

Jenna Dagher

RCSSCI 360

### The Origins of Techno in Detroit

Techno is an iconic form of music that blends African-American funk with European electronic music, creating a symphony of cultural expression that is unique in its Detroit origins. Detroit as a city is known for many things, but especially for the salient presence of the automotive industry and its music. Nothing comes from nothing, and therefore, it is imperative to consider the history of techno music in Detroit within the context of the city's economic and political history. Techno is notorious in Detroit, with a large and vibrant community who employed new technological innovation to explore and express issues of economic injustice related to deindustrialization, with them manifesting in an innovative and creative musical medium. The advent of techno in Detroit represents a meshing of a dynamic musical community, entrepreneurship, and the conditions created by deindustrialization, forming the distinctive music style that is so popular internationally today.

Beginning in the 1980s, innovations related to techno music were driven by technological advances, making the tools for creating techno music more accessible (Che, 2013). This accessibility led to a creative outburst in Detroit, culminating in the creation of techno music. Detroit's techno music genre was partly influenced by and exerted influence on Chicago's house music genre, which arose similarly in the 1980s (Vecchiola, 2011). Techno was heavily shaped by the decision of many to do without the assistance and traction of major record labels, culminating in a sort of underground subculture. This nature of techno is what makes it so distinct in Detroit, as it resists the traditional conventions of music production. Techno, though it lacks a singular definition, traditionally consists of technologically manufactured music in 4/4

time that is typically upbeat, incorporating abstract sounds (Vecchiola, 2011). The “OG” Detroit techno is distinct in its funky sound, stemming from funk music, and complex layered rhythms. Finding its origins in DJs, techno mixes many styles of music to create a unique musical experience, most often played in dance clubs. Particularly the Electrifyin’ Mojo, a popular DJ in Detroit in the 1970s through the 1990s, had a significant impact on the combinations of styles that define Detroit techno.

It is imperative to consider the influence that deindustrialization had on the creation of techno in Detroit. The Motor City, as the name suggests, was a hub for automotive manufacturing and production. Those growing up in Detroit during the latter half of the 20th century, watched as the Big Three— Ford, Chrysler, and General Motors— abandoned the city leaving behind tattered infrastructure and economic despair (Rietveld and Kolioulis, 2019). The transition from Fordism to post-Fordism left Detroit with a legacy of vibrant music seen in the Motown traditions as well as a legacy of auto production (Che, 2013). The “Fordist utopia” created a lasting vision of Detroit’s potential for economic and social success, characterizing it as a futuristic “techno city” (Che, 2013). This vision of prosperity, plus the lasting impact of industrial ruin, created a strong belief in an optimistic personal view of a post-industrial city in many young Detroiters. Techno represents a vision for the future of Detroit, one built on the entrepreneurship of the people.

Techno is inherently an entrepreneurial artform, both in its origins as well as current practice. Many artists rejected traditional record labels, instead forming their own music communities and using equipment that had become more widely available in the later 20th century (Albiez, 2005). Techno is considered “post-soul” and its creation and spread parallels the trajectory and origins of Motown music, as largely grassroots musical genres. The relocation of

the center of Motown music to Los Angeles, as well as the ongoing deindustrialization, left Detroit without an outlet for its dynamic musical and political voice (Albiez, 2005). Detroit was pivotal in the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s, and Motown was a crucial part of this. By removing Motown as a political symbol, Detroit lost its distinctive sound, paving the way for a new musical genre to take over: techno. Techno filled the gap left by Motown in an innovative way that rejected the traditional conventions of black musical expression as an attempt to detach from the historic visions of black music and culture (Albiez, 2005).

The advent of the new genre sparked a cultural revolution for Detroit, one rooted in visions of the future and founded on the principles of young Detroiters. This post-modern reaction to economic urban collapse has spread immensely across the globe, drawing many to Detroit as the hub for techno music. It drastically changed black musical expression in that it shifted the focus to creative individualism, arguably creating a new black musical aesthetic that is unique to Detroit and its sound. This new sound breaks down the traditional barriers of race and class, creating a more nuanced vision of black musical culture and political expression.

## References

Albiez, Sean. (2005). Post-soul futurama: African American cultural politics and early Detroit techno. *European journal of American culture*. Intellect.

Che, D. *Sound, Society and the Geography of Popular Music*. (2013). Google Books.

[https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=\\_p7eCwAAOBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PA261&dq=techno+music+detroit&ots=M8s8LhSCyD&sig=LMSzUtw8ImR6xaFAx87pxnDfWpU#v=onepage&q&f=false](https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=_p7eCwAAOBAJ&oi=fnd&pg=PA261&dq=techno+music+detroit&ots=M8s8LhSCyD&sig=LMSzUtw8ImR6xaFAx87pxnDfWpU#v=onepage&q&f=false)

Rietveld H.C., Kolioulis A. (2019) Detroit: Techno City. In: Lashua B., Wagg S., Spracklen K., Yavuz M. (eds) *Sounds and the City. Leisure Studies in a Global Era*. Palgrave

Macmillan, Cham. [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-94081-6\\_3](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-94081-6_3)

Vecchiola, C. (2011). Submerge in Detroit: Techno's Creative Response to Urban Crisis. *Journal of American Studies*, 45(1), 95-111. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875810001167>