

Growing up on music

Before becoming a key figure in space disco and electronic music, Didier Marouani was first and foremost a child of French 1960s and 1970s music. He was born and grew up in Monaco in a family of impresarios and producers. His father and his two brothers managed the careers of such illustrious artists as Michel Legrand, Juliette Gréco, Claude Nougaro, Barbara, Jacques Brel, Gilbert Bécaud and Michel Polnareff.

Music shaped young Didier's childhood. He began playing the piano at the age of five before attending the Monaco Conservatoire. He released his first single when he was 12, then moved to Paris and began studying at the prestigious Conservatoire three years later. By the age of 17, he was already composing for Nicoletta, Régine and Hervé Vilard, with Étienne Roda-Gil (the lyricist of Julien Clerc and Claude François' disco hits), with whom he began a rich collaboration.

His first two solo albums, featuring romantic songs and ballads, were released in 1973 and 1974. In 1975 and 1976, Didier was the opening act for Johnny Hallyday and Claude François on their respective tours.

The phone call that changed everything

Didier Marouani seemed destined to carry on the legacy of French song until a phone call decided otherwise. "One day," he recounts, "my producer got a call from the astrologer and fortune-teller Élisabeth Teissier. She wanted me to compose the theme song for a future TV show about astrology. I enthusiastically accepted immediately. I decided to compose something both melodious and cosmic, related to the theme of stars, inspired by the electronic music I was already listening to. So I headed to the Paris Pigalle neighborhood with its instrument stores to buy an ARP Axse synthesizer. Back in the studio, I spent two hours working on the machine. Thirty minutes later, I had already composed the melody for *Magic Fly*, which was to become Space's first single. To bring extra energy to this synthetic melody, I decided to add a kick and a snare drum inspired by the disco beat that was popular at the time. Its success came from the combination between the tenderness of the melody and the dancefloor beat."

Unfortunately, the TV show never got off the ground. Marouani then suggested his label release the song as a single. Polydor categorically refused. He was known as a singer and was told that it would never work. So he decided to invent a new identity for himself, form a band and appear masked as a cosmonaut. Space was born. The song was finally recorded in December 1976. A few weeks later, it was a huge success in record shops, on the radio and in discotheques, both in France and abroad. First the single and then the album sold millions of copies, just as the first Star Wars episode triumphed on the silver screen.-Like many other French disco and electronic musicians at the time, Space was beginning to enjoy international success. With their astronaut-like appearance, Space was the very first embodiment of the French Touch twenty years before Daft Punk.

The origins of Space Disco

Following the success of *Magic Fly*, three albums, recorded in less than two years, were to lay the foundations of what was soon to be known as space disco. In the twenty-four-track studios of the Vogue label near Paris, Didier Marouani experimented with unprecedented freedom, joined by Roland Romanelli on keyboards, Joe Hammer on drums, John Edwards on guitar, Jannick Top on bass, and Madeline Bell and the Costa brothers on vocals.

In 1977, the album *Magic Fly* was released. It blended melodic richness with synthetic innovation and featured dancefloor hits (*Carry On Turn Me On*, *Tango In Space*) as well as midtempo tracks that sounded a bit like cosmic flights (*Ballad For Space Lovers*, *Velvet Rape*).

A few months later, Space released *Deliverance*, a typical seventies concept album, with cover art by the star graphic designers Hipgnosis (creators of Pink Floyd's album covers). As its title suggests, the record reflects the quest for freedom and emancipation found in much of the music of the time, ranging from disco to cosmic electronic music. "To me, space represented deliverance, freedom and the promise of an imaginary world. And planet Earth, a kind of prison." The album, alternating ballads and synthetic beats, enriched by choirs and piano sections, begins with *Prison*, then moves on to more dancefloor-like tracks such as *Running in the City*, before ending with the epic *Deliverance*.

A year later, the trilogy that began with *Magic Fly* ended with *Just Blue* and its futuristic cover, a spaceship designed by Shusei Nagaoka (Earth, Wind & Fire, Electric Light Orchestra). The album, at times quite melancholic, features broader orchestrations and complex harmonies (*Final Signal*, *Secret Dreams*, *Symphony*), and is dominated by the hypnotic eponymous track as well as the feverish *My Love Is Music* (which would later be covered by Gloria Gaynor).

Rendez-vous in space

First and foremost, Didier owes his success to his melodic sensitivity. Inspired by Chopin and his classical training, by the great songwriters of his time, including Elton John and Paul McCartney, and by electronic bands such as Kraftwerk and Tangerine Dream, Didier generally uses a keyboard to compose songs. The keyboard is still his favourite instrument. "When you have a melody," he often says, "you can do whatever you want with it. Whether it's a love song, a disco song or an electro track. The synthesizer was a magical instrument. It gave me the possibility to record strings, choruses or more hypnotic ambient stuff. I knew from the start that it would become the major instrument of the late 20th century. It was also the ideal instrument to suggest space and the cosmos, which had always fascinated me. Even as a child, I'd followed the events of the space conquest, the first steps on the Moon. A photo of Neil Armstrong and other memorabilia of the Russian cosmonauts hang in my studio."

Throughout his career, something has always attracted Didier Marouani to the infinite spaces of the cosmos. In 1979, he composed the theme song of the French TF1 TV program *Temps X*, hosted by the famous Bogdanoff brothers, who were to convert millions of French viewers to the imaginary world of science fiction.

In 1982, he met the Soviet Minister of Culture, who wanted to invite him to perform in his country. Didier didn't know that he was already a star behind the Iron Curtain. For years, Soviet TV had been using his music to illustrate its reports on the Soviet space conquest. Their meeting was followed by a tour of 21 shows that drew a total audience count of over 600,000 people in a country where Western pop music had hitherto penetrated only under the radar.

Five years later, his album *Space Opera* for electronics and voice, featuring the Red Army and Harvard University choirs, celebrated the conquests of the two major space powers of the time, before the CD itself was taken aboard the Mir station and sent as a satellite into space.

In 1990, Didier gave a major concert in French Guiana to celebrate the tenth anniversary of the Ariane rocket. Two years later, he played in Moscow's Red Square before an audience of 360,000. In 2011, he commemorated the fiftieth anniversary of Yuri Gagarin's first space flight at the Star City in Moscow, then continued his exploration with the album *From Earth to Mars*, followed by more concerts in Russia. In 2013, cosmonaut Luca Parmitano even joined the musicians on stage, performing the melody of *Magic Fly* from the International Space Station ISS. To top it all off, in 2009, an exoplanet discovered by a Russian astronomer was named after Didier Marouani.

From Space Disco to Electro and Hip Hop

In the late 1970s, Didier Marouani unintentionally launched space disco, a synthetic dancefloor music whose themes reflected the era's fascination with the cosmos, space exploration and science fiction. This can be found in the works of Sheila and Chic (*Spacer*) as well as those of French bands such as The Droids, Rockets, Araxis and Space Art, all of whom attempted to draw inspiration from his music and costumes, with varying degrees of success. In the 1980s, Koto and Laserdance explored a synth driven side of space disco before the younger electro generation of the 2000s, with the likes of Justice and M83 in France, or Todd Terje, Bjørn Torske and Prins Thomas in Scandinavia, and the post-internet currents of spacesynth and retrowave drew inspiration from it.

In fact, Space's music has never really faded. Remixed by The Orb or Vince Clarke, covered by Felix Da Housecat, sung (or rather mewed) by Space Cats (one of the most famous internet memes), Didier Marouani's melodies still fascinate younger generations. The beatmakers of black American music are no exception. Space has been quoted by The Weeknd, and sampled by De La Soul, Talib Kweli, Q-Tip, Moodyman, Big Sean and The Pharcyde. These days, electronic music producers continue to pay tribute to Space through fresh remixes that allow us to rediscover the original tracks, which remain firmly embedded in our collective consciousness. It's as if Space's music has kept on floating in orbit.