

The Aesthetics Of Acid

by Rick Bull

Since the technological paranoia of the cold-war era, and the ensuing political and social consequences of the military technological boom, the development of electronic musics and proliferation of technologies through the 1970's to the 90's has seen the amalgamation of a multitude of cultural music 'systems' - the formation of a universal and hybridised(ing) 'pop aesthetic'¹. In the West at least, the employment of electronic music technology has largely been used to reinforce the 'classificatory arrangements'² of the anglo-saxon listening ear - those classical tonal / structural orders criticised by the likes of Webern, Schoenberg and Boulez³.....Towards the end of the 1980's however, the **popular** appropriation of available technologies was challenged greatly by groups of experimentalists from Detroit, Chicago and Frankfurt - leaders of the 'acid house' explosion of the late 80's, whose musics' roots greatly shaped the aesthetic of today's diversified 'techno' music genre. Much could be discussed in regards to history and subsequent sterilisation / diversification of such music, yet this essay seeks to focus primarily upon the change in cultural '**hearing**' that could be suggested has occurred in the late 20th century; reflected and catalysed by the appropriators of frequently 'obsolete' musical technologies. I suggest, that through the popularised use of sampling and analogue tone production, and overall shift in the electro-pop listening aesthetic can be observed; ie. that from high to frequently 'low' tone fidelity - from a transparent to 'opaque' technological ethic, from a melodic / harmonic to largely modal and heavily rhythm based ideal. Largely reactionary, the changing paradigm continues to be filtered, manipulated and sterilised by mainstream forces, much like the preceding punk era. As stated earlier, the avenues for investigation regarding 'electronica' are limitless and multifarious. This essay seeks to touch upon some fundamental paradigms of **duration / structure**, **tone / pitch**, **technological mediums** challenged and predominant in 'techno' music, and attempts to examine them as wider cultural referents of the present post-modern era - challenges to the previous high-tech synthesis paradigm. The way we 'hear' is being challenged, and the 'cultural frequencies' of hearing continue to be shifted, defracted, skewed and eventually appropriated by a new mainstream....

As far back as 1955, theorists such as Herbert Eimert began to consider the implications of electronic reproduction upon established schools of musical thought. Eimert saw that what was seen by many to be an 'enigmatic, extreme development', was, in his eyes, a 'postlude' to human musical progress, greatly due to the 'radical nature of its technical apparatus.....compelled to deal with sound phenomena unknown to musicians of earlier times'⁴. It is this very 'exposure' and 'control' of certain tonal elements afforded through electronic media, that has perhaps caused us to 're-hear' sounds in terms of new psycho-acoustic frameworks, and to begin to deconstruct the largely representational metaphors of traditional orchestrated and acoustic forms. In Russolo's "The Art of Noises", the author suggests a theory of 'sound education', whereby, through the ages, mankind's ears are attuned and re-attuned to differing planes of cultural 'frequency'. At the time (1913), he states that 'the ear of an eighteenth century man could never have endured the discordant intensity of certain chords produced by our orchestras'⁵. If this hypothesis is true, then the 'pioneers' of techno were borne on an enigmatic wave only now reaching the main-stream ear...Russolo and the futurists sought to move deliberately away from the purely representational tastes of traditional orchestral music forms, stating defiantly in their manifesto that 'the art of noise must not limit itself to imitative reproduction'⁶, and harping upon the fact that in order to experience a poignant 'freshness' - a 'new musical reality'⁷, the 'limited circle of pure sounds must be broken'⁸, and staunch representationalism would have to yield to Russolo's ideal of abstract tonal impressionism.

The synthesiser gave individuals access to, and control over the 'infinite number of gradations of tone, pattern and quality'⁹ within sound, that Russolo sought to exploit. Interestingly though, during its early popularisation, it remained a tool whose mainstream use remained representation. Whilst individuals such as Eno and Cage reclaimed the futurist manifesto, popular taste dictated an adherence to expectations of tone-stasis within sounds. During the 1980s, the widespread use of drum machines and synthesisers heralded an era where the employment of technology as a 'transparent' medium became fashionable - or rather, where an obsession 'the 'artificial', the 'imitation', the 'plastic' was 'no longer an embarrassment'¹⁰. The cosmetic production paradigm and the technological aesthetics of the 1980s spawned new ideals of **performance** philosophy, yet was arguably a regression to a non-

progressive and culturally stagnant norm of appropriating technology for 'obvious' means.

The Roland TB-303, was a small and unassuming 'synth box', released by the Roland company in the early 80's - a technology so paradoxically convoluted, that it ushered in an entirely new era of technological appropriation¹¹. Along with a number of cheap drum machines (the '808', '909' '606' and 'TR 303'), it became the tonal basis for the minimalist electronic dance movement known as 'acid house'¹², indicative of a revival in a pseudo Russolian mode of experimentation. Designed to emulate the sound of a bass guitar - complete with tone control and pitch 'slide' effect - it was the radical method in which the 303 was appropriated that further paved the way for new ways of 'hearing' the popular voice. Essentially speaking, the 303 was a small silver tone box, with an uninspiring and confusing control panel, near impossible-to-program internal sequencer, unreliable and idiosyncratic memory, and a tone colour bearing little semblance to that of any acoustic instrument. Often, hours of painstaking programming efforts would result in a single looped often random phrase, with little user control other than tempo and harmonic emphasis. Thus was born the sound of 'acid' house - minutes of synthetic rhythm-based, looped music, relying upon the 'tweaking' of tone filters for musical 'progression'¹³ - or rather, challenging the notions of pitch modes and melodic progression all together. Interestingly, Brian Eno's earlier work, 'An Index of Metals' had made use of this idea of exploited 'timbral predominance'¹⁴ and repetition, noting that 'when so much in the way of melody, rhythm and harmony has been stripped away from the music, timbral subtleties loom structurally large....even the octave position of the melodic fragments can appear to change'¹⁵.

Repetition, tonal graduation, ambiguous structure and the sound of the 'machine' were all crucial, if initially accidental elements that helped form the basis of the new 'techno' aesthetic. All elements signified a rejection of the elitist production 'sound' of 'plastic culture' - perhaps a return to something more primal, where the medium was somehow more integral to the message? In 1989, Graham Massey from the post-acid group 808 State, espoused the virtues of what he saw to be this new 'organic' aesthetic - throwing about 'key words such as 'alchemy', 'getting your hands in the mud', 'accident'¹⁶. The new album by Australia's Itchy and Scratchy states on its sleeve notes that it is 'under-produced' - this legacy continues.....The increasing popularity today of 'trip-hop' acts such as Massive Attack (whilst not direct predecessors of the acid-house movement) reflects the publics changing ear in regards to the sounds of technology. Mish-mashes beats, record scratches, distorted sampled loops, sounds of machine artifice - all have made the crossover with relative acceptance into the popular ear. The Roland company's new line of JP synthesisers comes with additional sampled drum loops, **and record scratch** samples for those wishing to overdub some 'digitised low-fidelity'. The 'determination to transmute machine sequences and electronic sounds into organic, changeable 'soft' substances'¹⁷ is rapidly being accepted.

More than a mere result of 'dance-floor' aesthetics, the repetition in 'techno' is a vital semiotic of a listening 'mind-space' removed from traditional forms. If we speak of virtual 'soundscapes' in music, then techno's is one that may have seasons and hours - yet is vast, deep, eerie, expansive and ceaseless. The word 'loop', itself suggests constancy - the capturing of a moment in time, or perhaps the inescapability of the 'state of existence' itself. Many have suggested that techno is the beat of the electronic Shaman -the bringer of magic, dreams, healing etc... I suggest that this music is the music of a journey - or at least the viewing of a landscape to be journeyed. Detroit's Juan Atkins's early techno, whilst cynical in its 'cold precision and roboticism', 'dwelled on the familiar Futurist themes of transcendence through movement and immersion in the smart city, the wired megalopolis'¹⁸. The Aphex Twin - Richard James' successful mainstream electronica crossover albums are based on what he believes to be his experiences of lucid dreaming - his imaginary dreamscapes¹⁹. Techno's unrelentless and urging pulse hypnotises and pummels ever deeper. When it fades, it is only ever for a moment - and even then only in audible terms. Somehow techno's repetitive beat, its uteral pulse, is the signifier of the listeners **internal** landscape. Those who 'escape' do so **inside** themselves - **inside** each other. Countless flyers for rave events speak of 'immersion', 'tranquillity', 'consciousness'. The nightclub Zoom advertised in early 1995 that, '**to find your mind**, you have to lose it first'. Techno is 'felt' beat. 'The Seventh Sign' was a rave that advertised, 'what can you **feel**, but cannot **hear**?'. It seems clear that the pulse of the 'body-electric' has transcended the emotional plane and has become a cerebral and physical entity for many. Could it be that the morbid techno-fear of years past is gradually being replaced with a part-cynical, part-nostalgic return to an attitude of fascination with the promise or power of technology, to the degree of fetishisation? Sydney electronic collective Clan Analogue presents weekly performances at an inner city club - their advertising flyer reeking of a strange, almost sexual machine lust; 'immerse yourself in the synaesthesia of light and sound emitting from machines, connect to the matrix of collective energy, synchronise and oscillate to the compu-clock...'.

If the voices of technology are becoming the new voices of popular culture - hoarse, stripped and all, then the larynx of these new voices remains the loudspeaker. Acid house / techno was made not only to be played through a loudspeaker, but to be listened to **loud**. Its roots lay on the disco floors, graduating to the thunderous warehouse-floored rave-scape. The Aphex Twin, Richard James' only 'reason for playing live, which he no longer relishes', 'is to hear his music **loud**'. Upon sound-checking, 'he locates the resonant frequencies in the room in order to ripple the floor with sub-bass and shatter the glass with high pitches'²⁰. Within the electronic movement, the loudspeaker is the voice of power - for traditional music mediums, it seems to remain primarily a source of transmission. Whatever the case, Eimert saw that the loudspeaker had 'almost imperceptibly revolutionised our way of hearing'²¹ - here is the almost physical manifestation of the power to '**move**'; in many senses. The dub, triphop and jungle movements all rely heavily upon exploitation of specialist 'sound systems' to achieve the full physical effect of their music - movements quite markedly utilising the system of reproduction as a system of **instrumentation** itself. A Massive Attack lyric speaks of the 'AK rig' going 'boom, boom' - one of the pleasures of listening to live jungle is feeling the cavernous sub-bass drones rumbling and shaking the bass bins...Whilst we may scoff at the mainstream euro-dance cry of 'can you feel it (baby)', and countless similar gesticulations, such seemingly banal statements reflect again a major shift in the listening aesthetic of the decade. What is it that we are being called to 'feel'? Not the chord, the melody, the terraced dynamic or recapitulation - but the pulse, the ambience, the cycle, the metaphysical 'vibe'.....

Whilst it would be self indulgent and foolish to suggest that electronic music and aesthetics are, somehow, the final chapters in the musical / spiritual evolution of the late twentieth century, their rise in popularity and historical development continue to signify major changes in the ways we listen to and appreciate music. If nothing else, the birth of the acid house movement reflects an era when an obsession with the technology of representative reproduction began, in certain groups, to be replaced in part with a freshness in sonic perspective - a return to the appreciation of 'sounds' as individual entities, unrelated to directly representational mediums. Partly due to bleak social realities, partly reactionary, and possibly largely coincidental, the unexpected appropriation the synthesiser and drum machine spawned the birth of 'acid house' and 'techno', as it later became widely known. Repetition, timbre graduations, polyrhythmic cycles and incidental tonal modes replaced traditional harmonic structures, and most importantly, placed the 'beat' as central to compositions. Techno is at once both music of the body, and music of the electronic body - in this respect, still seen by many as somehow 'primitive' and non-progressive; yet if we speak in terms of 'sound', the legacy of this electronic form cannot be overlooked. Technology, once dry, representative and distinctly 'hard', is at last becoming absorbed, appropriated, manipulated, exploited and exposed. As the electronic voice becomes stripped back to its naked and unashamedly idiosyncratic and unique self, it becomes freshly 'malleable' and 'organic'- the 'humanness' of technology-music is perhaps less idealised digital control and representation, and more of the imperfect, the random, the hands-on and the unpredictable. These elements form a cerebral sound-scape and space that are constantly unpredictable and evolving - voices of power and imagination that surely cannot be ignored.

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FOOTNOTES

¹Mitchell, p119

²Meyer, p159

³Meyer, p157

⁴Reike, p1

⁵Apollonio, p26

⁶Russolo

⁷Apollonio, p27

⁸ " " "

⁹Russolo

¹⁰Chambers, p199

¹¹The TB-303 Homepage

¹²Corbett, p35

¹³Cheesman, p5

¹⁴Tamm, p135

¹⁵ " "

¹⁶Toop, p214

¹⁷ " "

¹⁸Toop, p215

¹⁹Toop, p210

²⁰Toop, p211

²¹Reike, p11

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