

ON THE COVER

I kind of feel like it chose me rather than I chose it somewhat. — Chris Merk

ELECTRONIC MUSIC

Merk's focus is teaching and sharing

By Ashley Martin

Merky Waters has got a flow.

Working the turntables, it looks like the music is moving through him. He gently rocks as the fingers of his right hand scratch a vinyl record in time to the beat.

"With the vinyl, you have more of a feel for the (music); it's more tangible," says Chris Merk, playing at a '90s hip hop mash-up of Brand Nubian and Da Brat.

"There's lots of different intricacies with (turntablism) but you don't really think of it while you're doing it, while you're in the flow of it. It's just kind of more like a feeling."

It's a Thursday night at the University of Regina. In the basement of the Riddell Centre, Merk is at the Interactive Media and Performance (IMP) Labs. He's a research assistant there, during his off-hours as a full-time arts education student. He also DJs; he released his latest album, *Swim*, in December.

In his work at the IMP, Merk introduces people to alternative musical creation. There are no band instruments here. The IMP Labs have 10 sets of turntables and 12 beat machines.

Merk teaches beatmaking and turntablism here, and expands to rapping and beatboxing during visits to Regina classrooms.

"He's a great ambassador for not just hip hop but also for thinking about hip hop as pedagogy, and getting young people excited about learning through the hip hop art," said Charity Marsh, Canada Research Chair in Interactive Media and Performance and creator of the IMP Labs, which opened in April 2008.

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When Merk was 10, a Kool Moe Dee cassette from the library started it all. He fell in love with hip hop, even though it wasn't popular among his friends.

The rhythm hooked him.



Chris Merk works on cutting it up on the turntables in the Interactive Media and Performance classroom at the University of Regina. QC PHOTO BY TROY FLEECE

"It was always on my mind and it stayed in my life and eventually I was just like, yeah, I need to do this myself."

He started making pause tapes in high school, recording from CDs onto cassettes: releasing the pause button to loop sections, half-pressing the record button to double up sounds. He ruined two stereos jamming the pause buttons.

"I thought it was kind of original."

When he was 18, he invested in his first turntable. He had his first gig at 19, mixing and scratching records.

Then he started making his own music.

"I kind of feel like it chose me rather than I chose it somewhat."

He started performing as DJ Merkules. After a couple of years,

blues legend Muddy Waters inspired his new moniker for three reasons.

1) "He really was the one who started the electric guitar thing and turning it up and distorting it."

2) "I'm an Aquarius." The symbol for that star sign is the water bearer.

3) "The kind of music that I make I find is rather dark, not too shiny, I would say, it's not too clear." Murky.

His record collection numbers

close to 1,000, a fraction of its former glory. He estimates he's given away 5,000 albums in moves over the years.

He'll dig through "the dustiest parts of garage sales and thrift shops" for old and obscure records to sample. "I'll find a drum sample from here or piano notes from over here and bass from all over ... kind of beefing it up a little bit."

He's a great ambassador for not just hip hop but also for thinking about hip hop as pedagogy, and getting young people excited about learning through the hip hop art. — *Charity Marsh*

He manipulates the music to make it his own. "That's kind of a new thing, the whole idea of appropriation, using something that exists and remixing it, which I think is a huge thing in art right now."

He works with local musicians and formats their live recordings.

Classical guitarist Ramses Calderon is featured on two tracks on Swim.

"The idea of fusing in such a way to me is one of the richest things of combining both styles," said Calderon, who spent a couple of hours improvising in Merk's home recording studio. "You have some electronic and then you have something that is purely acoustic with a sound that is coming right from the wood."

"To me, music is a very personal and human thing," said Merk. "Most of my connections are from being in the same place at the same time with the same frequency. I think that kind of brings something out of it, where you're in the same place at the same time and it's very human."

He bridges cultures in his songs, like on New Moon, which features Ukrainian singer Yana and Farsi rapper Ali Dehesh. "So that's a combination of those two worlds on that one beat."

Merk's language expertise doesn't extend past English, so "I ask a lot of questions. A lot of checking back with them to make sure what I'm chopping together makes sense. And I've never had it come back."

He's a thoughtful creator. And that's one reason he doesn't do many gigs anymore.

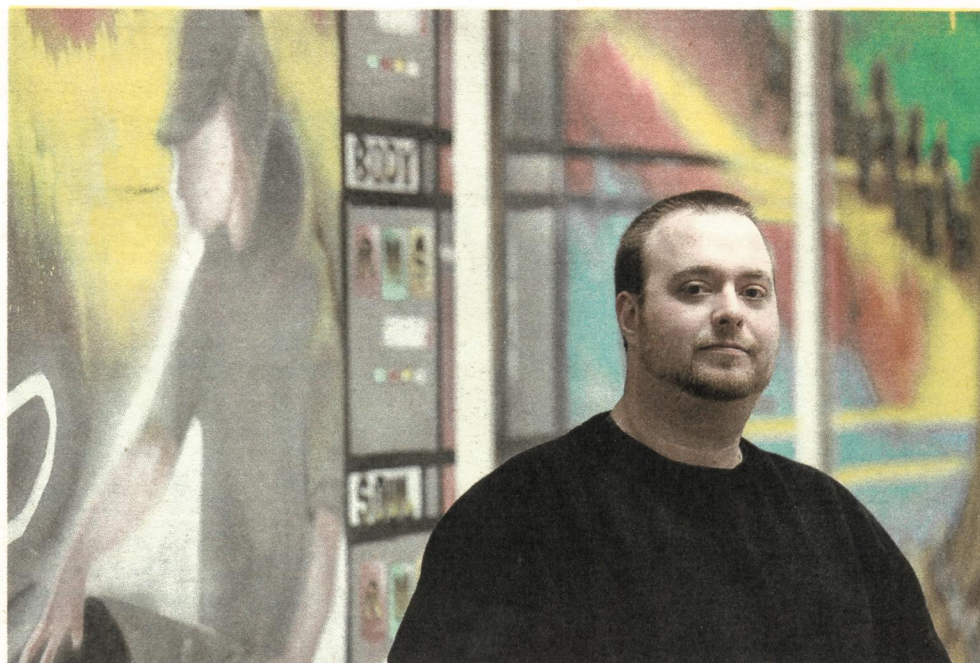
"A lot of people assume you're just playing a record," he said, like a wedding DJ. He doesn't want to take requests.

"I'm doing it to share what I like."



Chris Merk, left, with colleagues Charity Marsh and Ben Valiaho in the Interactive Media and Performance classroom. Merk makes beats, beatbox, sings and...

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Chris Merk is a research assistant at the Interactive Media and Performance (IMP) Labs at the U of R during his off-hours as a full-time arts education student. QC PHOTO BY TROY FLEECE

Scratching vinyl is like strumming a guitar. Learning tempo on a beat machine translates naturally to drums.

"There's that connection that I don't think many people see yet. So that's kind of what I'm trying to push to education and to schools is that you have to see that connection, that it's all music and that one isn't better than next and it all kind of leads to a musical understanding that can benefit on all formats of musical production."

He doesn't have traditional music training like some other people he works with, but "we're on an even playing field, so I'm seeing the equal benefits and the equal result coming from different angles of music. I don't see why one side should have a hierarchy over the other."

Calderon agrees there's value in learning both.

"You can use the band, you can use whatever other instruments you have, infuse it with the other genres . . . beatbox on top of it; you can improvise but you're rapping on top of it, just to deconstruct those archetypes

and that traditional form," he said. "It just gives a different option, give different opportunities."

When he completes his degree in April 2016, with a double major in education and visual arts and a minor in music, Merk hopes he can continue to apply his philosophy in the classroom.

"It's the sharing aspect of it. That's the reason why I became a DJ as well, just to share this music that I loved and that many people didn't have access to," said Merk, who got bit by the teaching bug when his nephew Isaiah, now 11, was little.

"I found a joy in teaching him art and drawing and music, so the more we did stuff like that, the more I kind of hinted towards maybe this is really suited for me and something that I could be really good at."

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His work at the IMP Labs is also devoted to sharing the music.

"It's kind of the alternative to the traditional musical landscape," said Merk.

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...the classroom because they just want to stick around and keep trying things and keep talking to me and what my experience is. — Merk

Its two rooms — one with beat machines, the other with turntables — are open to the public three evenings a week so people can explore new sounds. Merk and fellow research assistant Ben Valiaho are there to help show people the ropes.

It also hosts public workshops and university classes.

"In Regina, we really have a unique experience," said Merk. The IMP Labs, now seven years old, are unique in North America.

Marsh credits the U of R for supporting her vision. Compared to universities in Toronto, where she came from, "I had the support at U of R to do the kinds of things I want to do but I was left alone enough to let it develop.

"The composting is done and it's ready; we're ready to grow it," added Marsh.

TRADITIONAL VS. DIGITAL

When he's DJing, Merk's method of choice "depends on the environment I'm in."

The advantage of working digitally is music won't skip if people are dancing near the DJ

booth.

"When I'm doing vinyl, I kind of have to tell people around me to settle down," Merk said laughing, "which is kind of what you don't want to do in a club."

The disadvantage to just working digitally is "(it) bypasses that whole process that I think is valuable to DJing": Learning to mix manually and getting a good sense of tempo from having to count beats-per-minute.

"With vinyl you have to do it by ear, and that's a valuable skill that I would promote to DJs," said Merk

"You can actually get to a point where you feel the groove on the vinyl because it's actually engraved into the material, whereas when you have digital, it's more of just a flat line. But you do have a lot more options such as looping certain parts of songs and finding cues within the songs where you can kind of just immediately bounce back to, whereas vinyl you have to pick up the needle and move it back, so it has a lot more options."

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Chris Merk's record collection numbers close to 1,000 and he estimates he's given away 5,000 albums over the years. QC PHOTO BY TROY FLEECE

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