

THE SWEET SOUNDS OF A UNIFIED BERLIN

Text and photos by: Seth Rubin of Shrubin Photography

PRELUDE

It's the 7th of September 2008 and I'm six months in on a backpacking trip through Europe. I've found myself in Athens, Greece, sitting on a rock, on *the* "Sacred Rock," that is the Acropolis. The Parthenon stands before me and the sun beats down from above. It's a sight to behold, always captured in resplendent photographs; for most, however, it has remained so far away, nearly untouchable. I sat, thought, and watched the tourists pass by, one after another, with friends and loved ones, snapping photos and basking in the now. I meanwhile couldn't help think how I had no interest in sitting here, how I felt alone and never before so bored of sightseeing. The hot, arid conditions were wearing on me. Later that night I bought a plane ticket to Berlin, Germany for a recharge with the cooler temperatures and the thriving arts scene I had heard much about.

Arriving in Berlin two days later, I was pleasantly surprised, though a bit unprepared, for the much colder autumn temperatures. It was no longer blazing hot, and the green grass shone with beautiful evening dew. I embraced the change and grew excited for the times to come. Still aware of my continually growing boredom with sight-seeing, I attacked historic Berlin in the first day with one of Sandeman's New Berlin free tours. I then quickly moved on to the arts.

I knew Berlin had more to offer than what appeared on the surface of its intriguing architecture. I



Venue schedule cards

picked up a copy of *030*, a magazine guide to what's hot in the local entertainment world. Lying on my hostel bed while the afternoon passed, I daydreamed to the sounds of New Zealand reggae group [Katchafire](#) and breezed through the *030*. I took the listings day by day, as my taste-buds watered to the thought of endless venues and myriad music types, including punk, reggae, hip-hop, ska, mariachi, metal, hardcore, jazz, rock, funk, soul, even classical, though I can't say the classical necessarily struck my interest.

It was then I decided to dedicate my energy to the nights, to the music in Berlin. Seven nights strong.

Take notice: when stripped of their color, the following images focus on the emotions inherent in and common to us all. These emotions, inspired in the presence of live music, break down the barriers that so commonly tear us apart and redirect the focus to what is truly important. It is irrelevant from where each person has come, nor do race, religion, or belief divide, but rather fall secondary to the sounds that enlighten each of our days.

COVERAGE

That first night I visited the [Kaffee Burger](#), a dark bar with a small stage and dance-floor. [Simba Vibration](#) from Saint Petersburg, Russia was performing for the fourth time that week in Berlin, coming off a weekend dub reggae festival at [YAAM](#) (Young and African Art Market). Playing a unique style of “roots-afro-positive” music, the band is a diverse multi-cultural mix, hailing from the Congo (Africa), Finland, and Russia. Congo vocalist, Seraphin, was passionate, engaging, and brilliant at including the crowd into the song and dance. His uplifting lyrics are delivered in five different languages, switching between Lingala, Swahili, French, English and Russian. The eclectic music draws elements from various regions of the world, the fine-touch guitar techniques of Finland, the powerful percussive beats of Africa, and the rhythmic dance of Jamaica and Cuba. Possibly a better fit for under the sun at an outdoor music festival, the Simba lions didn’t let this cold and wet Berlin night bring them down!



Following the performance by Simba, with the night still young and the coffee/beer mix doing the trick, I ventured up to [Acud](#) where an afro-beat jam session was listed. I entered the appropriately crowded and smoky room where the crowd sat and grooved on appreciation for their fellow musicians. It was mid-session and led by a guitarist and a bassist, both from Mozambique. I grabbed a brew and snuck through to the floor in front of the stage for the end of the current session. It finished strong and then the band broke apart, as did much of the crowd. I befriended a nearby seemingly amenable woman,

Michaela at work in her studio. Gitarren Werkstatt



Michaela, and we grabbed a table at the front for the next lineup of musicians. Unbeknownst to me at the time, Michaela, a Berlin native, is considerably connected to the local scene and musicians through her nearby guitar and bass repair workshop. Throughout the night, she fed me bits of interesting background information on the venue and musicians: in 1989, the current Acud began organizing events in what was a squat house and began its initially turbulent start, not acquiring a proper lease until 1991. The years to follow proved positive for Acud, exhibiting art installations, theatrical performances, and live music. In October 1999, Thierry Bruehl wrote in the UNESCO Courier that “Daily life unwinds in places like Acud, which reflects the events and the metamorphosis of the New City. These are islands in a sprawling city which only ten years ago was an island itself.” The “island” of the decade prior was the suffocating West Berlin, lying within and surrounded by hostile forces; not until 1989 was West Berlin liberated and thus, the art scene and culture, miraculously, was only in its infancy.



These days Acud draws a regular crowd for the various blues, jazz, and afro jam sessions that take place throughout the week, led by Mozambique bassist, Carlos Dalelane. Over the course of an evening, numerous musicians switch in and out and take their turn, their moment in the spotlight. The resulting dynamics are very interesting. Most get on well together, capturing the defining moments, expressing their souls on the stage, and meanwhile learning from one another. The gestures of admiration and smiles are priceless. Unfortunately others just do not belong, whether it be their instrument, style of music, or simply just they themselves. How does one communicate to the sweet young girl on the violin that there's no place for her in the afro-jazz jam? She tried and tried, solo'd without end, and cut others off without hesitation until the rest of the band drowned her out and abruptly cut short the song. An off-line talk followed that I can only presume was on jam etiquette. To the speechwriters' dismay, this talk served to reinforce her previous behavior and she quickly lost her space on the stage. Better luck next time.



Big Joe Stolle (left)

The night dragged on and the impressive performances were growing less frequent. Calls for "Stormy Monday" were voiced from the foreign vocalist in the back . . . each time receiving the response that it wasn't a blues session. The drinks flowed and the request grew louder and louder, until he was finally given his chance at the mic and unfortunately embarrassed himself. It wasn't long until a pretty young thang took the stage and flirted the microphone right out of his hands and finished the song off herself. Again, better luck next time. Like anything in this world, in the jam session, the strongest survive.

In the local jazz circuit, often the strongest musicians are from the former East Berlin, under the German Democratic Republic (GDR), before the 09 Nov 1989 fall of the wall and the 03 Oct 1990 unification. The East German clubs ("Kulturhaus") were run by the State, which controlled the quality and censorship by requiring every musician to pass a qualification test before performing. Each

musician would receive a certain categorization rating based on his or her test scores, which translated to what he / she could expect to be paid. Without this categorization, the musicians were restricted to performing at private parties, which were often raided by the police to further maintain control. In turn, the resulting musicians were of a higher caliber, and were often demanded in the West after the fall of the wall. At Acud this night appeared vocalist and blues harp player Big Joe Stolle, a well known East German blues musician.

The following night, Thursday, I opted for a sensation from the farther east . . . the [Dirtrucks](#), an all-girl Japanese punk-rock band at the [Wild at Heart](#) venue. Soul yes, but it was apparent there was no heart



at this venue, even before finding the sign over the door on the way out reading “You are entering a heartless zone . . . stay wild”! A perfect venue for such an act, and quite the punch packed into these four small girls. Celica, on vocals, was geared up in a Ramones t-shirt and AC/DC wristband and Deth-Tomo, on bass, in all black leather and platform boots. The quartet looked the part and surely didn’t lose any energy on the travels over from Japan; they delivered a fire to the senses, and then some!



That night I arrived back at the hostel at 2am with news from one of the employees on how to purchase tickets to the [Metallica](#) show in Berlin the following night. I hadn’t seen the metal giants in some 12 years, and until now, hadn’t had much of a recent interest. I’m one of the believers that they hadn’t put out anything credible since their 1991 self-entitled “Black Album”, although their latest release *Death Magnetic* promises to regain their edge lost many years ago with haircuts and shrinks. I was excited to see this new Metallica and recall the days I knew every word and every riff from their ’83 to ’91 recordings. I bought two tickets and decided to bring my new German friend, Ben, who I’d be staying with the next few nights through the Couchsurfing.com community.

The show was at the brand-new O₂ (German mobile phone company) World [arena](#) and was the first public record release party / show for the album that was released that same day. Tickets were only available through official Metallica websites and on the day of the show at the stadium. Imagine, a Metallica show with plenty of seats available?! The crowd congregated outside the stadium, predominately thirty-something's dressed in all black and consuming bottle after bottle of beer and Jägermeister, and carelessly urinating wherever someone else wasn't standing. I awaited Ben and his roommate Mattis and made friends with some who wouldn't be remembering the show, nor entering the stadium for that matter!



We got seated just in time for the lights to dim and the crowd of 17,000 to explode. METALLICA was in Berlin, here, and taking the stage. For the next two hours, they kicked ass like a band who once released an album as intense as KILL 'EM ALL . . . then aged 25 years (and tragically lost bassist Cliff Burton). They



tore up their classics, both those expected such as *One* and *Wherever I May Roam*, and those less expected such as *Jump in the Fire* and *The Thing That Should Not Be*. Five songs from the new album were interspersed and warmly welcomed by the ground crowd who sung along more than I would have expected. Many of those in the seats around me repressed any emotion they may have been feeling. Maybe they were saving their energy for something greater, but either way, the beer in me got the better of them as I mouthed off like I would hope any true fan would. A German man above me heard my cries and identified, kindly (and humorously) apologizing for his fellow silent and unenergetic countrymen. After all, who could have asked for a more solid encore of *Blitzkrieg* > *Jump in the Fire* > *Seek and Destroy*?!?!?

Note: Unfortunately my camera was confiscated on entry and our seats were too far away to accommodate my point and shoot. My apologies.

The [VölkerBall](#) "Das Finale" brought in an early Saturday show at the [Kesselhaus](#), hosted by [radioMultiKulti](#), a local Berlin multi-cultural radio station. The show was the station's final, as they were soon to be shutting its doors, cutting its frequency. Unaware of the 7pm start, my new friend Olga and I missed the first few acts . . . the Brazilian percussion, Afro-jazz, and Balkan speed brass, though the performances to follow were well worth the 16€ entrance fee.



Berlin's [Nosliw](#) & Die [Feueralarmband](#) (the Fire Alarm band) entertained the VölkerBall attendees on the outdoor stage to welcome in the evening. The diverse crowd brought their own irie vibes for the band

that crossed over the reggae, dancehall, and hip-hop genres while keeping the songs family-oriented for the young and old. Though they often perform together, Nosliw is a solo artist of wonderful acclaim, while the Feuertalarmband, a.k.a. BigFinga!, is hailed as Germany's best reggae backing band. Over the last several years, they've supported such well known Jamaican artists as Jah Mason and Junior Kelly. During the performance, radioMultiKulti brought out a large bag of orange balloons for the crowd to release into the night sky; each balloon represented an employee let go by the unfortunate collapse of the radio station. While the overall vibes were positive, the balloons and accompanying announcements reminded the audience that their presence at the show was in support of the drowning station.



Next up, [Tiger Hi-Fi](#) delivered a line-up of roots reggae, soul stylings, and contemporary dancehall vibes to a neighboring packed room. The performances of vocalists Olivia Christou and Vido Jelashe were fantastic; Olivia's beautiful voice and Vido's deeply powerful dancehall spirits were unique contributions each made to their playful interactions with the crowd. They describe themselves as the "perfect choice for music lovers who value spirituality, romance and the beauty of dub sounds." The evening's performance featured the Black Uhuru roots classic *Looks Who's Coming to Dinner* and treated the crowd to an unexpected finale of U2's *Sunday Bloody Sunday* to close the show.



Following the Hi-Fi's energetic performance, "Das Original" lineup of [Los Multikultis](#) band could have felt the pressure to keep the vigor flowing . . . and deliver they did. Los Multikultis are just what their name suggests, a multi-cultural mix of musicians, with a wide variety of instruments and styles. A perfect fit for the VölkerBall and a brilliantly entertaining performance, especially from bassist Sabah Habas Mustapha, who poured his heart and soul into the music. Delivering a wonderful mix of rock, jazz, and

German traditional songs, the group even played the recognized classic *Tequila!*, which broke out the dancing shoes of the already captivated crowd. The following is the inspiring and humorous story of the recent origin of the group, from their MySpace page:

Where did it all begin? Why did it all begin? Two of too many questions. It was perhaps just a whimsical thought that took hold of the feverish imagination of young Rixen, as he stood by the virtual coffee-machine of his mythical Rixen's Café at the soon-to-be-legendary Radio Multikulti headquarters in Berlin. As yet another weekly staff meeting ended in the accustomed carousing, singing and endless toasts to longevity, loyalty, love, laxatives and lanolin (it was 'L' week), the whimsical thought became an irresistible idea that hurtled out of his mouth with startling alacrity: "we must create of ourselves an orchestra of as much dexterity as we can muster!", he cried, "we need a house band in da house!" And all shouted "Hurrah!" And so the mustering of the dexterity began. From all corners of the Radio Multikulti complex they came: the dedicated back-room workers, working dedicatedly in the back-room, the technicians keeping the world-wide music repertoire humming in the air-waves, the DJs and presenters, all gathered together, clutching their instruments and voices and bringing songs, dances and sandwiches from their homelands. Los Multikultis was born and soon they were honing their craft, polishing their shoes and stepping out on the stages of the nation's capitol. Everybody was happy. Then in 2008 came the announcement that on the 1st of January 2009, Radio Multikulti would be reduced to a pile of rubble. A great tragedy for many. But Los Multikultis have vowed to continue their quest to present a growing repertoire of world-wide classics arranged in their own unique style.

While the station may be on its last legs, there is great excitement and support for this house band to carry on the name and positive spirit in the years to follow.



Last on the bill of live music was the electro-dancehall [Boundzound](#). Side-project of Demba Nabé of popular international Berlin reggae group [Seed](#), Boundzound hit the large young crowd with an explosion of intensity. Loyal Seed fans and Boundzound newbies filled the hall with their energy. Songs such as *Get the Message* were electric, captivating, and catchy. A mix of dancehall reggae, hip-hop, and electro, the music is a unique blend that first impressed his fellow Seed members upon first listen back in October 2006. Those in attendance this night were enthralled by the dark, electric music, a drastic difference from Los Multikultis in the neighboring hall. The girls reached out for Nabé's attention and one was even lucky enough to receive a passionate kiss from the bending down Nabé. If this performance was any indication of Demba's and Boundzound's future, their fans can expect continued success from this hot project!





On Sunday I returned to more of my musical roots at [K17](#) for the *No End In Sight Tour 2008* and an aggressive shock to the senses. Though I missed Germany's own opening group [Übergas](#) from Hamburg, [S-Core](#) took the stage next to promote their latest release, *Gust of Rage*. S-Core, from Strasbourg, France, delivered the metal that their French and German followers have come to know very well since they formed in 1998. Massive dreaded front-man Ket screamed to the silent crowd, who stood back some 15 feet from the stage. Nonetheless, S-Core's energy was far from lacking as they pounded away at song after song, only pausing momentarily for birthday shots for their bassist, Myron's birthday celebration.



Following S-Core were two of America's own, representing both the east and west coasts. [Vengince](#) from Oakland, California, continued to warm the crowd as lead-man Relentless invited those seemingly shy fans to move closer and return the band's energy. Vengince had traveled a far way on their own dime to promote their latest album, *As It All Sours*. The Oakland quintet hit the stage with their supercharged "modern music with a hardcore and experimental twist", as they term it, bridging the gap between the French metal and Pro-Pain's upcoming hardcore. Relentless shared the vocals with keyboardist Father who performed with more energy and emotion than any other keyboardist I've ever seen. Dank on guitar and Slim on bass equally contributed to the band's ferocity as they thrashed around the stage as if it were on fire.



Between performances I roamed the crowd at the outdoor bar at the back of the venue and befriended several of the visually intimidating attendees. It had been some time since my last metal show; Metallica generally did not attract this same raw fan-base. In my younger years, I was often not immune to this intimidation, but in these times I recognize the open and friendly personalities in these black shirt, chain dangling, and skull ring wearing men. It was intriguing to speak with Slim of Vengince before they exploded on stage, finding the mellow, happy, and friendly off-stage persona turn into the appropriately aggressive and heavy presence once hitting the stage and the first shattering bass note to kick off the set.



And onto the prime meat, the heavy hard-core vets, [Pro-Pain](#) of New York City. Following their debut in 1992 with *Foul Taste of Freedom*, Pro-Pain have been delivering unrelenting hardcore for the last 15 years, and remain just as heavy and tight as ever. Recognizing such, the German fans have stood behind them, loyal, and in tune with every note. Following the younger opening acts, the presence of Pro-Pain taking the stage was intense. The crowd closed in, with a small center opening left for the strike of the first note and the mosh-pit explosion to ignite. For the next hour, the quartet pounded away at their instruments and chests, roared through the lyrics, and stared down the fans, young and old, male and female, below. Many tracks from their latest July 2008 release, *No End in Sight*, were featured, while the classics such as *Foul Taste of Freedom* certainly weren't forgotten.

It's shows like this that make one feel fully alive . . . and yet thankful to not be dodging fists, crowd-surfers, and bodily fluids on a more regular basis!



Ready for another genre change and musical experience on Monday, *Viva Mexico!* surely provided more than I expected when setting out for the show. It was the 16th of September, commemorating the anniversary of Mexico's revolt from Spanish rule in 1810, the start of the 10 year Independence War. Considered [Mexican Independence Day](#), this day unites Mexicans throughout the world for a night of traditional fiesta, and Berlin was no exception! Once arriving at [Maria am Ostbahnhof](#), the large venue hidden in the bush on the Spree River, I was welcomed by a trio of guitar, acoustic/upright bass, and drums. The music itself was merely satisfying, though the lighting and backdrop created a nice moody, trippy setting, covering the trio in grid-like lighting patterns.



Next was [Mariachi El Dorado](#) led by the distinguished Victor Ibáñez. The traditional Mexican group, living in Berlin, was joined on this night by five electrifying dancers who spun and twirled through various Mexican dances. Behind the dancers, the mariachis, in traditional dress and sombreros, kept them dancing and encouraging the crowd to feel as a part of the performance and warm up for the following main act.



And lastly, [La Calzada de los Muertos](#), the evening's feature act, took the stage. The band, named after the pathway of the dead in Teotihuacán at the pyramids "Pirámide de la Luna" and "Pirámide del Sol", was founded in 2004 by Mexican immigrants to Berlin and play an exciting Latin blend of ska, punk, and rock. The band provided a brilliant and festive performance on this special night, and near the end of the show, invited the energized crowd to join them on stage and raise the Mexican flag overhead. The action ended the evening in proper style, unifying the band and the crowd; could this have symbolized the Mexican people uniting with their own self-government, and separating from the Spanish rule?



Running low on sleep and now merely on fumes, night seven had arrived and I was happy to be nearly “done”. Interested in visiting the artistic and alternative community of [Cassiopeia](#) for my last night of music, I was pleased to find veteran New York City rappers Black Moon performing.

Like many other artistic communities of Berlin, RAW-Tempel (of which Cassiopeia is a part of) is meant to be torn down to be replaced with a more commercially mainstream purpose. Currently the area is home to four different club locations, an exhibition venue, a large indoor skate park, a beer garden and the highest climbing tower in Berlin. As described on the Cassiopeia website, “The Cassiopeia is an urban playground for adults and grownup kids in the heart of Friedrichshain.” Only two years ago, the area was undeveloped and barren; today it acts as an outlet for many of Berlin’s artists and followers where they can express themselves through music, art, and/or sport. As can be expected, the proposed plans are greeted by great sadness to see yet another possible loss of community. The recently opened O2 World arena is a similar example of commercialism overrunning the small businesses and artistic independence that existed in the nearby area to the RAW-Tempel.



With a later start than the previous nights, I arrived at 11:15pm as the house DJs spun old and new hip-hop for nearly an hour to warm up the crowd before the Speakin' Hands Orchestra switched out DJs and local artist P-RZM took the stage with dollar sign violin in hand. The Orchestra duo of [DJ Q-Millah](#) and violinist [P-RZM](#) presented an exciting blend of hip-hop unbeknownst to many, and was well received. While Q-Millah spun and mixed the beats in the darkness to the stage rear, P-RZM inserted the violin's melody, its ecstasy and agony, to add just the right amount of spice. The room slowly began to fill and those in front provided the feedback, the energy for P-RZM to pour his soul into the violin. The Orchestra performed for some forty minutes and while many took time to warm to their sounds, others grew tired of the duo, wishing for another element, another musician to round out a plausible trio.



Enter the [Black Moon](#) to the room, the veteran hip-hop trio from Brooklyn, NY. DJ Evil Dee and MCs Buckshot and 5ft waited stage-side for the Orchestra to finish, then *Enta(d) Da Stage* (1993 release) to a raging crowd. Evil Dee dropped props to the Speakin' Hands Orchestra and then prepped the stage for his MCs. The stage was set and the NYC rappers rose to the platform with an experienced and confident presence that the last fifteen years have provided them. They killed the show, dropping rhymes on the German youth below, many of whom sung along with each and every word, exhibiting their hip-hop knowledge and passion for these Black Moon vets. Meanwhile, Evil Dee kept the beats smooth flowing, the vibes grooving, and the crowd on their toes for what would follow next. The deep love and mutual respect between the group and crowd in this small venue was a moving sight and certainly a perfect way to end my week of music!



CLOSING

Enter the new millennium and a city of perpetual change. Enter Berlin.

Where an international music scene satisfies all tastes and where musicians of various countries, religions, and governments collaborate on this unifying factor, this art and culture. Where there is support by the masses in a large and diverse artistic community, though one that must struggle against the driving trends towards commercialism. Where immigrants may live, congregate, and celebrate for their home country's freedom. Where it is ensured the citizens and tourists won't forget the area's tragic past through its memorials, monuments, and remaining pieces of the wall. Where the concerned youth bonds together to organize and fight against increasing inhuman ideals in the arts, society, and government.

Let this microcosm of the world's music in Berlin serve as an inspiration and example for others currently torn with strife. Let the people come together through their common appreciation for music, while putting aside the tragically misunderstood precious differences that make us all unique.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Seth Shrubin', with a stylized, cursive script.

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If interested in further information or photographic services, please contact Seth at: seth@shrubin.com.