



# 20Q: TOKIMONSTA

Courtesy of Bethany Vargas

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The Los Angeles composer and producer is done proving herself. From the Holy Ship! Wrecked festival in the Dominican Republic, she talks to PLAYBOY about her latest album, life after brain surgery and how she survives and thrives in the man's world of EDM

Interview by  
ANITA LITTLE

MUSIC

**Q1:** *You have a new album coming out next month, your first since 2018. What can people expect from Oasis Nocturno?*

**TOKIMONSTA:** It's hard to say, right? It's difficult to manage anyone's expectation of art that you create and the moment that you're in. But I would say that with the album I wanted to create a concise body of work. I wanted to tell a story that felt very much interlinked phonically as well. I want this to feel very soulful and have a bit of an old-school energy, while still being very modern.

**Q2:** *This album features collaborations with some incredible artists, like EarthGang and Bibi Bourelly. What was the best thing about working with such musically diverse talent?*

**TOKiMONSTA:** It's a surreal experience to work with someone else and see how they work and how they elevate the song. We'll be in the studio together and I'll watch them write, and I'll give as much support as they need during the writing process. You end up with something so much greater than the individual parts. I'm super grateful for those experiences because I'm always blown away.

**Q3:** *You're a pretty prolific artist in terms of how much you produce. How did you ultimately decide which songs would go on the album?*

**TOKiMONSTA:** In the past, I've kind of been the type of person where if I make a song and I like it, I just want it to end up on the album. It's like I have 40 songs, how am I going to whittle this down to an album? You become so precious with each song because each song is like a child of yours, and it's a part of you. And to cut one out would say that it's not worthy. With this album, it was a little bit less of a struggle. I wanted all the songs to have a signature that ran through them.

**Q4:** *What do you want people to feel when they listen to this album? What mood do you want it to put them in?*

**TOKiMONSTA:** The main thing is I want them to feel, period. Some songs are more upbeat and fun, and some songs are more pensive and introspective. I really enjoyed adding that very last song on the album [“For My Eternal, Oh Dream My Treasure”]. It's a [reminder] to be mindful of yourself and who you are. It's meant to be an ambient, relaxing, beautiful song. Whoever needs to hear something like that to bring them down from the stresses of life, the song is available for them.

But yeah, I want people to feel happy, I want people to feel empowered. I want people to feel love and all those feelings. I guess not angry. Maybe skip anger, but the range of emotions is in there.

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**Q5:** *When you’re creating, do you completely self-isolate and just never leave the studio? What does it feel like to be in the zone like that?*

**TOKIMONSTA:** I just turn into this crazy mad scientist staring at graphs for like a month straight. It’s a lot more clinical than creative at times, and you just turn into a weirdo being stuck inside, no human interaction. That’s what usually ends up being a struggle. Me deciding, “Oh, is this [beat] loud enough or not?” It’s one decibel different, which is like completely indiscernible to the normal person, but you become that kind of crazy person.

When I’m in mix mode, that’s when I’m literally locked up inside here, because I have to get it done. All the songs are written but they’re not mixed, and I’ll have to go in there and get really technical. If I start working on a song and I get that motivation, I’ll sit there for like eight hours, 10 hours, finishing the bulk of the song in one sitting.

**Q6:** *Within all of that, how do you practice self-care? It seems you’re constantly touring or producing. When do you know it’s time to take a break or go on vacation?*

**TOKIMONSTA:** Someone taught me this stupid term called bleisure, which is business leisure. So I guess it’s when you’re trying to fit leisure into those times when you’re doing business. I do take vacations. If I have like a cool show somewhere like Thailand, I’m like, “Okay, cool. I get to maybe take a week off and do something.” I don’t put a lot of pressure on myself to be very regimented. If I don’t feel like making music, I don’t force myself to make music.

**Q7:** *You recently returned from doing shows at the Holy Ship! Wrecked music festival in the Dominican Republic. For some artists it can be difficult or distracting to always be on tour if they’re wanting to spend most of*

*their time creating. Do you enjoy touring or does it overwhelm you sometimes?*

**TOKiMONSTA:** Seventy percent of me just wants to make music, and a lesser part of me likes touring, thrives off of touring. I do actually enjoy touring up until a certain point, and that's when a lot of that whole self-care ethos comes in. When I tour a lot, it tends to burn me out pretty badly.

Making music never burns me out, but traveling can be quite hard. It's about finding a balance and actually saying no to lots of shows. I have played way more shows in previous years, and I'm choosing to make them sparser but more meaningful.

**Q8:** *Does touring make it hard to keep up with your relationships? How do you maintain a personal life when on the road?*

**TOKiMONSTA:** The friends that I have that are in the industry or are creative, they completely understand. I might be gone for one or two months at a time, but we have the internet and Instagram and text messaging. But for my really good friends that I went to high school with, it's harder for them to understand why I'm gone and why I can't go to a baby shower, why I can't go to bachelorette parties.

Those relationships probably have suffered a bit. But if these friendships are meaningful, then you work them through and learn how to communicate with your loved ones. And the ones that can't handle it, well, I don't need to hold on to them either. It used to bum me out a lot—friends telling me they're disappointed that I'm not around for certain things. But now I'm okay with it because it's just the life I live, and I think half of it is respecting what I do.







**Q9:** *We're at the start of a new decade. What do you hope to accomplish in the next 10 years?*

It's hard to think that far in the future. That's part of the reason I became a musician—to not have that whole five year, 10-year [plan]. I've thought about this, and I just hope in 10 years that I'm still making music. And I hope in 10 years that I'm making music that makes me happy and that is allowing me to live my life. I can't ask for anything more. If I could make music in 10 years, and still have my cat, and eat food, and have a roof over my head, I'll be happy.

In 10 years, I don't know if anyone's going to want to watch me perform. It might be a little weird, being a Korean auntie on stage or whatever, but I guess I just got to own it. For example, I love Bjork. When she's 85, I'm still going to be like, "Yeah, I want to go and see that." So maybe I want to enter a mode where I can really elevate my craft and my shows, and the experience that people have interacting with me and my music.

**Q10:** *Nearly five years ago, you were diagnosed with a rare and possibly fatal brain disease that required you to undergo two major surgeries and an extensive rehabilitation. After your recovery, you went on to release a Grammy-nominated album *Lune Rouge*. How has your life changed since then?*

My life has changed a lot. On the most basic level in terms of health, I get a lot less headaches. It's so cool to not have to get those. The last migraine I had was March of last year, which was pretty incredible for me. They're quite debilitating but with a surgery, those have been negated. And that's just a quality of life thing, you know? Not having to eat a bottle of Advil every two days.

In terms of career, everything changed. I'm so grateful because I've been rewarded so much for my hard work. I think about that surgery

and what I had to go through. Even though it was difficult to have to go through that then, and it's difficult now to still have the disease, I'm happy. I'm happy right now. It's really hard for people to even say something like that, but I'm happy. I'm grateful for everything that I've been given, and grateful for the situation I'm in. It was an intense hardship, but I grew so much from it that I wouldn't go back and take that experience away from myself.

**Q11:** *After your life-saving surgeries, you temporarily lost the cognitive ability to process sounds and language, a terrifying experience for a music artist. With time, you were able to make your way back into the studio and learned to understand beats again. Do any of the difficulties you faced in recovery still linger?*

I'm really good. If I'm not 100 percent, that's probably just my own life choices at this point. That moment was very difficult but again, in the scheme of my entire life, it was just one moment. If I think about the scheme of myself and all of humanity, I'm just a grain of sand. What I went through is so small compared to the difficulties that other people have to face in their daily lives.

Dealing with that hardship only allowed me to broaden my perspective of humanity. It helped me build a stronger mind and a more equipped body, but also grew the size of my heart and helped me have so much more empathy for people. Shit, life is hard. You don't have to have brain surgery to know that life is hard.

**Q12:** *There are very few women and even fewer women of color in the EDM space. Do you ever feel stifled by these male-dominated and white-dominated spaces. Do you struggle to be seen?*

You get so used to it. I'm just used to looking outward and seeing all my peers being predominantly white males. And yet I know I have something to offer. My voice in music is different than someone else's. If you were to think about a male singer-songwriter and a female singer-songwriter, like Dolly Parton versus Johnny Cash, there's something completely different that a female songwriter has to offer that just can't be communicated by a man. It's her feelings and her perspective going into the music that she's making. And for me in this space of electronic music, you're always hearing a man's voice, a man's feelings through his production. There's a lack of a female energy in production.

It doesn't mean that the song has to be feminine, but we're just missing that I have some songs that give off a feminine energy that a male

that. I have some songs that give off a feminine energy that a male producer just wouldn't make. I've always been glad to be that person, but it would be way cooler if there were more people, more women sharing their unique voices as well.

I try to be optimistic, but obviously it's misogynistic in music. It is statistically unfair. Our fees are less. If you play a festival, and there's someone the same as you at the same level, they're probably getting paid more.

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**Q13:** *Right, whenever I see these music lineups, I want to ask 'where are the women.' How can the industry work to make it more gender-balanced?*

The responsibility is held in those spaces where people have power to influence. Like the press, like music festivals producers, like other musicians, record labels. They have to go and seek out female talent. Good female talent. You don't need to promote a woman that's just mediocre, because there's so many amazing musicians.

It's a systemic issue. Maybe festival bookers aren't booking women because they don't know any women that would sell tickets. But then, okay, why can't they find a single female artist who would sell tickets? Well, it's because the music isn't being proliferated and supported via the radio and record labels. But it's out there. There are fucking tons of amazing female musicians, across the board, in all genres.

**Q14:** *When you were coming up in EDM. I imagine there weren't a lot of*

*Asian-American women in the space. Who did you look up to?*

When I first started making music, I didn't aspire to be an electronic musician. I thought I was going to make hip hop beats. I wanted to be a rap producer. I was making beats with Flying Lotus. Then weirdly enough, becoming a part of a scene that made mostly beats became the new genre for electronic music. We came from a hip hop background, but it ends up going into this new genre.

Most of my influences are all male producers. But one of the most monumental women in my life, in terms of artists, is Bjork. Bjork is someone that I look up to quite a lot. She's incredible, she's still innovating now, 30 years later. And I really like Missy Elliott because she's kind of my inspo in that world.

**Q15:** *You've said in the past that you don't think of yourself as a DJ, but as a composer and a producer. Why do you feel the need to differentiate?*

It's one of those things where people can misinterpret a bit because for me, I'm not just a DJ. A DJ is someone who mixes two songs together. There's a complete art form to that, too. But it's almost like doing a disservice to that art form because there's people that are far better DJs than me. But it all goes back to my 10-year goal. In 10 years, do I still need to be touring? That's maybe not as important. But I do want to still be composing and making music.

I am okay with people calling me a DJ because it is something that I do. But my view of myself is more as a composer, a producer. I can score film, I'm not just a DJ. Saying you're a DJ is not a bad thing, but it's just oversaturated now. The steam that came with being a really good DJ is getting lost in the sea of "well, everyone's a DJ."

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**Q16:** *Playing the piano was one of your first introductions to music as a child. Do you still play sheet music?*

You know what's so crazy, is I really think I should go back to practicing that. I haven't done it in ages. I'm pretty sure I could still read music, but it's just been so long. Actually, my childhood piano is at my friend's house because I couldn't move it into my current place. I'm hoping to get it back soon so I can practice. I have synthesizers and mini keyboards, but I miss my childhood piano.

**Q17:** *You recently performed at the first EDC in South Korea. Can you clue us in to what the burgeoning EDM scene is like out there?*

It's crazy how much EDM as a genre is thriving there. Like thriving. They love electronic music, they love dance music. But what I'm starting to see is them breaking out of mainstream EDM and getting into the deeper areas like house and techno, like left-field electronic music. That excites me the most because that means they're exploring with artists like Peggy Gou. Koreans, Korean women actually, are starting to make a big impact on electronic music right now.

**Q18:** *You seem obsessed with your cat Nisha and devoted an entire Instagram page to her. What kind of cat is she and does she have any favorite talents?*

Nisha is a Scottish Fold, and he's a boy cat even though everyone thinks he's a girl. His special talent is standing. He stands all the time. He stands for no reason, he stands in chairs, he stands on top of tables, he stands on top of the bed, he stands on top of the dresser. He'll stand on top of your lap. I don't know why he does that, but that's his thing. He stands



Tokimonsta performs a set at the Holy Ship! Wrecked music festival in the Dominican Republic, Photo by Keiki-Lani Knudsen

**Q19:** *When you come back to Los Angeles from a long stint of touring, what's the first thing that you want to eat?*

It depends. If I come back from an Asian territory, then I want to eat tacos. When I come back from Europe, I want to usually eat Asian food —or tacos. All the things that you can only get here that they do really, really bad everywhere else.

**Q20:** *How is your alter-ego TOKiMONSTA different from Jennifer? How are they the same?*

They're one in the same. I like thinking that the identity I share with the public is who I am. I want to be the most authentic version of myself for everyone versus just being a character. I want people to know like, "Hey, up there is TOKiMONSTA and she is just like me and I could one day be just like her," you know? I know it's not quite as magical that way, but I'm TOKiMONSTA, TOKiMONSTA is me. If you call me TOKiMONSTA on the street, I identify with it just as much as being called Jen.

I could be down the street getting a coffee right next to you, and I don't

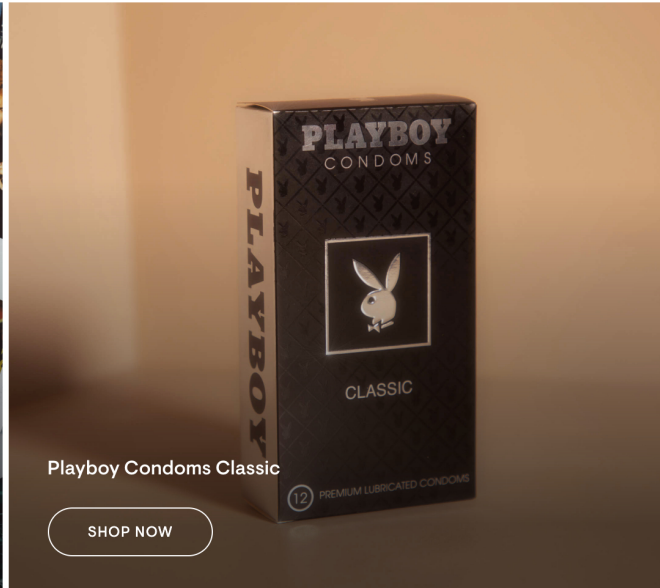
mind interfacing with people and just showing everyone that you can make music and do all this cool shit. You can make it through brain surgery and all of that while just being Jennifer Lee.



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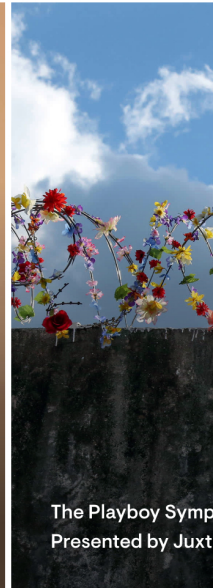


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