



(l-r) Danielle Baldelli, Grace Jones, Mozart, 1980



Cosmic Club, Lake Garda, Northern Italy

## ADRIATIC FOR THE PEOPLE

Cosmic Afro may sound like the terminable bastard offspring of big beat and Afro-house, with a bunch of psychedelics thrown in for good measure. But it's the name that's been given to an up until now undocumented scene, one that played a pivotal role in dance music's evolution. *Story by Louise Oldfield*

Developed at the tail end of disco by a group of DJs in and around Rimini, the Cosmic Afro scene plundered diverse genres of music and pioneered unique mixing techniques. Its DJs produced an eclectic tribal journey into sound and rhythm at a time when house music was still an itch in Chicago's pants.

The Paradise Garage and Studio 54 had just opened in New York, Northern Soul was taking off big style in the UK and Bambaataa and Grandmaster Flash were experimenting with rap's template in the Bronx. In regional Italy similarly seismic musical shifts were also taking place in clubs, they just weren't being documented by anyone.

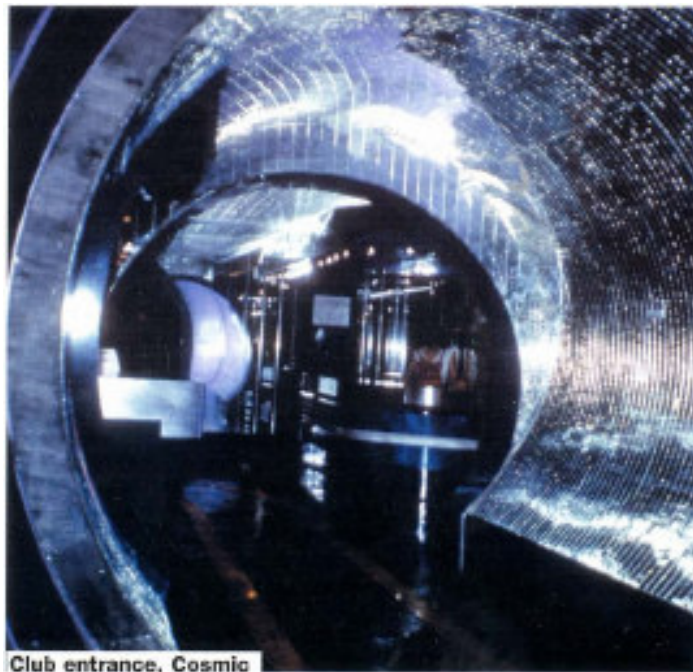
It would be a decade before Paul Oakenfold and friends would take their infamous trip to Ibiza, laying the seeds for the (now exposed) myth that house was imported into Europe from Ibiza in 1988. "When Ibiza blew up we thought it was really commercial," reckons Claudio Coccoluto, Italy's best known DJ. It's a little documented fact that a lot of the DJs in Ibiza at the time were Italian, hailing from their own, established dance music scene.

Back to 2002, and we're weaving down a gravel track on the way to the middle of nowhere in central Italy, a 20-year-old mix-tape playing on the car stereo. Space-age funk, electronic bleeps, African percussion, samba, twisted dub-disco, seamlessly mixed and continuously warped thanks to EQ blasting so frenetic it gives Francois K a run for his money. If it sounds intense now, in 1980, it must have sounded like it'd been beamed down from another planet.

There are a lot of foggy memories, but the many Italian DJs, producers and clubbers we speak to agree on at least one thing: that it all started at a club called the Baia degli Angeli (Bay of Angels) with two New Yorkers, Bob Day and Tom

Season. The Baia is said to have opened in 1974 (pre-dating the Paradise Garage and Studio 54 by three years). Millionaire jet-setter Gian Carlo Tirotti, unusually for an Italian at that time, travelled the world, moving through exclusive circles of beautiful people. He returned to Italy to build his dream on the top of a hill overlooking a bay on the Adriatic Riviera. A series of terraces with panoramic views of the bay, swimming pools, internal and external dancefloors, Baia degli Angeli was more of an immense sprawling luxury villa complex than a nightclub. From a distance, shifting lights could be seen operated from the cabin of a mechanical crane, picking out the dancefloors below. There was only one DJ console, situated in a four storey, fully functional glass lift, enabling the DJ to move between the dancefloors at will. The Baia was the first club to close at 7am, with the sunrise. The club opened and was a massive success. It was Italy's venue of the moment and anyone who was anyone had to be there.

Tirotti imported Bob and Tom as residents. Their impact on Italian club culture is the stuff of myth and legend. Some say they were from Studio 54, some say they were glass collectors, even gay sailors. What is true though, is that they were the first DJs to mix in Italy and that they owned records that no-one else had. Like Frankie Knuckles at The Warehouse. they played an exclusive selection of Philadelphia Soul, funk and disco. The designer Elio Fiorucci, at the time at the centre of New York's jet set, was a regular. But the scene was still in its infancy. It really began to grow when Bob and Tom made a point of inviting a number of young, local DJs to the Baia to be schooled in the then-secret art of mixing.



In 1977 Tirotti moved on. So did Bob and Tom, disappearing from the club scene,

never to be heard of again. Before they flew the nest, however, they suggested to the new owner that he hand the reigns over to two of their brightest pupils, Daniele Baldelli and 'Mozart'. This unlikely, odd couple began a journey into uncharted territory. The great adventure had begun.

Claudio Rispoli (aka Mozart, so called because of his classical music training) had been living at the Baia since the age of 16, spending his days hanging out with the owner, living a life of excess. He became famed for his improvisation, musicality and sense of timing and his eclectic, dark, funky mixes. In later years he'd receive international acclaim for his productions on Italian house label Irma Records (check Double Dee's 1990 Italo-house classic 'Found Love') and as one-third of the group Jestofunk. Back in 1977, however, Mozart was busy being the wild child of the Adriatic DJ set and was about to be thrown together with an unlikely partner.

Daniele Baldelli, who'd been DJing since 1968. was a studious geek, a technical perfectionist and an avid record collector, searching for the funk in the electronic end of the music spectrum, in

Kraftwerk and Moroder. Bob and Torn had picked him out too while he was DJing in a small club. At the Baia, Mozart and Baldelli began using what were then relatively obscure US and European records to create a new sound, forging disco, funk and electronica into something new. They managed to beat mix different genres of music with imprecise tempos, quickly moving on from the upbeat elitism of happy disco music, turning it into something darker and edgier. In Chicago, Ron Hardy would soon be doing likewise, forming the breeding ground for house music. Record shops with a convenient selection of playable tracks and listening facilities didn't exist. So the odd couple started to travel long distances in search of new beats and sounds; plundering all genres of music, buying boxes of sealed records on a hunch that there would be something, no matter how small, that they could use. Later, when Baldelli saw an ad for the new Technics SP15 quartz turntables, he knew they were what he'd been waiting for. Not only would they allow him to precisely orchestrate his set in advance, they would also solve the problem of skipping needles from going up and down in the lift between the dancefloors. The regular turntables of the day were Thorrens and could only go to +/- 3. Baldelli's SP15s would go to +/- 10, giving him far greater scope to produce a new hybrid sound for his dancers. Like Fabio & Grooverider would do years later at Rage with breakbeats, Baldelli played tracks at the wrong speed, adding a previously unrecognisable intensity and energy. Within a short time, a phenomenon exploded. By 1978 there had been a cultural shift of considerable proportions and the Baia was the epicentre of the storm. It was now a completely different place, the dancers grooving not only to a different beat, but different drugs too. Cocaine was out-favoured by hash and poppers; instead of designer labels, second-hand vintage was all the rage. Through mixtapes the word spread and the Baia became a mecca for a new generation of Italians. Thousands made the pilgrimage, a new tribe formed. And like many changes in style it too had its curiosities: "At one point white clogs were in fashion. They took them to the cobbler and got the heels filed down so the toes would point up! The jeans were tight at the ankle and short so you could see the socks," remembers Luca Benini, now owner of the streetwear



label Slam Jam, then regular clubber at the Baia. Customised Citroen DS and 2CVs filled the car park, packing super hi-fi systems and plastered with adhesives which had become official mascots for the scene.

But the numbers swelled, and the parties soon spiralled out of control. The Baia packed in up to 4000 people, but thousands would be left outside, unable to get in. Not that it mattered. Just being there was all that was important. As the consumption of illicit sub stances increased though, the authorities took matters into hand. In August 1978, the military police violently stormed the waiting crowds camped outside the club and the Baia was closed down for the first of many times. It was already too late: the virus had escaped. And it would contaminate the rest of northern Italy.

"I got hold of Mozart and Baldelli's mixtapes and they totally blew me

away," recalls Coccoluto. "They weren't playing records; they were creating music, which is totally different. I couldn't find the records, they didn't exist." Coccoluto didn't go to the Baia from his native southern Italy. "After hearing the tapes I headed straight to the instrument shops and tried to work out how they'd produced the sounds." Research and the concept of encapsulating diverse musical genres into a format is something that has stayed with him ever since and formed the basis of his most well known production, 'Belo Horizonte', which draws heavily from (Brazilian bossa-nova artist) Airtto Moreira's 'Celebration Suite' - a classic Latin track from the

Cosmic Afro scene. "How they [the DJs] played it directly inspired my own production," he says.

Following in Mozart and Baldelli's foot-steps, new DJs such as Ebreo, Spranga, Rubens, and Fabrizio Fattori emerged, developing new strains of their own.

Baldelli and new partner TBC took the electronic route even further at a new club called Cosmic at Lake Garda, northern Italy in 1979. Baldelli began experimenting with changing speeds of records, dropping artists as wide and varied as Klaus Shultze, Moebius, Kraftwerk, Yello, Airtto Moriera, Fela Kuti, Manu Dibango, Weather Report, Kool and the Gang and Funkadelic into his sets. It was here that the word first spread outside of Italy. German and Austrian holidaymakers copied the sound and took it home with them. Cosmic Afro events are held to this day in Italy, southern Germany and Austria, a far cry, however, from the original spirit, style, innovation and magic of its origins.

Wherever this new pack of DJs played, chaos was close behind. "I had a habit of closing clubs wherever I went," recalls Mozart. "Locals spray-painted 'Mozart go home!' on walls when I played somewhere." Thousands would turn up to a 500-capacity club in the middle of nowhere; those left outside would remain hanging around taking drugs. Heroin had entered the scene, on a massive scale. Unsurprisingly, many of the DJs became users. The odd one out, Baldelli remembers "I ended up telling people I was sorted, so they'd leave me alone. At the time it wasn't cool to be not doing drugs." Things got negative and, according to those there, began to implode. The combination of huge crowds and readily available heroin led to the inevitable crackdown by the police. Within 12 months virtually every club in the scene was closed.

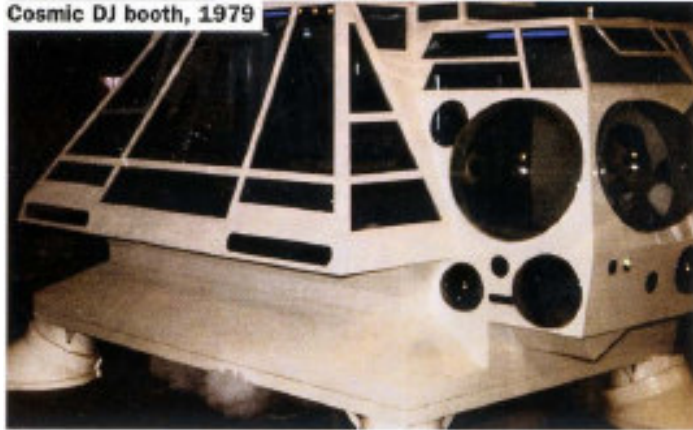
But, as ever, the scene didn't die. Like they would years later during England's acid house explosion, promoters simply found new ways to put on parties. In Italy, large-scale Cosmic Afro gatherings (featuring rave-like line-ups of DJs) would attract crowds of up to 12,000 in improvised venues in sport stadiums and fields.

With the arrival of the international circuit, DJs such as Ricky Montanari and Flavio Vecchi passed on the tapes from the bygone era into foreign palms. No-one bothered to contact the original DJs though. In the now production-fuelled era it didn't make commercial sense. There was nothing to sell; they didn't produce any records,



(l-r) Danielle Baldelli and Mozart, 1978

Cosmic DJ booth, 1979



just mixtapes.

But, beneath the surface of dance music history's thin veneer, the scene has been influential across Europe and America. The classic house/Balearic track 'Sueno Latino' is unmistakably a child of the scene, a re-work of Manuel Gottsching's proto-electro master-piece 'E2-E4', another Cosmic Afro classic. While in Chicago, New York and most importantly Detroit, Italian electronic disco would find its way into the clubs and airwaves, exciting and influencing then unknowns like Juan Atkins, Derrick May and Kevin Saunderson. "Over here we were really into the Italian electronic stuff in the early 80s, stuff like Alexander Robotnik was filling up DJs' sets," acknowledges West End Records' Andy Reynolds. Italy's DJs today credit their renowned mixing skills and particular style to their heritage

of Cosmic Afro. Listening to DJ Harvey's Black Cock series, Italian DJ Leo Young fed the tapes to a few London-based DJs and producers. "Leo brought me this Cosmic tape of Baldelli's to listen to and I thought it was technically amazing," recalls Faze Action's Simon Lee.

The tapes were nearly 20 years old by the time this new audience heard them for the first time. Listening to their mixes today, it's easy to be complacent, exposed for over a decade to the idea of eclectic DJs and dance-floors. What happened in Italy 20 years ago was some-thing completely different; what they were missing was the music industry machine that has brought so many English-speaking artists to instant fame and notoriety.

To really understand what it was all about you have to turn to the tapes. Listening to a track end to end won't give you the answer, you have to listen to how they played it. To understand the impact it had on a generation of Italian kids, you have to wipe your memory and return in a time capsule to Rimini in 1979. Failing that, go hunting for the tapes. They are around if you go looking. Just ask an Italian Q

Many thanks to: Daniele Baldelli, Mozart, Claudio Coccoluto, Ravio Vecchi, Luca Benini, Fabio (Disco Inn), DJ Miki. For further information check [www.cosmicafro.com](http://www.cosmicafro.com)

Baia degli Angell (Bay of Angels), Adriatic Riviera, 1977

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#### COSMIC AFRO CLASSICS

PETER BROWN 'DO YOU WANNA GET FUNKY WITH ME' (T. K. DISCO, 1977) JOHN TROPEQ 'LIVING IN THE

JUNGLE' (T.K.DISCO, 1978)

GUEM & ZAKA PERCUSSION 'LE SERPENT' (LE CHANT DU MONDE, 1978) WILL POWERS 'ADVENTURES IN DUB'  
(ISLAND, 1979)

SIMPLE MINDS 'LEAGUE OF NATIONS' (VIRGIN, 1979)

YELLO 'PINBALL CHA CHA CHA/BOSTICH' (RALPH, 1981)

LIASONS DANGEREUSES 'PEUT ETRE...PAS' (ROADRUNNER, 1981) KRAFTWERK 'HOME COMPUTER'  
(ELECTRA/ASYLUM, 1981)

LIQUID LIQUID 'BELL HEAD' (99 RECORDS, 1981)

LAIK BACK 'WHITE HORSE' (MEDLEY DK, 1983)

(l-r) Danielle Baldelli and Mozart, 1978