

Gendering the DJ

Female performers and the alternative electronic music scene

Eve Klein in conversation with Lorna Clarkson and Melinda Taylor



Robokoneko (Melinda Taylor) in Japan

This article will begin by exposing its primary flaw and premise: the concept of a 'female DJ' as an entity separate and unto itself. In mainstream dance cultures there has been an implicit assumption of the DJ as a masculine figure. So, discussions of the 'female' within electronic music cultures are both necessary and problematic, dually addressing and reinforcing this gender bias by marking 'the female DJ' as an exception to performance conventions.

The unquestioned masculinity of the DJ is evident in many publications on the art-form, including Bill Brewster & Frank Broughton's *Last Night a DJ Saved My Life* (1999/2000). As a female academic interested in club cultures, the chapter "The DJ as Superstar" that mapped the rise in profile of the DJ to superstardom, was significant less for its historical details and more for the way it framed and phrased this history. Paul Oakenfold is used as a template for the DJ's changing status, and subsequent discussions of the DJ figure utilise male pronouns:

"In the nineties, the DJ became a superstar. The disc jockey has always enjoyed a certain power over the dancers in *his* club because of the amount of pleasure *he* can dispense, but away from the dancefloor *he* had mostly been a rather anonymous figure. Suddenly *he* was manifest a thousand fold and *he* was treated as rock-god or pop-idol...."

(Brewster & Broughton, 2000: 386; emphasis added)

Brewster & Broughton have created an archetypal DJ possessing a god-like masculinity manipulating dancers of both genders through "the pleasure he can dispense" because "suddenly he was manifest a thousand fold" (2000: 386). Given that this book has become a key reference text on the development of dance music for popular and academic audiences, the framing of DJs as male is problematic because this kind of language affects the way that both genders understand and participate in DJ orientated

music cultures (1). Rather than delving into the way this assumption restricts female performers in commercial club cultures, this article seeks to address how these attitudes are experienced by female DJs and performer-producers operating outside of mainstream networks.

Two such performers are Lorna Clarkson and Melinda Taylor. Both artists are based in Sydney and in addition to being performers of international standing, Clarkson and Taylor have backgrounds in music management. Clarkson has worked for a variety of labels and in her capacity as manager of Floating Point / Breaking Point she supervised the release of Australian dance music. Taylor co-founded the label Couchblip! (<http://www.couchblip.com>) with Luke Killen and Jim Dodd in 2000.

Paying firm attention to the textures of the music she spins, Clarkson does not characterise her DJ performance as "flamboyant". She deliberately avoids the theatrics of juggling records, dancing around and wearing provocative clothing. Loving a diverse range of styles, Clarkson plays music which she describes as "challenging without being obtuse, strange rhythms, eerie melodies, soulful but dirty, deep and edgy", blending electronica, ambient pop, folk, r&b, hip hop electro, deep house and techno to produce an emotive experience for her audiences. While being known for downbeat and electro/club sets, Clarkson talks of her recent performance trajectory as moving away from club gigs with a dance-floor focus to performances aimed at considered listening.

Performing as Robokonko (<http://robokonko.couchblip.com/>), a name based upon a Japanese project to build an intelligent robotic kitten, Taylor is a live electronic performer working primarily with laptop and synthesizers. Taylor's work is often collaborative and her live performances are regularly accompanied by the video artist Superlight (<http://www.superlight.tk>). Taylor believes that this collaboration is part of the spontaneity of live electronic performance:

"I like to perform live as it gives the audience a chance to hear the warmth of the live instruments (rather than the CD) and for me to manipulate my music as much (or as little) as I feel like on each given night. To perform a live set I have to do a lot of work on my presequenced material - what was previously a sequenced song can then be performed in an adaptable and flexible way."

After appearing on a range of electronic compilations, Taylor released the album *Anembo* in 2003 which was followed by

Shades of Ghenki in 2004. Collaborators for upcoming releases include artist Conrad Newholmes (aka Smaze).

In email exchanges between March and June of 2005, I discussed with Clarkson and Taylor their experiences of gender as independent electronic performers.

Eve Klein: *Do you find the emphasis on gender, being forced to think or describe yourself as a female artist (which this article is guilty of) annoying, irritating or counter-productive? Alternatively is it something positive or empowering?*

Lorna Clarkson: I truly wish gender wasn't an issue or even of interest. Especially for DJing/radio presentation. I think gender only becomes of interest when a performer has some sort of gender specific point to their performance.

Melinda Taylor: When I am forced to think of my answers within the context of being female I tend to end each paragraph with an optional "this may have happened because I am female". You can never know whether opportunities arise because of that fact or not unless someone explicitly tells you so.

I tend not to look at music in a gender specific fashion and hopefully my music is received in that way.

Did I get invited to perform at place X because they wanted a female in their lineup or did I get invited to perform because they liked the color of my adidas? Silly example but I am trying to emphasize that you can focus on any attribute and ask the same questions with the emphasis on that attribute.

Chatting about women in electronic music is a good thing in the same way you would chat about Australians making electronic music (on the aus_emusic mailing list) - there is a common attribute in the former group of sex and in the latter of geographical location and I think it is just natural for things to coalesce in those ways. Focusing on the fact that you are female isn't bad, it's just something us gals have in common!

EK: *There have been a number of articles focusing on the experiences of "female" DJs working in the dance/club industry side of electronic music which either highlight the 'cute', 'novelty' factor of women in the industry, or alternatively talk about the barriers that female performers face. Often these articles have quotes from DJs saying that they prove themselves by being the best artists that they can, but they feel like there is less room for artistic mistakes as a woman. Alternatively they say that bookings often work on buddy systems which predominantly*

male promoters give to their friends or cliques and so breaking in as a woman takes a considerable amount of time and skill. As independent electronic musicians what are your experiences of gender within the industry side of the Australian electronic music scene?

LC: I have received a lot of support from some and experienced a lot of resistance from others. Who can say if it's to do with gender or music taste or just personality. All I can say is that relationships in the industry are key in getting bookings. You do have to play the game and it is true that a boys' network does exist (and I challenge any guy who says otherwise). I have plenty of 'right-on' male friends who would never think of themselves as sexist but what they may not realize is how exclusive groups of males can be in their conversation, as well as where, when and how they socialise. And it is usually during social occasions that work gets discussed and decided upon. And then there is the ongoing issue of money and billing. I know for a fact that I have received less money than male counterparts and I still get asked to do the warm up slots even when my profile is equal to or larger than others on the bill. Thankfully I like warming up!

MT: Not much experience in the industry side so I may leave this one.

EK: *As independent artists how do you think your role differs from mainstream club/dance artists in the electronic music scene? Are there issues that arise as an alternative female electronic performer that might be distinct from the experiences of industry based artists?*

LC: I'm not sure if this relates to me specifically but having a more alternative edge does allow me to move away from the image factor of mainstream female artists. If you are commercial then you have to look the part - slim, glam, sexy - a load of crap but that's the pressure of the industry (and society) we work in. I happily perform in jeans and a t-shirt (if appropriate) because the people who come to hear me are thankfully far more interested in my music than my hair-do.

MT: I find there is definitely a better community feel in the underground electronic music scene (UEMS). It is such a small community to begin with, I feel like I know a majority of the people involved, particularly in Sydney, whether that is only by name or it is by face. You meet people at places like Sound Summit or just at the gigs you might play in each state and/or when interstate artists visit your local electronic music night. Or maybe you just know each other via email or mailing lists such as the aus_emusic mailing list that has been

around for ages. I think that this community feel in the UEMS is to our advantage as it does make it easier to get gigs, female or not, as everyone is aware of what everyone else is doing (to a certain degree).

EK: *Have you had to develop alternative patterns of networking as an independent female artist in order to establish and build up contacts?*

LC: I don't think so. I've worked in the industry for so long that networking isn't at all difficult. You do have to prove that you know what you are talking about – it certainly isn't assumed that you have the knowledge.

MT: I don't believe so and if anything, networking might even be easier (but that is purely a subjective view) based on the fact that people *are* interested in seeing what a female electronic musician is creating and will go out of their way to get in contact with them. I try to keep aware of other female artists that are around, especially Australian-based artists as I am often asked if I can suggest any other female artists for certain projects.

EK: *Would you like to comment on the media coverage or portrayal of women working in electronic music? Do they help, hinder or otherwise?*

LC: Sister Bliss, Lisa Lashes, Lisa Pin-up, DJ Heaven -- the commercial end of the market and everything I hate about the portrayal of women in this biz. They play the game – glam up, tits out and who cares if they actually have any talent. I think they probably do have talent (though I don't share their taste in music) but it saddens me that they have to look a certain way to get the media attention. A case in point locally is Gemma Yared. She is a pioneer in Australian electronic music and has done more to help foster the growth of independent artists in this country than many others who have a much bigger profile. She has been DJing and producing for 20 odd years but she has never been given any real recognition. Doesn't fit the media friendly image perhaps?

MT: I recently saw an ad for a prominent local female DJ clad only in a bikini - it was advertising her upcoming tour apparently and it wasn't a beach tour. I couldn't imagine anyone in the underground scene wanting to represent their music that way? There are some choices I wouldn't make as an artist and putting a full-page advert of me in my bikini is one of them. Fans/listeners of electronic music, at least in the smaller less commercial genres, are actually more than happy for the artists to remain faceless and let the music speak for itself. I am sure there is curiosity at some level to find out what your favorite artist looks like, that's just human nature, but

it's not a defining factor for an artist female or otherwise in the UEMS. So, I think that in the mainstream, image is a very important factor in selling the music, but for me it doesn't even enter into it.

I am glad that the women in electronic music who are in the media are generally portrayed for their mind and their talents. Bjork is a good example of this. She's intelligent and talented (and cute) and the media coverage focuses on all of these qualities.

Surprisingly there are actually quite a few electronic labels being run by women as well these days, off the top of my head: Ellen Alien - Bpitch Control; Quantazelle - Subvariant Recordings; Clair Poulton - (the now defunct) Defocus. In most cases the person is also a musician herself.

EK: *In your experience do you think that gender considerations to electronic music performers (especially independent performers) are different in different localities: locally, interstate, and internationally?*

LC: I don't think so. There are a handful of women internationally who have succeeded in building a strong career in electronic music. Even those who are successful still don't have the same status (and income I imagine) as their male counterparts. Perhaps Bjork is the exception but only because she has been clever in keeping a pop sensibility in her music.

MT: I think that females as a minority in electronic music is an issue the world over. I have been a long time member of the IDM mailing list. IDM stand for Intelligent Dance Music, a term our genre got stuck with a long time ago and a constant topic of discussion on the IDM mailing list. This list has a couple of topics that are constantly revisited and some of them are related to the issue of gender:

- i) Are there any females on the list?
- ii) Women in IDM or Can anyone name any female electronic artists besides X?....

There are some great and amusing discussions on the list based around genre, someone asking if there were any females on the list that wrote CD reviews, as they wanted their release reviewed by a female. I was looking through the IDM archives searched on the word "female" and there were over 1000 archived messages related to gender.

EK: *Have you been in any performance situations where being female has been a distinct advantage or disadvantage? Has gender affected or been a consideration in the output of your music in any way? (eg: have you performed or produced music for a female audience etc.).*

LC: Unfortunately being a female DJ is still a novelty so you are offered work based on that

fact. It still astounds me though how many women approach me to show their support – like I am achieving something against the odds!!

There have been promoters who have expected or encouraged me to 'dress up' which really annoys me. I don't mind if it's part of a theme and I can have fun with it, but there have certainly been occasions where it is obvious they want novelty eye candy – there's no way they would ask a man to do that.

I have been asked to play at certain nights or be involved in projects because I am female which I have always found to be a positive experience.

I think males and females engage with music in a slightly different way. Music is very sexual and equally emotional – I do play for women because I think I understand what engages women on a sexual and emotional level. I know I can play some dirty r&b and will see all the women grinding and being very primal. Or I can play some deep melodic house or soul and I know the women will be listening to the lyrics and feeling the depth of the melodies. Some men have this response too but in general I know I can connect to the women.

MT: I do feel honored after a live set when other females come up to me and say that they thought it was great to see a female electronic musician up there for once. Actually, to be fair, that comment does come from both sexes and I agree. I am also often intrigued if I see a female artist on the bill. We're definitely a rare breed especially on the live electronics front. A lot of females appear in bands or as vocalists or DJs but it is still quite rare to see a female producer performing her music live.

I used to co-host an electronic music show on 2SER called Opensource on Tuesdays. On International Women's Day, 2SER generally does a full 24 hour female broadcast. It happened to fall on Tuesday this year so I took on the task of searching out two hours worth of female electronic music. It was actually quite a long time slot to fill using music from the niche genres we generally addressed on our show and I found I had to play two tracks from most of the female artists to fill up the timeslot (or choose their longest songs).

There was also an all female DJ lineup at the Hollywood Hotel which I was asked to play at. I generally don't DJ, but I do have a bunch of records at home and they needed another female to fill the bill.

The Amnesty International Australia FREEDOM 2005 Festival aims to raise awareness of their "Stop Violence Against Women" campaign and for this reason they

are trying to make sure that there is a good proportion of female artists in the show's lineup. I have been asked if I would be interested in playing this year because of the campaign and was also asked if I could suggest any other female artists in Sydney who could play.

EK: *Some female DJs have commented that they believe they spin more intuitively than their male counterparts. In your experience does gender infect style/ performance/ audience response?*

LC: I know many male DJs who are amazingly intuitive. It comes down to why you are DJing – not gender. I think because it is more difficult for women to break into the industry, those who aren't in it for the right reasons (a passion for music) are quickly weeded out. There are more male 'career' DJs around who just play for the kudos, the attention and for the money.

MT: As a producer I often receive feedback on the emotive side of my music. It's been said women are (in general) more sensitive but I don't like to really use generalizations like that. The sensibilities and the melodies I imbue are about me as a person and not necessarily just because I am female. I think the ability comes from an overall affinity with the music I am creating and being able to express myself through music. I find sitting down and making music for a few hours very therapeutic.

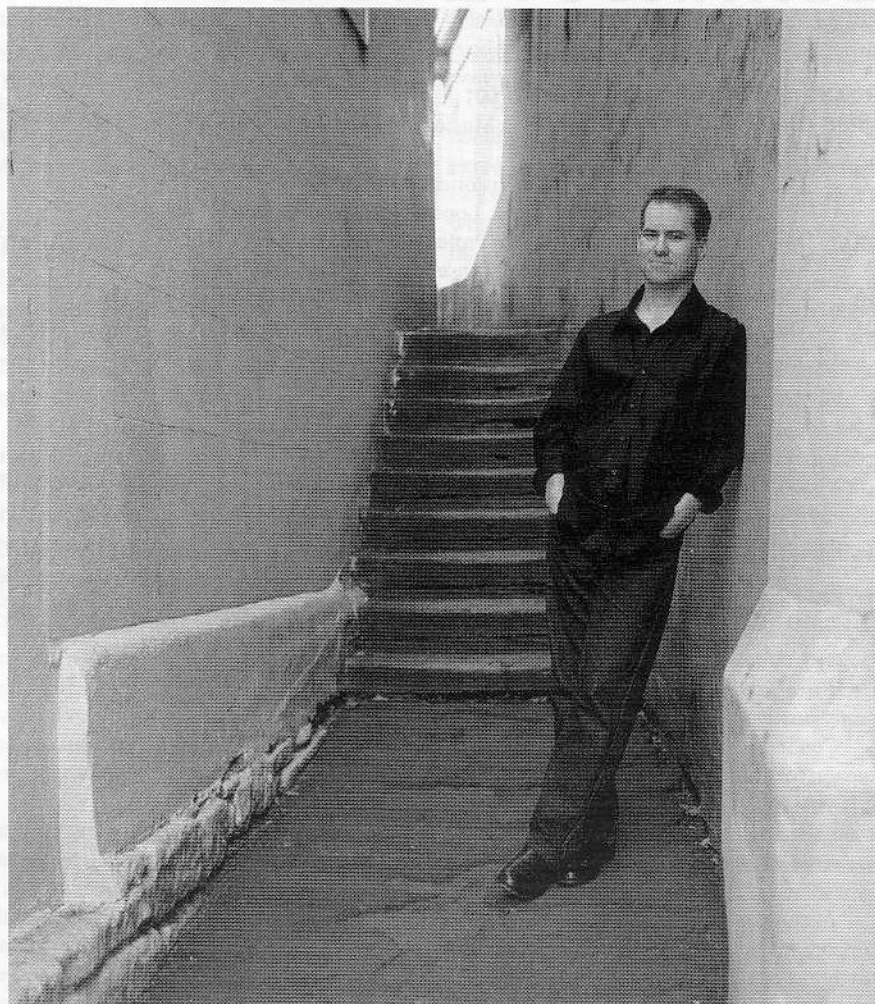
Notes:

1) Notably this framing is deliberate. Brewster & Broughton feature a brief section on 'Women DJs' in a chapter entitled 'The DJ as Outlaw' (2000: 376-378). In this section they argue that their depiction of the DJ as 'he' is due to women being largely 'frozen out' of the sphere of DJing across its 94 year history (ibid: 377). While admirable in sentiment, the positioning and relative shortness of this justification do not serve to alter the confinement of female performers that they document, rather it perpetuates the encoding of female performers as largely 'outside' the histories and contemporary conceptions of the DJ they discuss.

References:

- Brewster, B & Broughton, F (2000) *Last Night A DJ Saved My Life: The History of the Disc Jockey*. New York: Grove Press.
- Robokoneko (2003) *Anembo: Couchblip!*
- Robokoneko (2004) *Shades of Ghenki: Piehead*.

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"Paul McMahon has a very beautiful, lyrical voice with an enormously rich palette of vocal tones across the whole range." See review page 70.