

# ‘We Cross Examine with Old Sonic DNA’: King Britt and Tara Rodgers in conversation on Blacktronika, music technology and pedagogy

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**Composers, producers and educators King Britt and Tara Rodgers discuss music technology history and pedagogy in the context of King Britt’s Blacktronika course at the University of California San Diego, which researches and celebrates Black artists and other artists of colour who are pioneers of electronic music genres. Conducted over email in June 2021, this interview also touches on King Britt’s studio practice and evolution as an artist and educator, as well as on the social and political roots of contemporary electronic music genres.**

Tara Rodgers: King, first of all, let me say it is an honour to be in conversation with you for this issue of *Organised Sound*. I have followed your career since – I had to go back and look up the date – it was a 1998 Giant Step compilation with the Sylk 130 track ‘The Reason’ on it that I kept on loop for the longest time! 4hero, Morcheeba, DJ Cam, Finley Quaye, N’Dea Davenport, Roni Size were on there as well. This was the year I first set up a home studio, moving from performing jazz and funk keyboards into producing electronic music, so I was listening a lot along these lines. Listening to the connections.

King Britt: Honoured Tara! Wow you are going back!

TR: I’m sure I’m biased, but I always say that the 1990s was such an interesting and special time in the ways that musicians were bringing elements of jazz, soul, hip hop and emerging electronic genres together. It was underground music, but some of it bubbled up to the mainstream as well. Like a track you’d be dancing to in the club was just as likely to be charting on Billboard at the same time . . . which I don’t think is the case in all eras.

You were working within this culture from various angles, as a DJ with Dignable Planets, as a musician and producer, and as a buyer for Tower Records in Philadelphia. How do you remember that time? What, if anything, do you find unique about electronic music of that period?

KB: The 1990s were interesting for sure. The 1980s prepared us on a consumer level for electronic music. The sounds that were used and the accessibility of the new software/instruments started to morph the process of creating music. Sampling was here to stay in creative and non-creative ways, but sonically opened the floodgates of possibility. The need for paying for studio time started to dwindle, so more experimentation was being done.

The two genres that really stood out for that time was hip hop and acid jazz. Acid jazz, the UK hybrid of American soul music, started to resonate here in the States. With the success of Soul II Soul and Brand New Heavies, this sound was reminiscent of 1970s influences but with a new electronic twist. The cross-over of both genres started to happen as well, not only in the studio but live as well. Giant Step (NYC), Brass (LA), UFO (Japan) and Back2Basics (Philly) all had bands with DJs. Now is the norm but back then it was a new configuration.

Dignable Planets, Young Disciples, A Tribe Called Quest and Guru’s Jazzmatazz were at the forefront of this. Later Brand New Heavies’s hip hop project. So this sound and configuration was definitely mainstream not only in UK but USA as well.

Many of the DJs of this sound were also Billboard reporter for the charts, which also explains why you saw this happening. The 1990s also bridged generations together. Older who loved jazz and younger who loved hip hop.

TR: Wow, there is so much here. I often start thinking about music of a particular decade through the available technologies, how musicians were working with them, and the aesthetics around that. The circulation of samplers as you say, the fact that MIDI had been around for a decade or more, the synth sounds popping up at the same time in different genres. But you’re so right that it’s about the social connections and the generational mix as well.

KB: The sound also infiltrated the more electronic-based music. 4hero and Roni Size both did jazz-flavoured drum and bass, returning to the roots and reconstructing the rhythmic patterns. Labels like Talking Loud, Giant Step, 8ball and Acid Jazz embraced this and truly put much of it on the map.

Simultaneously, the rave scene finally hit the USA, bridging the house, techno, breaks, IDM and hip hop/acid jazz. It was a very young, fresh and vibrant scene that changed the landscape of electronic music for what we hear today on the radio. MTV also played a large role, the same as it did in the 1980s. Shows like *Amp* brought the DJ/producers to the forefront, which had chart stars like Chemical Brothers, Daft Punk, Frankie Knuckles, Felix da Housecat and many more.

TR: You're doing such important work to document and teach this history through your Blacktronika course at UCSD – researching, interviewing and honouring Black pioneers of electronic music genres (King Britt *nd*). Tell me about the genesis of this course and how you are approaching the research. What are some things you are learning in the process of teaching it?

KB: I noticed that this conversation and research has been missing from academia for a long time around the subject of pioneers of colour and their contributions to electronic music. I feel it was because there are many nuances that only certain individuals could truly teach it correctly. I felt this is the most important conversation to have, especially in the colonised conversations around electronic music and the purposeful whitewashing of dance music, eliminating its roots and foundation, which was created by Black musicians (Brown 2019; Britt and Wei *nd*).

TR: This is it. Absolutely.

KB: I am in a unique position, because not only did I contribute to the various sounds that I cover, but I lived it. I DJ'd many of these scenes and know many of the legends because we were all creating simultaneously.

Owing to the fact that I lived much of this, the research comes easy. I know where to look, I know most of the pioneers in the scenes and I also know the unspoken connections between the scenes.

I'm also extremely well read about music and history of Black music as it relates to electronics. So for things that I was too young to be a part of I can reach into that.

TR: You are uniquely positioned this way. I can relate to this through the Pink Noises interviews that I did some years ago, likewise documenting scenes that I am a part of as a musician and performer (Rodgers 2010). As a fellow musician in those conversations, I sometimes found there was a different level that we could get to in the conversation. A kind of mutual recognition that isn't always there if the interviewer is

seen mainly as a 'researcher', if you will, dropping in from the outside.

I see this in your interviews as well. Sometimes it means going to a deeper level about the tools and techniques, but more than that I think it can set up a kind of trust that facilitates sharing. And from your knowledge of the history, you know the questions to ask that create space for the stories to be told.

I think there's something, too, about how one's musical skills as a listener and improviser can cross over to skills as an interviewer. Timing is key! The rhythm and flow of the conversation. Knowing when to drop a question. Or how long you pause and wait for someone to continue a thought ... it's all there. I want to hear more about the conversations you are having, though.

KB: Zoom, truly, was a blessing in disguise. I was and still will be able to connect globally to the network of musicians, producers and label owners and have then in class for interviews and questions. It's been mind blowing some of the classes I have had. One that sticks out was Waajeed, Juan Atkins, Jenn Nkiru, Ash Lauryn, DeForrest Brown and Carl Craig in one sitting. Or Roni Size, Bahamadia, Gilles Peterson and Vikter Duplaix ... the list goes on and on, but those had more than one artist, so the cross-conversations and unspoken history comes out. I am starting my book at the moment. It will be a series and extremely valuable to the academia canon.

TR: That's great. The gathering of people and generations is really special. There's such a wealth of knowledge being shared in these interviews, I'm sure it's hard to choose highlights, and I look forward to the book. That said, are there any memorable moments you'd share here – perhaps something that came out of a conversation among the multiple artists present? Or a new insight that was shared that turned upside down, something you thought you already knew?

KB: Tara, there were so many OMG. The one that really sticks out is the story, instigated by DeForrest Brown, that Juan Atkins told. Derrick [May] had to pay rent and he was going to sell his 909 to Jeff Mills, but Juan said no because UR [Underground Resistance] was our 'competition' (friendly). So they took it to Chicago, where they would frequent to hear house. He sold it to Frankie Knuckles. Historic!!!! That little piece of history changes everything.

The main information that came out of all of these interviews was the community surrounding the technology. Everyone would share 909s, 303s, etc. This helped create a distinct sound for the cities. Philly included.

TR: This is fascinating! It reminds me, when I was interviewing Laurie Spiegel in recent months, she spoke about the sense of community in shared studios

in the 1970s, such as when she worked at Bell Labs. It was such that you might enter the studio and see the patch setup that the person before you had made. So there was some built-in knowledge sharing as well as resource sharing. I think these stories are so important for younger generations to hear. As much as we might celebrate the conveniences of affordable apps, and the mostly personal laptop-based setups that we use while connecting with other musicians and software developers online, there are other models of making community around music technology from not that long ago that we can learn from and build on.

Beyond the *Blacktronika* course itself, you're making space for doing this kind of work inside academia, while also sharing course material publicly through social media. Both of these things are really crucial. My sense is that it has taken roughly 25 years since the first scholarly monographs on hip hop and electronic dance music were published for practitioners of these genres to be hired as academic music faculty. We know that students are more than ready for these subjects! But the pace of change in most music programs and curricula has been slow. Is this your sense as well? Do you have a sense of breaking new ground, doing what you are doing?

KB: As stated above, yes, I just feel the capable people who can truly discuss the importance of these genres, specifically dance music origins, are not in academia, yet. It is changing, which is why I am where I am. This is my purpose and path. Soon the course will be open to everyone in 2022 fall (fingers crossed). I can only share so much on social media but just those snippets are gold!

TR: That is great news that the course might be open to all. What is most important to you about your work as an educator?

KB: The most important thing is that I remain the student in the context of being a professor. I'm constantly learning from my students about new genres and artists. We cross examine with old sonic DNA. This process is important not only in *Blacktronika* but in my production classes as well. It all goes together.

My work as an educator is to bring light to things that slip through the cracks and inspire new ways of process, while remaining rooted within the history of it all.

TR: It does all go together. I think a crucial shift that is happening in music technology teaching – long overdue in my opinion, and something you are advancing – is a growing attention to how technologies and techniques are deeply historical, cultural, political. And how this manifests through sound itself.

Was there a moment in your life or career when you started thinking of yourself as an educator, understanding that to be your path? Or has that always been present for you?

KB: It's funny because everyone keeps telling me I have always been an educator. I thought of myself as an educator in the 'DJ' sense of the word. Educating the dancefloor to new music. The past few years prior to UCSD I was doing more workshops and curatorial work for MoMA PS1, Cleveland Museum of Art and Philadelphia Museum of Art. These definitely put me in a more academic mindset.

TR: That makes sense. One of the issue themes put forward by the editors of this journal asks what 'a social justice approach' might be for studying and teaching electroacoustic and commercial music. What are your thoughts on this? Or, more broadly, how do you see the relationships between social justice movements and electronic music cultures? Are there particular artists past or present whom you see as forging these relationships, doing this work?

KB: The whole *Blacktronika* course goes deep into the sociopolitical movements of the time. Black power movement/jazz fusion, gay liberation movement/house, post-Detroit riots/Detroit techno ... so true authentic electronic music all comes from an urgency and struggle as a form of expression. The whole fact that Detroit techno was the soundtrack to the fall of the Berlin Wall, as well as the rebuilding of Detroit, speaks volumes and should be taught in all schools.

I think academia needs to dig deeper into the stories of the culture instead of only looking at publications from certain sources that are out of touch with said culture. You must live it, feel it, involve [with it].

TR: So true. I'd like to ask a few questions about your own history with music-making, technology, and collaboration. How did you get started with music technology and production? What were some of the first tools you worked with in the studio? Are there any from that period that you still work with?

KB: In high school (9th grade) I received my first sampler, a Casio SK-1. I started sampling everything because of my love for the band, the art of noise. My love for all things synth and electronic started with Bowie's *Low*, Stevie Wonder and Herbie Hancock. I then gravitated towards Depeche Mode and Yazoo (which I worked with Alison Moyet later).

I soon bought my first Moog Minimoog, 808 and Tascam Portastudio 4 track. Moving soon to the Macintosh for sequencing. I did demos for fun but when I started working at Tower, I sent them to Strictly Rhythm, who signed me.

At the same time I met Josh Wink who wanted to get into production. So we did the first EP together using his Roland R-8, Casio FZ-1, Minimoog and Juno 106.

I still work with the Minimoog and Roland SH-101 and kept most of my keyboards from over the years.

TR: Is there an instrument you are currently working with that you find especially engaging or inspiring?

Can you tell me something about your creative process with it?

KB: I have been completely in awe of the iPad for the past five years and it continues to be one of the most engaging, fun and inspiring tools. The apps that I use are so non-conventional in the way you create sounds and can alter field recordings and samples. Borderlands and Samplr are two of my faves. Also Spacecraft. Three go-tos. There is one that was discontinued that I truly love called Soundbow.

I can approach the iPad in a way that's casual and fun but the results are powerful due to the limitations of each app.

TR: You've collaborated extensively with other musicians over the years, including your recent Fhloston Paradigm projects. Is there anything you'd like to share about your process of seeking collaborators or working in collaboration?

KB: It's all a vibe. I usually collaborate with like-minded individuals who spiritually I resonate with. I have an album with Tyshawn Sorey coming out in September. This was pure love of music, sound and rhythm. We just hit it off in a way I haven't experienced before. I learned so much those two days ... completely improvised in the studio. We never played together but spiritually are brothers.

TR: I read in an interview that your parents influenced your trajectory in music, especially your mother's interest in music and her involvement with the music scene in Philly. Can you say more about this?

KB: Both my parents were collectors and lovers of music. My mother was friends with Sun Ra and many others. She would take me to shows all the time and when I got old enough I would take her to shows too. I remember taking her to see the Thompson Twins, she was singing so loud ... or she took me to Prince, The Time and Vanity Six for the 1999 album ... Dad was a lover of the funk and owned a barber shop which became one of my main places to learn how music affects human emotion. Learning this helped me to DJ in the future years.

TR: This is wonderful. I'm also thinking about what it's like for you as you embark on this new chapter of your career on the West Coast. How do you see your relationship to Philly at this moment, as far as staying connected or perhaps bringing some of its influences along with you?

KB: Philly is my DNA, it's in my bones. It goes wherever I go, but my creative time there is over. I've done my work there. New chapter in the ongoing story now. Everything I know has originated from my life in Philadelphia so it will always be in all my creations.

Bringing the East Coast hustle to San Diego has been a blessing. It has focused me and pushed me to create more and stay grounded within COVID times. One thing you do learn on the West is: attract don't chase. Tune into the frequency and attract those on the same frequency. A spiritual practice of manifestation.

As we continue...

TR: What are you reading and listening to at the moment?

KB: [www.instagram.com/explore/tags/kingbrittbookclub/](https://www.instagram.com/explore/tags/kingbrittbookclub/) [King Britt Book Club on Instagram] and <https://open.spotify.com/playlist/5UuSVd2zGYqu8nHHfVmHN8?si=529403a3f1154668>

[Beauty in Sound (a continuous playlist by King Britt) on Spotify].

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