

# “BPM Counter”

A short story by

Gari Hart

“BPM Counter”  
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At what felt like two hundred beats per minute, a hangover related headache was already up and active when Ariel's eyes squinted awake. Poor decisions from the previous night to stay out and keep partying after her set were to blame. The first coherent thought in her bleary mind was the same one she had every morning for a while now: "*I've got to pull it back a bit.*" This chorus of regret-spawned determination repeated in her head again and again, offbeat to the headache. Ariel could tell by the slivers of sunbeams that broken through the special light blocking curtains it was too late in the day to remain in bed for much longer. Regardless of how distorted she felt, it was time to get up.

Ariel pushed herself off the bed and meandered to the bathroom, keeping steady with her hand on the wall for support. Catching a look at herself in the bathroom mirror, she hunched over the sink with her arms braced on either side of it. The morning dizziness would subside, it always did, but the morning appearance was harder to deal with: The dried out condition of her skin, the sagging under her burned-out eyes, the stale frizz of her over-sprayed hair, the smudged lipstick and eyeliner, it was a stark reversal of how she looked only hours earlier, before coming home from the club and passing out on the bed. "*Maybe I just need to cut out the alcohol. It can't be the weed, it's got to be the alcohol,*" Ariel thought, disregarding her casual use of ecstasy only because she didn't do any that night. She never rolled during a gig, or

at least not before her set. Of course, she knew refraining from drinking at the clubs was not going to happen. It was too easy to follow along when everyone else was smashed there. Also, she could sense people for some reason did not trust a DJ that did not drink and roll. It was hard enough for a woman to get acknowledgment as a DJ to begin with, let alone a sober one.

Ariel did not bother to check her phone for messages or updates before stepping into the tub. The womb feeling of a hot shower was needed more than missed drunk text messages and social media praise. She appreciated all the attention, but not at that time of day. The shower was a safe zone for Ariel. She trained herself to leave all concerns on the other side of the curtain, making the inside a space to wash her mind clean. With her head pressed against the tile wall, eyes closed, she surrendered to a high-flow water streams colliding with her head and racing down her body. Steam from the temperature felt cleansing to her pores. Ariel stood immobile in that space until she was fully awake and coherent.

After leaving the comfort of her bathroom, she checked the time and saw it was two o'clock in the afternoon. Day had become her nights, afternoon her mornings, and she wondered if the transposition was healthy for anybody. A twisting in Ariel's belly screamed that it was not natural, for her anyway. She sat on her bed to take in a minute more of rest before starting her day. The blinking light on her phone signaled that life had started without her. She checked the notifications while in her bath robe: 4 voicemails from the old-fashioned friends, 22 text messages from the more modern ones, 37 Facebook comments on DJ Ariddle's page – Ariel's stage name - and 5 updates on her personal profile, 40 Twitter notifications, 15 emails in her personal box and 35 in her professional, and 2 failed alarms.

*'Damn, I must be doing something right,'* Ariel thought in response to the increased social media notices, compared to her last gig.

Ariel dropped the phone on the bed and picked out something modest to wear for her routine coffee shop visit, where she would answer all cosmetic fan comments before addressing anything business related. Dressed in blue jeans, flip flops, an old t-shirt and a baseball cap,

Ariel was a broad contradiction to her performing image; she would be practically unrecognizable to any clubber as she walked to the coffee shop. Once there, Ariel ordered a strong espresso and found a cozy spot to plod through and acknowledge the fan tweets and comments. Per usual, amongst the humdrum remarks about how her set “rocked” – even though she was a trance DJ who specifically excluded any rock’n’roll influences from her mixes – there were the virtual catcalls from jacked-up douche bags, who thought posting smutty comments on her social pages, or more pathetically by forwarding dick-pics, was a clever idea. Ariel deleted and blocked those users instantly, fretting over the fact they were becoming as frequent as any other fan. She worried about what action someone might take when they saw her out. She certainly did not make enough money to hire a body guard, and Security at the gigs usually focused more on peddling drugs than anything. Vulgar jerks and obscenity on the page were simply part of the picture, Ariel was told once by a club owner. As much as she hated to admit it, that seemed to be true. Still, there were always the more innocent, appropriate comments that she could not deny boosted her ego, and validated her struggle in the music and nightclub world.

Making headway in the music scene is hard for everyone. If anything it was substantially easier for DJs to earn money and notoriety than other acts. The crowds who went to those places and attended those shows typically had extra cash to dish out. With the mix of alcohol and ecstasy melting coherence away, their money dropped as quick as their sweat. That generally made club owners more generous when paying their acts. Plus, DJs needed less equipment, stuff that did not require tuning or restringing, which in the long run made it a cheaper to play. A 2 turntable mixdeck, headphones, and a laptop with some basic software. That was it. Most of which could be purchased second hand for starter DJs. The simplicity of the genre did not mean it was a cakewalk though. Gathering the right equipment and learning all the trade tricks took Ariel quite a while to tackle, consuming the majority of her free time and disposable income. When she was starting out, the applause and morning after digital thumbs up felt like all she needed to justify it. Naturally that sentiment did not last forever, not when it was costing more

to play the shows than what she was getting back at the time. Physically and financially it was exhausting her to play shows for a bit. And of course there was the consistently uphill endeavor of being a woman in the DJ business. Club owners loved hiring women DJs because of sex appeal, but did not give a damn about their skills. Not only did Ariel feel her talents were going unnoticed, which was needed to pass on word of mouth to other clubs for other shows, she worried that at any time she might be bumped or passed over for a hotter girl DJ. Audiences responded likewise for the same reasons, so long as the ratio of boys to girls on the floor favored the former. Which it almost always did. Even under the superficial layer of all that, no one naturally trusted a women DJ for some opaque reason.

Ariel could recall a night out at a club; she was not spinning that night, just taking in the scene for inspiration. Some boy there, supposedly dragged to that club by a friend trying to score drugs, “enlightened” her with the words “women who spin are just trying to play with the big boys. It’s like a kid sister trying to keep up with older brother.” Ariel detested gender biased assumptions and wanted to reply “If you think women spin tunes to compensate for not having a penis, maybe it’s because yours doesn’t quite cut it” in protest to reflect his infantile manner. She held back from saying anything though, lest she be labeled a Bitch for speaking her mind. Insults spread like wildfire, and she could see getting turned down for gigs because some club owner heard she was *bitchy* to deal with. Instead she walked away from him, hoping her silence said enough. Although she knew it wouldn’t, not with a small minded boy. The encounter had ruined her evening, and discouraged from pursuing music for a short while; it was not the first time she had to deal with some comment like that, and in all probability would not be the last she had to walk away instead of fighting back.

Although excited earlier on in the beginning, Ariel was finding less and less refreshment reading fan comments overall. It was just another part of the job.

Ariel left the coffee shop and settled back at her apartment in front of her laptop. Reading all the business related emails and newsletters, she responded first to any gig offers to

set up her event schedule. More places were offering slots, and almost every place she spun requested her back sometime in the future. That notion of them only after her pretty face on a flier in promotion of their club loomed over Ariel at all times, but she was nowhere famous or rich enough to turn down too many offers. So long as it paid well and did not conflict with another gig, she took whatever. A lot of the clubs were more dingy when the house lights were on and felt very unsafe. She hated playing those gigs, but needed the money and notoriety to hopefully get out of them for good. After going through all work emails, Ariel moved on to any replies to her applications as a Freelance Designer. Finding there were only a few rejections and no approvals, Ariel slouched back and eyed the empty spot on the wall where her degree in graphic design used to hang. She put it there as a reminder that with hard work she could achieve her goals. That bit of hokey, self-fueled inspiration weakened after ten months of rejections, and anchored the next year of them. That degree remained unused while she worked droning shifts at pointless jobs. Until one day when it finally felt mocking opposed to inspiring to keep it up, and she was compelled to pull it down. It was during that time her then boyfriend gifted her a used mixdeck to cheer her up; he thought it might serve as a hobby after she expressed an interest in trance music. The interest grew from hobby to skill, and she found herself spinning at clubs less than a year later. A few years had gone by since that, and DJing had just become what Ariel did now. The confidence from performing leaked into her latent desire to work in graphic design, as she recently started applying for freelance work. Of course, not having much work history as support, she was still getting nowhere in that field. Ariel closed her laptop, wanting to not think about it anymore. She had a set later that night and wanted her head clear.

She made lunch, and watched an episode of a mindless TV showing she had been following. She tried meditating; that was a new practice for her, one she was not sure she was getting the hang of. Meditation was too silent. After a few failed attempts, she grabbed her mp3 player, put on a new mix one of her friends made and took a long walk. That was more

revitalizing than meditation. She treated herself to some new clothing for the show later on, and to a few albums at a used records store she frequented. The owner there had helped promote her work, and even gotten her a few gigs, but he talked to Ariel more like a person than a commodity. She felt relaxed and comfortable there, and not like she was putting on act for work. After that she returned home and prepared for the night.

She pulled cash from her personal safe for cab rides to and from the club. Cabs felt safer than taking the train, especially during those tiny hours between late night and early morning when Ariel was usually heading home. It seemed like a time where few decent people were out still, and intoxicated women were easy prey for the fiends that were. Ariel put the money in her gig-bag so she would not forget it, and went about the rest of her routine. She applied her make-up, balancing the facade to highlight her features but tame enough to prevent boys regarding her as “asking for it.” The same delicate care was given when selecting her outfit. Ariel wanted to look the part of a club DJ, but had to draw a line marking how limited her appearance would be; she could not risk attracting the wrong attention. Sometimes this detail to the business made her feel like a prisoner, allowed to see the sky but confined in her ability to follow it.

Ariel took a look in the mirror at DJ Ariddle; a proud and confident alternate side of herself let out only on gig nights. In this form, Ariel felt empowered to take on anyone. Satisfied with herself, DJ Ariddle grabbed her bag and headed out.

When she arrived at the club, Sergio the owner let her in. He was a nice enough guy, never treating her like a piece a meat – though she had heard some rumors about his attitude behind closed doors. He always paid decent and in cash, right at the end of the night. Some owners or managers tried to stiff DJ Ariddle by claiming they would transfer her cut to her account, or pay her double next time. She learned overtime to write “cash the night of the gig” in her emails back to clubs who asked her to spin. The bouncer there and Ariel had a drink after she had set up her gear, and they waited for other employees to arrive. She was required to be there a few hours early, before the club opened, even though it never took her long to set up and

run a sound check. Shortly before the doors opened for business, Sergio turned on the stereo and Ariel retreated to the employee lounge in back. Some clubs would not let her in the employees only areas, leaving her to mix with the crowd, which proved troublesome more times than not. Every patron either wanted to chat with her forever, push their own mixes hoping to get connected, or offer her drugs and take her back to their place. DJ Ariddle was reaching a point where the only reason she wanted to come to any club was to play; Ariel was developing a distaste for common clubbers. She valued the benefit of waiting anywhere away from them.

The place began to fill up quickly, with some people there specifically there to see DJ Ariddle's set. She passed the time in the back listening to music, trying to get a little calmer in her head. DJ Ariddle looked at the clock and saw there was fifteen minutes until her set. Those last fifteen minutes were always the worst. Ariel had come to call it the quake time: everything in and around her felt like it was quivering so much it made her think of earthquakes. These last fifteen minutes were heavy with self-doubt and an urge to run. Despite increased popularity, Ariel continually fear being booed off stage. Her sets almost always earned loud cheers though, but that set off more paranoia. When DJ Ariddle's sets were good, everyone in the club tried to get closer to her, party with her, drink with her, sleep with her, whatever. There seemed to be no way around the probable and improbable effects of the night, and during the last fifteen minutes before set there seemed to be no chance of running from them.

Sergio came around to ask if she was ready to start. Whether she was or not, Ariel forced herself to say "Yes." She hesitated a moment, and then followed him out. DJ Ariddle took the stage and there was applause as the lights dimmed out and the house music quieted; her intro music faded in.

Before she could catch herself, DJ Ariddle was spinning and mixing beats and riffs. It was like watching someone wield a craft they had mastered across a lifetime. She crossfaded into her own world: the beats, the synths, the samples, the consistent pace, the jubilant vibe, the neon lights. It all came together, forming a singular high note. The crowd evaporated like a

faceless souls from a dream, and Dj Ariddle was the sole presence on her own plateau of electronic existence, breathing in music and living like light. She felt here and gone instantaneously; that state of mind meditators always raved about but Ariel could never get to. Everything went in slow motion, so she could take as much time as she liked to savor each note. Each fragment of time was alive and still, a living picture content in its space. And yet, it was suddenly over. That plane of emotional ecstasy seemed to last forever, but when DJ Ariddle saw she was nearly ninety minutes in, the experience completely faded out. DJ Ariddle knew she had to bring the set to a close, bow off, and let the staff push their crowd for more booze sales.

After the set DJ Ariddle was so amped up that she didn't realize she was heading off the stage to the main floor. She was greeted by so many people who wanted to chat with her forever, push their own mixes, and offer her drugs and take her back to their place. Like walking down the escalator from heaven to hell, or at least back down to Earth. Ariel tried to keep a smile, be cordial and maybe even accommodating while she moved to the bar. She asked for a drink, and indulged those who complimented her set, her looks, her whatever. She shot her drink to escape the banality of some guy nearby hitting on her, and immediately asked for another from the bartender. The pattern was coming full circle, and she could see another regretful morning rotating in.

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#### About the Author

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Gari Hart is a Chicago based author and musician.

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