

# Interfacing with the Night

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**Abstract.** In this paper, the authors consider the interfaces between academia and dance music. Dance music and club culture are, we argue, important to computer music and the live performance of electronic music, but there are many different difficulties encountered when trying to present electronic dance music within academic contexts. The authors draw upon their experiences as promoters, performers, researchers and audience members to discuss these difficulties and how and why we might negotiate them.

**Keywords:** dance music, club culture, new interfaces for musical expression, live coding

## 1 Introduction

The *club* is home to a range of musical practices, taking place after dark, in windowless spaces with large sound systems and intensive visual projections. The history of clubbing forms an important part of contemporary electronic music, in terms of how it is experienced, performed, and conceived. The club itself is a rich subject for research, in terms of the musical practices, interactions, modes of listening and the social environment we find there. However, the club, and dance music in general has an often difficult and uncomfortable relationship with academic research.

There are a number of challenges involved in bringing the environment of the club to an academic conference, which we will reflect upon through this paper, with reference to our own interventions. One challenge has been prejudice against repetitive and beat-driven music, classified under the straw man category of *popular* music, meaning that the club as a hotbed of intense experimentation and creativity has at times been marginalised within academic discussion. As these prejudices finally melt away, new ways of presenting music at conferences have become possible. In the following, we draw on our experiences as curators, practitioners and researchers in bringing elements of club culture into the academic realm, and sketch some of the possibilities that might emerge from the intersection of these two worlds.

## 2 Connecting with the Lost Future

Computer music has had a long-running problem with electronic dance music. Steady beats have been treated with suspicion, described in pejorative terms as “grid-based”, where repetitions of discrete events have been seen to make music too easy to consume and therefore fatally undermined by commodified mass production. Following this logic, for repetitive music to maintain art music status, inaccessibility and unpopularity must somehow be maintained, for example through the use of noise (Zareei et al, 2013).

This split between art and popular music has long been questioned as a kind of cultural schizophrenia, and its reintegration foretold (Born, 1987). By the last turn of the century, in the world of commercially saleable music, divisions between highbrow and lowbrow had appeared to break down completely (Seabrook, 2001). Following the shocking, generational waves of skiffle, rock, punk, it became clear that enriching, experimental and challenging music need not necessarily mean unpopular. These genres pushed the limits of sound, embracing exotic, industrial and alien rhythms

and timbres; movements in sound that come intertwined with challenging shifts in culture. With the advent of rave and the hardcore continuum, another shocking generational shift, mass commercialisation momentarily seemed to fall behind decentralisation and democratisation, where anonymous DJs, white labels, and free parties were the norm.

Fast forward to 2014, and the picture has changed somewhat; the music of mass culture seems lost in the past, a phenomenon which Fisher (2014) describes in terms of *hauntology*, being a depressive state of lost futures trapped in a period of late capitalism. This leaves us with an unexpected opportunity; with the slowdown in mainstream progress, approaches to music composition in academic institutions have the opportunity to catch up, and look for new musical futures which have renewed meaning for people outside the academy. This is not about impacting people with research, but rather academics taking part in wider cultural movements.

In making new interfaces for musical expression, we often consider the performer's relationship with the instrument, but rarely that of a wider community. From the perspective of Anthropology, Tim Ingold has recognised the cultural processes of adapting to algorithmic automation as the "irreducibility of skills"; human processes are turned into algorithms, but we then create new human skills in response based on these algorithms (Ingold 2011, p.62). This can be seen in the very history of techno, going back to female factory workers in Lancashire creating clog dances which mimicked the sound and movements of the industrial machines which they operated - astonishing, repetitive noise music created out of otherwise inhumane working conditions (Radcliffe and Angliss 2012). By creating new kinds of events around technology we are not simply presenting new music, but rather creating space for people -- performers to create new cultural meaning for technology. This turns the research impact agenda on its head -- as researchers we are not impacting audiences, but rather contributing one thread in a woven tapestry of cultural change; making space for, and responding to, the musical activity around us. From this perspective, we can reflect upon what it means to curate a public dance music event that interfaces with an academic conference, finding resonance between cultures.

### **3. A Short History of Dancing Academics**

The International Computer Music Conference is the largest of its kind, and at the time of writing has celebrated its 40th year. The conference has included late night concerts every year since 2007, when the evening programme in Copenhagen ran until 1am. The following year in Belfast included dance music within late programmes in the club style Mandela Hall, and the 2009 evening programme in Perth included a nightclub venue, although concerts there were seated and multichannel. The 2010 conference in New York included a category for music for a club atmosphere, and the 2011 Huddersfield call included a "club electro" music, repeated in 2012 and 2014. In short, the nightclub is now accepted as a potential venue for academic computer music, although music submissions are still overwhelmingly electroacoustic in style and format, and our informal canvassing of delegates has not found stories of significant numbers of delegates dancing in these venues.

The present authors have attempted to push elements of dance music within more academic contexts. Although live coding of music has become well established in computer music over the past ten years, it has had little take up as a practice outside the academy. This changed since the coining of the portmanteau *Algorave* by the present second author and Nick Collins in 2012, put into action in a London warehouse in an event organised by Dan Stowell, Matthew Yee-King and Ryan Jordan as a warm-up event for the Supercollider Festival (Collins and McLean, 2014). The notion of the Algorave immediately took on a life of its own, with events independently organised across the world, including Mexico, Australia, Japan, Canada, Slovenia, Spain, Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands. Many of these have been associated with academic or festival conferences. Again, people have not always danced, which underlines the risk inherent in interfacing with the nightclub; if the right atmosphere is not created, then there is no space for music to be enjoyed in. From a research perspective, failure of an algorave can be illuminating. For example, if we find ourselves standing in a

room looking at each other, issues of gender disparity which gravely undermines computer music culture become difficult to ignore.

As artistic co-chair of the International Conference on New Interfaces for Musical Expression (NIME) in London 2014, the present first author organised *Algorave NIME*, a club night at the end of the NIME conference which took place in Corsica Studios, a London club that is at the heart of many dance music communities within London, hosting regular events by Hyperdub, NTS radio and others. The music featured live coding, homemade electronics and music controlled by plants, along with DJs. The styles of music presented were diverse, mostly with repetitive beats, and ranging from experimental techno to dancehall. A well-tuned Funktion one sound system ensure the sound was appropriately physical. In our view, the night went extremely well, the room filled near to capacity, all performances were well received including a schedule-busting encore, and many people danced into the early hours.

We made specific efforts to connect the academic community of the NIME conference to the wider, non-academic music scene in London. We promoted the event through channels such as NTS radio, had a poster and flyer campaign, created a 'public facing' side of the website (for non-delegates to find out about concerts and installations) and received coverage from BBC World Service. This resulted in over 100 ticket buying members of the public attending, alongside the conference delegates.

#### **4. Dance Music and New Modes of Musical Expression**

Dance music informs the musical background of many working in computer music and related fields, and the club provides a space in which many of the changing technologies and possibilities for performing electronic music are explored. The growing hegemony of Ableton's "Live" software is testament to this: an environment which foregrounds the possibility of liveness, of electronic music emerging out of human interactions with a machine, including through add-on hardware controllers. Ableton Live is often used as a post-production and remixing tool, but its success is in presenting a way to perform live what would otherwise be music of the recording studio. It has contributed however to a particular view of liveness in electronic dance music culture; music is chopped up, tweaked and triggered but not fundamentally composed or improvised during performance. There are many exceptions to this rule, but this is the pervasive view; for example, live coding is often described by journalists as "Code DJing", even where no pre-composed pieces are involved, and the code is not always mixed as such, but created and rewritten live. The assumption is that music is brought to the club to be collectively experienced, perhaps selected live by DJs as curators, but not created as part of the flow of live experience. This popular understanding of the role of DJs illustrate the way in which conventional notions of liveness are challenged by the club, and there is a unique dynamic of musical creativity we find there.

Simon Reynolds uses the term *hardcore continuum* to describe the vein of creative dance music in Britain that emerged from hardcore in the early 1990s, which has been sustained by various pirate radio stations, club nights and DJs and has begotten such styles as Jungle, Grime and UK Garage. Reynolds perceives these as the most urgent and innovative new musics to emerge in recent times (Reynolds 2008). Whilst the relevance of this concept has been questioned, and Reynolds has been criticised for excluding some genres and styles from the continuum and implicitly questioning their legitimacy, the idea is valuable because it points to the club and surrounding cultures as a rich, dynamic environment, a hydrothermal vent of musical creativity occurring in a meshwork of dancing bodies, dubplates and new technologies. Within the hardcore continuum, musical styles evolve and mutate quickly, and there is an immediate engagement with emerging tools of musical performance, whether this is new software or hardware such as CDJs. Importantly, it is the functionality of the music and the laboratory-like environment of the club that creates an almost cybernetic feedback loop stimulating creativity. Club nights are in general multi-room, where people can freely circulate to catch a mood that suits them. This also supports risk-taking; noise, arhythmic breaks and long

form improv might send some of your audience out, but they will happily find their way to another room, and the more readily curious will be left.

Whilst it might not be the primary intention of every artist performing electronic dance music to actually make people dance, the feedback loop between dancing crowd and performer intensifies the experience of performing and listening. The immediate feedback from a dancing crowd brings focus and structure to the machine-interactions of a performer, where the musical decisions they make have literally biological consequences in shaping the energy in the room. Through the dancing audience, a performer's key presses and mouse clicks end up directly connected to audience members' swinging elbows. While notions of "embodied cognition" continue to be fashionable in music psychology, the club offers excellent ground to connect research with large numbers of actual bodies.

From notions of embodied cognition and the extended mind (Clark and Chalmers 1998, Wilson 2002, Dourish 2004), we can understand listening itself to be embodied and thus inseparable from how we move our bodies when listening. Cognitive processes occur not in some detached mind, but are bound up with a moving body and the environment that body is interacting in and with. Dancing is not some secondary physical activity done after a brain has heard and comprehended music, it is bound up with how we perceive that music in the first place.

Drawing on this, we can see that within the club, and within dance music in general, quite different ways of experiencing and presenting music can be found. A dancing audience is not focused on a stage, and some performance aspects that we might sometimes try and bring into electronic music through the construction of digital musical instruments lose some of their importance. Performing electronic music in a club can bring us to think of new ways of interfacing with electronic music that is not gestural and does not draw on traditions of instrumental performance. In "Against the Stage", Francisco Lopez (2004) argues that electronic music differs radically from the traditions surrounding the presentation of music in a concert hall, and must avoid imitating the performance practice and values that we find there in order to realise its potential.

## 5. The Club and the Concert Hall – Crossovers and Departures

Club spaces may still be seen as somehow opposed to, or simply less important musically than the concert hall. On the other side, academic music might be seen by practitioners as out of touch and their performances inauthentic. A curator who stages club music at an academic conference runs the risk of falling through the cracks between two opposing cultures. The exchanges between Stockhausen, Aphex Twin and Squarepusher in new music magazine *The Wire* (Witts 1995), reveal a mutual misunderstanding between the artists echoing this greater cultural divide. Stockhausen criticises the use of repetitive rhythms in Aphex Twin and Richie Hawtin: a repetition, however distasteful to Stockhausen, that is to a large degree essential in club music. The functionality of the music, and its "special effect in dancing bars", is dismissed, perhaps half in jest, as somehow being complacent with a public who will eagerly move onto their next musical hit, rather than allow the music to be elevated to some eternal canon.<sup>1</sup>

Nonetheless, the very existence of the article points to the parallels perceived between electroacoustic composition and contemporary electronic dance music, and the dialogue between

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1 For an example of the lack of understanding and indeed lack of influence between electroacoustic and techno musicians, see Richard D James's disappointment expressed in an interview on Radio 3's *Mixing it* programme (now Resonance FM's programme "Where's the skill in that"), from 6th November 1995, available here: <http://youtu.be/tcibDsSoNEY?t=12m>

these different yet related musical forces does suggest these alternative ways of approaching, staging and experiencing music can be blended into a cohesive programme.

An increasing number of more promoters and record labels - such as Nonclassical, the London Contemporary Music Festival or Pan - are nowadays blurring the lines between electro-acoustic composition, traditional 'computer music' and dance music, staging both within the same evening and drawing on the physicality and materiality of sound and other shared facets that these approaches explore. Digital music and digital arts festivals such as Sonar and Transmediale have showcased the wild experimentation in dance music that happens outside academia, with very large dancing crowds responding to new sounds and new ways of making music with enthusiasm.

There are clearly many crossovers between these scenes, though the question still remains how we as researchers could interface better with dance music and bring some of this energy into our own events. Hosting a successful club night as part of an academic conference takes more than just having dance music playing after 10pm. How do we blend beatless, electro acoustic music into programmes with dance music that should be danced to? What are the risks and curatorial responsibilities of bringing these together into a cohesive conference music programme?

Many of the difficulties we find in presenting club music within such a programme are down to the very context-specific nature of music and musical experiences: how a piece of music is experienced, is shaped strongly by the context within which it is presented. Two hours of pounding, repetitive synthesised kick drums experienced mid afternoon, seated, in a university concert hall is likely to have different affective potential than the same music played in a dark club at the witching hour. Drawing on the concept of 'Musicking' described by Christopher Small (1998), this context itself must be understood in the widest possible sense, incorporating the people (from the performers to the cleaners and the bar staff) the buildings and playback technologies involved, such that the way we experience music together plays out wider social constructs.

Club music particularly is very context dependent. The names of different genres often reflect very specific physical places and geographical regions: Detroit Techno, Chicago House (the name itself referencing the Warehouse club in Chicago), garage (named after New York's paradise garage), and more recently genres such as Niche Bassline, named after a Sheffield nightclub. "Gabba", a genre of hard, fast house music from the Netherlands, is Rotterdam slang for "mate". Through these names, even, one can see how certain locations play key roles within a wider community, culture and its own mythologies, of which the music plays a key role, and dance music is often routed in specific communities.

Central to many of the mythologies of dance is the idea that clubbing is framed as an 'outside' to regular life, or as a place with different rules and values, a mythology captured memorably on film by Tony Manero's character in *Saturday Night Fever*. Dead end jobs and oppressive social norms evaporate on the dance floor. Described in this way, the club might start to sound radically different to an academic conference. However, there are ways in which we might imagine a club night actually playing a similar role within an academic conference and the community surrounding it. Academic conferences act in some ways as community building events, bringing together specialists from around the world for what is often an intense experience of knowledge exchange along with a very important socialising aspect.

Of course, there are also differences. The demographic of an academic conference will be different to that of most club nights, and these people are not brought together by a specific rhythm or the culture of a certain venue or scene in the same way. However, if we are to see a successful presentation of dance music within an academic conference, it should draw upon this shared community, and we must understand dance music as not just a collection of sounds, but something with a social role that is very dependent upon place, atmosphere and values.

Reflecting again upon *Algorave NIME*, the evening felt very much like it was occurring within and, we hoped, serving a specific community. Some were old friends, some had known each other on-and-off

over the years, meeting at the annual range of conferences such as NIME, ICMC, SMC and others. They had spent an intense few days together, with packed schedules of papers and concerts. They will have shared inspirations and annoyances. Repetitive rhythms, affordable cider and a Funktion one sound system provided an atmosphere to bond a community in collective acts of dancing, but hopefully also providing a space that was in some way 'outside' of the conference.

## Conclusion

Electronic dance music and the unique listening and performing atmosphere of the club is, as we have argued, of great importance to anyone interested in electronic and computer music. Nonetheless, there are myriad difficulties with staging such music or creating a club-like space within academia and academic conferences. Simply having some music with repetitive rhythms within a conference programme does not properly represent dance music. We need to consider the whole context of dance music and club culture when exploring how we as academics interface with it. We could see this interfacing as an opportunity to explore the ways in which we can create new spaces for culture, fully exploring new musical practices, environments and the social interactions we find there.

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