

# Does the Musical Underground Exist in Las Vegas?

/ Andrea Domanick



Around this time last year, while Las Vegas mega-clubs were busy rolling out lineups of EDM juggernauts, an unknown new late-night spot called After broke the dance music internet with its “DJ Rules.” Forbidding everything from pre-mixed sets to Lil Jon drops, the list doubled as a snarky takedown of more or less everything that’s made commercial EDM and Vegas’ nightclub scene so massively successful.

As After celebrates its first anniversary this month, the after-hours event has proven there’s more to Vegas dance music than the untz that rules the Strip. Despite dark stretches and several location changes, crowds have continued to turn up thanks to the sophisticated but down-to-earth vibe and underground lineup curation—including the likes of Max Graham, Coby, Anthony Attala and Black Boots. This week, After announced a new home at Body English at the Hard Rock, where it kicked off February 7 with Max Graham. The party will keep going early on Sunday mornings through the end of March.

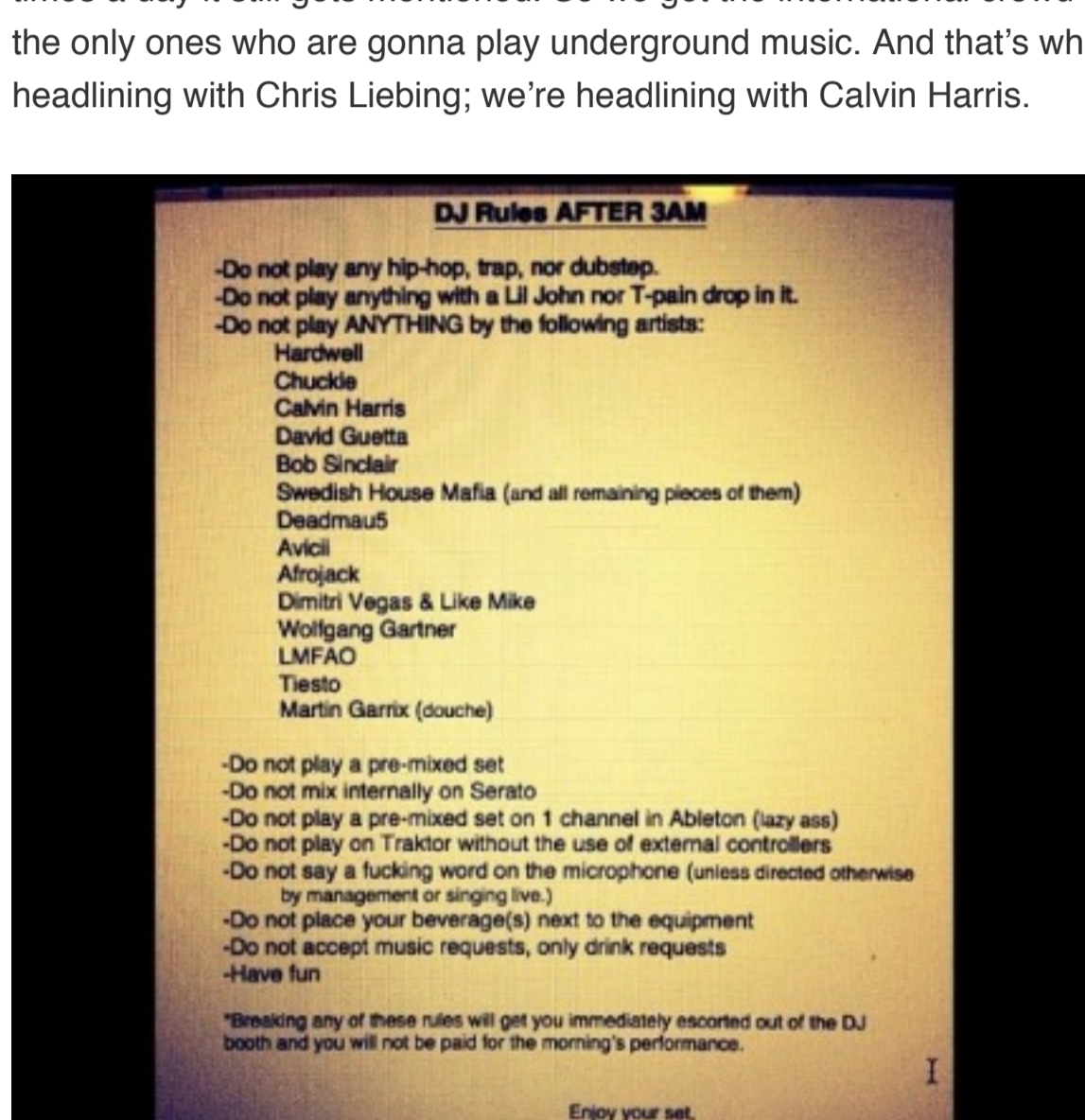
We spoke with managing partner and former DJ/producer Thom Svast about the future of dance music in Vegas, being an underdog in the club scene, and the impact of that infamous list.

## Who is After for? Is it for locals? Is it for tourists who like mega-clubs? Is it for tourists who don’t like mega-clubs?

We’re for anybody who loves and understands underground music—but also a culture that’s free without judgment. I’m tattooed from my ears down, but I’m a highly educated person, and I’m successful at what I do. So, we’re trying to change that here and be free-thinking. We have a relaxed dress code. Unlike other venues, we purposely keep our prices low for bottle service and drinks, so it’s affordable and people can actually enjoy the party and be themselves.

Underground is not big in Vegas; we know that. So the local crowd is very dedicated to what and who we are, and they’re as much a part of the business as I am as the owner. Without the continuous support, we don’t exist.

We’re also an international brand. We’re lucky because of what happened with the DJ Rules. It went viral worldwide, so it instantly gave us that recognition. We watch Google Analytics, and it’s amazing how many times a day it still gets mentioned. So we get the international crowd all the time, because they know we’re the only ones who are gonna play underground music. And that’s what they’re used to over there. They’re headlining with Chris Liebing; we’re headlining with Calvin Harris.



## Did you expect the rules to blow up the way they did?

Here’s what happened: I was reading the clubs’ big announcements of their lineups at the beginning of last year, and I found it laughable because nothing changed. They all made this big to-do, and it was just all the same DJs again. So I started writing these rules as a joke. I was so frustrated with the scene and the way bedroom DJs are now getting paid absurd amounts of money and having absolutely no talent and just ghostwriters. So it started as just me texting back and forth with Alex Clark from [After residents] Spacebyrdz, and we started laughing about it, and I was like, “I’m posting these as our DJ rules!” I didn’t realize what would happen. I mean, you can still see all the Word spell-check errors. But then White Raver Rafting picked it up, and it blew up. We just sat there at four computers in our office and watched it go crazy. It was absolutely insane.

## It’s wild that a year later, it’s still giving you buzz.

It does, and I’m glad it does. Underground will always have its voice, but I think the music scene just needed some sort of injection or wake-up call in America. For so long, underground was the only style of dance music here, unless you were talking about pop. But now with the advent of EDM... Some of these guys are real artists, but I know it doesn’t take a team of writers to make a track. But these guys are doing that, and it’s so frustrating. That’s what we’ve done: DJs are now pop stars. It’s not like the underground.

## Have the rules changed at all in the year since they’ve launched?

No, they’ll probably never change. I would add more people to ban on the list! The ironic thing is, people are like, “If you know the DJs you’re booking, you shouldn’t have to make rules for them.” Exactly, we know that. It’s kind of tongue-in-cheek—more like a laughable guideline. We don’t have to tell the people we book how to do their jobs. I would never book a DJ who plays that stuff. It’s more like the DJ rules tell us who not to book.

## If you were to give it an annual update, what would you add? Who else would you ban?

That’s a great question. I was a fan of the old-school trance sound, and a lot of these guys like Above & Beyond completely sold out from the beautiful music that they used to make. Fergie—he used to be one of my favorite DJs when he was a young techno artist, but now he completely sold out for money. I have zero respect for people who do that. So I’d ban anyone who’s done that. There’s no artistry in that. That’s what ruins the industry.

## Since underground is already a niche market in Vegas, why host your event after-hours, rather than up against the mainstream clubs?

I was the general manager and had DJed for other after-hours venues in town and had been in that scene for a long time; so it seemed to be where I always thrived and what I knew best. I saw this brilliant idea in front of me, but they were so poorly managed because they didn’t understand the culture. It forced [me] to say, “I’m sick of doing this for other people when I know what I’m doing, so I might as well just do it myself.” That’s when I left to start After.

After-hours is a niche market, but it’s one in Vegas that I find can be lucrative. There’s not much competition. Draii’s just about the only thing right now. And I think they made \$10 or 15 million last year. That’s a big chunk of change. We’re an international city, and when tourists from overseas come here, they don’t have that outlet for either late-night or the music. People keep comparing Vegas to Ibiza, but Vegas is not broad in musical taste at all. People are spoon-fed what’s out here at the clubs. This is what they are and what they sell. There’s no alternative. We’re the only alternative.

## Does Vegas’ rise as a dance music destination make it easier or harder to do what you do? On the one hand, it opens the door to launch places like After to begin with; but on the other hand, it maybe prices out or limits the kind of people you’d like to book.

Yeah, it absolutely does. That’s the problem: Vegas has so much money to educate. But one advantage is that we know we’re pretty much the only ones who are going to book underground in Las Vegas. I refuse to overpay. Nightclub bids are different from after-hours bids. We’re a much smaller market, and you just can’t spend as much money. If you spend \$20,000 on a DJ and that’s all your bar makes, that doesn’t make any sense at all.

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## But on the other hand, more people are now coming here and looking for this kind of music to being with.

Yeah. I agree with what Carl Cox said about EDM being an entry level to dance music. This is my biased opinion, obviously, but I think underground music is a little more intelligent, more artistic and thought out. For the most part, it’s a more mature sound. But they’ve both evolved from the same roots.

I love the city of Las Vegas, and I love what they’re doing with the nightclubs. At the price they’re paying for people, I think it’s absurd. But they’re paying for the experience, not just the DJ. And I thank them for it, because it is a stepping-stone. These clubs are paving the way for what we’re doing. Our average customer is not the 21-year-old you see at the clubs at the big clubs. They’re older, and again, I think that’s because it’s a more mature sound. But I’m starting to see our crowd slowly getting younger and younger, and I think that’s because they are being introduced to it. Even through radio, or just at parties, there’s a lot more exposure now.

## Even the more mainstream clubs are starting to diversify. You’re starting to see people like Jamie Jones and Claude VonStroke play places like Marquee. Do you think there’s room for Vegas to grow or expand into a destination for underground music, as well as more mainstream EDM?

Absolutely. I don’t think there’s any more room to grow commercially. But there is room beyond that. There’s room to educate. When people come to Vegas, you can educate them on what you want to be cool. A lot of these people who come to see Vegas, they think it’s this cool, trendsetting city. So if you have all these hosts selling tables for someone like Marco Bailey, people are going to show up for Marco Bailey. If you have a whole team with millions of dollars in budgets for marketing, guess what? They’re gonna fill the place. You can educate people on that sound by doing that. I commend Marquee for bringing in people like Richie Hawtin, even though they’re late-night sets. I applaud Light for trying to do it. But people don’t realize a lot of these clubs make it mandatory for DJs to send in track lists for approval to play in the club, which I’m extremely offended by. If I was a DJ, I’d tell them to fuck off. You might as well play a CD.

## What’s the next challenge?

The big thing is the pressure to have our own club, to find consistency in the brand in terms of knowing where to find us week in and week out. During these down times, we’ve had a lot of people contact us saying, “Hey, I’m coming to Vegas, where’s the party?” and I have to say, “Sorry, we’re not open this weekend. We’ll have a show in three weeks.” So we’re missing the opportunity to grow with the lack of consistency and not having our own space right now. I’m hoping that what we have with Hard Rock will turn into something greater. We’ve been really lucky that we’ve been able to grow primarily through word-of-mouth. At least it shows it can be done!

## After was also throwing warehouse parties for a while. Do you think there’s room or a culture for that kind of scene to grow in Vegas?

Absolutely. We stopped because we want to stay in good standing with the county, so we can open our own space. But there’s definitely a culture for it. A few people—including one of our resident DJs, Brett Rubin—are still doing them, and they’re all doing it really, really well. People want to see something here. Even though our clubs are gigantic and glamorous and cost millions of dollars, there’s a sense to locals that it’s been-there-done-that. It’s cookie-cutter, and I think the warehouse parties are that alternative. It’s a place you can dance all night but still wear your tennis shoes.

## Who are you listening to right now that you’d love to book at After?

Hollen—he’s one of my favorite producers. I’m really big on Agoria. I would like to even do a live performance with someone like Apparatus or Trentemøller. I’d love to integrate some of these Live PA shows into our shows. I’d like to also get some of the old Minus crew guys, like Hobo—and tINI, of course. One of my all-time favorites I really, really want to get to Vegas is Radio Slave. We’re working on that right now.

Andrea Domanick is a journalist living in Las Vegas. Yes, people really live there. She’s on [Twitter](#) and [Facebook](#).

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