

DJ Hawtin spins Detroit techno scene into 2000

By Jason Birchmeier

Daily Arts Writer

Nine hundred and nintey nine people experienced the future of electronic music at Richie Hawtin's highly anticipated New Year's Eve party in Detroit. Adequately titled "Epok," the event first retrospectively looked back at the roots of Techno in Detroit. Then once the clock struck midnight, Hawtin took over the decks, showing not only how he helped pioneer the genre but also how he plans to define the future of Techno music.

After a talented young female DJ from Detroit named Magda warmed up the party with a short set, special guest Scott Gordon took over the duties. The legendary Detroit DJ who gave Hawtin his start in the late '80s at the Shelter gave the ecstatic audience a history lesson, spinning classic tracks that were precursors to the futuristic sound of Techno.

In less than an hour, Gordon navigated quickly through classic electro bass anthems such as Telex's "Moskow Diskow" and Hashim's "Al-Naafiysh" before moving on to some of the early Detroit prototype techno of Juan Atkins, Derrick May and Kevin Saunderson from the late '80s.

Among the many Detroit techno classics Gordon spun were "Strings of Life," "No UFO's" and "Good Life." Then, once Hawtin joined his former teacher in the DJ booth, the clock struck midnight and everyone danced to the two Detroit P-Funk classics, "Flashlight" and "(Not Just) Knee Deep," as the evening's musical guide took control. Hawtin's five-hour musical journey passed through many soundscapes besides the sparse techno he is most well known for producing as Plastikman. Surprising many, Hawtin began his epic performance with some lively house music, retaining the celebratory mood ignited with the dawn of the new century.

In addition to the two turntables on which he spun his records, Hawtin armed himself with his versatile Roland 909 drum machine and various effects processors to tweak, modulate and phase his sounds. Throughout the night Hawtin would typically drop a record then begin adding his own sounds until the record became unnecessary. For several minutes he would then further his extrapolation of the record until eventually mixing in a new record.

Until 5 a.m., little disrupted the seamless continuity of Hawtin's performance, consisting half of spun records and half of Hawtin spontaneous techno compositions. The highlight of the evening came when Hawtin reinterpreted his signature Plastikman track from 1993, "Spastik."

Consisting entirely of multi-layered percussive rhythms produced on his 909 drum machine, the dense hailstorm of this legendary track with its symmetric percussion and the occasional appearance of pounding bassbeats sent the old-school Plastikman fans into a state of frenzy. This along with several other noteworthy tracks from Hawtin's past gave his performance a retrospective feel.

The relentless suturing effect of Hawtin's performance with its continuous soundtrack of both records and spontaneous composition sets the artist apart from his peers in the global electronic music community. Outside of the studio, few artists have the talent to spontaneously compose music for an audience in such a manner that the compositions cannot be differentiated from the records.

As illustrated on Hawtin's latest album, "Decks, EFX and 909," the combination of DJing and live performance creates not only suturing continuity but also adds an element of individuality that cannot be duplicated. Any DJ can buy the same records as Hawtin, but not even the most talented impersonators can recreate the spontaneous elements the Detroit artist adds to his set.

In addition to Hawtin's unparalleled talents as a live performer of electronic music, his parties also set him apart from even his most renowned peers such as Jeff Mills. While other artists can produce great music or spin amazing sets, few artists or even promoters can match Hawtin's knack for creating the perfect context for his performances. Epok-like past events such as Consumed, Spastik and Sickness/Recovery - functioned as a unique constructed world appealing to the mind-altering sounds of Hawtin's music and the escapist idealism of the audience.

Unlike most of Hawtin's parties which usually take place in long-abandoned, vacant buildings, the party took place within the context of a drastically altered version of Motor - currently the city's most popular legal venue. Hawtin and his camp of Techno apostles at M-nus records constructed a low hanging intermediary ceiling for the venue composed of black plastic screen. The many shining, flickering and strobing lights above the screen ceiling were heavily diffused to create a dim, disorientating aura further enriched by a series of red lights surrounding Hawtin.

The secondary room of Motor became a large installation art exhibit where vertical walls of the same plastic screen were erected in a maze-like fashion. Countless green lights were shone on these screen walls, making them appear holographic. At the rear of this hallucinogenic playground were two large stacks of speakers clearly teleporting Hawtin's cosmic audio transmissions from the main room.

While this gigantic art exhibit housed anywhere from 200-300 people snuggled and conversed with others to the transmitted sounds of Hawtin, a third room featured the ambient sounds of the artists on Hawtin's successful record label, M-nus. A small group of audience members taking a break from the intensity of Hawtin's performance sipped on drinks, wished each other a happy new year and chilled out to the down-tempo sounds of M-nus artists Clark Warner, Theorem and Matthew Hawtin.

When the party finally ended around 5 a.m., it was clear that Hawtin had set new standards in the minds of the audience members about the possibilities for techno performances. No other artist on the planet besides Hawtin could have blended the art of DJing so effortlessly with the art of composition.

In addition to the artistic performance, Hawtin added Epok to the growing list of his legendary atmospheric environments that establish the proper mood for his music. His performances, parties and the amazing albums he has released as Plastikman on his record label have established Hawtin as the most talented, creative and capable electronic music artist to lead the evolving genre into the new century.