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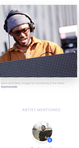

Why Kaytranada Thinks We 'Can't Just Ignore the Grammy'

By Tatiana Cirisano
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Photo by Jonathan Mannion for Kaytranada, of his new album, 99.9%.

The best new artist nominee making a honorable dance music's past with the sophomore album: "It's a project that I made from the bottom of my heart."

In the years between his breakthrough 2016 debut album, 99.9%, and his late 2019 follow-up, 80,000, Haitian-Canadian producer Kaytranada moved out of his childhood home in Montreal, signed a major label deal (moving from XL Recordings to RCA Records), and grew an interview around his first albums, jumping on a plane. It doesn't come as a surprise, then, that the 28-year-old describes 80,000 as his most true-to-self work yet.

"It's a project that I made from the bottom of my heart," the artist (real name: Kevin Celestin) says earnestly, joining our video call from his apartment in Montreal, where the walls are lined with posters of artists like J Dilla and MF DOOM. Though he is soft-spoken, his confidence is palpable over video chat, just as it is on the album. A rich, club-ready blend of dance and R&B, stacked with carefully curated guest spots from Twenty Meats, Vince Staples, Pharrell and others.

His self-discovery resonated widely, with 80,000 earning not just critical acclaim but also his first Grammy nominations in November: best dance/electronic album, best dance recording (for the hit Lativa collaboration "Lite"), and, to his welcome surprise, best new artist. A dance act has never won in that category, and for Kaytranada — who says 80,000 was influenced by the Black and Queer DJs who pioneered house and techno — the award would be a win for more than just his genre. Below, he reflects on the making of 80,000, the significance of his nominations and why the awards still matter.

How have you been spending your time these days?

I've just been at home, trying to make music. I'm doing experiments and trying to create new, different sounds. I've been spending time at my brother's [Louis-Philippe Celestin, who performs as the rapper producer Luu Phelps] house. He's a positive force and a genius, because he's not worried about everything that's happening right now. We're connecting on a musical level as well.

How did you find out about your Grammy nominations?

People kept texting me nonstop, and that woke me up early in the morning. I was in LA, for a session. Finding out I was nominated for best dance album and best dance recording was already crazy. Everybody was calling me. Thundercat called me like, "Yeeeeahhh!" And then I found out that I'm [nominated for] best new artist. I'm going to go to the The categories they're not presenting on TV. I'm actually going to be on TV — my name called, it's crazy to think about that.

Did you do anything to celebrate?

My manager [William Robillard Cole] has a house and a studio in his basement, and we do sessions there. We went upstairs, and he had this big cake to congratulate me. My brother was there, and a couple of my friends from Montreal. We just celebrated by drinking and eating cake.

It seems like you were surprised by the best new artist nomination.

I'm still kind of surprised. Maybe they should rename it "breakthrough," or something like that, because a lot of artists in this category have been around for quite a while. I've been making music for a long time. For me to be categorized as best new artist is still kind of like, "Okay, that's interesting."

For Dawnchi Hynes, His First Grammy Nom — For Classical Music — Takes the Scenic Opening

The day of the nominations, someone tweeted "we don't care about the Grammys," and you responded, "But I do." What makes you care, despite the criticism the Recording Academy has faced?

We love it and we hate it, but it's still a prestigious award. We can't really just ignore the Grammys like that. A lot of legends want Grammys. A lot of legends never get nominated, too. I'm sure that back in the day, people were talking as well. It's just that there was no social media. Marvin Gaye won his first Grammy with "Sexual Healing" which was not [from] his best album, of course, and it was late in his career. I'm sure Twitter would've been crazy then.

You're making beats all the time. When did you realize you were making the album that'd become 80,000?

I think late 2018. It's funny, because I was waiting for [music production software] Prototypes FL Studio to come out with a Mac version. I had to use Bootcamp [software that lets you switch between macOS and Windows] for a while. That's how I mixed my first album. — I did the whole mixing on my Mac in Boot Camp Windows. FruityLoops finally came out with a Mac version for their 20th anniversary, and everyone went crazy. I went crazy myself. When I did "Culture" with Tweedy Meats, that was this week of, "Okay, this is a project that I'm starting." It was finally easy for me to arrange songs. I was really focused, and I was reaching out to the label like, "Yeah, I want to work with this person and that person." I had a list of people.

What did you look for in collaborators?

A lot of the artists I worked with were R&B singers and rappers who love to sing. Mick Jenkins, everybody knows him as a rapper, but he sings on the record ["Gray Area"]. I work with Anna Wise, too. We have a record, but it didn't make the album because the sound was so different from every other song. I was really looking to compound R&B singers and songwriters on the project and make it a dance record because at the time there were not many R&B dance records. It was really inspired by the MOTOWN?? album Pot of Gold which was released in 2005. All the R&B had were hip-hop and R&B artists on the album, and it was super electronic. That influenced this as a similar project, but with my sound, my type of beats.

Steve Lite Bar Singer Mickey Guyton Wants to 'Open Doors' for Black and Brown Girls in Country

What was it like working with Pharrell, who sings on and co-wrote "Midsection"?

I was looking at my old, one of my favorite artists, just doing his thing. Seeing him live, doing it in front of me, vibing and trying to find lyrics — I've seen so many studio videos of him, so it was like, "I've seen this video before." It was way too familiar. That's how crazy that was. He wrote the song quickly. We made a beat together as well, another beat that's on the side. I'm going to keep it for myself.

You must have a huge treasure trove of unreleased music you're sitting on.

That's just the beginning. I don't know how I'm going to release them. It could be nice for the world to hear them, but it has to be for a specific project, I think. We'll figure it out.

Did all of the life changes you experienced after 99.9% impact your approach to 80,000?

On 99.9%, I was still trying to figure out where I wanted to go with my music. The album is pretty all over the place. There's jazz, there's Daft Punk-type house music. I was still trying to find my sound. But I moved out, and I had my own life, finally. I wanted to find something for me — to find my taste. That impacted the music. Before, I only used to go out [to clubs] with my brother. Going out by myself, with my friends and with my own friends, really inspired me to create this project as a part of me. But 28,000 came at the wrong time. I was like, "2020 is about to be crazy," and then...

How Mykki Kilgore Went from Broadway to the Grammy R&B Ballot

Where were you going out?

Clubs, bars, especially in Montreal. I wasn't getting shitfaced or anything — I was just going out to enjoy the music, whether it was house music or Trap All Stuff. That really inspired me to make club music.

So going out was research.

It was research. [Laughs.]

How did the history and roots of dance music shape the album?

I really got interested in it. I was finding out about the Black DJs, like Larry Levan, Ron Hardy, Frankie Knuckles. I saw the documentary Maestro: Clubs the Paradise Garage and Music Box were mainly Black people, gay people, Latinos — they were all going there and dancing their asses off. You can hear the influence on YouTube or Mixcloud. I, first, the DJ from Blue Jackets, showed me all those edits and made me want to check out more. These are samples, classic disco songs, where they just extended the drum break and made their edits. It was mind-blowing and very influential to making 80,000. When I was checking the Grammy categories, there were still not any Black DJs nominated. I felt like electronic and dance music should be separate. There should be more recognition and more flowers to be given.

The dance artist Kiana made the point last year that the types of dance records are wildly Black — such as Afrobeats or New Orleans bounce — are treated as isolated subgenres with less room to grow, whereas the types of dance music associated with whiteness, the tropical house and EDM, are treated as the mainstream.

That's true. There are a lot of subgenres that need recognition — Afrobeats, drum and bass, juke. There are so many subgenres, and it can't just be judged over a year by five nominations.

A Seat At The Table: Children's Music Grammy Nominees — And Their Overlooked Peers of Color — Open Up

Does your nomination give you hope for a more inclusive future in dance music?

We 10 years ago would've been like, "Wow, that's crazy." A lot of young kids who aspire to be musicians probably have the same inner struggles as me, being Black and gay just [trying to] fit in. It could be inspiring to them. That's why I want to win — that's who I'm going to dedicate it to.

Is it gratifying to receive your first Grammy nominations for a project that you feel is more true to you than your previous work?

Totally. It's not something that I'm like, [clapsy Kanye] "Oh, I need to do this for the Grammy. I need to be nominated." But it was good for the Grammys to recognize that. It's a project that I made from the bottom of my heart.

As your work has evolved, you've expressed frustration with fans who say things like, "I miss your old sound." How did that play out around 80,000?

It does among me sometimes. People would put mention me on Twitter and say, "Why did you go so commercial?" I'm like, "This is the least commercial stuff." I always think about when I used to listen to Kanye when I was young. Kanye came out with 808s & Heartbreak, and I just didn't get it. It was the same for Frances — I didn't understand it when it came out. But now that I've grown old and understand more things about artistry, there's always some type of rebirth in every artist. There's always going to be a part of what I do that people like to be on the next project. It's still me, it's just me at this present time. I love my growth. I'm really so proud of it. Sometimes, the stuff I used to do that people love so much, it's like, this is not who I am right now. Even some of my friends are like, "This is not as good as the last record." I'm like, "You just don't understand."

How Vernicia King Hollywood on Americana Grammy Nod — With a Little Help From a Certain Producer

Most artists who break out on SoundCloud migrate off the platform afterward, but you still post music there. What purpose does it serve for you now?

It's a gateway to putting music out. People get to stream it, but you tend to know it's not an official release. I don't have to do an Instagram post or whatever. It's like, "I want people to hear this, but this is just demos and stuff I'm trying." I always put out free downloads. I want the DJs to play the remixes in their sets, because people are always going to ask, "What is that?" Please play it. Like, please play it! It creates buzz. This [habit] is during for electronic DJs, to put stuff out like that, but I'm still doing it this way.

You titled 99.9% after your perfectionism, and never feeling satisfied with your work. Do you still operate that way?

Not anymore. Subconsciously, if I put out something, I'm always going to be checking if it's perfect. But sometimes I love the attachment to some beats. So if somebody wants an oldie that I made two years ago, and it's going to come out tomorrow, I'm not going to be like, "I've got to make sure the mix is alright." They can figure out what they want to do. Sometimes I am, sometimes I'm not. [Laughs.] I'm a Virgo — that's just me.

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