How Mega Rave Electric Zoo Will Try to Keep the Drugs Out
By Steve Weinstein
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As many as 100,000 EDM fans will descend on Randall's Island this weekend for the return of Electric Zoo. Over three days, the mostly 20-something crowd will hear an impressive roster of DJs that includes superstars David Guetta, Armin Van Buuren, Paul Van Dyk, Victor Calderone, Kaskade, and Sasha.

But first they will have to have their wristbands electronically validated after proving they have viewed — either online or there on site — a video on the dangers of Molly, the Ecstasy derivative responsible for several recent deaths at EDM events. Written and directed by James Manos, Jr., creator of the popular Showtime series, Dexter, and his teenage daughter, Ellie, the two-minute PSA shows a young man getting so high on the dance floor that he ends up alone in a very dark head space.

It's only one of the steps the festival's producer, Made Event, is taking after last year, when two attendees died, and several others were reportedly hospitalized. In the wake of intense media scrutiny...
and criticism, and after a strong recommendation by the mayor's office, the third day was abruptly canceled.

This year, attendees will be greeted by drug-sniffing dogs and "Amnesty Bins," which offer a last chance to trash the stash, no questions asked.

See also: GIFs: The Anti-Drug PSA All Electric Zoo Concertgoers Are Required to Watch This Year

The dogs, according to Made Event principal Mike Bindra, are "more of a deterrent factor. They aren't storm trooper German shepherds. You're going to have to go through a gauntlet. It's a way to bolster our security practices and eliminate stuff from getting into the festival."

Other innovations new this year are geared toward keeping partygoers happy and healthy. Messages from the stages will give advice like how to stay hydrated. EMTs will roam in the field, along with "Zoo Keepers," young medical students casually observing, offering free water or electrolytes, and offering assistance where necessary.

EDM fans took Electric Zoo to task on its Facebook page after it announced it would not allow CamelBak-type hydration packs, even empty ones. But the list of prohibited items at another local event earlier this month included empty cups, eyedroppers, Kandi bracelets, and even pacifiers and stuffed animals, a decision that might seem more reasonable in light of the two deaths and 20-plus hospitalizations at the EDM-heavy Mad Decent Block Party in Washington, D.C., just a few weeks ago.

Bindra says he is seeking a middle path. "When people in their early 20s are dying, even if some of the actions seem overreactions, we have to do everything in our power to prevent it from happening again."

Tammy L. Anderson, a professor of sociology and criminal justice at the University of Delaware who closely follows youth culture and drug use, says that in the heyday of rave culture music fans banded
"They were wiser about their drug consumption," says Anderson, also the author of *Rave Culture: The Alteration and Decline of a Philadelphia Music Scene*. "They had a methodology about recovery. Then came the 'realists,' the routine clubbers, the do-overs or pretenders, who said, 'I want to be a part of this scene' — frat boys, college kids. The sometime-goers would just overdo it and not have as much drug knowledge. Finally, there were the 'bandwagoners.' They would just do dance events to get fucked up."

The founding publisher of website *YourEDM.com*, Jordan Keeling, also blames bandwagoners — "the most damaging thing to our culture, the types of people who attend massive shows, whose sole purpose is to get laid, take handfuls of pills, get totally wasted."

Getting wasted, of course, is hardly unique to the EDM world. While national media blare headlines about a fatality at an EDM festival, there was far less coverage last month when more than 20 people were hospitalized due to "alcohol-related issues" at a country music concert starring Keith Urban.

Binge drinking at college sports events has become a national epidemic; dozens of hospital admissions were attributed to a giant tailgating party before a 2004 Harvard-Yale game, yet no one calls for the stoppage of intramural competition. In March, when I wrote a Voice cover story about Roseland closing its doors, Donald Bernstein, the industry attorney for the city's nightlife establishments, made a pointed analogy: "Should George Steinbrenner be penalized if drugs are found at Yankee Stadium," he asked me. "Could you imagine the police closing down Madison Square Garden if drugs were found?"

"All events are plagued with substance abuse," Meghan Ralston, harm-reduction manager for the Drug Policy Alliance, says. "It is unfair for music festivals to be taking such a hit in the press."

Certainly, two deaths at last year's Zoo was two too many. But that's two out of nearly 100,000 attendees. Not that you'd have known that from tabloid headlines like the *Post*'s "Death-plagued Zoo," or the *Daily News*' "Death Fest."

In a damning Huffington Post column after the Zoo deaths, "dance-music journalist" Kia Makarechi compared the current state of EDM to rock 'n' roll after the disastrous 1969 Rolling Stones concert in Altamont, California: "The broader society now views it as underscored by drug use and reckless behavior."

In other words, perception equals reality.

Today, nearly 40 years to the day after a Woodstock announcer warned the crowd not to take the brown acid, aging rockers look with disdain at the music enjoyed by millennials as only fit for druggies. Two months ago, veteran rocker Tom Petty told USA Today, "I don't think it would be any fun without the drugs. It's a drug party."

"The only thing that differentiates raves is that it was needed to reinvigorate the war on drugs," Anderson says.
It fits a pattern that began at the turn of the last century. As long as a drug remains in marginal communities, the rest of the country doesn't pay much attention. Pot was only made illegal after white, hipster types picked it up from black musicians.

Could the fact that the majority of EDM fans are middle-class and white have anything to do with the present national hysteria over MDMA? Politicians across the country have responded with harassment and bills, like the one signed into law by California governor Jerry Brown, which requires state agencies to consider accoutrements like neon gloves, pacifiers, and stuffed animals as drug paraphernalia.

In New Orleans, a zealous prosecutor invoked a law against crack houses to try to put away three rave promoters for 25 years because they had glow sticks, Vicks VapoRub, and bottled water. In 2003, then-Delaware Senator Joe Biden pushed through Congress the Rave Act, which was so vaguely worded even Fox News called it "raving lunacy."

Even if judges throw out cases brought on such ridiculous charges, Missi Wooldridge, executive director of DanceSafe — whose stated mission is one of both harm reduction and popular education at live music events — believes they send a message to lawyers and insurance brokers that they could be legally responsible for drug use.

Worse, the net effect is, in Bindra's eyes, a catch-22: Any on-site medical help becomes tacit approval of drug use. Promoters are so afraid to be seen as so much as acknowledging that attendees might be doing drugs at their events that they pretend that no one is using, even if that means people in extremis could die. Bindra should know: After last year's Zoo, the tabloids gleefully associated him with Twilo, the Chelsea megaclub where he worked as a talent manager, which was closed down after two fatal drug overdoses.

"I'd be lying if I didn't feel bad last summer, when the tabloids were making stuff up," Bindra says. "That was a lesson of operating in a harsh media environment. It's dangerous because then the
For EDM producers it's a case of "damned if you do, damned if you don't," Daniel Raymond, policy director of the Harm Reduction Coalition, says. "The politicians and media want to make you accountable for keeping drugs out of the venue altogether, although they know it's not possible. You need to give these promoters space so that people can be using in safe and healthy environments. The crackdown approach only exacerbates the likelihood of an OD."

Most Western European nations have accepted the inevitability of drug use at festivals. One of Ralston's colleagues just returned from a festival in Portugal, which decriminalized drugs 12 years ago. Mobile drug-testing vans went from club to club to ensure that what people were dropping was clean. "How many times do we hear stories about kids who don't even know what drug they're taking?" Ralston asks.
For 16 years, DanceSafe has been working on the margins of the EDM industry to provide information and assistance. After the deaths at last year’s Zoo, Wooldridge says, producing organizations finally began considering on-site harm reduction and education. "Folks in the industry are starting to have conversations with our organization."

DanceSafe has also begun receiving favorable media attention, such as a sympathetic segment on Katie Couric's late daytime talk show. "We've been shown in a very positive light, as has harm reduction," Wooldridge says.

Last year’s Tomorrowland was the first time DanceSafe was able to work closely with a producer. (It's probably not a coincidence that Tomorrowland's parent company is based in Belgium.) The event brought 140,000 people to a location in rural Georgia without one serious drug-related incident.

Bindra is optimistic that the tide may indeed be turning. "I feel we're moving in a positive direction," he says. "I do see a consensus building around these events. Harm reduction is more sensible. How do we get the right harm-reduction message out there?"

While Ralston applauds Made Event for making an effort to try to reduce ODs, she wishes the compulsory video had gone the distance and specifically mentioned Molly. "Where they went awry was not including any information," she says. "It doesn't say how to get medical help, what to do if you combine drugs. At the same time, at least they're trying to do something innovative here."

Festival organizers would like to do the right thing, but "without the cooperation of local law enforcement, their hands are tied," she adds. "They don't want to raise the ire of the community as being seen endorsing drug use. It has to be a trifecta of promoter, law enforcement, and local elected officials."

Harm reduction means acknowledging that people are going to do drugs, no matter how many laws are passed or how aggressively promoters try to police their events.
Wooldridge recalls an event where she had to pass through three different searches with state troopers and dogs at all three stations. "People were still using drugs. We have cavity searches in prison, and drugs still get through," she says.

Attorney Bernstein says he's "had clubs put in scanners, pat downs, everything I can. But if someone puts a pill in her bra, the most diligent club owner is not going to find that."

Three weeks ago, an editorial in the Baltimore Sun came out strongly in favor harm reduction. "Although no one wants young people to use illegal drugs, it is certain that some will make that choice anyway," Diedre Goldsmith wrote in a letter to the editor. "Therefore, we as a society need to adopt a policy of safety first. In other words, we need to adopt an approach that reduces the risks and harm associated with drug use."

Goldsmith is not an impartial observer. Her daughter, a scholarship student at the University of Virginia, died almost exactly a year ago at a rave-type event in a D.C. club.

Even though they are now based in Western Massachusetts, Bindra and Del Palma both consider themselves die-hard New Yorkers and have an affection for the city. Del Palma says Bloomberg was "great with city agencies." Bindra is especially grateful to Bloomberg for telling disappointed reporters smelling blood a day after Zoo's cancellation that Bindra had a "stellar record" and was "nothing but cooperative."

For this year's event, Electric Zoo had to work extra hard. It only received final approval on April 30 — one day after presale tickets were scheduled to be made available. Electric Zoo will undoubtedly receive a lot of attention this weekend. If all three days pass by without incident, it may encourage other promoters to brave the city's formidable hurdles.

With the cooperation of Mayor Bill de Blasio and Police Commissioner Bill Bratton, New York could help show the way toward an enlightened policy that faces the reality of drug use and where EDM can finally realize its ideal: P.L.U.R., peace, love, unity, responsibility.