



Heidi Mortenson: A Musician Without Boundaries

Written by Sean Bailey

Heidi Mortenson is no fan of boundaries. At the forefront of the experimental electronic pop scene in Berlin, Heidi has forged a successful musical career by shunning the rules and stereotypes of the music industry and, above all, by insisting on being herself.

Musically, this plays out in her love of experimentation and found sounds, vestiges of growing up with Asperger's. Her compositions are collages of beat box, ringtones, conversations, tiger growls, modem bleeps, static, and digital chimes. Accompanied by her powerful voice and lyrics, the results are remarkably catchy despite their surprising origins.

Professionally Heidi has taken every facet of her career into her own hands, ensuring complete creative freedom over her work. Heidi is a musician, a writer, a performer, a DJ, a producer, and even owns her own label, Wired Records.

Heidi's insistence on staying true to herself has also lead to her critique of gender and sexuality in the music industry. While queer and female, Heidi refuses to describe her band in these terms. Her aversion to boy/girl labels has also lead to her dynamic stage shows, which confront the audience with an ambiguous version of herself. When she is dressed in men's clothing, it is difficult to distinguish whether Heidi is male or female, gay or straight. Heidi stresses that ultimately these labels shouldn't matter, as what is of true importance is the music.

Sean: What was your childhood like growing up in Denmark?

Heidi: I wasn't a very social kid and was rather shy growing up. But even though I stuck to the sidelines, I really enjoyed being around happy people. I remember playing outdoors, listening a lot, thinking a lot, live music, and birthday parties. When I started school, however, I was taken out of kindergarten, because I was not integrating with the other children. Instead, I was homeschooled by my aunt, who would take care of me during the day, along with my cousin of the same age, until my mum got off work.

Sean: When did you first start experimenting with sound?

Heidi: When I was a kid, I would borrow my father's microphone and record things around the house. I would record sounds off of the radio or my father and grandfather when we would play the accordion together. Most of my recordings were of people unaware that they were being recorded. I used to lie behind the screen that separated our living room from the kitchen and record my mum as she spoke on the telephone. I felt that this was the most valuable material since people would shut up or act unnaturally when they knew that they were being recorded.

Sean: What about your first attempts at music?

Heidi: I first started modulating music when I was twelve, right when the film *La Bamba* came out. I would play the soundtrack on my tape recorder and play around with the equalizer and pitch knobs to modify the sound.

Sean: Living in Denmark, how were you first exposed to electronic music?

Heidi: When I was eighteen, I lived in Copenhagen and attended a dance academy. One night while going out, I discovered a club called X-RAY that played electronic music, and I thought to myself, this is what NY must look like! The club had me "zoomed in" from the first night. It felt so much more natural and right for me to freestyle to this electronic music, spun by DJs, than it did to be in the dance studio doing "1, 2, 3, and 4" routines in contemporary dance. The academic dance lessons were too disciplined and structured for my liking. I wanted to partake in wild, real, spontaneous expressions of music. At the academy I discovered Laurie Anderson, and at the club I discovered Josh Wink's "Don't Laugh".

Sean: You left home when you were still a teenager?

Heidi: I left home at nineteen, alone, and without anything except for my plane ticket and a suitcase. I first headed off to Italy, where I stayed for three months, and then moved to Barcelona where I spent the next seven and a half years of my life.

Sean: What precipitated the move?

Heidi: I left because I wanted to get away from a boring gray Denmark, where life was a safe bubble. The town I grew up in was quite small, and I wanted to really taste life, meet other open-minded people, and experience the types of things that I'd only ever seen on television. I also wanted a big dose of electronic music, and I wanted to dance.

Sean: How did television contrast with your small town reality?

Heidi: When I was a teenager, my hometown was quite small and narrow-minded. Everything in it, from concerts to hangouts, was mainstream. It was rare for anything to

really happen at all. In contrast the people I saw on TV were always on adventures and their lives were always changing. There was also the soundtrack music that really captured my imagination and that allowed me to interpret what was happening on-screen in intriguing ways. My own reality seemed to be heading in a straight line, in a single direction. I would finish school and eventually become a grown-up. Unsatisfied with these prospects, I couldn't wait to go and discover for myself what was out in the world outside of my hometown.

Sean: Was there a breaking point at which you decided that this is what you wanted to do?

Heidi: The breaking point, the moment at which I decided I wanted to be a musician, was in Barcelona after playing my first concert ever, which took place at the LEM festival in 2002. After my performance ended I headed backstage, feeling really uplifted, so much so that I had to force myself to sit down to really take it all in. I remember at that moment thinking this is what I want to do. It was at that very concert that I won the title of "Resident Artist of LEM 2002", awarded to the most talented act of each year's festival. While the point of the distinction was to help the resident artists to promote their act, and set up gigs over the span of a year, I ended up getting most of my breaks through people that had attended my performance. One of these breaks was meeting up with SOLU, a visual artist, who asked me to join her on a European tour.

Sean: Were your parents supportive of your music, or did it alienate them?

Heidi: My parents were not so thrilled at first. My mum tried to act interested, but my dad was alienated by the electronic nature of my music, and he found it very challenging to listen to. He's a very sensitive guy, and music affects his mood on the spot. Nowadays, however, they are very supportive of my career path. They know that this is my passion, my job, my life, and I've been at it long enough that they no longer doubt my commitment to it. They respect what I've been able to accomplish in my music, and they also respect me for taking risks and straying from the lifestyle they have chosen for themselves.

Sean: In some of your interviews you describe gender as a sort of clothing, and of having the capacity to feel like a boy one day, and a girl the next. What would you say characterizes each of these moods beyond their outward portrayal?

Heidi: The question of gender is funny for me, as I have fluid gender identities. Recently I have found that my notions of gender have woven themselves together, that they are fluid and shifting. I imagine gender like two daubs of colored paint that are mixed together with a paintbrush and water. At the edges, the paint still retains its original pigment, whereas at the center of the mixture, the part that is the largest in area, the colors fuse into a single new pigment. Where I am on this palette changes each day, or week, but mostly I move within these fused colors.

Sean: Do you think that there needs to be a clear distinction between the two?

Heidi: I'm happy to be a woman, but I don't feel that I have to restrict myself to the stereotype of a woman—clothes-wise, job-wise, partner-wise, nor any other-wise. The flexibility to move across the terrain of gender is natural for me. I like to make electronic music and beat box; I like tools and other gear, and I don't care what gender these activities or items are associated with. The definitions of what it means to be a boy or a girl are very much determined by societal traditions, by our upbringing, by our roots, by history. These traditions have created what one could call boy territories and girl territories. I

refuse to view these two classifications as separate territories, and for me it's all one big field. While boys and girls are different, you should be able to pursue and enjoy whatever suits you personally without paying attention to these territorial boundaries. I feel that the media takes advantage of these gender territories and solidifies their borders in order to facilitate the marketing of their products towards distinct targets. It gets tiring because they only ever represent the same old stereotype and disregard the possibility of bridging the two territories entirely. When I describe territories, I am suggesting the stereotypes that describe "boy-things" and "girl-things".

Sean: In your music, you are most often crooning to ladies. Would you describe yourself as a lesbian, or do you find sexuality to be as ambiguous as gender?

Heidi: I don't like to put my sexuality in a box. I also don't want to rule out any future romantic possibilities. This is why I like the word queer. It allows me to be any gender at any time, and also breaks away from the strict labels of lesbian, straight, gay.

Sean: Do you think distinctions between queer, lesbian, and gay are ever useful?

Heidi: Some of my friends feel the need to label themselves in these categories, and it's all good to me. Whatever definition, I feel that it's up to each of us to decide independently.

Sean: Do you have any advice for women that might identify as queer, but are having trouble expressing this to other people?

Heidi: I never came out of the closet via an official act. I never felt the need to, and I was also living very far away from my family, and so it didn't seem necessary. Being queer is very natural to me and never seemed like an abnormality that needed to be announced. I love who I love. Heterosexuals don't announce that they are straight, because they are the majority. Most of my life I have belonged to minority by choosing an alternative lifestyle, and it is in the minority that I feel comfortable and at-home. Some of my friends have felt the need to make the announcement in an effort to make people understand, but I believe it's up to each of us to make this decision. I don't, however, agree with hiding your sexual partner or sexuality from your friends and family. It's ultimately satisfying to be yourself.

Sean: What do you think of the term, "queer music"?

Heidi: I define myself as queer, despite the fact that I feel the term is pretty loaded in the context of the music industry. For this reason I don't describe myself as a queer band, or as a queer artist. I also refuse to describe myself as a female band or female artist. I don't believe that queer or female are genres of music, and so I simply describe myself as a band, or as an artist. I feel that any other sort of label is limiting to me. I make music, and I play music, and if people are interested in it, they are welcome to listen.

I find that the term "queer music" often represents trashy, un-clever and boring performances. Dildos, food resembling genitalia being destroyed in front of the audience, shouting, and an emphasis on the theatrics versus the actual music. I find that these types of performances have more in common with stage productions than they do with the production of music. I also don't believe that the shock effect works in 2008. Naked people, dildos, food throwing, we've seen it all before. I find that gender bending is relevant when expressing yourself outside of the boundaries of traditional gender roles, but it's nothing new. Marlene Dietrich was cross-dressing in the 1930's.



I think it's worthwhile to put thought into your art, be it provocative or funny. Audiences these days are smart, and they won't be won over or shocked by nudity. In contrast to these tactics, I applaud artists that really hone their skills and bring something personal and unique to the stage.

Sean: How has your questioning of gender and sexuality been received by your family?

Heidi: My parents are fine with it and wish me every happiness. My mum doesn't like to look at photos of me where I'm photoshopped as a boy, as she doesn't realize that it's all done through software, and she interprets it as reality. She hides the cover of my latest album *Don't Lonely Me*, because it portrays my head collaged over an athletic male body. She's embarrassed of family or friends seeing it. Her reaction makes me laugh. When I confront her about it, she doesn't want to admit that she's hiding it, which makes it even more hilarious. It's okay though, because I know that she is very

proud of me and loves me regardless, and she'll come around one day I'm sure. As for my dad, he is fine with me dressing up a bit like him. I used to wear his long underwear on stage and he found it amusing. I still wear them every winter, as they are very comfortable. We are very much alike when it comes to clothing. We appreciate practical clothes, and we don't mind if they have a few holes in them, or if they're not the latest style. My dad has a saying that goes, "If they're not modern now, they probably will be in some years." My father and I share another similarity, which is that we both have Asperger's Syndrome, which is derived from autism.

Sean: Did you eventually grow out of the most severe symptoms, or do you still have a hard time in social situations?

Heidi: I never regarded my Asperger's symptoms as being terribly severe, and for the most part attributed them to my character. I still stick by this belief, and generally don't regard Asperger's as having had a negative impact on me. I definitely don't view it as a sickness.

Asperger's can, however, be irritating and disturbing at times. It makes me dread huge crowds, which I find claustrophobic, something a musician is confronted with on an ongoing basis. When I lived in Spain for eight years, my Asperger's resulted in me being shy and added a dark mellowness to my personality. I was only finally able to overcome this shyness when I moved to Berlin and decided to take myself more seriously as a musician. This resulted in founding my record label, networking, setting up gigs in Berlin in conjunction with other performers, and generally becoming responsible for the success of my professional career.

I now find that my Asperger's is actually advantageous in some respects, as it creates two opposing versions of myself. It results in the immature teenager, the silly, nerdy, trifling,

trickster side of me that I feel provokes me to express myself, and the serious responsible side of me that allows me to succeed in business. I also appreciate my Asperger's, because I have traced it to my father who I love and admire. I also find that it rules out so many other mental disorders, and sicknesses. It has also led me to mentor as a big sister.

Sean: Do you think that the Asperger's part of your brain plays out in your music?

Heidi: Asperger's definitely plays out in my music as an obsession. I am constantly aware of sound and rarely travel without my stereo, pocket recorder, and iPod. I am constantly collecting records. I visit Wikipedia daily to advance my musical intellect. In my spare time I read autobiographies and watch documentaries on historical musicians. I don't read the manuals to any of my equipment, because I love to experiment with sound, welcoming mistakes and chaotic compositions, learning from them, and arriving at new combinations.

Sean: In your song, "Girl Since I Met You", you speak of the distraction that comes from lust, which seems both at odds with Asperger's, but also completely in line with its obsessive nature. Do you have any thoughts on this?

Heidi: I don't find myself obsessive when it comes to love. I'm definitely not a jealous type. When I'm in a relationship, there's you, me, and "us". I'm independent by nature, which I think is healthy. I also think it's important to love and respect each other's differences, as this makes for a more dynamic "us".

Sean: Could you enlighten us as to the current music scene in Berlin?

Heidi: Berlin is currently a Mecca for musicians. Artists from all over the world come to Berlin in the hopes of meeting like-minded people and being able to express themselves with the expectation that they can earn enough money doing what they love to afford the cheap rents in the city. A lot of new music has sprung from here as a result, with artists from different nationalities congregating, talking, and sharing ideas.

Sean: It seems like Berlin has given birth to a lot of independent female artists that are carving out a niche in experimental/electronic pop. I'm thinking of artists like Peaches, who moved to Berlin from Toronto, or Kevin Blechdom from San Francisco. All of these acts strongly question female identity and sexuality. Would you say that there is a dialog between these artists?

Heidi: We see each other perform, and we each have our own style of music, and our own personal goals as musicians. Some of our goals are the same or similar in part because we are all contemporary women who feel the need to bring attention to the forces that work against us. The music industry is a field dominated by men, which puts women artists in a peculiar position. As a result many of us utilize our music to bring attention to our malfunctioning patriarchal society and its manipulative media. This results in our need to question gender and sexuality in the context of the musical discipline.

Sean: Could you name some of your favorite up-and-coming Berlin artists that we might not have heard of in America?

Heidi: There are a few up-and-coming Berlin artists that I am excited about right now. Mosh Mosh are fun and original, and their lyrics are weird, catchy, and quite genius. Watch out for their album release on Wired Records. I am producing some of the songs.

Miss Le Bomb produces great catchy and humorous electro songs. She's always on to new projects and traveling the world performing and producing artwork.

My own band The Uncontrollables are being resurrected. We're starting practice sessions in my garage at the end of August. At this point all we know for sure is that there will be an organ, handclaps, harmonies, tape delay, reverb, inventive, and alternative recording techniques, tricks, and full-live-band concerts.

Sean: Sounds amazing.

Photos courtesy of Heidi Mortenson

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