

TRANSCENDING SCENT

From discrimination through to physical violence, being transgender is a hard road to traverse. Though finding a signature scent might seem insignificant at first, it can offer a little insight into the complexities of changing gender, as Anita Bhagwandas explores...

ILLUSTRATION: NOMA BAR



We rarely stop to consider how scent plays into our identity. But the fragrance choices we make – or don't make – define us by telling the world how we want to be perceived, received and recognised by others. It can define our mood and help us feel 'whole' – the finishing

touch on a night out or before we leave the house, signifying that we're 'complete'. That's why it feels so alien to wear a perfume that just isn't 'us', and why finding your signature scent is such a milestone.

Rhyannon Styles, 34 (author of memoir *The New Girl*, out in June), found her signature scent Daisy by Marc Jacobs [£54 for 100ml] a couple of years ago. "I was given a Liberty gift voucher but

instead of buying something more 'useful', I decided to pick something that was an investment in *me*. I chose Daisy because it felt fresh and light – there was an innocence to it. It reminded me of being a child and picking rose petals with some girls in my village; we'd soak them in water and make our own perfumes, even though they always just smelt like wet flowers. Daisy embodies that for me, in

a much more sophisticated way. It's a foundation to be able to move through life and without it, I'd feel incomplete."

When Styles first discovered Daisy, she wasn't a teenager like so many of us are when we find our signature scents; she was 32 and two years into her transition from being a natal male to female (known as MTF) – her *true* identity. She'd worn other feminine





scents before her transition, but this was the one that genuinely fit. “I feel like it matches who I truly am and how I express myself – it embodies the lightness I felt after my transition,” she says. That’s the joy of finding your signature scent, it brings together your entire identity, and for the many of us who are cis-gendered (meaning that we identify as the gender we were born as), that’s usually fairly straightforward – we walk into a store, try a few on and find something we like, or we admire something a friend wears. But if you’re transgender, finding a signature scent can be a little more complicated and emotionally wrought than that.

THE SCENT JOURNEY

The process of transitioning – to live in your authentic gender identity – can take *years* and it’s a lot to go through, both physically and emotionally. It tends to happen in three stages. Firstly, there’s social transitioning, which is living in society as your true gender identity (required for at least a year before medically transitioning). Then there’s the legal transition, the formal – and lengthy – process of changing your identity records, requiring doctors’ notes. And finally, there’s medical transitioning – involving hormone therapy, plus optional facial and genital reconstruction surgery. Getting to this final stage is a milestone.

Munroe Bergdorf, 30, found her signature scent during the early stages of her MTF transition. “I was 22 and had been living as a woman for a couple of years – this was before medically transitioning – and I’d been wearing Tom Ford’s Black Orchid EDP [£78.50 for 50ml]. I picked that scent because it was strong, feminine and very sexy. I wanted to convey those feelings to the people around me, so I wore it every day – it was like my security blanket, in many ways. But then I went to intern for the perfumer Roja Dove and as I learned more about scents and how the notes all work together, I fell in love with Chanel No 5 EDP [£74 for 50ml]. I loved the chypre notes and that it wasn’t ‘trying’ to be anything. It was still a strong feminine scent, but far more nuanced, and I realised that I could be softer

with my femininity. It showed me a whole different side to myself and how I wanted to be perceived from now on,” she says. Chanel No 5 became an even more meaningful scent for Bergdorf a few years later: “A pivotal moment in my transition was when my mum bought me a bottle of it – that was the first ‘female’ scent she’d ever given me without getting upset. All families find

“FINDING A SIGNATURE SCENT BRINGS TOGETHER YOUR ENTIRE IDENTITY”

transitioning hard and although we’re very close now, we didn’t talk for a long time. So for me, this fragrance was a very memorable form of acceptance. It can make me quite emotional when I smell it,” she says.

HORMONES AND BODY ODOUR

Hormone therapy plays one of the biggest parts in the transitioning process. Male to female transitioning requires

oestrogens, antiandrogens and progestogens to cause the development of secondary sex characteristics like breasts, fat and prompt a female pattern of hair growth. Conversely, female to male transitioning requires testosterone, alternative androgens and antiestrogens to increase the typically male characteristics such as a deeper voice, male-pattern hair growth,

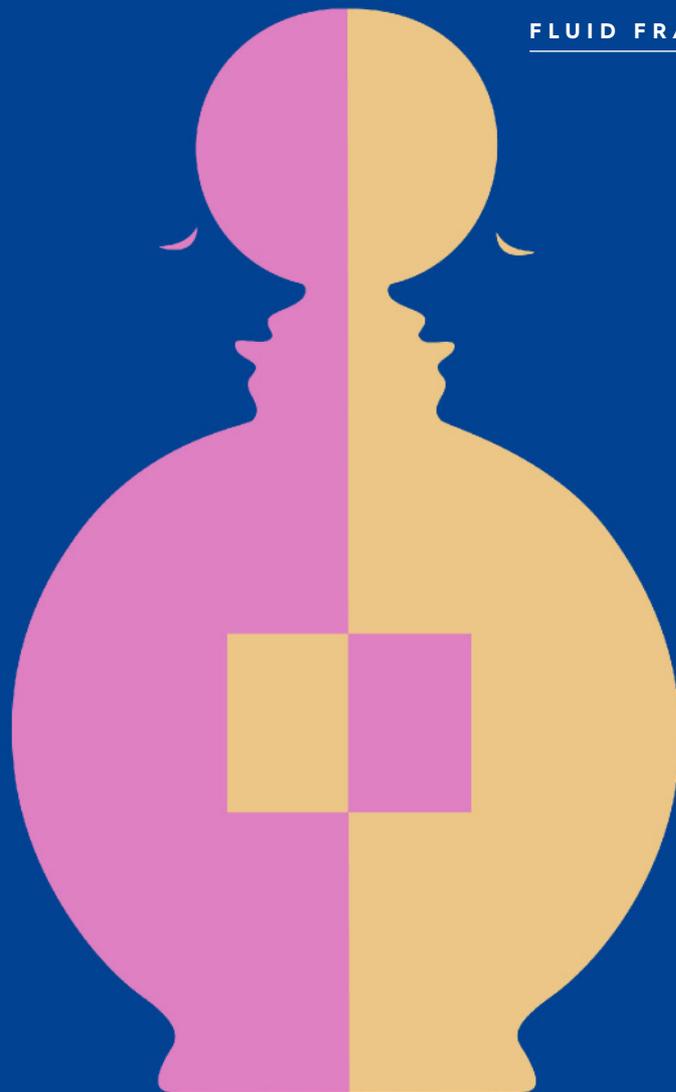
and fat and muscle distribution.

Hormones change the way we smell too, in a big way. Professor Gary Butler, consultant in paediatric and adolescent medicine and endocrinology at London’s University College Hospital, says: “Sex hormones, especially androgens, can make you become smellier as they change some of the sweat glands in the body. This will be more marked in a FTM person when testosterone is being taken,

which is the same as in a pubertal cis-gender male.” Bergdorf agrees: “You go through a second puberty because of the hormones and your skin starts to smell differently. It’s very noticeable. At the height of my ‘female puberty’, I noticed that scents would turn during the day and the fragrances wouldn’t smell the same because of my fluctuating hormones. Now, they stick and feel much more comfortable on me.”

Smelling like ourselves is crucial to *all* of us. Imagine hating the scent of lemons and then being forced to wear a heady citrus fragrance all day – that feeling of both disliking the notes and how they make you feel, churning inside. When you’re transitioning gender, the wrong scent can feel even more jarring, which is why finding a scent that embodies who you are on the inside, to the outside world, can be a challenge.

That’s where passing can come in, and it’s a complex subject. Passing refers to being able to



'pass' for one's true gender – so if you're MTF, that means being recognised by others as a natal or cisgender female, and vice versa (although it's to be noted that not all transgender people want to pass). For many though, it's a safety thing – being able to pass can mean avoiding a constant barrage of transphobic abuse. But not everyone can pass physically, in terms of height and build, for example: "Passing can seem like a test – and it's very emotionally fraught. Some people pass easily and some people will just never pass easily," says Dr Kenneth Demsky, a renowned psychologist and gender specialist who regularly works with transgender clients during their transitions.

Styles explains that your choice of perfume can act as a signifier to the outside world in many ways too: "Your perfume isn't just for you, it can be an indicator of your gender for other people. People will smell you and think, 'Oh, that smells feminine,' so their minds will be triggered into thinking that this person is a woman, avoiding 'that' awkward conversation. It's a prop, in a way, like long hair or heels. But biological women are allowed to make mistakes when they're younger with beauty. When I first began my transition, I made a few mistakes with my identity, and due to my age, these were way more visible than say,

a young teenager. So I actually started off very cautiously with scent initially."

FINDING IDENTITY THROUGH SCENT

Finding your true scent is a journey for everyone, and we go through trial and error as teens before – as adults – finding a fragrance that make us feel like 'us'. Still, those teenage scents tend to have a nostalgia factor for us – catching a whiff of Calvin Klein's CK Be or Impulse's O2 body spray can take us back years. Not for Styles though, who struggled with finding a scent that matched her identity as a teen. "Because I was a male,

it was perceived that I'd like fragrances by Lynx or Gillette, and I was given those gift sets for Christmas as a teenager. I felt obliged to wear them, but those fragrances and those identities were put on me; I didn't choose them. It's confusing as a trans kid – you want to push forward with your own sense of identity, but society tells you that you can't do that. It was easier and safer to comply to other people's perceptions of my gender so I wouldn't be harmed, rather than wear my female friends' Charlie or Body Shop White Musk scents."

As society becomes more gender fluid, it begs the question, is gender projected on scents and its consumers in a way that seems super archaic? "I do get that perfumes need to be marketed, but I find so many of them over the top and very old fashioned in terms of how they portray gender," Bergdorf muses. "Nobody is one thing or another, we all have male and female sides of ourselves."

Recently, there's been a marked resurgence of unisex scents, such as Calvin Klein's CK2 EDT (£35 for 50ml) and Sarah Jessica Parker's Stash EDP (£32 for 30ml), created to appeal to both sexes. And

to cater to all sexes, Schoen notes that there is a difference when it comes to genderless fragrances, which ignore gender as a concept entirely. "Gender limits scents and limits the wearer too. I draw my inspirations from bigger concepts than gender and that's actually what many people want now."

Michael Donovan, fragrance expert, explains that the old rules of gendered scents just don't apply anymore: "Women are embracing notes that were once considered ultra-masculine, like civet, tobacco and vetiver, while men are opting for lighter florals – gender doesn't define our choices now."

Bergdorf now layers her scents together for a more personal approach: "I love scent interaction – I spritz the more masculine-smelling Terre d'Hermès (£78 for 100ml) and layer it with the very floral Bvlgari Pour Femme EDP (£78 for 100ml). I put the 'male' scents on my chest – the most feminine point – and the female one on my neck and wrist. It expresses my entire identity," she says. And somebody feeling like they're truly themselves is perhaps the ultimate gift that fragrance could ever hope to give – and more of a reason than ever before to take the time to find your signature scent and explore the olfactory representation of yourself to the world.

“IS GENDER PROJECTED ON SCENTS IN A WAY THAT SEEMS SUPER ARCHAIC?”

despite having a relatively small place in the huge UK fragrance industry, the unisex perfume sector is expected to grow at its fastest rate yet, according to market researchers Canadean.

But the surge in popularity of luxury niche perfumers – including Byredo, Le Labo and Vilhelm Parfumerie – who don't project a gender onto their scent has been pivotal too. Geza Schoen, perfumer and founder of Escentric Molecules is one of the modern pioneers of genderless scent. While unisex scents are designed



Universal scents

The bottles that prove unisex scents have come a long way since the Noughties...



OOLONG TEA

The heady tobacco notes lend this scent a rich smoky base, but creamy cocoa and warm tonka bean give it an addictive quality. It's impossible to over-spritz. **£160 for 75ml, Jo Malone London**



ORRIS

An unusual blend of weighty musk, zesty mandarin and cool peppermint, this surprising scent is ideal for the summer months. And it lasts all day long. **£95 for 100ml, MCM**



CK ALL

A 2017 update on the cult scents CK One and CK Be, bergamot and mandarin are topped with hivernal neo – a synthetic ingredient that gives it a fresh, cooling quality. **£59 for 200ml, Calvin Klein**



BIBLIOTHÉQUE

Its scent has filled countless living rooms in candle-form and now, thanks to high demand, this warm fragrance (the olfactory version of a leather-bound book) is available in EDP form. **£150 for 100ml, Byredo**



CITRON FIG

Clean Reserve's collection of light, bright fragrances are designed with all genders in mind. If you like a fragrance with a kick, this scent blends fig and cedar with punchy ginger. **£79 for 100ml, Clean Reserve**

ADDITIONAL WORDS: ANNIE DAVIES, DR. KENNETH DEMSKY, PHD (DRKENNETHDEMSKY.CO.UK) BITTER-SWEET: NOMA BAR, A LIMITED EDITION BOOK BY NOMA BAR (£200, THAMES & HUDSON) IS OUT 25 MAY