# Between Possession and Depression: The Dark Continuum of Roman Techno

**A mixtape compiled by 'VM', member of the Gruppo di Nun and chronicler of Rome's dark twin city of Remoria, takes us back to the years 1990–1994, when a new brand of home-grown techno pumped a chronic strain of no-future energy into the peripheral zones of burned-out Empire.**

*The prophet of techno, proud to have him tattooed on my skin… When he took the decks— so much paranoia, so much joy!!!!!!!!*

YouTube user Patrick Supercars, comment on Lory D's 'Alkatraz'

In 1990, unbeknownst to the rest of the world, techno invaded Rome, the sunny, dirty, chaotic capital of Italy. At first, it was a story like many others. In the late 1980s, a bunch of young kids who were already fans of hip hop and electronic music discovered the new sound of Detroit, went to London, immersed themselves in the E-fuelled vibes of the Second Summer of Love, learned the basics of rave, came back to their own city and put what they had learned from these physical and mental journeys into practice. They opened record shops, reinvented themselves as DJs and producers, founded labels, launched radio shows, and most importantly, started organising techno parties on the outskirts of the city.

But by 1990, what had begun as a small, devoted scene for electronic music freaks and connoisseurs of synthetic drugs was starting to get out of control. 'Rave' became a code word for a new generation of local misfits, and techno was elected the official soundtrack in every neighbourhood from the city centre to the ghettos on the edge of the metropolis. Parties became bigger and bigger, attended by 5000, then 10,000, then 20,000 ecstatic ravers dancing until dawn—and beyond. It was a movement such as Rome had never seen before. A revolution was taking place, and it was as alien to its surrounds as a glassy hundred-storey skyscraper would be in the centre of the Colosseum—as if the cyberpunk prophecy of the early eighties ultraviolent comic *Ranxerox* was finally coming true.

**A revolution was taking place, and it was as alien to its surrounds as a glassy hundred-storey skyscraper would be in the centre of the Colosseum—as if the cyberpunk prophecy of the early eighties ultraviolent comic Ranxerox was finally coming true.**

From 1990 to 1993 Rome became one of the techno capitals of Europe but—perhaps surprisingly—the rest of Italy barely took any notice. For most listeners, critics, and clubgoers, 'electronic dance music' still meant the mellow rhythms of Italo House, regularly

celebrated in the expensive megadiscotheques of the Italian Riviera (Rimini and Riccione being the weekend capitals of the nation). Outside of Rome, no genuine rave culture appeared until at least the mid-to-late nineties. But the Rome crew had good connections with the other scenes spreading the techno gospel around the world—Derrick May, Joey Beltram, Aphex Twin, Richie Hawtin, and Underground Resistance were all regulars at Roman rave parties—and a few producers began to emerge internationally thanks to a never-ending stream of 12-inches (and occasionally LPs) released by local labels such as AVC and SNS.

## For most listeners, critics, and clubgoers, 'electronic dance music' still meant the mellow rhythms of Italo House, regularly celebrated in the expensive megadiscotheques of the Italian Riviera.

Several names stood out as mainstays of the scene. Leo Anibaldi released his debut EP *Noise Generation* in 1991, and between 1992 and 1993, produced two full length masterpieces, *Cannibald* and *Muta*, before moving to Rephlex (the British 'braindance' label founded by Richard D. James/Aphex Twin and Grant Wilson Claridge) for his 1995 LP, *Void*. Rephlex would also become home to Fabrizio and Marco D'Arcangelo, twin brothers who originally debuted under the moniker Automatic Sound Unlimited together with fellow producer Max Durante. And finally, there was Lory D—the original high priest of rave insanity, the crazy trickster who almost single-handedly generated a furious, uncontrollable cult dedicated to a Joker-style alter ego nicknamed 'The Holy Mountain' and boasting a legion of devotees.

It was Lory D who, in 1991, released the first real anthem of the Rome scene. A twisted hardcore banger titled 'Sickness', it contained a vocal sample which soon became the mantra for the entire community of local ravers: 'This is the sound of Rome'. The catchphrase eventually ended up defining a subgenre of techno clearly influenced by what was going on in Detroit, the UK, and Germany (especially the Frankfurt school of hardcore techno ignited by Mescalinum United's 'We Have Arrived') but with its own particular traits and idiosyncrasies.

In the words of British techno historian Matt Annis, 'Sickness' was one of the first examples of 'dystopian electronics, sharp, rave-era stabs, liquid acid lines and a colossal, industrial influenced techno groove'.[1] Similarly, the bulk of the music associated with the so called 'Sound of Rome'—tracks by Lory D, Leo Anibaldi, early D'Arcangelo, Max Durante, Andrea Benedetti, Eugenio Vatta, Marco Micheli, Gabriele Rizzo—was unmistakably dark. Verging on industrial and hardcore (and acid), Sound of Rome techno was as heavy and claustrophobic as a recovery from a bad trip. With its gothic atmosphere and Metal Machine Beats, it resembled a sort of horror-cybernetic dance fuelled by schizophrenia and paranoia: tracks often bordered on pure chaos—Lory D being the master of broken, convoluted high speed rhythms on the brink of sheer, hellish noise—adding a psychotic touch to an already sinister mood.

The distorted, fragmented, and 'experimental' character of the sound seemed more like the result of a horrified mind dealing with an endless stream of nightmares than a conscious stylistic choice. In a way, the whole spectrum of the Sound of Rome can be perfectly encapsulated between two poles named by early Leo Anibaldi tracks: 'Possession' and 'Depression'. This wasn't celebration music for all night parties on E, this was technology-induced Judgment Day, apocalypse dance for electronically charged zombies, constantly mounting tension with no sense of release.

## With its gothic atmosphere and Metal Machine Beats, it resembled a sort of horror-cybernetic dance fuelled by schizophrenia and paranoia.

'Dark techno' was of course a recurrent feature in the early nineties international rave scene, but in many respects the true antecedent of the Sound of Rome wasn't so much the fantasy of cyberpunk dystopia as the never forgotten lesson of local lords of horror, Goblin—the seventies prog rock band that came to fame thanks to their collaboration with film director Dario Argento, master of Italian giallo cinema.

1. M. Anniss, 'The Rise & Fall of Roman Techno, 1988–94', *Red Bull Music Academy Daily,* <https://www.museomacro.it/extra/parole/the-rise-fall-of-roman-techno-1988-94-di-matt-anniss-red-bull-music-academy-daily-2015/>.

It is no coincidence that Freddy K, a second generation producer/self-proclaimed heir of the original Sound of Rome, explicitly titled a track from his 1995 album *Rage of Age* 'Dario Argento'. Many of the most distinctive features of Roman techno clearly echo the sonic (and visual) environment of old giallo movies—morbid atmospheres filled with cold violence, erotic madness, and psychedelic flavour, and perfectly embodied by Goblin's peculiar style of Mediterranean prog rock, all paranoid synths, ghostly whispers and sensual grooves.

Tracks that pay tribute to the squeaky electronics of Goblin's scores for movies such as *Deep Red* and *Suspiria* are countless; the inner sleeve of Leo Anibaldi's *Muta*, with its surrealistic painting of fantasy creatures taken from a creepy erotic hallucination, is a direct reference to the seventies aesthetics of giallo and of Italian prog rock (compare it to the cover art of classics such as Le Orme's *Felona e Sorona*, PFM's *Storia di Un Minuto*, etc.); even the schizoid, erratic work of Lory D can legitimately be considered a form of techno prog, albeit an aberrant and deformed one—as if a horribly mangled version of Goblin were asked to score, not Dario Argento's psychic nightmares, but the Japanese body horror classic *Tetsuo: The Iron Man.*[2]

**Many of the most distinctive features of Roman techno clearly echo the sonic (and visual) environment of old giallo movies—morbid atmospheres filled with cold violence, erotic madness, and psychedelic flavour.**

A typical product of 1970s Italy, giallo movies were first and foremost a death trip into the abyss of the psyche, a feast of blood and perversion imbued with a heavy dose of LSD. Twenty years later, the Sound of Rome updated the giallo sensibility to be compatible with the cast-iron will of the machine, messing up the circuitry of the human brain with a quasi-sadistic taste for grim obsession and dead-end insanity. Its mental qualities perhaps explain why the Sound of Rome never seemed interested in trying to sound blatantly 'futuristic'. At its core, to quote one of Lory D's infamously delirious texts, were the labyrinths of 'the metropolis of the mind'.[3]

After all, Rome wasn't a vast, grey industrial metropolis like London or Detroit. It was a neglected city of ruins on the edge of the Mediterranean Sea, baked by the deadly rays of a tyrannical Black Sun, its peripheries an infinite sprawl where time is eternal and the future never arrives because it has already taken place in some long forgotten past.[4] Wandering among the phantasmatic vestiges of the ancient city in the early hours of the morning, when the effects of E are waning and all that is left is the fatigue of an imminent comedown, was like facing a horrible truth secretly transmitted by millennia of ghosts: everything is going to collapse—and you will collapse with it. Abandon all hope, ye who enter here: this landscape of ruins is the mirror of the wreckage of your mind.

By the tail end of 1993, the Rome scene was bigger than ever—and, as is often the case, bigger means more complicated. The once easy-going atmosphere of the parties had vanished, thanks to riots and gang fights. Lacerated by personal rivalries, internal conflict, and financial disputes, the original rave community split up. Many of the major figures quit and started concentrating on smaller events. But Lory D, Leo Anibaldi, and the D'Arcangelo brothers all continued producing records, and in the years that followed new generations of producers—from Marco Passarani to Donato Dozzy—would begin to emerge. Nonetheless, as early as the beginning of 1994, it was clear that the season was over.

Rome's orphaned rave community split into two different scenes. One—led by Virus, Freddy K's radio show (and related club night)—embraced the overtly populist style of gabber hardcore and

---

2. Interestingly, Goblin are at the origin of Rome's dance culture in a very direct way. In the late seventies, the band's leader Claudio Simonetti turned to disco music and started a collaboration with Easy Going, a legendary gay club in the very centre of the city, famously decorated by Tom of Finland. In 1979, proto-house classics such as 'Baby I Love You' and most crucially the horror-themed 'Fear'—an ironic nod to Simonetti's past with Goblin—paved the way for the rise of Italo Disco.

3. Anniss, 'The Rise & Fall of Roman Techno'.

4. See Gruppo di Nun, 'Solarisation', in *Revolutionary Demonology* (Falmouth: Urbanomic, 2022).

became a hotspot for hooligans, coatti, and hard techno maniacs. The other embraced the more experimental, darkside Sound of Rome, and plugged it into the burgeoning illegal rave scene that had arisen as the result of an encounter between the younger generation of ravers and a local network of squats, political activists, and underground 'cultural agitators'. This brought the rave scene to new heights of kamikaze techno-debauchery, as reflected in the black cult of *Torazine*, a sort of glossy fanzine born out of an inner circle of illegal ravers mixing occult theory and synthetic drugs, Gilles Deleuze and the Temporary Autonomous Zone, Italian post-workerism and high BPM, acid satanism and acid techno. In the second half of the 1990s *Torazine* occupied the cutting edge of the dark continuum inaugurated by Goblin's scores for giallo movies and resuscitated by the Sound of Rome.

**After all, Rome wasn't a vast, grey industrial metropolis like London or Detroit. It was a neglected city of ruins on the edge of the Mediterranean Sea, baked by the deadly rays of a tyrannical Black Sun, its peripheries an infinite sprawl where time is eternal and the future never arrives because it has already taken place in some long forgotten past.**

*Torazine*'s last issue appeared in late 2001 right after the 9/11 attacks, when the illegal rave scene—now at odds with the new culture of 'free tekno' imported by British travellers Spiral Tribe—was falling into decline thanks to too many drugs and increasingly predictable music. At this point, the dark continuum found new heroes in TruceKlan, a horrorcore rap gang whose members had been initiated into the synthetic paradises of those same abandoned factories where the illegal rave scene had once held court (Matteo Swaitz, TruceKlan's official music video director, later a convert to the porn industry, was one of the original minds behind *Torazine* and an early pioneer of the 'illegal' credo).

In 2014, after more than a decade of lust, excess, drug-induced paranoia, and psychosis, TruceKlan finally passed the dark continuum's baton to Dark Polo Gang, a trap crew whose producer (the now famous—at least in Italy—Sick Luke) was the young son of a former TruceKlan affiliate, and whose unswerving devotion to darkside prosecuted a now forty-year-long alliance between low-spirited states of mind and synthetic sound.

This mixtape focuses on the early era of the Sound of Rome—the pioneering years of Lory D, Leo Anibaldi, and co.—for the simple reason that this is the era in which it could be said that Rome's dark continuum reached its maximum intensity (with the obvious exception of *Torazine*, which unfortunately didn't produce any music—even if the experimental techno label Idroscalo Dischi, run by legendary DJ and producer Anna Bolena, was closely associated with the *Torazine* crew). The selection is anything but exhaustive. The thirty tracks I have chosen here constitute an incomplete list based on personal taste and (mostly blurred) memories. Too many classics and bangers have been left out, and fans will no doubt complain about some glaring absences ('No "Sickness"!', 'No "Il Futuro è Nostro"!').

For all the revolutionary demonologists out there: enjoy the music—enjoy paranoia!

## Tracklist

Leo Anibaldi – 'Muta (Part 1)'
Centuria City – 'The Dungeon'
Leo Anibaldi – '1972'
Centuria City – 'Mhz'
Automatic Sound Unlimited – 'Logout'
Gabriele Rizzo – 'Prophecy'
Gabriele Rizzo – 'La Notte Dei Morti'
Leo Anibaldi – 'Block One (Part 1)'
The Noisy Project – 'Percezioni'
Marco Micheli – 'Pioneers Hotel'
Leo Anibaldi – 'Basic Trax'
Full Immersion – 'Night Dogs'
Lory D – 'Rancid Trax 3'
Lory D – 'Non Fermarti'
Leo Anibaldi – 'Possession'
Lory D – 'SNS 007 / Unitled (Prendi Questo Treno)'
Leo Anibaldi – 'Depression'
Gabriele Rizzo – 'Jack Daniels'
Monomorph – 'Battletech'
Solid State – 'Neuron'
B.S.E. Brainstorm Experience – 'Diabolic Step'

Lory D – 'Coldbringer'
Marco Micheli – 'Beta'
Automatic Sound Unlimited – 'Matrix A.S.U.'
Sprawl – 'Rapid Eye Movement'
New Acid Generation – 'Neural Acid'
Automatic Sound Unlimited – 'Synthetic Material'
Centuria City – 'Justix'
Gabriele Rizzo – 'Quivera'
Lory D – 'SNS 008 / Untitled (Alkatraz)'