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MIKA VAINIO LEFT A LONG ECHO IN ELECTRONIC MUSIC

Pertti Grönholm

Mika Tapani Vainio (1963–2017) was Finland’s most acclaimed electronic musician from the mid-1990s until his death. He was highly respected both in his homeland and around the world, and the accolades he received for his pioneering achievements included the Finnish State Prize for Art in 2004. His name is known both on the electronic underground dance scene as well as in experimental music and sound art, and he exerted a notable formative influence on the evolution of minimalistic electronic music and avant-garde music overall. His music elicited mixed opinions, but his unfailingly original approach opened him doors everywhere from art galleries and performances to raves, underground techno festivals and fashion shows. He spent the last 20 years of his life touring the world both as a member of Pan Sonic and as a solo artist, and also as collaborator with numerous international musicians. After leaving Turku, he lived in London, Barcelona, Berlin and Oslo.

Vainio spent most of his childhood and youth in Turku, where he started out as a drummer, but soon discovered synthesizers and electronic music. In the mid-1980s he played briefly in the Turku-based band Gagarin Kombinaatti, which incorporated concrete and electronic sounds as equal elements alongside acoustic and electric instruments.

Between 1989 and 1995, Vainio was one of three DJs and many other active members in a collective calling itself the Hyperdelic Housers, which exerted a profound influence on the evolution of electronic music in Turku and throughout Finland. Conceived in the era of underground raves and warehouse dance parties, the self-funded, non-profit collective organized over 100 events within a span of only a few years. Its key members, Vainio and Tommi Grönlund, founded their own recording label, Sähkö Recording, through which Vainio and many other Turku-based electronic artists made their voices heard to the world.

In the 1980s and early 1990s, Vainio drew inspiration from urban environments such as Turku’s abandoned buildings, dilapidated industrial precincts, and “non-places” such as wastelands and the outskirts of dockyards. Back then, there were inspiring sites still to be found in Turku that harked back to the city’s industrial heritage, particularly the former factory areas around Aurajoki river mouth, Nummenmäki and Itäharju. The sights, sounds and moods of old industrial sites remained an enduring source of fascination for Vainio, who later also drew inspiration from various other types of physical environments both in Finland and abroad.

Vainio’s solo albums and his work with Pan Sonic won him acclaim in Finland and around the world, but he remained steadfastly true to his idiosyncratic style and embraced his marginality as a vital part of his musical identity. At no stage did Vainio’s success and fame have any influence whatsoever on his music, which followed its own rules and continued evolving in its own unique directions. Over

the years Vainio gradually began incorporating more and more concrete sounds, mixing both electric and acoustic instruments. When asked to define his work, he described it as “electroacoustic music”.

The uncompromising individualist

Vainio’s music was born of a relentless searching and unwavering insistence on following his own path. His inner voice can be heard in all his music: in its hypnotic techno-pulses, its ear-piercing electric buzzes, and its harmoniously meditative soundscapes. Vainio’s sounds and silences evoke moods and visions that bring alive his personal history, the important people and places in his life, and the experiences that left an indelible mark on him. The best example is arguably *Kantamoinen* from 2005, but similar echoes are audible in his other recordings as well. His darker side is also expressed in his music, which conveys feelings ranging from aggression to fear and anxiety. These darker shades are perhaps most palpable in the music he composed for Pan Sonic together with Ilpo Väisänen. Vainio never made music in order to please audiences, colleagues, or the media, but rather because he was driven by a compulsion to process his inner world, his relationship with reality, and the ideas he absorbed from his environment, which he filtered through his personality and private lens of experience.

Vainio described himself as a “brutalist-minimalist” composer, which seems an apt epithet. He made music with an uncompromising attitude and painstaking dedication. His music is reduced to the essentials, with all extraneous details stripped away. “Each composition is based on a particular feeling I want to convey. It might be inspired by a film, a book, a painting, or another piece of music. [...] The main thing is to find the right sounds and the right way to combine them. The structure comes after that – it takes shape as I begin to build the piece,” stated Vainio in a 2013 interview published in *Turun Sanomat*.

In the music library

Much as Vainio’s music revolved around his inner world, it was not born from a vacuum; he was well informed on the history of jazz, rock and pop as well as classical music and contemporary art music, especially its electronic genres. “My dad listened to rock music back in the 1950s. I stashed away his old Elvis singles. In the 1960s I got into jazz and in the 1970s I discovered a whole lot of other interesting stuff,” said Vainio in 2013. Vainio had no formal musical training, but he was an enthusiastic autodidact who learned by listening and composing and by reading literature about music history. His “school” was the music section of Turku City Library. “When we moved to Turku in 1975, I went there [to the music library] straight after school to listen to records almost every day. The guy who worked there was Jorma Tapio, a saxophonist who played in Edward Vesala’s band. Jope was my guru; he was always recommending something new I should listen to. He helped me discover a lot of stuff.”

Vainio’s musical interests were dizzyingly broad in spectrum: he listened to everything from Elvis, Hawkwind and Public Enemy to rockabilly, contemporary electronic, industrial metal and dub. His amazing bank of musical knowledge and vast record collection were a source of wonder and inspiration among his circle of friends from the late 1980s onward. He followed music religiously and was active in reaching out to potential collaborators and kindred spirits around the world.

Vainio performed in his hometown only sporadically in the 2010s, but these not-to-be-missed rare gigs drew a dedicated turnout of electronic enthusiasts ranging from young underground techno fans to well-known musicians and producers. Vainio's work sadly remained unfinished at the time of his death; in autumn 2017 he was preparing to release his next solo album and many agreed concerts had to be cancelled. Vainio's June 2017 memorial in Turku was attended by a large crowd of colleagues and collaborators going back all the way to the early days of the Hyperdelic Housers collective, his solo career, and the Sähkö Recording label.

Vainio was not a particularly talkative or easily approachable person; he was more comfortable communicating through his music. He left behind an extensive legacy in the form of a wide-ranging body of works that will undoubtedly continue to inspire fans of his music for many years to come.

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