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Dancing with the big unicorns

Duran Duran Duran bring back rave hedonism

DURAN DURAN DURAN

Appearing at Altered Beats with Hazmat, Dev/Null, c64, Interrupt Vector, 0=0, Unabomber. Fri, Jan 14. The Gladstone Hotel, 1214 Queen W. \$10.

BY DIMITRI NASRALLAH

"It's kind of like this big unicorn on a lot of drugs in a dark room dancing, only it's so high it can't tell what kind of music it's dancing to, though it doesn't really care. Also, the unicorn is going a lot of people to death with its horn and doesn't realize it."

Of all things, Duran Duran Duran's Edward Flis is offering his thoughts on the past few years of electronic music. Let's take a moment to open up the metaphor.

Sometime during the late-'90s, electronic music became that unicorn, dancing away to itself. It justified this self-infatuation to the audiences it was going by insinuating that it was at least hurting them in an impossibly difficult way. After all, they should appreciate being gored with such abstract effort. Somewhere along the way, dance music got lost in spiffy software and communication theory.

But ever since the 2002 backlash against clicks 'n' cuts minimalism and angular IDM, dance music has been searching through earlier times for its essence. Electroclash, electro-pop, schaffel techno, mutant disco -- all have had their moment to shine and fade, and more are still coming.

However, a renewed interest in acid techno, gabba and breakcore -- the cornerstones of the early-'90s UK rave scene -- has also been building, more quietly and steadily than the rest, and it doesn't seem to be fading away as quickly.

Duran Duran Duran is one of a growing number of young producers who are reinventing rave nostalgia. His take on gabba and breakcore is infused with doses of noise, hip-hop and metal. The thing is, like many of his counterparts, the Philly-raised producer was too young or too busy to really pay much attention to rave the first time round.

"I remember the early '90s rave scene, but I can't say I was directly a part of it in any respect," says Flis in an email interview. "I was mainly interested in metal, drugs, hip-hop and porno. Freestyle and club music were everywhere though and I guess, unconsciously, a lot of that took root."

Like kid606, Toronto's Knifehandchop and Donna Summer (a.k.a. Jason Forrest; see sidebar), he missed out because he was hitting puberty. And like the others, he grew up on this side of the ocean, where raving never really took hold in the same way. And when you cut your teeth on gangsta rap, punk rock and Miami booty bass, your version of rave is going to be louder, faster and dumber.

"Most American kids grew up in a rock/rap radio environment, and missed out on the UK rave thing, plus ecstasy was really expensive for us as teens," says Flis. "I don't really think it's a revitalization so much as a rediscovery. I know I'm pissed I couldn't afford E when I was 15. So I got totally destroyed by acid."

More than a decade on, that nascent rave scene has come to symbolize more than just ecstasy, glow sticks and those long plastic chains hanging off the side of pants. Perhaps it's nostalgia, but rave has come to embody a return-to-basics mentality for many young producers, who instead matured through the progressively highbrow and divisive dance genres that followed.

"I got heavy into rave and old-skool hardcore as an alternative to the art-wank, tight-ass, IDM bullshit, which is primarily a confederacy of no-talents and anti-talents," Flis says. "Rave is cheap, tossed-off, drug-damaged and rocking. IDM is pretentious, boring and not fun. It's the new prog-rock."



These are the breaks: Edward Flis, a.k.a. Duran Duran Duran, raves on.

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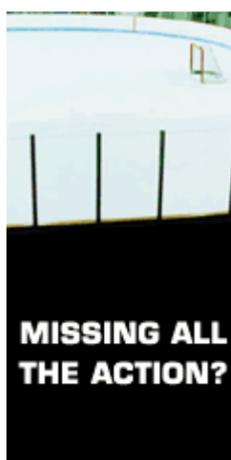
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Simon Reynolds, former senior editor at *SPIN* magazine and author of the essential rave-history textbook, *Generation Ecstasy*, agrees with Flis. "[The return to rave] is definitely a reaction against that overly prissy and anal click style," he says by email from his New York City home. "Also, the whole post-Autechre thing went right up its own arse."

It seems that the burden of exponential genre-splicing (how many different forms of techno and house can there be before each producer has their own category?) has worn thin. Even some of IDM's leading lights are harkening back to the jacked BPMs, the overt effects, to electronic music's initial attraction to hedonism.

"Quite a few of the IDM types in the UK had a phase where they were into hardcore," Reynolds says. "It's what pulled them into electronic music in the first place. Mike Paradinas is a prime example, even people like Squarepusher and a lot of the Rephlex label stuff. And we forget how hardcore Aphex Twin's early releases were, things like 'Didgeridoo' and all those tracks with very chemical-sounding names. He was making banging, slamming, kickin' music early on."

Given the time to develop properly, rave's place in the history of dance music may resemble the place punk holds in the history of rock. The mantra of ecstasy, escapism and hedonistic surges is akin to punk's mantra of DIY ethics, simplicity and social contempt.

Both defy the terms by which their form of music is found socially acceptable. The return to rave is a correction, a return to basics, for a genre that has a tendency to justify itself with intellectualism or fashion.

NOTABLE NEW RAVERS

Young enough to be gunning for allowances the first time round, these three producers are now excavating rave nostalgia for its adrenaline rushes and hedonism:

Kid606: 2003's *Kill Sound Before Sound Kills You* (Ipecac) and its sequel, 2004's *Who Still Kill Sound?* (Tigerbeat6), are both stellar examples of rave's reinvention. Both highly recommended, but start with the latter.

Donna Summer (a.k.a. Jason Forrest): Last year's *Unrelenting Songs of the 1979 Post Disco Crash* (Sonig) is more mash-up concept album than anything else, but live, he turns into an ecstasy-soaked Bob Barker, hamming it up while delivering breakcore and rave sirens at 140 BPMs or more.

Knifehandchop: This Torontonian has been pushing for rave's reinvention since his initial early-'00s releases. Track down his 12-inches on the Irritant imprint, or *Rockstopper*, his first album for kid606's Tigerbeat6 label. Well worth it. **DN**

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