

Title:

Digging deeper: Tracing the influence of geography on electronic music

Synopsis:

- Introduction
- De-mystifying the value of geography as a factor of influence
- How geography affects the aesthetics of electronic music
- Conclusion

As an electronic music curator and selector, finding a new rabbit hole (read: *music genre*) is always exciting.

The “rabbit hole”, can open a new play area to dig...

...and dig...

...and dig deeper...

...scrambling around underground pathways, ardently clawing through heaps of mud and dirt (read: *tracks*) until dazzling gems (read: *soul-moving, mind-altering, dance floor-melting tracks*) are found.

Fact: The prospect of finding a new music is invigorating.

The sojourn of exploring rabbit holes from the past, across different lands and regions, has always borne bounty; managing to inspire the burgeoning community of “*electrosicians*” (*electronic musicians*) to present their unique treasures to the ever-hungry, ever-ready music listener.

While the influence of factors like social, political and economic occurrences on electronic music are well documented, the study of geography and its underlying impact on the same, pales compared to its brethren.

For any selector worth their salt, understanding the history and origins of their musical niche in its entirety, is paramount...

...Thence, this article is for you.

De-mystifying the value of geography as a factor of influence

In the age of information blitzkrieg, we are inundated by new sights and sounds everyday.

In the light of the aforementioned circumstances, it shouldn't be surprising to note the onset of the same trend in the electronic music community as well.

Music does not evolve in a vacuum.

Electronic music, like any other art form, has been shaped by geography as much as by factors like heritage, economy, technological advancements, social forces and other phenomena.

Music plays an indispensable role in how society operates.

Music is connected to power (*Attali, 1985*); it is an economic resource, part of the heritage of a place or society and integral to the identity of social or political groups (*Ó Suilleabháin, 1994; Herbert, 1998; Sweeney-Turner, 1998*).

As society grows in size and stature, a growing need to promote its local, ingenious identity takes birth. This new development is followed by the desire to compete with other societies for funding, tourism and jobs.

It's here that music alongside a vibrant, holistic cultural representation, is integral to create a positive representation of the region, thus creating the right force of attraction.

History is replete with examples citing the importance of music in defining geographical-environmental processes. (For eg.: *Hindustani classical music exponent Tansen's composition 'Raag Megh Malhar' could bring rain.*) In the same breath, the role of geography in moulding the music produced, is equally great and significant...

...Alas, its awareness is low. But things are changing.

**Raag Megh Malhar:*

<https://youtu.be/YtgLaoGRHVw>

Highlighting the significance of music with clear geographical implications, Professor John Lovering, an Australian geologist, pointed out: *“Music is not just a hobby indulged at the end of the working day, an aspect of “entertainment consumption” or even a personal door to the sublime – although it can be all of these things. It is often also a profound influence on the way we see our world(s) and situate ourselves in relation to others.”* (1998: 32).

As a contemporary selector and aspiring producer, the art of drawing parallels between finding music jewels and decoding the process of its birth, is vital for learning music. Hence, de-mystifying geography as a factor of influence, becomes an *important* goal to accomplish.

How geography affects the aesthetics of electronic music

“Historians, sociologists, and folklorists have claimed for some time that there were regional patterns in the origin of music styles and that preferences for types of music varied from place to place”

—*Sounds of People and Places* (1987—a: 55) by professor George Carney.

In an attempt to understand the geographical influence on music, Carney’s approach to find answers, was four-fold.

The fourth approach, where Carney seeks to analyse a type or genre of music, the music narrative of a region, the diffusion and evolution of a musical style along with the role of music in the perception of place, is dominantly the approach I’ve adopted to drive the findings of this article home.

Take for instance, *house music*.

Hailed as legendary Dj Frankie Knuckles’ baby, (the name “house” comes from The Warehouse club in Chicago, where Knuckles held a residency) the “dance-ier”, more “raw” cousin of disco, house music came into existence in 1977, catering majorly to the black community.

Back in the day, Chicago’s social setup was deeply entrenched in racial discrimination. Several clubs, eateries, neighbourhoods among other locations (Northside and Westside Chicago) were off-limits for people of a certain colour, creed or race (Blacks, gays, Latinos).

In a direct attack on the existing societal prejudices, several hotspots emerged on the south side of the city (Chicago South Side) that catered to the oppressed community. These included many public recreational spots, eating joints clubs etc. One among them all was The Warehouse.

**Frankie Knuckles and the origins of house music:*

<https://youtu.be/L7JHqtMuuAI?t=41>

What's even more interesting to note is the influence of European sounds (disco, Eurobeat pop) and the addictive African groove aesthetic, that travelled all the way to Chicago, landing straight in the hands of Francis Warren Nicholls, Jr. who shone the light on the addictive 4/4 beat, and made the world get up and dance!

In an attempt to challenge orthodoxies and voice dissent, house music looked beyond its line of sight, which gave birth to the game-changer music genre.

On analysing its origins, it is easy to discern the contributing factors that led to the development of House Music—it's location, the impact of social issues, traditional music vocabulary of their forefathers, regional style and fascination with new sounds that came together to define and shape the genre.

But House Music wasn't alone.

One peek outside the electronic music galaxy, and several shining examples pop out in a flash that reflect (more or less) the same story—geography alongside other factors, has shaped the music of the region and spawned movements that created irreversible changes (Irish Traditional music, Jazz etc.)

In conclusion, speaking from the perspective of a listener, one can instantly relate to and interpret music based on their own prior life experiences, knowledge of music and , place of living, culture among other factors.

Regardless whether one is a listener or producer, geography and its influence on music cannot be ignored, as it can be one of the most emotionally dense means of forging an intimate connection between the two sides, without having any words exchanged.

...and that is a powerful connection, so to say.

For instance, jazz.

With much of jazz still left undug under layers 1950s hard bop music, many musicians have grabbed a shovel to dig and find precious jazz stones that radiate musical brilliance. While the success rate has been high, only few noteworthy explorers have managed to innovate on the discoveries, in an attempt to make it sonically edible for listeners in the 21st century.

One revered example is by Ludovic Navarre alias St. Germain.

<https://youtu.be/o7gdC6XWIoU>

Here's a personal favourite; written by Blue Lab Beats.

<https://youtu.be/Xe8Mxube7Ys>

Both compositions, among several other contemporaries, share a common jazz aesthetic. What sets them apart from their ancestors, is the unmistakable groove, making many hearts gently sway in glee across underground music communities.

The contemporary cousin of jazz has been christened as Jazztronica or NuJazz.

As rightly stated by John Lovering, *“Music is not just a hobby indulged at the end of the working day, an aspect of entertainment consumption,’ or even a personal door to the sublime – although it can be all of these things. It is often also a profound influence on the way we see our world(s) and situate ourselves in relation to others”* (1998: 32).

