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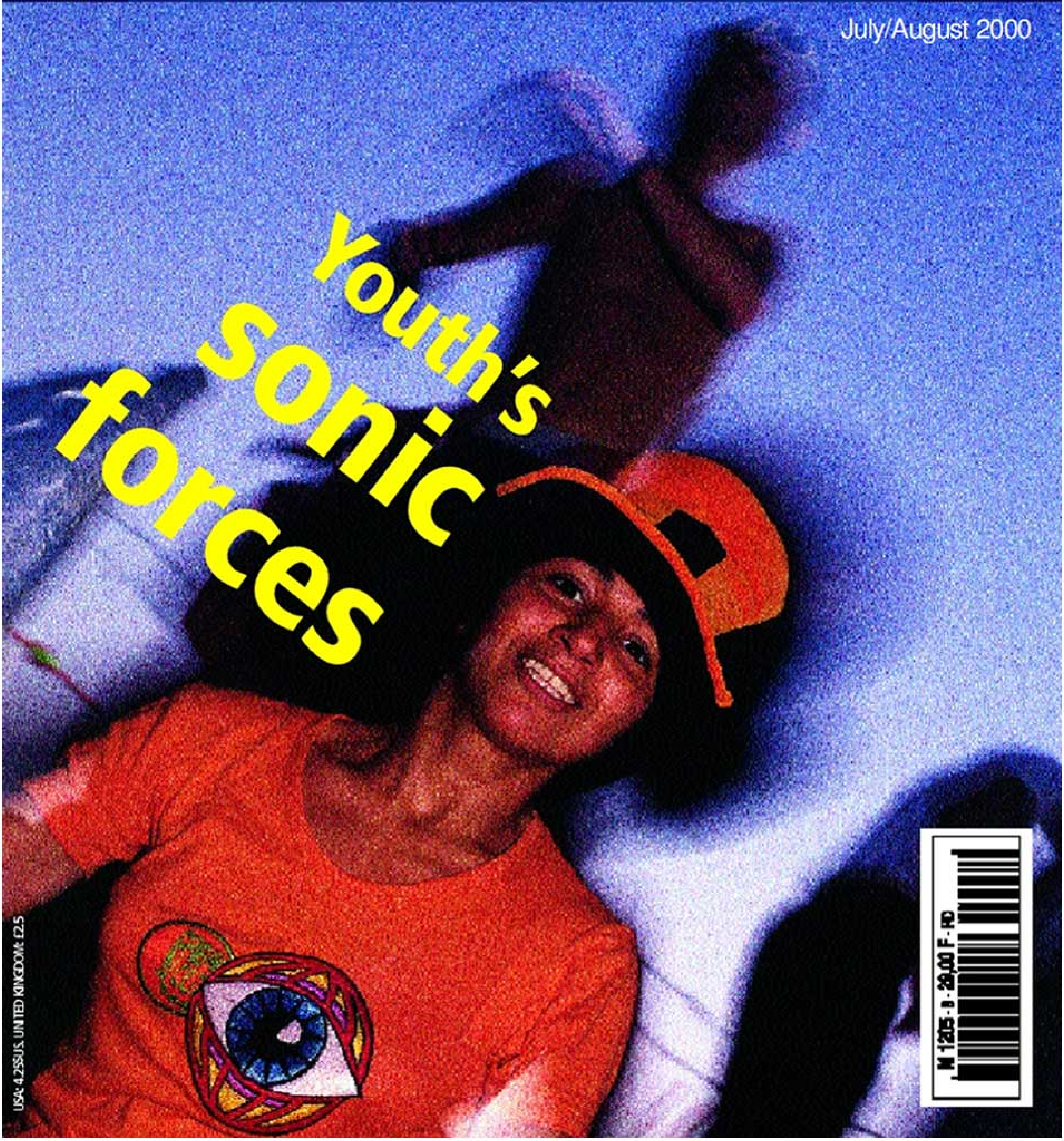

Youth's sonic forces

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The body and soul of club culture

Hillegonda C. Rietveld

Electronic dance music is constantly spawning new strands of music like techno and acid house. Behind the thudding beats, communities of DJs and dancers try to stay one step ahead of entertainment multinationals—and the law

United on the dance floor, revellers of different ethnic backgrounds, sexual orientations and ages dance wall-to-wall, sweating, smiling and enjoying the DJ's clever acoustic tricks. The combination of loud, rhythmic music and visual distortion heightens the collective spirit as the sound enters the crowd—machine rhythms, pounding drums, overlaid with a gospel spirituality of peace, love and unity. Welcome to Body and Soul in New York City, where the dream of dancefloor Utopia lives on and (in the words of one dance music diva) "everybody's free (to feel good)".

At Body and Soul, DJs like Joe Claussel still embody the determination to mix and match—both styles of music and their audience—to remain aloof from the machinations of the global entertainment giants, to find more in "club culture" than getting high or getting paid. And it takes determination, for over the past decade or so, "dance" or "club culture"—based on electronic music and its derivatives—has become an international, multi-million dollar market despite the efforts of DJs like Claussel to promote the dream of cultural diversity, artistic independence and universal spirituality. For many of its devotees, this club culture represents an escape from the regimentation of modern life and even a return to a pre-industrial pagan shamanistic utopia.

> For many of its devotees, this club culture represents an escape from the regimentation of modern life and even a return to a pre-industrial pagan shamanistic utopia.

But before delving into this global phenomenon, a little history and vocabulary is called for. To begin with, let's deflate the generic use of the term "techno" to describe anything with a thudding electronic beat. Techno is actually one strand of an ever-expanding genre generally called "electronic dance music". A veritable cannibal, this genre spawns a constant stream of variants as the technological wizards, DJs, re-configure any kind of music or sound—from a train whistle to the chant of a Tibetan lama—within the thud-thudding of a four-beats-to-a-bar rhythm. Two of the major sub-genres are techno and house.

The club culture surrounding the music is in some ways a reconfiguration of the disco era of the mid-to-late 70s. All of us probably remember that period as one of poor taste and excess, symbolised in the mainstream by John Travolta's white suit in the American movie, Saturday Night Fever. But before North America's white, suburban middle classes adopted the commodified BeeGee's Stayin' Alive version of disco, the music was considered an offshoot of funk and soul music. Commercial in aspiration, yes, but, at its best, fun and funky. Disco, under the pressures of the "disco sucks" campaign (orchestrated by disaffected rock fans) and the global over-exposure of Saturday Night Fever, waned in popularity as the three great anti-commercial genres of popular music emerged: reggae in Jamaica, punk in the UK, hip-hop in New York City. However, the disco principle of playing a smooth mix of long single records to keep people "dancing all night long" lives on in the endless stream of electronic dance music.

House music, in particular, is often held up as a kind of banner of cultural diversity owing to its origins in black and Latino discos, where it first found its audience (see p.45). One could point to the 1980s, when African American producers/DJs, like Frankie Knuckles, Marshall Jefferson or DJ Pierre, began refining the all-night dancefloor workouts at underground gay and mixed clubs in New York and Chicago, like the legendary Warehouse from which house music derives its name. Or there is DJ Larry Levan, whose residence at New York's Paradise Garage not only defined a distinct sub-genre of its own ("garage" is slower and more gospel oriented than "house") but set the tone for today's raves[1]—no alcohol, heavy drug use, a mixed, "up for it crowd" and loud, pulsating music for 15-hour stretches without a break.

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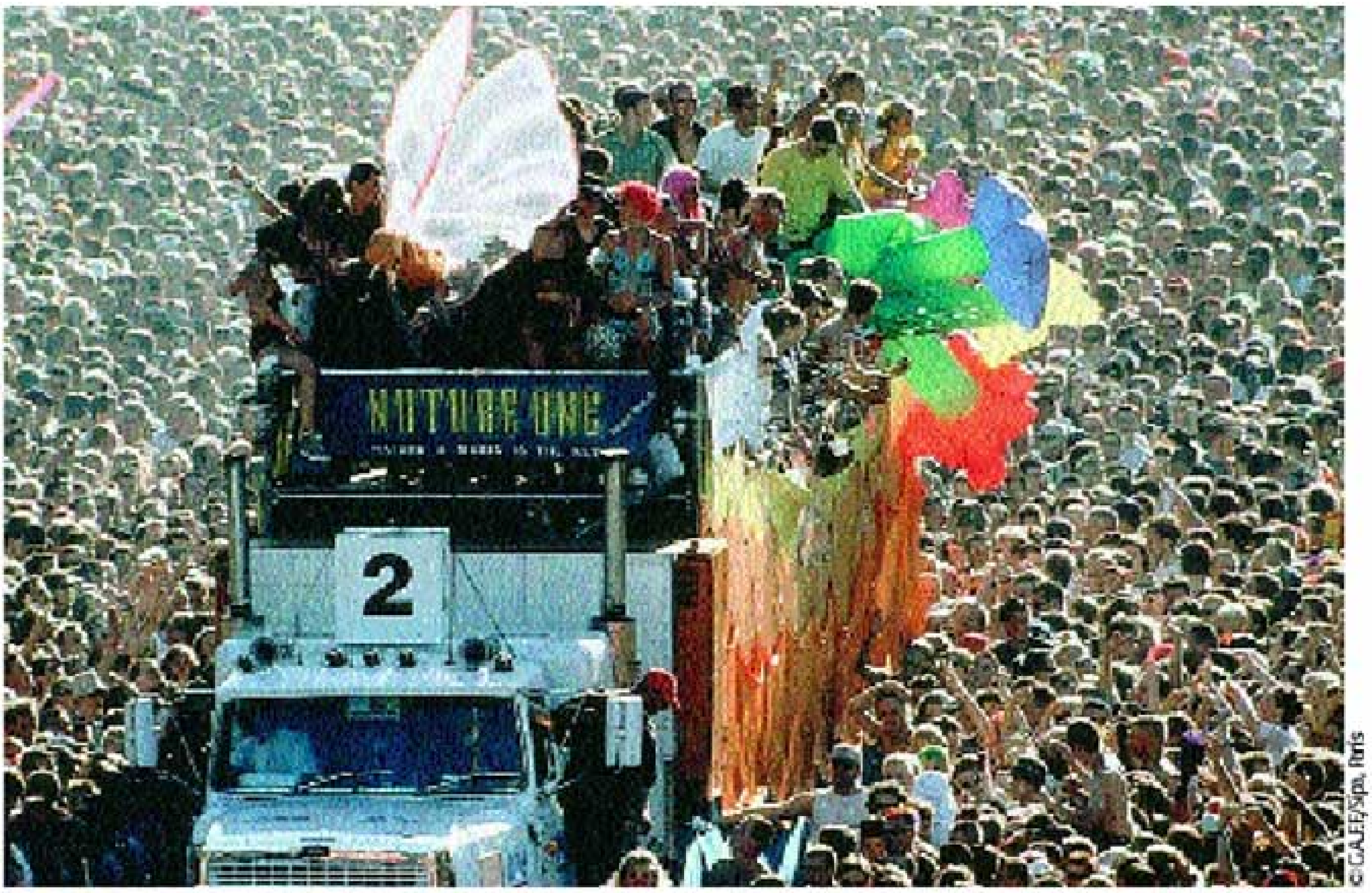
[1] In the 1970s, Afro-Caribbeans and Afro-Americans colloquially used the word "rave" to mean "party" or "have fun". In 1987/88, UK youth began calling large, often unlicensed parties "raves". DJs play through the night at these events which can attract thousands of paying participants.

At the same time, in the post-industrialising concrete jungle of Detroit (Michigan), techno, a cooler, more futuristic form of house—intensely layered rhythms, often pierced by machine noises and reconfigured over diva-vocals—emerged from a cross-Atlantic dialogue between young, radical African American producers like Kevin Saunderson and Derrick May and electronic Euro-pop, notably by Kraftwerk, a German experimental group of the 1970s.

By the mid-80s, a series of influential independent record labels had appeared and the various strains of North American house, garage and techno were exported to Europe, triggering the rise of local variants and scenes. Which kinds of music were adopted where is a story in itself. Briefly, warmer, more gospel-oriented house music found a ready audience in Italy. Northern Europe, Holland, Belgium and Germany proved fertile ground for cold, hard techno, which those countries' own electronic traditions had a hand in creating. However, the UK took the lead in adopting and adapting the new U.S. sounds. Each variant found a British audience: soul- and gospel-tinged house was adopted by "soul" fans, while techno drew devotees from rock and even punk.

In 1987 a group of British DJs and pleasure-seekers, enjoying the traditional British sun 'n'fun holiday on the Spanish island of Ibiza (a legendary spot on the hippie trial, with a casual attitude to drugs) discovered a potent mix. They found that the empathy-generating drug MDMA (aka ecstasy, "E") proved the perfect accompaniment to a night in the clubs dancing to the new, wobbly, futuristic sound of "acid house" (a variant of American house). On returning to rainy England, these DJs tried to "recapture" the Ibiza feeling by starting their own clubs and holding unlicensed "acid house parties", the prototype of the "rave". They began re-creating the feel of a holiday club in the sun by taking over disused warehouses or railway arches where an older mid-20s crowd had an ecstatically good time.

The parties thundered on for about a year before parents and police panicked over their "amoral" and illicit dimensions. The media had a field day sensationalising the raves' dangerous reputations, which, of course, heightened their attraction for thrill-seeking teenagers. As the chill of the British winter set in, acid house parties went further underground to escape police interference but by summer 1989, they re-surfaced outside metropolitan areas, in leisure centres, rural warehouses, even fields. The scene mushroomed: one event, Sunrise, reputedly attracted 10,000 participants.



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Europe's biggest party, the Berlin Love Parade.

An ecstasy is a thing that will not go into words; it feels like music.

Mark Twain, U.S. novelist (1835-1910)

Within about five years of "the birth of the rave", the UK government passed a series of prohibitive laws to crack down on the events. The Criminal Justice Act of 1994, for example, provided the police with sweeping powers to squelch any event featuring amplified repetitive beats. But the repression had contrasting effects. First, by driving the events further underground, it actually spurred their politicisation with the so-called DiY (Do it Yourself) aesthetic: organise events out of a commitment to independence and explicitly anti-consumerist political action. DiY ravers were no longer just organising dance events but musical protests around environmental and social justice issues. Groups like the legendary Spiral Tribe also began spreading the "gospel" of punk-like resistance across the European continent by helping to kick off "Teknivals" (techno-festivals) in France and Germany. Similar groups had a hand in developing the major European Technival circuit, which now includes one of the world's biggest parties: Berlin's Love Parade, which attracted an estimated 1.5 million revellers from across Europe in 1999.

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At the same time, legislation also led crowds to return to licensed nightclubs. The late 1990s gave rise to "super clubs", with rationalised administration and marketing strategies. Clubs such as the Ministry of Sound in London and Cream in Liverpool are hugely profitable businesses, flying in the latest "star DJs" to play in a tightly controlled and regulated atmosphere. Others, like Home and Gatecrasher, are exporting their branded goods (like t-shirts and records) overseas. Home even opened a club in Sydney (Australia).

Yet despite this commercial explosion, the dream of club culture's democratising power lives on, particularly in how the music is produced and consumed. The entertainment industry has conventionally followed a "rock" model, which relies on bands signing long-term recording contracts with record labels (production and distribution companies) so they can afford to record an album of songs in an expensive, commercial studio. The label then sends the band out to promote the album by playing live concerts in large venues.

Copyright chaos

Dance music has shaken up this model. Instead of hiring and promoting an entire band of musicians, the club and recording industries have the much easier and affordable task of signing and managing individual DJs who "play" the ever more affordable digital equipment produced by companies such as Roland of Japan and Sequential Circuits of the U.S. With drum boxes and synthesizers, technological wizards mimic musical instruments. By "sampling" (a form of digital copying), they can digitally record and manipulate any sound, thereby throwing copyright law (and its principles of originality) into a disarray from which it has yet to recover.

Creative individuals without musical training and only rudimentary electronic know-how can now produce dance music on their personal computers with programmes like Cubase. Using digital equipment, a "track" (not a "song") can be composed, produced and mixed entirely by the DJ/producer.

Although digital production is the standard in house music, vinyl (records), as opposed to digital forms like CD, still predominate in clubs. DJs seem to prefer the immediate tactile advantages offered by the old "needle-on-the-record" that allows special forms of manipulation ("scratching" records while rewinding and fast-forwarding by hand to taunt and titillate the audience). Turntables also seem to produce a warmer sound than CD players. However, many local scenes, such as those in Portugal or Belgrade (see p.43), lack vinyl pressing plants and must rely on imported vinyl from New York or London.

Many artists would like to remain independent and set up their own labels, sometimes even distributing their products from the DJ booth of a club or delivering by car to specialist record shops. However, if that recording does become a hit, the artist will soon need substantial investment to supply demand. Therefore artists are forced to do deals with either independent or "major" distribution groups or to sell the track outright to a record company. In this way, even independently produced music is incorporated into the global music market.

While digital technology may have opened up new possibilities for independent production, obviously not everyone has equal access. For the vast majority of the world's population this technology is economically out of reach and overwhelmingly concentrated in the U.S, Western Europe and Japan. Even in the West, the majority of producers and DJs are male in keeping with social codes. Even when female DJs do achieve a degree of "respect" from club crowds, they are marketed as sexual icons in music magazines rather than technically competent producers. When I mention my experience in an electronic dance music group (as a programmer and keyboard player), the first question I often hear is: "Were you a singer?"

In the global loops of music production and distribution, dance or club cultures are taking root from Sao Paolo to Tel Aviv across a wide political and cultural spectrum. Yet the spread has done little to shift uneven power distribution; Western global cities continue to dominate along with the five major record companies which control distribution and abide by the stubborn distinctions of gender and class. We cannot help but ask, "Is everybody equally welcome at this global party?" We must question the diva quoted earlier: Is everybody really "free to feel good"? ■

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- Beverly May (from Toronto, Canada), http://www.futurejazz.org
- Mad Mike (Detroit producer featured on a French website), http://www.multimania.com/fighters/madmike.htm
- Raya: Atmospheric Engineering, http://raya.org.uk
- House Machine (from Milan, Italy), http://www.housemachine.com

> The discovery of the DNA code, for example, focuses on how you can create different species of beings by starting from the very smallest particles and their components. (...) In music, we do exactly the same.
>
> Karlheinz Stockhausen, German experimental electronic composer and musician (1928-)

Could it be the "home studio" of one of the world's best-paid DJs, Fatboy Slim?

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