

BY RON SCHEPPNER FOR STYLUS MAGAZINE, US

Berlin-based Background Records was established by Andy Vaz in 1995 as an imprint specializing in minimal techno, but the label's music, especially its current fare, transcends whatever stereotypical associations such delimiting terms engender. Just as Perlon's microhouse is often more maximal than minimal, so too are Background Records' releases richly layered, compositionally detailed, and increasingly pan-global. In addition, the label's gaze is firmly directed towards the future, as its comp series Futuristic Experiments shows.

Since its inception, the label has evolved stylistically, inspired initially by Detroit's techno innovators, but in the years following has expanded its vision and pursued delineable if at times unpredictable trajectories. The label broadened its catalogue beyond Germany and the US and today reaches out to Africa, Australia, and Canada. Background Records is more artistically vital today than ever before, as its releases are becoming ever more sophisticated as a result of advances in digital production methodologies. Plus, they're deeper sonically as broader stylistic areas and musical traditions are explored by its current roster.

Hailing >from Düsseldorf, Vaz's exposure to techno came via early hip-hop and inspired him to host events in places like Cologne which featured American artists such as Todd Sines and Ectomorph. While Vaz's incipient vision of techno looked towards future forms, his interest in techno's past was strong too, in fact so strong that he made a Detroit pilgrimage to meet the music's founders. In establishing such key connections, Vaz clarified for himself the music's geographical links as well as the co-presence of past and future in the music's ever-evolving present. Witnessing the demise of US labels that had been home to these Detroit artists, Vaz decided to found Background Records as a vehicle for maintaining the life-force of minimal techno. Hence, early label releases like Futuristic Experiments Chapter 1 featured a preponderance of American artists (Terence Dixon, Ectomorph, Todd Sines) and their minimal styles, and thereby established a blueprint of sorts for those that came after. Gradually, however, the scope broadened to include US artists like Stewart Walker, Kit Clayton, and Sutekh, and Germany's Submania / Erkmoah and The Rhythm_Maker. Futuristic Experiments 3 arrived, featuring Berlin's Jan Jelinek (aka Farben and Gramm) and American Dean Decosta, and eventually the Canadian contingent of Jeff Milligan, Deadbeat, and Akufen were introduced too. Background Records 021 signaled a turning point as all releases until then had been 12-inchers only; Rhythm Maker's Landing was issued as a double vinyl set and on compact disc. Today, the label's roster has become even more expansive with the addition of Portable (South African-born Alan Abrahams), Mitchell Akiyama, Donnacha Costello, Smyglyssna, Geoff White, and Australian Dave Millar.

In addition to operating Background Records, Vaz has established two subsidiary labels: A touch of class, and Sound_Variation (or [---] as it's also identified) which releases Vaz's minimal 4/4 techno. The premise of the series (whose first twelve-inch 1-1 appeared in 2001 and which has lately reached 7-7 and includes a Live in Tokyo installment) is that each release is created from a circumscribed pool of sounds that are recycled and rearranged throughout an entire EP via pitching-shifting and other effects, the intent being to generate maximal results from minimal means. While each release in the series generally remains faithful to the core concept, 5-5 deviates from it by featuring remixes >from artists like Portable, Dave Miller, Rhythm Maker, and Dean Decosta.

Interview With ANDY VAZ

When did you start the label and what prompted you to do so? Was it your general dissatisfaction with the music being released at the time? Or was it your disappointment at realizing that there was a whole stream of music that wasn't getting exposure and deserved to receive it that prompted you to establish the label?

It was definitely not based on frustration about the lack of good music being released at the time. Compared to today's fully expanded electronic music world, the music in general was much fresher back then. Still, the idea of German labels fully concentrating on the pretty raw and minimal side of this music was very rare and the time seemed right for me to start filling the gap with the first Background releases.

Where are you based? Describe the make-up of the label company.

I am based in Düsseldorf, Germany and currently run the three labels by myself. My girlfriend Angela is probably going to start helping me build up the Background Records promotion company, where we will help foreign, like-minded record labels (mainly from Japan, East Europe, USA/Canada) to promote their releases in Europe via magazine reviews, features, and interviews of their artists in music publications, by radio promotion, and so on, by sharing our know-how and the contacts that I have built up over the years.

What is the most satisfying part of the experience and the least satisfying?

Most satisfying: always moving on with things and the music, meeting lots of cool like-minded people, seeing the world. Least satisfying: accounting, banks, lawyers, publishing rights organizations (!), government tax departments, and—not to be forgotten—all those people speaking loud but still saying nothing.

It's surprising that you are almost entirely absent as a Background Records artist, reserving your releases for the Sound_Variation series. Why isn't there more of your music on Background Records?

Well, the Sound_Variation series is planned to be a 10-record set in total, so before that's completed, I see no need to release my music on Background. My main goal is to finish this before I start other musical projects. I am currently working on a collaboration project with Jan Jelinek though, which when completed, might see its release on Background. At this stage we haven't completed the project and haven't yet made a decision about where to release it.

How were you able to secure contributions >from such an impressive roster of artists from the label's outset (i.e., Akufen and Sutekh) and who would you like to have release music through Background Records who hasn't yet done so?

Being there at the right time at the right place. I think it's all about finding talent right from the start, rather than waiting until people become successful and then signing them. Anyone can pick up an artist who is already known and successful; I am always interested in finding people when they are fresh. In answer to the second part: Theo Parrish, definitely, especially if the material were to sound like his earlier works.

What's next for the label?

Next this year is: a new Portable 12" entitled Flicker, the long-awaited, debut albums by dB entitled Peron (BG-040) and Australian's Dave Miller (BG-042), Futuristic Experiments # 007 compilation (vinyl/CD), Paul Hammond's 12" (as Further Details) on A touch of class 015, the new Warmdesk 12" Safety First (Atc-014), and my latest EP First Aid Course out any day now on Italian-based Persistence Bit Records.

Obviously the Portable releases possess an African dimension but other Background Records releases like those >from db and Frivolous have a similar quality. Do you deliberately want to bring forth this side of digital house music in your label releases? Does this signify a move away from a Detroit focus to an African one?

Yes, maybe so, but then again Paul Hammond's already mentioned A touch of class release is definitely more Detroit sounding compared to the recent Background releases, and so is the currently released Repeat Orchestra Album, Original Dimensions (re-interpreting Larry Heard and the early Chicago house sound, transferred into a 2004 sound feel). As long as it's natural, I will release it. No doubt Portable is the main artist that I am focusing on for Background at the moment. He has done two full-length albums in a very short period of time for me already, and soon his second 12" is going to be released. We are a strong unit, also tour together quite regularly so there'll be more to come. And if you look at things from an African perspective, then Detroit techno and Chicago house, being black music, all have roots that are somewhat similar. With all this click-house, laptop music, we tend to forget that this music started in Detroit and was made by African-Americans first. This music went through a long evolution and it's not about colours or places; there's so much more to it than any categories can capture.

Much of your label's music might be classified as minimal glitch house or techno. Does this seem an accurate label or would you prefer to omit labels altogether?

People obviously seem to have a million different names for this genre, which I feel is the main problem and why it remains quite hard to sell. How can you market something that you cannot even clearly identify with precision, when it has either no proper name or a million different names for the same thing?

How much do you dictate the label's direction, or is it more a matter of enabling the label's sound to evolve organically?

I try to keep the balance between sharing my personal ideas with people and giving artists the freedom to do what they want to express with their records. Background is definitely getting way more quiet and less 4/4 oriented from time to time, as that's what definitely interests me more and more at the moment.

The current inactivity of Mille Plateaux (apparently the label recently went bankrupt) has left a void which your label nicely fills. How do you see yourself in comparison to a label like Mille Plateaux?

I'd definitely say I'm more careful with the quantity of the records we release. I'm not into trying to create a genre to sell as a trademark. I try to release good music we believe in rather than try to market a philosophical image. I personally think that Mille Plateaux's biggest mistake was to put out way too many average records, among the great and important groundbreaking stuff that everyone knows they produced. Less is more, not only in the music, but also in release-politics.

Has your label suffered in terms of exposure from being in Mille Plateaux's shadow? How well is the Background word getting out as of this writing?

I don't think that we have ever been in Mille Plateaux's shadow. They were definitely always the bigger and better known label, but this has nothing to do with our existence and vice-versa. We simply have a different way of working and have a very individual existence and past. I don't think that comparing these two makes any sense as they are two different things. The bottom line is that I am still around and Mille Plateaux has gone out of business which I honestly regret a lot. I can still not see our label world without Mille Plateaux being an important part of it, and I would be happy if they would return someday.

Can you describe how the Background Records sound has evolved since its inception and especially how one might describe its current sound, if that is it can be characterized or categorized in this manner?

As mentioned earlier, we are partially heading out from the strict 4/4 minimal techno vein to more abstract listening-oriented music as well, also focusing way more on the minimal deep house side of things, by releasing great new artists and records on the sublabel A touch of class. As you mentioned before, I started with Detroit artists such as Terrence Dixon, then Submania as the second wave, then the California posse (Kit Clayton, Sutekh) as the third wave, followed by the Canadians (Akufen, Jeff Milligan, Deadbeat, Frivolous)—premiering their sound on a European imprint, then fully concentrating on Portable with his futuristic Afroism—definitely soulful electronic music, like Australia's Dave Miller, jazzy and soulful—a new breed. Also db has this fantastic combination of soulfulness and experimentalism in his music, a good combination and maybe the best way to describe the current Background sound.

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