

Harmony of Self: L'Marco's Ode to Awareness

GLENN SMITH

About L'Marco. The conversation took place on May 15th, 2023, at the Marlton Hotel, close to Washington Square Park in Manhattan. Performing alongside well-known recording artists such as Brandy, B. Slade, Robin Thicke, and Kim Burrell, L'Marco is an American singer, songwriter and performer from New York City with forays in photography, fashion, modeling, and teaching. Coming from a family who loved music and growing up in the church, L'Marco was surrounded by music from a very young age. He started recording as early as eleven. He studied opera and jazz at the Bob Cole Conservatory of Music at CSU Long Beach.

In 2015, L'Marco released his first album, *Feels Like A Dream*, which includes popular indie songs like "Love Is" from *The Last Letter* soundtrack, and "Come On." He has since released a series of fan-favorite songs such as "This Is Love," written by Wayne'M Lucas, and "If Only Pictures Could Talk," produced by Reinholds Berzins from Latvia. L'Marco has just finished the second part of his international tour, "Feeling Good: A L'Marco Experience," and plans to start touring again in the summer of 2023. He has also released his sixth album, *Word on the Street*, and is currently working on a new EP, expected to be released by the end of 2023.

I had the privilege of interviewing L'Marco at the Marlton Hotel, close to Washington Square Park in Manhattan. We delved into various topics about his personal life, musical journey and performances, the challenges he faces, and his aspirations as a Black and queer artist.

L'MARCO is an international recording artist from New York. L'Marco is most celebrated for his signature performance, charisma and vocal freedom. Performing for notable headliners like Brandy, Robin Thicke and more, he has recently paved his own lane with a slew of independent releases and worldwide performances. "Quiet Time," a collaboration with producer A-GO, is the latest addition to his ever-evolving catalog.

GLENN SMITH, Assistant Director of the Berkley achievement Scholarship program at NYU Stern School of Business and a dedicated advocate for diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), holds a Master's degree in Higher Education Administration from NYU, focusing on diversity in higher education. Raised in Brooklyn, he brings a deep commitment to supporting underrepresented students across the USA, leveraging his background in Political Science from Bloomsburg University and East Stroudsburg University. Smith's work at NYU Stern embodies his passion for DEI, driving efforts to foster social awareness and empower students to articulate their values, reflecting his dedication to creating a more inclusive educational environment. He can be reached at gjs11@stern.nyu.edu.

Popular Culture Studies Journal

Volume 12, Issue 1

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SMITH. Thank you for taking the time to meet with me. Can you do me a favor and give me your pronouns?

L'MARCO. He, Him, L'Marco... But honestly, I usually don't mind how you refer to me as long as the intent is respectful.

SMITH. I'll do that! So, my first question is: How do you consider the perception of your navigation through the intersections of your Black and queer identities, both in your artistry and in your daily life?

L'MARCO. I stay myself and I just hope that people can let me be. I don't *care* if people let me be, but I hope they do. I still am me regardless, you know? As you've seen in the show, I wear whatever I want. My fashion and song contexts showcase my true identity and what I really feel about myself. My mom used to say "baby, know who you are; whose you are," and I really took that to heart. I'm a child of God, I'm a gifted Black man. I'm daily reminded of the sacrifices that my ancestors endured so I could have a chance, and so I move around with gratefulness, but I also recognize that my Blackness and my art both deserve and have a place in society, home and abroad. Earlier I was wearing a black backwards cap and basketball shorts, but 'round came at 9 o'clock and I was like "oooooh let's hype this up, tighten this up, and crop it a little," you know? And the audience does not matter, I don't know who is there to watch me and I don't have the time to worry about that. Just listen to the music. I hope you clap your hands, see I'm wearing something nice I feel comfortable in it, shut the fuck up and enjoy the show. If not, we can handle that accordingly... That's how I walk through, I treat people with respect and I hope they do the same.

SMITH. Being Black you're faced with challenges for just existing and then being queer is an added layer to that, so when you are thinking about being Black *and* queer, and then being a musician in a city like New York, what are some of the challenges that you face? And what are the kinds of things you do for yourself to deal with it?

L'MARCO. I was told I walk around like a white man, which is very interesting...

SMITH. You walk like a white man?

L'MARCO. Yes, which is very interesting. It's sad, it's kind of funny, too. because I think I just walk around like a human being who deserves to be breathing and to

have what everybody else has. I walk around until I am stopped... until a cop or anybody else tries to impede upon my daily peace, I walk with my head high, my chest out. I take care of myself, I try to appear approachable, but at the same time don't come for me, you know what I'm saying? I wear what I wanna wear, I talk the way I wanna talk, and I'm aware that I don't control things... We are on the planet with other people.

SMITH. This transitions into my next question: how have your upbringing and your environment influenced your understanding of queerness and Blackness, and how you walk around and you present yourself?

L'MARCO. I grew up a very restricted young man, I still experience that with my family in my adult life, but I'm still being myself. I used to conform to straight standards, "put some bass in your voice," and [*using a lower range/deeper voice*] I would. Now I can access both, when I'm on the stage I can just [*singing with high pitch voice*], you know what I'm saying?

SMITH. You have the full range.

L'MARCO. Thank you. All of these restrictions have given me so much freedom. I realize how dumb restrictions are: nobody opens and closes my eyes when I blink, no one has the power to do those things for me. There is a limit to what I can allow people to decide for me.

SMITH. Can you elaborate a little more on these restrictions and your bass voice? Who was putting restrictions on you?

L'MARCO. Being queer is already a problem in a religious upbringing, and in the Black experience, even if it's not religious, queerness is equated with weakness and confusion... Even more than your history, it's important to know yourself. I don't know much about the lineage of my people, unfortunately, but I do know what makes me tick, what makes me smile, what kind of food I like to eat, that I don't like the rain so much, you feel what I am saying? When I go home to visit my family, I try to let them be themselves as much as I can. If they don't let me be myself, then I will speak up now... "Aunty, no you can't speak like that to people."

SMITH. I know what you mean.

L'MARCO. I don't mean any disrespect, but when I learned how to respect myself, I thought, "Oh my god I let people talk to me like that?"

SMITH. When would you say you learned how to respect yourself?

L'MARCO. When I almost killed myself, in November 2009. I realized the voices inside of my head were only speaking to the people outside that would not let me be myself. I think I always knew who I wanted to be, what kind of musician and entertainer I was, and how essential it is to know that. I can sing 'girl', I can sing 'boy', I can sing 'everyone'. I can sing Gospel, RnB. And you will still feel the rawness in all of it if you really are with me. Now, if you come to judge me, then by all means, have a ball. But you'll miss it all, -- the reason why I sing that way, why my hair is long... I have considered removing myself from the equation, and taking over this "control" of life that we don't have... That's why it did not work, because I don't control it. I couldn't even do it correctly, that is how much I don't control shit. When my number is called, I'll accept it. And having a close brush-up with that... being as confident as I've always been... I missed so many opportunities... A label just told me they tried to pitch me to some people who are interested, but they didn't know how to package me. I told them I was a bomb-ass singer, who can perform the house down, darling! If you don't know how to speak on my behalf, I'll do it myself. My Black experience, my queer experience, my musical experience all tie in with that. Just knowing who I am now is greater than any kind of social movement I've ever experienced. I almost died without living out all of my dreams.

SMITH. What do you think the label meant when they say they did not know how to "package you"?

L'MARCO. "Is he gay? Is he bi? Does he like girls? You seem kind of masculine but then you seem kind of fem, you give me kind of Prince vibes, we don't know, etc., etc." And frankly, it sounds like everybody just wants to fuck, you know, when I'm listening to their critiques and stuffs, that's what I'm thinking, "oooo... you and your man are trying to get it." Did you not hear the song I just sang to you? Did you like the song? Did the beat move you? Did the voice get you? All you are worried about is who I might be interested in. If you wanna date, let's talk about that in another moment. Now if you don't know how to tell people "he can sing anything, he knows how to engage the crowd, and it's a genuine moment, I've seen it, I've witnessed him," if you can't vouch for me, even though you really are a fan and you love me, but you just don't know how to package me... after sitting with me telling my heart, we have a problem, right?

SMITH. I think that I've had an understanding of what to say about you when I saw you perform [*laugh*].

L'MARCO. People don't know how to package me: That's not a "gay" performer, that's not a "Black Soul" performer... Because they need to put me in a box. Well, if you don't know what that box is called, put that as a selling point... Just call me an artist and let the music speak for itself, and when people start booking me, if I get all of these pop concerts, then I guess I'm a pop artist. If all of the Latino people are booking me for Telemundo, then *andale*, let's go! You know what I'm saying? My Black experience is that everything that we have, we had to fight for it. Anything that I have now is an accomplishment. The smile on my face is an accomplishment. Recognizing that I am strong-willed and able to have a chance in this fucking country is an accomplishment. When I woke up this morning, I walked out and people were scared of me even in these tight pants! People were crossing the streets. Like Yolanda Adams said, "this may be where I live, but it's not gonna change me." I will always be Black... Who I'm attracted to changes day to day! So how can you put that as a selling point for me anyway, cause I had exes who I can't even stand to look at and one day they were just fine as fuck to me [*laugh*].

SMITH. Thank you for sharing that, on a real level. A lot of record labels packaging Black artists don't necessarily know how to do it. Whitney Houston, with her big voice from Newark, New Jersey, was packaged as "America's princess," and they did not know how to handle her pushing back against it. Have you ever pushed back against narratives constructed about you?

L'MARCO. My last tour started off so rocky – no shade to anybody that I worked with – but the feedback from the audiences was great, but the management that I was working with, was giving me feedback like "you're not conforming, we need you to appeal to this kind of audience..."

SMITH. Were they specific?

L'MARCO. Yes, like "we should be doing more Motown, more soul, people see you and are like... 'ahhh he's giving James Brown', you should definitely add some James Brown to your aesthetics, you should do Prince, 'cause you got the falsetto..." Or I can also sing my song, and you will get what I give you. And so once again, if knowing myself [*ha ha*] is the theme of the night, I'll say after 2009, I won't be moved too much and I move very strategically. I'm not just performing any old song. It means something to me. If I'm singing [*sings*] baby

baby baby baby, I guarantee you it makes sense in my brain, there is a reason why I keep singing that.

SMITH. It's intentional.

L'MARCO. It's not deep all the time, but it's intentional, yes... I watched the ratings go up and I just kept the show the same. Maybe the audience changed a little bit, or maybe my confidence changed. I kept thinking: I'm sticking to my guns, so I'm performing even harder." I have no idea...

SMITH. How do you use your art to challenge these stereotypes? You stick to what you know and you maintain your authenticity, but how do you promote the self-love that you now feel? And can this self-love translate to other marginalized communities? Is that your intention or is it a by-product that you are OK with?

L'MARCO. I travel a lot; I am fortunate in that way. But I also worked hard and pushed past a lot of things to get overseas, to see other cultures. I am very adaptable, like a chameleon. I'm myself always, but if I'm at temple, I'll take off my shoes and submerge myself in your atmosphere, in another culture. I'm trying to do what I want people to do for me, to just come and try to put yourself in my shoes for a moment. When I went to Asia, I did a few shows in China. The people were quiet the whole time, and then at the end they went wild with shouts and applause! They gave me respect the whole time, even though they probably wanted to jump in on the inside, but it was their way of being respectful. Black people are different, and if I can get it, then other people should be able to correlate. I really just try to learn and not be ignorant.

SMITH. And is there a place where you performed and felt extremely welcome outside of the U.S. or does this mostly happen here?

L'MARCO. I would say Thailand. Being considered exotic is a very unique experience, to be somewhere where nobody has seen anybody like me, in real life. Sometimes senior citizens who have gone their whole lifetime without seeing an African American person or a Brown-skin person at all react as if I'm literally an oracle, it is the strangest thing. It's fascinating. How fortunate I am to have this career, to have pushed past police brutality, and pushed past stupid allegations just because I'm Black, past getting pushed to the end of the line because I'm too rough around the edges... or too gospel grit, not masculine enough, not feminine enough, too tall, too short... I think I'm probably more famous outside the U.S.

SMITH. On June 1, 2022, Lil Nas X tweeted: “I just feel like Black gay people have to fight to be seen in this world and even when we make it to the top, motherfuckers try to pretend we are invisible.” What do you think about that?

L’MARCO. He is correct. I am living proof. He is one of the few who have been given a chance and he must be protected at all costs. I hope he keeps his head on straight and that the fame monster does not attack him... he’s seen enough of it to know. I’m older than him, so I’m looking at him, and I’m like “yes, bitch,” at least somebody is paying attention to somebody like me. He does not even know me, of course. But to know that there are other like-minded unicorns makes me secure in my Blackness and my queerness. Even if they don’t see me, they’re gonna see him. It’s a matter of representation. And unfortunately, in the Black community, just acknowledging that gay exists is important. People try to claim it’s not real. And even if you’re confused, it has nothing to do with my music... I’m pretty androgynous, I’ll “trade it up” and just “queen out” in the next performance so you don’t ever get used to me. I wake up and I feel a different kind of way each day and I’m inviting you on my ride, to do exactly what I’m doing, which is minding my business! And I really hope that more Black, gay and queer artists keep minding their business, keep being themselves, keep being outlandish, loud, defiant, saying, “how dare you?”

SMITH. How do you think that mainstream queer Black artists could support, encourage and empower other Black artists?

L’MARCO. Shout out! Shout out more indie artists! I post everybody, and I’m not even a huge celebrity, but if you’re a kid on the street and you are... [*imitating a silly performance*], I’m posting it. It is free, and most things of this nature disappear after 24 hours anyway, so what did it really do to me? But it can do something for you overnight. If we amplify these voices... I’m trying to amplify friends of mine, and new people. It’s not hard, but in the Black community, we have been fighting for everything for so long that we don’t know how to just share. Even at the top, they are fighting, because it’s so rare, it’s the first Black this, the first queer Black that. It’s the survival of the fittest. But you just keep making art and promoting it for each other, selling out pride and posting in each other’s story, it becomes a trend. Promote your music and it doesn’t matter who you sleep with, tell people to mind their business, thank you.

SMITH. Do you have any role models or inspirations who have influenced your understanding of intersectionality and self-love?

L'MARCO. There's an artist named Tonéx in the gospel community, who now goes by B.Slade. I saw him get ostracized from gospel music, even though he was so anointed, selling out theaters, getting awards...I watched all of these people crying for that song. He moved you, with whatever he was going through, and got you wherever you needed it to be at that time. But suddenly he's wearing those pants too tight and they want to find out who he was sleeping with, and shocker – it's a dude! They don't want him anymore, but they still want that song... He went from gospel to secular and back to the gospel. Why do this? Why make people do this when you could just mind your business.

SMITH. During an interview, the poet Danez Smith said that, even though they have a political mind, they hated having their poetry reduced to a form of activism. Are your songs and performances a form of activism?

L'MARCO. I'd like to think of it more as a movement. Activism stresses me out. I really try to be an example, you know? I do show up to the rallies, because obviously there is strength in numbers, but I also try to implement that in my daily life, and in my songs of liberation and self-exploration. Everything starts at home.

SMITH. S Queer Black people come out and see you perform and you're singing James Brown and Prince in one show... Do you think that that in itself is a form of activism?

L'MARCO. I mean, sure, if me acting like myself is activism, then yes, especially since most people are not themselves. But move carefreely, if you want to wear this kind of clothes and sing in a dive bar... I will go into a redneck bar and sing country music. I will meet you where you're at, and respect the culture, if you will listen to me. So, my activism is me being myself. My freedom and fearlessness on stage is my "activism." I have a Rosa Parks mentality, I have a Harriett Tubman mentality, gun in the face to the slave. If you're not coming with me, you're dying right here. Let's go. I'm moving. So come with me. I'm being free right now. Yes, I'm uncomfortable, yes, I see everybody staring at me, yes, I hear the whispers. I don't want to make me sound all high and mighty like I got my shit together. But I *also* know that I hated myself at one time and I almost took myself out, and you had nothing to do with that. What you thought about me was the least of my worries. The fact that I didn't think that I could trust myself to talk to you was even more heinous in my eyes.

SMITH. And do you think that this person, who almost took their life, still shows up in your performances today?

L'MARCO. Yes, he is a survivor. When those pills did not work, I promised myself, "God... if these pills reverse right now as I feel them shutting me down, I will never take another day for granted." It was a bad day, one of those storms people talk about, one of those lows, I'll acknowledge and call it for what it is. The voice says, "take yourself out, nobody can understand you, you're too this, you're too that...you are kind of famous, but your career should be here by now..." woah woah woah! Time out everybody. I say it on my record, if I'm gonna believe what everyone else says about me, why wouldn't I believe what I say about me? So: I'm dope, I'm a superstar, I'm attractive, even when I don't feel like it, fuck it! My music matters. Somebody in Indonesia is listening to it, even if it's just one person So, the silver lining is that feeling that low taught me that everything is fake, orchestrated. I realized the only person that is setting me apart is me. Now I can go to the hood and be natural, and figure out a way to reach people who can't understand me. We always want to be ourselves so much that we are missing each other, we don't know how to fall back and be "everybody."

SMITH. How do you envision the future of queer Black artists and what role do you believe they can play?

L'MARCO. I see queer Black artists taking over! It's already happening. Vogue is poppin' all of a sudden, everybody cares about the Black queer experience, whether they picked it up on *RuPaul Drag's Race* or like RuPaul, actually know where the phrases are from, it's reaching across the world. "The House of this," "the House of that..." They did not want the slaves to speak, they did not want the slaves to sing, because if anybody heard your song, they would know you were up to something, and now [*beatboxing*] the Afrobeat is everywhere. It's like the BLM movement: it has just been illuminated, but it was always there. The Black queer experience has always been there. Everybody is invited, but who turned the light on at the party? You can come to the cookout, but let's give honor to the runners who put the lights on.

SMITH. What about your role in this future?

L'MARCO. I exist, I've existed. I've already put myself out there. I'm a part of the Black and queer experiences, I'm a part of gay history, and I'm making sure that it stays alive, because somebody will always say [*sings his song*], "I heard that the word on the street is that I'm the word on the street." There will always be someone like me. I was influenced by what I've heard, so how can I do that for people, how can I give them the chance people that influenced me gave to me? I

know there are spaces I can get in that the drag queens can't get into. I can wear a suit and tie and go to a gala and sing for the president [*singing*] and be distinguished, and then I show up as my authentic self and still inspire the people that are watching.

SMITH. If you were one word, what would you be?

L'MARCO. Aware. I am aware that I don't know most things, but I'm taking it one day at a time. What I need to know, I will know. And that alone impacts my Blackness, my queerness, my music, my religion. I'm aware that there are a lot of people who believe different things about me.

Wrapping up our chat, L'Marco and I headed to the Monster Bar in the Village, where he joined the pianist to give an impromptu rendition of Bill Withers' classic, "A Lovely Day." A few months later, L'Marco communicated to me via Instagram, sharing, "I'm in love with this current era I'm in. It's very revitalizing, even for me, to see the progress I've made. The quality of this new tour is an astonishing event to me, considering I self-produced the whole thing, from having the show transcribed for an orchestra to making audio/lighting cues."

While discussing his catalog of songs, L'Marco singled out "Get There" for the impact it has on people, "that's the whole reason I'm in the music business." The lyrics of "Get There" reflect L'Marco's approach to life: "Don't get stuck in life / you just keep on moving / [...] let yourself feel, that's when you truly become aware / and figure out how to get there, / cause you ain't never gonna get there, until you get there..." A testament to resilience for a broader narrative within the Black and queer communities, his lyrics encourage acceptance of one's feelings and realities, an essential first step towards progress and self-love. The journey itself is the achievement.