

WORLD

Bloc party-time

Dave Robinson is the new kid at the Bloc, a three-day festival of electronic music in the West Country



(L-R): The neon-tinted Ed Siebert, Rik Haines and Paul Rose in the Butlins atrium

▶ Earthquake bass. Concrete beats. Bleeps and blarps and blips. And a bodyslam or two of dubstep. Where are we, some desolate industrial estate on the periphery of Berlin? Er, no. Butlins.

For one weekend in early spring – in Butlins, Minehead, Somerset – it's electronica central.

Before the pallid masses from the Midlands descend on the quiet coastal region for a summer of Factor 50-based fun, Butlins fulfils another brief, you see, and that is as a venue for, well, whoever wants to hire it. Marillion and their fans held their own mini-festival here a few years back, and the All Tomorrow's Parties



Kevin Martin, AKA King Midas Sound, shakes Red:Bloc

crew have hosted their acclaimed indie weekenders at the site.

For the last three years, it has been home to Bloc, a festival that delivers an increasingly impressive line-up of electronic acts, old and new. But this is no Creamfields, it's a little more 'chinstrokey' than that. A little more leftfield and eclectic. This year's line-up included LFO, FourTet, Speedy J, Vitalic, and a double-headline of Aphex Twin and dubstep stars Magnetic Man.

Rik Haines is head of production for Bloc: "We started off in Pontins in Hemsby, Norwich five years ago, but outgrew that. Since we've been here, at the bigger Butlins venue – which is around 6,000 capacity across the site, and it was sold out two months ago – we've had to up our game.

"Now we have an event which is not just banging 'four-to-the-floor', it's more of a live feel – though there aren't a massive number of live acts."

Butlins is divided into several spaces, such as Tec:Bloc and Jak:Bloc. The largest, Centre:Bloc, has a capacity of 2,800.

Sound system provision falls to Audio Funktion, a Bristol-based outfit run by Paul Rose. The 'k' is a giveaway: Audio Funktion have carried Funktion One gear for around seven years now. The company's regular gigs include several festivals, including the Arcadia stage at Glastonbury and Rock Ness in Scotland.

Ed Siebert, technical manager of Bloc since its second year, brought the AF onboard. "I like working with the guys, and I like how they make events sound. The way their engineers tweak the system, it sounds perfect."

Siebert talks of another dance event, Glade (held near Newbury), where he's used "a home-made rave system, big bins, to punch the bass out in a different way". "But with techno, you want crisper, sharper, more professional sound, and F1 gear couldn't be better," he says. "I think it can be quite a dynamic PA, it can work for the real ravey stuff because the bass is bloody good, but it's got the range that not all PAs do."

For the main room (Centre:Bloc) Rose has spec'd eight Resolution 5 boxes, plus eight 218 subs a side, for the FOH system, with two rear stacks of six Res 5s and six 218s. "In Red:Bloc we're using the F221 powered subs with Res 5s and some Res 4s for infill; Tec:Bloc is Res 4s and F218s, the same with JakBloc; and in the Irish bar, Res 1s and 118s. So pretty much the full range of F1 kit."

"Our audience, they all know about Funktion One, they know it's good," adds Haines.

It's not just Tony Andrews' purple enclosures at this event, though. Greg Kirkby, head of High Pressure Sound Systems, has provided the kit for the

Ableton RFID (Recursive Function Immersive Dome). "I have a Logic System, I'm a big fan of the old stuff, because I'm a one-man operation so I needed stuff I could move around," says Kirkby. He's been involved with Bristol's dance scene, particularly dubstep, for a while. His spec for the RFID – where punters are encouraged to try out DJing gear supplied by Serato/Ableton/Novation includes "four 18" subs, four dual 15s, CS1296 top cabs".

What about other kit at the event? That's Siebert's responsibility. "I liaise with all the artists and managers to make sure we have all the kit. This year we have four Midas desks, five Mackie 1604 and 1202 mixers, 20 technics 1210 turntables, 14 CDJ1000s and 2000s, half a dozen Pioneer mixers... It's interesting to track over the years what kit continues to appear on the riders. [Allen & Heath] Xone:92 and [Pioneer] DJM800 mixers are always the most common requested. Oh and a Xone:4D, the new A&H mixer, but that was difficult to source. We've a few keyboards – a few Korgs, a Moog Voyager – but not a single drum kit on site! I've not had to deal with anything like that!" He laughs at that realisation.

But he would like to see more live performers, right?

"Of course," says Siebert. "The worse gig I ever saw was Brothemstates. He just sat there with his laptop and a projector. It was just so dry.

"If you can have someone use some kit, and see what they are actual doing, it makes all the difference. When you are putting energy into what you are doing, the crowd can engage with it so much better.

"From an aesthetic point of view, we want more live music, fewer DJs. But from a technical point of view," he laughs, "it's a darn sight easier when it's just DJs!"

Siebert cites King Midas Sound, the infamous dub specialist Kevin Martin, who has three benchtops covered in guitar pedals, effects and more. He'll be manipulating his sound like no one else dare. "It took a long while to set up, but my word, is it worth it!"

Siebert says he would love to entertain everyone in the main atrium space, but the noise requirements, the venue's acoustic design and budget capping makes that impossible at this point. Have they had any moans about noise so far? "One complaint last night, just the one. And that's because someone left the fire doors open."

Maybe the doors weren't closed. Or maybe the muscular beats and sledgehammer bass lines were just too big to be contained by a lowly seaside holiday village... 🐼

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