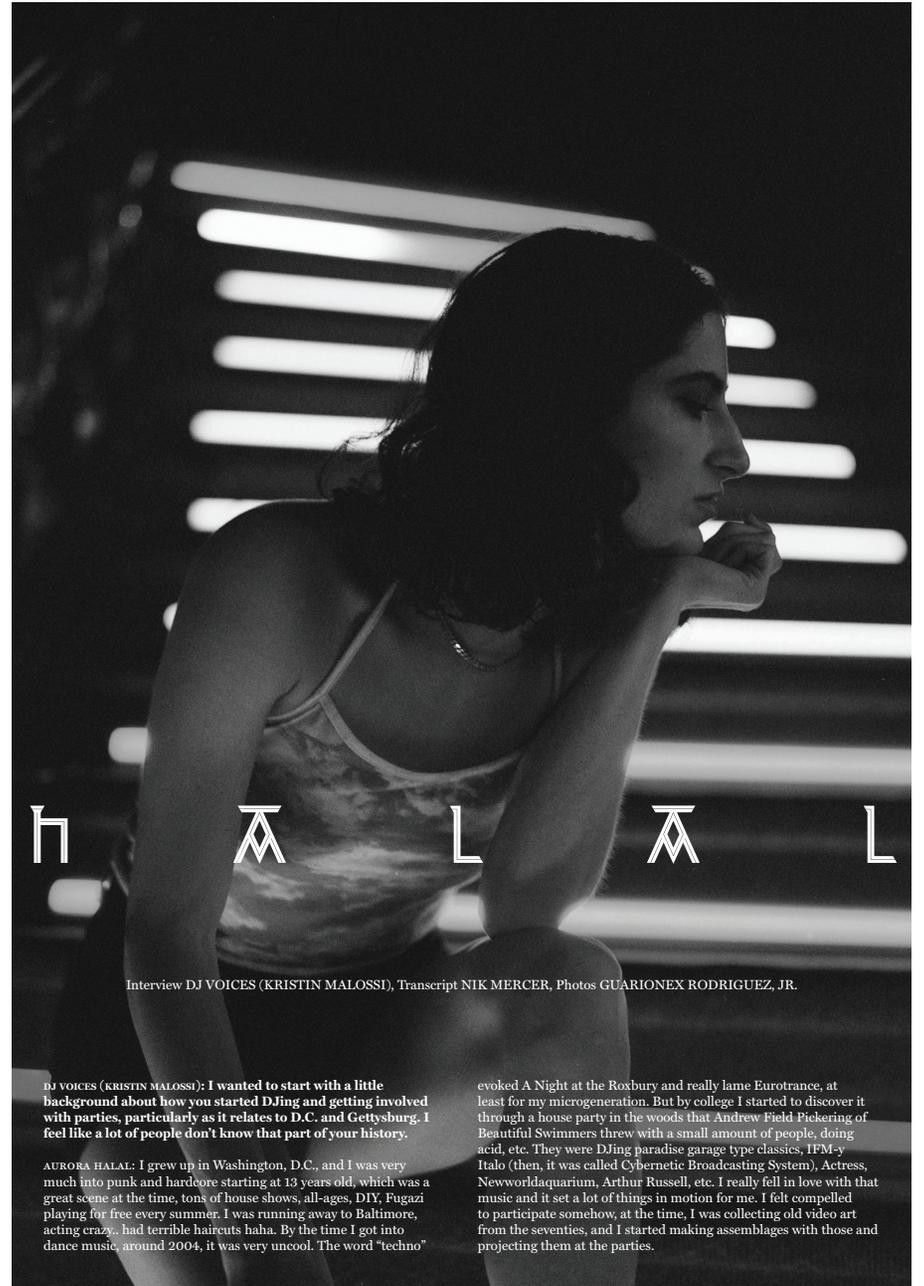


A U R O R A H A L A L



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Interview DJ VOICES (KRISTIN MALOSSI), Transcript NIK MERCER, Photos GUARIONEX RODRIGUEZ, JR.

DJ VOICES (KRISTIN MALOSSI): I wanted to start with a little background about how you started DJing and getting involved with parties, particularly as it relates to D.C. and Gettysburg. I feel like a lot of people don't know that part of your history.

AURORA HALAL: I grew up in Washington, D.C., and I was very much into punk and hardcore starting at 13 years old, which was a great scene at the time, tons of house shows, all-ages, DIY, Fugazi playing for free every summer. I was running away to Baltimore, acting crazy, had terrible haircuts haha. By the time I got into dance music, around 2004, it was very uncool. The word "techno"

evoked A Night at the Roxbury and really lame Eurotrance, at least for my microgeneration. But by college I started to discover it through a house party in the woods that Andrew Field Pickering of Beautiful Swimmers threw with a small amount of people, doing acid, etc. They were DJing paradise garage type classics, IFM-y Italo (then, it was called Cybernetic Broadcasting System), Actress, Newworldaquarium, Arthur Russell, etc. I really fell in love with that music and it set a lot of things in motion for me. I felt compelled to participate somehow, at the time, I was collecting old video art from the seventies, and I started making assemblages with those and projecting them at the parties.

LOVE INJECTION

It wasn't until a few years later that I started making my own music, first as synth weirdness with my friends Jan Woo & Pam Finch, then a group called Secondlife, then as a duo with [Jason] "Steve Summers" [Lektiewicz], in a band called Innergaze, which was sort of minimal wave-type music with an '80s, synths etc. Actually, at the time, I wanted to make proper dance music, but I didn't really understand how to, and it wasn't until we split up that I started my own solo music. Since I was only one person, I used an MPC and sent MIDI from it instead of hand-playing everything, and that alone turned it into the type of sound I had in mind, because it was loopy by default. I never had the intention to make any specific type of techno; I just sort of had this feeling of "my techno: I soon did live sets and from there it developed pretty quickly.

After another two years or so I started DJing, and to be honest, I really didn't want to at first. Since my friends were these fine-tuned record collector types, I figured that I would never have the type of collection or the nerdiness or the expertise to pull it off, so I never tried. I know it sounds funny but I always "collected" special MP3s I got from Souleek, coveted my various favorite youtube links, but didn't care so much about having anything physical, or it's rareness as object etc, and a lot of the mythology around DJing was about that so it kind of scared me away. But then we got CDs at our house and it was messing around with those that I got really inspired, and I figured it didn't even matter if I was good, I could just try it anyway. I did a low key first gig for a friend and it just made me hooked, so I kept practicing and practicing.

It was actually perfect that I learned with these crappy old CDs because the BPM [counter] was wrong on them, so I learned to beatmatch by ear. Now I still put tape over the BPM counter on my decks at home because it makes it more fun. I'm very into the digital format - I edit tracks a lot, just taking out a break, looping a part, adding drums, moving sections around. And getting to play something I just recorded or downloaded.

Let's talk about the early days of Mutual Dreaming. Can you share a bit about what it is and how it's grown and changed over the years?

It started in 2010, around the time I was playing as a duo and after I'd gone to Gettysburg. I was basically trying to create the type of parties I wanted to go to, with my imagination filled from the history of all this cool music I was just getting into—I was watching The New Dance Show from Detroit, boogie music videos, fascinated with Drexciya, etc, and wanting to create these situations.

One of my first parties had a catwalk and was called New Dance City. It was a really playful situation for me to every couple of months invite DJs I was interested in and make a flyer for it, everything was very low pressure as the rent at these DIY venues was cheap. I was doing visuals at the time and trying lights and fog. Looking back, my "installations" were incredibly janky, but it was fun to try things. Since then, it's improved massively by including people like Nitemind who are actual experts trying to push things to new levels. But, in the beginning, the jankiness was part of what I loved about it so much. It was this very free-for-all, grungy romp, where anything felt possible. Always in

random spaces, never a club. The clubs available at the time, Cielo and Club Love and all that - seemed very lame to me. Also, it was really all about re-doing a space that never normally had dance events, and renting speakers, deciding where to put the booth, and how I wanted to try some kind of lighting. That was half the fun. Still is.

At the time, there were so few parties like that for people of my age group. But to my surprise they were very much up for it, and were bringing this cool, fresh, excited energy, with lots of influences from different places. I still think that's super true too.

This was the same era of the L.I.E.S., White Material, 100% Silk, RVNG, Bossa Nova Civic club just opening etc, and it was exciting to put artists on a platform that felt more ambitious than the shows that used to be happening. In this early-tens era, all the local electronic acts were playing rock-format shows: you'd play on a weird, crappy table and no one would ever really dance, and it just felt really stale. My concept was to have this stuff actually live up to the potential I thought it had, have it be a real party. These artists weren't part of the previous dance scene and didn't aspire to be a part of it, either, so it was creating a new type of culture around it.

So that was the beginnings and it's hard to separate my memories of the scene from the intense newness and enthusiasm I had in those years. But now 7 years later it's gone through lots of phases and tightened up a lot, we've done 1 huge warehouse party, but mostly aim to do what I like to jokingly refer to as "medium room". Big room meaning dumb + commercial, small room as in 80 people, single red bulb, a blown out speaker but sick and underground. Instead of either extreme I like the feeling of 300-500 people, massive speakers and a really heaving vibe to a performance that's deep + powerful. The tingly we're all in this together feeling. But we only do like 2 Mutual Dreamings a year now since Sustain has mostly take over as the place where I pour all that energy into once a year.

And would you play these as well or were you just doing visuals?

I played live at a few of them, and later DJed every once in a while.

Now it's known for being quite a techno thing.

And house! I'd say we focus on music that doesn't conform to a tight genre category.

How did you come up with the idea for Sustain-Release?

Well, I wanted to throw a big Mutual Dreaming in the woods. Definitely not a "festival". Any time I went to a festival in Europe, besides Unsound or something similar, I didn't like it. I was more inspired by Gettysburg, where everyone leaves their comfort zone & bonds really hard, what I called a "heads summit" haha. So I'd been wanting to do that for years and was casually looking at spaces when I met Zara Wladawsky, who also wanted to do a festival because she had gone to Freerotation for years. With the two of us working on it together, within a year we found a venue and launched the first one in 2014 as Sustain-Release. In 2017, Zara left and Daniel Martin-McCormick took over as the co-director. It's been very important to me that it be entirely

DIY and stay that way, without funding, branding, streaming, press, not grow too much etc. We've been figuring it out as we go along, and I'm really grateful for the many many ups and downs.

I don't know if you'd call them residents, but Beta Librae is playing again, and DJ Python and Powder played a few times. Could you talk about both what you look for in the bookings and also the storytelling aspect over the years?

We try to always have it be something fresh, but like the idea of bringing people back for re-contextualized sets. DJ Python and Beta Librae have DJ'd before, but this time they'll do live sets, and I'm super excited for Powder to do the 8-hour closing after her epic appearance 2 years ago. I just love the idea of the... "ohhhhh now its serious" return-round.

The overall concept for our bookings is simply music we're obsessed with or curious about. We want it to be things that are relevant to what's happening in the world and new movements in art, but not necessarily things that are hype-y or just popular—we want to focus on interesting new ideas. What I would want to dance to, basically.

Typically, you and Daniel will play?

We've played each edition besides last year. Usually separately, but this time will do it together as Halal & Relaxer.

What's it like, playing Sustain for you?

It's very emotional. All the work and preparation that goes into Sustain is basically a vortex of excitement, racing thoughts, and stress - I'll be dealing with things like the shuttle buses getting caught in ditches, a fire alarm that won't turn off, an artist driver who couldn't find them in the airport, etc, while also trying to envision the bigger picture of the music, and then letting go of all that and having an experience with that music. By the time I actually sink into it, it's a big feeling of release, and when performing all of that energy goes directly into it. And then feeling the vibes from this incredible crowd that shows up for it just blows my mind.

I was wondering if there's a way that you would describe your sound to someone who's not familiar with you.

I would say that what I'm trying to do is something intimate and intense. I want to create a powerful dance experience, but one that's also for your mind, with an emotional resonance that goes between dreamy reflection and intense confrontations.. Light + dark.

How do you feel about being described as a psychedelic DJ?

I feel it's accurate because I find that dance music plus mushrooms or acid to be the purest form for me. If I can create a psychedelic experience for someone, I've reached my goal.

Aside from psychedelics, what are some of your other inspirations as a DJ?

I love going out and dancing and I try to integrate those influences. Various thoughts get lodged deep after a set that stick with me. Over the years I was fascinated with Sandwell

/ Function's what I called "evil steam", Joey Anderson's slippery-ness, Josey's rude 'tude. The nastiness of the vocals in Gesloten Cirkel. Stuff like that.

I'd say my first biggest musical influences would be the thought of Mancuso's Loft parties, even though I don't play music like that. I try to think of it as always something more meaningful than a frivolous drinking environment, a place that can transform you.

Sound wise, I'm very much influenced by Drexciya, Rrose, early Plastikman —things that worldbuild, are atmospheric, a bit introspective.

I definitely play lots of modern techno too, and I love the energy and power in it, the crazed evilness. But I don't really love most of what's considered "proper techno," that overall zeitgeist bores me to tears honestly, when it's very monotonous. Even though I play places like focus on that sound, and collect releases on Semantica etc, I'm never really wanna be adhering to this linear, rolling formula; I want it to be something that has twists and turns and mixes up rhythms, that's not within a certain box of expectations.

How do you respond to having certain expectations of your sound placed on you?

When I started playing at Berghain, I internalized a lot of fear that I was going to disappoint people by doing my thing. That never stopped me from doing it though, because A: I don't know how to do it otherwise; and B: I probably wouldn't be good at trying to fit into that sound, so why bother? But over the years, I've found the response is extra strong when I'm being myself and doing my purest voice. I feel like I'm letting myself down when I'm not pushing the limits of my sound. That's my biggest pressure for sure. Living up to what I'm hoping to do is actually really, really hard.

What's been your favorite DJing experience over the last year?

The all-night at Nowadays in January was my favorite experience this year for sure. But definitely Berghain, De School and Nowadays. There's something in common with all three of those - they draw an open minded music crowd that's actively craving an experience, they have a booth that makes you feel hidden, and the sound + lights are a spaceship. That combination is just perfect.

Was there a recent time when you cleared the floor or didn't feel like you were in tune with everyone in the room?

Touring, I'm sometimes in weird environments that make no sense at all for my music. In the last years I played my live set at a few festivals during the day time and I was just like... what am I doing with my life?? It's obviously not working for a crowd of random drunk people who want happy house music in the sunshine, and who can blame them?! hahaha. Honestly, you feel like you suck and you're letting everyone down just by doing your music, and then you can't focus so you start to actually suck. Those experiences can drain you so badly. But the right environment is such a magic thing that turns it into something way more intense than it could ever be outside of it. I live for that as a dancer and DJ.

AURORA HALAL

I've noticed your typical setup is three CDJs, and you do a ton of looping. It seems you've usually got all three of them going at the same time. Could you share your preferred setup? Favorite DJ tricks or techniques?

I like to have 3 or 4 CDJs. One of them is reserved for playing atmospheric sounds, like a vocal I recorded, whale sounds, a long hanging note, rushing sound, or chord I made in the studio, an ambient track, etc. Then in addition, having two decks alone feels really limiting because I like to load two different options of what's next, and then impulsively choose which one I want. I love that flow of having a lot of things at your fingertips. Almost always loop the end of one track to do a long blend to the next, or bring in a fragment loop of a track without ever playing the whole thing.

Ideally, I want to pull off really long, interactive blends. That's a big part of what's fun about the DJ sets, trying to come up with things on the fly that will work well together.

I think you've played in almost all the new venues that have popped up in NYC recently, and seem to have your finger on the pulse of the scene. Can you summarize your feelings about the state of partying in New York right now?

I feel really excited. There's an explosion of new venues and people going out. That earlier era I was talking about feels so long ago, and it was so full of promise, and I loved the feeling of beginner-ness to it, but I also really love seeing the outcome of it, the slow, gradual enthusiasm. They understand how to rave now, but it seems like there's constantly new people coming in who are first discovering it.

It's also really surprising that the amount of people has grown so much that there can be so many simultaneous venues, it did not used to be like that! I live at Myrtle-Broadway and its such a strip - between Bossa Nova Civic Club, Mood Ring, Happy Fun Hideaway, the taco spot... there's this energy on the streets. Tons of trans kids too, which is great to see. It feels like this exciting moment for New York, and I really love being part of that.

Right now, it's in a sweet spot, where I don't feel like it's reached the mainstream, but, if it did, it would probably mean the decline. Before, it was this secret, low simmer, but... I don't really know if it's heading that way. And things like Cityfox have existed, and they siphon off such a large amount of mainstream dance consumers, so it doesn't necessarily mean they're going to infiltrate all the small underground things. I've found that the crowd has stayed consistently cool.

It might sound like the 2010s were the glory days, but compared to now they really weren't. The crowd was super inexperienced; there were a lot of issues with groping and sexual harassment, which, thankfully, have really gone down. And it was mostly (like literally 80-90%) white men at the parties, but finally I've seen this enormous amount of cool, young, diverse crowds from all backgrounds all mixing it up. That's so awesome and makes the parties so much better.

Just a few years ago, the Oakland [Ghost Ship] fire happened, which made that diy era sort of end, and it also really made us aware of how unsafe a lot of these spaces we'd been using

are. Like, I'd been using the Taaffe [Place loft] for years, which was so fun, but it reminds me of the Ghost Ship and that scares me and makes me feel guilty. The fact that places like Nowadays can get the format right and have the underground feeling while still being safe and having an insane sound system and good drinks, it's a huge relief.

Going to these places in Europe like Robert Johnson and De School, people would be like, "Oh, where do you go in New York?" It's hard for them to understand the fact we had no cool clubs; we just had great parties occasionally. They'd visit and go to all these crappy clubs, like "New York sucks!" So to me, it makes me proud we actually have cool clubs now. Having official clubs is a good thing.

You have a pretty limited social media presence. You said you used to be pretty hesitant to give interviews. I don't think I've seen you do any big streaming parties. Do you feel like that's still the case?

I just don't like modern DJ culture that much and all the social media of it makes me feel weird. I've seen hype take the life out of so many things, and it's something I've never thought of as a good thing. With Sustain-Release, for example, on a very immediate level, attention equals problems: having a huge amount of people interested and finding out about it threatens its existence. The less exposure, the better. Generally, what I want for both my art as a performer and for Sustain-Release is that it's something you find in person or through a record or a podcast that you have a music experience with. I don't really like the ephemera around it; I want it to be something you have an immediate and emotional connection with first. Hopefully, you're invited into it through some small bits of media, but that, really, the point is the thing itself. That's my philosophy about it.

What's on the horizon?

I have a record that just came out, with four tracks of mine and 2 Wata Igarashi remixes. I've been home for a while to work on Sustain and enjoy the New York summer. I got my very first music studio, that I'm sharing with [Kristin] "DJ Voices" [Malossi], which I'm excited about. Halal & Relaxer is recording an EP. I'm moving towards a more focused recording schedule which feels good. I don't have any specific new plans.

Could you tell us what [your mix,] the Summer of Self-love, is all about?

It's a play on the "summer of love" which was the hippy movement in '69, and then again in '89 in the UK when rave exploded. Now it's 2019. I feel like it's been a really hectic year... years? The world feels like it's moving in a million different directions, and I'm not sure we could summarize the movement we're experiencing in the same ways, it's all super post-modern and rapidly changing. But I just really like the idea of putting on your headphones, focusing on yourself, and figuring out what you want in life and with yourself.

Sustain Release Year Six takes place September 12-15 at Camp Kennybrook.

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