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ONCE UPON A TIME IN THE WEST

How Los Angeles became the capital of the American dance music scene



DO YOU KNOW WHAT American clubs are like, don't you? Even if you've never been to one. It's all velvet ropes, bottle service and VVIP guestlists, isn't it?

Or candy ravers with dummies in their mouths and trousers that would sicken a clown, clubbers still in thrall to the 'superstar' DJs that the rest of the world started getting bored of around the time of the millennium bug – Sasha, Digweed, Tenaglia, same old names, same old style. Or maybe clubbing in the US makes you think of New York, where noise restrictions and even laws penalising dancing have managed to turn the city of Twilo, Studio 54 and Crobar into a raveyard where you can count the decent nights out on one hand. The idea that despite inventing house, techno, disco and probably the nightclub as we know it, the Americans have never quite 'got' European style-clubbing, is once again in vogue.

But that idea is wrong. Because thousands of miles and several time zones away from New York, on the coast of America more commonly associated with movie stars, David Beckham and a big white-lettered sign, dance music is thriving. A tight-knit community of committed clubbers-turned-promoters and DJs, allied with forward-thinking club owners, have turned LA into the last best hope of dance music in the world's greatest superpower.

Tonight we're on the main nerve. This is Avalon, the huge club built in 1920s Spanish Colonial style, at the epicentre of the LA dance music renaissance. It's on Vine Street – turn right and walk for fifty yards or so and you're on Hollywood Boulevard. You can follow the inlaid stars on the pavement – eyes down for Johnny Depp, Frank Sinatra, Ava Gardner, Humphrey Bogart, Donald Duck. Inside there's stardust of a different kind. On tonight's bill are Tiefschwarz and Pier Bucci, rocking the huge, dark main room.

The crowd reflects the LA population – all colours and shapes and sizes, from stunning South American girls and guys to techno-loving Japanese and Korean Americans, UK and European expats, 'bridge and tunnel' clubbers in shirts and jeans to hipsters in T-shirts and scarves.

Backstage, long limbed and sporting a battered pair of converse and drainpipe jeans, is Avalon's Ali Duncan. Originally from south-east London, he moved to LA after leaving uni in Nottingham. His excitement about the club is tempered by a slight ruefulness; he can't join in properly as he's twanged his knee playing football with Vinnie Jones's team of Hollywood expats (Vinnie wasn't directly involved in the knee-smashing – we checked). A former regular of Nottingham's Firefly night, Ali found the music in LA a little stale at first. "When I came here two years ago, the music was so far behind what I was listening to back home."

It was around that time that Garret Chau took over the club's Saturday nights (Avaland). He says that the club was stuck, along with most of the US, in a rut that had lasted half a decade. "After 9/11, when [then New York Mayor] Giuliani shut down Twilo," he recalls, sipping on a bottle of water, "the whole scene in the US went down. Clubs were nervous, and they started just booking the same names again and again. When I first said 'Booka Shade' to the club owners, they said 'Booka what?' It would have been much easier just to keep doing the same thing and getting the same crowd. But there was a space for being more daring. We've tried to emulate clubs like Fabric and Warung."

And it worked. Avalon's decision to ditch the old guard and bring in fresh talent like residents Matthew Dear and Damian Lazarus has not only rejuvenated the club, but is also a key factor in the rise of LA as a dance music power.

"It seems that LA is starting to become the centre for the alternative techno and house scene in the US," reckons Lazarus, "kind of similar to what Berlin is for Europe. There are like-minded people gathering here to make parties, produce and start collectives, and when there is a good party on, the 'heads' will travel from far and wide."

"LA is definitely one of the hot spots," agrees Matthew Dear. "I'm not going to say that nothing's happening in New York – there are warehouse



parties and some great nights. But on the East Coast you have to go looking for it."

HOLLYWOOD IS like a movie set because it is a movie set. This is the land of *déjà vu*. Every alleyway looks like the one from *Mulholland Drive*, the winding roads into the hills are familiar from everything from *Get Shorty* to *Chinatown* to *Jackie Brown* to *LA Confidential* and the Hollywood skyline is topped by the three domes of the Griffith Park Observatory. You might know it as the place where James Dean visited the planetarium in *Rebel Without A Cause*. Or where Arnold Schwarzenegger's T100 landed naked in a blaze of blue flame. Or even where Optimus Prime and the Autobots discussed the fate of mankind in *Transformers*.

Against this dramatic background Avalon has played an important part in bringing the best of the new European style of techno to LA, and by extension the US, but other clubs have big supporting roles. LAX is a red-lit sweat pit with dun walls and a sexy but scruffy clientele that look like they just walked out of the pages of *Vice Magazine*. The talk is all about the Justice concert the next night – the Ed Banger-led indie-dance sound currently blowing up clubs across the UK and Europe is spearheaded in LA by Steve Aoki's 'Banana Split' night here. Aoki is the hipster's DJ of choice whose Dim Mak record label was the first to bring the likes of Klaxons, Whitey and The Mystery Jets to a US audience. If there is any nu rave in the land of the brave, it's pretty much down to Steve, who this year is the in-house DJ for Manumission Rocks in Ibiza.

Alongside the big clubs and internationally known DJs, there are the underground warehouse parties of techno-heads Droid Behaviour, the US equivalent of the UK's Lost, who've been pushing underground techno across the city for years, and new promoters and DJ collectives like Droog and Compression connecting with the European underground and hosting mid-sized nights. There's also the huge appetite (and amazing outdoor arenas) for 10,000-person outdoor parties with the likes of Paul van Dyk.

But what's most striking about the LA scene is the tight-knit community feel. In fact, most Sunday mornings you can find many of the people spearheading the dance music renaissance of this 10 million strong megacity in the same house, the villa that Matt Zamias and the Droog DJ collective share, Monkees-style, at the foot of the Hollywood Hills. The rented, three storey 'Droog party house' effectively functions as the scene's afterparty most Sunday mornings. Inside you will find the club's residents and staff, whichever European DJs are in town, the Droog residents having a spin inside their jerry-built DJ booth-cum-studio, and various other local promoters.

"There's an extremely strong bond between promoters," says Matt Xavier of Compression, an underground techno night based at the King King club that regularly hosts DJs from Berlin labels like Get Physical and Mobilee as well as underground US DJs. "We make sure we don't step on each other's toes. One of the more destructive forces in US culture was that old competitiveness."

"When warehouse parties caught on here it panicked a lot of people"



Avalon: a Hollywood institution

Avalon also incorporate the local smaller promotions – a clever move, not only because it helps the city's biggest club reach out to all the different regions of this sprawling city, but also helps make sure the scene has solid foundations from the bottom up, instead of depending on expensive foreign imports.

Of course, promoters here face the same challenges that apply to dance music across the US. Maybe it's because the community rave ethos of 'losing yourself in the music' doesn't suit traditional American values of rugged individualism, but for whatever reason the Summer Of Love didn't just arrive here late; it stalled. "When warehouse parties caught on in the late 90s it panicked a lot of people," says Matthew Dear. "In the US the word 'rave' is associated with underage excess," explains Droog's Matt Zamias. "It has a pejorative ring."

What has made things easier is the new breed of techno and electro's link to the arts scene. "A turning point for me was in August 2006," says Matthew Dear. "Me and [fellow Detroit DJ] Ryan Elliott played six parties across three days and got an amazing response – we felt like missionaries. We also played at the Getty Museum [the LA equivalent of New York's Guggenheim], outdoors on the terrace. To have the Getty support your music, to consider it worthwhile, was a great feeling."

But perhaps the biggest turning point in LA's relationship with dance music came on April 29 2006 at the Coachella Valley Music and Arts Festival, 125 miles east of Central LA, when two French robots unveiled the greatest live dance music production of all time. "The Daft Punk show was massive," says Ali. "Everyone was talking about dance music." Since then, Coachella, the region's biggest and most important music event, has been dominated by artists straight out of *Mixmag* – this year's line-up featured SMD, Hot Chip, Boys Noize, The Field and dozens more.

As in the UK, changes in the dance landscape have meant a new idealism amongst promoters. He may be chatting to me in a plush bar and steakhouse on Sunset Avenue, all black leather and mirrors, tiny candles and staff so friendly they make your typical British tourist feel intimidated, and he may be a promoter with aspirations to run his own label, but Zamias doesn't come across as the tycoon type. "Since 9/11 money has been put on even more of a pedestal in this country," he says, describing the velvet rope/bottle service type club, with its emphasis on conspicuous consumption, as "antithetical" to what Droog are all about. In fact, he names a 500-capacity club in Edinburgh, the excellent but hardly internationally famed Cabaret Voltaire, as



Banana Split at LAX



Matt Xavier of Compression

"a real eye-opener in terms of what clubbing is all about."

Chau is also keen to disassociate Avalon from the stereotypical US club with door pickers and multiple queues. "These clubs are unsustainable – once Paris Hilton or whoever moves on the club is finished."

In contrast, Avalon has as long and distinguished history. Built in 1927 as a vaudeville theatre, it later became home to some of America's best-loved TV shows. Owner John Lyons, who bought his first club in Boston from Studio 54 owner Steve Rubell at the age of 18, says that owning a club in LA is "living the American dream". Last Year Barack Obama gave a speech here, as did Richard Nixon in the 1950s.

It's this kind of glamour and history, combined with a perfect climate, the chance to perhaps kick Vinnie Jones and a handy nearby entertainment industry with oodles of cash to throw at music producers (just ask Paul Oakenfold) that is bringing the DJs here in droves. But there's also something else that makes LA a perfect fit for dance music, a feeling of westward-moving freedom that has drawn everyone from cowboys to artists and film makers here throughout history. "People come to LA to find something new about themselves," says Xavier. Right now people are finding out that they want to dance. Hooray for Hollywood! ☺

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