

Music dark enough to tug the guts

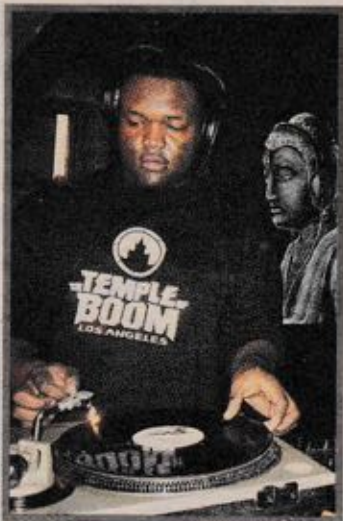
London-born dubstep, an electronic genre with a signature sub-bass rumble, gains a foothold in L.A.

By JUSTIN B. HAMPTON
Special to The Times

THE British DJ-producer Scuba, a.k.a. Paul Rose, has stepped behind the turntables at the Nasty Sonlx club night at Echo Park's the Echo. It's his U.S. debut, and a mix of adventurous hip-hop heads, jaded club scenesters and indie-electronica geeks lounge around in laid-back anticipation. A slow, almost dirge-like rhythm floats through the air as Scuba begins to spin. He mixes into the next record, and it hits them like a ton of bricks: a massive, overwhelming, nearly physical assault of sub-bass frequencies. The crowd roars in appreciation, and Scuba immediately rewinds and re-loads. Looks like he struck a nerve.

The sound is dubstep, the South London-born electronic music revolution that's an evolution of the garage/2step genre and a close cousin of British hip-hop variant grime. Its recombinant interpretation of reggae, techno and industrial metal coupled with its signature sub-bass rumble was perfect for the equally moody and dystopian sci-fi flick "Children of Men," which featured dubstep on its soundtrack.

Since its birth in the early 21st century, dubstep has grown worldwide from an obscure sub-genre of dance music to the fastest-growing and -evolving electronic genre since drum and



SARA AJIRI
GROOVING: Joe Nice, America's biggest Dubstep DJ, at a Smog session.

bass' heyday in the mid-'90s. (Both genres emphasize the sub-bass, but drum and bass' break-neck speed is at odds with dubstep's all important silent spots).

In the Southland, dubstep is catching on, albeit slowly, thanks to dedicated local producers and promoters such as Smog L.A.

Formed by Colm Doherty and Andrew Best, the company started in 2006 at the drum and bass club night Funktion at the Vanguard in Hollywood, where Best worked as a resident VJ. The two liked the music's spare aesthetic — not so much their first audience. At Smog's debut "session" — a free party at Casey's Irish Bar & Grill that

DUBSTEP'S MOODY CHARM

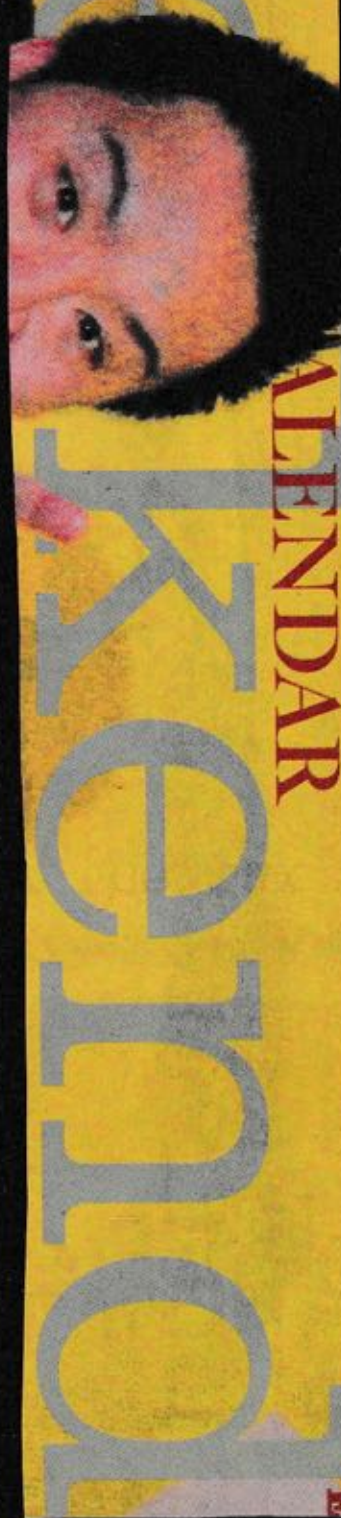
August — "everyone was looking around like, what do we do? It was awkward," remembers Best. "People are used to hearing big, loud, spastic music. They're used to hearing music with vocals, or they're used to seeing lighting, and this is a dark space" with no visuals.

DUBSTEP (once labeled "dark garage") is not only aurally austere, it promotes a grim, gothic aesthetic and, like early electronic music, emphasizes anonymity. The point, says Best, is to let the music do the talking. "I want people to come [into our parties] and the only thing they're focused on is the music."

Sam Robson, co-owner of L.A.'s Temple of Boom records on Melrose Avenue (one of the few local stores that stocks dubstep) knows the music takes some getting used to but points out that drum and bass had a slow build too. "People used to say, 'I don't know how you dance to this,'" says Robson, who also DJs with a group called the Professionals (just booked to play the Coachella Valley Music & Arts Festival). "But 10 years down the line, drum and bass is huge in the L.A. underground." Robson figures if the city can support several drum and bass weeklies, an audience for this music definitely exists.

Or not. Dubstep has its detractors. "So much of it just bores me to tears," says San Francisco-based DJ/producer Bassnectar (a.k.a. Lorin Ashton), who has played the genre's best tracks but considers most of them excessively lethargic. Even fans can find the music difficult. "It's not a friendly music, and sometimes it takes a lot of concentration," says Smog's Doherty, who also DJs under the name Showguns.

So far, dubstep has the largest following in Northern





DUBSTEP FANS: From left, Matt DiChiara, also DJ Knife Dreams; Paul McGuigan, a.k.a. DJ Pablo Hassan; Colm Doherty of Smog L.A., Sam Robson, owner of Temple of Boom; and Andrew Best, of Smog.

California (where tracks from homegrown producers such as Matty G and Nick Argon have been on the charts in Britain) and New York City, where the 2-year-old Dub War has become a monthly party often featuring the stars of the British scene (such as 20-year-old Skream, responsible for dubstep's most recognizable crossover hit, "Midnight Request Line.")

In L.A., the biggest turnout was for a Smog-hosted event last February featuring the U.S.' biggest dubstep DJ, Joe Nice. But the city has a big advantage over New York: the vast, open expanses of downtown. "The first Smog parties, you could hear the bass four blocks from where you parked your car," says Robson. "We had one of the guys from Dub War come on and play, and he was like, 'You could never pull this off in

New York City.'"

Robson will prove it when Temple of Boom hosts its first weekly event on April 24. Pure Filth! will introduce a new sound system (courtesy of the Professionals) that enhances the visceral bass frequencies dubstep fans live for. "I'm always telling the sound guy, '[Make it] a little more gut-wrenching,'" Best says with a chuckle.

The event might also give the genre the push it needs.

"Dubstep isn't being promoted enough," says Amoeba Records music buyer Ronondo Hahn, who DJs dubstep and Jamaican roots reggae at Barcade on Saturdays. And he sees the music's potential all the time. "People I know who don't know dubstep but are into electronic music, they really gravitate to it and ask me what it is," Hahn says. "And once they hear it, they just flock to it."

Dubstep

Smog Sessions (with Random Trio, Knife Dreams, E.M.U. w/Showguns)

When: Friday; 10 p.m. to 2 a.m.

Where: Casey's Irish Bar And Grille, 613 S. Grand Ave.

Price: \$10

Info: (213) 629-2353; www.smogla.com

Pure Filth!

When: Tuesday, April 24; 10 p.m. to 2 a.m.

Where: For location, log on to www.myspace.com/thetempleofboom

Price: \$5 to \$10

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calendarlive.com/weekend

Dubstep for dummies

Baltimore-based dubstep DJ Joe Nice famously defined the elements of dubstep as "space, bass and pace." Pace refers to the music's 138 beats per minute average, but because beats fall on the half-step, the music's perceived tempo is somewhere around 70 bpm. Dubstep's producers also make use of silent space between the beats and sounds, accounting for the space, and, finally, there's bass.

Above that, anything goes, from aggressive nu-metal carnage (DJ Distance, Vex'd), dystopian soundscapes (Burial), futuristic dance hall (Skream) and even avant-folk interludes (Various Productions), with newer permutations continuing to the surface.

Dubstep has benefited greatly from the advances of Web 2.0. And many credit the international BBC Radio One webcast of Mary Anne Hobbs' "Dubstep Wars" special, aired in January 2006, for the genre's explosion worldwide.