

Ambivalent

Written by CGNY

Tuesday, 26 February 2013 16:55 - Last Updated Tuesday, 26 February 2013 17:42



Kevin McHugh aka [Ambivalent](#) stopped off recently to play the [Momentum party with Miss Kittin](#). It's always fun doing an onsite interview with the music thumping in the background, if not a little challenging! But we managed to have a little chat about collecting records and airmiles and the nature of dj culture!

CGNY: I have a friend named Kevin McHugh! He's a musician who plays the [uillleann pipes](#) but I don't think you play them?!

Kevin: I wish I'd had the chance to learn!

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CGNY: Haha! But you must have some Irish in you?

Kevin: I have about 99 percent probably!

CGNY: That totally explains your technophilia then!

Kevin: You think? Actually there are a lot of great techno fans in Ireland. I've had some of my most fun moments in Ireland.

CGNY: Indeed many people have said that about the crowds back home. We definitely migrate to the where great techno is playing whether it's Dublin or Limerick. I saw that Dave Clarke was playing in Waterford there before Xmas! There's a mini techno explosion happening in Ireland.

Kevin: I played a show in Cork that I absolutely loved. Every time I play in Dublin you know it's hit or miss to be honest. Sometimes it's amazing; sometimes it's like 'where did everybody go?'

CGNY: Running to get a cab home at 230am probably! Clubs tend to close early there! So tell us a little about how you got into being a dj?

Kevin: I started djing probably about 1995. I was living in London. For me djing came as a result of being a record collector. Whenever anyone asks me what kind of advice to give to anyone who is starting out –my thing is always be a fan first – that's the only advice I can give because that's what's worked for me. I was an obsessive nut for the music that I wanted to play. It was about having a record collection more that it was about becoming anything. That's how it was for another 10 years plus after that. I loved the music and played it but it was about having the music not being in front of it. And it was the same with production. I was making the music because I loved it and wanted to see what it was like to make things the same way the records that I loved were made. I never in any of that time anticipated that it would get to the place where I was an artist who was being listened to – that was never the expected outcome. It was always that I wanted to just be a part of it. At one point, I had friends because I'd been working as an enthusiast, as a promoter, a person who just wanted to promote the scene. I ended up having friends who were in a place of when they liked something that I gave them were able to

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take it to a global stage. And having friends like Richie Hawtin, Magda and Troy Pierce who were big supporters of music that I gave them put me in a different category than I was before. But I never made it with the expected goal of making some kind of career for me. It was just that I loved it and I only functioned out of passion.

CGNY: That's the best way to do it – or anything!

Kevin: I think it's what's missing from a lot of the music I hear these days. To be really flatly honest I hear a lot of music that is so purpose driven that it's...

CGNY: By purpose drive you mean made for the commercial market?

Kevin: Beyond just that. Made for the market place with an eye towards that next step being this person getting to a career goal with it. I have a career without ever having had a career goal in this. Even at the point where I had a record that was really successful I still anticipated that I would be working a day job and I'm still kind of floored that I haven't had to get one.

CGNY: That's fantastic though!

Kevin: Yes I and I always feel incredibly lucky which also feeds enjoyment of it more. You never enjoy something as much as when you know that it could go away tomorrow.

CGNY: So true that! You're based out of Berlin now Kevin?

Kevin: I kind of shuttle between Berlin and New York. My fiancée lives here so we're doing the intercontinental romance.

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CGNY: That's got to be a bit tough!

Kevin: I pretty much live my life on airplanes so it's not much more to hop on a plane to come see her.

CGNY: And that trip across the Atlantic when you've done it a few times seems more like a bus journey it goes fast!

Kevin: I fly something in the neighborhood 200,000 miles a year so flying 3000 miles home becomes nothing really.

CGNY: And home is still New York – you were born here?

Kevin: I was born in Washington DC but my mother's family is from here and I spent about 15 years living here before I moved to Berlin. So New York is as much a home as anywhere else but probably number one if I had to list the places that are in my bloodstream.

CGNY: When you come back here to the US do you find there is a big difference in the crowds between Europe and America? Or are techno crowds similar everywhere?

Kevin: I would kind of say it's not a or B but maybe C? And the C choice is that not everywhere is the same and in a way everywhere is different but different enough. Each city has its own quirks in terms of what kind of people come out and what kind of circumstances exist. I think often a scene can be defined by a club. Or by the legal hours the clubs can be open in that city. You go to a city where things have to close at 2am – there is definitely a different culture. It can mean that maybe that city has adapted an afterhours culture. I play a lot in Glasgow and when I play there it's almost inevitable that I will play 2 sets; one at the official show and one at the afterhours because Glaswegians don't get going 'til pretty late and show up at the after party with twice as much energy. So you kind of get a two for one deal. That's that scenario and playing in Berlin is a different one. You can go to a gig without any idea of how long you're

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going to end up playing. So you take the culture of each city in stride. The thing about New York is having been a part of the electronic music scene here in 1996, I've seen it go through so many waves. It's interesting that you can play the same city with 2 or 3 years in between them and play for a completely different set of people. There's a really big turnover so that the people who were coming to shows that I organized in the late nineties are people that I know; they're all still friends of mine but they have kids. We're all getting older and some of us have stayed quote/unquote professionally involved and some have gone on to be passionate about the music. Also there's a new crop of 21 year olds every year.. and that's a good thing. It's what you rely on to a certain degree You're always exposing the culture and music to people at every new turn. You never know who you're playing for. So I can play an old record and be referencing something and it can sound brand new to someone who's never heard it before.

CGNY: I've spoken to a good few djs about the upswing of interest in electronic music – but the more commercial side of things and how whether that's a good/bad thing for the scene. What do you think?

Kevin: I don't think it's possible to define it in terms of good or bad. Also I think that the line is a bit different than people make it out to be. There's much more of a musical continuum but there's a big cultural break. The way I mean that, is you can have very accessible dance music which has a really strong musical resemblance to underground dance music but they come from two very separate cultural purposes. So if something is made for mass absorption or mass digestion, it's just got a different focus. Look Madonna and Kraftwerk were using a lot of the same technology and had a lot of musical similarities and yet culturally they couldn't have been more different. And no one would say that Madonnas fame in anyway benefitted Kraftwerk. There's no relationship there. I don't necessarily see how someone like a David Guetta has any positive or negative influence on what I do. They're completely separate cultures and what he's doing doesn't threaten or undermine anything that artists that I believe in are doing. And he doesn't necessarily benefit them either. But from a different perspective you look at a group like The Clash and the Clash being popular did actually open the door to a lot of audiences who otherwise wouldn't have paid attention to other punk bands. So really what it is, is just a matter of the cultural stand point of the music that you're coming from. So I look at someone like Richie Hawtin, Loco Dice people who are coming from the same cultural standpoint, them getting big does impact a lot of artists who are like minded and from the same place. But just because another dj plays at 125bpm with a very similar rhythm pattern and a mixer; those things in a way are window dressings. They don't actually represent what the real nexus is.

CGNY: What's going on with your releases?

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Kevin: I've got a couple of things but too early to say anything about them right now. But definitely things in the pipeline that look like they will be coming out in the next year. I'm broadening my reach a little too. I've been exclusively in one pipeline for a long time and now I'm trying to connect with a bit of a broader network. So yeah – we'll see what happens there.

CGNY: And next after New York?

Kevin: I have a couple of shows in Columbia then I head to Canada. I go back for 3 weeks of studio time in Berlin. The next set of gigs after that, are in China, Korea and Russia. Then it kind of goes back into the full on schedule. February I'm trying to lay low and finish some projects in the studio.

CGNY: Well Kevin it was a pleasure talking to you. Go do your thing! Looking forward to your set!

Kevin: Looking forward to it too and figuring out what I'm going to play!

Click [here](#) for footage from the gig!

Follow Ambivalent on [Twitter](#) or on his new website - www.ambivalentdj.com

Check out a 2 hour set from Ambivalent [here](#)

for more information about the next Momentum party with Dasha Rush and Mark Broom check out their [Facebook](#) event page.