

Like here, like us

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In 2007, I wrote my first and only book. Named *Soundtrack*, it was a collection of essays about New Zealand music, and I wrote it to give a nudge to a hundred or so local albums I thought crystalized something remarkable, potent and true about the times and places in which they were made.

One such record was *Inside A Quiet Mind* by Denver McCarthy, a humble young Krishna devotee from Tokoroa who released it when he was only 20, under the name Micronism.

I loved McCarthy's album so much, I devoted an entire chapter to its brilliance. My somewhat florid intro noted that *Inside A Quiet Mind* was "the best electronic album ever made in this country—luxuriously melodic, rhythmically complex, tinged blue with sadness and—occasionally—bright red with joy; a record not so much touched by the hand of God as given a lengthy massage."

I still stand by every word. *Inside A Quiet Mind* remains a cultural treasure, prized by the community for which it was made; a musical time capsule that sends the listener hurtling back to the earliest flowerings of a New Zealand dance party scene in the mid-90s.

When it first came out in 1998, I remember thinking this was the record I'd been waiting for, an album that moved beyond mere imitation and grounded incoming house and techno influences from Berlin and Detroit, London and Chicago deep down in our local mud.

It sounded like us, and it sounded like here. *Inside A Quiet Mind* resonated with my own experiences as a DJ, promoter, music writer and fan at a time when electronic music felt fresh, exhilarating and emotionally generous, a time when huge numbers of people were gathering in warehouses and paddocks to dance and reaffirm a sense of community they hadn't even known they were missing.

I thought "this record is extraordinary. What will the guy make next?" Answer: nothing. Within a year of releasing the album, McCarthy had sworn off synthesizers. He had exchanged techno for chanting, dance culture for root vegetable curries.

After hectic antics in assorted Auckland warehouse flats where acid and ecstasy were the stimulants of choice and electronic music pounded away around the clock, he embraced the quiet life of a spiritual nomad, living for many years in Krishna ashrams in Peru, Bolivia and Ecuador before moving to Australia.

Inside a manky flat. Heaped up in boxes in McCarthy's Brisbane shed are photos showing the primitive circumstances under which *Inside A Quiet Mind* was cobbled together using basic equipment in bedroom studios in Morningside, Kingsland and Mt Eden. One photo looks down on a skinny strip of floor where a sleeping bag lies alongside a jumble of keyboards, drum machines and snaking cables.

"That was in a famous place called the Red Shed in Normanby Road," McCarthy told me in 2017 when I called him in Brisbane, where he now runs a Krishna vegetarian restaurant.

"It was a time where people were very excited about electronic music, both here and overseas, and people threw a lot of dance parties in that old warehouse. Heaps of people lived there, too. There weren't even any walls where I slept, just a curtain. I set up my little studio there in '96 and made tracks like "Rainbow City" in that tiny space. When I was writing that music, it was my whole life. If a track was going somewhere, I would stay up all night and follow it to see where it might end up."

McCarthy was born in Tokoroa, moving to Auckland when he was a child. He worked in a music store in his teens and became interested in DJing, and later, inspired by Auckland club culture and early outdoor festival The Gathering, began making his own electronic music.

Released under the name Mechanism, his first electronic tracks were almost comically intense. The more relentless and abrasive, the better.

"I used to be in a metal band in my teens, and that influenced the earliest techno I made. But as I got older, I grew out of the harder stuff, and started to become more interested in spirituality."

It was this quest for meaning and transcendence that informed *Inside A Quiet Mind*. McCarthy recalled a revelation of sorts.

"I had crates and crates of DJ records back then, yet I kept coming back to this one LP of people chanting the Hare Krishna mantra. It was suddenly the only record I wanted to listen to, so I gave all the rest of my records away and started selling my musical equipment. There was no desire to make fast and aggressive music anymore. As my ego fell away, I lost the taste for it."

Looking back over the intervening decades, McCarthy saw *Inside A Quiet Mind* as a sonic snapshot of a young man beginning a journey into the unknown, flushed with excitement and expectation.

"*Inside A Quiet Mind* is based on minimal techno from Berlin and Detroit, but what makes that album unusual is that it's a document of someone finding their spiritual path in New Zealand, using electronic music as the vehicle for that."

I interviewed one of Detroit techno's greatest producers, Carl Craig, when he performed in Wellington in 2005. He said his home city was "one of the most desolate, crime-ridden

places in America”, painting a grim picture of crumbling factories, burnt-out houses and desperate crackheads wandering among the wreckage.

“Techno is driven by an obsession with what the future could be, and it’s an attempt to represent that in sound,” Craig told me.

Detroit techno wasn’t about escapism, as people so often suggested. It was about creating a unique kind of emotionally nurturing urban renewal programme you could dance to.

“We made this music to help us imagine more hopeful alternative realities,” Craig said. “When we were inventing this music as teenagers, we wanted to make the place we were living more beautiful with the sounds we made. When you get a bunch of black ghetto kids reporting on what they see around them, that’s hip hop. But when you get a bunch of black ghetto kids with electronic instruments dreaming of alternative futures, that’s techno.”

And when you get a young brown kid from Tokoroa with a burgeoning spirituality and a beautiful natural environment to respond to, you get *Inside A Quiet Mind*.

It’s as if McCarthy had sat down in a shady clearing in the bush, plugged his instruments into a portable generator and got to work, distilling what surrounds him—deep green leaves, bellbird calls, smooth round stones, icy water, scuttling insects, clammy mud—into a forest of fluttering frequencies.

He had taken a musical style born of cracked grey concrete and urban desolation and employed it to express a thousand shades of green. It seems apt that the original *Quiet Mind* CD cover is a photo taken from the forest floor, looking up to the sky through the fronds of a gigantic native tree-fern.

It’s music that not only conjures such wild green places but also lifts us up, takes us there, drops us off. Anyone who attended a big outdoor dance party in the mid-90s will feel warm waves of nostalgia wash over them from the very first few bars.

The album fades in on a distant bass throb and crisp hi-hats and carries on for another seven blissful minutes with just subtle changes in high frequency cymbal percussion and low-frequency bass churn.

It’s a track that captures McCarthy’s evolving relationship with the local electronic music scene, the sound of a central participant becoming more of a thoughtful spectator. It sounds as though the listener is on top of a high hill and somewhere down in the valley a huge dance party is happening. Distance has dulled all the bright middle frequencies, and music that would be intense and overwhelming up close has become wistful and hypnotic.

The next track “First Reflections” was a DJ favourite at dance parties all over the country for many years. With its extended intro of echo-heavy keyboard runs, bountiful sub-bass and chords that melt away like sugar on your tongue, it became Aotearoa’s first home-grown techno anthem, and to play it today is to be tele-ported back into a corner of the House Tent at The Gathering at 4 a.m., smiling until your face hurts, the room liquid with spinning mirror balls.

On and on it goes. McCarthy keeps rolling out gem after gem, euphoric electro giving way to cavernous dub, hip hop breakbeats lifted aloft by heat-haze keyboards, each track triggering memories of places you’ve been during those times, sounds that you cared about, people you were with.

McCarthy told me he hoped *Inside A Quiet Mind* might be useful in listeners’ daily lives: an aid to silencing the mental commotion central to modern existence. And it works. You listen to these offerings of his and feel your anxiety leak away. Many tracks share qualities with the more cerebral ambient music of composers such as Brian Eno or Erik Satie, in that they calm the mind while also leaving it feeling more alert and focused.

You feel this record in your body, too. These sounds and rhythms stir up a deep muscle memory of ways you, your friends and thousands of happy strangers used to move together many decades ago.

Inside A Quiet Mind captures the hopeful, communal spirit of this country’s early D.I.Y. dance party scene better than any other album I know. Just before McCarthy unplugged his instruments and headed off to new adventures, he left us this love letter to a time when the Aotearoa party scene was a family affair: fresh and naïve and rickety and home-made.