

## **Genghis Barbie brings pop hits and French horns to Sunday Chatter**

by Sam Adams

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### *French horn quartet fuses pop hits and classical training*

Jay-Z and Kanye West were the subject of much debate last year for dropping a single called "Niggas in Paris." In a testament to lavishly extravagant materialism, Jay-Z goes so far as to say he's "planking on a million," meaning that he's laying facedown on a million dollars because, hey, why the fuck not? The album it came off of, *Watch the Throne*, had a lot of critical backlash, both from the media and from more "conscious" rappers like [Chuck D](#) and [Mos Def](#). And while statements of being pridefully careless with one's ridiculously large bankroll—e.g., throwing stacks of money in the air at strip clubs or lighting cigars with Benjamins—aren't exactly an unheard of blight on the genre, the timing was, well, a little off. The song was blaring on the airwaves while people were camping in the streets to protest corporate greed.

All that said, there's one thing that the naysayers can't deny: Regardless of the message, pop hits like "Paris" can be infectiously exhilarating. Every time I hear the song I feel like I've been injected with a can of Four Loko (in a good way). That's probably why crowds went nuts as Jay and 'Ye performed it up to eight times in a row, night after night, as they toured to promote the album. It's also why the song showed up on numerous "best of" lists in major publications.

"It's fun to play a classical-pop crossover concert and wear spandex and funky fur collars." Danielle Kuhlmann

### **I got to thinking about all of this during a conversation with a French horn player.**

Danielle Kuhlmann (aka Velvet Barbie) is one quarter of French horn quartet [Genghis Barbie](#). Like the other members of her ensemble, she's a classically trained brass player who began her lessons in grade school. But rather than sticking to the traditional route of playing symphony halls and swanky tea-time luncheons, she and her bandmates decided to go pop.

Their repertoire consists almost entirely of covers of well-known top-40 hits. "I really love pop music," says Kuhlmann, "and I actually think a lot of the music is great music, and it doesn't get the credit it deserves."

Some of the more popular arrangements composed by Genghis Barbie include renditions of Sisqó's ["Thong Song"](#) and Seal's "Kiss From a Rose."

"If I'm gonna play a Mahler symphony I wanna have as much fun as I do when I play Lady Gaga." Danielle Kuhlmann

The four members of GB—who, in addition to **Velvet Barbie**, operate under the pseudonyms **Attila the Horn**, **Freedom Barbie** and **Cosmic Barbie**—know each other from the New York City conservatory system. Some of them schooled together at prestigious academies like Juilliard. They've all navigated the waters of music freelancing in NYC. (And yes, it should be noted that both Attila and Freedom have played backup for Kanye, including on "SNL" and at the BET Awards.)

Kuhlmann says it was at one of the girls' bachelorette parties in 2009 that they decided to branch their pop passion into a full-fledged group. "It's fun to play a classical-pop crossover concert and wear spandex and funky fur collars," she says, referring to some of the attire in GB's YouTube videos. "We're girls and we're not going to pretend that's not something we want to do." They dub their style "post post-feminist."

As for the name, it refers to a comic book that a 5- or 6-year-old family friend of Kuhlmann's was making back in the '80s. Like many young girls, she was obsessed Barbie ... and Attila the Hun. Kuhlmann's dad is a rock drummer and always thought it would make for a great band name.

It's clear in watching the group's videos that the whole thing is about a droll sense of fun—informed, of course, by immaculate technical proficiency. But it's also a reminder of how enticing music that's typically written off as trite can be when put in the right hands. "Not just the songs," Kuhlmann says, "but the actual music, the actual melodies and structures and everything that's going on. ... If I'm gonna play a Mahler symphony I wanna have as much fun as I do when I play Lady Gaga." And Genghis Barbie gets downright wicked when it comes to ["Bad Romance."](#)

**Sunday Chatter** (formerly The Church of Beethoven)

Performance by Genghis Barbie, reading by author Judith Chazin-Bennahum

Sunday, Feb. 5, 10:30 a.m.

The Kosmos Tickets: \$9 to \$15 adults, \$5 under-12

[chatterchamber.org](http://chatterchamber.org)