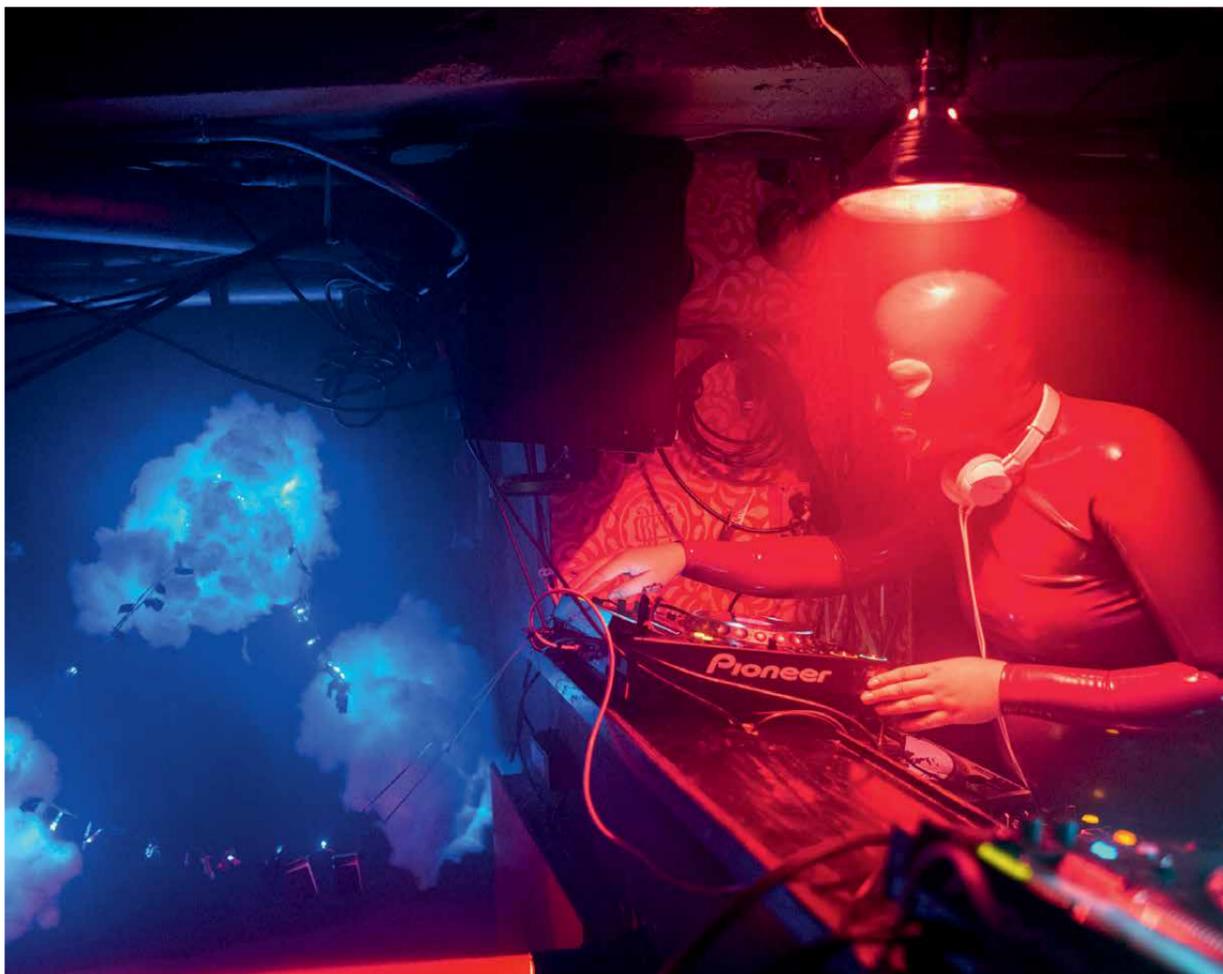


»I'M TRYING TO IMAGINE A SPACE A LITTLE BETTER THAN WHAT WE'VE INHERITED«

KILBOURNE IN CONVERSATION WITH CRISTINA PLETT



Kilbourne performing, October 2017, photo by Luis Nieto Dickens.

WHEN CRISTINA PLETT CALLED ASHE KILBOURNE, SHE HEARD OF HARDCORE MUSIC BANGING OUT OF KILBOURNE'S MONITORS. »LET ME JUST SWITCH THEM OFF,« ASHE SAYS, MAKING ROOM FOR THE CONVERSATION. HER STUDIO ROOM IS BRIGHT, FILLED WITH LIGHT AND THE REFLECTION OF THE HEAVY SNOW THAT HAS JUST HIT NEW YORK. HAVING GROWN UP IN A RURAL TOWN IN NEW JERSEY AND RECENTLY LIVING IN NEW ORLEANS FOR THREE YEARS, SHE JUST MOVED BACK TO NEW YORK CITY. THE 25-YEAR-OLD (»BORN IN THE SAME YEAR AS THUNDERDOME!«) DJ AND PRODUCER HAS AN EXCEPTIONALLY POLITICAL VIEW ON HARDCORE. SO, WE ASKED HER ABOUT HER PERSPECTIVE ON IT.

How did you get in touch with electronic music generally and hardcore especially?

Through the internet I found happy hardcore pretty quickly. That was when I was in middle school, just through YouTube and stuff. I remember my friend would give me the *Bonkers*-CDs. The first ones were like early happy hardcore, early rave, then some of the later ones had like hardcore techno and hard techno! Also, in high school I started going to parties and dance parties and raves in Philadelphia and New York.

The shifting of energy in your DJ sets is so quick. How do you try to channel this energy?

I think that a lot of hardcore works with formulaic arrangements, where there is often an intro, a dropout of the beat, a build, a bigger crescendo drop, and then a dropout and then another build-crescendo-drop, and then an outro. Those at-

mospheric moments where the beat disappears, I think they work to both intellectually and physically gather yourself. Because if you do a set where the kick drum will be going 95% of the time for an hour or two, you just have to keep up with it or take a break at your own pace. Like a »Gather your head and figure out maybe what is motivating you to dance at that moment« kind of thing.

I was surprised that your early compilation *18 songs, 2012 – 2015* is a very different style than, for example, your *Sourland* EP from 2016. When did this shift?

A lot of the songs on there are Philly and Jersey club. There was a time when that was a lot of what I was making. This art form is very much black, and it is simultaneously really in the moment of being exploited by white people around the world. Ultimately what I saw was, if someone wants a club DJ and they're a promoter, often if they're white, they are more inclined to

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book a white performer. Just because white performers who do black art are seen as transgressive or edgy in a way that black people who are doing art that is black aren't. So, I thought, for whatever good intentions I might want to have, I can't change the structural inequality around the music I make. I think I've stopped making club as much because the more I try to push myself to the center of this genre that I love and care deeply about, I'm going to be pushing others out.

So, do you think more black people got pushed out as club music becomes more hip?

Yeah. Or maybe like they weren't given the same economic opportunities as certain people. I think there is crossing-over with hardcore as well because a lot of the big producers right now are white, but then, if you look at the sampling culture of hardcore, a lot of it is nineties hip-hop tracks. It's kind of mind-boggling that there is, especially in the Netherlands, a really white culture.

White, and it also seems very male.

Yeah definitely. These big songs have rappers using the n-word, and it's so ... it's uncomfortable. There is this group Gunz For Hire. It's a big raw style duo. And I like their work individually, but their whole thing is just these over the top vocal raw tracks, where it's like, [sings] »To the weak, no mercy! To the losers, no mercy! NO fucking mercy!«. You know, two white Dutch dudes and the songs are like »LA,« »Brooklyn,« mostly offensive, about violence and an imagined macho, coded as black, culture of hip hop. Basically, there is a whole market for that in hardcore, too; mostly white performers using black aesthetics because it's edgy and over the top and often seen as really exaggerated.

Do you think that's most of the hardcore scene or just a small negative part?

I don't know, I think [pauses and thinks]... Maybe there are parts like that that are really obvious in what they're doing. But I think white supremacy runs through everything in culture so...

it shows up in small and subtle ways, too. I think that in some of the first hardcore and early rave and gabber tracks it's a big part of it, the fetishizing of black culture.

It's only a small part of the world but it's also a reflection of the whole world.

Absolutely. I think about the Netherlands, which is where so much of it starts, the assumption is that everyone's kind of very informed and educated about shit. So, the accusation of them making something negative going on in the community – I feel if you were to ask at a lot of these festivals, these guys, »Are you sexist?«, they'd be like no! But the whole thing about putting women's bodies on display and hitting on women being really aggressive sexually, is that a big part of it? Yeah, definitely.

How do you feel then producing it as a woman and especially as a trans woman?

I don't know about many hardcore people who are visibly trans-women. What's her name...? She is like one of the original hardcore and early rave people who is a trans woman and I really should know her name. [clicks on the computer, thinks]. Ah, yes! Liza N'Eliaz. She's a trans woman, she's an important person. She's no longer alive. Aside from her I don't really know anyone. When I've gone to festivals in the Netherlands, being trans is definitely a point of harassment and fear. There is also so much stigma in hardcore about producing. A lot of women who make it are accused of having ghost producers and certainly some do, but still, it's so weird. I always see on message boards – there is this artist I love, Miss Hysteria. They will be like »Best woman in hardcore!«, »Only woman who really makes her music!«. Even in supporting her they're basically downgrading women who try to participate in the scene.

I have the feeling that this old traditional hardcore scene from the Netherlands is very different to the new scene where you are and that's merging with club music. Are you trying to build a nicer scene for yourself or do you identify more with the old one?

I hope that in my own actions I'm trying to imagine and enact a space that's a little better than what we've inherited as far as politics and gender politics go in the scene, but at the same time it's difficult because maybe it's a genre that hasn't had these conversations so much. And it's starting to. I think there is a danger too: Of having a total break, even if hardcore is having this moment of a club and hardcore crossover and both are critiquing the politics of what has come before it. If there is a total break it's probably very easy to lose track of the music that got you here in the first place. You need to be involved in the critique of what's come before you, because there are issues that are clear around the scenes. Like misogyny and racism. And if you consider yourself totally separate from hardcore before, you might lose your connection to it.

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You lose touch with the roots and the bigger picture. And it also doesn't improve the old one.

Yeah! Because if you just have these little pockets of people where everyone is on the same page, it's nice, but it doesn't affect the larger conversation.

I was wondering how you see this becoming hip of hardcore with acts like the Casual Gabberz, Wixtapol etc. – more positively or more negatively?

I think it's positive – and I think I trust everyone there really loves the music – but you get scared that it will just become, not for the groups you mentioned, but for people around it, like a fun little thing to try on, but not really embraced fully and sincerely. I feel like this because it's music that I love, and it's given me so much inspiration and happiness in my life. So I get scared at the thought of people being like »Oh this is like so over the top, Gabber!« but they're not really being there for it. The other thing I worry about – did you see that Resident Advisor article? Where it's top trends and hardcore as one. It's weird because hardcore shouldn't be a trend, it's such a giant mainstream culture in certain parts of the world, literally hundreds of thousands of people are obsessed with this genre. So it's important not to fool ourselves that we're something totally new and out of the blue.

It's just a new thing for the »underground« of electronic music.

And I love whatever that »underground,« obviously nerdy, club, internet people do and so I just hope that collectively we pay tribute to the music that's come before it and just live it to the fullest. And not treat it as just a joke.

CRISTINA PLETT is a freelance music journalist from Berlin who regularly writes for Groove magazine.

To listen to *KILBOURNE*'s music go to:
» www.soundcloud.com/kilbourne