

# Synthesizing the Absurd: The Rhumbas of Jean Michel Jarre, Nostalgia and Techno

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Let us enjoy a moment of beauty, courtesy of Albert Camus, from his essay "Summer in Algiers":

The dancehall at Padovani Beach is open every day. And, in this immense rectangular box, open to the sea all along one side, the poor youngsters of the district come to dance until evening. Often, I would wait there for one particular moment. In the daytime, the dance hall is protected by a sloping wooden roof. When the sun has gone down it is removed. The hall fills with a strange green light, born in the double shell of sky and sea. When you sit far from the windows, you can see only the sky, and, like puppets in a shadow theatre, the faces of the dancers floating past, one after another. Sometimes they play a waltz, and the dark profiles revolve like cutout figures on a turntable. Night comes quickly and with it the lights. I shall never be able to describe the thrill and the secret enchantment of this subtle moment...I owe my idea of innocence to evenings like these. And I am learning not to separate these beings charged with violence from the sky in which their desires revolve.

Beautiful indeed. But wherein lies the beauty? The play of the words themselves or in the sentiment of the words? Is Camus suffering through a delicious nostalgia? Clearly, he misses Algiers and all its delights, the delights of his youth. Yet he *is* in Algiers as he writes these words. He is at the dancehall, bearing witness to this spectacle of mystery and sensuality. Far from being nostalgic for Algiers, he is drinking it in, in the moment. The roots of Camus are being tapped by Camus.

For the existentialist, the moment is all you have. The past is gone; the future is an inevitability called death. Hope is every bit an enemy as nostalgia. You live here and now in the absurd or you don't live at all. Asceticism is out of the question; you live full on, you don't ponder living, hedging your bets all the way to the grave. In "The Myth of Sisyphus," Camus suggests that a man must first be undermined before he can elude that fatal illusion of hope. In other words, he must see things as they are, not as they once were or how he wants them to become.

What interests me is how relevant Camus and his visit to a dancehall in Algiers over sixty years ago are to my own dancehalls—the nightclubs and abandoned warehouses of Detroit. Here one does not hear waltzes. Not by a long shot. Techno reigns supreme in the warehouses and clubs where *white* Detroit shakes its booty. The thundering backbeat, rippling bass lines and edgy minimalist inflections to melody seem tailor-made for a sprawling misbegotten rustbelt city laced together by crumbling freeways. Freeways designed expressly for that speed machine of speed machines, the automobile. Techno plays to and plays up the strange mythos of the urban dystopia—a future past.

How romantic it is to imagine your future in the midst of a ruined glorious past. The problem is that the mythos thrives on the very two things that Camus advises against, hope and nostalgia and a faux nostalgia at that. The imagined future is set in amber; the ruins must survive. The reification of techno feeds on the reification of Detroit as rusty dynamo. Clear out the ruins and the mystique is lost; without the wreckage of the past, the dream of the future withers. Heaven forbid that the city actually begins a renaissance; suddenly the future becomes the present, a present that no doubt would fall well short of the hopeful "dystopia" fantasies.

As such, techno refuses the absurd precisely because it is unable to deal with it. Techno began in the early eighties as a suburban black music form, marrying the electro-fetishism of Kraftwerk with the emerging street rhythms of hip-hop. Its proponents, a trio of black youth generally referred to as

the Belleville Three in honour of the rural suburb from which they hail, found an audience for their sounds in Europe not America and decamped to the continent. In their absence, the white kids of the suburbs lying just outside the dreaded Eight Mile Road boundary crossed into the foreboding promised land. Irony needs little time to make its mark. Just as their parents had fled the inner city after the riots of the late sixties, most never to return, the children flocked to the core. By the late eighties, you could go wild from dusk to dawn, travelling from one rave to another, all held in derelict areas well known to the police. There was no better badge of courage, of authenticity, than the ticket you received the night before at a rave bust. In Europe, raves are held in the streets of Berlin or the beaches of Ibiza; in Detroit we are obliged to dance in the ruins. Even when we manage to dance in open air, we choose to do so in a concrete pit in the ominous shadow of the Renaissance Center. This spring over a million people gathered in Hart Plaza in what must have been the singular largest mass delusion set to music.

Much has been made of the use of designer drugs at raves. Kids die, not of overdoses but dehydration. The promoters who have colonized raves know what trip the kids are on and price their wares accordingly. But for our purposes drugs are a red herring. Without psychedelic, eros-inducing drugs such as ecstasy, a rave is non-event of sweating hordes and sensory overload. Cyber-beams pulse and the speakers pound through the stinking darkness. You are plugged in yet there is something missing: Sensuality.

Techno not only lost its early negritude, it quickly became defiantly de-racinated. It is the anti-thesis of Motown—no chorus, no bridge, almost no harmony or melody. Just squeaks and rhythmic patterns, amplified till the ears bleed for mercy. Hitsville USA is now Headachesville. Producers and DJs embrace minimalism precisely because it gives them the leeway to make the most of the least. In this, they resemble the punks. Musicianship was beside the point for punks; in fact, musicianship was a mark of inauthenticity. Musicianship made you an elitist, a square, or the worst of the worst, a hippie. Not being able to play an instrument or read music or caring who did made you a true democrat. Pick up an electrified rake and strum away. Likewise on the dance floor you flopped about or pogo-ed up and down. Anything went as long as you were there. This ethos of do-it-yourself kept everyone in their place and kept interlopers out.

But punk had a thorn in its side—disco. It was easy enough to call the Beatles or the Eagles wankers. The former flamed out in disgraceful self-importance, the former thrived on hedonistic excess and overproduced rubbish for hippies coming down from their generation's bad trip. Disco, on the other hand, was a force to be reckoned with. Disco was soul and R&B set to a 4/4 pulse, a music that demanded mastery in both performer and dancer. And at its best, disco reminded us that punk had two left feet—sensuality was sacrificed on the altar of minimalism and aimless ill-temper. Saturday Night Fever, despite all the derision heaped upon it, *undermined* punk and its acolytes. Punk lacked staying power; disco, with the help of gay men and Latinos, easily transformed itself into house and promptly went underground until the nightmare of New Wave played itself out.

Enter Jean Michel Jarre. Born in 1948, he is the son of Maurice Jarre, the Oscar winning composer of Lawrence of Arabia and Dr. Zhivago. Although given a thorough education in classical music and composition, the younger Jarre found his way to the storied Groups de Recherche de Musique, home of Pierre Schaeffer, the father of musique concrete. By day Jarre studied with his master, by night he played guitar in Paris garage bands. This mixture of the sacred and the profane served him well in 1976 when he released his first album, a 43-minute composition entitled Oxygene. The recording was notable not only for the seamless mix of its six movements but more importantly how it was very much a do-it-yourself effort. Recorded in a small home studio, Oxygene was rejected by all major labels. No vocals, no three minute single that could get radio play, no contract. Jarre finally found a small independent label to release it. Within a year, it was number one on the Billboard chart and he was People magazine's personality of 1976.

Jarre foregrounds the programmed rhumba pre-set of a drum box, almost defiantly, and transforms it into an elegiac, impressionistic coda to his suite. Remember this is 1976—punk is all the rage and Giorgio Moroder has just issued that signature Eurodisco track “I Feel Love” featuring Donna Summer cooing her way to an orgasm at 135bpm. Despite all the stirring moments of the previous five movements in Oxygene, one must make it through the rhumba to finish the journey. The rhumba is no afterthought; it is the climax. But even that, a definite end, is denied to the listener. Throughout Oxygene 6, dispatches of

white noise, mimicking the breathe of the sea, rise and fall in time with the lagging beat. As the music fades out, the counterfeit sea takes over. Or rather, the music gives itself up to the sea, entering into communion with the infinity of the tide. Here is a prototype of techno as it might have been—sensual music born entirely from filters and voltage regulators, music that makes serious philosophical demands on the listener. Or as the case may be, the dancer.

Jarre's rhumbas are no kitsch affectation although the millennium ear, tuned as it is to the harmonic scale of irony, might think otherwise. French artists such as Air, St. Germain, Bob Sinclair and DJ Dimitri all peddle heavily in French kitsch and faux nostalgia—both for the sunny post WWII France of the 1950s and the swinger's paradise of Paris in the seventies. They are selling a past to the kids that they themselves could only have lived through their parents. In numerous interviews, Jarre has pointed out that Latin rhythms and elegiac melodies are who he is. As a child, he was fascinated by the circuses to which his grandparents took him. Later, in adolescence, he recognized in the music of Fellini's composer, Nino Rota the same haunting vibrations of the circus—kinetic yet sad.

In 1981, after *Oxygene* and its follow up *Equinoxe* had sold millions of copies, Jarre released what must be the first all-rhumba techno record. Punk was all but dead, disco was going underground and New Wave was on the rise. *Magnetic Fields*, like its predecessors is a seamless mix of tracks, all tricked out with complex spatial effects and galloping rhythmic patterns. Yet the melodies and the beats are unmistakable. And lest we miss the point, Jarre offers "The Last Rhumba," stripped down to a comical skeleton of what has come before - a shameless, slowed redux featuring a rickety drum box, cheap organ, and pedal steel guitar. Again, Jarre foregrounds his Frenchness, inviting the listener to choose between a surface "cheesiness" that invokes a Paris in amber<sup>1</sup> or going deeper into the suite as a whole to find that "The Last Rhumba" makes perfect sense as a fitting closer.

Yet the most audacious of Jarre's proto-techno rhumbas appears on his least accessible album. Which is exactly the point when you consider that "Music for Supermarkets" (1983) was designed as a protest against both the mass reproduction of popular music and the fetishization of popular music as consumer product. Jarre auctioned off a single copy of "Music for Supermarkets" then allowed the broadcast of the album twice on European radio before destroying the masters. As one listens to the insouciant vamping of "Music for Supermarkets Part 1," it's not hard to imagine Jean Luc Godard pushing Raoul Coutard in a wheelchair down the aisle of some massive supermarket in the Parisian suburbs as they track Anna Karina sashaying her way to the produce section. Call the film "Two or Three Things I Know about Shopping." Jarre parodies muzak not just to critique the form but also the forum(s) in which it thrives. By the end of the album, the initial rhumba has discombobulated into random electronic noises. Notes are numbers. The synthesizer and the cash register mate and merge. *Tout va bien* indeed.

To pick on techno may seem less than sporting. Now a staple of car advertisements and entertainment television, techno, like so many art forms before it, has roamed far from its cradle. The more it is copied, the more it must innovate to stay one step ahead of the profiteers. But techno, in its purest form, resists innovation precisely because any change from the formula would inherently challenge the musical ethos upon which the whole scene is predicated.

Why then has techno endured? For the sake of self-preservation, the scene employs a failsafe device lifted from punk. Techno aficionados and artists alike worship equipment—if one has the requisite gear, the right black boxes, the right computer software, the right turntables and mixer, then talent is a moot point. Learn to loop a sample, cut together beats, get three turntables running in synch and voila, you're in business. You have every right to call yourself a DJ or a musician. You merely have to play the part. Yet a music that prides itself on the irrelevancy of musicianship surely must reach the end of its road quickly.

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<sup>1</sup> The image that comes to mind, particularly from this rhumba, is of Marlon Brando making a last ditch effort to save his tortured relationship with Maria Schneider in *Last Tango in Paris*. They are in a dancehall filled with old people moving to old music. Throughout the film, Bertolucci shows us Paris in transformation, the magnificent old buildings being dwarfed by new, sleek office towers. Modernity giving way or rather bullied into postmodernity. Something elemental is being lost, not just between the two lovers but between the past and the present.

Unless, of course, the audience is complicit in the swindle by fetishizing the music's limitations, turning a negative into a positive.

Again, faith in the future looms large. Much has been written about how techno taps the dreams of the Italian Futurists, in particular their obsession with speed and efficiency. This seems both a strained and misbegotten attempt for respectability. Marinetti and friends advocated an artistic fascism that played perfectly into Mussolini's vision of totalitarian statehood. The musical equipment of techno *is* infused with a certain democratic ethos. The makers of electronic music instruments have rendered the synthesizer and the drum machine the equivalent of the parlour room piano. During the eighties, commercial electronic music gear reached its design nadir—the instruments all sounded alike, all pre-programmed according to incomprehensible algorithms that nobody had the time or inclination to mess with. But they were relatively cheap, allowing non-musicians access to what had once been the domain of a privileged few. A decade later, manufacturers, thanks to the exponential growth of computer memory and processing speed, were able to replicate the analogue controls of vintage seventies synthesizers that made up Jarre's signature arsenal. The sounds Jarre produces are once again in vogue because they can cheaply and easily be reproduced. What cannot be replicated are the intangibles of talent and personal history. A machine, no matter how sophisticated and subtle, is just a machine until it is handled by a craftsman expressing his roots.

Thus, Jarre is such a subversive presence in the field of electronic dance music because he has returned to his roots at the very moment that techno is in spiritual crisis. When a 52-year-old Frenchman is making dance music, at once very contemporary and very old, for people less than half his age, something strange is bound to happen. In 1997, Jarre released a "sequel" to *Oxygene*, appropriately titled *Oxygene 7-13*. He called it *Oxygene* "replugged". And guess what? It was another seamless mix of tracks, at once sounding at home in 1976 and 1997, climaxing in... a rumba, complete with lush melancholic theme and lagging tempo.

Imagine hearing that at a rave! It would never happen. In techno, the mix is monochromatic, a manufactured eternity, much like television, always on, always set at the same frantic driving pitch. If there is a dropout, it is purely for dramatic effect; in no time the atomic metronome will explode back into action. The dancer is a sad solitary entity, trying in vain to keep up with that cruel galley slave drumbeat. In this, techno is also strategically minimalistic; while it escapes the vulgar dirty dancing associated with hip-hop, it also frees its acolytes from knowing how to dance together in a controlled, artistic manner. Ravers are off the hook of history. To repeat, the complete lack of sensuality in techno is a conscious philosophical dodge, designed to keep the past and the present at bay. Emotionless, ascetic yet fetishistic, techno privileges the worship of technology and its future over the embrace of emotional and physical authenticity. Jarre's rumbas, slow and sexy, force the issue by taking us back to Camus' dancehall where the absurd is waiting to take the floor in the arms of Beauty.

#### Discography

Jean Michel Jarre

*Oxygene* (1976)

*Oxygene 7-13* (1997)

*Magnetic Fields* (1981)

*Music for Supermarkets* (1983)