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A Party in Baltimore Bridges the Scene's Racial Divide
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All Photos By Alexandra Brandon

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It's a visceral experience watching Baltimore rapper Abdu Ali live. Saturday, beads of sweat rolled down his face and into his beard, his necklace swinging over his bare chest as he rapped. At one point he was writhing on his back on the stage; at another, he jumped down onto the floor with an ecstatic fervor, the crowd circling around him as if we were a 70s cult leader.

Last weekend, Ali performed at Kahlon, the bimonthly party that he puts on at the Crown in Baltimore. The same raw energy and spirit of generosity that pervades his live act bled through the entire night's rage, which bounced back and forth between the venue's two rooms, one bathed in a sultry red light, the other in a cool blue.

Ali has been putting on Kahlon at the Crown since November 2013, and he's been determined to put together a diverse bill, which in turns brings out a diverse crowd—Saturday's party was mixed not just black and white but equally queer and hetero. Over the past year, the acts that have played Kahlon have ranged from Dan Deacon, a Baltimore mainstay and Dad-like icon who's

been playing electronic music in sweatpants around the country for decades, to Brooklyn-based babe and seriously empowered rapper **Jungle Pussy**, who was opening for Lil Kim earlier this year. It's been a space for more emerging acts too. This past Saturday, a highlight was Philly-bred R&B crooner **DonChristian's** set.

I caught up with Ali after the party to find out more about how Kahlon fits into the Baltimore scene and its goals to bring people together in and outside of the city.

Whitney Mallett: How has the Crown emerged as a venue after a lot of DIY ones in the city were shut down?

Abdu Ali: The Crown came up at the perfect time right after the city was getting ridiculous with shutting down DIY venues in the summer of 2013. It's basically a DIY spot because it's run by people of the arts community and they let artists come through and do their thing without any kind of limitations. I think they were able to emerge because they have the right papers to keep from getting fucked by the police.

WM: People sort of associate Baltimore with Baltimore club, but there are a lot of different scenes in the city. What different fractured scenes or communities are you aiming to bring together with this party?

The music scene lines are blurry and complex, and are not only segregated by music taste but race and culture too. But I would say I am really trying to bring everyone together racially first. That's the big thing in Baltimore, most events are either black or white, no in-between. I've been to some music or arts events and was the only black person sometimes or it's like one or two others and vice versa. Then also within the racial divide you have the music genre divide. It's ironic because Baltimore is so small, yet we have such a divide within the arts and culture community. I'm really interested in bridging the gap between the rap/R&B scene, club, punk, and electronic scene and the art school kids, the HBCU [Historic Black Colleges and Universities] kids, etc. Everybody basically. Lol.

WM: Are there any other goals or ethos behind Kahlon?

AA: I came up in the 90s when Baltimore club music was universal and large in the world, and also I witnessed the second time Baltimore was hot in music in the late 2000s when people like Dan Deacon, Animal Collective, Rye Rye, MIA, Blaqstarr, and Diplo were all rising. I believe the underground Baltimore musicians have a swag and sound that can be universal and appealing to the world and can be a place where musicians can thrive without having to move away. Kahlon is a part of a larger goal to bring more attention to the music scene not only within the city itself but also to the rest of the world. The artists here have a peculiar ear, voice, and narrative that needs to be heard and respected by many. It's also important to showcase that Baltimore has an audience for the kind of musicians you see at Kahlon too.

I bring in non-local acts to bring awareness to the scene here, but also to bridge another gap, between the music scenes of different cities—like it's kind of crazy that artists from NYC, Philly, Baltimore, and DC don't cross paths as much as they should and can.