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Clubbing in India

Indian producers, promoters and audiences say the country is primed for an electronic boom. RA tags along with Andy Vaz, Murat Tepeli, Glitterbug and Ronni Shendar to see if, at the very least, they're ready for Cologne.

Sweet lassis, spicy curries, samosas, sitars, tablas, Bollywood soundtracks, techno hippies in Goa and the ubiquitous grinning face of Shahrukh Khan. Every typical Indian cliché is true. And, yet, it's not. India is first and foremost a country of contradictions, a land with surprises on each and every corner. It's an entity made of multiples, shattered into too many different realities to be put into just one small box—even the one with psychy batik patterns painted all over and incense aroma flooding the place once you open it.

More irritating, though, is the fact that all these realities are so intertwined with one another. The only thing that you can count on during a tour of this huge and overwhelming country is that you have to be ready for surprises. Of course when you're on a trip with old-school house heads and romantic techno dream dancers from Germany, surprises are par for the course.

But when the Goethe-Institut offered up the chance to four lucky Cologne residents to delight audiences in India, there was no way to say no. Yes, it's true! You can get money for going abroad and partying to your own beats in some club at the other end of the world. Just ask Till Rohmann, AKA **Glitterbug**, and Israeli video artist **Ronni Shendar**, who not only runs a joint label venture called c.sides, but also organises a "festival for independent electronic music and critical media arts" in Israel under the same name; **Murat Tepeli**, Chicago-adoring DJ, producer and, alongside Prosumer, responsible for some of the most in-depth gay Jack hymns on recent vintage on labels like Ostgut and Playhouse; and **Andy Vaz**, long time worshipper of Detroit's profound techno and house history and founder of the Background and Yore imprints.

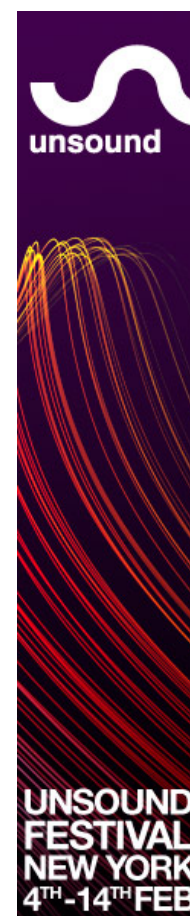
RA did its best to capture the foursome's trip late last year that took in Mumbai, New Delhi, Kolkata and Bangalore, through a world of generously AC-ed club restaurants and cocktail bars, five star hotel lounges and sticky sleeping boxes with no windows. Along the way, we were confronted with shocking poverty, and the glam of the nouveau riche celebrating just around the corner, all the while grooving to a soundtrack of German emo house and even a little bit of electronic dance music made in India.

Mumbai

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Kravis
Where there's a hit there's
a writ: Plagiarism in
electronic music
Cio D'or: Techno traveller



There is no real preparation for Mumbai. We arrived, and were immediately thrown right in the middle of it, hardly being able to handle the city's intensity and sensory overload: its gigantic chaos of sounds, colors and smells, children half-dressed or naked, playing or begging on the streets, people sleeping on the roadside, cows and stray mutts amid the never-ending line of black and yellow cabs. The first days saw our small group of five led patiently through the endless, crowded alleys and street markets of South Mumbai, through heat, dirt, sounds and noises and general havoc. We hardly even realise that we miss out on the usual record shopping ritual. At Mumbai's "Rhythm House" they sell mostly Hindi DVDs, at Chor Bazaar, the market of thieves, we only run across stocks of old shellac-78s. As we're told later, you won't find a record shop selling the latest Smallville 12-inch or even a Kompakt compilation on CD anywhere in this country. Digital is big in India.

Of course, exhausting tours like this make a traveller hungry. And so we're finally led to the inevitable stomach shock each and every one of us has to go through one after the other. Blame it on the butter chicken! Even Andy Vaz, whose father is Indian, has to give in. His power puke screams in the middle of the night probably awoke the entire hotel, if not the whole area around Crawford market in South Mumbai. Lesson one: Even the little frustrations and disappointments here taste like a Chana Masala: exotic, gorgeously intense and, finally, a little bitter between all the pepperiness. The big belly rumble comes only later, in the middle of the night, preferably before the first performance.

The first Friday of the journey is to a club called Blue Frog. We leave our hotel in the middle of the afternoon for an early soundcheck, crammed in a taxi with expensive electronic boxes, roaring through the streets of Mumbai. You wouldn't expect to find a complex consisting of a high-end recording studio, label offices and a lushly furnished club restaurant just around the corner from street markets, slum barracks and babies playing on the boiling hot dusty asphalt. But rub your eyes once again, here it is: the **Blue Frog**, one of the best live music and party venues in India's biggest metropolis.

Entering through the gates of this complex, and you immediately find yourself in a comfortably ACed and westernised zone. The Blue Frog seems to be French territory. You find quiches with camembert on the menu, the speakers of an excellent L-Acoustics sound system hanging from the ceiling and two guys from the **Bhavishyavani Future Soundz** collective, awaiting their guests from Germany. Mathieu Josso, AKA MMat, and Charles "Charlee" Nuez left their French homes several years ago for jobs in India. Charlee came for a simple reason: chow. He's set up the South Asian branch of a big dog food manufacturer in France, and soon started to spend his hard-earned CEO money on intercontinental flights. Not for himself, though. He buys flights for people like Laurent Garnier and Mathew Jonson so that they can come to Mumbai and play at Bhavishyavani events.



The circular separées at The Blue Frog in Mumbai.

Apart from their salaries and the entrance fees, tonight Charlee and Mathieu have a little help from Goethe as well as from a white rum and a blonde beer brand. Seeing the rather low turnout of the night—and the difficulty the musicians are having luring those few to the dance floor—they're quite happy that booze sponsorship is so big in the Indian club scene, even if drinking is frowned upon in the Hindi society and even prohibited in parts of the country.

A toast to that! The glockenspiel chords of Glitterbug's live set mix with the clink of glasses and cutlery from the tables and Blue Frog's open kitchen. Small groups of twentysomethings delicately dissect their mustard chicken or vociferously order another round of cocktails. From the safe distance of their circular separées, they cast curious glances at the stage and on Ronni's videos, simultaneously projected onto three large screens. But no one dares to enter the dance floor. The glamorous and crazy nightlife face of this multifaceted country remains mysteriously hidden

for tonight. And not even Mumbai club veterans like Mathieu or Charlee can tell you why.

New Delhi



Electronic music is their business: B.L.O.T.

New Delhi welcomes us with its ever dusty and luminous air and mild temperatures, and a seemingly endless labyrinth of traffic. Lots of cars, almost no pedestrians: Quite a contrast to the crammed streets of Mumbai. In the heart of the city, the garden of the New Delhi Goethe-Institut's own Max Mueller Bhavan is already awaiting its guests, decorated with fairy lights in the trees and white sofas surrounding a dance floor made of grass. It's an open air party tonight, with no cover charge, no French menu, no cocktails, but a decent amount of canned beer instead with a very mixed crowd of Indian kids, techno hippies, ex-pats from various countries, elderly Goethe regulars, students learning German and two business scholars from Cologne. It almost feels like home.

Well, apart from the curfews maybe. For a clubber educated in Barcelona or Berlin, they tend to end things incredibly early in India. But even if the tour line-up with two live acts plus visuals and a DJ is jam-packed—and the Goethe guys have to cut bass and beats around 11 PM—they somehow manage to squeeze in a local act to start off the evening. The two guys from **B.L.O.T.** (The Basic Love of Things) are among the biggest local acts in the electronic music scene in India. They're not only regulars at every club in their home town of Delhi, but also label managers of their own audiovisual B.L.O.T. imprint. (The label has plans to conquer cinemas and theaters with multimedia shows incorporating classical Indian dance.) Oh, and they're about to open a high-quality gear store, as well as curators of a coffeehouse cum gallery located inside India's most expensive shopping mall. Some days after the gig, we even manage to spot them on the glossy pages of *Elle India*, featured among their "25 hottest new talents" list.

Just a few minutes before the duo start their audiovisual show with pumpin' tech house beats and rapid stop-motion visuals in full saturation, B.L.O.T.'s Gaurav Malaker shares his view on club culture in Delhi: "The scene here is fairly large right now. On a Friday and on a Saturday almost everyone below 35 wants to party, because they work hard all week. Most young people are employed in Delhi and they have a lot of purchasing power, a lot of money. It's similar to London; Delhi is a very cosmopolitan and metropolitan city, so is Bombay. There's a lot of money with the young people, and they know how to have a good time—unlike everyone else in India."

There always seems to be a financial expert plug-in turned on when Gaurav speaks. There's a lot of enthusiasm in his voice as he lists all the different projects he and his partner Avinash Kumar are involved in. Not unlike the enthusiasm of a businessman after a successful deal. On top of all the other activities, Gaurav has just launched his own label **Qilla Records**, one of only three labels for real electronic dance music in India, he proudly points out. No need to mention that Bollywood and Goa trance outfits are not included in that calculation. And no need to mention either that he quit his career as a lawyer before he turned 24. Electronic music for Gaurav is his full-time job.

After B.L.O.T.'s massive opening of the night at Max Mueller Bhavan—it's around 9 PM when Gaurav and Avinash hand over the controls—Ronni and Till, Andy, and Murat do their best to get the crowd up from their sofas and on the grass, AKA the dance floor. It doesn't take them too long to make up for the Mumbai disappointment and turn the Goethe garden into one of the highlights of the tour. There's a big round of applause after every performance. And, for the big finale, the guys are garlanded with flowers and accept compliments on stage. In the background, the horizon glows bright orange, much like a sign of future glory. Or maybe it's just the wind, loaded with the sand of the Rajasthan deserts that grinds between our teeth on the rickshaw odyssey back to our temporary home in New Delhi.

Kolkata

Kolkata, a few days later. The lobby at the Park Hotel seems almost frozen. You wouldn't guess how chilly it can get between a ten meter-long aquarium wall, myriad glass glowsticks hanging from the ceiling and a collection of '60s design classics in black and white, especially if you just jumped out of the gym in your shorts and sweaty T-shirt. But in the hot and sticky center of Kolkata, freezing can be considered a luxury. And even if Murat might be slightly disturbed by this unexpected luxury, he certainly doesn't show it.

He's too busy, in the middle of an interview with two newspaper journalists, explaining the mission his Cologne troupe is on. Murat talks about their fascination with the minimalism of dance music, about the joy of bringing their take on electronic music and club culture in Germany over to the crowds in India. "How do you get across such a kind of music to the public?" the journalists ask. "How do people react when you take the stage armed only with a computer, some electrical boxes, or a couple of black plastic discs?"



As the writer's finish their question, you can almost see the memories flooding back to Till and Ronni, all those pictures of endless security checks at the airports, uncomprehending looks at the many electrical boxes and desperate explanations: "We are musicians! These are all instruments, for playing electronic music. This is a mixer, this is the sound card, here's a synthesizer, over there is a controller that lets you manipulate the software on the computer, then another synthesizer..." The chief inspector looks aghast at the alien contents of the suitcases. Nuclear technology, industrial espionage or just a very complex new form of time bomb? The inspector seems anything but convinced, but after staring at the contents for a while longer, he slightly shakes his head in the typical Indian uhm-yes-whatever manner. "OK, Sir," he murmurs.

Andy is the first to recover from the flashback. At home in Europe, we actually have the same problem, he explains to the journalists in Kolkata. Being realistic and looking at things from a broader perspective, they'd have to admit they're the niche of a niche, he says. Andy himself, with his take on house deeply rooted in the heritage of the Detroit pioneers, Murat with his fetish for Chicago Jack's old-school purism, Glitterbug with his bemused emo techno and Ronni with her video projections, strictly working with documentary material, almost no effects and very minimal changes. But once you're leaving the comfort zone of your cosy specialist corner and take a look around, you'd still see yourself confronted with the same old prejudices and misunderstandings.

Once you travel to India for example. Electronic music is a niche there too. A rather elitist and exclusive one, but also one with a huge ceiling. It's just about to get really raving, organizers in Mumbai, producers in Delhi and club managers in Kolkata and Bangalore tell us in unison. And we ought to keep in mind that India is a massive country. Even if only 2% of the kids are going crazy for techno beats and the rest is still listening to Bollywood, that's a huge following you can build on. (Or "capitalize on" as Gaurav from B.L.O.T. would have put it.) Electronic music seems to be the new cool for everyone who has had enough of the usual western pop tunes, for everyone who's just not sure if black t-shirts with skulls, bones, and runes are really a reasonable style option for the years after your teenage rebellion and for everyone who's got enough Rupees in their pocket to afford a cocktail in a five star hotel lounge.

A few hours after the interview, Murat spins his records at the Park Hotel's own Roxy Club; real vinyl he carried through a dozen security checks from Cologne to Kolkata. After a half-hour, the manager of the premises asks when the performance will finally begin. Murat gets a couple of kids going on the dance floor to the bass of Chip E's 1985 early Chicago House track "Time to Jack." Meanwhile, the Someplace Else pub right next door that also belongs to the hotel—and is managed by the same booker—is packed. The whole place is roaring to a Pink Floyd cover band: "Shine on you crazy di-ha-ha-moon!"



The streets of Bangalore.

Bangalore

Just a few hours after it was "Time to Jack," it's chief inspector time again. We leave Kolkata for the final night of the tour in Bangalore, the capital of Karnataka. Bangalore is not only famous for being a fast rising IT-metropolis, but also for having one of the best club scenes in India. Even if the curfew times are among the strictest, people definitely know how to get the best out of their tight party slot from 8 to 11 PM.

They pass the security guards at the entrance to the Lalith Ashok Hotel with their suits and metal detectors; they get inspired by the big flags of a famous Scotch whisky brand that welcome them in the hotel's cocktail bar called Sutra; they're even willing to give up part of their tight party slot to wait until Ronni finally gets a projector to beam some videos up on the ceiling, and to watch Murat setting up the delayed delivery of fresh-out-of-the-box Technics 1200s; they are ready to shake a leg as soon as the music starts, and they do all this and more just to show their guests from Europe that Bangalore really knows how to party.

So you find yourself in the middle of all of this. It's this amazing country called India. It's half past ten in the evening. It's a cocktail bar in a five star hotel. And it's a rave. It's totally alien, yet in an odd way you kinda feel at home. Especially when someone holds up a mobile to your DJ booth, with a very urgent and well-known message on its display: "HARDER!"

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Mumbai market, Blue Frog, B.L.O.T., Bangalore street - Ronni Shendar

Murat interview - Arno Raffaeiner