

Rusty Lazer on finding inspiration in your surroundings



May 24, 2017 - Rusty Lazer is a New Orleans-based musician and organizer. He's best known as the live DJ and creative partner of Sissy Bounce rapper Nicky Da B, and as the onetime manager of Big Freedia. In 2006 he co-founded the artist-driven nonprofit organization [New Orleans Airlift](#). He helped create the Music Box Village, where every house can be used as an instrument.

As told to Brandon Stosuy, 2072 words.

Tags: [Music](#), [Culture](#), [Inspiration](#), [Independence](#), [Collaboration](#), [Adversity](#), [Identity](#), [Success](#).

A house fell down next to mine, so I saved the wood to build something else. It was me and my friends—Delaney Martin, Taylor Shepherd, and Swoon. We debated what to do. We were like, “We’ll build a residency for artists. This will be totally cool and cute.” I made a model with Swoon. We were excited about this idea, and were like, “Music is important to people. Let’s throw a little music into it.” It was part musical architecture, part sound art.

Then we went to the Historical District Landmarks Commission. We brought our model in and put it on the boardroom table. One of the guys, the head of HDLC, looks at it and he goes, “Well this is great but have you ever noticed your block before? Have you ever paid attention to the rhythmic nature of your block before?” I was like, “I don’t even know what you’re talking about.”

He said something like, “Your model doesn’t include this, but your block has a rhythm and the rhythm is: door, window, window, door. Door, window, window, door. All the way down your block on either side. It’s because of blah, blah, blah...” and he had these reasons for why that was.

My street was an alley at one time. It was the back of things, not the front of things. He was like, “You’ve got this thing happening for this reason and it really sets the pace.” He was like, “You know, if you really want to do something with this project that reflects the meaning of that, you should try and incorporate this architectural rhythm that’s happening.”

We were flabbergasted. Like, who thinks of this shit? In what other city is the head of a historical district commission, who spends a lot of time telling people their fences can’t be nine feet tall, saying to you: “Yeah, you can build this fucking crazy thing but you have to respect the musical nature of your block.” It changed everything. It sent us down the track of: “Music is woven into every single aspect of life here. If we’re going to make an architectural musical reality, then we have to respect even the city’s rhythms.”

It’s an across the board kind of thing that we’re just tapping into with [The Music Box](#). People make an instrument out of everything here. When you stand around in New Orleans, you hear kids playing drumsticks waiting for the bus, on the bus stop pole. You hear a little bit of music in everything. I hear it in the way people talk to each other. Everything’s sing-songy, the way people speak. It gets inside of you and it seems natural to do things this way.

The best compliment we’ve gotten so far on The Music Box was from an old timer who lives in the Musician’s Village nearby, which is a city project to provide affordable home-buying possibilities for musicians. He told us that he lives in the Musician’s Village, but that this was a true village for musicians. He came over and checked it out and he looked around The Music Box and he just goes, “This is like something New Orleans people would do.” We were like, “Fuck yeah.” As transplants, even 22-year transplants, that was the best compliment you could possibly get in a million years, that people would look at it and be like yeah, take an old thing, make a new instrument out of it. Make it musical.

For somebody who really loves music, music is everything. It’s the thing you use when you’re sad. It’s the thing that you use when you’re happy. It’s a tool in every way for emotional accessibility. In New Orleans, you’re literally surrounded by an entire city that agrees with you on that.

When you tell people in another town, “Oh I’m a musician,” they might go: “Okay but where’s the coffee shop you work at?” Here in New Orleans if you say you’re a musician they want to know what gigs you’re doing, and if you’re not doing any gigs, they want to know why not. If you are, they’re going to come see you. If you suck, they’re going to tell you to get better. In every way, you get a push from behind or a pull from the front. Everyone has that same idea that music is a tool for survival. I don’t really know if that’s something we have here in America as a general rule. These are ideas you don’t get when music is an industry or a commodity.

I’ve been a drummer since I was about five years old. I’ve played in everything from symphonies to punk bands to marching bands, all the different arenas that you can be in. Metal bands in high school. Through all those years of playing, I never really acquired a soul. That didn’t happen until I came here and started to interact with people who were multi-generational. It wasn’t just like living in a place like Austin or somewhere else where every musician is your age, sort of does your thing, sort of has the same idea about what originality is. It wasn’t until I came here and was sitting next to 80 year-olds playing trumpet and 16 year-olds making art and all these folks synthesizing at every level, that it was like, “Oh my god, this is just what your heart does forever. This is what your soul does forever.” I was able to tap into that creative soul that everyone else is experiencing around me and be a part of something in that way. It’s corny to say, but New Orleans literally gave me a soul.

I haven’t played drums with any seriousness since Hurricane Katrina. I’ve been in a few projects, and have done a few things that mean a lot to me, but I lost the three bands that really defined me prior to that. I was working full-time. I was doing 15 to 20 gigs a week and really feeling it, then it all fell apart post-Katrina. It wasn’t like there wasn’t anywhere to go, I just stepped into another way of serving, which in this case was DJing. It seemed natural, like “Okay I’ll do this now. If this makes people feel good, then I’m going to keep moving in this direction.” It takes away a lot of the metrics for being successful as a musician that are really based on superficial, inconsequential bullshit, like “Am I making money or am I hot in this moment?” All that shit goes out the window.

In New Orleans you have people like DJ Jubilee. His title is King of Bounce. He’s been making bounce for 23 years. He’s an amazing person. As a performer, you see his shows and you’re like, “Oh man this guy can really tell a crowd what to do.” He coaches basketball and the State Championship-winning football teams. You watch him coaching and you’re like, “Oh shit, it’s the same job.” You stand in front of a bunch of people and you tell them what to do for about four hours and then all of a sudden, they’re a finely-tuned machine.

He’s the guy who really owns the very concept of bounce and has held onto it for so long. He can walk into any room in New Orleans, and everyone, white, black, and otherwise has seen this guy play. My friend went to a private all-girls Catholic school. DJ Jubilee played there.

Outside of New Orleans, people think of bounce as a late night kind of thing. It's dirty, it's 3AM. It's all those things, but there's also a 3PM version of bounce. There's a school-day version of bounce. It's so ingrained and embedded in the culture that the things that people do—like being a football coach and a special ed teacher, in Jubilee's case—are just somehow a corollary to the music that they create. It's all the same tool again to make people feel something, or make people react to something and energize and mobilize.

I see it across the board. Big Freedia decorates parties as her side job. Cheeky Blakk is a home care specialist. These are people who serve, serve, serve, serve, serve, serve and then they get up onstage and they serve you some more and they serve you some more. It's beautiful to watch that and it makes you want to make it thread through your whole life without even thinking about it: whatever you're going to do to make your money, you're going to serve people.

The one thing about The Music Box and New Orleans Airlift in general is our whole point is collaboration. We started off doing collaborations between New Orleans artists and the outside world. It was a big step for us. Over time we realized that there was just as much need to talk across neighborhoods in New Orleans as there was to talk between New Orleans and the outside world.

The kind of voices we like to amplify are from people who don't know they're artists yet, but have an artistic bent in their lives and are willing to go with us down this weird rabbit hole of art. Some of those folks are amazing to talk to, folks that don't think of themselves as artists but are making beautiful things everyday.

I'm always afraid we're going to lose this. I had a tour that started six days after Katrina and lasted for a month. Everywhere we went on that tour, we looked at it as a place of possible refuge. Like, if we can't go home, where are we going to go? Is Portland a good place? Is Seattle a good place? What about Phoenix? Everywhere we went, we could tell that it wasn't our place. We could tell that people weren't processing life in the same way that we were.

I'm pretty sure that I could do this somewhere else. I could survive in a similar way or find a community that has this kind of energy. I don't know if it's in America, though. I've traveled around the world looking in the same way for a backup spot. I've found some sister cities. The one thing you can't find anywhere else is the city-wide sense of this appreciation for actually being happy and being balanced in your life.

I had the artist TT down here. She's a Baltimore club rapper and dancer. Baltimore club is her thing and she's really good at it. We went to a party at Katey Red's. She's legendary, the first real trans rapper here. It was her wedding reception party at a nightclub. They were playing bounce, all night long. TT looked at me and she's like, "They're going to play this all night long?" I was like, "They're playing this in every room in the city out of every car in town all night, every night. Every day." It doesn't matter at all. Our own thing is what we live for. I don't really know that other places have that much respect for the local output in the same way. We don't have many signs around that say, "Support local music." You don't have to. We're doing it.

Somebody made this comment to me one time about the free speech movement in Berkeley. I'd gone to Berkeley and I was like, "Wow Berkeley seems really conservative." They were like, "Yeah, well you don't need a free speech movement where you have free speech." I was like, "Oh, yeah, right." Similar thing here. We don't need to keep New Orleans weird. We don't need to support local music. Those things are happening everywhere, all the time, in every arena, period.

Five ballads that stick with me through everything by Rusty Lazer:

"Profoundly Blue" - Edmond Hall

"Phosphorous" - Niobe

"A Sailboat in the Moonlight" - Billie Holiday

"Baby" - Donnie and Joe Emerson

"Without You" - Spooky Black

5 mottos I like in 5 words by Rusty Lazer:

Don't mooch off the crew
Boundaries means I love you
You don't know anyone's struggle
Aim to share your privilege
All music once was new

Name

Rusty Lazer

Vocation

DJ, Drummer, Artist Manager, Co-Founder of New Orleans Airlift

Fact

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