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A lament for London clubbing

By Oliver Gordon

A few months back, standing in the midst of a heaving dance floor in a converted warehouse in Greenwich, I came to what at the time seemed a poignant, heart-felt epiphany: ‘This music is shit.’ Perhaps not on the Descartes spectrum of revelations, but it settled an itch I had been scratching for a long time. It was 3am and I was one of many hundreds of frequenters of that particular edition of *Percolate* – a House night run at different locations around London every few months. I was swaying along to the tune trying to find my rhythm, annoyed by my inability to do so. I opened my eyes and everyone I could see was swaying in the same arrhythmic, zombie-like fashion; although most were too anaesthetised to care. Then the aforementioned thought hit me, but in truth it had more layers: not only was the music shit, but the night was shit, and in fact I couldn’t remember when I had last been to a club night in London that wasn’t shit.

The first time I aired such a thought was in January last year, when Shoreditch’s famed Plastic People nightclub closed its doors for the last time. A couple of weeks after, I was asked by a Turkish friend visiting London for the first time what the city’s must-do clubs were. I

couldn't name one. I rang off a list of names, but caveated them all with: "xxx is pretty good if..." I couldn't give him one safe-bet for a good club night out.

Beat-rationing bollocks

One of the main problems is the vapid bollocks that London clubs pass off as music these days – and as sentimental as that sounds, even in my relatively nascent millennial memory can recollect the Drum'n'Bass movement in the mid-2000s, and Dubstep scene after that. Take that night at Percolate: utterly banal House music that, when listened to sober, can only really be appreciated on some obscure level of hipster-irony that can manage to justify a Nike sweatshirt/tweed flatcap combo.

It's the embrace of the 'minimal' forms of electronic music – whether house, techno, disco, and so on – that has metastasised through the city's club scene in recent years. Not content with mimicking the German masters of the art – Paul Kalkbrenner, Bookashade, Modeselector, to name but a few – UK producers have gone a step further and stripped away the euphoric drops that made their continental counterparts such as joy to listen to. No, in the UK, producers are looking for 'realness', so they cut away any semblance of the 90s-Ibiza-inspired electronic nuances that would allow anyone to define their music as 'cheesy' (we get it, you're not David Guetta, now take a fucking risk or

two). This is beat-rationing at its worst, and only compounded by the presumption of a wave of cheers any time said producer alters the musical gradient half a notch.

These Minimal proponents further ensnare themselves in grey by their incessant need to maintain the same tempo throughout all the sets of a given night. Result: “Is this the same song? Wait, the DJ has changed, when did that happen? What do you mean xxx has already done his set? I’ve been here the whole night...” In search of a seamless transition of songs and sets, UK producers and DJs have managed to create a string of dull, emotionless seven-hour tracks.

The worst thing about this conundrum is that it’s entirely avoidable. As all of you who tune in to Gilles Peterson on Radio 6 every Saturday can attest, there is no shortage of talented, innovative, dance-inducing beat-makers on our shores. But where are they on your night out? Well.. Your Jamie XXs and Four Tets are playing their own gigs at the O2 Academies of the world (it’s not clubbing if there’s seating); your Romares are playing surprise experimental sets in dank Dalston basements for the city’s most most effete, non-dancing scenesters; and your Hudson Mohawkes – and this is the vast majority – are squeezed into a line-up of minimalist purveyors of tumbleweed, having to water-down their goods to the eve’s tempo to such an extent as to make them indistinguishable to the surrounding chaff. Take my Percolate night, for example, Moodymann – a star of the Detroit Techno

scene – was stuffed into the jam-packed line-up, and his set was so indiscernible from the rest that I completely missed it, despite residing on the dance floor for its entirety.

Now, I don't want to tarnish the great live, instrumental music London has on offer on any given evening – we've got that locked down. And it's not to say that there aren't fantastic DJ sets all around the capital most weekends: funk, soul, blues, afrobeat, dancehall, reggae; you name it London caters to it. But no matter how enjoyable all those sets are, they are still either attempting to summon an experience from a bygone era or trying to replicate one from the other side of the world. For want of sounding all Farage, they're not *Made in London*. They should be complementing something homegrown, not replacing it; otherwise what musical legacy will London's millennials have? No-one's ever going to say: "Ah, do you remember the Northern Soul scene in London in the mid-2010s?"

3,000's a crowd

The next problem is the promoters. Too much of anything is never a good thing. Yet London's promoters seem to believe that is a fact of life that simply doesn't apply to club capacity. If I wanted to feel like a tinned sardine marinading in human perspiration, I'd ride the tube every morning. One of the worst offenders I've come across is the curators

behind the somewhat renowned electronic music night *The Hydra*, whose big-name line-ups always flatter to deceive. On both occasions I've had the misfortune of frequenting one of their events, overcrowding has completely ruined the evening. The first time, at Fire in Vauxhall, the queue to pass through the infinite number of security checkpoints would have made Luton Airport Immigration proud; and then on the second attempt, at Studio Spaces E1 on Pennington Street, you had to queue for 15 minutes just to get out to the smoking area.

Overcrowding a club stands in the direct contradiction to the reason people go clubbing in the first place: to have a drink and a dance. Let's look at those two elements separately. A drink: waiting for 20 minutes to catch a bartender's eye with absolutely no romantic intentions is enough to make anyone consider Alcoholics Anonymous. A dance: it's not really dancing if all you're trying to do is sway in the same direction as the sweating bodies enveloping you so as to not spill the plastic glass of stale Carlsberg you've got tightly coddled at your chest. That's passable at a gig, but what are we all looking at in a club? It's not as if you're watching a jaw-dropping guitar solo. You're stuck there looking at someone press some buttons and adjust some dials – and even that is basically blocked from view. Electronic music isn't for the performance; it's so you can close your eyes, let your limbs roam free and enjoy the wonderful new universes of sensory exploration that the sound variety offers.

London's promoters should take a leaf out of the book of their counterparts in Berlin. Now, like many, I'm not a massive fan of some Berlin bouncers' tendency to permit entry solely on the basis of yoga-bunny bodies and perfectly symmetrical facial structures. It's debasing for all humankind, and also counterproductive – a good club night should embrace a variety of type. Granted, if you're putting on a night of esoteric afrobeat, you're within your rights to reject a group of 20 Millwall fans on stag, but those kind of nights tend to be self-selecting anyway. Nonetheless, one thing that stands in favour of Berlin's door policies is that the clubs tend to be sparsely enough populated for you to throw some substantial shapes on the dance floor and get a drink within a few minutes of waiting at the bar. And, in turn, that tends to elevate the atmosphere of the place. There's less chances of agro caused by unintended collisions – strangely, you tend not get pissed off by someone stepping on your toes if they're not actually stepping on your toes.

Granted, London promoters are probably trying to cover the extortionate cost of the venue, whose proprietors in turn are attempting to make up the eye-watering overheads that accompany the temerity of using any London property within Zone 4 for anything other than soulless, cardboard boxes disguised as flats. Just look at some of the clubs that have closed in recent years: Plastic People, Madame JoJo's, Herbal, The End, Proud2, The Fridge, Cable, Bagley's, The Cross, The Astoria, Velvet Rooms, Turnmills, Matter,

SeOne – the list is endless.

But still, club owners and promoters, that's not the full story; many of you just got greedy. And it's completely counterproductive anyway. You could avoid all of the above by simply not selling 50% more tickets than there is capacity at a venue. Fall foul of that basic rule and you might bolster your bottom line for an event or two but repeat business will be irreversibly damaged in the long run. I certainly won't be returning to The Hydra anytime soon.

That's it. Rant over. I now feel like that cantankerous twat who gets out his soapbox to knowingly complain about a problem while proffering little in way of solution. But what's more London than that? Besides, that Percolate night really was terrible.

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