



When Ninjas Attack Surrounded by Ninjas

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Electronic music has walked a bumpy road since its production tools first became affordable and accessible to the public at large. It was met with staunch resistance by many in the musical community as a way of cheating, so to speak, at the art of making music. Since then, as we all know, electronic production has gained wide approval, and has developed its own musical and stylistic identity, as well as infiltrating just about every conceivable genre. Yet there are still those out there who refuse to open up to it. Perhaps because of its lack of adaptability in a performance setting, many feel it is impossible to adequately express oneself musically with tools that are so limited in this sense. All that, however, is changing before our very eyes as software manufacturers and musicians alike innovate and push electronica forward into new realms where its limitations are peeling away, allowing it to blossom into an art form where limitations are quickly becoming an endangered species. Portland, OR- based Surrounded by Ninjas is an example of this forward thinking philosophy that is taking electronic music in new directions and tearing down the restrictions that were once so feared. The duo consists of Asher Fulero- keyboards, loops, beats, noises, knobs, and buttons, alongside Joel Barber- turntables. Not a totally unorthodox instrumentation, but without question, these are innovative minds pushing the musical envelope to new places.

Fulero has had a long and diverse musical story. Musically educated, he has always been hungry for interaction with as many musicians as possible, but in the formative years, he was "generally being swept along the 'instrumentalist' road where manual control over an instrument is seen as the only true musicianship." Fortunately, one required component of his formal education was to "dabble in electronic music, at which point, I realized that GOOD electronic music is just as hard to make as GOOD music of any other kind. Once I made that connection, I started hearing things differently, picking the good electronic music from the bad. My own tastes changed pretty fast actually..." and the doors started swinging open to musical dimensions which had, until then, eluded Fulero's attention altogether. Enter Joel Barber, promoter and emerging DJ. While Asher was honing his engineering skills in his bedroom studio during his first years out of college, he was gigging around Portland, sitting in here and there with whomever he could. While Asher was playing a show with the Ashleigh Flynn band one evening, the DJ they had hired for the night caught his ear. He was "dropping these killer vocal clips into the beginnings and endings of Ashleigh's songs." As it turns out, it was Joel Barber's first DJ gig, but due to Asher's new-found interest in electronic production, he struck up a conversation with Barber- and their friendship and musical partnership were out of the gate.

Fulero's background in improvisation made him eager to overcome what may be the biggest hurdle in electronic music- the inability to flex, change, or adapt your sound around the energy of a particular moment with a particular audience in a particular place- having an impromptu conversation, as opposed to pre-conceived oratory. But thanks to the innovation of folks like Ableton, with their Live software application, this was suddenly a non-issue. Electronica-Goes-Improv is by no means a novel concept, but it is relatively undeveloped, and has yet to be propelled by any real defining leadership. Not that Surrounded by Ninjas aspire to fill that role; they're just out to make the best music they can by having as many tools at their disposal as possible. As Fulero puts it, "I've never been too taken with 'combining' genres. I've always looked for ways to create new approaches that are informed by different genres, but applied uniquely rather than simply juxtaposed."

Over the three years following their meeting, the music of Fulero and Barber has morphed in several phases, leading up to the release of their newest album. *Dual Processor* is scheduled for mid-2006 release on reapsandow, an outfit dealing exclusively in digital

distribution. It's been in constant flux, as Fulero describes: "We went from completely ambient improvisation and into a more controlled, still improvised, loop-based downtempo phase. Then we moved into a heavier and more aggressive, yet still improvised, loop-based drum-n-bass phase, which is represented by the second half of the new album, then into a long hiatus, which culminated in the first half of the new album- the studio tracks. After that, we nearly abandoned the improvisation and dove headlong into using our laptops to create songs which we could perform consistently, albeit with massive improvisational control over the layout and structure of the music- thanks to Ableton Live."

Seems like a natural progression, no? Moving from improvisational jams into loops and samples, then into improvisational looping- both on stage and in the studio. Barber describes this improv-in-the-studio approach: "We had only very basic tracks when we went into the studio and we worked much in the same way that we perform, except we had the luxury of having time to talk about it and a professional studio that allowed us to pull off anything we could conceive, really. Ironically (and much like a live improvised set,) the studio tracks exist only in the studio, fleeting. The album is the only real place to experience them because in taking advantage of and embracing the studio environment, we created tracks that we could never pull off live. And allowing ourselves to step beyond our IMPROV ONLY rule, we're able to provide tastier grooves in less time. It takes a while to build a sweet jam from scratch and we're not doing three to five-hour lounge sets anymore."

Beyond their musical progression, Barber and Fulero have definitely got a collective ear to the ground when it comes to the currents of the industry as well. Signing with reapsandow, and therefore being distributed solely by digital means, is in a way betting on the future direction in which the industry will veer. It's easier to get a project off the ground without massive overhead, and quicker than was ever possible with conventional distribution. Artists and labels with small catalogues can make their material available on mega-digi-distributors like iTunes and Rhapsody, but by doing it under the banner of organizations like reapsandow, they are far less likely to be swallowed up into the void and forgotten. As reapsandow Director of Operations J Gibson says, "It's one thing to be on these services—which everybody wants—and not have anyone know unless they are one of your fans, but it's another to have people knowing you are there [and] where to look... or better yet, stumble upon you."

This also has to do with the ability of consumers to easily cross-reference their interests, essentially flipping the script on demographic marketing, and allowing those within a given demographic target group to seek out whatever they're after, rather than the artist or label having to find them. This further serves to reduce production costs by eliminating advertising and marketing expenditures. The consumer does all the work. Ingenious. "Though no one likes being pigeonholed into categories," continues Gibson, "I truly believe that in the digital era it can help you expose listeners as well as bands to genres they might never have even thought of before."

The future of music- the industry, the artists, the listeners, and how they will interact in forthcoming years- is a whirlwind of question marks. Today's do-it-yourself production explosion is allowing more free expression among amateur musicians, and with the costs of distribution plummeting, the playing field has never been more level. Surrounded by Ninjas are on the cutting edge of this revolution and are pushing boundaries musically. Somebody always has to take calculated risks as well as leaps of faith to propel a movement forward, and with trailblazing artists like Surrounded by Ninjas working side by side with industry forward-thinkers like reapsandow, the possibilities are infinite, and brimming with potential. [B](#)