



Sarah Jaffe's "Mannequin Woman" video from 2013 marks the musician's first ventures into a fantastical, yet minimal, audio-visual aesthetic that strayed from folk. She and New York-based artist Jen Ray usher in Soluna with a public performance on Wednesday.  
*STILL c/o Kirtland Records*

## Sarah Jaffe and Jen Ray Built a Show Like You've Never Seen For Soluna

**The two artists explain how drumline, Texas folk, tap and ballroom will spell out dark dreams Wednesday on the radial staircase at the Meyerson.**

Soluna's footprint just keeps getting bigger. The Dallas Symphony Orchestra's music and arts festival built its name on performances of original commissions and repertory works by international artists throughout the festival's three weeks. Now Soluna is expanding into new territory with events like Array, which embrace the possibilities a mix of popular and classical music afford. Hip-hop superstar Nas is among the performers booked.

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A prelude event will set the tone for it all on Wednesday. *Eyes as Bright as Diamonds* is the first taste Dallas audiences get of this year's Soluna.

The newly commissioned performance kicks off the Dallas Art Fair on Wednesday at the Meyerson Symphony Center at 5:45 p.m. The event, free and open to the public, is a collaboration between New York-based artist Jen Ray and Dallas' own Sarah Jaffe.

I sat down to chat with Ray and Jaffe about the genesis of the project, billed as an exploration of the "dark glamour of American life, its history of transformation and reinvention." Joining Jaffe on the lobby's radial staircase will be a range of other performers including the Haltom Color Guard and Drumline, SMU ballroom dancers, tap dancers from Booker T. Washington, and an all-female string quartet from the Dallas Symphony Orchestra.

### **Talk us through the genesis of *Eyes as Bright as Diamonds*.**

JR: Wow, I've actually been working on the project for a really long time, partly because I wanted it to be super engaged with the Dallas community. I keep coming to Dallas and meeting more and more people, attending rehearsals... I feel like that's part of the project it's not about just taking puzzle pieces and fitting them together, it's really fully having relationships with our collaborators.

SJ: Initially I was contacted to see if I might be interested in a collaboration of some kind with Jen. Not knowing what exactly the project was, after seeing her work I knew, in whatever capacity, that doing anything with Jen would be an experience I wanted.

### **Talk about working together and how you developed the musical elements of the performance.**

SJ: I knew Jen was wanting music to basically act as a score to thread the "moving parts" together... I also knew that the song choices were of the most importance so we started a dialogue very early on about specific songs that painted a broad story of the south, or Texas specifically.

JR: Sarah will be singing *Yellow Rose of Texas*, *Home on the Range*, and *Waltz Across Texas*.

### **Wow, I wasn't expecting so much Texas.**

JR: Yeah, we went back and forth for a long time: *Do we want to sing something original? Do we want to sing something contemporary?*, and I feel like for this project it needed to be something iconic. It's not just about Texas and these are really iconic American folk-songs that really relate to our country and to American history.

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**Talk a bit more about how what American history means for the performance. You talk about the American dream in your artist statement in a sort of ambiguous way.**

SJ: Jen and I are both from the south. We talked a *lot* about its sad and very dark history, its codependent relationship with religion, its many enigmas...

JR: Like most people, ok I don't want to get too negative, but I'm very ambivalent at the moment. This project comes out of really having these different feelings about America. I think a lot of artists right now want to talk about their experience with America, the good the bad and the ugly and I feel like in a way I'm talking about my American experience in this project but it's also a shared experience.

**So you're really working with these classic songs that are so associated with this idea of America and freedom and the American dream and pulling them out of their tired associations and putting them in a drastically different context. Was that difficult to do?**

SJ: It wasn't so much difficult to make these songs my own, but rather to remake them in such a way that I/*we think* about them differently. The songs that we sing carry a history too.

JR: Yeah. The performers too though, are really all-American tropes in a way; the color guard, the drum line, the tap dancers— these are very American dance and musical forms. I say in the description it's a site-specific performance exploring the dark side of the American dream. When I moved back to America I had a lot of ambivalent feelings about it, but I was also attracted to it, I still find America very glamorous.

**That attraction to the dark side definitely seems like a through line to your work as a whole. In general, your performances seem more akin to punk shows, albeit highly orchestrated punk shows with costumed back-up performers and glitzy sets. Is that kind of the mood you're going for?**

JR: I'd love for my work to be thought of as performance art, although I guess I kind of hate the term performance art. Basically I wanted to bring to the art space something as passionate as what happens in music spaces. Part of it was also that I wanted to bring my drawings to life, but also I wanted to explore this notion of passion in the art space. Art can be so cerebral, I would see a show that I really enjoyed, but then I'd go to a concert and be more like *oh my god*. So I thought, how can I take those two things and do a mash-up of these two things? So when people ask me well, is what you're doing performance art I'm like, *yes? sure? I don't know?* All I know is I just wanted to bring the passion back.

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