

**"Digital DJing: Richie Hawtin and (the) Final Scratch."
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The art of DJing maintains a quaint nostalgia in the face of rapid technological advancement. As Palms and cellphones SMS your lunch date and cancel your doctor's appointment—and Microsoft gets set up to control not only your computer but your toaster—the world of vinyl, turntables, and needles continues its steady course. Until now, that is—for the next step has arrived and it is called "Final Scratch." Unlike DJable CD players and computer MP3 mix programs, Final Scratch (FS) uses all of the existing equipment—Technics 1200 turntables, needles, and a mixer—to allow you to DJ MP3s supplied by a laptop. Two special FS records sit on the platters with USB connections that go from the mixer to the laptop; then you can do *all* of the things—I closely questioned Hawtin about this, and this is what he claims—you can do with a normal record: scratch, cue, backspin, lift up the needle to skip through the track, slow down and speed up the record, accidentally knock it off, etc. Simply, you can *spin MP3s*.

I am really suspicious of gadgets. I started learning violin years ago, and as everyone knows, a Stradivarius violin, a couple hundred of years old, sounds and plays better than practically anything made today. And so I approach the art of DJing, as a DJ, with the same feelings: that perhaps it doesn't *need* to technologically advance, because essentially what we have is an instrument that has somewhat reached its holistic peak. And as much as I have ooh'ed and aaw'ed over the many gimmicks and gadgets out there, from EFX processors to built in samplers on mixers, when it comes down to it, either you can DJ smooth and hard with the knowledge of the tricks of a turntablist or you can't. So with that said, I remain cautiously suspicious of Final Scratch, perhaps because I am inherently suspicious of technology, despite the fact that I often embrace it—perhaps a little too quickly. Hawtin is somewhat of a futurist, and as a stakeholder in the company that makes FS, he is avowedly positive about the possibilities that FS opens.

Richie: ...it really is helping to redefine things. Once you have control over digital music files, you have much more of a greater possibility for interacting with those files—when you're playing cds or vinyl, you're playing a physical form, it's locked into that physical form. You really can't change the sequencing or the arrangement. Now, because you are already using digital files, they are sitting right there in front of you, ready for manipulation. And I think...that at this moment, this is one of the key advances, because you don't have to use the system to play back music the way it was originally recorded.

So it makes the whole medium much more pliable, plastic...

Richie: Exactly, and I think that's what...artists have been doing a lot more steadily over the years is trying to manipulate music as much as possible, whether with two turntables or two copies of the record or, like myself, drum machines or EFX boxes. Now, you can really get into each piece, you can start to reinterpretate it: extend breaks, take out

sections, so it's more of your own personal version. And then have that physical interaction with it because of the vinyl interface.

Now, as somewhat of a musikal anarchist myself, I can understand Hawtin's sentiment. By introducing the ability to DJ MP3s, we are also inherently introducing the ability to easily DJ one's own music, but beyond that, to DJ one's remixes of others. This will, no doubt, lead to all sorts of good and bad developments. Obviously, this will allow a creative and deeper exploration of the music on behalf of the DJ. But what about DJs who take a soulful, underground techno track—say, oh, UR's *Knights of the Jaguar*, and then add a thumping, cheesy trance beat with a big and lame breakdown in the middle? This is exactly what happened two years ago, and the entire electronic underground rallied behind the maker of the original track—DJ Rolando—and his crew Underground Resistance, who pursued first Sony and then BMG, both who had the gall to distribute said cheesy remix 12" and compilation without permission (they were explicitly denied it). We are, in many ways, resurrecting an age-old artistic debate focusing upon the artist's intentions and intellectual rights to his/her work, a sense of "the track is the way it is because that is the way the artist wanted it," and a subsequent respect for the artist's integrity in making those decisions. The digital revolution is anarchic in *all* directions.

The same can be said for DJing one's own music. Unlike the Major labels, the electronic underground is often operated as a break-even (at best) venture; only the lucky few like Hawtin had the right combination of timing, luck, and talent to make a living out of it and still stay on the "underground" side of the fence (ie. not sell out—witness the UK, Ibiza, etc—although as I write this, Hawtin has gained a residency on Ibiza). Final Scratch will open the doors for DJs to no longer have to go through all those hassles of submitting demos or starting up their own labels. Voila! They can play their crap/genius music immediately...and we are facing similar questions: on the one hand, certainly a proliferation of excellent DJs putting out their own excellent music; on the other hand, the majority will probably be 303 cheese Rebirth-made crap 24/7. General result? Music overload. There are already too many records: now we have too much sound, period. It's like the musical equivalent of Baudrillard's information syndrome, where the more information there is, the less we know, and the stupider we get. This will also have major consequences on the labels when combined with the power of internet distribution: MP3.com will become the new place to get music for DJing, and not your friendly, local, independent record store, thereby once again distancing communities through technology, possibly bringing down the labels and the distributors, and hurting dedicated artists, as fewer and fewer buy their records, or possibly, even their online MP3s...

Perhaps I am elucidating a worse-case scenario. To a degree it's the same fear that strikes at the Major labels with MP3s, although the difference here is that of the *art of DJing* and the viability of a *countercultural music*. It would take many people with FS to have an impact, and with a price of \$2999 US (albeit including the laptop!), on top of the cost of turntables and a mixer, this won't happen anytime soon (although, given that one no longer has to buy records at \$15 a 12", this is essentially the equivalent of two year's records for the average DJ). Not to mention that the end user must MP3 all of their records—as this is unlikely, I predict the majority will simply play their own music or

material from the Net—and perform as a DJ playing-out on a regular basis (prediction 2: the majority of users will split into two camps: rich white bedroom DJ kids with cash and professional club DJs, ie. the Paul Oakies of the world, who can hire people to MP3 the music/hunt it down for them). As for distribution and labels, if you want to get your music out to people, you will still need to press records, as I believe that people will still want an actual art object in their hands, be it a CD or a record, despite the influence of the nominalist Net—the packaging and the presentation is part of the mystique of vinyl, be it the minimalist German colours or the white label of an underground techno producer. Buying an MP3 just won't have the same feeling...which again leads me to think that what will happen is a glut of free, crappy music on the Net being DJed: this is perhaps the scenario of not this generation of DJs, but the next, the kids right now. As Hawtin recognizes, it's a love/hate relationship:

Richie: A lot of artists aren't looking forwards to digital distribution. I think this will start to pose more questions. A lot of distributors and labels are a bit scared of final scratch, they love it and hate it at the same time. But the floodgates were open before FS...I am a little bit scared of digital distribution, I am a little bit weary of exactly what is going to happen, but it is going to offer so much more potential, so much more possibilities for people to hear new and unheard music. I think I would much rather have greater accessibility to my music and a little more bootlegging than the way it is now.

What is also necessary? According to Hawtin, nothing short of a shift in the way we think about owning things—property and possession. “Now, to own a piece of music, you have to have a physical form...I actually don't really care if I own the new Herbert cd anymore. If I could really, just pay for the times that I was going to listen to it, on a subscription method, and know that when I wanted to listen to it, I could do it—driving or chilling situations—I would. But none of these kinds of infrastructures are there yet”—i.e. the point where we can have wireless broadband connections in our cars, PDs, and toasters, with built in credit card microchips so we can pay on the spot. And, instead of the careful design of record sleeves and covers, Hawtin sees the future of design in Flash, allowing a deeper and more immersive format for the artist to present their message. Well? What does it all come down to? It sounds to me like the turntables are getting more and more lost in the increasing attention paid to the *box*, the *screen*: no longer, as I noted to Hawtin, will we *feel* the raised Plastikman logo on the *Muzik* album; now, I will watch the Flash vid on my glaring radiation array and be happy I only paid 50 cents for this track that I will never listen to again. Disposable culture: disposable, transient, virtual *muzak*. Will we still feel any value, any emotion, for such a transient, virtual “product”? Or, are we truly entering the realm of music itself, which in all reality has no object, is purely only sound waves? Welcome to the postmodern: as music becomes more and more virtual and omnipresent, it also becomes more and more inaccessible, with more and more technology needed to hear it. Baudrillard, you were right. Me: I think I will hang onto my records a little bit longer...

More information on Final Scratch at: <http://www.finalscratch.com>.

