



In session with Carl Craig

Todd L. Burns checks in with underground legend and now Grammy nominee Carl Craig.

What can you say about Carl Craig these days? The Detroit techno producer and DJ is an inspiration to just about every artist ever featured on Resident Advisor. The reason is simple: Craig has been making records since the early nineties but he has reinvented himself time and time again, most notably as jazz impresario, remix god, crunk promoter and record label tycoon. He's tireless in his reach and insatiable in his appetite for new sounds.

So, now that we have that out of the way, we can actually talk about Carl Craig. Because, you know, he's also just a dude who lives in Detroit with his wife and two kids. A man that likes to bring his friends along to work with him when he can. A guy who gets excited by music—just like the rest of us.

At least that's the impression that I got when talking to him recently. Craig was engaging, funny and passionate about the work that he does, whether it be trying to craft a two-and-a-half hour mix of classic joints or convincing Mike Banks to come play keyboards for him in Paris. Oh. And, if you thought his music career was exciting, just wait till you hear about his plans for his avant garde restaurant chain.

I've read a lot of interviews in which you've talked about Detroit techno and its capacity to embody futurism. So, I have to ask about Sessions: why release a two-disc compilation of largely previously released material?

Ahhh. You know, sometimes you gotta revisit the past to go to the future. I think I've said that too. [laughs] It's a bit of revisiting the past, but I think that now is a better time to do something like this than it would be to wait another ten or twenty years. The music is strong. The remix, the production, and DJ part of my career have all been very strong, so I think this is a good time.

Why is now better than, say, in ten years?

You never know what's going to happen in that time, you know? I mean, in ten years I'll be 48 years old and I don't know if I'll be necessarily known as a dance guy at that time. Or a remix guy. I might be more known for doing, say, classical stuff. You never know. I might take over from the great Stockhausen. [laughs] Maybe I'll change my name to Carl Stockhausen!

Are the two Sessions CDs different in terms of what you're trying to present? Or perhaps just what fit together best? I feel like the second CD is a bit darker...

I don't know about that actually because it was all done in one go. I have a hard time starting mixes in the studio. I try to do everything where it comes from inspiration, so the mix came together only hours and hours after false starts. I think I started at about six in the evening and it finally came together at six in the morning. [laughs] At that point, I was just like, "OK, CD 1, CD 2. Let's cut it." That's why you'll hear the fade that comes in at the beginning of the second CD because that's where I mixed from the Delia and Gavin mix.

"Our culture celebrates being a bad boy, whether it be hip-hop or rock. It doesn't translate to dance music."

I've heard that you've helped produce the jazz guys in Tribe, right? Can you tell me a little bit about them?

Yeah, the Tribe collective is from Detroit. They started out in the '70s: it was Marcus Belgrave, Wendell Harrison, Phil Ranelin and Doug Hammond. They all released music on the Tribe label. It was actually started by Wendell and Phil. They made Detroit modern jazz with revolutionary overtones, but it was music that was something like the stuff that was coming out on Black Jazz and Strada.

How did you get involved with them?

I worked with Marcus Belgrave on the Detroit Experiment record. When I met him then, I'd told him that I was interested in doing something with the Tribe stuff because we had done 'Space Odyssey' on that album and that song was originally put on Tribe in 1973 or so. We had talked a lot about it, but nothing really came together until I asked him to play a gig in Paris and he couldn't make it. He asked me to talk to Wendell about it. Luckily, when I talked to Wendell about it he was like, "Hell yeah, let's do it!"

Can you tell me a little bit about that recent 12" you put out, 'Paris Live'? Is this the same thing? It seems like another case of you revisiting the past, but in a very interesting way.

Yeah. I was asked to perform for the opening of Jacqueline Caux's film, Detroit: The Cycles of the Mental Machine, a movie about Detroit's past, present and future in a very political sense. It wasn't candy-coated view of Detroit at all. Because she went through so much to finally get this thing made, when she asked me to perform, I really wanted to do something special.

The first person that I thought to ask was Marcus. Because he couldn't come, though, Wendell was there, Kelvin Sholar was on keyboards, and I really wanted to put some sprinkles on top, so I asked Mike Banks (He knows Jacqueline as well.) It was really fantastic to have him come. I asked Mike to come as a keyboard player, you know? Not as Underground Resistance or anything that anybody knows Mike as being. I was just like, "Come on Mike, play keys!" and he was all "Yeah! Let's do it!" [laughs]

So, how did the show go?

Well, we rehearsed a bit in Detroit, then rehearsed a bit over there. It was at the Centre Pompidou, an art museum, so it was a sit-down only crowd and it was just amazing to do these versions in front of them. Because, you know, with any artist whether it's on tape or live, they have to revisit their music at some point in their life. And so we did versions of 'Sandstorms' and 'Twilight,' as well as 'At Les' and a bunch of other stuff. We ended up playing for about an hour, hour-and-a-half.

Are there plans for further releases of that material?

The plan was to do a Paris Live DVD, but I haven't quite had a chance to mix it yet.

Recently Planet E has been signing European acts like Lazy Fat People, Buttrich, Vince Watson. Is that a conscious move? Are you listening to a lot of European techno these days?

I'm listening to a lot of anything that I think is interesting. [laughs] There's interesting music that is coming from Detroit, but a lot of those guys already have their own labels. It's not a conscious move to put out music that's European. It's a conscious move to put out music that I like. If it's interesting, I put out.

You've also just recently started releasing Planet E's music digitally. Why did it take you so long? Were you against digital? Or did you just not have your stuff together to do so quickly?

I'm not against digital at all. I mean, I prefer vinyl. The problem with digital and getting used to digital is how to make it work where somebody isn't taking your music. I've had a lot of people who just simply download my music online. For free, I mean. Vinyl makes people take three steps before they can actually put mp3s up online to download. And you have to take even more steps to bootleg it. You know, it's just that difference between making it easy for people to put it up on sites to download for free or to go on with the way that we're doing it with vinyl already.

I just decided that I'd stick with vinyl. I love vinyl. I love the process to make it and, of course, the end result. But, at the same time, I'm somebody who travels and plays with Serato. I do buy music on Beatport and it makes sense for me to sell music on there. So, I'm not against it at all, we were just a little slow. And I was a little wary about it.

Tell me about the upcoming Demon Days parties. Why are you continuing with them?

I've had a lot of fun with them, you know? It's a nice change. Gamall and I get together and it's really cool to do it on a different level than what I usually do. In Europe I feel like people hear and listen to music a little bit differently than they do in the United States. I think Demon Days gives us more of an opportunity in the US to, you know, have it be an interesting concept. A lot of people think that they know what I do and they come out and it's all scenesters or whatever. Demon Days is more for those who know.

How do people listen to music differently in Europe than in the United States?

I think people in Europe are exposed to music differently simply because Europe is multiple countries in the same amount of land size as the United States. In the States we have three or four companies, basically, that control radio. They control what's heard throughout the country. There's very little difference between what happens on New York radio and what happens on Detroit radio. In Europe, you have the BBC in England and various stations throughout the country and then in Belgium you have completely different programming altogether. I think people over there maybe are more open to hearing other things because they have that history of diversity in music.

I mean, if you listen to the BBC these days, you'll hear a bunch of commercial stuff during the day with a couple of things sprinkled in every so often. But, then in the nighttime, it progresses and they do things a little bit differently. I mean, show me a place in the United States where they have a Gilles Peterson or where they have a jazz show. Tell me how many public radio stations in major cities in the US that even play music these days! Our public radio station here in Detroit plays music for something like two hours a day. From 7 p.m. until 9 p.m. and then they go back to news again. I don't think you'd ever have that in each little country in Europe. And, even if it did happen in one, you'd still have twenty others to choose from. It's simply easier over there to be able to get a bit of diversity and not just commercial music all day long.

Do you feel like that's why techno has never really gained a foothold in America? Or is that just one of many reasons?

It's one of many reasons. I really feel that in the US that our land size is simply too big. I also think a big thing is that our culture celebrates being a bad boy, whether it be hip-hop or rock. That's our culture and it doesn't translate to dance music. We never had that connotation with techno. The only image that you got was what the news media put out there about people using too many drugs. So then people just came out for the drugs and didn't come out for any other reason. We never had that commercial angle that was presented to people in the same way that it was with hip-hop or rock that was so strong in shaping the precious little minds of our children. [laughs]

What does Carl Craig do for fun? Are you watching movies? Sports?

I ask myself that all the time. [laughs] When I'm on the road I like to watch movies. When I'm at home, though, I watch a lot of TV. I haven't been one to go out to the movies much. I've never found movies that attractive of an escape.

That's funny. I would have guessed the opposite. You named a track 'Suspiria' and there's, of course, been other references to films.

Yeah, I've got all that on video. I'm just not that into going to movies. Detroit isn't really designed for anybody to do anything easily. [laughs] It's not like you can walk out of your house and be at a movie theater. You always have to drive. I'd ask my parents to drive me to the movies when I was a kid, but you know... I think I would've been much more into movies when I was a kid if I had lived around the block from a movie theater or if I had lived in the city where it was more accessible. You know, Detroit turned into that kind of place, especially as I was growing up, that had such a bad name. "Ah, you don't want to go anywhere in Detroit. You'll get killed!"

I know it's kind of sacrilege to ask, but have you ever thought about moving or has that never even entered your mind?

I've lived other places, but permanently it'd be pretty difficult. Detroit is really cheap. And it makes it possible to have a good studio and a great house. And do a lot of good things. I've flirted with it a little bit, but when it comes down to it—for my business and what we're doing right now—Detroit is probably the best scenario.

Last question for you, although I think you already answered this earlier, but where do you see yourself in ten years?

[laughs] Yeah. Stockhausen Jr.! That's my new chain! We have experimental burgers and, as a daily special, you can get a fish sandwich flown in on a helicopter!



Positively Lower East Side: Carl Craig in New York.

Photo credit: Timothy Saccenti.

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