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Divas have a special place in electronic music. Historically connected to house, vocalists often add soul-tinged sexuality a spirit of liberation to all things four-to-the-floor. Venezuelan-born musician and singer **Aérea Negrot of Hercules and Love Affair** continues on in that tradition while venturing into decidedly new territory. Here, Negrot talks to one of the rave generation's darkest and most celebrated divas, **Billie Ray Martin**.

Billie Ray Martin: Aérea, both you and I have pretty big queer followings—even though our music obviously transcends frameworks of gender and sexual orientation. For me, there's always something that's remained cutting-edge about the pioneers of gay culture, especially Andy Warhol and his superstars—people like Candy Darling and Holly Woodlawn. Somehow I have the feeling that if they were to do today what they did in the sixties it would be banned because gay culture, by becoming mainstream, has also become so conservative. Were these characters at all an influence for you?

Aérea Negrot: Not initially—or at least not consciously. But recently I was asked to do a three-day shoot with Gerard Malanga ...

BRM: [bouncing up and down] Oh my God—he's my hero! Oh my God—did you do it?

AN: But of course! It's funny because before that I didn't know all that much about Gerard or about The Factory, even though he and I actually have a friend in common who lives in Berlin. But the shoot made me curious, so I did a bunch of research on Warhol and you're absolutely right about how ahead of their time that entire scene was ...totally unafraid of breaking rules. But I think social progress comes in waves and there will always be a back and forth between pushing boundaries and conservatism. But things have been so conservative for so long, I think we're set to explode again into a major liberation.

BRM: I hope so, because, seriously, New York and London have become like generic episodes of Sex and the City. In New York, all the freaks have moved out of Manhattan and even Brooklyn to make lives for themselves in Queens. When things get so expensive, they become precious and when that happens, they become boring.

AN: That's why it's so important to have artists that shake you out of your comfort zone. For me, conservatism, especially in art, is also a fear of showing true emotion and talking about the reality of your feelings. It actually reminds me of a line from "Anatomy of a Plastic Girl" off the new Opiates record: "I have no enemies, only reality."

BRM: That's me speaking in the voice of a young actress who's had insane amounts of plastic surgery, looks in the mirror and realizes something's not quite right. But I like your interpretation as well ...

AN: Liberation and wealth are strange bedfellows. You know, in the fifties in Venezuela, the middle class had lots of money. They were happy until they realized that material objects pacified them and that true liberation came from freedom of expression. I think today people are starting to also question the "freedom" we've gained through technology.

BRM: But for that to happen you need somebody to wake people out of their stupor—or provide an outlet for the freaks to express themselves, give them a voice. I mean, that's exactly what Andy Warhol did at a time when home appliances and television were making people dumb and uncritical. He gave a voice to the counterculture. Without him, all of these wonderful freaks would have just been on streets turning tricks and doing drugs. Instead he had them do all that in The Factory and made them stars. I mean how else would Candy Darling have gotten on the cover of Vogue?

AN: But somehow it's sad that these things also became part of the establishment. Subcultures have always existed, so I'm not worried about the future, even if it's easier today to do things online in the virtual world instead of in reality.

BRM: Yeah, it's like I can protest with a mouse, clicking for or against things. But is it the same as going out onto the street?

AN: It's so easy to be a slave to information. I noticed this recently when my phone was stolen. It was like my whole life—my thoughts, my plans, my bills—were in that machine. But on the other hand, if it weren't for all of the incredible digital technology we have today, I wouldn't be able to make the music I make. The plug-ins and software and controllers—that's my bread and butter. Some people can't handle all of the possibilities of playing with sound, but I'm swimming in it.





BRM: I hate to admit it, but I usually feel overwhelmed by the technology. I actually have a bit of a technophobia, to tell you the truth. But when I do delve into computer stuff, I get really into it. I remember when I started out playing in bands it was just "One, two three four!" and there was the music. But then you have to deal with all of the egos, so I prefer to just sit in my room and push the buttons myself.

AN: I actually started making music because of my computer. When I was growing up, we were one of the few families to actually have a computer—which all of my friends and schoolmates were jealous of at the time. I had a much tougher time learning the basics of music theory.

BRM: Not that you need that to make music...

AN: Of course not. I have a background in ballet, so music was always something that came intuitively to me. But if it wasn't for software, I'd never be able to do what I do.

BRM: I think digital technology for music has come a long way in the past few years. Even in, like, 2004, you could still hear this massive difference between plug-ins and analogue effects. I used to be much stricter about using analogue gear—it had to be this mic with this amp...but I've come around these days. You know, you really can record incredible vocals at home, covered in two or three blankets with a good mic and a good preamp and a good soundcard.

AN: I actually recorded all of Arabixilla at home, but with production by Tobias Freund who really knows what the hell he's doing. I was kind of nervous about giving him all of my home-recorded vocals and asked him first thing if we should rerecord them in the studio. He was like, "No! Let's do everything at your house." For me, the rawness was part of the concept.

BRM: If it sounds good, why not? When I was listening to your album I kept thinking to myself, "How can I become that spontaneous?"

AN: With some of the songs I sing in German, there are dozens of grammatical mistakes. But that eventually became part of the idea, you know? It's real. It's how I talk. And it's also part of living in a pluralistic world—embracing accents and different ways of communicating that express personality.

BRM: I also have to say that I was really impressed by how descriptive your lyrics are. I felt like you were just kind of reporting on the absurd reality that you were experiencing. It was really very non-judgmental, just observational.

AN: That's true, but the songs are still emotional.

BRM: I tend to write my lyrics from somebody else's perspective, but in a similarly reporting style. It's like documenting the world through the eyes of a certain character, almost always from the perspective of an outsider—at least with Hollywood under the Knife. I think Wolfgang Tillmans' photographs for the album really capture the scary, haunted, Lynchian side of Los Angeles I was trying to portray.

AN: Watching you perform these songs live, I thought you channeled these characters perfectly.

BRM: You know, I'm not the most confident, secure, self-assured person in the world. But somehow onstage or in front of a camera, I become somebody who's in total control. I might have had some fucked-up situation—a fight or an argument five minutes before show time—but when I put my makeup on and go onstage, I transform.

AN: The actress Rita Hayworth had an interesting take on that kind of transformation...and how people project things on performers. You know she became famous for her role in the sexy noir film Gilda, and afterwards she liked to say that men went to bed with Gilda and woke up with Rita. I know that I make a very different impression onstage than offstage.

BRM: Performers who are the same onstage and offstage usually bore the hell out of me. I mean, this is show business! You have to show something else, you know? I guess that always came naturally to me, because growing up in the red-light district of St. Pauli in Hamburg I was surrounded by trannies and prostitutes and gangsters who were always dressed to the nines—people whose professional lives depended on mastering a certain role, playing a certain character. But I also was obsessed with memorizing rock and roll songs as a kid—The Beatles, The Rolling Stones, Elvis Presley...



AN: Really early musical influences have an interesting effect on personality...

BRM: Yeah, I think my personality is a mix of British and American rock and rollers on the one hand and German strictness on the other. I actually tend to really annoy people with my German stubbornness and perfectionism. A sound engineer once asked me if I ever had a producer tell me they were going out for a pack of cigarettes and just never come back. I haven't but it's not totally outside the realm of possibility.

AN: It's funny to hear that because a lot of people have moved to Berlin because things here are so much more open and less strict—which doesn't really fit with the typical cold, unfriendly, German stereotype. When I was a kid, I always thought there was some sort of mistake; that I was actually from somewhere else. I think that's what pushed me to explore the world. I left Venezuela for the first time when I was thirteen to go live with my father, and to me, that was one of the most important decisions I ever made. Somehow I still didn't feel at home, so I moved to Holland, and then England, and then eventually to Berlin eight years ago. And now I finally feel totally at home. I really feel like this is where I'm from.

BRM: I had the same experience, but for me it was going to London when I was twelve on a school trip. Somehow I ended up at The Marquee Club on New Years Eve and I just knew: this is where I'm meant to be. Everybody was so drunk and open and friendly. I remember being in tears on the bus back to Hamburg because I was just so sad and euphoric at the same time—it was so different to Germany. And when I moved there years later, it's where I discovered acid house, which was an epiphany for me. This is the music I want to sing, and this is where I want to sing it. And that's how Electricre 101 got started.

AN: I had a similar house experience when I went to Caracas when I was twelve.

My cousin played me "Gypsy Woman" by Crystal Waters and it floored me. Seriously floored. So house was definitely my entrance into the world of electronic music, even though today my focus is more like Ellen Allien or Ricardo Villalobos or whatever. But there was a long and winding musical road in between. Fata Kiefer, my dear friend and roommate with whom I also perform live, is really the one who "trained" me. I mean, I went from listening to the Spice Girls to Fantasma by Cornelius ...

BRM: No shame in that! Everybody has their own musical path. For me, it was always thrilling to meet like, my musical heroes. For me it was running into Siouxsie Sioux in a bar in London. I was actually really frightened to approach her because she always had such a fuck-you attitude, you know? I thought she was just going to punch me in the face. But my friends were like, "Just go and tell her how much you admire her", so I did. I rolled right up on her and Budgie and was like, "Hi I'm Billie Ray Martin, and I love your music so much. Thanks for listening! Bye!" And she was like, "Billie Ray Martin? You're not going anywhere! Sit down and have a drink! Champagne!" We got pretty drunk and at some point I told her "I'm surprised you like my singing", to which she replied: "Are you kidding? Fuck Whitney Houston and Mariah Carey. I have two favorite singers: Maria Callas and Billie Ray Martin." And I completely freaked. I spent the next two days calling everybody I knew and telling them that story.

AN: I had by far my most significant encounter with a musical hero in Berlin when I went to see Antony Hegarty at the Volksbühne. Somewhere in the middle of the set I just kind of broke down and started weeping and couldn't stop. Pretty soon it got really loud because I was so moved. The woman in front of me even turned around to tell me to keep it down, which I thought was hilarious. I went outside to get it together and met Andy Butler, who was part of Antony's crew at the time. Anyways, we got to talking and he asked me what I did and I told him I made music. I had my iPod with me and I played him some stuff and he was like, "Antony should hear this!" So a day later, Andy set up a meeting with Antony and I was insanely nervous, because he just has this incredible aura, you know? It fills a whole room. Anyways, he had a listen and all he said was: "Oh, this is really weird ..."—which coming from him was a big compliment. And that's how I ended up in Hercules and Love Affair.

BRM: I saw Antony in New York play for around twenty people before he got big. It was really, really impressive—but slightly different than what he's doing nowadays. Back then the music was more Marc Almond-esque, which is what I personally prefer. Anyways, I went up to him after the show and told him that he should be singing in the Royal Albert Hall. And lo and behold ...

AN: He's just incredible. I think Antony was also one of the first people to really give me confidence to continue doing some of the stranger things I do with my voice and my music. You know, growing up gay, I was influenced by the music in the only places that people like me could go, you know? I got my start performing in gay clubs and it was there that I really was able to explore who I was ...even though it took me a while to figure out that my sexual identity did not have to determine my musical orientation.

BRM: You know, all the women in my family looked like transvestite starlets. They had these beehive hairdos, crazy eyeliner and clung to that campy sixties style ...they just couldn't let go. My aunt looked like a cross between Jayne Mansfield and Marilyn Monroe and my mother looked like Brigitte Bardot. I don't think the look itself had much of an impact on the music I make, but I learned to appreciate the aesthetic, especially when going out.

AN: I tend to write a lot of my songs after weekends of partying, on Mondays in the fourth dimension. I usually feel a combination of fried and a depressed. I don't know why it's such a fruitful time for me creatively. Actually, it was pretty recently that I woke up on a Monday for the first time in a long time and felt good. ~

Photos: Billie Ray Martin and Aérea Negrot, photographed in Berlin by Andrej Krementschouk.

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