



# ELECTRONIC DANCE MUSIC

FROM DEVIANT SUBCULTURE TO CULTURE INDUSTRY

CHRISTOPHER T. CONNER and DAVID R. DICKENS

# **Electronic Dance Music**

# Critical Perspectives on Music and Society

**Series Editor:** David Arditi, University of Texas at Arlington

This book series produces books that present a critical perspective on popular music and the music industry. Two dominant strains of thought exist for the study of popular music. First, many texts in the popular culture tradition celebrate the artists, fans, and cultures that arise from popular music. Second, Music Industry Studies texts give students a “how-to” perspective on making it in the music industry. In both cases, texts rarely address the way that the music industry produces and reproduces power. The purpose of this book series is to provide a platform for authors who explore the social production of music; as such it is broadly interdisciplinary.

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Christopher T. Conner and David R. Dickens

LEXINGTON BOOKS

*Lanham • Boulder • New York • London*

Published by Lexington Books  
An imprint of The Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc.  
4501 Forbes Boulevard, Suite 200, Lanham, Maryland 20706  
www.rowman.com

86-90 Paul Street, London EC2A 4NE

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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Information Available

### **Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Names: Conner, Christopher T., 1981- author. | Dickens, David R., author.

Title: Electronic dance music : from deviant subculture to culture industry /  
Christopher T. Conner and David R. Dickens.

Description: Lanham : Lexington Books, 2023. | Series: Critical perspectives on music and society | Includes bibliographical references and index. | Summary: "This text explores how the Electronic Dance Music subculture transitioned from a marginalized deviant subculture to a billion-dollar culture industry, looking at how the culture's success has undermined in-group solidarity and marginalized those who helped pioneer it"—Provided by publisher.

Identifiers: LCCN 2022060864 (print) | LCCN 2022060865 (ebook) |

ISBN 9781793620392 (cloth) | ISBN 9781793620408 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Electronic dance music—Social aspects—History. | Rave culture.

Classification: LCC ML3918.U53 C65 2023 (print) | LCC ML3918.U53 (ebook) |

DDC 781.648—dc23/eng/20221220

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022060864>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022060865>

∞™ The paper used in this publication meets the minimum requirements of American National Standard for Information Sciences—Permanence of Paper for Printed Library Materials, ANSI/NISO Z39.48-1992.

*Chris would like to dedicate this project to the memory of David  
R. Dickens—a friend, father, and all-around real mensch.*

*David would like to dedicate this book to his  
darling wife, Angeliqve Dickens.*



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# Acknowledgments

We would like to thank our friends and colleagues at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas—especially Robert Futrell, Connie Dye, and Pam Weiss. We also want to thank our editor, Courtney Morales, who never stopped encouraging us to complete this project. Danielle Hidalgo, Andi Dassopoulos, and Joan Hermsen also acted as fantastic colleagues helping out with this study. We also received a wide range of financial support from several sources, including the Graduate College at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, the Sweet Summer Sabbatical, the Knox College Professional Development Fund, and the Department of Sociology at the University of Missouri, Columbia.

There were a variety of people and organizations outside academia that aided to this project in a variety of ways. The images in this text are courtesy of Michael Tullberg, the Rave preservation project, and a variety of unnamed sources. Chris, the first author, was motivated to initiate this study based on his small role in the Indianapolis music scene and wishes to thank Joel Adams, Lynn Albers, Gretchen Banning, Greg Brenner, Caroline Courtney, "Disco Donnie" Estopinol, Jason Gehlhausen, Andrea, Amanda Grube, Kyle Hodges, Slater Hogan, Pierre Jackson, John Lerner, Topher Jones, Janine and Ken Jordan, Dorothy Larosa-Fyffe, Kyle Matthews, Jack Shepler, Stephanie Swanson, "Tuffty," Sarah Vain, and many others who gave us access to the world of electronic dance music. Additionally, various livestreamers helped provide hours of breaks while finishing this project—Echoplex Media, Gremloe, Homozygoat, James from the Internet, Polly People, and QAnon Anonymous. Finally, thanks to the workers at all of the coffee shops in Columbia, Missouri.



# Introduction

Music subcultures have long occupied the minds of the public and sociologists alike, partly because of their music and style of dress but also because of the alternative lifestyles that many of them propose. While previous music subcultures, like hippie, rock, and punk stood directly in opposition to the dominant culture of their time, the Electronic Dance Music (EDM) subculture resisted the status quo in a variety of different ways. The term EDM refers to a collection of music genres that originated in Chicago and Detroit in the 1980s, heavily influenced by advances in new computing technology (Reynolds 1999, 2012). The EDM subculture was far less active in organizing for overtly political reasons (i.e., protesting), but it excelled at subverting authority by using clandestine venues (i.e., underground nightclubs, warehouses, and other unused urban spaces) in order to bring together a broad variety of marginalized groups to exchange a plethora of ideas. Their style stood in stark contrast to punk, goth, and rock subcultures through their use of bright day-glow colors and a positive playfulness within the culture. However, instead of abandoning the ideas of previous generations that had come before them, they built upon these in order to create something altogether new.

The music itself was developed by musicians who began experimenting with developments in new computer technologies. These musical pioneers came primarily from Chicago, and dubbed their style “House music.” As a genre, “house” was melodic in character and consisted of vocals and themes emphasizing sexual and sensuous. However, “house” also offered an escape from mainstream society by advancing alternative normative claims about the way things ought to be. A particularly important point that previous studies of EDM have underplayed is that the music was established by queer men of color, and this may explain many of the themes embedded in the original

EDM subculture. Thus, some argue, house music resembled earlier race hymns by calling for listeners to “be free,” or to “rise up,” and the music itself often contained a quasi-religious element. As such, the genre first took root within a predominately African American and Latinx Gay audience (Silcott 1999).

Not long after the development of house music, musicians in Detroit also began experimenting to create their own genre of music. Also pioneered by queer men of color, Detroit developed a somewhat futuristic and harsher style of EDM dubbed “techno.” Techno incorporated guitars, mechanized beats, and computerized sounds (Brewster and Broughton 2000; Silcott 1999). Detroit’s harder style has been linked by some to the failing automotive industry in the city. Thus, techno’s aggressive style may be seen as a reaction to the social conditions that affected the lives of its creators—providing a critique of contemporary urban life in Detroit (Reynolds 1999; Silcott 1999).

The EDM subculture organized itself around the values of Peace, Love, Unity, and Respect (PLUR)—though this was itself an evolution of Peace, Love, Unity, Movement (PLUM), which we discuss in chapter 1. Within these cultural values one can see elements of the free love movement of the 1960s, and the strategy of using entertainment as a vehicle for expressing their ideas can be traced more recently to the gay rights movement that came out of the late 1960s (Humphreys 1972: 84). Indeed, queer culture has a long history of organizing in clandestine venues and reappropriating spaces to establish a sense of community among its participants. The EDM subculture also drew upon the values of punk culture, especially its DIY aesthetic, anti-establishment and anti-capitalist beliefs, and appropriation of symbols as a resistance strategy (Fox 1987; Haenfler 2004, 2014; Williams 2011; Haenfler, Johnson, and Jones 2012).

The third element crucial for understanding the emergence of EDM—and one that has been largely overlooked by scholars studying the subculture—is the role of new technologies (Bredow 2006; Vitos 2017). EDM emerged in the late 1980s when electronics were starting to become more affordable in consumer households. This would give access to those who lacked the means to purchase musical equipment and making new instruments (i.e., the synthesizer) more readily affordable in lower middle-class households. The other major technological development was, of course the introduction of personal computers and the Internet. Early on in the subculture’s development computers were only available to those working at research universities, but they would later become a crucial component for organizing, exchanging music and ideas, and allowing the music to proliferate around the globe and then return to the United States as a more refined product. Europeans added cultural references, like the distinct style which would come to define the

subculture, as well as play a necessary role in the creation of new genres that were more easily mass marketed (i.e., Trance).

This present study seeks to place EDM within a larger historical context in order to understand how the subculture went, in relatively short time, from being perceived as a “deviant” subculture to becoming a multi-billion-dollar culture industry. In doing so, we address several important questions unanswered thus far in the sociological literature on music subcultures and social movements. Among those questions remaining are what happens to the subculture as the music becomes more popular—does it cease to exist and do its more recent enthusiasts maintain some semblance of the group’s core ideology? Also, how do longtime members feel about these changes, and are they merely passive participants in this process? Equally important, we also analyze the crucial role played by DJs, promoters, and other event organizers as well as law enforcement and other public officials.

### **SUBCULTURE, SOCIAL MOVEMENT, COUNTERCULTURE, OR “DEVIANT” SUBCULTURE**

An important point of clarity for this study concerns how we utilize the terms subculture, counterculture, movement, and deviant subculture. Strictly speaking, the EDM subculture is best described sociologically as a subculture, or even a deviant subculture. However, a comprehensive reading of the literature reveals that the term subculture is perhaps one of the most contested in sociology. Researchers at the University of Chicago were some of the first to utilize the term and applied it to the study of “deviant” youth involved in criminal behavior (Thomas and Znaniecki 1918; Park and Burgess 1925; Palmer 1928). They proposed that, because urban areas were socially disorganized, individuals were not properly socialized (Thomas and Znaniecki 1918; Park and Burgess 1925; Palmer 1928). Thus, initially, the early Chicago school sociologists saw the development of subcultures as a result of the decline of traditional social institutions (i.e., the family, the church, the school,). While the Chicago School has been portrayed as having a narrow approach, they in fact employed a broad range of approaches in their research (see Shaw 1930; Cressey 1932; Sutherland 1937; Bulmer 1984). The central thread running through their work was the notion that contemporary urban life was producing new types of social organizations.

Later on, development of the concept, subculture, drew upon the work of Robert Merton (1949). Merton’s theory of anomie, or strain theory, understood deviance as a response stemming from an incongruity between culturally sanctioned goals and the means to achieve them. The frustration that this produced created feelings of anomie or disconnection, which led to the

formation of deviant groups, otherwise known as subcultures. In light of this, theorists in the Chicago School concluded that subcultures emerge to alleviate one's inability to achieve success in society through the development of a new status and value system to take the place of more conventional goals (Cloward and Olin 1960; Cohen 1955). Later scholarship emanating from Chicago would expand usage of the term to a variety of groups, including jazz musicians, pool hall hustlers, and others (Becker 1963; Shaw 1966; Polsky 1967).

The focus on subcultures by the Chicago School was subsequently picked up by British cultural studies theorists, who stressed the role of working-class solidarity, and later, identity politics (Turner 1990; Dickens 1994). If the University of Chicago was the center for subculture studies in the United States, the Birmingham School's Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) was the epicenter for the study of subcultures in the United Kingdom. Cultural studies researchers often studied male working-class youth groups that had a distinct, or fantastic, style (such as mods, rockers, teds, and punks). In their analyses, they understood members of these subcultures as trying to exert resistance against hegemonic forces seeking to make them conform (Clarke et al. 1976). Yet, because these groups can never fully exist outside of the dominant parent culture from which they emerge, they often end up recapitulating the same values they oppose. Through their use of style groups such as rockers, teds, and punks allowed members to temporarily resolve contradictions and produce a unique but similar identity (Williams 2011).

Consisting of mostly cultural critics and literary theorists, the Birmingham School was an interdisciplinary program drawing upon Marx when interpreting subcultures, while applying a micro-level interpretive-based study of the participants. The result of the Birmingham School's approach was the ability to address both the everyday lived reality of subculture members, as well as the structural components of society (Willis 1977; Dickens 1994; Williams 2011). Thus, the power of the Birmingham school lies in analyzing the meanings that individuals produce, and connecting them to larger social structures (Dickens 1994).

Some have criticized the Birmingham School for being overly deterministic and too focused on class as the basis for participation in the subculture. Such criticisms are not fully justified, as the best examples of their work (especially Willis 1977) take into account both social structure and socially constructed meaning (see Dickens 1994). Willis uses the term "counterculture" instead of subculture because he is wary of the cultural relativism the term subculture implies (Willis 1977: xlvi). The problem may be due to the fact that the early members of the Birmingham School were not sociologists. They have also been criticized for not taking gender, sexual orientation, and to a lesser degree, race into consideration (though much of the work from

the Birmingham School focused on race, especially that of Stuart Hall, Dick Hebdige, and Paul Gilroy).

Some scholars have argued by using the term “subculture,” we are inevitably linking it with the concept of “deviance.” In so doing, so they argue, it marginalizes and treats those within it as abnormal (Liazos 1972; Kitsuse 1975). They also argue that this framework allows sociologists to impute their own values to the groups they study (Mills 1943). However, proponents of this framework argue that their work helps in humanizing groups so marginalized (Becker 1963, 1967). Indeed much of the work on LGBTQIA culture, sociology of race and identity, and a variety of other areas draw upon this framework in their analysis of social life.

A second criticism that has been raised against the term “subculture” is that it lacks analytical usefulness because it has been overutilized (see Yinger 1960; Fine and Kleinman 1979). To resolve this concern, some theorists have argued for the development of the term “contraculture” or “counterculture,” to differentiate between groups who actively resist the values of the dominant culture and those who do not (Yinger 1960). The argument here is that the term “subculture” implies labeling from the outside, whereas “contraculture” or “counterculture” implies active resistance on the part of the group members themselves. Despite this criticism, recent developments by Hodkinson (2002), Gelder (2007), and Williams (2011) have revitalized the term, arguing for its continued utility.

Contemporary scholars have responded to these criticisms in one of two ways. Some scholars have expanded upon this critique by proposing a post-subculturalist approach. Post-subculturalists draw on the work of Andy Bennett (1999) who criticizes the term for being overly static. In practice, he argues what sociologists call subcultures are in reality temporary and fleeting social forms of organization. He proposes that researchers instead utilize Maffesoli’s (1996) concept of neo-tribe as an alternative framework, as it provides a more fluid approach to the study of youth groups. In a similar fashion, Muggleton (2000) argues that social scientists have imputed the meaning where none actually existed in the first place. The post-subculture critique has been highly influential among some EDM scholars in Europe, especially among the early studies on the topic.

EDM scholars using a post-subculture framework exhibit postmodern emphases on fragmentation, decay, and the apolitical nature of social contemporary youth subcultures (see McRobbie 1994; Thornton 1996; Malbon 1999; Reynolds 1999; Bennett 2000, 2001). They instead focus on the hedonistic, fantastic, and consumer orientation of the EDM subculture—echoing earlier concerns of the group as deviant subcultures (see Redhead 1993; Williams 2011), or taking a cultural populist approach (see McGuigan 1992). Instead of seeing youth cultures (especially EDM cultures) as part of an interconnected