

Battle songs

A collective of female musicians from conflict zones around the world is gearing up for dates in the north. But first, musical director Laima Layton tells **Antonia Charlesworth**, there are visas to be secured and lyrics to be written

Brazilian DJ Laima Layton is best known as a touring member of Soulwax, and as one half of electronic duo Mixhell. With the latter, she's been touring and producing her own music for 12 years, as well as remixing and collaborating with artists such as Moby and Diplo.

By her side in her professional pursuits, as well as her personal, is Igor Cavalera – who made his name as the drummer for heavy metal band Sepulture and who happens to be her husband.

“He was already very famous, so you end up having the Linda McCartney-Yoko Ono thing,” laughs Layton from her home in London, where she’s lived with Cavalera and their blended family of five children since relocating from Brazil in 2013.

“It was really hard to be a woman DJ for a long time, especially in Brazil. You are

seen as the cute thing that comes along to play and in this time of the superstar DJ, you’re expected to be ‘the’ girl – looking good, clapping along, wearing red lipstick and I’m like, no,” says Layton. “I dress like a boy. I’m not going to put high heels on. That’s really weird and impractical. The DJ should be behind the booth, playing the track. She doesn’t need to show off – that’s the beauty of it for me.”

She recalls playing the Box in Soho – exclusive and risqué playground for the

at the bouncer and said: ‘Well, there’s no music then – she DJs way better than me. If there’s only one allowed in I’ll have to stay out.’ The bouncer was speechless.”

Now she is stepping out without Cavalera, or any of her other male collaborators. Instead, she’ll be heading a collective of seven pioneering female artists from around the world who are coming together to tell their stories of life in areas of conflict and inequality. The project is presented by In Place of War – a

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rich and the famous. “I approached the booth with Igor and the bouncer said: ‘No, you don’t go in.’ He was expecting me just to be his girlfriend. Igor looked

University of Manchester-based initiative that works with creative communities in places of conflict. With a nod to their revolutionary punk predecessors,



and buoyed by a female engineer, tour manager, producer and drums from Cavalera and Layton's 16-year-old daughter, they're collectively known as Grrrl.

"Doing the Grrrl project on my own is a very big step," says Layton. "I fell in love with the work In Place of War do after they invited me to one of their meetings. Through their academic research they found that people in places of conflict and crisis are looking for shelter, they're looking for food, they're looking for water and the next thing they look for is culture, because no one lives without their culture.

"Their work is not just charitable – it's educational. It allows people to take the power into their own hands. They empower people to produce their own art and be sustainable with it. It doesn't really work if you just dump guitars in a place of conflict."

Layton became an ambassador but wanted to do more. In April she went with In Place of War to an East African music festival in Uganda. "I learnt how hard it is to record an album inside a refugee camp. I found out that in Uganda there were only 20-something records in the whole history recorded. We trained people to use equipment we took over for them and how to record."

Then she was invited to become musical director of Grrrl. "I thought, oh my god, I've never been a music director. It was a challenge. But then I found out about the women involved. Most of them have a background in music but take Wiyaala from Ghana – she's won prizes for singing but to survive in her industry she has to record pop songs. She said: 'I never sang to a techno track. I really want to discover this world.' So I thought, OK, I have something to offer."

Wiyaala, aka the Young Lioness of Africa, will be joined by: South African nu jazz/folk singer, author and activist Nono Nkoane; Mabe, a DJ and journalist from Caracas, Venezuela; Brazilian "Queen of Dancehall" Lei Di Dai; AWA – standing for African Women Arise – who raps about women's rights, gender-based violence and the political struggle in her native Zimbabwe; and two British vocalists – rapper and activist Speech Debelle and folk, modern and traditional Bengali singer Sohini Alam.

"We're very lucky that In Place of War is in the background of this because



Left: Lei Di Dai, Laima Layton (also above), Sohini Alam, Speece Debelle, Wiyaala, AWA, Nono Nkoane and Mabe are coming together to tell stories of inequality through electronic music

you need someone with the knowledge and skills to bring the girls out of those places of conflict," explains Layton the day before the artists are due to arrive to start writing and recording vocals for the tracks she's been preparing for the past two months.

In one week's time their live shows begin, culminating with a headline set at Hull's Freedom Festival, where they'll also take part in a panel discussion entitled Be The Change – about women, war, activism and music. "We're having issues right now getting AWA and Mabe here. Mabe still doesn't have a visa or a passport confirmed. We are getting help from the Venezuelan Embassy, which is hosting all of the girls while they're here. You can see the kind of things they are up against."

Layton says she is lucky not to have lived in an area of direct conflict but for her, living in Brazil, where there is a high level of poverty and huge inequality, was conflict enough.

"There may not be machine guns but it's conflict in your head about how you educate your kids, and then fear because there's a huge amount of violence. People from our family have been kidnapped and that's normal. To have your dad call you in the morning and say 'Last night I was taken by two guys with a shotgun' is common."

Despite the expectations on her, Layton says electronic music is a good environment for women, and one she's excited to introduce her new collaborators to. "There are many more male DJs than female but there are a lot of women in the crowd. If you compare with metal, which is where Igor started out, that is a very masculine world. Would you want to go to a party with just narrow-minded guys or a fun party where everyone's welcome?" ■

Grrrl play Manchester's Soup Kitchen, 31 Aug, and Hull's Freedom Festival, 2 Sept (grrrl.net)