

Alan Oldham Reintroduces JOHNNY GAMBIT For A New Generation (Interview)



Credit: Jen Jeffery

Alan Oldham is what society now calls a multi-hyphenate, but in times past, the term was Renaissance man.

For the past three decades plus, he has been an innovative purveyor of electronic music and a comic book writer and artist extraordinaire. Oldham started his trek as an eclectic art fan during the '80s in his Detroit hometown. He combined his love of the German Expressionist movement in film, the clean lines of Art Deco-inspired objects and more to start writing the narrative and visuals for his characters. The first major result was his trench coat-laden hero JOHNNY GAMBIT. Oldham hit paydirt and was signed to Hot Comics out of Chicago in 1986. The company folded soon after and the

character would have two more issues published in 1987-88 by Detroit's Eclectic Press.

Oldham did not have any time to think about the next move for JOHNNY GAMBIT because he was busy creating the cover art for the first Detroit Techno releases from childhood friends like Derrick May and Juan Atkins. These same friends also supplied him with music for his influential Fast Forward radio show being broadcast on WDET. This writer remembers listening to Oldham play Detroit Techno, house music and industrial in the early morning hours as listeners would call in and get an education on the new sounds that have laid the foundation for today's myriad of electronic artists. He also worked as a DJ for Mike Banks' sci-fi and funk-dipped techno crew Underground Resistance. As the '90s moved on Oldham started making his own music and founded the Generator and Pure Sonik labels.

Today, Oldham is just as excited about creating as he was years ago. A current resident of Berlin, he still travels the world as a DJ and has had art exhibitions in several countries. He is having a rebirth of sorts with JOHNNY GAMBIT and a Kickstarter relaunch. The new graphic novel is bringing GAMBIT back with a remastered 2 CD set. I spoke with Oldham last month shortly after his set at the Charivari Music Festival in Detroit. We talked about GAMBIT, the early days of Detroit Techno, and what it is about the city that drove him to greatness among his many other career-defining moments.

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back and tell you good job. If anything, they will shit on you. So, it motivates you to push forward, to push internationally and outside of the city."

How did you decide to bring Johnny Gambit back now?

I'd been working on the book for almost 15 years now. I started it in 2007 and it's been kind of in the back of my mind to bring back JOHNNY. We did a run in the '80s and I didn't get a chance to finish the original story because my publisher(s) went out of business and then time went by so I thought I'd just reboot it completely.

What was your original inspiration for the character?

Well, that's a really good question. JOHNNY GAMBIT is basically the kitchen sink character for everything I liked at the time; Japanese animation, Japanese Manga, "Miami Vice," "Love & Rockets," the movie "Metropolis" by Fritz Lang, Art Deco design, prototype cars that were never made, and there was a comic back in the '80s called "Mister X" that was a huge influence.

I saw where Marvel later came out with the character in "Uncanny X-Men" #266.

There was a girl, well, woman now, that I met at the old Chicago Con back in '86, and we became friends. Turns out she worked for Marvel so we stayed in touch. It turned out I was going to New York for my first visit back in '87 and she invited me up to visit Marvel. That was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for me 'cause you got to see the real Mighty Marvel bullpen with your own two eyes. So I got to NYC, went

up there and I had a bunch of my old JOHNNY GAMBIT number ones with me and she introduced me to a few of the editors like Archie Goodwin and Carl Potts, and I was just leaving my comic as a calling card.

Fast forward to 1990, I'm at Todd Johnson's old comic shop in Ferndale, and I notice a character named Gambit with the hair to one side and a trench coat. But they gave him powers and they changed it enough so where you can't sue them. You know how it is, they take the idea and add just enough to it so they can say hey, we came up with this on our own. But the resemblance was uncanny, no pun intended. So yeah, there's nothing you can really do about it. At this point, it's just an interesting story.



So as far as the reboot is concerned on the musical side what can you tell me about the new double album? How is it

different from the original release?

It really isn't, except it's going to be remastered. It's the same tracks as before. We never really did any real CD pressing on the original tracks, so it's going to be remastered and repackaged and the plant that I'm using is in the US. So it's going to be a little expensive 'cause we make it in America and we ship it back to Germany. But it's the same tracks by my friends FBK, Nino Sebelic, Blak Tony from Aux 88, Phrek, Altroy, Sprawl, and Krenzlin from Germany. I also did a solo soundtrack which will be included.

You created the visual art for many of the first techno labels in Detroit, how did the music influence your cover art? How were you able to visualize what the art should look like for this sound that was new then?

When I did the stuff for Djax-Up-Beats, I was encouraged to do what was in my head. Saskia Slegers, who was the label owner, would take the art and match it to the music, so she said draw whatever. The very first stuff I did for Derrick May, I just went by vibe and the track titles and things of that nature when he asked me to come in and do "Nude Photo." It just seemed kind of obvious what I drew. I don't know. Sometimes I got to hear the music first, but a lot of times it's just do what you want and the label will match it to the music.

What is it about Detroit that has shaped your artistry?

You know, I have absolutely no idea other than there are so many talented people in Detroit. I didn't really appreciate it until I left. So many talented Black people. One of the things Detroit did for me I will say, is it's a constant fight to be recognized and you're constantly motivated to push forward because a lot of people—especially in the early days—a lot of people like to shit on you and they try to shit on your work. It just motivates you to push further, so that's one thing about Detroit. It's not an easy place, no one's going to pat

you on the back and tell you good job. If anything they will shit on you. So, it motivates you to push forward to push internationally and outside of the city.

How did you start DJing for UR?

It was 1990 and I was working at a record label called Full Effect. And Full Effect Records at that time fancied themselves the Detroit version of Chicago's Wax Trax Records. They did industrial style music. I had a real job and quit it to work at the office at Full Effect. What it turned out to be was just to sit there all day answering the phone and telling everybody that the owner, Tony Srock, wasn't there. Because he was busy scamming people, ripping people off, and running up lines of credit, so people would call the office looking for him. The one perk was I got to make free long-distance calls all day. Full Effect only put out two releases before the house of cards crashed down.

Anyway, Jeff Mills came around to the office one day because him and Srock were friends and did Final Cut together. And Jeff said, "Hey man, come work for UR, we need somebody to do press releases and stuff and you can write, you can communicate." I was also doing my radio show, "Fast Forward."

So I ended up quitting Full Effect and I went to work with Underground Resistance doing press releases and promo stuff. And then a year later, Jeff quit UR to go solo and Mike Banks needed a DJ because they were getting ready to go on tour and he asked me if I wanted to DJ for UR, which of course, I said yes. And once we got on the plane he was like, "What's your code name, because everybody in UR has a code name." I had just seen the movie "Terminator 2" and the T-1000 is the liquid metal cyborg terminator in the movie, so I took that name and it stuck, and that's how I got involved. I was with Mike a year and half for the live shows, then he quit the road to focus on Submerge. After that I was on my own, and I've been doing it ever since.

**I became aware of you because of your radio show Fast Forward.
How did that start?**

I was a student at Wayne State, and my major was Radio TV Film. The plan at that time was to be a commercial radio jock. I had done a radio show on WAYN which at that time was the low-powered AM radio station on campus only. Only available in Student Center and the campus apartments nearby, but it afforded me the opportunity to do air checks. Air checks are when you record your show and your on-air persona and you can use those demo tapes to get jobs.

A buddy of mine named Todd Boyd who is now a film professor at USC, was telling me WDET had an internship open and I should go down there and look into it. At that time you needed an internship to graduate and I didn't have a car like a lot of my peers, so I couldn't go out to the 'burbs to the big advertising agencies or the real radio stations like WXYZ, but WDET was located right on campus. I marched my Black face in there and right away I met Judy Adams, and I guess she liked me because she put me on that day, then she introduced me to Ann Delisi, who was the program director at that time. Judy was Ann's boss, and Ann was my boss.

My first job was to alphabetize the record library. I spent the whole summer doing that and learned a lot about music, especially jazz, because you're listening to music while you're alphabetizing. Then finally it got to be fall and the internship was over. The overnight guy had gotten fired and Judy asked me if I could take over the overnight slot which was 3-6 AM on Fridays. Then she asked me if I had an air check, which I did. I let her hear it, and she hired me to be on WDET and that's how that started. She came up with the name "Fast Forward." The night of my first broadcast I went by Derrick May's place on the east side and he gave me a whole stack of white labels, and was like "Hey man, you can play these," and all this stuff turned out to be some of the very first Detroit Techno records.

I got a lot of that stuff early and started playing it on my show, and people liked it from the very beginning. At the time, the show was a mixture of Detroit Techno, Chicago House, I was still into jazz fusion at the time, it was quite a mix. This was 1987.

Then 1988 was the Summer of Love in England, Acid house came in, and then you had industrial which I was getting into, and slowly the jazz fusion part was phased out and the industrial Wax Trax kind of music was coming in. I was playing a mix of everything electronic. Cabaret Voltaire, Rhythim Is Rhythim, Inner City, Kenny Larkin, Depeche Mode, Ministry, just a mix of everything.

I had fans from the beginning. Back in those days people would call into the radio station and the phones would light up and I'd be talking to people, and it was always the weirdo night owl insomniacs, you know a lot of artists and bohemians. Old hippies, painters, those kinds of folks. Real old-school Cass Corridor (not Midtown), Woodbridge-type people.

What was cool about it to me was a lot of Detroit people would call in, a lot of hood dudes who'd never heard Clan of Xymox before, never heard Skinny Puppy or Severed Heads before, and the brothers would call in and be like "Mannn what kind of music is that?" One time, I played a Kenny Larkin track, and I announced that Kenny Larkin was from Southfield, Michigan, and this guy called in, he was shocked because they think anything electronic is from Europe. It turned out I was educating people that a lot of this stuff was from Detroit, their own hometown.

What made you want to start making your own music and start your own labels?

I must say I was doing Fast Forward and I was also doing my comics and I'm still in my last days at Wayne State (later graduated). But it seemed like the art was really, really

thankless. I didn't feel like I was getting anywhere, even though I did publish. I had an actual comic book company pick me up (and I actually got paid). But what really snapped me out of it was there was a photo that I saw in the paper—you can tell how long ago it was, because it was a newspaper (laughs). There was a photo of Derrick May and he was chilling in his loft with my man from Depeche Mode, the lead singer?

Dave Gahan.

So yeah, Dave Gahan and Martin Gore were in town and came up to Derrick's loft. The big thing with me and Detroit Techno was that these were guys that I knew, some were guys that I grew up with. They were my own age and they were making records. Not just Derrick, but all of those guys. Kevin (Saunderson), Blake (Baxter), Juan...Juan was like slightly older than us, like one or two years older, but these guys were actually making records. People didn't make records, corporations made records.

But what really got me was Derrick hanging out with Dave Gahan and Martin Gore. That's when I was like I've got to learn how to DJ and make my own music. My little studio is in my grandmother's basement it's all cold and I had a little space heater down there, and I'm like OK that's miserable (laughs). I'm doing this and a guy I actually know is hanging out with these people and then you're reading in Melody Maker how he played The Hacienda in Manchester, and he's playing alongside Bernard Sumner from New Order, so I'm one degree away from fucking Joy Division.

When I was in college, I used to dream about going to England and somebody I knew who was my own age was hanging out there, and actually knew these people. That's what inspired me to make my own music and learn how to mix.

It's been 20 years since the Metro Times cover with you, Kelli Hand, Mike Huckaby and Juan Atkins. Kelli and Mike have since

passed. What are your thoughts on their contributions?

Invaluable. Both of them. As far as Huck, he was a great teacher. He got a lot of people into this stuff, into production and making their own music and the freedom of it. I think his most famous student was [Kyle Hall](#), who just played [Charivari](#) this past weekend. When I was moving over to Native Instruments' Traktor and Maschine, I would hit up Mike whenever I had a question. I would PM him on Facebook and no matter where he was in the world, he would always take the time out to answer my dumb questions. His tastemaker days at Record Time. His Sun-Ra Reel to Reel Sessions. His productions. His mentoring. Everything that man did really came from a good place.

With Kelli, she was The First Lady Of Detroit Techno. The good news is before she passed away, she got a citation from the city that she was bonafide and that's it. She too is just irreplaceable. Her place in the hierarchy as the first woman to do it in Detroit.

I give Kelli props because no man helped her. See that, to me, is the key with Kelli.

Guys kind of hung around and helped her hook up her gear sometimes early on. Mike and Jeff and Sean Deason would just kind of go around to her place to help her set up. But once this lady was set up, once she knew what she was doing, no man helped her after that. Which is a stark comparison to today with a lot of these young women getting in and getting famous off of Instagram, it's their boyfriends making their music, teaching them how to DJ and all that.

The hypocrisy is what I don't like. You know, you do these big feminist "down with the patriarchy" interviews, but you know that's your boyfriend in the background that made that music. These women are model-looking and they just get up there and get some dude to help them. And then of course, when they get

a level of fame they dump the guy.

I wish I knew who you were talking about.

All I'll say is there's a couple of ladies who fit that description. Kelli will always have my respect as someone who did it on her own. There is no question as to who made a K-Hand track.

You guys went back to high school, right?

Absolutely. We were at Henry Ford together. I graduated in '81. I think she graduated in '83. I used to think she graduated in '82 but we were there at the same time. We used to hang out even back then, like even before music.

I remember her from The Scene. Was she always so unique and a maverick?

Totally was. She used to get her parents' car and we'd go up to Birmingham and buy New Wave clothes. She was always her own woman.

What made you move to Berlin? I saw on your Twitter timeline one day where you said you walked into a room realized everyone hated you and decided to move.

It was a retweet of like "that feeling when you walk into a room and half the people hate you," I vaguely remember that Tweet from my friend Andi (laughs). At the time I was gearing up to leave I wasn't really well-liked in the city. You go to places and show your face and you'd feel vibes, it was really a tough time. This was 2000, 2001. I'm feeling weird vibes locally yet I was famous everywhere else but Detroit. I literally would go play a gig in Toledo, Ohio and get more props just 45 minutes outside of Detroit.

So finally in 2004 when my lease was up, that's when I left. I went to Chicago originally because my ex-fiancée is from there. I thought that would be a new start but it turned out

to be a big miscalculation on my part.

Then finally in 2014, that's when I went to Berlin to stay, so that was eight years ago now. A friend of mine had gotten an artist visa. I thought it would be harder, but my friend inspired me to get one. So when I was over there on my visit I made an appointment, got my paperwork together, got a visa and ended up staying.

Can you compare here and there a little bit? Do you still feel unappreciated in Detroit?

Actually, I don't. I'm feeling the love now, but this is almost 20 years ago. A whole new generation has taken over and it's a new city now. And I'm not the dude from Meyers and 7 Mile anymore. I'm the cool guy from Berlin (laughs). I mean, it's all the same for me, but the perception changes. You get that validation from the Europeans, the big stamp of approval from the Germans, now you're the shit (laughs). I'm known as Ellen Allien's friend now. It's bizarre but cool, I guess.

It's what I call doing the Jimi Hendrix.

Pretty much, you're absolutely correct. Yeah, the Jimi Hendrix, the Willi Smith. Remember Willi Smith? The fashion designer?

Yup, Willi Wear.

You know he went to Paris and he became huge, it's the same thing.

How do you like living in Berlin?

I love it. It's quite a freer atmosphere. I have health insurance there. I have the national pension. You can just do whatever you want. It's becoming gentrified now, but you can still do whatever you want. You can have a guerilla art exhibit if you want to. You just ask around and see if you can find a space to do it. You can DJ all the time if you want.

The clubs themselves are the culture and industry, there so there are many opportunities living in Berlin, and it's just really super cool. What's also really cool is going to different countries in Europe is like going to different states here. I just went to the French Riviera last month for vacay, it was a 90-minute plane ride.

So it's not like a plutocracy or full of nepotism?

Not at all. The thing about Berlin in my view is that it meets your efforts, the city will reward your efforts. If you try to do something the city will reward it. The people and the audience will reward it. You don't feel like you're throwing things against the wall to see what sticks. If you have an idea you can do it. There's a big movie studio right outside Berlin where they make big movies. "The Matrix," "John Wick," "Atomic Blonde," the "Bourne" movies. These guys work there; cinematographers, set designers, writers, video guys outside of music. Berlin is a place of opportunity in all arts and music types, in my opinion.

How do you feel about Beyoncé bringing house music back to the mainstream?

I don't have much of an opinion. Us older people remember when house music was mainstream before, like '90, '91. Cece Peniston, Crystal Waters, C&C Music Factory, Black Box, etc. It had to happen for this generation. The only problem is the younger people who follow Beyoncé may think that she invented this stuff, and there was not an underground before. That's always kind of the problem.

It is. And to her credit, I think she publicized Robin S. because I think she sampled her and she sent her some flowers. I think the younger people may know who Robin S is.

Yeah, I think Green Velvet worked on this record, from what I understand. It was a few cool people who worked on this record. Green Velvet, Robin S., and Honey Dijon. That's what I

heard, I could be wrong.

My attitude is long as the originals are recognized I'm good. Anything that brings more coin to the original Black artists is good with me. Beyonce and her producers are recognizing (and paying) the originals, I'm cool with that.

Check out Alan Oldham's [Kickstarter](#) campaign and follow him on [Instagram](#), [Twitter](#) and [Facebook](#).

<http://kck.st/3TI5jUT>