6 Las Vegas DJs You Should Know

BY ANDY WANG

Each year, Vegas honors six men—our Vegas aces—who are making incredible strides in their fields. Who better to celebrate than the DJs who are redefining nightlife in Vegas—and the world?

On the first Monday of 2011, XS managing partner Jesse Waits invited DJs Tiësto, Steve Aoki, and Manufactured Superstars’ Brad Roulier, as well as Pasquale Rotella, for dinner at Wynn. They couldn’t have known that Rotella’s Electric Daisy Carnival, a summer away, would become one of the world’s biggest music festivals, or that Beatport, the dance-music website that Roulier cofounded, would soon be acquired for $50 million. Or that DJs like Tiësto and Aoki would make millions headlining colossal Vegas clubs. “We all had a feeling that Vegas was on the verge of something special,” Tiësto says, “and that’s why so many of us made such a commitment to the city.” DJs have become the city’s new leading men, making a nearly immeasurable cultural and economic impact. Here are six who have turned Las Vegas into the party capital of the world.

Tiësto: The High Roller

Dutch DJ Tiësto, a godfather of the electronic dance music world, has toured the globe for more than a decade. But it’s Vegas that inspired his latest album, A Town Called Paradise. And the video for the radio-friendly hit single “Red Lights”—a song about running away from everything and reveling in the moment—was filmed here. “The video is very much a tribute to the city,” Tiësto says. “I travel all over, but due to my residency I seem to spend more time in Las Vegas than anywhere else.” And his time here has been one long highlight reel. “EDC Vegas is unlike anything else in terms of scale. But my residency at Hakkasan and Wet Republic has had so many amazing moments,” says the global phenom. “It’s hard to compare Vegas to anywhere else. Vegas is a true entertainment capital. From a dance-music perspective, people try to make comparisons with Ibiza, though it’s only similar in that both places are destinations with so many clubs and DJs in close proximity.” Yet Ibiza is seasonal. Vegas is
paradise year-round, a fact Tiësto knows as well as anyone.

**Steve Aoki: The Action Junkie**

Steve Aoki is all about chasing a rush. He cliff-dives, snowboards, does CrossFit, and happily lets go of everything when he’s in the DJ booth or crowd-surfing on an inflatable raft. It’s all dopamine, after all. “I’m drawn to that feeling,” says the Hakkasan and Wet Republic resident DJ, whose new album, Neon Future, was released in September. “I’m not into drugs. I don’t really get drunk anymore. I find my adrenaline through music and sports and poker and things like that.”

He’s also focusing energy on his new Vegas house, a 15,600-square-foot Summerlin mansion that he calls The Compound and that’s turning into a “Steve Aoki signature house.” His team of contractors is creating a “multipurpose, functional house,” he says, with a studio, rehearsal space, a multimedia room for photo and video shoots, and maybe even a poker room.

“Leaving LA was a difficult thing to do,” says Aoki, who moved to Vegas from the Hollywood Hills. “I wanted to create an environment where I could have as much of my life as possible, where I could develop my music.” Now known as an electro-house wizard, he remembers playing Vegas gigs back in 2005, when his friend DJ AM’s open-format mastery ruled the clubs. Since then, Aoki has seen many factors turn Vegas into the world capital of dance and nightlife: festivals, the Internet trumping radio and TV as the way many people discover artists, the big gamble that Steve Wynn took on DJs like Aoki in 2010.

He has talked to Tony Hsieh about Downtown ventures that could include a place that offers raw and organic food, or perhaps a production school to help other DJs get their start. Vegas is Aoki’s house now, and he’s ready to go hard.

**Dash Berlin: The Frontman**
Dash Berlin is a collaboration of three Dutch musicians, but the whirling dervish of a DJ that festival crowds and the throngs at Marquee know as Dash Berlin is Jeffrey Sutorius. He’s the perfect face for the rousing trance act, and he knows that the stakes for his pure-energy performances are greater in Vegas than anywhere else.

“The production and the elements of shows and the quality of entertainment is so high here,” Sutorius says. “You have to bring the best of the best. And the crowd is always fresh—there are always new people here. No two shows are the same.”

Like an ace poker player who knows when to bet more and when to slow things down, Dash Berlin understands that coming in with a plan only takes you so far. “Deejaying is always adapting to the atmosphere and the crowd and catering to that and trying to read what people are wanting,” Sutorius says. “Where do you want to go? The story is never the same.”

One allure of trance music, which Dash Berlin and other Dutch superstars, like Armin van Buuren (another Marquee regular), have dominated, is that it takes you on a journey. It’s melodic and emotional and midtempo until it’s not. And in the case of Dash Berlin, it’s largely influenced by being on the road and, of course, in Vegas. “I’ve found inspiration all over the world, met so many cultures,” Sutorius says. “Especially on the dance floor. Countries like Mexico, one of the first countries that started embracing Dash Berlin, have been so important for our music. And being a resident DJ at Marquee enables me to do so much in terms of experimenting more than usual.”

Zedd: The Prodigy
Zedd is a true producer. When he performs at XS, he knows that the songs are just part of the allure. “I don’t want just to be a DJ that rolls into a club and has a drink and plays the music,” he says. “We create visuals for each show. I want you to see what you hear.”

So he digs deep into his own pockets to pay for elaborate projections, lights, and flames at Steve Wynn’s mega nightclub. “I play a lot of songs specifically because they look great,” Zedd says. When he deejays at Encore Beach Club during the day, there are visuals, too, but the bright sun and the sunshine-celebrating songs he plays are all the light anyone needs.

Lucky for Zedd—a 25-year-old Russian-German wunderkind who started playing piano when he was 4, composed music throughout childhood, and drummed in a metal band at 12—his chart-climbing songs like “Spectrum,” “Clarity,” “Stay the Night,” and “Find You” create mad joy in clubs day and night. And Zedd, who has already won a Grammy (for “Clarity”) and found time to cowrite and produce Lady Gaga songs, is getting ready to unleash even more music to the masses. But, of course, Vegas gets a sneak peak. He’s been living in LA, grinding away on a new album in his studio. And being so close to Vegas means he’s able to come back to Wynn’s clubs again and again to try out new beats and see how the huge crowds react.

“It was a really packed house the last two times,” Zedd says about a string of recent shows billed as “The Summer of Zedd” at XS. “It’s an amazing feeling to know you can play every week and there’s going to be thousands of people and that it’s going to be a great moment.”

Erick Morillo: The Marathon Man
Erick Morillo—an underground icon known for grinding out club gig after club gig and often playing slow-burning, uncompromising sets that last until well after sunrise—did something rare recently. He took some time off to clear his head.

"I took a big long break," he says. "I stopped playing September of last year and came back in May. I missed it so much. I kind of refunded my love for deejaying again."

So he showed up at Space in Miami and played for 11½ hours. And with his monthly residency at the nightclub LIFE in the new SLS Las Vegas, where he deejayed the August 23 grand opening, he’s willing to make his sets as lengthy as the crowds want.

"I don’t care—I can go as long as they want to go," says Morillo, whose stamina has improved since he went completely sober more than six months ago. "I’m doing what I do." What he does, and what he became famous doing at clubs like Tao in Venetian, where regulars knew they could show up at 7 am for a Morillo gig and still have hours of partying ahead, is play dark, sultry sets that happily ignore the pop-laden beats of commercial DJs remaking No. 1 songs.

"I’m playing rough and tough underground music with some vocals here and there," Morillo says. "I know how to straddle both worlds, keep it sexy and underground. I don’t have to play hit record after hit record. That’s not my job. I’m going to be the alternative to everything else in Vegas. This is the sexy move right now." See you at 9 am.

**Kaskade: The Pioneer**
Kaskade, the most prominent of Marquee’s headliners, has drawn tremendous crowds to everything from his Summer Lovin’ residency to an endurance-challenging 12-hour set on New Year’s Eve. “The most important preparation is obvious: making certain that I bring a colossal amount of music with me,” Kaskade says. “There’s no way of mapping out where a set like that is going to go. I can build the tension for what seems like days and take people somewhere.”

It helps that Kaskade doesn’t drink (he’s been a vocal critic of the media misrepresenting electronic dance music) and that he’s been as responsible as anyone for the city’s DJ explosion. “I wouldn’t say I so much caught the beginning of the boom as I orchestrated the boom,” Kaskade says. “When Encore Beach Club hired me to play a pool party back in 2010, the idea was for me to play some house music once a month. That sounded fun, but I had a different idea. I asked them to let me curate the pool party every weekend. I wanted to bring talent in to play alongside me that Vegas had never seen or heard. I brought in Groove Armada, Chuckie, Afrojack, Pete Tong, and Dirty South, to name just a few.”

The doors opened on Memorial Day, and you could feel everything starting to shift. “An absolutely massive crowd had shown up, and it was utter chaos,” Kaskade says. “The reverberations of that pool party could be felt from here to Ibiza.” Now Kaskade can show up and have every show feel like a holiday weekend. “When I began shaping the idea to hold down a residency, before that was something anyone other than Cher could do, nobody thought it could work,” he says. “Watching this concept that I was a part of pioneering not only work but monopolize the clubs is pretty gratifying.”

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