

A DYNAMIC PROCESSES



Marc Romboy is one of the most prolific and diverse DJ/producers around. From his early '90s house beginnings through a spell in pop music and back to releasing, making and playing underground dance, he's made all kinds of styles, collaborated with his heroes and built his Systematic label into a universally respected stamp of quality. On the eve of the label's 100th release, we talk to Romboy about turning his back on the mainstream and returning to his roots, his can-do philosophy, and much more...

Words: BEN ARNOLD

This month producer, DJ and label boss Marc Romboy's Systematic imprint reaches a pair of extremely neat milestones — its 10th anniversary and its 100th release. Prior to

Systematic, he had always collaborated on his projects, whether in production or label-running, but Systematic was the first label that was solely his and, quite rightly, he's wildly proud of the amount he's achieved in a decade. "I'm the sole A&R, and that was a kind of debut for me," he says. "But there was never really a plan. One thing just led to another."

When he created Systematic back in 2004, he was at a turning point. From a grounding in classic electronica from the earliest days of acid house in Germany, he'd drifted. He'd launched the Le Petit Prince label in 1993 with producer Klaus Derichs, which had latterly capitalised on the growing appetite for trance across Europe. They produced together as Marc et Claude, releasing throbbing, commercial trance versions of tracks like Minnie Ripperton's 'Loving You' and their biggest hit, a cover of The Korgis' 'Everybody's Got To Learn Sometime', called 'I Need Your Lovin''. The prolific Le Petit Prince released pop trance in droves from acts like RMB and Nikolai, with several tracks troubling the charts. Despite knowing the difference between good music and, let's say, not so good music, and with the label in profit, he'd convinced himself that he was on the right path. But all was not well. "Around 2002, it became so silly. Producers would be making these silly cover versions of soundtrack music, like Titanic and whatever. Even this became successful," he says. Then one day, he was 20 minutes into recording a new mix in his basement when he pressed stop on his turntables and decided that enough was enough. "I really could not continue, it was impossible," he says. "Something in my mind just said 'No, I can't do this shit anymore'. I supported this development for a couple of years, and for a while there was nothing really to say against it. I'm very thankful that I was able to self-reflect. It sounds easy now, in this interview, like 'OK, 10 years ago I did this', but it sounds much easier than it actually was. I'm very happy I had the power to say, 'I don't want to do this anymore'. It was a seamless transition. I stopped that, and I started this. "I thought, 'Where have I come from? What are my roots? What makes me happy?'" he says. "And it was not this commercial bullshit."

At almost exactly the same time, Walter Merziger & Arno Kammermeier, now known as Booka Shade — and who had also recorded trance and commercial Euro house for Le Petit Prince and other labels under various pseudonyms — had had something of an epiphany too. They'd decided to turn their back on the past, move to Berlin and launch a new label called Get Physical. They invited Romboy over from his hometown of Mönchengladbach to check out their new office, and they wrote Systematic release number one together — Booka Shade vs Marc Romboy, the track 'Every Day In My Life'. It was the end of one

chapter, and the start of another one. One with a happy ending, and one that was actually a lot more like the first chapter in his musical journey.

ACID DUSSELDORF

Romboy has always lived in Mönchengladbach, which thanks to proximity to Dusseldorf, felt the influence of Kraftwerk looming large when he was growing up. He remembers going into a record shop aged about eight and trying to sing 'The Robots' to the man behind the counter so he could buy it. His parents had extremely eclectic tastes too, while the sound of the German new-wave of pop — known as Neue Deutsche Welle — seized his imagination. "It was not only Kraftwerk, people like DAF or even Can who are partly from Dusseldorf, they colour your mind, your opinion," he says. Like London and Manchester, Dusseldorf seemed to receive acid house in its infancy, around 1987, when Romboy was 16. Sneaking into clubs was the only option, and the local one happened to be owned by the footballer Günter Netzer. It was called Sunrise. "This club was special because they played everything. Bauhaus, Joy Division, early electronic stuff, cool pop stuff, The Smiths. And later there were acid house parties there. People from Cologne and Dusseldorf, the bigger towns, would come. It was a huge influence to me. This summer I met at a boat party the guy who was the door bouncer at the club. He said he knew that I was not old enough, but he could somehow feel that the music was important to me. I was astonished, and [it was] funny to hear that after such a long time. I thanked him a lot."

Finishing high school, he started a degree in medicine in Dusseldorf. But as soon as the lectures finished, he couldn't wait to get to Sounds Good, a record shop in town run by a gay couple from New York. "They knew the hot shit. Sometimes the UPS guy wouldn't even get past me to the counter, and I'd be opening the packages," he says. All the early Detroit and Chicago tracks would come through, and Romboy would swipe them before anyone else. Soon also the music coming from Antwerp and Ghent became 'essential' too, notably from the eminent R&S Records and Music Man labels. "I bought almost everything they released," he says. "CJ Bolland, Joey Beltram, Robert Leiner. Then later Ken Ishii, and we're friends now, which is really nice!" The medical degree did not stand much of a chance. He thought he might go back to it after a couple of years, "but those one or two years turned into 22 years". Romboy's mother, he remembers, said to him: "If you feel it, do it". Clubs like Relax, a seminal gay club, and Ratinger Hof, the pivotal Dusseldorf venue where countless krautrock bands made their names, became regular haunts. "We had records, but no idea how to produce music," he continues. A friend knew the prolific acid techno producer Jürgen Driessen, who had a local studio and agreed to act as a kind of musical director, throwing down the ideas they came up with. Romboy, Driessen, Derichs and Stefan Bossemes released their first track under the name Unknown Structure in 1992. It was abrasive stuff.

TECHNO WORKOUTS

Smitten, he immediately bought an Atari ST, a mixing desk, a Roland 303, a Roland JD800 and an Akai S1000 sampler using his Volkswagen Golf as surety for a loan from the bank. Early tracks for Le Petit Prince, which in 1993 was among the first German dance labels, found him recording under names like Chicago Jaxx, making Armando-inspired, stripped down techno workouts. Hints

of that original trance sound — “trance was nothing else but techno with pads”, he says — were evident in tracks recorded under other names like Cologne Summer and Marcello & Claudio. He also recorded with the likes of Trope’s Thomas Heckmann, making pretty uncompromising acid techno. But it was once Romboy’s trance crisis, so to speak, was resolved that he set himself on this current course, slowing the beats per minute and returning to his roots in house music. He set up Systematic, and it’s allowed him to move forward, and also to work with some of his idols, like Detroit veteran Blake Baxter.

“The funny thing is, I totally believed that he would work with me. Which looking back was a little bit crazy, because we didn’t have any personal contact before. I just contacted him through his booker, and said I wanted to do a record with him. So I sent him the instrumental, and the result was ‘Freakin’”, Systematic number six!

“Try, try, try... that was always my philosophy. And if you don’t know people personally, I feel there’s a kind of non-verbal language with music. Obviously, he could feel it. Sometimes music can say more than a million words.”

HEROES

Some labels have a plan. They might deem themselves ‘a brand’, and have a strategy for everything from art to marketing, but Romboy seemed to just take things as they came. “There was not a plan. [Early on] I asked John [Dahlback] to remix one of my singles, then he said ‘by the way, I have three or four tracks’, and would I like them. It was just a kind of dynamic process.” Dahlback has been one of the Systematic crew since the very beginning, duly followed by the likes of Ken Ishii (once an idol, now a friend, with whom Romboy wrote the album ‘Taiyo’ last year), Paris the Black Fu from Detroit Grand Pubahs, Stephan Bodzin, Robert Babicz, Ripperton, Chelonis R. Jones, Steve Lawler, Belgium’s Spirit Catcher, Satoshi Tomiie and the legendary Mike Dunn.

Among his proudest moments is scooping and re-issuing veteran producer Terrence Parker’s classic Detroit piano anthem ‘Love’s Got Me High’ for the label, one of his favourite tracks of all-time. “Oh my god, yes,” he says. “It gave me goosebumps. What an honour to be able to remix and release a track like this, and of course have a great guy like Jimpster remix it too. It always depends what you expect from your heroes, they are human beings after all, but Terrence is a very nice fellow. It was all done with mutual respect. I think this kind of music should be more supported anyway. Tracks like ‘God Made Me Phunky’, or ‘Love’s Got Me High’, I’m pretty sure people will be listening to this music still in 100 years. Maybe it’s then something like classical music?!”

Things have continued to take pleasing turns for Romboy, who, given his input into the electronic music scene over 23 years, deserves very much to reap what he’s sown. A remix of his own track ‘Iceland’ from Laurent Garnier, a hero of his since Romboy presented the French titan with some of his material in a warehouse in Cologne back in 1993, is soon to be released. “I met him again, like, 15 years later, and he remembered this moment, when I gave him some records! I don’t know what kind of brain he has, but it must be a healthy one,” he says. He’s doubtless in a good place right now, 100 releases in, yet he’s still somehow amazed that the label has become the success it has. It’s perhaps this humble nature which keeps things together.

“That I can share this vibe together with people all over the globe, this is something I sometimes still cannot really believe,” he says. “It sounds like a movie, but sometimes I still wake up and say ‘wow’, and know how grateful I am for it.”

• *Catch Marc Romboy in London at DJ Mag Sessions at Egg, 26th September...*



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