

Denise Benson

interview for Tdot magazine - September, 2001

(strongandfree.ca/tdot)

What's rockin' you right now?

I'm always being rocked by lots of different stuff at any given time. So, I can't even rattle off a pile of names...I mean, the Herbert album on K7 is one thing that's really, really stuck with me. The Micatone album also. There's a new release on Blood + Fire Records called Darker than Blue which is a beautiful collection of '70s reggae artists covering soul stuff; a ton of house singles. I go for stuff that's kind of jazzy or dubby, but always quirky. It could be house, it could be broken beat, it could be straight up jazz. There's always at least 5 things, you know?

I know you get lots of promos. Are you going through the back alleys trying to get the rare stuff or what?

I'm less about rare stuff right now. I've gone through my phases where I really look, particularly in the days when I was playing weird rock shit, and punk rock, I was definitely looking, yeah. That's my background, more on the punk tip. The Clash turned me onto dub, then I got into hip-hop, moved from there into early acid house, early techno, early house, acid jazz and all those things. Now, I'm collecting mostly new stuff. The older things I'm collecting aren't me hunting them down in record stores, it's old jazz CD's. I'm on a total Miles Davis kick right now, and to a lesser extent Thelonius Monk. I'm definitely in a jazz phase. I feel I know a lot about my dub history. And to me, the two things that influenced the music I listen to the most, are jazz and dub. I collect a lot of dub and roots reggae, singles, and now re-issues on CD. When I hear certain Miles Davis albums, especially 'Big Fun,' I listen to it and realize "Oh my god, this totally connects the dots between what I listen to now, and the 60's and 70's." Besides, buying new releases is expensive enough, like fifteen bucks a pop for a single. So I mean, hunting down rare records... there are no deal's anymore. Rare records are gonna run you anywhere from thirty to a hundred bucks or way more.

What's the underground electronica scene like in Toronto? Who are the up and comers we should watch for? I remember reading about Nick Holder in what must have been your column in Eye...

Well Nick has been around, doing his thing for at least 7 years, and put out about a 100 releases. To me he's kind of an example of somebody who's big internationally, where people locally are just finding out about him. He's been doing his thing for a long time, and slowly developing an international reputation, which is probably stronger than his local reputation. He knows it. We know it. It's a frustrating thing about living in Toronto. That said, Nick is always someone I'd point to, also the Gemma Records boys – Suges, Martino, Triplet and those guys. The Spot Records label is definitely one to watch out for with releases by Blissom and others. Always Public Transit Records, with Moonstar, LAL and everyone. I just got a demo from King Sunshine which is really nice. Directions has just put out a CD. Manitoba's CD on the UK's Leaf label was wicked, though he's just moved to London for a bit. There's a healthy dub scene in Toronto. There are healthy

techno, house, and experimental electronic scenes. You name almost any genre, hip-hop too, it's happening here.

With Toronto it's not about the artists lack of trying, but more so about people not listening, or a means to listen or what?

There's the whole industry side of things, which is kind of the boring but very factual, important side. Which is, there are only so many people in Toronto, and in Canada, so major record labels will only take so many chances on local artists 'cause there's only so many people to support them as a 'market.' As opposed to the American artist, or the European... people they can just sell, prepackage based on media from other countries. So no, it's not lack of trying or lack of talent in this city. There's an incredible wealth of it. I find the people here are more likely to see out new talent than they were three or five years ago. It's definitely a vibe of wanting to support our own. It's encouraging. I feel that from the phone calls, and emails I get in response to the radio show and the stuff I do. I hope the artists are feeling that too. That's true on the DJ scene too. The promoters are fixated on bringing people from out of town, they focus the parties on the international headliners, but there's also an increasing number of parties that focus on locals, and pull solid crowds. I think Toronto is on the verge of exploding internationally, no exaggeration. There was a recent article on Movement in Straight No Chaser, there are Toronto hip-hop artists who are increasingly respected in Europe and in the States; There've been big articles on the Toronto rave scene, jungle scene and so on. I've been doing this for fourteen years in this city, and I think now, even compared to two years ago, we're definitely on an upswing. No question.

I have a friend who's making electronic music and talks about wanting to make a million bucks, like people talk about winning the lottery. Meanwhile the Canadian music charts are rocking with Our Lady Peace. I feel if you want to crossover, at least in commercial success, you need a lead singer, or a personality. I wonder if you see a change in people not needing a personality to sell some records...

Well the thing is, with very, very few exceptions, no matter what kind of music you're selling, you need a pop angle if you're aiming to make serious money. It doesn't happen to many people at all, it doesn't matter what kind of music you're making. What's been big the last three - four - five years, has been pop shit. Girl bands, boy bands, blah blah blah. Look at someone like Bif Naked, right? She's been making rock music for a long time, always has something to say and she's got the personality. What song made her big? I don't know the name of it, 'cause I'm not into it, but it was the Boomtang Boys remix, whatever that track was. It made her a Canadian superstar. I just read somewhere the other day that she's had the most singles sold of any Canadian artist in Canada. And that's based on the Boomtang boys track, which is a total Euro trash kind of remix, very easy to digest. If you wanna make a million dollars, no matter what kind of music you're making, you gotta make easy to digest shit, that can hopefully get played on commercial radio. If you wanna make music with integrity and you wanna make a million dollars, good luck to you.

The artists I think of, like Moby and Fat Boy Slim, who have reached a larger audience, at a some point they become supersaturated in the marketplace and it does become tiresome.

That's true of anything that gets played on the radio. That's how commercial radio works.

Particularly when you look at someone like Moby. How have they crossed over? It wasn't immediately going into rotation at stations, it was through licensing the music to car commercials. Then people hear it, and they're like "What's that song?" The hype builds and then the songs finally get added to radio. That's the way electronic music has been crossing over. There's all kinds of examples, it's become a real medium to make some money. I can't tell you how many years I've been playing Bill Withers, and then his song "Lovely Day" becomes a huge hit based on a television commercial. I don't remember the product, but now I play that song and people freak out for it. Doesn't make it any less of a good song though, I still love it and him to bits. If something is good, it's good.

What kind of punk did you listen to back in the day?

I was heavily into Fugazi. Earlier on, Minor Threat was my favourite hardcore band. Also Crass, Circle Jerks, that kind of stuff. The Clash, Ramones, Pistols, Velvet Underground, which was pre-punk but definitely opened my ears up. But through it all, definitely the Clash. I think that's a lot because they're very musical. No matter what I'm into, I appreciate strong song writing, plus The Clash just opened me up to so much, especially in leading me to dub and roots reggae. I feel like I owe them one for that.

Are you into the production side of things? I know you promote shows and DJ, but what about the music itself?

I get asked this all the time. At this point in history, the expectation is if you're DJing, you want to produce. When I was younger - even in grade nine Guidance class, we were asked to close our eyes and imagine ourselves at 30. We had to share our stories of what that was. My vision was leaving my house, getting into some red or burgundy convertible, having a dog, being in leather pants and being on my way to the recording studio. [laughs] Producing has always been of interest to me, but it's not for me right now. I've produced a couple of tracks, one as part of a project called the Disciples of Yahoo, a drum and bass piece with sitar and jazzy elements which came out on the last Metro Breaks compilation. I also put compilations together for a label called Iron Music when I was worked for them promoting Cup of Tea Records. But right now my focus is DJ'ing, and writing. The thing about production is that you either need to be living rent free, or you need a day job that pays the bills enough to let you do that 'cause you're not gonna earn money by producing, at least not right away. I live totally freelance, on my DJ'ing and writing, which doesn't leave me much time. So when I get on the production thing, it's not gonna be because there's pressure for DJ's to produce, but because I've got that burning need. It's funny. I find that to be a really male expectation...A lot of those guys out there who are DJ's who are producing, they're not really producing in my opinion. They walk in the studio, and they've got a record with a sample they want. They give it to the engineer, and collectively with the engineer they come up with the track. To me, that's not producing. When I'm ready to produce I'm gonna be serious about it. I'm gonna know my gear, and I'm gonna be able to incorporate live instrumentation. I don't do shit half-assed. The track that we did do, there was live trumpet, sequenced guitar samples, a lot of interesting things going on. That's more where my head is at. Until I can achieve the things that are in my head, I'm not gonna touch it. For now, I'm focused on promoting other people's careers, via the writing, the radio show, the DJ'ing and so on. I get a lot of satisfaction out of that because I get a lot of response and love for it. I know I'm bringing people music that, for the most part, they won't hear elsewhere, that's pretty underground. But it's not like I'm out there going, "I want to be underground," it's

more like where my ears take me is where I take my radio listeners and so on. I think as a radio or club DJ, you can take people on a journey. I get really frustrated by people who only play one style. They sit, they play the same tempo all night. For me, you've gotta tell people a different story or a different chapter of a story, each time you play.

Would you play rock stuff? Would you throw on the Clash?

Oh yeah, the Clash or say ESG, I'll throw them into the middle of a dub or roots set. But straight up guitar wise, not a lot. There's occasionally things that will come out, but I go from jazz and dub to house, broken beat, downtempo, quirky hip-hop, whatever. That's why I've been doing this night [Glide at Gypsy Co-op] for almost five years, 'cause I can play whatever I'm feeling at the time.

And this venue the whole time?

Yeah. Glide has been here since January of '97.

Did you have a regular night before that?

I've played around town since 1987. I've had a ton of residencies at a ton of different clubs. I've played a lot in the women's community, and the gay community. Nights like Dyke Nite, S.H.E., I did a night called Bent at Catch 22 that was really popular for about three years – always with a totally mixed crowd. That night, I went from rock to hip-hop to dance music, trying to bring people together with the music. That's always been my interest. It's a bit more loungey here at Glide, a bit less of a dance focused thing. I also get a lot of bookings separate from my own stuff, playing at places like Roxy Blu and Una Mas pretty regularly

More expectations for a style for your set then?

Most people that promote, promote around a style of music. I'm playing Garage 416 this coming Friday night, and I'll be playing more house. I like doing those gigs too, 'cause it means I get to specialize and focus. I wouldn't want to do just house, for example, or drum'n bass.

What are some of the nightclubs, that may not exist anymore, that really turned you on to music? That you had a good time at?

Well, in terms of the dance and the rave scene. I was there at 23hop and the early raves. I played at the first Nitrous rave. That whole time in the early nineties was really exciting. Also, the warehouse scene that happened in the early to mid nineties was a huge influence on me. Going out to see Dino and Terry play at this abandoned church, or different warehouse things that happened on Spadina, or the Kola parties. Huge influences. Before I got heavily into dance music I was out all the time at Nuts and Bolts and Domino's, my first two Toronto clubs. I actually played at Nuts and Bolts just before it closed. My first gig was at Showbiz which was owned by the Nuts and Bolts guy. The Lizard Lounge; the Caribou was where my first Dyke Nite was, with the other nights done by Marva and Malik X. Later, the Claremont and the Boom Boom Room. From there I got heavily into the warehouse and rave scenes. The Cameron on Wednesdays was an influence and like a home 'cause Malik and then Mark Oliver were playing a lot of what I was feeling at the time. Unfortunately, I moved to Toronto too late to really

spend much time at the Twilight Zone and Club Z, but they were obviously huge influences in Toronto's dance community. So many spaces and places!

The rave scene in the early 90's, it was a vibrant time when there was lots of truly underground parties. They would take on a lot of adventurous venues, is that stuff still going on? Or has it moved to large buildings where you would normally see a concert?

There's been a few different streams of it, because of the cops in the background... There are less and less illegal parties going on, because everything gets busted now. So you've seen a move back into large clubs, or large venues, like the C.N.E. (Canadian National Exhibition), Turbo, and System. The techno community tends to be a lot older. A lot of people who were ravers tend to graduate, same thing with the drum and bass / jungle scene, people have gone back into clubs but they're being a little more playful with it... There's always gonna be an underground element to dance music. There's always gonna be promoters who remember the early days, and recreate some of that, and take it to a different place.

Is the new place things like the OM festival, back to nature stuff, where they do a large outdoor concert?

Yeah, I mean, OM is completely special though, it's like this year, I went and I played, it was my first year going. The crowd was incredibly mixed, from an older environmentalist crowd to raver kids, parents with babies and teenagers and loads of people in between. It was amazing to see that. Everybody was brought together by being outdoors, and by the music. The OM is completely in a class of it's own... There's so many streams. There's the outdoor festivals, the club parties, the underground parties, the lounge parties. No matter what you're looking for, you can find it in Toronto. I can't think of anything that I'm aching to hear, that I can't find here with a little bit of digging. We are spoiled here. The more you travel the more you realize that.

Would you say Europe is more friendly to electronic music? Is that where Nick would be really big?

Nick is big in Europe, the U.K., Scotland, and I think he's played a fair bit in France. I mean house music, and techno music travelled from North America to Europe. It's been part of the culture in a more integrated way for longer (in Europe), except compared to really specific North American cities like Detroit, Chicago or New York, and even their scenes flip up and down over the years. In Europe I think electronic music is far more ingrained, it's just part of the culture. You can go there, you can tour, and cities are so close together. You can travel, tour, and break even, or make a little bit of money. It's hard to do that in Canada. You can do that in the States, but Americans are still caught up in big beat, harder techno, easier to market stuff. Jungle is just catching on in some cities there, UK garage is just catching on, ditto the deeper elements of house and so on. So the States is now becoming a bit more of an option for people, but America has always been very caught up in personalities, whether it's Fat Boy Slim or Bad Boy Bill. Far more caught up in easy marketing. Japan, for example, is a totally different scenario – there's a huge scene there for underground electronic, house, techno, and a really great scene for jazz both old and new. They really know their music. But, speaking more generally, no matter what kind of music you make, you've gotta look around the world and say, "Ok where can I tour, and where do my records sell?" Generally it's not Canada, 'cause we don't have the population to support it. That doesn't mean scenes

are good or strong, but sales essentially come down to numbers.

Right...where has your DJing taken you? What places?

Toronto, Montreal, Ottawa, New York, Michigan... I don't travel a ton, and that's where time and the production issue comes in. I don't have a lot of extra time with all the writing, gigging, promoting and the radio show, but beyond that, right now, if you wanna travel as a DJ, producing music really makes a difference. An audience and demand can then be built, which doesn't mean that all DJ's are strong producers or that all producers are necessarily DJ's. We get tons of people coming in from out of town, who have hot records, get paid way more than any locals do, and can't mix for shit. But they get to play based on their records...

It does seem that some producers like Kruder and Dorfmeister are known as good DJ's as well...

There's plenty of examples of producers who can mix too, no question there! Ultimately, the issue for me - the DJ's I relate to are people who prioritize programming and flow over flawless beat-matching anyway. It's becoming an over-used phrase, but I do think it's a DJ's job to entertain by telling a story or taking their crowds on a musical journey, which I don't think you can do nearly as effectively by playing one tempo or sound all night. Mixing is hugely important, but beat-matching isn't the be all and end all of mixing or musical storytelling. I believe in really mixing sounds up, so if you come to Glide for example, you'll hear jazz, you'll hear dub, downtempo, uptempo, house, broken beat, hip-hop, occasionally techno and other sounds also. It doesn't matter where you're from in the world ultimately, it matters whether or not you can take your passion for music and connect with a crowd.