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Electronic Music Festival draws techno fans from all over the country

DETROIT – Detroit's Electronic Music Festival has happened every Memorial Day weekend since 2000 at Hart Plaza, a huge 14-acre, two-level outdoor concrete park right on the Detroit River and the Canadian border.

Also every Memorial Day since 2000, it has been a sort of Mecca for counterculturalists from all over the country, with attendance (over all three days of the festival) totaling about 500,000 people. At least a dozen of those people, every year, have been from Battle Creek.

I first went in 2003, when it was free to get in, and had a lot of fun up until about midnight, when the 14 acres of concrete was covered with 14 acres of dancing bodies, and three of my friends separated from me. I ended up having to abandon them in Detroit and head home, which caused a lot of tension for years afterward.

On Saturday, I was back. This time, I was armed with official press credentials that said I was a certified professional, and the outcome was decidedly better.

I could write an entire novel on the far-reaching social implications the festival has on the music and the people and the city, but for now, we'll have to settle on a few quick notes on the music and the scene and why DEMF is the draw that it is.

THE MUSIC

DEMF is all about techno music, a weird genre that seldom uses instruments and instead uses computerized loops of melodies or bass lines or drums or even strange, distorted sound effects. A DJ will take hold of one of those loops and play it faster and harder and louder until the tension breaks and the beat changes into another weird sound of distorted, computerized effects. Hence the name "electronic" music.

Techno is the last frontier for music, not hindered by scales or structured melodies or even music notes. It can be anything, as long as it has a beat, and it's king-hell music to dance to.

There are five active stages at DEMF: Two in tents, one right on the river walk, one underground and one huge main stage at the bottom of a concrete gallery. It was at this main stage that I saw my favorite act on Saturday: DJ Malik Alston, a Detroit native, who played a fine blend of jazz, funk, soul, hip hop and

R&B, all twisted and distorted with techno drive. Alston had a live band with him, with horns and keyboards and congas and vocals, but it was all run through a computer that bent the noise to a unique sound by the time it boomed out of the gigantic speakers.

Also of note was Rhythm & Sound, a two-man DJ team that played contorted reggae, with three live singers. It was a good groove for those who like the unusual, like Bob Marley falling through a black hole.

THE SCENE

Techno music was born 20 years ago in clubs and at raves in places like L.A., New York, Chicago and Detroit. It was made by people and for people who'd grown tired with the increasingly bland rock and pop music that had taken over the late 80s, and it was for people who liked to dress original, act original and listen to original music.

The scene at DEMF on Saturday could have been used as a visual model for the evolution of the genre. The age of the attendees ranged from 6 months to about 60 years. There were aging hipsters who'd been around at the birth of nu-wave, techno's predecessor by another decade. There were teens dressed in rainbow colors and beads and strange hair. There were families with infants in tow.

There was break-dancing, flailing bodies moving to the beat. There was no denying the presence of drugs: One kid in a tie-dyed T-shirt and black aviator sunglasses was selling out of his pockets. The smell of marijuana was thick, despite the heavy police presence.

DEMF would be a culture-shock to anyone who'd lived even a partly sheltered, biblical life in any Midwestern small town. The festival is a brilliant testament to the urban sprawl of Counterculture that the past 50 years has seen. In a world that has created alienated children who listen to techno to be somewhere else, DEMF is a place where anything goes and everyone is accepted, no matter who they are.

That is the reason that, as long as the festival blasts its music, people will travel from Battle Creek or anywhere they feel like aliens to spend three days dancing in a place where they feel normal.

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This week's Top Five

Every week, I generate a Top Five list of my favorite artists, songs, albums or music events, within a particular theme.

This week: Top 5 techno songs

5. "Reach," by DJ Malik Alston.
4. "Sandstorm," by DJ Darude.
3. "Last Time I Tried to Rock Your World," by Mindless Self-Indulgence (techno-rock).
2. "Smack My Bitch Up," by Prodigy.
1. "Moaner," by Underworld.

On the Net

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* PHOTO GALLERY: Go to this story at battlecreekenquirer.com to see a photo gallery of Saturday's events at DEMF.

* MORE STORY: Visit www.battlecreekenquirer.com/counterculture to read my blog, "The Counterculture Criteria," for more notes from DEMF.

* MORE INFO: Visit the Web site for Movement 2007: Detroit's Electronic Music Festival at www.demf.com.

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