Global Ear: Ho Chi Minh City

A wild weekend of club culture in Vietnam's largest city reveals a scene making connections on the global electronic network

By Mike Steyels

When I landed in Ho Chi Minh City (the former South Vietnamese capital Saigon) and my motorcycle pulled off into the dense afternoon traffic and heat, I still wasn't sure of my itinerary. But I knew it would be fun. I start my trip with a night at Arcan, a warehouse space with black walls, nitrous balloons in the crowd, and a smokers welcome policy.

When I pull up to the spot, I realise this is not the event I expected, but it turns out even better. Local DJ Larria holds down the decks first, spinning a UK-centred set spanning everything from remixes of grime classic "Pow! (Forward)" by Lethal Bizzle to Bronx drillista Ice Spice. Larria is well known for his expansive interest in global club music, spinning and producing everything from Jersey club and baile funk mixed with V-pop and local dance music style vinahouse.

His friends are on stage next to him, dropping the occasional bar on the mic and taking phone camera shots of him in his wraparound shades and vintage white windbreaker. At 25 years old, Larria is young but has a head start on much of the scene in the city. "My parents sold bootleg CDs from our house, so I had early access to everything – I was listening to Tupac in first grade," he laughs. As a teenager, he DJed vinahouse for his local hiphop dance crew. Soon he was using SoundCloud to discover dance music from around the world.

The UK selections tonight are intended to introduce East London's Elijah, formerly of the Butterz crew, making his first trip to Asia. He plays a familiar range of everything from grime to two-step garage and bassline to a crowd with a few more expats than usual. After his set, they take a pause to preview a new music video directed by Vân Anh, who handles visual design for Arcan and is also a DJ with her own regular LGBTQ party Gái Nhảy.

Across town, Teddy Chilla rocks the crowd on the rooftop at Piu Piu, which usually has an upscale hiphop vibe, but they're loosening the rules for his set of uptempo trap, UK club and reggae tracks. Chilla is only 33, but in the youth-driven scene of Vietnam, that makes him something of an elder. He credits the kids for pushing the scene forward: "A lot of the friends I started with have stopped clubbing. But the younger crowd want to listen to something new."

The next day, I groggily make my way to an early event at Arcan where Elijah is giving a lecture as part of a tour discussing the economics of underground creative scenes. It's quiet but all the seats are full and nearly everyone raises their hands with a question. At one point, he asks if this is the first time we've been to a lecture in a club, and the audience nod. The turnout and engagement prove the scene is thinking strategically about how to build what comes next.

Later that night, when the lights dim and fog spills onto the floor, Tri Minh treats the crowd to a set of live hard techno. In town from Hanoi, he performs with stacks of controllers connected by metres of wires. He programmes and plays loops and melodies, steadily pounding the space with four on the floor debauchery. His set features almost no trace of Vietnamese influence, something he says he's battled with for years. "I started to recognise a kind of racism, where people expected an Asian electronic musician to play with some kind of traditional music," he says. Some of his recordings have mimicked the scales, notes, and flavours of Vietnamese genres in unexpected ways to avoid the label of an Asian artist.

Downstairs I find Nodey, whose music is some of the most notable and adventurous electronic music coming out of the country, lounging on a couch, chilling. He's Viet kiều (Vietnamese from overseas), was born and raised in Paris, and his music blends Viet influences with big beats and crisp design. "I'd be making rap beats for 90s French guys, blending Vietnamese sounds into my beats," he says proudly.

For my last day, I take a trip to Nodey's studio in a faux colonial house in a quiet residential part of town. The white and wooden interior is littered with Viet instruments in various states of repair. Zach Sch, who was born in the US but grew up in Vietnam and is a member of the amorphous Rắn Cạp Đuôi collective, is putting the final touches on his album for the local Nhạc Gãy label melding IDM, rap beats, drones, soundscapes, and global instrumentation. "I like how he blends the local influences very naturally and purposefully; it's not gimmicky at all," says Anh Phi Trần, a cofounder of Nhạc Gãy who's sitting in for the session.

Sch also helps organise shows including the recent Nusasonic event, which brought dozens of electronic artists together from all over South East Asia for a two day mini-festival in the city. He tells me that the crowd was almost entirely local – thanks to publishing the PR material primarily in Vietnamese – which in his eyes is good for the scene. "I'm really happy with the event and think it proves that Saigon can support weird shit now," he says. "Enough people will come out and really enjoy it. Three or four years ago, that really wasn't the case."

One of Elijah's trademark yellow Post-it note motivational images stresses the range of talents which are needed for a creative ecosystem. It reads: "Artists+Producers+DJs+Platforms +Managers +Promoters=Scene." Although the underground electronic community is still small here, it's active in many of the things that count to make a scene grow sustainably. It's a fast-growing, youth-driven moment that's unlikely to slow down anytime soon. ○

Larria DJing at Arcan, Ho Chi Minh City