

The rise and rise of Norwegian dance music

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Norse culture is often summarised by serene beauty in landscape, oil and the music of A-ha. The world's most democratic nation and home to one of the strongest market economies, Norway may be idealistic but that doesn't mean it wasn't boring. In the 1980's from the bedrooms of Tromsø, the youth decided to plug the Northern Lights and the Arctic Circle into their turntables and synthesizers to escape the mundaneness of safety and create a new identity, an identity that filled the dancefloors of Oslo and shook the wooden houses of Bergen. The landscape was no longer snow caps and flammable fluids, it was dance music.

From Tellé Records to Smalltown Supersound to Olsen Records, the Norwegian avalanche has no intention of slowing down. With this comes the release of disco-mentary Northern Disco Lights - The Rise and Rise of Norwegian Dance Music, a sonic exploration of the often overlooked founders, successes and stalwarts of the scene. With Scandinavia's crucial three Todd Terje, Lindstrom and Prins Thomas blowing large waves over the North Sea, we caught up with director Ben Davis of for his analysis and insight.

Q. My first encounter of Norwegian electronic music was hearing Royksopp's 'Eple' and what felt like discovering something that seemed so familiar yet had only become apparent to me in the last 30 seconds. What was your earliest memory of this elusive scene and how did it first resonate with you?

A. When we first got sent the Those Norwegians demos which was Rune Lindbaek, Ole Mjøs and Torbjørn Brundtland (later of Røyksopp), it came fully formed with that Nordic psychedelic wonkiness running through. When the first Bjørn Torske and Erot releases started coming through on Tellé and SVEK I realised that Norwegian dance music was a thing.

Q. Before and when you first started work Northern Disco Lights, what were your outsider impressions of Norway and did they resonate with those you interviewed? Could you relate to the feelings they had of their homeland?

A. I've always been fascinated by Norway for all sorts of reasons. For starters if you see a map and look at the coastline, it's fairly mind-bending! I makes me think of all that wilderness and inaccessible bays and beaches that in these days of connectivity is fascinating. I've always found Norwegians to be very straightforward and confident with a completely bonkers undercurrent and that hasn't changed with all the time I've spent there. And I think that is reflected in the music too.

They are a very modest bunch and are pleased to have a light shone on Norway as it's not something they would do themselves.

Q. The film toys with the feeling of escapism and pathetic fallacy from the offset in the opening sequence and Rune Lindbaek mentions Detroit Techno as an influence, a scene birthed from the GM Motors Factory where employees were absorbed with the clinks and bleeps of the machinery and robotics. How do you think nature and surroundings crafted the unique sound that came from Tromsø?

A. There is a glacial, cold feeling to the music Biosphere and Mental Overdrive that I think is reflected from the landscape. Also the fact that it is so far away from the cultural hotspots means that music has grown at it's own pace in it's own bubble without much thought about what is hip.

Q. Bjørn Torske in particular seemed to be a pioneer amongst his peers, even taking influence from past Scandinavian music on the reworking of the cover of Pugh Rogefeldt's classic 'Ja Da A Da!'. What was it like working with him in this documentary?

A. One of the high points of the film has been making some good friends and it has been a pleasure to spend time

with Bjørn. I find him hugely inspirational as he is so talented and there is no ego about him whatsoever. Having heard him DJ quite a few times recently he knocks spots of nearly every big name I have heard in the last few years. If he gets more attention as a result of the film I will be very happy.

Q. Tellé Records was seemingly the collective young Norway was craving for. Being a part of the impact yourself with Paper Recordings in the famous Club Skansen, did you feel you could relate with their success at the time and how this is aid the questions you asked? Did Tellé influence you?

A. I guess I came to the film with some prior knowledge but also some pre-conceptions of what I thought was important. I did a lot of research and tried to make sense of how the scene developed and relevant to how the scene developed. For instance there was a big rave scene in the 90s where Mental Overdrive, Olle Abstract and DJ Strangefruit cut their teeth but it didn't really add to the scene or the Norwegian sound so we left it out. It is such an sprawling subject that you have to take a narrative line and stick to it otherwise it would be 8 hours long and unwatchable!

Q. One of the more devastating points of the film is the tragic premature loss of 23-year old enigma Tore Knowles AKA Erot. What effect do you believe his passing had on Telle and the scene?

A. I think he really laid the groundwork for what the Norwegian scene is today and along with Strangefruit, pushed it in the disco direction that still resonates. He was a massive talent and Todd Terje feels like his spiritual heir with all the success that he has gone on to have. When he died the Bergen scene fractured but I think it would have done so anyway as scenes generally do.

Q. Todd Terje, Lindstrom and Prins Thomas are the new generation of the scene and have all gained large momentum away from Norway, particularly in the UK. What do you believe their appeal is to the wider spectrum and how much of this do they owe to their forefathers?

A. That's an interesting question. With producers that talented they would have done well anyway but the door had certainly been opened and made it easier for them to walk through. As to their appeal, they came along when disco was making a resurgence with a fresh take on it and it was the right thing at the right time. They are all pretty canny when it comes to their careers and have kept true to making the music they want to make rather than just cashing in.

Q. Bryan Ferry makes an appearance during the last section of the film (Having supplied vocals to Terje's cover of Robert Palmer's 'Johnny and Mary') Did he have any views on the scene as a whole? Was he aware of it?

A. His son Isaac manages him and is a big fan of Norwegian dance music so that was our in. Bryan Ferry was aware of the scene but I wouldn't call him an expert!

Q. Do you think the new resurgence of Norwegian Dance music will stand the test of time and expand beyond that of what it has done prior?

A. There are some many talented producers and DJs there and a great network of clubs and labels like Full Pupp and Smalltown Supersound to encourage youngsters coming through. There is a more global, commercial scene that has developed with people like Kaigo but I think that underground dance music scene is strong and will remain so. The scene is very open-minded and leffield and Norwegian producers will always bring something fresh.

Q. Lastly, with the exception of Royksopp, do you think the Trosøm and Bergen scene gets the recognition it deserves? If not, do you think this film will help?

A. Hopefully the film will shine a light on it but I don't necessarily think it needs it. Prins Thomas, Lindstrøm and Todd Terje are great ambassadors but I think in general Norway is quite happy plugging away doing their own thing without the pressure of being the next big thing. That is the reason they make such fantastic music so I'll be happy if

they just carry on doing what they do!

Northern Disco Lights: The Rise and Rise of Norwegian Dance Music is shown at FACT in Liverpool on Thursday 30 March, followed by a Q&A with Ben Davis.

Image - Sigurd Fandango