

JUSTIN HAMPTON'S OVERVIEW OF THE TECHNO SCENE

After the second storm of the season, I return to inform you on the recent rumblings within the electronic music community. Most exciting of all was the Red Hot Organization's Offbeat party, held at the Westbeth Theater on Feb. 2nd. Cynical as I was at first given this event's extremely high profile (bound to attract no small amount of close-minded and ignorant partygoers who understand nothing about the music), I was pleasantly surprised to witness an event put together with a great degree of care and intelligence. Three stages - a two-tiered DJ platform, a concert stage, and a ground-level area where the East Village multimedia combo By-zar held court - were erected inside the main space, and as a brilliant touch, performers segued into each other's sets, so there was no break in the music.

The volunteers of New York were privileged to hear Japanese trip-hopper DJ Krush make his first American appearance with a set that jumped from mid-tempo jazzy trip-hop to straight-up Japanese rap (the only difference between it and our domestic stuff is the vocals). Soul Coughing were a disappointment for me, as their performance lacked charisma and brought an indie rock vibe to the event that I felt wasn't needed (and who could hear their sampler?) but the best was saved for last, as DJ Spooky threw hardcore jungle in our face, By-Zar had some of us sit down and listen, and the final DJ meltdown of the night (a trademark loaned to the event by SoundLab, who co-promoted the event) included Spooky, Slipmatt and Matt Ducasse of Skylab, jamming until we all got thrust into the snow.

In short, it was enough to reaffirm my faith in NYC's sincere love for music passionately and innovatively presented. The event

was in part thrown to promote Red Hot's new Offbeat compilation, which upon first listen immediately confirmed my belief in the slowly growing popularity and relevance of electronic music. After a slow start, experimental electronic club nights have resurfaced with a vengeance, many of them excellent: Wednesday's Static night at Void has picked up where the Chameleon Lounge's Minimal (currently on a one-month hiatus, I'm told) left off, with top-notch DJ's that have included Matt Ducasse, Abe Duque and Walker from Air Liquide (and in the future, Adam X).

On Thursdays, Robots presents Killer, and on Friday Soundlab dukes it out with Chameleon's Fluid. Sundays gives us Cell at Den of Thieves, which leaves most clubgoers only two days to relax, with Saturdays reserved for one-offs. Most of the one-offs, unfortunately, have been somewhat disappointing. Sheldon Drake threw a private party on February 3 in a beautiful townhouse in the West Village, and the event proved valuable if only as an examination of what is right and wrong about staging all-night ambient affairs in the city.

Technical problems pushed everyone back, and there were few surprises - almost everyone played what you'd expect them to play. An exception was Gen Ken, the owner of Earwax in Williamsburg and longtime aficionado of electronic music, who played a stellar set of beatless abstract sinewaves stretching from the present to two decades back (in the dark days when electronic innovators wallowed in obscurity). Saddest of all, quite a few of the people there barely seemed to care that

much about the event, with many people leaving around the Pavlovian 4 a.m. social curfew.

Abstract Wave's one-year celebration, Surf, provided more variety and performances by By-Zar and W&A (who were excellent, incidentally), but nevertheless lacked the focus needed to make the event truly magical. And as for the Paper party thrown at Irving Plaza - which was to feature ambient pop icons Orbital in an ISDN performance that, like many, ran aground due to technical foul-ups - I felt like one of the few people who knew or even cared about who was performing, and marvelled at the rest of these clueless trendoids networking over rehearsed hip hop breaks.

It's enough to make anyone who cares about the growth of the scene frustrated. However, the commitment of the East Village Ambient Posse to create and spread these sounds easily rivals that of any music scene in the city you'd care to mention. It's a pivotal time, where the identity of a new musical style is beginning to shape a social community in the process.

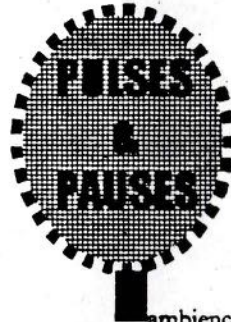
Meanwhile, our sister city in Baltimore, continually amazes me with their Cloudwatch events. The city's main promoter, Lonnie Fisher, has been throwing the Ultraworld parties for five years, and unlike many promoters who have chosen to downsize, has always retained a top-quality chill room in his events (his New Year's event, Vibration, featured in the Chill room New Yorkers Sheldon, Olive and Abstract Wave's Decent, along with Atlanta, Georgia's Little Jenn and locals Infinity and Lovegrove.)

Sonic Soul, the local ambient crew, has been throwing "Cloudwatches" for years now.

They've built the events from slumber parties thrown at DJ Bobble's suburban house to all-night blanket events that draw 250 to 300 people and have featured Space Time Continuum Mixmaster Morris and Ben Neill. The last Cloudwatch, thrown on January 27th, ranks as my single favorite event so far this year, one which all of us in the ambient community could take lessons from.

A back room featured a local ambient group jamming away, with a sitarist and Sheldon Drake and Decent providing accompaniment throughout the night. Decent aka Tim Sweet also unveiled Intermodal, a new group featuring Lonnie himself on percussion which poured out beautiful ethereal melodies before Matt Ducasse arrived fresh off the plane to play the best DJ set I have ever heard. Defining the term "trip-hop," Matt took us all on an auditory journey that cruised through Massive Attack, wicked dub reggae, Dr. John, cheesy psychedelica and as the peak out of the night, the Beatles' "Tomorrow Never Knows."

Needless to say, the crowd, made up mostly of younger kids but also consisting of older adults, went nuts. Tomorrow of Drums in Space and Home fame spun a wonderful set of early morning ambient, and Sheldon provided the proper coda to the night's festivities. In short, a perfect evening, one which New York has yet to provide. The potential, there, though: I saw it at Offbeat, when at least 200 people had to be kicked out at 3:30 A.M. and people I knew who had early-morning appointments ended up sitting down to listen to By-Zar. As soon as a large and safe enough space can be secured where well-focused one-offs can be thrown, the scene will grow from its roots. Be certain that I'll let you know how we're floating up here...



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