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in a Romantic mood

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T H E

Moving from Frankfurt to Chile in the late 1990s enabled Uwe Schmidt aka

Atom™

to escape the tyranny of the dancefloor and develop his innumerable electronic simulacra, from Señor Coconut's Latinised Kraftwerk to his latest minimal reinterpretations of Schubertian Romanticism.

By Dan Barrow. Photography by Cristobal Palma

E C S T A S Y

It started with rhythm. "At the wedding of some friends of my parents, someone said to me – I was the only kid, I was really bored, drumming on the chair – she said, 'Instrument'. And I said, 'No'. The idea came, the idea that I actually could play an instrument – I'm not from an artistic family, it's a very working class background; cultural things, culture, music, were alien. So that was the moment when the idea came that, yes, I could play an instrument."

Speaking down the line from Santiago de Chile, the city that has been his home for the past 15 years, Uwe Schmidt – alias Atom™, Atom Heart, Señor Coconut and innumerable others – reveals none of the archness projected through the pencil-moustached Hapsburg poise of his recent public images. His body of work, released under a series of simulated identities, is one of the strangest and most eclectic in the recent history of electronic music, spanning the early days of rave and German Techno to Ambient (he released a number of albums as Atom Heart on Pete Namlook's legendary Fax label in the mid-1990s), glitch, manipulations of gospel, lounge, exotica and cosmic jazz (his Flanger project with Burnt Friedman), reinventions of recent pop history through covers, and investigations of Central American and Caribbean pop. His latest obsession is 19th century German Lieder, as heard on the two Schubert-influenced albums he has issued on Raster-Noton: 2009's *Liedgut* and *Winterreise*, released this month.

Born in 1968, Schmidt started out in his parents' basement, trying to replay the drum parts from 1980s pop-rock records – "The Police or stuff like that, which had very good drummers." The Damascene moment came from hearing a LinnDrum machine on the radio: "I was so impressed by that... I knew it was a human being, and I was 13, and I thought, that's totally ridiculous, to be in the basement and try to practise something and play it, because what I wanted to do, a *machine* just did." In a nicely symbolic gesture, he sold his drum kit to buy a "very, very cheap Korg drum machine. I just sat at home programming that little box of weird rhythms and stuff... when you're a kid you're not really thinking about the future or anything, you're doing things you want to do... it was like *playing*, I was playing with a drum machine." Around the age of 16 or 17, a change of schools brought him into contact with underground music: the hard-edged rhythms of Industrial and EBM. "My friends suddenly changed from working class kids to kids that had much younger parents, who were intellectuals or artists, sociologists... these new friends, they listened to Front 242, and I was like, what's that? What's Throbbing Gristle?"

He began making tracks and running a tape label with a friend, bringing him into contact with likeminded souls in the cassette underground, but his interest in the music wasn't directly social. "I would say my initial scene... I usually call it very nerdy, you know. In an adolescent way, just with a couple of friends, and they're all boys, of course, and you're talking about nerdy topics and doing nerdy stuff. I never saw music as a tool for some kind of social achievement. I mean, some people make music because they want to have a

girlfriend, and stuff like that. That was not the point for me. So I wasn't aware of the whole club thing, which came about a little bit after that initial period – suddenly the whole scene changed from EBM and Industrial to that new thing, which back then didn't even have a name necessarily. It wasn't called Techno or anything, it had lots of names – it was called Acid House, and Acid, and House."

For Schmidt, the music that began occupying clubs sounded full of possibility, a disappearance from the social into a world of pure sound. "The first time I listened to an Acid track, it was nine minutes long, and it was just a drum computer and the bassline, and in the club there was only a strobe... And it felt really different from the 80s, you know, the whole attitude was different. The 80s always had that Industrial... something like a message, or it was quite grim, and the 90s came along and they were quite aseptic and clinical – clean, and aseptic, and not interested in social friction, or in anything social at all – it was just music, and being in the club and being on ecstasy, and things like that." Around this time, Schmidt started studying philosophy at the University of Frankfurt, working in a record shop which was "the only place back then where, in Frankfurt, you could buy Techno records, or that new kind of music, and all the DJs came in every week and bought their new records."

He characterises the music in terms of "trying to develop new musical codes, which sounded very alien". The bodily intensities and ahistorical noise of Techno chimed both with the atmosphere of the period after the fall of the Berlin Wall, and the French theory Schmidt was reading. The work of Jean-François Lyotard and Jean Baudrillard proposed that the modernist era was over, its intense consciousness of history, aesthetics of social dissonance, investigations of emotion and meaning, and cryptic or overt solidarity with revolutionary change in the end adding up to nothing. Baudrillard was not alone in speaking, in 1992, of a "vanishing of history". Acid and Techno felt "light, it didn't have any social burden, or any social intention even... This music felt like the 90s, like the end of history," says Schmidt. In the latest records from Chicago, Sheffield, London, Amsterdam, Berlin, Frankfurt, he could hear this unnamed music "progressing and changing on a weekly basis. This was really interesting. I got really interested in that musical dialogue, that I could be part of a musical code being developed." Schmidt's early records bear the evidence of all this: Atom Heart's "Whitehouse" 12" layers blaring sequencer lines over claustrophobic breakbeats; Lassigue Bendthaus's *Cloned*, from a year later, is Acid roughened to a sandpaper harshness.

Schmidt is caustic about how quickly, in his eyes, Techno betrayed its own promise. "I always thought, 'Wow, this could be like a great future', you know. Soon I realised that not really everybody was interested in that, in the same thing. And that was quite a frustrating moment, around 94 maybe, when I felt that there was a stagnation: everything had come a halt in terms of development, and the name was coined: it was Techno. In my opinion the peak was 94, 95. From



Uwe Schmidt aka Atom™ at home in Santiago de Chile, March 2012



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there on, everything up until now I would consider ornamental to the initial idea.”

The reification of Techno prompted Schmidt’s radical reconsideration of the temporality the genre claimed for itself (more of which later); it also influenced his decision to explore musical forms not directed at the dancefloor. By 1994, “that entire playground of the 90s was beginning to move towards the dancefloor. It wasn’t always like that, but suddenly it turned 100 per cent into dance; everything had to be dancefloor material, and every kind of music was judged by whether it was compatible for the DJ to be played or not. And being compatible for DJing – we’re talking about very basic musical code here, there’s not a lot of things you can have... I got kind of disappointed by the dancefloor, I would say.”

This disappointment formed the catalyst for an astonishing burst of creativity. He founded his Rather Interesting label, through which he has released most of his 70-plus albums, using more than 50 solo aliases and convening almost 20 group projects. For much of the 90s, he “had an idea for an album every day”. The variety of those records, the sheer unlikely wealth of ideas, textures and rhythms that float through their interstices, is close to mind-boggling.

When I ask Schmidt whether it felt odd to be working at such a rate, he cheerfully admits, “It was a very natural, coherent, linear thing. Usually I wake up in the morning, and I have an idea, and if I cannot let it out in a way, or channel it, I get very nervous... But back then, I just woke up – for most of the time I had no girlfriend or anything – I woke up in my studio, because I was sleeping in my studio,” he laughs. “And I would turn on the machines – I had that idea, and it was finished at the end of the day – great, you know? And after seven days you have an album – or a week or two weeks, it depends.” His way of working across a

range of different projects emerged from the process of imaginative bricolage through which he developed ideas into solid entities. “So at some point you start to label that idea, and in my case, I’m always collecting music, but also typographies, or pictures or paintings or drawings, or lyrics. So there’s quite a variety of things I collect. Some of these elements start to attract each other, and they start to fall into the same box – there’s like a couple of things in that box, a song, a sample, and some lyrics.”

The names are working titles that stuck, but Schmidt also mentions the term “simulations” in connection with them – copies, reproductions, stand-ins. They could equally be tagged with the Baudrillard term simulacra – fantastic copies for which no original exists, or which replace their original. Such simulacra, as David Toop has noted, have a long history in 20th century culture, from Raymond Roussel’s armchair travel book *New Impressions Of Africa* to Les Baxter’s and Martin Denny’s confected exotica and Holger Czuyak & Rolf Dammers’s fake ethnographic recordings on *Canaxis*. These simulacra are tied up with the history of the deterritorialisation of culture, the detachment of culture from its geographical and historical origins. Schmidt laughs that many people don’t know that the identity of Señor Coconut is a “simulation, they think Señor Coconut exists in some way on this planet... Which is great: the music just works, you like it or you don’t, and if you want some more philosophy around it then you can have it, but I don’t request that.” Such jokes have eminent precedents, not only in Erik Satie’s work, but in Kraftwerk’s showroom dummy act.

By the time Schmidt moved to Santiago in 1997, the sense of communal commitment to innovation that characterised the early 90s had been deformed by commercial interests. “Within Frankfurt I felt pretty much on my own, I have to say... So I didn’t go out very much, I didn’t have a lot of social relationships in Frankfurt, but I was pigeonholed as being a Frankfurt producer... I wasn’t interested at all in that, in that whole movement. I was just interested in my own movement; I had that feeling of being in an isolation tank, and I just wanted to experience my own ideas popping up.” After living in Puerto Rico for six months in 1992–93, he visited Santiago with a Chilean friend, and found “the perfect isolation there: there was no musical scene, there was no electronic music in Chile, it was really hard to get information here.” Of course, he laughs, he soon enough came to know almost everyone connected with electronic music in Chile, many of whom, such as Ricardo Villalobos and Luciano, had lived in and out of Europe. “People say, ‘Oh yeah, you’re from Chile, there’s a big Chilean music scene, and you’re part of it, and I was like [laughing], ‘No, I wasn’t part of it!’ And suddenly record companies tried to reposition me back into a scene, you know, and I got really pissed about that, I have to say.”

He had long been a fan of various strains of Latin American pop – Central American, Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, “mainly of the 30s and 40s” – and had recorded tracks incorporating Latin rhythms, such

as his early Lisa Carbon material, before his move to Chile. But this new distance from Germany lent a different aspect to these musical codes. While making *Pop Artificielle*, an album of electronic covers of pop hits, “many people said, ‘Oh, why don’t you do a Kraftwerk cover?’”, and I said, ‘No, this is too obvious’. That whole Kraftwerk thing, people brought it back to me. And then suddenly one day I woke up and I heard in my head, “Neon Lights”... it kind of auto-generated itself in my head.” He had hardly listened to Kraftwerk while living in Germany, but “suddenly I woke up one morning and I could hum the melody and even sing part of the lyrics in German. But it was a cha-cha-cha.” He recorded a series of Kraftwerk songs recast as cumbias, merengues and cha-cha-chas, which became the first Señor Coconut album, *El Baile Alemán* (2000). The slight air of the novelty record that hangs around it and subsequent Coconut albums belies the brilliance of the songs’ construction – made from tiny samples of Latin records – and Schmidt’s understanding of Latin rhythms, while bringing out the latent humour of Kraftwerk.

Viewing Kraftwerk from the distance of his South American home, he found their music was littered with references to German classicism and Romanticism; and the chord progressions of many Kraftwerk songs, for all their electronic textures, “are very classic... if you would play them on the piano and the cello, they could be Schumann. And with a classic Schumann interpreter singing the lyrics, they would be very kind of German Romanticism, 19th century kind of stuff.”

The titles of both *Liedgut* (2009) and *Winterreise* (2012) allude to the German song tradition brought to its finest expression by Schubert. Both are, as you would expect from albums on Raster-Noton, minimal, even astringent electronic records: the albums unfold as drifts of white noise and buzzing sine-tones, brooding and toxic synths, low-bitrate samples, stumbling pianos, a strange structural logic of sequences that refuse to resolve, sudden dropouts, glitches, elements that flicker across a backdrop of digital silence – and, most disconcertingly, on *Liedgut*, vocodered German voices that congeal out of background noise, singing as if to themselves. Schmidt insists that this latest phase of his work as Atom™ should be comprehensible even without knowledge of the buried influences that went into the albums’ composition. It’s certainly comprehensible, although the album retains an enigmatic quality that works to its advantage. One or two sequences on *Winterreise* play explicitly with wisps of melodic material – sampled or synthesized, it’s hard to tell – that call up the melancholy of Schubert’s last song cycle; these ghosts of Romantic cadences cast the album’s otherwise all-electronic palette in a new light, which now confronts the listener with the estranged quality of a half-remembered language.

After ten years, the isolation of Santiago had unexpected consequences for Schmidt. “Suddenly German became like an alien language in a way, and I started to see words in a different light. And when I realised that, I started to get really interested again in



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the German language, and to read things I hadn't ever read when I lived in Germany, like poetry for example – Rilke, Romanticist poetry. And on a philosophical parallel I got really into Nietzsche, who by himself is really related to a lot of postmodern philosophers, they all refer back to Nietzsche.”

Kraftwerk's mediations of German Romanticism had leaked into Schmidt's subconscious, engendering his fascination with the intellectual atmosphere of late 19th century Europe, particularly the German physicist Hermann von Helmholtz, who, while Nietzsche was meditating on the ethical weight of Beethoven and Wagner's work, “wrote a very big book [*On The Sensations Of Tone, 1863*] about the scientific fundamentals of music: it ranges from the analysis of sinewaves, to the analysis of the human – I don't know, why a major chord does what a major chord does.”

Schmidt's fascination with 19th century Europe led him to investigate his family background. The discovery that it came from a region – now part of the Czech Republic – which during the 19th century was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, conjured images of the repressed and claustrophobic bourgeois world mourned by Walter Benjamin in *The Arcades Project*. This mass of interrelated ideas and images functioned, he admits, “not [as] a coherent framework, more like a bunch of triggers”, processed and dissipated into intellectual atoms, capturing and imbuing the work with what he calls “an air or a texture, an aura” (perhaps not coincidentally, Benjamin refers to the ‘aura’ of a work of art as “the

unique apparition of a distance”, a formulation as much temporal as spatial).

Liedgut emerged from Schmidt's distanced re-engagement with German culture (completing the circle, ex-Kraftwerk member Florian Schneider contributed vocals to a bonus track). *Winterreise* was conceived as the soundtrack to an exhibition of Schmidt's photographs in 2010. Taken during a European tour in winter, they evoke the atmosphere of a Caspar David Friedrich landscape, or Brueghel's *Hunters In The Snow*. Although he used only a few samples of the classical tradition on *Liedgut*, Schmidt found that it subtly coloured the whole work. “On *Winterreise*, there are a couple of pieces from Schubert compositions, mainly little parts – just like a chord. And I threw them in my sampler, and everything that came out of my sampler kind of mangled with the other information... suddenly I realised that all the textures I was making for that album had a romantic feeling, to me, heavy and melancholy, but not sad... I realised it's because I used that millisecond of Schubert, and it turned into an oscillator for a texture – and I found that very interesting, that in the technological process, it kind of prevailed. That was very interesting to explore on that album.”

David Harvey, in *The Condition Of Postmodernity*, points to Central European culture at the turn of the 20th century – the crucible of modernism, with collage as its signature technique – as an example of art warped by “intense time-space compression”, a process that, from the 90s to our own period, has reached hitherto unimaginable levels. Schmidt characterises his methodology in terms that echo Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's concept of deterritorialisation: “I always tried to absorb musical ideas – the same is true with Acid or with Techno, or with anything basically – and tried to lift it off that first-level connection it has to a territory, history, who was making it, and all that, and extract a certain idea out of it.” As a response, he would “throw away the folkloristic part of it, and just maintain the musical code itself, and try to reintegrate that into what I'm doing.” Many of Schmidt's 90s records were made with a sense of play and happy irony. Back then, he says, music had “very little to do with history, and had very little to do with nationalities”. He suggests that the world of simultaneity and placelessness posited by postmodern theory, in which all history was available to be rifled through, was “[a] little bit of what the reality is today”. But the strange atemporality of contemporary music (as Simon Reynolds describes it), a temporally static condition in which development is replaced by difference, is no longer carefree and untroubled. It continues, absurdly, alongside a possibly terminal crisis in the economic system whose feverish overproduction lay at its root – the system which, through its annihilation of space and time, made possible the ecstatic simulacra of the last 30 years of pop history – and the return of history, in the international rebellions against neoliberalism. Darkness seeps into the very metabolism of music. Melting the solid forms of music as social practice and cultural artefact into air, digital audio, which promised

to become an immersive ocean, has become a haunted space filled with the echoing voices of the historically saved and damned alike.

Although Schmidt insists that they are not sad pieces of music, it's notable that *Liedgut* and *Winterreise* converge with the melancholia of those practitioners of audio collage in whose work the shock registers most deeply – The Caretaker's unspooling loops of Schubertian longing, Indignant Senility's slurred Wagner, Hype Williams's misrememberings of lush pop and R&B. The method of carefree collision, spawning new identities, feels, he admits, “very 90s, and I see myself in a different road at the moment than the beginning of the sound, where it was a very inspiring and entertaining world, to say we have the world which is a collection of things [that are] not connected to each other at all, and then at random you can connect certain things.”

Schmidt has, for the last few years, chosen to concentrate on Atom™ and Señor Coconut as his main vehicles, alongside his collaborative projects, and it's notable that, with this new focus, the syntheses and transformations of his recent work have become more thorough, penetrating into the depths of the material.

Reynolds asks, in *Retromania*, whether genuinely new art, imagined as total historic rupture, is possible in this climate. Although he may appear a survivor from another era, Schmidt's work suggests that we should consider other ways of figuring the new. Nearly 20 years ago, he was already noticing the hollowness of Techno's claims to permanent futurity. “I found it always a bit pathetic from the electronic world: ‘We're futurists, we don't care about the past’. So I said, ‘Let's see happens if we bring the cover version into electronic music’. And it kind of worked, because afterwards people said, ‘Yes, it makes sense, more than we thought’. And the future, to be honest, is already the past. Futurism is a very old fashioned concept. That whole idea of futurism is 19th century in a way. So I really like to give it that twist, to say: ‘OK, it's not really important where it is on the timeline, it's important if it makes sense in its elements’.”

Schmidt is working on a new album for Raster-Noton, titled *HD* – “that will be very different from the last two” – and is “planning to release, like, five albums” with his Acid-reggaeton duo Surtek Collective; an archival release of an Ambient Atom™ album, *Cold Memories*, is imminent on Sähkö. The unstoppable momentum of his work seems almost its own justification. Deleuze and Guattari considered deterritorialisation, in spite of the damage it caused, one of the unrepealable advances of modernity; to refuse the possibilities it creates for music, in “open[ing] the horizon to the past”, as Schmidt puts it, of drift, play and movement, seems absurd, regressive. If anything suggests survival strategies for music in the future, it might be his example.

“So, movement, that's what's going on all the time when I work: it's always an idea that's being opposed to another idea, and then it transforms into something else... And then it dies away and it's being reborn in a different moment... And I've done that for a very long time.” □ *Winterreise* is out now on Raster-Noton