



PORTER ROBINSON

TOUR WITH THE RELUCTANT SUPERSTAR

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IN a plush Virgin Australia lounge at Sydney airport, Porter Robinson's managers are debating whether or not to book a last minute private jet. It'll cost \$15,000 - a bill the promoter for tonight's show will mostly foot - but the flight time is an hour longer than on a commercial airline and the jet only seats nine.

Right now, the tour entourage totals 12 people, including Porter, the three-piece opening band The M Machine, a posse of managers, the lighting and visuals guys, a videographer and the journalist tagging along to watch.

If it sounds like a scene plucked out of *Entourage*, don't be fooled. While all this is happening, the star of the show is slumped over in an armchair, falling in and out of sleep. His flight's delayed and he's been at this airport almost four hours, running on barely any sleep and a diet of coffee and airport food. He's trying to get to Melbourne to play his second show in his third city of the day, but bushfires outside of Sydney have caused massive delays. If the flight doesn't board in the next hour, he's going to have to cancel. "This is why you don't do two shows in one day," one of Porter's two managers, Neal, sighs.



Today, Porter and his team are less than halfway through an Australian club tour cramming 11 almost entirely sold-out shows into as many days. This is Robinson's fourth time in the country. In August 2011, he was brought out for a string of tiny shows off the back of his first single *Say My Name*. In early 2012, just as things were really taking off, he came back as a must-see act on a Future Music Festival stage curated by Knife Party.

Eight months later, he played a primetime set at the country's biggest dance festival Stereosonic while thousands of hyperventilating girls and unashamed fanboys cheered his name. Now, at all of 21, he's back with his own headline tour. "Any good artist shouldn't only be doing festivals all the time," the tour's promoter, and a good friend of Porter's, says. "They should do tours where it's 100-percent fans."

Before today, the tour had hit three cities in three days. From Melbourne, it'll roll onto Sydney, Brisbane, Newcastle and Perth, a blur of hotels, airports, clubs and 4am finishes followed by 7am starts. Cutting through the fatigue are those fleeting moments that make it all worth it.

Today, though, is a bad day. The night before, Porter played late at a club on the Gold Coast which, for all its gaudiness, is as close to Vegas as Australia comes. A corset-wearing hostess teetered around in dangerous-looking heels, greeting the star of the night in his green room with two sparkler-topped bottles of Belvedere upon arrival. He was visibly nonplussed. By the time the show had finished, it was only a few hours out from lobby call and an early flight to Sydney to play a sparsely populated under-18s afternoon show. "If you set out to see all the shitty shows," Porter tells me after he steps off stage, leaving a quarter-full dancefloor behind, "you're killing it."

But watching him on stage, you'd think that there's nowhere Porter would rather be. He labours over the mixer, cycling through tracks every 20 or 30 seconds. He waves at superfans in the front row and displays baffling levels of enthusiasm for someone who, more often than not, is severely sleep deprived. In person, he is articulate, perceptive and frequently witty. He is put off by people who talk too much about themselves, and when he speaks to the label bigwigs and festival promoters who are trying to get him inside or the fans who wait for him outside shows, he

prefers to ask them questions than let them congratulate him.

He also seems defined by contradictions. Porter is one of the biggest names to come out of North America's EDM explosion, but he has no great love for the culture around it. He caters to kandi-clad ravers at festivals and bottle service crowds at the biggest clubs in the world, but he's never been to a rave he wasn't playing at. By his own admission, he "doesn't know clubs" either. He's a god-like celebrity in his niche, but when he walks down the street in Sydney - his "most popular city", according to Facebook - no one looks twice.

He's 21 now, but in the early days of his career, when he was still a teenager, Porter would have to get a special performer's license to be allowed into the clubs he was booked to play at. As soon as his set was over, he'd be escorted out by security.

BEFORE he was selling out tours on the other side of the world, Porter led a very different life. He was born and raised in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, a town with a population just under the 60,000 mark. Porter describes it as "an oasis of liberalism in a very Southern, very Republican state". He lived with three brothers, whom he still gets along very well with, and both parents, who didn't drink and took a hands off but supportive approach to his hobbies, the latest of which has turned into a fulltime career.

"I definitely grew up under some favourable circumstances - there's no question," he concedes. "I had a privileged childhood." His older brother Nick introduced him to games like *Dance Dance Revolution*, which led Porter to get into Japanese culture - an interest that's now near obsession levels - and from there, he found electronic music. "They're a very intelligent family," Porter's other manager Aaron says. "The stuff they talk about at dinner is not normal."

When he was 12, Porter started flexing his creative muscle on Photoshop, creating digital illustrations and trying his hand at video editing. Music, he says, was not only the thing he found he was best at, but - "thank god" - what he liked the most. He hung out on internet production forums, swapping his music with fellow electronic wunderkind Madeon before he, too, had his name in lights.

School, though, wasn't always his favourite place. "I left abruptly in middle school to be home-schooled for a year," he explains. "I wasn't getting along with the kids in my grade. I was just super unhappy." He was re-enrolled in a new school, things got better and soon he was bringing home straight As in Advanced Placement classes.

"They don't really like funny kids in middle school and that was the group I was lumped in with, the kids with weird senses of humour, with problems," Porter tells me. "I loved those kids but then they started doing a lot of drugs in high school and the further they went with that, the more I focused on music."

By the time he was 17, Porter had put the track *Say My Name* on Beatport and watched it skyrocket to #1 on the site's electro-house chart. Shortly after that, he was fielding offers from people who wanted to manage him. It wasn't until The M Machine got in touch that he signed on with one.

They'd had *Say My Name* on repeat since it came out, looked on Porter's MySpace page and noticed he listed one of his influences as Pants Party, a previous incarnation of the group. Their manager Aaron Greene, a then 22-year-old college student who was testing out artist management as his latest entrepreneurial scheme, had noticed the song too. He offered to fly Porter and his dad - an attorney who's handled Porter's contracts from the beginning, and still drives him to the airport for shows - out to L.A. to meet with him about representing the enigma behind the surprise hit. They agreed, and Porter and his dad decided to go with Aaron instead of Ash Pournouri, who was already managing an emerging 20-year-old Swedish producer going by the name Avicii, and hoping to add Porter to his list of clients.

"The deal with my parents was, as long as I got into the University of North Carolina, which was a good local university that both my parents went to, I could do what I wanted with music - and I did," he explains. "And

that was the summer I started getting offers to tour and go play out and they were like, 'You can do it. You did everything we asked of you, so, go ahead'." He deferred his admission for one year to see how the music thing went.

If all this hadn't taken off, he'd probably be there majoring in psychology now. But by the time 12 months had rolled around, his parents never raised the university thing again. At that point, Porter was crashing Beatport's servers with the release of his *Spitfire* EP, he'd already toured with Tiësto, and he was getting booked for mainstage sets at the biggest dance festivals in the world. He doesn't particularly regret never making it to college. "I think that could've really depressed me, to know more than I do about the human psyche. The way that it rationalises emotion can be very haunting and weird."



BACK at Sydney airport, plans for the private jet are scrapped when boarding's called at the last minute. It's close to midnight by the time we get to the venue, and past 1am by the time the dinner arrives. The M Machine have lost their chance to play live and the rider hasn't been properly fulfilled. But it's a sell-out show and the crowd's receptive enough for Porter to tell the thousands who've come out to see him on a Sunday night that this has been his best show ever. "Or at least top five," he says backstage.

So when Porter doesn't get out of bed until 3pm the next day, it's a well-deserved sleep in. The afternoon is spent at the house of OWSLA name and Melbourne local Nick Thayer, who's showing Porter and The M Machine his in-house studio. "Nick, this place is so inspiring to me," Porter says after getting the tour of the renovated warehouse. "In ten years..." he trails off.

Financially speaking, Porter's own dream home is well within reach. "I could start building a place tomorrow but I just keep thinking, man, the thing I do on the road is miss home and I don't wanna be living by myself in a really nice place - that just seems so shitty to me," he says of his decision to stay living with his parents. "I just stay there 'cause I really like my dogs and my family and writing music in my bedroom."

Thayer's wife, a national ballerina who joined Nick, Porter and Zedd on last year's Poseidon tour, is no stranger to producers passing through their house. "There's a lot of assholes in the industry," she tells me. "So it's inspiring to see young people in electronic music like Porter who are so switched on and so mature."

“THEY’RE A VERY INTELLIGENT FAMILY,” SAYS AARON, ONE OF PORTER’S MANAGERS. “THE STUFF THEY TALK ABOUT AT DINNER IS NOT NORMAL.”

FOR someone who spends half their life on tour, Porter Robinson isn't very good at being a famous musician. He rarely has more than a few drinks a night, he doesn't smoke, take drugs or trash hotel rooms. He's on a no sugar, no carbs regime called the Paleo Diet ("I got a bit fat on tour," he says), something he picked up from his buddy Skrillex, who'll regularly roll up pieces of ham backstage, dip them in mayonnaise and hand them out as snacks.

He drives a "shitty car", still lives with his parents, and most of his money is invested back into touring or already deposited in retirement accounts. The remainder, he'll freely admit, is mainly spent on food and clothes. He has cold & flu tablets, towels, sugar-free Red Bull and not too much more on his rider. He was once offered six figures by the Prince of Dubai to play a set in the royal's Vegas hotel room, and turned it down. By his own tour manager's description, Porter would rather spend his free time with "Tumblr and room service" than living the high life.

Porter confirms it's "90-percent true" that he'd rather be at home in his bedroom-turned-studio than doing this. The perks of getting on the road are obvious: he gets paid to travel with his best friends while working towards his goal of creating a live show that's "transcendentally beautiful".

The drawbacks are less publicised. On two occasions after shows, Porter has stepped off the stage and had a panic attack. The combination of sleep deprivation, an unhospitable crowd, and technical mistakes in his set made him feel like he wasn't worthy of being up there. "I know this would sound silly because there's so many people there watching you, but being on stage can be really lonely," he tells me in the green room of the Metro Theatre before his second Sydney show.

The last time he came to Australia, he and the team had their bags searched on arrival because customs officials knew they were DJs heading to the biggest dance festival in the country. Porter's tour manager Dan even had his personal diary read and phone checked. The search, presumably for drugs, came up cold.

The customs staff mightn't have bothered if they knew what really went down on tour. The first day in Sydney, the promoter hired a yacht for the afternoon to take the team on. It'd be the sort of superstar DJ experience you see on carefully-edited tour recap videos, only there's no bikini-clad women or champagne showers.

Adding insult to injury, no one can have more than two standard drinks with lunch, because next on the day's agenda is a Sydney Harbour Bridge Climb, which is preceded by a breathalyser test. There's a conscious effort to up the baller level by switching the stereo to Jay Z, but even that only

lasts a few tracks. In fact, Porter spends most of the trip napping on a couch, trying to avoid getting seasick.

"What I'm most worried you'll write," Porter tells me somewhere on Sydney's murky green harbour, "is that we were on a yacht. As if we're the sort of people who go yachting." I ask the lighting guy how joining Porter on the road is different to his last tour. "With Tiësto, every night is a party," he says.

"I'm super hangover averse. It's just a fact. I just don't like to be hungover," Porter explains. "I also think that it's kind of hard to do my style of DJing when you're super shit-faced. Plus my family kind of has a history of alcoholism and I think addiction is one of the few things that can take super-smart, super-competent, talented people and just ruin them. So I'm wary of it."

ON the second night of the tour, Porter sits on the couch of the noisy green room in Academy, Canberra, staring intently at his Macbook. It's the seventh or eighth he's gone through in the last couple of years - bringing laptops to clubs day in and day out tends to shorten their lifespan. Right now, he's deep in his iTunes library.

"I always tell people my first album was [Daft Punk's] *Discovery*, but really, it was this," he says, pulling up Vanessa Carlton's 2002 alt-chick opus *Be Not Nobody*. I ask him if he's going to play the same set in every city. The answer's emphatic: "No!"

"The first four or five songs I play in a set are usually the same ones, just because of the whole primacy and recency thing I told you about," he explains.

He's referring to a theory he learnt in Chapel Hill PSYCH101. As Porter tells it, it's about the effect the order of presentation has on memory - basically, you're more likely to remember the beginning and end of a show than whatever came in the middle. For his sets, that means an epic intro and *Language* to close every time, with the middle section spanning everything from CHRVCHES to Flume, Disclosure, Kanye West and Gesaffelstein (or, if you're really lucky, some Aphex Twin). All up, he'll work well over 100 tracks into a two-hour set.

Backstage at another show, his manager Aaron picks at a slice of pizza and scrolls through the comments on Porter's latest Instagram post, stopping to read one out loud. "I'm gonna get a photo with you tonight, Porter," it reads. "Please let me drill you also."

Every day, on every form of social media, Porter gets messages like these by the dozen. There are several Tumblrs devoted to scouring Instagram and the internet and cataloguing Porter's every move. His Facebook page is growing by about 6,000 new Likes per week. "I really stalk myself on the internet," he happily admits. "My fans have secret clubs that they don't know I know about. They have stuff they try to hide from me that I've found."

In Sydney, a girl shows Porter the tattoo of his name on her arm, encircled in a pink love heart. In the alley outside one venue, another fan - who Porter recognises from her avatar because she tweets him everyday - tells him she's following him to a few of his east coast dates. A guy in his 20s stops Porter for a photo.

"Did you enjoy the show?" Porter asks him.

"I didn't see it. I had tickets to last night but I didn't see you afterwards so I came back tonight."

"Oh. Yeah we went out a different exit last night."

As ever, Porter's gracious when he meets his fans. But living between tours with admirers (by the thousand) watching intently isn't entirely normal, either. For one, it's the reason why Porter's reluctant to speak about dating. "It's something that I don't talk the most about, just because there is kind of an element amongst my fans, there's this weird kind of idolisation..." he says. "I've kind of started to see a girl lately. She lives in Las Vegas, which is a place I go to like, 12, 14 times a year."

As it turns out, they met the same way Porter interacts with many of his fans. "She sent me a message on Tumblr, and I happened to be in town that

day, and we were all celebrating everyone's summer birthdays on one day with my whole crew in Vegas and I invited her out and she came."

The challenge of holding down a relationship on the road isn't something that particularly worries him.. "I think I can do it. I'm a trustworthy person. I've never cheated on anyone in my entire life. That is a literally true thing I have never done," he assures. "But, you know, a lot of my peers are, like, 'Never get a girlfriend. Don't do it. It's the worst thing you can do.' But I don't think I would just dive into it capriciously."

Now, the friends giving him advice are mainly other guys in the dance music orbit. He considers the guys in The M Machine his "closest buddies" and he's pals with Zedd, though he thinks they have "different approaches to music". In the green room before one show, Dillon Francis phones Porter from Alaska to thank him for a tweet that really resonated with him.

"Dillon must have the happiest mom in the world," Porter says after he hangs up, "because he just calls and is like, 'I just wanted to hear your voice, and make sure you're alright'."

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THERE'S another thing about Porter Robinson: he really cares what you think of him. Often, I'll catch him biting his tongue when he knows the journalist sent to profile him is listening, or he'll pause before speaking and proceed with a cautious, "I'm really trying not to sound like a douche."

When his manager Aaron excuses himself before saying something unflattering about a girl at the previous night's club, Porter cuts him off. "Don't. If you have to apologise first, don't say it." Another morning, he tells me about the nightmare he's just woken up from, where he was sent to jail in place of one of his brothers (*Hunger Games*-style) for a crime he had no memory of committing. "My biggest fear is being wrongfully incarcerated," he explains.

He doesn't want to be crucified on the internet, either. "Oh god, Twitter's gonna murder me for saying that," he groans after forgetting himself and describing one genre to me in less than flattering terms. He's aware of how quickly one throwaway comment can become a headline and, more than any other artist I've encountered, takes a hands-on role in how he's presented online. When Porter does interviews with journalists via email, the questions usually come back through a publicist with a caveat: "Please use Porter's language, syntax and prose **exactly** as he has written it!"

He laughs when I bring it up. "I just think that the way that you present text on the internet - I call that your internet voice - it carries a lot of tone with it." Proper syntax, commas in the right place and initial caps conjures images of someone Porter doesn't want to be seen as. "To me, that looks more like a person who uses Reddit and is an atheist loudly and wears a fedora."

And Porter's internet presence is large. He lives mainly on Twitter and Tumblr (Instagram's "uncool" and he can't be bothered with Facebook), making a point of reading just about everything fans post to him. Social media, he thinks, is important. "I'll see people who are promoting their stuff way too much, whose Twitter account is clearly managed by someone else, where they post an Instagram at 6pm every day, and they post it to Facebook as a promoted post and it gets 20,000 hits instantly. It makes me cringe. I hate it."

"I think the most beautiful thing about social media is that for the first time ever, it's this direct link between an artist and the people who care about people's opinions," he continues. "Anything you get in the way of

that - if you try to optimise it - you totally dehumanise the whole experience and totally rob it of the best aspect of it, which is the complete authenticity.

"You get to see Kanye West making tweets about hating waking up next to a water bottle because then he has to look after that water bottle for the rest of the day. That is something that is totally unprecedented. For the first time there is a paradigm between artists and fans where there's not a huge PR thing in between them. I think that's so amazing, and so, so shitty to eliminate that, and so I want to have an active hand all the time in how I look on the internet."

Not to mention the fact that it's the one place he can always be found. On Facebook, Porter lists his current location as "busses and airplanes". In a life spent across time zones and continents, the internet is his most dependable anchor. When he's running late for a pre-dinner interview and missing a phone in Sydney, the promoter trying to get a hold of him will just tweet @porterrobinson and tell him he needs him. It's the fastest way to get in touch.

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OVER breakfast in Sydney's Kings Cross, conversation turns to how different Porter's experience of dance music has been to the generation of producers before him. "I didn't grow up going to Ibiza and hearing techno and house music in its original form" he tells me. "I am coming to appreciate it, but it's not what I grew up with. So DJing and club culture is something I only came into because of production." DJ sets that only aim to get people dancing feel "more like solving a Rubik's Cube than it does real musical expression" to him. "It feels like a skill. It's craft, but it's not something that makes me feel anything. It's not an expression of anything that I feel in my heart. I'm trying to explore electronic music not as a means to an end but as, hopefully, an art form."

He's more excited about his album, which for the time being is kept under lock and key, but which is not, he assures, a collection of generic club material. So, will it surprise people?

"Hell yeah. Totally. Yeah." There's a pause. "It's gonna disappoint a lot of people. But that's okay. That is something I had to come to terms with because I just can't write music that I don't like. And the thing that is often misconstrued

when I talk about this is the idea that I didn't like my old music. I really did like it at the time and again, I feel like the EDM thing was not the massive meme that it is now when I wrote that stuff."

"I want to present my taste in its most distilled form," he continues between bites of avocado. "And that might not be a thing for 20 million people. And that might not be a thing for Top 40 radio. But right now, I'm good. I can do what I want indefinitely. I'm set. And if I ever need to, I'll make a fucking song for whatever pop princess exists five years from now. More or less, I feel like I was going to quit if I couldn't do music that I wanted to, 'cause that's not inspiring."

Some might find the tenacity off-putting. But if Porter comes across as over-enthused, it's only because he genuinely cares. The tweet that Dillon Francis called to thank him for? "It's weird to live in an era when it takes effort and bravery to like things sincerely and not be a huge ironic piece of shit all the time," Porter wrote, with over a thousand retweets to back him up.



NEAR the tour's end, as Porter collapses face down on a couch in another characterless green room, the videographer asks him the million dollar question: "How do you do this all the time?"

"I'm paid very well," he says, closing his eyes. Remuneration may be the reward, but nothing about Porter Robinson suggests it's ever been the motive.

"I have so, so much that I want to do," he later tells me with steely sincerity. "I want to do everything. And I don't want anything to get in the way of that."

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