

# **DJs, CLUBS AND VINYL**

The Cultural Commodification and  
Operational Logics of  
Contemporary Commercial Dance  
Music in Sydney

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## **ABSTRACT**

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The development of contemporary, post-disco dance music and its associated culture, as representative of a (supposedly) underground, radical subculture, has been given extensive consideration within popular music studies. Significantly less attention has been given to the commercial, mainstream manifestations of this music. Furthermore, demonstrating the influence of subculture theory, existing studies of dance culture focus largely on youth-based audience participation, and as such, those who engage with dance music on a professional level have been somewhat overlooked. In an attempt to rectify these imbalances, this study examines the contemporary commercial dance music scene in Sydney, Australia, incorporating an analytical framework that revolves mainly around the work of DJs and the commercial scene they operate within.

An ethnographic methodological approach underpins the majority of this thesis, with interviews forming the main source of research material. Beginning with a discussion of the existing academic literature on dance culture and dance scenes, an historical context is subsequently established through a section that traces the development of dance culture from an underground phenomenon to a mainstream leisure activity, both within and outside Australia.

The ideas, opinions and interpretations of a selection of local DJs and other music industry practitioners who work in Sydney are central to the analysis of DJ culture herein. Issues discussed include the interaction and relationship between the DJ and their crowd, the technology and formats employed by DJs, and the DJ's multiple roles as entertainer, consumer and educator. The final part of the study gives consideration to the structure of the Sydney dance scene, in regard to the frequently used, but rarely critically analysed, terms 'underground' and 'mainstream'. The thesis concludes with a discussion that challenges the structural rigidity imposed by subcultural theory and scene-based analysis,

arguing instead for a greater degree of fluidity in the theoretical approaches taken towards the study of contemporary dance music scenes.

## **DECLARATION**

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I certify that this work has not been submitted for a higher degree to any other university or institution. The work herein is entirely my own, except where acknowledged.

Edward Montano

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In no particular order, thanks must go to the following people, without whom I just would have had to get somebody else:

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Those at Central Station Records (staff, customers, and all the other assorted waifs and strays who regularly wandered in off Oxford Street), whose passion and enthusiasm for dance music provided me with a startling introduction to club culture in Sydney. A special mention goes to Trent, whose infectious love of dance music not only proved to be an endless source of inspiration, but also served to waste hours of MiniDisc space. I think the battery's run out...

Those who have commented upon and critiqued this thesis, in particular my two supervisors at Macquarie University, Prof. Philip Hayward and Dr. Denis Crowdy, their disappearing act during our sole night out clubbing providing one of the more amusing moments of my research. Apparently, they were in the breaks room all night...

Those passionate, energetic, and crazy people who keep the Sydney dance scene alive, and without whom I would have had nothing to write about...

... and to anyone I've forgotten, sorry, but all the late nights spent clubbing in the name of research seem to have affected my memory.

## **PREFACE**

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In order to fully contextualise the observations and arguments I make throughout this study, and in order to support my claim that experience within a particular scene allows for a more complete and detailed ethnographic analysis and interpretation of that scene, it would be useful to briefly discuss my own personal involvement in club culture. Given the importance of incorporating a degree of self-reflection in the methodological approaches taken by researchers, relevant to any research project is the history of the researcher within their chosen field, and it is this history that contributes significantly to the arguments and interpretations that are made during the course of any study. While some projects may be undertaken because of the degree of strangeness and unfamiliarity they present to the researcher, it was my own knowledge of, and passion for, dance music and club culture that drove me to investigate the scene in Sydney.

Being from the UK originally, my initial involvement with the Sydney dance scene came about during the six months I spent living in the city as part of my twelve-month working holiday around Australia between the years 1999 and 2000. Both prior and subsequent to this holiday, I undertook some undergraduate and postgraduate study in Liverpool, the English city that gave the world the Beatles. Alongside its rich rock music heritage, the city gave rise during the 1990s to Cream nightclub, and Cream's subsequent development into a globally-recognised brand of club culture meant that Liverpool became a centre for all things dance music. It was this vibrant and increasingly commercial dance scene that I fell into when I commenced university life during the latter half of the 1990s, and indeed, so did many others, with one of the reasons that was often cited for Cream's success being the city's bustling student population. These first years at university, under the glare of the bright and startling lights of city life, were when my love of music shifted from a rock-based aesthetic into something more electronically-driven. I can admit now that I had prejudices against DJs, which

would have developed out of the various authenticity debates that typically surround the performance of live rock music and the skills necessary to successfully complete such performance, which then would have led to a dismissal on my part not only of DJs, but also of music that was seemingly electronically-generated. Hindsight proves this to be a highly unfair and biased perception, and thus I am grateful to the efforts of friends to take me on a night out to Cream in an attempt to shake me from my rock-based ignorance. My first visit to the club soon made me realise that there was much, much more to dance music than simply someone playing other people's records. At the risk of resorting to hyperbole and cliché, I recall being struck almost immediately by a realisation that here was an entire music, sound and culture open for exploration, all of which was entirely new to me and therefore excitingly offered the thrill of the unknown.

During subsequent months, I not only became an active clubber, but I also explored dance music as something to listen to at home. Alongside my dismissal of DJs, I had previously taken the blinkered view that dance music could not possibly be something that anyone could enjoy within the confines of their lounge or bedroom, but I soon realised not only that dance music could work within both the home and the club, but also that the term 'dance music' encompassed such a wide variety of styles that the dance music one may enjoy listening to while cleaning or cooking could differ quite significantly to the dance music one may enjoy while out on the town. Through both the advice of friends and my own personal research, which was made somewhat easier through my employment in music retail at the time, I ploughed through various different styles of dance music, initially latching on to trance as a favourite sound, a possible reason for this being the dominance of that particular style within UK clubs and on UK radio at the time. This interest, however, gradually waned, and I became fascinated with house music, which seemed to contain a soulfulness and emotional warmth that, at least to me, was missing from trance. To start with, this interest revolved largely around the more commercial house music sounds, due to the fact Cream

was the only club I visited regularly, which certainly catered for a commercial crowd, and the dance music compilations I regularly bought were the mass-marketed ones put out by Cream and the London-based club Ministry of Sound. As I became more familiar with the music and the culture, I began to explore house music that sat outside of the mainstream, that did not get regular airplay on the radio, and that did not feature on every dance compilation. That is not to say that I suddenly found a passion for underground, left-of-centre, abstract experimentation, but rather that I began to discover house music that retained the accessibility of commercial dance music, but that was not so prominently featured within the dance music media. While the various terms and descriptions that abound within dance culture make it difficult to lend any kind of universally understood definition to the many different styles that fall under the umbrella heading of 'dance music', I would describe the particular form of house music that I am passionate about as 'deep' and 'soulful' house music, with an emphasis on the music put out by producers and DJs such as Miguel Migs, Jay-J, Roger Sanchez, Andy Caldwell, Ben Watt, and others of that ilk. Alongside this, I have also found myself drawn on occasions to the darker, tribal sounds of people like Steve Lawler, Wally Lopez, and other DJs who have typically been lumped by the dance music media under the 'progressive' banner, for better or worse.

In the interest of balance, it is relevant to note the dance music that falls outside of my comfort zone, which would mainly be hard house, techno, breakbeat, drum 'n' bass, and anything else where the beats are either too fast or too fractured. This should not be taken as meaning that I do not appreciate these forms and cannot see their value, but rather that my interest in them does not extend to regular listening. Similarly, I have never had any great desire to go to clubs that play such forms of dance music, although inclement weather at a couple of dance music festivals I have attended in the past has forced me into the drum 'n' bass and breakbeat tents, experiences I never wish to repeat.

As an indication of the way a person's geographical location can have an effect on the development of their musical tastes, I can say unequivocally that since arriving in Sydney to commence the research for this thesis, I have been exposed to a wider variety of house music than I was in the UK, and as such, my interest in, and appreciation of, house music has been further developed. Part of this is no doubt related to my work in a specialist dance music store (see below), but I would also suggest that in comparison to cities in the UK such as Liverpool, Sydney has a far more popular and prominent house scene. I have certainly enjoyed experiencing the clubs in Sydney that offer such music through their DJ line-ups, venues such as Home, Tank, YU and The ArtHouse providing many memorable nights out during the course of this study. As such, my own passion for house music, combined with the centrality of this music to dance culture in Sydney, led to the focus of this study being placed on the commercial house music scene in the city. While the frequency and regularity of my clubbing experiences dipped somewhat towards the conclusion of this project (from a peak of once a week to something like once every eight weeks), due to changes in both my work commitments and methods of socialising, I still make a concerted effort to keep abreast of developments in the rapidly changing world of house music and club culture, while I still feel the same sense of excitement for new dance music as I did ten years ago back at Cream in Liverpool.

Being raised in Thatcher's 1980s Britain, and seeing the subsequent development of the commercial club culture in the UK during the 1990s that seemed to perfectly embody the former Prime Minister's capitalist, consumerist, and entrepreneurial political thought, certainly had an impact on my overall perception of dance music culture. While there is no place in this thesis for a discussion of my own political perspectives, I certainly see a link between the political background of my upbringing and my embracing of club culture at its most commercialised level. I never shared the sentiments of those who saw Cream and other similarly successful clubs as having somehow compromised the authenticity of dance music through blatant commercial exploitation. The

discourses and value judgements that circulate within rock and pop music culture in regard to 'selling out' also filtered through into dance music culture, and yet for all the criticism they received, these clubs drew many people into club culture, including myself. Without their existence, dance music, arguably, would not have penetrated the mainstream to the extent it did during the 1990s.

My analysis of the Sydney dance music scene is thus grounded in a commercial sensibility that is infused with an international perspective. Coming over from the UK meant getting to grips with the relatively unfamiliar terrain of Sydney's club culture in a rather short space of time, something that I initially perceived as a potential disadvantage, although I soon overcame this not only through the 'education' and 'insider's perspective' I received during my work at Central Station Records, one of Sydney's main dance music record stores (see below), but also with the realisation that a sense of detachment from, and unfamiliarity with, a research subject can serve to foster a degree of objectivity which enables the researcher to maintain a critical distance from their subject. At the same time, I would argue that my familiarity with dance music in the UK allowed me to engage more closely with the debates and issues surrounding transnationalism and the global appeal of contemporary dance music culture. I was able to compare and contrast dance music scenes of two different countries, and many of my conclusions regarding the place of the Sydney dance scene within global dance music culture are certainly informed by my experience of club culture outside of Australia. I am not suggesting that this experience somehow makes me more qualified to speak on this topic than someone who has only ever experienced dance music within the boundaries of Sydney, particularly given the media avenues that are now open to obtain information from the other side of the world in a matter of seconds, thus giving everyone access to an international perspective. Yet my knowledge and understanding of the UK dance scene, when placed alongside and in contrast to my exploration of the Sydney scene, most definitely granted me an increased sense of the fluidity and interaction between dance music scenes around the world.

The job I managed to secure at Central Station Records proved invaluable to the research for this thesis. This was a full-time position working behind the CD counter (during the time I worked there, the shop was divided into four distinct sections: the dance vinyl section, the CD section, the hip-hop vinyl and DJ equipment section, and the clothing section). Having only just arrived in Sydney from the UK to commence my research, I came across an advertisement for the job in the classifieds section of the local street-press (free) publication *3D World*, a Sydney-based paper dedicated specifically to dance music. I expected my unfamiliarity with the Sydney dance scene to work against my chances of obtaining the position, although given that I was ultimately successful, my previous experience in both music retail and dance culture in the UK must have been of more significance to my interviewer. Initially, I was unaware of the importance of the store to the history of dance music in Sydney, and also of the importance of the associated Central Station Records label to the history of dance music in Australia, but once I became familiar with the development of dance culture in the city and the nature of the city's contemporary dance scene, I realised just how fortunate I had been in obtaining the job, given the subject of the research project I had just undertaken. Having selected the Sydney dance scene as my focus, I now found myself immersed fully in one of the key sites of this very scene. While I only worked at the store for the first two of the four years during which this thesis was completed, the insights, perspectives, experiences and contacts I obtained through the job have all gone towards forming the very shape and content of this study.

Aside from the DJs who were regular customers of the store, who I got to know on a first-name basis, and who then subsequently became key participants in my research, my job at Central Station affected my exploration and investigation of Sydney dance culture in many different ways. Perhaps of most significance is the impact my employment had on the actual research trajectory of this project. Initially, I had planned to gather together a focus group of clubbers, and then

base my thesis around their understandings and experiences of the culture, but then, having conducted my literature review, it became obvious that clubbers had been given a significant amount of consideration in academic analyses of dance culture, and that missing from these studies was detailed consideration of the work of DJs and promoters within local dance scenes. With my job providing me with regular, daily contact with such people in the Sydney scene, I saw that I was in an ideal position in which to conduct a detailed ethnographic study of Sydney club culture through the eyes of some of its most passionate and devoted participants, or rather through those who work within the culture on a regular basis.

Furthermore, the job enabled me to gauge and measure the structure and shape of the Sydney dance scene, through such factors as CD sales, vinyl sales, and ticket sales for dance parties. In effect, the job took on a degree of schooling, in that I was constantly being educated about the styles of music that were popular with Sydney clubbers, the clubs and venues that were pulling in the biggest crowds, and the discourses and value judgements that circulated within the scene. Having a UK-based background in dance culture, I had to negotiate the unfamiliarity and strangeness of the Sydney dance scene upon arriving in the city, something which I was able to overcome rather rapidly through the educational value of the job. In addition, the industry-related benefits of working in the store also allowed me to further my research into Sydney's clubbing landscape, in that I took full advantage of the opportunities for free entry into most of the city's clubs that working alongside DJs provides. All those employed to work behind the store's vinyl counter were professional DJs, while dance party promoters would often drop into the store to leave flyers or posters for their events, typically offering guest-list places or free tickets for any staff. I was thus able to form a network of contacts that proved beneficial not only when seeking out interviewees, but also when seeking entry to clubs and events. While I was always careful not appear like I was exploiting a friendship for personal gain, I certainly enjoyed the benefits of being placed on a guest-list (not having to pay,

jumping to the front of the queue), and I certainly went out clubbing more often than I would have done if I had had to part with my hard-earned cash to gain entry.

Ultimately, the conclusions I have drawn about dance culture in Sydney throughout this thesis are rooted very firmly within the experiences and encounters I had while working at the store. Indeed, I am certain this study would have turned out very differently had I not worked at Central Station. The job afforded me an insight into the city's club culture that could not have come from any other source or method of investigation, and allowed for an intensity of participation within the scene that, I believe, acts as a solid foundation for the observations and interpretations I make throughout this thesis regarding the contemporary dance music scene in Sydney.