

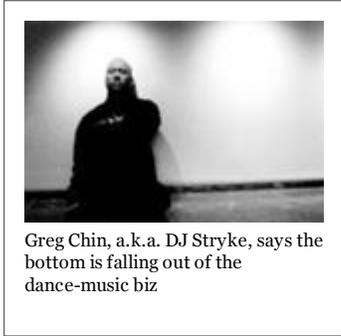
Bare Floors

Put away those glow sticks -- rave culture needs electroshock therapy

By Leah Gliniewicz

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A new Levi's commercial shows a couple plunging their car into murky water to the tune of Air's "Playground Love." Techno duo Orbital makes a cameo appearance in this summer's action film *XXX*. Although electronica has penetrated every living room in the nation, the electronica scene doesn't have much to show for it. DJs, record labels, and distributors are suffering. CD/vinyl sales have been weak, and there have been fewer bookings at lower rates. The industry blames the downturn on a host of factors that have eerily aligned, triggering a malignancy eating away at the electronic-music scene in South Florida.



Greg Chin, a.k.a. DJ Stryke, says the bottom is falling out of the dance-music biz

Miami DJ Greg Chin, a.k.a. Stryke, has felt the pinch fore and aft, both as an artist and label owner. Although he's kept a high profile, sales of his *Pages from the Blue Diary* album, which he released earlier this year on his Substance Recordings label, have been terrible. "I'll be honest," he shudders. "We're biting our fingernails right now because people aren't

buying much."

Stryke doesn't think it's fair to blame the collapse on September 11, because the music industry was reeling before that. Perhaps electronica needs something similar to the crossover push that has recently fueled hip-hop's success. "The music is still really new to a mass audiences on the whole," Stryke asserts. "We're fighting an identity crisis right now."

Stryke and his partners are finding alternative means of keeping Substance Recordings alive. The label recently launched a club night at the Miami nightclub Red. And Stryke is looking for good distributors as well as third-party licensing opportunities with companies overseas.

As techno and its subgenres have come to dominate many clubs, it seems that many of those who followed the rave scene have grown up and moved on. Some tied to the electronica-music industry fear that they have been cut off from the 16- to 20-year-old age group, which hip-hop dominates. This fear has been softened, though, by the fact that promoting DJs for club dates has proven much more lucrative.

Chico Large of Aventura has been promoting parties for a decade. At age 14, he started throwing what he calls "storm raves" in New York City. "Half the time, we didn't even know where the location was going to be," he says in a thick New York City accent. "You'd always go do it like that because we didn't want any heat, cops breaking it up."

"We used to do parties in the middle of fields," he boasts. "We even did a party in the middle of the Brooklyn Bridge. You don't see parties like that anymore."

For artists who thrive on the rave scene, maintaining exposure and record sales proves increasingly difficult. Boca Raton-based distributor, DJ, and label owner Todd Greenhouse (a.k.a. DJ Hardware) attributes the nosedive of his business to three things: the economy, Internet file sharing/CD-burning, and the crackdown on rave parties.

Hardware says sales from his Boca Raton-based electronica distribution company, Hardware World, are down almost 60 percent this year. One disc, which he says would have typically sold 200-300 copies off the bat in past years, has only moved 50 or 60 units.

"As a DJ, I've lowered my fees to make sure I'm still out there," Hardware says. "I'm scaling everything back to make it work on a smaller level."

In a down economy, why buy when you can download it for free? Total domestic shipments from record companies to retailers were down 10.3 percent in 2001 from 2000, according to the Recording Industry Association of America. The trade group attributes the drop largely to on-line piracy and CD-burning. RIAA surveyed 2225 music consumers from ages 12 to 54. Nearly a quarter of that group said that they didn't buy more music in 2001 because they downloaded or copied most of it without paying a dime.

Hardware says the stepped-up efforts in recent years by law enforcement to put an end to raves have made it hard to set up large-scale gigs. "When you don't have these parties, what are [young DJs] aspiring to?" he asks.

The Reducing Americans' Vulnerability to Ecstasy Act of 2002 (or the "RAVE Act") was introduced to the U.S. Senate's Judiciary Committee in June and will soon head to the floor. Sponsored by Sen. Joseph Biden (D-Delaware), the bill aims to punish those who set up the parties if drugs are involved.

In effect, raves have become a victim of their own success. Almost no one wants to host a big party. "The problem we're having is you can't get a space," Hardware says. "*Rave* is such a bad word. People won't even talk to you, and the clubs don't want it because they don't want to bring bad press. What can we do to correct it? I don't know. You have to get the right permits, and most of these people won't even grant those permits."

Tim Santamour, executive director of a national group called DanceSafe, says the number of smaller events has skyrocketed, particularly in Texas and Florida, where the government crackdown on raves has been concentrated. DanceSafe is a nonprofit organization that promotes health and safety within the rave and clubbing populace.

According to Santamour, this negative attention has led DJs and promoters to hold underground raves, as they did in times past, at unlicensed venues such as abandoned buildings, where there are no proper bathroom facilities and emergency medical services are out of reach. The ideal solution, he contends, would be for all the DJs and promoters to take action to stop drug use at their events. "The DJs and the promoters want to do the right thing," Santamour concludes. "It's the government that's preventing them from getting information [out] on what the harms of the drug use are."

Even for legitimate sites, staying open has been a battle. Lack of permits and fire-code violations were at the heart of the May 25 raid on Fort Lauderdale's beleaguered Lumonics Light and Sound Theatre. The place's sculpture gallery showcased local electronica DJs weekly and featured a late-night light and music show.

"When they raided us, they really doubted that we had permission," says Lumonics flak Barry Raphael. "So they were a little flabbergasted that we had permission to have these events."

The theater, which shut down and then reopened, doesn't serve alcohol and touts itself as a drugless high. In the past, it typically attracted an underage crowd.

"When we started bringing in DJing, it really struck a chord," Raphael explains. "It was really exciting for us. You'll see [Lumonics Website] postings of how it's really changed peoples lives. Lumonics was growing really fast. Not because we were doing a lot of advertising. They were coming by word of mouth and arriving in numbers much faster than we could have imagined.

"What was being conveyed by the police and some of the media reports was that people were coming to Lumonics only to buy drugs. The vast majority of people we met were very much into the music, the Lumonics setting, and the PLUR [peace, love, unity, and respect] concept.... If drug-dealing was limited only to Lumonics and the 200 or so customers, then the problem has been solved."

The gallery reopened in August, limiting itself to 50 people a night. Raphael says the owners are sponsoring spoken-word events and planning more nights that de-emphasize electronica.

In hopes they can accommodate a larger crowd of up to 200, they're working with an architect and a contractor to make changes to the property. "We're not even sure it's worth it," he sighs.