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Passing the Baton From Detroit to Berlin: Techno's Introduction to the Global Scene

Rebekah M. Thomas

University of the Pacific, rebekahthomas93@yahoo.com

Rebekah is a music major at University of the Pacific with a focus on music management. She is also a singer/songwriter and recording artist with Plural Music records in Oakland, ...[Read More](#)

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Techno's Introduction to the Global Scene: Passing the Baton from Detroit to Berlin

By Rebekah Thomas

Picture an old concrete building amidst bustling city streets and industrial style skyscrapers. Seemingly resigned during the day, this building becomes a vessel for a very lively local youth culture after-hours. When the sun goes down, this vacant corpse of an old department store that went out of business years ago will transform from the inside out. Crowds of young adults flock to the location around 9pm wearing a wide range of clothes, from casual street-wear to tall pumps and leather straps with a full face of impressionable makeup on. Inside, the concrete walls encapsulate smoky rooms lit with LED Lasers and strobe lights. A loud beat shakes the floor and compels those inside to move their bodies in time with the demanding rhythm and the crowd around them. The goal is a simple one; Dance until the sun rises. It's a techno-wonderland.

What you just read describes the Tresor Nightclub in East Berlin in 1991, homage to that era's techno-takeover in Germany. Many other establishments of this kind popped up to accommodate illegal raves throughout England and the United States after techno music's introduction to popular culture. Techno music started the dance culture that is so popular in today's music industry. DJ's like Zedd, Calvin Harris, Marshmello, Avicii, Swedish House Mafia and many more are the results of three decades of developing dance music in the United States and Europe. Although famous for its association with the city of Berlin, techno's true roots and futuristic aesthetic came from Detroit. This Detroit-Berlin Alliance has since been proven to be one of the most iconic international relationships in recent music history and has

had major lasting effects on popular music. In order to uncover how this connection came to be, one must follow an important series of events that influenced and led up to the creation of Detroit techno.

Detroit's re-awakening: Techno stirs in the birth of a new industry

The music in Detroit in the late 1970's set the scene: a funk-disco hybrid amongst largely queer Detroit night-clubs.¹ Motown had come and gone from Detroit to LA, lasting as a Detroit powerhouse from 1960-1972. A new scene was in motion in these local clubs due to the rise of the individual DJ. According to Detroit DJ Felton Howard, "The bands were being pushed out because they cost \$500 and a DJ cost \$50."² Funk and disco bands had a disadvantage in the local club scene due to their expensive prices. Instead, they were replaced by a DJ who could play all the popular hits on his or her own equipment at a fraction of the price for a gig that could last an entire night. Clubs began to adapt to hiring DJ's instead of live artists.

Soon, DJs were the ringleaders of the party scene in Detroit. The social and musical sphere they created was valuable in building connections between local artists that would put out the first techno hits, especially one DJ named Ken Collier. Ask any DJ from 1980's Detroit and they would tell you that Ken Collier was widely responsible for creating the local scene that led up to techno. He was respected, approachable, and had all the connections needed to bring the right people together. Collier played at many prestigious nightclubs in the area including many gay clubs (Studio 54, Club Fever, The Pink Poodle, L'uomo, and especially the nightclub Heaven.⁴) A lot of the first techno music debuted in queer venues throughout Detroit, but that didn't make a difference in who showed up to these parties. In an interview, DJ Felton Howard

recalls, “[The] type of club didn’t matter to me. I went to straight clubs, gay clubs, black and white clubs. Latino clubs – everywhere. And then we had this thing where we got bored of black urban clubs and wanted to hear some good music, we started venturing to the gay clubs.”⁵

Another DJ, John Collins, said, “At gay clubs, we could play whatever we wanted!”⁶ It appeared the freedom for DJs to experiment and play new music peaked in queer venues in 1980’s Detroit.

In 1981, three of the main DJ’s responsible for inventing techno would enter the Detroit social scene. Described by *Mixmag* magazine as the “holy trinity” of Detroit techno, Kevin Saunderson, Juan Atkins and Derrick May began making beats with a futuristic dance-music sound.⁷ Atkins released one of the first known techno tracks in 1981 titled, “Cybotron.” It was like nothing that had been heard before. Using a simple drum machine and a Mini Moog Model D synthesizer, the track’s 4/4 rhythm and shifty electronic beat drew attention from miles away. In 1987, Derrick May released “Nude Photo” which only foreshadowed the success of his next release one year later, the techno anthem, “Strings of Life.” Saunderson didn’t disappoint in 1988 when he released his hit, “Big Fun,” notable for having a vocalist on the track and not just a sampled phrase. These tracks are now identified as the first techno, but at the time it was called electronica or new wave. Besides growing up together and then becoming roommates, the three Detroit DJs had another big thing in common that influenced their musical exploration: They started their electronica discovery listening to a radio personality and DJ named Electrifying Mojo.

Charles “Electrifying Mojo” Johnson was a radio personality with an alien-like persona that broadcast a very specific collection of new-wave music from 1977 to the mid 1980’s introducing artists like Kraftwerk, The B52’s, Prince, and new wave electronic music to Detroit

locals.⁸ Saunderson said in an interview with Red Bull Music Academy that he and Atkins would turn the broadcast on every night and listen to the show.⁹ One of the most noteworthy artists that Mojo played was a German electronic band called Kraftwerk. In 1974 they released their 22-minute single, “Autobahn,” from their album *The Man-Machine* which had a significant impact on electronic music due to their use of three Mini Moog Model D synthesizers, one drum machine, and a microphone. The results were a futuristic electronic quality unrivaled by any band in the music scene up to that point. Today, the Moog Music website has an entire page dedicated as tribute to Kraftwerk’s use of the Moog synthesizers because of how revolutionary the band was for electronic music. Kraftwerk had a notable influence on Detroit through Electrifying Mojo’s radio broadcast.

Taking the next step: The second wave of Techno in Detroit

A second wave of techno music appeared in Detroit when producer/DJs Jeff Mills and Carl Craig stepped into the scene. Jeff Mills debuted his techno chops in the early 90’s, DJ-ing at a club called Cheeks under the artist name “The Wizard.”¹⁰ Because of Mills, Cheeks is thought to be the first club to feature live techno music, although the most famous techno club in Detroit became The Music Institute.¹¹ Carl Craig was also releasing techno tracks under a multitude of aliases. Starting in 1989 and continuing through the 90’s with his albums *Elements*, *Landcruising* and his hit 1992 single, “Bug in the Bassbin,” which is credited by Wikipedia for starting the Drum and Bass genre in England (also the happy-hardcore genre in the US). Fortunately for Craig and Mills, the success of the second wave didn’t just draw local attention.

Passing the Baton

Across the globe, post-war Germany was suffering from an identity crisis. During the decades before the fall of the Berlin Wall from 1980-1998, citizens of East and West Berlin were divided. Parties and nightlife were illegal in the city and the police could arrest attendees. Many people felt they lacked a singular cultural experience and were burdened with post-war shame. This caused a need for some kind of movement to bring people together again. Interestingly, some residents in East Berlin had rebellious plans as to how to bridge the gap between this cultural divide. Specifically, one Berliner began to stir the pot. Dimitri Hegemann, a local DJ and club owner, took matters into his own hands. At night in East Berlin, he and a crew of eager young partiers snuck into the empty buildings of old businesses that hadn't been able to survive Germany's postwar economy in the past decades. The shells of these extinct businesses provided the perfect setting to throw somewhat exclusive and *very* illegal parties for anyone who wanted to let loose.

Hegemann was especially interested in a new party sound that could get the crowds dancing and feeling a sense of unity, one that he heard overseas in Detroit. Hegemann was a fan of the Detroit techno movement and also the industrial electronic scene appearing in Germany including bands like Kraftwerk and DAF. He and other fellow DJs began spinning techno music at these illegal get-togethers throughout Berlin, and sure enough the crowds came.¹² A lively group of young adults had been waiting for an opportunity like this to come together and party the night away. However, East Berlin Police were actively trying to find and shut the underground raves down.¹³ Each night the location for these pop-up parties moved to a different venue until the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989.

After that, things changed for Berlin's party crowd. There were no longer police around to enforce these anti-gathering laws. For the first time, East Berliners were allowed to experience freedom. Dimitri and his posse found a permanent spot to settle down inside the ruins of Wertheim department store.¹⁴ The abandoned industrial style warehouse seemed to be the perfect spot for a crazy techno rave. Even better, the location had a giant Vault in the basement used as a bank in its previous era that now provided a large empty space for a bar and a dance floor. Tresor nightclub (meaning "safe," as in a place to store money) opened for business in 1991 and instantly became a hit in the local techno scene.

However, Hegemann wanted to take Tresor further than that. Not only did he open up the nightclub, but also turned Tresor into a music label for techno artists.¹⁵ Because of Tresor's local success, he was able to sign on some familiar names. Hegemann decided to sign the likes of artists including Jeff Mills, Blake Baxter, Juan Atkins, Robert Hood, Stewart Walker, Joey Beltram, DJ Surgeon, Pacou, Cristian Vogel and more.¹⁵ Many of these were Detroit artists that Hegemann wanted to showcase amidst the growing techno movement in Berlin. Of course, it was widely successful amongst the Berlin techno crowd. In 1989 Hegemann organized the Atonal music festival with an exciting lineup; Final Cut with Jeff Mills, Baby Ford, 808 State, GTO and Renegade Soundwave.¹⁶ This festival brought Detroit techno directly to the youth of Berlin and started a phenomenon city-wide.

At this point, Berlin had surrendered completely to the techno wave. Clubs like Tresor, Berghain in the empty lot of the retired Vattenfall energy plant (previously the Ostgut club from 1998-2003), and the E-Werk nightclub held in a former *Abspannwerk Buchhändlerhof* electrical substation turned into the city's main attractions. Techno became the heartbeat of Berlin, and the

local media channels certainly reflected it. Specifically, the magazine *FrontPage* became a must-have for dedicated techno-ravers in Berlin. Editor Jürman Laarmann, who started the magazine in Frankfurt (1989), quickly realized the party scene was in Berlin and moved the magazine to the city.¹⁷ *Frontpage* covered all the local clubs including Tresor, Ostgut, and many more. Laarmann himself was obsessed with Berlin's techno culture and the freedom it gave the local people. The fanzine fed off the wild vibes and industrial settings, interviewing ravers and DJ's that frequented the scene. The magazine's graphic depictions of these raves by designer Alexander Branczyk were possibly the best part of the magazine, displaying real images of Berlin ravers in the height of their craziest moments. The magazine has been described as, "a "printed rave" and "graphic ecstasy," in a modern review by Dazeddigital.com.¹⁸ Laarmann's success covering the not-so-sub subculture of Berlin techno was so great that it gained national attention from other parts of Europe and the U.S. To the locals, techno had become much more than a music genre, it was now a way of life.

Techno Attracts the International Eye

In 1991, Laarmann co-organized a world-changing event in the history of techno music: The Love Parade, located on Kurfürstendamm Avenue in Berlin. A quick Wikipedia search accounts that this event was supposed to be a multiple-day festival originally orchestrated by Berlin undergrounders as a political demonstration for peace and unity through techno music. Although the Parade had happened in previous years as a small protest amongst Berliners, this time was different. There was mass media coverage on the event and nearly one million people attended, many of whom were travelers who heard about the techno movement in Berlin and

wanted to experience it for themselves. As one could imagine, this drew attention globally. Videos of the event show thousands of people marching (and dancing) in the streets of Berlin. Vehicles piled full of partiers blasted techno music out of their windows and waved to the masses around them. For the first time, Germany was recognized internationally for their positive attitude of love, unity, and creativity and the world wanted in on it.

The Love Parade went strong from 1989-2009. It ended abruptly after that when the event got too large for the location and a trampling incident caused the deaths of 21 attendees in 2009.¹⁸⁻² Despite its grim ending, The Berlin Love Parade became one of the most influential techno events in history for its massive crowds and international appeal which put Berlin on the map as the techno-center of the world. Not long after its global debut, techno spread like a wildfire throughout Europe. Mini-raves popped up all over the place, especially in Manchester, soon dubbed “Madchester,” England. Teens and young adults flocked to locations like farm fields, empty buildings and basements to experience the electronic dance music that built rave culture. By the mid 1990’s, new genres of electronic dance tracks were created like acid-house, drum and bass, happy hardcore and jungle. The global obsession with underground rave culture was in full swing everywhere from Thailand to London.¹⁹ However, this success faced opposition from political leaders who thought that the rave drug culture involving heavy MDMA usage was dangerous. Many club promoters and DJs faced fines for throwing these underground raves and were often forced to shut down. This wasn’t enough to stop the enthusiastic ravers though. The trend had built too much momentum.

In America, the effect of these internationally publicized raves caught on in larger cities. San Francisco, San Diego, New York and other cities held underground raves in unusual venues

like airplane hangars, outdoor fields, and warehouses. Fashion designers like Thierry Mugler and Vivienne Westwood in the 1990's used techno and house beats in their fashion shows.²⁰ Four-to-the-floor dance music of some kind was played in every nightclub and party across the nation.

Analysis

Although Berlin has faced backlash for seemingly “appropriating” the African American roots of Detroit techno, it appears upon closer look that that is not actually the case. Many of the founding and second wave Detroit DJs feel that they would not have reached the level of success that they did without Berlin's re-establishment of techno music into popular culture. Carl Craig, one of techno's second wave superstars, said in an interview with *NPR Magazine*, “I'm fortunate because I exported my business. If I kept it in the U.S., we would have failed a long time ago.”²¹ In the same article, author Wills Glasspiegel reports that, “In addition to making his own music, Craig runs a record label he started two decades ago in Detroit. Last year, it shipped nearly 20,000 vinyl records out of the city — 70 percent went to Europe. Craig is a star in Berlin and Paris.” It appears that the Detroit DJs responsible for starting the techno craze received sufficient royalties and credit for their work in Berlin.

In the article “*Techno in Berlin: Down In The Bunker*,” author Bethan Cole concludes on behalf of Tresor nightclub in Berlin, “Because Tresor not only brought the leading lights of Detroit and Berlin into collaboration, it gave artists from Detroit the money, recognition and mythology they had never received in the US.”²² And in fact, they certainly did reach a level of recognition in Berlin that resembled mythology. The article later interviews Dimitri Hegemann

regarding today's establishment of techno music in mainstream popular culture in Berlin. He describes a new generation of young Berliners who have discovered techno's legacy and want to learn about its creation. Hegemann accounts that "they come to Berlin for Tresor, for the Love Parade, for music, like they'd go to Mecca."²³ Not only do young European techno fans travel across the country to visit the Berlin techno scene, they occasionally even travel overseas.

Nicole Stagg is a Detroit representative of the travel website www.couchsurfing.org, and she said of travelers coming into Detroit, "There's also a small but steady stream of 'techno tourists' who visit Detroit. We've had several people that have come from Germany, mostly from Europe, specifically for the techno scene here...they come to see the abandoned factories where techno parties happened, and to visit Detroit's techno landmark, Submerge."²⁴ Clearly techno fans worldwide consider Berlin and Detroit to be sacred locations for the genre, one that is even worth a 'pilgrimage' of sorts. In Bethan Cole's article from *Mixmag* Magazine, she concludes from all this that, "In Berlin, it seems there's every reason to worship at the altar of Detroit techno — for inspiration, money and a sort of imaginary vision of authenticity that haunts the dance floors."²⁵ Detroit exists today as a techno legacy that is worshipped in Europe.

It's clear then that the Detroit founding fathers of techno are seen as royalty in the eyes of Berliner's. Juan Atkins, Kevin Saunderson, Jeff Mills and Carl Craig are all frequently paid to travel to Europe to perform their techno sets in famous nightclubs in Berlin and London. If this were a case of appropriation, the Detroit artists would not have received the money, credit, or success that they currently have achieved all thanks to Berlin. The relationship is clearly consensual for both parties and certainly symbiotic.

This leaves the question: Why Berlin? For what reason did Berlin of all places develop such an intense love affair with the techno music coming out of Detroit in the mid 1980's? After some consideration, it seems apparent that Germany already had the capacity for the genre due to having a variety of its own electronica bands at the time who were making similar sounding music. Kraftwerk, DAF, and other German electronica bands seemed to inspire Detroit techno artists, which then came full circle with Detroit igniting dance music culture in Germany through techno. It seems that since techno and electronica had so much in common, it was only natural for Germany to embrace techno with such intensity. The Detroit-Berlin bond was one of instant chemistry.

Conclusion

The relationship between Berlin and Detroit proved to be an appropriate match for the task of bringing techno and dance music to the global scene. The afro-futurism of techno happening in Detroit mixed favorably with the electronica new-wave sound from Germany. Both Detroit and Berlin benefitted from the culture resulting from the techno-surge: Detroit regained their reputation as innovators in the music industry and Berlin rediscovered unity and a sense of culture once again after the fall of the Berlin Wall.

Techno music started the dance culture that is so popular in today's music industry. As was mentioned in the introduction, superstar DJs such as Zedd, Calvin Harris, Marshmello, Avicii, Swedish House Mafia and many more carry on the traditions formed over three decades of developing dance music styles in the United States and Europe. Although it seems to many that today's dance music originated in Europe from party scenes in Ibiza, Manchester, and Berlin, the truth is that dance music got its start in the humble roots of Detroit in the 1980's.

Popular music today would be much different without dance beats and electronic music. The 'rave culture' of the 1990's has also come a long way in influencing today's music festivals. Still decorated with smoke machines and laser light shows, music festivals like Coachella, EDC, Tomorrowland, and many more are a developed version of a 90's rave. Music festival attire can be traced back to the future-punk styles from the 90's Berlin techno scene where ravers wore neon colored clothing, leather strap outfits, platform shoes and chaotic makeup. The effects of the 1990's techno craze are still very alive today and thanks to the Detroit-Berlin alliance, can be found across the globe.

Notes

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3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
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