

The Techno Fest And The New Movement In Detroit

Detroit is the home of the annual Electronic Music Festival – now called “Movement” - held on Memorial Day weekends on Hart Plaza. It is one of *the* seminal events in Detroit as it transitions into a new, post-industrially-dominated city and the “movement” that was taking place on the riverfront was not only to the music, but a synergistic spark in the movement of young whites coming to – and remaining in - the city.

Detroit is an overwhelmingly African-American city, yet for this event, the crowd is overwhelmingly white. After decades of their parents’ fearful avoidance of the city, a new generation of suburban kids are not only refusing to be afraid of the urban center, but refusing to leave, setting up residence in downtown lofts and apartments, partying in downtown clubs, and skateboarding in the night on Woodward Avenue.

There are enough black Detroiters to give the Techno Fest – as it is known - the edginess and cool to make for an exciting musical event for the whites who have come to the city, for up to this point the blacks in attendance have been mostly members of the Detroit’s black cultural and musical intelligentsia. Techno music, with its pan-continental DJs and audience, is not viewed as a “black” dance music of choice in the ‘hood – rap, hip-hop, and the new R&B were the genres that were marketed to blacks, doubtless, the African-American founders of techno music, accustomed to mostly white audiences in the US and Europe, are glad to see so many brothers and sisters here in their home town. On the other hand, too much hip-hop throughout the festival weekend runs the risk of attracting too many of its fans from the ‘hood - which might make this neo-hippie fest a little too “diverse” for comfort to the whites who are pouring onto the plaza. Others come to the Techno Fest from many miles away – not just the suburbs but from Australia, France, Japan, Germany; backpacks full of provisions for this new electronic Woodstock. During the festival, thousands of mostly white kids rest and hang out near a monument on the promenade dedicated to the Underground Railroad, a bronze depiction of a group of slaves fleeing toward freedom to Canada, in plain sight across the river. Only those familiar with the intense racial divisions between Detroit’s city and suburbs truly appreciate the irony of this scene.

The music could be heard from three main stages and a dozen booths at once, banging off the high-rise buildings that rim the plaza, The DJs use the archetypal beats and sounds of R&B, funk, disco and pop culture - the building blocks of our contemporary aural heritage – to create transnational dance genre. Multiply these samples and sounds by tens of thousands of culturally recognizable beats, phrases and riffs,

rearrange them into new configurations, and they are as creative as the original makers of the music from which they sample.

The turntable technicians transform electronic sounds into music, and many, with their sampling, display a prodigious knowledge of the vocabulary of modern cultural sounds. Detroit's Motown sound developed in part from the relentless rhythms of the mechanized clash and clang of assembly lines of the auto plants in which Berry Gordy and his contemporaries toiled. Today's youth grew up with different sounds – the ambient noise of video games, computers, cell phones; technology with its hums, bells, bleeps and blips, the aural wall that surrounds today's environment. All of this electronic sound engendered a musicality that is based on – but is inevitably unlike – the sounds of the rock and roll generation. Techno music evolved from black middle-class Detroiters able to afford – or hustle up on – the turntables, electronic equipment and voluminous libraries of vinyl record collections that were the original tools of the DJs craft.

Masters of the Dance

On the last day of the first Techno Fest, a new element changed the character of Movement, so that its final day was different than the first. The police had abandoned bag checks and let the crowds pour in, and they showed no sign of thinning. For the first time all weekend, pouring into the main entrance was a growing phalanx of bristling “young Black males”. The mostly white crowd had gradually become “Blacker” and it wasn't clear what this would mean. These new arrivals crowd the plaza in excited agitation, some with the sullen defiance of the unwanted, wearing the mask of fear that they are unwelcome, that their presence is cause to tighten jaw lines and police lines, both. It is understood that this festival is not for them, but rather for the visitors, though doubtless, its founders are gratified that, finally, the music that they created will have an audience of boys from the ‘hood. Over the three days of the festival, word has spread through Detroit that the music is “live” and worth risking the possibility of suburban and police hostility. They know that their arrival is akin to crashing a gigantic private party; nevertheless, they come. They flow into the bowl of the plaza; and the air crackles with their presence. Yet instead of fleeing – as may have happened a decade ago – the young suburbanites jelled into a concentrated mass of excitement and awe.

The festival had blown off the hook – it was electrified. The black youth crowd the plaza, huddle in tight, dark circles. No rainbow-hued costumery and Hackey Sack looks for these new arrivals – they are from the shirtless, bedraggled, disarrayed school of urban poverty. They feel out the crowds, spot locations,

size up adversaries; they work their limbs into cudgels or stand still in Zen concentration. They are the Masters of Dance and they have come to take their rightful positions. The battle has begun. It is a war, not of weapons, but of strength, grace and mental acuity. The crowds part like the Red Sea as these new participants step into the whorls of dance that have formed in the ocean of people.

The music is bumpin' bass through to the bone marrow. These new dances defy any concept of what was known as dance decades ago but then again, this is not the movement of courtship - as in the Motown days - but of power, motor skills, and muscular control. Their bodies replicate the movement of computerized machines, and it is not romantic, and barely sexual. One marvels at just what kinds of bodies can do these things. Thirty years ago black dance broke out of partnered confines into robotic motions of machinery and mime. After they had been embedded in the dance lexicon of the Black community for years, Michael Jackson displayed these moves to the world. "Poppin' & Lockin'" the abrupt, mechanized, stylized imitation of robots, is familiar now to generations of Black dancers, mastered even by small children in the 'hood. Body waving, Breakin', Moon Walking, Runnin' Man, Robot and Tickin' - the bizarrely elegant quivering of every joint and muscle at conflicting angles - all these dances grew from hip hop's beginnings. With music videos, MTV, BET and the exposure to black music at exponentially higher levels than previous generations, the great racial rhythmic divide doesn't exist in the same way as generations past. The white kids, most as segregated as ever in real life, are profoundly integrated regarding aspects of music and elements of dance - even if they are learning dances that black kids mastered almost 40 years ago.

Dance Wars on the Plaza

The white kids who could "Lock" and Break Dance had dominated the festival's dance circles and entertained the crowds all weekend - but now they stand back in humility and awe. The blacks have come to "take them to school" - and they all know it. Many of these suburban boys rarely get a chance to see - in real life - the rippling pop of brown limbs and muscles and they study these moves with as much concentration as college entrance exams. Emboldened by attention and recognition, the black dancers from the city challenge one another to ever more physical effort. The suburbanites are mesmerized by this urban drama. The blacks are sure of their dominance, suffering no fool gladly to step into the ring with them unprepared, but they are generous as well. The suburban boys who prove their mettle and go toe to toe with the brotha's are given

respect – smug, serious nods of approval, wild high-fives pass to one another as each dances into the ring and out again. Dancers strip from the waist up, every visible muscle moving like rhythmic pythons under the skin.

Added to the layers of consciousness, physicality and race, there are whites whose forebears would not or could not flee from Detroit – these are the white boys from the ‘hood, lighter facsimiles of blacks; skin color alone differentiates them from their darker neighbors, they are indistinguishable in speech, dress and attitude. They too are stars in this game of bravado and skill and their combination of urban-ness in white bodies makes them fascinating bridges between the two worlds – humble enough to accede leadership to their dark mentors in the ‘hood, but cocky in their dance mastery and urban skills in comparison to the suburban boys.

All weekend the white girls’ moves approximated Britney Spears’ hip-hop lite, but they stepped back in excited incredulity to watch the arrival of the “ghetto fabulous” home-girls. The allure of these new arrivals is primordial; the suburban girls – princesses in their hometown schools and malls – are agog at the finesse of these brown, urban females. There is nothing coy about their moves; this is the hard core “booty shake” of Senegal via the East Side of Detroit. Their rhythmic undulating is intense and incredible to behold. As their bodies roil they stare straight ahead in the dead seriousness of trance. After minutes of these pelvic machinations, they collapse in childish giggles - just young girls having fun. The boys from the ‘hood danced in tandem, transferring waves of rhythm to one another, staging mock vignettes, sexual simulations and Chaplinesque parodies for the crowds. Watching this populist art unfold, there is a deep, adult intelligence at play in this display of skill and wonder. The battles intensified all over the plaza and black, white, yellow and brown dancers established victories in recognition of their mastery – they are the Shaolin warriors of dance. There are no guns shot, no violence – dance alone is the measure of will and negotiator of the social contract.

At the edge of Hart Plaza the huge, dark figures of the Underground Railroad sculpture stood larger than life; massive, bronze figures fleeing from the ancestors of some of these very young people in their ceaseless, ecstatic movement on the plaza. I stood and reflected that during my own youth such an edifice would be unthinkable; much has changed within my lifetime. This statue of slaves on the verge of freedom stood in the midst of a scene that years ago was only a dream – kids of all colors dancing in Detroit’s dark night.