

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT WITH BUSTY BEATZ - July 2020
Ella Mesma talking to Busty Beatz- transcribed by Hannah Robertshaw

ELLA: Here we are today with the amazing Busty Beatz of Hot Brown Honeys. Welcome!

BUSTY BEATZ: Thank you so much, so good to be here.

Super excited! This interview journey has come out of a video that we made called 'I Am All Womxn'. We interviewed four of those womxn, and of the four we interviewed, three of them spoke about you and your amazing work. I feel like you are representing and really covering everything that the goal of this mini project was, in terms of talking about gender roles, looking for change and moving forward. So super honoured and excited that you were able to make it today.

I thought we'd start with diving into a little bit about Hot Brown Honey, where you are and what you guys do.

Yes, so Hot Brown Honey, I like to call it a theatrical explosion of activism, dance, songs, circus, poetry - everything. We just use everything, actually. We came out of - Hot Brown Honey started as a club night. Back in the day, around 2011-2012, it really came from - I had already been working with Lisa for many years before that and it really came out of a sense of frustration and feeling quite, you know, oppressed and a bit angry that there weren't more Brown and Black bodies on stages, across the board. We're in Australia, so we're in the colonies, right? They really hold onto this idea that, firstly, there's only one narrative that can be seen as excellent. And secondly that Australia is a white place. It's actually, Australia is a Black country, you know? I'm on the lands of the Yuggera people right now. Australia has a Black history and pretty much the Indigenous people here are Black people. We were also meeting so many brilliant artists, brilliant femmes, Black and Brown femmes, femmes of colour who were all on the fringes. It was then - Lisa and I, we were working on the fringes and we really just decided that after a couple of these crazy club nights, we would just, you know what, it's time we're centre stage. There is so much beauty, talent, amazingness, political thought, critiquing going on and there's no spaces for it to happen, so we were like, right, what do we do? We set ourselves a task of we want to create this show that involves all these different artists with all these amazing stories. We went in pretty hard, going we want to be centre stage, we want to be on the main stage and we want to play at the Sydney Opera House and the Southbank Centre and all these places because that's where we really felt these artists deserved to shine. With lots of music, lots of dance, lots of costumes. Any way that we can tell the story, we used it.

Thank you

I had the pleasure of seeing Hive City Legacy, I've seen it twice actually because it's so good. I could see it again! Every now and then, I get, 'ain't nobody got time for that' in my head and I'm like 'yes!' The message of it, I even used it in a Whatsapp chat this week as a solution to someone's dilemma!

I feel like you offer so much in your work, it's almost like you're giving people a mantra of how to live and how to navigate in this very patriarchal, misogynistic, racist world that we live in, so thank you for being you.

Thank you! And working on Hive City Legacy, that belongs also to those artists, those Black artists who were on board. Lisa and I often talked about how we make work, too, and that was definitely a facilitation process, more than a 'you're going to do this' process, because all of those artists are brilliant in their own right. They're all independent artists working it and at that time it was such a joy to see them all together on stage.

And that links nicely to the expression 'make way for the matriarchy' which I know Hot Brown Honey use. I speak a lot with my friends of what might a female system look like- we live in a patriarchy right now, but what does the matriarchy look like? You are making work from that patriarchal space, for example you saying it's not my work, it's our work, that sounds to me very patriarchal. So can you explain a bit what matriarchy means to you?

So in different cultures as well, because a lot of the artists we work with are from indigenous cultures as well, we've had a really - and for me being Xhosa and having the experience of my grandmothers, it really does feel like it's a holistic space, society, that can be pretty much run in the best possible way. If we were able to make way for the matriarchy, I think we would see things very differently. When I think about what's going on at the moment, talking about prison abolition and defunding the police and making sure those funds go into community, it's pretty much - that's a patriarchal act. To take away from those who have so much power for not great reason, and the consequences have been so massive around the world to see, I feel that's a patriarchal act.

We also have, 'the revolution cannot happen without childcare'. It takes a village, whether that's making art or bringing up children, or having a space where we can work together for a better future, once again it's a patriarchal act. So, it's really based on some key principles as well, because we've all lived in this patriarchal, capitalist, colonialist world, the first thing we've got to start doing is recognising our accountability and decolonising. Getting out of those mindspaces that, 'there can only be one' or 'it's a competition all the time', these are acts that we're re-matriarching. So we're coming back into a space that is female-led and specifically, Black and Indigenous female-led. I could talk about this for hours!

I was thinking about that, in terms of these 'I am all womxn' and the topics that have been coming up: a lot have been around the ceilings that people are experiencing in the UK. A lot of the conversations have been about people not having the confidence to go for it, not having the confidence to speak up, not knowing how to deal with the fact that they can't break through, so I think this is so important. This is the key of the magic that you've done, you've broken those ceilings and you've gone international. I know Elsa was in Brazil with a project that was Hot Brown Honey led: you are proof that we can change the world. It would be really nice to hear a bit more about that - the work starts here, but how do we do that? How do we undo? You also say 'activate, pollinate, liberate'... I'd love to hear more about that?

That came to us - it's so interesting, because we were trying to think - we were in Calgary, about to start a Canadian tour and talking about Hive City Legacy and how are they coming up with these ideas? We didn't know who was going to be in it, at all, and we were talking about this idea of, just say we get all these people that we don't know, or who don't know us, we want to create a bridge. And I'm like, hashtags to try and do it. Just use the right words to try and get the message across. And that's when we came up with 'activate, pollinate, liberate'.

I think the other one you say is 'decolonise and moisturise'?

Yeah, decolonise and moisturise. That was one of the actual first ones when we were doing some scriptwriting, that we came up with because we were just like, every part of this, it's like what Audre Lorde, the poet and amazing writer has talked about self-care as warfare. By your self-preservation, and having the time for yourself and your community, it means you're able to hold space. So that's really 'decolonise and moisturise', that's what it's all about, you know? Making sure that us and our communities are ok, and that we can actually - because decolonising is really hard. It's really hard. We've been taught that we're not worthy, continuously. Everywhere we look, whether it be in the magazines, from making art for art institutions that they look at you and go, you're not worthy. Hip hop dance, one of the most specialised type of dance there can be, there's a definite thread of 'that's not art. That's not high art enough'. I'm like, 'uh yes it is!'. So it's a constant battle, but you know what this whole COVID time into Black Lives Matter has really brought to the surface, these unjust systems and institutionalised racism, it's become so crystal clear that there was never space for us there, they were never gonna - it was already a system that wasn't there to bring us up together. That's become really clear.

I wonder, there's this thing of having the space. I feel for me, personally, I've been so much in survival mode, running to do the work, to make enough money to survive that I haven't had time to just go, oh it's not ok. And to an extent, my work

I'm also making activism art, but this time in COVID has really been a time to just go, absolutely not. We're not doing it any more, this is not ok. I wonder if part of this decolonising is this having time to reflect?

Yes, definitely. You know, we've been in the same mode, it was really interesting and heartbreaking at the same time, realising that artists have been at the forefront of the fall with COVID, but also that means we've been at the forefront of capitalism. We've been allowing it to happen because we've been so, 'just keep on going, just hustle hustle hustle'. So that, for me, that took me a little bit of time to get over, because I was like, wow, we have been trying to create a little world where obviously all these structures, the pressure has been pushing on it all the time and so I was like, wow, we need to be accountable that we were in that cycle. We were really in that cycle, and now not being able to perform live is very difficult, but it's also been that time to go, if all these structures are falling, the arts should be leading this. The arts should be the one - artists are the ones who felt it first, artists are the ones that have been living in the new normal the longest, so we've been living in a different reality, you know? We've always been on that edge anyway, but now it is really - it's happening. And how can we now move forward and forge a way that is not going to be like it was? People are doing it, it's happening everywhere, everyone's thinking about it and putting it out there as well. I do love the call out, because this is actually the consequences of so much stuff. It's not like the call out back before COVID, this is really different. This is community actually going, 'we've got your back. We know it's not right'. And I think this is the first step. The first step of truly decolonising is everybody taking accountability. The truth has to happen first before anything else. And there has to be a bit of retribution as well, before we can get to reconciliation or any other way of doing things, we need to go through this messy, messy period and really start looking and critiquing how we can move forward.

Yes, amazing. I totally agree and I think that it's going to be a hard time, but it's also going to be such an inspiring time, such a time for change. I want to check what questions I said that I'm going to ask and haven't asked yet, it's so exciting getting to speak to you. Maybe a little bit about you, your journey, both in terms of how you are such an involved thinker and speaker, but also in terms of the art you make and your journey to here.

I feel like I've had a really - as much as it's been quite a turbulent journey, I feel like I've been very privileged to meet and work with a lot of amazing artists because I'm based in music. So I get to work with dancers, circus artists, other musicians, amazing game changers and trailblazers. I've really been able to work in a whole heap of different worlds, and the patriarchy really loves their boxes and genres, but I feel like I've had this great ability to move through different parts of the artistic world. That's why now I'm in a lot of different groups, and we're all talking about the same things. The musicians are talking about this, the dancers, everyone is talking about this. That's why I have a lot of hope at the moment.

I was born in South Africa and we came to Australia, me and my parents came as refugees to Australia under apartheid. So in South Africa, a lot of music was banned. My Mum wasn't able to do ballet, or a lot of the arts weren't allowed at that time. This was the 70s, and my Dad was part of a teacher's union so he had to get out. My Mum was very political too, even though she's very like, 'I wasn't that political'. I'm like, 'you were pretty political, you were the secretary of the Labour party!'. So coming to Australia was very - it was jarring, I think, because we actually found out the information later that apartheid actually started in Australia, in a place called Rockhampton. One of the Prime Ministers had visited Rockhampton and really was inspired by the white Australia policy and what was happening, felt that Black people were really kept in their place in Australia. And that inspired the whole apartheid system. So there's always been this really interesting juxtaposition, or parallel I should say, going through with my life.

Of course, I love Black music and I was so into the music that we could have, and the family community that we could have in South Africa. And then coming to Australia, I really discovered a whole heap of other music that I'd never heard of before, a lot of rock bands and my Mum was adamant that her daughters would have access to the arts. I wanted to play the piano and I wanted to play the guitar, and she just made that happen. And then when I was sixteen, I think, fifteen? I started my first band and we kind of, we were at an all girls school, so it was an all girl band and we played together for like ten years in this very indie music scene. And I played in that band with my sister Tanya, and then from there I went into learning how to do beats production. So working a lot with different singers, and in the very multi-cultural hip hop scene that was emerging in Australia, and that was quite a beautiful time of all of these artists who had come from other refugee backgrounds or migrant backgrounds, or were Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander working together in this really organic scene that was happening in the 90s, I think?

From there, my little sister Candy had started at acting school and she had started a little group called Sister She, that was her, another womxn Sarah Ward, and they needed some music for some of their shows because they were on that real cabaret-comedy edge. I started making some music for them. Then that's when I got into theatre, because I was like, wait, people can do live theatre and I can be playing beats? This is live performance, what is happening here?! So from there I started going, I can do all of these different things and I started working on plays. In 2011, I got to work with Jonzi D on a performance called East London West Sydney, which was an amazing experience to actually work with Jonzi was next level. It brought artists from East London and West Sydney together to create a work.

That's funny, I did my first thing with Jonzi D in 2011 as well. And then from there, when did you meet Lisa and start to work with Lisa?

That was actually, I first met Lisa in early, I think it was early 2000? And she had started her - she's the co-director of a company called Poly Toxic. I met Lisa - we actually went out into many, many communities and worked with kids, so we went to communities like Woorabinda, which were - what's the word for it? I suppose back in the day they were missions, so basically Aboriginal people were rounded up out of the whole state and then put onto these certain tiny plots of land, and that was where they were told they could live. We started on a project which ran for at least six years, I think? So we started going in and out of these communities quite a lot and making music, making hip hop, making dance and then it would all come back to this amazing festival which happened - it's not on any more. It was the first ever festival, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander run festival, hip hop and r'n'b festival that would have like 20,000 people would show up! It was these kids on stage, doing all the stuff that we'd worked with them on and then all these brilliant artists would just get up and do their thing and it was really the best. Starting up was really something special and unique, and it would attract some big names as well to headline that show, but because it was actually run by the elders of the community, who recognised that young people really wanted to be involved, and wanted to move in this beautiful music scene but there weren't really opportunities for them to do it. So that was amazing.

That flows really nicely to my next question: in a world where there aren't really the opportunities to do it, how did you do it? How did you make an international company?

It's interesting, because a lot of our processes also come from the work we did in community and what we were able to learn from a lot of the elders and the young people about how they put stuff together. So that was one of the things, another thing was - I think back and go, we were just so annoyed. We were like, how is this still possible in 2012? And here we are in 2020. We just knew too many amazing womxn, actually, and really it was pretty hard. It was hard. We got a great producer who actually just believed us when we said this is what we want to do, and was excited about that. We had talked to a number of producers and we had gone for a number of grants and every time we were told, this is too risky, this work is too risky, what you're trying to do is too risky and we were like, ok so this means we just have to do it ourselves. This is going to be hard, that's why we - it did start off as a side project, because we were just like, how is it going to happen? How can we make it happen? They're too amazing, this singer Ofa Fotu who was in Perth that we had all seen live and that was on the other side of the country. Perth is a long way from where we are, but we were just like, she's amazing, in every way, playing these tiny gigs. It's like Hope One, who's a beatboxer in our show. We have known her for a while, we did workshops with her when she was younger and then we just watched her explode onto the scene, and then kind of internationally as well, she did amazing beatbox comps and stuff like

that. And then she had a baby and we watched that all kind of go - people just turned their heads away, and I'm like, 'she's still just as good!'. She's awesome, actually. And then knowing that she had that experience as well was also a thing of you've probably got your head screwed on, as well as having mad skills.

Even Crystal, who is our circus artist and does aerials, she was probably the youngest member of the crew and we actually heard about her because of a school called the Fruit Flies, which is like a circus school in Albury-Wodonga. We heard about some of her skills and also that she had Indonesian heritage, and in Australia you're like - we were always looking for people who were up for telling a story about Black and Brown womxn. So I mean, it's still been - and Rowdy, I've known Rowdy for a number of years now as well, and it just seemed like perfect. She came on a trip to Australia and we were like, 'come to the show, come along, of course'. Her and Carly, and after she wanted to be in the show and I'm like, 'that's what I wanted, yes!' And she was, 'I'm going to make it happen', and I'm like, 'yes you are'. The seed is already there, now.

It would be cool to hear about - if there are any offerings of inspiration that you have, and maybe a bit about what you're doing next? One of the things I find so inspiring about you as a collective is that you're not just reliant on funding, that you're also making - you have your badges and your online shop. You have lots of different ways, you're not stuck to one thing, you're not attached to those spaces, or that's what it seems like. So it would be gorgeous to hear about that, how you came up with so many different ways - how are you so creative with how to create income streams? And then if you have any advice or offerings for what people should do next, and where we can see you next or find you online.

The merch has been really important to how we roll, because before this it was about raising money so we could take the kids on tour, because we just felt that was - and this was the collective group, everyone was like, yes we all agree that this is something that needs to happen, because we weren't sure how else it could happen as well. It was just like two single mothers in this crew, so Aunty Lisa really has been driving because she's like, this is really important! And we're like, yes it is thank you so much. So we got this line of merch, and now what we've tried to do is now take it online and because it's not so much about childcare on tour, we're like how else can we use this income stream? We just keep coming back to the same things, we just need to see as many beautiful Black, Indigenous, Womxn of Colour, just womxn being pushed into the limelight and making sure that they are seen. So we started up this Instagram series with one of the Honeys being able to chat with another artist and they can choose who that artist is and I feel like that has been really great, because it means that we're getting some great conversations and that's really important 'cause the conversation

just seems to keep going. It just can't stop now. And we're also trying to self fund in a number of different ways of other artistic - we want to make the album, have been wanting to make that for a long time. We've got the new show which is the Hot Brown Honey Revolution, which is we just want to bring everyone together, so all the artists we know, we just want the biggest revolution. People are still like, 'are you sure?'. We want band, choir, multiple aerals, multiple dancers. Why not? Why wouldn't you think that we could do that? Of course that's what we want. All the Hive City Legacy - everyone!

So it's been really quite intense to try and self fund, I can't say - we still try to go for things all the time. We keep on trying to think laterally because it's the patriarchy, we've got to think about how - it's like mutual aid, it's community, how do we get money out there to who needs it?

That's me hugging you for that, so inspiring.

Just thinking of the second question, was that the inspiration?

Yeah, do you have any suggestions for how can people be more Hot Brown Honey?

I think the first thing for me, personally, which really helped me with the decolonisation process is really recognise some things as - there are some things that you can knock your head against, and they were never meant for you. They were never meant for you. There are always cracks, they are always coming through the cracks, so how can you find that? You can always - you have to look for it. Find your people, of course, then that's all about relationships and that can be really difficult at times too, but it's worth it. And just remember you're worthy. You are so worthy in spaces that have constantly said you are not. From the beginning of colonisation that said you are not worthy, and that's just not true. It's completely not true, and at times it's hard not to believe it because whether you see you're not getting what you want - maybe that's not what you need though. Maybe it's something else that you actually need. It's about being open to the universe, open to the Mother, you know? To go, this is the right thing for you.

I suppose it's inspiring too, because there are so many people - at the moment, I feel so very not alone, even though we're all stuck in our houses and unable to do very much,

but I just go, we are not alone in our thinking. We are not alone. And the arts has the capacity to change culture, I really believe that. This time, we need to be telling the story of this time, it hasn't been told. Our stories haven't been told, so it is really important, as hard as it sometimes - there's a lot of trauma that's been brought up, there's a lot of anger and I'm in for the anger actually, I think that's very necessary to keep fires burning. With the trauma stuff, that can be debilitating, so wherever you can find that light or find that way of - to keep creating, that is going to be the ultimate, because the art's gonna talk. People are going to look back at this time and look at the art.

My eyes kept welling up as you were speaking. I'm so glad to have you here, to have people hearing you. I think the work you're doing is just so, so important and is shining lights for so many people, so thank you for you. Thank you for being here today, and if there's anything else where you're like, I just want to say this, if there's something you need to see, something we need to check out?

Yeah, check out the Hot Brown Honey Insta chat series, they're really great. There's some amazing artists on there.

Link is down there, everyone!

And then also, I'm working on a couple of really exciting projects. Poly Toxic, which is Lisa's other company, are putting on an amazing - it's going to be a projection with aerials and the storytelling of the now, as sort of like a heartburst to artists at this time and how we have actually already changed the world just by changing our whole process at this time. So that's called Snapshot, that's going to be on at Brisbane festival in September, so that's something to look forward to. We don't know if people will be going to it, but it will be probably live streamed.

We'll be there on a screen.

And the other project I'm working on with Inala Wangarra is called Knowledge Keepers, and on my gosh it's so beautiful to interview four elders from the Inala community, which is just South West of Brisbane and - just gorgeous. It's just them talking about their lives and what they've been through, and just - they're knowledge keepers. And

there's going to be an exhibition which is going to be part of that too, and a book that will come out, but I'll keep you posted on that too.

Thank you so much, Busty Beatz, it's been such a pleasure to speak to you today.