

Valenti, Lauren. "Hair Wars," Vogue, March 20, 2019.

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Joanne Petit-Frère is pictured here in her Blondie face mask, which she made out of braided and peroxidized hair. "There's still something magical and real about braiding with your hands," she says, speaking to the Hair Wars community's dedication to craftsmanship.

head. Bedecked in a leather jumpsuit, crocodile cowboy boots, and a sumptuous brown fur coat, veteran performer Wishbone, who is returning to center stage for the first time since 2012, beating cancer in the interim, has just parked his car; he drove more than 500 miles from the Motor City to transport his eight-foot-long, retractable bird wing Black Phoenix headpiece, just one of his many elaborate hair accessories of the day. And then there's Brooklyn-based first-timer Joanne Petit-Frère, who will be her own model for the show and is braced to festoon herself in a medley of jet-black and white-hot blonde braided sculptures. Overseeing it all is none other than DJ and producer David Humphries, aka Hump the Grinder, who is the wunderkind behind this unprecedented spectacle. "We don't have any restrictions," he says. "This is where hairstylists can get crazy."

In the mid-'80s, Humphries saw a need for a platform that would celebrate the talent of Detroit's local black hairstylists, as well as encourage them to elevate their visions. He started throwing and emceeing underground parties at downtown nightclubs on the city's west side, and the high-octane hair happenings, which were infused with runway performances, dancing, and DJ sets, quickly built a loyal following.

Fast-forward to the '90s, when Humphries began taking the annual show on the road across major U.S. cities. The first stop? Los Angeles. "Hollywood is theatrical, but they can't do hair like Detroit," he says with hometown pride, underlining that the city is and will always be "the hair capital of the world," due in large part to its Motown legacy and the iconic looks that the Supremes and Martha Reeves and the Vandellas pioneered. "Back then, Detroit was a predominantly black city," he recalls. "It was like a hair show at every bus stop."

Each Hair Wars player has an unmistakable style and signature: Matthews, a

At the infamous Detroit-born beauty battle-meets-showcase, industry legends and newcomers spin hair into art.

Inside the labyrinth of corridors at MoMA PS1 on a recent Sunday night in New York City, there is human hair, cast in supernatural shapes and ceiling-bound heights, at every turn.

With one hour to go before Hair Wars's show-time—at 6:05 p.m. sharp (to ensure punctuality, no exceptions!)—stylists are putting last-minute touches on their painstakingly detailed creations. Every nuance counts; this is, after all, the free-form traveling showcase that has, for three decades and counting, fought to put fantasy hair design on the beauty map.

In one corner, Detroit legend Keith Matthews is tinkering with the LED lights on his elaborate Technicolor wigs, while Antigua-born Dave "The Beauty Surgeon" Ray tends to the rhinestone-encrusted hoops of hair suspended above his model's



photo: Evening Standard Magazine, hair by Joanne Petit-Frère



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photo: Evening Standard Magazine, hair by Joanne Petit-Frère

city salon owner and longtime participant, is known for molding towering, multi-media 'dos to scintillating effect; his materials of choice include foam, pipe tubing, and Pringles cans. "I call my method 'commercialized fantasy,'" he says of his designs, which have incorporated everything from Tootsie Roll candy to classic 45 RPM records and even his own moniker—in bold, glittering fonts. Consider Matthews the Andy Warhol of hair: A man with a skill for weaving playful commentary on pop culture into imaginative updos, his penchant for three-piece suits and matching fedoras not to be overlooked.

It's the sort of swag that Wishbone, who calls himself the "Michael Jackson of hair," also has in spades. While his soaring phoenix creation and human-hair fashion garments (think: a miniskirt of free-flowing spiraled lengths) inspire awe during the showcase, so do the audacious dance moves he busts out on the holographic tinsel-strewn runway.

These larger-than-life stylists, including Ray, who describes himself as semi-retired from the hair fantasy game despite his ability to whip up hypnotizing, Garden of Eden-inspired wig creations with just a week's notice, have helped pave the way for a new generation of hair disrupters.

First in line is 30-year-old Petit-Frère, who is most known for the braided, halo-like piece worn by Solange Knowles—and then famously Photoshopped out by the publication—on her Evening Standard Magazine cover. "We're in the midst of a major movement now with consciousness of hair types, as well as art and imagery, being pushed to fantastical reaches in the digital era," Petit-Frère explains. "It's an important time to insert my identity as a hair sculptor." Although in the case of tonight, she has obscured her own features with those of a familiar alter ego, strutting onstage wearing a peroxided Blondie face mask—a nod, she says, to the lesser-known fact that rocker Debbie Harry bought Jean-Michel Basquiat's first painting for \$200 in

1981. Behind her is a pulsating light show as well as a live noise-rock performance by Brooklyn's own Vat of Acid.

Thirty-three years since first celebrating the culture, community, and meticulous craft of black hair, MoMA's stamp of approval is not lost on the Hair Wars originators. But regardless of the venue or number of people in the crowd (there are hundreds), these artists have always served up pure drama. And if this weekend is any indication, the only place they—and their mesmerizing styles—will go is up.