



Plugged In

For DJ, presenter and producer Colleen “Cosmo” Murphy, sharing her love for high-quality sound and music discovery isn’t only a calling, it’s a spiritual imperative.

BY ANDY THOMAS

Whether she’s running deep disco cuts inside a sweaty sound-system tent at Gilles Peterson’s We Out Here festival, hosting listening sessions of classic albums at Royal Albert Hall, or celebrating the turntable in a BBC Radio documentary series, Colleen “Cosmo” Murphy is someone who encourages people to experience and think about music on a deeper level. More than just a DJ, producer, and presenter, she’s become a pillar in the renaissance of vinyl and hi-fi audio, an advocate for analog delights committed to upholding her late mentor David Mancuso’s maxim: “Good sound is a human right.”

Raised in the suburbs outside Boston, Colleen found her calling in New York, where she relocated in 1986 to attend NYU. While hosting a laundry list of shows at the school’s influential radio station WNYU-FM (89.1) and serving as its first woman program director, she was swept up by the city’s underground club culture. After meeting and befriending David Mancuso in the early 1990s, she joined an exclusive group of musical “hosts” invited to hold court at Mancuso’s legendary Loft, spinning sets at the disco institution that she’d soon help introduce to a new generation of music obsessives.

A move to London in the late ’90s saw her join another underground dance community as disco in the U.K. began to be reappraised through labels like Nuphonic Records, for which she instigated and co-produced 1999’s *David Mancuso Presents the Loft* compilation and its 2000 sequel. With the late Mancuso’s blessing and guidance, Colleen subsequently co-founded the London Loft,

a U.K. incarnation of the seminal New York party, helping spur a boom in audiophile dance sessions around England.

Launched in 2010 as a response to what Colleen saw as the devaluation of music into aural wallpaper, her Classic Album Sundays series has been similarly prescient, bringing creators and audiences together in sonic and contextual appreciation of well-known records ranging from Supertramp’s *Crime of the Century* to Soul II Soul’s *Club Classics Vol. One*.

As important as sound was at the Loft, it would have meant little without Mancuso’s deep attention to musical sequencing. As a leading audiophile DJ spinning across the world, Colleen takes a similar approach. Pushing against genre boundaries, she revels in finding connections and sharing discoveries, as heard on her weekly radio show *Balearic Breakfast*, and in her festival sets as Love Dancin’ Sound System with husband Adam Dewhurst (aka Daddy Ad of Trojan Sound System).

Colleen’s open-minded outlook on music is equally evident in her work as a producer under the moniker Cosmodelica, through which she’s remixed the likes of Horace Andy, Róisín Murphy, A Certain Ratio and, recently, the Cure. Driving everything she does is a spiritual connection to sound, and a belief in the power that coming together as a community holds in these troubled times. With the fourth volume of her *Balearic Breakfast* compilation series out now on Heavenly Recordings, and a raft of fresh Cosmodelica remixes on the way, Colleen recently spoke about her life in music and where it might take her next.

(opposite) DJ Cosmo in the mix at WNYU in 1995. All photos courtesy of Colleen “Cosmo” Murphy.



Sharing music and building community is at the heart of what you do, whether it’s Classic Album Sundays or Balearic Breakfast. Where did this all begin for you?

Collen “Cosmo” Murphy: I had a show for four years on my high-school radio station, WHHB [in Holliston, Massachusetts]. I was really into turning people on to music. I had started record collecting when I was fifteen and, at sixteen, was working in a record shop. I grew up in a small New England town where pretty much everybody listened to classic rock and Top 40, so I was a bit of an anomaly, but I had some other friends too that were into different kinds of music. One was Mary Caruso, who I did the radio show with called *Punk, Funk, and Junk*.

It’s a great name. The title kind of gives it away but what were you playing?

I was playing more of the punk stuff but Mary was getting me into the new sounds of hip-hop and electro. I always had a really open mind with music, and loved searching for it. I would go into Boston on my own to [second-hand record store] Nuggets. One time, they were playing Rahsaan Roland Kirk’s *Rip, Rig, and*

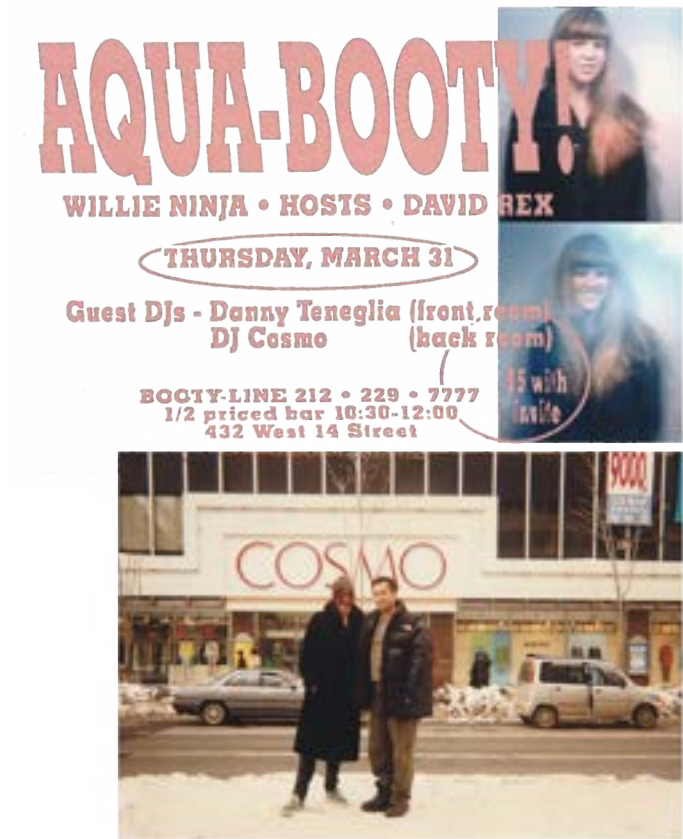
Panic, and I was like, “Oh my god, what’s this?” They couldn’t believe this fifteen-year-old girl was buying this record. And then I started working at [Massachusetts-based music chain] Strawberries Records & Tapes, and we all know that no one works in a record shop for the money.

So that became your education?

Everyone that worked there was a music obsessive, and had their speciality. My assistant manager was a jazz fanatic and introduced me to Charles Mingus, Pat Metheny, and Chico Freeman. Another manager was into 1960s psychedelia, so I got turned onto Electric Prunes, the Chocolate Watchband, and all those things. Another was a DJ who looked after the remix 12-inch section. So I was taking all of these things in.

What radio stations were you listening to?

Boston had some of some of the most progressive commercial radio stations in the country. And there were two that I really listened to. One was WBCN, which was a freeform station that started in 1968, the year I was born. The program director, Oedipus, had a



show called *Nocturnal Emissions*, where I heard Brian Eno for the first time. On the other end of the dial was Kiss 108, run by Sunny Joe White. He had come from a Black AM station called WILD. He was playing stuff from the Paradise Garage. So I was getting turned onto things like D Train, alongside Prince and Rick James.

You mentioned the Garage. When did you start having an interest in New York?

I was obsessed with the Velvet Underground, and that side of New York. I was an indie kid in many ways but I was also into hip-hop from New York: Run-DMC, Eric B. & Rakim. There was this record by IRT called “Watch the Closing Doors.” It had this great story rap [about] taking the subway on the whole line. And it was so cinematic. Some friends and I drove to New York one day and I saw [Keith Haring’s] *Crack Is Wack* mural in East Harlem. I just had this burning desire to live in the city.

So you’re in New York in 1986. When did you start experiencing the cultural life there?

I was mainly going to live shows to begin with. But a friend of



mine from NYU, Adam Goldstone, was really into club culture. He started bringing me to parties [around] Lower Broadway, like Payday. Then there was Tracks on the West Side and Save the Robots in the East Village, which was a lot of fun because it was after hours and so sleazy. But the one that had a major, major influence on me was the Shelter with Timmy Regisford.

Why did the Shelter make such an impression on you?

It was a mainly Black and Latino crowd, some of whom had been around for fifteen, twenty years. A real Garage crowd—they’ve been dancing for that long. And they [would] pass that on to the younger generation, both with how they dance and the way they are into the music and the spirit of the dance. I’m really fortunate, because it was such a great emotional, beautiful, and holistic experience. You’re being taught by the generation before you, you know, because I was one of the young ones. I was in my early twenties and some of them [were] in their forties. That seemed so old at the time. I feel blessed that my history in dance music started in New York properly.

And then you get taken to the Loft.

David had just reopened it [in the East Village], and that neighborhood of East Third Street between Avenues B and C was rough. I lived there, but I found out later a lot of the older Loft crowd didn't want to go there as it was a big heroin and crack neighborhood. David had a few problems there, but he was able to solve it. David's philosophy was to always become friendly with the people living on the block, especially the grandmothers. He was a friendly, open guy. Very egalitarian.

What was it like walking into the Loft for the first time?

Well, firstly, it wasn't like I knew what I was walking into. It was Adam saying, "Hey, let's drop something, and go to a party. I think you're gonna like it." We got there, and it was this incredible experience. I saw this older man playing records. I didn't know who he was. I didn't even know the name David Mancuso, or what the Loft is. Anything. But I immediately felt a similar sensibility.

In what way?

I had grown up with '60s and '70s music, and had a hippie sensibility, really into Hendrix and Van Morrison, and so was he. He brought that kind of open, psychedelic approach to all different forms of music. The sound [at the Loft] really was amazing, but it's not like I knew about Klipschorn speakers and all of that back then. Plus, the space was his home, you know. His cat Wolfie was walking around. There was a bed in the corner.

How did you get to know David?

I started going to the Loft all the time, and signed up as a member. I had my show, *Soul School*, on [WNYU] 89.1 FM on Friday nights, mainly playing all this disco soul stuff I was really getting into. Lots of Larry Levan mixes. I thought, "Oh, my dream is to get David up on the radio." I'm not one of those people that goes up to the DJ and starts talking their ear off, so I asked [through] a mutual friend. And David said, "Tell her I'd like to go out with her first." So David and I went to a bar on Avenue A and started talking. I brought up how I have this musical synchronicity thing that goes on, both as a listener and as a dancer on the receiving end, but also as a DJ. Someone would call and request a song that's already queued up, ready to be played. Or I would think, "Gosh, I hope David plays this next, it would sound really good." Kind of getting on that telepathic level. He and I just vibed. [David] came to my show, and he was too shy to talk. He just handed me the records. And then he blew me away by saying, "I'd love for you to come to the Loft and play some one-on-ones with me." That had never occurred to me. I wouldn't have become a [club] DJ without the whole radio thing. I would have never jumped in.

That must have been some responsibility.

The first time I played, I played four records. He didn't have headphones. You had to put the needle on the record by eye, and it was a moving coil cartridge made by Koetsu. He only had two of them, and David was having a real hard time financially. My biggest worry was handling the cartridges because, if I had messed up, he would not have been able to afford to send it back to Japan to get repaired. They were, at that time, *two thousand each*. So that was kind of heavy. As was not having headphones to cue up the record. And my first cut was an inside cut. I remember it was Lola's "Wax the Van (Jon's Dub)" and it starts, "Hello!," and I somehow got it. And David turned to me and said, "Very good, Colleen."

You became a trusted musical host at the Loft. Working at [long-running East Village record shop] Dance Tracks and being younger, were you also introducing David to new music?

At that time, it wasn't like he had the money to go out and buy records. He relied on other people either to give him promos or turn him onto things. And I became one of those people. Recently, I found an email from David saying how much he trusted my ear. He said, "If you ever find anything that you like, just buy another copy for me." When I was living here in London, there were a lot of those records I brought to the Loft, like Karma's "High Priestess."

"High Priestess" was on the Loft compilation on Nuphonic. How did that project come about?

At the time, David was suffering for a few reasons. He wasn't always the most astute businessperson. This has to be said. He wasn't motivated by money. He wanted enough to do what he wanted to do. If he had money, like when he was doing parties at [99] Prince Street, he would give it away. In the 1990s era of Giuliani, rents [were] going up in the East Village—the area [was] becoming gentrified. He moved to a space on Avenue A, where I really helped him out a lot. And then to Avenue B. There was an older crowd going but, apart from me and my friends and a cool Japanese crowd, young people didn't really know about him.

This was before Tim Lawrence's book *Love Saves the Day* came out, right?

Yes, it was. There was one book by Albert Goldman [1978's *Disco*] which mentioned the Loft, and you could find things on microfiche at the New York Public Library by Vince Aletti, but David's story wasn't out there. I had just done my first compilation for Nervous in 1998 called New York *After Hours: A Later Shade of Deep*. It put this thought into my head that David should do a compilation. Not only will it get his story out there, it will also be







some good “green energy,” as he used to call it, and he needed it so much. We started putting tracks together when I lived in New York. I still have all the handwritten notes.

The Nuphonic compilation led to the London Loft parties. How hard was it to take an event ingrained in that particular New York culture outside of its natural environment?

It was difficult to start with, especially with the sound. Some people didn’t think it was loud enough, or there wasn’t enough bass. You have to remember: there’s no compression, no EQ, in the Loft sound system. It has a very simple signal path, with beautiful Class A amplifiers, a Mark Levinson ML-1 preamplifier, the Koetsu cartridges David got from Japan, and three-way, horn-loaded Klipschorn speakers. They go down to about 30Hz, but some people are just used to having more bass. But it actually eats into the other frequencies, and the music becomes less dynamic.

How did Love Dancin’ Sound System evolve, and how does it differ from the Loft?

When Gilles [Peterson] started We Out Here, he asked me and Adam to host a tent bringing in our London Loft sound system, but with some tweaks. You can’t really bring the Loft to a festival. But we wanted to take things we had learned from the Loft, and amend it into a situation where other DJs could play, and that would work in a festival. And, with the help of our great friend Iain Mackie of A-Live Sound, who is kind of our Alex Rosner [Mancuso’s sound engineer/designer at the Loft in New York], and has been with us since we started the London parties, we have done that.

You’ve paved the way for other sound-system parties and, similarly, Classic Album Sundays has been an influence on listening bars and all that. Where did the idea for it come from?

After we bought the sound system for our Loft parties in London, two Klipschorns ended up at my house. Our playback system was really phenomenal, and I started to listen to all my records again. It was like, “My god, I didn’t even know that was in there!” So, when friends would come over, we’d sit and listen to a whole album. At the same time, Greg Wilson had started an online listening event called Living to Music with a classic album selected, and listeners sharing their impressions on his blog. In September 2010, he had chosen *Dark Side of the Moon*. I had this crazy Mobile Fidelity Sound Lab pressing, got the incense out, and it sounded sublime. I thought I should share this experience, but bring in a really great sound system, and tell the stories behind the records and give them musical context.

I wanted to talk about your productions. I remember going down to [West London distributor] Goya Music in the late 1990s and picking up white labels with Bitches Brew written on them.

When I moved to London, it was 1999, and the broken beat thing was going on. It was something so unique to the U.K., you know. I was so into it. I met [Goya founders] Mike [Slocombe] and Spence [Weekes] going over there to pick up promos from them and, at the same time, I had met Nikki Lucas, who worked at Honest Jon’s, and we decided to start a label. We named it Bitches Brew because that [Miles Davis] album was a landmark that fused a lot of different things. I’ve always found that, whatever I do in terms of music, I try not to pinpoint the genre. I have a lot of different styles that I’m into.

That brings us to your remixes as Cosmodelica. I’m thinking about the eclectic range of artists you work with, and if there is a Cosmodelica sound?

Sometimes I admire artists that have a signature sound. I know it’s easier for people to market, and get their head around. But that wouldn’t be authentic for me. I’d lose interest. Plus, I was getting asked to remix a lot of different sounds, from Desmond Dekker to Phenomenal Handclap Band. I’ve done six remixes [in the last year], and they’re all different. There’s [“Alone Together” by] Saint Etienne, which has a very Dorothy Ashby sound. And then [“I Wanna Get Over” by] the Street People, which is more high-energy disco, almost Northern soul-ish. Then I just remixed Ada Morghe, a German singer, which is more of a downtempo Balearic thing, and I’ve done a similar thing with Santino Surfers. Then there was [“And Nothing Is Forever” by] the Cure.

What else can we look forward to?

I’ve got this new project, Electric Eden, with Joe Goddard, Alexis Taylor, and Al Doyle [from Hot Chip], and [DJ and singer] Lou Hayter. We’ve done two songs so far, and I worked with them on the Cure remix. It’s really fun, they have a great studio, and they’re great people. I’m really enjoying it. ●

