

## Alors On Danse

### Twenty-Five Years of Dance Music in the Low Countries

264

[ M A T T I A S B A E R T S O E N ]

The renowned music magazine DJ Mag annually ranks the hundred best DJs in the world. In 2014 the Dutch DJ Hardwell was in first place for the second time and, moreover, all of those in the top five were for the first time from either Belgium or the Netherlands. This is not by accident, as over the last twenty-five years the Low Countries have helped shape electronic dance music and have been the source of numerous evolutions and revolutions.

### The sound of Belgium

For Europe, the late seventies and early eighties were a miserable time. The Cold War was at its peak, the depression led to economic decline, and in some countries ultra-conservative governments came to power. The anarchic and subversive punk and the darker new wave pushed aside the frivolous disco music that had brightened up the seventies. By experimenting with heavy, impassive beats, such Flemish groups as The Neon Judgement and Front 242 made this darker new wave music a touch more danceable.

Several years later the sound of The New Judgement and Front 242 formed the basis of a new movement that unfolded in Belgium: 'new beat'. This genre took shape by chance when the DJ Marc Grouls had some fun with the speed at which he played *Flesh*, a disk by the Belgian electrowave group A Split Second. Instead of playing it at 45 rpm he used 33 $\frac{1}{3}$ . His night-owl listeners found the sluggish, monotonous sound of the music hugely intriguing. Grouls was a DJ at the Boccaccio, a club in Destelbergen, near Ghent, where new beat made its breakthrough; a place that appeals to the imagination. Grouls stuck to the same slow tempo all night. In 1988, the British pop magazine *i-D* wrote that walking into the Boccaccio in Ghent was like entering a distorted version of life in slow motion. 2500 people were dancing round rigidly, moving their limbs like robots at half speed. Every weekend the Boccaccio filled up with party-goers from all over the country, and from France, Germany and the Netherlands too. There is no statutory closing time for clubs, so at five in the morning you often still had to queue up for hours to get in.



But what exactly was this new beat? In *The Sound of Belgium*, a 2012 documentary by Jozef Devillé that charts the history of dance music in Belgium, one party-goer offers a very telling definition of the genre: 'It is more like a manufactured sound than a true musical genre. The music is made more by technicians than musicians'.

New beat was born in unlit attics and sounds as pitch-black as the night, perfect for the night owls who only come to life in the dark. The heavy synthesizers and repetitive nature of new beat were a blueprint for the techno music that was to follow. Clubbers were mad about this new sound, but it also had a great many opponents: several magazines scoffed at new beat, and the national broadcaster refused to play the music and considered it scandalous that such a thing should be shipped abroad. New beat was nevertheless a huge success, and sales of some records easily reached 60,000. Flemish DJs were hot property in England and 'Mixed in Belgium' was printed on the record sleeves to stimulate sales. New beat went beyond just the music, and expanded into a real subculture with its own style of dress; the ingredients of the look were black boots, Volkswagen badges and devotional pictures and smileys printed on T-shirts.

As a genre, new beat vanished as quickly as it had appeared. In 1989, barely three years after its breakthrough, the pursuit of profit had completely swamped creativity. New beat acts drove from club to club in a minibus, and landed up to a thousand euro for a mimed show lasting barely twenty minutes. The crude number *The Sound of C* by The Confetti's – named after a discotheque in Brasschaat – was the kiss of death for new beat. The barman in the nightclub served as the band's mascot, the number was recorded in just three hours, and it was outstanding in its senselessness. The fans from the early days gave up on it, calling it 'nougat beat' by analogy with that sickly-sweet confection. The advent of Ecstasy (XTC), the perfect party drug, also helped new beat to its doom. The police raided nightclubs in search of drugs, and in barely six weeks seven of the largest clubs had to close down, including the Boccaccio.

Yet in the course of its short life new beat laid the foundations for the future. In Ghent, only a few kilometres' drive from the Boccaccio, Renaat Vandepapeliere and his wife set up R&S Records while new beat was at its height, and it grew



*Land of a Thousand Dancers*, an illustration by Typex for an article about dance, published in the Dutch music magazine *Oor* in 1993. At the time the picture was cut up and scattered throughout the article. This is the first time the original picture has been published whole. It was also the very first illustration Typex ever made, Mutsaers Collection / © Typex.



into one of the world's best and most well-respected labels for electronic music. It was internationally-oriented from the very beginning. It gave the American techno pioneers Derrick May and Joey Beltram and the British innovator Aphex Twin the opportunity to launch their first numbers. Vandepapeliere set up his own studio at his home, filling it with equipment the artists could use. When it got late, or if they came from overseas, he offered them overnight accommodation. Another label that appeared during the glory days of new beat was Antler-Subway, the brainchild of Maurice Engelen. He approached it as a businessman and producer, but also as the founder of the dance bands Praga Khan and Lords Of Acid. Through these groups, Engelen exported new beat to America and Asia. With success. Lords Of Acid gave hundreds of sell-out concerts in America and Japan, with such leading acts as The Prodigy and Rammstein as their supporting act. In his home country, it was only years later that Engelen received recognition for his pioneering work.

### The terror of nothingness

Dance music also established itself in the Netherlands at about the same time as the breakthrough of new beat. After visiting the dazzling nightclubs of New York, the Flemish DJ Eddy De Clercq wanted to create the same atmosphere in Amsterdam. He was the first to play American house music numbers on the European continent. He opened the RoXY nightclub in Amsterdam and himself took to the turntables every Friday. In 1988 it was he who created *Pay the Piper*, the first house number in the Netherlands. Like new beat, house – commonly known as 'acid' – met with plenty of criticism. Journalists referred to 'the terror of nothingness'. De Clercq put a large part of its success down to this criticism. The more intense the opposition, the better the movement. That was also one of the major reasons for continuing, as he told the Dutch music magazine *Oor*.

Another Dutch metropolis, Rotterdam, focused on techno, the cool, hard counterpart to house music. Under the name Speedy J, Jochem Paap issued records on such renowned international labels as Plus 8 and Warp Records. He sold more than a million copies of his biggest hit *Pulllover*. Dance was hot, and parties – legal and otherwise – were held in clubs,

squats and warehouses. But, just as in Belgium, drug use flourished in the Netherlands and the police closed down a great many nightclubs, often with a considerable show of force. They brought a heavy-handed end to club culture, but not to dance culture. On the contrary. In 1989, the DJ Paul Jay, a member of the Soho Connection that united British and Dutch DJs, spoke the following prophetic words: 'I believe that house has opened a lot of Dutch eyes and is only the beginning of the establishment of a lasting dance culture in the Netherlands.'

In the early 1990s, producers in both Belgium and the Netherlands substantially increased the tempo of the music. The public wanted its music faster and louder: 'harddance' and 'hardcore' made their appearance. In Belgium, Christian Pieters, aka DJ Fly, set up Bonzai Records in 1992. One of its first releases was Thunderball's *Bonzai Channel One*. The number's rapid rhythms and high tempo meant it was labelled as harddance. The Bonzai Sound conquered dance floors all over Europe in no time at all. The tempo of the numbers rose to 140 beats per minute (bpm), a huge difference from new beat, which remained at about 90 bpm. The Dutch variant of harddance was called hardcore, and here the tempo went even higher. In the book *Mary Go Wild*, an overview of 25 years of dance music in the Netherlands published in 2013, DJ Dano, one of the pioneers of hardcore, says: 'How far could I take my audience? The answer turned out to be 370 bpm, beyond that they just stood still, ha ha! On one occasion I was the opening act at the Hemkade, but funnily enough the room remained empty. It turned out that the First Aid room was full, because people had started shaking *en masse*. The tempo was too much!'

## Champagne, caviar & groupies

With hindsight, hardcore is not the most refined product the Netherlands has ever come up with, and the marketing and merchandising machine that was set in motion was possibly even more important than the music. The caps, T-shirts and mousepads printed with the Bonzai logo were at least as lucrative as the records. DJ Fly talked about this success in the Flemish weekly *Humo*: 'One day we received information from customs that in Antwerp they had intercepted a container from Asia that was full of T-shirts, half hardrock and half Bonzai, all fake.' In the Netherlands, 'hardcore' suddenly turned into 'happy hardcore', which gave the genre a more positive allure. This was followed by compilation albums, parties, T-shirts, magazines and its own programmes on radio and TV. Three Dutch friends, Irfan van Ewijk, Duncan Stutterheim and Theo Lelie, set up the ID&T events agency and in 1992 launched the all-embracing Thunderdome concept, which was the foundation of their success. ID&T expanded into the biggest party organisation in the world. For the first time champagne, caviar and groupies all appeared on the scene.

By 1998 hardcore was on the way out. Just as with the decline of new beat, the initial fans turned up their noses at its extreme commercialisation. Dance music split up into all manner of subgenres and the Netherlands concentrated on a melodious offshoot with lots of catchy, stirring synthesizer phrases; it was called 'trance'. The roots of this genre lay in Germany, but it was three Dutchmen who put trance on the world map: Ferry Corsten, Armin Van Buuren and DJ Tiësto (later to become simply 'Tiësto'). When Ferry Corsten issued *Out of*

*The Blue* under his alias System F in 1999, the joint really started jumping. As Corsten tells us in the book *Mary Go Wild*: 'Suddenly every door was open. I was called by the Ministry of Sound [a trendsetting London dance empire with several clubs and a record label, MB] to ask whether I wanted to mix *Trance Nation* [an acclaimed compilation album, MB]. Note that I wasn't even a DJ! But you can't refuse an offer like that. That first compilation immediately sold 400,000 copies. ... Then I heard from all the major English clubs. ... *Out of The Blue* sent everything into overdrive. One request after another came in. ... And then Bono called. At that moment it suddenly dawned on me: wow... here I am just talking to Bono of U2 on the phone!'

In 2002 *DJ Mag* for the first time proclaimed Tiësto the best DJ in the world, an honour he was later to receive twice more. Van Buuren and Corsten followed in fifth and ninth place. DJ Tiësto's success reached its peak in 2004, when he performed before the eyes of the world at the opening ceremony for the Olympic Games in Athens. The Dutch DJs turned into the pop stars of their generation.

The trance that Corsten, Van Buuren and Tiësto produced sounded quite euphoric; it was music that was 'bigger than life', too big for the smaller clubs. In addition, after the turn of the century we started experiencing music in a different way: party-goers shared photos and film clips via the internet and social media to show how much enjoyment they derived from going out. ID&T understood this and started up a number of impressive events both indoors and outdoors. The visual aspect became more important than ever: huge sets were custom-made for the chosen theme. Then there were circus acts, laser shows, fireworks, side stages and delicious food. ID&T made Mysteryland the biggest dance festival in the Netherlands, with 60,000 visitors a year. This was followed by Innercity, launched by DJ Tiësto, and Sensation, a dance party in the Ajax football stadium in Amsterdam that pulled out all the stops to create an all-round spectacular. In 2011 no less than 1.5 million dance-lovers attended one of the major festivals in the Netherlands. ID&T is also the driving force behind Tomorrowland, which is held in Flanders and, since the first one in 2005, has grown into the biggest dance festival in the world, with no less than 400,000 visitors in 2014.

## Dirty Dutch

ID&T exported its open-air festivals all over the world, and Sensation has so far been organised in 22 countries. In 2013 140,000 party-goers turned up in the Chattahoochee Hills in the American state of Georgia for TomorrowWorld, a smaller version of Tomorrowland. Over there they are currently crazy about the European beat offered by the Frenchman David Guetta and the Swedish Avicii. Though it is the Dutchmen Afrojack, Hardwell and Nicky Romero that respond best to the wishes of American dance fans, who like their dance music on a large scale. This has led to the term Dutch Big Room House, Dutch House for short, or else Dirty Dutch. This is dance music suited to huge festival sites, with several climaxes in each individual number. The melodious nature of trance as played by Tiësto and Van Buuren was combined with the hard beats of house music and the cool of hip hop. Dirty Dutch caught on: Coachella, the major American rock festival, acquired a separate dance stage where the performers were almost all Dutch. It is as if they were minting money: in its list of the

best-paid DJs of 2014, the American business magazine *Forbes* put Tiësto in third place (28 million dollars), with Afrojack at six (22 million dollars) and Hardwell at eleven (13 million dollars).

In another list, of the hundred best DJs in the world as drawn up by *DJ Mag*, Hardwell is right at the top. The Flemish brothers Dimitri Vegas & Like Mike, and the Dutchmen Armin Van Buuren, Martin Garrix and Tiësto complete the top five. At the time Martin Garrix was barely eighteen years old and was one of a new generation of Dutch youngsters who, as adolescents, uploaded a number onto the net and, before they knew it were travelling the world and being asked to perform as DJs in the most renowned clubs. They have benefited from the success of their predecessors and can rely on professional organisational structures.

Yet in the Netherlands people are also worried. In 2013 ID&T was bought by SFX, the dance empire headed by the American media mogul Robert F.X. Sillerman, though ID&T retains the decision-making in the creative process. Donald Stutterheim, one of the founders, emphasises that money is necessary to continue exporting their mega-concepts, and he has become the CEO of SFX Europe. When SFX also bought Awakenings, another of ID&T's showpieces, for millions of dollars in 2014, reactions were very harsh. ID&T defends itself by saying that in the meantime it is more the rule than the exception to be bought up by SFX.

## A new standard

Questions are also being asked about the present state of the dance scene in Belgium. The pioneer Renaat Vandepapeliere gave vent to his feelings on the *Clash Music* website: 'When I go out, it's not the same vibe anymore. I see the kids and I think they're missing something. Now you get a list of very expensive DJs, big lights, and a big sound system, but when you walk in you can smell the money.'

In recent years Belgium has fallen substantially behind the rest of Europe. There is no organised scene as there is in the Netherlands and the centre of European electronic music has shifted to London and Berlin. There are some noteworthy success stories, however, such as the Ghent brothers Stephen and David Dewaele (2 Many DJ's) who in 2002 set a new standard with their compilation album *As Heard on Radio Soulwax Vol. 2*. The brothers cut up existing hits and then ingeniously pasted them back together again. This yielded daring combinations that had never previously been heard: the vocals from Destiny's Child were superimposed over Nirvana's hard guitar work, and those of Salt-N-Pepa over Iggy & The Stooges. *The New York Times* declared the album record of the year; David Bowie and Kylie Minogue are fans and 2 Many DJ's play for dancers at the hippest parties in the world.

The young Flemish drum-and-bass producer Boris Daenen, aka Netsky, is also an international success and, in addition, young Flemish producers are occasionally able to issue their records on a foreign label or supply a remix for an international star such as Beyoncé. In Belgium, though, all eyes are currently focused on the phenomenon called Paul Van Haver, aka Stromae. In 2009 he achieved a number one hit in more than ten countries with *Alors On Danse*. This was followed by *Papaoutai*, *Formidable* and other hits. Stromae performs at European venues and is gradually conquering the United States. In late 2014 no less a figure than Madonna invited him to her New York apartment to talk about

possible collaboration. In interviews he declares that he is influenced by Jacques Brel, but also by Technotronic, the successful group headed by Jo Bogaert, who actually took his first steps as a producer during the 'new beat' period.

I mention this simply to show what things can lead to, things that started about twenty-five years ago in squats and small clubs and were dismissed as crude and repugnant. In this quarter of a century, dance music has expanded into a billion-euro business. The Flemish and the Dutch played a part as international pioneers: the ID&T party organisation developed into a market leader and the youthful producers on the Dirty Dutch scene nowadays fly straight from their classrooms to America, where they perform for tens of thousands of party-goers. And Belgium is home to Tomorrowland, the biggest music festival in the world.

Not bad at all for a movement which, according to the Netherlands' leading pop journalist when the first reports of house music appeared about a quarter of a century ago, would never amount to anything. 'None of it's worth any more than a postage stamp,' he said in 1988. How could he have known that in 2014 the faces of the Dutch DJs Tiësto, Hardwell, Armin Van Buuren, Dash Berlin and Afrojack would be immortalised on... a postage stamp? ■

*Translated by Gregory Ball*

Tomorrowland, Boom, Flanders

