

# **Detroit's maritime techno underground.**

## **On the relationship between the 18th century pirates movement and concepts of social utopias, ideology, and cultural production in Detroit techno.**

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## 1. Introduction

While Detroit techno has been widely acknowledged as an artistic answer to post-fordist metropolis Detroit, the scene's political strategies for a post-colonial society have so far received only limited attention – even more so outside a small circle of dance music enthusiasts and in stark contrast to Hip Hop. Similarly, the pirates movement of the early 18th century – the other topic of this paper – has long been belittled with the pirate's comical and childish image prevailing, while its significance as a political movement is often underestimated. Not surprisingly, the pirate theme is largely absent in techno music.

In this paper, I want to examine the cultural production of Detroit techno (as an underground music culture) and relate it to Paul Gilroy's notion of the *black Atlantic* and the role of Caribbean pirates in the early 18th century (as a political underground movement). To do so, I will start by presenting and contextualizing two important concepts, W. E. B. Du Bois *double consciousness* and the already mentioned *black Atlantic* by Gilroy. Afterwards, I intend to elaborate on the ancestors of the genre, George Clinton and Sun Ra. After covering the 'first wavers' of Detroit techno and a short excursion on the relation of the pirate ship and Fordism, I will concentrate the works and concepts of two collectives, Underground Resistance and Drexciya. The analysis will include records, texts and fictional narratives, set in relation to *double consciousness*, the *black Atlantic*, and historic pirate narratives.

## 2. Double consciousness

The term *double consciousness* was coined by W. E. B. Du Bois in his book *The Souls of Black Folk*. It describes the "twoness" (Du Bois 9) of being an American with African descent. The concept is particularly important in Black American music. As Gilroy demonstrates, Du Bois was inspired by the performance of the Fisk University Jubilee Singers in Great Britain in the early 1870 (Gilroy 88–91), being "the first group to perform spirituals on a public platform" (88) and thereby transforming "a black university into a place of music and song" (90). For Du Bois, "black music [is] the central sign of black cultural value, integrity, and autonomy." (ibid.)

A similar instance of *double consciousness* in music is described in James Weldon Johnson's novel *The Autobiography of An Ex-Coloured Man* from 1912, in which at one occasion the main character plays a rag-time piece during his travels to Europe. In response, a local pianist replays the same rag-time piece in straight cords. Johnson's hero is stunned: "I had been turning classical music into rag-time, a comparatively easy task, and this man had taken rag-time and made it classic." (Johnson 142)

Detroit techno can be described as a product of *double consciousness*, in a sense that (mostly) black American musicians reacted to the cold and mechanical sound of European electro-pop by Kraftwerk, Yellow and others (Raynolds 8). In the words of Robert Hood: "They had Kraftwerk, but we took Kraftwerk and added Stevie Wonder. The soul comes from Detroit." (Shallcross 52)

Gilroy suggests that when Du Bois writes about *double consciousness*, he does not restrict the concept to "the distinctive standpoint of black Americans but also [wants] to illuminate the experience of post-slave populations in general" (126). Hence, the 1893 pirate narrative *Emmanuel Appadocca* written by Michel Maxwell Philip, who was born in Trinidad and educated mostly in Great Britain (Philip v–viii), can also be read from this perspective.

### **3. The black Atlantic**

In 1993, Paul Gilroy introduced the term *black Atlantic* in his writings about post-colonial societies in Europe, Africa, and America. In the book with the same name, he suggests "that cultural historians could take the Atlantic as one single, complex unit of analysis in their discussions of the modern world and use it to produce an explicitly transnational and intercultural perspective." (15) Referring to the *middle passage* – the triangle shipping-route on the Atlantic ocean, where slaves were shipped from Africa to America, goods from the colonies in America to Europe, and goods from Europe to buy new slaves in Africa – Gilroy insists that post-colonial societies and cultures on all three continents can only be understood when set in relation with each other.

#### 4. The ancestors of Detroit techno: Funk, Fusion Jazz, and Afrofuturism

The German group Kraftwerk is widely acknowledged as one of the most important influences for Detroit techno. However, only few people are aware of the central role of American musicians such as George Clinton and Sun Ra for the genre. While their significance becomes explicit in some conceptual works of second wave Detroit techno artists such as Underground Resistance and Drexciya, also ‘first wavers’ like Juan Atkins and Derrick May have emphasized the importance of Clinton’s Funk. For May, Detroit techno is “like George Clinton and Kraftwerk [being] stuck in an elevator with nothing but a sequencer to keep them occupied” (Raynolds 4). And Atkins remembers listening to Parliament’s *Flashlight* in 1978, describing the sound as “UFOs landing on records” (ibid.). And he remarks, that it was “the first record [he] heard where maybe 70 per cent of the production was electronic – the bassline was electronic, and it was mostly synthesizers.” (5)

George Clinton’s music collectives Parliament and Funkadelic founded a style called P-Funk. Eshun points out that the term has a rather ambiguous meaning: “to funk is to threaten and promise, to exhort and extract” (166). In fact, ‘funk’ would as well serve as an appropriate definition of the pirates of the Carribean in the 1720s – *threatening* empires, *promising* a free society or expanding empires, serving as an *exhortation* to the rich, and enabling the *extraction* of the gain of colonial exploitation. In *Unfunky UFO* from 1975, Clinton – acting like a pirate captain on his mothership – demands: “Give us the funk, you punk”.

In fact, Parliament’s oeuvre is full of references to the ocean and to the space – mankind’s last uncharted spheres. Here, Du Bois’ *double consciousness* appears once again, as Afrofuturism pairs with the American *frontier spirit* – for example in *Mothership Connection* from 1975 or in the songs about Atlantis on *Motor-Booty Affair* from 1978.

Aside from Funk, Fusion Jazz served as a key influence for Detroit techno. Miles Davis was one of the first Jazz musicians to incorporate electronic instruments in his tracks. While conservative jazz musicians like Wynton Marsalis “argued that jazz provides an essential repository for wider black cultural values” (Gilroy 97), Davis pursued a

strategy to combine jazz with funk and electronic sounds. Thereby, Davis “insisted upon prioritising the restless creative energies” of black music (ibid.).

Sun Ra took the fusion concept even further, and not only incorporated Clinton’s Funk into his Jazz, but also developed Parliament’s Afrofuturist concepts into a all-encompassing science-fiction narrative in order to overcome the dilemma of *double consciousness*. He states: “I ain’t part of America, I ain’t part of black people.” (Lock 39). Sun Ra is extremely conscious about his strategy of sonic fiction: “[B]lack people in America [...] don’t deal with culture, with progress – they back there in the past, a past that somebody manufactured for ’em. It’s not their past, it’s not their history. They don’t see no fault with America, they want to be part of it.” (ibid.)

## 5. The Belleville Three

In the 1980s, Juan Atkins, Derrick May and Kevin Sounderson formed the *Belleville Three*, named after a suburb in Detroit. Even though by that time Detroit was still still America’s second largest city, its car industry was already facing a severe decline as a result of the 1973 oil crisis and large parts of the city had already turned into “post-Fordist wasteland.” (Raynolds 12)

Atkins had already released music together with Rick Davis as one half of *Cybotron*. Their sound paralleled early Electro that was emerging from New York, but *Cybotron*’s music was a direct reaction to the decay of Detroit – in tune with science-fiction novels like Gibson’s *Neuromancer* or dystopian films such as *Robocop* (Raynolds 10-12). According to Atkins, *Cybotron*’s *Techno City* was “a social commentary” (Raynolds 12) inspired by Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis*, whose vertical architecture reflects the social divisions (ibid.).

## 6. The factory: from the ship to the city

By the early 17th century, the ship had become “a prototype of the factory.” (Linebaugh 150) The middle passage “provided a setting in which large numbers of workers

cooperated on complex and synchronized tasks, under slavish, hierarchical discipline in which human will was subordinated to mechanical equipment, all for a money wage.” (ibid.) And like in *Metropolis*, the ship’s architecture reflected the social status of its passengers, and ‘below deck’ became synonymous with the uprising of “the motley crew, [...] whether in mutiny, in strike, or in piracy.” (154)

More than two centuries later, Henry Ford introduced the assembly line in his factories in Detroit. In the early 20th century, racism was pervasive in Detroit with Ford being no exception – dreaming “of an ordered – and racially segregated – workforce.” (Shallcross 50) While the concept of the factory had been refined, the social conditions in those factories had not changed dramatically. Hence, Detroit had its ‘motley crew’ as well, resulting most significantly in the ‘race riots’ of 1943 and in violent protests in 1967, when “working class folk (blacks and whites) [...] exploded against the oppressiveness of everyday life and against overt police brutality” (Glover 162).

## 7. Underground Resistance

In the late 1980s, at the height of Reaganomics, the second wave of Detroit techno artists came through – most notably, Underground Resistance. The group was initiated by Mike Banks and Jeff Mills, but would soon be joined by other artists such as Robert Hood. As the fall of the Berlin wall “gave way to the full-spectrum-dominance of a Capital that could now claim global reach,” (Fisher 44) Underground Resistance combined a strict “anti-corporate DIY stance” (Raynolds 252) with “a kind of abstract militancy” (ibid.) similar to that of Public Enemy. The collective stood in stark contrast to the historically most important label in Detroit, Motown Records. Berry Gordy’s label was “modelled [...] on classic Fordist production principles of standardisation – deliberately simple arrangements, bassline melodies, and call and response vocal lines lifted from gospel” (Shallcross 49).

Underground Resistance defined themselves as the outcasts, or as Robert Hood puts it: “We were a bunch of musical terrorists – the Techno Taliban!” (Shallcross 50) I would argue that 200 years earlier, Hood would have referred to pirates or the Maroons, instead of the Taliban. In fact, Underground Resistance employed numerous references

to the era of slave trade. The sleeve of the 1998 compilation *Interstellar Fugitives*, for example, contains a page showing a skull masked with a bandanna, in combination with the words “EST·1528”. In 1528, the first Afroamerican slave named Estevanico arrived in Florida (Gordon 198-199). The cover of the release features black-and-white drawings of the artists on the release as the ‘crew’ of Underground Resistance. In the sleeve notes, slavery is inserted “into a cosmic cyberpunk hyperfiction, webbing Underground Resistance into a literal master narrative about an abstract ‘R1 virus’ [...]” (Fisher 44). Thereby, Underground Resistance rejects the history of slave trade as their own history, pursuing a similar strategy to that chosen by Sun Ra in order to escape the dilemma of *double consciousness*. Kodwu Eshun remarked that “Sonic Fiction replaces lyrics with possibility spaces, with a plan for getting out of jail free.” (103) Paul Gilroy describes this process as *politics of transfiguration* (in contrast to *politics of fulfilment*) – the “invocation of utopia [...] constructing both an imaginary anti-modern past and a postmodern yet-to-come. This is not a counter-discourse but a counterculture [...]” (37).

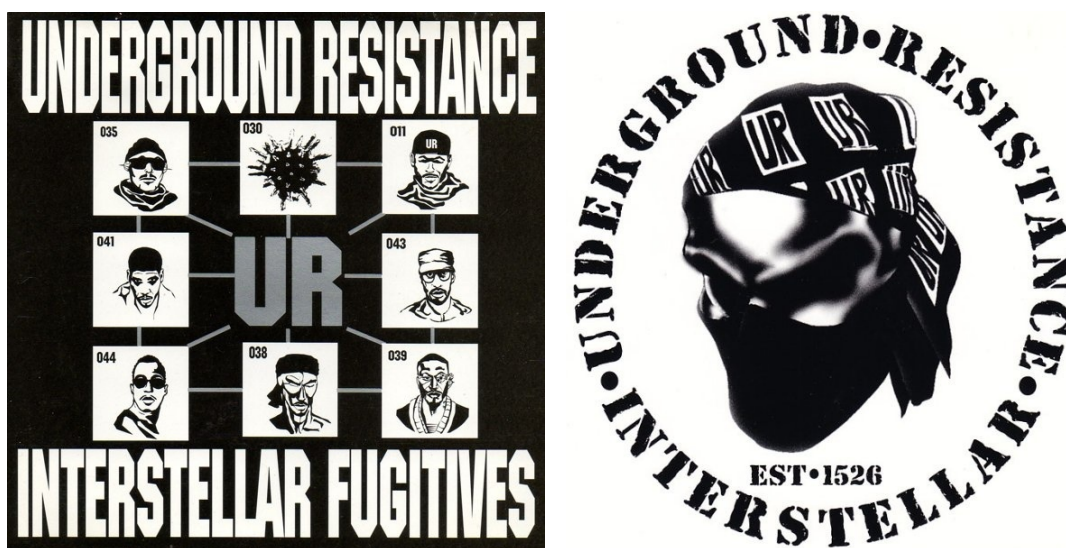


Fig. 1: CD-Cover of the *Interstellar Fugitives* Compilation (1998)

The places Underground Resistance chose for their utopia were usually outer space or the deep sea. The latter was referred to in the concepts of Drexciya and the Aquanauts, and it appeared in track-titles such as *Words from Atlantis* or *Cruiseship Killa*. Jeff Mills released a record entitled *the seawolf*, introducing “the seaman’s most feared nightmare, [...] [a] German U-boat of destruction and mayhem for all who dare to cross it’s [sic] path.” Can *the seawolf* be read as a hypothetical post-modern pirate ship, with its crew being composed of “outcasts of the nations of earth” (Linebaugh 201), casting the dark



shadows of European nationalism, just as Africa remains the dark shadow of European capitalism based on slave trade?

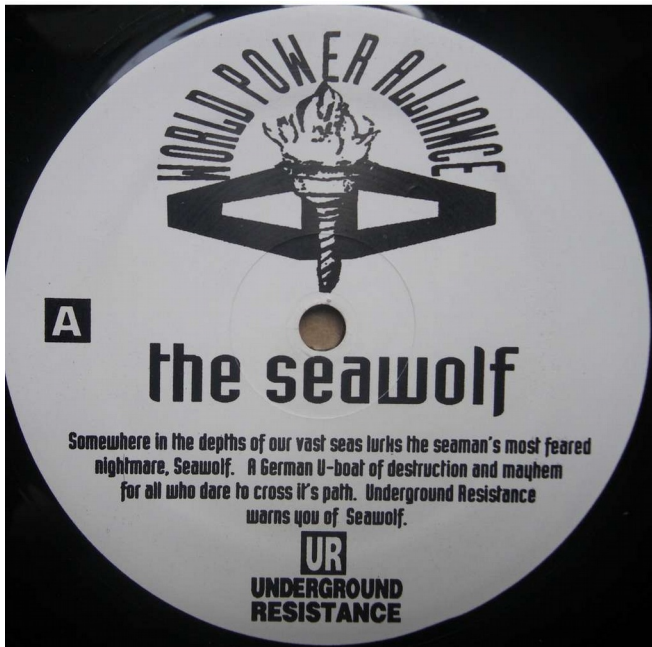


Fig. 2: *the seawolf*

Both, outer space and the deep see are paradox: paradise-like galaxies on one hand, and forbidding and hostile worlds on the other. These are *non-places* in a sense that Drexciya – and this applies for other projects on Underground Resistance as well – “depict a void rather than a utopia.” (Rennicks 31) The references to Atlantis may be interpreted as a hint to the lost paradise of the extinct Native American cultures. Mike Banks’ own biography points in that direction – with his mother being Native American and his father being Afroamerican, Banks mentions “twin genocides” in the history of his family (Raynolds 270). Hence, Underground Resistance’s sonic fiction can be interpreted as the continuation of Exquemelin’s description of *Hispaniola* in *The Buccaneers Of America* (Exquemelin 47-66) – however, from the perspective of the now extinct populations. Thereby, Underground Resistance’s narration of this void remains “[...] like water: clear with no shape and no form”, as Mike Banks puts it (Fisher 43).

## 8. Drexciya

Water is also the main theme of Drexciya, a duo formed in the late 1980s by James Stinson and Gerald Donald, who elaborated on a comprehensive fictional deep sea civilization. The Drexciyan ‘aquazone’ is inhabited by the descendants of pregnant slaves thrown overboard – unborn babies that managed to adapt to the new environment in their struggle to survive, and who subsequently built a new Atlantis in the deep spheres of the black Atlantic. In an interview with Derek Walmsely, Kodwo Eshun points out that the painting *Slavers Throwing overboard the Dead and Dying—Typhoon coming on* by J. M. W. Turner depicts a scene which could as well show the moment of birth for the Drexciyan civilization (29). Turner was inspired by the Zong Massacre in 1781, when a ruthless captain threw 131 slaves overboard and later claimed the insurance money for the loss of his ‘freight’ (Craps 469). In fact, Drexciya’s fiction is not only backed by historical events, but also supported by a scientific theory. While it is commonly known that newborn babies are able to breath underwater, the ‘Aquatic Ape Theory’ even suggests that the predecessors of today’s human inhabited shallow waters (Rae 60). Even though this theory is subject of controversial discussions, it is supported by prominent advocates such as Sir Alister Hardy or Elane Morgan (ibid.).



Fig. 3: J. M. W. Turner’s *Slavers Throwing overboard the Dead and Dying—Typhoon coming on*

Stinson, whose death in 2002 also marked the end of Drexciya, describes the foundation myth of the group as follows: “[...] one night I could not sleep – cold sweat, tossing and turning, and around 3am, 18 September 1989, I stood up and said, ‘Drexciya’. It felt like a tidal wave rushing across my brain. All kinds of ideas were coming out. I could not stop it and I would not stop it.” (Rennicks 34) Reading Stinson’s description of this moment, one can hardly omit being reminded of a Voodoo ritual – offering another reference to Exquemelin’s *Hispaniola* and Haiti, the only nation that gained independence as a consequence of a slave revolt between 1791 and 1804 (Penier 124). Even though there are 70 years between the defeat of the Piracy around *Hispaniola* in the 1720s and the Haitian revolution, Linebaugh and Rediker have shown that “[...] in the decades to come [...] [the sailors’ hydrarchy would be] biding its time, then rearing its heads unexpectedly in mutinies, strikes, riots, urban insurrections, slave revolts, and revolutions.” (Linebaugh 173) Therefore, I would argue that the legacy of Caribbean piracy played a significant role in the Haitian struggle for independence.

While the similarities between Techno and Haitian Voodoo music – the never ending, steady beat with its mesmerizing rhythms (not being able to stop, like Stinson) – are rather obvious, there is also a remarkable parallel between Drexciyan fiction and the way how the footage material of Voodoo rituals is used in Maya Deren’s films. Referring to her “1940s ‘trance’ films” (Russell 207), Maria Pramaggiore argues that “Deren’s films, which draw heavily from her study of dance and ritual possession, explicitly deconstruct notions of individualism and engage in an aesthetic of depersonalisation.” (Pramaggiore 19) The same argument certainly holds true for Drexciya’s fiction, as Deren’s and also Stinson’s “multiplied and fragmented [...] protagonists refuse to ‘guarantee’ textual meaning through persona.” (ibid.) Unlike Deren, who “participated in a process of persona construction during the 1940 which looks surprisingly similar to the construction of mainstream film stars in that era” (17), Stinson goes even further by applying the principle of depersonification to himself as well. During an interview with Stinson in 2002, only a few months before his death, radio-presenter Liz Copeland reflected: “It seems like you have reached this level where you say: ‘I just don’t wanna ride the image of a place, or an attitude or a personality.’”

In 1996, Drexciya’s *The Return Of Drexciya* was released on Underground Resistance. The label contains an illustration by Frankie C. Fultz, showing a light-house on one

side, while on the other gigantic human eyes with pupils depicting the coordinate system of a planet evolve out of the clouds of a storm. On Side A, “[...] You don't know – what lurks in the fog” is etched in the lead out groove. Similar to the opening scene of *Emmanuel Appadocca* – a description of two ominous canoes in the morning haze (Philip 2-3) – a dark foreboding is anticipated already before even listening to the actual music. The record warns and threatens at the same time, with the strange pupils in the gigantic face on the flip-side hinting to super-human powers and thereby further intensify the feeling of unease. There is a similar reference to super-natural powers to be found in *Emmanuel Appadocca*, when Appadocca’s “large tropical eyes that seemed to possess the power of the basilisk” (Philip 12) are described.



Fig. 4: *The Return of Drexciya* (1996)

## 9. Conclusion

As I have shown in my paper, Detroit techno is deeply rooted in the black Atlantic. Even though direct references to Caribbean piracy of the early 18th century are rare, Detroit techno does have several links to the history of maritime resistance against the colonial regime: from Underground Resistance’s webbing of slave narratives into sonic fiction in order to escape the dilemma of *double consciousness*, to references to Haitian Voodoo culture and a cultivation of *politics of transfiguration* by proposing the existence of superior deep sea civilizations in the case of Drexciya.

And even though there are no clear hints proving that James Stinson was familiar with the films of Maya Deren or Philips' writings, or that Mike Banks was aware of the connection between the slave ship as forerunner of the Fordist factory, it is surprising how accurately those artists' cultural strategies are able to address questions arising in post-colonial societies.

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