



MAJOR LAZER

Written by Drew Tewksbury Photographed by Evan Klanfer

No one seems to mind that the floor might fall away. They might even be wishing for it. The ultimate comedown from a night like this might just be an apocalyptic plunge deep down into the Earth's core, the ocean waters following them into the void, spiraling forevermore into God's last great undertow. It's not especially odd to wish the world away in a place like Hollywood's Bar Marmont. People come here specifically to hide. But tonight it's odd for a different reason: no one seems self-conscious, no one is staring, no one is passing judgment. Using only music, DJ Diplo has them boiled down to their essential selves. If someone can destroy vanity in a place like Los Angeles, it is advisable from this point on to listen and listen closely.

Photography: EvanKlanfer.com.

Tonight Diplo is unveiling Major Lazer—his pseudonymous collaboration with London-based DJ Switch—to a crowd of music insiders. The opening track “Hold the Line” begins with low, surf-rock strumming, followed by the playful, schoolyard singing of Santigold layered over a stomping beat. Santigold (aka Santi White) stands behind him, sipping a drink as her own voice soars from Diplo's turntable. He wipes his brow and turns up the bass on the mixer. It's time not only to be heard, but felt. And hasn't what Diplo does best. His signature sound is culled from rapid-fire Miami bass and Brazilian baile funk, a largely unheard-of scene that Diplo excavated and served up on club-thumping mix tapes in 2004. Major Lazer's *Guns Don't Kill People... Lazercide* marks a return to original music for Diplo (aka Wes Pentz) since 2004's *Florida*. Not that Diplo hasn't been busy. In the five years since, he was professionally and romantically linked to M.I.A., produced her Grammy-nominated track “Paper Planes,” founded the label Mad Decent, and helped put Philly's music scene back on the map. Tonight, Diplo is a hustler.

But 24 hours ago, Diplo was a dork.

Or so he tells me. “Sorry man, I look like a total dork. I was about to go for a run,” Diplo (looking a lot like just Wes Pentz now) says as he stands in the living room of a loft-style house, clad in an inside-out orange shirt and basketball shorts, with iPod in hand. His arm displays a tattoo of the gigantic Jurassic-era sauropod called a diplodocus (get it?). On the balcony overlooking the hills of Silver Lake—the Los Angeles enclave of hipsters and working-class Latinos—is Pentz's Philly cohort Spankrock (aka Naeem Juwan). Juwan talks on a cell phone, leaning way back and super-slouching in the chair, looking bored as hell.

Somewhere upstairs is Switch (aka Dave Taylor)—the house DJ, M.I.A. and Santigold producer, and owner of U.K. label Dubside. Switch is asleep. It's 2 p.m. “You know that one movie where the guy alien gives birth to a baby alien?” Pentz asks. “*Alien Nation*,” I suggest. “Yeah, well, that baby is what Dave looks like when he first gets up.” So we decide not to wake him, but I will catch up with Taylor a week later in New York City.

Far from the complementary drinks and morsels at the Marmont, the sparse kitchen at the rental house (“Pssh, you think we own this place?” Pentz admits) contains only a box of Clementine oranges (affectionately known as Cuties) and a seemingly unused George Foreman grill. Apparently, the lives of globetrotting DJs leave little time for culinary pleasures or a permanent residence.

Diplo and Switch are no strangers to the road, especially to locales traditionally off the beaten path. In 2004, Diplo traveled around Brazil to experience the flavor of the favelas, which he developed into an explosive underground mix CD *Favela on Blast*. Around this time, he also created the Hollertronix crew in his hometown of Philly. In the mid-2000s, Philly's scene became a polyglot of names to watch (Amanda Blank, Spankrock, and Santigold) with Diplo at the center. The throwback '80s aesthetic—neon, Ray-Bans, white pants—was only beginning. Steve Aoki, DJ Z-Trip, and A-Trak became famous for playing other people's music, but Diplo created some of his own. He mashed it up.

“I wasn't making mash-ups for the sake of mash-ups,” Pentz says, while we sit on the porch, Spankrock reclining on the couch inside. “I was interested in doing everything. We just found a way to do it, to make sense, instead of being just iPod DJs. That was so punk rock to me, to loop up some rock and rap all ghetto over it. Now it seems so commonplace, like Jay-Z over Linkin Park or something.”

The mash-up of beats was jarring and a perfect extension of the cross-pollination of musical genres in the late 1990s. Rap and rock were paired in countless excruciating permutations then, but when Diplo mixed Southern-fried crunk (a favorite of the native Floridian) with Brazilian beats and ragga vocals, nothing sounded more natural.

While DJing in London, his beats garnered the attention of then-underground artist, Maya Arulpragasam, better known as M.I.A. They eventually became a couple: she was a socially conscious Sri Lankan artist-turned-electro-pop star; he was the white party boy who loved being in the bad part of town (or world).

“We were into the same music and movies,” Pentz recalls about her, as the sun bakes us on the balcony. “Except she is a Sri Lankan who grew up in England, and I'm a white guy from Florida.”

M.I.A. was in America finishing up recording sessions for her yet-to-be-released debut album, and they tried unsuccessfully to make some tracks. Then Diplo decided to just take the a capella tracks, which were later held up for over a year in legal

strife, and mash them over beats ranging from baile funk to The Bangles. The underground mix tape, *Piracy Funds Terrorism*, was America's first introduction to M.I.A., before her (musically and politically) revolutionary album, *Arular* dropped in 2005.

“With M.I.A., we made a pop song totally by accident,” Pentz says. “We didn't aim to have a big record. But she's so cool, and that resonated with people.”

He loaned a baile funk beat for her song “Bucky Done Gun” and got much of the credit for producing the whole album, which he says isn't exactly the truth. “Back then, I told people that I produced [*Arular*], to get them to know who I was, but that was a total lie,” Pentz says.

Just another Diplo hustle.

M.I.A. didn't seem to mind at the time, but presaging her second release, *Kala*, she set the record straight about Diplo's participation. The media deemed Diplo the “mastermind behind M.I.A.,” but she says he had little to do with *Arular*. When pressed to name a chief collaborator, she credited Switch.

Switch is still asleep.

Of course, M.I.A. went on to become one of the most lauded musical artists in the world, and Diplo went on to create a small empire for himself, including the label Mad Decent, home to his Brazilian sextectroclashers, Bonde De Role, and other artists from his neighborhood in North Philly.

Then came the Lazer.

For Major Lazer, Diplo and Switch decided to explore the music of Jamaica that inspired them. The album takes cues from dancehall and dubstep, featuring some of Jamaica's finest and grimmest, including Vybz Cartel, Mr. Vegas, and Einstein. Major Lazer reverse engineers the mash-up and filters Jamaican music through the lens of Diplo and Switch's production. “I'm interested in taking those genres we used to fuck with, and go deeper into them,” Pentz says, “What we're doing with Major Lazer is taking those influences and trying to flip them.”

The project began in 2007, when Pentz ditched a “cheesy jam cruise” to stay in Jamaica. There he began to network with Jamaican artists, and convince them that he, a smaller name in Jamaica, could keep up with the established acts he wanted for Major Lazer. With cold hard cash and some powers of persuasion, Pentz got them on board.

Hustle, hustle, hustle.

“Really, [Jamaica] was an indulgence for us,” Switch tells me the following week, traffic streaming past as he stands outside a New York City recording studio, while the Beastie Boys work inside. “WHEN YOU GO SOMEWHERE LIKE



INDIA, AND ESPECIALLY JAMAICA, IT PUTS YOU IN A DIFFERENT TRAIN OF THOUGHT, OUTSIDE OF YOUR USUAL WORKING CONDITIONS. THEY USE MUSIC AS THEIR VOICE; THEY USE IT FOR POLITICS, FOR RELIGION. SO, I THINK FOR PEOPLE THAT ARE STRUGGLING, THEY CAN USE IT TO VENT FRUSTRATIONS, OR TO CELEBRATE.”

Major Lazer isn't necessarily another colonization of Jamaica, and Pentz is all too aware of the effects of his musical tourism. Like the gentrification of the Philly neighborhoods around him, “the Diplo phenomenon” has the ability to gentrify an entire musical scene, as Internet-trawling culture conquistadors snap up the latest flavors from foreign lands. In the way Elvis gentrified the blues, Diplo has been accused of exploiting music scenes, like baile funk, for his own good. But he says it's different with Jamaica. “[Jamaican musicians] steal from cultures more than anybody,” he says, referring to dub, the prototypical remixing method that originated on the island. “We're way past the arguments of me being a culture-vulture guy. As long as you pay respect to the artists and keep things right, everything falls into place.”

Everything is falling into place for Diplo. His label is successful, he's working on a documentary about baile funk, he's leaving for Angola to record with Buraka Som Sistema, and he's “doing way better than when I was working at Subway six years ago.” Hip-hop hipsters dance awkwardly to his beats, and in Japan, he says, they don't dance at all. He's a hustler. He's a dork. He's a hustling dork. But right now, there's no food in this house, Spankrock is hungry, and Diplo is going out to lunch. ☒

For exclusive video, visit Flaunt.com.