

# COM- ING TO

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Global journeys into an electronic  
music and club culture capital

# BER- LIN

First published by Velocity Press 2022

velocitypress.uk

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Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

Cover design: Hayden Russell

Cover image: Nina Richards

Typesetting: Paul Baillie-Lane (pblpublishing.co.uk)

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ISBN: 9781913231156

# 1: FRESH SNOW ON RIGAER STRASSE

## INTRODUCTION. ARRIVALS.

The first time I danced in Berlin was in a place I never knew the name of, and in the years since, I have never found where it was.

I remember conversations; I remember the lights, the frequencies, movement. I even remember the hair and voices of the people I crammed into a taxi with on the way there and the position of the warped Formica tables stacked with coats and bags that had been shoved around the side of the dancefloor. Most significantly, I remember dancing and the feeling emitting out between everyone, and that it wasn't just one thing. Maybe I'd glimmered this feeling sporadically before, a moment at a festival perhaps, forgotten moments in fields rekindled unexpectedly. Over the following month, that feeling extended outwards into my experiences of being in the city, a few more times as I danced but more than that. In cafes, in bars, in the tempo of conversations, with the way strangers would look at each other. Sometimes gruff. Sometimes flirtatious. Rude or sexy. Warm or cold. It was an energy I couldn't and didn't want to define. I just wanted to be in it. What I don't remember, because maybe I never knew to begin with, is the club's name.

I remember the beginning of the night. Twisted half out of the window ledge, the snow falling across the tenement courtyard. I checked the list of places Maya recommended. Bars mostly, nothing too hectic; I was exhausted and

wanted to ease my way in. That afternoon we'd eaten bagels and stove coffee standing up by the fridge as we both drew up comparative lists. Not long after, wiping crumbs from her lips, she wrapped into a thick black scarf until her neck disappeared, lifting a travel bag over her shoulder. I opened the front door, and with a draft of cold air, she said what I'd later realise was not cheers but *tschuss*. Bye.

This was my first night alone in Berlin. I'd arrived earlier in the week, 14 February 2012. Maya was a friend of a friend and we'd arranged a room swap. She was studying and wanted to write her thesis and cycle around Hackney. I didn't know what a Berghain was, or a Tresor, and the only Sisyphos I knew was a myth. Still, the prospect of spending a winter month living in her Friedrichshain *Altbau* played into this romantic notion I'd built up from years of listening to *Low*, *Heroes* and *Lodger*, those three albums Bowie made in the two years he lived across town in Schöneberg. To me, that meant a sort of desolate isolation and creative rebirth. Historically neglectful perhaps, but something I'd come to learn I was very far from unique in feeling.

In London, I had once been an electronic music producer. I worked in events and then, through this, I'd become a DJ, but not a DJ in the sense of what I'd reconnect with over that night and in the months and years following. I was a DJ in the sense that I'd figure out what to play to different clients. And then I'd play it in an order I'd figure most effective, and this would get me bookings. I played film wrap parties and weddings, bars, openings and hotels. I played requests. Sometimes I'd finish one set, Pret sandwich in one hand, headphones dangling, straight onto the tube to the next. Fun. Formula but fun. Rent paid. But hang on a minute – really, I just like to make things. I like to make connections, and I'd forgotten this somewhere along the way. Maya and I started talking through Messenger about her little one-room apartment, and that in February, Berlin would be really cold – like, really cold. I could spend time in a city where I didn't know anyone and didn't speak the language. I

thought of 'A New Career In A New Town' off Bowie's *Low*. I played the track on repeat, those wintry synths, the distant harmonica that sounds like a drunk making their way home along a brutalist alleyway. Maya had some fantasies about London too. Over a month of Facebook conversations, it felt a trust had been built. We arranged the room swap.

The first several days, I trudged in the snow along Simon-Dach-Straße. I found a thrift store; my London shoes had holes and my socks turned into a soggy mess. I bought some trainers for ten euros and ate lunch in the first place I saw. I ordered something off a menu I didn't understand and went to Mitte, spending an afternoon reading a book in Café Cinema on Hackescher Markt. And I slept. I slept a lot. I had absolutely no desire to do anything other than just slow down. In the evenings, Maya would get back from her student job. One night we went to what I'd come to know as Kotti, where Maya introduced the concept of Club-Mate in the smoky backroom of Cafe Luzia. It tasted like herbal Irn-Bru, and at the bar, they topped up our litre bottles with vodka. We went up a graffiti-covered stairwell and listened to a DJ playing New Order in Paloma Bar. Maya taught me some very rudimentary Deutsch, and that one of the first words *Ausländer*s like myself start using is *genau*, which sort of means 'I agree.' She joked that *Ausländer*s will often, if they don't understand what a German has just said, reply with a simple *genau*. Another: *Kann ich bitte einen Wodka haben?* And then I'd go and try saying this at the bar.

On the Saturday after Maya left, I showered and went for a walk around the neighbourhood. The snow along Rigaer Straße fell so consistently that in those first few days I never noticed the cobbled paving. I stopped off at Lidl; it was Saturday evening, and she'd warned me that supermarkets shut on Sunday. 'So unless you want to live off Haribo from the *Späti*,' she'd said, 'go before you go out.' I asked her what a *Späti* was and she described to me the little Turkish-ran late shops where you can buy alcohol, tobacco, snacks and maybe toilet roll. There I was, learning the rudimentary *Ausländer* terms. *Späti*. Kotti.

*Genau.*

On the way, along Rigaer Straße, I saw protest banners hanging from balconies. Years later, I'd get told these were once unoccupied buildings. During a period after the Wall fell, in what the publisher Christoph Links called 'The Wonderful Year of Anarchy', these buildings became the squatted housing of young East Berliners and their wealthier West German cousins. There were battles between occupants and the police. 'The Battle of Mainzer Straße'. I'd also learned that a decade before the battles, inside a church I'd pass on my way back from Lidl, in the tall and Gothic Samariterkirche, a union formed between young East German punks and the Catholic church, right under the radar of the Stasi.

I got back, ate and opened the kitchen window, looking at the list of bars and clubs in the area Maya had recommended. At the top: Berghain. This word came up in conversation more and more. 'You can even walk to it from here,' she suggested. I gulped. In my years out of sync with underground dance culture, there was a lot to catch up on, and so what if people were saying that this big old former factory was the best club in the world? An opinion was setting in my tired mind: stringent door policy and strict minimalism. Fucking on the dancefloor and The Piss Man in the urinals. You've got to wear black. Yada yada. Even now, even amongst Berliners, Berghain gets mentioned so often in the hyperbolic, an invitation to recount wild experiences. And at that moment, smoking out of the window, tired, and as I practised saying *Kann ich bitte einen Wodka haben?* and *genau* into the night air, it just sounded too much. An hour later, I was in Süss War Gestern.

On the way, snow was a blizzard, Simon-Dach-Straße eerily quiet. In the decade following, I would only again feel this overwhelming quietness during lockdown. I passed Astro bar, the long-gone KPTN, the Intimes Cinema. Left along Wühlischstraße. Maya had described Süss War Gestern as a bar but with a club atmosphere. So I think, hey, I can listen to DJs, maybe even dance, but

then leave at a reasonable hour and be in bed early. *Genau*. I found a seat near the DJ booth, cigarette smoke ascending into swirly grey constellations around dozens of miniature disco balls, and I asked someone what the bar's name was in English: Sweet Was Yesterday. Inside the DJ booth, a woman with blonde frizzy hair was taking over from a guy in a beanie hat. She had her headphones hanging below her chin and used fingers delicately to cue in a record. Backwards a little. Pause. A little forward.

'Hey, what do you think?' says a voice, leaning over from a group of five or six next to me. 'We're debating if midnight is too early to go to Berghain.' They've all driven down from Oslo, crossing the Baltic Sea via the ferry; we chinked glasses. I tell them I'm new in town too, but that I'd heard locals go on Sunday morning. Maybe eleven. 'Eleven in the morning?' said one, with an air of exasperation. It's funny how I remember her peeling the label on a bottle of beer, saying how she didn't think she could stay awake so long, their warmth as they invited me into their circle and that Nordic ability to naturally switch on English mannerisms. I remember all this, but what I don't remember are their names. Or even particularly what they looked like. We drink, and every now and again debate whether to go or not. We jump into a taxi.

The taxi pulls up and I see it for the first time, like a giant radiator standing in the middle of industrial scrubland. An austere workhouse in DDR cream with a long line of people reaching outwards in black, beyond where a man is stood by a fridge on wheels, selling bottles of beer. As the years pass, I will meet people for whom being inside this factory at the weekends is a way of life. People who adjust their diet so that they can have both adequate stamina and recovery. I will know people who live deliberately within walking distance. I will have a friend who, after one night inside, moved here from Melbourne. When federal policy towards the pandemic altered in the autumn of 2021 and the club reopened for several months, it was not uncommon to stand in this line for seven hours. And what's more, some people will tell me that the

queueing is not only worth it but forms part of the process of leaving behind the world you've spent the rest of the week in. After maybe an hour, we had reached an inner courtyard, off the industrial estate, where a cattle grid folds inwards towards the rattling bass of a kick drum. We huddle together, drunk and talking loudly, edging nearer the entrance.

It's then that I saw groups walking away from the door, back past the cattle grid and out towards the darkness of Friedrichshain. 'They didn't get in,' one of my new friends said. How strange, these people looked clean, presentable. They looked exactly how you'd look to get into clubs, I thought. Then, we're at the front. A tall, grey-bearded figure with a tattoo on the side of his face looked at me calmly, his eyes directing me across the other side of the line. For a second, as I walked with my new friends into a shadowy corner, I thought that maybe there were two entrances. But then I realised, no, we have just been turned away from Berghain.

What's next jumps around in my memory like chewed-up VHS tape. Somebody knows another club. We're in a taxi. Roads whizz by outside in an unfamiliar blur. We're walking into a building. I remember the building having one floor and set back off a tree-lined *straße*. I remember handing over change to somebody on a door. Then, as recollections jump about and rush before gradually smoothing out, I'm dancing. I could describe the interior, a musty smell like a church, or the physical dimensions, similar to a community hall where plastic chairs were shoved to the side and the DJs played across from a school assembly style stage. Then I could describe moments, smiles, synchronicities in movement. Feeling energy subtly shift in the crossfade like a breeze through a window. But this wasn't what I took away.

What I found on the dancefloor that night stayed with me over the next month in Maya's apartment. It hovered around in people I met, as I wrote in cafes, walked across the town, rode the U-Bahn, stood naked in the cold Spree air after the heat of an *Aufguss* ceremony, had late-night discussions with new



friends where politics and art took centre stage. I never felt I had to tone down that dreaded cliché: I'm an artist. And nobody ever spoke about money unless it was to complain about how something had become more expensive. For the next six years, every time I could afford to go on holiday, I'd come back. Clubs would not be the reason I'd eventually move to Berlin, and over time, my frequency of visiting dance spaces became more erratic. I came for the community, the creativity, of being accepted as an outsider and accepting outsidership in others, and I tuned into sounds that echoed my experiences in the city: echoes of the desolate recent past in Kreuzberg and Schöneberg, deep global rhythms. Drones and noise humming across independent spaces in Neukölln. The international bustle of Mitte and Friedrichshain. Ghettoblasters ridden across the runways of Tempelhofer Airfield. And the passing ambiances of city life.

I didn't own a smartphone back in 2012. Walking home without maps, as sunlight rose over unfamiliar buildings, I never did find out the name of that club or where it was. And what's more, I've never wanted to.

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