LONDON DUBSTEP CULTURE IN AN ONLINE DISCORD COMMUNITY: THE MEDIATION OF BASS, SPACE AND PLACE

FEATURE ARTICLE

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ABSTRACT

What happens when a music scene's spaces of performing, socialising and dancing—including venues, radio stations, record stores and internet forums—are reconfigured online? When the scene in question gravitates around extreme sub-bass and the sound systems that reproduce it, how exactly does that scene take shape on the internet? This article addresses these questions by presenting a digital ethnography conducted with Real Heads, a dubstep-centric music community on the social media platform Discord established in 2019. The analysis focuses on a weekly broadcast of DJ sets by Real Heads hosted on the livestreaming site Twitch. I explore how this communal project, born out of COVID-19, reworks the space and sociality of early or so-called "real" dubstep (when the genre first emerged in London in 2001–6) through inherited musical practices and regimes of subcultural capital, particularly from pirate and internet radio. In doing so, the article wrestles with the tensions between the (im) material space of the internet and the community's investment in dubstep's sonics, heritage and performance practices. I argue that Real Heads represents a novel form of DJ culture that warrants critical attention, and ultimately show how the group's online performances afford potent affective experience outside the physical space and visceral materiality of traditional sound system events: materiality that, at first glance, should be non-negotiable for "real" dubstep heads.

KEYWORDS: dubstep, bass culture, space and place, materialism, DJ performance, digital ethnography

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INTRODUCTION

What happens when a music scene's spaces of performing, socialising and dancing—including venues, radio stations, record stores and internet forums—are reconfigured online? When the scene in question gravitates around "bass culture", in all its materialist concerns with low-frequency vibration and the sound systems that reproduce it (as musicologist Robert Fink discusses), how exactly does that scene take shape on the internet?[1] In this article, I address these questions by presenting a digital ethnography conducted with Real Heads, a dubstep-centric music community on the social media platform Discord.[2] Specifically, Real Heads are a group of DJs, producers and fans invested in the sounds, spaces and practices of early dubstep, from when the genre first emerged in London in 2001-2006 and was thriving in emergent social networks of the young internet, but had yet to be assimilated into mainstream EDM.[3]

I chose to investigate Real Heads because, as an affinity group whose online sociality parallels that of early dubstep web spaces, it presents an ideal case study of bass culture on the internet. While Real Heads have diverse interests beyond dubstep, and neither is the community deliberately designed to replicate aspects of early dubstep, I will show how this parallel nevertheless emerges through inherited practices and regimes of subcultural capital (enabled by readily available historical sources about the genre online). These connections will primarily be explored in the context of Fruit Sessions, a weekly broadcast of DJ sets by Real Heads hosted on the livestreaming site Twitch that began during COVID-19 and continues today as a valued social tradition.[4] Sociologist Nick Prior would term this "new amateur" musicianship done "to professional standards . . . without the infrastructural support or conventional credentials accorded to professionals" (2018: 343). I thus argue Fruit Sessions warrants critical attention both as a performance space that functions analogously to early dubstep radio stations, and in general as a self-organised community project enabled by the internet.

In undertaking this analysis, the article will reflect on how sonic experience mediates community in online and offline space (though the ethnography does not venture into participants' home studios). It will also wrestle with the at-times contradictory materialism of bass culture, the growing literature around which is criticized by Fink for eulogizing low frequencies as "exemplary", "ethereal" and having "more reality" than others, providing "little practical information about how bass culture actually works" (2018: 89–90). "In the final analysis", writes Fink, "the 'sound' of the sub-bass is a timbre of no timbre, a tone whose expressive effect comes largely from that which we cannot hear [...] we must understand bass *as* culture" (2018: 112). While I heed this call, I also contend that doing so need not preclude examining both the music and its social mediation. Dubstep and Fruit Sessions offer a valuable window into this topic and its imbrication with the (im)materiality of the internet.

The article will proceed as follows. I will first outline the practical and conceptual aspects of the study, including a discussion of the relational nature of space and place in the digital ethnography. The next section will situate Real Heads in its wider context as one of several dubstep-centric online communities formed over the last decade, partly in reaction to the mainstreaming of the genre and its transgressing of bass culture's materialist ideals. I will then detail Real Heads' structure and sociality, noting the central role that early dubstep heritage plays in the community's exchanges of subcultural capital. Finally, the article will explore Fruit Sessions as a case study in online dubstep performance that connects this study's interrelated threads.

Online Spaces, Networks and Ethnography

My ethnography with Real Heads consisted of four months of participant-observation in May-August 2022, and 9 semi-structured online interviews conducted up to May 2023. I kept a detailed diary and observed life in the community in three settings: discussions of dubstep in any context, the oversight and social environment of Fruit Sessions and the DJ performances in Fruit Sessions itself. I recruited interviewees to depict a broad cross-section of the community in terms of how long they had been a member. Each interviewee also had at least some experience performing on Fruit Sessions and could be considered an active member, which I defined as participating in any discussion more than once a week.

I joined Real Heads in March 2020 in the wake of COVID-19, but only became an active member in late 2021. This was ironically when Britain's social distancing restrictions were being lifted. I felt motivated to re-invest in being a DJ for the first time since the pandemic and thus looked to Discord as a space to share work-in-progress tracks and keep up with dubstep, as someone with few personal connections in the scene—an experience I learned was not uncommon amongst Real Heads. I gradually became more involved in the server's communal projects such as Fruit Sessions and made my researcher status known. This process helped establish trust, and once fieldwork began it provided me with a valuable insider view of social and musical activities as a practicing DJ in the community. Building trust also meant that the boundaries between research and leisure were productively blurred. For example, I lived in Bristol for the duration of the ethnography, and within weeks of becoming active I was invited to a mix session by another Bristol-based member, shortly after which I performed as a guest DJ on their radio show and attended a local club night with members from elsewhere in England. These experiences gave a more rounded view of the community's DJ culture and underlined the extent to which the project was a form of "fieldwork at home", where working with and being a member of Real Heads became mutually influential rather than a conflict of interest (Stock & Chiener 2008: 110).

Approaching Real Heads as a fieldsite, it became clear the community was (and remains) a complex network of people, platforms, music and ideas rather than a singular online space. For example, Fruit Sessions were organised internally within Discord but broadcast publicly on Twitch with a different chatroom environment, and they entailed musical practices inherited from London pirate and internet radio stations. The leisure and labour of the community also often spread to spaces on Reddit, Facebook, Instagram, Soundcloud, Bandcamp, YouTube and other EDM-specific Discord groups. These platforms were integral to how members shared links to music, informally exchanged knowledge and promoted their creative outputs as new amateur musicians. Each site blurred together in a "polymedia" environment: a terrain that digital music researcher Blake Durham finds is marked by increasingly homogenous audiovisual and social affordances rather than technological features that truly distinguish one platform from another (2018: 148).

To understand these relations, I drew on the work of communications scholar Jenna Burrell, who lends precision to the notion of "the field"—difficult to define even in offline ethnography—by treating research sites as networks comprised of overlapping, changeable relations (2017: 56). Burrell's foregrounding of networks reflects an emerging consensus in online ethnography, in which scholars such as Christine Hine argue that the internet is an "embedded, embodied, everyday" phenomenon rather than distinct "virtual" world, though engagement through spatial metaphor remains important (Burrell 2017: 53).[5] As Daniel Allington and colleagues also find, the "ostensibly 'placeless' medium" of the music streaming platform and social network Soundcloud—a vital tool for Real Heads and other bass music communities—tends to reflect offline geopolitical inequalities, a reminder that online networks always have material roots (2015: 211).

EARLY DUBSTEP: ORIGINS AND TRANSFORMATION

Since its inception in early 2000s London, dubstep has been a subculture almost exclusively about bass, tethered to the practice of reggae sound systems. Dubstep emerged from the reinterpretation of garage and house grooves into swung, syncopated beats known as 2-step, which London producers such as El-B engineered with minimalist textures that cut vocals and other instrumental layers to foreground bass and percussion. This stoked a multiracial albeit male-dominated "dark" garage scene with Big Apple Records (1992-2004) in Croydon being a hotspot (Martin 2015). Steve Goodman, critic and DJ-producer under the name Kode9, heard the transformation of 2-step into dark garage as analogous to the remixing of reggae songs into bass-forward dub instrumentals that began in 1970s Jamaica (see Veal 2007: 51). Goodman subsequently coined the term "dub step" (Marlow 2014). Dubstep is thus less a direct descendant of dub than it is a kind of convergent evolution in studio methodology and musical logics, spurred by decades of Jamaican music's influence on UK club culture (Melville 2020: 53). Dubstep producers reconfigured 2-step into mixes intended for levels of bass amplification not typically available in clubs, distributing their music via exclusive acetate records known as "dubplates" (Veal 2007: 52). The subculture revolved around live events (especially club night FWD), local cultural hubs (such as Big Apple), a handful of radio stations (such as pirate Rinse FM) and online communities (Martin 2015). In turn, space, both real and virtual, was an important dimension of early dubstep: artists sought to carve out space for bass in both recorded mixes *and* on the dance floor as the genre developed with an online-offline geography.

As dubstep coalesced as a genre and became increasingly popular, the tipping point in its mainstreaming was January 2006. DJ Mary Anne Hobbs hosted a show on BBC Radio 1 titled "Dubstep Warz" featuring several DJ sets by leading artists from the south London scene (BBC 2006). Thousands of listeners re-distributed "Dubstep Warz" and exposed the genre to a global audience via Myspace, DIY mix archive site Barefiles, the recently founded YouTube, Dubstep Forum (DSF) and other smaller fora (Fintoni 2018). When Dubstep Warz was initially announced on DSF, the forum was already approaching a total membership of 10,000. The announcement stimulated a feedback loop that built initial anticipation for the broadcast, during which Hobbs shouted out "all the crew posting on Dubstep Forum", with DSF then seeing a surge in new activity in the following weeks (Akingbehin 2020).

Dubstep Warz catalysed a process that would not only transform dubstep but also spur the development of the North American "EDM" industry (D'Errico 2015). This process impacted popular musical culture to such an extent that in musicologist Mike D'Errico's assessment, electronic music after Dubstep Warz constitutes a "dubstep era" (2015). By the late 2000s, artists such as Britney Spears began capitalising on dubstep in chart music, British DJs including Skream and Benga began playing to sold-out arenas and North American "EDM" artist Skrillex became the face of dubstep internationally upon releasing his first EP (D'Errico 2015). In these contexts, the stylistic and spectral composition of dubstep was radically reinterpreted and became known pejoratively as "brostep", reflecting a perception that the music's aesthetics invoke hypermasculine aggression and are popular among young, male "frat-bro" audiences (D'Errico 2015). Skrillex, among other producers, popularised a "maximalist" aesthetic of timbral and melodic complexity that was a far cry from the aesthetics of artists associated with British label DMZ (such as Mala and Coki), who emphasised sub-bass pressure, harmonic stasis and space in the recorded mix (D'Errico 2015). As a 2009 DSF post summarised, to "real" dubstep fans, brostep sounded like an "unpalatable mush of midrange madness" and "pissing contest" between "EDM" participants hungering insatiably for ever-filthier bass drops (spacer 2009).[6] However, British dubstep was also a scene dominated by men, and dance music ethnographer Christabel Stirling observed that mainstream "EDM" festivals saw dubstep audiences approach gender parity for the first time (2016: 142).

No Brostep Allowed: "Real" Dubstep Discourse and Communities Online

Dubstep's sensationalised transformation in the "EDM" industry has had a lasting effect on DJs and fans committed to the genre's subcultural roots. The arrival of brostep and "EDM" became the "constitutive outside" against which Real Heads, and communities like it, define themselves online (Born 2010: 221). More than mere posturing between fans, "real" dubstep discourse offers a window into what happens when the mainstreaming of a genre also entails "treblification" that threatens its sonic materiality and, thus, identity (Marshall 2014: 44).

During the 2010s, online communities converged on a shared understanding of "real" dubstep in opposition to brostep, with the distinction between these categories routinely debated.[7] The term "real" dubstep was established in 2011 with the founding of the Reddit community r/realdubstep at the height of brostep's popularity. The forum's description lists canonical British artists and labels such as Skream and DMZ as a guide to what is deemed acceptable for discussion. "This is a community about dubstep music and culture. The sounds that come from the fusion of break beat, 2 step garage, dub reggae and more. . . . If you're looking for the dirtier side of dubstep, please check /r/dubstep."[8] The designation of a genre as more "real" than another is not entirely lost on the community, with one member, for example, writing: "I get it, your genre was bastardised, but . . . [you're a] bunch of old wankers trying to tell everyone how to act and police their music tastes".[9]

A range of communities similar to r/realdubstep were established on Facebook in the 2010s, such as Shitty Tune Share For Us Wastes Who Like Dubstep (known as Shitty Dubstep), Memeplates at roughly 139.6bpm and Dubstep Vinyl Collectors. Shitty Dubstep closely resembles the long-form asynchronous discussions housed in DSF and Real Heads' mixture of informal and formal sociality. Alongside memes and in-jokes, users share new dubstep releases, discuss current issues in the scene and promote their own DJ sets. They often hyperlink to a wider ecosystem of YouTube channels such as GetDarker, who upload rare mixes and early dubstep ephemera. Unlike r/realdubstep, however, these Facebook groups only tacitly imply their relationship with "real" dubstep as part of a wider regime of subcultural capital.[10] In Shitty Dubstep, this manifests as the stipulation "No brostep" in the group description, and Dubstep Vinyl Collectors is largely self-selecting since mainstream dubstep releases tend to circulate only via digital formats. By contrast, the "139.6bpm" in Memeplates plays on dubstep's conventional tempo of 140 beats per minute (BPM), a niche reference that targets the tendency for "real" dubstep enthusiasts to be music producers and DJs with a technical—and at times pedantic—understanding of the genre.

DEFINING "REAL" DUBSTEP

"Real" dubstep certainly functions as a discursive mechanism by which fans (often self-righteously) distinguish their tastes online, but how do these communities make sense of the category musically? As the r/realdubstep description indicates, "real" dubstep is generally defined as music adhering stylistically to the British dubstep canon, though in practice, it tends to be more precisely defined in opposition to brostep. Brostep producers are criticised for their preoccupation with broad-spectrum synthesised timbres that detract from or downplay sub-bass, and that performed live, do not require speakers capable of extreme low-end amplification. As one DSF member in the above-cited thread writes, a "real" dubstep experience is about feeling a "rumble in your chest . . . if there aint no sub bass in the tune and it kinda just wails away on midrange . . . its gonna be hard to get that same effect" (spacer 2009). This reference to felt vibration and frequency bands is crucial because it highlights how brostep's mid-range stylistic elements make it significantly more audible on earbuds and other listening media with a limited bass response, making the music accessible entirely outside of clubs. Yet "real" dubstep is difficult to divorce from its performance at live sound system events and the Jamaican dub-reggae traditions that power them (Marshall 2014: 63).

"Real" dubstep's insistence on felt bass thus emerges as a partly political response to the appropriation of a Black and multicultural genre by predominantly white (though mixed gender) audiences in North America. Nevertheless, "real" dubstep is laden with contradictions. Dubplate records are prized to the extent that their significance exceeds their materiality. The genre can be about subcultural exclusivity as much as it is a pursuit of tactile sonic experience. If the music no longer requires expensive, labour intensive specialist sound systems to make bass audible, is it dubstep at all? This perspective was raised in my interview with Nate, a DJ-producer and moderator of Real Heads who, asked to define dubstep as a bass culture, emphasises "the hardware that you need to make loud, low waves. And then the ways that you can turn that up to eleven".[11]

This does not make dubstep incompatible with the "treble culture" of mobile and internet listening, however (Marshall 2014). Several interviewees recalled discovering the genre online at an early age before attending sound system dances or listening with audiophilic gear was possible. For example, Sir Ebral, an occasional Fruit Sessions participant, remarks that "I had no clue" dubstep was bass-centric: "I was one of those listening on my laptop speakers. . . . I still do it now. . . . As long as everything else pleases my ears, I know the bass will be fine".[12] Dubstep livestreamed through a project like Fruit Sessions today is thus an evolution of this story that warrants critical attention, which I will turn to shortly below.

Being a Real Head: Dubstep Heritage and Subcultural Capital

Some notes on the community's structure and how Discord works are helpful at this juncture. First is size and intimacy: Real Heads houses a wide range of members and discussions, but the core of the community is small and tight knit. As of 2024 there are 900 members, mostly young men living in countries including Puerto Rico, New Zealand and India, though the majority are in Europe, the UK and the US. About 100 members are active and approximately 20 interact daily. The group, or server in Discord's terminology, is private, meaning new members can only join through a direct invite from an existing member. Active members often address each other by their real names, flowing freely from chat about life to debates about politics or dubstep. About a third of all members are electronic music DJs and producers, some of whom perform regularly, sell records and go on tour; but practically none told me they pursue music full-time, or could earn a living doing so. Nevertheless, these members altruistically share information on music production, DJing and entrepreneurship. A smaller group arranges in-person meetings at raves in the UK a few times a year. This level of closeness is not necessarily atypical for niche groups on Discord, but it differs substantially from the more anonymous, asynchronous sociality found in "real" dubstep groups on Reddit and Facebook (Ng & Gamble 2022).

Discord servers are organised by text- and voice-based channels, with most of Real Heads' interactions occurring in the former. Users can embed links, GIFs, emotes and files, and create nested threads and forum channels organized by topic. This makes Discord a hybrid social media platform that combines the peer moderation and ephemeral nature of channel-based instant messaging with the asynchronous interaction and community-oriented features of forums like DSF. In Real Heads, the channel structure (managed by a small team of moderators) creates a diverse set of spaces in which members engage in often collaborative and reciprocal exchanges such as Fruit Sessions. The main channel is #heads-speak, a loosely music-focused lounge that is also the landing area for new members. Below #heads-speak in the user interface are ten narrower discussion channels. The most important of these are #music-share, #mix-share and #new-releases, channels dominated by members sharing links to tracks, albums and playlists. This behaviour plays a powerful role in individuals' expression of their identity and subcultural capital, occasionally blooming into fleshed-out conversation about dubstep or other genres. Also important are #production-chat and #show-off-tunes-and-feedback, where members discuss production strategies and work-in-progress tracks, respectively. In #events, members either share recordings of club nights they have attended or arrange in-person meetings at upcoming events. For DJs, #sync-or-spin is dedicated to organising Fruit Sessions and general DJ chat. A #dubstep-lore channel also hosts exchanges about early dubstep's history a few times a month.

When I ask interviewees "what does it mean to be a Real Head?" there is little consensus. The owner of the server, Kar, states he chose the name Real Heads as a joke, a view borne out by the responses of other interviewees and the ironic use of similar terms in other dubstep communities.[13] Yet during fieldwork it became clear that knowledge of and appreciation for "real" dubstep unites members, as part of the community's wider regime of subcultural capital. A sentiment of "no brostep" is the invisible rule governing new members that they must discover on their own, where brostep and North American "EDM" are excluded through social enforcement. Having some personal investment in "real" dubstep is, therefore, a soft prerequisite for participating in the community. A striking manifestation of this social environment is visual. The server's icon by which users can identify it in Discord's interface borrows directly from Big Apple Records, a fondly remembered record store in Croydon, South London that played a pivotal role in the 1990s "dark garage" scene from which dubstep would emerge a short time later (Big Apple Records 2020). When a new member joins, they are greeted with a screen showing the server's icon in the centre, lifted from Big Apple's cartoonish banana peel logo. A photograph in the background shows a group of dubstep DJs and producers (see fig. 1 and fig. 2 below). Taken in 2006 at Third Base, the venue where the influential DMZ club night was hosted, the photo is a who's who of the British dubstep canon (Clark 2008). These images immediately communicate a particular sense of place; you are entering a record store-like online hang out for "real" dubstep heads.

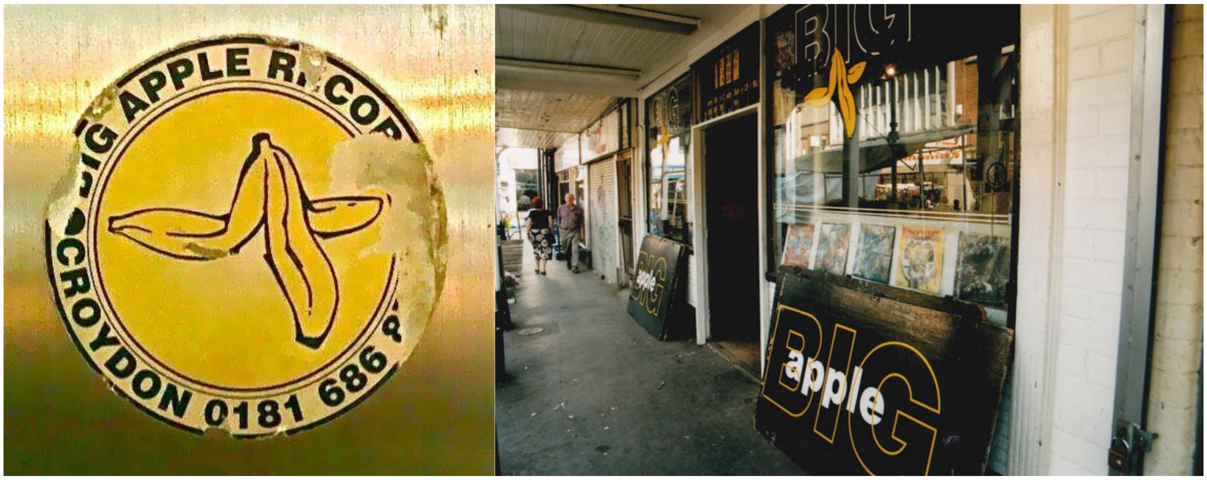
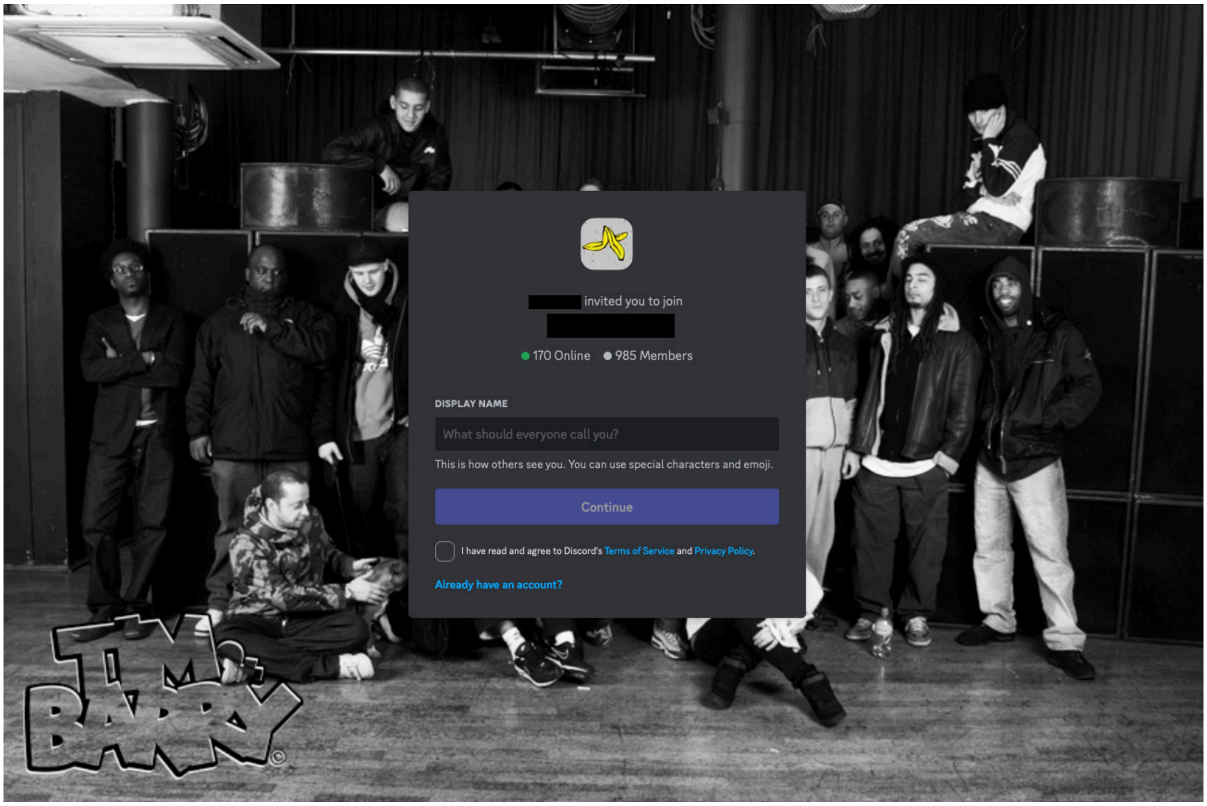

BIG APPLE R COR
CROYDON 0181 686
BIG apple

Figure 1. Big Apple Records' logo (left) and its former storefront (right).
Photo credit: Big Apple Records (2022).


[redacted] invited you to join
[redacted]

170 Online ● 985 Members

DISPLAY NAME
What should everyone call you?

This is how others see you. You can use special characters and emoji.

Continue

☐ I have read and agree to Discord's Terms of Service and Privacy Policy.

Already have an account?
TIM BARRY ©

Figure 2. The Real Heads splash page shown to new members.

In our interview, Nate relates the server's iconography explicitly to "secret knowledge", framing the banana as

> Basically a dog whistle . . . from the outset, someone who joins the server is going to see that . . . [and] either they're gonna know what it is or they're not. That's quite a large part of the identity of the server I think.[14]

Nate is surprisingly plain here in stating that being a Real Head is about belonging to an exclusive subculture, though this perspective is not universal. Lacu, for example, a frequent Fruit Sessions participant, suggests in our interview that the server's network of relationships can be understood as analogous to what Big Apple did for early dubstep. "[It's] a community of like-minded people who support each other, who help each other learn. . . . When one person gets a platform . . . they'll promote the other people from the server, use their tunes [in DJ sets]".[15] This comparison to Big Apple is significant given the prominent role it plays in Real Heads' iconography, and because Big Apple indeed sustained a network of musical relationships, DIY projects and radio-centric DJ culture not dissimilar to that facilitated by Real Heads. Big Apple's archival material on Facebook shows that it was a laddish, homosocial and racially mixed social network. DJ Hatcha worked behind the counter and was a tastemaker in the fledgling dubstep scene in the years approximately 2001-2004 (Martin 2015). He attracted DJs from local pirate stations to the store, mentored younger artists such as Skream and would play their latest dubplates at influential club night FWD. Garage producer Artwork, who worked in the studio above Big Apple and also mentored artists there, summarises: "we were all making records for Hatcha to spin and meeting in the record shop to discuss the sound. . . . It was a bit like a bass university" (2010).

The networked space of Real Heads reconfigures this social environment into a flatter hierarchy—enabling a wider range of DJs, producers and listeners to interact and collaborate—though it has not always been welcoming. A pointed illustration of the community's enforcement of "real" dubstep authenticity occurred in early 2022. Kar had added Real Heads to third-party indexing websites such as Disboard, which allow the public to browse servers by category and join even if a server is invite-only. This led to a temporary but unusually large influx of new users who, in seeing Real Heads listed as a dubstep community, joined on the assumption that dubstep's mainstream manifestations would be welcome. Although the community has never had a formal initiation process (some servers ask new users to introduce themselves after agreeing to rules, for example), what resulted was a tongue-in-cheek hazing in #heads-speak where established members would ask what kind of dubstep new members liked. When they responded, predictably, by sharing music that fell outside "real" dubstep, this was viewed as an irredeemable *faux-pas* and they were made unwelcome. Some Real Heads preferred a compassionate approach, with Nate, for example, remarking in our interview that "if they obviously don't know the unspoken rule of what kind of music is OK . . . then I'm not going to tell them that their music's shit".[16] Lacu similarly shares that he dislikes the "snobbery" of some resolutely anti-brostep Real Heads.[17] By contrast, Zane, also a regular DJ on Fruit Sessions, argues new members have a role to play in respecting the intentions of the server:

> It's your job to take the time to assess the situation . . . if you're not going to . . . look at some other links that people have posted recently and get an idea of what the community's like . . . then I think you deserve to be made fun of.[18]

"Where Bass Matters": Fruit Sessions and Performing Dubstep Online

Every Sunday, a small group of Real Heads hang out on the livestreaming website Twitch to enjoy performances by members of the community over a few hours. This weekly ritual is named Fruit Sundays as another play on the Big Apple logo, and given the broadcasts are publicly accessible, they function effectively as an online radio station. In dubstep, garage, jungle and related UK club genres, stations such as the internet-based Sub FM and the (now licensed) pirate Rinse FM have provided important space for DJs and their audiences since the 1990s (Macpherson 2014). Sub FM's tag line "where bass matters" attests to how a particular sense of sonic materiality and shared space is central to these stations' communities.[19] Moreover, in the context of grime, musicologist Alex de Lacey shows how they have fostered collectivity for a "Black counterpublic" in response to decades of over-policing and exclusion from public spaces and dominant channels of distribution (2021: 201–2). I argue Fruit Sessions is an internet-specific evolution of this vital performance tradition in British bass culture. New amateur DJs draw on the practices of early dubstep pirate and internet radio and in turn reconfigure these stations' sense of place. Yet they also relocate the illicit and decentralised social networks of earlier radio forms to the digital platforms of Discord and Twitch, where bass culture encounters new social contexts and modes of performance that scholars have only recently started to interrogate.

Structure, Context and Values of the Project

Fruit Sessions began in early 2020 as a creative outlet for DJs and a social event for the community during COVID-19. The project was initiated by Nate, who explains that it evolved from a simpler, jukebox-like listening activity within Discord. The sound quality of these sessions was poor and Nate envisioned the server hosting a series of live DJ sets instead. He established a Twitch channel describing the project as a community committed to underground bass music and real dubstep, inviting viewers to participate as DJs and join Real Heads. As the project continued into 2021 and became a weekly fixture it settled on a standardised format still in use today, equivalent to an open mic. Up to six or seven DJs each perform a one-hour set (usually from home), with broadcasts running from approximately 18:00 to midnight GMT. Any member with the necessary equipment and internet connection can participate by putting their name forward in #sync-or-spin. To arrange a broadcast, someone—often but not always a moderator—posts in the channel a few hours or days in advance to check the number of willing participants. During fieldwork, there were approximately ten regular DJ participants and up to 20 other members who regularly joined as viewers. Less than three available DJs usually meant that week's broadcast was cancelled. There was no requirement for broadcasts to be recorded, although DJs increasingly decided to record and archive their sets online, sharing recordings in #mix-share or #sync-or-spin the next day. DJs performed on a range of formats, with some opting for vinyl or vinyl-digital hybrid sets, though most participants used digital players (CDJs or MIDI-based controllers) given the prohibitive cost of records.

In interviews, the question of whether and how the project was promoted beyond Real Heads and its significance to participants during the pandemic prompted lively discussion. Small promotional efforts were occasionally made, and some sessions in 2020 were especially popular, reaching an approximate peak of 50 viewers. Nevertheless, Nate explains that growth was not a goal; the project was initially only "a lockdown thing" aimed at members who missed being able to go out to raves.[20] This is corroborated by Zane, for whom Fruit Sessions was "a great community thing that helped a lot of people when they couldn't hear live music and see their friends".[21] Lacu similarly enjoyed Fruit Sessions because "It felt like connecting with people. . . . I was home all day with no job because I was furloughed. . . . [Then] I found a community of people who were into the same music as me".[22]

Fruit Sessions also entailed advantages for participating DJs musically. Nate, for example, describes how it was an opportunity to practice regularly before an audience: "it was just a way to keep DJing to people, not just to myself, [and] have a bit of feedback. That made it enjoyable".[23] Relatedly, for Lacu, a productive tension arose in knowing the audience consisted mostly of his peers:

> It almost to an extent feels like you're playing in front of people, even though you're not. . . . You would start to get a little bit nervous . . . because they were peers and you know that . . . the only people that are watching are other DJs who DJ the same music as you. It's not like it's just a bunch of punters having a drink sitting on their phone or talking to their mates. . . . Like, if they're watching it, they're *watching it*, generally.[24]

Zane echoes these perspectives, describing how Fruit Sessions facilitated both community and musical experimentation:

> I'll very freely play my new music not necessarily knowing if it's going to work. . . . I think it's a good environment to test out new tracks, obviously throw in some old ones, and have a bit of a reaction in the crowd . . . it's just fun. . . . . A bit of practice, bit of community.[25]

Thus, Fruit Sessions developed during 2021 into an established tradition enjoyed by a small subset of Real Heads as an informal, social practice arena, likely explaining why it continues today despite the lifting of COVID-19 restrictions.

Another notable aspect of Fruit Sessions is the tension between the project's liberal oversight and social-musical internal policing in the community. Individual creative choices are generally respected, as Zane suggests in the freedom he has to experiment with genre. Longer-term members and more experienced DJs also enthusiastically encourage beginner DJs and newcomers to play on the broadcast, often emphasising that addressing the audience with a microphone or camera is not obligatory. Attesting to this, in 2022, another member named Sir Ebral and I performed live online for the first time on Fruit Sessions; we continued to perform monthly throughout the year. To a lesser extent, freedom extends to the musical content of DJ sets, in that there is rarely formal gatekeeping of genre. UK club mainstays including garage, dub, dubstep, jungle, drum 'n' bass and genres on the periphery of this continuum like house, techno and footwork are all played regularly. However, Real Heads being a dubstep-centric community means dubstep is the focus of most performances, and the musical programming of Fruit Sessions is therefore to some extent governed by self-selection. The unspoken etiquette, of course, is "no brostep", which DJs are likely to be familiar with because they must already be members of the server to participate. Nate elaborates:

> When we started . . . we just booked people, so to speak, who were . . . going to play the stuff that we considered to be the in-group of tunes. 'Cause there definitely is boundaries to the scene, particularly surrounding the history of brostep and dubstep. I guess we have had a couple of people play some brosteppy stuff. . . . But we didn't really gatekeep them exactly. We didn't tell them, you have to stop playing this stuff. But in the chat people would be like, uh, cringe [laughs].[26]

5 for the Reload: Internet-Mediated Sonic Intimacy

It's Fruit Sessions on a Sunday and Axle is in the mix. He is playing a hybrid set using mostly vinyl and a few digital tracks. There are ten viewers, with three or four Heads hanging out in the chat, sharing occasional reactions to the stream. The record currently being played—J:Kenzo's "Ruffhouse" (2011)—is familiar to "real" dubstep fans, and Axle has cued another record on the left turntable. We reach the breakdown of "Ruffhouse", a DJ-friendly 16-bar section amenable to blending with other records, consisting of a thin texture with only hi-hats and a plucky synth ostinato. Axle slides up the fader for the left turntable, bringing the new record gradually into the mix. The newly entering melody creates a bubbling anticipation. It is instantly recognisable as the lead synth line of Leftlow's "Cluedub" (2019), with its wobble envelope filter, triplet quaver rhythm and descending stepwise pitch contour all borrowing from canonical early dubstep producer Coki. Axle has timed the entry of "Cluedub" perfectly, with the 16 bars before its drop section overlapping exactly with the 16-bar instrumental breakdown of "Ruffhouse". This mix is suggestive of the technique known as a double drop, where the climaxes of two records are synchronised, typically with the bass line of one record filtered out. But Axle instead opts for the straightforward route, fading out "Ruffhouse" immediately before "Cluedub" drops and hits like a truck. The synth melody is now pitched down and doubled, running at a mid-range and sub-bass register. A hyped reaction in the chat is imminent, although instead of words or emotes, the crowd simply enters one number: "5". A few more 5s stream in, and as another user types the Twitch text command "!5", a customised chat bot for the Fruit

Sessions channel is also triggered to send the phrase "⚠ 5 ⚠ 5 ⚠ 5 ⚠". Having faded out "Ruffhouse" and completed mixing these two records, Axle turns away from the decks and toward his laptop, seeing a flood of 5s in the chat. He knows exactly what is happening: the crowd is calling for a rewind. Axle turns around to stop "Cluedub", scratching it back and forth to punctuate the moment before re-cueing the record to be played from the top.

The preceding passage is a narrativized excerpt from my observations as a Fruit Sessions viewer during fieldwork in June 2022. This moment captures a typical Sunday night broadcast, and effectively illustrates how "5 for the reload" has been a cherished tradition in DJ-audience interaction in dubstep radio since the early 2000s. As the excerpt shows, listeners ask the DJ to rewind the record by simply stating "5"—or many 5s if the energy of the moment demands it—using the chat function of an internet station, or less commonly by sending an SMS to the phone line of a terrestrial station. The rewind is a central DJ technique in bass culture that primarily enacts moments of sonic rupture and catalyzes further improvisation (Henriques 2011: 165).[27] It is therefore unsurprising that "5 for the reload" has been adopted in other scenes such as grime. Nevertheless, the practice is particularly well-regarded in dubstep and arises in contexts like Fruit Sessions because of its inception in the Gourmet Beats radio show hosted by North American dubstep pioneer DJ Joe Nice. Journalist Laurent Fintoni addresses this in a cultural history of the rewind, noting how "5 for the reload" came about spontaneously during one of Joe Nice's shows on Sub FM.

> "I don't remember what tune I was playing," Joe recalls, "but the chatroom was going crazy, and I said, 'I need 5 for the reload' expecting to see the word [rewind] five times in the chat." Instead, [audience member] Dave Q went straight for the number. "I just put in a '5' and that was an instant rewind. It became the thing that you just write '5' if you want a pull up." (Fintoni 2015)

This origin story is significant given Sub FM's importance in Real Heads. Since its inception in 2004, the station has shaped the careers of dubstep performers like Joe Nice and served as a training ground for aspiring DJs in the scene (including other Real Heads members and me). Sub FM was established in London by garage DJ Whistla—incidentally also a member of Real Heads—who notes that his experience of organising (and performing on) pirate stations in the 1990s directly informed his founding of the station (Clark 2009). A snapshot of Sub FM's website from 2010 describes the station as "a community of like-minded people who love bass music" and, despite being a legal internet station, invokes pirate radio as a marker of legitimacy and subcultural capital with the tagline "giving you the best in online pirate soundz".[28] This nested connection to "pirate soundz" is noteworthy because the likely predecessor to "5 for the reload" is a similar practice developed in the 1990s on pirate radio. As media scholar Matthew Fuller notes, a flurry of calls dropped after the first ring would act as a code to DJs that listeners wanted a rewind (2005: 50). For Fuller, this ritual made the audience-performer relationship tangible, drawing both parties out of abstract airwaves and into a shared grounded place, even if the illegal, ephemeral nature of pirate radio meant stations were never rooted in the same location for long. He writes:

> The message is not so much that people simply want to listen to the track but that *they are out there*, that the listening is being done collectively, that there is *hype* about a certain track, and . . . a system of feedback and production to intensify it. (Fuller 2005: 50)

It is precisely this feedback system that came alive in Fruit Sessions moments like the one illustrated above. As such, "5 for the reload" can be productively brought into dialogue with the sonic materialisms of bass culture, which media scholar Malcolm James theorises as "sonic intimacy" (2021: 16). In a recent monograph, James explores the pirate radio media ecology of London's 1990s jungle scene, notably echoing Fuller in identifying "hype" as the relational state of feeling that pirate radio engendered for its participants (James 2021: 56). Jungle pirates helped people feel "they were known and heard by others . . . in a fractured and sped-up society", argues James (2021: 65). Hype assumed multiple forms, from listeners "feeling the rave" in their living room and DJs gauging the presence of listeners through shout-outs, to crews savouring the rush of ending a broadcast unscathed by authorities (2021: 74). In the early millennium, stations such as Rinse FM mediated similar experiences for the dubstep and grime scenes (Macpherson 2014). James, however, is pessimistic about the dominance of digital media and the internet as distribution channels in the late 2000s. He explains how, at least in grime, the proprietary "closed-circuit" designs of mobile phones and YouTube diluted the "expression of craft and illegal DIY" formerly present in jungle, limiting experimentation and displacing the collectivity of pirate radio with the individualized pursuit of view counts (2021: 102, 89). Hype was transformed into cold agonism as grime producers also adapted to the "trebly" output of MP3s and phones by engineering bass lines in higher octaves with thick compression, foreshadowing the reinterpretation of "real" dubstep as brostep that arrived shortly after (Marshall 2014: 62).

The performance of "real" dubstep on Fruit Sessions today does not fit neatly into this narrative. Certainly, for DJs broadcasting safely and legally from home via Twitch, the stakes of hype are lower. The locality of pirate radio and its illicit shared labour is watered down in the reach and anonymity of the internet, with chest-rattling bass unattainable in most participants' studios. The racialised geography of London and pirate radio's concomitant fostering of a Black counterpublic is also a less material concern for a largely (though by no means exclusively) white group of bass enthusiasts online. Yet the Real Heads community nevertheless embraces this performance space and its seemingly diluted, trebly materialism, finding sonic intimacy in an unlikely format. Why?

I suggest the answer lies in Fruit Sessions manifesting a different *kind* of hype, shaped by early dubstep's entanglement with the internet and stations such as Sub FM. This observation is underscored by the sociality of the rewind in the context of a streaming platform like Twitch. For example, I found that the vitality of "5 for the reload" was brought to light by its absence during quiet broadcasts, when only a few DJs were available (often because of members' family or work commitments) or the chat room was inactive (because those performing simply had not captivated listeners). There was an unspoken ethos in this regard where most DJs would only rewind a track if they registered 5s from at least two different chat participants, as with the Axle example above. In fact, this invisible threshold of DJ-audience intimacy is embedded in Joe Nice's anecdote about how "5 for the reload" came about: the listeners serendipitously misinterpreted his demand as a request to type the number 5, although Joe's intention was, seemingly, to instead sense the crowd's size and energy as though it were a face-to-face set. In other words, he wanted *at least five* people to ask for a rewind, otherwise it would not have been appropriate to perform one.

The sonic intimacy engendered by "5 for the reload" invites critical reflection on how the internet can act as a tool for musical dissemination and create space for new creative practices in unexpected ways. In a state-of-the-field column written shortly after Dubstep Warz aired, Clark comments on Joe Nice's stage presence as a DJ, noting how he would "motion to the crowd for reloads (using his own terminology, "5")" even at in-person shows (Clark 2006). This reveals an unexpected line of influence where "5 for the reload", a practice specific to internet radio, was already spilling over into club performance early in the history of dubstep. This offers a new perspective on the long historical relationship between technology and "liveness" in popular music; as Philip Auslander theorises, live performances have come to replicate their studio-recorded counterparts over time (2008). "5 for the reload" can thus also be understood within a broader continuum of net-native musical practice that includes subcultures like the exclusively online vaporwave, where, as Georgina Born and Christopher Haworth show, "the net itself becomes central to the creative practices defining the genre, acting as shared horizon of meaning, content medium, production studio, and means of distribution" (2018: 605).

In this brief case study of Real Heads, music also emerges as a potent mediator between several overlapping scales and modes of space. The hype of early dubstep's pirate and internet radio stations in postmillennial London comes alive in Joe Nice's in-person and online performances, in turn becoming integrated within "real" dubstep practice and manifesting over a decade later in the internationally distributed network of Fruit Sessions. As Stirling finds in her ethnography of audiences in dubstep and other dance musics in London, DJs in Real Heads articulate a "merging of 'imagined community' and physical reality" mediated by sonic experience (2021: 131). This underlines, in turn, the radical potential of Black diasporic bass cultures such as dubstep. The shared experience of felt vibration, shaped by socially embedded tastes and the contingencies of live performance, facilitates "ways of knowing" space through sound (Henriques 2011: 121). This knowledge exceeds what cultural theorist Kodwo Eshun calls "big P Politics" to become "sensual/sensory politics" (2006: 294).

Conclusion

This article has weaved together digital ethnography, analysis and theory to examine how the sonic culture of "real" dubstep is mediated by online space. Real Heads inherit and reconfigure early dubstep practices and spaces, which converge in Fruit Sessions and represent a new kind of DJ culture mediated by digital platforms. Whereas Marshall posits "treble culture" as a "suggestive foil" to bass culture, in dubstep, rather than existing in a paradoxical relationship, bass and treble culture emerge as co-constitutive. Given early dubstep's online-offline geography, the discursive negotiation of its genre boundaries and its circulation in online spaces has been integral to its identity from the beginning. Beyond this, the Real Heads community illustrates how the internet also allows for the sonic materiality of a staunchly bass-obsessed subculture like dubstep to involve potent affective experience even when it is mediated by layers of digital platforms, mobile devices and lossy audio compression. My analysis of the internet-specific practice "5 for the reload" shows, in this regard, how livestreamed DJ performance can afford a sense of co-presence and hype despite operating outside the visceral materiality and physical space of live sound system events. At first glance, this materiality should be non-negotiable for "real" dubstep heads. Bass culture on the internet, especially in the context of platforms like Discord and Twitch, remains underexplored territory in popular music studies, and I hope to have offered some insights and productive paths forward for future research.

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NOTES

1 Bass culture is best understood as emergent from a network of genres—sometimes referred to with the contested term bass music—that value live performance in the tradition of reggae sound systems, and tend to engage with Black diasporic styles, traditions and ideas. As Fink explains, bass culture is "a virtual archipelago of thumping musics situated along . . . the African diaspora", including dub, hip-hop, British club music, Latin American dance genres and more, which "come together in a culture of musical resistance predicated on the ability to dominate collective spaces with large quantities of low-frequency sound" (2018: 88).

2 The community's name has been changed to protect its anonymity, but the intended meaning, that the group is a space for authentic bass music fans, is preserved.

3 A definitional note: I use EDM throughout to denote electronic dance music in general. This is distinct from "EDM" as it has developed in the North American music industry over the last fifteen years, where the acronym refers to a cluster of locally popular genres influenced by dubstep. I will use "EDM" in quotation marks to refer to the specific North American formation, in line with leading scholarship. See, for example, Garcia 2015: 73, note 2.

4 I have also renamed Fruit Sessions for privacy while maintaining its intended meaning as a play on the banana in the logo of Big Apple Records, a Croydon store influential in early dubstep.

5 Relatedly, I deliberately describe this study as an *online* ethnography to avoid the baggage of "virtual" (which best describes immersion in video games and similar media), "digital" (which

does not necessarily denote internet activity) and other terms such as business researcher Robert Kozinets' "netnography", not typically used in the humanities (2015: 6).

6 Spencer details these perspectives and their gendered dynamics in his thesis about dubstep on the internet (2020: 17–23).

7 See, for example: <https://www.reddit.com/r/realdubstep/comments/ay3qqy/what_is_the_line_between_true_dubstep_and_brostep/>, (accessed 12 October 2024).

8 See Forum Description at <https://www.reddit.com/r/realdubstep/>, (accessed 12 October 2024).

9 See <https://www.reddit.com/r/realdubstep/comments/k3r31/just_curious_but_what_is_the_difference_between/>, (accessed 10 March 2023).

10 These unspoken relationships affirm the dynamics of subcultural capital observed decades ago by Sarah Thornton in British club scenes, revealing "real" dubstep's longer historical trajectory (1995: 24–27).

11 Nate, interview with the author (on Zoom), 29 May 2022.

12 Sir Ebral, interview with the author (on Zoom), 4 March 2023.

13 Kar, interview with the author (on Zoom), 28 May 2022.

14 Nate, interview with the author (on Zoom), 29 May 2022.

15 Lacu, interview with the author (on Zoom), 16 March 2023.

16 Nate, interview with the author (on Zoom), 29 May 2022.

17 Lacu, interview with the author (on Zoom), 16 March 2023.

18 Zane, interview with the author (on Zoom), 27 March 2023.

19 See <http://www.sub.fm/>, (accessed 12 October 2024).

20 Nate, interview with the author (on Zoom), 29 May 2022.

21 Zane, interview with the author (on Zoom), 27 March 2023.

22 Lacu, interview with the author (on Zoom), 16 March 2023.

23 Nate, interview with the author (on Zoom), 29 May 2022.

24 Lacu, interview with the author (on Zoom), 16 March 2023. Emphasis added.

25 Zane, interview with the author (on Zoom), 27 March 2023.

26 Nate, interview with the author (on Zoom), 29 May 2022.

27 These qualities of the rewind are detailed in de Lacey's study of DJ performance practices in grime (2023: 83–84).

28 See <https://web.archive.org/web/20100825194646/http://www.sub.fm/>, (accessed 15 October 2024).

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