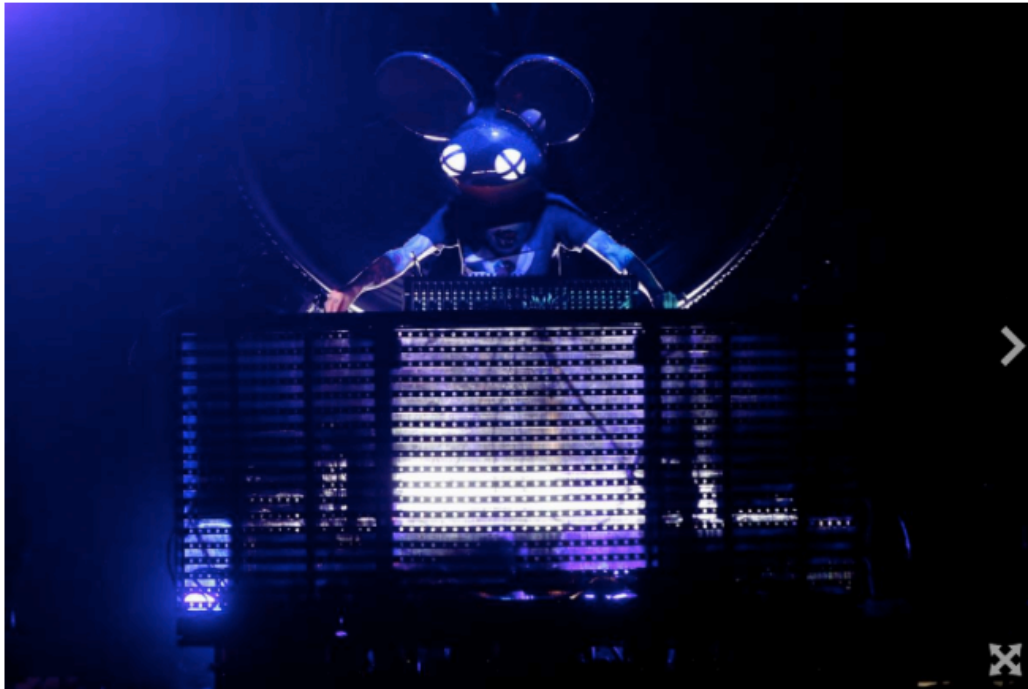


Of mau5 and man

Electronic producer Joel Zimmerman puts his money where his mouth is

BY FRANCOIS MARCHAND, VANCOUVER SUN JUNE 30, 2015 12:56 PM



When deadmau5 isn't touring, recording, remixing, or making Tim Hortons runs with Rob Ford, he's spending time with Meowingtons (below).

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Joel Zimmerman just had his passport renewed, which unfortunately for him means he won't get a break from touring any time soon.

"Oh f--," Zimmerman says with a huff, speaking via Skype from his Ontario home. "You're living the dream! I'm enduring the nightmare."

The man known internationally as electronic music producer and dance music superstar deadmau5 is joking about his terrible life, which mostly consists of recording music, touring the globe and showing off the toys he gets to buy with his supersized earnings — including an array of sports cars and other assorted gizmos — via his Instagram and Twitter feeds.

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Or is he? You'd be hard-pressed to tell if Zimmerman is ever really being serious.

Zimmerman is well-known for naming his deadmau5 albums things like Random Album Title (2008), For Lack Of A Better Name (2009) or >album title goes here< (2012). His latest, the excellent atmospheric double opus while(1<2), is named after a line of code that tells a computer program to do something else while completing an operation. Considering his multi-tasking tendencies, it might just be his most thought-out album title to date.

Our conversation is essentially that: Just one of many things Zimmerman is juggling while other (and arguably more important) things are happening.

Zimmerman audibly flicks a lighter and puts the flame to a cigarette. He immediately resumes clicking away on his computer mouse, a sound that permeates the entire conversation.

"Sorry, I'm playing Diablo as we speak," he explains. Click. Click-click-click.

Diablo is an action role-playing game in which players attempt to clear dungeon-based quests, also known as "rifts," for experience points and loot. Zimmerman is admittedly really good at this game, judging by the furiosity of his clicking.

"I'm in a 45 grade rift and it's very taxing," he continues. "I'm playing 'hardcore' (level) too, so if I die that's it."

Click-click-click-click-click.

As obnoxious as all of that might sound, the conversation is quite fun. The notoriously sarcastic Zimmerman is in a good mood, having just wrapped a solid set at the Bonnaroo music festival in Tennessee, which he called his "New York redemption."

At a performance at the New York City's Governors Ball in early June, deadmau5's set was interrupted by a power failure, which led to Zimmerman having a bit of a blowout with the technical crew on stage. Rocker Ryan Adams, who was performing nearby, also took to Twitter to voice his displeasure at deadmau5's set bleeding into his own due to high volumes, likening the experience to "living in a f---ing Terminator nightmare."

One of the best moments from the deadmau5 set at Bonnaroo took place during his song Seeya, when Zimmerman removed his trademark "mau5 head" helmet, stepped in front of his equipment, and plopped himself down on a couch to have a beer while the song played behind him, without any need for assistance.

It was an amusing interlude where he was also joined by a guy dressed as a palm tree and another as Katy Perry's infamous "Left Shark" character from her recent Super Bowl halftime show.

"So all of my show is more or less live, right?" Zimmerman explains. "So I'm banking out all these stems (the bits and pieces that make up deadmau5's tracks on the computer) and I'm playing synths and I have MIDI going, recreating the original production as the show goes.

"So I was working on that segment of the show and I lost all the stems for it. So I was like, 'F---, man!' I gotta play that track because it's a good little break. But I didn't have any of the parts or the MIDI files — anything. I can't do a harmonica solo on top of it. So I said, 'F--- it. I'll play the two-track (album version) back.' But then what can I do? I could just sit there and fist-pump and at that point, then yes, I'm a DJ."

Word to the wise: Don't ever call deadmau5 a DJ.

"So I thought, 'Let's just get some goofy costumes and sit down and have a beer' — a little improv theatre. Actually, it's really great because after 90 minutes or 75 minutes or however long it is, I just want to take a seat."

Considering his disdain for certain electronic artists whose sole role behind the decks is pushing a button and watching the party roll along, you could have made the mistake of thinking this was Zimmerman's own little commentary on the state of EDM.

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"No, it was just me being unprepared," Zimmerman says. "A lot of people were speculating, 'Oh, yeah! He's anti press-play DJs and that's why he did it.' Actually, it's because I had nothing better to do up there."

At 34, Zimmerman is one of the biggest names in electronic dance music.

A six-time Grammy nominee and four-time Juno winner, Zimmerman is essentially self-taught. With no formal education in computers or real musical training, Zimmerman evolved his machine-generated blend of progressive house music with the technology available to him at the time, starting with a keyboard he received one Christmas as a teenager and expanding as he went along.

"(As a kid) I was struggling with Atari STs and Amigas — you couldn't even make music on the computer. I was fortunate enough to grow up with that and learn as new stuff came out. And that just kind of applied with graphic design and web design. I did web design for the longest time while I was doing music, (quoting George W. Bush) 'to put food on my family.'

"There's fundamentals of music composition that have been around for hundreds of years that are just good to know. In terms of computer-assisted music, that was a little more my forte."

One of the top sellers in his genre, deadmau5 appeared at the 2010 Olympic Winter Games in Vancouver and he was the first Canadian to headline Toronto's Rogers Centre, performing to 20,000 people in 2011. He was also the first electronic artist to headline at London's famed Earls Court.

In B.C., deadmau5 was recently seen at the Contact event at BC Place in 2012 and he was one of the headliners at last year's Pemberton Music Festival.

He returns this weekend for FVDED in the Park, taking place at Holland Park in Surrey, headlining Friday night.

Zimmerman's mission statement (as posted on his website) remains: "There are no CDs involved. It's a technological orgy up there and I try and keep it more my music than anyone else's. If people come out to see deadmau5 I want them to hear deadmau5 music."

Zimmerman understands the rather ridiculous nature of electronic music concerts. At least he has consistently attempted to elevate the experience through technological gadgetry.

It began with the borderline Disney copyright infringing mau5 head, of which there were many versions, and it expanded to a stage apparatus that, during his last tour, had blown up to extreme proportions, featuring a cube-like station and an array of video game-inspired visuals to enhance the musical experience.

For his latest round of touring, Zimmerman has come up with a new tactile, touch screen workstation set under a morphing metal dome. He still proudly sports the mau5 head.

"My thing with live performance is that it's only useful to me on stage if it's useful in the studio," Zimmerman says when asked about his equipment. "I'm more likely to click a mouse and draw around on a screen than I will use some obscure, esoteric control surface to do something you could just program in. It's show pony shit, the touch screen stuff. It really is. I'd rather be turning a small knob that not anyone can see, you know what I mean? As far as doing stuff efficiently, touch screen is not the way to go — it's not 'the future of DJing' — but it looks cool.

"There are easy ways to convey your music but I like to build more of a show around it, even though a lot of the principles remain the same: That I'm playing back a lot of premeditated things and pre-produced things but I'm not doing it with two \$500 pieces of Pioneer shit and a glow stick in my mouth. The way I see it: If you're going to pay a guy upwards of \$500,000 to a million f---ing dollars to stand on a stage in front of however many people at 'X' EDM event, if you're not putting at least 200 grand into your stage show other than an LED wall and some backline stuff, it's just the biggest ripoff."

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