



Words: Richard Brophy

HEADY AND COOL, MINIMAL TECHNO AND HOUSE HAVE BEEN SEEPING INTO THE SOUND OF A WIDE VARIETY OF DJs OF LATE. DJMAG INVESTIGATES...

MAXIMUM MINIMALISM

IT'S more experimental and daring than any other modern dancefloor-based sound, but minimalism - a loose term to describe Mathew Jonson's dreamy techno, Robag Wruhme's skeletal stutter-funk and the visceral howl of Sender Records and everything inbetween - has steadily become a sound championed across the DJ big league. DJs from John Diggweed to Adam Beyer are recent proponents.

It is also spreading virally through clubland. Witness the rise in popularity of Barcelona's Sonar festival - whose headline acts this year included arch-minimalists Ricardo Villalobos, Richie Hawtin and Herbert - and Canada's experimental Mutek festival, which now also takes place in Mexico and Chile. Witness, too, its popularity in clubs like London's Fabric, Ibiza's DC10 and Frankfurt's Cocoon.

Minimal's rise has been stealthy: there are no big DJ names (apart from Hawtin), no big tunes and no discernible, distinctive style. While many minimal records take inspiration from Rob Hood and Daniel Bell's early '90s vision of minimal techno and Basic Channel's mid-'90s expansive, dubby grooves, there's a wealth of other influences at play. These include electro and Chicago house - evident on Poker Flat and Get Physical releases - and even dodgy '80s German pop and r&b: Kompakt's stable and Akufen and Soft Pink Truth's cut-up aesthetic.

So why is such unconventional music quietly conquering global clubland? "It's simply exciting new music and compared to what is on offer in commercial dance areas, the records you described as 'minimal' are the business. They work on dancefloors and give people that care an opportunity to get back into

clubs, parties, festivals and record shops," says Damian Lazarus from Crosstown Rebels.

Damian's new 'Suck My Deck' mix on Resist features tunes and remixes from European minimal producers like Trentemøller, Pier Bucci and Villalobos. Ironically, the other reason for its popularity, Lazarus believes, is its proponents' disregard for the notion of making music for commercial purposes.

"Unfortunately in the UK we have got too used to the idea that making music is only relevant if it makes money," he says. "You will find that many of the best producers in this scene do not see things in the same way. For them, living in Berlin or Barcelona is an opportunity to make incredible music and to be appreciated by clubbers and music lovers who understand that this style of 'dance' music is special and is not being forced down their throats by music magazines or commercial radio stations. "Take a look at the DJs that pack out Fabric every Saturday," Lazarus continues. "These are people that have little or no interest in selling out or playing the shit music that we often hear on our 'dance' radios or see in the 'dance' charts."

SEDUCE

More than any other UK club, Fabric, and its resident Craig Richards, have tirelessly championed this sound. The club booked DJs like Villalobos, Luciano, Magda and Hawtin when few other nights in the UK were supporting minimalism.

While Craig admits that turning Saturday night clubbers onto stripped-down, spacey techno isn't easy, he acknowledges that he has a powerful weapon, his armoury - Fabric's sound system. "It isn't always easy to engage and excite the crowd with the simplicity of a few basic elements," Craig admits. "I try to communicate my own enthusiasm for the sound, or lack of it, and presenting it in such a basic form demands a great deal of the listener -



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but the rewards are high. The realisation that very little can be extremely entertaining is exciting in itself.

"At Fabric, my aim is to use the sound system to give the music its best chance, and peoples' ears are open because they are aware it could go in any direction. The range of the sound system is incredibly important and I am lucky enough to play on impeccable equipment," he adds.

"The music can breathe because the sound is delightful. At 5am, with the lights down low, I feel as if I can achieve anything. With beautiful sound, it's possible to seduce the audience."



Damian Lazarus

For other DJs who have picked up on this sound, the desired result is the same - to shatter perceptions and to seduce their audience with a challenging new sound.

Adam Beyer's 'Fabric' mix boasts tracks by underground artists like Dominik Eulberg and Reinhard Voigt. He's now set up a minimal label, Mad Eye.

"It's the style that I buy most records from and where I see most progression in electronic dance music," says Beyer.

"I've been playing this type of techno every time I get a chance: it doesn't have the same energy as the more uptempo stuff and maybe that's why some people who are into techno think it's boring. But it's not like I've started to play jazz; it's still techno, so why limit yourself to just one sound?"

"There are exceptions and there have been a few times where the crowd gets confused because the music goes somewhere unexpected. I've seen DJs crashing a party with it, but I have been playing around the world for 10 years and I think this style fits in dancefloors all over the world."

EXCITING

Perhaps the other reason why minimalism is a ubiquitous fixture among house and techno spinners is because its stripped-down form makes it ideal for fusing with other styles. Chris Fortier, a spinner perhaps unfairly associated with progressive house, successfully blended dubby grooves by Mathew Jonson and Alex Smoke and Wighnomy Brothers' spiky, angular grooves with deep, techy house on his recent triple CD mix, 'Balance 07'.

"I don't see myself as following a trend but a lot of this stripped, tracky stuff is the most exciting music around.

When I made the mix, I really didn't realise so many people were heading in this direction," Chris explains. "At the same time, it would have been boring to release a minimal CD without any ebbs and flows. It's about finding great records and putting them with other great records and if that means me playing other minimal house records, then so be it.

"Other styles have become stale and boring and there is an evolution going on. I never thought Hawtin or Sven Väth would be James Holden fans.

"By the same token, there is infiltration going on from the other side," Fortier continues. "There are a number of German minimal records that if released by a UK label would be considered progressive."

However, it would be foolish to assume that every minimal release is, by its nature, brilliant. The downside to its popularity is that, like the excess of monotonous looped techno music that Jeff Mills' groundbreaking PurposeMaker series unwittingly spawned, the great minimal releases are now overshadowed by a vast glut of one-dimensional rubbish.

DJT says, "Everybody who makes modern house music is influenced by the new minimal movement." But he also adds: "There is a very high percentage of trash and there is often a very thin line in this music between trash and quality."

Does the fact that it consists of basic components mean that it's easy to make, and that anyone can churn out a standard minimal track?

"Like all styles of dance music, there is a lot of dull and quite boring music," Damian Lazarus agrees. "But while the best minimal music may sound basic, in truth when you break it down and really listen to it, it becomes clear that it is by no means easy to make."

"I'm certain many people find minimalism dull and dreary - perhaps it is and maybe that's its charm," Craig Richards adds cryptically.

"I'm not sure that minimalism is that daring or adventurous. Personally, I find the simplicity of sound very stimulating in the same way that I find dub reggae entertaining. I love the idea of sounds repeating themselves, the concept of monotony and the whole idea of being overwhelmed by basic qualities."

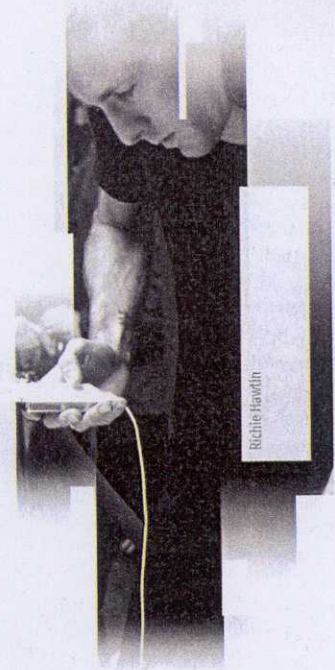
REPETITION

Listen to Richie Hawtin and Villalobos DJing together for hours and hours, immerse yourself in the cold, clinical funk of Poker Flat or absorb the brutal force of a Sender release and you will share Richards' sentiments that monotony and repetition make minimalism a compellingly hypnotic proposition. Of course, context is everything for such unconventional music and you need to find a place to present it, where the normal rules don't apply.

It's no surprise that Germany - and Berlin in particular - lead the way in this field, in terms of production, labels and clubs. Germany's love of avant-garde music also plays a role and, at times, Villalobos' freeform, rambling grooves seem to be as much inspired by Krautrockers Can's freeform jams as clinical techno.

"A lot of the clubs in Europe, especially in Germany, book me to do three to six-hour sets, which gives me a chance to go from warm-up to full-on techno and back," Adam Beyer says. "You have to remember that a lot of this music comes from Germany, where the clubs are open for over 12 hours and people party in a different way, so it's more of a prolonged rush than the few hours in England."

However, Craig Richards contends that it is "really an international thing" and cites UK producer Baby Ford and



the Chilean-German contingent - Luciano, Villalobos and Pter Bucci - as key to the music's development.

Indeed, more and more clubs and festivals, from Ibiza to Mexico, are adopting this music. When DJmag spoke to Dutch trance DJ Ferry Corsten, he admitted to playing some minimal music - perhaps seduced by James Holden and Nathan Fake's hypnotic, tranced-out releases.

Amongst all this sound pioneering, however, there are dissenting voices. Although he says that early '90s minimal techno like Robert Hood's 'Minimal Nation' "still shakes ass the world over", Dave Clarke believes that the early '90s style has "more funk because it was made live. Whereas minimal techno now is so over-engineered that its basis seems to be clever programming and not feeling".

"I think it has its appeal, but in small quantities," he says. "I couldn't be bothered doing a minimal set, but it's very easy to mix, and I suspect that's its appeal for many DJs. "There are DJs jumping on the bandwagon, but maybe that's because you can have a great haircut if you play minimal music [referring to Hawtin's haircut], so maybe all the progressive house DJs playing it want to spruce up their barnets!"

The next step for minimalism could involve getting play-listed by a Radio 1 dance DJ or for one of the leading producers to land a major label remix job - Villalobos has just done a version of The KLF's 'What Time Is Love'. But it won't matter because its leading lights will probably be doing something more daring before the bandwagon catches up.

"There are loads of people trying to get into this sound and it's only a matter of time before Seb Fontaine gets into it," Chris Fortier warns. "Everybody will start making it and there will be hundreds of rubbish records. But for every push to the mainstream there will be an underground reaction and producers like Steve Bug, who have spearheaded this sound, will just move onto something else - maybe they already have."

WITHOUT a shadow of a doubt one of the most exciting underground house/techno producers to emerge in the past 12 months is Denmark's Anders Trentemøller. His tracks are hybrids that fuse deep, electro and tech-house with minimal house/techno to create vivid, rich and dynamic soundscapes. This creativity has not gone unnoticed with his tracks picked up by labels like Poker Flat, Audiomatique, Naked and Third Floor. DJmag caught up with Anders to find out more about his influences, live show and, er, his penchant for rock music...

So, how did you get into music?

"I started playing in a rock band when I was 10-years-old. Later I went to London and heard various types of music such as trip-hop and jungle. These new sounds really excited me so I decided to buy some equipment and start producing some of my own music. "I dabbled in a bit of drum & bass early on but was mainly focusing on making hip hop influenced by funk and soul. At this stage my aim wasn't to release anything but rather to experiment for my own pleasure."

How did these sounds progress into electronic music?

"When I was playing in a funk band one of the other members, Thomas Bertleson (DJ Tom who now works with me when I do my live show), was always buying new tracks and playing them to me."

Your band Trigbag was cited as the "first house band in Denmark". What's the story there?

"It was a collaboration once again between myself and Thomas but we also brought in a drummer and bassist. It was all live with myself on keyboard and sequencer, Thomas DJing over the top adding effects and scratching, plus the bassist and drummer. "We only released one single but many DJs played it back then, including Etienne De Crecy, Alex Gopher and Laurent Garnier."

How is the scene in Denmark?

"It's really cool now and has improved a lot in the last few years. People have begun to really come into their own, developing their own sound and style. A few years back everyone was copying French or US producers but now people are experimenting and doing it their own way."

Which other Danish producers/DJs or labels are cutting it at the moment?

"On a slightly more mainstream level, Artificial Funk is doing some great stuff for UK labels such as Skint and Underwater. We also have this clicks 'n' cut band called System, with Thomas Knak (who previously produced tracks by Bjork), and they are really good with a cool minimal sound. "There's also Buda from the former Banzai Republic; he simply makes the best chillout/electronica in the world. He's a fantastic producer and is working on a new album under his own name - very clicky and warm."

You've experimented with your sound from the likes of the fairly slick accessible material on Naked Music to more experimental gritty underground club tracks for the likes of Poker Flat and Audiomatique. What influences you to move on in this way?

"The important point to make here is that the two tracks I did for Naked Music were actually two or three-years-old when they were signed and I was already making more underground music when they were released. Therefore there is actually a big gap between the Naked stuff and the more techy stuff I'm doing for Poker Flat and Audiomatique. "I actually don't listen to that much electronic music as a lot of it bores me and I like to keep my ideas fresh and original rather than being too influenced by other artists. Every now and again DJ Tom will play me stuff that he's into."

Tracks such as 'Physical Fraction' have a real balance and contrast between delicate and beautiful sounds and darker and more menacing sounds. Do you agree with the statement that without light there is no darkness?

"Absolutely. When I'm working on tracks I think it gets too monotonous if you only have dark or beautiful elements so I like to mix the two. By doing this you create many layers, giving the music a deeper feel. I also like to use these same principles when I make more ambient music."

Which track that you have produced are you most proud of and why?

"Production-wise, I'm most proud of 'Physical Fraction', 'Polar Shift' and 'Chameleon'. I'm also really into a new dub-tech track that I've also recently completed. But a

track that always works on the dancefloor everywhere I play is 'Rykketid' so I'm also proud of that."

You're currently playing out around the world with your live set-up. Tell us a little bit about that and what we can expect musically...

"I'm trying very much to put some energy and improvisation into my shows and connect with the audience. Rather than simply staring at my laptop, I tend to play more live with my keyboard jamming over the top of my own records, while Thomas might mix tracks over the top. I obviously play many of my own tracks, but live versions plus new material. "I also take influences from rock, not in an electroclash way but by adding the feel of rock into techno, and I play some bootlegs too."

You mention that you are influenced by rock music. Which bands have influenced you?

"Back in the beginning I listened to a lot of The Smiths, The Cure, Depeche Mode and Joy Division. Now I often listen to Mazzy Star, Low, M. Ward and still some of the old Cure stuff. I also listen to a Swedish jazz pianist from the '70s called Jan Johanson."

Which current DJs/producers are influencing you?

"I love Rhythm & Sound - they are the best. Also Maurizio and I listen to Pole - I like his deep, dub sound but don't like it when he puts rap on top."

Tell us about any forthcoming productions and remixes you are working on and is there any chance of a Trentemøller album?

"I'm really busy at the moment in the studio. I have just finished a new heavy club track, which should see the light of day fairly soon, and I've also done remixes for the likes of Röyksopp, Terry Lee Brown and Ian Pooley. "I have also turned down a lot of remix work, preferring to work on my own material, and I'm hoping to release an album on Poker Flat early next year. This won't just be a collection of songs but also the kind of stuff you can listen to on your home stereo."

**from darkness...
let there be light**

Words: Giles Smith