

## 10 YEARS OF DANCE MUSIC IN BARCELONA

By Albert Masferrer\*

Traditionally, Barcelona has always maintained a link to the main European cultural tendencies. It is not surprising then, that Barcelona became the port of entry for “club culture” in Spain. This expression, coined by the British press, defines the dance music movement of the mid-eighties, propelled by the acid house boom. Strangely enough, the introduction of such a term in Spain awoke a stream of opinions against its use, as it was considered sterile to put into cultural terms something as spontaneous and basic as going out dancing and enjoying yourself. Of course, those of us who found significance beyond the visceral nightlife satisfactions, defended “club culture” as a musical-aesthetical code on par with any esteemed form of youth expression. Conflicts aside, and faithful to the maxim that “here, everything arrives late and badly”, club culture in Spain followed its own particular *vía crucis* in the beginning. While London commandeered the crazy house scene, we turned our backs on the European capitals. In Barcelona in the late 80’s, only a couple of seminal clubs such as Ars Studio and the after-hours The Club and Distrito Distinto went for the new and revolutionary sounds arriving from the USA and the UK. Energetic sessions, reserved for a small contingent of wide-awake and keen clubbers, would slip into noticeable T-shirts with smileys, flares and other complementary gear such as sports shoes, baseball caps and even whistles with which to egg on the DJ mixes. Little by little, this reduced group of night-birds influenced the night-time habits of the Barcelona modern set, who were distraught over the decay of the fashions of the time. Fads such as “disseny catalá” (the Catalan design hype of the 80’s), savage postmodernism, or the so-called “hard door” policy of emblematic venues such as the Otto Zutz and the Nick Havanna, were substituted by imported chemical excitement from the United Kingdom via Ibiza. It was the end of the 80’s and the Balearic island channelled the high spirits of thousands of Brits who would discover, with the help of ecstasy, a new dimension to leisure called acid house, in temples of terminal hedonism such as Space, Ku and Amnesia. From this moment on, things began to take shape in Spain, above all in Barcelona. Though the house euphoria was consigned to and entrenched in the gay clubs, other important propositions were emerging, such as the San Francisco, where multi-racial and cosmopolitan followers fed on hip hop and raggamuffin’, the killer after-hours at Distrito Distinto, the high voltage sessions by the Bots collective (later Vots) at the Apolo dancehall, or the Monumental Club de Ritmo, with its cool style and mythical jazz-dance sessions. Producciones Animadas, the club promoters, were the first to introduce the publicity flyer, with a leaflet entitled “La jungla del Ritmo”.

In the early 90’s, the foundations were laid for the “scene”, which would later be characterised by the important recognition of the figure of the DJ, and the first visits by selectors from outside, such as Gilles Peterson, who caused a sensation with his first Barcelona session at the Monumental. It would take a couple of years for the explosion to take place and as such it continued to be an underground minority affair far from the eyes and ears of the media and the masses.

Along these coordinates, Sonar entered the stage. The first “Festival of Advanced Music and Multimedia Art” promoted by Advanced Music, was crucial to the development of the dance scene. Sonar became an indispensable means of finding job outlets for national DJs, musicians and vanguard artists, as well as importing talents from abroad: Orbital, Daft Punk, Autechre, Jeff Mills, Josh Wink and Roger Sánchez, to name a few. Beginning in 1994, Sonar was responsible for sparking off the techno fever which would overtake Barcelona, and later the rest of the country, involving the press and TV public institutions, and an increasingly larger audience. In turn, Sonar revealed itself as a legitimising force for the “enlightened ones”, and an “upgrade path” for the obsolete modern ones. They saw the doorway to the future in this new culture, only perceiving its external and most noticeable aspects, ignoring its fundamental elements.

Then began the recycling of clubs. Nitsa, one of the most important mini-phenomenons on the Barcelona scene was the first. There, the indie followers, with their forced naive look: adidas, hairclips, bell-bottoms and suspicious skinniness, discovered the pleasures of techno and house, thanks to the help of certain prohibited substances and the sexy charisma of Sideral, the resident DJ. This club, opened at the end of '94, has forged a prestige beyond that of individuals, and over the years has nurtured one of the most solid and eclectic schedules in the country, with weekly visits by the best selectors and groups.

Since then, the network has expanded exponentially, generating clubs, record labels, festivals and booking agencies which are reaching European levels. Nobody can deny, no matter how relative we see things, that a dance microcosm has emerged which does not cease to be interesting because of its smallness. There is a network of independent labels with important expectations for the future and a tremendous potential for exporting “Made in Spain” sounds. We are talking about initiatives such as Minifunk and Cosmos in Barcelona, together with Boozo. Yo Gano / Tú pierdes and Evil Tunes in Madrid and Novophonic in San Sebastián. These are some examples of companies which have built un reputations independently, without external support or subsidies, and have achieved economic viability in a country not well-disposed to business ventures of this nature.

Along the same lines, many publications specialised in the club universe have emerged, such as Disco 2000, aB and Self in Barcelona; together with Undersounds and Neo2, in Madrid. Other initiatives worth highlighting are the increasingly common promoters and booking agencies, like MurmurtownLaGloria. Producciones Animadas, Advanced Music and Night Sun Group, responsible for promoting parties and club sessions, and contracting DJs and bands. In addition, there are many nightspots that dedicate their sessions to new trends and sounds. Like the fore-mentioned Nitsa/Apolo, both Moog and Dot have recommendable daily schedules. Moviedisco, Picasso or Walden, to cite some vitally important names within the Barcelona area, have taken the risk of going for club culture, alongside ventures such as Sporting Club or Touché, two prestigious itinerant DJ collectives. If you include the big summer festivals, such as Doctor Music, Benicàssim or Festimad, with dance sections in their programmes, the real extent to which things are taking off on the península becomes apparent.

Lastly, we should not overlook the backbone of all this: the DJs, who, along with the indispensable audience, are those who are really getting this thing going. Here and now, we have a considerable contingency of DJs and musicians who, far from being considered superstars, as occurs in other countries, are on the lips of any club kid in-the-know. In short, we are talking about a phenomenon, product of the enthusiasm of a small few, which has transformed itself into a micro-disneyland of techno, a mini-supermarket of hedonism, or a giant with clay feet that runs the constant risk of crumbling. It sustains itself thanks to that still talent initial enthusiasm, and increasing economic interests, legal or not, which inevitably inject the cash necessary for all this to work.

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