

# Chicago Antisocial

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Clayton Counts (top), Lava manager and music director Brian Sarpalius, aka Phantom 45 (bottom), Lava



ANDREA BAUER

## Last Night a DJ Called Me a Whining Little Bitch

Clayton Counts spins his last gig at Lava.

By Liz Armstrong

Clayton Counts calls himself “one of the hardest-working unknown DJs in the city.” Since moving here from Texas five years ago, he says, he’s played everything from “lounge music for old people to hip-hop for kids” at places like Whiskey Sky, Reserve, Darkroom, the Allstate Arena, and countless private parties. He DJs to support his work as a composer and producer. “I was a writer before I moved here,” he says. “I make more money as a DJ.”

But the job has its downside. “There’s a certain kind of bar manager who has insignificant aspirations and is almost never humble,” Counts says. (Counts never says “um” and always speaks in maniacally precise complete sentences with liberal doses of SAT vocabulary words.) “They’ll ask me to come in, and when I show up with my gear they tell me I’m not playing. And when I inform them of my cancellation fee, they refuse to honor it. . . . They feel the need to exert themselves upon other people. . . . They’re all shat out

by the same Play-Doh factory. They don’t consider DJs workers in the same way they consider their staff. They treat me like a jukebox.”

Counts Friendstered me a couple weeks ago to find out if I knew anyone with an extra laptop and a delay pedal for a gig. He didn’t have access to his own equipment, he said. When I asked why, he told me a story so good I started taking notes.

Two Mondays ago Counts DJed at Lava—formerly Lava Lounge, until Small Bar co-owners Phil McFarland and Ty Fujimura bought the place from Cris Ongkinko early this month. He was wrapping up his set when bar manager and music director Brian Sarpalius (aka Phantom 45) told him it was too loud and turned down the volume on the master mixing board.

“I said very politely, ‘You told me you were a DJ,’” Counts says. “You could just ask me to do it.” Counts says Sarpalius started raging, screaming at him to leave, yanking cables out of the computer and mixer. “I asked

him again as politely as possible to let me attend to my machines and leave. He continued screaming, so I called him a whining little bitch. He then repeated my invective as a question, in a squeakily inflected voice, to which I responded, ‘You even said it like a whining little bitch.’”

That’s the last dig he got in, he says, before Sarpalius ordered the very large bouncer at the door to “get him out of here.”

According to Counts, he had his gear—a laptop, an external drive, some cables, headphones—in his backpack and was leaving of his own accord when the bouncer came up behind him, grabbed him by the shoulder and neck, and pulled him toward the door.

“Hey,” yelled Counts’s friend Shannon. “That’s not necessary. There’s no reason for this.”

Counts, who’s 32, was born with detached retinas in both eyes. A series of operations when he was a baby only made the condition worse: he’s now completely blind in his right eye and his left eye is weak. He can’t

drive; he can barely navigate the dim rooms he works in several nights a week. You can tell something’s wrong just by looking at him: his right eye is glassy and both of his pupils are oblong, giving him an eerie, feline countenance.

Outside on the sidewalk, Counts says, he pulled out the pepper spray he carries around for self-defense and blasted it toward the bouncer’s legs. “It was a warning shot,” Counts says. “I didn’t want to spray him in the face.” But the door swung back open, and some of the spray might’ve gone inside, he says. “My retinopathists have warned me against getting into fights, and I am a pacifist to begin with. . . . I took only the necessary caution in preventing myself from getting clocked in the head, possibly blinded for life.”

Sarpalius has a different story. It was closing time, he says, and Counts was still playing loud enough to disturb the bar’s neighbors, so Sarpalius turned down the volume. Counts turned it back up, so Sarpalius lowered

it again. Then Counts got angry, says Sarpalius, and called him “every name in the book.” Sarpalius handed Counts \$45, or 10 percent of the register—the payment they’d agreed on. Then Counts went nuts, Sarpalius says. “He unplugged all of our equipment—turntables, mixer, CD players.” He pulled the plugs so violently, says Sarpalius, that one of the club’s new DJ monitors broke. Sarpalius asked the bouncer to remove Counts from the premises. The bouncer grabbed Counts’s shoulder and the back of his neck and shoved him out the door. He was back inside for a few seconds when the door flew open and Counts squirted the pepper spray in his direction.

At this point the stories converge. Everyone agrees that Counts and Shannon left Lava on foot and headed south on Damen. Sarpalius left the club and approached two officers in a police car parked across the street and asked them to go get Counts.

The cops pulled up to Counts and Shannon and stopped their car. They told the friends to put their hands on the car, then cuffed them together. After a pat-down they asked Counts if he had just maced someone. “Well,” Counts remembers telling the officer, “if you listen I’ll explain.”

The officers didn’t seem interested in his explanation, he says. They took the cuff off Shannon and clamped it onto Counts’s other wrist. They told Counts he could give his equipment to Shannon or to the police. “But they told me, ‘You don’t want to give it to the police, because we might lose it,’” Counts says. So he gave his backpack to his friend.

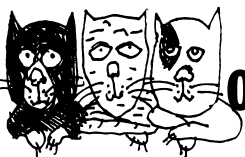
Counts was taken to a police station in Logan Square, where he spent the night behind bars with a guy who was vomiting all over himself, he says. He was charged with simple battery, a misdemeanor. A court date has been set for August 24.

After being released Counts couldn’t get in touch with Shannon, who still had his equipment and who doesn’t have a working telephone, for five days, though he eventually did get his stuff back.

Sarpalius says he’s not sure if he’ll show up for the court date. “At first we thought we’d let it go, that hopefully he’d learned his lesson,” he says. “But now that he’s talking to the press about it. . . .”

“I was assaulted, and then for defending myself I was charged with assault,” says Counts. “What’s crazy is that I’ve played at Lava for going on four years, on and off. I was always tight with those guys, and then they switched owners.” He says the incident separated him from his equipment, and as a result he lost a gig that weekend that would’ve paid him at least \$250. “I don’t have any other work aside from DJing. My life is pretty much destroyed right now.”

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