

SXSW Music Festival 2013—Part 1

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Now in its 27th year, South by Southwest (SXSW) in Austin, Texas has grown from a local independent music showcase attracting some 700 registered attendees in 1987 into one of the largest music festivals in the world, funded by a slew of corporate sponsors and attracting tens of thousands of attendees.

At this year's SXSW (March 8-17), more than 2,500 acts from over 50 countries and every continent performed at more than 100 venues—amphitheaters and concert halls, as well as pop-up outdoor stages, bars, lounges, cafes, record shops, on rooftops, riverboats, from the tops of double-decker buses. Austin is the capital of Texas and the thirteenth-largest city in the US, population 820,000. It is home to the main campus of the University of Texas and its music scene and nightlife have a long history.

SXSW is a huge draw for industry professionals—artists as well as marketers, managers and sundry others. Marketing demographics data show that in 2012 these professionals accounted for 82 percent of total badge sales, the number of which in 2013 exceeded 16,000. Individual badges cost hundreds of dollars and provide varying levels of access. More than half of registered attendees in 2012 had household incomes above \$100,000 per year.

Harder to quantify, but certainly more numerous, are those who flock to Austin without purchasing badges. They can wait in line and try to attend certain official shows when capacity allows, or attend any of the thousands of unofficial shows and parties held from morning until late at night all over town. Many acts played at both official and unofficial shows throughout the week.

Performing artists ranged from the commercially successful (Justin Timberlake, Green Day, etc.) to lesser-known acts with sizable followings (Sharon Jones and the Dap Kings, Nick Cave and the Bad Seeds), to the virtually unknown. Musical styles ranged across a wide spectrum of popular and underground music in the US and many places around the world.

Hip hop and “indie” or “alternative” rock styles dominated. Laptop-enabled electronic music, much of it dance oriented, also made up a good share of the goings-on. Of course, these all tend to bleed into and influence one another. Other American styles were also represented such as soul and country music. Certain events showcased musicians from a particular city or

country, including, for example, Beijing, Detroit and Uruguay.

At a music festival in an age of global economic integration and communication, world artistic trends inevitably and rightfully emerge. Certain aesthetic values and thematic orientations prevailed and made themselves felt broadly across geography and genre.

What is the general situation in 2013? Social life is dominated by increasingly severe and tense contradictions—of course with national peculiarities—and, at the same time, wide layers of the population have yet to grasp their implications. Honest artists struggle to understand and communicate something important, while there are also political and intellectual forces at work that have a stake in keeping the population confused and disoriented. This complex situation was reflected at SXSW in several ways.

The most pervasive musical trend to be observed was what is loosely known as “trap” music. Such music most typically combines aggressive, dark and spectacular electronic productions with belligerent and self-aggrandizing rapped vocals. Sometimes electronic producers forgo the rapping and simply seek to evoke a swaggering, shock-and-awe sensual response.

The style descends from “crunk” hip hop from the 1990s American South—whose name is a portmanteau of the words “crazy” and “drunk”—and innovates by way of 21st century laptop production techniques that offer finer control over the manipulation of the senses. Lyrics typically express arrogance, menace and the glorification of wealth, while the music evokes tension, power and violence. Beats often sample or replicate gunfire, explosions, sirens.

Something about American and global life finds reflection here, but how conscious or deep-going is it? How do the increasing brutalization of everyday life, inequality and rapidly advancing technology come together in 2013, and what are the effects on all involved? An artistic exploration of these phenomena could be very powerful. But much of what was on display at SXSW was not exploration, but accommodation.

Thousands of fans lined up many hours ahead of time, in perhaps the longest line of the week-long festival, hoping to see the Saturday night's Boiler Room showcase, featuring some of the best known purveyors of trap. Twenty-two-year-old electronic producer Baauer topped the bill. His song “Harlem Shake” became a left-field global dance craze early this year

thanks to fan-made videos shared on the Internet. It went on to top the Billboard chart when the ranking calculation was recently changed to include streaming Internet data.

Chief Keef, the Chicago teenager whose “I Don’t Like” is as good an example as any of the fundamental trap form (though it’s called “drill” in Chicago), was slated to perform on the same bill, but did not show up. However, his imitators were everywhere. Lunice, from Montreal, Quebec, DJed at this showcase as well. He is one half of the duo TNGHT, whose self-titled 2012 EP was a critically well-received minimalist reduction of trap aesthetics.

Critically, satirically, or as a part of a more complex whole, trap has considerable artistic potential. However, with very few exceptions, this is not at all what one experienced in Austin. For the most part, audiences were meant to celebrate these emotions and sentiments uncritically.

UK dance label Night Slugs, and their New York-based offshoot Fade to Mind, hosted a number of shows throughout the week. Coming from a dance music background rather than hip hop, their music nonetheless also tends to combine a high-gloss and high-precision production sheen with dark and aggressive moods. Their notable releases include Jam City’s album *Classical Curves*, which occasionally satirizes extreme wealth and power, and Fatima al Qadiri’s *Desert Strike* EP, which combines weapon sounds with somber synth and vocal lines and Middle Eastern tonalities. Her cover art depicts a drone flying low over a burning ocean of oil, viewed on some kind of tablet or flatscreen television.

The set design at one such Night Slugs show featured a towering stage, elevating artists more than 10 feet above the crowd, and putting them in the absurd position of looking down at the audience through a cluster of low-hanging chandeliers.

Regrettably, the artists played almost none of their interesting, or even pleasant, material and instead seemed to be trying to out-“trap” the Americans. Their show was difficult to endure. Several Night Slugs artists have sizable followings, and the label heads host a popular and much more eclectic radio show. For many fans in Austin this was the first time they had the opportunity to see these acts perform live, and anecdotally it didn’t seem like most of them were pleased.

A second major trend at SXSW was rock music that imitates or expresses nostalgia for the 1990s and early 2000s. For those of a certain age, that period may represent a less troubling time, before the deep penetration of the Internet and digital technologies into daily life, before the economic recession and the social counterrevolution that has accompanied it.

Just walking around the festival area, one could at any time of day count on hearing from somewhere or another dead-ringers for 1990s’ pop-punk acts like Green Day or Blink 182, sentimental and anthemic odes to youth and lots of covers of songs by millennial acts like Fall Out Boy and the Yeah Yeah Yeahs (who themselves performed as well).

Both of these trends suggest a reluctance or inability of many

artists to cognize and probe the complexities of the present situation. Naturally certain individual artists fared better than others. There is of course a limit to the number of acts one can see in the course of a few days, so still others may well have displayed different strengths and weaknesses. Some more performances will be described in more detail in another article to follow.

Apart from listening to music, the experience of simply attending the festival was quite striking in several ways. Social media and mobile phones have been carefully integrated into the events by the sponsors and organizers. New apps for recording, uploading, tagging and sharing—a process known as “scrobbling” data—were developed and released as a part of the “interactive” technology conference that has been associated with the festival for the last several years. Some shows required this type of participation in order to gain access.

The activity of attendees, never mind the performances of the artists, at this corporate-sponsored festival must be one of the most recorded social experiences in history. One was seemingly always on camera, often from numerous angles.

Additionally, the police deployment was noteworthy. SXSW takes place in the streets of Austin, and city police officers provide crowd control. Their sheer number was striking. They were on foot, on bike, on horseback, in cars and all-terrain vehicles, indoors and out. A mobile “Command” center, the size of a double-wide modular home, was situated in the middle of 6th Street, the festival’s main promenade. That a large gathering of young people undoubtedly makes the authorities nervous is itself an expression of social tensions, as is the “new normal” of a significant police (or military) presence at virtually every public event in the US.

Police not only detained or removed unlicensed food vendors, people found carrying drugs and certain belligerent individuals, they also mingled with the crowd and posed for photos. In one surreal image, two performers were freestyle rapping in the street, surrounded by perhaps forty onlookers, and the whole scene was being circled by three police officers on bicycles, as though by sharks.



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