

Datebook

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Michael Tran / FilmMagic 2006

Ryan Raddo performs as Kaskadee at a Hollywood club in 2006. The celebrated DJ got his start at Om Records.

Record label, at 25, evolves for survival

Om endures amid shakeups in dance music, industry and world

By Robert Spuhler

It's not just that Om Records, the San Francisco music label known for an eclectic mix of electronic music, has survived for 25 years that is remarkable. It's that Om has survived these 25 years: the evolution of dance music in America, the evolution of the music business generally, the changing Bay Area landscape, and now, a pandemic that may mean a reimagining of what club life is like.

"The entire time I've been in it, (the music industry) was declining," founder Chris Smith says with a laugh. "We started pretty much at the height of the global music industry's value. It was the height of the CD era, then people stopped buying vinyl, and MP3s came along, eroding, eroding, eroding."

Still, Om is looking toward the future while celebrating a quarter-century with a compilation featuring some of the label's biggest names and potential future stars. The run started in 1995, but it was born in the early '90s, when San Francisco had a mixture of rhythms. There were influences from the Los Angeles rave scene, homegrown Bay Area hip-hop producers and rappers, and Chicago's thriving house music community. The mix had been known as acid jazz in the United Kingdom for years at that point, it was another San Francisco label, Luv N' Haight, that released one of the first U.S. acid jazz recordings in 1991. The mashup of genres had become the soundtrack to the city's nightlife.

"That was the genesis of the label," Smith says, "to do something that captures all of that stuff together, instead of just focusing on one specific sound."

At the same time, a DJ from Chicago took up residency in the Bay Area, taking the name from a couple of his mixtapes and turning it into a club night, one that eventually would become a worldwide sensation. Mark Farina and his manager, Patty Ryan-Smith, created Mushroom Jazz at the Oasis nightclub in San Francisco's South of Market district.

"I found in S.F., people were more open to dancing to different tempos than just 120 to 125 beats per minute, which was more of the norm in Chicago at that time," Farina says.

That sound and its broken-out elements would become the foundation of Om Records.



Krescent Carasso

Chris Smith, founder of Om Records, is looking to the future.

Tribe Called Quest. Curtis Mayfield led off the "Soul Motion" compilation a short while later, and the first record with a credited curator was Farina's first "Mushroom Jazz" wide release (it's now up to eight volumes).

Those early releases attracted artists who wanted to release their own tracks and albums through Om. Blue Boy's "Remember Me" was the label's first single, and it became a regular in clubs everywhere. Groups like the rap duo People Under the Stairs, trip-hop outfit Soulstice and breakbeat duo Ming-FS made homes here. And in 2001, an assistant at the label got his sound in front of his higher-ups. The label loved it, and the career of Ryan Raddo, now known as Kaskadee, one of the world's best-known house DJs and producers, was born.

"Let's just say I'm not above sneaking my own music into the pile going to the boss, and apparently that approach worked out," Raddo told The Chronicle about his start at Om in 2000 as an A&R assistant. "They're still around and so am I, and it's an honor to say that we are such a big part of each other's stories."

As a label, Om has seen its share of evolution over the years. Those compilation albums faded out of style; the individual songs are difficult to license for streaming, and with so few people buying full mixes, if an album isn't on one of the major music services like Spotify, it may as well not exist commercially. When Om started, nightclubs often had "chill-out rooms," where downtempo electronic music thrived, and

from compilations because we were licensing all that material and the red tape that goes into a release like that is long," says Gunnar Hissam, Om's current label manager. "And the majority of these artists will not want to license (their songs) to you forever. So if you're going to put a mixed compilation out, you're only going to have it for however long that license is good for; then you have to either renew it or remove it."

Instead, Om put together a roster of diverse artists that carried the label's flag. English house duo Dirty Vegas and the trip-hop-leaning Underworld both settled on Om for a time. Local hip-hop artists like Zion I & Grouch and J Boogie also released records through the label.

Over the past few years, though, as the label adjusted to many of the industry-wide changes, Om started to release less music and hold fewer live events.

"We were kind of going into a phase where we were kind of getting ourselves back together again," Hissam says. "I think it was really just about finding that spark again. And I think the 25th anniversary was where we were setting our sights."

To help find that spark, Om released "Om Records — 25 Years" on July 10, a compilation of old classics and new favorites from some of the label's stars of the past and the future. Kaskadee is there, along with Farina, Soulstice, and possibly the last "new" track from People Under the Stairs, who retired in 2019.

But the compilation also features music from the next generation of Om acts. One example: Reptile Room is a trio from Atlanta that found its way onto the label via a blind email submission. Reptile Room's single "Sunlit" is a blissful ray of positivity in the form of synth pop, backed by cymbal rolls and breakbeats.

"We didn't realize how far the history had gone until Gunnar started talking to us about this 25th anniversary album," Bill Zimmerman says of the trio. "That's when my eyes opened up a little more."

The party was supposed to stretch to in-person events, as well, with 25th anniversary nights in San Francisco, Los Angeles and other cities. The coronavirus pandemic had other plans, of course, and it now looks like the label will be forced into celebrating the much less sexy 26th anniversary in 2021.

Beyoncé's ode to Black pride a visual treat

By Aidin Vaziri

In an era when most people are communicating with Instagram-size PowerPoint presentations, Beyoncé still talks in grand gestures.

Early on Friday, July 31, the 24-time Grammy winner released her latest visual album, "Black Is King," a companion piece to the 2019 album "The Lion King: The Gift," on Disney Plus. Written, directed and executive-produced by Beyoncé, the extended music video follows the lead of its dazzling predecessors — 2013's "Beyoncé" and 2016's "Lemonade" — and is a celebration of the Black experience.

As the pop star described it, it's "a story of how the people left most broken have an extraordinary gift and a purposeful future."

As with "Lemonade," there is no clear narrative. Instead, Beyoncé serves up a series of visually stunning interludes that vaguely suggest a coming-of-age story accompanied by the songs from "The Gift," a collection of songs inspired by the 2019 live-action remake of Disney's "The Lion King." The scenes are tied together by dramatic spoken-word interludes from the film by James Earl Jones, who voiced Mufasa in both Disney versions.

Shot primarily in Africa over the past year (primarily before the coronavirus pandemic swept the

world), the big-budget film plays out like a collection of opulent music videos. It's not a live concert film, but it does take cues from the theatrical pacing of Beyoncé's tour performances.

We see Beyoncé on the beach holding a newborn while wearing a designer gown singing "Bigger" in the opening scene of the film: "If you feel insignificant/ You better think again."

We see her dancing in the desert amid dancers and fireworks, flanked in a series of Swarovski crystal-embellished outfits.

We see the beauty of the land in ominous close-ups of people's faces and sweeping scenes of everyday life.

In an era of so much real grief, the over-the-top opulence of "Black Is King" may feel like pure escapism. But Beyoncé has other intentions.

"We are all in search of safety and light. Many of us want change," she wrote in a post on Instagram in June. "I believe that when Black people tell our own stories, we can shift the axis of the world and tell our real history of generational wealth and richness of soul that are not told in our history books."

Fueled by high-profile collaborations with superstars including Childish Gambino, Lupita Nyong'o, Naomi

Beyoncé continues on *E!*



Robin Harper / Parkwood Entertainment

Beyoncé's lavish visual album vaguely suggests a coming-of-age story.

PUBLIC EAVESDROPPING

By Leah Garlich

"My water meter has a more exciting life than I do."

© Woman near Brown Vista Park

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DATEBOOK

TONY BRAVO
Get ready for the next social media challenge



Disclaimer: This column is a work of parody meant to demonstrate the frequently absurd cultural phenomenon of the social media challenge.

I've chosen you for a social media challenge!

For the next 384 years for the first coming of the Twitter blood moon you must post a photo with no caption that represents something completely opaque that is also deeply specific. This can be a still from a film, your favorite yodeling album covers or your least favorite wives of Henry VIII — it doesn't matter, just be sure to use a trending, socially conscious hashtag and an artsy filter. You must post this challenge while in a headstand with one hand typing and the other taking a panoramic selfie while you Tik Tok having a bucket of duck forage sauce dumped over your body to raise money for an undisclosed charity. We don't know how this will raise money for charity

ity (what are you, the IRS has all these questions?), just press post.

If you enjoy social media challenges, you'll press like on this post. If you're a good American, you'll comment. And if you're right with the Lord, you'll share this challenge under threat of excommunication from the internet. You can't escape this post, a social media challenge is the new blood oath, and it can only be broken on the night of the aforementioned Twitter blood moon with a virgin sacrifice to Jack Dorsey.

What if I told you that by sharing this post you could help cure deadly COVID-19? But what if I told you that? Would it encourage you to share it?

You've been tagged, now show us the 12th picture on your phone's camera roll followed by any memes you've saved with a caption that misattributes a quote from a dead celebrity.

If you believe in this social media chal-

lenge, believe in the power of positive thinking or believe in life after love, you will also download this app that shows what you'd look like if you were a hops farmer in the year 1347 in the township of Surrey, England. Allow it to access your contact list, your credit history and your DNA mapping. You may outrun the Black Death in 1347 Surrey, but you can't outrun a social media challenge.

I don't know how many of my followers will read this, but true friends will read it to the end and true patriots will also pledge allegiance to this social media challenge and to the republic for which it stands.

Back to reality: Since the pandemic, participatory posts have flooded social media feeds, from Facebook to Instagram. The recent challenge to post black-and-white selfies of women has even gotten celebrities like Ava DuVernay, Kerry Washington and Jennifer Lopez to participate in the name of womensupportingwomen. As someone who does

believe in the importance of supporting women, it is unclear how posting to social media makes any true impact. But I guess it can't hurt.

The origins of the challenge and its specific purpose were also unclear. After critiques that the posts were nothing more than narcissism disguised as hashtag activism, some claimed that the challenge was meant to raise awareness for women's issues in Turkey. The challenge was more likely started by journalist Ana Paula Padrao, in Brazil.

While some may find participation in these challenges a comfort during social isolation or even personally meaningful, various rules and guidelines for them as well as the cajoling language used to encourage participation are rife for satire.

Repost at your own risk.

Tony Bravo's column appears Mondays in Datebook. Email: tbravo@sfchronicle.com Twitter: @TonyBravoSF



Andrew White / Parkwood Entertainment

Beyoncé's big-budget "Black Is King," shot primarily in Africa in the past year, plays out like a collection of opulent music videos.

Beyoncé visual album celebrates Black pride

Beyoncé from page E1

Campbell, former Destiny's Child member Kelly Rowland, her husband, Jay-Z, and their children, Blue Ivy and Sir Carter, "Black Is King" also puts the spotlight on a long list of fresh African artists.

The film finds its grounding in the closing scene when it strips away its grandeur and Beyoncé sings an a cappella version of "Spirit" backed by a gospel choir before being transported across deserts,

waterfalls and other lush landscapes as the song hits its climax against the setting sun.

The visual album arrives with a deluxe edition of "The Lion King: The Gift," which can be streamed on various streaming services and includes three new tracks.

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Record label, at 25, keeps eye on future

Om from page E1

a virus to stop Smith, Hissam and company.

"I think what's next for Om is focusing really more on new artist signings and developments that are not necessarily based on club music, but

are based on unique sounds," Smith says. "Unique artists doing cool stuff, probably still rooted in electronic music primarily, but not focused so much on the club world."

"Whether or not we're locked up in our homes, the music will still find us," Hissam says, "and so I have faith that Om will continue to discover and release the music that we've always done for 25 years."

Robert Spabler is a Southern California freelance writer.

MISS MANNERS

By Judith Martin, Nicholas Ivor Martin and Jacobina Martin

How to get politics out of friendly get-togethers

Dear Miss Manners: I'm one member of a group of six longtime neighbors. We take turns scheduling a monthly breakfast or dinner outing so we can meet up, enjoy a good meal and maybe a drink.

One member of our group has taken to wearing his red, pro-president hat whenever we meet. This person can be quick-tempered and defensive. For me, this hat is very offensive for all it stands for, and it's also sort of an in-your-face insertion of politics.

I've rehearsed ways that I

could address this at our outings, but no amount of rehearsal makes me think that a blow-out wouldn't ensue. I don't want it to become a "what side are you on" type of outcome.

Guest Reader: These days, there are people on every side of every issue who feel as you do about avoiding controversy.

The problem is usually ascribed to partisanship, a description Miss Manners finds unilluminating. The problem is not that you and your friend have a strong disagreement; it is

that you do not know how, or when, to put aside your differences.

Of course he has the right to form his own political opinions. But he has violated the tacit agreement not to introduce politics into your social setting.

How do you restore peace? Search out a member of the group who agrees with your friend politically, but with you on the desire to keep the group going. If you can convince that person that introducing politics will end the friendships, then he may be able to convince your hat-toting friend.

Send questions to Miss Manners' website: www.missmanners.com; to her email address: dearmissmanners@gmail.com; or through postal mail: Miss Manners, Universal Uclick, 130 Walnut St., Kansas City, MO 64106.

ON TELEVISION

Table with columns for time slots (7PM, 7:30, 8PM, 8:30, 9PM, 9:30, 10PM, 10:30, 11PM, 11:30) and program listings for various channels.

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PUZZLE ANSWERS

Crossword Puzzle

Crossword puzzle grid with letters filled in.

Today's Crossword

Crossword puzzle grid with letters filled in.

Sudoku Puzzle

9x9 Sudoku puzzle grid.

Challenger

9x9 Challenger puzzle grid.

Table with columns for time slots (7PM, 7:30, 8PM, 8:30, 9PM, 9:30, 10PM, 10:30, 11PM, 11:30) and program listings for various channels.