IN CONVERSATION WITH:

KEYRAH

Birmingham-bred Keyrah is blazing her own trail with her brand, Misc;, a musical concept that transcends spaces and genres to unite people through her dynamic, uplifting sets.

Before making her mark in London, she diligently studied the music scene, honing her craft and understanding the nuances of the space. But Misc; is far from a typical club night. With a refreshing indifference to people-pleasing, Keyrah intuitively draws from her diverse musical background to curate each set and create an immersive experience.

She's had the ambition to bring her inventive ideas and musical experimentation to nightlife since her teenage years in Birmingham. Blending contrasting genres, sounds, and beats, all while maintaining an experimental and playful atmosphere, each Misc; set is a unique journey, mirroring Keyrah's own passion for exploration.

As she continues to expand Misc;, her artistic mission remains clear: to push boundaries and craft expansive spaces and memorable experiences that are truly innovative. "As a kid you're open to new experiences and influences, and I want to ignite that flame again. I want to feel excited about new things again."

Looking forward to her upcoming Misc; show in London next week, Keyrah sits down with Original Shift to chat about how Misc; first started out as a playlist, what led her to step away from Birmingham, and her most memorable WTF moments as a DJ.

George: How has life been? How are things for you at the moment?

Keyrah: It's good! Coming off the back of last year, I ticked off a lot of boxes and achieved things I wanted to. A lot of stuff happened that was in the plan, but a lot of stuff happened that wasn't in the plan as well, which was great. I feel like it was a great year. But coming into the new year is always a bit stale in the music industry. It takes everyone a while to get back into the flow of things. For me, as much as it's nice to have some downtime, I can't sit around for too long because if I'm not out DJing and left to my own devices I start to overthink, so I like to stay occupied. By the end of January I was going to fashion week and I had more bookings. It was nice to have that downtime, but I was "Ok cool, I'm back in the swing of things."

At the moment, I've just launched Misc; which is going to be my new night. In the past, I've curated nights in my name, but Misc; is me launching a whole brand. It's exciting, but I'd be lying if I said I wasn't nervous because it feels like there's a bigger expectation. I've just put the Birmingham lineup out and I'll announce the London lineup soon. That's what I've been up to recently

George: Where did the first musings of wanting to get into DJing come from?

Keyrah: A few routes led me to DJing, but the simplest one is that I was living in Birmingham. At the time, the nightlife in Birmingham was quite stagnant and I really wanted to put on my own events. It's a bit better now, but it was either you go out to a bottleservice and tables sort of club, or a hardcore rave playing tech house. There was no middle ground. Whereas in London, you have an in-between. If you want to listen to some hip hop or some zgood music in general, you don't have to go out and heels or your best drip, you could just fucking go out and chill in a nice club. Those spaces didn't exist in Birmingham back in 2016, and I wanted to build out a night in that space where people could enjoy underground music. Off the back of that, I thought I should just learn how to DJ as well because I've always had a love for music. Whenever I'd go to house parties I'd always be on the laptop with two YouTube tabs open fading one track out and fading one track in, like super technical shit (laughs). I also had people say to me "I feel like you'd be a good DJ", so then I just learned. The DJing was supposed to go hand in hand with putting on the events I wanted.

George: What led you to leave Birmingham?

Keyrah: Around that time I was coming down to London a lot to attend talks with women in music and I was interning at a record label in London. I realised that London was the place I needed to be or wanted to be. I had to make a choice and I was like, "Okay. I can either stay in Birmingham and try and build out a bit of an event scene and build out my career, or I can come to London, build out my career in half the time and then try and go back to Brum and continue it out there". And it feels kind of surreal to think that I'm at the latter stage of that statement now. I always wanted to put on my own events and curate a different nightlife experience.

George: I think that explains how you activate yourself and your name, you're not confined to just being a DJ, which is quite a saturated industry at the moment. How did that lead to you building out Misc;?

Keyrah: In 2020 during lockdowns, I put this playlist together with songs that represented me and my music tastes and I called it Misc;. The idea around that playlist, which translates into my DJing as well, is that I'm going to play a mashup of what I like, but still read the crowd so it all comes together. That's where Misc; was born. People really liked the playlist and it developed a following over time. After that, I got my residency with Rinse FM and I decided to name that Misc; as well. So that's Misc; with Keyrah, and it's a slightly deeper dive into my music taste because I can put out an hour long mix of good music that doesn't necessarily have to perform in a particular setting like a club. So, the plan was always to bridge my music into events, but I think I just needed to get to a certain point of building myself as a DJ to then have the time and energy to curate the events. It's been a natural progression. The playlist, the radio, and now we're at events, so that's kind of the story of it. But if you take it all the way back, I always wanted to put on my own events

George: I think there's great roots there because you've just built on the simplicity of what you've always cared about. It could be as simple as those YouTube tabs crossing over and then that crossover again from Birmingham into London. What was it about London that made you think it was the place you wanted to be?

Keyrah: I look at London as the hub for a lot of creative spaces. London's the capital, so there's always going to be a lot more industry down here. Birmingham has an industrial background, so it has a history of making chains and armoury. Even in Manchester, you've got cotton mills which is why there's a bit more of a fashion scene up there. There's different heritages attached to different places and Birmingham just sadly didn't have that creative bit. A lot of creatives from Birmingham and a lot of my friends have had to move to London to pursue their careers. I kind of reached this point where I started to think about the next generation that also wants to pursue something creative, but don't feel like they can do it within this city. I thought something had to change. But I remember I had gone to a talk in Birmingham, I think it was hosted by the BBC, and they had this lady there who worked for a label called Disturbing London. She was from Birmingham and obviously now lives in London and was working for this label and explaining her job role. At the time, I was studying music business and I knew I wanted to work in music, but I didn't know specifically in what capacity. So, I hung around after the talk and I spoke to her and I said, "Look, this is where I'm at and I feel like I could do with some inspiration. Is there any chance I can do a work placement at your label?" And then she sorted me out an internship to work at her label. I did it in two week intervals because I couldn't afford to live in London at 17, and I was also working full time. So, that was the start of me getting more exposure to London and getting experience in the music industry.

I started to experience the nightlife as well, seeing what other DJs were doing down here and what the spaces were saying. Like, you can walk into a party on a random Thursday night in London and see Skepta and them. For me, that's mind blowing because in Birmingham you can't even throw a party on a Thursday night let alone walk into a party and see Skepta. So, I was just exposed to all these new experiences and I started to realise that apart from my family and friends, it really felt like there's nothing for me in Birmingham. In London, I was seeing DJs that play similar music to me or in similar spaces to me thrive. It was kind of a no-brainer that I needed to be in London.

George: Was there one specific lightbulb moment you experienced in London or in London nightlife that sparked the urge to move?

Keyrah: I remember one day when I was interning at that label and I was walking to work, I stopped at this little cafe on the bridge. It was in Haggerston. I went in and got a coffee and then I was just walking around and I was like, "You know what? I kind of like this city." (Laughs). It was the small things that got me. I was like "Yeah, this is cute. I could get used to this." That was the first time it hit me that I enjoyed being in the city. And in terms of nightlife, there were so many things I was going to before I moved as well. Virgil did 'The 10' collab with Nike, and he was doing all these activations, like customising shoes and throwing these crazy parties. I also worked at Selfridges at the time, so there was a lot of crossover with coming down to see the events that happened at Selfridges, like stuff with ASAP Rocky. I just felt that there was something exciting happening every time I came to London because there's always parties attached to the fashion events and I felt like it was the hub for culture

George: Looking back, did you get any push back or have any doubts about moving to London to pursue DJing?

Keyrah: Not particularly. I've always had super supportive parents. My mom's always been the person to be like, "As long as you're sure of it, I'm going to be supportive," but within reason. She knows me well enough to know there's some sense behind whatever I do. My dad was a little bit more on the fence. I know he had my best interests at heart and he was a musician himself and worked in the industry. So, I think when I told him I wanted to pursue DJing full time and I wasn't going to go to university, he had a lot more to say about the nature of the industry from his experience. He wanted to make sure I had my grades to fall back on, I think. But I really had to explain my DJing and that space to him because he didn't really understand. Like, I could say "I'm doing pretty well, I'm getting these bookings, I'm playing this venue, and blah blah," but it wouldn't translate. Then last year, I threw a big party in Birmingham, technically for my birthday, and I curated the whole night. My dad got to come through and see me DJ in my element and see what I had put together, and he was like "Wow. Okay, I get it now."

George: Yeah, sometimes it's easier to show than to tell, especially with parents. I think music as an industry has had some of the most dramatic changes throughout generations as well.

Keyrah: Yeah, and my dad comes from a musical background. He played bass guitar in a rock band. So, he would have been active throughout the' 80s. Things have changed, but he also has no connection to the DJ world, you know what I mean? It's a separate world for him. So, I completely understood his stance, but it was a moment of relief when he finally did see it.

George: How did your parents' relationship with music influence you?

Keyrah: It's a funny one because I'm an only child. I think a lot of people develop their music tastes through older siblings who are tapped into the new thing and so you get access to that music even though you're still young. I'm conscious that I didn't have that. I really just had my mom and dad who were listening to everything that was popular through the '70s and '80s. My dad lived and breathed music. He'd be in the house recording or just rehearsing 24/7. I'd go to bed for school at 7pm and he'd be on the sofa with a guitar in his hands, strumming and watching the TV. I'd wake up at 7am, and he'd be in the same position conked out with the guitar in his hand (laughs). And that really was my life as a little girl.

He naturally bought me my own guitar, but I played various instruments growing up. I played violin…I was gonna say professionally… but I don't know if that's the right word (laughs). I was studying violin and I played in a youth orchestra. And that was the instrument that I was most invested in whereas the others were just hobbies. So, I always had this musical connection as a little girl, but when you're a kid, you don't see how your interests can transcend into your adult-life, or into a career. You just think they're things that you enjoy. And then alongside that, every time I was in the car with my dad, he'd be listening to Thin Lizzy which was an Irish rock band and then The Police. He used to play a lot of Michael Jackson as well. And the Beatles, of course. He was a massive Beatles fan. On my mom's side, she listened to a lot of Prince, Donny Osmond and then super random things like Rage Against the Machine and The Prodigy. So, those were my influences growing up, but everything else, I was left to develop by myself. My love for hip hop and R&B, I found on my own, because they weren't interested in that. I used to buy compilation CDs from Woolworths or wherever. But listening to those different sounds helps build your musical ear. I can't exactly put into words how that broad exposure shaped my sound, but I can definitely hear certain elements and genres come through in the way that I produce or mix tracks. It's been a melting pot of all these different influences and, here I am.

George: When you have all these influences, you have the ability to pick and choose sounds from everywhere. Do you think that's one of the skills that marks you as your own artist?

Keyrah: I always say, if it wasn't for my parents, especially my dad, I don't think I'd be sat here right now. I probably wouldn't be a DJ. Who knows what sort of career I would have pursued. Because before deciding that I wanted to pursue music, I used to be really into sports in school. I wanted to study sports science and be a physiotherapist. I had this crisis moment at 16, and was like, "Actually, I don't want to spend my whole life massaging people's feet," I want to do something that I've always loved.

And once I started spending more time in London and seeing people hold different jobs within music, and see new spaces I never experienced, the dots started to connect for me. I was like, there's definitely scope for me to use my musical intellect somewhere here. So, yeah, I always just put it down to my ear. I do feel like my ear has been carved out by all these different influences over the years, and that's what makes you, you.

George: What do you think is the most important skill for a DJ?

Keyrah: Music is subjective and it's down to how you interpret it. People come up to me and tell me, "I'm learning how to DJ, but I'm finding this part difficult." Anyone can learn the basics of how to DJ. Once you learn how it works and what gear to use, you're good to go. But at the end of the day, you can't teach someone how to read a crowd or know how to mix two songs together because they're in the same key. But when you've constantly been around a musical environment, and maybe it has to do with being able to read or write music, it comes innately.

George: I think one thing that people know you for is your ability to strike a conversation with the crowd through music. There's this constant line of communication enforced by the fact that you're genre-less. How do you know when it's time to switch the sound up in a crowd?

Keyrah: Sometimes it's hard. You never kind of know what you're walking into. Sometimes you're fighting with the crowd because you don't know what they want to hear, sometimes it's a walk in the park. And then sometimes you start a gig and it's a mixed crowd or it's people that aren't necessarily there just for the music and it all depends on the sort of booking it is as well. It's impossible to get it spot on all the time, but what I try my best to do is pay attention to what the crowd is feeling and what they want to hear. So, I experiment with different sounds but it is a give and take, because I'm never going to download music that I wouldn't want to hear myself. I'm not a crowd pleaser in that sense. I'm not going to come and play Dua Lipa (laughs), but I might give you a remix of a popular song at the minute. I'm always gonna play within my realm of music. But I do think it's a skill that you either do or don't have. Because it's also about pacing, you know? I mean, you could do whatever the fuck you want, but you're not gonna just pull up and start a party with all the club hits without a warmup set. You have to give the crowd a chance to warm into the night and be experimental with them. It's a skill to know your part within the night and play that part right so you're not approaching it selfishly. At the end of the day, you're there to provide an experience for people. So, It's important for the night to flow properly and you have to take that into account.

George: Yeah, I guess that's part of DJ etiquette.

Keyrah: I'm not too heavy on DJ etiquette, unless it's my own night. The more active you are in nightlife, the better understanding you have of how the night should flow. But there's a lot of politics with it. I try not to get too involved but I think sometimes if you are in a space where you think the DJ isn't doing the right job at the right time, then, especially as a DJ, it can be hard to not judge.

George: Have you had an experience, maybe in your earlier days, where you look back on yourself or a certain circumstance and you're like, what the fuck?

Keyrah: There's probably a few to be honest. When I was starting out, I obviously wasn't getting the headline slots. But there's definitely been a couple of experiences where people have tried to cut my set short or put me on at a time that clearly doesn't make sense because of the sort of music that I would play. And I think in those circumstances, you just have to prove yourself. And sometimes it's worth it. I do remember one time in Birmingham, my set just kept getting pushed back and it wasn't really making any sense. I think it's because whoever they booked for the headliner wasn't happy with the way that the crowd was at a certain time. But they kept pushing my set back and I was like "Okay, so when am I going to play…?" And then eventually I go on, but they were like "Oh, you're only going to play half an hour not an hour," and I was like "Well, that's not what we agreed." So, for that half hour I just went on and tore it up. When I had finished my set, because they cut it short, the crowd was chanting my name (laughs). So, in that circumstance, it was okay for me to just come and fuck shit up because I kind of had to prove myself, you know what I mean? That was very early days, I'd probably been DJing for about a year at that point. But those experiences shape you and then you also prove to yourself that you're capable of doing certain things that push you into new spaces.

George: In the early days, you were also operating in such a male dominated industry. I think we've seen in the last five to ten years, the emergence of strong female headliners that have managed to create these really organic spaces for themselves. And I think that perfectly shifts into Misc;, and it being a representation of you. How do you want to expand it and what do you want to see Misc; become?

Keyrah: For me, it's a space where you can come and play a set that you wouldn't necessarily play in another setting. If you're known for playing heavy garage, or funky house and dubstep, maybe you want to come to Misc; and play an R&B set. That's what the space is about, it's completely miscellaneous. That's why there's a heavy emphasis on the curation. I don't just want to throw a bunch of random DJs in a room and be like, "Do what you want.

George: It's kind of like directed chaos.

Keyrah: Yeah, curated chaos. It's careful curation, like I'm going to pick the DJs that can mould themselves into different spaces and would be able to resonate with the crowds that are tapped into what I do. It sounds cliche, but I want to become a space where everything is about the music, but it can transcend being a club night. I'd love to put on an evening of live music as well, where maybe you come and see someone play jazz or maybe you can see a singer that I'm really interested in. It's a space for me to experiment. If you've seen my Soulection set, it's smooth, hip hop, r&b, soul, and jazz. And if you've seen me play at KOKO, I've played house, garage, and everything else in between. So, if you come through Misc;, it's going to be blending those two ends of the spectrum. I guess it's a bit of a playground, because it doesn't have to be confined to one experience. It can be multiple ones. And that's what I'm excited to explore – does it sit in a club space one night? Does it sit in a listening bar the next night? Does it take on the form of live music? There are all these elements that I'd like to explore so yeah, it's a bit of a playground

George: I think one thing that we've lost as we've gone to more of a consumerist music industry, is that everything is actually just for the crowd and there's not that conversation. I think there has been a certain sort of stagnation in the nightlife scene because there's been a lack of that, so I personally am so up for this. It sounds amazing.

Keyrah: I think it's very stagnant in London at the moment, I think a lot of that comes down to venues, which is an ongoing conversation, the lack of venues. I think in previous times there have been different movements in London. I never made it to Plastic People but the way that people talk about that venue, it was this space where you could just go and enjoy music with like-minded people and you knew what you were walking into. And I kind of want Misc; to be a similar space, but also for the people that want to listen to jazz but then dance their heart out to some deep house. Why can't you do it with the same people in similar spaces but just translated in different ways? Or why do you have to go into a completely different area?

George: It's weird that you can put complete strangers in a room but bring them together by playing music that sparks their spirit inside of them. It can all resonate differently with people, but that's what's beautiful about it. It's like a universal language.

Keyrah: That's why I want to build this community of people looking for that experience and space. When I was growing up, I didn't have friends that listened to rock music. It was kind of taboo where I was from to even speak about the fact that my dad was Black and played rock music. People used to just take the piss about it, so I grew up shielding that side of me. And I've gotten to a place where I found more like-minded people who also enjoy a wider array of music and I started to feel a bit more at home. Everything I do is for the 8 year old version of me that wanted to feel more comfortable in the genres I was immersed in. The adult world imposes on you, but as a kid you're open to new experiences and influences, and I want to ignite that flame again. I want to feel excited about new things again. I think I've come full circle with the things I loved as a kid and realised it's those things that made me who I am today.

George: What's the thing that brings you peace when you're DJing?

Keyrah: It depends on how comfortable I feel in the set. Even though there was a point where I was genuinely nervous to do a set, I'm calm within myself now. I'm less nervous about that side, but I feel like interacting with the crowd and looking up at people, I still get a bit nervous and I don't even know why. When I did that Majid Jordan gig the other day, the decks were so close to the crowd, I was literally looking at the girl in front of me and then I just felt really awkward. Because if I look up at you, and you look at me… I don't know.

George: You're gonna have to have a real conversation (laughs).

Keyrah: I've gone on a tangent now. But what brings me peace…if I feel the sets go smoothly, and it's translating well with the crowd and they're receptive to what I'm doing. Sometimes you naturally get into a flow of things and it feels easy. And I don't think people understand this part of DJing, but I don't ever know what I'm going to play beforehand. I might throw songs together into a playlist, and think "Okay, this might be the vibe," but sometimes it's not the vibe or I haven't put enough tracks in there. So, I just set everything to BPM and then go from there. That's kind of the beauty in it because it's back to that experimental playground. I might mix two songs I've never mixed before and stumble across a blend that I've never done before and I'm like "Wow this is fire," and it lands with the crowd as well. Those are the real beautiful moments.

George: I love that because it's kind of like how kids learn. They just learn by doing. I love the fact you're bringing fun back into the industry that I feel is quite serious now. What's your go-to track at the moment that you know is going to land every time you play it?

Keyrah: There's a few that I have. But there's certified classics that no matter where you go, they'll land and I feel like for me that's always Lady by Modjo. You could be playing the worst set of your life, and if you throw that track in, it's the lifeline. There's bound to be a quarter of the room that are going to sing their heart out. And I think for me, that sort of French disco house was an intro into house music. So, there's a nostalgia attached to that track. I've played it many times. If anyone reads this and comes to my sets regularly, you probably already know.

George: Nice. Thanks, Keyrah.