

# **The Place of British Electronic Dance Music**

by

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This dissertation presents results of original research undertaken by the author. The work has been conducted in accordance with the University of Nottingham's Code of Research Conduct and Research Ethics and in accordance with the School of Geography's risk assessment procedures.

## **Abstract**

This dissertation explores the relations between contemporary electronic dance music (EDM) and the notion of place. Through a focus on three post-rave genres, I offer a spatial consideration of EDM itself and some of the different contexts in which it is performed and consumed. There are a range of complex and evolving geographies associated with dubstep, jungle and drum & bass music, all of which are styles of EDM seen to have a relationship with Britain. I work from interviews with artists, fans and industry professionals, a remote form of participant observation I refer to as 'livestream fieldwork', and my own experience as a participant in a range of EDM scenes. I first examine EDM's ability to evoke a sense of place in its sound, despite a frequent lack of lyrical content and its almost entirely digital instrumentation. I draw on conceptualisations of the lineage of genres that stemmed from the rave scene to discuss the possible existence of a sound with a national quality in EDM, as recognised by my participants. Through a focus on livestreams, I then outline how the COVID-19 pandemic reshaped networks of creativity, reproduction, distribution and consumption within EDM by considering some of the sites that witnessed musical practice during 'lockdown' and the motivations behind mediated performances, ultimately theorising the internet as an important place for music at a time of crisis for the arts. However, the experiential difference between mediated and classic liveness was identified as profound, leading me to argue for the importance of physical space and copresence within live music. My conclusions indicate that place matters to people who engage with EDM in a variety of real and imagined ways, that are often unique to an individual.

Keywords: electronic dance music, place, space, Britain, creativity, internet, live performance

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I would like to dedicate this dissertation to the memory of my dear friend Mathieu Quigley, who left us too soon. Matt loved telling me about music, going out to have fun, and a heavy bassline. Our late nights and early mornings at Pirate Studios and Fabric will not be forgotten. This one's for you, Matty Q.

## **Epigraphs**

“Gonna send this one out to all the ravers that go out on the weekend,  
All over the U.K., just keep raving,  
Keep raving until they run out of breath and need resuscitating,  
You know the score, this one’s yours and it’s raw”

Dimension – “UK”. MTA Records, 2017

“Hold on DJ, the place is packed,  
And they’re telling me hardcore will die.  
If hardcore will never die and you agree, say aye”

Jamie XX – “All Under One Roof Raving”. Young Turks, 2014

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## **1.0 Introduction**

After walking from Cannon Street station through a series of inner-city back roads, I turn a corner to find a queue of at least two hundred people along the wall of a dimly lit alleyway. I move towards the back of the line and pick up brief snippets of conversation, hearing just enough to gauge the aura of excitement. A high-rise office block stands on my left, and railway bridge on my right with large brick arches at ground level covered off by metal panels. Once at the back of the queue, I can see the River Thames beyond the end of the street, offering a picturesque glimpse of the London skyline. People are talking to each other in front of me – “it’s been so long!”, “it feels surreal to be back”, “apparently the sound system in there is mental”. Once at the doorway, I hear a dark rumbling sound coming from deep within the structure underneath the arches. The entrance hall lights are almost blinding compared to the streetlamps, but through another set of doors I find what I’ve been waiting for.

The space inside is cavernous and has a raw aesthetic comprised of brickwork, ventilation tubes and rusty steel girders. There is a sea of people ahead of me through another set of smaller arches. Bright white beams of light flash in a chaotic pattern, piercing through a cloud of smoke that engulfs the crowd. I join them from the side, and the full force of the music hits me. Subwoofers beneath the stage emit sound pressure levels such that the air in the room feels condensed and physically heavy, with a practically material texture. Two arrays of speakers around ten feet long hang from the roof, filling the room with crisp hi-hats, snare drums, and the chattering voice of an MC who keeps the crowd moving. The DJ stands in front of a screen illuminated by a projector. The bass cuts out as the track reaches its breakdown, giving the crowd a chance to catch their breath without the pressing weight of low frequencies on their bodies. A kick drum begins to strike at an increasing pace and the music builds to a crescendo. The MC looks to the DJ and then back to the



crowd, raising one hand in the air, as the sound of fast-paced drums and an enveloping bassline rolls over the audience again.

Fig. 1 – A photo of The Steel Yard's exterior on the night of my attendance in early August 2021. The club is built under the railway line between Cannon Street and London Bridge station. (Flexout Audio, 2021)



### 1.1 Electronic dance music

This dissertation provides a consideration of the relations between contemporary electronic dance music (EDM) and the notion of place. Despite the profound impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the global music industry, popular music remains a central aspect of British culture. The description above outlines the first EDM event I attended in over 18 months after hospitality venues closed following the introduction of social distancing restrictions. This event was not a research encounter. Flexout Audio's 10 Year Anniversary party at The Steel Yard in London was an archetypal night of drum & bass; a friendly and lively crowd, plenty of strobe lights, DJs selecting the right tracks at the right moment, and extremely loud music (see fig. 1). My account paints a picture of a form of shared experience enjoyed by countless EDM fans on a regular basis, the removal of which was similarly shared for the months between March 2020 and July 2021.

Over the last three decades, EDM's place within British life has changed drastically in both a theoretical and physical sense. What was once an underground subcultural movement in the mid-to-late 1980s became a counterhegemonic social and cultural phenomenon in the early 1990s, and is now an arguably commercialised form of popular music that is prevalent across the globe. In the same period, the sound of EDM that is typically associated with Britain has evolved, alongside the labels attached to its range of different styles, and the size of its fanbase. As is the case with most, if not all forms of music, EDM displays an inherently important relationship with place and space. EDM as a catch-all term has come to at once represent a plethora of musical genres and a particular facet of popular music, used in different contexts within common discourse and academia. As succinctly stated by D'Errico (2015: 1), "by the early 2010s, the acronym 'EDM' had itself taken on a specific vernacular meaning, referring to phenomena such as the rise of the millionaire DJ, [music] festivals in suburban America, and arena shows mostly catering to white, teenage audiences. In contrast, academic scholarship continues to use the term in a much broader way, as an umbrella term for the various international cultures and communities that comprise electronic dance music culture".

Put simply, EDM can be described as a meta-style that encompasses the many different sounds and scenes that have emerged as a result of the transformative impact that 1970s disco music had on club culture (Garcia, 2011) and that electronic hardware and software had on music production (Taylor, 2001). Popular and influential genres include, but are far from limited to, house, techno, trance, drum & bass, dubstep, disco, garage and jungle, all of which span a range of tempos and aesthetics and can be further broken down into subgenres. As a result of the continuous development of new musical technologies, not only is EDM an ever-expanding field of styles, but the specific nuances found within genres change on a continual basis (Holmes, 2012). Basslines engineered via music production software to sound overwhelming when played in a live setting are prevalent within modern EDM records. Genres

like dubstep, jungle, drum & bass, and garage have a particular exaggerated emphasis on low end frequencies, meaning they are often colloquially referred to as 'bass music', which is a term used throughout my work.

EDM is almost entirely performed by disc jockeys (DJs) who play through a set list of tracks that may or may not be their own productions. An individual attending an EDM show would expect to hear a combination of music they know, and music they have never heard. In recent years there has been marked increase in the number of EDM shows where music that was originally produced via software is arranged for musical instruments. The purpose of this is to appeal to a wider audience familiar with traditional band-style live performances, and offer a potentially more engaging spectacle than watching an individual press buttons and 'mix' tracks. This process happens through Pioneer CDJs or Technics 1210s, the two most common forms of turntable - the former is digital, and the latter is for vinyl records. However, for almost all EDM fans, attending a live performance typically still entails going to watch a DJ play recorded music. Nowadays, almost all popular DJs are well established music producers as a result of a growing collective desire for people to hear music they recognise when at a live show. This was not always the case, and appears to be a by-product of entering the era of digital streaming and mass music consumption.

Throughout my dissertation I make references to 'the people of EDM'. This phrase was first used by Fraser (2012: 500) who adopted a blanket term to refer to the wide range of individuals involved with EDM, such as "DJs, producers, MCs, artists, promoters, and ravers". However, I use the term in a manner that reflects Fraser's conclusion where he asserts how a deep-rooted culture of cooperation and cohesion exists amongst people who participate in EDM. In Britain, this can be traced back to the subcultural, do-it-yourself (DIY) ethos behind the rave scene. Although phrases like 'EDM fans' are also included, future references made to the people of EDM are designed to imply that those who engage with EDM often view it as a major aspect of their lives that is simultaneously shared

with and constructed by other individuals. Indeed, there is a very strong sense of community associated with EDM.

'Electronic Dance Music Culture' (EDMC) is an area of academic study focused on the largely overlapping sociological, geographical, anthropological and philosophical elements of EDM (St. John, 2009). Intriguingly, in the decades since the new millennium EDMC work has gained substantial traction, most likely because a generation of party people have now transformed their youthful passions into scholarship (Madden, 2019). As Garcia (2011: 5) notes, "those who participated in the boom of [raves] in the 1990s have been filtering through graduate programs, completing their dissertations, and publishing doctoral work". Broadly speaking, academic shifts such as the cultural and creative turns within my home discipline of Geography (Jackson, 1997; Hawkins, 2019), and a sustained disciplinary interest in the mutually generative relations of music and place have allowed me to become a part of this trend, transforming my personal interest in EDM into an academic pursuit.

My dissertation is predominantly focused on three EDM genres that are seen to have a relationship with Britain – drum & bass, jungle and dubstep. Prior to conducting empirical research, the idea of the Britishness of EDM was based on my own experiences as a participant in various scenes, my awareness of the discourse that exists within them, and some non-academic literature. Most notably, Brewster & Broughton's (2006: 447) compelling argument that "if you're British, there's a bassline that's part of you" was foundational in this project. Their emotive suggestion that "this bass has boiled and growled and woofed through thousands of speakers into millions of chests, and though it started in forgotten deprived corners, it's now a national treasure" (ibid.), resonated with me, and formed the basis from which my early research stemmed.

All three styles in question are post-rave scene genres. Jungle was relatively well established by the early-to-mid 1990s and was responsible for pulling listeners away from hardcore, a more upbeat and fast-paced form of music that was also prolific at the time. Broadly speaking, drum

& bass stemmed from jungle when producers began using a 'two-step' drum pattern, instead of relying entirely on sampled breakbeats, such as the well-known 'amen break' and 'think break' (Kemp, 2021). Dubstep emerged in the mid-2000s with strong ties to Croydon in South London, and grew in popularity towards the end of the decade. Both jungle and drum & bass reside around the 165-175 beats per minute (bpm) mark, while dubstep is typically approximately 140bpm. The genres constitute part of Simon Reynolds' (2013) conceptualisation of EDM stemming from the British rave scene as the 'Hardcore Continuum', which Brewster & Broughton (2006) indirectly appear to be referencing in their description of a distinctively 'British bass' sound. The title of my study is inspired by one of the foundational critical geography of music works – Leyshon, Matless and Revill's (1995) 'The Place of Music'. Their essay, which later became the introduction to a full collection on the same theme in 1998, provided an introductory framework for geographical work relating to music, covering a broad range of academic themes and genres of music, while maintaining a critical relation with place. I have sought to do the same for modern day EDM while taking a more exploratory stance. This dissertation is about EDM in its present-day state. However, what that means has changed significantly even throughout my period of writing. Whilst my focus is the current moment in time, everything leading up to this point is undoubtedly also of significant importance.

## **1.2 Structure outline**

Retrospectively, I have been in an excellent position to conduct music geography research that documents things as they happened for a group of individuals, and for myself, throughout a unique period of time. Indeed, the COVID-19 pandemic became a key theme of research in its own right. As may already be evident, I have followed Leyshon (2014) who took inspiration from Thrift (2001: 11) in paying "close attention to the present", as a means of documenting the changes that EDM has undergone, particularly in the last 18 months. At times I have deployed a descriptive,

more narrative style in order to comprehensively account for shifts, processes and practices that are yet to be included within other scholarly work.

I begin with a literature review that situates my study within the now substantial body of music geography work that exists. I first provide an overview of some of the earliest scholarship on the geography of music in order to mark out the development in critical engagement that has occurred within the field. I follow with three sections that contextualise my analytical chapters through a combination of geographic work and studies from other disciplines. My methodology outlines my data collection process through interviews and remote fieldwork, while outlining the impact of the pandemic on my studies. I also note some of the challenges that conducting research in EDM scenes can entail.

My analysis starts with a consideration of 'the music' itself, its specific characteristics, the aesthetic it presents, and its history. In my fourth chapter I attempt to discern why certain forms of EDM can sound distinctively British to those who consume them, through a combination of applying traditional urban geography debates and locating the spatial in existing conceptualisations of the lineage of EDM that stemmed from the rave scene. Chapter five moves to the near-present, and considers what life was like in a musical and creative sense for EDM scene participants over the pandemic. Through a focus on livestreams, I outline how COVID-19 restrictions significantly impacted the physicality of place for EDM fans and their audiences, detailing some of the important spaces in which musical creativity happened over lockdown and the motivations behind mediated performances. This chapter acts as a work of record, including a selection of images and descriptions that aim to give a vivid sense of what the pandemic was like for the people of EDM. My final chapter reflects the period of time that passed as I was writing, and the profound difference this made to how people were able to experience music. As social distancing restrictions were lifted in July 2021 and music venues opened for the first time in nearly 18 months, it became evident how fundamentally important in-person performances are within EDM,

which is often produced in a way that means it is designed to be heard in a live setting. Chapter six documents the importance of physical space and copresence to individuals who consume and perform live EDM.

In short, my analysis explores how people who participate in EDM scenes understand and construct real and imagined notions of place, in a variety of different ways. The key resource for my research is a selection of interviews conducted with individuals who hold a range of different positions within EDM, supplemented by remote fieldwork which is linked with my own experience and knowledge as a member of all three relevant scenes. As indicated by my dissertation title, the underlying narrative I present is one of Britain and Britishness in relation to specific styles of EDM. However, within literature, recorded music, live performance via the voices of MCs, my interviews, and common EDM discourse, Britain and the United Kingdom (UK) are often conflated despite their different geographic areas. This is evident in the interview extracts included in my analysis, and in my epigraph. I follow my participants by using this interchangeable terminology, and suggest it broadly reflects the inclusive and cohesive spirit amongst those who engage with EDM (Fraser, 2012). My core argument asserts the importance of place and physical space in the production, performance and consumption of EDM. Place matters to the music itself, and the people who engage with it. I demonstrate this through a specific focus on dubstep, jungle and drum & bass.

## **2.0 Literature Review**

### **2.1 Introduction**

Over the last four decades, geographers have paid consistent attention to music and sound in a variety of social, economic, cultural, transnational and local contexts. Sound, and music in particular, have always been inherently geographical phenomena, despite the time taken for their first appearances to be made in geographic discourse. Broadly speaking, music is ubiquitous in every known society and is rarely, if ever, not tied to a place, space or community of people (Kong, 1995). In much the same way that the study of landscape is central to human geography, the concept of sound is inseparable from our social landscape (Smith, 1994). Music is often the outcome of environmental experience, allowing for specific geographic imaginaries and identities to be created through sound, lyrics, production and performance (Tweed & Watson, 2019). In the words of Hudson (2006: 626), “there is ample evidence to support the proposition that music has the ability to conjure up powerful images of place [and] feelings of deep attachment to place”.

In the years between the publication of Nash’s (1968) work on regional music – the first scholarly article on music to be written by a professional geographer – and the early 1990s, a noticeable quantity of necessary foundational work on the geography of music was authored. However, despite occasional reflections on the spatial dimensions of music, such as Ford’s (1971) work on ‘rock and roll’ and Tavernor’s (1970) study of Latin American music, Nash (1996) remained critical of the lack of work conducted on the theme by cultural geographers. Whilst geographic work on music had become an accepted subfield of cultural geography, the research lacked breadth. More than 60 articles had been published across 40 academic journals before the turn of the millennium, yet over half of all music geography output focused on American country music, with a further one-fifth on rock music (Carney, 1998: 2-3).



Scholars had barely begun to scratch the surface of the global musical arena, and had so far devoted little time to the many different forms of popular music, and themes such as the economic geography of the global music industry, for example. Notwithstanding premature claims that music geography research productivity peaked in the 1970s (Carney, 1990; Nash & Carney, 1996), the mid-to-late 1990s proved to be a particularly vibrant period and arguably the real starting point for valuable and constructive inquiries. Kong's (1995) landmark paper called for greater inclusion of popular music in geographical analyses, also rising as a broader critique of the longstanding trend of neglecting popular culture within cultural geography. Indeed, much of the work that had materialised up to this point appeared to have fallen into the trap of assuming inherent or relative 'worth' (Burgess & Gold, 1985) through its specificity, whilst lacking a deeper critical engagement with the fundamental notion that music and place have a mutually generative relationship (Leyshon et al., 1995). This is not to say that American country music was unpopular or unworthy of examination, rather that excessive engagement with one genre had so far dominated scholarship. Music geography has risen from an undervalued area of the discipline to its relative prominence. Coincidentally, the critical changes that writing on the geography of music underwent occurred at a similar time to the EDM and youth culture revolution that Britain was witnessing with the rise of rave and acid house across the course of the 1990s (Reynolds, 1998).

## **2.2 The cultural turn and critical music geography**

In the latter half of the 1990s, a series of agenda-setting papers and collections were published by the likes of Smith (1994), Kong (1995), Halfacree & Kitchin (1996), and Leyshon et al. (1998). These studies both called for and signalled an end to the arguably more descriptive and conceptually limited studies produced so far, that had considered the geography of few musical styles and genres (Hudson, 2006). Throughout this period, attention was given to music's ability to play a part in identity

formation at both national and local subcultural scales (Kong, 1995a; Smith, 1997), and the important place that sound should hold in our geographical imagination (Leyshon et al., 1998). These themes remain a key part of research today, with recent work published on the distinct place-based laddish identity that emerged from the 'Madchester' music scene in the late 1980s (Milestone, 2019), and on the clear geographic imaginary evoked by Icelandic folk music (Tweed & Watson, 2019), to give just two examples. In addition to this, music can offer both a real and representational inclusive space for those who may feel marginalised or voiceless as a result of their beliefs, race, gender or sexuality (Milburn, 2019). This characteristic encouraged geographers of the late 1990s to reframe their engagement with music, and more conscientiously explore what exactly it is that music does, and the place that music holds within society.

Around the same time as rave culture and EDM were taking off in Britain, the 'cultural turn' was taking place across Geography and related social sciences (Valentine, 2001). The 'new cultural geography' mode of thinking came to the forefront of academia, which allowed for new methodologies and qualitative approaches when researching music. Broadly speaking, a refocusing on meaning, identity, lifestyle and representation within cultural geography allowed for a more sustained and deeper engagement with "music's relationship to currents affecting society and culture more generally" (Milburn, 2019: 732). Geographers began to progress beyond the somewhat critically cursory studies produced by scholars before the 1990s, while still retaining the explicitly spatial focus that other disciplines often lack. Hudson (2006) points to three other shifts within human geography that music research benefitted from, namely the growing emphasis placed on performance and practice, the growing recognition of senses other than sight, and the greater acknowledgement of affect and emotion in shaping human behaviour. Together, these constituted a broader understanding of music's socioeconomic importance. However, returning to the calls of Kong (1995) and more recently Hubbard (2010) for greater emphasis to be

placed on popular music, Milburn (2019) proposes that work towards the end of the twentieth century maintained an imbalanced focus on artists and genres operating at tangents to the mainstream. That said, it seems unnecessary to critique the scope of research that was progressive for its time and still provided valuable engagement with music (see Valentine, 1995; Rycroft, 1998). I intend to contribute to the body of geographic scholarship that has now rigorously explored the mutually generative relations of various musical forms with a wide range of places (Connell & Gibson, 2003).

Given the range of analytical themes included within my chapters, I illustrate here the theoretical and topical breadth of more recent music geography in non-EDM contexts that have influenced my writing. Despite Zelinsky's (1999: 420) outdated proposition that "our accomplishments in exploring the geographic dimensions...[of] music have been rather rudimentary", much has been achieved in the wake of the cultural turn and the more than 20 years since the publishing of 'The Place of Music' (Leyshon et al., 1998). Music geography research consistently analyses a specific genre, drawing conclusions based on its relation to a place, production of space, or relevance to meaning, identity, lifestyle as brought forward by the cultural turn. Forman's (2000) study of race, space, place and rap music considered how little attention had been given to the spatial logics and diffusion of hip hop, suggesting that the hip hop nation is more of a geo-cultural amalgamation of personages and practices as opposed to a historical construct, in the context of the United States. This has particular relevance to the possible existence of a distinct 'sound' with a British quality within EDM. Connell & Gibson's (2004) paper on world music and de-territorialising place and identity similarly reflected on musical diffusion, but in the context of musical commercialisation and authenticity. Whilst their use of the word 'world' to describe a genre of music now seems sweeping, the connections drawn between musical categories for marketing and reaching a global audience have implications for future studies, such as on the use of the term 'EDM' as a catch-all phrase. Gibson & Davidson (2004) considered

Tamworth, a city in Australia, as the nation's country music capital, revisiting a wide range of debates such as national, gender and class, in a site where meanings of place are interpreted very differently by local residents. Returning to Britain, Revill (2005) analysed a single evening event in Nottinghamshire where folk music was performed to the local community. His work examined the relationships between folk culture and everyday life, again revisiting themes of authenticity, tradition and sense of place. Orienting his study around a single event highlights a valuable way of geographically approaching music. This small selection of examples shows a portion of the musical forms that authors have approached. Whilst in earlier music geography work scholars perhaps felt obliged to examine music they had no interest in, the cultural turn provided a fresh vision, resulting in an important increase in freedom to tease the geography out of a greater range of music. My research has benefitted from this progressive mode of thinking.

A significant body of literature now exists focused on music's economic geography. Most relevant to my study, Bader & Scharenberg's (2010) work on Berlin, subculture and the global music industry is particularly valuable through its exploration of the importance of creative individuals to the local economy. Further research has also been conducted on how workers in the creative industries transition from amateur to professional or full-time status, specifically in the context of DJs in New Zealand (McGregor & Gibson, 2009). Bennett (2004) has made significant contributions to our understanding of music scenes, describing how clusters of people can emerge in a certain place, associating with a certain genre. Currid (2009) has built on this also from an economic geography perspective, noting that 'scene' has expanded to become a model of academic analysis through which to view broader creative clustering. However, whilst music scenes are an integral part of the music industry, work by Leyshon (2014) on the notion of 'placelessness' in music importantly suggests that scenes are rarely as local as they once were with the advent of digital music technologies and the increasingly connected global music audience.

Certain music geography writing adopts a more narrow approach, often in relation to a specific genre, artist, place, or type of space. Milburn's (2019) work on Frank Sinatra presented a general critique of the lack of work focused on popular music icons, and outlined notions of travel and mobility within the geographical imagination. His analysis of Sinatra's travel-themed album, *Come Fly With Me*, also demonstrates how geographical imagery within music titles can be a useful site for research. Moreover, Hudson's (2006) paper on regions, place and music considered the imagery at a much broader scale, drawing the surprising conclusion that music lacks the capacity to form a substantive base for regeneration efforts in urban areas, despite its ability to shape a place. Nonetheless, his raising of the notion of 'music cities' is valuable for approaching music from an urban geography perspective, and proved useful for my analysis of Bristol and South London as important places for British EDM.

### **2.3 Electronic dance music and geography**

In comparison to other styles of popular music, EDM has received relatively little explicit geographic analysis. Although Christodoulou's (2011: 44) suggestion that bass as a defining characteristic of EDM "powerfully resonates among the cultural discourses" stands true, a series of intriguing and noteworthy reasons exist that explain the lack of EDM exploration particularly within geography. As Hubbard (2010: 407) succinctly states, "not all popular music lends itself to geographical interpretation, with the imaginative geographies inscribed in some tracks resolutely impermeable to anything but the most cursory of interpretations". At first glance, the dearth of lyrics within EDM, its almost entirely software-based production process that does not require a recording studio, and the arguably little resemblance some tracks bear to what certain people might define as 'real music', perhaps suggests EDM falls into the category raised by Hubbard. However, if the past 20 years of music geography research have demonstrated one thing, it is that

geographic identities and imaginaries can be reinforced and created through differences in any form of sound, tied to a set of spaces, that are meaningful to a community of people. A growing body of geographic literature on EDM exists, demonstrating its viability for rigorous and meaningful geographic analysis. Although EDM very rarely explicitly offers geographical discourse, with the exception of certain albums and track titles that have a tendency to reference the urban form (such as, Goldie's [1994] 'Inner City Life'), this does not render it worthy of exclusion.

Acid house music, one of the first widespread and popular forms of EDM in Britain, caught the attention of the academy primarily because of the youth culture revolution that came with it (Reynolds, 1998). Despite the acid house explosion occurring at a similar time to the cultural revolution across the social sciences – around the early 1990s – geographical analyses again remained limited for several identifiable reasons. Most notably, the moral panic caused by large-scale illegal parties perhaps made academics steer clear of associating themselves with what would most definitely have been seen as not a 'serious' scholarly topic (Burgess & Gold, 1985). Tellingly, the only mention of raves in the 'Place of Music' (Leyshon et al., 1995) comes in the context of banning them. However, even before the new millennium geographic work was published on acid house, Ingham et al.'s (1999) examination of warehouse parties in Blackburn provided a novel perspective on the relationship between a new form of sound and a set of specific spaces, paying close attention to the contested and ephemeral nature of the sites in question. Several years earlier, Sibley (1994) analysed the implementation of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Bill 1994 and its serious consequences for acid house revellers and youth culture more broadly. This act infamously categorised EDM as "music [that] includes sounds wholly or predominantly characterised by the emission of a succession of repetitive beats" (Maylon, 1994). Taking an approach oriented around themes such as the rural, mobility and regulation, Sibley (1994) demonstrated that traditional geographic concepts could be usefully applied to rave and acid

house, producing a paper that aggressively critiqued policymakers for their efforts to criminalise groups who were seen to constitute a threat to 'society' – namely the land-owners and upper middle-class population of rural England. Hill's (2003) study of acid house and Thatcherism branched out to include analysis of political spatiality and examined the disruption that acid house parties and their appropriation of marginal spaces posed to the hegemonic Thatcherite project. I present Hill's (2003) firmly rooted geographic approach, amongst the other works discussed, as evidence that EDM remains open to productive and valuable geographic interpretation.

'The Place of Music' discussed early work on music and place and demonstrated a range of possible themes and styles for further research. In a similar vein, Fraser's (2012) paper on 'The Spaces, Politics, and Cultural Economies of Electronic Dance Music' was agenda setting for geographic work on EDM. Of relevance to my study, Fraser notes there is good reason to expect progress to be made with EDMC scholarship from new generations of geographers who have grown up listening to and knowing EDM, like how older generations knew rock music. Garcia (2011) also recognises this, attributing the recent rise in broader EDMC scholarship across the social sciences to the number of individuals who most likely attended raves in the 1990s, filtered through graduate programs, completed dissertations and then published doctoral work. After covering themes such as the politics of space in EDM, and applying Leyshon's (2001) work on networks of creativity, reproduction, distribution and consumption to EDM, Fraser (2012) concludes that the geographies of EDM are diverse, mobile, fleeting and complex, asserting that EDM's survival hinges on particular types of spaces such as clubs and raves – a suggestion I provide a timely reassessment of in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. His suggestion that a culture of cooperation exists within EDM proved to be of significant importance to my study, especially when drawing links between the DIY provision of illegal raves and the DIY nature of many EDM livestreams throughout the pandemic. Other scholars have analysed employment and shifting spatial practices

within EDM (McGregor & Gibson, 2009), and the EDM festival as a geographic site that hosts 'weekend societies' and event cultures (St. John, 2015). Taking an interdisciplinary approach with psychology, Christodoulou's (2011) study of jungle and drum & bass asserts how EDM can speak of particular experiences and spaces and assert an urban imaginary without any explicit lyrical content to analyse. His suggestion that 'dark' basslines can be linked to deindustrialisation in the London docklands and the South-East of England, inscribed with social, cultural and environmental transformations in the urban metropolis, opens up meaningful pathways for further geographic analysis of modern day EDM, and proved particularly useful in my exploration of the perceivable aesthetic that certain genres offer.

## **2.4 Bass and Britain**

The rave scene is widely recognised as the transformative period during which genres like jungle and drum & bass first emerged in a recognisable form (Reynolds, 1998). However, the genealogy of EDM in Britain, and specifically its emphasis on low frequency sounds, can be traced further back than the 1990s and late 1980s. Whilst contemporary EDM is the focus of my study, its history is pertinent to a series of later claims made about the existence a national or British 'sound' within certain genres. A deep-rooted relationship exists between post-rave EDM genres, their powerful basslines, and Jamaican sound system culture which, broadly speaking, was exported to Britain with the arrival of the Windrush Generation starting in 1948. The invention of the sound system occurred in Jamaica in the late 1940s, and by the mid-1950s, these sources of amplified music had evolved into "a sophisticated mobile entertainment institution [that was] the principal site of musical practice in Jamaican popular music" (Jones, 1995: 3). It took until the early 1970s for the Jamaican diaspora to firmly establish 'sound system culture' within the UK, most notably in London (Woods, 2019). Whilst the cultural value of sound systems is largely attributed to their historical capacity to spread



the latest Jamaican music and its often politico-spiritual message (Henriques, 2008), their ability to project bass and create an affective sonic space is relevant to modern day EDM. Indeed, the longstanding existence of sound system culture in Britain contributed to the laying down of a lineage of authentic and home-grown EDM that was driven by bass, throughout and after the rave scene period. In the words of Brewster & Broughton (2006: 476), “when a generation of UK sound systems abandoned [Jamaican] reggae roots to blaze their own trails, they freed British music”, resulting in the production of “sound system music [that] reflects the time and place it comes from. The British bassline, born on sound systems, bred by DJs, and fed on vinyl, has triumphed”.

Scholars have attempted to take stock of this complex and niche aspect of Britain’s musical heritage. Namely, Boothby’s (2020) charting of a ‘convivial continuum’ in British post-war popular music and Reynolds’ (2013) argument for the ‘Hardcore Continuum’ within EDM are useful conceptualisations of music that has a ‘British bassline’ at its core. Boothby’s (2020) work is oriented around a playlist of eight records, six of which are from EDM genres typically associated with Britain. Although he makes references to bass and recognises Henrique’s (2003) notion of ‘sonic dominance’, referring to the super-liminal whole-body experience of being immersed in the materiality of bass, his study fails to stress the importance of sound system culture in influencing the genres his chosen tracks come from. While Spencer (2020) is critical of scholars who appear to eulogise bass itself, low end frequencies are necessarily a core element of jungle, garage, dubstep and grime which are included within the convivial continuum. Reynolds’ (2013) Hardcore Continuum appears to be the best theorisation of the lineage of EDM genres that stemmed from the rave era. Through writing a series of six essays between 1992 and 1999, followed by the addition of an introduction in 2013, Reynolds only later realised he had been documenting “a continuum of musical culture that emerged out of the British rave scene – a specific strand of dance music centred in London with outposts in the Midlands, Bristol and

various Northern cities with a large black population” (ibid.: 1). Most importantly, what Reynolds asserts which is understated by Boothby, is that the musical foundations of certain post-rave EDM genres have practically stayed the same for over 20 years. Specifically, those core elements are “beat science seeking the intersection between ‘fucked up’ and ‘groovy’, dark bass pressure, MCs chatting fast over live-mixed DJ sets, [and] samples” (ibid.).

The prevalence of powerful low end frequencies within EDM genres associated with Britain has led to the term ‘bass music’ becoming popular. This indiscriminate term has been used in recent years to describe vast portions of EDM, regardless of its actual spectral makeup. Whilst Jasen (2016: 153) is critical of the fact that this phrase is “too vague to tell us much that we did not already know...that is, that some amount of low end is essential to most electronically constructed dancefloor music”, the phrase ‘bass music’ accurately describes the collective sound pushed forward by many British DJs and producers in the post-rave period. Fundamentally, whilst bass-heavy EDM is now a global phenomenon, the multiplicity of bass within an interrelated set of dance music genres was originally “something truly unique to the UK” (Muggs & Stevens, 2019: 11). Brewster & Broughton’s (2006) coining of the dominant audible constant amid Hardcore Continuum genres as ‘the British bass’ reflects the home-grown nature and sonic aesthetic of genres like dubstep, jungle and drum & bass.

## **2.5 The internet, creativity and ‘lockdown’**

The internet has played a pivotal role in shaping musical networks of creativity, reproduction, distribution and consumption since the early stages of its creation (Leyshon, 2001; 2003). The process of digitalisation that both the music industry and music itself have undergone has changed the organisation and structure of the field significantly (Verboord & van Noord, 2016). Internet technologies have increased mobility within musical creative networks, resulting in the wider dissemination of musical

products and the enhanced sharing of knowledge (Watson et al., 2009). Specifically in relation to British EDM, the internet played a central role in the formation of the genres at the core of this dissertation and has subsequently sustained their growth. Although the selling of tracks via online music vending platforms such as 'Beatport' and the Apple iTunes store contributed to the demise of high street record shops, especially those selling non-commercial 'underground' music, older social networking sites like MySpace and software such as America's Online Instant Messenger (AIM) are regarded as fundamental to the development of drum & bass and dubstep (Fraser & Ettliger, 2008). Whilst technological change once appeared to pose a significant challenge for EDM, with regard to contradicting methods of selling records and the difficulty that online file sharing posed to maintaining an authentic dubplate culture (Rietveld, 2012), the internet's ability to connect individuals in different places appears to have been a lifeline for artists and music fans alike throughout the pandemic.

Between March 2020 and July 2021, the United Kingdom underwent several extended periods of collective isolation in an effort to reduce the transmission of COVID-19 and 'flatten the curve' of infections (IFG, 2021; Vandenberg et al., 2021). These stints of societal 'lockdown', which were made up of particularly stringent restrictions in the UK, resulted in the closure of all live music and performance spaces, forcing creatives and their audiences to pursue alternate means of live music performance and consumption. Whilst not all music venues remained completely closed throughout the entire 16-month period, it took until 19<sup>th</sup> July 2021 for social distancing restrictions to be completely lifted and for nightclubs to return to operating at full capacity (Morton, 2021).

The practice of video livestreaming existed long before COVID-19, most notably within the gaming industry (Hilvert-Bruce et al., 2018). Music streams date back to as early as 2000, the year that Madonna broadcast her first UK concert in nearly a decade which attracted a record-breaking nine million views at the time, spread between the live event itself and subsequent playback (Dodson, 2000). With the longstanding existence

of livestreaming technology, its relative success, and the ever-increasing necessity for artists and musicians to engage with social media platforms to promote themselves, scholars and music commentators were left asking the simple question, “why isn’t this happening more?” (Thomas, 2020: 84). It appears to have taken a global pandemic for artists and their audiences to realise both the potential of livestreamed music performances, and perhaps most importantly, their flaws.

The pandemic – and the resulting paradigm shift from in-person to online practices within EDM – presents a unique opportunity to revisit current debates within music geography. There is scope to reconsider Gibson’s (2005) argument for a relational understanding of the local spaces that are involved in the creative practices that constitute the production of music within cities. Pubs, clubs and recording studios were all either closed or not operating in their normal capacity for the period of this study, limiting creative interaction with urban physical form and placing greater significance on technology and “the various actors in networks of creativity and production” (Watson et al., 2009: 864). In a similar vein, Scott (1999) posits that creative moments and episodes connect with concrete social conditions even at their most intimate beginnings. As a result, attention should be given to the physical and social environments in which creativity occurs (Watson et al., 2009). However, throughout lockdown the spaces that would typically constitute these environments remained inaccessible. The pandemic and the restrictions it led to severed ties between creative individuals, their spaces and their audiences. Scholars have also suggested that the increasing popularity of the internet has had a lessening impact on the importance of geographical location within music, particularly in the context of the link between the notion of scene and locality (Connell & Gibson, 2003). Whilst the internet, livestreams and the connections they facilitate between artists and their global audiences support the suggestion that music scenes are becoming increasingly trans-local (Bennett & Peterson, 2004), the visual element of EDM livestreams provides a new window through which to view the importance of geographical location within live

music. More broadly, creativity, the different scales at which it occurs and the mediums through which it is expressed have long been framed as a spatial issue (Hawkins, 2013; 2019). My study falls in line with the suggestion that “the latest ‘turn’ to appear on geography’s intellectual horizons pivots around creativity” (Hawkins, 2019: 962), with chapters two and three underpinned by a theoretical framework that questions the specific sites in and scales at which musical creativity occurs. The lockdown livestreams that were performed and consumed by the people of EDM tell a story of simultaneous solitariness and connectedness, and of alienation amidst shared experiences.

## **2.6 Live music and performance**

While performance studies have existed for a significant length of time, only in recent years have scholars turned to the category of live performance with a specific focus on music (Holt, 2010). The digital revolution within music led to a large body of work oriented around the recording industry when the balance of power seemed to have tipped towards recorded formats instead of live performances by the early 2000s (Mazierska et al., 2020). Telling articles were published with titles such as ‘Live Music Matters’ (Frith, 2007), at a point in time when entire books on popular music would omit live performance altogether. When research on live music was conducted, it was often from the perspective of cultural and economic policy (Cloonan, 2011), giving less attention to the aesthetics of live experiences and their spatial dimension. However, following what some refer to as the crisis of the recording industry (Kusek & Leonhard, 2006; Holt, 2010), a refocusing on live performance has occurred within both literature and the everyday lives of music fans. A small body of work has now also emerged specifically on motivations behind attending live music events (Bowen & Daniels, 2005; Brown & Knox, 2017). Prior to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, research indicated that the live sector was the fastest growing part of the music industry by a significant margin, with music performance events making

a £4.5 billion annual contribution to the UK economy (Mazierska et al., 2020: 4). Relevant to this study, the IMS Business Report published in 2019 indicated that EDM fans have a higher propensity to attend live events than any other genre (Peter, 2020: 187).

Mazierska et al. (2020) point to two main categories of liveness based on the works of Phelan (1993), Auslander (2008) and Sanden (2013). The first can be described as 'classic' or 'absolute' liveness. A form championed by Phelan (1993), this is not sensitive to technological advances or historical shifts, and denotes "corporeal, spatial and temporal copresence of the performer and the audience, [allowing] for the production of a unique event" (Mazierska et al., 2020: 6). Descriptions in my writing of 'traditional' and 'in-person' live music events fall into this category. On the other hand, the second can be described as 'relative' or 'mediated' liveness (Auslander, 2008). Performances in this bracket are limited to one type of copresence. For example, when watching a livestream, the dispersed audience experience temporal but not spatial copresence. In this case, Sanden (2013) points to the importance of perception over actuality. He suggests that liveness is better defined as a certain authenticity that is associated with performance, in the face of claims that musical performances using various electronic technologies can be viewed as inauthentic.

The definition of what constitutes 'live' music to different people has changed significantly within the past two decades. As observed by Jones & Bennett (2015), live music has expanded to include forms of performance that do not require the audience and artist to share the same space, or even the same time. Indeed, "for traditional live music fans, the face-to-face concert lends a layer of authenticity to musical enjoyment as an identity marker, due to its relative fixity and trustworthiness when compared to the fluid and easily manipulated digital landscape" (Thomas, 2020: 85). In the words of Mazierska et al. (2020: 7), "what 'live' means for one generation does not necessarily mean 'live' for another generation, or [someone from] another culture". For Phelan (1993: 146), writing in the context of acting and theatre, "performance's only life is in

the present. Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations of representations". Although this perspective now seems very outdated, it indicates that the digital revolution divided researchers, with some deeming the now very popular practice of taking personal video content at performances enough to constitute an event as not 'absolutely' live (Lingel & Naaman, 2011). As such, the notion of 'pre-recorded' livestreams, whereby a performer records video content in advance of its 'live' broadcast time and date on the internet, would not meet pre-2000 definitions of liveness either.

### **3.0 Methodology**

This dissertation takes a qualitative approach to developing an in-depth understanding of how EDM scene participants engage with the theme of place. My research was focused on conducting interviews with individuals from a range of EDM scenes in different roles and professions. These were supplemented by a form of virtual participant observation I have referred to as 'livestream fieldwork', alongside analysis of secondary resources including old documentaries, images and recorded DJ sets available online from websites like YouTube and SoundCloud. My work on EDM represents an intriguing intersection between my 'non-research self' (Glensne & Peshkin, 1992) and my academic self. Although not explicitly reflected on in my analytical chapters, my own participation in various EDM scenes proved to be vital in successfully conducting research during a time of crisis for the music industry. I am a keen consumer of live EDM events, a member of several active online communities, and a part-time DJ in my university city of Nottingham. Although Garcia (2013: 5) laments the "near-total lack of explicitly pedagogical materials" for scholars concerned with EDM, forcing them to turn to potentially incompatible methods from their home disciplines, I found traditional geographic techniques for collecting empirical data to yield strong results. This chapter is loosely organised in chronological order.

#### **3.1 Interviews**

My primary method of research was conducting semi-structured interviews, followed by detailed thematic analysis of my transcribed material. Between June and July 2021 I conducted a total of eight interview sessions, one of which was a small focus group. Ten individuals were spoken to overall. The focus group took place as a video conference call, and the other seven conversations were via telephone. The total combined length of the conversations came to just over seven hours. As



argued by Longhurst (2010), talking with people in an informal or conversational manner is an excellent way of gathering information for social scientists. Participants were free to answer my open-ended questions as they wished, and when an intriguing idea or prospect was raised I directed the discussion further, constituting the semi-structured aspect of the process. I found McIntosh & Morse's (2015) suggestion that semi-structured interviews often do not give participants the opportunity to provide in-depth answers to be inaccurate. The combination of my predetermined questions and supplementary probing allowing for responses which clearly demonstrated a level of deeper thinking about the subject matter. Indeed, semi-structured interviews were fitting in the sense that I was able to cover a significant amount of ground in terms of the themes discussed, whilst maintaining a satisfactory amount of detail.

Within the discipline of Geography, debate continues as to whether or not interviews can constitute as ethnographic research. Whilst Herbert (2000: 552) states that ethnography should be viewed as distinct from interviews because the latter does not permit an adequate examination of "what people do as well as what they say", I found my participants to seemingly answer truthfully and comprehensively with regard to their practices and experiences. I recognise Hammersly's (2006) suggestion that it can be difficult to view research that heavily relies on interviews as methodologically sound in an ethnographic sense. Thus I did aspects of ethnographic work as far as the pandemic would allow, namely consuming livestreams which later helped me to contextualise the perspectives of my interview participants. I also followed the ethnographic principle of entering the field generally interested in exploring particular social phenomena, instead of testing specific hypotheses (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994). Although the qualitative depth of face-to-face interviews is difficult to argue against (Opdenakker, 2006), I felt comfortable progressing with remote work knowing that transcripts of telephone and face-to-face interviews often resemble little to no significant differences (Sturges & Hanrahan, 2004).

### 3.1.1 Recruiting participants

Scholars conducting research within EDM scenes can often have difficulty reaching participants. As noted by Garcia (2013: 5), “one of the primary challenges of nightlife [and EDMC] fieldwork is thus to gain access, collect data, store sensitive information and finally publish [material] on a social world that relies on the avoidance of public scrutiny to sustain its experiments in living differently”. When mentioning ‘nightlife fieldwork’, Garcia means this in a literal sense, referring to carrying out interviews and participant observation while in the field, usually at a live music venue. Although this initially seemed like an intriguing research method very rarely seen within geographic study, the prolonged lifespan of restrictions and quite rigorous theoretical nature of some of my questions pointed to recruiting participants in a more traditional manner. Indeed, I avoided a host of ethical and more general methodological concerns by interviewing participants in a setting completely detached from a night out. These difficulties can range from the basic premise of working in a noisy or chaotic environment, and having to navigate the costs of nightlife, to the more serious issue of infringing on someone’s ‘nocturnal persona’ (Grazian, 2005) if attempting to interview someone in the process of enjoying their time for escapism.

However, the pandemic presented me with a significant set of challenges. The music industry was facing a crisis; many individuals spanning both the recording and live sectors were in significant financial difficulty despite government assistance, and worse, some were losing their jobs. It did not feel appropriate to cold contact individuals or even organisations in the way that might normally have been the case, based on the very real possibility that I could exacerbating wellbeing issues that were widely reported at the time particularly for those working in music. Instead, I opted for a mixed approach that involved utilising my existing network of contacts who are either knowledgeable about or professionally involved with EDM, combined with a separate community-level strategy whereby I allowed potential participants to reach out to me themselves, instead of vice versa. I did this by posting a request for people to contact me in

online Facebook groups (see fig. 2). These groups often have specific questions that must be answered before membership is granted, creating a pre-established “trust network” (Garcia, 2013: 11) for me to utilise.

I remained mindful of Bennett’s (2002: 460) suggestion that “objectivity and detachment” from one’s subject matter have long been regarded as central qualities for rigorous social-scientific work. However, I would argue that a complete outsider may have had difficulty conducting research on an industry that had been hugely impacted by the pandemic without any form of ‘insider’ knowledge, most importantly regarding where to start recruiting participants in a sensitive manner. As Bennett (2002) later recognises, being familiar with one’s social surroundings can substantially assist researchers in accessing particular groups, as was the case for me. Of the ten interviews I conducted, five were strangers and accessed via my Facebook group posts, three were long-term friends of mine who formed a small focus group which was used as a pilot for my questions, and two I would loosely refer to as ‘connections’. Namely, Rishi had booked me on a number of occasions to DJ at his events in Nottingham, and I had previously purchased a ticket from Robert for an EDM festival – at the time, we struck up a conversation in the process of exchanging the ticket over our mutual passion for music. All participants were provided with an informed consent document which also included relevant information such as example questions (see fig. 3) before interviews commenced.

Fig. 2 – Screenshot of the post I put up in a drum & bass-focused Facebook group called '174'. The group's name references the most popular beats per minute value of the music.

 **Tom Sanders**  
28 June · 🌐

Easy 174!  
Calling all promoters, venue owners/staff, record label owners, DJs, producers, sound system owners, and any other roles I may have missed - If you have 30 minutes next week to have a conversation with me to help with my Master's thesis on UK bass music, I'd love to hear from you!

I'm conducting interviews (which are really more like informal discussions) to collect data on three main themes - The impact of Coronavirus on dance music, the extent to which bass music may or may not be a 'British' thing, and whether or not special relationships exist between bass music and certain types of places and spaces (e.g. warehouses and cities).

If you'd be interested drop me a message or a comment below and I can provide more details. Also, a huge thank you to people from this group who I've already chatted with - you know who you are!

Sick photo of WHP for your attention. Thanks



Fig. 3 – The information sheet that all participants were sent before an interview. The most important details were reiterated at the start of every call, such as that the conversation was being recorded, and that names could be changed if a candidate desired. I received no requests for pseudonyms to be used.



ID 14314610

### **Interview Participant Information Sheet**

<b>Working Title</b>	The Place of British Electronic Dance Music
<b>Registration</b>	MRes Geography
<b>Primary Researcher</b>	Tom Sanders Email: lgyts2@nottingham.ac.uk
<b>Supervisor 1</b>	David Beckingham Email: david.beckingham@nottingham.ac.uk
<b>Supervisor 2</b>	David Matless Email: david.matless@nottingham.ac.uk

#### **General Information**

The interview will be conducted in a semi-structured, conversational format. There are no right or wrong answers. I am interested in anything you have to say!

The interview will last approximately 30-45 minutes.

The interview can be conducted via Zoom, Facebook Messenger video call, or telephone.

The interview will be recorded.

All participants are free to withdraw from the study at any point in time, including withdrawing data following its collection.

Anonymity can be guaranteed, and replacement names used if the participant desires.

'British Electronic Dance Music' (UK EDM) refers to genres and sub-genres typically associated with the UK, such as jungle, drum & bass, garage, dubstep, breaks/breakbeat, and hardcore. Also referred to colloquially as '(British) bass music' and/or 'dance music'.

#### **Project Chapter Outline and Related Example Questions**

##### **1. The online place of dance music during a global pandemic**

- How would you describe the experience of attending livestreams during 'lockdown'?
- Is the internet now a viable place for musical performance?
- What is it that matters about music that's being played live?

##### **2. The UK Sound: Imagination, Identity, Origin Stories and Place**

- Does a distinctively British sound exist within certain electronic dance music genres and sub-genres?
- Does British bass music make you think of certain places?
- What about this music makes you want to listen to it?

##### **3. Siting the UK Sound: The cultural landscape and listening spaces**

- Is British bass music an urban thing? Are cities the place of UK EDM?
- Why are certain types of spaces (i.e. disused post-industrial sites) so popular as dance music venues?

### 3.1.2 Participants list

There is a trend within social scientific research to anonymise interviewees even when material of a sensitive nature is not being discussed. When conducting research within EDM scenes, Garcia (2013: 12) raises the intriguing possibility that some people “may explicitly request that their real name or artist’s moniker be used in order to raise their own public profile”. Indeed, my interviewees were offered the use of a pseudonym on two separate occasions as part of my information sheet and at the start of each conversation, which nobody expressed interest in. My questions were largely theoretical and were not concerned with topics that could be viewed as harmful. Therefore, my participants below appear as who they are to offer the possibility of promoting their aliases or brands.

#### Ben

- Location(s): Brighton, London
- Approximate age: Early 20s
- Organisation(s) and occupation(s): University of Brighton graduate, current freelance fashion designer. Amateur music producer and DJ
- Duration and date: 1hr 31m (focus group), 2<sup>nd</sup> June

#### Harry

- Location(s): Bristol, London
- Approximate age: Early 20s
- Organisation(s) and occupation(s): University of Bristol graduate. Up-and-coming music producer and DJ under the alias of ‘HYRAH’
- Duration and date: 1hr 31m (focus group), 2<sup>nd</sup> June

## Theo

- Location(s): London
- Approximate age: Early 20s
- Organisation(s) and occupation(s): University College London student. Amateur music producer and DJ.
- Duration and date: 1hr 31m (focus group), 2<sup>nd</sup> of June

## Rishi

- Location(s): Bristol
- Approximate age: Early 20s
- Organisation(s) and occupation(s): 'No\_One' – Record label and promoter. Founder of the brand and part-time DJ, also under the alias of 'No\_One'
- Duration and date: 50m, 10<sup>th</sup> June

## Chris

- Location(s): Brighton
- Approximate age: Mid 20s
- Organisation(s) and occupation(s): 'Onyx Recordings' – Record label and promoter. Founder. 'Stay At Home Festival' – Livestreamed online music festival. Co-Founder.
- Duration and date: 35m, 12<sup>th</sup> June

## Sabrina

- Location(s): London, previously Jakarta in Malaysia
- Approximate age: Early 20s
- Organisation(s) and occupation(s): Up-and-coming DJ with notable recent success in achieving high-profile bookings under the alias of 'Sabrina'
- Duration and date: 51m, 19<sup>th</sup> June

## Rory

- Location(s): Chippenham
- Approximate age: Mid 20s
- Organisation(s) and occupation(s): British and Irish Modern Music Institute (BIMM) graduate, music producer, club DJ and former promoter
- Duration and date: 40m, 1<sup>st</sup> July

## Tom

- Location(s): Manchester, previously London
- Approximate age: Mid 20s
- Organisation(s) and occupation(s): Full-time music producer and DJ, signed to 'Low Down Deep Records' under the alias of 'Sota'
- Duration and date: 45m, 2<sup>nd</sup> July

## Kenny

- Location(s): Leicester
- Approximate age: Mid 20s
- Organisation(s) and occupation(s): 'In The Lab Recordings' – Record label and promoter. Founder and part-time DJ under the alias of 'Kendot'
- Duration and date: 1hr 1m, 5<sup>th</sup> July

## Robert

- Location(s): Houston, Texas
- Approximate age: Early 40s
- Organisation(s) and occupation(s): 'WYLDNIGHTS' – Dissolved artist management agency. Former artist manager. 'Insomniac' – Major American EDM promoter and distributor. 'AEG Presents' – Live entertainment division of 'AEG Worldwide', an all-encompassing music industry company. Events planner.
- Duration and date: 50m, 9<sup>th</sup> July



### 3.1.3 Further reflection

Semi-structured interviews and the list of the same or very similar questions they entail for each participant make them popular amongst researchers seeking to subsequently code their data (McIntosh & Morse, 2015). I transcribed all of my interviews in full and took inspiration from Cope's (2010) process of formulating first-level descriptive and second-level analytical codes, alongside Crang's (2005) technique of creating 'theoretical memos'. My interview questions were generated through my preliminary literature research, but the largely exploratory nature of my work and ongoing nature of the pandemic meant that my intellectual focus shifted as time went on. I approached each transcript on an individual basis and identified key quotations pertinent to my broader research themes as they developed. This ultimately led to the selection and organisation of the extracts found in my analytical chapters. I have followed the excellent work of other geographers concerned with music, such as Cohen (1991), by firmly basing my arguments on the voices of my interviewees and ensuring the inclusion of "extensive interview and observation material" (Bennett, 2002: 455) within my analysis.

As raised previously, whilst I may have been doing what Garcia (2013: 10) describes as "interviewing party people", I was not conducting research that required me to ask questions of a sensitive nature that might have raised ethical concerns. In my group of participants, eight were both white and male. One was male and of Asian descent, and one was female and of South-East Asian descent. Everyone I spoke to was in their 20s, with the exception of Robert. Undoubtedly, a greater diversity of participants in terms of gender, ethnicity and age would have benefitted this study and allowed me to draw more accurate conclusions regarding the diverse views held by people who engage with EDM. If my research questions were specifically oriented around themes of race, sexuality, or gender within EDM as opposed to its relations with place, a more representative group would have been vital, but this was not the case. Again with the exception of Robert, all my interviewees were residents of English cities without any participants from Wales, Scotland,

or Ireland. The conclusions I reach in my first analytical chapter regarding the existence of EDM that exhibits a British quality through its sound reflect this. Whilst a greater number of participants and hours of recorded material would have been preferable, I ensured that my fieldwork conducted on livestreams and my analysis of secondary sources were thorough enough to present a substantial package of empirical research. Indeed, on several occasions the fact I had watched the same livestream as a participant allowed for a far more detailed conversation about the nuances of a certain performance and the atmosphere that might have been experienced while watching it, than would otherwise have been possible. Given the difficulties I faced conducting research during a global pandemic, I consider the group I accessed to have offered an extremely valuable range of perspectives on the subject matter.

Throughout my data collection I paid significant attention to self-reflection and subsequent self-improvement as per Ortlipp's (2008) suggestion, particularly in the context of interviews. The exploratory nature of my dissertation meant I initially found myself with a lengthy list of questions covering a large number of academic themes. Although it would typically be seen as unusual to interview close contacts for research projects that demand a breadth of perspectives (Longhurst, 2010), I found organising a focus group with three long-term friends of mine to be useful for several reasons. First, I was able to test all of my questions in an environment without time constraints, leading to the production of a fine-tuned list to progress with after adjusting those that they perceived to contain "jargon" (McLafferty, 2010: 79). Second, we were able to conduct our focus group via a video call, which no other participants were willing to do. This meant I had an important opportunity to gauge visual responses to certain questions (Opdenakker, 2006). Third, their in-depth knowledge of an array of EDM genres and subgenres meant I was able to record valuable answers to some of my questions, irrespective of the focus group's role as a pilot. Finally, pertinent to being self-reflective, the close nature of our friendship over the last 10 years which has been fundamentally built around music allowed the focus group to act as a micro-autoethnographic

study. I was able to view my friends' responses almost as an extension of how I might have answered the same questions myself, allowing me to confront my own positionality in the research process (Maréchal, 2010). This resulted in a deeper reflexive investigation of how I was going to present questions to future participants and ensure that I maintained a neutral position in the interview process, despite my aforementioned involvement with EDM scenes.

### **3.2 Livestream fieldwork**

Returning to Herbert's (2000) ethnography guidelines, I did engage with what people were 'doing' as well as just 'saying' to the extent that was possible, given the circumstances of the pandemic. Between August 2020 and May 2021 I consumed approximately 10 hours of EDM livestreams with a deliberately analytical lens, on top regular consumption of streamed performances on a near weekly-basis as an EDM fan myself. Watching livestreams allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of how EDM scene participants were enjoying music and interacting with one another in the absence of traditional events, and document a unique moment in time through my work. Although the way in which people generated online relationships with one another was not a primary concern of my research, it was important for me to have an awareness of the types of livestreamed performances that had occurred before asking participants about their own experiences. Applying methods adopted by the likes of Garcia (2013) for conducting fieldwork at venues, I paid attention to the music and my experience of it for the duration of a livestream, made some observational notes, and then later revisited its recording automatically uploaded to YouTube or Facebook to take some screenshots. Descriptive accounts of specific streams and screenshots of interesting or frequently raised performances are included within my second analytical chapter.

The entirely mediated nature of livestreams did make it difficult to gain in-depth insight into the perspectives of the individuals that I was

'observing'. In reality, this meant watching a stream of comments flood into the online chat, some of which were particularly amusing as viewers seemed to try and replicate the conversations they might have had with a stranger while out partying. Following Bennett's (2002) suggestion that researchers should reflect on the impact of their presence in the field, my concerns in this area were minimal. Being sat behind a screen presented a rare opportunity to observe live music while risking no chance of my work getting in the way of the event. Indeed, the reality of conducting livestream fieldwork from my desk was particularly unusual and dissociating. I agree with Assiter (2020) who notes how difficult it was to spend all day working at one's computer, have a small break in the evening, and then return to spend more time at a desk for what was meant to be musical leisure.

In sum, the challenges of the pandemic meant at times my methodological process felt almost like one of trial and error. That said, the final set of analysed and organised interview quotations my research yielded, along with my own in-depth knowledge and experience of livestreams and EDM, allowed me to construct three rigorous analytical chapters. To the best of my ability, I acted as a 'musicking geographer' (Kavanagh, 2020), engaging with the primary outlet of EDM performance that the pandemic permitted. Using my data collection as a reflexive process allowed me to take stock of a potentially once in a lifetime event, and document its impact on a social group of interest to me. While the pandemic initially appeared to be a significant inconvenience, it eventually became a primary focus of my intellectual work. My last interview took place ten days before live music venues opened their doors for the first time in nearly 18 months.

## **4.0 Sense of Place in Electronic Dance Music: The National and the Urban**

### **4.1 A British thing?**

This chapter is exploratory of the different ways that place, in a physical and imagined sense, is understood and constructed by people who participate in a range of EDM scenes. Certain forms of music are seen to evoke a sense of place in the way that they sound (Tweed & Watson, 2019), and certain places have witnessed the creation of music that clearly reflects the environment in which it was made (Harrison, 2010; Christodoulou, 2011; Nevarez, 2013). Although lacking the lyrics or instrumentation that have been the usual starting point for studies of music and geography, there is much to learn from dubstep, jungle and drum & bass despite their often entirely digital production and frequent lack of lyrical content aside from samples. My interviewees clearly indicated that place matters to them when consuming, producing and experiencing their preferred choice of music. These thoughts were sometimes expressed in relation to specific major cities such as London, Manchester and Bristol, in addition to the nation as a whole.

I address what exactly it is that makes certain forms of EDM sound British, in turn suggesting that the 'UK sound' my participants referred to can be located at the meeting point between real and imagined musical qualities that work together to evoke a sense of place. There are certain identifiably real elements of music that can be heard, alongside an aesthetic that is perceived by the listener, exists in their imagination, and is arguably distinct from musical composition and arrangement. My participants' assertions that certain forms of EDM sound British and could only have come from Britain, without any detailed knowledge of the intricate genealogies of each genre, relates to their particular perception and understanding of Britain as a place for music. The existence of a sound that evokes a sense of place to the people of EDM appears to lie "somewhere between the domains of the factual and fictional, the

subjective and objective, [and] the real and representational”, to follow Daniels (2011: 182) when describing the notion of a geographical imagination.

This chapter is organised around case study examples frequently raised by my interviewees. I explore the identifiable qualities of British EDM that can be heard and the place-based aesthetic that can be perceived and resides within consumers’ imagination, with a view to recognising the different scales at which EDM can have relations with place – Britain as a whole, its cities and the various concrete spaces in an urban area. I consider the prevalence of sampled breakbeats, basslines and MCs in EDM, the differences between ‘American dubstep’ and early British dubstep which has its roots in South London and, drawing on a theme of my interviews, a claim about the possible existence of a ‘Bristol sound’ which fits within broader UK sound discourse. The chapter closes with an overview of the notion of placelessness within British EDM in light of growing awareness that the increasingly connected and globalised nature of our world has changed what it means to critically locate music.

#### **4.2 ‘That UK sound’**

I began by asking my participants the fundamental question, “does a distinctively British sound exist within certain EDM genres?”. Although I initially intended to query the extent to which genres like dubstep, jungle and drum & bass have an intrinsically British quality or firm association with the nation, most took this as questioning the existence of a specific sound or style inside of genres that they already recognised as inherently British. The interchangeable terminology used by my participants when referring to Britain and the UK became immediately apparent here. Whilst some expressed slight ambiguity, all interviewees were in unanimous agreement that certain EDM genres either exhibit an identifiably British sound amidst their range of styles, or are themselves are a ‘British thing’. The following answers indicate the former point.

Yeah, unequivocally. For example, one of my teammates in Onyx, he's an Australian. Before he joined Onyx there was so much of drum & bass he hadn't heard before, so much of the sound he'd never understood before. He's [said] on multiple occasions before, "I wasn't attuned to this British drum & bass sound". (Chris)

Definitely. Especially dubstep is a good example for that. I see posts in online forums [about how] the sound travelled to America and became different. There's a more UK sound. It's a less homogenised, well I don't know, a darker...more stripped back [sound]. (Ben)

Robert had similar thoughts stating that he "absolutely" agreed a British sound exists, going on to suggest "it all stems from stuff like jungle [and] really raw garage". When discussing 'Onyx', Chris is referring to the small record label that he owns. In addition to attempting to mark out the existence of a British sound, some interviewees appeared to consider the genres mentioned by Chris, Ben and Robert as a 'British thing'.

Yeah, one hundred percent. I think in every genre of music Britain's a world leader, and I'd say we've got the best, I don't know what it is, authenticity?...Especially within underground bass music as we'd say, [it's] definitely a British thing. (Rory)

Yes, one hundred percent...it's about origin story and history definitely...[but] in terms of certain genres there are some things that just came out of the UK, no argument. (Tom)

Kenny and Rishi followed the above points with slightly more uncertainty by stating, "short answer yes...the long answer is, can I tell you what it is? No", and "yes, [but] I sort of went with my gut on that one...what defines British then?", respectively. A collective narrative seems to exist amongst EDM fans that certain genres have a special relationship with Britain which can often be difficult to comprehend. Genres like dubstep,

jungle and drum & bass have geographical meaning in their sound which is understood and imagined in a variety of different ways.

#### **4.3 Breakbeats, basslines and MCs**

A point frequently raised by interviewees was that sampled breakbeats, also known in shorthand as 'breaks', are a crucial element of much EDM they perceive to sound British. Revisiting Boothby (2020: 221), "the 'breakbeat' is a section of a funk or soul record where the other instruments drop away to leave only the drummer playing solo for a two or four bar measure". The sampling of these lively segments of percussion, which originate predominantly from American music, has been a mainstay of EDM production in Britain since the early days of genres like rare groove and acid house in the mid-to-late 1980s (Melville, 2019). Indeed, Reynolds (2013: 1) noted when discussing his notion of the Hardcore Continuum that "the basic parameters of the music have stayed the same as they were in the [days of] early Hardcore". As such, sampled breakbeats appear to be one of the driving forces behind the lineage of EDM that has stemmed from the British rave scene. Some participants, aware of this history, commented on how the origin story of breakbeats appears to influence the sound of modern music that utilises them.

You had all of these funk breaks back in the '90s...Taking those, looping them...and then obviously adding the bass element...That was when it became more British. Once those British DJs [and producers] started messing around with the resampling of American and global songs...That splitting point was when it became more of a British thing. (Harry)

In the same vein, Kenny described how "that evolution of music [is] the reason we have drum & bass in the first place. Reggae music evolved and hip hop guys started sampling drum breaks". Sabrina shared a similar perspective stating that "the drum patterns in drum & bass have evolved...You can hear the jungle roots behind it" when describing what



current EDM sounds like. Some interviewees briefly raised a number of other identifiable aspects, with Tom noting how “if I hear a lot of breaks, if I hear 808s, if I hear warp basses, I always sort of associate that with a British sound”. Lastly, when talking about the ‘Think Break’ which is taken from Lyn Collins’ (1972) track ‘Think (About It)’, Ben noted how the “high pitched vocal snippet” the sample features when sped up to a tempo of over 170bpm made him reminisce about jungle music, suggesting that overall the sound of the break “alludes to Britishness”.

The ability of breakbeats to evoke a sense of place has several possible explanations. Although British producers were not the first to use breaks, with American hip hop artists of the 1980s also realising their value in adding another layer to their ‘beats’ (Christodoulou, 2020), they were the first to carry out the specific but pivotal process of manipulating and speeding up the samples to transform them into the driving energetic force behind new forms of music, such as jungle and drum & bass. Describing the difference between the mentioned genres, Chapman (2003: 3) notes how “unlike in hip-hop, where sampled breakbeat grooves are simply looped at a moderate tempo, drum & bass producers dissect and fragment breakbeats into their smallest components, reassemble them into intricate, asymmetrical patterns and then set them at a rapid tempo”. The original function of the breakbeat was merely to ‘fill time’ in between horn or vocal sections (Kemp, 2021), meaning that jungle and drum & bass producers of the early 1990s combined “disparate musical elements to produce innovative music that [was] distinctively British” (Boothby, 2020: 213). Moreover, whilst nowadays an almost endless number of ‘sample packs’ are available for purchase online with perfectly isolated and processed breakbeat samples, the early development of British EDM enabled a “discourse of authenticity to develop around knowledge of the recordings from which these ‘breaks’ were derived” (Christodoulou, 2020: 10). Despite the now revolutionised access to samples, it appears that breakbeats have not lost their original authentic quality, not least the raw energy and excitement they provide, hence their maintained popularity within EDM particularly of British origin

over the past 30 years. For my participants, breaks and their culturally rich geographically rooted origin stories work to give EDM a 'UK sound'. Returning to Reynolds (2013: 1), the Hardcore Continuum is defined by "beat-science[,...]...dark bass pressure, MCs chatting fast over live-mixed DJ sets, [and] samples". Despite the frequent raising of breakbeats in interviews, it is clear from Reynolds' outline how much more there is to EDM with a British quality than just sampled drum patterns. For example, MCs are an integral part of the live performance of dubstep, jungle and drum & bass. MCs perform alongside DJs for live events and radio shows and have increasingly started to feature on recorded music. They "speak about their lives, their worlds, and [the] scenes in which they operate" (Fraser, 2012: 509). If British, their accents can provide an additional layer of character and national association to the genres in question. Indeed, Tom stated that "a large part of it is MCs" when interpreting what the UK sound meant to him, and went on to clarify that

Belgium with their drum & bass scene now have MCs, but it's because of us...Go to America and you won't see an MC anywhere. You will not see one. We've definitely got our own culture in that sense. It's about giving up to the DJ and the MC.  
(Tom)

Harry agreed by also noting that distinct sounds from Britain are "often driven by MCs". The way in which MCs have acted as 'community workers' within British EDM scenes, "leading, building and networking in ways that help generate solidarity, reciprocity and alliances" (Fraser, 2014: 42) has helped develop the notion of a national sound. MCs are especially important in the context of performing music live that typically does not have much lyrical content. They add to the Britishness of the live soundscape of certain EDM styles, speaking of their predominantly nationally grounded experiences. The specific role of MCs is later explored in more detail under the theme of 'artist-audience relations'.

Moreover, the bassline, or what Reynolds (2013) describes as 'bass pressure', is a fundamental part of EDM that listeners perceive to have a

British aesthetic. Intriguingly, this was barely explicitly reflected on by my participants, most likely because to members of relevant scenes, the prevalence of bass might have seemed too obvious to mention – with a genre like ‘drum & bass’, the clue is in the name. Instead, many interviewees simply chose to repeatedly use the phrase ‘bass music’ when referring to the genres in question. Indeed, whilst bass-heavy EDM is now a global phenomenon, the multiplicity of bass within an interrelated set of dance music genres was originally “something truly unique to the UK” (Muggs & Stevens, 2019: 11), and has continued to be a core element of Hardcore Continuum genres.

Although identifiable elements like samples and basslines are useful sites for tracing the British quality of music, when heard together these aspects produce tracks with individually unique aesthetics. Not all musical qualities that make EDM sound British can be pinpointed, and are sometimes as much imagined within the listener’s mind as they are real. This was indicated by many interviewees who turned to EDM terminology that articulates the ‘vibe’ or ‘feel’ of music.

In terms of the feeling of [British EDM], I’d say it’s quite dark. We’re cynical people, a nation of stiff upper lip people. That’s why you get the American dance [music] that feels very bubbly and light, because they’re all quite like, “American dream”. Unless you really get into the nitty gritty of the genres. (Chris)

I definitely think there is a British sound man, I think it’s stripped back, it’s quite a lot darker. (Tom)

Theo agreed by stating that he thought “the sound within drum & bass is still very dark”. The best conceptualisation of the ‘darkness’ narrative within EDM which also pays attention to geography comes from Christodoulou’s (2011) work on the relationship between urban areas and bass music. My participants’ views point to Christodoulou’s (2011: 44) suggestion that “accelerated breakbeats and ‘dark’ basslines can be seen to inscribe recent...social, cultural and environmental

transformations in the urban metropolis”, reflecting the vital role that former industrial spaces in London and the South-East of England played in the formation of Hardcore Continuum genres in the 1990s. Although a wide variety of ‘lighter’ styles now also exist, such as ‘liquid’ drum & bass and its more melodic sound, the rawness of jungle, drum & bass and dubstep was possibly once a common vernacular for those disillusioned by the reality of post-industrial urban life in Britain. The genres possibly reflect the feeling of Britain as a place, most notably at the time of their creation. In turn, this has had lasting impacts on the aesthetic of the music hence the maintained prevalence of ‘dark’ sounds. Much like Tweed & Watson (2019) suggest that folk music instruments and lyrics focused on physical landscape can generate geographical meaning in Icelandic music, it appears that breakbeats, the sound of MCs and powerful basslines can work together to allow certain forms of EDM to evoke a sense of place in their sound. The origin stories of Hardcore Continuum genres, firmly rooted within Britain, arouse the cultural memory of different listeners in a variety of ways, leading to the production of musical styles that have a real and imagined British quality.

#### **4.4 Exploring dubstep**

Several participants referred to the differences between what they described as ‘American dubstep’ and ‘original’ or ‘UK dubstep’ when attempting to delineate what makes some forms of EDM sound British. Indeed, dubstep is a genre said to have an identifiably British sound alongside an almost reified origin story that is firmly tied to Croydon in South London. All dubstep is driven by two core elements – a tempo of around 140bpm alongside basslines structured in a way that enable the music to be heard and danced to at half that speed (Rietveld, 2012). Reynolds (2010: 74) regards dubstep as one of the main Hardcore Continuum genres to emerge in the last decade, despite criticism from what he refers to as ‘EDM cognoscenti’ that modern and predominantly American reproductions are a “bastardization of true dubstep”. Indeed,

within digitally produced EDM “the simultaneous potentialities of both establishing and disintegrating new genres [and subgenres] are infinitely greater than in other forms [of music]” (Monroe, 1999: 149). This statement is directly applicable to dubstep where a paradigm shift in sound has occurred within the past 15 years, with two different fan bases either side of the Atlantic.

The easiest comparison you can make in today’s music is if you listen to American dubstep and [then you] listen to what the dudes over here are still making...Granted it doesn’t really have that much of a fanbase anymore, but I think...the difference in sound is so clear. (Tom)

Especially coming from America, we always have the joke that there’s dubstep, and there’s *dubstep*...Skrillex [took it] and ran with it back in the early 2000s and he kind of transformed [original] dubstep into what is now American dubstep. There’s a huge difference between American dubstep and UK dubstep. (Robert)

With dubstep, a transnational process of “commercialisation and hybridisation” has occurred (Christodoulou, 2020: 16). The original format, which was never noticeably popular in America, has maintained its characteristics but not significantly developed or expanded in domestic popularity. Meanwhile, the version created by producers of typically American origin has grown to be one of the dominant forces in North American EDM, without ever achieving success in the UK. The change and mutation that dubstep has witnessed on an international scale is compelling, given that musicologists regarded British popular music as remaining firmly rooted in the sensibilities of the United States in the not too distant past (Cosgrove, 1987; Halfacree & Kitchin, 1996). In contrast to this assertion, one of the most popular forms of EDM in America had humble beginnings in the clubs and bars of South London. Regarding the audible differences between the two categories, Robert’s views were particularly interesting as an American citizen based in Houston, Texas.

American dubstep is very much your head-bangers...The siren sounds, the really heavy growls...Americans really like to overexaggerate things a lot. Whereas the UK sound is a lot more subtle...The sub and the bass and the groove are really the things that drive the UK sound...Whereas American dubstep, it's very...dynamic and action packed. (Robert)

[American dubstep] is very top heavy, very compressed, very like plastic-y clean. And [original] dubstep is just a bit less produced, a bit more [about the] vibe. (Tom)

Both interviewees use a range of EDM terminology in their attempts to describe the sonic diversity that exists. As Robert later went on to state, "it's very obvious when you hear it". For an audible comparison of the two different categories, see Skrillex's (2011) track 'Ruffneck - Full Flex' or Excision and Subtronics' (2021) more recent track 'Bunker Buster' for an example of the American style. Mala's (2007) track 'Changes' or Skream's (2006) 'Midnight Request Line' are well-known examples of the original sound created by British producers. The accounts provided by my interviewees align with existing work on, and critiques of, the varied styles. D'Errico (2015: 1) notes how James Blake, a former dubstep producer turned pop artist, argued against the American version in masculinist terms, suggesting that its aggressive nature appealed to only a 'macho' crowd and was a significant misrepresentation of the original. This "overexaggerated" form of music, as described by Robert, contrasts with the British style which Rietveld (2012: 224) suggests can act as a form of "musical memory" that reminds listeners of its historical roots in British and Jamaican dub reggae. Intriguingly, there are two forms of transatlantic connection that exist here; not only has original dubstep informed the creative practice of American producers, but the original British version is itself deeply rooted in Afro-Caribbean music and what Christodoulou (2020) refers to as 'Black Atlantic cultural practice', referencing Paul Gilroy's (1993) seminal work. Boothby (2020: 216) points specifically to the typical removal of frequencies between 3kHz

and 6kHz in original dubstep designed to give tracks an “eerie hollowed-out feel” that remains a uniquely British element of production. As directly reflected on by Robert

UK, or original dubstep, is all about the groove. It has its roots in the Jamaican [music] scene...you have the sub that’s almost driving, like a pulsating heartbeat. Whereas the American dubstep is that loud, metal, head-bangy [sound]. That’s the big difference between the two. Subtly, versus energy. (Robert)

Given the differences between the two styles and the arguably abrasive nature of some American dubstep, it is unsurprising that many fans of the original British version perceive this stylistic development to be negative progress. The now global nature of dubstep often leads to style comparisons emerging as authenticity debates between British and American producers and their audiences. Indeed, D’Errico (2015: 1) notes how some commentators attempt to transcend the authenticity debate altogether, “arguing for the invincibility of British dubstep as a style that is above influence, unable to be ‘corrupted’ or ‘copied’ by a global community”. In this context, he posits that dubstep’s association with South London produces the notion of a ‘Croydon Sound’ that stands as a “frozen monument...as it is eternally embalmed as a ‘national’ style” (ibid.). Rishi and Tom seemed to follow this line of thought.

[Music] can evoke a [sense of] place, like early dubstep to London. I didn’t even need to know that dubstep was from London, it has that brutal coldness to it, that is just so intrinsically identifiable with South London, it almost screams it without having any lyrics most of the time. (Rishi)

My family bloodline is Croydon born and bred, so I witnessed the rise of dubstep in the middle of Croydon basically, I saw Skream go from no one to someone...It was garage that they wanted to take back...I think certain sounds are undeniably from certain places, like dubstep and Croydon, for example. (Tom)

Rishi also noted how he thought that “dubstep was almost [a] political response to the pretend happiness of the UK garage years during ‘bling’ and all the rest of it”. This points again to certain EDM genres perhaps reflecting the general mood or feeling of Britain, particularly at the time of their conception. Tom’s suggestion that he bore witness to the rise of dubstep in South London stands at odds with D’Errico’s (2015) somewhat dismissive argument that the Croydon Sound is better viewed as an ‘origin myth’, rather than a traceable story. Ties between original dubstep and South London are perhaps so strong because of the genre’s decreasing popularity towards the end of the 2000s, around the time that music was starting to be widely disseminated via the internet. Although Reynold’s (2010: 74) description of original dubstep purists as “history boys [set on] reactivating Nineties vibes” seems unnecessary, scholars critical of new styles would do well to note his stance on the inevitability of musical evolution within EDM and its digital production. Comparing international variations of the same genre has proven to be a useful site for recognising EDM that evokes a sense of place in its sound. The evidence presented indicates that within dubstep, there are clear identifiable and perceived musical qualities that demonstrate what my participants call the ‘UK sound’.

#### **4.5 Bristol**

The suggestion that regions or cities within a nation can generate a distinguishable ‘sound’ is common within geographical studies of music, and seemingly more thoroughly researched than the possible existence of a sound with a national quality. Focusing on Britain alone, work has been conducted on the relations between heavy metal and Birmingham (Harrison, 2010), how both Joy Division and the ‘Madchester’ scene each came to sound like Manchester (Nevarez, 2013; Halfacree & Kitchin, 1996), and most relevant to this section, Henning & Hyder (2015) have attempted to locate the ‘Bristol Sound’. I suggest that studying locality and its significance in the production of supposedly unique styles can



also work towards marking out music with a British quality. That said, there was an intriguing division between respondents as to whether or not certain forms of EDM should be located within cities at all. Bristol was the focal point of this debate, possibly because of its status as an important musical place and site on Britain's map of musical cultural heritage, named by the Performing Rights Society (PRS) as the country's 'most musical city' in 2010 (Henning & Hyder, 2015). The diversity of opinions ranged from Sabrina stating that "it's a fact that Bristol is the home of drum & bass", with Tom asserting the opposite by saying, "no one can tell me that drum & bass started in Bristol". Most importantly, conversations regarding city-specific sounds were all firmly situated within the ongoing 'UK sound' narrative. In other words, the proposal that a genre such as drum & bass was born and bred in Bristol validated its inclusion within the wider national bracket, as opposed to separating it. My argument here is that attempting to ground a sound within a city or region seemed to act more broadly as a method of reaffirming its Britishness. Intriguingly, the notion of subnational sounds did not appear to be centred around individuality, or being 'not London', as was once the case with the likes of music stemming from Manchester and Liverpool (Cohen, 1991). This perhaps traces back to Fraser's (2012) assertion that a culture of cooperation exists within EDM scenes, particularly within underground communities that traditionally have stood in opposition to the mainstream.

As is a running theme, interviewees suggested there are both real and imagined qualities that can identify certain forms of EDM as either stemming from Bristol, or having a strong association with it. Drum & bass was the focus, although Rory, a resident of Chippenham about 15 miles from Bristol, touched on a wider range of genres. Harry stated that the music he listens to made by Bristol-based producers often has "punchy drums", but doesn't lose that "minimal aspect", with Kenny mentioning that "Bristol's famous for having wobbly, wonky basslines". Harry coined the term for a drum & bass track featuring all three of these elements as "the Bristol roller", a phrase which implies the combination of a carefully

constructed drum pattern, often involving breakbeats, and a captivating bassline that can make a track seem like it just keeps ‘rolling’ on. For a perfect example of this type of production that, perhaps by no coincidence, shares the name of the city it supposedly sounds like, see Technimatic’s (2017) ‘Bristol (Break Remix)’. The song’s sharp drums and ‘wobble bass’, whereby two low-frequency oscillators are put out of sync with each other to produce the effect of a sound wave wobbling (D’Errico, 2015), fit directly with how my participants perceived drum & bass from the city to sound. Discussing dubstep while describing the perceived aesthetic of Bristolian music, Rory noted how “there’s a trend of sticking things through reverb and tape delays” which can make music “sound a lot more warm, a lot more dark and more sparse as well”. The production techniques mentioned there are typical of what Rishi described as Bristol’s “massive dub, reggae [and] sound system culture”, which he went on to suggest influences “all sorts of different genres, because it becomes a part of the culture [and] of the Bristol sound”. These comments directly align with Henning & Hyder’s (2015: 99) assertion that “the Bristol sound label tends to ignore genre differences, and is often used to describe a wide range of music from the city, including drum & bass, jungle, dub reggae and dubstep”. As is the case with most post-rave genres that constitute Reynolds’ (2013) Hardcore Continuum, all the above styles share powerful basslines as their sonic constant.

Several interviewees pointed to the significance of prominent artists, record labels they have started, and ‘collectives’ they may be a part of in determining the sound of a city. These comments follow traditional urban geography debates regarding the importance of cities in providing the concrete spaces for musical creativity, and creative networks more broadly, to flourish (Watson et al., 2009). Indeed, localised creative practice appears to be central to the generation of a supposedly city-specific sound. When discussing what Bristol drum & bass might sound like, a small group of producers received frequent mentions. Chris noted how “if I listen to Dillinja, or DLR, or The Sauce, I definitely feel like I’m in

Bristol". Harry also recognised how music similar to that created by Bristol-based artist DLR "doesn't really crop up as much in any other part of the country aside from Bristol", because his record label attracts so much attention from other producers making a similar sound. Kenny agreed with this by stating that "DLR, Break and Ill Truth, the whole Sofa Sound crew" all sound like Bristol to him, with the latter being the name of DLR's record label and collective. Artists DLR and Break, who both reside in Bristol and have frequently collaborated as their discographies indicate, seem to have played a fundamental role in constructing what Harry earlier described as "the Bristol roller" – the dominant sound that my interviewees seemed to associate with the city. For another example of this style, see Break, DLR and Randall's (2018) collaboration 'Song and Dance'. Indeed, Bristol appears to be a thriving 'cultural space' (Connell & Gibson, 2003), driven by "musical praxis and the alliances which support musical scenes and performance spaces" (Watson et al., 2009: 863). The arguably distinct sound described by some interviewees is the result of "vibrant combinations of venues, local production and methods of information flow and exchange" (Connell & Gibson, 2003: 102) between artists.

Chris made yet another reference to the same group of producers, but with the intriguing suggestion that the internet has impacted the extent to which a certain style can be said to sound like a city. It appears that the ever increasing connectivity between places and the creative individuals who inhabit them can make it difficult to locate 'sounds', in comparison to when the likes of Halfacree & Kitchin (1996) were writing, for example. Chris stated that DLR "was making music way back, or at least in the early stages of the internet", going on to argue that "20 [or] 30 years ago" the idea that cities have their own unique sound might have been more applicable. In the same context, Rory noted how

I wasn't there in the 90s, but I listen to music from the 90s, more the early 2000s, [and] you can definitely hear different themes. I think now the internet [exists] it's become more blended. (Rory)

Finally, Theo suggested that “the labels do push [the sound] quite a lot”, noticing how Portuguese producer Molecular who has released on DLR’s record label is “not even from Bristol, but [his] music [is] so in line with their kind of sound”. This is compelling, given that Verboord & van Noord (2016) state that artist clustering may reduce in particular localities now that internet-based connectivity means that physical proximity, and perhaps even location more broadly, are becoming less important within popular music. Following this theme, some participants clearly disagreed with the suggestion that cities can have their own sound.

As much as I agree that Bristol currently has the most thriving bass music scene in the whole of the UK, that can’t be denied, I also think that it definitely hasn’t always. I remember Bristol...four or five years ago was nowhere near as rammed for the bass music stuff. (Tom)

I don’t really like talking about sounds specifically tied to a [city]...In a broader sense it’s better to look at it as a British thing. I don’t think it’s as easy as it was, even five or six years ago, to say “this is a Bristol thing”. (Rory)

Tom appeared to tie the notion of scene (Currid, 2009) to the existence of a localised sound, suggesting that the only relatively recent popularity of EDM events in Bristol meant that he struggled to think of the city as exhibiting a clear style of its own. Rory reflected on his previous views expressed about the internet, returning to conceptualising certain forms of EDM as evoking a sense of place in their sound on a national scale, as opposed to regional.

Henning & Hyder’s (2015: 106) work on ‘locating the Bristol sound’ in fact refers to a research project they are conducting set on “understanding how the live independent music scene in Bristol might be recorded, archived and historicised”. Although Connell & Gibson (2003) seem dismissive in arguing that a coherent Bristol sound does not exist, their suggestion that the latter is a social construction should not be viewed in

a negative light. Indeed, a city's sound might be best conceived as a cultural metaphor that articulates a strong sense of authenticity and creativity with that place, stemming from local practices. In the case of dubstep, jungle and drum & bass, my participants who argued for the 'sound' of a British city were often reinforcing broader rhetoric that points to a national sound.

#### **4.6 Placelessness**

Pertinent to the works of Leyshon (2014) and Watson (2014), several participants alluded to the suggestion that at times EDM might be better described as not explicitly 'placed'. Raising this notion does not disvalue all the work that has come before it. Rather, I posit that the ideation of music as a placeless phenomenon, amidst maintained national discourse, reflects the dialectical tension of universality and particularity that has long been identified within music (Leyshon et al., 1995). Indeed, EDM can be recognised as simultaneously global and local. Whilst music can be viewed as bound to places, albeit at a range of different scales, it is also a 'universal language' of sorts. Thus, I realise that asserting the importance of place to music should not reduce the concept of place to a physically defined area (Morley, 1991), be that a specific city or the nation as a whole. Rishi and Sabrina seemed most keen on this idea.

Music in all its forms is an ethereal philosophical concept that can be applied and introduced into any place...I'm very much for the belief that music has no bounds whatsoever...Once it's been created and it's out there, it becomes its own thing for anyone in the world to apply their own meanings and attachments to. (Rishi)

I don't think [music] makes me think of a place, but it makes me think of a time...Music doesn't belong anywhere, it only belongs somewhere if you feel it...Music can be born somewhere but keeps evolving. (Sabrina)

Following a similar line of thought to Sabrina, Rory suggested that he definitely believed there to be a broader relationship between EDM and place, but stated that “it’s also dependent on the timescale you’re looking at”, noting how “if you were looking at the 1990s you’d easily be able to identify different scenes and the cities they [came] from”. Interviewees presenting the importance of time when discussing matters of place within music again reflects the proposition that digitalisation and internet-based media have perhaps altered the meaning of geography within the music industry (Verboord & van Noord, 2016). Sabrina’s argument for the link between music and ‘feeling’ something is compelling in light of Frith’s (1996: 278) statement that “memories dance with music too...[music is] rootless, cut free from any originating time and place, [yet] rooted in the needs, movement, and imagination of the listener”.

As reflected on in my chapter introduction, although my interviewees unanimously agreed that certain forms of EDM are a ‘British thing’, many found it initially difficult to establish what this really meant. The answers I received which point to both placelessness and the existence of a national sound reflect the position of my participants as devoted and well-informed musical people, but of course without knowledge of ideas that academics have taken to pursuing. Their comments offer an interesting insight into everyday notions of place. Moreover, comments regarding placelessness often came immediately after discussions focused on the relationship between EDM and individual cities in Britain. This meant some respondents appeared to imply that the notion of EDM as exhibiting a national quality was, in their eyes, synonymous with it not having a particular relation with (a particular) place. This is exemplified by Rory initially suggesting that he didn’t “really like talking about [music] specifically tied to a place”, but shortly afterwards suggesting that it’s best to conceive of dubstep, jungle and drum & bass “as a British thing”. Rather than suggesting that certain forms of EDM are completely placeless, I believe my interviewees were attempting to articulate the important dimension of personal experience and subjectivity within

music, that does not at all disvalue its real and theoretical relations with place.

#### **4.7 Conclusion**

This chapter has demonstrated that certain forms of EDM can evoke a sense of place in the way that they sound. The notion of place within EDM is constructed and understood in a variety of real, imagined and personal ways by people who engage with it. As indicated by my participants, drum & bass, dubstep and jungle represent three core examples of music that, to them, exhibits a British quality and evokes a sense of place at both a national and sometimes subnational scale. It appears that Simon Reynolds' (2013) *Hardcore Continuum* is, so far, the best conceptualisation of a lineage of EDM genres that stemmed from the British rave scene and the subcultural transformation it resulted in. As stated by Reynolds (2013: 1), "in a profound sense, underneath two decades of relentless sonic mutation, this is the same music, the same culture". Through my interviewees' responses, I have shown that this continuum of interconnected musical tradition, subcultural practice, 'beat science' and 'bass pressure' can be theoretically located within Britain, despite the now global popularity of the styles in question. This music has audible characteristics that create a perceivable 'British' aesthetic, consistently featuring sampled and intricately rearranged breakbeats, powerful basslines, and the chattering voices of MCs when played live. Very strong scenes were identified in London and Bristol, although devoted listenership spans far beyond these regions. Drum & bass, dubstep and jungle remind EDM fans of the rave scene, and the feeling of Britishness attached to their cultural memory of it, in turn representing the latest evolution of a range of EDM styles that were originally created in Britain, albeit often through taking music and influence from America and Afro-Caribbean countries. The national rhetoric maintained by the people of EDM serves to ground what were once underground communities amidst the progressive globalisation of music. Maintaining

the existence of a UK sound reaffirms origin stories related to the nation's rich cultural heritage, serving to mark out Britain as an important place for EDM in the face of the now global popularity of the genres in question.

The sound of a city or a nation is perhaps best conceived as a sonic and cultural metaphor that articulates a strong sense of authenticity and creativity associated with that place. For another example of this mode of thinking, see Bader & Scharenberg's (2010) work on 'The Sound of Berlin', which discusses the importance of the city's dynamic subculture and range of thriving music scenes, instead of arguing for the existence of a style of music that may have originated there. Of course, however, specific techniques and ways of musical thinking can, and often do, stem from a place and its embedded creative networks, resulting in the generation of a particular sound that really can be seen to have come from somewhere. Indeed, the existence of a 'UK sound' within EDM lies at the nexus of real and imagined musical qualities that work together to evoke a sense of place. It is worth noting that the UK/British sound narrative I have presented is possibly another iteration of the longstanding tradition whereby discourse which originated in England ends up speaking for a greater geographic area than it maybe ought to. In this case, two different geographic areas that my participants chose to reference interchangeably, which I have followed them in doing to best represent their language and way of thinking. However, instead of purveying a hierarchical relation between England and the rest of the UK, I suggest that this all-encompassing national rhetoric is more broadly reflective of the foundational culture of cooperation and cohesion that exists within EDM (Fraser, 2012), which, much like the music, can be traced back to the rave scene. The Hardcore Continuum is evidently not *the* sound of the UK. Rather, music fans and artists perceive the array of genres it accounts for to sound *like* the UK. Knowing about and affiliating oneself with this form of national music appears to act as a form of deeper belonging for the people of EDM, as opposed to what might initially come across as an unusual form of patriotism.



## **5.0 The Online Place of Electronic Dance Music During a Global Pandemic**

This chapter addresses the role of EDM livestreams as cultural outlets for musical creativity throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. In turn, I position the internet as a fluid creative network and important place for music at a time of crisis. Following the closure of clubs, pubs and bars in the UK, all individuals I interviewed noticed a significant and almost immediate increase in the number of EDM livestreams occurring. As noted by Watson et al. (2009: 871), “dance music producers [and DJs] have traditionally been quick to embrace new technologies and modes of production”, which proved to be no different when faced with the adversity that lockdown posed. The already digital nature of EDM, its deep-rooted DIY culture, and the spatially diffuse nature of its livestreamed performances produce an important area for contemporary research. EDM livestreams present a timely and important stepping off point for geographical inquiry. The internet has acted as a support mechanism for the creative practices of the people of EDM in real physical space for a significant length of time (Gibson, 1999). However, only in the last 18 months did online platforms and virtual space become the primary outlet for creative output.

The ability of a livestream to transcend conventional geographic barriers converts the practice of performing to an audience from a typically intimate experience – even at the scale of a large nightclub when considering corporeal proximity – to a detached and alienated one for both the artist and the consumer. Livestreams provide a visual and aural connection between two different places. In the context of lockdown restrictions, these sites either side of the online portal were often not typically associated with EDM performance, such as artists and consumers’ homes, closed and empty live music venues, and outdoor areas. For a period of time, livestreams both physically and in an

imagined sense remapped the ways in which EDM gives meaning to individuals and their social surroundings (Vandenberg et al., 2021).

Mediated performances helped maintain a collective memory of the live music experience, and held in place people's desire to return to nightclubs and venues once the pandemic was over. Although streams were enjoyed by thousands of music fans and gave practitioners a sense of purpose during a time of significant difficulty, the spatial transition from live music venues to the internet was always assumed to be reversible. Lockdown had a profound effect not only on spaces of musical creativity and the physicality of place within EDM, but also on the spaces which constructed the everyday lives of the British public. My participants indicated that they perceived livestreams as a placeholder for traditional live music events, or 'the real thing', as they often described the latter.

### **5.1 The livestream: A cultural outlet**

After a short spoken introduction, a woman dressed in a beige trench coat walks towards the back doors of a building with Victorian architecture in central London. Inside the industrial-looking space, a tower of red LED light strips stands around 12 feet tall behind the DJ booth, held in place by metal trussing connected to a support arch that holds up the building's cavernous roof. The stage becomes shrouded in smoke, which catches the light emitted by the LED strips creating an atmospheric red glow around the DJ, who is now wearing a similarly red shirt. Over one thousand people eagerly look on as she presses play on her first track. The sound of a harsh and energetic synthesiser can now be heard. The amount of smoke engulfing the booth begins to intensify and four powerful beams of white light emerge, shooting straight out either side of the DJ and cutting through the misty setting. The track gradually builds to include sharp hi-hats and a powerful, pulsating kick drum. Eventually reaching its crescendo, the music becomes driven by a thumping bassline, a complex percussion arrangement, and an arpeggiated 'acid' synth sound. The tower of LED lights has now turned

to a shade of electric blue, and begins to strobe as the tempo of the music increases.

Fig. 4 – A screenshot of object blue’s performance from inside Smithfield Market in East London, as part of the Fabric London Unlocked series. Livestream date: 28<sup>th</sup> March 2021. (Fabric London, 2021)



To an unknowing reader, the image detailed above of a performer and their audience could describe an almost endless number of traditional live EDM events. However, the reality of the segment is a description of a livestream where the DJ was alone in her performance space, aside from a production crew and some passers-by, and the audience were watching from computer screens or mobile devices. This specific stream featured Tokyo-born and now London-based DJ ‘object blue’ (Resident Advisor, 2021), playing a set from the main entrance hall of Smithfield Market in Farringdon (see Fig. 4) which has been viewed nearly 25,000 times across Facebook and YouTube at the time of writing. Her performance was broadcast on the 28<sup>th</sup> of March 2021, relatively near to the end of the UK’s 18-month period of restrictions, and was part of a series of livestreams curated by Fabric London, a well-established nightclub often regarded as the institutional home of dance music in Britain. A complex web of vastly varied livestream content exists,

encompassing a wide range of geographical locations and motivations behind the delivery of livestreamed performances.

From Durdle Door to Printworks London, Corfe Castle to the Royal Albert Hall, and the bedroom to the kitchen, by the time social distancing restrictions were lifted in the UK, there appeared to be few remaining sites that someone had not at least considered broadcasting a stream from. The lockdown livestreams can loosely be organised by the physical locations in which they took place. Most notably, the home, empty nightclubs and other live music venues, and a range of outdoor locations were frequently seen on the screens of music fans throughout the pandemic. Pioneering creative individuals and organisations, such as Fabric, also took EDM to some more curious spaces, such as the Victoria & Albert Museum and the glass walkway above Tower Bridge (see Fabric London, 2021).

Although Fraser & Ettliger's (2008: 1649) suggestion that "drum & bass events rarely occur in places designed for the music" seems somewhat sweeping in the context of their overview of London's clubland in the late 2000s, this notion transpired to be highly relevant in the context of lockdown. Expanding their statement to British EDM as a whole, livestreams proved to be fleeting and spatially diffuse cultural outlets, with little to no discrimination as to where was an appropriate site to broadcast from. As indicated by the screenshots of livestream webpages, this section is primarily focused on YouTube and Facebook as livestreaming platforms. Whilst Twitch is arguably the premier social media platform solely oriented around livestreaming, with more minutes of programming watched per user per month than YouTube (Thomas, 2020), interviewees indicated the majority of livestreams they had watched were on YouTube or Facebook. This perhaps reflects the pre-existence of YouTube channels with a large number of subscribers and Facebook groups with significant numbers of active members dedicated to EDM.

## 5.2 Location and visuals

A point of general agreement among interviewees was that the visual element of a performance was a significant motivating factor in their consumption of content. More specifically, the location a performer was physically situated in had a noticeable impact on how enjoyable a livestream was, and how likely participants were to engage with it. When asked if his experience of a stream was influenced by the location it took place in, Kenny asserted that

If I was going to be totally devout, I'd probably say "no, [the] music is the most important thing, I don't care about where it is, you could perform it in a shed and I'd still watch it". That sort of rings true, it is all about the music, but the production is the entertainment...I think there's a very strong link there between people actually watching it and enjoying it more if the stream is interesting, and the location is interesting. (Kenny)

In a typical live music context, the production of an event refers to the elements in place that constitute the overall experience beyond the music itself, such as sound systems and lighting. However, in the frequent absence of these aspects from livestreams, Kenny referred to the chosen location as part of the production of a performance. Raising the environment in which he often consumed livestreams, Harry agreed by noting

A lot of the time streams are put on in the living room, when we've got all of our friends round, or in someone's bedroom. If it's aesthetically pleasing and interesting to watch as well as there being good music, then it's the best of both worlds. (Harry)

Some interviewees chose to reflect more broadly on the visual element of livestreams without specific reference to the location they were filmed in. After watching a performance from an American producer called 'G Jones' as part of Proximity Music's 'Digital Mirage' online festival, Robert described how

That set, it blew my mind. Even watching it just on my computer screen, it was incredible. The visuals and the way he incorporated [them] into his set. (Robert)

The set Robert mentioned featured G Jones DJing from what appeared to be his own home, with a projector pointed onto the wall behind him displaying time-synced animations to the music he was playing. After making a brief reference to the music production one might find at a music festival, Robert then summarised that “visuals do very much play into if I want to see [a performance] or not”. However, the fact that many livestreams lacked the same level of production as one might find at a traditional live music event presented a problem for Rishi.

If it's a livestream it's obviously not about the sound as much, it's also about the visuals. And I think that's a thing that a lot of...these streams failed to consider. With people watching it, you need to have something to [actually] watch. (Rishi)

The vast range of content available over lockdown meant that not everyone consumed the same livestreams, resulting in very different experiences. In the same vein, Tom raised an intriguing counterpoint to the general suggestion that the visual element and location were key.

I think the vibe [of a livestream] is far more important than the initial striking image. Because the initial striking image, all that is for someone to scroll down and be like “oh what the fuck is this”. It's boring man. (Tom)

This take appeared to be based on Tom's position as a full-time music producer and DJ, having played a variety of his own livestreams over the course of the pandemic. In contrast to performances filmed in dramatic environments, particularly ones outdoors, Tom suggested that his favourite set was one played from within a studio. He outlined how “there [were] five or six of us in there, everyone's having a few beers, the rig was loud, there was a vibe in that room which you [wouldn't] get elsewhere”. Participants often made sure to point to the importance of ‘the music’ in their consumption of streams. This perhaps reflects the

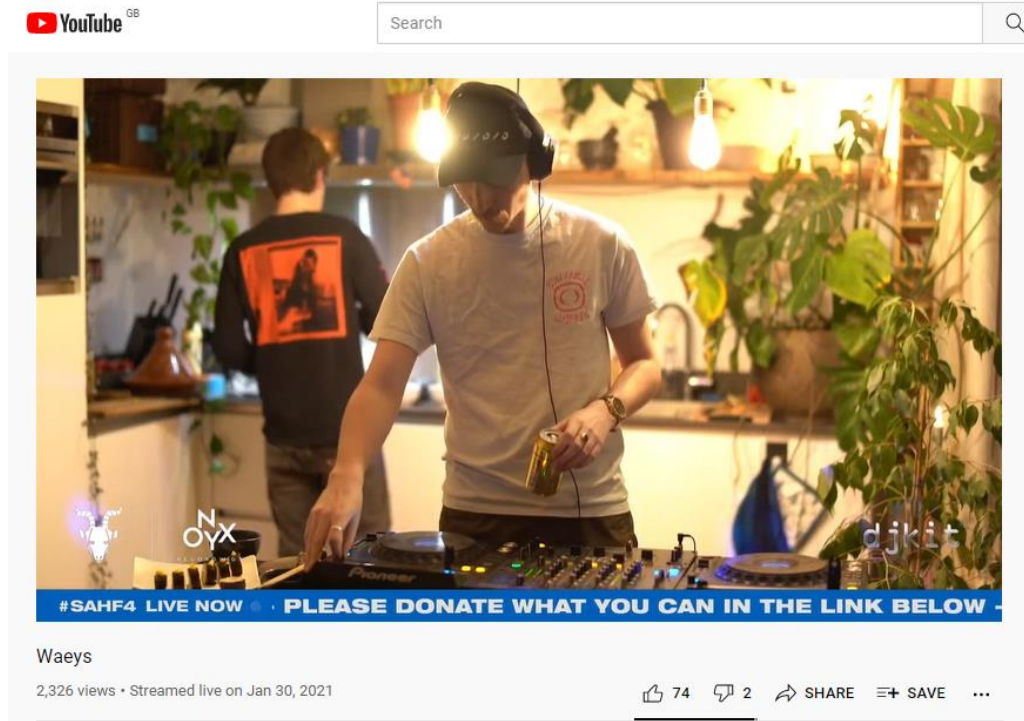
position of my interviewees as devoted EDM fans, making sure to clarify that they would never be motivated to watch a livestream purely based on its visual element with music they did not like. Interviewees displayed differing perspectives on the physical siting of livestreams, highlighting the importance of understanding the various spaces in which musical creativity occurred over lockdown, and of geographical location within live music (Verboord & van Noord, 2016).

### **5.2.1 The home**

Surrounded by house plants, a man wearing a white t-shirt stands in front of club-standard Pioneer CDJs that seem somewhat out of place set up inside his kitchen. A fast paced drum pattern can immediately be heard with melodic strings slowly building in the background of the track. A second man dressed in black enters the kitchen behind the DJ, and appears to start cooking while dancing along to the record currently playing. A small disco light projects rapidly spinning blue circles around the room. After a few minutes, the camera angle changes to a downward pointing view of the space, revealing that the man not DJing is in fact preparing sushi, while his friend continues to DJ from a homemade booth constructed using a small dining table. Around halfway through the performance, the angle changes once more to bizarrely reveal a close-up shot of the food that has been prepared. Meanwhile, quite aggressive, snappy, minimal drum & bass is playing as the only audio from the video.

Interviewees consistently recognised the home as an important site for musical creativity throughout lockdown. Whilst my previous account of object blue's performance outlined a livestream that took place in a special venue in central London, the reality for the large majority of EDM practitioners was very different. Indeed, the scene above describes a performance by Amsterdam-based producer Waeys (see fig. 5) – one of an uncountable number of livestreams broadcast from various rooms in artists' homes. Only a lucky few were either invited by an organisation to do a stream in an unusual location, or could pay to do so themselves.

Fig. 5 – A screenshot of Waeys playing the Stay At Home Festival Part IV. This was the fourth rendition of the online festival. Livestream date: 30<sup>th</sup> January 2021. (Goat Shed, 2021).



I suggest that the home can be viewed as a site of incredible creativity, performance and DIY culture in the context of lockdown. The measures for a connected and creative period of collective isolation were already in place for the people of EDM. The almost entirely digital nature of the music, and the widespread availability and ownership of the technology needed for the production of a livestream in its most basic form led to the establishment of the home as a pivotal creative and performative site. One of my interviewees was responsible for organising the ‘Stay At Home Festival’ (see Fig. 6), the first rendition of which (there were four in total) took place only two weeks after lockdown was implemented on March 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2020. At this point in time, restrictions did not permit leaving the house for reasons other than exercising once a day or purchasing essential items from shops. Reflecting on this period, Chris noted how

At first everyone was super interested in what DJs’ rooms looked like, and DJs’ houses. It really gave birth to this funny culture of



mocking people, for not having enough house plants. It was hilarious. In terms of the technology and what it provided; it really gave birth to this hugely intimate thing. (Chris)

In other circumstances, the image of retreating into a solitary space to immerse oneself in creative practice might appear quite romantic (Hesmondhalgh, 1997). However, in the case of lockdown artists were initially left with no choice but to broadcast images of what would typically be a private set of spaces within their home if they wanted to perform to an audience. Lowe (2004) argues that bedrooms are one of the safest spaces in a domestic environment. Indeed, creative practitioners over lockdown arguably engaged in a form of subconscious resistance against the restrictive measures that lockdown placed on the arts, by continuing to perform from within their own homes.

Fig. 6 – The flyer for the first Stay At Home Festival livestream which took place only two weeks after music venues were forced to close their doors. (UKF, 2020)



While many interviewees fondly reminisced on the early era of lockdown livestreams, Chris noted that as time passed, interest in livestreams began to decrease, particularly those conducted from the home without an exciting visual element. With my interviews conducted in the Summer of 2021 over a year after lockdown was first implemented, participants'

frustration at still being presented with content that bore resemblance to their own everyday lives became apparent.

If it's just someone in their bedroom, you may as well mix it yourself. It's like living vicariously a bit. You don't want to watch someone else stuck in their bedroom because that's what you're currently doing. (Theo)

Although some DJs did stream directly from their bedroom, this notion is better perceived as a spatial metaphor for the DIY creative practices that have existed within EDM for many years, traditionally sited in the home (Hesmondhalgh, 1998). Specifically, "if punk's metaphor of access...was the garage, dance music's is the bedroom. The image refers to real changes in the availability, expense and sophistication of recording technology" (Hesmondhalgh, 1997: 174). Theo's comments came after a discussion about livestreams similar to those that Fabric organised for their London Unlocked series, which featured visually striking locations as raised previously. Rishi agreed with Theo on two separate points, first asserting that "for me personally, I would rather mix myself with my own music than watch a livestream", later stating that "[if it's] just a person in their room with their decks looking down, maybe with their logo in the background...just sort of nodding their head now and then...to me that's boring".

Rishi is a relatively established promoter and DJ within the EDM scene in Bristol, and Theo is currently an amateur producer and DJ, set on honing his craft and "[practicing] DJ-ing intensively at home...to demonstrate perseverance" (Reitsamer, 2011: 33) in search of potential future bookings. Notably, however, both suggested that they have the equipment necessary to DJ themselves at home, demonstrating the widespread availability and access to technology within EDM. However, Sabrina, an up-and-coming DJ from London who has launched into the early stages of her career in the wake of lockdown and the return of in-person events, described how she "got [her] decks in around May [2020],

but didn't really put anything out there until about August". Following this, Sabrina stated

I haven't done my own livestreams from home because I didn't have a proper setup. (Sabrina)

This view represents the flipside of broadcasting from home for some practitioners. Although the availability of music production and now DJing technology – namely DJ 'decks' – has vastly increased, these elements have always been *relatively* affordable, but most definitely not cheap (Ryan & Peterson, 1993). Interviewees made clear their contempt for being presented with livestreamed content sited in the home after over a year of being under restrictions. Whilst streams from rooms throughout the home (see Fig. 7) provided entertainment and a sense of intimate solidarity near the start of lockdown, the length of time that individuals had spent in their own homes meant livestreams from other locations, once restrictions had eased, were often a welcome change. Nonetheless, the home proved to be a site of significant creative and performative importance throughout lockdown, with new light shed on the role of the home in the context of traditional musical creative networks.

As a final note, although not specifically reflected on by my participants, a significant number of EDM livestreams were broadcast from 'home studios' (see fig. 8). The lessened need for vocal recording equipment in the production process and EDM's capacity to be created via downloaded software leads to a significant number of home studios existing, even when considering high profile artists (see Deadmau5's studio, for example). Therefore, while studios can be understood as spaces that centralise, control and channel creativity (Toynbee, 2000), this is not reserved for formal establishments that exist only as recording studios. The home plays an important role, which was made particularly clear by the number of artists that used their studio spaces to broadcast performances from.

Fig. 7 – A screenshot of Particle livestreaming from his home as part of Hospital Records' 'Royal Rumble' Hospitality House Party. Livestream date: 8<sup>th</sup> May 2020. (Hospital Records, 2020a)

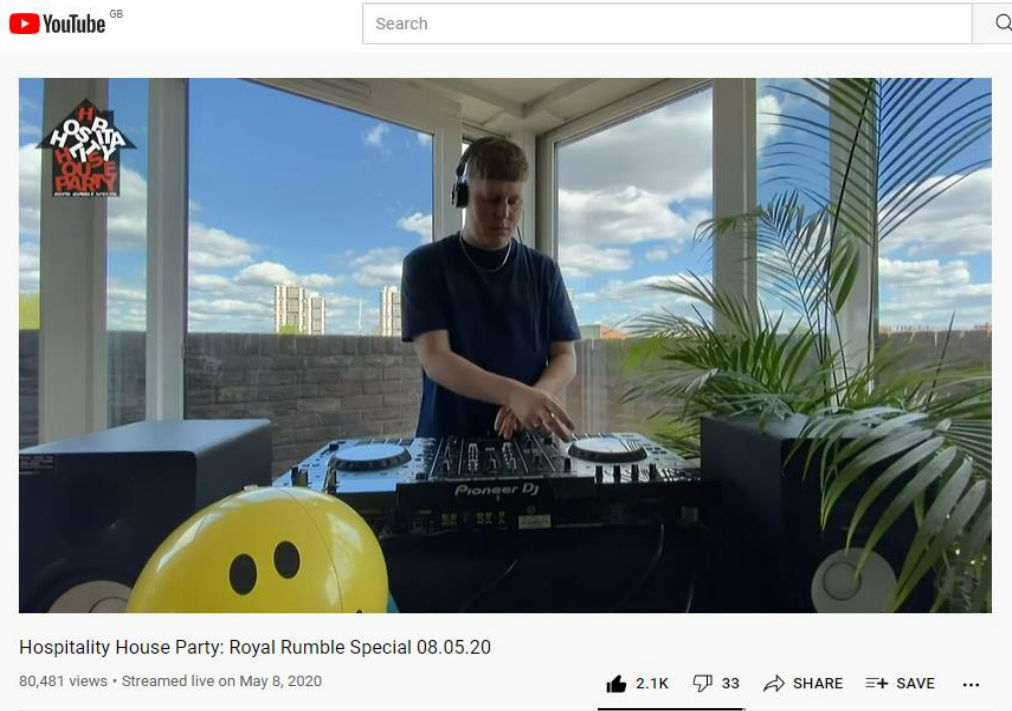
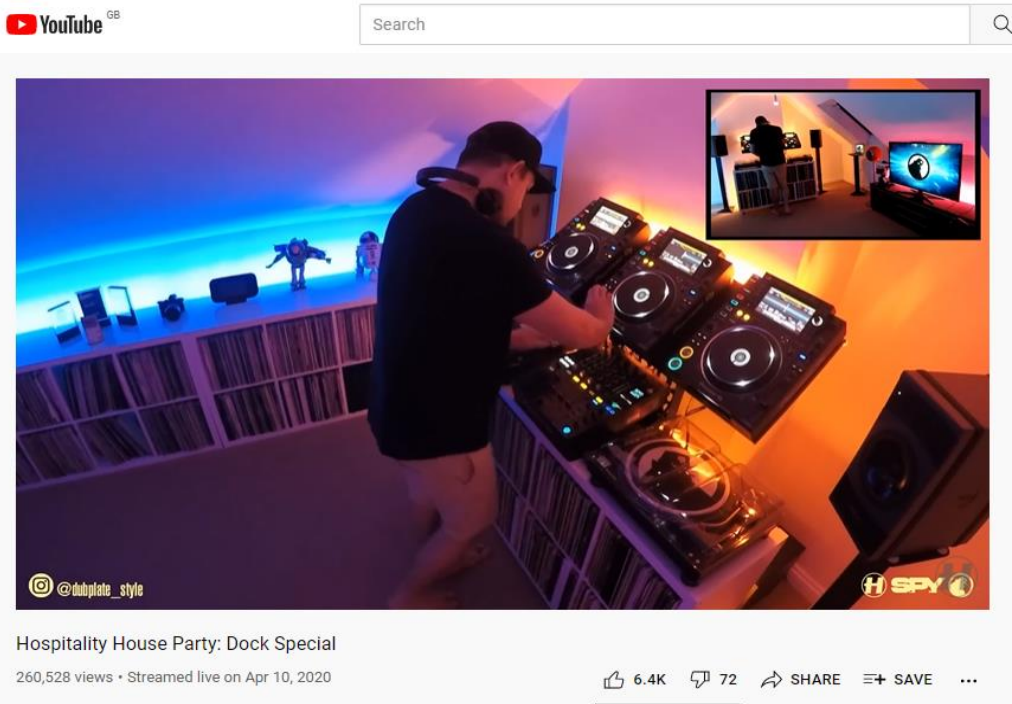


Fig. 8 – A screenshot of S.P.Y performing from his home studio as part of Hospital Records' Hospitality House Party. Livestream date: 10<sup>th</sup> April 2020. (Hospital Records, 2020b)



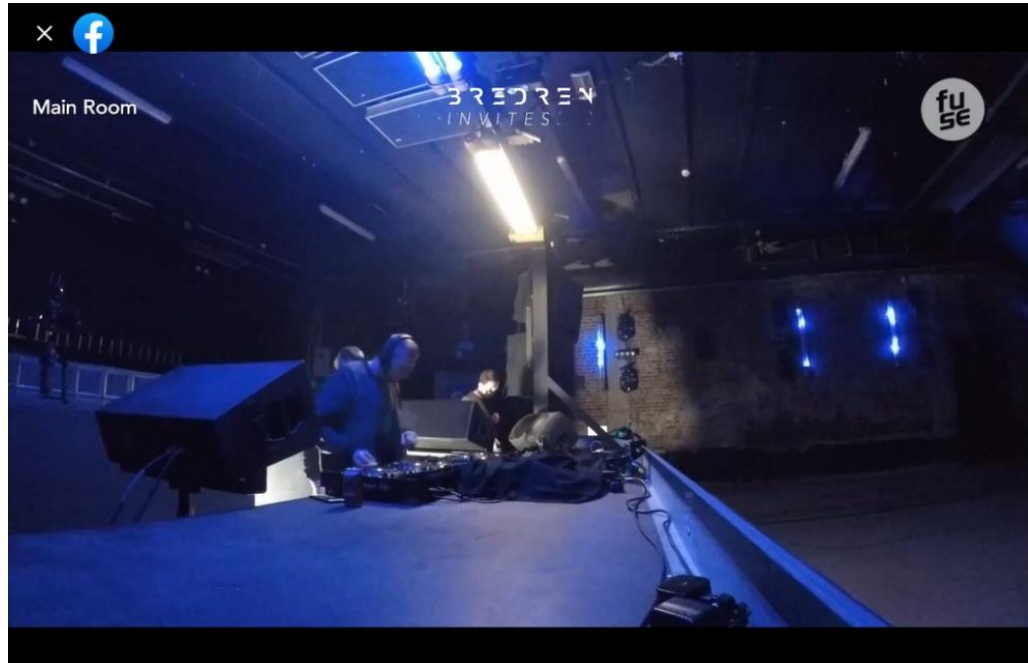
### 5.2.2 Empty clubs

A man stands in between two large monitors pointed directly at his head, shrouded in a blue glow. With little warning, a hard-hitting bassline can suddenly be heard, paired with a syncopated kick drum. Our view changes to a position from the back of what transpires to be a very large room, with rough brick walls covered in small spotlights. The full scale of the DJ booth can now be seen, which must be at least 20 foot wide. Black metal grilles cover its front, encasing a wall of subwoofers that are obscured from view. Three large speaker boxes hang from metal trussing either side of the stage, although it is impossible to tell if they are actually on. There was no delay in getting into the mix here, with the DJ already selecting his next record what feels like less than a minute into the first. Sharp hi-hats, a punchy snare drum and a rolling, dark bassline are the soundtrack for now.

My participants also reflected on the broadcasting of livestreams from closed nightclubs and other live music venues, amidst the search for striking spaces that would captivate the attention of consumers. (see Fig. 9). Although the image of an empty club appeared to provide some interviewees with a sense of nostalgia, the lack of an audience and the atmosphere that would typically be present in a live music space led to the format being relatively poorly received. In this case, the collective memory evoked of the live in-person experience seemed fundamentally intertwined with feelings of loss. Describing his experience of watching this type of livestream, Kenny stated

The livestreams that are from venues are kind of cool in a really sad way. I saw the CamelPhat one at Printworks. And it was just empty, you know. It made Printworks look small which is strange to say out loud...It was quite solemn I think, when they [had] some shots of the empty club with all the lights on. It just made you think that these [venues] are...liminal spaces, like an abandoned hotel. It feels like there should be people there but there's nothing...It's kind of a ghostly feeling. (Kenny)

Fig. 9 – A screenshot of the ‘Bredren Invites’ livestream, which took place inside an empty nightclub. Livestream date: 2<sup>nd</sup> April 2021. (Bredren, 2021)



The suggestion that dancefloors and nightclubs are liminal spaces (Matsinhe, 2009; Li, 2018) or sites for individuals to experience liminality (Gerrard, 2004) is well explored. However, lockdown and the lack of any physical presence within nightclubs beyond performers and livestream technicians temporarily gave a new meaning to this notion. Instead of the dancefloor acting as a site for escapism and the enjoyable disorientation that occurs in the middle of the experience of a night out, empty live music venues became places on the margin (Shields, 1991), far removed from the everyday lives of EDM fans. Viewing an empty nightclub from behind a screen shifted its purpose from providing “the spatial and temporary frame for liminal cracks to be occupied” (O’Grady, 2012: 100) to acting as the imagined space between consumers’ current situation and their desired destination. Viewers watched livestreams from the confines of their homes, creating a perception that empty and restricted music venues on a screen were an imagined liminal space in between their residence, and their eventual return to unrestricted, fully operational clubs. Kenny went on to explain how it felt to be the performer in this scenario.

I played one in Milton Keynes in Unit 9, which I played to an empty room except for the cameras and the production crew. And it felt really, really weird. It felt like we shouldn't be there, like the ghosts are watching you, and that you're an alien in that space. (Kenny)

This strange feeling was also experienced by Rishi, who described how when he was “watching a club livestream it's like, oh, they're gonna play some more drum & bass...With club ones it's just not a vibe. It doesn't feel right”. His comments came in the context of a discussion about the importance of the performer themselves, as well as the space in which they are sited, being engaging to watch. Rishi asserted that the only livestreams where he had “sat through and watched the whole thing” were from an artist named Marc Rebillet (see O'Reilly, 2019), whose performances of a wide variety of music better described as ‘electronic’ rather than EDM are based on live production using instruments, his own voice and looping hardware to make new music in the moment. Although a strong argument exists that the practice of DJing, blending songs together and taking listeners on an original journey through music stands as a creative process in itself (Rietveld, 2016), Rishi hinted that the club environment viewed as part of a livestream provided a level of predictability that the experience of watching the same performance in-person would not. Being removed from a nightclub, but viewing a performance taking place in one, meant the typically immersive and exciting sensation of watching a live DJ set became disproportionately mundane when mediated via the internet.

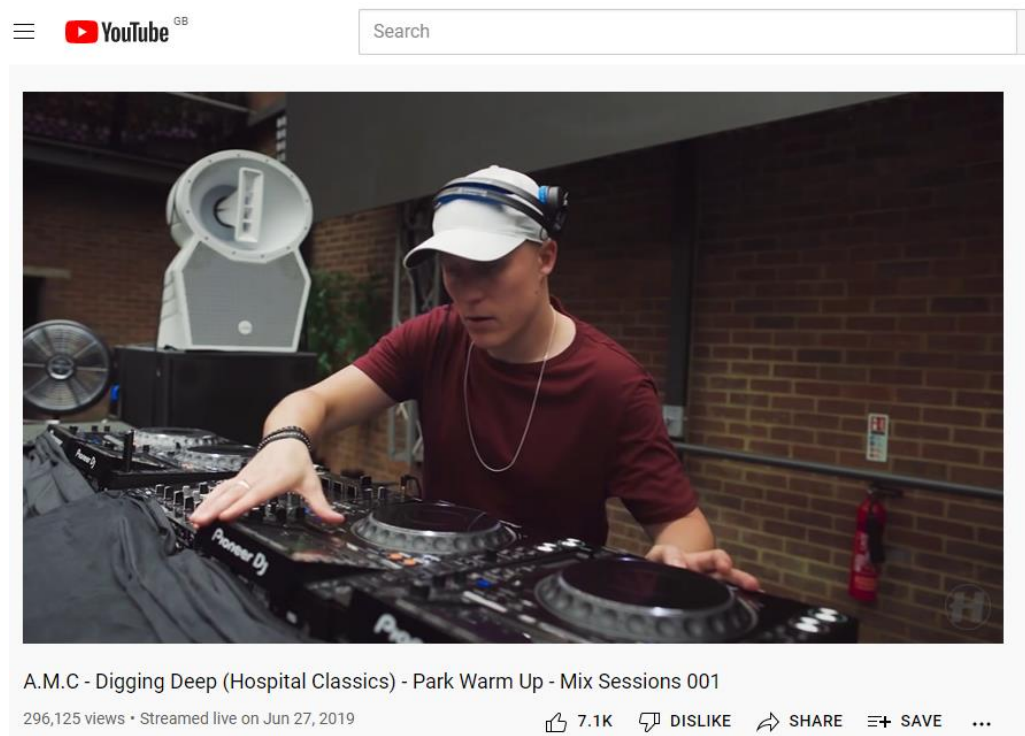
The digital and technological nature of EDM I have described meant the conditions for transitioning to an online world already existed to a significant extent. Kenny outlined a possible relationship between this suggestion, and livestreaming from empty nightclubs.

I was watching the A.M.C livestream that he did for Hospital Records [that] was streamed from Studio 338 in London, on their stage. I couldn't help but notice it was actually recorded before the coronavirus pandemic had hit, which means that Hospital Records

had already thought about this entertainment possibility and already piloted the idea of streaming from a venue. (Kenny)

Whilst this intriguing account supports Watson et al.'s (2009) assertion that the people of EDM have always been quick to embrace new technology and methods of production, it appears most likely a coincidence that some practitioners had already played sets from empty nightclubs, in this case as a promotional tool to advertise an upcoming music festival organised by Hospital Records in London (see fig. 10). In sum, not too dissimilar from opinions on livestreams broadcast from the home, participants recognised closed nightclubs as important sites of creativity and performance throughout the pandemic whilst also outlining their lack of resonance with this particular format, mostly for reasons oriented around loss and nostalgia. Although evidently entertaining to watch, livestreams from closed venues appeared to hit too close to home given the circumstances of lockdown, resulting in feelings of bittersweet reminiscence of the live music experience.

Fig. 10 – A.M.C's livestreamed performance from Studio 338 that Kenny described. The show was recorded over six months before the pandemic arrived in the UK. Livestream date: 27<sup>th</sup> June 2019. (Hospital Records, 2019)



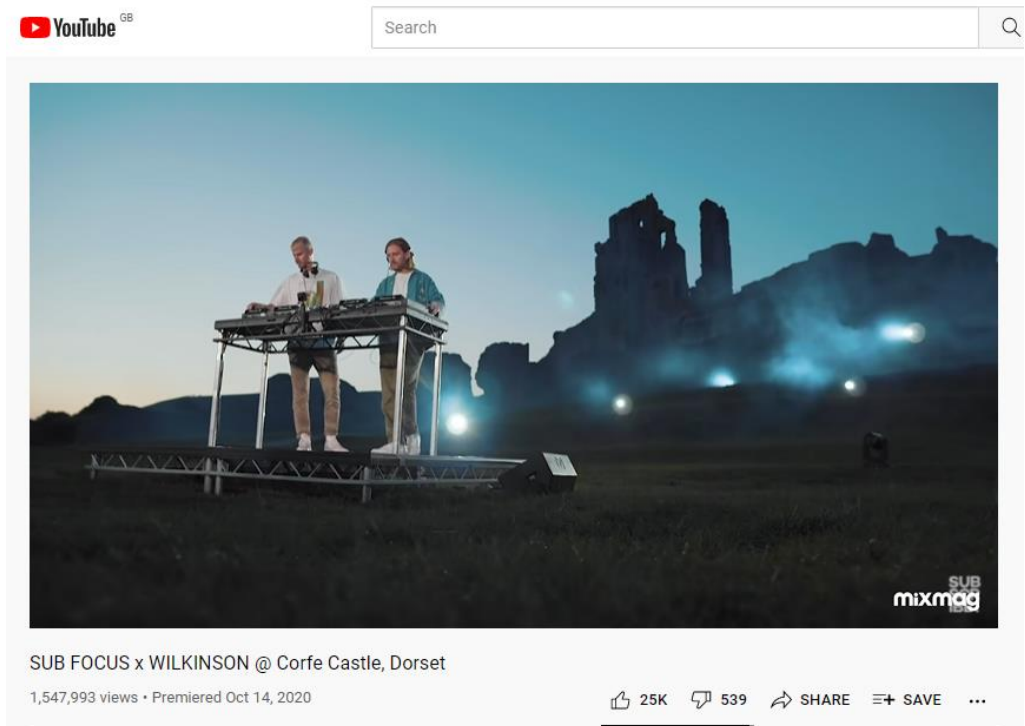
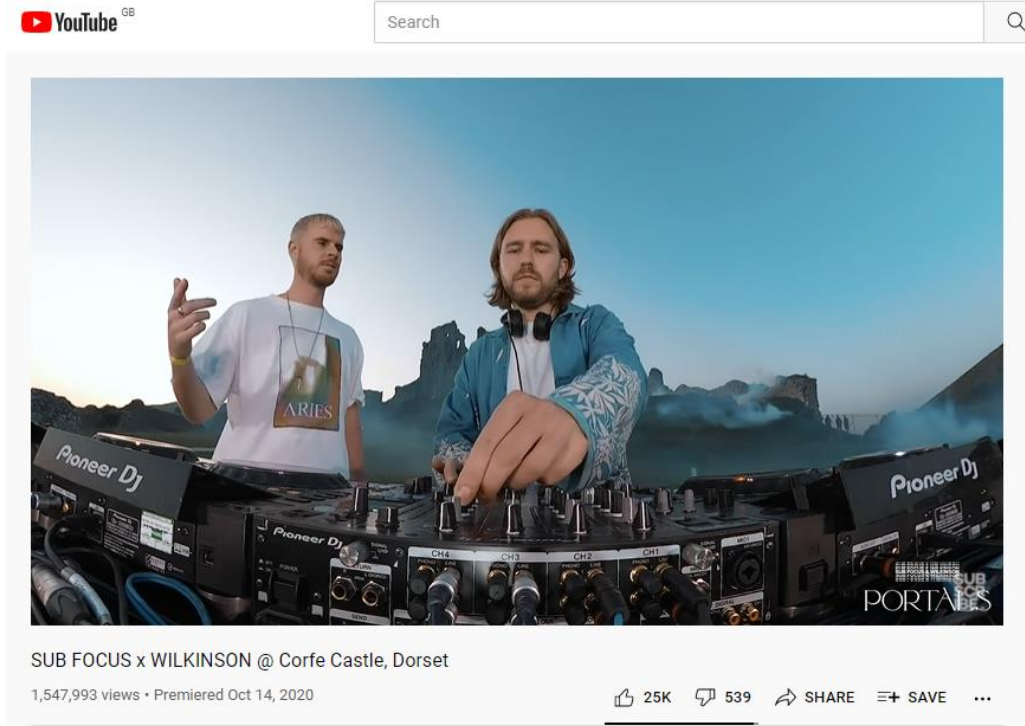


### 5.2.3 Outdoor areas

A striking aerial shot of Corfe Castle comes into view. The sky is completely cloudless and a shade of pale blue. Atmospheric synthesiser pads gradually become audible with an ethereal vocal layered over the top, as our perspective changes to the other side of the ruined structure. The shot switches once more, this time to ground level, to reveal two men stood behind a set of DJ decks on a raised platform in the middle of a large field, with the castle in the background. Another aerial view shows smoke machines billowing misty clouds into the air, which are swept across the picturesque scene by the wind. White lights are dotted around positioned on the hill which Corfe Castle sits on top of. The track reaches a breakdown phrase, and a carefully constructed high-pitched piano melody is at first all that can be heard. A female vocal starts up over the top, as a drum roll starts to build in intensity. The two DJs briefly turn around, observing the remarkable view behind them. After a short build up, the track drops and the white lights on the hill begin to strobe, lighting up the smoke surrounding the performers that provides an atmospheric visible texture to the air.

In addition to performances from the home and closed live music venues, my participants also identified livestreams broadcast from outdoor spaces, often in rural areas, as particularly prevalent over lockdown (see Fig. 11 and Fig. 12). Practitioners took EDM to a range of outdoor sites that would never typically witness performances – certain DJ sets were played practically in the middle of nowhere, with equipment powered by portable battery packs. Some interviewees agreed that the outdoor livestream format provided a refreshing break from the vicarious nature of content from the home, and the sense of disappointment and longing attached to videos from closed nightclubs. Theo noted how “it’s nice to see, even if you’re not there physically, [that] there’s still something out there that’s a bit more interesting”. Harry agreed with by asserting that “having someone else enjoying a really nice open space when you’re locked up in your bedroom is quite important”.

Fig. 11 & Fig. 12 – Two screenshots of Sub Focus and Wilkinson’s eye-catching livestream from Corfe Castle. At the time of writing, this performance has over one million views, and was one of the most commonly disuccsed streams by my participants. (Mixmag, 2020)



Kenny gave an example where he compared how appealing the livestream pictured above of two DJs in front of a castle would be, in comparison to one broadcast from someone's shed, for a consumer who wasn't necessarily familiar with EDM. It is intriguing that artists took to recording livestreams outdoors, given that EDM festivals in both urban and rural areas have witnessed a significant rise in popularity in recent years (Florida, 2019).

Livestreams in outdoor rural areas provide an alternative perspective to the overwhelming suggestion that urban areas and cities are of central importance to musical networks of creativity (Watson et al., 2009), and point to a need for a new form of relational understanding of the various spaces in which musical creativity occurs spread across a nation. Lockdown meant that practitioners were no longer able to interact with urban physical form in the same way as before, as places for meeting and creating like pubs and recording studios became temporarily unavailable. Although Watson et al.'s work focuses more on conventional music production, namely writing and making music, the notion that DJ sets themselves stand as a process of creative production (Rietveld, 2016) raises the importance of livestreams in this context. The existence of the outdoor stream format by no means disvalues the significance of cities, the physical urban form and the spaces within it. Rather, lockdown and the restrictions it placed on access to these sites meant practitioners were forced to search for increasingly unusual spaces to perform in to keep consumers engaged. However, as with both other livestream formats, some participants identified flaws. Tom outlined how

If you're a big artist...I don't want to see them in the studio, I want to see them at a castle. But for other artists, doing it [in front of] castles or out in a field, I just don't think there's much of an atmosphere to be honest.

Here, Tom suggested a link between the popularity of an artist and how dramatic or extravagant the setting of their livestreamed performance should be. Intriguingly, Tom and other interviewees like Rishi and Robert

pointed to the importance of the atmosphere that a livestream conveyed, despite the physical detachment of the audience from the performer. Indeed, the importance of “the experience and the atmosphere” (Brown & Knox, 2017: 238) at a live music event is well recognised within research on motivations for attending concerts, but not in the context of livestreams. In a traditional setting, the uniqueness of a live music experience is often measured through quality of atmosphere, performance and social interaction (Holt, 2010), which my interviewees indicated livestreams can only provide in an alienated or limited sense.

Through three case study examples of livestreams broadcast from the home, empty nightclubs and outdoor areas I have started an exploration of the many spaces in which musical creativity happened throughout the global pandemic when social proximity was not an option, broadly demonstrating how the physicality of place within EDM was impacted by lockdown. My participants appeared to indicate that not one of the three types of location was perfect for broadcasting a livestream from, pointing towards the challenges faced by creatives in offering an engaging reproduction of live music.

### **5.3 Performance motivations**

Behind every streamed performance during the pandemic lay some form of motivation for doing so on the part of the practitioner. Whilst livestreams evoked a collective memory of the live music experience for consumers, they also represented a way for artists to connect with their fanbase and feel as if all was not lost with regard to their employment, acting as a placeholder for ‘the real thing’ for both groups respectively. As explained by Tom

Doing livestreams was a good thing because it made me feel like I was doing my job again. It was the acceptance of the fact that this is the only way I can do my job right now. (Tom)

Reflecting on the internet from his perspective as an owner of a small record label, Kenny suggested that

Before the coronavirus pandemic and the shutdown of nightlife I had never really considered livestreams as an outlet...I think the intention of the format is really quite important...When the pandemic hit it sort of put [the internet] in a new light, and suddenly this was the only way you could consume music from your favourite DJs. It shifted the goalposts on why people even go and look at music online in the first place. (Kenny)

Interviewees offered a variety of perspectives on the intentions behind livestreams and the implications that internet-based connectivity had specifically for practitioners over lockdown. This ranged from the simple suggestion that streams provided new options for personal promotion and social media content, to the realisation that the role of gatekeepers within EDM may have been diminished, to the broader notion that livestreams were perhaps a form of future cultural investment for artists hoping to either start, or continue, musical work within the live sector. These lines of thought remain oriented around the way in which social media platforms and the internet have made distributing and consuming all forms of popular music increasingly easy (Baym & Ledbetter, 2009; Verboord & van Noord, 2016).

Although livestreams were very rarely behind a paywall within EDM, which was not the case for other genres (see Craig & Tonks, 2021), practitioners recognised the potential economic benefit of performing and keeping themselves known within the musical sphere. Livestreams allowed them to reach new fans all over the globe, and maintain connections with existing followers in a more intimate way. For up-and-coming artists, livestreams provided an opportunity to boost career prospects, converting the act of home-DJing from an activity oriented around improving their skills and acquiring cultural capital (Reitsamer, 2011) to a direct potential opportunity to receive future bookings at big shows with large audiences. This would often have taken consistent and

high quality in-person performances at smaller venues before the pandemic, which in themselves can be difficult to gain access to. As such, a new strand of economic geography appears to have emerged within the music industry, concerned with artists and their respective networks of creativity, reproduction and distribution (Leyshon, 2001). The spatio-temporal change that lockdown resulted in for creative practice is an important site for future research on musical work and DIY culture within EDM.

Primarily, artists seemed to livestream to promote themselves and their music.

Apart from anything it was really good to have the clips for content afterwards. They're free and you don't have to pay a videographer to come to a show with you. (Tom)

You have big artists doing a stream and playing songs from smaller artists, who then use that clip to promote their own song on their socials...If they're doing an album release livestream, they're making it obvious. (Harry)

Artists [use] livestreaming as a way to promote new aspects of their financial income, such as releasing promotional packs, sample packs, et cetera to more niche audiences I suppose. I think that would be a good example of how livestreaming could have been used as a marketing tool. (Ben)

The importance of social media and its ability to help develop an artist's career is well understood (Verboord & van Noord, 2016; Thomas, 2020). Simply put by Sabrina, "the internet is a great platform for putting yourself out there". Tom specifically mentioned how he had used short videos of himself playing livestreams to post on his online pages, in replacement of content that would usually be filmed during regular performances. Harry recognised the same process occurring, also noting the way in which some artists broadcast livestreams specifically to promote

upcoming releases as a replacement for 'album launch parties' which are a common form of live event. This was the case for drum & bass artists Sub Focus and Wilkinson, who promoted their new album via their livestream from Corfe Castle that proved to be particularly popular (see Fig. 11 & Fig. 12). Last, Ben chose to mention how he had seen artists promoting other forms of material, such as sample packs or 'promo packs' which would typically include unreleased music or digital dubplates, only available in a limited quantity. These accounts point to the various ways that artists approached the fundamentally reshaped nature of musical networks during the pandemic, in order to maintain a sustained flow of income.

Going beyond livestreams, Tom reflected on his use of the internet as a whole from his position as a full-time music producer and DJ.

It's definitely a promotional tool, but I also now see it as...my direct communication line with fans, which doesn't happen at shows. For me to characterise that as just promotion would be quite shallow because it's pretty much the way I can speak to my fanbase. It's difficult to do it elsewhere...Instead of just calling it promotion, for me personally I'd call it more of a communications point that you can promote with. (Tom)

Notwithstanding the alienated experience the internet seemed to provide many artists and consumers with, Tom's description clearly articulates a dimension of livestreams and social media use that allowed practitioners to stay in relatively close contact with their fans even during a time of collective isolation. This is intriguing in light of Verboord & van Noord's (2016) work that illustrates the importance of social media in raising an artist's public profile and growing their fanbase.

Participants went on to suggest that being able to promote oneself through a livestream has perhaps begun to shift the influence of gatekeepers within EDM. As mentioned previously, to receive bookings artists would typically have to reach a high enough standard of performance before seeking out entry level 'warmup' live sets through

promoters. Indeed, network sociality and 'who you know' has long governed access to becoming a successful live performer across a variety of genres (Wittel, 2001). In the words of Sabrina, lockdown gave practitioners the opportunity to put themselves "out there" from within their own home, without having to directly approach gatekeeping figures responsible for compiling line-ups. Harry went as far as stating that this adjusted process has "completely changed the dynamic of entry into the scene". Some evidence for this was provided by interviewees.

For example, Disrupta, he got approached by management...Lots of opportunities were spawned because of Stay At Home [Festival] and the [chance it gave] to broadcast to such a large audience.  
(Chris)

These livestreams were the reason I got gigs. When I get booked the promoters say to me "I bumped into your Hit & Run Manchester livestream, do you wanna come and play Printworks!". That's the good thing about the internet, you don't know who knows who. One share can get you somewhere.  
(Sabrina)

For up-and-coming artists like Sabrina and 'Disrupta', the benefits of livestreaming and its ability to act as a form of acquiring cultural capital had already become apparent by the time interviews took place. Shedding new light on the suggestion that 'who you know' "mediate[s] access to gatekeepers on the supply side" (McGregor & Gibson, 2009: 285), namely venue managers and promoters, Sabrina suggested the fact that "you don't know who knows who" had led her to being presented with work opportunities.

Live music performance has been recognised as a key source of revenue within the music industry for a significant length time (Williamson & Cloonan, 2007). The economic viability of the music industry, especially with regard to the live sector, has traditionally been seen as dependent on demand within local markets (Watson et al., 2009). However, the shift



in creative spaces that lockdown led to and the transition to an online world not restrained by locality reshaped networks of production, dissemination and consumption. Livestreams and the ability of practitioners to effectively promote themselves from home led to a temporary, if not long-lasting change within EDM. Broadcasting performances online allowed practitioners to boost their presence within the EDM world, maintain connections with their fanbase, bring in new consumers to their circles, and eventually reap real the tangible benefits of their efforts in the form of musical work.

#### **5.4 Conclusion**

In this chapter I have presented livestreams that occurred throughout the COVID-19 pandemic as cultural outlets for musical creativity at a time of crisis for EDM, and the music industry as a whole. The shift in available spaces for musical practice, most notably live EDM performance, led to the internet acting as an important place for music while social distancing restrictions were ongoing, despite the eventual reversal of these measures. As stated by Thomas (2020: 93), in a piece of work that was ironically published during the pandemic, “perhaps it will take one big break-out story...for more musicians to fully integrate livestreaming into part of their practice or promotional campaign”. That story seems to have been unfolding just as his chapter was published. In the eyes of both consumers and performers, livestreams during this period appear best viewed as a placeholder for traditional live music, which was assumed to be returning once lockdown ended. Although mediated performances witnessed initial popularity, the length of time that restrictions went on for, especially in the UK, meant that consumers quickly grew tired of watching live music through a screen regardless of the location in which the performer was sited. Lockdown had a profound impact on the physicality of place within EDM and temporarily repositioned the home, live music venues and outdoor areas within networks of musical creativity. All three types of space played a part in the production and consumption of EDM

before the pandemic, via the existence of home studios for creating EDM and outdoor areas for the provision of music festivals, for example. However, the pandemic restructured their respective roles and importance within musical networks of creativity. The home became the primary site for performance in the early months of lockdown, while live music venues and outdoor areas were stripped of their audiences and capacity to function as usual.

The spatial transition brought on by lockdown not only reshaped networks of creativity and consumption but also those of reproduction and distribution (Leyshon, 2001). My exploration of motivations for broadcasting mediated performances demonstrates that artists within EDM scenes are often more than just music producers and DJs, especially in the early stages of their careers. One individual, their social media skills and their ability to take advantage of the internet can at least partially fulfil the roles of a record company, a publisher, a distributor, a booking agent and a manager. Although not the focus of my work, this is also the case for the production side of music – a single artist can be a producer, a songwriter (a small number of EDM producers write lyrics and sing on their own tracks), and a mastering engineer, from within their home studio. Lockdown emphasised this process and further prompted newcomers to acquire cultural capital and existing artists to promote themselves to stay known in the EDM sphere, hence the overwhelming number of livestreams and the vast range of geographic locations in which they took place in order for a performer to stand out from the crowd. The provision of livestreams over lockdown appears to be the latest representation of a longstanding DIY ethos within EDM, with their initial popularity signifying the similarly fundamental culture of cooperation that exists amongst EDM's participants (Fraser, 2012).

## **6.0 'IRL to URL': Experiencing Live Electronic Dance Music**

### **6.1 Differentiating liveness**

The title of my final chapter includes a phrase borrowed from Robert, who gave me permission to use his wording. The first acronym stands for 'in real life', with the second referring to the address found at the top of the web page, abbreviating the words 'uniform resource locator'. This chapter is concerned with the particularities of experiencing live EDM and liveness from the perspectives of both artists and audience members. Having considered some of the spaces in which musical creativity happened over lockdown and the motivations behind creative practice, I focus on the specificities of how and why livestreams were received in a certain way by my participants, and in turn argue for the importance of traditional live music. Not only did interviewees share their views on the physical location of and motivations behind livestreams, but also on their experience of shifting to an online world in comparison to their usual lives, which previously featured an abundance of live events. Developing our understanding of the importance of traditional live music continues to help theoretically locate EDM within modern everyday life.

I address a fundamental question posed by Simão & Guerra (2020: 1), who ask whether or not the people of EDM are "prepared to give up the real-physical-offline-sweaty dance floors [with the] coexistence of isolation and crowds" that the internet facilitates. Although the virtual reality environments that Simão & Guerra were discussing provide a level of immersion and active participation that livestreams do not, the resounding answer from my interviewees was that the people of EDM are *not* willing to abandon traditional live music events and the notion of absolute liveness in favour of mediated performances. The reasons for this are manifold, but appear to point to the importance of physical space and copresence within live music. I demonstrate this first through a focus on what livestreams lack, followed by an exploration of the materiality of music, the importance of a direct connection between artist and

audience, and the ephemerality of traditional live music. Some suggestions are exclusive or more relevant to EDM than other genres, such as the affective experience associated with sound system culture and the physical feeling of amplified bass (Christodoulou, 2011; Woods, 2019).

Although interviewees accepted livestreams as a valid form of live event, their opinions on the format seemed to align most with the traditional views of Phelan (1993), with the echoed suggestion that corporeal, spatial and temporal copresence of performer and audience within a shared space were absolutely essential in constituting an event as ‘the real thing’. I follow Bennett (2015: 3) in arguing that “live music – in the old-school sense of the term as a face-to-face meeting between artist and fan – still has a significant role to play” in our consumption of EDM. Whilst sense of community and social interaction are core elements of the live music experience, the following two sections focus predominantly on themes of atmosphere and sharing space.

## **6.2 Online events: Alienation, inauthenticity and *not* ‘being there’**

Participants offered differing views on their overall perception of livestreams and how they conveyed liveness in comparison to traditional live music events. Although no one provided an entirely positive account of online events, most interviewees gave the impression that their rapid rise was a phenomenon everyone expected to occur. This links to the suggestion that the people of EDM were inadvertently ready for lockdown in ways that fans and artists within other music scenes were not. However, in almost all cases responses indicated that performers and consumers felt fundamentally withdrawn from the live EDM experience while engaging with mediated performances, despite the sense of solidarity and connectedness they seemed to give some people. Whilst an artist’s internet home page may have once been “a virtual place that facilitated the belief in a local music community” (Kibby, 2000: 100), the ability of livestream web pages to perform the same function dwindled as

restrictions persisted. The unavoidable lack of corporeal and spatial copresence offered by online performances proved to be a significant limiting factor in the enjoyment and meaning they could provide. Sharing the same moment in time was typically not enough to give consumers a memorable or valuable experience, of course with some occasional exceptions for specific individuals. Indeed, in several conversations participants were explicitly clear that livestreams, their inadequate copresence and the subsequent severing of direct artist-audience relations provided an incomplete experience. This directly supports Charron's (2017) recognition that "mediated performances typically lack presence and authenticity", despite their ability to permit the simultaneous existence of isolation and 'crowd' membership (Simão & Guerra, 2020). The following accounts affirm this suggestion.

[A livestream is] just like non-alcoholic beer. It's enough to give you the taste, but it's surely not the same thing. There's no substitute for the real thing, there really isn't. (Robert)

I just struggle a lot with the whole livestream format, I feel really alienated from the fun of it...During COVID I think we all felt, the key word here is alienated, from each other and from music as a whole...I want to be there experiencing it in the flesh, because too much of our lived experience is now alienated...The way we interact as people through social media is now a lot more alienated, a lot less in-person. (Rishi)

[With] livestreams I don't see the appeal...What motivated me to go out and party was to stay up to date with the music, up to date with the scene, socialise, go out every half-an-hour to chat to people then come back in. (Rory)

Although most participants appeared to resonate with a suggestion made by Sabrina that livestreams "kept people going", their contempt for the format as a whole when comparing the two different types of live music experience became clear. Responses indicated a clear differential

between the notion of livestreams acting as a fulfilling substitute for live music, which I initially questioned my interviewees on, and my recognition that they are best conceived as a placeholder.

A number of people pointed to the vitally important fact that livestreams cannot convey the usual affective experience that bass-heavy genres like dubstep, jungle and drum & bass provide in a traditional live setting (Christodoulou, 2011). Current scholarship on live music typically pays attention to the importance of the broader experience of being in a given space surrounded by like-minded people (Brown & Knox, 2017), but often does not adequately conceptualise the importance of being able to 'feel' music even for genres not oriented around bass. The materiality of bass and its ability to create a sonic space (Woods, 2019) will be explored in more detail in the following section focused on traditional live music. However, pertinent to themes of alienation, some participants noted how being sited in their own homes made it impossible to access the corporeal dimension of EDM.

There's no physical feeling through livestreams. There's no music going through you when you're just at home watching a livestream off your TV or laptop...Especially since lockdown there's been loads of music coming out, and I guess livestreams don't do it justice. You need a proper sound system. (Sabrina)

I think there's something just about a live event with having everyone in the same room that creates this electricity with the feeling of the music in your chest. I'm pretty sure you could get ninety percent of the way there [at home] but still realise you're on your own...You still wouldn't have the feeling of the sub bass. (Chris)

[EDM] is meant to be enjoyed together in a dark dingy space with big speakers. That's how it's meant to be heard. So hearing it through my laptop speaker or even a TV, whatever it is, it's just not the same. (Rishi)

Tom pointed to other specific flaws based on his occupation as a full-time DJ and producer. The majority of accounts provided so far are from the perspective of consumers, but similar feelings of difficulty and estrangement appeared to be experienced by performers. Tom suggested that

You don't really know until you start playing a livestream what it's gonna look like viewers-wise. There was a bit more anxiety about who's gonna be tuning in, how many viewers you've got, how many comments you're getting, I feel like you're paying more attention to that stuff than actually playing. Which is why I prefer pre-recording to actually playing live, definitely, because that way I can just focus on doing a good mix. (Tom)

As previously mentioned, even within livestreams varied nuanced levels of liveness exist. The technological function of YouTube allows creators to record content whenever they like, and broadcast it to their audience at a specific time and date known as 'premiering' on the platform. The individuals watching when this occurs experience temporal copresence with other viewers, but not the performer, providing a form of shared experience and representation of liveness by Sanden's (2013) contemporary definition that asserts the importance of perception over actuality. Despite this, Tom later went on to recognise how consumers are "still lonely at the end of the day, on the internet" even with the community aspect of livestreams. Tom's suggestion that being alone during his performance led to feelings of discomfort presents a direct link to Harper's (2015) conclusion that physically isolating artists from their audience results in the development of anomie, otherwise known as the feeling of instability felt by an individual resulting from a breakdown of usual social standards. This is exactly what occurred for artists over lockdown. Not only is the feeling of real time participation and copresence a valorising aspect of the live music experience for consumers (Van Buskirk, 2009), but also for performers.

At times, some interviewees did seem marginally more positive than others about the role of livestreams.

In the absence of live events, [livestreams are] the next best thing.  
(Harry)

[The Stay At Home Festival] was deep in lockdown...Livestreams will never compete with what an actual rave is like, but it's still something that kept people going. Which is the most important thing, it kept people going. (Sabrina)

There were many different ways in which people utilised the term 'live'. In his response, Harry was not suggesting that streams are not a form of live event, but instead subconsciously reflecting on his only experience of musical performance before lockdown as live in the classic sense (Phelan, 1993). The way in which Harry and Sabrina both refer to traditional events as part of their descriptions of livestreams reflects the underlying feeling beneath most answers in this section; that people seemed pleased livestreams had happened, but had no intention of continuing to engage with them in a meaningful way once social distancing restrictions were over. Going one step further than Harry and Sabrina, Kenny suggested some potential benefits.

Livestreams are great because you can tag in and tag out, you can pause, [and] you can watch it again in the future. The amount of times I've been at a club night and I've wished that I could revisit that in the same way that I'd experienced it in the first place, and the livestream does exactly that. If you enjoy it the first time you're gonna enjoy it the same the second time. It's the same performance. (Kenny)

This response adds a new perspective to the notion that live music is made valuable by its ephemeral character, which would also typically only be experienced within the space of a venue or club. Although Kenny did later provide an emotive account of the importance of 'being there' at traditional events (Brown & Knox, 2017), his previous response



acknowledges that “if one misses a concert, one will be unable to ever make up for this loss” (Mazierska et al., 2020: 9). He chose to raise the fact that Facebook and YouTube livestreams become normal videos available for playback once the performance has ended as a positive. Rory offered a different view on this aspect, describing how with “livestreams you can walk away at any point and get distracted” as the most important difference between mediated and classic live performances, pointing to more traditional views about the importance of ephemerality.

In addition to this, Rishi suggested that the live broadcasting of other practices worked well, such as professional sport on television, but made clear that the online format was not appropriate for live music. When asked how he perceived the mediated dissemination of performance, Rishi stated “I don’t think the internet is a viable source format to broadcast art...In my opinion [music is] something that is experienced best when it’s live”. Once again, ‘live’ was used to describe the experience of being at a traditional event as opposed to watching a stream. In this case, the certainty behind Rishi’s initial statement seems to suggest an implication that livestreamed performances do lack the layer of authenticity and trustworthiness that face-to-face events offer (Jones & Bennett, 2015).

In sum, as stated by Kenny, the pandemic “shifted the goalpost on why people even go and look at music online in the first place”. Although livestreams did occur before the impact of COVID-19, their fundamental differences to traditional live events meant few EDM fans had engaged with them in a meaningful way, let alone in a manner designed to replace an in-person performance. Even with music venues closed, my participants appeared to have difficulty accepting livestreams as an authentic form of live performance that was worth devoting time to, especially over the entire 18-month course of social distancing restrictions. In light of Jones & Bennett’s (2015) suggestion that digital musical landscapes are fluid and easily manipulated, consumers may have become aware that the livestreams they were watching were

increasingly not even being performed in real time, as outlined by Tom. It is no surprise that, despite the fact they may have “kept people going”, the dispersed and isolated nature of viewers who were unable to share physical space with other likeminded people meant livestreams provided a live music experience that was not favourable to engage with.

### **6.3 Traditional events: Shared space and copresence**

My analysis thus far has presented underlying themes of loss, nostalgia, and reminiscence of live music before the pandemic. A collective desire seemed to exist for people to return to how they remembered live EDM, centred around sharing spaces and experiences with one another. In the words of Charron (2017: 1), “even if digital mediation maintains the time dimension (*now*) of live performances, it ultimately loses its spatial dimension (*here*)”. There appears to be no doubt that the assumed reversibility of lockdown was welcomed, and the impact it had on the physical siting of live music performance and consumption was opposed. Responses within this section stem almost entirely from the open ended question, “what is it that matters about live music?”. My intention with this query was to prompt interesting replies concerned with my presupposition that interviewees might have devoted a significant amount of time to livestreams over lockdown, as opposed to re-watching existing past sets available on platforms like YouTube and SoundCloud or listening to recorded music on streaming platforms.

Tellingly, although I had meant the word live to imply only temporal copresence, encouraging participants to reflect on streams in their answers, almost everyone took this to mean Phelan’s (1993) classic definition of the word encompassing all forms of copresence. I was presented with an array of compelling accounts of what interviewees described themselves as so sorely missing – ‘real’ live music. Therefore, it seemed fitting to close my analysis by discussing this topic and not losing sight of what was to come for EDM fans once restrictions ended and has now since become more normal again, notwithstanding the

possibility of future restrictions. Taking inspiration Holt (2010), I strongly suggest that EDM performance is a cultural practice where copresence and physical space matter. All traditional live music events take place somewhere, remaining grounded and authentic through their occupation of a space. The following three subsections analyse elements that work together to construct what could be viewed as the essence of live EDM.

### **6.3.1 'Bass is the place'**

The title of this segment is borrowed from Christodoulou's (2011: 45) work on how bass within certain EDM genres can be seen to articulate contemporary urban space as a place of subjective loss and regression, in early 2000s Britain. Albeit concise, the title phrase has great meaning for the genres at the core of this dissertation. Whilst Christodoulou (2011) argues that low frequencies within jungle and drum & bass can construct a material sonic space on the dancefloor, I propose that the corporeality of amplified bass can be seen to foster a physical sense of place for a listener positioned in proximity to loudspeakers at the right moment in space and time. In this circumstance, the term dancefloor denotes any indoor or outdoor space where an individual can dance in front of a sound system, instead of the typical image that might come to mind of a nightclub or bar. Although all music can physically be felt to some degree when played loudly enough, bass-heavy EDM arguably stands apart from the crowd in the realm of corporeal musical experiences.

When stood within the affective range of powerful subwoofers, one may experience what Henriques (2003: 452) refers to as "sonic dominance". This occurs in scenarios where sound has "the near monopoly of attention" (ibid.) superseding the typical dominance of the visual, and is usually the result of experiencing pervasive and intensely projected bass. Whilst the reggae sessions Henriques was referring to often differ from EDM events through their almost sole focus on sound over visual production, I suggest his recognition that there is "no escape, no cut-off, no choice but to *be there*" (ibid.) when enveloped by bass of any kind is

reflective of the place one might find oneself in while in front of a sound system at a dubstep, jungle or drum & bass event. As stated by Rishi, “when you’re in a live space, you’re not just hearing it. You’re literally feeling the bass of it run through your feet”. His mention of a part of the body aligns with a previously included response from Chris, who made a reference to having “the feeling of the music in your chest” as being of paramount importance. Reiterating part of this phrase, Tom explained how the value of live EDM resides in

Having the sub in your chest, being able to dance with your mates.  
You know what I mean. (Tom)

The way in which Tom primarily referenced the impact of sub bass on the body reflects my suggestion that immersive low frequencies can generate a sense of place on the dancefloor which in turn works to bring people together. Producers of dubstep, jungle and drum & bass, amongst other subgenres, skilfully engineer ‘sub’ frequency basslines using their digital audio workstations (DAWs) to sound as powerful and overwhelming as possible when reproduced live through a sound system. The predominant number of drum & bass tracks produced in the musical key of F Minor (see Beatport, 2021) reflects this, with the root note of F[1] playing at 43.65hz (MTU Physics, 2021). This is a frequency most subwoofers can reproduce at very high sound pressure levels without difficulty. It appears that the capacity of amplified bass to create a sonic space is a central aspect of the live EDM experience.

Briefly returning to livestreams, Tom also suggested that his favourite performance was one where “they had a sound system in [the studio]...so it felt like I was at a show at least”. Theo similarly recognised this link between an event feeling authentic and the presence of powerful speakers, by stating that a big part of “paying for a club night is that you get to [hear music] on a decent sound system”. In the same vein, Kenny comprehensively described a range of reasons why online events and traditional events are different.

I don't think it's fair to compare a livestream to a club night because you don't have the sound system, the atmosphere, the smell, the abundance of people. We could talk all day about how livestreams are different to a club night. (Kenny)

Like Tom, Kenny chose to turn sound systems as his primary point of reference when describing the experience of a traditional live event. In his recent work on the future of onstage sound systems, Kerry (2020) suggested that a 'silent stage' model whereby the removal of amplified sound sources on a stage occurs, could optimise the live experience for the performer and audio engineers. However, his suggestion that the audience would supposedly experience an improvement in sound quality fails to adequately conceptualise the importance of amplified music and bass in generating an atmosphere and a sonic space for consumers to lose themselves in while on the dancefloor. My evidence presents a strong case that the corporeal impact of music reproduced through a sound system has a place at EDM events, and perhaps at all popular music performances more broadly.

When asked what mattered to him most about music being played live, Robert presented a different opinion to most other interviewees.

I almost consider it a religious experience...The fundamental aspect of music is sound moving through you, especially with sub [bass] culture. A big part of it is feeling the sound, and [being] enveloped in the sound and the vibes of the place...So for me, live music is not just about listening to my favourite music, but it's about worshipping the sound, in a way. (Robert)

Although the relationship between religion and EDMC is not a primary concern of my work, these topics have been explored in great depth by a wide range of scholars (St. John, 2004). Henriques' (2003) aforementioned notion of 'sonic dominance' was utilised by Woods (2019) in his critical analysis of spirituality and the roots reggae sound system. Lynch & Badger (2007) go as far as suggesting that the mainstream post-rave club scene in Britain could once have been viewed

as a secondary institution that supported a new social form of religion which emphasised self-realisation and self-expression. Robert's suggestion that his event attendance is oriented around worshipping 'sub sound' clearly implies the importance of amplified bass within his live music experience. The language Robert used to describe the enveloping nature of bass affirms Wood's (2019: 189) conclusion that "the sound system experience is an embodied experience" – an experience I suggest is central to the essence of live EDM.

### **6.3.2 Artist-audience relations**

The value of music, particularly in a live context, often relates to factors beyond the music itself (Holt, 2010). EDM events symbolise a form of co-creation that stems from interaction between performers and attendees where the end product is an immersive live experience (Minor et al., 2004). In the words of Watson et al. (2009: 872), "there are demonstrable ways in which creativity in music involves much more than just production. In the warehouses and clubs of rave and [drum & bass] scenes...and in the open-air venues of sound system clashes, the creative process involves interaction between DJs and their audiences, breaking down the distinction between production and consumption". As reaffirmed by Rietveld (2016), the engagement by and between all participants at an EDM event creates an authentic sense of liveness just as much as other factors like the spectacle of performance. The existence of a direct connection between artist and audience within a physical space carries a strong association of authenticity. The manifestation of this connection, engagement and co-creation is what often gets referred to as a "reaction". The following extracts from Rory and Tom outline this.

It's just nice to be in a space where everyone's there for the music. I guess it's different going to things in-person. There's the whole crowd vibing at once, and you get the reactions to tunes. (Rory)

From a DJ's perspective...the big thing about playing shows is having those reactions. Being able to test out a new tune and find out if it's good is [important to] me. (Tom)

Here, interviewees implicitly suggest that spatial copresence and having a direct visual and aural connection between an artist and their audience is necessary for a live EDM event to feel authentic and engaging. Tom's statement is compelling, given that Fraser & Ettliger (2008: 1649) describe how "learning also occurs on the dancefloor in raves, which become a testing ground, a laboratory, even a marketplace in which new, often unsigned music is played and consumed". Indeed, consumer reactions and artist-audience relations "can shape how events unfold" (Fraser, 2014: 54). This assertion refers to the practice of rewinding or 'reloading' a song that has received a particular response from attendees. 'Reloads' essentially happen when a DJ picks the right record at the right time, which is often new or unreleased material, or when a well-known classic is played (Christodoulou, 2009). The limitation that livestreams put on interaction between artists and audiences meant that, although reloads did occur during mediated performances, they were very rarely the result of co-creation and were often a decision solely made by the artist based on their own appreciation of the record being played.

The usual indicator that a rewind should take place "is the crowd reaction: shouts from the crowd...or waving hands in the air" (Fraser, 2014: 54). Livestreams could not fulfil this aspect of the live EDM experience, and the existence of the chat function was not enough to result in the typical co-creative practices that occur between a performer and their crowd. Although consumers often used livestream chats to voice their opinions on how a performance was going and generate a sense of solidarity with other viewers (Vandenberg et al., 2021), it seemed that artists rarely interacted with their comments, at least within the streams my participants had watched. Tom suggested that for one of his sets he "had an MC there" who was "really on it with the chat", reading messages and responding to people via the microphone, but this was not always the case. Nevertheless, the roar of a crowd over bass-thickened air produced

by a thumping sound system appears vitally important in generating an atmosphere during a live event, and is incomparable to messages popping up on a screen, no matter how many of them there are.

### **6.3.3 Ephemerality and 'being there'**

A point of general agreement amongst interviewees was that ephemerality is a central marker of traditional live music's identity. The value placed within a transient live music performance is inherently linked to the necessity of physically being there while it happens. To experience the feeling of a fleeting atmosphere, one must be present in the place that it exists. As described by Charron (2017: 1) "regardless of technological developments, live performances retain some elements of uniqueness that cannot be reproduced, such as being there". Within live music an assumption exists that, regardless of the tracks played or the people in the audience, each performance will be different from the next (Mazierska et al., 2020). The way in which Lingel & Naaman (2011) chose to title their paper on the practice of taking video recordings at live events 'You should have been there, man', implies that if one is not physically present when and where a performance takes place, this loss can never be made up for. When describing what mattered to him about attending EDM events, Kenny stated

I think the value that people place in a live setting is the unpredictability of what the DJ is going to play, who you're going to meet, what's going to happen...Also the fact that you can't get those moments back. You know, once the DJ drops a big track and everybody goes mad...that moment once experienced is gone. And it's not to be taken back. You can record it on your phone, you can record it professionally, but you being stood there in that crowd experiencing that and feeling the heat from the people around you...feeling the pressure from the system, it's not something that you'll ever capture again. (Kenny)



This response directly affirms Mazierska et al.'s (2020: 9) assertion that “the high value attached to attending live events can be attributed to their ephemeral character”. Kenny did not seem to think that taking a video recording of a performance had any impact on a sense of absolute liveness being conveyed, as Phelan (1993) would otherwise state. His mention of feeling ‘pressure’ from the sound system relates to the specific importance of amplified bass in generating an atmosphere and sonic space for the audience to immerse themselves in, while also using the same language as Reynolds (2013) when describing ‘bass pressure’ as a core element of the Hardcore Continuum. Moreover, the feeling of unpredictability within a live setting that Kenny noted appears to align with ephemerality and the assumed uniqueness of each performance. Harper (2015) suggests that the possibility of unanticipated public action is a fundamental aspect of live music, and that digitally mediated concerts should attempt to somehow recreate the haphazard nature of experiencing classic liveness. Indeed, Kenny also noted how one’s ability to “hit pause” on a livestream acted as a barrier to conveying unexpectedness.

Some interviewees chose to reflect more generally on the importance of ‘being there’ at live events without specific reference to their ephemeral nature. Reminiscing on his live music experiences, Chris stated

The atmosphere, the sound, just the whole mix of being...You’re around loads of people, the heat, even the sweat and the toilets, but it all makes you feel like you’re in that [space] where you know what you’re doing. (Chris)

Following this, Chris provided an example of fully immersing oneself in a livestream then visiting the completely clean and silent bathroom within one’s home, implying that he felt slightly lost when consuming a performance in that environment. His description of how unfamiliar it felt being physically removed from the space of a nightclub again points to the importance of being somewhere designed for live music, and experiencing spatial copresence with fellow attendees and the

performing artist. Conveying similar emotions, Rishi stated how “when you’re in a live space it just...captures all the senses”. This is directly aligns with Jones & Bennet’s (2015: xii) proposition that live music has the ability to reframe and reinvigorate the personal experience of listening to music alone by engaging “all the senses at once” in a communal setting.

The fact that a live music event is fleeting and transient can give it an exciting aura. For Benjamin (1969) whose work on the latter is widely regarded as definitive, the aura of something is about its spatial authenticity and the need for one to be in close proximity to art to establish a relation with it. Applying this notion to music, Harper (2015) suggests that aura could be thought of as ‘jouissance’ at a live performance, otherwise known as a deep and unrelatable feeling of pleasure. Building on this, I propose that when attending a traditional live music event one can experience its aura just before one is actually ‘there’ within the space it is happening. In line with this, when asked what she valued about live music Sabrina noted how

The first thing that pops into my head is the adrenaline you get before you go into a rave, and the excitement about being [in a] physical space of like-minded people. (Sabrina)

Although one may experience jouissance while participating in a live music event, Sabrina’s response indicates how arriving at a venue provides a sense of spatial authenticity and understanding of what is to come through anticipation, the act of standing in a queue with soon-to-be audience members, and hearing the energetic sound of EDM reverberating out onto the street. Experiencing copresence, interacting with performers and being subjected to the materiality of bass constructs an atmosphere, while aura can be registered in the excitement that exists before being physically present in a live music space.

In his work on the contemporary live music economy, Holt (2010: 256) concludes that “[traditional live] performance retains some elements of its uniqueness, even though it has lost some of what Benjamin calls aura

because it is not quite as unique when it can be reproduced". However, it appears the assumption that each event is different (Mazierska et al., 2020) means reproductions do not have a negative impact on people's motivations to attend live music. Rather, if we take mediated performances as a reproduction of 'the real thing', their existence reminded people how valuable live events are, and inspired them to go out and return to this form of experience once restrictions were over. In short, being present at a live EDM event allows consumers to feel like they are "part of something unique and special" (Brown & Knox, 2016: 233). As emotively described by Kenny, those special moments happen somewhere, and will never happen in the same way again.

I've been to some events where...I've really felt like I'm a part of history. You know, in 10 years people will see a flyer and they'll be like "oh my god, I remember that night, it was incredible". And you're there in the moment, right there! (Kenny)

## **6.4 Conclusion**

This chapter has explored the different experiences offered by mediated performances and traditional live EDM events, with an explicit spatial focus. Livestreams proved to be important cultural outlets, providing EDM fans with a reliable source of entertainment and sense of solidarity, and giving artists the opportunity to keep performing to an audience despite ongoing collective isolation. However, the ability of livestreams to bring together music fans from an immeasurable range of different places is at once their main positive attribute and their most significant shortcoming. Through a consideration of the materiality of bass in EDM, the importance of a direct connection between an artist and their audience for co-creative practice, and the place-based ephemeral character of live music, I have suggested that livestreams seem to lack authenticity, aura and atmosphere, leaving viewers with an unavoidable feeling that they aren't 'there', or part of something special and meaningful. This is primarily

because livestreams can, at best, only offer temporal copresence to all participants.

Due to the technological function of platforms like YouTube, content that appears to be live can often be recorded in advance, meaning that viewers only share temporal copresence with one another and not the performing artist. The argument that real time participation is a valorising aspect of the live music experience (Harper, 2015) must include performers, in the context of livestreams. The reality of many livestreamed performances was that consumers were merely diasporic observers who engaged in a surface level of participation, spread out over an uncountable range of different places, without sub bass in their chests. Although the internet did act as an important place for music throughout the pandemic, distributing and consuming performance via livestreams was never meant to be a permanent substitute for traditional live events. This traces back to the assumption of reversibility that came with lockdown. Practitioners and fans of EDM were left longing for the return of absolute liveness and all-encompassing copresence, regardless of the many livestreams they were presented with.

In light of this, the pandemic seems to have cemented the importance of traditional live performance particularly within EDM scenes, and reaffirmed the necessity of copresence and shared physical space in the provision of authentic and meaningful live events. The conclusions reached by Holt (2010: 256) in his work on the live music economy in the digital age succinctly and directly voice the sentiment of my participants, despite being published over ten years ago.

“Even the most perfect reproduction is always lacking presence in the here and now. This remains most important in practices where copresence in a physical performance space matters... Regardless of technological developments and massive media consumption via iPods and YouTube, for instance, being at a live concert remains a different kind of experience”.

Intriguingly, however, at the time of writing the possibility for performance to be reproduced via a livestream seems to have had little to no impact on EDM fans' propensity to consume traditional live events now that social distancing restrictions have ended. It remains to be seen if this will change, as an increasing number of promoters start to host events where tickets are sold to an in-person performance and a livestream is provided of the same show. After prolonged restrictions on social proximity over the pandemic, traditional live music and the unique experience it offers has prevailed. Despite the rise of livestreams, my participants indicated that EDM performance remains a cultural practice where copresence in a physical space is of deep significance. Mediated performances were never meant to be more than a placeholder for traditional live music throughout the pandemic.

## **7.0 Conclusion**

This dissertation has contributed to ongoing theoretical discussions of the relations between music and place. People who consume and perform EDM understand, construct and engage with the notion of place in a variety of ways, which are often unique to the individual. I have explored how and why certain forms of EDM are seen to have a relationship with the UK and Britain irrespective of their different land mass, the creative practices of people who operate within EDM, and the experience these genres provide in a live setting. By offering a spatial consideration of EDM itself, and the different contexts in which it is played and heard, I have shed light on some of the geographies associated with dubstep, jungle and drum & bass, all of which have an important place within British music and the everyday lives of those who listen to them.

Through a combination of the voices of my interviewees, remote fieldwork and my own experience as a participant in EDM scenes, I have first demonstrated that EDM can evoke a sense of place in the way that it sounds. This sometimes occurs at a subnational scale, where local creative networks and their output can both constitute a city as a musical place, and generate styles of music which have characteristics that reflect techniques and ways of thinking that stem from a specific area. Predominantly, however, dubstep, jungle and drum & bass seem to exhibit an intrinsic national quality that scene participants unanimously recognised, but found it difficult to comprehend. All three genres are post-rave styles that fit within Reynolds' (2013) Hardcore Continuum, which conceptualises a lineage of authentic EDM that stemmed from the British rave scene. There is an important historical and cultural memory element to this national rhetoric, whereby real and perceived qualities of the music can remind listeners of the rave scene – a period of time they might not even have been alive for – and its historicised Britishness. The most commonly used phrase to describe this form of national music was 'the UK sound', which is reminiscent of Brewster & Broughton's (2006)

suggestion that the sonic constant amid post-rave scene genres is a distinctively 'British bass'. Referencing both the UK and Britain may represent EDM discourse that originated in England and speaks for a wider geographic area than it perhaps should. However, the UK/British sound narrative seems to be the product of the cooperative and cohesive spirit (Fraser, 2012) that has existed amongst people who engage with EDM since the early days of the rave scene, and does not assert a hierarchical relation.

EDM livestreams were influential cultural outlets for musical creativity throughout lockdown. The internet acted as an important place for music during a time of crisis for the arts, providing consumers with a sense of solidarity and a source of live performance, while also offering artists an opportunity to connect with fans and stay known within the EDM sphere, even if at times their audiences were very small. Lockdown reshaped musical networks of creativity, reproduction, distribution and consumption (Leyshon, 2001), and temporarily repositioned physical sites like the home, live music venues and outdoor areas within the complex web of musical practice. I suggest that the immediate provision of livestreams at the start of lockdown and their initial popularity can be viewed as the most recent iteration of cooperation and mutual support within EDM between artists and consumers.

As restrictions went on, the importance of classic liveness within EDM became strikingly apparent. Indeed, participants expressed there is a profound experiential difference between watching a mediated performance through a screen, and attending a traditional live EDM event that takes place in a shared space with other likeminded individuals. This is particularly important, given that for years music commentators and scholars have hailed livestreaming technologies and the gradual rise of virtual reality equipment as possibly signifying a new era for live music. Within EDM – where the materiality of amplified bass, the establishment of artist-audience relations and simply 'being there' are so vital – it seems unlikely that traditional live performances will be replaced in coming years. That said, we would be naive to think that technology in the distant

future will never be able to substantively replicate the experience of being at a live show. The people of EDM have always been in search of authentic and meaningful experiences. Whether it be a warehouse in Blackburn in 1989, the function room in a South London pub in 2010, or a big music festival in the summer of 2019 just before the COVID-19 pandemic, these experiences happen somewhere, and one must be there to take part. With Holt's (2010) work in mind, EDM performance, so far, remains a cultural practice where copresence, physical space, and being in that place, all matter in the construction of atmosphere, aura, and a sense of authenticity.

As stated by Reynolds (2013: 1), a large part of his work on the Hardcore Continuum was merely his efforts to keep up with what he describes as "the music's ceaseless forward drive". A forward-thinking ethos and progressive attitude still exist within EDM. I have sought to do the same as Reynolds by continuing to keep up with the music in the present moment, but through recognising the constantly evolving existence of geographical meaning within genres. Following Leyshon et al. (1995) in their tracing of themes of universality and particularity, the pandemic emphasised dialectical relationships within music that can be observed through EDM. The consumption of a livestreamed performance via the internet from the hyperlocal space of one's bedroom simultaneously reinforces and disregards the importance of geographical location to music. Lockdown inadvertently highlighted a set of spatial tensions within EDM and popular music more broadly that appeared to have been building for several years, or even decades, with awareness of the potential held by livestreaming technologies existing well before the pandemic. Moreover, the extent to which certain forms of EDM exhibit a national quality to an attuned listener is compelling, while remaining completely open to interpretation from listeners who associate with other music scenes, and might struggle to tell the difference between dubstep and drum & bass, for example.

EDM and the people who engage with it are not strangers to spatial transitions. There is a pleasing historicity to the adaptability and quick



thinking of EDM practitioners at the start of the pandemic. Approximately three decades ago, participants in the rave scene and acid house movement turned “the cracks in urban landscapes into temporary lived spaces” (Watson et al., 2009: 871). Indeed, Britain’s lineage of authentic EDM genres first rose to popularity in abandoned air fields, warehouses, and grassland surrounding the M25 in the late 1980s and early 1990s (Hill, 2003). In the same way that organisers of raves created fleeting moments of life in otherwise marginal spaces on the periphery of urban areas, livestreams throughout lockdown offered moments of escape from the mundane, an opportunity to connect with others, and a much needed special occasion. Albeit on different temporal scales, the gradual shift from consuming EDM in Britain through raves on the periphery of urban areas to events in fully licensed inner-city venues, is arguably comparable to the almost overnight transition from in-person live music to mediated performances when lockdown was imposed. Musical knowledge and music itself have always been mobile, moving within and between cities and across the globe with the advent of the internet. Uniquely skilled and creative individuals are often the main pre-requisite for successfully maintaining and renewing creative networks (Törnqvist, 2004). This remained no different during lockdown. Practitioners utilised their skills in a range of ways to keep audiences engaged, and EDM scenes thriving.

### **7.1 Future research**

Place clearly matters to EDM, and to those who engage with it. The exploratory nature of this study and the attention I have paid to the present led to my realisation of a range of valuable sites for future geographical work on EDM, not least because the spatiality of distribution and consumption changed as I was writing. With regard to EDM’s ability to evoke a sense of place in the way that it sounds, it seems important to consider how citizens of Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland perceive the UK/British sound narrative that all of my interviewees described.

Moreover, future work that interviews a more diverse range of participants who could offer a wider range of views on what the term 'British' means to them in a musical context would be valuable, particularly given the widespread recognition that many British EDM genres are rooted in Afro-Caribbean music and cultural practice. Boothby's (2020) work on the existence of a 'convivial continuum' within post-war popular music in Britain traces the same lineage of EDM genres that stemmed from the rave scene as my work and Simon Reynolds' essays, and is good start to work paying greater attention to the importance of race and Britain as a multicultural place for music.

Although beyond the reach of this study, virtual reality worlds should continue to be questioned as a site for musical creativity and performance. Despite recognition that virtual environments have a higher likelihood of changing the way that we experience performance than livestreams, the technology required to participate in this form of entertainment and experience remains relatively inaccessible. Finally, while my work has explored the two main forms of live performance that currently exist, a bizarre variant of traditional live EDM emerged in the middle of the pandemic known as 'sit-down raves'. These shows, whereby tables were set up on the dancefloors of nightclubs and standing up to dance was banned, were designed to fit around the restrictions placed on the hospitality industry at the time. Future research on the nuances of what 'live' looked like throughout the pandemic which seeks to analyse all known variations of performance would be fascinating.

Traditional live events have made a bold return to the calendars of EDM fans. However, livestreams have also continued in a noteworthy capacity. Current trends suggest a hybrid future, not just within EDM but across the global music industry. The importance of copresence in a shared physical space remains paramount within live music, but the world, and particularly major record labels, have taken notice of livestreamed content's potential as a previously largely untapped form of shared experience. Within the writing period of this dissertation, Warner Music Group partnered with Twitch to become the first major label to join forces

with a livestreaming platform (Kelly, 2021). Also of note, music discovery and ticketing platform DICE who were responsible for hosting over 6,400 livestreams throughout the pandemic, won \$122 million of investment in their most recent round of funding (Stassen, 2021). With their new capital, DICE acquired Boiler Room, a household name within EDM known for their webcam-style livestreams and YouTube content. Intriguingly, the livestreaming practices and timeline I have documented appear to reflect longstanding currents in the wider musical economy. It is still the case that “smaller record companies tend to act almost as centres of research and development within the industry, spotting and cultivating new trends” (Leyshon et al., 1995: 428). Over lockdown, the pioneering efforts of both individual EDM practitioners and certain smaller record labels demonstrated the real potential of livestreams for promoting artists and their music, and connecting a global fanbase.

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