

Revisit: Skrillex: Scary Monsters and Nice Sprites

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Every top-rated YouTube comment in early 2011 seemed to equate Skrillex's music to Transformers fucking. It's apt: when it first roared into the mainstream it was seen by dance-music purists and fans of more gentle genres like indie rock as empty spectacle, giant chunks of metal slam-banging into each other as a simulacrum of entertainment, much like the Michael Bay franchise that ruled the box-office when Skrillex put out his *Scary Monsters and Nice Sprites* EP in late 2010.

But maybe Skrillex tracks work more like monster movies—and not just because like they soundtracked so many first fumbblings and joint hits, like the B-movies that played in the drive-ins of old. Skrillex trafficks in the primal thrill of having something big chasing you, the same reason people shell out money to see King Kong and Godzilla on the big screen. His famous drops, which are more sudden and less teased-out than those of most of his progeny, are prefaced by violent exclamations—the famous “oh my gosh!” on “Scary Monsters and Nice Sprites,” a chipmunk announcing “I want to kill everybody in the world” on “Kill Everybody.” When they come, the track's sound blows wide open.

Skrillex's music can be amazingly tactile. The thrill of “Scary Monsters and Nice Sprites” is as much in the power of the drop as just how bizarre it sounds, metallic yet somehow fluid, like the undulating core of the *Event Horizon*. Perhaps it's no coincidence that, when the EDM era began, Hans Zimmer was a minor superstar, his earth-shattering blats for the *Dark Knight* and *Inception* soundtracks thrilling those who'd normally have no interest in film scores or sound design. For all the legitimate grievances one can have about brostep, it remains one of the most effective mergers of volume and sound design ever to be popular.

The link to heavy metal was obvious, not least because Skrillex himself was Sonny Moore, former singer for the screamo band From First to Last. He thrived on a negative, aggro, black-clad aesthetic that in the rock vs. disco wars skewed grimly towards the former. His is the kind of music that can make a kid feel powerful, and it's easy for older folks who went through the same formative obsessions with loud, knuckleheaded music—bands like KISS or Aerosmith, perhaps—to be skeptical. The “ill” in Skrillex's name is rendered in his logo with three red slashes, evocative of a wound from a mauling but also unmistakably similar to the Monster Energy scratch-marks. Brostep skewed the personality of mainstream dance music towards the same straight male machismo so many of the clubs that first played electronic music were designed to escape, and though it certainly wasn't the first popular dance music to adopt cock-rock signifiers, it was certainly among the

most popular.

But it's easier to remember Skrillex's music as uglier than it is. Though his music thrives at the extremes of sound design, *Scary Monsters* also contained "All I Ask Of You," a competently pretty electro-house track with singer Penny. His way with melody can be astonishing, and the EP's last track, "With You Friends (Long Drive)" is an obstinate wall of intersecting melodies that refuses to yield a beat until nearly two-thirds of the way in. It conjures the same exhausted, sun-dappled afterglow that defines Harmony Korine's *Spring Breakers*, to which Skrillex contributed a substantial amount of music.

That film, one of the first to treat the EDM dynasty as a *era*, was released in 2012. "Scary Monsters and Nice Sprites" plays in its opening sequences over a pan of the gyrating breasts and overflowing beer-bongs of Florida beachgoers. Selena Gomez's character delivers a wide-eyed narration about the beautiful people and meaningful community she'd discovered on her robbery-funded spring break. It's meant to be ironic, of course, but for kids born towards the tail end of the millennial generation, that's really what it felt like. The highs were better, the thrill of partying had yet to accumulate into a physical toll. Purists had every reason to be frightened by the impact *Scary Monsters and Nice Sprites* would have on dance music. Eight years later, it plays like a relic of a simpler time.

