





BECOMING BIG GIGANTIC

HOW THE COLORADO JAMBAND
SCENE SPARKED AN EDM SENSATION

BY SAM D'ARCANGELO

SUPERIOR, COLO.'S SUBURBAN LANDSCAPE IS NOT the type of place where one might expect to find a pair of rising rockers who specialize in electronic music. Located about halfway between Denver and Boulder, the town—if you can even call it that—is essentially a cluster of open spaces and faux-idyllic subdivisions, with winding rows of mass-produced homes that all conform to an eerily similar size and aesthetic. The calculated serenity of the development, in particular, is a far cry from the atmosphere at Rowdytown, the name of Big Gigantic's annual party at the nearby Red Rocks Amphitheatre. Yet this is where producer/saxophonist Dominic Lalli has decided to settle down, to the degree that any touring musician can really do such a thing.

"Dom lives in an adult house now," notes drummer Jeremy Salken.

"I just moved in a few months ago," adds Lalli while fiddling with a recently purchased synth pad in his new basement-turned-studio. "I haven't really recorded anything here quite yet."

The spacious home, complete with high ceilings and large living room windows that keep the picturesque hills at the foot of Colorado's Front Range in full view, is a testament to Big Gigantic's rise from local after-party sensation to the touring juggernaut they are today. Lalli and Salken's lives have changed dramatically since 2008, when the pair—who were formerly roommates—started making music together at Salken's home in Boulder. The same can be said of the American electronic dance music scene, which recently graduated to the mainstream after decades of being relegated to the underground or, at best, the periphery of pop culture.

LALLI AND SALKEN WEREN'T ALWAYS PART OF THE EDM WORLD. For the better part of the early '00s, Lalli, a classically trained saxophonist from Las Vegas who holds a master's degree from the Manhattan School of Music, put his jazz background to good use as a member of the Rocky Mountain State's premier funk band,

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The Motet. The Virginia-bred Salken, on the other hand, divided his time between school, graphic design work and a variety of music-related endeavors in the Denver/Boulder area—from playing gigs around town to loading gear for Zilla (the now-dormant live/electronic trio that featured Jamie Janover, String Cheese Incident drummer Michael Travis and Vibesquad's Aaron Holstein) while he followed them on tour.

The two became acquainted through the local Colorado music scene, where they both played regularly with numerous projects. Before long, Salken was on the road with The Motet as their merch guy, helping the band with whatever was necessary.

"Jeremy came out on the road with The Motet for a tour," recalls Lalli. "Then we played a few more gigs together, and I ended up needing a place to live. Jeremy said, 'Oh, you can live with me, man, it's going to be great.' That's when I bought an old computer from Jans [Ingber] of The Motet, a white MacBook, and started trying to make beats. We didn't really do any Big G stuff—that all came together after the fact, when we weren't living together anymore. We started rehearsing in Jeremy's garage and trying to figure out what the hell we were doing."

Though Colorado was primarily known for many years as a hub for jamband and bluegrass music, about 10 years ago, the state—particularly the Boulder and Denver nexus—started to nurture its own electronic music community. A stark contrast from the dance clubs that defined the party scenes in New York and Los Angeles at the time, many of these electronic music shows took place in traditional live music venues and featured jamband-associated musicians on the decks. The late-night shows often orbited around Sound Tribe Sector 9, who have deep ties to Colorado and regularly hosted multi-night runs near where Salken and Lalli were living. It also didn't hurt that Madison House, a jamband-oriented booking and management company that developed a keen interest in electronic music, was based in the area.

"It all kind of evolved pretty naturally," adds Salken. "At the time, we were getting close with David Murphy, who used to play with Sound Tribe Sector 9. He was doing the DJ thing locally, and our first gig was opening for him. It started going from there. That's when the whole after-party thing was really starting to pop off. It all revolved around Sound Tribe—Pretty Lights was doing shows, Bassnectar was doing shows, Bonobo was doing them. Promoters were bringing in all these people that no one had ever heard of and, all of a sudden, we started getting busier."

Big Gigantic took the Boulder/Denver circuit by storm with their fusion of hard-hitting dance music and jazz-inspired saxophone riffs. With instrumentation that gave them more room to open up than the average button-pushing DJ—while still remaining more constrained than a full-on jamtronica act like STS9—Big Gigantic was able to build followings on both sides of the jam/electronic divide thanks to their mix of heavy beats and often melodic grooves.

Before long, the pair decided to put everything else on hold so they could give their new project the attention that it deserved.

"We finished a Motet tour and Dave [Watts of The Motet] was having a kid, so everything was going to slow down. I thought, 'Oh shit, what am I going to do to eat now?'" says Lalli. "I figured I should do my own thing because that way, at the end of the day, if I wasn't eating, it would be my own fault."

"I was doing graphic design; I made money redesigning MySpace pages," remembers Salken. "I did The String Cheese Incident, I did Keller Williams. That was my gig. I thought, 'Damn, this is awesome.' But luckily, we started to pick up when that was slowing down, so I was like, 'OK, cool. Now I can feed myself with Big G instead of MySpace pages.'"

"We tried to do it strategically from the beginning," adds Lalli. "We got a bunch of gig offers but we said, 'No, let's wait for the right shows.' We opened up for Bonobo at the Fox in Boulder, and that one was the kicker. After that, we were opening for Sound



Big in Boulder and beyond: Salken and Lalli (l-r)

Tribe for a few shows. We tried to do it in a way that would get us from one to 100 as quickly as possible."

Like many acts associated with the then-burgeoning EDM scene, Big Gigantic honed in on the festival circuit, which was experiencing a renaissance as events began upping their production value and offering more late-night revelry. Their early sweep of festival gigs included well-received sets at gatherings like the 2009 Rothbury Festival, 2010 Wakarusa Music Festival and 2010 Camp Bisco. The wider exposure from these kinds of performances was crucial to the pair's success, as new fans returned home to introduce Big Gigantic's music, and that of their EDM contemporaries, to friends via social media.

Unlike many of their peers, the band embraced the realities of the 21st-century music industry from the beginning and gave away their recorded music for free, focusing on building their fan base one show at a time. Only a few years after their first informal jam sessions, Big G found themselves at the center of an evolving scene near the heart of a nationwide electronic music explosion.

"All of it was kind of happening at the same time," remembers Salken. "The whole scene was growing in a way where it started to become a thing. The fans were starting to make shirts, sell burritos and go from show to show. They were doing the same thing that the jamband crowd has done since the Grateful Dead. I feel like it spread so fast because there was a quicker way to share things. When I was growing up, you would send a blank tape to someone and they would send you back a copy of a Phish show or whatever. Now you just send somebody a link and—bam—they download it. Now they have the music."

"The X factor in all of this is computers and the Internet," says Lalli. "People stopped buying music. That was what was happening and it was clear as day. So it helped that we knew that and were online because a lot of bands were like, 'Internet? Ugh. Facebook? Fuck that.' But we just said, 'Hey, we're on Facebook' and people thought that was awesome."

Big Gigantic's music, which Lalli produces, is an eclectic mix of hip-hop, electro-funk, dubstep and jazz that is always tied together by an underlying, infectious beat. The style is evident throughout; two of the group's more popular tunes, the laidback-yet-totally-danceable "Sky High" and their futuristic remix of Aloe Blacc's 2010 soul hit "I Need a Dollar."

Both Lalli and Salken are longtime fans of improvisational music. In particular, Salken's tastes and social circles are products of the Colorado jamband subculture—and those roots have inspired Big Gigantic's performance approach. While much of their music is created using computers, the live saxophone and drums allow the pair, particularly Lalli, to push the envelope onstage with extended soloing. The improv aspect of Big G's sound was even more pronounced in the early days, though they've toned it down in recent years as their style has become more polished.

"Over the years, we've learned—through observation—that we only have so much time during a show, so we try to keep it flowing quickly," says Salken. "We didn't always do that. When we first started, we would launch into the solo section just like you would in

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any tune, and it would stay open until Dom triggered the next section. We could be in that for 64 bars or 10 minutes, depending on the night. Then we started realizing that it works better when things are a little more condensed and to the point."

"We sort of have a path of how we're going to start and finish, but it's like a 'Choose Your Own Adventure' thing," explains Lalli. "We'll improvise the phrasing of how we're going to get from here to there. For instance, let's say there's 16 measures to build something, I've just played this melody and now we have 16 measures, so I'm going to make something up right now, but I've got to engage Jeremy properly to get a rhythm set up. It's hard to put a percentage on how often we're doing that, but we're doing it a lot. It's like, 'How am I going to get these 16 measures to a melody that everyone can latch on to? How am I going to improvise some hot shit?'"

"[Improvising] is what we want to do," says Salken. "But we have to fit it within the means of what we have. The way that it's developed just gets the concept across more easily."

"We're jammers at heart," adds Lalli. "Whenever I'm playing—especially if I'm sitting in with a jamband—and there's a solo coming, I'll think, 'WWTD: What Would Trey Do?' Because he's just the best at taking his time and building something."

Given how integral the saxophone layers are to Big Gigantic's style, it's a bit surprising that the band didn't utilize the instrument on their first album, 2009's *Fire It Up*. Lalli attributes this decision to his lack of experience in the studio at the time, noting, "I didn't even know how to record my sax at that point." That all changed with 2009's *Wide Awake* EP, which was more reflective of the duo's live sound than their debut effort. Subsequent records—2010's *A Place Behind the Moon*, 2012's *Nocturnal* and 2014's *The Night Is Young*—took a few more leaps in that direction, seamlessly interweaving Lalli's saxophone riffs with an assortment of electronic grooves, builds, drops and beats.

DESPITE THEIR RECENT SUCCESS, LALLI and Salken remain a true team and possess a ceaseless desire to improve. Even now, after nearly six years of constant touring, the duo are content with their respective roles. When they're not on the road, Lalli is busy dreaming up new ways to keep the crowd hooked, while Salken delves into the more mundane aspects of making a band function.

"We've both compartmentalized everything since the beginning," says Salken. "Dom's like, 'I'm gonna work on music,' and I'm like, 'I'm gonna book the flights and make sure we have hotels.' I think that's why it works so well. We both realized what we

needed to get done. We almost made a list of, 'You do this and I do this.' We split it up, do our thing and then come together to crush it live."

"The thing that's different today is that the sonic quality of what I'm making is tenfold better," admits Lalli. "It's interesting because, when I got started, I didn't know what the hell I was doing. I was a saxophone player that was learning how to write—to be a writer of electronic music. Then I had to learn production, making synths and how to be a sound engineer. When I was making the first record, I had no idea how to do most of those things. Now I hear an idea, and I know how to make it."

"I feel like now I'm embarking on a sound that I've been trying to hit from the beginning," he continues. "After all these years, I'm finally getting there...the music I make is a melting pot of all sorts of different styles. Maybe it's an old funk tune, maybe it's a brand new track from some DJ or something. Put it all together, and that's us going forward."

The duo's bass-heavy, saxophone-infused take on EDM has found a niche in the live music arena that only seems to be growing with time. In fact, Lalli and Salken seem as surprised by their success as anyone, and there's a palpable giddiness when the two discuss their recent performance at Madison Square Garden as part of Bassnectar's Bass Center mini-festival—or their latest edition of Rowdytown at Red Rocks, which sold out even after it was expanded to two nights. (In a full circle move, Lalli invited his old Motet bandmates to join them onstage for the Rowdytown shows.)

Those two events don't even scratch the surface of the band's 2014 accomplishments, which also include performances at top-tier festivals like Coachella and Firefly, a gig as the house band for Skrillex's Bonnaroo SuperJam, the release of their new album *The Night Is Young*, a hometown New Year's Eve show, and stints in Australia and Europe. They've also just announced their first trip to South America, where they'll perform at the Brazil and Argentina editions of Lollapalooza this spring. Suffice to say, now is a good time to be Big Gigantic.

However, as a testament to their work ethic and overall outlook, Big G are still humbled by the prospect of building an audience overseas, even if they're up for the challenge.

"It's a lot like starting over," muses Lalli. "If we had a hit, it would be different, but basically, we're going at it over there the same way we did here—starting out small, going on tours with other people. And it's cool, there's something I like about that. Starting from the bottom, fresh, with no expectations."

"It's working well here," adds Salken. "Let's see how it goes in Europe." ●