CULTURE

Dance Dance Revolution

The biggest thing in music this year? A supercharged version of something that nearly died in the '90s: the rave. Gideon Lewis-Kraus reports from the Electric Daisy Carnival, a three-ight (and surprisingly polite) bacchanal where international DJs spin for 100,000 wasted hedonists scantily dressed in furry underwear

By Gideon Lewis-Kraus, Photography by Erik Kabik

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SAVE THIS STORY

Outside the gates of the Las Vegas Motor Speedway, along the dusty perimeter road, party kids mass in the flat glare of the dusk sun. They're here for the Electric Daisy Carnival, hyped as America's largest rave—though it's unlikely anybody here would describe it that way. "It's not actually a rave," says Peter, a cloud programmer in his late twenties from the Pacific Northwest I'd met in the hour-long cab line back at the Strip. "It's a massive. A rave is at a warehouse, and it's noncommercial. EDC is a hundred thousand people at a racetrack." EDC is such a massive massive that it takes us twenty minutes to rush across the interior staging ground of the Speedway, from

The entrance past the six satellite stages to the main stage, kineticFIELD. Though the biggest DJs aren't on until 1 or 2 A.M., some of Peter's favorite acts are on early, and our special wristbands—his VIP, mine media—hadn't gotten us out of the long line to be frisked.



_ At this rate, they're gonna need more Red Bull. _

That hundreds of thousands of kids would fly and drive across the country to pay hundreds or thousands of dollars to spend three days in the desert dancing to the beats of

the thing that everybody had predicted since 1999—that electronic dance music (hereafter: EDM) would take over pop—had been delayed a mere seventeen years. In 2012, a gentleman named Skrillex, whose music sounds like a computerized raccoon fight, took home three Grammys, sweeping the electronic categories, and was the first EDM act to be nominated for Best New Artist. Deadmau5 appeared on the front page of *The New York Times* in his signature mouse head. *Forbes* estimated that Tiësto was averaging $83,000 an hour for his DJ sets. No corner deli went unthrobbed by a Calvin Harris beat. Why was this happening now? Was this really the rave scene's triumphant return, another retro craze for a culture increasingly addicted to accelerated nostalgia, or was this something different? There at the Speedway, the scene had grown so inclusive—Greek-letter tank tops and athletic jerseys—that it was hard to tell if it was a scene at all. I put the question to Peter, who was dressed in a symphony of gray: "When you look out at these people, do you see anything like a coherent style or culture?"

"You can tell sometimes by how people are dressed what genre they're into," he says. He gestures at a little flock of scant-vested people who could be parking attendants at a busy nudist colony. "Like, those kids in the Day-Glo neon, they're probably into house. And the kids who are in black or goth are probably into dubstep, and I guess the people who are into trance, like me, are harder to pick out."

According to Peter, we're "living in a house moment now." The biggest DJ here this weekend is Avicii, Peter says. Avicii is Swedish and is 23. He first got big at age 18 when the Swedish House Mafia started picking him up and playing his tracks. The Swedish House Mafia is a group of three DJs who perform separately and together. Their name isn't meant to be ironic. "He was all of a sudden number six in the world last year. Now suddenly everybody's gotta be house. Like, Deadmau5 is huge now, and he's house. Tiësto was a trance DJ forever, and he switched from trance to house. Like, Armin—"

"Armin van Buuren?"

years, from 2007 to 2010. DJ Magazine publishes the rankings, which are based on reader votes. "And Armin plays trance, but in 2011 he got knocked to number two, after David Guetta, who's a house DJ." David Guetta helped do the thing where the Black Eyed Peas had a feeling.

"Can you explain why trance used to be popular and now it's house?"

"The tastes change quickly because music is free and so widely available, so it's easy to know what's the most popular, and there's this constant drive for novelty. Free music leads to quick evolution, and the music is like a virus." What I think he means is that the music feels somehow less sought out than pervasively insinuated. It's beating in our circuitry.

Here's a thing: I like electronic dance music. For a brief period in what feels like a bygone life, I used to go out to clubs in Berlin, to hear Modeselektor or Ellen Allien or Apparat or Richie Hawtin. We'd get to Berghain at three thirty or four, wait two hours for the tattoo-faced doorman, Sven, to pass judgment, maybe get inside at six, newly flushed by that moment of door acceptance. The old exclusivity, as arbitrary as it could be, I totally get: Artificial scarcity can make anything desirable.

In the early '90s, the rave was an in- the-know scene: All-night parties took place in remote warehouses that, even if a thousand people showed up, billed themselves as underground. Increasingly frequent police raids on clandestine venues, along with the potential for real money, drove raves into licit clubs. Then the RAVE Act was passed, allowing police to treat the clubs like crack dens—that is, thinly costumed drug-abuse bazaars. Rave culture assumed the quaintness of a curious historical trend. Neon orange parachute pants went the way of white bell-bottoms, and the music went back to Europe, where it belonged. American teens discovered emo, wore more eyeliner. A decade passed. Now, somehow, rave culture has come back, and its appeal appears to be more mass than the rave kids of the '90s could have hallucinated—or, for some of them, desired.

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_ Afrojack mans the DJ booth at kineticFIELD, the festival's main stage. _

Peter and I round the corner to kinetic-FIELD just as Hardwell is ushered out to the decks. Hardwell is the DJ name of a 23-year-old from the Netherlands—the ranks of the DJs swell with the barely postadolescent Dutch—named Robbert van de Corput, which makes him sound both fatter and fancier than he seems to be. Hardwell has been playing clubs in Holland since he was 14, or so his particular origin myth goes, but it wasn't until 2009 that he broke out "onto the scene" with a bootleg remix of a 2007 remix of Robin S.'s classic '90s dance track "Show Me Love." Breaking out "onto the scene" seems to mean massive instant Internet popularity followed by great Ibiza-Vegas-Istanbul-circuit IRL demand.

He presses play just as we're getting to the thick of the crowd. At the beginning of DJ culture, what made a good DJ was the ability to direct the energy of the crowd in front of you, to react to and manipulate the ebb and flow of its specific enthusiasm. On the scale of one of these massives, though, it's just impossible to get that sense of a specific crowd with its specific mood. We're close enough to the stage that we can just barely make out Hardwell's more extravagant gestural exhortations to continue enjoying his music,

collective dance victory, which he celebrates by putting his arms up in a great V, usually just after he's pumped his right fist for a bit. A big part of the effect seems to be the display of the decks' hands-free technology. You can put your arms up in a wide, helpless V and the music goes on; this technology seems precisely what is, after all, being celebrated.

The DJ area itself is the size of a long card table, the only thing around on a human scale, and it's at a low stage level, dwarfed by six rectangles of mesh LED screen. The screens stretch the sixty or seventy yards across the stage and reach perhaps another five or six stories up. Nested and inset, the stacked screens give an illusion of depth. The first images that roil with icy precision across the deep screens are giant Hardwell branding devices, not dissimilar in font from the original Nintendo logo. They spin silvery and clean against a black background as Hardwell continues pressing buttons and making V's. The next images are his professional head shots, recognizable from the billboards that line the fifteen miles of highway to and from Vegas.



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As Hardwell presses more and possibly different buttons, the sun begins to set at our backs and the crowd fills in behind us. Insofar as a unifying motif presides, it's flesh, graced by fur and emphasized by tattoo. There are a lot of pasties. Pasties in taped

rainbows. Scantily goth-clubby à la '90s Japanese tweens. The particularly tacky look of a Dacron bandeau over a lace underwire bra. One would hope that Instagram filters were doing something for the colors, because the contrasts are hideous: pink and green, orange and purple. But the range of neons pales in comparison with the dazzling range of flesh tones. There are black people with Hispanic people, Hispanic people with Asian people, black and Hispanic people with white people. Tie-dye tank tops, Indian headdresses, and arms beaded with chunky bracelets from wrist to shoulder, bead-mail gauntlets cuffed against a coming Zelda insurrection. A frankly surprising array of your basic polo shirt. Spirit hats: panda heads, tiger heads, shark heads, wolf heads. Neckerchiefs. Beaded neckerchiefs. Beaded Pac-Man neckerchiefs. Gone, apparently, are the days when hippies home-embroidered their Turkish-shepherd kits. There's not a single costume in evidence that hasn't been purchased, recently and disposably. "Fluffies," the knee-high canisters of fake fur, sell for $18.99, some with matching wrist cuffs. UV-pink micro-tutus run $11.95, foxtails $13.99, and all are available at raveready.com. There are lizard-irised color contacts. Cursive text tattoos spidered across lats, written in such fine calligraphy that they're less like actual words than word-shaped impressions, too blurry to communicate anything, like coins with the relief rubbed out. Most of them might as well just say TEXT TATTOO or FOREIGN-TEXT TATTOO. There are emoticon tattoos. A man decked out in mirror shards. Not a single beard except mine. Whole teams of people wearing matching neon so as not to get lost. In, I suspect, the most profound possible sense.

The more enthusiastic fans, or perhaps just those least afraid of panicky trampling, push past us toward the front. Figuratively speaking. They don't actually push. What they do is more like a caress. This is a crowd of more than 100,000 people packed into a desert speedway, enjoying massive amounts of alcohol and what's presumably a limited but potent array of psychoactives, bouncing and pulsing to beats that are being beaten anywhere from 85 to 180 times each minute, and what a person does when he or she wants to move past you in the crowd, to take a cell-phone photo from a different vantage

to throw up behind a chain-link fence, is pin you guilty of the sin.

Not only that, but people are constantly ducking out of other people's Instagrams, waiting patiently to avoid interrupting mobile uploads. And that's the least of the near parodic levels of gentleness and etiquette. As the screens behind Hardwell turn to this Star of David warp tunnel leading us into an architecture of DNA beehives, a little futuristic wood nymph—naked but for a few strategic patches of nylon, some illegible French tattooed under her right breast**—**steps on the fringe of my big toe; she stops dancing, turns to me, and with a sweetness matched only by her clarity and crispness of pronunciation, apologizes. Shortly thereafter she kickstyle-dances my shin a good bark, but I wave off her follow-up "Sorry" as she ramps to feudal-Japanese heights of self-abasement.



Some non-negligible factor in this neighborliness is the aforementioned drugs. I'm not going to say everybody is on drugs. Peter, for example, is not on drugs. But most of the people are on drugs. I say this not strictly based on lollipop vending and/or consumption but on the fact that the world's only groups of five people passing around menthols as though they were initiatory chalices are people on Ecstasy. On the matter of drugs, what Peter has to say is that smart people buy them in advance and take them before they enter, in case they're not up to defeating the joke of an entry frisk. What less smart people do, Peter says, is buy inside, a good way to pay $20 or $30 for an aspirin.

Insomniac, the producers of EDC, have got to have complicated feelings about the drugs. They're well aware that horror stories of drug abuse were part of what killed '90s rave culture, so everything they do here is organized to prevent the kind of teen drug death that, along with allegations of managerial misconduct, helped get this event kicked out of the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum. There's no mere infirmary tent; there's an entire on-site hospital. Still, Insomniac will get all the terrible press it feared when a young woman on Ecstasy falls twenty stories from her special EDC-rate hotel room the morning after the event ends.

Onstage Hardwell pushes the buttons to play a few bars of a new song, and the crowd raises its lever arms in mass approval. (The raised-arm gestures would unnerve if this crowd seemed to have even the remotest political potential.) This is his remix of a really popular Avicii track. The song is called "Fade into Darkness." Peter explains to me that he and most of the people there use a service called SoundCloud, which lets you listen to tracks, post tracks, and comment on tracks, often with useful links to other tracks. The most popular receive lush attention. Search SoundCloud for "Avicii Fade into Darkness," you get 500-plus hits, everything from Avicii's original to Avicii's remis to the remis of other famous DJs, such as Hardwell, to the posted-this-morning remis of precocious 11-year-olds from Malmö to Maastricht.

The only really crucial thing to note here about the music is that the whole thing is about the bass. People who know a lot about electronic music will disagree with me, but

progression of a house track, and the plausible reason for house's ascendancy, goes like this: There's some twinkly pirouetting melody in the higher registers, then some bass for a while, and then the introduction of a soaring, optimistic vocal track about saving the world or, for the slightly less ambitious, having a feeling re tonight's bestness, then the simultaneous near-crescendo of the twinkles and the all-out vocal redemption, and then, right at the moment of presumed climax, the bass goes away for a few beats, everybody misses the bass so much and can't wait for it to come back, maybe the snare reintroduces itself after a few seconds to remind you to get excited for the prodigal bass's triumphal homecoming, a good DJ takes *just longer than expected* to bring the bass back, 20,000 or 50,000 hearts stop as one, lever arms hanging anxiously in midair, and then, when the bass kicks back in, the crowd goes out of their motherfucking minds, just like they did the time the bass disappeared and came back four minutes ago, pumping their right arms in genuinely exhilarated unison, survivors all of the briefly yet catastrophically lost bass.

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The edc attendees wake up, put on their pasties, and by then it's once again dusk and Peter and I are walking back across from Gate A to the kineticFIELD stage to see Sander van Doorn (number eighteen) play his early set. There's a light wind, and even for people like me, who remain not on Ecstasy, it feels we're being taken care of by the desert. The mountains in front of us glow in sleepy pink, and we can see the helicopters from the Strip queuing to deliver VIPs who've paid $800 for the privilege. Spirits everywhere seem irrepressibly high as we make our way through the windy nightfall to the stage.

Sander is Peter's favorite DJ. "I like him because he's really versatile," he's told me. "He'll move from trance into house into dubstep, totally smoothly." Peter also happens to be an acquaintance of Sander's publicist, Sara. She's agreed to set up an interview for me with Sander as long as I agree to her rules. Her e-mail read: "Please focus your questions on his new single Nothing Inside, EDC and make no mentions of genres." I ask Peter why.



_ You know what the Electric Daisy Carnival could totally use more of? Exposed flesh and furry leg warmers. _

"Because of everything I was telling you yesterday about trance and house." The house of house is ascendant; trance has been sliding out of fashion, and a rising DJ such as Sander isn't keen on being identified with last year's category, even if the sounds themselves remain debatably distinguishable.

"This is trance now. Hear it? *Wah wah wah wah*. The song is called 'Renegade.' "

The song I'm allowed to ask about, "Nothing Inside," is not bad at all. For an upbeat house track, it's mournful; in an arena where most sentiment is dedicated to such nuanced declarations as *We are your friends / You'll never be alone again,* it's got some emotional sophistication. It's pretty clearly about drug use—there's a line about keeping up the rush, and stuff about cold blank stares—but it seems even better as a comment

At the artist-relations gate, Peter and I find some officious staffer to take us to the trailer of Armin van Buuren, where I'll be interviewing Sander. Inside, Sander sits on a couch, elbows on his knees. He's a young-looking 33 with short tousled hair, a thin V-neck T-shirt with a graying Marilyn Monroe print, fitted flat-front khakis, and red Adidases with red laces against red skin, sunburnt from a set at one of Vegas's increasingly popular dayclubs. He asks if I mind if he smokes. He shakes a cigarette out of a pack of Marlboro Reds, offers me one; in his other hand is an iced cup of a viscous liquid the sickly jaundice of a vodka Red Bull.

"So, okay," I say, after we introduce ourselves and I tell him that his set was awesome, which isn't a lie. "This was a huge culture in the '90s, and then it seems to have largely gone away, and now it's back, and it's bigger than ever. What happened?"

He explains about the government and the drugs, says that U.S. political culture seems more tolerant now. "But it's also, you know, the role of social media."

The whole event, especially in the context of the ubiquitous DJ rankings, does seem like an Internet phenomenon. The most bananas I've seen a crowd go over a track all night was for Knife Party's "Internet Friends," whose lyrics go: *You blocked me on Facebook / And now you're going to die.* A lot of these kids are here because it's so easy to know about each day's new tracks as they roll onto SoundCloud, which helps everybody keep abreast of what's most popular *right now*. You can even see *which specific part* of *which specific track* everybody's most excited about. And they can see that kids just like them are uploading their own remis and getting thousands of listens and comments.

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_ For all we know, she's just high on life. _

"The timespan of a track used to be a couple of months, and now it's just a couple of weeks. The technology makes it so much easier. We producers are able to make music more quickly. What's important is that it gets out, that everybody gets to hear the tracks.

"If I make a track today," he continues, "people know it tomorrow. It's really fresh."

"Does that get exhausting?" That must get exhausting.

"It's a different generation out there now. The kids are wiser than we were; there's so much more information. There are 16-year-olds producing tracks I couldn't have made until I was 25. It's just so easy to download the software." I ask what's ahead for the kids who download the software and want to be DJs. "I think they just make music because they like it, but they run the risk of getting into a harsh industry. You have to perform

want to be DJs, it's a pretty intense job.

He looks over at Sara, and she winces a little. "But don't get me wrong, man. It's the best job in the world. I love what I do. I love all of this."

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Later, back on the kineticFIELD stage, Bassnectar's telling the crowd how much he fucking loves his job. The guy standing next to me says, through the accelerating wind, that these are the only days a year he gets off from the grind—he's a computer technician—and he'd fucking kill to have a job like Bassnectar's. From what I can tell, the main differences are that this guy stands at a computer during the day while Bassnectar stands at a computer at night, that this guy stands at a computer in an office while Bassnectar stands at a computer in front of hundreds of thousands of people, and that Bassnectar's skill or, more probably, luck at computers has put him in great in-real-life demand, such that he gets to stand at his computer in a different city each night to be revered for a few hours by people who, in all likelihood, have been less lucky at computers.

We are in a bowl whose perimeter is a series of giant screens. We all stand together politely, our hair whipping back in the wind, worshipping a man whose luck at computers has given him a brief fan-polled tenure at these screens. It could happen to us, just as long as we keep posting comments with links to the remis we've made with stolen software.



_ It takes some effort to stand out at the Electric Daisy Carnival. Success! _

Because what's important now is not where or how you heard a track first; it's that it's heard repeatedly and by as many people as possible. It's the opposite of hipsterism. Where hipsterism is about being part of the few in the know, the EDC scene is about being a part of the many. Insofar as it's a scene at all, it's one geared toward the universal coalescence that the focus group of the Internet makes possible. This is a youth phenomenon that has submitted to the fact that access to knowledge—the secret location, say, of a warehouse party—no longer sets one particular group off as a special vanguard. They've forsaken the secret-remote-warehouse culture for the understandable reason that it defines itself by whom it leaves out, and from the standpoint of lunchroom sociology, the Speedway feels downright utopian. Distinctions obtain, but frivolously: Whether you look cool at the door has been replaced by which subgenre you've allied yourself with. It's less a scene than an indistinguishable panoply of micro-scenes. But it's hard to tell if anybody worries that when you have so many "friends" that you'll "never be alone again," what constitutes friendship—its texture and specificity, its content—might have been diminished. In a world where the highest compliment you can pay a piece of music is to compare it to a virus, where the Internet seems to function as an all-encompassing and largely inexplicable lottery, it's easy to see how the effortful things become secondary, and why we might just be glad to concede that we're all athrum in these beats together.

Bassnectar cedes the stage to Calvin Harris. Harris is best known for two recent tracks: one called "Bounce," with a peppily distinctive goombah-rallying eight-bit melody, and that terrific Rihanna dance track that played on a loop in every indoor place last winter. Behind him, on the screens, a human braid lacquered in gold spins and multiplies. He's playing remis of all the hits of all the recent years, starting with Basement Jaxx's "Where's Your Head At?" and then moving into Swedish House Mafia's "Save the World Tonight." On-screen behind him is a spiked boulder rolling toward us with the ever rising wind, and as it gets closer we can see that the boulder's spikes are actually the dark spires of an

the beat, now faster, threatening to shake the crowd with a roiling planet dense and dark with us.

And as that spire-crowded planet nears us, the stage goes dark and the music stops. After a few seconds, a deep bureaucratic voice from nowhere comes over the public address and says that there is too much wind; they have to wait a few minutes before they restart the show. The man next to me sighs that this sure means there won't be any fireworks tonight. And after a few minutes they announce, in a relad, matter-of-fact way, that the wind is still too strong, that it's threatening the stage, and that they might ask the crowd to begin slowly walking away from the stage, please. The wind blows from the empty desert and might bring down the towering stage, but nobody panics, nobody pushes, nobody runs, nobody yells. A serene technorationality prevails. The screen wouldn't fail. The desert wind wouldn't blow down the screen. The crowd collects itself in slow, measured, obedient retreat to wait for the wind to end and the screens to start up again. After a few minutes I leave, hitchhiking away with some chemical engineers from the Rand Corporation. Just as we're getting back to the Strip, we hear on Armin van Buuren's EDC Sirius XM channel that the winds are too high, that the night will probably be called off. The next morning I get a text from Peter. He'd stood with the crowd in the wind in front of the blank screens for hours, waiting for the bass to return.

_Gideon Lewis-Kraus is the author of _A Sense of Direction, _a memoir about pilgrimage. This is his first piece for _gq.

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