybe look it up?'" Another smile. "None of which is the point. The point is the bigger picture."

Fiercely intelligent, proudly non-binary, Chris/Christine described herself as pansexual – that is, attracted to people regardless of their sex or gender identity – in 2014. Released in September last year, her synth-laden second album, *Chris*, reinforced the inadequacy of labels, coinciding with a new shorn haircut and new abbreviated name ("A way of reaffirming freedom"), an alter-ego of an alter-ego she'd invented during a period of introspection and identity reconstruction while hanging out in London with a group of drag queens.

Back then Chris was in her early twenties: "Christine started out as a sad clown," she says. "I don't encourage you to watch early videos of me because they're a bit weird; me filming in my room in a black jacket with white face make-up on, sort of thing, or doing shows where I stop and stare at the audience for a minute in silence, which I guess was slightly creepy. I wrote the character before I did the music."

Chris grew up in Nantes on the French coast, the daughter of academic parents, music lovers ("Everything from Vivaldi to Joe Jackson"), who encouraged her to read, think outside the box.

"When I was 15 my dad gave me *Tipping the Velvet* – Sarah Waters' historical novel about a lesbian love affair – "which was clever since I was just starting to have girlfriends. It was his way of saying, 'It's okay'." She went out with guys now and then, reinforcing a later realisation that nothing is simple, and aged 17 fell in love with a woman and went about dressed like 18th century queen, Marie Antoinette. Theatre school in Paris was a natural calling.

Chris's voice is remarkable. Sweet and strong, with a lilting vibrato and apparent inability to hit a wrong note.

She is looking forward to visiting Australia, she says, though not to the lengthy flight. Still, even that has upsides: "I'm going to see if I can have an entire relationship on-board the plane: meeting someone, falling in love, the honeymoon period, the boredom, arguments, break up and recovery," she laughs.

"If there's one thing I've learned in life, it's that anything is possible." ●

**Christine and Queens play WOMADelaide March 8-11. womadelaide.com.au**