

Why I Don't Like SouthEnd, or Why Dance Music Is Political. Sub Bass Snarl

Since the coming of Western religion, centralised power, and, more recently, capitalism, all forms of bodily expression and ritual have been fiercely regulated. From the crushing of tribal ceremonies by the Imperial powers and Christianity in the Age Of Discovery, through the Victorian repression of sexuality, to the closing of raves the world over, most explicitly through the pending Criminal Justice Bill in the UK, people in power have always feared the gathering together and celebrating of, in their eyes, disempowered people.

Techno is a type of music that is inherently liberating, but also potentially fascistic. Techno creates a space for thought that rock never did, or could. Rock had lyrics, and with lyrics came images, images that the listener conjured up in their mind, it was explicitly culturally specific. Techno, on the other hand, despite being created by predominantly White middle-class males, holds little or no image to be heard. Devoid of lyrics the images are created only by the familiarity of certain sounds. The reference points, are, on the whole, self-referential. For instance, can you describe the sound of a Roland TB303? Of course, this begins to change when programmers/composers, begin to use dolphin noises and other more familiar sounds. We hear these noises and locate them within a framework whereby the image provides the sound with an array of other messages. For example,

DOLPHIN SOUND = water, ecology, New Age, nature, etc But what of the pure 303 sound? There is no reference point other than the instrument itself which few of the listeners would ever have seen.

Being based on a large number of electronic, self-referential sounds, techno, in its purest form, lets say Detroit acid in 1988, creates the situation whereby the meaning of the music is entirely created by the listener. Thus it gives the listener the opportunity to explore their own emotions and create their own images to accompany the music. For example, we hear Detroit acid and can feel the gloom and the decay in the harshness of the sound only through our impression of the music - there are no lyrics or obvious sonic symbols to give us these ideas. Dancing to it allows us to inscribe our own meanings on the music in a state in which we are mobilising our whole body as a form of expression.

Contrast this with, for instance, Morrissey. Listening to Morrissey we are invited into his doom and gloom, his depression. The presence of lyrics give us two options. Firstly we can empathise and feel what Morrissey tells us he is feeling or we can identify with it based on our past experience. Or secondly, we can reject what he is telling us. Both these options do not allow us to create or particularly change the meaning of the track, although in the first example we can add to the meaning of the track through the addition of our own experiences.

What adds to the techno experience is the dancing. Dancing in a liberated manner, free from the constraints of regimented ballroom dancing and the like, the process of adding meaning and of thought itself is amplified a thousand-fold. Coupled occasionally with mind altering chemicals the effect is quite pronounced. In anthropological terms, a liminal state is attained, between the structures of traditional dance and traditional music (rock), we are free to explore with fewer suggested meanings than other types of Western music.

But lets move onto SouthEnd. In 1993 SouthEnd and Sydney DJ Nik Fish wrote a track called "And The Winner Is..." which sampled IOC President Samaranch announcing the winner of the 2000 Olympics bid. The winner, of course, was "Sid-Der-Knee". Objectors to this show of nationalism, which I have described previously (3D World 10/10/94) as "nationalism at the expense of the poor and renters of Sydney", disapproved of the blatant pro-status quo message of the sample and the tune itself. The problem for me, was deeper. Here we have a track that goes top ten and is popular throughout the rave scene as a 6am anthem. No problem with that, most pop songs and rave anthems are equally musically crass. The real problem is the coupling of the sample with the liberation of the beat. Of course we are all going to cheer when the "winner is" sample is played because the music and the beat take us to a psychological peak. We are freely creating our own meanings and adding them to the beat, dancing and enjoying ourselves, when suddenly, the track suggests to us that "the winner is Sydney". Our freedom is interrupted. Immediately we think of patriotic little Aussies, the beating of the Chinese (re-inventing Vietnam?), and a whole host of other images - lager louts at the Rocks etc. We have little choice but to accept this message. This lack of choice is entirely because of the structure of the music. Like the subliminal advertising of the 1960s, the medium can either be extremely liberating, or extremely fascistic - it all depends on the nature of the message. If SouthEnd had used, as other techno-poppers have, samples/lyrics such as "feel real good" there would have been little harm as this type of lyric leaves it up to the listener to decide what they will feel real good about. SouthEnd pervert this into a state where they tell you what to feel real good about, and in this case through the use of sampled cheers, they want you to feel real good about the winning of the Olympics, despite their repeated denials. The problem being, as critics of the Olympics have pointed out, is that the Olympics will push rents up, move the poor out of the city, waste tax payers money on a frivolous sporting carnival that only gains us prestige on a world scale at the expense of a decent living standard for all here in Sydney.

Again SouthEnd decide to make a hit. This time it is "If You Believe". However this time the suggested message is far more insidious. Coupled with the dance beat, this message is like saying "buy Coke" or "vote Liberal". Below are excerpts from a review of the track I wrote for 3D World, 10/10/94.

"Listening to this and its many remixes you can almost see the seething mass of twelve year olds, Ecstasy-riddled gums wrapped around their Chupa Chups, resplendent in their fashionable "Baby Doll" or "Gangsta" looks, waving their hands in the air and singing aloud at 6am. Lovely for those who still cling to romantic notions of love and middle class equality. For those in the real world, though, the ideological message this "choon" carries - "if you believe in what you do everything will come to you" reeks of Bronwyn Bishop. Certainly positivism is one thing but the contrite New Age individualism of these lyrics is positively dangerous... this track ignores those who do not "believe" or cannot through structural disadvantage and inequity. The real problem, as cultural critics Theodor Adorno and Wilhelm Reich would argue, is, that even if you do not agree with the ideological message contained within you will probably end up dancing to it amongst the smiling masses at a rave and hum the tune on your way to wage slavery the next day, anyway because of the structure of the music itself. Musically it is bound to be a "hoor" hit with its popular techno breakbeat, analogue sirens, crowd cheers and synth washes; all but the radio mix of the track having great rave anthem potential. For me this is a negative for when coupled with the dodgy lyrical message it will finally prove to me that people really do just want to lie down, be silent, escape, and dream of little White fluffy clouds. Ahhh, the mass psychology of fascism and the pop hit"

Why do SouthEnd do it? Are they really fascists?

In some ways I wish they were and that this was, in fact, a conscious decision on their part, but alas it is not. There is nothing to expose for they are innocent. They have merely exploited the nature of dance music, and in particular, techno, to express a point of view. The real problem is not the point of view they hold, but that one has little choice in the matter of agreeing or disagreeing with it because of the medium they have used. I can easily turn off the radio when I hear Mariah Carey or Phil Collins but at a rave, mind pumped full of drugs, I cannot stop dancing. I cannot not listen and this is what is dangerous.

Techno can either be a powerful tool for liberating the mind from ideological structures and barriers of oppression or it can be an equally powerful tool for indoctrination and incarceration. The choice is yours.

Sub Bass Snarl is a Sydney DJ and freelance writer. He writes regularly for 3D World and Oyster magazines and intends to write a PhD thesis on youth culture, politics and popular music in 1995. He welcomes comments, response and, especially, abuse on fax (+61 2) 5169 2005.