

# WIRED



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**N O T N O T F U N**  
Britt & Amanda Brown lead Simon Reynolds through the LA underground

**David Toop** on mellow soul

**New rap bratz**

Lil B | Odd Future | NRK

**Daniel Miller**

Ekoplekz

Micachu & The Shapes



# H A P P Y

"My secret dream really is to work in a record shop, just listen to music all day. That would be great," says Mica Levi. But for the 24 year old singer, songwriter, producer and composer, it's already too late. To date, she has released two albums with Micachu & The Shapes, plus an abundance of mixtapes, remixes and compositions, and she is also an increasing presence on the London festival circuit. All this good work would get her disqualified by what she calls the record collector's code of honour. "See, the thing is," Levi continues, "if you've already put a record out and you go to work at a record shop, they're not going to like you in there. They're either going to not like your record, and there's no way they're going to like you, or there'd just be the fact that you're a chief. You're not a proper listener because you've tried to do it yourself."

As the daughter of a "catalogue-number geek" father, it's only natural that Levi would have internalised the rigorous standards of music enthusiast etiquette. It's a shame, because she is well equipped for the scholastic pursuits of record collecting. It's evident in her musical knowledge and creative scope, spanning a reverence for The Beatles and Captain Beefheart, training in classical composition and an adoration for rap and R&B. Only the other day, she and her housemate, known only as 'Dave', were making further amendments to the latest addition to her battery of homemade instruments in their dining room. What began as a monstrous crossbreed of an adapted CD rack and an old electric guitar became the part-strung, part-percussive turntable aptly named the chopper. "It's based on a guitar crossed with a record player and a hurdy-gurdy," she says, and the result is the physical interpretation of the Texan style of remixing, developed to imitate the changing tempos and seesawing rhythms of 'chopped and screwed' hip-hop.

The chopper isn't the first self-built instrument in Levi's arsenal. On Micachu's 2009 debut album release *Jewellery*, she introduced the chu, the only one of its kind, and the name of which completes her Micachu alias. "It's adapted and fuckt [sic] with, but sounds like this," she volunteers by email, by way of description of the jarring shifts in pitch she achieves on the instrument's single guitar string. Then there's the plethora of sand-filled tins, modified acoustics and novel tunings she and fellow Shapes Raisa Khan and Marc Pell deploy live. "Limitations are essential to anyone," she explains. "It's a bit of a backwards way of looking at it, looking at what you don't have, but it's part of the decision making process, of creating something. If you're going to write a song you need to make a decision about what's going to be done on it. The problem with us in the band is we just started off doing so much different shit."

*Jewellery* is Micachu's reaction to contemporary culture and the information saturation it produces. Devoid of romanticism, Levi's lyrics barely hold together the album's 12 tracks of graceless sampling, frenzied dynamics and deranged song structures. Consciously avoiding songs of sentiment, she dwells on the banality of a relationship gone stale, underscored by the sound of a domestic vacuum cleaner, while modern love is seen in relation to venereal disease: "*No I won't have sex 'cause of STDs.*" Each track feels like it could collapse at any moment under the weight of its own ideas. Yet that very teetering on the edge of sanity is what makes *Jewellery* so exciting.

Even now, Levi glances sheepishly at handyman Dave, having convinced him that cutting the chopper's body in half would make all the difference to its volume. They finished the instrument in time for the second rendition of *Chopped & Screwed*, the piece she composed for The Shapes and London Sinfonietta.

## Micachu & The Shapes

By Steph Kretowicz

"I probably prefer the concept of it over a lot of actual 'chopped and screwed' stuff," qualifies Levi, before continuing, "We tried to put those same limitations we have as a band back into the Sinfonietta performance. So we selected a smaller orchestra than we thought we'd need. The thinking, when writing it, was that the string quartet within it would have been my guitar, that mid-section. The flute and clarinet would represent high synth lines and the bass would be the bass. Marc did percussion, I sang and Raisa played the chopper, zither and some percussion. That's just the band, except spread over 11 people instead of three." Common to hip-hop and classical music, says Levi, is a mutual concern for purely sensory engagement. For *Chopped And Screwed* she got her musicians to play the 'electronic' parts. "What electronics used to mean to me was the things you can't do live; to loop and reverse sound. This moment now, you couldn't recreate the same moment twice, but electronic music can do that and that's what I tried to do, imitate things that can't usually happen."

"Reversing sounds, the idea of looping, speeding up and slowing down, just textures," she continues. "You have space with a bunch of virtuoso musicians. It is a weird and difficult project to do; to come together with an orchestra like that. What we gave them wasn't necessarily very challenging, but what was challenging for them, I think, was the fact that we told them, 'This is the verse, this is the chorus, this is this material, you do it here and we lead.' We all just had to remember it like we do in the band; you have the bits and remember the order of it. They're used to having everything written down and can play anything, but as an ensemble whose players change a lot, that was something they're not really used to. That was how we kept it not really boring for them, hopefully." □ Micachu & The Shapes & London Sinfonietta's *At Kings Place 01-05-10* is out now on Rough Trade



Mica Levi with her self-built chopper

# C H O P P E R