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As told to Julian Brimmers, 3207 words.

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On fighting against your own apathy

Musician and visual artist Kelman Duran on dealing with the constrictions of academia, making illegal music, and why it's so difficult separating art from life.

How did you get started in music?

I started out playing jazz in 5th grade, and then I played in a jazz band at Harlem School of the Arts. I grew up on nerdy jazz, not standards. My teacher, who was the piano player for Dizzy Gillespie for a really long time, put me on to samples. I started listening to hip-hop seriously after that. And then me and another kid, who played bass, started a rap group. It was really corny. Later, I went to the art high school, LaGuardia. That silly movie *Fame* was written about it, everybody there wanted to be famous.

Did you rap?

No, I just made beats. There were all these house parties all the time, and DJ Playero mixtapes were going around. That music was called underground for a while, like the old Daddy Yankee stuff. That's how I got into that kind of music. But I left it for a really long time. I didn't do any music from age 18 to 28. Ten years.

What held you back?

I think the jazz band ruined my childhood. I never had time for anything else, so I was like, "fuck this." My parents didn't care. After 18 they let me go. I moved to Korea, with my partner at the time. I went there to teach English, like everybody else. When I came back home I went to grad school, but dropped out. Then I got accepted into CalArts.

What kind of place was CalArts when you were there?

For the first two years it was amazing, to tell you the truth. People were running around naked. I used to smoke cigarettes in the hallways. The teachers were really engaged. But as with most institutions, they got neo-liberalized and stopped accepting crazy people. It made everything super normative for a while. I think it's still like that. I'm in school right now for my Ph.D. and I'm thinking of leaving just because of the student population. Like, I got snitched on for smoking a cigarette on campus. I know you're not supposed to smoke, but I was like, "Really, you're gonna tell on me?" And they went, "Yeah, we have to." No, you don't have to do anything.

You're a writer, a musician, and a filmmaker. You've written [essays] about Michael Brown and the police killings.

I went to an arts school that's all about critical theory, so they take the emotional and poetic side of everything away. I think that's why I started doing music again, as a response to those events, just to be

able to feel stuff emotionally. I was surprised how those events politicized artists. I listened to that Future song, "March Madness," there's a very small reference in there, but it showed that he created the song in response to that. Most people wouldn't think Future cares, that's why I referenced him in my essay.

Do you think it's because of the sudden visibility of new media that many people are concerned with this for the first time?

I knew it was a thing, but I was unsure why it was happening so frequently. There are so many people that are not living a so-called normative life in society, or that are making something creative, as opposed to our parents, who were forced to do labor. I think we have a different schism for us and that brings out fear. That is a big thing. And I don't think it's been always like this. I think 9/11 was the turning point. When I was a teenager, it became really obvious that there was a dialectic shift happening in society. Grey areas started vanishing.

Tell me about the emotions you try to funnel into your music.

I think it's impossible to be apolitical. My first album, I really like it, but I made it in five days. 1804 Kids is a reference to the Haitian revolution. It's a simple reference about going back to rhythm, back to feeling good about your body. It's totally nostalgic and totally aesthetic. A friend of mine who's a journalist was really upset that I named it 1804 Kids. He said, if you're using a political reference, don't be so fucking lazy. No one cares about high-pitched voices. He's one of those people who are against musicians and DJs borrowing from art theory to justify the music that they're making. You don't need to justify it. You don't put it in that language.

But still, people project a political motivation onto your music all the time...

Yes, that happens a lot. I think if I hadn't gone to art school it would be a different conversation. And that's fucked up to say, but when people go, "Oh, what concepts do you use for your music, how does it relate to film," I feel bad because they put so much research and thought into it, and all I can say is, "I was just high, bro." [laughs]

Do you think this quasi-activist reading of your music gets you bookings as well?

For sure. People get attracted to art for different reasons. I mean, my song that's the most popular is the song that I hate the most, "6 De La Mañana." Everywhere I go, people love it.

The other day, I was reading about The Caretaker, Leyland Kirby. I think the writer was Mark Fisher, who recently died, saying that his music was about nostalgia being a wish for the future. Sometimes I feel like, damn, is that my generation, is that what we do? Because my friends always joke about how in 200 years people are just gonna laugh at us. Like, "Damn, these people had to work for money." They'll laugh at the type of system and the labor relations we have created.

In general, I think our generation is pretty progressive on stuff that has to do with basic human rights. But then I noticed in the older generation, some people at least seem to just say, "I don't give a fuck. I understand what you're saying about human rights, but no. This is not how our country is gonna work." It comes down to this lack of agency. For a long time, I thought what I do is giving me agency, but it's not. I'm just having fun with friends. I get to see people, and I get to re-see people, and that is all I can ask for.

If people over-theorize your music, how would you yourself describe what you do? It's very much illegal music, isn't it?

Yeah, it's illegal music. So that's one format that I kept: It's gonna be edits and it's gonna be illegal. I'm surprised it hasn't come down on a lot of platforms. I definitely got asked by major labels and television to use the songs and they...just can't. We had to get a lawyer once and he went: "You're fucked. I suggest you just stay quiet and duck. Or you could give it to these platforms and get it taken down and get some press through that." That was his advice. I was like, "No, I don't think so." [laughs]

You break down the elements and what you use it for, though.

I definitely think domains are important. For example, Gqom is very popular right now, so for me making reggaeton versions of it, I can't just use it out of context. On this second record, *13th Month*, I got more specific about what I sampled. I dedicate it to something irrational, a constellation system. Some of it is based on very formal things, like the number 13 is based on a moon cycle. A lot of "traditional" or "indigenous" people have a moon cycle for a year, that is 13 months.

I made those diary films on a reservation in South Dakota. What they would do there is, whenever the constellation changes, they go to specific places and do specific rituals. As a Westerner and a person dealing with the humanities, I was skeptical. But then I thought: Let me try this format for music. It was so nice, when the full moon was out I would just destroy myself. Three days, just going in, taking very few breaks. For no reasons other than that I learned this from friends and wanted to see if it works.

That's how all spiritual systems eventually work, right? It's acquired trial-and-error knowledge that gets passed down.

Yeah, and it really worked. It's gotten really weird, actually. They didn't make me sign anything, so I'm gonna tell you this:

A few months ago, I was checking my spam folder on Instagram and found this message, "Kanye West is a big fan, can you get on the phone?" I was like, this has to be a joke. So, I write them back, then one day he called and was like, "Just send me music." I sent him 12 beats that I made in a day, and he asked if I can come to Chicago the next day. He's super nice and super easy to work with. He gave me the whole new album to work on, right away, on a USB stick. Eventually, I realized that he was not really interested in me producing for him as much as he just wanted people to be around, which I thought was really sweet. His family was around all the time, they all were super sweet and it was super intimate.

He wanted you to be there in an advisory capacity?

Not even in an advisory way... just like... he'd call me and go, "Your music makes me feel really calm. It's really good. I'm on this calm shit now." I was like, "Okay" [laughs]. Chicago was sweet, but at some point I had to leave because I was like, "I don't know what I'm doing here." And they didn't buy me a return ticket, they just assumed I was gonna stay, but I was like, "I gotta go." It was amazing, really nice. It definitely showed me that you have to make music within a specific context. And the new album is amazing.

So did you end up doing anything on it?

I don't think he's gonna use anything that I did. But I think there's something in the air. When I found myself in the studio with Ty Dolla \$ign, Mike Dean, Che Pope, and Designer and these people, I was playing some of my music to break the ice. Most of the stuff was ambient. And people really responded exactly how I would like people to respond. So much so that they were like, "Is this still the same song?" I'd be like, "No, we're on track five right now" [laughs].

They were not treating me like a nerdy kid. And the crazier thing was, the first track that I played was an edit with a sample by Tupac's verse on Scarface's "Smile." Mike Dean turned to me: "Where did you get the vocals from? That's crazy, I recorded this." I just found them on the internet. Everyone knew this was a weird astrology kinda moment. That happened during my first two minutes there. I felt like, "Damn, maybe I should take music more seriously."

If music serves this emotional, non-theoretical purpose for you-how does that apply to your films?

For a song I made inspired by a star system in South Dakota, I sampled "Starlight" by Model 500. Just because of the name, not because I liked the song. Back in art school, they'd say, "This works, the reference and the connection works." In music you don't have to put everything into language. But in art school, all your decisions need to be transparent. They need to be known. My films are a bit like that. They jump from name to name and from reference to reference, kinda rationally.

What does it do to you personally when you interact on such a deep level with marginalized people for your

films?

To tell you the truth, whenever I feel it gets too much and I get too depressed, I leave the reservation. It's really unhealthy. The food that they're forced to eat there is super unhealthy. Of course, I'm forced to eat it, too. One time I brought them alfalfa sprouts. I bought them outside the reservation and they were like, "What is this white man food? Get the fuck outta here with this shit." [laughs]

It's really hard for me to separate art from life. Sometimes I'm really gullible. Whereas, if I were a more dedicated and engaged artist, I should have taken certain things further. If I was Hito Steyerl, for example, she always explores things further, because her art is about discourse. She's one of my favorite artists. I guess my thing is more about hanging out and less about creating some form of discourse. That can make for bad art, and I'm kinda okay with that.

You've worked as an art teacher and lecturer as well, how does that work out with your understanding of art?

I never tell them to go my route. If I was really honest, I'd be like, "Don't get a job, be broke and make your art." You don't have that much time, you know what I'm saying? Do it now. Living out of your car and doing shit like that, you can't do that when you're 40. That's one piece of advice I got from Harry Gamboa Jr. from ASCO: "Dude, spend two years and don't get a job." That was terrible fucking advice, yet somehow it worked for me. But I never tell students to do that, no.

I taught at CalState LA. Universities in America have specific outcomes for their students. CalState LA, not that there's anything bad with it, they have a ceramics program, you know. People are still painting portraits and shit like that. I told them that they're not gonna make it in the art world if they continue to do that. The art world is not interested in that. But because the students are poor and from a lower class, they tell them to just become technicians in art. That's not real art. So, I tell them which artists are doing really well in the art world. I almost always point to Hito and people who work in that regard. I tell them: if you wanna make money, you can make money in the art world.

Does that go down well with the dean's office?

I think they're suspicious of the way I do things, for sure. One time I got into trouble for telling a fashion student that fashion is not art. They said, "You can't tell that to students here," and I responded, "Don't put a person who wants to make another fucking American Apparel in a grad art class." Students just want a grade. And sometimes they're like, "I understand what you're saying, all that critical BS, but I don't care." They respect it, but they keep painting, because that's what they do.

Did your mentality towards cultural production change over the years?

For a long time, I really thought that art was a pretty transgressive way of going about life. Funny enough, museums are catching on—they're all of a sudden really interested in DJs. They ask these questions sometimes that make me wonder: "Do you think we sit around and discuss these things?" Most DJs are so weird, they don't talk to anyone! I play with so many people and I never talk to them once. I don't know why that is. Holy Other gave me a real history lesson on DJ club culture once. This kid is so smart. There's definitely a history, but naturally DJs try to stay away from it. Still, they're being used by institutions a lot. Just because they have to make ends meet. I've done shows in a museum, but never again. I'm not doing cocktail art. I could just get a regular job if I wanted to do that.

There's a ceiling for what you can achieve with your music, commercially. What is it that you want to happen with *13th Month*?

Damn, I don't know if I ever really thought about that. I do want to play live at some point, instead of from my computer, but that would require a lot of people. I do wanna explore that format, but also, I was slightly disappointed by Jeff Mills and this orchestra doing techno. I don't know what it was, but I was slightly like, [*breathes sharply through his teeth*], I'm not sure about this. Is this how incorporated techno has become?

I think by now I know more about what I *don't* want than what I actually want. I don't wanna fly so much

anymore. And at home, I'm literally failing my Ph.D. program. I've only been in it for two months and they're already upset with me, but it felt like playing gigs was more important for me than being in academia. I went into academia for the wrong reasons. I wanted to get sober, wanted to get a partner. Be a bit more stable. That's why I wanted to get a Ph.D. But I've been there two months and I was like: "Nope, can't do it."

It's hard to go back to L.A., it really is. But—I know it sounds quite contradictory— I love writing and I love text. That's the only thing that is going to live on from all of this. There are so many amazing scenes and so many things that are happening there, but if you don't have any people writing about it... the people in the scene don't do it because they are too depressed, or something, I don't fucking know. Probably out of apathy, which a lot of us suffer from.

Including yourself?

I definitely feel like I've become more apathetic. I definitely feel that I used to be more active. Like, I don't even vote anymore.

That's one part of activism, but creating on all these levels: making movies, writing essays, touring, making tracks...this sounds very far from apathy to me.

I mean, I agree with you on some points. I just feel like... maybe you're right. I'm a person that learns after the fact. It's hard for me to understand what's going on at times.

Kelman Duran recommends:

5 things to learn while living on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota

When the crickets stop on the prairie, you stop moving. It usually means a bad spirit is around.

Be careful of the Deer People.

Buffalos run towards the storm.

Crazy Horse never took a photo, the one circulating online and in museums is supposedly a fake.

Throw out some tobacco for the hawks when they keep you safe.

Name


Kelman Duran

Vocation


Musician, Filmmaker, Scholar

Fact

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