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Interview: Electric Zoo Organizers Mike Bindra and Laura de Palma on Techno Outdoors, Dance-Music Geeks, and Port-o-Potties

By Max Willens in DFA, Electric Zoo, Featured, Interview, Max Willens, interviews

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Photo courtesy of Plexi PR

James Murphy and Pat Mahoney aren't Mike Bindra and Laura de Palma, but we couldn't resist this photo.

The United States is most definitely at a different point in the electronic music festival life cycle than Europe. Without getting into Europe's stage (dirty 30s?), it's fair to say that Electric Zoo, a weekend-long electronic music festival created by long-time events organizers Mike Bindra and his long-time business partner, Laura de Palma, is the event ushering America into its young adulthood. Over Labor Day weekend, Electric Zoo will pair old-school legends (Frankie Knuckles, Richie Hawtin, Francois K) beside hipster favorites (James Murphy and Pat Mahoney, Lindstrom and Prins Thomas, Busy P) and guido gods (ATB, Armin Van Buuren, Deadmau5) on four different stages, all hidden away in the (relative) wilds of Randall's Island.

To get the lowdown on this momentous occasion, we recently spoke with Bindra and de Palma by phone about the appeal of techno outside, territorial dance-music genre geeks, and Port-o-Potties.

What made you two decide to do an electronic music festival in New York City?

Laura de Palma: Because we're crazy! [laughs] It's been something that we've been working towards for years. We've been doing big outdoor events in Central Park, and other big outdoor events for about seven years or so. We're up to it.

Mike Bindra: We did Pier 54 last year--

LDP: Pier 54, we did McCarren Pool for a couple of years. We've been on the lookout for a venue that we thought would be appropriate.

MB: And there wasn't really a venue available to do it for the last few years.



Laura de Palma and Mike Bindra

That brings me right to my main question. The vast majority of the acts you've booked for Electric Zoo have spent their careers making music for a very specific space: a dark nightclub. What do you think it's going to be like to present that kind of music in an outdoor, daylit, open-air environment?

LDP: We're going to have four different environments. We're going to have an open-air main stage, which we've had experience with before in the past, and it's worked very well. And in the tented environments, we'll have the opportunity to create an experience-not like a club-but a unique experience within a unique environment.

Obviously, the booking will give each space its own vibe, but you're going to actually give each one a unique decor and ambience?

MB: Yes. We hired a great production designer! He does all of Kanye's stuff.

Whoa, really?

MB: Yes, and he's designing all of our tents, plus the main stage, and each will have their own feeling and their own vibe.

LDP: Yes. Essentially, it's been a great experience working with him, because he brings the experience of working with a really massive stage, and within the tents, he has some unique opportunities to play with the fact that they're closed and contained, like a club or indoor venue-a dancefloor environment.

You guys were specifically interested in holding Electric Zoo in a grassy and leafy kind of space. What's so appealing, especially for this kind of festival, about a woodsy environment?

MB: It goes back to what you were asking before about the DJs being used to a club environment, and how that's going to affect them. We've found, over the years, that the minute we put this type of music or these types of performances in an area with trees and grass, it just takes things to a whole other level. People are just happy, and smiling, and joyful, and that feeling of freedom or unity that you can reach sometimes in clubs-to be able to achieve that outdoors just makes it that much more special.

Why not something like a beach, then? Did you guys consider doing this out at Coney Island, or out by the Rockaways?

MB: We have. But, you know, it's very difficult, within the metropolitan area, to find a place that you can [get a] permit for the type of event that's the size and scale of what we're doing. And also with multiple stages; a lot of venues that maybe can accommodate 10-15,000 people can't do it with the multiple stages that we want to have.

Let's take about the size and scope of this lineup, then. Electronic dance music has grown so much more prominent and visible in the last couple of years. Even if Randall's Island had been available three or four years ago, do you think you could've pulled off something this big back then?

LDP: I think so. I think it would've been different, but we could've.

MB: Obviously, now, there are a lot more artists to choose from than there was back then. I think we would've needed certain artists to make it work, and without them, it wouldn't have worked. Now, I think there's a bigger pool of artists with a big enough following to choose from.

LDP: And to your point, I think that that is the way the wind is blowing.

Talk a bit about the variety of artists you've booked. You've got old-school pioneers, trance gods, minimal techno guys, electro-house celebrities, the whole package. Tell me why it was so important to have such variety.

MB: I think it's very healthy for the scene when stuff crosses over. What we're seeing in electronic music now, instead of it being self-segregated into sub-genres, you've got a lot of artists who are crossing those boundaries. At the same time, you've got artists crossing over into the commercial mainstream-and vice versa-and we think that's healthy for everybody.

LDP: Oh that is true, that is very true. And we agree that it doesn't need to be that way.

MB: Some of the most musically advanced and sophisticated-as far as musical tastes go-DJs I know were once going to Twilo and listening to big commercial trance guys. And, y'know, it's the same in any type of music, whether it's Britney Spears being the gateway, when you're a kid, to, uh, getting into Radiohead later in life.

LDP: Exactly. Hearing electronic dance music as much as I have heard it over the years, all of the separate sub-genres are probably more alike than they are different. Like, when you really hear a lot of it, and hear it over and over, you start to understand the similarities.

Exactly! I've never understood the obsessive self-segregation that exists in some of these scenes. There are guys who act like they'd rather have one of their eyes plucked out than hear a Diplo remix dropped into the middle of a set of German tech-house.

LDP: [laughs] Yeah!

MB: You're so right.

Silly questions now: Are you gonna have enough Port-o-Potties?

Both: Yes!

MB: We're going to have considerably more than the industry suggests.

LDP: It was important to us that people not have to deal with that crap.

MB:[laughs]

LDP: Pun intended!

That's reassuring. I've heard you guys also put a lot thought into the non-musical attractions at this festival. Without giving everything away, what does that entail?

MB: There'll be shaded areas, protected from the sun, where you can eat your meal and not be in the midst of it all. There'll be an interactive art installation. Without giving it all away

[pauses]

Well, I'll give it all away. It's called Sonic Forest.

Oooooooh.

MB: It's an interactive art installation that, as you move by it or touch it, it creates light and sound. The more people who enter it, the crazier it gets.

LDP: That's a total sonic environment. And also, just the nature of the venue itself, there's grass, trees, a lot of hills. I think the venue creates plenty of spaces for people to just relax.

MB: We're also striving to have a good variety of vending. Different food choices. Not your usual hamburgers hot dogs pizza. We'll have that, but there'll be a nice quality vegetarian option. There's stuff to do, if you just want a break from the music.

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One final thing. You're planning on doing this every year, right?

MB: Yes.

LDP: That's the hope, that's our plan.

So you're not planning on building the whole thing up for a few years and then airlifting it to London?

Both: [laughs]

MB: I think we're at a different point in the electronic music festival life cycle over here in the U.S. than they are in London, or Europe.

But it's encouraging, I think, to finally have somebody ushering our country into that life stage.

MB: It's exciting for us too-the culmination of many years' work for us.

Electric Zoo takes place this Labor Day Weekend, Saturday, September 5 and Sunday, September 6, at Randall's Island Park from noon to 11pm each day, with four stages, 50-plus artists.



photo courtesy Plexi PR

Richie Hawtin