

What Makes Moby Tick?



Sanjoy Narayan

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His stupendous Berlin concert in June 2009 showed this dance and electronica expert's surprising versatility

IT'S NOT often that I think of choosing an album by Moby to listen to but when I do, it is usually *Play*, his hit album from 1999 that has a hint of melancholia but is otherwise quite upbeat electronica. Tracks from *Play* include *Honey*, *Find My Baby* and the sad *Why Does My Heart Feel So Bad?*

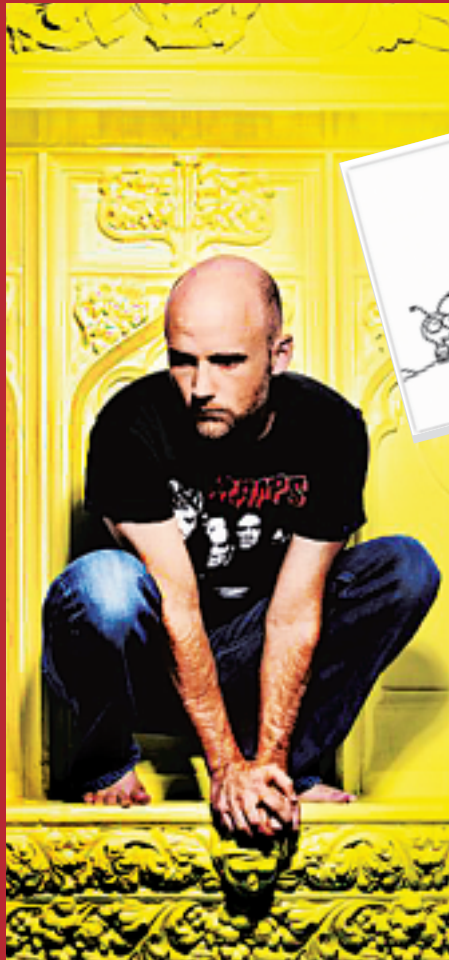
I haven't really been a great fan of Moby - I find some of his music repetitive (not surprising considering his roots as a DJ who made a name as a dance and rave music exponent) - but *Play* is an album that I sometimes like to, er, play, in the car during a commute or on a tired flight. The ambient nature of electronic music is soothing and *Play*, especially, works for me.

Still, I'm not overly into dance or electronica. Unless you're at a rave party, the genres can get monotonous. But Moby bucks that trend. Moby was born Richard Melville Hall and got nicknamed after the novel his great-great grand uncle, Herman Melville, wrote. Moby could probably be credited with giving DJs a face. Back in the early 1990s, DJs were faceless characters with little more than word of mouth among loyal fans at the clubs they played to spread the word about their talents. Moby was one of the first DJs to make it in the mainstream music market - something that found him, in equal measure, fans who admired him as well as critics who thought he had sold out.

Besides *Play*, I've had my Moby albums - *18*, *Hotel* and the eponymous, *Moby*, which is also the first album he recorded in 1992 - for a while but it's not often that I reach for them. I did last week after I heard the recording of a stupendous concert by Moby in Berlin on June 26 this year. Reaching into his not insubstantial repertoire of songs, Moby and his band - many of whom are Europeans, including the highly talented British singer, Joy Malcolm - played 22 songs for nearly two hours and the result makes it the best ever Moby recording that I have heard.

As well as some of his more popular tracks (including the three I mentioned at the beginning), there were new ones and more than one surprise. The first of these was a stunning cover of a song by post-punk legends Joy Division, called *New Dawn Fades*, which, if you hear in isolation, you'll never realise that it's being performed by Moby. It's a song that Joy Division's residual band, New Order (formed after their former band-mate Ian Curtis committed suicide), never performed after Curtis's death in 1980, till a few years back when they toured with Moby and, as he says before playing the song, he persuaded them to do so along with him.

Moby's version of *New Dawn Fades* is so stellar a rendition and



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A DECADE LATER
Moby's latest album *Wait for Me* is getting rave reviews ten years after the launch of *Play* (1999), which had a hint of melancholia but was still upbeat electronica



SECOND LIFE
Joy Division formed the band 'New Order' after former bandmate Ian Curtis passed away

so 'un-electronic' that it left me wondering how versatile the man was. Then I learnt about Moby's brief departure from electronica for an interlude during which he made a guitar-rock alternative album called *Animal Rights* in the mid-nineties. I haven't heard that album and always held off buying it because every reviewer I have read has given it two stars or less! Now, after listening to his Joy Division cover, I'm thinking of getting hold of it and making up my own mind.

After *Animal Rights*, Moby came back to what he does best, electronica and dance music, and *Play*, the album I mentioned before, resurrected his career. But let's get back to the second surprise on the live recording of his performance in June that I heard last week. It was a totally unexpected version of Neil Young's *Helpless*. Sung by soul singer, Joy Malcolm, this version of Young's song was another eye-opener to Moby's wide-ranging talents.

Moby's latest album, *Wait for Me*, came out the same month (June) that he performed in Berlin so it's no surprise that many tracks from there made the cut to his playlist. Ten years after *Play*, *Wait for Me* has been getting rave reviews from most quarters and is, indeed, a fine album. And, after listening to his Berlin concert recording, it's an album that's doing the rotation on my current playlist. Incidentally, if you want the Berlin recording, the entire 1-hour and 45-minute mp3 is available for download, free and legally at NPR's website. Alternatively, you could head over to the web version of this column, where there's a link.

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