

## DETROIT: TECHNO CITY



Step down into a brightly lit bunker.

Monochrome paste-ups neatly interspersed with record sleeves, Trinatron monitors on a white plinth.

A Techno soundtrack reverberates, still in possession of transformative power, blasting open time, breaking through the walls of this sanitised space-

Cybertron, Inner City, Underground Resistance.

Sound transports you to a network of derelict chambers, a de-industrialised zone.

It conjures a city where collective memories warp and condense as civic buildings strain under the weight of abandonment-

the curlicues of a scorched ceiling rose,

window panes scored with agitated glyphs,

the marble floor of an abandoned railway station.

A threshold realm, stranded on the cusp between booming motor city, dystopian life-world and site of emancipatory potential.

On an end wall a photographic mural opens up a monochrome vista of downtown Detroit- Grand Hall, Best Sports Bar, East Grand River, names conjuring an American city in ruins, a city ossified but porous, possibilities opening in fire escapes, parking lots, the liminal zones behind hotels.

The liminal zone is the site of the shaman, the shapeshifter, the one who guides between worlds.

Techno producers emerging in the 1980s- Juan Atkins, Derrick May, Kevin Saunderson-occupied multiple liminal zones just as they adopted multiple names, a proliferation of selves, a shattering and reassembling of ego—the breaking apart in order to *re-member*.

For them the apocalypse had already happened, they were living in a dystopian world. Techno articulated an experience of living amongst the ruins, it took flight above the fire blackened buildings of 1967, it hovered over the aftermath of the 1973 recession, looked down from a position of supernatural clarity on a city hollowing in the grip of Reaganomic policies.

Ford's were laying off men and replacing the conveyor belts with robots. It was these new robots that would become receptacles,

vessels imbued with the spirit Techno producers would breathe into them. The futuristic oneiroscapes they conjured were about harnessing powers of strategic transcendence, plotting fugitive lines.

Roland synths appear in this room as fossils, uncannily beached as if recovered from the rubble of a collapsed building. They possess a residual power, an alien presence, 808 as relic, the body when the spirit has departed. If the music is spectral, the synths themselves are husks. Hushed beneath the bright strip lights of this white bunker they appear archaic, nostalgic, a retrofuturist fetish.

The walls are punctuated by a singular pedagogic voice, the tone is sensible, playing down race and class, imposing order.

A narrative, easy to follow- distanced, dispassionate, impartial.

Composite images, fluorescent posters depicting lost scenes- recording studios, mix-tapes, radio stations. I scan the documentaries; the format, men in recording studios always breaking the spell, dragging the music into the realm of the prosaic.

But the spirit, omnipresent in the soundtrack, still contains distilled moments of potential, it opens up futures, albeit ones we might have temporarily lost.

Techno doesn't lay crude territorial claim to Detroit, instead it glides through walls, speeds across freeways, becomes a nomadic, haunting presence. Detroit is a city riven by boundaries, 8 Mile road, Base Line Road, the Northern City Limits- lines of segregation between areas mired by poverty and wealthy upper class suburbs. It is the awareness of these margins and the capacity to transcend them, to warp and distort them that gives rise to this mesmerising and unearthly sound.

Embedded within the music is a tangible desire to heal, to *re-member*, put together shattered elements.

Techno as an immersive, auditory hallucination is an escape, not into blissful ignorance but as a strategy of resistance to a ravaged environment and an impoverished every day life. In the charcoal shells and derelict factories it escapes ordinary space and time.

This room, this brightly lit bunker is polluted, permeated by the quotidian life of the ICA- sounds from the kitchen, clanks, clatters, the piquant tang of lunch. Bright clinking of glasses and middle class laughter create a jarring sensation, Detroit Techno in the heart of a sealed and socially-cleansed central London. The sublime potential sizzling in the speakers shoots beyond the locked down 1 and 2 zones and connects in places once called suburbs, the 3,4 and 5 zones. As the Techno *geist* circuits through Bleep, Spiral Tribe, the Free Party scene it can be heard in the loci of the ruin, sites of transience and becoming- Edmonton, Croydon, Barking, Tottenham-grime, broken beat, dubstep- the fizzing, kaleidoscopic sounds of liminal London.

Speakers here are set at polite volume, the music retains its mesmerising power but can't possess the body, it lacks the viscera seizing force of the sound system. I yearn for the electrical charges up and down my spine, those scuttling sensations across my skin.

Record sleeves are pressed behind clip frames, little museum pieces neatly archived, hemmed in. I think of the lost network of London record shops, the basements with racks of jungle, hard house, tech-step and the moody petrochemical scent of vinyl.

First time I've really examined these sleeves, my understanding of this music was never encyclopedic the way it was for my male colleagues in that seething hive of shops. My knowledge came from the rave scene, the proliferation of scenes that radiated from Techno when it landed in Europe, or more specifically when it landed in the North of England. This landing, this cataclysmic moment of emergence resonated across a region that bore an uncanny resemblance to Detroit.

I remember hearing Underground Resistance *Revolution for Change* for the first time in a former pit village in South Yorkshire in 1992, the track was being blasted from a sound system outside a housing estate. I remember looking out across derelict marshalling yards and the abandoned Cortonwood colliery, I remember the toxic waste seeping through the ecosystem. The apocalypse had already happened.

Techno as it emerged in Detroit was an alchemical conjuring, a series of inversions. It occupied a zone between the louche recklessness of P-Funk and the precision and mathematical ordering of European electronic music.

In the industrial cities of the North of England it encountered a co-ordinate of its inception, a multifaceted range of influences- Flock of Seagulls, Human League, Cabaret Voltaire- signals broadcast in Europe, received in Detroit, mirrored and returned.

Blake Baxter -Deep Space Soundworks - Xray- a litany of names taking me back to those Smokescreen parties in Sheffield, to the Afterdark club in Morley, to DiY sound systems in the quarries and fields of Yorkshire in the early '90s. Industrial infrastructure became host as moribund mills, factories and clubs were inhabited by countercultural scenes. In that moment, elements of working class culture were subverted/elevated, the ruins of textile, steel and mining areas were illuminated by a sequence of epiphanies.

If Detroit was steeped in the musical imprint of Berry Gordy's upbeat Motown, Techno disassembled that, it clattered over the ripped out conveyor belts, it scavenged and rearranged the remnants of the production line and listened to the new rhythms of the robots; in the North of England there was an innate understanding of that.

The question I was asking then still obsesses me now, if grand civic and industrial buildings are the physical containers of our collective memories what happens to the auditory textures of those memories when iconic structures lie in ruins?

Techno is the closest I have come to finding an answer; with its re-routing of spatial narratives, the hypnotic rhythms and shamanic beat it articulates the territory we search for, the site of emancipatory potential. Techno is an echo from a future moment, it appears like a hallucination before it exists in the physical realm. Techno summons multiple futures by sifting and reassembling of fragments of the past, by *re-membling* those glimmers of light, embers lying dormant in the rubble and dust.

I am reminded of a quote by Fredric Jameson 'It would be best perhaps, to think of an alternate world - better to say the alternate world, our alternate world - as one contiguous with ours but without any connections or access to it. Then, from time to time, like a diseased eyeball in which disturbing flashes of light are perceived or like those baroque sunbursts in which rays from another world suddenly break into this one, we are reminded that Utopia exists and that other systems, other spaces, are still possible.'<sup>1</sup>



<sup>1</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Valences of the Dialectic*, Verso, 2009, p.612

Image credits : 1 Downtown Detroit Marie Stagart- 313oneloveweb

2 Mark Blower