
DISQUIET ON★THE EASTERN FRONT

A DISPATCH FROM EASTERN EUROPE'S
GROWING EXPERIMENTAL ELECTRONIC
MUSIC COMMUNITY ★★★★★

by Eric Smillie

Western Europe has always held onto the electronic music spotlight, be it for German electro, French abstractions, or Dutch gabber. You may have also heard of the Russian electronic scene, including artists such as EU and Lazyfish. But what about these countries' neighbors? Across Eastern Europe, from Slovenian satellite jams to Estonian post-pop, Polish avant hip-hop to Slovak noise pilots, former communist countries are buzzing with innovative music never heard before. Every year, the scenes here grow larger and louder, and the world may soon be unable to turn a deaf ear their way.

Certainly, electronic musicians from the region have had a hard time getting the world's attention, almost as hard a time as they have achieving success at home. "In comparison to Western Europe or the USA, there is no market [here] for such things. This is really underground," says Wojtk Kucharczyk, the bald head of the Polish label Mik.musik!. and a producer of abstract techno that is equal parts wry and serious in its use of samples and field sounds. Yet despite their difficulties, members of the Eastern electronic underground are optimistic; the countries here have been playing catch-up with the West for the past 15 years, and are slowly gaining admirers.



★ Daniel Korbik, Jamka



★ Wojtk3k Kucharczyk



★ Yonderboi



★ Urbsounds



★ Monika Subrtva

For now, however, times are still tough. Matjaz Mancek, a music editor at the Slovenian label rx:tx, sums up the problems Eastern Europe faces in familiar terms: "Releasing records in Slovenia is not a problem. The problem is promoting, distributing, and selling them. The market for experimental electronic music and avant-garde music in Slovenia is tiny, almost non-existent."

After the fall of communism in 1989, economic and cultural life was in chaos throughout the region. The musicians of Eastern Europe still find it hard to get real support, let alone build markets for their music.

According to Daniel Korbik, a member of the duo Jamka that works with Urbsounds, Slovakia's most high-profile experimental electronic collective, "Everyone's heads turned to the West [after 1989] because there was nothing here. Everything on TV, in magazines, or in culture that was inspiring was from the West. There were no institutions in the East, so everyone was trying to get to the West to have a chance to play or for the things that were not here."

Artists from the region had to look outside for support. Local audiences likewise faced westward and still do, trusting Western producers and stores more than local ones. "We didn't have these kinds of purchasing possibilities here up until now," says Peter Fiala, a DJ for 13 years who recently opened Notape, a vinyl store in the Slovak capital of Bratislava, just an hour's train-ride from Vienna. Customers, he says, "know a few stores in Vienna where ... they have already learned to go and know unconsciously that 'I go because I know that I'll get something there.'"

This frame of mind makes it difficult for local distribution companies to gain a foothold. "All the shops import, and it is very, very difficult to have them change their well-working, old-fashioned methods of getting the stuff themselves from an Austrian or German wholesaler instead of buying it from a local distributor," says Peter Notari, head of the Hungarian distribution company Neon.

Notari adds that business in general is slow. "If we are talking about specifically underground electronic music, then the picture is even more bad [sic]," he says. "But then again, it depends greatly on what we call underground electronic music. Here in Hungary, even Warp and Ninja Tune are underground by far, and things are changing very, very slowly."

Paradoxically, East European musicians often need to gain approval abroad before receiving attention at home, where it is easier to buy releases from Western labels than small domestic ones.

The strongest publishers of underground music, then, sell mainly abroad. "As far as we don't have an established local market, we focus on the world market," says Andrey Kiritchenko, founder of Nexsound, a Ukrainian experimental label that describes its music as "indocile ambient."

Kiritchenko often cooperates internationally, for example on *Fourfold Symmetry*, an album with Kim Cascone, Andreas Berthling, and label-mate Kotra. The artists dissect the collaborative process by exchanging and reworking one another's samples, an operation that results in a coherent but varied micro-sound creation clicking and rumbling with a life of its own. Cascone laid the first seed of this album when he dropped Nexsound an appreciative line to say he used a favorite Kotra track in a lecture.

A prolific producer, Kiritchenko releases under various guises, such as Nihil Est eXcellence, or NEX, his outlet for drone and ambient creations at times tense and obscure, or Sidhartha, under which he tackles music with a beat. Under his own name, his releases fall somewhere between the two. His 2003 album on German label Ad Noiseam, *Kniga Skazok*, takes fairytales as its theme, spinning a charmed atmosphere of exact, minimal beats underlined with subtle shades of terror. A new album, *Interplays, in Between*, is scheduled for release on the same label in October.

Mik.musik!., "the Polish label known abroad" in Kucharczyk's words, also supports itself on the global market. The label and its irrepressible artists cooperate mostly with labels from the western half of the EU.

For example, the most widely available album by Molr Drammaz, the label's flagship band formed by Kucharczyk and his sister Asia Bronislawska, saw distribution help from the German A-musik label. Boazeria walks the ear through a shifting improvised landscape of lurking industrial atmospherics, cartoonish sound effects, moody acoustic instruments, spoken word, pattering blips, and chugging rhythms.

As for artistic cooperation, Kucharczyk most recently worked with the German Felix Kubin on *Territerritorium*, a sonic turf war for radio broadcast in which they exchange aural blows over the national prejudices and dark history of border obsessions between their two neighboring countries.

Rx:tx was destined to be international from its birth in 2002, with its mission of exposing electronic musicians from post-communist countries and, with its parent organization the Projekt Atol Institute, to widen the collaborative space between scientists and artists. Its Signal_Sever! performance series, for example, sees musicians, visual artists, and telecommunications experts from all over the world jamming live over satellites and working with and within the radio zones of the electromagnetic spectrum.

The label also looks outside the region. It recently released *Double Fold*, an album by English artist Scanner (Robin Rimbaud), on which he snipped, spliced, and smudged his extensive tape archive into eight tracks set at a steady 128 beats per minute that, as they pass, speak more and more loudly to your dancing shoes.

Collaboration, of course, is the rule for the international electronic and experimental music community. But market pressure and exposure to Western motifs inevitably push local artists to imitate what they hear. Copying is rampant among Polish artists, Kucharczyk says. But he adds that "I put some hope in the new, upcoming generation. There are already signs that young people have finally started to be bored with well-know styles ... coming from MTV and commercial radio stations. But without great, expensive promotion, it will all go very slowly."

On the international market, it is no easier to break through. "Distribution companies [in the West] are already overstuffed with the constantly increasing production of already-established international artists and labels, and most of them don't have the time, space, or courage to deal with new, anonymous, and exotic artists and labels from the East," says rx:tx's Mancek.

Mik.musik!. got around this problem by combining brash attitude with original sounds—"music never heard before," in Kucharczyk's words—and producing albums on CD-R with cult abandon. Its releases were printed in batches of 111, with handmade and numbered cover designs wild enough to be collector's items themselves.

Today, demand has outgrown this method, and the label will release fewer titles but of a higher quality, according to Kucharczyk. ne of the first is the riotous *We Can Make It Faster and Better than Deuce*, the second album by Deuce, or Piotr Poloz, a man with a thick mustache and a fierce comb-over. On stage this past fall at the NEXT festival of new music in Bratislava, Deuce summed up the frustrations of the local music markets by singing, "I hate hip-hop, especially the Polish one/I like hop-hop, especially the Polish one" over a crunchy beat and a tiny, comically outdated keyboard.

The label is not alone. Krzysztof Sadza, the main editor of the Polish English-language Webzine Eld Rich Palmer, lists at least seven other important labels in the country, many of which use CD-R distribution. One is Vivo, originally founded as a distribution company by Janusz Leszczynski, who prefers to let his label's music speak for itself. It does so in a language of drone atmospheres and avant hip-hop in the case of Zenial, Middle Eastern percussion through Iranian multi-instrumentalist Amir Baghiri, and dirty, rubble-strewn break beats on a live album from Scorn.

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Another Polish label is Simple Logic Records, which began as a source of noise and then expanded to include industrial, drone, and even Japanese techno. In the near future, it plans to bring out a series of compilations called *Noise to Meet You* focusing on Asia, the U.S., and Europe in turn.

In Ukraine, too, Nexsound has gone through a transformation similar to Mik's in its three years of operation, switching to CD production as it saw growing distribution worldwide.

One force behind this growth has been Tamizdat, an American and Czech organization that brings the independent music of Eastern Europe to the West through an online store and magazine and by arranging foreign tours. “Our strategy has been a very long-term one that, I like to think at least, is slowly raising the access, and the aspirations, of Central and Eastern European artists,” says Marek Culen, the managing director of Tamizdat's Prague office. “Through our booking and visa work, we've helped artists reach Western European and American audiences as I think no one has done before, or is really doing now.”

Another push was the Go East program at the Club Transmediale festival in Germany, which brought in many musicians from Eastern Europe in 2003 and was extended as Further East in 2004.

These positive developments point to the change coming to the region. The entry of many of these countries into the EU last May is the most obvious sign that they have laid the foundations for the domestic institutions and support structures that they lacked 15 years ago. There is a general feeling that these new democracies are pulling themselves together and boom times are ahead.

“Now, people are looking out for their regions more,” says Korbik. “For me ... I'm getting more responsible for the scene here [in Bratislava], and trying to get it to have something that will be unique, that will not be the same as in Berlin—a reason for people from Western countries to come here and be interested.”

The music across Eastern Europe is already unique, and rich in variety. The groups that make up Urbsounds, for example, are among the mutant offspring spawned when Slovakia's DIY punk scene intersected with Bratislava's signature hard techno. They now spearhead the city's growing experimental scene with their chaotic work in raw noise.

Then there is Kohvirecords in Estonia, a stable of artists with playful post-pop sensibilities. On the split album *Dehemardik Datis*, artists Barabriz and Pastacas carefully arrange instruments, electronics, and voices in songs both clever and emotional. Then, at Galaktlan's fingers, crisp beats gather like frost on a window while long strokes of synthesizer tones and sounds paint the melancholy picture seen through it. The post-rock duo Uni, meanwhile, lulls an audience with its combination of laptop loops, guitar, and keyboard on a live recording. Typical of the label, this live album comes simply but intimately packaged in a two-color sleeve bearing just the label's official stamp (in true East European style) and containing an actual photograph, ostensibly from the concert itself.

A wide selection of smooth music is also gathered under the Hungarian label Ugar, best known for its act Yonderboi, who gained attention with his 2000 album *Shallow & Profound*. Upcoming releases include the soundtrack for *Szezon* (Eastern Sugar), a hip new Hungarian movie, where the band Zagar showcases its head-nodding down-tempo groove and expressive instrumentation.

In the Czech Republic, musicians Neutrino and Selectone—Petr Mares and David Rambousek, respectively—were inspired by the work of philosopher Gilles Deleuze to compose the split album *Rhizomatic Sound*. Loosely based on the idea of a center-less rhizomic foot system that spreads in all directions, the album yields surprisingly warm results in the form of Neutrino's funky down-tempo and Selectone's stuttering, misfiring beats. The two also manage Mufonic Records, founded in 2003 to bring together experimental electronic musicians in the Czech and Slovak Republics. The first step in this direction is the forthcoming compilation of tracks from the two countries, *Out of Place Artefacts Vol. 1*.

The innovative music cultivated in Eastern Europe results in part from locals' comparatively low purchasing power, which often limits musicians' access to tools. “We sometimes need to pay even more for equipment, soft[ware], anything, than in the West or the USA at a moment when our incomes are several times lower,” says Kucharczyk. Artists suck everything they can from their old equipment and resources, which forces them to improvise and invent new ways to make the sounds they need.

“Do they need to improvise? Yes, I think so,” says Tamizdat's Culen. “Does it change the aesthetics? I'm not sure—the ethic, yes, the aesthetics, probably not much.”

Dropping computer prices and their growing practicality, as well as the spread of the Internet, fueled a quick growth in the electronic music scene at the end of the 1990s. Still, it's possible, Mancek says, that the West does not want to hear about it. “There is a sense that the Western scene is a bit afraid of opening the door to the East,” he says. “They know that there is a vast region with a lot of talented artists [and] with a good knowledge of survival techniques and a ‘can do’ attitude.”

With these same qualities, he thinks, the musicians of Eastern Europe can solve their problems themselves: “The artists and music activists of the Eastern European regions have to work hard ... to create networks and encourage artistic collaboration as well as collaboration in distribution, promotion, and other music business activities in order to make the region's production more self-conscious, more relevant on the international scene, and not so totally dependent on the mercy of the Western independent music machinery.”

Rx:tx is trying to do just that with a compilation series called *Progress*, the first volume of which was released in conjunction with the Go East program at Club Transmediale in 2003. The second edition is due out on October 11 and brings together a selection of the region's artists who will, Mancek says, take a crucial role in the rising scenes of Eastern Europe. A conference designed to increase contact between Eastern European artists, labels, and distributors in Ljubljana, Slovenia, will follow in late November.

Other labels, such as Mufonic, act as a platform to encourage the growth of an active community. “Mufonic is not only a label—we would like to create an informative base for this scene and inform about actual events and bring reviews of interesting musical releases from other labels,” says co-owner Mares.

As such efforts by musicians and labels grow, so too do their audiences. Fiala's Notape was one of two vinyl stores to open in Bratislava in the last year. The city's music scene has diversified in the past two years, he says, showing that fans and artists want more. Like all the people interviewed for this article, he is optimistic. “If I wasn't,” he says, “I wouldn't have opened this store.”

★ Rbnx (Tobias Potocny)

