

M.I.A. a.k.a. Maya Arulpragasam

Only Swiss Gig:
1st of July 2005, Wasserwerk Club Bern

Maya was born in Hounslow, London but spent little time there as, at only 6 months old, her parents moved the family back to their native Sri Lanka. Motivated by her father's wish to support the Tamil efforts to win independence from the majority Sinhalese population, her father became politically known as Arular and was a founder member of EROS (the Eelam Revolutionary Organisation of Students), a militant Tamil group.

In Sri Lanka, they lived at first on her grandparent's remote farm, a collection of huts without electricity or running water. After a year, as her father's involvement in militant activities increased, Maya, her older sister Kali and their mother moved to Jaffna in the far North of the country, where Maya's younger brother Sugu was born. Contact with her father was strictly limited as he was in hiding from the army, he occasionally visited in secret, slipping through the window at night and being introduced to the children as an uncle so that they didn't give him away to the army when they regularly came to question the family.

Eventually, as the civil war escalated, it became unsafe for them to stay in Sri Lanka, so her father sent tickets for them to relocate to Madras in India. Maya's mother moved with the three children into an almost derelict house, 3 miles from the nearest road or neighbour. They scraped by for a while, with sporadic visits from Maya's father, and the girls attended the local school, excelling as students. After a while, visits from friends and family grew less frequent and money grew very tight. The children became ill, Maya's sister caught Typhoid and they struggled to eat enough. A visiting uncle took concern and moved them back to Sri Lanka again, where they settled back in Jaffna.

By now, the violence of the civil war was at its peak and the family repeatedly tried to flee the country. The army regularly shot Tamils seeking to move across border areas and bombed roads and escape routes. After several failed attempts to leave, Maya's mother successfully made it out with the three children, on to India and then finally back to London, where they were housed as refugees.

It was in the late eighties and on a notoriously racist council estate in Mitcham, Surrey, that Maya began to learn English. Aged just eleven and in a new country, she was exposed to western radio for the first time by the noise resonating from her neighbours. Her affinity with hip-hop and rap began from there - the uncompromising attitudes of Public Enemy and N.W.A. clicked with a frustrated, energetic war-child trying to relate to grey and foreign surroundings.

Maya was a talented and creative student, eventually winning a place at London's Central Saint Martins Art School, where she studied fine art, film and video. Here, for the first time, she began to piece together some of the different strands of her life experience. In an early incarnation of what was later to become M.I.A., she learnt how to play off her different cultural personae against each other; layering rap iconography with the warfare pictures from her youth, Asian Britain with American new-wave film making style and St. Martin's fashion sense with refugee outlooks.

A successful art career beckoned and, for a while, seemed to be Maya's destined path. Her first-ever public exhibition of paintings featured candy coloured spray-paint and stencil pictures of the Tamil terrorist movement. Graffitied tigers and palm trees mixed with orange, green and pink camouflage, bombs, guns and freedom fighters on chip board off-cuts and canvases. The show was nominated for the alternative Turner prize, every painting sold and a monograph book of the collection was published by Pocko (which was simply entitled 'M.I.A.', an acronym for Missing In Action).

A commission from Elastica's Justine Frischmann to provide the artwork and cover image for the band's second album led to Maya following the band on tour around forty American states, video-documenting the event. The support act on the tour was electro-clash supreme Peaches, who introduced Maya to the Roland MC-505 sequencing machine and gave her the courage to take on the one art-form she felt least confident in, music.

Back home in London, Maya and Justine got hold of their own 505 and, working with the simplest of set-ups (a second-hand 4-track, the 505 and a radio mic), Maya worked-up a series of six songs onto a demo tape

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which became her calling card to the industry. The tape found its way into the hands of Steve Mackey and Ross Orton who then re-worked 'Galang' into the monstrous meld of influences that would eventually propel M.I.A. into the limelight.

An addictive mashed-up recipe of dancehall, electro, grime and world music, Showbiz Records only pressed up 500 copies of 'Galang' but that was enough for her to go on and win the instant support of DJs and the media seemingly everywhere – *"M.I.A. has the look, the lyrics, the profile, the mongrel beats to be huge. If the majors have any sense, they'll pile in."* Sunday Times Culture.

The majors did indeed pile in with M.I.A. eventually opting to sign to XL Recordings (home to Dizzee Rascal, Basement Jaxx and the White Stripes), embracing them as they were the only label to offer her 100% creative control. Meanwhile, the underground success of 'Galang' had continued to spread, even earning M.I.A. plaudits in the American Press - *"The 'hey ya ya hey' singing at the end of 'Galang' is this year's riot music."* The New Yorker.

For her next single release, 'Sunshowers', Maya again hooked up again with Ross Orton and Steve Mackey who had furnished her so successfully with the insane electro-squelch and mangled beats on 'Galang'. Hitting the airwaves in June, they pushed boundaries even further with hyper-minimalist production and a reworked chorus from Dr. Buzzards Original Savannah Band's track of the same name to create a hypnotic template for her to fire out her young-girl bravado, this time about guerilla warfare and the Tamil-Sinhalese civil war.

With this first single proper barely on the shelves and no gigs at all to her name, New York's Fader magazine made her their cover star with the strap-line 'THIS IS M.I.A. - MUSIC'S NOW THING!' She flew out to New York to perform her first ever live set (for the launch of the issue) to a screaming crowd of hyped fans and then stayed to see Matthew Williamson open and close his fashion week runway show with 'Sunshowers'.

November 1st sees 'Galang' get the re-release the public have been demanding since the first time they heard it but couldn't buy it. The accompanying video, featuring multiple M.I.A.'s amid a backdrop of her graffiti artwork animated and brought to life, was directed by Ruben Fleischer and art directed by M.I.A. herself. On the surface it looked like a colourful pop video but watch it carefully and you'll see scenes of urban Britain and the ongoing Sri Lankan civil war being depicted and delivered with a wry sense of humour. M.I.A. is fast proving herself to be a far from ordinary pop star.

Her debut album, 'Arular', is set for release in February 2005. Titled in acknowledgment of her father's past, it follows the same philosophy that unites all strands of the M.I.A. project - cut and paste. The mix of production credits on the album all feature forays into new territory for the collaborators, with ex-Pulp member Steve Mackey doing dancehall and pop-maestro Richard X working with Sri Lankan nursery rhymes; and from her hand-sprayed artwork on the record sleeves, lyrics that mix Tamil, cockney and American slang to her tracksuits and hoodies specially sewn from the brightest, boldest African print fabrics, or Mowgli dance moves for ragga beats - M.I.A. creates culture clashes that work; *"a unique voice unafraid to mix big issues with cool sounds"* Harpers & Queen.

Stephen Loveridge
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