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Studio Tracks: Sterling Ruby's Eclectic Playlist

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Sterling Ruby
(Photography by Melanie Schiff, 2013)

This weekend, Sterling Ruby contributes vividly colored stage backdrops — akin to some of the huge textile works recently on view at Hauser & Wirth in New York — for BasilicaSoundScape, a curated music festival featuring the likes of White Lung, Deafheaven, and Swans. The Los Angeles-based artist's large-scale paintings and hulking sculptures certainly require a great deal of planning, technical prowess, and attention to production detail, and Ruby clearly applies the same level of intensity to his extracurricular passions. "I listen to music in the car and in the studio every day, all day," he said. "I love good audio equipment. In the car I am running a Burmester system and in the studio I have a rack mounted Behringer EP2500 2X1200 Watt Power Amplifier hooked up to a Numark CDN450 CD player, which can bend, slow, or speed up any CD's pitch. The speaker combo in the studio is a set of JBL 15" 2-way integrated loudspeakers, two dual 18" subwoofers, and two compression drivers."

We asked the artist to share his current studio playlist, which is often in flux. "My tastes," Ruby admitted, "have been inconsistent for as long as I can remember." Here are the albums that have been recent favorites, including African guitars, boastful hip-hop, Katy Perry, and Lykke Li (who he'd love to direct a music video for).

Elephant Man, “Comin’ 4 U” (Greensleeves Records, 2000)

“Elephant Man! Coming for me? Can’t wait! Elephant’s voice has never wavered over the years, he hasn’t softened or given up the terrifying goofiness that makes him a standout. He could easily be my favorite dancehall figure. ‘Watchie Pum’ is a good example if you can’t handle the whole album — it’s super punchy and will rumble any rearview mirror.”

Miles Davis, “Big Fun” (Columbia/Legacy, 1974/2000), “Get Up With It,” “Pangea”

“Anything Miles did between 1968 and 1975 sees heavy rotation, but these three recordings are mind-bending. If I could only listen to just one song from this period it would be ‘Gondwana’ off of ‘Pangea,’ which was recorded in Osaka, Japan, 1975.”

Robert Fripp & Brian Eno, “No Pussyfooting” (DGM/Inner Knot, 1973/2008)

“I put this on in the evening when I take that long drive back from the downtown studio to my home in the mountains. Eno’s tape loop recordings of Fripp’s guitar can be ultimately meditative and trance invoking. I can space the fuck out — sometimes I don’t even know how I got home.”

Katy Perry, “Prism” (Capitol Records, 2013)

“Yeah, Katy Perry, that’s right. My two daughters and I listen to her in the morning as we drive to camp. I would be lying if I said that ‘Birthday’ and ‘International Smile’ aren’t absolutely perfect pop songs. I sometimes even keep it in the deck after I drop them off.”

Ariana Grande, “Yours Truly” (Universal Republic, 2013)

“Here’s another from my morning kids commute. Grande is coming into her own as a musician after starting out as a child actor on Nickelodeon’s show ‘Victorious.’ She unfortunately seems to be taking the usual route of trying to sex up her image by using mediocre hip-hop and Beyonce tropes. I am not giving up on her, though. My daughters and I believe that the next album, ‘My Everything,’ which is due out any day now, will be the real proof.”

Lykke Li, “I Never Learn” (Atlantic, 2014)

“This is *my* album and I think it is really something. I have been sneaking it in on the morning rides and while I thought I would get a ton of resistance because it is not the usual pop, it turns out that the peanut gallery in the back seat love it. As a matter of fact they request it now! It’s so simple, sad, and beautiful. I would love to make a music video for ‘Gunshot’ — Lykke, if you’re interested, let’s discuss.”

Chrome, “Half Machine Lip Moves/Alien Soundtracks” (Cleopatra, 2007)

“‘Alien Soundtracks’ came out in 1977 and ‘Half Machine Lip Moves’ in 1979. I had not heard this until I wound up having a chemical exchange with Helios Creed in his van after a show in 1993, which was something of a life-changing experience for my 21-year-old self. Chrome was a pre-cursor to so many things, Damon Edge and Helios Creed were so trashy and disjunct, but somehow they made it all sound sonic and spatial.”

Junior Murvin, “Police & Thieves” (Island Records, 1977)

“His voice is so easy on the ears, I don’t know why I always think Marvin Gaye, but there it is. ‘Police & Thieves’ is the best Murvin album, not that there are very many. The Lee Scratch Perry production makes it organic. I love the cover artwork — how crazy is this cover? — the police and the thieves are all pick pocketing each other in some repetitive domino effect. ‘All the

crimes committed, day by day. No-one tries to stop it in any way. All the peace makers turned war officers...”

Group Doueh, “Guitar Music from the Western Sahara” (Sublime Frequencies, 2007)

“Seattle’s Sublime Frequencies is one of my absolute favorite record labels. They have exposed me to stuff that I would have never realized existed. Group Doueh is a Dakhla guitar band. Sublime Frequencies take on it goes like this: ‘Raw and unfiltered Saharawi music from the former colonial Spanish outpost of Western Sahara.’ Twangy distorted electric guitar and vocals from the poetic Hassania language.”

Günter Schickert, “Kinder in Der Wildnis” (Bureau B, 1983/2013)

“I started listening to Günter Schickert after I ran my Popol Vuh collection into the ground by playing it too much. Schickert started out as a free-jazz musician in the ’70s. He formed the German group GAM in 1976 with Axel Struk. There is a lot of Schickert material, most of it loose, guitar-driven, repetitive, almost mantra-like. He sings, grunts, screams, or just sighs over the rhythms. I like this one because of the sample of the birds that filter their way into the gap between every song.”

Peter Eotvos, “Chinese Opera/Shadows/Steine” (Celestial Harmonies, 1997)

“I would say that Eotvos is the current contemporary composer darling, but maybe I don’t have a clue. I have listened to him for a long time and have never once had a disappointing purchase. He seems like a thoroughbred: Hungarian, Stockhausen Ensemble, conductor at the Gothenburg Symphony Orchestra, a tradition with film scores, the list goes on. He doesn’t seem afraid to mix traditional courses of classical concerto music with electronic ambience, which is probably why most critics see him as the post Bartók and Boulez. I can’t believe that this recording is already 14 years old. To risk sounding cliché, it is haunting, a great work.”

“The Music of Islam, Volume Ten: Qur’an Recitation, Istanbul, Turkey”

“I play this in the studio through the Numark CDN450 CD player and slow the pitch down by 16 percent. It echoes through the buildings and gets into every nook and corner of the complex. While I am aware that it might seem blasphemous to change the intonation of the recitation of the Qur’an, I don’t think that it alters the actual expression of the reading; as a matter of fact, I feel like it is a bit more somber, and I like that it lasts longer.”

Trinidad James, “10PC MILD”

“I have been listening to less rap lately; my morals are being tested. That being said, I can’t stop myself from rotating the immaculately styled Trinidad James. ‘10PC MILD’ only has 10 songs. So many mix tapes are just filler, no editing, too many tracks, but T. James seems to have a different strategy. ‘10PC MILD’ is just as good as his first tape, ‘Don’t Be S.A.F.E.’ My favorite is the single ‘Jumpin Off Texa\$,’ featuring Rich Homie Quan.”

Gucci Mane

“Again it’s problematic, but I still have a big soft spot for Gucci. His new mix tape is not his best, not by a long shot, but the single ‘Top In the Trash’ is great. Chief Keef’s short verse is as sloppy and slurry as ever and it works: ‘I drink my champagne straight out the bottle, I don’t fuck with no glass.’”

Diamanda Galás, “Schrei X Live” (Mute U.S., 1996)

“When my friend Brian DeRan first told me about this year’s BasilicaSoundScape festival, there was talk of Diamanda Galás coming. I started remembering the naked, blood-covered performance I had seen so many years before. I immediately broke out every album. ‘Schrei X Live’ is for me the toughest one there is, just vocals with echo and reverb, no musical accompaniment. The track ‘Hee Shock Die’ sends chills down my spine, I listen to it in the car at full volume: ‘Kick my head, OK.’”