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Drexciya: Fear Of A Wet Planet

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The enigmatic Detroit duo Drexciya disperse the African-American diaspora from the depths of the Atlantic into outer space.

"Our technology forces us to live mythically" - Marshall McLuhan

In their six year history, Detroit's ultra-elusive electronic duo Drexciya have surfaced periodically, four or maybe five times, giving stern, brief interviews that read like briefings from an unannounced war. There are few if any pictures available.

Intensifying the modus operandi of open secrecy adopted by Underground Resistance and Basic Channel, they have obsoleted biography and personality, generating a vacuum filled by machine music mythology, an electronic mythos further mystified rather than clarified by The Quest, their first and final CD.

From 1991-97, each Drexciya EP - "Deep Sea Dweller", "Bubble Metroplis", "Molecular Enhancement", "The Unknown Aquazone" double pack, "Aquatic Invasion", "The Journey Home", "The Return of Drexciya", "Uncharted" - has pursued a second wave Electro that purges all tom-toms, cowbells and claves, leaving a caustic Techno soundworld that intimidates, enthrals and terrorises. The title track of 93's "Bubble Metropolis" EP is a tone film in which a Drexciyan submersible docks at Lardossan Cruise Control. "AquaWormhole", on the same EP, is their loveliest track by far; an underwater skank of ear caressing striations and bubblicious synth.

Both are exceptions in the unremittingly alien explorations into what they call aquatic assault programming. Instead of emulating orchestras or choirs, they use the synthesizer as a sonic weapon, which Xenakis calls a Sonotron, to pulsate, emit and radiate inharmonic tones. Drexciya specialise in tones that scour and slide at the same time. Harsh glissement, dry wetness, acrid liquid, alkaline solutions. Rather than projecting imaginary soundtracks onto the mind's screen, Drexciyan Techno puts a distance between you and it. To listen is to be shut out of their inhuman world. You want in to that world but all your senses tell you that you won't survive it.

Drexciya's anempathetic tones repudiate musicality, block the pathways to familiar emotions and get directly on your nerves. This nervous excitation is carving new routes through the distributed brain which is you, firing neuroelectric charges across the synaptic junctures. The machines are mutating you, conducting frequencies across your skin that lower body temperatures, inhibiting, constricting until you want to flee from the skin you're in. The Sonotron provokes tactile hallucinations, the sensations of being scoured, abraded, attacked by angles and hydrocubes, the Drexciyan equivalent of rubber bullets.

Underwater mythology

The name Drexciya refers to an imaginary subcontinent populated by water breathing militaristic mutants called Drexciyans. Every EP is an episode from this world. On 94's "Aquatic Invasion", artist Frankie C Fulitz illustrates Drexciyan wavejumpers "somewhere over the Atlantic". They have diving masks and webbed feet. In the Aquatic Invasion's label communique, 'The Unknown Writer' - possibly 'Mad' Mike Banks - explains how the the Drexciyans have teamed up with Underground Resistance in their ongoing perceptual war against planetary control systems incarnated in the Audiovisual Programmers. This briefing doesn't channel the sensations of hostility that swarm off the vinyl. On the contrary, it ensnares you in sensations of vigilance, makes you target and aggressor, inducts you into their Forever War.

"Epsilon Aquazone we're going deep" - Drexciya

Marine militarisation

Hendrix's "1983...(A Merman I Should Turn To Be)", Parliament's "I'm A Fish (And You're A Water Sign)", Can's "Future Days", LTJ Bukem's "Atlantis (I Need You)", the late 90s Vincent Floyd-inspired Deep House of Aqua Bassino and 16B: all these are aquatopian. Aquatopias cradle and lull you into a deep end of placid angles. Like UR's X-103 Atlantis project, Drexciya paves over this underwater paradise, requisitions the Bermuda Triangle for a fifth theatre of war. Modern science knows more about the Red Planet than the abyssal plains of the deep sea. Therefore, these unknown depths are the appropriate environment for concepts secreted deep in track subtitles, impressed in the vinyl, hidden notions you have to dive for.

The Future feeds forward into the Past

The sleevenotes to The Quest CD are an origin story, a prequel that links genetic mutation to recent breakthroughs in liquid oxygen technology and retroacts both back to the Slave Trade. "During the greatest Holocaust the world has ever known, pregnant America-bound African slaves were thrown overboard by the thousands during labour for being sick and disruptive cargo. Is it possible that they could have given birth at sea to babies that never needed air? Are Drexciyans water-breathing aquatically mutated descendents of those unfortunate victims of human greed? Recent experiments have shown a premature human infant saved from certain death by breathing liquid oxygen through its underdeveloped lungs."

By inventing another outcome for the Middle Passage, this sonic fiction opens a bifurcation in time which alters the present by feeding back through its audience - you, the landlocked mutant descendent of the Slave Trade. The sustained cruelty of Drexciya's project is not so much justified as it is distributed and intensified. If the dominant strain in Afrodiasporic pop culture stresses the human, the soul, then the post-soul, post-human tendency Drexciya belong to rejects the human species by indentifying with the alien. From Sun Ra's instruction to the peoples of Earth to Parliament's greetings to the citizens of the universe, from The Martian's astro disco Red Planet series to Dr Octagon's address to Earth people, becoming alien allows an extraterrestrial perspective. The ET discontinuum generates a new emotional spectrum towards the human: attraction, indifference, hostility, medical curiosity.

Drexciya bring this extraterritorial discontinuum down to earth and under the water. Instead of ground reality, their sonic fiction sinks through the streets with the invisible force of an intensified magnetron. It derealises the solid facts that Hardcore music insists upon, deforming reality through a systematic confusion of technology with rumour, information with mystery. Drexciya are esoterrorists. "Mommy, what's an esoterrorist?" Something, or someone who terrorises through esoteric myth systems. Infiltrating the world, the esoterrorist plants logic bombs and then vanishes, detonating conceptual explosions, multiplying perceptual holes through which the entire universe drains out. So the sleevenotes report "sightings of Gillmen and Swamp Monsters in the Coastal Swamps of the South Eastern United States" that make the Slave Trade theory startlingly feasible. Did they migrate from the Gulf of Mexico to the Mississippi River Basin to the Great Lakes of Michigan? Have they been spared by God to teach us or terrorise us?

Alternating currents

Taken together, the EPs and the CD form a Black Atlantic cycle which is electronic music's most ambitious sonic fiction since Parliament's 1975-79 Mothership Connection cycle. The Drexciyan cycle plumbs the remotest depths of the Black

Atlantic, pursuing its "processes of cultural mutation and restless discontinuity" to extreme ends. As theorised by British cultural critic Paul Gilroy, the Black Atlantic is the "webbed network" between the US and Africa, Latin America and Europe, the UK and the Caribbean along which information, people, records, and enforced dematerialisation systems have been routing, rerouting and criss-crossing since slavery.

When you prise open The Quest CD, you see four maps of migration routes. The first shows 'The Slave Trade (1655-1867)'. The second: 'Migration Route of Rural Blacks to Northern Cities (1930s-1940s)'. The third: 'Techno leaves Detroit, spreads worldwide (1988)'. Gilroy and Drexciya both agree that modernity starts here, with the alien abduction of slavery. Fast-forward 342 years: America is deaf to Atlantic electronic culture; still hears HipHop as the defining expression of black pop culture.

But Drexciya know better. For them, Techno's electrification of consciousness is a world historical event in the machinic mutation of modern life. As imperceptible as the Net once was, Techno is an evolutionary phase shift in African-American history and therefore in the coevolution of humans and machines. Back in 1993, Gilroy heard the Atlantic network in Soul II Soul's need to "Keep On Movin'". In 1997, Drexciyan tonal communication is worlds away from this nice 'n' easy lyrical message. Electronics volatilises the soul at the push of a button: there's no singer, no redemption, no human touch. Far from rehumanising electronics, Drexciyan fiction exacerbates this dehumanisation, populating the world with impalpable hallucinations that get on your nerves.

According to mainstream media folklore, the UK and the US - ie New York and London - take turns to innovate music while the rest of the world worshipfully tunes in. But the digital diaspora of the late 90s import culture multiplies this alternating current into an unaccountable network that redraws the globe along ex-centred time zones: Chicago becomes a fourth world transmitting to Cologne; Detroit becomes an internal empire which seceded from America long ago; Glasgow becomes the 53rd State; Tokyo kids run barefoot through a London of the head. Twelve-inch records ship across the ocean, arriving as hordes of import aliens. Import culture has scrambled the maps in everyone's mind.

Drexciya hears this new world and their records chart this aqua incognita. Like SimWorld programmers, they have become cartographers of the Information Age, mapping out unknown states of mind in track titles that extend from "Positron Island" through your nervous system, from "Bubble Metropolis" to Vienna via the "Red Hills Of Lardossa". Submerged beneath information oceans, their obsessive continental drift reconfigures the placeless space of the Net across which bytes transmit. Each track title draws you further into their Unknown Aquazone, functions as a component in an electronic mythology which the listener assembles. The Quest CD's fourth map is titled 'The Journey Home (Future)'. Destination lines point from Latin and North America towards the South Western Coast of Africa. Unlike the other maps, no arrow indicates which way the information current flows. Neither repatriation or dispersal, but a process that won't show up on the old maps. A new geography of morals.

"Do they walk among us? Are they more advanced than us? How and why do they make their strange music? These are many of the questions that you don't know and never will" - 'The Unknown Writer', from The Quest sleevenotes

Participation mystique

At Love Parade and Tribal Gathering, you can still hear DJs saying electronic music is a universal music. The frequencies can unite us all in a tonal consensus. After listening to Drexciya, it's audible that if electronics ever unites us, then it does so through obfuscation. It communicates through mystification. To buy The Quest CD is to participate in the mystery Marshall McLuhan heard in which "electronic circuitry confers a mythic dimension on our ordinary individual and group actions". This "mythic dimension" is visualised on the CD by an illustration of a Drexciyan hand whose fingers grasp at air. Strangely unwebbed, the hand is suspended in water, severed from its body.

You can see a similar hand on the back of A Guy Called Gerald's Black Secret Technology and on the inside sleeve of Jeru The Damaja's Wrath Of The Math, where his hand has an eye in its palm. That's the giveaway. The hand is there to take your mind. The hand touches you, sees through you. It's the mark of the esoterrorist. You can hear parallels to Drexciya's systematic perplexity throughout 90s music: in Teknotika's "Gigi Galaxy" EP series; in Jeff Mills's Axis EPs; in the autistic Electro of Ectomorph and Dopplereffect; in the bleak aharmonic terrain of Terrence Dixon; in

the echomazes of Monolake, Helical Scan and Various Artists on Berlin's Chain Reaction imprint. No one knows where or what the Epsilon Aquazone is. The listener never solves the mystery, never cracks the codes. You pass it on.

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Who has had a subscription to *The Wire* for over 15 years, Matt Groening or Thurston Moore? Answer here.

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