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**STRANGE
ROOTS**

BAND MEMBER BIOGRAPHIES



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PHOTO: MARIEL ROSENBLUTH

Strange Fruits is a trio of singers-songwriters, musicians and beatmakers, comprised of Mags, SageS and Naïka Champaigne. These 3 young women were brought together under NoBad Sound Studio to participate in a potential women-run workshop, in the hopes of encouraging more girls and young women to express themselves musically in an environment dominated by the male gender. What was supposed to be a series of music workshops, turned into the forming of a band, each member being an artist in their own rights.

Strange Fruits is the coming together of different backgrounds of the same Black diaspora (Haiti, Jamaica, Senegal and Ghana) as well as drastically different musical influences, to convey the message that everyone should embrace who they are no matter where they're from or what they're going through, because in this life we are all fighting our individual battles, and even forget that others are fighting as well, but that it shouldn't keep us from living our best life while we can.

NAÏKA CHAMPAÏGNE



PHOTO: MARIEL ROSENBLUTH

Naïka Champaigne (Born **Naïka Champaigne Boissinotte-Alexis**; February 21, 1995) is a singer, singer-songwriter and multi-instrumentalist of Haitian-Canadian descent, but is most prominently a guitarist as a player and composer. Her working scheme in musical creation involves a variety of musical styles such as jazz, soul, blues, folk, alternative, chill, ambient, experimental and pop. She is also known as DragonFroot in the alternative hip-hop girl-group **Strange Fruits**.

EARLY LIFE

Naïka was born in Montreal, Canada, Quebec. The second child of a single-parent family, she was raised mostly by her mother, Sylvie (née Boissinotte), who is an electrophysiologist at the Maisonneuve-Rosemont hospital in Montreal, as her father was no longer in her life by the age of three. She has one older brother, Shawn, who is also a musician and with whom she is very close. Growing up, she was noted for her deep voice, raising concerns in her grade school teachers. Before taking an interest in composing songs, she was a child who practiced a lot of sports. In primary school, she played basketball, handball, practiced one martial art (judo), and briefly did gymnastics. She wanted to pursue a career in basketball or in singing. At the age of 12 in secondary school, she became increasingly attentive to music around the house, and especially in school as she attended the Joseph-François-Perrault Academy (a French music school) enrolled in the classical/orchestra music concentration program. The form of her schedule would allow her to play music nearly every day. She began playing the clarinet until secondary two, when she transitioned to the saxophone. The classes were mostly classical and theatrical pieces played by the orchestra; by the end of the year, they would play a concert at “L’Auditorium de l’école Plateau Montréal”. This music theory knowledge incited her to begin composing herself. The knowledge acquired in the classes led her to pick up the guitar, learning it on her own, and accepting her low voice as a musical attribute and an instrument to convey the emotional undertones in her music.

MUSICAL STYLES AND COMPOSING

By age thirteen, she would listen to music on her own and discover different music genres such as blues rock, folk music, soul, metal, post-hardcore and pop rock. These styles made her want to perfect her guitar skills further; she decided to take guitar lessons for approximately five months before she began writing her own guitar compositions. The first song she learned on the guitar was “Tears in Heaven” by Eric Clapton. At around 14-15, she would write songs every day in classes, in a notebook that she carried around everywhere. She was really influenced by metaphors, abstract

writings that carried through in her folk, soul, acoustic sounds. That is around that time that she started recording herself, and singing in front of people.

FIRST STAGE PERFORMANCES AND APPEARANCES

Her first live performance was in class for a project about art and experiences. She performed an acoustic rendition of “All Time Low” by Jasey Rae. She received good feedback for her soulful voice; from then on, she performed for fun in front of friends, as well as posted videos on YouTube of her singing covers and original songs. At seventeen, she was collaborating with her friend Jessy (a rap artist known as Azelf) in a makeshift studio, a small room with one mic and soundproofed with egg cartons; this was her first experience recording. She first performed on stage with Azelf at her high school talent show the same year. Noticing her talents, she was also asked to perform during intermissions. She performed on her own with her guitar singing covers of Mumford and Sons and Amy Winehouse. She knew then that she truly enjoyed being on stage and connecting with the audience. When entering Dawson College she gained confidence in her musicality and song writing. She participated in a talent show called “AdoFest”, a festival in which teenagers audition, get selected and then practice their acts to perform on a stage at Plaza St-Hubert in Montreal. There she was contacted for a free trial at studio, in which a band called **Pink Chocolate** was recording. Her first acoustic song was recorded there, “Stop... I Don’t Want to Accept My Soul, Flesh Covers the Bones. Let it All Alone” and covers of Amy Winehouse’s “Cherry” and Damien Rice’s “Delicate”.

She was introduced to **Doc Mo** and **Téhu Dézuets D’plingrés**, both hip hop producers and musician from Montreal who had an open studio for kids that worked as a community workshop, but closed at the end of the year 2012. She recorded a cover of Amy Winehouse’s “Me and Mr. Jones”, and they both decided they wanted to work with her. It was her first time singing over hip hop beats with her own lyrics and it was different from her and her guitar, but she took a fondness of it, even adding guitar to some of the beats they were making for her; “Lounge”, “We All Feel Like Heartless Vampires”, “The Last Year We Put Into”, and other of her songs. From then on, she performed at Quai des Brumes (a bar) and some lounges. Her first experience in a music video would be as a featured vocalist on Dézuets D’plingrés song “La Force”. She would later befriend beatmaker and rapper **Tshizimba**, with whom she would participate in a talent show at Dawson singing the chorus for his song “Feelin’ Myself”. He is the one that introduced her to **NoBad Sound Studio**, a studio where teenagers can record for free.

NBS AND THE CREATION OF STRANGE FROOTS (2014)

Naïka first started going to No Bad Sound Studio, an affiliate of la Maison des Jeunes Côtes-des-Neiges founded by Canadian hip-hop supergroup **Nomadic Massive**, in February 2013 and recorded from time to time; it wasn’t until May 2014 that she met **Mags** (now known as PassionFroot from Strange Fruits) at a meeting and jam session that things started picking up. Koffi, one of the head leaders of NBS, wanted to do a girls workshop in June, because he believed that not enough girls were entering the studio and in the hip hop movement. Mags, Naïka and another young woman **Sage Stewart** (who would become StarFroot) were the only three to show up. They then decided to create a band, and Naïka suggested Strange Fruits as homage to Billie Holiday and Nina Simone. They wrote their first song “Green Apple” a week after, and in three months created an EP of six songs. They had their EP launch in September at the Hip Hop You Don’t

Stop Festival. Their first music video, directed and produced by videographer and MC **Jai Nitai Lotus**, came out in February 2015.

As the year progressed they were associated with Nomadic Massive, and performed at several venues, such as Theatre St-Denis for We Day Montréal and Unis pour L'Action in February 2016.



PHOTO: C. MARTIN

SAGES



PHOTO: MARIEL ROSENBLUTH

Sage Stewart-La Bonté is a French Canadian singer, songwriter and *beatmaker*, who was born in Montreal, Quebec in 1996 to an all-woman, Jamaican family. Also known as **SageS**, a music producer for nearly ten years, she blends her theatrical nature with her alternative, orchestral, and rock-inspired music. Sage is a co-founder and member of **Strange Froot**s, under which she goes by the name of StarFroot.

EARLY YEARS

Sage Stewart-La Bonté was born on May 25th, 1996 in Montreal, Quebec, Canada to an all-woman family. Her mother and aunt, both multidisciplinary artists, inspired her love of the arts. While growing up, Sage's mother, **Sylvia Stewart**, worked primarily as an actress and stuntwoman, exposing her to the world of acting and stage performing. Her aunt, Paula, passionate about communication and studio arts, encouraged her passion for songwriting.

EDUCATION AND ARTISTIC DEVELOPMENT

Passionate about music, but having no creative outlet to produce music, Sage searched for a platform online in her second-to-last year of elementary school. It was then that she discovered Mixcraft, her first beatmaking software. Excited to begin producing, she learned how to use the software kinesthetically. Sage incorporated her theatrical nature into her alternative, orchestral, and rock-based music. As a result, she became a producer under the name of SageS, an Anglophone pronunciation of the French word *sagesse*, meaning wisdom (not unlike her real name).

Sage attended Roslyn Elementary School, a semi-private school in Westmount, Quebec. At Roslyn, she participated in choir and the school musical in her last year, performing (for the first time) both a song and a monologue. She continued to pursue the arts during high school at The Study School. In her two years at the school, Sage participated in choir and concert band (playing the clarinet), as well as badminton, soccer and basketball. During her second year due to a scheduling conflict, Sage was required to choose between choir and basketball. She ultimately chose choir, a decision she felt defined her path in life greatly.

As of her 9th year of high school, Sage became homeschooled through an American, distance education program called The Keystone School. During her time apart from a bricks-and-mortar institution, Sage focused on her beatmaking and being introspective, in addition to her studies. After 2 and a half years of homeschooling, Sage decided to rejoin the masses at a public high school to complete her diploma. She attended James Lyng Adult Centre and High School of Montreal, graduating with honours.

NBS AND THE FOUNDING OF STRANGE FROOTS (2014)

In June 2014, Sage joined **NoBad Sound Studio** (NBS), an affiliate of the Maison-des-Jeunes, Côte-des-Neiges after hearing about their beatmaking workshops by her mother. It was here where she met **Dr. Mad** (of the group **ALAIZ**) and switched to beatmaking software, FL Studio, for more creative freedom after 8 years using Mixcraft. **K.O.F.**, an artist and then-manager of the studio, invited Sage to take part in the formation of woman-led workshops to inspire and empower young females musically. Ultimately, only 3 women showed up to create these workshops: Sage, **Naïka Champaigne Boissinotte-Alexis** (a.k.a. DragonFroot), and **Magassy “Mags” Mbow** (a.k.a. PassionFroot), who would decide to form the group, Strange Fruits.

As part of Strange Fruits, Sage goes by the name, StarFroot and produces a previously unexplored genre for her music, hip hop, which is a welcome challenge to her. Between June and August 2014, they created their EP of six songs. Together, the group has released the EP in September 2014, made a music video for their song, “Green Apple” in February 2015, (directed and produced by rapper and videographer, **Jai Nitai Lotus**) and performed at numerous venues around Montreal. Sage is currently attending Dawson College in Languages, producing, and working on Strange Fruits’ full-length album.



PHOTO: ALEX MENJIVAR

MAGS



PHOTO: MARIEL ROSENBLUTH

Magassy Nyane Mbow, (born August 30th, 1992) better known by her stage name **Mags**, is a first-generation African-American cartoonist, singer, songwriter and alternative music producer from Silver Spring, Maryland. Based in Montreal, Quebec, Mags gained notoriety as an illustrator, an amateur MC, and later as the *de facto* leader of alternative hip-hop girl-group **Strange Fruits** (in which she is known as PassionFroot).

EARLY YEARS

Magassy Mbow was born in Silver Spring, Maryland, on August 30th, 1992 to Makhtar Mbow, a Senegalese man, and Nana Afram-Mbow, a Ghanaian woman. The fourth of 5 children between the two, and the first American-born, she has one younger sister, two older half-siblings from her mother's previous marriage, and one older half-sister from her father. Both her parents, having immigrated to the United States in 1991, were diplomats working for the World Bank based in Washington, DC. From ages five to seventeen, she attended the French International School Lycée Rochambeau, in Bethesda, Maryland. As a child she immediately took an interest in drawing, having grown up watching anime and reading manga under her brother's influence, as well as her own personal attraction to Western animation. As an illustrator, she lists *Pokémon*, *Dragon Ball Z*, *Sailor Moon* and *The Powerpuff Girls* as her earliest influences. During her first 5 years at the Lycée, Mbow would gain confidence as a stage performer participating in musical numbers with her class for the annual School Fairs, which are mandatory until the 3rd grade. Onwards, she joined an after-school choir during the 3rd grade, and took a liking to theatre, showing much enthusiasm during improvisation exercises and school plays. At the age of eleven, her father would acquire a copy of FL Studio from a work colleague. In his habit of showing her different computer programs to further her art skills, he would teach her how to make her first beat. As she was reaching high school and finally being able to put music to her lyrics, she began singing covers, and eventually performing her own material at talent shows and school functions. But as she grew older she would focus more on dancing on stage rather than singing. In high school she studied in the Economy/Sociology sector in preparation of her *Baccalauréat*, while taking an elective in Cinema. By the end of her high school career, she had established herself around the school as an artistic polymath, earning the moniker "Mags".

2010-2013: MOVE TO MONTREAL AND BEGINNING OF ARTISTIC CAREER

Near the end of 2010, Mags moved to Montreal, Canada to pursue Sociology at Concordia University, moving into the Grey Nuns dormitory in the Sir George Williams downtown campus where she would spend her first year. Her time there would inspire her to launch her webcomic *AtTheNunnery*, a series of comic strips based on her and her friends navigating through residence life and university in Montreal. In 2011 in her second academic year, she registered for the Fine

Arts course “Hip Hop: Past, Present and Future” taught by Marc Peters (previously co-facilitated and currently solely instructed by Yassin Alsalman, better known as **Narcy** or **The Narcicyst**). There she would meet Jasmine Thagard, then-co-organizer of Hip Hop Karaoke Montreal, a monthly hip-hop event held at Le Belmont allowing hip hop fans to perform their favorite tracks without the assistance of a screen, contrary to actual karaoke. It would be at this event, her first attendance in February 2012, where she would begin gaining confidence as an amateur MC, and join the underground Montreal network of urban artists. She became a monthly regular, and a crowd favorite, earning her the title of “HHK Legend”.

During the summer of 2012, Mags, Thagard, and other classmates from the FFAR course, would join together in founding a hip hop club at Concordia University. After several months, the Hip Hop Heads Concordia was officiated in December 2012, with Mags as the VP Communications and Marketing. During this time, Mags continued to pursue her visual art as a private event caricaturist, as a blogger for her sub-series of illustrations on her website, as well as a collaborator to Aile Reve Webmag as an illustrator and music editor. In the spring of 2014, nearing the end of her degree, Mags learned of the NoBad Sound Studio, a free music studio for teenagers, run in conjunction with Maison des Jeunes Cote-des-Neiges, the youth center in the neighborhood, Cote-des-Neiges, she moved to after her year at Grey Nuns. The youth center, and consequentially the studio, is run by **Nomadic Massive** member **Vox Sambou**, who would serve as a mentor to Strange Fruits. She was introduced by her friend Mahdi Saoula (producer better known as **Dr. MaD**), whom she met as part of a snowball effect from networking at HHK; Saoula is the studio’s music engineer, assisting youths in creating beats and recording. Mags, being extended an invitation to a jam session in mid-May at the studio, suggested that the HHHC executive team join her to be able to network and possibly recruit future students.

Mags would meet her future Strange Fruits bandmate **Naïka Champaigne Boissinotte-Alexis** (simply known as **Naïka Champaigne** or **Naïka**), a member of the studio, and become friends over the jam session. It was at the end of this event the girls were approached by Philippe-Koffi Rider, also known as **K.O.F**, a counselor at NBS who was looking to facilitate female-orientated workshops at the studio to compensate for the lack of young girls coming in. Approximately a month later, on June 11th 2014, the meeting was held to see how many young women were interested in attending or contributing to the workshop series. Only Mags and Naïka showed up to the meeting, later joined by **Sage Stewart-La Bonté**, who, after deliberation, would become their third and last band member. The workshop series was then changed to a summer-long girl-group project.

2014: STRANGE FROOTS

On June 25th 2014, Mags, Naïka and Sage began their first day at work as a band. They would write their first song together (“Green Apple”) and decide on the name of their band. Initially, at Naïka’s suggestion, they were known as Strange Fruits, in homage to Billie Holiday and their Black heritage; after the conceptualization of the EP art inspired by the cereal Froot Loops, however, Mags decided they would spell it with two O’s, with group names to match (Mags became “PassionFroot”, Naïka became “DragonFroot”, and Sage became “StarFroot”). Their first live performance was of “Green Apple” at the Hip-Hop Cafe in the Mile-End borough, as part of an NBS showcase. Their first show unaffiliated with the studio would be the annual “Do My Ladies Run This?!” female artist showcase in Notre-Dame-de-Grace, the adjacent neighborhood to Cote-Des-Neiges. After performing at a handful of other events, on September 19th, they released their debut, self-titled EP at the Hip Hop You Don’t Stop Festival.

From then on, Mags continued to play shows locally and act as a social agent, speaking out against racism (specifically police brutality), sexism and homophobia, through their music as well as a panelist alongside Naïka during university and festival events. They shot their first music video in October 2014, directed by producer, MC and videographer **Jai Nitai Lotus**, and premiered it in February 2015 at Les Bobards. Currently, Strange Fruits is working on their debut LP, projected release date in 2018.



PHOTO: HERI RAKOTOMALALA