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By CJ Lotz

The room smelled like a beer-drenched cement basement. Industrial piping hung low, visible in the moody lighting only when flash bulbs popped. As soon as Polish hip-hop artist Fisz took the back-room stage at Cargo Sunday night, mobiles slid out of pockets to snap photos and hands drew cameras out of their purse holsters. Fisz and his band, along with producer Emade, are musical mavericks in Poland. They capped off the "Fertilizer Festival: Good Shit from Poland" in a night that was as surprising as the words "Polish hip-hop."

Fertilizer is an annual festival that cultivates the music and culture of one country. This year, the focus was on the East as the freshest sounds of Poland joined for a series of shows in the East of London. Cargo held the final night of music, featuring Fisz and goofy rock group Mitch and Mitch.

[IMAGE]

Photo credit: Fisz pumps his fist in the air. CJ Lotz

Amidst Sunday's mob of devoted Fisz fans, swaying couples locked at the hips and beer sippers leaning on the bar, one audience member pulled out a piece of throwback technology: the instant Polaroid camera. The photographer lined up the lens with the hatted, bespectacled and darkly bearded Fisz, who palmed a corded mic close to his lips. He spouted air and rhymes in punctuated Polish. Flash.

A deja-vu-familiar photo square popped out. It takes approximately one minute for a Polaroid to fade from gray abyss to saturated image. As it transformed, the photographer placed the image between a water bottle and an amp cord on the stage, an offering at the sneakered feet of Fisz.

[IMAGE]

Photo credit: A photo gift, water bottle and sneaker. CJ Lotz

The rapper didn't notice. He was too busy blending his words with the gorgeous flow of bluesy guitar, slick keyboarding and punchy drums that fleshed out his sound. Fisz is so full of musical tricks and giggles, one can't restrict a definition to a single musical type. He's a rapper who scats, the leader of a big band, the frontman of a reggae group, an inspiration for Poland, a fresh face for the London crowd. Whatever role he fills, he's a talented performer with a crew of musicians at the top of their art. Fisz takes everything good about Western music and forces it to speak his language.

Longtime Fisz fan, Agata Chodorowska from Krakow, and now living in London, said the music has grown from standard hip-hop full of samples from other songs, to now representing the zenith of Polish creativity.

[IMAGE]

Photo credit: Photographers snap photos of Fisz as he lays out some rhymes. CJ Lotz

"It's ambitious. They are real musicians," she said. "Their music is more mature, not just samples anymore. In the beginning it was good in Poland, now it's ... wow ... it's a must-see."

The set list included songs reminiscent of disco, jazz, reggae and blues, all linked by the words of Fisz and crisp drumming. Maija Handover, co-director of sounduk, which helps put on the festival, said Fisz was a highlight among many talented musicians.

[IMAGE]

Photo credit: Mitch and Mitch perform. CJ Lotz

"Artistically we've been really impressed by the creativity that exists in Poland, and the quality of musicianship has been superb across all the gigs," Handover said. "We knew Sunday night would be popular with Polish audiences so we chose the biggest artists. Fisz is the best-known Polish artist in the festival."

The Polaroid image of the MC rested on the stage even after the lights dimmed. When the group answered the crowd's cries for an encore, the photographer grabbed the image and pushed it toward Fisz's guitar player's feet. He looked the image, picked it up and set it on his guitar case. The song finished when the sharp drum beats finally ceased, a halted force between pulsating music and the throbbing crowd. The guitar player opened his case, tossed the photo inside, laid his instrument on top, and clicked the latches shut.

Earthen fertilizer needs nitrogen from banana peels and apple cores. Well-fertilized music? A little reggae, jazz and a lot of hip-hop strummed together with an unrelenting beat. It nurtures a connection between sound and cultures. That's how you cultivate the sound bloom that is Polish hip-hop artist Fisz.

Links

Fertilizer

<http://www.fertilizerfestival.com/>

Fisz on Myspace

<http://www.myspace.com/fisz>

Blog about Polaroids

<http://www.npr.org/blogs/pictureshow/2009/05/nypf.html>