



Jihae I must confess: before I actually sat down and interviewed Jihae, I spent a smoldering hot night with her. It was the first of those rare too-humid spring nights where you end up restless in bed, naked, hellishly close to the fan. I'm staring at Jihae on the screen, tears dripping down her face. Her lover with a bad blonde wig and awkward goatee tries to comfort her, gently wiping away her tears. "*I like to close my eyes and think of you,*" she coos in a trance-inducing lullaby. The *you* in the video for her song *is* her, as Jihae kisses the dragged-out hyper-macho extension of herself.





Jihae is undeniably alluring: long raven black hair, lithe body, Jaggeresque lips. A natural no-fuss beauty, just a touch of liquid eyeliner to accentuate her almond eyes that today are obscured by aviator glasses, and a blazer over a braless thin jersey. She has a Patti Smith vibe going on that would be intimidating if her smile wasn't so generous. I'm sitting across from her at a little French creperie in Chelsea, and bashfully admitting to my stalking ways. I ask her what she thinks makes a woman sexy. *"Fearlessness, a woman comfortable in her own skin."*

"I shed some skin—literally and metaphorically," she continues referring to her shoot for *25*. While happy with the results, she was at first conflicted to pose in some of the more risqué items, doubting it represented her properly. Her video for "Black Pearl" was there to tell a story, and its sexiness was just an addendum to that. *"You can take those clothes and put them on someone and make them look skanky, or put them on with the right person shooting and make it powerful, it's a fine line to walk."*

Jihae could have been a model; in fact, she was for a moment, and will still dabble if she feels the project has merit. Scouted in Atlanta while still in college for a degree in political science, her agency wanted to send her to London. But Jihae had fallen in love, and instead followed her heart to New York. While the romance didn't last, her love affair with New York stuck, and it is home to this day. Unfortunately, upon her arrival the agency already had two Asian models, apparently their maximum quota. She parallels the absurdity of that with the fact that her sister, a doctor who graduated from a top medical school had a harder time getting a work visa than she did. She doesn't want to talk about modeling. *"I'm not trying to sell my sensuality or sexuality, or my looks. What matters to me is what I am saying, what the songs mean, what the music is."* I drop the topic, but I doubt you've dropped looking at her pictures on these very pages.

"I grew up singing, my first words were a song." Comically, a TV slogan for a Korean electronics company. Her mother was a trained opera singer and piano teacher



and she grew up singing in a church, which didn't much allow for secular music. Her sister introduced her to Nina Simone, *"it was like a prized possession, a secret jewel."* She thought it was a man. *"I didn't know what it was about it, but it just seemed so heartfelt, it gave me chills."* Jihae does a rendition of Simone's "Do I Move You" and when she breathlessly asks her audience, *"Do I soothe you?... tell the truth now,"* like Simone before her, I can't imagine anyone would feel the need to lie.

Jihae has been a rebel with a cause since she was a child. Born in South Korea, the daughter of a diplomat with the heavily stamped passport to match, she found herself at age nine in Nigeria, not speaking English and forced to go to kindergarten with children half her age and size. A lesson in humility, a small price to pay for the benefits of a childhood exposed to so many cultures. It was there she learnt the universally famous children's game Simon Says. While most kids simply pat their tummies or jump up and down on one leg, just because, well, Simon said so, the young and already stubborn Jihae wondered who the

hell this Simon was, and why we had to do everything he ordered us to.

It's an idea she revisited as an adult when she wrote a song called "Simon Says," a peace effort to raise awareness for children who live in the shadows of war, being forced to become child soldiers. *"I gave Simon a character make-over and made him a Ghandi-like non-violent freedom fighter to engage in a conversation of peace through creativity."* And as often with Jihae, it's about sharing messages, not claiming them; the song's available free without words to encourage anyone to write and upload their own message of peace.

The title of her first album *My Heart is an Elephant* comes organically from what she calls *"one of those magical New York City moments."* A disheveled looking man sat on the stoop and kept asking passers-by, *"Is it raining? Is it raining out there?"* Everyone ignored him. *"He showed me a milk crate overflowing with childish but beautiful drawings of elephants. Amidst the herds of elephants there was one lone drawing of a woman's face. He said it wasn't for sale, that it was his wife, and she had died."*







He unbuttoned his shirt, revealing an elephant-shaped birthmark near his heart."

Like many artists, Jihae's no fan of the recording industry with its known money-making formulas that shackle creativity. Eschewing convention for a young artist with interest from major labels, she decided to release her music on her own, saving her money, taking subways to record in parts of New York I won't venture alone to this day. Her path was seemingly rewarded, for there aren't many who can lay claim to having cameos by Michael Gondry and Lenny Kravitz jamming on their first indie release. But Jihae quickly learnt that *"making music is really just the start of a long road."*

SEPTEM is her digital multimedia platform for musicians, artists, and social-based projects. It's a constructive fuck-you to the recording industry and a boon to other artists who would be in the same distraught position she once found herself in. She's in a pretty good position right now. After this interview she's on her way to a farm to photograph an album cover for her yet-to-be-released album *Illusion of You* which is executive-produced by legendary rock-god

Dave Stewart, one-half of The Eurythmics. While she considers him a mentor, he says she's "the real deal."

Her collaboration with Stewart also led to what she calls one of her *"greatest musical moments."* Stewart wrote a poem with Leonard Cohen. It's called "It Just Feels" and it maybe one of the only singer-songwriter songs about an orgasm. They gave it to Jihae to write music for and Cohen loved it so much they gave her a song-writing credit. *"Leonard Cohen spent a lot of time in a monastery as a monk, and you can really feel the purity in his expression."*

While touring is the ultimate dream, it is also impossibly expensive...so instead she decided to create a seemingly more impossible complex rock opera. *"It was so ridiculously ambitious, even John said he thought I needed a shrink!"* John, whom she mentions casually, happens to be Academy Award-winning playwright John Patrick Shanley with whom she created "Fire Burning Rain." Stretching her repertoire, it encompasses every possible medium: music, acting, costumes, dance, choreography, acrobats, and was based on a Joan



of Arc type heroine coming to save earth and humanity. The parallel seems almost auto-biographical.

While the phrase “renaissance woman” is a cliché tossed around faster than hipsters can toss kale, Jihae is an exception. Her collaborations read like a who’s-who of almost every industry, and you practically need a chart to understand the multitude of her projects. She has a new line of leather jackets coming out. *“I’m not trying to be a designer.”* The collection, like her next album, is titled *Illusion of You*. She doesn’t spew fashion jargon nor attempt to promote where they’ll be available. Instead I get, *“Women need to take their power back.”* She then goes on speaking of the recent atrocities against women around the globe, and the general malaise of patriarchy as if this somehow explains how the collection came to be. This is how it works in Jihae’s world.

I usually have to try and find the good in people. In Jihae I’m looking for the bad. The few things she thought should be “off the record” are what most people would talk about flippantly at the water cooler.

I guess her friendship with Salman Rushdie is rubbing off on her, as she jokes that she doesn’t want a fatwa issued against her.

We go for a smoke break. I like that she smokes. I find it relatable and human in all its complexities and contradictions. Of course, in the sheer time it takes for the fire to burn our nicotine down to its butt, she manages to teach me about artist Sharon Hayes, about an imprisoned Burmese Nobel Peace prize laureate, and about enough references to dog-ear for weeks of exploration. A raspy breath of fresh air in a world polluted with candy-coated pop stars, Jihae is at once dreamy and defiant. Using her voice as her ultimate weapon, she wistfully sings, *“with so many unanswered questions, I’m just glad I got to sing a lullaby for the lonely people.”*

My only unanswered question is what her name means. I forgot to ask and think about calling her. Instead I end as I began, by stalking her through my computer. It turned out Jihae means “wisdom” in Korean. It brings new substance to “Simon Says.” You should listen to Jihae, not because I said so, but because “wisdom” itself says so.





1. Favorite breakfast? A latte and a crispy nutella crepe.

2. What's the longest you've gone without sleep? Forty-eight hours.

3. Worst habit? Over-analyzing, thinking too much.

4. Where do you go for advice? The teacher within.

5. What inspires you? Fearless, innovative, pioneering ideas, execution of them and people with those qualities.

6. If you could have a super power, what would it be? Turning black coal hearts into mush by the sound of my voice.

7. Truth or dare? Dare.

8. If you could relive a day in your life again, what day would you choose? The day I met Bob Dylan.

9. What drink do you order at the bar? A tequila on the rocks with a splash of soda and lime.

10. How do you sleep? Diagonally. My boyfriend doesn't like it much.

11. What turns you on? Creativity and wit, humble intelligence.

12. Describe how you kiss in one word. Like a flower.

13. Complete this sentence: "I'd rather be..." A mermaid than a disco dancer.

14. Erotic movie or porn? Who needs either when you are present in the moment?

15. If you weren't doing what you are now, what do you think you'd be? A film director or a video artist.

16. How well do you keep secrets? Better than average.

17. Best word of advice? Be here and now.

18. What person from the past do you wish you could go back and talk to? Kurt Cobain, Jim Morrison, Janis Joplin, Sam Cooke, Jimi Hendrix.

19. Worst "pick up" line you've heard? Are you a model?

20. What have you refused to learn? Piano. I used to hide in the playground when it was time for my lesson when I was four. My parents gave up after six months when I made my teenage piano teacher cry.

21. If you could pick two people to put in a wrestling match, who would they be and why? Ariana Huffington and Al Gore. Hopefully their fight would turn into passion and they'd make an army of babies that grow up to make the world a better place.

22. Favorite song? Too hard to name just one.

23. Describe your last dream. New York City is flooded in an alien invasion. The aliens come out of the space ship in Russian army uniforms.

24. What's your drug? Music.

25. If you were on Death Row, what would be your final meal? Kimchi Stew.