Nicolas Jaar on chasing a creative high

December 12, 2016 - Nicolas Jaar is a Chilean music producer, mixing engineer, and DJ based in New York City. Since 2008 Jaar has released nearly a dozen EPs, a variety of remixes, two film soundtracks, and a couple of critically-acclaimed full-length albums (2011's *Space is Only Noise* and 2016's *Sirens*). In addition to his solo work, Jaar also served as one half of space rock duo Darkside and owns and operates his own record label, Other People. In 2012 Jaar performed a 5-hour improvisational piece inside the then brand new geodesic dome at MoMA PS1, which remains one of the most beloved performances in the history of that space.

As told to T. Cole Rachel, 2509 words.

Tags: Music, Beginnings, Inspiration.

I know you grew up in New York City. I assume that means you got to see a ton of shows when you were younger?

My teen years were absolutely not what you would think. I didn't go to a club until I actually played in one. My fondest memory of a concert was seeing Goran Bregović in some park somewhere and then seeing shows in Williamsburg when I didn't even know what Williamsburg was. Those are the kind of concerts I remember seeing. I used to try to go to CBGB's as much as I could. I lived close to it. It was really fun for me to go by myself. Sometimes you could get in and didn't need an ID or anything. My parents were strict and I never had a fake ID, mostly because if they'd found out I had one, they were going to think I was doing things that I was not doing.

Why do you think you gravitated towards making electronic music as opposed to playing in a band?

I was in a band, actually. I was in a couple of bands. My education in regards to playing with other people came from playing in the streets. Weirdly, I have never spoken about this. I actually kind of realized this recently. Earlier this year my parents moved out of the apartment they were renting for nearly 25 years in the heart of SoHo. They moved there in the '80s and that's where I grew up. The last dinner we had there was with me, my girlfriend at the time, and my two best friends. We were just talking about all the memories. I remembered what a huge part playing music in the street was when I was growing up, and how I have maybe just completely forgotten about that entire part of my musical life. Somehow it's just never come up in conversations. I was basically out in the streets asking for money and playing the accordion for a long time.

Why the accordion?

I kind of learned how to play piano, not very well, and then I sort of learned how to play accordion. Again, I didn't even play very well. My friend Will was an amazing sax player. Still is. My friend Mike was a great bass player. I was just there, honestly, doing a C-minor pad on the accordion. I wasn't doing much. As a band, we eventually graduated to wandering around and trying to find plugs in the street—and by plugs, I mean electrical outlets where we could plug in our gear. I would bring speakers, and then I would do my electronic thing, whatever the fuck that was at the time. That generated a little bit of interest in the street, because people weren't really expecting that. I remember making 30 bucks one day on Elizabeth and Spring Street. Me and Mike, we would literally walk around trying to find plugs, because we had such a fun time doing that.

There was a moment where—this is more the accordion days—but we would go to Spanish Harlem because we could eat chicken and rice, and I could speak Spanish. We could eat really cheap, like for three bucks, and they would serve us beer sometimes when we were like 14 or 15. Then we'd play and sometimes the kids there would bring drums. We'd also play in that little bandshell in Central Park sometimes. We'd bring our own neon lights and make it look all pink and bright, then play with all the drummers. It was all really fun… and I have never talked about it before, which is weird. I don't know why.

That sounds like a formative experience—for an aspiring musician to play music in public and to see people react to it.

I think I wanted that. I was excited by that. I was excited about playing with people also. We didn't have a place to play. We didn't have a basement or anything. When you grow up in New York City, what are you gonna do? Are you gonna ask your parents to pay for a practice space? No.

That same scarcity of space is what inspires a lot of people to make electronic music in the first place. When you are using computers and keyboards, you don't need a lot of room. You can wear headphones, so you don't have to worry about being too loud.

A hundred percent! I remember in the very early days when I had put out maybe one or two EPs, I was immature and foolish enough to go into an online forum to see what people were saying about my music, which is something I absolutely don't do anymore. I already have enough anxiety; I don't need to add that to my life. There was some internet person that was like, "I don't understand if he puts MIDI keyboards, like MIDI piano sounds, in there on purpose. Why can't he just record a real piano?" There was this vibe of like, "Oh, he's not real because he doesn't use real piano sounds." Meanwhile, I was there in my bedroom. I was like 19 or 20 maybe, and I was like, "Don't they understand I have kind of no way of actually a getting a good piano sound with the equipment I have?" I'm in a shitty dorm room. What do you want from me?

So yes, a lot of times you end up making things a certain way out of necessity. So much electronic music is made out of scarcity and trying to do the most with what you have at the time. I think that is beautiful. It's like when you think about the beginnings of Acid House and how it was made by people using a Roland 303, which was kind of a cheap, fucked-up machine that didn't really work… and then that becomes a signature sound for a while generation of kids. Beautiful.

Is making music what you always thought you'd end up doing?

I was surprised by the fact that people thought of me as a musician. In my high school, I know this might sound weird today, but back in 2005 or 2006, for me to be there with Ableton in the middle of my school library making beats… people thought I was just listening to music. I wasn't really able to explain to some kids that I was making beats. No one else necessarily saw me as a musician, so therefore I didn't really see myself as a musician. I just saw it as this thing that I did, but I never really "learned" music until I started putting it out myself. At some point I was like, "I should probably learn more about this stuff."

Do you remember when you first realized like, "Oh, this is a career. This is not just a hobby or something I'm doing for fun. This is my life now."

I can remember when my friend at Circus Company—which was the label that put out my first record—asked me to make a full-length album. I was totally over the moon. I remember how I felt when I started working on it: realizing what I actually needed to do in order to make a good record, figuring out how I could communicate what I wanted to in the best possible way. It was sort of like, "Well, I might as well try to do this the best I can and just do whatever I want because if it doesn't work, it doesn't work. That's fine. I'm in college anyway, it doesn't matter." Because of that sort of thinking, it was ok to do things like… not put any dance tracks on my record, even though that's what people like. It didn't matter if people didn't like it. That wasn't me. I didn't make dance tracks.

So I stayed true to really doing me for that record—or what was "me" at the time—and when it did well, I was kind of like, "Oh shit, this is really cool. People are actually responding to this thing that I did and I didn't have to compromise while doing it in any way." There was no sense of rebellion in it, instead it was just like "Here's who I am right now." It was quite honest in that way, and I was super lucky to be at the right place at the right time. I mean luck is the biggest factor in all of this. In that moment, I was really at the right place at the right time. I ended up having an audience for this music that I really honestly did not think would have an audience. It's crazy. I think about this a lot. If it had come out in 2010, it wouldn't have worked. If it had come out in 2012, it certainly wouldn't have worked. It came out at the only time it would have worked…

Sometimes blind luck and a certain element of cluelessness are crucial to creative success. Sometimes if you are too cognizant of what you are doing, you wouldn't do it.

Exactly. Not only are you super lucky in that moment for the way things are going, but you're oblivious to the fact that things are happening on that level, which can actually be quite dangerous for your ego. You don't even realize how lucky you are at the time. This is such a thing. Sometimes there's a certain beauty to just how blind you can be.

It's funny to think about that now. At one point I'd made these edits that I was playing in my live sets and then my label at the time was like, "Let's put them out." Some of them were just the most basic things—like a deep house remix of fucking Nina Simone—which today, I would honestly never do. I can't believe I was okay putting something like that out, even back then. But I was so incredibly ignorant. I was like, "She's a big influence on me. I'm going to make a deep house remix. It's totally fine." I mean, she's still one of my heroes—literally one of the top three biggest influences of my life—and I hate the fact that I did that. I can't *believe* that I did that; but I was fucking, what, 18? I had just gone off to college and it was the fall of my freshman year. I was totally blind.

Do you have a habitual music-making practice?

Oh yeah, of course. It has changed over the years a lot. I've gone through several periods where I make a song a day. Piano and voice only. I produce the whole thing. It sounds as produced as something that'd maybe be on my record. I really try to see it all the way through, even if it's just an okay song, I'll go all the way. I have maybe 50 or 60 songs like this that I won't put out. Some of them are actually weirdly close to my heart. They're indicative of really intense moments of my life. That being said, just because the feelings were intense it doesn't always create good music… or it creates music that's kind of derivative. It doesn't always necessarily push things to some new place, but it still feels important to do it. And when I listen to these things they immediately bring me back to that emotional place.

That way of working is my favorite. I'm at my happiest when I'm making a song a day. Usually the way that goes is: I make a song, then I make another song, and then seven or eight days in, I fall onto one idea, and that idea is unlike all the others. That idea has legs that'll go all the way down to the ground. It's not just floating around; it's going low. It's connected to something else—usually that happens by mistake.

I feel like I'm very much unable to reach that kind of creative place without some beautiful mistake happening in my studio. Like, "Oh, I fucked this up," whatever, and then the accidental sound ends up pairing with an old sound that I did five days ago that I didn't touch, and this new thing surprises me. Then boom, there's something there. Then I'll spend a week working on that song. Really, I think about that and I get so happy. Those are the moments I feel very connected to something and extremely happy and lucky to be alive. There seems to be a communication between me and—I don't know what it is—in that moment. I feel like I'm communicating with something. I'm not saying something really huge. I'm maybe just communicating with myself. Right? There's something really healthy about the openness that you can have when you're allowed to be creative all day, every day, for a while. You just feel healthier.

Essential Nicolas Jaar:

"Space is Only Noise if You Can See" from 2011's *Space is Only Noise* LP

BBC Essential Mix from 2012

"Muse" from the *Pomegranites* soundtrack, 2015

"Don't Break My Love" from *Nymphs (2011-15)*

"The Governor" from 2016's *Sirens*

Cat Power – "Cherokee" (Nicolas Jaar Remix)

Honestly, I think I've been making music every single day since I was 14. That's 12 years straight where I've done something every single day that has something to do with making music. Yet, honestly, right now, I can tell you, I haven't done one song that I feel is indicative of what I wish I want to do. I'm still just learning and I constantly feel like I'm at the beginning of the path.

This can have its whole dark side of like, "Fuck, this sucks," but also it's so exciting to go into the studio and be like, "All right, now *finally* I'm going to do this thing I've been trying to do for years now…" but it never happens. And that's what keeps you going; you are reaching for this unattainable thing.

The idea of discovery is really what it's all about. The idea of having that moment of discovery while making music, while being really deep in it, it's honestly like honey. It's just one of the sweetest feelings in the world. It's otherworldly.

Name
Nicolas Jaar

Vocation
Musician, Producer

Fact

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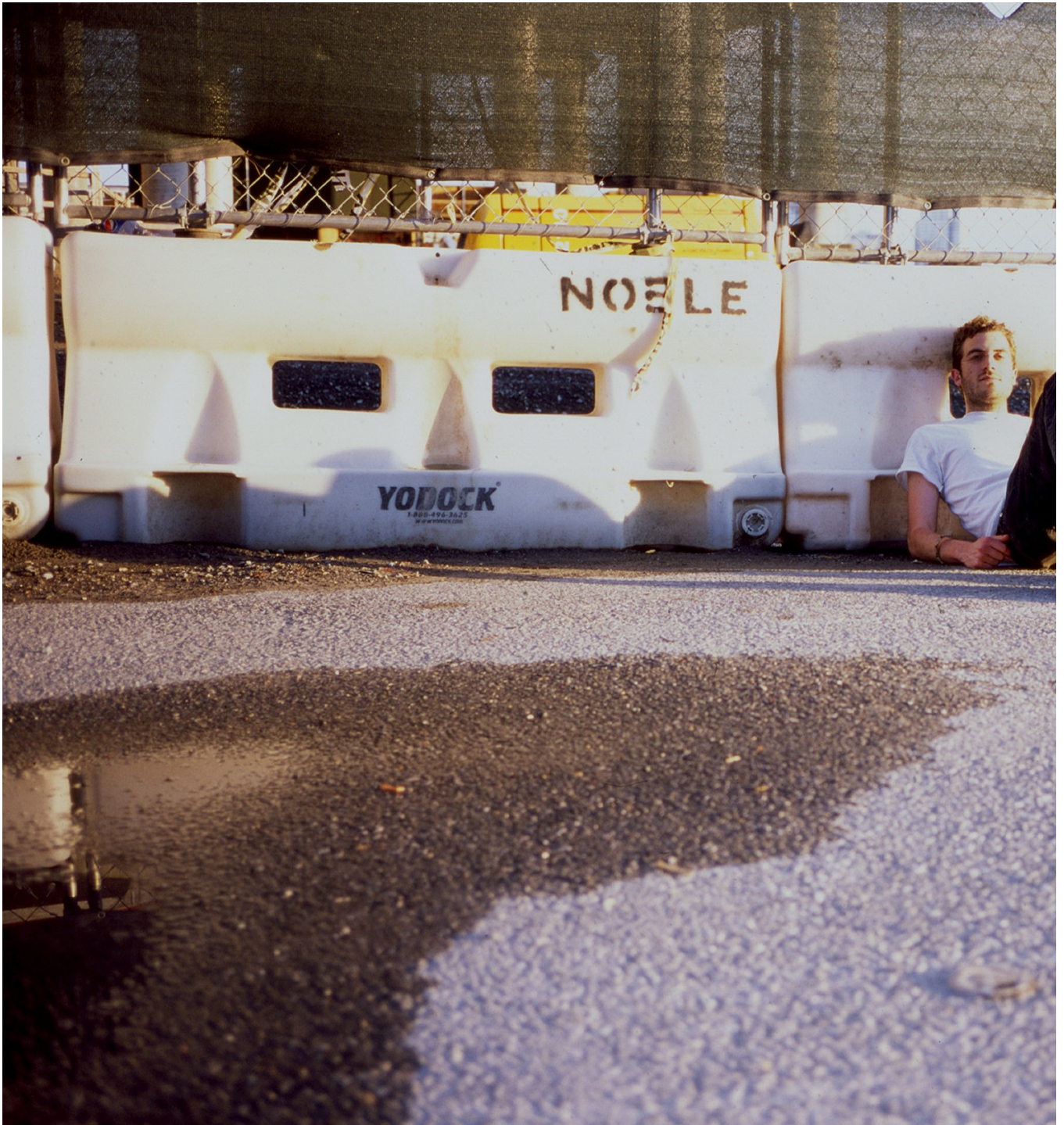
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