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Xiomara on ‘the essence of hip-hop’ and internal revolution

By Kaiya Gordon | April 28, 2017 | Comments Off on Xiomara on ‘the essence of hip-hop’ and internal revolution



“I’m just trying to encourage other people to be their best selves,” **Xiomara** tells me, as we chat

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over the phone. She's babysitting for a friend, and throughout our conversation, children's voices interrupt, asking for an orange; a game; attention. She apologizes, but I think it's cute: It reminds me of my life as an after-school teacher, and also of how deeply rooted Xiomara is in her community. Born in Berkeley, Xiomara has moved all over the Bay Area during her lifetime, and has made connections throughout.

Xiomara's debut album, *Seven Nineteen*, was recorded at the Knock Knock Recording Studio in San Francisco, with the help of friends and artists Xiomara has collaborated with for years. The result is a transcendent album which resists genre and dazzles in its depth and purpose. Xiomara's vocal performance is breezy and deft, drawing inspiration from Lauryn Hill and Stevie Wonder. The production, too, is comfortable and warm: The bulk of the album was recorded live, with musical arrangements solidifying as the album was tracked.

Xiomara is a passionate learner, and as we talk it becomes clear both how influential her desire to be an intentional person and student has been on her life, and how supportive her family and friends are of those intentions. Her family is deeply musical; her house was filled with the music and instruments of her fathers' native Barbados from a young age. "My father has had me singing since I was a child," she tells me. The pair make music together onstage and off; last year, Xiomara's father joined her for a performance on Halloween.

In advance of Xiomara's performance at Southside Festival, co-sponsored by Imprint.City and The Bay Bridged, we sat down with the artist to talk about her debut album, her politics, and her thoughtful approach to self-care.

The Bay Bridged: You've moved around the Bay Area, you're from here, and you talked about working and collaborating with people [from the Bay] — I'm wondering what your experience engaging with the Bay Area music scene is like?

X: I think there are a lot of factors to the Bay Area music scene. Overall, I believe that the artists themselves are where the support comes in. From what I have experienced, the infrastructure here in the Bay for...self-released and independent music leaves a bit to be desired. We're kind of out here to wing it, and it's cool, because the Bay Area has this deep, deep treasury of gift. Every artist here is super-gifted. And it's really hard to translate that on a global scale, because there's not really too much of an industry.

So when I play to people, it's to very different crowds. It's either a really supportive, artistic, political crowd, or...more of an objective, 'phone-stage-phone-stage-phone-stage' type of crowd, if you will. It is hard for artists out here. But my friends usually come to my shows — there's usually someone marching up in there.

To me, revolution is within. I spent a lot of time doing marches, and right now I'm trynna do the internal revolution. Everybody has their ebb and flow; and I'm working on trying to be more accepting of what is in the Bay, in terms of infrastructure for music, and still get my messages across — still be true to the art.

TBB: I think that's interesting, and I also know it's really hard to learn and internalize things. What are you doing to work on a revolution within?

X: At this moment, I am prioritizing my music over a lot of different things. I've chosen, for example, not to have a regular job, at the moment. Coming from a family of people who can't stop working, can't get off the wheel, choosing to say no to the system which is essentially built against me and the people that I serve with my music is part of my personal revolution. [I'm] trying to treat myself with more love and less violence so I can teach others how to treat me.

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I'm reading a whole lot right now: That was one of the things that I actually stepped back from marches and meetings to do, was to educate myself. Not so much on the system that is in place, because I've been living in it my whole life, but what I can can do outside of it to enrich my community in my life.

TBB: Do you have any books to recommend?

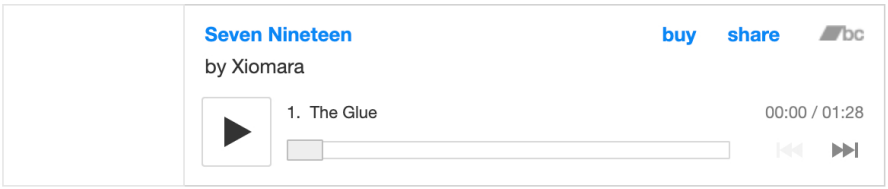
X: *Way of the Orisa* is really good, and my friends and I have been reading this book that we found on the street called *Tribes*. The [author, Seth Godin] writes business help books and books [about] navigating the business world, but [this book] is about how tribal traditions work in the modern business world. I'm in a hip-hop group — six people, me and five of my brothers — and we all work, read, breathe together. We've been practicing reading [in this way] where if we're reading any text that, for example, imposes an idea, we actively try to read that from a spiritually sound standpoint. Reading the text, I guess, with a spiritual grain of salt.

For the personal journey, one of my favorites to go back to is *Like Water for Chocolate*, so I re-read that recently. It's a good book to go back to in this time, when everything seems so real.

TBB: I read that you started creating for [*Seven Nineteen*] as early as 2007. Can you tell me a little bit more about the writing and recording process?

Xiomara: The writing process for seven nineteen came together pretty haphazardly. I started writing the last song ("719") when I was 17, and allowed myself to write songs organically as they came. It didn't start off being an album, conceptually, it was just kind of a collection of things that I had finished up.

I started back in 2007 when I was high school in Colorado. I wrote up until we were about six months from the album release, and that's when we started recording. It was a collaboration of folks that I've been meeting and playing with all over the Bay Area. It was sort of a going around thing, saying 'Hey, are you guys down to do this? Are you down to do this?'



TBB: It's surprising to me that you started writing the song "719" when you were in high school, because there is so much to unpack in that song. How did you come to write it when you were young, and what was the editing process like?

X: That was actually the longest one to edit over the years, because I didn't really write it with any idea of what it would sound like. [During] my high school experience...I was really learning a lot not only about writing, but about geometry, and mosaic — it was kind of a crazy school, but there were some really intricate and interesting writing programs, so I was delving deep into poetry. I wrote the verse for the first part when I was isolated in boarding school, in a small retirement town, getting some perspective and time away from the Bay. With the politics around that song: The rest of it, the second verse, the rap, and everything else, formed in the months when we were producing the album. We knew that we wanted at least one rap verse, and at that time, the whole album crew was deep in the Mario Woods, Alex Nieto, Amilcar Perez-Lopez marches, and we were having ourselves a really challenging and beautiful socio-political experience. The words in the beginning were meant to be non-specific; I was writing in a reflective style, like Stevie Wonder

or Lauryn Hill. Kind of like, what I would say if I had a moment to talk to the people that I'm trying to affect.

TBB: That's great.

X: Yeah. It's funny, because the women at the end of the song singing opera — and I don't think I've ever told anyone this — Aisha Campbell, was my roommate and co-worker when I first moved to San Francisco, and started doing the marches and stuff like that. She's a trained opera singer, and she got her MBA at the Conservatory. So we were roomies, and living and struggling together, all throughout this period working up to making the album.

TBB: Do you have hobbies outside of music?

X: Yeah, absolutely. I paint, I draw, I've been known to sew people's clothes back together, I knit...painting and drawing are hobbies of mine that I'm really passionate about. Writing poetry plays a role. [I] go to good shows, [hang] with the kids.

TBB: Are you writing new music right now?

X: Yeah. I had a week in February, where a homie [from] Chicago came through, and we wrote and recorded the skeleton of a piece. It's four songs...called *Nothing That Come Will Stay*. That includes a disco track, a couple of soul tracks, and a guitar track that I'm really excited about.

I'm writing right now, a lot more, because a couple of members [from the group] moved back to the Bay Area. We've been doing a whole lot of writing on the beginnings of an album. We released an EP as a group, *The People's Tree*. We put an EP out on Solidarity Records like a year and a half ago. And did a bunch of shows for a while — that was as a five-piece, because [one of the members] moved away — now everybody is back [...] in fact, most of them are moving into my house pretty soon [laughs]. It's gonna be really great, I'm excited. These brothers are like my heroes — they're the best musicians I know.

TBB: You mentioned having a disco track, a soul track — in general, the music you make is very varied. What inspires you?

X: I just re-discovered this song by Stevie Wonder called, "I'm Free," and he says "I'm free to be sure of what I am and what I need not be." I have learned a lot from others telling me that I should stick to one thing, or that I won't be able to translate more than one idea. I learned about who I "need not be," through knowing better and experimenting, and trying things out...

I co-produced my album, [and] I always have to have my hands in the decisions. I wanted to be a musician because I love listening to music. My father plays all sorts of Afro-Cuban music and Brazilian instruments; his dad was a musician, my mom's dad and my mom were both musicians — so it's been around forever. They're older parents, so...I got a lot of '50s, '60s, '70s vibe when I was younger. My context is hip-hop and the essence of hip-hop is flipping things that pretty much already are. So that's what I do.

TBB: You've mentioned Stevie Wonder several times...

X: Have I? [Laughs]

TBB: You have — so I'm wondering if you remember the first time you listened to Stevie Wonder.

X: Wow, nobody has ever asked me that before...Yep, I do. I probably don't remember actually the

first moment I listened to Stevie Wonder — my mother was probably playing him when I was in utero — but my first memory of Stevie Wonder was when I was six or seven, and we were in a school in Berkeley that required everyone to take the drama course, which included a lot of different musicals with popular songs strewn through them. Stevie Wonder's "As" was one of the songs [we sung], so we all had to sing the different parts ...I'll just never forget that. Realizing those words, as a child so young, and actually having to learn them and say them over and over and practice — those words are drilled in my memory.

TBB: I wanted to talk to you about some of the lyrics on *Seven-Nineteen*. One of the lyrics that stands out to me comes early on the album, and it's "can't appreciate the cleanest game played in the mud," on "The Glue." I think that's a really interesting metaphor, so I was wondering how you came to it and what it means.

X: That is something that I've said for a really long time...you can't appreciate the clean, if you ain't lived in the mud. It's like a yin and yang thing: There is always a drop of white in the black, and always a drop of black in the mud. If you know one without the other, that one will seem strange. I'm basically alluding to the balance [between them], while also trying to encourage people to go through the mud: Live in it, be in it, be where they are. Soak in it and remember, so that when you're in a clean space, it's clear.

TBB: Another lyric that seems straightforward, but I actually thought was very complicated, is on "Mic Check," when you say "can you hear yourself on the microphone." To me, that reads like a very interesting question about recognizing yourself, and personhood — so I'm wondering about the process behind that lyric, as well.

X: It was kind of funny, because it came in that deep, but that chorus in particular came together quite literally when I was doing a mic check [laughs]. I was just kind of on the mic [sings]...that was the first part, and then the second part came later, when I was at home...that line was a product of being in a vulnerable state, when you're putting yourself out there. I get caught up in what I'm giving to other people, or what I want to give to other people — it's kind of like living as a vessel...but I need to hear myself. For me, [I think], 'OK, what can I give people?' I can give people my best self. I can't sing if I can't hear myself in the monitor, you know what I'm saying?

TBB: Can you tell me about the album cover for *Seven Nineteen*?

X: That's me and my mom, the day I was born. So seven-nineteen is actually my birthday, July 19th. It started coming up for me as a timestamp, and then I started intentionally making it a moment, like: 'You're exactly where you need to be'...a lot of my music, and a lot of what has happened in my life, has evolved from the help and wisdom of my mother, so I couldn't think of a better person to put on the front of my album.

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Kaiya Gordon is a writer and poet from the SF peninsula. Kaiya believes that impact is more important than intent, and is not interested in listening to your normcore noise band. Follow them on twitter @ayobaio

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