

Global Ear: Bratislava



Groovy Brats: urbanfailure (left); Jamka

"Bratislava is the Detroit of Europe," declares Jeff Milligan, a DJ and producer of minimal House and Techno and the founder of Revolution Records, from a pavement cafe table in the Slovak capital. A Toronto native, he might well be talking about the city's smokestack-studded skyline, or Slovakia's relative poverty among other EU countries. But as a musician, he is certainly referring to the city's signature electronic sound that, despite its transformations over the past 15 years, has retained its raw edges.

Milligan has played Bratislava since his first tour of Europe at the end of the 90s. Back then, the hard Techno scene was in its heyday and its epicentre was the U-club, a booming, echoing bomb shelter buried in the hill under the city's castle. This movement has since waned, but others have inherited its energy. Techno's potential for innovation attracted a group of Bratislavans whose roots reached into DIY punk, hardcore and thrash Metal. It eventually inspired them to form Urbsounds, a collective of electronic sound pilots.

"I chose, and my friends chose, to go to everything that had roots in DIY," says member Michal Lichy, who plays out as urbanfailure. In those days, underground musical life in the newly democratic and independent Slovakia was blossoming and open to cross-pollination. "After the fall of communism there were so many influences and so many possibilities of music to listen to or play. You could do what you liked and it was great that there were people starting to do free parties, punk gigs, Metal gigs, Techno, whatever."

Before switching to electronics, Lichy played in the politically minded thrash Metal group Správny Smer (Right Direction), which enjoyed recognition in places as distant as Japan and Singapore. He believes the same steps and structures, a personal signature from that time, can be found in the music he creates today. Stripped of melody, his breaks and broken beats grind and shudder like an aged industrial mechanism chewing through a pile of sonic detritus.

Lichy has also retained the ethic of simplicity from his group – actually only himself on guitar plus a

drummer. After tiring of carting a desktop PC to gigs, he decided against a laptop in favour of hardware purchased secondhand from friends. "For me the challenge is to try to get the maximum from minimal equipment or minimal possibilities," he says.

Daniel Kordík, half of Urbsounds duo Jamka (with Monika Subrtová), also played guitar in two politically outspoken punk outfits – Sin Frontieras and Naive Fighters – before turning to electronic instruments. The pair cite the free Techno party scene as one inspiration. "Punk people started it," explains Subrtová. "It was illegal and all the stuff around it [was punk], but the music suddenly changed. There wasn't any guitar, no grindcore, no crustcore – suddenly it was very fast Techno, and electronic. That's maybe how some punk people got to electronic music." But, Kordík adds, "The sound of punk rock is very boring... I was playing in this kind of guitar band for ten years, so I cannot imagine playing it for ten more."

Far from boring, Jamka's Techno compositions form unusual structures from chunky pulses. Their halting beats seem to be perpetually collapsing, opening up silent spaces that punctuate the otherwise raunchy minimalism. Kordík's recent adoption of a laptop has added a non-linear field of chaotic sound and greater complexity to the duo's musical dialogue.

The third corner of the Urbsounds triangle is Tobias Potocny who, as rbxn, scrupulously follows the DIY philosophy. He uses homemade equipment to generate pattering and squealing noise, improvising sound-shapes that are almost tangible as they unfold and mutate. He cites as influences Japanese hardcore noise and groups with no musical ability. As for his own work, he places it outside the realm of music. "Musician is close to artist and I consider myself more of an engineer, which I certainly look at from an artistic perspective – but only a little," he explains.

"Maybe Bratislava was the Detroit of Europe five years ago," says Lichy when the comparison is put to him. "That was when the U-club was really underground. Now it's much more commercial, though still not so commercial compared to other European clubs."

In fact, all of Bratislava is more commercial now than it was in the mid-90s, when Vladimír Mešiar, a prime minister with authoritarian tendencies, steered the country away from Western Europe and economic growth for six years. Since his failure to be re-elected in 1998, the country has joined the EU and rushed to create free market conditions.

In a twist on the Detroit comparison, recent large-scale investments by several international carmakers have been touted as the symbol of Slovakia's new economic growth. As the centre of this boom, Bratislava more fittingly recalls the confident, self-assured days of Motown soul than the desolate times that saw the birth of Detroit Techno. For every abandoned building here, two or three new ones go up or are under construction.

As the mood turned from uncertain to optimistic, electronic music in the city diversified. Milligan's relocation to Bratislava to take up a residency at the new club Spojka with former U-club stalwart Tibor Holoda is a sign that the city's constellation is rising. His move speaks for the city's growing international reputation and its pleasures. Stuffed with outdoor cafes and a close-knit nightlife, the intimate centre is relaxed and welcoming. And this is one of the cheapest capitals in the EU.

The increasing activity of Urbsounds, who released a compilation entitled *Urbsounds Collective LP* last month, equally belies this expansion, and their approach to politics has evolved to reflect it. "In Slovakia [right] after communism not so many things were really clear," says Lichy, reflecting on the political bent of Správny Smer. "We were just breaking all that seemed wrong for us and trying to fight for what we thought were the right ideas."

"Our lyrics were political," he concludes, "not stupid and angry but just opinionated and pushing for things. But it was a direct push. Now our music and what we are doing supports a DIY or alternative scene, but there are no lyrics. There are no comments. There is just us and people can see how we are living, what we are doing, how we are communicating." □