

VEGAS 2.0



Las Vegas is now established as a global dance music destination. But is it still all tourists, bottle service and bigroom EDM? Has dance music changed Vegas – or has Vegas changed dance music? Mixmag heads to Sin City to investigate

Three years ago you might have thought Las Vegas' love affair with dance music was peaking: new clubs like Encore Beach Club and Marquee were on fire, Electric Daisy Carnival brought 250,000 clubbers to its new Vegas home and clubbers from across the world began flocking to the city, changing the global clubbing economics in the process.

But as Sin City's super-tanker of a nightlife economy changed direction to embrace club culture over cabaret and pop-stars in their twilight years, it wasn't a smooth turnaround. Tales of DJs being thrown off the decks for 'not playing commercially enough', predictable, sound-alike 'Vegas sets' and daft VIP requests were rife. The question seemed to be whether Vegas would successfully adapt to dance music culture, or whether dance music and clubbing could only exist on Vegas' own terms.

Three years on, the nightlife scene in Vegas hasn't slowed or even plateaued: it's continued to grow and grow. Now with its own dance music conference (EDM Biz), the gargantuan annual festival (Electric Daisy Carnival) and even more monstrosized and senses-saturating clubs (Light, Hakkasan, Drai's Beach/Night Club), Vegas is becoming more than just another clubbing tick-box: instead, it's the world's clubbing city – 24 hours a day, seven days a week, 52 weeks per year. Electric Daisy Carnival is the perfect microcosm for what's happened in Vegas, and this is the only time you'll see the event described as 'micro'-anything. This year's main stage was the length of 13 double-decker buses and the event had over 400,000 attend over its three days.

So dance music in Vegas is bigger – but is it better? The talent list for EDC might hold a clue as to whether tastes in Vegas are going beyond names who've charted in the US or had songs on the radio: the line-up included Claude VonStroke, Skream, Julio Bashmore, Jimmy Edgar, Dusky and a raft of underground names who a few years ago wouldn't have sold out a phone booth at the MGM Grand.



Encore Beach Club tell us they've hired 20 per cent more staff this year to cope with the increase in numbers and even uprooted palm trees from the club to make more room for clubbers. And they attribute that growth to genuine dance fans, not just tourists. As David Schnitzer of Encore says, "In some cases, people plan their trips just to see a specific DJ and don't do any sightseeing or gaming at all."

Obviously the 'booth and bottle' brigade (ie the VIPs, guys in suits and stag and hen parties bankrolling this revolution) is still integral. But not all the new clubs follow the traditional model. "We opened with a firm belief that the general public is more important than the table customer in Vegas," says Amy Thompson, Director of super-club, Light (and part of a generation of Vegas club managers and owners with a background in the UK). "So there are no ropes or burly doormen. Also, there are tables in our club that are free – since when has the human right to sit down been associated with a charge?"

And its not just the club designers who are changing the way clubs work. "It was actually David Guetta who earlier this year said 'let's clear some of these tables and make the dancefloor bigger'," says Pauly Freedman from Encore Beach Club.

Vegas' newest after hours club, After, went viral in February thanks to the DJ rules printed in the booth ("Do not play anything with a Lil John or T-Pain drop in it", "Do not play a pre-mixed set", "Do not say a fucking word on the microphone"). While a lot of the rules seem like a cry of despair in the face of 'EDM' culture as a whole, some of them clearly point in the direction of a more credible future for dance music in Vegas. "DJs lost the artistry in their sets by conforming to club and bottle service demands," says After's Thom Svast. "We didn't want our club to fall into that same trap. Plus we were tired of hearing the same crap songs over and over."

Despite the obvious growth and the indications of a maturing audience, Thom doubts whether Vegas is there just yet. "Some of the bigger clubs have brought in the likes of Carl Cox, Richie Hawtin and Jamie Jones," says Thom, "but it's only a quarterly event, or on special occasions. People went to see Richie Hawtin at a certain club and they turned away patrons in Plastikman shirts because they have a collared shirt rule. The big clubs aren't mentally there yet to support that type of scene, it would only ruin it."

But a credible scene also needs strong grass roots rather than depending on imported talent (just ask the England football team). Ibiza, for example has a clubbing ecosystem of smaller clubs and bars and independent promoters that nurtures talent both local and from overseas. Right now in Vegas the action is centred on the Strip, but the rise of local acts like Splitbreed, who incorporate live instruments into their fun-fuelled brand of EDM-meets-trap is encouraging, while local promoters Epyk bring a Burning Man-style vibe to their desert parties and events at downtown venue the HardHat Lounge.



Jason Strauss of the TAO Group that runs Marquee argues that Vegas is cultivating local talent. "We put a lot of emphasis on fostering talent from all over. We firmly believe it is important to support today's newer artists as they will grow to become the major headliners tomorrow," he says.

Obviously there's still work to do. But the sheer amount of money invested in the future of Vegas' newest revenue stream means that the city's move from slot machines to drum machines can no longer be dismissed as a passing fad. Millions of dollars are being spent transforming old club spaces like Pure in Caesar's Palace into better clubs. An area of land by Circus Circus hotel is being renovated to create an outdoor festival space, and the \$415 million SLS Las Vegas opens at the start of September. New hotels like The Delano, opening this autumn, don't even have a casino in them– and if that doesn't prove how much dance is shaping Vegas 2.0, all bets really are off.