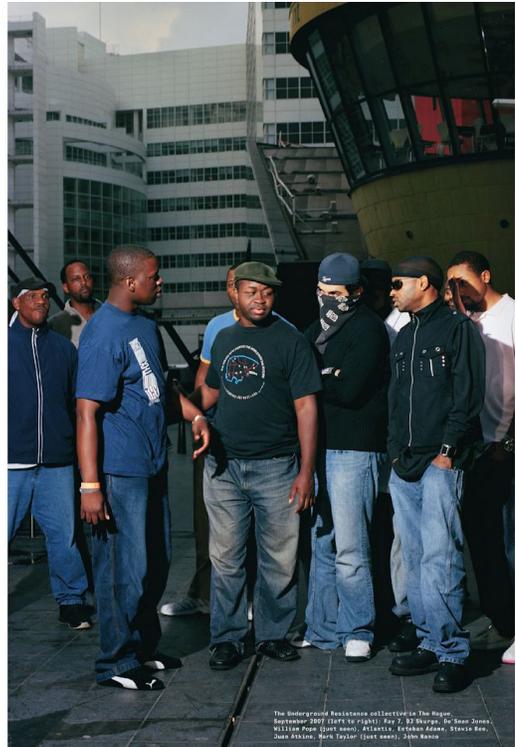




UR Label artwork (above and following pages) by Frankie Felix, Mike Hogg, Charles Etkin and Shada Warrior

Since 1989, Detroit Techno collective Underground Resistance have been locked in a struggle against the global forces of Capital corroding the social fabric of their city. Breaking cover for a rare interview, founder 'Mad' Mike Banks discusses their methods of electronic warfare and UR's ever-proliferating cells — Drexciya, Punisher, Suburban Knight, DJ Rolando, Universe 2 Universe and more — through which they have taken the fight from Motor City USA to the stars. Words: Mark Fisher. Photography: Daniëlle van Ark

## Agents of disorder



The Underground Resistance collected in The Hague, September 2001 (left to right): Jay Z, DJ Rolando, DJ Steve Jones, Billie Brown, Juan Pablo, Frankie Felix, Charles Etkin, Dennis Brown, Juan Atkins, Mark Taylor (just seen), John Rene



"I believe that if you put your ego in front of the music, then the people trying to listen to the music can't hear it, they just listen to your ego" — 'Mad' Mike Banks

Mark 'Vintage Future' Taylor and Steve Bone of The 3 Head



"In one time Detroit was the only place in the world where cars were made in that kind of abundance, but now it's a more global game and they face really stiff competition from great auto makers from all over the world, just like we face competition from great electronic music producers all over the world. So what used to be your territory only, now is shared by many." Mad Mike Banks is describing the current economic and cultural conditions in Detroit. I'm talking to him in The Hague, where Underground Resistance — the group, record label, collective and cargo cult whose operations he has co-ordinated for nearly two decades now — are appearing as part of the sprawling TodayArT festival that has taken over the city.

Securing the interview was a grueling trial of faith, involving missed emails, late night phone calls, postponements and a rearranged travel itinerary. My innate paranoia intensified by sleep deprivation, I had begun to imagine that I was being subjected to a programme of UR psychological warfare. Is this what anyone who gets to peek behind the curtain to see UR's scorcher supreme must endure, I wondered? So it's not surprising that, with Mad Mike in front of me at last, I should feel a little like *Wildcat* at the end of *Apocalypse Now*. I've gone through the shadows and the mist, the rumors and the misinformation, to meet the man without a face.

As soon as Banks starts talking, there's no question that my faith has been rewarded. Mad Mike — engineer of collectivity, sonic and political theorist and technologic televisionary — is an eloquent and moving advocate of a position that the PR-driven criticism of consumer culture would like to have completely erased long ago. He believes in the power of music to save and transform lives, something he's seen happen many times in the unforgiving environment of Detroit, his and UR's base of operations. As a time when politics and culture have lagged into a cheery, anti-critical conservatism not seen since the 1960s, UR are more crucial than ever: invaluable both for their implacable persistence and their constant mutation.

The label has an identity that is at least as strong as legendary independent imprints like Factory and Rough Trade. It has just released UR 972, and shows no signs of going gently into the good night. On the face of it, The Hague — with its general mix of Old European grandeur and serene skyscrapers — might seem an odd place for an encounter with UR to happen, but Detroit Techno has always been about a strange tension between Europe and the USA. The first wave of Detroit Techno — initiated by three schoolfriends, Derrick May, Kevin Saunderson and Juan Atkins — built a futuristic rhythmic sound from synthsop components that had been designed, but quickly discarded and derided, in Europe.

UR might have been the leaders of Detroit's second wave, but they have always been evangelical about the importance of the first wave. "I made a little bulletin museum, I got Juan's sequencers, Kevin Saunderson's keyboards," Banks tells me, and Juan Atkins made The Hague trip with UR, fronting a blustering live incarnation of the group Model 500. Banks's collaborators at the beginning were Robert Hood (aka The Vision, whose nom de plume, a reference to the ecclesiastically troubled android from *The Avengers*, is one of many borrowings from Marvel Comics to the UR universe) and Jeff Mills. As the pioneers of minimal Techno, UR pursued a ruthlessly subtractive sonic strategy. 1987's "Punisher" — a typical early track, and yet another

Marvel reference — was perfectly named, since UR's records at this time were punilovely reductive exercises in repetition. The song form was deleted, and the abstraction facilitated by the use of electronic machinery was embraced and accelerated.

Even as UR moved to 'reinvigorate' the sound palette of Techno, they maximised its non-sonic fictional and conceptual elements. There can be no act which violates Kodwo Eshun's thesis about futuristic rhythmic music as a carrier of 'sonic fiction', more consummately than UR's *Underground Resistance*. Eshun's claim (in his 1998 book *More Brilliant Than The Sun*) was that, as the sound became more abstract and impersonal, the sensibility parhous that that surrounded and packaged it — the sleeves, the titles, the online communications — bore all the conceptual weight. This opposition was nowhere more starkly apparent than on the early UR records, although the tracks themselves were largely devoid of any verbal content; they were presented as part of a densely consistent mythoscape. The title "I'm Not 'Ho Chi Minh' City" from the 1998 EP *Electronic Warfare* is one of the most delicious examples I referred to an ongoing science fictional war in which you played a part simply by listening to the records. By contrast both with the passivity imposed upon the listener by rap "tool" media and the pallid 'interactivity' offered by New Media, UR have always been cool. In Marshall McLuhan's sense: their world induces you and induces participation. The question "Who is UR?" answers itself. You are UR, as soon as you are involved.

The relationship between politics and the sound was left occult, something for listeners to figure out for themselves. Kodwo Eshun set UR's silent stealth in opposition to the rabble-rousing hyper-visibility of Public Enemy, an act with which they have always been compared. While Chuck D belittled that he "would never be queer" (from "Blightstarliner Message To A Black Man"), 1993's *Underground Resistance* intimated that they "would never surface" (What made UR Black Men?). 1995's *Underground Resistance* intimated that they "would never surface" (What made UR Black Men?). 1995's *Underground Resistance* intimated that they "would never surface" (What made UR Black Men?).

Banks made an anti-epitaphic ethic out of Techno's anonymity, refusing to be photographed or to play the PR game according to the media's personification rules. "I learned not to describe anything and just leave it like water: clear, with no shape and no form," he explains. "I think that's what people really enjoy about UR, they get to paint their own picture. We might just make the canvas for them with the record, and in their mind they paint the picture and that's one of the reasons we sold for so long. We just went forward. There was no reason for you to know what we look like, you just concentrate more on what the sound was."

"Unfortunately, people need a face at the time and for many years I don't give them a face, but now — Internet, cellphone — people take pictures of me, the shit's all over the Internet. I figure, well, hopefully the people will have some honour, and honour my wish not to be seen in front of my music. I believe that if you put your ego in front of the music and place it in front of the speaker, then the people trying to listen to the music can't hear your music, they just listen to your ego."

In any case, attributing the music to a personified face is philosophically, as well as ethically, wrong. "There's been times," Banks continues, "when I've made music like [1989's] "Ho Chi Minh" City, when I made that track I can't remember nothing... it was a

two week blur. The spirit was moving through me and when I got through, it was "Ho Chi Minh" City. Many times I play in church and as a keyboard player, or guitar player, or bass player. I'm present at what I do, but there's times when people in church get into it, and the feeling comes, and the spirit comes, and you can play way beyond your ability. In fact, you know the bass pedal on the organ? I always have trouble with it. I have to look down and play the bass. It's difficult, but when the spirit comes, you don't have to look down, your foot be moving, so at the point you realise that I ain't really playing this organ. It's the same with a track. If the spirit come when you make a track, the question then becomes, 'Is it really you making the track?' So again, it's difficult to take credit for some of this stuff some of the time."

He nods enthusiastically when I say that it's the same with writing. "I've talked to a lot of artists, painters and they say that the point comes when they get it, and they just start doing it. Many times we say 'I did this, I did that, we all slip and say it, but the truth of the matter is, why should you put yourself in front of your music? As human beings, people get a lot of faith — a god might like girls too young, or be into smoking, gambling, drinking — but your work, or your art, or whatever passes through you, your contribution, it lasts way longer than the human does. Beethoven and Bach, their music has outlasted their physical being, so they would have been a fool to put their self in front of it, because as a man you're frail, but your work can stay in humanity forever, like the Egyptian. That shit is so deep, it still there. People are still putting their hands on work that was done who knows how long ago. There's a number of reasons for the make, but that was one of the bigger reasons."

Instead of pursuing the dull demystification agenda that has blighted so much political pop, UR propagated an elaborate system of (de)stimulation and mythologisation. Part of the reason that Marvel Comics applied to Banks so much was that each individual issue contributed to the building of a universe, a consistent plane in which invented characters could commingle with entities from mythology and history. Banks appropriated very quickly the potency of what capitalists call 'branding' — a semantic soverer, the trans-codification of things by signs — and developed UR as a counter-brand that embraced, rather than decried, the power of the logo. Accordingly, UR has always been semiotically imprecise: their T-shirts, the best known of which feature the skull-with-bullet-teeth Punisher logo pilated from Marvel, are perhaps better recognised than any of their records. ("Steve [artist] Abdul Haq is a real big part of UR," Banks enthuses. "He's a conceptualist, he's a futurist, he's an artist, and I think a lot of the time he looked at us as a bunch of characters, so different, but maybe united by this one, strange, strange. Steve Surfer was my guy, because he didn't talk a lot. He just did what he did, and was real smooth. Hertz really created the various characters. With artwork, he really added a great strength to what we were trying to do, a great gift.")

Banks also took design and conceptual tips from 'old Progressive rock albums, Rush, Yes, Lenny White

