

# A Decade of Space Disco: What's eating Oslo's club scene?

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## Prins Thomas

“I never listened to Abstract, but I listened a lot to Strangefruit,” Terje tells me in the days after his headlining set at Øya. “He was probably the only one at the time who played really, really good music. I thought I was more into straight-up house, but he showed me how to mix, how to blend weird styles together and make them fit like a glove.” Exploring the same eclectic approach as Strangefruit, and inspired by the disco revivalism of fellow Norwegian Bjørn Torske (a key influence on the nascent Oslo sound despite being located in the rival town of Bergen, home to the likes of Röyksopp, Annie and Erot), Terje moved to the capital in 2000 to get the measure of the local scene.

Unfortunately, not much was happening. “Before then, there were maybe three nice clubs where you could go and listen to, maybe, Basement Jaxx before they were famous, stuff like that. But then something weird happened around the millennium – there were a couple of years where nothing happened in Oslo. Two of the really good clubs [Jazzid and Skansen] closed down at the same time. When I moved there in 2000 there was nothing – I mean, there were a few people who played, but you had to really search for it to find it. It was difficult to get bookings as well, and that was maybe the most important thing for me.”

Terje and his new acquaintances Prins Thomas and Hans-Peter Lindstrøm discovered that the lack of a dominant

dance trend gave them some breathing room to indulge their eclecticism. “The absence of techno let us think more freely I suppose,” says Terje. “Around the early 2000s, most of the DJs in Oslo would play ‘eclectic’ music, although some of them just used it as a trendy word because that was a thing when broken beat happened. There were so many different styles of music being played, like funk, techno, rock – everything in one night .”

While international attention was focused on Bergen following the success of Röyksopp’s 2001 debut *Melody AM*, Oslo’s producers were left to “piece things together very naturally,” says Thomas. “I met Lindstrøm, he introduced me to Terje, I already knew people like Blackbelt Andersen, Magnus International, Kalle Sandaas – there was something bubbling under. Everybody worked on music but nobody was doing anything except in their bedroom. So I started my first label, Tambourine, putting out some of this stuff and realising how not to run a label – we did everything wrong,” he laughs. His second attempt, Full Pupp, got off to a more promising start with the release of Terje’s ‘Mjøndalen Diskoklubb’ (the title is self-explanatory) at the start of 2005.

“Terje was 17 years young, eager. He was always a nerd, but he’s a good one. He was doing great stuff, but everything he was making was not good enough for him,” says Thomas. Strangefruit agrees: “Terje is super talented – he can also be almost academical, sometimes on the borderline of a kind of craziness.”

Boosted by the support of François K and Dan Tyler from Idjut Boys, who helped Thomas secure a decent distribution deal, Full Pupp began to poke its head above the parapet, releasing a string of chrome-plated, retro-futurist grooves from the likes of Diskjokke and Randaberg Ego Ensemble, while Thomas and Terje flew the flag abroad with their signature eclectic DJ sets. Soon came the release of Lindstrøm’s scene-defining ‘I Feel Space’ on his own label Feedelity, followed by his eventual arrival on Norway’s definitive experimental imprint Smalltown Supersound. By 2006, an international audience had cottoned on to this Norwegian space disco malarkey.



With no homegrown music industry to pull the strings, the city’s producers had the space to gestate slowly and practise their craft away from the spotlight. “There was no pressure,” adds Thomas. Meanwhile, the local club scene received a shot in the arm with nights like Shari Vari, run by Terje with his hometown pal Dølle Jølle, and the growth

of Sunkissed at Blå, which launched in 2000 with a typically mixed-bag music policy, as DJ and promoter Ola Smith-Simonsen recalls. “For the first three years we’d be mixing Carl Craig records with The Clash. Back in 2000, you couldn’t really run a club night playing one type of music, and I think this eclecticism has become really important [to Oslo’s scene].”

After four nights on the trot, I have to admit I’m still slightly baffled by the city’s club culture, particularly after having to fend off a pair of drunken creeps during Robert Hood’s set, something I rarely have to deal with in London clubs (admittedly, most of my nights out take place at the thoroughly asexual Corsica Studios). But an odd atmosphere springs up in a town where everything shuts at 3am. You’re constantly clock-watching, trying to cram everything – drinks, fags, dancing, chatting, loo breaks, a bit more dancing – into just a couple of hours. Looking at the logistics of it, you can see why these eclectic, disco-rooted sets have dominated – no one’s got the time to lose themselves in a session of deep, dark techno with only the odd hi-hat for company. “Here, it’s about giving the best of the best for the shortest amount of time,” says Bratten, the DJ from Dattera til Hagen earlier. “And the alcohol laws here are unfortunately shooting themselves in the foot, because people are trying to drink as much as possible in this time – even the DJs are drinking as much as they can, because it’s free!”

And partly for that reason, drugs like MDMA and ketamine are virtually non-existent here. Cocaine is prevalent, as it is wherever bozos and money collide, and a staggering number of these outwardly wholesome Scandis are puffing Marlboros, but really it’s booze that’s the order of the day – dance floors are rowdy, drinks are spilled, and taxis are bitterly fought over at the end of the night. After a year of visiting clubs around Europe, Bratten is convinced his home country takes the wrong approach. “Curfews are stupid. In Berlin people are coming and leaving constantly, everything is easy and calm, taxi queues are short. But when 600 sexually frustrated males meet in a taxi line, a fight is very easy to find. Especially with liquor and cocaine.”

The early closing time is a misguided attempt to reduce alcohol consumption, says Smith-Simonsen. “The reason why people are so drunk is that they adapt to the framework, so you have to push everything into those two hours when you’re in the club. People drink a lot before they go to the club, because it’s quite expensive, but when you get old enough to actually afford it, you’re so tied up in this tradition that you keep going to pre-parties,” he explains. “I think it’s important to remember that the Labour Party here was actually started through the Christian teetotal movement as a response to tough times and lay-offs. So the teetotal movement is equally strong within the Labour Party, and as a party that’s in and out of power as much as the Labour Party is in the UK, or more, that has an effect,” he says. Venues can be slapped with a week-long ban if inspectors discover two violations – that is, two people they deem too drunk – as happened at Dattera til Hagen a while ago. “The licensing here has been completely off the hook, they’re running around like little detectives trying to find people who are a little bit over the limit,” he sighs.

For those who want to carry on until morning, a handful of after-parties and illegal set-ups do exist, though few people I meet seemed to know about them. Bratten, however, is currently involved in setting up an after-hours offering at an artists’ community in the city called White Light Studios. “I wanted to help them have a proper techno venue here because I play techno when I DJ, and when I do, I see that people like getting something rougher and harder – but you can’t close techno parties at three in the morning! So we have to figure out how we’re going to do this. It’s on the drawing board.”

The issue of drugs, meanwhile, is “very sensitive”, says Smith-Simonsen. “The Norwegian national press can’t debate drugs in a sensible way. Talking about drugs in a club setting is difficult because there’s no finesse to it here, there’s no understanding. That obviously permeates in terms of what’s accepted. And what it does is it pushes all this stuff onto illegal scenes where you have no control at all.”

“But there’s also this thing of Norway being a society where there’s money to fix things. There’s not a lot of big

issues, and you end up starting to micro-manage people's lives, you know – cigarettes are bad for you, alcohol is bad for you, cycling without a helmet is bad for you, sitting on the back of lorries driving through fields is bad for you, all this stuff. Sometimes it becomes this feeling that it's so dangerous to live that you can't really do it, and that becomes a danger in a society like Norway where you end up debating these small things. The space in which to make your own faults and live a little, those spaces are getting smaller and smaller. There's nothing good about drinking too much alcohol or taking drugs, but I actually think that it's a good thing to get smashed some times in your life."

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