

I'm in the Band x D.C.: The Social Power of Music

Episode 1: First Ladies DJ Collective

Audio Transcript

Run Time: 25:25

[Music: Bratmobile – “I’m in the Band”]

Allison Wolfe: Hey! Welcome to *I’m in the Band*, a podcast produced by me, Allison Wolfe. Each episode focuses on a feminist musical artist—door-kicking, ceiling smashing people who’ve made their art their way.

Usually, I interview musicians, but this time I wanted to do a story on some cool feminist DJs I knew back when I lived in Washington, D.C. These women formed do-it-yourself DJ collectives and threw parties and club nights that were politicized—but, also, just so much fun.

Kristy La Rat: We would have these parties, but this one ended up being wildly huge. The floor almost broke through.

Allison: They created the nightlife that they wanted to see: people partying together in spaces that welcomed women, people of color, the LBGTQ+ community, and beyond.

So, as a project with the Smithsonian Folklife Festival, I curated a speaking panel in D.C. with some of these DJs and interviewed them to make a special *I’m in the Band* two-part podcast series.

[Music: “Girls get busy, not in the way/ Girls make music, we’re here to stay/ Hey, hey, hey...”]

In this first episode, we have Les Talusan, Kristina Gray, and Maegan Wood, who were all part of the—

Les Talusan: First Ladies.

Maegan Wood: First Ladies.

Kristina Gray: The First Ladies DJ Collective.

[Music fades: “We’ll be playing every night and I’ll be punk for the rest of my life, alright...”]

[Snippets from the discussion panel]

Les: The stuff that people tell us, right? So let me start with: “Where’s the DJ?” [crowd boos] “Oh, he’s the DJ?”

Kristina: “It’s my boy’s birthday. Can you play his demo?”

Ebony Dumas: Always somebody’s birthday.

Kristina: “Hey, uh”—this is a total hipster bro—“can you play some more of that ghetto shit?” While playing Lil’ Kim.

Les: “Wow, you’re actually mixing!” Keep going...

Kristina: “Can you play some Beyoncé?” “Well, that’s not really what we’re doing tonight. But I’ll see if I can fit some in.” Fifteen minutes later, “Can you play some Beyoncé?” “Okay, I’m working on some things right now. Let’s see if we can get to some Beyoncé.” Ten minutes later, “When the fuck you gonna play Beyoncé?!” And that’s when I said, “Ma’am, this is an ’80s night.” [crowd laughs]

Les: “I got a pocket full of coke. Can you play some hip-hop?” while playing old-school golden age hip-hop and then also showing *Wild Style* behind me. And I’m like, “This is hip-hop.” “Well, can you play some 50 Cent?” “If you can identify this movie playing right here, which is hip-hop, I shall give you your 50 Cent!” [crowd laughs]

[Interview audio]

Les: My name is Les Talusan, and I go by Les the DJ, but I used to go by The Pinstriped Rebel. I was part of the First Ladies DJ Collective.

[Music: Third Wave – “Niki”]

I found a purpose with DJing. So with DJing, what I do is I try to connect with people.

I’m very intentional about my sets. I DJed an event called Dream Jungle for Folklife, and the two other artists headlining were Filipino American. I played music by Filipino and Filipino American artists all on vinyl, and I remember people being like, “What is this?”

It’s a band called The Third Wave, and it’s Filipino sisters—Filipino American sisters from Stockton, California. That was the first song I played. And then I played like some Filipino funk, boogie, disco—and some people just Shazamming, you know, everything I’m playing.

One of the people that was there came up to me and said, “I didn’t know our people made this kind of music.”

[Music: “I am strong and rich and very wise...”]

I grew up in the Philippines, in Caloocan City, specifically, in Manila. I lived there until I was twenty.

[Sounds: Manila streets and jeepneys]

So in the Philippines, or at least in Manila, music is everywhere. Like you ride a bus, you ride a jeepney, which is a smaller bus, there's music blasting.

My grandfather was a jeepney driver. His other sons were jeepney drivers too. My mom was an aerobics instructor— but not what I wanted to do, so I gotta do my own thing.

I remember, in the mid-'80s, when they were still building the light rail system, I remember thinking that I wanted to curate the music for for the light rail system. So, I think that's my first consciousness of DJing.

Growing up in my neighborhood in Manila, early, mid-'80s, our neighbors would call each other from house to house by clapping. They would clap the intro to, to a Cure song. [Les claps]

[Music: 4 Hour Quarter – “Close to Me” (The Cure cover) with street sounds]

You know that it's like, “Let's hang out.” Like a whistle, but it's a clap.

Neighbors, like really loud across the street, would blast music. So I would wake up to AM radio, and then the neighbors would either karaoke, like way early in the morning. We called it “minus one” back then. It's not karaoke yet. It's just like, you know, minus one, minus the vocals.

That's how I grew up. It's just very noisy.

[Music fades]

Kristina: My name is Kristina Gray. I DJed under the name K La Rock. I was one of the cofounders of the First Ladies DJ Collective.

[Music: Coup Sauvage – “Sneaks”]

Our flagship party that we were probably most known for was called “Girl Friday.” It happened every month at the Black Cat for several years. I also went on to do some parties of my own and with some other folks, including with June Bullet from First Ladies. We did a night Wet Girl and You Ain't Slick.

[Music: “But I know a secret/ That she feels like a pump but looks like a sneaker/ You think she's real sweet, but you'd be mistaken...”]

I remember someone at work asking me last year, after a meeting I had organized, “You’re such a great facilitator. You should do a workshop for the office,” like, “What’s your secret?” And in the back of my head I’m thinking, it’s because I was a DJ for over a decade. And I’m used to just being in front of large crowds, some people who are really obnoxious and drunk, and they want their way. And you have to learn how to talk to people, and you just have to know how to really command a crowd.

[Music: “She looks real nice, but looks are deceiving/ ’cause she feels like a pump but looks like a sneaker...”]

I grew up in the D.C. area, in the area affectionately known as Ward 9, in Prince George’s County—so right on the southeast border of D.C. You are always connected to government and politics. It’s a company town. You see the protests that are happening in your backyard. But also on another level, I think because of the unique racial and social and economic and cultural dynamics of D.C., that absolutely informed my social and political consciousness.

I really came from this long line of agitators and community activists and rabble-rousers who really had to fight very hard to build this community of their own as black folks in D.C. My family is represented on the H Street Heritage Trail for their work in the community. My grandmother helped desegregate schools in D.C.

Yeah, you’d think every kid is spending their weekends going to the pan-African bookstore and buying, you know, Malcolm X speeches as a preteen. And then you realize, oh, that’s not what other people are doing on the weekends at all. [laughs]

My very first instrument was the violin, because my parents read a story about a woman named Sheila Johnson, who was a black woman who was teaching violin classes at her home in Northwest. If her name might be familiar, it’s because she later became the first black billionaire woman. She’s the wife of the founder of BET. I just took for granted that there were black people making and teaching classical music.

It wasn’t until I got older, that I just discovered DJing and clubs.

[Music: Coup Sauvage – “Sneaks (Maegan Sauvage Remix)”]

I was counting down until I could finally just go to a rave. I really, really wanted to be a club kid. As soon as I was old enough, I just totally dove into that DJ world.

Dance floors are this place where you can find community, a sense of release and expression. It was very participatory. Punk culture and what dance culture used to look like—both of those worlds had that same DIY ethic. If you were a part of it, you wanted to do something to help build this community, the scene.

[Music fades up]

Maegan: My name's Maegan Wood. My DJ name is June Bullet. I'm a co-founder of the First Ladies DJ collective. Some of the parties that I've hosted have been Hot Box, which was at Phase One—sadly gone now, a lesbian club in D.C. that was around since the '70s. She Rex, that was from 2008 to 2013. Booty Rex, a yearly pride event that I do with Anthology of Booty at the Black Cat. I also work at the Black Cat.

I grew up in Fairfax County right outside of D.C. In high school, I started listening to like electronic music, and then kind of late high school, early college, I just started going to raves. In the late '90s there was big scene here. And that's when, you know, Buzz at Nation was still around. Nation was a big club on the waterfront, which is now totally redeveloped, and there are condos there. But at the time I was going, there were just a few big clubs. There were a lot of gay clubs there. There was this whole neighborhood of clubs that are just gone from the city because the Nationals have a stadium now.

Maegan: I got into DJing because—

Kristina: —I wanted to get on the other side of the turntables.

Maegan: I wanna see if I can do it.

Kristina: And it wasn't enough to just sort of watch and dance to DJs. I wanted to become a DJ myself.

[Music: Cibo Matto —“Moonchild (D's Funky Space Reincarnation)”]

Kristina: I had spent that summer after college interning at *Ms. Magazine* in New York. And on one of my trips through the city, broke, just needing to find a reason to stay out of the apartment where I was staying, I ended up at a record store in Brooklyn with used records. And I just said, why not? And I started taking a look through the stacks. And then I saw some stuff. Actually, I remember, literally, there was a Cibo Matto remix record, and I thought, I'm just gonna get this.

I didn't have a record player at the time, no turntables. I just decided, that's it. I'm gonna start buying records.

[Music fades]

Kristina: I had already become friends with Maegan “June Bullet” in college.

Maegan: When I was in college and I'd just gotten my DJ in a Box kit, which I ended up selling to her. And it was—they don't sell them anymore because this is not how DJing works anymore. [crowd laughs] But there were really, really, super cheap like two belt-drive turntables and a tiny little mixer just literally in a box. And I would play with them in my dorm room, and my

roommate at the time was also really into like dance music. And so in between classes, we would just make like noise in our dorm room together.

Kristina: And we all started going to raves together. And we had both become obsessed with DJing around the same time. So I actually inherited her first set of turntables.

[Music: Coup Sauvage – “Don’t Touch My Hair”]

Kristina: The First Ladies DJ Collective—

Maegan: It immediately grew out of Ladyfest DC, which happened in—

Kristina: —basically all of 2001 to 2002, which was one of the many sites across the country and really now across the globe of these Ladyfest festivals. There was a group of us who had been volunteer organizers and had met each other through putting Ladyfest together. And coming out of that, a bunch of us who had been involved realized, you wanna start DJing? Oh, I wanna start DJing! And we came together and decided, let’s learn together. Let’s promote each other. And let’s try to teach other women and really create this network of female DJs. And it really just took off from there.

[Music fades]

Les: When I joined First Ladies, it was still like in the early part. I wasn’t part of the meeting where they’re like, let’s build this. I was already DJing before I moved here. I got pregnant, I got my visa, and then I moved to the U.S. It’s just like, oh shit, like, we’re poor, and I’m pregnant. And there’s no options for me back home.

And then when I moved here to the U.S., it’s just like, I don’t know anyone here, like, what do I do? Like, so I started volunteering for this Filipino American organization, and none of the people I would meet would be interested in any of the music that I like—you know, indie pop, shoe gaze, like, post punk.

When I met First Ladies folks, I just wanted to have community. I just wanted to DJ with people. I just wanted to have fun, because you know, my life, on the flip side of that, is not that fun. It’s hard. I’m away from my whole family. I’m in a country that is not my home, at that time.

Kristina: We just knew that we could get a lot further together than we ever would individually by ourselves.

[Music: Coup Sauvage – “Don’t Touch My Hair (JD Samson Remix)”]

Kristina: And so we said, let’s make this a DJ collective instead of just a DJ crew. So we went into it knowing that there would be shared decision making, that there was something inherently political to what we’re doing, too. We really wanted—

Maegan: —to raise the profile of women DJs in D.C., a place for us to play, a place to bring other women DJs, and a place to feel comfortable DJing, because the thing about the First Ladies that I think was so interesting and different was that it was this very diverse range of experiences, down to like age and stuff, 'cause it wasn't all just people in their early twenties. So this wide, wide range of experience and skill levels and genres, all those people together in one collective, all doing the same event.

Kristina: You know, when we started, it was still kind of the era of the super club, where you had these mega spaces. Like in D.C., there was the infamous Dream and Love where like Diddy would have his parties, and there was the infamous time Cam'ron got his like Lamborghini stolen! It was such a boys' club, and it was so hard to break in. Our tagline was to "break the vinyl ceiling." There just weren't as many opportunities. We had to make them for ourselves.

Maegan had just started working at the Black Cat, and so we had an in. We got a Friday night—

Maegan: —which was our monthly flagship event.

Kristina: We called the party Girl Friday.

Maegan: We pooled all the money we made, and we were eventually able to buy a communal set of turntables and a mixer and some like CD players and some speakers.

Kristina: A lot of people reached out to us for their benefits and their fundraisers and anything that was, you know, women's related. Amnesty International, National Organization of Women, for like women of color artists, lesbian couples who wanted a different type of DJ because they were having a different type of wedding. Just if— "Oh, there are women DJs here in D.C.?" They were reaching out to us.

Not knowing how people would react to us. Some people would be straight up confused by women DJs.

Les: I was about to DJ an event, and the tech guy said, "Oh, hello, Miss Lady DJ Ma'am!" I was like, give me more femme genders, please. [laughs] Yeah, and then the other one was like, "Oh. You're actually DJing." But, what— what was I supposed to do with the turntables and the mixer?

Maegan: The First Ladies were asked to DJ at Nation, and we were very, very excited because Nation is this big like flagship club, especially for house and techno. You know, if you got asked to DJ there, it's like, yes, I've made it! And we get there, and they're like, "Okay, you guys are going to DJ in the front room, and it's going to be like beach themed. So we'll have beach balls and palm trees and sand, and you guys will be in your bathing suits." And, it was just so like soul crushing.

Kristina: I was in a record store, you know, as I bring my stack of records up. And you know, I'm there, like, at least a couple times a month. One of the clerks, I've seen him often, as he's ringing me up, he just says, "So, huh, are you a DJ?" "Yes. That's why I'm here often." "Are you like a *real* DJ?" And I just remember saying, "Yes, I'm a real DJ. I actually DJ. I'm actually a part of a group of women, and we DJ." And it would just be so interesting how, sometimes, we would baffle other people. We just fell so outside of their frame of reference that they didn't know [laughs], do I just not take them seriously? Do I question them? Do I try to hit on them?

I don't think the issue is if there are enough female DJ collectives or, wow, look, they're women DJs. I think the problem is the system that continues to prop up certain male DJs and has created that narrative of what a DJ even is.

Les: The norm is creepy people creeping up on your butt. That's not safe. The norm is an all-male lineup.

Kristina: And I do think that is changing. I think digital DJing blew open the doors and made it more accessible to so many people. I think that just the fact that you see so many more communities represented just on the dance floor, in a way that was really hard to do. You had a hip-hop DJ, indie punk DJs, and you had disco dance DJs, and that was it. And it was polarized and very segregated based on race and location and socioeconomic status, gender, and sexual identity. And I think a lot of the women DJs in D.C. have had a lot to do with those lines blurring and those walls coming down in D.C.

[Music fades: "an education..."]

Kristina: I just wish that women DJs got more credit.

Les: Being part of First Ladies, I did it as a means of survival. Like, I just would like to play music. I was undocumented for a while. I just wanted to do something, you know, like on the low down. They didn't even know my last name for a while. But what it taught me is that I need to be in spaces that are safe, and I like being in spaces with a lot of women. And now because I am more stable, I create these spaces, 'cause before, I feel like I was in the background a lot. I was just afraid.

[Music: Monster Women – "Forget Me Not"]

Maegan: After the First Ladies ended, we used the money to like take ourselves out to like a really nice dinner at Jaleo. [giggles]

Kristina: We stopped really being active pretty much around about like 2007, 2008. I met some people that are still among my closest friends ever. At one point, myself, Maegan, and Les even lived together in the same group house. Just all the paths that all of us have taken— I mean, a lot of people who are involved in the collective, they still do music, or they still do really interesting creative stuff.

[Music: "I'm never gonna let you forget me..."]

Les: It is nice when when some other Asian American kid sees me. I tell them like, "Oh, this is how I make a living, this and photography," and it's kind of unheard of for some people. It's just like, "What? That's what you do? Because, you know, my mom's a doctor or a nurse..." You can also be like me, but it is a lot of hard work. But at the same time, I work for myself, I feel good, and I'm contributing to the community with my volunteer work. So, I don't know. You can do it too. You can do it too, little kid! Little weirdo! [laughs]

Kristina: It really has shaped my life in so many ways, this decision I made at twenty years old. This just looks fun. I just want to do it. And knowing the history of DIY culture in D.C. that just sort of seeps into you, where you really believe, I *can* do it. Like, let me just get some friends, and let's just do it! And we did it. And now when I look at all of the female DJs that have come along, there's like a third, fourth wave just in D.C. alone.

Maegan: I may not know any of the collectives that are around anymore.

Kristina: I'm really excited to see that there are all of these other female DJs.

Les: It doesn't have to be as hard for them as it was for me. So if that helps people, then that feels good.

Maegan: I think it's actually a very good thing that I don't know, that there are DJ collectives I don't necessarily know who they are. It maybe means that everything's worked correctly. This is what it's supposed to be.

[Music: "Forget me/ Forget me/ Forget me..."]

Les: That's the name of my future podcast: [whispers] *Guys, Don't Touch Me*. [laughs]