The Hidden Artists of ‘EDM’

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Vello Virkhaus has worked with such artists from Korn to the Red Hot Chili Peppers to some of the biggest names in electronic music, like Krewella, Dillon Francis and Skrillex. He plays a key role in mapping out the production at major music festivals, such as Coachella and Electric Daisy Carnival, and recently helped design the visual setup for new

Vegas hotspot Drai.

What enables him to this? As the CEO of V Squared Labs (VSL), Virkhaus is a leading director and “VJ” in the electronic music and visual art scene. “Vjing,” in its simplest terms, is performing with visuals. An artist will take video clips, animated graphics and other illustrations, and layer them together in a musical way. It’s the manipulation of patterns in a way that makes sense with the pace of the music.

“You don’t VJ in a vacuum; it’s a reactive art form,” explained Jonathan Bernbaum, a VJ with VSL who recently programmed DJ Destructo’s show at ‘Electric Daisy Carnival’ New York. “The skill becomes about being ready for anything and being able to anticipate it.”

For big events like EDC, Virkhaus and VSL often work closely with Steve Lieberman, who owns SJ Lighting and is the production and lighting designer for Insomniac Events and Ultra Music Festival. Lieberman and his team produce the designs, and then VSL comes in and customizes the visuals to that canvas.
“Dillon is a great example of somebody who’s more of an artist than just a DJ. He has this unique sensibility and style and humor, and what we did with the Gary was to really interpret his style into something that worked for him,” said Virkhaus. “He had enough identity to do that.”

However, while there is a growing awareness of such visual elements among DJs and promoters, the audience has a lot of catching up to do. Promoters generally do not advertise VJs or production designers because they’re supposed to be “off the record.” “They want our art to be their brand,” said Virkhaus.

Virkhaus said it’s frustrating because he believes it would actually help expand the audience for electronic music if people knew more about the visual art going on. “Everybody wants to see the spectacle,” he said.