

Sasha & John Digweed: The Renaissance men cometh

Created On October 23rd, 2006 by Nyquist Theorem

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http://www.inthemix.com.au/features/29061/Sasha_John_Digweed_The_Renaissance_men_cometh

As individuals, Sasha and John Digweed stand as two of the most creative, influential and important music makers on the entire planet. As individuals, they regularly tour the world, stunning packed clubs the world over with their cutting edge musical selections and their uncanny ability to play the perfect record for the moment, no matter where or when that moment might be. As individuals, their fanbase and following borders on the mythical, both in numbers and in devotion. As individuals, recent years have seen them tour Australia to rave reviews in some of this country's most impressive venues. But this article isn't about Sasha or John as individuals – for in the coming weeks, Sasha and John Digweed are touring Australia not as individuals, but as the legendary partnership that is Sasha and Digweed.

To the uninitiated, such fanfare may seem a bit over-the-top for a couple of guys that, a cynic might argue, just stand around playing other people's records. But if you're not convinced the praise is worthy, ask someone who's been following dance music for some time about the names Sasha and Digweed. They might tell you about the pair's mix compilations such as *Renaissance – The Mix Collection*, which created an entire genre in the early 1990s, or the *Northern Exposure* series from the later 1990s – landmarks to some, the musical equivalent of the Holy Bible to others. They might tell you about the pair's contributions to the *Global Underground* series of CDs around the turn of the century, or about the groundbreaking individual efforts of the two more recently, such as Digweed's *MMII* compilation in 2002 or his more recent *Transitions*, released just a few months ago, or Sasha's *Airdrawndagger* and *Involver* releases in 2002 and 2004, respectively. They might tell you about how legendary their live appearances are, or how they once heard from a friend of a friend of some guy who dated some girl who knew some guy about how utterly amazing their last appearance together in Australia was half a decade ago – at which point they're likely to launch into a tirade about how 'those were the days' and whatnot. At this point, feel free to let them know that 'those days' are *these days*, Petter – for Sasha and John Digweed are well and truly on their way back to Australia for another tour. On the eve of their triumphant return to Australian shores, ITM caught up with dance music's most important dynamic duo to find out the complete story.

My first questions for the two have to do with how the partnership has fared over the years – and if the Sasha and Digweed of today is indeed the same musical tour-de-force that it was five, ten, and fifteen years ago. “It’s a bit like getting the old band back together,” John admits with a chuckle. “We just kind of click, Sasha and I. We’ve been playing together for so long, and it’s just one of those things where you never lose it.” “We go backwards and forwards,” Sasha adds. “Playing in a club together back-to-back, you definitely get to sit back and listen to the music a bit more. You get inspired and you pull things out to try – it’s kind of like a gentle one-upmanship where you’re trying to outdo each other ever so slightly with each record.”

So just how do the two share the space and controls across an evening? “We just kind of get up there and do our thing,” John says. “There’s nothing pre-planned, nothing worked out.” “It depends on the night, the length of the set, and the vibe,” Sasha adds. “Some nights if I’m not feeling up for it right away, John will take over and start things off, and it works really well. In a partnership like ours, you carry each other.”

John notes that the opportunities for the two to play together are becoming increasingly rare. “We did a big show in Romania together recently, and another in Istanbul – I think the fact that we don’t do it as much as we used to kind of makes it that much more fun when we *do* manage to do it,” he says. “It was New Years 2001 the last time we were through Australia together,” says Sasha. “I’m looking forward to being there with Johnathan – it’s always a special night for us to be playing together in Australia.”

These two are no strangers to Australian shores, of course, either individually or as a team – and so it should come as no surprise that the two have their fair share of amusing stories and anecdotes from having crawled so thoroughly through Australian clubland. Their favourite? “We did a Northern Exposure tour – 1997 I think? – and we had to do a mix for triple J,” John recounts. “We were supposed to get this mix done, but we got delayed, and then something else came up, and we finally ended up going into this club in Perth on a Wednesday night that was having an 80s night and asked if we could record our set. It was one of the most surreal things.” “It was this really cheesy bar,” Sasha adds. “But they had this little DJ setup in the corner, and so we asked if we could borrow it to record our set.” And so, on a weekday evening at a small hotel bar in Perth, twenty-odd punters were treated to a blistering three hour set from two of the biggest names in dance music. Their reaction? “Kind of mixed,” John says with

a laugh. "Here was this little group of people in there expecting 80s music, and there's Sasha and myself up there in the booth churning out the most banging upfront tunes at the time. Some people were coming up asking why we weren't playing 80s records, while the other half of the room knew who we were and were standing there in disbelief going 'what on earth are you two doing in here on a Wednesday night?'" "Yeah, it was a real banging techno mix," Sasha recalls, "much to the amusement of the cleaning staff."

For as much as Sasha and Digweed work well as a musical team, their individual styles – both musical and technical – are markedly different. "Progressive is a bit of a dirty word at present, but it's something that's been attached to my name," Sasha notes. "I'm sure minimal will be a dirty word in three or four years' time, and those who are currently riding that wave of success will be trying to get away from it." "I always try and play new and fresh stuff," says Digweed. "But, I think it's also important to play *good* music. There's no point playing something new just for the sake of it. It's important to have standards, in that if there's a certain period where there's not a lot of good music out there, I won't play new stuff if it's not working. I think it's important to maintain the quality. My main focus as a DJ is to try and educate when I'm DJing." "Usually by the time something's written about you and what you play, you've moved on. The important thing is to keep moving, to keep changing and evolving," adds Sasha.

And so just what sort of tunes have been catching the ears of these two dancefloor superstars in recent months? "The Germans are just completely on it at the moment," enthuses Sasha. "They are the saviours of house music at the moment. I don't play a minimal set, but even with the stuff that I'm playing that's a bit more progressive, that country has single-handedly saved the scene, I'd say. The UK scene has really, really kind of shrunk, and lots of the major labels that were really influential at the end of the 1990s have disappeared." "Radioslave has been turning out some fantastic stuff, and Tiefschwarz are really, really smashing it out as well," John adds.

What, then, of Ableton Live, the computer-based DJing and audio production software that Sasha has been using to DJ with instead of CDs and vinyl? Having listened to more than a few international DJs share their views on bringing laptops into the DJ booth, I ask Sasha for his perspective on the technology – and his response to the criticism that's been levelled at him over the past year. "Once I switched to Ableton and started DJing with that, I really got back into playing again, I really got excited by it," he says. "It's like a mixer with

endless channels, you know? It's a very creative tool. You're not just limited to a couple decks."

So what then of the criticisms raised by his peers? Here Sasha has plenty to say. "There's definitely prejudice," he begins. "With any new kind of jump forward, anytime there's change there's going to be prejudice. Some people have used the fact that I'm using Ableton just to have a dig at me because they don't like my music. The thing about Ableton is, if you didn't like my music before I started using it, well it's not suddenly transformed me into a completely different DJ. I'm still playing my favourite records, and putting them together the way I feel they should be put together. It's still a thought process – it's not like I mix a tune and then sit down and light a cigarette and talk to my mates for ten minutes while the record is playing – I'm very focused and very busy when I'm playing."

Clearly I've struck a nerve. Sasha continues. "Playing with Ableton, your concentration shifts to other things," he says. "Sometimes I'll switch and do a set on CDs every now and then, and it feels very different – just as playing vinyl feels different to playing CDs. At the end of the day, though, it's just a tool for playing music. Each tool shifts your brain slightly in different places. I'm not focusing on beatmatching, but on finding those records that really work well together. I still have to be very aware of what's going on around me, though. At the end of the day, it's a fragile system – using a computer in a nightclub."

We then discuss Sasha's hardware controller, the Maven, a custom-built device covered with faders, knobs, buttons and sliders that allows Sasha to control his Macintosh laptop with the same analogue tactile motions honed from his decades in the DJ booth. "Unless you have a controller, Ableton is very hard to use as a DJ tool," Sasha explains. "I built my own controller for that reason, and I'm surprised something else like it hasn't come out on the market." Given the close partnership between the two, I have to ask – is there a Mavenweed in the works for John? "No," John replies with a chuckle, "no Mavenweed just yet."

So where in the booth does that leave the Digweed half of Sasha and Digweed? "I'm still on CDs and a mixer," John replies. "I haven't made any transformations to a computer yet. It's one of those things where we can still do tag-team and everything like that." "The first couple gigs were shaky," Sasha admits. "But now we've got it down, and we can go back and forth seamlessly."

As we wrap things up, I ask for a bit of insight into how the past fifteen years have been for two of dance music's most luminary individuals, and how their fanbase has changed – or stayed the same – over the years. Here Sasha is introspective. "Success isn't just riding the peaks of your career, but also how you deal with the lulls," he says. "I've been DJing for 17 years, I've had peaks and I've had lulls, and it's how you move on from that stuff that counts, I think." "It's nice to know that you've made an impression on people and that they like what you do," John adds. "I think people can see that we're passionate about what we do, and that we're doing it for the right reasons."