

# Basslines – Space Of Involvement

Column in zweikommasieben Magazin #18, 2018 ([www.zweikommasieben.ch](http://www.zweikommasieben.ch))  
*Annotated version with sound and text references*

Text: Marius ‚Comfortnoise‘ Neukom ([www.comfortnoise.com](http://www.comfortnoise.com))



*As time passed it became inevitable: club culture would enter the museum and become subject of historical research, a development both exciting and terribly sobering. Club culture began in the 60s, entered its heyday in the 90s and began to wither in the 00s. Today its existence is bleak. With ever more distance, it's becoming increasingly clear what made club culture. The exhibition and catalogue Night Fever. Designing Club Culture 1960 – Today (2018) at the Vitra Design Museum in Weil am Rhein, as well as the documentary book Der Klang der Familie: Berlin, Techno und die Wende (2014), an oral history project by Felix Denk and Sven von Thülen, consider the nuts and bolts of club culture: the history of its spaces and how German reunification worked decisively in its favor.*

At the beginning of 1995, I touched the plasma ball in Globus, the top room of Berlin's Tresor. Naive and boundlessly fascinated as I watched the colorful electric charges pour out from the sphere into my palm, I knew that I was in the right place at the right time<sup>1</sup>. What I didn't know, however, is what was new, what differed. I gave myself over to Tresor with Marcos Lopez, WMF with Kid Paul and E-Werk with Westbam. They laid the foundation for the years of clubbing that followed; DJ'ing with different music styles and in different scenes; running a record store; organizing countless parties—to this day with my current involvement with a collective that runs a club and me producing electronic music for the dance floor. That club culture has been “in crises for a number of years” according to the

<sup>1</sup> A video tour of the original Tresor, including the plasma ball, can be viewed here: <http://www.technostation.tv/walkthrough-first-location-tresor-berlin/>.

*Night Fever* introduction<sup>2</sup> seems mildly put to me. Recently on a visit to the Vitra Design Museum, reencountering the plasma ball next to other rusty Tresor artefacts, it became unavoidably clear to me: club culture is over. We can only look back.

Picture this: Back then, Tresor in a pre-war ruin on Leipziger Street 126-128 in the immediate vicinity of the yet-unbuilt Potsdamer Platz. Right in the middle of the city, nothing but ruins, a massive empty space, remnants of the wall. Now, in the well-manicured Weil am Rhein, the dashing Vitra Design Museum in a Deconstructivism-inspired building by renowned American architect Frank Gehry<sup>3</sup>. Club culture forced into the museum via presentations of nostalgic objects and the process of historicizing, academicizing and finally, archiving<sup>4</sup>, already says enough. For me, the realization of spatial and temporal contradictions was simply heartbreaking. However, I'm not interested in sentimentality. And just like with *Der Klang der Familie*—the (in the German-speaking world) widely-received book—the stock-taking of *Night Fever* brings much inspiring and revealing information to light.

It all began in the 60s in Italy, when spaces to dance were transformed into discos and discos into clubs. Photos show impressive interior designs, improvised, unfinished and still modern-looking in character. The Italian architectural scene of the time was occupied with the idea of an openly-conceived “space of involvement.”<sup>5</sup> Social classes of all levels mixed in unprecedented ways in the nightclubs<sup>6</sup>.

Based on the psychoanalyst Donald W. Winnicott<sup>7</sup>, I define the club space as a transitional area and club culture as a transitional culture. Created by and for people who, faced with the seriousness of adult life, wanted to pause, lose themselves and simultaneously find themselves again. A space for play that doesn't belong entirely to the outside world, nor is entirely a fantasy. An intermediate realm where inside and outside not only touch, but temporarily, fantastically, blend, unleashing an unheard-of creativity. A space where people themselves can merge into a fleeting work of art.

New York in the 70s and 80s had a similar development to Italy's, with clubs following the European model opening<sup>8</sup>. David Mancuso began with a private party in his apartment, from which his famous weekly loft parties emerged. Each spatial and sound experience was carefully designed to merge, ultimately becoming one. His experiments resulted in an enormously dynamic and inspiring mixture: gays and heterosexuals, innovative music, contemporary art, alternative lifestyles and socially critically thinking people. No one in attendance thought of going home.

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<sup>2</sup> *Night Fever*, p. 21

<sup>3</sup> However, this building was already finished in 1989.

<sup>4</sup> See e.g. the following Internet sites: [www.technohistory.org](http://www.technohistory.org) and [www.zeitmaschine.net](http://www.zeitmaschine.net).

<sup>5</sup> The architectural professor Leonardo Savioli taught a course at the University of Florence in 1966-67, which dealt with the idea of “spazio di coinvolgimento” (space of involvement): <http://www.gizmoweb.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Leonardo-Savioli-Adolfo-Natalini-Spazio-di-coinvolgimento-1968.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup> “There were no social differences, everyone was equal, everyone spoke to everyone, you could be the richest person in the world or a great artist. You danced with workers, with the beautiful and the normal, the actors, singers...”: Francesco Capolei Cavalli describing Rome's Piper Club in the 60s. (*Night Fever*, p. 43).

<sup>7</sup> See Winnicott, D.W. *Playing and Reality*, Penguin, 1971.

<sup>8</sup> *Night Fever*, pp. 89ff.

In spite of this, stagnation set in and the scene was moved back to Europe, among other places. Those quoted in *Der Klang der Familie* report that at the end of the 80s, German discos were dead-boring<sup>9</sup>: punk was over, disco was sucked dry and *Neue Deutsche Welle* was smothered by commerce. Reunification proved to be an unlikely stroke of luck in club culture's development. Berlin's Tresor was the most radical, consequential and congenial experiment in the conversion of empty buildings and the development of electronic dance music and club culture. At this point, the USA came back into play, since it was the African American producers in Detroit who developed the ground-breaking sound that could fully unfold in Berlin. Key figures Mike Banks, Robert Hood, Blake Baxter plus Thomas Fehlmann, Mark Ernestus and Dimitri Hegemann tell the story of a highly successful collaboration<sup>10</sup>, culminating in the zenith of techno and club culture.

But this image of give and take is relativized and problematized in *Night Fever*. There, the same Mike Banks is quoted as saying, "Of course, I want people elsewhere to know about our lives here, but then you can't constantly come here and borrow from us without being willing to give something back."<sup>11</sup> There is a critical look at the "whitewashing"<sup>12</sup> of Afrofuturism—techno was black and political before it became white and hedonistic. It was no coincident that this transformation in the early noughties led to the decline of club culture. The popularization of music pushed in the direction of pop: electronic music was softened, formalized and commercialized. Scenes split apart and retreated into their ancestral niches. Lost were the society-changing visions, gone were the new impulses. An oppressive routine took over the club spaces. Gradually, almost all of the trend-setting venues shut down<sup>13</sup>. Younger generations no longer seem to find the excesses of their predecessors particularly attractive.

Will club culture experience a revival? Can—and should—something so worn out even be revived? The exhibition and publication relate a well-founded skepticism. As long as clubs are caught up in routine, affirmation, predictability, consumption and economically-driven thought, they can no longer be spaces of involvement and lose their function as transitional spaces. Club culture as an ever-evolving, innovative form of celebration that's actively shaped by its participants, is history. There is no question that even today, interesting electronic dance music is being produced, great clubs and good parties exist. If it wasn't so, I myself would have long-since ceased being active in it—I also would have stopped writing as a columnist for this magazine, which, incidentally, eliminated the phrase "club culture" from its own description not long ago. Because no cultural form can be forced, all that's left is to remain open to the new, to that which we haven't the slightest notion of—whether it occurs in the club, on the street or at home. In *Night Fever*, former Turin club operator Sergio Ricciardone expresses a single, for me, future-forward phrase: "If I ran a club today, it wouldn't be a club; it would be an art space."<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> *Der Klang der Familie*, pp. 15ff.

<sup>10</sup> *Der Klang der Familie*, pp. 195ff.

<sup>11</sup> *Night Fever*, p. 321

<sup>12</sup> See <https://www.merriam-webster.com/words-at-play/whitewashing-words-were-watching>.

<sup>13</sup> Between 2006 and 2011, Dubstep was a last innovative and original music genre. It created a particular atmosphere of departure with its skillful combination of soundsystem culture, reggae, drum'n'bass and techno. However, the cycle from innovation to globalization and commercial exploitation to finally a formalized empty shell was tremendously short. The dynamics of the Internet and digitization changed a lot – they didn't support a renewal of club culture but rather hindered it (see *Basslines* column #1 in *zweikommasieben* Magazin 10).

<sup>14</sup> *Night Fever*, p. 341; the interview with Dj Norman Jay (p. 324ff.) is revealing as well in this context. – The term „art space“ implies for me a space where art takes place. Art that is characterized by openness, crea-

**Literature:**

Denk, F. & von Thülen, S. *Der Klang der Familie: Techno, Berlin und die Wende*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2014.

Kries, M., Eisenbrand, J., & Rossi, C. *Night Fever. Designing Club Culture 1960 – Today*. Weil am Rhein: Vitra Design Museum, 2018.

The exhibition *Night Fever. Designing Club Culture 1960 – Today* was on view from March 17 to September 9, 2018 at Vitra Design Museum in Weil am Rhein, and will be on view from November 20, 2018 to May 5, 2019 at ADAM Brussels Design Museum. Further exhibitions are in the works.

In this column, Marius 'Comfortnoise' Neukom introduces book publications that relate in various ways to dub culture. He contextualizes each publication, describes its guiding principles, and expands on its author's thoughts. An annotated version of this column with supplemental sound and text references can be found at [www.comfortnoise.com/blog/basslines.html](http://www.comfortnoise.com/blog/basslines.html)



tivity, originality and also the inclusion of the recipients. Therefore it is *not* a gallery marketing art. Such a space is not about high-salaried musicians and djs posing on a stage and being hailed by an uninhibitedly consuming audience. It's rather about musical happenings that take risks, are occasionally demanding and break with expectations. The guests meet the artists at eye level. They are ready to engage in the new and want to experience themselves as a part of the events. Consequently they get the chance of involvement and therefore joint responsibility for the success of the stagings: e.g. by dressing imaginatively and celebrating themselves, discussing the performances during breaks, taking actively care for the well-being of other guests, and contributing as volunteers. It is a free, sheltered space that is marked by tolerance and allowing *everyone* to join with their own originality and creativity.

