



Melleefresh and Spydabrown. Pic: Xander Wood

Playing Deep:The Ballad of Melleny Melody

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Whether it's as the recording artist Melleefresh or as a record company owner who helped to globally establish EDM superstar Deadmau5, all Melleny Melody wants to do is play.

Her dance-oriented label Play Records is celebrating its 20th anniversary this year, generating enough revenue over the years through more than 1000 released tracks to substantially bankroll London, U.K.-based Play Deep Studios, co-owned and run by her son, Zachary "Spydabrown" Brown-Smith, and recent home to projects by the reunited Spice Girls, Emili Sandé, the Duchess of York, Sarah Ferguson and producer Jonny Coffey (Beyoncé, Naughty Boy, Wretch 32.)

But while the zesty and flamboyant Toronto-based singer, songwriter and collaborative catalyst has enjoyed surprising international musical and entrepreneurial success in the U.K. European house and EDM scenes, the 56-year-old Melody has quietly also become one of the genre's more influential figures.

The fact she's accomplished the feat largely on the periphery of the music industry spotlight over the past three decades is even more impressive, both as a survivor and an enabler.

"I've done my own thing more than anything," Melody recently told *FYIMusicNews*. "Whether it's (with) Jaymz Bee or Alphonse Alixander Lanzall (Azari & III) -or 'Dirty 30,' as I call him - I was always writing songs and doing music."

Melody's humble music career beginnings can be traced back to her initial ambitions as an actress: in the 1970s, Melleny Brown was a regular on CBC Radio dramas, performing with the likes of iconic Canadian actor Al Waxman.

"I was usually 'Screaming Girl in Car' or 'Nurse No. 1,'" she recalls.

A brief foray to New York at the age of 21 to attend acting school landed Melody a job as a publicity assistant at Australian-British impresario Robert Stigwood's RSO Records, manager of Eric Clapton and The Bee Gees and producer of such films as *Saturday Night Fever*, *Grease* and *Tommy*.

"I couldn't even type," she admits. "Just entertain the secretaries and get coffee."

At one point, Scottish comedian Billy Connolly came to town and Melody remembers having to "run around with bags of bananas" that were required for his stage routine at the time.

"It was not my big break to stardom, that's for sure," she laughs.

Upon her return to Toronto, Melody became a voiceover talent. "The first voice work I did was 'The Cute Chick' on (Johnny Hart's) *B.C.: A Christmas Special*," she recalls. "I was 'The Cute Chick' and Barbara Hamilton was 'The Fat Broad.' One of my first really good experiences doing a cartoon thing."

It didn't take her long to become a regular on Nelvana Limited-generated animated TV series, cementing her profession by playing the roles of "Cheer Bear" and "Baby Tugs" on *Care Bears*, which lasted three seasons, and later jumping to *Inspector Gadget* and *Star Wars: Ewoks*.

"I also had a part in *Rock & Rule*, which was Nelvana's big animated feature, and I wrote a song in the movie that I did with Patricia Cullen called 'Hot Dogs & Sushi.' That film had a cast of amazing performers, including Blondie, Cheap Trick, Lou Reed and Iggy Pop.

"So I've always been borderline music and theatre or acting."

She also met future husband, Nelvana co-founder and animator Clive A. Smith, in '79 (he and two partners sold Nelvana to Corus Entertainment in 2000 for C\$554m) and gained recognition for ventures other than acting: in the '80s, her company Mel-Made Madness specialized in fashion design (she dressed the popular '80s Jaymz Bee-led alt-band The Look People, Billy Newton-Davis and Molly Johnson among others), art cakes, picture frames and other art styles.

She also discovered there was a demand for her singing.

"I was always close to being in music, but never really thought that I could sing," Melody admits. "Then I ended up in Kensington Sound singing back-up for a kid whose father had bought time in the studio. The son was tone deaf, so I sang 'Rubik's Cube Blues,' co-written by Jody Colero.

"All of a sudden everyone got excited and thought they had something. There was even interest from Island Records in New York. But then a dispute broke out over ownership and it didn't go anywhere."

However, it was enough to spark Melody to create more.

"I'm So Happy Just to be Here with You, Me and My Sequined Shoes Are Happy Too," was her first VideoFact-funded single and *Melleny Melody and the Syncopated Symphonies of John Henry Nyenhuis* in 1994 - an album she describes as "big band cartoon music" - was her first long player.

"Everything was all blending together. But I always had a huge passion for dance music."

After teaming up with ex-Look People frontman (and current JazzFM radio personality) Jaymz Bee and delving into cocktail music, she formed her first label, Nepotism, with Bee.

"Our motto was 'Family, friends or fuck-off,' she laughs.

The duo released four albums, including a compilation that included contributions from such Canadian stars as Barenaked Ladies keyboardist Kevin Hearn, ex-announcer and current political advisor Ralph Benmergui and the future Peaches, Merrill Nisker.

"His stuff was a little more cocktail and more jazz, my stuff was more cartoonish: a cross between Marilyn Monroe, Shirley Temple and Betty Boop on acid," she declares.

More solo work followed, as Melody began working with Great Big Music, Inc. - the Toronto-based team included Tim Thorney (Alanis Morissette), Brent Barkman and Carl Lenox - recording "Doin' Dishes," "Fashion Victim" and "Cruising Down the 401" during studio downtime.

"I figured they had to be remixed as dance tracks," she recalls. "I'd been speaking to Pete Jarvis (DJ Peace Harvest). He had all kinds of connections to England and Ninja Tunes. He could remix."

She also worked with Dave Howard of The Dave Howard Singers.

Melody and Jarvis flew to MIDEM in 1996 to sell their music, and as a result formed two record companies - Play Records and Gay Records, the latter releasing the album *Melleny Melody & The Pop Machine*.

At the beginning, Play Records exclusively released vinyl. The house music compilation *Floorplay*, manufactured by Acme Vinyl, was one of the label's first releases.

"We did some performances at MIDEM in a little nightclub," recalls Melody.

She also applied her marketing skills to the label.

"I knew how to get us into studios, and once the music was done, how to market it and get it out there," explains Melody, who also earned a 2008 Dance Recording of the Year Juno Award nomination for Melleefresh vs. Deadmau5 "Afterhours," and a turntable hit in the U.K. with the Hoxton Whores called "Let's Get Dirty."

"Because it's not like I've ever had a Universal or a Sony or a BMG or anybody giving me money to market my stuff."

By this juncture, Melody the recording artist had become Melleefresh, a pet name given to her by Alphonse Lanza (Alixander III), who later departed to form Azari & III.

In 2004, Melody and Play Deep President Brown-Smith co-owned an in-house studio and that's where she first collaborated with Joel "Deadmau5" Zimmerman.

"Carole Pope had put out a record called *Transcend* and okayed me to do a remix album called *Transcend - The Remixes*," Melody recalls. "I got DJ Iain (McPherson) to help select people and he found Joel.

"Joel's remix of 'Americana' was kind of like 'Faxing Berlin.' It was very prolonged. Ian said 'it isn't super 'dancy,' but I liked it."

Zimmerman then showed up at Melody's doorstep and they became "fast friends."

Melody gave Zimmerman some money to remix the track "Beautiful, Rich and Horny," recorded by Melleefresh and Dirty 30, which she calls "electro-trash" music.

"I really loved it and sent it to my friend Johnny Williams who worked with (trance DJ) Dave Pearce at NuLife (Records). Williams gave the track to influential DJs and radio personalities Pete Tong and Judge Jules, scoring substantial BBC Radio airplay for most of 2006."

The duo ended up collaborating at Melody's house during several late-night sessions, with Deadmau5 eventually signing publishing and personal management agreements.

"That's where we put out the first stuff that Deadmau5 and I did together, recording in my husband's woodshop studio," she laughs. "That's where we did 'Afterhours' and 'Hey Baby.' We had remote cameras set up in the woodshop."

The arrival of Beatport, the Denver, Colorado-based electronic music retailer, specializing in EDM and dance music, was a godsend to Play Records' commercial success.

"When Beatport came out, it made things so much easier to get your music out to the world," said Melody, whose label joined the service in 2006. "When the Internet started, that was a huge opening for independent labels. If you were there at the time and you had music ready to go, it was a totally awesome way of doing it."

Play Records was also offering a new musical niche with the work of Deadmau5.

"When Joel came out on board, we ended up doing electro and nobody else was doing that kind of music," she says. "Joel's also really savvy with I.T., so he helped me to load tracks up to Beatport."

"The whole Beatport thing totally took off. The music sold like crazy. I made a lot of money for the first time in a long time. We were the top label selling music."

The dual U.K.-Canadian citizenship because of her marriage to Clive Smith opened doors to doing booming business across the Atlantic.

"I think the center of the universe for most of this music is the U.K.," says Melody. "We're working with a lot of U.K. talent. We made vinyl in England years ago. We had a really good relationship with Prime Directive Distribution, and now my distributor Labelworx and my publisher Bucks Music Group - they're in England."

A trip to Amsterdam in 2009 with her son Zach inadvertently planted the seeds for Play Deep.

"When we returned to England, Zach thought that he would like to stay," Melody recalls. "So he stayed and found a building that was grungy, but he rented it for a couple of years."

"But we found renting in England so expensive that it's just stupid. So we had a few bucks and thought, 'why not buy a building?'"

Officially open for just over a year, Play Deep (see separate story (<http://www.fyimusicnews.ca/articles/2016/06/17/spydabrown-sounds-play-deep-studios>)) has been building a substantial buzz with heavy duty clients and Melleefresh herself has taken advantage of the digs, recently recording a track with The Real Dosage (Dayne Jordan) and DJ Ferno.

"It's a word-of-mouth thing more than anything," she asserts. "And with the Spice Girls tweeting in the studio on lockdown for 48 hours, that started a chain reaction with a whole bunch of other stuff. That type of publicity you can't even buy."

Legal issuers surfaced for the label last year. On October 26, 2015, Joel Zimmerman, a.k.a., Deadmau5, filed a lawsuit against Play Records Inc., for tens of millions of dollars in damages over what he claimed to be unauthorized remixes and mashups.

Melody says the whole thing was a misunderstanding.

"He had an issue with a remix that I released that another writer had written - old tracks that me and Dirty 30 (Alixander III of Azari and III) had done. We had also done a few new tracks together, so I had promoted this album called *Secrets* that included a couple of remixes that Joel had done, which I had paid for, in 2005."

She said that a writer had erroneously reported that the project had included new DeadMau5 material, putting the EDM superstar "into a tizzy" for "wrongly promoting his music."

In May, an agreement was reached, with Melody saying that, moving forward, she will not create any remixes of Deadmau5 material.

"But the catalogue of mixes and old tracks from 2006-2008 is still mine," she asserts.

Melody is now focusing on releasing new and archival music to celebrate Play Music's 20th anniversary.

Melleefresh's latest project is a video collaboration with Boy Pussy called "Yummy" and "Work My Body" as well as NHB's "Bad Boy."

Play Records just released "Danger" by The Blue Elephant (Montreal-based house music producer and DJ Andrei Poliakov) featuring J.O.A. and is working with former Nelly Furtado programmer DJ Shine a.k.a. Jason Spanu, the Peterborough-Toronto electro tandem Phauna and Italian progressive house artist Crossfingers ("Collapse") among others.

"I was just in the studio with this new Toronto duo called Cuetwo and Tarquin Richards, who self-produced an album that's now on iTunes," says Melody.

For Play Records' 20th year, Melody and VP Zach-Brown-Smith is reviving and re-releasing some of the early vinyl-only tracks to digital.

With European distribution provided by Labelworx and over 1000 tracks in circulation, Melody is constantly scouring for fresh talent as she continues to wave the Play Records flag.

"You're as good as your last song. So you have to keep your presence out there as much as possible. And it's house music - so it never goes out of fashion."