



Volume 10. One Germany in Europe, 1989 – 2009
Reflections on the Love Parade (1995)

A British journalist discusses both the history and the allure of Berlin's annual Love Parade, one of the world's largest street festivals. He asks whether it is actually a political demonstration for peace, as organizers contend, a pop phenomenon, or just a huge party fuelled by youthful exuberance and exhibitionism. The author was not alone in his questions: in 2001, German courts ruled the Love Parade a commercial – not a political – event. In 2007, the Love Parade (a registered trademark) moved from Berlin to the Ruhr region, but its problems went along with it. The Love Parade continues to be plagued by funding and organizational problems, and its impact on the environment (i.e., damage to festival grounds and post-parade clean-up) is an ongoing source of concern.

Berlin Cabaret, Old Chum

Matthew Collin joins the ravers at one of Europe's biggest street parties

“Scotty, mehr Energie!” The can of Warp 4 Star Trek soda on the stall in front of us bears a mantra for the moment. We reached Wittenbergplatz around 2pm, but even then, two hours before the start of the parade, the square was packed with bodies, flesh throbbing to the pulse of a sound system. That morning we had felt the anticipation building, the clamour of car stereos as people arrived in town, beats clashing as they parked up alongside each other in the surrounding streets. As we walked down to the square, a tacky boutique cranked up its PA with some tinny techno tune and a colossal cheer erupted out of nowhere to the surprise of the staff. Mehr energie! More energy! The temperature is pushing 35 degrees.¹

A group of boys who have customised bin-bags into sou'westers prowl through the crowd, seeking likely victims. Poking out of slits in their curious attire are monstrous fluorescent water pistols; it would seem that spray guns are this year's essential accessory. A Tank Girl clone struts by arrogantly. Strapped to her back are three canisters of H₂O reserves, a water cannon jerks in her hand. No one is going to take her on. Another part of the square has turned into a sniper's alley – scuttle through quick and cover your back, or risk a dousing. We purchase a little squirter for DM20 (pounds 9) from a passing arms dealer. Just in case.

¹ 35° Celsius equals 95° Fahrenheit – eds.

Bang on 3.45pm the floats, each one stacked with speakers and decked with the colours of its club or city, pull into the square, massing for the off. It seems as if every raver in Europe is assembled here. Orange hair, red hair, green hair, blue hair, no hair. The men sport studded codpieces and see-through flares, army camouflage T-shirts with dayglo CND logos²; hearts, flowers and stars decorate nipples; beards are like ornate facial topiary.

As the first truck begins the two-mile crawl down the Kurfurstendamm, Berlin's upmarket equivalent of Oxford Street, people start clambering up trees, shinning up lampposts and scaling the sides of buildings. The pressure of the throng and the chorus of whistles is almost unbearable, the humidity worse. The thud of techno deepens and the smiles stretch as wide as those on the painted banner adorning the oncoming vehicle.

The biggest conga in the world starts up and water guns spurt liquid salutes into the air – it's on, it's on! The local newspapers estimate that there are up to 300,000 people celebrating out here in the July heat. But in the beginning, there was just one man: a Berlin DJ known as Dr Motte. Motte is a talismanic presence, the patron saint of the day. Or, as one friend describes him, “a holy fool, a brilliant man, a force for good but completely crazy.”

The idea came to him – like many mad schemes come to devotional clubbers – at the peak of an ecstatic night out. Let's dance in the streets and make a stand for togetherness and peace, let's build a piece of heaven right here on Earth. Let's have a Love Parade! But unlike most 3am visionaries, Motte hadn't forgotten all about it the next day. He was determined to carry his plan through.

“I didn't want to spend anything or earn anything,” he recalls. “In Germany you have the basic right to demonstrate under the law, but how and what about is up to you.” He called the authorities, obtained a licence to demonstrate and, in the summer of 1989, 150 friends caroused down the Ku'damm with one sound system beating an acid house tattoo under the banner “Friede, Freude, Eierkuchen” – “Peace, Joy, Pancakes.”

What happened later that year ensured that Motte's little invention would be more successful than he ever could have imagined. When the Wall came down on 9 November, it did more than liberate East Germans from the communist GDR, it also liberated East Berlin's physical space. Suddenly there were new places to party in, new people to party with and a new sound to party to.

Techno had already found a place in the hearts of West German clubland's opinion formers, but when the Wall fell, the intense electronic abandon of the music somehow synergised with the atmosphere of the moment. Liberation! Techno! One nation under a groove! Mehr energie! Clubs occupied buildings left abandoned by the Communist regime and its collapsing industry –

² Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament: the logo is commonly known as the peace sign – eds.

disused factories, bunkers and power stations – and the youth of East and West danced together for the first time.

“I don't really care who is from where,” a clubber at Tresor, held in a derelict bank vault, said at the time. “Here in the darkness, there are only happy, sweaty bodies.” “They will have to build a new Wall if they want to mess this up,” offered another.

By 1991, the Love Parade had grown to 5,000 people; in 1992 there were 15,000; in 1993, 60,000. Techno had become one of the dominant currents in German pop culture and techno records appeared in the charts with increasing regularity. Germany, for the first time since the post-punk bands of the Neue Deutsche Welle movement in the 1980s, had an indigenous music to be proud of.

Thomas Fehlmann, a key figure in Berlin's musical community since the early 1980s and currently co-producing Erasure's next album, says that its increasing size and diversity strengthened rather than diluted the scene. “You could say techno has become the establishment because little record labels from five or six years back are now big money-spinners. At the time of the Neue Welle, record companies were still important in terms of paying for studio time for people to make a record; now people are just banging it out in their homes, and that sustains it.” Changes in the Berlin techno scene seemed to reflect changes in the city as a whole: the endless construction, as some of the more bizarre party spaces were eradicated by property development; the establishment of order over lawless grey areas, as clubs like Tresor achieved legal status; and the arrival of multinational concerns in the city. German rave flyers started to look like Formula One cars, spattered with corporate sponsors' logos. This was no more apparent than at 1992's Love Parade, when Philip Morris saturated the party with promotional material and giveaway packets of fags. This year, Camel cigarettes set up booths along the Ku'damm offering free water alongside heightened brand awareness.

From a British perspective, this sponsorship appears incongruous and somewhat distasteful. Yet, conversely, the Germans are bemused at the British government's attitude to raves. The same weekend as the Love Parade, a collective of activists attempted to throw two free parties in the English countryside to demonstrate the unworkability of the Criminal Justice Act.³ As we danced through the Berlin streets, a gun-toting uniform nodded his head to the groove with a smile on his face. Back in London, meanwhile, police were kicking down the doors of Advance Party organisers and charging them with conspiracy to cause a public nuisance.

³ The Criminal Justice and Public Order Act (CJA) was passed in Great Britain in 1994. It prohibited unlicensed open-air events where music “wholly or predominantly characterised by the emission of a succession of repetitive beats” was played for 100 persons or more, and it gave police the power to break up gatherings of ten or more persons if those persons were believed to be waiting for a rave – eds.

“You can't compare the German scene to the English one,” insists Jurgen Laarman, editor of the techno magazine *Frontpage* (which has a nationwide distribution of 100,000) and one of the five co-owners of the Love Parade name. “Something like the Criminal Justice Act wouldn't be possible here. All parties here have been tolerated by the state – there have been no illegal raves. In Germany there are now some politicians who like the rave scene; the Green Party tries to support the Love Parade to get new voters. We have problems with drugs – one week ago we had the first Ecstasy death in Berlin – but not the same as in England.” The Love Parade has, however, had its problems with the local authorities. When numbers doubled again to 120,000 last year, some conservative members of the Berlin senate became displeased at the rising cost of policing and cleaning up after what they saw not as a political demonstration, but a schnickschnack – a bit of fun.

Until the beginning of May this year, the authorities stood firm: the Love Parade would not take place unless the organisers paid up. But the media rallied round: the Love Parade was good for Berlin and its international image. Motte met the authorities, adopting a new slogan for the parade to re-emphasise what he insists is its political nature – “Peace on Earth” – and carried the day.

“It's great for the city of Berlin, but it's also great for the whole world because there is so much hate on planet Earth,” he told them as he now tells me. “We kill so many trees, so many animals and so many people that we need a sign. Not against all that, but for something. A sign for love.”

6pm, 7pm, 8pm, 9pm. . . lost amid 250,000 bobbing heads, the techno-hippie cliché that dance culture is a link to ancient trance rituals seems to gain credibility. Tomorrow the local press, high on a new feeling of optimism in the city after Christo's wrapping of the Reichstag the week before, will find no bad word to say about the parade, even though some collapsed from heatstroke in the sun and proceedings ran hours behind schedule. The last of the 34 floats crawled back into Wittenbergplatz at around 11pm. A couple of years ago, the heavens opened as the parade reached its climax; an awe-inspiring, thunderous endorsement from above.

Today we cheer the lorries in, jumping and clapping, while I begin to wonder whether Motte's dreams have any basis in reality. Peace protest? Pop phenomenon? Or just a brilliant party? Is the Love Parade still an embodiment of the spirit of reunification? Dave Rimmer, a journalist who has written guidebooks to the city, believes the parade has a more pressing function: upholding the countercultural heritage of Berlin – traditionally a place of squatters, anarchists, draft-dodgers, punks and freaks – as 1998 approaches. That is the year when the German parliament returns to the city and the social sanitisation involved in the reconstruction process is presumably complete. “They're already a bit worried about how near the parliament is to Kreuzberg (the anarchist/immigrant quarter),” says Rimmer. “And they're maybe going to construct a maximum security zone around the district, with security cameras everywhere so they can clear everybody out at a moment's notice.”

Today we seemed to stretch the limits of what is possible. It's hard to see how the parade can continue to grow in this confined space. Is the Ku'damm still big enough for what has become one of the world's great street parties, on a par with Rio, Gay Pride, the Notting Hill Carnival or Sydney's Mardi Gras? Jurgen Laarman is in expansive mood: "Maybe next year there will be one million people," he speculates. "The number of people on the Love Parade doubles every year, so naturally in a few years we will have world peace!" Then Laarman laughs at his own hyperbole, but after seven hours immersed in the fervour of rhythm, wild optimism seems perfectly sensible.

Next morning, someone has affixed a placard to the Zoo U-Bahn station: "Mehr Techno!" it demands. Spot on, I think. Mehr energie, Scotty, mehr techno. Mehr freude.

Source: Matthew Collin, "Berlin Cabaret, Old Chum," *The Observer*, August 20, 1995, p. 46.
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