

From Industrial to Techno: The Secret History of Pacific Northwest Techno

by tobias c. van Veen

I imagined it all... secret underground cults of Pacific Northwest techno DJs, worshipping Detroit in dark warehouses far from the grind of the househeads... and then I was snapped out of the dream.

This article is a creative trainwreck. Jeff Mills thrashing three decks of words at 150bpm... My original mission was to find that link between Vancouver's revered industrial scene of the '80s and today's explosion of techno, electro and experimental producers in the Pacific Northwest who openly proclaim their debt to Detroit's Afro-Futurist techno and Germany's minimal dub explorations. The mission was personal. As a techno DJ of many years in Vancouver, I wanted to discover who laid the groundwork for the subsequent techno enterprises. Any trainspotter will notice cracks in the vinyl, and also my own personal involvement with this scene. This article thus remains subjective and Gonzo. Drop the needle... the following mix only sketches out the sonography. Memory tracks remain white labels in the grooves of history...

Outside the House

Vancouver is primarily known for its house scene through the Nordic Trax label, and probably the most recognized DJ from Vancouver is Tyler "T-Bone" Stadius. Tyler moved to Vancouver in the early '80s, DJing funk, acid house, soul, reggae and a "spot of techno." I asked him if there were links between Vancouver's industrial scene — cEvin Key, Frontline Assembly, Skinny Puppy, Phil Western — and the early rave scene: "No, not at all," says Tyler. "I'd really only heard of them. In the early days I'd play a Ministry or Front 242 track but it was never my first love." Maybe not for Tyler — but for anyone else? People that have been forgotten, perhaps? The answer was grim: "No clue."

Re-mixing the strategy and not to be dismayed, I turned to CTR's DJ Noah. Tyler remembers him well as a DJ who "played more techno than most." I used to tune into Noah's Homebass show on Friday nights — which is still running — and it influenced me for years. As Tyler says, "Noah played what would later become known as 'Rave Classics'." But like me, it was the style of Noah's DJing that was most impressive. "The quality I admire most about Noah's DJing," says Tyler, "is the fact that he can be unpredictable — an attitude or style sometimes associated with 'Techno' DJing." Indeed. Anyone who has heard Donald Glaude throwing down techno records can attest... it's not only the music, it's the attitude toward the records, an unmistakable grasp of the mixer and the EQ in a vicious speed that combines the hip hop tricks of turntablism with the beatmatch skills of a house DJ, ending up somewhere in uncharted turntable territory — a sonography of skills akin to Toronto's Jeff Milligan, a.k.a. Algorithm.



Which is where I had to jump — back East. With, unfortunately, no response from Noah at press time, I turned to one of Canada's most infamous techno DJs, Algorithm, who was influenced by Vancouver's industrial scene. He explains it like this:

"In Toronto, there were two types of people: the ones who listened to '80s alternative music then listened to 'alternatetechno' (Underworld, Orb etc.), and the ones who listened to '80s alternative music, and then listened to house and techno. I was kind of in between both, but just like everyone else, I was listening to New Order first."

Industrial Isolation

The path to fame in Vancouver is weird, but normal for the recognition of a sound. The industrial scene had the most influence outside its coastal home... but this boomerang returned, for Algorithm and other debtors to the industrial world, such as Richie Hawtin, had a longstanding influence on the generation of DJs that came after Tyler Stadius. But this was evidently still a few years to come and on the fringe of Vancouver's music history.

In the mid-'90s, DJs such as Micronian and Chris Schmidt in Vancouver mixed industrial, trance, and techno. Artist Olo J. Milkman remembers the definite isolation of the "Freak Scene" in the days of the goth/industrial club Twilight Zone: "The music was electronic but not what we know as techno now, it was more like what became trance without the builds, and again there was no beat matching, so the whole point of how the music is supposed to be assembled was lost on the freaks."

Around the same time, the splintering of the '80s industrial scene filtered into the domain of electronic music, namely through the various admixtures of the "Skinny Puppy scene" in Vancouver — cEvin Key, Bill Leeb, Phil Western (Philt), M. Handraber, Dave Ogilvie and a host of others that brought the world Frontline Assembly, Download, DVOA, Noise Unit, Off-Off, platEAU, Floatpoint, Vuemorph, Sanctum... Yet it wasn't until 1993 that ravers took serious notice. Net records — in one of the few moments of glory before a long fall into commercialization — released a side project by Bill Leeb and Rhys Fulber. This was Delirium's first album, Semantic Spaces. Despite an Enigma-take on world beat, the album remains a chill-out favorite from the era. And in 1996, Robert Shea launched Map Music, going on to release Phil Western's crossover album, The Escapist, in 1998. Shea was Harthouse North America acid-techno label rep and an early Vancouver rave DJ alongside DJ Noah, and probably represents one of the strongest links between the industrial and early techno scenes in Vancouver.

Trackin' Techno

It was in the same mid-'90s era that Vancouver's techno underground was forming. In Victoria, artists who are recognized today on Spencer's itiswhatisits label were DJing and collecting gear and setting forth their first productions — Matt Johnson, Tyger Dhula, Cobblestone Jazz and Colin the Mole. Vancouver witnessed the appearance of Loscil, Ben Nevile, Kerry Uchida and Steb Sly. A primary force at this time was ex-house DJ Jess, whose Broken Record Chamber experimental side project and Q funk band provided a creative drive for further explorations beyond Vancouver's predominant house sound.

None of this would have been possible without a dedicated and supportive framework of DJs and conceptual event curators that thrived in the mid-to-late '90s and into the millennium for this music. In Seattle, DJ Brahman's gr0k studios events, the launch of Randy Jones' ORAC records, the success of Jacob London, the madness of erik's eventual Phoenix Festival and the influence of producers such as Ben Sims, Solenoid, Mike Perkowitz, Masa's 1200

