

# AVICII ARRIVES

**In March 2013** Tim Bergling did something that most DJs fear: He cleared the dance floor. Headlining Miami's annual Ultra Music Festival, the young Swede—better known by his stage name Avicii—halted his computer-driven electronic set and brought out seven live musicians to preview songs from his first album, *True*.

The performance, which included elements of folk, rock, bluegrass and neo-soul, was in stark contrast to the euphoric club music the crowd was expecting. But it served to announce that the beat-sequencing, sample-editing producer was reemerging as a songwriter with a new-found focus on melody. And while it may have given the crowd pause that night, the 24-year-old's change in direction paid off six months later, when *True* debuted at No. 5 on the *Billboard* 200.

#### FYI: IT'S STILL EDM

*True* is a noteworthy release for several reasons. First, it shows how electronic dance music, or EDM, has risen from an underground style to become a mainstream force in pop. Second, it illustrates

**A new generation of DJ/Producer/Artist is bringing electronic dance music from the underground to the mainstream and redefining the term "pop star."**

how the form can be expanded beyond its electronic core—in this case, by bringing in more traditional musical elements. "My new material is definitely a step away from your typical EDM track, but that's what I like about it...that it doesn't sound like anything else out there," Avicii says.

But what exactly is EDM? Like "rock," the term encompasses a number of different styles: house, techno, trance, and



most recently, dubstep. The genre's defining qualities include pounding bass, high-energy synthesizers, intense rhythms (typically 128 to 140 beats per minute), and uplifting hooks that are designed to keep dancers moving.

The "E" in EDM is also a clue: The music is composed and produced on computers using a combination of samples and digitally generated synthesizers, pre-recorded loops, programmed beats, and sound-altering effects. Avicii's U.S. breakthrough came through the 2011 GRAMMY-nominated single "LE7ELS"—which made creative use of a sample from legendary R&B singer Etta James.

Other genres also use computers, but EDM makes them the central focus. Instead of going onstage with a band, EDM artists perform with laptops and play their pre-recorded tracks like notes on an instrument. They combine the skills of composer, DJ, producer, and recording engineer, and, in a way, conductor, choosing which parts to bring in and out of the mix. They also pride themselves in the ability to use software to design new—and floor shaking—sounds. The ferocious "bass drops" produced by dubstep star Skrillex are as much part of his style as the vibrato of blues guitarist B.B. King.

EDM is also known for its "Do It Yourself" approach to studio production and composition. Instead of collaborating with live musicians, many artists—including hit makers like Calvin Harris and David Guetta—create tracks on their own and then have high profile artists like Rihanna and Usher sing over them.

Years ago, people with their skills would probably have taken a more "behind the scenes" role instead of being known as artists and performers. A producer's job was to oversee recording sessions. DJs played other people's music. Recording engineers helped shape the sound of recordings. And although many musicians took on these roles, there was much more separation between the processes of composing, arranging, recording, mixing, and performing music than there is today.

Now, anyone with a computer (and, increasingly, a smartphone or tablet) has access to virtually the same sounds and production tools that top EDM producers use. Popular EDM programs like Ableton

The band Chic had some massive disco hits; leader and guitarist Nile Rodgers (third from left) collaborated with Avicii on *Truth*.



## The Roots of EDM

**EDM'S ANCESTORS CAN BE TRACED TO 1970S DISCO**—which also broke into the mainstream after originating in dance clubs. Disco came before the dawn of digital recording and sampling, and in many ways, the music didn't sound all that different from rock and pop. But it introduced the steadily pounding bass drum—played at a constant tempo—that has driven most dance music styles since. By the 1980s, "disco fever" had died down in pop circles, but dance music was still going strong in the clubs.

The electronic techniques of EDM—and the rise of the DJ as a musical artist—started with hip-hop in '80s, which used sampling and loops, and in turn, influenced new dance styles appearing in Detroit and Chicago. Known as house music, this really caught on in Europe, but in the U.S., its mass appeal came and went in the late 1990s, when releases by the pioneering dance artist Paul Oakenfold, as well as followers like Chemical Brothers, the Prodigy, Fatboy Slim, Underworld, and Moby jumped onto the pop charts.

It was from there that the current wave began gathering steam. Thanks to the internet, music that was once only heard in clubs could now be easily shared online through blogs and forums. (It was through one such forum that Avicii first shared his music—and found his current management). But it wasn't until French duo Daft Punk's tour of 2006–07 that EDM once again had cachet as a large-scale live draw. It would take several more years for it to impact radio directly. In the meantime, its influence started to filter into the sounds of hip-hop, R&B, and pop, laying the groundwork for its current emergence as a distinct pop style.

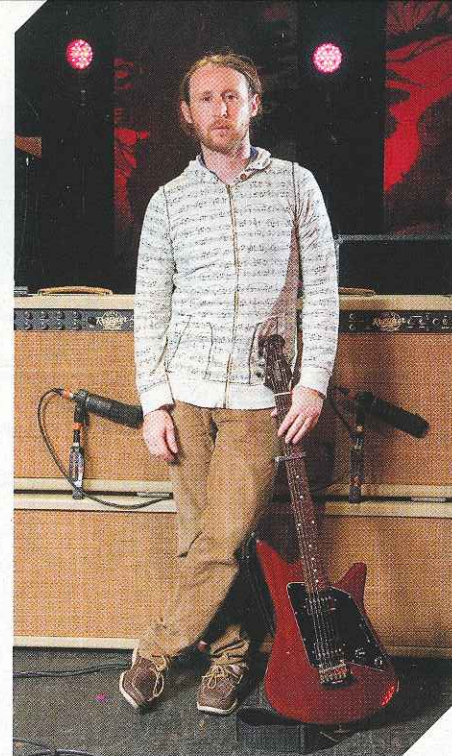
Live and Logic X can handle every step of the production process—and they cost about as much a "student quality" instrument.

At 17, Bergling was introduced to a program called FL Studio (Fruity Loops) by a friend. It allowed him to build tracks and create his own electronic instrument sounds, setting the foundation for what he does today. "Working with a computer speeds up the workflow," he explains. "I'd say it's mainly about being anywhere, at any time, and being able to produce without carrying an instrument."

Computers also allow EDM producers to use the internet to connect with collabora-

tors without actually meeting them in person. For the first several years of his career, Avicii took this route, creating electronic guide tracks, then sending them to vocalists who would add their contributions remotely and send back digital audio files for editing and mixing.

He intentionally went the other way with *True*, making collaboration more personal and direct. He enlisted the help of songwriters, players, and singers ranging from Imagine Dragons frontman Dan Reynolds, blue grass artist Dan Tyminski, folk-rockers Audra Mae, country veteran Mac Davis, and disco pioneer Nile Rodgers.



Country, rock, and jazz musicians co-write and record together as a matter of course and often cross over to different genres. But for an EDM artist like Avicii, it was an unexpected move—and a bit of a risk. Successful dance music is about coordinating rhythms and musical keys in a way that a crowd can follow. When Avicii's new material debuted at the Ultra Music Festival, he was not in sync with what the audience expected.

*True's* rapid rise on the charts shows that listeners have caught up with him, thanks, in part, to the success of his single "Wake Me Up!" Featuring vocals from Aloe Blacc, it topped the charts in dozens of countries and has garnered millions of online video views. It also showed that the computer audio techniques of EDM could be applied to more traditional instruments, styles, and sounds. "I don't think people should be afraid of what type of sound they're creating," he says. "I am confident enough that I can turn almost anything into [dance] music, so I am able to pull influences from every which way."

"Tim is an amazing editor, and I consider him a musician that happens to play a laptop," adds Mike Einziger, guitarist for the band Incubus and co-writer of *True's* "Wake Me Up!" and "Liar Liar." "I'd had zero interaction with the whole EDM universe before my manager introduced us, but I knew the song 'LE7ELS' and understood how clever Tim was at putting together melodies that can



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just pervade mainstream culture."

Einziger says that Avicii's decision to collaborate in person played a major role in the development of "Wake Me Up!" "We had vocal melodies and lines in mind, but neither of us are singers and we hadn't written lyrics," he explains. "Thankfully, Aloe was totally up for it. He drove over and put down the lyric. He sang from his heart and it immediately put the song into a different place. It was three different people coming together and exchanging ideas. None of us could have predicted how far it would go, but I think [it succeeded] because we didn't say 'no' to trying different ideas and ways of working."

As has happened with earlier dance styles, (see "The Roots of EDM") new technologies and working methods can be controversial. Some critics think of the computer as a "crutch" instead of a tool. Although Avicii plays a little bit of keyboard himself (and sometimes uses it when he's composing), he

Incubus guitarist Paul Einziger (left) co-wrote and played on Avicii's genre-melding hit "Wake Me Up!"

acknowledges that computers make it possible for people without formal training or instrumental technique to produce professional-sounding music—leading some to believe that there's little or no musical skill involved. "I think that the biggest criticism EDM gets is that it's not 'real music,'" he says. "I think we DJs/producers are still trying to break that stereotype. Just because people don't see us on stage with a guitar or whatever, they don't see us as musicians. I absolutely believe that a DJ is a musician."

So, what are the musical skills required to make electronic music? The ability to find creative new ways to use the technology is part of the answer, but not all of it. Just as the great composers of the past heard music in their heads and wrote it down, EDM producers know how to listen, judge, and remember things they hear—and imagine sounds they've never heard before.

Avicii immerses himself in as much music as he can, constantly adding to his mental catalog of styles and sounds. He drew from that catalog when he decided to bring acoustic and electronic elements together on *Truth* and ended up expanding the definition of EDM along the way. "I have always been open to listening to anything, and bluegrass in particular has always captured my attention," he says. "The sound of the acoustic [instruments] is just so pure. 'I think 'Wake Me Up!' actually resonates with such a broad audience because of the diversity and range of genres within it."

By making EDM more diverse, Avicii has done more than give it a wider audience. He has also shown that EDM techniques aren't only for dance music. Einziger compares it to the early days of hip hop. "When that first became popular, rock musicians and people who played other instruments had a problem with it," Einziger says. "But it's just a different way of making music. [EDM techniques] will become more and more popular when used by someone with a vision, like Tim."

"Now that [electronic dance music] is considered more mainstream, it needs to keep changing," Avicii concludes. "If it doesn't, it will become a fad and people will get sick of it really fast." **T**

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(LEFT) WILL IRELAND/GETTY IMAGES