

# Maya Jupiter

## Crossing musical borders – from R&B to hip hop to salsa

Tony Mitchell

*In her short career, Maya Jupiter has become one of the leading figures in Australian hip hop. Now the host of Triple J's weekly Australian hip hop show, she is also a former host of Channel [V]'s Soul Kitchen, and a regular club MC in both hip hop and R&B circles, as well as fronting the 11 piece salsa band Son Veneno, and running hip hop and music industry workshops for disadvantaged girls. She combines a diversity of musical influences with a Mexican-Turkish heritage, all of which are featured on her debut album Today (reviewed in Music Forum's February-April issue). This interview took place in November 2003, shortly after the album's release. Thanks to Karli Munn and Alessia Campagna.*

*TM: You were born in Mexico?*

MJ: Yes. But I was one year old when I came to Australia, so I'm pretty much an Aussie. They call me *cangurita* in Mexico. I've been back a couple of times, but not to the place where I was born. My mum is Turkish. My father was working in the city of La Paz when I was born, which is in Baja California, but he wasn't from there. All my family is from Soleuo, which is a city in Beunavato, just north of Mexico City. We migrated to Melbourne and then we came to Sydney. I didn't speak Spanish until I was about seventeen and I went overseas. When I was growing up, like maybe from four to twelve years old, I was living out west in Busby, which is near Liverpool. And I just remember at that time in my school just experiencing a lot of "go back to your own country you wog", a lot of racism, and I never wanted to learn. My mum tried to teach me Spanish and I would just go "No!" and scream "I don't want to learn it!". But then as I got older I wanted to get more in touch with my cultural heritage. And I think moving towards the inner city around Ashfield and going to a much more multicultural school helped. Times had changed by then too.

*TM: You talk about your mother and your upbringing and schooldays in your track Mamacita. You also mention you were school captain...*

MJ: I was captain of my primary school and I was sports captain in high school and a prefect in high school. That song was about the divorce of my parents and I guess it was very personal and I was really deciding whether I should put it on the album or not. Even when I recorded it I was like "Oh damn" - you know it was very full on. But now the band plays it and we perform it at gigs and sometimes I think people don't catch it but you obviously catch it! It was a song that I needed to get out about my father because I didn't see him for about seven years, which I think incited the whole fascination of wanting to know about the Mexican culture, because up until the age of twelve you don't know what you are. People ask you and you go "I'm half Mexican and half Turkish" - "Oh that's unusual". Growing up as a teenager I just didn't know any Mexicans at all - there were none in Australia and we don't have a community, although we are everywhere, we are all around the place - so that song was about that.

*TM: Did you more or less teach yourself Spanish or did you learn it at school?*

MJ: I enrolled myself in a six week course, then I went to Mexico for about three months and picked it all up because I'd heard it my whole life. I lived with my aunts and uncles, who didn't speak a word of English. For weeks I was there with a dictionary just trying to communicate and I really threw myself in the deep end. But on the other hand my grandmother in Mexico was an English teacher so she was able to teach me because she was the only one who was able to talk to me and translate between all the family. I'm not fluent but I can converse (sic).

*TM: How old were you when you first got into hip hop?*

MJ: I think consciously in deciding this is the music that I like and going out and buying my first record I was probably about fourteen, in high school. At that time I got really into artists like Naughty by Nature, their first album - really, it just made a difference with me. Now as an adult I listen to the lyrics and I wonder how I related to what they were saying back then, what did I know about living in the ghetto and poverty and struggling? I think young people, myself included, get attracted to the passion and the reality of the lyrics. Then eventually Ice Cube, but as I got older I found the hip hop community around 1998 - I would've been 18 or 19, and started going down to my sister's breakdance classes down at Marrickville Youth Centre. I went there for about three years then just decided to focus on being an MC - I didn't like the bruises! You want to do all these power moves and you want to be good straight away, but you've got to build up the strength and the technique and it just became more of a social thing too. Then I got tired of teaching the new girls Crazy Legs.

*TM: And what about your interest in salsa? Did that develop alongside your interest in hip hop?*

MJ: It was weird because I was running these two different lives at the same time. On one hand developing as an MC and really trying to hone my skills and just excel in that area - hip hop has always been number one and my passion and everything, but at the same time I've been a dancer since I can remember. And when I was about nineteen my sister was dancing with this salsa group and pulled me into it. And I saw it as a way of making quick money on the

weekend, doing shows at night, and I started going to rehearsals but then I really was good at it and I really enjoyed it. My older sister was really into the South American community and Latin dancing, and she'd take me to salsa clubs and I'd hated it because I couldn't speak Spanish. And I'd just get attacked. And I hated not being able to understand what they were singing about. Being somebody into music and lyrics. And not being able to do the dance, like I was never shown it. But then I just started learning it. I went out at that time with a Venezuelan guy who showed me how to feel the music. Salsa, Latin music is all about feeling the rhythm. Then I started dancing with this Brazilian dance company for about five years. We toured overseas, we did lots of shows all around dancing samba and cabaret style things in RSLs - we'd do weddings, corporate functions, birthday parties, restaurants, boats ...

*TM: The video of An Ordinary Night, which is on your album, is set in a salsa club. It seems to combine the two worlds.*

MJ: That song had a salsa hook, I think it was a mambo sample actually, but everyone in that video clip are all my friends that I'd danced with. It was about having a fun time with all my dancing mates and I wanted it to be like that because it was my first release. They always say in hip hop "keep it real" "be true to yourself". So for me that was being true to myself. And I remember back then looking on some chat boards and seeing "oh Maya she is just a booty shaker blah blah blah" And I remember consciously trying not to dance around on stage and just rap so when I read that I got so shook up and so angry and so hurt. I realised you are never going to win with people, you've just got to be yourself and feel good, and you find that people who have those confines might shut you out and say "OK I don't like that, for me that is not hip hop". Other people will like the fact that you're being yourself and letting go.

*T.M: Have you investigated Mexican hip hop?*

M.J: I heard some when I was working for SBS Radio's *Alchemy*. Ozomatli are one of my favourites - I got to interview them for *Alchemy* and I was so happy. They are just amazing the way that they fuse hip hop and salsa. A lot of people love their energy but some people are like "Nah, they are not hip hop." But I know the rhythms that they are twisting and playing with - they will play traditional music like a *merengue*, and *ranchero* music, which is like cowboy music, and mix it with a hip hop beat or put a little reggae into it. I can really relate to them. They are one of the groups that definitely influences me and the band that I'm playing with, Son Veneno, in a way model ourselves after them because we are an eleven piece band and we've got Latin jazz musicians. Our director Cesar plays bass guitar and he and his brother play traditional Chilean music - we've got so many sounds all through the group - Latin, jazz, hip hop - they're all fused. Sometimes we do shows for the Latin community, but if we go to the hip hop scene, we are a bit too Latin for hip hop so it is like where do we fit in? On my album launch it was the wickedest night. I wasn't sure how people were going to react but Son Veneno played their own set - their own original sounds and some covers, and I stayed out of it and then they played most of the songs from my album live with different arrangements - putting horn lines in, and it was just amazing.

*TM: What about within the Aussie hip hop scene - who have been do you think your big influences or inspirations or role models?*

MJ: I've always loved groups like Koolism and just the way that their music sounds and the way they do their shows. Hilltop Hoods have been such a good group - their music and the way that they rap, just really good lyrics and really good beats. But definitely Trey. Since I was young, since I was just discovering the hip hop scene - she was one of the first people that I met at the Urban Xpressions festival in '98. That was my introduction to Australian hip hop. Because here I was thinking yeah I know all about hip hop and R n B - I was already rapping in the R n B clubs by then and had recorded a demo CD with two other guys and I'm just like "yeah, yeah I'll see I'll see what this is all about". I came down and I was just blown away by that ten-day festival. Seeing Trey do her thing, I just really admired how she was out there - she was just working, she was doing shows, she was in papers, she had it all locked down. That was the direction I wanted to go in, and it was nice to have a female role model.

*T.M: You've since performed with Trey and worked with her on the Souljah Sistaz project at the South Sydney TAFE.*

MJ: Out at South Sydney Youth Services. Antoinette Abboud and Gemma Deakin got the funding for it as a TAFE Outreach project. Trey and I did Cert 4 workplace training certificates at TAFE, so we are kind of teachers in a way, and we got to teach off their modules. Our target group were all ladies, all young women, because when you do co-ed courses women tend to just shy away and drop out and the guys are the first ones on the drum kit and the first ones doing stuff. So we said "right - no men; this is for the girls". And we started with 20 or so and we ended up with about 15 who stayed and participated and saw it out. A lot from Pacific Islander backgrounds, some Koori girls, a few mixes, I think there were a couple of Australian girls. One girl was half Egyptian, half Australian but mainly Pacific Islander or Koori girls from pretty difficult backgrounds, living really hard lives and complicated lives - disadvantaged and not in school. And two of the girls were pregnant during the course and had the babies - one had it right afterwards. We did everything from song writing to covering the music industry and the way it all works and different roles in the industry, to recording the music to designing the CD cover to performing it. We did a launch night at the Metro and it was almost packed out. They did lots of different performances, but they got interviewed as well for radio and interviewed for *Insight* on SBS, which they were excited about, so we talked about being interviewed, and how if you are not comfortable answering a question you can say no - things like that. It was full time three days a week. And since then the girls have gone on to do a Cert Two in music industry or music studies at TAFE and a couple of the girls have gone back to TAFE to do their HSC. For us it is not about developing young pop stars or singers or the next big rappers but it is just about providing that opportunity for further learning and being engaged. Two of the girls started running workshops out at Wollongong as teachers - they ran them for younger kids.

*T.M: It seems to me that teaching is becoming one of the five elements of hip hop.*

MJ: Definitely. Ask Morganics. It is just passing on what you know and what is wrong with that? I never keep information if people want to know stuff, and I give out contacts - it is just about passing on the info. When I was that age I would have loved to have been able to go to a youth centre and record a CD and things like that. I didn't even know about programs that were happening. You know I think it is just important to listen. A lot of young people just come to the course because they want an outlet to express themselves. They just want to have someone listen to them. We have nights where they perform brackets and jam down at Redfern at St Xavier's church. All the girls from our workshops went and performed there one night. It was amazing to see them be real shy, and then at the end of the course grab a microphone on stage and like "OK - we are here tonight blah blah blah" and just be so confident! It was just like give them a microphone and look what happens! So I am torn between all these things that I am doing, but at the same time to me it is all hip hop and it all relates.

*T.M: There still seems to be a lot of resistance to Australian accents in hip hop.*

MJ: (Radio) Nova was sent my CD and the reason they gave the record label for not playing it was they didn't think their audience was ready to hear an Aussie accent rapping. And I said "Just tell me you don't like it, tell me it's not the right music, but don't tell me that!" People are used to hearing American accents so people are always going to say it doesn't sound right because they have never heard it before and they are not used to it. They are not accustomed to it because TV, the movies, everything is such an Americanized culture. Coca Cola culture. But there are full on ocker dudes down in Melbourne that I just go "Agh please". I remember it from Liverpool and Busby and Green Valley where I grew up. "Ah mate how's it goin'?" (*in very broad Australian accent*) - you know full on. But to hear it in a rap - "Yeah I rap like this 'cause I'm an Aussie" (*raps in broad Australian accent*). It is just too much - like you don't even talk like that, you're emphasizing it because you're trying to make a point. Sometimes I think you've got nothing other than the fact that you are Australian and that is what defines Aussie hip hop.

*MJ: Your track The Truth on the album is about the reception of Aussie hip hop.*

MJ: I wrote that two years ago, so it was a long time ago. I was definitely a lot more frustrated than I am now. Things have changed - that was before I was involved with *Alchemy* and before I was hosting Channel [V] and Triple J and before a lot of things happened. Things have changed since then - just a little bit but still not as far as the major labels go. That track wasn't saying why aren't the major labels playing my music, it was about the whole scene, that feeling of a young artist not being supported. Just feeling you're really going against the wind. The first version was actually the Spanish version which is at the end of the CD. And that was then remixed, Mr Jux did both versions into a hip hop version - you know, "the Street Mix!" - but my brother in law wrote the chorus in Spanish "Contra el viento" ... "Even when going against the wind I will fight, if you give me your hand I will take it." Meaning "if you help me out I will take that help, but if you don't it is cool because I'm still going to get there anyway ... with this passion I feel right now I know I will get there". And then it goes "Even when things seem dark, when things seem obscure and nothing is going to happen, Don't worry because the one who was born for triumph will win in the end". And that was the whole heart of the song and that is why it is one of my favourite songs on the album because that is what I was feeling. Totally.

*TM: Have you had any involvement with (Sydney-based Spanish language hip hop group) Ila Famiglia at all?*

MJ: Dwight the Venezuelan who is in Ila Famiglia is the one who rapped the chorus on my first single and he is actually a DJ. He has been a salsa DJ for the longest time and he was the one who taught me how to dance to salsa music. I met him when he first came to Australia. So we have been friends for a long time. And Rafa and Sebab - we haven't actually done stuff together but we've talked about making music together. I love their album. It was produced by Zux who is a Tanzanian MC/producer who is just about to release another album where he raps in his native tongue [Swahili] and it is so good. He has fused Latin samples from his experience with working with Ila Famiglia with African rhythms from his heritage and it just sounds so good together in the hip hop style. The Spanish meet the Africans - it is just amazing.

*T.M: There was also a big Spanish influence on Songs of Freedom.*

MJ: I love *Songs of Freedom*. If it was up to me I would make it a single. I wrote it in Mexico while I was waiting at the airport and I think I had been wanting to write a song like that with that kind of message for a long time. There were so many things running through my head, about refugees and people struggling. I wouldn't consider myself an activist as yet but I do find it hard to sleep at night sometimes thinking about what I can I do to make a difference, and come to terms and understand the true meaning of resistance.

*TM: Do you think that hip hop has an obligation to talk about these kinds of issues?*

MJ: Definitely and I don't see it existing in Australia hardly at all. Metabass was one of the groups that was really at the forefront of that, but compared with when I was in the States and I saw young active people protesting and organizing all these rallies and raising funds for causes like the three strike rule. I don't see that here in terms of hip hop.

*TM: There seems to be another border that you are crossing between hip hop and R&B.*

MJ: As far as R&B goes people always say, if you sing on your song then it is not hip hop. Tell that to Mos Def or any other amazing artist like Busta Rhymes that he is not hip hop ... I've been MCing in the R&B clubs now for a couple of years, and I started out in the R&B clubs - it is what I knew as hip hop back then. There wasn't a division in my head until I found the Australian hip hop scene and I realised "Oh this is us and that is them." When I did find the Australian hip hop scene I wasn't interested in R&B clubs for a couple of years. I was over it. But I realised in my

travels overseas that R&B and hip hop are not divided - you can go to a club in the States and they'll play the most underground track then they will drop in a hot R&B or commercial rap song and then throw in a dance hall track and the whole club just goes off. Beyonce is there to make you feel good, to dance to the music. People work an entire week, a 9-5 job where they are accountants or whatever they are doing, and they have their own stresses. They go to the club on the weekend and they want to let go - or they are studying or whatever the case is, they go to the club they want to enjoy themselves.

For me the R&B scene was that next circle if you are trying to grow. When I first went to the R&B clubs and I started working there, I got offered jobs which were just regular money that saved me from getting a "real job". 2000 people at City Live every Friday night. R&B people are fun people, they are happy. They sometimes have their attitudes but if we expose them to Aussie hip hop I reckon they will like it. And that is another two thousand people right there that can buy your record that can come to your gigs and that can contribute to the whole scene and community. So I just think it is stupid to try and keep it to yourself if you really want to make something of it and see the culture and the scene grow.

*T.M: You also seem to get a lot of support from your extended family.*

MJ. My brother in law has been such a huge influence because he is Mexican and a mariachi. He went to university and studied musicology and things about Latin American rhythms, all of that. So when my sister married him he was really my teacher in a lot of ways. And he played on the album - he plays Latin American harp and percussion - congas and things like that on *The Truth* and *Mamacita* as well. Don't tell anyone, but one day I'm going to do mariachi hip hop, because they have all these violins and horns and guitars and stuff. I'd love to do something like that!

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