

Kim Ann Foxman

Kim Ann Foxman's trajectory from rave-curious kid to clubland headliner may seem broadly familiar, but it's the details that stand out. Some of them appear relatively minor, like her stint as Miss Teen Hawaii Filipina pageant champion. Some are a little bigger, the party that arguably kicked Foxman's career into gear, Mad Clams, held in the notoriously seedy East Village gay bar the Hole in the early 2000s. There, Foxman DJ'ed with Andy Butler, who went on to create Hercules & Love Affair, with Foxman as a core member of the original lineup.

At the time, Foxman's flirtation with pop stardom masked a distinct musical personality, one defined by the sound and vibe of classically jacking club music — specifically old-school house and rave. But in the years since, her love for that music has found full expression through her ever-higher-profile DJ sets, as well as through her handful of solo productions.

Interview — Bruce Tantum
Photography — Nathan Perkel





You grew up in Hawaii, right?

Yeah, I was born and raised in Hawaii. I lived there through high school. It was in Honolulu, on Oahu.

So you're the Hawaiian equivalent of a big-city girl.

Well, Honolulu wasn't so big when I was growing up. It's a lot more developed now. I lived deep in the valley near a waterfall. I would hike there every weekend, barefoot. I was like a little wild island animal.

Yet somehow you were refined enough to win the Miss Teen Hawaii Filipina contest.

Yeah, that was when I was in eighth grade. I was such a tomboy, but my mom had this dream that I would be a model or a beauty contest winner or something. She wanted me to go to charm school and be like a little princess, but I didn't even like to brush my hair. She and my aunt signed me up for this pageant without my knowledge, and it kind of traumatized me. I was crying in the dressing room because I didn't want to wear the lipstick, and I didn't want to wear the evening gown. I even refused to do the talent part.

But you still managed to come out on top?

I really slammed it with swimsuit. I came out with my boogie board and my fins, in like a sports bra and spandex shorts combo in fluorescent colors. I think that made a statement; they had never really seen that before. And somehow I won.

Did you have to perform any duties during your reign?

I had to do stuff like make appearances at other pageants. They'd say, "We have a special guest!" I'd have to stand up and wave, with the spotlight on me. It was total hell. I actually resigned early. I gave my crown to the second-place winner.

I love that you use a photo from your reign as the cover of the "Energy EP!"

The whole thing is funny for me now. I figured, why not own it?

Were you into music when you were young?

Well, I was into dancing. And then I discovered rave music as a kid. Somebody gave me a techno compilation, probably around 1992 when I was in ninth grade. It was the first time I had really heard anything beyond the kind of dance-pop stuff that was on the radio. I was like, "Whoa, what is this?" I didn't know there was this whole other thing going on. I thought it was so cool, and became really curious about it. I started digging into it a bit more.

Were you thinking about DJ'ing at all?

I did DJ at this school dance with this kind of music. I was mixing it up with other music that people knew, and people were still like, "What the hell is this stuff?" But I wasn't serious about DJ'ing at all, and had no idea

that I would ever become serious. I didn't even know how to do it — I was just playing these songs off a Discman.

Were you buying vinyl yet?

I had some vinyl, but it was just stuff like J. J. Fad. I didn't have money to buy many records, anyway. But I kept following the music.

How did you start to dive deeper into dance music?

There were these little raves in Hawaii. They were very tiny, like the smallest raves you could imagine. I started going to them, but my mom was really strict, so I always had to tell her that I was sleeping over at a friend's house. Then during my final year of high school, I got a job at an all-ages club, so that was my excuse for staying out late: "Mom, it's my job!" The club would actually get some cool people, like Deee-Lite.

What were you doing at the club?

I actually started as a dancer. Not really a go-go dancer, but like an in-house person who would just dance.

"I didn't have money to buy many records, anyway. But I kept following the music."

You were the person who would get the party going?

Yeah, I was a get-the-party-going girl. Then I started working behind the non-alcoholic bar, making rave smoothies. I actually liked it there, but the scene was so small.

That can be a plus, actually.

It makes you really thirsty. If we found anything cool, we'd get really excited. So even though it was a tiny scene, the people who were into it were really into it. But I knew there was more out there. I just hadn't been able to experience it yet.

You moved to San Francisco right after high school. Why?

Yeah. That was in '95. A friend of mine said, "Oh, the scene is so wild in San Francisco. It's going crazy right now!" I was like, "Ooh, get me over there!" I applied to art college, moved there and went full into the rave scene.

Did you actually attend art college?

Well, I made friends at art college. But I wasn't really there. I was going out a lot, and I was starting to buy records.





“I was like, ‘Where is the real New York stuff? Where is the house music?’”

Do you remember what shops?

There was BPM Records, Tweekin Records, and a little bit later, Amoeba. But mostly it was BPM and Tweekin for techno, house, and progressive house. And I was also collecting rave tapes. I had actually started buying them in Hawaii, but once I got to San Francisco, I really got into them. I would bring a tape to the record store and go, “What’s this song?” and make them find it. I still have those tapes, and I still have a lot of those records. Some of them are my secret weapons.

You were in a band of sorts while you were in San Francisco, right?

Around '98 or '99, I was in this two-man electronic band called Toobit. We played around 10 shows total, really small little gigs.

Was DJ’ing beginning to enter the picture?

Not yet, but I remember someone trying to teach me how. I tried it and got really into it, but I couldn’t afford to buy the equipment. I still wasn’t thinking about actually being a DJ.

When did that thought start to enter your mind?

That wasn’t until I moved to New York in 2002. I basically moved here because I was in love with this girl who had moved to New York a year earlier, and I followed her like a little puppy dog. I had been visiting her in New York before that, and it was kind of exciting, but I wasn’t sure if I could live there. Eventually, I became excited by the idea, so I moved — and then we broke up three days later. We’re best friends now, though.

Were you immediately immersing yourself in the NYC scene?

I was, but it was kind of disappointing! It was still when they had “No Dancing” signs up on the wall. This was the tail end of when electroclash was happening, and I was partaking in that a bit, but everything outside of that was kind of dance-rockish, which wasn’t really my thing. It was better than nothing, but I was like, “Where is the real New York stuff? Where is the house music?” The kind of music I liked was so untrendy back then. I figured that I was just the dork who likes uncool stuff.

But around this time, I was starting to shop at [Brooklyn thrift store] the Thing. And because nobody was looking for the kind of music I liked at the time, I would find crates full of really cool records, stuff like old Todd Terry and old rave records. It was a goldmine. I used to go to the Thing with my little turntable and spend the whole day.

When did you start playing those records out? Was that at the Mad Clams party?

The first party I DJ’ed was a little before that, just basically for a bunch of friends at this little place on Grand Street in Williamsburg. From there, I started playing out more, and then Mad Clams started.

What was the genesis of Mad Clams?

I had been looking for a bartending job, but then a friend of mine said, “Well, actually, the Hole is looking for somebody to throw a party. Would you want to do something like that?” I was like, “Hell, yeah!” He said, “It’s in two weeks. You can do whatever you want, but you have to ultra-promote it. You’re responsible for bringing people.” I was like, “Uh, OK, whatever!” I asked Andy and my friend Holly to do it with me. At the time, the Hole was a really hot bar, and it took off really quick.

The Hole was such a fun place back then.

Yeah! It was one of those really dirty places. That and Mars Bar, which was right down the street. Mad Clams was a mostly queer but all-inclusive party, with a really mixed crowd.







“Antony said, ‘I actually think you should just leave her on it!’ So that’s how I ended up on the album.”

Was that your goal from the outset?

It was totally by accident. All these really cool people would come through. Lesbians would be hanging out with skater boys. The Irak graffiti crew was really big at that time, and they were there a lot. But the best part was that I got the chance to play the kind of music that I wanted to hear played, and I didn’t really give a shit what people thought about the music.

What did they think about it?

A lot of them didn’t really like it! But people would come because everyone was there. It was so much fun and really debauchorous. We’d really mix up the music. I can remember playing something like Bam Bam’s “Give It To Me” into a freestyle song and then back into house music.

How long did Mad Clams run?

It went from 2002 till 2005. Then I was playing a lot of other people’s parties, like at places like ... what was that place with the basement on the Lower East Side below Delancey that looked like it used to be a sauna?

Happy Ending?

Yeah, Happy Ending! Places like that, four or five times a week. Then I began playing slightly bigger places, like Happy Valley. I was a resident in the basement there for Susanne Bartsch’s parties. But I still didn’t think I was going to be playing outside of New York.

How did Hercules & Love Affair happen?

Originally, I had been working with Andy on music to play out in our DJ sets, just kind of like messing around, and that had been going on for four or five years before Hercules even became Hercules. I had heard 50 versions of “Blind” before it ever came out. So it all started very casually. And it was never my intention to be in a band. For instance, on “Athene,” my voice was originally intended just to be a placeholder.

For who?

For Antony [Hegarty, now known as Anohni]. I sang on that demo on a little tiny home setup. Andy played the song for Antony, and Antony said, “I actually think you should just leave her on it!” So that’s how I ended up on the album. Andy said, “Well, you’re on the album. That means you’re in the band. And we’re going on tour.” And I said, “Uh, OK!” It sounded scary but exciting.

You probably weren’t expecting the band to become as huge as it did.

Not at all. It was very strange. While we were waiting for the tour to begin, the album had really exploded in Europe, particularly the UK. It was not buzzing in New York at all. It was almost like you’d be hearing a story about someone else, especially since it was Andy’s project and not mine, and then it would be like, “Wait, I’m actually involved in this.” It was the weirdest feeling.

Was it your choice to stop working on Hercules & Love Affair after the second album, or did Andy make that decision?

That was my decision. Hercules was great and really fun, but only the very first single, “Classique #2,” was really musically my vibe. Hercules’s music was very much Andy’s thing. Plus, bands get very complicated. But I’m still really grateful for that time, and I know that it’s very responsible for me getting to have the platform that I did. There were only a handful of female DJs who were out there internationally back then, and if I didn’t have that platform, things probably would have happened a lot slower.

You were getting billed as “Kim Ann Foxman from Hercules & Love Affair” for quite a while after you left the band. Did that bother you at all?

Yeah, I did get that “Hercules member turned DJ” stuff for a long time, even though I had been DJ’ing for years before Hercules. It was a little frustrating because it took a long time to shed that and to be seen as my own artist. I can remember doing gigs where people would say, “Why aren’t you playing everything that’s on DFA? Why don’t you play this, why don’t you play that?” Also, at the same time, there was this horrible trend of personality DJs or model DJs or blogger DJs or whatever, people who would play off their iPad.

Like DJs who aren’t really DJs?

Yeah, and some people who didn’t know I was a DJ first kind of lumped me in with that a little bit. Luckily, I knew how to mix, and was still only using vinyl, so I think I pleasantly surprised a lot of people who didn’t really expect much. They could see I knew my shit. Still, it was hard to shed the Hercules, nu-disco aesthetic. But after a lot of time and many gigs, I was able to make a transition out of that perception. A very slow and painful transition.

Record

How long did that transition take?

It was a couple of years, at least, maybe even more than a couple of years. I finally had to start telling people to stop billing me as being from Hercules & Love Affair. I needed to stand up on my own.

Now that you are playing in front of much bigger crowds than you were at Mad Clams, do you feel like your sound has evolved at all?

Probably in some ways, though it depends on the gig. I think in general that the tracks themselves have gotten bigger.

In what way?

Just in their sound, really, through the way that newer tracks are produced. When I play something old, it sounds really raw in comparison, not beefy at all. Basically, I try to mix those two things up. But when you do these bigger gigs, you'll often be on after someone whose sound is really punchy, and it's really easy to feel like you're bringing it down too much if you're not careful. It's a balance.

Do you think your own productions have gotten bigger-sounding as well?

Maybe a little bit. I'm trying to make stuff that sounds like me, but will still sound good in a bigger situation.

Do you enjoy playing in those kinds of situations?

It's really exciting, really. I know how cool it is, because I never really had an idea about getting this far. When I think back to that little two-man electronic band, I just never thought I would still be involved with this world so many years later. It's been a really slow burn, a really slow process, and I like that. It feels like it's been a really natural evolution. It's weird, because I never thought about having a history, but when I look back, I realize that I actually have one! I'm proud and happy that I'm getting to do what I like to do.

Even though you have a number of records to your name, I get the feeling that DJ'ing is where your passion is, not production.

You're right. I feel like I've learned production along the way, and I'm still learning. I'm not an engineer at all, and I think I produce by trial and error. But DJ'ing is my background, and I know it well. I feel very comfortable doing it, unlike when I was performing with Hercules, which gave me a lot of anxiety.

You don't have that anxiety when you spin in front of thousands of people?

Not really. 30,000 people? No problem.

It seems like there are more DJs — people like Mike Servito, Black Madonna, Honey Dijon — who, like you, have broken primarily on the strength of their DJ'ing rather than through productions. Is that something you've noticed?

Yeah, and it's really nice. Like, I always think of Solar as one of the best, and he's never really produced until recently.

He's great.

He's one of my favorite DJs, from back when I was in San Francisco. I probably wouldn't even be a DJ if it weren't for his parties, along with stuff like the Wicked Crew. Anyway, I never came from the mentality that you had to produce to DJ, though over the years production's become like the DJ equivalent of a business card.

People just produce to get the gigs.

Yeah, and I think that's bullshit. There are so many great DJs who aren't producing, and there are also so many great producers who are shitty DJs!

Do you find it easier to be a solo artist than to be in a band?

Definitely, though I do have another band now!

Once more unto the breach!

Well, it's more of a studio project than a band at this point. It's called Pleasure Planet, with Andrew Potter and Brian Hersey. It could be something really cool, something that could last for a while. At the same time, we have no pressure for this to turn into a really big thing.

So your time in Hercules & Love Affair didn't totally turn you off from working in a band situation?

No, as long as it's something that's really collaborative, where decisions aren't being made for me. And Hercules wasn't exactly my voice, though I'm really proud of it. With Pleasure Planet, we're just allowing it to grow in an organic sort of way.

Organic growth seems to be your new career ethos.

I think I've really learned to base my career on just doing what appeals to me, really. If it appeals to anyone else, that's great, but I try not to worry about that too much. Whatever happens, happens. **R**

