

SONIC BOOM

Born in the studio, raised in the club,
EDM is now poised to conquer the world

By Kenneth Partridge

It's the bouncing, humming high-voltage strings that launch Nicki Minaj's hit "Starships." It's the swirling, building buzz in Rihanna's No. 1 smash "We Found Love." It's the driving dance groove in hits by Usher, Pitbull, Jennifer Lopez, Enrique Iglesias, Chris Brown—you can't turn on pop radio for 10 minutes without hearing its influence.

But what do you call this thing?

When we talk about tunes made with synthesizers, drum machines, sequencers and computers, it's best to use the most basic term: electronic music. For a spell in the 1990s, "electronica" reigned as the prevailing genre tag, but this was a horribly unhip industry buzzword—the nomenclatural equivalent of a dad at a rave. These days, as synth riffs and club beats rule the charts, and DJ/producers such as Skrillex and Deadmau5 enjoy the kind of notoriety reserved for pop stars, the term EDM—electronic dance music—has come into fashion. But according to British music journalist Simon Reynolds, author of *Energy Flash: A Journey*

whatever the music is ultimately called, it cannot be ignored.

Since the Black Eyed Peas struck gold with French DJ David Guetta on their inescapable 2009 chart-topper "I Gotta Feeling," Guetta has become the go-to collaborator for Top 40 artists like Usher, Flo Rida and Chris Brown. And Guetta has become a chart regular with his own hits, including "Turn Me On" featuring Nicki Minaj and "Titanium" with Sia. Rihanna enlisted Scottish beatmaker Calvin Harris for the aforementioned "We Found Love." And there's hardly a hit-maker on the pop charts who hasn't benefited from teaming up with Grammy-winning Swedish producer RedOne: Nicki Minaj ("Starships"), Pitbull ("Rain Over Me"), Jennifer Lopez ("On the Floor"), and Lady Gaga ("Poker Face," "Just Dance" and "Bad Romance," to name a few). "Everyone was looking for something new," says Tim Bergling, the Grammy-nominated 22-year-old Swedish house DJ better known as Avicii. "When this upbeat, energetic music came along that pop and hip-hop artists' fans were already familiar with ... it was very easy for the mainstream to start listening to it."



The Crystal Method

Through *Rave Music and Dance Culture*, even this acronym is problematic. "EDM isn't a word anyone in the dance underground would actually use," Reynolds says. "There's no one in the scene who goes around saying, 'I like EDM!' In the same way, saying you're a rock fan would be a meaningless statement."

Reynolds is right, and the reason is that electronic music, like rock, cannot be summed up by any one sound. It encompasses countless subgenres—everything from classic techno and house to modern variations like hardstyle, trancestep and liquid funk. But

**'All around the world,
there are people making
wild party music.'**

—Simon Reynolds

Still, it took the mainstream a while to catch on. In the early 2000s, following a '90s surge in popularity, electronic music had lost its juice. Only in the last few years has it resurfaced—and now, it's arguably bigger than ever. EDM's ascendance has been the talk of the

music industry, and in February 2012, even the Grammys staged a special—if bizarre—tribute to the genre. Joining Deadmau5 and Guetta for the puzzling performance were rapper Lil Wayne, R&B singer Chris Brown and rockers the Foo Fighters. Musical merits aside, the cross-genre confab showcased the extent to which DJs have

infiltrated pop culture. A month later, more than 160,000 fans flocked to Miami's annual Ultra Music Festival. When it comes to North American festivals, Ultra is second only to the Electric Daisy Carnival, which drew an estimated 320,000 sweaty, writhing bodies to Las Vegas in June 2012.

"This is just the beginning of an era of electronic music," says Patrick Moxey, founder of Ultra Records, a label that has dealt in the dance realm since the mid-'90s. "It's going to have a substantial impact for a number of years. The festivals will get bigger, the artists will get more complex and intense, and more genres and subgenres will split off. It's going to get a lot more interesting."



Deadmau5

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-Patrick Moxey

FROM DISCO TO TECHNO

Not that it hasn't been interesting thus far. The story of electronic music has no shortage of possible starting points, but most critics begin with Kraftwerk. Combining minimalist melodies, rigid electronic beats and an eerily cool android-chic visual aesthetic, the German band emerged in the 1970s as unlikely harbingers of a funky new age. Kraftwerk were too avant-garde for the mainstream—their biggest U.S. hit, 1975's "Autobahn," peaked at No. 25—but their influence can't be overstated. Echoes can be heard in such disco-era hits as "I Feel Love," a collaboration between diva Donna Summer and Italian producer Giorgio Moroder. Composed entirely of electronic sounds, the 1977 smash famously led producer Brian Eno—no slouch in the sonic-innovation department—to proclaim, "I have heard the sound of the future."

These synthesized sounds fed into electro-funk and hip-hop, both of which led to techno and



Nicki Minaj

suburb of Belleville, three middle-class African-Americans fashioned their own brand of electronic music. Known as the "Belleville Three," Juan Atkins, Kevin Saunderson and Derrick May forged a dark, edgy sound.

RAVING ACROSS THE GLOBE

In the U.S., house thrived mainly in the black and gay nightclubs, but overseas it found a pop audience. In 1986, Chicago producer Farley "Jackmaster" Funk scored a No. 10 U.K. hit with "Love Can't Turn Around," and early the following year, fellow Windy City artist Steve "Silk" Hurley topped the charts with "Jack Your Body." These set the stage for other house crossovers, and toward the end of the decade—as tastes and technology progressed—the music morphed into a new sound: acid house.

Also cooked up in Chicago, acid house allowed for trippy music that, especially



Skrillex

in Britain, meshed well with a certain hallucinogenic substance: ecstasy. As the drug gained popularity, U.K. youth staged increasingly massive underground parties, laying the groundwork for rave culture. "It wasn't about sex," says Reynolds. "People weren't moving their bodies in that funky, sex-imitative way. It was all about losing yourself. It was much more ritualistic."

By the early 1990s, electronic music had spread throughout Europe and reached places like Berlin, where Paul van Dyk got his start. Looking back, the superstar DJ remembers a "massive club scene" filled with innovative artists. "Everything was new," van Dyk remembers. "Nobody had any experience

ESSENTIAL ELECTRONIC



The Prodigy

"ON AND ON" 1984

JESSE SAUNDERS

Widely considered the first-ever house record, "On and On" captured the sound emerging from Chicago's dance clubs. Saunders and his friend Vince Lawrence were novice musicians, but armed with the Korg Poly-61 keyboard and two nifty Roland devices—the TR-808 Rhythm Composer drum machine and TB-303 Bass Line synth—they launched a new era in electronic music.

"SHAREVARI" 1981

A NUMBER OF NAMES

Whether it's the first Detroit techno single or merely an important precursor, "Sharevari" was a major hit in Detroit's underground party scene. Named for one of the day's popular soirees, this sleek, futuristic jam caught the ear of influential radio DJ the Electrifying Mojo, who helped it become an instant classic.

"ACID TRACKS" 1987

PHUTURE

Experimenting with the Roland TB-303, Chicago producer DJ Pierre and his band of buddies created a trippy new synth sound—the squelch heard 'round the world. Acid house was born. The music soon spread to the U.K., where eager young night owls began staging massive parties, giving rise to rave culture.

"FIRESTARTER" 1996

THE PRODIGY

Combining brash club beats and a snarling punk aesthetic—who can forget singer Keith Flint's spiky hair and Johnny Rotten vocals?—this U.K. trio made dance music safe for alt-rock fans. "Firestarter" topped the charts throughout Europe and went Top 40 in America, proving that with the right look and attitude, "electronica" could make the jump from raves to radio.

"SCARY MONSTERS AND NICE SPRITES" 2010

SKRILLEX

Love him or hate him, Sonny John Moore, aka Skrillex, is the face of American dubstep, the most popular (and divisive) subgenre of modern EDM. Featuring shrieking synths, mega-bass and an "Oh my god!" vocal sampled from a viral YouTube video of a girl stacking cups, "Scary Monsters" won a Grammy in 2012 for Best Dance Recording.

with what it could become. It was this adventurous moment." Van Dyk went on to build a mammoth following and is viewed as a pioneer of trance—a hypnotic sound characterized by fast tempos, repetitive melodies and thrilling builds. He's sold more than 3 million albums and twice topped *DJ* magazine's "Top 100 DJs" poll.

The rave scene also spawned domestic stars. Ken Jordan and Scott Kirkland, a duo called the Crystal Method, formed in Las Vegas before setting up their own studio in L.A., then home to a fertile rave scene. "It had a real excitement value that you couldn't really find anywhere else," Kirkland says of the scene. "It had a group of likeminded people who really appreciated the music. It was such a welcome relief." Dubbed "big beat"—a label also foisted on the likes of the Chemical Brothers and Fatboy Slim—the Crystal Method's was a hook-heavy brand of electronica that reflected their rock influences, showcased on their breakthrough 1997 debut, *Vegas*.

BIG BEATS = BIG BUSINESS

In 1997, the hard-hitting, awesomely coiffed English group the Prodigy topped the U.S. charts with *The Fat of the Land*, which contained the hit "Firestarter." Although the incendiary track came to signify electronic music for many pop fans, Paul van Dyk is quick to point out that the Prodigy—like Fatboy Slim and the rest of the era's heavies—had little to do with authentic underground dance music. "If you look at Prodigy, it was basically a fusion between really cool progressive rock and elements of electronic music," van Dyk says. "Everything that became really popular used other already-popular elements."

Shawn Reynaldo, editor of *XLR8R* magazine, agrees, and notes that the decade marked a fundamental shift in how DJs were perceived. "It was being marketed the same way as rock music with bands, even though they weren't bands in the traditional sense," Reynaldo says. "The Prodigy, Chemical Brothers and Crystal Method were being presented as artists with backstories to latch onto, the same way a band would be marketed."



David Guetta

Just before the turn of the millennium, Moby gave electronic dance music perhaps its greatest boost, wracking up platinum sales around the world with his 1999 album *Play*. Packed with gospel samples and plenty of pop appeal, the album resonated with fans, critics and advertisers, who were quick to license the tracks for commercials, adding to Moby's ubiquity.

THE RETURN OF EDM

The key for artists like Moby, Daft Punk and the Prodigy was putting a face on a style of music that hadn't previously centered on superstar personalities. For the current crop of EDM luminaries, image is vital. The poster children for the new movement are Deadmau5—notable for his illuminated Mickey Mouse-on-acid helmets—and Skrillex, the black-clad former rocker who's transformed Britain's dark, fidgety dubstep sound into something fierce and abrasive. In 2012, Skrillex took home three Grammys, and although he plays to adoring fans around the world, he's suffered the inevitable backlash from purists.

"People in that Skrillex position always get criticized from the underground," says Reynolds. "I don't think it's a bad thing at all, myself. Populizers of music are good. It's not like he's taking away money that would otherwise be going to these obscure underground DJs. They're in a different world altogether."

Not sweating the backlash is Avicii. At the 2012 Ultra Music Festival in Miami, he performed with Madonna who has a long history of hijacking underground trends and was gearing up to release a club-friendly album called *MDNA*. Genre hardliners weren't alone in dissing Madonna, and even Deadmau5 got in on the act. Avicii didn't follow the controversy. "People want the music to be cool, and they want to be the only ones listening to it," Avicii says. "I don't see the point of it at all. Good music is good music. It doesn't matter if it's 100 or 100,000 people listening to it."



Paul van Dyk

THE FUTURE

If a common thread spans Kraftwerk to Skrillex, it's the compulsion to move forward. While Reynolds believes electronic music has become less innovative in the last decade, he's confident we'll hear exciting new sounds likely from outside the U.S. and Europe. "The slums of Brazil have produced their own twist on this kind of music, and places in Africa," Reynolds explains. "All around the world, there are people making wild party music. On the one hand, they live in ghettos, but on the other hand, they're plugged into the whole world of music."

Over at *XLR8R*, Reynaldo has his eyes and ears on several under-the-radar scenes. In L.A., he says, Flying Lotus and artists associated with the Low End Theory dance party are creating an experimental hip-hop-indebted sound. In Britain, progenitors of so-called "bass" music have brought new variations on that country's garage, grime and dubstep subgenres. Reynaldo is perhaps less enthused about the Skrillexes and David Guettas of the world, but like all followers of electronic music past and present, he hasn't lost faith in the future.

"If you're a kid, and you want to make music, it's a lot easier to do that in your room on your laptop with some software you either bought or pirated than it is to find three friends and learn how to play instruments and make a band," Reynaldo says. "It will probably keep growing, and it will become more normal hearing electronic music in the U.S. The interesting part will be seeing what develops." **M**

ELECTRONIC FESTIVALS



Madonna and Avicii, Ultra Music Festival, 2012

ELECTRIC DAISY CARNIVAL

From its origins in the late '90s, Electric Daisy has blossomed into a bona fide EDM franchise. In June 2012, the flagship three-day festival—the largest of its kind in North America—drew more than 300,000 to Las Vegas, while a New Jersey spinoff the previous month attracted around 135,000.

ULTRA MUSIC FESTIVAL

Launched in Miami in 1999, Ultra runs a close second to Electric Daisy in terms of overall attendance. Over three days in March 2012, more than 160,000 packed Bayfront Park, where artists ranging from Kraftwerk to Skrillex represented electronic music in all its forms. Even Madonna couldn't stay away.

NOCTURNAL WONDERLAND

Presented by Insomniac, the promoter behind Electric Daisy, Nocturnal Wonderland began in Southern California in 1994 and has since expanded into Texas. In April 2012, an estimated 50,000 enthusiasts turned out for the Lone Star party, where headliners included Dutch superstar Tiësto and Sebastian Ingrosso of Swedish House Mafia.

SONAR

Founded in 1994, this popular Barcelona festival offers "a carefully assembled range of culture that combines entertainment with artistry, the avant garde and experimentation," according to its website. Whatever that means, it's working. Sonar draws more than 80,000 each June, and 2012's lineup included everyone from Deadmau5 to the Roots.

TOMORROWLAND

Since launching in 2005, this Belgian festival has seen its attendance skyrocket, and in 2011 some 200,000 flocked to the aptly named town of Boom. In addition to Tiësto, Avicii and Afrojack, organizers make a point of booking highly respected second-tier acts, ensuring this fest is about quality, not just quantity.

Christoph Koeslin; Paul van Dyk © 2012 Ultra Music Festival www.fotografieren.net; Madonna/Avicii

TENACIOUS D | JOE BONAMASSA | MINDY SMITH | JOE JACKSON



SHAWN COLVIN
Falls free

LINKIN PARK
On a roll

JOE WALSH
Goes solo

RUSH
Can't stop thinking big

STUDIO WIZ
HEAR NO EVIL
EDM ERUPTION

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