



DEAD MAU 5

HEADSPACE

Deadmau5 is the newest star on the international dance music circuit. This is how he became the big cheese.

*By Dennis Sebayan
Photography by Phil Knott*

Joel Zimmerman's story is one filled with dichotomy. It's a tale that pits the old school against the new school: the digital vanguard against the analog purist, and the DJ against the live musician. Heck, this chronicle is even about MIDI against Open Sound Control. And right in the middle of it all is an artist who wears a cartoon mouse head to his breakout performances. In just two years, Zimmerman has skyrocketed to fame as Deadmau5, an alter ego that blends technology, innovation, dance music and flashy onstage antics into one.

Born on January 5, 1981, on the Canadian side of Niagara Falls, Zimmerman never really aspired to become the world's fastest rising dance music producer, but in 2008, he is. He took a shotgun approach to his early career as a computer programmer, gravitating toward any area that was "developing fast [with] new methodology for working."

"I always had a backup plan of being a designer or a programmer," he says. For a minute, he thought he would become a Flash guru, but developments in the ways music could be made steered him into production. "If it's more fast-paced than my attention span," he explains, "that's the kind of thing I want to do. Music was a natural choice."

The Deadmau5 pseudonym materialized in 2005 when a mouse crawled into Zimmerman's computer and died, leaving smelly remnants for him to uncover. The round mouse head logo, which has become synonymous with his work as a DJ and producer, was the first fully finished model he completed while exploring the world of computer 3-D modeling and animation.

The head started out as a "bit of a laugh" in the beginning, until he began using it as a branding tool for his freelance web design projects and for his label, Mau5trap Recordings. "A friend of mine from Los Angeles sent me a picture of him drunk, passed out on a couch," he recalls. "I superimposed the head on him in Photoshop [and] sent it back to him as a laugh. It became one of those 'you've got to do that' things."

He began in 2004 to produce singles in earnest, eventually landing them on the playlists of the world's top DJs, including Sasha, Carl Cox and Dubfire. When progressive stalwart Chris Lake passed Zimmerman's single "Faxing Berlin" to a certain Pete Tong, Deadmau5's fate as a wanted producer was sealed. In 2007, he was the recipient of the Canadian Juno Award for his collaboration with Newton Davis on "All You Ever Want." By September 2008, Deadmau5 became the highest selling artist on MP3 outlet Beatport. "Faxing Berlin" and the single "Not Exactly"—both appearing on his new full-length, *Random Album Title*—had already moved more than 30,000 units at the online music shop.

Contrary to popular opinion, Zimmerman does not practice his Deadmau5 antics in front of a mirror, nor does he wear the mouse head to bed. The first time I saw him live was during a 20-minute set at Ultra Music Festival in Miami last March. The appearance served as a teaser for anyone who hadn't heard of Deadmau5 before the Winter Music Conference. While he jumped around looking like dance music's first ever cartoon mascot, films of Zimmerman skateboarding played on giant projection screens behind him.



Fast forward to September and I meet the man behind the mask, just hours before a rare DJ gig at Cielo. Looking weary, Zimmerman is two weeks into a Beatport and Puma-sponsored 52-show tour across three continents. "Touring drains your soul completely," he says. "It's not so much showing up to a club, playing a gig on your feet for three hours, as it is being on a flight every morning and every night."

A few minutes into the conversation, he lets his guard down. We talk about his live setup, which comprises two laptops (one is a pure live machine containing clips, MIDI sequences and VSTis; the other contains full audio tracks), an Allen and Heath XONE 42 mixer and two devices called the Anomaly and the Lemur. During his sets, he uses the XONE 42's four channels, configuring the first two with laptop A and the last two with laptop B.

The Anomaly and Lemur are two pieces of equipment—"essential tools to moving forward"—that place the Deadmau5 live act apart from the rest. "They're both very modular," he explains. "Two artists can buy them and never do the exact same thing with them; they're customizable to the degree of changing the control surface [and] programming new ways to use set devices." While he's interfacing on the XONE 42, he's utilizing the two touch-screen grids to punch in commands,

apply FX and adjust sliders.

When he purchased his Anomaly, it didn't come with a manual or software, only a power supply and the box. This forced him to do research, learn a new programming language and discover Open Sound Control, the protocol it uses to communicate. "It's MIDI 2.0—you can send the signal over the Ethernet," he tells me. While OSC is similar to MIDI, he believes "it is faster and smarter."

OSC is now Deadmau5's "protocol of choice" for synchronization and control-sending language. "MIDI should just fuck off and die already," he says. "It's so clunky and unreliable. We have fiber-optic technology to send this very conversation halfway around the world and back in less than two milliseconds. Why do we still have sync problems with electronic instruments?"

Later that night, I'm at Cielo, surrounded by the flock of managers, agents and publicists who make up Zimmerman's entourage. For a Tuesday night, the club is completely filled. His manager invites me to check out Deadmau5 in the booth. The "rare DJ set" is usually a lazy excuse for a producer to make some money by showing up at the club with a case of CDs. Yet I find Deadmau5 actively working the four sliders on the mixer and interfacing the two touch screen devices. The set sounds like an expertly crafted journey into minimal, progressive

and techno. Almost more exciting, tonight, Deadmau5 has revealed a new blue mouse head. Whenever he puts it on, stroboscopic eyeballs scan the crowd—everybody goes wild.

Deadmau5 is coming up at a pivotal point in dance music history, where new technology is enticing DJs to visit the live music realm, and vice-versa. "The DJ comes out on top in the nightclub over a lot of live PAs," he admits, "because it's playback of mastered product." But while some are resistant to the idea, Zimmerman fully embraces the new hands-on technology. "It can help you stop worrying about certain aspects, allowing you to develop new areas."

The beauty of club culture is that it's constantly evolving, from the people and the venues to the music and the way that it is relayed. It started with vinyl, then the CD DJ threatened to usurp the purists. Soon, the Ableton and Serato DJs started blogging their way into the club's PA. Through it all, the integration of new developments has always called for an upward battle. And now, Zimmerman is facing trial by fire.

Recently, Deadmau5 cast himself as the "up-and-comer versus [the] DJ guy" in an interview for *DJ Magazine*. The publication ended up putting his ubiquitous big mouse head on the front cover alongside his quote, "The Day of the DJ Is Just



"There will always be something I want to do that's extremely impossible"

Gonna End," as the headline. "The whole fucking article basically said that I did it," he says.

When an artist comes up in a competitive scene known for its elitism and resistance to new forces, there's bound to be a backlash. Likewise, critics and dance music fans tend to lump him into the new school of DJ/producers, downplaying his credibility as a viable act on the global dance circuit. Deadmau5 has become a colorful poster-boy punching bag of sorts. But he's not down for the count.

Zimmerman will continue embracing new innovations, modifying his set to include the latest developments. "Things will never get satisfactory because there will always be something I want to do that's extremely impossible," he says.

"The electronic music scene can best be described as a roller coaster," he explains. "Along the timeline, you're going to have high points and low points. But at the end of the fucking day, old school DJs and new school DJs have to get on this fucking thing. And it's going."