

‘If You Love Music You Should Learn How to DJ’: Maria Chavez and Elijah interviewed by Jake Williams

JAKE WILLIAMS 

University of Birmingham, UK
Email: mrjakeone@gmail.com

In this article, DJ and scholar Jake Williams speaks with Maria Chavez and Elijah about their ideas concerning education and pedagogy in electronic music. Although they come from very different musical backgrounds, the rationale for the joint interview was twofold: first, they are both DJs who think deeply about their practice and have strong pedagogical commitments; and second, their pedagogical practices have led to them to work between informal and formal educational spaces, across a range of age groups. The talk touches on their views on music education, academia, definitions of success, what it means to be ‘open source’ and, of course, DJing.

1. BACKGROUND

Elijah is a musician, educator and entrepreneur based in London. He co-founded the celebrated grime record label Butterz in 2010, after running a blog of the same name for three years. Between 2008 and 2014 he held a residency on the key London pirate radio station Rinse FM, was a regular at the highly influential FWD club night at Plastic People (one of the few playing grime at the night known as an incubator for dubstep and post-dubstep mutations), and has run numerous parties in the capital. He is also an artist manager for producers working across the genres of UK garage, UK funky, grime and bassline, including Flava D, Royal-T, DJ Q and Swindle. During the pandemic, he started an Instagram-based project called *Yellow Squares* (Figure 1), which consists of short provocations regarding technology, access, community, politics and education in electronic music. They have become an open-source resource for both aspiring producers and educators. In 2023, Elijah released *Make the Ting* with grime MC Jammz, which brought ideas from *Yellow Squares* together with an open source remix project. Since 2022 he has been a community fellow at SOAS, London.

Experimental turntablist Maria Chavez is an internationally recognised improviser, DJ, sound artist and curator. She has performed globally and released albums on Macro, Ballast and Pitchphase, among others. In 2012 she published a how-to manual summing up her turntable practice to that point titled

Of Technique: Chance Procedures on Turntable (2012). She has also exhibited paintings, drawings and sculptures at various art institutions. Alongside her other practices, she regularly gives lectures and abstract turntablism workshops in formal and informal educational contexts. In 2023 she toured with fellow turntablists Mariam Rezaei and Victoria Shen, and the trio were featured on the cover of *Wire* magazine.

2. INTERVIEW

Jake Williams (JW): I’d like to hear a little about your own educational experiences, and why you both now have some form of education as part of your artistic practice?

Maria Chavez (MC): I was in art history and I dropped out at the end of my junior year of college, but I wasn’t even in school for that last semester because I was on tour already. I had been a professional DJ since I was 17 and I went straight from high school to college, to the University of Houston, thinking that that’s what you’re supposed to do. But I’d already had my career starting, I was already doing it. I ended up doing an associate degree programme with the Houston Community College, audio engineering, just so I could get the background of the audio stuff, because the boys are giving me such a hard time about that. It didn’t help that much (laughs). Just nice to have.

But then I got kicked out of the DJ scene for being too experimental. That’s when I met Pauline Oliveros. Her mom was living in Houston so she was visiting Houston quite a bit and there was the Pauline Oliveros Foundation there, and then they took me in. David Dove was the teacher, and Pauline would come in every few months and talk to us. We’d perform all of her pieces and she’d tell us what we were doing wrong or right, not *wrong*, but *differently*. She’d always say ‘different’ (laughs) instead of wrong. She was really good with her words. But I feel like I learnt a lot from her communication, her kindness in her

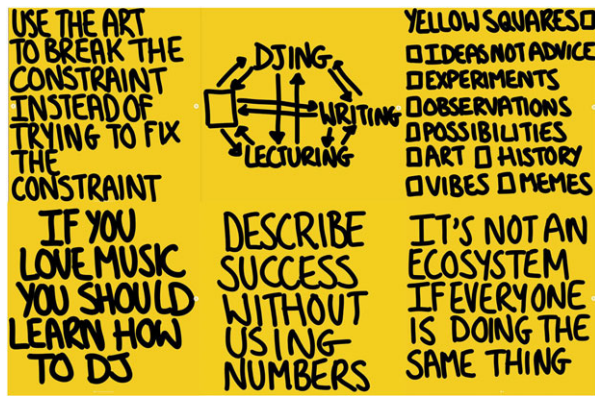


Figure 1. Six of Elijah's *Yellow Squares* provocations.

communication. I also learned about the workshop form, interactive workshop – as – performance practice, through Dave and Pauline. It had nothing to do with any academic university, it was an after-school programme, a foundation started by Dave on his own. He still doesn't have a direct link with the university, which is frustrating for me because he's been doing this for almost 20 years and he's changed so many people's lives in Houston by providing these improvisation workshops on Pauline Oliveros's work.

Elijah: The reason why I have it like this now is because, after that gap in the two years of the pandemic, I saw a lot of young people wanting to get started and come into an industry that was going to be vastly different to the thing that we left behind in March 2020. Before that, I was already aware of the difference between how things are perceived through social media versus how they actually are. So, I'm trying to be transparent to people. Like, okay, this is actually how the industry works, or this is how I'm finding this challenge at the moment, or this is a different way of looking at all of these standard industry practices which were established for completely different reasons at completely different times. I don't know if I'd call that specifically education, it's based on transparency and getting the best information possible to the people that want to participate.

I went to university because it was just like, what else are you going to do? I was 18 and I think maybe the immigrant dream, being a child of an immigrant in London, is sending your kids to university and not them becoming mechanics or plumbers or anything like that. There wasn't a consideration of anything else – internships for, I don't know, building cars in a Ford factory or something like that. But I would have been better served doing something like that with my skill set and energy.

JW: From my perspective, what you do with *Yellow Squares* is education in the best way. You're putting

out provocations and starting discussions rather than a top-down delivery.

Elijah: An educator is with you through it. So maybe some of the work that I do is that – when people interact with me on Instagram, or when I do the lectures live. A teacher is in the room, has a sensitivity to people's situations, is seeing them every day, watching them grow. It's a very different kind of interaction. The ideas I put out there on Instagram have to be true at scale to make sense. Whereas if you're teaching in a class in East London, that's all you're thinking about, you're thinking about East London. Whereas I'm talking to the world.

MC: I feel like in the art world, and especially the sound art world, education is still very much this white supremacist idealism of if you don't sound educated, you don't get to participate in the discourse. We can't judge people if they are more articulate or not, or if they have more education or not. That's classist and that is the route of white supremacy that we need to break away from.

JW: Elijah, how did you learn to do all the various different things that you do: DJing, production, the business side of it?

Elijah: It's all through trial and error or reverse engineering stuff. I grew up listening to pirate radio, going into record shops, being outside, and going to clubs, from really young. I was just super curious. There was not as much information online at the time, so people were accommodating to anyone who showed curiosity. The scene I was part of was DIY. If you wanted it to be done, then you had to figure it out. Whereas now, for the kind of music that I do, there are managers and agents that are willing to help you build a business around doing creative work. When I started, there wasn't anyone rushing to do that. If I wanted to participate as an artist, have artistic ideas, or help other artists, I would have to do the business bit too. The history of our music and Black music in general, and I guess all musicians/artists, is being screwed over by the industry, and I just didn't want to replicate that model or be part of that.

JW: Maria, you talked about David Dove and Pauline Oliveros. Would you say that that was a mentoring environment for you? Did you have other mentors?

MC: Yeah, they did throw me down the rabbit hole, as I like to say. Once you go down this experimental rabbit hole, you never come back up (laughs). I always tell people that are just starting 'welcome, have fun, we'll see you on the other side, see what you end up sticking to'. Dave gave me an overview of sound art, free improvisation, and free jazz. I was already very much invested in visual art practices, like painting, because Houston has an amazing collection of museums. I still think the Menil Collection is one of

the most fantastic collections of surrealist paintings in the world. I think the Rothko Chapel is one of the most important fixtures showing Mark Rothko's work in the world. It's oil money, so there's just a lot of money for art there. I was already around that art world, the historical art world, but it was really the sound art stuff that Dave brought me into. I then pulled it all together to make sense of it. He was definitely my mentor, and I credit him for everything, all the time. Without him, I wouldn't have known who Otomo Yoshimide was, or any of those guys. They created a safe space for me. There was no judgement anymore of like, 'you can't break that needle, you can't break that record, you can't do those sounds'. They were 'actually, you can do that and it has a long history, since the 50s'. They would show me John Cage, Milan Knížák and everybody, and I'd be like, 'oh wow, okay. I'm actually a part of history, I actually belong somewhere'.

Elijah: A writing that I shared earlier this year was 'none of my mentors know they're my mentor' and a lot of people said that I was that to them too, without realising. For me, it was JME and Skepta because they had that duality of commercial music and independent-DIY approach in the same family. They were producers, MCs, and they had a logo and all these things, and I thought 'that looks like some crazy operation'. But when it started, it was just two guys in their house, in their family home, just making tunes that everyone liked. I find that mad inspiring, and that's what made me think 'I can do that too'. When I think of other people that were the spark, I guess having Rinse FM – the groups of people, the community of DJs that were on that station. Also the FWD club night at Plastic People – I could see all of this talent in one place and was figuring out what people were doing, and figuring out what I could contribute to it. I don't think I've created anything that's not highly reactive to the environment I'm in. This is not conceptual. It's like 'oh, I think this could slot in here and be functional'.

Maybe mentoring, and the way I think about my interactions with people, we were all doing that for each other in different ways without realising it. The night was called FWD, like trying to push ideas forward. Maybe there was some sort of hierarchy or people that we looked up to as big brothers or sisters. But, because things were changing so fast, the utility, or at least what I felt was the utility, of the information they could give us for the time we were in wasn't that helpful.

JW: So you both learnt what you do outside of formal institutions, but you now both go into higher education institutions in various capacities and teach. How have you found that?

MC: It depends if it's a visual art programme, or a music programme, or an audio engineering programme. I try to adjust the workshop according to the class. But I always try to start every workshop where nothing is plugged in, because everyone was always 'we have to get everything plugged in before the students get there'. Now I don't plug anything in. We're going to teach these people how turntables work, why they work the way they do, the history of it. By the time they leave, they're going to break a record and they're going to know how to connect a turntable to a DJ mixer, to a PA system. They're going to learn the most basic form of signal flow. It's not even so they can be turntablists like me, it's just so that they can understand the most basic form of audio engineering which is from point A to B to C, to going out into the space. Then the next hour is 'all right, now we're going to take all of that and we're going to throw it all away and we're going to break everything'. We all play the Christian Marclay piece 'Record Player'. That's such a fun way to start because at the end everyone breaks a record and that starts the whole workshop. I also like to have older artists' works represented in my workshops, to give a history lesson. And then, thankfully, there's my book (*Of Technique: Chance Procedures on Turntable*), which is still very much an outline of how I present my workshop.

People walk away not necessarily becoming another abstract turntablist, but walk away with a new neuron connection because they broke a record, which is an extreme. That really gets burnt in your neuron connections. I wrote an article for Guggenheim, I think last year or two years before, about neuroplasticity and the function of multichannel sound installation as a form of a safe space to encourage neuroplasticity. That's what the arts are for. It's not really about this industry where you have to make the numbers, have the followers, be cool, be in fashion, and all of this stuff. So that's how I see my workshops now, as these spaces for neuroplasticity – exercising for these connections. And the most important connection is the broken record, to break the record, because it's going against so many things at one time. It's going against consumerism, it's going against objectness. In my workshops, breaking means something new, new opportunities.

Elijah: It's made me explain my ideas and my context, the time I came up in, and why I think the way I do. Many of the things that have worked for me as an artist, or that I'm adjacent to, are breaking away from convergent logic. A classroom can be a bizarre way to filter that back through to other people – you're trying to make a hundred people think differently all from each other, to make it work for themselves. I don't think that's easy. When they're doing an exam or coursework, there usually is some sort of uniform

marking standard, boxes that you need to tick. So I've had pushback from people. One of the points of view I had was, instead of doing the dissertation, just put out a record. You will learn more about grime trying to put something out in the grime scene than writing about grime. Also, if you're going to write a dissertation about something that happened in grime, or in Black British music, try to get it viewed by the most people possible, not just the person that is marking it. There's so much great work I've contributed to, or I've seen people doing, but then not a lot of people see it. Most of the academic writing in Black music is going to be within the walls of universities, which is crazy. It's going to be sitting on a shelf of the person that wrote it and the person that marked it, and that's it.

Another thing with these institutions – this is what I try and articulate the most – is that no one in any of these institutions at a high level knows who I am or cares about my work. It's not an institutional policy to get me to go and talk to the students. It's individuals, people that are going beyond their job description to open doors to people. I've been given the title 'Community Fellow' at SOAS, for example. They don't even know what that means. They're like 'oh, just do what you want'. It's not very helpful. The person that actually brought me in probably won't even be there this year. Do I have free rein to do anything? I don't know. I literally don't know, and I don't think they know how to manage an outsider either.

JW: You've talked a little about histories, which is obviously one of the things that can be taught. What would you say would be a good way of ensuring that the histories and subcultures valuable to you and your practice are communicated and preserved?

MC: Our presence in these spaces is already changing the story. Is already changing the history of the spaces we are entering. When people say 'your work doesn't really talk about you being of Indigenous descent and you being Peruvian, you don't really make work about your identity', I'm like 'the fact that I walk on stage and break these records and sit down at a turntable – that is the political statement'. I am making space for whimsy, where it's been all white male whimsy for as long as we can all remember, because that's the only whimsy that was allowed to be documented and celebrated.

You create installations, art, whatever, in order to make that space for yourself and say, 'I belong here too'. Now I sculpt with white Carrera marble and my studio is in Marina di Carrara, in Tuscany, where Michelangelo worked. That's where they mine all the white marble for the Vatican. I chose that specific location for a reason, because white Carrera marble has been identified as this white, male material in art

history for thousands of years. But if there's anyone that should be dealing with stone, it's an Inca-descendant Peruvian person. We know a thing or two about stone, that's for sure. So, my working with the material isn't because I want to be a sculptor, it's because I want to interact as an identity with that material. The question is, am I allowed to make this work too? Use this material and still be seen as an upper echelon artist? Is that challenging for you? Is that challenging for the industry?

Elijah: Before, maybe, the journalist, or the writer, or the author, they felt more powerful than you. Now that's not the case. With the kind of music and the kind of scenes I'm in, the whole time you see your culture told back to you in a way that it's not. You're just used to it. But the fightback is telling the *many* stories, the many possible stories. There shouldn't be a house documentary, there should be many houses (laughs). Not one grime documentary, but many. There are benefits to grouping all these things together, but then you see how one dominant story becomes *the* story.

Some threads are not super obvious. You'll see stories told about grime music that is like, oh, 'sound system culture and then it's hip-hop meets garage, meets dancehall'. But we also had Nintendo, and we also grew up on American television, pro-wrestling and football culture. All of these things are not super obvious on the first layer, but the music would be different if we didn't have Fruity Loops, and Pioneer, all of these different things. We were plugging into technology from Japan, to bootlegging, Napster. We were also experiencing the world like everyone else was too. It wasn't just, yeah, born in Kingston and then popped up in London and then 'we've got to plug in this sound system mate' (laughs). There were things happening in between, and sometimes the simplification of the story has left our characters out of it, the humour. Even just something as simple as martial arts, all the samples that people were using back in the day from bootleg films from Hong Kong, that's got nothing to do with Jamaica and London and New York. But that's still something that we were taking in and influenced the work. Maybe when you tell a story that involves millions of people over multi-continents, it's not as easy to make a succinct point.

I've also got a very privileged first-generation immigrant experience, but that might not be obvious in the storytelling of music or our culture. I have people tell me that I'm disadvantaged, or not able, or whatever, and it doesn't feel like it (laughs), it doesn't. If I lived 30 minutes further out, in the next borough or the next county, I would have had a completely different experience of the world. If my parents didn't move to the UK, I would have had a completely different experience of the world. People ask me, 'would you move anywhere else?' I said 'well, if I

moved somewhere else, I would have to do something else'. I can't do this living in Tuscany, for example, like Maria mentioned earlier. This is a very 'London, right now' job. Maybe I could be a lecturer anywhere, but I don't think so. To do the multitude of things that I do, I have to be in London or I have to work in the way that I am and that definitely plays into the work.

JW: I wanted to move on to talk about your thoughts on open source education, using the internet as a resource maybe?

MC: I do think that open source teaching is really valuable to lower-income households. At least the information that was normally held in a vault in the academia realm is now more open. La Meme-Young, I don't know if you know him, Max Alper? He has a really great open source electronic music class where he talks about noise, music and I was a sub for one of his classes one year during the pandemic, which was really fun. It was all live streamed on Zoom and I thought that was really interesting because a lot of these kids, not only are of a different income bracket, but they also live too far away from a city that has a university that would provide these kinds of classes for them. Max is providing a resource for them that they otherwise wouldn't have access to.

Elijah: I use open source in different ways. I did an album earlier this year and released all of the acapellas before even dropping the full release. It's a way of having a conversation with people, more than it being an educational tool perhaps. The work I'm doing now, I'm just trying to use social media productively. I enjoy using it in a creative or educational capacity, rather than an advertising board or as a place to just post selfies. Like, okay, 'how does this thing that someone has posted make me feel?' then 'what do I put back in response to that?'. Once you put out an idea, it is open source, whether you like it or not. Once you put it on the internet, once you've performed it, once someone has heard it, yeah, you're going to get some sort of response, whether you like it or not. Or if it's nothing, then fine. But if you're getting some sort of feedback it's going to influence some other people's work. Sometimes very heavily, and some more subtly. Usually, when people point out 'oh, you must have got it from this', they're wrong. There's subtleties of things, usually, that I notice. Something that gave me the feeling. It's the same when I give a talk and someone asks a question, and then I extrapolate on that question.

JW: So we're getting towards the end now, but I wanted to ask you about a subject close to all of our hearts, DJing.

MC: I think DJing should be taught in elementary school. I believe that it should be part of a regular curriculum for children because I think just that act in itself of beat matching by ear, and then putting songs

together in certain keys, in certain genres, and outside of the DJing fun aspect of it, it's actually really key in brain development. What better place than in elementary school to have opportunities and make a space like that? But I also think that DJing for elderly people, especially those with dementia and Alzheimer's, it's also really important for them too. There are studies where if you play back songs that these individuals grew up with, while they might be deep in their disease of whichever neurological disorder they have, most often they remember the song.

So, I had this theory, 'why don't I do DJ sets for nursing homes?' For assisted living facilities, where I figure out the ages of everyone there and I find out where they grew up, what eras, what were their favourite song and I just make a DJ mix. I could visit assisted living facilities once a week in different parts of America and I DJ for them. That is just a form of sonic therapy where they can all just sit around and listen to these songs.

I feel like the more that it's in schools and things like that, I would hope that it would lessen the desperation to want to 'make it', you know?

Elijah: Yeah, mine mirror Maria's actually. This is a point of view that a lot of people disagree with in the DJ community, the wider electronic music community, because they view it as a zero sum, 'DJs are a specialist thing with all of this magical talent that no one else should have and you can't touch the deck' type of energy. My last post on my Instagram was, 'If you love music you should learn how to DJ.' But what Maria is challenging is beyond that – let's not even question whether you love music, DJing can make you love music. DJing might be the foundation of your love of music and that could be a different way of learning about sound and ways of putting things together. A DJ isn't just a person that is on the stage at a festival looking down at everyone else, playing the record. That is one application of it, but there are thousands. Never heard of the care home example, sick idea, yeah, teaching at primary school level, sick idea, never thought of those things.

In my head, the example I was giving to people on Instagram was: what if you had decks in every home instead of a television? Why can people imagine sitting down every day for three/four hours watching something on Netflix and not imagine being tactile or in control of the information that's coming in? If CDJs sold as many devices as PS5s, how different would society be? Obviously, they're very different things but you can get controllers in and around the same price range as PS5 and you don't have to buy a PS6, or you wouldn't have to buy another one and another one and another one and another one (laughs).

It's bizarre because, obviously, I've travelled around, DJing, and DJing is a big part of my life. But I would have sacrificed that to have more people engage with it, enjoy the music, and have creativity as part of their life. In the grand scheme of DJ culture and electronic music culture or British Black music culture, I'm small fry anyway. So, this point of view might be the most useful contribution that I make, as small as it is. The 'If you love music you should learn how to DJ' post was the most reacted, most liked, most shared post – and I posted it last week.

I'm a follower of football, it's like most people's first love of football came from playing football, not watching it. And it's the same thing with music or the

same thing with DJing. Why doesn't the foundation of your love of DJs start with the love of DJing? Why doesn't your foundation of the love of musicians and the people behind them start with the love of music? But that is not the first way it's being told to you or sold to you. Even if you are a DJ, or even if you are making a living as a DJ, wouldn't you want that to be the thing that you left with more people than playing records to drunk people in the middle of the night?

REFERENCE

Chavez, M. 2012. *Of Technique: Chance Procedures on Turntable*. Brooklyn, NY: Self published.