

Justice, Access All Arenas

The Album Review

Up until the mid-2000s when brand name DJs exploded into the height of their mainstream vogue, my musical taste leaned sharply to towards the contemporary alternative genre. Not venturing too far, I however quickly found a soft spot for vocal house. Some classic if clichéd tracks from this era are still on my go-to playlist for background music to accompany mundane tasks - Tiesto's *Do What You Want*, Gabriel & Dresden's new take on old classic *Dust in the Wind*, and Armin Van Buuren's *The Sound of Goodbye*, chief among them. As overplayed as they might be, the musical arrangement and manipulation of with these tracks perfectly lifts the vocals, elevates the lyrics, and gives the songs a skillfully nuanced mood and meaning.

Living in the ever avant-garde Montreal for a few years, I saw these acts as well as a handful of the more obscure live early on - but mostly under duress, and usually playing chaperon to over-excited visiting friends. Already a skeptic of the seemingly over-hyped art that goes into electro, I had little tolerance for seemingly simple beats that seemed to garner near fanatic worship or for standing in long and sweaty lines to "watch" artists push buttons and release pre-recorded sets. The concept of watching these acts "perform" seemed counterintuitive. Call it blasphemy, but Deadmau5 agrees with me.

The infinitely acclaimed progressive-house music producer and performer took to his Tumblr in a deliciously blunt rant to call himself and his peers "button pushers" and set the record straight: "When it comes to lives performance of EDM ... I think given about one hour of instruction, anyone with minimal knowledge of Ableton and music tech in general could do what I'm doing at a Deadmau5 concert."

For the uninitiated, EDM is electro dance music, Ableton AG is a Berlin-based music software company that primarily produces production and performance programs, and I wholly agree. By all means attend "live" electro performances to revel in the collective high of good music in a shared group experience, but don't kid yourself into thinking you're getting anything different than you would via illicitly shared mp3.

That is unless the act is Justice.

French house music duo Gaspard Augé and Xavier de Rosnay are no strangers to critical acclaim. If you haven't heard of them, you've almost certainly unknowingly heard them. Justice won Best Video at the MTV Europe Music Awards 2006 for the addictive *We Are Your Friends*, their debut 2007 album was nominated for a Grammy for Best Electronic / Dance Album, and they won the Grammy Award for Best Remixed Recording, Non-Classical for their remix of MGMT song *Electric Feel* in 2009.

Despite having little to prove in terms of both technical capability and artistry, Justice make it a point to use their live shows to experiment organically, making them what Pitchfork called "one of the few existing electronic acts where the impulse for the crowd to arrange itself facing the stage actually seems justified."

These days the duo is zipping around prime venues across Europe and North America, so catching them live in the near future without investing in a plane ticket out of the Middle East is improbable. Fortunately, this year's live album *Access All Arenas* is a formidable substitute.

Recorded at the Arena of Nîmes in July of last year, this is their second live album in a climate where one is already a tough-sell. A little under an hour and a half of musical mastery, it goes through 14 tracks, including the inescapable *D.A.N.C.E* which earned them a nomination for Best Dance Recording and Best Electronic/Dance at the 2008 Grammys and their first single *Waters of Nazareth* that catapulted them into the public eye. Some, such as *Audio, Video, Disco*, are pulled to almost ten minutes, and all interwoven with a spectacularly curated selection of samples - from classical Bach, to contemporary Jay-Z, and even obscure Italian progressive rock.

Musicians in the classic sense, they might not be, but they certainly know their techie tools and play them like instruments. It's this intrinsic familiarity that allows them to actually perform their studio work, taking it to different heights and in different directions to truly play live.

Justice are known foremost for incorporating a strong rock and indie influence into their music, and as the explosive crowd reactions indicate on *Access All Arenas*, this extends to how they conceive of their shows. In the arena they hold themselves more as rock gods than electro artists and blur the line between classical performance and its modern incarnation impeccably.

Listen to *Access All Arenas* to redefine your expectations of live electro-music, and vocally demand more than pre-queued audio tracks out of your next \$100 show ticket.