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Music and art 'mix' in Beijing

By James P. Ong
Inquirer
Last updated 12:44pm (Mla time) 06/29/2006

The room thumped with music and the crowd verged on breaking into dance. Except it was afternoon, the lights were bright and they weren't in a dance club. They were at Vibes Art Club in Beijing, an art gallery café transformed into a workshop room for five days during the city's most talked-about annual arts festival.

The occasion? "I'mPulse Beijing," a music camp for disc jockeys organized by the Singapore-based Asia-Europe Foundation, and one of several activities in the three-week-long Dashanzi International Arts Festival—popularly known as the "798 Festival" because of its location, an industrial factory complex called Factory 798 filled with Bauhaus-style buildings built in the 1950s. It began housing artists' studios in 2000 and is now home to several studios, galleries, performance spaces and trendy cafés.

"I'mPulse aims to encourage fresh minds to pursue the development of their music concepts by learning from each other," says Asef's Vanini Belarmino, one of three curators of the eight-day event, which culminated in two nights of live performances at one of China's most popular dance club.

The I'mPulse music camp was first launched at the Philippine High School for the Arts in Los Baños, Laguna last year. It was attended by classical and traditional musicians from Asia and Europe. A second event gathered traditional singers in Ireland that same year.

The challenge of putting up the music camp in Beijing, according to Belarmino, lay in the fact that deejaying is not considered technically an art form, though both organizers and participants feel otherwise.

"By focusing on a dynamic artistic discipline highly popular not only among DJ practitioners but also with young people," Belarmino explains, "part of the aspiration was to embrace both its participants and audiences in an environment created in the rhythm of the mind, body and soul shaped by music."

"There is a process of creation that makes it art," argues Sam Zaman, known in the clubbing scene as State of Bengal, and one of the key DJ/producers to arise from the new cutting-edge British-Asian music scene.

He fuses Bengali folk music with Western dance beats—a sound so unique and danceable it has attracted the likes of Bjork, who asked Zaman to open her world tour and remix the track "Hunter" for her album "Homogenic" in 1997.

"You will have to explain yourself as an artist," says Ges-E, another DJ/producer from the United Kingdom known for fusing Eastern and Western beats.

He merged traditional tabla loops with break-beats and soon came to be regarded as an innovator in Asian dance music. He went on to release the critically acclaimed "Eastern Drum and Breaks" on his own label, Nasha Records.

"To start becoming a DJ, first you must create a small community that is into your music—and then that circle grows," Ges-E adds.

Both Zaman and Ges-E held talks with 18 DJs on the "representation, translation and migration of Asian and European DJ culture" at the workshops.

The European countries represented in the event were Austria, Belgium, Czech Republic, France, Germany, Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands, UK and Slovakia. There were also participants from China, Indonesia, Spain, Japan, Singapore. There was no Philippine representative.

The workshop began with a no-agenda meeting where the 18 participants were asked what they wanted to explore

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while in China. They were then broken into small groups. Some of the DJs paired off and decided to collaborate during the live performance later in the week.

The DJs took turns talking about the club culture in their respective countries and what influenced their choice of music. The rest shared the tricks of their trade, while some lamented the fact that music has become so disposable with the advent of MP3 technology.

There was also a heated discussion about vinyl records versus electronic music. "I'm not a DJ in the more traditional sense," said DJ Istar of Belgium in an interview with "That's Beijing" magazine. "I don't own a lot of vinyl, I don't really beat-match, and my work isn't really dance-oriented. I do, however, perform electronic music, mostly with my laptop."

Ges-E from the UK advised the participants—and those who want to become a DJ—to learn about vinyl records first instead of going straight to computer-generated music.

Daito Manabe, a very famous sound engineer in Japan who has performed in high-profile store openings of fashion boutiques in Tokyo, also cautions that the quality of computer sound is much lower than that of a turntable deck and a mixer.

I'mPulse also incorporated multimedia installations from German artists of Walkscreen at Tango, the dance club that hosted the two nights of live performance by the participating DJs.

Two video walls were installed, where a series of images and video clips depicting daily life in Beijing were projected while the paying crowd of almost a thousand danced away till three in the morning.

They were truly nights of global music.

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