

Nicolas Jaar Tests the Limits of Dance Music

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Nicolas Jaar in his rehearsal space in Brooklyn.

When Nicolas Jaar was 17, he e-mailed a piece of electronic music, which he made on his laptop, to a record label in Brooklyn. He'd heard an interview with the owner of the label, Wolf + Lamb, who was going on about house music and "elasticity." Jaar felt he knew *exactly* what the guy was talking about. Wolf + Lamb agreed to put out Jaar's first E.P. and invited him to perform at a somewhat sketchy space called the Marcy Hotel in Williamsburg. At the time, Jaar was a senior at the Lycée Français on Manhattan's Upper East Side.

So on the evening before the last day of school, he went to his family's apartment in SoHo, changed out of his school uniform, took the subway to Brooklyn and played a set that ran strongly against the grain of the techno of the time. Back then, Jaar says, everything D.J.'s were playing was 128 beats per minute. The stuff he was doing was almost half that speed, with improvised piano haunting the tracks. And it really resonated with the crowd at the Marcy, which happened to be quite high. "Everybody was on ketamine," Jaar recalls. "They all kept coming up to me and telling me how amazing my music was." Having never done drugs (let alone horse tranquilizers), he took the compliments at face value. It occurred to him only later that "elasticity" might have been referring to the effects of ketamine rather than to experimental house music.

After that night, things moved quickly for Jaar. Wolf + Lamb continued to release his music, but Jaar had so many completed songs that on his 19th birthday, he started his own record label. His debut album, "Space Is Only Noise" (2011), was hailed as an electronic masterwork. He has played before crowds of thousands at techno clubs and festivals all over Europe. He has also performed ambient sets at museums (MoMA PS1) and classical amphitheaters (the Cologne Philharmonic). He did most of this touring and recording while earning a degree in comparative literature at Brown University. He is now 23.

Jaar's gift is for combining floor-filling club music and so-called difficult sounds: a techno beat with a loop of what seems to be Ethiopian jazz; a soulful bass line overlaid with light industrial glitches. Yet only a few

months after winning skeptical dance-music fans over to his contemplative rhythms, Jaar was dismayed to realize that the tracks on “Space Is Only Noise” were no longer the outliers they once were. “Suddenly,” he says, “everything was 80 b.p.m.” Jaar’s response was not to speed up his songs but to add instruments — a truly perverse act for an electronic artist. He began performing live with a saxophonist, a drummer and a guitarist, each providing accents to Jaar’s spontaneous soundscapes. He is the rare electronic artist who never plays the same set twice.

After a long European tour this summer, Jaar found himself increasingly connecting with the improvisations of his guitarist, Dave Harrington (who also went to Brown). During down time between shows, Jaar and Harrington would repair to a small studio in Paris and record their open-ended sessions. Jaar would then take the music and chop and distort it — out of hours of jamming, he might fixate on a single guitar phrase to build a song. The resulting music sounded vaguely like the soundtrack to a lost David Lynch sci-fi movie. Much to their surprise, Harrington and Jaar realized that they had actually formed a band, which they named Darkside. And while both insist that the name in no way references Pink Floyd, you wouldn’t be wrong to think that Darkside’s album, “Psychic,” recalls “The Dark Side of the Moon” — not the songs, just those spacey passages between them.

Harrington is curious about how Darkside will be received abroad. He jokingly compared the situation to when Bob Dylan went electric at the Newport Folk Festival. “It’s a little bit scary in Europe,” Harrington said. “Nico is actually . . . big.” His succinct description of Jaar’s zealous following: “French kids freaking the hell out.”

Jaar and Harrington have been rehearsing daily to prepare for the Darkside tour, which starts in London this month. And Jaar himself, restless as ever, has been collecting sounds for some unspecified future project. One morning last month in the studio next to Darkside’s rehearsal room, he was recording a drummer named Tlac. He wanted to capture a sound that conveyed “decay” and “release.” Which meant, he told Tlac, toms only — no snare, no cymbals. He asked Tlac to play to an orchestral piece from a Sergio Leone movie, a spaghetti-western theme with virtually no beat. Tlac might as well have been playing along to wind chimes. But he eventually found some inner rhythm to the movie score, and Jaar, who planned to delete the orchestra once he found the right drum loop, got what he was looking for. He says the drive to find the sound in his head is no different from when he first started making music. “When I was 15, I was buying records and stealing sounds — stealing a kick sound, stealing a tom sound,” Jaar says. “Now I get to go to a studio and record my friends.”

[\(http://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/13/magazine/nicolas-jaar-tests-the-limits-of-dance-music.html?_r=1&\)](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/13/magazine/nicolas-jaar-tests-the-limits-of-dance-music.html?_r=1&)

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