

MAJOR LAZER

“We’re not making the world smaller,” says Walshy Fire, one-third of the global hitmaking behemoth that is Major Lazer. “We’re making the party bigger.”

For Major Lazer, which also includes Diplo and Jillionaire, that is a noble mission, and the trio bring a sophisticated fusion of Caribbean and American music—Trinidadian soca, Jamaican reggae, American hip-hop and dance music—to dance floors across the world. Over the last ten years the group has expanded from a notoriously raucous side project into the biggest musical act in the world, crafting multiplatinum hits like “Cold Water” (featuring Justin Bieber and Danish singer-songwriter MØ) and “Run Up” (with Nicki Minaj and PARTYNEXTDOOR). With a combustible vocal turn by MØ and sharp beats by French producer DJ Snake, their ferocious 2015 single “Lean On” broke records for independent songs on pop radio to become one of the most popular songs of the 2010s: an era-defining smash around the world.

That mind-boggling success has not distracted the trio from their goal of making innovative music for the entire planet. “We create this Carnival atmosphere for people, like a Caribbean party where you’re dancing in the streets,” says Diplo. “That’s the vibe we’re trying to create, the language we’re trying to write. It doesn’t sound like anything else, because no one has done this kind of fusion before. Because of that, we don’t have a roadmap. We don’t always know if we’re doing it right, but we’re going to keep doing it.”

By all accounts, the musicians who make up Major Lazer are doing it exactly right. They’ve worked with artists from every continent (okay, except Antarctica), some of whom are well-known and some of whom are on their way up: Beyoncé, Justin Bieber, Nicki Minaj, Ariana Grande, Snoop Lion, Pharrell Williams, Sean Paul, Vampire Weekend’s Ezra Koenig, Ellie Goulding, Travis Scott, 2 Chainz, Vybz Kartel, among many others. By uniting this loose community of similarly adventurous artists, all of whom are helping to expand the party as well as the possibilities of pop music, Major Lazer have become something more than an American pop act. Instead, they’re truly global in their reach, with billions of streams across various platforms and number-one singles around the world. In March 2016, the trio played to more than half a million fans in Havana, Cuba, a historic event chronicled in the new documentary *Give Me Future*.

“We were the first American group to do a show down there once Obama had reinstated diplomatic relations,” says Jillionaire. “Almost all of Havana showed up—some people because they were fans, some people because they wanted to see the spectacle. There were people as far back as the eye could see and the music could reach, and then there were more people beyond that.”

The trio have always harbored immense musical ambitions, but the level of success they’ve achieved remains mind-boggling. Major Lazer had humble origins as a side project through which Diplo (real name: Wes Pentz) could explore his love of Jamaican music. Following the success of his second full-length, 2004’s *Florida*, and production work for M.I.A. and Santigold, he formed the group with British DJ Switch and hypeman Skerrik Bwoy, quickly developing a reputation for outrageous live shows and an omnivorous

musical appetite. They devoured everything in their path, from dubstep and surf rock to moombahton to samples of whinnying horses.

For their first tour, the group enlisted Trinidadian DJ Jillionaire (a.k.a. Christopher Leacock) as an emcee. “We had two DJs, two dancers, and I had the crowd,” he recalls. “It’s very funny looking back on that set-up now. I got back home after the tour and thought, I can stay in Trinidad and get a real job or I can see what this DJing is all about. I chose the second one.” He would eventually join the group full-time, bringing a cerebral spirit and playful soca rhythms to the music.

Major Lazer mutated and evolved, shedding two of its founding members but recruiting Jillionaire and Walshy Fire. Born in Kingston, Jamaica, and raised in Florida, Leighton Walsh is Major Lazer’s street team and hype man, a relentlessly energetic emcee who can rouse a crowd of any size. “I got into music by being a fan of it, going to parties, going to the dancehall,” he says. “I started selling dancehall cassette tapes in the streets. I’d just walk around with the radio on and a box full of tapes.” He pursued a career in computer technology, however, and even worked at IBM before quitting to make music full-time and co-founding the groundbreaking Miami sound system Black Chiney. He and Diplo worked together a few times, and then “Wes called me up and asked if I wanted to do a show with him. I went there thinking it was going to be one or two shows, nothing long-term, but we crushed and here I am, years later.”

Separately, they’re three distinctive artists with unique perspectives grounded in the vibrant culture of the Caribbean, each involved in projects outside of Major Lazer and each based in a different city: Diplo in L.A., Jillionaire in New York, Walshy Fire in Miami. But together, they’re something unique, something greater than the sum of its parts. On 2015’s breakout *Peace Is the Mission*, they came across like a global supergroup for the 21st century, crafting wildly imaginative—and imaginatively wild—songs that raised the stakes for pop music. “We’re always paying attention to whatever’s happening and trying to stay ahead of everybody else when it comes to finding new sounds,” says Diplo. “Music moves so fast and songs become hits overnight. That’s how it’s going to be from now on, and we want to work with that, not against it, one song at a time.”

“One of the benefits of being in such a global situation right now is that we’re played in India and Mongolia and Africa, and everybody is understanding each other,” says Walshy Fire. “The music no longer plays like it’s from some exotic culture. We’re just trying to make every sure everybody is working and reacting and communicating with each other when it comes to music.”

In other words, that party is only just getting started.