



KIMBERLY M. WANG

**Grammy-winning singer,
songwriter and actor
Dee Dee Bridgewater**

featured Lincoln. “Abbey told me she asked Fabrice during the interval about her cash payment. She’s onstage when he runs in carrying a wig. So she got her money. I bumped into her at the airport afterwards and she was like, ‘Dear God, Dee Dee, he robbed a bank today.’”

Apocryphal? Maybe. But the tale speaks to the larger-than-life characters who populated Bridgewater’s world. Born Denise Garrett in Memphis, Tennessee, and raised in Flint, Michigan, she was a “mischievous, rebellious tomboy” who grew up steeped in jazz thanks to her schoolteacher father, a trumpet player and radio DJ who nurtured her musical curiosity from the start. She fronted her school’s jazz band and, in New York, became lead vocalist with the hard-swinging Thad Jones/Mel Lewis Orchestra.

She sang, and clashed, with bebop pianist Horace Silver, and twice stood in for Lincoln during performances of *We In-*

sis! when Roach – addled and surly – confused her with his former wife. She shaved her head, a symbol of creative freedom, for the cover of her 1994 debut *Afro-Blue*, and again permanently in 2007.

Self-consciousness has never been Bridgewater’s style. At this year’s Grammy Awards she wore a silver bubble mini dress and custom-made glasses embellished with silver panthers – a reference, perhaps, to her early support for the Black Panthers, helping out with their free breakfast program for children in Michigan and covertly printing posters and flyers for their activities after arriving in New York.

“I love being a woman. I’m so into clothes that people look at my fashion and say, ‘Oh my God’. But I still kind of think of myself as a kind of boy,” she adds brightly. “I have no fear of men. I have no fear of going up to some man who’s six foot seven and putting my finger in his face and saying what I have

to say.” The shaved head that has become one of her signatures was, the second time around, born out of necessity.

“I had partial alopecia, and my band started telling me it was ridiculous, they could see right through my hair,” she says. “Anyway, it is totally freeing. I love that when people look at me, they have to look me in the eye.”

Especially now. “I was having a conversation recently with my daughter, China Moses, who is also a singer. We were talking about how men take things from women without crediting them. They won’t say, ‘Oh, Dee Dee did that’. They just never acknowledge us.”

Herbie Hancock, she says, is a case in point. The revered 14-time Grammy winner didn’t just invite musicians from Mali onto his cross-cultural 2010 album, *The Imagine Project*. He brought in Oumou Sangare and Toumani Diabate.

“Herbie hired musicians he heard in my band and on my albums. He literally called me up and wanted to know where I had recorded in Mali. But when he was asked about it later he said, ‘Oh, I’ve always been interested in West African music.’”

Her eyes flash. “Marcus Miller now uses some of the players I had on *Red Earth*, but you don’t hear him saying, ‘Yeah, I heard them on Dee Dee Bridgewater’s album.’”

Hancock and Miller might dispute that characterisation. Regardless, Bridgewater blames the patriarchy: “It’s so inbred from generation to generation. I just try and keep moving. I choose to be a positive person with a smile on my face, while at the same time going, ‘F..k you. We exist.’”

Another sigh. “You know, at this phase of my life, with everything I’ve done, and the fact people call me a legend, which happens when you’re still around in your later years, for me to make that statement and back it up by being surrounded by females is important. And goddamnit, you are going to pay attention.”

Such reminders are as vital as they ever were. As vital as when Lincoln sang “I’m a woman hard to handle/If you need to handle things/Better run when I start comin’/I got thunder and it rings” on her 1990 album *The World is Falling Down*. As when she made her oft-quoted statement: “The best thing you can do is to be a woman and stand before the world and speak your heart.”

“We were sitting together at a Grammys ceremony (in 1996), and neither of us won, and neither of us minded,” Bridgewater says. “Abbey said to me, ‘We don’t need to care about the Grammys. We just got to keep telling our truth.’”

“So, when I’m doing a song – her song, any song – I try to live in that space and tell the story so that people can feel we are being interactive with each other. When I’m doing a show with my ladies, the *We Exist* show, I’m talking about social inequity and doing protest songs. Songs of rebellion.”

At an age when many artists are content to celebrate the past, Dee Dee Bridgewater is still arguing with the present. ♣

Dee Dee Bridgewater will perform in Sydney, October 22; Melbourne, October 24; Perth, October 27.