

Australian Dub Morphs Now

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" I don't think we can just point to the seventies and say "well they were being political so we are because we're using their kind of music". I think we have to become political ourselves, I think if we are writing music and we want to be revolutionary then we have to take a look at our own lives, we have to look at our own music and the way that we're actually writing and the way that we're living, not to the way that dub artists were living in the seventies. We're in a completely different paradigm now and I think that has to be referred to ."

Kate Crawford (*B(if)tek*)

"We're all working within a cultural context which includes what happened in the seventies and eighties. We don't have to be aware of that. All we have to be aware of is what we're doing right now and anyone working in that sort of cultural context will have all those same influences implicit in what they're doing and what they're listening to at the time."

Bo Daley (*Dark Network*)

"It's not about the music. It's about the community which is created by the music."

Seb (*Sub Bass Snarl*)

This paper is not a definitive history of the evolution of dub in Australia. This paper is not about Jamaican dub occurring in Australia. The focus of this paper is on the musics that have arisen in this country which could most accurately be described as dubmorphs. There are links, clearer in some cases than in others, between the sounds and processes commonly recognized as dub and the work that will be discussed, yet a (r)evolution has occurred in Australia that has challenged the perception of the genre. We wanted to know why and how this has occurred, what are the musical and cultural implications, and what does it all mean for the future. We wanted to know the unknowable. Any art has as many possible histories as it has participants be they spectators or creators. Even the most "objective" research is subjective, in that a choice is made when one piece of information is included in preference to another. We recognise this, and we make no claims to objectivity. We will make our opinions known throughout the paper, and we ask that no matter how many quotes or seemingly rational explanations we offer to support our opinions, you remember that they are just opinions. Words on paper cannot give you the feeling of a deep fat bass groove, or even capture the accents of certain interviewees.

We recognise these shortcomings in our paper's potential to inform, and in ourselves to be without humanness. As such, we set out to capture a moment in the life of dub. Aspects of this moment with which we were concerned were:

- i.) the issue of cultural appropriation through music.
- ii.) whether anything genuinely new is occurring.
- iii.) social and musical implications of existing and rapidly advancing technologies.
- iv.) dub as a philosophy rather than a genre.
- v.) uniqueness of what is currently occurring in Australia.

These were the main topics of discussion, and responses varied from artist to artist. The simple fact that three or more artists working in dub related fields could not talk about dub without disagreeing with each other about what now does or does not work under the tag of dub illustrates the highly subjective nature

of even the most seemingly simple issues relating to the music.

At any rate, the report that follows is a slice of the attitudes, opinions, feelings and events occurring in the metamorphosis of dub in Australia, though more precisely in Sydney, in the latter half of 1996, as experienced by ourselves and those with whom we spoke.

In the pages to come, we will quote many of the artists active in dubmorph in Australia. Any attempt that we make to describe what they do is only a guide, as dub as a term now embraces many microgenres, between which many of the bands travel. As such, one track might put a group into the spacebass heavy ambient dub category, while their next track might portray them as performers of cut up dub, with different drum, bass and sample patterns setting up new rhythms, changed by phasing in and out of new or continuing patterns, rhythms, and sound sequences. By their willingness to experiment, the bands for the most part defy accurate labelling, so it must be understood that a dubmorph outfit may also be housey, trippy, or acid, but that the dominant aspect of their nature would appear to be dub, whether it be new school, old school, or weird school.

Dubmorph in Australia is along the evolutionary trail from Jamaican dub of the sixties and seventies of Lee Perry, King Tubby, & co. However, it is not necessarily directly descended from these musics. Seb (*Sub Bass Snarl*) is working on a PhD thesis dealing in subcultural politics, how scenes are imported and what happens when they are, charting the changes that occur and questioning the issue of what it is to 'sell out', or whether the 'sell out' even actually exists. As to the question of how dub has made it to this country, he responded that "there is a kind of chain back to some source, but there's not a direct chain to a source. Being positioned here it's hard for us to claim authentic sources of anything." Scorn, Aphex Twin, and The Orb all seem to have played their part in the drift of dub to this country - but that is not to say that more traditional dub hasn't been a factor, nor that experiencing dub from an English based group isn't just as valid an experience as experiencing it from a Jamaican based group. Ali and Andy of left-of-centre dub outfit Atone have unique backgrounds as far as Sydney's groups go, in that they grew up in England, and experienced the growth of dub as part of British club culture.

"Jamaica's where its roots are, but in the seventies alot of the studios and places pumpin' it out were in London, and Brixton, and Manchester, and Birmingham"

Ali (*Atone*)

So maybe the artists have been exposed to dub in its mediated form. Maybe they've been exposed to the earlier dub. Recently electronic artist collective Clan Analogue released the compilation album "Jaunt, bass heavy excursions in time & space" showcasing the work of eleven artists working across a broad spectrum of dub's manifestations in Australia. When the project's two main co-ordinators were asked their views, the response was simply:

Toby Grime: "I don't think most people on the Jaunt CD are totally aware of dub's origins and I think that's good"

Gordon Finlayson: "I think they are, and I think that it matters."

Toby Grime: "I don't think they are and I don't think that it matters."

So how much respect is owed to the original sounds by those who probably wouldn't be making the music that they are were it not for them?

"In music, all sound is sourced from somewhere else, no matter what that sound is, but there is in the music industry a lot of history of appropriation of black sounds, and if you're into black cultures and stuff, you're aware of that. Hence you begin to become aware of when it's going on around you and it's not necessarily just in music, it's also because the folks who listen to dub-house here, say, are all on the whole wealthy and white and driving fucking Porsches and shit, so it isn't the musicians appropriating the kind of sound, but the consumer of the sound being something which you either don't really like, or disagree with, or not having any roots to what black sounds were about, which were resistance sounds."

Seb (*Sub Bass Snarl*)

"The meaning of something is in its use, not in itself.¹"

John Cage

Hence, the use of the sound is a major factor in determining its cultural value and status in a specific situation:

"If you're playing dub...people either say 'oh, right, white boy,' sometimes white girl but generally white boys, 'playing around with a culture they know nothing about, exploiting a black tradition,' or they'll say 'hey, that's really powerful, you're looking at a black tradition, you're learning from that, and you're letting it inform your work.' "

Kate Crawford (*B(if)tek*)

The main taboo would seem to be appropriating the sounds for massive economic gain, while denying the relevance of those who've gone before. Artists do also expect their peers to be aware to some degree of their music's past - not to say that they all are:

"You've got idiots nowadays saying 'yes, we're totally original.' It's bullshit. Scorn is not original, Scorn has took a lot of influences, y'know what I mean. A lot of jazz music influenced me, you're not going to hear it in there, but for sure as far as the space and improvisation go, and that's the whole dub aspect for Scorn. Scorn is not a dub outfit, it is not a reggae dub outfit period. But as far as the dub elements - what I see within dub is the space, the creation of space, the creation of using effects and using the mixing board to create the dub, that for me is where dub is coming from. Dub is something that I have listened to for a long, long time, a lot of years now, and it's obviously had its influence, but there's a lot of influences on Scorn."

Mick Harris (*Scorn*)

This information says a lot about dub's evolution during its drift to Australia. Scorn, a U.K. act, now the ultimate one man band, features Mick Harris drumming, with a backing bass and drum track, stored samples, live sampling, and sounds being triggered throughout, often randomly. Many of the Australian acts talked to cited Scorn as a major inspiration/ influence. We can see that through his listening to dub, Mick Harris has selected the elements of the style which most appeal to him and put them into play in his creative process, along with various elements drawn from jazz and elsewhere. Artists inspired by Harris in this country are then likely to use the same process, drawing from Scorn the elements of the sound which most appeal to them, adding elements from other genres, and of course drawing on their own environment and personal creativity. Hence, we can see that as dub has travelled through time and space - coming out of both Jamaica and the sixties - it has become a philosophy more than a reggae based musical genre. It has become a philosophy of bass, space, reverb, echo, shifting layers, rippling delays. It has become a philosophy which governs both the production process and the product.

Thus, many artists are receiving a very concentrated influence on their own work. The sounds are stripped away so that dub is no longer a certain guitar sound coupled with a reverbed brass section. It is now very much about the advanced processes used to meld these together. The incorporation of non-dub influences has put an interesting twist on its evolution. Many electronic artists mentioned Bauhaus or Devo when asked about music that they grew up listening to.

According to postmodern theorist Frederic Jameson "the writers and the artists of the present day will no longer be able to invent new styles and worlds - they've already been invented; only a limited number of combinations are possible; the unique ones have been thought of already²". Such an attitude is ill-considered. Not only are dubmorph artists creating new worlds, they're taking their audiences on guided tours. Massive advances in music-related technologies have meant that sounds once only imagined can now end up on tape or disc. Sampling and digital effects technologies have improved at an inestimable rate over the last fifteen years, clearing the way for creation of twisting masses of sound layers, all processed differently and with varying degrees of precision.

"There's no doubt that there is a lot of reference, but that's part of the process."

Dave Carnovale (*Wicked Beats Sound System*)

Dub originally created the sense of the studio as an instrument. Now that that instrument is more powerful than ever before, it follows that dub should come into its own, drawing attention to itself as a whole, not just as a production process.

Not only have studios become more advanced, home studios are becoming increasingly affordable. While it still costs around \$A15 000 to get together an 8 track mixing desk, ADAT, various sound modules, sampler, CD burner, and the computer and programmes to run them all, rapidly advancing technology means that some people are continually upgrading with new gear and getting rid of old. This means that there is a high rate of equipment turnover, with good equipment that may be only a few months old being available to buy second hand and at a reduced price. With studios costing less to setup, and becoming more available to work in there are implications for dubmorph in Australia:

"...definitely make it weirder as well, because of people just experimenting, and they're not confined by, y'know, having to do it this way because the record company wants to do this, and they're not confined by abiding by certain standards. They can just be free, and that's what I think it is about in Australia, it is more free in what people write here."

Andy (*Atone*)

At the same time that the equipment has become more available and advanced, and electronic music has become more widely made and accepted, the sampler has enjoyed increased popularity. The discussion of the interrelationship of dub, more mainstream dance music, and the growth of sampling technology would be very chicken or the egg in nature. However, when addressing a music form as concerned with process as dub is, it would be foolish to ignore the fact of this relationship's existence. The sampler, as an instrument, is just one of the many factors in dubmorph and electronica's increasing array of possible microgenres. While the sampler received massive amounts of attention in the early '80s, in particular for the track "Pump Up The Volume" by MARRS, its potential is only really being addressed in the '90s. Now it is being seen as something more than a really good way to make tracks which are still essentially pop songs. Now that it has been accepted, its role can be challenged. Rhythm tracks can be created from vocal samples, a single loop can be endlessly built on and stripped back, howling animals become backing singers with perfect timing. Idiosyncrasies and "flaws" in the new machines can be harnessed and used by the composer. Increased possibilities of creation method and variation mean an increased number of possible outcomes, and ultimately an increase in number of the music's possible futures. Just as its originators incorporated technology in new ways at the time of its conception, its caretakers are nurturing its growth with new uses of both old and extremely recent technologies.

The general feeling amongst artists was that the growth in home recording technology would support the growth of dub related and electronic musics in Australia. Kate (*B(if)tek*) was of the opinion that we're getting back to a culture of "musica practica". Not unlike the days before wax cylinders and their sound reproducing descendants, "we're getting back to a point again where people are the producers of their own music in their own homes and that is fascinating". At the very least this is increasingly an option for the artist. They can make the music to bring together a community, or they can record the music to distribute to the community, or they can make a really good sounding demo for when they try to sell their music to a record company. There is again the issue of selling a music taken from another culture. However, at least for now, while dub may be a buzzword it would not appear to be a genre entered into by those planning to retire early and live off the fat profits generated by their multi-platinum debut album. As such, it seems likely to be a form more noteworthy for its experimentation and development than for the number of units sold per annum in this country, at least for a little longer. As Andy said, as the gear gets cheaper, sounds will get weirder, with more time and better equipment available for the making of samples so integral to the music. The use of new technologies will play as big a part in dub's evolution as they did in its birth.

Thus, there are clear implications for the development of the music. There is also the question of how human interaction with these new machines will affect our society. To quote postmodern philosopher and theorist Donna Haraway, machines "do not dominate or threaten us³" and as such offer "a way out of the maze of dualisms in which we have explained our bodies and our tools⁴". This breaks down to mean that as we create new identities for ourselves by incorporating new elements as we see fit - be they a wrist watch or a drum machine - we must readdress our notions of human. We were curious as to whether, with the anonymity of technology based music, and machinery playing such a part in its creation, dubmorph would be the scene of an ongoing human evolution.

"If you want to take cyborg theory, it's very interesting in the sense that, yes, we are directly bonding with machines and particularly when you play live you are so focussed that it's really difficult to say where the music starts and the machine ends and where you begin. I mean, there is a real relation between those three points and that's quite fascinating, but I don't think you can say that it's escaping capitalism because it's not, and

capitalism is very much intrinsically related to the patriarchy, and so again you're operating in this field where you're writing what is called "underground music", and you're in this so-called "underground scene" which is supposedly counter-culture to mainstream capitalism and patriarchy, but that's only partly true. You still have people trying to exploit that scene, trying to release that music and make money out of it and again it tends to be male producers and male dominated record companies and you're constantly having to deal with that...so it's powerful when you're writing your own music and you're not caring about that whole scene."

Kate Crawford (*B(if)tek*)

So, culture is indivisible, and interrelations exist throughout. Men still make more money on average than women. Conveniently, money usually equals power, and thus it usually men controlling the means of production, while women are denied access by economic constraints. When women overcome this barrier, they must again deal with male agendas. But then again we're middle class white boys. While it is nice to think that a misogynist at a dance party might be really getting into the tunes at a gig, before realizing that the forms behind the banks of machinery are female, leading to a reevaluation of his or her attitude to women - in much the same way that homophobes can be forced to address their attitudes on finding out that someone who is already a close friend is gay - access is clearly an issue. Clan Analogue is subversive in that access for the individual is based ideally not on individual means, but on group means. Hence, what's between your legs shouldn't affect what gear you can get your hands on - in a manner of speaking. Hopefully, greater freedom in the process of music creation will occur as a result of this. In a society which continues to discriminate on the basis of gender, it would seem appropriate for the "music of revolution" to be invoked in changing the paradigm. Only time will tell.

Clearly, our society is not a mass of strands existing in isolation of each other. It is a complex web of interrelations, and so too is music. There is no absolute truth as to the path that dub has taken since its conception. There are tunes being made in Sydney which are very close in feel and structure to early dub, and hence immediately recognisable as dub. However, as we have said, many artists are producing work which is not traditional dub, but certainly is in the spirit of dub, and fits into a place on the evolutionary path of dub. As mentioned earlier, right now, in Australia, in 1996 dub has become a philosophy more than a reggae based genre. World-wide, dance music has enjoyed massive commercial popularity in the past few years. As a flow on effect, people drawn to the genre have begun to seek out new "flavours" as it were, so where there was house there is now hardcore, trance, acid, electro, industrial techno, and so on. As one of these more specialised categories, dub is still a marginalised form of music, however experimental the artist may or may not be. Thanks to interest in Australian dance artists - like Boxcar, Vision45, and Itch.E & Scratch.E (now Boo Boo & Mace), and the generally increased popularity of electronic dance music, people are increasingly aware of a culture of Australian electronic artists, and this is flowing on to awareness of dub related musics.

"What bothers me is a whole lot of record companies marketing something as dub without really knowing what it is in the first place."

Ian Andrews (*Non Bossy Posse, Hypnoblob, Organarchy*)

Hence the awareness may stop at the genre title, with the word "dub" appearing as part of the names of numerous non dubby remixes and non dubby additional tracks on singles released by many non dubby artists over the past few years. Something "new" arouses curiosity, and thus acts as a selling point. So, one may decide that major labels are seeking to exploit dub's past of being an underground and sonic experience and introduce the word "dub" to mainstream consumer culture in much the way that the word "punk" has been so successfully dusted off and generically applied twenty years after it was fresh and diverse. The person who describes this as a calculated marketing ploy focussed on creating mass consumption of user friendly rebellion may be called either an idealist or a cynic.

Either way, if being used as a selling point, as a word with no link back to sonic and political revolution, dub is a dead horse being flogged with a view to milking the cash cow. If, however, a group or an artist is incorporating or exploring dub elements in the hope of creating a fresh sound, pushing the fringes outward, and progressing from where their predecessors left off, then it is an exciting thing, expanding music's parameters, as well as our sense of what music may or may not be.

Pavo Cristatus is such a group. The sound of the band is difficult, at best, to classify with currently existing genre names. Even when referring to them as a dubmorphism outfit, we must say that they are on the extreme fringe of the notion. As traditional dub outfits did, they incorporate prerecorded material - both

on reel to reel machines and record - and an instrument treated with effects, in their case a 'cello which is transformed by delays and a variety of processors into endless new sounds. As more recent artists have done, they also use samplers and drum machines. The whole is added to by their use of human voice as an instrument, also transformed by effects into a crossbreeding of angel choir and whalesong. As a total sensory experience, images are projected onto the stage, engaging the eyes in the same way that the sound engages the ears and the bass frequencies engage the body. When talking about what they do, the artists commented that they've been into dub for ages, but would not regard what they do as fitting into the category. We felt it right to consider them to be a dubmorph band though, considering the number of dub elements which are present in how they do what they do.

This raises the issue of a musical form's evolution, and how it can be tracked. At what point does a primate cease to be a monkey and become a human? Can that human be called a highly evolved monkey, or is that human now something totally different? Is there actually any difference between the human and the monkey, beyond those which the human creates, and does the birth of the human render the monkey obsolete? Replace the words "primate", "monkey", and "human" with "music form", "dub", and "dubmorph" respectively and you begin to realize some of the issues at stake. If dubmorph threatens to render dub obsolete, then the dub traditionalist must avoid becoming obsolete by denying the existence of dubmorph as anything other than a completely different form of music. If dubmorph renders dub obsolete, and yet they are ultimately philosophically the same, then dubmorph also renders itself obsolete. Hopefully, the music is much more tangible than such considerations and at its current rate of growth and advancement will outlast those who make a living out of writing about it.

The aforementioned band was one of the many that we both checked out and talked to in the hope of finding out what is unique about the dubmorph being created in Australia, and what aspect of its formation in Australia has led to the uniqueness of the sound.

"Yeah, it has origins in Jamaica, but now, here, the roots are less important than what's going on now and what has come from it, and it's an example of how diverse our cultural mix is and our range of cultural sources to pluck things from that we like."

Seb (*Sub Bass Snarl*)

"Australia's definitely got the climate on its side when it comes to dub, cause it's got to be chilled out, y'know, it's to chill y'out, relax it. It's written in the heat and so I think climatically it's got similarities there, y'got a bit of a feral population growing here as well, same way as in Jamaica you have the feral population there who are into it. So it's got similarities there, and I can say it's one of the last new worlds where there's little bastions where you can feel free here so y'got so much more room here to be innovative and I think it's just got to keep going."

Ali (*Atone*)

"I think because we're in Australia we've been doing our own thing without looking over the fence at our neighbours. We're not in Europe where there's countries all jammed in one place - which is kind of cool - but we're so far away from everything, yet now I guess things are a little more cosy with the internet and stuff and the increased amount of journals you can get access to to inform you of what's going on around the world, but I think also in Australia, the cities are far enough away to start their own little vibe as well, which is interesting, and that creates culture in itself."

Toby Grime

"I don't think that Australia has a particular scene, I don't think that Australia has a scene in terms of dub electronica. It has a number of artists who are working and producing stuff in the area, but at the same time you can't hone that down to any particular sound. I think that's one of the things that really characterises the sort of musical styles and electronic music that come out of Australia - it's that you can't say there's one thing that is dominant...I don't think you can say there's any one thing there that characterises it except the diversity of it"

Gordon Finlayson

So, be it geographical, climatic, cultural, or social, there is a sense that something here is different than

elsewhere in the world, and is a contributing factor to the difference in music coming from this country than elsewhere. Some felt that England has actually been a bigger success at integrating people of different cultures into the society, while in Australia pockets of different ethnic groups have formed and not been integrated into the society. As a result, it was felt that England had actually benefited musically from immigration more than Australia. There is clearly a problem in seeking a definitive answer or truth with subjectivity involved at so many levels. Is Australia a mass of cultural pockets of varying sizes? or a nation united? Are we pushing ahead, isolated from the outside world? or are we slave to mediated experience? Is it valid to consider dubmorph an underground music just because its creators receive virtually no support whatsoever from radio in this country? Whatever the case may be, we were conscious throughout of a sense that something unique is happening in dubmorph in Australia.

Hopefully, self-doubt in the group mind won't see this scene/non-scene implode before it receives international interest. The previously mentioned "Jaunt, bass heavy excursions in time and space" CD features eleven local artists, is a totally independent release insofar as the artists own their work, and presents a cross-section of dubmorph in Australia. It features one or two tracks which could almost have been lifted from King Tubby's first sessions with Scientist, and at the same time travels from the contemporary cut-up dub of Negative America to the more ambient dub of Undermind, while exploring other dubmorphs of varying nature and temperament.

"There's a lot of really interesting acts coming out who are producing dub-influenced music and it's come to a head recently I think around Sydney, so there's a lot more acts who are producing that style of music so that was the idea behind the CD, to expose this certain type of music and musical direction."

Gordon Finlayson

So too, Aton's CD "Atonement" has recently been released by Zonar Records, a new independent label which looks set to encourage and release dubmorph and other electronic artists in this country. Agrocalm is another new label dedicating itself to bass heavy ambient and experimental works, with their first release "Alien Bass Soundscapes" by Hiss inaudible for the most part through headphones and non bass friendly speakers. Meanwhile, Melbourne's psyHarmonic label continues to sign and release artists working in dub elektronika, and electro-experimentation, both in their own right and on various compilations. B(if)tek, having remixed a track for "combat rockers" The Mark of Cain to release on a remix e.p. also featuring tracks remixed by The Young Gods, and Godflesh, have secured distribution with Canberra's Geekgirl through Nephilim in Europe, and will also be sharing an E.P. release with Dark Network in early 1997. So too, dubhop group Raised By Wolves look set to release new material shortly, while Wicked Beat Sound System continue to draw favourable attention and radio play with their debut LP "Music From The Core". All of these artists differ from each other, yet are all making some contribution to the ongoing development and future of dub in Australia, and with One, Australia's first major dance music festival set to run for three days in early '97, the pace looks set to continue.

Thus it is clear that dubmorph has found fertile (under)ground in Australia, for a variety of reasons and with a variety and multiplicity of possible outcomes. It is not a music form which has developed simply through a process of migration and inclusion of different sonic cultures. Its development has been affected by technological advancements and developments, as well as by developments in the attitudes of the artists working with the new technology. This has led to something more than an old form with a cleaner sound. It has led to a multitude of hybrids, which may be viewed as new species or as mongrels, depending on the subjectivity of the beholder. It has led to new specialist dance musics, new reasons for people to get together, new possibilities for expression, and the creation of new commodities. In its travels, dub has become a new entity. Disembodied, its spirit can be heard in the dubmorph happening in Australia, both totally different from and very similar to its ancestors for a variety of reasons. As such, it is both valid and informative in 1996 to address dub as a philosophy rather than just as a specific sound.

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