

Global Ear

A survey of sounds from around the planet

There are seven of us sitting down to lunch in this restaurant in the Estalagem hotel, a vertiginous terraced complex of two-storey apartment blocks, patios, pools, cafe and bar areas built into the side of a cliff face overlooking the village of Ponta Do Sol on the southern coast of the island of Madeira. My lunch companions comprise four Africans, a Cuban and a German. The Africans and the Cuban are joking with each other and giving me a lesson in the kind of tense relationships that can exist between island communities and their mainland hosts. They are all in fact Portuguese, as is Madeira itself. Apparently, the mainland Portuguese refer to the Madeirans as Africans due to the island's location, 500 kilometres off the coast of Morocco, but more than 900 kilometres from Lisbon itself. The islanders refer to the mainlanders as Cubans for a rather less prosaic reason. In 1974, Portugal's long standing right wing dictatorship was overthrown by a left wing military coup, the so-called Carnation revolution. Intriguingly, the current Madeiran flag bears an uncanny resemblance to that of a defunct right wing terrorist paramilitary organisation styling itself the Madeira Archipelago Liberation Front, which once fought an unsuccessful campaign for independence from mainland Portugal.

Isolated from continental drifts and trends, remote island states can become enclaves of entrenched tradition. Over the years Madeira has acquired a reputation for being a suitably conservative location for the members of Europe's bourgeoisie to live out their retirements. And so this lunchtime meeting is part of another ongoing coup attempt, one which looks to reboot the island's cultural identity along more progressive lines.

With the exception of your correspondent, all of those around the table are involved in one way or

another with Madeira DiG, one of the more unusual and utopian, not to say unlikely and little known, events on the global electronic music calendar.

Styling itself as "an avant garde trip through the world of serious new and contemporary music," this festival for digital music and art "aims to bring international top level artists from music, film, video, computer art and photography [to the island], and also to motivate Madeiran artists to create new works in these fields." What that has meant in practice is that since 2004 the likes of Vladislav Delay, Burnt Friedman, Jaki Liebezeit, AGF, Tina Frank, Fennesz, Frank Bretschneider, Alog, Philip Jeck, Scanner and Oval have travelled to the island to perform initially at venues located in the capital Funchal but in more recent years at the Casa das Mudras arts centre, a low-rise slab of concrete and glass that juts out into the Atlantic a few kilometres further along the coast from Ponta Do Sol. The decision to relocate the festival to a venue outside of the capital is just one aspect of a mission to extend access to vanguard digital culture, and not just with regard to Madeira.

"Five years ago, when Rafael first had the idea for the festival, it came from him going to electronic music festivals in Europe that were always presented in urban areas, northern cities," says Maurício Marques, Madeira DiG's co-producer, referring to Rafael Biscoito, the festival's unassuming creative director. Rafael has joined us for lunch, but sits quietly at the far end of the table throughout the discussion, citing his poor English as the reason he is happy for others to proselytize on his behalf. "The idea," Maurício continues, "was why can't we use this kind of environment, that is very friendly and natural, and produce a digital arts festival in Madeira, to mix electronic works with the environment, with the sea,

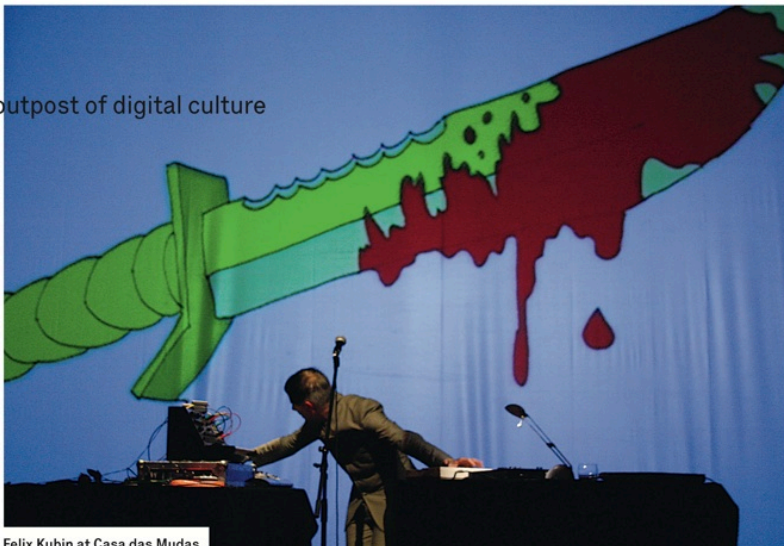
with the landscapes, with the forests? We can offer a truly unique experience. The whole concept is to create something unique."

In recent years, Madeira DiG has taken place over the first weekend in December. The format for each of the four nights of the festival has remained consistent: a concert at Casa das Mudras followed by an after show party at the Estalagem. By all accounts, up until 2008 the audience for this tropical island mix of arts centre electronica, VJ culture and Ambient DJ sets was comprised of curious local youth and superannuated winter sun seekers with not much else to do on a Friday or Saturday night in Madeira. Enter Michael Rosen, a Berlin based IT consultant for Design Hotels, the chain of boutique establishments of which the Estalagem is a part. It just so happens that Rosen also runs the Digital In Berlin website, which hosts and publicises events that feature the kind of advanced electronic sound and visual art that the organisers of DiG are so keen to transpose to the island. After attending the 2008 edition, Rosen started promoting DiG heavily through his website, selling it to Berlin's electronica community as an exotic new destination festival. He is obviously an effective campaigner, because this year the bulk of DiG's audience was made up of punters who had travelled to Madeira from various points across Germany, buying into the prospect of a total island experience that was implicit in the kind of package deals being offered by the confluence of the festival, venue and hotel.

"I came here for the first time in 2008 and saw the possibilities," Rosen explains. "So this year I help these guys with making a whole corporate identity, with the art directors, making a website, trying to show the people what is special about this place, what is unique about it, because normally a festival like

On the paradise island of
Madeira

Tony Herrington discovers a utopian outpost of digital culture



Felix Kubin at Casa das Mudras

Jason Forrest at the Estalagem hotel



Gigantiq at Casa das Mudanças

this exists in cities, in cellars, in dark places. We are on a special island that has more character, more adventure, than an island like Majorca. The festival is not about Techno. Here we create adventure for serious music in a beautiful place.”

If that sounds a little like the kind of rhetoric used by the tourism industry to sell vanguard destinations to jaded world travellers, it fits with the philosophy of an event that needs to rewire perceptions of its host island if it is to develop the kind of international audiences that will guarantee its future viability. The decision to stage the festival in December was also strategic, as Maurício Marques explains: “The festival used to happen in September. We moved it to December for two reasons, because there is not much happening in Europe then, but also in Europe in December it is cold, there is snow, and we can say to people, look, there is this thing happening in Madeira, and the climate is like spring, and also because that is when flights are cheapest.”

“We can never be a big festival, this is a small island, we cannot bring 50,000 people here, it’s impossible, so we don’t want to be a new version of Sónar. But we don’t have an audience here that can support the festival, so we have to attract people to come here, but to keep it intimate at the same time.”

All the literature produced by DiG, Casa das Mudanças and the Estalagem emphasises Madeira’s unique ‘floating garden’ ecology, its spectacular volcanic landscapes, the ‘paradise island’ environment. Likewise, the festival and its content is characterised as an example of sophisticated sustainable development within a delicate and exquisite ecosystem. But the organisers also look to exploit the Easyjet effect, which has had a significant, if little commented upon, impact on the map of experimental music in Europe. Budget airlines

open routes that connect hub cities such as London and Berlin with otherwise obscure destinations, from Tampere in Finland to Madeira itself, and all of a sudden the cultural traffic is rerouted down previously occluded channels and new centres of energy and excellence are established.

“The people who come here are the opinion makers, they effect what can happen or doesn’t happen,” suggests Vitor Joaquim, the sole Cuban at this particular feast. He is referring to the kind of hyper-networked artists that perform at DiG, whose line-up this year included Murcof, Carsten Nicolai, Felix Kubin, Jason Forrest, Zavoloka, as well as local (ie Portuguese) artists Gigantiq, Jerome Faria and Hugo Olim. Like Michael Rosen, Joaquim, a musician and educator who also runs the EME (as in Encontros de Musica Experimental) festival in Lisbon, has been drawn to the island by the possibilities offered by the DiG initiative. “There may only be a small number of people here but everybody has connections that can really effect things like information, education. So you are dealing with people that can really change opinion.”

Vitor Joaquim dreams of bringing the British land artist Anthony Goldsworthy to the island, of video mapping the blank exteriors of Casa das Mudanças, of building a programme of lectures, workshops, seminars, expanding the discourse around the music, “changing lives” as he puts it. For his part, Michael Rosen sees the potential for DiG to become “a creative base for companies to come and brainstorm and workshop ideas.” This would have the added effect of boosting off-season trade for this particular Design Hotel, of course, which is now a core component in the infrastructure of the whole Madeira DiG project, as Michael explains: “The hotel

is homebase for everyone coming to the festival. This is where the after shows happen, all the artists are here, all the people are here.” “It is the perfect place to make connections,” adds André Diogo, the Estalagem’s director general, “and to come and find out more about Madeira.”

And sure enough, on the Saturday of this year’s festival, a party of musicians, delegates and punters take a coach from the Estalagem to the vast plateau at the top of the island, 2000 metres up in the mountains, in order to walk the levadas, a labyrinthine network of irrigation canals and aqueducts that has been cut into the living rock. Up on the plateau, forests of wind turbines churn through the low lying mist. And I think of the cloud sculptors in JG Ballard’s *Vermillion Sands*, and of how Casa das Mudanças might soften the cold, hard surfaces of its classic Brutalist architecture by integrating the kind of singing statues once imagined by Ballard. As is the case with Lanzarote, it’s easy to lose yourself in the fantasy that this island is *Vermillion Sands* in the here and now. The dread mood might be dissipated, but spend a few days here and you soon start to sense that peculiar kind of ennui that paradise brings on.

“Some of the things that happen here, like the levada walks, they are spontaneous, they are not calculated,” insists Maurício Marques, as we near the end of this long lunch. “Our idea is not to lose that spontaneity, but to engage more people in this kind of stuff. When artists come here we encourage them to stay for the whole festival, to see the island, to meet with the audience, other artists, exchange ideas and experience. Sometimes it is not possible, they have other agendas. But if they do stay they see what is unique about this place.” □ Additional research by Roxan Kiley

Jerome Faria