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DEMYSIFYING DJ ARTISTRY: Q AND A WITH SIENNÁ

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Norwegian EDM artist [Sienná](#) has a lot going on. Her latest album, the breathtakingly complex "Q.o.S.," released in April, is a one hundred percent solo effort and the result of an adventurous separation from the producer and band she has worked with regularly over the years. In fact, since her migration from Japan to Norway more than a decade ago, Sienná's life is one of change and creative exploration. With her recent foray into DJ work, Sienná begins yet another chapter in her musical life.

In May, she spun some beats at the legendary [Cavern Club in Liverpool](#), where John, Paul, George and Ringo got their start. Sienná's set included Beatles' tunes intermixed with her own irresistible hybrid of dance and ambient electronica along with house music. To hear just how amazing it sounded, check this out:



Fresh off this opportunity to perform at the origin site of her heroes, Sienná answered some questions to shed some light on the DJ trade for [Synthbeat.com](#). Here goes:

So DJ is essentially now a genre of music? What exactly does a DJ do? Sienná: "A DJ mixes different sources of pre-existing recorded music. A DJ may choose to play recorded music as it is, or may divide a song into bits and pieces to mix and loop. I see that DJ music could be a genre, especially when a DJ manages to create a whole different song from the 'bits and pieces.' It's based on arranging skills. You could also add extra imaginations anytime in many ways."

"The most important preparation as a DJ first of all, is to prepare a playlist that contains an excellent selection of songs with good sound quality. And I think it helps to 'know' the songs well enough in advance. Then I could do something like, using song's original structure effectively - and adding some effects to it at the right time. Or I could also do something like selecting a loop to keep the groove rolling - and mixing other songs/adding effects when suitable etc. There's various ways to DJ."

How much of the DJ biz is improvising, and how much is simply playing a playlist? Sienná: "A DJ has a playlist, like you have on iTunes. A DJ may choose how to deal with the playlist. Some DJs may follow pre-programmed playlist, like some rock bands follow their set lists on stage. Although, some DJs may perform like improv Jazz bands in a way, do freestyle out of what they have on their playlists. Personally I prefer having max 2-3 songs just to start with, but no plans after that. It's more fun this way, and also easier to watch and follow what's happening right in front of me on the dance floor."

"I remember an amazing DJ like Four Tet started to loop a short unidentifiable part of a very popular song first, gradually and naturally built up - and much later, he revealed which song he actually was playing. It was fascinating to experience his process - almost like music quiz - and to see how people reacted when they finally found out 'Ah! Of course, that was the song!' I also remember particularly DJ Todd Terry created a perfect break at the very rightest time - he literally made 'everyone' (like 300 people) there to jump all at the same time. I believe a good DJ is so amazing at 'timing' and manages to create some magical moments like that. When it happens, you really get a boost of adrenaline."

So when did you first get the idea to add DJing to your repertoire? Sienná: "I replaced a drum machine with a Linear Wave sampler (Roland SP-404SX) in 2012, so I could interactively control drums and some effects/loops while I sang and played keyboards on stage. My band/trio was consisted of Jazz musicians at that time. So, I could impulsively make them a space for free improvisation without striving at all. The size and weight of the sampler was extremely convenient too. I'm still using the same sampler, because it just adds more freedom and options to my DJ-set."

So how do you integrate different types of music, or your own sounds, into the playlist of songs? In other words, how does new music by Sienná mix with the classic rock, or whatever sounds the audience is expecting to hear? Sienná: "Songwriting and DJing are two separate matters for me. I'm a songwriter first of all. DJing is my way to go out of a dark studio and to perform the music outside for inspiration and fun. So my music is there, ready to be played like any other songs on my playlist. The only difference is that it's much easier for me to use my own music, as I naturally have perfect knowledge of what's going on within the songs from before."

"I personally have nothing against mixing various genres. I'm focusing more on 'grooves.' It was fun mixing The Beatles with house music though. Their music I think is quite psychedelic especially after the album 'Revolver.' So I coincidentally found some weird guitar loops that worked well on my live mix."

What interesting equipment do you have? Do you have synths or trigger pads or anything else that let you improvise? Sienná: "I have a tiny handmade Theremin that my father made for me once, and I can use it anytime. But normally I use just Denon MC-4000 connecting to a Macbook Pro with Serato DJ, Roland SP-404SX and sometimes also to a microphone. If I perform as a live act, I could also bring my E-Mu Shortboard in addition."

The DJ biz has evolved from what was previously a couple turntables to what it is now. Is Beck out of date, "two turntables and a microphone?" Sienná: "Oh I love Beck! But no, I cannot see anything is out of date. It's said that the very first musical instrument was the human voice. It's not outdated to sing, is it? Or how about an orchestra? I think good music is still good regardless of the selection of methods. An instrument is just a part of serving its creative purposes. Time changes, so as circumstances."

The list of Beatles' tunes Sienná spun into her set at the Cavern Club on May 31st:

Taxman
Tomorrow never knows
Helter Skelter
Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band (Reprise)
Paperback Writer
Day Tripper
Back In The U.S.S.R.
I Am The Walrus

Thanks, Sienná!

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