

# SAE Institute London

SAE 501:Written Assignment

## **An Analysis of the Cultural Influences That Shaped Detroit Techno**

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BA/BSc (Hons) Audio Production

05 December 2014

Word Count: 3210

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## An Analysis of the Cultural Influences That Shaped Detroit Techno

### **Abstract**

*An Analysis of the Cultural Influences That Shaped Detroit Techno* explores the ways in which the social, economic and aesthetic surroundings of a generation of young people living in Detroit inspired a new musical genre that we now know as Detroit Techno. Specifically, a sound that is driven by the rising and falling fortunes of technology; how the noises and rhythms of the machines the city's automobile industry was built around inspired music, how this music was appreciated in other parts of the world that were experiencing similar social and economic changes, and how new technologies allowed for the creation and dissemination of Detroit Techno on a global scale. To do so, *An Analysis of the Cultural Influences That Shaped Detroit Techno* focuses on the experiences of Detroit in the late 1970s and 1980s of three of the genre's foremost pioneers: Juan Atkins, Derrick May and Kevin Saunderson, and the musical and environmental influences behind their early experiments with techno.

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**Preface**

Within this essay I explore the ways in which the urban landscape of Detroit in the late 1970s and early 1980s inspired a collective of sonic artists to forge a new genre of music – Detroit Techno. My enquiry into this topic has been driven by a personal passion for techno, and an intellectual curiosity into the forces that shaped this genre.

My research draws heavily upon the first person, on-the-ground accounts of Dan Sicko, the author of *Techno Rebels*, a 1993 *Village Voice* article detailing how Detroit Techno found an enthusiastic audience amongst the English rave scene of the early 1990s, and numerous online sources. As a non-native English speaker who has only become familiar with the language in the last three years, I have received assistance from a professional proofreader in tuning the language and grammar of the essay – all research, writing, and angle of enquiry remains otherwise my own.

## Introduction

Detroit has been synonymous with the automobile industry since 1903, when Henry Ford established the Ford Motor Company. Within ten years other major companies such as General Motors and Chrysler followed suit, and workers from across America and beyond migrated to the city looking for work in the car factories. By 1929, Detroit was America's largest centre of industry, and its population of four million made it the country's fourth largest city. (Klepper, *The Evolution of the U.S Automobile Industry and Detroit as its Capital*, 2001)

However, these golden days were not to last, as in the 1960s, the city's car companies were losing customers to more efficient European and Japanese cars. As a result, Ford, General Motors and Chrysler restructured their manufacturing operations, relocating many factories to other parts of the US to avoid Detroit's high tax rates. This decrease in demand, coupled with new assembly line technologies that meant much of the manufacturing process could be done by machines, led to many people losing their jobs, and the city effectively became bankrupt, which in turn led to the local government raising taxes while offering fewer public services and of lesser quality. (Wolff, *Detroit's decline is a distinctively capitalist failure*, 2013) It was not a nice place to be – and in a phenomenon known as 'white flight', many middle class, mainly white, residents moved out of the city to its suburban fringes. This migration, coupled with the closure of many factories, left the inner city with many empty buildings, and a largely African-American population. The city's population decreased by 60 per cent since its four million peak, leaving only one million residents by the turn of the 1980s. (Molyneux, *The Truth About Detroit's Bankruptcy*, 2013) It was a situation that was to last for many years, with Derrick May stating, "*I do not remember Detroit changing since I was a little boy*". (Bredow, *High Tech Soul*, 2005)

However, every cloud has its silver lining. Detroit had space, which gave young people freedom to create – the city was a blank slate for a new generation to make their mark upon. And that space wasn't just empty; within laid the machinery of industry. "*You can look at the state of Detroit as a plus*", says Atkins. "*All right, you*

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*can only take 15 minutes to get from one side of the city center to the other, and the main department store is boarded up, but we're at the forefron [sic] here. When the new technology came in, Detroit collapsed as an industrial city, but Detroit is techno city. It's getting better, it's coming back around.*" (Savage, Machine Soul, 1993) In the 1980s, violence in Detroit had begun to decrease, and a positive development of underground recording studios and local radio stations were beginning to take place, with large audiences attended social parties held in Detroit high schools by three childhood friends: Juan Atkins, Derrick May and Kevin Sanderson. They were to become the first Detroit Techno DJs, and referred to themselves appropriately as the "originator", "innovator" and "elevator" respectively. (Bredow, High Tech Soul, 2005)

## The Early Detroit Sound

It was the sounds particular to industrial Detroit – the vibrations of a drill, the clashes of steel upon steel, the beat of metal being forged and their reverberations through the cavernous factories and assembly halls – that inspired the three pioneers of Detroit Techno, Juan Atkins, Derrick May and Kevin Saunderson. This coupled with the release of the German group Kraftwerk’s first album, 1974’s *Autobahn*, and its 22 minutes of sounds from a Moog synthesizer, drum machine, vocoder effects and car noises, were to set the template for Detroit’s take on electronic music. (Naoki, *Brief History Of Detroit Techno*, 2014)

The influence of Kraftwerk on the city’s black population should not be underestimated. As Afrika Bambaata says in David Toop’s book *Rap Attack*, *“I don’t think they even knew how big there were among the black masses in ’77 when they came out with Trans-Europe Express. When that came out, I thought that was one of the best and weirdest records I had ever heard in my life.”* Indeed, *Trans-Europe Express*’ *“click clack of metal wheels on metal rails, the rise and fade of a whistle as the train passes, the creaking of coach bodies, the final screech of metal on metal as the train stops”* was a reflection of Germany’s industrial landscape. (Savage, *Machine Soul*, 1993)

Interestingly, there are some parallels between the fractured cities of Detroit and Berlin. In discussing East Germany’s political reforms of 1984 and 1985, which resulted in radio stations being allowed to play music from the “Imperialist” West, the radio presenter Monika Detl:

*“Started broadcasting the new Motown sound (Lang 1996), connects Detroit and Berlin on an aesthetic level that is similar to the musical influences that Atkins and May drew on in the early 1980s and show a crossfertilisation of sound. Without these reforms young people in East Berlin would not have been able to listen unprosecuted to radio stations based in West Berlin.”* (Peter, *Techno City Berlin*)

Yet, where Kraftwerk’s records rarely featured voices or lyrics, Detroit had the rich heritage of Motown’s tradition of soul to draw upon, and enmesh with their

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machinery. It was the synthesis between man and machine, and an exploration of whether technology –sounds inspired by machines and produced by machines can – communicate a feeling of soul.



### **Juan ‘ The Originator’ Atkins**

Born in Detroit on December 9, 1962, Juan Atkins had a background in classical music, but inspired by Kraftwerk and the eclectic music played at high school parties, he soon turned his attentions towards electronic music, and began djaying even before he graduated high school. After leaving school, he studied music at Washtenaw Country Community College, where he met Richard ‘Rik’ Davis who was a Vietnam War veteran and electronic musician. “*Davis’ material was real abstract... avant-garde montage stuff*”, according to Atkins. (Sicko, Techno Rebels, 2010, p.43)

Davis was a very isolated person, and eschewed recorded music under his own name, instead preferring the moniker 3070, and his process was a revelation for Atkins:

*“He had one of the first Roland sequences, a Roland MSK-100. I was around when you had to get a bass player, a guitarist, a drummer to make records; you had all these egos flying around, it was hard to get a consistent thought. I wanted to make electronic music but thought you had to be a computer programmer to do it. I found out it wasn’t as complicated as I thought.”* (Savage, Machine Soul, 1993)

Atkins and Davis began making synthesized music in the studio, and this new music needed a new vernacular to describe it. They began putting together a dictionary that reflected their own ideas of music and their imaginations of the future. Named *The Grid*, they treated it as their own Bible, and they called themselves Cybotron, an amalgam of the words cyborg and “*cyclotron*”. (Savage, Machine Soul, 1993)

Cybotron’s sound was more complex and darker than Kraftwerk’s. The vocals were much deeper, and the beat more danceable than their German forbearers. Blending elements of funk, as evident in their first single, ‘Alleys of Your Mind’, a 4 minute song recorded on a four-track tape machine, Atkins and Davis’ music was made specifically to be danced to. (Sicko, Techno Rebels, 2010, p.44)

The unique eclectic sound of ‘Alleys of Your Mind’ impressed a popular local radio DJ, Electrifying Mojo, who played the track, and their follow up, ‘Cosmic Cars’ on repeat on the local airwaves. His influence on Atkins and Davis, and Detroit as a

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whole is paramount. *“If you want the reason why that happened in Detroit, you have to look at a DJ called Electrifying Mojo; he had five hours every night, with no format restrictions. It was on his show that I first heard Kraftwerk.”* (Savage, Machine Soul, 1993)

With Electrifying Mojo’s support, Cybotron became one of the local area’s most popular musical acts. According to Atkins, *“we sold 10,000 copies of ‘Alleys of Your Mind’ and 10,000 to 15,000 of ‘Cosmic Car’.”* (Sicko, Techno Rebels, 2010, p.45) The success of their two debut records pushed Atkins and Davis to new levels. At the time, Atkins converted his DJ collective Deep Space into a record label solely for the production of Cybotron’s music.

They released their first album, *Enter*, in 1993, which was at the time, considered a progressive rock album for its electronic sounds, vocals and importantly, guitar riffs. *Enter* went on to become one of the most influential album’s within electronic music to this day. One of *Enter*’s tracks, the single ‘Clear’, was an electro hip-hop track with multiple synth lines, a rubbery baseline and a dirty pitched down vocal – a remix of which, by Jose ‘Animal’ Diaz spent nine weeks at number 52 on the Billboard Top Black Singles Chart (as it was called then). (Sicko, Techno Rebels, 2010, p.47) It was Cybotron’s biggest achievement and proved what Davis and Atkins had long suspected – that electronic music could have soul and energy. Its fusion of experimental electronic sounds and analog funk drew a new line in the sand for this nascent genre that had not yet been named. And we can hear the same instrumentation and song structure in today’s music – Missy Elliot’s 2005 single ‘Lose Control’ being a good example of how ‘Clear’s’ synth line has been sampled.

### **Derrick ‘The Innovator’ May**

Juan Atkins started the game, but the second artist who came to the circle was Derrick May. Born in Detroit on June 4<sup>th</sup>, 1963, May’s family had moved to Chicago when he was a child, but he returned to Detroit to live with his grandmother and attend Belleville High School, where he became friends with Atkins, setting up the Deep Space collective and record label together. (Sicko, Techno Rebels, 2010, p.49)

While running Deep Space, May sometimes went to visit his mother in Chicago, where he would listen to the local radio station WBMX, and became influenced by the Chicago’s take on electro. (Sicko, Techno Rebels, 2010, p.49) The Chicago sound was developed and played in the city’s warehouses, hence the name ‘Chicago House’. These sounds were usually longer than commercial recordings – Chicago’s producers used analog synthesizers and sequences to create and structure their music. They mixed and sampled traditional African instruments, such as the bongos and other percussion instruments, with soulful vocals. Of WBMX and Chicago House, May says:

*“When I first heard the guys on the radio, I was surprised. I thought we were the only ones thinking and feeling this kind of music... I was thinking of moving there [to Chicago] just so I could hear [DJ] Farley Jack Master Funk and these guys playing Trax [a record label]... When I heard them play and saw the way people reacted, danced, and sang to the song – and fall in love with each other [to the music] – I knew this was something special. Not just being a DJ and playing music and being on a mission, but playing music with love. This vision of making a moment this euphoric... it changed me.”* (Sicko, Techno Rebels, 2010, p.49 & 50)

May combined elements of the Chicago sound with Detroit’s in an attempt to take his music to the next level, and in 1985 he impressed the music director of the Detroit radio station WJLB after she had heard him DJ at the Detroit Club Liedernacht, and offered him a slot on the station, which he titled ‘Street Beat’ and was scheduled to be broadcast right before the Electrifying Mojo’s show. (Sicko, Techno Rebels, 2010, p.50)

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A year later, after inspiration from Atkins' and Electrifying Mojo's radio show, May decided to set up his own label, Transemat, named after a lyric from Atkins' song 'Night Drive'. The label's first single was a twelve-inch vinyl released titled 'Let's Go', which was a co-production between May and Atkins, with the former contributing the song's baseline, and the later adding finishing touches of hip-hop elements from an electronic drum kit. It was an experiment that explored the various instruments that can be used to create techno. (Sicko, *Techno Rebels*, 2010, p.51)

In 1987, May released 'Nude Photo' under the moniker Rhythm Is Rhythm. 'Nude Photo' demonstrated a completely different view of Chicago House, as a result of May's first experiment with a Yamaha DX-100 keyboard, which is a smaller version of a DX-21. Frequency Modulation (FM) synthesis helped the baseline to be more dynamic than the usual Chicago House records. (Sicko, *Techno Rebels*, 2010, p.51)

The same year, May released what was to become his most famous arrangement – 'String of Life'. The idea for the track came from when a friend of his Michael James, played a melody on the piano that May built the song around, adding string elements sampled from the Detroit Symphony Orchestra. 'String of Life' was intended to be set to 80 bpm, before May changed his mind and increased the tempo to that of Atkins' early Detroit Techno records, and as a result, its combination of loops, percussion and strings have made it one of the most influential records within the genres of house and techno.

### **Kevin ‘The Elevator’ Saunderson**

Kevin Saunderson was born in Brooklyn, New York on May 9<sup>th</sup>, 1964 and moved with his family to Detroit where he attended Belleville High School with Atkins and May. His first exposure to the techno scene was seeing Eddie Fowler djaying at a fraternity party in Eastern Michigan. As a friend of Atkins and May, he hung out at Deep Space and started practicing with the intention to not only learn how to mix, but to create dynamic sounds, to edit other people’s music and to create using the pause button. He wanted to create something completely new for their audience. (Sicko, *Techno Rebels*, 2010, p.54)

Saunderson’s style differed from May’s and Atkins’, as he was more interested in mainstream pop music than his friends, and so result experimented with vocals more. In 1985, Saunderson launched his own label, KMS Records. His first track, ‘Big Fun’ was a collaboration between himself and the rhythms of James Pennington and melodies of Art Forrest and himself. They felt it to be a personal success, and so they formed the group Inner City together, and were later introduced to the singer Paris Gray. The trio went back and reproduced ‘Big Fun’ with vocals from Gray, and it became an instant radio hit in Detroit. (Sicko, *Techno Rebels*, 2010, p.54) Four years later, Inner City released their album which also took the title *Big Fun*, and four singles from the album – ‘Big Fun’, ‘Good Life’, ‘Ain’t Nobody Better’ and ‘Do You Love What You Feel’ – reached number one on Billboard’s Hot Dance Music chart in 1989. (Sicko, *Techno Rebels*, 2010, p.54) In another show of Saunderson’s vision, their success was international, as tracks from Inner City’s *Big Fun* reached the UK Top 40 eight times.

He recognized that for techno to develop further, that he and his school friends, Juan Atkins and Derrick May should join forces. And so they relocated their respective labels, Metroplex, Transmat and KMS within the same building on Gratiot Avenue in Detroit’s Eastern Market, which they later named Techno Boulevard. Having each other based out of the same building allowed for a synergy in sound to flourish, and they would regularly work together and remix each other’s material. It was around this time a second generation of Detroit artists such as Jeff Mille and Carl Craig started to develop the newborn sound of Detroit. (Sicko, *Techno Rebels*, 2010, p.66)

### **Exporting Techno From Detroit**

The first outsider to discover there was a new scene happening in Detroit was Neil Rushton. A professional record collector from Birmingham, UK, Rushton was also Northern Soul fan, and the head of Kool Kat Records. He first made contact with Derrick May and invited him to England. May brought Saunderson with him, and Rushton immediately licensed 'Nude Photo', 'The Sound', 'Our Music' and 'Groovin' for European audiences.

Rushton wanted to release a compilation album of Detroit's sound, and worked closely with May, who had "*essentially become a production coordinator of the compilation as he was the main port of Rushton's call.*" (Sicko, Techno Rebels, 2010, p.67) May worked with Atkins in getting more and more Detroit artists such as Carl Craig, Black Baxter and Anthony Shakir to contribute tracks to the upcoming compilation album.

The working title of the compilation was *The House Sound of Detroit*, but the last of the artists to contribute to the album – Juan Atkins – delivered a track called 'Techno Music', with a similar integration of a speech synthesis from Kraftwerk's 1981 *Computer World* album. (Sicko, Techno Rebels, 2010, p.69) The vocal's repeated refrains of "*I program my home computer and techno music*" inspired Rushton to rename the album's title to *Techno! The New Sound Of Detroit*, released by Virgin Records in 1988 – and thus a genre of music was named: Detroit Techno.

It was around this time the rave scene in the UK was beginning to flourish, with huge audiences attended raves in the edges of Britain's cities, such as Sheffield, which like Detroit was an important centre of industry, but found its manufacturing base falling into rapid decline – in Sheffield's instance, due to Margaret Thatcher's economic policies to close Britain's factories and restructure the country along the service and knowledge economies. Rob Mitchell, the co-founder of the influential British electronic label Warp Records, states:

*"All these industrial places influences the music that you make. Electronic music is relevant because of this subliminal influence of industrial sounds. You go around Sheffield and it's full of crap concrete architecture built in the '60s; you go down into*

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*an area called the Canyon and you have these massive black factories belching out smoke, banging away. They don't sound a lot different from the music.*" (Savage, Machine Soul, 1993)

By 1990, the relentless demand for new dance music was such that, in Neil Rushton's words;

*"The Detroit innovators couldn't take it to the next stage. What did was that kids in the U.K. and Europe started learning how to make those techno records. They weren't as well made, but they had the same energy. And, by 1990-91, things became more interesting, because instead of three people in Detroit, you suddenly had 23 people making techno, in Belgium, in Sheffield."* (Savage, Machine Soul, 1993)

## **Conclusion**

Detroit Techno is a genre of electronic music that was formed by the influence of a post-industrial landscape, and that of the economic and social issues had in creating a new cultural movement. The conditions of Detroit in the early 1980s opened a new style of thinking about dance music for the genre's three pioneers – Juan Atkins, Derrick May and Kevin Saunderson. In the thirty years since their first experiments, Detroit Techno has broken the boundaries and united people across the world in a celebration of electronic sound. In doing so, Detroit Techno demonstrated that emotions of soul, ecstasy, euphoria and conviviality could be created by electronic instruments – these feelings reconciled and reflected the modern world's relationship between man and machine – and as such techno became a universal language that could be appreciated by audiences across the world.



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