

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-

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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