

We throw a few curveball questions the way of...
DANIEL MILLER

Words: JOE ROBERTS

"It's a bit like playing your first football match at Wembley stadium," says Daniel Miller, Mute Records founder and now techno DJ about his 2010 debut gig at Berghain, courtesy of an invite from UK industrial techno pioneer Regis, aka Karl O'Connor. "I said, 'Make it easy for me Karl', so I had the opening slot on a Saturday, which is midnight when people start coming in and it starts to get going."

Quite what the electronic music landscape would look like without Miller, it's impossible to imagine. Launching Mute Records in 1978 to put out his own single 'Warm Leatherette' as The Normal (the track was later covered by Grace Jones) at the start of a highly experimental period known as post-punk, the label went on to provide a home for a huge list of successful acts utilising a new age of electronic instruments including Fad Gadget, Depeche Mode, Nitzer Ebb, Yazoo and many more. His soon to be relaunched Novamute sub-label, meanwhile, was a springboard for the likes of Richie Hawtin, as Plastikman, and Luke Slater.

"I like the culture around the techno scene, I find it very friendly and collaborative," says Miller, who now lives in Berlin but is still a regular in the UK to play clubs such as Egg London. "It doesn't seem so competitive, certainly the people I know. It's the nearest thing I'm going to get to playing live, and I enjoy it very much."

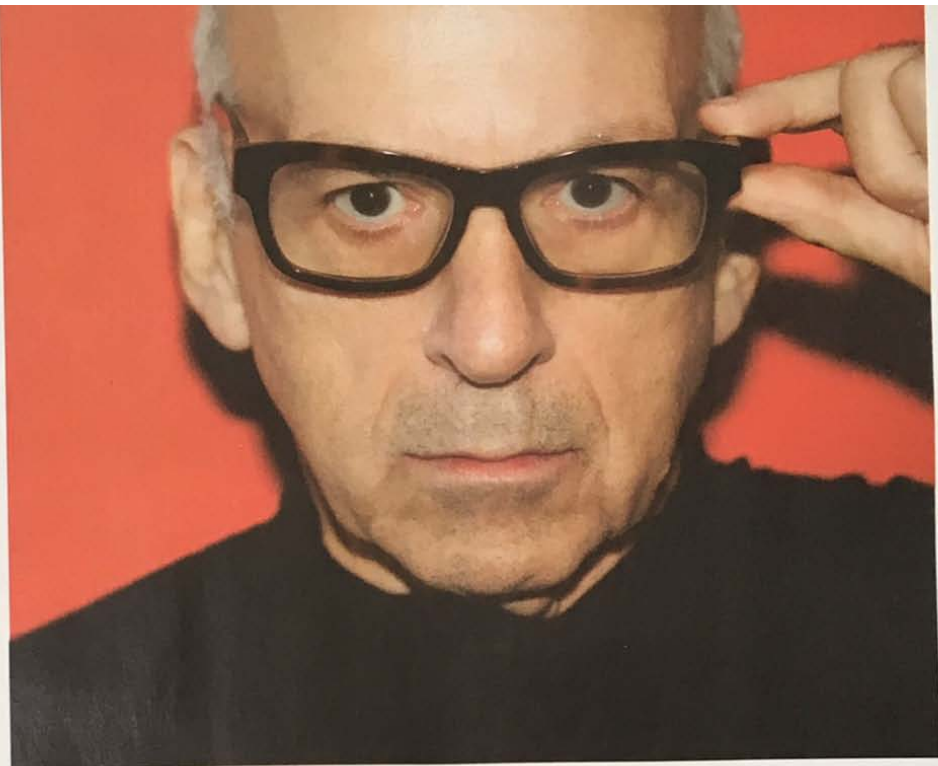
We chat to Daniel about Seinfeld creator Larry David, modular synths and why Mute works best without any artist contracts...

It is true you almost became a comedian? It's quite a different path to putting out dark synth-pop...

"Ha ha. I wouldn't say I almost became a comedian, I was very into writing comedy. Three or four of us used to write together at school and we met John Cleese a couple of times. I'm definitely still into comedy, although not so much stand-up. Curb Your Enthusiasm is my favourite situational comedy. Larry David is an absolute genius. It's hard to watch other stuff after that as it's not as good — I can watch it over and over again. I also like people like Jackie Mason, who's getting on a bit now like all of us. He's not scared to push the boundaries. I still love the old Monty Python thing and Fawlty Towers, of course. What else... I wasn't ready to talk about comedy!"

OK. Your dream in starting Mute was of electronic music changing from something elitist to something popular. Did you think it would end up quite like the American EDM explosion with a producer on stage with a laptop and a silly mask?

"Yes! I wouldn't have been able to tell you exactly how, that it would all be done via computers, but I thought it would. The price of synths around '76/'77 started to really come down and a lot



of people were really bored of what was going on with music and I think wanted to make weird noises and try to put that into some kind of structure and try something new.

"Punk rock was kind of the end of something, and the beginning of something. The first electronic musicians of that post-punk generation were all bedroom composers. Now, of course, it's normal, everyone makes music in their bedroom with their laptops. But then it was unheard of. You couldn't make a record unless you had a big professional studio. It was the beginning of the whole DIY movement. A lot of things that happened in those days are strongly echoed in what is happening now."

"It's not hard to make quite good-sounding electronic music now, but it's as hard as ever to make exceptional music of any kind, whether it's electronic or anything else. From my perspective as an A&R person, or running a label, you have to sift through an awful lot of OK stuff to find the really great things, but that's fine. It encourages people to push the envelope, if you pardon the pun."

You've done a talk on modular synths, casting light on what sometimes seems an esoteric world. Are they not what producers get into to try and make it elitist again?

"It's not really elitist. You can start small with two or three modules and take it from there. I think they're sick of pushing a mouse around, and sick of going through endless lists of presets and sample libraries. They just want to create something on their own, which I think is much more pure."

We're in an age of reissues and revivals. Is there the same appetite for anything revolutionary as there was after punk?

"People have been asking that question for almost as long as I can remember. In the '70s, it was 'It'll never be as revolutionary as the '60s again', then there was punk and post-punk. Then

in the '80s people said it'll never be as exciting. Revolutionary is not necessarily the word I would use.

"The cultural context of music has changed, as there are so many other things to do. Because there are so many other things to do, people's attention spans have changed. There's also a lot of music, which is a good thing, and it's much more easy to get hold of, so the chance you're going to sit down and listen to an album from beginning to end is fairly slim these days. Then, of course, there's social media. People's lives are very busy in the Western world, we're constantly trying to keep up."

Why do you think Depeche Mode stuck with Mute, despite the lure of the majors?

"When I saw them first at the end of 1980 at The Bridge House, Canning Town, supporting one of our other artists, Fad Gadget, I thought they were amazing. I asked if they fancied doing a single, and they said OK. I told them we didn't have to have a contract, we could just have a profit-share, which is what I'd done before, and take it single by single. For whatever reason they felt comfortable working with me.

"I think I understood the music a lot better than other people, who just thought they were a band who'd have a few hits. I didn't have a contract with them for about 15 years, and I still work with them on a kind of A&R basis, which I'm very happy about. In those days — it's hard to imagine — none of them had lawyers or managers. But gradually people started getting lawyers and managers, and lawyers and managers have to justify their fee, and that's it really.

"I understand why people want contracts completely, you need to protect yourself. But if you find a home or label where you feel comfortable and you trust the people, then I don't think you need a contract. That trust element, both from a business and a creative side, is part of what has kept us going so long."