



To Unite in the Groove: An Interview with SK Shlomo

[00:00:19] INTRO

Duška Radosavljević: Hello and welcome to The Gallery!

Our guest today has come to theatre-making via a stellar career in the music industry, working with the likes of Björk, Damon Albarn, Lily Allen, Jarvis Cocker, Imogen Heap and Ed Sheeran. He has been a World Looping Champion, a co-founder of the Beatbox Academy at Battersea Arts Centre, and the first ever non-classical musician to be given the position of Artist in Residence at the Southbank Centre in London.

Born into a Jewish Iraqi family in the UK, SK Shlomo is no stranger to storytelling – only his particular style has been honed through a lifetime of virtuosic practice as a percussionist, beatboxer and producer – all seasoned with a smile, and a glint in his eye.

In this interview we learn about how he discovered his rapport with the audience, his particular way of developing narrative material through recordings and live performance, and how he dreamt up and brought to life the concept of ‘rave theatre’.

SK Shlomo is one of the four artists selected in partnership with Battersea Arts Centre to be supported by the Aural/Oral Dramaturgies Project.

This interview took place via Skype on 10th March 2020.

[00:01:37] GETTING ON THE MIC

Duška Radosavljević: Shall we start then with you telling us about you – in whatever way you like – we’ve heard about you through the shows and through how you’ve presented yourself so far, but in terms of how you developed as an artist?

SK Shlomo: I was always really into the music, and throughout my whole childhood and teen years I was playing lots of music – I was a percussionist and a drummer. My dad’s a jazz musician so I used to play two or three gigs in his quartet a week when I was in my teens. So that got me a bit of money, and then I started joining other bands in my teens. So I was gigging most nights a week for the last two or three years I was home. And then when I left home, I was 18, and I went to Leeds in the North which is, like, a real music kind of city. I went to go and study Physics with Astrophysics, which was very different to the music in my heart.

DR: When was that – what years?

SKS: 2002, I left home. But it was the perfect place for me because there was a real music scene there. And the first time I lived somewhere where there was a real scene, so I started like, jumping on microphones and just trying to get as much experience as I could on stage as a beatboxer.

DR: Whereabouts in Leeds did you go to, where was this happening?

SKS: I need to remember some of the venues. There was a venue called the Wardrobe. Another one called the Basement. There was – the two universities both had venues – the Leeds Uni and the Leeds Met Uni, so I did a lot of gigs around those parts. Outside of rave, I met a guy who was in a hip hop band and then he invited me to join the band. And through that we started touring, first in the UK and then we started touring internationally. They’re called Foreign Beggars. Really, really underground. Based in London but a very international group, everyone was from different backgrounds, hence being called Foreign Beggars. So they loved it that I was foreign. And that was a real big deal for me because I’d always felt like a bit of an outsider being from an immigrant family, but this new world was – it was your job to be different and that was really lovely. And I was so young, I was 19, and these guys never asked me any questions about... They were like: ‘What’s your name?’, and I was like: ‘Shlomo’, and they were like: ‘Cool!’ That’s just what they called me. There wasn’t any like: ‘What does that mean,



what's your real name, where you from?' – there wasn't any of that. It was: 'Cool, let's just be together, let's just make music.'

DR: Did your music career take off before you finished your degree, is that what happened? Or did–

SKS: Nah, I didn't finish the degree. I officially was enrolled for the whole of the first year, but I wasn't going in. I was getting on the mic every night. And then, after that first year, I couldn't convince them any more that I was gonna change my ways, so I had to leave. And I was thinking of maybe trying to move to a Music course at Leeds College of Music or something like that, but it was too late in the year, so I went and got a day job, like a temp job. And then I left the temp job, I remember what happened – because I got offered this job in the summer from Leeds City Council teaching beatbox workshops for six weeks. I was like: 'Great!' So I quit the day job and then I showed up on the first day, and they were like: 'Oh, no, no, it's not six weeks, it's six workshops – one every week.' And I was like: 'Oh, no, I've just quit my job!' [*Laughter.*] Then I just decided: if I could earn as much money this week as I would've done in the day job, then I'll stay, I won't go back to work. And then, I managed to do that since, so that's good. So that was 2004, that I left the day job and that same summer I worked with Björk who was making an all vocal album. And she'd heard some of the demos that I'd put online which I just made by phoning up music studios in Leeds saying: 'I'm a beatboxer can I make a demo?' And some of them were like: 'Oh, this would cost you this, this would cost you that.' And one guy was like: 'You do what? You better come in and have a cup of tea!', and he ended up mentoring me a bit and introducing me to a lot of the industry around Leeds.

DR: And who was this guy – can we know?

SKS: He is called Bruce Wood and he had a studio called Touchwood. There's a Leeds band called Nightmares on Wax who are really successful, and they started out with him, so he kind of introduced me to all those guys.

DR: At what point did you meet Foreign Beggars? Which year was that?

SKS: That would have been straight away, like 2002. In the first few weeks of my being there. And then, yeah, after the Björk thing, people started wanting to book me rather than Foreign Beggars, so I started trying to do my own stuff. I started looping, so I got a pedal so I could live loop, and I made my own music rather than just... Because up until then I was just basically copying famous songs like, doing Snoop Dogg and doing Missy Elliot and all these songs. But I wasn't really, I didn't really think of it as creation, I just thought of it as a trick, and a fun way to get people excited. But when I worked with Björk she just wanted to make music. And I was like: 'Ah yeah, that's a cool idea, I make music – why am I not bringing these two worlds together?' I then decided to take my solo career really seriously and then I did a TV performance in 2005 on BBC 2. It was a show called *Later with Jools Holland*. Getting on that show was such a big deal. That was: boom, proper mainstream music industry exposure.

[00:06:42] TECHNOLOGY

DR: It sounds like the Björk incident was quite significant. What was it that drew her to your work?

SKS: She was making an album that was all voice. It was kind of a concept album – it was called *Medulla*, and she'd already recorded the album, and she'd used various different people. But there was a beatboxer called Rahzel, from America, who had been my hero, my whole generation's hero, and he'd done most of the work. And then she had this other track that wasn't going to go on the album, right, it was a commission for the Athens Olympics in 2004. She was going to perform it at the opening ceremony. She'd already finished recording the album and she decided she wanted to put this song on the album as well, which meant if it was going to fit on the album it would have to be all vocal. So she decided to re-record it, and they were mixing in the UK. So I think she literally just typed into Google: 'beatboxing UK', and my website came up, and she listened to it and she was like: 'Great, let's book that guy!' So, yes, I was kind of lucky in that way. I was quite entrepreneurial, and I had – at the time having a website was a big deal – but I had a really good website. Do you know what I mean, I had my shit together to a level that a lot of people – like 20 year olds – just didn't have.

DR: I would also observe from that you were quite tech savvy. What was that journey then towards making the Beast?



SKS: Well, I got into the looping and using technology in my show in a way because I wanted to expand my solo act. I wanted to keep it all vocal but I wanted to have more than just what I could do in one take. And then I guess you've got to skip forward a few years, because it was 2010, I entered the UK Looping Championships for fun. I entered it for fun, I saw it come up and I was like: 'That looks fun!' I entered that. Got into the finals and then won the UK finals, which meant I went to LA to represent the UK in the world finals. And then I won that. So I was like: 'Okay, I'm a world champion', and that day it was hosted at this big international music conference called NAMM which is like the annual event where all the music companies show off their new equipment. And they've all got these stands – this massive conference. I went round all of these stands and I was like: 'Oh, I've just become a world looping champion', and everyone was super interested in that, and they wanted me to try out all their equipment. I got home and people started sending me all of this tech. So then I had all this equipment which was really, really powerful but it was so cumbersome and it was really messy, and every time you plug one piece of hardware into another, you start having more and more degradation of the audio quality, and it's harder to get them to synchronise together, and it just got more and more messy and complicated. And I was getting more frustrated and I thought: 'Well, I want to make my own thing.' I kind of created this hybrid software/hardware setup and tried to synchronise the two together. But the software I was using was called Ableton Live, which is a really popular music software, and it's great for live electronic music. But you can also get this thing called Max for Live which is a programming language which integrates with Ableton and it means you can hack it. You can hack the software, but you can also hack the hardware, so I was using a physical controller, and you could hack it so you could change how it works and what the buttons do and when they light up and why and all the logic behind it. And so I kind of asked for some advice because when I first started to do it I couldn't do this – have you ever tried writing code? It's like, if you don't know what you're doing, it's just words that don't mean anything. But I got some mentorship, and I got some advice and I got some help, and then eventually I kind of broke through the seal of doubt, and then I was off. I could make it do it.

DR: And what were you trying to make it do that it wasn't doing already?

SKS: Initially, I was trying to emulate the hardware... There were probably four main pieces of hardware in my set up that each did different jobs, and I wanted to emulate that with the software so it would all happen in one place, in the computer.

DR: And what were the four pieces of hardware that you were using up until then?

SKS: The main one's called the loop station, which was a similar piece of kit that I'd been using right back since the beginning. But I'd been using all of the more modern versions of them as they came out as they got more and more powerful. Then I had another called the Kaoss Pad which is a really powerful effects unit. It has an XY touch screen so you can control two effects with one finger by – going up and down affects one parameter, left and right affects another. And I had another big effects unit with different vocal effects to kind of manipulate my voice. What I wanted to do was do all of that with the computer, so it all happened in one place. One of my rules, if I was going to use software, was that I would never touch the laptop. I was always really physical with the hardware, like, I used to come off stage and my knuckles would be bleeding. Because they are not really built to use with your hands, they're built – the ones I was using at the beginning – they're like foot pedals, they are designed for guitar players. And I'd be smashing them. I never wanted to lose that physicality. Because a lot of people use touch screens and things like that but they're so delicate and I wanted to keep that quite aggressive, quite violent drama to the performance.

[00:12:06] TEACHING

DR: That's good. I was going to backtrack a little bit because this is the technological strand that's important. You talked to us about how your interest in music has evolved, and you just talked to us about how your journey towards working with different hardware and software has come about. And actually it's quite interesting that you said you studied Physics because that's also part of that journey in some way in my head–

SKS: Yeah...



DR: And there is this other thing that you've touched on, which was about teaching beatboxing in Leeds, that I don't know whether that's a strand that leads towards your work with the Beatboxing Academy in Battersea Arts Centre. Where was it in Leeds that you taught beatboxing?

SKS: I started doing workshops really early on. I'm trying to remember exactly the story. So you know I told you about Bruce who had the studio, he introduced me to Leeds City Council because they had an annual music competition called Bright Young Things or something like that, and they wanted someone to host the gigs, so those were some of my first paid gigs. I'd go on stage and I'd do some beatboxing and I'd get the crowd hyped—

DR: And where did that take place?

SKS: It was in Leeds city centre various venues in there – one called Northern Lights, one called – oh I need to try and remember where they all were. I can find out if you want to know. But these are my first professional gigs really. Through that I got into working with Leeds City Council and they asked me to do these workshops over the summer. And it was like – there were six workshops in six different parks, like Roundhay Park and Hyde Park, different parks around the city, and just trying to engage with the kids, and young people hanging around in the summer with nothing to do. Get them making music. The teaching thing happened right in the beginning and kind of grew in parallel with my own practice. And I always really loved teaching because when someone asks you how you do it and you have to explain it, you actually think about your practice in a way that you don't always notice when you're just performing. You're like: 'Well, how do I do that?' It makes you think step by step how you're actually doing it, and that's a really helpful process for your own learning. So I always loved that. And yeah the BAC thing wasn't that far forward from that. I think the first gig I did there was 2006 or something like that. I think I did a one-off gig there and it sold out. So we were like: 'Yeah, we need to do more', so then we did a whole weekender where I took over the building for a weekend. The idea was we'd engage the community, so we started going into schools doing little workshops and I brought some of my friends in to do that with me like Zani. And various people got involved. They brought Conrad [Murray] in, and we were like: 'This is amazing! We need to formalise this!', so we called it the Beatbox Academy, we never looked back.

DR: So have you been as closely involved in it as Conrad has since then?

SKS: I stopped teaching at the Beatboxing Academy quite gradually and Conrad took the lead. Originally it was me, Zani, a guy called Jez, Conrad and a lady called Monique. Jez moved to Italy, Monique moved to the other side of London, Zani is like a world champion beatboxer so he was always on tour, and I was always on tour as well – so it was really hard. But Conrad stayed, he became the director of it and became the centre of it. And I'd have more of a consultant role and these days I'm not really involved at all apart from just being very proud.

DR: Yes!

[00:15:27] THE TURNING POINT OF THEATRE

DR: Would you say that was your sort of first crossover with theatre-making or was there any other path towards now wanting to make a theatre show?

SKS: Yeah, there was a real key turning point for me which was – I got offered to do a gig at Southbank Centre in the Queen Elizabeth Hall. And I got asked to curate a whole beatboxing event. That was 2006. Around the same time. Yeah, the BAC gig would have also been 2006, I think, and that was my first headline show in London, and that sold out. But this gig at the Southbank also sold out but I wasn't headlining. I performed, but I'd also booked some of the other key beatboxing people at the time. And Foreign Beggars came and played as well. It was really weird for all of us because it was our first seated gig – like the Queen Elizabeth Hall, I don't know if you've been there, but it's a really grand traditional concert hall. Beautiful room, with seats! And everyone was sat down. I remember Foreign Beggars hated it, because their whole thing is getting people absolutely crazy and jumping around. And some of the other beatboxers hated it, but I absolutely loved it, and it's because I realised that I had been talking quite a lot between songs just kind of bantering, but normally it didn't get much reaction, but at this show they laughed, and I was like: 'Oh, they're listening!' And then I was like: 'I



wonder what would happen if I just stopped and didn't say anything', and the whole room went completely silent. I was like: 'Oh, this is so much more exciting – the dynamic you can build all the way back up!' And I realised that they listened to what I was saying, it wasn't just about the music, it was about like the whole performance, the whole story behind who you are. It's not just – look at these skills I have, it's let me take you on a journey. So I really got the bug that day of creating more narrative, storytelling-led performances that incorporate the beatboxing and the music but that are about more than just make some fucking noise, do you know what I mean? They could be, like, a bit more delicate or vulnerable or whatever energy I wanted.

DR: And it was primarily a music gig?

SKS: It was a music gig, it wasn't a theatre show, it was a gig. But it gave me the bug. And then that same night I got a phone call from the artistic director of Southbank Centre, Jude Kelly, and she offered me a position as Artist in Residence – which was like, do you know what I mean, there had been no non-classical artists do that, especially not something as abstract as beatboxing, it was a huge accolade! Yeah, so then I set up office at Southbank in 2007 and I had a space there, a creative space to work from and have meetings from. And I had free rein of the concert halls so I programmed a whole series of concerts in the QEH. We did a monthly concert series for a whole year. They all sold out. They were all really, really varied – I was working with folk, or I was working with indie musicians, or I was working with Jamaican music, I just wanted to like absorb as much music as I could. Throughout all of that I was really developing my craft as a storytelling performer. And then the real theatre thing happened. I remember – 2011, I had a little baby and I wanted to tell the story of what it felt like to be a dad. And I just won this World Loop Station Championship thing so I just wanted to talk about all of that. And we put on my first kind of headline tour and the show was a theatre show, a one man show called *Mouthtronica* and then we toured that, we took it to the Edinburgh Fringe and the whole run sold out. It was like: 'Okay, this is a thing, storytelling theatrical performance, yeah it works!'

[00:19:06 to 00:20:34] 'Sweet Dreams' from *Mouthtronica* (2011)

[00:20:35] HONING THE CRAFT / HAVING FUN

DR: What would you say were the most significant factors in that process, and what was the kind of journey of that? How did your craft actually develop in that time?

SKS: I did lots of collaborations, so I was kind of working with wildly different genres of music and different disciplines. And I was absorbing all of this. And then every summer I'd be doing the festival season, so I'd be taking all these skills and playing to really big crowds. A lot of it is just experience, like the more shows you've done the more things that have gone wrong and you've survived them and added those to your arsenal. And, yeah, building a following, and creating a vocabulary as a performer, and I mean, at the time I think I was still quite frustrated though, because really what I wanted to do was be a recording artist but I was too scared to do that. So I was just really obsessed with pushing myself as far as I could as a beatboxer and a vocal artist. That was my obsession – to like keep breaking boundaries.

DR: You mentioned the vocabulary – I am really intrigued by that. I'd like to know what you would consider to be your vocabulary. Is that something that you're clear about or is it something quite instinctive?

SKS: Yeah, I think it's not super defined. It's more like – because my background had been in jazz drumming and I also played orchestral percussion, so I had this real open mind. It was kind of genre-less in a way, because beatboxing isn't actually a genre, it's more like an instrument. Yeah so, if you say: I play guitar, that could mean anything – it could mean rock guitar, or it could mean classical guitar, Latin, flamenco, it could be a million genres. So I think I was just exploring technique. But also just like crowd – I think I really learnt a lot about how to bring a crowd together and make them feel excited and connected, and like they've come on a journey with you. That was a huge deal.

DR: So some sort of improvisational skills–

SKS: Hugely. All those shows we did at Southbank would be very raw. We wouldn't rehearse them very much, we'd just throw some ideas together before and then just take it on stage. Yeah, it was



improvisational, and I'd developed this voice as someone who could guide that, who can bring musicians together, and in the moment build something from it. And then – meanwhile, I haven't mentioned it, but I also had the Vocal Orchestra which was my beatboxing ensemble, which went through various stages but they'd often be with me, so I'd have this, like, incredible – all of them were incredible musicians, incredible vocalists, singers and beatboxers, and I could just throw stuff at them in real time–

DR: Yes, tell us about how that started, and where, and who these people were.

SKS: Well, it started in 2007, so this was just as I was gearing up to start this residency at Southbank Centre. And I wanted to organise the world beatboxing convention, which had happened a couple of times before. I was like – I wanted to organise it. I'd also been organising the beatboxing championships. So I was still very entrepreneurial at this point, I was still, like, making things happen. And I wanted to do the world beatboxing convention. We were looking for a headline act that would appeal to the beatboxers, but also to the wider Southbank Centre audience. And I was like: 'Well, we're going to have to make one then. So we'll make an act!' I was like: 'Let's create the world's first beatboxing choir!' That was my dream. And I'd been hanging around with this vocal group called the Swingle Singers, who were a really traditional vocal group who'd been around since the 1960s and won Grammys in the 1960s, or whatever. And they do this jazz classical thing. And I was like: 'What happens if you take them and mix them with a bunch of beatboxers?' It was an experiment. Through that – that was big there were 13 or 14 people on stage and then when we started getting offers to tour it, I shrunk it down so it would be not quite so cumbersome, so it was down to seven or eight people. We did loads of shows at Southbank, we did shows at Glastonbury and big festivals like Latitude Festival, Big Chill, WOMAD, things like that. And to be honest that was kind of the real – in terms of audience reach, that was the peak of my career. We were playing to thousands and thousands of people – it was really exciting time.

DR: When Jude Kelly asked you to come into the Southbank Centre as the Artist in Residence, what did she say she wanted from you? What was her vision for you being there?

SKS: That's a really good question – that's what I asked her. Because she was like: 'Do you wanna be Artist in Residence?', and I was like: 'Yeah, what's that then?' She was like: 'Well, it's up to you.' 'Yeah, but what does it mean? What do I do? What do I have to do? Do I make something?' She was like: 'If you like.' She was a bit, like, deliberately super vague about what it meant. One thing she suggested was that I could make a Christmas show, but I didn't know what that meant I thought she meant a show about Christmas. I only understood a year or two later she meant a show that could run over Christmas time. A big theatre show.

DR: I'm identifying these different strands of your influences and your identity as an artist and so on. And there's another one – I saw your children's show. And there is also something quite childlike in *Surrender* as well, especially at the beginning – and the Jewish Nanna story as well is quite a striking one that seems to be an important marker of your work in some way, because it kind of recurs, doesn't it? It exists in *Surrender* and, as I understand it, you are trying to bring it back into the new work that you're developing–

SKS: And I made that piece for *Mouthtronica* which was my first theatre show. I've re-used that piece because it worked so well–

DR: So there is something about this, when you said Jude Kelly wanted you to do a Christmas show, I was thinking: 'Yes, she was kind of envisaging engaging the kids, engaging the families', which you ended up doing with your children's show maybe later. So are you aware of this? Is this a conscious part of your identity as an artist?

SKS: What, to keep it childlike? To keep it playful?

DR: Yes.

SKS: I guess so, yeah. I remember watching my first gigs when I was a kid, and I'd always love it if they were having fun. If the band were having fun on stage, it was infectious, it was really hard for you not to have fun. Because my dad used to take me into London to Southbank or Barbican to watch lots of jazz and lots of Latin music and also classical stuff. And I'd always be fascinated by how fun it looked.



I thought: 'I want to do that, I want to have fun.' So I always try to have fun in my show, I always try to keep it – yeah, I had to be delighted myself or else what's the point? You know what I mean?

DR: Where did you grow up?

SKS: I grew up in a village called Bourne End in Buckinghamshire – it was kind of one hour from London, half way between London and Oxford, so I could get to London easily. And in the area – I used to go to music school on Saturdays, and I got a scholarship there when I was about ten years old. So then I'd go there on Saturdays and study and play in orchestras and learn. It was always just around me – music was always such a big part of what I was doing.

DR: And why drums? Is drums the main instrument that was there from the beginning, or was that one of the many of the instruments that you played?

SKS: That was the main instrument from the age of eight to 18 – that was my dream – drumming. But I did play other instruments – I'd sing, and I'd play guitar, bass, piano, stuff like that – anything with your hands. But drumming was my specialty.

[00:28:30] MAKING 'RAVE THEATRE'

DR: We've touched on both the first part and the second part of our intended interview in terms of your different journeys towards what you do, and then what you do – this idea of making performance that is on the cusp between music-making and theatre-making. I'm obviously coming at it from theatre, although of course you are coming at it from music. It's quite interesting to observe how your work comes across – the ones that I've seen, for example, *Surrender* – as having all these different layers that is the narrative, the music-making, the way in which you use rhythm and melody in the storytelling. Is there a way in which you articulate the way you do this, or is this again just an instinctive thing that just happens?

SKS: I don't know, I feel like that show in particular, *Surrender*, was built from such a wide range of inspirations and influences. Because there are chunks of it which are taken from older influences like the beatboxing and the live looping and the talking about my nanna, talking about how I discovered beatboxing, playing at Glastonbury and things like that. There's a bunch of music in that show which was much more recent from my album where I actually did a lot less beatboxing and I really wanted to embrace myself as being a producer and a recording artist and a singer. So then in a lot of that show I'm not really doing a large amount of clever performing, I'm just singing. That was a real departure for me. That was a brave step for me to survive and for it to still be considered to be successful – that was a big deal. I had, like, quite strict starting points for that: 'I don't want to do any gimmicks, I just want the music be respected.' I think I had a bit of a hang-up because I'd get a lot of people come up to me after my beatboxing – and I still do – and they say things like: 'Oh wow, that's amazing, it blew my mind – the music wasn't my thing, but you are amazing and what you do is amazing!' And I'm a bit like: 'What does that mean? Like, the music is what I care about, I don't care about how it's done – I care about what I'm trying to say.' I think I had a bit of a chip on my shoulder that I had to prove my music would stand alone, without using my personality or charisma and without using my virtuosity. Just using my voice, my songs. I feel much better about all of that now, now I've just gone back to 'It doesn't matter!' People can take what they want from it. The whole process helped me relax my rules to myself. I was being quite hard on myself. All of that came out of insecurity and a dislike of myself. And that whole process was really helpful for me to just like understand that you don't have to prove your worth by achievement, and everything you do is fine, it's good, it's beautiful. This new show's much less strict about how to make it. It's just: what am I trying to say, and then all the tools can follow that.

DR: That makes me want to ask a question about the new show – which section of the Fringe brochure was the *Surrender* show in?

SKS: Music–

DR: Music – interesting!

SKS: I mean, I didn't know what to do, so I chose music. [*Laughter.*] But I think this new show is going to be in the theatre [section].



DR: So what is the intention for the new show?

SKS: Well, it's the first time I've really defined it as theatre – as a piece of theatre, as opposed to a gig that's theatrical. Although it is very much still a gig, very much still it ends into a rave – that's my whole idea. With *Surrender* and the Fringe – that was the first time I'd managed to pull together both sides of what I love to do, which is – tell a story and host a gig where people get to go crazy. Because ever since that first gig at Southbank where I had the seated crowd, I'd loved being able to tell the story but the crowd always said: 'We wanted to dance, we wanted to dance!' And it was always awkward. This show was finally the first time I'd felt I'd nailed it – because I told the story, it was very emotional, there were lots of tears, and then every night they'd kick their chairs away, and they got rid of the chairs and they came back and we raved, and it was a real celebration of life, and celebrating recovery basically. And that got me really thinking, 'cause that venue I was in was perfect – it was basically a nightclub with some chairs in it, so it was really easy to just move the chairs, but still have really cool sound and lights. And I was like: 'That's what I want to do – I want to create a theatre show that turns into a rave!' So with this show, I wanted to tell the true story of how I started hosting raves in my living room when I was in recovery. I'd been off the road for pushing two years, and I hadn't gone back to work. I was feeling a lot better but I wasn't ready to go back to work, and I was like: 'This was going to be a way to reconnect with this community that I felt isolated from. In this show I'm going to tell the story and then the audience will suddenly realise that they are in the story, they are the guests at the rave, and we're all gonna have this party together.' And this concept of 'rave theatre' – everyone I've said those two words to has just like – their ears prick up and they're like: 'What is that, that sounds cool!?' [Laughter.] 'I wanna go to that.'

DR: And what would make it more theatre, what would make it more qualified for the theatre section of the Fringe brochure?

SKS: Well, I've written a script. I've written a story. And I've got a theatre director to help me bring that to life. Like, I've never done that that before. I've had offers to do it before, and I've been: 'No, I want to do it, because I'm a control freak!' But then–

DR: Yes, because the lighting in your shows that I've seen till now is very elaborate – do you do your own lighting designs as well?

SKS: No, I normally get someone to help with that, but it's almost always quite last minute, or quite improvised. It's more like a feel, rather than a design. Whereas this show, we want to go much more detailed, so we can really create worlds with light, and we're gonna hopefully have a little bit of set – something really simple but it's going to be a bit more designed and it's a bit more considered. Because I remember the moment, *Surrender* got nominated for the Edinburgh Fringe Mental Health Award, so I went to the Fringe First awards where actual Stephen Fry was handing out the awards. And I listened to everyone give their thank you speeches, like: 'I want to thank my director, my producer, I want to thank my designer', and I was a bit like: 'It's just me.' [Laughter.] It's me and my partner who's also my business partner, we co-produced it all ourselves. She was here and I was up in Edinburgh by myself and I was like: 'I need to have a bigger team, and I need to have like people around me.'

DR: I'm interested in how the writing happens for a show like this one. Maybe we don't know yet about the show you're writing but we can maybe talk about the shows you've written so far, like *Surrender* – was the text that's in it actually written down first or–?

SKS: No–

DR: Okay, tell me more about that!

SKS: Well, actually – it varies. Actually – *Surrender*, I actually built the narrative around a TED talk that I'd written, and that TED talk was very, very scripted. Because when I was working with the organisers they wanted to see a draft, and they wanted to give feedback and they wanted to see a redraft and it was very, very structured. And then I worked really hard to internalise the speech, so that I didn't have to think. I practised it for weeks and weeks and weeks and got it really tight. So then, when I wanted to expand that into an hour – it was already there, the arc was already there. So I guess, I was writing stuff down and memorising it and changing it, but a lot of it was devised, and devised on stage as well. Not necessarily rehearsed. It was like – I'd start talking on stage and then I'd start performing, and yeah



all that stuff about the nanna, the piece about my nanna, the 'Bellydancer' piece, was devised on stage – like, I kind of knew what I wanted to say, and I went on stage when I was first touring *Mouthtronica* a long time ago – and it would have been an eight-minute piece, and I'd listen back to it and be like: 'Oh, come on!', and I'd condense it down a bit. And then I did a TV version of it when it had to be three minutes, and it got really really tight and then, boom – that's the kind of solidified version. So it's like devising, but without a director so the audience becomes my director. I just play it. I record every show I do. I used to listen to every single one I do and make really detailed notes. Like even that sharing you came to in the tiny room, I recorded that on the GoPro. And whilst that wasn't even a show we were just talking, there were some things that I said whilst I was explaining ideas that made everyone laugh that I wasn't planning – I hadn't thought this is going to be a funny joke. I just said something and everyone laughed. And I've transcribed that and that's gone into the script. I said something about getting a babysitter and everyone laughed and I was like: 'Boom, that's going into the script.' That wasn't even a show. That's why I film everything because you have to find what made people laugh, it can be [that] articulation is really key, or timing or the fact that I was surprised. It's hard to remember those things if you haven't filmed it.

DR: That's very exciting to me: this idea that the work does not begin with the process of writing down on the page. But it actually gets formed – what you just said the audience being the director is really insightful, it's really interesting to me.

SKS: That's how my whole thing evolved, like out of doing open mic nights in Leeds, all the way to playing at Southbank or playing at Glastonbury. Like, I never wrote a script, I just performed and spoke, and saw what resonated. And that became more and more tight. Even the kids' show that you watched, that wasn't scripted that was from me teaching workshops to kids in Leeds and gradually repeating it and finding which bit made people laugh, which people learnt quicker, and that just becomes tighter and tighter and more and more refined.

DR: Are there any reflexes that you resort to when you are composing live if you like? So like in hip hop presumably you have a meter you are working to, right?

SKS: Yeah, yeah.

DR: So I was noticing in *Surrender* also that there was also a meter to which you were delivering particular bits of text. How does that work?

SKS: Well, hip hop and a lot of electronic music is centred around a loop. Unlike classical music where it's more linear, electronic music tends to be something that loops and builds up, rather than along. And that creates a steady beat and a steady tempo that's what makes people tap their feet. It's your heartbeat, it comes from your heart, that's where it evolves from, like – tribally. It's like, we all want to unite in a groove. I think because I got into the storytelling through the music rather than the other way round, I always just assumed it would be part of the music, so it would need to go in a groove. And if there wasn't a groove, if I took the music away, that creates a big contrast, that bit then feels naked. Which isn't a bad thing. It's basically, I'm not telling a story, I'm singing a song – I'm just singing a storytelling song, if that makes sense.

[00:39:59 to 00:42:58] 'Bellydancer' from *Story So Far* (2013)

[00:42:58] STORYTELLING – BACK TO THE ROOTS

DR: To what extent do you feel your work, the way it is, might connect to the cultural heritage that you might have been exposed to as a child? Are there any storytelling traditions that your grandparents might have fed in at their end.

SKS: Yeah, I'm sure there are. My grandparents were from Iraq. They would have descended from Bedouin Jews, who were like travellers, they would travel around the desert. And a lot of the food my nanna would cook was traditional Arabic Jewish food, and a lot of them are these really slow cooked meals. And the reason why is – on the Sabbath, you're not allowed to start the fire, you're not allowed to touch the fire. So they have to start the fire before the sunset on the Friday before the Sabbath starts and you can't touch the fire again until Sunday, until sunset on Saturday night. So they need to cook food that will sit in the fire for a long, long time, and it was really, really delicious. There's this whole



culture of the fire, the campfire, the centre of your community – wherever you happen to be that day – is there and you sit around that and you sing and you tell stories and you dance. I think that is a real fundamental part of our core, our DNA as human beings – we’ve evolved to live in these tribes. We just happen to have, in the very recent history in terms of evolution, moved into cities and separated ourselves into houses where we can’t do that every night. And I think that kind of tribal rhythm is essential to what I do with the looping, and the beatboxing, and the bass and the pulse of it, and the heartbeat of it is all about that – kind of connecting humans together through rhythm. It’s a cultural way of bringing people together.

DR: What about Matthew, how did that choice come about – the choice of Matthew Xia, as the director?

SKS: Well, I’ve known him for years and years. When I first joined Foreign Beggars our first tour that we did, he was on that tour, because he was DJing with another group who were supporting us. And he at the time was a hip hop DJ on BBC 1Xtra which is a radio station, at the time it was quite new as well. That’s how I knew him as DJ Excalibah, I didn’t know him as a theatre guy. I don’t think he did either. And we stayed in touch over the years, and I kind of watched him gradually become this award-winning director. I’d always invite him to see my work, and he’d always have lots of helpful things to say. And then, when I was about to go up to Edinburgh last summer, I invited a few theatre-type people to watch me do a little sharing, and just give some last minute feedback. It was too late for me to make big changes, but give a bit of feedback and I really liked what he said and it was like–

DR: What did he say?

SKS: He asked me to think about movement and why I was doing things. His main thing is – he likes to say: ‘Yeah, but why?’ Like: ‘I wanna do this.’ ‘Yeah but why?’ ‘Because of this and this.’ ‘Yeah but why that?’ He really makes you dig down into the actual core of what it is – why you’re doing it. But also, I had worked with him before as a director, I forgot to say, in 2014, maybe. I did a project with a choir called Sense of Sound in Liverpool and they wanted to make a theatre show. And they got him to direct that and that ran for about a week or something like that, and I was in the show as a guest, and was part of the story and I really enjoyed working with him. So yeah, that trust’s just there. And also, everyone I’ve said his name too has said: ‘Whoah, you’re working with him!?’ And I’m like: ‘Yeah..!’

DR: It’s great!

SKS: He’s got a really strong reputation so I’m really excited about it!

DR: Great. Thank you for your time! I really appreciate it.

SKS: Thank you, guys, it’s been fun to talk to you.

Transcribed by Matthew Powell & Duška Radosavljević

Clips Summary

[00:19:06 to 00:20:34] ‘Sweet Dreams’ from *Mouthtronica* (2011)

[00:39:59 to 00:42:58] ‘Bellydancer’ from *Story So Far* (2013)

Audio available at www.auralia.space/gallery3-skshlomo/.

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