A conceptual EDM act based around a fictional character, Major Lazer launched in 2008 as the digital reggae/dancehall project of Diplo, the globetrotting, taste-making DJ/producer whose previous collaborations included work for M.I.A. and Santigold. Recorded at Jamaica's Tuff Gong studios, Major Lazer's debut album, Guns Don't Kill People... Lazers Do, featured producer Switch as a member. Vocal contributions came from noted dancehall stars including Vybz Kartel, Busy Signal, Mr. Vegas, and Turbulence, as well as Santigold, Nina Sky, and rapper Amanda Blank. Much anticipation and online chatter were fueled in part by the novelty video/song "Zumbi," featuring the comedian Andy Milonakis, the frenetic, legitimate lead single "Hold the Line," and a goofy, invented back-story about a renegade Jamaican commando with prosthetic laser arms who was allegedly a Zombie War veteran and vampire-fighting C.I.A. operative (but was demonstrably a rampant Twitter user). The album was released in June of 2009 as a joint venture between Downtown Records and Diplo's Mad Decent label. Lazers Never Die, an EP with two new songs and three remixes, followed in 2010, along with Lazerproof, a collaborative mixtape with the English electropop duo La Roux.

In 2012, Snoop Dogg joined Diplo for the digital reggae single "La La La," released under the name Snoop Lion, while Switch announced he was leaving the project. Likewise, hype man Skerrit Bwoy left in order to pursue religion. Diplo carried on with producer Jillionaire, joining the group for Free the Universe, the group's sophomore album. The 2013 release featured Wyclef, Bruno Mars, Vybz Kartel, and Shaggy on its long guest list. Sean Paul and Pharrell Williams joined the party for the 2014 EP Apocalypse Soon, which was also the first Major Lazer release to include Walshy Fire, who had replaced Skerrit Bwoy as the group's live MC. The 2015 album Peace Is the Mission featured the massive hit "Lean On," plus chart-topping guests like Ariana Grande, Ellie Goulding, and 2 Chainz. It was also supported by an animated series that aired on the FXX cable television network. An extended edition of Peace Is the Mission appeared in November of 2015, sporting five bonus songs. In 2016, Major Lazer scored their biggest pop hit yet with "Cold Water" (featuring Justin Bieber and MØ), which topped the charts in over a dozen countries.