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Inside Lauren Halsey And Erykah Badu's Immersive Experience At The Hollywood Bowl

For *emajendat*, Badu hands the creative reins to the South Central artist, who is taking her work beyond the gallery and onto the concert stage.

By Okla Jones



PHOTO CREDIT: HUGO GLENDINNING / COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

"I feel like we're in the pocket, finally," Lauren Halsey tells Erykah Badu as they discuss their upcoming event at the Hollywood Bowl. "Everything looks *beautiful*, and I cannot wait for your directive," Badu replies. For a performer who usually directs every part of her own shows, Badu sounds pleased to put this one in Halsey's more-than-capable hands.

On September 29, Halsey will take over the Bowl's grounds for *emajendat*, an evening of installations and live music headlined by Badu alongside The Alchemist. Here, concertgoers can experience games, airbrush stations and Flipper's Roller Boogie Palace before the concert begins. DJ Pee.We—Anderson .Paak's DJ alter ego—and the Charles Gaines Collective featuring Black Nile will also perform.

The evening gives Halsey a chance to work at a scale she knows well, but with a new purpose. Her studio has spent months designing a stage for the musicians, testing dimensions on the floor before building and painting the pieces. Halsey has made monumental sculptures before, so she figured her team could handle an even larger project. "We surely can make a stage," she remembers thinking. "So, we started playing around in the computer programs and laying things out, and then you start taping things out on the floor, and then you start sculpting and making things and you do site visits, and it's just this really interesting call and response that manifests into something real."

For Badu, the arrangement reverses her usual role. She studied theater at Grambling State University and says her training covered every part of putting on a production. "I usually am the auteur. I do everything in my shows," she tells ESSENCE.

"Now I have an opportunity to just be the artist in a different way and get to be directed by a person who is one of my favorite creatives." Additionally, the Grammy Award-winner is comfortable leaving some of the details unsettled. "I just don't know what's going to happen and I love it that way," she says. "It is the best way to create."

The connection between the two creatives began years ago at an event where Halsey received a GQ award and Badu performed a DJ set. (If you've never been to a DJ Lo Down Loretta Brown event, *please* make sure you put it on your to-do list.) Badu had recently discovered Halsey's work, and she accepted the invitation because she wanted to meet her. Halsey, meanwhile, had been listening to Badu since childhood. She remembers *Baduizm* playing at her Black Montessori school in Los Angeles when she was in fifth grade.

"It was wonderful," Halsey says of Badu's debut effort. "I was so lucky, my childhood was contextualized by Black women who spent their careers and their catalogs very invested in a collective freedom, self-determination, and a free spirit." Despite years of admiring Badu, Halsey found herself too shy to say much when they finally met; after Halsey stepped offstage, Badu offered a compliment she still remembers: "You were like, 'I love your work, sis,'" Halsey recalls. "And I was like, 'Oh my God, what?'" Eventually, Halsey worked up the nerve to propose a collaboration, asking Badu if she would perform on a stage she designed. Badu said yes, setting their Hollywood Bowl project in motion.

Badu's interest deepened when she visited Halsey's sculpture park in South Los Angeles. She saw traces of her own upbringing in Dallas in Halsey's tribute to the people and places around her. "Everyone has this hood, this neighborhood, this tribe," Badu says. She admired Halsey for making room for visitors to see parts of their own lives there, too. "Each of the things in that sculpture park represented parts of me, and I thought it was brave to do that, to give us a platform like that, to cry, to laugh, and to remember."

Halsey has thought about the relationship between visual art and music since she was a child. Too shy to take speaking roles in school and church productions, she was assigned to build sets instead. She later became fascinated by Parliament-Funkadelic's stage shows and began imagining what she could make alongside the musicians she loved. The Bowl offers a chance to pursue that idea throughout the venue.

"I'm literally building a universe around them," Halsey says of the performers. A gallery exhibition has limits on how far she can extend an idea, she explains, but here she can consider the entire presentation. Badu welcomes the arrangement. "My part is to be the art inside of the frame that she creates," she says, adding that she plans to give Halsey whatever she needs to complete it.

The Bowl also holds a personal history for Halsey, who grew up in South Central Los Angeles. She visited as a little girl, sometimes on field trips when no one was performing, "I would just take my peanut butter and jelly and sit in the stands at 2:00 PM and just *imagine*," she says with a smile. Now, she gets to show an entire city what she imagined.

Near the end of our conversation, Badu tells Halsey how elated she is to take part in her work on this scale. She praises her for continuing to pursue ambitious ideas while acknowledging what it takes to carry them through. "It's hard. It's not easy," Badu says.

"[Lauren] does it with the same rhythm and realness and honesty and pace that she has from the beginning from the time that we met her and saw her," she continues. "It's the same thing. There's no pretension. She's still afraid, but very brave, very brave. And that's how we are as artists, and it's just refreshing to see her as a reflection. Two different mediums, but we meet at this place, and I'm so proud to be a part of her work at this scale."
