

Out

THE 100 ISSUE

**STARRING
SAM SMITH**

PHOTOGRAPHED BY
Terry Tsiolis



PLUS

Jeremy O. Harris

Ronan Farrow

Young M.A

Nicolas Ghesquière

Cecilia Gentili

Papi Juice

Lilly Singh

Shangela

Megan Rapinoe

Rebecca Sugar

Ts Madison

King Princess

Bowen Yang

Angelica Ross

Crissle + Kid Fury

Chase Strangio

Collier Schorr

Paul Mpagi Sepuya

+ The Trans Obituaries Project

The *Out*100 Evolution of the Year: Mx. Sam Smith

Our cover star opens up about anti-queer violence, mental health, and their new music in a revealing interview with ALOK.

BY ALOK - NOVEMBER 18 2019 7:11 AM EST

When Sam Smith debuted their video for “How Do You Sleep?” in July, the world caught a glimpse of a side the singer had long kept concealed: femme, dancing joyously, wearing heels, and being, well, free. It would take a few months before the Grammy Award-winning artist came out as nonbinary, revealing their new pronouns and showcasing themselves proudly to the world. But many people — including members of our own LGBTQ+ community — tried to discredit and devalue their newfound freedom. Luckily, Smith has spent the past year building a support group — a queer and trans chosen family who came to their rescue. Now, one of their treasured siblings, ALOK, chats with them about their process, their music, and the magic that’s coming next.



Time to Shine - Jacket by Balenciaga. Earring by BVLGARI.

ALOK: You said to me once that so many cis people have forgotten their own names because they have only been told that they are men or women. Can you elaborate?

SAM: Over the last seven months of really discovering myself, which you've been such a huge part of, I keep coming back to the fact that I am just me. I am my own person. In the words of Jerry Herman, "I am what I am. I am my own special creation." I just feel, looking around sometimes, that people are afraid of their individuality.

A: What do you think it is about us as nonbinary people that challenges others so much?

S: I'm very new to this, so I'm still figuring it out. I feel happier and more comfortable within myself when I'm wearing more feminine clothes, which I'm experimenting with more and more. When you're comfortable with yourself, I feel it threatens other people who are uncomfortable within themselves. How does it affect you that I want to be called they? Why does it affect you so much?

A: I think underneath the hatred is deep, deep pain. There's jealousy because we said we don't want that pain. We took steps to declare, "I'm not going to live in that pain." So maybe when they see us, they're thinking, "There's another way where I don't have to be this miserable." Maybe they're jealous of our freedom, and maybe they're jealous of our joy.

S: In changing my pronouns, I felt incredible freedom. It's like a brick was lifted off my chest, and with that freedom comes another kind of pain. Feeling this free in our skin is answered with abuse. And that's really hard. For the last year and a half, I've thought about changing my pronouns. I've always hid behind my "he, him" pronouns because I was too scared. I thought living a life playing pretend would be less painful than being authentic. But I'd rather be myself, even if it means being abused for it. I'd rather get all this shit for being myself than lie to myself. That's not a way to live.

A: There's something here about what it means to be an artist: If you don't access this truth, then you're not able to make creative work for yourself. It becomes for other people.

S: I don't think you can sing, write music, or make art without having an open heart. There was something blocking me when I was writing my last album because I felt like I was playing this "Sam Smith" character that I created. I was depressed because I was this person in suits who other people wanted me to be. I can wear a suit now, actually, and can feel completely different in the suit, but at the time I felt, *I've got to be butch for other people*. I feel my music suffered. I think people can hear that. As soon as I came out with "Promises" and "Dancing With a Stranger," I started playing. I started having fun. I started being myself. My art has become truer and more honest after coming to peace with being nonbinary.

A: I feel like you're playing with binaries more generally — like the one between fine art and pop. We've spoken a lot about how you don't feel like you have to compromise artistic integrity while existing in a pop space.

S: It's something that's been a fight within me for so long because I love all types of music. When I say that Britney Spears basically saved me as a kid, I'm not saying that lightly. Britney, Christina, Madonna, and Beyoncé — I believe their art is fine art. Pop music is fine art. My relationship with Lady Gaga when I was 15 was so powerful and strong. If pop music was so easy, everyone would be making it and have hits. To write a song that everyone can sing along to, that relates to a lot of people, that takes a lot of work. I do always want to try and walk the boundaries a bit because I've got such huge taste. I love folk music, jazz music, and soul music.

I love the muse side of each of those genres as much as I do the commercial, but I've been made to feel ashamed throughout my career for loving pop so much. This album is me basically telling everyone to fuck off. I'm trying to fly the flag a little bit and say that simple music isn't simple.



Feel the Beat - Left: Necklace by Cartier. Right: Blazer, pants, and shirt by Givenchy. Tie by Dior. Glove by Gucci. Hairclip (worn as brooch) by Simone Roche.

A: That's such a nonbinary frame because what you see is actually so much more tremendous than you might think.

S: But I had that with my first album, *In the Lonely Hour*. I'm in a suit and in that suit, I was channeling Judy Garland. I look back on those videos of me when I was 20, and I see a feminine energy. I was singing songs about a married man I'd fallen in love with, and we did not kiss, nothing happened between us, but I was so in love with him, and I was tortured. I remember releasing the album thinking that it would be heard in that way — that it was a queer record — but it wasn't taken like that. I've realized now that people weren't understanding me.

A: I think that what you're communicating with the world through your music is so beyond the body. Can you speak a little bit about your love of music? What does it mean to you?

S: I feel like my voice is genderless, and I've trained it to be that way. If you go into my library of music, I only listen to women. Music was that escape for me. When I was a child, I put in my earphones and I became the woman of my dreams a little bit. I came out when I was 10 years old, and music was my safe space. It was my sanctuary. Even in the playground, I would take myself off and just sit and listen to songs, and they would give

me the courage to walk back into those classrooms. And music still plays that role in my life today. I still get bullied, and it's still a sanctuary for me.

A: As someone who's watching you, I think that's where you're doing a lot of your emotional processing work.

S: If I find a piece of music I love, I wear it like it's a dress.



The Switch-Up - Hoodie by Balenciaga. Earring by Alan Crocetti.

A: I thought it was so special that you shouted out your nonbinary peers when you disclosed that you were using they/them pronouns. I think it's so important that we practice queer community actively by bringing other people into the conversation. With this new album and this new tour that you're putting together, how are you thinking about using your platform to provide a space for queer and nonbinary talent?

S: There are so many people that have come before me. There are so many people who have already been fighting so hard for so long. I feel I'm not at the stage to be shouting whilst flying the flag — it's not my place. I have so much more to learn and figure out along the way.

For years, my entire music industry surroundings and teams have been cis straight people. I've just been surrounded by straight people, and that made it very, very hard. They were all very accepting and loving, but I felt very alone. But now I've realized I need to have more queer people around me. It's so needed — it's mandatory. It's my aim right now because I don't have to feel this alone. Starting to dance on tour has been a way of reclaiming my queerness, and I'm going to make sure my dancers are all queer. Not only would having queer people by my side be amazing and comforting to me — the music industry as a whole is incredibly homophobic and transphobic, so I'm going to do my part to bring queer and trans talent up with me.

Sometimes I feel a bit bad about it, but I definitely did make a decision. I was 19 when I moved to London, and I got punched. I used to wear lots of makeup and female clothing, and I got punched by this man, and ever since that happened, I started to dress down. When I started to dress down, that's when my music career started to lift off, but I made a decision in that moment that I felt more comfortable and safer pushing myself to that male side, and it helped. It helped my music because I guess there was nothing polarizing about me in that album, so I could cross over to all these parts of the world that are extremely homophobic.



They Ready - Left: Top by Prada. Brooch by Cartier. Right: Coat, bag, and earring by Balenciaga. Hat and gloves by Gucci. Ring by Cartier.

A: How are you maintaining your mental health with all the pandemonium that's going on in the world right now?

S: First of all, the big thing that I'm doing now is recognizing that my breakdowns weren't breakdowns — they were breakthroughs. I'm trying to change the vocabulary. I've had to say "stop" at certain times because I'm a giver. I give, I give, and I give through music, through art, through performance — it's like a mass healing sometimes, you know? Sometimes, even yesterday, I felt like I was on the verge of having a panic attack. I feel very, very up and down still. I'm very privileged. I have access to therapy. I can go and see my family whenever I want. I'm my own boss in a way, so I can stop things when I need to. I know that the majority of people reading this cannot do that. And that's why I've found breathing is very important, because that's something we all can do. Just coming back to my breath, I think, is something that's really helped my mental health.

A: There are so many things that I love about you, but perhaps what I appreciate most is your honesty. What is your relationship with these new images that you are putting out into the world, these truths you are sharing? Do you just not give a fuck anymore?

S: I give a fuck. Oh, my God, I give so many fucks. I care so much, and I'm still like, "Oh, my God, I'm on the verge of a meltdown at all times." I go back to Brené Brown's words, which mean a lot. "Vulnerability is the birthplace of courage." We are vulnerable at all times as human beings. Society has turned me into a perfectionist in every way. I believed that I could achieve perfect happiness. I am now realizing that I will never reach it. I just believe that you have to find power and strength within your vulnerability, and that's what I'm trying to do. I might have a meltdown in a few weeks and have to come off Instagram for a bit, but I think being in the public eye and showing these ups and downs, showing a fluctuating body, all these things, it's important. I just want to be human. That's my aim now — to be as human as possible.

A: With all that's going on in the world these days, I've been thinking a lot about the importance of leaving legacy and ensuring that we won't be disappeared. What kind of legacy do you hope to leave to the world?

S: I just keep thinking about this one Bertolt Brecht quote: "In the dark times, will there also be singing? / Yes there will also be singing. About the dark times." I think if it came down to my legacy, I'd want people to think that I kept on singing. Singing through everything I've gone through until the day I fucking die, until there's nothing left in my throat that will come out. I will carry on singing.

Photographed by Terry Tsiolis

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Makeup by Frankie Boyd at Streeters using Pat McGrath Labs

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