

Last Night a DJ Queered My Life: Disrupting the Mythologies
of a Popular Media Practice

by

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Abstract

DJing is an important cultural practice that emerged in the United States in the 1970s. The development of its craft, techniques, and technologies over the past five decades has made DJing into a formidable performed cultural practice and art. The metaphors for a disc jockey, or DJ, are many: beat conductor, god, mastermind, and savior, to name a few. The popular perception of what a DJ does is exaggerated by overrepresented elements of a DJ performance, most notably scratching the sound source and utilizing studio production technique. I ask, if these standard conceptions of DJing are centered on the male figure of a DJ, what are the lived experiences of women and nonbinary DJs? This project examines queer and feminist DJ practice through ethnographic research with women and nonbinary DJs of color. From this research, I produced a 5-episode short form podcast series, *From The Decks*. The podcast format not only provides information about the various findings, it inserts the artists and their sounds into the research. Included in this thesis is the text of the interviews in their entirety so that the archive will have the in-depth detail of the cultural practice within the contemporary arena of media and communication

Thesis Supervisor: Vivek Bald,

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**Last Night a DJ Queered My Life: Exploring and Disrupting the Mythologies of
a Popular Critical Media Practice**

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INTRODUCTION

Since its beginnings in the 1970s, DJing has emerged as an important cultural practice, one that is ubiquitous in popular music across the United States, Europe and many parts of the world. At its simplest, the work of a disc jockey, or DJ, can be understood as playing a continuous stream of music over a sound system. The term was first used in an article in *Variety* magazine in 1941 to refer the radio announcer speaking before playing a record as if to ride the track.¹ In the contemporary context, the DJ has emerged as a figure that plays music in a variety of locations for the purpose of a listening audience, frequently in spaces to stimulate dancing and movement.

This musical stream requires the connection of two playback devices (turntables, CD decks, computer drives) to a mixer, which is a central device that regulates the output of each device through volume controls and/or a crossfader. The end result is continuous sound. Over the past four decades, DJs have developed a set of specific techniques as part of the craft and, along with technological advances, have forged DJing into a performance-based cultural practice and art form.

This project takes a close look at DJing as a media-centered cultural practice.

Media historian Lisa Gitelman defines media as:

socially realized structures of communication, where structures include both technological forms and their associated protocols, and where communication is a cultural practice, a ritualized co-location of different people on the same mental map, sharing or engaged with popular ontologies of representation. As such, media are unique and complicated historical subjects. Their histories must be social and cultural, not the stories of how one technology leads to another, or of isolated geniuses working their magic on the world.²

¹ Bill Brewster and Frank Broughton. *Last Night A DJ Saved My Life* (London: Grove Press, 1999)

² Lisa Gitelman. *Always Already New: Media, History, and the Data of Culture*. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2008), 10.

As Gitelman asserts, the study of media must go beyond examining media technologies in isolation to consider the social and cultural contexts within which they emerge, change, and develop.

DJing is also, specifically, a *popular* media practice. DJs perform at weddings, music festivals, in nightclubs, as members of bands, and at any number of venues where audiences listen and dance to music. This relationship of DJing to the popular, to daily life and community formation, makes it an important object of study. As cultural studies scholar Stuart Hall puts it:

Popular culture is one of the sites where [the] struggle for and against a culture of the powerful is engaged: it is also the stake to be won or lost in that struggle. It is the arena of consent and resistance. It is partly where hegemony arises, and where it is secured. It is not a sphere where socialism, a socialist culture – already fully formed – might be simply ‘expressed’. But it is one of the places where socialism might be constituted. That is why ‘popular culture’ matters. Otherwise, to tell you the truth, I don’t give a damn about it.³

The impetus for this project is my own experience working as a DJ for over twenty-five years and seeing neither my lived experiences nor the social and cultural contexts within which I perform reflected in the available discourses on DJing.

I was born in London, England in the early 1970s to Punjabi parents who were child refugees of the Indian and Pakistani Partition of 1947. After a forbidden love marriage in 1968, they moved with my older sister, who was two at the time, to London. They were quickly immersed in a Punjabi community – albeit a new and different one, as they were from the city of New Delhi and many of the immigrants in London were from rural parts of the Indian state of Punjab. The Punjabi communities in the UK were part of a migration spurred by the labor shortage in post- World War

³ Stuart Hall. “Notes on Deconstructing the Popular.” In *People’s History and Socialist Theory*. Ed. Raphael Samuel (London: Routledge, 1981), 239.

II Britain in the late 1950s and 1960s. And when they left their villages for Britain, they brought with them their cultural traditions, including music.

Six years after they arrived in England, my parents moved to New York City to pursue better economic opportunities. Another four years in, they bought a house in Westbury, Long Island, a suburban area twenty-five miles away from Manhattan which was where my father ran numerous small businesses. This “Village,” as it was designated, was racially and economically diverse but the school system was segregated. White families primarily sent their children to private schools and the public school system was largely made up of Black students. After one year of private school, due to economic hardship, I entered public school as a sixth grader.

Growing up in Westbury exposed me to the rich culture of second generation Caribbean Americans. I also witnessed the birth of hip-hop as we were in close proximity to the Queens hip-hop scene. Hip-hop, the music as well as its five elements of graffiti, breakdancing, DJing, MCing, and knowledge, was the dominant topic of conversation in school. Many of my classmates were actively engaged in breakdancing, graffiti, and composing rap lyrics.

In my interviews for this project, I asked many of my subjects if they remember the first time they saw a DJ. Three of us have the same memory of watching the 1984 Grammy Awards on TV and seeing Herbie Hancock perform a live version of his track “Rock It”. A *New York Times* write-up of the performance, published the next day, states that it “featured synth drums, a stacked keyboard rig and a D.J. behind a set of Technics 1200s — Grand Mixer DST — whose scratching made him the track’s breakout hero.”⁴ This performance was all the seventh

⁴ Nate Chinen. “Two Turntables and a Keytar: The Night Herbie Hancock Rocked the Grammys.” *The New York Times* (New York, NY), February 8, 2016.

graders could talk about at my school the next day. Yet, as much I was moved by that performance and as much as I became immersed in hip-hop music from that moment onward, I did not envision the possibility of being “behind the decks” – of being a DJ myself.

In 1986, when I was fifteen, my mother went to England to attend the wedding engagement celebration of a family that my parents were close with when they lived there. She brought me back a cassette tape of Birmingham-based Bhangra singer Malkit Singh’s album, *Upfront*, as it was very popular at the event. The music was groundbreaking. It was a departure from the South Asian popular music of Hindi language films—the term Bollywood was not yet in parlance—to which I had thus far been exposed. The vocals were in Punjabi, my parents’ mother tongue, but in a different dialect. The rhythms were electrifying.

A few years later, two of my male cousins, Nitin and Deepak, moved from India to the States with the intention of settling down here. Our age difference—they were four and six years younger—felt significant at the time. But, since I was attending Queens College on the same plot of land as their high school, our close proximity to each other fostered a relationship. Our growing bond over music deepened our connection. Through their South Asian classmates, they were getting remixes of Punjabi songs layered and mixed with hip-hop, dancehall, and electronic beats.

The vocals of Malkit Singh, the artist I fell in love with a few years earlier, were now embedded in an eleven-plus minute track, *Golden Star U.K. Ragga Muffin Mix* (1991), by U.K.-based Punjabi producer Bally Sagoo. Sonically, this medley embodied the Caribbean sounds of dancehall that I was exposed to living in Westbury and incorporated a DJ aesthetic of blending in the various songs from

Malkit Singh's band Golden Star. The style of music is referred to as Bhangra, and, more specifically, since it came from Great Britain, it was also known as UK Bhangra.

During this time in the early 1990s, my cousins and I saw the emergence of DJs in the Indian community at cultural events and social gatherings. We felt our combined musical knowledge of Indian and American music and my unused credit card would be enough for us to form our own DJ crew. On June 26, 1992, our "Sangam Sounds" was the DJ crew for hire for a little boy named Ankush's first birthday party at Bombay Harbor restaurant in New Hyde Park, New York. The DJ set up consisted of two consumer CD players, including one that I pulled out of my parent's hi-fi rack system, a Radio Shack Public Address System mixer, a tape deck, a receiver (also from the parents' hi-fi rack system), and a set of low quality carpeted DJ speakers. We had only 15 CDs, which caused us to repeat several key tracks-- a DJ no-no. In our inexperience with the technology, we did not account for the receiver, which was powering the speakers, overheating. This necessitated borrowing a fan from a college classmate who lived close by. The compensation for the night was \$51.

From there, the gigs became more lucrative. We slowly amassed music in the form of several crates of physical vinyl records and CDs. Within a couple of years we had two turntables, a professional mixer, a commercial grade amplifier, and DJ speakers, as well as several crates of records and CDs. Meanwhile, due to family circumstances, Nitin first, and then Deepak a few months later, returned to India.

My role in the crew was gendered. Being older, owning a car, and possessing a credit card established me as the informal head of operations. Nitin took on the actual act of DJing. Then, when he left, Deepak took on this role. In fact, when Nitin

left, Deepak had very little experience on the decks, but we worked out a system where I would select the music and he would be the one to actually play it. Upon Deepak's departure, I was left with several thousand pieces of music and a slew of bookings, but I had not actually DJed.

Through my networks, I was introduced to Joy Bhattacharya, another student who DJed at his college radio station. He agreed to help me on my next booked gig on August 4, 1995, a 40th birthday party for one my parents' friends, seventy miles away from my home in Westbury. Joy was also living at home a few miles away from me. That summer Friday, I picked him up after his car died and we made our way through rush hour traffic. After many of the guests arrived, we set up on a multi-shelf computer table, putting the different pieces of gear on various shelves. I had given Deepak many of the CDs we accumulated as a parting gift so I had to resort to using cassette tapes for some of the tracks.

Over the next year, I greatly improved my rudimentary DJ skills by spending hours in Joy's parents' basement where the gear was set up on a ping-pong table. He was very adept in spinning and patiently imparted his knowledge. One year later, on August 4, 1996, Joy and I performed in front of 5,000 people at Central Park's SummerStage to support Qawwali⁵ singer Abidha Parveen and Pakistani rock band Junoon.

Socially and creatively, we became immersed in the burgeoning South Asian party scene in New York. Competing crews would rent out different venues, usually on holiday weekends when the mainstay club crowds were out of town and the clubs had an extra day to fill. This was one of the only ways that South Asian and other

⁵ Qawwali, also spelled qavvali, in India and Pakistan, an energetic musical performance of Sufi Muslim poetry that aims to lead listeners to a state of religious ecstasy—to a spiritual union with Allah(God). The music was popularized outside of South Asia in the late 20th century, owing largely to its promotion by the world-music industry. (Gorlinski, <https://www.britannica.com/art/qawwali>)

non-dominant groups could get access to mainstream venues. We were hired to DJ these events, pejoratively called Indian or Desi Parties. The competition extended to securing choice spaces on coveted weekends. Meanwhile, the aim for many party promoters, then, as it still is today, was to get a moneyed professional crowd in the door. As Joy and I were gaining a reputation for playing good music, our bookings increased but so did the directives on what to play. We were frequently told not to play too much hip-hop or Bhangra, the styles of music I fell in love with as a teenager.

In November of 1996, Joy and I were asked by Ethnic Folk Arts,⁶ an organization dedicated to presenting different immigrant art forms, to participate in a program celebrating the range of Indian dance styles. We were there to represent the Desi Party scene and its embrace of South Asian dance music and club culture. Also on the bill was the Toronto-based band, Punjabi by Nature. Ethnic Folk Arts tried to get the band a second gig since they were driving fourteen hours to perform in New York City. They reached out to SOBs, Sounds of Brazil, a live music and club venue that was known at the time to feature World Music. The bookers at SOBs did not have any openings at the time but offered them a gig in February, the slowest and coldest month, of the following year. Joy and I were hired to help promote the night. We were paid in part by the number of people who brought discount flyers to the door with our hand-marked initials.

That cold February night, the venue was packed and the booker at SOBs asked us to come up with a concept for a monthly night. Since this was a music venue and not an off-season nightclub, they were interested in the style of our music, which fit SOB's brand as a place for global sounds. They were also one of the few

⁶ The organization is now called Center for Traditional Music and Dance.

clubs that embraced hip-hop at that time, as hip-hop was still seen as niche music for a Black audience and was not yet part of mainstream radio play.

Joy and I had been feeling increasingly frustrated by the directives we got from Indian party promoters to not play Black music as it was perceived to attract a more unruly crowd and to not to play Bhangra music as it was associated with cab drivers and seen to draw a lower-class/non-professional Punjabi crowd. So, when SOBs asked Joy and me to come up with a concept for a monthly event we decided on these two genres that we loved: hip-hop and Bhangra. The idea that certain kinds of music would draw “undesirable” people was not a concern for SOBs. They saw commercial potential in serving a new audience that liked to drink, fortifying the revenues of a given night. They had experience with weekly events marketing to the Haitian American community and did a lot programming that focused on New York’s many underserved immigrant and diaspora communities. So we conceived of Basement Bhangra as a night where we would spin “Bhangra music with a hip-hop sensibility.”

The creative freedom to play whatever I wanted spoke to my commitment to create an inclusive space. At this time, I was also active in South Asian community organizations. Galvanized by a wave of violence by a group that called themselves the “Dotbusters” as they targeted Indian immigrants in the Jersey City area in the late 1980s, second-generation South Asian law students in New York City formed an organization, Yaar.⁷ I found out about Yaar when they organized an action to support Dr. Kaushal Saran, a victim of a hate crime whose attackers were on trial; they were later acquitted. As a means to raise funds to continue the work for civil rights education, I suggested we start hosting a monthly event. From an ad in the

⁷ A word that can be translated into “friend” in several South Asian language including Urdu, Hindi, and Punjabi.

local arts paper, the Village Voice, I found a club space that could be rented out for \$500. This monthly night brought together different intersections of academics, members of the LGBTQ community, and activists interested in social justice. This moment in New York also witnessed the formation and rise of other South Asian community organizations including the New York Taxi Workers Alliance, and Sakhi for South Asian Women.⁸

As luck would have it, Bally Sagoo, whose productions had sparked my cousins and me to form a DJ crew several years earlier, had signed a worldwide record deal with Columbia Records, a division of Sony Music. The label was looking for places to promote his two albums, *Rising from the East* and *Bollywood Flashback*. Our about-to-be launched club night was a perfect fit for Sagoo to get in front of a South Asian club audience in New York. The first official Basement Bhangra night was launched with him as the headliner.

The crowd that night comprised of Joy's and my social circles, record label professionals, and New Yorkers who looked to SOB's as a place to discover and listen to non-mainstream music. Also present were people from activist circles, many of whom were of the LGBTQ community and/or in the academy. The next twenty years of this monthly party became the base for my artistic career. Joy gave up DJing in 2000 but, for me, it became a viable and fulfilling way to realize my artistic self.

The voluminous press attention the party generated during its tenure contributed to greater visibility for South Asians as part of American society and culture. Its success was a springboard for many great creative opportunities in sound design and remixing. It also provided a secure foundation to launch other club

⁸ Sakhi works to end gendered violence in South Asian communities. I was a summer intern there in 1992 and secured Sangam Sounds' 2nd gig for their 5th annual fundraiser.

nights like Mutiny, Bollywood Disco, and Lipstick Optional. Basement Bhangra taught me how to create and hold space. The act of presenting the night encompassed curating the performers, the design and production of physical and digital flyers used for branding and information, projection of visuals that were mixed live during the event, and the use of various DJ methods to disseminate sound to a room of dancing bodies.

From 1997 to 2017, when Basement Bhangra had its final club night at SOBs, DJing witnessed many technological and social transformations. The DJ booth was perched out of view above the bar in 1997 and by the last night all DJ performances were done from the stage in full view of the audience. The main media transitioned from vinyl records and CDs to mp3 files, played off a computer via specially-modified turntables and DJ software. Spreadable media⁹ was also present here in the textual reiterations through flyers, which were then incorporated into the video screens and merchandise. This history is partly documented in media coverage, which was consistent from the beginning of Basement Bhangra to its very end, when WNYC Radio produced and aired a program reflecting on the event's twenty years.

Basement Bhangra is an example of what media scholar Henry Jenkins has termed convergence culture. As Jenkins writes:

By **convergence**, I mean the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences who would go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they wanted. Convergence is a word that manages to describe technological, industrial, cultural, and social changes, depending on who's speaking and what they think they are talking about.¹⁰

⁹ Henry Jenkins. *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture*. (New York City: NYU Press, 2013).

¹⁰ Henry Jenkins. "Welcome to Convergence Culture." *Henry Jenkins* (personal website), June 19, 2006, http://henryjenkins.org/blog/2006/06/welcome_to_convergence_culture.html.

In the context of DJing, I would argue that “convergence is a word that manages to describe technological, industrial, cultural, and social changes, depending on who's **[spinning]** and what they think they are **[dancing]** about.”

My career as a DJ was not limited to Basement Bhangra or club nights. My DJ schedule included spinning at an array of events at different cultural institutions. At last count, I have spun at over twenty-three museums; events for organizations, both corporate and non-profit; music festivals; private events such as birthday parties, celebrity weddings and related celebrations; and, even the White House under the Obama Administration.

This notoriety led to an Artist-in-Residence appointment at NYU's Asian/Pacific/American Institute. In return, I curated events and conversations and became part of the creative and intellectual community of the Institute during the tenure of the residency. I was given an opportunity to teach undergraduates for one semester, which led to more academic teaching opportunities at the University. I was also asked to do the sound design for Sarah Jones' one-woman play, which made its way from off-Broadway to Broadway and eventually won a Tony Award. As DJ Reborn states in her interview, working in theatre and other music-related arenas is an extension of the DJ practice.

In 2009, I released *DJ Rekha presents Basement Bhangra*, a mix CD comprised of existing and original tracks in the style of a set at the club night. The album release led to a rigorous tour schedule the following year. Because the nature of the music on the CD did not easily fit into existing popular mainstream music genres (e.g. none of the tracks were in English), the gigs to promote the album were not part of a geographically organized tour but a mix of festivals in venues that crisscrossed the continental United States, Hawai'i and Canada. The tour was

lucrative but exhausting. With no built-in support or significant fan base outside of the coasts, I would sometimes play to spare rooms. My management and booking agent put the burden of promotion on me in places that had little or no South Asian people. By 2012, I was let go from the booking relationship. I fired my management whose strategy was simply to repeat what they had already done for a white male cis-gender dubstep producer: build a grassroots fan base by playing events attended by the jam-band and Burning Man communities; he eventually fired them too.

I reflect here on my career, in part to emphasize that I have been an active practitioner with expertise in several arenas stemming from my DJ practice. Yet, one consistent thread throughout the many times I have been asked to discuss my work, from interviews for undergraduate term papers to a CNN artist profile to a music industry panel, is the question: what is it like to be a “woman DJ”? The posing of the question itself both reflects and contributes to the need to ask it. The assumption embedded in this question about gender and this popular media practice is that there is an inherent burden on women in their ability to successfully perform DJing. In the course of my fieldwork for this project, I never ask this question. My intervention here is to investigate the practice of DJs who are women and nonbinary people of color, and not in contrast or opposition to cisgender male DJs.

THE DJ IN POPULAR CULTURE

The dominant metaphors for a disc jockey, or DJ, are many: beat conductor, god, mastermind, and savior, to name a few. These rhetorical associations are inherently masculine in their conception and imply a dramatic and patriarchal power relationship between the DJ and the audience they serve. In this popular conception of the DJ, the markers of, and route to, success are based in a path of autodidactic learning, from practicing in a bedroom to breaking into a scene, followed by releasing remixes and recorded music to an eventual significant financial reward and notoriety. This dominant narrative relies on myths of perseverance and innate talent for success.

Origin stories are powerful in defining the nature of a technological practice, a genre, or a method of production. There are three widely accepted histories for what we know to represent a DJ: 1) Kool Herc and the first hip-hop party in 1973, as described by Jeff Chang in his seminal book, *Can't Stop Won't Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation*; 2) British selectors by way of radio shows and dance halls in Bill Brewster and Frank Broughton's *Last Night A DJ Saved My Life*; and, 3) the underground party scenes of New York, Detroit and Chicago most notably through the Detroit Bellville Three, producers who became DJs credited with the development of house and techno music, as chronicled in Simon Reynolds' *Energy Flash: A Journey Through Rave Music and Dance Culture*.¹¹ These histories are

¹¹ Jeff Chang. *Can't Stop Won't Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation* (New York: Picador, 2003); Bill Brewster and Frank Broughton. *Last Night A DJ Saved My Life* (London: Grove Press, 1999); Simon Reynolds. *Energy Flash: A Journey Through Rave Music and Dance Culture* (Berkeley: Soft Skull Press, 2012 (reprint)); Tim Lawrence. *Life and Death on a New York Dance Floor, 1980-1983*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016) and *Love Saves the Day: A History of American Dance Music Culture, 1970-1979*. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

also captured in Tim Lawrence's *Love Saves the Day* and *Life and Death on a New York Dance Floor*.

These genre lanes of DJ culture take two well-worn paths— one of hip-hop and the other of electronic music, the latter as the heir apparent to disco and house music. Both of these divisions are coded with their own racial histories, biases, and stereotypes that inevitably set up a limiting binary of black versus white music, excluding other musical possibilities outside these genres. But, what these histories have in common is that they rely upon and further the idea of male genius. Much of the origin story described in each narrative is framed as a flash of divine inspiration or divine happening. They present a male figure in a position of power, whether it is in the ability to manipulate the devices, in the proficiency and knowledge of employing studio techniques, or in having access to lucrative gigs.

The origin stories also rely upon the reference point of specific technique. In *Scratch*, the 2001 documentary film about hip-hop DJs, Grand Wizard Theodore, a notable early hip-hop DJ, is interviewed about his start. He states that he was playing music late into the night when his mother complained about the noise. To better control the sound, he held the record while the platter underneath was still spinning. The manipulation of the vinyl record on a spinning turntable generated the sound of the scratch, the movement of the stylus back and forth within the groove of the disk.

DJing was, on the one hand, a form of resistance to high-end technologies (such as high-fidelity turntables) and, on the other, a practice that created new means of using these technologies for the performance of continuous music. DJs manipulated the turntable platter to have precise control over when to start and stop a record and used the turntables' pitch controls to change the speed of the record,

which in turn allowed DJs to line up and synchronize the records spinning simultaneously of two turntables to cut smoothly between them and extend their play. This practice of moving back and forth between tracks – using the technology in a way it was not originally intended – produced and synthesized new continuous sounds. These techniques led to innovations in hardware such as the DJ mixer. They also influenced the production of a new music format, the 12-inch record,¹² which was designed for DJs to employ in the club to give them the power to “break” new tracks.

The scratch has become a signifier of a mastery of skill that is vital to being a “real” DJ, and yet it disrupts the flow of music. In electronic dance music, the marker of mastery is not only a command over the DJ setup – the sound sources – but also the ability to augment the musical performance by integrating production techniques. This assumes the DJ must not only be good at spinning but also possess the skills of a studio mastermind. Such a conflation of DJ and producer serves to devalue the skills of the non-producer; it furthers the idea that extraordinary technical competency is what is required of the role of “DJ”. This in turn leads to assumptions about authenticity or what makes a “real” DJ, which ultimately become a form of gatekeeping that excludes different groups actively engaged in DJ practice. Other representations of the masterful DJ focus on performance of fist-pumping in front of huge crowds in a stadium atmosphere or in upscale clubs that cater to moneyed clientele such as bottle-service consumers – an image that further devalues DJs whose practice is focused on creating smaller, more intimate spaces that bring together specific communities.

¹² Bill Brewster and Frank Broughton. *Last Night A DJ Saved My Life* (London: Grove Press, 1999)

The primary currency for success, at least in electronic dance music, is studio knowledge and high-paying shows, neither of which have been easily accessible to marginalized DJ communities. Male gatekeepers regulate the transfer of knowledge and the relationships required to attain this success. This phenomenon is expressed as a matter of fact in Jace Clayton's memoir about his DJ explorations.¹³ Clayton travels across the globe with ease, finds music producers, and discovers different musical styles that employ "Western" techniques. Communities of cisgender men govern all of these spaces. In Clayton's memoir, queer people and women are never presented in positions with agency or power.

Recent scholarship aims to expand the existing canon in order to document the histories of DJ practice that falls outside the dominant narratives. In the past few years, two books have been published about Filipino DJ culture: *Filipinos Represent: DJs, Racial Authenticity and the Hip-hop Nation* (2013) by American Studies scholar Antonio T. Tiongson and *Legions of Boom: Filipino American Mobile DJ Crews in the San Francisco Bay Area* (2015) by sociologist Oliver Wang.¹⁴ These texts expand the scope of looking at DJing beyond a narrow black and white binary. As someone who does not fit into that binary, I appreciate that these texts add an important history. However, they remain texts that are largely about the lived experiences of cisgender men.

On the other hand, media scholar Rebekah Farrugia's *Beyond the Dance Floor: Female DJs, Technology, and Electronic Dance Music Culture* (2012)¹⁵

¹³ Jace Clayton, *Uproot: Travels in Twenty-First-Century Music and Digital Culture*. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2016).

¹⁴ Antonio T. Tiongson, *Filipinos Represent: DJs, Racial Authenticity and the Hip-hop Nation*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013; Oliver Wang, *Legions of Boom: Filipino American Mobile DJ Crews in the San Francisco Bay Area*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015.

¹⁵ Rebekah Farrugia, *Beyond the Dance Floor: Female DJs, Technology, and Electronic Dance Music Culture*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012.

explores the process and practices employed by queer and women of color DJs in defining artistic and economic success. However, her book limits the conversation to a specific community of DJs and as a result does not include women of color. Its focus on technology and electronic dance music does not account for the numerous DJs that spin outside these genre constructions.

This project aims to contribute to documenting of the history and the present of the lived experiences as well as the social and cultural context of queer and people of color women and nonbinary artists. Its goal is to challenge the current perceptions of the DJ and DJ practice. If the conceptions of DJing are centered on the male figure of a DJ that is concerned with the actual materiality of performing the act of DJing, then we should ask, what does a queer or feminist DJ practice look like? My intervention here is to study the DJing practices of women, nonbinary and queer DJs of color to understand, historicize, and archive this important media practice today. How do these DJs redefine, subvert, or expand DJ practice through 1) their use of technologies; 2) their approach to their audiences and club spaces; and, 3) their creation of economic models to sustain their art? What strategies are utilized to counter challenges of operating in a male-dominated arena? What is missing from current representations of DJ culture? The decision to only interview women and nonbinary DJs was an intentional intervention in the documenting of this media practice.

YOUTUBE AS A PEDAGOGICAL SITE

YouTube videos have become an important source of finding out how things work. The metrics of YouTube in term of views and subscribers attest to the popularity of the video being watched.¹⁶ Typing “how to DJ” garnered the results of Cole Plante’s TedED Video, and the instructional video by Phil Harris, *First 10 minutes on DJ Decks Beginner DJ lessons*. I identified these two instructional videos to examine what knowledge is being bestowed about how to learn how to DJ and by whom. Harris’ video promises a quick and thorough starting point to the craft. The second video comes from the TEDⁱ Organization. These videos are routinely viewed millions of times and have an inherent credibility. The format is accessible and familiar. The last visual media I analyzed is a full-length documentary entitled, *Scratch*. At the time of its release in 2002, there were few films that addressed the craft of DJing. There have since been more documentaries seminal to the understanding of DJ culture and practice, but the film still holds up as one that singularly focuses on the craft and the DJ practice.

These three pieces of media further my contention that there is a dominant gendered perspective on DJ craft and knowledge. Like many contemporary media practices, such as digital filmmaking and podcasting, practitioners range from amateur to professional. Who is seen as authentic is linked to the perceptions of who is seen as a qualified professional.

¹⁶Jean Burgess and Joshua Green. *YouTube: Online Video and Participatory Culture*. New York: Polity, 2009.



First 10 minutes on DJ Decks | Beginner DJ lessons .com

902,299 views

👍 13K 💬 276 ➦ SHARE ⌵ SAVE ...



Getting started as a DJ: Mixing, mashups and digital turntables - Cole Plante

1,671,685 views

👍 28K 💬 1.2K ➦ SHARE ≡+ SAVE ...

RESEARCH METHODS

The research methods employed in this project were ethnographic fieldwork, including interviews accompanied by a short demographic survey and site visits to three parties. I interviewed 13 New York City-based women and nonbinary DJs of color, many of whom I have worked with and others who I found through a snowball method. Eleven interviews were one on one, and I also conducted one roundtable with Rimarkable, DJ Selly, Zeemuffin, and myself. I also recorded my own story guided by the questions that I asked the other subjects about their musical histories, artist trajectories, physical methods of performance, experiences with safety, relationship with mentoring, and roles in curation. In my interviews I actually don't ask my subjects what it's like to be a woman DJ. I just asked questions inquiring about their, background, their DJ practice, techniques, community and audience, and economy. These conversations generated over 20 hours of recorded audio and over 150 pages of text.

The interviews and site visits were conducted over a period of 18 months. When possible they were done in person, one on one, but DJ Laylo and Twelve45 were done via telephone, and JADALAREIGN's interview was conducted via Skype. Despite not being in the same physical space for those interviews, the intimacy and depth of discussion was rich. The roundtable conversation with Rimarkable, DJ Selly, Zeemuffin and myself took place in a Manhattan recording studio. The small room we were in created an intimate vibe and truly open conversation.

All interviewees completed a short online survey, which was used to collect personal demographic information as well as how long and frequently they perform and what hardware and software they employ. I also visited the sites of performance for DJ Uskha, DJ Laylo, and Rimarkable. Additionally, I bring in years of knowing

many of the subjects and prior experience of having been to many of their events and even past experience of DJing with several of them.

MEDIA INTERVENTION- Podcast: From the Decks

In support of this written text, I have created a short-form podcast, *From the Decks*, with audio content from my interviews. *From the Decks* is a podcast of five episodes that are approximately ten minutes each. In each episode, I narrate an introduction providing my background and context before turning to interview footage. By hearing the artists speak, their narratives are activated. The podcast format not only provides information about the various findings, it inserts the artists and their sounds into the research. The fifth and final episode in the series is my reflection on the research conducted here as well as a discussion of my own DJ experience.

The length of the episodes allows for a quick but intimate auditory experience so that the listener can home in on key points discussed by the subject. My introductory narration situates me as well as the context of the show: I am a nonbinary woman of color DJ, with many years of industry and artistic experience and that, as a part of my Masters of Comparative Media Studies degree at MIT, I am capturing, acknowledging, and giving space to the stories of other women and nonbinary DJs of color. My intention in embracing the short-form podcast is to offer a glimpse into each the interviews that I conducted over the course of my research; each podcast episode is meant to direct the listener to a full-length interview transcript, included in this thesis. The transcripts form the beginnings of a new archive of DJ experience – and of critical reflection– that collectively provide a more nuanced understanding of the current practice of DJing. The initial release of these five episodes will be on Soundcloud in playlist form so that the episodes can be listened to individually or continuously, in any order.

The episodes appear in the playlist as follows:

1. Episode 1, DJ Ayes Cold illuminates the struggle of breaking into a male-dominant producers circle as well as her thoughts on the overuse of scratching from her male DJ colleagues.
2. Episode 2, DJ Reborn talks in detail about her involvement in mentoring and the skills necessary to teach DJing, as well as strategies for keeping the peace as the opening DJ for a notoriously tardy hip-hop superstar.
3. Episode 3, Rimarkable describes how the Orlando Pulse Nightclub shooting in a queer nightclub led to the creation of an intergenerational community day dance party called Joy.
4. Episode 4, DJ Uskha discusses her strategies for activating the dancefloor and the specific strategies she uses to transition a disparate style of what she dubs “migrant music.”
5. Episode 5, DJ Rekha, here I reflect on how the process of doing this research has affected me. I also talk about why I don’t ask certain questions, the frustrations of typecasting, and what community means to me.

This podcast project will exist outside the academy in a format that has itself become a popular form of media consumption. Initially seen as an extension of the radio format, podcasting has become its own formidable medium. Apple, Inc.’s decision to integrate podcast offerings in their Apple store in 2005 furthered its accessibility. But, podcasts are no longer just relegated to the Apple Store; they can be distributed through any number of apps and embedded in existing platforms.¹⁷

¹⁷ “The Infinite Dial 2018.” *Edison research*, March 6, 2019, <https://www.edisonresearch.com/infinite-dial-2019/>; Ellen Gamerman. “Listen Up, This Podcast Will Just Take a Minute,” *The Wall Street Journal* (Washington D.C.), last updated January 3, 2019, <https://www.wsj.com/>

RESEARCH FINDINGS

The histories and trajectories of each DJ I interviewed was unique, as was the path that led them to embrace DJing. The very idea of becoming a DJ was often not available to my respondents until an external suggestion or circumstance encouraged them to embrace this possibility. However, each practitioner worked relentlessly to perfect and master their craft. In my respondents' eyes, the definition of "mastery"; what is valued as mastery; even what is understood as the "craft" of DJing are all subjective and personal. Guided by my questions, the topics spilled into many arenas but to distill the findings I have categorized them into three albeit broad and sometimes overlapping themes of: 1) technology and techniques; 2) space; and, 3) labor. While not given its own sections, concepts of community and gender permeate the discussion throughout these themes.

Technology and Techniques

After 2011 there were a lot more queer and women DJs, and I would hear men say, there are a lot more women DJs because it's easier. You can just hit sync... There's still a craft. For me, there's a craft around how you create a space, how you sustain a party, how you sustain a vibe with music in a way where you're not just hitting Play and then Start.

-DJ Uskha

Whether analog, digital, or some combination, DJing is inherently a technology-based practice. Conceptually, the physical equipment is designed to facilitate the control of sound, but access to knowledge about how to use the equipment and assumptions about who has the necessary aptitude both present barriers to women and nonbinary DJs. A DJ's use of technology often becomes used as a marker of authenticity or validation, and skill and mastery, or lack thereof.

As DJ Uskha states above, in her experience, the recent increase of queer

and women of color DJs was seen by men to be the result of the rise of the sync functionality in DJ software and hardware. This assumption breeds a misconception of what the sync function does in the software. Like many features that have been incorporated in the evolving technologies, the sync assists in mixing but it cannot automate the process. The sync adjusts the speed and lines up the musical key. Decisions around the selection of what song to play and when to start the track as well as control over other aspects of the sound of the track still require the DJ to be engaged and present to execute the mix.

DJing started with turntables and vinyl records. To spin a record is to have as much control over it as possible. When you start playing it, there is a delay in when the sound is heard. Accounting for when it is released from the hand holding it to when the stylus plays over the groove to generate sound is a fundamental part of a DJ's understanding of timing. In order to mix, you have to determine the speed of the record to line it up with the next one you want to play. These are things that are taken for granted today, like how much time is remaining on a track when listening to a song. With vinyl, the total time of the track or the track per side are listed with a single track time, but as it is playing, knowing how much time is left is a skill built over time. Newer methods of deploying music display the information but a skilled understanding of what to do with this information is still necessary for an effective mix.

In their prescient 2005 article, "Tracking The DJs: Vinyl Records, Work, and the Debate over New Technologies," Farrugia and Swift assert that the practical implications of technological advances are often misunderstood:

Reservations about adopting new DJ technologies often stem from the fact that advances in digital music technology threaten the existing order of E/DM DJ culture, an order maintained by numerous gate-keeping practices,

including the ideological enforcement of standards for discerning the value and authenticity of certain DJ practices.

-Farrugia and Swift, *Tracking The DJs*, 31¹⁸

This article considers the impending implications of Final Scratch, a software interface that replaces the need for physical records and CDs. Final Scratch would evolve into Serato, which became widely adopted as DJs switched from vinyl and compact disc to the use of digital files mediated by the software. Farrugia and Swift observe the paradox of progress or at least the dangers of a disruption of order. With many of the women I spoke with, access to the physical gear itself functioned to preserve the (cis-male dominated) order.

Another theme that came up in the interviews was the dominance within mainstream DJ practice of the technique of “scratching.” In the roundtable conversation with DJ Selly, Zeemuffin, and myself, we watched Herbie Hancock’s 1984 performance with DJ Grand Mixer DST, which I showed to get the discussion started. Afterwards, Rimarkable recalled:

But I do remember when scratching became popular. It being an art form, it became like the connotation of what a DJ was.

That followed me when I started DJing. I wasn't a hip-hop DJ. I was a woman DJ coming out and it was like, “Wow you don't scratch?” Or, “You don't do this turntablism so you must not be a DJ.” That kind of thing went on. Scratching or turntablism had a direct impact on the connotation of what a DJ was. Being from Detroit and Chicago, Rimarkable’s musical history was rich with

exposure to many styles of dance music, rock and roll, as well as Top 40 radio hits. Her beginnings as a mobile DJ trained her to be versed in several genres as well as to be technically adept in setting up sound systems for her gigs. Yet she saw that a DJ was often defined by her/their ability to scratch, or employ turntablist techniques. This has happened to me countless times at gigs when my DJ booth was in close

¹⁸ Rebekah Farrugia and Thomas Swiss. “Tracking the DJs: Vinyl Records, Work, and the Debate over New Technologies.” *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 17, no. 1 (2005): 30-44.

proximity to the audience. Someone will inevitably come up to me and make the scratching gesture, as if to move an imaginary record in a back and forth motion. The request is sometimes direct: “Hey, can you scratch?” Here, the implication is that if I am a real DJ, I will know how to scratch and I will prove it.

The issue of access to technology is one that that recurred throughout my interviews. DJ technology is hard to access, but many of the DJs I interviewed had some avenue to technology or an established person or DJ to facilitate access for them. JADALAREIGN and Twelve45 each began spinning after the opening of Scratch Academy and other DJ schools. They were able to enroll in school and benefit not only from having access to a place to practice but also from the community created in those spaces. Men often managed these schools, but they also found female mentors in those sites as well as a vibrant community.

Experienced DJs also named pressures to keep up with and master the changing technology. Technology is always changing, often rapidly. There is a need to have a sense of fluidity around the technology. For example, when you are at a venue, you need to be prepared to perform whether there is a turntable setup or any number of combinations of gear. The younger DJs stated that they have been gravitating towards DJing with USB sticks, which makes their physical labor negligible. However, this technology strategy requires a lot of creative labor in advance of each gig.

Space and Identity

Many of the DJs I interviewed were specific and intentional in investing in the kinds of spaces they created. The importance of, desire for, and necessity to create space was something that came up frequently in our conversations. While no one

can guarantee a safe space, Rimarkable, DJ Uskha, and I are all DJs, event producers and curators who are invested in creating intentional spaces. I am creating community space here in this thesis project not just by analyzing the ethnographic fieldwork but by creating a podcast based on the interview content and including the complete transcripts for further study.

Space encompasses the dance floor, the area of the DJ booth where the DJ set up is located, the full venue, the vibe that is created, and the larger space of community. Such community is often of particular importance to members of immigrant diasporas. As diaspora refers to a scattering of people outside a homeland, the DJ's selection and performance of music in a physical venue can function as a means to collect, gather and recreate an imagined homeland - to create a new space of connection and community.

The scattering of diaspora that is mostly obviously visible is among first, second, and third-generation immigrants from their origin to the United States. Yet, there are other formations of diaspora, including internally within the boundaries of the nation. Twelve45 brings diasporic knowledge with her when she DJs and invokes it upon her audience. For example, she reflects:

In New York you have black people from everywhere. It's different. I'm saying, this guy has the reggae, soca, the rap, the RnB. No one told me about this. I live in New York and I feel like I never heard Jersey club or Baltimore club and I was like, What the world? Y'all right there.. So it was a beautiful experience music-wise.

Similarly, DJ Laylo articulates this idea when she says:

Everything, every party, or even residencies, or any long-standing things that I've done have come from a place of wanting to create something that didn't exist... One of the things that resonated, and why people would call on me, was that I would play hip-hop and dancehall but I would also play Latin music and I would also play house. There was a range of music that was all Black music but they usually didn't get all played in the same space.

For DJ Laylo, her act of gathering was about disseminating different musics but, in doing so, she also addresses the need based on the lack of space where she lives.

She continues:

There wasn't much uptown, at all. Everything, you had to come downtown. Brooklyn, that wasn't even the kind of nightlife destination that it is today. Everything was downtown and we wanted to do something. I'm feeling a little fuckin tired of dealing with the E train... I lived in the Bronx already but [a friend] was like, we should do something in El Barrio because it's accessible to the Bronx. It felt like this could be an uptown gathering, a watering hole if you will. We were already part of a community of activities and ideas. We wanted something that had that kind of feel to it, a space that was reflective of our political values too.

Seeing this necessity for a space of shared values and musical experiences was the impetus for DJ Laylo's club night, *A Party Called Rosie Perez*. Originally located Uptown and now in its fourth year, the party has taken place in a variety of venues and boroughs, and in conjunction with other club nights.

In November 2017, I attended The Rub, a Brooklyn based hip-hop centered dance night with a male-dominated DJ crew at the Bell House in Brooklyn. The Brooklyn mainstays packed the larger room, which has a capacity of 500. In the front room, DJ Laylo and co-DJ Sucio represented their party, *A Party Called Rosie Perez*. DJ Laylo, who noted that she would often be compared to the actress in all-White spaces, and her choice of naming the party after Rosie Perez was to reclaim the comparison, says:

I do identify as a black woman, as a Dominican woman and as a New Yorker; those are the biggest parts of my identity. In many ways, Rosie Perez represents that ability to be Afro-Latina, to be a New Yorker, to be from the hood, and be unapologetic about it. And to be authentic about it, and forge all kinds of new pathways for herself — not in spite of who she was but because of who she was. It's perfect that the party is named after her.

Musically, *A Party Called Rosie Perez* represents the music from the New York City Afro-Latinx diaspora but it also incorporates various styles of New York

City dance genres. By being in the room adjacent to the mostly White audience of the Rub, DJ Laylo widened the musical scope of the night. At one point, she spun a 1994 track, "Love and Happiness," by River Ocean featuring the percussion of Salsa legend, Tito Puente, and Puerto Rican born, Bronx raised, Latina vocalist, India. This song was a staple of 1990s New York dance floors, including the Desi parties I attended and DJed. Not quite in the repertoire of the Rub, DJ Laylo playing this track took on a different meaning by exposing a new audience to this music. She also brought immense joy to the non-White patrons in the room, including me as I was transported to a time when this song was a staple in my DJ sets. Anyone listening to a DJ spinning brings their expectations, which are filled with their own personal histories and nostalgias. The DJ taps into this and it informs what they play.

In the summer of 2018, I made a trip to Cafe Erzulie, tucked beneath the elevated J train in Bushwick, a neighborhood now associated with White hipster Brooklyn. I felt a calming energy in the crowd at *Joy*, a Sunday day party started by Rimarkable and Ryan of Brooklyn Boihood. Notably, the space was Black, queer and intergenerational. Space creation can have healing powers. As Rimarkable explains the origins of the event, she says:

The Orlando shootings happened around Pride season, during Pride month. I reached out to Ryan. I was at the Allied Media Conference with Ryan, who is the founder of Bklyn Boihood. We've been dear friends for years. I was like, yo we need to throw a party for our people for Pride. We just got to heal, we need some love, we got to hug it out. We need to be around each other, you know." Quite frankly, everybody doesn't go to the city. Everybody doesn't want to go to the city for Pride. We need to throw one. I want to do this party and I want to call it Joy. It's going to be a cute day party, a little tea party because people are missing that, and this younger generation doesn't know about tea parties.

I wanted to create a safe space for queer and trans people of color to come together, for us to be around each other. We feel safe. We're not subconsciously antagonized by the threat of whiteness. Sometimes it is very threatening, especially when you're already triggered or you're already feeling hurt or you're already feeling pain. I wanted to create a place where people

felt safe to be themselves and to celebrate our own traditions. We're playing Spades and we're doing the Electric Slide, playing our music, you know!

Labor

The reduction of physical vinyl and the use of turntables as a primary instrument in some ways has reduced the physical labor of DJing. My interviewees spoke about other dimensions of the labor of DJing. Now, the burden of labor is in the prepping and organizing of music for a particular gig. The paradox of music being readily available digitally is that it is hard to find if it is not in the genre of mainstream music. Additionally, adaptability or being flexible to deal with a variety of set-ups requires knowledge of and preparedness to work with different hardware and software systems. The physical demands of standing on your feet for several hours and, in some cases, carrying gear to the venue is part of the labor that is not recognized.

Lastly, to build a viable art practice, some women worked at gigs that were not creatively motivated but lucrative, so they subsidized the ones that paid less.

Teaching, working in theater, curating, filmmaking, sound collaging and design are examples of the other kinds of paid work my interviews do.

In the case of DJ Shilpa her mobile wedding business subsidized her creative pursuit of being a club DJ under the moniker of DJ Scarlett. JADALAREIGN was actively involved in curation and setting up workshops for aspiring DJs, producers and event creators. Twelve45 worked with a dance company providing sound design, which is a job DJ Reborn has had in many different circumstances. Rimarkable also stated that corporate gigs paid for the less lucrative, but more artistically rewarding ones.

The thread here was that to build a viable living with DJing as the center, diversifying the nature of the gigs and supplementing them with other types of work was

necessary.

With respect to the labor of DJing itself, DJ Ushka discusses the process of making a mix, and the labor and intentionality that goes into it. She talks about the work that happens before the actual physical act of DJing begins. This labor is necessary to be able to make decisions while DJing that respond to the vibe and the flow of the dance floor. DJ Ushka states:

For me, making a mix is an art project in and of itself. You can tell a whole story and you have a little bit more time to think about it. It's a whole research process: what tracks are you going to put on this mix, who, who's producing what. It feels to me when I'm making a mix, it's like an essay when I'm in the club.

For an hour gig, I've spent three to four hours prepping, putting in cue points. Acquiring music is a constant process. That happens every week. That happens when you're out and you hear something and you're like, oh what's that.

You have to think about audience and you have to think about vibe. And so in the club I may have a sense... a lot of people who aren't DJs will be like, what's your first song? I get it. What's your first song? What do you know how to plan? I'm like, you don't. You just have to feel the vibe. I always get there at least an hour before my set because you have to be able to hear what that person before you has been playing, what people in the room are doing, in order to play your sound.

I play a lot of stuff that I like but I always play like a dancer. I play stuff that I wanna dance to. I play a lot of like bass music. I always fixate on the two or three people who I can tell are really good dancers. A lot of my flow is based on their flow because I can see what they're into and it feeds my energy, so a lot of my sets are impromptu. I'm basically I'm deciding in the moment what to play.

Another issue that interviewees brought up when asked about the labor of DJing concerned safety. This issue is always a concern when you are in proximity to an audience, but what about when you are in a large arena with fifty thousand people who are impatiently waiting for the headliner. DJ Reborn relayed an experience that she had on tour, which is also a common situation when in a venue where people are consuming alcohol. DJ Reborn recalls:

On one of these tour dates recently, Miss Hill was super late and I was out there [on stage] for a really long time. People were getting really upset, and I was like, it just would take one person throwing something at me for it to get wild in here. People were restless. I had a tinge of, Mmhmm! If she doesn't show up right now, I don't know what's gonna happen.

DJing, a lot of times, is in environments where there are lots of men. There sometimes can just be that twinge or that feeling. Especially if people can get to your DJ booth or wherever you're DJing. It doesn't always feel so good to be that vulnerable, which is why DJ booths are preferable. So people can't necessarily just walk right up to you. With drunk people, fights break out. Shit starts getting thrown and you're like, Oh, I better duck under these turntables.

The situation that DJ Reborn discusses is potentially volatile. The burden of maintaining safety is not only that of personal safety but of the space itself.

In our exchange, I probe a little further and ask if DJ Reborn thinks her gender impacts how she gets paid. Her response touches on the concern of economics which here is wrapped up with gender position. She notes:

Absolutely my gender has played a role. We live in patriarchy. We live in a sexist society and oppression and white supremacy is just real. I'm a black woman DJ. People are going to try to test you. I've been tested and that's another reason why I don't think I'm interested in doing my own events. Dealing with that side of things of having to logistically deal with anything from getting my money to just logistical stuff. I'm not into it. Venues and promoters have tried to not pay, or promised one thing and did something else. It's tricky sometimes only because you can do everything in your power to articulate, solidify details, all that stuff, and if at the end of the night somebody comes to you with empty hands, you've already done your work. So a lot of that is around doing it long enough, and having hopefully a strong enough reputation that anything coming in is actually reputable, and you're not going to have to fight for your money.

Conclusion

Doing this project has been deeply personal for me. I forgot how much shared history I had with many of these women. Some of them I knew and some of them I met through the snowball method. But, the women I know also had trouble recalling their own histories. More than once I heard, "That's a good idea. I should write that down." Especially for DJs who started pre-smart phone, memories and documentation was not always easy to recall.

The point of me doing of this work, I hope, is that if someone was to come and examine DJing as a cultural practice, we have a text and archive that is reflective of what is happening in the experience. If we were to consult existing media of videos and written text, we wouldn't get an accurate picture. The act of doing this research made the women I talk to consider their own histories by adding vital knowledge about this ubiquitous media practice.

The tension between what is premeditated and what is in the moment is what makes DJing a practice that cannot be automated. Streaming services attempt to organize content and anticipate what a listener may want to hear, but as we have seen, so much happens prior to and during the performance. Technology can add tools and information, and techniques can be honed to perfect the execution of physical movements of the media that being played, but ultimately maintaining the flow and creating the vibe is what is at the core of what a successful DJ does. From speaking with my interviewees, learning about the depth of their engagement with the gear, the amount of labor put forth, and the joy they bring to others is all part of what goes into awareness of this a cultural practice within the contemporary arena of media and communication.

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APPENDIX

Podcast Transcripts:
From the Decks

Podcast Transcript

From the Decks: Introduction

From the Decks: Introduction

Rekha: Welcome to *From the Decks*, a short but powerful podcast about the experiences of women and non-binary DJs of color. My name is DJ Rekha. I've spun every type of DJ set you can imagine from, sweet sixteens in suburban cellars, to the Women's March for a million people, to the White House—the Obama White House.

After 20 years of running a club night in New York City called Basement Bhangra, in 2017 I enrolled to get a masters of Comparative Media Studies at M.I.T. When people find out you're a DJ they often make that scratching gesture: “wiki wiki!”. You know, you put your hand out and pretend you're moving an imaginary record back and forth. But DJing is so much more than that. Some representations of DJs are turntable wizards or fist pumping godlike figures at festivals. These dominant depictions don't show what a DJ really does, and it leaves out the voices and experiences of me and my comrades: other women and non-binary DJs of color. I'm here to take you on a journey. Ok, it's a quick ride, but you'll get to hear firsthand the histories and insights of these phenomenal spinsters. In talking to them, I'm capturing knowledge and giving space to their stories. These episodes are short glimpses into their lives. Our full conversations are part of my written thesis entitled, *Last Night a DJ Queered My Life: Disrupting the Mythologies of a Critical Popular Media Practice*. Thanks for listening to my homework.

Podcast Transcript

From the Decks: DJ Ayes Cold

From the Decks: DJ Ayes Cold

Rekha: This first episode of the series starts with Ayes Cold. I first met Aisha Chugh a.k.a. D.J. Ayes Cold in 2016. Our paths crossed several times that year, first when she was DJing for drummer and electronic artist Madame Gandhi as part of Red Baraat's Festival of Colors Tour. We then DJed at a few times at the DC Club Tropicalia where she had a monthly residency. I booked her to DJ the after party for a Celebrate Brooklyn show where I presented a special edition of Basement Bhangra in Brooklyn. She was also part of the last Basement Bhangra show at SummerStage in August 2017. Growing up Ayes Cold moved around a lot, spending some years in the United States but also in various cities in India, including going to nightclubs in Bangalore at the age of 16 where she would sometimes bump into her mom. After college, she solidified her DJ career in DC hosting an array of club nights. Here Ayes Cold talks about community, turntablism, her specific methods of working the dance floor and the elusive producers firewall. We recorded this interview at the Splice office in Manhattan where she recently acquiesced to a day job, as an intervention of self-care after the rigors of a full-time gigging schedule. Let's take a listen.

Ayes Cold: I've never really been a part of crews, and I do think that a lot of the queer scene, it's a very chosen family oriented model, community oriented model, and I've always rolled solo dolo.

It's really how I am. It's not necessarily a rejection of community as a necessary thing. But I always rode solo to things and so I did not necessarily have a place in those scenes. So much of those portions of the scene were defined first and foremost by creating community. And then second by music.

Music was not necessarily the glue or like entry point into the center or focal point of those scenes, even though music was definitely

something celebrated. It never felt like it was ever about the craft to me. It was about this feeling of creating a sense of community on the dance floor, you know, and playing the songs that people could sing along to and everyone known and loved. A lot of cumbia and bachata, connecting musical traditions with other cultural traditions in the various diasporas that would be in the room which was a beautiful thing.

But my approach was a little different.

Music for me built community in unexpected ways with people who I wouldn't necessarily have expected would be in my musical family. Music connected me with people who perhaps I would have otherwise not really given the time of day, based around just our own insularity around who we hang out with and who we identify with cultural and social level. DJ Underdog and Native Son, two of my comrades and early supporters, they were using the Pioneer DDJ series controllers, a couple different kinds and I saw them using them and I was like, "These are great!"

You've got pads that you can use as hot cue and like rolls and create loops, and you also have JAG wheels which give you a little bit of a more traditional D.J. feel, and two guys who I looked up to were using them, and they were very portable and easy to set up. That was my format for at least up until 2017, even.

I need to be able to rock on whatever equipment the club has. So I got myself a Serato box, Serato control vinyls.

Rekha: So did you have turntables home?

Ayes Cold: I now do, but at the time I didn't.

Rekha: Ok, but you had that stuff in preparation. And did you learn how to use turntables in Serato?

Ayes Cold: Yes I did. Yeah, but mainly self-taught. Some advice from friends, but I didn't have two turntables. I had one turntable actually, so there was a time where I was going instant doubles. There are gigs that I did just with one turntable.

Rekha: We've all known. Mostly because the other turntable's broken

Ayes Cold: Yeah, I've had massive calibration issues with different turntables at different clubs. I've had so many nights where I've just had to Uber home and get my controller, in DC especially.

Janky-ass turntables. So it kind of got me thinking about other ways to be versatile. And then I got my hands on a pair of CDJ-850s.

Rekha: Do you scratch when you play?

Ayes Cold: You know what, so there was a moment where I definitely was teaching myself different scratch technique. Across the different gears that I've practiced on over the years. So not at one point, but there were consistent attempts. And I just never felt turntableism, as an approach to DJing was really my initial point of interest, or entry point into DJing, and I really felt like I was definitely getting a lot of advice and unsolicited advice from other DJs to teach myself how to become more of a turntableist.

Rekha: Who was giving you this advice?

Ayes Cold: Mostly male DJs, turntableist friends, some really nice guys, but narrow-minded in the sort of "real DJ", you know that, have you seen that term used?

Rekha: Please. Girl, I've been doing this for 26 years. Those real DJs, do they use scratching when they DJ a lot? Do you know?

Ayes Cold: Yeah definitely. Yeah, they were they were deaf.

Rekha: Were they doing open format parties, or were they doing parties where people appreciated it?

Ayes Cold: They were doing open format sets.

Rekha: They were scratching in it? And people liked it?

Ayes Cold: You know what, that's actually a good question. Some of these DJs would play for hip hop crowds and they were just so confident in their skills that they didn't really care. And I think in some ways the psychology of that made other people kind of not really critique them. There is this attitude which is like, "I'm a DJ. Naturally I'm a turntableist. Naturally you want to hear me interrupt every couple of bars with some scratch action." It's interesting, right, because it's so subjective. Yes scratches can sound dope, but at the same time, I don't feel a desire to hear scratching on the mixes that I listen to when I'm on dance floors. But I definitely have been in rooms with people who really, really—mostly men—who really look up to it as a way of manipulating sound, and a nod to an old school culture that's dying, and so there's a masculinity, there's is a machismo around it, and there's this notion of preserving traditions that are under assault.

Rekha: What's the tradition under assault?

Ayes Cold: It's turntableism, you know. It's real hip-hop, which I never really saw myself as. That wasn't really what I felt when I wanted to set as my task or my challenge when I started DJing. My task initially or my challenge was always the blends, mixes, telling a story, going on a journey. The curation side.

Rekha: The curation.

Ayes Cold: Absolutely. Personally, I want to feel like, even if your emphasis is on curation you want to engage your hardware in a way that enhances that curation. For me what enhances my curation are the spaces are transitions. Transitions are very important to me, and I think transitions give you the opportunity. You can create your own beats with a transition.

Rekha: Do you produce music?

Ayes Cold: Music production is a boys club. You can enter that boys club as a boy, pretty early in life, if that's something you're interested in, at the age of 16. So a lot of producers who we know have been making music since they were 16.

Rekha: As an artist, what is your main medium? Is a DJing or is it...?

Ayes Cold: Right now I would say it's still DJing, until I actually have evidence of actually being a producer.

Rekha: Whoah, ok. Well we'll be ready for it.

Ayes Cold: Hell yes, I appreciate that. Stay Ready!

Podcast Transcript

From the Decks: DJ Reborn

From the Decks: DJ Reborn

Rekha: This installment features Robyn Rodgers, aka D.J. Reborn. I can't remember exactly when I met her, but we've known each other for over 20 years and have played together several times. It was hard to schedule this interview because Robin is a little busy currently as, Miss Lauryn Hill's opening tour DJ. Having grown up in suburban and urban Chicago. DJ Reborn was exposed to a wide range of music. She got her DJ start in San Francisco and made her way to New York, where she became committed to making DJing a full time situation. DJ Reborn talks about teaching, the difference between spinning at lounges and stadiums, and gives some sage advice. Let's listen to DJ Reborn.

Reborn: My practice is definitely DJing, and then I do things DJ-related, so whether that is working in theater, like I said, providing soundtracks for live theater shows. That's not just straight ahead mixing music but also incorporating sound effects, dialogue, recorded voices, sound design, collaging—I also consider myself to be a sound collage artist—and then also, all of my years as a mentor and mentoring young people particularly young girls with creative writing and DJing. I would say I'm a sound collage artist, a DJ. I've dabbled a bit in production but not enough to call myself a producer at all. But I'm interested in learning, it's still what I do.

So you Ubiquita that you mentioned, Ubiquita was a women DJ centered party that I did on the Lower East Side with Kim Knox and Deshawn Maxwell and Selly and Moni, and we had other DJs sort of rotate in and out shErOck, Rimarkable, this woman Mia for a while. And so it was a weekly party. So that was my main residency in New York and it grew to be pretty popular in terms of all the dancers would come, and the music was eclectic. Super fun party. We had a good time there.

Rekha: You had two floors.

Reborn: Exactly. You gotta love that.

Rekha: It was at Save the Robots?

Reborn: Yes, exactly. Save the Robots which was then Guernica when we were there. But that party sort of gave me a home base in New York, but at that time I was also traveling too, with Will, for the theater piece and then I got booked for being the DJ for Russell Simmons Def Poetry Tour, like their final year of touring. So I did that for a year.

I appreciate the diversity of what I do. So I've done stuff with the Howard Zinn project and the Eve Ensler stuff like. I love being able be the musical voice or the soundtrack for events and organizations that do work that I believe in that, and that I care about, and that I think is important. I like having something to say in those environments with what I play.

So as far as the teaching stuff, again, I started mentoring in 2000, somewhere around there. Then that transitioned into teaching at a DJ school here in New York that no longer exists. And then I've taught at another one as well. I've taught at a few DJ schools now over the course of all these years in New York. And it's interesting because I didn't realize, as I said before, that it's a whole different set of skills right. So, teaching people how to DJ is very simple, it comes easily from me, but it also took a long time to fine tune my teaching style and being able to communicate information, terminology, and skill, and be supportive to people and make them work hard but also show them a bunch of shortcuts that I wish I would have known, when I was teaching myself how to DJ. So for me I always get so much out of teaching because I lie seeing people connect those dots and have a successful mix or whatever it is that makes them feel less intimidated by the craft, because it is a craft and I think people, because of the technology of today, really take for granted how you still have to work at the craft.

Rekha: Is a different to do the fifty thousand versus Bed and Vyne, or a nightclub versus a stage, is there anything different about how you work in the different contexts?

Reborn: There is something different about how I work, depending on what setting I'm in. So to DJ at a smaller bar lounge is a bit more relaxing. You can just kind of do you and be creative, and the stakes are not high because people are chillin', so you can relax a bit. If I'm doing a theater thing, that's a bit more nerve racking because so much of that is about hitting cues. It's like coloring inside the lines in this particular setting. I have to stay within the lines otherwise other things get thrown off if I'm off.

Rekha: You're keeping the time.

Reborn: I'm keeping the time literally. Exactly. So yeah, when I'm in front of huge crowds, it's very daunting and nerve racking, but my strategy with myself is to try to just enjoy being in the moment and not focus on how many people, how many eyes are on me. I get a lay of the land and I'm like, "Ok, there's 20,000 people here. I know that this song is going to work for 50 percent of them.

Rekha: Right, so party joints, you know.

Reborn: Yeah exactly, I try to have a diverse set so that everybody in the crowd hears something that they like and that they remember that they're having like an experience and they're being taken on a journey, as opposed to it just some DJ slamming record together.

So when I'm on tour, the sets have some staples, some go-to's that I know work no matter where I am. And then I try to modify it based on where we are. So if we're in a particular city, country, I usually try to play music from that place, or from artists that are from that place, just

as like a nod to knowing where I am and wanting to represent the sound of that place in my set if I can, just out of respect for being there.

And then because DJing is a lot of times in environments where there are lots of men, there sometimes can just be that twinge or that feeling of like, you know, especially if people can get to your DJ booth or wherever you're DJing. It doesn't always feel so good to be that vulnerable, which is why DJ booths are preferable. So people can't necessarily just walk right up to you, but that's kind of it. It's like you know or you're somewhere like with drunk people fights break out. Shit starts getting thrown and you're like, "Oh I better duck under these turntables."

Oh absolutely my gender has played a role in that, I mean we live in patriarchy, we live in a sexist society and oppression and white supremacy is real. I'm a Black woman DJ, so that's just like... People are going to try to test you. And I've been tested and that's another reason why I don't think I'm interested in doing my own events, because dealing with that side of things and having to like logistically deal with anything, from getting my money to just logistical stuff, I'm not into it. But yes, of course venues and promoters have tried to not pay, or promised one thing and did something else. I do think that obviously gender plays a role, just like race does in the opportunities that come or don't come. So I think that it's really powerful when people get to see a Black woman DJing in a major setting, like we're in a huge arena or whatever that is, just because it's not a common sight. So I know that it's powerful. And so I think my focus is just on that. On trying to be powerful.

The other thing that I will say to young DJs too or new DJs is: you never know who's listening and I want to say that my biggest professional opportunities have come from me just putting my head down and doing the work and someone happened to be listening. That changed my life. That changed altered the course of my professional

experience, because they were in a room and I had no idea they were there.

Rekha: Well that's great advice. It's like "dance like no one's watching", or "play like anyone's listening."

Reborn: Exactly.

Podcast Transcript

From the Decks: Rimarkable

From the Decks: Rimarkable

Rekha: In this episode I speak with DJ Rimarkable. I've known about Rimarkable since she was part of the all-female lineup at the legendary Ubiquita nights in the East Village in the early aughts. We DJed together twice, once at DJ Reborn's birthday, and oh yeah, at the Women's March in DC, where she told Madonna's daughter to get off our monitor's speakers. Rimarkable talks about how a tragic event became the impetus for creating a much-needed and healing day party, and how an ad in a school paper started her professional music career. Let's listen to Rimarkable.

Rimarkable: My name is Maria Elana Garcia also known as Rimarkable.

Rekha: How did you become a DJ? Where did it start, and feel free to go as in detail as you want to. I'll ask follow-up questions as we unfold your story.

Rimarkable: Ok, interestingly enough, I've been asked this question a lot recently, and thank you for giving me permission to go as deep as I'd like to go, as it just kind of sparks some ideas in my head. I wanted to be a DJ out of rebellion. My love for music and all sorts of genres came out of rebellion. I come from a very staunch Christian household where my mother was, or is, also a classically trained pianist. I was raised strictly on classical and gospel music. And I have older siblings, had more access to worldly music or what we call worldly music, secular music. So I was reduced to a broad spectrum of music: popular music, black music, and just all kinds of music honestly, genre. Being from a place that is known for its music.

Rekha: What does that place?

Rimarkable: So I'm from Detroit, a place that is very famous for its music, not just Motown but also techno music. Detroit is also known for its rock and

roll. So all those layers, all those things intertwining in the DNA of the city, being programmed into me and subconsciously, when I gained access to it, inspired me to not just retain the knowledge of it being there but also to use it as an act of resistance.

I'm not going home this summer, it was right after sophomore year, and I was like, "Well shit I better get a job." I'm waiting last minute trying to find a job, trying to find a job, and there was this ad in the paper, in my school paper that was like, "Wanna be a DJ or looking for DJs," blah blah blah, "Hit us up." Hit them up. They called me in for an interview, I forget, I was late, because I got lost and they were pretty much over me when I walked in, because I was so late. But they gave me a little music test, which was the most obscure, random, almost like big band and 70's and 80's music, like stuff you play at a wedding or whatever. And they were so impressed that I got them all right. Like, "Who the hell is this girl? How does she know—who is this girl?" And they were like, "Ok, wait a minute." Because nobody gets all of these right. And so it was a mobile company, and I told them, "Like look I don't have any experience. I'm down to learn, you see I have the knowledge, help me." And it was not getting paid jack during my training. Free training. Free for them. But I learned how to use equipment and learned how to troubleshoot. They had turntables. They had techniques, but I also learned from the beginnings of the CDJ. But I was just so enthralled and excited to be a DJ.

It taught me how to read a crowd. Like honestly, it taught me how to read a crowd, how to play for anybody. I know how to play for anyone I've done it all.

I've done christenings to weddings to bar mitzvahs to funerals like I've done it all, backyard barbecues, grand openings, proms, like you name it. I've done this.

In the 90's they would let me have back-to-back weddings. I was making like 50 grand in the 90's, which was a ton of money. That was that was good money, but I gave up a lot. I gave up a lot of my youth. That was my heyday. I had to get confined, so knowing what I was going to do a year from now. [I couldn't really plan. I couldn't go on vacations. I couldn't explore like all my friends are going to Europe and everything. I'm making all this money but I'm still right here.

I actually don't use turntables. I was kind of like nervous or slightly ashamed to even say that, because I was looked down upon. People would hire me. My hip hop friends that were emcees would hire me for stuff, but hip hop was not my first love. My first love in the dance world is disco and house music.

The Orlando shootings happened, and it happened around Pride Season. During Pride Month and I reached out to Ryan, or I was at the Allied Media Conference with Ryan, who is the founder of BkIn Boihood, and we've been dear friends for years. And I was like, "Yo, we need to throw a party for our people for Pride. We got heal, we need some love, we got to hug it out, we need to be around each other." I was like, "And quite frankly everybody doesn't go to the city. Everybody doesn't want to go to the city for Pride. And so we need to throw one." And I was like, "I want to do this party and want to call it Joy." And it's gonna be a cute day party, a little tea party, because people are missing that, and this younger generation doesn't know about tea parties. I wanted to create a safe space for queer and trans people of color to come together, for us to be around each other. We feel safe. We're not subconsciously antagonized by the threat of whiteness, sometimes it is very threatening, especially when you're already triggered or you're already feeling hurt or you're already feeling pain. And I wanted to create a place where people felt safe to be themselves and to celebrate our own traditions.

We're also trying to only work with people of color, or at least queer folks. So we outgrew Cocktail in two seconds. And it was uncomfortable and it didn't feel safe. It didn't physically feel safe. So that's also very important to me. There needs to be exits. There needs to be accessibility to people that are disabled. There needs to be accessibility to the damn bathroom. There are a few white allies that come. But I think because there's such a strong presence that is known, they just haven't shown up.

The collective, like Joy being the collective, or the business. We have very strong policies and we don't care how big your shit is. We had a battle with Brooklyn Museum about certain things. About visibility, about the way that they were being marketed. For instance they kept being like "Bklyn Boihood presents Joy," and we were like, "Ok no, Joy is not Bklyn Boihood. Joy is Bklyn Boihood and Rimarkable." That's very important because people need to see what we're doing. The power behind what we're doing. And how we name is very important. But they kept but they kept making that mistake and it was a mess for a second. And it was a queer person of color that kept making the mistake, and I was just like, "Yo...."

We had to clown name on the mic a little bit, you know. Kind of like, "Let's be very clear about certain things, don't take our power away from us." Like we're not fighting for no reason. We show up, our people are going to show up and we're going to smash. I obliterated Brooklyn Museum. I know I did. I'm very proud of that. Tore them a new asshole, like I feel that way. We went off in there and it was packed, and it was a sea of brown and black queer folks. And it was dope, amongst all these bougies and their Hasids and the this and that. Yeah. It gave us a platform and it gave us access to something that we may not have had access to. But the exchange was like, "We made y'all look good. Like make us look good."

Rekha: What do you consider your art practice when it comes to DJing. What is it that you do?

Rimarkable: I would consider it alchemy. I have a class that I teach that has a very particular curriculum. And I call my class "The Alchemy of DJing" and I call it alchemy I'm taking a roomful of people that may or may not know each other, but I have all kinds of different backgrounds. Even if physical, like we're all black in this room, everybody's not the same. Everyone has a different experience. Some people are shy. Some people are extroverted, some people, whatever. And I'm using music to transform this room.

Podcast Transcript

From the Decks: DJ Ushka

From the Decks: DJ Ushka

Rekha: In this episode I speak with DJ Ushka, a Sri Lankan-born, Thailand-raised, Brooklyn-based DJ that traverses genres across electronic club and bass music. She DJs from the perspective of a dancer, blending a wide range of club music from soca to dancehall, hip hop to South Asian rhythms, Baltimore Jersey Club to Baile Funk, and too many genres to list. When she isn't crafting dance floor spaces, Ushka is a political and cultural organizer. Here, DJ Ushka, or Thanu as I know her, talks about the power of the backspin, playing club music from communities of color, what makes a mix an art project, and why she always insists on getting paid, even if it's for a good cause. Let's take a listen.

Ushka: My DJ name is Ushka. My full name is Thanushka Yakupitiyage. Thanushka actually means the rhythm of music in the sky. How you flow from one song to another, where you're being conscious of the BPM and how songs like fit together, basically. When I say transition, as a DJ, you're not just playing one song after the other, in succession, you're blending music and that's what I mean by transition. So how do you blend music with that fundamental flow? I think about it from the perspective of a dancer, because when I was just dancing, you can always tell if something was a little bit off or a tempo is off. In the in DJing, you have to keep the flow. For me it's also about how you can also dance uninterrupted.

I do not scratch the way a hip hop DJ would scratch on vinyl. I use CDJs now, USB sticks and CDJs. So I prep things on Rekordbox ahead of time. I'll spin the track, like sometimes if I am not just transitioning. I'll back spin, and because I play across genres, I really see my DJ practice s one of genre blending and I'm very interested in what I call migrant music.

I play everything from my Afro beats to soca to dancehall. I play maybe less South Asian music, but certainly Desi music as well, club music from across communities of color in the States. So sometimes it's difficult when you're sustaining a set that has multiple kinds of genres, like you have to employ other techniques, transitions are not very simple.

And so back spinning sometimes is important to be able to shift from one general to the next. For me like making a mix is an art project in and of itself. You can tell a whole story and you have a little bit more time to think about it. And so it's like a whole research process, like what tracks you're going to put on this mix and like who's producing what.

When I'm making a mix, it's like an essay. When I'm in the club, you have to think about audience and you have to think about vibe. In the club, I might have like a sense. Usually like a lot of people who aren't DJs will be like, "Well what's your first song." Or like, "What do you know how to play," and I'm like, "You don't, you have to sort of feel the vibe." So I always get that at least an hour before my set, because you have to be able to hear what that person before you has been playing, what people in the room are doing in order to play your sound.

I play a lot of stuff that I like, I think I play like a dancer.

Rekha: So what does that mean?

Ushka: I play stuff that I want to dance to like. I play a lot of bass music. For example one thing that I like to do, I always fixate on the two or three people who I can tell are really good dancers, and a lot of my flow is based on their flow, because I can see what they're into and it feeds my energy. And a lot of my sets are impromptu. I'm deciding in the moment.

This is one of the things that is a constant critique, like suddenly after 2011, I feel like, particularly 2013 onwards, there was a lot more queer and women DJs. A lot of men I would hear be like, "Well there's more women DJs because it's easier to DJ." That was like a lot of what people would say, you could just hit sync and then you consider yourself a DJ.

Rekha: Do you think that's true?

Ushka: No, I mean because there is a conversation to be had about accessibility. I do think that certain things became a little bit more accessible, and I think that's OK. And I think that there's still a craft.

Rekha: What's the craft?

Ushka: For me, there's a craft around how you create a space, how you sustain a party, how you sustain a vibe, with music, in a way where you're not just like hitting play, and then start and play.

Rekha: Well how do you create a space?

Ushka: What does it mean to create a space?

Ushka: For me what gives me joy is actually seeing people starting to move and the times that I feel like the most satisfied, for example I just DJed Papi Juice just two weeks ago, and I was in a smaller room and the DJ before me, there was not really that many people on the dance floor because it was too early, and then I had the set up at like 12 or 12:30. And I had the opportunity to fill the space. And the way in which you attract people to dance is by like, for me it's playing a set that makes people nostalgic and also bringing in sort of new beats. Because I DJ all sorts of music, just like having a sense of who's in the room.

Rekha: So it's curating, right. It's like the programming part.

Ushka: Yeah it is. It's a curation of music.

Rekha: You're attracting people by what you play.

Ushka: Yes.

Rekha: The content.

Ushka: It's a profession. It's not like my full time profession, but I think that we need to be super professional about it. In the past when I initially started, I was a little bit more like, "Yeah pay me whatever." It gives off the impression that you don't really care, so other people don't have to care. And so I'm very, very clear. And it's not like I charge that much. If someone's like, "How much is an hour set," I'll belike, "it's 300" and go from there and do some negotiating.

And like it depends, like if it's like a corporate gig, I'm charging a lot. If it's like an organization, I'm charging a certain amount. I am also like making some assessments, so it's not the first thing that I'm thinking about, is money, and also like I'm not a full time DJ. I have health insurance. I have a full time job. But I'm also interacting in spaces with people who are full time DJs. And so I don't want to lower my standards because if I lower my standards I'm blowing it for everyone.

Podcast Transcript

From the Decks: DJ Rekha

From the Decks: DJ Rekha

Rekha: The final installment of this series is with yours truly. I was resistant to include myself in the narrative, but then I realized by not doing so, I was doing what a lot of folks I talked to with did, which is to diminish and or deny my history. What happens when the interviewer is the interviewee? The accounts presented in the previous four episodes were so rich yet varied, as it was my intent to let you hear different aspects of the DJ experience. But now I'm gonna share a few thoughts about my own experience, and how this process of doing this research has affected me.

Shireen: My name is Shireen Hamza. I am an independent podcast producer and a historian. I'm really excited to be sitting down with Rekha today who I've had the immense pleasure of getting to know over the last two years.

Rekha: Likewise.

Shireen: And I just learned a lot from her about her research, but also about her very long and interesting career as a musician, as a DJ, as a producer, as a creative talent.

Rekha: Thank you.

Shireen: I'm really curious about this question that I've heard you get and seen your face suppress a cringe. [Laughs] In a way that-

Rekha: Has it really been suppressed though? I doubt it.

Shireen: And the question is: what's it like to be a woman DJ?

Rekha: I hate that question. And I will actually not answer the question, but I will tell you why I do not like the question. The question assumes that

it's a burden, and it assumes that I must labor to talk about why it's a burden, as opposed to addressing structural issues of why that's even a question. And I'm a DJ first. You don't ask a man what's it like to be a man DJ, or anything, director, actor. It sort of reifies the need to ask the question, and I feel like there's so many better deeper questions to ask, that we can skip that question. And sometimes in interviews I ask ahead of time, you know, "What are you gonna say?" And they say that. I go, "I don't wanna talk about that." There's other things to ask and we're sort of like, acknowledging that question needs to be addressed and asked in this way, and I feel like it's forcing a marginalization, and let's move on. You know, let's just move on from that.

Shireen: Is there an aspect of it that you think is productive to talk about especially with women who are maybe aspiring to be DJs?

Rekha: I think for women who are aspiring to be DJs, they should just also listen to the larger story. The larger story talks about whatever challenges or whatever things may or may not happen. And I think if you want to learn about, aspirationally, just being and just speaking, it is important to say why is it like, because you're a woman. It assumes a burden, and it's not a burden for me.

It's not to say it's not challenging, it's not to say there are not issues because of gender, but this feeling of burden is burdensome.

Shireen: I'm really curious about what you learned from these interviews that you maybe didn't expect going in.

Rekha: I was surprised to learn what I learned too, because this was familiar territory. I knew a lot of these women. I was like, "Oh we're gonna have shop talk," but it went so much deeper than that. The act of us sharing our stories was so empowering to me. We don't really get to talk about our histories or what we're doing, and to have someone who's had

similar experiences was really important. So it was really deeper point of connection. I've worked a lot of these women, but I didn't know their histories. I didn't know Ayesha lived in so many places and started clubbing at 16.

Shireen: And saw her mom there.

Rekha: And saw her mom. Her mom was a party girl and was also at the club. [Laughs]. So I mean, what is that like, growing up in a place of privilege and being in clubs that young? Or Rimarkable started out her career as a mobile DJ, which I did too, which I didn't admit to for many years because I thought it wasn't cool, but it's really good training, and it makes sense of how I see her understand music and the depth of her understanding music. And even the way Reborn, who I've known for many years, her relationship to teaching and mentoring, how seriously she takes it. Just the different kinds of things each person did.

Shireen: Do you want to tell us what mobile DJing is?

Rekha: Mobile DJing? Yes, I will tell you what mobile DJing is.

Shireen: I was too ashamed to ask about it before. [Laughs]

Rekha: I know, I think I think the one thing that is easy for me to do, and even when we're talking, is to get in the weeds and talk about things with a sense of familiarity. I do think that in my experiences of talking with men, that's a kind of a way of exclusion, is to not explain things. I'm glad you asked what mobile DJing is.

Mobile DJing refers to bringing everything to the place. And when we think of mobile DJing, we think of private parties, weddings, weddings, bar mitzvahs, for hire. And there's a certain kind of aesthetic around that, which is different to club DJing.

Shireen: That really resonates a lot with me because-

Rekha: You're from New Jersey! [Laughs] I'm just kidding!

So I guess the takeaways from the research is, it made me think deeper about my practice and what I do. It connected me deeper to these stories. It reminded me how important it is to self-reflect, and in asking a lot of these questions for these women, they were forgetting, or they weren't remembering in the same way. And it's so easy for us, especially, you know, as an artist, as a New Yorker, as we hustle from gig to gig, to just forget things. So I do think it's really important and powerful to remember, to acknowledge, to take a step back and to talk with each other.

You know, the community-ness of DJing. When we DJ together, it's a loud place. It's at night, if we're transitioning, we're trying to do a technological switchover. And you know, within these group of women, some of them are friends and they communicate and hang out outside. But some of us, we just see each other in these spaces, and it was just really great and powerful to share.

Interview Transcripts

Interview Transcript:

DJ Ayes Cold

(Edited) Interview with DJ Ayes Cold

Rekha: So let's take it from where you started DJing. We talked a lot about format and that you started DJing in D.C., in art parties. Through friends and connections, and then you built a reputation and then one thing led to another. It kind of snowballed. You said you found these two mentors or colleagues-mentors who showed you the way in some ways or did some skill share knowledge. As well you felt that there were some other crews, say that part again about the other crews that you felt...

Ayes Cold: Well there, in D.C., there are portions of the DJ scene centered on people, centered around people of color, women, non binary people, queer people. At the time I started DJing, I did not necessarily feel like those portions of the scene were that forthcoming with connecting with me. It took me a while to, to connect with those scenes and feel seen by the people running those scenes.

Rekha: Were you a participant? Did you go to those parties?

Ayes Cold: Yes, I did. I did go to those parties but not as, I, I have always been more of a loner.

Rekha: Right.

Ayes Cold: Socially, I've never really been a part of crews. And I do think that a lot of the queer scene, here maybe, but in D.C. definitely, it's a very chosen family-oriented model, community-oriented model. And I've always been, I've always rolled solo dolo. It's really how I am. It's not necessarily a rejection of community as a necessary thing.

Rekha: Right.

Ayes Cold: But I always rode solo to things and so I did not necessarily have a place in those scenes. Even as somebody who you know really, like, I had, I had a girlfriend at the time, who a lot of them knew.

Rekha: Right, right. So it didn't help.

Ayes Cold: No, because they probably didn't like her [Laughs]. And, she probably hooked up with a couple of them.

Rekha: That's the problem with family, with a chosen queer family. That's interesting.

Ayes Cold: I think musically. So much of those portions of the scene were defined first and foremost by creating community. And then second by music. Music was not necessarily the glue or entry point into the center or focal point of those scenes even though music was definitely something celebrated. I started DJing solely with an obsession around the music, and the community that emerged from that came secondary. I always felt like I've seen these distinctions. The community is defined and then the music, or you focus on the music and the community builds around that. I don't necessarily see people seeing eye to eye on that.

Rekha: Did you feel like the DJs in that scene were like, did they not care about the music or did they care about the craft or the DJing or what was it?

Ayes Cold: I felt like, it's kind of hard to say without coming across as like, I want... Basically, it never felt like it was ever about the craft. To me it was about this feeling of creating a sense of community on the dance floor and playing the songs that people could sing along to and everyone known and loved. A lot of cumbia and bachata, connecting musical traditions with other cultural traditions in the various diasporas that would be in the room which was a beautiful thing. But my approach was a little different.

Rekha: You were more concerned with craft.

Ayes Cold: Yes.

Rekha: So in terms of like those scenes and wanting to connect in the celebratory community way, did you feel the music, did you build community in those spaces?

Ayes Cold: Music for me built community in unexpected ways with people who I wouldn't necessarily have expected would be in my musical family. Music connected me with people who perhaps I would have otherwise not really given the time of day. You know based around just our own insularity around who we hang out with and who we identify with on a cultural and social level.

Rekha: So you started on a laptop and Twitch, and then you now DJ how?

Ayes Cold: Now I DJ on CDJs on a USB stick primarily. Although in a heartbeat I could switch to CDJs and Serato.

Rekha: When I met you, you were using a controller.

Ayes Cold: I was using a controller. If you're asking me now, this is what I do now. If you want to know about the evolution, how I got there...

Rekha: I do. I want to know how you got there. Tell me.

Ayes Cold: So I started on Innovation Twitch and Traktor. And then I moved from Traktor to Serato, so I needed a Pioneer controller to go with Serato. Because I don't think that there was a functionality...

Rekha: There's no internal mode.

Ayes Cold: ... With Pioneer and Traktor even.

Rekha: No, nope. There wasn't.

Ayes Cold: Unless you were to map it, which is complicated.

Rekha: No, you could use Traktor on, you could use it, not on the controller. You can use physical hardware like turntables and CDJs. You can't use, like the controllers are not made for Traktor. There are separate Traktor controllers.

Ayes Cold: So DJ Underdog and Native Son, two of my comrades and early supporters, they were using the Pioneer DDJ Series controllers, and they had a couple different kinds. I saw them using them and I was like, these are great. You know, you've got pads that you can use, it's cute to hot cue and rolls and create loops. And you also have jog wheels which give you a little bit of a, you know, a more traditional DJ feel. And two guys who I looked up to were using them and they're very portable, easy to set up. And so that was, that was my format for at least up until 2017, even. My preferred format. And then after a certain point, I started feeling like I need to be able to rock on whatever equipment a club has. So I got myself a Serato box, Serato control vinyls, did that...

Rekha: So did you have turntables at home?

Ayes Cold: No. I now do. But at the time I didn't.

Rekha: OK. But you had that stuff in preparation, and did you learn how to use turntables and Serato?

Ayes Cold: Yes, I did. Yeah, but mainly self-taught. Some advice from friends. But I didn't have two turntables. I had one turntable actually. So there was a time where I was going instant doubles for the most parts. There are gigs that I did just with one turntable.

Rekha: We've all known, all done them.

Ayes Cold: Yeah.

Rekha: Mostly because the other turntables are broken.

Ayes Cold: Yeah. I've had massive calibration issues with different turntables at different clubs and I've had so many nights where I've just had to Uber home and get my controller, in DC especially.

Rekha: Yeah. Oh yeah.

Ayes Cold: Janky ass turntables. So it kind of got me thinking about other ways to be versatile. I got my hands on a pair of CDJ 850s. I guess in 2017 from this club that was shutting down downtown.

Rekha: Uh huh.

Ayes Cold: And I bought a pair of those for, two for eight hundred.

Rekha: Wow, good price.

Ayes Cold: Yep. One of the key buttons was a little sticky on one of them but for the most part functional. They both have USB inputs.

Rekha: Perfect.

Ayes Cold: CD inputs. They don't link. But hey I will take what I can get to practice on. And the display is very rudimentary but that really does train you to beat match by ear, not having anything visual to rely on.

Rekha: And it plays record box.

Ayes Cold: Yeah. Actually, no no no, sorry.

Rekha: No. Okay.

Ayes Cold: No cue points.

Rekha: No cue points.

Ayes Cold: So you really have to like...

Rekha: You're cueing each time.

Ayes Cold: It forces you to...

Rekha: No, well, I used to have CDJ 1000.

Ayes Cold: MK2?.

Rekha: Yes.

Ayes Cold: Yes!

Rekha: Maybe an MK 1.

Ayes Cold: I used to book at a bar that only had those.

Rekha: You could put an SD card in.

Ayes Cold: Oh cool.

Rekha: And have cue points on the SD card.

Ayes Cold: Wow that's cool. Must have been an MK1.

Rekha: I did a live performance. Spoken word performance with a friend. It was such a tight transition that I was playing stuff while she read, and this is before Serato...where I eventually sold those two pair for like 300 for both because even though I bought them for like eight, nine hundred

bucks each. Because you know I was trying to get the last juice out of them. They're so obsolete.

Ayes Cold: Yeah for sure. You know what, I actually played on my 850s for a gig as soon as I got out here to Brooklyn. I DJed that Brooklyn Bazaar that Anuva threw and Anuva didn't have any gear, and the only gear I had with me that I brought with me to New York was those two 850s.

Rekha: And a mixer?

Ayes Cold: And a mixer. Yes I brought my, I actually bought a pioneer D.J. M8. I think it was an 800 mixer.

Rekha: I have that.

Ayes Cold: Four channels.

Rekha: Solid, its solid.

Ayes Cold: I bought that for a thousand.

Rekha: Yeah.

Ayes Cold: It's a little more pricey than the two CDJs.

Rekha: No, it is. But you know a mixer, has many inputs, does lots of things. So, do you scratch when you play?

Ayes Cold: You know what. So there was a moment where I definitely was teaching myself different scratch techniques. I think, I mean across the different gear I have practiced on over the years, so not at one point, but there were consistent, like you know, they were consistent attempts.

Rekha: Right.

Ayes Cold: And I just never felt like turntableism as an approach to DJing was really my initial like point of interest and entry point into DJing. And I really felt like it was, I was definitely getting a lot of advice and unsolicited advice from other DJs to teach myself how to, you know just become more of a turntableist because..., in DC especially.

Rekha: Who was giving you this advice?

Ayes Cold: Mostly male deejays, turntablist friends. Some really, some really nice guys but, but definitely narrow-minded in this sort of "real DJ" you know that, have you seen that term used?

Rekha: Please. Girl, I've been doing this for 26 years ... And did they use, those real DJs, did they use the scratching when they DJed a lot? Do you know?

Ayes Cold: Yeah, definitely. Yeah. They were, they were definitely turntablists.

Rekha: Were they doing like open format parties or were they doing parties where people appreciated it or not?

Ayes Cold: They were, they were doing open format sets.

Rekha: And they were scratching in it.

Ayes Cold: Yeah.

Rekha: And people liked it?

Ayes Cold: You know what. That's actually a good question.

Rekha: I'm such a, totally leading the question.

Ayes Cold: Some of these deejays would play for hip-hop crowds, and they play for, they were just so confident in their, like, in their skills that they didn't really care. And, I think in some ways the psychology of that like made other people kind of like not really like critique them. You know about that aspect.

Rekha: What do you mean they didn't care? They didn't care what people were doing or they didn't care...

Ayes Cold: There's this attitude which is like I'm a DJ. Naturally I'm a turntableist and naturally you want to hear me interrupt every couple of bars with some scratch action. You know like it's, it's interesting right because it's so subjective. Like, yes scratches can sound dope but at the same time I don't feel a desire to hear scratching on the mixes that I listen to when I'm on dance floors. Personally I don't. But I definitely have been in rooms with people who really really, mostly men, who really like look up to it as like a way of like manipulating sound, you know, and a nod to an old school culture that's dying and so there is like a, I don't know. I don't know. There is, there is a masculinity, a machismo around it and there's this notion of preserving traditions that are, that are under assault in this digital era.

Rekha: And what's the tradition that's under assault?

Ayes Cold: It's turntableism. It's, it's real hip-hop. You know D.C. actually has very like thriving, thriving like turntableist scenes. But I don't know how they actually do as far as numbers go from like a bookings standpoint because when I worked at a club, we would mostly book more electronic DJ acts.

Rekha: And they don't scratch as much?

Ayes Cold: No they don't. Which comes back to my point, which is, I never really saw myself as that. It wasn't really what I felt I wanted to set as my task or my challenge when I started DJing My task initially or my challenge was always the blends, mixes, telling a story, going on a journey. The curation side to this.

Rekha: The curation.

Ayes Cold: Absolutely.

Rekha: So, not to dwell too much on the other scene, the queer scene that you know we talked about. Do you feel like the curation in those scenes was thought out or important, or like you know in terms of like you know scratching or the craft wasn't necessarily a display there. Do you think that there was thought put into curation in those spaces?

Ayes Cold: Yes. There was definitely thought put into curation. But I think personally I want to feel like even if your emphasis is on curation, you want to engage your hardware in a way that enhances that curation. For me, what enhances my curation are the spaces, are transitions. Transitions are very important to me and I think transitions create, give you the opportunity as someone you can create your own beats with a transition, you know. Transitions to me are telling a story in a way. They add to the narrative for me. That was initially the challenge too, you know, come up with bizarre transitions. I loved that.

Rekha: And do you use other like techniques, like looping, or...?

Ayes Cold: Yes. I was doing a lot of looping and I still do a lot of looping as a means to... like I don't go crazy with like you know the sort of like that tiny one beat loops, you know that that stuttering sound.

Rekha: Well I feel like the stuttering is sort of an extension of scratching. It is a way of disruption, disruption for attention.

Ayes Cold: Yeah definitely. I felt like I engaged looping since I started on a controller. That's always been my way of control without having to even nudge the jog wheels. Looping and hot cues, hitting the hot cue pads like they were drums, like on a drum pad.

Rekha: Hot cues meaning that there's several different cue points and then you're going between them.

Ayes Cold: Yeah.

Rekha: To sort of create like a, like a new edit or something on the fly is what you're, what's happening.

Ayes Cold: Yeah. But again, I've always been a deejay who likes to listen to how my dance floor is responding.

Rekha: Right.

Ayes Cold: And so I always approach like the disruptive aspects of DJing with the, a desire to keep a groove or a flow that people are in. I just really enjoy the feeling of people enjoying themselves on a dance floor. And if I can negotiate, like, it feels like a negotiation to me. You know it's like being able to negotiate my own technique and my own intentions with the energy that I'm getting from, from the room too.

Rekha: Now earlier you said you grew up in several places and you're exposed to several, you know, each place because you travel in so many places. Could we just do a quick review of that.

Ayes Cold: I was born in Chicago. At seven, I moved to South India. Chennai. I lived there for five years. The age of 12, I moved to the San Francisco Bay Area and lived there for two years, did middle school, listened to a lot of hip-hop then. Then I moved back to India because the stock market crashed. I went to boarding school in the foothills of the

Himalayas, to Woodstock International School. Went there for two years. My mother lived in Goa at the time. She got robbed and so she basically decided she needed to leave Goa, and she wanted to move to Bangalore and give that a shot. So she took my sister and I out of boarding school and we finished up high school, the last two years, 11th and 12th grade, at a Canadian school in Bangalore.

Rekha: Of course, where you learned Canadian.

Ayes Cold: Where we were unmonitored. We would go to the liquor store and buy Smirnoff Twists, lock our doors and drink and go out to the clubs. And, listen to the local DJ, DJ Ivan who was the beloved local selector with his own DJ show. Him and his friend, Rohit Barker, would play lots of house music, lots of tribal house. People are very sensitive to the term tribal house, but back in the day, you get it, progressive house, tribal, it was like it's own...

Rekha: Tribal is definitely... in New York, tribal house is huge. It was one of the staples of body and soul.

Ayes Cold: No way.

Ayes Cold: I still really dig it. I'm going to be real with you.

Rekha: I mean, it is my preferred, my preferred house music. It's sparse.

Ayes Cold: It's got groove.

Rekha: Groove. Tribal Latin.

Ayes Cold: Yeah.

Rekha: I'm not a fan of progressive.

Ayes Cold: Yeah.

Rekha: I personally never got really into techno either.

Ayes Cold: Yeah I feel you.

Rekha: Airy vibes. Louie Vega, Masters at work. That's my shit.

Ayes Cold: OK. Got you. Yeah. There were certain, there were certain tracks that I can't, I wish I could, that were just really the more memorable tracks of the moment that were tribal house tracks. I can't remember them. But I could sing them to you and I don't want to right now over here. Okay.

Rekha: That's okay.

Ayes Cold: So yeah. And then we you know we would, we would wait till midnight usually though and go dance to his hip-hop selections for the most part. So those were some of the experiences that kind of influenced my love of different styles of music and definitely on some level skewed towards hip-hop and dancehall.

Rekha: Yeah but you're also like listening to it in a club. So it's it's own experience right? Was it different than listening to it at home? Did you want to, did you get that music to listen to at home? Was there a different feeling around the experience?

Ayes Cold: I think that there is a real excitement to being in a club, especially the age of 16.

Rekha: Anytime you're doing something you're not supposed to do there's an excitement.

Ayes Cold: Oh, I was allowed. I would run into my mom at the club though. It would be so funny.

Rekha: So funny. You've got the fun mom.

Ayes Cold: Oh yeah.

Rekha: You got the tequila shot.

Ayes Cold: Much to my Dad's dismay. My dad wasn't in the country at that time. He was trying to wrap up some business in the states still. So, yeah we, we definitely had a lot of fun and definitely became aware of the power of the DJ.

Rekha: Right.

Ayes Cold: You know.

Rekha: What is the power of a deejay?

Ayes Cold: The power of a D.J. is huge. I see it as you, you can make someone's night really amazing or really terrible. You know, you have... life is hard for a lot of people. And sometimes the power of movement and music can be so healing for people. And, it's such a wonderful feeling when you see people letting loose and like truly being present in the moment and like that sort of... I feel euphoria vicariously through people. And I don't know, some of the gratitude that people have expressed over the years and shared with me, just there's been so much of it. And in certain situations it's all it's been is just playing the right song at the right moments. You know I can't even take credit for that but it just makes me really aware of the power of sound and the ability of, of sound to really evoke movement but also create mood. You know you set the vibe. It's there are just so many levels here we could even go into the science of it, I'm sure. But that would be another conversation.

Rekha: So how do you prepare for a set?

Ayes Cold: I usually go into Record Box on my computer and I plug my USB sticks into my computer and I pull them up on record box and I make sure that my crates are organized. Basically when I say organized, all my tracks that I think I'm gonna play or go to, I know where to find them. They're usually across a series of crates. but if I think that there is a specific mood that I want to set and I don't think any of my existing crates already address it, I will drag a bunch of stuff into a crate and I will make sure that the that the beak grids are set and I often just grids actually and I will make sure that cue points are you know where they need to be. Because I'm not one of those deejays who really like wants moments of silence on the dance floor, like breaks in songs and stuff. I find those a little awkward.

Rekha: Who wants that?

Ayes Cold: I don't know. I think certain House DJs and Techno DJs. They'll do like the slow build back up.

Rekha: They'll do the old, turn down all the frequencies so you get a little bit of space.

Ayes Cold: I know, that's not my style you know.

Rekha: So, what is your style? Is there your style?

Ayes Cold: It's very hard to define, Rekha:. It's evolving to at this point. My style has changed from this year to even last year. This month it feels different.

Rekha: You're a little baby in D.J. terms.

Ayes Cold: Yeah, maybe I'm going through the adolescence. Will I settle into a style? Who knows?

Rekha: Things keep changing.

Ayes Cold: Yeah. I think right now, I'm actually working on a new mix and I would say my, the power of the impact of my mixes has waned over time as I've gotten more weird. You know initially my mixes played it more safe and they were getting a lot more love.

Rekha: You mean mixes that you record and put up?

Ayes Cold: Yes on Soundcloud, as far as Soundcloud activity goes.

Rekha: And, is that experience different than mixing live. Making a mix?

Ayes Cold: Making a mix? Absolutely. Because when you have a mix, you have your, you can plan an entire set. You could, you could map out every transition with a mix that you're going to record whereas on a dance floor you kind of really have to be open to the power of suggestion from your audience. I've learned that the hard way. When I first started DJing, you know, I was like setting up every transition the safe way. And then I learned that I started feeling constrained and when things wouldn't, the audience wouldn't respond the way I'd want them to, I would still feel trapped to follow through for some reason with the plan. Then I started learning that hey, maybe the key is to set myself up for the most, you know, flexible scenarios. So I think the bottom line is just being as organized as possible and having an idea of the multitude of directions you could go in.

Rekha: And does that take a lot of time?

Ayes Cold: You know, if you're DJing every other night, no, because you kind of are, like you said, in flow and you're organized because you know you organized for a set that was 24 hours ago.

Rekha: But is there an end then if you're doing multiple gigs then, the organization you do. For one thing you're getting more mileage out of the organization I would say.

Ayes Cold: Yes, exactly.

Rekha: Is that what you're saying? So, does that organization take time is there labor involved in it?

Ayes Cold: Yes. There is so much. So much. How much. I don't know. When I was a full time DJ, when I didn't have a day job, I would probably say like 50 percent of my time, my downtime, was organizing music and digging for new music. Because I also used to be that DJ who wanted new tracks where every set, like at least a few new elements in every set, like a few downloaded tracks every set. And I started realizing that's not sustainable for me.

Rekha: Have you ever felt unsafe while you've DJed, well, physically.

Ayes Cold: Yes, absolutely.

Rekha: How so?

Ayes Cold: Once when I was DJing I had a woman-- but a woman who liked other women-- come up. As I was DJing, she started trying to talk to me but also trying to mess with my DJ gear.

Rekha: Oh.

Ayes Cold: Like pushing buttons and stuff. I felt unsafe, not physically as much as like the sanctity of my practice at that moment. You know like my personal space was really being invaded on a new level. You know like she was trying to flirt with me but she, she crossed a different line with me.

Rekha: It didn't work obviously.

Ayes Cold: As non cis-men DJs, I feel like there's a certain level at which we know how to de-escalate situations. It's just a matter of, it's been a matter of survival in a way. This was one of those things that I just felt like was something that had already escalated because they were already like fucking with my set. I don't know.

Rekha: What did you do about it?

Ayes Cold: Security. It was at Tropicalia. I was on stage.

Rekha: So you're so close to those people.

Ayes Cold: I know.

Rekha: Also in Tropicalia...

Ayes Cold: It's been a while though since I played there.

Rekha: I haven't played there a long time either. I've also DJed not on the stage, on the floor. That's some shit that's....

Ayes Cold: Now that on *that* floor.

Rekha: Oh yeah, I've done that.

Ayes Cold: I've done that.

Rekha: So I mean sometimes, it's just a lot of fun that you're in.

Ayes Cold: It can be fun.

Rekha: It's like, it's like kind of insane but it's like, it's such a high up.

Ayes Cold: Absolutely. One time I also got somebody pulled a knife out at me, not at a set but on my way home. I was at the bus stop after a gig.

Rekha: By yourself.

Ayes Cold: Waiting for the bus. This is after that I decided to take Ubers after every set. But I used to, I would, this was right on 16th Street by Adams Morgan and like Columbia.

Rekha: Where you think you would be safe.

Ayes Cold: That it was, I thought, it was well-lit, you know. And I was waiting for the bus and I used to live literally like up the several blocks, up the streets. Why not wait for the bus?

Rekha: Now you're like, well why take a cab because it's so close. Be safe. So after the performance.

Ayes Cold: Yeah, after the performance basically I was waiting at the bus stop.

Rekha: Which is like the end of the night and there's like...

Ayes Cold: I mean there was a person who was basically shit talking everybody waiting at the bus stop. It was a really uncomfortable situation. This guy was shit talking Indians, Ethiopians, just other immigrant groups talking about how he didn't belong here, talking about how we smell, all of that shit.

Rekha: Ah fuck that guy.

Ayes Cold: Yes.

Rekha: Terrible.

Ayes Cold: Yep. He triggered me. I said something and he, and then he pulled out the knife.

Rekha: Shit.

Ayes Cold: Yeah.

Rekha: And then what happened?

Ayes Cold: Well I probably should have stopped talking to him but I insisted that he, I shouldn't have done this but I was like I probably had to...

Rekha: Did you have some drinks in you?

Ayes Cold: No.

Rekha: No, no liquid courage?

Ayes Cold: I literally gestured to him, like you need to sit down and we need to work through your anger issues.

Rekha: So do you think now, this is interesting—are you saying, do you think as you are self-identified as a woman that you have to de-escalate and that you know how to de-escalate.

Ayes Cold: Yeah. Yeah. I think also growing up in India too and being in Indian clubs playing, there's so many situations where you have these like guys breaking out into fights with each other in clubs. You see it happen, you know, and you don't even know over what. Especially, especially the clubs I used to go to a lot of clubs in India or wherever it would be in India, I would end up at some club, in clubs and bars. Something would trigger something and like you know de-escalation

was always something, that friends would jump in the middle and like try to do.

Rekha: My God, if I had a nickel for every fight I've broken up. It's just, it's an instinct, it's a thing. So I would even like, I could smell it about to happen. Yeah, I can see it on the floor. And I'm just like, okay watch that guy. That guy's being a jerk. I can see it's about to happen.

Ayes Cold: Seriously and I think, you know I don't know, I think that when, I mean, I I don't see women breaking out into fights as much. You just don't. And so I think, I think, I don't know.

Rekha: Have you seen fights while you DJed?

Ayes Cold: Well I don't know if social, socialized biological, I do, I do, I do, I do feel like intuitively, my instincts are to de-escalate conflict before it happens.

Rekha: I mean obviously if there is a fight the party stops.

Ayes Cold: Or de-escalate even an unpleasant situation from happening to me.

Rekha: For your own safety.

Ayes Cold: Yeah. For my own safety. Definitely.

Rekha: Do you ever get asked to do things for free?

Ayes Cold: Yes actually even like two weeks ago I was asked to do something for free. And it sucked, because she was Indian. Just throwing an Indian event and she was friends with someone who used to teach a theater class that I used to take in Chennai when I used to go to Chennai and I used to be in her productions. And she told me that she'd love to get me involved.

Rekha: What was it for without being specific?

Ayes Cold: I, it was for, it was a gala.

Rekha: Oh the fucking gala. Don't get paid at the gala.

Ayes Cold: And, she said a bunch of artists-- she's a bharatnatayam teacher-- and a bunch of artists were donating their services.

Rekha: Yeah, fuck those guys. [Laughing]

Ayes Cold: It was really hard because you know she and I connected just from our Chennai connections.

Rekha: And how did you how do you respond to this?.

Ayes Cold: Well to be real with you, I had to make up a little bit of an excuse. I mean I told her that you know, this is in some ways still my livelihood. But I basically said that I can't afford to bring equipment without being paid. I said I need to rent sound equipment etc.

Rekha: If there was equipment, would you do it for free?

Ayes Cold: Would I have done it for free? You know I haven't done a free gig in a year. It feels like years. So I don't know. But I did make her a playlist for free.

Rekha: Yeah, it's a compromise.

Ayes Cold: Yeah.

Rekha: So you book your own gigs?

Ayes Cold: Yes. Yeah. I book my own gigs. I used to have somebody who would help me negotiate the rates.

Rekha: Did that help?

Ayes Cold: It made me more bold to ask for the same money after this person and I stopped working together. It set a precedent.

Rekha: They asked for more and then you realized you could get more.

Ayes Cold: Yeah. Absolutely. Yeah.

Rekha: You said when you started like you went from art parties to getting really really busy. And, what did you attribute that to do you think?

Ayes Cold: Actually I would attribute it to multiple things. One I would say being at the right place at the right time. I think that it sounds like a cliché but I do think that timing is really important. I think in D.C., as far as like the evolution of the music scene goes in D.C., I think there was a turning point where people were just starting to play, to bring more obscure music on the dance floor. And when I say obscure Internet music, you know certain artists who were gaining followings through platforms like SoundCloud etc.

There were some deejays doing that but more in the context of warehouse parties and house parties and their own nights. But there really was no precedent for that at the time and so when I started doing that at my shows people couldn't help but find it intriguing.

I felt like on some level I was playing music they'd never heard. And people. So people, that added you know that added some degree of interest I think, and also like people would talk about sets that I would do because of that aspect. You know I was playing things that were just

added in there that were creating a unique memorable listening experience too I think for them.

Second it was also again an issue related a matter of timing. But in a different way, which is that at the time there really were, there still are, just it's a really finite handful of women DJs in D.C. at bars and clubs. And I think at that time the fact that I was a woman bringing some of this novel music to dance floors, it only enhanced my visibility. But I do think it was like those two things reinforcing each other in a way because I don't think alone me just being a woman doing it would have been enough.

Rekha: So do you think the visibility got you the gig, but then...

Ayes Cold: Visibility I think helped open doors for sure. Yeah the visibility around being a woman, and also perhaps tokenistic attempts to include more women on bills and stuff. But even at that moment, like in 2013, I don't think that conversation about booking more women was as, you know, in full speed as I feel like it's been in the last two years.

Rekha: So do you think there's more conversation around the need to book women today?

Ayes Cold: Yeah definitely I see it. I mean I see it happening more in digital spaces, conversations around that, you know, just the multiple multitude of social media platforms, you see that happening on and off a lot. There's not enough for sure but also that conversation is happening. It actually needs to be calm, a nuanced conversation in many ways, and I think there is an oversimplification of that.

Rekha: What you mean?

Ayes Cold: Well I think that you know people are like: book more women. But then what about people who are nonbinary or trans etc.? People who don't fit the sort of mold of like "woman DJ" that is, you know.

Rekha: What is that mold?

Ayes Cold: The mold. I mean I think though like the woman DJ angle that has been desirable from a marketing perspective historically has been a super femme image of a woman DJ and a cis woman image of a woman DJ. So basically anybody not in that category is still you know pressured to fall to market themselves and brand themselves in that category or just not be seen you know.

I mean I have a lot of thoughts about this but this notion of getting more women on bills has still favored and continues to favor women who bring, who play to unintentionally or into or intentionally certain aesthetic preferences of cis men for the most part and mostly cis white men.

So there's that but there are other things too. Like, for instance, I don't know, just from having an experience doing talent booking at a nightclub, I've been in situations where I want to book a woman opener for a certain night and I've been in a situation where I've been like, well in this specific niche or genre or vibe I can't really think of women who would do... who I would call, who I could confidently book.

Rekha: Have you been involved in any way to cultivate or mentor?

Ayes Cold: Yeah. Definitely.

Rekha: Do people come up to you and say hey, you know...

Ayes Cold: Definitely. I've had mentees. I've had aspiring women DJs come to my house and play on my equipment. I've donated to organizations'

equipment, organizations like Words Beats and Life that actually do work with a lot of women. I've been on radio shows hosted by women about women musicians.

I speak about my own experiences dealing with the challenges of perception around what you do.

Rekha: Speak about it now.

Ayes Cold: Well, um..

Rekha: You have a microphone.

Ayes Cold: I know, I know, it's a, it's a...

Rekha: You want to take a break for a minute.

Ayes Cold: Yeah, maybe.

Rekha: We've been talking for a long time.

Ayes Cold: Yeah, I've been talking...

Rekha: So I mean we've got a lot of great stuff and we can wrap it up. I mean the last question or last round was just, so have you thrown your own events?

Ayes Cold: I have. Yeah I used to. I used to do a residency. It was a Tropicalia party actually, and at Velvet Lounge.

Rekha: So was it a residency that you were the resident deejay or were you involved in the creative aspects of it as well, like the night.

Ayes Cold: Yeah. It was both and both were flexible spaces. But I have to say that both were very challenging.

Rekha: How so?

Ayes Cold: The first residency that I had was at this tiny dive bar called Velvet Lounge in D.C., its capacities is probably like no more than like 70 people. And I started with my friend, Native Son. So it was like we were tag teaming here, which was great because we both shared the labor in a certain sense. But I was always more creative direction and he had a lot more DJ friends, so he would basically invite the special guests and I would make the flyers. I proposed the name of the party. You know so some of the....

Rekha: What was the name of the party?

Ayes Cold: It's called Underwater D.C. And that the vibe was anything goes but keeping it fluid musically. And those parties were really successful and I think those were actually really key to cementing me as a DJ in the D.C. DJ scene, people knowing where to find me every first and third Wednesday of the month. Regularity.

Rekha: Yeah, regularity.

Ayes Cold: Regularity. Those were great. But the pay was never, it was always hard to get paid, always.

Rekha: Why?

Ayes Cold: Because the club owner was very lax and still is very lax about paying his DJs on time and paying them fairly. It was just shady, you know. Like the bookkeeping was shady. It just never made sense. We'd packed the joint on certain nights. So we curated the vibe. We curated the music. We curated the guests.

Rekha: What's the vibe? How do you curate a vibe?

Ayes Cold: You curate a vibe by, it's a combination of aesthetics and sonics. I would say so. You curate the vibe by the styles, the music that you play. You also curate the vibe around your flyers. The artwork for the event. It kind of sets a tone. So we use a lot of like watery images. We'd use a lot of images of space. Definitely some esoteric sort of imagery. Sometimes DJ Underdog would do a flyer occasionally but for the most part it was just me playing with my own Illustrator and Photoshop skills. I felt like I did a lot of work for those parties.

Rekha: Did you feel like the work was evenly distributed?

Ayes Cold: Sometimes. No.

Rekha: And, why not?

Ayes Cold: Because I felt like it really was...

Rekha: Was it gendered, or not?

Ayes Cold: I mean, yes, absolutely. I'm thinking about the aesthetics. And he would think about just hitting up his friend on the phone and his friend who's already a DJ would just come and play. I think I was thinking more big picture. And he was thinking like just who he knew in his phone book. You know different. Different.

Rekha: Did he want to just have his friends in the room and you wanted to have....

Ayes Cold: You know actually to his credit he had pretty on point taste. And so the friends in the room were actually DJs, a lot of them are producers who I was already aware of and had listened to their stuff and thought would

be great additions like him. It was a great relationship in that we had a working relationship.

I just started feeling like the issue of money... It always felt like a labor of love and never just, never worth, I mean after a certain point, I started questioning the time commitment to first and third Wednesdays, making artwork, promoting, spending late nights... we would go until 3:00 in the morning. Ten to three, just DJing so many hours. All for 75 bucks at the end of the night? Are you kidding me?

Rekha: Seriously.

Ayes Cold: Yeah. So.

Rekha: But you know, it's a build, right?

Ayes Cold: Yeah. Then I tried doing my own residency, like my own party. It was the summer of 2017 at Tropicalia. I was doing, every Thursday I was there.

Just never, you know, with a two hundred capacity room and just never filled up. Just never filled up. Thursdays were jinxed at that club though.

Rekha: Oh, yeah. Trying to think if I did Thursday. Yeah. I did. Mostly weekends.

Ayes Cold: Yeah the weekends were the best nights. But you had to also be able to cater to their weekend crowd. Yeah. Other eye rolling experience sometimes.

Rekha: Definitely. Well I mean I think that's, we've talked about so many different things. Even after it started recording and some before, notes on it.

Ayes Cold: Yes. At the very least you know me better, you know. .

Rekha: Oh definitely. I mean it's why I'm doing this, because this is the shit I like ... Anything you want to add?

Ayes Cold: Yeah I guess I want to add that right now I I feel like I'm at another crossroads in my career and in my life where I have in some ways taken a step back from regular DJing because, just concerns that I've had about my own health and personal well-being.

Rekha: Say more.

Ayes Cold: Well I started realizing that, the late nights adding up were just taking a toll on my physical health. I just don't do well with several late nights in a row. It was messing up my eating, the way I would eat. It was messing up the way I would sleep. And that was leading to a depression.

Rekha: It's interesting. Yeah, it's a hard lifestyle.

Ayes Cold: It is. And I was able to do it up until very recently. I moved to New York in May from D.C. And I think that was the right intervention for me. I now work a 9 to 5 job. Barely a 9 to 5. It's more like a 10 to whenever I want to leave. Very flexible. I really do love working in a place surrounded by music producers because I am trying to ramp up my own skills as a music producer, mainly so I can release my own tracks.

Rekha: And do you make your own music? Have you produced?

Ayes Cold: Yeah I've been producing since 2015 but I've always felt like there's been a little bit of a hump that has been hard to get over. Like a ceiling to the skills I can actually acquire without making a concrete investments in getting to the next level. And when I say investments, I mean having the capital to actually purchase certain kinds of equipment

or the not just physical capital, social capital professional capital, to access certain kinds of more expert knowledge around music production.

Rekha: Do you feel like that knowledge is hard to get?

Ayes Cold: Very hard to get to if you are, well, in my situation, I found it very hard to even sometimes just sit down and make the time to do youtube tutorials, to learn techniques that, just hacks really.

Rekha: Right.

Ayes Cold: There is, there is a lot of it. There is a lot of knowledge in producer circles but a lot of this knowledge is concentrated in the hands of men.

Rekha: Yes.

Ayes Cold: And to access or tap into that knowledge you've really got to integrate yourself into like a crew of producers. This seems to be how it goes to really be able to benefit from the knowledge of other people. Because people don't share that knowledge unless you get in with them. And, as a woman it's been very hard to do that because of perceptions.

Rekha: What are the perceptions?

Ayes Cold: Perceptions are that you don't know as much as they do, the perceptions that you know you're a girl in a traditionally male field or space. I've been in situations where I've felt awkward around other men making music and it's really hard to kind of step away from some of the insecurity that I've harbored around my own skills as a music producer given that I did not grow up making music. It's almost like music production is a boys' club and you can enter that boys' club as a boy, pretty early in life. If that's something you're interested in at the age of 16. So a lot of producers who we know have been making music since

they were 16. As a 16 year old girl, you are socialized to do other things for the most part. And you're not typically making or playing video games and music-making is more associated with gaming culture too I think.

Rekha: Do you think there's a boys' club in the DJ circles too?

Ayes Cold: Oh yeah, absolutely. But I think it's a similar phenomenon. Being able to really get to that next level in your skills does take tapping into the knowledge of other people who are more experienced than you. And, also giving yourself the time, lots of time, and space to actually experiment and practice.

Rekha: Time is such a commodity in capitalism.

Ayes Cold: Yeah so I'm at this point where I'm like all right, I'm at Splice every day. Every day I'm learning something new and allowing myself to actually take in knowledge that I otherwise wouldn't have access to right, as a producer.

Rekha: That's great.

Ayes Cold: And so I'm OK with the DJing slowing down because I feel like there still is a new flow you know. Not to say that I don't want to continue DJing. I love it but I've had to, you know.

Rekha: What do you say in terms of, as an artist, what is your main medium? Is it DJing? Or is it...?

Ayes Cold: Right now I would say it's still DJing until I actually have evidence of actually being a producer.

Rekha: Well okay, yeah, well, we'll be ready for it.

Ayes Cold: Hell, yes! I appreciate that. Stay ready.

Ayes Cold: Thank you.

Rekha: Thank you.

Interview Transcript:

JADALAREIGN

(Edited) Interview with JADALAREIGN

Rekha: Let's just get started. I'm just going to ask you about your background. So, where did you grow up? Where are you from?

JADALAREIGN: I was born in Summit, New Jersey. My mother is from Newark. My father's from Brooklyn. I spent the first year of my life in Irvington, New Jersey and then I moved to a town called Mahopac, which is in Putnam County, which is about an hour north of Manhattan.

Rekha: I know where that is. I did a gig there and I did not realize how f'ing far it was.

JADALAREIGN: Oh my goodness. Oh my God. I've never told somebody where I was from and they knew the town. So that's crazy. Yeah. Very suburban, predominantly white. Small town. So, that's where I grew up. I was there until I graduated high school and then I moved to Manhattan for college. And then I've been in the city ever since. I'm in Brooklyn now.

Rekha: If I may ask, where did you go to college?

JADALAREIGN: So I started at Hunter and then I went, I transferred to LIM College, which is a fashion business school. I wanted to, I started off when I was younger playing instruments and things like that. Around college, I really wanted to get into design. So I did that for a few years. My school required us to do a lot of internships in the industry. That's when I realized that it wasn't something that I wanted to pursue as a career. I think the industry aspect kind of made me hate it. After that, that's when I reconnected with music and I started learning how to DJ.

Rekha: Okay, we're going to get to that. Let's talk about the instruments that you play.

JADALAREIGN: So the first instrument I played was the acoustic bass. I started when I was, going to say ten. I played for five or six years. I also dabbled a little bit with piano and guitar as well.

Rekha: So just going to show the background and then we'll get into how you got into DJing. What kind of music did you hear at home whether with your family or siblings or your community? And, was that different from what you heard at school? What are your musical memories, in terms of the music that was around you?

JADALAREIGN: I am biracial, so my mom is black and my father's white. They come from two different worlds and their musical influences are very different as well. My mother, she grew up in the church so she was a pianist and a singer, and she had a very eclectic taste in music that I can recall. So it was like, from Slave and the whole disco and funk era to Led Zeppelin and a lot of rock, and then to African and Brazilian music. It was like very very diverse gospel. I pretty much listened to everything under the sun while I was with my mother.

Then with my father, he was into a lot of just classic rock like Bruce Springsteen and Billy Joel and that kind of stuff. And, then you know I grew up in a suburban white town. So then, the Hustle. The influence of a lot of the top 40 and radio stuff that was going on and mainstream rap and pop and... So I had a very very diverse eclectic musical palette as a child.

Rekha: Could you hone in a little for me on the time period-- like school, the top 40, rap, what eras?

JADALAREIGN: I started High School in 05. That was around like Ashanti, JaRule and like that era with the G Unit and Dipset and all that stuff. Yeah.

Rekha: Do you have any kind of first memories of DJing, or not of DJing, but seeing a DJ, being around a DJ, or, is there a conscious memory of that? You might not have one.

JADALAREIGN: You know there is never a moment where I was like I saw another DJ playing and I was like, wow I really want to do that. It was just, it formed out of just a deep appreciation for a vast types of music. And, a vast influence of music. So, I wouldn't say I had a defining moment. Any moment now. Yeah.

Rekha: So for folks that are older, it's more of a thing, that first time or something... now we're in it you know. Like the first time you saw a glass of water, you really can't isolate that. So, how did you learn how to become a DJ. What was your process, your story?

JADALAREIGN: When I was in college as I was figuring out that I hated the fashion industry I was still very much involved with music on a personal level. Just because you know, it's my therapy and just everything. So around that time when I was in college, I was doing a lot of digging on Soundcloud and immersing myself in local producers and a lot more underground stuff because I had become a little bit more disenchanted with mainstream music. And also just like doing my own research because there is a lot of stuff that, a lot of music that I wasn't exposed to as a child, that I was kind of like doing my own research on and figuring out a lot of early hip-hop and still stuff like that. My mom didn't listen to a lot of hip-hop so I was kind of doing that research for myself, before college and early on in college. So, I was just really immersing myself in a lot of different types of music and hanging out with a lot of friends that were doing the same. And I had

this one producer friend, one day, and I had thought about DJing and production kind of together as something that I wanted to try out.

But I always had this idea in my head, it was still really new for me at least for what I was exposed to, to see a woman in that field. So it was kind of something that I just put in the back of my mind like, oh that would be something cool to pursue but I never really took it seriously. And then a friend of mine, one day we were hanging out just like you know chopping it up, listening to music. I was playing him like some new stuff that I had found and he said, you know you'd be really good at DJing, have you ever given it a try? And that's when I like, which kind of sucks, not that I'm saying that he validated that for me but that was what kind of made me like, okay, if somebody else thinks that this is something that I could be good at, I may as well give it a try.

So, He connected me with a different friend of his that gave me my first DJ lesson. And, the first lesson I had, it was like: what the fuck is like, what is all of this? He sat me down in front of...

Rekha: Your friend introduced you to another one of his friends. And he gave you your first DJ lesson.

JADALAREIGN: Yes. And, I was just like, I don't know what the fuck I'm doing. He had a turntable setup. So, it was really hard for me the first time I sat down with it. But, it was something that I knew that I wanted to conquer. So I had met with him a couple more times. The more I spent time with him, the more really intrigued I was. And, I would leave and want to go home and still mess around with it. So I got a controller. And I just became obsessed with the whole thing. And then, I like serendipitously got a gig a few months

later. A friend of mine was looking for a DJ for some event. He owned a bar. I probably wasn't ready but I went back to the guy that had been giving me the lessons. And I asked him for pointers and I, you know, I'm like, I got my first gig, is there anything any knowledge that you can impart on me that might help make it easier? It was like, four hours too or something ridiculous for the first time. It was ridiculous. Like what.

Rekha: What controller did you get?

JADALAREIGN: I got a Pioneer DDJ SR, I think. Not the small one but like the middle.

Rekha: The professional two-channel one, right? Not the entry one, which is an SB.

JADALAREIGN: Right right right. I got the second one and so.

Rekha: And so that works with Serato.

JADALAREIGN: Correct. Yeah I had been learning on Serato so I went back to him and I asked him for some pointers and the first thing he said to me was, "[W]ow you got a gig. Power of the pussy." And that kind of like really fucked me up. I was just like, just because I was already feeling vulnerable even learning how to DJ. And then I got in this position where I was getting really excited about it thanks to this guy. And then I got a gig and I just felt like, I don't know, it's kind of like the air out of my tires.

So I think after that conversation with him was the last time I hit him up after that. I just felt like this is just not somebody that I wanted to include in my journey. So I went. I did the gig. I was probably too prepared. And I did really well for my first time. I

think I got paid like \$450 or something, something that I would even be happy with now if I got that booking.

Rekha: Me too and I have been doing this for almost 30 years.

JADALAREIGN: Right. So you know that was exciting for me because I didn't fuck it up and I got paid a nice penny and I was like, no this is dope. I know I'm not in a place where I need to be but I want to keep working towards this because this is something I can see myself doing.

Rekha: What do you remember what you played? Can you tell me more about the gig? Like, where was it...?

JADALAREIGN: Yeah sure. It was at the spot, it's called Durden Bar. It's a sports bar on the Lower East Side. I think maybe 12th Street and Third Avenue or somewhere around there. It was just like, it might even have been, it was a Thursday or Friday, Friday night. There was some big game on TV. I don't really pay attention to sports so I don't know exactly even what sport. But there were a lot of people there excited about the game. And my library at the time just consisted of a lot of mainstream. Well, at least for this gig, I was like, let me play it safe and play mainstream Top 40 radio, bar-friendly type stuff with a little bit of classic hip-hop and throwbacks mixed in. Right. So it ended up being great. I got a couple of requests, which I was able to accommodate which was cool. And yeah. Went pretty well. Yes.

So after that I was like OK I want to keep learning and practicing and getting better but I don't want to do it with him. So after that I signed myself up for a class at Scratch Academy. Because I was like, I'm not going to leave my destiny in the hands of a man. Also because he's a DJ that's been doing this for like at this point already 20 years or something. So I felt really insecure about

the fact that he's somebody that I potentially could have really looked up to. But I couldn't. Well, let me just go take a class in an official capacity. I went and I signed up for the class. It was like an intensive course over six weeks that met twice a week.

Rekha: When was this?

JADALAREIGN: This was in 2005. I'm sorry, not 2005. 2015.

Rekha: I was going to say you was in middle school then.

JADALAREIGN: No, this is 2015. So yes I signed up for the class. And it was great. I love Scratch Academy. I love the way that they teach. It's interesting because the majority of the classes like Principles, that I had already known, but it was cool to be able to go and practice on turntables. The six weeks went by very quickly. The last class we had a little showcase kind of and everybody puts together a quick five minute set or whatever, three or four songs. And we demonstrated in front of the class. And, me with my highly self-critical nature I'm stressing myself out about this five song set and like, freaking out and practicing a bunch at home. Then I did my set in front of the class and the teacher was like, No, that's an example of a perfect SAMPLER set. And I was like, so geeked. So you know that like made me feel a lot better about the previous situation. And then from there, I kind of felt good enough to go back home keep practicing. I did a lot of research on YouTube and I bought some books about DJing and...

Rekha: Do you remember the books you bought?

JADALAREIGN: Yeah. What is that? There's this... I think it was written by Jam Master Jay. it's like the Scratch Academy guide. You probably know which book I'm talking right?. So I bought that book that was ...?

Rekha: How did you get it? [...] Oh here it is, *On the record*.

JADALAREIGN: Yeah exactly. That's exactly the one.

Rekha: See my pile right there.

JADALAREIGN: Yeah. I kind of just felt comfortable enough to keep working through that stage. From there, I want to say I gave myself a good six, seven months of just really going hard, practicing at home a lot. Every single day. And after a point I was like, alright I want to get some live, I want to get more live practice. So I had been working with this women-owned, women-ran entertainment blog called Strawberry Blonde. It was like a hip-hop and entertainment blog that was making really dope moves in the city around that time. I got with them in 2012. This was like just before, a couple of years before I actually decided to try DJing. I was their music editor. Through working with them, I had developed a pretty extensive network of contacts, like people in the industry, media personalities, other artists and producers and event curators and blah blah blah. So I went to my network and I was like, "Look I'm gonna be a DJ. I recorded some mixes. Here they are. If you want to book me I'll do for free. I just want to start gigging."

I remember the next gig I had after that was at this do it yourself, like this really shitty venue in Brooklyn, I forget what it's called. It's like a spot that's a coffee shop during the day. I think it's called Much Mores. It was just like this makeshift, there was nobody there. There's 20 people there. Yeah, that was my second gig. That was fun. And then from there it was kind of just like I do these gigs. I meet people and then those people would have another gig that they want to book me for. So I was kind of

just doing the three gig thing for a little while. And momentum picking up pretty quickly.

I feel like around that time there was this new generation of women DJs starting out but there was a lot of us. Well, it was an exciting time. I feel like it was kind of a novelty thing to book a Woman DJ around that time but I didn't mind because I wanted to just get my name out. And then a friend of mine, he's a rapper. He had a tour. He had a DJ for his tour but there were like two stops where his DJ wasn't going to be there. So he asked me if I wanted to DJ those two stops. Once again, this is like super early on in my career. I wasn't actually opening for him. I was literally only playing his set. So I did that. That was fun. I went to two cities in California. When from there I was like, okay I think I'm good to start accepting paid gigs now.

Rekha: You did this just to build and then after this you start getting paid. So you were just trying to do gigs to get some live practice.

JADALAREIGN: And to just get my name out and meet more people, and immerse myself more in the scene.

Rekha: Can you, just for the record, before I forget something: Give me your government name and give your DJ name.

JADALAREIGN: Yes. So my government name is Jada Lorraine Haytough and my DJ name is JADALAREIGN. It's spelled a little bit differently.
JADALAREIGN

Rekha: That's your DJ name. Basically your real name.

JADALAREIGN: So essentially it's my first and my middle name. But you know, I just tried to jazz it up and not make it so. first and middle name -looking. Also right around the time that I was learning to

DJ, my grandmother passed away. I was named after her. Her name is Lorraine. She was also very musically involved. She played the drums up until she was like 72 or whatever. So it was kind of like my homage to her as well, in a way that she passed like right before I started gigging.

Rekha: We'll go back to the journey after this rap tour towards DJing or dropping tracks. You came back to New York then?

JADALAREIGN: Yes, I came back to New York. This was probably now like June 2016.

Rekha: So then what happened?

JADALAREIGN: From there I was getting both. It's funny because I learned how to DJ on turntables, my first experience ever with DJing was on turntables and then when I went to Scratch, I was using turntables. But I didn't have anywhere to practice on turntables and I'm just very self-conscious and I like to be prepared for things. So, I was still carrying my controller to my gig. I didn't really know how to set up turntables on my own or how to set up a Serato box. There was like one class [at Scratch] where they ran through how to set up turntables. But I never had hands on experience doing it myself. You know it's kind of just like a demonstration. And you know how it is, every club is different, every setup is different. So you have to do trial and error one hundred times to know all of the different setups and different situations that you could be put in when you get to the club. For the first year of my paid gig journey, I was still carrying my controller everywhere, trying to get as much practice as I could wherever I could, on turntables because I really prefer the feel of turntables more than anything else as well. But I just didn't want to put myself in a position where I'm doing something live and it's not sounding as good because I didn't have the practice. After a

while I made that my priority. I was like, okay, I'm going to do what I have to do and figure out a way to be able to gig on whatever equipment is at the venue.

Also because there is this like all of this discourse on Twitter about new DJs and new DJs and Controller DJs, and I don't want to be a Controller DJ especially because I don't really like playing on my controller every minute, carrying this shit with me. I love turntables so I wanted, it was it was something that I felt the pressure, but I really also wanted to do it for myself. So I bought myself my slip mats and my vinyl and my needles. At one point I was like, alright I'm just going to start showing up to my gigs and play on the turntables and get my practice that way. I'm not gonna let it stop me.

I started doing that. I think I probably had a low-key gig at Bed-Vyne or a Casablanca or something like that. I brought my set up, and I used it as practice. There wasn't very many people there and I was like, oh, I don't sound terrible, why? I can continue to do this. So I made that my priority and I did the same for CDJs and I made sure I knew how to set everything up and how to do the Serato box and all that stuff. So that was the next lap of my journey, figuring out how to be able to really have versatility with my setup.

Rekha: What was the worst gig you ever had?

JADALAREIGN: What was the worst gig I ever had?

Rekha: And, that's followed up by what was the best gig you ever had?

JADALAREIGN: I never had a gig where I completely fucking bombed. But I do remember this one time that left me scorn for a little while because I could tell this other DJ was judging me. First of all, I

showed up late. I showed up ten minutes after my set was supposed to start. That was bad.

Second of all, I brought my controller when I told him that I was using turntables because I ended up like last minute being like I don't want to make a fool of myself. Because it was at a venue where there was a stage and everybody's looking at you and I was like don't even do it to yourself like. There's just so much like insecurity when you start out as a DJ. I don't know what your experience was because you've been doing it a lot longer than me but so much insecurity especially when you're dealing with men.

Rekha: Tell me more about this. So the DJ was a guy?

JADALAREIGN: Yes so the guy that booked me, this was his party series, an established party series. I don't think he ever heard me play. But you know I was making a lot of buzz around the time. And you know, I showed up, I told him I was going to use the turntables. I got really insecure and I was like, just bring my controller. I brought my controller but I didn't have a USB cable. So then I was like I'm going to use the controller and he's like play, set it up whatever. I didn't have a cable so he had to go run and find me a cable. And plus I was late. I could just feel like his energy from those two factors alone. So I was just really insecure my whole set. I don't know, it was just a very high pressure situation. I felt really uncomfortable the whole time. And when I feel uncomfortable, no matter how much I prepare for that, if I feel uncomfortable and the energy is not right in the moment I'm going to just bomb. I didn't bomb but I didn't do as great as I wanted to. And this is a DJ I respect and he never booked me again after that. Like, never booked me again after that.

It always bothered me because I was like I had a really shitty set that one time. But then in the past year, this past year he's seen

me play a couple of times and congratulated me and told me I did a great job, which was gratifying. But that one set gave me nightmares for a while.

And then for my best ever: This past December, this DJ that I worked closely with, A friend of mine inside and outside the industry, we got booked to do a back to back set for this festival in Mexico. So we went to, it was then, Acapulco. The festival is called Tropical Festival. I don't know if you've ever heard of it but it takes place on this resort in Acapulco over three days. And they had us doing a primetime set for their beach party. This party that we had worked with before, they were doing a pop up party at the festival, and they had booked us. They did a party on the beach that Saturday night in this tent. And they're known for doing disco and house parties. And I was excited about that because I feel, not that i got pigeonholed into a Top 40 scene in New York, but, I just get booked for a lot of Top 40 type gigs. I don't always get booked for disco and house gigs so that was really exciting for me because I love disco and house music. And yeah it was incredible.

I still use Serato. I don't know how to use CDJS with USBs yet. That's like my next dragon then I want to slay. So the Serato wasn't working with the CDJs for some reason. We had to play internally but the energy was just incredible and we were so well received. Our sets were amazing. It was on the beach in Mexico with this huge disco ball and these lights and like everybody just having, it was just so much fun and the people loved us. I feel like, the reception overseas is just, you know how it is, it is so different and just so much more exciting. And just inspiring. So yeah exactly, my favorite gig thus far.

Rekha: Is DJing your primary artistic medium? Do you work in other other genres, like do any other kind of art stuff? Or is this what you do, other things?

JADALAREIGN: I'm pretty creative overall but DJing is my main thing. I've really been trying to incorporate more mediums into my DJ career if that makes sense. So I really started planning--I'm going to be doing this mixed series. And so for the cover art, I have this vision to recreate old 70s album artwork. So I just shot. I don't know if you can recall the Funkadelic cover where the girls like leaning back and it's a blue background. It's Free Your Mind and Your Ash Will Follow. I just recreated that with a photographer. So I'm going to use that for a cover for my mix.

I have mentioned I used to be into fashion and design and I draw and paint a lot during my childhood so it's just something I want to incorporate this too. And just elevate the experience I feel like you know artists put a lot of work into their home. Why shouldn't DJs as well, you know what I mean. Just make it a full experience.

Rekha: So do you do a lot of pre-recorded, like you put out mixes a lot, or have you?

JADALAREIGN: I have mixes out. I'm like. Here comes up fucking highly self-critical artists again. I'm such a perfectionist with mixes so like even there have been times where I'll sit down to record a mix. And I'll have everything prepared and it's like I'll have a really lit tracklist. And I'll just never put it out because there's like one transition that I just wasn't keen on.

Rekha: I hate recording remixes. I hate all of it. I always hear mistakes.

JADALAREIGN: Exactly.

Rekha: I agree. You don't need to explain. I get it. I get it. No it's hard. I mean I've had to do mixes a handful of times for like BBC Radio Asian Network. It's like the South Asian thing. It's taken me like, I mean I did it old school. I used to have a double CD player. And record it in real time and then from the point where I fucked up, play it in real time and record from that place. It would take forever.

JADALAREIGN: Oh my goodness.

Rekha: Yeah. I mean a lot of times mixes are now done digitally right. But I would do a technical mix and then every time I'd fuck up. Like let's say I fuck up 15 minutes into the mix. Instead of doing the whole mix over, I would wait to that part again and then catch it and then try to keep going ...

JADALAREIGN: I'd be recording in Serato. Okay I was good up until here. Let me re-record this. And then I'll start mixing the rest of it.

Rekha: So when you when you play like you're using now, you're versatile and DJs and turntables and controllers, which is basically the Serato platform. Is there a way to describe your style? What do you do? Do you blend more do you cut like. I mean not having heard you live-- What's the experience like? Do you scratch. Do you talk on the mike? What is your actual DJ performance, if there's a way to characterize?

JADALAREIGN: It really depends. Like I said I still play a lot of like mainstream gigs which isn't necessarily my preference but it really depends on the gig. So when I'm doing the more mainstream gigs I'll get on the mic I'll do scratching and cutting and all those kinds of things. But when I'm doing a gig where I'm playing dance music, where I'm playing like house music and

just incorporating a Caribbean and Afro beat, Afro house and all that stuff that I love then, I'm like definitely blend. I mean, for sure, I do a lot of blending with that.

Rekha: So when you do the more mainstream gigs, you feel more pressure to talk on the mike and scratch more. Do you think?

JADALAREIGN: I mean I feel like that is just in those scenarios, it's easier to engage with the crowd when you're talking on the mic and you're doing tricks and things like that because I feel like that audience, you really have to work on them more so than somebody that's just coming out to hear music and dance. Like they're going to come and enjoy themselves regardless as long as the music is good. Well like in a mainstream scenario, like certain venues I just stay away from because I know that it's the way it's going to be and that's what's gonna be expected of me and that's not always my favorite. But then at other times I do like it. It can be exciting but I feel like in those scenarios, the crowds are more fickle so those are just foolproof ways to get more engagement and to drum up more excitement in the room.

Rekha: Do you think it's important for a DJ to do that?

JADALAREIGN: I think it's important for a DJ to be able to understand their audience. So you know the audience isn't always going to require that but just being able to have an intuition to know what your audience needs is definitely really important.

Rekha: So when you say there are certain venues you stay away from, is it just the audience? Is there anything else about the venue you don't like? Or is it more like the gig...

JADALAREIGN: I mean it's mostly the audience. I mean I know what to expect from certain venues. In terms of the type of people that are

gonna be there and it's not always just a matter of having to work harder to get them excited. Some venues I know that they have a certain type of misogynistic predator crowd. So I know the women that follow me and follow my career and like to come out and hear me play. I don't want to play there because they're not going to be comfortable because there's creeps there.

Rekha: Have you ever felt...

JADALAREIGN: But most often it's the crowd.

Rekha: Right. But the crowd is, maybe it's the crowd and...

JADALAREIGN: Definitely.

Rekha: ...whether the space is safe for your audience. Who is your audience? Do you have your following or fan base? If there is, or maybe it varies gig to gig?

JADALAREIGN: I would say my audience is mostly people of color. From ages- I have some young followers too though I would say from like ages twenty one to thirty five. That's my core audience.

Rekha: And have you ever felt unsafe. DJing?

JADALAREIGN: Yes. So I'm glad you asked because I always go back to this one story. I mean as women in a male dominated industry there was always undertones of like men patronizing you and just you know how that is. But there is this one instance where the whole thing was messed up.

So I had a gig. I was actually DJing for this artist. We stopped working together just because she kind of moved her live performances in a more live music aspect. So she plays the

guitar now. But there was a six month period where we were gigging together and I would open for her and then I would DJ her set. She was doing a showcase at Bowery Electric. We went early to set up. They didn't have--this is around the time I didn't have a Serato box yet. The venue didn't have Serato so I had to bring my controller. So I brought my controller and I brought my headphones. And we went early. I set up my equipment. We had to leave the spot and go. So we went to like Tidal, or something-- she had an interview.

There was like a 30 minute period where my stuff was left at the venue because the event hadn't started yet. The soundtech had assured me there's no other DJs. Nobody's going to be in the booth; your stuff will be fine. So I leave myself set up. We did a soundcheck. I left everything hooked up. When the interview came back, there was another DJ in the booth. And so I go up to the booth and I'm sure he's using my equipment. He was using my equipment of course. And I noticed that my headphones were literally split into two pieces like down the middle. Broken and half into two pieces. And. I was just like what the fuck. Like, what is going on. So, I'm like what is going on. This is my equipment.

Long story short, he said that the soundtech told him that he can use the equipment. And so I approached the soundtech because he's the one who assured me that my stuff would be safe. At the end of the day, I shouldn't have left my stuff there-- lesson learned. But I approach the sound guy and I was visibly upset. I'm like what's going on, this guy's using my equipment. You told me it would be safe. Now my headphones are split in half. This needs to be reconciled. What is going on.

The showcase is going on at this point so there's nothing really that can be done at that very moment. So I'm pissed off. The

event happens. I run through my artist set without headphones. And then at the end of the night-- also the artist, her manager was there and he's really good. So he, at the end of the night, we went to the sound guy and we're like, look my headphones were damaged on your watch. Something needs to be done about this. And he said to me, We're not replacing your headphones and if you ever speak to me like that again. I will slap the shit out of you. This is a fiftysomething year old white man.

I was appalled. I was in shock. First of all, I've never been spoken to that way by somebody I didn't know. Period. So for him, somebody that I'm supposed to be dealing with in professional capacity, for him to talk to me like that. And I wasn't being disrespectful to him or anything. I was just, he could just tell I was upset. And you know I had the right to be upset in that instance. But I was just taken so, I was just like, I'm really in shock. I really didn't know how to respond to that. I was just enraged. And then at the same time I'm like, fuck, I'm here representing this artist, I can't get crazy right now. I just maintain composure and this, it'll be dealt with tomorrow. So I left. I left the event. I just had to leave the venue and I was really upset. I didn't realize, I would just like, in the middle of Third Avenue broke down crying out of frustration that somebody would talk to me that way. You know what I mean.

Rekha:

The experience. It's not that long ago and I was looking for an artist and the guy was being a dick to me and I had to control myself because I don't want to look bad and also don't want to burn a bridge. It was a douchy sound guy and I needed him to play my visuals for me and he was wasn't doing it. And he was being ...and I asked him if he could...I was trying to be nice as you can. And, would he have talked to you that way if you were a guy?

JADALAREIGN: Absolutely not. And an artist manager reached out to the venue and got in touch with the owner. I don't remember if it is the owner, or the manager. Whoever it was, was a woman. And she was adamant that no repercussions were going to be had for this man. All they did was they made him issue, they emailed me an apology. Which she didn't even try to make sound convincing obviously but I was just like, this is the fact that it was a woman. Like not even so much as take them off the schedule for a couple weeks. Nothing was done.

Rekha: That's kind of upsetting because you know Mobile Monday happens there. And you know Belinda's there. I mean whatever her name is. Natha Diggs. Yeah. And that other woman, the British lady -- she does it too.

JADALAREIGN: Oh yeah, Misbehavior..

Rekha: Man I had an opportunity to DJ there once and I got sick. Anyway that's upsetting-- I'm so sorry that happened to you. Well, that's definitely the worst gig. That's a good worst gig story. And, so you handle most of your bookings yourself.

JADALAREIGN: Yeah. Pretty much all my bookings I handle myself.

Rekha: How often you would say in a month do you DJ?

JADALAREIGN: It varies. The beginning of this year has been unusually slow for me which has been cool because I've been focusing on other projects. I'm doing this workshop series which I've been thinking about for a while, which has been getting great reception but in general.

Rekha: What is it? Tell me more about it.

JADALAREIGN: I'll circle back about the gigs but I basically organized this workshop series centering women and queer people of color. And it's for Women's Month. It's happening all of March. It's 12 workshops and discussions about different formats of DJing, production, event production, community building.

Rekha: Wow. Amazing.

JADALAREIGN: ... professional development. And then I did one on collective culture.

Rekha: Can I go? Where is it now?

JADALAREIGN: So it's being held at this place called Power Plant, which is in Bushwick. It's like a community center when it's not being used for workshops and events. It functions as a computer lab for the kids that live in the community. I've literally only been promoting it on Instagram and Twitter.

Rekha: I'll check your IG feed

JADALAREIGN: Everything's on Instagram.

Rekha: No I can't get with the times I'm like, where is the flyer?

JADALAREIGN: So far we've done two production basics with Logic. I did one class on analog production with synthesizers and sequencers and stuff like that. And then I did CDJ and Record Box basics workshop. I did a Serato workshop and then this week I'm doing Ableton.

I have a discussion on community building with a couple really old people within my community and then I'm doing a collective

culture so I'm sitting down with this collective called rose gold collective. And it's all Black women and nonbinary people of color. A few of them are DJs. A couple of them do events and video. So I'm going to sit down with them and talk about their efforts together within the community with event production, how they help each other to advance each other's brands and careers and things like that.

Then the last one. I have one on Vinyl basics, and then the last one at the end is going to be the last day of the month, it's on professional development. So for young women or queer people who are just starting out that need to know about setting rate and securing gigs, and negotiating contracts and all of that stuff. Tech riders and setting up, just like things that you wouldn't necessarily know if you're just starting out and you don't have that experience.

Rekha: Probably learned on the job.

JADALAREIGN: Exactly. Just like little tidbits that would definitely be useful to somebody starting out so you don't get jerked and so you know how to handle yourself in certain situations.

Rekha: Rimarkable has talked about doing a DJ blacklist of places that have screwed you over. Do you feel a responsibility to pay it forward or to pass on the knowledge?

JADALAREIGN: Oh yes definitely. Especially as a woman because it's just something that's been on my mind for a while because of how many instances I've been in where I'm like, fuck I wish I had somebody that I could ask about this or somebody that could recommend a venue that's good for this or ... you know what I mean just so many times where I just wished I had somebody that I could reach out to and asked those questions

to. I think it's really important and I think it's important for women to have resources and to have camaraderie and have community and other people that they can talk to and interface with and ask questions to and share experiences with. Even if it is as small as me letting my peers know this is what happened to me about Bowery Electric. You may not want to work... You know what I mean. Stuff like that. And I start each workshop and I tell everyone, look, this is a workshop but it's also a community initiative. Make sure you're exchanging contact information and stay close to these people because you never know when you're going to meet somebody.

Rekha: And so do you feel part of a DJ community?

JADALAREIGN: Oh yeah, definitely. For sure.

Rekha: And you go to see other DJs performance and stuff...you support each other.

JADALAREIGN: Yep. Absolutely.

Rekha: Have you created your own nights or anything, or put stuff together that you have curated? And if so, tell me about that.

JADALAREIGN: Yes. So, my most recent thing: I put together this party with that same friend of mine that I mentioned I went to Mexico with. Her name's Niara Sterling. We produce a party called...

JADALAREIGN: It's called Perk. And we're just trying to bring an organic carefree energy to our, I guess, community. So basically we play a lot of dance music so we'll start the night with like a lot of soul and funk and then it'll progress into a more uptempo dance music and then we'll incorporate a lot of disaporic music. So like Afro

House and Dancehall and Soca and just like Latin Funk and a bunch of different stuff to get people moving.

But we also incorporate live music. So each time we have a different set of musicians that play with us so we have somebody that plays the djembe drum. And then we have somebody that's on the sax. The last time we had a saxophonist and a violinist as well. And I've had somebody come with snares and play before.

So we started it at Lot 45. We're going to move it just because we both agree that it'll be better received at a different venue because of what they've already established at Lot 45. I know you play there because you know Matt.

Rekha: I played there once. I mean I could see the direction of what's going on.

JADALAREIGN: Exactly. So. We're moving it. But the three or four times we did it there, it was great. Like it was. We did on Saturday night. It's interesting because the parties that they were doing there were going in the direction of the mainstream Top 40. Like hip-hop focus, and Matt was booking a lot of the selection DJs and just going that route with it which is very different from what we were trying to do. So the nights that we were there, there was a lot of that crowd there. But the vibe that we were creating was just so strong that even the people that were coming there for the typical Lot 45, they were having an amazing time.

Rekha: It's become a place where there's a baseline reputation for good music so people know and they've done enough mixed programming that people are kind of open a little bit. It can feel very mainstream sometimes.

JADALAREIGN: We do it once a month. We're taking this month off since we're moving the venue but...

Rekha: So let me see if there's anything else I mean this has been a great conversation. I think I hit all the notes. Is there anything else you want to add. I mean where do you see yourself going.

JADALAREIGN: So I really want to get out of New York more. I don't know if that means domestically or if that means internationally. But I want to play more music that I feel passionate about and I want to be known more for my style as a DJ, more so than just being a DJ that can play whatever. I mean it's been a great experience and I feel like I'm well versed in a lot of different styles and things like that. But, I want to take a more artistic approach. I'm learning how to produce. So that'll definitely help me leverage my career but I want to get out more. I want to feel that feeling in Mexico and I got booked in Tanzania in June as well. I'm just like, no I need more of that.

Rekha: You played there already?

JADALAREIGN: Yeah I played there.

Rekha: A bunch of my classmates, one of my professors does research in Tanzania, and they were there over the break. I was like oh my god that sounds amazing.

JADALAREIGN: It is incredible.

Rekha: It's fantastic. I mean it's kind of like sometimes DJing is like acting. It's not like you can't do it, you just have to be cast for the role.

JADALAREIGN: Exactly. That's how that happens is. I still don't know.

Rekha: I will definitely check you out when I'm back in New York.

JADALAREIGN: Yeah please do. And hopefully I'll check you out as well.
Take care. Thank you. Take care.

Interview Transcript:

DJ Laylo

(Edited) Interview with DJ Laylo

Rekha: So what was the neighborhood like where you grew up. Give me a little bit about your background.

Laylo: So I grew up the first part of my childhood in Harlem. We came to the States when I was 3, from the Dominican Republic. I was born in Puerto Rico, both of my parents are Dominican, but we basically went from Puerto Rico to the DR, and from DR, here. Lived in Harlem around like 139th Street near the City College area. And from age three to about twelve, thirteen, and then we moved to up Washington Heights, and then we moved to the Bronx, around 96th, 97th. My whole family is now still in the Bronx since then. And I would say all of my neighborhood were predominantly African American and Caribbean Latino neighborhoods. So actually, a lot of Cubans when I first came. They're not around anymore. They left. But there was a lot of Cubans. And then, you know, Puerto Ricans, Dominicans.

So that was really kind of my universe growing up. And then some other Caribbean, like English speaking Caribbean folks, but not a ton. So yeah. Like low income, I grew up in New York City in the 80's and I live in an apartment where, kept getting broken into because everybody was smoking crack and what, you know! (laughs)

So definitely grew up seeing a lot of violence, and hearing about a lot of violence you know experiencing shoot-outs and things a really early age, but also experiencing like a super vibrant community, where like you know regardless of how people were making their living, people were looking out for each other, and there really was a sense of community. Especially like my early childhood in Harlem, like everybody knew each other, people looked out for each other's kids. So very, very vibrant you know. I felt like I could say I had a happy childhood you know. And then musically like you know hip-hop was everywhere and all around and all like all consuming.

Rekha: And when you heard hip-hop, did you hear that at school and at home? Was the music at home different from what you heard at school?

Laylo: Yeah. Definitely at home I was hearing salsa and classic 70's salsa because my mother lived in Puerto Rico during her 20's. And so she's like a hardcore salsa person. Mostly salsa and merengue at home, and then as soon as I stepped outside of my house it was hip-hop out on the street and at school.

Rekha: And when's the first time, if you can remember, that you saw a DJ. Do you have a memory of that?

Laylo: Oh, that's a great question. Yeah. First time I saw a DJ. I mean I definitely remember seeing Spinderella and noticing her.

Rekha: Where did you see her?

Laylo: On TV somewhere. Video Music Box or something.

Rekha: Video Music Box, after school!

Laylo: Latchkey kid, after school! Yeah maybe that's probably like the first DJ I could say probably like really noticed. But I when I was in junior high school, I did really used to listening to DJs and buying mixed tapes. There'd be this place called Harlem Music Hut on 125th, likeright before you got to Broadway. Just a little store and they used to sell some vinyl, CDs, tapes, but they sold like mixtapes. They used to have a little binder with the list of the songs. Yeah. So I got into that in junior high school and that's when I like really, I felt like for me the way to listen to music at time like that transformed, at that point, because it became about creating like an experience and telling a story for me. And then what prompted that was hanging out with other friends like other girlfriends that were really into music and we wouldn't make mixed

tapes for each other like you know sit there and I record the song off the radio and stop and record and play you know do the whole thing to give each other tapes you know and like I felt like oftentimes when we were giving each other tapes we were like telling each other things, it was like a story you were telling or like. Like an experience you wanted to provide for your friend by the song selection and the order of the songs and, if I knew that that she was going through something at home, like it was one thing if I knew that she had just broken up with somebody that she really thought she loved. That was another thing you know. And so it became like more about like understanding that you could really have like intention behind you know how somebody hears music, again yeah I think maybe like just telling a story through that is like the best way I can describe it.

Rekha: Do you remember the first time you saw a live D.J. like in your presence not on TV alive.

Laylo: A live DJ... I definitely remember there being like block parties and seeing DJs.

Yes, actually I do remember. There was a block party on my aunt's block on 136, and I actually now can picture the day, that you know that you're asking about. And that was probably like somewhere between like 9 and 11, or something. And yeah it was a block party. Yeah. And this was like you know like maybe right before this era that I'm talking about. Yeah. Right before this era when I started to really think about curating music.

Rekha: So you know you saw Cinderella, you went to block parties or maybe multiple. When did you actually start DJing?

Laylo: I started DJing right after college or like my last year in college. I was part of a collective of women of color organizers in Brooklyn called Sister to Sister. And we used to throw a lot of house parties as

fundraisers. And at that time, this is like late 90's early 2000's, at that time like basically all the DJ's were guys, or at least that we knew of, you know. And so I remember us getting together and having a conversation about this kind of being whack, and we had a situation where there was one particular DJ that we invited, he was like a mutual friend of a bunch of people. And he showed up and he was shitty. He was like hitting on people, he made a couple of people feel uncomfortable.

And so we had the situation, where we were like, oh we have to deal with this one dude, but that situation made us realize like oh actually all the DJs that we ever call upon are dudes. And that's whack. And so we were like we should do the music ourselves. And then Paola was like, well I did a little bit of—Paola was a member of this collective—she was like, well I did a little bit of DJing in college, and I have some records at home. And I was like, oh maybe we should like get a pair of turntables and like you know whatever. And so actually, Paola, Ujju, and myself went in on a pair of turntables, and the plan was that the turntables would travel, like they would spend a couple weeks at my house, a couple weeks at Paola's, a couple weeks at Ujju's, but like once they came to my house, we never left because I think like I was the only one that was really like serious about it. And I would say that that's when I really started for me.

Rekha: When was that?

Laylo: That was like 2000 or 2001, around there, and then the other major thing that happened for me was that I lived in Brazil, I know I spent some time in Brazil from 1999 to 2000, and I met my ex-husband while I was there and then he came to live in New York in 2002 or 2003, and he had been in a hip-hop group in San Paolo for like years and years and years, and one of the things was really dope about hip-hop in Brazil is that they had really maintained the kind of idea that like a group is a MC and a DJ. So all the groups—no matter how poor or

wherever they were coming—they had to DJ. And people would share turntables or you know, shared, the one DJ in that neighborhood who could afford to have equipment or whatever. And so when he moved here and left his hip-hop group, I mean he had kind of left the hip-hop group before he came to New York, but when he moved here, he was like, I want to keep making music and I want to keep him performing. And you're already interested in DJing like you want to perform together. And so my first time performing as a DJ like outside of my house was... I did a show with him at the Bowery Poetry Club. It was like an international hip-hop showcase, and I want to say that was 2003? But actually before that I had done some other Sister to Sister parties.

Rekha: So your first gig was at the Bowery Poetry collective. How did you learn how to DJ?

Laylo: Messing around a lot. So with these turntables that we have—and actually would say I think of it as the first real big gig that I had. You know the Bowery Poetry Club is not that big, big. But It's a place, right. It's like a proper place with history.

Before that I had done some of the house parties with Sister to Sister. So I had these DJed outside of my house before. And it was a lot of likes start and stops, mess around. I think I might have bought some DVDs too. I'm like definitely had like a Q*Bert DVD and a Z-Trip DVD at one point. And then also my ex-husband knew little bit of how to DJ too. But when he came we would practice together. That's like how I got the basics, like a combination of DVD and playing at the house parties and kind of figuring out what people like responds to. And even though I wasn't really blending at that point.

Rekha: But where did you get your music from?

Laylo: So I started on vinyl. So I would buy records. So I used to spend a lot of time at Rock and Soul. Yes I would. I would go to, there's a spot in the Bronx called that's on Casa Amadeo that has Latin music. And then I started, any trip that I took I would make it a point to a local record store. Especially in the Caribbean, when I went to Cuba I racked up on a bunch of vinyl that someone was selling on the street and DR too, like random stuff you know like African highlife, that somebody was selling for like you know three Dominican pesos on a little side street, you know it just became part of like what I did any time that I traveled.

Rekha: Yeah I remember in Brazil everywhere there was the We Are The World record everywhere.

Laylo: Yes, yeah. vinyl was what, buying vinyl, you know, was where I got my music to start off with. I didn't switch to Serato. I never really did CDs, like CDJs. I went from vinyl to Serato practically. Although I have CDs, which is interesting, because I have mad CDs. But I never really had a period when I was like using CDs to DJ.

Rekha: Do you have any formal musical training?

Laylo: No not good.

Rekha: So outside of these like random trips and Cuba it seems you're pretty much self-taught.

Laylo: Yeah. Yeah. Oh, for sure. Sure.

Rekha: And the Bowery Poetry Club did you get paid for that gig?

Laylo: I don't think so.

Rekha: Do you remember the first time you got paid?

Laylo: Probably the first time I got paid for a gig was like, because what happened for me then, before I started getting gigs in nightclubs, I started getting hired to do all the parties for non-profits. So that's probably like one of those, first time somebody paid me and it might have been like cab fare. Because I have records. You know, I was like literally carrying all these record around.]

Rekha: You know you don't have to tell me. I know! 5 crates a night the average!

So the Bowery Poetry Club. How many people were there, do you remember?

Laylo: It was full. You know, that place is small.

Rekha: They re-did it. It's a cabaret place now.

Laylo: It was maybe like 50, 60 people. Yeah, it felt real. It definitely felt real. I remember like my nerves are very real.

Rekha: So then and so then where did when did you switch to Serato?

Laylo: I switched to Serato maybe like around 2008 or 2009. Because I remember I had our very I had already started my first party which was called Liberation Lounge that I did uptown in East Harlem, in El Barrio, and the first couple years of that party I remember I used to actually being on the tables and everything because it was like a little hole in the wall. It wasn't an actual club. And maybe like two years into that party was when I switched to Serato. So that had to be like 2008 or so I want to say.

Rekha: When did you decide to start this party? So give me a trajectory, like you did the he Bowery Poetry Club for your ex-husband, you did these parties with your girls, and a lot of non-profits. How did you get to a

place where you like started your own night. What was your schedule like in terms of gigs?

Laylo: That's a great question because I know like the party idea was again and conversely...I feel like everything I've started, even now with the party called Rosie Perez, every party or everything, even like residencies or long standing things that I've done, have come from a place of wanting to create something that didn't exist. And so like I know doing the different events with the non-profit stuff, I think one of things that really resonated and why people would call on me was that I would play hip-hop and dancehall, but I would also play Latin music and I would also play house. You know there was kind of like a range of music that was all Black music, but that usually didn't get all played in the same space. And I think you know that's highly still true in terms of like what people know me for. That's still probably at the core of it. And so you know the party was like, well one there wasn't much uptown, at all. Everything you had to come you know downtown like Brooklyn wasn't even still the kind of nightlife destination that it is today. So everything downtown, and we wanted to do something uptown. We were feeling a little fucking tired of dealing with these train and shit you know. And it was me and one of my closest friends who lived in El Barrio or she lived like on 103rd Street. I lived in the Bronx already but she was like, yo we should do something in Barrio because it's like accessible. It just felt like this this could be an uptown gathering, you know, like a watering hole, if you will. And we already had like, you know we were already part of a community of activists and artists, you know. And so we also wanted something that had that kind of feel to it. You know like a space that was reflective of our political values too, you know.

So I was basically like a party for our friends and a party for uptown. Those were the two things that we were trying to create. And you know it's called Liberation, it's also about freedom and freeing ourselves and

our community through music. That whole kind of ethos was how that party came about.

And then from there our friends, like our peer group, everybody's doing amazing things, right. So like you know like Martine from Antibalas from would come. And then he would call me to open for them or something. Bobbito used to come to that party because he lived in Harlem. And then being Bobbito, went on to be Bobbito stage, went on to do these some of the first like Fania tribute parties.

So that kind of became you know a springboard for, first collaboration with other artists and DJs and musicians who would come and have a good time and then who would call me. And then you know the trajectory from there was like, I remember one night, I forget who exactly was it pulled me into the show but there was like a live music show at this bar in Brooklyn that doesn't exist anymore in Williamsburg. I think it was like the Rose Lounge or the Rose Club. And so I went to do that gig. And after the gig was over, I just kind of stayed on the decks like fucking around. And it turns into like an impromptu sort of party. It didn't go on for very long, but it was like enough for the owner to then ask me to come back. And then I came back and did a night. And then I ended up being there every Friday night for like three, four years. And it led to a residency.

Rekha: It was like side room next to a restaurant, right? Grand Street or something?

Laylo: Yeah. Yeah. Exactly it was really dark and sexy in there. And so I was there. And from being there like I did some other thing at some other Williamsburg place that I can't even remember. And then everybody said—oh yes I've done Bembe. I did Bembe

Rekha: That's like, you gotta pay your bills.

Laylo: Yes, yeah, yeah. No, for sure. I did Bembe for maybe like a year and a half or so. I did a Thursday night thing at Bembe. And then still getting calls because I feel like everywhere you play out, something comes from it. And then again a lot of the kind of growth and opportunities has really come from other DJs and other artists pulling me into to collaborate on something, and then that becoming something else or leading to something else. So I would also say that I've experienced a lot of really beautiful wonderful community through to the DJ world. Because I feel my entry into the DJ space has been very much through the, like I guess I'm part of the tribe that is about music and community, and music and activism. I know there's a lot of different tribes and everybody has a different experience but that's the tribe that I've been a part of. So a lot of really beautiful and dope collaborations with people.

And then I would say the bigger visibility thing that I do in terms of trajectory stuff, along that route was the tribute parties, with Bobbito and La Fania, it was called Siempre: Tribute to Fania. And this was before there was a million and one Fania tribute parties.

Rekha: Right, you were like one of the first people.

Laylo: We were one of the first people to have that kind of idea. We did it at like a Sophie's one year, and then we did it at Santos, and then we did it at Central Park Summer stage. And then we did it at Central Park Summer Stage, and again, all through that, the more stuff that I did, the more that I would also get called to do, like museum gigs. I've done the Brooklyn Museum three times over the year, or stuff like that.

Rekha: And what would you say in terms of your artistry. Is DJing the only primary medium. Do you do other things creatively?

Laylo: So I do do other things creatively. I work on documentary films and DJing for me is like the perfect complement to documentaries because

you know, and this is something I've only realized recently about DJing. Like I'm a Capricorn and I'm a perfectionist, and DJing for me is probably one of the only times or things that I can do where I'm like fully fully just in the moment, like I completely present. And if you're DJing live, like whatever, if you fucked up a mix, you fucked up a mix, you got to keep moving and you can't just like give up. You know you have like four more hours left to spin. You got to keep moving, and there is this ability to just be fully present and not really be thinking about perfecting it, but it's really about how it feels to me, how it feels to the crowd, what I feel that the crowd is feeling. It just feels like one of the moments and spaces that I'm like most present and I feel most connected into something that's not from my head, which I desperately need because of my perfectionism, and my control issues. It does so much for me. Like one good gig is like a shot of good energy that can sustain me for weeks at a time. It's like my fix! I felt like an addict. But it is something that I need you know.

While filmmaking, I completely love, and I also see it being really deeply aligned with my sense of purpose in the world, and I love, love, love it. But that's all about perfecting. You go out and shoot and then you're in the edit from months, like pouring over every second, every moment, every minute. DJing is the opposite of that for me.

Rekha: It's hard always hard to do this, but I like to ask the question. Worst gig best gig?

Laylo: Worst gig, best gig.

Rekha: And if it doesn't come to mind that's okay.

Laylo: Best gig I would say, maybe, I mean I have a few. But one gig that really marked me was I DJed in Sao Paolo, Brazil in 2007, and I was still on vinyl at the time, so I bought records. It was a party that is still around actually and it's done by this crew of the dopest DJs in Sao

Paolo. I was super nervous. I knew them really well, and they were like friends and family, but they didn't know me as a deejay so I was super nervous. You know, whatever. And went in and I killed it. It was such an affirmation of my ability to read a crowd, because I had spent some time, but I'm not like from there. And this was a very discerning crowd, because they used to come to this party on a monthly basis. And this crew of DJs is super dope. Yeah that for me was just like a real affirmation of like trust your instincts. You have good instincts around music and how to keep a dance floor present and moving and connected.

So I know a lot of people are on different minds about this. Depending on your priorities as a DJ. I have some of my closest friends these days that I love and really respect, that their priority is to like introduce rare music to a crowd, or to break new records, or there's these different things that they see as their kind of utmost goal.

For me, I'm from the school of like my utmost goal is to rock the crowd. I do feel like I care about rocking the crowd on my terms, so like I'm not going to play music that I don't stand behind. You know, I have to like it. And that can be anything from super obscure to super contemporary, and sometimes even pop. But I have to stand behind it and I get a real kind of kick out of figuring out how to take the crowd along with me without losing them, like how to go on a journey and connect dots between things that might otherwise not seem connected at all.

I'm particularly into that idea of connecting dots in terms of the African diaspora and like people kind of sometimes hitting people with unexpected things, but it making so much sense that they go with it, you know it's like the dance floor never stops. But that for me is like you have to be reading them. You have to be paying attention, it has to be a conversation. You can't just be all about me. It's almost like being a good lover, you can't just be in it to get your rocks off, you have to be attentive and connected and receptive and responsive. And that for me

is like what my ultimate kind of goal is as a DJ. So for me, reading a crowd is of the utmost importance because that's my goal of DJ'ing, is rocking the crowd.

Rekha: And would you play things that, I mean you stand behind it, but you know the situation is that we get requests for like, I don't know, "could you play the Macarena."

Laylo: Nah. I'll figure out a Beyonce song to quench their thirst or something for, you know, I'll figure my way out around it. I tend to not take requests unless I'm like doing a wedding or something, but that's not even...

Rekha: I'm talking about the wedding where you have to play the Macarena.

Laylo: Oh yeah. Oh yes. Oh yeah. Yeah. Oh yeah, yeah, yeah. But if you're doing a wedding at that point you can't even consider that a request. This is this person's, one of the most important days of their lives. They hired you. You don't have a whole lot of leeway. Although I will say like I feel like most of the people that have hired me to DJ weddings, hire me because they like what I play. There's like, what's the Jewish song that they do when they do the chair thing and everything, I forget the name of it. I'd have to play that because one of the partners is Jewish and there has to be one nod to the Jewish side of the family. I would never play that outside of that context. But in that context its totally fine doing it, it makes a ton of sense.

Rekha: Weddings are a slippery slope. I feel the same way. But you know sometimes people who hire you are not the people, it's them who want something, and then it's their relatives.

Laylo: Oh yeah. Yeah. For sure. Power struggle.

Rekha: I remember I remember when I started, most of my gigs were weddings. I would upfront ask them, "Do you want or do you not want the Macarena," that was like my question. If you do not want the Macarena, who can I blame? Can you designate a family member that says you don't want it. There is this whole colonial mentality of service.

Laylo: Yeah that's true. That's very true. My worst gig, I'll tell you my worst gig. I had to DJ a party at junior high school.

Rekha: Oh wow.

Laylo: In my neighborhood in the Bronx. In my mother's neighborhood that I lived in. And that was fucking horrible, because the kids were like an incessant about what they wanted. And then the teachers were incessant about what they didn't want and imagine that the two things were completely at odds. So, it was like the most tense three hours of my life ever, because it was incessant. And I was like I am never doing this shit again.

Rekha: Yeah. I mean one bad gig is when people, they just don't even see you. They just want you know like, I've been there. So now what format you used to deejay?

Laylo: Mostly Serato. Yeah mostly Serato.

Rekha: Controller or turntables or vinyl?

Laylo: I do both. I do both.

Rekha: So you had a lot of vinyl, did you have to eventually digitize that music?

Laylo: I did digitize some of it. Not all of it. But then I did a lot of kind of like pools. Like music pools with other DJs. With Reborn, I would give

Reborn music, she would give me music. A lot of that to kind of really built up the library, and then you know also be buying stuff.

Rekha: And how do you prepare for a performance now?

Laylo: So when I have something coming up, I typically, about a week before, I start checking in with myself around like where are you at right now. What kind of vibe, you know. What have you been listening to. And then I just start thinking about music like a week before. Not like making lists or anything but just more of like a check-in. Especially because now the only real like regular gig I have is my own party. I'm not doing a ton of other things, because I can't, I don't have time. And so that to me is almost like a family party because the people that are coming to that I know that they're gonna, they kind of know what to expect or they're willing let us take them wherever the hell we want to take them. So, then it becomes about well what do I want to show my family this Saturday.

That's a check-in that I started to do with myself. For example I did that today because it's going to be the three year anniversary party coming up. I was listening to... what I was listening to? I was listening to "It's A Vibe", that trap song, this morning and I was like, oh you know if could roll in "Crew" by Goldlink right at this point... I'm driving and I'm thinking about this. I'm like taking my kids to school and this is what I'm thinking about. And then I was like, well, you know, I kind of want to mess around and see if I can find some dope funk, baile funk instrumentals to then, like a quick remix live with a couple R& B songs, and then I go from there to some Afrobeat and then go to some merengue, that's kind of what I'm thinking I want to do.

Rekha: So that sort of like a roadmap, do you stick to it?

Laylo: No, it depends. Sometimes what happens is because it's three of us, and we DJ together, everybody has their own roadmap and then

somehow the roadmaps need to meet, when it's time to transition. So sometimes what ends up happening is that I'll pick up wherever I think the crowd needs to either stay or go from the previous DJ. And now beyond whatever that is, because again for me, I need to rock the crowd more than I need to stick to my plan or anything. But oftentimes what will happen is that at some point in the night I will at least get to touch that road map. I'll get there at some point, even if it's not the full thing I was thinking about, but I'll get to kind of touch it. That's usually how it works because I go on third. So Christian opens, then Sucio goes on and then I come on.

Rekha: Is that usually at the peak of the night?

Laylo: Yes usually around the peak like you know 12:30, 1, 1:20, depending on what time we actually get going. What happens from there is that usually after my set, then Sucio and I will do 2 for 2, mess around, and then Christian will come back at the end and close out.

Rekha: With the right DJ I love going song to song or back to back.

Laylo: Oh, I love. That's like one of my favorite things about the party. Sucio and I were talking about maybe doing just a one-off, like that's what we do all night. Because we have a good time doing it. Yeah. That's dope to me. That's super fun.

Rekha: Do you interact with the crowd at all? Do you talk on the microphone?

Laylo: I do that very, very, very little. So with a party called Rosie Perez, Sucio is really good at it and he's like hilarious, really funny dude. So he usually plays that role. If I'm DJing by myself and it's my regular party, I force myself to be on the mic at some point. But I do look out and dance along, or do my hands along with the crowd. I feel like I do interact, but I'm not always, it's hard for me to get on the mic. I don't like it.

Rekha: When you're actually spinning, just from a mechanical perspective, are you cutting and scratching. Can you describe the physical process?

Laylo: Yeah. So I'm the kind of DJ that if left to my own devices, I would blend every single thing, all night. That's my default, is my preference. That's how I like to hear music. But I have over recent years gotten a little more into like cutting, very little scratching.

Rekha: So when you say cutting, you mean like cutting on a phrase or something? But not beat juggling?

Laylo: Not beat juggling, just cutting.

Rekha: Do you think you think those things are important?

Laylo: I think they're terrific and wonderful, but they're not necessary in every context.

Laylo: Yeah. I don't know. I think again, I'm not trying to dismiss it because I know that this form, this craft is so expansive, which is what I love about it, that there's a corner for everybody. I mean like there's a lane for everybody.

Like I have gone into situations where I've gone to DJ events with DJ's that are really dope with scratching and just really technically super human, kind of more on battle DJ, that school of thought, and that's a school. And I think the party rockers are another school. I've been in situations where I was nervous because, oh my god, there's this DJ that can do all of these fancy things. I don't know how to do any of that. But then I go on and I rock the crowd and because I have a good time, nobody remembers that I didn't do the flares or whatever. Because they had a really good time. And from that other DJ, they might remember that sick ass routine that they did because they had a good time, but

you can make an impression on the crowd and give the crowd whatever it is that you can uniquely give them. And so I think that's great and important, but I don't think there's any deficiency if you don't do that. Particularly if you have these other things that are really important too, which is like the ability to read the crowd and that ability to just really be able to be connected and to really prioritize their needs. I feel like those are all strengths just as cutting and scratching and you know fancy routines.

Rekha: Have you ever felt like unsafe while you DJed?

Laylo: Yeah definitely. I've had situations where like the venue owner was disrespectful and very inappropriate with me. I was worried, I was trying to finish and get out safely and I wasn't sure if I would be able to do that. That's the whole gig, that was on the back of my mind. I've definitely had that situation. I've also had situations where fights have broken out. Not many of those, but that's happened.

Rekha: Not feeling safe with the venue owner, does that affect your performance?

Laylo: Oh yeah. Yeah.

Rekha: And whether or not you were going to get paid or not.

Laylo: Yeah. Yeah.

Rekha: Definitely. Because if you, were a guy, he wouldn't be doing that.

Laylo: Of course. I've also had situations where the MC who was announcing me, said some inappropriate shit as they're announcing me. And I'm coming onto a stage where I already feel disrespected.

Rekha: If you don't mind elaborating, what do you mean?

Laylo: Like there was a situation at SOB's, long time ago, where the emcee is like, "Oh and next up is DJ Laylo," and then he looks and he's like, "Oh shit. And she's fine as fuck too." Then he like goes into like a two minute thing about what he wants to do to me.

Rekha: Oh gross.

Laylo: To the crowd at a packed SOB's, and I have to get on the stage and pretend like that didn't just happen and I'm totally focused and centered and I'm totally fine to do my job now.

Rekha: I don't even want the cab driver to ask me a question. I know what you mean.

Laylo: You know it's like it totally throws you off, for sure. It's disconcerting that it throws you all the way off. I clearly have a lot of stories! I've had situations where I'm DJing, and there's a ton of guys behind me and they're saying shit to me and saying shit to each other. And I have to keep my game face on. And they're saying shit to each other about, and they're right behind me.

Rekha: As if you can't hear them.

Laylo: As if I can't hear them and as I'm DJing, you know.

Rekha: Do you feel like there is ever aggression or any kind of mansplaining behavior around what you're doing.

Laylo: A lot. A lot. People have taken things out of my hand, taken like needles out of my hands, or my own headphones out of my hand, like I don't know what the fuck I'm doing.

Rekha: Taking them out of your hand, and put them on so they could take over?

Laylo: Yeah.

Rekha: Oh my God. But no, I hadn't had exactly that, but pretty close. Has it changed over time?

Laylo: It has, but also I have to say I'm not in a ton of environments, Like I'm not DJing as much as I used to. I'm also not DJing for my survival, which is different. Like at one point DJing was my primary source of income, and so I did a number of different things and I was out a lot more, and dealing with all kinds of... I was like a regular, like I had one thing that was my night, but then I had a bunch of gigs that were just gigs, like I was the house DJ for the Friday or Saturday or Thursday, whatever. I would say it has changed, but also it's changed in a lot of different ways, my context is totally different now. So I guess maybe I'm not the best person to give a broad assessment of how much has change or not.

Rekha: The goal here is to speak from your experience.

Laylo: I do wonder, for the women... I mean there's a lot more women and women of color DJs now, than when I started. When I started, in terms of our universe, it was like Ubiquita folks and you. And there was Kuttin Kandi. You could count them on one hand.

Rekha: And now you can't count, there's too many.

Laylo: Now you can't count. No, you can't count. And a lot of people, this is how they're living. This is how they're making their bread. They're out there four or five nights a week DJing. I do wonder for them, if they feel... But I almost feel like the fact that there are so many of them happens to be indicative of a change. That in and of itself is a change.

Rekha: I mean there's a change, but there's also like you know... I'm sure there is a change but sexism is sexism. Is it safe for women ever. I think for me, just being in this game for a long time, the surprise of you being there is not the same. Because it would just be downright surprise.

Laylo: Oh yeah definitely. Like, "Oh, you're the DJ?"

Rekha: I did a gig three years ago in Philly. It was kind of a corporate gig, and I couldn't believe that there were still people that were like, "Oh my god, I've never seen a girl beat down records," and I was like, "Are you fucking serious?" It was just a context. It was just like a weird gig. There's a lot of young kids out there. It's definitely changing.

So I kind of think that's it for me, in terms of, if I have any follow up questions, I could shoot an email or something. And do you produce music?

Laylo: I don't.

Rekha: And do you record you sets?

Laylo: I do that very rarely. Yeah.

Rekha: And now your main gig is Rosie Perez, right.

Laylo: Yeah.

Laylo: And you guys do that like around once a month?

Rekha: That's as much as anything needs to be, let me tell you!
Well I really appreciate your time. Thank you. This was really great.

Laylo: Thank you, my pleasure. I can't wait to see what you come up with.

Interview Transcript:

DJ Reborn

(Edited) Interview with DJ Reborn

Rekha: Tell me about who you are. What was the neighborhood like where you grew up? And what was it?

Reborn: I grew up in Chicago but the neighborhood changed all the time. We moved pretty much every year of my life so I lived all over Chicago's South Side, North Side. Then we moved to the suburbs, to Evanston. So there isn't one neighborhood. There are a bunch of them.

Rekha: Did they have different characters or qualities?

Reborn: Yeah I mean I want to say pretty predominantly black neighborhoods. Until junior high school, and then there was more of a mixed community, in terms of people's backgrounds and diversity.

Rekha: And then what was it like, was there a feeling of living in Chicago that transcended the different neighborhoods you were in.

Reborn: Yes, the feeling of living in Chicago is so unique. I guess it's like growing up anywhere. It has its own character. And so for me a lot of what Chicago felt like growing up was a lot about music, a lot about architecture, a lot about food. Those are my most formative memories, like the layout of the city, and going places with my family, and just having my world view and eye shaped by being in this very Metropolitan Place. That was super diverse but also pretty segregated as well.

Rekha: And what kind of music did you listen to at home? And do you have siblings?

Reborn: I do have siblings. I have three siblings, and music was a huge part of our household. My oldest-

Rekha: Could you say that again. I do have siblings.

Reborn: Oh I do have siblings. I have three and I'm the youngest in my family. So my oldest brother played piano and was super into Elton John and just all kinds of music. But I just remember he drove us all crazy learning Bennie and the Jets on the piano for like too long. I was like, "Oh my god, I don't need to hear this song again!"

So there was a lot of mixed genres playing in my house. So a lot of funk and soul, a lot of Parliament Funkadelic, a lot of Chaka Khan, a lot of Stevie Wonder, jazz, blues. My parents were super into music. They loved going to concerts, but it was a lot of like R&B, funk and soul, and a little bit of like rock.

Rekha: Were they from Chicago?

Reborn: They were both from small towns in Illinois. Like you know a couple hours away from Chicago proper. But they met there.

Rekha: And then you live in New York now. What's your journey to get here?

Reborn: Oh god. My journey to get to New York was leaving Chicago at a really young age, at 18, with no real plan of what I was going to do. But I knew I really wanted to leave Chicago at that point. I felt like my life was going to be a very predictable and unhappy endeavor if I stayed there. Only because you know when you grow up somewhere you just really want to get the hell out. I just was ready to go. And I wanted to see what else was in the world.

So I decided to move to California. It was sort of a last minute, like I'm kind of moved on a whim. And went with 60 bucks, a suitcase, no plan, no friends. It was after high school. So, yeah it was like the fall after I graduated from high school, and I say I was driving in a car cross country with one of my high school friends to California, and I moved to

the Bay Area. I'd never been there before, I didn't know anything about it. I had no ties there. I mean I had some family there, but not that I was super close to. And I just started to make a way from myself which is how I got interested in DJing, was being in the Bay going out to parties and meeting these amazing DJs who happened to be from New York. We were going to UC Berkeley, and I worked in the area, and I started meeting these DJs who just had these amazing sets and they spun all different genres of music, which is what I like and so it really inspired me to want to get to figure out how to DJ.

Rekha: So speaking of that, what's the first time if you can remember seeing a DJ actually perform? Do you remember? First time or times?

Reborn: I think the first time I remember seeing DJs perform was probably just in videos, music videos. Maybe that was my first like laying my eyes on that, and then also just growing up in Chicago house music was such a huge part of the culture. So I used to listen to DJs mixing live on the radio. You know like the mix it six, the drive at five, whatever all those things are that they still do. I still listen to that stuff.

And then physically seeing DJs, movies, videos, TV, and then I want to say live, there were a couple. One was obviously like going to shows, so I want to say going to see Public Enemy or whatever what 17. But also I was friends with and went to high school with this very famous DJ now called Heather, DJ Heather from Chicago. So she was the first DJ I saw, like we would go out and listen to her DJ. None of us were old enough to be out in bars. But we would go and listen to Heather spin, and this was like early in her early years of DJing, but she was like the first DJ I knew when I was a teenager.

Rekha: So then how did you actually start, and do you remember the process of like, first gig, or you know. How did you get there?

Reborn: I first started DJing, living in the Bay Area. And like I said I met some DJs that just really inspired me. And then one of my best friends, she was dating a DJ. She decided to, one year by some use turntables, because we were both had talked about DJing and wanting to like collect records and blah blah blah. So she bought these turntables and so we would practice at her house, we would buy records and just kind of like mess around on the turntables. Try to figure out how to mix, and all that stuff. [31.7s]

Rekha: No YouTube. Did anyone show you how to do stuff? Or did her boyfriend or...?

Reborn: No not really. I mean we had DJ friends at that point who gave us some pointers and I want to say maybe once or twice another DJ friend tried to give me some quote unquote lessons, but you know everybody can't teach the thing that they know, everyone is good at that. And some of it too was just like a sexist endeavor, in terms of like you're asking someone for help, but they think it's an opportunity to hit on you, and you're like, "Oh yeah. You know what. Never mind. Going to teach myself." I had people try to show me a couple of things. But as you know, DJing is a completely tactile, hands-on, you gotta do it yourself.

Rekha: You had to figure it out with your own hands and your own brain unless you have two sets right next to you or something right. Which, rarely. Yeah, I remember in the early days when I used to do a lot of workshops. The guys would just be brazen and like touch everything and women would just be so hesitant and scared and just their reaction to technology was so different.

Reborn: Yeah but that's socialization. You know, boys are encouraged to tinker with things, to take things apart, and women are not.

Rekha: So how did you, you know, you and your friends started learning, you had a set of tables, you were collecting vinyl. How did you get your first gig or what was your first gig? Or your first time you played.

Reborn: So the first gig..Oh yeah. I totally know the date and everything. I know where I was. It was April 15, 1992.

Rekha: June 26, 1992. Oh sort of. I was kind of the DJ manager but that's some date, that is a famous date. Yeah see where we've been riding along each other's sides for a minute now. Yeah.

So, April 15th, often Tax Day. 1992 in the Bay.

Reborn: I felt taxed, too, by the experience! So Rachel, that was my friend who had gotten the turntables, and we were practicing at her house. Her boyfriend was also doing music production as well as DJing, but he was phasing out of being a DJ. He got offered a gig at this bar, which at the time was called The Eleventh Hour in San Francisco. And he threw us into the gig. He literally told the promoter, "Oh I can't do it but my girlfriend and her friend they can do it." So he basically gave us a gig without asking us first. He just was like, "I got you guys a gig, here. "

Rekha: He had faith in you, or you just needed somebody to take up? You don't even know.

Reborn: Yeah, I think what it was, it was a blessing of him kind of pushing and pushing us into the thing because we probably just would've stayed in her room practicing till now. You know what I'm saying. I think it was an encouraging healthy, loving push, like, "Here, if you guys don't get out and do it now you're not gonna do it." So we made a flyer. Called the party a name-

Rekha: Do you remember the name of the party?

Reborn: It's so stupid! It was called Soul Pilgrimage. We didn't want to say journey because that's just too obvious. So we had to do a pilgrimage and be dramatic. Yeah. We made a flyer and we made up our random DJ names and-

Reborn: What was your random DJ name?

Reborn: Oh that's in the vault. I'm not telling. My old DJ name is in the vault. Some people know it, who have known me that long. But we chose DJ names, we made a flyer, we invited our friends, and carried all that vinyl, and practiced our sets, and had a lot of support. It was a really nice night in terms of just, you know, people come out and support you when you-

Rekha: When you start until your friends age out of showing up.

Reborn: Right, but they were there! And the mixing was terrible but the selections were good. And that was the beginning.

Rekha: And then what was the next gig. Was it the same place?

Reborn: No I don't think we got booked that place again.

Rekha: Did you get paid?

Reborn: Maybe like seventy five dollars.

Rekha: I got fifty bucks, combined with me and my cousins.

Reborn: Exactly. It was more for fun and nerves than anything else. I don't remember the gig directly after that. But gigs just sort of started to trickle in, and I started to want to DJ a bit more out. Even though I wasn't as confident in my skills, at that point. I still wanted to just

contribute something to the conversation. The sonic landscape of the Bay Area.

And also, being a woman and doing it, just over time. I don't know that I had a consciousness about how important that was until I really saw the lack of women in the craft. I mean we've always been there, so I really hate when a new DJ comes along and they act like there wasn't someone there before them. There were not as many, but I can't stand these you know millennial DJs who are like, "Five years ago when I started, nobody was doing this". It's like, "Girl, get out of here."

Rekha: And also it was on the cover of the Village Voice, like please do your research.

Reborn: But do your research because there is somebody from back in the 70's, the 60's. Just because you didn't see the person doesn't mean that they weren't there doing the work, and you're standing on their shoulders still.

Rekha: Growing up did you have any formal musical training at all?

Reborn: No formal musical training for me growing up at all. I took guitar lessons for a semester.

Rekha: So how long were you in the Bay?

Reborn: I lived in the Bay for nine years. So I started DJing in '92. I moved there in '90, '89 or '90. So yes. So I DJed for seven of those years as kind of a side hustle.

Rekha: What was your other hustle? If you don't mind saying.

Reborn: Oh no I don't mind. I was working in retail management. So I worked a lot at clothing stores and managing the vintage and new clothing

stores. Stuff like that. But I didn't love it, like it was OK. It was something to do while I was that age. But I didn't really consider DJing as a viable career option. It never seemed legitimate enough to do full time at that time.

Rekha: Just because there wasn't enough stuff.

Reborn: I just didn't understand the value of it. It took me a long time to understand the value of putting my focus on it. As opposed to being like this is something fun to do, that I make money at sometimes. When I moved to New York after being in the Bay for a while, I sort of felt like I had plateaued in the Bay for myself in terms, like at that point I was doing OK. I was pretty well known in the area. And then I just felt like I've hit a ceiling and I was just like there's no... It wouldn't be fair to say that there was nothing else there for me. But it felt like there was nothing there for me and I needed grow.

Rekha: And so then you moved to New York.

Reborn: I moved to New York.

Rekha: When was that?

Reborn: '99. The summer of '99.

Rekha: Probably when I met you.

Reborn: Yeah Summer. Yeah.

Rekha: And then what happened to your career after that.

Reborn: When I first came to New York, I thought I was going to have a lot of DJ gigs. I started off having a few before I got here. Stuff was booked so I felt confident, but I was too confident because within two or three

weeks of being here, there were no more gigs, after the first couple. But for some reason I just thought work was gonna keep a sort of cartwheeling into itself, and it just didn't happen. So then I panicked and I got a job in retail in Soho.

Rekha: What you knew.

Reborn: Yeah it's what I knew. I knew someone that worked at the place and I could be paid under the table. So I was like, I have to do something right. So I went back to what I knew. But a few months into that or several months into that I was completely miserable, and I had an epiphany one day riding the subway that I wasn't willing to be in New York and do what I already did somewhere else. That was not the point of uprooting my life and coming here. So I just made an agreement with myself that I was going to recalibrate my focus on DJing and go towards it and work on it like a real job, like treat it like a 9 to 5.

Rekha: So what did that mean for you?

Reborn: That just meant that I had to do things that were outside of my comfort zone. Some of that was networking, going out and talking to other DJs and meeting people, showing my face doing gigs for cheap or free, following up, emailing people if I met them. You know, just the professional things that you do with whatever it is you're doing in the world that keeps you present and viable and in front of people. So I think I just I made a conscious decision to be more present with trying to get DJ gigs and getting better at DJing. And then in 2001, when I started doing theater stuff with Will Power, that was like a new challenge for me. So it helped my DJing exponentially and my ability to be in front of people.

Rekha: Can you explain a little bit about what that was.

Reborn: Yes. So I started DJing in theater contexts, like in 2001 and still do it now, off and on, and it was a one-man-show called Flow. With this playwright and actor, Will Power from the Bay, who I'd known since my days in the Bay. He used to be in a hip-hop group in the Bay. So we'd known each other for years, and when he was writing this piece he wanted a woman DJ as the person running the world of sound throughout the piece. So he had me in mind and then we finally were able to work out the dates and I just embarked on this journey of essentially being like the live orchestra for theater pieces but with turntables.

Rekha: That's awesome. And what would you consider your main artistic practice, and do you engage in other disciplines as well?

Reborn: My main artistic class practice, as in, you mean DJing itself?

Rekha: Are you DJ producer, right...?

Reborn: Yeah, I mean the...

Rekha: It's a requisite question because sometimes people work in different mediums.

Reborn: Yeah. I mean my practice is definitely DJing and then I do things DJ-related, so whether that is working in theater like I said, like providing soundtracks for live theater shows. That's not just straight ahead mixing music but also incorporating sound effects, dialogue, you know, recorded voices, whatever that, sound design, sound collaging. I consider myself to be a sound collage artist. And then also all of my years as a mentor and mentoring young people, particularly young girls with creative writing and DJing.

Rekha: And then you used to work with writers and poets?

Reborn: Yeah, yeah I was a mentor for about 12 years with Urban Word.

Rekha: My friend, you know, Bushra Rehman, of course.

Reborn: Yeah, exactly yeah. So I would say I'm a sound collage artist, uh, DJ. I've dabbled a bit in production, but not enough to call myself a producer at all. But I'm interested in learning it still. I have been wanting to paint for a long time but I haven't done it yet. I know it's gonna happen. It's like right there at the tip of my brain. And then continuing to like, you know my theatre piece that we did, like that was four years ago.

Rekha: Was that four years ago?

Reborn: Yeah four years ago. My life has just taken so many twists and turns. That's my promise to myself, when you're 19. That thing has to be resurrected.

Rekha: Yeah. So in terms of other work in the DJ realm. Actually DJing for people, do you actually put on events? Curate?

Reborn: No. Like maybe I've thrown one party or something. Even before I lived in New York. But I find that that's a whole other set of skills that I do not possess. Like that would not be a strong place for me to throw up my own events. I might be down to curate something. Curate or help make decisions about a vision of something or have a vision of something and what I carry it through. Like I said, with the theater piece that's like the closest thing I could do to throwing an event. But throwing parties, I just feel like I would fail miserably. I know what I do well. It's like playing your position on the team.

Rekha: So tell me about Ubiquita, and some of the other things you've done in your career. Because I know you've spent a lot of time teaching,

actually teaching not just mentoring. You were affiliated with different nights, as a resident DJ. Have you had residencies and things?

Reborn: Honestly the residencies haven't been the bulk of what I do. So you Ubiquita was a women DJ-centered party that I did on the Lower East Side with Kim Knox and Sean Maxwell and Selly and Moni and we had other DJs rotate in and out. ShErOck . Remarkable. This woman Mia for a while.

So it was a weekly party. So that was my main residency in New York. And it grew to be pretty popular in terms of just like you know all the dancers would come and the music was eclectic. Super fun party. We had a good time there.

Rekha: There was two floors.

Reborn: Exactly. You gotta love that.

Rekha: Was it still, Save the Robots?

Reborn Yes exactly. Save the Robots which was in Guernica. When we were there.

But that party sort of gave me a home base in New York. But at that time I was also travelling too with Will for the theater piece and then I got booked for being the DJ for Russell Simmons Def Poetry Tour. Their final year of touring. So I did that for a year.

I appreciate the diversity of what I do. So I've done stuff with the Howard Zinn Project and then Eve Ensler stuff. I love being able to be the musical voice or the soundtrack for events and organizations that do work that I believe in, that I care about, and that I think is important. I like having something to say in those environments with what I play.

Rekha: What about the teaching stuff, do you want to talk about that?

Reborn: Yeah. Yeah.

Rekha: Talk to me about it. And then we'll get a little bit more into some technical stuff.

Reborn: So as far as the teaching stuff, I started mentoring in like 2000, somewhere around there. And then that transitioned into teaching at a DJ school here in New York, that no longer exists. And then I've taught at another one as well. I've taught at a few DJ schools now over the course of all these years in New York. And it's interesting because I didn't realize as I said before that it's a whole different set of skills. So teaching people how to DJ is very simple. It comes easily for me, but it also took a long time to fine tune my teaching style and being able to communicate information terminology and skill, and be supportive to people, and make them work hard, but also show them a bunch of shortcuts that I wish I would have known when I was teaching myself how to DJ. So for me, always get so much out of teaching because I like seeing people connect those dots and have a successful mix or whatever it is that makes them feel less intimidated by the craft you know because it is a craft. And I think people, because of the technology of today, really take for granted how you still have to work at the craft. People can literally sink things up now and not rely on their own system of counting internally. People don't even know how to do that anymore. They're just pressing a button and looking at a screen.

Rekha: So yeah I know one of your students, was one of my students. What was her name? She's a Pakistani girl, rich Pakistani girl. She had liked faded hair. She went for like, third world kid. I don't know. I was teaching the NYU masterclass which you spoke, at and then we were doing we were doing the practical at the place we will not mention. And it was Shifty, I was co-teaching it with him because he was thrust upon me with my choice. Yeah. And he's just you know whatever. We had

very different philosophies around what it meant to DJ, and what was important and what wasn't. Because you know he came up as a turntablist. Mohin I think, Mohit, you must have had so many students. Anyway, so you've taught there and you were just talking, we were talking about technique. So you started on vinyl.

Reborn: Started on vinyl.

Reborn: And do you remember the mixer that you and your friend had?

Reborn: I believe it was a Numark mixer. That first mixer, but I don't remember.

Rekha: I'm just I'm like, because remember my first mixer, and it was terrible.

Reborn: Also maybe I don't have such a strong memory of it because it was her set up. It took me years to be able to afford my own gear.

Rekha: Yeah, it was pretty expensive. Yeah. That's how it is, you know. So you started with vinyl. And when you came to New York you had a few gigs and you worked your other jobs. At what point did it feel like this is for real, or this is my career, or does it feel that way? I don't want to put words in your mouth. Is there is there a moment or a time or a feeling around that?

Reborn: Yeah.

Reborn: I do feel like the story that I said before about being on my way to work and on the train and sort of seeing myself be miserable and deciding in that moment to pursue DJing full time. That was the turning point for me, because it was just my decision and everything that's come after that has been because I've tried to stick to that decision. It's like you keep choosing the thing, right.

Rekha: Right. Or the thing has chosen you.

Reborn: And the thing has chosen me. And so when I knew that I didn't have to do anything that wasn't related to music for money, is when I also knew that it was like, "Ok, this is it." Which is why I started mentoring and teaching and doing theater stuff and just trying to be diverse about my approach to the work, so that things wouldn't dry up, like I always have streams of income cause I do different stuff.

Rekha: What's the work?

Reborn: What do you mean?

Rekha: You said different approaches to the work. The work of DJing?

Reborn: Different approaches to the work of sharing my passion for music and my limited knowledge of it. That's the work. The work is like, ok, I'm here. I'm a vessel. I do this craft. I'm technically good at this craft. What else can I do with it that's useful? Can I show other people how to do what I know how to do. Yes. That's useful. Do I need to reinvent myself and continue to discover music all the time. Yes. That's important, that's part of the work. Am I going to keep doing weird gigs because they keep me on my toes. Yeah. That's the work.

Rekha: So weird in terms of just strange or just like...?

Reborn: New challenges, like new challenges. So like this tour, for instance. Yes is a big deal and I don't think I've played in front of this many people.

Rekha: What's the biggest number of people you've played for? Can we mention that the tour

Reborn: I'm on tour with Lauryn Hill. And I have been for several months off and on. But the biggest crowd I want to say is at a festival we did a couple months ago in L.A. called Camp Flog Gnaw, started by Tyler the

Creator or something. It's like one of these like definitely millennial, festivals. But we did a set there, and I want to say there had to be at least fifty, sixty thousand people.

Rekha: Wow that's intense.

Reborn: But on average we play in front of anywhere, like, from five thousand to fifty thousand people.

Rekha: So is it different to do the 50 thousand versus Bed and Vyne. Or a nightclub versus a stage. What's different about, or is there anything different about how you work in the different contexts.

Reborn: There is something different about how I work, depending on what setting I'm in. To DJ at a smaller bar lounge is a bit more relaxing. You know you can just kind of do you and be creative, and the stakes are not high because people are chilling, you know, so you can relax a bit. If I'm doing a theater thing, that's a bit more nerve wracking because so much of that is about hitting cues and there's not, it's like coloring inside the lines. In this particular setting I have to stay within the lines otherwise other things get thrown off, if I'm off.

Rekha: You're keeping the time.

Reborn: I'm keeping the time literally. So that's different, my focus has to be different in that setting. It's like wearing different hats or turning on different parts of your brain. And then when I'm in front of huge crowds, it's very daunting and nerve-racking, but my strategy with myself is to try to just enjoy being in the moment and not focus on how many people, how many eyes are on me. You know it's like I get a lay of the land and I'm like OK there's twenty thousand people here I know that this song is going to work for 50 percent of them.

I try to have a diverse set so that everybody in the crowd hears something that they like and that they remember that they're having an experience and they're being taken on a journey, as opposed to it just some DJ slamming records together.

Rekha: And you're set. Does it change when you're on tour? Is your set different in different spaces, or you've been trying to adapt to like the locale or...?

Reborn: So when I'm on tour, the sets have some staples, some go to's that I know work no matter where I am. And then I try to modify it based on where we are. So if we're in a particular city, country, I usually try to play music from that place, from artists that are from that place. Just as I a nod to knowing where I am and wanting to represent the sound of that place in my set if I can, just out of respect for being there.

Rekha: Nice. So we were starting there, and then conversation went in different directions. But you started with vinyl and what do you use now? What's your preferred method?

Reborn: My preferred DJ gear setup now is still two technique, twelve hundred turntables or twelve tens or whatever. A Rane mixer now is my preference like, Rane or Pioneer mixers are great to me. Rane 62 or the Pioneer S9, yeah. So that's still my preferred thing. So turntables, Pioneer, Rane mixer, Serato is what I use but I still like to use vinyl too. I just don't get to do it as often, and then I don't mind working on some controllers. Some DJ controllers. It's like I can work on anything. I can work on CDJs, I can work on turntables, I can work on a controller. I like that I feel comfortable and all of it at this point. When I started off with vinyl I was very resistant to CDs.

Rekha: Yeah.

Reborn: I eventually had to get good at using CDJs but I used to dread it.

Reborn: Yeah. Yeah. You still prefer a vinyl. What is it about vinyl that you prefer?

Reborn: It's just the feeling of it. It's being able to touch records, it's the control, it's the muscle memory of how I learned. I think that I just have an attachment to the process of putting my hands on records and manipulating in that very specific way of how you fast forward or rewind the vinyl or cue things up or adjust the needle or clean the needle off, like all the little rituals, small pieces of doing the work is why I like those tools.

Rekha: Rituals slash obstacles.

Reborn: Right! But it's like using your instrument.

Rekha: So the turntables are the instrument.

Reborn: Yeah for sure the turntables are the instrument.

Rekha: Do you use any specific techniques when you mix, do scratch, do you...? Are there specific things you do other than play song after song? Just curious.

Reborn: Yeah. So my style when I'm DJing is I do some scratching, I do some cutting. I'm not necessarily great at those things, but I'm good enough to utilize them decoratively when I'm DJing. So not every mix is gonna get a scratch or cut. But I do love beat matching, I do love blending. I do love letting songs have conversations with each other. That makes sense coming out of the speaker. I like being able to shift energy based on what record I play next.

Rekha: We touched upon it a little bit earlier that the technology that's available, the BPM's being apparent, even the key signatures if you

want, the keys the song's in. How does all that, does it help? Does it matter? Does it aid your practice?

Reborn: You mean the technology?

Rekha: What's your relationship to the technology of today in terms of DJing.

Reborn: Well my relationship to it is my relationship to that to the technology with my DJing at this point is me taking responsibility for understanding it enough to use it pretty well to troubleshoot if there are problems with it and fix the issue and understand it. It's convenience and just try to use that to the best of my ability. So for me the technology is transactional. I mean it gives me something and then I try to take care of it right. So it's the convenience of it is great. I haven't cracked every part of that program open and really tinkered with it, but it's like I have a pedestrian—it's more than a pedestrian ability—but you know it's like I know a lot about it. I don't know everything about it. And I use it for good, but I'm not attached to it as a thing.

Rekha: You don't know everything about it. Do you think you need to know everything about it?

Reborn: No. I don't think you need to know everything about it, but I would like to know more, and I could stand to utilize some tricks that could unlock in the program.

Rekha: Who do you think your audience is. It's a very open-ended question.

Reborn: I pretty much. It might sound conceited or something, I don't know, I think I can play for any audience, and I like to. I feel like my audience are people that are really open, musically, mentally, spiritually, energetically so that they aren't going to get angry if they don't hear a Drake song every 10 minutes. You know what I mean, it doesn't mean you won't hear that coming from me. It just means that like 10 minutes

ago I was over there. Now I'm over here. Fifteen minutes from now I'm gonna be over there, and it's gonna make sense. But you have to trust, you know, Rimarkable has this T-shirt that says, "Baby trust your DJ." You know, it's just like just... It's the only job in the world where everyone feels like they can tell you how to do it better than you do it, when they don't do it, as you're doing it! And they've never done it.

Reborn: Do you feel like you're part of a DJ community?

Rekha: Yes I definitely feel like I'm part of a DJ community.

Reborn: How would you describe that community?

Reborn: It's a huge community that has cliques and pockets and crews and people that do things together, more as a collective. I feel like I know these different pockets and the different crews of people and that my community of DJs is made up of individuals that work together in groups sometimes, and sometimes they don't. Sometimes we collaborate, sometimes we don't. And I haven't had an affiliated crew since Ubiquita. But yeah.

Rekha: Who's in this crew? Could you describe it a little bit?

Reborn: Well obviously, you know, Selly, Rimarkable.

Rekha: So are these mostly women?

Reborn: Spinna. A lot of women. Monday blue. Natasha Diggs, who else... there's so many people.

Rekha: Brooklyn, New York based mostly?

Reborn: Yeah mostly New York based. My nephew's a big DJ in Chicago. He's part of my DJ community too. Yeah. I feel like it's just a bunch of DJs

who I personally love, who I think are really incredible voices in the DJ world in their own right. You know the Riches, the Bobbitos.

Rekha: Do you book your own gigs?

Reborn: Yes I book my own gigs. I do wish I had an agent, and a manager. I do.

Rekha: It's a blessing and a curse. I've had it all and I've had. I've had every iteration. Right now I'm down to a fake virtual assistant.

Reborn: Okay. At least you have that.

Rekha: No it's me, posing as somebody else on the e-mail. And you can do that too. Just come up with a name. And she's been fired, hired, applauded and it just adds a layer.

Reborn: Yeah I'll consider it.

Rekha: Have you ever felt unsafe while you've been spinning?

Reborn: Unsafe.

Rekha: Like take it anyway you want. Like physically unsafe, or you know, like in a space where y maybe you're spinning around drunk people, or someone's being request-y, or whatever that means to you.

Reborn: Yes of course. Yes.

Rekha: Could you give me a nugget.

Reborn: I think feeling unsafe in DJing, the things that come to mind are like maybe on one of these tour dates recently, when Miss Hill was super late and I was out there for a really long time and people were getting really upset, and I was like it just would take one person throwing

something at me for it to get wild in here because people were restless but that was sort of like I had a tinge of like, "Mmhmm! If she doesn't show up right now, I don't know what's gonna happen." And then because DJing is a lot of times in environments where there are lots of men. There sometimes can just be that twinge or that feeling of like, you know. Especially if people can get to your DJ booth or wherever you're DJing. It doesn't always feel so good to be that vulnerable which is why DJ booths are preferable. So people can't necessarily just walk right up to you. That kind of it, like you said, with drunk people, fights break out. Shit starts getting thrown and you're like, "Oh I better duck under these turntables."

Rekha: Have you had issues or anything dealing with venues, or in terms of like the business side of getting paid? This is your living, right, you can reveal as much about that as you feel comfortable. Do you think your gender has played any role in those instances?

Reborn: Oh absolutely my gender has played a role in that. I mean, look, we live in patriarchy, we live in a sexist society and oppression and white supremacy is just real. I'm a black woman DJ. People are going to try to test you. And I've been tested, and that's another reason why I don't think I'm interested in doing my own events. Because dealing with that side of things of having to logistically deal with anything from getting my money, to just logistical stuff. I'm not into it. Yes of course, venues and promoters have tried to not pay, or promised one thing and did something else. It's tricky sometimes only because you can do everything in your power to articulate, solidify details, all that stuff, and if at the end of the night somebody comes to you with empty hands you've already done your work. So a lot of that is around doing it long enough, and having hopefully a strong enough reputation that anything coming in is actually reputable, and you're not going to have to fight for your money.

Rekha: I recall that magazine shoot. There was at least two times we were involved in some sort of shoot.

Reborn: We were in *Seventeen* Magazine.

Rekha: You were in *Seventeen*? Then there was that other one. Like the *Seventeen* magazine shoot which was me. I was in that too. Yeah. And then they had like they had some DJs and some models. And then when it came out they had a white guy with a chain and they called him DJ Chain Snatcher and he was not a DJ. Mihoko was in that. Yeah. They somehow talked me into bringing all my gear. Talked me or I like was trying to be nice. And was the last person there at the very last. You know whatever.

Then there was another magazine shoot we were in for this magazine called *suede*. Yeah. Where they took a bunch of women DJ. And they shot us separately and put it together in some panorama. And I just remember they had the DJ gear set up completely wrong. The pieces were floating the turntables were next to a mixer. I was like, "Yo." You gotta make this look like it's real, and this Gemini mixer, you gotta put a black tape over there." I'm not ever trying to be on a Gemini mixer. Oh they had a bad, because that was everyone's first mixer because it was so cheap. One of them made a farting noise. They had all these really awful effects on them. I actually went to small claims court because it was so terrible. The first time I used a credit card, I bought a mixer. That's how I got into consumer debt.

Opportunities in terms of professional opportunities, do you think any of that is affected by your gender? I mean it's always a soup of things in terms of your contemporaries. Or do you think the way you approach the actual art or when you're in the room spinning, any part of your technique is different or your method? Does your gender play any role in terms of your professional standing or opportunities and just the

physicality of DJing, is it anyway influenced, or do you think, in any way related to your gender.

Reborn: I do think that obviously gender plays a role, just like race does, in the opportunities that come or don't come. I used to feel more stringently about not getting more opportunities, and I would sort of have this self-pitying narrative about it in my head, because DJing is like anything in the world, and a lot of times you get more opportunities based on how people perceive you, whether they think you're attractive or not, or whatever those things are. So people are operating from all kinds of places that have nothing to do with me. So I think I had to learn to just put my head down and keep doing the work and know that whatever was supposed to happen for me would happen for me and if it didn't, that was not a reflection of me not being good at my work.

I have to keep reminding myself that I'm good at what I do and I get plenty of amazing opportunities, and not every opportunity is meant for me. But some of those opportunities don't happen I'm sure, because I'm not a man, but plenty of things happen because I'm not a man that are good. You know opportunity is to work with or to be, you know, I think it's really powerful to be the opening DJ for an artist like Lauryn Hill because she could pick anybody. She could have a dude, which she has had or person not of color or a man or whatever. I think that it's really powerful when people get to see a black woman DJing in a major setting, like in a you know huge arena or whatever that is, just because it's not a common sight. So I know that it's powerful. And so I think my focus is just on that. On trying to be like powerful and visible.

Reborn: And then the physicality. Was that your other question?

Rekha: So let's say gender, race the intersectionality-ness of who you are, and if you want to break them out separately or not, do you think that's different? Does that affect, in terms of how you actually play or spin?

Reborn: Sure absolutely

Rekha: Unpack that a little bit if you can.

Reborn: This is why for me DJs are very interesting people, because whatever the story is, whatever our story is, whatever our lens is, everybody comes to the craft with a narrative and a lens that is about how their life was shaped. So for me, being able to play songs that have an emotional pull for a lot of people, like a lot of people have an emotional reaction to certain songs and that's a commonality. That's a part of how as a DJ you're able to unite energies in a space. So for me, I think growing up a black girl in Chicago, only around black people mostly until like the age of 12 or something and then being exposed to all different kinds of people which meant more music coming into my ears, that would never have come in, and all of these things inform how I play and sort of how I approach things.

The one thing is that, again, hopefully my sets are diverse, because when I was a teenager and listening to like New Wave and stuff in the 80s, that I don't think I would have been listening to had we not moved to a suburb. I might have, but I don't know. These things inform me. So if I'm gonna DJ said it's gonna incorporate all the things that I personally love that have an emotional pull for me. So that's gonna be funk and soul, that's gonna be hip-hop, that's gonna be reggae, that's gonna be house music, that's gonna be rock, that's gonna be new wave, that's gonna be 80's, that's gonna be whatever all the things are that have an emotional resonance for me I'm trying to share and play. So bringing all those things to the work. And then my style of DJing. . . Yeah I just feel like I'm bringing hopefully the diverse way that I like to listen to music. I hope that that's what I'm presenting. And part of that is being able to be a person that can say I grew up with music in my household. I grew up around musical people. I grew up with parents that loved music and so it's always been around me. I just have had to figure out a way, and DJing became that vehicle, for me to share how

much music has meant to me. And that's just how I get to do it. But it's meant so much to me because it's had to save me on so many different levels, whether that's something around race or something around being a woman or whatever that is. Because you know as well as I do that in music there are so many songs that address things that affect us. We were talking about *The Miseducation*, and that album really changing you as a young woman because you're listening to this powerful young woman talk about her journey and that means something.

Rekha: And for that album specifically, the interstitials. I mean she's a little bit younger than me but she grew up in an African-American suburban setting, it was very similar to where I grew up. It felt like I had a teacher like that, that would ask those things and say, "Miss Hill". Those things really connected to me and just the sound created on that album. She blended all these styles and made that flow and she's a damn good rapper.

Reborn: She's one of the baddest MCs still.

Rekha: She really is. And the lyrics are just layered and they have quadruple meanings and it's just you know word mastery at its finest.

Reborn: Agreed.

Rekha: And musical mastery as well. You gotta listen to that podcast.

There's two. New York Times has this podcast of these two critics and they broke down her album. They broke her down on the album, so it's just like one episode. And this other one is like multi episodes, and it's you know, when you love something and you just wanna hear people who love it as much as you, you just identify with it in a different way. I love that.

If somebody wanted to be a DJ today, what would you say to them? Is it a viable profession?

Reborn: Oh absolutely. DJing is more viable now than I think it's ever been, because people take it more seriously. People value it more than they used to. And there are a million different ways that DJs get utilized in culture now.

Rekha: But this against streaming and playlists still.

Reborn: For the people that think DJing is nothing, they're going to feel that way no matter what. So they're not going to necessarily find the value in it. I find that people gained respect for it and found value in it when they tried to do it. So when I'm a teacher, and we would do like these one-off weekend workshops where people would come and do like two hours of DJ instruction in a day, two or three hours. That was where the respect came in and they always would leave class and be like, "Oh I totally have way more respect for DJs now than I did before I took this class."

Rekha: So we're saying this should be mandatory education.

Reborn: It should be mandatory education!

Rekha: Before you make a request, you should learn. And that is the gospel.

Reborn: Yes exactly. So yeah I would just say it to any new DJ starting now, have a genuine passion for what you play. And figure out how to tell stories with what you love to play. Think about what you're playing and the way you're playing it affects the environment.

Rekha: Well that's deep. Do you do say no to gigs?

Reborn: Yes.

Rekha: Why.

Reborn: Because it seems not worth it. Sometimes it may be. It's not even really just money all the time, which is one of the beautiful things about where I'm at with what I do as a DJ, is that I have some gigs that pay very little money and I have some gigs that pay way too much money. But I say that to say that for me it's critical for me to have balance in the kinds of gigs that I do, so that nothing feels like that's beneath me. I would never feel that or say that about a thing. But maybe I've already paid that due you know. I mean I paid those dues to do a gig like that and I don't see myself fitting in that space.

Rekha: What kind of gig is that?

Reborn: So that might be a gig that is more on the commercial side in terms of what they expect you to play. That might be a gig where the sound is terrible in the venue and the bar and they don't care about the sound and your ears are bleeding, and I just don't even want to play on that. It could be the people involved seem disorganized and like they want to get the benefit of having a seasoned professional DJ play but they don't want to compensate for that or they don't want to make sure that things are organized and proper and professional. So if something feels unprofessional like it's going to be more work than what I'm willing to put out. I've turned down gigs that pay well because I didn't like whatever the project was.

Rekha: Same here. I haven't turned down many because I haven't been in that position but I once did this weird gig for an after party for Devo. It was weird. I mean I get the Indian minstrel show gigs. You know so they want to do some Indian thing and that time Bombay Dreams was on Broadway. So they had the actors from Bombay Dreams collab with parts of Devo. And so I played this really wide range of Indian influenced stuff and my friend's cousin, rich, rich Bay Area friend was there and fell in love with what I was doing because she's like Indian

and she wanted like hybrid, the Indian and not Indian and she was just like all about it. And at that time I had someone who was assisting me with booking, and so she got our info and I quoted her ridiculous price. But she was getting married in a year. Now you know how our lives are. You don't know what you're doing a year from now. And she didn't even blink at the price at that time. I was like I think it was 10 G's or something or something stupid. You know, sometimes you want to test people.

Reborn: Oh yeah. Because you're like, "They're not going to say yes to this." But sometimes you gotta just do it.

Rekha: There's unfortunately no formula. They said yes right away. Blah blah blah blah blah. And she said OK. So she talked to my person. She's like, "Ok, send me, my fiancé, my mobile and e-mail this and that." And I was like, "You know what. I'm not taking it." And I was not in a position to say no to some of that kind of money because I would have said half up front. I thought, "You know what. She's going to call me every day for a year."

Reborn: Right. And it's not going to be worth it.

Rekha: They got DJ Aqeel from India. He was like #1 DJ in India. At some point, nightclubs. He doesn't do gigs without flying first class, and then my friend ended up shooting the wedding. She's a photographer and got stiffed. So I did the right thing.

Reborn: Wow. You made the right choice.

Rekha: So yeah the spidey sense comes in. You know you can just kind of feel the vibes in these lives are wrong, you know. It happens. What are some of your favorite gigs to play, if you have them.

Reborn: My favorite gigs to play again are gigs where I get to play with friends. People who I know enjoy DJing as much as I do and just want to have fun playing together. Those are my favorite kind of gigs, is if I can play with friends.

Rekha: And you do that a lot?

Reborn: No I don't get to do it often but that's why, mostly my friends who have residences if they asked me to be a guest, I will always say yes. Just because it's an opportunity to play with them.

Rekha: Right. Right. Right.

Reborn: But those are my favorite kind of gigs. Gigs where I get to share space with other DJs that I know are like into the craft of it. My other favorite kind of gigs to play now are these big gigs. Only because I'm challenged to see what works in those spaces like I'm learning so much on this tour because the audiences are so big and I have to manage so many things. I have to technically be good, I have to have an interesting selection. I never know exactly how long my set is going to be I'm trying to like pace things out in a certain kind of way.

Rekha: Wow that's really stressful.

Reborn: And then have personality and be engaging with the crowd because it's my inclination, and just put my head down and mix mix mix mix mix.

Rekha: So what do you do when you sing? How do you engage with the crowd?

Reborn: I do a lot more stuff on the mic than I usually like to do. And I just sort of have my little things that I've developed over time that I think help keep the energy up. So talking on the mic is some of that. Some of it is crowd participation. I ask questions or you know I'll cut the music when

I know everybody knows the lyric, those things and just talking to people, engaging with people, asking questions. Dancing to stuff that I love. Just all those things that it's like, look I'm here too. Let's just have fun with this.

Reborn: Yeah that's right. I'm waiting for her too.

Rekha: I think also when you start out you have a nervousness to get it right. I'm always about looking in the room for the crowd. But I did this gig once in the Bronx Museum. I don't know how I got on the bill with Kid Capri because I did not deserve to be there. It was one of these like super Bronx things, and I think I learned such a lesson that day. He was having so much fun. He was having so much fun. He was singing every song, he was talking to the crowd. He's so Bronx, right. I was like, "What part of Bronx you from". He's like, "Ok you know like." And I was like, "Oh if I look like I'm having fun, then you have to have fun."

Reborn: Right. Exactly.

Rekha: Which wasn't exactly comfortable and I think for me being queer adds another dimension, being gender nonconforming. What you're allowed. You know, it's like whatever. Women are always told to smile, and things like that and I think that happens.

Have you ever had to share DJ space that you didn't want to, or that was off, or transitioning, were you on a lineup or something? How do you negotiate that?

Reborn: It's gonna sound weird and formal, but I do think that there's such a thing as a DJ etiquette.

Rekha: Elaborate I think there is DJ etiquette and I think you should... What is DJ etiquette?

Reborn: For me DJ etiquette is just we both know what's going on here. So if we're transitioning between each other as DJs, there are certain things that you do and don't do. You, for instance, want to make sure that if you're playing the last song of your set before somebody else has to come on, there's enough time in that song to make the transition. They can do what they need to do, you can do it you need to do, and you're not leaving somebody hanging with like a minute in the song and being like, "Here, take over." When it's not that moment. Part of the etiquette is make sure your co-DJ or the other DJ is ready before you let go of the wheel. You know what I mean. Some people just get out of the car and the car is still going, and you're like, "Wait! You didn't let me get in the seat and put my hands on the wheel." So just having this mindfulness that when you pass the torch it has to be done seamlessly. So that it's not awkward.

And also being respectful and kind. If this is a person that you've never DJ with before, finding out their name and having a level of just like cordialness to you, where you're just like, "How you doing?" Just you're a human being doing the same work I'm doing. Let's make this easy for both of us.

And then it's also having your own stuff. I mean I know that people leave stuff behind. I have been guilty of being like, "Oh crap, I forgot my needles and the other bag," or I did this, I did that, which is why you should have your little mental checklist. But I don't like how sometimes there are some celebrity DJs or big name DJs that I know. They don't show up with anything. They don't have headphones. They don't have needles, they don't have headphones, they don't have nothing. And you're like, "But this is what you do, and you're so big, that you should be getting all the stuff free from companies. I'm sure you do. So for you to not have the basic tools..."

Rekha: Or they think the venue should do it and the venue doesn't bother. No, but I mean I was trained, I don't know how, but you always had your

headphones, your slipmats, your needles. Like always. Like if you forgot once in a while, it's ok.

And the other etiquette is know your time slot. Play to the room. Don't play fast music when it's the beginning of the night. Don't play all the good songs before it's time. Help build the vibe.

Reborn: Exactly. Agreed. 100 percent.

Rekha: I've had to deal with a lot of Indian male DJs before I go on. They'll try to play songs, they'll basically, they're upstaging.

Reborn: I hate that. And I also feel like part of the etiquette is knowing the gear. It's very frustrating when there is another DJ who is maybe billed the same as you, but they don't know how to handle the equipment and you're like...

Rekha: How important is knowing the gear? Is that part of the work?

Reborn: Absolutely. Anything you choose to do in the world, you have to know the tools that make the craft happen. And to your point from earlier, I may not know everything, but I know how to troubleshoot 20 times over, because I had to learn, because that's when you get embarrassed, that's when you mess up, that's when the sound stops. So I pride myself to have been able to learn when things go wrong, or to detect something is gonna go wrong and stop it from happening. And I just think that that's being sharp with the work. You have to be prepared to know how the engine runs.

Rekha: I mean and also, super nerd it out. Try to refresh myself. We know people who check in with Serato once in a while, what's your new shit. Due diligence in keeping up, just professionally keeping up.

Reborn: Exactly.

Rekha: Ok last question. This is out of sequence, I should have asked in the beginning, I'm just clumsy with this. What is your DJ name and where does it come from?

Reborn: My DJ name is DJ Reborn, like born again, reborn, and it came when I was considering changing my DJ name from the first name that I had. Because it was a dumn name and I kind of chose it quickly and it didn't really make any sense and whatever. So I had been thinking for so long that I wanted to change the name. I knew going into that name that I wasn't gonna be a permanent name, but it stopped for a couple of years, I think. And so I was out with my boyfriend at the time in Oakland one night, we were at some little shitty bar and one of those, you know those digital read out signs, like they have them at the bodega.

Rekha: Yeah yeah yeah yeah.

Reborn: They have them with different advertisements. So we were at this place and they had one of those digital boards and stuff was going by and then it said something, something, and then it just said "reborn" in red lights. And "reborn" was just suspended there and I was like, "That's my new DJ name!" That was it. It just clicked in my head and I was like, "It sounds like my name, which is Robyn, but the idea, what I thought about the literal definition of being reborn, and rebirth and this constant, constant renewal and the responsibility to kind of keep reinventing yourself and making yourself new and I liked that idea. And then I was like reborn, that's a feeling I would like for people to have when they hear me playing. So that was it.

Rekha: Awesome. All right, well, I'm done. So is there anything you want to add or anything.

Reborn: Just that you're awesome and thank you for doing this important work, and I'm so excited to be able to read it and hear it, and thank you for

making space and wanting to communicate the stories of all of us in this world.

Rekha: Yeah, I mean, I think what really struck me about our conversation is the fact that you've been doing this for 20 years at least. No, '92. That would be 27 years. You've been in New York for 20 years. And for you to DJ on tour is still not, it's still a big deal. And that to me was the most like yeah, you know what, you're right, it is a big deal because there's a super, I mean there's so many segments of DJing and DJ culture and festivals and you know, whatever. But that's still like surprising in some way.

Reborn: I agree.

Rekha And that's ridiculous.

Reborn: I agree. It's so crazy into my brain all the time. The only other thing I will say is this full circle. For me one of the things, particularly about this tour is like, because of how much I love this artist and I love that album, I just can't believe that I get to do that, you know what I mean. For me it's full circle because the album changed my life, it meant so much to me, she meant so much to me, and I'll say this one last thing, actually that I just remembered. So 20 years ago, in '99 the year that Lauryn Hill won those Grammys. She won the five Grammys. I strangely got booked to DJ the after party for her Grammy party. It was like one of my first gigs in New York and I was so excited. I still have the handwritten invoice that I gave to whoever hired me from Sony or whatever, and I was so amped because I was just so into her. And the party was just at some weird random place and my setup wasn't great. It didn't really feel much like a party, it was like a receiving area. But Lauryn Hill came through and I was so excited, and she one thousand percent did not see me. Like a hundred thousand million percent. But I assumed, I was like, "I'm a black girl DJ, she's going to see me, we're going to love each other, it's going to be amazing." And she just floated

through the room and said hi to some people and she was gone. I was so sad because I felt like, "Oh I thought I was going to get to meet this woman, and she would think it was so cool that I was DJing." And it didn't happen. And now fast forward literally 20 years later, I have the gig because she was at a party I DJed, and I never even saw her. She tracked me down like three months later after that party. So that's how I got this gig, the tour gig. I was DJing a holiday party in Harlem. Last December. She happened to be at the party. I never even saw her. A couple of people were like Lauryn Hill is here, and I was like, "Oh cool." And then nothing. I just never saw her and then I heard she was gone pretty quickly. She wasn't there for much of my set.

Rekha: I went to a party you did. You did some birthday. Fortieth birthday party for Kara Walker.

Reborn: Oh yeah.

Rekha: That was a fun party.

Reborn: Yeah. She's so great.

Rekha: So she tracked you down.

Reborn: She had someone get my number. And then months later I got a call from her right hand person and then that's how this whole thing started.

You know, when I first got put in contact with her, she sent me a text, and she said, "Hey Reborn." I was like, I don't know how she knows me. And they didn't know either, her people, they're like, I don't know. So when she texted me, she was like-

Rekha: Hey the boss wants to talk to you.

Reborn: Exactly. And she was like, "hey Reborn, I was at a party that you DJed last December, and I enjoyed myself immensely. I want to talk to you about some things." And that's just how it started. But the other thing that I will say to young DJs, too, or new DJs, is you never know who's listening and I want to say that my biggest professional opportunities have come from me just putting my head down and doing the work and someone happened to be listening. That changed my life. That altered the course of my professional experience, because they were in a room and I had no idea they were there.

Rekha: Well that's great advice. It's like dance like no one's watching, or play like everyone's listening.

Reborn: Exactly.

Rekha: Awesome, awesome. Great.

Interview Transcript:

Rimarkable

(Edited) Interview with Rimarkable

Rimarkable: My name is Maria Elena Garcia also known as Rimarkable.

Rekha: Let's just get started. I wanted to interview you because I'm a fan. We've worked together briefly for a very weird gig. We could get into that very weird gig. But I just want to approach, just want to get some very basic organic background of how did you become a DJ. Where did it start? And feel free to go as in detail as you want to, I'll ask follow up questions as we unfold your story.

Rimarkable: Okay interestingly enough I've been asked this question a lot recently. And thank you for giving me permission to go as deep as I'd like to go. Because it just kind of spark some ideas in my head. I think I became a DJ out of rebellion. You know, there's a very simple explanation how I became a DJ. But I wanted to be a DJ out of rebellion. My love for music and all sorts of genres came out of rebellion. I come from a very staunch Christian household where my mother was, or is, also a classically trained pianist. So I was raised strictly on classical and gospel music. And I have older siblings who had more access to worldly music. what we call worldly music, secular music. So I was very introduced to a broad spectrum of music, popular music, black music and just all kinds of music, honestly. Being from a place that is known for its music.

Rekha: What is that place?

Rimarkable: So I'm from Detroit. A place that is you know very famous for its music not just Motown but also techno music. There's also there was there was a ton of music around. Detroit is also known for its Rock n Roll. So all those layers, all those things intertwining in the DNA of the city, being programmed into me subconsciously when I gained access to it.

It inspired me to not just retain the knowledge of it being there but also to like use it as an act of resistance, because the fact that I was confined in my household or in front of my mother who was the authoritative figure in my life, the fact I was confined and restricted of only listening to two kinds of genres, it made me want to rebel and go against it and I had all this ammunition, which is like all the knowledge of all this different kind of music from rock music to country music to soul music to disco to funk to house to hip-hop. All of that. Had all of that because I would absorb everything. I was addicted to music. Also I was a latchkey kid, so I spent an exorbitant amount of time by myself. So I was able to explore these genres, and culture and television also heavily influenced me. I grew up in the MTV generation and I just had all these things coming at me. And I also was always kind of afraid to really be out there with it because I had this restriction.

Rekha: Just so we can have some context and demographic information, you were born in Detroit?

Rimarkable: I actually was born in Lansing. Which is the capitol, but I was raised in Detroit and also in Chicago.

Rekha: Chicago, of course, known for House music, and has its own music culture.

Rimarkable: I spent a long time after college in Ann Arbor. Detroit was the most present in my life. The most consistent thing in my life. So it's just much easier for me to say that.

Rekha: Sure. And sometimes people need one place where you're from.

Rimarkable: They don't want to hear all that. I was raised like Army brats, you know.

Rekha: So were you an army brat?

Rimarkable: No, I mean, like an army brat, it's very difficult to say where you're from.

Rekha: And where you're from is a loaded question for anyone, especially for immigrants as well, as people who are not seen as part of whatever.

Rimarkable: Yeah and I have that also, you know my father is an immigrant from Puerto Rico. He immigrated to the U.S. before it was considered a colony.

Rekha: Because technically he's not an immigrant because he's Puerto Rican.

Rimarkable: Yeah, technically the American United States owns Puerto Rico now, but before he came here not speaking a lick of English, 6th grade education, and moved to Chicago where he met my mother. And they had five kids and they migrated to Michigan.

Rekha: You're number five.

Rimarkable: I'm number five.

Rekha: Exactly.

Rekha: Hence the older sibling.

Rimarkable: I'm actually the only sibling that was born in Michigan. Everyone else was born in Chicago.

Rekha: OK. So you're a little special.

Rimarkable: Super special.

Rekha: Is there a lot of age difference between you and your next sibling?

Rimarkable: Large. My next sibling is seven years. The one after that is 10 years, and then 14 and then the oldest is 20.

Rekha: Wow. They spaced it out.

Rimarkable: Yeah exactly. Grateful for those age differences because they brought me a lot of information from their experiences musically. So I'm very grateful to have seen hip-hop be born.

Rekha: Same.

Rimarkable: I grew up in that. You being from New York, you definitely-

Rekha: The greatest blessing ever. To be born at time I was born because we literally saw it spring up.

Rimarkable: Yeah I remember everything my brother was a B-Boy. I saw everything happen. I remember when the launch of MTV happened.

Rekha: Absolutely.

Rimarkable: I remember Michael Jackson.

Rekha: We weren't allowed to have MTV.

Rimarkable: We weren't allowed either. My mom cut the cable like probably in like '86, '87. But I remember watching the MTV launch.

Rekha: I used to babysit at my uncle's house and they had cable. My parents didn't have cable. They just didn't think it was worth the money.

Rimarkable: Yeah, I primarily didn't grow up with cable.

Rekha: And so every time I went to babysit I was like fiending for MTV. And then my uncle who's very uptight, was like, "Do not watch it in front of the kids, because these people do lots of drugs to stay awake."

Rimarkable: Oh my god, that's so funny.

Rekha: He's was like, "Don't watch it." So I would do overnight babysitting, and the minute the kids would sleep, I was in it. Yeah.

Rimarkable: So yeah I always had to watch it a cousin's house.

Rekha: So you gave a really amazing context and will, I would say, you gave a motivation for how you got involved in DJing. I want to unpack a little bit about the technical beginnings of your desire, and how you decided of all ways to rebel and to express yourself musically. What is your technical story? When is a first time you saw DJ or you tried or you had access? How did you learn, and let's start there. How did you learn?

Rimarkable: Well the first time I saw DJ would be probably in the hip-hop context you know and it was probably on television, honestly. I don't remember the day I was like, "I want to do that."

Rekha: Did you see Rocket on TV, was that a little bit before your time?

Rimarkable: The Rocket, the Rocket, Don't Stop, that one?

Rekha: Yeah technically speaking, the first time DJing was shown on TV was Herbie Hancock did Rocket on the Grammys or something.

Rimarkable: That might have been it.

Rekha: And that clip has been really replayed and replayed, so you know.

Rimarkable: Quite frankly that might have been it, because anything on television I could get my hands on that had to do with music, I was all over it. Yeah, and I always knew what a DJ was but I had it in the context of hip-hop, the mixing and scratching.

I was making mix tapes and I didn't know that I was DJing in a sense because I was like a lot of kids back in the day, we had our tape decks. We would record pause tapes off the radio. And I was doing that, I didn't know it was a whole phenomenon. I just was doing it. I remember pausing my tape, the record button, to match another song that I would wait to come on, and I would program my playlist. Basically I would essentially know what I wanted to play next and I would pause my tape to do that. And there was some beautiful moments in all of that pausing, like the tape would a slur, or it would some kind of way have an effect, or it would cut the person, the announcer from speaking in the middle of a sentence, and it would hit right back into, or will bleed into it, because you would put some tape over the little holes. You would just keep taping and taping. And I still have a lot of my tapes. I have a lot of funky stuff on there.

Rekha: You should digitize it.

Rimarkable: I know I've got to figure out how to do that.

Rekha: It's so easy. I can help you offline. I'm definitely going to help you do that.

Rimarkable: OK.

Rekha: As my small token for your time, I will happily digitize your tapes, its not hard.

Rimarkable: Thank you so much. I would love that, because I need that.

But when I was in college, I decided out of rebellion, I'm not going to go back home this summer.

Rekha: Where did you go to college?

Rimarkable: So I went to college in Ann Arbor.

Rekha: You decided not to go home one summer.

Rimarkable: I decided not to go home one summer. And so I had a friend and my best friend at the time, we decided we were going to get an apartment. And I was like, yeah, because I'm not going home this summer. It was right after sophomore year and I was like, "Well shit, I better get a job." And I'm waiting last minute trying to find a job, trying to find a job and there was this ad in the paper, in my school paper that was like, wanna be a DJ, or looking for DJs, blah blah blah. Hit us up.

Hit them up. They called me in for an interview. I remember I was late because I got lost, and still made it and they were pretty much over me when I walked in because I was so late. But they gave me a little music test, which was like the most obscure random, almost like big band and 70's and 80's, stuff you play at a wedding or whatever. And they were so impressed that I got them all right. Like, who the hell is this girl?

Rekha: Why does she know this stuff?

Rimarkable: How does she know, who is this girl? Right. You know. And they were like ok wait a minute, you know, because nobody gets all of these right. It was a mobile company and I told them like, "Look I don't have any experience. I'm down to learn. You see I have the knowledge. Help me!" And I was not getting paid jack during my training.

Rekha: Free training as they like to call it.

Rimarkable: Free training. Free for them. But I learned how to use equipment, I learned how to troubleshoot. They had turntables, they had techniques, but I also learned from the beginnings of the CDJ.

Rekha: So I can't resist going diving deep. Mobile DJ companies, so it means that they get hired to do events. They bring everything to the situation, and spin.

Rimarkable: So we're talking weddings, bar mitzvahs, proms, grand openings stuff like that.

Rekha: So in DJ land, there are certain types categories and divisions, and mobile DJs are one particular division, as one could say.

Rimarkable: And they're also considered kind of corny.

Rekha: Yeah, absolutely.

Rimarkable: But I was just so enthralled and excited to be a DJ.

Rekha: I personally think it's the best training a DJ can have.

Rimarkable: I think it is also because it has prepared me for so much.

Rekha: Because you have to make it work. You've got to work with a lot of age groups.

Rimarkable: I mean it taught me how to read a crowd. You know what I mean? Honestly it taught me how to read a crowd, how to play for anybody. I know how to play for anyone. I've done it all. I've done christenings to weddings to bar mitzvahs to funerals, like I've done it all, backyard barbecues, grand openings, proms, you name it. I've done this shit, you know.

Rekha: So let's go back, because I just want to know about the gear.

Rimarkable: Yeah so there was two techniques.

Rekha: Do you remember the needles they had? Do you remember the cartridges they had.

Rimarkable: No I don't.

Rekha: Whatever. What was the mixer?

Rimarkable: The mixture was like this four channel Gemini bullshit, you know what I mean.

Rekha: Ugh Gemini, it's the worst.

Rimarkable: It was bullshit, you know.

Rimarkable: And the speakers were unamplified speakers.

Rekha: So you had to have a separate amplifier.

Rimarkable: Had to have a separate amplifier. This was my gear when I would go to a gig. The vinyl was kind of starting to phase out. It was the very beginnings of the vinyl phasing out, and with a mobile company, they just didn't feel it as portable, like a coffin was not as portable as a cube. We called it a cube because it was basically the racks of the, CDJs control at the top and the drawers at the bottom and the mixer.

Rekha: So they were already at this point where they were going to phase out vinyl for portability and ease. Were they burning their own CDs and giving you music.

Rimarkable: No actually, it was a big investment. So at that time was my first introduction to DJ pools. So there was this company, which is kind of big now, well it's kind of tried and true at this point, called Promo Only. So Promo Only, they had a subscription.

Rekha: They had all the cheesy stuff plus all the new stuff.

Rimarkable: They had all the cheesy stuff and some remixes and edited versions. They had different categories. You know, urban, club...

Rekha: We don't have time for that.

Rimarkable: Exactly. So they had actual albums. A client wanted to hear a certain song, they would buy the CD. I collected a lot of music in that way. Oh, I was selling them my setup.

Rekha: So when you went out, did you go by yourself?

Rimarkable: Eventually I did, at first I would shadow another DJ.

Rimarkable: I learned a lot of stuff. I learned how I would do things and how I wouldn't do things. And they also hosted open houses every Tuesday and Thursday. So it was a lot of time investment that I didn't get paid for. And I had to compete with other DJs-

Rekha: Wow.

Rimarkable: -On our staff to be hired by the people coming in to get their wedding person or whatever.

Rekha: So you had to audition each gig almost.

Rimarkable: Yeah I had to audition. But I learned so much about this business, it really prepped me for being a businesswoman as like, "Oh this is a

business. I'm not just getting hired randomly. I can actually have a business at this." So I would audition and I would learn really how to sell myself, how to present myself how to be charming, how to be witty, how to be engaging. And it will be a room with a mock DJ set up, like how we would look at your wedding. We had like a script and we would go in there and I would have a part of the script. And within that I would you know do a little light show or something, turn the fog machine on. It was fun as hell, actually. And I would give my bio, and really present myself and if they wanted to work with me the owner would come in and sit down with them afterwards and they'd be like ok, we want Maria. Well my DJ name back then was Ria G.

Rekha: All right.

Rimarkable: Ria G, oh my god. And the owner will go through the contract with them, they'll put the deposit down or whatever, and I will come back in and finish filling out the paperwork and just making them feel comfortable, and you know really addressing some of their concerns what have you. But when I would go to their gig, I would have two amplify speakers. This is me, a woman at this time, 21 years old. I would have 2 amplified speakers. There were about twelves, probably about twelves.

Rekha: Twelves which refers the size of the bass, the woofer, 12 inches, there's 12, 15, 18.

Rimarkable: Yes.

Rekha: So twelves.

Rimarkable: About twelves. I would have two speakers stands. I would have a tree and truss. I would have maybe three to four boxes of lights. Three to five, depending if they got the super package. Well goddamn, I have like six or seven of those joints. I had a backup. I have the amplifier,

heavy as hell then I had the backup amplifier. A whole box with all my cords and all the jazz in it. And then the cases of the music. And if it was excuse me a school party or something, I would also have a subwoofer.

Rekha: Right because they needed it to bump.

Rimarkable: They needed the bass. And I was carrying and setting up all this stuff by myself.

Rekha: And the company provided the equipment?

Rimarkable: Yeah they provided the equipment, and took a significant chunk out of my money, actually in hindsight, they did. And if I owned my own equipment they probably would have taken half, but I still think it was way too much money.

Rekha: If you feel comfortable, do you want to disclose what you were getting paid at the time.

Rimarkable: I have no problem, I was killing them back in the day, you know.

Rekha: So you what were you paid for a gig?

Rimarkable: For a gig in the 90's. Depending, on what it was, the minimum I would ever make was 250. And if I did a wedding or something, I'd make almost a thousand, if not more.

Rekha: And this was '90...

Rimarkable: '97, '98, '99, 2000.

Rekha: So a thousand dollars for a 21 year old. For a day's work.

Rimarkable: Yeah, in the 90s that was, you know, and don't let me have back-to-back weddings. I was making like 50 grand in the 90's which was a ton of money. That was good money. But I gave up a lot. I gave up a lot of my youth, that was my heyday. I had to be confined to knowing what I was going to do a year from now, and I couldn't really plan. I couldn't go on vacations, I couldn't explore, like all my friends are going to Europe and everything. I'm making all this money, but I'm still here.

Rekha: So how long?

Rimarkable: I did that for five or six years.

Rekha: Five or six years you were a hardcore mobile DJ.

Rimarkable: I probably stopped in 2002, because I was like, I'm done. I can't do this no more.

Rekha: But that's intense work and that's intense training.

Rimarkable: I moved away from Detroit in 2005. I moved to California, and I moved to San Francisco, specifically. But then I started doing like, maybe, instead of 30 gigs a year or, actually I'm being really light on myself. Instead of like 60 gigs a year, I was doing like 15.

Rekha: You started to wean off.

Rimarkable: Yeah definitely. I was still doing it, it was still great money. I just did other things you know.

Rekha: And the CD players. Do you remember which ones they were?

Rimarkable: They were they were the Denon.

Rekha: The Denon, 2000s?

Rimarkable: Yeah. The Denon 2000s, with the two trays. They weren't even the 2000s, because the 2000s were dope and I loved them I wanted them so bad. They were expensive, but they had the isolator on there where you could remove the vocals. Yeah they had the voice reducer. And I was already thinking about remixing. I did some early remixing. Some early looping. I did some early producer stuff. That's where my mind was, and that's kind of where I'm more so now. I'm also a musician, I'm a vocalist and I have other things that I'm into, but DJing is always going to be kind of right there.

Rekha: So then after this mobile DJ career that robs you of some precious youth, which I'm sure you regained manifold, I hope, you moved to L.A.

Rimarkable: No, I moved to San Francisco.

Rekha: San Francisco, sorry, to California. When was your first non-mobile gig. Was there a distinct moment, or were you DJing mobile, and did you start....How did you...?

Rimarkable: Well what happened was my peers, hearing that I'm a DJ, thinking in they're thinking that's dope, but they're thinking of it like a hip-hop mind state. I am like, I actually don't use turntables, you know. And I was kind of like nervous or slightly ashamed to even say that, because I was looked down upon, because I was using the newer technology instead of this organic thing. But techniques were the latest technology at one point. You know people tend to forget that. But I would still be hired to do certain little club gigs, or honestly I don't remember my first.

Rekha: You don't remember.

Rimarkable: I don't. It was so long ago, but I know I did a lot of stuff on the side. People would hire me, my hip-hop friends that were MCs would hire me for stuff. But hip-hop was not my first love, my first love in the

dance world is disco and house music. I actually separated around the Yo! MTV raps generation. Right before that I kind of dipped out of the hip-hop theme, because I fell in love with George Michael and-

Rekha: Who didn't!

Rimarkable: and Pet Shop Boys and Prince. I was just having a love affair with Prince for my whole life.

Rekha: Same.

Rimarkable: I was obsessed with all these other types of music. And I just kind of dipped out.

Rekha: Did you notice a thread with all this?

Rimarkable: Right. Exactly. But I was into New Wave and Prince and soul, UK soul, and stuff like that. So I missed a lot of the hip-hop culture, so I felt disconnected when I would get asked to do these gigs. But I was also a club kid, so I was always collecting house music. I was always in the clubs. I wasn't quite out of the closet, I guess I wasn't. I was still dealing with my sexuality. But one thing I was still a part of that culture, I was still drawn to it.

Rekha: So what kind of clubs did you go to?

Rimarkable: I was going to gay clubs where they were playing house music.

Rekha: Ok.

Rimarkable: Also, going to the underground clubs in Detroit.

Rekha: What is that like? What is an underground club? How would you define it?

Rimarkable: Underground clubs like a loft. First time I saw Moody Man was at a loft. First time I saw Theo Parrish was at the same loft. You know what I mean. And they were the young whippersnappers, in the sense, you know, wet behind the ears doing this stuff.

Rekha: And what did these spaces feel like?

Rimarkable: These spaces feel like a very special invitation. Like it's a happening. It's something that is happening, and there's a certain vibration and certain understanding and particularly in Detroit there was a certain kind of darkness and a sense of evil, but in a sense of warmth and a sense of otherworldliness, that was so intoxicating, very enticing to me. Something that comes up with the music, it's very soulful. It's very organic and loving in that sense. Then I started going out to the gay clubs. There's a very different experience between the white gay clubs and the Black gay clubs. I will say that.

Rekha: Please unpack.

Rimarkable: And that is the music, primarily. But one common thread that they have is house music. Some of it in the white club is soulful, some of it is more electronic and base-y and trance-y, I guess you could say.

Rekha: Is it different to hear the same song in a white club as it is in a Black club.

Rimarkable: Yeah because there's different responses. I think the ultimate response is joy. And I think that what was most important, and that may be the common thread that keeps the gays in one community, because they have this rebellion, they all have this liberation. They all have this this freedom of expression commonality. However, you can be gay all day but if you're a person of color, that soul is not removed from you. And not to say that is removed from the white clubs. In my personal opinion,

the soul is absent. You know or it's just not the same soul, kind of soul. And so in the black gay club, I was partying with men and women. There was no separation. And that's something that really made me feel good. It made me feel safe. And you know that's a whole bunch of stuff too. That's a whole other thesis.

Rekha: That's another thesis.

Rimarkable: Yeah.

Rekha: Well in some ways it is the thesis.

Rimarkable: That is true.

Rekha: Before I go there, if we could just for the next round, just keep going with your trajectory. Where you were, and where you lived, and just sort of the D.J milestones, and then I think I'll get into a couple other questions around more your artistic practice. So then, you went to San Francisco.

Rimarkable: So also at the time, I was also a vocalist. I was the lead singer of a James Brown cover band.

Rekha: I want to hear that.

Rimarkable: It was a huge thing. You know I didn't do the whole imitation with the cape and all that. I did my own interpretation, I would say. And that band fell apart. I wasn't DJing as much. Also as a drummer in a punk band, I had a bunch of music stuff going on and I realized I had reached the ceiling in Detroit. Because this is also pre-internet, so you could only do so much. And I needed to live my life as an artist. But it also needs to be paid for. I need to be able to sustain myself. So I had an opening to move to San Francisco, never been there in my life. I just packed up my shit and I went across country and moved to San

Francisco. I flew. I put my stuff in storage with a company that holds it until you're ready and then they'll bring it to you.

Rekha: So you can be tentative. But then you can the trigger right. You can say, all right, I need it.

Rimarkable: Exactly, exactly, which was really good for me. But what ended up happening, sidebar, but it's kind of related to this, is I put all my stuff in storage. And I came home. When I say I came home, I came back to Detroit for like a few weeks or something. And I got a letter because my friend took over my old apartment. I got a letter that all my stuff burned in a fire. And that was like all my music that I had been collecting my entire life up to that point.

Rekha: Oh my god, I felt like I just got punched in the stomach.

Rimarkable: Yes so I immediately had to let it go. So I had to. It was a metaphor for me to let go of everything in the past and to just recreate myself. So when I went to San Francisco, struggling to figure that out, it was basically like my living expenses had doubled because of the-

Rekha: San Francisco!

Rimarkable: Yeah it was ridiculous, you know. That was 2005 and apartments the were still like 2000 dollars for a one bedroom. It's really crazy. But I had an opportunity to move across the Bay to Oakland where I joined this collective that had this warehouse, where the rent was only 250, but part of your rent was you had to do something with the space. They accepted me in the collective. By the time I moved in, was ready to move in, the collective had fallen apart and I was the only one. There was one other person and me, and so I turned that space into an art gallery and into a music venue.

Rekha: Wow. Amazing.

Rimarkable: And my friend at the time, my lover's friend, best friend at the time was granted like a huge grant, and he brought all this music equipment, including DJ equipment and he stored it in my warehouse. And he also gave me access to it. So I was throwing parties, and I was also teaching young people how to DJ in the neighborhood.

Rekha: So is this the first time you were throwing the parties?

Rimarkable: Yes.

Rekha: Okay.

Rimarkable: It was. I mean, I would throw house parties in Detroit, but it was the first time that I was actually organized as an event producer, as a gallerist, as a director of a program.

Rekha: And you just did it.

Rimarkable: And I studied that in school also.

Rekha: You studied art in school?

Rimarkable: I studied arts management in school. And so it was a natural progression. But it was my first experience, so I had to really teach myself. I had to do some flash flood courses on how to run a gallery, how to charge artists, what's the point of sale, what's this, what's that. I had to work with other collectives, and I was actually one of the beginning members of what is now huge in Oakland, called The Art Murmur. Oakland Art Murmur, which is a First Fridays thing. But my gallery was a part of that.

Rekha: What was the name of your gallery.

Rimarkable: The Ghost Town Art and Music Space and that area of town was the called Ghost Town. But there was another group of young white kids that co-opted my name. I was going by the Ghost Town gallery and then they coopted that name. It was this huge battle and I just submitted and just changed it to the Ghost Town Art and Music Space.

Rekha: And how long did that run for?

Rimarkable: It ran for almost two years. And so from there, I left that because it was just a lot of drama that happened, I'll fast forward through that. Oakland has a growing, or was growing, house music scene, and that was always the truest thing near and dear to my heart. And I also noticed that the places that Black and Brown queer folks were congregating to hear house music where in straight spaces. And that was something that I wasn't used to not having access to. Or having access to without an alternative, you know. And there was a lot of harassment, a lot of weird stuff happening, so I was like I'm going to throw a queer house music event. It was it was pretty successful. So many politics out there, it was really draining. Eventually I left Oakland, and I moved back to Detroit and threw some events out there, and then I moved to New York.

Rekha: When did you move to New York?

Rimarkable: 2008. And I was very blessed to join up with folks that were already established and had a name for themselves. Ubiquita welcomed me in.

Rekha: You were part of Ubiquita.

Rimarkable: I'm part of Ubiquita, Ubiquita brought me in. It really catapulted me into a limelight that I will probably have to, teeth and nail, work my ass off to get into. It just put me forth into a space where I was seen. I was also living with people who were pretty well-known in the entertainment, you know social scene, in New York. And so I was very blessed to have

some good connections. I'm grateful for my time in Oakland because it really helped me, come to me.

Rekha: So from Oakland, you came here.

Rimarkable: I went to back to Detroit for about a year, or six to eight months

Rekha: And then you linked to the right people. So explain Ubiquita. Because that was off the chain.

Rimarkable: Yeah. So it was before my time, though. Actually Ubiquita was wrapping up what it was known as when I first moved here.

Rekha: Save the Robots, then?

Rimarkable: Right after that. OK. When they moved to Deity. You remember? When they moved to Brooklyn, to Deity.

Rekha: So just some background. Ubiquita was this amazing party. It was in the city for a while, Lower East Side. It was on two floors. Place called Save the Robot, which is famous for many things, probably not for this kind of music and it's all women DJs.

Rimarkable: Yeah, it was a collective that had all women DJs, and actually, in my opinion kind of started off the beautiful, talented, female DJ platform. Especially as a collective, I definitely give them credit for beginning that. It had a legacy, it had legs, you know.

Rekha: Who is in the collective?

Rimarkable: So we have DJ Reborn, DJ Selly and Mony. And then shErOck came, and then I came afterwards. So Ubiquita ended their party, but the collective remained. And so with Ubiquita, shErOck and I started our own party called the Go In, which did very well for.

Rekha: And where was that?

Rimarkable: It started off at Sweet Revenge, which was in Bedstuy which was a really dope venue, slash bar. It was really kind of known for being kind of tropical. It had a backyard and it had sand and it was really dope. Then we moved to the Emerson and then we just kind of dissolved after that. I just continued to throw events.

Rekha: Emerson is like Fort Greene, Clinton Hill.

Rimarkable: Yeah, exactly. And it wasn't as accessible. And sometimes when you move venues, it just kind of destroys the whole vibe. Don't move venues.

Rekha: I know it. I mean 15 years at SOB's, went down the street, lost everyone. Went back. They all showed up again.

Rimarkable: That's crazy. You had a reunion thing, recently, right?

Rekha: I was 15 years at SOB's. I was feeling some kind of way. SOB's is, you know, loaded, the owner, whatever. I also had some darkness within my crew. And I think part of the move was wanting to cleanse that. And then you know got talked into, for no good reason, oh it's just down the street. In some ways all LPR they do things proper and a certain kind of way. But it's a much whiter space. And so I felt like my people just didn't feel comfortable there. Whereas SOB's, there's something very down home about it. And from my production point of view LPR was great. They have sandbags on the D.J table. They have multiples of things. At SOB's like they won't ever, they won't even own a—they do so many hip-hop shows—they don't own a cordless mic system. It's night and day, and yeah, for five years we were struggling, we kept the party going in name. But I went from 500 people to sometimes 60 people.

Rimarkable: Wow.

Rekha: From the big room to the small room. And then as we were nearing 20 years, one of my main, like my best friend, someone who worked with me for many years, she's like, and who maintained her relationship with us, who I also got into legal battles with because they tried to mimic the party, all kinds of drama. We had to hug it out. And she's like, "You to just go back there." So we did the last round of months and then we did a finale and then we did Summer Stage, which was the ultimate finale.

Rimarkable: Yeah that was huge.

Rekha: Yeah. That was great.

Rimarkable: You learned your lessons.

Rekha: Well, you know, it's interesting because I learned the lesson about space and you organically fell into being a mobile DJ, which I think is actually like, I wish more DJs would do that, to you know forcibly curating a space, to being part of an established network or established idea or a party. What do you think of when you think about space? How do you decide, like I went to your party this weekend, Joy. Which is such a great name for a party. I'm obsessed with party names, I keep coming up with new parties myself. What goes into the space? What does it mean to you? And what do you do to create the space? Just talk to me about that a little bit.

Rimarkable: I'll speak specifically about Joy, which is an event I partner with Bklyn Boihood to present. After the Go In, which attracted a lot of queer community, I became frustrated with being typecast, I guess you could say. So I separated myself.

Rekha: How were you typecast?

Rimarkable: Like events wouldn't hire me unless it had a queer context around it. And it's like who I have sex with has nothing to do with how I play.

Rekha: That's a soundbite right there.

Rimarkable: You know I mean, it was very frustrating. And also I wouldn't be as successful as I know I could be if I didn't separate myself from being pigeonholed. So I'd separate myself, which was my party, Everybody Random, came into.

Rekha: Oh yeah. So that was a great party.

Rimarkable: It was great. I'm grateful for it.

Rekha: It was at Bed and Vyne?

Rimarkable: No, Bed Vyne Brew.

Rekha: I think I was at the first couple ones, beginning, when it started.

Rimarkable: Yeah it was special. And I ended that party. I ended it at that venue to take some space because I was becoming, you know, people will put you in boxes, and I do my best to separate.

Anyway. The Orlando shootings happened. And it happened around around Pride season. During Pride month. I reached out to Ryan. I was at the Allied Media Conference with Ryan who is the founder of Bklyn Boihood, and we've been dear friends for years. And I was like, "Yo we need to throw a party for our people for Pride. We just got to heal, we need some love, we got to hug it out. We need to be around each other, you know." And I was like, quite frankly everybody doesn't go to the city. Everybody doesn't want to go to the city for Pride. And so we need to throw one. I was like, "I want to do this party and I want to call

it Joy." And it's going to be a cute day party, a little tea party because people are missing that, and this younger generation doesn't know about tea parties.

Rekha: A very, very strong tradition in the queer community, especially Pride. So that's interesting. So in terms of the demographic, you said it before where you had your space in Oakland, and then the younger people here and I know-

Rimarkable: Oh yes so we're talking about space. And my ideas around space. So I wanted to create a safe space for queer and trans people of color to come together, for us to be around each other. We feel safe. We're not subconsciously antagonized by the threat of whiteness. Sometimes it is very threatening especially when you're already triggered or you're already feeling hurt or you're already feeling pain. And I wanted to create a place where people felt safe to be themselves and to celebrate our own traditions. We're playing Spades and we're doing the Electric Slide, playing our music, you know!

Rekha: It definitely had a welcoming vibe, it was not pretentious. I mean, you know queer spaces-.

Rimarkable: It's not a scene.

Rekha: Queer spaces can be so scene-y.

Rimarkable: It can be so scene-y and that's the other thing. Out of the popularity for a lot of alluring events of color, who I'm not going to put on blast, but by trying to do something cool, they've created spaces of scenery, where people feel alienated. And when you have that separatism and you have alienation, that becomes elitist, it becomes classist. You know, the separatism.

Rekha: So what is it about the physicality of this. How did you find this space?

Rimarkable: Well originally the space was at Bed Vyne Cocktail, which is a sister bar of Bed Vyne. And I liked it because it was great for a day party, it had an outdoor space. We brought in a caterer, and so we had good barbecue. I actually had a very good person that did the food, it was like gourmet barbecue, soul food. The bar was beautiful, and the people came and I think that particular one was free. And it was overwhelming. We didn't know how successful it would become. That let us know that it was needed. And the owners even were like, "Yo, can you keep doing this." And so we were like, "We need to do this. We to do it." And so we kept doing it, and we kept figuring out ways to make it better and better and better, and that meant better food, that meant, well we're outgrowing this space. People feel claustrophobic. Is it accessible to Elders? Because this is also a multigenerational event. And we have a section that is just for the OGs, we call them, everyone. Basically you're 35 and up.

Rekha: That would be my section right.

Rimarkable: Right, the OG's can sit here. The OG's have earned their place to sit down. Everybody else got to stand up and dance, you know. It's also 420 friendly. Always. We're also trying to only work with people of color, or at least queer folks. So we all grew Cocktail in two seconds. It was uncomfortable and it didn't feel safe. It didn't physically feel safe. So that's also very important to me. There needs to be exits, there needs accessibility to people that are disabled. There needs to be accessibility to the damn bathroom. Yeah. And if some shit goes down, someone needs to be able to run out, there needs exits, you know. So all that stuff is very important to me. No pretentiousness. We actually just had an incident with someone, who unbeknownst to me, behind the scenes, was connected to some drama where they harm someone, also in our community and it was their birthday and I was going to promote them like, "Hey our special love is like having a birthday." And we made a special flyer for them, and I got word from my business partners like,

we actually can't promote this person because they've harmed a couple of people in our community. They're still welcome to be there, but they've harmed people, and we can't publicly put our name behind. And I had to adhere to that, because that is very important. That's about the safety of others.

Rekha: Sure.

Rimarkable: So those are the kinds of things I consider.

Rekha: So what is the space called now?

Rimarkable: The space now is called Cafe Erzulie, which we've outgrown. Like you came during a very busy, busy-

Rekha: In my experience of clubs, you know when the bus is about to arrive, that imaginary bus where you look down at your tables, and then you look up, and then all of a sudden there's all these people. I was there right before the bus arrived.

Rimarkable: Yeah. Yeah. Absolutely.

Rekha: Spidey sense, you know, from throwing parties you know what's up. So you've outgrown that space.

Rimarkable: Outgrown that space because even with the busy weekend, we were still busy, you know. We need to find a bigger space.

Rekha: My god, I have so many other questions now. Who are your business partners? Who is this in conjunction with?

Rimarkable: My only business partner in this particular space or this particular event is Bklyn Boihood.

Rekha: Ok so Bklyn Boihood, and they throw other parties, of course.

Rimarkable: They throw other events. They have programming there. They really advocate for the-

Rekha: And they've done programming at Brooklyn Museum, all kinds of places.

Rimarkable: Yeah, we just did something big at Brooklyn Museum. Joy. Joy was there, and it was amazing.

Rekha: So now in terms of the space, you've outgrown the space. First question is how do you control the audience? The audience there was intergenerational. Lots of different range of different kinds of queer folks, but very POC. Bklyn Boihood has a built-in audience. You also have your own following. How do you control who is there, and how does...What if a bunch of white queers start showing up? How does that work?

Rimarkable: We have not had that I think because both of us have, you know, I have my platform, I definitely have my white audience. There are a few white allies that come. But I think because there's such a strong presence that is known, they just haven't shown up. But when we arrive, like the business is still open to a certain time, and we've had to ask people to leave. Like, these are the people that are coming. This is a private gathering. It's not, no you're welcome to stay. It's like, you got to go.

Rekha: And the owners are okay with that?

Rimarkable: They're fine. We've made that very clear from the beginning, like, no, no, no. It needs to be a safe space.

Rekha: If Output Roof in Williamsburg said, "Oh my God, you have so many people. We have this dope outdoors. Would you do it there."

Rimarkable: I've seen it become a successful thing with other events to have a POC following. And I think if we could come to terms with the way that they market it, it's a possibility.

Rekha: You would entertain it.

Rimarkable: But I also know that we're very adamant as a collective, like Joy being the collective, or the business. We have very strong policies, and we don't care how big your shit is. We had a battle with Brooklyn Museum about certain things.

Rekha: What were the battles?

Rimarkable: About visibility, about the way that they were being marketed. For instance they kept saying, like Bklyn Boihood presents Joy. And we were like ok, no. Joy is not Bklyn Boihood. Joy is Bklyn Boihood and Rimarkable. That's very important. And that's very important because people need to see what we're doing. The power behind what we're doing. And how we name is very important. But they kept making that mistake, and it was a mess for a second.

Rekha: I had a nickel.

Rimarkable: You know I mean. And it was a queer person of color that kept making the mistake and it was just like, yo! We had to clown on them on the mic a little bit, kind of like, let's be very clear about certain things, like don't take our power away from us.

Rekha: No absolutely.

Rimarkable: And don't try to market or piggyback, with your marketing off the strength of the name. You think it's larger, you know what I mean.

Brooklyn Boihood does have a larger name in the queer community, than I do.

Rekha: But also, once you say Bklyn Boihood, B-O-I hood, it's a very specific idea and has very specific connotations.

Rimarkable: Exactly.

Rekha: So then it's like, is it really honoring what Joy is about. Is it honoring the depth of the context? I mean my favorite gig. People are like, what's your favorite gig? The Brooklyn Museum, hands down. Hasidic people, Caribbean people, bougie white people, mixed race people. You just get everybody.

Rimarkable: Yeah absolutely. It was phenomenal.

Rekha: First Saturdays are amazing. I've done the rotunda, I've done the outside, I've done it a few times. It's quite phenomenal, so to get that right is very important.

Rimarkable: I'm like, if you don't correct this, the world is going to have a different idea about what our event is. We can't risk your, the strength of your platform. Having the strength of your platform and speaking to the rest of the world, with, we can't risk our context. We can't risk our platform going with yours, and you having it wrong. Basically.

Rekha: So, this is a sticky place in the sense of, you know, it's the Brooklyn Museum or whatever that means. It's a good gig, it's a lot of visibility of thousands of people, and you're sticking your ground. And you have to make this negotiation. And there's always a risk when you make a negotiation.

Rimarkable: Absolutely.

Rekha: The question of, like, are they going to bring you back.

Rimarkable: We're not fighting for no reason. That's that's our narrative, we're not fighting for no reason. We show up, and our people are going to show up, and we're going to smash. I obliterated Brooklyn Museum. I know I did. I'm very proud of that. I tore them a new asshole, like, I feel that way. You know like we went off in there and it was packed and it was a sea of brown and black queer folks. And it was dope. Amongst all these bougies and the Hasids and this and that.

Rekha: The mix that is Brooklyn.

Rimarkable: Yeah, you know, it gave us a platform and it gave us access to something we may not have had access to. But the exchange was like, we made y'all look good. Make us look good. You know what I mean? That was just the argument. And that's our approach with that everything that we do.

Rekha: Does that get tiring? Is it a battle or is it just part of the work?

Rimarkable: It's just part of the work. I'm definitely exhausted that it has to be so much work but I'm willing to do it because it's so important. I mean, Joy was started as a political, you know not for nothing, like as a form of community service, but as a political narrative. This has happened to us. We're not going to crumble, we have each other. Let's join up.

Rekha: So we've spoken a lot about black and white. Where do other folks of color, do work in the space, or does that show up for you in any way?

Rimarkable: In terms of my event, Joy?

Rekha: Just like in different spaces? Like what if at Joy you had a wave of other folks that were not necessarily Caucasian. But I'm also curious about-

Rimarkable: Brown. Brown folks?

Rekha: Yeah.

Rimarkable: There's plenty of brown folks that come to Joy and they're nurtured, they're loved as well. They're held, there's a space for them. I think that I just speak more, predominantly about blackness. Black queerness. Because a lot of times it does get categorized, white queerness or Black queerness. And I'm grateful to my sweethearts Papi Juice. Who have made space for Brown queerness or just queerness of color. And I think that they're doing an amazing job with that. And I love how they work, and I've worked with them. And I think that just by default Joy has become more predominantly Black, but it is known that-

Rekha: I'm just talking at large..

Rimarkable: Of course, of course. You know, people ask that sometimes.

Rekha: Yeah I'm just curious. We've set up these binaries, but at the same time there's so many multiples that exist in spaces and I'm just curious about those multiples and those overlaps.

Rimarkable: You know our platform is we provide this space for queer and trans people of color. Hands down, it's not for white folks.

Rekha: What else are you doing at this moment? You do Joy, and you do other gigs. What other projects are you working on currently?

Rimarkable: Something else that took a lot of my summer was the release of my music. I'm an artist on a Dirt Tech Rech record label which is spearheaded and ran by Waajeed who is a well-known electronic music producer. And I say electronic music because his beginnings were in hip-hop. He was working very deeply with J Dilla, and he's actually the one that came up with the name Slum Village.

Rekha: Oh wow.

Rimarkable: And yeah they were brothers, partners in crime. And he also produced and founded Platinum Pied Pipers, and he's well known for his own work as Waajeed.

Rekha: And that's your first commercial release?

Rimarkable: It's not, actually. I did some other stuff with some other people, but they stole my money basically. And I don't promote it. But it wasn't my first. But it felt like it was the most official. You know there was a whole marketing thing and there was backing and support and he's phenomenal and we work very well together. So I'm working on finishing up an album. Or what may be an E.P. You never know. And dropping some stuff on some of his platforms as a vocalist, and hopefully touring very soon.

Rekha: Cool. So I'm going to just ask you a couple of nitty gritty questions. What else are you working on, my question is more about what's your daily, monthly art practice? Working on this vocal is one project. I want to go into like the day-to-day. It doesn't have to be project with a capital P, like, this is out, we need to promote this. I'm just talking about the day-to-day. I mean, just looking at your IG, you have so many different kinds of gigs, they're so interesting to me, and I'm sort of trying to get into the mindset of what it is to DJ professionally on a daily basis. What does that mean. How do they come about? And then we'll get into like your technique and your art practice. But just like, even if you have to look over the last two weeks or three weeks, or whatever time frame you want to think about.

Rimarkable: Well interestingly enough, I just did this gig this past weekend at Yale. Which was super dope. It was a big concert with the DJ. I was the DJ. It was the first time they've ever done a welcome party like that for their

new students, or for the campus in general. The shit was dope. They had like gourmet food for these kids, for free. They had a bar for the 21 and olders.

Rekha: That's slave money, that's just slave money.

Rimarkable: No, it absolutely is, you know. And they had Juan de Marcos who is the founder of Buena Vista Social Club, his band. And they had Baba Israel who was a beatbox champion, I believe, and a community activist. He's a cool cat, and he did a performance with Grace, and there was another like big band kind of thing. It was dope.

Rekha: How many people, like thousands?

Rimarkable: I would say a good two thousand people were there.

Rekha: And you spun. And so you were doing the dance portion after the live stuff.

Rimarkable: Yeah I played to warm up the place, and I played to close it out.

Rekha: How long was your set?

Rimarkable: I played probably altogether two hours, which I thought was pretty good, considering all that stuff was going.

Rekha: Before, during then and then, after.

Rimarkable: But during, was like five minutes before, it was like 15, 20. I didn't really even play between acts they kind of blended together, except for one of them, but whatever.

Anyway what I enjoyed about the event was that I got to see some of the ways that this really Ivy League place that has all this Ivy League

context behind it. How they were just getting a resurgence, or an eye-opening or a wokeness about them. You know I met several deans of color from several departments, and a lot of cool and hip people and I got to see a lot of kids of color. A lot of students of color.

Rekha: What did you play?

Rimarkable: Ok here's the kicker and I'm like, "Whoa, what a hodgepodge of entertainment this evening. What am I going to play?" And because I know how to read a crowd, and because I have this overstanding of production, I knew, I was like, "Now these kids, they've been drinking, they've been eating. Even if they didn't go to this bar, they snuck bottles and some kind of shit popping off. There are new in college, whatever. They want to party and just be reckless, you know. So I gave them the full Top 40, and I gave them all that, I gave them that shit, you know. I threw a little bit of this in there and I put a little bit out, and I let them explore. But I primarily gave them the night of their life. You know what I mean?

Rekha: Right.

Rimarkable: You know one of those like bridge and tunnel bar joints, you know what I mean.

Rekha: Because you could do that.

Rimarkable: Because I could do that, and I do do that, and I do that regularly. That's a lot of the money that pays for my rent sometimes.

Rekha: So unpack it more. So you know you got this Yale gig, which is great. You do Joy on Sundays, and then your bread and butter is...?

Rimarkable: My bread and butter is honestly corporate gigs, like Yale, like these big corporations or these big nonprofits or these weddings or these big venues. You know the ones that pay me big checks.

Rekha: And what's your structure.

Rimarkable: And I don't always advertise those.

Rekha: Yeah, yeah, no, of course! Because part of it is to not advertise, right? Because you're like-

Rimarkable: I'm too cool for school. I can't put, "Come find me at come find me at Dropbox tonight." No I can't do that. No, but I'm going to cash Dropbox's check. But that's my bread and butter.

Rekha: So what's your structure like. Do you take the bookings or is there somebody intermediary?

Rimarkable: Ok, so I do everything myself you know. And I'm circling back to the beginnings. I'm grateful that I learned how to do this as a business. So that has stuck. That's an advantage I have over a lot of other DJs that are trying to do this as a career. I don't need a manager. I need one, because I'm exhausted trying to do everything myself. But I don't need a manager that is going to do the talking for me. I do everything myself. I'm very prompt. I get a lot of respect. I've earned my respect, and which is why I repeat clients and why they tell their friends about me, because I'm very good to work with. I'm very adamant about being anti-cliche you know. Yeah. Like, "Whew, oh god, thank you for sending your stuff, I don't know. You're like the first DJ that's ever done that, blah blah blah blah blah, to send your stuff in so timely." Like I hear those kind of things all the time, and I'm like, "Yo, because this is my business!"

Rekha: Stuff like bio and headshots.

Rimarkable: Yeah, like my package, or whatever. Or my W9 or damn invoice.

Rekha: I'm just going to wear it on my forehead because I feel like I get five e-mails a day asking me for my W9.

Rimarkable: You know, that's what I'm saying, it's insane.

Rekha: Do you think that not having your manager, which is, one function of a manager is to take the call, negotiate the money, and make sure the paperwork's right. Do you think that affects, influences the business end? Do you think if there's someone else...?

Rimarkable: Absolutely. You know in terms of like the reach that I'm really aiming for. Like I want to play in Europe. I want to make 5000 euros a gig. I want to play in these big ass venues with the people jumping up and down and acting crazy, because that's just more access to a global reach, which is my ultimate, ultimate goal. It does look better if I have a booking agent, if I have a manager, it looks better.

Rekha: Yeah, but did they take a cut too.

Rimarkable: Yeah. But they take a cut, and also you don't know what these people are saying to them on the phone. I've had heard horror stories. And I'm like, I need to have control over what is going on. So I'd rather get an assistant than get a manager.

Rekha: 100 percent agree with you. I've been through it all.

Rimarkable: Yeah, I'm not dealing with that stuff. It would help to have a booking agent, which I'm shopping for now, but it tends to be where they have to shop for you.

Rekha: You're running your whole operation. You're pretty booked, you get enough corporate stuff hopefully to sustain yourself-

Rimarkable: Yeah, to sustain me and I'm making money. And also feel like I'm in a place where I have to demand more money from people that book me locally. I say no to a lot of stuff. Don't come at me with seventy-five dollars an hour gigs. Somebody asked me that the other day, I was like, "I'm sorry baby. This is not for me. Let me know if I can connect you with some people that might be."

Rekha: I have a weird backlash. I think the challenge of being boxed is real. I'm going to say men don't get boxed in the same way.

Rimarkable: You know, we didn't really talk about that. I want to pedal backwards just a little bit.

Rekha: Let's talk about it now.

Rimarkable: Yeah I want pedal back because I'm meant to talk about this when I was first starting off as a DJ. There were definitely not many women DJs. It was very few and far between. There was definitely not a lot of women DJs of color. So I would show up at these very corporate, very white, very masculine or hetero normative spaces, and they would look at me and be like, "What are you about to play? Are you going to play anything good tonight? Do you need help with that?"

Rekha: Of course.

Rimarkable: "Do you know how to work that?"

Rekha: "When's your boyfriend coming? When's the DJ coming?"

Rimarkable: Yeah. Are you the DJ, or is there another...? Are you just by yourself tonight?" I would get that. I had to really brush that off, and I had to rise above that. For some reason it never hurt me. Except when I could feel

a tinge of racism in it, you know. But it was always like, "I'll show you," you know.

Rekha: And you did.

Rimarkable: I have always been a good ass DJ. I know I have.

Rekha: So what's your method? Let's not talk about method. What do you consider your art practice, when it comes to DJing? What is it that you do?

Rimarkable: I would consider it alchemy, you know, and I teach. I have a class that I teach that has a very particular curriculum, and I call my class the alchemy of DJing. I call it alchemy because I'm taking a room full of people that may or may not know each other, but have all kinds of different backgrounds, even if it's a cohesive thing like we're all black in this room. Everybody is not the same. Everyone has a different experience. Some people are shy. Some people are extroverted, some people, whatever. And I'm using music to transform this room. I don't know what your day consisted of. I don't know what you brought in to this event. Everybody is bringing in something different. And my job is to create a transformation.

Rekha: Let's go deep and let's get nitty gritty. The reason why I'm asking you, and I keep going nitty gritty, is because part of my aim for this project is to review the existing literature and recording or history of DJ practice and to see what's missing in there, and to have a critique of it, because I feel that it defines things in a limited way, in a very particular point of view. And I think there's so much more, as a DJ myself, I can agree with every single thing you say almost. The space, the journey, people's backgrounds. Like my audiences, they may be all South Asian. I don't know where they grew up. I don't know how much money they have. I don't know what they know. I can't even make assumptions on a baseline of what music they grew up with. Maybe they lived in

South Queens and they never heard anything but X, or they grew up in France. So it's finding the commonality. I think my interest in doing this is to sort of write a different narrative, or to add to the narrative, how much intention goes into the work.

Rimarkable: Right. Ok, I got you. How do I prepare for that, how do I... ?

Rekha: How do you prepare. Well you said that you started programming the mixtapes for the sounds and making sure they lined up. It was almost unconscious how you were doing that. And like reading the crowd is really important. So a lot of times people say DJing is scratching. So I say scratching interrupts the flow, and when people dance, they don't like the scratch. So I'm just saying, get nitty gritty.

Rimarkable: How do I make all these people come together? I pay attention to people outside of these spaces. I do a lot of reading. I keep up on my news as much as possible.

Rekha: What does news have to do with DJing.

Rimarkable: News is like the way that people may be affected in the world. Like right now this is going on in the world. People subconsciously or consciously may be feeling this. Now have an insight on how they may be feeling. So I may play a song, or a few songs, that is touching specifically on that theme, or I'll prepare myself for that.

Rekha: So what are you using, you're using Serato?

Rimarkable: I'm using Serato a lot of terms. Also use CDJ 2000s, with a flash drive, which I really enjoy, but I'm finding that—I actually love that—but I'm finding that I enjoy that only when I'm doing genre-specific events. Because I tried to do it at an event, and I was like, I'm gonna lose my mind. I don't know how to find my song, I don't know how to do shit.

Rekha: I lose things too fast and the thought of me constantly losing flash drives is keeping me away. I'm a holdout. I'm going to get there, because at some point everyone is going to use flash drives.

Rimarkable: But once you're in it is really dope. But I'm also like, it's making certain people lazy. Like the DJ from the other night, she was after me and... Yeah, I work with my own sound team as well you do. Yeah.

Rekha: So tell me about that. Who is your sound team?

Rimarkable: I have a friend whose name is Greg C.

Rekha: Was he a booking for one of the venues?

Rimarkable: No, no, no, no. He's an old school house head, that's like a tech nerd.

Rekha: That's the guy you want for your sound.

Rimarkable: He is a nerd like me. He has giant cabinets all the way to like a small portable.

Rekha: So he's your person.

Rimarkable: He's my guy, you know what I mean. But I have worked with other people in terms of like, I rather y'all just go get the equipment than me have Greg just like drudge all his shit.

Rekha: Right, or you have your rider, like, I need it like this.

Rimarkable: Yeah, absolutely. I have tech rider, here is my stuff, go get it, whatever they use, they use. I haven't really had any trouble, thank god.

Rekha: I like Soundhouse, right now.

Rimarkable: Ok. I'll remember them.

Rekha: Prices are standard. I've been with them for a while, so I get the little in-house discount. They pick up, drop off. Everything is a charge.

But I want your daily practice, like get technical.

Rimarkable: Like I wake up in the morning, I eat, type of thing.

Rekha: Like what do you do to prepare for a gig? Do you have a system?

Rimarkable: So I make crates from myself. Serato is great for that. So I make crates in my iTunes and they transfers to Serato. So I know I definitely want to play this song. I definitely want to bring this energy to this gig. Here are some things that I may play. I have started doing programming, but I'm 21 years in the game. I can't get caught up in that shit because shit changes. Like old girl was kind of like, it's not in the same order. I've started programming because sometimes it'll keep me kind off focused. But I always deviate. But that's something that's a new practice for me.

Rekha: Have a plan but do not be afraid to go off plan.

Rekha: Well you know it's so funny, the other day I saw a tweet from one of the guys that used to DJ with Freedom, I can't remember which one. He's like, "Every once in a while, delete all your crates and start fresh." Now the thought of that for most DJs is horrifying.

Rimarkable: It's horrifying. But I'm into that as well.

Rekha: I went to Serato, went to OP, and he's like—and my shit's a hot mess. He's like, "You need to get rid of music." He's like, "No, you have to start getting rid of it. There's things you're never gonna play."

Rimarkable: I need to sit and do that as well.

Rekha: I do a lot of Bollywood. There's so much fucking Bollywood music. I panic buy.

Rimarkable: Oh I need some actually up some actually.

Rekha: I will hook you up. I'll be happy to do that.

I panic. I always feel like I'm not on to the latest, I don't watch the movies because they're fucking boring as shit. So I panic buy a bunch of stuff, and sometimes the songs never pop and nobody really cares. And I have a lot of that stuff, that just doesn't matter. That needs to go.

Rimarkable: Thank you for reminding me, I need to spend some time sitting with my hard drive and getting rid of a lot of shit. Like I've never played that and I never will because it's loading down my hard drive. And I can put them on a separate hard drive if I'm so afraid of losing them.

Rekha: You don't have to like give it up, but it just doesn't have to be in your regular crates.

Rimarkable: I need to take it out. It's distracting.

Rekha: I think as I get older I feel it. "Did I play that? Oooh."

So what happened with Ayesha, with Ayes Cold?

Rimarkable: She was projecting a lot of her nervousness on me. Let me just tell you, the girl who played before me, she was killing it. She had the energy like a freaking closing set energy, but I'm not mad though because when I did Boiler Room, I'm like, this is a Boiler Room. I'm giving it all I got and I had opening set-

Rekha: Your Boiler Room is set so fire. I've seen it so many times, and I'm so mad that we couldn't do basic Bhangra boiler room. I was like, "Yo this party is iconic, it's ending. Can we do it?" They just didn't have their shit together like accommodate it. I'm just like, "Ugh!"

Rimarkable: Anyway so I wasn't mad.

Rekha: But that's immaturity. The opening set is-

Rimarkable: Absolutely, it's super immature. Boiler Room is a very different thing than a regular-ass party we were at. But my point in mentioning that was that when I went to transition, I was using the NSX 9000 mixer which has Serato in it. And I was transitioning, had my flash drive which had the my Serato wave, or whatever. I'm getting ready. She had our controller on top of the mixers, or whatever, the setup. I was like moving her stuff down while she was playing so I could start loading up. My shit wasn't connecting, and I was like, "Play another song, play another song." And then I was like, "Damn it's still not working, play another song." Do you know this girl had been playing a mix the whole time?

Rekha: Shut the fuck up.

Rimarkable: I didn't know people actually did that in real life.

Rekha: She basically faked the whole thing.

Rimarkable: She was playing a freaking mix because I kept hearing how everybody was like, "I'm surprised she didn't sing." She's known as a singer. She was so on a million.

Rekha: And it wasn't it wasn't playing to the room?

Rimarkable: The room loved it.

Rekha: I love that room because they just want to dance. If you had a good country set, they'd do it.

Rimarkable: They just want to freaking dance.

Rekha: That's definitely a fun place to play.

Rimarkable: But anyway, I hated that she made a point to be like, "I gave up on Serato a long time ago." I was like, "That was dumb. Why did you do that?" It's an industry standard thing. Why would you give up on something like that. I'm not giving up on Serato. I may enjoy using USBs more when I'm doing house music and disco parties, but I'm not giving up on Serato. It's important.

Interview Transcript:

DJ Shilpa/Scarlett88

(Edited) Interview with DJ Shilpa/Scarlett88

Rekha: We're rolling. So this is an interview for Rekha Malhotra as masters thesis research for M.I.T. Comparative Media Studies. With a Shilpa Sabharwala. So what is your DJ name?

Shilpa: My DJ name is DJ Shilpa. Very creative. It's my first name.

Rekha: That's your only DJ name.

Shilpa: No, I actually have a alter ego, it's called DJ. Scarlett.

Rekha: Ok. What's the difference?

Shilpa: DJ Shilpa caters more to the South Asian scene wedding scene, to be specific. And then Scarlett is more the club scene in New York.

Rekha: Okay so where did you grow up?

Shilpa: I was born in New Delhi, India and then we migrated to the United States in the late 80's, early 90's. And I grew up in Somerset, New Jersey which is like Central Jersey.

Rekha: And what kind of music did you listen to growing up?

Shilpa: I would say in India obviously like the Bollywood tunes that were super famous in the 80's and early 90's. As far as like the American stuff was concerned while I was in India, the most we would get is like Michael Jackson, and stuff like that. Stuff that was like super popular abroad. You know not very much like 80's music. Oh and like Madonna. In India itself, Michael Jackson and Madonna were really big at the time when I was growing up, and then obviously like a lot of Indian music that I listened to.

But then when we migrated here, I became more aware of like the hip-hop culture and obviously going to school here and being friends with different people. I started listening to more and more Top 40 stuff that was out here. Also the Indian stuff that was being played at home.

Rekha: When did you actually start DJing?

Shilpa: So in '92, my dad decided to start a mobile DJ business because he felt that the Indian culture in Central Jersey could benefit from having someone that knew how to play Indian music at private parties. It started off more of like a hobby, where you know how families would have like birthday parties or small functions, and you know my dad would take his two speakers and he invested in two turntables and he would you know start playing music at these functions. I was still a little girl at the time but obviously like that sort of seeped into me and I would say '96 or '97 is when I really was like, "Oh I want to do this at a gig with you."

Rekha: How did he learn?

Shilpa: Himself. He just self-taught. He just felt there was a need for it in our community because nobody in our community was doing it. Yeah, he was self-taught. He went to Sam Ash and brought himself some speakers, some turntables, a tape player because most Indian music was only available on cassette. At the time, not records and a mixer and he just started.

Rekha: And he started doing parties for people.

Shilpa: Yep started doing parties for people. Started off with birthday parties, small weddings, and then obviously like Diwali functions, that was a big hit. He used to do a Diwali function every year for people in Central Jersey, and he used to have a lot of people come out. Anywhere from between 250 to like 350 people would come out at this party

Rekha: Awesome. Do you have any formal musical training?

Shilpa: I played the flute. I would say I started in sixth grade. I'm sorry. Seventh grade is when you pick up an instrument in school. So I chose the flute, and I pretty much played the flute for from 7th grade to high school, till senior year. And so obviously with that I learned how to read music, write music. So that would be my formal training. And then by the time senior year in high school came along, I was drum major for the band.

Rekha: So you were a drummer too.

Shilpa: Yeah.

Rekha: Awesome. So the first time you saw a DJ live would be...?

Shilpa: Like the first time I ever DJed?

Rekha: That you saw somebody DJ.

Shilpa: Oh live. Would be my dad, obviously, at an event. And that was pretty much all of '92 to like '96, '97. Yeah. My dad is the first person I saw.

Rekha: Yeah, I remember your dad.

Shilpa: Yeah.

Rekha: So the next section is more about your actual DJ practice. What was your first gig, do you remember?

Shilpa: Yeah I do, vaguely, but I do remember. My dad said to me that, "Hey I have a gig today, and instead of you just being my helper," which he said I was great at and I would get ten dollars for every party, to help him carry his stuff and make sure his music was in order.

So my dad was doing this on the side, but also had a full time job. So if he had a gig on Friday night or Saturday night, my job was to make sure all the cassettes were rewind to cue, so that if he did have to play a song off the cassette, when he hit play, it started at where he wanted it to start at. That is such a cool story to me. I don't even know if DJs right now could fathom that. Because when you hit play on the cassette player, it would go "vmmm", and then go to the actual song.

But anyway, yeah. So my first gig was he pretty much was like, "Instead of helping me today, why don't you, you know, you've been expressing your interest to play. So why don't we get you to play." And that's what it was. I can't remember the year. It's got to be in the mid 90's, maybe late 90's like '96 or '97. But yeah that was my first gig ever. It was like a private pre-wedding gig.

Rekha: And you still got ten dollars?

Shilpa: No I got one hundred and one dollars for doing a good job.

Rekha: That's great. My first gig I got fifty one dollars. So who was there? Where was it exactly?

Shilpa: It was somewhere in Jersey. It was like a VFW hall that this client-

Rekha: Veteran of Foreign Wars.

Shilpa: Yeah. that this client had rented obviously for themselves and the family. My dad and I showed up. I helped him hook the system up, and then we kind of played according to what the client wanted. And my dad kind of let me take it from there.

Rekha: And so you were using what, what was the hardware setup?

Shilpa: A mixer, 2 turntables, because I think I specifically remember Shaggy was big at the time, and I was like to my dad, "Trust me the people that are in there like teens or early 20's are gonna dig this, dad." And he was like, "No you just stick to the Indian music," and I'm like, "No, no. Like we'll do that too, but we're gonna stick this in there because they're gonna love it." And so I did the Indian music on the cassettes, and whatever Indian music, I think I had Apache Indian on record.

Rekha: You guys weren't using CDs at this point?

Shilpa: No not at this point. Not the first gig. We couldn't, at this point my dad hadn't invested in CDJ's because with the amount of money he was making doing it, he couldn't afford it at this point. We were we were straight on cassette at this point. So I would do the Indian music on cassette and then every now and then mix in Shaggy on the turntables, or anything popular that I thought the kids would respond to. And that's how it went.

Rekha: After that first gig, did you just keep doing them or what happened?

Shilpa: Yes. So, obviously it's like getting a taste of what you can do. And I felt so good because, you know. And that's the crazy part. I wasn't even nervous. It was like I was ready, and I just wanted my dad to give me a chance. So I wasn't nervous. I wasn't scared. I just wanted him to have enough faith in me to let me do it. And I did it and I rocked out and I wasn't like shy on the mic or anything like that. And he was like, "Wow, you did an amazing job," So he's like, "So why don't you just start coming with me to all the gigs that you want to, as long as it doesn't affect school." And I was like, "Yo I'm totally down for that. I definitely want to do that." And that's kind of how it started and I just kept going.

I think with his business it was like, we would do a gig and it was word of mouth, you know. And if we did a good job we would get another

lead out of it. And that's how it was for the next couple of years. Like I would say, until '99, 2000.

Rekha: Right. When was Scarlett 88's first gig?

Shilpa: That wasn't until like 2010 or 2011. Like almost ten or eleven years later.

Rekha: Tell me about that gig. How did that happen? Where was it?

Shilpa: I felt there was a need to divide the brands. Everything related to Shilpa that I had worked so hard on over the years was wedding related and Bollywood related. My website, all my mixes, my EPK, my media kits, everything had South Asian something in it. So I couldn't go to New York City clubs and be like, "Hey check this out, I'm DJ Shilpa. Check out all my marketing material," because if they checked it out they would be like, "Oh well I don't really want a South Asian DJ who specializes in Indian music at my club."

So it became essential to divide the brand, and I think the reason why I did that too is because although I love doing weddings, I really do, there's only so creative I can get, because sometimes I get a playlist from the bride and groom, and they tell me like, "Oh I specifically want these songs for the dance floor," or whatever, and I can't really express my creativity with a 50 song playlist. So I was like, you know what, why don't I try to separate the two brands and start Scarlett. So somewhere in 2010 or 2011, I decided to do that, and I got my first club gig. I don't know man, I've done so many, I can't remember what my first one was like.

Rekha: How did you get it?

Shilpa: Again. Networking. Word of mouth. You know I think I just started hitting up DJs in the city and was like, "Yo, I'm starting a new brand and

I want to be able to DJ in the city as Scarlett.” Oh, I know! I would say my first few gigs were at dive bars in the city, like Solas in the Lower East Side.

Rekha: I remember you, I wanted to see if you were DJing anymore, and you were like, “I’m doing solo.” I think I might have stopped by. I don’t know, maybe I thought about it.

Shilpa: So Solas was definitely one of the first few gigs. 49 Grove. That was one spot. Yeah. To name a couple.

Rekha: So in terms of your transition. So then you have these two different identities. One is sort of a commercial, wedding type audience. The other one is clubs. And you started off, your first gig was turntables and a tape deck. And then what do you use today?

Shilpa: So I’m very versatile today. I obviously grew up on turntables, so I’m comfortable with turntables. I eventually moved to CDJs because when I was doing the bulk of the gigs that I was doing, Indian music started becoming available on CDs. One of the first CD players we bought was a Denon.

Rekha: You remember the model? Was it the 2000?

Shilpa: The 2000 and the we got the 2500.

Rekha: Ah that was so baller to get the 2500.

Shilpa: Yeah, with the remote control thing in the jog wheel.

Rekha: Oh yeah the jog wheel. Denon 2000, industry standard for a long time.

Shilpa: Yeah. So it’s almost, if you were doing private events, and you were doing such a niche clientele with niche music, it just became essential

to have that. CDs were better quality music, and of course when you hit play on the Denon player, it actually played from the spot, not when you hit play on the cassette and it took a minute to take off. So yeah, Denons were one of the first CD players we bought. Obviously constantly using the Denons. Then we went to Pioneer CDJ's, one of the first models that we bought for the Pioneer CDJS were a CDJ 100s. I still have those. They're ancient but I still have them.

Rekha: The white ones?

Shilpa: Silver ones over with a big jog wheel. Yep the three effects on those CD players. And so what happened was, that technology also kind of became more reliable at an event. I started not wanting to deal w the records and the needles and stuff like that. It just became really easy to like show up at an event and hook these things up and I'm ready to go. So for a really long time I became very comfortable with CDJ's.

Rekha: All right. So where were we. Something about the CDJs.

Shilpa: Yeah I think you were saying what do I play on now.

Rekha: Yeah that's where the questions started.

Shilpa: Yeah.

Rekha: So you were going through the history of like, at some point you transition to the CDJs, the 100s.

Shilpa: So right now I'm most comfortable on CDJs in a mixer. I also do all types of events. My main setup for my private events is two CDJ 2000s and a mixer, whether that's a DJM 2000 or an 800 or an S9, just depends on what type of event it is. And I make that decision. Playing in the clubs, you have to be super versatile right now. Some clubs have

CDJs, some clubs have turntables. And believe it or not, some clubs have controllers now.

Rekha: They do. We've seen that. It's happening.

Shilpa: It's happening. But I don't think there's anything wrong with that. I mean it depends on who you are as a DJ. I want to be a versatile DJ. I want to be able to play different rooms. I am a professional DJ. I'm good at what I do. I don't want to show up to a gig and be like, "Yo I can't play on this because I don't know how." I don't know. So I make it a point to learn controllers. I make it a point to learn.

Rekha: And this is all via Serato?

Shilpa: Yep.

Rekha: Okay. That is the industry standard.

Shilpa: Industry standard right now. Yeah.

Rekha: How do you learn from cassette to CDJ to controller?

Shilpa: So yeah, again, self-taught. You know just like my dad. I could tell you the very first time I did a live mix. So we're not using cassette players anymore at this point, at these at my private gigs with my dad right. We go to Ohio to do this wedding for someone. And we have our fresh pioneer CDJ 100. I got my CDs. And we check into the hotel, we set up. And I specifically remember my dad and I dragged my cousin into it because we were like, "Well we're going to Ohio, we're gonna need another set of hands." So me, my dad, and my cousin, we check into the hotel, we're good, so we go set up the equipment. My dad's like, "Well we've got a few hours before the wedding starts, so I'm going to get some rest and your cousin, you can do whatever you want." And I'm like, "I'm going to go downstairs and practice," and he goes,

“Practice what? You know what you're doing.” I was like, “No, no, no. We have to take this to the next level. I can't just drop a song and then drop the next song on the one.” Because that's what I had been doing. I was playing a song and then when I saw fit to drop the next song, I would drop the next song on a one. I now wanted to blend. I wanted to learn how to blend. So I specifically remember spending three hours in that Ohio ballroom teaching myself how to mix from one song to the other. Now that kind of came naturally to me because I was in band in school, and I know music is supposed to sound. I know what BPM is. Beats per minute. It's the temple of the song. And that I learned in band. So I'm like OK. Like if I'm playing a song that's 120 beats per minute, I'm not going to try to match it to a song that's 105 beats per minute, I'm going to try to match it to a song that's 120 beats per minute, or within that vicinity. Now, Serato is an industry standard. It actually shows you the beats per minute for the song. When I was teaching myself, I use my ear. I didn't have something telling me this song is 120, this song is 120.

Rekha: Did the 100 do BPM?

Shilpa: It had pitch control. I don't think it showed you the BPM. It had pitch. You had plus or minus. You could bend it using your ear. I have to think really hard, but I know one of the two songs that I first learned to mix together were, The Bomb. I don't know. I can't remember.

Rekha: “These Songs Fall Into My Mind.”

Shilpa: Yeah yeah yeah. “These Songs Fall Into My Mind.” Yeah. That song and “Saturday Night”.

Rekha: Whigfield

Shilpa: Right. So it's like I taught myself how to mix those songs, and I don't know man, when I did my first mix I was so excited that I figured it out. I

felt like I figured out something so huge. I was just like, "Yo I'm on a roll right now." I literally woke up my dad from his nap, was like, "You got to come downstairs and hear this." And he comes downstairs and I play it for him and I do it and he's like, "That's amazing." I don't know if he appreciated it as much as I did. I think he got it. But he was also just so big on dropping it on the one for so long, where it took him a minute to realize.

Rekha: He was into really function, he's like, get it out there.

Shilpa: Yeah. Yep. Exactly.

Rekha: So in the course of like, from when you were your dad's assistant to now, have you done any other kind of training?

Shilpa: Yeah I think. I mean, just being musically inclined and like having music in my life for so long. Once high school was over, I was no longer playing an instrument. And I kind of miss that. So I just started taking drum lessons in the city, just for fun. Like once a month. Just to keep up with it, because I missed it. I just have a small pad and drumsticks that I sometimes bang out to. And I got busier and busier with my with my gig schedule. As time was moving and whatever, I started realizing that a lot of DJs were putting out mashups, and a lot of DJs were working on their own remixes. So I started thinking that I should get into production. So I went to Dubspot. I picked up a production course for Ableton which a DAW, it's a software that a lot of people used to produce.

Rekha: Desktop Audio Workstation.

Shilpa: Yes. So I took the Ableton course and I learned Ableton. It was about a six month course and I finished it and now I'm Ableton certified. I know how to use that software very well and I use it mainly to make remixes and mashups. So yeah, those are things that I continue to do to stay

relevant and I just always feel like it's very important to keep investing in your craft, keep practicing, you know.

And then growing up, like I said, we grew up on turntables. But the most I ever did on turntables when I was growing up was mixing one record to the other, or baby scratching one track into the next track. Recently, about a year and a half ago, I wanted to really sharpen my turntableism skills. So I reached out to Rob Swift. He's a legend in the game, hip-hop turntablist. Part of the executioners. And I started taking lessons with him. It's been about a year and a half that I've been taking lessons with him and I love it. It's just taken my performance game to the next level.

Rekha: So speaking of your performance game, and feel free to distinguish if you do things differently as DJ Shilpa or Scarlett, when you were actually DJing, do you employ techniques like scratching or any other techniques aside from playing the music. Is there something, and what are your feelings around that?

Shilpa: I think every gig is different. But yeah for the most part, what I really make sure that I can do at every gig is sound clean. I blend really clean. To be able to go from one genre to the other, from one song to the other flawlessly, I really pride myself in that. I think that it also keeps the dance floor engaged. It's a lot easier to dance to music that's not being interrupted with, like there is no break. But yeah like sometimes if I'm engaged with the crowd, I'll scratch a little bit or I'll do a routine. In the club scene, I have a money routine which is like a two or three minute routine of like money songs.

Rekha: What do you mean by routine, explain.

Shilpa: It's like a routine. It's like a practiced routine, where like let's say I drop a song, I scratch in another song relevant to the theme that I'm playing. In this case, let's talk about the money routine. I'll start off with like, "I

Got Money” by 50 Cent and then it’ll go into “Money, money, money, money!” Something like that. Then I’ll go into like, “I need a dollar”, “All about the Benjamins”, but I have a practice routine where there’s some scratches, and I bring the track back. I’ll do that in the club scene because I feel like people appreciate that a little bit more in the club scene, as opposed to weddings.

Rekha: You wouldn’t do that at weddings?

Shilpa: Unless I knew my client for that particular wedding would appreciate that. Maybe towards the end of a wedding, when everyone’s drunk and would appreciate something like that.

Rekha: Because they’re more, like, formal?

Shilpa: Yeah I think weddings are a little bit more formal. There’s all walks of life. I’m not so sure opening up the dance floor with a money routine at a wedding is really going to work. I think weddings are more like Top 40. And making sure like the parents dance as well as your best friends that are at the wedding.

Rekha: What’s your process of preparing, and how do you decide what you’re gonna play when you are actually DJing?

Shilpa: So the process for preparing for each gig again, very different. I think for weddings, obviously every wedding comes with an itinerary. Also sometimes I get a playlist from the bride and groom like, “Hey these are 50 of our most important songs that we want played at the wedding. These are five songs we absolutely don’t want.” That kind of allows me to prepare the general gist of what the music is going to be like. So that’s the pre-prepping for a wedding. Pre-prepping for a club event, I download new music. I make sure I have dope remixes. If I’m doing the same club twice in one month, I make sure that my set is different. I

don't want to sound exactly the same that I did from the last time I was at that club.

Rekha: What do you physically do to prepare. Do you make crates, do you organize?

Shilpa: Yes.

Rekha: How much time do you spend not DJing, prepping for a gig. If there's a way to characterize a range or something. I'm just trying to assess the labor involved.

Shilpa: Absolutely. I think that even with my clients, I tell them, "You know how you wake up in the morning?" I tell my clients, "You wake up around 7:00 or 8:00 o'clock and you get ready to go to work. I wake up too and I have my cup of coffee and just like you sit down at your desk from 9 to 10 or 9 to 12, the first set of things that you do, I have my cup of coffee and I sit down at my desk and I research music." New stuff that's out. I spend about an hour and a half, to two hours a day researching new music, which is new music that's out in the market as well as dope remixes that have come out of evergreens or old songs. So yes, I do spend about an hour and a half to two hours a day on that. I think that in the past it wasn't so ritualistic about it, but now it has been more and more. It's become my morning ritual because it really allows me to differentiate myself from other people. So to answer your question, in fairness, I spend a lot of time researching new music and making sure I'm adding that to my playlists. Which I prep for these events.

Rekha: And so you organize them in some sort of folder.

Shilpa: Yeah. Like some of my lists are called, I'll give you some examples. Latin Anthems. I find another Latin anthem that's new, it gets added to that list. I have another list called "Don't forget to play tonight." And that's just because that's fresh new stuff that everyone's responding, to

it's popular right now. And I'm probably going forget if I don't add it to this list.

Rekha: I sometimes forget to play newer music because I'm not used to playing it. Yeah, I have all kinds of names for lists.

Shilpa: Oh yeah.

Rekha: It's kind of fun. Even when you're making, producing, like naming the songs.

Shilpa: Yeah. So much fun. I have a list called "dope house remixes of hip-hop records". So it's just whatever is going to work for you.

Rekha: What do you decide what to play?

Shilpa: At the gig itself?

Shilpa: Yeah.

Rekha: How do you know what to play?

Shilpa: I think it's reading the crowd right. Most gigs will give you a general gist of what you need to start off with. I think it's great to talk about a current gig or residency that I have right now. I have this residency at the Bodega Negra which is a restaurant in the Dream Hotel. I play there every Thursday from 9:00pm to 12:30am. It's a dinner party, specifically. So it's not like the people get up and dance or whatever. They're just listening to dope vibes while they're having dinner. Now the specific music for this room, and as per instruction of my employer, the instruction that I've been given is they want an old school vibe, like disco, feel-good music from the 80's and the 90's, singalong stuff. They don't want anything new. Like no Drake, no Migos, no hip-hop, like nothing crazy Top 40, because once these people finish dinner, they go

upstairs to PhD, which is a club where they're going to hear all of that anyway. So I think what they're trying to do with this this room is, you get to hear these like cool vibes that you're probably not going to hear upstairs in the club. And so it kind of differentiates the experience . So taking that residency into consideration, I prep a list. I prep a list of disco stuff, feel good music, stuff that I can play, like "Jessie's Girl", "Sweet Caroline", "Livin' On A Prayer", "Don't Stop Believing", stuff like that. And the way I decide what to play in what order, is how the party is going. I usually like to start off with a little bit more tame stuff, and again beats per minute can help you too. I usually like to start off that dinner music like if I'm in the 95 to 100 beats per minute zone, and then I build up the party and go more into 127,128 type of beats per minute.

Rekha: So you're getting very specific directives from the employer.

Shilpa: Yeah for this particular party yes. Yeah.

Rekha: But other places you can sort of play.

Shilpa: But the other places I can sort of just play off of like how the crowd is reacting. One of the things I really like to do... So let's talk about DJ Shilpa and how I play at weddings. If I'm doing a South Asian wedding and both sides are Indian, probably gonna open up the dance floor with an Indian song because it's going to, in my opinion, get everybody going. Based on how the crowd reacts to that particular song, I usually pick my next song. So if I played a pretty popular song that's out right now, and the reaction's just like crazy, I'm probably going to stick to another Bollywood song that's also popular. After a few songs I'll probably transition into something more top 40 and see how the crowd reacts to that. If the crowd reacts really well and they love it maybe another top 40 record.

Rekha: So even with weddings, you're basically deciding on the fly. You're in the moment.

Shilpa: In the moment. feeling out the crowd. I love going based off of how the crowd is reacting to me and what I'm playing. That's very important.

Rekha: You say that you make mixes. What do you mean by mix, like a mix tape, a mix like a... What is a mix to you?

Shilpa: So I think in the beginning of my career, I was making mixes to just show people my-

Rekha: Tell me what a mix is. What you define as a mix.

Shilpa: Whether it's 30 minutes or an hour, it's just to showcase your skills, in my opinion

Rekha: So it's bunch of songs.

Shilpa: Put together, mixed well. To be able to show your clientele or whoever you're putting out the mix for, your style, your skill. How do you go from one song to the next song. Cause in my opinion you can give 10 different DJs the same 10 songs, and they'll put together a different mix. If you gave me 10 songs, the way I put those 10 songs together is gonna be different, like orderwise and how I go from one song to the other is gonna be super different from the next DJ, who's given that same 10 songs.

Rekha: Is that experience different than playing live? Than playing those same songs?

Shilpa: Absolutely, absolutely. My general like rule of thumb for a mix is like, I'll start off a mix with a track and I'll probably play like a verse, chorus, verse, chorus, and mix out of the song, and go into the next song. To

me and mix is more done just to have something that people can listen to you on road trips, or in the background of their house while they're cleaning or whatever, and they're like, "Oh I love the way Shilpa mixes, and I love this mix," or whatever. Whereas I might not play a verse, chorus, verse, chorus at a party, because I actually might play a song at a party, and I play the verse and the chorus, and I notice that the people are not that interested in the track anymore, like the energy has gone down, and I might mix out of the song right away. So that's the difference between doing an actual mix, you don't have a live audience that you're interacting with. You're doing a mix in your house, you're just making a mix. It's just you and the equipment.

Rekha: Do you use any other techniques while you're DJing live, like looping, sampling, any anything that might be used?

Shilpa: Yes looping for sure. One of the easiest examples I can give you is there's a part in Jay-Z song, "Hustler" where he goes, "It's about to go down." So you loop that part. So basically he's just saying "it's about to go down" over and over. Now it's up to you, there's a couple of things you can do. I like doing several things depending on where I'm at. So if he's saying, "it's about to go down" and then I loop it again, and then I go into a turn down for what. And that's wordplay, because he's saying it's about to go down, and then you do, "turn down for what." At weddings, Sometimes I do "it's about to go down" and then I drop in the "Crazy in Love" beat by Beyonce. And it sounds really dope on top of that loop.

Rekha: So some of these techniques you sort of have in your pocket, or maybe you practice them home and as you see fit, you employ them.

Shilpa: Yeah..

Rekha: Okay now we're gonna go into a little bit different area. Do you feel like you are part of a DJ community? Don't hold back, I know you got shit to say!

Shilpa: Yeah I would like to think so, but in my opinion I think the DJ industry is like the only industry that's like really not regulated. It's like a wild, wild west. It's like to each its own. I wish it was a little bit more regulated but it's not. And so to answer your question, like do I feel like I'm part of an industry overall. Yes.

Rekha: Well the question is are you part of a community, not or are you part of an industry.

Shilpa: No, I don't feel like I'm part of a community.

Rekha: Why not?

Shilpa: It's to each its own. It's everyone's out here for themselves. That's the feeling I get. I've tried but I don't feel like I'm part of a community at all.

I'll give you an example. I made a post, like being a DJ or whatever. I think it's important to be cordial with your competition, but you can't necessarily be best friends with them. At the end of the day, we're still competition. You know what I mean, to an extent. And someone commented on my post and were like, "Oh I completely disagree with this. I'm actually really appalled that you wrote something like this, because I think DJ family is so important. I've gotten all my gigs base through my DJ family." to which I responded back like, "What are you talking about. I've never gotten a gig, like a wedding gig from another DJ." You know what I mean?

Rekha: Do you think that has anything to do with your gender? Or do you just think that's the climate of DJs or DJing that you know?

Shilpa: I don't know. I think it's just the DJ community as a whole. I think it's just DJs as a whole. I don't know how to explain it. A photographer once came up to me at a gig and was like, "You know I wanted to ask you something." I was like, "Yeah go ahead." He's like, "Why do DJs hate each other?" And I was like, "Dude I don't know how to answer that. I don't really hate DJs." And then I was like, "You know I think in all fairness, the only thing I could say is we're very passionate about what we do. And I think everyone has their own spin of how it should happen, or everyone has their own spin of how it should be. And maybe that passion comes out as like we hate on each other. But I really don't think they hate each other." I think it's I was also trying to be politically correct with this photographer. That's the best answer I could come up with. But I get what he's saying because he's like, "It's not like that for me as a photographer." He's like, "We're very helpful to each other. We give each other like references or whatever and blah blah blah." But then again, I have my solid four or five people that I trust. You being one of them, you know. The lack of a better way to say it, the four or five people that I fuck with.

Rekha: That's the way you say it! And who are those people?

Shilpa: You being one of them. A few people in the industry in New York. Unfortunately I can't really say. I'm cordial and friendly with everybody in my industry. I really am, I tried to be.

Rekha: Let's get into who those people are and why do you... I just want to know like, I'm interested in the question of community and that's where this question is coming from. It seems to me that a lot of, what you're putting together is a mix. You know, just to clarify, you are full time at this. This is your full-time profession.

Shilpa: Yes.

Rekha: So there seems to be a motivation to like continue the work and get more work.

Shilpa: Absolutely.

Rekha: So part of it is about like a certain sense of professionalism and competence. Is that correct?

Shilpa: Yeah.

Rekha: But then what I'm interested in in terms of community, is like outside of the commercial or capitalist aspect of what this practice does, is there something in it that is outside of that. That is about experiencing music, playing music, that is not necessarily motivated around seeing other DJs as competition or not. I mean, is there another area around that... So you say with me-

Shilpa: Yeah, I mean like-

Rekha: You know, and who are those other people in your sphere that you say that you fuck with?

Shilpa: You know like when you brought me on to the whole Basement Bhangra scene, that was very special to me. That was very important. Like that a cool two years of me being a part of something, I think what you had established is something that not a lot of people have established in New York City and it's a vibe. It's a culture. I felt like I was part of something that was so important. I kind of have that with a bunch of DJs that I follow and go to like these DMC competitions and stuff like that like.

Rekha: So you think there's a community in the DMC World?

Shilpa: Yeah I do. I think there's a community in the DMC World, in the Red Bull competitions. I find that to be less aggressive and people are actually supporting one another in those. One of the very first times I decided to do a competition, I was scared. I was scared shitless, but I wanted to put myself out there and one of the first competitions I did wasn't even DMC level it was just a DJ competition at the Winter Music Conference in Miami, and I decided to do that because I just thought it would be important for me, it would be important for other DJs to know who I am, not just in the New York City area, but a lot of DJs come to the Winter Music Conference from all over the place. So I just thought it was very important for me. I did that and I was scared shitless. I was like, of course, like it wasn't a perfect execution, but I executed that performance for that competition 85 percent to like 90 percent of what I thought it would be. I think I messed up like once, but the amount of love I got from that community, from those DJs that were at this competition was just so surprising. It's not something I was used to. I don't know how to say this, at home. The amount of love that I got from other DJs was just unreal at that competition, and it really made me want to do more and more of them. And that's what got me to, let me hit up somebody that I think is very good at turntableism and learn more so I could compete more.

Rekha: And have you been competing more?

Shilpa: The next competition I want to do is next year. It's going to be that A-Trak competition, the Goldie awards. I just got really busy with my schedule, and I didn't find the time to prep for this year, but I feel like that's something that I'm aiming to do. That's a goal.

Rekha: In terms of the schedule. Your summer is super busy with weddings.

Shilpa: Super busy, so I tried to take the winter to focus on my craft more. So January, February, March, I'll focus more on practice. Practicing, hitting

goals, learning some more, spending some more time in classes, because I know I can't do that as much April to September.

Rekha: And in this community of whether it's DMC or Red Bull or these other places, what's the gender mix of those communities, or the people that you fuck with.

Shilpa: Right now, there aren't a lot of females doing it in the DMC World or Red Bull.

Rekha: What about the club scene or the place?

Shilpa: Club scene, yes, it's a little bit more. You do see more and more female DJs now, as well as male DJs. It wasn't like that 10 years ago, but now I could say there's a handful of female DJs that I know in New York City that are doing their thing in the club scene. So yeah, it's becoming more and more mixed when it comes to gender.

Rekha: And when we're talking about clubs, you're talking about Manhattan?

Shilpa: Yes.

Rekha: Manhattan, Atlantic City, Miami, Atlanta, Los Angeles.

Rekha: Straight clubs. Bottles, like people pay a lot of money?

Shilpa: Yeah. And even like normal rooftop lounges and stuff like that, there's definitely a mix of now female and male DJs.

Rekha: Do you feel any different in terms of your interactions with them, or camaraderie or...

Shilpa: I want to say females are obviously going to look out for each other. I think that is important, right. Like it's funny, I sometimes post on

Instagram and I use a hashtag called #FemaleDJ, and a male DJ reached out to me and was like, "Why do you use that hashtag, like you don't see me using #MaleDJ." And I was like, "Dude, one it's a hashtag. Are you serious?" And two, one of the reasons I think that I started doing it is because I've actually met dope female DJs doing it. Using that hashtag has allowed me to make friends with other female DJs in the industry that I wouldn't have known unless I hashtagged myself with that hashtag.

Rekha: And is that important to you?

Shilpa: Yeah. It kind of is. I guess maybe a part of me is looking for that camaraderie in the scene. I want to be able to discuss with other female DJs some of the things that we might go through, that's all.

Rekha: What are those things?

Shilpa: Like as a female, I find myself having to prove myself so much. I literally have to go in and kill a party for someone to be like, "OK you're validated." As opposed to a dude that would just get booked and probably wouldn't have to submit a mix.

Rekha: You feel you have to work hard-

Shilpa: Harder.

Rekha: Because you're a woman.

Shilpa: Absolutely. People just assume I'm not going to know what I'm doing. They just assume like, "Oh I don't think she'll be able to handle it. I don't know how to describe how I get that feeling, but I do.

Rekha: You book your own shows, you book your own gigs?

Shilpa: Yeah.

Rekha: You interact with the people that are booking you.

Shilpa: Yes. Private events. 100 percent. I interact with my client. My clientele comes directly to me. It's a very boutique way of doing it. I meet with my clients personally. Club scene, yeah. Right now I'm booking myself. I don't have management. I don't even have PR.

Rekha: What do you mean, you don't even have PR. Is that something you aspire to do?

Shilpa: Yeah. Because you know PR obviously helps you get into some places where I probably can't get into. You know I think PR is important right now especially if you're trying to elevate your brand. At the end of the I want to be able to do the Netflix holiday party, or like I'm South Asian, so I should be kind of doing some South Asian events as a South Asian DJ. Let's just make up an event. I don't know, Bollywood Awards Afterparty. You know what I'm saying. Not that something like that exists.

Rekha: Girl, I should be doing those!

Shilpa: Do you get what I'm saying?

Rekha: Yeah. What does it mean to do those events? I mean, you think because they're visible?

Shilpa: Yeah I think it creates a little bit more visibility for your brand, you know. And I think it's important. Like it also shows, I don't know how to say this, like people supporting me. It also shows they're willing to support me and my brand.

Rekha: Have you ever felt unsafe while DJing?

Shilpa: No. No.

Rekha: Best gig, worst gig?

Shilpa: I don't know. I've had so many dope gigs.

Rekha: Bad gigs?

Shilpa: So many dope gigs, Bad gigs?

Rekha: And what makes a bad gig, if there's a bad gig.

Shilpa: I can't even say I've had like a really bad gig. I think maybe there's been bad situations, like I've walked into a gig where the equipment wasn't working properly and I've just had to troubleshoot.

Rekha: Can you give me an example in one of those situation where the equipment's not working? Why? Is it because the venue is just not equipped properly...?

Shilpa: I mean I went into one gig and I was told there was going to be two CDJs and a mixer. The one CDJ was down, just wasn't working. The pitch wasn't working. I basically couldn't even mix, you know.

Rekha: What did you do?

Shilpa: Instant doubles on Serato. Serato allows you to play on one player and then you can switch it to the next player by using instant doubles, and then mix on the player that's actually working. So that's how I trouble shot that.

Rekha: How was the venue about it? What did they do?

Shilpa: I just alerted the manager and was like, "You know there's something wrong with this player" and he goes, "Yeah I think we're aware," and I was like, "Ok". I was like, "Are you guys doing anything to fix it?" And he was like, "Yeah this player is supposed to go into the shop soon." And that was the end of.

Rekha: That was it. Like, too bad.

Shilpa: Yeah, that was that.

Rekha: Have you ever been in those situations, do you feel like the people, the venue, the management has doubted your competence.

Shilpa: Oh yeah, yeah. I've definitely walked into venues the management has come up to my team, and been like-

Rekha: Who is in your team?

Shilpa: My roadies and my husband. This is for a private event. So they'll walk up to my team and be like, "Oh, are you guys the DJ?" And Neil and my roadies will be like, "No it's DJ Shilpa, she's right over there," and they'll continue to address my team.

Rekha: And not talk to you?

Shilpa: And not talk to me.

Rekha: And these are people at the venue.

Shilpa: Yep.

Rekha: I think that's it. Is there anything else you want to add? I have one more question. But is there anything else you want to add?

Shilpa: Not really I think.

Rekha: So my last question is, you use the word brand a lot. Do you consider yourself an artist, and is there a difference between artist and a brand?

Shilpa: I am an artist, for sure. But I'm also building a brand. I think building a brand is important in what I'm trying to do. I'm trying to build a brand that's reliable, that's professional, that people can trust. They hire me, and they know that they're going to get good music. And you know that that I'm gonna show up on time, and I'm going to be professional at their event.

Rekha: Do you have other gigs you've done where you feel like you can play whatever you want? I guess like in the sense of there's directives, of this dinner party, which has a certain vibe, and a lot of times in my experience the club places, there's a limit to how much you can push the music. There's always a secret code of "don't get to X". Do you feel like you have places where you can just play whatever?

Shilpa: Yeah I do.

Rekha: Or do you feel constrained in those spaces?

Shilpa: No I think like a few of the places that I've done, you know recently, Magic Hour being one of them in New York City. I'm really allowed to kind of just do me. And I appreciate that. I am overall a Top 40 DJ. You know, I like playing to the room. I like making sure people have fun. But I like throwing in classics. I like all types of music. Being able to blend different things, I'm able to do that at certain venues and I enjoy that.

Rekha: How do you control or do you have influence over your visual representation for promotionally, like on the flyer, photos, do you have visuals playing when you're performing?

Shilpa: I mean if some venues allow for it, they'll throw my logo up on the projectors or the screens, which is helpful. People get to basically search you on social media if you're logos up there. I think that's important. At weddings, no. Private events, no. And then in terms of flyer parties, you do your photoshoots. I've got to do some new ones because I've been using the same pictures for like last year.

Rekha: 11 years I've used the same picture.

Shilpa: Yeah. So, you know how it goes.

Rekha: All right. So this question is: So do women ever come up to ask you for advice or help on how to DJ? Have you interacted with people who are aspiring in any way.

Shilpa: Yes. More so in recent years. I think in the earlier part of my career, no.

Rekha: Say it in a sentence. People have come up to me.

Shilpa: Women have come up to me and asked me for advice on how to start DJing, learning, and how to put themselves out there, more so in recent years, than in the beginning of my career. And I think that's because things are changing. Maybe they're more encouraged to actually follow their heart and do what they want to do, as opposed to feeling restricted. And I'm talking about South Asian women in general, like there aren't a lot of South Asian female DJs. And I wonder why. I feel like there should be more of us. I'm not so sure if that's because people feel in the South Asian community, there's almost like this, I don't have to explain it to you!

Rekha: But explain it to the tape.

Shilpa: I think that you understand and-

Rekha: You're not talking to me.

Shilpa: I don't think that it's DJing or that sort of field is encouraged in the South Asian culture. Like even with me, let's just talk on a personal level. My dad obviously encouraged it because he was a DJ and he had no problem with it, but my mom had a huge issue with it. We didn't speak for six months. She always thought it was like, "Okay yeah it's a phase, she'll get over." But she made sure I went to college, which I'm also very thankful for. But when I decided to do this full time, we didn't speak for six months because she said, "How are you gonna take care of yourself. This is not a profession that you can rely on when it comes to the money," and blah blah blah. I think our parents are so focused on making sure that we make a good living. That's all she was kind of trying to say. But I also think that she didn't understand that you can actually make a living off of this now, because there is a need for talent. There is a need for a good quality DJs.

I mean, initially there were not a lot of women coming up to me and I just chalked it up to I don't think there's a lot of women that are pursuing this path. Whereas now, I've had a few people reach out to me. Younger ladies have reached out to me and said, "Hey I want to learn DJing, and how can I go about it..."

Rekha: What's your response to them?

Shilpa: I'm open. I'm like, "Hey! Like if there's basics you want to learn, yeah we could totally get together in my studio. I don't have a problem teaching you some basics like mixing," and whatever. I try to see where they're at. Some of them that have reached out to me; they understand the basics of mixing and whatever and they just want to know how to put themselves out there more. And my response to that is always: go out. Tell people that you DJ. Put yourself out there on social media. Go up to people you admire. Be friends with them. Tell them what you're trying to do. That's like my number one thing. No one's dreaming that

you're a DJ. If you're just sitting in your basement or your studio and making mixes, how are people supposed to know you're actually doing this and you're actually pursuing it. No one's gonna know unless you put yourself out there.

Rekha: That's it. We're good.

Shilpa: Cool.

Rekha: Awesome.

Interview Transcript:

Twelve45

(Edited) Interview with Twelve45

Rekha: So tell me about where you grew up. What was your neighborhood? A little bit about your background.

Twelve45: Sure. I was born in Brooklyn. I was there until I was five, and then we moved to Hollis, Queens. I lived there and went to elementary school in Queens, Cambria Heights. Not too far from there. And then I commuted to Brooklyn, Bushwick for middle school and then Fort Greene for high school.

Rekha: Did you go to Brooklyn Tech?

Twelve45: Yes I did.

Rekha: I heard that coded language. My niece worked there.

Twelve45: [Laughs]. It's the only like big school, or maybe like George Washington and a couple of others schools. Yeah. But yes, I pretty much grew up commuting. Even in grade school, I had to take two city buses.

Rekha: Wait, so you can move from Cambria heights to Brooklyn Tech?

Twelve45: Well Hollis. I went to elementary school in Cambria Heights. So I was taking two buses in fourth and fifth grade, taking buses to go to school.

Rekha: I know Hollis very well. I grew up in Westbury Long Island.

Twelve45: Oh ok, you're not far.

Rekha: So when we were broke, we would just take the bus all the way to Queens. N22.

Twelve45: Yes. Oh yeah. [Laughs]

Rekha: I'm sure you must've taken it the other way to get to the Roosevelt Field.

Twelve45: Yeah I have. I have taken it. And it's funny that you mention that because I was talking to a friend, because my friend lives in Harlem, and I would make fun of them because they have to go like a Target and stuff in the Bronx. I'm, I'm giving you a hard time, I had to go to stuff in Long Island. I wasn't that far away. Yeah I get it.

So out there, a lot of gifted and talented programs. Pretty much why I was going to none of my neighborhood schools. I went onto the PAL like in Hollis. It was think St. Pascals, before that. But I went to that PAL, a Police Athletic League. Yeah, so like after school, summer camp. That type of stuff. So until like 13 I was pretty...

Rekha: That was your connection, you still have roots in the community?

Twelve45: Yeah.

Rekha: People your age.

Twelve45: Yeah I did. It's funny you mention that because I always feel like I didn't have as much, but it was funny, I was walking to the gym one day, and this dude who went to PAL with me, he recognized me. I was like, "Oh yeah, you did." You're from New York, you want to have some type of street cred, you know, it's a thing. And I feel like I don't have any so I was like, "Oh no, I'm not here. I did the thing. I was out here in my streets doing the stuff."

Rekha: Hollis is famous, because obviously it has deep hip-hop connections.

Twelve45: Yeah. I saw LL Cool J at the Red Lobster at Green Acres one time. My mom hated it, because this is like '96, because cell phone were popular, so he was on the phone, outside with people, you know.

Rekha: I knew somebody who knew somebody that was dating him, and they had his phone number, and he had this rap as his outgoing message. [Laughs] I just remember, people would call him just to hear the rap.

Twelve45: Right.

Rekha: And then one time we were coming home from clubbing and we stopped at Georgia diner in Queens as you do. And he was sitting there, kind of by himself or with one other person with a big fur coat just being really obvious. And then one time it was really funny because we were, after a club night, we were in the Waverly diner and I had just said this, I'm like, "Who orders lobster at a diner? Who orders all these things that at a diner?" I've never seen anybody. Before you know it, DMC walked in with two or three other people, and they totally ordered up the fanciest things in the menu. It was pretty funny. And one time I went to—I have all these sightings. Anyway, we digress. Let's get back to this. I know there's also a Jam Master J Way.

Twelve45: Oh yeah. On 205th. It has a big mural. That's literally the streets I was, I just moved from... I move and I came back in 2013. So I was living there until 2017. And then, still at my mom's, still there, so I'm always like back there. So I'm driving, I'll be at my gas station I always go. My my Walgreen's right over there.

Rekha: Well a lot of kids I went to college with lived in Queens Village. So what was the makeup of your neighborhood like? What kind of music did you guys listen to, and was it different in your household, around the way, in your neighborhood? Were there any community events with music and was that different from your experience at school?

Twelve45: Yeah I think a bit. My mom, a lot of RnB being, so I was going to elementary school with Roberta Flack CDs and The Spinners, that was what I was listening to. I had to learn more about hip-hop. I heard it on a radio and I knew what it was. But that just wasn't what I was listening to. I remember like getting really really turned on to it when The Fugees came out. I spent that summer in Brooklyn. So I that's all you heard, and I was like, "Man this is bananas what's going on!" And then like, I listened to a lot of Bad Boy. I had a neighbor who would recite Biggie lyrics. He put me on to Notorious Thugs, like that is my favorite rap song. I can do all of Biggies verses. My family's from the Caribbean, so my mom didn't play like a lot of reggae and soca, but like mainstream Bob Marley and stuff.

Rekha: What part of the Caribbean?

Twelve45: Barbados, my parents are from Barbados. And then my family friends who are from Jamaica, Trinidad. I was under a decent amount of protection. My mom didn't let me run the streets so much. What would happen is because Hollis was Hollis, people will come through there. So I think with Puffy and Nas or "You Can Hate Me Now", that was not far from my house. Sometimes rough riders would drive down Hollis for all their things. I could be in the neighborhood and I get stuff. And then of course the parks and stuff would have music and hip-hop, but I wasn't really encouraged to hang out late at all those places, so I would be on the block mostly, if I was going anywhere. So it's funny, because a lot of people talk about all the parties at skate rinks, and I didn't have that experience. People think it's interesting because I wasn't a night owl anyways, like parties, you know. But to be in this profession now...

Rekha: Right. I hear you. I hear you.

Twelve45: Everyone's like, "Oh yeah you must have..." but that wasn't it, I was in college out there, more so. Whereas like I started going out and stuff....

Rekha: So Barbados, that's where Rihanna's from. Barbados has such a particular different history in the Caribbean. It was sort of an island that was actively involved—you know I just read about this history. It's a really interesting place. I took the class last semester on Beyonce and Rihanna. So where did you go to college?

Twelve45: Hampton University in Virginia.

Rekha: And what was that musically, for you?

Twelve45: Well that was wonderful. I was so excited. What's great about it is it's a historically Black university. It had all these Black people from everywhere. So in New York, you have Black people from everywhere. But it's different. I had the Reggae, the Soca, the rap, the RnB. But like, chopped and screwed, no one told me about chopped and screwed. I live in New York and I feel like I had never heard Jersey Club or Baltimore Club, and I was like, "What the fuck! Y'all right!". It was a beautiful experience music-wise. I got there and burnt everybody's CD, I was like, "Give me that, give me that, give me that." I want that music. So it was beautiful. West coast, Hyphy.

Rekha: I think it's so interesting that Jersey Club feels so much more connected with the Baltimore sound. They're so similar and it's true, people in New York, if they don't know, they just don't know.

So college was like a whole another set of musical awakening in some ways.

Twelve45: And then I feel like the Southern bands, and people were listening to different things and just like you know hip-hop, but by that time, had officially spread. We were getting into the Internet music age. I graduated in '09, so we were just getting into everybody's mixtapes, and all that stuff, online. It was great.

Rekha: And just to go back, or to go forward depending on where you are. What's your first memory ,if you have one, you may not, of seeing a DJ? In person, or a lot of people say, "I saw one on TV." Do you have that first memory?

Twelve45: I feel like I don't have that first memory. I feel like, because growing up in New York, I just grow up kind of knowing what a DJ was, not necessarily what they did. You know, like learning to DJ you're like, "Oh shit, I didn't know all this was going on!" But you have the rap groups, you have the park jams. I think the first time I appreciated DJs, like really specifically was college. Because they had to have new music mashups, a lot of different things. And that's when I really understood the flow of mixtapes. I would get mixtapes a lot. So I was commuting. I would be coming back to Jamaica Avenue. So I'd be getting all the different mixtapes. And I'm sure they were like good ones with good mixes but they were mostly, like track based, you know.

Rekha: Right.

Twelve45: And it wasn't till I memorized a transition from one to the next was in college. But that's when I was paying more attention. I think I listened to album some more so. I always had headphones on. My friends, the ones who knew me, they're like, "I'm not surprised that you got into music because you always had your headphones on." I was like, "I just assumed when everyone did." That was a boom of you known CD players got real cheap. iPods and all that stuff. Wasn't everyone in their headphones listening to music? Everyone loves music right now. But I think I just listened to more albums and projects that way. So when I got to college where I had to discover music through everyone else. And we had a college DJ, so it was like this person on campus, at the party. Remember I didn't go out a lot. So I didn't know...

Rekha: A lot of Indian kids have this experience. You know whenever you grow up in a conservative environment, and then you go to college, it's like

“What!” So when did you start? What was your first experience of yourself DJing? How did you learn?

Twelve45: Yes. I learned, I went to scratch. This was 2014. I started taking classes March 2014. So that was like my first time like DJing, learning how to DJ and playing out. But there were years of me just at friends' gatherings and parties doing a playlist. I remember one party specifically, a few parties. I moved to New Orleans right after school and I would just be like creating through YouTube channels at peoples' parties, being the DJ. People were like, “Oh wow, like, this is crazy.” I was like, doing that. It's really weird to look back on it, because I'm like the music sucks, we can't just go off Pandora playlists, like the ad would come on, just everything would irritate me. So how do you fix it? You know the person throwing the party, their hosting.

Rekha: When did you know you wanted to do it? You were in a “make the experience better” situation, and you were, and maybe you got known as the person who could handle the music better, right?

Twelve45: Yeah. I think I got known as it, but known one would help me come play music, if that makes sense.

Rekha: So then you went to scratch academy in 2014. When did you do your first gig?

Twelve45: My first gig gig was that December 2014. I hadn't played out. I did my scratch graduation, I felt like I did a set. First time I've played out, like someone invited me to gig, was that December.

Rekha: Ok. And what was that gig? Do you remember?

Twelve45: Yeah it was Von Bar, Dr. Unos & Dubs. Ellison, he was my first DJ teacher, and he was like, “Hey you want to do this?” I was like, “Sure, yeah!” And I had come out to Von before. It was cool.

Rekha: Do you remember what your set was?

Twelve45: Oh yeah, it was great. It was RnB, hip-hop, this 90's to 2000's, like everything feel-good. I'm mad because my friend had a live stream of it. I would go back and watch it every now and then. It was another DJ, she was really dope too. Twenty Tammy, DJ Twenty

Rekha: And then from there, what was the next round of gigs, and how long was your scratch? When you went to scratch, how many classes was it, was it a set of classes?

Twelve45: Yeah I did the whole thing. I took a one on one class, so I was teaching at the time, and I took a leave of absence from teaching and I really need to find something I wanted to do. So I took a DJ class and then it was kind of a wrap from there. I had to leave this, and then I picked up a class and was like, "Man I really like this." So I took all the classes, they have a certificate programs, so I took all of them. So I took one class like the 101, and I took the 202 class. My mom came to see the performance, we had to do like a little six song set.

Rekha: And what did you learn on? You learned on tables, with vinyl, or what...?

Twelve45: So the first the first 101 class was all vinyl, but I started learning on Serato, almost immediately me because I was around all these DJs, so I was just looking at what they were doing. They had all the equipment there. So I downloaded like Serato. I downloaded Serato DJ, was actually the first Serato program I downloaded. I had to download Scratch Live afterwards, just for some stuff. This was 2014.

Rekha: So they'd already moved to DJ.

Twelve45: Yeah they had already moved to DJ, so that was the first program I downloaded.

Rekha: Who were your instructors?

Twelve45: So the first 101 was Ellison who was Dr Unos & Dubs, is his name.

Rekha: What were their genders?

Twelve45: This is a great question. So all my instructors for my actual classes were men. The person who really took me under their wing when they saw me practicing in the space was Rogue Cruz, also a very dope DJ. I came in maybe four to five days a week since I started. So when I finished, I was probably like three hours a day.

Rekha: Wow so you practice. You would come in and practice three hours a day.

Twelve45: Yeah I would treat it like a job. I wasn't working anymore, so I was like, "This is what I'm going to do." This is what's happening.

Rekha: So what was the name of that instructor that took you under their wing?

Twelve45: Rogue.

Rekha: So he took you under his wing?

Twelve45: She.

Rekha: Ah! So all the instructors were men but Rogue, a woman, took you under her wing. Can you tell me more about the gender dynamic? What were your classmates?

Twelve45: Sure. So actually, I would say majority of the people taking classes at Scratch were men, but I had a lot of women around me, so Tammy who I mentioned, she was a Scratcher woman also. I think she was a

teaching assistant when I was there. I think I'm sure she went up to instructor afterwards. And then Nina Vicious, now, and she would come through every now and then. And then in my 202 class, there was two women and one guy and then it was 303, it was like three women, two guys. So I had a lot of women around, and I was like in the space. All the teachers, all the actual instructors were men. Except Rogue. She worked there, She would do private instructions. She was one of the desk and sales people so she worked there.

Rekha: But she was also a DJ and she also gave instruction.

You know Jay Master Jay was one of the founders. And his son is a DJ now.

Twelve45: Yes, Mizell.

Rekha: So outside of DJing, did you grow up learning any musical instruments or do you have a musical background.

Twelve45: Mmhmm. In high school, drums. It is pretty handy. I think another reason why I just like started practicing, because you have to do your rudiments and stuff. So yeah, drums. I tried to guitar a bit, but I didn't really pick that up too much. I mess around with Fruity Loops and stuff. Nothing really serious. And that was mainly it. My freshman year we had a band, and I picked drums, and then I told the church then and I told the drummer, so I did lessons with him, and then I got a few other kids at the church to come and do some drum stuff. So we had a little mini drum line which was cool.

Rekha: That's dope. So your first gig was at Von because that's where they do the graduation. No?

Twelve45: No, I did a set for graduation, which was at Scratch.

Rekha: You know why I'm getting that confused, because Dub Spot used to their graduation downstairs. So how did you get from that gig, when did you start gigging more, or what was the next step in your DJ story.

Twelve45: So there was this meetup group that had opened turntables, at this place called Skinny Bar in Lower East Side. So I was just signed up for a set, like an hour set. Because it's great to have some place to invite people out to. Like, I'm DJing here, and just get the jitters. For some reason at Von, I was fine. I think it was just I was in a familiar place around familiar people, and I got to a skinny bar and I got lots of jitters. I was mixing well, but people couldn't talk to me. I was like "mmm". This guy was trying to ask questions, and I was like, "After this, I can, like..." I just I couldn't really function fluidly. I think the booth felt really exposed too.

Rekha: Yeah.

Twelve45: You know like, it was a table, you are pretty open, and getting used to space. It was just a different experience, which is interesting because it felt like a regression. Like, "Oh you were comfortable at Von, you're good, and and in this space it was like, "Ugh". I couldn't. I did that for a few months. I think January I did almost every Tuesday. I did maybe every other for a while.

Rekha: How did you transition from that into other gigs. Did that get you noticed?

Twelve45: No, I wouldn't say got me noticed. I think it got people who, knowing I was DJing frequently because I would post flyers, you know what I'm saying? It was a huge jump. I wasn't in music, I wasn't in the scene. Really only played to people who know other DJs, and they're usually not trying to come out to the same gigs over and over. So that was that was part of it. And then other DJs, like some other DJs from Scratch started giving me gigs. I was really good at documenting. In the sense

of like I would put it on Bands In Town, and tell people to come out, all those things. I was really trying to build a following. Did that. Trying to figure out where like my next gig gig was.

Rekha: Is this your primary profession now? That's the kind of the journey. Walk me through how does it go from intense practicing to turntables to getting gigs to whatever else you've done. Let's take a step back for a minute, what's your method? Are you Serato, do you use controller, CDJs?

Twelve45: Serato, mostly. I like turntables. I've been playing on CDJs a lot lately with the radio show I do, and as a function of a lot of the places.

Rekha: I gave up asking for turntables because they're all they're in terrible condition. I got tired of carrying around needles, and control records. I gave in. I gave up. I started on vinyl too. Vinyl because I play a lot of Indian music, and from the get-go we had use CDs. From the beginning, so kind of needed to have all of it. So you're Serato-based and prefer turntables, but comfortable with CDJs. Do you use controllers at all?

Twelve45: I do use controllers. It's much more mobile. So currently I am the musician and resident for a class at Steps on Broadway. So that, like, I need to be on a controller. There's no way I'm setting up...

Rekha: So what controller do you use?

Twelve45: Mix Track Pro 3 or something like that.

Rekha: What brand is that?

Twelve45: Numark.

Rekha: Oh it's a Numark.

Twelve45: I dot understand the Pioneer.

Rekha: You know, it's too big though. Pioneer is bulky. Really bulky. And then when you DJ, do you...? How would you describe your physical, way you DJ? Do you blend, do you cut? Do you talk on the mic?

Twelve45: I don't talk on the mic too much. I talk on the mic during my radio show, just so people know what's happening. Sometimes I don't talk enough. Like almost 40 minutes will pass, "Oh yeah. I need to say something." But I'm blending, blends are like my thing, and I do cut. I like to cut where it makes sense. I do little audio drops and stuff like that. I want to get back to scratching for real. That's my next thing.

Rekha: Do you do any production edits?

Twelve45: Yeah I did. I did this certification at Scratch for production as well.

Rekha: What did they teach you on Ableton?.

Twelve45: Ableton.

Rekha: And so do you use any of that, like you make edits or mashups or anything?

Twelve45: Yeah I do some edits. I've done refixes and stuff like that. And then I produce, I work with a rapper. Like I'm her tour DJ. I produce some tracks for her.

Rekha: I'm gonna have to get a resume from you, because you have a lot going on.

Twelve45: I do! I need to write all that.

Rekha: Let me make a suggestion as someone who has DJed for almost twenty seven years. And I'm so bad about writing things down. I wish I had a notebook, where I just had the date and wrote down what the gig was, and then that's all I wrote and maybe two or three thoughts about it. Just keep that as record. You know, just like one interesting thing. I also wish I saved ten dollars from each gig. but that's another story.

So what do you what's your opinion on like cutting, scratching, cutting? What's your opinion on scratching and turntabling during a set, like all these fancy button but they have now, like loop roll, this, that. What's your thoughts on that.

Twelve45: I love everything, as long as it doesn't get in the way of the music. Like for me, it should be adding. I love cutting and scratching, but I'm not doing it so that you just only hear me cutting and scratching. I'm using it as an added element to what's happening. I'm using it to introduce the next song I'm using. It's like you're still having a good listening experience. I feel like as long as this is still a good musical and listening experience, I like them. They sound good, I use them sometimes, I'll have the same tracks going and use a loop roll, like in a thing. My thing is we have the technology, like we should be better DJs. There is nothing wrong with just a straight mixing, I don't have a problem with that, I do often. But it's just like we have so much at our fingertips that people, look, like people were literally cutting pieces of tape and taping them together to do that, you know what I'm saying? They're people who spend hours innovating, like use it! Use it, but use it well. Part of my name is like, it's about just the music, right. I'm not there to get in the way of the music. Anytime I personally make a decision about DJing, like it's me and what I want, it never sounds good. It's what music needs to be and what needs to happen. So cut if you can cut. If you like cutting, get better at that. But some people, I can't enjoy your set. Either it's a vision set or you're here for the people. It can be a bit of both, but like really, don't kill the vibe.

Rekha: Is there anyone who you see that does that well?

Twelve45: That's a great question. Because what I like about different DJs, are these things I kind of want to pull for myself. I don't want to say that I'm my favorite DJ, but I play music the way I like to hear it. Does that make sense?

Rekha: It does and sometimes I am my favorite DJ, because I don't think...and I don't know why it's so hard.

Twelve45: I liked being on Carl Cox's set at the other day. And I want to get better with multiple decks. like I'm going to get up before I my there. Yeah.

Rekha: That's generational. They have the rotary mixers. They were doing like 25 minute blends. They were doing so subtle. But also the music they were using allows for it, it was produced in that way, that was meant for layering. You know like Danny Taneglia too, there's a bareness to it that lends itself to layering, which is really nice. I mean one DJ that I think kind of does it ok, or good, I don't know if you've heard of DJ Kayper, I mean there's so many DJs now. She's become more of a bottle service-ish DJ, but she has hip-hop roots.

Twelve45: I saw her before. One of my friends and instructors at Scratch did a party called Brooklyn Took It, at Friends and Lovers. So I saw her perform there. I'm trying to remember if I was on that bill or not, because it was like, the woman stuff and different stuff, but you know she killed it. I like the way she does scratching with good music. She didn't let it get in the way of the music, that's what I'm talking about.

Rekha: I think sometimes A-track is good like that. Because again, foundationally these are hip-hop DJs who are now playing open format and leaning towards dance music. So I think that's why it works for them. But let's go back to the journey. Lead me to your current resume.

Twelve45: So after teaching, going into DJing. I taught math. So when I came back here, I was teaching middle school math, I taught high school math, and I was teaching in New Orleans. Which was also great for me musically, I discovered bounce music and second line and all the other stuff, so that was great. And so I was teaching math. I was still trying to figure out, I think it was gigging, here and there, and then the summer of 2015, I started teaching with this nonprofit called Building Beats, where we teach DJing and music production to kids throughout the city. So I started doing that and I'm trying to remember, I feel like I had gotten a few more gigs and was doing some things.

It's really hard to remember that far back. But one of the things that happened was I met a young lady who did a review of my friends' music, and we met up and she did a RnB trivia party. Like I told you, I love RnB.

Rekha: That's when I met you! Or I met her. I remember hearing about this trivia party.

Twelve45: So like she mentioned that. I was like, "Yeah, I'm just like doing random gigs and stuff. Anytime, I'm down." You know how it is with parties like this, she was like "It ain't much fame," and I was like, I'm trying to like play music that I enjoy for people that enjoy it. I went to one, and I was like, "Yeah yeah. So let me know". And so through that and as it progressed, ended up being like the resident DJ for that.

Rekha: What was the name of that party?

Twelve45: It went from Jam Parly to RnB trivia. So J-A-M P-A-R-D-Y, then we named letters R-N-B trivia.

Rekha: That was in Bushwick, right?

Twelve45: Yeah, over by Trophy bar.

Rekha: Right, right. I think I got a flyer for it. And that was monthly or weekly?

Twelve45: It was monthly. Yeah. I just became a regular there. For me, all of my gigs have been, for better or worse, handed to me. There's very few gig that I'd go out and get. Like people who had heard me play before would call me for their parties and stuff.

Rekha: That's how most gigs work.

Twelve45: Yeah, yeah exactly.

Rekha: Like most DJs, that's how you get it. You ask any of those old folks. You do a gig and get another gig, it's very hard you go out find your own show.

You've mentioned a lot about the DJ community, like the Skinny Bar and learning from scratch. How would you define the DJ community?

Twelve45: That's a great question. I was say anybody who DJs and cares about DJing. To be honest. Because there are some people in the community who are not my favorite DJs, but they made sure that they say, "Oh here's an opportunity for you." So that was the community. The guys who did the open turntables. And then sometimes it was just people from Scratch. There was a lot of Scratch people, who had heard and looked out, because I did this certification program, I started in March and ended in October. I was one of the premiere people for the graduation. Someone made a comment like, "If you spend time," because I in there all the time. So I feel like one, I had the inclination, obviously with music and I had that the rhythmic timing stuff, but also like I spent a lot of time with the music and learning how to manipulate it and play with it. So it's like people took notice of that. Like I care about how music is played. It's just a fact. So people in the DJ

community who really care about that try to make spaces for people who do that.

Rekha: And that's men and women? Across the board, right?

Twelve45: Yes, I would say across the board. In, 2015 I was doing some meetups, women beatmaker meetups at Dub Spot. That's how I met Kristen, she's a producer and she DJs as well, and some other women producers. So even just being the space, being able to be encouraged and encourage other people. So there's one young lady who I only new on Twitter. But she was dating someone I'd met at Scratch. She did some really great SoundCloud mixes and she was expressing online how she was afraid to DJ in front of people. I was like, "Oh, no that's not a problem." I invited her to one of the beatmaker meetups. It wasn't about DJing specifically, but it was about the confidence of being in community.

Rekha: Of being in community. So these women meetups, they were obviously all women and was that an important space? Who initiated that?

Twelve45: It was Kristin and this other woman, I'm really blanking on her name. But she was really great. And offered really great feedback, things that you need to hear, not like being mean, but like, "Oh you need to layer those claps. You need to do this. You need to do that." Like, thank you, I wouldn't know what I wasn't hearing but that was... Just even just being in a space where you come in, and it's just people trying for something, dabbling in something or being a professional. They would bring in in professionals to talk to us, because that was part of their network. So that was great.

Rekha: That's awesome. So, keep going down your journey. Tell me more.

Twelve45: So I would say as far teaching at Building Beats, it was just like doing gigs. People start hitting me up. I can't recall a specific progression. I would just do open turntables, people hit me up.

Rekha: Were you able to make a sustainable living out of this?

Twelve45: I was still living in Hollis at my mom's house. So it was quite subsidized. She was cooking. [Laughs] So Building Beats helped a lot. I was doing a lot because I had a teaching background, too. I had a lot of workshops. It was easy for me to take two, and then I ended up moving up. That so that fall, I ended up building out some of the curriculum and then moving into the youth programming leads. I was looking over all the workshop leaders and working with them.

Rekha: So you were still working in music but that was another job in education. Music and education together.

Twelve45: Yeah, that's what I really like. It's interesting because I started DJing at 27. Trying to figure out a certain things, and what I really liked about what happened is I had gotten all the things that I needed, experience I needed to be sustained through it, and then also like I got into DJing, I didn't know DJing was becoming popular at the time that I'd gotten into it, but because it has become popular, because it has like current technological advances, because there was a certain accessible community, I feel the timing of it was really great. I could even be able to do Building Beats, because Building Beats didn't exist like five years before, you know. Doing that was really one of the ways I was contributing, to both my skill set and my pockets.

Rekha: So how many times a week would you DJ?

Twelve45: I would say twice a month, like for sure. I was like out somewhere doing something maybe, like maybe open turntables and RnB trivia.

Rekha: And were they like places that people paid to get in? Did you ever create your own nights, or your own thing?

Twelve45: No.

Rekha: You've been just working.

Twelve45: I can't remember exactly, I think it might have been like winter 2015. I had hit the pavement with Rogue and tried to go out to venues and do stuff, and that's just not how I see myself doing it. I was glad like we went and did it, because I was like, "Ok now you see like what's playing where, what's on what..."

Rekha: That wasn't your thing. Some people organize their own club nights or their own parties, it's a whole different skill. For some people, they wanted to do that.

Twelve45: And also people have different networks. Some people have like 50 people come out. I don't, like I could do the work to do that. That's not really where I'm at.

Rekha: And it's really terrible for venues to judge based on that, which is not fair.

Twelve45: Yeah exactly.

Rekha: What has your experience been with venues, like when you did RnB trivia or any spots you played regularly.

Twelve45: So RnB trivia, it's a pretty small pay out, because we're doing it on Monday night. I was really going for the chicken sandwiches and the drinks. I was going really to play, because it's really great to see all these RnB nights be really be really big and people touring and stuff like that, but it was like, to be around people who were not only

knowledgeable about the music, but the people behind the music, who really made space for people. I don't feel like everybody is doing it for hype or clout. I don't think that that is the process, but there needs to be different spaces in the entertainment food chain that makes sense, like small intimate moments and larger things also. Every time we come together for RnB Trivia, it is a family, it's a friendship. People like have wanting to commune with each other for Black month or we're doing it quarterly this year.

Rekha: I'm going to come next time.

Twelve45: Yeah, I got you. That aspect of it. Because it really isn't about being seen or anything else. And we have really have something special in the way we speak about the music, because we speak about people as real people. It's really funny. Up to date, going really old, I enjoy it thoroughly. I think that is the most involved as far as creating a night or a party. But I came into something that was already going, so I feel like that's a little different.

As far as venues and stuff, I'm usually brought in by a DJ to do something. I'm usually dealing with the DJ as far as pay out or whatever the situation is. I'm trying if there was a venue that I went to that I was like—oh I know one. But again, it was covering for a friend and they had just lost their liquor license, so it was like super empty. It was not like my favorite type of place to play anyway. Just chalk that one up to whatever, but I feel pretty fortunate that I don't really have too many gigs that I don't enjoy. Right now I hold down the monthly residency at Franklin Park, and I enjoy it because they have good food, it's a nice little payout. And people come to party. I've never had a night there, even on the slowest of nights, people are there to enjoy themselves. I can take it to wherever I want to take it. They appreciate when I'm really on the nose as far as timing, and it was very current. That's the only continuous thing I have. It fulfills all I need. I have the whole night to myself. I'm on S9, I got turntables. I'm good. I don't need

much. Other than that like I've been doing some more weddings lately, like that's the word of mouth stuff.

Rekha: Do you have your own set up for weddings?

Twelve45: Yeah. I have my own set up, so I just bring the cases out on speakers and stuff. It's pretty cool when it happens. I don't go out and find the weddings. The ones who lately, they've heard me play and want me at their wedding, or like their friend. Now I'm talking to someone, and I'm doing their friend's wedding.

Rekha: The way to get wedding is to do weddings. People at weddings are also getting married. No, weddings are great. I mean that can be stressful but if people are chill it can be a lot of fun.

Twelve45: And that's the thing. Every couple I've had has been a good couple. Good people, good taste in music. Because I'm not pressed to do weddings, if it doesn't work, it doesn't work. This is a match, so I appreciate that you like me as well. It's a really special day, and it's a lot of money.

Rekha: Definitely a lot more money and a lot of different things. Do you get asked to do shit for free?

Twelve45: All the time, all the time. It depends on who's asking. If that person is making an ask and we're building something or doing something, it's like, yes, if I'm available. That happens, even this class at Steps right now is not a cash cow. I work with a dance company, Elisa Monte Dance... So I'm their resident DJ, sound person. We did a collaboration in 2017. The artistic director's name is Tiffany Rea-Fisher.

Rekha: You DJ for their class, for their performances?

Twelve45: I have. So we did a collaborative performance, think of “Alice in Wonderland in the club” type of thing. With modern dancers, so it was really dope. It’s called “After Dark.” And I met, I actually met Tiffany at a panel discussion for people in arts administration. So working with Building Beats, I was like, “I’ve never done this before.” I had connected with someone who worked at the Apollo, Princess it was her masters thesis.

So every project was put on this panel. There was this other gentleman who work at Urban Arts and Tiffany was talking about her work with Elisa Monte Dance. And I just asked a question and we ended talking afterwards at the reception, and she invited me to see their performance. They had their season in like a couple months or weeks or whatever. And work was wonderful you know. I had come out to another performance they had, and she asked me. January 2017. So I like met her in 2016, January 2017, if I wanted to collaborate with her on a project. I was like, “Yeah, that sounds great!” I sent her some songs, she started creating to them, and then we talked a bit about what she was doing why she was creating the space she saw this in. I helped guide it in the sense of I’m the DJ and I’m here. Where would it make sense for a DJ to be? A club. Let’s make that the overall setting and then we can take the story from there. So each song had its own setting. The way it worked is we had a beginning song. So I do a set before the show. So people are eating, drinking. I’m doing a set before the show, and then the crew would indicate when the show was going to start, and then I mix directly into the first song. So we have a first song and a last song, and all the songs in between, I could do in whatever order I wanted. So we had Friday and Saturday. Both shows were different, but still the same kind of theme in there. So each setting was like a VIP lounge, one’s like the bathroom with all the women... Think of each song is a space in a journey. So that was really great.

So from there I’ve been working with them. We did a show last year at the National Gallery of Art and we’re doing another show in April for

Easter. We're doing a theme about the moon, innovation and discovery and stuff.

Rekha: Bring that to M.I.T. They love shit like that.

Twelve45: I've been watching a lot of YouTube videos on the universe and those things. I love the moon, one, and then also, this one at the National Gallery.

Rekha: Send me the information about it. I don't all the people, but I know it's something like that would go on well here. I would love to. Tell me about your radio show.

Twelve45: Sure. It's More than Mondays. It's is on Mondays, 10:00am to 12:00pm. It's on New Tower Radio. It's in Brooklyn.

Rekha: So is it on actual radio?

Twelve45: It's Internet radio. And I really enjoy it. It started as a noon show, but because of the classes I do at Steps, I had to move it up. What I really like about it is, it is Monday, and I'm starting my week, so I really want to help other people start their week, and what that sounds like and what that looks like. So originally it was just a straight mix show. I would tell friends to come in and people would end up coming in. We talked, and I had one friend, Jillian, who lives around the corner, he would just keep coming by. So he ended up being my co-host now. The thing about it is, when you're DJ and especially cause I'm not vocal on the mic, you know you are sending out messages, but people don't really need to know who you are. We talk about what's going on day-to-day, what we think about, all that stuff. I feel like I sent something out to people that makes them feel not alone, so they can get started, and shoot the shit. Sometimes you need to just talk to a friend, and just talk about what's going on with you, what's going on with them, where it coincides. We end up talking about McDonald's for a long time, but

what was great about is we went everywhere with it, to a broader point like, "Oh, McDonald's, you're either treating yourself or you're like punishing yourself." And I was like, yeah. That's so true!

I get to hold the tagline for the show, it is "A vibe from every tribe. A toast to every coast." So I really have the freedom to play whatever I want, from wherever I want. This week I had more sleep than I wanted, so I was like, "All right. Let me get some energy." I was really up, I'm playing Afrobeat, I'm playing Latin music, playing everything. I was playing K-pop. I try to like really grind. I was really obsessed with the Netherlands like a month. I was playing a lot of their artists. It's exploration and music for me, but also kind of showing that we all have something. There's seamless mixes, theirs transitions, we have something in common. And you can enjoy this music that you don't know and then I'll get some pop stuff, I'll play dance stuff. Whatever feels good. I'm trying to have good energy.

Rekha: I have a couple more questions. One is how did you get your DJ name?

Twelve45: Yeah sure my DJ name is Twelve45, or twelve and the number forty-five. No space. I gave that name to myself, or it came to me, I would on my first DJ class. I was talking to a friend, I was like, "I don't know what my DJ name will be." She was like, "You haven't even had a class yet." I was like, "All right, fair enough. Fair enough." After my first class I was walking around, going to meet with the same friend, and it came to me just walking around and like it was one I wanted. What it's most representative of is the vinyl size, the 12 inch and the 45. I really want it to be about the music. The music is the most important part. That comes through me. That's what I'm playing, that's what I'm manipulating. That's what I have the honor and privilege to work well with. So that's the main thing. And then, for me, the other number is that Jordan wore, he wore twelve one time on his jersey that was stolen, and forty-five when he came back from retirement. We overcome things in life, and you have transitions, literally, in life and

talking about that. The difference between 12 and 45 is 33, you know, RPM. It's a lot of little math things in there.

Rekha: Your math nerd is coming out. So here's another thing. It seems that in your career you've been fortunate enough to like build your gigs through community, and you approached or you learned DJing within a community. Have you ever felt unsafe when you've been DJing?

Twelve45: No I've never been in a position where I've felt unsafe. I've seen people do some kind of risky people, take drugs and stuff like that. But I've never been where I don't feel good here. But I've been fortunate. I've heard stories and I've seen people get out of order. I'm live a pretty protected life. I fortunately don't encounter a lot of energy like that. But I'm not saying that other DJs are playing the wrong music. The energy, I'm really intentional about what frequencies I'm putting out with the music and how that should affect people.

Rekha: I mean the thing is, sometimes working DJs, we've got to work and play. We can't control the crowd. Have you played a lot with men DJs or in other communities? And how has that experience been, or is there a way to characterize that experience?

Twelve45: It's fine for me. I would say working with men is not the same as working with women, but I couldn't really give you exactly what it is. They they just generate a different environment, different frequencies. So we're transitioning like DJ to DJ. They care if the transition is good. But I feel like if I'm working with women, we're really like, "What you playing? Well I got this. OK I'll put something in with this." It is more about how to do it. How our house should be done. It's about the people, about the listening experience, about the vibe, continuing that.

Rekha: You think it's different with men?

Twelve45: I would say they don't care as much.

Rekha: They don't care much about who they are playing for?

Twelve45: No, I'm trying to see if I can word it correctly. They care, but not as much. We'll spend like two songs figuring out what the transition is. They sometimes go, "All right, one coming in. We'll figure it out." They don't care as much. They care if they can make it happen. But there is a level of intention of seamlessness of keeping it going. Not all men. It's just like they may have their scene that they're coming in with to. I feel like a lot more come in with a couple of these cuts, or the drop or whatever, but they may want people to know that they're not-

Rekha: They're not trying to build for you. They're just trying to go on.

Twelve45: Mmhmm.

Rekha: Has anyone ever, while you're DJing, even from a transition, like fiddled with your shit, fixed your E2, or put their hand, reached in?

Twelve45: Yes. Both in the good and bad way. Sometimes you may hear something different in the monitor. It may need to be louder or stuff like that. And then I've had people come too close the equipment, but not really DJs. Somebody does that hand motion over this stuff, you know. I haven't really had experiences where someone is coming and fixing things for me that don't actually need fixing. Not in a bad way. Something you don't know. I'm up here killing it, and they're like, "Ok, you need to be louder. They need to hear it." Okay, great. I'm happy with that. It's usually someone involved, sound tech, person in the party. Not to be intrusive, but to let me continue do what I'm doing, and focusing on that.

Rekha: Well is there anything else you'd like to add? So you do a radio show on Monday. You still working with Building Beats.

Twelve45: No. I ended up being there for workshops and partnerships, a representative. And I left this past December. Now I'm full time music DJ, audio, sound production. Currently I'm a manager and curator of a Culture Center in Bedstuy.

Rekha: Oh I think Reborn mentioned. Tell me more about that.

Twelve45: It's the Remy Rouge Culture Center. They're a gallery space, community space. We're really here to help continue the dialogue in the community, and also be an affordable space for the community to be used for art. We've had Markus Prime, who's a illustrator, we currently have on Passions with his work up. We have different artists come in. We do writing workshops every first and third Sunday, yoga every Monday. People come in and do different events here, like pop-up shops, brunch, just different things that are connected to our community. All of it is culture based and art driven for us.

It's been a really great experience. Ever since I started DJing I had to give up whatever I thought I was going to do, because like nothing is that. Just be a person who is able to provide space for people. We have an open mic, we have a flat collective which is a non-profit artist collective, for self-love, affirmation and preservation. One of the things we had to do for that open mic was look for a space. And that's one of the biggest thing for artists, trying to find space to have something to show their work. So like for us, thousand dollars gives you a week in an event. For some places, that's four hours of a white wall space at a gallery that no one goes to. We have fostered a community where people can come in and come into the space outside of the times it's just a gallery event. So, it's been really great.

Rekha: Do you feel connected to the kind of work you do as a DJ, it seems really integral. I mean if you could define it, and maybe it changes for gigs, who do you think your audience is or who your community is?

Twelve45: That's a great question. As much as I know I'm good at what I do, part of what building is knowing who your fan base is. Knowing who your audience is. I really do think for people who love music that's to be played well, to explore music to both be nostalgic and be futuristic. People who can who have fun accessing all those places. Also like the creative community, people who like to talk about certain things, too. I think that's the other part of my show. What would you like to speak about, what frequency are you, on what type of collaboration, organizing are you doing. As far as right now, the things that I'm trying to do with the dance company in the next couple years is going to be people who really are about elevating the presentation of the craft and just consistently liking to see it presented well and on different stages. And how do we integrate it with different mediums and different artists.

It's interesting because doing the venues and the gigs and stuff like that, I'm not a night owl. This is tough for me sometimes but I still am DJing. I think DJing at night is important. I think the nightlife is important and should always be a rule of the DJ to know what people respond to in that space. But I'm trying to take other places, and onto the National Gallery, doing a show on Sunday. During the day. Because it deserves that. DJing deserves that elevation. It is a high art. There is a turntable orchestra traveling now, so being able to be seen as a relevant instrument and as musicians and stuff like that. Being a DJ at Steps is a really big thing because the musicians are usually pianists or drummers. Or the teacher just has their iPod. Being on call as a musician is a great thing. Trying to do it a little differently and it seems to worked well for me.

Rekha: What was the worst gig you ever did?

Twelve45: Oh man. Worst gig. I don't know. As I would say worst for sure was this one time I was in a place in the Lower East Side. It's not not my scene, it's right off center from my scene, so I can do it but it's like I have to really think about it. And I just wasn't playing enough pop music and

like certain songs, and I just wasn't in their pocket. And the dude was like, "Yo, you have to play more dance music." And the thing is top, the way that venue is set up, where the party is happening is downstairs and the DJ is upstairs by the lounge at the bar.

Rekha: You can't see what's happening.

Twelve45: Can't see the people I'm responding to, their energy's completely different from what you need down there. It's usually not a problem.

Rekha: Sometimes things just are not working out that day.

Twelve45: Yeah. Exactly. And so I would say, as far as being a bad gig, that was one. I would say one where I had the most like technical mess ups, I was doing Essence. They have a street style festival underneath DUMBO. So this is like a big stage. This was like a big deal, you know. I didn't have my headphones. That was the first thing. I luckily had some earplug headphones, but this was this big system and I'm on a big stage and I can't hear in these fucking earbuds that well. I was doing OK. And I was fine and but then at some point the whole system just shut down for no reason. And I was doing CDJs, I forgot to put the loop back on, so then when I came back on, the track ran out. There was a lot of those things.

To be honest, I had a good time and I got good feedback. But other than it was a tough technical gig. That was definitely the biggest stage I had been on, so I think it helped me calibrate, like what are you trying to do. Because if you're trying to be on the stage you have to have different energy, because you feel it when people come on stage, how everyone's energy and all problems come up. It's like, "Oh, ok this is something different. This is a whole different life." It was really good for me to do it at that time. I could do it technically, but also I was present enough, because I'm one to be on the mic, so I had to do different things to get people's attention. Like, don't be afraid to say "follow me",

just different things. So it was great. It was like, "Ok, if this is where you're trying to be regularly, you have to want and do certain things."

Rekha: Well thank you so much for your time, and for the sharing story with me.

Rekha: I wish I could just keep talking to people. Stories are so important here. One thing that strikes me is when I ask people, "What was your first gig?" People are like, "Oh wow." To remember and document your own story, or read it back to yourself is so important. I think sometimes as women we don't. We don't do that. I think as artists and people, it's really important to remember that. So thank you, so much.

Interview Transcript:

DJ Ushka

(Edited) Interview with DJ Ushka

Ushka: My name is Thanu Yakupitiyage and I consent to this interview.

Rekha: So what is your artist or DJ name?

Ushka: My name is Ushka.

Rekha: How did you come up with that name, what does it mean, does it have a significance?

Ushka: My full name is Thanushka. So it's just the second half of my name. Thanushka actually means the rhythm of music in the sky.

Rekha: Wow, that's awesome.

Thanu: I grew up kind of all over the place. I was born in Sri Lanka, in Colombo and when I was one, my mom and I moved to Scotland, where my dad was doing Ph.D. So I lived in Sterling, which is in between Glasgow and Edinburgh, until I was five. That's where I learned English, and kind of forgot Sinhalese. And then after that we moved to Thailand, to Bangkok. Where my dad's taught still teaches at the Asian Institute of Technology, and so I mainly grew up on university campuses, and mainly on this campus in Bangkok. I moved back to Sri Lanka when I was 8, for about four years. But then I finished middle school and high school in Bangkok. I moved to the US when I was 18 for college. My father is a biologist and he does work around agriculture and aquaculture. He does sustainable farming practices with farmers across South and Southeast Asia.

Rekha: What kind of music did you listen to growing up?

Ushka: We listened to a lot of reggae because my dad was a really big fan of Bob Marley and the Wailers so it was a bit of everything. I remember the the CDs and tapes of his that I would always play were always Bob Marley, Tracy Chapman, old school soul and funk stuff. So everything from Jimmy Hendrix to Aretha Franklin. You know James Brown. Just like a scattering. He didn't really listen to that much like Sri Lankan music per se, but we had like Star TV, so we were also listening to a variety, particularly Bollywood music. My father liked Black music from the states and from the Caribbean.

Rekha: Was that the only access you had to music, was through your father?

Ushka: I mean MTV was a huge source. So like MTV and getting satellite TV was a huge source of Western music. Thailand is a place where everyone is so aspirationally Western, and so the radio stations that I would listen to both when I lived in Bangkok and in Colombo, were the radio stations where it was a lot of hip-hop that was playing. Growing up in Colombo when I was nine or ten, like Gangsta's Paradise was like the big thing, that everyone listened to and so I listened to it all. Aaliyah, Destiny's Child, TLC, I grew up on American music even though I lived in Asia.

Rekha: What attracted you to DJing, or when were you conscious of what DJing is?

Ushka: I think when I came to college in the States. I went to Hampshire College in Western Massachusetts. There was a person named Damian and he was like the DJ, and he DJed all college parties. That's where I became aware of it as an art form, but from the perspective of being a dancer. It was like on the dance floor that I started to meet other women of color who were dancers. The dance floor became an important space to me, and the club space became important from the perspective of someone who's coming and listening to music and using my body and moving. Because my family was really strict, I couldn't go

out that much when I was in high school. I think like also because Western Mass isn't that far from New York, we started to come to New York to go to those 18 plus club nights. I remember coming to Basement Bhangra when I was 19 maybe, or like 20.

Rekha: I want to know how you got in, it's 21 and over. Whatever. [Laughs]

Ushka: I think it was very much from the perspective of a dancer. But then I was I was very aware from my experience as a younger person, it was always men who were DJs, and men who got a lot of clout because they were DJs. Because I was mainly in a hip-hop space, when I was like 18, 19 in my early 20s. I always kind of wanted to be a DJ, but I don't think I really thought I could until maybe I was like 22 or 23, and a male DJ friend of mine was like, I'll teach you. I had access to equipment through someone.

Rekha: What attracted you to it. Why were you interested in it?

Ushka: So after college I had moved to New York for a year. The economy had crashed, so it was really hard to get a job and I needed a visa.

Rekha: What year was this, if you can remember?

Ushka: It was 2007. I graduated in '07, so it was '07, '08. Because I had come from abroad, I needed a visa, I needed a sponsorship to be able to stay and I wasn't going to be able to stay, because of the economy. So I had re-applied to grad schools. Basically the year I graduated college, it felt to me like I only really had a year left to be in the States and I would have to leave. So I spent a lot of time in club culture. Just going, even to places like Bembe, and I just sort of exploring music in New York again as a dancer. Coming to places like Basement Bhangra, other places. Going to those Sweat Parties, those queer parties. And then when I went back to grad school in Massachusetts at UMass, and when I was in grad school, I started to DJ on the side, just playing around

because I had a friend who had access to equipment. When I moved back to New York when I was 24, 25. Even though I was here all the time, I like officially, officially moved back in 2010. I was quite depressed actually in 2010 because I had secured an H1 visa, had secured a good job, but I just I wasn't satisfied. It felt like everything that I had been working for, because I spent so much time hustling to be able to stay, I didn't actually think about what I wanted. So I was going out a lot, like every day of the week I was out, even though I had a full time job. And for me, club spaces were very much about working out what was going on for me. So I was 25 years old, where I was like, "I want to help craft these spaces and create these spaces."

Rekha: What do you mean by craft the space?

Ushka: I think what I mean is intention around who the space is for, how do you curate the music, how do also make sure that—I don't believe that any space is truly safe. And so this idea of a safe space is kind of complicated. But how do you make an experience for people who are people of color, immigrants, queer folks. How do you sustain something? That's what I mean by craft. And you know when I was 25, I was like I was going to parties like Que Bajo. There was still few women running spaces, like queer women running spaces. I was mainly in these male-dominated spaces still and I just felt like there was more room for women DJs, more intentional.

Rekha: And you weren't finding that?

Ushka: No, I had it. I liked the spaces I was in, but it always felt like there was like one or two. For me when I was 25, there was Que Bajo and there was Basement Bhangra. The Sweat Parties had happened on and off, but they were like kind of dwindling by then. There were a couple of Black house music parties, but that was it. Everything was really siloed. It felt really siloed. I just wanted to be part of adding to something that still felt really limited.

Rekha: Let's go back to what you mention that in grad school you had a friend who had access to equipment. Who was that friend, and what equipment?

Ushka: His name was Damian and he had turntables. He DJed Serato off of turntables. When I first started bedroom DJing, using his equipment, he taught me how to use Serato vinyl. I had Serato on my laptop. He was a really good teacher because before we got on Serato, he was like you need to learn how to DJ records. And so we did that for a little bit, and then also Serato on vinyl.

Rekha: How did you find that experience?

Ushka: I think that a lot of people, when they say that they want to DJ, it's not easy. I don't think it was easy. It's really funny to me now when young people are like, "Hey, I want to DJ, can you teach me?" Because they think they can just like press sync on a CDJ, like it's all good. But the way I started, you had to listen. All of my first experiences learning how to DJ was learning how to listen to records, and learning how to listen to tempo. And obviously it was easier on Serato than just doing it on records. It took a lot of practice and I wasn't good at it in the beginning. I felt really like deflated at times, but would always just keep coming back to it.

Rekha: Do you have any formal musical training?

Ushka: I played keyboards when I was a kid. It's mainly actually through dance, like I took a lot of hip-hop classes.

Rekha: So you had a lot of dance experience?

Ushka: Yeah.

Rekha: So your first experience was learning through your friend at college, and then, did you continue to learn, or what were the next steps in learning.

Ushka: So when I moved back to New York in 2010, I met Beto. I met a bunch of people because I was out all the time. I met Beto. I met Andy Gillis, I met Geko Jones. I met you, I think before 2010 actually. I met a bunch of people.

Rekha: I met you in Northampton

Ushka: Oh you met me in Northampton, when I was in grad school actually.

Rekha: Yes and I did a gig there.

Ushka: Yeah I remember you came to my house.

Rekha: Yeah and you made a green beans and chicken, like you whipped up some ridiculous meal.

Ushka: Oh yeah, at 3:00 in the morning. Yeah, I do remember that. That's funny.

Yeah I met a bunch of people, but it was actually Beto who.. I mean so Damien, who was my friend from college, was also in New York, so I was continuing to play around with Damien, and then Beto started to also teach me. But Beto used Traktor, which was a different kind of DJ software. Because I was also hanging out with him, I also downloaded Traktor. So when I first started playing people's house parties, I was initially doing Serato.

Rekha: And he was using Traktor with a controller?

Ushka: He was using Traktor with a soundcard. He was just using his laptop.

Rekha: Self-contained in a laptop using Traktor.

Ushka: Yeah. But he's DJed for 20 years. He started as a vinyl DJ. He just slowly was like, "This is like easy, this is what I want to use." So he had been throwing this party iBomba with his friend Mike. Basically the way in which I got into nightlife is I started being a promoter for folks. So I was promoting for Que Bajo, I think I promoted once for Basement Bhangra.

Rekha: I think you promoted for our sound clashes.

Ushka: Yes. And then I promoted for iBomba, and because iBomba was more like small party, it was on a Monday night, it didn't have as much clout, and so it was an easier space to learn and fuck up and get better. And that was at Bembe.

Rekha: Which is like the place for everyone's first gig.

Ushka: Everyone's first gig. I do not enter Bembe now, because of the amount of fights I've had with the bartenders and the owners. Basically I first promoted the party for a little bit. I think it was like December 2011, I DJed my first gig at Bembe.

Rekha: So tell me about the first gig. What do you remember about the first gig? Was it at 205? Was it that gig at Glasslands?

Ushka: That was one of my first gig. So my first gig was December 2011 at Bembe, and one of my second big gigs was that gig Glasslands.

Rekha: So tell me about the first gig

Ushka: I was so nervous. And literally had practiced, like I had my little playlist that I had memorized and like transitions that I had memorized, and I was nervous because at that point I knew DJs. DJs were my friends. I

was promoting for DJs. So people like Uproot Andy and like whoever else. They were coming to my first gig and to have people in the room who were established, good DJs coming to my silly first gig, I felt super nervous because I wanted them to think that I was a good DJ. The people that I had looked up to.

Rekha: Those DJs at Bembe were all men, that you remember?

Ushka: There were all men. Yeah it was nerve racking. I'm an organizer too so a lot from like the organizing communities came out for me. It was pretty packed and it was very sweet. There was a lot of people who didn't care about a transition. I'm the one who cared, and I cared because other people I know, who listen to music like that, where there.

Rekha: Explain to me what a transition is.

Ushka: How you flow from one song to another, where you're being conscious of the BPM and how songs like fit together, basically. When I say transition, as a DJ you're not just playing like one song after the other in succession. You're blending music, and that's what I mean by transition. So how do you blend music without fucking up a flow. I think about it from the perspective of a dancer because when I was just dancing, you can always tell if something was a little bit off, or the tempo is off. In DJing you have to keep the flow. Because for me it's also about how you can dance uninterrupted.

Rekha: In the actual moment of spinning, do you scratch? What other techniques do you utilize?

Ushka: I do not scratch the way a hip-hop DJ would scratch on vinyl. I use CDJs with my USB stick. So prep things on on Rekordbox ahead of time.

Rekha: You use Rekordbox to DJ?

Ushka: Yeah. I'll spin the track sometimes, not just in transitioning-

Rekha: You mean back spin?

Ushka: Mmhmm, back spin, and because I play across genres I really see my DJ practice is one of genre blending, and I'm very interested in what I call migrant music. I play everything from like Afro beats to Soca to dancehall. I play maybe like less South Asian music but certainly Desi music as well, and club music from across communities of color in the States. So sometimes it's difficult when you're sustaining a set that has multiple kinds of genres, like you have to employ other techniques. Transitions are not very simple, and so like back spinning sometimes is important to be able to shift from one genre to the next. I have DJed now since 2011. Because Beto was using Traktor, like internal mode, even though I initially started when I was practicing doing Serato with turntables, I then shifted to doing just Traktor, internal mode, and then Traktor with a controller, and then I could shift, like I could also do Serato with turntables, but it just became too many things that I was trying to do. So then I stuck with Traktor and a controller, and then now everything I've transitioned to Rekordbox, and I'm just doing Rekordbox with USB.

Rekha: So in terms of techniques, is there stuff you do on the fly, like looping, or sampling, or any of that kind of stuff?

Thanu: Yeah so I loop a lot. I do a lot of looping, I do a lot of back spinning. Sometimes I trigger other sounds.

Rekha: So those are sounds pre-sampled, set in?

Ushka: Pre sampled.

Rekha: But if you are using CDJs and USB sticks how are those sounds saved?

Ushka: I have a folder for samples.

Rekha: Oh so one thing's playing and you are dropping in samples.

Ushka: Yeah. Yep exactly.

Rekha: There's no external submixer.

Ushka: You can.

Rekha: Oh, I am talking about what you do.

Ushka: No, I don't do that.

Rekha: I am asking these questions to get a sense of what happens in the moment.

Ushka: And for me it's also shifted over time, for example when I am using a Traktor controller, you can basically program those pre-samples, so you can basically press a button to trigger the sample. I mean honestly because I don't own CDJs, they're so expensive, there's things about it I'm still learning.

Rekha: So you don't own CDJs at home.

Ushka: Yeah. Or I go to a club to practice. I go to C'mon Everybody.

Rekha: So in terms of artistic discipline, do you consider yourself DJ?

Ushka: Yeah. Yeah.

Rekha: Do you practice any other art?

Thanu: I'm trying to produce more. A lot of my efforts in production are in collaboration with someone. So like other media, I use Ableton now. I've used Logic some. In college I was a video editor so I have an understanding of like programs like Final Cut. A lot of where I'm transitioning my work is from being less of a DJ who plays out, and more or someone who's producing podcasts, producing experimental music within like museum-type situations. So for example Atropolis and I produced a track for Mel Chin's exhibit at the Queens Museum this year. Basically the task was to take archival sounds of the subway and make it into a track. I like things like that, it's more experimental so I've been doing more production like that.

Rekha: So would you consider that DJ work?

Ushka: I would consider that production. I would say that it's an extension of my DJ practice.

Rekha: Do you record sets at home, without an audience?

Ushka: Yeah, I put out mixes. I just did this mix for Fader. For me making a mix is an art project in and of itself. You can tell a whole story, and you have a little bit more time to think about it. And so it's a whole a research process, like what tracks are you going to put on this mix, who's producing what. When I'm making a mix it's like an essay.

When I'm in the club, you have to think about audience, and you have to think about vibe. In the club I may have a sense. A lot of people who aren't DJs will be like, "Well what's your first song." I get that. "What do you know how to plan." I'm like, "You don't, you have to sort of feel the vibe." So I always get that at least an hour before my set because you have to be able to hear what that person before you has been playing, what people in the room are doing in order to like play your sound. And I play a lot of stuff that I like, but I think I play like a dancer.

Rekha: What does that mean, I play like a dancer?

Ushka: I play stuff that I wanna dance to. I play a lot of bass music. For example, I always fixate on the two or three people who I can tell are like really good dancers. A lot of my flow is based on their flow, because I can see what they're into, and it feeds my energy. A lot of my sets are impromptu I'm basically deciding in the moment what to play.

Rekha: How do you prep for a gig?

Ushka: Well now because I use Rekordbox, it's like a whole process. I have my like stock folders based on genre.

Rekha: So one method of organization is a genre.

Ushka: Yes, but I personally like to do it per gig, also. Depending on what the gig is. So for example, tonight I'm DJing a Middle Eastern and Arab party, and so even if I drop some of the stuff that I normally DJ, I know that I have to DJ some Middle Eastern and Arab tunes. My prep is based also on the vibe of the particular party. It means sorting, it means queuing. Like in Rekordbox you have to put your queues in. I just put in my cues ahead of time, and then you have to like analyze stuff and make sure to put it on the USB.

Rekha: Each track has to be analyzed?

Ushka: Yeah I mean analyzing of a track doesn't take long. If you create a playlist or a folder of 50 songs and you put it queue points for those songs, it takes Rekordbox sometimes like 15 to 20 minutes to get it all on the USB, to render it, basically.

Rekha: How much time would say you spend in your art practice not performing?

Ushka: Let's say you get booked for a guest set. A guest set is usually an hour and usually if I'm playing my own party, I'm DJing maybe two hours. Otherwise it's an hour, unless it's some special gig where maybe it's like three, four hours. I'm not one of those DJs who does six, seven hour gigs. I'm just not. For an hour gig, I've spent like three to four hours prepping, putting in cue points, and then also the process of acquiring music is a constant process. That happens every week. That happens when you're out and you hear something and you're like, oh what's that.

Rekha: Do you go to listen to other DJs a lot?

Ushka: Yeah maybe less now, but yes. There's been a depreciation. [Laughs] I go out and listen to the shows a lot. I'm also always on the internet, like SoundCloud listening to other people's mixes. BBC One Radio.

Rekha: Who would say is your primary audience if you could characterize that?

Ushka: I think my audience is really eclectic. Because what I play is really eclectic. I think so iBomba, which is the party that I run, the audience is super mixed, it's like Caribbean folks, Latino folks, South Asian folks. It's like young Brooklyn people between the ages of like 23 and 42.

Rekha: How do you interact with your audience and in what way, outside of deploying music?

Thanu: While I'm DJing, people are always invited to come dance on stage. And so people are dancing onstage, I'm definitely interacting with people. I hate when people touch DJ booth and it's just hard, you know, things start skipping and people are like dancing on the booth. So I need a little bit of distance.

Rekha: Interaction for you means, inviting dancers into your space? Do you yourself use your body in any way?

Ushka: I feel like for me, other dancers help me loosen up and not just be looking at the equipment. It's more like me interacting with other people dancing.

Rekha: What about verbal interaction?

Ushka: I have started to do more mic stuff but during my set I will usually have someone else be the hype person and I won't necessarily get on the mic. Sometimes at iBomba, if it's like major gigs like something a Brooklyn Museum, I'll get on the mic. Or I will be the hype person for like Beto, he's on. But during my set itself I don't usually get on the mic.

Rekha: How often do you DJ with other people. Are there differences you feel based on gender?

Ushka: Yeah. I mean see this is a thing. A lot of the people who initially taught me how to DJ and brought me into DJ spaces were men, straight men. And I don't know what it was, maybe it was a guilt thing for them, wanting to support a woman in doing that. I think like femme women who fit a certain criteria of attractiveness is also one of the reasons why some men are down teaching a woman how to DJ, like incomplete recognition of that. But I also felt because there were so few women and so few queer folks, it felt like it was hard to access other folks to support because it's a weird competitive environment. My access very much was because of men. The one cis man that I DJ with frequently is Beto because we run iBomba together, but otherwise I'm DJing mainly with queer people, including queer men, but queer women, trans women. So outside of Beto, it's mainly queer people and it's mainly queer women.

Rekha: Well yeah. Is this your full-time profession?

Ushka: No. So I am the full-time communications director at a climate justice organization right now. And that's fairly new, that's the last year and a half. But before that I was doing media and communications for an immigrant rights organization.

Rekha: Have you ever felt unsafe?

Thanu: Yes, particular at Bembe. There when I'd be DJing where straight cis men would come and touch my hips, from the back or like try to grind me.

Rekha: While you're DJing?

Ushka: Yeah there was a lot of men coming up to the DJ booth and looking at the track and being like, "How do you know this song?" Just like a lot of shock. Like a lot of shock seeing a woman DJing. And then my sets were like, I'll play like a tune, and then I'll shift to dancehall, then I'll shift to Bhangra. Sometimes it's positive sometimes, sometimes it's people feel some sort of a connection with home, and then other times it's like, "How do you know this? Like how do you know that song?" People wanting to have like a full on conversation. It's a lot of men. I think was that was Bembe's vibe, but it's also the vibe of a lot of venues that just are more straight and catered to men, or have that thing where ladies get in free, and then men have to pay. It happens a lot of that at venues like that.

Rekha: So do you feel part of a DJ community?

Thanu: Yes.

Rekha: How would you define that community?

Thanu: I think that over the last seven years, there's more DJs and there's more queer people and there's more women DJing. I know it must be a

trip for you in particular given that there was nobody, but even when I think about me starting to DJ in 2011.

It's so funny, today, the hottest, biggest, party in Brooklyn, potentially New York, is Papi Juice. Papi Juice like the hot queer party. Oscar Nñ who's like one of the founders, Oscar's first DJ set was with me at Azucar, where he opened for me and he didn't know how to plug in his headphones and didn't know the right IRCA cables and I had to plug it in for him, you know. All that is to say that that's how this DJ community has come about. It's people who, their first gigs, myself included, we didn't know what we were doing.

Azucar, which is a space that no longer exists, that was a queer Latino party. There have been on and off other sorts of queer parties that have popped up, now there is like much more of a community than there was.

Rekha: Is it supportive?

Thanu: It depends, like I would say yes it's supportive, and also right now in the media landscape, because like media is always looking for the hot, next queer thing, it's competitive. And people also think it's easy. So for example, a couple of months ago, a queer young person I know texted me, she's like, "Hey, do you think you could teach me how to DJ. Because I want to do this gig a month. Do you think I could charge 200 dollars for an hour." I was like, "I don't have capacity to help teach someone." And I asked them, "Why do you want to DJ? And they couldn't answer. And I was like, honestly, before you started doing gigs, you need to know why you want to DJ." And I was like, "Do you collect music like? Where do you get your music from? Where do you look for inspiration? Before you start to DJ, talk to people, learn from other people's practices, before being like, 'I want to DJ because I want to make an easy 200 dollars.'"

Rekha: Was that their motivation initially?

Ushka: The initial text, it seemed like it.

Ushka: This is one of the things that is a constant critique. Suddenly, lafter 2011, particularly 2013 onwards, there was a lot more queer and women DJs. And then a lot of men I would hear be like, "Well there's more women DJs because it's easier to DJ." That was a lot of what people would say, like you could just hit sync and then you consider yourself a DJ.

Rekha: Do you think that is true? No I don't.

Ushka: No I don't. There is a conversation to be had about accessibility. I do think that certain things became a little bit more accessible, and I think that's ok. And I think that there's still a craft. Like for me, there's a craft around how you create a space, how you sustain a party, how you sustain a vibe with music in a way where you're not just hitting play.

Rekha: How do you create a space? What does that mean to create a space? Musically, technique-wise, in the practice.

Ushka: This is a hard question! I think bass-heavy music is a huge part of how I create a space. I do it very much for people who like to dance. For me what gives me joy is actually seeing people starting to move. For example, I just DJed Papi Juice just two weeks ago and I was in a smaller room, there was not really that many people on the dance floor because it was too early, and then I had the set at like 12 or 12:30. And I had the opportunity to fill the space. The way in which you attract people to dance is by playing a set that makes people nostalgic, but and also bringing in new beats. Because I DJ all sorts of music, just like having a sense of who's in the room.

Rekha: So it's curating. Or it's the programming part.

Ushka: Yeah it's a curation of music.

Rekha: You are attracting people by what you play.

Ushka: Yes, yes.

Rekha: How do you get your gigs?

Ushka: I handle my own bookings. I got my gigs based on word of mouth. I've put out some mixes that have done really well, because they've been featured on magazines or whatever, I get... And the Internet's also a different beast even from like 2011. There's also the way in which you like curate a self-image on places like Instagram.

Rekha: What does that mean, to curate a self-image?

Ushka: In any successful business or career, including DJing it's like how you market yourself.

Rekha: So what happened with that girl? You just said you don't have time, go do your homework?

Ushka: Yeah I was like, "Tell me what your what your interests are musically." And she was like, "I don't know," and I was like, "I'm happy to have coffee with you. I'm happy to show you some things, but you should think about what it is that you want out of out of a DJ practice." I'm sure she just dropped off because one day she was sitting around, and it was something she had to do, so she never got back to me. But I there have been times when people have asked me to teach them how to DJ, and I'm totally open to that. Like I've opened up C'mon Everybody on an afternooon. And had people to learn how to use CDJs. I think that's important, and a lot of people don't do that. I think now the Brooklyn culture in particular is shifting to words like, "Oh if you don't

you use CDJs, you're not..." I feel like things come in trends, and right now the trend is CDJs.

Rekha: CDJs, like you have to be using USB sticks

Ushka: I've seen DJ's like Venus and UNIIQU3 post these memes about, "If you use vinyl, then you're basically a grandpa. If you use Serato with like vinyl, then you're still old school. If you use Traktor, you're a student..."

Rekha: So technological judgement is rampant.

Ushka: Exactly. There's a lot of technological judgment. But in Brooklyn I feel like the technological judgment is around CDJs, and for the longest time I didn't use CDJs, and I saw that the number of gigs I got started to dwindle, because I didn't use CDJs.

Rekha: Why would they dwindle, you mean you would say, "I don't use CDJs, I can't do the gig"? Or would you say, "I will bring my controller"?

Ushka: Yeah. Or people will see from photos that you don't use CDJs.

Rekha: And they don't book you?

Ushka: Yeah, that's been my experience. I mean some people don't, some people do. I took a long time getting on CDJs just because I'm really disorganized with my music and it requires that you actually are really organized.

Rekha: Sounds like a nightmare.

Ushka: It is kind of a nightmare.

Rekha: I also find it limiting. I like to see all my shit.

Ushka: And I also have a really bad memory. So you're like sitting there racking your brain because you're literally scrolling through songs. It's awful. I've had a lot of people being like, "Hey I'm using this controller but I want to use CDJs, do you have access."

Rekha: What kind of people ask you?

Ushka: Other DJs, like women.

Rekha: Do straight men ever ask you for advice?

Ushka: No, no. Never.

Rekha: Do you turn down any gigs?

Ushka: I turn down weddings. I just don't want to do that. I turned down more house party type situations. I just don't have time. I also have a full-time job. I have to be selective about what I do now.

Rekha: Do you get asked to do things for free?

Ushka: I used to. Yes. I do not do things for free.

Ushka: Do you get asked?

Ushka: The last time I got asked was by a non-profit. About six months ago. I said if you can't at least pay for a car for me there and back, then I can't do it. And they were like, "We have a limited budget." And I was like, "Well I'm sorry."

Rekha: They didn't even offer you fucking car service. No, fuck that shit. Roxanne Gay just tweeted, she's sick of organizations asking her to come and not taking care of her flight accommodations.

Ushka: And it was an immigrant rights organization. A lot of the places where I get asked to DJ for free, it's because people have this idea that I'm an immigrant rights organizer, so I'm passionate about this and I'll do it for free.

Rekha: Do you think its influenced by that fact that they know you have a day job too?

Ushka: I mean it could be. Nobody's said that to me explicitly. I think it's partially because they're like, "She's like known within the organizing scene and she cares about this, maybe she'll do it for free." I'm very strict about it. I'll basically e-mail people and be like, "Hey this is like one of the reasons why I'm not going to do this for free, because all artists should get paid. And you're an organization that has a budget."

Rekha: Do they say things like, can you recommend someone?

Ushka: Yes. I say that unless you have a budget to pay them, I'm not recommending anyone. Or people will be like, "Oh well we'll put you on the on the screen and you'll have exposure," and I'm like, "I don't need your exposure."

Rekha: How important is the financial part of the interaction when you DJ?

Ushka: It's a profession, like it's not my full time profession, but I think we need to be super professional about it. In the past when I initially started, I was a little bit more like, yeah pay me whatever. It gives off the impression that you don't really care, so other people don't have to care. And so I'm very, very clear. And I don't think I charge that much for an hour. If someone's like how much is an hour, I'll be like, it's 300 and go from there, and do some negotiating. It depends, if it's a corporate gig, I'm charging a lot. If it's an organization, I'm charging a certain amount. I am also making some assessments, so it's not the

first thing that I'm thinking about is money, and also I'm not a full time DJ. I have health insurance. I have a full-time job.

But I'm also interacting in the interface with people who are full-time DJs, and I don't want to lower my standards because if I lower my standards, I'm going it for everyone.

Rekha: That's a very important consideration. Anything else you want to add?

Ushka: It's so exhausting. You know, just like life! DJing is so tiring. I started DJing when I was 25. I'm 33, and I'm just tired. The primetime spot is around 1, let's say. Yeah, New York timing. So often times I'm booked for 1am slots, 2am slots, and it's just hard now. It's hard to stay up until then. when I get slotted for like 11:30 or 12, I'm like so happy about it sometimes.

Interview Transcript:

DJ Roundtable

with

DJ Rekha, Rimarkable, DJ Selly, and Zeemuffin

(Edited) DJ Roundtable with DJ Rekha, Rimarkable, DJ Selly, and Zeemuffin

Rekha: Thank you all so much for being here on a very rainy Tuesday in New York. Election Day. Our lives will change today in one way or another.
[Laughs]

Selly: It's great to be here.

Rekha: I really appreciate it. Can't say it enough. So, I will stop saying it.

Zainab: We appreciate you.

Rimarkable: My pleasure.

Rekha: Thank you. Forgive my slight inexperience with this, bear with me. I'm glad it's all you guys. I feel very comfortable with you. I've known you for several years. You, the least longest. You're probably the youngest. So let's just do a go around and say your name. We'll start with start with you.

Rimarkable: I am Rimarkable. I'm a DJ, producer, performer, curator, all things art.

Zainab: I am Zainab or Zeemuffin. I'm also a DJ, artist, writer, lover of all things music and art and culture.

Selly: I'm Selly. I'm a DJ, curator of sound, and lover of music.

Rekha: I am Rekha. I'm a DJ and many things. Right now I'm a grad student, trying to get this paper.

Zainab: Flex a little bit.

Selly: Big tings are gwan!

Rekha: You know, change the system from the inside, or create space for more voice and different voices.

So the nature of this project is I'm very interested in what people actually do when they DJ. The actual experience of performance of in the moment. But since I have all of you guys here in this moment, we'll ask some questions, hopefully it'll be a free flowing conversation, feel free to jump in. So take a breath.

All right so let's just let's watch the clip.

Selly: I felt like I saw this live performance. I remember the video, it freaked me out for a really long time.

Rimarkable: This was an award show or something.

Zainab: This is creepy.

Rekha: 80s was creepy. We had Michael Jackson doing Thriller. Scared the beejezus out of me.

Selly: Bring back the keytar.

Zainab: Who's that?

Rekha: That's a good question. That's DMT.

Rekha: Do you know the song?

Zainab: No.

Rimarkable: Yeah! All right!

Rekha: Well we'll play a little longer (Rock It Video Plays in background).

Zainab: This is a trip.

Rekha: Hold up, can you turn up a little, Raj?

So you remember seeing this?

Rimarkable: I do remember seeing this. It was a huge deal. For one, what I can understand is it was kind of the morphing, or the acceptance, of hip-hop and being accepted by other genres as being a thing. Like Herbie Hancock, legendary jazz fusion producer and performer. And jazz, that that culture, that genre, was joining forces with hip-hop, and hip-hop was huge. Hip hop burst on the scene. It was like KAPOW. And I was a little kid and I understood that, you know.

Rekha: Do you remember seeing or have you seen that?

Selly: No I haven't seen this live performance but I do remember MTV very vividly, and I remember how things like this, watching music became such a thing. It wasn't just about listening to it anymore. We had the advent of video, and then with video came merging of different genres of music, like you had the insanity of Run DMC and Aerosmith coming together on Walk This Way. You had Herbie Hancock, you had Chaka Khan.

Rekha: Let Me Rock You.

Selly: Exactly with Melle Mel and Furious 5 and all of those guys. You started to watch all of these artists like, "Oh shit, hip-hop is this thing that we need to pull into our culture a little bit." And even just last night, I was listening to BGO and Rhonda Hamilton couldn't remember the name of the RH factor, because all weekend they'd been featuring the music of Roy Hargrove, because of his passing. But she was trying to recall the name of it, and she was saying that it was so instrumental in the way she listened to jazz and the way jazz kind of fused with hip-hop. And I

mean it's similar, it's not exactly the same thing that you're presenting here. But I do remember listening to that album very much and listening to Q-tip and Erykah Badu flow over Roy Hargroves's grows beautiful trumpet sets and things like that, and it just moves you you know. It's kind of a natural progression of music to fuse. Because otherwise you just have all of these pocketed genres, and you have people who are very exclusive to these genres. When you merge music, you merge culture, you merge people, and it's so powerful, what music does in terms of bringing people to the foreground who had not been there at all in the past So yes I remember Rock It the video, and I remember as (Rimarkable) said, hip-hop now becoming accepted as a part and normalized into pop culture, tt was a good thing, and some of us say that it wasn't such a good thing. And all of it's debatable, but the progression still happened nonetheless and it's still happening.

Rekha: So I showed that because that was arguably the first presentation of a DJ on TV.

Zainab: Can I contest that. I feel like it was Blondie with Fab Five Freddy, Rapture.

Rekha: Arguably that was 1980. That's the first time you see you a scratching DJ. And that video-

Zainab: It was fake DJing.

Rekha: It's fake.

Zainab: Yes I remember that. But I do remember it being the first time they showed.

Rekha: Sure. I used to use that video in class all the time. I just remember seeing that as a kid and being like, wow.

And you remember it too. So I guess the question I have for you guys is, what is the first time you remember seeing a DJ. Do you remember seeing a DJ? Do you remember your first time seeing a DJ, whether it was on TV or live or somebody actually manipulating or playing music?

Zainab: First time?

Rimarkable: It absolutely was in examples like this one, and MTV, like you were saying or videos. It actually was through hip-hop, and it became like a thing.

Rekha: Do you remember specifically, like identifying or seeing DJs.

Rimarkable: I don't remember when scratching became popular, it being an art form, and it became like the connotation of what a DJ was. And I know that followed me until when I started DJing. And I wasn't a hip-hop DJ. I was a woman DJ coming out and it was like, "Wow you don't scratch," or "You don't do all this turntablism, so you must not be a DJ." So that kind of thing went on. Scratching or turntableism had a direct impact on the connotation of what a DJ was.

Rekha: Do you remember the first time?

Zainab: It was definitely not on television. My first intro to hip-hop was Tribe (Called Quest). I'm a 90s baby so I never really like saw Tribe on TV per se. It was mostly like 50 Cent and G-Unit, that type of stuff. That was what I grew up on, and like Pharrell, so that was like my introduction to hip-hop, was like really that stuff. Even though I went back and listened to like De La, Tribe, those were like the first... When I first heard Tribe, I was like, "Oh wow, this is hip-hop."

But when I actually first saw a DJ, wasn't really until I went to college and I started going out and stuff. The DJ was always just like person I wouldn't really see. I remember when DJ AM became a thing. He was

always kind of behind the scenes and then when he kind of blew up, he was always hidden and you couldn't see him behind digging his crates and doing that whole thing. And then with him, he kind of pushed the DJ forward, and I remember in college, finally like going to a club and physically seeing the person in the booth. And then that was the first time I was like, oh! It was some random DJ at some random bar, I went out with friends. It was a guy, of course it was a guy. At that point I was like, oh, this is what they do. And I remember being that annoying girl that asks for a request.

Rekha: Now you know!

Zainab: I like hate myself for doing that. But that was the first time I saw someone controlling a room and I almost had this sense of envy, like yo, I could do that, or like, I want to do that. I want to provide the vibe or the feeling that's in here. I feel like I could do a good job.

Rekha: When you saw that, you said, "I want to do that?" You thought, maybe I want to do that?

Zainab: Yeah, music has always been something that I've...it's never been something that my family has loved, it's just something I've discovered on my own. I would sit in my room in my basement. iTunes is really like the way I used to find music. I would just go in these holes and find things. But I grew up playing viola, drums. I just played instruments but I never really found a way to get into music that was the right way of expressing it to me, because I was forced to play viola. Drums I didn't really get serious about. I was like, "I don't want to be a band or anything!" So when I saw someone DJing for the first time I was like, "Oh I'm someone who has such a wide taste in music. I love so many different types of music. I've grown up on so much different stuff. So for me that was the first option to do something in music to fully express my love for all the different genres and styles that I've learned about over the last whatever years.

Rekha: How about you Selly. The first time you saw a DJ, or like the moment where you said, oh!

Rimarkable; Selly was born with a turntable!

Selly: So it's funny. Ok. So there are two answers to that question. I've been playing records since I was probably 6. And, you know, go put the record on the turntable blah blah. It was just something that I did at home. Played music for dinners, for Saturday, whatever it was. I just played the music but I didn't really know that that had a name. A little bit later on, let's say 9, 10, or whatever. I'm from Queens originally, so DJing is just part of the culture, and it was the culture.

Rekha: What part of Queens are you from?

Selly: Hollis, Close to Hollis. So I saw LL, I saw Run DMC, I saw the Lost Boys, I saw Tribe. All those guys were from the neighborhood.

Rekha: I knew someone, who knew someone, who dated LL Cool J.

Selly: Well I used to see him. I used to work at McDonald's as a child. He'd come in for his chocolate shake all the time, sidebar, with his boombox, looking just like LL Cool J on Jamaica Avenue.

Rekha: I went to Fresh Fest too.

Selly: That was entertainment for us. That was entertainment for us because it wasn't the most exciting place to grow up, so we created our own bit of fun, and fun was involved in block parties. So if you didn't have a sound system and you had to come with a huge ass sound system. You had to come with the turntables, that was part of the culture. So as we started throwing parties, we would get our friends who basically had that equipment, and we would have these notorious basement parties

all over, wherever we could hijack somebody's house. The parents would leave and then we had a big yard and then it would turn into a situation where the cops would be there...Don't ask me for the years! You about to ask me for the years?

Rekha: No, I don't know, not necessary. When you say we, who's the we?.

Selly: The "we" are me and my friends. So we actually had a crew. So back in that back in that time, you just ran with crews. So we created our own crew. There were other crews, and crews were rivals in terms of music. It wasn't anything else.

Rekha: Was it all women, was it guys and girls?

Selly: We had the Nasty Girls Crew, which was named after the actual Nasty Girls. And that was my first situation where I was involved with a crew. Once you had a crew, you had to have music, and you had to to present good parties. That was part of being a crew.

Rekha: So throwing and curating parties was part of it. Was it almost like you had to have the puff letter shirt.

Selly: Yeah, we had those. We had all that stuff. I wish kept mine, that would have been some nice nostalgia.

Rekha: So you went from like being in a crew, playing records.

Selly: Yeah, I played records for the family. It's just something you do. I still have the first records that were given to me. I still have the first records that I went to the store and bought. But then what happened was the record collector became slightly obsessive. And when I would go to my friends' parties at their homes, before the whole big crew thing, I'd bring my stack of records. And I would sit there in the corner and I'd put the

records on and people would dance. So I didn't really know what that was called.

Rekha: When was your first gig?

Zainab: [Laughs] That disaster!.

Rekha: Oh, I want to hear it! I could tell you my first gig story, it's hilarious.

Selly: My first paid gig? Or when my first thing when I played in a party?

Rekha: However you want to define it.

Selly: I would play parties all the time and not get paid for them.

Rekha: When did you become a DJ? I'm trying to find if there's that moment from being casual to playing parties or playing music.

Selly: I had a boyfriend in high school and he said, "You should DJ, professionally," and I was like, "That's silly, that's ridiculous."

Rekha: Why?

Selly: Because I never looked at it as something that I could do and sustain my life from. So to me it was almost laughable to think that. I didn't know the different levels that you could be on as a DJ. There's so many different platforms that you can entertain as a DJ. So for me that wasn't the route I was trying to go on. I always view myself first as a music appreciator. I love any range of anything, so I was like, "I'm just messing around. I'm headed to college. I've got this career lined up. I've got stuff I need to do."

Rekha: Right.

Selly: So it didn't occur to me that that could be not only a living, but a lifestyle and a way of being and it just turned out that it was that.

Rekha: So then how did you...?

Selly: People would approach me. They'd be like, you have to play. You have to go out and play.

Rekha: And so how did you go from playing one turntable to like, did somebody show you? How did you have access to equipment?

Selly: I worked in a record store. Go figure, I put myself through college working in a record store. I worked at the Wiz, I worked at Tower.

Rekha: You worked at Tower on West 4th Street? We must have been in there at the same time.

Selly: Probably. I worked at some of those rinky dink record stores on the Lower East Side briefly. But I started to amass a whole bunch of music. It was kind of ridiculous. So I started with CDJs is actually.

Rekha: Ok.

Selly: Even though I grew up with a turntable in my house, I was like nah, this is the CDJ age. So I started mixing with CDs. And then, I reverted to vinyl.

Rekha: Which CDs? Do you remember the model.

Selly: I had no idea.

Rekha: Two CDs in a mixer? And did you have speakers as well?

Selly: Yep. I had my own system and so I was able to kind of be mobile with that around the neighborhood. That was fun. At one point a friend approached me and said, I'm starting a party and you're the DJ. And so that's how that DJ Selly person really kind of transitioned into nightclub culture, and then from then on, I just kept getting more and more work. And then that's it. It just never really stopped. So I'm still a nightclub person.

Rekha: I am too, except when I'm doing these daybreaker parties.

Rekha: Do you remember your first gig? Maybe it's not an obvious starting point.

Rimarkable: My first paid gig, I think it was a wedding. Honestly. I started off DJing by working for a mobile DJ company. Like Selly, I started off with experience with vinyl. But I also started off using CDJs because that was the latest technology, and I was super excited about that technology. I'm a nerd like that. I love tech, any tech this and that, I want the next shit, I'm on top of it. But I do remember the model, it was a Denon 2000.

Rekha: The two trays.

Rimarkable: And it would be in a cube and the rack at the top would be the controls, and the bottom would be the trays that would come out.

Rekha: Nice big green button. Red button and a blue button, for the pitch taking control.

Rimarkable: Pitch control.

Rekha: That's right. And like a nice digital display. Little bit of orange.

Rimarkable: And a little jog wheel. And if you had like 2500...

Rekha: Oh that was too expensive.

Rimarkable: It was way too expensive. 2500 had like a vocal remover.

Rekha: Yes. It had voice reducer.

Rimarkable: Voice reducer on it. So you could be fancy. I had ideas like that in my head, like "damn! I want to mix like this!" But anyway, the wedding was dope. I did a ton of weddings back then. That's how I paid my way through college, actually DJing, doing all these private parties.

Rekha: So who taught you to use the equipment?

Rimarkable: There was a staff member, like the senior DJ on the staff, her name is Diana.

Rekha: She was a woman.

Rimarkable: Yeah. We were the only two women in the company.

Rekha: How many people in the company?

Rimarkable: There was about 10 DJs on the roster. But also hardly any women DJs in the industry or in our area, in the Detroit area. It was illuminating to come up at that time, when being a woman was not fashionable. I really got some you know good chops. I don't want to drift too far away from the question.

Rekha: Wedding DJing will make you super strong.

Rimarkable: It makes you super strong. And I'm grateful for those times because I really learned how to read a crowd. I learned how to access all the

different genres I know, and how to bring it to light and how to make people dance.

Rekha: Wedding DJ for Desi people really teaches you something.

Zainab: That's another story.

Rekha: They don't give two shits. They're like, "Play something fast good. What is this? When party starting again?"

Rimarkable: And I did a couple back in the day. And I love those parts, because they're like, "It's not loud enough. Turn it up."

Zainab: So true.

Rimarkable: I mean its blaring. They're like, "Louder!"

Rekha: What about you, Zainab. What's your first gig you saw?

Zainab: I'm just dead at this Indian wedding thing because I've done it few you know and it's so true. First gig was at now defunct Westway. I know the second part of this was how did you learn. So after I graduated college and I got a job in investment banking, as one brown person. I was like, Ok, I'm making all this money. Let me try to learn how to DJ. Like actually learn through something. There was this school which also doesn't exist anymore. DubSpot. Robyn was my teacher. Shout out to DJ Reborn! One of the best to ever do it.

Rimarkable: Absolutely.

Zainab: So I took a class there. It was like a crash course over the summer with her and Opie. And JP. So all three of those people taught me on vinyl not CDs.

Rekha: That was they what they taught you first. When I taught my class you had to learn vinyl first.

Zainab: You learn CDJs after. But actually hated CDJs and I wanted to stick with vinyl because it just felt like, you know with the pushing and the pulling, just a natural feel of that. It felt more natural to me and easier for me to even mix and beat match and stuff. It was better on vinyl for me. But from that just used to hang out at DubSpot after I stopped taking classes there because the community was so strong, whatever business practices they had I'm not going to speak on those, everyone who worked there and went there was so sweet and ready to help you out and like teach you things, and let you stay when you aren't really even supposed to be there. Like during lab hours and just like use equipment, because I didn't have equipment, so I would just go there to practice. JP really became a mentor in a sense where he was like, "Yo like you really have an ear for this. You should get a little bit serious about it." And I was like, ok. He's like, "Practice and I'm going to try to set up a gig for you."

So Westway was where he used to play, and I was super nervous about playing out. I would practice in my room, and when you play out for the first time it's a totally different story. And I had all these songs I was so excited to play, from Gesaffelstein to some hip-hop shit, like just all over the place. I remember got dressed up, got this this yellow blazer, I didn't get like paid or anything. I was in the back room, and I remember my sound cut out twice, but it was so nerve wracking, but had so much fun. I was like, "This is amazing. I want to get better at this. I want to do this more." After that, I just got super aggressive about asking people to play their parties.

Rekha: As we saw earlier today.

Zainab: Literally that's how you have to do it. Not to sound crazy, but anything I've gotten has been by me being persistent. At least from the first point

I was like super persistent about just asking people like, “So let me get this meeting. Put me on. I promise, I'll show you I can do this you know.” It's just this constant state of business development right. You have to just pitch yourself to people always, or just find the right opportunity.

Rekha: Want to hear about my first gig?

Rimarkable: Yes.

Rekha: I had two younger cousins here that were from India, and we started seeing a bunch of DJs in our Indian community, and kind of hated them. They were all Magic Mikes boys. And so my cousins did a Bhangra performance at their high school, John Bowne high school in Queens. And they were asked to do it at some community center in Long Island. And the DJ had to play their music, and we thought it was sabotage. He was a family friend and he worked with Magic Mike. He's still around Magic Mike, he's like the first Indian DJ in the Tri-State area, he sounds like Wolfman Jack. They were there were little bit younger than me, they were from India, I was from here. We started hearing a lot of music from UK. Bally Sagoo and different things.

Next thing I know, my cousin works at a store, off the books, and someone is trying to sell him some equipment. He goes, “Should I buy it?” He pages me, because I had a pager. I was like “Sure, buy it”. We volunteered to do this kid's first birthday party at an Indian restaurant in New Hyde Park, on the border of Queens and Long Island. We had two CD players, a RadioShack mixer. which is built like a tank, a microphone, a cassette deck. Maybe we had one CD player. One CD player, cassette deck, RadioShack mixer, a microphone. We bought speakers off of this older family friend of mine who I then returned because they were terrible Gemini speakers. We borrowed the amplifier of my parents Kenwood rack system. We had 15 CDs, and the

amplifier just kept overheating, because it wasn't meant for that. I got paid 51 bucks. And I've never stopped.

But that that situation was me and my cousins. I was not the actual person playing the music. We only had 15 CDs, I know we repeated them a few times, or ten. I actually started DJing being the DJ, and I don't remember my first gig, physically doing it. We slowly got more money. Bought one turntable, second turntable, mixer, slowly amassed. Self-taught, all of us. But it was really my younger cousin Nitin who was the DJ, but because of certain family circumstances, they went back to India. So then I was stuck with this gear and all the stuff, and I was really behind a lot of the programming and the music. But there was a gender divide. There were the boys, they did it. I had the car, I had the credit card, they were sort of inching out of high school. And then once they left, one left and then the other one left, I started actually DJing myself.

And it wasn't until I met, through my friend network, this kid, DJ Joy who was sort of in between colleges, and he was a hip-hop DJ. Queens kid, Bengali kid. He didn't really know a lot about Bollywood music or Bhangra. He knew how to mix and he had good ears and stuff. It was just the right time and place. I needed somebody to help me. We got on board, and the first gig was some crazy birthday party in Connecticut, had a lot of cassette tapes because a lot of Indian music was on cassettes.

A year after we did our first gig, we were playing Summer Stage. We just had a good chemistry, a good vibe. We started Basement Bhangra. Eventually he broke up and he did his own thing. He's like some venture capitalists, some nice straight-laced thing.

I'm glad we got everyone's origin stories, but what I'm really interested... But what's your format today? What do you guys mix on, what do you play on? CDJs, and you started on vinyl, which is

interesting because you're a little bit older than us. Taught correct way. So what's your preferred format now? What is your technology now?

Selly: Well I still collect records. I still hunt for records, I order them online. I still go to the stores, you know, what stores are left.

Rekha: When you play, what do you do? Are you using Serato?

Selly: Well last week, I played two vinyl gigs, and I got to play with Robyn last week. I ended up playing on my controller because we had an issue with that particular mixer at the place we worked out, and she played on Serato. Which was totally fine sometimes, you know, it's hard to make two things work so great. But I find myself recently, I'm getting a lot of vinyl gigs, and I have one this week.

Rekha: People are saying specifically this is a vinyl gig. Like Mobile Mondays.

Selly: Yeah, they want records and I'm like, "No problem. I've got thousands. I can play records!" So I'm enjoying going back to vinyl. I'm enjoying going back, this is a finite musical set. I've got two bags with me, and I explain that to this guy who approached me last week asking for something very new, and I've gotten a lot of new stuff, but I didn't have the Scorpion album on vinyl.

Zainab: Drizzy Drake.

Selly: Drizzy. So I said, "It's just what's here." And I put the records up behind me on the shelf and I said "Here we are, it's just here. I don't happen to have the Drake."

Zainab: Who does have that on vinyl!

Selly: You know, somebody does! Cardi does, the Carters. All that stuff is still out there.

Zainab: It's hot. It's selling more than ever. People are like pressing vinyl for their albums now.

Selly: Yes they are. And I think that they should, because I just love it.

Zainab: It's great.

Selly: So it's interesting to people, I said, "See there are two turntables, there's no laptop here."

Zainab: I can't just Google "Drake".

Selly: People have to wrap their heads around that. It's like they're not even thinking, because we live in such an instantaneous society where everything is so much at your fingertips all the time, "What do you mean you don't have it?" I don't have it, it's not here. But he's like, "Well I'm really enjoying it." So he was like, "All right, keep going." You're having a good time, that's all that matters.

Rekha: So he approached you in the booth while you were mixing.

Selly: There was no booth it was a huge open forum. Some places there is no divide anymore. Sometimes you're just in a huge open space and folks can just walk up to you.

Rekha: Have you seen that change over time?

Rimarkable: Yeah it's annoying. I am very sensitive. I'm a very emotional DJ. I need that divide. I need the separation. I need the access, but I need the separation. And I missed that from back in the day, you know, and people are just too familiar and they don't look at it as disrespect, but I feel like it is, for someone to come in and interject or impose themselves on what I'm offering, or not really realize what I'm doing.

Selly: Just appreciate what's happening.

Rimarkable: Yeah, you know what's going on? What I'm giving to you? What I'm unloading? And what I need you to give back to me?

Selly: My least favorite thing. And it happens, a lot, you know, often enough, is the phone. I'm just going to put my phone in your face. I am not even going to give you an excuse.

Zainab: I hate that so much. They don't even say hello, it's like, "Here's this song."

Rekha: So dialing it back, every gig is different. Every room's physicality is different. When I started DJs, were absolutely never center stage. They were always hidden. Sometimes you could peek at them. You could absolutely not see what they were doing at all. And now things a lot more transparent. There's less separation. Do you think the way people come up at you, or access you, has anything to do with your gender? And also have you ever felt unsafe?

Zainab: I've never thought from a gender way, to be honest. It's just like, "Oh I can see you. And I want to hear this song right now. And that's the person responsible for playing the songs right now, so I'm going to ask them to do this thing." Maybe not unsafe, but I've Definitely been harassed, a hundred times. Like at Westway where I had my residency for a while on Fridays, which was like the day. Everyone used to come through there, like Cameron used to come through there, J Cole has come through there. It was like the spot on Fridays. The promoters were all men obviously, white men. I don't drink, so I would be behind the booth doing my thing and these people would be belligerently drunk and get up in my ear, super close to me and like ask for a song. Or like touch me in a place I don't want to be touched and like ask for a song. And that's like a different story. I could tell that whole Westway story, but I

won't. That, shit I hate it. And the phone. It's just rude, so rude to just come up to me and be like, "Hey I need you to put this on. I understand if you're at a wedding or it's a gig where you're like, "Hey this is what we need you to play", like you're contractually agreed to. I'm only listening to the client, I'm not listening to some random person who came up to me and asked me to do XYZ.

Rimarkable: I've definitely felt unsafe. I don't feel like people making requests were being rude like that, or it's because of my gender. But the unsafe part, I've definitely been touched inappropriately. I still work at this venue. I'm not going to say their name. I still work at this venue and they've made changes to correct it, but it's generally super dark in there. At a certain point of the night, people used to get wasted. It used to be very man heavy, and they've made a lot of changes to switch that up.

Rekha: Sausage fest.

Rimarkable: Yeah. So it would be super dark in there, and the music would be blasting, and I'm in a dark corner, and people step behind the table and touch me on my waist, or touch me on my arm, or come right up in my ear, or just get very inappropriate. And I've also been like flinching. They're like, "I'm just trying to ask you for a request," and I'm like, "No requests, no requests," and I've been cussed out, called all kinds of bitches like, and that energy will affect what I'm doing.

I have had another incident in this really big club I play, with one of the female patrons. I keep the security guard right by my booth at that point, because, don't talk to me it's really distracting. The 30 seconds I have to stop and listen to you, I'm missing the moments, I'm missing out on the vibration.

Selly: People don't understand that, and that's what's so fortunate. DJing is so cerebral in so many ways, they don't even understand that you are in a place in your head, you're reading a screen for the most part.

You're filtering sound, you're watching energy, you're shifting energy. People don't even understand all those dynamics. They're drinking, they're having a good time, and all they want to hear is their jam. I'm like, "Ok guys, that's cool, but there's something going on here behind this table."

Zainab: Just trust that your song will come when it needs to.

Rimarkable: It probably will.

Rekha: Or your songs sucks.

Zainab: Or your song sucks and I'm not going to play it.

Rekha: Or I played your song and you weren't here!

Zainab: Yeah, I've been here for three and a half hours, it's 1:30.

Rekha: I don't care that you have to must leave now..

Rimarkable: I'm sorry you missed that, you can listen to it in the car because it's probably going to come on when you get in there.

Zainab: You're so right though. If you're at the chorus, we were going to mix out whatever. And then someone decides to have a full-on conversation. And you're like, now I just played an extra minute of the song that I didn't need to play.

Selly: And I didn't want to play it. I had a moment where I knew what I was coming in with the next song. And you kind of hijacked it.

Zainab: You ruined it!

Rekha: How much do you prepare?

Zainab: That's a great question.

Rekha: And how do you prepare? I want to think of it in terms of labor. Your set is an hour, but what goes into that?

Rimarkable: I tell people DJing is a 24 hour job. I am constantly preparing. Constantly, from witnessing people walking down the street, bopping off a song that's in the car, to feeling the vibration, to watching the news, to the weather, to looking at Spotify seeing where I'm going to be led. Or Shazamming when I'm out and about and digging, and that sends me through a rabbit hole. I'm constantly preparing.

Rekha: Ok, I mean we're always constantly listening to music and making notes. I'm saying for specific gigs. Is there a methodology around your preparation? Do you make crates?

Rimarkable: I feel like I have a ton of crates because I do all kinds of parties. I have a ton of crates sometimes I just show up and feel the vibe and see what's going to happen. Other times, lately in the past year I really started programming. I used to live under that philosophy, like, "I don't know what I'm going to play. I never prep for my gigs." But I programming, and it's not like the songs I'm picking aren't dope, and it actually frees me up to kind of have a different experience, which is refreshing.

Rekha: What's the time like?

Rimarkable: To prepare it? It takes a lot of time, I would say hours honestly because I have to move songs around, and I have to see how it's gonna to flow. I have to listen to the beginning and the end of things, or think about how I want to shift the energy.

Rekha: Yeah so at a minimum when you get a song you have to do something to it. So that it's ready to play, right. You have to at least queue it. You have to at least figure out where it's going to start. Lesson number one. where are you starting this song.

Zainab: That takes the longest, is the prep. For me when you say prepping for a gig, it's not so much being behind the turntables and mixing as much as it's like, all right this is the vibe I want to go for and these are the songs I want to play. And all those moments that you mentioned, like hearing that song in the car, walking down the street. I'll always have my notes up, and I'll just write down a song. Two hours would just be like downloading the song. Getting the songs that I need. Because for me at least, yeah you have your crates, but then you have a gig you're like ok, I don't want to play the same shit I played last time, so let me find out all these new songs that I've heard since my last gig and that takes the longest. And then you've got to sit and organize a crate and figure out, pull from this crate and that crate, and then put in all the new songs, analyze them, put in the queue points, find a cool loop, and then you get to practice. I often feel like what ends up happening is I'll spend hours doing that, and I don't even get the time to practice, and then my practice is at the actual gig.

Rekha: My favorite ideas happen in the moment, because I'm just feeling it. Absolutely. But every time I have put in dedicated work for gigs that I don't want to fuck up, I've used whatever I've done there, like forever. And it's like, "Ok, this set. There's something about these songs. I know this works." Over time it changes, you know. But that's very helpful.

So when we were talking about the whole like DJ booth space and people coming in and out. Has anyone ever—like venue people or sound people or CDJs—has anyone ever reached in.

Rimarkable: What do you mean, like reach across the table?

Rekha: Reached in like tried and like fixed the EQ?

Multiple: Oh my god, what colleagues do that!

Zainab: I hate that shit.

Rimarkable: I feel like Incredible Hulk on the inside, like, are you serious? And when I see people doing, when a D.J. is transitioning, like you're going transition to the next DJ and they'll do something like that...

Rekha: So I've had a lot of experiences where guys be on around you, hovering, and then there's some reason they just reach in.

Zainab: Yeah I've had that too.

Rekha: Do you feel like it's a dude thing or not?

Rimarkable: I definitely feel like it's an aggressive dude thing. I actually had one woman do it because I was at a gig and I stepped away to use the bathroom and to grab a drink real quick. She's a DJ friend, colleague and I was like "Wow, I didn't know the bass went out on that part." This chick is my booth! Tweaking my—I was like, "Girl! Girl, if you don't come out of my booth right now, it's going to be a problem.

Rekha: What does that mean? Your booth? It's your booth?

Rimarkable: It's my booth, for that time?

Rekha: Is it your dance floor?

Rimarkable: It's my altar!

Rekha: What is your relationship to the dance floor? If that's your altar, is that your flock?

Rimarkable: Well interestingly enough, I was a dancer first, before I was a DJ. And I know the way that music responds, and the dancer's body, and that gives me the insight that I use to perform. And so I know about that exchange. I'm not in the party by myself, which is kind of why I don't want people talking. It's like, "Enjoy this! Let's have this exchange! Concentrate on the floor!" The dance floor is mine in terms of like I have the controls. I am controlling it. But it's more so like a give and take response to what the dancer is doing. Or what I want them to do. I want them to escape.

Rekha: Does that feeling feel different and different spaces? Does the crowd matter? Does that affect the experience?

Selly: Well I would say you just have to know where you are. If you don't know where you are, then you don't know how to approach this thing. There are certain venues where dancing and carrying on is not the equivalent of folks having a good time right. It's not necessarily allowed but people aren't really known to dance. It doesn't have that reputation, but they love a good heavy beat, or something like that. For some spaces, the relationship that music has to the audience is different. Some places are more notorious for having crazy dance parties, if you know you are in that spot, you'd better come and bring it you know. And if you know that you're in a wine bar a place that's serving specialty cocktails, then you're going to give them something maybe a little different. So I would say that there are different versions of myself that I bring to the different places that I go to. I have an awareness of where I am. I don't always have this privilege, but I try to visit a place before I go play there. I'm not always able to do that anymore but I think it's our job to do our homework in that way, or to see the way people respond to a DJ, an alternate space that you know that you're going to come and play. It's good homework and as DJs, we have all kinds of homework to do.

Rimarkable: It's one of the hardest jobs out there.

Zainab: It is because it's like you said, it's always on.

Selly: Yeah you're never not thinking about it.

Rekha: What's the homework like in terms of interacting with the venues?

Zainab: For me, that's one thing, like visiting the place. I think it's your first time playing is the homework, like seeing what the crowd the first time you play there. Like, they didn't really react to this, but let me switch it up here. And like, ok that's a good note for me. Next time I play in this venue, are like, maybe when I have this timeslot or whatever it is.

Rekha: And the time slot matters?

Zainab: Time is important. I hate the DJs who show up at like 10:00pm and play all the bangers. I'm like, that's not your job.

Rimarkable: You got to play the opening set dawg.

Zainab: Yeah you got play an opening set! That to me is one of the most annoying things you can do as a DJ. Feel like you're privileged to bring the songs that are meant for that 12, 1am time...

Rekha: I love opening sets.

Selly: Opening and closing.

Zainab: Less pressure.

Rimarkable: I love closing. I'm learning to read the situation. I've had a couple incidents where I was the opening DJ. One, I was the opening DJ and I

did not hold back. Because I'm like, "This is where we are. We came to play. This is the bar. Sorry. This is my shot."

Zainab: I see what you're saying.

Rimarkable: There also was a situation where I played with one of these celebrity DJs and I held back to set her up. She came and played basically everything I had played already.

Selly: I've actually had that experience.

Rimarkable: I am like, "Damn I should have went off!" I should have gone off.

Rekha: I think it's a dick move to like preempt the main headline. Even if it's your slot.

Rimarkable: Not go off in terms of embarrass her, like smithereens in this piece. But I didn't have to pull back so much.

Rekha: I'm notoriously so picky about who opens for me. I feel sorry for that person because with Indian music, if it's an Indian set, there's a limited... In a situation you're playing the hits, there's always a window of hits, and if someone before you-

Rimarkable: It's a hard job.

Rekha: And if my person before starts dipping into that pool, it really affects my flow a lot. Like you said, I don't want to fuck it up for them, but I want them to understand that they need to set the vibe. I the time of setting the vibe has changed greatly, because things happen faster. I used to play slower, longer. Now it's like I'm getting things faster, quicker. Technology has informed that to some degree as well as people's impatience. Before when you went into a club, all exits were final. There was no going up to smoke. Now it's like, this place sucks we're

going to the next place. So the dynamics of the experience on the other side of change. Do you guys scratch in your sets?

Zainab: A little bit.

Selly: No I'm not a big scratcher. Every once in a while, I go, "ziga ziga ziga"
But that's not my lane. I'm comfortable with not being known for that.

Zainab: I actually tried to learn. At one point, I got kind of serious about it. I was like, "I really want to do this. This is how I'm going to take my DJing to a next level". I always the turntablism. I was, "These are the roots of DJing. This is where it all started. Let me at least pick up some shit." I had someone teaching me basic stuff, like fade in and out. And then I remember trying to do a crab scratch and I gave up. I was like, "This shit is hard. I don't have the patience for this, but I know enough stuff. It's so militant. You have to do it constantly."

Rekha: I don't scratch either. I do the little "ziga ziga" every once in a while. Pull it back, throw it in, scratch into it, dramatic starting transition. You don't use it in your sets.

Zainab: Barely, if ever.

Rekha: How do you think the crowd is into it?

Zainab: So here's the thing. I think no one really gives a shit if you scratch or not like, at least now, because people are fucking—I won't even go into who's doing it today and what DJing even means in 2018. That has a whole different definition. So I don't think anyone gives a fuck if you're if you're scratching or not as long as you're playing their songs. But I will say, DJ's like A-trak is somebody who is on a big stage and still does that, and I respect that, because those are his roots and that's where he came from. It's part of his performance. For people like him and people who can do it, I think when people hear it, they appreciate it. But

they're not looking for that, they don't want a whole break down, like turntablism set in the middle of a 1:00am slot at some popping nightclub. No one's really looking for that. Unless you're known for that. So I don't think it's necessary, if you will.

Rekha: What about other DJ techniques or tools that maybe are afforded by aides and software like looping.

Rimarkable: I love that. I love effects and loops.

Rekha: You guys do that?

Rimarkable: I do it all the time. I love it. I'm having more and more fun with it. I used to be just straight, next song to the next song. Blending of course, but the effects, that's cool. I love it. I'm looking for new ways to utilize the equipment. You have all this software with hundreds of effects and you're like, I want to try that one day!

Rekha: Do you feel like the crowd responds to those things?

Rimarkable: If you do it right. But I don't like sets where it's constant. It's like, do you know how to blend or nah? But if you throw it in, if you make it like a dramatic blend, an echo, a loop, I love that shit.

Zainab: The echo out is my favorite thing.

Rimarkable: Its helpful too.

Zainab: 'Cause it a good cheat code. If you want to switch BPMs.

Rimarkable: But every mix cannot be an echo out.

Rekha: I have a hard time blending without bass dropping. I just don't even know if I can. And then I was doing something small scale. Just with

friends. And there was no EQ, and I was like, "I don't know how to do this!" How did I ever.

Rimarkable: Especially with house music, certain drum patterns are going to be different and it'll sound like a clash

Rekha: It's overkill drums, so like to blend out, it's just better to do... It is my signature.

Zainab: For me, what I've seen a crowd respond is word play. So taking a phrase and sound or something in a different song and playing with that back and forth.

Rimarkable: Yeah that's dope.

Zainab: For me, that's more than a filter out or an echo out, or something. That's when I've seemed crowd be like, "Oh that's dope! You took that T-Pain song and did something with that Kanye song and that was dope."

Rekha: Are we plaining Kanye?

Zainab: Oh god, no this was before [Laughs].

Rekha: Do you feel like you're part of a DJ community?

Rimarkable: Absolutely.

Multiple: Yes. Yeah. Absolutely

Rekha: Who's in the community? How do you define it?

Rimarkable: Honestly, people that show me love and people I show love to.

Rekha: Like DJs?

Rimarkable: Yeah other DJs. I go to their parties, they come to mine.

Selly: It's hard to do it. You know it's an effort. Oftentimes we're all doing the same thing at the same time, so that's hard. But there is a community, there's definitely a community. And you try to throw each other work here and you get a little exchange going here and there, but yeah there's definitely a crew around who I support and I hold in reverence.

Rimarkable: Absolutely

Zainab: For me, it's not what you were saying of giving people work. When I can't show up to a gig, or actually listen to your set. We've done that a bunch of times. I do that with somebody, who was starting up. Now like he's playing everywhere. I remember when he first started playing, I was like, "This could be a good party for you to do." And I introduced them to somebody, so now it's like we have that understanding, I have your back, you have my back type of thing.

Rekha: Ever been burned by giving somebody a gig, and then you don't feel like it comes back to you in the same way?

Zainab: I don't really do tit for tat.

Rimarkable: One person out there. I've taken her off the shit list, she was definitely on that list. Showed up hella later to my gig, and wanted to leave early and has not held me down! Like, I hooked you up. Not that I need it, but it's about the gesture.

Zainab: Yes someone did that to me once, where I built a relationship with this venue. I was curating that night and I had worked with him multiple times and I was like, "Do you want to open for me?" So I didn't show up at the opening time, I was coming closer to my time. So he was

supposed to be there to open, and I get a text from the venue, the promoter being like, "This person lashed out on us, just like threw a whole hissy fit and didn't play the set," and basically was like clearly in the wrong. They were like mad that he showed up late and he basically refused to play after that because they gave him an attitude, that kid has problems anyways. He left and then he fucked me, because then the venue didn't want to work with me anymore. So that was the last time I played there.

Rimarkable: In New York, we're building these reputations and these relationships, like you can't be messing around. You're messing my shit up.

Selly: The most memorable thing that I could say happening in the recent past was that I gave somebody a night and they didn't show up.

Zainab: That's bad.

Selly: Granted there was snow, but it's still not an excuse.

Rekha: I DJed the day after my wisdom teeth were extracted

Selly: It wasn't serious. I mean, we go out in all kinds of weather because we have to. But yeah that person didn't show up and needless to say I haven't given him any more.

Zainab: That person like totally ghosted, like didn't even say anything?

Selly: He didn't say anything. I found out think the next day.

Rimarkable: Wow the venue didn't even hit you up?

Selly: I have a good relationship with the venue. So it was it was ok.

Rekha: I had a high end gig and I asked somebody to recommend musicians to join. He couldn't be there. So he's like, "Look I know you guys do these kinds of parties. You do extra musicians, like a sax, a drum kit, the Indian Drum, the dhol." And it was a lot of money on a table. This one high-end wedding planner that throws me a bone every once, not often, but the bone is really good. Maybe it's once a year, maybe every two years, but it's stellar. And he's like, "I'm going to send a video crew to tape them," I'm like, "No you're not." You can't send a video crew to tape them. And then this woman shows up. She's a sax player and she's wearing cowboy boots.

It wasn't a wedding, but it was at the Rainbow Room, and it was a high end gig. And I didn't know, I thought he had this cadre of musicians that jam together. These people didn't play together. So he was just throwing shit together. And then the kid he had, the guy, I was like, "You can have one drink." And he was late. I go, "Come on!" I do call time super early. They didn't get the level, of you know, they didn't get it. That's the kind of place where before they let doors open, they make sure everything is pointed the right way. Those are those gigs, that's why the stakes are different. They just didn't understand that. It was fine in the end, but that kid told him later, "Yeah, I don't want to work for her," because I said, "You're on your second or third drink and you're hitting on a girl." You know, no. I tell people, you don't talk, you just do your thing. People don't understand. This is a context where we're in service to them. I think I'm like, kind of done. I don't know what else you guys want to talk about.

Rekha: Do you think there's anything different about being a woman DJ or DJing in different spaces? Like in terms of the makeup or the crowd.

Rimarkable: Absolutely.

Rekha: Let's go there. Tell me about that. The question is, do you think there's a difference being a woman DJ.

Rimarkable: Absolutely. I think there is a difference, being a woman DJ. It's expected for you to have a certain physical aesthetic nowadays. It's part of the deal. Yeah it's absolutely a part of the gig. You have to present a certain way.

Rekha: What do you mean present a certain way?

Rimarkable: You have to be femme. Not so much these days, but femme or just sexy. Quite frankly, sexy. I know that I have been shadowed out of certain gigs and crews because I don't always present that way. I'm old school. I have been DJing 22 years. I'm about the guts and the grit and get nasty with it and I don't always think about that, you know. But this is a new time. This is a new day. And you know, I do enjoy looking nice and it does give me a certain way of confidence, but that doesn't mean that I'm trying to do that every single time. Not that I'm going to look bad at any point. But I don't want to feel pressure to beat my face, and be dressed in heels to go play a damn gig, when I want to be sweaty and get nasty, and I'm dancing too.

Rekha: When I say, to be a woman, are there other things that are not just about physical appearance. Like your Sunday Joy party in the summer. That's a very special space, it has a different energy. It does not feel like a douchy club at all. It feels intergenerational. It feels like it's super queer. There's a range of different kinds of people. I'm just wondering is any of that kind of thinking behind how that feels differently and different?

Rimarkable: That definitely feels differently. Because it's something that I'm a part of creating. I am creating that vibe. I'm creating what I really want to see what with events where it's about joy, it's about love, it's about the music, it's about the people, more so than like, we're at the club and we're buying 15 dollar drinks and look at that sexy girl DJ that's playing

kind of in a mediocre way and getting away with it because she's pretty. I really value that versus the latter.

Rekha: You know the question is like, is it different to be a woman DJ. What is different about that?

Zainab: The thing I dislike is when someone will come up to you and be like, "Wow you're pretty good for a girl." Or like, "I love female DJs." That phrase is just so contradictory and stupid to me because it's like saying, "Oh, you're a female doctor. You're a female lawyer. You're a female teacher." What do you even mean, it's just a profession. It's a skill. It's not something that as a female, it's interesting for me to be that.

Even in the tech industry. Like I know Rekha, you kind of work on that side too. Of course there are less women. That's a fact. From tech to music to whatever. But that doesn't mean just because you're a woman in that space that your skill set is less than. So that's the thing that I face, those comments of like, "Oh like you're pretty good", or "I really want female DJs for this." I get that but I hate that it's this quota thing. Like, I need to have a quota, or I'm going for this look or this vibe, or I'm trying to look like I support women and it's just feels really phony to me a lot of the time. Not always. But don't really like that. And the thing you mentioned about looks, that is so much a part of it now. Right. It's like, Let me have that super hot girl, who doesn't really know what the hell she's doing. But it's going to look really good at this Vegas party." I saw this girl propelled from being a host. I was DJing a party where she was a host, and in the last year, she just decided to DJ and has now played in clubs that I could never think of touching.

Rimarkable: I think I know who you're talking about. I am like, "Wow, really?"

Zainab: And you know, because she's naked a lot. Her boobies are out. She's got a social media. I get it. I get that's like the formula these days. But if I had maybe taken my shirt off and had my titties out, or like decided to

be really out there physically, I feel like I could have been in Vegas in no time. A lot of those people associate with other people who are in those spaces because of how they've used their looks as an advantage, or the way they're going to be naked on the gram to their advantage. And so they band together, and they take up all these gigs, where like women like us who have been doing this forever and refuse to risk that, have a longer trajectory to getting to that pay grade or to that venue.

Rekha: Is that the only way?

Zainab: It's not the only way, but it's an easier way. It's a faster way.

Rimarkable: It's way faster, but I'm grateful I took the high road, the long road, because I actually can DJ.

Zainab: And you know when you see those people up that they actually can't. So it's fine because I'm not trying to service a Vegas audience anyways.

Selly: So you can equate it to a race or a marathon. I'm in the marathon. I'm going the 26.5 five miles or how many point whatever miles it is. There are so many years and history behind me as I am right here in 2018, and I wouldn't trade that for anything and I wouldn't have done anything different. Have I been overlooked for gigs a lot? Yes. Because I'm a woman? Possibly. Have I played up on dressing up and looks? No, I haven't. And maybe I have lost out for that. I feel like I've done something ethically that I can live with. And I know that we live in a very instant society, but those women who are running the race to get to Vegas or to get to the Sunset Strip or wherever it is that they view as the top echelon of DJing, check them in five years.

Multiple: Exactly!

Selly: Check me in 5 years, I'm still going to be doing this.

Rimarkable: I'm still going to be doing this. I have a career.

Zainab: So true. I used to complain to my boyfriend about this, "Yo, I'm so tight, this girl is taking all my gigs."

Selly: It's really about the longevity of it. Honestly I view myself as a music lover first, so that love is never going to leave me when my breath leaves my body, that love will leave me. You know what I'm saying. So it's really about knowing that, if you're in this and you're passionate about it, it will continue to transform and morph and be all of these different things as you presenting yourself as a music authority. And those who were in it for the wrong reasons will fall right back into something else for the same reasons. So maybe it's DJing today, whatever the next trajectory of fame, how that's manifested. They're going to jump on that band wagon. Because it's not about the culture of sound for them. For me that's what it's about. Which is how I pick and choose, as you were saying, my community. The people who I revere, the people who I embrace, those are those people in the marathon with me. Because they're in it for the long run. They're in it for their passion. They want to produce. They want to move forward with it. And they're really about it. I can't put myself in a place where I am comparing myself to those people because I just can't. I live in a completely different life.

Zainab: You guys have obviously been—you said 22 years. How long have you been DJing?

Selly: I can't even count, since I was a kid. Professionally like 19. A very long time.

Zainab: I haven't even hit 10 yet. I'm at like 9 or something, 8 or 9. In that time right that I've come up, I feel like I was at the place where the DJ was

starting to become that person, like the famous person. Like Diplo was starting to become a big deal and all those people who now have their residencies in Vegas and everything. But even then, when I first started learning, I felt like the right people were in those places. And I was like I really looked up to a lot of those people, because I would see them play and I genuinely would feel something, and be like, "This is amazing. Like the way this person does this." And then five, six years into it, I had like my own residencies, parties, whatever. And I felt good, but then I started to see this Instagram era take over with these younger girls or anyone who had a following, honestly, and was like, "Oh I can leverage this following into this thing that people actually work hard at, and I'm just going to pretend to know what I'm doing." I kid you not. One of these influencers invited me to one of their gigs, when they just decided to start DJing. I went and they were literally playing from Spotify, pressing play and pause. I was so mad. I sat in my room for like hours at a time, learning how to do this, actually learning. And I got so mad seeing that, so I did start comparing myself to people.

Rimarkable: Yeah that's why we can't do that. It is bad and it is misleading because I find myself getting like, "How the hell?" Then I have snap out of it, because she's not going to be here forever.

Selly: The people who are often most misled by those profiles are the venue owners. They are the ones who are blindsided by that. Real DJs don't recognize that behavior. If they're about something, they're coming to see if you can play. They're not coming to see what you are wearing.

Rimarkable: Exactly.

Zainab: It took me a while to get over that. For me, it was like, "Oh this is a gig that I could be on. But this person who just started DJing..."

Rekha: It's not whether you can act, it's being cast in a part.

Rimarkable: That's right.

Zainab: That's a bar. That's a bar.

Rekha: To me the DJ booth the sacred space. I need to trust that you not going fuck up my set. Put your hand in, do the right thing. Be in here with me. How many times have we had guest DJ's, in 20 years of Basement Bhangra, where my co DJ Shilpa, she'll be like, "What is it with these guys. Why don't they have the right software updates?" She's like, "I have the leadership. I'm on top of my shit. And these guys are just like, what do they do?"

It happened at Summer Stage, completely mis-connect things. Do women ever come up to you and be like, "Yo that's cool and I want to learn. Any of that stuff. Have you taught anybody? Do you have any relationship to mentoring, or anything formally or informally?"

Rimarkable: I formally teach a course called the alchemy of DJing. It's expanding and I do offer it publicly. I do have people that may have caught wind of it and then come up to me and it's primarily women and I love that. I probably have had one guy, and he fell off. I'm like, "OK great. I want to build a DJ army." This class or this course is to to teach people how to actually DJ.

I think we were hanging out one night and I was sharing with you about one of my students, attended one of these "academies" and she paid six thousand dollars for a year. She said, "I learned more in three sessions with you, for a fraction of that, than I learned in a year."

Rekha: How is it going to take a year?

Zainab: I took one of those classes and 90 percent of my learning, don't get me wrong, Reborn and everyone were great teachers. It's what you do on your own. The little nuances and tips and tricks. That's not going to

come from a six thousand dollar course, that's going to come from practice.

Rekha: I can teach somebody the mechanics of DJing in about ten minutes. It's a question of, "Ok I'm going to tell you what's going to happen." But how to do that right, that's up to you. You could show people an octave and where the notes are. But they have to learn-

Rimarkable: I teach people what actually happens when you are DJing. The alchemy behind, the magic.

Rekha: What is magic?

Rimarkable: Alchemy is a seemingly magical process of transformation. So basically, I'm taking this music and I'm making it become a celebration. I'm creating something out of thin air, basically, by mixing this music. And it's done in a certain way that the transformative process is, you got to know that. That's what the real DJing is.

It's not just programming. It's about understanding people. It's about understanding emotion. I mean you gotta take my course. But it's about understanding people, and understanding emotion and how to program that essentially.

Zainab: That's so true. I had such a funny experience teaching someone how to DJ. I want to do it more honestly. I would love to actually have a student and go through a whole course, but a girl reached out to me and was like, hey I really want to DJ my birthday party. She a specific thing that she wanted to do. And I was like, "Great!". I thought it was more longevity, like she wanted to actually learn and not just for the party, but that was the thing that she wanted to be prepared for. So I took her coins and I taught her how to DJ. But it was annoying because she didn't give a shit about actually DJing. When I got into the first lesson, it was like, this is purely about looking cool in front of people.

Rimarkable: I've had students tell me that's what they want to do, and I'm like-

Rekha: Wrong class!

Zainab: She didn't care. I was trying to actually teach her stuff. I was like, "I'm imparting real knowledge on you right now." I could tell she was so distracted: she was on her phone, she was looking away. I had to explain something like 30 times, to the point where it was like, you don't really give a shit, you just want me to show you how to go from song a to song b, so you can make yourself look cool. But hey if you want to waste your money, fine. It was a shame because I knew the girl through stuff and I liked her, when I gave her these lessons, it was just like, "Damn this sucks." And that's what really then opened my eyes, for a lot of people, like you said, it's that race. They're not in it for the marathon, they're in it for that one moment where they're in front of the crowd and they just want to look cool. And I was like, "I can't believe these are the people reaching out to me for lessons." But I took her money regardless.

Selly: Unfortunately it's what this digital culture breeds, because they see the DJ's kind of like an iconic figure. But they don't really understand what is behind all of that. It's like, "Oh DJ, that's the name of the coolest job in the world. I want to be that, and I want to wear pretty dresses and do this and have my hair be special," all that stuff. It's not about any of that. But people are blindsided by this digital age, where you can manipulate anything to look like a rock star. You can create this alternate self that is playing in front of 2000 people and just rocking it out. There's so much falseness involved. I don't dwell on that because again that's not my world. I don't dwell on it. I find joy and happiness in the parties and the things that I get to bring to people. I try not to live in a place where I'm looking at all of these things. As far as I'm concerned, the things that I look at on my Instagram feed are very curated. They represent me, they represent the people who I hang out with. I'm not about that

life. I'm not looking at these rock star people, who some may have earned it, but many of them haven't. That's not something I'm avidly paying attention to. There's no app for taste.

Rekha: Money can't buy you class!

Selly: There is no app for taste. If you have poor taste in music, if you cannot put things together and make a story and present a scene or an experience to people, then you're pushing buttons. What are you building, what are you creating, what kind of experience are you giving people?

Rekha: How do you learn that?

Rimarkable: It's one of those things, you either got it or you don't.

Zainab: I totally agree.

Rekha: It's not learnable.

Rimarkable: Like how do you know if it's a good song.

Zainab: Taste is like style. You either have style or you don't.

Rekha: Do you think that the perception of not having style could prevent people, if they don't dress a certain way, or look a certain way? I'm just curious.

Zainab: Everyone can say they have good taste in music. Like, "Oh I listened to this and I listen to that, this is my unique taste." That's fine. That's great. But part of it with DJing is bringing that taste and narrowing it down to that place and moment that it makes sense for. Do you know how to come in and read a room and be like, "This is the taste level I'm going to bring here." The other part is storytelling, which is taking that

those songs and that taste, and being able to take someone on a journey through that. That's your unique perspective that you're bringing to DJing that no one else can bring. But you either have the ability to tell a good story, or you don't.

Rekha: So what about these cases of like, the bedroom DJ makes a track, goes somewhere, becomes famous, there's always...

Zainab: Some people get lucky.

Rekha: Do you think it's easier for a guy to get that?

Rimarkable: Potentially. Like Dan Funk. He was a veteran DJ, and look at him now, like he's actually good. I love Dan Funk. I have a student that just finished her course, she is a beast. She just needs her confidence.

Rekha: What was up with her confidence?

Rimarkable: She came from an abusive relationship where a man was overbearing and basically breaking down her confidence, and she was afraid. Much of the class was like a therapy session, honestly. She's a beast! She comes from a jazz family. Her music knowledge is incredible. I am like, "Girl. All you got to do is practice at least two hours a day. By the summer, Imma put you out. Imma put you on a stroll. Imma put you on the strip in the summertime, because you about to knock some heads over." She's the complete package. She's just a beast. Yeah, confidence is important. But the bedroom DJ shouldn't give up. It's usually the confidence piece. There's a lot of stuff that goes on in people's bedrooms.

Zainab: Are you talking specifically about the bedroom DJ, or like producer? I feel like there are 2 different things.

Rekha: I feel like there's this sort of mythology around the whole idea of how easy it can be. The coolest job in the world. When I was on the come-up, or even when I was teaching at NYU, this notion of like "bedroom DJ producer gets a song out." Some of these really young people/ Avicii came up that way. It's a moment of time. It's some sort of divineness around bedroom production that's just like secret, like in this bedroom, if given the opportunity, they can just be like, you know. Maybe that's just my perception of things. A sort of a mythology around the ease of how easy it is to get there. Same thing where people who are "influencers" and they just want to jump, maybe they want to be in acting, or they want to do something that has a visibility, because they have something else going for them.

Zainab: To your point of technology. It's easier to make a song, because you can torrent Ableton and go on YouTube and figure out how to put together a beat.

Rimarkable: And have mastered and then put it up and sell it on Bandcamp.

Rekha: The process to do it is easy. Taking people like it or grab it or making it sound good, that's...

Zainab: That's a totally different story, and some people get lucky where it's like, oh this is the first beat I made, and it's blowing up. The detail that people forget is that that bedroom DJ producer has probably been tinkering in their bedroom for years, and they put that song out.

Rekha: My favorite is when Desi girls like want to be like RnB singers and they started five minutes ago. I'm like, "Beyonce started when she was two." You want to do that, you want to be pop? All these girls that are pop stars, they started at six.

Zainab: That's to your point again about the instantaneous gratification that also comes with the wanting to be that instantly famous pop star or instantly

famous DJ. It's like, you think that all it is, is buying that set up or making that one song, and then you should be on by now, like damn you put in the work! People think that that's putting in work, and it's not. The 10,000 hour shit is real. Going out there and failing and trying again and having a horrible gig, like all this stuff.

Selly: And falling on your face a million times. You have the most to gain from your mistakes, not from your successes. If you are reflective, you will learn, and you will get better and you're going to say, "You know what, that didn't really work." You go back and revisit that. And those are the things that make you better.

Rekha: Yeah. All right. Any final words? What if someone says female DJ, girl DJ, queen on a flyer, how do you feel? Does it matter? Ladies Night?

Multiple: [Laughs]

Rimarkable: It's like, all right dude. That's how I feel.

Rekha: I hate it when people call me the queen anything. It just fucks with my gender. It's not my gender! I'm not a queen. People who should know better still do it. The most woke person.

Zainab: Yass Queen.

Rekha: No not even that, that's just appropriating queer black culture. That is just a bastardization of black culture.

All right. I think it's time for TGIF. Tuesday TGIF. That was our plan, we would eat afterwards and the closest proximity to food, the most easiest thing on this rainy day is TGIF. We could discuss later if there's an option.

Selly: I want to say thank you. Thank for bringing us together. I think it's important for people to record and to listen to stories of one another, in terms of the things we've had to work through. And I know you have your own story, and your own timeline with your party and much respect to that. Much respect for just asking us to come on board and do this today.

Multiple: Thank you so much.

Zainab: You said that so eloquently.

Rekha: Weren't we in that photo shoot?

Selly: Yes, I can't find that magazine, do you have it?

Rekha: I have it. Suede.

Selly: Take a picture and send me that picture.

Rekha: I will take a picture. I don't throw anything away.

Selly: I've moved so much over the years, some of the magazines I have lost.

Rekha: We were in this ridiculous photo shoot. Were you there when I was fighting for them to connect the equipment?

Selly: Yes.

Rekha: They had the set up where the turntables and the mixers were not together. I go, "First of all, that's not how you DJ, and I'm not going to be in the picture unless you connect everything."

Selly: Absolutely!

Rekha: And I need you to put a black tape on this thing that says “Gemini mixer” because no DJ would ever use that a Gemini. I will not use Gemini. I learned about the small claims court system. “This is about a shitty Gemini mixer from the store.” That’s one issue. Their launch issue they they did this panorama of female DJs.

Selly: It was hilarious. It was so cold in that place.

Rekha: It was terrible. It was the worst shit. They had us come in Chelsea, it took forever, they drove us in, freaking, like, Kensington somewhere, some gymnasium. It was horrible.

Selly: Some weird shit. And then our gig was just...

Rimarkable: Aww man, ain’t going to talk about that.

Rekha: That was one of those. Wow. You are. Yeah, okay. Yikes.

Rimarkable: It was definitely a yikes. T

Rekha: The best part was telling Madonna’s kids to get off the fucking speakers, that was a moment.

Rimarkable: I yelled at Lourdes.

Rekha: And what’s the kid’s...

Multiple: Rocco.

Rekha; Rocco. Madonna was performing, we were on stage. It’s the Women’s March. The Women’s March! We’re on stage all day, to not play any songs. It started off with Michael Moore talking too much. Then Scarlett, she got cut off because she talked too much. Yeah it was extra. And then Madonna came on, and then like a hundred people

came onstage with her, and then her kids were all on top of our monitors.

Rimarkable: Lourdes was standing on a monitor, and I was, "Um, get down!"

Rimarkable: She loved it, she loved me after that.

Selly: She needed you to put her in her place.

Rimarkable: Yeah, people were like, "You do know Madonna will buy another one." I was like, "Actually no she won't. She's going to go home after this. She's not going to think about these funky monitors. Sue her for it."

Rekha: Oh my god, can I put that on my resume now, "shared stage with Madonna".

Rimarkable: Yeah, I totally have that in my bio.

Rekha: Oh my god, everyone—Janelle-

Rimarkable: Alicia Keys, Maxwell, Madonna. Cher, I don't put her on my bio, but I definitely say Madonna. Janelle Monae, everybody! What's the other-

Zainab: Jidenna.

Rimarkable: Yeah, he performed with Janelle.

Zainab: Oh yeah, because they're on the same label.

Rimarkable: They did that horrible song. It was weird ass protest song.

Rekha: That was a long cold day. He played exactly one song at the end.

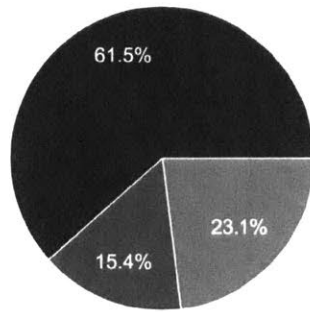
Zainab: I like Jidenna.

Rekha: All right guys. Thank you so much!

Survey Data

How long have you been DJing

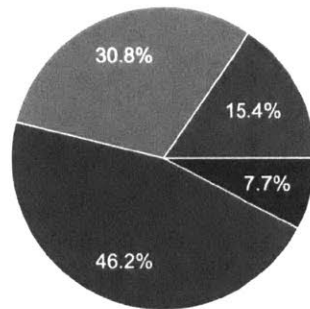
13 responses



- less than 1 year
- 1-3 years
- 4-6 years
- 7-10 years
- 10+

How many times do you DJ in a month?

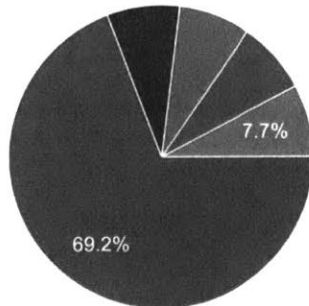
13 responses



- 0-1
- 2-5
- 6-10
- 11-15

What software do you use?

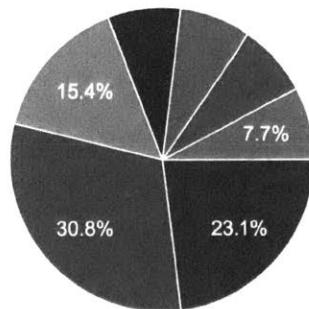
13 responses



- none; I am analog
- Serato DJ/ Scratch Live
- Traktor
- Rekordbox
- Ableton
- rekordbox and traktor
- I use a serato cdj / tt / controller setup for more open format wedding type events
- Ableton and Serato DJ Pro

What primary medium do you use to DJ?

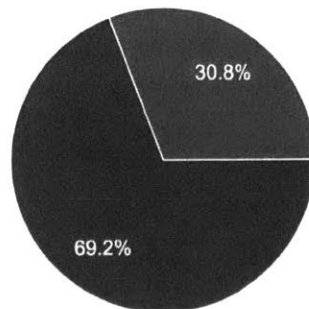
13 responses



- Turntables with vinyl
- CJDs with discs
- USB sticks
- DJ Controller
- Laptop
- cd-js with usb
- I use all of the above
- Or vinyl :)

Do you produce your own DJ events?

13 responses



- Yes
- No

At what age did you start DJing?

13 responses

