

Bittles' Magazine | Interview with Screamin' Rachael

Rachael Cain, or **Screamin' Rachael** as she is better known, is a bit of a legend in the house music scene. Labelled the »Queen of House« by those illustrious people at Billboard magazine, the name has stuck since it seems quite apt. Over the years Rachael has had a string of releases and been heavily involved with the legendary *Trax Records*. She has also invented her own musical genre (hip-house) together with **Africa Bambaataa**, and released some of the most sleazy, euphoric and downright funky music to be found. By **JOHN BITTLES**



Recently Rachael released *Screamin' Rachael: Queen of House* which you should be able to find online and in all good record stores now. The album contains an epic 32 tracks that make up some of the highlights of her musical career to date. And rather good it is too! The compilation really is a must-buy for anyone with even a passing interest in house. For those old ravers with mortgages and receding hair-lines it will bring back rose-tinted memories of simpler times. This is a lot more than a mere nostalgia trip though, as many of the songs in the set have well withstood the test of time and would rock any dancefloor out there today. *I Need A Party* and *Boom Boom* are both fearsomely funky and have that unique house-style that immediately transports you back to the heady days of the late eighties.

The whole record has a wonderfully joyous feel containing swirling acid lines, gorgeous bass, the odd distinguished guest, and enough funk to satisfy even the most discriminating of dancefloor needs. Holding the whole thing together are Rachael's own bewitching vocals which allow tracks such as *I Need Love* and *Murder in Clubland* to soar to ever more mesmerising heights.

The fact that **Screamin' Rachael** maintains such infectious enthusiasm together with her unbridled love of all things house made the following interview both an education and a complete joy! Can I recommend that you pop over to <https://soundcloud.com/trax-records/sets/screaminrachaelqueenofhouse> for a truly awesome mix of

the album that makes the perfect complement to the following interview. You can also watch some of her videos here <http://youtu.be/sObZDZRr9e4> and here <http://youtu.be/xTSPsLGYKpc> Enjoy!



For those people out there who have still to experience the delights of your music could you tell us a little bit about who you are and what you do?

I am petite, but I carry a big impact! Friends call me Tinkerbelle, because they say I'm still the same after all these years, and put pixie dust into the music! I like the idea of never growing up. On the other hand there is the Rachael that a lot of people do not see. The strong crusader who had to battle many dragons just to hold on to my own music, and that of *Trax*. I have no regrets it was worth fighting for.

Everyday I try to be creative, acting, writing songs, and filming, (I produced my own documentary *The House That Trax Built* and the local Chicago show *Trax TV*). I've also written a screenplay about my life and the rise of House Music. My vision is to produce, and star in it. I'm looking for others to collaborate on it. I can't say my path has been easy, especially since being a woman who is an artist, but also in the business is very rare. I'm underestimated a lot, but my mentor was **Sylvia Robinson** at *Sugarhill Records*, who historically put Hip Hop on the map.

*You recently released **Screamin' Rachael: Queen of House**, a wonderful compilation of some of your tracks. How did the album come about?*

My album came about because of the small miracles of people who believe in me. One of them was my right hand thru many of the toughest years, **Jorge Cruz**. I don't know what to say about him other than he is a total artist. When the industry stopped returning our calls, we just kept working. I was very involved in saving the label, and Jorge took the time to listen to all my music, a lot of it had never even been released. He said, »Rachael this is your time. Your music must be heard«; and he dedicated himself to putting it all together, even the cover! I can never thank him enough! Also, I have a great husband, Mark, who stood by my side throughout all of the struggle, encouraging me to stay in the game. My personal reason is to get out and tour... I am spending a lot of time in New Orleans. The House scene is blossoming here. It's exciting and fresh! We've put together a band that loves House but still have an incredible background in Jazz and Blues. The group consists of myself, **Emilio Avila** on keys, and **Sir Stephen** (*100% Silk Records*). We use a variety of instruments, many of which haven't changed since the dawn of House. Two of us DJ, and we're able to infuse the electronica to our sound. I love live music, so performing my album live gives me the spontaneity that I can't wait to share!

How did it feel revisiting these songs?

Revisiting the songs was very emotional for me, because there is so much of me in them. Some made me cry, some made me laugh, and there were those that reminded me of how feisty I am, and to keep that up! Listening to the album felt like watching a movie about my life. Some things were very painful like the circumstances surrounding the track, *Murder in Clubland*, yet all the Punk spirit takes me back to some of the happiest days of my life.

Have you got a personal fave?

I can't say that I have a favorite because they are all little pieces of me. It's like children, how can you pick a favorite? I can tell you about, *Build You a House* though... One of my best friends **Lewis Pitzele**, who passed on, produced it with me. Build you a house is a metaphor about building, and carrying on the power of House Music. It has that inspirational Gospel feeling to it, and I hope it inspires others as it still does me.

There is a total of 32 tracks on the album. Are there any songs where you now think 'I wish I had managed to squeeze that on'?

I did think about two songs that might have been interesting to include. One was *Don't let Go*; I recorded it with my punk trio **Remote**, it has kind of a vintage feel; like *To Sir With Love*. That description sounds like it could not fit Punk, we played it and it worked well with the audience. The other song is blues; it's called *Strange Life*. Growing up in Chicago, I soaked up the sound of *Chess Records*. I feel that label was the *Trax* of its day. When I came back home from New York, I wrote it. The feelings about what happened with **Michael Alig** and the club kids came through allowing me to take a retrospective look at my life. Music and art have always been my salvation, so that song let out a lot of emotion and helped me move forward.

Many of the songs on the record would still make even the most discerning of dance floors erupt in joy. How do you go about creating a tune that can stand the test of time?

Thank you for the wonderful compliment about the timeless quality of my music.

I do not follow time, and I don't give a damn about trends. I feel the same spark of enthusiasm that I did back in the *Space Place*, as I felt creating **Todd Terry's** remix of *U Used to Hold Me*. I think when people set about trying to emulate what they feel is hot at the moment, the sound is time locked. I believe in producing new sounds, but why try to copy others to be cool? Like in Method acting; are you an actor or an indicator? Are you creating music or attempting to copy what you perceive is successful? I hate it when people ask me about Dub-Step, especially when they try to say it's new and cool. That's been around for years just like Juke. I don't like when people use EDM to describe what I do. That is such a cold generic term to me. And it's not that I don't enjoy Dub-Step, and Juke, it's all just House Music to me.

*What was it like working with the legendary **Afrika Bambaataa**?*

I've been very fortunate to be able to collaborate with some of music's greats; including **Marshall Jefferson**, **Joe Smooth**, and **George Clinton**. **Afrika Bambaataa** is a standout though... Working with him taught me about musical integrity. He keeps true Hip Hop alive. You see when I first got to New York from Chicago, many people made fun of me and said House Music was not even music! But from the first day that I met Bambaataa at *Sugarhill Records*, he told the Hip Hop greats to give me respect. **Afrika Bambaataa**, will only do projects he believes in. I have seen him turn down lucrative product endorsements because he did not want to familiarize his fans to products he felt could potentially be harmful. At a time when most acts went from Hip Hop MCs, to Gangster Rap, Bambaataa would have no part of it. When we decided to put Hip Hop and House together, (Hip-House) we were actually told by powers in the industry that could never work because House was gay and Hip Hop people thought it was for sissies. Because we took such a huge part in creating those

street sounds, it was absolutely ludicrous to say that to us. Isn't it funny that's the sound pop acts have today? No music should divide people. Music historically brings people together, and for the love of God may it always be that way... Bambaataa educates youth through his long standing non-profit »*The Universal Zulu Nation*«. He so inspired me that I became Vice President of *Youth Communication*, an organization whose mission is to give urban youth a voice.

Working with Bambaataa is so much more than creating great music, He elevates everything that music stands for.

At the end of the album there are some pretty excellent punk tunes which you created at the very beginning of your career in music. How did you make the leap from punk to house?

Chicago in the 80's was all about underground warehouse parties. One night when the *Space Place* was raided by the police, a kid came up to me and said; »**Frankie Knuckles** is mixing your song at the warehouse right around the block.« I had never heard the word mixing, so of course I was intrigued. From the very moment that I walked in the door my life was changed forever! I also have to thank Jesse Saunders and Vince Lawrence, because the song that was being mixed was *Fantasy*. When we created that I wasn't even sure that I liked it, because it was very different from the Punk I performed. Now it's one of my all time favorites.

In the early days of house it wasn't unknown for DJs to play acid house next to punk, rock, funk, soul and many other types of music all in one set. With the dance music scene getting narrower and more genre-specific do you think DJs still have the freedom to play such a broad selection of music?

DJs have the freedom to select whatever they want to play, but unfortunately most of them don't have the courage to do that! That's another thing that I absolutely appreciate about **Afrika Bambaataa's** DJ sets. When I ask DJs why they don't play certain things they say that they have to keep the BPMs about the same, and not play anything that might upset their dance floor. What a pile of rubbish! It takes courage to play different things, and I can tell you that House Music would have never happened without DJs who were willing to take a chance. That's why when it comes to House Music DJs, my all time favorite was **Ron Hardy**, R.I.P. If he loved a song he would just play it! On vinyl, on cassette, or on reel-to-reel tape, he made it happen. I'm not a great DJ with mixing, or technical skills but I do take chances! I love vinyl, too and a lot of DJs have given up on that, because they say it's troublesome to carry etc. Of course I play music that's on CD or that I download, because I can't miss out on things that might never get to vinyl. I'm just proud to be taking *Trax* back to our roots, by pressing vinyl again. The first record is available now, *Used to Hold Me* my single with **Todd Terry**. The next release will be a sampler of four songs from my album, some of which have never been released till now, on vinyl, or CD. I did an Acid cut with **Hot Hands Hula**, from the crew that brought the world *This is Acid*. Some DJ friends say it is one of their very favorites, so after all these years you can get it digitally on my album, or on limited edition vinyl.

Would you ever consider creating punk rock again?

I would love to do Punk music again, in fact not too long ago I got together with my guitarist **Al Salecker**, who played & collaborated on the Punk cuts on my album. I love the way he plays, and he loves working with me, as long as it's not on any House Music. He made that very clear! I love the energy of Punk and always considered *Trax* to be a »Punk« label. Like you mentioned, DJs used to play all styles like Acid, Punk, and Funk together. I'm sure some still do and hopefully more and more DJs will. I don't think that mixture will disturb the dance floor. I think it would give people a jolt of energy. A lot of DJs have created this robotic feel. Sometimes I just want to say lets snap out of it! Lets blast the dance floor with different energy.

Trax has a huge 16-disc compilation out which features the label's first 75 releases. What was the idea behind

doing such a comprehensive retrospective?

The 16-disc compilation was done through a license. Though I have not yet seen an actual copy or heard it, I'm sure that it is quality because *Trax* music is quality. I would not have used that style of packaging, and I hope that the liner notes are respectable... But again, *Trax* is *Trax*; and as long as the music is there as far as I'm concerned it will be a masterpiece.

At the time (the 1980s) were you, or anyone else in any way aware that so many of the tunes released by Trax would have such a cultural impact on the musical world?

I always knew that we were doing something different and special at *Trax*. For one thing the movement was organic and made by kids who couldn't care less about charts or acceptance. All I ever thought about was music as a rebellion from the over produced sounds that dominated at the time. I never wanted to be part of a major label, and still don't. I believe that art is the expression of those who create it; not to be changed by A&R or marketing people. That independence is the very reason why our music had such an impact on culture. House was a youth explosion with no rules that suddenly dominated the streets. The *Trax* sound is fresh and in your face. Some people try to tell me that House is Disco. I don't think that at all! The proverbial death of Disco came about because it was over produced to the point that it became homogenized. We stripped down Disco & Rock, which brought back raw feelings and changed music forever.

You have had quite the career so far. What would you consider to be the highlight?

I have been blessed to have many career highlights. If I pick one so far, it would be »*House Unity Day*« in Chicago's *Grant Park*. Part of that concert is documented in my documentary. The headliners were **Marshall Jefferson, Jesse Saunders, & myself,**

but many of the others who built House were there too. The moment, I looked out on a sea of people, from grandmothers to small children, black, white, gay & straight, with a representation of many cultures and many countries, a light went off in my head, and I realized that we had done what we set out to do. Unified people with our music.

I believe the best highlights are yet to come!



Where and when did you first discover the joys of house music?

I first discovered the joys of House Music the night I entered the *Warehouse*. I don't know how to explain that epiphany. It was too powerful to put into words. I had never experienced that kind of uplifting spirit before.

There was something so very special about all of the people dancing so freely.

*Dance music is more popular now than ever with the likes of **David Guetta**, **Avicii** and **Disclosure** regularly topping the charts. Do you consider this to be a positive or a negative thing?*

I hear that **David Guetta** is a fan of *Trax*, as are many other popular DJs and producers, including **Kaskade**. I recently received a photo of her in a *Trax* T-shirt, on the big screen at *Free Fest*. I feel we have inspired what they do, and that is rewarding. I've seen *Trax* music come a long way, from the days when people said it wasn't even music, and made fun of us calling it House, to today where it is on a platform for all the world to hear. It's an incredible story.

What do you think is the main differences between the house music scene when you first started out and the house music scene now?

The difference between House Music now, and when we started is that feeling of adventure, not knowing where your music would take you. All the passion and never letting anything discourage your dreams. I still believe in those things, and I will until the day I die. I am always looking for like-minded people and somehow I find them, or perhaps they find me.

Now that this retrospective has been released what does the future hold for you?

Now that my retrospective has been released I want to go out into the world and perform. Meet people to collaborate with and experience the energy that inspired me in the first place. I need to dance, and share the feelings of others dancing. Hopefully I will be in a city near you soon. Then of course make movies, and continue to act. I'd also like to produce a coffee table book on House & Clubbing. I have so many great photos to share; they will be the primary thing; but I have all the stories that go along with them...

What one track or album would you play to someone to help eradicate their hatred of electronic music?

The one track that I would play to eradicate the hatred of electronic music is »*Can You Feel It*«. The music is poetic all on its own, and how can anyone not feel the powerful message of those lyrics.

Is there any advice that you would give someone starting out in the world of music production today?

The advice that I would give someone starting out is »don't let the world change you, be yourself. That way you just might just change the world«.

The album is available now and can be purchased from sites such as [Beatport](#) You might even get a discount if you tell them »John's Nan says it's ok!«

| JOHN BITTLES