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Submerge in Detroit: Techno's Creative Response to Urban Crisis

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The Detroit electronic music (DEM) community is a group of urban residents who, since the 1980s, have used new technologies in music production as well as changing communications technologies to create a transnational arts community. This article is a result of ethnographic research of the DEM community conducted from 1999 to 2007 and is focussed on the city's biggest independent distribution company, Submerge. The phrase "electronic music" refers to both house and techno music. Techno music and house music are African American music genres created in Detroit and Chicago respectively during the early 1980s. Recent concerns in the field of American studies – transnationalism, community collaboration, issues of technology and global communication – can be seen in a group of urban residents who have been exploring similar issues, in some cases by necessity, for the past three decades. It is important for the study of American urban places to include a clear picture of heterogeneous urban populations in places of crisis. With a richer idea of what life is really like in cities in crisis, we can better plan, develop, and encourage urban revitalization.

Stepping off the plane after more than half a day's travel he might have been a little shocked at the shabby interior of the Detroit Metropolitan Airport. At the time of his arrival in the summer of 1999, travelers to Detroit's major airport were greeted by deteriorating waiting-room chairs, old restroom fixtures, and creaking baggage carousels. Using his limited English, he gave the cab driver an address he'd found on a website. It was not the address of a hotel, a rental car lot, or a tourist welcome center. It was not a museum, a major corporation, or a university. The Chilean tourist was a techno fan, and, like others, his appreciation for the music drove him to Detroit.

His twenty-five-minute cab ride ended at a small business. He reached his hand past the sign on the door that read "BY APPOINTMENT ONLY," and rang the bell. When the workers answered the door, they were not entirely surprised by the immediacy of his unexpected arrival direct from an international flight. They did not, however, know how to deal with his limited English because most of the others who had arrived in a similar fashion spoke at least

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a little. No one at Submerge, at that time, spoke Spanish and so they called for my help. They welcomed and visited with their guest from Chile and then drove him to a motel just east of downtown where I would later pick him up for a car tour of the city. I modeled the tour on the one that I had been given two summers earlier during my first visit to Detroit. Many had arrived at the doors of Submerge in a similar fashion before us, and hundreds would continue to arrive just like we did – uninvited, unannounced, but not unwelcome.

The Chilean fan's arrival at Submerge is part of a larger pattern of international fans intrigued enough by the way the musicians represent Detroit to want to see the city for themselves. Submerge is a logical first stop from the airport because it is Detroit's major independent distribution company, exporting about 80 percent of the city's electronic music labels to the world. The Submerge building houses the distribution company's mail-order operations, its manufacturing division, and the "by appointment only" record store, as well as recording space for a few of the artists on the independent record labels it distributes. Submerge's workers are of critical importance in maintaining the Detroit electronic music (DEM) community's relationship with international fans through their distribution not only of music but also of information, cooperation, and good will.

Detroit is not a primary tourist destination for international visitors. In 1999, only 1.7 percent of overseas travelers to the US visited the state of Michigan.[1] The tall, constantly smiling Chilean who figured into that 1.7 percent made his trip to Detroit for a chance to meet some of his favorite musicians. The arrival of international techno tourists to Detroit disrupts accepted knowledge about American urban places. While some American cities such as New York, Miami, and San Francisco draw international tourists and function as the center of their metropolitan areas, other urban places, exemplified by Detroit, are not regarded as cosmopolitan, desirable tourist sites. The very word "Detroit" is regularly used in place of the phrase "urban failure" in the national media. For instance, on 27 August 2006, a year after Hurricane Katrina, Adam Nossiter reported in the *New York Times* that pessimists worried that "New Orleans will be Detroit, they say, a sickly urban wasteland abandoned by the middle class."

In the academic literature, the debate about Detroit does not concern *whether* it is a failure, but *how* and *why* it is the most representative urban

[1] The top three states visited by overseas travelers were California with 25.5%, Florida with 23.7%, and New York with 23.7%. US Dept. of Commerce, International Trade Administration, *Statistical Abstract of the United States, 2001*.

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American problem.[2] I believe it is a necessary move within American urban studies to destabilize the trope of failure that is unilaterally applied to urban places in crisis in order to avoid the consequence of dispensing with the people living in them. The people living in besieged urban places are not the completely homogeneous group of poor and powerless that captures the American imagination. While the realities of living in the urban centers most affected by postindustrial crisis include high numbers of residents challenged with joblessness, poverty, limited city services, and higher incidences of crime, academic researchers have responded to this crisis by neglecting the heterogeneous population of these cities that also includes committed citizens, creative entrepreneurs, innovative artists, and active citizens.[3] In contrast, the urban vernacular usage of the phrase "inner city" is fluid enough to recognize urban diversity; it is used descriptively to mean alternately "broken down" or "creative hustle." While conventional wisdom separates two city populations into the urban poor, usually of color, and the urban pioneer, most commonly a white gentrifier, the two groups cannot be so easily divided. Long-time urban residents who have faced the many challenges that besiege urban cores have responded in ways we tend to attribute only to the recently

[2] The title of the book that was quickly catapulted to required-reading status on Detroit exemplifies this tendency: Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996). While Sugrue's book does the important work of refiguring the urban crisis as the result of economic policy and white homeowner animosity rather than springing from the urban rebellions of the 1960s and cultural patterns of urban pathology, the book's major flaw is the lack of attention to black agency. The consequences of this limitation are explained well in Beth Bates, Timothy Bates, and Grace Lee Boggs's "Where Are the People? Review Essay on Thomas Sugrue's *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*," *Review of Black Political Economy*, 27, 4 (Spring 2000). Comparing Detroit to disaster resulted in two provocative recent articles: Laura A. Reese's "Economic versus Natural Disasters: If Detroit Had a Hurricane …," *Economic Development Quarterly*, 20, 3 (2006), 219–31; and Jerry Herron's "Detroit: Disaster Deferred, Disaster in Progress," *South Atlantic Quarterly*, 106, 4 (2007), 663–82. I do not want to suggest that the motif of disaster is not useful in order to make policy suggestions, but merely that a concurrent attention to what functions as vibrant in the city enhances our complete understanding of the realities of urban places.

[3] For some notable exceptions in ethnography see Elijah Anderson, *Code of the Street: Decency, Violence, and the Moral Life of the Inner City* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1999); Kathryn Edin and Maria Kefalas, *Promises I Can Keep: Why Poor Women Put Motherhood before Marriage* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005); Mitchell Duneier, *Sidewalks* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999); Katherine Newman, *Chutes and Ladders: Navigating the Low-Wage Labor Market* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation at Harvard University Press, 2006); Katherine Newman, *No Shame in My Game: The Working Poor in the Inner City* (New York: Knopff. 1999); Mary Pattillo-McCoy, *Black Picket Fences: Privilege and Peril among the Black Middle Class* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); Mario Luis Small, *Villa Victoria: The Transformation of Social Capital in a Boston Barrio* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

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arrived gentrifiers: they have created artistic, innovative, profitable responses to urban crisis.

In this article, I describe one example of a vibrant urban community that reaches out from the country's most besieged city to make connections to an international community of concerned techno tourists. My call for attention to the realities of urban places in the face of the tendency to imagine a flat, homogeneous population stems from more than mere virtue; I believe that those of us interested in American studies can learn practices for recent concerns in the field – transnationalism, service-learning and community collaborations, issues of technology and global communication – from a group of urban residents who have been exploring similar issues, in some cases by necessity, for the past three decades. In addition, it is important for the study of American urban places to get a clearer picture of heterogeneous urban populations in places of crisis. If we get a richer idea of what life is really like in cities in crisis, we can better plan, develop, and encourage urban revitalization.[4] Building urban revitalization on grassroots community development already in progress will benefit center cities by increasing social, economic, and political participation. The benefits of a stronger center-city economy will extend to surrounding suburban regions because stronger central cities result in stronger suburban economies.[5]

One example of grassroots urban revitalization is the DEM community, a group of urban residents who, since the 1980s, have used new technologies in music production as well as changing communications technologies to create a transnational arts community. This article is a result of my ethnographic research of the DEM community conducted from 1999 to 2007. I am using the phrase "electronic music" to refer to both house and techno music. Techno music and house music are African American music genres created in Detroit and Chicago respectively during the early 1980s. Musical pioneers in Chicago and Detroit were, and still are, heavily influenced by each other. Early designations of what was house and what was techno had more to do with city than with style and both house and techno continue to be made in both places, although each city is more widely known by international electronic music fans for its respective genre.[6] My project built from

[4] For an excellent, Detroit-based discussion of the importance of community participation in planning practice see June Manning Thomas, *Redevelopment and Race: Planning a Finer City in Postwar Detroit* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1997).

[5] Andrew F. Haughwout and Robert P. Inman, "Should Suburbs Help Their Central City?", Brookings-Wharton Papers on Urban Affairs, 2002.

[6] An informative discussion of this interchange can be found in an article by Heiko Hoffman, "From the Autobahn to I-94: The Origins of Detroit Techno and Chicago

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the realization that the media, public, and academic approach over the years towards Detroit made it nearly impossible to know what life was like in that city because of its overrepresentation as urban failure. Therefore my methodology evolved out of my understanding that to tell a story of a present Detroit would require long-term participant observation and residence. From 1999 through the present, I have lived in the city of Detroit, building relationships with musicians, promoters, label owners, and other participants in the scene who, like me, love the music. It understandably took years of my residence in Detroit before some were able to overcome decades of journalist, academic, and pundit abuse in order to get past skepticism of my intentions.

In what follows, I explore a network of international connections, forged by an underground music scene that kept Detroit connected through some of the years in which the city was most maligned by regional and national media. I use the distribution company, Submerge, as my main example because it functions as a hub within the music community. The foundation for Submerge's independently created global fan base was laid by the musicians' decision to forego record contracts with major labels in order to build distribution relationships with mom-and-pop record stores in other countries. Building on that foundation and incorporating the reach of the World Wide Web, they have now amassed a network of fans that stretches to all parts of the world. Submerge's international acclaim is made all the more interesting by its existence in Detroit at the center of a social terrain of disregard.

During the car tour, the Chilean fan beamed with pure enjoyment despite Detroit's sometimes dreary city streets and neglected architecture. He brightened further when we returned to Submerge. His expression resembled those of other techno tourists who see their time in Detroit less like a vacation and more like a kind of pilgrimage. In order to consider the importance of the local electronic music community's international connections, I offer the example of the international fan's adoration of Detroit, learned through their admiration of Detroit artists, against the disdain Detroit often faces on a regional and national level. I explore these international networks to illuminate the ways in which local community-building can be buoyed by reaching across regional, national, and international lines. Is this a necessary step for those who find themselves disregarded within their regional setting? What can we learn from urban artistic movements regarding current concerns with transnationalism, community involvement, and innovative use of new media? Urban places in general and Detroit in

House," *Pitchfork Media*, available at http://www.pitchforkmedia.com/article/feature/10251-from-the-autobahn-to-i-94.

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particular take on new meaning if we acknowledge that urban residents, such the ones in the DEM community, have exhibited "inner-city" resolve with a "creative hustle" that offers one solution of how to weave together transnational connectivity and local community rootedness via new media.

SUBMERGE AND THE EXTENSIVE REACH OF INDEPENDENCE

Though non-fans tend to think of electronic music as repetitive, unnuanced, or soulless, Detroit techno's distinct sound is funky, while simultaneously human and otherworldly. Both house and techno use 4/4 time, but house music is generally slower (about 120 beats per minute), with accents on every other beat, and is more likely to incorporate vocals. Techno is more likely to have a straight 4/4 sound, is generally faster, and incorporates more abstract sounds. Though techno is now made all over the globe, Detroit techno is known for its use of layered rhythms and the influence of funk music.

Electronic music is now seen as fitting within tight generic borders but its creation stems from DJs in the 1980s playing music from many different genres, including rock and roll, alternative, funk, and early hip-hop. From the mid-1970s until the late 1990s, Detroit had a radio show hosted by the Electrifying Mojo. Mojo refused to recognize generic borders, dispensing with the notion that city residents would only tune in for stereotypically "urban" music. He played new wave, rock, funk, and soul, introducing many Detroiters to Kraftwerk while playing Run DMC alongside the B-52s. In the last few years there have been occasional "tribute to Mojo" parties in Detroit, at which the DJs play Mojo's favorite records; at these parties I have witnessed a room full of black women and men in their forties and fifties raise their hands, close their eyes, and enthusiastically nod their heads to Peter Frampton's "Do You Feel Like We Do." Detroit techno owes a debt to Mojo for the multiplicity of influences that resonate within its sound.

Mojo's eclecticism influenced what Detroit DJs played at local parties. Almost all Detroit DJs will acknowledge that they were also influenced by the similarly eclectic Ken Collier, who was Detroit's top club and party DJ in the late 1970s and the 1980s. Young Detroiters, wanting to rock the turntables like Mr. Collier, formed DJ collectives in which they worked together to play parties, clubs, and radio spots. The Direct Drive crew was known for dominating the 1980s party scene because they not only provided the DJs, they also provided the lighting and the sound system. In the early 1980s, another crew called Deep Space was founded by Juan Atkins and Derrick May and included Kevin Saunderson and Eddie Fowlkes, among others.

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Atkins was not only interested in mixing together records to get this new eclectic sound, he also wanted to produce his own records that were electronic, futuristic, and funky. Atkins originally worked with a partner, Rik Davis, as the duo Cybotron, in 1981 releasing "Alleys of Your Mind," which is often regarded as the first techno record.[7] Atkins assembled electronic instruments such as drum machines and synthesizers into a studio on West Seven Mile in Detroit for the Deep Space DJs to make records. Alongside the requisite turntables, the Deep Space DJs took their drum machine to performances so that they could program live beats for the dance floor. This attention to production differentiated Deep Space DJs from other DJ crews. Atkins founded the record label Metroplex and, after becoming a solo artist, released his and other Deep Space DJs' music on his label. Early techno is evocative of the cityscape of 1980s Detroit: it is futuristic, postindustrial, and obsessed with technology. Deep Space DJs' musical output was noticed by a producer in the UK, Neil Rushton, who worked with them to compile *Techno: The New Dance Sound of Detroit*, released in 1988. After 1988, many of the Deep Space DJs started to travel regularly to perform in the UK and later worldwide.

The origination of Detroit techno not only required creativity in pushing musical boundaries but also demonstrated a creativity and flexibility that would become part of the artists' business approach. Rather than seek major record label distribution, most early electronic musicians founded their own labels. Releasing music on one's own label meant that the artist would maintain not only creative control but also ownership of the art. Detroit electronic musicians always thought of themselves in conversation with musicians and musics of other places. Their early attempts at expansive, global communication through music have resulted in the current international fan base. The fan base is nurtured by Submerge, the major crossroads for DEM's international connections, as well as, arguably, the heart of techno in the city.

Established in 1992 by Michael Banks and Christa Weatherspoon Robinson, Submerge is a manufacturer and wholesale distributor of vinyl records that works with retailers and distributors worldwide.[8] The idea for

[7] The same year a collective of musicians, known as A Number of Names, released a song called "Sharevari" which is alternately regarded as the first techno record. Its layered sound and repeated vocals that mimic two copies of a record played almost in synch ("Chari Chari … Vari Vari") replicate the sound of a DJ's performance. Naming the song after an influential 1980s clothing boutique that featured avant-garde fashions demonstrates the aesthetics of this particular social scene.

[8] Submerge was nurtured early on by Mike Banks's family, including support from his mother and his sister, Bridgette.

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Submerge emerged out of the difficulties faced by Underground Resistance, which is a musical act that at the time consisted of Mike Banks and Jeff Mills. In 1992 Jeff Mills moved on as a solo act to his own record label and since then Underground Resistance has swelled to incorporate many musicians besides Banks. While fans sometimes conflate Submerge and Underground Resistance, Submerge is solely a distribution company and Underground Resistance is one of the acts that Submerge distributes.

A look at the founding of the business will demonstrate the beginnings of the international network forged by independence and creativity. The early Detroit techno musicians had difficulty maintaining their labels because they were facing busy touring schedules in Europe, the place where their music was most enthusiastically picked up by a growing techno fan base. This left a kind of vacuum, where later DEM artists were unable to speak with the first wave of musicians for advice or potential record deals. Noting the challenge of busy overseas schedules, Mike Banks also noticed that artists' lack of business experience and limited resources presented a challenge for distribution. Quoted in the history section of the company's website, Mike explains Submerge's origins as a way to address these needs:

> In a rare interview from a 1994 article in "A House in Detroit", Banks says, "Submerge was founded out of a need. There were a bunch of small, unorganized labels struggling to survive. None of them had any formal business classes, and for any record label to survive, you have to produce music. Jeff (Mills) and I were signing acts, back when he was here, trying to collect money, bill people, send invoices, and it was cutting into our music. We couldn't afford a staff. So my idea was to accumulate all these labels. Then have a business educated visible person to be the face of the company – that person was Christa Weatherspoon.[9]

The idea to accumulate the labels into an administrative hub resulted in cost-sharing and labor reduction for each small independent label. As Mike points out, the administrative work kept the musicians from producing music. Additionally, one label did not require enough work to hire a complete staff. The Submerge staff is, in a sense, shared amongst the small labels it works with, making administrative support an affordable possibility while also centralizing and streamlining the efforts of distributing music from independent labels.

Christa Weatherspoon Robinson became a cofounder of Submerge while concurrently receiving a bachelor of science degree in business administration (corporate finance) from Wayne State University in 1992. Though no longer

[9] "History," Submerge, 1 Aug. 2009, available at http://www.submerge.com/distribution/gallery.html.

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with the company, she echoed, in an interview conducted via email in 2005, the need from which Submerge was born:

> Actually, Submerge was born out of a need more than anything else. Many smaller unknown labels were making music in their mama's basements or garages and after they made this music they didn't know how to go about selling it … We offered smaller labels that met the criteria, a hub to have their records pressed and distributed which increased their label's profile; all for a minimal administration fee.[10]

The "hub" that Christa mentions is a good description not only of the business approach of Submerge but also of the way in which it functions as a community center. The international arts community is the result of the foundation laid in large part by the service Submerge provides, centralizing the distribution of Detroit techno records and carrying the evidence of a creative response to urban crisis to a worldwide audience.

Submerge was started and built on determination and continued struggle. For instance, Bridgette, Banks's sister and currently co-owner, describes how the company was structured in the very beginning:

> Well, it was in my mom's basement. When it was coming right out of my mom's basement … they did everything pretty much by fax and orders would come in by fax. They would ship the records out from our house by UPS, out of the basement. That was Michael and Jeff. And then Christa came in, and Christa put it into what it is today, which is – let the business side be business, and artistic side be artistic. And she put all that stuff that Mike and Jeff did and made it into something that was a reasonable [business model]. She did all that. And then it grew into this.[11]

Christa further recalls, "We didn't have any business loans or our parents' funding either. We did it all with a lot of hard work and a dream." The Submerge founders and workers are incredibly proud of their beginnings and their progress. The early space of the "mom's basement" becomes a motif within their accounts of their company history, representing the hard work and creative resolve required in the earliest stages of Submerge.

A closer look at one staffer's flexibility in the face of multiple duties will illustrate the foundation behind Submerge's international reach. Bridgette Banks, who supported Submerge at its inception, was born and raised in Detroit. She attended Renaissance High School and has continued her schooling first at the University of Michigan's Ann Arbor campus and then at its Dearborn campus. Bridgette is softly spoken but her dedication and hard work make her a dynamic force at Submerge. As a nonmusician, Bridgette knows how important yet distracting the administrative aspects of

[10] Christa Weatherspoon Robinson, email interview, 10 June 2005.
[11] Bridgette Banks, personal interview, 8 July 2003.

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the music industry are. Throughout her years at Submerge and no matter what her official title, she has balanced a multitude of responsibilities. She coordinates the delivery of the original tracks to the mastering studio. She is responsible for working with two record-pressing plants, Archer Record Pressing in Detroit and United Record Pressing in Nashville, to secure the manufacturing and delivery of the pressed records. Bridgette also manages any back orders of released titles. In recent years, she has taken on bookkeeping and accounting responsibilities. Her duties are demanding and time-sensitive, and require constant coordination with clients, service providers, and other Submerge staffers. When I asked her during an interview in 2003 to describe what Submerge does, she did not, however, focus on her work and responsibilities but on the service Submerge is able to provide for the artists:

> Submerge gives independent labels an opportunity to be independent. The labels do their own promotion but we make sure that their records get out there. They're able to do what they are supposed to do. That's how I look at it – Submerge manufactures and distributes the records; we ship them where they need to go. But the artist is able to do what the artist is supposed to do – which is be an artist. The musician can – instead of trying to chase money down, and chase invoices down and doing the managerial side of it – they are able to do the artistic side and it allows them to do that.[12]

In relaying how Submerge makes it possible for artists to make art, Bridgette points to the advantages the business affords its clients. Submerge provides musicians with flexibility and independence.

Bridgette describes the biggest changes to the business since she joined the company in 1992 as "fine tuning." She describes a "learning process" in the beginning with trial and error that has now been replaced with an organization that is "that much more tighter." One of the largest changes to the company has occurred because of the most dominant recent technological change. Bridgette remarked, "there wasn't a mail order when I first started. There was just shipping to retailers and distributors. And then the Internet came, and that's when the mail order [started] and they put me in that position."[13] Mail-order customers are the reason why the DEM community's international network extends to all parts of the world.

Mail-order customers are folded into the extended Submerge family by the kind of care and attention that only a small company can give. For example, during the years she worked as the mail-order specialist Bridgette went to great lengths to get Submerge's music to all parts of the globe, no matter how far from Detroit. Her eyes lit up when she talked about the challenges she

[12] Ibid.

[13] Ibid.

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faced and how much work she put into sending the packages. She mentioned a customer on a tiny island off the coast of Scotland to whom she was happy to be able to ship. She showed satisfaction when describing how she used the US postal service (USPS), instead of Submerge's regular shipping company, to ship to the military members that can only receive packages from USPS. Finally, she described figuring out the import tax for various countries so that she could advise her customers the least expensive way to place their orders, for example how many records per order would minimize their expense. When I asked if she ever received gifts or thank-you's in return from customers who realized that she had gone to such an effort to get them the records she said that she occasionally does; however, the "biggest gift is them spreading the music. When they spread that music, and that other person from that country calls … that's great."[14] As the first mail-order specialist, Bridgette took on the massive challenge of shipping to the most remote locations, which played a large part in allowing such a wide distribution of the music. She helped build the transnational community that has Detroit as its center, a position in stark contrast to its usual existence in a social terrain of disregard.

Submerge has exported more than simply their stock of twelve-inch records, CDs, and clothing. Their approach to avoid the major music industry has been admired and imitated in other places, inspiring similar operations in other countries. Christa noted,

> People view us Detroiters as a model of determination and independence against all odds. While some of the global community were busy studying or imitating the sounds coming from Detroit's electronic musicians, others noticed the independent machine behind it and it too was duplicated by inspired European, British, Japanese and Australian kids tired of waiting for Major record companies to recognize their skills. In fact, every year we get hundreds of people who visit our small outlet store located in the basement of our building and make their pilgrimage to Detroit to visit the source of their inspiration and to buy the records that many say changed their lives forever.[15]

Christa and Bridgette have both witnessed countless numbers of these pilgrimages from international fans. Small companies inspired by Submerge's model are scattered throughout a transnational community centered in Detroit. Besides disrupting conventional wisdom regarding "inner-city" outcomes by being innovative and successful, Submerge also serves as a model of success to a transnational audience. Submerge is one example of the most equitable possible outcomes of globalization. By mobilizing the resources of a more connected global market as an independent business, the company is

[14] Ibid. [15] Christa Weatherspoon Robinson, e-mail interview.

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a hopeful example set against justified concerns about a globalization that will only be controlled by large corporations, resulting in growing inequality.

Multifaceted, including manufacturing, distribution, and online retail, as well as artist development, Submerge manages to be small and dynamic as well as broad and well rounded. Marked only by the sign from the building's previous occupants, a Laundry Worker's union, Submerge is a quiet but energized nexus for international business and a welcome center for those who know. Its existence, in the hands of born-and-raised Detroiters in the center of what is considered urban failure, undercuts the assumption of the homogeneity of urban poverty; it does so by offering a creative solution to the problem of urban crisis that is both transnational and locally rooted.

In 2002, Submerge moved from rented offices into its own building, described on the website as a "home built on vinyl sweat and percussive dreams."[16] Though the company grew to include almost a dozen staff members in the early to mid-1990s and dabbled in digital downloads, it has returned to its roots of distributing vinyl records and is now largely made up of the work provided by current co-owners Mike Banks and Bridgette Banks, as well as occasional part-time workers.[17] Submerge is important to Detroit not simply because of its location on a sparsely populated segment of East Grand Boulevard, but because of its orbit of fans, which includes not only local, but also national and international customers. Submerge creates a major link from the DEM community to its international fans. Years of hard work and perseverance led to the Submerge that exists now, a stable business that also functions as a central community space and, occasionally, an international welcome center. For all of these reasons, Submerge is a good representative of the DEM community's local struggles and international successes. The history of the company, the techno pioneers, and their music are preserved in the form of an exhibit and celebrated annually at a locally held and internationally attended festival.

SUBMERGE: LOCALLY ROOTED INTERNATIONAL NEXUS

Submerge houses Exhibit 3000, a collection of artifacts which represents historical memory and current developments in the music community. Exhibit

[16] "History," Submerge.

[17] The company investigated incorporating more digital downloads but decided instead to remain rooted in its foundation of vinyl records. Some considered vinyl records obsolete as early as the introduction of the cassette tape and the compact disk, but DJs and electronic music have saved vinyl from extinction. Digital downloads are, however, sold by Submerge Recordings, which is a separate company owned by Ade' Mainor that was once housed in the same building as Submerge.

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3000 functions as a gathering place for the community, particularly during the last weekend of May because the annual Detroit Electronic Music Festival, called the DEMF for short, brings hundreds of thousands to a Detroit downtown plaza, drawing fans from around the country and a substantial number from around the globe. In essence, Submerge's *Exhibit 3000* is a nexus for international attention to Detroit, attention that shows that innovative, technological, creative, and grassroots approaches to urban crisis are the unrecognized strengths of besieged urban places.

Exhibit 3000 mirrors Submerge's do-it-yourself approach to the music industry. It was the idea of Submerge's cofounder, Mike Banks. His materials make up the bulk of the collection and the exhibit's archive. Mike asked me to be a part of the team, along with his sister Bridgette, organizing and displaying the materials. Exhibit 3000 includes an extensive sweep of artists, as well as behind-the-scenes contributors. It tells a broad, inclusive story of Detroit techno's evolution, showcasing how Detroit's particularities influenced the sound now imitated around the world. The impetus behind creating the exhibit came from the musicians' understanding that the story of the innovation of the music needed to be told to avoid the fate of some early blues musicians whose contributions went unrecognized until after their deaths. The story begins by highlighting influences, including Kraftwerk, George Clinton, Berry Gordy, and Coleman Young. The inclusion of non-musician Mayor Young, Detroit's first black mayor, emphasizes the relationship between the DEM community and black political power within Detroit.[18] Exhibit 3000's equipment case holds some of the early tools of Detroit techno's creation, including ones used by the originators of Detroit's sound.

While the Influences case and the Equipment case focus visitors' attention towards the origination of Detroit techno, the Map case visually displays the end result of an extended international fan base. Brown pushpins indicate distribution points and cover Asia, Europe, South America, and various parts of the United States. Green pushpins indicate mail-order clients and are by far the most numerous, popping up on cities and towns on all continents, including smaller outlying islands. In these more remote locations, the marker represents a single fan, unlike the other green pushpins which indicate

[18] While the urban crisis of Detroit influenced the music, the positive effects of political power resting within the black community were also important to the development of the music. For a text that reframes the discussion away from the absence of white residents towards the resulting realities of black political power see Heather Ann Thompson, *Whose Detroit? Politics, Labor, and Race in a Modern American City* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001).

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multiple mail-order customers. Black pushpins indicate where Submerge DJs have flown to perform and their spread over various countries hints at why the other color pushpins manage to reach so many places. The combination of the density of the pushpins representing mail-order customers and the breadth of the pushpins representing artist appearances and retail distribution conveys a visual representation of Submerge's, and by extension DEM's, global reach. The Map case positions Detroit at the center of a global music community the existence of which challenges Detroit's usual positioning within a social terrain of disregard. It also visually represents a particularly innovative and successful response to urban challenges that traverses nation and language to create an extended arts and economic community.

During the DEMF weekend in May 2004, in conjunction with Exhibit 3000, Bridgette and I planned an exhibit called Translocation featuring visual artists whose work is inspired by electronic musicians. Two of the first guests at our art show opening had come directly from their flight from Japan, one of the two was making her first trip ever to the United States. The music draws the tourist to an unlikely first stop in the US, showing how a grassroots urban campaign can work to destabilize a city's international reputation. The room filled with people chatting, eating, and drinking, speaking French, Japanese, Spanish, Italian, Dutch, and English. Attendance was more or less evenly split between local and international visitors. Many of the international guests had long relationships with local electronic music fans, and with each other, from meeting on the occasions of this and other festivals. For instance, the first guests, who had arrived from Japan, were friends with one of the featured artists, who lives in Los Angeles. A French film crew was also among the early arrivals. An Italian group of party promoters showed me a flier for an event they had had months earlier at which a Submerge label artist had played. Some of the guests knew each other from previous events, but even participants who had never met still knew that they were part of an extended international arts community in which they all shared an appreciation for DEM. Because of the shared sense of an already existent community, people meeting for the first time felt like something more than strangers. Because the global community is used to imagining its connections despite long distances between respective homes, moments of interchange exist within a social network of friends not yet met and familiar places not yet physically experienced.

The international techno tourists are drawn to the city by the creative response of an urban community that counteracts the stereotype of a flat, homogeneous urban poor. Detroit for a moment shines as an international beacon, disrupting popular beliefs about what exists in besieged urban places.

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While the music travels and takes Detroit and Detroit stories out across the globe, it also attracts visitors to the city, visitors who would not otherwise come, and therefore makes the musicians and participants, including the ones who do not tour internationally, more cosmopolitan in their acquaintances and more transnational in their thinking. While conventional wisdom paints a picture of Detroit as flat, homogeneous, and destitute, the members of the DEM community are made more cosmopolitan through their regular contact with people from dozens of nations; in a city stereotyped as solely "underclass," participants in the DEM community greet Detroit-born friends, who happen to be traveling musicians, with "how was Japan?" or "I thought you had that residency in London this week."

Local outreach is as important to Submerge as are the global connections. A long-term goal for Exhibit 3000 is to create workshops for local school-aged children to learn about the electronic music industry. In fact, the goal of reaching out to local kids is the main motivation for Bridgette's participation in Exhibit 3000. Her reasoning gets at the heart of why the DEM community is grounded in Detroit concerns, ideals, and strategies:

> My idea is to get the kids before they get corrupted, before they get MTV'd out. They can see – not to say that other forms of music aren't intelligent – but you do need to have a clue to make this music. You have to know your way around some equipment … Let them see that there is work, there is stuff that you can do and use your head instead of all that crazy stuff, but to reach those kids and let them see that you can do this, from your mom's basement sometimes, get it going. And then have your own stuff, and you don't have to be dependent on other people to do things for you or wait on the government to take care of you. You can do these things yourself.
>
> It's all in here, it's in your head and in your heart, and if you're able to put those things together you can be successful. And you don't have to do bad things. Be a strong individual, but you don't have to be that street person. You can have your own, by yourself, or with people that you trust, or your family. Which is what we consider this is like a family, instead of "oh I gotta go to work." No, it's not that kind of thing, it's more like a family here. That's my goal for it, just to reach the kids.[19]

Because Submerge started with no resources, as many DEM artists started out, Bridgette emphasized that this could be a source of inspiration to school-aged visitors. She argues that the visitors will understand that this music-making requires skill and intelligence. As a small business with a global reach, Submerge can inspire Detroit youth to put their energy into legitimate enterprises rather than be lured by the gains of street hustling. Additionally, working for a small, family-style business like Submerge encourages pride in

[19] Bridgette Banks, personal interview.

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a tangible product and the opportunity to associate faces and names with the customers. The theme of independence, which is the basis of Submerge's business strategy, comes through in Bridgette's answer as an individual's goal, as well as a lesson for the community as a whole.[20]

The Submerge family, including its two current full-time staff members as well as part-timers, past staffers, and affiliated musicians, understand both the local necessities for maintaining a small business in Detroit and the global expansiveness that is at the base of why they connect so intimately with such a widespread music community. Though their customers are worldwide, their concerns remain with their community and with a city that is more than mere location. Their interest in Detroit is symbiotic, in that on the one hand Detroit is the basis of how their music sounds and the model for how they conduct their business, and on the other Detroit is also the motivation for their success as well as the community towards which they hope to be inspirational.

Serving many functions, Submerge is a business, a family, a welcoming center, and the nexus of an international arts community. Like the music it distributes, Submerge is creative, flexible and based in a broadly appealing foundation. Submerge acts throughout the year as a beacon, bringing global attention to a locally disregarded place. It operates as the node through which an extensive, international community participates in the sharing of music and ideas and as such maintains the creativity that allows electronic music to continue to evolve. Once a year, during the annual electronic music festival, Submerge's building becomes a physical manifestation of the innovative spirit of the global electronic music community. The Submerge staff are supremely busy at this time of year, sometimes bothered by the barrage of sights and sounds that invade their normally peaceful space (if one can consider a building where the basement is constantly filled with booming bass a peaceful space). They are, however, never irritated with out-of-town guests because they realize the magnitude of their journeys to have arrived at the building – both the journey required to become a fan of an underground music and the actual flights, capped by the obligatory direct-to-Submerge taxi ride.

[20] Though she cautions against waiting for the government to take care of you, I believe that Bridgette's comments have less to do with a broad-based repudiation of the welfare system than with an understanding of the limits of the system as it exists. The challenges facing the central city are discussed within the city in terms fluid enough to incorporate both self-reliance and the necessities of public policies that redress inequities of opportunity in urban neighborhoods.

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Submerge is one example of the DEM community and of the international techno tourists that it attracts. While it is easy to offer Detroit as the most exemplary case of American urban failure, to do so often elides the lives of Detroiters that are exemplary Americans – entrepreneurs, innovators, good citizens, lively ambassadors, thoughtful neighbors, community activists. The patterns of urban disregard that have created the social terrain of indifference towards Detroit are old and entrenched in collective memories steeped in fear and racial tension. Scholars should study but not replicate these patterns that demonstrate only urban absences. While scholars of American studies are currently concerned with how to balance transnational and local research interests, a few people from Detroit who call themselves "inner city" have beat us to the punch by creating a transnational, multifaceted, extended arts community. They have managed to attract the attention of an international audience toward the narrative of a locally embattled place, a narrative that demonstrates a creative response to urban crisis and undercuts the perception of center-city hopelessness.

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