

Death Can Dance Too

By Brett Anderson

At least there was a dress code at the Luna Dei: no jeans, no baseball caps, no t-shirts. Like all dress codes, its purpose is to keep out undesirables such as the hoodlums and house party drunks who decide to rip it up at the club. The clientele at the club I was playing was fairly high end, or what passes for high end in Minneapolis. Now, don't get me wrong, the club scene there is up and coming. It isn't Vegas or San Francisco, but it's up and coming.

I flew coach from Vegas that afternoon. I was late getting to the airport, but luckily my vinyl and the flight case with my turntables and mixer made it on the plane somehow. In Minneapolis, one of the owners of Luna Dei picked me up in an old rusted out Toyota. He wore a white t-shirt and jeans. His hair was messily spiked, it was the only part of him ready for the evening. He shook my hand and smiled the smile reserved for VIP customers about to drop half a grand on table service.

"Great to meet you face to face," He said.

"You too."

"You know Darrin Bellton?" he asked.

"Yeah."

"He played here last year."

I nodded, "Cool."

"Also we're getting, or we're really hoping to get, DJ Acropolis in September. He's a friend of mine."

"Great."

"Oh, before I forget," He handed me three worn laminated tickets, each the size

of a credit card, that read "One domestic bottle or rail mixed drink." I could redeem them at the bar during the night.

The few times I've been in Minneapolis I get the impression that they're about six months behind the coasts in terms of the music they played. This is fine by me, but you have to keep this in mind when choosing your set list.

I play and record electronic-dance music. This is a general description; people familiar with the genre would know better how to classify it. It's dance music, little to no vocals, driving bass and synthesizers. Come down to the Pinnacle on Tuesday nights in Vegas if you want to check me out. You can find me on the web too of course.

We arrived at the club, I set up my equipment and did a sound check. I asked the owner what there was to eat in the area, hoping to get comped something from the kitchen. Instead, I got what I asked for and so around seven I walked to a pizza place down the street, had a couple slices and a couple beers. After, I walked around downtown Minneapolis and peeked in the clubs where I could convince the bouncers to let me look around. I dropped my card everywhere. At nine I headed back to the Luna Dei.

A local DJ named H-Fly started the night off, his set leaned towards Chicago House music. He got the crowd warmed up nicely. I went on at eleven and by then the dance floor was getting crowded.

To start I did my scratching routine where I quickly mix snippets of different tracks and show off my quick fingers. The crowd responded to every move, they were ready. I pushed up the faders on my best slab of vinyl. The crowd became a wave, moving up and down to the beat.

A tall beautiful brunette with white skin leaned against the bar. She wore a slinky dress that was various shades of dark blue. Her pose said, I've seen it all and if you hit on me, I'll be patient for about three seconds before I snub you.

Earlier, she arrived with a group of about ten men and women. I saw Rusting Toyota answer his cell and run over to the door. He escorted them to the best table and the waitress brought out top shelf bottles of vodka and whiskey. The men wore dark suits and the women dark dresses, they looked European and wealthy. I thought I caught the brunette in blue looking at me, but I wasn't sure. Most of the group was loud and drunk, but there was a core of three men that stood sober and alert, keeping their hands folded in front of them.

A drunk guy in a sweat stained shirt, beer in hand, started talking to the go-go dancer who shimmied and dipped on a three-foot pedestal. She made a little motion to one of the bouncers and he walked over to the shithead. The bouncer, his black suit and purple tie ballooned by his large shoulders and chest, slapped the drunkard on the shoulder and talked to him while leading him away. The dancer didn't miss a move.

I thumbed through my vinyl, looking for a forty-five: my remix of Venus Nine's

"Flower Sandwich." I put it out a month ago; sales are sluggish at the moment. As I pulled out the forty-five in its paper sleeve, I saw trouble sliding into my peripheral vision. But oh, how trouble can move. The brunette in the blue dress was navigating towards me through the crowd. I smiled at her and she leaned in.

"Hey, I'm lovin' your set. That new Alpha Train Wave mix you spun was great!"

"Thanks, I think its better than the original."

"Yeah, I think so too." She had an accent that sounded Russian. She stood about five feet ten with heels, with straight black hair parted in the middle and flowing down to her shoulders. Her firm build held her steady despite being a little drunk. After leaning towards me to hear or be heard in the din she always returned to her regal stance, shoulders back, head held up.

"You've got good taste in music," she said, "but I think you might be a little weak on the scratching." She said pretending to scratch a record.

"Oh really? Maybe you have an itch I could scratch for practice?"

She laughed and thought for a second, "I think you're letting your needle jump the groove Mr. DJ, keep it on the proper track." she started to move a little to the song while talking: a slightly slower song with ethereal synthesizers, heavy reverb and a droning bass line.

"Okay, Beauty in Blue, I'll stick to my tunes."

"Myka's my name. Are you always this forward with women?"

I tilted my head a little, "Only with you." I held her eyes and let a smile wash

over my face. She caught it and pushed me away shaking her head and laughing.

"I better get back to my friends, but I'll see you later."

"Really?" I said, calling her bluff.

She nodded and raised her eyebrows before walking away, trying not to waiver. I imagined the sensation of putting my arm around her waist and pulling her close; coming into the warm out of the cold, or into the cool out of the hot came to mind. I watched her walk away and talk briefly to one of the men of the Euro-Mystery Tour. They were clearly talking about me, I wasn't sure I liked that.

Everyone wants to be seen talking to the DJ. If your station is accessible, like it was that night, you tend to get a steady stream of people at the DJ booth. Bigger clubs tend to set the DJ high up and far away, both to attenuate distractions and to give the DJ a more priest like stance. A messenger of the divine preaching to his flock. Looking at some of the people dancing that night, there might have been a religious experience or two happening on the dance floor. That's what I sell. But also, the girls tried to look good, and not embarrass themselves, in front of the boys. While some of the boys danced, the majority stood on the edges choosing a target or sipping a drink trying to look comfortable. Everyone checks out everyone else until someone escapes the web of convention and fear and makes a move. It's the same everywhere, and I love every minute.

Once in a while, people who approach the DJ Booth make a request. But most know I'm not that sort of DJ, no

matter how bad the bachelorette wants to hear "Baby Got Back" or "Dancing Queen."

A tall slender man in a black suit, black shirt and white tie in his early thirties came up to me. He was from Myka's group. His reddish hair was about four or five inches long and slicked straight back. A goatee seemed to elongate his already long face. His deep-set eyes drooped a bit but he walked with a straight back and his handshake was firm. It was a silk suit.

"Killer set," he said, also with a Russian accent.

"Thanks."

"We're having an after party at my flat around the corner," He was looking right at me, almost yelling into my ear to be heard above the throbbing bass.

"Would you like to DJ for it?" he said. I started to shake my head.

"I'll pay you seven hundred dollars."

I was tired, but rent was due in a week. My flight back to Vegas didn't leave until noon the next day and I didn't have another gig for two days, plenty of time to recover.

"Alright man, you've convinced me. It will take me a while to pack up but I'll be over as soon as I can. And when I get there I'll require payment up front."

"No problem. Arkady will stay behind and escort you over." He pointed through crowd at a large man, also in a black suit standing at the bar looking at us. He nodded slightly. Two hundred dollar bills found their way into my hand.

"A retainer. My name is Peter by the way."

"Hey Peter, good to meet you."

“Well, I’ll let you get back to work.” He smiled slightly and walked away.

Thump, chip, pop, chip, thump, chip, pop, chip slapped the drums. The bass buzzed, sliding back and forth between a second interval. The harsh white house lights flooded the club like opening blinds at noon. The spell broke; dancers slowed and stopped like unwinding toys and slid off the dance floor. Girls gathered their purses and the bar tenders began serving water to the thirsty patrons about to fight for a cab.

I played five more minutes after the lights went up. I slid the fader on my mixer and the music evaporated. The bouncers began aggressively herding the screaming, laughing and stumbling patrons out the door. A bouncer I know has a saying about this time of night: when the lights are down they’re guests, when the lights come up they’re cattle.

I began tearing down my equipment: two turntables, a mixer and my laptop to control effects and play MP3’s. I disconnected and coiled all the cords connecting everything. I carefully moved everything inside the case walls before fitting the top half of the case and flipping the latches. The case was heavy but it rolled. I picked up my vinyl case and laptop bag.

I could do everything just as well and probably better with just the laptop, but people expect a DJ to have turntables and vinyl, its part of the mystique. If DJ’s only used laptops, people might start getting the idea they could do what we do. And as far as the software and the equipment goes, they’re right, it’s easy. And don’t tell me vinyl sounds better than digital. Maybe on

a good hi-fi system, but in a club there’s no way you can tell the difference between a record and an MP3. What your average DJ wannabe doesn’t have is my taste, my connections. And they don’t want to be at the club, sober, until five a.m. on a Saturday night and then wait tables at seven a.m.

Rusty Toyota came up to me and handed me a check. “That was a sick set man. Totally pumpin’. We’d love for you to come back really soon.” They all said that, once in a while it came true. Some DJ’s do have regular gigs at a club or bar. But most travel the circuit just like other musicians do, rarely playing the same place twice if they’re not in their hometown.

As I walked out pulling my cases, the club, which earlier a hive of intense emotion and alcohol turned into a cafeteria of drudgery as the staff cleaned as quickly as possible so they could sleep or get to an after party. The bouncer in the purple shirt held the door for me and nodded as I stepped outside. The cool breeze of early June felt good. A man stepped out of the alley.

“I take you to Peter’s party.” Arkady said, sort of in English. In the dark Arkady’s shape reminded me of a block of concrete. We walked and the sound of the wheels on the flight case made a grinding sound on the concrete, interrupted by the gaps. The streets were quickly emptying and we headed away from the bars and clubs of the Warehouse District: old unused warehouses converted into bars, clubs and music venues for yuppies and college students. The Luna Dei clung to the outer edge of this district, across the street cars cruised on a freeway underpass and past that sat low rent

working warehouses and light industry. I stared hard into the alleys as we past. I wasn't sure this was worth the risk anymore, who were these people who hired me?

"So, what does Peter do?"

Arkady sighed, "He is businessman."

"And you're his bodyguard?"

"Da."

We crossed on a bridge over railroad tracks, walked another block, and made a right at the corner. We stopped at an old six-story brick building with carved stonework. The surrounding buildings were similar and all had 'space for lease' signs. The streets were deserted, it was a nine to five neighborhood.

My escort entered the wrong security code at the entrance. He closed his eyes, his mouth moved silently. After a few seconds, he tried again, gaining entry this time. I thought I heard someone behind me and I swiveled around. There was nothing. As I turned around, I thought I saw someone step behind a white windowless van parked across the street. I stared for a time but there was no movement. I looked at my feet and shook my head. In my profession, you have to roll with whatever is thrown your way. You meet strange people. You meet strange people who invite you to strange parties where you don't know where you are or what you're smoking. But in order to make contacts, to get jobs, to keep the edge, you have to roll. I've woken up in some strange places, once I woke up alone in the back of a convertible in the middle of the desert. The convertible's owners came back after a while and we got breakfast on the Strip,

they turned out to be all right. I've taken risks and they've always paid off, but luck runs out I suppose.

My fear turned up another notch. Mainly I fear getting ripped off when I'm playing DJ. My head told me this group was the real deal but my gut said different. I knew I was being paranoid, I mean, I'm not worth an elaborate ruse: inviting a DJ to a dilapidated warehouse to steal his turntables and fifty bucks. Or at least this is what I told myself when I started sweating. I thought of the money in my pocket, and my rent. So I rolled, I rolled and rode the slow and cranky elevator in silence with Arkady.

We exited the elevator on the fifth floor; an old janitor mopped the floor. Balding and bent over, he looked at us out of the corner of his eye, weakly moving the mop back and forth. Given the low rent feel of the building, he was probably used to strange characters wandering around in the middle of the night. Arkady took a long look at him walking past. The offices on this floor held a used medical equipment dealer, a recording studio, and an accountant.

Arkady stopped at the last door in the hall. It looked like an office door: a metal fire door with one of those hydraulic attachments to slow the door closing. Laughter and music seeped through from the other side. Arkady knocked a coded knock and said something in Russian. As another bodyguard opened the door, dance music from India pounded my ears. We walked in and everyone cheered. I played it up as if I was a monarch entering court, waiving and gesturing. Every party needs a DJ to avoid the tragedy of a chump

fumbling with his iPod attempting to divine what makes girls dance.

The apartment seemed to be a furnished short-term rental. As we entered, a short hallway brought us to the living room and dining room. The furnishings were stylish and contemporary but impersonal. Bland abstract art lined the walls. The apartment was sizeable and probably cost a great deal to rent. The furniture was pushed flush against the walls, leaving a vacuum which dancers were impelled to fill. Immediately to the right was another hallway leading to bathrooms and bedrooms. The open kitchen was to the right of the living/dining area.

Peter closed his cell and walked over to me, thanked me for coming and led me over to the PA system. I hoisted the flight case on a wobbly folding card table.

"Thanks for playing for us, we appreciate it. Just let Arkady know if you need anything. Do you want a beer?" I nodded.

"A beer for the man." He said to Arkady. His phone started ringing. "Excuse me, I must take this. Please start whenever you're ready."

Arkady, expressionless, brought me the beer. I took a swig, plugged in, chose my track and started spinning. I hadn't seen Myka, but once the bass dropped, she appeared and started dancing. Most of the girls and two guys danced in front of the sound system. There was a wall switch that led to overhead track lighting for the kitchen. I flicked it off and on in time with the music, Myka smiled and everyone laughed at that, except Peter.

I checked the scene and sipped my beer. I picked out a third bodyguard sticking close to Peter. Peter stood at the other end of the apartment talking on the phone and putting one hand over the other ear. He closed his phone and looked outside at the street below. His phone lit up again. Peter nodded to the bodyguard, a shorter bulging man in a black suit and grey shirt who then walked quickly out of the apartment. Arkady pulled up next to Peter and also looked down at the street. A few more groups of twos and threes arrived in the first hour and the party grew to about twenty or so. A flurry of phone calls and anxious nods by Peter and his bodyguards preceded each group's arrival.

One of the bodyguards made whiskey sours and vodka tonics and handed them out. A drunk girl in a black miniskirt and high heels fell on the dance floor. Arkady immediately propped her up and she continued dancing.

Most of the group seemed oblivious to the tension; maybe this was a normal Saturday night for them. What was Peter's business, why all the security? It was a weird scene to behold. I felt the money in my pocket and went back to work, the greenery needed its friends. I hadn't collected the rest of the money upfront like I had wanted, but I didn't think it would be a problem.

I decided to play a song that wasn't on my regular playlist now, too old, two years old, but I didn't think the crowd would mind at this point. Get 'em in a good place and you can play whatever you want. I thumbed through my vinyl case and pulled out the forty-five. I slid off the white paper

sleeve and, holding the record by the edges, slipped it over the pin in the center of the turntable. I flipped a switch so I could hear the record in my headphones. Spinning the record, I found the exact point in the song where I wanted to start. I adjusted the speed of the record to match the timing of the current song. While the tail end of the old song played, I seamlessly mixed in the new song and faded out the old. The troops yelped and writhed as they recognized the tune. We can learn to be slaves to the novel, but we're naturally bound to the familiar, especially with music.

After a few more songs, Myka moved off the dance floor. I sipped my beer, trying to look busy, but she caught me looking and smiled as she picked up her purse and walked away. I chose my next track, cued it, and looked out over the crowd. The dance floor was bleeding dry, and the blood that was left danced a little slower. The couches on the far side of the room were filling up. I looked at my watch, five a.m.

Someone touched my arm; Myka leaned in for the kill.

"I made Peter go to the Luna Dei tonight, and hire you to come back here. I saw you in London at St. Vincent's. I've been a fan ever since. You make me dance, and I like that." She slowly moved her hand along my arm. Her breath was minty, with an undertone of alcohol. I didn't mind. She was drunk, but her eyes were still bright and she seemed more in control than at the club.

"This is my birthday party," she said like it was a secret.

"Has it been happy?"

She nodded and looked out over the crowd, "So far. I'm on your email list so I knew your schedule. Then I found out Peter would be here on business. So, it was a perfect alignment. Peter's been nice enough to indulge me."

"I'm glad I'm a part of it. I have some new tracks I'm working on back at the hotel. I'd love to get your opinion if you wanted to come back with me." She stroked my arm more firmly and smiled. I almost lost consciousness for a second.

"Let me know when you want to leave," she started to walk away but I grabbed her arm.

"One more thing, are you sure Peter or anyone else won't be mad they're not invited," I said with a smirk.

She nodded her head slowly returning the half smile and said, "He's my uncle." She walked over to the couch and fell sprawling on two girls there. They all giggled. Peter looked at me for a second and casually went back to his phone. I thanked everyone and said goodnight over the PA, the crowd cheered weakly. I took it as a compliment that I wore them out. I faded out the music and began to pack up my equipment.

Peter seemed looser. He walked around offering people a place to stay for the night, what was left of it. I even caught Arkady cracking a joke to Peter and a bleach blonde in a grey dress putting on her coat. Peter doubled over in laughter. I picked up my cases and started towards Peter.

Glass crackled and the blonde standing behind Peter jerked. A red dot appeared on her left shoulder and a red stain on the wall behind her. She looked at

her shoulder, began to gasp, and crumpled to the floor. Arkady pushed Peter to the floor. I stood there, staring, trying to process what happened. An object about the size of a tennis ball shot through the window. I now know the Russian word for grenade. It hit the far wall and dropped onto the carpet. I did the same and covered my head. I thought I heard a click. I waited, eyes closed.

An eternity passed over me as I wondered which part of my body was expendable and should therefore face the grenade. Nothing happened. I opened my eyes. The center of the three large windows had a hole and spider web of cracks encircling it. I put my head down again. I acutely sensed the world: the texture of the carpet on my cheek, the individual bubbles of foam escaping the dropped beer bottle in front of me. More shots streaked through the window, some with a crack as they embedded in the far wall, others with a muffled pop punching through a piece of furniture. There was no sound of gunshots, just the sounds the bullets made as they bumped into glass, brick and furniture foam.

I pulled out my cell phone, but it was off for some reason. I tried to turn it on but it was dead. I looked around and saw Myka, laying on her side by the couch.

"Mine doesn't work either," she said.

It was the grenade, it must have produced an EMP. "Then it might be awhile before the police get here," I said. The shooter didn't have a clear target, but the bullets were keeping our heads down.

I looked at the broken window and saw that it had thick faux wood blinds. I

started crawling towards the pillar next to the window. Myka shouted for Peter and he called back. Besides a few sobs everyone else was quiet. I started feeling broken glass rub against my hands and chest as I crawled, but I chose that over the whiz of bullets above. I pulled myself up next to the pillar. I grabbed the cords and pulled but it wouldn't release. I rolled back under the window and once I got further away and pulled the blinds released. The shooter caught on and started shooting the bottom part of the window near me, but the building favored me. Though I could feel the bullets embed in the wall there were enough layers of brick and wood beneath the windows so they did not penetrate. I crawled to the other window on that side of the apartment and closed the blinds.

I looked around to see if there was a clear path to the door. Nurse, note the time, this party is dead. Sliding my gear in front of me, I crawled out of the apartment. The hallway was empty and silent. Half the fluorescent lights were turned on and the one at the far end of the hall flickered. As I neared the stairway and elevator, I for some reason and listened. From far down the staircase came the soft tinkle of glass breaking. I started down the stairs. The elevator made me nervous, I might have a surprise when it opened up. The stairs offered a little more control. Unlike stairways on modern buildings, which are for emergencies only. These stairs were built to be used. They were wide, made from granite and the hardwood railings were worn from hands sliding over them. Once well lit, some of the light fixtures were

burned out, creating a jigsaw of shadows on the walls. I paused at the fourth floor. My legs were weak and shaky, my body shivered.

From far below I heard what I thought was the old janitor start to say something, then something small and metal hitting the floor, then a dull thump. They would take the stairs too. I stepped out into the fourth floor hallway and waited. If I stayed quiet, they would walk right past me up the stairs. All I had to do was stand out of the way. I heard one set of footsteps enter the stairway, taking a few steps at a time, then stopping to listen. I slowly lowered my vinyl case until it silently touched the floor. My hands felt slippery, they were bleeding from the broken glass. Whoever was coming up the stairs would walk right by. I hoped they would walk by.

And then what? I knew they would walk into that party and shoot someone, maybe everyone. What did I care? This is not my problem. Peter is probably a Russian gangster. Probably, he deserves to get wacked. Maybe these are CIA agents and Peter is a money launderer or drug dealer. Sweat slid down the small of my back. I gripped the flight case. With the adrenaline, it was light. I thought of Myka and all the other people, they weren't all gangsters. Hardly. They were just drunk kids, no different from the average hedonist out for a good time anywhere on the planet, they just had a lot more money. And I am their DJ. They, Peter really, paid me seven hundred dollars to play records. Not everybody does that. And these guys shooting everybody, they weren't CIA, FBI or Salvation Army. Even if Peter is a

criminal, it's beyond wrong to shoot up this party.

The steps became deafening, but I wasn't sure how close they were, sounds deceive when you're anticipating. I could pop out and the gunman might be too far below. I had to punch out of the hallway at exactly the right moment. I crouched and wiped the sweat and blood off my hands. The steps reverberated off the concrete walls, impossibly loud. Still I waited. I was aware of only three things: the white of the fluorescent light in the hallway, the weight of the flight case holding the tools of my profession, and the sound of the steps on the stairs.

I picked up the flight case and hoisted it over my shoulder. I ran out into the stairwell. The gunman was in his forties, white, average height and weight, short salt and pepper hair. He wore a grey suit and black trench coat and carried an assault rifle with a silencer. The gunman had just stepped onto the landing between floors and was looking up the stairway leading to the fifth floor and saw too late. I flung the case at him with a grunt. He brought down the rifle, which had been pointed up towards the fifth floor, and fired. Without time to aim before his reflexes reacted to the huge projectile quickly growing large in his vision, the shot went wide and sprayed me with concrete bits. The case struck his head and he crumpled, the case rolling off him. Blood ran out of two cuts near his right temple. I knew he was dead. I turned around and leaned against the handrail until the police arrived.

I found some news stories online when I got back to Vegas. They said the

same thing the detectives told me, I've no reason to question it. Peter's company was buying rights to an oil pipeline. The seller was slowly dying at the Mayo clinic. Somebody didn't want the deal to go down. The parties signed the contract the next morning.

Peter sent me a check for \$15,000 along with a note, "Pick out some new turntables and music. I'd like you to DJ a party I'm hosting in Moscow next month, details are enclosed. Myka plans to attend."

I booked my flight ten minutes later.