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Tim / Modern Arts

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Tell us something about yourself.

Tim Kleinert, 37, born on August 25th 1973 in Zürich, Switzerland and still live in the vicinity. Today I'm a professional performing keyboardist, synthesist, producer and professor for keyboards and synthesizers at the University of the Arts in Zürich.

What handle(s) did you use and how did you come up with it/them?

My handle was Tim because that is my real name. The group name Modern Arts (MDA) was invented by Mat, which surprisingly also is his real name. Mat and Tim of MDA sounded good to us! Later on when Jürgen joined us, to stay with the three-letter concept, he called himself Joe.

What group(s) were you in?

Modern Arts (MDA).

What roles have you fulfilled?

I did music and code, and of course came up with creative ideas.

How long were you active for?

I got my C64 in 1986 and stopped using it around late 1990.

Tell us about those years and how you got into the scene in the first place.

My dad ran a successful night club in the late 70s/early 80s in which the light show system was controlled by a VIC-20. When he abandoned the family and disappeared abroad, that VIC-20 fell into the hands of me and my siblings. None of us had any clue how to operate it, but one of my sisters had this friend at school that owned the same computer and was very proficient with it. We invited him to our home and he set it up for us and got us going. His name was (is) Matthias, and that's how Mat and Tim of MDA met for the first time! This was in 1984 and I was 11 at the time. Not long after that, he showed me his new C64. I almost fainted when he POKEd a sprite onto the screen, and of course, I had to have one too (which required some begging to my mum). From then on, I began visiting Mat regularly on free afternoons. In the beginning it was all about gaming, obviously, but we got more and more into the creative aspects of everything. I was just a typical teenage nerd; spotty, overweight, wearing glasses, shy and reclusive, plus enjoyed being creative with the C64. No ambitions.

Describe a typical day for you in front of the computer.

On my own: There was no typical format. I was pretty unfocused, enthusiastically starting countless things but never finished most of it. When motivated, I could snap into hyper-focus, lose all sense of time or need for food and be at it for days, not even opening the shutters during daytime. My mum told me that I would even code in my sleep, talking aloud.

With Mat: I normally went down to his place on Wednesday and/or Saturday afternoons, as on these days we only had school in the morning. We would most often start off by playing games and copy the newest ones before getting bored with all the consumerism and move over to doing creative things, which would go on into late evenings.

With Mat and Joe: Mat and I would sometimes take the train to Joe's place, which was a 1,5 hour trip. By that period, we were all proficient with Assembler and deeply into coding. Our protracted sessions were sometimes interrupted by Joe's father coming into the room and reciting well-meant (but not entirely effective) educational monologues on current political and economic affairs.

Did you personally invent any special techniques or tools to make things easier for you?

In the beginning, I used Chris Hülsbecks' Soundmonitor to make music. A German computer magazine had published its hex code and Mat had doggedly typed off the whole thing. It used a lot of CPU, but it taught me all the established SID techniques and concepts pioneered by Rob Hubbard. So I then went out to code my own music player which was OK for a first try. When my skills had progressed and I saw a lot of room for code improvement, I wrote a second one with a nice GUI and the option of pitched 4-bit sample playback (which was used in Graphixmania 2). It was quite good

1. Morpheus
2. Bacchus
3. Antitrack
4. Yip
5. Lucifer (in..
6. Lord Nikon
7. Antichrist
8. Drax
9. Zzap
10. Honey
11. Ian & Mic
12. Ixion
13. Lucifer
14. O.B.
15. Danko
16. Gotcha
17. Incubus
18. The Sarge
19. Grendel
20. Icon

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actually, and in retrospect, I regret never having shared it around.

When you look at what you did back then, what are you most proud of?

For a long time, I wasn't proud of anything at all. On the contrary! When I decided to become a performing musician, I regretted having spent my teenage years in front of the C64 instead of the piano. I honestly thought I had wasted time. Only many years later, when it gradually became obvious to me that synthesizers were closer to what I heard in my mind than the piano (and I thus switched to synths as my main instrument), did everything make sense. All the conceptual understanding gained from C64 Assembler coding and the SID serves me to this day, especially when working with digital modular synthesis platforms. I've developed algorithms for the NordModular G2 synthesizer which makes it do things its designers probably never dreamt of. Sounds familiar? It's not so long ago that I discovered that some of our stuff was salvaged and documented on the Internet, and that people actually remembered and liked MDA. Although I personally find my musical juvenilia terrible to listen to, this gives me a good feeling. So, if anything, I'm proud and grateful that I'm a part of the C64 history.

Who were your heroes on the scene and why?

I wasn't into the scene thing at all, and thus didn't have any scene heroes. Of course, there were many people I held in very high regard, but these were people who appealed to me due to their accomplishments which stood on their own, scene or no scene.

What, for you, was the coolest thing ever invented on the C64?

Every few months or so, somebody would come up with a new insane way of tricking the video chip into doing seemingly impossible things. The first time your jaw dropped, but after that it grew old pretty quickly. So I'd rather mention something more profound. As a C64 music guy, I should mention Rob Hubbard's technical innovations. His groundbreaking techniques of rapidly sequencing oscillator waveforms and/or pitches to simulate drum sounds, chords and FX, his synth engine which featured LFO's, envelope generators, pitch bending and whatnot – all this opened up the vista of what was possible to squeeze out of the SID chip. In my honest humble opinion, he single-handedly defined the blueprint and set the standard for everything ever to come from the C64 in terms of sound and music.

Did you go to any copy-parties, meetings or tradeshowes?

Not that many, perhaps three or four. There weren't that many happening in Switzerland anyway, and I was too young and shy to go abroad.

In your opinion, what was the scene all about?

As mentioned, I never was a scene guy and therefore cannot comment.

What were the particular highlights for you?

I guess the most intense C64 experience I ever had was my very first introduction to it at Mats' place on a Wednesday afternoon. He loaded the game Commando from disk which really was enough to impress me (I only had a datasette recorder for my VIC-20). Then he started to play it and I'll never forget this moment. The colours, the soft scrolling, the multiplexed sprites, the Rob Hubbard soundtrack... It killed me! It just killed me. It was an epiphany. Later he showed me a demo containing digitized sound (an excerpt from the song Kung-Fu Fighting by Carl Douglas). Not knowing anything about the concepts of digital sound sampling (hey, I was 12), I just couldn't grasp how they got the sound in there. For me, it was like this box was a strange device accidentally left behind by visiting aliens, and it was performing magic. I went home with an eerie feeling that evening. The "strange alien device" nevertheless appeared to be for sale in ample quantity at our local electronics store, so I soon ended up with one too.

Any cool stories to share with us?

I don't know if this qualifies as cool, but here's a tidbit about MDA. MDA was at times just as much about the C64 as it was about building explosives. Just as our programming abilities progressed from lame BASIC to nifty Assembler code, our pyrotechnic enterprises progressed from making simple squibs out of hacked fireworks to home-brewing nitroglycerine and hooking it up to an electric remote ignition. The prospective thrill of blowing up postboxes and bird feeders in the neighborhood was probably the only thing capable of luring three nerdy couch-potatoes outside to get some exercise and fresh air anyway. Due to the chronic lack of female companionship, it was a welcome source of adrenaline too. In retrospect I think we were lucky there weren't any mishaps. But we really had a blast (pun intended).

Are you still in contact with any old C64 people today?

Only with Mat of MDA, who still is one of my closest friends. The C64 days are undoubtedly the foundation of our friendship and also our professional careers. We

unfortunately don't see each other so much anymore since the old factory plant where we had our music studios was torn down three years ago. But we remain in regular contact, both professionally and personally, which for eternal geeks like us is the same thing anyway.

When did you get your C64 and do you still have it lying around somewhere?

My mum bought it in the local electronics store after much, much begging from her 12 year-old son. Later, even more begging then led to the purchase of the 1541 floppy disk drive. Five years later, when the time had finally come to move on, I carefully wrapped everything airtight in thick plastic foil and stashed it away. A few months ago, my mum found it when clearing out the cellar and told me to come and pick it up. So here it is now, in my attic, still in great condition.

Was the C64 really as special as we like to think it was?

I think so. In the 80s, there seems to have been this bubble in time where technological advancement had made computers affordable enough for a larger public, hence the term "home computer." But at the same time, it was still slow enough (remember Moore's Law) that people had enough time to actually build a personal relationship with them. And the C64 was the prime exponent of this.

When can we expect to see some new C64 output from you? :)

Unfortunately never...

Do you have a message for your old contacts and/or anyone reading this?

The C64 and its fan base and nostalgia should remind us that it's about the journey, not the destination. What does it mean to stand on Mount Everest if you just flew up there by helicopter? By the same token, what does it mean to have a gazillion of 3D objects and colours on the screen if it's just something your off-the-shelf graphics card rattles off automatically? Transcendence is the primal human urge, and the C64 was all about transcending the given technology, pushing it beyond what anybody ever thought it would be capable of. That's what gives true satisfaction, true happiness. The more powerful our technology becomes, the more important it is for us not to forget this.

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