

How Norway took disco to galactic new levels

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Anna Cafolla

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Floating through the 80s and 90s, New York club kids were beating the dancefloors of The Limelight, the ballrooms of Queens were heaving, thousands of British teens moved as one in middle England's fields to acid house, and squats in east Berlin vibrated with dark techno. The scenes that birthed our most hallowed musical genres are well documented and worshipped, though one, just past the Arctic Circle, has yet to have its story laid bare, until now.

Northern Disco Lights: The Rise and Rise of Norwegian Dance Music aims to put that right. It tells the tale of Norway's early flirtations with dance music, kids poring over imported records and zines that told the stories of vibrant music subcultures shrouded in neon lights, thousands of miles away. Per Martinsen, who DJs under the moniker Mental Overdrive, recalls using a radio high in the mountains: "We could just sit up here and monitor what the humans were doing in the rest of the world." Then teenagers, the purveyors of a high-energy, arpeggiated wave of "cosmic disco" toiled in their rooms and tiny back-bars shrouded in 24-hour darkness to kickstart the movement.

"We were trying to escape the dull reality of living in Norway," says Bjørn Torske, a seminal DJ and producer who was at the helm of sculpting the Scandinavian country's sound in his hometown of Tromsø, one of the most northerly cities in the world. A country famed for its Northern Lights phenomenon and reindeer, it's also the home of renowned

artists like Torske, Martinsen, [Strangefruit](#), Annie, [Lindstrom](#), [Prins Thomas](#), [Todd Terje](#) and more – who all feature in the documentary.

Northern Disco Lights also sheds light on Tore Andreas Kroknes, known as [Erot](#), an artist who initiated the deep, dubby sounds of Norway and beyond, and produced the huge pop banger “Greatest Hit” for his girlfriend Annie. Erot passed away at just 23 years of age back in 2001 because of a pre-existing medical condition, but his music and story lives on today, illustrated in the doc’s VHS footage and a rare, pumping back catalogue of the young musician.

Here, we chat to Ben Davis, one of the filmmakers behind the project tracing the long-burning, fiery embers of Nordic disco-soul from its icy home.

Why make a film about Norwegian electronic music?

Ben Davis: Pete (Jenkinson) and I actually had been looking for another challenge for a while, because we’ve been at our label (Paper Recordings) for 25 years. We had a meeting in Norway about a band we have, but they didn’t seem keen, so we were just throwing any ideas that stuck. I suggested a film on the history of modern Norwegian dance music. We really did bite off more than we could chew, though. We aren’t filmmakers, nor had we done anything like this before, but I knew there was a story. It’s a very underappreciated music scene that has had a big influence on modern dance music, and I saw the opportunity to put that right.

It’s interesting to see how this genre of Norwegian music – ‘cosmic disco’, as they call it – was a major influence on the wider electronic scene, but remained relatively unknown. And how Detroit techno, Chicago house and NY disco influenced them in turn.

Ben Davis: It can be a troublesome term – if you listen to Bjørn’s music, there certainly isn’t much ‘disco’ as we know it. I was curious as to why Norway, being a white country on the edge of Europe, was so influenced by 70s New York. Norway’s disco has a unique flavour to it. They can’t really spot it, but we can. There’s a kind of naivety, a creative openness and psychedelia. And they all have different names for it – no one likes to be labelled, but at the same time it does give you a purpose and kind of lets you know what to expect: ‘one legged disco’, ‘cosmic house’.

Do you think their physical environment influences that? The drone shots in the film show this otherworldly, Arctic Circle landscape.

Ben Davis: The ‘cosmic’ idea came from Daniel Baldelli in Italy with his Cosmic Club, so I guess they’ve re-acquired it. I wanted to make this connection between the music and their geography, but every single Norwegian artist I asked all said no to that, though Bjørn does mention it in the film. I think because we’re looking at it objectively, we’re able to see.

Tromsø has this real sense of isolation, a real edge-of-the-world feeling in places. Oslo feels quite cosmopolitan. I think the naivety, and sense of not having a master plan or pandering to anyone else, is in part due to how detached it feels from Europe. I think it’s really down to the people and their talent – they could have done it anywhere. Although there’s not much to do in Tromsø with 24 hours of darkness in winter, so it was a good place to stay inside and create.

So how did you begin piecing together the narrative?

Ben Davis: I had a rudimentary understanding of who Bjørn was, and I knew Prins Thomas. While I was digging away I found these connections and collaborations; it was like a history lesson. We really try and chip away at the characters underneath. There isn’t much tension from a filmmaker’s point of view: no David and Goliath story. I would ask ‘What was it like growing up in Norway?’ and people say ‘Oh God, it’s great, people are so friendly and everyone is really helpful,’ and you’re like, ‘No, no, tell me how awful it was!’

Why make Erot’s story a main focus?

Ben Davis: I was always very aware of Erot – ‘Greatest Hit’ was huge for me as a DJ, and we tried to license it as a record label before. I knew he died young but not much else. It’s really the emotional half, transcending the music, because we see how these parents lost their young son and it’s tragic. He was pivotal in the disco sound, and it’s still great years on. He was so young, working on really rudimentary equipment. I have listened to his catalogue of about 15 records and they’re all distinctively him. His family were very helpful, and they gave us some great footage. I think for them, too, it’s lovely to see how much their son influenced people, maybe quite cathartic.

When we explore Todd Terje, it feels like he’s kind of the spiritual heir of Erot. Todd’s sister was friends with Erot, so that music definitely surrounded him as a kid. The idea of that was to link in Todd Terje’s success and show what Erot could have done.

Erot’s ‘Song for Annie’ and ‘Song for Annie 2’ feel like they could have been produced yesterday, their longevity is amazing.

Ben Davis: It’s the drum thing. There’s an interesting dub influence on there, as with his Mental Overdrive remix of ‘All About Jazz’: it’s just mind-boggling. Records really weren’t made like that. And now there’s Lindstrøm, who did that album (*Where You Go I Go Too*) – it’s so bubbly and avant-garde. It’s accessible and underground at the same time. Lindstrøm – and the rest of them really – can make music for a gay disco, a techno club, after-hours Berlin house club, and the Roxy.

Why do you think it was disco that thrived in Norway? I mean, they had black metal too.

Ben Davis: I asked this question as well and no one knew. I think pillars like Erot and Bjørn just had that ability to influence the generations after them. It’s like Seattle and grunge. Nirvana were this one band, and then suddenly it was the sound of the city. You get these pockets of scenes and it’s down to a handful of people who played the music as proof of what was to come.

How do you go about scoring a film like this?

Ben Davis: We researched heavily. Some key tracks were needed, like Annie’s ‘Greatest Hit’ – we couldn’t get it because of licensing issues with the Madonna sample. Todd Terje’s ‘Inspector Norse’, Bjørn’s Sjøppelmann were important. ‘Inspector Norse’ is a modern classic, one of those records that you’d hear every different type of DJ play. Then Per Martinsen produced the original score which was used for the drone visuals.

Who did you see as the most pivotal players in the movement?

Ben Davis: We couldn’t have done this without Mental Overdrive, he was the founding father really, as well as Biosphere. The original ending of the film had Per (Martinsen) talking about how younger artists these days are playing it too safe – they should fuck shit up. Twenty-five years ago he did just that. It’s refreshing to see that he wants them to continue with change and making noise. That pioneering spirit of Norway is still there. Bjørn is the heart and soul of the film really. He’s very modest, quiet and unassuming, but he just makes this mental music. Bonkers, but in a very nice way. Again, for me, his music has this naivety and playfulness. In the UK, everything feels like it has this layer of irony or knowingness.

The film has a massive timeframe – seeing Erot on those ancient computers, to Lindstrom and Prins Thomas on the Essential Mix. How was it trying to create a story with such scope?

Ben Davis: We were never going to be able to include the amount of information we had available. There was a really nice story about Bjørn and the early [Telle Records](#) guys having a club in the bottom of a kebab shop. You couldn’t have alcohol and you had to just go behind the counter to get down to it, with no toilets and no lighting, just a sound system with 300 people. We don’t explicitly talk about the connection between nature and their music, but I think it came across in the visuals.

Has your original vision for the documentary changed much?

Ben Davis: The film has taken about three and a half years, but no: I did a story map on my wall a couple of years ago and it still adheres to that. The first act was Tromsø, the second act was Bergen and the third act was Oslo, and how it has spread to the rest of the world. Now I want to shine a light on the Norwegian dance music scene, and I would love for Bjørn to be able to get the credit that he deserves. I also want there to be a newfound appreciation for Erot.