

"Vinyauralism: The Art and the Craft of Turntablism. The DJ School." *Discorder* March, April (2002).

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Record players have come a long way since the beginning of the Twentieth Century. Somewhere near the end of this bloody epoch, enterprising music lovers figured out ways to beatmatch, mix, and scratch vinyl records on Technics 1200s, and the cult of DJing was born. DJing, however, has always tread a fine line between art and craft. Not quite a radio disc jockey, and not quite a live performance, the DJ as a musician—and turntables as an instrument—are in a grey area that oscillates between becoming an art or a craft. As we enter the Binaries, DJing has formed two explicit camps: the hip-hop turntablist and the "dance dj." Of the two, hip-hop turntablism has managed to establish itself as an art. The international DMCs provide a way to judge competitors, and many advanced turntablists have invented new forms of scratches and cuts—which can now be written down using a number of hip-hop "scores." Becoming a talented hip-hop DJ takes years of practice and talent, and the hip-hop community can spot a good DJ from a bad one a mile off. But what about the "dance" DJs? The category itself is already problematic, for many non-hip-hop "turntablists" do not consider themselves primarily a dance jukebox. The question is: what makes up the "art" of "dance" turntablism?

A Short Manifesto of Turntablism

Turntablism at its fullest has several different aspects of control: tactile (physical manipulation of the vinyl), spatial (effects and processing), frequential (EQ manipulation), compositional (ordering and choice of the tracks), and auditory (the volume of the track, and use of silence, such as in cutting). All of this is combined in the *mix*, which is the blending of the records using the above techniques through the further skill of beatmatching and compositional arrangement (when to drop the track, and how, and at what volume, and how quickly to bring it in, etc.). The mix is an open space of possibilities, and primarily requires the automatic achievement of beatmatched records. Advanced turntablists, such as Detroit's Jeff Mills, play with the beatmatching structure (setting one record off by an eighth of a beat, for example), but this is within the general beatmatch of the two records at the same pitch. The *mix* defines the DJ's originality, her vision of the music, her response to the music, and not only her interaction with the crowd, but her reaction to the record's effect upon the crowd. A movement of Dancefloor Dialectics, where the moment of collapse, of spectacted and spectacular simulacra, is the mix. But even this notion of the mix is one among many mixes. The dancefloor is a presupposition, and the notion of the crowd and its expectations a concept and a structural desire: the turntablist learns to utilise the dancefloor-mix as one way of lengthening tension or bringing about closure in a long procession of mixes, each which treats the listener in a different fashion, thereby reconstructing the expectations built up by the crowd of

the dancefloor, of dancing, of the necessity of movement, of the proper mode of accepting or rejecting, relating or disassociating, of essentially reacting to the sounds emanating from the speaker stacks. The mix is the aesthetic and creative moment of the DJ, the moment when all is lost or won: a moment of brilliance or of defeat, when at the cusp of the successful mix, the tracks coalesce to become more than an amalgamation of sounds and move in orbits of power.

For DJing is a position of cultural power. With turntablism comes a responsibility, as with any art. However, because DJing is an aural medium, and one that pervades the senses to a powerful degree, bringing about a reaction from the audience and creating entire sets of expectations, hierarchies, and contexts, it is a responsibility that is infused with a particular thread of ritual power. For Paul Miller, aka DJ Spooky, the DJ can act as a “memory selector” by juggling, cutting, and pasting cultural signifiers into new contexts and selections, thereby deconstructing traditional references and recontextualising the present experience by remixing the past in real-time. Such a position is a refraction node for the dissemination of power, channeling aural signifiers that trigger memory associations that can powerfully move an audience: the result is a ritual of remembrance or reworking of the past to create future-memories, such as the desire of early Detroit techno. In general, the DJ can slip into two modes: that of the commercial Carnival—example: the Roxy on a Saturday—and the deterritorialized TAZ—examples: the warehouse break-in, the forest party, the late-night one-off, the 5 hour set of a sweating house DJ who cries when he drops George Clinton into a minimal house track...

The art of DJing arose in a myriad of socio-political contexts across the globe, all of which have in common a cultural investment in musical interpretation, which, in its freest form, is the physical embodiment of music, be it in dance or deep listening. In Europe, such a history is predominantly that of the lower or nomadic classes (the Roma, the Irish jig). The aristocrats did not get up and move to the orchestral scores of their conductors; indeed, they were stratified beyond compare in social hierarchies of extreme complexity that simply never granted them the opportunity to even consider such a radical prospect. The Western *ball* was a carefully constructed semi-Carnival, primarily designed to enforce patriarchal rules of male privilege and genealogy through arranged marriage. It was really only with the lower classes that a radical experience of music survived. I do not wish to go into a deep analysis on this point except to note that musical-dance culture often traces its histories through oppressed peoples, through resistance movements, through alternative sexualities, genders, and politics: Jamaican soundsystems, the resistance to modernism of Detroit techno, the sexual liberation of Chicago house, the Temporary Autonomous Zone anarcho-rave soundsystems, the psychedelic drug explorations of desert and forest parties, the links to the politics of funk and punk. The music will always hold its most potent liberating force at the hands of these movements; this is why the Top 40 dancefloor is not so much a space of liberation as it is a cage of patriarchy and capitalism, where sexism dominates in fashion and social

interaction, where advertisements are bombarded upon the audience through visuals and through the music itself, and the DJ becomes a glorified highball announcer.

Teaching Sonic Power: the DJ School

It is the responsibility inherent with these forms of power that bring us to the question of the DJ School. For what is the responsibility and position of a DJ “school,” a commercial and financial endeavour, in light of these reflections? What forms of DJing is the “DJ school” teaching, and thereby, what forms of power are being taught and emulated? How does a DJ school teach cultural signifiers and histories of other cultures? How does a DJ school teach memory-responsibility?

The Rhythm Institute, situated in Boomtown records in Vancouver, is a new DJ school that caters to beginning DJs. Run by house DJ Leanne, along with accomplished DJs Jay Tripwire, Yann Solo, Wood, Ricco, and Skinny, TRI is a good case study for the emergence of the DJ School. TRI is not being singled out for any reason other than it is new, accessible, friendly, and—according to its website—“the first of its kind in Western Canada.” It is perhaps worth looking at the rest of the statement present on the TRI website before we continue as it gives a good idea of the commercial goals and representation of the school and its mixed position in regards to aesthetic, political, and artistic goals.

“The Rhythm Institute DJ School is the first of it’s kind in Western Canada. Students receive hands-on training on how to perform all the skills necessary to become a successful DJ using industry-standard technology. Our critically acclaimed, professional DJ instructors take you step by step through all of the latest mixing and turntablism techniques, from beginning to intermediate levels. The best thing about DJing is that you get the chance to express yourself, be creative and satisfied knowing that you are creating the music atmosphere. To achieve this, it takes time, hard work, and a lot of practice. TRI is here to help you accomplish your goals!”

The statement in itself is nothing new: it is a rather straightforward piece of advertising lifted from the corporate world. Because of its transportation, the advertising mixes with the subcultural roots of DJing in a very odd way: the contexts are mixed, crossfading the beats with the suits. TRI claims that it will teach you *all* the skills necessary to become a *successful DJ*. The emphasis, then, is not on teaching skills to learn an art, such as learning a violin; the emphasis is squarely upon *success*. What determines “success” for TRI? This is unclear whether it is *successfully* completing the requirements of the course (learning how to beatmatch, etc.) or, as the statement seems to imply, becoming “successful” as a DJ—and by this, do we mean artistically or financially? Is there a difference? Or both? TRI also claims to teach *all* of the skills necessary—this would include, it would seem, talent. Or does DJing not require talent? Can simply *anyone* DJ? Leanne does realise that talent is involved; yet this is the

implication behind the advertising: with all of the skills at our disposal—including the “latest mixing and turntablism techniques,” which I find fascinating, as a statement, for it sounds as if these techniques roll off a production line or come from some DJ think-tank—the DJ school will make you successful, irregardless—wait, almost irregardless: there is a work ethic involved: “To achieve this, it takes time, hard work, and a lot of practice.” This is a necessary caveat, and a good one; yet what is being *achieved*? “Success”—which perhaps can be measured as *power*, a very particular, perhaps even selfish, power. DJing is the “chance to express yourself”—that’s *yourself* in those records, and not, say, the producer’s musical soul. Likewise, DJing is the chance to “be creative and satisfied knowing that *you* are creating the music atmosphere” (my italics). Much emphasis is placed on the powerful role of the DJ as the original creator of the “music atmosphere.” The lessons are for *you*, *you* are the DJ, and the DJ creates the music—it’s a tasty lead-in that entices people to *be* that power-position. For *you* are always *satisfied* with *yourself*, and because of this, *you* will be satisfied with the “musical atmosphere” created by *you*. Are these good reasons to become a DJ—that of *you*? The reasons given certainly, perhaps unconsciously, latch onto several key principles: the DJ is a node of power, and wherever there are nodes of power—however simulated—there is an influx of desire, to *be* that node of power; in fact, this is the primary focus of the entire statement: *be successful, be satisfied, be a DJ*.

It’s the car-ad model, the SUV tactic of DJing: be free, get out into nature, with this metal beast...become that what you worship: *you are the one I am speaking to*.

It is necessary to point out that The Rhythm Institute’s Advertising statement is not particular to their business, and I do not wish to single them out in this regard. Rather, it is reflexive of the way DJing is being sold as a commodity of the Carnival. The marketing strategy is that of the *my* generation—in this case, advertised with *you*.

Techniques of the Trade vs. Aural Poetics

Upon checking into the school, the student fills out a questionnaire that asks them why they want to DJ, whether they are passionate about it, and what sort of music they like. A lot of effort is made to situate the student in a context that can be utilised by the teachers for instruction. Leanne, who is the house music teacher, explains to me that some of her students are party-goers and dancers who simply wanted to get behind the decks; a more particular student, however, is an older woman who wanted to learn something new, and has no prior experience with the subculture. Other students include musicians who want to incorporate DJ skills into their instrumental capabilities. It is obvious that the DJ school has the potential to become a truly heterogenous space of cross-cultural influences. Perhaps because of this diversity, TRI includes a rather broadly comprehensive and condensed handout explaining the history of the area that the student has signed up for (dance/electronic, urban, scratching). In a way, this

pamphlet is informative, as it provides historical background; in other ways, it is a packaged commercialisation of an anterior culture, not to mention generally free information, and leads to all sorts of questions: why are people paying to learn about a foreign culture, and then master a skill from that culture? In the mix is an element of musical tourism along with curiosity, and it raises the question of how and what should be taught, and why. For underneath the cultural signifiers is the underlying question surrounding the very existence of the DJ school: why are people paying to learn a skill that has never been taught up to this point? The majority of today's DJs are self-taught or learnt from a mentor. DJ Leanne recognises this, and attributes the need for a DJ school to a breaking-down of the previous DJ culture that provided mentors. Although I can understand her answer, I find it hard to believe. Locally, organisations such as wickedhouseparty.com and blackholeclub.com have created organised gatherings for DJs and musicians to meet each other and learn in a supportive environment. Personally, as a self-taught DJ, I know it is still possible to pick up decks and figure it all out. DJ culture is alive and well—obviously well enough to sell it. The question is, if you are going to pay to learn from a teacher, what are you learning and is it worth the money?

Technically, the students are taught the very basics—from how to put a record on the deck, to how a mixer works—and then get on with learning to cue and beatmatch the record, eventually moving on to EQing and programming. The style of beatmatching is purely mathematical. Building upon the basis that most dance records are in 4/4 time, TRI teaches students to bring the record in on the 16th or 32nd bar. Such a mix creates a numerical purity to the mix, a very precise style that results in a strictly conventional and safe mix. On the one hand, it is a basic mix; on the other hand, it is the dominant style of complacent mixing that leaves most Vancouver DJs lacking in creative versatility. And is it really the “basics”? Is teaching numbers a good way to teach *music*? In a way, the mathematical style can be seen as a simplified DJ equivalent to the Royal Conservatory style for violin and piano, as opposed to the Suzuki method, which requires learning by ear, and not by sight or counting. Traditionally, DJs have learnt by the “Suzuki” method—as well as the “let’s try this and see what happens” method that brought about the art in the first place. Considering the experimental background of the art, and the general realisation that there is no proper way to DJ, is math a good idea? Leanne tells me that most records change every 16 bars—a break down, a new kick or high hat, a riff comes in or out, etc. But this is really only true for certain, perhaps basic, genres of house, techno, trance, and their offshoots. As a teaching tool, it teaches students to look for these conventions in their records, and the 16 bar tactic is a pop-music convention that some producers use and others don’t. The result is that TRI teaches house music with records that follow this pattern, thereby limiting the student’s exposure to different styles of music which don’t strictly follow this convention, such as repetitive, looping house or techno, cut-up Montreal glitch styles of minimal house, much of Detroit techno and house, German minimal funk, a good chunk of electro, etc. Are DJ schools really teaching the “basics,” or

are those “basics” already tailored toward a particular style and genre of music—i.e., the acceptable house norm in Vancouver? There may not be a way around this, given the cyclical nature of the beast: but perhaps it is the *responsibility* of the teacher to provide as much information about differing musical points of view as possible, to expose the student to different platforms of basic mixing.

Mind/Body, Wax/Needle

The DJ school is a concentration of both the knowledge gained so far in this young history—including the knowledge of insurrectionary potential—and of that history’s desire to sell itself out, which can be seen as a classic example of commodified cultural appropriation: black music, taken out of context by white people, is bought and sold as a commercial skill to the dominant class, thereby once again excluding its cultural origins through a class-based (i.e. financially based) user-pay system. The music is an industry, not a cultural responsibility. On the other hand, the music has transcended racial boundaries from its inception; and the school can be seen as a positive development in increasing the art’s potential: as an aesthetic, as a form of rebellion, as a community. The DJ school gives the opportunity to those interested in DJing to try it out without having to invest several thousand dollars in equipment, and in this sense it acts somewhat as a way to optimise involvement across class barriers. (However, it still requires payment for the lessons—money that could be put toward equipment). It is also an opportunity for the teachers to discover new methodologies, techniques, and strategies of DJing through the art of teaching. By gathering students and teachers together, the DJ school contributes toward creating a community of sorts, albeit one mediated by money; or at least trying to recreate what is now a somewhat dead community through commercial means; and, like the DJ record store, provides a focal point for the wider music community. The school is overall a positive development as it at least teaches solid beatmatching techniques before turning students loose. But loose to what? The expectations are still there that all one needs to have are some good records and some beatmatching skills to land a clubnight or play a party. Until this changes, DJing will forever be constrained as a commercial craft.

We are founding a new history of a radically new instrument, a sonic system that significantly redefines the relation between human and machine. We are doing this in and through the production of an art that has the power to aurally control, destabilize, inspire, and explosively revolt a mass of people through a sonic pastiche of cultural memories, meanings, energies, and directions that rewrite the future past. And what we need now are visionaries. We need the Mozarts and the Glenn Goulds, the Brian Enos of the world, who will take the math of DJing and expose its soul through the dissonance of breaking the strictest conventions: and we need bold teachers to expand this knowledge through an exploration of the turntable instrument with their students.

