

# Youth Revival: The Reunification of Berlin Through the Emergence of Techno

Emma Broach

COLL 103: Soundtrack to Revolution: Protest, Sound, Power, Resistance

Dr. David A. McDonald

October 27, 2024

## Introduction

In 1989, life in Berlin drastically changed. After living with a wall separating the city for thirty years, readjusting individuals searched for something unifying to grasp; and, surprisingly, that something came from distant Detroit, Michigan. According to the book *African American Music: An Introduction*, techno music, or repetitive, rapid electronic dance music, originated in the black community of Detroit, and became trans-Atlantic as it piqued the interest of young people from a struggling Berlin (Maultsby 2005, 452). Suddenly, the techno scene flourished in Berlin, and satisfied the existent emptiness after the Cold War from 1947-1989 left the city in a state of desolation. Countless clubs were founded, and festivals, such as the Love Parade, were introduced. In a time of devastation, an exciting new phenomenon arose. As a result, it is crucial to ask: how did the advent of techno music in Berlin affect the reconnection of youth politics and culture? Through a comprehensive review of literature surrounding the emergence of techno music in Berlin and its connection with the youth population, I suggest that as techno developed into a social phenomenon of Berlin, Germany, the youth effectively reunified beneath one shared interest and encouraged the beginnings of political stability within a rebuilding Germany.

## Historical Context

Following the first world war from 1914 to 1918, Germany's democratic Weimar Republic beginning with the end of WWI until the foundation of Nazi Germany in 1933 encouraged novel social liberality and more progressive actions than many other flourishing countries, even while Germany struggled economically and politically after suffering the repercussions of WWI. As a result, prior to the invasion of the second world war, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum explains that Berlin was a paragon of counterculture and activism within the female and LGBTQ+ communities, despite its legal provisions ("The

Weimar Republic”). According to Gabrielle Bryan-Quamina from *Science Magazine*, Magnus Hirschfeld, a prominent yet subtle social activist and a gay man himself, established the Institute for Sexual Science in 1919, a forum for sexual freedom and creation that performed some of the world’s first gender reassignment surgeries. However, as the Nazi party commenced its bloody reign of terror, the Institute for Sexual Science and all of its literature was burned in 1933. Individuals were persecuted, and the Nazi regime effectively quashed the rise of alternative culture in Berlin that would not explicitly arise again for decades (Bryan-Quamina 2024).

As World War II began to intensify, Nazi Germany suffered dramatically. According to information from the Center for European Studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, however, when the war culminated in 1945, Germany was forced to unconditionally surrender all control to the world powers of France, Great Britain, the United States, and the Soviet Union as decided through the Yalta Conference. A second meeting, the Potsdam Conference, further discussed divisional plans for Germany, resulting in the separation of the country and its capital Berlin into four occupied zones, respectively. The western half of the country was controlled by France, Great Britain, and the United States, while the majority of the eastern side was policed by the Soviet Union. As this system progressed, however, the Soviet Union slowly began to establish Communist policies in Eastern Germany, eventually prompting the start of the Cold War. Western Germany was then combined under the name of the Federal Republic of Germany, and East Germany became the German Democratic Republic (“The End of WWII”). Abruptly, western capitalist and eastern communist ideology were positioned directly head-to-head in Germany. Twenty years later, the Berlin Wall Foundation writes, as tensions escalated and the border between the FRG and the GDR tightened, the Soviet-controlled east constructed the historic Berlin Wall in 1961. The fortifications surrounding the wall increased over time, and this divisive boundary came to symbolize the solidified “Iron Curtain”

of ideological war between capitalism and communism and the Eastern and Western worlds (“The Berlin Wall”).

As the Berlin Wall continued to stand, desperate individuals in oppressive Eastern Germany fought for their freedoms and the easing of travel restrictions across the border. The GDR progressively lightened policies and mistakenly announced a new travel law on November 9th, 1989, resulting in a mass exodus to the Berlin Wall. Consequently, a section of the wall was opened under pressure of the overwhelming number of people, effectively ending the oppression of the Berlin Wall and the reign of the German Democratic Republic in Eastern Germany. Soon after, the wall was rapidly demolished and the two opposite halves of Germany were forced to reunite and meld into a singular, common country after decades of separation and unequal treatment (“The Berlin Wall”). While there existed an overwhelming sense of relief at the demolition of an ideological and physical division, Germany was suddenly tasked with the responsibility of unifying two entirely contrasting states. Subsequently, according to the U.S. Department of State Archives, the “2 + 4” talks ensued between the two halves of Germany and the four powers who had previously controlled them: England, France, the United States, and the Soviet Union. On October 3rd, 1990, the Final Settlement Treaty was enacted, reunifying Germany and signifying the final termination of the Cold War and occupied Germany (“2 + 4’ Talks and Reunification”).

As Berlin grappled with reunification, a new style of music emerged. Denise Dalphond, an expert in ethnomusicology who taught at Indiana University, describes in her chapter of the book *African American Music: An Introduction* that techno music, the force that assisted in shaping reunified Germanic youth, was originally founded in Detroit, Michigan by young African American producers experimenting with electronic sounds and innovative styles in the 1980s (Maultsby 2005, 453-454). However, as described during an NPR interview with

journalist Tobias Rapp, a fateful meeting between an anonymous man from West Berlin and a group of African American techno producers resulted in the producers' travel to Berlin, where they immediately discovered a market for their inventive techno music (Schmitz, McNamee, and Intagliata 2024). Berlin youth quickly latched onto the phenomenon, and the city's club scene swiftly prospered as a vessel of safety and reconnection.

## Development of Berlin Techno

The development of the techno phenomenon in Berlin accelerated fairly rapidly within the city, particularly as clubs and festivals dedicated to techno emerged within the early years of the movement. According to professors from Princeton University, the Love Parade surfaced in 1988 before the fall of the Berlin Wall as a small gathering of 150 individuals dancing to techno music for a weekend in the streets of the city. However, as the Love Parade tradition progressed, it became a globally-known spectacle, attracting up to one million individuals per year for decades. These authors note upon the fact that the Love Parade was designed without political motivations, but was determined to encourage collective experience, communal peace, and non-action to express relationship. In fact, the name Love Parade was never translated into German – leaving the phrase in English emphasized the universality of the event, despite the primarily German attendance (Borneman and Senders 2000, 294-295). According to Jacob Ganz from NPR, the Love Parade was permanently canceled due to a deadly stampede in 2010 that killed 19 and injured 500 (Ganz 2010); and yet, this early phenomenon powerfully impacted the techno culture of Berlin, and encouraged its growth within the city as a method of reunification and community.

Similarly, a club opened during the advent of techno music in Berlin became a beacon of both unity and protection as the early musical movement continued to develop. Holly Dicker

from *DJ Mag* explains that Tresor, still among modern Berlin's most prominent techno clubs, conceals a convoluted history that begins with the progressive ideas of Dimitri Hegemann who assisted in pioneering the early Berlin techno movement, and in 1991 converted the abandoned Wertheim department store in East Berlin into a club intended to host a more hardcore, simplistic version of electronic dance music: techno at Tresor. Initially, Tresor functioned as a venue for Detroit techno artists who found interest in their work with the young people of Berlin. The club then founded its own label, Tresor Records, that signed with many of the Detroit artists already performing at the institution (Dicker 2021). Tresor continued to prosper, and Mats Wurnell from *Medium* argues the club is modernly parallel with the global popularity of Berghain, a historically queer techno club built in the early 2000s that continues to offer a haven for the Berlin LGBTQ+ community (Wurnell 2016). Techno clubs and the Love Parade at its inception critically influenced the early stages of Berlin techno, and were amongst the most important forums for youth conversation and reunification after the partition dividing Germany was dissolved in 1989.

Contemporarily, Berlin's techno scene exists as a globally-appreciated sensation, and has recently been officially recognized by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and the German National Registry of Intangible Cultural Heritage, according to Lynn Brown at the BBC (2024). Modernly, Berlin's techno clubs have developed into a social legend, fabled to be impossible to access often on the basis of dress, language, appearance, and demeanor. Despite this difficulty, tourists continue to flock to Berlin for an experience of the acclaimed techno culture that is boasted about on the city's official website, Berlin.de, which explains that modern partying has become more commercialized than the original underground phenomenon in the 1980s and 1990s yet still represents a crucial aspect of Berlin's culture ("Berlin Club Culture"). While some native Berliners admonish this diluted

version of the techno scene, it is impossible to ignore the centrality of its position within the city's youth culture and its pivotal history of unity.

## Political Reunification

After the Berlin Wall fell in 1989, *DJ Mag* explains, the young populations of both sides of the city were eager to interact: Those from the west explored the abandoned and dilapidated areas of the east, and individuals from the east excitedly poured into the west to take advantage of its unique capitalistic opportunities such as access to college education, higher potential for personal financial gain, and individualistic expression (Dicker 2021). As a result, both sides were eager for a common sense of belonging; and, as reiterated, that sense of belonging primarily originated with the foundation of Berlin's techno scene. However, the question still persists: How exactly did the emergence of techno music unify the youth of Berlin? I intend to explore this question through the examination of Berlin techno music's transmission factors such as sound, rhythm, and performance contexts.

According to *Playing for Change: Music and Musicians in the Service of Social Movements* by Rob Rosenthal and Richard Flacks, the sonic content within a piece of music may have the ability to "convey messages of its own" (Rosenthal and Flacks 2011, 49). Dividing these sonic aspects into more specific concepts, the authors argue that rhythm, the nature of a beat, the structure of a piece, and the instruments used all uniquely have an impact upon both the meaning of a song and the message that an audience may glean from it (51). Consequently, when considering the phenomenon of techno in Berlin, it is necessary to understand some of its musical characteristics that I argue influence its reception and perceived significance. In order to conduct this aspect of discovery, I heavily rely upon the research of Asngar Jerrentrup, a professor at the University of Wuppertal, who studied the qualities of techno and its early

progression in Germany. According to Jerrentrup, techno is inherently designed to encourage the “longest lasting, most exuberant” (Jerrentrup 2000, 68) form of dancing that takes place at techno clubs, necessitating its distinctive repetitive rhythm that conveys a sense of power, collectivity, and relationship through hypnotic sonic patterns. Additionally, Jerrentrup explains that fundamentally, techno music is produced with vinyl, despite the fact that much is electronically-manufactured today. As a result, unique techno songs are typically played once during a live performance, unable to be replicated in the future (67-68). This aspect of the instrumental facet of techno further underscores the communal quality of the genre in Berlin as a unifying force, encouraging active audience participation with a sense of exclusivity; in other words, clubs effectively proclaim, “Come and dance at our club to hear an exclusive techno set, never before created and never to be recreated.” Furthermore, the incessant continuation of techno throughout one night at a club contributes to the communal culture, encouraging all attendees to meld as one group, whether from the east or the west, and attempt to last throughout the duration of the set (Jerrentrup 2000, 69). In examining these unique sonic transmission factors of techno music, the collectivizing purpose of the genre becomes evident: repetitive, neverending, and irreproducible techno in 1990s Berlin served to unite the youth community under a common interest that inherently encourages accord.

Perhaps even more important to reunification, however, is the performance context of techno music in Berlin, particularly in the movement’s early days. Initially, according to Jerrentrup, techno in Berlin was a subculture that created a particular ambience within the smaller early clubs of the 1990s, filled with youth searching for community. Jerrentrup claims that techno was and still is a “multi-sensational phenomenon,” only complete with the accompaniment of light effects, locations with “sub-culture flair,” and dancing (69). Additionally, when discussing the early techno sanctuary of the Love Parade, Borneman and

Sanders (2000) explain that this event stressed a “machine” experience: “the major experience is to alternate between silently standing and waiting, in no particular order for nothing in particular, and ‘raving’” (295). Both the essential accompaniment of lights and location and the culture surrounding how to participate in Berlin techno events stress the importance of the live performance aspects of the music. According to Rosenthal and Flacks (2011), it is often “the active shared performance, rather than simply the words or music, that is at the heart of the experience” (161). Live performances create both physical and social space, and facilitate increased commitment from members within the community (168), which, in this case, surrounds Berlin techno as a method of reunification. In creating a culture surrounding the new musical genre, techno artists in Berlin effectively utilized the inherent entanglement of techno and live dance to unite youth from the East and West during an era of uncertainty and instability.

Through examining the many transmission factors that shape the Berlin techno scene, it becomes evident that the music was initially used as a uniting factor that “provide[d] a link to unknown others who share[d] your perspective, beyond those immediately present” (Rosenthal and Flacks 2011, 126). Consequently, techno embodied this sense of solidarity within Berlin youth through its use of repetitive beats, visual effects, locations, and “underground” culture.

## Implications and Conclusion

Politically, the reunification of Berlin’s youth throughout the 1980s and 1990s is an interesting statement of action through non-action. Borneman and Sanders (2000) explain that the Love Parade could never be manipulated by politicians to support their causes, because the event never provided any direction about its purpose or supporting motivations aside from the idea of theoretical world peace (298). Love Parade attendees consistently denied all affiliation with authority and debated issues, and Borneman and Sanders argue that it in fact supported a

concept of political “nonengagement” (299). Refusing to engage in discussion, “rave talk creates a constricted chronology of the present; devoid of locutionary force, it intends neither meaning nor significance” (307). Consequently, as the Love Parade was a hallmark of early techno music in Berlin, it is reasonable to draw a connection between this event and the larger techno scene in the city at the time. Techno in Berlin created a sense of community through non-action, communicating to politicians that unity was the young population’s primary goal. As Berlin reunified, techno provided an essential outlet for youth expression, conversation, and integration.

In this paper, I primarily focused upon the historical reunification of Berlin’s youth after the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 through the emergence of techno music. However, future research could explore how techno in Berlin has matured, and if the phenomenon still carries the political and social weight that it once did. Additionally, researchers could investigate alternative avenues of social reunification in Berlin during the 1990s, examining how these may have compared to the effects of techno music. This topic offers a plethora of opportunities for further inquiry, and encourages a critical inspection of the precise methods through which music, particularly techno, can influence society.

## References

- “Berlin Club Culture.” Berlin.de. Accessed October 23, 2024. <https://www.berlin.de/en/tourism/insider-tips/8100644-5766508-berlin-club-culture.en.html>.
- “The Berlin Wall.” Berlin Wall Foundation. Accessed October 23, 2024. <https://www.stiftung-berliner-mauer.de/en/topics/berlin-wall#:~:text=On%20August%2013%2C%201961%2C%20the,sovereignty%20to%20the%20outside%20world.>
- Borneman, John, and Stefan Sanders. “Politics without a Head: Is the ‘Love Parade’ a New Form of Political Identification?” *Cultural Anthropology* 15, no. 2 (May 2000): 294–317. <https://doi.org/https://www.jstor.org/stable/656578>.
- Brown, Lynn. “How Berlin’s Techno Scene Transformed the City and Gained UNESCO Status.” BBC News, March 22, 2024. <https://www.bbc.com/travel/article/20240322-berlin-techno-scene-gains-unesco-status>.
- Bryan-Quamina, Gabrielle. “Magnus Hirschfeld and the Institute for Sexual Science.” Science Museum Blog, February 29, 2024. <https://blog.sciencemuseum.org.uk/magnus-hirschfeld-and-the-institute-for-sexual-science/>.
- Dalphon, Denise. “Detroit Techno.” Essay. In *African American Music: An Introduction*, 2nd ed., 452–76. New York, New York: Routledge, 2015.
- Dicker, Holly. “Tresor at 30: The Evolution of a Berlin Techno Institution.” DJ Mag, September 30, 2021. <https://djmag.com/longreads/tresor-30-evolution-berlin-techno-institution>.
- “The End of WWII and the Division of Europe.” Center for European Studies. Accessed October 23, 2024. <https://europe.unc.edu/the-end-of-wwii-and-the-division-of-europe/#:~:text=A%20Divided%20Germany,divided%20into%20four%20occupied%20zones.>
- Ganz, Jacob. “Love Parade Festival Canceled Forever.” NPR, July 26, 2010. <https://www.npr.org/sections/therecord/2010/07/26/128775229/love-parade-festival-canceled-forever>.
- Jerrentrup, Ansgar. “Techno Music: Its Special Characteristics and Didactic Perspectives.” *The World of Music* 42, no. 1 (2000): 65–82. <https://doi.org/https://www.jstor.org/stable/41699314>.
- Rosenthal, Rob, and Richard Flacks. *Playing for Change: Music and Musicians in the Service of Social Movements*. New York, New York: Routledge, 2011.
- Schmitz, Rob, Kai McNamee, and Christopher Intagliata. “How Berlin’s Legendary Techno Scene Has Become Recognized by UNESCO.” NPR, March 15, 2024. <https://www.npr.org/2024/03/15/1238876785/how-berlins-legendary-techno-scene-has-become-recognized-by-unesco>.

“The Weimar Republic.” United States Holocaust Memorial Museum. Accessed October 23, 2024. <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/the-weimar-republic>.

Wurnell, Mats. “The Berghain Backstory: Building Berlin’s Most Legendary Nightclub.” Medium, October 6, 2016. <https://medium.com/cuepoint/the-berghain-backstory-building-berlins-most-legendary-nightclub-87ad2d901ee9>.

“‘2+4’ Talks and the Reunification of Germany, 1990.” U.S. Department of State Archive. Accessed October 24, 2024. <https://2001-2009.state.gov/r/pa/ho/time/pcw/108224.htm>.