

Frigidity: Scenes, Spaces and Places of Australian Electronica and Hip Hop

Eve Klein

Eve Klein talks with Seb Chan of Sub Bass Snarl.

Seb Chan's ingenuity has been bent towards the creation of events and spaces for electronic music in Australia since the early 1990s. After beginning as a radio host for Skid Row, he and Luke Dearnley formed Sub Bass Snarl and began playing in the emerging Sydney party and rave scenes in 1992. Weathering the upheaval of the Sydney rave scene in the mid 1990s, Sub Bass Snarl went on to found electronic music club *Frigid* in 1996, after involvement with other events like *Cryogenesis*. Currently held at the Newtown RSL in Sydney, *Frigid* remains a weekly electronic music staple, despite venue changes and financial insecurities common to live music of the last decade. *Frigid* in turn created *Cyclic Defrost*, a nationally distributed electronic music publication, now partly supported by the Australia Council. Chan was also one of the founders of Newcastle based electronic music festival *Sound Summit*, a part of the larger digital arts and media festival *This Is Not Art*. Chan has toured internationally across North America, Europe and Asia with Sub Bass Snarl and as a solo performer known as Yellow Peril.

Following on from an article in the last issue of *Music Forum* (v10, n5), I invited Chan to discuss his experiences of venues, locality and space effecting Australian electronic music and hip hop. The following excerpts were taken from a wandering conversation over a Thai meal in Sydney's Inner West during August:

EK: Let's begin by thinking about locality in terms of venues. Do you agree that there is a venue crisis for music performance in Sydney?

SC: I think there has always been a venue crisis in Sydney or NSW and Shane Homan's (1) research on that has been pretty clear, showing it as a combination of public policy, licensing laws and the general geography of Sydney that creates these issues. It's effected different scenes in different periods. So in the early 1990s you had live acts being hit hard, but at the same time you had a really vibrant rave scene going on because they were utilising different sorts of performance spaces like warehouses. Whereas now, subsequent to '95 and the shut down of rave, you get a situation where all the styles were pushed into competition for the same kinds of spaces – you have live acts, rock bands, dance parties and hip hop crews using the same kinds of spaces whereas in the past perhaps, at least for a short period, dance spaces were warehouses, pubs were rock and hip hop happened in lounge rooms and youth centres.

EK: Did you agree with Homan's linking of licensing laws to the closing down of space?

SC: I agree with some of Shane's work from what I've taken from the rave scene, the shut down of the *Vibe Tribe* parties in Sydney Park and the changing demographics of Alexandria and Mascot. It's a combination of public policy and demographic issues. You can't pin it down to any one thing because these scenes all naturally change but certainly in terms of rock, the licensing laws in NSW does make it kind of hard to run any music space profitably without poker-machines... I think some of the stuff about rock venues disappearing was also about the demographics of those audiences beginning to shift and people going into inner-city pubs not so much wanting dirty, grimy spaces... The Olympic announcement in '96 was a catalyst for change in terms of land values and property values with venues being measured in terms of their real estate potential rather than their cultural potential.

EK: What impact did the loss of the squat spaces at Broadway have on the local arts community?

SC: There's a few impacts that you could measure from that. For me that was one of the last attempts, along with a few other spaces... which were about creating artist run spaces within the inner city. Whilst I was fully supportive of squat space I also think that there is an attitude suggesting that the inner city is about art because it has been traditionally so, but I think as the demographic of Sydney has changed and property values have gone up... people have moved in and out. What I'm seeing I guess is... artists are being forced out of the inner city because of rising rents. I thought that the squat attempt at Homebush with the social centre was an interesting attempt to re-locate arts spaces to areas where artists can actually afford to live. Moving things further west has been resisted in the past... I'm generalising here, but a lot of artists, particularly artists who have been brought up on that middle-class based idea that art occurs at the heart of the city, aren't comfortable with moving out west where its supposedly suburbia. But I think that is the reality of things, that artists are spreading out so it makes sense for arts spaces to move with those shifts. What you don't get there is the density of artists around a certain nodal point. The NSW government's attempts to set up Western Sydney arts policies is trying to address the issue of creating nodal points in the west at the expense of the inner city.

EK: *Frigid* is interesting as a kind of melting-pot space, where you get the two happening on alternative nights or with different DJs doing different mixes on the same night. It seems to draw really good responses from the crowd. Do you think that events like *Frigid*, which share spaces, allow people to cross between hip-hop and electronica?

SC: To an extent. *Frigid*'s a very Eurocentric set-up really. We all came out of the rave scene with the idea of setting up an arts space... It was a very middle class dream.... Yet, at the same time, we've always tried to keep things moving and part of that's been our diverse tastes, so you get that reflected in there. It's hard to put it into words but I guess *Frigid*'s always been, at least in my mind, a social experiment that we've been under control of. Everything is not so much planned, but we have the freedom to experiment whereas other people don't, or may not feel that they have the freedom to experiment. Rightly some of the hip hop crews in Sydney have said 'well you guys can afford to run a club where you can have this eclectic mix'. And we can, so we're trying to do the best possible eclectic thing. Maybe that's a bit harsh but you know what I mean. It's like people in Paddington in the 80s purchasing World Music because they could... 'Oh, I'm interested in Africa so I'll buy some African music'. Kind of that middle class eclecticism, and I don't think that's necessarily a bad thing so long as it's pushed. And that has been our intention, to continually push the boundaries so it doesn't become static, and I think we've all been quite accepting that we are products of a particular upbringing, of a particular class and social structure and that that has afforded us particular opportunities, benefits, relationships etc. But we aren't happy to sit back and say 'we have all this, let's just keep it to ourselves.' It's more about trying to set up opportunities for other people. It's hard to explain.

EK: How would that contrast the difference between class, community and locality associated with hip hop and electronica in Sydney?

SC: In Sydney electronica is generally middle class and white, and that's also because it has those connotations from the media: its own subcultural media as well as general media portrayal of that kind of sound. It's abstract too in a way that's similar to a whole range of other changes in technology.... that aren't so much about community. Hip hop is a very people-centric sound and performative style that's very much about building networks of people whereas electronica's about building networks of machines, and networks of isolated people who may get together once or twice. You see that maybe with the sound art scene versus, say the hip hop scene. They're different, but they're quite similar too.

EK: What do you see as being the main physical spaces for Australian music communities to meet?

SC: I think music communities revolve around two simple meeting places. They will either have a particular series of pub nights or club nights or gallery nights, and/ or you have a series of record shops or bookshops where people meet and discuss. These kinds of things are critical and the differences between the cities are based on those sorts of things. Where there's a really vibrant night for a particular sound in a particular city, you will have more of that kind of sound.

EK: The physical space of *Frigid* is interesting in that it's a seated venue rather than being orientated around a dance-floor. Was that a consideration when you were finding the venue?

SC: *Frigid* has been in five different venues and each of the venues has brought its own set of constraints and benefits. When we were at the Dendy Cinema in Martin Place, it was very much a seated event, but we also had films playing so we'd get a lot of soundtrack improvisation. We moved to the Globe in Newtown and it was a larger space so we could have a more up-tempo live kind of thing going which allowed Elefant Traks to create a starting point for performances. Then the Hopetoun brought that more even more towards a live-act theme. At Newtown [RSL], we are going back to a more comfortable setting where the sound system's better, but there's less focus on the stage so we can experiment with music that's not so front-focused...

Good DJs can have a diverse collection of music and utilise the space in a particular way. In the same way any famous club has a particular sound that is shaped by the DJ, the people and the physical dimensions of a space. You find that in UK, but also in Tokyo where clubs are set up with a particular sound system and speaker set-up to maximise particular frequencies or particular reactions. It's the same as Jamaican sound system culture too. People build a sound system to work in a particular space with a particular musical style because the impact of these factors creates the vibe.

EK: How do you view the introduction of 5.1 Surround Sound formats to some music venues?

SC: In dance music, bass is the key and it's non-directional, so I think its importance is less marked. However there are people putting out records that are in surround which are kind of curious experiments. But until that becomes locked down I don't know, and it's hard also for venues to set up. There was one space in Melbourne that was set up for surround sound for a little while, the Rob Roy, where Qua and a few other people ran a night, but they were really sound art focused, they weren't about dance floor pressure. Most club systems, some, are still in mono because you get the best bottom end response with a mono system in a small room. So it depends on the music you want. While the music remains very bottom end focused for dancing, then surround is not really going to give any extra benefit.

EK: On a broader level, is locality important to the hip hop and electronic genres? Does it make sense to talk about a Sydney or a Melbourne sound?

SC: I guess each city has its own scene. Australia's very different from say Europe, where there is a lot of movement between cities. It's easy to travel around Europe and scenes spread faster there, whereas in Australia you get a lot more locally based scenes. We have, say, a hip hop scene that may be only Sydney based and another hip hop scene in Melbourne, but they don't really communicate much. I think if you talked to people like The Herd or Celsius or Hilltop Hoods, you'll find that those guys spent a long time making it in their own home city, and then even more time getting out of there. In a sense once you get out, you begin again. Particularly without JJJ airplay it's very hard to break across cities. I think it's a bit easier for hip hop acts now because JJJ has changed a lot. But you can play up those local acts and euphemisms with hip hop whereas in electronic music it's much more of a generic, global sound. It's hard to say 'well this is a Sydney sound'. It doesn't make sense.

EK: Have web resources shifted or changed this at all?

SC: I used to think that the web was the answer for a lot of issues around geography. I think it's hard. People can find out about more things now but they don't necessarily find out the context. Talking to someone in a pub about what's playing [is an experience] you don't get chatting on a message board in your bedroom to someone else in Russia. You might get something else, and that's what's interesting. You may not get the local community but you get tied into international networks.

EK: Have you had any important personal experiences of meeting someone online?

SC: Most of the travel I've done over the last few years... has involved people I've met on the web. I've made some good friendships and through that, and stayed at people's places that I've only met through the net... Certainly for any artist to be connected is essential. The democracy of communication that the internet provides with e-mail makes it quite easy for say an artist who finds it a bit difficult to approach a promoter on the local scene, to anonymously approach someone the UK or Japan with an equality of access. Maybe that's the wrong sort of word but you get the idea.

EK: Do you agree with the perception that suggests a new artist should attempt a career overseas before coming back to Australia?

SC: I think people think that the scene or the market is bigger than it is. The Wire, XLR8R and other magazines along with the blog scene... make you feel as a reader that the scenes are big where you aren't. [The implication is that] they're big in the UK or New York or Tokyo. But you get there and it's a room of forty people. The reality is different. Of course there are exceptions but my experience has been even at the Sonar Festival that things are small. In Australia and New Zealand things are good, we just don't see them as good. But comparatively they are.

EK: Is CD and Mp3 Distribution the way that this music travels best?

SC: It depends what it is, but I think most music travels best when it is performed and when you can experience it in a club. Similarly I think you'll find that most hip hop acts will... make the most sales after a show. The Herd for example sell lots of records, but they sell them because they tour a lot. They don't sell them necessarily because they are played on JJJ, though that helps. It's the experience of the live show and hearing it in a social space that changes it. It's when you can't hear music in a local space, say with minimalist electronica or IDM [Intelligent Dance Music] that's when packaging forms the mystique of consumption...

With the democratisation of distribution on the Internet you also have a massive increase in the volume of product produced. So you can get to more people, but they can get to more competitors as well. Really your sales drop, they don't go up. When I was speaking at *Mutek* in Canada last year [a techno festival held in Montreal] the overarching theme was that this music is declining... The Internet may have made things more accessible but there's more actually made now and the community can't keep up. There are too many options in terms of websites... People get a bit swamped with information.

EK: Thinking about the small independent labels as part of this democratising process, do you think the affiliation of smaller labels with the major record conglomerates has in some way or another, affected the kinds of music that are coming out of the independent music scene?

SC: Less so now. The days of partnerships are dying off really. Most of the majors won't sign anyone until they've put out a release on their own label. No one's taking any risks at a label level, though it's hard to generalise. It's easy

enough to set up a label yourself these days. People who want to produce experimental music can, but they won't make any money out of it. People realise that they wouldn't in any case.

EK: How does Australian electronic music relate to other Asia Pacific electronic scenes?

SC: We're isolated and Japan is the logical place for a lot of Australian artists to go, but they don't. They go to Europe or America which is further, more expensive etc. and that's just the history of Australia. We don't see ourselves as part of Asia, so we don't think of going there first. Japan has a great market, with lots of opportunities and lots of things going on... We've been trying to build more relationships with people in Tokyo, Japanese labels. [Sydney label] Couchblip are doing well and are just back from a tour. Room 40 in Brisbane have found tours and distribution there. So the opportunities are available you've just got to go there and hook up and people find that hard.

EK: So you've toured Tokyo with Sub Bass Snarl? What was your experience?

SC: Luke and I had a great time. We played a couple of shows, it's just a wild place. You can't go there and not have fun... They are a really knowledgeable audience. People go out for social reasons and you don't get the drug issue that can cloud a lot of the scenes in Australia or Europe... People go out for a party, and that's all cool, but the number of people who are there for the party, versus the number of people who are there to see an artist, the ratios are very different in Japan. People will sit and listen or dance and you get the feeling that they actively listen...

EK: That seems to be reflected in the venue setups that you were mentioning before...

SC: It's a cultural thing I think too. There is an interest in art and a voracious appetite for anything that isn't Japanese, because Japan's been so isolated and inward looking in its history. A lot of younger people are really looking outwards and trying to incorporate it into what they do.

EK: You mentioned on another occasion that Canada's electronic music scene offered an interesting comparison to Australia. Are you able to expand on that?

SC: Canada's very similar to Australia in that it's large with a small population. It has government arts funding and the cities are quite spaced out, so there's not a lot of cross-city traffic in terms of electronic music. Each city has its own sound. At the same time, its proximity to America and Europe on the East Coast means that it's well connected into its neighbours, whereas we aren't, which is one of the major differences. So you get things like Mutek or events in Toronto and Vancouver which... can draw on other people who are close instead of far, exchanging of ideas and people. And it's cheap too. Montreal is a cheap city to live in. Whereas in Australia, Melbourne and Sydney, as an international focus city, are really expensive to live in, which is detrimental to an arts scene.

EK: The last thing to talk about would be festivals. You've been involved in a variety of levels as a performer and an organiser, how do you think that fits into encouraging people to make art?

SC: Sound Summit was set up by myself and Kenny Sabir from Elefant Traks. I was the director for four years until 2003... The festival and the way that developed came out of my experience of other events and also performing in Europe and other places. It's a good way of exposing people to new music but also allowing people to meet artists and that's the thing a nexus is really good at. You can see someone play and then go down to the pub and ask them why, how and who they are... Networking is... one of the things in Australia that we're really starved of, because we're so far away. If you go to *Sonar*, *Ars Electronica*, or *Transmedia* festivals and international events, you quickly realise that Europe and America have established much greater networks of artists... In the European and American circuits, you have a continent-wide network of people and that's what festival culture is about. It's important that these events are funded, and funded for that purpose, to build networks.

Notes:

¹ Homan, Shane (2003); *The Mayor's a Square: Live Music and Law and Order in Sydney*; Newtown: Local Consumption Publications.

