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Toronto Scene Report - Spring 2004

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With a dnb scene that traces its origins back over 10yrs to the early rave days, Toronto continues to be a Mecca for North American (and international) drum and bass.

In the early 1990s the scene attracted a variety of people to underground events featuring a range of music. Hardcore was evolving into jungle and early crowds soon grew from a few hundred regulars to 1000+.

Early promotion companies included Atlantis, Chemistry, Delerium, Nitrous and Pleasure Force among others. At first events were simply characterized as warehouse parties, it took a while for the term rave to come into broad use. There were also regular club nights at places like 23 Hop and later Destiny Fridays, first held at the Party Centre on Church St., but soon moved to 31 Commissioners St.

A small shop called Xstatic located at the corner of Queen St. W. and John St. (in "graffiti alley") was the epicentre of the early Toronto rave scene. Started by Alan Stevenson and Mike Stein, it sold rave tickets, rave fashions, glow sticks, and DJ mixtapes (many featuring live sets from UK events) and all other manner of rave gear.

The back wall was stocked with flyers for upcoming events and independent publications like Tribe Magazine, which catered to the developing scene. If you wanted to find out information on the Toronto scene at the time, Xstatic was the place to go.

When Xstatic closed, Numb moved in to fill the void, although Numb eventually moved beyond simply the retail sector and branched out into other areas of the scene.

In 1994, the legendary Syrous promotions company was founded by Chris Smart and later passed on to Rob and Vito Lisi. It was one of the first rave promoters in Toronto, apart from Pleasure Force, to push jungle/dnb and fly in top-name talent from the UK.

Soon other promotion companies like A.W.O.L., Big Bud, Empire, Ganja Smile, Liquid Adrenaline, Next Junction and Renegades were starting up catering to the growing dnb audience. In the mid to late '90s events started drawing crowds of 5,000 to 10,000 on a regular basis. A-list UK DJs and MCs were frequently flown in to headline, and most of the larger events would feature a line up of 2 to 4 UK

headliners.

Eventually Better Days, Dose, Renegades and Syrous, some Toronto's biggest promoters at the time, teamed up to form Lifeforce. Better Days left the partnership early on, but the remaining partners threw some of Toronto's biggest ever events. Lifeforce's Halloween bash Freakin' '99 featuring: Grooverider, Jumpin' Jack Frost, MC GQ, Dynamite and EPMD set records with an attendance of 18,000.

People influential in the early scene included DJs: Marcus, Medicine Muffin, Jungle PhD, Mystical Influence, Sniper, Ruffneck, Dr. No and the Hard Cru; MCs: L Natural, Flipside and Caddy Cad; and promoters like O/S2 of Destiny.

College and community radio has played a huge role in exposing new audiences to the sounds of dnb and electronic music in general. Before the age of the internet, it was instrumental in spreading info and creating a community feel. Listeners would tune in to weekly shows on the University of Toronto's CIUT and Ryerson University's CKLN to hear the newest tracks and get info on upcoming parties. Standout shows included: The Prophecy (Marcus Visionary's Sunday night session on CIUT) and Medicine Muffin's Rinse Out show on CKLN.

Around 2000, there were a few unfortunate incidents that attracted undue media and police attention. In Toronto as in other cities across North America, politicians and police alike started cracking down on the scene. The era of the massive events seemed as if it had come to an end. But that proved not to be the case.

The scene evolved and started catering to the 19+ crowd in legal, licensed venues. New promotion companies like Theory have started up organizing events for the older crowd. Companies like Ganja Smile and Empire are still around but they have also shifted their focus to 19+ events. Although 10,000 person events may be a thing of the past Theory parties regularly draw crowds a few thousand strong. Blackmarket Records have also thrown two successful events, the latest featuring the legendary Bryan G.

Currently in Toronto there is a good energy within the dnb scene. You can go out to a nightclub or lounge and hear dnb almost every night of the week. Top weeklies include: Liquid Funk Sundays at Milano; Illegal Sound Mondays at Gorilla Monsoon; Chicks Dig It Mondays at IV Lounge; Empire's Loose Wednesdays at System Soundbar; Chronic Soundsystem Thursdays at Down One Lounge; Oscillate Thursdays at Insomnia; Knowledge Fridays at Sound Emporium; Destiny Fridays at 19 Charlotte; DF's Swing Saturdays at 254; Sex and the City Saturdays at the Hooch and Jungle Bass Saturdays at System Soundbar.

There are also many monthlies and smaller promoters throwing regular events attracting crowds of 100+ at club venues including: Nasa, Labrynth Lounge,

Sound Emporium, Reverb, Una Mas, B-Side Surface and Mad Bar. Companies include: Gridiron, Platinum Vibes, Impure, Automate, Fever and an ever-growing list of others.

Apart from nights and events, other aspects of the Toronto scene are thriving. There are many shops catering to DJs and music connoisseurs alike including: Blackmarket Records (619 Queen St. W); Play De Record (357a Yonge St.); Release Records (527 Yonge St.); Funky Boodah (70 Main St. N); 2the Beat (161 Spadina Ave); Metropolis Records (162-164 Spadina Ave.) and The Pit (439 Yonge St.).

Following a path blazed earlier by Vinyl Syndicate, Placebo and Jedi, many record labels based in Toronto are releasing the work of local and international artists alike. Toronto's newest label is Stranjah's Version Recordings. It joins a well-respected group of others including Furious, Tune Inc., Nice + Smooth, Oscillate, Gamma Ray, Visionary Recordings, Hustlin' Beats Records and Train Records.

It is the people of the Toronto scene that help keep it vibrant and exciting. Although there are too many people working hard to forward the scene to name individually, a big shout out goes to the soldiers that come out to events week after week and show their support.

Although some of the original faces are no longer actively involved in the scene, their contributions continue to be felt. Toronto dnb scene would not be where it is today without them.

Find out the latest info on the Toronto scene online at: www.torontojungle.com; www.tribe.ca; www.dnbnation.com; www.keep6.com. For general info on Toronto check: www.toronto.com or www.city.toronto.on.ca.

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