

Andy Vaz jokes that Background was named for its reference to criminal (background) record checks. Vaz started up the label in 1996, a year to remember in the annals of minimal electronica, for not only did Hawtin's Concept series hit the shelves, but the first trickle of the Köln explosion, including Mike Ink's Studio 1 projects, crossed the Atlantic.

Background arrived as a German export of quality 12-inches that mirrored the North American techno underground: Todd Sines, DJ Hyperactive and Terrence Dixon etched the first few releases, while new names — Submania, Rhythm\_maker — engraved their eclectic and often abstract techno patterns (Rhythm\_maker is the techno mask of Stefan Schwander, aka Antonelli Electr.). Background tapped into the melodic yet stark Midwest minimalism of Stewart Walker and the San Francisco dub-techno sound of Kit Clayton and Sutekh, and at release number eight, the label hit a landmark: *Futuristic Experiments II*. This unassuming slab of wax launched a minor reinvention of the minimalist aesthetic and its relation to dub, techno, granular synthesis techniques and house. Simultaneously, the musical cartography was redrawn to the new axis of Germany-Detroit-San Francisco; later, in a similar fashion, it slipped again to Montréal and Vancouver. Along with releasing one of Kit Clayton's earliest records (slyly titled "Sx=Smøles'avocadoes;") — the 'peeling bells' section of Clayton's live performance at Mutek 2000 derives from this harmonic cascade of rhythm — Background was not afraid to plunge the darker depths of minimalism and abstraction.

The harder-edged loops of Submania and Detroit's Dixon set up the palette for a repetitive atomism of intricate yet emotive programming, conjoining not only the dub-house currents still being explored after the repercussions of Basic Channel, but mixing directly into the pounding grooves of Detroit, the UK, and Sweden. Techno DJs schooled through this era often embrace an eclecticism based on an appreciation for the mindset of the loop and its relation to the dancing-body. In this respect, the early Background releases form such a pertinent historical record of the development of what Simon Reynolds later failed to coin as 'art-techno' it's criminal.

Ten more releases of the hypnotic and dark underbelly of repetition embodied by Rhythm\_maker and Submania, pivoted against the dub techno of the San Franciscans, set the stage for release 15: the *Algorithm* EP by Toronto's Jeff Milligan. A quirky record worthy of Milligan's own abstract and flaired turntablism, this hopped and manic microtechno sent all attention to the precise pick of every pop and whistle. Background's spank on the flank of microtechno was born. The Canadian Invasion continued as Deadbeat and Akufen introduced submarine dub and cut-and-paste sampledelia respectively on releases 16 and 17. New names came to fruition, including Sweden's Smyglyssna, whose crunchy 4/4 outing might be a surprise to those who know only his IDM full-length on Vertical Form.

Background moved into CD full-lengths as well. *Futuristic Experiments IV* marked the turn of an era: Todd Sines, Sutekh, and Akufen set the tone for a retrospective of the label's finest moments, running the gamut from the bleeped loops and hard funk of Detroit to the crackled basslines of San Francisco segued into the knifework of Montréal's 'postmodern' techno. The trajectory was clear for the poppy and complex tracks that mark the compositions of the laptop generation. Vancouver's Frivolous and Australia's Dave Miller exemplified this twist, each embracing a slice-and-dice collage of sounds and influences that defy the labels 'house' or 'techno'. While Frivolous' *40 Inch* EP (release 31) is quirky and kinky, exploring broken grooves with violins and voices in skinned dubscares, *Crankkongestion* (release 28) mines the deeper repetition of twilight dub house, accenting hypnotic melodies with a playful grip on sampledelia. In many respects here, techno becomes reborn yet again, as it escapes the one-bar loop not by becoming dub, house, electro or academic — or by reducing minimalism to simple silence — but by subjecting rhythm to the same warped treatment formerly reserved for samples.

Less pasted and more pernicious, Toronto's Pan/Tone and London's Portable re-cement the schizoid aspects of sequential techno. Pan/Tone's *Funky Martini* (release 30) mixes swirling complexes of layered blips, squelches, bleeps and low pads in forming a harder patch for the pattern recognition of dancefloor feet. The flip is a long and schizosonic jam that ascends the mental slope of solitary depravity, inducing the listener to slip over to speaker sacrifice. Portable's *One Second Ago Or Less* (release 32) is a slamming analogue crunch of malformed code that affects a futuristic nostalgia, both through its buried minor keys and an acid house tempo insistently driving the dancefloor. Memory is replayed and remixed, and seven years since its inception, Background resamples its roots: both Pan/Tone and Portable weigh the options of techno and remix the variants, recombining the fundamental aspect of the loop at the same time that Detroit's song structures are overcome by a gleeful samplemania and a complexification of its essential structures.

Presenting the next metamorphosis, Vaz recently launched two other imprints: A Touch of Class (ATC), which focuses on "modern deep house", and [---], aka the nameless label, which, he proclaims, "refuses to adhere to any specific production style" thus "the musical vision shall not be limited by expectations based on a record label's static, given name." [---] also showcases the recombinant experimentalism of Vaz's own work, including his *sounds\_variations* project, which is "based on the use of the same sounds, re-used throughout, giving each track another approach by pushing each instrument in a different compositional direction. Through re-arrangement, toneshifting and by adding/changing effects, it's demonstrated that a defined production criteria can bring forth maximal results." TOBIAS C. VAN VEEN