

Photo by Paul O'Valle.



Dennis Ferrer: Soul Tech

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Ask two people in the club who [Dennis Ferrer](#) is and you may get two completely different answers.

To an older house head, Ferrer might forever be associated with names like Kerri Chandler or Sfero Recordings and Afro-house tracks like “Orixas” and “Reach for Freedom.” Meanwhile, someone who has recently crossed over into the world of house via techno might think Ferrer’s story begins with “Sandcastles,” the huge cut he co-wrote with Jerome Sydenham, or “Son of Raw,” or his remix (with Abicah Soul) of Telepopmusik’s “Love Can Damage Your Health.” The man himself draws no distinction between his recordings in the early 2000s and his latest single, “A Black Man in Space.” Ferrer says his music all comes from the same place—the soul.

Thus, Ferrer is not afraid to use “soulful house” as a descriptor of his sound. Actually, it was a vocal house track that inspired him to get back in the game. In 1995, Ferrer was working at Rogue Music in midtown Manhattan, selling musical equipment. He met people like Kenny Dope and JoVonn there, and also Kerri Chandler, with whom he became fast friends. One weekend, Ferrer accompanied Chandler to a party in Boston thrown by the Biscuit Head crew. “Everybody’s screaming at him, ‘Kerri! Kerri!’ hands in the air, [and] Kenny Bobien’s remake of ‘Why We Sing’ by Kirk Franklin [was playing]. [I had] one of those epiphany moments, where it’s just like, ‘Oh, shit!’ I had that moment on the dancefloor and it was just like Kenny was singing to me. I heard it and I was like, ‘This is the reason why I want to do music—because of this beautiful record.’ After that, I basically bum-rushed Kerri’s house!” Ferrer laughs.

Thus began what was actually a return to music-making for Ferrer. Having grown

up in the Bronx, checking out hip-hop block parties and trying to sneak into The Fever club to see Run-D.M.C., Ferrer tricked his way into a record contract with Big Beat while still a teenager. He put out records with Tetsuo Inoue as OM for C&S in 1993 and with Damon Wild as Morph for Synewave and New Electronica in 1994 and then... he stopped. Sick of too much work, too little credit, and constantly being screwed over by record labels, Ferrer sold all his gear and went back to school to become a computer systems programmer. While he was in school, he took the job at Rogue, met Kerri, and found himself falling back into the music world. “They say it’s in you, and I didn’t believe that for a while,” says Ferrer about the drive to make music. “I used to say, “Aww, you can learn how to play” but... that doesn’t mean you can *make* stuff. It’s two different art forms basically. It was just in me.”

Ferrer made himself at home in Chandler’s studio, eventually getting his own keys to the place and a room for his own equipment. In 1998, the pair launched the Sferre label with *The Lost Tribes of Ibadan*, marking the beginning of an Afro-centric sound for which the pair, along with contemporary Jerome Sydenham, soon became known. Ferrer also incorporated gospel into his recordings, catching ears with the rich keys and uplifting vibes of tracks like 2001’s “4 the Children.” All the while, he was remixing everyone from Robert Owens to DJ Pierre to Stephanie Cooke. “I take remixing like I take making my own records,” says Ferrer. “It makes no sense to remix a good record. Why fuck around when somebody did it right the first time?”

In 2003, Ferrer got together with Sydenham to “do it right the first time” and created the track that ushered in the second phase of his career. “Sandcastles,” with its spacious drums, lushly deliberate pacing, and tense strings, crossed the boundaries between soulful and tech house, and soon became a standard in both camps. Though Ferrer continues to refine his Afro and gospel touches with cuts like “Dem People Go” and his remix of Blaze’s “Most Precious Love,” “Sandcastles” has been followed by a string of remixes and original work that combines soulful house with a heavy tech punch. From the rolling, jazzy keys of “Son of Raw” (played by Ferrer himself) to the leaden bass and crumpled hi-hats of “Transitions” (both of which were featured on his 2006 artist album for King Street, *The World As I See It*), Ferrer has melded the rich emotions of his turn-of-the-century work with the stark electronics he explored back in the early ’90s.

“I’m a true believer in cycles,” he says. “When I first started out I was doing very tech-y, 132-bpm stuff. And I left that and started doing very soulful music. And now I’m somewhere in the middle, so whatever I learned during those years with tech-y and electronic music, it comes in handy today. I find myself almost going backwards to go forwards.”

For Ferrer, forwards means a new album for his [Objektivty](#) label, which he has used to foster new talent like [Karizma](#) and the [Martinez Brothers](#). But first is “A Black Man in Space,” a new Ferrer track under the Son of Raw moniker. “*Somebody once said/That there is no soul in space,*” Ferrer intones over its booming drums, ragged bass synth, and ominous pads. “Somebody slap that fool,” he continues before a ripping, urgent sax solo begins. Listen to the man—he knows what he’s talking about.

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