

the isolation and ecstasy of dance music in the arctic circle

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Most dance music scenes are born out of a sense of rebellion and resistance. Chicago house emerged from black and queer communities; UK rave kids filled underground warehouses and secluded fields during the Thatcher years. Norway, an isolated winter wonderland frequently ranked one of the world's most prosperous and progressive countries, is better known for its shockingly low rates of seasonal depression than its grimy subterranean clubs. Yet the arctic city of Tromsø is the birthplace of out-of-this-world house and disco music.

Ben Davis, one of the co-founders of 90s dance label Paper Recordings, traveled through Tromsø, Oslo, and Bergen to document the emergence of Norway's unique sound — and the teenagers who created it from their basements and bedrooms, often during the months when the country is plunged into 24-hour darkness. His film *Northern Disco Lights* includes interviews with a whopping 67 DJs, friends, and fans including Bjørn Torske, Prins Thomas, DJ Strangefruit, Lindstrøm, Annie, and Mental Overdrive. The result is a breathtaking portrait of geographic isolation, desire for escape, personal tragedy, and unadulterated hedonism. We talked to Ben about how landscape can inform music, and how music can create a world.

***Northern Disco Lights* is your first-ever film. What inspired you to capture this specific music scene?**

We had been looking for a new challenge for a while, because we had been running Paper Recordings for 25 years. We went for a funding meeting with Music Norway and ran a few ideas past them. We were actually looking for funding for Proviand Audio, one of our Norwegian acts. Almost as an afterthought, we put forward a film on Norwegian dance music. They thought it was a really good idea, so Pete and I left and decided it might be the challenge we had been looking for.

How familiar were you with Norwegian dance music before you embarked on the project?

There was definitely an element of wanting to explore the scene more myself. We have a strong connection with Norway through our artists, but I guess the genesis of the idea was [our curiosity about] why disco resonated so strongly within Norway. Disco started in the black gay clubs of New York, and Norway is this very white Scandinavian country on the edge of the Arctic Circle. As a country, I really like the people and I really like the music. There's something really weird about the music. On the surface, these Scandinavian countries have a great living standard and a very strong middle class. There's not much of a gap between rich and poor. It's very safe. But in Norway, certainly, there's this bonkers undercurrent that's really unique compared to anywhere else.

Where did the term "cosmic disco" come from?

I think it's just one of those things that stuck. I don't think it's necessarily relevant any more. When Lindstrøm and Prins Thomas first came out, [their music] was certainly labeled that. I guess there is a psychedelia and a weirdness to Norwegian music, but it's fairly broad. You listen to Mental Overdrive and hear techno, you listen to Bjørn Torske and hear something else. I guess there is a loop into modern Norwegian dance music with some of the Lindstrøm records. I think with Strangefruit, it just sounded like it wasn't from Norway. Growing up, there was only one radio station that played rubbish mainstream music. So this sounded like nothing else.



There's certainly that connotation of escapism and possibility rather than a specific sound.

Yes. What does Strangefruit say? He created his own world with the music that he listened to. Strangefruit ended up with the magic tape. It was on his coffee table with no label on it and he put it on. It was Paradise Garage, on Kiss FM. It was like it was from outer space. He didn't know where it was from or what it did, it just resonated.

Kiss FM and Paradise Garage, plus imported British music magazines and foreign records, seem to have really informed the Norwegian dance sound. How difficult were those things to access before the internet?

I suppose, wherever you are, if you're interested in music, you try to find out about it. You can probably say that in the 80s and 90s, the UK was the centre of that. There is a strong connection between Norway and the UK. They would get those music papers and come over on record buying trips. That's where they found a lot of the inspiration — it was closer than New York.

In the documentary, the DJs talk about airing anything from Detroit techno to live sex on the radio. Lindstrom and Prins Thomas's career-defining BBC Essential Mix was also very eclectic, encompassing Giorgio Moroder, 70s Greek singer Demis Roussos, and Fleetwood Mac.

There's a real sense of eclecticism. Certainly before, if you were a DJ, you would often be stuck in your genre. In Norway, they're quite happy to play anything as long as it keeps the dance floor full. They can play quite cheesy records and get away with it. Todd Terje is a prime example of that. He makes pretty cheesy records but they seem to just stay on the right side of credibility. You listen to Prins Thomas's mixes these days — he recently hosted Beats in Space — the music is pretty out there, whacked out, and avant garde, but Norwegians don't think in genres like the rest of the world does. I think that's why there's longevity in the scene. They're just interested in music.

The relatively unknown story of Erot, who died of a heart condition at just 23, is really touching. Did you always know he would become such an integral part of the film's narrative?

Erot's story is the film's heart, really. I was aware before we started the film that he had died and I was aware that I really liked his records. So he was definitely on my radar. He was the first one who kind of got global success, and pointed the way for the others. He was an immense talent. He died when he was so young, and if you listen to his records now, they still sound pretty amazing. You can hear his sound develop over a short period of time. There were two aims of the film. One was to get Bjørn Torske more appreciated, and the other was to shine light on Erot's career.

I love that you released Erot's *Song for Annie* for Record Store Day. It's a beautiful track and much of this music is really hard to find online.

Well, we had real trouble licensing some of this stuff. Most of it is only on vinyl, so in the film, they're vinyl rips. It's a real shame because there are a few things we would have liked to put out, but we felt uncomfortable about putting out a vinyl rip for sale. They're probably around somewhere, but we certainly couldn't get hold of them.

Tell me about the link between Todd Terje and Erot. Todd's sister was actually friends with him.

Yeah, I think of Todd Terje as being the spiritual heir to Erot. They have a thin connection in the film, and Bjørn is the only one who mentions it. It's almost like a feeling, though there is something concrete. It's not like Erot mentored him but I feel Todd has achieved what Erot would have done 15 years ago.

How did you go about sourcing and curating all the archival footage? The old VHS tapes from the underground raves in the 90s are amazing.

God, I spent weeks trying to get this stuff out. The holy grail was getting video. Everyone knew someone who had something in his grandmother's loft six miles away, and a lot of it was trying to get it off them. When a DJ gave us footage from a rave, we were breaking out the champagne. These days, everyone videos everything. Back then, there was usually one guy who did a lot of videoing. Everyone else did nothing. So we were super happy when that landed. There was another guy who had started making a film on the Tromsø techno scene. He never quite finished it and so we were able to pay him a bit of money for it. To see people moving is so much more powerful than a photo.

The sweeping drone shots of the landscape are also stunning. It really gives you a sense of how isolated that part of the world feels, particularly in winter when the sun never rises.

I was conscious from the beginning to gather as much footage as we could. The landscape, to me, was one of the characters in the film. It informs the music and informs the people. The cliché view of Norwegian scenery is the Northern Lights. I wanted to get away from that. The scenery can be really weird and a bit sinister and bleak. The other thing with the landscape shots is that we were conscious of it moving through the country. At the beginning it's all ice and cold, then it goes down to Bergen and it's all lush and warm and green, then it goes through Oslo and it's a bit more urban and grey.

Were you aware that the landscape would become such an important character? It seems so integral to the development of the sound.

I guess it developed more as I went on. Norway is so underpopulated. The geography is also just very interesting. You look at a map of Norway and it's mind-boggling. The coast is just all these inlets and it's so complicated. I wanted to get that across. When I started asking questions I wanted to make a stronger connection from the landscape to the music and the artists. But in the end it was more of a suggestion, really. As an observer, and not as a Norwegian, you can have a bit more of an opinion the landscape.

Northern Disco Lights is on general release on April 29.

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