

## FEATURES

# Breakcore: Live Fast

MATT EARP - JULY 20, 2006



What defines the current breakcore scene—a style and community rising from the ashes of gabber, noise, breaks, and ragga jungle—is what doesn't define it. Even Jace Clayton (DJ /rupture), who's known for his erudite commentary, can only describe it in vague terms. "It was this amazing *danceable* noise with some kinda reggae bass/base to it," he writes of the first time he heard breakcore scene pioneer DJ Scud play at one of the Soundlab parties in New York.

Indeed, Scud and Nomex tracks like "Total Destruction" helped create the blueprint for much of breakcore's sound, a high-bpm mash-up of hyperkinetic, post-jungle breaks, feedback, noise, and Jamaican elements paired with a devil-may-care attitude towards sampling that pulls from the broadest musical spectrum of styles (hip-hop, rock, industrial, pop, and beyond). And even 12 years after the debut of seminal labels like

Scud's Ambush, Christoph Fringelli's Praxis, Alec Empire's Digital Hardcore, Kurt Eckes' Drop Bass, and Australia's super hardcore Bloody Fist, the scene continues to seethe with energy and unexpected twists.

But ballistic sonics are only half the equation--experiencing the culture behind breakcore is just as important. And the only true way to get a feeling for the scene is to make it out to events like Breakcore Gives Me Wood in Ghent, Belgium, Jason Forrest's Wasted parties in Berlin or any one of hundreds of smaller events around the world, often outdoors and free. It's there that artists, the majority of whom perform live, unleash their sonic assault and some serious antics: singing, screaming, moshing, telling jokes, tearing their clothes off, bashing their heads on tables and then bleeding on the audience, making the most of thrift store bins for crazy costumes, and, bizarrely, almost always wearing funny hats. Breakcore artists are some of the most thoughtful, inventive, and politically progressive people making music today, but on stage they are a bunch of fucking loons.

While the parties are open to a range of styles (it's not uncommon to hear dancehall, ragga jungle, and grime), there's much debate within the scene about what is and isn't breakcore, and the usefulness of the term itself. (For more on the discussion, check the lively web forum at [c8.com](http://c8.com).) Daniel Eiterherd--the force behind Graz, Austria's Elevate festival and moderator of online breakcore community Widerstand.org--thinks the lack of consensus is a positive thing. "The fact that such a huge discussion in a scene is possible is just simply great," he says. "Self-reflection is a [virtue] that you won't often find. I describe 'breakcore' as a state of open-mindedness--any new direction the music goes is fine, because I know there's not just one but literally hundreds of directions the music *will* go."

Perhaps the most striking thing about breakcore--besides a new artist cropping up nearly every hour--is that, unlike grime or *baile* funk, the scene lacks a single geographic center. Hot spots include Berlin and Belgium as well as London, the American Midwest (birthplace of the legendary Drop Bass Network and Dan Doormouse's long-running Addict Label), and California (San Francisco's 5lowershop and L.A.'s Darkmatter Sound System). Ultimately, it's the internet that has facilitated breakcore's fast and far-reaching spread.

The six artists profiled here have wildly divergent and sometimes conflicting views, and they're just a sampling of the state of the genre, and they're just a sampling of the iconoclasts that populate this enthusiastic scene.

## **Hecate**

There is no greater single force of personality in the scene than Hecate, the founder of the fiercely independent Zhark International label and creator of 10 years' worth of "the most destroyed and blasphemous electronic beat fuckery." Her sound is a dark, almost alchemic hybrid of blistering, stuttering breaks, power noise, and Eastern influences, and she has collaborated with numerous artists from across both the breakcore and the Satanic, black, and death metal scenes.

Hecate—born Rachael Kozak and currently living in Basel, Switzerland—is keenly aware of her status as a female label owner and artist in a male-dominated scene; sex is a major theme in her work, along with death and the occult. One of the most extreme examples of Hecate's aesthetic is *Nymphomatriarch*, an album made entirely out of recordings of herself and Venetian Snares having sex on their two-week tour in 2003.

If you're getting the idea that Kozak is the scene's ultimate provocateur, you're not half wrong. But for all its blatant shock value, *Nymphomatriarch*, like all her releases, is still highly emotional, dark music that kicks ass, blowing everyone else away for raw complexity and energy. Hecate is clearly a force to be reckoned with, a claim recently reinforced by the April release of her *Brew Hideous* (Sublight/Hymen) album. Look out for forthcoming material from Treachery (a collaboration with Ablecain and Slutmachine) on NOX, a new Zhark sublabel.

## **Parasite**

It's hard to believe that the royal ruckus known as Parasite is actually breakcore's hardest-working bloke. The affable bloodsucker (Armin Elsaesser to his mom) is best known for helming the consistently great Death\$ucker label, which boases the scene's best and most eclectic roster (with releases from Bong-Ra, knifehandchop, Monkey Steak, d'kat, and DJ Ripley). He's also the head honcho of DSWAT distro, one of the most active online mailorder stores, and a driving force behind the Toxic Dancehall parties in his hometown of Bristol, England. A testament to breakcore's increasing popularity, these raucous affairs grew from 30 people in the basement of an Indian restaurant to crowds over a thousand strong at the Black Swan in just three years. ^

Toxic Dancehall is now defunct, but Parasite and his partner Anakissed are starting a new party called The Goat Lab. "The name was directly inspired by the U.S. military's research into psychological warfare using de-bleated goats as a test bed," says Elsaesser, who, like many in the scene, has a strong political streak. "Breakcore, by its very nature, is political!" he says. "The very fact that the majority of breakcore tunes are a copyright infringement [case] waiting to happen is proof of this. Also, political opinions can be heard in a wealth of breakcore tunes today. Look at artists like Aaron Spectre, Noize Punishment, and The Bug, to name a few—all have a political message to convey. Certainly in Bristol whenever an anti-Blair/Bush sample gets dropped, the reaction from the audience is generally positive, with shouts of acknowledgment. Personally' try to remain active in a political sense in that I regularly play benefit gigs, support political causes, and attend political rallies, [and] I also sell political material [through DSWAT]."

### **Criterion and Doily**

Since 1999, Criterion Thornton ("Eh, my parents were hippies") and Heather Leitner (Doily) have been turning out music from their home/studio under the JMZ subway line in Brooklyn, where the walls are covered with (mostly Xeroxed) flyers from the countless parties they've been involved with in the New York underground scene.

Not surprisingly, the duo has also collected numerous stories in the last seven years. One favorite, shared with every touring breakcore artist who invariably stops by their studio, concerns a bar show they were booked to play in Detroit. It turned into them DJing hip-hop for someone's cousin's birthday party before launching into their live act, only to have a bunch of wannabe MCs freestyle for the rest of the set. All the while, thousands of people were camped out outside the bar, waiting in line for the *American Idol* auditions the next morning. "Ah, Detroit," sighs Doily.

It's not all war stories, though. Besides making music, DJing, and promoting club nights (often at NYC's Tonic), Criterion and Doily run Brooklyn Beats, which has released music from 1-Speed Bike (Aidan Girt of Godspeed You! Black Emperor), I-Sound, DJ /rupture, Troy Geary, and Jason Forrest (under his copyright-challenging Donna Summer moniker). They've recently launched the Redux 12"s, re-releasing old tracks with new remixes, as well as the *Applecore* mix CD series. "[The term "breakcore"] is a way to describe our noisy amalgamation of soundsystem culture and a punk rock mentality," says Crito.

"Musically, Heather and I don't stick to the breakcore conventions but we're still attached to that community of producers, so I don't mind throwing the term around. At the end of the day, 'breakcore' has a better ring than 'experimental breaks.'"

The pair's commitment to the community has given rise to their small but active Brooklyn Beats distribution company (see sidebar) and they often express their strong views publicly. Doily, who is one of the few women making breakcore, has strong opinions on the role of female musicians in the scene: "No, [the scene] is not integrated between men and women. It seems quite ironic that women will dance their asses off to some thug telling us to back it up but not to something like breakcore, which is much more respectful of us and definitely booty-shaking music--200 booties per minute! I can count on one hand how many women I've played with on the tours I've been on and most of them weren't even producers. I think women are not expected to--or pushed to--play anything other than the instruments that have been deemed appropriate for them for centuries. Bring machines and computers into the equation and that's another story all together."

### **Aaron Spectre**

Mild-mannered, bespectacled [Aaron Spectre](#) from Stow, Massachusetts has a youthful exuberance equaled in the scene only by Shitmat and the Wrong Records crew, which probably explains why he recently fled to wild Berlin. His recent singles for Death\$ucker, Japan's Electro-Violence, and Bong-Ra's Kriss label--some of the scene's most popular tracks in the last 18 months--only hint at the ferocious level of intensity in his live shows. A whirlwind of dreads, Spectre thrashes out blistering amens and distorted calls of "Bloodclaat" from his two Oxygen 8 keyboards and Ableton Live. For his new project, Drumcorps, whose first record is due out this fall on Jason Forrest's Cock Rock Disco label, he mashes a whole slew of metal tunes into the mix.

Spectre, who also has a dulcimer-playing downtempo side ("If I can make an album as good as Dead Can Dance's *Toward the Within*"ll die happy," he says), is fiercely positive about the future of the sound. "The gear is cheap, the software is becoming more intuitive, and kids are coming up with the most mind-blowing music!" he enthuses. "To complain about a lack of innovation means you're just not listening in the right places. There's no shortage of creativity in sight." Spectre's music has taken him all over Europe and even to the Middle East, where he played at Beirut, Lebanon's first-ever free open-air party, No Borders. "It drew about 600 people, many of whom had never heard electronic<sup>^</sup>

music before, outside of house or the odd pop-techno track," says Aaron. "I played for almost four hours, starting with breaks at 125 bpm and ending with 250 bpm nosebleed breakcore, and they were dancing furiously all the way through! Imagine a huge crowd of people from every walk of life dressed to the nines, mashing it up to Venetian Snares under the full moon and the bombed-out buildings. It was a lovely, rare, tabula rasa moment."

## **Rotator**

You can't go very far in the breakcore scene without hearing someone refer to Rotator, the legendary Anti-Cartel parties he and his crew throw in Rennes, France, or his Peace Off label, which pushes the hardest sounds with a higher level of quality control than anyone else. Widerstand's Daniel Eiterherd describes Peace Off as "a professional team on such a high level." Ask Rotator (Frank Tavakoli), more a man of boundless action than words, for a comment and he replies (via a terse, manic email): "Come on, punxxx! Jump around! Hahaha!"

Peace Off and its numerous sub-labels--Damage, Mutant Sniper, and Bang A Rang (for warped dancehall)--have gotten the very best material out of Enduser, Venetian Snares, Doormouse, and Kid606, as well as French associates Krumble, Electric Kettle, and Electromeca. Rotator recently started another imprint, Ruff, to release grime-influenced material from Starkey, Mathhead, and his Black Ham alias.

Rotator may be a proper label head, but in person he's a madman with a maniacal grin. He always performs in a crazy mask or balaclava and his music is so hard he often goes on at the end of the night, giving him ample time to get plastered, play for four hours instead of 40 minutes, and then wail at frequent tour-mate Drop the Lime, "Ohhh... I played too fucking long, didn't I?"

"You can find all you need inside," says Tavakoli when asked why he's so into the breakcore sound. "Ragga, mash-up, hardcore, melo, dark, electronica, glitch, metal... Diversity is the blood of this music and there's plenty of new producers, new styles, and new vibes." He's quick to shout out up-and-coming stars Cardopusher, Xian, and the unicorn-porn-obsessed Vytar but, like Faith Hill giving a Grammy speech, he's careful not to leave out the fans. "Every actor (artist, promoter, producer) is important in this scene, but without the crowd and the listener who's supporting it, there's nothing," he says. "Respect and thanks to all of them." ^

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