



Clubbing in Los Angeles

Jonny Coleman tackles the multi-farious scene in one of America's biggest cities.

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It doesn't help that many of the historical clubs/bars in places like Hollywood and West Hollywood are a tough sell to fans of underground music, as the price points, degree of parking difficulty and douchebaggery quotient are all high. That means that many parties of note take place downtown or in other east side neighborhoods (if not a private estate). Costs of living in the east are relatively cheap, and many of the blocks are industrial, so it's easier not to bother the neighbors. There are a few clubs on the west side, but any attempt at growing a scene there would be met with conservative resistance. (The west side, after all, is home to some of the priciest zip codes in the country.)

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Mainstream interest grew at the same time, and rave producers that are still hugely successful today started in this era as well. The infamous Rave America took place in 1993, while the first editions of Electric Daisy Carnival, Monster Massive, Nocturnal Wonderland and Together As One all took place throughout the mid-'90s. But as the first generation of ravers got older, Dennis Romero says that they wanted the same things that Europe and New York had transitioned toward: "superclubs like Ministry of Sound and Twilo." While "two of the biggest promoters, Insomniac and Go Ventures, began holding events at the LA Coliseum and Sports Arena in 1999...they felt like throwbacks to me," explains Romero. But "they held on and, as you know, came back strong more than ten years later."

"Strong" may be a bit of an understatement. The Electric Daisy Carnival, for example, has established itself as one of the premier big festival brands in American dance music. It's hardly the only one. The greater LA area offers a bevy of larger, legitimate festivals that operate, for all intents and purposes, like raves of the '90s—except with a much higher level of scrutiny and regulation. Crowds are still keen to dress candy rave or something equally over-the-top. Also, like parts of the first wave of rave, the commercial success of these events has made these promoters and headlining DJs the wealthiest men in West Coast dance culture.

Indeed, while the music may have changed in some cases, perhaps not much else has. Promoters like Giant and Insomniac are still around and relevant, in addition to mainstream concert promoters like Goldenvoice, AEG and LiveNation who are producing events entirely dance-driven or have been incorporating dance into their existing programming.

EDC and similar events were once open to crowds age 16 and up, which was a huge draw for the hundreds of thousands of high school, undergraduate, and graduate students in the region. However, in 2010, 15 year-old Sasha Rodriguez snuck in and died of a drug overdose at EDC, which sent the Insomniac-run circus packing for Vegas and had conservative California lawmakers trying to pass a bill that would make it illegal to host an event where prerecorded music was played for longer than three-and-a-half hours. It later passed in a much more diluted form, and EDC is now aggressively trying to return, no doubt with the hope that LA will

go through with construction plans for two new enormous football stadiums in the coming three years.

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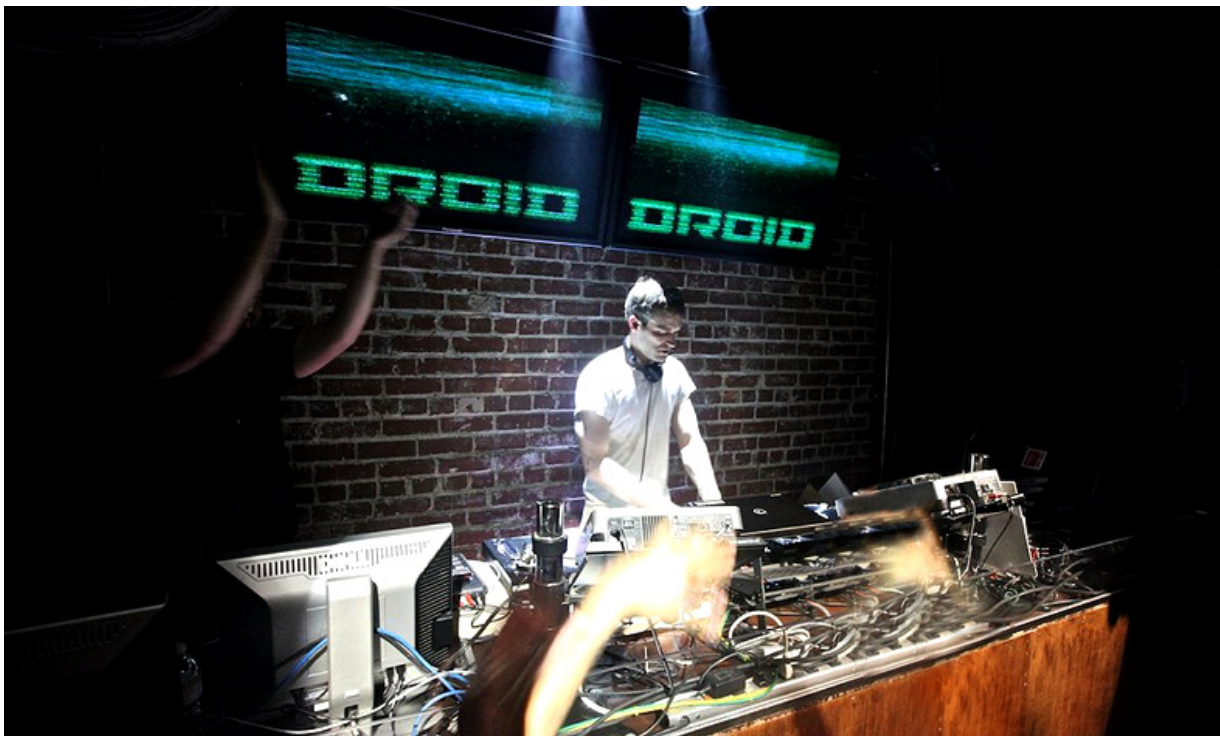
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Other Hollywood clubs of note include **King King Club**, **Dim Mak Studios** and **Vanguard**, but while each has their own pluses and minuses, clubbing in Los Angeles is best understood through the promoters rather than the venues. **Droid Behavior**, for instance, are the city's most visible torchbearers for techno. (Their official motto? "eat.sleep.shit.techno"). Their origin story is a familiar one: The trio simply weren't satisfied with the city's offerings. Vidal Vargas: "[When] I learned about Detroit, New York, Canada and Germany, I found out [about them] through the internet. Those guys weren't really coming to LA."

There was a small scene—largely fronted by local legend John Tejada—but there was also an opportunity to bring together techno fans from around the city under one umbrella. Internet early adopters, Droid built an enormous newsletter database and website as a hub to engage and inform—in addition to simply announcing their latest events. They were blogging and putting out podcasts long before it became de rigueur. Often times, their parties take place in warehouses, but they're refreshingly open-minded as well: Droid has not been afraid to pair up with people that may be considered mainstream or suspect (like Insomniac or Scion)—in an effort to continually expand its reach and grow its crowd.

Their centerpiece event is Interface, a couple-times-a-year warehouse multimedia blowout. It's there that you're likely to see acts like Marcel Dettmann, Speedy J or Surgeon. More regularly, they do a Thursday night event called PRIME at **Medusa Lounge** in Silver Lake, which showcases their varied tastes: Two recent events welcomed ghetto house artist DJ Slugo and ambient techno master Donato Dozzy.

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DJ Harvey and Sarcastic has helped to make Los Angeles a haven for disco lovers.

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Droog's Standard Rooftop Hotel parties have helped shape the sound of Jamie Jones and Lee Foss.

Droog is the foremost tech house-centric promoter in Los Angeles. Co-founder Andrei Osyaka, a Ukrainian expat, moved to LA after making some money in the finance game in the first half of the '00s, and eventually linked up with Brett Griffin (attorney by day) and Justin Sloe (ex-IT manager). Together, they release records on their Culprit label. They're perhaps best known, however, for their summer daytime pool series at the downtown **Standard Hotel**. Jamie Jones, Matt Tolfrey and the like are frequent guests to the potentially stuffy environs of The Standard's rooftop, and they often transform it into something far more feral.

Like Droid, Droog's members make some of their rent on out-of-town gigs, so promoting locally is a part-time job. That's just the nature of the LA party scene in Osyaka's eyes. "There are

more obstacles than in most places [but that] makes for a stronger scene, even if it's smaller. We complain a lot—we look at lineups in London and go 'Damn, look at that,' but most of us are happy now. It's the best it's been for small-to-medium sized parties for non-mainstream, what-we-consider-cool-music. Now these bigger forces who wouldn't have given a shit about us a couple years ago are now tuning in."

Things came together when Chicago native Lee Foss came to LA around 2007. Osyaka elaborates: "It was an epiphany for him because Chicago had gotten stale in his estimation. He felt like something new was being born here. He was one of the few people to give us the push to go beyond the parties—let's start making music. He said, 'Fuck it. Let's do it.' We had a house in Hollywood that was called the Bunker. It was one of the most prominent factors of why we took off—that house. We'd go after our Avalon parties and have parties for days."

Not coincidentally the upcoming album from Hot Creations—Foss' duo with Jamie Jones—was largely conceived in Los Angeles, and Damian Lazarus has also lived in the city for the past few years. So it's no secret that Hot Natured and Crosstown Rebels' neon house sound has drawn a great deal of inspiration from the city. (Listen to the pop and soundtrack work coming out of LA in the '80s and compare the two.) While Droog hasn't reached quite the same heights with Culprit, their label project, they've managed to establish a strong foothold in the international scene with releases from Tolfrey, Subb-an and Jozif.

A Club Called Rhonda represents a similarly serious ethos but also delivers with personality in droves. Rhonda began as a twice monthly party in Guada Linda, "some type of Guatemalan [place that was] super shady...[there was] illegal money coming through there," explains co-founder GODDOLLARS. Their self-described "polysexual hard partying" event has hosted acts like Dimitri from Paris, DJ Harvey, Oliver \$ and Tensnake in its four years, and drawn in a diverse crowd as a result. While they have a keen eye for talent—booking in Todd Edwards for a gig in 2009, a few years before his current DJ revival; asking MK to produce a single for their label in 2010—Rhonda parties are all about the crowd. At any given event, you'll encounter all strands of gay, straight, in-between, trannies, gangsta cholas, frat guys, lesbians, indie rockers, techno nerds, 50 year old bears, blue collar kids and music industry folk.

Like many of the promoters in Los Angeles, Rhonda's Alexis Rivera perseveres in the face of "a lot of limitations...I think we do a good job of pushing the extreme of the limitations. The limitations are having to close at 2:00 AM or 1:30, being in a city where almost everyone has to drive, being in a city where you compete with Avalon, being where there's a lot of just straight parties or just gay parties." Following in the footsteps of Droid and Droog, Rhonda aims to make their record label a more consistent concern and hopes to one day own a venue in the city. For now, though, they often take over **Los Globos**, a former Mexican dive bar and one of the better new club spaces in the city.



While the 4/4 triumvirate of techno, house and disco have come a long way in the last decade, LA's relationship with hip-hop has always remained steadfast. One of the most respected producers in the city is Madlib, the resident weirdo stoner godfather of the **Stones Throw** label. Label head Peanut Butter Wolf, an accomplished DJ in his own right, started releasing Madlib's records around the turn of the century and has given the gifted beatmaker the space to create some of the most vital projects in underground hip-hop over the past decade. Stones Throw's success, however, is down to Wolf's hugely eclectic approach. Few imprints could take on Dam-Funk, James Pants, Gary Wilson and Mayer Hawthorne and have it make sense. Stones Throw does it with ease.

On the techier, more machine-driven underbelly of hip-hop stands Low End Theory. The night emerged from Sketchbook, an early '00s weekly where local producers would test drive new productions. Low End founder Daddy Kev invited friends like Gaslamp Killer, Flying Lotus and dibia\$e to be involved in his Wednesday night weekly in 2006, and it has seen an almost unbelievable cast of guests stop by over the years—Thom Yorke and Erykah Badu among them. What's unique about Low End Theory is the vibe: friendly but competitive. "This is a city of entertainers, and you have to be a performer," Kev explains. "You have to make this not just an engaging but enthralling thing to watch. Having this forum, knowing that the presentation and sound system will be correct. It's pushed everybody. That comes from hip-hop, sure."

The most obvious success to emerge from the night is Flying Lotus, who now records for Warp and is a European festival veteran. But this is a party that doesn't put on airs: the weekly features many artists recording on Daddy Kev's Alpha Pup and FlyLo's Brainfeeder,

and it's the most centralized, regular and cheap way to hear these voices in the city. They've received a considerable amount of press both locally and internationally as well as corporate offers, but the brand has remained as independent as possible. Most interestingly, though, it's still a place that sees a huge melting point of influences come together. Whether you're into hip-hop, house, techno, rock, punk or whatever, Low End Theory likely has something for you.



Dig below the surface of the big underground house, techno, disco and hip-hop parties that Los Angeles has to offer, and you'll find even more. The Do-Over, a free Sunday weekly in Hollywood, has hip-hop and partyrocking as its backbone but is ultimately one of the most eclectic games in town. The hook is that the DJs are never announced beforehand. You're just as likely to get Theo Parrish or King Britt as you are Diplo or Flying Lotus. The crowd, as with most of the aforementioned parties, is extremely mixed in ethnicity, fashion, age and musical background. It's one of the few regular open airs that captures the best aspects of house parties.

Downtown's Voodoo delivers equally on a familiar, eclectic house party style. It's a (roughly) 100 person event that usually has a strict pre-sale and entry policy but rewards its devotees with an all-night house party with proper sound. Founder Eduardo Castillo makes a living through owning and operating Pattern Bar, a young downtown bar with solid programming, which allows him to throw parties whenever he pleases, rather than relying on it to pay his bills.

And there are even more that deserve mention: **Dâm-Funk's** free Monday night

Funkmosphere event specializes in funk, boogie and proto-house. If you venture east, Mustache Mondays offers a bold array of Monday night, queer-centric entertainment (Lady Miss Kier, Zebra Katz). Add to that Futra, **Incognito**, Doc Martin's **Sublevel**, MFD, Making Shapes, Sunny Side Up, Fade to Mind, The Lift, Full Frontal Disco, Spank!, Cub Scout, Hott City, Booby Trap!, Animal Club, Nox Illusio, We Own the Night, 2 True and events from DJs and acts from 100% Silk, the 6Bit Collective, Smog, American Standard, Friends of Friends, IAMSOUND, CYP 2, FYF and dublab and many more and the calendar fills up pretty quickly.

Despite the relative optimism about things in Los Angeles at the moment, it's far from a clubber's paradise. Nothing seems to come easy. Unlike in London where you might get five different types of house music heads all looking for something slightly different, Los Angeles promoters are often drawing from the same group of clubbers. There also continues to be waves of crackdowns on warehouses and lofts when things get just a bit too big for the police to ignore. And, like anywhere else, the sound at certain loft and warehouse parties usually leaves a lot to be desired.

The circumstances for partying in Los Angeles are also far from ideal and may stay that way indefinitely. There are no indications that liquor laws or restrictions on obtaining the proper licenses will change anytime soon. Likewise, acquiring work visas for foreign artists is an enormous hassle—and can sometimes result in a last-minute cancellation. Factor in the general difficulty in making a living from solely promoting events, especially in the underground, and you can see why it's taken Los Angeles such a long time to build a solid scene that can accommodate underground and overground parties on a regular basis.

"The thing that conflicted LA so long was our willingness to let everything be an import," Daddy Kev told me. "That has changed recently." And he's right: Whereas Low End Theory, Droid, Droog, Rhonda and others had their beginnings in bringing exotic things into the city, each of them now have their sights set outward as well. Parties are touring nationally and internationally, and many promoters are looking to make moves towards establishing more clubs in the city.

The people behind those aforementioned parties seem to be Los Angeles lifers, and they understand the scene better than anyone. They prefer the struggle, choosing to stay put rather than moving to more liberal, dance-friendly cultures. There's a variety of reasons why: There's all the beautiful people, the semi-decriminalization of marijuana and the macrobiotic burritos. There's also the local values of experimentation and eclecticism.

It could be the whole Manifest Destiny thing too—everyone living out a prospector's dream. Like Joan Didion once wrote, "The future always looks good in the Golden land, because no one remembers the past." Or, as Andrei Osyaka puts it, maybe it all boils down to one simple reason: "Maybe the reason I'm so positive about the future in Los Angeles is because the weather is so fucking good."

Words / **Jonny Coleman**

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