



Opposite page clockwise from top: Phantom/Ghost, Thomas Fehlmann and Ekkehard Ehlers at MarkeB. Above: Cobra Killer

MARKE B FESTIVAL BERLIN CAFE MOSKAU

GERMANY

BY CHRIS SHARP

"Please wait for the next smile," says the sign next to the reception desk. The Park Inn Hotel has a game crack at presenting the kind of corporate vapidness that the international traveller no doubt expects these days, and the ersatz saxophonist in the lobby tootles away in the same spirit, delivering a suitably bland version of "All Of Me" to the knots of beer-quaffing businessmen that populate the bar. But this is Alexanderplatz, the vast, sterile heart of what was East Berlin, and the hotel is a 40-storey block of concrete visible from all over the city. In an architectural context like this, such tiny nods in the direction of globalisation still feel like the first tentative outcroppings of returning vegetation after an ice age, even though it's 14 years, almost to the day, since the Wall came down.

Berlin-Mitte, the old heart of the city which spent more than four decades isolated in East Germany, has over the last decade drawn in people from all over Germany, and indeed the world. Berlin music is predominantly not the work of Berliners — rents are cheap here, but, in

a city so scarred by history, you need a short memory to really take advantage of them. And perhaps it's only outsiders who qualify.

But whether MarkeB, now in its third year and a confirmed focal point for underground musical activity here, is more an attempt to bolster a fragile ecosystem than an unselfconscious celebration of creativity, nobody seems to be thinking of the past at the Cafe Moskau. The present location of Ocean Club — the hosts and organisers of this gathering of the Berlin tribes — is a former East German Army officers' club. Just 15 minutes after the doors have opened, the place is already thronged, and everyone is intent on exploring an upstairs room that looks like a halfway house between a comprehensive school canteen and an art fair. There's a table-tennis table, vases full of giant paper poppies, mobiles constructed from record sleeves, and a good couple of dozen monitors displaying everything from prelapsarian games of Pong to impressionistically-collaged video footage of road accidents.

All the participating labels — and there are about 40, including Bpitch Control, Bungalow, City Centre Offices, !K7, Kitty Yo, Morr Music, ~scape, Shitkatapult, and many others — have set up trestle tables, displaying a cornucopia of

CDs and merchandise. There's no denying the enterprise of these people, and it's genuinely bracing to see their kaleidoscope of ideas, gathered together in the same space. And as the weekend gathers pace, it's obvious that the music can't be straitjacketed into any kind of generic pigeonhole. For every Ekkehard Ehlers, who conforms to type by sitting perched on a stack of beer crates, summoning a swirling parade of amorphous sound from his Powerbook — there's an Angie Reed, who comes on like a Latina diva, her sassy drawl riding a succession of twitchy grooves, taking in squelchy electro and Garagey clatter with equal aplomb.

Much excitement is centred on the performance of Kitty Yo's most recent signing — Rhythm King And Her Friends — a trio of politically-charged young women whose lithe, angular songs and megaphone-filtered polemics carry on where the DFA remix of Le Tigre's "Deceptacon" left off. Their strident energy is deftly counterpointed by Morr Music's Guther, whose sweetly circular pop frameworks are gradually clothed in tidal sweeps of sampled texture. Even more approachable is the music of Dub Tractor, whose tonal tinnabulations represent the unashamedly melodic approach of the City Centre Offices label; again, it's one man

and his computer, but his gently tactile revolutions offer a soothing way into Saturday's sprawling allnighter.

There's really too much to take in — at one end of the spectrum, Girls Girls Girls combine bruising breaks and twitchy turntablism, and at the other, Phantom/Ghost's curiously stately slow anthems conjure an almost Weimar sense of romantic doom. And several acts belie the claim that electronic music lacks stage presence — chief amongst them Cobra Killer, who look like refugees from *Faster Pussycat! Kill! Kill!* and perform their set of charged, mutant disco like a pair of deranged go-go girls. Jahcoozi's touch of homemade surrealism is almost as striking — their line-up includes a cross-dressing Rasta and a female vocalist who croons the word "fish" over and over from beneath a safety helmet adorned with velcroed-on animal ears. All in all, it's radiantly clear by 3am on Sunday morning — as Pliq seamlessly take up Thomas Fehlmann's hands-aloft baton and deliver an exhilarating set of tough-stepping laptop Techno — that whoever the people are that make up this scene, and wherever they come from, they're bringing plenty of energy and imagination to the party. At MarkeB, at least, there was no waiting for a smile. □