



DETROIT: TECHNO

Johnathan Bowen

Detroit has long been known by many names: Motown, the Motor City, Hockey Town, and even the less than flattering Murder City. However, with the passing of time and the dimming and brightening of trends, Detroit would come to be known by another name: TechnoTown. What is techno? Upon opening an Encyclopedia Britannica and looking under the entry labeled "Techno," one will find this encompassing and revealing definition:

Electronic dance music that began in the United States in the 1980's and became globally popular in the 1990's. With its glacial synthesizer melodies and brisk machine rhythms, techno was a product of the fascination of middle-class African-American youths in Detroit, Michigan, for European electronic dance music.

Influenced by Kraftwerk's Teutonic electro-pop and Alvin Toffler's concept of "techno rebels," a clique of deejay-producers—Derrick May, Juan Atkins, and Kevin Saunderson—began drawing attention to their innovative music in 1985. Crossing the Atlantic as an adjunct to Chicago house music, their early tracks—Rythim is Rythim's "Strings of Life," Model 500's "No UFOs," and Inner City's "Good Life"—incited pandemonium in Europe's dance floors. Unlike house, Detroit techno was primarily all instrumental, and its beats were more complex than the disco-derived, four-to-the-floor kick-drum that underpinned house.

Until recently, Detroit has not had much attention at all concerning its role as the birthplace of techno. "Detroit, globally known as the birthplace of techno, is virtually unrecognized nationally and locally beyond its Motown and rock roots". It has always existed as such under the popular culture radar. First and foremost, *why* was Detroit the breeding ground for techno music? Why has the general population taken so long in recognizing Detroit for its techno accomplishments? Could it be simply because Detroit is not a mega-city like New York or Los Angeles? Or is it simply because the time and the place were not right until recently?

The Belleville 3: Juan Atkins, Derrick May, and Kevin Saunderson, are the three individuals who are credited as techno's creators. These three individuals grew up in Belleville, hence the term "The Belleville 3," but they later moved into Detroit to carry on their pioneering work in the 1980's and beyond. Atkins, May, and Saunderson didn't actually begin this pioneering work of creating techno in Detroit however. Juan Atkins sums it up best: "When I first started making music, I lived in Detroit. You could walk down the street and there'd be a garage band playing on every block. When I moved to Belleville (at the age of 14), the closest person I could play with was 5 miles away. Eventually, I learned how to start putting things together on my own". It is this "putting things together" that would come to be known as techno. Eventually the three hooked up and began experimenting with synthesizers, cassette decks, and turntables, and eventually became DJs.

Over in Europe, the whole 'electronic' music trend was already thriving. Back home in Detroit, where a new breed of the 'electronic' music, techno, was about to be unleashed, not much interest was felt on the mainstream wavelength. In 1987, a mild spike was felt in the dance community when Derrick May's first release, entitled "Rhythim is Rhythim" was released to the public. However, it wasn't until another release of May's, "Strings of Life" that Europe took notice of this new form of music coming from Detroit. Once noticed, techno

took off like a landslide and the Belleville 3 were constantly wanted over in Europe to do remixes and make appearances. Kevin Saunderson says: "When Derrick made 'Strings of Life,' that was the first big record of international calibre. That's when Derrick made the decision to go to England, which probably was the biggest decision that really helped things kick off." Saunderson continues: "It changed that quick. Everybody wanted us to come to Europe and do remixes. I was just winging it. I didn't really realize I was making history."

Back in Detroit, the birthplace of this new phenomenon, things finally began to perk up in 1988 as Derrick May, now with his own radio show, lent a helping hand in founding the Music Institute, a downtown Detroit dance club owned and operated by a creative collective of downtown artists and musicians. According to May, "People came together for the first time to hear this music on the loudspeakers. It was unbelievable. I can't explain to you how beautiful it was." However, the Music Institute wouldn't last and the city that spawned this new form of music didn't seem all too excited. It wouldn't be for many more years that Detroit would finally be regarded as ". . . definitively Techno music's Mecca . . .". As for the Belleville 3 and their role in Detroit, Kevin Saunderson wraps it up perfectly: "Juan was the originator, Derrick was the innovator and I was the elevator".

In an interview with *Wired* magazine writer Dan Sicko in July of 1994, Juan Atkins gave this view as to why Detroit is the birthplace of techno: "Let's remember Detroit is representative of the whole Industrial Revolution. When that came to a close, it was the first place hit. And because of its lack of status, it's a lot more depressed than other areas. That forces people to be creative." Another source, an online urban culture website, urban university, credits this as a reason: "Detroit Techno music originally grew out of the rich musical soil that spawned the Motown dynasty. From its inception, it was nurtured by radio DJ's that were not constrained by the play list driven formats that stifle today's underground scene." Perhaps then, it is the unique mixture that this hollowed out post-Industrial Rev-

olution city gave in the form of creativity, radio freedom and "rich musical soil" that allowed the music dubbed 'techno' to be born there, to struggle there, and to survive there. Furthermore, a Detroit Free Press writer, Brian McCollum, comments on the million dollar question, 'Why Detroit?:'

Pop culture sociologists have had a field day with this one: How did the most avant-garde dance music of the late 20th Century emerge from a city widely regarded as a decaying Rust Belt has-been?

They cite a variety of factors, including the idea that techno's futurism represented a musical and philosophical escapism for its creators. Listen to Detroit's early works, and you hear an eerie blend of optimism and melancholy. It was the sound of young black men quite self-consciously commenting on their environment, their past, their future.

It's that paradox—the shimmering electronic sounds of techno rising from the perceived ashes of a fallen city—that has lent Detroit techno its mystique. Among its international fans, the music and the city are spoken of in reverent tones.

In the early 1990's, as "the Big Three" (Atkins, May, and Saunderson) went off to Europe to explore the success of techno there, a new generation of techno music makers sprung up. Among this new assortment were Richie Hawtin (a.k.a. Plastikman), Carl Craig, and Jeff Mills (a.k.a. The Wizard). These individuals, while hardly new to the scene, began to create their own music and their own record labels amidst the absence of their mentors and role models 'the Big Three' genre of techno had deftly crept into all corners of the globe and had indeed begun to catch on in a global manner—in part because of the influx of all this new talent pouring from Detroit. But in the United States, things were not as quick to catch on. Sure, there were the mainstream popular acts such as The Chemical Brothers and Underworld, but for the most part the United States mainstream audience just wasn't listen-

ing . Perhaps this quote from local Detroit writer Dan Sicko says it best:

“It’s clear that the United States is still techno’s toughest, harshest obstacle. In attempting to reach wider audiences here, the music has lost too much through too many compromises. And after several attempts to include techno in its plans, the U.S. music industry hasn’t really conceded much in the process. In other words, techno has to face the reality that in the United States, it’s not destined to run on any fast track to acceptance”.

All of this began to change slowly, in 1998. A documentary titled “Modulations,” which features Juan Atkins, Derrick May, and Kevin Saunderson, opens in New York and Los Angeles . Finally Detroit is beginning to receive the national and local attention it deserves as its role in bringing techno to the masses. On one hand, this is great—finally the music will be in the hands of the culture that brought it forth. On the other hand, Derrick May says: “It’s kind of insulting. We’re in our 30’s. We’ve been doing this since we were 18 years old. The whole world’s been listening, and finally somebody back home wants to pay attention. We’ve been ambassadors for the city, running around the world, and people back home have no idea”. As shown here, there seem to be mixed feelings about the United States and Detroit coming around to techno music. Hands down, it is high time that the people take notice of the monumental events and achievements around them. But conversely, shouldn’t the people have *been* noticing from the beginning?

Starting in 1999 and building momentum into the millennium and beyond, an idea would form, take shape, and forever change the landscape of techno music.

“In the summer of 1999, a plan was hatched to draw the attention of people from around the world to the city of Detroit, the birthplace of techno and electronic dance music as we know it today. The idea was to organize an electronic music festival the size of which the world had never seen, with 50- plus artists performing on four out-

door stages over a three day period, and with one added incentive: this event was to be entirely free of charge”.

This revolutionary event, taking place in Detroit would come to be known as the Detroit Electronic Music Festival (DEMF for short). This was the wake-up call that the nation and localities at large needed to finally open wide their eyes and recognize once and for all the legitimacy of Detroit as the birthplace of techno. Fortunately, the plan came to fruition in 2000, thanks to techno forefathers Carl Craig and Derrick May. On Memorial Day 2000, an estimated 1.5 million attendees joined together to celebrate not only the music of techno, but the city of techno—Detroit.

This festival—the world’s largest free event of the kind—drew not only local citizens of all walks of life, but also drew people from all corners of the world. According to Ani Gharibian of Roseville’s Record Time store:

“Before, you’d hear people saying Detroit is dead, this and that. The festival breathed new life into the scene. The number of people who showed up, the diversity of ages and race—it showed that there are a lot of people interested in this type of music. It wasn’t just a bunch of old-timers making music for other old-timers”.

Not only was the festival a success, it was a well-needed cultural booster for the city:

“. . . techno music, born in Detroit, would come back home to celebrate its history and bring a community together in pride. Not only did the festival expose electronic music to a wide variety of people, but also, in the process, broke down barriers of background or race under a universal message of electronic music.

The success of techno music in the mainstream did not stop with the first DEMF. As 2001 rolled around, plans were yet again under way for the second year of the ground-breaking festival. Once again, the festival showcased local superstars as well as international ones. Further proof that techno music would

stand the test of time and trouble: when bad weather erupted above the festival's second year celebration, fans and artists alike stuck it out and held their ground until the most severe conditions forced them indoors. As Kevin Saunderson says:

"It's nice now that people (in Detroit) are starting to understand what we do. Because of the Internet, the festival and the publicity in our city, it's giving us opportunities to shine. The recognition that we got in Europe in the 80's is now coming home. Hopefully, it's gonna hit this whole country".

The DEMF is not the only sign that techno has survived and is sweeping the nation and Detroit—also in 2001 there is another festival (this one is not free) called Area: One where mainstream electronic artists such as Moby and Outkast will perform alongside legends such as Atkins, May, and Saunderson.

The fact that the music has survived says something of the music itself being born in Detroit. Detroit the city has had its fair share of problems, including race riots and general cultural upheaval. Yet, the city has somehow found ways of surviving and living on. It would stand to reason that the fact techno has had such problems with its growth and yet has survived is perhaps because it has grown from a city that knows all too well about trials and tribulations and ultimately about survival. Derrick May speaks on the music itself and all that went into bringing it to where it is today: "We introduced this music to the world, but we gave up a lot of our souls to people we never knew. People don't even realize the amount of sacrifice we made. Juan and myself, we gambled our lives on this". He further continues and speaks of the DEMF: "The bonus of the festival is that it's bringing accolades where they should have been brought 15 years ago. But it's never too late, ya know?" And perhaps that says it best, not just for the music of techno, but for the city of techno: it's never too late.

Bibliography on request