

---

## GIRL

KANDEYCE JORDEN (DIR.)

USA: Current Mood Productions, 2018.

<<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt2624640/>>

---

<<http://dx.doi.org/10.12801/1947-5403.2018.10.01.05>>

MAREN HANCOCK

YORK UNIVERSITY (TORONTO)

Most films depicting DJs and their attendant culture—whether documentary or drama—feature predominantly masculine points of view. *Girl*, a full-length documentary focused on legendary hard house/trance DJ Sandra Collins as well as six other women-identified DJs, offers a unique collection of feminine voices and experiences, making it an important contribution to the history of EDM and the study of DJ culture. Part wish-fulfillment, part confessional, part documentary and part cautionary tale of the push and pull of excessive partying of touring life, *Girl* covers a lot of ground. Filmmaker, visual artist and actor Kandeyste Jordan notes that it was an enthusiasm for dance music and culture that inspired her to direct this film. Early in the film’s narrative, Jordan states that were she not a filmmaker, she “would secretly want to be a DJ”. Later in the film she expresses a yearning for Collins’ seemingly carefree life as a DJ: “she never made lists, she never returned phone calls ... being in the moment ... was starting to feel like a drug”. It is no surprise then that, alongside Collins’ narratives, there is a prominent foregrounding of the director herself and the resultant changes to her life experience in the wake of touring with Collins.

With regards to structure, the film breaks down into two sections. The front matter outlines Jordan’s background: Jordan narrates via voiceover, first introducing herself before describing her relationship with her film director partner and their success collaborating on a short film together. After marrying, Jordan stayed home to raise their newborn son while her husband pursued a burgeoning career. She describes feeling a need for more in her life than “just being a mother”. When her husband was hired to write and direct a film about a female DJ to be produced by Paul Oakenfold—which never materialized—Jordan expresses jealousy of his “hang outs” with Oakenfold, complete with access to glamorous

parties and women. As she clarifies, “I didn’t want to be left behind” so she decided to shoot a documentary about “girls who really do this”.

This first section features interview footage with DJ Rap, Collette, DJ Irene and the more unknown Rebecca Sin, Lady D and DJ Mea. Each DJ is interviewed separately, and each addresses one or more of the now-familiar themes identified in the growing body of work on gender and DJ culture (Rogers 2010; Farrugia 2012; Gavanas & Reitsamer 2013, 2016; Gadir 2017), albeit from primarily white, cis-gendered and correspondingly hegemonic perspectives; in the film, Jorden profiles one racialized DJ (Lady D) and one openly queer DJ (Irene). Aside from Irene, all of the other DJs profiled present as femme, meaning they face obstacles that arise via stratification due to both appearance and sexuality. As Lady D notes, women are policed in terms of their appearance and sexuality and viewed dichotomously as either virgins or whores. DJ Irene as a queer female deftly sidesteps this sexist stratification. Indeed, critical evidence exists of how queer and non-femme women-identified DJs encounter less sexist barriers due to the fact that they are not viewed as “fuckable”, and therefore granting them honorary male—and not sexualized—status (Farrugia 2012). As influential scholars have concluded, research beyond hegemonic white norms, including further studies of how race and sexuality intersect with gender to impact DJs’ experiences of their work, are much needed (Rogers 2010; Farrugia 2012). As a professional DJ with two decades’ experience (including five years of steady touring) who is a white cis-female, it makes sense that the film resonated with me, particularly around topics such as autonomy, loneliness, credibility, safety and self-medication on tour.

Each DJ has an interesting story to tell, but DJ Irene makes a compelling subject in particular, both in terms of her challenging early life as a young single mom at the age of fourteen residing in a foster home, and her queer persona which shields her from the kind of policing of appearance and sexuality experienced by women presenting as femme. Irene describes her musical style as aggressive, and comments enthusiastically that during her hard-hitting DJ sets she “comes out slugging and keeps going ... I don’t like foreplay ... I’ll just fuck you now because I’m going to fuck you later”. Jorden depicts her subjects reveling in the joy of being a DJ, and their ability to entertain an audience as they are moving in the moment. As Lady D puts it, in an obvious ode to Michael Jackson, you help people “leave that 9-5’er on the shelf”. In an incredible sharing of communal joy, the film captures its subjects’ passion for their craft.

The second section of the film leaves the six other DJs behind to focus on the relationship that develops between Jorden and Sandra Collins over the remaining course of filming. Jorden explains that while pursuing interview subjects she kept hearing about Sandra Collins, “who plays boy’s music better than most boys”. Jorden decides that Collins is the subject for whom Jorden has been searching and is certain that Collins “had a story to tell”. Finally, Jorden tracks Collins down but still has difficulty securing an interview with her alone, even as Jorden tours with Collins on and off over the course of a few years. Ultimately, Jorden suppresses her own identity somewhat in order to realize her vision of EDM hedonism.

Over the course of filming, Jordan's marriage breaks up and she moves into her own place in Venice, CA, sharing custody of her son with her ex-husband, who remains supportive of her ambitions. Interestingly, Jordan's self-insertion into the narrative fills in the space where Collins would not pour her own confessions.

A particularly original and engaging feature of *Girl* is its exploration of both motherhood and its seeming counterpoint: a type of hedonism enabled by being a touring DJ. Jordan does not flinch in addressing the impact of drugs and alcohol on those whose job it is to "bring the party". As acknowledged, an interesting aspect of the film arises in the juxtaposition of DJ and domestic lifestyles. The film presciently documents how DJing is (still) gendered as male dominated, while child rearing is (still) gendered female in western culture according to a binary conception of gender. DJs are professional partiers in a sense, and whilst male DJs are lauded for indulging to excess because "boys will be boys", women face judgment as transgressive according to the good girl/bad girl narrative that echoes the age-old virgin/whore dichotomy discussed above. Jordan describes Collins' reputation in DJ culture as the "Peter Pan of the female race" partly due to Collins' experience of losing of her parents and her isolation from her siblings. When Jordan first meets Collins, the latter expresses feelings of being orphaned and in need of being mothered, saying to Jordan, "I need a mom ... can I have you as a mom?" Jordan's response: "I felt protective of her, as if she were a sister".

This connection through a sense of the familial—and by extension, domestic—is disrupted toward the end of the film when Collins takes Jordan on a tour of Eastern Europe and their relationship changes; Jordan begins to "party too hard" in Russia, abandoning her mothering role. The intense relationship comes to a head when Jordan pressures Collins to stay out (and up) longer, until finally Collins' loses her patience with Jordan, understandably expressing her exhaustion and frustration with Jordan's choices and lack of self-awareness. As Jordan admits: "I wasn't at my best and I can tell that everyone around me agreed". It comes as no surprise then, that—upon returning to the hotel room—she realizes that she has lost her wallet and passport. The DJ leaves to catch an impending flight to the next gig without telling Jordan if she will be re-joining the tour or not. Jordan is stranded while she awaits new documents to leave the country. At this juncture, she films her self-reckoning realization that, for her, partying is an empty activity, which led to a distancing of her subject. Collins took Jordan on tour with her because, as Collins states in the film, she needed someone to tour with (assumedly for safety and stability; which again, I relate to) and until that point Jordan had played a maternal role for Collins. In a way, by losing herself and her identification to the party scene, stranding herself in a hotel in Russia with nothing else to do but "drink vodka", Jordan experienced a stereotypical aspect of DJing, as per her wish at the beginning of the film.

Before concluding I would like to comment briefly on the visual and audio aspects of the film. Jordan paints a dreamlike portrait replete with footage of lavish outdoor parties, and eye-catching long shots of Burning Man, which she attended for the first time with Collins. Throughout the film, Jordan does an admirable job of working with the iconography of

light, for example, demonstrating the full variety of sensations that accompany the unique feeling of watching a sunrise after dancing all night. We get a montage of dancers, fashions and indoor smoking, inducing nostalgia for the early '00s. The exceedingly well-curated music suits the accompanying visuals, spanning a variety of EDM's multitudinous genres (helpfully, track listings appear in the credits). In addition to the sheer visual appeal and the structural aspects of the film, Jordan evokes an aural sense of being at the party by tracking voices and conversation to filter in and out of the film's audio, initially overtaking and ultimately receding from the musical soundtrack.

## REFERENCES

- Farrugia, Rebekah. 2012. *Beyond the Dance Floor: Female DJs, Technology, and Electronic Dance Music Culture*. Bristol, UK: Intellect.
- Gadir, Tami. 2017. "Forty-Seven DJs, Four Women: Meritocracy, Talent and Postfeminist Politics". *Dancecult: Journal of Electronic Dance Music Culture* 9(1): 50–72.  
<<http://dx.doi.org/10.12801/1947-5403.2017.09.01.03>>.
- Gavanas, Anna and Rosa Reitsamer. 2013. "DJ Technologies, Social Networks and Gendered Trajectories in European DJ Cultures". In *DJ Culture in the Mix: Power, Technology and Social Change in Electronic Dance Music*, ed. Bernardo Attias, Anna Gavanas, and Hillegonda Rietveld, 51–78. New York, NY: Bloomsbury.
- 2016. "Neoliberal Working Conditions, Self-Promotion and DJ Trajectories: A Gendered Minefield". *PopScriptum* 12. <[https://www2.huberlin.de/fpm/popscrip/themen/pst12/pst12\\_gavanas\\_reitsamer.pdf](https://www2.huberlin.de/fpm/popscrip/themen/pst12/pst12_gavanas_reitsamer.pdf)> (accessed 25 October 2017).
- Rogers, Tara. 2010. *Pink Noises: Women on Electronic Music and Sound*. Durham: Duke University Press.

---

## WEEKEND SOCIETIES: ELECTRONIC DANCE MUSIC FESTIVALS AND EVENT-CULTURES GRAHAM ST JOHN (ED.)

New York: Bloomsbury, 2017.

ISBN: 978-1-5013-0931-1 (hardcover), 9781501343773 (paperback), 9781501309335 (e-pub)

RRP: \$108 (hardcover), \$39.95 (paperback), \$28.76 (e-pub)

---

<<http://dx.doi.org/10.12801/1947-5403.2018.10.01.06>>

CHARLES DE LEDESMA  
INDEPENDENT RESEARCHER (UK)

*Weekend Societies* sets out to explore what festivals—mostly from the Electronic Dance Music Culture (EDMC) family—look like today, how they operate, who goes to them, and why. Under the sturdy editorship of Graham St John, who has written widely on this intermingled, kaleidoscopic and often psychedelic topic, a wide palette of festal event types are explored, and in many different ways. Contributions range from tobias c. van Veen’s exploration of Montreal’s tightly curated MUTEK—which nominally excludes DJ performance while “inviting” top names—to the late Ed Montano’s informed history of the multi-city Stereosonic festival (now defunct), which pinpoints a commercial peak of EDM culture in Australia where the DJ is an elevated, even anointed, figure of adulation.

Although theoretical backbones across the collection are varied and often loosely applied, one appears as a fairly firm anchor in an ever-shifting sea of heterogeneous cultural expression. In St John’s introduction, *Dance Music Festival and Event Cultures*, he discusses the value of the idea of a “transformational festival”, promoted by documentary film-maker Jeet-Kei Leung in a 2010 TEDx talk and further developed in the documentary webseries *The Bloom*. St John explains, “I have long been cognisant that festivals, especially those across the alternative spectrum of events, are transformational. In fact, this is among my chief motivations ... [in that] they permit entrants to become liminars (literally: threshold dwellers) while occupying the demarcated time-space framework of the event” (10). The festival here is more than mere bacchanalian fun and frenzy over throbbing and variously sync-ed BPMs, but can promote “the interwoven agendas of personal growth and global consciousness that are the legacy of the transpersonal culture” (11). A prime *Weekend Societies* project then is to explore how this could be done, or at least attempted, at the featured festal spaces.

The collection’s most fascinating inroad into the purportedly transformational ethos comes in Deirdre Ruane’s *Harm Reduction or Psychedelic Support? Caring for Drug-Related Crises at Transformation Festivals*. Wasting no time on festival charms *per se*, Ruane draws on fieldwork from three psychedelic support organizations—KCUK (UK), the

Zendo Project (USA) and Kosmicare (Portugal)—documented at seven festivals during 2014’s northern hemisphere season. The central element of transformation for Ruane emerges in the dramatic tension between apparently opposing professional strategies for dealing with the bad Class A trips of entrants, and other, often-connected episodes, across the festal events attended. Opening the chapter with useful fieldwork data edits, Ruane asks if it would be possible to sit with or talk to one man receiving help at Burning Man’s Zendo camp. “The shift leader quietly points me towards one guy sitting cross-legged on the floor, swaying and moving his hands fluidly...I ask him what he took...and he closes up and pulls away (saying), ‘I don’t see why I should tell you that...it’s irrelevant to my personal quest’” (116). Ruane consequently explores the deep debate between the more dominant “harm reduction” approach which looks for ways to bring the entrant safely away from enveloping darkness and isolation towards a perceived “normalcy”, while the psychedelic support mission, pointed to above, attempts to work with difficult emotions, and behaviour, which can rise in a psychedelic “phase of (self) dissolution” (121). This in turn aims to aid an entrant’s potentially transformational episode. Ruane concludes, “Psychedelic support training sessions propose an alternative view, in keeping with the more fluid concept of self within psychedelic culture. Volunteers are encouraged to respect visitors in deeply altered states, which may indicate valuable internal processes—as one participant said, “we don’t know if they are meeting God” (131).

A contrasting depiction of the transformational festival emerges in a colourful account of California’s Raindance Campout. Researcher Bryan Schmidt contextualizes the small annual event, which is only slightly bigger than a private party, through the founder, Little John’s perspective. John is less interested in putting on a show, and more eager to “summon artistic display enacted by the participants themselves” (96), which include dance, painting, poetry, sculpting, installation-building and more. Now we arrive at, for Schmidt, an inter-connected concept that he finds useful in Raindance’s peculiar situation: Nicholas Bourriaud’s *Relational Aesthetics* (2002), which helps in integrating all these kinds of artistic expression, flow and play, seemingly almost *de rigour* at the campout. Relational art extols “being together” as a central theme, elevating the *encounter* between beholder and picture, thus allowing for—even leading to—transformation(s). Another example of a transformational approach to festival-making can be found in Anne Petiau’s masterly discussion of the gift exchange process underpinning many of France’s teknivals. Introducing the concept of the donation principle, Petiau walks us through a potted-history of the French outdoor rave tradition —its ups and downs, triumphs and tragedies, from the free-spirited ’90s to the harder, repressive later years. Built on gift economy principles, the researcher finds a complex and often contested social ecology at work: “the party-as-gift and the gift of music (can) also generate social superiority ... [while] a certain pleasure be find in...a generosity that makes sense of itself” (170). It is not unlikely that large numbers of teknival adherents have experienced both personal and social transformation in the very material acts of co-creating these vast events, often with dozens of sound systems, which, at their peak, lingered on from days into weeks.

Further chapters explore equally fascinating and instructive avenues of the EDMC, or wider alternative festival, experience. Judy Park starts her ethnography *Searching for a Cultural Home: Asian American Youth in the EDM Festival Scene* with a reminder that “few scholars have focused on non-white participants’ negotiations of race or class” (71). While applying notions of belonging and authenticity to her debate, Park concludes “Asian American youth have turned to the EDM festival scene to fill the cultural void created by their status as perpetual foreigners” (87). Based on her data, she arrives at the sober assessment that, for many ethnic interviewees, white people are still the main characters at events. Likewise getting her boots muddy in the field, Alice O’Grady, in *Dancing Outdoors*, return to the almost prophetic theorizing of Hakim Bey in applying the “Temporary Autonomous Zone” (TAZ) to Britain’s persistent alternative party circuit, and reminds us of the impact of the 1994 Criminal Justice and Public Order Act; a draconian measure intended to snuff out outdoor party action. At smaller scale DIY events like Alchemy and Magikana she finds a healthy, fulfilling TAZ at work where activities like blacksmithing demonstrations sit easily alongside eclectic DJ sets, dancing and play for all ages. Last, Paolo Maguadda’s *Towards a Cosmopolitan Weekend Dance Culture in Spain* analyses two contrasting cases from Spanish electronic music cultural history: the wild *ruta* techno bashes of the ’90s, and Sonar—the Barcelona electronic music happening, which, unlike the *ruta* parties held in warehouses and clubs in Valencia’s dock areas, lasting only for a brief giddy period in the ’90s, has helped construct “a legitimate discourse of electronic music as art” (176).

By the time the reader reaches the concluding chapter she may well be in need of a good old festival yarn, transformational or otherwise, and that is ably provided by St John in his history of Burning Man, held annually for upwards of 70,000 on the Nevada desert *playa*. The editor eschews cultural anthropology stances, delving into a kind of *Mad Max* soap opera for an imagined anarchic age, starting with the widely acknowledged view that Burning Man organizers were for many years opposed to sound system culture. A true latter-day veteran of Burning Man, St John ventures to all vectors of the vast *playa* to see the changes, and interviews some fascinating characters. Terbo Ted, recognized as the first person to play a DJ set there, remembers, “ravers were always pariahs...we were the poor people on the wrong side of the tracks and the wrong side of the man [the central burning figure]” (226). St John regales us with tales of resistance such as the time a crazy man tried to chainsaw through sound system cables and when shadowy people dropped poo bundles from a helicopter onto a repetitive beats dancefloor. In time, however, the account reaches the Space Cowboy’s vast flamboyant Mog, a mega-beefy mobile system, and mutant vehicles such as the out-of-this-world Dancetronauts system verily crush all opposition. These shenanigans lead St John to offer thoughts on the *playa*’s various shades of “discommunitas”, but the reader leaves with a fundamentally warm glow from the high octane party, and its multi-tendrilled desert cosmos.

*Weekend Societies* is a welcome and valuable contribution to an expanding literature on the alternative festival phenomenon, offering numerous avenues for further investigation given an eager researchers’ capacity to fend off chain saw-wielding critics, party round-the-clock, and hunt for the most innovative of creative expressions wherever the transformational path may lead.

---

## FRANKENSTEIN GOES TO HOLOCAUST: MOSTRI SONORI, HYPER MASH-UP, AUDIO ESPROPRI

RICCARDO BALLI

Milan: Agenzia X, 2016.

ISBN: 978-88-98922-12-3 (paperback)

RRP: €14 (paperback)

---

<<http://dx.doi.org/10.12801/1947-5403.2018.10.01.07>>

PAOLO MAGAUDDA

UNIVERSITY OF PADOVA (ITALY)

The task of reviewing this second book by Riccardo Balli (aka DJ Balli), written in Italian for the independent publisher AgenziaX (Milan), is a challenging one, not least because the book has a very unique approach to structure, genre, content and language. In short, it is not far from the truth that this is the most bizarre and unconventional book I have ever reviewed in my scholarly career. As the title itself suggests, the book is not just a classic essay on music culture, even though much of its content are “serious” essays or interviews; instead it is an original and unique texture of different kinds of materials and literary genres, including parody and situationist *détournements*, imbued with a dose of sexually explicit pranks.

Two things are, however, clear and plain: first, that *Frankenstein goes to Holocaust* is a tribute to the culture, practice and aesthetics of plunderphonics and music plagiarism, and a useful and inspiring read for musicians and listeners who fell in love with making music by cutting and pasting sounds produced by other; secondly, that Balli’s book is above all an act of creative writing or, even better, an imaginative attempt to compose a book that is completely dissimilar to any other book about music I have come across. Indeed, while the regular essays about plunderphonics and plagiarism included in the book are interesting readings (including, for example, the Italian translation of John Oswald’s classic *Plunderphonics* essay), where the book shines is in its challenge to develop a meta-discursive reflection on plunderphonics and plagiarism, instilled with a demystifying attitude.

To understand the approach of this book more deeply, it is useful to say a few words about DJ Balli’s activity as artist, musician and cultural entrepreneur (a history that I know quite well, knowing him for almost two decades). Since the late ‘90s, DJ Balli has been engaged in creating and supporting several kinds of radical, disturbing and downright weird electronic-based musics, both as musician and manager of the experimental music label Sonic Belligeranza. Recently, his enduring creative efforts have expanded toward book



writing, again exploring some of the most unconventional electronic music genres. The first fruit of this literary foray was *Apocalypso Disco* (2014), which explored the landscape of electronic post-techno music genres through a literary re-writing of Philip Dick's novel *Clans of the Alphane Moon*: a story in which a fictional society is divided into seven tribes, based on different electronic music styles. The essential structure adopted in *Frankenstein goes to Holocaust* recalls what is already seen in Balli's previous work with even more space to the work of literary *détournement*, but this time focusing on Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein*; evidently a very fitting metaphor to talk about those music styles characterised by putting together sonic parts coming from many different "bodies".

Hence, the book unfolds by intertwining different kinds of materials, including at least three categories of texts, held together in a unique flow of forty-six short chapters. First of all, we have "conventional" texts, represented by essays and interviews on significant issues concerning plagiarism and plunderphonics, written by journalists, musicologists and plagiarism practitioners. Among them, an interesting reading is the opening essay by Francesco Fusaro about the roots of plunderphonics in classical music, focusing on the sub-genre of "musical variations": the basic compositional practice of creating new music by elaborating themes composed by other composers (featured in the repertoires of Haydn, Schumann, Liszt and so on).

The relevance of this book is not just the content, but also the way it is reflexively reworked with a plagiarist and demystifying attitude. Thus, for example, we also find another seminal text on plagiarism, *Plunderphonia* by Chris Cutler which is not simply translated from English to Italian, but also creatively elaborated through alterations in the original text, enriching it with musical references as well as sexual pranks, putting in practice (in textual terms) the art of plundering existing contents to create something definitively new, yet always within a frame of demystification of authorship.

A second layer in the book's composition is the core literary metaphor that supports the patchwork put together by the author (i.e. the creative elaboration of the novel *Frankenstein*), revisited by twenty-three experts in alternation with the book's other contents. As is obvious, the idea of a new living entity made up by parts coming from other dead bodies is a perfect metaphor to give expression to the culture of plagiarism and plunderphonics. To do this, Balli's writing exercise consists of re-writing Shelley's original text infusing in it musical references coming from those same music electronic genres performed by Balli as a musician (including styles like 8-bit music, gabber and grindcore), with the further addition of other interventions. In these excerpts we read about Mary Shelley (called *Squirting Mary*) and Lord Byron (*anism*) engaged in an MCing contest where all participants "should attempt to create the most horrific sonic monster of music history" (25). After much effort, the monster finally comes to life in the shape of a mash-up generated in Shelley's "bedroom studio" with a Gameboy, where the modified machine starts producing "most scary sounds: remixes of neo-melodic Neapolitan singers in a porno-grindcore style!" (38).

As the readers can tell from these examples, demystification is a relevant ingredient of the book, as the author does not attempt to sacralise the art of plagiarism, instead insisting on a relentless endeavour to reframe plagiarism in a sarcastic way, explicitly linked with the situationist tradition. This demystification is particularly evident in the third type of content in the book, represented by a set of Dadaist passages where, for example, famous bands' names are distorted in irreverent ways with mash-up techniques; some also accompanied by humorous visuals, including a photo of the singer "Woody Allin", a poster of the "Turandeth Rancid Opera" or "Lionel Nietzsche's" album "Is it Truth you are looking for?". Probably the most situationist section of the book is where the author recalls the history of his alter ego, Bally Corgan—inspired by Billy Corgan from the *Smashing Pumpkins* (who the author physically resembles)—an alter ego actually used by DJ Balli along the years in both his recordings and live acts. Above all, this last example helps to understand the actual continuity between the situationist spirit of the book and Balli's whole artistic career. Unfortunately available to an Italian-speaking readership only, the book succeeds in offering an original, meta-discursive and demystifying contribution on plunderphonic culture, not just for the content it offers, but also for its ability to intertwine multiple discursive layers, producing an experiment that is finally able—like Frankenstein's efforts—to give birth to a weird and bizarre textual monster.

## REFERENCES

- Balli, Riccardo. 2014. *Apocalypso Disco*. Milan: AgenziaX.
- Cutler, Chris. 1994. "Plunderphonia". *Musicworks* 60: 6–19.
- Oswald, John. 1986. "Plunderphonics, or Audio Piracy as a Compositional Prerogative". *Musicworks* 34: 6.

---

## POPULAR MUSIC, DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY AND SOCIETY

NICK PRIOR

London: Sage, 2018.

ISBN: 978-1-84860-044-7 (hardcover), 978-1-84860-045-4 (paperback), 978-1-47393-416-0 (e-book)

RRP: £75.00 (hardcover), £26.99 (paperback), £26.39 (e-book)

---

<<http://dx.doi.org/10.12801/1947-5403.2018.10.01.08>>

ANDREAS RAUH

UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS (UK)

Nick Prior sets out to investigate the complex relationships between contemporary popular music, digital technology and society. His aims are ambitious, and the breadth of topics covered in the seven chapters (including online music consumption, digital music production, mobile listening and the connections between music and video games) is evidence of the author's broad and in-depth knowledge of relevant fields and debates, as well as the importance and ubiquity of digital technologies in the worlds of contemporary popular musics. The premise of the book—which the author freely admits he is not the first to observe—is that music and technology are intrinsically connected; in Prior's words, "all music is technological in the sense that it is mediated by technological material, forces, and processes" (3). However, the starting point in Prior's approach is his suggestion that, from the early 1980s onwards, changes associated with (largely digital) technologies "have dramatically reshaped . . . [the] landscapes of popular music" (5). Prior has argued in previous works about the importance of the early 1980s in understanding the development of contemporary popular music (see Prior 2010), but this latest book is his most sustained and successful effort in analysing the developments of digital technology (for music) and its complex relationship with the broader issues concerning popular music at large and society in general. Moreover, he must be credited for addressing these difficult topics using clear and accessible language—particularly useful for undergraduate students—and avoiding simplistic views about the role of technology in social, cultural and historical change in general.

Readers interested in debates about technology, including many scholars of dance music culture, will probably be familiar with the theoretical framework used in the book. Prior draws largely from science and technology studies (STS), and follows the tradition of scholars from popular music studies (Jones 1992; Théberge 1997) and sound studies (Taylor 2001; Pinch and Bijsterveld 2004; Sterne 2006) in highlighting the importance of user agency—yes, the classic discussion of turntables as machines for music (re) production and the (re)appropriation of Roland's TB-303 as evidence of user agency is on page 9. Nevertheless, given the long history of electronic dance music and technology, as well as Prior's background as an electronic musician, there are surprisingly few direct references to the genre through the book.<sup>1</sup> In fairness, this is not a genre-focused work, and the strengths of its contributions to relevant theories relies on its effective use of

theoretical concepts in the analysis of the selected cases and topics (chapters two–six), and how these theoretically-informed analyses drive forward contemporary debates about the interplay of music, technology and society (see the discussion about the Japanese cyborg pop star Hatsune Miku on pages 138–41 for a good example with regards to issues about authenticity, performativity, representation and simulacra). Prior's able use of theory shines in his discussion of the incorporation of sampling as a standard compositional process across genres of popular music, including pop and rock. Furthermore, he offers the compelling argument that widespread use of sampling is evidence of a broader process of naturalisation of technology (understood as the assemblage of devices, practices, and associated socio-cultural meanings) in society. Thus, while Prior argues this book is not a deeply theoretical work (15), one of its most significant contribution lies in retaking and updating many of the classic debates that have framed our understanding of society and technology using contemporary data and cutting-edge musical works, and showing how widely these *digital* technologies relate to socio-cultural changes.

The breadth of topics that the book touches on is commendable, and it was a pleasant surprise to read a chapter dedicated to music and video games alongside an in-depth analysis of software for audio manipulation and circulation (an often overlooked yet important element of contemporary digital music production). But as I read the book, I was frequently left wondering about the underlying implications of digital technologies for those most deeply invested in it; for instance musicians, producers, committed fans, and the music and tech industries. In other words, what are the positive and negative aspects associated with digital technologies for each group of stakeholders? Take the debates about democratisation of cultural production and digital technology as an example. Drawing from “third-age” internet studies, Prior rightly acknowledges that digital technologies—such as online platforms—have been normalised and integrated in most of the (post)industrial Western world. However, recent research about the “platformisation” of cultural production (Nieborg and Poell 2018) and the political economy of digital technologies (Wittel 2017) highlight the contradictions between a higher concentration of power by tech industry giants and the potential benefits that digital technologies offer to democratise cultural production. On the music consumer side, given the business model of online platforms (such as music streaming) based on the commodification of user data and privacy concerns, it may well be the case of bringing question about users' rights, power, transparency and a more critical assessment to the forefront. It is true that STS have contributed to understand the intricacies of complex technological assemblages, but the field is not traditionally concerned with issues of power and agency, and Prior does well to bring the latter into the forefront by touching upon many critical elements throughout the book, even if briefly. The passages where he brings up issues such as gender, race, power and agency to the analysis add valuable contributions to the book and provides some of the sharpest insights in the book.<sup>2</sup> However, given the author's informed analysis of the complexities about the relationship between popular music, digital technologies and society, alongside his in-depth knowledge of the fields, it would have been very interesting if he were to have offered a more detailed critique with a normative view that takes into account these increasingly pressing issues.

Overall, this is a significant contribution to the study of popular music, and its focus on digital technology offers valuable insights that help unpack the complexities between music, technology and society. It will be of interest to scholars from the fields of popular music, media and communication, video game studies, music production and sociology of music. Musicians and practitioners will also find the book useful to understand the landscape they operate in as cultural producers. Lastly, music educators and researchers interested in methodological questions will find the discussion in the last chapter insightful, as Prior describes his efforts to teach and research music-production processes using a collective practice-led research approach.

## NOTES

- 1 Exceptions to this include: the meanings associated with discovering music in dance cultures as a form of symbolic capital (53), which could explain contemporary hierarchies of musical taste online; the discussion about the significance of sampling and drum machines as both devices and compositional practices in electronic dance music (68); the use of the vocoder by Detroit techno pioneers as an example of digital manipulation of the human voice (129), and how the genre normalizes heavily processed vocals (135); and, how the designer of the 2002 video game *Rez*, an early example of music *as* games, was influenced by the sensorial (and arguably synesthetic) experiences associated with 1990s raves.
- 2 For examples, see the discussions about the limits of technology in the democratisation of music production (88–9), lack of transparency of online music streaming’s recommendation algorithms (45–6), concerns about “free labour” in participatory cultures (49–50), a critique of the ethics of sampling (127), and an analysis of the gendered roles of female singers in the digital manipulation of vocals (137).

## REFERENCES

- Jones, Steve. 1992. *Rock Formation: Music, Technology, and Mass Communication*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- Nieborg, David and Thomas Poell. 2018. “The Platformization of Cultural Production: Theorizing the Contingent Cultural Commodity”. *New Media & Society*: 1–18.
- Pinch, Trevor and Bijsterveld, Kevin. 2004. “Sound Studies: New Technologies and Music”. *Social Studies of Science* 34(5): 635–48.
- Prior, Nick. 2010. “The Rise of the New Amateurs”. In *Handbook of Cultural Sociology*, ed. John Hall, Laura Grindstaff and Ming-Chen Lo, 398–407. New York and London: Routledge.
- Sterne, Jonathan. 2006. “The mp3 as Cultural Artefact”. *New Media & Society* 8(5): 825–42.
- Taylor, Timothy Dean. 2001. *Strange Sounds: Music, Technology & Culture*. New York: Routledge.
- Théberge, Paul. 1997. *Any Sound you can Imagine: Making Music/Consuming Technology*. Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press.
- Wittel, Andreas. 2017. “The Political Economy of Digital Technologies. Outlining an Emerging Field of Research”. In *Digitisation. Theories and Concepts for Empirical Cultural Research*, ed. Gertraud Koch, 251–75. New York and London: Routledge.

---

## PLAYING WITH SOMETHING THAT RUNS: TECHNOLOGY, IMPROVISATION, AND COMPOSITION IN DJ AND LAPTOP PERFORMANCE

MARK J. BUTLER

New York: Oxford University Press, 2014.

ISBN: 9780195393613 (hardback), 9780195393620 (paperback)

RRP: £86.00 (hardcover), £20.99 (paperback)

---

<<http://dx.doi.org/10.12801/1947-5403.2018.10.01.09>>

TOBY YOUNG

UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD (UK)

Published in 2014, *Playing with Something That Runs* is already widely cited across EDMC scholarship and in receipt of industry-wide plaudits (notably the 2015 PMIG Outstanding Publication Award from the Society of Music Theory). And yet surprisingly, it has yet to be reviewed in an academic journal. Through a stylish interdisciplinary approach, Butler elegantly transcribes, renders and elucidates the landscape of improvisation across contemporary DJing and live production practices in full 360° technicolor. Butler's methodology feels as virtuosic and light of touch as any of the musicians he examines, bringing together elements of ethnography, anthropology, sociology, analysis and aesthetics to deftly unpack the complex issues of creativity, liveness, hybridity and interaction at the core of his investigation. For a scholar so well versed in the theoretical, it is admirable that the monograph's backbone comes from extensive observations and interviews with DJs and laptop musicians, focusing predominantly on fieldwork conducted by the author across a variety of Berlin studios and nightclubs.

At the heart of the discussion is an exploration of the various elements (both practical and theoretical) that comprise live performance in EDM. In addition to offering useful reviews on existing literature, each chapter draws together central elements of dance music performance studies with other recurring themes in Butler's work such as ontology and the "work concept" (chapter one), creativity and materiality (chapter two), perception (chapter three) and technological mediation (chapter four). Intersections with other pillars of EDM scholarship inevitably feature in much of the work—for instance in the final chapter, which is underpinned by a discussion about repetition and its perception—but typical to Butler's previous work, revisiting these well-trodden paths never feels tedious. Indeed, the new lens of performance frequently offers up new and interesting ideas; for example the compelling notion of a "perfect loop", which adapts Robert Fink's idea of recombinant teleology to consider how the micro-manipulation of static or repetitive material can lead to the perception of a technologically-driven musical experience as *quasi* organic.

---

This strand of the book—unpicking the ways by which fluidity in performance is created from seemingly static, typically pre-recorded musical objects—is one of the most interesting aspects of Butler’s discussion, and really gets to the core of what his work is about. One of the most compelling theoretical tools of the book for instance is the author’s identification of seven techniques or “technologies” used by DJs and laptop performers for the creation of fluidity: *viz.* repeating, cycling, going, grooving, riding, transitioning and flowing (71–2). The handling of static material such as loops, samples and records through these actions—which Butler describes as musical affordances—are commonplace enough to practitioners, but too often treated as problematic in lieu of the more rigid definitions of musical composition, improvisation or performance that are typically found in musicology. Through this lens of affordances, as well as Butler’s analysis of both theoretical and practical examples, a more precise discussion of musical creation in dance music is opened up, with profound implications for future discussions of EDM ontology.

Overall, *Playing with Something That Runs* is an immaculate piece of popular musicology, with the potential to become one the cornerstone texts in our discipline. Its interdisciplinary approach provides an incredibly compelling insight into the performance and consumption of live EDM, and the companion website offers a great tool in bringing the discussions of recordings and performances to life through carefully curated audio and video examples. It would be ideally suited as a key text for any popular music course whilst also having the potential to deepen and expand our discipline at the highest level, and really does provide something for everyone. I could not recommend it more highly.