

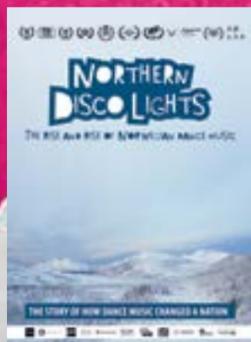
this week's essential reading

'Is Rihanna the most influential singer of the past decade?' by Jayson Greene, Pitchfork

'Listen to the radio, when Rihanna isn't on it – which, granted, isn't too often – and you will hear molecules of her vocal style swarming around everywhere'

# Disco of the Arctic

In the remote frozen landscapes of Norway, a group of teenagers forged a disco sound that would change their country, writes James McNair



**Northern Disco Lights: The Rise and Rise of Norwegian Dance Music**  
Ben Davis (director), April 29

In *Northern Disco Lights*, a stylish new documentary about the “cosmic disco” sound that grew out of Tromsø, Norway, one of the world’s most northerly cities, Per Martinsen, also known as DJ/producer Mental Overdrive, gives a flavour of growing up in splendid isolation.

“We would sit up here [in the mountains] and monitor what the humans were up to in other parts of the world,” he says.

Chatting to *The National* from his Tromsø studio, Martinsen elucidates. “Yes, that was in the mid-to-late 1980s. Every record we listened to was imported by mail order and radio, and British music magazines like *NME* and *Melody Maker* were our only real source of outside information. Even today, Tromsø doesn’t have a train line.”

Bjorn Torske – the DJ/producer whom the film describes as “the enigmatic genius of Norwegian dance music” – also grew up in Tromsø, and he, too, acknowledges the city’s effect on the creative psyche.

“You’ve got your Aurora Borealis and you’ve got the snow and the starlit night”, he says from his current base in Bergen. “That can create a sharp image even if it’s dark, and nature is right on top of you.”

“The other thing is, that, because of the lack of light, people get problems with their sleeping patterns, or at least I did. When you’re a kid and you go to school it’s pitch black. And when you go home at three o’clock it’s pitch black. You get a little bit of daylight for your lunch break but you can’t see the sun because it’s below the horizon.”

Three years in the making, *Northern Disco Lights* was the concept of debut filmmakers Ben Davis and Pete Jenkinson. These two Englishmen are also the proprietors of Paper Recordings, a record label which has long had close ties with Norway.

With its spectacular, drone-shot footage of Norway’s physical geography, its incisive artist profiles and its use of anima-

tion and rare archive footage, the film shows how a country in which skateboarding was illegal until the end of the ‘80s became an influential pop-cultural force, thanks to three distinct and sequential “waves” of dance music. These came from Tromsø, Bergen and Oslo.

“We felt it was a largely untold story about an under-appreciated strand of music,” says Davis. “But the kernel of the idea was: how did this white country at the edge of Europe come to develop such a strong affinity with disco, which is at root a black music form from New York?”

“For me, personally, there’s also this psychedelic aspect and an undercurrent of eccentricity to Norwegian dance music that I’ve always found appealing. Norwegians can seem quiet on the surface but underneath they’re all bonkers. They’re also a modest lot, though, so I suppose it took an outsider to do this.”

The film maps the DIY culture that led Martinsen and Torske to join forces to build stroboscopes and stage decor for Tromsø’s first ever rave, and the emergence of Norway’s first indigenous dance music label, Tellé Records, in 1997 (it was funded by a toga party/rave inspired by the movie *Animal House*, after the main Tromsø scene players relocated to Bergen).

As well as shining a spotlight on artists such as Mental Overdrive, Torske and later Norwegian dance music notables such as Prins Thomas and Todd Terje, *Northern Disco Lights* also attempts to define what Norway’s cosmic disco music – a genre also known as “Scandolearic”, “space disco”, or best of all, “one-legged disco” – actually is.

Bright synths, off-kilter basslines and liberal use of echo and tape-delay effects all play a part, but just as important, perhaps, is a certain childlike playfulness. This is manifest in the way the music is made and the way tracks have traditionally been titled.

The percussion-based floor-filler that is Torske’s *Jeg Vil Være Soppelmann* (I Want to be a Garbage Man), is a case in point. “This old drunk guy was pestering me and a friend in the pub,” Torske recalls. “He said, ‘You’re DJ’s? You put music out? You know, to get success you need to dress up as garbage men.’ That’s where that title came from.”

One of the most inspirational creatives profiled in *Northern Disco Lights* is Tore Andreas Kroknes, also known as Erot, the pioneering DJ/producer who died at the age of 23 in 2001 due to a heart condition he had had since birth. The film’s archive footage of Kroknes at home with infant siblings reveals a sweet-natured, instantly likeable figure.

It was in the late 1990s that Kroknes met Annie, producer/singer Anne Lilia Berge Strand at Pop Till You Drop, a club night in Bergen. The pair became romantically involved and famously collaborated on 1999’s *The Greatest Hit*, which sampled Madonna’s 1982 debut single, *Everybody*. Erot’s *Song For An-*

*nie*, meanwhile – “it sounded like magic; like a new start for music,” says musician/writer Gaute Drevdal in the film – was a self-explanatory love letter to his muse. Moving new interviews with Annie and members of Kroknes’s family lend *Northern Disco Lights* an emotional heft not commonly found in dance music documentaries.

“I think Tore was the first producer to point towards a new sound that was genuinely Norwegian,” says Martinsen, further underlining Kroknes’s importance. “And it was rooted in disco, not these colder, techno and EDM [electronic dance music] elements. Tore knew what he wanted. All the time. He was never in doubt about what he was creating.”

What made this all the more remarkable was that the unique groove of Kroknes’s wonderfully organic-sounding music was the painstaking product of what Torske calls “prehistoric equipment”, namely a Commodore Amiga computer and an early music software programme called FastTracker.

“If he was still around and using modern music software, who knows what he’d be able to do,” says Torske. “I’m also quite sure that Tore knew how thin a thread his life was dangling from. He’d been having surgery since birth and that gave him this pinpoint focus on his music and getting it out. He didn’t drink or indulge in anything and he wasn’t scared to talk to you about his illness, which he did in a very technical way.”

*Northern Disco Lights* does a wonderful job of portraying Norwegian dance music culture up until the mid-to-late noughties, and as Martinsen is quick to point out, plenty of pretenders to the throne have emerged in the interim. “I really like Cashmere Cat [29-year-old Magnus August Høiberg] who has done a couple of productions with Kanye West”, he says, “and there’s also this great kid from Bergen called Niilas. Between them they’re creating a totally new vein of Norwegian sound – it’s great to see that continue.”

● *Northern Disco Lights: The Rise and Rise of Norwegian Dance Music* is on general release on April 29.

James McNair writes for *Mojo* magazine and *The Independent*.

## the playlist

### Three essential Norwegian floor-fillers

**Haribo**  
Erot  
(Footnotes Records, 1997)

Named after the German confectionary company of the same name, this lopsided groove from Erot’s debut 12-inch is perhaps the perfect encapsulation of the so-called “one-legged disco”.

**Eple**  
Røyksopp  
(Wall of Sound/Astralwerks, 2001)

With its Möbius strip-like synth melody and spacey string pads, *Eple* (Apple) crops up everywhere. You’ve almost certainly heard it – now you know what it’s called.

**I Feel Space**  
Lindstrøm  
(Feedelity Recordings, 2005)

Donna Summer’s *I Feel Love* meets Daft Punk in this utterly hypnotic track from Hans-Peter Lindstrøm of Stavanger, Norway. Resistance is futile.



Above, DJ and ‘enigmatic genius’ Bjorn Torske in *Northern Disco Lights*. The scene in Norway had a DIY mentality – which can be seen from the flyers pictured here.

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