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## Scary Monsters and Pervasive Slight: Genre Construction, Mainstreaming, and Processes of Authentication and Gendered Discourse in Dubstep

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts degree in Popular Music and Culture

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SCARY MONSTERS AND PERVASIVE SLIGHTS: GENRE CONSTRUCTION,  
MAINSTREAMING, AND PROCESSES OF AUTHENTICATION AND GENDERED  
DISCOURSE IN DUBSTEP

(Monograph)

by

Kyle Fowle

Graduate Program in Popular Music and Culture

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts in Popular Music and Culture

The School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies  
The University of Western Ontario  
London, Ontario, Canada

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### **Abstract**

This thesis examines discourses on dubstep, a currently popular form of electronic dance music (EDM). The thesis identifies discursive patterns in the received historical narrative of EDM and explores how those patterns may or may not manifest themselves in the current discourses on dubstep. The analysis explores how the value of electronic dance music has historically been judged according to frameworks of authenticity rooted in jazz and folk traditions that were later adopted and adapted by rock. Consumers and critics of EDM in general, and dubstep in particular, are found to deploy key elements of rock's framework of authenticity in the making of judgments about dubstep's value. Furthermore, the gender politics of these judgments tend to reproduce a masculinist disposition seemingly at odds with the ideals of EDM culture. Thus, this thesis investigates the problematic relationship between traditional notions of authenticity and the shifting values of the EDM community.

### **Keywords**

Dubstep, Authenticity, Electronic Dance Music, Mainstreaming, Gender, Subcultural Capital

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## Introduction

Skrillex's jet black hair and pasty complexion adorns the cover of *SPIN Magazine's* "Dance Issue" in September, 2011, the bold, green font of the lede proclaiming the emergence of a "New Rave Generation." Names such as Tiesto, Justice and Diplo grace the lower half of the cover of a print outlet that long was the home for alternative rock criticism - an outlet that has grown up with grunge, metal and noise rock and has championed artists such as Sonic Youth, Nirvana and Pavement. On the cover of the July, 2012 edition of *Rolling Stone*, the comically oversized, Swiss cheese-resembling plastic mouse head of Deadmau5 can barely fit alongside the headline that reads "Summer Special: Dance Madness!"; The exclamation points continue with, "The Clubs! The Festivals! The Drugs! And the DJs Who Rule The World!"

It is clear, by looking at the *Billboard* Top 40 and by perusing a handful of music and general interest publications, that dubstep, the genre that originated in the UK but has seen a massive sonic overhaul in North America, has worked its way into mainstream consciousness. There's hardly a pop music hit that doesn't borrow from the increasingly popular genre. Taylor Swift, the heiress apparent to the country music throne, tapped Max Martin to produce "I Knew You Were Trouble" in late 2012, the dubstep influence evident in the melodic build up and subsequent bass drop and wobble. Swift is not the only artist to bring dubstep to mainstream radio, though. The examples are seemingly endless: Psy's "Gangnam Style" (2012), a K-pop crossover hit, replicates the trick of forging melody out of sub-bass oscillation; Nicki Minaj evokes the "drop" of dubstep in her club banger "Starships" (2012); Alex Clare, a soulful crooner from London scored a

massive US hit with “Too Close” (2011), which blends classic blues rock vocals and the wobbly bass of a late night dubstep club. The list goes on.

Dubstep’s ubiquity extends beyond magazine and radio, though. On August 21, 2012, the online style and culture publication *Blackbook* ran this headline: “RIP Dubstep, Killed in a Tragic Kmart Commercial.” Within the article, writer Miles Klee lamented the fact that dubstep had “jumped the shark” after appearing in advertisements. Klee goes on, stating that, “dubstep’s death knell, as with any offensively unlistenable subgenre of pseudo-music<sup>1</sup>, was its wholehearted acceptance and assimilation by Real America.”<sup>2</sup> Embedded below the quote was a video of the lambasted Kmart commercial, showing young children in their back-to-school clothes, strutting while departing a school bus, all to the soundtrack provided by the wobbly, whirring bass tones of “Punkshock” by Matroda.

At the 2012 Grammy Awards, dubstep figurehead Skrillex, aka. Sonny Moore, walked away with three Grammys, including one for Best Dance Recording, one for Best Remixed Recording (non-classical) and one for Best Dance/Electonica Album.<sup>3</sup> It was a monumental night for one of the most identifiable artist within the dubstep scene, a turning point of sorts where the mainstream, represented by awards ceremonies like the Grammys, acknowledged the cultural shift that had been occurring for some time.

Since approximately 2008, the North American version of dubstep, which differs significantly from its UK namesake, has worked its way into mainstream consciousness.

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<sup>1</sup> Foreshadowing the dismissive tone of the discourse that will be examined throughout this thesis.

<sup>2</sup> Miles Klee, “RIP Dubstep, Killed in a Tragic Kmart Commercial,” *Blackbook*, August 2012, <http://www.blackbookmag.com/music/rip-dubstep-killed-in-a-tragic-kmart-commercial-1.52084>.

<sup>3</sup> Theo Bark, “Skrillex, Grammys 2012: EDM King Wins Three Awards before Telecast Begins,” *Spinner Canada*, February 2012, <http://www.spinner.ca/2012/02/12/skrillex-grammy-2012-wins-three-awards/>.

As evidenced above, dubstep is used in a variety of commercials, including advertisements for Kmart, Internet Explorer, GoPro HD cameras, Southern Comfort, Weetabix and many others. While publications, which focus on the world of electronic dance music, such as *Mixmag* and *DJ Mag*, have also published many pieces on dubstep in the past few years, recognizing its growing popularity, the genre is also frequently talked about within the popular and alternative press, where dubstep artists such as Skrillex, Tiesto and Deadmau5 adorn the covers of *Rolling Stone* and *Spin Magazine*, are featured on music websites such as *Pitchfork* and *Resident Advisor*, and the *New York Times* and the *Wall Street Journal* publish lengthy opinion pieces on the state of dubstep.

It is clear, then, that dubstep, and specifically its North American version, has entered mainstream consciousness in North America. With such recognition comes a bevy of issues, debates and complexities that this thesis will examine. The thesis will explore a variety of issues long associated with electronic dance music genres, including notions of authenticity, the employment of symbolic violence within scenes and subcultures, issues related to the construction of genre, the problematic relationship between the underground and the mainstream, and the gendered language that is part of this discourse. Thus, this thesis is interested in the struggle over meaning and value found within current discourse on dubstep, a struggle fueled both by the genre's newfound cultural ubiquity and by longstanding concerns within the world of EDM.

A key tension within the current rhetoric of dubstep involves a schism between creators and proprietors of UK and U.S. dubstep. James Blake, a prominent UK producer who has had success in the United States recently said, in regards to U.S. dubstep, that "certain producers...have definitely hit upon a sort of frat-boy market where there's this macho-ism being reflected in the sounds and how the music makes you feel. And to me,

that is a million miles away from where dubstep started.”<sup>4</sup> Blake’s quote is relevant for a number of reasons, exemplifying the myriad struggles currently taking place in the dialogue on dubstep. His invocation of the “frat-boy” suggests certain class and gender fears and he suggests that US dubstep has distorted how “the music makes you feel,” insinuating a hierarchy of appreciation or proper listening habits and emotional reactions. Finally, he notes that US dubstep is “a million miles away from where dubstep started,” thus suggesting anxiety over the control of dubstep’s narrative as an underground or mainstream music and its value as related to notions of authenticity and genre expectations. Blake’s quote is therefore a useful jumping-off point for an analysis of the rhetoric that has informed his (and others’) thoughts on the meaning and value of electronic dance music, as it encapsulates much of the dialogue on EDM since the days of disco. The above quote from James Blake represents a variety of issues that signal the relevance of dubstep as an object of academic study.

This thesis, which examines various discourses on dubstep, is divided into five chapters. Chapter one reviews various writings on club culture and popular music more generally. Pierre Bourdieu’s notions of distinction and taste, coupled with Sarah Thornton’s idea of subcultural capital, are discussed in relation to EDM culture. Various works on “subcultures,” “scenes” and “tribes” by Will Straw and David Hesmondhalgh will be used to relate club cultures to subcultural theory, and to understand how the organization of club cultures has typically been written about in the field of cultural studies. Theories about the organizing principles of subcultures will be used to inform an examination of the construction of genre and how it relates to the ever-branching tree of

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<sup>4</sup> Liz Pelly, “Interview: James Blake’s dub soft-shoe,” *The Boston Phoenix*, Sept. 28, 2011, <http://thephoenix.com/Boston/music/127478-interview-james-blakes-dub-soft-shoe/>.

EDM genre labels. This exploration of genre and subcultural authenticity, coupled with an analysis of various literature on gender discourses related to evaluations of popular music, will allow for an examination of the complex gender issues circulating within electronic dance music cultures.

Chapter two establishes a brief history of various electronic dance music (EDM) genres since disco, detailing the splintering of genre names, the various historical peaks and valleys of the relative underground and mainstream popularity of EDM, and the multiple social and cultural implications associated with various scenes and subcultures. In particular, this historical narrative posits that EDM, at times, was a significant commercial product (eg: the height of disco in the late '70s; the popularity of rave culture in the UK in early '90s) as well as being a genre (or cluster of genres) with ties to underground scenes and subcultural formations.

The final three chapters present a discourse analysis, which will explore how discursive patterns established previously inform the current discourses on dubstep. In order to organize this discourse analysis, chapters three, four and five will focus on what I will call 'Cultural Critics.' These chapters will address the way critics associated with various publications discuss dubstep. While this analysis of the work of critics does include quotes from DJs and producers who are also cultural intermediaries working in the dubstep scene, the focus of the final three chapters will be primarily on how the words of those DJs and the discourses they engage in are mediated through the work of the cultural critic. In other words, in the various publications analyzed, I will be interested in understanding how critics discuss and present issues of authenticity, gender, and connoisseurship as related to dubstep. Critical discourse has been chosen as a subject

for analysis because it is integral to the shaping and dissemination of dominant meanings within popular music culture. Because critics often hold public positions of some authority and possess cultural capital, their opinions are potentially able to influence discourse on emerging musical genres such as dubstep. In addition, the publications critics work for often have large readerships, allowing the discourses engaged in by critics to be widely circulated to various audiences.

For the sake of clarity and balance, I have established three distinct categories of publications that make up the discourse analysis. Firstly, I have identified what I refer to as EDM-only music publications, which include writings in *DJ Mag*, *Mixmag* and *Resident Advisor*. Secondly, I have identified what I refer to as mass-circulation music publications. These are online or print publications that publish music criticism and music-related features dealing with multiple genres. The discourses in *Spin*, *Rolling Stone*, and *Pitchfork* will be examined. Finally, I have identified what I refer to as general interest publications. These publications are non-music-specialist oriented. They cover a variety of topics depending on the mission of the publication and its readership. Included are the discourses on dubstep that appear in the *New York Times*, the *Los Angeles Times*, *New York Mag* and the *Wall Street Journal*.

Including a mix of music-oriented and general interest publications will allow for a balanced understanding of how the historical discursive regularities outlined in chapters one and two may manifest themselves in various publications from approximately 2008-2012. Taken together, these categories and their respective discourses will be used to develop a broader understanding of how critics portray, influence and shape the current discourses on dubstep.

The sample of publications outlined above will be used to gather material for the second half of this thesis, each of which analyzes and discusses specific issues relating to the current discourse on dubstep and EDM. The purpose of this discourse analysis is to identify discursive regularities related to genre, gender and the underground-mainstream dichotomy, as well as notions of authenticity and value as evidenced in specific publications.

Following the historical narrative of chapter two, chapter three examines how issues of genre formation and meaning are part of the current discourse on dubstep, as well as outlines an etymology of the word “dubstep.” As will be explored in chapter two, EDM is made up of an ever-splintering set of genres, which creates a cycle of clashes over the meanings associated with different genre labels. Debates about the label “dubstep” form an instance of this ongoing process in EDM. Chapter four will examine discursive patterns related to branding, commercialization and the mainstreaming of dubstep, which includes an analysis of the gendered implications associated with the mainstream-underground divide. Finally, chapter five will examine patterns of authentication in the current discourse on dubstep. This will include an examination of authenticity as it is understood in the world of EDM. It will also include an exploration of the role of the DJ and of various notions of “liveness.”

A key concern within each of these final chapters will be to identify how patterns of discourse engage with gender. Each chapter will include an examination of how discourses of authenticity, genre and mainstreaming mobilize gendered connotations. Such analysis will draw upon much of the theory outlined in chapter one, including the

gendered connotations of the mainstream-underground dichotomy and those invoked in arguments about authenticity.

Considering dubstep's widespread popularity and influence, it is important to consider how the genre came to fruition, to examine the genre's forbearers and to understand its place within the larger narrative of electronic dance music. Before delving into a historical narrative of EDM, though, it will be pertinent to outline the various texts and theories that have influenced this thesis more generally.

### **Chapter 1: Literature Review**

The tension between the underground and the mainstream found within the electronic dance music scene across its historical narrative has recently been amplified by the mass popularity of EDM within the current pop music landscape. More specifically, the popularity of dubstep in the United States has fuelled the struggle over who will control the value, meaning and direction of electronic dance music, not just within the scene itself, but also in the mainstream press. The rhetoric and language associated with club culture and electronic dance music is more ubiquitous today than during the late-'90s, when electronica represented the height of EDM's mainstream appeal and acceptance. This rhetoric has been a significant part of electronic dance music's historical narrative since disco and has many implications in regards to a variety of topics that remain central to the study of popular music. In particular, it raises questions regarding authenticity, genre formation, gendered language and technology, the tension between the underground and the mainstream, and notions of exclusivity and connoisseurship. These are all part of the current conversation on US dubstep taking place within mainstream culture.

Since the conversation surrounding EDM has shifted from the underground into mainstream consciousness, coinciding with the rise of the genre within Top 40 radio and beyond, exploring the various dialogues throughout EDM's history is particularly relevant at this specific cultural moment. Before delving into the current discourse on dubstep, it will be pertinent to review the literature that has shaped the rhetoric on EDM and club cultures while also examining the theories and discussions that have influenced my own study of dubstep.

The current discourses on dubstep contain elements integral to cultural studies at large and more specific to popular music studies. Thus, in order to examine, analyze and comprehend the current discourses on dubstep, a variety of sources within cultural and popular music studies must be examined. In accordance with this task, the following chapter will be sequenced and separated accordingly: subsection 1.1 will discuss the various characteristics and values of club culture and how it is understood and conceived of in the field of cultural and popular music studies; this will include an outline of the way in which Pierre Bourdieu's notion of distinctions and taste have influenced the study of EDM culture, including a look at 'subcultural capital,' Sarah Thornton's club-culture specific elaboration of Bourdieu's cultural capital. This subsection will be devoted to understanding how ideas of distinction, taste and value are employed in the discourses on electronic dance music and club culture and how popular music studies has historically understood and analyzed those constructions. Subsection 1.2 will discuss subcultural theory along with key popular music studies' terms such as 'subculture,' 'scene,' 'tribe' and 'neo-tribe.' Specifically, the work of Will Straw and David Hesmondhalgh will be invoked, including the various issues associated with subcultural theory and the institutional creation of labels such as 'scene,' 'tribe' and 'neo-tribe' and how these labels

are used in the study of electronic dance music. This subsection will also draw on Hesmondhalgh and follow his claim that 'genre' is a more useful term to use when describing the relationship between social groups and musical styles. I will examine and draw upon the work of Simon Frith and Hesmondhalgh (amongst others), both of whom provide a detailed understanding of how the rules and regulations of genre work as an organizing principle within music communities (particularly EDM communities) and, in a broader sense, the music industry itself. Subsection 1.3 will detail the literature written on the divide between mainstream or mass culture and its seeming opposite, underground culture. The work of Andreas Huyssen, Diane Railton and many others will contribute to my understanding of how notions of mass and underground culture have been previously understood and problematized within cultural studies, with particular attention being paid to related notions of gender and authenticity in popular music studies and in the study of electronic dance music. Specifically, the gendered language involved in the separation between the mainstream and the underground, the gender imbalance in subcultural theory and the relationship and tension between gender and technology as related to the study of electronic dance music and club culture will be examined.

Separating this chapter in this way will help articulate and organize the specific issues relevant to this study while also showing how dubstep and dubstep club culture fits into a tradition of cultural and popular music studies. Taken together, these various subsections will reveal what is at stake in this thesis, which explores the power relations and discourses involved in recent discussions of dubstep.

### **1.1 Club Culture, Taste and Subcultural Capital**

Before gaining an understanding of how various power relations influence the creation of genre in electronic dance music culture, it will be pertinent to outline and

discuss the various characteristics of club culture. What are the values and meanings associated with club culture? What are the power relations at play within electronic dance music cultures? The answers to these questions and how they have been considered within the relevant literature of popular music studies will allow for a more cogent understanding of the issues related to genre formation within EDM communities outlined in subsection 1.2.

Sarah Thornton defines “club culture” as “the colloquial expression given to youth cultures for whom dance clubs and their eighties offshoot, raves, are the symbolic axis and working social hub.”<sup>5</sup> Clubs are, generally speaking, spaces where DJs spin some form of electronic dance music; where bodies congregate on the dance floor and revel in the anonymity of the dark space. While the space itself (ie: the club) is loosely defined and open to a variety of interpretations as to what constitutes a club, ‘club culture’ is a more specific term that can be understood as a complex weaving of several meanings, rules and values. Thornton, early on in *Club Cultures*, outlines the various characteristics of club culture. She states that club cultures are “persistently associated with a specific space which is both continually transforming sounds and styles and regularly bearing witness to the apogees and excesses of youth cultures.”<sup>6</sup> Thus, club cultures are in a constant state of flux; they contain and promote different sets of meanings, relationships and values depending on a host of variables, as evidenced by the variety of ways clubs and club cultures have been understood from disco to rave to dubstep. Thornton notes that dance music has long been excluded not only from the popular music canon, but also from “much pop scholarship” which has “tended to

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<sup>5</sup> Sarah Thornton, *Club Cultures: Music, Media and Subcultural Capital* (Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1998), 3.

<sup>6</sup> Thornton, *Club Cultures*, 3.

privilege ‘listening’ over dance musics, visibly performing musicians over behind-the-scenes producers, the rhetorically ‘live’ over the ‘recorded’ and hence guitars over synthesizers and samplers.”<sup>7</sup> While this privilege of certain tastes has historically excluded electronic dance music, Thornton posits that club cultures are in fact ‘taste cultures’ themselves. The structures in place that have traditionally privileged rock music over pop and EDM also, quite ironically, operate within club cultures themselves.

Thornton explores this idea of club culture as ‘taste culture’ further:

Club crowds generally congregate on the basis of their shared taste in music, their consumption of common media and, most importantly, their preference for people with similar tastes to themselves. Taking part in club cultures build, in turn, further affinities, socializing participants into a knowledge of (and frequently a belief in) the likes and dislikes, meanings and values of the culture. Clubs and raves, therefore, house *ad hoc* [Thornton’s italics] communities with fluid boundaries...[and] embrace their own hierarchies of what is authentic and legitimate in popular culture.<sup>8</sup>

At the heart of club culture, then, exists a blatant contradiction. Electronic dance music, and dance music more generally, has often portrayed itself as a barrier-less form of art, one that doesn’t involve the same exclusionary behaviours and models associated with more “intellectual” music – mainly, the connoisseurist culture of rock music. Dance music is of the *body*, as opposed to being *head* music, and is therefore meant to be a music that everyone can participate in. The club, with its dark dancefloors and hedonistic appetites, also seems to promote democratic pleasures, of letting one’s self go. But as

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<sup>7</sup> Thornton, *Club Cultures*, 1-2.

<sup>8</sup> Thornton, *Club Cultures*, 3.

Thornton notes, club cultures come with their own set of rules, schemas and structures that act as exclusion mechanisms.

The rules by which clubbers agree to abide by are in place in order to distinguish themselves from outsiders or those that do not possess the same cultural capital as they do. Bourdieu might label these two distinct groups “inheritors” and “newcomers,”<sup>9</sup> labels that address the complex set of distinctions and meanings that are evoked in assertions of taste and value. Thornton herself acknowledges three main distinctions that lie at the heart of club culture: “the authentic versus the phoney, the ‘hip’ versus the mainstream, and the ‘underground’ versus ‘the media’.”<sup>10</sup> While these distinctions have been quite thoroughly explored in cultural and popular music studies, they have often been examined in relation to rock music. In *Club Cultures*, Thornton suggests that these distinctions, which rely on notions of authenticity, hipness and connoisseurship, need to be newly examined in relation to club cultures. Throughout *Club Cultures*, those three distinctions are examined, and the framework that Thornton has laid out will be integral to my own research into the power relationships and structures in current dubstep discourse.

About her first identified distinction, the notion of the authentic, she states: “although the authenticities of ‘live’ performance have been comprehensively researched, little has been written about the new authenticities attributed to records and recorded events.”<sup>11</sup> Notions of authenticity play an intriguing role within club culture. After all, more traditional markers of authenticity (ie: ‘real’ instruments, ‘honest’ lyrics and songwriting that represents the struggles of the middle class, to name a few) are mostly

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<sup>9</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1984), 19.

<sup>10</sup> Thornton, *Club Cultures*, 4.

<sup>11</sup> Thornton, *Club Cultures*, 4.

absent from the world of electronic dance music. DJs, at least during the time when Thornton was doing her research, often remain faceless, removing themselves from the star system and roots backstory underpinning rock music's authenticity. EDM producers and artists sample heavily from other songs and artists, and do so using "inauthentic" instruments such as samplers or computers. Uncertainty about the status of the EDM musician is heightened today by the widespread availability of beat-making programs, from Logic to Ableton Live, which perpetuates an accessible, DIY culture, where just about any kid with internet access can begin experimenting with beat making and share tracks through various services such as YouTube, Soundcloud and Bandcamp. So, if traditional values of authenticity are not present in club culture, what forms of authenticity do members of the EDM community privilege? Thornton notes that within club culture, recording and live performance have swapped statuses, where the recording is privileged as the original and the authentic, and the live performance is understood as a reproduction – this in contrast to rock's notion of the live performance as authentic. Also, an artist's authenticity is often defined by his or her acknowledgment of EDM's history, an extension of the inheritors-newcomers dichotomy referenced above. Despite the fact that EDM is enjoyed as body music, club culture clearly also privileges the accumulation of a specific type of knowledge and information. Thornton labels this specific accumulation of knowledge "subcultural capital," which will be explained below.

The second distinction Thornton explores is the divide between the hip and the mainstream. As Thornton notes, "the mainstream is the entity against which the *majority* [Thornton's italics] of clubbers define themselves" and that, "to some degree, the mainstream stands in for the masses – discursive distance from which is a measure of a

clubber's cultural worth."<sup>12</sup> Thus club culture is built on a distancing distinction, creating a hierarchy of taste that positions the clubber above a perceived other. Much like the punk movement or any number of DIY counter-cultures, club culture characteristically views itself as opposed to mass culture. Club cultures "admire innovative artists, but show disdain for those who have too high a profile as being charlatans or overrated media-sluts."<sup>13</sup> At times, this fear of the mainstream results in clearly gendered rhetoric (as here, with the invocation of "media-sluts), and this will be explored further in subsection 2.3 below.

Thornton's final distinction is very much an extension of the hip versus the mainstream distinction. The notion of the underground as a place of purity and independence, contrasted by the media as a place of corruption plagued by artists "selling out" is ground thoroughly covered in popular music studies. Club culture thus evokes many of the same principles as punk and radical art movements, viewing the media as a corrupting, commercially-minded force bent on co-opting subcultural style for capitalist gain – and yet, Thornton notes that the media is integral to the dissemination of subcultural capital.

These three tenets of club culture serve as specific distinctions, the employment of which are used to collect subcultural capital. For Thornton, subcultural capital fits in with Bourdieu's notion of distinctions, suggesting that "subcultural distinctions have significant consequences"<sup>14</sup> for youth who participate in club culture. Their knowledge of specific records and DJs, their use of certain lingo, their clothing choices, can all be seen as the collection of subcultural capital. In many ways, subcultural capital is nearly

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<sup>12</sup> Thornton, *Club Cultures*, 5.

<sup>13</sup> Thornton, *Club Cultures*, 5.

<sup>14</sup> Thornton, *Club Cultures*, 11.

equivalent to ‘hipness’ – or as Thornton puts it, “subcultural capital is embodied in the form of being ‘in the know.’”<sup>15</sup>

Thornton notes a few differences between her application of subcultural capital and Bourdieu’s notion of cultural capital, which she builds upon. Firstly, she recognizes that “while subcultural capital may not convert into economic capital with the same ease or financial reward as cultural capital, a variety of occupations and incomes can be gained as a result of hipness.”<sup>16</sup> From DJs to promoters to music journalists, a wide range of job opportunities become available to those in-the-know. Secondly, she notes that subcultural capital is less bound to class than cultural capital. She states that “class is willfully obfuscated by subcultural distinctions” and that “subcultural capital fuels rebellion against, or rather escape from, the trappings of parental class,”<sup>17</sup> once again evoking the principles of many punk/counterculture movements. Lastly, Thornton asserts that in contrast to cultural capital, the media largely controls the circulation of subcultural capital. “In other words, the difference between being *in* or *out* [Thornton’s italics] of fashion, high or low in subcultural capital, correlates in complex ways with degrees of media coverage, creation and exposure.”<sup>18</sup>

Subcultural capital will play a prominent role in my study of the dubstep scene and in understanding how mainstream and alternative publications construct discourses on dubstep. As Thornton states, drawing on Bourdieu, “distinctions are never just assertions of equal difference; they usually entail some claim to authority and presume the inferiority of *others*” [Thornton’s italics].<sup>19</sup> This seems particularly relevant when

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<sup>15</sup> Thornton, *Club Cultures*, 11.

<sup>16</sup> Thornton, *Club Cultures*, 12.

<sup>17</sup> Thornton, *Club Cultures*, 12.

<sup>18</sup> Thornton, *Club Cultures*, 14.

<sup>19</sup> Thornton, *Club Cultures*, 10.

analyzing the discourses taking place regarding dubstep not just within the local scene itself, but also at large in various mainstream and alternative publications.

Now that I have outlined club cultures and Thornton's understanding of the various distinctions present within them, it would be relevant to review some of the literature that critiques subcultural theory and how that will influence my own study of dubstep based on the organizing principle of genre.

## **1.2 Problematizing Subcultural Theory, and the Move to Genre as an Organizing Principle**

Understanding how genre formation affects audience reception, the structures that enable the flow of knowledge and cultural capital, and how the boundaries of genre are articulated within and without particular scenes is essential not only to my study specifically, but also to examining the various dialogues on electronic dance music. Thus, this subsection will discuss the various critiques of Thornton and others' subcultural theory while also exploring genre as put in dialogue with subcultural theory in order to understand and explore the relationship between musical styles and youth groups.

In his recapitulation of rave culture and dance music in the 1980s and '90s, Simon Reynolds covers an array of EDM genres that arose out of disco and krautrock and splintered into a variety of subgenres. To Reynolds' credit, he manages to shape a cohesive narrative out of the unruly peaks and valleys of EDM and the subsequent, seemingly endless subgenre formation. From acid house and gabba to 'ardkore, jungle and beyond, he tracks with rigid specificity the cultural and musical contexts that contributed to the vast array of subgenres that came to define dance music during that period. While *Energy Flash* is certainly a useful and detailed encapsulation of the historical narrative of dance music, what is more intriguing, and in some cases daunting,

are the fissures and in-fighting, the struggle for control of meaning and perception, that it opposes beneath the umbrella genre of EDM. As Kembrew Mcleod notes, “the continuous and rapid introduction of new subgenre names into electronic/dance music communities is equaled by no other type of music.”<sup>20</sup> Therefore, framing the narrative of EDM in terms of genre formation and the structures involved in such a process is particularly relevant and challenging.

In his book *Performing Rites*, Simon Frith states that “genre is a way of defining music in its market or, alternatively, the market in its music.”<sup>21</sup> He adds that genre is a way for the A&R departments of record labels to organize the sales process. In this way, the generic label that is placed upon the musical recording serves as a way of not only signifying what the music supposedly sounds like but also, perhaps more importantly, what that music is supposed to mean to an audience. Genre suggests, or, more accurately, prescribes, divisions within an audience. In fact, a genre label is not so much an encapsulation of what that music *is* in terms of sound and meaning, but what it most certainly *is not* in regards to those terms.

More than just a clash of musical, marketing and ideological forces<sup>22</sup>, genre is also a process by which one can make sense of cultural experience, providing order to the seemingly random and transient shifts in culture. Understanding that cultural experience, and in this case musical experience, can be organized generically is to understand that certain institutions, be it A&R departments, music magazines or popular discourse, structure the creation of distinctions. Thus, the process is not organic. Genre creates a

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<sup>20</sup> Kembrew Mcleod, “Genres, Subgenres, Sub-Subgenres and More: Musical and Social Differentiation Within Electronic Dance Music Communities”, *The Journal of Popular Music Studies*, no. 13 (2001): 60.

<sup>21</sup> Simon Frith, *Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music* (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1998), 76.

<sup>22</sup> Frith, *Performing Rites*, 84.

social narrative, a thread to follow within the complex intertwining of distinctions, meanings and values that define popular music and culture. This concept, of genre as a distinct process meant to catalogue and define meaning and value, to create an identifiable social narrative, is evident throughout the history of the study of electronic dance music.

David Hesmondhalgh, in his critique of traditional subcultural terms, posits that “genre is a much more satisfactory starting point for a theorization of the relationship between particular social groups and musical styles than are subculture, scene or tribe.”<sup>23</sup> Throughout the article, he outlines numerous reasons why subcultural theory is occasionally problematic when it comes to popular music studies. He sees the systems of genre and articulation as a more precise way of dealing with notions of musical communities and identities, suggesting that subcultural theory, and the use of the terms ‘tribe’ (also see: Bennet, 1999) and ‘scene’ (also see: Straw, 1991) are not “useful ways to conceive of musical collectivities in modern societies.”<sup>24</sup> He sees the terms ‘scene’ and ‘tribes’ as problematic and often reductive, failing to encompass the complexities of musical collectivities. Andy Bennett, who coins the term ‘tribe’ as a way of understanding musical communities, also suggests that using subcultural theory in cases of popular music analysis is often too rigid and, through its constant attachment of subculture to youth groups, overestimates the cohesiveness of such groups. In response, Hesmondhalgh notes that there’s a dichotomy at work between subcultural theory and Bennett’s notion of tribes: the duality of “fixity and rigidity versus instability and

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<sup>23</sup> David Hesmondhalgh, “Subculture, Scenes or Tribes? None of the Above” in *Journal of Youth Studies* 8, no.1 (2005): 32.

<sup>24</sup> Hesmondhalgh, “Subculture, Scenes or Tribes?,” 22.

fluidity.”<sup>25</sup> Hesmondhalgh goes on to argue that such a duality is too polarized to serve the function of examining the process of creating meaning and value in popular music studies. Though the notion of tribes may present an alternative to the problematic and dated terms of subcultural theory, which involve a rigid focus on youth and class relations to subculture, the resulting duality leaves academics in the same position from which they started. Or, as Hesmondhalgh states: “we need to know how boundaries are constituted, not simply that they are fuzzier than various writers have assumed.”<sup>26</sup> Where traditional subcultural theory marks out distinctions and value judgments based largely on class position, the notion of tribes foregrounds consumer agency. Hesmondhalgh views this dichotomy as unbalanced and problematic, too rigid to apply to the fluid, complex relationship between music and consumers.

While Hesmondhalgh suggests that subcultural theory is occasionally problematic, a complete dismissal of subcultural theory is not wise – nor does Hesmondhalgh suggest such a practice. Subcultural theory has been particularly prominent in the study of club cultures, likely due to the fact that A) clubs and electronic dance music have generally been the territory of youth; B) electronic dance music has often fallen outside of mainstream recognition; and C) the audiences associated with a variety of EDM genres have, historically speaking, been composed of minorities and “others.” Thus, the examination of club culture and electronic dance music contains many possibilities for using subcultural theory, as Thornton has already shown. I will, however, subscribe heavily to Hesmondhalgh’s proposal that genre and articulation are useful additions to subcultural theory and notions of tribes and scenes in order to describe the relationship between music and social process. By not limiting the theoretical framework

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<sup>25</sup> Hesmondhalgh, “Subcultures, Scenes or Tribes?,” 24.

<sup>26</sup> Hesmondhalgh, “Subcultures, Scenes or Tribes?,” 24.

of this study to purely subcultural theory – by emphasizing genre and articulation in the analysis of the dialogues on dubstep – a more variable and differentiated theorization of the relationship among the music, audience and the social process can be understood.

Genre, then, is a social process and therefore a significant way of identifying certain patterns, relationships and structures within various music communities. As Frith states, “genre is not determined by the form or style of a text itself but by the audience’s perception of its style and meaning.”<sup>27</sup> He adds that it is “through generic organization that music offers people, even so-called passive at-home listeners, access to a social world, a part in some social narrative.”<sup>28</sup> Thus, when UK producer/artist James Blake laments the mangling of the word ‘dubstep’ by producers and media in the US, he is not critiquing the sound of the music so much as an entire social world associated with that genre marker. Genre labels lie “at the heart of pop value judgments”<sup>29</sup> and therefore construct certain meanings and values that intertwine with the distinctions laid out in the previous subsection. The difference between pop and rock, while not always immediately clear musically, is certainly identifiable when it comes to meaning; rock as the often masculine, DIY, authentic, oppositional genre and pop the supposedly feminine, mainstream, capitalist enterprise. Thus, these labels are more than just ways of organizing record stores; they are ways of organizing groups of people and their value systems.

Considering much of the current discourse on dubstep dwells on what “dubstep” actually *is* as a musical style<sup>30</sup>, the generic process will serve as a necessary supplement to the subcultural theory outlined in subsection 1.1 in shaping my own research. Taken

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<sup>27</sup> Frith, *Performing Rites*, 94.

<sup>28</sup> Frith, *Performing Rites*, 90.

<sup>29</sup> Frith, *Performing Rites*, 75.

<sup>30</sup> For instance, *SPIN* magazine ran an article in January 2013 about Skrillex’s most recent EP, which contains a mellower, more atmospheric vibe, with the headline “Skrillex makes actual dubstep.”

together, subcultural theory and genre formation allow for a more productive understanding of the complex relationship between music and audience. By bringing the two together, we can start to make sense of the value judgments being made within the current discourses on dubstep and further understand how the industrialization of culture and music, and the perpetuation of distinctions of high and low, influence such discourses.

### **1.3 Expanded Authenticity and Understanding Gender in EDM Discourses**

If there's a lesson to be drawn from the work of Sarah Thornton, Frith and others that I have mentioned in this chapter so far, it is that there has long been a dominant discourse used to discuss and understand popular music that upholds certain key, Western ideals. This discourse often privileges masculinity and patriarchy, views the mainstream and capitalism as a corrupting force against DIY culture and creativity, and promotes rockist notions of authenticity and legitimacy.

These rock-derived notions of legitimacy and authenticity have come to frame conceptions of the narrative of electronic dance music. Yet EDM has historically had a very tense relationship with rock. Rockist principles seem to suppress and devalue electronic dance music as a legitimate art form – one look at the 'Disco Sucks' movement of the late '70s is proof of this – yet EDM has also evinced its own mutated form of rockist principles during its own legitimization process in the '80s and '90s. It is this contradiction or paradox, between EDM's seeming opposition to rockist ideals and its blatant, though often complex, subscription to those ideals, that lies at the heart of my research on dubstep discourses.

Within this subsection, I will discuss the literature relevant to an expansion of Thornton's three distinctions outlined in subsection 1.1, focusing on the literature that

suggests electronic dance music has fought against rockist ideals while also relying on those ideals during its own process of legitimization. This will be interwoven with an exploration of the various texts on gender that have influenced my study, including articles on the gendered connotations of the mainstream-underground dichotomy and the role of women in subcultures and club cultures.

Will Straw remarks that in the years following disco's decline, electronic dance music and clubs took strides to distance themselves from "the signs of debasement"<sup>31</sup> that defined disco in the late '70s<sup>32</sup>. With this in mind, he goes on to observe the differences between dance clubs in Toronto and Montreal in the 1980s. In Montreal, "the DJ booth was positioned low, close to the dance floor. Customers could walk freely in and out of the booth, to talk to the disc jockey or look at the records being played." In Toronto though, "DJs were 'locked away in sealed booths' high above the dance floor and inaccessible."<sup>33</sup> While the inaccessibility of the DJ and his or her records seems to suggest that club culture was less vibrant in Toronto, Straw posits just the opposite. Instead, the steps the Toronto scene took to glorify and seclude the DJ, to shroud the process of spinning records in mystery, fortified the scene against the debasement suffered by disco and consequently contributed to the culture of connoisseurship that would come to define many electronic dance music cultures. As Straw puts it, "the removed diffidence of the Toronto disco DJ served as a strategic, long-term investment in credibility, and would prove to be what made the Toronto club scene, at the beginning of the 1980s, the coolest

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<sup>31</sup> Straw suggests that the physical layout of Toronto clubs in the late '70s and early '80s, with DJs separated from their audiences, was a strategic move to contrast itself against the layout of the disco club, therefore moving away from the signs of debasement lingering within the club scene post-disco. The notion of disco as "debased" or "vulgar" will be explored in Chapter 2.

<sup>32</sup> Will Straw, "The Booth, The Floor and The Wall: Dance Music and the Fear of Falling," 1993. PDF from <http://strawresearch.mcgill.ca/>, 169.

<sup>33</sup> Straw, "The Booth," 169.

in the country.”<sup>34</sup> In many ways, for electronic dance music to move into the realm of ‘legitimate art,’ club culture had to learn from the decline of disco and plan for the future. Thus began EDM’s legitimization process, fighting for the right to be considered ‘real’ music, removed from the sensational headlines that evoked the ‘vulgarity’ of disco’s late years. As Straw puts it, with appropriate gloom, “the image of disco’s chaotic unraveling would nevertheless linger on within dance music culture throughout the 1980s.”<sup>35</sup>

Disco is not the focus of Straw’s argument, though. Instead, it is his sweeping analysis of the systems put in place to avoid dance music’s collapse into vulgarity post-disco that remain central to his article; systems that have a profound affect on the legitimization process of EDM and that will prove integral to an analysis of the discourse currently taking place in regards to dubstep. As Straw states: “what is at stake, in any case, is not the reading of disco music itself, but the way in which its decline produced a set of moralistic imperatives which have shaped the development of dance music ever since.”<sup>36</sup> These moralistic imperatives served to “install militancy and rationality as protective walls against the possibility of collapse into vulgarity”<sup>37</sup>.<sup>38</sup> Thus, a culture of connoisseurship is created, in part, by the separation of the DJ from the dance floor, removing the disc jockey from the mass of bodies writhing to the music. This separation has long been a source of anxiety for dance music culture: “one of the persistent dilemmas of dance music culture grows from the recognition that popular enthusiasm on

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<sup>34</sup> Straw, “The Booth,” 169.

<sup>35</sup> Straw, “The Booth,” 170.

<sup>36</sup> Straw, “The Booth,” 171.

<sup>37</sup> Again, Straw suggests that club culture in Toronto at the time sought to distance itself from the “debased” disco. The “vulgarity” of disco will be explored further in Chapter 2.

<sup>38</sup> Straw, “The Booth,” 171.

the dance floor may bear no necessary relation to the DJ's level of cultivated knowingness."<sup>39</sup>

This dilemma then serves as fuel for the legitimization process of EDM, which can constantly see the looming vulgarity in its rearview mirror. Thus begins the cultivation of connoisseurship, the elevation (both literally and figuratively) of the DJ/producer as a true artist. The most immediate sign of this shift in value takes place spatially. As Straw states, "throughout much of dance music's recent history, the spatial relationship between floor and booth has stood metaphorically for the gap between Low and High – for the distance between a populism which might at any moment become vulgar and a connoisseurship which imagines itself the custodian of historical rationality."<sup>40</sup> Connoisseurship, the act of "tracking down old albums, learning genealogical links between bands, and so on – has traditionally been one rite of passage through which the masculinism of rock-music culture has been perpetuated."<sup>41</sup> It is intriguing, problematic and perhaps somewhat obvious then that electronic dance music culture would adopt this rockist rite of passage as a way to safeguard it against vulgarity. While EDM's legitimization process was partly aimed to distinguish itself from rock music, the form of music that had essentially abolished disco as a legitimate art form, the larger narrative suggests that EDM was also adopting rockist notions of authenticity and connoisseurship in order to secure its longevity and its "seriousness." It is a curious, fascinating contradiction, yet understandable given the privileged position of rockist ideals in Western society, rock's secure balance of mainstream appeal and underground credibility, and its canonical status within popular music studies.

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<sup>39</sup> Straw, "The Booth," 172.

<sup>40</sup> Straw, "The Booth," 172.

<sup>41</sup> Will Straw, "Systems of Articulation, Logics of Change: Communities and Scenes in Popular Music", 378.

With this legitimization process that relies on the perpetuation of rockist ideals in a club culture-specific format, various gender issues become increasingly relevant to the study of EDM culture. Straw notes that “as with the distinction between High and Low, it is in the divide between floor and booth that the gender relations characteristics of dance music culture also assume their distinctive forms.”<sup>42</sup> By adopting bourgeois notions of authenticity, which involved the distinction between High and Low art, the problematic gender relations of rock music are thus moved into EDM culture. Straw expands on this idea:

Much of dance culture’s political credibility has rested on its links to disenfranchised sexual communities and on its distance from the modes of performance and affect posited as typical rock music. It remains the case, nevertheless, that there are more women in heavy metal bands than there are female producers or mixers of dance records, and that virtually all of the club DJs in the English-speaking world who exercise influence are male. The masculinist character of dance music culture is easily glimpsed in the homosocial world of the dance record store on Saturday afternoon, where the dispositions of nerdism are regularly reborn as those of hip connoisseurship. Like that of sports, the culture of dance music embeds the most blatantly physical of practices within elaborate configurations of knowledge and information.<sup>43</sup>

Connoisseurship is, once again, a way of distinguishing the High from the Low, of privileging certain knowledge above others, suggesting that the underground is pure whereas the mainstream is corrupt. Within this dichotomy is an obviously gendered

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<sup>42</sup> Straw, “The Booth, The Floor and The Wall”, 173.

<sup>43</sup> Straw, “The Booth,” 173.

language, one that connotes the masculine underground as superior to the feminine mainstream. Perpetuating this distinction was a significant part of rock's legitimization process. As Diane Railton notes, "rock distanced itself from the 'low' in a way that can be seen as very similar to the methods common within the bourgeois public sphere: by masculinising itself, and by introducing a particular way of enjoying music that eschewed the feminine, emotional and physical response of early 1960s pop fans in favour of cool, laid-back and thoughtful appreciation of music."<sup>44</sup> This kind of appreciation was mirrored in the rise of IDM (the regrettably labeled 'Intelligent Dance Music'), which, as will be outlined below, privileged listening over dancing, thoughtful appreciation over physical enjoyment. This focus on the distinctiveness of 'real' music and 'real' listening and collecting practices in 1960s rock presents a myriad of problematic discourses that have consequences in relation to gender. In her study of girls and women in rock culture, Norma Coates posits the Monkees as an example of how "teenybopper", and therefore more 'feminine' culture, is lambasted by patriarchal structures. She suggests that "the way the Monkees television program and its fans were invoked in subsequent rock critic discourses incorporated the opinions and gender politics of middle-aged writers for trade magazines in the 1960s, and reflected the normative gender roles of the 1950s and early 1960s that informed the opinions of even countercultural journalists."<sup>45</sup> The gender politics of this discourse positioned pop music and mass culture as a feminine, and therefore lesser, form of art. Andreas Huyssen suggests that the desire to differentiate between High and Low art is not the issue, but rather "the persistent gendering as

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<sup>44</sup> Diane Railton, "The Gendered Carnival of Pop" in *Popular Music* 20, no. 3 (2001): 324.

<sup>45</sup> Norma Coates, "Teenyboppers, Groupies and other Grotesques: Girls and Women and Rock Culture in the 1960s and early 1970s" in *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 15, no.1 (2003): 73.

feminine of that which is devalued.”<sup>46</sup> For decades, electronic dance music has been the devalued form of art, the seemingly feminine other, given its ‘mindless’ beat and its appeal to the body instead of the mind. Thus, when EDM culture begins adopting rock-derived structures for legitimizing art, the discourses the EDM cultures employ come loaded with gendered connotations.

Though I’ve already explored some of the texts and discourses that point to the gendered language associated with distinctions between the underground and the mainstream, more needs to be said on the way such discourses have traditionally affected the role of women within club culture. Essential to my research and understanding the role of women in current club culture is Rebekah Farrugia’s *Beyond the Dance Floor: Female DJs, Technology and Dance Music Culture*. In her book she notes that the arguments for the democratic potential of EDM – being of the body and for everyone – are based on “naïve dismissal of the relations of power that construct and permit social interaction”<sup>47</sup> within EDM culture. Thus, there is often a limited role for women in the world of electronic dance music. Farrugia identifies three stereotypes that encapsulate all women in EDM: the ‘sex kitten,’ the ‘t-shirt DJ’ and the ‘dyke’. At the heart of each label is the suggestion that women DJs and producers can either profit by exploiting their sexuality (the ‘sex kitten’) and ignoring the music side of the business, or they can masculinize their behaviour (the ‘t-shirt DJ’ and the ‘dyke’) and suppress their femininity in order to be taken seriously. Often times, the role of the woman in electronic dance music, and this is true dating back to the days of disco, is limited to being a vocalist. The role of DJ, producer, concert promoter, sound mixer and so on are often unavailable to

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<sup>46</sup> Andreas Huyssen, “Mass Culture As Woman” in *After the Great Divide* (1987): 53.

<sup>47</sup> Rebekah Farrugia, *Beyond the Dance Floor: Female DJs, Technology and Dance Music Culture* (Intellect Ltd, 2012), 77.

women because the structures in place within EDM culture continue to privilege men, much the way rock music does. Part of the reason EDM culture remains a hostile space for women is the fact that the technology ubiquitous within DJ culture “continues to be discursively and materially framed in masculine terms.”<sup>48</sup> Farrugia relays a number of anecdotes where male DJs purposely sabotage the set-up of women DJs spinning after them, or who refuse to share common, insider secrets with up-and-coming women artists. This hostility is not only represented within the scene itself, but also in the discourse at large, as has been discussed in this subsection. As Farrugia notes, “girls’ involvement in music has long been associated with consumerism and viewed as complacent with dominant cultural values.”<sup>49</sup> And yet, as we have seen throughout this literature review, the narrative of EDM’s legitimization relies on the upholding of problematic bourgeois cultural values and, implicitly, of ideals associated with rock.

If there is an overarching theme to the texts presented in this literature review, it is that club culture, from disco to rave and dubstep, and the larger narrative of electronic dance music, is fraught with complex and sometime contradictory relationships. Perhaps this is due to the fluidity of music communities as a whole, as Hesmondhalgh has suggested, or perhaps it is predicated on EDM’s adoption and adaption of rock-derived notions of value and authenticity. Nevertheless, the texts and discourses presented above outline a substantial groundwork for my own research on the discourse on dubstep. Thornton’s expansion of Bourdieu’s distinctions will inform my own understanding of the divide between High and Low art in club culture. Also, her term ‘subcultural capital’ will prove integral to my own identification of certain activities and patterns within dubstep culture. Hesmondhalgh’s critique of subcultural theory will also serve to inform a

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<sup>48</sup> Farrugia, *Beyond the Dance Floor*, 8.

<sup>49</sup> Farrugia, *Beyond the Dance Floor*, 24.

further analysis of dubstep discourses. As an addendum to subcultural theory, I will also employ Hesmondhalgh and Frith's exploration of genre as an organizing principle, as a way of understanding the relationship between musical styles and music communities. Finally, I will examine how rockist ideals and structures as explored by Frith, Coates, Straw and others, inform current EDM culture and perpetuate problematic and harmful gendered discourses.

Now that I have established the various theoretical texts that have influenced this thesis, it would be pertinent to establish a historical narrative of electronic dance music genres since disco.

## **Chapter 2: Historical Narrative**

### **2.1 I've Got A Fever and the Only Prescription is Disco**

Few words manage to reference a discourse of hearty disdain better than "disco." "Disco" is so woven into the Western cultural fabric that it not only evokes a musical sound, but also an entire decade of fashion and indulgence; in fact, the cultural signifiers of the word "disco" are arguably more ubiquitous today than the musical ones. As Alice Echols notes, "the seventies have not loomed large in our national imagination, except perhaps as comic relief".<sup>50</sup> Much of the cultural indifference towards the 1970s in current discourse and culture stems from the overbearing shadow of the 1960s; if the '60s were a time of peace, love and understanding, not to mention apparent musical innovation with the rise of rock 'n' roll, then the '70s often represent commercialization, indulgence and capitalism, drowning out the flower-power ideals from a decade earlier. Nothing represents the alleged crass commercialism and indulgence of the '70s like disco, with

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<sup>50</sup> Alice Echols, *Hot Stuff: Disco and the Remaking of American Culture* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 2010), xv.

the iconic image of John Travolta in a white jumpsuit forever burned into the collective cultural conscious of Western society.

Echols states that, “disco snuck up on America like a covert operation”<sup>51</sup>. While it took the major American publications and music labels a few years to catch on to disco – Echols states that, “record companies neither opened their arms nor their coffers”<sup>52</sup> to disco during its earliest days - the music itself had been an identifiable, if yet unnamed, part of culture since approximately 1970. It is possible that disco’s origins as a predominantly black subculture initially kept it from mainstream appeal, though as Tim Lawrence notes, in the early ‘70s, “black audiences were beginning to buy more albums and white audiences were starting to tune in to black music.”<sup>53</sup>

What one could identify as “disco” music in retrospect was hardly visible as such in the early ‘70s. Some of the earliest disco hits, from the likes of Barry White, George McRae, Isaac Hayes and Gloria Gaynor were not too far removed from traditional black R&B and soul. In fact, early disco deejays populated their sets with hits from the Temptations and the O’Jays, artists that were just as likely to be played on Top 40 radio as they were at an underground disco joint. Part of the reason disco managed to remain an underground music despite its reliance on the soul and R&B hits that were burning up the charts was the fact that Motown was still looming large in the early ‘70s<sup>54</sup>. Still, disco was growing out of the same scene and Motown artists would prove to be integral to the rise of disco.

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<sup>51</sup> Echols, *Hot Stuff*, 1.

<sup>52</sup> Echols, *Hot Stuff*, 1.

<sup>53</sup> Tim Lawrence, *Love Saves the Day: A History of American Dance Music Culture, 1970-1979*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003): 117.

<sup>54</sup> Lawrence, *Love Saves the Day*, 118.

In its early years disco was an unidentified offshoot of Motown and black R&B that had a strong appeal in the predominantly gay and black nightclubs chiefly located in New York and San Francisco. The Stonewall Inn, an early gay nightclub that spawned the Stonewall riots which arguably kickstarted the gay rights movement in 1969, was integral to the adoption of disco within gay subculture. The legalization of homosexual dancing was just underway in the late '60s<sup>55</sup> and changed the social dynamic of nightclubs in the US, including at the Stonewall Inn, where open sexual expressiveness “forged a closer connection between going out and coming out.”<sup>56</sup>

While disco evolved out of the support and innovation of gay subculture, artists such as Barry White and Isaac Hayes scored some of disco's earliest, biggest hits with themes of heterosexual longing. Slowly, disco started to put together its sound with the help of Motown and the enduring love of the gay subculture. Echols and others have noted that Eddie Kendrick's “Girl You Need a Change of Mind”, produced by Frank Wilson in 1972 under the Motown label, was really the starting point for disco's identifiable, and therefore marketable, sound. Specifically, it was Wilson's use of the gospel break in the track that significantly influenced the emerging disco scene. Disco, defined by its 4/4 thump and lengthy breaks, where vocals and instrumentation would be dropped out and slowly built back up again, was drawing from a number of Motown sources, enacting small shifts in sonic texture and production technique that would prove integral to the formation of disco's sound. That very sound was being built not just out of Detroit and Motown, but also from its offshoots in Philadelphia and New York. In

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<sup>55</sup> Echols, *Hot Stuff*, 44.

<sup>56</sup> Echols, *Hot Stuff*, 47.

particular, the Philly Sound, with its lavish string arrangements and indulgent percussive swings, shaped what disco would soon become.

It was not until the mid-'70s that disco reached mainstream consciousness. Coming off the freewheeling, revolutionary times of the '60s and contrasted against rock's notions of authenticity and value, to some disco felt like a submission to capitalist practices. Richard Dyer, in his "In Defense of Disco", notes such a trend: "it is assumed that capitalism as a mode of production necessarily and simply produces 'capitalist' ideology"; an ideology that runs contrary to the DIY, "of the people" movement that rock and roll had built itself on.<sup>57</sup> Disco's rise to the mainstream is often pinpointed to 1974, when disco singles were dominating the charts. Carl Douglas' "Kung Fu Fighting" topped the charts in the US and the UK and went on to become one of the best selling singles of all time, subsequently woven into the fabric of popular culture through its use in many Hollywood films and television commercials. Disco's rising popularity also vaulted Barry White's orchestral "Love's Theme" into the #1 spot in early 1974 despite having been recorded and released the year prior. George McRae's "Rock Your Baby" flew to the top of the UK charts in '74 as well, its chunky, funk guitar and lush arrangement drawing on Motown while also being firmly entrenched in the modern disco sound. While male artists were certainly making waves in disco and bringing the sound to the mainstream, it was the divas who came to truly define the genre at its peak. No song was and still is more significant to disco, and electronic dance music in general, than Donna Summer's Giorgio Moroder-produced, 17-minute, orgasmic "Love to Love You Baby", released in 1975. Featuring a lengthy extended break and the breathy, sexual

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<sup>57</sup> Richard Dyer, "In Defense of Disco," in *On Record: Rock, Pop and the Written Word*, ed. Simon Frith and Andrew Goodwin (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), 412.

groans of Summer, the 12” single went to #2 in the US in 1976 after some success in Europe, becoming a staple of discos throughout the country. Summer’s success was part of a larger, diva-centred culture of disco. Just as the gay liberation movement had adopted disco, disco also forged a path for the open sexuality and sensuality of the woman musician. Echols draws comparisons between disco’s diva movement and rock’s own form of male sexual liberation in the ‘60s, stating that female musicians sought to claim “the same privileged turf – the creative freedom, individuality, sexual forthrightness, and right of reinvention – so effortlessly occupied by male rockers.”<sup>58</sup> The fact that disco was a diva-centred music potentially contributed to disco’s relative underground status and certainly coloured the anti-disco, anti-pop mainstream (and therefore anti-woman) rhetoric that would emerge in the late ‘70s.

If disco had worked its way into the cultural fabric of the US by 1974 and ’75, then that popularity went into overdrive in 1977 when the film *Saturday Night Fever* was released. Echols states that “even before the release of *Saturday Night Fever* in late 1977, disco was a proven cash cow, generating substantial profits for both record labels and club owners.”<sup>59</sup> As Lawrence notes, in 1976, *Billboard* organized a three-day conference on disco in New York, which was “attended by some five hundred registrants” where “the panels drove home the message that, as *Billboard* reported, ‘disco is rapidly becoming the universal pop music, and that industry now has another viable tool to tap additional consumer dollars’.”<sup>60</sup> Still, the popularity of *Saturday Night Fever* expanded interest in disco. Within a year of the release of the film, “there were one thousand discos

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<sup>58</sup> Echols, *Hot Stuff*, 97.

<sup>59</sup> Echols, *Hot Stuff*, 195.

<sup>60</sup> Lawrence, *Love Saves The Day*, 206.

operating in New York's metropolitan area" and "between fifteen and twenty thousand discos operating in America"<sup>61</sup>. John Travolta and his white two-piece suit and vest had painted a picture of disco's extravagance, showing that disco and dance music were no longer predominantly gay and black subcultural forms, but now also a suburban phenomenon. Among the many clubs operating in New York at the time, none was more famous than Studio 54, the Manhattan club that epitomized the extravagance of disco. Opening in 1977, Studio 54 was converted from a TV studio into a massive dance floor with high-tech lighting and sound systems that brought the 4/4 thump of disco to life. But Studio 54's popularity was not so much based on the state-of-the-art sound system as it was built on celebrity status. The likes of Truman Capote and Andy Warhol – as well as mainstream rock idols such as Mick Jagger - and other elite Hollywood players frequented the club, which not only raised the profile of disco but also served to exclude ordinary listeners or participants; disco and club culture had come a long way since the Stonewall Inn.

While 1977 and the release of *Saturday Night Fever* was the height of disco's popularity, anti-disco rhetoric, which was often homophobic and racist, followed the genre throughout its move into the mainstream. Rock purists viewed the music as an indulgent, commercial enterprise that was undoing the "of the people" work that rock music had done just a decade earlier. As David Hesmondhalgh bluntly states, "in the late 1970s, the dominant form of dance music at the time, disco, was the target of derision for rock fans."<sup>62</sup> If rock was understood as a struggle against the pop music industry – a struggle defined in the value judgment of authentic vs. vapid – then disco's popularity

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<sup>61</sup> Echols, *Hot Stuff*, 197.

<sup>62</sup> David Hesmondhalgh, "The Cultural Politics of Dance Music," *Soundings* vol. 5 (1997): 167.

was read as a return to pop emptiness. The height of the anti-disco movement arguably took place on July 12, 1979 at Comiskey Park in Chicago, Illinois. Local radio deejay Steve Dahl had been engaging in anti-disco rhetoric over the airwaves of WDAI for some time. The hatred Dahl had for disco was amplified when WDAI fired Dahl after switching from a rock show format to disco. Dahl was a fiery on-air personality who rallied a so-called army of followers to bring back rock to the airwaves and disparage disco wherever and whenever possible. He organized many protests against disco music, outside of Village People concerts or at the locations of various disco radio stations. No protest was more popular and ludicrous than Disco Demolition Night. During the intermission of a doubleheader between the Detroit Tigers and Chicago White Sox, Dahl organized for fans to bring disco records to the park, where they would be put in a crate on field and blown up. Over 70,000 people showed up to Comiskey Park that night – a stadium that only held about 55,000 people. Dressed in army gear, Dahl drove onto the field during the intermission, where a crate with approximately 50,000 disco records was ready to be demolished. Dahl lit the explosive fireworks and shards of disco records flew in all directions. It was not long before fans stormed the field, lighting fires and destroying the batting cages and anything else in sight. The ensuing riot was only tempered once tactical police showed up, arresting 39 people while medical staff treated several injuries.

Despite the ludicrousness of the protest, Disco Demolition Night is often cited as marking the death of disco. Echols notes that “the day after Disco Demolition, Chicago’s dedicated disco station, WLUP, played Donna Summer’s “Last Dance” for twenty-four

hours straight, then pronounced disco dead and started spinning Top 40 rock songs”<sup>63</sup>.

While it is always problematic to confine the life of music genres to specific periods of time, by the time 1979 came to a close, disco was swept up in a cultural shift and began to lose its commercial power. Still, disco paved the way for dance music genres to come, and a variety of mostly underground genres of electronic music sprouted from the ashes of disco’s inferno.

## 2.2 The Genesis of House and Techno, and Leftover Disco

While much of the music scene in the late ‘70s was defined by disco’s rise to the mainstream, a new focus on “machine music” was creeping in to the underground. Specifically, kraut rock, as pioneered by German band Kraftwerk, was being adopted by the black youth of Detroit, Chicago and Philadelphia, where the anti-disco rhetoric was reaching a fever pitch. I would posit that, potentially, some black youth’s fascination with kraut rock was a safe reaction to the anti-disco movement, replacing a love for disco’s indulgence and lavishness with the cold, mechanical, sparse tones of *Autobahn* and *Trans-Europe Express*. But the ‘80s is not so much a story about the popularity of European machine music as it is about the lasting influence of that music; for kids like Derrick May and Carl Craig, the calculated sounds of europop and kraut rock represented a source of inspiration for the variety of electronic music genres that would sprout up in the next decade in the US and the UK. As Simon Reynolds notes in his history of rave music, there would be four new, distinct EDM genres by the end of the decade: “Detroit techno; deep house and garage in Chicago and New York; acid house and minimal jack

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<sup>63</sup> Echols, *Hot Stuff*, 207.

tracks; breakbeat and sample-based hip house”<sup>64</sup>; four genres that would pave the way for the rave boom in the early ‘90s and influence a splintering of electronic music genres going into the early ‘00s.

While disco was no longer a mainstream, dominant genre of music in American consciousness by the mid 1980s, there were certain DJs picking up the pieces of disco in the hopes of forging a new kind of dance music. The genre that would later be referred to as “house” had its roots in eurodisco and particularly in the work of Giorgio Moroder, who had worked with many disco artists, including Donna Summer, throughout the ‘70s. Moroder’s contributions to disco as a producer and as co-creator of Say Yes Productions were a harbinger of things to come with house in the ‘80s. Specifically, Reynolds notes that Moroder had a hand in influencing three distinct characteristics of house music that originated in eurodisco: the extended mix (notably his 17-minute take on “Love To Love You Baby”), the four-to-the-floor rhythm, and lastly, a focus on creating arrangements out of purely electronic elements<sup>65</sup>. Everything from bass lines to melodic whirs and dark undertones were generated from synthesizers, creating the processed, mechanical feel that original house artists would employ.

Therefore, house can be read as a response to a genre’s past - a culture of mixing, cutting and sampling perpetuated by a handful of local DJs. Most famous among them was Frankie Knuckles, who is often credited with ushering in the house movement. It was Knuckles after all who was the musical director of the Warehouse, the predominantly gay, black nightclub from which house music takes its name. It was at the Warehouse that Knuckles spun and mixed disco tracks, cutting and rearranging them into a collage of

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<sup>64</sup> Simon Reynolds, *Energy Flash: A Journey Through Rave Music and Dance Culture* (Berkeley, CA: Soft Skull Press, 2012), 33.

<sup>65</sup> Reynolds, *Energy Flash*, 16.

breakbeats and diva vocals. It is from this DJ culture that house emerges; “stylistically, house assembled itself from disregarded and degraded pop-culture detritus that the mainstream considered passé, disposable, un-American.”<sup>66</sup> In other words, house artists had taken disco and its European offshoot and created a new genre from the pieces the anti-disco movement had left behind.

House was hoping to take lessons from the fallout of anti-disco rhetoric as well; early club owner and DJs sought to keep the music underground, part of a subculture of people who truly appreciated the music. Sarah Thornton notes that “the authentication of discs for dancing was dependent on the development of new kinds of event and environment, which recast recorded entertainment as something uniquely its own.”<sup>67</sup> These underground environments relied on specific sets of language, dress and behaviour that Thornton terms “subcultural capital.” The notion of subcultural capital in relation to the developing house music scene is evident in the scene’s reluctance to be co-opted into the mainstream; once a scene moves into the mainstream, it is perceived that the subculture loses control over the creation of meaning and value.

The pioneers of house, as would be the case with many EDM genres, were eager to keep the scene underground. When in 1983 the Warehouse doubled its entrance fee in an appeal to a higher class of patron, Frankie Knuckles left the club and started his own. This fear of upward and downward mobility had been part of electronic dance music’s narrative since disco and fits in with a larger narrative of fear of the mainstream. House, piecing together its sound and culture from parts of disco, could potentially be seen as

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<sup>66</sup> Reynolds, *Energy Flash*, 15.

<sup>67</sup> Thornton, *Club Cultures*, 51.

fearful of suffering the same fate as disco, choosing to keep itself underground to avoid the corrupting mainstream.

As house grew in popularity in the late '80s thanks to DJs in Chicago, hits from the likes of Farley Jackmaster Funk, Jesse Saunders and D.A.F. took house in varying directions. Along with the growing popularity of house, so too did drugs become a large part of the scene, like so many other dance music cultures. Pot and cocaine were consumed regularly at clubs across Chicago; acid was also cheap and seemingly the drug of choice for those sweating and writhing on the dancefloor. In the late '80s, house, techno and garage moved across the ocean to the UK and achieved a new level of popularity. The fear of drugs, alongside the tensions relating to class, race and sexuality that were at the heart of the rhetoric related to the scene, became amplified. Where Derrick May and Farley Jackmaster Funk were popular DJs within the U.S. house scene, their records did little in the beginning to make waves in the UK. Reynolds posits that much of the initial mainstream antipathy to house music in the UK was loaded with anti-gay sentiments: "straight audiences regarded house suspiciously as 'queers' music."<sup>68</sup> Most of the kids attending clubs in the UK – specifically in London – were enthralled by hip hop and rare groove (essentially early '70s funk) – and were not open to the 'queer' sounds of house. By 1987 and '88 though, DJs were incorporating more house sounds into their hip hop and breakbeat sets. Before long, house was part of some of the biggest UK hits such as M/A/R/R/S's "Pump Up the Volume" and S'Express's "Theme from S'Express." House's popularity in the UK seemed to coincide, perhaps not so coincidentally, with the rising popularity of Ecstasy. Soon, DJs such as Paul Oakenfold

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<sup>68</sup> Reynolds, *Energy Flash*, 35.

and Johnny Walker were transporting the after-hours hedonism of house music from Ibiza and Chicago over to the UK. In Ibiza, DJs like Alfredo Fiorillo were championing house music as after-hours club music; the clubs were often roofless, with dancers and patrons flailed away under the stars as their hit(s) of ecstasy ramped them up and then mellowed them out. The all-night, and often illegal, drug-fuelled parties inspired by the Chicago scene made their way across the ocean. Clubs such as the Santcuary, Shoom, and events like The Future were popping up around London; if police raids shut some down, then more would pop up the following week.

The house music scene paved the way for what would arguably be electronic music's most significant movement: the rave scene in the early 1990s. House, with the aid of ecstasy, was moving towards a bigger, more mainstream audience while attempting to hold on to its queer roots. As Reynolds notes, "gay behavioural codes and modes of expressivity were entering the body-consciousness of straight working-class boys, via ecstasy"<sup>69</sup>. A lack of reservations about dancing, an increasing camaraderie at clubs, all enhanced by the prevalence of ecstasy (the love drug), contributed to the overall acceptance of house music across varied barriers. As Hesmondhalgh notes, the scene, "confirmed the subversive populism of dance" and, in spite of various discourses on the danger of drugs within the scene, helped promote "an especially strong Utopian discourse of collectivism and equality within club culture."<sup>70</sup>

Reynolds notes that ecstasy was widely available in London toward the end of the '80s<sup>71</sup>, which accelerated the explosion of what was being referred to as acid house. Acid

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<sup>69</sup> Reynolds, *Energy Flash*, 39.

<sup>70</sup> Hesmondhalgh, "The Cultural Politics of Dance Music," 169.

<sup>71</sup> Reynolds, *Energy Flash*, 43.

house was constructed around the squelch of the Roland TB-303 synthesizer, with hypnotic hooks on top of trance-like bass lines. The rise of acid house as mainstream UK club music, and predominance of raves and warehouse parties, was quickly situating this period of time and its music as the ‘Second Summer of Love’. While the title invokes ‘60s nostalgia, it hardly portrayed the truth of acid house as it closed out the ‘80s. While the music remained influential and set the stage for rave, drugs were increasingly fueling the scene itself, with parties and raves happening four to five times a week. There was a perpetual cycle of drugging up and coming down that couldn’t be sustained. Despite the apparent progressive effects that Reynolds observed at the time – he claims that ecstasy was melting the barriers of class, race and sexuality<sup>72</sup>, turning brutish, working class footballers into loved-up clubbers - acid house fell prey to media moral panics alongside the increasing attention paid to the scene. Hesmondhalgh suggests a slightly different approach to understanding the role of drugs within the acid house scene: “pharmaceutical determinism ignores the crucial role of subcultural *discourse* in framing such events, but there can be little doubt that ecstasy did help to bring about a strong sense of collective abandon on the burgeoning scene.”<sup>73</sup> The “acid” in acid house was an instant red flag for the media and for parents of the kids who were attending raves and warehouse parties; the media latched on to the notion that the acid house scene was a dangerous drug culture. In a sense, they were right; there were plenty of reports of kids dying from overdosing on ecstasy, but the rhetoric used was steeped in hyperbole and could be perceived as classist and ageist – characteristics consistent with the rhetoric that served to dismiss and undercut most electronic dance music scenes throughout the ‘90s and ‘00s.

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<sup>72</sup> Reynolds, *Energy Flash*, 44.

<sup>73</sup> Hesmondhalgh, “The Cultural Politics of Dance Music,” 169.

The media posited that acid house was music for hopped-up kids who had no sense of direction or responsibility. The media was not the only one lamenting acid house's drugged-up nature, though; in-fighting plagued the scene, as various subcultures and factions attempted to claim and define what acid house *really was* and what it *meant*. The continued reporting on acid house from mainstream and tabloid newspapers didn't deter the youth of Britain. Instead, it gave the scene widespread coverage and lured more followers to the massive parties in fields and warehouses; the influx of fresh, young patrons to the scene caused a rift within the scene, as various groups attempted to control the direction and meaning of the music and culture they engaged in. Jeremy Gilbert and Ewan Pearson note that in the early '90s, "acid house, and the wider rave movement which followed it" saw "rapid expansion beyond the confines of a metropolitan 'underground' club culture into many other locations and spaces formerly occupied by more familiar pop and rock forms."<sup>74</sup>

The class anxiety within the discourse on acid house was the most obvious. As acid house became increasingly popular, the mostly urban, outsider music started to attract kids from the suburbs. The original pioneers of house and acid house "were horrified by the arrival of the great unwashed and unhip"<sup>75</sup>, as Reynolds calls them. Gilbert and Pearson link this dismissive rhetoric to the invasion of physical spaces by newcomers, stating, "the schism between suburban/rural rave and urban clubbing is analogous with the divide between the town and the country, or the capital and the provinces."<sup>76</sup> This was more than class warfare though; it was the fear of upward

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<sup>74</sup> Jeremy Gilbert and Ewan Pearson, *Discographies: Dance Music Culture and the Politics of Sound*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), 30.

<sup>75</sup> Reynolds, *Energy Flash*, 51.

<sup>76</sup> Gilbert and Pearson, *Discographies*, 30.

mobility mixed with fear of the mainstream. Club and dance culture, since the demise of disco, had sought to protect itself against an influx of mass popularity, potentially to shield itself from perceived the vapid and commercialism associated with the mainstream. This fear of the corrupting mainstream is a common theme across the narrative of dance music. While the rhetoric surrounding acid house was one of exclusivity and anti-elitism – “Come one! Come all! Get E’d up and hug one another!” – the reality was that newcomers were met with suspicion. Taste and value judgments were employed in deriding the “johnny-come-latelys”<sup>77</sup>; a whole generation of older acid house pioneers sneered at the influx of youth, viewing them as vapid patrons only looking to get high and claim a façade of subcultural capital with no authentic appreciation for the music<sup>78</sup>. Thus, the enthusiasm for acid house began to peter out in the late ‘80s, as acid house veterans lamented the influx of newcomers. Suddenly, their subcultural capital had gone public, their “ensemble of sounds, gestures, rites and apparel...had become common currency, tarnished and tawdry”<sup>79</sup>.

While the music itself failed to survive in its original form, the scene acid house built had merely changed shape. In the early-to-mid 1990s, raves were getting bigger, becoming big business for promoters, DJs and hosts. Detroit techno, which was seen as a sister genre to Chicago house in the UK, was now finally making waves amongst the youth of Britain and Europe just as house was dying out. But the techno that UK youth craved – faster beats to amplify the high of the ecstasy hit; massive raves at warehouses with specific dance moves, clothes and lingo; a completely different set of subcultural

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<sup>77</sup> Or, as I use throughout this thesis, “newcomers.”

<sup>78</sup> This is the process of using a culture of connoisseurship to retain genre exclusivity and to create an imagined “other.”

<sup>79</sup> Reynolds, *Energy Flash*, 53.

capital – was far removed from the techno that Detroit DJs had pioneered. Just as the house veterans began to distance themselves from the youth co-opting acid house<sup>80</sup> in the late '80s, so too did techno veterans like Derrick May disassociate themselves from the UK and European youth who latched on to techno and created their own subculture from it. Again, the tension between mass, international popularity and the need to hold on to some semblance of underground culture rose to the forefront of understandings of techno's move overseas. It was not just the culture that was changing though; the music was changing as well. "The cultural framework they [the rave newcomers/Johnny-come-latelys] built actually changed the music itself, mutated and mutilated the sacred Detroit blueprint, adding new inputs and intensifying certain elements that enhanced the drug experience."<sup>81</sup> The shifts in sonic texture that signaled the decline of house and techno paved the way for the music and culture that was to come in two distinct forms: 'ardkore in the UK and the new rave scene both in the US and the UK.

### **2.3 Hardcore and the Height of Rave**

The UK rave scene, particularly in London, really started to gain momentum circa 1990.<sup>82</sup> Rave had been an underground phenomenon of sorts for a few years, but the widespread popularity, advanced sound system technology and sheer scale of raves in '89 was something new. While there was certainly a subcultural feel to rave at the time, perpetuated by the convoluted instructions on how to get to the raves and the gear-head lingo that adorned the flyers promoting the raves, the events themselves had become an illicit form of capitalist, commercial enterprise. Massive raves took place in "aircraft

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<sup>80</sup> Just as UK dubstep purists would do later to North American adopters of the genre.

<sup>81</sup> Reynolds, *Energy Flash*, 57.

<sup>82</sup> Gilbert and Pearson, *Discographies*, 28.

hangars, grain silos and open fields...near the M25 orbital motorway that encircled London” and were organized by promoters boasting shady ties with criminal football gangs.<sup>83</sup> Rave was spreading beyond the city centres “between 1989 and 1992” as “hundreds of raves and parties took place well beyond the suburbs, into rural England and Scotland.”<sup>84</sup> The illicit enterprise associated with raves at the time shifted the musical focus away from acid house and into denser music, the bpm<sup>85</sup> rising with every new subgenre of electronic dance music. With each new generation of raver there seemed to be a need for more speed, for more size. Dancing with a couple of hundred people in a club in London no longer appealed to the young ravers in the late ‘80s and early ‘90s – not when compared to the rush of being high on E and dancing with anywhere from 5,000 to 25,000 people in an open field from midnight until noon the next day. The music at these events appealed to a wide swath of youth across varying cultural, racial and class boundaries. Acid house was that music when rave became popular, though it was not the same acid house that had been underground in London, imported from Chicago. Instead, a fresh group of new-age punks were taking the Detroit and Chicago blueprint for techno and acid house and aligning it with more traditional rock sounds. In many ways, the shift in sound from the likes of Derrick May to psych/acid bands such as Happy Mondays and the Stone Roses – the move from purely electronic music to a more traditional blend of electronic and rock elements a la Pink Floyd – accompanied a shift in audience. While rave, techno and acid house were never strictly black or minority musics, the roots of such music had been established in gay clubs and by a lower/working class population.

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<sup>83</sup> Reynolds, *Energy Flash*, 61.

<sup>84</sup> Gilbert and Pearson, *Discographies*, 30.

<sup>85</sup> Beats per minute.

When bands such as the Happy Mondays began to remix their recordings and appeal to the E'd up ravers in and around London, Manchester and Liverpool, the music drew a more predominantly white audience. The labels attached to these bands that practiced a blend of acid house with new wave and punk rock aesthetics potentially served to make the vulnerability and perceived vapidness of dance music more palatable to traditional rock audiences that were starved for punk authenticity to go with their ecstasy and raves. Happy Mondays' *Pills 'N' Thrills and Bellyaches*, released in 1990, was one of the final hits of the acid house era. A glossy, sometimes manic blend of funk and acid, the album was far removed from the origins of house but represented the direction that the genre had moved in.

As of 1990, illegal raves had begun to peter out as police cracked down on licensing laws, while a generation of ravers were suddenly burned out. Though the dust was settling on the illegal rave scene, house music was mutating into something called hardcore (or 'ardkore) and then jungle, the increasing speed, complexity and density of the two genres paving the way for electronica in the late '90s and, significant to this thesis, the rise of dubstep in the UK and US in the late 2000s.

Hardcore, "a frenetic breakbeat-driven product of the suburban rave movement, taken up in combination with reggae-derived dance forms of the Afro-Caribbean"<sup>86</sup> was a "distinctively British rave sound...which decisively broke with the mould of Detroit and Chicago."<sup>87</sup> It was a genre that came on the heels of acid house and the rave scene, perpetuated by increasingly cheap home studio setups and the resurgence of a do-it-yourself aesthetic left over from the traditional punk rockers who had adopted acid house

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<sup>86</sup> Gilbert and Pearson, *Discographies*, 31.

<sup>87</sup> Reynolds, *Energy Flash*, 96.

late in the '80/early '90s. Hardcore was immensely popular in the UK in the early '90s and represented some of the most significant sonic changes in EDM for some time. In hardcore, every DJ was in search of the heaviest bass sound<sup>88</sup>, programming whirring sub-bass frequencies from synthesizer test tones and reveling in the pummeling, gut-punch power of the low frequency oscillation. More so than with acid house and techno, hardcore was about unabashed anthems, about whipping ravers into an E'd up frenzy. Warp, the record label that had close ties with a number of clubs in London and Sheffield, proliferated this sub-bass frequency sound with releases from artists such as LFO (which actually stands for Low Frequency Oscillator).

While this version of hardcore was burning up the UK charts, there were many rave purists who balked at hardcore and the aggressiveness within the scene and the music itself. The vitriol occasionally directed at the ever-increasing bpm within hardcore might have its roots in the bourgeois distaste for excess. The peace, love and unity that supposedly defined acid house was being replaced by an increasing hunger for more *everything*; more speed, more drugs and more bass were the calls from this second wave of youth ravers. Hardcore's focus on increasing speed and bass punishment and the rhetorical reaction to that shift in sound once again revealed how electronic dance music was further splintering into varied subgenres and subcultures. As each new sonic innovation came about and a new group of youths created a culture around that innovation, there were bound to be groups of older ravers who scoffed at how far removed the new music seemed from traditional house, techno and rave. Thornton notes that most clubbers and ravers distinguish themselves against the mainstream, against

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<sup>88</sup> Working within the same "dub" and "bass culture" that originated in Jamaica in the 1970s that would then influence UK dubstep.

populism and commercialism.<sup>89</sup> They are protective of their subcultural capital (ie: their modes of expression, dance, lingo; their cultivated record collections and “in the know” behaviour) and view themselves and the scene as standing outside of the mainstream and removed from capitalist intentions. Thus, with the constant fragmentation of the electronic dance music scene in the UK, the current guard often views a shifting subculture with reservation. After all, a shift in that culture results in a new understanding of what clothes, records, sounds and behaviours confer authentic subcultural capital. Hardcore highlighted the tension between groups struggling to gain control of the narrative and meaning of the music they felt part of. The genre was considered a bastardization of house and techno that had more in common with heavy metal than with the roots of electronic dance music<sup>90</sup> – claims that are remarkably similar to the claims that would be thrown at mainstream US dubstep by the underground creators of the original UK dubstep and by alternative and mainstream media critics in the late ‘00s.

There are many arguments at the heart of the tension between the purists and the newbies in relation to hardcore. Firstly, there was the longstanding tension between the underground and the mainstream that had plagued electronic dance music for years. Hardcore was marked as commercial and mainstream, since it had become a staple of huge commercial raves in the UK circa 1991 and '92; events bearing names like Eclipse, Mayhem, Helter Skelter and Fantazia drew anywhere from 10,000-25,000 people to hangars and fields, promising bone-rattling bass from a state-of-the-art sound system.<sup>91</sup> Clearly, there was a commercial opportunity with hardcore and the seconding coming of

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<sup>89</sup> Thornton, *Club Cultures*, 105.

<sup>90</sup> Reynolds, *Energy Flash*, 97.

<sup>91</sup> Reynolds, *Energy Flash*, 118.

rave, not only for previously underground promoters, but also for record labels, artists and more commercially viable promoters. Fears of commercial ambitions and mainstream co-option fuelled the anti-hardcore rhetoric of the time.

It is possible that all the hostile rhetoric tempered audience's love of rave circa 1993; or, just as any scene that's fuelled substantially by hard drugs, most of the ravers had burnt out, left the field and hangars and gone home. Hardcore had its moment, but the momentum couldn't be sustained in the UK or in the US. The appetite for rave in the US had been nearly as strong as it had in the UK, where it originated. American DJs such as Frankie Bones and Lennie Dee were spinning hardcore for raves in Brooklyn, and, just as in Britain, "the early 'pure' phase of rave was succeeded by a period in which entrepreneurs, legal and illegal, cottoned on to the money-making potential of the scene."<sup>92</sup> San Francisco also had a thriving scene similar to that of the Happy Mondays-driven acid house scene in the UK. Reynolds suggests that much of the reason for the decline of the rave scene in the US was the fact that rave was treated more as a fad than as a culture. Reynolds thus draws upon and perpetuates the inheritor-newcomer dichotomy, a problematic rhetorical strategy central to the narrative of electronic dance music and its increasing fragmentation. Much like the distinctions currently being made between U.S. dubstep and UK dubstep, so to were distinctions being made by critics between U.S. and UK rave. While there was certainly in-fighting within the UK scene which led to hardcore being viewed as a degraded or bastardized form of techno and acid house, there also seemed to be collective disdain for the youth of America who had adopted the European and British rave culture. This was odd, considering most of the

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<sup>92</sup> Reynolds, *Energy Flash*, 283.

rave music in Britain had its roots in the U.S. Again, this rhetoric is evidence of the ongoing struggle over the direction and meaning of electronic dance music at a time when certain genres were attracting mainstream attention. Perhaps it is out of this growing fear of commercialization and the mainstream that the middle of the '90s signaled a shift in how representations of electronic dance music were consumed, moving from the dancefloor to the bedroom.

#### **2.4 Jungle, IDM, Electronica and The Emerging Rhetoric of Progressivism**

Drum and bass (D&B), or “jungle” as it was also called, became the music of choice for the post-rave generation in London when the mega-rave scene had all but dissipated. D&B came on the heels of the rave comedown circa 1992, but didn't really hit the mainstream of London until approximately 1994. Alistair Fraser and Nancy Ettliger note D&B's ties to dub plate culture and reggae music:

D&B developed and especially close association with reggae and ragga. Part of this was about ‘sampling’ reggae records or blending ragga lyrics with D&B beats. But the association with the world of Jamaican music also entailed adapting technological practices to suit the requirements of D&B's fledgling industry. Part of the ‘culture’ in dub plate<sup>93</sup> production is precisely that it has been ‘cool’ for D&B to emphasize its Jamaican ancestry.<sup>94</sup>

While drum and bass' densely layered break patterns didn't share much with the hardcore music it had come out of, it did perpetuate the notion that more speed was the way forward for electronic dance music. The breakbeat, the instrumental portion of a funk or

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<sup>93</sup> An acetate disc often used for test recordings before producing the final version on vinyl.

<sup>94</sup> Alistair Fraser and Nancy Ettliger, “Fragile Empowerment: The Dynamic Cultural Economy of British Drum and Bass Music,” *Geoforum* vol. 39 (2008): 1649.

soul song that was often used as the crux of disco tracks or, later, as the building blocks of rap music, also proved integral to the formation of drum and bass. Drum and bass artists would take multiple breaks, speed them up and loop them, creating a disorienting but often complexly woven syncopation of polyrhythms.

Perhaps, then, drum and bass' focus on intense rhythms and multiple layers helped what was once considered electronic *dance* music to being to be viewed as an experience meant not for the club, but for the home<sup>95</sup>. That's not to say that people were not dancing to jungle; the jungle scene had a thriving 12-inch white label, underground feel to it. Jungle was certainly being played in clubs, but it was hardly the E'd up love fest that the rave scene once was.

Jungle was not the only new electronic music genre to form after the decline of rave. If jungle was the music of England, then Gabba was the post-hardcore equivalent in Scotland and Northern Europe. Gabba is seen as more of a footnote in the narrative of electronic dance music, but it is important to note the rhetoric that surrounded the genre's inception, especially in light of the dialogue and struggle over meaning that's currently taking place with the dubstep genre. Gabba, with its harsh light shows and manic bpm counts – easily upwards of 200 on an average track – was viewed as a militaristic, macho, aggressive form of EDM. Reynolds has some particularly harsh, and potentially ageist, words for Gabba: “Gabba is music for the sensation-junkie, for kids reared on Nintendo, Hellraiser, Manga comics, and Freddie Kreuger”.<sup>96</sup> It is music that employed the heaviest bass it could find, disorienting light shows and boasted track and artist names with militaristic imagery. Reynolds notes that the media's reception – not too mention the

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<sup>95</sup> A clear division between the mind and body - between intellectual and physical pleasure – which would continue to influence the discourse on EDM.

<sup>96</sup> Reynolds, *Energy Flash*, 257.

rhetoric employed by those within the hardcore scene - of Gabba bordered on hysterical and reactionary, referred to as “kill-your-mother music” and “Nazi-techno”.<sup>97</sup> This was an aggressive, mostly white-male scene. Thus, the historical dialogue that Reynolds points to that encapsulates the feelings toward Gabba at the time sets up an argument based on the tension between nuanced dance music and blunt, mindless escapism. This dichotomy was partly fuelled by generational resentment and was perhaps a lament that rave was no longer dominant within EDM. Mostly though, the language of disdain used to deride “aggressive” EDM like Gabba seems to be the product of electronic dance music’s move away from the dancefloor and into the bedroom – away from physical pleasure and towards intellectual pleasure - a move that jungle and the label “intelligent dance music (IDM)” perpetuated.

Reynolds notes, “as the ‘intelligent’ drum and bass style took shape, its purveyors increasingly defined themselves against the populist fare that ruled the dancefloor at big raves and clubs”.<sup>98</sup> This schism within drum and bass artists and the subculture created around the music was representative of the larger tension within electronic dance music at the time. Now that rave had had its moment in the sun, a variety of fragmented subgenres and cultures were left to find their place within the larger narrative of electronic dance music. Progressivist discourse became part of the struggle for control over the direction of EDM, specifically jungle/drum and bass, with many within the UK press heralding drum and bass as “the UK’s first ‘authentic’ urban music culture.”<sup>99</sup> While many artists like Photek and Bukem were working towards a more populist form

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<sup>97</sup> Reynolds, *Energy Flash*, 261.

<sup>98</sup> Reynolds, *Energy Flash*, 337.

<sup>99</sup> Gilbert and Pearson, *Discographies*, 31.

of jungle, there was an entire scene that felt the increasing mass popularity of jungle called for the genre to push even further outside the boundaries it had set up. Reynolds describes this tension as being “caught between intelligent’s serenity and the ruff-stuff’s moody minimalism”.<sup>100</sup> In a broader sense, jungle’s popularity amplified the underground vs. mainstream dichotomy; the idea of the mindless masses consuming a once-underground subculture and co-opting and bastardizing everything it stands for.

The height of mainstream electronic dance music came to a head in the US during the late ‘90s and early ‘00s, when the extended rave scene ended. UK jungle and drum and bass never really crossed the ocean. During this time, dance music was becoming nearly indistinguishable from pop, a lack of distinction that would be amplified even more in the following decade, from 2010 until the time of this writing. Artists such as Moby, Daft Punk, the Prodigy, Fatboy Slim and the Chemical Brothers topped charts in the UK, Europe and the U.S. and Canada. I would suggest that the popularity of electronic dance music within the US mainstream in the late ‘90s helped position EDM as familiar to mainstream audiences, allowing the tropes of EDM to find their way into today’s pop music.

The most notable genre partially inspired by EDM to come to mainstream success in the late ‘90s and early ‘00s was rap. Hip hop culture and rap music had been around since the ‘80s in one form or another, whether it was the jazz-fusion stylings of early rap artists De La Soul and A Tribe Called Quest or the move into gangsta rap pioneered by N.W.A. and Public Enemy. In the late ‘90s though, there seemed to be a fusion of rap music and EDM. Producers such as the Neptunes and Timbaland were making natural

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<sup>100</sup> Reynolds, *Energy Flash*, 352.

partners out of EDM and rap, which both employed heavy cutting and sampling aesthetics. Reynolds notes in his *Energy Flash* update that by the early '00s hip hop was eclipsing electronica as the go-to club music; it also had the added bonus of being a chart-topping genre.<sup>101</sup>

## 2.5 UK Dubstep and Its US Mutation

Amidst EDM's rise to popularity, there was a reaction going on in the UK against the pop-mainstream side of electronic music. Descended from jungle/drum and bass and UK garage, the newest EDM genre was labeled dubstep. It was a minimalist music that exchanged the bombast of hardcore for a more nuanced approach to sonic texture. As Reynolds states, "the dubstep style in its early days was a moody and minimal garage mutation that dropped the songs and the pop-fizzy euphoria in favour of...empty space."<sup>102</sup> As early as 2003 dubstep was taking shape in the UK, defined by the digital dubs of Kode 9, Plasticman and Skream - the latter's 2006 album *Skream!* proving to be a significant step toward popularizing the genre on a wider basis. In *Energy Flash*, Reynolds views this period of electronic music as a stagnant phase, with genres splintering and fragmenting and turning in on themselves. He sees very little progress with dubstep in the UK, suggesting that the genre draws on significant electronic music of the past (hardcore, garage, house) rather than innovating. This problematic progressivist discourse employed by Reynolds is part of a larger struggle within the electronic dance music scene throughout the '00s and into the '10s. Electronic dance music was well past the days of rave (going on 15 years by the time dubstep becomes popular in the UK) and there was an increasing fragmentation of subgenres and culture.

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<sup>101</sup> Reynolds, *Energy Flash*, 496.

<sup>102</sup> Reynolds, *Energy Flash*, 511-512.

Though EDM culture was changing (or stagnating, in Reynolds' words), some of the same battles over meaning and direction of electronic dance music were being fought. When dubstep became a phenomenon in the US and Canada circa 2011 with the likes of Skrillex and Deadmau5 selling out massive arenas and participating in festivals normally reserved for traditional rock acts, the same culture-war rhetoric popped up again. An intriguing chain of value judgments was created: Hardcore/rave purists viewed UK dubstep as a regression, and in turn, UK dubstep pioneers often viewed US dubstep, which is drastically different, sonically speaking, with similar disdain. Articles in the popular music press such as *Rolling Stone* and *Spin* covered US dubstep with hesitation and sometime straightforward resentment. Skrillex, undoubtedly US dubstep's biggest name, was making dance music with heavy, oscillating bass and whirring synths, creating strange melodies from chopped samples and distorted mid-frequencies.

If UK dubstep is a minimalist form, as Reynolds has noted, then US dubstep is surely maximalist. It shares some of the aggression of Gabba, though instead of simply ramping up the bpm it builds tension around its main sonic signifier, the "drop." The drop comes after a melodic build up of, generally speaking, layered, simplistic breaks and piano chords and a pounding 4/4 kick. Once a tension has been established by increasing the bpm within the song, building to a crescendo, the DJ "drops" out the bass before bringing it back, emptying out the mids and using a low-frequency oscillator to create a "wobbly" feel. Most US dubstep tracks are constructed around that moment, creating a tension between build up and catharsis that whips audiences into a frenzy of fist-pumping and moshing. Though dubstep shares some stylistic or sonic equivalents with other electronic dance music genres (mainly drum and bass, Gabba and electronica), its

popularity amongst North American youth is unprecedented. Dubstep has kicked off a renewed interest in EDM as of this writing. EDM is bigger than its ever been, ubiquitous on the festival circuit, Top 40 radio, in mainstream and alternative press and within many local club scenes. Unlike the unidentifiable threads of subgenres during the late '90s electronica boom, US dubstep has an identifiable sound. While there's a dialogue going on within dubstep and the electronic dance music scenes about the genre's meaning, value and direction, there's no denying that dubstep is a massively popular form of EDM and youth music with significant commercial potential. An August 2012 article in *Forbes* magazine notes that over the past 12 months, the world's 10 highest paid DJs, half of which could be classified as dubstep DJs, earned approximately \$125 million.<sup>103</sup> DJ culture is alive and well in North America and Europe, and dubstep is the main music of choice.

The widespread popularity of dubstep has reinvigorated some of the complex, problematic discourses that have presented themselves across the history of electronic dance music since the days of disco. There's the dismissive discourse employed by the pioneers of UK dubstep towards US dubstep, who view the latter as an aggressive, mindless frat-boy bastardization of their sound. Then there's the coverage of dubstep within the mainstream and alternative music press, as represented by *Rolling Stone*, *Spin* and *Pitchfork*, among others. As has been the case with other rising electronic dance music genres (notably, disco, house, techno, hardcore and jungle), these outlets have struggled to define the music and culture, only covering the music once it was clearly part of the cultural zeitgeist in some fashion. Found within these discourses are a tangle of

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<sup>103</sup> Zack O'Malley Greenburg, "The World's Highest Paid DJs 2012," *Forbes*, August 2012, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/zackomalleygreenburg/2012/08/02/the-worlds-highest-paid-djs/>.

problematic arguments that present fears of the mainstream, rock frameworks for assessing authenticity and value, and suggestions about divisions based on gender. The current discourses on dubstep adopt and adapt arguments and tensions present throughout the history of electronic dance music since disco. Thus, if there's a common thread to identify in the narrative of electronic dance music since disco presented in this chapter, it is the ongoing tension between wanting the music to reach a larger audience in a culture dominated by rock-derived notions of authenticity and value, and the will to keep it an exclusive underground culture where the music's direction and meaning can be controlled and monitored.

The second half of this thesis incorporates an analysis of the various discourses on dubstep. Chapter three is an exploration of how genre construction influences the current discourse on dubstep. Chapter four examines issues of mainstreaming and gendered language within the discourse. Finally, chapter five explores patterns of authentication, including an examination of anxieties related to performance in EDM.

### **Chapter 3: Genre Arguments in Current Dubstep Discourses**

As noted in the literature review, genre is a complex set of meanings and values that serve not only to simplify, classify and organize the sales process, but also has the potential to create and represent unique divides between audiences. In that chapter, I noted how genre could be viewed as an organizing principle within and without music scenes. Genre not only attempts to define what certain music sounds like but, perhaps more importantly, aims to interpret certain meanings and values for a potential audience. In the world of EDM, where genres and subgenres sprout up seemingly every few months, the struggle over the meaning associated with genre labels is ever-present.

Within the current discourse on dubstep, there are many examples of this struggle. At the very base of these struggles over meaning and value is the use of the word “dubstep” itself, a popular topic of discussion in the discourses on the genre.

As outlined above, dubstep is a genre of electronic dance music that began in the UK, its origins most often linked to the underground scene in London, growing out of the EDM genres of garage and drum and bass. Early uses of term “dubstep” connoted the UK sound (sparse, atmospheric, drum and bass-influenced) to many people. Arguably, the majority of North Americans, especially those who consume more mainstream music, as opposed to underground music, today associate the genre term “dubstep” more with current US star Skrillex rather than UK dubstep pioneer Skream or any other early practitioner<sup>104</sup>. This is likely due in large part to the media, which consistently uses “dubstep” to describe the hard-hitting music of Skrillex and his like-minded peers. While Skrillex’s music may not be the sonic equivalent of what “dubstep” originally described, it is arguably now the most ubiquitous sonic referent of “dubstep.” Thus, this chapter is not interested in whether or not the music of Skrillex, sonically speaking, can be musicologically analyzed as “actual” dubstep based on bpm and other factors. Instead, I will examine how arguments about genre are presented in discourse on EDM and dubstep, and what such arguments mean to critics. But first, in order to understand how classification works within the discourses of dubstep, we must look at the etymology of the word “dubstep” itself.

“Dub” music was a genre from Jamaica that went on to influence, along with post-punk, the EDM genres of ragga and drum and bass in the UK. In the early 1970s,

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<sup>104</sup> An electronic music producer from the UK, his debut album *Skream!*, released in 2006, is often cited as one of the original dubstep records.

many reggae singles included a B-side known as the “dub” version of the A-side. The “dub” version often removed the vocals and melody, creating an instrumental track. Then, the producer of the track added a variety of special effects, from reverb to echo and more, to that instrumental track. Therefore, the creative control over “dub” music did not come from the band, but rather from the producer. Furthermore, “dub” has its roots in the Jamaican word “dubplate,” which is an “acetate or test pressing of a vinyl record.”<sup>105</sup> More importantly, the OED states that “dubplate,” in the late ‘70s and throughout the ‘80s, often referred to “an advance copy of a record” especially “in a genre of dance music influenced by dub.” Thus, dub’s connection with modern DJ and remix culture and dubstep is clear, as the dub artists coming out of Jamaica<sup>106</sup> significantly influenced electronic music by engaging in sometimes extreme manipulation and remixes of recorded tracks. Also, the understanding of “dubplate” as an advanced or rare copy of the music is linked to notions of subcultural capital, which would later become an integral part of the EDM scene in the form of exclusive white-label vinyl. Dub itself morphed into various forms in Jamaica, influencing ragga<sup>107</sup> in the 1980s. The Oxford English Dictionary also traces “dub” back to the 16<sup>th</sup> century, where it has onomatopoeic roots. In the mid-late 16<sup>th</sup> century, “dub” was used to describe the beat of a drum, or a “blunt dull-sounding thrust or blow.”<sup>108</sup> Thus, the musicological implications of the word dub seem to be long established, even as the word is reinterpreted across centuries.

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<sup>105</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*. 2nd ed. 20 vols. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989, [www.oed.com](http://www.oed.com).

<sup>106</sup> Eg. King Tubby and Lee “Scratch” Perry are considered canonical dub artists.

<sup>107</sup> A subgenre of reggae, where the music is mainly consists of electronic elements.

<sup>108</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*. 2nd ed. 20 vols. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989, [www.oed.com](http://www.oed.com).

The “step” in “dubstep” has its roots in the UK electronic dance music genre of 2-step (also written as “two-step”), which itself comes out of the rise of ragga in the UK. The encyclopedic music website *AllMusic* states that 2-step took the sounds of UK garage and added “ragga and diva vocals, constant rewinds, and DJ scratching along with spastic drum’n’bass rhythms.”<sup>109</sup> In contrast to the “tuneless dead end” of drum and bass, 2-step was presented as “soulful, sensual and more manageably groovy.”<sup>110</sup> It was not long before US producer Timbaland adopted this style of EDM in the late 1990s. Timbaland incorporated 2-step influences into his production style, making it part of mainstream hits “from Missy Elliot, Aaliyah, Jay-Z and many more.”<sup>111</sup> The “step” is meant to refer to the “breakbeat aesthetic” of the genre, where artists “break up the even flow of four-to-the-floor rhythm (as in pumping house and traditional garage, including speed garage), riddling the groove with hesitations, erotically teasing and tantalizing gaps.”<sup>112</sup> UK dubstep then draws on both garage and 2-step to create a “tense, almost oppressively dark sound” defined by “tightly-coiled productions with overwhelming bass lines and reverberant drum patterns, clipped sample and occasional vocals.”<sup>113</sup> This dark sound is the traditional definition of the word “dubstep” before it crossed over to the United States and into the mainstream.

Andrew Gaerig, in his “Dubstep Primer” for a North American audience who may just now be hearing about the term, explores the tension that came with the use of the word “dubstep” to describe the music of US producers and DJs like Skrillex. Early on in

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<sup>109</sup> “2-Step/British Garage,” *AllMusic*, <http://www.allmusic.com/style/2-step-british-garage-ma0000004479>.

<sup>110</sup> Reynolds, *Energy Flash*, 448.

<sup>111</sup> Reynolds, *Energy Flash*, 449.

<sup>112</sup> Reynolds, *Energy Flash*, 449.

<sup>113</sup> “Dubstep,” *AllMusic*, <http://www.allmusic.com/style/dubstep-ma0000004465>.

the article, he notes that even though many people may not be aware of the term “dubstep” and how it is being used in popular media and on the radio, dubstep, “depending on your perspective...has arrived broken, dead or unrecognizable.”<sup>114</sup> Gaerig does not mean that the music or the popularity is broken and dwindling, but rather that, to many, dubstep has been transformed beyond recognition as it moved across the Atlantic. This struggle over the “true” definition of dubstep is, in one sense, a geographical struggle, an instance of division between the UK and the U.S.: “‘The stuff that’s popular in America is different than the London dubstep sound,’ explains Drew Best, cofounder of Los Angeles-based Smog, one of America’s first dubstep parties.”<sup>115</sup> Generally speaking, the music hits harder than the softer atmospherics of drum and bass, a key influence on dubstep, while also containing more bass frequency oscillation, which creates melody and the “wobble” frequently associated with North American dubstep. This difference in sound – the contrast between slower, more atmospheric UK dubstep derived from drum and bass and Jamaican dub, and the harder-hitting North American version - has resulted in a splintering of genre labels, creating some very complex subgenres. The fight over dubstep’s “true” or authentic meaning has spawned a convoluted set of terms that attempt to differentiate North American dubstep from its UK predecessor.

What is at stake in this struggle is not just the description of sound, but, perhaps more importantly, the description of an imagined audience. Just like the creation of a genre, the creation of a imagined audience is a mix of commercial and cultural forces. In relation to this chapter, the image of an imagined audience is disseminated by critics and

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<sup>114</sup> Andrew Gaerig, “Dubstep 101: A U.S. Primer,” *Spin Magazine*, September 2011.

<sup>115</sup> Gaerig, “Dubstep 101,” *Spin*, Sept. 2011.

perpetuated by the DJs they quote. The various imagined audiences associated with dubstep are examined below alongside the issues related to genre creation in EDM. The creation of new genre terms, meant to classify North American dubstep in contrast to UK dubstep, has significant implications on the discourse engaged in by the cultural critics explored in this chapter.

Dubstep had already begun to undergo a sonic transformation in 2006, with UK artists such as Rusko and Benga creating dubstep songs that included what would later be termed “the drop,” a key characteristic of North American dubstep. When this sound crossed over to North America, there emerged a need to create new genre labels for this seemingly harsher form of dubstep, which differed sonically from the UK genre with which it shares a name. A term often used by critics at the time of this writing to describe this North American form of dubstep is “brostep.” As with any genre label, “brostep” is a complicated term, suggesting many complex meanings and values that also contribute to the creation of a perceived audience. Sonically “brostep” describes the heavier-hitting form of dubstep popular in North America, but its invocation of an imagined audience is much more complex.

Deconstructing the connotations of the term “brostep” will serve to better understand how the current discourse on dubstep is influenced and shaped by arguments related to problematic genre discourses. Generally speaking, a “bro,” as used and understood by the critics and consumers in this paper, is a typical frat-boy type; likely Caucasian, possibly a jock, perceived as mindless and as someone who finds catharsis in the aggression of North American dubstep, or “brostep.” When the term “brostep” is invoked then, it is used not only to describe the music, but also to classify the consuming

audience. “Brostep” suggests mindless music, pointlessly aggressive and lacking the nuance, subtlety or the dynamics of UK dubstep. Much as the term Intelligent Dance Music could be used to distinguish itself from more pop-friendly EDM by distinguishing itself from a presumably unintelligent audience of consumers, “brostep” connotes an imagined mindless and male audience. Thus, genre can often be understood as a link between sound, audience and meaning, involving a variety of complex and problematic labels and divisions.

This dismissive use of the term “brostep” by critics, however, neglects to recognize the significant role of women within the North American dubstep scene. By creating an imagined audience of macho “bros,” it ignores the fact that many clubbers and consumers – not too mention creators - of dubstep are women. While the makeup of EDM DJs still skews towards men – there are no women on either *Forbes’* list of Top 10 Earning DJs of 2012<sup>116</sup> or a list that notes the total net worth of the Top 30 DJs in the world<sup>117</sup> - women are certainly part of the larger EDM scene, and play roles within dubstep. Also, propagating the term “brostep” could have the effect of dissuading female newcomers from checking out dubstep for the first time. Using “brostep” to describe the genre suggests an unsafe, woman-unfriendly space.

The “brostep” genre label can thus be viewed as a way to create an imagined audience and label it as “other.” It is clear that the “other” in the discourse on dubstep, engaged in by the critics and DJs quoted, is perceived as mindless. Martin Clark suggests that producers like James Blake and Mount Kimbie are creating a new down-tempo genre

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<sup>116</sup> Zack O’Malley Greenburg, “The World’s Highest Paid DJs 2012,” *Forbes*, August 2012, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/zackomalleygreenburg/2012/08/02/the-worlds-highest-paid-djs/>.

<sup>117</sup> Brian Warner, “The 30 Richest DJs in the World,” *Celebrity Net Worth*, January 2013, <http://www.celebritynetworth.com/articles/entertainment-articles/30-richest-djs-world/#!/>.

of EDM called “post-dubstep” out of “a need to make something less moronic”<sup>118</sup> than brostep. In an article analyzing the current state of dubstep, Camille Dodero dismisses a set from dubstep DJ Bogore as a “shout-a-long bro-down.”<sup>119</sup> Furthermore, Dodero, quite vulgarly, states that “brostep” is a “term that has broadened into a sneering electronic-dance-music catchall for robot-butt-sex basslines, unnecessary shirtlessness, and general dancefloor boorishness.”<sup>120</sup> These derogatory evocations of an imagined audience bear a striking resemblance to the anti-disco sentiments explored in the previous chapters. Just as the earliest disco clubbers were thought to be a “pretty disreputable lot – alcoholics, drug users, hustlers”<sup>121</sup> and the music viewed as “mindless, repetitive, formulaic and banal”<sup>122</sup>, so does the term brostep classify an imagined audience with similar features. The creation and dissemination of an imagined audience has several purposes, including the perpetuation of taste distinctions, the structuring of genre, the upholding of certain meanings and values, while also serving to devalue the imagined group. It is a distancing and othering effect that creates a hierarchy of taste and value, and is intertwined with the discourses of authenticity already explored. The use of the term “brostep” by critics and DJs deploys symbolic violence, clearly imagining a mindless, lowbrow male audience.

There is thus an intriguing and problematic contradiction within the genre arguments being made in the current dubstep discourse – contradictions that I suggest have significant implications in terms of homophobia and the reinforcement of gendered discourse. Historically speaking, within the realm of pop music the mindless “other” has

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<sup>118</sup> Martin Clark, “Grime/Dubstep,” *Pitchfork*, May 2011.

<sup>119</sup> Camille Dodero, “Summer of Wub: Inside the Dubstep Boom,” *Spin Magazine*, August 2012.

<sup>120</sup> Dodero, “Summer of Wub,” *Spin*, Aug. 2012.

<sup>121</sup> Echols, *Hot Stuff*, 47.

<sup>122</sup> Echols, *Hot Stuff*, 10.

often been coded as feminine, the ultimate mindless consumer represented by the “teenyboppers” explored by Norma Coates.<sup>123</sup> The notion of mass culture as feminine in regards to popular music, which has its roots in folk and jazz traditions, draws upon the notion of mind-body dualism, where the mind is privileged as a masculine attribute and the body is perceived to be feminine<sup>124</sup>. The privileging of mind over body, of intellectual pleasure over bodily pleasure, is a longstanding trend in the consumption of popular art and music. Linda Williams, in her study of pornography, horror and melodrama, notes the derision often aimed at genres that display “the spectacle of the body caught in the grip of intense sensation or emotion.”<sup>125</sup> Williams notes that this display of the body, of excess emotion, is often labeled as low art, possibly because “the body displayed is female.”<sup>126</sup> Thus, body genres, or works of art that trigger emotional instead of intellectual responses, are often feminized. In the case of discourses on “brostep,” it is the often-shirtless male body that is now connoted as low. While this shift in the perception of low art from feminine to masculine, where masculine qualities such as toughness, moshing and heavy music are derided by critics, could be perceived as progressive, it instead engages in discourses that are reactionary and potentially homophobic. As noted above, Doderro associates the sonic qualities of “brostep” with “butt-sex basslines” and “shirtlessness,” two very problematic terms that may invoke homophobia. Doderro uses “butt-sex,” a word that is not inherently homophobic but is often tied to homosexual intercourse, as a derogatory term, as a way of undermining the value of “brostep.” It is

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<sup>123</sup> Coates, “Teenyboppers, Groupies and Other Grotesques,” 2003.

<sup>124</sup> Thornton, *Club Cultures*, 104.

<sup>125</sup> Linda Williams, “Film Bodies: Gender, Genre and Excess,” *Film Quarterly* vol. 44.4 (1991): 4.

<sup>126</sup> Williams, “Film Bodies,” 5.

possible that Dodero is attempting to point out the homosocial<sup>127</sup> tendencies of “brostep” and suggest that the scene has a clear disdain for women. However, by invoking a term associated with homosexual intercourse in a negative fashion with the purpose of labeling “brostep” as low art, she engages in homophobic discourse.

An even larger issue related to the term “brostep” and the association of low art with abject masculinity is that such an association fails to meaningfully combat the notion that art must be gendered. Discussing the negative qualities of “brostep” in terms of gender – indeed, to derisively label a genre with a gendered term – only perpetuates the problematic discourse historically associated with popular music that suggests either the masculine or feminine must be associated with low art. If we can accept that associating low art with the feminine is a problematic, sexist construction that symbolically perpetuates real social divisions, as explored in chapter one, then merely shifting low art to the opposite end of the spectrum, associating it with masculinity, is also troublesome. This is problematic because despite the flip in the gendered connotation of low art within dubstep discourse, the derision of body genres, the dismissal of deriving physical and not intellectual pleasure from music, still remains.

In his defense of disco, Richard Dyer posits that part of why disco is discussed in such vitriolic terms is the fact that it is openly erotic. He notes that the success of many non-disco pop songs is due to their ability to avoid open eroticism, or as Dyer puts it, to be “disembodied.”<sup>128</sup> It is no coincidence that such a word would be used to describe the lack of eroticism in pop songs, which invokes the idea of the body as part of low art. For

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<sup>127</sup> The social relationship between members of the same sex, usually in regards to men.

<sup>128</sup> Dyer, “In Defense of Disco,” 413.

Dyer, disco is clearly a body genre, a physical, raunchy and insistently rhythmic music.<sup>129</sup> He goes on to note that rock is certainly a physical music as well, but that it typically confines its bodily eroticism “to the cock.”<sup>130</sup> In contrast to rock, he views disco and its variety of percussive elements, its rhythmic playfulness, as being able to restore “eroticism to the whole of the body and for both sexes, not just confining it to the penis.”<sup>131</sup> Thus, for Dyer at least, the body genre has the potential to be androgynous, to exist outside or beside gendered language as it restores pleasure to the entire body. Thus, the invocation of the word “brostep” by the current critics strips a body genre of this potential, and instead reinforces the real social divisions perpetuated by ascribing value to genres in gendered terms. I will address the racial connotations of “bro” below.

What is also intriguing about how dubstep has shifted and the ensuing fight over genre labels is the way in which *other* genres of music, and therefore other imagined audiences, are implicated in these discourses. Particularly, I’d like to turn the focus of this chapter’s interest in genre towards the invocation of rock-derived values in dubstep discourse. A genre that is often linked to the North American form of dubstep within the discourse of the critics is heavy metal – as I have suggested previously in this thesis, many of the issues explored seem to circle back to rock and rockist ideology. Gaerig notes that the intense dubstep of Rusko and Benga “was still slow, but also intense and active, and more appealing to *American teenagers raised on rock radio*. It is a sound that Caspa calls ‘noisy, mid-range-tearing-through-the-system dubstep. Americans like it

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<sup>129</sup> Dyer, “In Defense of Disco,” 414.

<sup>130</sup> Dyer, “In Defense of Disco,” 415.

<sup>131</sup> Dyer, “In Defense of Disco,” 415.

pretty hard”<sup>132</sup> [my emphasis]. I emphasize the quote above because it links North American dubstep with rock music. The evocation of rock’s masculinism, whether its musical properties or its notions of authenticity, seems to be a common theme of the discourses engaged in by the critics and few DJs quoted. It would seem that, as I have argued throughout this chapter, rock notions of authenticity and value are being used to describe and assign value to North American dubstep. Many of the discourses on dubstep engaged in by the critics are rooted in comparisons to rock. As Keightley states, “Rock offers an elaborate worldview in which musical practices (styles and sounds, images and industrial process) and musical preferences (tastes, pleasures) become intertwined, in which aesthetic and ethical judgments inform each other.”<sup>133</sup> Dubstep and EDM discourse, engaged in by the critics, adopt and adapt rock’s mix of aesthetic and ethical judgments, resulting in the creation of imagined audiences and anxieties about notions of “authentic” performance. This is not just problematic because critics use a rock framework to evaluate non-rock music. It is also problematic because the constant use of rockist language perpetuates and upholds the hegemony of rock, even in the face of the widespread popularity of EDM. By using rock frameworks of authenticity and value to discuss and evaluate dubstep music, creators and consumers, critics are upholding the problematic values of rock ideology – ie. traditional notions of authentic performance and connoisseurship tied in with complex gender politics.

Rock is consistently part of the discourses on dubstep. In 2011, Korn<sup>134</sup> collaborated on a record with Skrillex, stating that their brand of metal was “dubstep

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<sup>132</sup> Gaerig, “Dubstep 101,” *Spin*, Sept. 2011.

<sup>133</sup> Keir Keightley, “Reconsidering Rock,” *The Cambridge Companion to Pop and Rock*, 2001: 111.

<sup>134</sup> A popular American “nu metal” – a typically masculine style of music – band formed in 1993, who had significant mainstream success in the late 1990s.

before there was dubstep.”<sup>135</sup> Critics often describe the music of Skrillex and others like him (eg: Araab Muzik and Bassnectar) as an EDM version of metal or rock, with the indulgent rock guitar solo replaced by “the drop” of dubstep. In fact, Scott Plagenhoef states that, “Skrillex makes dance tracks the way a rock artist might.”<sup>136</sup> As noted earlier, Sonny Moore (aka. Skrillex) fronted a screamo band called From First to Last before adopting<sup>137</sup> his DJ moniker in 2007. The participants at many dubstep/EDM festivals, as depicted by critics, often display the behaviour normally associated with punk rock or metal, with moshing and fist-pumping all part of the ritual – Matos notes the audience “whipping into a froth”<sup>138</sup> at the IDentity Festival while Dodero suggests that dubstep fans “dance like rolling gorillas.”<sup>139</sup> Again, the critics seem to be lamenting the homosociality of North American dubstep. Bob Hammond, while covering the third birthday of Dub War, known as the “first dubstep club night to emerge in North America,” notes that the dubstep club “environment [is] becoming too ‘aggro’...where young men come to dubstep nights to thrash around.”<sup>140</sup> Not only does Hammond invoke a connection between the aggressive behaviour of “young men” and low art, but he also engages in reinforcing the division between newcomers and inheritors, clearly suggesting that a crowd of newcomers have arrived on the dubstep scene and are changing the meaning of the scene for the worse. Here, I am drawing on the Bourdieuan notion of “inheritors” and “newcomers” where the inheritors’ participation in a scene and their

<sup>135</sup> Sean Griffiths, “Korn: We Were Dubstep Before There Was Dubstep,” *Mixmag*, November 2011.

<sup>136</sup> Scott Plagenhoef, “Drop The Bass: How the ‘90s Won Again,” *GQ*, March 2012.

<sup>137</sup> Therefore establishing his reputation among some cultural critics as a newcomer.

<sup>138</sup> Michaelangelo Matos, “Live: IDentity Festival Walks the Line Between Raving and Raging at Jones Beach,” *The Village Voice*, July 2012.

<sup>139</sup> Dodero, “Summer of Wub,” *Spin*, Aug. 2012.

<sup>140</sup> Bob Hammond, “How Low Can It Go? The Evolution of Dubstep,” *New York Magazine*, July 2008.

cultural capital is perceived as organic and earned, whereas the newcomer is conceived of as ignorant of the history of the scene and is perceived as attempting to co-opt the signifiers of the scene in order to appear part of that group. Tied up in the inheritor-newcomer dichotomy is the notion of symbolic violence and cultural capital, where the inheritors have access to and privilege certain knowledge that the newcomers do not have access to. Therefore, boundaries are drawn between insiders and outsiders using symbolic violence.

What is once again intriguing, as with my analysis of gendered language above, is that the newcomer being derided here is male. Markedly, it is masculine characteristics—aggressive behaviour, moshing – which are typically heralded in rock-oriented popular music discourses that are being undercut. Once again, a value judgment is being made, where the newcomers, who display masculinist behaviour, are equated with low art, with being an “other.” Thus, there’s an evident contradiction, as the discourse of electronic dance music simultaneously ridicules the masculine behaviours typically associated with rock while also engaging in rock-derived notions of value and authenticity.

As outlined in previous chapters, electronic dance music has long had a tense relationship with rock music; yet the legitimacy of EDM, as I have explored here, is often evaluated in terms of rock notions of authenticity. Rock, despite its discourses of underground authenticity, has long been the dominant form of music in the mainstream. Therefore, because of the tense relationship between rock and EDM, and thus between EDM and the mainstream, any time a genre of electronic dance music gets close to rock, or adopts the signifiers of rock, the scene undertakes a distancing strategy. Just as rave had to distance itself from the alleged perversions of disco, the current dubstep/EDM

critical community feels the need to protect its genre(s) from the values of rock and the mainstream. As I have explored throughout, while cultural critics seek to protect dubstep and EDM from corrupting mainstream and rock ideologies, they also adopt and adapt rock notions of authenticity and value in order to undercut and devalue the new, North American form of dubstep.

What is at stake here is control over dubstep's historical narrative. The cultural critics seem to be of two opinions: there are those that seek to hold on to the perceived authenticity of UK dubstep, and those that view the popularity of EDM, no matter the terms being used, as a step forward for EDM in general. Or, as stated in *Mixmag* in January 2013:

It's clear that a bitter rift is slicing the dance music community in two.

On the one side are those who think that EDM is diluting dance music<sup>141</sup> and failing to introduce ingenious sounds to a mainstream audience, on the other are those who believe that EDM is truly revolutionary and buzzing with creative energy.<sup>142</sup>

Thus, these arguments over genre meaning and control over labeling are intertwined with tensions between the mainstream and the underground. Furthermore, the discourse that perpetuates the underground-mainstream dichotomy reproduces social divisions based on gender. In the subsequent chapter, I will examine how notions of the mainstream as corrupting, mixed with negative views of branding and commercialism, are shaping the current discourse on dubstep, and what is at stake.

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<sup>141</sup> For many critics, the use of the term "EDM" in itself contributes to the devaluing of electronic dance music. Many critics see "EDM" as a simplistic catch-all term, which reduces the complex interplay and nuances of the numerous genres that make up electronic dance music to merely an acronym.

<sup>142</sup> "The Great EDM Debate", *Mixmag*, January 2013.

#### Chapter 4: Branding, Commercialism and the Corruptive Mainstream

Electronic dance music has a fraught historical relationship with the mainstream. Disco dominated commercially in the mid-‘70s, yet was derided by rock purists before finally collapsing. In the late ‘90s, electronica, spearheaded by the likes of the Chemical Brothers and Fatboy Slim, made a push into the mainstream. In 1997, the Prodigy’s *Fat of the Land* debuted at Number 1 on the *Billboard* 200, and yet, electronica faded back into the underground and left a splintered set of dance subgenres in its wake. This seems to be the cycle of EDM as much as a cohesive cycle can be discerned: it approaches mainstream consciousness before moving back into the underground with a new set of subgenres, as pop, rock and certainly hip hop remain firmly established as the mainstays of mainstream radio and media.

As of the late 2000s, North American dubstep, and EDM more generally, has seeped into the mainstream and begun to dominate the charts. Back in 2006, EDM-only publication *Resident Advisor* wrote that “electronic dance music is increasingly pervading the mainstream, and moving beyond the realm of simply dance music.”<sup>143</sup> Jack O’Shaughnessy, writing for *Resident Advisor* in 2011, noted that the profile of dubstep and EDM “music and artists in the mainstream media...is perhaps the highest it’s ever been. Diplo is appearing in commercials for Blackberry; Deadmau5 was the DJ at the MTV Video Music Awards; David Guetta is slowly becoming a household name.”<sup>144</sup> In 2012, massive pop stars like Ke\$ha<sup>145</sup>, Taylor Swift<sup>146</sup>, Nicki Minaj<sup>147</sup> and Justin

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<sup>143</sup> “Pump Audio: Helping Electronic Music Reach the Mainstream”, *Resident Advisor*, March 2006.

<sup>144</sup> Jack O’Shaughnessy, “Growing Pains: US Dance Festivals Meet the Mainstream,” *Resident Advisor*, January 2011.

<sup>145</sup> Note songs such as “Warrior” and “Die Young” from her 2012 album *Warrior*.

Bieber<sup>148</sup> have all incorporated dubstep into their pop formula. On alternative rock radio, such as Toronto's 102.1 The Edge, dubstep-indebted songs by Muse and Imagine Dragons get steady airplay. Dubstep, as a genre and as a sound, is fairly ubiquitous within the mainstream. With the genre's move into the mainstream, a place where past EDM genres have withered when confronted with rock notions of authenticity and value, the discourses on dubstep have expanded to touch on the many issues associated with "going mainstream." Perhaps rock's hegemony has withered, at least within the mainstream, and created a more EDM-friendly space, especially considering that the pop stars listed above, among others, are consistently incorporating elements of EDM into their music.

One of the fears some critics associate with dubstep going mainstream is the sense that the genre is being stripped of its meaning; that dubstep is now an empty signifier, and already obsolete despite having only come to fruition in the mid-to-late 2000s. Philip Sherburne states that "it looks like we may have reached the peak of dubstep,"<sup>149</sup> a peak that seems associated with a view of current, North American dubstep as a form of crass commercialism. The February 2013 issue of *DJ Mag*, as part of a prelude to an interview with UK dubstep pioneer Skream, refers to dubstep as "dead in the water. Cursed with a lethal mix of commercial success, mass popularity, a huge internet presence, countless sold out raves, the scene is, any fool can tell, totally knackered."<sup>150</sup> Considering that the above quote claims dubstep is "dead in the water" due to its "mass" appeal and "huge

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<sup>146</sup> Producer Max Martin provided the dubstep wobble for her 2012 single "I Knew You Were Trouble."

<sup>147</sup> Among others, her massive hit "Starships" (2012) includes a wobbly dubstep break.

<sup>148</sup> His 2012 hit "As Long As You Love Me" uses bass-frequency oscillation to create melody and tension, and includes the "drop" before the chorus, all characteristics of North American dubstep.

<sup>149</sup> Philip Sherburne, "State of Dance Music 2012: Have We Already Peaked?," *Spin Magazine*, December 2012.

<sup>150</sup> "Q&A: Skream", *DJ Mag*, February 2013.

internet presence,” the issue at hand seems to be that dubstep has moved from an exclusive subculture to a more inclusive form of mass culture. The fear is rooted in the notion of incorporation, where the dominant culture adopts, adapts and reduces the signifiers of certain subcultures and then repurposes them for mass consumption. Within this process, the subculture loses control over the meaning and narrative of their art. Thus, the current discourse on dubstep, which includes anxiety about dubstep’s current widespread popularity, draws upon and perpetuates the fear of incorporation and the shift from exclusivity to inclusivity.

As EDM continues to become part of the pop universe, many within dubstep circles maintain a resistance to mainstream success. DJ/producer Porter Robinson, when speaking with Sean Griffiths of EDM publication *Mixmag*, noted that he turned down doing a remix for Katy Perry because “those kind of functional, club-focused EDM tracks that are created to make people jump in stadiums are as uninspiring to me as bad pop music,”<sup>151</sup> evoking the association of bad pop music with the mainstream – and perhaps not coincidentally, with a female pop star. Furthermore, Robinson uses the word “functional,” suggesting that mainstream music lacks autonomy. This divide between autonomous and functional music is integral to the discussion of the mainstream-underground divide. As Howard Becker notes in his study of jazz musicians, “the most distressing problem in the career of the average musician is the necessity of choosing between conventional success and his ‘artistic standards’.”<sup>152</sup> Becker, through the musicians he studied, represents conventional success as a lack of autonomy, where creativity and improvisation are suppressed in order to achieve commercial success.

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<sup>151</sup> Sean Griffiths, “Q&A: Porter Robinson,” *Mixmag*, March 2013.

<sup>152</sup> Howard Becker, “The Professional Dance Musician and His Audience,” *The American Journal of Sociology* 57.2 (1951): 136.

Thus, commercial music is functional music. Robinson, as quoted above, seems to share similar feelings about the mainstream, as suggested by his invocation of Katy Perry and pop music as functional.

The negative association of the mainstream with the commercial and capitalist is an ancient one<sup>153</sup>, and the critics examined here, whether in *Mixmag* and other EDM-only outlets, or the general interest or mass-circulation publications, continue to perpetuate such associations. For an underground culture, like EDM once was, consumerism appears as the enemy. Consumerism is seen to rob DIY artists of their agency, strips meaning from subcultures and uses the most obvious signifiers to generate profit on a mass scale. This view of the mainstream dominates the current discourse on dubstep.

It is also a view consistent with characterizations of the history of popular music and mass culture, where low, mainstream art is seen as the territory of women, and high art is believed to be the territory of men. Andreas Huyssen notes that this notion, “that mass culture is somehow associated with women while real, authentic culture remains the prerogative of men”<sup>154</sup> gained ground during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. He goes on to note that while the exclusion of women from high art by no means originates in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the gendered connotations take on new meaning in “the age of industrial revolution and cultural modernization.”<sup>155</sup> Huyssen suggests that the rise of major women’s movements in Europe largely influenced the anxiety towards the female “masses”; that a fear of mass culture corresponded with an anxiety about women “knocking at the gate of a male-

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<sup>153</sup> A significant portion of the anti-disco rhetoric in the ‘70s equated mainstream popularity with the soulless machinations of capitalist enterprise.

<sup>154</sup> Huyssen, “Mass Culture as Woman,” 47.

<sup>155</sup> Huyssen, “Mass Culture as Woman,” 47.

dominated culture.”<sup>156</sup> Thus, the masses pose a threat to the established, dominant social order, and one of the ways to fortify this order is to establish a hierarchy of art, where women are excluded from high art and relegated to the space of low art. Thus, when Porter Robinson suggests that a Katy Perry remix is beneath him, the equivalent of bad pop music, he is not merely engaging in the privileging of certain genres, but also reinforcing a social hierarchy of taste that, as Bourdieu would argue, perpetuates social divisions. Here, the social division perpetuated is between male and female, and notions of masculine and feminine art, as connoted in the language of the divide between high and low art and inheritors and newcomers.

This set of divisions seems to also engage with David Riesman’s notion of majority and minority listeners. Riesman suggests that popular music has the ability to create, “in combination with other mass media, a picture of childhood and adolescence in America as a happy-go-lucky time of haphazard clothes and haphazard behaviour” and thus, “the very problems of being young are evaded.”<sup>157</sup> Riesman is suggesting a certain intellectual passivity when it comes to the consumer of popular music. He goes on to suggest that, “we may distinguish between two polar attitudes toward popular music, a *majority* one, which accepts the adult picture of youth somewhat uncritically, and a *minority* one, in which certain socially rebellious themes are encapsulated”<sup>158</sup> [Riesman’s emphasis]. The belief that the majority audience views popular music uncritically, or passively, clearly engages in the discourse of distinction that this thesis has explored. Riesman goes further, vilifying young people in language that, while not explicitly

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<sup>156</sup> Huyssen, “Mass Culture as Woman,” 47.

<sup>157</sup> David Riesman, “Listening to Popular Music,” in *On Record: Rock, Pop and the Written Word*, ed. Simon Frith and Andrew Goodwin (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), 7.

<sup>158</sup> Riesman, “Listening to Popular Music,” 8.

gendered, certainly has gendered connotations: “Most of the teenagers in the majority category have an indiscriminating taste in popular music; they seldom express articulate preferences. They form the audience for the larger radio stations, the “name” bands, the star singers, the hit parade, and so forth.” Within this quote, Riesman clearly links the majority audience with what we could identify as the mainstream audience, where teenagers (largely understood as young women) consume music as an excuse for socializing, enraptured by the mindless physical pleasure and the most commercial, popular singers. For Riesman, the majority audience seems to choose functional music for the purpose of acceptance or conformity within a group. Thus, the majority audience’s listening preferences are predicated on two notions of “popularity”: the popularity of the “star” singer, and thus their own popularity, which can be increased within a specific group based on choosing to listen to a popular singer. Thus, for Riesman, the majority audience is interested in social activity and popularity first and foremost, and therefore chooses the “lower,” functional music. However, Riesman’s critique of listening to functional music overlooks the fact that all art serves a social function, including the “high” art that Riesman would associate with the distinguished minority audience. Thus, Riesman is engaging in arguments about taste, arguments that the current discourse on dubstep replicates, where the mainstream dubstep audience is conceived as the passive consumer (majority listener) and the underground audience is the privileged, discerning listener, enraptured by intellectual responses to the music (minority listener).

Anxieties about advertising inform the critique of consumerism evident in current dubstep discourse. Dubstep’s cultural ubiquity has led to an increasing amount of the

genre's music being used in advertisements, and the discourse on this use of dubstep has been largely vitriolic. In her August 2012 article, Camille Dodero notes how advertising has latched on to the mass popularity of dubstep:

In the past year, dubstep has been an unavoidable advertising presence, soundtracking clips for Weetabix cereal (Mord Fustang's "A New World"); GoPro cameras (Skrillex's "Scary Monsters and Nice Sprites"); Coca-Cola (Skrillex's "Le7els" remix); Microsoft's Internet Explorer 9 (Alex Clare's "Too Close," coproduced by Major Lazer); Southern Comfort's Fiery Pepper line (Crush Effect's "Burn It Down," featuring Vokab Company). Nestlé's Willy Wonka brand even commissioned an "original" dubstep track for a Nerds commercial. Films from *Red Tails* to *Battleship* have exploited dubstep as a dramatic element, and after serving as the foundation for a Kanye West and Jay-Z *Watch the Throne* track, Flux Pavilion's "I Can't Stop" showed up in the KONY 2012 viral campaign.<sup>159</sup>

The flow of economic capital, and even the *perceived* flow of capital, cannot be ignored when discussing how discourse on dubstep engages with the tension between the mainstream and the underground. EDM, by way of dubstep, seems to finally have the attention that many DJs, artists and fans have long sought; yet they're hesitant to accept everything that comes with mainstream attention. This struggle over how dubstep is used and perceived in the mainstream also serves to reinforce the divide between functional and absolute music. Many critics, like Dodero above, suggest that dubstep is functional music by linking it to advertising, to selling products seemingly unrelated to the music. It is part of a long history of this tension within electronic dance music, but also popular music more generally.

At the time of this writing, there's an undeniably large amount of investment in EDM as a commercial product. Not only have a variety of brands used dubstep to shill their products on television and radio, but EDM festivals are also massive cash cows for

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<sup>159</sup> Dodero, "Summer of Wub," *Spin*, Aug. 2012.

promoters, artists and vendors. As reported in the *New York Times*, in 2012, 60,000 tickets to the Electric Daisy Carnival, which, at minimum, sell for \$100 each (\$275 for a three-day pass), sold out in three hours – and that was before any headliners had even been announced.<sup>160</sup> In the same article, Sisario reports that artist fees within EDM have skyrocketed as “DJs like Deadmau5, Tiesto, and Afrojack can earn well over \$1 million for a festival appearance and \$10 million for a Las Vegas nightclub residency.”<sup>161</sup> These are massive numbers for a scene once relegated to warehouses and basement clubs. Currently, independent promoters fuel the live electronic music scene; yet the *New York Times* reports that this is potentially changing, that inside and outside investors are scrambling for potential capital investments. A.E.G. Live is one of the biggest potential investors currently, along with Ron Burkle, who bid on Warner Music Group in 2011, and Robert F.X. Sillerman, who was the mogul behind the conglomeration now known as Live Nation.<sup>162</sup> There’s no doubt then that dubstep and EDM are now big business, and if there is anything that the underground ideology opposes, it is big business.

It is clear that the dubstep scene has its misogynistic leanings. Dodero notes that one of Borgore’s tracks invokes a sing-along containing the lyrics “act like a ho/but first do the dishes.”<sup>163</sup> Matos notes that while attending the IDentity Festival, girls between the ages of 14 and 18 can be seen wearing t-shirts and pants with the words “SLUT, BITCH, and WHORE” written on them.<sup>164</sup> From an analysis of many different publications, women within the discourses on dubstep are represented as having little

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<sup>160</sup> Ben Sisario, “Electronic Dance Concerts Turn Up Volume, Tempting Investors,” *The New York Times*, April 2012.

<sup>161</sup> Sisario, “Electronic Dance Concerts,” *New York Times*, April 2012.

<sup>162</sup> Sisario, “Electronic Dance Concerts,” *New York Times*, April 2012.

<sup>163</sup> “Dodero, “Summer of Wub,” *Spin*, August 2012.

<sup>164</sup> Matos, “Live: IDentity Festival,” *The Village Voice*, July 2012.

agency. Matos' article on the IDentity Festival bears a tone that's hostile towards the female participants. In fact, he explicitly says so. In regards to all the women wearing the neon shirts with derogatory words printed on them: "I feel sorry for all of them."<sup>165</sup> The cultural critics at work here seem to treat women and "bros" as the same thing: mindless mainstream consumers. This should come as no surprise, as the mainstream has long been associated with the feminine, a stand-in for the supposedly mindless consumer activity of young girls. As I have already discussed, though, this association is clearly paradoxical as articulated within the current discourse on dubstep, as it is often the masculine that is especially associated with low art within the discourse.

In terms of the historical narrative of popular music, the notion of low, mainstream art being classified as feminine, and high, serious art as masculine is most obviously evident in the divide between pop and rock. The divide between pop and rock ideals is, according to many critics, part of a larger framework that uses taste to perpetuate social divisions – in particular, the pop-rock divide reinforces structures that oppress and vilify women. Diane Railton links the gendered divide between high and low art to Jurgen Habermas' notion of the public sphere. For Railton, the public sphere, "describes a particular site of social intercourse that developed in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries and facilitated bourgeois hegemony in both politics and the arts." Thus, "through the institutions of the public sphere, informed public discussion, rather than royal decree or courtly practice, became the basis on which matters of taste and of politics could be decided."<sup>166</sup> The bourgeois public sphere was the territory of men though, largely white, land-owning males. As Railton states, the bourgeois public sphere

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<sup>165</sup> Matos, "Live: IDentity Festival," *The Village Voice*, July 2012.

<sup>166</sup> Railton, "The Gendered Carnival of Pop," 321-322.

“was based on what are traditionally considered masculine values (reason, objectivity, the mind) and eschewed the traditionally feminine (emotion, the home, the body).”<sup>167</sup> Thus, the public sphere, which involved public discussion meant to mediate between the bourgeoisie and the aristocracy, continually excluded women. This pattern of exclusion, which serves to privilege traditionally masculine values, is integral to the pop-rock divide, as evident in rock’s rise to prominence in the ‘60s and ‘70s. As Railton argues:

Parallels can be drawn in a number of ways between rock music culture as it developed in the late 1960s and early 1970s, and the bourgeois public sphere. Just as the bourgeois public sphere was a starting point that facilitated the hegemony of bourgeois ideals and political power, rock culture served as the starting point for the hegemony within popular music discourse of particular ways of understanding and appreciating music.<sup>168</sup>

In order for rock to establish its hegemony within popular music discourse, it had to claim high art, contrasting its “authentic” values against the values and alleged perversions of low art – in this case, “the mass-produced, commercial popular music that was the youth music of the early 1960s.”<sup>169</sup> What is clear to Railton in this establishing of rock hegemony within popular music is that the low art rock defined itself against was often perceived as feminized, whereas rock’s “authentic” values were aligned with high art. Thus, rock discourses, and popular music discourses more generally, as rooted in the formation of the bourgeois public sphere, privileged values traditionally understood as

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<sup>167</sup> Railton, “The Gendered Carnival of Pop,” 322.

<sup>168</sup> Railton, “The Gendered Carnival of Pop,” 322.

<sup>169</sup> Railton, “The Gendered Carnival of Pop,” 324.

masculine, and therefore marginalized women within those discourses. As Norma Coates argues, “masculinity became naturalized in rock in the 1960s and, as a result, women became marginal and/or subservient to men in rock culture and its discursive formations.”<sup>170</sup> For Coates, one way in which rock maligns femininity is evidenced in the deployment of the term “teenybopper,” a word she suggests “originally bandied about in entertainment industry trade magazines as shorthand for the pre- and mid-teen adolescent cohort and their music.”<sup>171</sup> Coates analyses how the term “teenybopper” was often used in 2003:

Today, the term is used much more promiscuously, applied indiscriminately to fans or performers like the sexually charged (at least in the minds of their critics) Spice Girls and Britney Spears to the oh-so-cute-and-dreamy boy bands. It doesn’t matter whether the teenyboppers in question are 9 or 17. What unites them is their bad taste, as perceived by critics and scholars who “know better.”<sup>172</sup>

The consequence, then, is the unchallenged “power of discourses that feminize mass culture in general and valorize the “authentic masculine” in rock.”<sup>173</sup> Thus, when rock music went through a process of legitimization during the late 1960s and early 1970s, it contrasted masculine authenticity against feminized mass culture. More specifically, rock contrasted “authentic” values against pop music, which was viewed as “mindless music appealing to the bodies of those who enjoyed it, not to their minds”<sup>174</sup> – a similar

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<sup>170</sup> Coates, “Teenyboppers,” 67.

<sup>171</sup> Coates, “Teenyboppers,” 68.

<sup>172</sup> Coates, “Teenyboppers,” 68.

<sup>173</sup> Coates, “Teenyboppers,” 68.

<sup>174</sup> Railton, “The Gendered Carnival of Pop,” 324.

discursive pattern evident in the current dubstep discourse, as explored in the previous chapter on genre construction.

This critique of the mindless consumer is pervasive in current dubstep discourse. In many ways, the term “bro” is used in 2012 and 2013 much the same way “teenybopper” was used in the late ‘60s and early ‘70s; it is meant to deride an imagined audience of mindless consumers who derive bodily pleasure, not intellectual stimulation, from music. The most common use of the word “bro” takes place within African American culture, where it is used as a colloquial shortening of “brother.” It is often employed as a term of endearment. Its use in current dubstep is thus problematic for two reasons: Firstly, the “bro” often identified within dubstep discourse is Caucasian, which therefore strips the word of its established cultural roots. Secondly, the term is used in a derogatory fashion, which presents problems in regards to racist language. Just as Camille Doderó’s use of the term “butt-sex basslines” to dismiss dubstep may invoke homophobic language, so does using “bro,” a word that is largely accepted as part of African American culture, as a derogatory term within dubstep discourse engage in potentially racist discourse.

This line of thinking is not just problematic in terms of the gendered divisions explored above. In fact, there is a significant tension at the core of the dubstep discourses I have examined, in that dubstep discourses have adopted and adapted rock notions of authenticity and value – values historically used to oppress and degrade electronic dance music – in an attempt to legitimize EDM. Thus, the North American form of dubstep, which has moved into the mainstream and is perceived to be the choice music of “mindless” consumers, serves as a contrast to more intellectual, underground forms of

EDM, much the same way pop music served as a contrast highlighting the “authentic” values of rock. Railton states that rock music distances itself from the low by “masculinising itself, and by introducing a particular way of enjoying music that eschewed the feminine, emotional and physical response of 1960s pop fans in favour of cool, laid-back and thoughtful appreciation of the music.”<sup>175</sup> The same deriding of “emotional” and “physical” responses to music perpetuated by rock discourses is part of current dubstep discourses. Consider how Dodero, writing for *Spin*, laments the ignorance of festivalgoers at Nocturnal Wonderland Texas, stating, “they really don’t know much at all except that they like to bang their heads deliriously when the monumental bass drops, or punch the air along to rapper Waka Flocka Flame.”<sup>176</sup> Or, how *Mixmag* knowingly parodies the mindless audience by labeling them “Bass-Face Newbies”<sup>177</sup>, once again enforcing the inheritor-newcomer dichotomy, who have “fully embraced the potential for moshing bare-chested.”<sup>178</sup> This construction of an imagined audience of newcomers that privileges bodily response over intellectual stimulation is a consistent discursive patten within the current discourse on dubstep. Where the bare-chested moshers are derided for having a physical response to dubstep, their “head-banging” is an improper use of the head, which is meant to receive intellectual stimulation, not be a component of the physical response. In reaction to the mainstreaming of dubstep, the discourses of EDM seem to have adopted and adapted

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<sup>175</sup> Railton, “The Gendered Carnival of Pop,” 324.

<sup>176</sup> Dodero, “Summer of Wub.” August 2012.

<sup>177</sup> Public Enemy used a sample of Chuck D shouting “Bass” in “Night of the Living Baseheads” as slang for the zombie-like effects of crack cocaine, similar to the way “bass” is used here, suggesting a mindless, ignorant audience – an audience of newcomers who only find pleasure in the heavy bass frequency oscillations of North American dubstep, not in the atmospheric subtlety of UK dubstep.

<sup>178</sup> Seb Wheeler, “The New Tribes of Dance Music,” *Mixmag*, March 14, 2013.

rock notions of authenticity – the privileging of “real” performance, as we will see in the following chapter, and connoisseurship; the upholding of the underground-mainstream dichotomy and gendered discourse – in order to construct the value of various genres of electronic dance music, specifically dubstep. EDM’s adoption and adaption of rock frameworks of authenticity in order to determine value are thus problematic for two reasons explored above: 1) Historically speaking, electronic dance music since disco has been judged and derided using the rock framework of authenticity and value, and 2) such a framework has historically drawn upon problematic evaluations of gender difference. While women are certainly part of the dubstep scene in various capacities – Dodero is a woman reporting on dubstep for *Spin*; Matos notes the prevalence of female festivalgoers at the IDentity Festival; Kate Hutchinson suggests that in the UK, “women do play instrumental roles in dubstep, but mostly it’s behind the scenes”<sup>179</sup> – their participation, whether as clubber, promoter, DJ or producer, is either minimized or hardly acknowledged in the current discourse.

What I am suggesting, then, is that the current discourse on dubstep reinforces and upholds rock notions of authenticity and value, which, as Coates, Railton and others note, draws upon and perpetuates gender divisions. Even though the targets of James Blake’s criticism of the North American dubstep scene are men, the framework that he uses to critique the scene and audience is one typically used to perpetuate notions of authenticity and value that have traditionally been associated with dominant forms of masculinity. In many ways, then, the discourse on dubstep is reactionary. While the discourse subverts Huyssen’s notion of mass culture as woman by vilifying the mindlessness of the “bro,”

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<sup>179</sup> Kate Hutchinson, “Women in Dubstep,” *Time Out London*, June 10, 2008.

the outcome is still a discourse that upholds distinctions based on gender, where binary oppositions are used to create a hierarchy of taste and thus, social division. Farrugia, in line with Railton and Coates, notes that “girls’ involvement in music has long been associated with consumerism and viewed as complicit with dominant cultural values.”<sup>180</sup> Current dubstep discourse replaces the girls’ involvement with that of the “bro,” similarly vilifying the male listener as mindless consumer. Labeling mass culture as masculine only perpetuates the problematic use of gendered language to demarcate the divide between high and low art, between the mainstream and underground, between self and other. Thus, the lowbrow becomes the low “bro,” upholding a hierarchy of gender, class, race and art. Furthermore, traditional rock-derived frameworks of assessing value in popular music, which privilege perceived masculine characteristics such as authenticity and anti-commercialism, are upheld in the discourse on dubstep. This creates a problematic relationship, where not only is the value of EDM determined using a rock framework, but it also perpetuates the use of gendered and elitist language in assigning that value. While the construction of gendered oppositions is integral to the analysis of the use of the term “bro,” there are also significant racial implications, as outlined above. Thus, the term “bro” can be used to construct divisions on multiple fronts, used to oppress and ridicule an imagined “other.” Specifically, its use potentially engages in homophobic and racist discourse.

The ongoing association of the mainstream with mindlessness is not the only aspect of the tension between the underground and mainstream in dubstep discourse. Another aspect of mainstream ideology that EDM has adopted in its shift out of the

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<sup>180</sup> Farrugia, *Beyond the Dance Floor*, 24.

underground is the “star system.” Typically associated with rock and pop, and certainly existing in historical tensions with the supposed and valorized “anonymity” of the underground electronic music scene, the star system involves the marketing and promotion of an individual artist’s persona. This involves branding and massive media exposure. North American dubstep is clearly working with the star system – which also intertwines with the critical notion of “button pushing” explored below, as the star system is often criticized for valuing style over substance. The name ‘Skrillex’ is practically a brand in and of itself; and no artist is more brand-able than Canadian DJ Deadmau5, whose giant LED mouse head is tailor-made for t-shirts, stickers and websites. While many publications and DJs weave cautionary tales about the mass commoditization of EDM, there are some critics and DJs who embrace the broader shift in EDM’s popularity. Deadmau5 in particular acknowledges the commodified nature of EDM. In an interview with CBC, he notes that his LED mouse head, which doubles as a logo he designed, is a brand, “something you can identify a whole bunch of stuff with without having to write it all out.”<sup>181</sup> Deadmau5 seems to come back to the recurring idea that of simplistic knowledge, of an imagined audience that is more physical than intellectual. Within the context of the interview, I do not believe Deadmau5 is insulting his audience, but the idea that his music and brand needs an easily identifiable marker, one that takes all the complex information of EDM and boils it down to something flashy and marketable, is clearly engaging in the discourse that presumes an imagined, mindless mainstream audience.

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<sup>181</sup> Janet Thomson, “At Home With Deadmau5,” *CBC News*, March 2011.

EDM discourse about the mainstream shares many of the same insecurities and hesitations outlined in the earlier chapters of this thesis. Discursive patterns of critics, particularly DJs and producers who felt reservations about the rise of house, techno and electronica and the potential for co-option by the mainstream for the sake of profit, are evident in current dubstep discourse. Whether it is being discussed in the *New York Times*, *Spin*, *Resident Advisor* or *Mixmag* it is clear that the tension between the underground and the mainstream is still relevant.

What is interesting to note here, considering this thesis largely focuses on how EDM discourse involves a fraught relationship with rock ideals, is the fact that rock notions of “selling out” – also linked to jazz and folk, as stated earlier - also abound in the discourses on dubstep. Many of the critics engaging with dubstep, as well as the DJs and producers quoted in this chapter, share rock ideology’s fear of the mainstream and its corruptive potential. It is unclear whether or not the sudden influx of capital and popular emotional investment in dubstep will result in the genre’s demise – some would certainly argue it has already been stripped of “authentic” meaning – but what is clear is that dubstep discourse certainly upholds and perpetuates the mainstream-underground dichotomy.

### **Chapter Five: Patterns of Authentication**

Authenticity has played a curious and complex role in the narrative of electronic dance music since the days of disco. Disco was often vilified by comparing it to the supposedly superior “realness” of rock music. Techno and House were genres sometimes associated with mindlessness, and were once again contrasted with the apparently more intellectual nature of rock music. Thus, as suggested in chapter two, rock discourse has

often played an integral role in the larger narrative of electronic dance music. Much of the discourse outlined in the previous chapters has perpetuated traditionally rock-derived notions of authenticity, performance and songwriting, all culminating in an ideology of what “real” music is. It is intriguing, then, that some of the pillars of mainstream music criticism, such as *Spin* and *Rolling Stone*, where rock music was often the dominant topic of conversation and praise, are now home to many articles on EDM. *Spin*, for instance, has long been associated with the promotion of “alternative rock music,” covering the likes of Sonic Youth and Nirvana in the ‘90s. *Rolling Stone* is often seen as the old guard of “traditional” rock and roll, an aging baby-boomer with a dusty record collection giving five-stars to each new Bob Dylan record – and yet, now they have Deadmau5 gracing their covers. *Pitchfork*, being considerably younger than *Spin* and *Rolling Stone*, is often associated with the more tenuous label of “indie” and is therefore perceived as outside mainstream criticism. Each publication certainly ventures outside of rock to cover rap, country, and a variety of other genres, but this generally amounts to a small portion of their coverage. While no publication can nor should be reduced to such labels, recognizing that these publications have largely and historically focused on some form of rock music is relevant to the discussion of understanding their constructions of authenticity in this chapter.

One of the prevailing questions about the authenticity of EDM involves the role of the DJ and his/her performance. There’s a clear trend in a variety of publications, suggesting that critics and audiences, as well as DJs and producers themselves, are grappling with new articulations of authenticity as related specifically to EDM – a clear byproduct of the rise and relative cultural ubiquity of EDM in North America today.

More than a few articles in the various publications I examined ran articles specifically dissecting current notions of whether or not a DJ performance, whether in a club or at a major festival, involved some sort of deception. Thus, inauthenticity is a key focus of the current discourse on dubstep.

For example, in the July 2012 issue of *Rolling Stone*, a special ‘Dance Madness’ summertime issue, Steve Knopper writes a short piece wherein he contemplates the role of the current DJ performance and whether audiences deserve (or even care) to see mixing done live, or whether pre-recorded sets are now accepted as common practice within EDM. Knopper notes that when Steve Angello, part of Swedish House Mafia<sup>182</sup>, released a YouTube video showing him behind his decks<sup>183</sup> at a massive festival, smoking cigarettes and having a few drinks, responses from the DJ community were swift and vitriolic. Particularly, he draws attention to a response from DJ Sneak<sup>184</sup>: “Via Twitter, Sneak assailed Angelo as a Milli Vanilli<sup>185</sup> of contemporary dance music. ‘There’s a lot of fake DJs out there,’ Sneak tells *Rolling Stone*. ‘You don’t want some clown up there smoking cigarettes, taking pictures, not wearing headphones, not working equipment – sometimes it’s not even plugged in. It’s Spinal Tap<sup>186</sup>.’”<sup>187</sup> Sneak’s comment, as relayed by Knopper, evokes multiple issues related to EDM discourse, and is key to discourses about popular music in general. Notions of good and bad

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<sup>182</sup> A Swedish electronic dance music trio made of up three DJs/producers.

<sup>183</sup> Whereas two turntables are traditionally used by DJs, the term “decks” usually signifies a digital audio interface from which a DJ inputs his mixes.

<sup>184</sup> A Puerto Rican-born house music DJ popular in Chicago in the early 1990s.

<sup>185</sup> A black dance and pop duo, created by Frank Farian in 1988, whose members were Fab Morvan and Rob Pilatus. The duo enjoyed significant success with their album *Girl You Know It’s True*. Their Grammy for Best New Artist, won in 1990, was revoked after Farian admitted that neither Morvan nor Pilatus sang on their record.

<sup>186</sup> The fictional-and-later-real heavy metal band at the centre of Rob Reiner’s 1984 mockumentary *This Is Spinal Tap*.

<sup>187</sup> Steve Knopper, “What Are DJs Doing Up There?,” *Rolling Stone*, July 2012, 54.

performance, of “liveness” and presence, are often at issue in rock culture and popular music discourse. Sneak’s comment thus evokes a series of questions: What constitutes a DJ performance? After that is defined, how is a good or bad performance then defined? These are complex questions that cannot be definitively answered, though they can be examined as raising key issues within the current discourse on dubstep and the various discourses throughout the history of popular music. In fact questions about the status of live performance and technology are central to current EDM discourse.

Simon Frith notes that, in relation to crooners and their reliance on microphones for amplification in the 1940s, “technical dishonesty means emotional dishonesty.”<sup>188</sup> If a singer didn’t have to emote to be heard, then they were not believed to be conveying true emotion to his or her audience. While the microphone brought the voice closer to the audience, it was thought to also emotionally distance the audience from the performer. This fear of technology as alienating performers from their audiences is present in many discourses on popular music. The use of technology, in particular when it is used on stage during a performance, has a history of being considered cheating or being disingenuous, as noted by Frith’s statement above. Part of the fear of technology as related to performance has to do with the physicality of playing an instrument. Just as the visible exertion of a singer performing without a microphone was contrasted against the effortless singing of a crooner relying on a microphone, rock and EDM contain related standards of performance linked to technology and perceived honesty. As Frith notes: “one important strand of rock common sense is that playing an instrument is a physical

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<sup>188</sup> Simon Frith, “Art vs. Technology: The Strange Case of Popular Music,” *Media, Culture and Society* 8, no.3 (1986): 264.

exercise, visibly involves the body, and is, above all, a matter of effort.”<sup>189</sup> That kind of effort is easily visible during a rock concert, but can the same be said for an EDM show? Even if a DJ is mixing live, whether with vinyl or through a digital interface such as Ableton Live or Logic, his or her visible effort doesn’t coincide with traditional notions of performance as bodily movement. Thus, notions of performance within EDM are unique, leading to subtle distinctions between a good and bad DJ performance. Just as radio “programme controllers” had to “define crooning in the first place and then...distinguish between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ crooning”<sup>190</sup> so too do the DJs and critics engage in discussions of what constitutes ‘good’ DJing or ‘authentic’ performance.

DJ Sneak’s critical comment about Swedish House Mafia, then, shares in Allan Moore’s notion of authentic performance, where authenticity is rooted in visible effort and improvisation. Moore traces this notion of authenticity to “the 1940s Dixieland jazz revival where it had a role within the bourgeois romantic critique of industrial society.”<sup>191</sup> Thus, the notion of an honest, visible, physical performance as authentic is rooted not only in the discourse on EDM, but also in the discourses on popular music in general.

DJ Sneak’s disdain for the lack of performance evidenced by the member of the DJ trio is in line with a longstanding notion of authenticity as related to performance and technology. Sneak is hardly an outlier though, as many DJs and critics seem to share his opinion. As Knopper states, “as live dance music has grown into a billion-dollar business, some are concerned about the growing perception that not all artists are creating a

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<sup>189</sup> Frith, “Art vs. Technology,” 268.

<sup>190</sup> Frith, “Art vs. Technology,” 263.

<sup>191</sup> Frith, “Art vs. Technology,” 210.

spontaneous mix,”<sup>192</sup> his evocation of spontaneity invokes the jazz authenticity Moore describes. Despite Knopper’s suggestion that much of the *audience* is worried about the “perception” of DJs not mixing live, much of the anxious rhetoric surrounding this notion of performance authenticity seems to come from *fellow DJs and producers*. In the same issue of *Rolling Stone*, Josh Eells spends time with Deadmau5 during the European leg of his tour. Known for his foulmouthed tirades, Deadmau5 (real name Joel Zimmerman) spares no time lashing out at the notion of the authentic DJ performance as engaged in by critics. Eells notes that it is difficult for the audience at a festival to see what a DJ is doing on stage, and Zimmerman agrees, stating that, “if I wanted, I could play<sup>193</sup> a fucking .wav<sup>194</sup> file and just stand there and fist-pump all night.” He argues that a lot of DJs do it: “David Guetta has two iPods and a mixer and he just plays<sup>195</sup> tracks...even Skrillex isn’t doing anything too technical. He has a laptop and a MIDI recorder, and he’s just playing his shit. People are, thank God, smartening up about who does what – but there’s still button-pushers getting paid half a million. And not to say I’m not a button-pusher. I’m just pushing a lot more buttons.”<sup>196</sup> The critical notion of “button pushing,” a term commonly used by critics to deride or undercut the DJ performance, has historical ties to established notions of authenticity explored thus far. Button pushing is once again contrasted with the historical privileging of exertion and the visibility of performance, a discourse problematized in an age of digital production and DJing.

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<sup>192</sup> Knopper, “What Are DJs,” *Rolling Stone*, July 2012.

<sup>193</sup> Deadmau5’s invocation of the word “play” as a lack of performance seems to engage in the same notions of authentic, visible performance explored in this chapter. Here, “play” is not a physical, visible effort put forth by an instrumentalist or DJ – it’s similar to DJ Sneak’s dismissive invocation of Spinal Tap and Milli Vanilli.

<sup>194</sup> Shorthand for Waveform Audio File Format.

<sup>195</sup> Again, “play” as inauthentic, as lacking effort and visibility.

<sup>196</sup> Josh Eells, “The Rise of the Mau5,” *Rolling Stone*, July 2012.

Whether Deadmau5's comments are based in actual distinctions between performance practice or just part of his boastful persona is beside the point. What is important is that there's an anxiety about the performance of authenticity present within the dubstep and EDM scene. It is an anxiety not solely fuelled by the media but also part of a significant trend of in-fighting.

Philip Sherburne, a writer and music critic who mainly covers EDM, delved into this subject of performance authenticity for *Spin* after witnessing a collaborative performance from David Guetta<sup>197</sup>, Deadmau5 and the Foo Fighters<sup>198</sup> at the 2012 Grammys. Writing about the performance, Sherburne states that Guetta was merely “jabbing away at the controls in a pantomime of performance. What was all that flicking of the faders and tweaking of the knobs about? Why was he wearing his headphones over one ear, as though he were cueing up the next record?”<sup>199</sup> Sherburne's invocation of a “pantomime of performance” shares ideological territory with Sneak's comment relating Swedish House Mafia to Milli Vanilli. After all, Milli Vanilli was the very definition of the pantomime of performance; they were models hired not to sing, but only to lip-synch on stage and in videos. Sherburne and Sneak seem to be suggesting that such a correlation could potentially harm the EDM scene as a whole, leading to a Milli Vanilli-like backlash against DJs who are not engaging in a “real” performance. Sherburne goes further and acknowledges the problematic notion of authenticity he's deploying, yet still suggests there are significant stakes in regards to EDM performance:

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<sup>197</sup> A French house music DJ and producer who broke into the US mainstream after producing the massive hit “I Gotta Feeling” from the Black Eyed Peas.

<sup>198</sup> An acclaimed alternative rock band formed in Seattle in 1994, which includes former Nirvana drummer Dave Grohl.

<sup>199</sup> Philip Sherburne, “Dance Music at the Grammys: What Skrillex, Deadmau5, David Guetta, et al. Mean (or Don't),” *Spin Magazine*, February 2012.

I know it's not cool to get too hung up on "authenticity," but this was not what dance-music culture looks or feels like. Most DJs and laptop performers actually *do something* onstage. I don't want to come across as rockist, but this matters. And to pretend otherwise, and try to cover it up with dance steps and glow sticks and an uncomfortable, kind-of-almost-but-not-really mash-up between Deadmau5 and Foo Fighters, is to treat dance music as just another fad to be chewed up by Big Entertainment and bottled up like a noxious pot of 5-Hour Energy.<sup>200</sup>

Thus, it is clear, at least to Sherburne, that the phenomenon of “button-pushing”, or of doing even less than that, does dance music a disservice; that it strips dance music of its purpose, agency and meaning and marks it as an empty fad. It is a fine line to walk, as evidenced by the prevalence of anxieties about performance within the current discourse. Some DJs, fans and critics argue that EDM concerts, and festivals, especially, are mostly about the spectacle – the light show, the pyrotechnics, the glow sticks, the dancing, the drugs – so the notion of ‘live’ mixing being *real* performance is ultimately beside the point. Others, like Sherburne, worry that if EDM DJs come to be viewed as mere button-pushers, then the whole scene will devolve into an over-commodified and over-technologized mess and lose its value. As Frith notes in his piece on Bruce Springsteen, much of the perceived authentic value of his performance is based on the fact that “his exhaustion – on our behalf – is visible.”<sup>201</sup> This notion of authentic performance is tied to jazz and folk traditions, and manifested in the ideals of rock music. Thus, the discourses engaged in by critics (which includes the DJs who are quoted *by* the critics) are often tied to notions of authenticity related to rock.

Around the same time as his statement above, Deadmau5 released a widely dispersed rant on the notion of ‘live’ performances of EDM via his Tumblr page. In this

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<sup>200</sup> Sherburne, “Dance Music At The Grammys”, *Spin*, February 2012.

<sup>201</sup> Simon Frith, “The Real Thing – Bruce Springsteen,” *The Rock History Reader* ed. Theo Cateforis, (New York: Routledge, 2007): 249.

rant, he lambasts any DJs who criticize the use of prerecorded tracks, noting that an EDM performance is necessarily limited due to its extensive engagement with and use of technology. As he states, in his typical lower-case rant styling, “i don’t have any shame in admitting that for ‘unhooked’<sup>202</sup> sets...i just roll up with a laptop and a midi controller and ‘select’ tracks n hit a spacebar”<sup>203</sup> [sic]. Where as the previous quote from Deadmau5 admonishes DJs like David Guetta who merely hit “play”, here he admits to doing it himself. The contrast between the two quotes, which contradictorily disparage the lack of performance associated with “button-pushing” or pushing “play” while also acknowledging that it is common practice within the EDM scene, is representative of the complexity of the discourse of authenticity within EDM. Contributing to that tension is a struggle over how to value a dubstep performance, and how critics shape that value. As we can see, many critics, and the DJs they quote, invoke rock (with ties to jazz) notions of authentic performance, as outlined above. These notions are often tied to a longstanding fear of technological mediation in performance and the desire for a perception of effort on behalf of the audience.

Yet alongside this tension, there is another, countervailing discursive pattern that celebrates the hard work of the touring DJ. Where the notion of authentic performance is fraught with tensions and complexities, the DJ touring lifestyle is often portrayed as “real work” and glorified by critics. For example, referring to the long hours involved in being a touring DJ, producer/DJ Stefano Ritteri states, “Any fool can watch a sunset, but a

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<sup>202</sup> By this, Deadmau5 means a DJ set without the big production value, without the LED screens and giant LED mouse head; typically, an “unhooked” DJ set would take place after the big show, at an after-party or small event.

<sup>203</sup> Joel Zimmerman, “We All Hit Play,” *Deadmau5: United We Fail*, July 2012, <http://deadmau5.tumblr.com/post/25690507284/we-all-hit-play>.

dawn you have to earn,”<sup>204</sup> evoking the early morning comedowns associated with the early ‘90s rave scene. The notion of earning, effort and visible exhaustion is in line with the traditional notions of authenticity outlined so far. If a DJ is unable to “earn” his or her authenticity on stage due to technological limitations, then they must “earn” it through the visible effort of touring. There’s a discursive pattern in regards to touring perpetuated by critics, where the touring lifestyle of a DJ is portrayed both as an endless party and a serious grind. In an interview with *Pitchfork*, Skrillex portrays touring as being “about the vibe and people hanging out and having drinks” while he plays in clubs where “girls are on the table dancing,” while the author also notes the sheer effort it takes to play “more than 300 shows around the world”<sup>205</sup> in one year. This notion of the tour as an everyday grind - as a taxing, exhausting part of the DJ lifestyle and yet also an all-night party - engages in the same rock discourse of authenticity outlined above. Much like the effort and exhaustion shown that allows for views of Springsteen as “authentic,” critics of EDM are engaging in discourse that suggests that the exhaustion that is a consequence of the DJ touring lifestyle evinces a form of authenticity. Thus, while the notion of “authentic” performance is a fraught and complex issue within EDM discourse, it would seem that the understanding of touring life as “real” effort - that despite the use of “inauthentic” technology, touring is a physical act undertaken by the DJ - remains intact within EDM discourse.

Another part of the discourse related to authenticity is the idea of being a “true” dubstep artist<sup>206</sup>, someone who came to the genre organically and displays a sense of

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<sup>204</sup> “The Panel,” *Mixmag*, January 14, 2013.

<sup>205</sup> Ryan Dombal, “Interviews: Skrillex,” *Pitchfork*, March 2012.

<sup>206</sup> Or an “inheritor.”

connoisseurship in regards to EDM's history. Conversely, along with button pushing, this notion of being a newcomer to the genre, there only to capitalize on its commercial popularity, is a prevalent trope in the discourses on dubstep. Joe Muggs, writing for the *Guardian*, suggests that Skrillex is the most hated man in dubstep. As he explains, referencing the historical roots of dubstep in London, England: "evidently, many fans of an underground UK genre have not taken kindly to a Los Angeleno Korn fan who dresses like an emo<sup>207</sup> kid, and who used to be the singer for the screamo<sup>208</sup> band From First to Last taking dubstep to daytime radio and the pop charts."<sup>209</sup> Thus, the issue at hand is not simply that Skrillex's music is found distasteful, but that he is a newcomer, someone who has come to dubstep and EDM inorganically, unaware of the roots of the genre. Skrillex, therefore, does not possess the knowledge privileged by the inheritors and thus becomes a victim of symbolic violence.

Likewise, in a piece for the *Village Voice* covering the IDentity Festival at Jones Beach, Michaelangelo Matos laments how the intricate stylings of Gaslamp Killer and more traditional drum and bass are lost on the young audience, stating that "creativity counts for little here."<sup>210</sup> While his argument raises issues of ageism<sup>211</sup> along with the vilification of the mainstreaming of EDM, it is his evocation of rock notions of authenticity and connoisseurship, as explored above, which remain relevant to this chapter. Matos is suggesting that the young concertgoers are newcomers, unaware of the

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<sup>207</sup> An offshoot of '80s hardcore punk, characterized by melodic builds and expressive, often dark and confessional lyricism, often perceived as having feminine characteristics.

<sup>208</sup> A more aggressive, masculinized subgenre of emo popular throughout the 1990s, typified by screaming vocals.

<sup>209</sup> Joe Muggs, "Is Skrillex the Most Hated Man in Dubstep," *The Guardian*, September 2011.

<sup>210</sup> Matos, "Live: IDentity Festival," *The Village Voice*, July 2012.

<sup>211</sup> Matos even acknowledges the issues that come with an older generation charged with dissecting a youth culture, stating that, in contrast to the young festivalgoers, he is "an old, old man who writes on paper."

drum and bass influences on dubstep, ignorant of the genre's history and that therefore their taste is positioned as inferior to that of Matos, the critic engaging in symbolic violence. The assumption by the critics, then, is that Skrillex is inauthentic because he reinvented himself from a screamo frontman to a dubstep DJ, leaving his band in 2007, and thus possesses no appreciation for the authentic roots of dubstep. Furthermore, this inauthentic performer attracts young concertgoers who do not possess the relevant cultural capital in order to properly discern adequate dubstep, and thus reveal their inadequate taste.

Furthermore, Matos laments the genre ignorance of the IDentity Festival audience, a clear invocation of the culture of connoisseurship perpetuated by rock discourses outlined in chapter two. Again, connoisseurship privileges the possession of certain knowledge and the accumulation of specific cultural capital. In rock, this knowledge is used to create an exclusive environment. The discourse of connoisseurship is invoked by the critics and DJs quoted thus far as related to dubstep. In an article for the *Wall Street Journal*, with the gloom-and-doom title of "The Dumbing Down of Electronic Dance Music," Jim Fusilli furthers this idea of genre ignorance (on behalf of the "newcomers") as inauthentic:

There's also a growing sense that some newcomers to giant EDM festivals (the three-day Electric Daisy Carnival in Las Vegas beginning Friday, for instance, is expected to draw more than 300,000 people), or those who spent time in the dance tent at this year's Coachella Valley Music and Arts Festival, still prefer songs they've heard on the radio to on-the-spot DJ mash-ups or the varying forms of EDM known as house.<sup>212</sup>

The three examples above are only a sample of the large amount of articles that tackle this notion of connoisseurship – and that position a proper appreciation of a genre's past

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<sup>212</sup> Jim Fusilli, "The Dumbing Down of Electronic Dance Music," *The Wall Street Journal*, June 2012.

as a source of authenticity. There's an anxiety over the current direction of EDM, particularly that the "newcomers" are adopting the signs of dubstep while stripping it of its meaning and value.

DJ Sneak, once again railing against Swedish House Mafia, invokes this idea of newcomers undermining EDM. In regards to the history of EDM, he states, "we built this house a long time ago, these newcomers just like to vandalise it by bastardising the music to become some kiddie pop genre."<sup>213</sup> His comment is problematic for a number of reasons, and clearly invokes and reinforces the newcomer-inheritor dichotomy. He derides the music of Swedish House Mafia as "kiddie pop," an ageist term fraught with gendered connotations that also creates and dismisses an imagined audience - a common theme in the discourse on dubstep that will be explored later in this chapter. DJ Sneak clearly invokes the notion of mass culture as low art, using "kiddie" to link the taste and low cultural capital of North American dubstep fans to the perceived blind consumerism of "teenyboppers."

Also evident is the tension between the inheritors and newcomers, rooted in the notion of connoisseurship. DJ Sneak perceives the Swedish House Mafia as newcomers, as fake DJs looking to capitalize on the popularity of EDM solely in order to make money. He even suggests that Swedish House Mafia are "manufactured like Coca-Cola," suggesting that the newcomers have solely commercial, and therefore inauthentic, interests in dubstep. This notion of the newcomer vs. the inheritor also ties in with ideas of connoisseurship traditionally valued by rock. Connoisseurship, as valued by rock, involves the possession and privileging of certain historical information, of respecting

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<sup>213</sup> "DJ Sneak: The DJs are Vandalising and Bastardising House Music," *Mixmag*, June 23, 2012.

and examining the roots of certain genres of music, as crucial to a discerning taste for rock as high art. DJ Sneak takes this notion of connoisseurship and uses it to undercut Swedish House Mafia. He states that they need to “listen to the classics<sup>214</sup>, look back at the history. If you’re going to start making or playing house music, educate yourself...and respect the sound.”<sup>215</sup> This notion of education as authenticity, which is a form of symbolic violence, has its ties to folk, jazz and rock, as outlined above. DJ Sneak, then, and many critics, are participating in a larger discourse that upholds rock notions of authenticity. To label Swedish House Mafia as newcomers and suggest that they are bastardising EDM is to use a rock framework of authenticity and value to assess and critique a non-rock genre of music. This is a problematic discursive pattern continually engaged in by critics of dubstep because it perpetuates social division through the use of symbolic violence. DJ Sneak – along with many other critics – elevates himself to the level of the inheritor within EDM, someone who has a specific set of knowledges, a certain distinctive taste, that one can only access through paying respect to the history of EDM. This symbolic violence, which is exclusionary in its function, is once again also the territory of rock. As Keir Keightley states, rock has “been defined historically by its processes of exclusion,”<sup>216</sup> using connoisseurship and notions of authenticity to attach value to certain kinds of information. Within the discourse of EDM and dubstep, it is clear that such symbolic violence is a response to many of the anxieties taking place in

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<sup>214</sup> His invocation of the term “classics” engages in the complex contradictions I have explored throughout this thesis. By suggesting that current DJs should examine the “classics,” DJ Sneak is invoking the culture of connoisseurship - which, contradictorily, is part of rock-derived notions of authenticity that EDM has historically positioned itself in contrast to – in order to disparage and dismiss dubstep and newcomers.

<sup>215</sup> “DJ Sneak: The DJs are Vandalising and Bastardising House Music,” *Mixmag*, June 23, 2012.

<sup>216</sup> Keightley, “Reconsidering Rock,” 109.

regards to performance, “button-pushing” and the allegedly corruptive power of newcomers.

Even if we are to accept that “button-pushing” is what the majority of DJs are doing on stage, and that some DJs have adopted their craft without the connoisseurship required to legitimate their art, what indeed makes them less authentic than a DJ mixing a few stems<sup>217</sup> on the spot, or someone who was there at the genesis of house music? Again, it would seem that rock-derived notions of authentic performance explored earlier in this chapter, alongside the model of newcomers versus inheritors, is being used here, both within and without the EDM scene, to assess the value and legitimacy of certain aspects of EDM. This creates and perpetuates a tension, since rock frameworks are being used to examine non-rock music and scenes, a common thread in the discourses of the cultural critics. Furthermore, critics often engage in symbolic violence, which attempts to assert a specific definition of value while undermining a rival definition of value created by another group. After all, do clubbers and festivalgoers value whether or not the DJ mixes live? Or are they there to hear the music, or experience the social aspects of EDM? Does the experience of the clubber change, or does their creation of meaning and value differ whether or not they have a grasp of the history of electronic dance music?

If we can accept, then, that rock notions of authenticity contribute in large part to the formation of discourses on dubstep, as evidenced by the numerous examples above, then one central question remains: what allows for the consistent privileging of rock notions of authenticity within the discourses on EDM? What are the motivations for continuing to use rock notions of authenticity to evaluate legitimacy in the world of EDM

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<sup>217</sup> Individual aspects – eg: drum loop, vocal track, synth line - of a pre-existing digital track, usual played through a digital audio interface.

and dubstep? *New York Times* pop culture critic Jon Caramanica notes that rock's shift from mainstream dominance to a more residual place as EDM grows within the larger cultural consciousness in the past few years means that many critics are unable to converse in a language they had mostly ignored due to the presumed longevity and dominance of rock.<sup>218</sup> These critics, whether writing for large audiences at the *New York Times* or smaller outlets like the *Guardian*, were forced to cover a widely popular scene, of which they had little historical knowledge. I would suggest, then, that the rock frameworks of authenticity I have explored in this chapter, that continue to influence the discourse on EDM and dubstep are, at least partly, perpetuated due to the fact that popular music criticism has, historically speaking, largely privileged and discussed rock music. If music criticism, and therefore rock criticism, has often engaged in the structuring and valuing of authenticity, then there is certainly the potential for deadline-driven critics to use similar templates to examine and discuss dubstep and EDM. While *Spin*, *Rolling Stone*, *Pitchfork* and the like are not necessarily rockist, they have long engaged in music criticism that has privileged rock music. It should come as no surprise then that rock's frameworks of authenticity, which privilege live performance and connoisseurship, are still being used within dubstep discourses to discuss non-rock music and scenes. What is perhaps most surprising, though, is that such frameworks are also being used in EDM-only publications, where similar arguments over authenticity and performance are taking place.

### Concluding Thoughts

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<sup>218</sup> Jon Caramanica, *The Combat Jack Show*, January 2013, [https://soundcloud.com/combatack\\_and\\_friends/jon-caramanica-episode](https://soundcloud.com/combatack_and_friends/jon-caramanica-episode).

There is no shortage of cultural critics who have declared dubstep – the North American incarnation of the UK original – to be past its peak, both creatively and commercially. In reference to the creative aspects of dubstep, the *Wall Street Journal* has lamented the “dumbing down” of electronic dance music for younger audiences.<sup>219</sup> Philip Sherburne, in an article for *Spin*, suggests that, “within electronic-music circle, dubstep felt old hat” in 2012.<sup>220</sup> Sherburne goes on to wonder if, considering the divide between the mainstream and underground in the EDM community coupled with the various issues in regards to safety at large festivals and small clubs<sup>221</sup>, dubstep will fall back into the underground in the same way techno and house did in the early ‘90s. And yet, despite the fact that many critics suggest that dubstep is on the decline, the significant amount of economic capital that is associated with the scene, not to mention the ubiquity of dubstep on the *Billboard* charts and Top 40 radio, suggests that dubstep is indeed a considerable cultural force.

Throughout this thesis, I have examined how various discourses have influenced and shaped the historical narrative of electronic dance music. Chapter one outlined the various texts that influenced this thesis, including Sarah Thornton’s notion of subcultural capital, which draws upon Pierre Bourdieu’s understanding of cultural capital and taste judgments. Chapter two presented a historical narrative of EDM since disco, which focused on the varying genres under the EDM umbrella, including house, techno, garage, drum and bass and dubstep. Presented within this narrative was a snapshot of the various

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<sup>219</sup> Fusilli, “The Dumbing Down of Electronic Dance Music,” *The Wall Street Journal*, June 2012.

<sup>220</sup> Sherburne, “State of Dance Music 2012,” *Spin Magazine*, December 2012.

<sup>221</sup> In July, 2012, three fans were stabbed at a Swedish House Mafia show in England. An event in Madrid, headlined by EDM DJ Steve Aoki, ended in the death of five young women, who died from injuries sustained during a massive crowd rush near the stage.

discourses on EDM. Discourses on gender, genre and authenticity were examined in order to highlight the specific values that are drawn upon and perpetuated in the current discourse on dubstep. Chapters three, four and five presented a discourse analysis that focused on how cultural critics influence and mediate the discourse on dubstep. In chapter three, I examined how the construction of genre within current dubstep discourse works to replicate real social divisions based on gender. Also, I examined how a culture of connoisseurship in relation to genre knowledge operates within the discourse to create and dismiss an imagined, “other” audience. I examined how the use of the genre label “brostep” by critics not only creates and dismisses an imagined audience, but also engages in potentially homophobic and racist discourse. In chapter four, I explored how the current discourse on dubstep draws upon and perpetuates the mainstream-underground dichotomy. Particularly, I examined how critics draw upon the bourgeois notion of the corrupting mainstream, and how such discourse draws upon and perpetuates a gendered binary opposition. Tied in with this analysis was an examination of how rock notions of authenticity and value, as related to the mainstream-underground dichotomy, are being adopted and adapted by critics of dubstep. More specifically, I suggested that rock frameworks for assessing value are being used within current dubstep discourse to evaluate the value of dubstep and dismiss and undermine an imagined dance music audience. Finally, in chapter five, I examined how anxieties about authentic performance, with ties to concerns about technology as inauthentic, are part of the current discourse on dubstep. More specifically, I examined how critics of dubstep are, once again, adopting and adapting rock-derived notions of authentic performance in order to determine the value of an EDM performance. Included in this section was an exploration the

phenomenon of “button pushing” and the privileging of visible effort as authentic performance.

I’d like to conclude this thesis with a few thoughts on where dubstep discourse goes from here, and how the consumers of dubstep may or may not engage with the current discourse. Since disco, electronic dance music has splintered into a variety of genres. From techno and garage to grime and 2-step, EDM is constantly undergoing revision and refinement, as new genres, and therefore new meanings and values, are in a constant state of flux. This pattern of new genre creation and the struggle over the control of EDM’s meaning and narrative has, I would suggest, reached an apex in the form of the discourse on dubstep. Not since disco has an electronic dance music genre been so culturally ubiquitous. Not since disco has an electronic dance music genre enjoyed such mass commercial success. Dubstep, in many ways, is its own brand at the moment, packaged along with commercials, products, films and festivals. It has become so ingrained in the current popular culture landscape that it is barely noticeable. Yet because dubstep has risen to such cultural ubiquity, many critics, as I have explored in this thesis, are engaging in problematic processes of othering when discussing dubstep.

One of the more intriguing ways the current discourse engages in arguments of value and distinction is the way critics have adopted and adapted rock-derived frameworks of authenticity and value, and are using such frameworks to discuss EDM. Thus, these notions of authenticity and value, which privilege visible effort in performance and promote connoisseurship as integral to being “real,” are being used to discuss and determine the value of a musical genre which has historically set itself apart from those values, that indeed has been oppressed and othered by those values. Various

EDM genres have embraced their role as body genres, as music in which to lose yourself to, which runs contrary to the notion that intellectual pleasure is of greater value and more meaningful than bodily pleasure, a notion rock used to legitimize itself, using pop music as its opposite, lower form of art. Also, EDM genres have traditionally embraced releasing music as singles, on white-label seven-inch records. Rock frameworks of authenticity and value, on the other hand, privilege album-oriented music, where a larger theme or motif is explored, and is therefore regarded as more “serious” music. Thus, EDM has long been at odds with rock-derived frameworks of value and authenticity – and yet, the current discourse on dubstep seems to suggest that EDM critics are adopting and adapting those rock frameworks in order to undercut and devalue the North American version of dubstep, or “brostep.”

If we accept that many critics are using these rock frameworks of value and authenticity to dismiss dubstep, a significant question remains: do cultural consumers – the fans, dancers and casual listeners of dubstep – engage in similar arguments over value, meaning and authenticity? This is an area of analysis that this thesis unfortunately could not cover. A well-researched ethnography would certainly complement this thesis and would allow for a broader understanding of how value and meaning is determined within the dubstep scene; but an ethnography was not within the purview of this thesis as the scope of the discourse analysis proved to be deep and rich enough to explore at length. Thus, I would like to conclude by offering some hypotheses about the way cultural consumers engage in the discourse on dubstep, taken from my own perusal of fan-created forums and responses to the pieces published by many critics.

One of the more notable discursive differences between the critics and consumers is the use of the term “brostep.” It is a term that critics use quite often to describe the North American form of dubstep, yet there seems to be little evidence that the dubstep community embraces such a term. I’d hypothesize that the way in which the term is often used to devalue the music and other the imagined audience is responsible for its lack of use within the community of dubstep consumers. Also, it would seem that many mainstream listeners of dubstep do not differentiate between UK and US dubstep, instead using “dubstep” as a term to describe many different forms of EDM that share some sonic similarities. There are plenty of dubstep forums dedicated to pointing out the difference between “dubstep” and “brostep,” but I would hypothesize that those forums are populated by EDM connoisseurs who privilege genre knowledge, rather than more mainstream listeners.

In regards to anxiety about performance authenticity, the sheer popularity and scale of dubstep and EDM festivals seems to suggest that such anxiety is mostly confined to the cultural critics. As evidenced above, thousands of EDM fans are willing to pay hefty ticket prices in order to see the likes of Tiesto, Swedish House Mafia and Skrillex. This has resulted in a massive festival industry for EDM, which includes a newfound role for DJs as headliners at traditionally rock-oriented festivals such as Coachella. It would seem that fans of dubstep have little concern for whether or not a DJ is mixing live on stage; rather, dubstep and EDM festivals are potentially about the social and aesthetic experience, including the expensive, dazzling light shows. These are just a few stray thoughts on the way consumers may or may not engage with the discursive patterns I

explored above. As I stated, ethnographic research would serve the scene well and contribute to a broader and fuller understanding of all its complexities.

My analysis of the current discourse on dubstep proved to be rich with discursive patterns left over from the days of disco and rave. While I would hesitate to establish a single narrative that could define the current discourse on EDM and dubstep, it is clear that one of the prevailing discursive patterns is the adoption and adaption of rock-derived notions of authenticity and value by dubstep and EDM critics. Within the discourses on genre, the corrupting mainstream, technology and gender, rock notions of authenticity and value play a consistent role. As I suggested, this is perhaps due to the fact that music criticism has long been the territory of rock music; therefore, the discourse of rock, despite its residual status, continues to be used to evaluate and discuss EDM and dubstep. Perhaps, the consistent use of rock frameworks of authenticity is linked to the demise of disco, where rock notions of authenticity helped to disparage and dismiss the genre. If disco, which once represented EDM at its most popular, had faltered when confronted with hegemonic rock frameworks of authenticity and value, perhaps the best way for critics to defend EDM against such vitriol was to adopt and adapt the very frameworks historically used to dismiss electronic dance music. By adopting and adapting these frameworks though, critics engage in an obvious contradiction: rock frameworks of authenticity and value that have historically disparaged electronic dance musics are used to dismiss dubstep and therefore assert the meaningfulness and significance of “real” EDM.

Ultimately, the current discourse on dubstep seems to have had little effect on the genre’s popularity. Since its rise to mainstream attention circa 2008, dubstep has found a

home on mainstream radio, at massive music festivals, and in a variety of advertisements. Dubstep has been parodied on *South Park* and sketch-comedy show *Key & Peele*. Dubstep was used in a commercial for President Barack Obama's "State of the Union" address. Thus, I would suggest that dubstep has reached a level of cultural ubiquity like no other electronic music genre. While dubstep may ultimately wither away into obscurity, or become another fad that Gen-Y will nostalgically look back on fifteen years from now, for now, its presence within the mainstream culture is secure, and it is hard not to see the acceptance of dubstep within mainstream culture as a significant moment in EDM's historical narrative.

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