

## The metro network of music

Far below sea level, in the basement of the underground of the Rhine and Meuse delta you find people and places that are connected to a world wide network of autonomous music. It can be described as a subway network where musicians and music fanatics travel from station to station but also are part of a station themselves. Those people are the ones who set up shows, volunteer at the venues, squats or bars, put down mattresses for artists, stick posters on the walls, spam the social media and cook the meals for all people involved in the show of some particular night. And most often they are a musician or a DJ or a booker or label owner or a promoter or a record seller too.

I am such a person; a musician but also promoter and volunteer at an underground music venue and quite often artists sleep at my house. I have also done around 2000 gigs in at least 35 different countries and met like-minded people everywhere. All the time there were people waiting for me, who set up a show, organize food and drinks and a place to sleep, did the promotion and arranged a stage and sound system. I know them through other musicians or because they passed by Amsterdam and invited me to their neck of the woods. This network goes all over Europe and North America but also pretty deep into South America, Asia and Australia and is sometimes touching Africa too.

In January 2015 a little baby was born, my first child, and I decided for this year to not book three week Zea (my solo project) tours. The band I play in, called The Ex, already has a rule of keeping the tours at ten days maximum, which meant I had time to say yes to all the requests that came from nearby, from the lowlands. So in 2015 I played at least seventeen times in an underground place somewhere in The Netherlands. And I saw a new, good and growing underground scene.

Around ten years ago the lowlands underground was obviously imploding. Since 1999 many cities in The Netherlands lost their ability to book weird music, strange bands and unknown artists because they lost their squats and cultural centers to huge prestige projects from local governments who found it necessary to put their cultural money into stones. The one building bigger and fancier than the other, looking very "modern" but killing for the local music fanatics who lost their place to set up shows. Buildings applauded to by civil servants and their contractors but hated by the musicians, bookers, promoters and even their own staff. Dead rooms, back-stage on the fifth floor, blunt security people, the list is long. And the big cities could survive, although Rotterdam has been struggling for years, but smaller cities were lost. Youth centers with very low doorsteps, where young people could walk in with excitement and a few ideas and get involved in art and music and build up experience and knowledge about how to get around the world of sound, while helping at the bar and not having to lay down accountability to superiors, parents or teachers, were gone. Given up for places that need much more money and can't work with volunteers because the equipment is too fancy. Given up for places that need lots of security and look like airports, where its

forbidden to stick up a poster and even if the place is a fusion of a few local youth centers, it has more overhead costs than all those independent places had together.

Yes, in the new buildings you can discover some young kids, but they are there because of their “stageplek”, internship, and they have no direct connection with the place. They only need points and a good rating and go back to the Rock School or Pop Academy. And then hope they can once work at a big festival or such. All connection between local kids and their place for noise and fun seemed to be gone.

Until a few years ago. I guess a vacuum can only last so long and it gets filled with fresh air again. A new generation, excited about strange sounds, has been looking and finding new ways and new places to make off-kilter, independent and subversive music heard and seen. Or sometimes there are some older people who have the energy to do the same thing again as they did in the eighties; find an abandoned place and make it your own and keep the people who claim to own the building away from the doorstep. For a while.

There is not one format or mold for such initiatives. It depends on people and places, on groups and cities. Sometimes it's an empty factory, sometimes it's a former prison and sometimes it's a basement of a 16<sup>th</sup> century historical building. But always it has people involved who are craving for new sounds, for adventurous concert and dance nights and for down to earth simple interaction without security. There is not a governmental organization directly involved. They might come later. They might try to support the initiatives by not blocking them and by not offering to take over with a bag full of money and requests.

The place I am involved with the most is OCCII in Amsterdam. It's down the street of my house, a seven minute walk. I did my first little festival there in 1998 and became a volunteer in 2001. There has been an innumerable amount of musician staying at my house, I have organized countless shows in OCCII and I might be the artist who has played there the most times (as Zea and with The Ex). And it doesn't get boring because it's not only me and a fixed group of others walking around there. It's an ongoing stream of people and collectives who set up nights at OCCII. Okay, the kids theater is solid. And Sjoerd, the coordinator since 2005, is solid. But things are always changing; improving I must say. The building itself is remarkable. Built in the twenties of the last century to function as a horse tram stable and used as an architect experiment inspired by the old Russian tale about the “hut on chicken-legs”. OCCII was squatted thirty years ago, got legalized and is part of De Binnenpret, the name of the whole block, and is autonomous in it's creative programming.

A few years ago the front of OCCII was restored with some money of Monumentenzorg, with a lot of help from the OCCII volunteers. Last summer OCCII got a whole new floor and fresh makeover on the inside. I can see closely how this all comes along since I joined the board two years ago and still go to volunteer meetings too. There is hardly a place like OCCII left in Amsterdam, even in the whole of The Netherlands, and OCCII is mentioned by many international touring bands a special and inspiring place.

Volunteers walk in on their own account. Usually they come to see a concert, like the place and find out it's run by volunteers and decide they like to get involved; put time into music and get great concert nights back. It's as simple as that.

Although the coordination of all the volunteers became too much for Sjoerd a few years ago and OCCII got the opportunity to get support from the Stadsdeel Amsterdam Zuid, the borough where OCCII is based. People from the Stadsdeel came to see OCCII and told us we should apply and they wanted to support OCCII. We took it. And now OCCII can afford someone who coordinates all the volunteers and helps with lots of other work too, she is called Hilde. It's half a job but it's double the help. We don't know how long this can be sustained but it surely helps make more good music nights possible in Amsterdam (Zuid).

The other sixteen Dutch underground places I played this year are completely different from OCCII. Which is logical in itself. No two groups of people without a mold, in different surroundings, will create exactly the same venue and organization, as opposed to the big black fancy boxes I spoke about earlier.

If you made it to the end of this piece, if you want to get involved, if you are a musician, booker, promoter, DJ, label owner, cassette dubber or other sort of music fanatic who is glued to the urge of underground music, if you are about to step into the metro or are busy building a station, I wish you good luck. In the meantime I like to thank Vechtclub, Simplon, Next to Jaap, WORM, Derde Wal, Media Bunker, De Bakkerij, Café de Ruimte, Vrankrijk, Witte Vila, Asteriks, Vrijplaats Leiden, Swaf, Ruimte voor de Kunst, De Nieuwe Anita and OCCII of course for helping to make great and special nights and having me play in 2015. But I like to mention also Lepel, De Onderbroek, Extrapool, Gifgrond, Landbouwbelaang, OT301, Huize Pinto, Plantage Dok, De Roze Tanker, Zaal 100, Splendor, Roodkapje, dB's, ACU, EKKO, De Vijfpoort, El Atico, KNG 56, De Groote Wijver, AA Leiden, for you to go and check out. And the list is much longer. There is a lot of free space again under the ground.

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