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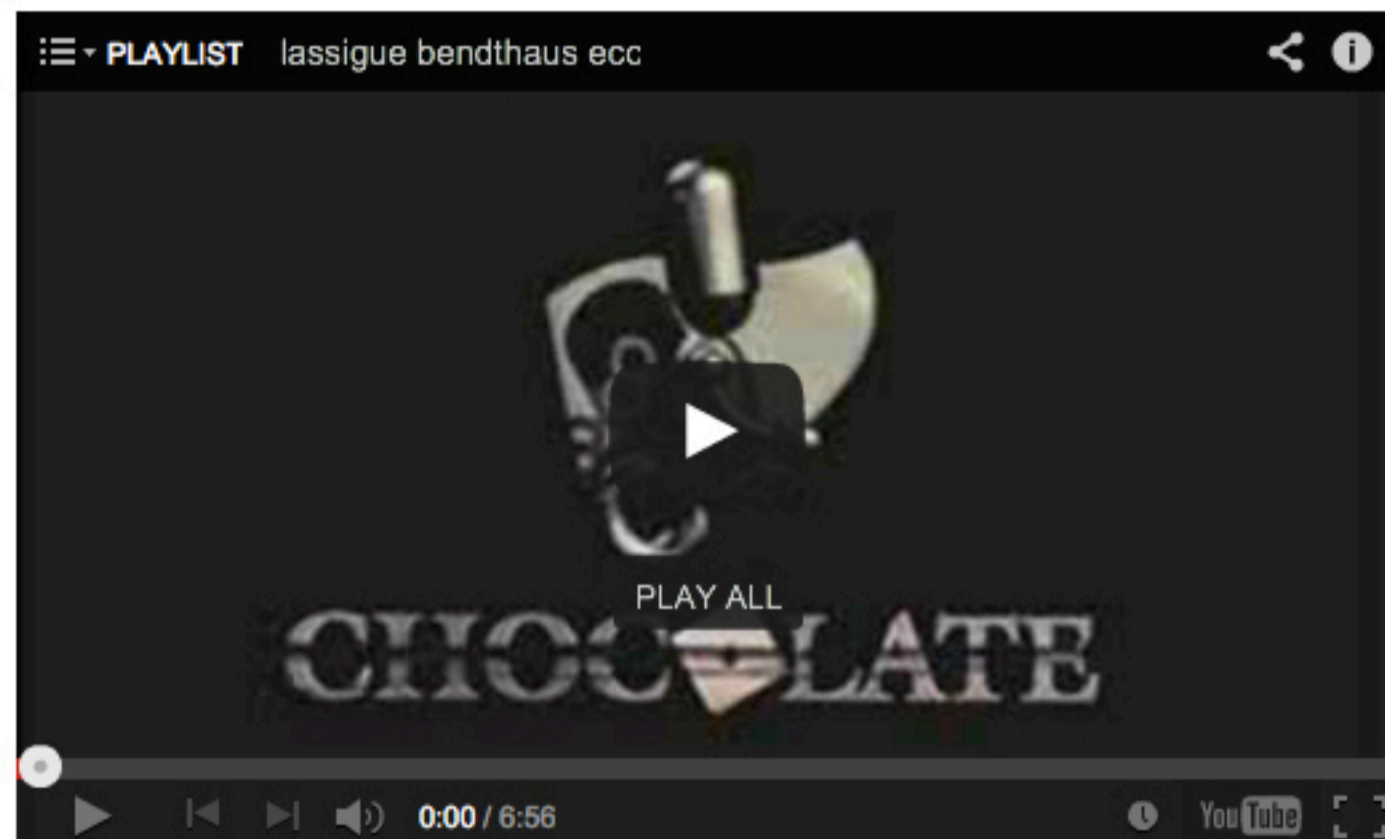


UWE SCHMIDT / ATOM™ : INTERVIEW

BY ALEXEI MONROE ON FEB 6, 2014

Last autumn saw the re-release of *Matter* by **Lassigue Bendthaus**, a strikingly innovative album that was the first release by Uwe Schmidt a.k.a. Atom™ and a thousand other aliases.

Alexei Monroe spoke to Schmidt about the album, its sources and its relation to the development of electronic music....



Alexei Monroe: You've said that Lassigue Bendthaus was already anticipating acid and techno, and this is certainly clear with hindsight and it soon became clear for listeners who followed you from LB into your techno/acid/ambient productions.

What was the reaction to the "newness" of the sound back then? Although there were similarities with **Front Line Assembly** and other contemporary industrial groups, there was already much that was audibly new and different, not least in the futuristic sheen of the sounds....

Uwe Schmidt: Back then, to me, I have to admit, I didn't perceive said difference really, but I was pretty convinced that *Matter* was a kind of classic "EBM" production. In other words, those differences were invisible to me by the time. Also, when I started writing the songs for *Matter*, "techno" (or whatever you want to call it) hadn't arrived on the event horizon just yet.

I wrote the first tracks around 1987, and worked on the album all the way up until 1989, then recorded and mixed it in 1990. In the course of that process, "techno" appeared and so it only had a minor impact on that particular record, while on the other hand it had a big enough impact on me to make me stray away from "industrial" and "EBM" altogether, once *Matter* was completed.

Sequences and tight percussive programming

What I expressed on *Matter* therefore, I think, had more to do with what I liked most about electronic music, which are sequences and tight percussive programming, something that became more popular via "techno" later on. So, in way, looking back at it, I coincided with the flow of things, rather than I consciously took part in it. From a distance, certain features of my early work stand out clearer today than they did at the time.

AM: Were you already aware of/involved in dance music as you were recording this album?

US: When I got into that type of music, and even more so, began to make music myself, there wasn't really any dance music scene

to start with that I would have found inspiring. "Techno", "acid" and all that didn't yet exist, on one hand, while on the other hand, I was way too absorbed in making music myself to bother with "social" activities.

Like I said, half way through the production of *Matter*, "acid"/"house" appeared and defined what we know as "dance music" today. Back then I was a lot into post-modern philosophy though, which was kind of more futuristic than the 80s were. Finally, when "techno" arrived, it was the perfect soundtrack to the futuristic philosophy I was into.

Everything then started to resonate – music, philosophy/sociology, etc. and "EBM" or "industrial" turned into an 1980s sensation, while "acid"/"techno" reflected the future.

AM: As an EBM/industrial listener, I slowly began to switch over to techno from late 1991 and within a couple of years those styles seemed very old-fashioned compared to the newly emerging sounds. Did you slowly switch away from industrial/EBM elements because you felt there were greater creative possibilities in the new forms of electronic music?

“ the ultimate sci-fi attitude of a society that was heading into the postmodern apocalypse

US: I felt that "techno" was simply much more resonant with the 1990s and my vision of things. "Techno", in fact, was a revelation when I first heard it or experienced it around 1990. So, my moving away from industrial/EBM actually happened pretty quickly. However, there were productions of mine which fell into the moment

of transition, and hence reflect both sides of the spectrum I was interested in back then.

Much more than "possibilities", to me "techno" simply was a cultural revolution in the sense that it had a totally different attitude and feeling to it, compared to everything that happened in the 1980s. It was apolitical, for example, while on an emotional level it was "colder", less passionate than the 1980s ever were, without being "grim" or negative. To me, that was the ultimate sci-fi attitude of a society that was heading into the postmodern apocalypse.

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postmodern apocalypse.



AM: What were your primary influences at the time you recorded *Matter*? At times there seems to be a trace of **Cabaret Voltaire's** more electro tracks....

US: Yes, there was a lot of Cabaret Voltaire on it, most certainly. Still, I think that *Matter*, as much as any other production of mine digested all sort of things, not only music. My contact with so-called "industrial" and "EBM" was rather brief, since, due to my age, I discovered it relatively late. Basically "industrial" as such had ceased to exist and transformed into "EBM" some time during the mid 1980s. Therefore it seemed almost like "history" to me.

Perhaps "EBM" can be seen as the transformative link that brought "industrial" to "techno"... however that analysis may be concluded, my contact with both genres was short, yet intense.

AM: The production was very advanced for its time – what were you doing that was different? Can you tell us more about how you produced the album?

Technique and technology

US: I think the difference was that I had no idea whatsoever how to "do things"... that is, mainly out of a lack of interest or possibilities, paired with ignorance, I was on my own when it came to the technique and technology I was able to use to concretize my ideas. There wasn't really a blueprint to electronic music production, you see... there weren't online blogs or manuals.

One received very little to no information at all about how other musicians would do things, technologically or artistically. In a way that was very liberating, because I had to come up with methods. My economic means were very limited, since I basically had no income and worked out of my bedroom, where I had accumulated a handful of very basic machines.

Fortunately right around that time "analogue" gear had gotten really out of fashion (1985 onwards), since sampling and "fm synthesis" (Yamaha DX-7) were the hottest thing. Many, many musicians sold their analogue gear cheaply and so I could buy synths for a bargain price.

Layering sequences

Still, I only had a cheap digital drum machine and one synth (Moog Prodigy) and a four track cassette tape recorder to compose and outline *Matter*. Later for the production I managed to get a friend's sampler too, but basically that was it! With such a small amount of technology, and almost no compositional experience, I could only compose music by layering sequences on top of each other, without being able to really structure the tracks.

“ I built each song by tape splicing hundreds of individually mixed segments into one final composition,

I had to structure the songs in my head, planning to do the final arrangement and structure in the professional recording studio in which the album then was recorded. The Moog sequences were conceived on and played by the drum machine, and were then recorded

onto 16 track 1/2 inch tape, together with all the other elements, such as vocals, sampled drums, and so on.

Basically, the sound of *Matter* is the sound of the Moog Prodigy, since it was the main synth used for the production. Once all the material was recorded, I decided that the method of arranging the songs had to be done by building (mixing) all the different sections of a song, one by one, (basically muting/unmuting elements) and then splicing them together on 1/4 in tape (studer).

In the course of the production I not only had to deal with and learn the basics of analogue recording and mixing, but I also learned the technique of tape splicing in order to be able to build the structure of a song myself, instead of depending on a studio engineer. So, instead of programming each section of a song, record it and mix it like that, I built each song by tape splicing hundreds of individually mixed segments into one final composition, which up until that point had only existed in my head.

Back then I had already been very interested in and fascinated by sequencing, hence it became my main focus on that album. I hadn't been interested at all in keyboard playing for example, but rather enjoyed the use of abstract "input interfaces" such as the Yamaha drum machine, on which is



programmed everything. In other words, I did not input the sequences or melodies using a normal keyboard, but used the 2x12x3 "pad" matrix of the drum machine instead.

It was a very abstract way to compose music, since I never touched the topic of "harmonies" or "musical notes"... everything was just "rhythmical sound", that either "worked" or "did not work". It was that very same idea which then fascinated me so much, the moment "techno" or "acid" came along: it just worked with sequences and rhythm, and in a very linear manner.

The whole idea of "tracks" hadn't been put in words at that time, nor had it been conceptualized really (with a few exceptions) and "layering tracks" instead of "composing songs" was the ultimate thing to me. Looking back at it, even though I was not conscious about it at all at the time, *Matter* had much more in common with "techno" than I had thought.



AM: Was there a specific 'philosophy' behind Lassigue Bendthaus? There's an interesting split between the more recognisably 'industrial' tracks and the ethereal, ambient textures (for instance on the first part of 'Transitory' or 'Laternslide') that would find their way into later LB releases and Atom Heart works.

US: I guess there must have been some sort of grid behind "Lassigue Bendthaus", yet I feel unable to piece everything back together from today's perspective. Back then I had been studying physics, philosophy and sociology, yet was very into art as well. I think it was a blend of all that, plus the music I listened to, that I brewed into my first musical idea.

I was very young, and absorbed and digested everything eagerly with a certain blend of impatience, ignorance and euphoria. I was interested in post modern philosophy/sociology on one hand (such as the writings of **Jean Baudrillard**) to a very big extent, while I was into physics as well.

The cherry on the cake may have been the fact that I had played drums, before I got hooked on drum machines, so the entire rhythmical approach to music and the new technology that enabled incredible possibilities, kind of interlocked with the abstract ideas behind it. I wouldn't necessarily use the word "philosophy" though, to describe the grid in which I was operating back then.



Like I said before, everything I did was very intuitive and on a practical level, very often not reflected at all. Almost more important than any philosopher's theory was, for example, the impact a "linn drum" had on me when I first heard it on the radio. The fact that one could program rhythms, instead of playing them, basically got me hooked on electronic music. These obsessions drove me much more than any theory ever did.

Naturally, the musical style in which said obsession surfaced may just be seen as a minor detail in the overall picture, and hence later releases show similar, if not identical themes and mutations thereof. For somebody thinking in genres and styles, that may seem strange, yet for a human being trapped within himself, it is the most normal thing.

AM: There is a vague air of techno-panteism sometimes, was this obvious to you?

US: Not at all!

AM: Given that industrial is now seen as aesthetically and sometimes also politically compromised or tainted, it's interesting to see you place such emphasis on *Matter* as the first release in the Atom™ series. Could you comment on the influence of industrial in your later works and on how you view industrial now? Is it something you've left behind or do you still find value in it? Do you think some who discovered you later are going to be surprised by your industrial past?

US: Those are a couple of questions in one. I will try to separate them. As for my being influenced by industrial in the early days, let's say that I got in touch with it relatively late in its development, when the pure industrial had already transformed in something else (EBM). I would say that I wasn't that much influenced by industrial as such, but rather by an atmosphere, which is partly shared... the atmosphere of the late 1980s.

When "techno"/"acid" appeared – that breaking away from the 1980s was a much bigger influence on me, than the 1980s, "EBM" or "industrial" ever were. What I really thought should have been left aside, was exactly that political/social attitude industrial had. The 1990s, in my opinion, were unpolitical in the traditional sense, yet, by that absence of political attitude, highly political in its core.

Postmodern philosophy

This you may understand a bit better when understanding postmodern philosophy, which defined the absence of political interest as the ultimate political act. In all that, "acid" and "techno" reflected that new era of hyper-politics. The dancefloor, the lack of lyrics, the reduction of everything to an individual (not "social") event, it all made much more sense to me than the old, 1980s attitude of "social criticism" through lyrics and words.

Now, talking about today, I think the 1990s and early 2000s are long gone, and I have a strong feeling that what the world needs today is in fact a re-definition of that edginess that industrial provided. What I think is lacking today are truly radical artists, in the sense of people who are not sucked up by the environment they are perceived in.

I miss art that does not care about the market, the media, the critics, the value, and so on, but truly just cares about itself. "Industrial" in that sense was radical, because it was willing to create something outside any known market... which was its ultimate power and achievement.

In that sense, I would like to bring uncorrupted art back into today's world and "industrial" is an inspiration for that. You may see such development as a movement of "thesis, antithesis, synthesis": it was necessary to push away from industrial, go through it's anti-pole, and now, on the next level, create the synthesis of the first two steps.

I think "techno" and "industrial" can learn a lot from each other, always given that both are not seen as "styles" but as methods.

To the last part of your questions, well, given the fact that my overall catalogue/archive contains a huge variety of musical styles, I think that "surprise" is a continuous experience when exploring it.

AM: What are the next releases in the series? Have you selected based on what you see as your most important works or also based on listeners' opinions?

US: There are two releases in the pipeline right now. The 1992 release *I-repetitive digital noise*, probably the first "techno" work of mine, and the 1994 *Orange (Monochrome Stills)*, an ambient album which sort of announced my releases on Rather Interesting: the label I founded shortly after. I still don't know which releases will then be next in the sequence, yet would like to re-release an album or two around February 2014.

