



Ariel M.

Ariel M is the New York-based musician and vocalist behind Club Music, Death Valley, Rottweiler, Love Free Spirit, Convent Walls, and Afterimage, all projects that demonstrate her mastery of different genres and an ever-evolving command over her artistry.

The interviewer, Mimi Luse, aka Permanent, is a musician and the Head of Program Production at the Institute for Contemporary Art at Virginia Commonwealth University. She lives in Richmond, Virginia.

Discussed: New Beat, Chicago Research, Grateful Dead, mental health, orchestra hits, proving oneself, institutionalization, harassment, hardware, misogyny, the comments section, John Carpenter, Ableton, neofolk, Medieval hymns, etc.

I think I first heard your music in 2019. It must have been *Club Music Volume 1*. My friend posted it on her Facebook, and at the time I had a radio show at WXDU in Durham. I remember immediately playing it on the show and then digging into the Chicago Research catalog, getting all their stuff and putting it in our collections.

That's so cool. I had no idea that you knew who I was when we had first crossed paths, in Carrboro.

I remember hearing your sound and it being really revelatory. I'd randomly started getting into [Belgian] New Beat when I lived in France. There was this record store outside of Paris, in Pantin, called Mood that had all these really cheap industrial records and New Beat records, and it was always pretty empty. I was in grad school just kind of frittering away my time avoiding the dissertation, and the guy would just sit there and let me listen to these New Beat records. It opened this portal. The sound is so unique and dark and sexy. And they use these orchestral hits in New Beat like you do. What interests me so much about all of your projects is that you're so astute when it comes to understanding a genre and deconstructing it or reconstructing it, like reverse engineering the genre. Can you talk to me about genre?

I was at a bar for a friend's birthday, an Italo night, and it was loud as fuck for no reason. There's this Italo disco song playing, and when this loud-ass orchestra hit comes in, this guy I'm seeing, he jumps every time and flinches. He was like, "this is scary!" And he hasn't heard my music. I don't know, when I'm first trying to date someone who is also a musician... [laughs] First of all, I don't want to really hear their music either, because I don't want it to interfere with how I see the person. What if their music sucks? I'd rather get to know them as a person first, and I'm very secretive about what I do creatively in that regard. But in my head I was like, if he's afraid of orchestra hits he's going to hate my music. I love orchestra hits!

With Club Music specifically I was really influenced by Wax Trax, and I was just getting into New Beat as well. Film scores, Wax Trax, John Carpenter, and Liquid Sky, those things all influenced me at the time. I've secretly kind of always wanted to be a composer. My dream job is to compose for TV and film. But really I was just picking and choosing, extracting elements from across different genres, even pop and early hip hop, 80s R&B, and using those elements in

Photos by Adam Keith, shot at Spectacle Theater.

non-conventional ways I guess. I was just having fun with it. I wasn't afraid for it to be silly and self-referential. Kind of in the spirit of *New Beat*, I guess.

There's that Wax Trax compilation. That's what got me into it. It's a 2 CD comp, I think.

Is it the Trax Box?

Yeah, ok. Then there's also some stuff on the label that's really bad. Like, I don't know if you've ever picked up something by them and been like, what?

Oh, it's definitely hit or miss.

I definitely hear the John Carpenter influence. There's a foreboding bass that's always a huge part of your music.

All those songs on *Beyond New Beat* were sort of recorded for different projects, like not necessarily for Club Music. By then I was already workshoping different things, and Blake was wanting to do another Club Music release because the first two were really well received. So he was kind of encouraging me to do a third release. So I kind of threw together these songs that I had laying around, songs that didn't even really go together. But they kind of just create their own warped narrative. A lot of them were sort of imagined for film scores.

Oh my God, my ringtone is the "Assault on Precinct 13" theme song. That's so silly.

No, I love it.

But yeah, you're really creating a kind of somber mood and it definitely speaks to that aesthetic. But then your voice is cutting through, at least on the first two Club Music releases. I do see the connections to Carpenter and movies from the 80s, the theatricality, the costumes on the covers. Tell me about the photo shoots you did for those first two.

Oh, yeah, I'm hesitant to talk about it even.

Well, no pressure. No pressure at all.

The reason that I'm hesitant is because... I don't know, a lot of the aesthetics I was playing with at the time, it's been five years now and I've changed a lot as a person. I've been through things that have changed me entirely, and I don't really feel like I relate as much to what I was creating during that time, the Club Music releases and the sort of aesthetic those are cultivating.

Let's unpack that a little bit more. [laughs]

It's hard to say. I was trying to do something that was going to grab people's attention and be really confrontational. I was doing photoshoots with weapons and things. It came from a place of self preservation because of what I was going through at the time.

The images for the first two releases were inspired by Kylie Minogue in the *Street Fighter* movie. When Volume I came out, that was the first time something I'd created got that

much attention. It was uploaded to the Youtube channel Harakiri Diat at the height of this channel's popularity. I remember seeing it and then going on Youtube [again] a few days later or something, and it had generated a shitload of views. I was kind of like, what the fuck.

Like I said, I knew I wanted to do something that would get people's attention, and it worked. So the YouTube comments had a lot of people arguing about communism and politics, which I wasn't really anticipating. And there were a lot of people coming for me personally and calling me a fascist, and equating using a hammer and sickle to using a swastika or something.

The other thing I hadn't anticipated was actual harassment from dudes online. And this kind of goes back to why we updated the album art because, alright, I wanted to remove myself from it. I didn't want it to be an image of myself. People were picking apart my appearance and stuff, which I wasn't used to. It's the kind of thing that the majority of women and femmes I know in music go through, being told they aren't attractive enough to be in their position, to be creating or to have a public platform. I've talked to a lot of other women who have been through similar things, or gotten in the bad habit of reading comments online, where it's dudes saying shit or evaluating them for their sex appeal or whatever.

That really fucked with me, and I kind of lost my mind over it for a bit. I have thicker skin now, I think, and that sort of thing gets to me less, I think, but it's something that I've struggled with through my whole career. Yeah, I don't know. I've straight up been told that I would be more successful if I was conventionally attractive, like whatever that means. That's pretty subjective, I think. I don't know. That's just a really difficult part of being like an AFAB musician. If I were a man there wouldn't be these sorts of discussions. You know what I mean.

It's not something you would expect with an independent label, either. Sign to a major label and you're bracing yourself for the inevitable trash. But you would think that the kind of people listening to that YouTube channel would be a bit more...

Earlier I mentioned that one of the images was sort of made out of self-preservation. Volume II happened after I experienced online harassment, putting myself out there in that way, in a position to sort of just be dissected. And yeah, straight up, at a point in time I did receive threats. So on the second release Blake and I did a photoshoot with a gun laying there. That's something I don't necessarily stand behind now, I don't relate to those choices at this stage, but I was trying to project the sort of attitude that like I couldn't be fucked with. You know what I mean.

Bring back the guns. I don't know.

Yeah, I don't know. We decided to pull that image, but it makes sense to me, trying to project an image of being strong. I was worried about actually being stalked at one point, so I felt like I had to do something to sort of protect myself in that way.

To me it's like, how can you do something, and have this conviction, and you can know what you're doing aesthetically and execute it flawlessly,

but then someone can just show up in the fucking Youtube comments and call you a fascist, or something? How does that feel, and how do you learn from that? Do you think you've honed a better sense of intuition, or confidence?

At the time I was 24 or 25. I think everyone expresses a lot of self-doubt at that age. I just felt incredibly vulnerable. And yeah, to share your music or art with the world and have it so heavily picked apart and scrutinized, that was completely new to me. It was really difficult. But I think at this stage I welcome it and invite it, in terms of that kind of scrutiny. It really doesn't bother me as much. It was a really strange experience, though, to have people accuse me of all kinds of insane things. At one point someone was like, "more boring music, made by a retarded lesbian drug addict." It was a pretty insane time. I'm proud of myself in that way, for not just crawling in a hole and quitting forever after that, because I definitely wanted to at times.

Can you tell me about your childhood? I know your mom was in a band.

Yeah, my mom was a musician. She was a vocalist, mostly in psych rock and garage bands, from the time that she was about 14 growing up in Indiana. And my dad was an aspiring actor. Yeah, the arts were definitely in my family.

We relocated from Chicago to Indiana when I was around 4 years old, and I grew up in the same house my mom grew up in. From the time I was 6 I'd always said that I wanted to be an artist. I remember being in second grade, and we did this exercise. We all said what we wanted to be when we grew up, and we had to work together to rank each career in order of importance. I said that I wanted to be an artist, and I was ranked dead last. I never forgot that for the rest of my life, because I realized that the world does not value art. I remember being really bent out of shape about that.

My parents definitely always encouraged and cultivated my interest in art, but my home life was really chaotic. When I was a teenager I discovered the punk scene in Northwest Indiana, and I sort of found refuge in that. Punk subculture was the first thing that really resonated with me as a young person. It got me interested in feminism and human rights, and it helped me to become more outspoken and come out of my shell. I read that you have a background in the punk scene, too.

Oh, yes but we are so different. I got into punk later. I was sincerely into the Grateful Dead, I was a hippie. I'd go to the library and get books about 60s counterculture, and I had like the whole Grateful Dead discography. I was just super "nostalgic" for the 60s. I just wanted to live in the 60s. It wasn't until I went to art camp at MassArt one summer and this girl Trish from Philly was my roommate — she was like, check out this band Minor Threat. She had single holes in her ears with multiple earrings, like hoops through them. I just remember being like, Oh my God. She would smoke a cigarette before we went to the cafeteria in the morning to get breakfast. She was really hardcore. That was like a really fun summer. But yeah, I'm not one of those kids that grew up going to punk shows. There weren't really any punk shows in Greenwich, Connecticut.

I do have a soft spot for the Grateful Dead, because my dad was a huge Deadhead.



I think my favorite album is like the really early one with Pigpen, like when they have the kind of honky tonk organ sound.

I was subjected to hours and hours of live Dead sets on tape when I was on tour with the band Plastic. My bandmate Blake, and our friend Kyle who was basically our roadie, were [both] extremely into the Grateful Dead. So we would be doing long drives and exclusively listening to Grateful Dead live sets for like six hours. Eventually I'd lose my mind, reach a breaking point and make them turn it off. But oddly enough, yeah, the Grateful Dead has had a presence throughout my life.

Your mom was playing in bands and was a feminist. Did you look up to her, or did you have to figure out your own path?

I do remember going with her to band practice. She was in her late twenties, early thirties, around the age I am now. She was working at a chocolate store and single-handedly supporting our family. My dad was a stay-at-home dad. In the evening she would come home and get ready to go to band practice. I remember being like 4 years old and putting my shoes on and crying because I wanted to go to her gigs at whatever dive bar in Chicago, and I didn't understand why I couldn't go. But she brought me to band practice sometimes.

We relocated to Indiana, and by that point she'd kind of given up any semblance of a music career [in order to] be a mom, and I think that was really hard for her. So when I was growing up music was kind of in the rearview for her. My own interest in music...I would say I kind of forged my own path. I never learned how to play an instrument. Playing in bands kind of happened by chance. The jumping-off point was agreeing to be in some random person's band when I was 20.

Later on I joined Plastic, a synth punk band from Chicago. It was supposed to be a Screaming Trees-inspired thing, and I didn't know Blake from the band at all. He approached me to join and I replaced the original synth player. He ended up becoming the most significant collaborator in my life, and he went on to start the Chicago Research label. I'm grateful for his collaboration and encouragement.

The label ended in 2022. In its heyday I feel like it was a creative renaissance of sorts. I did feel a strong sense of community for the first time in a very long time, pretty much since my time in the punk scene when I was very young. Community is extremely important, but for me it's been fleeting, and those sorts of things kind of come and go. When the pandemic hit that really interfered with this scene that we'd established in Chicago and this sense of community. It's unfortunate, but that's the way those things go, they don't last forever. But I look back on those times really fondly and I'm proud of what we accomplished with the label.

One thing I want to ask about is your training in Ableton. What have you been teaching yourself? In your astrology chart it said oftentimes you will be in search of knowledge, even if it's not through school, it's self-taught. So yeah, can you just tell me a little bit about your educational journey?

Yeah, there's a side of me that's incredibly curious and hungry for knowledge. I've also been told by more than one person that I ask "why" too much, which has been the case since I was a kid. But it's really coming from a sense of curiosity and wanting to know everything. As far as my educational background, I did go to school. I studied sociology and anthropology. In terms of Ableton, I started learning it when I was living in Bloomington, Indiana, for a short time in 2018, and one of my roommates that I lived with had studied audio engineering. I was kind of feverishly reading all of her audio engineering textbooks from when she went to school, and teaching myself about production that way. It's been like six years. And I'd say at this stage I've gotten really far with



it, and I've taught a handful of other people how to use Ableton.

I've always really wanted to do an Ableton workshop.

When I was starting out with the project Death Valley that was pre-Ableton days, and I was trying to be more of a hardware person. Once I got into Ableton that kind of went out the window. It blew my mind, like holy shit. I can make all this music so quickly and easily. With my early music, I was actually tracking stuff and recording on 4 tracks. I still have a bunch of broken 4 tracks laying around. But yeah, I have a lot of memories of trying to painstakingly record songs in one take and having to do it over and over again. And then it was like, Oh, I don't have to do that anymore. Like this is insane, actually.

I mean, the sounds are really warm and almost analog the way you manipulate them in Ableton. We won't reveal the recipe.

I think about how hardware people sometimes looked down on me for being an Ableton person. But like, there's just different camps of people, like hardware people flock with hardware people and identify with each other. And then I get really excited when I meet other Ableton people, and we can nerd out about it. There's no right or wrong when it comes to the recording process or what tools you're using. I don't think that the tools matter at all. I think the end result is what matters and it doesn't matter how you get from point A to Point B.

You must have learned this in those books, these drum rolls. You're using pop conventions and song structures...it's so great.

Yeah, I would say with that side of it I didn't get from the books. I just got that from listening to a lot of music and just being a music nerd, and consuming all kinds of different music. I paid close attention to production and songwriting conventions.

That's great. I do it, too. I was obsessed with this tom drum roll in Clan of Xymox's "Michelle," and right now, I'm trying to replicate it using this ancient Yamaha Groovebox sequencer from 1999. It's hard to reverse engineer stuff, but you learn so much by doing it.

I guess in the way that you have said Ableton intimidates you, hardware intimidates me.

Yeah, well maybe I'll do like a hardware workshop. Oh, so I wanted to talk about writing solo stuff and working really quickly. Can you tell me about Rottweiler and the genres you were playing with there?

I was pretty much making solo music from 2017 on. I did Club Music, then Rottweiler, and that kind of spurned all these other one-off solo projects. I'd really gotten to the point where I've hit a wall with solo music, especially when I was recording the first Club Music releases, *Volume I* and *Volume II*. It was during a time in my life where I was experiencing a lot of isolation and alienation and throwing myself into my creative projects. I was just trying to generate as much as I could creatively. For a while I was recording three to four songs a day.

Oh! So there's like a whole backlog of things that you didn't use.

Oh, yeah, definitely. There is like an insane back catalog of unreleased material, and I've revisited a lot of it in recent months. But like I was saying, I have a hard time identifying with a lot of that stuff now. It's been like five years, and my interests have shifted and changed pretty significantly.





For one thing, I've become kind of disillusioned with the "club scene." I was more interested in that sort of thing at one point. But I wouldn't really say that's so much the case now. I just have a hard time identifying with it, or at least with the current state of things. Things feel nihilistic and cynical in a really bad way. I don't know, I'm kind of over nihilism in music, I think.

You were talking about a neo folk project?

That project I've been calling Convent Walls, but I feel like that's sort of a placeholder name, it's subject to change. I've played one show since I've been in New York. I didn't have any songs or material written when I agreed to play the show. I didn't know what it was going to be, and I kind of wrote and recorded everything a month before the show. The set was sort of all over the place, some of it was noise stuff. There were a couple of songs that were more neo folk, with acoustic guitar. And I'm like actually singing. And I really love singing, and I don't feel like I've had enough excuses to do it in recent years. And a few songs are more like martial industrial... One of my main influences for that project is this band The Moon Lay Hidden Beneath the Cloud. They're one of my favorite bands. There's a lot of medieval influence in their music, and sort of ritualistic elements.

On a few of the songs, I actually reworked and reinterpreted lyrics from this book of medieval hymns I got. The book itself, actually, is from Tom Verlaine's book collection. When he died they had to sell his insane book collection, and when I went it was already very picked over, but I found that book. It's brilliant, and it's actually been very integral to this project. Here it is, it's an anthology of medieval hymns and lyrics. I love the cover.

When I first moved to New York I went to the Met Cloisters and had sort of a transcendent experience. That was around the time that I started working on this music. Oh, last night I actually watched *The Passion of Joan of Arc*.

That's one of my friend Lucy's favorite movies.

The movie is incredible, like holy shit. It took me so long to actually sit down and watch it. There's something to be said for a 100 year old movie that can still be relevant and incredibly influential. I partly wanted to watch it cause I got really obsessed with [Antonin] Artaud in the last year, and of course he's in it.

Ohh! Lucy's obsessed with Artaud! We made an Artaud shirt last summer. We actually collaborated on a New Beat T-shirt together that had Artaud and Bataille on it.

I read a lot of Bataille when I went to the psych ward. I was feverishly reading a lot of Bataille in the hospital. To me he was sort of like my savior in that place, cause pretty much all I did the whole time was read. There was nothing else to do. That's part of the reason I feel such a strong connection to him now. He was someone that experienced a lot of childhood trauma, and he was able to subvert that through his writing. *The Story of the Eye* is actually Bataille unpacking his childhood trauma and transforming it. So yeah, part of my insane New York trajectory is getting into all the French surrealists, like Artaud, and Alfred Jarry. Artaud was institutionalized long-term toward the end of his life, and he underwent electroshock therapy. If you read his later writings it's obvious that it broke him; he was no longer able to write coherently at all.

Well, it's funny, because I watched *Girl Interrupted* last night... I had been super reluctant to watch it, because I was institutionalized in high school and I very conscientiously didn't want to romanticize the experience even more than it had been in the 90s. I watched it last night, and it was really interesting, cause they were doing

a shallow job of looking at the history of BPD. I mistakenly diagnosed myself as having that a couple of years ago; I think it was partially because I was in a really toxic relationship where I wasn't ever getting attention. And now I'm looking at it and I don't know if that diagnosis would exist without patriarchy. I did a deep dive into researching the history of the diagnosis after initially entertaining and trying to grapple with the possibility that I might be the problem, you know? I found that I put myself in situations where I shouldn't be for way too long, where I'm not trusting my instincts telling me to run, for so long that I lose touch with myself and my own needs and lose myself. I've done that before with men who I am seeking validation from, instead of validating myself. I'm coming to the realization that it's important to express that stuff. And it's also important when creative people talk about their mental health issues.

Yeah, other people can relate to it. You know, you're just making it less scary to talk about. But yeah, is *Girl Interrupted* actually worth watching? I haven't even seen it.

I mean, *Winona Ryder* is really fun. It has a lot of great 90s actresses in it. Angelina Jolie is pretty awesome in it. I feel like you would probably enjoy it.

When I got out of the hospital part of me was inclined to consume a lot of media dealing with institutionalization and stuff. Oddly enough, like right before I was hospitalized I started watching *Titicut Follies*, completely unrelated. I never actually finished it, but I've been meaning to revisit it. In the film they stage this whole musical performance,

I'm someone who writes a lot of letters to people that I don't intend to send.

among the inmates, and I was joking with my friend when I was in the hospital that I was gonna compose a musical like Marquis de Sade. I really couldn't get through *Marat/Sade* though. I thought it was kind of boring and goofy. But I know people love that movie.

I'm seeing a lot more like "crazy BPD girl" memes; my other friends that have been hospitalized are sending me "crazy girl" memes. The fact that those exist and circulate make me feel so much less alone. Bring back female hysteria.

I have found solace in the crazy girl memes for sure. Speaking of which, when I was in the hospital my roommate came by and brought me books cause I was bored and had already read everything that I brought with me. And he ended up bringing me a bunch of crazy women books. He brought me Yoko Ono's *Grapefruit*, as well as the book that Lisa Carver wrote about Yoko Ono. And he brought me a Phoebe Gloeckner comic, which, all of her comics deal with fucked up childhood trauma. I was just like, Okay, I see what you're doing.

I was trying to do some of the exercises in *Grapefruit*. It's all very nonsensical, whimsical sorts of things like "watch the snow fall until dinnertime. Watch the snow fall until it covers thirty three buildings." That's one of the things that kept me at bay in there. I had never really learned much about Yoko Ono until then, but I respect her a lot.

I was just thinking of someone like Yayoi Kusama. The whole myth is that she lives in a mental institution and makes art all day.

I don't know what mental institutions are like in Japan. I'm guessing the conditions are better than here in America. It's not a therapeutic environment here; it basically is like prison, it's really dehumanizing. It's not an environment that's conducive to healing. Thinking about people that are institutionalized long term—it's so fucked up, humans aren't meant to live like that. Humans aren't meant to be isolated, humans aren't meant to be kept inside.

Yeah. I remember, when I went to the institution in high school I was there for like a week and a half. My parents actually broke me out, because legally I had to stay. They forced past the security guard and broke me out, which was actually the most traumatic part of it.

I didn't feel safe there, because there were violent people there. So it was my mission to get out of there as quickly as possible by proving that I wasn't actually crazy.

Yeah. Compared to the other girls in there I felt very like sane and lucid.

Yeah. I met some really cool people there actually. Definitely some interesting people for sure. I met this woman that was a pathological liar. She said she lived through both attacks on the World Trade Center, the one in the 90s and also 9/11, but she wasn't even old enough, her story did not line up. My roommate was an older Russian woman who whenever I would open my eyes she would be staring at me, watching me sleep. There was this lady that would walk around wearing a giant floppy hat and sunglasses and her face wrapped up because she was a hypochondriac, and she said that she couldn't be exposed to the sun. So she would just like walk around like that, and when she would come in the room you felt like you were interacting with like the Invisible Man.

I remember seeing a girl like that at the academic research library in Paris. She would bring a briefcase in to do work there, and each book would be individually wrapped, like everything within a plastic bag. It was kind of amazing, but also distracting, because you could hear her sitting next to you working. She was like covered with plastic, she was like crinkling. And she only wore all white. It was kind of cool.

Do you have particular exercises or rituals for making art?

I'm someone that writes a lot of letters to people that I don't intend to send. A lot of my lyrics come from revisiting old letters I have written and re-arranging the words as a means of constructing a new meaning. It's very therapeutic, I highly recommend it. It sounds like something that a therapist would tell you to do. But I invented it.

What are you looking forward to, you know, in the upcoming months? Okay, that's one question. And then the other question was, what are you trying to do when you make music?

Both these questions are really difficult. In terms of the first question, I'm very much one to worry a lot about the future. And I'm trying to do less of that. I'm trying to be more focused on the present. Being in New York, it's been like a really chaotic time. It's been like, exhilarating highs and devastating lows—no in between really, and so much uncertainty. In July I'll have been here a year, but it feels like it's been eight years. Time feels really distorted here. It's really odd. So I'm just taking things day by day. Generally, I feel like a lot of things are still really uncertain for me. I do have a show coming up with the new project Convent Walls, so I'll be preparing for that finalizing the demo that I recorded, finishing editing it. And then, hopefully playing more gigs. But really I'm just flying by the seat of my pants, which is kind of how I operate. Because it's fun.