

Veiled poetry

Leikeli47's rap masquerade



New balaclava, who's this?

BY HOWARD HARDEE

PHOTO COURTESY OF PHILIP-DANIEL DUCASSE

Leikeli47 keeps her identity secret. During public appearances, the Brooklyn-based rapper, singer, producer and director shrouds her face with a balaclava or bandana. She never divulges her real name to reporters. The mask creates a tantalizing mystery in the age of oversharing on social media, and she likes to play it up.

"I'm never going to give my magic tricks away," she told SN&R.

Concealing her identity not only allows Leikeli a private life outside of music, it also offers freedom from her own inhibitions, she said.

"I'm the shyest person in America outside of that mask," said Leikeli, who plays Harlow's in Sacramento on April 15. "My mask is like my superhero cape ... It's taking me across the world right now, taking me to places I only dreamed of. It's putting me in front of people I'd never even talk to, people who would probably never speak to me."

The mask is an extension of her Missy Elliot-esque style, on bold display in the music video for her 2018 single, "Tic Boom." She acknowledges the juxtaposition between emphasizing image and obscuring her own face, but said she doesn't see it as a conflict.

"I love fashion, but I love it my way," she said. "What I adorn on my face, to me, that is fashion. I'm stepping out to show people that they, too, can do it in their way."

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Leikeli47
rapper/producer

National audiences were introduced to Leikeli's clever flow and N.E.R.D.-influenced production style in 2017, when she released her major-label debut album, *Wash & Set*—the first installment in her three-album *Beauty* series. The series makes a point of normalizing symbols of black womanhood, such as the image of hands adorned with fake nails and big jewelry on the cover of her sophomore LP, *Acrylic*.

Leikeli is as outspoken as anyone on the cultural contributions of black women. The refrain in her single "Attitude" goes like this: "Kelis is God, so is Beyoncé /

Kelis is God, so is Leikeli."

Acrylic is a song-to-song demonstration of versatility. Leikeli seamlessly transitions from brain-frying future-rap to jazz, and from neo-soul to spoken-word poetry. She has studied artists ranging from Stevie Wonder to Tom Petty.

"There's something for everyone, because I never really looked at genres," she said. "I kind of blurred those lines early."

Acrylic also offers glimpses of what's behind Leikeli's mask. On the darkly hypnotic "Droppin'," her voice lowers to a vulnerable whisper as she tells a rags-to-riches story referencing "free lunch in the summers" and confesses, heartbreakingly, that "I'm the baby from the dumpster."

Leikeli said she's fine-tuning the third installment of the *Beauty* series and hopes to release it soon. Meanwhile, don't expect her to dramatically reveal her true identity and take full credit for her art. By removing the traditional beauty standards from the equation, she's allowing viewers to consider her music on its own merits—exactly as she prefers.

"It's a part of me, it's etched in my heart," she said of the mask. "It's my best friend. I will never, ever take it off."

Catch Leikeli47 on Monday, April 15 at Harlow's Restaurant & Nightclub. Show starts at 7:30 p.m. Yung Baby Tate opens. Tickets are \$18-\$23 via [ticketfly.com](https://www.ticketfly.com). 2708 J Street; [harlows.com](https://www.harlows.com).

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Leikeli47 is here