

The Frenetic and Crazy World of 1990s Electronica, Ecstasy, and the Rave Scene

Shôn Ellerton, October 26, 2025

Here's why the absolute pinnacle of electronic music took place during the 1990s.



During the early 1990s, I was a university student in London reading civil engineering. It was a magical time for me. I had my own little room in one of those high-rise university dorms. It was cosy. I had good friends to speak to and there was a great bar on the ground floor.

It was my refuge in an otherwise busy and large city.

There was no Internet in those days. Well, at least, certainly not as we know it today. But I felt connected to London in other ways. And one way I did was with music. The music of electronica.

The 1990s, in my opinion, was *the* most important decade in the world of electronica.

I worked part-time in Graham's Hi-Fi, a wonderful little hi-fi enthusiast shop situated in the middle of an industrial estate in the east end of London. You'd never know the place existed unless you researched it.

There, I met incredibly weird people from all walks of life who brought in their favourite albums to try out on potential purchases of hi-fi components. But the most fascinating of all were those customers who brought in their electronica collection. The staff at the shop knew and acknowledged my appreciation for abstract electronica and popular dance music. We had a strong team because each

member had a predilection towards a certain genre of music. If a customer phoned in and had an interest in electronica, the manager would usher me in.

I have three main favourite genres of music. Electronica, classical and progressive rock. None of these three genres are really mainstream and popular with most simply because they all sound crappy on a car radio, a portable music player or on one of those kitchen bench Alexa things. Moreover, complexity and track length tend to put off quite a few of us. There are, of course, exceptions. Pink Floyd's *Dark Side of the Moon* album and Queen's *Bohemian Rhapsody* hit, both inarguably icons of progressive rock, had drawn a massive number of fans.

These days, *very* few people have good enough standalone hi-fi stereo systems at home to enjoy the wide dynamics needed to appreciate so much material. Although, a good set of headphones goes a long way, one tends to miss out on the sonic vibrations running through the body, but on the upside, it is private, personal, and not distracting to others.

In my little room during my university days, I had a turntable, a nice pair of compact speakers, a great set of headphones, and a nice little amplifier in which to enjoy my music. I laid there on my bed in near darkness listening to a very spaced out ambient album titled [*Selected Ambient Works Volume II*](#) by Aphex Twin.

Believe me, I wasn't taking any drugs or alcohol, but when I lied there listening to this, I was drawn in to this bizarre blurred border of fantasy versus reality. Grey, amorphous patterns, much like those creepy Rorschach patterns they use for psychoanalysis tests materialise on my ceiling as I lie gazing upwards in enchantment.

It was a blissful but extremely haunting experience.

90s electronica in London was at its peak, with absolutely no doubt whatsoever.

I was walking down Tottenham Court Road in Central London, and found a little bar called Silverfish or something that sounded like that. It has been long ago closed down and forgotten.

The entrance to the premises was unassuming but had a door which was silver with a sign in a style of writing which would not be too far removed from a cyberpunk-like sci-fi movie.

I entered a fairly small room with a bar and a dance floor barely big enough for around thirty people or so. An occasional jet of smoke fog emitted from time to time giving the place that nightclub vibe.

I was bombarded by loud hard techno music running at a frenetic 180 bpm, or beats per minute. The early 90s heralded in this crazy era of quite extreme electronic music. After 2000, electronica seemed to settle down and become tamer in general but there were still quite a few artists who continued to push the sonic barrier. However, you'd be hard pushed to find many others in the ordinary music scene who've heard of any of them.

Most of the people were drinking these energy drinks or just plain water from plastic bottles rather than your standard fare of traditional beery and alcopop beverages. The techno rave scene was renowned for its pervasive use of drugs and clearly, the sort of drugs that many took during this time did not mix well with alcohol. Particularly, the drug, methylene-dioxy-methamphetamine (MDMA), better known as ecstasy or simply, *e*.

I saw this wiry long-haired guy in his mid-thirties naked from the waist up dancing there frenetically flailing his arms every which way. On closer examination, there were others doing pretty much the same thing. Men and women. All, seemingly fit, with not an ounce of fat to share between them. Although, I dare say, many looked like they were drugged up on ecstasy.

Techno music at 180 beats per music is ridiculously fast. You'll see why when, if by chance, you manage to pick up one of those *Technohead* or any variety of hard techno compilation albums. Within are tracks made by artists who seemed to prefer to remain in obscure anonymity with multiple aliases rather than give their full name. That seemed to change later when EDM (electronic dance music) became the mainstay in the next millennium. Most dance music is around the 120 bpm mark or less. Once you exceed 200 bpm, it no longer becomes effective because we tend to skip every other beat essentially halving the rhythm, if you get what I mean.

I have not heard anything as lethally violent and fast and 90s techno music. Ever!

It was total escapism like being launched off to space in a rocket. Indeed, graphic designers of techno often portrayed images of 50s style rockets to propel its listening audiences into the heady auras of the Oort Cloud or towards the edge of the Universe where the quasars lie. Many of these tracks had an ominous

dystopian theme to them depicting technology gone wrong or the end of the world whilst others were just very silly and fun.

The key with hard techno music is to maintain a sense of humour, get lost in the rhythm, and just have fun.

The techno scene had a darker side in the 90s with the increase of drug abuse, especially with the aforementioned ecstasy drug. Pure ecstasy taken in very small doses without alcohol and only to those who are fit and healthy wasn't so much of an issue. The problem became acute when *impure* or doped up ecstasy was sold indiscriminately to unsuspecting customers, some of whom, became violently sick or just died.

Ecstasy is classed as an illegal drug and there was a war on this drug by the authorities. In response, the rave scene became to be the underground response to evading the authorities. Invitation to rave parties became somewhat secretive and wouldn't be announced until the last minute. Disused warehouses were quite popular with organisers of such events. Because of the secrecy and short notice, by the time the police knew about them, it was too late and most everybody had already fled and gone home.

Ecstasy is basically illegal but it was going around like hotcakes during the 1990s and the early 2000s. Now, it's not something to be proud of, but I did try it once, if anything, to see what it does. Then again, marijuana is also classed as illegal in Britain, but many have, at least tried it once to see what it does. Incidentally, ecstasy is not an addictive drug like tobacco or heroin, so I wasn't concerned about becoming hooked on it. Moreover, I was physically fit and in good condition.

This is how it happened.

During 1999 or thereabouts, I was working a very long weekend on data engineering work for a telco company in London, and my New Zealander friend said that I needed to get down to the Fridge, a well-known nightclub, in Brixton for a good night out. Having started the day at 4:30am, I thought this was probably not a good idea. I've never been a night owl and am often ostracised by my friends for falling asleep in nightclubs. I don't know about now, but during the 90s, the Fridge was one of *the* places to go for a thrilling night out in the world of electronica.

My friend, didn't coerce me in any way, but said to me, if I'm wanting to stay awake and alert, an ecstasy tablet can do wonders. However, do not drink any alcohol. He also warned me to never accept a pill from someone who is not a trusted friend.

Somewhat reluctantly, I agreed to go but I was already tired when I got to Brixton. It took us an hour and a half to get from Watford by train, north of London, to get to Brixton, located on the south side of the London.

We entered The Fridge, an enormous cavern pumping the very best of dance music and techno.

My problem with nightclubs is that I can't focus on anyone's conversation. *Everything* goes into my ears and floods my head with unintelligible noise. I generally tend to crawl into my shell, sit on a sofa and fall asleep when this happens. I tend to struggle with big crowds, especially when assaulted by noises from all asunder.

I ordered bottles of soda water and, as promised, tried one of my friend's ecstasy tablets when I started to struggle to keep awake.

Well. I took the tablet, and nothing really happened.

However, an hour later, I kind of felt that I woke up again, and I went into the dance floor and had an actual conversation with someone *and* being able to understand it. Bearing in mind that I started work at 5am and it was around 1am the next day, I wasn't doing too badly.

I don't know what was going on but I was able to clearly understand everyone's speech near to me regardless of the background of the music and the noise level. It was so bizarre. I felt that I was fully awakened. I wasn't being any more active than usual. Still very calm but being refreshed and awake. For those of a more extrovert or hyper nature, perhaps, there might have been a different result.

After the crowds died down, we were let out of the building and ushered out to the grassy area skirting the premises. We sat down on the grass and sort of chilled out.

It was 7am the next day.

The sun was out and the birds were singing, always a slightly disconcerting reminder that one has just missed out on an entire night of sleep.

At this point, I had enough energy to do a 7km jog around the Thames River, which I did with my friend, who also, by happenchance, had one of his own ecstasy pills.

What ecstasy does to you is quite simple in practical terms.

It makes your body forget that you are not supposed to be doing something to it and rather, that you should be resting. In other words, ecstasy overrides the body's response to wanting to rest when overexerted.

For those who are not in good shape, this could be very dangerous. Many incidents from those who take ecstasy are heart related because the drug takes away the reminder to stop what you're doing if you're physically overexerting yourself.

So, for me, my first and only experience with ecstasy was a positive one.

As for the music.

Electronica, in earnest, started its roots many decades ago back in the 50s with its *musique concrete* and *experimental* styles, but neither were harmonic or musical being more a potpourri of odd electronic beeps, blips, and other discordant electronic sounds. In the 60s and 70s, we had this strange mixture of electronica and *progressive rock* by the likes of Rick Wakeman and Emerson, Lake and Palmer. We also had the first sounds of ambient music from the likes of Brian Eno. Then we move on to the 70s and 80s with the Jean-Michel Jarre and Kraftwerk sounds, and then moving into popular electronic dance music.

By the way, I discovered an amazing website which covers just about every style of electronic music by the name of [Ishkur's Guide to Electronic Music](#), which, apparently came to being from a university project in the field of music. Fans of electronic music must check out his website.

Also worth checking out is the website called [The World's Greatest Ever Electronic Music Albums \(TWGEEMA\)](#) which has an extraordinary and near-exhaustive list of every great album or song of electronica ever made. This must be checked out as well.

The 90s, in my opinion, reached the pinnacle of electronica. Ambient music became so much more interesting and dynamic with the likes of artists like Future Sound of London and The Orb. Dance music became legendary made possible

by the Ministry of Sound and the Detroit music scene. The brand new world of IDM, strangely dubbed Intelligent Dance Music, with the likes of Aphex Twin and Plaid set a completely new and, often bewildering, sound. And of course, the exciting world of techno and trance came into being. Certainly, there are many other pieces of electronica after this period of time which grabbed my attention, but the 90s, in my opinion, sets the defining moment that electronica changed forever.