Dubstep: Dub plate culture in the age of digital DJ-ing

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ABSTRACT
This paper inquires into the role of the dub plate within the creative practice of the dubstep DJ. Dub plates are important to dubstep for a range of historical and aesthetic reasons. As a concept, the dub plate connects dubstep genealogically and rhizomically to the cultural memory of 1970s Jamaican reggae sound system practices. As a one-off cut, a dub plate provides an aura of authenticity to the DJ-producer. In the dubstep music scene, however, dub plates seem to appear in a variety of media formats, from analogue lacquered aluminium (“acetate”) and vinyl to digital CDR. Finally, when inquiring into the current practices of digital dubstep DJs in the UK, the dub plate functions as a residual concept of a unique, authentic, event.

KEYWORDS: electronic dance music; dubstep; DJ techniques; dub plate; cultural memory.

INTRODUCTION
Dubstep is a transnational music genre that initially developed within the specific cultural space of London-based post-colonial musical crossroads. A type of electronic dance music (EDM) genre, it emerged from South London (UK) during the early twenty-first century. Since 2006, dubstep gained in significance by spreading in the UK from London to Bristol and other British cities; then, via the Internet and a network of independent record shops and dance clubs, further into Northern Eu-
rope (particularly the Netherlands, Scandinavia, Poland, Russia), Japan, Brazil and the US, morphing into a range of subgenres.

With this paper, I explore the connection between dub plates, as a concept, and dubstep in the context of analogue and digital DJ techniques. The materials are based on ethnographic research that has taken place between 2006 and 2011, in London Soho’s specialist shops, including Black Market and Sounds of the Universe, and one of the main seminal London dubstep clubs, FWD at Plastic People. In addition, niche media are utilised that are part of dubstep fanculture, such as insider video documentaries, YouTube clips of DJ interviews, club nights and dance demonstrations; online London-based radio station Rinse FM; and online forum discussions, like dubstepforum.com (n.d.), that offer a transnational platform to the dubstep scene.

SONIC SPACE

As dubstep producers foreground texture over melody, which does not suit notational analysis, the music is described here in a similar manner as by its participants. Dominated by a modulating, sometimes wobbling, (sub-)bass, and thin in mid-high frequencies, many seminal dubstep tracks produce a submarine sensation. Although the average speed of the tracks is around 140 beats per minute (BPM), the structure of the bass lines enables the music also to be perceived as half that speed, acting like an echo in musical memory, as it reminds the listener of dub reggae. Such a double experience of timing in the structure of the bass lines can also be found in dubstep’s two-step predecessors, UK garage and drum ‘n’ bass; these break-beat EDM genres emerged during the 1990s from post-colonial music scenes in the London-area (Hesmondhalgh and Melville 2001; Rietveld 2000) of which Christodoulou (2011, pp. 58-59) states that

bass functions as a sonic inscription of the urban uncanny in electronic dance music, especially in drum ‘n’ bass, […] brought about by the uncontrollable speed of life for those who live and grow up in London, its place of origin. […] The ‘darkness’ of low-frequency sound as described by its mainly working class participants develops out of its framing within a general fatalistic attitude to life in the ‘urban jungle’.

Dubstep differs from drum ‘n’ bass in that it normally lacks the clutter of frantic drum programming. Especially earlier tracks, like Mala’s “Blue Notez” (DMZ, 2006), emphasise a deep sense of decelerated time, while foregrounding its sonic space, which can be experienced as though existing in the inert eye of the information storm, of a spiralling accelerated culture of computer games, of the Internet, of the raging city. As such, many dubstep recordings offer an open auditory space that enables its electronic low-frequency textures to fully develop and reverberate, enveloping the audience with physical vibration, erratic rhythm and warped digital sound. For this reason, although dance events can peak to intense skanking two-
step jump ups at London club nights like DMZ and FWD, elsewhere participants can also be seen to move in a type of quick stop-start, alternated by slow-motion, body popping.

The typical sonic spectrum of dubstep produces and safeguards its underground cultural exclusivity. The sparse presence of mid-range frequencies gives space to MCs to add vocalised rhymes to the recordings during DJ sets at club events, which means that, like Jamaican versioning dubs or instrumental dance vinyl b-sides, the tracks are never fully complete. As an event-specific musical assemblage that depends on DJs, MCs and the crowd to let it come alive, dubstep shatters the dominant spectacle of mass mediated music.

The site-specific exclusivity of dubstep is further enhanced by the fact that loud sub bass and muting of low mid-range sound frequencies means that, although there is plenty of opportunity to engage with the sound through (Internet) radio, it is best experienced through a large club sound system it is made for. There, space can be given to its sonic dominance, in a similar way that Henriques (2003, p. 457) has observed in rhizomically related Jamaican dub sound systems, “The sound just hits you. You can’t ignore it. You have to feel it”. In this sense, dubstep belongs to a family of music genres that can be indicated as “Bass Culture”, a term used by Bradley (2000) to describe reggae dub sound system music culture.

**Dub plate**

Of importance to the argument of this paper, evidence of the cultural memory of 1970s Jamaican reggae sound system practices can also be found in the concept of dub plates, with unique recordings of *riddims* (bass and rhythm tracks), or as Bradley (2000, p. 309) puts it, “the crushing bass ‘n’ drum remixes [that] keep us on our toes”. Such instrumental tracks enable versioning that could be dubbed over as part of a reggae soundsystem performance and was, according to Reynolds (1998), a first example of “remixology”. In the context of reggae “sounds” (soundsystems) in South-East London during the 1980s, Back (1988, p. 144) describes dub plates as

> recorded rhythms [...] original acetates [,] and they are usually the only copies.
> (Dub is essentially an instrumental form of reggae.) They often have the bass and drums re-mixed with a more resonant, eerie emphasis, underlined by a snatch of vocals and other instruments sporadically dropped back into the mix.
> The records are made by the artists, specially for the sound.

In short, the dub plate is a unique analogue cut of a sound recording that is based in studio engineering practices and sound system competition.

As a one-off cut, each dub plate provides aura of authenticity to the DJ-producer. In this sense, dubstep DJ-producers hold on to the dub plate as a concept, sometimes literally, when a recording is cut into 12-inch lacquered aluminium (“acetate”), or on 10-inch and 12-inch vinyl (see Afrika et al. 2010, mins. 24.30-27.30; Madboy and Spermchaser 2006, mins. 25.00-26.00). Other media formats are also
used, such as small batches of 12” vinyl pressings, which arguably function as a re-
idual medium from days of electro, house music and, before that, disco (Rietveld,
2007). Such low print runs can become favourites with rare record collectors. An
example of dub plate romance can be found in the release of a limited edition 12”
vinyl pack that offers pressings of some of dubstep’s seminal dub plates from 2000-
2004 (Tempa, 2006).

**Mixed Media**

Digital media formats are increasingly popular with many DJs, due to their easy
portability, low price and malleability. For the past decade, a common practice is
to burn digital productions straight onto CDR as pre-releases and to cater for a spe-
cific dance night. Increasingly, DJs convert unique digital music productions to an
uncompressed digital WAV file format that can be controlled with a software based
Digital Vinyl System (DVS).

Analogue vinyl is still in rotation though, not only due to its visual resemblance
to the prized dub plate, but it is also defended because of the importance of the al-
mighty sub-bass. A low frequency is produced by a large sonic waveform that makes
the distinction between analogue and digital apparent to the connoisseur because
analogue sound waves have an infinite resolution and can therefore enable a smooth,
“warm” texture (for example: Deapoh, cited in Afrika et al., 2010, min. 23.04).

In digital formats, a large sound wave may sound broken because digits are finite
and incomplete, causing a dirty digital noise, which indicates absent rather than
additional data. Yet, the digital distortion of the wave sound is currently embraced
in dubstep productions, creating a sonic aesthetic that enhances the experience of

In 2011, at the time of writing, DJs that use only vinyl, work side-by-side to DJs
who favour mixed media. See, for example, footage of the Boomnoise and Poke
show on online radio station Sub FM, using 12” vinyl and a popular DVS, Serato:
Scratch Live, (Afrika et al. 2010, mins. 44.00-47.00). There are also DJ-producers
that take the potential of digital production/mix software, such as Ableton Live, into
the club to produce unique sonic experiences for their crowds.

Regarding the dub plate, Bristol-based digital DJ-producer DK Sam-Atki2 states
that “the performance is in hearing these exclusives […] that is where the lap top
comes in […] it’s a slightly different package from what the other dub step guys
are doing” (Madboy and Spermchaser 2006, mins. 21.30-24.55). Using clips of
existing records and uniquely produced music, the dub plate as a concept is here-
by stretched, blurring the division between studio producer, DJ and music perfor-
ance.

**Conclusion**

As a component of the rhizomic cultural memory embedded in two-step music
genres, the dub plate remains a residual medium on the dubstep scene, both as an
actual “real-world” object, as well as a concept of a unique digital DJ event. As DJ and electronic production technologies are constantly changing, this is an area that requires further investigation and analysis.

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References
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