

BELGIAN BEAT BRIGADE!

Belgium's contribution to dance music is often overlooked, but throughout the '80s and '90s the country produced some of the world's most influential electronic music. With *Belgium Booms*, a series of events in London this October showcasing the country's talent, and a new film *The Sound Of Belgium* looking to change that public perception, we take a closer look at the country that gave us EBM, new beat, hardcore techno and so much more...

Words: JOHN POWER

From a few likely lads holidaying in Ibiza to clubs like Shoom, The Trip and the wild excesses of the rave scene, the story of how acid house took root in the British Isles is a familiar, if still entertaining, tale. Britain's rave revolution didn't occur in splendid isolation though and by the time Britain's youth were dicking about in dungarees and getting right-on-one-matey, a similar scene was already firmly established in Belgium. Only this one, rather than being soundtracked by imported vinyl from Chicago and Detroit, was being driven by a homemade sound — new beat. By the mid '80s Belgium already had a strong electronic music pedigree, having gifted the world the stern sounds of Electronic Body Music. Powered by the availability of cheap synthesisers, post-punk Belgian bands like Front-242 spliced Throbbing Gristle's industrial noise with the clean Körpermusik of Kraftwerk to create a muscular, martial sound that would in turn influence many of Detroit's techno pioneers. Charting the rise and fall of the country's club culture, new feature-length documentary, *The Sound Of Belgium*, out this month, is at turns both funny and sad as the likes of Telex's Dan Lacksman, CJ Bolland and Renaat Vandepapeliere from R&S recount how this small self-effacing country found itself to be the epicentre of Europe's techno scene.

SLOWER GROOVE

Despite its pivotal role in the evolution of electronic music, Belgium's contribution rarely gets the attention it deserves, not that *The Sound Of Belgium* director Jozef Devillé blames anyone but Belgians

themselves for this oversight.

"It's mostly due to our own lack of interest," he sighs. "Even after 20 years I'm still the first to tackle this subject. If this had happened in Holland there would have been dozens of books and documentaries about it because they are proud of their culture, the French and the Germans are too, and well of course, especially the English, but us Belgians... if we have something worth talking about, we'll be the last ones to."

In Antwerp's Ancienne, Belgique DJs like Ronnie Harmsen were creating an eclectic scene mixing the harder sequenced sounds of EBM with leftfield new-wave pop by Belgian bands like Allez Allez, and everything from Bauhaus' gloomy goth-rock to the experimental sounds of Klaus Schulze and Steve Reich. Every weekend, queues would stretch around the block as the resident DJs put together sets with the same attention to detail, passion and sense of drama as that of their more famous American peers like David Mancuso or Larry Levan.

Then in 1987 Dikke Ronny, then resident DJ at the Café d'Anvers, would take Belgian electro act A Split Second's 'Flesh', slow the vinyl down to 33rpm +8, and in doing so, would create the famous new beat sound. The effect was electric. Slowed down, the music became even more powerful, the bass became more pronounced and other DJs took note. Labels began to re-release records in this new slowed-down style and Belgian producers began to adopt this slower groove into their original productions.

Clubs like the soon to be legendary Boccaccio became temples to this new beat, whilst the influential Liaisons Dangereuses radio show broadcast the sound to the whole country. New beat exploded across Belgium. Unlike the acid house parties across the channel though,



Dan Lacksman



CJ Bolland

the atmosphere the new beat DJs looked to create was far from euphoric. At Boccaccio DJs would keep the punishingly loud music pounding at a grinding tempo, selecting the darkest-sounding tracks as lasers strafed the 3000-plus Belgian youths who'd pack out the club every Sunday. The effect was as intimidating as it was exhilarating.

Belgium's youth lapped it up. New beat burst out of the clubs and onto the streets, its devotees dressed in a mix of new romantic and acid house styles — crucifixes, smiley faces and a Beastie Boys-esque obsession with wearing stolen car decals as jewelery. At this point the mainstream may have been doing its best to ignore it but the kids were buying new beat records like Erotic Dissidents' 'Move Your Ass and Feel the Beat' in their tens of thousands.

As is often the case, success would ultimately lead to saturation and with easy money to be made every producer and has-been singer rushed to release a new beat record. By the end of the '80s Belgium's pop charts were dominated by new beat tracks, with bands like Confetti's and Plaza created to provide a recognizable face to the music that could fill arenas with mainstream pop fans dancing to sanitized new beat pop hits. Barely two years from its birth new beat was dead and buried, but whilst the pop charts were full of watered-down imitations, many Belgian producers had already moved on.

HARDER AND DARKER

As the world at large began to tentatively embrace electronic music, Belgian producers like CJ Bolland shifted their focus to producing music that was harder, more aggressive, darker than anyone else had dared till then.

"Sequenced music like EBM or techno or new beat, music programmed with computers, you cannot miss a beat, you can set your watch to it, it's too perfect and for a lot of people it feels unnatural," explains Devillé. "I remember watching a documentary on the television at the end of the '80s and they went to Holland and France, and this new house music coming in from the States, the people just didn't get it but in Belgium we had already been dancing to it for several years."

Belgian producers' headstart and seeming affinity for sequenced sounds were paying off. Belgian techno was here and the world couldn't get enough. Packed full of orchestral stabs, breakbeats and hoover bass, the sounds coming out of studios in

Brussels and Antwerp would soon go on to have a massive influence on the UK's own nascent rave scene.

"The UK rave sound was completely inspired by hearing those Belgian riffs," admits Optimo's JD Twitch in the film, as what Belgian producers did one week, British producers rushed to copy the next.

It wasn't just the UK that was falling under the Belgian spell, and by now the shockwaves given off by the country's hardcore attitude were reaching further than just across the channel. From New York to Tokyo, producers like Joey Beltram and Ken Ishii were not only being inspired by the Belgian sound, but were

also finding a home on the country's labels like the pioneering R&S, whilst Detroit's Underground Resistance would acknowledge the country's scene with 1992's 'Belgian Resistance' EP. The boom time couldn't last though, and whilst bombastic techno and the easy availability of ecstasy were fuelling wild nights in the clubs, the accelerated tempos were also speeding the scene towards its downfall. Whilst new beat had been co-opted by the pop mainstream, records like T99's 'Anasthasia' were too savage, too wild to be tamed. For the Belgian authorities, much like the Tory government in the UK, the idea of a generation getting high as kites and dancing to this aggressive anti-music was just too much to countenance.

In the early '90s the crackdown began. Police stepped up their raids, and club closures were commonplace. One by one these temples to techno were targeted and by 1993 even the legendary Boccaccio had closed its doors for the last time. As the credits roll, Devillé's film ends on a sombre note, as a movement that had united an often divided country was cut off in its prime. The music they made and that features in The Sound Of Belgium would continue to influence producers for decades to come but whilst Belgian labels, DJs and producers may have been revered abroad, at home the party was over... for the time being at least.

THE SOUNDS OF BELGIUM – FIVE TRACKS THAT DEFINE A NATION

FRONT 242

'Special Forces' (1984)

Packed full of stuttering samples, portentous vocals, industrial bass and primitive drum machines locked into a martial stomp, 'Special Forces' taken from Front 242's second album 'No Comment' defined the EBM aesthetic.

A SPLIT SECOND

'Flesh' (1986)

It was A Split Second's 1986 single 'Flesh' that DJ Dikke Ronny thought would sound better slowed down to 33rpm +8, and he was right. New beat had its first anthem.

RAVESIGNAL III

'Horsepower' (1991)

One of CJ Bolland's many releases for R&S, 'Horsepower' is Belgian techno at its finest. Packed full of trance riffs, sledgehammer beats and Belgian hardcore attitude, it still sounds as incredible today as it did on its release in 1991.

2MANYDJS

'As Heard On Radio Soulwax Pt.2' (2002)

The only Radio Soulwax mix officially released and one of the most influential DJ mixes ever. An eclectic mix of rock, pop, hip-hop, electro and the Dewaele's own bootlegs, its anything-goes spirit redefined what club music could be in the 21st century.

COMPUPHONIC

'Sunset' (2012)

The ne plus ultra of Belgium's recent Balearic house sound, Liege producer Compuphonic's dreamy end-of-day anthem has clocked up over 4,000,000 YouTube plays since its release, and its ubiquitous presence throughout the summer months has ensured its status as a modern day Ibiza classic.





BELGIUM BLASTS BACK

Belgium may not be the hardcore techno powerhouse it once was but despite having a population just half that of Greater London and having seen many of its leading clubs closed, the country has continued to produce more than its fair share of electronic music superstars...

Having spent much of the '80s and early '90s bestriding the world of electronic music like some waffle-scoffing colossus, Belgium's producers were

left splintered and isolated by the authority's clampdown on the nation's clubs. With legendary incubators of talent like the Boccaccio shuttered, the Belgian techno community lost its focus at the moment producers in neighbouring France, Germany and the UK began to assert themselves. Still, with a seemingly natural affinity for electronic music, a love of partying all night and a penchant for brewing phenomenally strong beer, it was unlikely that Belgium's club culture would just roll over and die. And if the country's monolithic rave culture was unable to sustain itself, a more eclectic scene would soon spring up in its place.

In the late '90s two Belgian DJs, David Fourqaert and Mo Becha, then known as The Glimmer Twins, were organising their first Eskimo parties, throwing everything from house and disco to ragga and rock'n'roll into the mix. Along with 2ManyDJs, another Belgian DJ duo with an equally eclectic nature, those parties and the label that emerged from them would come to revive the anything-goes attitude that had been such a feature of clubs like the Ancienne Belgique in the mid '80s.

BACK ON THE MAP

The Glimmers and the Flying Dewaele Brothers put Belgium back on the map, and in the years since the country's producers haven't looked back, literally in many cases as opportunities abroad have

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Surfing Leons



outstripped those at home. Over the past decade we've had the likes of electro rockers GOOSE and The Subs follow in the footsteps of the Dewaele's band Soulwax, bands equipped with a stadium-sized wall of synthesised sound, whilst The Glimmers' Eskimo Recordings label became synonymous with the rise of nu-disco, introducing Aeroplane, amongst many others, to the world.

Today The Glimmers' brand of Balearic house and disco seems almost as Belgian as moules et frites, with the likes of The Magician, ATTAR!, Compuphonic, A.N.D.Y and Mickey all defying the country's notoriously wet weather to produce balmy sun-dappled electronic music. But despite their success there still hasn't been a clear 'Belgian sound', a defining national movement similar to new beat, and much like the country itself today's Belgian electronic music scene is a patchwork pieced together from contrasting styles and sounds, some homegrown but just as many imported.

Mathieu Fonsny, aka Surfing Leons, is one of the new wave of DJs and producers with a distinctly global outlook. His music, taking in elements of hip-hop, electro, house and techno, has been released on Buraka Som Sistema's Enchufada label, his own Forma.T parties in Liege have hosted everyone from Erol Alkan to Hudson Mohawke, and he's just about to head off to the States to play for the Mad Decent stage at the Tomorrowworld festival.

Still, despite spending more time outside the country than in these days, Fonsny is still sure of his identity.

"Oh, I'm a Belgian producer through and through," he asserts. "I was raised on R&S and 2ManyDJs. We're a small country and we're often the first to put ourselves down, but I think we are a cool and

honest people."

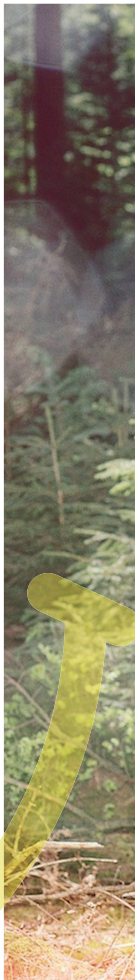
Fonsny recognizes that things have changed since new beat's heyday. "For me there's not so much a 'Belgian sound' any more, but there's definitely a 'Belgian scene'. We have all this history, from the Boccaccio and Bonzai Records to Front-242 and R&S. Growing up, it was all around us. But it's great today, you've got these big acts like Stromae, 2ManyDJs, The Magician, GOOSE and Netsky, but also lots of cool young guys coming through, people like Locked Groove, Kolombo, Bad Dancer, the Pelican Fly label. We are all working together to make things happen."

VIBRANT LOCAL SCENES

With releases on labels like Glasgow's Numbers and freshly signed to Claude VonStroke's Dirtybird, Brussels duo GoldFFinch are another act making waves beyond the country's borders. For them the lack of one defining sound has allowed them to be more open to outside influences and driven them to make a success of their career beyond Belgium's borders.

"Belgium has always been open to new music and movements of music," Yoann and Gilles say. "Right now the heart of the electronic movement is based in places such as London and Berlin but because Brussels is on a crossing point between those cities, artists here can easily pick up on new trends. With GoldFFinch we try to let these influences appear in our music without just copying any one particular genre. Being in the centre of the electronic map certainly affects our work everyday.

"Anyway, times have changed," they continue, "everything is global now, it's as easy to work on a tune with someone from Canada as it is with someone in Brussels and if your music is good, it'll



be noticed everywhere. There's a lot of talent in Belgium, good clubs and awesome festivals, but Belgium can easily get too small, you eventually have to look elsewhere for bigger opportunities."

Julien Fournier — whose Vlek label has been championing the wayward and wonky sounds of techno and electronica producers such as Squeaky Lobster, Cupp Cave and Sagat — agrees that with no defining homegrown scene for Belgian producers, exporting their music is now as important as building a domestic fan-base. "Look, Belgium is a very small country; from Brussels if you drive any direction for two hours, you're out of the country," Fournier explains. "But the capital is not the only focal point for electronic music, and even less so for more experimental sounds. Liège, Antwerpen, Charleroi, Leuven, Gent... they all have vibrant local scenes with a strong identity of their own. But it's a fact that good clubs for showcasing this music have become rarer in recent years. Music is still being played a lot though, but just in temporary and less established venues, places that eventually get refurbished, turned into apartments, offices, that kind of thing. In a way it keeps the scene moving, but it also makes it quite hard to develop an audience's loyalty to local artists."

Despite the lack of infrastructure, Fournier thinks things are on the up again for his country's electronic producers. "We haven't reached the point that we have in the past with,

say, new beat, where there's something clear and definite like dubstep in the UK or minimal techno in Germany, but I'm finally starting to see more and more people lose this very Belgian inferiority complex and get their act together. It might take some time, but we can already see a lot more artists and bands reaching an international audience.

"I like to think Belgian electronic music's future is bright," he adds. "Anyway, we're one of the very few countries in Europe where the beer is as good as the party spirit, and that still counts for a lot I reckon."

• *Dikke Ronny, The Glimmers, Surfing Leons, GoldFFinch and more will all be appearing at Belgium Booms at venues across London between the 5th and 12th of October. 'The Sound Of Belgium' gets its UK premiere on Friday 11th October at Café 1001 in East London.*

DANCE TUNNEL

The mid '90s may have been a hard time for Belgian clubbers, but today the country enjoys a more liberal approach to partying and just two hours away from London by Eurostar, a night out in Belgium should be high on any clubbing tourist's checklist. Many of the country's best parties, especially during the summer months, take place in impromptu spaces atop parking garages or out in the parks and woods, but there are still several clubbing institutions well worth adding to your agenda.

LIBERTINE SUPERSPORT, Brussels

Hosting everyone from Erol Alkan to Kompakt's Michael Mayer, Libertine Supersport's huge monthly parties draw a devoted and eclectic crowd ranging from hipster kids to the occasional naturist. As its name suggests, it's a louche affair, the perfect place to let down your hair and hear international stars play alongside residents Mickey, A.N.D.Y and Rick Shiver. libertinesupersport.be

FUSE, Brussels

For nearly 20 years techno and house in Brussels has meant FUSE, the legendary club, having hosted everyone from Derrick May and Jeff Mills to the likes of Kyle Hall and Guy Gerber. Still going strong today, the club continues to reinvent itself whilst maintaining its original identity. fuse.be

CULTURE CLUB, Gent

In the early 2000s residents 2ManyDJs, The Glimmers and TLP put Culture Club, and Gent, on the clubbing map with a wild mix of pretty much everything and anything that was danceable. 13 years on, the club is still going strong and TLP can still be found manning the decks at the weekends. cultureclub.be



GoldFFinch

