

Exploring the World of the Dark Electronica Architect

Shôn Ellerton, September 12, 2024

Being utterly obsessed with dark atmospheric electronica, I present to you some of the geniuses behind it.



One of my pleasures in life is to sit down in front of my stereo and be immersed in a sea of sound created by some of the most imaginative architects of ambient, trance, and techno electronica. Particularly so of dark and brooding electronica, an area of music conducive to very deep and introspective thinking. Most of the music I tend to enjoy can be deemed a little too abstract, weird, indecipherable, or downright unlistenable to many, but for me, it is pure escapism. This extends to classical music as well. What is absolute hell for me is to be stuck in a room of over-happy people shouting out YMCA impressions or singing Dancing Queen very badly, usually at ear-piercingly high volumes. I'd be the one sitting on the couch listening to sinister and dark music contemplating my next move on how to obtain world domination or, at least, solve some problem bugging my mind. And no, my name is not Stewie, in case there are some Family Guy fans out there!

OK. I exaggerate!

But seldom does the best electronica, dark or otherwise, ever makes it to mainstream listeners for two main reasons. Firstly, it is simply too complex for many to appreciate. The very best electronica must be appreciated without distraction, much like drinking a fine wine. And secondly, good electronica requires a playback system worthy of its complexity and quality. Much like classical music, the average playback system in most people's homes cannot extract the subtlety, nuance, depth, and essence of beautifully crafted electronica.

A good pair of headphones with a high quality source can do wonders as long as the listener is isolated from external distracting sounds.

As for the material, the most memorable and timeless pieces have been conceived by, what I would consider, sound architects rather than artists. They often work solo buried in a rat's maze of wires connected to very complicated bits of kit riddled with dials and switches. One could mistake them for being network engineers rather than musicians. Indeed, quite a few of them *did* work in the world of networking and IT.

From the early days of [musique concrete](#) back in the 50s to today's electronica, the mindset and technical ability of these masterful architects probably hasn't changed substantially. However, the technology *has* changed, making it easier for them to create their weird and wonderful landscapes. The difference being is that they push the technology that much harder to push new boundaries.

Generally speaking, these architects of electronica tend to differ almost entirely to those artists of some of our most beloved pop and rock bands in terms of their mindset. By and large, they prefer solitude, tend to have soloist hobbies, seem to have a predilection to unusual and haunting places, and most striking of all, don't really give a damn if you like their music or not. Their world is their own, and if you don't like it, so be it.

The rock star musician who can strike up a few, literally few, happy chords on a guitar and do a bit of a sing-song is almost the absolute antithesis of an electronica master. The former will, no doubt, garner a far larger crowd in terms of the mainstream, being able to amass enormous fame and money if they give to the masses what they want to hear and see. However, the master of electronica, so typical of the mind of an architect, will create a world of sound purely in the way that he or she wants it to be with utter disregard to what others think about it. It is their world and their world alone. To quote the fictional architect, who'd rather work in a quarry rather than have his building designs altered in any way, in Ayn Rand's epic novel, *The Fountainhead*, "Every form of happiness is private". It is the same with these sound architects.

Another quality shared by those who create complex pieces of music in the world of electronica is the ability to steer away from, what we consider, standard practices of music. For example, most musical instruments of the Western world are consigned and limited to the traditional heptatonic scale. This is highly restricting to those who want to unlock the portals of an unlimited soundverse. It

must be said that creators of electronica and composers of classical music have a lot in common. The Satie's, the Ligeti's and the Sorabji's of the classical world are like the equivalent of today's architects of dark electronic music, the difference being that the classical composers did not have access to an unlimited tonal spectrum which today's digital world can give us at very minimal cost.

Take the piano. Each octave is designated by the next eighth key going up and down the keyboard. In the world of electronica, there are *no* limitations at all. Our masterful architects can create a universe of sound so utterly unique to any particular mood. They can make their listeners happy with ecstasy, dizzy in a trance-like state, or even feeling downright terrified and paranoid.

I keep running into new material which, somehow or another, escaped my attention when I first really started to explore the world of electronica during the 90s. But these days, our reach through the Internet has made this far easier. Gone are the days one had to be reliant on forking out cash for an album purchase that it might be a great listen or relying on the contents of a review from a glossy music magazine. One of my current sources for electronica recommendations is at [TWGEEMA](#), which also hosts one of the best Facebook groups for electronica music I've ever come across. Coupled with streaming services like Tidal or Spotify, it is so easy to listen to material without risk of wasting money for buying an album you don't like.

Let's run through eight of some very highly talented electronica artists which I've come across and grown to love and then look at some examples of their finest and darkest material. One should be able to find any of the tracks I recommend in YouTube, Spotify or Tidal.

1. Wolfgang Voigt (aka Gas)



I'll start with my most recent find. An artist by the name of [Wolfgang Voigt](#). Born in Germany in 1961, he later signed under some fairly impressive techno labels including Warp, Raster-Noton, and Kompakt. However, his most impressive project by far is his [Gas](#) project. A collection of ambient music featuring disorientating orchestral backdrops, glitchy sounds and other artifacts, accompanied with a deep and somewhat claustrophobic pulsating rhythm. According to Voigt, the sound is akin to being engulfed in one of his dark forests around his home town of Cologne in Germany whilst in the dark and in the rain all under the effects of LSD.

When I first listened to Gas, I had no idea what to make of it. It seemed undecidedly dull at first, but then it grew on me. Remember, as with all the pieces I've recommended in this article, you need to either have a good setup at home or some good headphones. The low frequencies of the rhythm intermingling with layer after layer of distant orchestral strings began to induce a strange cocoon-like sensation. Like being in one of those claustrophobic dreams difficult to escape from.

Very dark and very profound.

Try these tracks for size.

Zauberberg 2, Zauberberg 5, Rausch 2, Narkopop 8, Der Lange Marsch 6

2. Geir Jenssen (aka Biosphere)



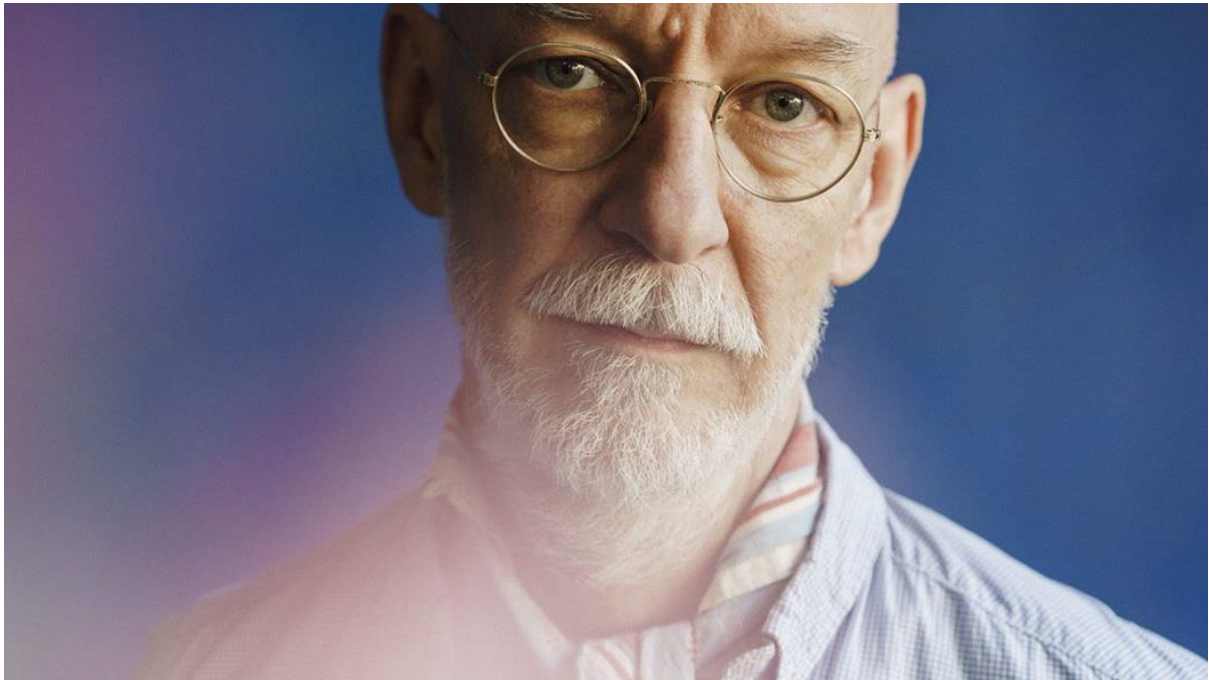
Next one on my list is [Geir Jenssen](#), born 1962 in Tromsø, high up within the Arctic Circle in Norway. He is otherwise known as Biosphere, a well-known ambient name from the early 90s to the present.

Geir's fascination with remote places, arctic landscapes, and high mountains is clearly felt in his music. Indeed, Geir himself, was a mountaineer and climbed an 8000-metre peak in the Himalayas without oxygen. No mean feat!

His many albums vary in sound and texture, but most tend to exude that feeling of isolation, mystery, and unease.

A couple of his more serene and introspective tracks include *Poa Alpina* and *Iberia Eterea*, while a couple of his more colder workings in collaboration with [The Higher Intelligence Agency](#) include *Cimmerian Shaft* and *Countdown to Darkness* on the joint effort, *Polar Sequences* album. *Cimmerian Shaft* conveys the feeling of being near to an operating mine shaft elevator somewhere up within the extreme north amidst the howling and frigid winds during the winter months.

3. Thomas Fehlmann



We move on to [Thomas Fehlmann](#), a Swiss music composer born back in 1957, who later worked with Dr Alex Patterson with the Orb, an artist, no doubt, every electronica guru would know.

What stands Fehlmann apart is his ability to create an ultra-sophisticated and polished sound. My personal favourite album of his is *Los Lagos*, released in 2018. Ultra-low dub-like rhythm, but also very subtle and velvety. Again, like the two artists I mentioned above, many layers on layers of textural sonic soundscapes are overlaid in his work.

Try the two tracks, *Loewenzahnzimmer* and *Window* from the *Los Lagos* album. *Atlas* from the *Honigpumpe* album is intriguing as well.

4. Richard D. James (aka Aphex Twin)



We can't, of course, miss out on Richard David James, otherwise known as Aphex Twin and a load of others aliases including AFX, Caustic Window, Polygon Window, Dice Man, and several more.

[Richard D. James](#) could be the most influential of all experimental electronic artists from the late 80s, and he's still producing material to this day. Born in 1971 to Welsh parents but growing up in Cornwall, he became acutely interested in experimenting with new sounds generated from a variety of old computers and electronics. Like so many other electronica artists of his calibre and style, James liked the solitude of being cut off from the rest of society, and residing in windswept Cornwall being at the very southwestern tip of England suited the bill just perfectly.

James's work is so varied and avant-garde, it would be practically impossible to describe it. From creepy slow-burning tracks like *Grass* from his masterpiece album *Selected Ambient Works Vol II* to the scary madness of *The Garden of Linniri* from his Caustic Window alias, no sonic soundscape is forgotten within James's repertoire.

In addition to the two tracks cited above, try out *Icct Hedral (Edit)*, which is deliciously dark and gothic, as if played inside a demonic cathedral. And for something quite unusual, going under his alter ego, The Tuss, is his strange and disturbing track [Vx Sy Md Test](#) which is based on Eric Satie's very unusual and

notoriously hard to memorise classical piece, [Vexations](#). And believe me, being a pianist, it is *very* hard to memorise despite it being a very short piece!

5. Thomas Russell Jenkinson (aka Squarepusher)



In a similar vein to the aforementioned Richard D. James above, [Thomas Russell Jenkinson](#), otherwise known as Squarepusher, created a vast repertoire of extremely varying electronic music from the late 90s to the present. Born in 1975 and living in Chelmsford, Essex, Jenkinson could be regarded as the east coast version of Richard James. They are both masters of experimental music and their audiences tend to know and like both of these artists.

I find the music of Squarepusher quite different, however. Jenkinson brought many elements of jazz and classical and used some fairly esoteric sounding eastern-influenced qualities to his music. For example, his lovely melodic Asian-sounding track, *Iambic 5 Poetry* from the Budakhan Microphone album. But notably, he liked drum and bass and coupled with his fondness for dark psychedelia, created some strikingly rhythmic but cold and austere pieces like *Tundra* from his first album, *Feed Me Weird Things*. For sheer craziness and chaos, his much-later track, *Mekrev Bass* from *Be Up A Hello* is a rollercoaster ride.

6. Luke Slater (aka Planetary Assault Systems)



Yet another one from England, we come around to one of the most famous DJs during the acid house scene during the 90s. It is none other than [Luke Slater](#), born and bred in the commercial town of Reading on the west side of London in 1968, who later became one of the most well-known DJ greats during the 90s, but also an accomplished composer of some incredibly good heavy rhythmic trance music. We must remember that the 90s was at the apex of heavy and full-on techno and trance. Never have we seen so much energy than we had during this strange and enigmatic period of the electronica architect, many who'd rather remain anonymous than bow down to convention and shallow popularity.

If one could summon up one word to describe his sound, and that would be *power*. Take his track, *Nano Chameleon* from his Planetary Assault Systems album, Sky Scraping. Although fairly recently produced during 2021, it embodies the strength and power of his heavier trance pieces. With sounds akin to the tolling of massive cathedral bells, one could imagine the presence of sinister gargoyles waiting to pounce on you amidst a sea of low frequency rumbling and thumping techno beats.

7. Christopher Stephen Clark (aka Clark)



I don't know what it is with England. The bleak weather, the drudgery of clogged motorways, or that pervasive negativity which the Brits seems so often to thrive on. However, perhaps this is all conducive to creating some of the most original, complex, interesting, and thought-provoking music in the world of electronica. I would like to throw in a small point that the Scandinavians and Germans are pretty good too. Seems that the happier and sunnier countries in the world simply can't make deeply intellectually and challenging music. I've lived in Australia for many years, and, apart from the amazing group, Dead Can Dance, I've not come across anything I really like in the form of mysterious and dark electronica that came from there.

Anyway, I digress. Once again!

Let's bring in [Christopher Stephen Clark](#). His alter ego name is not nearly as innovative as his music, simply being, Clark. Clark was born in 1979 in St Albans, a lovely little town full of pubs and old houses, but most notable for me personally, the place I finally struggled to pass my full motorcycle test.

I didn't know Clark until only fairly recently, but was taken in by his exceptional flair for creating quite unusual, extremely engaging, and unconventional electronic music. *Outside Plume* from his Totems Flare album is an example of a striking piece of music with very odd and extremely precise timing with crystal clear and hard-hitting rhythmic punctuation.

Every album he has created is uniquely different in sound. The complex jazz-like nature of *Herr Bar* in his album, *Body Riddle* to the disturbing diminished chords and strangely offset rhythm in *Silvered Iris* in his album, *Clark*.

8. Andy Stott



Andy Stott is a relatively new one for me, and I'm glad that I've discovered this mastermind of electronica. Born in Manchester, England, he started making his presence known more recently from 2005 onwards.

His sound is quite unlike the experimental electronica developed during the 90s. Gone are the glitches, the techno-stuff, and the Roland 303 acid-like sounds, that were so pervasive during the 90s and early 2000s. Stott brings an exceptionally deep palette of sound so intriguing and so deep.

A worthwhile track typical of his exemplary qualities in this genre of music is *Violence* from his album, *Faith in Strangers*. A mysterious, slow-moving and beautiful track with some female vocals accompanied by, possibly, some of the deepest bass I've ever heard.

And there's so much more!

I could run through so many more of these great and glorious dark artists of electronica, but I'd be here forever writing their stories.

So, to finish off this piece, I'll list a few more of my favourites, some of them being duos rather than solo artists. I've added an example track against each one.

Deaf Center



Norwegian duo, Erik Skodvin and Otto Totland. Starting out in 2005, this duo has created some deep and atmospheric sound pieces. A notable piece I came across is *Loft* from album, *Pale Ravine*.

Amon Tobin



Brazilian born in 1972, his repertoire is a fascinating variety of different and unusual sounds. Try this one for size. *This Living Hand* from album, *How Do You Live*.

Air Liquide



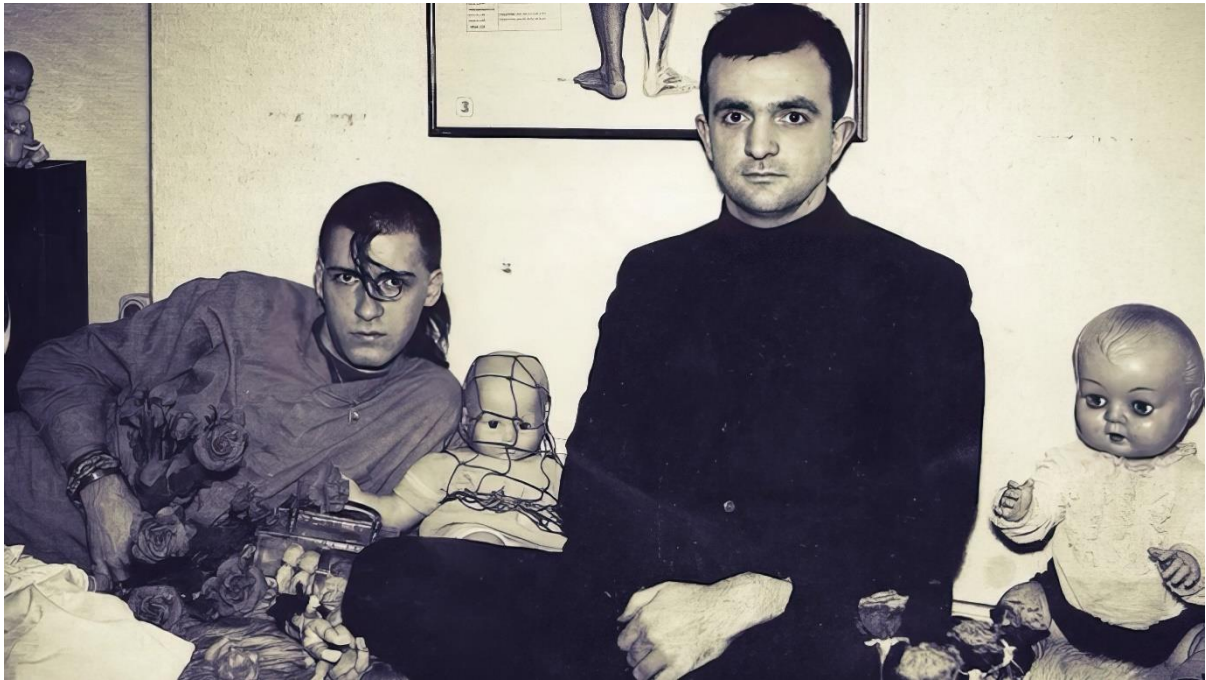
Comprising of German electronic artists, Cem Oral and Ingmar Koch. Very dark trance ambient music. A couple of notable tracks include *The Cloud* from album, *Nephology* and *Homicidal Diary* from their 1997 EP, *Homicidal Diary*. A journey into paranoia and terror.

Autechre



Formed in Manchester, England, the duo of Rob Brown and Sean Booth being one of the great heavyweights of the IDM (intellectual dance music) scene. They've created a prolific quantity of album from the early 90s to the present bringing in all sorts of weird and wonderful sonic landscapes. Here're a couple of typical examples. *Tankakern* from album, *Quaristice* and *Foil* from the *Amber* album.

Coil



By far, this duo, John Balance and Peter Christopherson, had created the most eery, scary and creepy electronic music I've come across. They started in the mid-80s but the duo came to an end in 2004 when John Balance tragically fell from his balcony after a heavy night of drinking. Note that this duo was derived from Throbbing Gristle, of *Hamburger Lady* fame, and Psychic TV, so it is no surprise that their material was sinister, occult-like, industrial, and dark. For ultimate discomfort, try out the album, *Constant Shallowness Leads to Evil*, consisting of pulsating throbbing machine-like electrical generating noise loops. And many other tracks including the *Box Theme* from album, *The Unreleased Themes For Hellraiser* and *North*, a track that reminds me of wandering through the hallways of an old abandoned hospital.

Future Sound of London



Starting out in the early 90s, this Manchester duo, comprising of Brian Dougans and Garry Cobain, formed one of the best and well-known artists in the electronica genre. They're still around but have kept under the radar somewhat restricting themselves within the Bandcamp ecosphere. Their album, *Lifeforms*, is stunningly beautiful and the album, *Dead Cities*, is a fascinating but depressingly dark portrayal of urban decay and loneliness.

Jean-Michel Jarre



Jarre, born 1948 in France, probably doesn't need much of an introduction as he is so well-known in the genre of electronica. His best and most original material was during the 70s and 80s, including such great albums like *Oxygene* and *Rendezvous*. However, his most unusual and darkest album, and my personal favourite, is *Zoolook*. With its discordant sounds, echo-like dripping caverns and haunting babbling voices, it is a curious listen.

Meat Beat Manifesto



Formed during 1987 by John Stephen Corrigan (aka Jack Dangers) and Jonny Stephens, this Swindon based group has been in the forefront of coming up with weird and wonderful lucid dreaming material along with twisted sounds and subliminal landscapes. This artist has created some of the best mind-warping trance-like trippy stuff. Try out *Simulacra* in their Subliminal Sandwich album, which, for me, is their best album.

Ed Rush, Nico, and Trace.



Otherwise known as Ben Settle, Nicholas Sykes, and Duncan Hutchinson respectively, these three form a powerful triad of what I would consider that scary techno and drum and bass sound. If one was to select a compilation featuring the best work of this ilk, I would say [*Torque*](#) is one of them. Featuring Ed Rush, Nico, Trace, and Fierce, this compilation is the ultimate techy drum-and-bass scary techno fest incorporating sounds of what would be considered a dystopian robot-controlled future.

Enjoy exploring the dark and atmospheric music created by some of the finest architects of electronica!