

BAUCHKLANG AKUSMATIK



Tribal drums at the club: Bauchklang »electronic«

Bauchklang make club music with only their voices - and they keep surpassing themselves: a »vocal groove machine« that beams electronic music into the future using the oldest musical instrument – the voice. An evaluation on the occasion of the release of their current album *Akusmatik* and the creation of their label Bauchklang Records.

As an indication, let's agree that the Austrian quintet Bauchklang are a beat-boxing band. Beat-boxing developed from hip hop in the early 1980ies. Sounds of synthesizers, drum machines, or the DJ's scratching were imitated using voices, diaphragm, stomach and mouth. Beat-boxing is not rapping, but a percussive, onomatopoeic and rhythmic linking of sounds. In beat-boxing, influences from scat singing or Doo-wop can be identified; styles which emerged from Afro-American gospels and spirituals. Further back along this line, a cappella is not only a centuries-old art of singing, but also a form of communicating. Thus, already in ancient times the imitation of sounds as an extension of song and acoustic »Morse code« advised the audience of approaching danger (animal sounds, drums of an enemy tribe) or invited to dance and hip shaking. From these structuring sounds of orientation, survival and celebration, beat-boxing developed into one of the most rudimentary and at the same time historically powerful styles of pop music on the backdrop of an urban sound and music experience. Your body is your only musical instrument.

Tuning voices

Unlike a cappella or even beat-boxing, Bauchklang are no vocal ensemble. Neither are they about giving an accurate auditory image of noise-like sound processes. And even less about re-enacting hit tracks. Bauchklang's music is organised in electronic tracks instead of sung songs.

Their synthesizers and sequencers are their stomachs. Groove in its purest form as an archaic articulation of voices, Bauchklang as a human rhythm machine.

Bauchklang's consciousness distils through similar formal structures as Afro-American call-and-response or spoken-word traditions (Last Poets, Gil Scott-Heron, Saul Williams). The band fulfilled an old wish of theirs in this respect when collaborating with the American spoken-word icon Ursula Rucker for the track »Toil in Your Field« (on the CD *Signs*; Monkey) in 2010.

After some changes within the band, since 2006 Bauchklang are Bina, Alex Böck, Andreas Fränzl, Gerald Huber and Philipp Sageder. They released on well-known labels such as Klein Rec., Monkey Music or Ecco.Chamber. In 2011, the EP *Le Mans* was self-published as a harbinger for an artistic re-orientation, the EP *Ray* followed one year later, and with *Akusmatik*, the foundation of their own label Bauchklang Records is cast in an album format. A more than fitting decision: after all, Bauchklang have been notorious for their individuality, and with a self-controlled label, creative serendipity can be promoted more precisely. As a distributing partner, the legendary independent label Rough Trade was enlisted.

Groove alliances

When Bauchklang formed in St. Pölten in 1995, beat-boxing was hardly known in Austria, and a cappella was far from funky or sexy. At the same time, electronic dance music in the form of techno was becoming big and splitting up in a track of sub-genres. Bauchklang went straight between a rock and a hard place by not only activating beat-boxing in Austria, but also raising it to a contemporary mixture of dub, downbeat, dancehall, techno, electro and electronic funk.

The experiment of short-circuiting archaic voice acrobatics with club music became the band's hallmark. Consequently, their first bigger gig took place in the Viennese club Flex.

»We played a 20 minute set between two DJ blocks because we wanted to test how sung drums, beats and beat-box would hold their own impact-wise against electronic music«, remembers founding member Andreas Fränzl aka Lichtfels.

The test run was successful, a year later their debut *Jamzero* was released and won the Amadeus award. For FM4, an Austrian radio station, Bauchklang were the «best alternative act», and Jamzero the album of the year. The single release from it, «Don't Ask Me» was in heavy rotation on FM4 and especially on French radio stations. In the same year, Bauchklang performed at the *Transmusicales festival* in Rennes. In 2002, they honoured the Jazz Festival in Montréal. In 2009, they sold out three times in a row at the Club *Blue Frog* in Mumbai and were awarded Best Gig International in India. «Some older members of the audience said they had never heard anything like it and they actually didn't go in for electronic music.

They danced their legs off anyway», says Fränzl.

By »electronifying« ritual tribal songs to onomatopoeic rhythm sequences of club music, Bauchklang proved to be an integrative bridge between generations and they appeal to an extremely heterogenic audience. Bauchklang build hyper-physical plateaus in which technology discourses of electronic music dissolve into a global understanding of groove. Just listen to the sessions with Vivek Rajagopalan and Shilpa Rao on *Live in Mumbai*: Crazy sliding rhythms, breakneck speeds, one is tempted to call it drum 'n' bass, a vocal-acrobatic cross-cultural feast. In due form for beat-boxing shows, Bauchklang share the stage for several tracks for live collaborations and open mic. In late 2011, at a home game at the Festspielhaus St. Pölten, appeared, amongst others, the singer Marie Daulne of Zap Mama, the Turkish-Austrian rapper siblings EsRaP & Enes, and the theremin performer Pamela Kurstin.

Bauchklang were and continue to be a decided live band. For the last ten years, their summer schedules have been filled with festival performances all but completely, whether at the *Sunbeat* near Haifa in Israel, the *Fusion* near Rostock, the *Roskilde* in Denmark, the *Frequency* in Austria, the *Montréal Jazz Festival* in Canada or the *Ladakh Confluence* in the Himalayas, the *Printemps Musicales* in Luxemburg or the Youth Olympic Games in Innsbruck. But only in 2009, their booking at the Blue Frog gave them the opportunity to capture a live recording on CD, which was released as *Live in Mumbai* with Monkey Records. This met a long-standing wish of Bauchklang fans. A rather late live CD, as it «is one of the most difficult challenges to make a good live album», according to *Patrick Pulsinger*. Techno pioneer Pulsinger was taken on board as a producer for Ray and later for Akusmatik. This was a logical step, as Bauchklang had moved towards club music during the preceding years, and expanded obvious lines of tradition between gospel and hip hop with minimal techno, electronica of French provenance like Justice or with abstract, ambient-like soundscapes. Thus Le Mans at first sounds mostly like a tech house maxi.

With Ray, this avenue became more sophisticated, more complex. The track »Change« on Ray is almost prototypical for this: A robot-disco-outfit à la Giorgio Moroder with the most minimal dub effects and driving bass beats. The track »Morgenluft«, produced by long-standing Bauchklang sound technician Bernhard Schedelberger, gyrates into concentrated dub soundclouds, tracks of basic channel or rhythm & sound are just around the corner.

Acousmatic

The album *Akusmatik* has seven new tracks in addition to the two EPs *Le Mans* and *Ray*, which are re-released. These EPs are the most experimental material of the disc. This constitutes a healthy contrast to the other tracks, in which the band allows its diverse styles to drift farther away from ›regular‹ beat boxing. They weave atmospheric soundspheres, down-tempo tracks are unabashedly romantic or meditative and absorbed, and of course there are some groove party tracks, too. »Letter To Me« and »Most Of The Time« appear as pure 2013 soul, »Enjoy The Risk« presents itself as adventurous electro, and »Bidde« can easily be part of a dancehall DJ set. Socio-political intentions, which have always been a Bauchklang trademark, are also part of the package, see e.g. the track »Change«, which invites us to change just about everything, or »Ray«, in which »Black« and »White« combine to a freedom inside, or »Warning Bells« with its call for awareness. Because human and all-too-human issues are part of our lives, »Another One« tells us about relationships.

Akusmatik is exemplary of the qualities of Bauchklang: catchy themes, percussive machine sounds, interlaced rhythmic aggregates exhaustingly falling in and out of each other.

Bauchklang, although naturally never electronic, come across like electronic music. Since *Le Mans* and *Ray*, it was obvious that the band has embarked on keeping us guessing about the boundaries of human sound and electronic music, and with *Akusmatik*, this reaches a climax.

Derived from the audio tape/ collage music of French musique concrète in the 1950ies, acousmatic represents an approach in which the facts of production on stage take a back seat in favour of the pure sound experience. Acousmatic veils the artistic subject, and presents comparatively contemplative listener's concerts.

Transferred to Bauchklang, the acousmatic approach means effacing possibilities of attribution of what is a human voice and what might be electronic. For illustration, see the production process of *Akusmatik*: For Pulsinger, it is »the opposite of electronic music production. Audio- and recording-wise, working with voices only instead of instruments means completely different problems. It was recorded in a collective performance context, which is a contradiction to electronic thinking with its individual tracks and small modules«.

For the current album, *Akusmatik* means ›acousmatic stomachs‹, sounding like vocoders or drum computers, but still being stomachs. It is not without manifest irony that Bauchklang engage with the mix of attributions on this level: After all, acousmatic is – with some detours – a precursor of techno. Another ironic twist is that one of the most outstanding live bands of the country refers to a setting in which the physical presence of the artist during the concert is consciously omitted. The Bauchklang guessing game is thus raised to the second power where an a cappella band sounds like electronic music, the production process is anything but electronic, but the album title affirms this and thus enhances the technological discourse of Bauchklang. *Akusmatik* means crossing frontiers, much more than the fascination of what you can do with a voice. *Akusmatik*, this hybrid from ancient vocal noise structures and modern sound design, carries the band further in a direction in which man and machine are fused: the ›vocal groove machine«.

Text: Heinrich Deisl (skug – Journal für Musik)

BAUCHKLANG / AKUSMATIK

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Bauchklang:

Gerald Huber: vocal sounds, backing vocals, beatbox, human bass

Bina: beatbox, vocal sounds, mouthpercussions, backing vocals

Andi Fränzl: lead vocals, vocal sounds

Alex Böck: human bass, vocal sounds

Philipp Sageder: vocal sounds, mouthpercussions, backing vocals, human bass

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