



What To Do In Chicago...

A MELODIOUS JOURNEY - NEWS

A MELODIOUS JOURNEY: MOBY

by *Brandon Howard* March 9, 2015



Sitting inside a small private dressing room in Navy Pier's Grand Ballroom, Richard Melville Hall, better known as **Moby**, is cradling a cup of coffee and calmly awaiting his performance. He is humbly dressed in blue jeans, a comfortable looking sweatshirt and a baseball cap with a folded brim. The electronic music legend is both incredibly articulate and mild-mannered, considering he is about to play 90 minutes of heavy hitting house and techno for a headlining set at **Snowstorm Music Festival**. Starting in the late 1980s, Moby has recorded everything from punk, gospel, techno and ambient film scores. His catalogue of albums and hits is massive. However, Moby seems to stay personally grounded and politically active, and still fosters a love of dance music.

Before blowing away a young crowd with edits of Fatboy Slim and Basement Jaxx, as well as some of his own material such as "Thousand," Moby was kind enough to speak candidly about the current state of electronic music, his approach to DJ sets and how he (and young artists) can best approach political activism. We can't confirm Moby's IQ, **or if his intellect is somehow linked to a vegan lifestyle**, but it is safe to say this man is a genius.

Do312: When you're DJing, you may be introducing a lot of people to a vast back catalogue of electronic music they otherwise would not know. Is that something you are conscious of when going into a DJ set? How do you approach a set knowing that when "Go" was first released, a lot of the crowd may not have been born yet?

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Moby: It's a really good question; I wish I had an equally good answer. Honestly, especially with DJing, for me, it's fun and intuitive, so maybe I shouldn't admit this but I just don't really think about it that much. There's no ulterior or grand agenda. It's just simply first and foremost playing records that I love in the hopes that other people will love them. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn't. I had taken a break from DJing for about 20 years, where I just focused on making records and touring and playing live. And then when I got back into DJing, this is about 7 or 8 years ago, I hadn't bought new records in a while so I was playing a lot of older records. And I realized that some of it was working but a lot of it was just sounding kind of dated.

Luckily for me there is a lot of new music that very much sort of captures the energy of some of the records that I loved in the early 90s. What's funny is people come up to me and say, 'I loved the set that you played and all those old rave records,' and most of them are actually new. It's just new producers who are basically making new rave records, people like The Loops of Fury, AC Slater and Mighty Fools. They might be 24 years old, but they are essentially making old school rave records.

Do312: Is there a specific example of that, where you had a one on one correlation, where something reminded you of an old rave sound with a new update on it?

Moby: It's more just emotional and subjective. Like the same feeling I would get in 1990, being at a rave in the UK, and hearing Strings of Life, Dream Frequency or Blame, or any of these original rave anthems. It's more just that excitement and the warmth, and the collective spirit as well. And also, the current state of dance music, I don't want to necessarily complain about it, but sometimes some of the music feels disingenuous to me. Meaning, it's not an expression of love, it's an expression of marketing. That just seems like it's doing a disservice to everyone. When you have the capacity to either make or play or listen to amazing emotional music, why wouldn't you do that? Or at least try to do that?

Do312: And sometimes it feels like that attempt isn't even made.

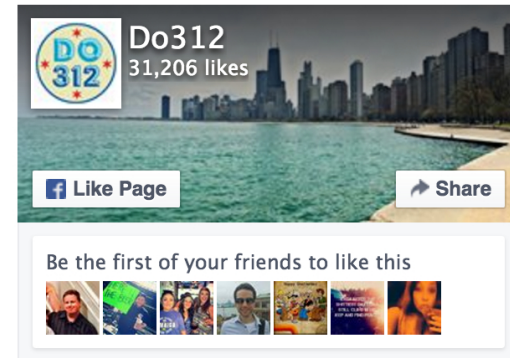
Moby: Ya, and I understand because DJs can be very successful. A lot of aspiring DJs are really trying to figure out how to have a big career. Sometimes what that means is almost like compromising their artistic principles in the interest of trying to have a bigger career. I won't criticize them for it, but it creatively makes me sad. Also, there's not a lot of precedent for musicians, or DJs or whomever pandering to a market and having a long-term career. The musicians who tend to have success over a long period of time

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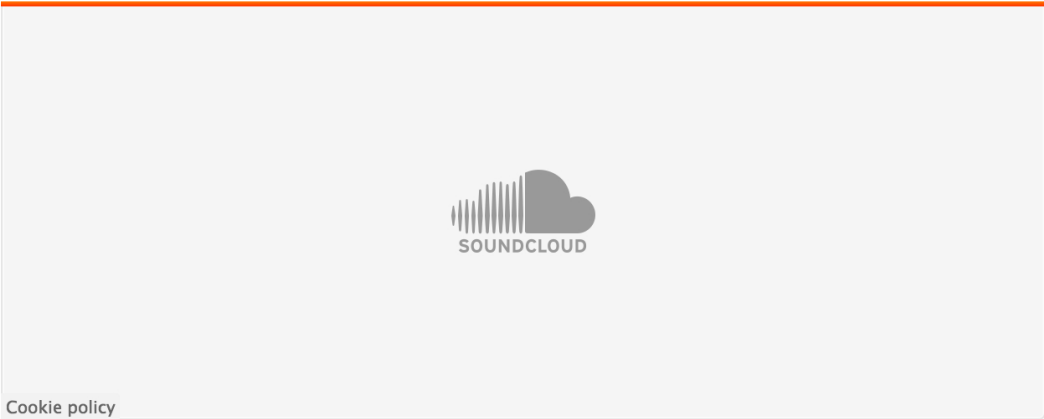
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tend to be driven more by an internal love of what they're doing. And of course everyone likes a degree of recognition and commercial success, but when that's the only goal, the music by definition suffers.



Do312: Was that ever a goal for you?

Moby: Well, I grew up playing in hardcore punk bands and then I grew up in the underground dance scene, and there was no such thing as commercial success. The biggest punk rock bands were Black Flag, Minor Threat and the Bad Brains, and they were playing to 200 people a night. The biggest DJs were getting paid \$250 a night, so there was nothing huge and commercial to aspire towards. When I started making records, I just assumed that I would always be an underground musician working within underground musical contexts. And then when I started having commercial success it was very confusing. And for a while, I pursued it. But then I realized it was very difficult for me to pursue commercial success and also make the music that I wanted to make.

It's so hard to talk about this without singling out people who do this, and it's never my place to criticize someone's approach, but there are musicians who age and they do everything in their power to pretend that they're not aging, and they try and suddenly do collaborations with much younger musicians. When it's driven by marketing, it just feels awkward.

Do312: What was the diversity of the club scene like when you started DJing?

Moby: The first big club I ever worked at was this place called Mars. It was remarkable. It was 6 stories, and each floor, to an extent, was a different genre of music. The main floor was house music, the second floor was hip-hop, the third floor was reggae, the fourth floor was funk and rare groove, there would be dub-reggae in the basement. So

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every floor was different. And even more eclectic, Danceteria a club in New York, was a club I started going to when I was 16, and The Beastie Boys hung out there, Madonna hung out there, Rick Rubin hung out there; Jean-Michel Basquiat and Warhol all hung out in this place. It was so eclectic, even more so, where they would have the Bad Brains playing on the main floor, a gay disco DJ on the second floor, a hip-hop DJ on the third floor, some guy playing Bauhaus and Sisters of Mercy records on the fourth floor. People [were] almost trying to out-do each other in terms of eclecticism. And that is the ethos that I was brought up in; of having no allegiance to any musical genre, but rather an allegiance to what music is capable of doing...

Do312: What is the modern equivalent of this late-80s New York City eclecticism?

Moby: I think now that music doesn't cost anything, eclecticism is so much more rampant. If we're going by 20 or 30 years ago, it's hard to be eclectic when you're buying \$20 CDs. Where as now music costs nothing and I feel like people can be so much more experimental, whether it's with Spotify, or Pandora, or Soundcloud or even iTunes. I think shuffle changed things a lot. Suddenly people were hearing a Metallica song next to a Donna Summer song next to an Eminem song next to an Elton John song; just baffling eclecticism. And somehow, that started to feel normal.



Do312: Do you feel large music-festivals bring that sense of diversity in terms of listening habits to a live platform?

Moby: Oh ya. And then there's the very practical other side which is when you're DJing, and if you're trying to go from song to song, you can't be that eclectic. Like the sets that I play they have to roughly be around 130 beats per minute... and they all kind of have to be mixed the same way or else the audience is going to lose interest.

Do312: There's so much eclecticism in terms of listening habits, but in a DJ set maybe there isn't. And there's so much eclecticism in terms of music one can listen to, but then certain artists produce music for marketing [creating homogenized sounds]. So where do you think it all converges?

Moby: Well at the end of the day it's just making music that people love. I know that

seems very reductionist and simple, but that's the ultimate litmus test. How people respond to a piece of music in the privacy of their own home, or in their car, in front of their laptop, in a nightclub, at a rave, ultimately that's the sole litmus test and there's no objective criteria for determining what's good or what's bad or what's successful or what's not. It's ultimately the individual or collection of individuals that is the judge and the jury...

Do312: Would you say this is determined by the amount of money exchanged? Or number of downloads?

Moby: I think it's just listening. In the olden days you could determine the success of a piece of music by how much it had sold, and now that doesn't really exist. You can figure it out through Spotify plays or Soundcloud plays... but even that though... there is something strange about that, about saying something can only be successful when it is listened to a lot of times. Some of the most remarkably powerful music is very obscure and only listened to by a few people. Every now and then, and I'm sure you have had this experience as well, you go on Soundcloud and you find a beautiful, wonderful piece of music and you realize its got 10 likes... and then you go to a Taylor Swift B-side that has 50 million likes. It's really down to that individual.

I remember at one point, back when millions of records got sold, I was in a meeting with my record company and we were talking about the last month's record sales. And let's say in the last month I sold 500,000 records. It's a lot and everybody is kind of happy... and all of a sudden it struck me. What that means is it's 500,000 individuals. There's no such thing as 500,000 people. It's not like there's this mass of 500,000 people who collectively call each other and say 'let's go like that song.' It's 500,000 individuals, leading individual lives of their own volition going out and either buying or listening to a piece of music. It almost reminds me of a Stalin quote where he's talking about people dying, and he said like 5 people dying is a tragedy, 100,000 people dying is a statistic. So it's very dangerous to think of an individual's emotional relationship to a piece of music as a statistic. That's not the way the individual is seeking out the music or interacting with it.

Do312: This idea of the danger in reducing human emotions to statistics is so personal, and also so political. That is an example of why I feel people deeply connect with your work. You are outspoken about environmentalism, animal rights and civil rights issues and you are really open to talk about these subjects. From following a lot of electronic artists on Twitter, this isn't usually something a lot of artists discuss...

Moby: Ya, I noticed that.

Do312: And that's a little deterring. What advice would you give young artists who feel strong political beliefs, but are afraid to voice them via their own outlets?

Moby: It's super tricky. Activism is a really tricky thing. For me, the two goals of activism are effective activism and sustainable activism. By way of example, I have friends who years ago became vegans and animal rights activists and they got burned out really quickly. They'd go to a fur store and throw fake blood on someone's fur coat and be so angry, and eventually after a couple years, they get burned out. So the activism itself, throwing fake blood on a fur coat, didn't change any minds, and they weren't able to do it for very long... I think for any activist it's figuring out how to be strategic and self-sustaining. Just screaming, as seductive as screaming can be, all it accomplishes is it makes people annoyed. Sometimes you need to annoy people. Especially in the world of social media, there are a lot of people, if you have an opinion, they're just going to hate you for it, it doesn't even matter what your opinion is. I think it's tricky to sometimes distinguish between cautious strategy or fear. Meaning, a lot of people are more motivated by fear, and it's understandable, they are afraid of losing an audience, they're afraid of alienating critics...

I think that speaking your mind and potentially alienating people is worth it. Because ultimately, life is short. What's the point if you're not trying to make things better in some capacity? If the only goal of a life is self-promotion and acquiring more stuff, that might create a lot of happiness for someone, but I don't see that working collectively. The more our culture focuses on selfishness, self-promotion and materialism, not only does our culture not benefit, but the environment does not benefit, and the individuals themselves don't benefit. If shameless self-promotion and crass materialism actually made people happy, there would be no psychiatrists in Beverly Hills. There would be no divorce lawyers on the Upper East Side of Manhattan. It just doesn't work. So that's my advice; be strategic, but I also think it is important to respect other people's perspectives. Don't get mad at someone just because they disagree with you, be willing to have a conversation with them...

Moby - Go





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