

Electronic Avenue

Electronica: the new alternative to alternative.

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IN 1991, THE MUSIC charts were crowded with benign R&B acts like Paula Abdul and Mariah Carey and bland pop and country bands like Wilson Phillips and Garth Brooks. The world of popular music was safe, formulaic and incredibly dull.

Not long afterward, a trio named Nirvana released its stellar album, *Nevermind*, which rocketed to the number-one position on the *Billboard* charts. Popular music hasn't sounded the same since.

Now, five years later, the top of the charts look suspiciously the same as in '91. Bland R&B (Toni Braxton), bloated pop (Kenny G.) and generic country (LeAnn Rimes) acts are perched alongside Pearl Jam wannabes (Bush) and whiny aggrogirl rock (Alanis Morissette). It's a period when R.E.M. and Pearl Jam

turn in critically acclaimed records that flop with the fans. Music, the kids say, is not all right. And everyone from the record industry to the fans is taking a big breath and waiting for the face of popular music to metamorphose once again.

Techno revolution

They may not know it yet, but they're waiting for techno.

Techno (now called electronic) music has been ignored, denounced and ridiculed by American critics and mainstream listeners for the past decade. At the same time, electronica has quietly built a small army of fans who learn of the music mainly through underground dance parties ("raves") and electronica insider magazines like *Urb* and *XLR8R*. In the past few months, *Spin*, *Rolling Stone*, *Newsweek*, *The New York Times* and even the *Wall Street Journal* ran stories posing the question: Will electronic music be the next big thing?

"Electronic music is just going to explode in the next 18 months," predicts junior Jake Buffington, station manager at Arizona State U.'s KASR radio.

Many people in the music industry agree. Marco Collins, DJ and music director at The End 107.7 radio station in Seattle, has been instrumental in getting electronic-based acts on the air. Like any other mainstream radio station, The End has a predetermined format that leaves little or no room for experimentation. But Collins gave it a whirl anyway, spinning bands like Prodigy, Chemical Brothers and Orbital on prime-time radio, unedited.

"It's a risk throwing electronic music on," he says. "But it's important for a station that is supposed to be about change — new things and new ideas — that we go there. You know, actually delving into it before it becomes a fad."

Euro stash

Funny thing. Because in England, techno has been a staple of radio for roughly a decade. Bands such as Prodigy, which is relegated to playing to audiences of less than 1,000 in the States, will play to a crowd of 60,000 in the Mother Country. In England, it's not uncommon to find a Chemical Brothers track charting in the Top 10 with the likes of Oasis, Elastica or Echobelly.

Nils Bernstein, a representative at the mother of all grunge labels, Sub Pop, explains the phenomenon quite succinctly: "The youth culture in England and Europe is far more centered around dance clubs than it is here," he says. "Also, England and Europe are relatively tiny markets compared to the U.S. — small enough that a simple fad can have seriously commercial consequences."

Andrea Mulrain, a regional representative for electronica front-runner London Records, agrees. "[England] is the more progressive nation when it comes to dance stuff," she explains. "Our country is grounded in formatted radio. Everything is so compartmentalized."

Reborn in the U.S.A.

In a country where every little nuance in music needs to be labeled and defined, is American music

ready for such an extreme change?

Collins points out that traces of electronic music's influence have already made a dent on the music scene — albeit in a rock-hybrid form. Trip-hoppers Massive Attack remixed Garbage. The Chemical Brothers remixed the Charlatans UK. Tori Amos got special treatment from Armand Van Helden and Rabbit in the Moon. And Bomb the Bass' Tim Simenon remixed Depeche Mode.

Meanwhile, other artists have been stealing stylistic snippets from electronica tracks and incorporating them into a more traditional "verse, chorus, verse" format. *Spin's* Artist of the Year, Beck, has been the most successful at meshing all these styles. Meanwhile, newcomers the Sneaker Pimps (from England, natch) combine Garbage-like layers of manufactured beauty with saccharine-sweet vocals and catchy melodies.

Not everyone on the campus music scene is jumping on the electronic bandwagon. "Since we're close to L.A., we're big on ska," says Tony Mayberry, KUNV assistant operations manager at the U. of Nevada, Las Vegas. But he adds that requests for electronic music have surged during the past few months.

The problem with promoting electronic music as the "next big thing" is that it could spell an inevitable doom for the art form. Longtime fans of techno are watching and listening with mixed emotions of glee and horror as MTV installs *Amp*, a new show devoted entirely to electronica.

But Collins remains optimistic. He's obviously hit a nerve with his

listeners. The DJ relishes stories about kids calling the station and requesting Tool, Nirvana, and... Prodigy. Collins says it doesn't matter if the music was created with guitars or with a drum machine. If kids connect with the music, then the music will survive. "I said it before, but the energy of Prodigy [and other electronica bands] is parallel to that of Nirvana."

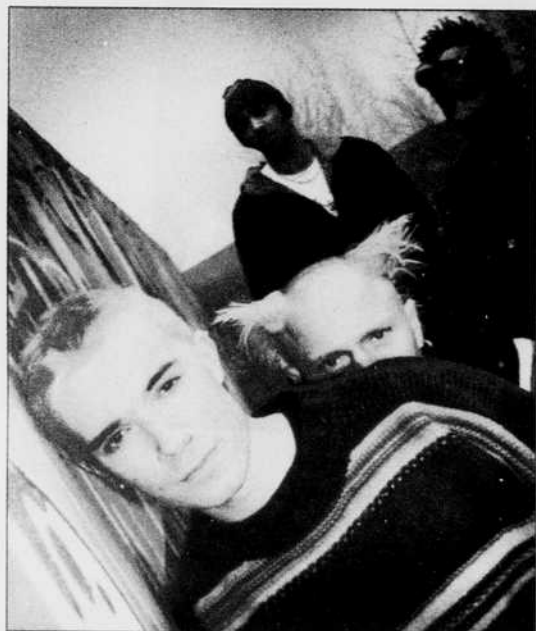
Only time will tell.

Don't let her fool you, Tricia still spends her Seattle nights decked out in flannel and hunting for some good grunge.



Guest
Expert:
Coolio

On techno:
"I hate techno.
You have to be
on drugs to get
into it. I can't
get into it."



Prodigal son.



Lost in space.

Techno Lowdown

A techno-phobe's guide to electronic music:

House: Originated in Chicago and is noted for its consistent, repetitive beats — about 120 beats per minute (bpm) — and diva-style singing. Ex: Boris Dugosch, Love Tribe

Deep Dish Techno: The most common and popular format, it's also the most computer-generated. Very high-energy with different layers of sounds and high bpm. Ex: Hardfloor, Prodigy

Trance: Generally more melodic and complex than your garden-variety techno. So named because the music should guide the audience into a trancelike state. Ex: Underworld, Future Sound of London

Ambient: More soundscape and setting than a cohesive form of music. It rarely has steady beats and is sometimes mixed with other house or techno. Ex: The Orb, Brian Eno

Drum and Bass (a.k.a Jungle): Comes from London and is characterized by erratic double-layered beats and bass lines, with a second melody floating over the top. Ex: Goldie, Alex Reece

Trip Hop: Arrives straight from the Mother Country. Shifty, layered noise with slow hip-hop beats and emphasis on vocals. Ex: Tricky, Portishead

Acid Jazz: A mixture of hip-hop beats and jazz-influenced sounds that usually features lots of saxophone and some slick rapping. Ex: Guru, Courtney Pine — TR