
Electronic Dance Music [EDM]

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Electronic music intended primarily for dancing at nightclubs and raves. Electronic dance music (EDM), or simply “dance music,” is characterized by rapid evolution—hundreds of subgenres and hybrid genres have been created since its inception in the 1980s. Whereas EDM has achieved widespread popularity in Europe and the UK, it remains a comparatively underground phenomenon in the United States. The production and distribution of EDM has not been particularly adaptable to the American music industry, whose practices have been largely shaped by rock and pop. In addition, because EDM does not follow a standard song structure and often features very lengthy tracks, it does not easily lend itself to commercial radio. Ironically, while EDM culture operates below the radar in the United States, it can be heard frequently in American television programs, films, advertisements, and video games.

EDM is produced “from the beats up,” in that melodies, vocals and sound effects are layered over a steady beat. A notable feature of many EDM tracks is the utilization of Sampling and sequencing, hip hop, a practice in which a discrete portion of sound is recorded and then inserted into a new piece of music. Ethical and legal issues notwithstanding, EDM producers and DJs capitalize on the creative impulse to reuse, recycle, or rework previously created material.

1. Roots

Some of the earliest structures and concepts that inform EDM production include Italian futurist Luigi Russolo’s “noise music” (1913). Russolo created instruments that reproduced the sounds of industry and machines (*intonarumori*), and composed pieces incorporating these sounds. The concept of music as the sound of everyday life reappeared in 1948, as experimentalist composers Pierre Henry and Pierre Schaeffer pioneered a technique of musical composition called *musique concrète*. Various sounds were recorded onto reel-to-reel tape, which was cut and spliced together to construct a piece of music. The advent of digital sampling in the 1980s made this process easier and more deliberate.

In the 1970s Jamaican-born Kool Herc, a pioneering hip-hop DJ, invented a practice similar to sampling. Calling his technique “the merry-go-round,” Herc would place two copies of the same record on two separate turntables, so that he could play the drum break on one copy and replay it on the other copy, creating the effect of a continuous loop. DJs such as Grandmaster Flash continued Herc’s practice of looping drum breaks on two turntables, making it quicker and more precise. This technique has proven highly influential to EDM producers, many of whom began using looped drum breaks as the basis of their tracks. (*See also* Turntablism.)

In the 1960s and 1970s, Jamaican dub reggae producers like Osbourne “King Tubby” Ruddock, and Lee “Scratch” Perry produced remixes (or “versions”) of reggae singles—a practice that would later be adopted by EDM producers and DJs. King Tubby also experimented with various studio techniques that

emphasized bass frequencies, so that his tracks would make a greater impact when played on sound systems at dance parties. The emphasis placed on bass in a dance party environment has carried over into EDM and rave culture.

The early sound of EDM, especially electro and techno, owes a great debt to the German group Kraftwerk. In addition to making extensive use of electronic instruments—synthesizers, drum machines, and vocoders—the group perpetuated a mythos about technology and the future in songs such as “Trans-Europe Express” and “Autobahn.” The disco producer Giorgio Moroder’s work in the late 1970s was also influential. Moroder eschewed the symphonic flourishes of early disco (i) in favor of an overtly electronic, “futuristic” sound, which relied heavily on sequencers. The 1977 smash hit “I Feel Love” was entirely synthesized, with the exception of Donna Summer’s vocals. The Japanese band Yellow Magic Orchestra and British synth-pop groups such as the Human League and Depeche Mode also influenced many early producers of EDM.

2. Technologies.

EDM was initially created with drum machines, sequencers and synthesizers. The proliferation of cheap, portable synthesizers in the early 1980s—most famously the Roland TB-303 “bass synthesizer” and the Roland TR-808 and TR-909 drum machines—allowed synthesizer-based music to move from research labs, recording studios, and concert halls to more casual, egalitarian confines. (See Synthesizer.) The Linn LM-1 Drum Computer, the first drum machine to use digital samples, was introduced in 1980 at a retail price of around \$5000; its successor, the Linn Drum, released in 1982, was somewhat more affordable. While the Linn Drum gained favor with popular mainstream artists such as Prince and the Human League, its price was still out of reach for the average producer. The Roland TR-808, which would become a bedrock of techno, hip-hop and house music, retailed at one-fifth the price of the LM-1, around \$1,000 upon its initial release in 1980. It was an analog drum machine, which produced tinny, less realistic drum sounds than the Linn LM-1, which sampled acoustic instruments. But its price, ease of use (its colored buttons made it look like a toy) and distinctive presets, such as the cowbell sound, made it extremely popular. EDM’s growth was also spurred by the introduction of the MIDI (Musical Instrument Digital Interface) protocol in 1983. MIDI allowed subsequent drum machines such as the Roland TR-909 to synchronize easily with other electronic devices. (See Electronic percussion.)

Since the early 1990s, computer software has greatly facilitated EDM production. Programs like Reason, Cubase, and Ableton Live provide producers with a virtual sequencer, sampler, drum machine, and soundbank of a wide range of musical instruments. Such equipment enables producers easily to incorporate various effects such as reverb, delay, compression and equalization.

3. EDM in performance.

Electronic dance music’s performance in nightclubs has traditionally relied on DJs mixing 12-inch vinyl records on two turntables. This common setup was used by pioneering disco and hip-hop DJs in the 1970s to construct continuous mixes for dancers. Disco DJs such as Francis Grasso and Larry Levan advanced new turntable techniques designed to meet the demands of the dance floor. Grasso pioneered “slip-cueing”—holding the vinyl record still with his hand while the platter continued to turn underneath, allowing the record to be cued at a specific time. Grasso also helped develop the

technique of “beatmatching”—matching the tempo of two records with each other, on two turntables, allowing for seamless mixing. Levan constructed continuous DJ mixes stretching over several hours at the legendary Paradise Garage club in downtown Manhattan in the mid-1970s, augmented with live effects and creative use of crossfaders and equalizers. (*See also* DJ.)

The main purpose of an EDM DJ, in a club or at a rave, is to take listeners/dancers on a type of musical journey. Because EDM is most often played for long stretches of time, DJs have to pace their sets by playing a combination of uptempo and downtempo music. Typically, a DJ begins with slower, mellow tracks, then gradually builds energy on the dancefloor with louder, faster and more well-known tracks. Experienced DJs have perfected the art of reading a crowd, choosing tracks whose style and character serve to maintain activity on the dancefloor through musical peaks and valleys. Yearly large-scale EDM festivals such as Winter Music Conference, Movement: Detroit’s Electronic Music Festival, Moogfest and Electric Zoo Festival feature both EDM pioneers and upcoming DJs and producers.

4. EDM genres.

Electro, short for “electro-funk,” was the first electronic dance music genre of the 1980s to gain wide appeal. The sound of electro was brittle, spacey and completely electronic, often lyrically infused with sci-fi or futuristic themes. The Roland TR-808 was the drum machine of choice in most early electro tracks, and vocals were often fed through a vocoder to generate an eerie, robotic effect. Electro exhibited a good deal of crossover with early hip-hop, emblemized by “Planet Rock” (1982) by Afrika Bambaataa and the Soulsonic Force, Produced by Arthur Baker, the song paid literal tribute to Kraftwerk by incorporating elements of two of their songs, “Trans-Europe Express” and “Numbers.” The seminal Detroit electro group Cybotron, formed in 1980 by Juan Atkins and Richard “3070” Davis, helped pave the way for the subsequent growth of Detroit techno.

Techno and house music were birthed in the Midwest; techno was invented in Detroit in the early 1980s, and house was a product of Chicago in the mid-1980s. Named for their neighborhood west of Detroit, the “Belleville Three”—Juan Atkins, Kevin Saunderson, and Derrick May—were associated most strongly with techno’s roots. Though producers such as May were associated with a more lyrical, soulful version of techno music, techno, for the most part, implied a harder sound, underpinned with a steady 4/4 beat hovering between 120–140 beats per minute. In contrast, house music, which owed more to the legacy of disco, was slightly slower in tempo and more likely to incorporate vocals, strings, and other flourishes.

The term “house” is said to have come from the Warehouse club in Chicago, where house pioneer Frankie Knuckles was the resident DJ. In Chicago venues such as the Warehouse and the Music Box, this emerging sound flourished, fostered by ace DJs like Frankie Knuckles and the late Ron Hardy, and furthered by labels such as Trax and DJ International. House wasn’t one sound, but a wide panorama of sounds, encompassing everything from the tender, moving melodies of Larry Heard to the twitchy, futuristic “acid house” of Phuture. House music, in its early days, often sported this signature “acid” sound—the rubbery, “squelchy” timbres of the Roland TB-303. Acid house would gain major commercial success in the UK a few years later, dovetailing with the rave movement that exploded in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Street drugs like LSD, mushrooms, and most notably MDMA (ecstasy), became increasingly popular with EDM audiences. MDMA had a particular synergy with electronic dance music for a number of reasons. First, as a psychedelic amphetamine, it offered a powerful

stimulant for late-night DJ sets in clubs that fueled dancers well into the morning. Second, its mechanism of action—which causes the release of large amounts of the feel-good chemical serotonin, along with the neurotransmitters dopamine and norepinephrine—led to feelings of profound euphoria, empathy, and intimacy. The drug’s array of physiological and psychological effects worked in tandem with acid house DJ sets, sending dancers on a musical and emotional journey. In London, clubs such as the exceedingly popular Shoom, were the gateway to rave culture, which soon became a global movement.

Rave culture grew as well in response to the UK’s high population density and its network of pirate radio stations that promoted EDM. By 1991, there were reports of up to 50,000 people attending large open-air raves in the UK. In the United States, rave culture spread more sporadically, in part because of strong competition with West Coast hip hop, alternative rock, and grunge. The closest that EDM came to being a mainstream phenomenon in the United States was in the 1990s, when music videos by acts such as the Chemical Brothers and the Prodigy became mainstays on MTV rotation. As the 1990s progressed, acid house, techno, and breakbeat hardcore (a genre based on drum breaks from funk and soul records) morphed and merged, creating Ghattotech and ghetto house, Miami bass, Baltimore club, Trance (or psytrance) and drum ‘n’ bass (or jungle). EDM continued to grow and splinter, producing new subgenres such as techstep, 2-step, so-called “intelligent dance music” or IDM, glitch, and so on. In the 21st century, genres such as grime and Dubstep have attracted audiences in the UK as well as the United States and abroad.

With the advent of the Digital Audio Workstation, cheap mixing/recording software, Internet exchange boards and self-distribution, the start-up costs for a prospective EDM producer are much lower than ever before. So it is not a surprise today to find new forms of EDM being produced all over the world, from India to South Africa, Israel to Japan and beyond. Incorporating traditional and popular musics close to home, artists such as Talvin Singh, Badmarsh and Shri, Cheb i Sabbah, Transglobal Underground, Banco de Gaia, and Fun-Da-Mental, have created versions of EDM that reflect their local experiences and identity. In this way, EDM has truly become a global phenomenon.

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