

Local DJs talk about navigating the tricky waters of Vegas nightlife



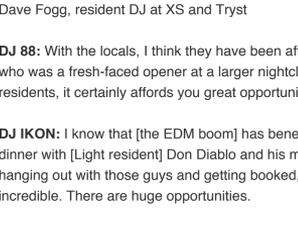
Throw a rock and you're bound to hit an international DJ headlining a major dance space in Las Vegas. The likes of Kaskade, Afrojack, Zedd and Baauer fill the local club listings as if they lived here—and they certainly answer questions as if they did. But this overlooks an important contingency: the true local DJs. We all know how Tiësto feels about playing Vegas, but what about his sometimes-opener Jeff Retro, who actually lives in town?

We asked Retro and seven of his peers to reflect upon the progression of their careers in Las Vegas, the pros and cons of DJing in town and the evolution of the still-expanding, still-evolving club scene. Each discussion was lively and frank, and their sum revealed very little groupthink. We share some of their observations below.

The result of the EDM boom

DJ Five: It's helping us out. Those [international headliners] are demanding from \$10,000-\$200,000. When the clubs come hiring open format guys, they won't hesitate to give more to the locals since they're used to paying so much for the [big DJs] ... Clubs make more money with open format guys anyway—we can play all the big EDM songs and also Top 40 and hip-hop, and we work with the club on bottle presentations and shout-outs.

DJ OB-One: I'm not real happy with the way music is now. It makes all of us on the Strip a slave to a certain format because, unfortunately, a lot of the crowd ... are just there to have a good time, hear music they know, sing along. I don't particularly enjoy that, and we have to play it.



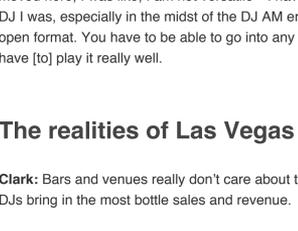
Dave Fogg, resident DJ at XS and Tryst

DJ 88: With the locals, I think they have been afforded opportunities by way of exposure. If you're somebody who was a fresh-faced opener at a larger nightclub and suddenly you're opening for any of the big-name residents, it certainly affords you great opportunity of exposure.

DJ IKON: I know that [the EDM boom] has benefited my career, I can quantify it ... Two nights ago, I went to dinner with [Light resident] Don Diablo and his management team. There's a direct correlation between hanging out with those guys and getting booked, and if I produce a song, I can give it to Baauer. That's incredible. There are huge opportunities.

Availability of gigs and competition

Rubin: Half of the residencies have gone to people who live out of the state. It's tough on the local guys. Maybe there are slightly more venues, but there are far less [slots] for us to play.



Jeff Retro, resident DJ at Hakkasan and Wet Republic

DJ Five: It's kind of hard because there are so many DJs who moved here to work. I have a few friends who moved from another country or state, and I'm trying to help them out, but my hands are tied. If you're on your own, you have to hustle harder.

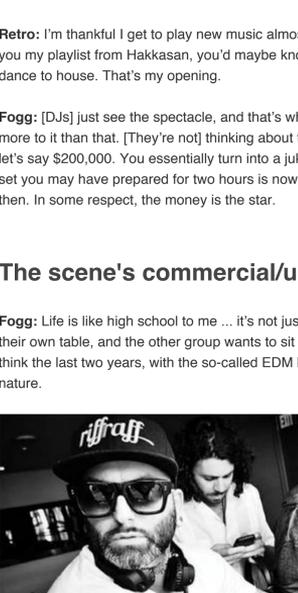
The need for versatility

DJ IKON: It's funny. When I moved here from Reno, in my mind I was like, yo, I'm versatile! When I actually moved here, I was like, I am not versatile—I have a lot to learn! I had an immediate wake-up call as to what DJ I was, especially in the midst of the DJ AM era ... He shows up and it was like, this is versatile, this is open format. You have to be able to go into any room, know what you're [doing], be up on music, and you have [to] play it really well.

The realities of Las Vegas nightlife

Clark: Bars and venues really don't care about the music—it's what money they'll make that night, and what DJs bring in the most bottle sales and revenue.

DJ OB-One: I feel like there's a lot of talented DJs in town. I think sometimes they're not given the credit because they're overshadowed by the big names. Sometimes they're better, but they don't have the name or the draw, so they never get a chance to showcase [to the big crowds].



DJ 88, entertainment director and resident DJ at Insert Coin(s)

Fogg: Some headliners will come in and there's a road manager or an agent maybe telling your boss, "Hey look, this guy plays too hard, or we don't want this DJ to play." Resident DJs now have to deal with those kind of politics—and sometimes not even work. You can be pulled off a shift because a headliner has a cousin or an upcoming artist on his label who wants to DJ. So you stay at home.

DJ Five: I ask girls what songs they like or are into. For us open format DJs, you're pretty much playing for girls to dance. You don't want to play for a bunch of dudes on the dancefloor.

Freedom of programming

Retro: I'm thankful I get to play new music almost every week. I don't have to play the Top 10. ... If I showed you my playlist from Hakkasan, you'd maybe know two songs—everything from tech house to deep to indie dance to house. That's my opening.

Fogg: [DJs] just see the spectacle, and that's what they want. They want to be in front of the crowd. There's more to it than that. [They're not] thinking about the times when the whale comes in and drops \$50,000, or let's say \$200,000. You essentially turn into a jukebox. You're playing whatever that guy wants to hear. The set you may have prepared for two hours is now thrown out the window! Your artistic integrity means nothing then. In some respect, the money is the star.

The scene's commercial/underground divide

Fogg: Life is like high school to me ... it's not just the DJ industry. People are cliquish. They want to sit at their own table, and the other group wants to sit at their table, and that dominates any social interaction. I think the last two years, with the so-called EDM boom, it was always there, but it showed a more competitive nature.



Alex Clark, resident DJ at After; member of Spacebyrdz

Clark: There is a divide. I don't mind the open format DJs. If they really enjoy it, that's fine. I feel like they don't really enjoy music as much as I do when I play. Everything I play I love, versus the open format guys who don't love everything they play, but they get paid more.

Is playing commercial selling out or necessary for work?

Retro: It's not selling out, it's living, it's following your dream. ... You gotta do whatever you have to do.



DJ IKON, resident at 1 Oak and the Bank

Clark: I wouldn't play [mainstream] because I would lose some credibility. I would do it if I had no means of making money and I could only do that. But I'd rather serve drinks or work fast food because I'd be miserable doing it.

Escape to Downtown

DJ OB-One: Those are the parties that keep me sane! That's why I like to play Insert Coin(s). ... It's a nice venue. Josh [Swissman] and I just played a jungle set at Beauty Bar.



DJ OB-One, resident DJ at Insert Coin(s); member of HavocNdeeD

DJ 88: Downtown is such a multicultural area, not just by ethnicity but peoples' tastes. In [Insert Coin(s)] there can be a 21-year-old starving artist and a \$5 billion entrepreneur in the same room, which is what I find so great and refreshing about that venue. You can get away with anything there if it's done correctly. You're creating an experience for so many different people instead of delivering a standard house set where people don't dance but jump when the crescendo hits and the confetti cannon goes off ... I conditioned every single DJ on that team to bring people on a roller-coaster ride every night. We don't do compartmentalized sets.

To produce or not produce

DJ IKON: We can age ourselves out as DJs. I have always looked at DJs like professional athletes: They become popular, they reach a certain point and then fade away. We all know Benny Benassi is an older man, and he's killing it. [That's because] he's making relevant tracks people love; he does a great job. I definitely saw six years ago that I'm at this point where I want to take production seriously, and it needs to be the next step in my career or I'll [be looking at] obsolescence.

Rubin: For me, it's important because I've pushed things to the pinnacle of where I want to be as a DJ, so I've been in the studio and producing and starting to make advancements ... but it doesn't have a bearing in this town for me.

What the future holds

Brett Rubin, resident DJ of After

Fogg: [The resurgence of open format] is definitely happening. The EDM boom in this market is over. People will come to EDC, yeah, but that has nothing to do with the way the clubs are booking and what next year is looking like. The experience of being at XS every weekend and seeing how the crowds react to DJs and music they like—it's definitely there. Even the EDM artists are playing hip-hop to deal with the market.

What the future should hold

Clark: If [club managers] would bring something different and take a risk, that's all they need. It's promotion. If they market [a party] right, people will show up and go—they don't know better. They'll just go where they hear they're supposed to go.

Fogg: I would cut off every DJ agency that ever existed. It's one of the reasons you end up paying the top DJ \$500,000 [a gig]—it's because of their agents and the practices they use. And it's not like any other market in the world ... I wish a DJ could be hired on their talent and their experience and their reputation.

DJ Five, resident DJ at Tao

DJ 88: I would love to see a lot of the younger DJs challenging themselves and coming out of their comfort zones. Anyone can play the hits. I would love to see more variety and more excitement and creativity in people's sets.

The perks of being a Vegas DJ

Retro: I do well, pay my bills, get to play what I want and be fulfilled. It's a win-win.

DJ 88: There's nothing better than someone walking up to you and asking, "What the hell is that [song]?" I love what I do. I have the best job in the world. I am blessed.