



Lions and Lambs



photo by Vince Kline

JOE NICE

Joebama. Dr. Dubstep. Mr. Minus Degree. The Dubstep Ambassador. El Presidente. Jose Noches... Many nicknames, one guy – Joe Nice.

Leader of the stamina crew, general manager of the Red Bull Posse, and the CEO of OMG, Inc., Joe was there at roots of dubstep in America. With his endless enthusiasm, passion, and energy, Joe helped plant the dubstep seed on North American soil and has been watching it grow for years.

Before the interview, Joe warned me that he had a lot on his mind and indeed, he did. A couple of hours before his show in San Francisco, we sat down in the basement of the club and no topic was out of bounds. From cooking ramen noodles and ironing, to performing (not playing!) dubstep (not brostep!), producing, being better, doing more, and staying true. Read on and listen up, this man you can trust.



photo by Seckle

Joe, let's just get this out of the way. Why do you play with your shoes off?

I always get this one! I do it because when I first started deejaying about 15 years ago, every house I performed in had a carpet. And my mom would never let me wear shoes in the house. I always remember her voice: "Joseph, take your shoes off," and I'd always leave my shoes in the kitchen, 'cause it was the only place in the house with tiled floor. So one of the first times I played out, I was terrible, I was horrifically bad... and I remember driving home that night and thinking that something wasn't right, something went wrong that night. And I realized I had my shoes on! And I'd never played with my shoes on before.

It's not some hippie thing, where I'm trying to be one with the bass, have the vibration come to my feet or I like having my toes vibrate when I play. It's simply a habit. And now it's one of those things that people are waiting for, "The shoes are OFF! The shoes are OFF!" People are even taking pictures of my socks and my shoes when I play..

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Do you have any other habits you absolutely have to follow?

I iron everything (not underwear and socks). You see how nicely pressed I am? When I go somewhere, I have everything planned out, so I know what I'm gonna wear. I iron everything, and I put it in the plastic bag before putting it in a bag. And there's a reason for that. You never know when you're gonna be somewhere where it's gonna rain or snow. It once happened to me: something had leaked from the inside of the airplane right onto my bag. And when I got my bag in the baggage claim all my clothes were wet! So I learned that when you put your clothes into a plastic bag before putting it in a bag, it protects them from being wet.

That's funny!

See, you're laughing at me now, but when that happens to you, when your favorite pair of jeans is soaked... You can only hold that hair dryer up to that pair of pants for so long, before you'll go, "You know what, it burns and it's NOT working!"

It's just one of the things that I learned after a few years of traveling. If it's straight out of the plastic bag it's fresh. It's gotta be ironed though. It must be a British thing...

I actually just found out recently that you were born in the UK.

Yes, I was born in England. Both of my parents are from Trinidad. I came to America when I was two. Been in Baltimore ever since.

Let's talk about Dub War. You were there from the start. Reflect a little bit.

The very first show... Ah! This was June of 2005. Dave wanted to start a dubstep show in New York; he saw me playing shows here and there so he brought me out. I think I drove up there. It took forever... Anyway, we did the first show and thirty people showed up. I think that was the first night we met Seckle too. I gotta say, without him Dub War wouldn't be nearly what it is right now. Because he does all the behind the scenes stuff: all the photography, all the YouTube videos that people in Slovenia and Croatia are watching... He does all that and god bless him for that, 'cause that's the world profile of Dub War!

So then we did another show a couple of months later and that night a guy with dreadlocks and Trinidadian accent [Juakali] walks in and gets on the mic. It was very different, and absolutely perfect for what we did. Juakali is not your typical MC, he's not talking over every tune, and he has a certain flavor, sound, and style that separate him from all the MCs around.

A couple of months later we brought Kode9 over, and had Juakali as MC. They smashed the place to bits! When that night happened, Dave and I realized that that's exactly what we should be doing and we needed to make it a regular... Since then we've been doing it for years.

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We always try to push the envelope and keep things fresh. We try to look outside the dubstep bubble and keep it interesting. We brought Mike Slott, Ras G, Martyn... 'Cause you know, if we get bored with what we're doing, then partygoers and listeners will get bored with it too.

The latest addition to Dub War is Alex Incyde. He's got a very different style; he's into a techy kind of sound. And it works for Dub War, because Dave and I play similar kind of stuff, but what Alex likes is different.

Why do you always play last at Dub War?

I've always played last ever since the early days. It's become a tradition for me to play after the headliner and I like that because I look at whatever the headliner does and I go in another

direction. If it's jump-up, i'll dub it out. If it's techy, time for the bangers. There's enough in the box to go in any direction.

And it's always fun to play for the stamina crew (after 3 a.m.) – I also call them the Gatorade gang or Red Bull posse. At that point we're trying to keep the energy level up, so people have the best time.

What do you think the impact of Dub War on dubstep in America has been?

Overall, there's a piece of me that honestly believes that dubstep in America wouldn't be what it is now without what we've done with Dub War for years and years. I know that there are other parties that look at what we've been doing and they take a chance with dubstep. I'm happy that we inspired promoters in other cities to say, "Ok, you know what, there can be dubstep in Austin, TX; damn it, they love bass in Miami, it can work there too!" Lord knows, San Francisco has been going off, LA, Portland, Seattle, Chicago, Kansas City, Albuquerque, San Diego... So people in other cities are taking chances that we took nearly five years ago, and I'm pleased to see the success all the way around.

I know you've got a lot to say about the state of dubstep music nowadays. Let it out.

How much time do we have? [Looks at the clock] Ok, I'm on in an hour. I've got a lot to say. There are producers who are making quality music out here. We know who they are, we know their names, we see their faces in the magazines... [Pauses] But there's a pile of shit music out here as well. There's a lot of producers now that know software, but don't know how to make music. All that overly angry, aggressive, brostep, fratboystep... shit music! And within the past 18 months or so there's been so much of this recycled sound that I can't even call dubstep!

If your tune sounds like a bunch of power tools at a Home Depot – that's not bass, that's not sub, therefore, it's not dubstep!

When you think of dubstep, the first three letters spell "dub." Dub was about bass, pace, and space. You listen to any dub musician back in the day – that's what dub music was and still is to this day. If you have a tune that's full of midrange and chain=saw sounds – how is that bass?! If your tune sounds like a bunch of power tools at a Home Depot – that's not bass, that's not sub, therefore, it's not dubstep!



photo by Ian Flannery

I get a ton of these tunes sent to me – I delete them all, I don't have time for them. I probably shouldn't say that in an interview, but I'm gonna relay it... It's gotten to a point now where if you send me a shit tune on AIM, I'm blocking you. And someone can say, "Damn, Joe, you're cold and ruthless." No. I'm not cold, I'm not ruthless. I'm responsible. Listen, if I had a shit set on the decks one night, people are gonna remember. They're not gonna come see me again. It'll be a while till I get booked at a particular location again, because of whatever happened. So if partygoers can do that with me as a DJ, I too, as a DJ, should be allowed to do that with the producers who want me to play their music. I should be just as critical of them as the crowd would be of me. I think that's the right thing to do.

I don't want dubstep to become brostep. If it does, I'm selling my equipment, giving away my dubs, and I'm done.

If all you do is make shit tunes, why should I think that you're gonna do something different in the future? This is who you are, this is what

you do, therefore I should expect a certain result in the end. If that's what you feel dubstep is, if that's your way of expressing yourself musically, god bless you, more power to you. That's just not for me. I know it's not. Because when I first started playing dubstep seven years ago, it was never midrange, chainsaw sounds and boring melodies. No. Dubstep was bass, sub, and melody. And I am a dubstep DJ, so I can't play that other stuff.

But I do like a lot of the different ways sound stretched out towards. We have influences of techno, funky house, etc... But I don't want dubstep to become some repository of music at 140 bpm that didn't fit into any other genre.

So do you think there's a threat to what you call "the real dubstep"?

Yes, there is a huge threat! The problem is that there are so many people producing dudestep, and some people might think that's what dubstep is. There's more and more mixes, radio shows, club nights, festivals with that sound coming up, and less of what the real dubstep is. I don't want dubstep to become brostep. If it does, I'm selling my equipment, giving away my dubs, and I'm done.

Should there be some sort of quality control? Dub police?

[Laughs] Dub FBI. Well, all I know is it's a whole lot more work to find quality tunes now than it was two years ago. There are more people who are producing, and want to be a part of this sound for whatever reason. It's just an observation – it takes a lot more effort to get a quality tune now. It's a shame. Before, I would get tunes that were good music, but bad dubstep. Now it's just bad music. So it's far worse... You can tell bad music when you hear it. People know. And if something has to be done about it, it's continuing to push what you've always believed – stay true to yourself and the real dubstep sound. That's the only way I know how to do this.

Have you tried producing?

I have. But you know, I'm impatient. Really impatient. If I feel I'm not picking up a concept or an idea right away, I begin to question myself and come to a block. After a while I just can't help it and I have to leave it alone. I'd love to make my tunes of course, but I get my enjoyment and fulfillment from kicking the crowd's ass when I deejay. That's what I like doing.

What is it exactly that makes you happy when you deejay?

It's a blank canvas in front of you – which is the crowd. You've got your paint and colors – dubs. Paint the picture! I like thinking of what kind of picture I'm going to paint. What do I want people to feel when they are going home after the night...

The one thing I took from a lot of the DJs I grew up watching (like Scotty B, Mark Henry, DJ Boobie, DJ Technics), they looked like the focal point of their entire lives was on those two decks in front of them. There could have been fire in the crowd, it wouldn't mater, they'd still be playing. And I remember how I wanted to be just like them; no, actually I wanted to be better than them.

Is that so?

I'm sure everyone wants to be good at what they are doing. But there comes a point in personal development when you don't want to do what *they* did, you want to do better. The DJ's playing before me, they're hungry too. They've got something to prove. They've got something to say with their set. They want to be heard. I should know, I was that guy too. Trust me.

I was playing in Oregon earlier this year. After the show this guy comes up to me and he goes, "Man, one of these days I'm gonna rock the crowd better than you." All I could do was smile and laugh, because I never said that to any of the people I looked up to, but I thought that so many times. And I completely respected the guy who said that to me. I value that compliment better than "Yo Joe, nice set." I feel that there is a personal connection between what I did and what he experienced that night. And that's the ultimate feeling I get from being a DJ.

I want people to go, "Ok, I'll be eating ramen noodles for the next three days, but damn it, Joe Nice was worth three days of ramen noodles."

Plus given the economy state today, with people losing their jobs, working weekends, living from check to check... When people come out and spend their 10, 15, 20 dollars on the show, I better make sure they get their money's worth. I remember spending my last ten dollars on a show and then regretting it, thinking I should have watched a movie or played video games. I don't want that to happen when I'm playing. I want people to go, "Ok, I'll be eating ramen noodles for the next three days, but damn it, Joe Nice was worth three days of ramen noodles."

Speaking of ramen, beef and chicken flavors are good, with a bit of Parmesan, but honestly, I don't remember the last time I had Top ramen. I'm a married man now.

Name the most treasured dub in your collection.

Easy question – easier answer. Hands down, Mala's "DMZ vs. MZN." [MZN = Mighty Zulu Nation]

Since you've been playing strictly dubplates from day one, you might be one of the best people to talk to about the usual vinyl versus digital argument.

Well, the issue I have with digital is that it's not for me. I'm a dubplate guy. When something spins or rotates, for example a record on a turntable, the rotation causes vibration, the vibration creates sound. You don't get that from a CD player or a laptop. For me analog is the more authentic sound, then digital. It's the same argument as accuracy versus precision. When something's accurate, it's right. When it's precise it can be numerically correct but it's not right. MP3s are precise, they are digital, it's binary code – zero one zero one, zero one. There's no room for interpretation. Analog is accurate...

I'm a firm believer that there is no finish line. No matter how far you've gone, you can always go farther, you can always do more and be more.

And honestly, I'd rather have something I can *feel* than something I can *understand*. You can understand zeros and ones of an MP3. But you can feel the bass hit you in your chest, you can feel your pants vibrate at your ankles, you have bangs so you can feel something depending on how close you get to the speaker... You get the point.

What are you going to do in the next couple of years? What's your plan for the music?

I don't necessarily have a plan for myself for the next couple of years, but I know when I'm done with dubstep or music, I don't want any regrets. I'm a firm believer that there is no finish line. No matter how far you've gone, you can always go farther, you can always do more and be more. It's the way of life. Ten years from now you're gonna be doing something different from what you're doing now. So before the expiration date hits it's up to all of us personally to do as much as we can when we have a chance to do it, 'cause

that chance might not come around again. One thing I can do is play more shows, keep pushing the sound, cause that's my passion – I love performing in front of people. Not playing. Performing. I know there are a bunch of DJs who put everything they've got into what they're doing. They're not playing, they're performing. There are some that stand there with no action or emotion. They're playing. I'm not that guy. I can't just "play"...I gotta perform. I gotta give it my all. Gotta empty the tank. I don't know any other way to do it and if I do it any other way, I'd feel like I'm cheating the crowd, and ultimately cheating myself. And you have to be true to yourself, 'cause what you do changes but in the end, you are who you are.

Any plans for your radio show?

With my radio show I want to do more presenting than performing. People know I can DJ. I feel right now a lot of radio shows are not informative. I want to make a point of it now. I want to give people information about the tunes and who made them. I don't want to leave people in the dark.

Finally, whom do you want to Big Up?

There's so many people... Dan Gee and John Ask, local DJs from Baltimore. They always told me to keep doing what I was doing. And they were right. I've gotta Big Up former roommate extraordinaire, DJ Tai. Without him, there's no Gourmetbeats and no Gourmetbeats Radio. Big up Oscar at Turnstyle Records. He's been cutting my dubs since day one. That brother has made miracles happen. Thank you, sir. Also gotta thank DJ Knowledge, N'Dinga and DJ De Star. Without them, I'm not who I am now. Gotta thank Donny Burlin – he was one of the few DJs that made me believe that everything he did on the decks was important, even if it was twisting a knob or turning down the volume. He was all in – all the time. Baltimore legends forever. 410 style. My Dub War guys – Dave, Ken, Juakali, Incyde. We're family. When you have Dave, Jua, and me on the stage there's this magical chemistry that you can't buy at any drug store. The producers like Skream, Mala, Breakage, Youngsta, N-Type, Hatcha, Distance, Plastician, Loefah, Coki, Pokes, Kode9 – timeless stuff. Chef – a hell of a DJ. A lot of the guys I talk to online - 2562, Martyn, Untold, Joker, Jakes, Blackdown and Dusk, Ramadanman, TRG, Truth. Jay Da Flex – I was just starting doing my radio show and he invited me to see his radio show. And by watching him I've learned more than I've ever learned by watching someone do what they were doing. All the promoters, my management crew. My mom and dad, 'cause my love for music comes from them. My wife, Tammie. We've been together for three years and it's been the best three years of my life. [Pauses] I'm a better person because of her and I'm eternally thankful that we're together. I'm lucky... and happy.