

HOW TO WRECK A NICE BEACH: THE VOCODER FROM WORLD WAR II TO HIP-HOP—THE MACHINE SPEAKS

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Brooklyn: Melville House, 2010.

ISBN: 978-1-933633-88-6 (hardcover), 978-1612190-92-1 (paperback)

RRP: US\$35.00 (hardcover), US\$22.95 (paperback)

DOI: 10.12801/1947-5403.2012.04.02.04

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Never mind the robots. Electronic music has always entertained the trajectory of becoming someone—or something—slightly if not entirely other. When the Jonzun Crew performed “Pack Jam” live in 1983, they took the stage in a strange blend of interstellar outerwear and 18th century clothing modelled from the French aristocracy. Who were these Afrofuturists aliens? The Jonzun Crew’s blend of hip-hop and electro announced a unique, offworld status to black electronic music: we are not from this planet! With electronic sound ideas seem to fly at different speeds; we all dream of other planets and speaking in alien tongues. Thus it should come as no surprise that if there is a voicing to the intergalactic tendencies in electronic music—the sci-fi sounds of sonic fiction—it is thoroughly alien. The device to achieve this is known, of course, as the vocoder.

In order to write this review, I put on a greatest hits compilation of Zapp & Roger’s early ’80s electro-funk, followed by The Rammellzee’s 2004 album of duck-intoned and raspy

“Never mind the robots: what’s more human
than wanting to be something else, altogether?

—Dave Tompkins

Panzerist rap. First the sexy, silky tones of the vocoder lulled me into the ever-so-slightly alien funk of Zapp and Roger. I was on an easy-lounge spaceship leading me into deep space... inside all was warm and fuzz, shag carpet and slo-motion gravity. As Rammellzee came on, I was thrown into a different universe entirely; the vocoder was now an interface device communicating the hidden mathematics of slanguage. 'Zee's voice intoned growls and wheezes through alien harmonics as the vocoder became more or less menacing in the vocal chords of the Garbage God.

For researchers in EDMC, the vocoder is likely more known for its use in the earliest recordings of everything from electro to hip-hop, from Kraftwerk's "Pocket Calculator" through Afrika Bambaata's *Planet Rock*, Cybotron's *Enter* through The Jonzun Crew's *Pack Jam*. Roger Troutman. Scorpio. Laurie Anderson. Can. The vocoder has a storied history in the history of EDMC; it is the alien-enabling device, one of the few direct means of altering the human signature in sound to speak in alien-tongues.

Dave Tompkins provides an evocative history of the vocoder in *How to Wreck a Nice Beach*, digging deep into the archives of the vocoder's buried past, unearthing rare stories of its invention, its origins as a secret scrambling device for Allied communication during World War II, and its creative misuse by legions of electronic musicians worldwide. Written in a provocative style that makes use of the vocoder's infamous ability to blur signifiers into sonic scrambles and strange sibilances, Tompkins' writing seeks to perform, in a way, the weirdness of the content it explores. As he recounts the strange history of the vocoder, Tompkins demonstrates an uncanny ability to cobble together seemingly incongruous observations into bite-sized slices that are as absurd as they are penetrating. Or as he puts it: "One man's rubbish is another man's theory" (271).

Thus the title *How To Wreck a Nice Beach* is a vocoded mishearing of *How to Recognize Speech*. Academic readers seeking a closely footnoted, dry and logical text take note: though Tompkins' volume contains many closely researched sources that tell the story of the vocoder's use and origin, it steams along without a scholarly apparatus. It is writ like a letter to a long lost robot lover: somewhat dense, crowded with conceptual metaphor, and enraptured with the rhyme and rhythm of its text. This makes sense, and I couldn't ask for more; there are enough dry tomes out there. Like Kodwo Eshun, Tompkins demonstrates that a hybridity of research, critical thought and immersive approach, impeccably researched, can always teach a thing or 2 to academia when it comes to communicating its content through style. Metaphor is not superfluous here, but the outcome of a text vocoded. This is candy for the ears. When Tompkins described the painstaking effort Afrika Bambaataa went through when to vocode "uh huh" in *Planet Rock*, I came to realise that nothing passes by his ears—this is a writer who is a raptured listener.

Besides its use in music, *How to Wreck a Nice Beach* discusses in some detail its invention. Like many such technologies exappropriated by a myriad of performers during the 20th century to form the strange culture of electronic music, the vocoder's history is military in origin. Invented by Bell Labs, it served as an encoding device for phonecalls between none other than the likes of Winston Churchill and Franklin Roosevelt. The vocoder is basically a

“Tompkins demonstrates that a hybridity of research, critical thought and immersive approach, impeccably researched, can always teach a thing or 2 to academia when it comes to communicating its content through style.

bandwidth compressor and a scrambler. It slices the source into specific frequencies which can then be cut-up and rearranged across the scale. When combined with a randomized channel of noise, the result is a transmission that sounds a little like background hiss over the radio. What is thoroughly intriguing about the vocoder's earliest incarnations—along with its massive, vacuum-tubed room size—is that two turntables were used to synchronize the scramble platters. One-off vinyl records were recorded with the signals necessary for encoding/decoding the encrypted signal. These records, by the way, were made by the Muzak company (72). With the calls connected through the vocoder, say from Washington to London, the turntables on either end would have to be matched in perfect sync for the conversation to properly decode. In short, both beatmatching and the alien vocoder were invented to get the Allies talking. Who knew?

During the War the Russians were working on a vocoder as well. Well-known dissident author Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, a zek or prisoner in a sharashka—a gulag for inmates with some technical skills—worked on the design of a Soviet vocoder in the Moscow suburbs. His experience is documented in his book *The First Circle* (1968), which Tompkins weaves into the Cold War narrative of the vocoder's use as an encryption/compression device for communications. What is interesting is how Tompkins unfolds the fate of the vocoder during its early days. In 1939, vocoder inventor Homer Dudley (of Bell Labs) offered the vocoder to MGM Studios in Hollywood as a “scientific aid to movie stars,” a kind of autofix for bad voicing, possibly for use in overdubbing (49). A large-scale, art-deco Voder was presented to the public at The World's Fair the same year, as a marvel of modern telecommunications; the public could have their voice mangled in front of the crowd. The War, however, intervened, and the vocoder went more-or-less underground until its resurrection in public life by—who else—the BBC Radiophonic Workshop, which managed to get its hand on the costly EMS 5000 Vocoder in 1976 (90). Still in use as a mobile communications encryptor during the Vietnam War—in a convenient suitcase size—the vocoder found its way into the hands of musicians, who immediately began to misuse it as a strange kind of signal processor. Though

analogue vocoders had been built after the War by the likes of Siemens, it was Robert Moog (and Wendy Carlos) who built one of the first solid-state vocoders in 1970. Carlos went on to score Kubrick's *A Clockwork Orange*; from then on the vocoder popped up everywhere in prog rock: Tomita, Styx, Pink Floyd, Alan Parsons Project and ELO. But for Tompkins, the paradigm shift is Michael Jonzun, Afrofuturist hip-hop and electro innovator, who used a Roland SVC-350 to create an entirely vocoded identity (111). It didn't take long for it to fall into the hands of the likes of Kraftwerk, Can and Afrika Bambaata.

Along the way, Tompkins clears up several misconceptions concerning what is and is not a vocoder. Roger & Zapp, for example, used a Talkbox, as did Peter Frampton (notably on his best-selling *Frampton Comes Alive* (1976)). Likewise, T-Pain does not use a vocoder but rather more-or-less "is" (at least sonically) the software program Auto-Tune. In fact, Tompkins' reflections on the confusing technico-ontology of being an application make a fascinating postscript to the book:

As the voice of pop-radio, Auto-Tune is there for the confusing identity siege that is junior high. Faheem Rasheed Najm is T-Pain. T-Pain is Auto-Tune. Auto-Tune is a vocoder. (T-Pain said so.) I am T-Pain is an App. You are T-Pain. T-Pain is a brand. No sooner did Jay-Z call for Auto-Tune's head after seeing Wendy's use it to sell a Frosty, than Apple made the I am T-Pain app available for \$2.99. As demonstrated on the Champion DJ track, "Baako," babies can now be Auto-Tuned before reaching intelligibility (303).

Marshal McLuhan would be impressed—which is actually not a bad point of comparison for this book, save that Tompkins, on many occasions, does it better. There are no embarrassing "tribal man" motifs and Tompkins' in-depth knowledge of his subject allows him to forge connections between technics and concept at a level perhaps best compared to a funky mix of Friedrich Kittler and Kodwo Eshun. Indeed, this is how I tend to read Tompkins when, on the same page as his reflections on Auto-Tune, he writes: "Robotic is the world in which everyone sings perfectly without even knowing it" (303). The consequences of always-already technico-ontology could not have been stated more succinctly. The question is: has it already happened?

Perhaps. The vocoder finally saw the widespread adoption of its intended use as a bandwidth compressor when the world began gossiping on digital cellphones. Yes, the PCM band (Pulse Code Modulation) is a vocoder. The voice is scrambled down into harmonic particles and reassembled, which is why we all sound just a bit like robots on the mobile. I am unclear if this remains the case once we all switch over to data networks, but this shows again how the vocoder has become oddly ubiquitous in modern society's use of audio communications, both for alien effect and as its means of cost-effective efficiency, which is where the whole story began.

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GROOVE MUSIC: THE ART AND CULTURE OF THE HIP-HOP DJ

MARK KATZ

New York: Oxford University Press, 2012
ISBN: 978-0-19-533112-7
RRP: US\$24.95

DOI: 10.12801/1947-5403.2012.04.02.05

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I knew something had shifted significantly the first time I noticed someone playing air turntables. It was around 1989; after a generation of seeing individuals playing air guitar, sweeping their arms in a windmill motion a la Pete Townsend or twiddling their fingers as if producing an elaborate arpeggio, it was slightly jolting to witness the hunched body language of the DJ. As one hand floated level, backspinning an imaginary disc on an invisible turntable, the other hand executed tight side-to-side motions on an unseen crossfader. That the individual was mimicking the moves of a scratch DJ was without question.

Mark Katz provides a beautifully written account of the DJ's evolution in *Groove Music: The Art and Culture of the Hip-Hop DJ* that is sure to stand as the go-to text for anyone seeking knowledge about the who, what, when, where, why and how of DJ culture. Apart from Katz's expertise in the study of music and technology, what makes this such an enjoyable and ultimately useful book is his proficiency as a storyteller. He establishes a

perfect narrative tone encompassing elements of a nerdy gearhead, an awe-struck fan-boy, a competent DJ, a quizzical scholar, a slightly skeptical curmudgeon, and an astute music journalist. Rather than producing a flawed unevenness, these multiple perspectives reflect the intricate history and evolution of DJ culture while simultaneously allowing Katz to emphasize diverse themes across cultural domains.

Katz focuses explicitly on the “hip-hop DJ.” As he explains, there are a variety of modes within which DJs work (e.g. club or EDM DJs) but not all of these involve hip-hop and not all of them embrace the crucial facets of compositional creativity, battle and performance that are essential to hip-hop’s DJ practices. For the hip-hop cognoscenti this might seem obvious, but this book is oriented toward a wider audience and Katz should be applauded for his capacity to present consistently compelling material that won’t alienate readers of expert or minimal knowledge.

Defining his project, Katz writes, “The purpose of this book is to chronicle and investigate the rise of a new type of musician—the DJ—who developed a new musical instrument—the turntable—and in doing so helped create a new type of music: hip-hop” (6). Indeed, discovery and innovation—the “new” at the core of his mission statement—are on display throughout the book as Katz’s analytical gaze encompasses technologies and artistic technique, sonic construction and aesthetics, and the formation of social and industrial infrastructures that enabled DJs to find their footing as party rockers and to evolve as iconic figures and even celebrities on a gradually expanding scale.

The book is organized chronologically, delineating developmental and transitional phases and isolating the temporal modalities within which the formal characteristics of the hip-hop DJ evolved. Some of the DJ history that Katz opens with is already well documented, with details about the socio-economic environment of the South Bronx in the 1970s and early 1980s or oral accounts of the rise of key figures such as Kool Herc, Afrika Bambaataa, Grandmaster Flash or Grandwizard Theodore circulating widely in publications and on the internet. Despite the historical reiteration, however, the effort is not wasted. Rather, in order for Katz to fully engage the evolutionary process he must revisit these particular narratives in order to impress upon the reader the incremental, accumulative progression of the art of the hip-hop DJ. His particular contributions to our understanding of the process lie in the refutation of romanticized notions of youth resistance that continue to permeate many mainstream and scholarly histories of hip-hop as well as his emphasis on the “hustle” which includes an unflagging creative striving coupled with a markedly capitalist entrepreneurial bent. Like much of hip-hop, the art of the DJ evolved within a sophisticated commercial context that gradually expanded to include a range of participants such as nightclub promoters, paying customers, record labels and audio technology manufacturers.

Moreover, this is not a straight retelling of the DJ’s evolution that maintains an unbroken linear flow. Throughout the book Katz pauses to remind the reader of previously cited incidents, returning to established individuals or events with additional information and greater nuance. The themes of technology, race and ethnicity, the rise of the DJ battle and other factors constitute the grooves that Katz is working with. In much the same way that

hip-hop DJs produce different experiences of listening to, say, a classic James Brown or Curtis Mayfield track (or, as he describes in Chapter 3, the phrase “Ah, this stuff is really fresh” from the 1982 track “Change the Beat” by BeSide and Fab Five Freddy) by chopping it up on the turntables, Katz produces narrative loops, dropping back into the groove of a story in a manner that continually recontextualizes the issues, offering alternative understandings of single moments and their principal protagonists, revising the original tale and adding greater complexity. It not only works as a strategy of telling, but it also masterfully reinforces a logic of DJ practice that is at the book’s foundation.

The book relies strongly on interviews with pioneering and veteran DJs (some of which are featured on a helpful online companion website; note, however, that some of the links featuring recorded tracks are already defunct), adding a distinct authority to the project while presenting a sense of personality to the mix. Some of the artists, such as Grandwizzard Theodore, Qbert, DJ Shadow or DJ A-Trak are well known, but there are a host of lesser-known innovators here who provide insights galore. One comes away from the book with more than just an awareness of who did what, when, but also of who these people are and what drove them in their ongoing pursuit of DJ artistry and excellence. Katz presents their open admissions of accidental discovery and of failure and he is particularly adept at eliciting conversations about attribution and respect around issues of hip-hop legitimacy and claims of creative authority over specific turntable techniques such as “scratching” (and its myriad inflections), “transforming,” and “beat juggling.” DJ Aladdin is cited in this discussion as he attempts to sidestep the implications of improper attribution and the ego-based antagonisms that can ensue, stating, “I don’t get into the political talk about the DJ world” (119).

Katz, too, attempts to navigate the waters of conjecture and dispute, offering voice to DJs who are highly opinionated about their art form and whose opinions are frequently at odds. In this regard, we see that this is not a simple game lacking stakes but, like anything of cultural value, it matters greatly how the lore is framed and what kinds of knowledge are produced. Katz not only illuminates the details but he also offers insights on what it means and why some things might actually be worth fighting for.

Pertaining to this last point, in the later chapters Katz engages several key debates about the relationships between original vinyl-based analog technologies and DJs’ rising reliance on contemporary digital technologies, the role of women as hip-hop DJs, and the sense of tradition that saturates the discourse of DJ artistry. This is a kind of culmination, carrying the story into the current moment where the past and present mingle and, at times, collide violently. For instance, no one disputes the significance of women entering the ranks of accomplished DJs yet there is an underlying sense that digital turntablism makes it easier for anyone to become a reasonably competent DJ; hence, for some chauvinistic male DJs the emergence of a greater female presence may be based on a decline or dilution of traditional techniques. In another context, Katz explains how issues of modern technological convenience are not necessarily at odds with old school orthodoxies, citing several founding hip-hop DJs (including Afrika Bambaataa or Grandwizzard Theodore) who accept the

displacement of bulky and heavy vinyl which, over a lifetime, can contribute to chronic back problems.

I take minor issue with a few aspects of the book. For instance, when Grandwizzard Theodore and others suggest that hip-hop DJs made “something from nothing” (147; 253), a point that is repeated in several permutations throughout the book, Katz seems to let it stand, even though the text is replete with counter-evidence indicating that hip-hop and the art of the DJ evolved from a deep cultural heritage and rich local scenes that are, conversely, full. Most readers would be aware of the intent of this sentiment, yet it also indulges an idealized notion of success over adversity that is at odds with many of Katz’s own observations, such as when he articulates the love, nurture, support and creativity that seep endlessly through the hard cracks of tough urban conditions. While Katz seeks to balance the recollections, presenting differing interpretations of this or that “fact”, the discourse of “something from nothing” offers one case where more rigorous challenge could be warranted.

In a final assessment, on every page of *Groove Music* Mark Katz expresses his love, respect and most of all, his knowledge of the art of the DJ. No one—and here I would include outsiders, passing fans, hardcore hip-hop heads as well as seasoned DJs—will come away from this book without learning something new.

THE RECORD PLAYERS: DJ REVOLUTIONARIES

BILL BREWSTER AND FRANK BROUGHTON

New York: Black Cat, 2011.

ISBN: 978-0-8021-7089-7 (paperback)

RRP: US\$16.95

DOI: 10.12801/1947-5403.2012.04.02.06

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In *The Record Players: DJ Revolutionaries*, Bill Brewster and Frank Broughton contend that the underlining motivation for DJing is to share music with others. “This is the thrill, and the compulsion, of DJing. This need to share music, and to constantly find new music to excite people with, this is the primal force of DJing” (4). The book focuses on this premise by exploring the lives of DJ pioneers who have been influential in the creation of popular music and dance culture scenes and helped to shape social trends, sensibilities and the worldviews of generations of partygoers.

Brewster and Broughton craft a carefully considered mix of narratives which explore

the lives of DJs across historical post-war music scenes and dance cultural movements, contributing an eclectic and informative text for anyone interested in the history of DJing as a cultural practice. Those expecting to encounter the authors' usual humorous writing style may be slightly disappointed as what we are presented with are 46 verbatim interviews followed by illustrative discographies, unfettered by commentary and analysis, save for brief scene-setting introductions.

The opening encounters hook the reader up with some of the earliest pioneers who can lay claim to making DJing visible (and audible) in the public's consciousness. Those familiar with the authors' acclaimed book *Last Night a DJ Saved My Life* (1999) will have come across the authors' archaeological finds before, digging up the tales of pioneer Jimmy Saville, who as early as 1943 began disrupting the societal belief that dancing in public could only be accompanied by live music. "Now, it's a startling admission that people didn't think you could dance to records, but then nobody conceived it" (8). Rare interviews with Terry Noel and Francis Grasso also highlight that contemporary DJing sensibilities and techniques such as beat-matching aren't as new as we may think, being practised in the late 1960s.

After these early encounters, Brewster and Broughton weave together a series of storied arcs that bring together the tales of key DJs and producers instrumental in shaping some of the most memorable underground party scenes and dance music moments from the 1950s through to the early 21st century. The arcs progress in a broadly chronological manner, covering northern soul, (proto) disco, house, techno, Balearic and acid house before Brewster and Broughton bring into the mix players who have been influential in the British post-acid house inspired genres jungle, progressive, garage and big beat. This final arc also brings to the fore narratives with DJs responsible for the mass popularisation of electronic dance music (EDM) from the mid-1990s, with the advent of the super-club and the emergence of DJs as global nomads, folk heroes and pseudo-religious icons (e.g. Sasha and Tiësto).

Placing interviews of DJs from the various scenes side-by-side, we learn of their lives behind the decks and in the studio and their reflections on the scenes they helped to shape. This makes for a stimulating read, as the voices of the players collide with one another, sometimes confirmatory and on other occasions casting contradictory lines of thought on the scene in question. The arc on Chicago house was one of my favourites in this respect.

“... the book uncovers key first person insights that illustrate how emergent techniques, tools and sensibilities which have informed DJing as a cultural practice are deeply rooted in the learning that occurs on the dance floor.

Enough space is given to the DJs to tell stories on their own terms. This breathing room is particularly welcome, given the historical importance of some of the insights shared—witness the rare interview with Francis Grasso who passed away shortly after their conversation. Investigative sensibilities also ensure plenty of moments where Brewster and Broughton the urban archaeologists come out to play and sample on behalf of the historical archivists and DJ anoraks, enquiring about the novelty of equipment and techniques used and whether interviewees were aware of the significance, for example.

If, as the authors contend, the primal purpose of DJing is to share music with others, the book uncovers key first person insights that illustrate how emergent techniques, tools and sensibilities which have informed DJing as a cultural practice are deeply rooted in the learning that occurs on the dance floor. For example, Tom Moulton, pioneer of the disco mix and inventor of the preferred DJ 12-inch format, alludes to an observation he made in 1971 sitting at a beach party on Fire Island:

They'd really start to get off on it and all of a sudden another song would come in on top of it and the people would be.... And he was a terrible DJ, too. It was a shame that the records weren't longer so people could really start getting off. I came home and tried it and it took forever (137).

In all respects, this was a defining moment that shaped Moulton's life in dance music production and as a consequence gifted DJs the format they craved, an extended mix designed specifically for the dance floor. Reflecting on the production of Afrika Bambaataa's "Planet Rock", the renowned electro producer Arthur Baker describes his conscious decision to capture what DJs were doing in their sets by transferring it onto wax:

What I was trying to do was mix in the DJ bits of other records. It was a conscious thing. It was almost like a medley, but not really, because you only used little bits of things. I tried to create what a DJ would do with records (208).

The sampling-like approach coined by Baker on "Planet Rock" prior to the widespread advent and use of sampling technologies illustrates how DJ sensibilities honed on the dance floor have been fed back into the production process, helping to create the sampling cut and paste aesthetic that became so influential with EDM production.

Somewhere between the sound-bite journalism of the popular music press and the reification of music and dance culture studies proliferating within academia, there is a genuine need for first person oral histories. This book provides a welcome reminder of how and in what ways oral approaches can contribute to our understanding.

I believe this book has some fairly unique gifts to offer DJs with an interest in understanding the roots of what they do and exploring more deeply their own relationship to creating and sharing music, not least because of its dialogical qualities. This conversational approach worked because it engaged me personally. I was able to place my "I" alongside the others and join in the conversation. In doing so the book spoke to the DJ within me and re-ignited my passion for finding and sharing music. The book ultimately succeeds because this is what

it sets out to do. Its dialogical qualities also sets *The Record Players* apart and allows it to make a unique contribution to cultural and historical studies in popular music and related fields of enquiry. The conversational space created prompts the reader to engage with the text directly in an open and reflexive manner so that you become actively involved in the sense making process. This is refreshing and contrasts with the third person gatekeeper role favoured in academia, which bookends informants' narratives with thoughts on what is meant, foreclosing alternative readings and interpretations.

There are some minor criticisms with the book. Most of the interviews took place in the mid to late 1990s giving *The Record Players* a slightly dated feel. There have been quantum-like shifts in DJing over the last decade that have questioned the primacy of the spinning record and reconfigured the ways in which DJs create and share music. The emergence of digital vinyl solutions (DVS) and controllerism are indicative of these developments and are an obvious omission in the present collection, save for some thoughts by Sasha on using Ableton to DJ. The authors observe in their introduction that there are some important scenes that haven't been included, namely reggae. In a book that attempts to plot points linking DJing across times and geographies, there is always a risk of omitting important scenes. Whilst an anticipated future volume will likely seek to redress this, in any follow up I'd like to see the authors make a more conscious effort to disrupt the predominantly Anglo-American narratives of DJing and club culture to be found in this book. Small criticisms aside, I think this is a vital book. Brewster and Broughton seem to have a knack of producing accessible and informative material about DJ culture that engages both practitioners and interested souls, whilst simultaneously making serious and valuable contributions to historical and socio-cultural studies of DJing and popular music cultures. Their latest effort does much to continue this tradition.

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POPULAR MUSIC: TOPICS, TRENDS & TRAJECTORIES

TARA BRABAZON

London: Sage Publications, 2012.

ISBN: 978-1-84787-435-1 (hardcover), 978-1-84787-436-8 (paperback)

RRP: US\$108.00 (hardcover), US\$43.00 (paperback)

DOI: 10.12801/1947-5403.2012.04.02.07

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For students of popular music there is no shortage of books, with the field now firmly established in the corridors of academia and interpreted through a body of literature as diverse and as vibrant as the music itself. The most engaging and stimulating reading is more often than not to be found in the writing that has a specific focus, whether that be on singer, subculture, style or scene. By contrast, you rarely seek out a textbook for reading pleasure outside of the classroom context. With this diversity of literature, it is questionable whether the world actually needs another textbook on popular music, given that between monographs and journals it is relatively easy to compile a list of required readings for any course on the subject. That said, having introductory material in the one easy-to-digest form is particularly convenient, and therein is the appeal of Tara Brabazon's *Popular Music: Topics, Trends & Trajectories*.

The book is promoted as “the first text book on Pop Music to be completely researched and written after the arrival of the iPod”. While I can't be sure of the veracity of such a claim, it allows space for Brabazon to explore and interrogate the many changes to music production and consumption that have occurred with recent developments in technology, explaining in the Introduction that “digitization” was one of the propelling factors behind the writing of the book (4). The text is structured into five key sections (Approaches, Music Spaces, Instruments of/for Study, Genre and Community, Debates), each of which is subdivided into short chapters. These chapters feature four “Key Questions” at the end to stimulate student discussion, testing not just comprehension of the chapter content but also of broader debates and issues around that content.

In relation specifically to electronic dance music culture, Brabazon provides a handful of interesting discussions. In the section on Music Spaces, attention is given to the centrality of clubs and pubs in the flowering of particular music scenes, with The Warehouse in Chicago and The Hacienda in Manchester receiving detailed descriptions, together with passing reference to London's Shoom, Spectrum and The Trip as clubs that “were not only located in a precise geographical location but also in a distinct moment in history” (69). Elsewhere, there are references to rave culture and the rise and fall of acid house, the genres of disco and house (the latter located alongside a discussion of “post-house musics”), and the

flourishing of remixing and mash-up culture facilitated by digitization and user generated content. Brabazon certainly takes a broad perspective throughout the book, demonstrating an appealing open-mindedness. In the section on Instruments, one chapter is devoted solely to turntablism, with references to not only hip-hop and its pioneering DJs but also the shifts from analogue to digital that have given rise to software such as Final Scratch and the practice of controllerism. While all of this is nothing new for the scholar of EDM, the attention given to dance music and club culture is an acknowledgement of EDM's standing in the development of popular music, Brabazon going beyond the rock-centred orientation of much popular music writing. As she notes in the Introduction, one motivation for the book's creation was "a desire to construct a more complex and contemporary musical history that is post-rock and post-genre" (6). At the conclusion of the book I'm still unclear as to what "post-genre" could possibly refer to, but Brabazon certainly succeeds in outlining a history of popular music that accounts for style and genre complexity and that shifts away from any infatuation with the sound of the guitar.

The breadth and scope of the book is impressive. Brabazon displays a thorough knowledge of popular music history, technologies, debates and theories. While any book is ultimately defined as much by what is excluded as what is included, Brabazon certainly cannot be accused of omitting the essential facts. This is perhaps the most impressive aspect of the book. While the array of topics covered dictates that each chapter runs to no more than a few pages, you never feel that Brabazon has failed to mention important information. Her ability to speak with equal authority on subjects as diverse as, for example, metal, sonic architecture, and race, appropriation and commodification lends the book an integrity that will ensure its relevance for a number of years. Obsolescence is the destiny of all textbooks, and while the reference to the iPod in the promotional blurb already seems somewhat anachronistic (perhaps "iPhone" or "Apple's dominance" would have been more appropriate), there's an intellectual rigour and comprehensiveness embedded within the book that ensures it transcends its year of publication. No doubt this will be one of those texts that gets republished very few years in an updated edition.

A colleague and I used this book as the prescribed text for an introductory undergraduate course on popular music earlier this year, and we both found it highly

“Brabazon displays a thorough knowledge of popular music history, technologies, debates and theories.”

effective as a starter book for students to initially consult before moving on to more theoretically detailed journal articles and topic-specific books. Feedback from students was that Brabazon's writing style is accessible and engaging, and that the variety of sources listed at the end of each chapter (Further Reading, Sonic sources, Visual sources, Web sources) is useful for anyone seeking to pursue a particular topic in more detail. The broad coverage of the book means that it will comfortably fit in to most popular music courses. Brabazon has crafted an essential textbook that balances historical outlines with contemporary debates, meaning that it is comprehensive enough to engage not just students studying popular music for the first time but also those with more sustained involvement in the field. Fusing discussions of key artists, styles and moments in the development of popular music with acknowledgement of the work of key academics, theorists and journalists, Brabazon demonstrates how popular music is both a diverse and intriguing cultural phenomenon that demands continued research and investigation, and a complex and challenging area of study surrounded by a variety of theoretical debates. Textbooks rarely provide a stimulating cover-to-cover read, but *Popular Music: Topics, Trends & Trajectories* breaks that tradition, and will be at home equally in the hands of students as it will on the shelves of their lecturers.

FILM

BIG FUN IN THE BIG TOWN

DIR. BRAM VAN SPLUNTEREN

Holland: VPRO, 1986.

<http://fivedayweekend.co.uk/>

DOI: 10.12801/1947-5403.2012.04.02.08

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This documentary was originally commissioned by Dutch broadcaster VPRO and was filmed and broadcast in 1986; it finally gained commercial release on DVD in 2012. The director originally hoped to explore the origins and culture of hip-hop with the aim of educating the Dutch TV viewer whose perception of the style may have been tainted by exposure to novelty material such as Dutch act MC Miker G and Deejay Sven's 1986 hit "Holiday Rap". The braggadocio and materialism of American hip-hop also left some European listeners with the impression that the style had little substance and was merely a passing fad, a viewpoint the film-maker hoped to change.

The film commences with an initial sequence that sets the scene, including shots of New York and studio footage of hip-hop DJ Mr Magic's radio show. After a brief sequence of live concert footage we see the director on the phone in the hotel setting up interviews, the first of which is with Grandmaster Flash. English subtitles explain that they meet in the South Bronx, "one of the most poor and dangerous parts of town but also the place where in the second half of the '70s the first rappers and scratchers appeared". Although this film was made relatively early in hip-hop history, it was shot thirteen years after Herc's (now mythical) first party in Sedgwick Avenue, a period from which little archival material survives. So, although the film leaves the impression it offers a snapshot of an emerging style, there was a significant period of development that is not explored in the documentary.

Flash initially shows the film crew the site of a Bronx venue where he played as the style emerged. He then demonstrates his skills as a turntablist (in his living room) by beat juggling two copies of Bob James' "Take Me to the Mardi Gras". Flash explains that his key innovation as a DJ was to loop the strongest part of a record by using two record decks to extend the break section (conveniently ignoring that this technique was Kool Herc's innovation). Flash found that by using a crew of MCs to accompany his DJing it turned the overall performance into a show and made it less like a technical demonstration of his turntable skills. Again, this is essentially a Jamaican sound system performance practice introduced by Herc, which was developed further by Flash and other DJ-led crews. Possibly due to the footage being shot in only a week, and the researcher being based on another continent, numerous hip-hop innovators such as Herc are not interviewed or even mentioned, which could be considered a notable omission.

The film then cuts to Harry Truman High School in the North Bronx, where we see clean-cut happy looking kids singing and rapping in the playground. The students' (white) music teacher Dennis Bell explains that the style developed in the Bronx, and that in many New York schools the music programmes were cut for budgetary reasons, and that due to the relative poverty of families in the Bronx private music lessons were not an option for most young people. Bell then states that as there was no musical outlet for young people, "in the Bronx what happened was they figured out a new form of music that didn't take any music lessons, and that is using poetry and a rhythm, which has a lot of roots in African stuff". He states that programming a drum computer doesn't require music lessons. This is true, but a drum machine wasn't a particularly affordable item in 1986, which somewhat negates the argument that poverty reduced the available opportunities to develop "traditional" instrument skills. Explaining the origin of the style entirely on educational cutbacks somewhat over-simplifies the origins of hip-hop. This notion that the style resulted directly from a lack of access to "real" instruments is also repeated (by Lord Jamar of Brand Nubian) in Ice-T and Andy Baybutt's film *Something from Nothing: The Art of Rap* (2012). The socio-economic and cultural influences that impact the origins of hip-hop culture are obviously unpacked in far greater depth in the work of hip-hop scholars such as Rose (1994), George (1998), Toop (2000), Forman (2002) and Chang (2005).

The next sequence is in Harlem with Doug E. Fresh, a pioneer of the practice of human

beatboxing. The director states that from the introduction of beatboxing the street kids were self-supporting, as they didn't need to rely on a rhythm machine anymore to supply a beat to rap over. Fresh compares rap music's status to that of rock and roll when it initially emerged to critical opprobrium, and its subsequent acceptance into the mainstream. He then contrasts the "street tough" image of rap artists to some of the more androgynous black pop stars of the period. Their names aren't mentioned, but Rick James and Prince (amongst others) spring to mind as the probable targets of this comment.

The documentary includes footage of a hopeful crew from Chicago rapping and beatboxing outside Def Jam's offices in an attempt to gain Russell Simmons' attention. They deliver a slick routine critiquing gang culture after the director asks if there are street gangs in Chicago. The director evidently has a fascination with gang culture and this topic is the focus of attention at a number of points in the narrative. The film features a cameo from DMC (of Run DMC), who shows off his new Cadillac and its sound system and raps to the camera whilst on the street outside Def Jam. An edit introduces an incredibly focused and business-like Simmons in the Def Jam office, explaining the market for hip-hop and his intention to sell his acts without resorting to gimmicks. This comment is possibly a veiled reference to "Holiday Rap's" European success. Simmons demonstrates a paternal pride, noting that his artists write their own material and he states that they have more commercial talent than most pop stars. Then the film takes the viewer to Queens to L.L. Cool J's grandmother's house for an interview with L.L., her home located in an apparently pleasant residential neighbourhood, a striking contrast to the footage of urban dereliction in the Bronx that is standard fare in hip-hop documentaries.

Suliaman El Hadi from the Last Poets is introduced and provides an opportunity to contrast the older generation of black artists with the new. He offers a critique of hip-hop, as he considers the style is not addressing the realities of black life such as poverty, powerlessness and economic decline. He disparagingly refers to the average hip-hop MC's raps as "nursery rhymes".

The footage is cleverly edited back to L.L. explaining that he doesn't rap about ghetto problems, as he wants his audience to be able to forget day-to-day reality and have fun when they attend his concerts. When asked if it is necessary for rap to have a message, L.L. replies, "why would a kid want to pay for a ticket to hear how bad life is?" The footage then cuts back to Suliaman, who is now accompanied by one of his teenaged sons, and although his son is obviously respectful of his father and aware of the power of his thought and poetry, he admits to liking rap music. The boy says, "I do admit what I be listening to is garbage, but I still love it, I still like it, it makes me dance, you know, it gets me up!". He comments that his father's music "brings education" and then his father delivers an impassioned performance of Last Poets' material to the camera.

The film finally cuts to concert footage which shows Schoolly D performing live with his DJ operating a drum machine as the sole accompaniment to Schoolly's lyrics. When interviewed backstage, Schoolly states that his sound is raw and that he can address topics other MCs cannot as he has his own independent label. Again, rock and roll is mentioned

in comparison to rap. Schoolly worries that rap will be made too “pretty” as it becomes more commercialised, a fate that he considers has happened to rock and roll.

Obviously, hip-hop has evolved considerably since 1986 and has had a remarkable global impact, musically, commercially and culturally, in the almost forty years since Kool Herc’s first party in the Bronx. *Big Fun in the Big Town* is mainly notable for offering a snapshot of the genre in a more innocent (pre-crack epidemic) era, before the emergence of gangster rap and hip-hop’s overt commercialisation. One of the most interesting aspects of this documentary is the original footage that had languished in VPRO’s archives for a quarter of a century before this DVD release. Anyone who watches a wide range of music documentaries will begin to recognise the same segments appearing repeatedly in different films; however, the footage used here is refreshingly unfamiliar to the jaded eye. The film doesn’t offer any unique insights and can be criticised for a lack of historical rigour, but it is nevertheless an entertaining addition to the available material exploring early hip-hop.

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