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Making Beats:
The Art of Sample-Based Hip-Hop

Joseph Glenn Schloss

A Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

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Program Authorized to Offer Degree: Ethnomusicology

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Abstract

Making Beats: The Art of Sample-Based Hip-Hop

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Ethnomusicology

Since its birth two decades ago in New York's African-American and Latino communities, hip-hop music (also known as "rap") has become the most popular musical genre in the United States. Structurally, hip-hop blends two relatively discrete endeavors: rhythmic poetry ("rapping"), and musical accompaniments in which brief segments of found sound (or "samples") are arranged into larger musical collages (known as "beats"). While much has been written about rapping, the "beats" - and the tightly knit community that produces them - have often been overlooked. Based on extensive ethnographic fieldwork, *Making Beats* explores the ways in which the non-vocal elements of recorded hip-hop are conceived by producers, and how these conceptualizations are informed by a variety of social, practical, and artistic concerns.

After a brief historical overview of the development of hip-hop music in general and sampling in particular, I proceed to the social and aesthetic issues that concern hip-hop producers. These issues include why a musician would choose to use digital sampling rather than live instrumentation, the social significance of collecting rare records to sample, and the so-called "producer's ethics" which monitor the ways in which

sampling may be used. Finally, I address the actual process of creating sample-based music, including the aesthetic that drives it, how technology facilitates the continued existence of this aesthetic, how legal and moral issues are resolved, and the practical steps that must be taken to produce a finished product.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES

Acknowledgements

Not only is it a cliché to remark that a given work would not have been possible with out the generous help of a variety of individuals, but it has now become cliché to note that it is a cliché. Nevertheless, it is a fact that this dissertation would not have been possible without the generous help of a variety of individuals.

First and foremost among these were the producers, deejays, emcees, and others who agreed to be interviewed. All of them went above and beyond, sending me magazine articles, useful phone numbers and critiques of early drafts. I am deeply indebted to each of them.

From Conception Records: Jake One, Strath Shepard and Mr. Supreme each went out of their way to provide information, advice and guidance. Strath, in particular, got me writing about hip-hop for Flavor Magazine, an experience from which I continue to reap benefits even now, four years after the magazine folded. From Tribal Productions: Vitamin D, Samson S and DJ Topspin provided perspective, humor and examples of the kind of deep commitment that hip-hop engenders in its participants. From the TBC: King Otto and the inimitable MC Specs share the distinction of being the two quietest hip-hop artists I have ever encountered. Still waters run deep. Specs also came to my dissertation defense, which I will always appreciate. From the Jasiri Media Group: Kylea, Wordsayer and Negus I continue to teach me so much about so many things. Wordsayer, in particular, has been true to his name, helping me tease out many threads of various arguments. From the Hieroglyphics: Domino patiently answered many strange questions and Karen Dere (the West Coast S.K.Honda) gave me many insights, useful pager numbers and pleasant conversations. The West Coast's number one tapemaster, DJ B-Mello, has always been a good friend and that has

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I am proud to be a member of the second generation of hip-hop scholars. Many thanks to the first generation, who did all the hard work: Stephen Hager, David Toop, Craig Castleman, Cheryl Keyes, Rob Walser, Michael Eric Dyson, Nelson George, Greg Tate, William Eric Perkins, Tricia Rose, Russell Potter, and many others too numerous to mention here.

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Elstad is a millionaire by now. Daniela Garaiz is my Spanish slang consultant. Mike Singer collaborated with me on the original business plan for concentric chicken. Elle Chan makes the best matzoh ball soup other than my mother's. Lee Ford coined the term "preventative asswhippin'". Chris Coleman coined the term "gangsta-friendly". David Reck introduced me to ethnomusicology at Amherst College in the late 1980's. Thank you for that. Sue Darlington was the chair of my first committee. She taught me about being an engaged scholar. Bernard Z. Friedlander provided me with sage counsel. S.K. Honda (the East Coast Karen Dere) gives me the industry perspective and a nice dinner whenever I'm in New York. Malaika Lafferty sends me fun emails. Chris Waterman introduced me to both urban ethnography and I.K. Dairo. I thank you for both. Eileen Hayes was a fellow traveler. Gretchen Yanover has been a neighbor, friend and sounding-board. Lorri Plourde is my partner in crime, if by "crime" you mean presenting papers at academic conferences. Michael "Moishe" Horowitz helped me out in a pinch. Laurel Sercombe was always willing to listen to me complain, a rare and appreciated gift. Drego Little will be making waves soon, just watch. Spyridon "Spin" Nicon always provides me with both incisive criticism and a fresh cut.

My ever-evolving committee has helped me in innumerable ways. Shannon Dudley is a friend and trusted advisor. Ter Ellingson has been a helpful critic. Cynthia Schmidt's enthusiasm has kept me going. Howard Becker is a friend, mentor and fellow Lenny Bruce fan. Hillel Kieval gave me much to consider. Lorraine Sakata helped me navigate many a dangerous bureaucracy. I think Chris Waterman was in there at some point, too, but I'm not sure.

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My family helped bring *me* to fruition with a lifetime of support and nurturance. They are: John Schloss, Suzanne Schloss, Sara Schloss Stave and Channing M-L Stave.

Finally, I would like to thank my sister, Sara Schloss Stave, again, just to be sure she sees it.

Dedication

To my parents, and to their parents;
Who provided me with direct and indirect inspiration.

I: Introduction and Methodology

Joe: I wanted to get you to tell that story about when you were talking to your mother-in-law about painting...

Mr. Supreme: Oh yeah, and we were arguing, 'cause she was saying I didn't make music. That it's not art...She really didn't understand at all, and we argued for about two hours about it. Basically, at the end she said... if I took the sounds, it's not mine—that I took it from someone.

And then I explained to her: What's the difference if I take a snare drum off of a record, or I take a snare drum and slap it with a drum stick?

OK, the difference is gonna be the sound. Because when it was recorded, it was maybe a different snare, or had a reverb effect or the mic was placed funny. It's a different sound. But what's the difference between taking the sound from the record or a drum? It's the *sound* that you're using, and then you create something. You make a whole new song with it.

And she paints, so I told her, "you don't actually *make the paint*." You know what I'm saying? "You're not painting, 'cause you don't make the paint"...But that's what it is, it's like painting a picture. (Mr. Supreme: personal interview 1998)

Since its emergence in the mid-1970's, hip-hop has become one of most popular forms of music in the United States and is well on its way toward conquering the world. So what is it that gives the music its enormous appeal? Some hear in its lyrics a cry against poverty and oppression, while others see hip-hop as the quintessential postmodernist art form, perfectly suited for its time. Hip-

hop may be a shameless commercial exploitation of humanity's baser instincts, or an appeal to our highest aspirations.

For some, hip-hop is an invigorating cultural phenomenon in an era when most cultural phenomena have everything *but* vigor:

> At its most elemental level hip hop is a product of post-civil rights era America, a set of cultural forms originally nurtured by African-American, Caribbean-American, and Latin American youth in and around New York in the '70s. Its most popular vehicle for expression has been music, though dance, painting, fashion, video, crime, and commerce are also its playing fields. It's a postmodern art in that it shamelessly raids older forms of pop culture – kung fu movies, chitlin' circuit comedy, '70s funk, and other equally disparate sources – and reshapes the material to fit the personality of an individual artist and the taste of the times. (George 1998: viii)

The earliest hip-hop music consisted of live performances in which a deejay played popular records (or segments thereof) accompanied by an MC (or "rapper") who exhorted the crowd to dance, shared local information and noted his or her own skill on the microphone. When hip-hop expanded to recorded contexts, both of these roles became somewhat more complex. MCs began to create increasingly involved narratives using complex rhythms and cadences. And while deejays continued to make music with turntables when performing live, most also developed other strategies for use in the studio, and this eventually came to include the use of digital sampling. As studio methodologies gained popularity, the deejays who used them became known as producers (see "axiom #2" below). As a result, while there are still many deejays who do not produce, virtually all producers deejay.

Structurally, then, a recording of hip-hop music blends two relatively discrete endeavors: rhythmic poetry ("emceeing", also known as "rapping"), and musical accompaniments in which brief segments of recorded sound (or "samples") are arranged into larger musical collages (known as "beats").

Previous studies have tended to isolate hip-hop's lyrics from their musical context so that they might be analyzed - for better or worse - as poetry. This dissertation, by contrast, focuses precisely on that musical context, its timbral and structural elements and the compositional process that brings it to life, as well as the social, practical, and artistic concerns of those who do so.

It is significant that hip-hop artists refer to these compositions as "beats". In its broadest sense, the term is used to refer to an instrumental hip-hop composition, comprising drums and other musical material, but not vocals. In some instances, however, it is used in a narrower sense to refer only to the rhythmic feel of the composition, in a manner similar to that in use in other forms of popular music. The fact that the same term is used to refer both to the rhythmic aspect of a composition *and* to the entire composition suggests the significance of rhythm to the musical form.

Overview

This study is structured so as to address various issues of concern to the hip-hop producer, in roughly the order that they would arise for him or her. After a brief history of hip-hop music in general and sampling in particular, I proceed to the specific social, ethical, and aesthetic issues that an individual producer encounters as they accumulate the necessary knowledge to create hip-hop music that is accepted by other producers. These issues include the choice to use digital sampling rather than live instrumentation, the social significance of collecting rare records to sample, and the so-called "producer's ethics" which monitor the ways in which sampling may be used.

Having established the existence and nature of a "producers' community," the dissertation uses information gained from formal interviews and participant-observation to develop a hip-hop aesthetic in relation to composition, production, and ethics. I will address the actual process of creating sample-based music,

including the sensibility that drives it, how technology facilitates the continued existence of this aesthetic, how legal and moral issues are resolved, and the practical steps that must be taken to produce a finished product. In so doing, I attempt to break down the binary distinction which argues that the collage aesthetic of hip-hop must be either primarily African in origin or a postmodernist result of the market forces of late capitalism. Following a path forged by Gates (1987) and Potter (1995), I argue that hip-hop represents a fundamentally indivisible mix of both influences, a postmodern venue for traditional African American expression.

I then place this approach, which is the banner of the insular producers' community, within the social context of the larger hip-hop world; a caustic brew of competing influences, needs, and intentions, all of which must be recognized by the successful producer.

Axiomatic Assumptions

The following four assumptions underlie much of my discussion: 1) hip-hop music is fundamentally African American by nature and intent; 2) sample-based hip-hop is, in its conception, a form of recorded music (rather than of live performance); 3) unlike most African American music, hip-hop is highly individualistic in its vision (rather than communal); and 4) hip-hop that uses samples is seen by its creators as aesthetically distinct from other forms of hip-hop music (such as west coast "G-Funk", or Miami Bass); it is a genre unto itself.

1. Hip-hop is African American music.

Hip-hop developed in New York City, in neighborhoods that were dominated by people of African descent, particularly African Americans from the continental United States, Puerto Rico and Jamaica. As a result, African American aesthetics, social norms, standards and sensibilities are deeply embedded in the

form, *even when it is being performed by individuals who are not themselves of African descent.* Scholars such as Thompson (1996), Gaunt (1997) and Keyes (1996) have demonstrated this in very specific terms, on both abstract and practical levels. Thompson, for example, traces the intervening steps between traditional dance forms in the Congo and b-boying/b-girling (also known as breakdancing), while Gaunt connects rap's rhythms to those of 'pattin' juba', a tradition that goes back centuries (Thompson 1996: 216-218; Gaunt 1997: 100-112). The influence of African American culture is deeply felt in hip-hop music. Perhaps the best example of this can be found in the aesthetic principles of hip-hop production. As I argue in chapter seven, traditional African American tropes [particularly what Gates has called "signifyin(g)"] inform producers' activities on many levels, particularly in their embrace of ambiguity and collage.

2. Sample-based hip-hop, in its ideal form, exists on records rather than in live performance.

It is no accident that the individuals who create hip-hop music call themselves 'producers', rather than composers or musicians. The term 'producer' came into vogue in popular music in the 1960's with such individuals as Phil Spector, Brian Wilson and Sir George Martin. While a 'recording engineer' uses recording equipment to capture a sound on tape, a 'producer' - while performing a materially similar task - is seen as having a larger aesthetic responsibility. A producer chooses the methodology of recording (and often the musicians and studio) in order to evoke a specific sensibility within the music (Theberge 1997: 192-3).

This was a role that could not have existed until the technology existed to support it. When recordings were being made monaurally with two or three microphones, there was little room for an individual to put their personal stamp on the recording process. While there were certainly creative individuals who

developed innovative recording strategies during this era, their work was rarely appreciated beyond a small circle of aficionados, and even then, it was noted primarily for its fidelity, rather than for its creativity. As a rule, the intent of recorded music until the 1960's was to reproduce the sound of live performance as accurately as possible (see Beadle 1993, Buskin 1999).

As studio technology developed to the point where a musician could create sounds in the studio that they could not possibly create live (such as playing a backward guitar solo), the roles were reversed, and the studio recording became the ideal to which live music aspired. Albums such as the Beach Boys *Pet Sounds* (produced by Brian Wilson), and the Beatles' *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* (produced by George Martin), began to experiment with the artistic possibilities of studio recording. It was at this time that the role of the producer became both feasible and significant (Beadle 1993).

In the 1970's, developments in electronic music (particularly the advent of synthesizers and drum machines) made the producer even more important, since live musicians were no longer an essential part of the recording process. The roles of composer and musician became integrated into that of the producer. Disco producers such as Giorgio Moroder found they needed only drum machines, synthesizers and a live vocalist to make hits (Buskin 1999: 201-205). The development of digital sampling technology in the 1980's continued this trend, bringing past recordings of live musicians back into the electronic mix.
For hip-hop producers, then, the process of *creating recorded music* has become almost completely estranged from the process of *capturing the sound of live performance*. Live performance does not serve as a significant model for the producers' aesthetic. Conversely, live performances of hip-hop are rarely concerned with reproducing any specific processes from the studio (aside from emceeing); the studio recording is simply played (and sometimes manipulated by a DJ). In fact, one of the major challenges of performing hip-hop on instruments –

in the rare cases where this is done - is that many of hip-hop's most typical musical gestures (such as 16th notes played on a bass drum) are virtually impossible to reproduce without electronic editing. Sample-based hip-hop is a studio-oriented music.

3. Unlike most African American music, sample-based hip-hop celebrates the vision of a single composer. Equal interaction between musicians is not a priority.

Hip-hop producers celebrate an image of themselves that recalls nothing so much as European art composers: the isolated artist working to develop his or her music. As producer Mr. Supreme says on his web-site, "It's the shit to be at home at 4:00 in the morning, in your boxers, in front of your sampler, making some *shit*, you know?" (Mr. Supreme 1999,<www.conceptionrecords.com>).
In a describing his ideal work setting, Mr. Supreme cites three factors, each of which specifically diminishes the possibility of other individuals being present ("at home", "at 4:00 in the morning", "in your boxers"). This, he suggests, is the best environment in which to create hip-hop music.
As a result, hip-hop music confounds many of the generalizations that have historically been made about the communal nature of African American music, especially those that interpret specific musical interactions as reflecting deeper truths about social interactions. Much of my task here will be to interpret this apparent anomaly.

4. Sample-based hip-hop is a genre.

While digital sampling is the primary avenue utilized for hip-hop production, it is not the only one. One of the major underlying assumptions of my project is that the distinction between sample-based and non-sample-based hip-

hop is a distinction of *genre*, more than of individual methodology.[1] Hip-hop producers who use sampling place great importance on that fact, and – as I will show –find it difficult to countenance other approaches (such as the use of live instrumentation or synthesizers), without compromising many of their foundational assumptions about the musical form.

Methodological issues

The major methodological issues of this project concern the construction of the field, the background against which a particular set of social and musical practices are brought into focus. My field site – the community of hip-hop producers – is at variance with the historical conventions of fieldwork in two ways: the geographical base of my fieldwork was in Seattle, where I attended graduate school; and, at the same time, the community with which I worked is geographically dispersed across the country. I wish now to deal with both of these issues in some depth.

Taking the bus to the field

The title of this section is a play on a recent piece by Joanne Passaro, entitled "You Can't Take the Subway to the Field," concerning the definitional problems that many academics had when confronted with her decision to do fieldwork among New York City's homeless population (Passaro 1997). As Passaro suggests, the primary difficulty in this endeavor was maintaining a distinction between the subject of one's study and the other aspects of one's life, including the analysis of one's data. The origins of this distinction, its nature, and

[1] Mainstream journalists, for example, spent several years in the early 1990's trying to define "Gangsta Rap" by its lyrical content, inevitably settling on a definition that was either too narrow (music that contains references to specific gang activities or sets), or too broad (music that contains violent lyrics of any kind). For its listeners, however, "Gangsta Rap" was primarily defined by two characteristics: its heavy reliance on synthesizers, rather than sampling, and the vocal delivery, or "flow", of its MC's.

its use as an instrument of post-colonial power have been discussed at length elsewhere (cf. Fabian 1982, Marcus & Fischer 1986, Gupta & Ferguson 1997, etc.). As Fabian in particular has convincingly argued, the idea of an objective and distinct "field" removes the culture of the researcher from the study's purview, despite the fact that it is often a deep and abiding influence on the processes being studied. One of the explicit aims of the current work is to use the specific nature of my experience to implicitly question the value of this distinction. In other words, I have tried to use my own disorientation as a way to 'disorientalize' the field (cf. Said 1978), in the sense that a researcher's self-conscious confusion over the nature of social boundaries can help to point up the extent to which those boundaries were imposed by the researcher in the first place.

While the relevance of such definitional issues to the specific act of performing fieldwork in one's native environment has been apparent since at least the early 1970's, a cohesive body of literature has not developed. This is largely due to the simultaneously specific and abstract nature of the issues that arise. While there have been several notable anthologies concerning the nature of fieldwork itself that have touched on such questions (Okely & Callaway 1992, Fowler & Hardesty 1994, Barz & Cooley 1997), most of the work that has been done can be found in the introductions to a wildly diverse group of doctoral dissertations. As a result, those who wish to address these issues have little easily available material to draw on, aside from their own experience and intuition. Fortunately, both of these sources have much to offer the researcher who wishes to utilize them.

One of the main projects to which the home-based researcher must devote these energies is, as I said, the maintenance of the (admittedly artificial) separation between "the field" and "the academic world". They may become conflated for a number of reasons, the most obvious of which is that they both occupy the same physical space.

Another reason for disorienting overlap is that the scholar is often not the only individual that moves between the two worlds, and the resulting malleability of social barriers tends to blur any strict distinction between the field and the academic world. A number of participants in my hip-hop world (including S.K. Honda, DJ Topspin, DJ E-Rok, Jake-One and MC H-Bomb) have attended the University of Washington as students during my time here. Five of the people I interviewed for this project (Wordsayer, Kylea, Strath Shepard, Mr. Supreme, and DJ B-Mello) have lectured to classes I have taught at the University.

Perhaps the best example of this phenomenon in action was a festival of African American music which I attended in the spring of 1999. My committee chair (along with a visiting artist and several graduate students from my department) performed Trinidadian Pan music; they were immediately followed on the same stage by a hip-hop show that featured a number of my consultants. In between their sets, I found myself in a conversation with two members of my doctoral committee and two hip-hop artists, all of whom saw themselves simply as fellow participants in a musical event.

Despite the threat to anthropological tradition, I do not see this state of affairs as a shortcoming of this work. The problematic nature of my relationship to the field served as an organic critique of the study itself at every stage of the process. At any point in the preparation of this work, for instance, I could email or telephone a consultant for clarification. It is difficult, in retrospect, to imagine the shape of this work had such an option not been available (as it traditionally would not). It even became commonplace to bring drafts of various chapters with me whenever I went out to a nightclub for fun, on the assumption that I would encounter at least one of my consultants, whose comments I sought. In other words, my fieldwork was a social process that interacted in manifold ways with the social processes that were the intended focus of this study. While I brought the field into my analysis, I also brought my analysis into the field. Several of the

interviews for this project were conducted in my home, and I often unwound from a long day of writing by discussing my ideas with consultants in the back of loud, smoky, nightclubs in between their DJ sets.

Working in Seattle also allowed me to spend an extended period of participant observation in the field (seven years, so far), an opportunity that has greatly affected the finished work. I became involved in the Seattle hip-hop scene when I moved here to begin graduate school in 1992, and have attended an average of one hip-hop event per week (concert, club night, etc.) since then. I began writing for Seattle's now-defunct hip-hop magazine *The Flavor* in 1995, and currently write about hip-hop for the *Seattle Weekly*, *Resonance*, and the nationally distributed *URB* magazine. After I began the current project, I bought a sampler of my own, and began to make rudimentary beats, often playing them for my former *Flavor* compatriots who had now become substantial figures in the hip-hop scene, and – not incidentally – my consultants. Perhaps more significantly at my level of development, I have also found myself with an increasingly obsessive devotion to "digging in the crates" for rare records (see chapter 5). My practical experience with these endeavors, as well as my discussions about them with my consultants and others, has played a deep role in forming my analysis.

Non-local communities

I interviewed individuals from Seattle, Oakland, Los Angeles, Atlanta, and Philadelphia for this study. All of them knew each other, either directly or indirectly. As I discuss in chapter five, this is a small community, held together by phone, the Internet, and regular travel. While such communities have always existed to some degree (Anderson (1983), in fact, argues that even such an accepted political formation as the nation-state constitutes an "imagined" community), the increasingly global nature of communication and the

international flow of labor and capital has made the non-local community an increasingly common affair (Clifford 1992 Appadurai 1990, Slobin 1992). While this has its practical difficulties for the ethnographer – there is no "village center" where important business takes place - it also means that relationships are driven by the needs and sensibilities of the individuals in question, more than by the physical manifestations of traditional power. In other words, there is no village center where "important business" takes place.

The ease with which such relationships can be maintained still surprises me. When I travel, I am regularly asked by Seattle hip-hop artists to deliver records and gossip to individuals in other cities. More often than not, these individuals give me records and opinions to take home. In each case, the interaction has been treated as a commonplace one, not unlike a daily mail delivery.

The Internet, in particular, is a powerful tool both for communication between individuals and dissemination of general information. The "crates" email discussion list, for example, brings about ten messages a day to its subscribers, concerning the availability and desirability of various used records for hip-hop production purposes.

In short, then, I chose Seattle as my primary field site for two reasons. First, my pre-existing experience with the hip-hop community there afforded me a greater degree of access than if I had begun my work elsewhere. Second, I felt that Seattle was exemplary as a node of the national network I am trying to portray; large enough to support a substantial community of musicians, but small enough to be constantly aware of its place within the greater social context.

Theoretical arc of dissertation

The practice of creating hip-hop music by using digital sampling to create sonic collages evolved from the practice of hip-hop deejaying. The nature and

implications of these developments are discussed in chapter three. Also discussed in chapter three are how this progression is largely recapitulated in the lives of individual producers, as part of an educational process that intends to inculcate young producers in the hip-hop aesthetic. This process is ongoing throughout a producer's career, and concerns many facets of hip-hop endeavor. In particular, I focus on the relationship between hip-hop deejaying (the process of manipulating records in a live performance setting), and hip-hop production (the manipulation of digital samples in the studio).

A significant portion of this dissertation concerns the ways in which social, artistic and ethical concerns work together to construct a sense of relative artistic quality, and how this sense of quality then circles back to affect individuals' social and artistic praxis. In doing so, I follow a model in which relative ethical and artistic quality is represented by a series of concentric circles, with the ideal being the center. Figure 1 represents the internal values of the producers' community, particularly the relationship between the aesthetic and ethical concerns discussed in chapters four, five, six and seven.

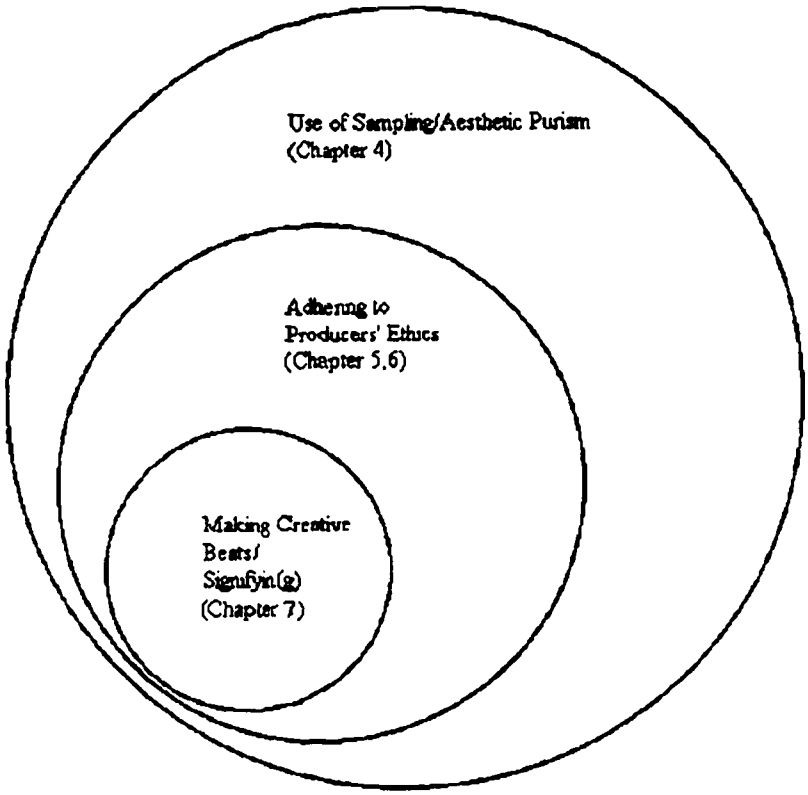

Figure 1: Increasing Quality in the Hip-Hop Producers' Aesthetic

I am presenting the various levels of "quality" (as judged by the producers themselves) as concentric circles with the center being the core, or theoretically "best" approach to hip-hop sampling. The decision to use digital sampling in the first place (as opposed to live instruments) reflects the purism of hip-hop producers in defining their genre (Chapter 4). Once that decision has been made, the next step on the road to increased quality is to follow the "producers' ethics", which define *what* may be sampled and *how* this sampling is to be done (Chapter 5). Finally, the most valued status to be claimed by producers is that of one who, having done these things, is able to produce a creative work (chapter 6). I argue

that, at this level, creativity is primarily defined by the process of signifyin(g), as described by Gates (1988). Each circle represents both a level of artistic quality *and* the group of people who have attained that level. The smaller circles are seen as existing within the larger ones, so, for example, all people who adhere to the producers' ethics use digital sampling, but not all people who use digital sampling adhere to the producers' ethics.[2]

This entire configuration is itself contained within a larger social world, as depicted in Figure 2. [3]

[2] This formulation also requires that all who are creative are ethical, which may seem odd at first. But the reason for this is that the ethics are required for admission to the community in which creativity is judged. Unethical people may be creative, but they are not creative *as sample-based hip-hop producers.*

[3] Since I am interested in hip-hop production, this model represents a perspective that is intentionally "producer-centric". Others in the hip-hop community would most likely not put producers at the center of their philosophical world.

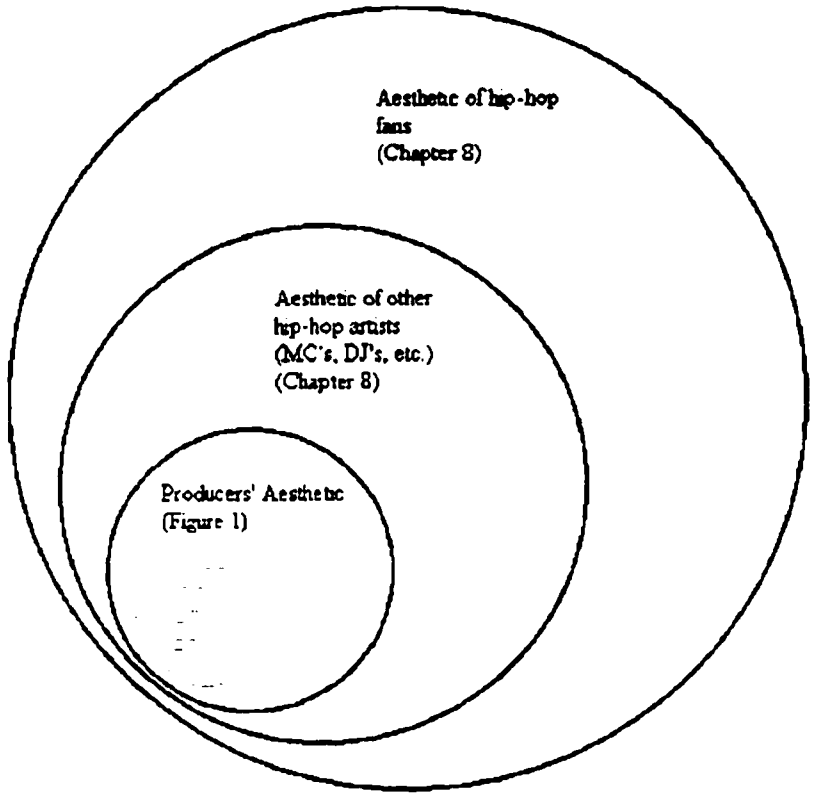

Figure 2: Increasing Quality in the Social World of Hip-Hop

Figure 2 situates the entire producers' aesthetic within a larger social world, whose concerns deeply and necessarily affect a producer's output. Again, while it is assumed that members of the inner circles abide by the outer, the reverse is not true. These outer circles include other members of the hip-hop industry, such as MC's, record company representatives, and radio and nightclub DJs, as well as fans. In chapter eight, I argue that the social structure represented by Figure 2 constitutes what Becker has called an "art world" – the total social network required to produce and interpret a work of art (Becker 1982). This

concentricity model implies that producers simply have more aesthetic rules than fans do, rather than different ones. This is, in fact, the case.

Textual issues

There are several issues concerning the nature of this project as a text that I wish to remark on.

First of all, I make a distinction between the terms "African American" and "Black", using the former in a much broader sense than the latter. In the pages that follow, I use African American to refer to the collective cultural legacy of people of African descent in the Americas. I use the term "Black", by contrast, to refer to a specific ethnic group in the United States that has largely been constituted by a tradition of racialist thinking. Given this definition, it seems appropriate that the term should be capitalized. The term "white", by contrast, does not appear to merit capitalization, insofar as it does not refer to a particular ethnicity, but rather to a social status (non-Black), that is shared by individuals from a variety of different ethnic backgrounds. As a number of scholars have pointed out, this social status, rather than a common history or language, is the primary constituent factor of whiteness (Epperson 1997, Goldner 1997).

Another decision I have struggled with has been to refer to producers with masculine pronouns in most cases. This is not intended to be in any way prescriptive. *I do not believe that producers "should" be male.* But I do believe that most producers *are* male. Furthermore, it is clear (as I will discuss in chapter 3) that the abstract ideal of a producer is conceived in masculine terms, and that this has a substantial effect on how individuals strive to live up to that ideal. The use of gender-neutral language, I feel, would create a distorted picture of this process.

Similarly, I feel that specifying the ethnicity of particular producers who I quote in the following pages would also add distortions, since the producers

themselves did not make any such distinctions to me. *I am not suggesting that ethnicity is not a concern for these individuals, only that it is not a determining factor in their conduct as producers.*[4]

Producers from a variety of backgrounds socialize with each other without particular regard to race. This is not surprising. Of the four generally recognized elements of hip-hop – emceeing, deejaying/producing, graffiti-writing, and b-boying/b-girling – only emceeing holds forth the promise of significant wealth or fame (and, of course, it is largely a false promise, but that is neither here nor there). But as a result, racial or cultural outsiders can reasonably be assumed to have exploitative motives for becoming involved in that practice. The other elements, however, offer little reward beyond the recognition of cultural insiders; those who engage in them, for the most part, do it for the love of the artform. It has thus been my experience that white DJ's, producers, b-boys, and especially graffiti-writers[5] – all of whom may be presumed to have purer motives - are much more readily accepted by the hip-hop community than white MC's.

Finally – and most significantly to the current study - there are no discernable stylistic differences between the practices of producers from different ethnic backgrounds. If there were a "white" or "Latino" style of hip-hop production, I think distinctions would be more justifiable. But, as I argue throughout this dissertation, all producers – regardless of race - make Black hip-hop.

It is certainly possible that the apparent colorblindness of the producers' community is an artifact of my own racial point of view (as a Jew, I would be considered white by most Americans). But, given the nature of my personality and those of my consultants, it is difficult for me to imagine that they would

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[4] A slight majority of my consultants identify themselves Black or African American. The rest are white, Latino and/or Asian.

[5] This is also due to the unavoidable fact that many of the early pioneers of graffiti writing were white.

downplay racial issues simply to avoid making me uncomfortable.[6] In fact, I have discussed various racial questions with almost all of them in other contexts. Ultimately, though, this is a question that can only be answered satisfactorily by a non-white researcher. From a purely logical standpoint, I cannot assess my own blind spots – if I could, they wouldn't be blind spots.

One factor that particularly stands out in an interview-based dissertation is the disjucture between the oral language of those who were interviewed and the written language of the author and secondary sources. In other words, my consultants' comments were initially presented orally, improvisationally, and in response to questions that they had not seen beforehand, while scholars' comments (both my own and quotes from other writers) were presented in written form, with (presumably) much forethought and revision.

Moreover, many of my consultants speak African American Vernacular English, even if they write Standard (i.e. European-inflected) American English. If one is not familiar with it, a written approximation of AAVE – non-standard by definition – may make the speaker appear to lack full linguistic competence. While such judgements are entirely the result of social prejudice, they may be reinforced by the textual juxtaposition between a quote from a speaker of AAVE and the broader text written in Standard American English.

I have used three strategies to try to account for the occasionally jarring nature of these oppositions (oral vs. written, AAVE vs. Standard English, improvised vs. prepared), the first of which is simply to call attention to them. A second strategy has been, as often as possible, to include my own side of the conversation when I quote from interviews. In this way, I am able to present a

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[6] Although three of my consultants did make brief pejorative references to "suburban kids", which I took to be a euphemism for "white kids". But, then again, one of them was himself white.

record of my own (often inarticulate) oral expressions, as an implicit point of comparison to those of my consultants.

Finally, I have shown drafts of this work to my consultants, in order to see that they are comfortable with the way they are being presented, as well as to make sure that my interpretations of their statements are consistent with what they actually meant. I feel that this is key, not only for ethical reasons, but also for simple accuracy. It is precisely the things we take for granted - our own assumptions about the way the world works - where we are most vulnerable, and where our consultants can exert a decisively positive role.

Even as groundbreaking and exemplary a scholar as Tricia Rose, for example, has fallen prey to such assumptions, as when she quotes a lyric from the early 1990's MC Paris – "P-dog commin' up, I'm straight low/Pro-black and it ain't no joke," – explaining that the song, "locates Paris's anger as a response to white colonialism and positions him as a "low" (read underground) voice backed up by a street mob whose commitment is explicitly pro-black and nationalist." (Rose 1994: 103). In fact, the word in question is "loc", slang for "crazy" (from the Spanish "loco").

Social Context of the Current Work

> This automatically throws us either down under and/or out back.
> And from that point of view, it's most improbable that anyone will
> ever know exactly who is enjoying the shadow of whom...
>
> Duke Ellington, *Afro-Eurasian Eclipse*

As I was completing this dissertation, Wordsayer – one of my consultants - asked me to interview him for the forthcoming album by his group, Source of Labor. We recorded three hours of conversation about the group's history and

outlook, from which he chose several brief excerpts to be set to music by producer Negus I. My role as an ethnographer, in other words, was being folded back into the music. Hip-hop is interpreting me even as I am interpreting hip-hop. So who am I? For white people writing about African American music this is an important question. Unfortunately, it is often answered with either guilty soul-searching or a confident recitation of one's credentials, both of which tend to be so particular to the individual in question as to be of little value to others.[7]

One begins to move beyond the constraints of this binary opposition when one senses the underlying issues implicit in William "Upski" Wimsatt's rhetorical question (which arose when he reflected on his own experiences in hip-hop culture), "Hadn't I just been a special white boy?" (Wimsatt 1994: 30). In other words, when a white person does manage to forge a relationship with Black culture, there is a temptation to attribute this to some exemplary aspect of our own personality. While there may be some truth to this (otherwise everyone would do it), it would be foolhardy – as Wimsatt forcefully argues – to ignore the larger forces at play. The difficulty lies in the fact that these forces manifest themselves primarily through our daily activities and interactions; it is often quite difficult to distinguish between one's own impulses and the imperatives of the larger society.

Upon further consideration, I find that a productive approach is for the scholar to create a framework in which their particular path may be interpreted as a case study of individuals from similar backgrounds pursuing similar goals. To that end, I wish to discuss several aspects of my own life that may contribute to a broader understanding, not only of my own project, but also of other such endeavors. In making this choice, I am intentionally avoiding the impulse to give a comprehensive explanation of my actions, in favor of focussing of a few specific factors that I feel have contributed and have been less exhaustively

[7] In some cases, the question is simply ignored entirely.

discussed elsewhere. These aspects include my ethnic/cultural background, age, and approach to scholarship.

I was born in 1968, and raised in suburban Connecticut, in a predominantly white, Christian suburb of Hartford. I was introduced to participant-observation at the age of five, when, according to my parents, I browbeat them into taking me to see Santa Claus at G. Fox, a large downtown department store. After a long wait, I made it to Santa's lap, and was asked what I wanted for Christmas. "Nothing," I replied, "We're Jewish."

This anecdote suggests to me that the experience of fieldwork was known to me at an early age, and that it was used to define my own identity as a Jew in America. In other words, I was trying to understand what I was by engaging with what I was not. I knew Santa Claus wasn't for me, yet I wanted to experience and understand him anyway. And I would suggest that, for American Jews in general, day to day living in this society (not to mention conscious self-definition) is always- to some degree – a process of participant observation.

When it comes to Black-Jewish interactions, the process becomes even more complex, since Jewish people must define themselves relative to *two* other factions –the majority culture as well as other minorities – whose relationship with each other is itself constantly in flux. As Rogin (1996) has pursuasively argued, the alteration of *any* leg of this triangle affects Jewish social positioning. In Rogin's view, Jewish engagement with Black culture is profoundly related to Jews' collective relationship to the white power structure, for better or worse. I believe that this social impulse, combined with a general Jewish predisposition toward scholarship as a mode of social interaction (Boyarin 1997), may account for the disproportionate Jewish representation in fields that make use of ethnography, such as anthropology and ethnomusicology, as well as our particular use of these fields to study African American culture.

Another useful approach may be to see my work as a delayed product of the cultural environment in which I was raised – particularly that of 1970's television. As Serlin (1998) has pointed out, children's shows of that era (particularly Sesame Street, the Electric Company, and Schoolhouse Rock), presented multicultural utopias held together by what, in retrospect, was extraordinarily funky music.[8] While hip-hop samples from a variety of sources, there is a particular focus on music that was originally recorded in the early 1970's, an era that corresponds to early childhood for myself and my contemporaries who are hip-hop producers. I imagine that at least some of the pleasure we derive from hearing a vibrato-laden electric piano or a tight snare drum comes from the (often subconscious) visions they conjure up of childhood, and the mass-mediated friendships of Maria, Gordon, Rudy, and Mushmouth.

Moreover, a significant social aspect of this particular project - and its value to me personally - is the scholarly approach that hip-hop producers take toward collecting old records for sampling purposes (see chapter 5). This dovetails nicely with my own tendencies as an ethnomusicologist, insofar as I enjoy talking about various trends in popular music history, as well as collecting records. This, in other words, was common intellectual ground upon which my consultants and I could stand.

On a more specific note, the general tenor of this study is related to my own experience with hip-hop in a way that may not be immediately apparent. Much of this dissertation concerns the material realities and artistic aspirations of individual musicians – an approach that, in many cases, conflicts with analyses that are concerned with the more general social or political implications of hip-

[8] As Serlin is focussing on explicitly educational television, he does not focus on *Fat Albert and the Cosby Kids*, but this was certainly an influence as well. The motto, recited at the beginning of each show by Bill Cosby, always comes to mind when I'm feeling idealistic about hip-hop (I'm

hop culture. While I do feel that many previous analyses have overstated hip-hop's political implications, I also believe that the dichotomy is ultimately a false one. My concern in these pages is merely to elucidate the aesthetic and social structures that have been overlooked in the rush to assign political significance to this art form.

Throughout the dissertation, I argue this point on various grounds, each of which the reader is free to accept or reject on their own merit. But absent a brief recapitulation of my own developing relationship to hip-hop aesthetics, I am concerned that the reader may get the mistaken impression that I feel that politics either is not, or should not be, important to hip-hop.

My relationship with hip-hop began in earnest in early 1987, when my housemate Dan Booth and I chipped in to buy *Yo, Bum Rush The Show*, the first album by Public Enemy. This was at a time when the idea of "political hip-hop" seemed almost to be a novelty – it was at least novel enough that I would contribute three dollars and fifty cents to the purchase of the album entirely on that basis; I had never heard any of Public Enemy's music. I became interested in hip-hop because of its politics, and to this day my favorite artists remain the most political: Public Enemy, KRS-ONE, Brand Nubian, X-Clan, Poor Righteous Teachers, Rakim, Black Star. And yet, I soon realized, it was not the politics alone that attracted me. In fact, there were artists whose politics more closely mirrored my own, but whose albums lost their appeal quite rapidly, while albums featuring more politically problematic messages remained attractive to me. At the same time, I was beginning to notice that, while there have been many hip-hop albums that featured no rapping, no one has ever released an album that featured only rapping and no music. Ultimately, I realized, all of the politics, social issues,

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quoting from memory here): "Bringing you music and fun, and if you're not careful, you may learn something before it's done."

and slogans in the world would not be significant if I didn't actually like the sound and feel of hip-hop.

Like my consultants, I love a tight, cracking snare drum sample, the feel of bass in my chest, and a crowded dance floor. "They Reminisce Over You" by Pete Rock and C.L. Smooth, in addition to being a fine example of creative sampling, is also one of the most beautifully poignant songs I have ever heard, and it never fails to send chills down my spine. It is these chills that are often lost in academic discussion. It is these chills that motivate hip-hop producers to devote their time and money to sample-based hip-hop. And it is these chills that have drawn me to produce the following study.

II. Literature Review

In this chapter, I will discuss the previous scholarly work that forms the foundation of the present study. My intention here is to discuss some of the general issues that have influenced the course of hip-hop scholarship, in order to place the current work within it. I will deal with many aspects of the previous literature more specifically in the chapters that correspond to their particular concerns.

The development of a cohesive body of literature on hip-hop music, though still in its early stages, has already been characterized by a number of discernable trends. The literature that addresses hip-hop's precursors, such as traditional African American oral poetry, is dispersed among the literature of a variety of academic disciplines, a situation that has unintentionally created an inappropriately fragmented portrait of hip-hop's origins. The early 1980's brought a number of relatively historical and descriptive works that focussed on the new musical form. In the 1990's, the literature seems to have again split into postmodernist analyses of hip-hop as commodified aesthetic or highly polemicized portrayals of hip-hop as a social movement. Discussions of hip-hop as a musical form have been notably sparse.

For a number of historical reasons, it is valuable to look beyond the walls of academia to understand how the discourse of hip-hop was shaped. One important reason is that, with a few significant exceptions, analytical writing on African American cultural forms before the 1960's was almost entirely the work of white academics. Before the emergence of Black Studies departments at major universities, African Americans were excluded in large part from this scholarship, both by explicit racism (segregated schools, quotas, etc.), as well as by an

objectifying style of discourse that often made the study of African American cultural material uncomfortable, or even distasteful, for individuals who had grown up in that culture (Harrison 1991). While many of the more overt factors have fallen away in the ensuing years, many of the more subtle factors remain. For this reason, I will draw on popular as well as scholarly works in this chapter and throughout the dissertation.

Precursors to Hip-Hop

Hip-hop's precursors, when they have been studied at all, have been studied in ways that are not particularly related to music, or to each other.

I would distinguish five primary factors that contributed to the birth of hip-hop music: 1) the African-American tradition of oral poetry (influential on the style as a whole); 2) various kinesthetic rhythm activities, such as children's clapping games, hambone and double-dutch ; 3) developments in technology for the recording and reproduction of music which culminated in the use of digital sampling; 4) attitudes in African American cultures regarding the value and use of recorded music; and 5) General societal conditions (i.e. social, political and economic) that made hip-hop an attractive proposition for inner-city youth.

Any useful scholarship on hip-hop that wishes to be grounded in the literature is therefore *necessarily* interdisciplinary, since it must begin by integrating the literature on these diverse subjects. Of the five areas I have delineated, only one - societal conditions - had been extensively investigated prior to the birth of hip-hop. This, I believe, is one of the reasons that its significance is frequently overstated, relative to the other four, in many discussions of hip-hop.

Scholarship that ties the remaining four areas to the birth of hip-hop is sparse, a state of affairs I would attribute to two factors: 1) for various social reasons (particularly race, class, and gender) precursors to hip-hop, such as toasts, double-dutch rhymes, etc., were not seen as warranting academic attention; and 2)

because this material was inconsistent in many ways with academic ideas of music, the literature that does exist is scattered among a variety of other disciplines, such as folklore and sociology. In other words, there is little material on the antecedents of hip-hop, and virtually none that addresses it from a musical perspective (or even admits that there is, in fact, a musical aspect that exists to be addressed).[1]

In order to discuss this literature, therefore, one is forced to focus on oral poetry: rapping. The nature of the scholarship on African American rhythmic poetry varies radically over time, in terms of the modes of inquiry that are employed, the core issues which are emphasized, the political valence of the work at the time it was done, and the availability of accurate information to scholars.

Although there is a substantial body of work on West African oral culture, little of the scholarship dates from the era of slavery, when its influence would have been felt on African American culture. Nevertheless, I believe there is valuable information to be gained from contemporary African poetic forms, so long as we keep in mind that those forms, like their American cousins, are contemporary descendants of shared ancient ancestors, and not the ancestors themselves.

For example, in Christopher Waterman's bibliography of basic resources for sub-Saharan Africa, the earliest listed work dates from 1901 (Waterman 1993). Earlier work consists largely of travelers' narratives, folklore collections, and, in the second half of the 19th century, some philological studies (Finnegan 1970: 28). Little, if any, of this work, however, notes such aspects as specific rhythmic or melodic patterns. Of course, much of the contemporary popular literature that does address this subject simply begs the question by equating putative ancient practice with contemporary rural traditions, including musical

[1] A notable exception to this trend is Paul Theberge's excellent work on contemporary technology's influence on modern conceptions of music (Theberge 1997).

forms which, in many cases, are nationalist revivals (or constructions) (Burns 1991/1995, Jones 1992, Tate 1992, Sexton 1995, Shomari 1995). Again, though, these approaches are still valuable to the scholar.

There has been a great deal of work done on African oral culture which draws explicit or implicit connections to the performance practice of African Americans (Finnegan 1970, Herskovits 1941, Kilson 1971, Okediji 1992, Oliver 1970, Stone 1988, Waterman 1963). These works point to several distinct types of poetry which are in evidence in contemporary West Africa, including praise poetry, elegies, religious or spiritual poetry, topical songs, and functional songs (Finnegan 1970). Note that I am using the terms 'song' and 'poetry' interchangeably, as cultural convention, in addition to the tonal nature of many West African languages, renders the distinction largely moot (Chernoff 1979, Finnegan 1970, Herskovits 1941, Stone 1988).

Since the slave trade made specific, and largely successful, efforts to destroy linguistic ties between Africa and the United States (though not so much in the Caribbean), African poetic retentions in the U.S. tend to be more in the nature of social context, form, and subject matter, rather than specific poems, which would have a more difficult time surviving translation (Herskovits 1941, Waterman 1963, Oliver 1971). This is reflected in the scholarship on rhythmic activity in the United States.

Deanna Epstein, however, cites a number of references to the practice of "patting juba" (a precursor to the modern hip-hop practice of "beatboxing", or creating rhythmic patterns with the mouth), most of which come from traveler's descriptions (Epstein 1977:141-144). She notes two significant aspects of the historical perception of this activity in that it seemed to be more of interest to poets than musicians, and that it did not become part of the minstrel tradition (Ibid.: 142). Both of these observations suggest that even among white people that

were familiar with them. such practices were considered more along the lines of pass-times, games, and perhaps poetry, than music.

It was not until the late 20th century that these practices became the object of significant scholarly inquiry (Abrahams 1964, 1969, 1970, Dance 1978, Epstein 1977, Gaunt 1997, Levine 1977). I believe that the absence of scholarship on these phenomena in the United States is largely due to social pressures along several different axes. One is a sense that childrens' games are less significant than other forms of artistic expression.

Another is the association of toasts with lower class African Americans, rendering them unsuitable for middle class or religious African Americans, as well as a tendency by those groups to prevent such displays from being observed by whites. As Abrahams puts it:

> ...there are those blacks who would reject the street-corner culture that I discuss herein because it is part of the life lived in the depths to which whites have forced Negroes to sink. These militants argue that we have a black culture only because blacks have not been permitted access to those features of American affluence and power that go along with white middle-class culture...Though there is a good deal of truth to this argument, the pursuit of it provides a disservice to Negroes, because it intensifies guilts and insecurities for the black masses who are born into, and who continue to express elements of this culture. It serves the revolution, it seems to me, but not the masses. (Abrahams 1970: pp?).

In making a distinction between the outlook of "the militants" and "the masses" Abrahams is ignoring a third party to this controversy: conservative (usually religious) African Americans. Although it might seem strange that radicals and conservatives might find themselves allied in opposition to working- and lower-class sensibilities, it is, in fact, a class issue that goes back at least to the era of Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Dubois (DuBois 1903/1965, Washington 1901/1965). Militants and conservatives alike wanted to reinforce

what they saw as the best aspects of African American culture in order to "uplift the race".

In addition, the specific language and subject matter of the toasts certainly adds fuel to this fire. "The Signifying Monkey", which has formed the basis for Henry Louis Gates' Black literary theory of the same name (Gates 1987), opens - in most cases - with the following lines:

> Deep down in the jungle so they say
> There's a signifying motherfucker down the way.
> There hadn't been no disturbin' in the jungle for quite a bit,
> For up jumped the monkey in the tree one day and laughed,
> "I guess I'll start some shit". (Abrahams 1964: 149-150).

Finally, the tendency of Eurocentric musicology to value melody and harmony over rhythm is well documented, and it is not surprising that this would remove toasts and rhythm games from the purview of musicology.

Most of the ethnographic information available on how this tradition developed in the early 20th century can be found in works that have emerged from the folklore tradition, dealing with extended narrative poems or toasts (Abrahams 1964, 1970, Dance 1978, Levine 1977). As I said, little work on this tradition exists from before the 1960's, but most later works take pains to note that their informants indicated that the particular poems that they perform have been around since at least the 1930's (Abrahams1964: 126, 139). Again, it seems that, until the civil rights movement and emergence of Black nationalism in the 1960's, these traditions were still seen as mere pass-times at best, not worthy of serious study.

In addition, because of their disciplinary focus, these works tend to stress the isolation of general narrative themes and local variants, implicitly looking for an ur-text, which was an ancestor to all. For this reason, the performances are abstracted from their particular characteristics and circumstances into texts, which are then analyzed as literature (Abrahams 1964, 1970, Dance 1978, Levine 1977). I am not arguing that these works *do not* constitute "literature", with all the

cultural value that that word suggests, only that this is only one of many potential ways in which the phenomenon could be analyzed, and that, in taking this approach, these scholars may have obscured some of the musical value which these performances had to offer. For instance, none of the above-cited sources contain any information about the rhythms or relative pitch-levels, which are used in the toasts. Again, this ties back to my point, that these activities have not historically been viewed by academics as music.

In the late 1960's, largely as the result of Black cultural nationalism, many previously rejected aspects of Black culture began to be celebrated. Such things as rural working class styles of cooking, singing, and dancing, which had been largely rejected by newly urbanized African Americans in the 1950's, were recast as "soul food" and "soul music" in the 1960's (Harlambos 1974, Van Deburg 1992).

As part of this movement, poets, musicians and radio DJ's, such as the Last Poets, Gil Scott-Heron and Gary Byrd, turned to the toasts of an earlier era for stylistic inspiration (Heron 1990). This, I believe, removed much of the social stigma from these traditions, allowing the older forms to be studied as cultural material that would not be an embarrassment. Nevertheless, even its performers did not see this material as specifically musical until it was combined with recorded music manipulated by DJ's in the late 1970's.

Since that time, while nominally considered music, there remains strikingly little work on the specific musical gestures that hip-hop comprises. The fact that the present work – the first substantial study of hip-hop sampling – is being written almost fifteen years after the phenomenon first arose, attests to that state of affairs.

The literary tradition relating to hip-hop's precursors, then, seems to encompass the literature of every discipline *but* music, from African American oral poetry (folklore) to the rhythms of double-dutch (developmental

psychology/sociology) to the technological developments of South Bronx DJ's (history/sociology/postmodern literary theory). Hip-hop – as music - is literally *unprecedented.* This may create an unbalanced environment for hip-hop scholarship, since the scholar must explain how a musical form such as hip-hop could appear instantly from nowhere. While few address this question directly, it does emerge in the literature in the form of a striking ahistoricality, particular notable in the work of postmodern theorists. As Cheryl Keyes has noted, "...postmodern criticism tends to define rap music in modernity, thereby distancing it as both as verbal and musical form anchored in a cultural history, detaching it as a cultural process over time, and lessening the importance of rap music and its culture as a dynamic tradition." (1996: 224).

Hip-hop literature

When I refer to the ahistoricality of much of the contemporary literature on hip-hop, I am referring to the difficulties of putting hip-hop music into the context of a larger *musical* history and the resulting implication that hip-hop – as a musical form - is *sui generis* and unprecedented. The eighties did bring several excellent works that strictly concern the development of hip-hop itself (cf. Castleman 1982,George 1998, Hager 1984, Toop 1984/1991). Castleman's work – essentially an ethnography of the graffiti-writing community in New York City (including police officers who try to stop it) - has been a particular influence on the current study.

But most works on hip-hop present it as a discrete moment in time, and the few that do take a larger historical view almost universally follow the development of rapping, to the exclusion of other hip-hop arts. This has its benefits as well as its liabilities.

The primary benefit of such ahistoricity is that it implicitly presents history (i.e. a developmental paradigm based in linear time) as only one of a

variety of possible settings for analytical work on hip-hop. Many of the above-cited works primarily emphasize economic, social, and cultural contexts, all of which are valuable approaches. The liabilities emerge, however, when history is summarily excluded as a paradigm, due to the paucity of source material, or the requirements of a theory. While some scholars find that historical context is not relevant to their particular argument, many imply that historical context *cannot* be relevant, since hip-hop's use of previous recordings from different eras automatically voids the paradigm of historical development. This, I believe, is a mistake. As Keyes notes above, hip-hop's aesthetic is deeply beholden to the music of other eras, and an understanding of these sensibilities can only enrich our understanding of contemporary practice.

Furthermore, the boundary between hip-hop insiders and outsider can be rather porous, a state of affairs that may be obscured when hip-hop is removed from its larger context. As I will show, the nature of the producers' art in particular requires them to explore outside the genre boundaries of hip-hop. Producer Mr. Supreme, for instance, rejects the notion that a "true hip-hopper" should listen only to hip-hop music:

> If you're a real true hip hopper - and I think a lot of hip hoppers aren't -like I always say, "it's all music". So if you really are truly into hip-hop, how can you not listen to anything else? Because it comes from everything else. So you *are* listening to everything else. So how can you say "I only listen to hip hop, and I don't listen to this." It doesn't make sense to me. (Mr. Supreme, personal interview: 1998)

If such attitudes are rarely seen in scholarly writing about hip-hop, it is largely because they do not answer the questions that scholars are interested in: what does hip-hop's popularity say about American culture in the late 20th century, how does global capitalism affect artistic expression, and so forth.

Most hip-hop writing in the 1990's has rested on two major premises: that hip-hop is primarily expression of particularly Black social and cultural

formations in the United States (Spencer 1991, Shomari 1995, Keyes 1995, Perkins 1996, Awadu 1997, Norfleet 1997, George 1998), and that hip-hop is an expression of the cultural logic of late capitalism (Costello & Wallace 1990, Lipsitz 1994, Rose 1994, Potter 1995),

Rose and Potter offer particularly sophisticated blends of these two arguments. Rose, for instance, defines her project as follows:

> I have chosen four main areas of inquiry: (1) the history of rap and hip hop in relationship to the New York postindustrial urban terrain; (2) rap's musical and technological interventions; (3) rap's racial politics, institutional critiques, and media and institutional responses; and (4) raps' sexual politics, particularly female rappers' critiques of men and the feminist debates that surround women rappers. (Rose 1994: xv)

Rather than present hip-hop as either a virtually predetermined result of global market forces or as a completely internal cultural development within the Black community, Rose – I believe, correctly – sees these forces as intertwined. A fine example of this can be seen in the above quote, when she presents hip-hop's racial politics as a phenomenon that exists not in isolation, but rather as part of a dialectic with the mainstream (i.e. white, corporate) portrayal of the culture.

Potter's work continues this approach, making a more somewhat more subtle effort to link hip-hop to postmodernist approaches:

> ...it could be said that *all* black artistic movements are postmodern. In fact I would argue that, while in a very general sense such a statement has its truth, in actual historical practice postmodernity has marked a particular *part* of the cycle of African-American arts, a part intimately related to its material situation. For there is history at stake here, not only the history of the structures of resistance, from spiritual songs to Calypso stick-dancers to Public Enemy's S1W security force, but the already double(d) history of "white" appropriation, commodification , and dilution of black artistic expressions. From the minstrel shows of the nineteenth century, through the "swing" jazz cover bands that cashed in on the Jazz craze of the '30s, to the white musicians who appropriated jump Blues and called it rock-n-roll, African-

> American arts have always been dogged by the backhanded compliments of exoticization and commodification. A great deal of value has been placed on black arts, but this value has been largely negotiable only in terms of white dollars. Conscious of this recurring act of appropriation, African American artists have again and again wrenched new time out of old, refusing and interrupting the commodification of their work. And, while much of this has been represented by its chroniclers as a species of *modernism* (and here I am thinking of moments from the Harlem Renaissance to Bop to the Black Arts movement), each has been pointedly sited on cultural breaks – breaks with pre-existing black traditions that had been approprated and retailed to suit mass (read *white*) tastes, and at the same time *returns* to previous moments within the black artistic continuum. The resulting radical *now*, based on the irruption of unaccounted histories and as-yet unfulfilled futures, itself constitutes a *gap* in progressive time, a gap which both draws from and gives voice to the frustrations felt when the artistic expressions of black diasporic communities are once again taken out of the control of their originators and producers. (Potter: 4-5)

At the same time, however, neither Rose's nor Potter's works are based on participant observation. In fact, only two of the aforementioned works –Keyes and Norfleet – are primarily ethnographic in their approach. In other words, while many scholars write about hip-hop *music*, few write about hip-hop *musicians* (or fans). As I will discuss in the next chapter, this can lead to a number of misconceptions, including overly deterministic views of hip-hop developments and the reduction of individuals to symbolic constructs.

Finally, virtually all of these works are primarily concerned with rapping, to the exclusion of other hip-hop arts, such as deejaying, producing, writing graffiti, and especially dance.[2]

Given innumerable possible theoretical approaches and a host of possible subjects, it is strange, to say the least, that the overwhelming majority of hip-hop scholarship consists of postmodern analyses of rapping.

The Current Study

In addition to the use of ethnography, the current study is also distinguished by its subject matter: the non-vocal aspects of hip-hop music. While there have been several short works on the role of deejaying in live performance (White 1996, Allen 1997), there has been very little substantial work on sampling within a hip-hop context. In fact, to the best of my knowledge there have been only two journal articles that focus specifically on sample-based musical gestures (Walser 1995, Gaunt 1995). Walser, in particular, provides a detailed analysis of the sonic components of Public Enemy's "Fight the Power" (1989). But, again, neither of these works is based on ethnography – they focus on the results of sampling, rather than the process. And, as I suggest throughout this dissertation, a musical analysis that does not take the musicians intentions into account may not be entirely satisfying.

There are two primary reasons for the lack of attention that the non-vocal aspects of recorded hip-hop have received from academia. First, the aesthetics of composition are determined by a complex set of ethical concerns and practical choices that can only be studied from within the community of hip-hop producers. Most researchers who have written about hip-hop have not sought or have not gained access to that community. Second, as suggested above, many of these scholars have emerged from disciplines that are oriented towards the study of texts or social processes, rather than musical structures. Simply put, it is not the music that interests them about hip-hop.

While I don't feel that it's appropriate to criticize someone for what they *don't* study, such an approach –legitimate on its own terms – does reinforce the notion that the non-verbal aspects of hip-hop are not worthy of attention. For

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[2] For some reason, the small amount of work that has been done of graffiti-writing is uniformly excellent (see Castleman 1982 and Austin 1998).

example, Potter, in an otherwise excellent book, dismisses the instrumental foundation of hip-hop almost out of hand, beginning a chapter with the pronouncement that, "Whatever the role played by samples and breakbeats, for much of hip-hop's core audience, it is without question the *rhymes* that come first." (Potter 1995: 81[emphasis in original]). In a sense, this entire study is devoted precisely to questioning this conclusion.

As I will discuss in chapter four, in the rare and brief cases when the music is the focus of the study, it is usually addressed as an example of what Jamison has called "the cultural logic of late capitalim": postmodernism (Jamison 1978). I would caution, however, that hip-hop's apparent lack of history, which I've just detailed, when combined with its apparently 'postmodern' sampling style, may make hip hop appear to be more conducive to such analyses than it actually is.

On a theoretical level, various strains of postmodernism have much to contribute to the study of hip-hop music. From Birmingham-school reception theory to the negotiation of ethnicity in contemporary society to the commodification of aesthetics in a global marketplace, all of these things are very much present in hip-hop culture.

But postmodernism, as paradigm, tends to devalue the specific, demonstrable approaches used by individuals within hip-hop in favor of broader theoretical concerns. (c.f. Allen 1996, Costello & Wallace 1990, Del Barco 1996, Dyson 1994, Flores 1996, Kelly 1996, 1997, Lipsitz 1994, Pareles 1995, Potter 1995, 1998, Rose 1994, Shomari 1995, and Wheeler 1991). While all of these works have provided valuable theoretical insights, they have been notably lacking both in empirical data and indigenous perspectives. This literature treats hip-hop lyrics either as free-floating texts or political symbols, rather than as a single component of a larger socially situated musical process whose players operate within identifiable (and often self-imposed) pragmatic and aesthetic boundaries.

Put another way, I would argue that this approach imbues the (quite valid) insights that postmodernism can provide with more significance than they warrant, and tends to minimize the role of aesthetic histories, both personal and communal.

And as I will discuss in the next chapter, these histories exert a decisive influence over contemporary hip-hop sampling.

III. A History of Sampling, and its Connection to Deejaying

In this chapter, I will discuss some of the developments that have led to current hip-hop sampling practice, beginning with a brief history of hip-hop sampling itself. Having done this, I will discuss the process by which individuals become hip-hop producers. A major influence on both of these processes has been the close historical and social relationship between deejaying (manipulation of turntables in live performance) and producing (use of digital sampling in the studio). Finally, I will address some of the ways in which tropes of masculinity have become encoded in this educational process.

On a more general level, I try to stress the ways in which material reality and specific social pressures have influenced individual innovators. As I will argue throughout this study, I feel that analyses that focus on more general political and social concerns – even in cases when they are voiced by hip-hop artists themselves – tend to be ex-post-facto justifications, rather than reflections of their actual intent when creating specific recordings.

Historical issues

Before addressing the specifics of sampling history, I want to call attention to - and dispute - the popular tendency to portray hip-hop as an organic cultural development. In reading about the music's history, one often gets the impression that - given the social, cultural and economic circumstances in which it arose - hip-hop was inevitable; that if none of hip-hop's innovators had been born, a different group of poor Black youth from the Bronx would have developed hip-hop in exactly the same way. Although he is being intentionally impressionistic, Robert Farris Thompson exemplifies this approach when he writes that, "...in the Bronx at least, it seems the young men and women of that much-misunderstood borough *had* to invent hip hop to regain the voice that had been denied them

through media indifference or manipulation." [emphasis in original] (Thompson 1996: 213). Or as Spencer puts it:

> ...The current emergence of rap is a by-product of the *emergency of black*. This emergency still involves the dilemma of the racial "color-line," but it is complicated by the threat of racial genocide: the obliteration of all-black institutions, the political separation of the black elite from the black working class, and the benign decimation of the"ghetto poor," who are perceived as nonproductive and therefore dispensable...
>
> ...Both the rapper and the engaged scholar seek to provide the black community with a Wisdom that can serve as the critical ingredient for empowering the black community to propel itself toward existential salvation, that can overcome disempowering, genocidal, hell-bent existence. [emphasis in original] (Spencer 1991: v)

In short, Spencer is saying that hip-hop developed primarily as a form of resistance to oppression. While I certainly agree that all of the dire factors that Spencer cites are significant, I question whether their existence constitutes a sufficient explanation for the emergence of hip-hop music. In fact, as the historian Robin D.G. Kelley has pointed out, the unquestioned association of oppression with creativity is endemic to writing about African American art, in general:

> ...when social scientists explore "expressive" cultural forms or what has been called "popular culture" (such as language, music, and style), most reduce it to expressions of pathology, compensatory behavior, or creative "coping mechanisms" to deal with racism and poverty. While some aspects of black expressive cultures certainly help inner city residents deal with and even resist ghetto conditions, most of the literature ignores what these cultural forms mean for the practitioners. Few scholars acknowledge that what might also be at stake here are aesthetics, style and pleasure. (Kelley 1997: 16-17)

Moreover, I would argue that, in addition to the misdirected focus that Kelley criticizes, such analyses may also promote several specific deterministic misconceptions.

The first of these is that a culture can exist outside of individual human experience. Hip-hop was not created by African American *culture*; it was created by African American *people*, each of whom had volition, creativity and choice as to how to proceed. This becomes apparent when one remembers that hip-hop did not emerge fully formed; like all musical developments, it grew through a series of small innovations that later became retroactively defined as foundational. DJ Kool Herc, for example, was not forced by his oppressive environment to isolate percussion breaks when he deejayed in the early 70s; he chose to do it. And if he hadn't, there is little realistic reason to assume that someone else would have. While his socio-cultural environment embraced his innovation, it did not create it.

In addition to cultural determinism, there is also a great deal of class determinism evident in the scholarly discourse of hip-hop. While certain elements of hip-hop culture, such as b-boying, graffiti-writing, and emceeing may well be the products of economic adversity, other aspects, particularly deejaying and producing, are not: they require substantial capital investment. This, in and of itself, is not particularly significant, except that it contradicts the narratives of those who would characterize hip-hop as the voice of a dispossessed *lumpenproletariat*, a musical hodge-podge cobbled together from the scraps of the majority culture. As Toop, for example, writes:

> Competition was at the heart of hip hop. Not only did it help displace violence and the refuge of destructive drugs like heroin, but it also fostered an attitude of creating from limited materials. Sneakers became high fashion; original music was created from turntables, a mixer and obscure (highly secret) records; entertainment was provided with the kind of showoff street rap that almost any kid was capable of turning on a rival. (Toop 1991: 15).

While Toop's examples are certainly accurate historically, one must be careful of letting the very real influence of material circumstance on individuals become inflated into either a motive or an aesthetic for an entire movement. To do

so demeans the creativity of the artists involved, suggesting that they had no choice but to create what they did, since no other options were open to them. In the above quote, for example, Toop marvels that "original music" could be created from the "limited materials" of "turntables, a mixer and...records". But exactly how are these "limited"? The idea that an individual could have access to a DJ system and thousands of obscure records, but not to a more conventional musical instrument (such as a guitar), is difficult to accept.

DJ Kool Akiem of the Micranots, for one, disputes the assertion that early hip-hop artists were primarily influenced by their poverty:

DJ Kool Akiem: [sarcastically] "They were too poor to get instruments." Yeah, right. They were too poor for classes. Somebody came along with a hundred-dollar sampler.

Man, those samplers were [expensive] back then! I mean, you gotta have money, some way, to put your studio together.... Producing takes more money than playin' a instrument. You play an instrument, you buy the instrument and then you go to class, you know what I mean?

Joe: Even deejaying costs more money than playing an instrument...

DJ Kool Akiem: I mean deejaying, if you're serious, you're gonna have to spend a thousand dollars on your equipment. But then every record's ten bucks. Then you got speakers and blah, blah, blah.

> Even saying that is kinda weird. Obviously, they [the scholars] just probably didn't think about it. The most important thing to them is, "Oh, the kids are poor," you know what I mean? Not even thinkin' about it. Just like, "Well, that must be it: they're poor!" (DJ Kool Akiem, telephone interview: 1999)

In 1986, when sampling achieved its initial popularity, the least expensive version of the E-mu SP-12[1] carried a list price of $2,745 - well beyond the budget of most inner-city teens (Oppenheimer 1986: 84). And while the current popularity of hip-hop music has led to an increased demand for inexpensive equipment, the Akai MPC 2000 (the most popular digital sampler used by hip-hop producers today) sells for $1,599 (*Musician's Friend Catalog*: Summer 1999).

Hip-Hop History

> The rap DJ evolved from the party DJ, whose ostensible role was merely to play pre-recorded music for dance parties; like their audiences, these DJs were *consumers* of pop music. Yet by taking these musical sounds, packaged for consumption, and remaking them into new sounds through scratching, cutting, and sampling, what had been consumption was transformed into *production*. (Potter 1995: 36)

The basic DJ system consists of two turntables and a mixer that controls the relative volume of each. Using this equipment, a new record could be prepared on one turntable while another was still playing, thus allowing for an uninterrupted flow of music. As has been extensively documented elsewhere, the central innovation of early hip-hop was the use of this system with two copies of the same record for various effects, particularly the isolation of the "break".

[1] The SP-12 and its more expensive sister the SP-1200 were the samplers of choice for such hip-hop innovators as Marley Marl, Public Enemy, and Ced-G of the Ultramagnetic MC's.

As Toop relates:

> Initially, [Kool DJ] Herc was trying out his reggae records but since they failed to cut ice he switched to Latin-tinged funk, just playing the fragments that were popular with the dancers and ignoring the rest of the track. The most popular part was usually the percussion break. In Bambaataa's words: 'Now he took the music of like Mandrill, like 'Fencewalk', certain disco records that had funky percussion breaks like The Incredible Bongo Band when they came out with 'Apache' and he just kept that beat *going*. It might be that certain part of the record that everybody waits for – they just let their inner self go and get wild. The next thing you know the singer comes back in and you'd be mad.'
>
> A conga or bongo solo, a timbales break or simply the drummer hammering out the beat – these could be isolated by using two copies of the record on twin turntables and, playing the one section over and over, flipping the needle back to the start on one while the other played through (Toop 1991: 60)

At some point in the late 1970's the isolation of the break, along with other effects (such as "scratching", "cutting", etc.), began to be considered a musical form unto itself.

In other words, hip-hop became a musical genre (rather than a style of musical reproduction), when the deejays and their audiences made the collective intellectual shift to perceive it as music. This is often portrayed as a natural evolutionary development, but – as Potter points out – it is a substantial change whose implications could not have been foreseen even by those who were at its forefront.

One important force in the shift from hip-hop-as-activity to hip-hop-as-musical-form was the incursion of the music industry, which introduced significant distortions:

> Hip-hop's remaking of consumption as production was the first thing lost in this translation; despite its appropriation of Caz's rhymes, "Rapper's Delight"[the first major rap hit] was first and foremost a thing to be consumed, not a practice in action; its

> relation to hip-hop actuality was like that of a "Live Aid" t-shirt to a concert: a souvenir, a metonymic token. Hip-hop was something goin' down at 23 Park, 63 Park, or the Back Door on 169th Street; you could no more make a hip-hop record in 1979 than you could make a "basketball game" record or a "subway ride" record. As a vernacular practice, hip-hop depended on its audiences, its sites, and its technologies to construct a zone of sonic and cultural bricolage which was produced as much by the dancers or listeners as by MC's or DJs; no two jams were the same, and such upredictability was built into its antagonistic aesthetic. At best, a record could offer a trace of one or another jam – as did the tapes Grandmaster Flash used to sell for a dollar a minute – at worst, as with the Sugar Hill Gang, it was a Disneyland simulacron, a robotic hip-hop recreation. (Potter 1995: 45-46)

The effects of this dissociation (between recorded and live hip-hop) are still being felt twenty years later. One particularly noticeable effect has been that hip-hop sampling is almost entirely divorced from live performance, and that – as a result - other social structures have emerged in recorded hip-hop to take the place of the live context. This is a major theme of the current work.

Before sampling was invented – in the late 1970's and early 1980's - this decontextualization presented a very specific hurdle for the record industry: it seemed unwise (not to mention illegal) to release recordings that consisted primarily of other records. Early hip-hop labels, such as Sugar Hill, therefore, relied on live bands and drum machines to reproduce the sounds that were heard in Bronx parks and recreation centers.

As Doug Wimbish and Keith LeBlanc (bassist and drummer respectively in the Sugar Hill house band) recalled in 1987, there was conscious attempt on the part of the record company to capture the essence of these performances:

> Doug Wimbish: The reason you hear tunes [on Sugar Hill raps] and say, "Damn, I heard that tune before" is that you did hear it before...

Keith LeBlanc: Sylvia [Robinson, Sugar Hill president and producer] would be at Harlem World or Disco Fever, and she'd watch who was mixing what four bars off of what record. She'd get that record, and then she'd play us those four bars and have us go in and cut it better. (Leland & Stein 1987: 28)

But in the mid-1980's a new technology developed that was better suited to the needs of hip-hop musicians: digital sampling.

Digital Sampling

In its earliest incarnation, sampling was seen as a strategy for expanding the tonal palette of the keyboard-based synthesizer, as in this definition from a 1986 issue of *Electronic Musician* magazine:

> Sampling is like magnetic tape recording in that both technologies involve the capturing , storing and recreating of audio (sound) waves. In fact, many of the standard terms associated with this technique (e.g. loop, splice, crossfade, etc.) have been borrowed directly from the world of magnetic tape recording. Sampling is the digital equivalent of music concrete, wherein common sound are manipulated (and sometimes integrated with traditional instruments) to produce musical compositions.
>
> Sampling allows the musician to record sounds from other instruments, nature, or even non-musical sources, and transpose and play them chromatically on a standard piano or organ keyboard. This new and emerging technology greatly expands the creative horizons of the modern composer. (Tully 1986: 27-30)

Another use, however, soon began to emerge. With the SP-12 (1986), E-mu systems introduced the "sampling drum computer" (Oppenheimer 1986: 84). Its intended function, as its name suggests, was to allow a producer to build rhythm tracks from individual drum sounds that had been digitally recorded, or "sampled". In addition to sampling functions, the SP-12 also boasted 'sequencing' functions - the ability to precisely organize samples within a temporal framework.

Needless to say, such an option would have been of little value to the previous generation of sampling musicians, who were more interested in creating novel sounds to play on their keyboards.

The defining innovation of hip-hop production was, in essence, to combine the rhythmic and melodic possibilities of sampling. In other words, early hip-hop producers used the SP-12 not only to sample drums sounds, but also to sample entire melodies from old records. This approach would also not have appealed to musicians from other genres, since their approach to sampling left the melodic responsibility to them; they had no need for digital recordings of other people's music. For those trained as hip-hop DJ's, however, the ability to play an entire measure from an old record was not only acceptable, it was exactly what they were looking for.

The credit for exploiting this possibility is generally given to Queens-based producer Marley Marl. As Chairman Mao writes, "One day during a Captain Rock remix session, Marley accidentally discovered modern drum-sound sampling, thus magically enabling funky drummers from his scratchy record collection to cross decades and sit in on his own productions." (Chairman Mao 1997: 88). The innovation was quickly embraced, and almost immediately ended the era of live instrumentation. In fact, many contemporary artists characterize hip-hop's brief use of live instruments as merely a deviation, a capitulation to circumstance:

> People could say, "Well, Sugar Hill Gang [used live instruments]". Yeah, but see: that's before there were samplers, too. And if they had the sampler, I would like to think that they woulda sampled. That was before there were samplers, and...they couldn't just play the record...

> That's part of the history that people don't really realize: that hip-hop is about the turntables. And cats was rhymin' on turntables. And when they started makin' records...they had no choice but to get a band...But as soon as there was a sampler, they went back to the root. How it originally was, you know what I mean? (DJ Kool Akiem, telephone interview: 1999)

Note that in DJ Kool Akiem's formulation, the use of turntables is organically linked to the use of samplers, while live instruments are seen as being outside of that direct line: "as soon as there was a sampler", hip-hop musicians were able to return to their original conception. While there is certainly ample reason to hold this perspective – turntables and samplers *are* similar in that they both utilize other recordings as their means of sound production – its articulation in this way is part of a mythology that is specifically invoked in order to authenticize sampling by associating it with the deejaying practices of hip-hop's early innovators.

As digital sampling became the method of choice for hip-hop DJ's (who, now that they used sampling, began to call themselves 'producers'), their pre-existing hunger for rare records became paramount. As Jazzy Jay recalls:

> We'd find these beats, these heavy percussive beats, that would drive the hip hop people on the dance floor to breakdance. A lot of times it would be a two-second spot, a drum beat, a drum break, and we'd mix that back and forth, extend it, make it 20 minutes long. If you weren't in the hip hop industry or around it, you wouldn't ever have heard a lot of these records. Records like "Apache," [The Magic Disco Machine's] "Scratch-in," Funkadelics, I'm talking about records like [Perez Prado's] "Mambo No. 5" – you could forget about it. That was the whole thing, the element of surprise, coming out with something new. Find a record nobody else has got, do a routine nobody else can do. That was what kept it going. I grew up under Bam[2], and basically, I got first shot at all those records. Bam used to soak the labels off.

[2] DJ Afrika Bambaataa

> I'd throw 'em on, a lot of times I wouldn't even know what I was playing. (Leland & Stein 1987: 26)

In the mid-1980's, a Bronx-based DJ named Lenny Roberts began to press compilations of rare recordings, each containing a sought-after rhythm break, under the name *Ultimate Breaks and Beats* (Leland & Stein 1987: 27). This development reinforced the producers' resolve to find new breaks that were more rare, and, in response, Roberts would compile the breaks on new editions *of Ultimate Breaks and Beats*. As a result of such competition, hip-hop producers soon found themselves with record collections numbering in the tens of thousands, as well as a deeply embedded psychological need to find rare records.

At the same time, the compilations established a canon of records that a producer had to be familiar with, an expectation that still stands to this day. Bob James's 1975 jazz fusion recording, "Take Me To The Mardi Gras," for example, was a favorite of early hip-hop DJ's and producers (most notably, it forms the basis for Run-DMC's "Peter Piper"). It is so well-known, in fact, that few contemporary producers would even consider using it for their own productions. Nevertheless, a producer *must* have the recording in his collection if he wants to be taken seriously by others.

The *Ultimate Breaks and Beats* series, for its part, eventually grew to twenty-five volumes, and spawned hundreds of imitators (see chapters five and six).

> That was big, big, big, big influence to me, you know. I had'em back in the days in like 1983, 1984, before they were even Ultimate Breaks, when they was just Octopus records. With the little picture of the Octopus DJ on'em...That's what they were originally. And they didn't list any of the artist's names or anything, it was just the titles of the songs, no publishing info or nothing. It was just something somebody pressed up out of their

> house or something. Yeah, they were a big, big influence, man. I mean, I had all of 'em: doubles and triples of everything.
>
> That was the foundation of hip-hop, man. 'Cause you listen to all the rap records when they first started sampling, and it was all that "Ultimate Break" stuff. That's the *foundation*, right there. (Phill Stroman, telephone interview: 1999)

Although many producers today see such compilations as a violation of the producers' ethics (see chapter six), most make an exception for the *Ultimate Breaks and Beats* collection, on the grounds of its historical significance in alerting producers to the value of breaks in the first place:

> ...Those were the ones that started folks looking for breaks and shit, anyway. I don't know too many people that got the original 'Substitution' break[3], you know? So nine times out of ten, if you hear that shit on a rap record, they got it from 'Ultimate Breaks and Beats'. (Samson S., personal interview 1999)

Of course, not everyone made this exception:

> Even ["Ultimate Breaks and Beats"] -I'll tell ya, man – there was a lotta mixed feelings about those, too...You talk to old school cats like Grandmaster Flash, and they'll tell you that was like the worst thing to ever happen to hip-hop. 'Cause it took all the mystery out of the whole breakbeat game. But it inspired me, man. If it wasn't for them, I don't know if I'd even be in it to the level that I am now. (Phill Stroman, telephone interview: 1999)

As the 1980's wore on, the potential of digital sampling to go beyond the mere replication of deejaying techniques led to an increasingly sophisticated aesthetic for hip-hop music. In particular, producers made use of the samplers' ability to play numerous samples at the same time (a technique which would have required multiple DJ's and turntables), to take very short samples (which would

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[3] "Synthetic Substitution", by Melvin Bliss, a rare song that was officially released only as the b-side of a 45 r.p.m single in 1977 (Rap Sample FAQ 1999), but which appears on "Ultimate Breaks and Beats: Volume 5", released in 1986.

have required very fast DJ's) and to assemble these samples in any order, with or without repetition as desired (which could not be done by DJ's at all).[4] The creative exploitation of these new techniques, along with parallel advances in emceeing, has led to the late 1980's being referred to as the "golden era" of hip-hop.

Perhaps the most significant force in this development was the Bomb Squad, a production collective that became known for its work with Public Enemy. Their style – a blend of samples from diverse sources that emphasized chaos and noise – revolutionized hip-hop music. With regard to my earlier argument about hip-hop not being an organic development, Keith Shocklee, one of the Bomb Squad's masterminds, specifically characterizes their sound as being in contrast to the typical African American fare of the time:

> Public Enemy was never an R&B based, runnin'-up-the-charts, gettin'-played-all-day-on-the-radio group. It was a street group. It was basically a thrash group, a group that was very much rock 'n' roll oriented. We very seldom used basslines because the parallel that we wanted to draw was Public Enemy and Led Zeppelin. Public Enemy and the Grateful Dead. We were not polished and clean like any of the R&B groups or even any of our rap counterparts that were doing a lotta love rap. That just wasn't our zone – even though when we were DJs we played all those records. We decided that we wanted to communicate something that was gonna be three dimensional – something that you could look at from many different sides and get information from as well as entertainment. (Chairman Mao 1998: 113-114)

But for most producers, the contribution of Public Enemy and the Bomb Squad lay not so much in their particular approach, but in the fact that they had a definable approach in the first place. They were consciously breaking new ground

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[4] As I discuss below, these techniques can, in fact, be reproduced by DJ's through the use of multitrack recording. But, aside from being incredibly arduous, such techniques are so far removed from live deejaying practices that it probably would not have even occurred to anyone to attempt them before digital sampling arose.

in their production style, and that was an inspiration to other producers; suddenly, one could sample more than old funk and soul breaks; nothing was out of bounds.

Contemporary producers cite other historical figures from the late 1980's, such as Ced G. of the Ultramagnetic MC's, Kurtis Mantronik, Prince Paul of De La Soul, and the Large Professor as artists whose individualistic styles contributed greatly to contemporary approaches. In fact, this collectively-held historical narrative is clearly one of the things that holds the producers' community together. The veneration of certain lesser-known hip-hop artists, for example, creates a common bond among contemporary producers.[5]

One example of this tendency is Paul C., a New York-based producer of the late 1980's who passed away before his work became widely known, but whose style is heard in the music of those he influenced:

> He kinda put it down for Ced G and Extra P [also known as the Large Professor]...I think he was one of hip-hop's biggest losses of all time. I think he was destined to be dope. He was gon' be the *man*. He was the best producer that never happened. (Mixx Messiah, phone interview: 1999)

Although his name is largely unknown in the broader hip-hop community, Paul C. was cited as an influence by virtually every producer I interviewed for this study.

The history of hip-hop sampling, like the history of most musical forms, is a story of dialectical influence. New innovations are accepted only if they conform to a pre-existing aesthetic, but – once accepted – they subtly change it. Sampling was initially embraced because it allowed DJs to realize their turntable ideas with less work. But the sampler quickly brought hip-hop to places that a turntable could not enter. Nevertheless, a certain consciousness about the

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[5] I would compare this to the bond that exists between aficionados of less-universally known Jazz musicians, such as Eric Dolphy.

significance of the turntable informs sample-based hip-hop even to this day (see below).

Moreover, as with any historical narrative, the shape of this story is largely informed by contemporary needs. The narrative, which I have recapitulated above, is, in some sense, the origin myth of sample-based hip-hop and serves the needs that such a title implies: it provides a sense of rootedness, group cohesion, and direction for the future.

Individual histories

The development of individual producers often mirrors that of the form as a whole. This is due in part to a personal commitment to the above historical narrative, but also to socio-economic factors that run across the spectrum of music. Stradivarius violins, for instance, are beyond the price range of most violinists; even if one could afford it, one would not buy a Stradivarius for a beginning violin student. Similarly, even if they can afford it, few producers purchase state of the art equipment until they are in a position to exploit it to the fullest. As a result, most producers develop their talents on relatively simple and inexpensive equipment, comparable to that with which the form was originally developed.

For many producers, in fact, the educational process begins with a single tape deck, and the creation of so-called "pause tapes":

> Basically, it's a early form of sampling, in the most 'ghetto' form possible. What you do is you play a record, and then you pause [the tape], and you play the break, pause it, bring it back, play the break, pause it...til you have like a continuous loop. And then I'd take another tape and rap over that, put like scratchin' and shit on it. So I started doing it that way. (Samson S., personal interview: 1999)

At some point, many - though not all - acquire a second turntable and a mixer, and begin to learn about deejaying. Most producers see learning to deejay and learning to produce as being part of the same process; none of my consultants made a distinction unless I specifically asked them to.

Most began by experimenting on their own, and it was only later, after they had achieved some proficiency, that they met other like-minded individuals and began to share information. This pattern has led to certain idiosyncrasies becoming formalized in hip-hop practice:

> Mr. Supreme: Just learned on my own, really...And another funny thing is that nobody taught me and when I brought that $24 mixer and I came home, I plugged up the turntables. I didn't know, but I plugged'em in backwards. And to me that was right, 'cause I didn't know. I just naturally thought number one would be on the right side, two would be on the left side...That's how I plugged'em in and that's how I taught myself.
>
> And now a lot of DJ's say, "Yeah, you're weird. You go backwards."
>
> Joe: Oh, so you still have to do it that way.
>
> Mr. Supreme: Yeah, to this day! That's how I learned. I can't go the real way. And that's called a "hamster". A lot of DJ's are called "hamsters", that go backwards...I don't know who came up with that name or why. (Mr. Supreme, personal interview: 1998).

In fact, many mixers are now outfitted with a "hamster switch" that automatically reverses the controls, so that a backwards DJ's can use another DJ's set-up without having to unplug the turntables and reverse them. The significance of this to my discussion is that so many individual DJ's made the same mistake when figuring out how to DJ that their approach – backwards deejaying – is now

an accepted practice in the community. This pattern – individual experimentation retroactively legitimized by a professional peer group - can been seen at many points in the development of hip-hop (and, in fact, in most forms of music).

For most, the development of deejaying proficiency was followed by the acquisition of an inexpensive keyboard instrument with a rudimentary sampling function. At this point, the music is powered by youthful enthusiasm, creativity, and a generally high school aged peer-group that didn't have very expectations in the first place.

Hieroglyphics producer Domino describes his origins as a producer:

> ... I had a partner named Jason at the time. Basically, I was their MC, and we were producing together... I bought this little keyboard, and basically you would push the button and whatever you put into it would be what it sampled. Like, I started off by saying, "I'm dope! I'm dope! I-I-I'm dope! I'm dope!" Didn't have enough insight to do anything with it.
>
> Well, he sampled the beat. We used to just like have a continuously drum break and tape it on a tape. And then have another tape player and then record from that tape to another tape player, and add stuff off the sampler—the new things that we had sampled. So by the time you're done, you got like a fifth generation copy...That was the initial way that we sampled. That's how we had the different tracks was by dub tape to tape. (Domino, telephone interview: 1998)

DJ Topspin describes a similar process, which soon evolved into an impossibly byzantine home "studio":

> I got a Casio keyboard, a sampling one...for Christmas...I thought that was interesting when I first got it. I was like, "Oh, you can sample your voice", and I'd just do that forever and ever...You couldn't really do too much with it, until I looked at the back of it, and there was a input. So you could do something other than your voice. So I went to Radio Shack...

> I got the thing hooked up...It had the input, and I plugged into the Yorx [stereo]...and sampled little bits of stuff. And then I took my walkman... and would sample pieces from a song.
>
> I mean, it was...like with a little Y-jack, like you have two headphone female jacks, and it would be one going into the sampler, one coming out of the walkman, and vice-versa. This big spider-web concoction. But you could end up playing the walkman, while hearing you triggering the sampler.
>
> ...The machine was so limited, you could only do like halfs or thirds [of a loop] sometimes, you couldn't get a whole. You'd have to overdub all those pieces. So you'll have like a six, seven generation beat.
>
> [But] people I was runnin' around with were like "Yeah, that's the *shit*, man!". (DJ Topspin, personal interview: 1999)

Notice that both Domino and DJ Topspin specifically point out how their low expectations facilitated their early development. Both reflect with some amusement that their efforts were acceptable by the standards of their peers.

Significance of Home Studio

As they become more emotionally and financially invested in their work, most producers acquire increasingly professional equipment to facilitate it. This again raises the issue of sample-based hip-hop as a non-performative genre. Abstract and aesthetic concerns aside, there is a practical issue here: the hip-hop musician's instrument – the sampler - is a piece of studio equipment. This simple fact totally obliterates conventional distinctions between performing (or practicing) and recording. Everything that is done with a sampler is, by definition, recorded.

Moreover, the output of the sampler is almost always recorded onto a conventional medium (usually some form of digital audiotape). At the most basic level, then, the mere addition of a microphone (for vocals) transforms the hip-hop producer's "instrument" (sampler/sequencer, mixer and tape recorder) into a rudimentary home studio.

Virtually all sample-based hip-hop producers do the majority of their work in such home studios. As Theberge notes, this is typical of contemporary electronic music:

> In genres of music that rely heavily on electronically generated sounds, a great deal of pre-production sequencing in the home studio (no matter how modest the quality of the synthesizer set-up) became possible. You could then simply carry the work on diskette to a more professional facility where "finishing" work could be performed in a reasonably short amount of time. (Theberge 1997: 232)

For many non-hip-hop electronic musicians, the use of a home studio is a matter of convenience and expense, rather than of socialization. They tend to make their studio spaces as distinct from their domestic pursuits as possible:

> Often ignored...is the manner in which the domestic space has been transformed into a production environment. Musicians' magazines often use cliches such as the arrival of the "information age" and Alvin Toffler's (1980) notion of the "electronic Cottage" to explain the existence of the home studio. It seems to me that there is something else quite striking about this particular manifestation of contemporary music-making that is very different from previous uses of music technology in the home; that is, the degree to which the home studio is an isolated form of activity, separate from family life in almost every way.
>
> The home studio is, above all, a private space. Studios tend to be located in bedrooms, dens, or basement rec rooms, far from the main traffic of everyday life...The home studio is thus, by design, a private space within a private dwelling. (Theberge 1997: 234)

For hip-hop artists, however, the integration of the production environment with domestic space is one of its primary benefits The Lion's Den - home studio of Jasiri Media Group - features a playpen for the MCs' infant son, while the Pharmacy - Vitamin D's home studio - actually has a bed in it. In fact,

as Vitamin D reports, the sense of social ease, and domesticity, that a home studio can provide is one of its major selling points:

> There's really no time-rush thing. You're at the house...People come through unexpectedly and it just adds a whole different energy in the room. So when you're bustin'[6], it's like you kinda get their energy in the track, too...It's how you can keep the spontaneity and stuff goin'. A lotta times, the best ideas that we've come up with...they were spontaneous, they just kinda: "Let's just do this. Let's do it!" you know? You can't do that in a studio...
>
> And you get inspired at different times. You're not always inspired right then, you know? It's like, I might be cleaning up the house, listenin' to some Miles Davis and hear a cold little riff or something. Be like, "Man!", you know? "I gotta sample that right now!" Instead of goin' in the studio, doin' all this.
>
> If I become inspired by something right there...I'ma get to choppin' up these pianos, and then lead on from there, I might add these other records and start mixing over it. And it becomes what you hearin' on tape. And you can't get that with just goin' in the studio. (Vitamin D, personal interview: 1998)

And yet the very fact that these home studio spaces have their own names (e.g. "the Lion's Den"[Jasiri Media Group], "the Pharmacy"[Vitamin D/Tribal Productions], "the Basement"[Pete Rock]) suggests that producers actually do see them as being distinct from their general domestic environment. In fact, when referring to the home studio environment in the abstract, producers often refer to it as "the lab", a term which very clearly draws a distinction between work space and living space.[7]

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[6] Rapping.

[7] In my experience, this term is always used generically, in a manner analogous to the way Jazz musicians refer to "the woodshed", i.e. a practice space, defined by its function. There is never a specific "lab"; it refers to any space in which studio work is undertaken.

Producer as Composer

Moreover, in characterizing the home studio as a laboratory, producers are comparing themselves to research scientists. The image resonates with producers' methodology: individual experimentation with the intention of "discovering" worthwhile musical combinations. This approach sees musical figures as pre-existing structures to be plucked out of the ether by the devoted producer, much in the same way as Michelangelo is said to have viewed his sculptures as being implicit in the stone, his role being merely to chip away extraneous material.

The hip-hop sampling aesthetic that producers learn is based on the deejay's discovery of new breakbeats and new combinations thereof. For DJ Kool Akiem, making beats is a process of discovery, informed only by a pre-existing aesthetic; he is looking for things that sound good together:

> A lot of times, I'm not really looking for a specific sound. The way I make beats, I'm not like, "Oh, I need a horn on here." And then go lookin'; "I know what horn I want." And go find that horn.
>
> I throw down something, and then I just go through a lotta records and kinda feel out, "well, this might sound good with that."...I mean, occaisionally, I guess I'm going for something specific. But usually I'm just randomly throwin' stuff on there, kinda feelin' it out. Tryin' to, you know, "ooh, if I chop it here, it'll sound like that." (DJ Kool Akiem 1999)

Mr. Supreme also favors an unstructured approach:

> Mr. Supreme: Sometimes, I'll know exactly what I'm gonna do. I'm gonna use such and such drums with this. Sometimes, I'll just grab a stack of records, and come in, sit at the sampler and start putting stuff together. And kinda mess with it like that. So it's a little of both.

Joe: And I'm assuming both of those work equally well, otherwise you would have started to do one or the other.

Mr. Supreme: Yeah, and it's crazy, 'cause you might go in with no ideas, a stack of records, and make something dope in five minutes. It's probably one of your better beats. Or really work on something for a month, and it's good, but it's not one of your better things. It's just how it goes. (Mr. Supreme 1998:1)

The producers' methodology has much in common with the experimental approach of collage artists who work in other media, particularly visual media. When the collage artist Romare Bearden describes his approach to his work, for example, he could easily be discussing hip-hop:

> You have to begin somewhere...so you put something down. Then you put something else with it, and then you see how that works, and maybe you try something else and so on, and the picture grows in that way. One thing leads to another, and you take the options as they come, or as you are able to perceive them as you proceed. The fact that each medium has its own special technical requirements doesn't really make any fundamental difference. My overall approach to composition is essentially the same, whether I'm working with the special problems and possibilities of the collage, or with oils, water colors or tempera. As a matter of fact, I often use more than one medium in the same picture.
>
> Once you get going...all sorts of things begin to open up. Sometimes something just falls into place, like piano keys that every now and then just seem to be right where your fingers happen to come down. But there are also all those times you have to keep trying something over and over, and then when you finally get it right you wonder what took you so long. And of course there are also times when you have to give it up and try something else – which sometimes turns out just great as the beginning of another, totally different picture. By the way, this sort of thing is much more likely to have to do with how something fits into the design

> or ornamental structure of the painting than with its suitability as subject matter.[8]
>
> Romare Bearden, quoted in (Melberg & Bloch 1980: 17-18)

It is interesting to note also that Bearden specifically states that the larger design or structure is more important than the significance of the individual item (or sample). This is a sentiment that is echoed repeatedly by producers in chapter 7.

In addition to providing clues as to the nature of the aesthetic, the idea of the producer as researcher reaffirms the individuality of the pursuit. The aesthetic vision described by producers is that of a solitary composer, an idea that is often at odds with an African American tradition of collectivity in art. As I argue in chapter seven, however, this does not necessarily conflict with such interpretations; the collective aspect arises when the completed work is presented to an audience, and is made with such a presentation in mind at every level.

Listening to other producers

As with any form of music, an important technique of self-education is to listen to other artists in order to learn new techniques:

> I try to get into people like that's heads...just to know. I'm just curious. You try to break down their method...figure it out. (Jake One, personal interview: 1998)

> Joe: So you, like, listen to other producers and break down their formula...
>
> Vitamin D: All producers do that, whether they admit it or not. (Vitamin D, personal interview: 1998)

[8] When I presented this comparison to Negus I, who is a graphic artist as well as a sample-based producer, he responded that Romare Bearden was his biggest influence as an artist.

This does not mean that producers are interested in imitating each other; the things they listen for tend to be very subtle techniques or approaches that non-producers would most likely not even notice. When I asked Negus I if he studied other producers, he was explicit on this point:

> I do. Yup, I do it all the time. Like Timbaland, I'll put him up there, because I like the way he makes beats, in that he samples occasionally, but for the most part his compositions are original. He does use some sounds, but for the most part he doesn't use looped samples. I'm impressed by his music, by his beats. Not that I would necessarily emulate his sound, but...I'm impressed with what he's done, in terms of his originality, his creativity.
>
> ...But if I made a beat that sounded too much like him, I would be like "man, that sounds too much like Timbaland". I wouldn't be happy with it, because it sounds too much like someone else's style... (Negus I, personal interview: 1998)

And such listening is not limited to hip-hop:

Joe: Do you listen to other producers to break down their method?

Domino: I listen to *all* music like that. Today I was listening to the Beatles. I was just peepin' how they have things panned.[9] And the ways that they totally change the song, within the song. And how they have a certain type of effect behind the MC's vocals, or behind the guitar, or whatever.

Whenever I listen to music, I'm not the type of person, who really has it as background music...I gotta turn it on, and listen to it, and really listen...that's just how I am. (Domino, telephone interview: 1998)

Domino's telling slip - referring to the Beatles' vocalists as "MC's" - suggests that he is actually listening to the Beatles *as hip-hop music*. While he

may appreciate many diverse aspects of the Beatles' music, the elements he cites (how instruments are set off from each other spatially, the structure of the song, the use of various effects) are all specifically applicable to hip-hop production. The producers' aesthetic is such that innovations from other musical forms can be brought in to their own practice.

An important adjunct to the listening process is discussion of hip-hop music with other producers. Not surprisingly, this often takes the form of ridiculing absent third parties. As I will discuss in chapter six, ridicule plays an important role in maintaining the continuity of the hip-hop aesthetic. But it is also an important pedagogical tool. Hearing another producer berated for something can lead a young producer away from it, before it even becomes an issue in his own music:

> King Otto: I really don't talk with that many producers about making beats, per se. We just talk about other people's beats...Like make fun of someone else's beat...
>
> Joe: What types of things would you make fun of somebody for doing?
>
> King Otto: There's occasions where maybe somebody sounds like somebody else. 'Cause everyone has their own distinct style, but sometimes you'll cross the line and make a [DJ] Premier beat. I know I've done it. Or maybe a Pete Rock beat. 'Cause their sound is so distinct. If you get too close to it you can tell. (King Otto, personal interview: 1998)

This process has a secondary function in that, by mutually criticizing other hip-hop artists, producers are implicitly complimenting each other on their knowledge and taste:

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[9] Where sounds are placed in the stereo field.

> I think an interesting dynamic to that, too, is that that type of exchange is something that only happens with people that have relationships with each other where they know that [they each have] a degree of knowledge within music, where that's even the point for bringing the conversation up. It's like, "I know how you know music," so it's like, "what's up with this?"
>
> But it's not just something that you casually do, just everyday. You don't sit around and critique, or whatever. But, definitely. That's almost like out of acknowledgement, you know what I'm saying? You respect the other person's opinion, so you wanna see where they're at, with the other music. That's definitely true. MC's do it with MC's. MC's do it to producers. That's the element within the culture where it's like, "is it fresh, or isn't it?" (Wordsayer, personal interview: 1998)

Relationship Between Deejaying and Producing

The value of hip-hop deejaying is deeply embedded in the production process. In fact, this association is so strong, that the terms "DJ" and "producer" are often used interchangeably.

As DJ Oliver Wang notes, there are numerous reasons for this:

> It's definitely not a coincidence that most producers start off as DJ's. Because not only were they exposed to music in a very significant sense, they were basically exposed to music a lot, in volume. And also they have access to music, which is always important in sampling. A lot of DJ's are also record collectors, which transitions well to becoming a producer, since you have a source of sampling to work from. And because deejaying works as a profession, that can earn you the capital that you would need to become a producer as well. So I think all those different things kind of work together. (Oliver Wang, personal interview: 1998)

As the preceding sections clearly demonstrate, deejaying has often been a direct precursor to producing, both historically and in the lives of individual producers. In addition to its historical significance, though, deejaying also exerts an influence on production in two other ways. On a practical level, deejaying may

contribute materials, skills and approaches that will be valuable to the producer. And, on a more philosophical level, many producers can trace their sense of what it means to be a producer to the role of the DJ.

Practical influence

> I think the basis of [production] is deejaying. A lot of people that just get into production, I don't think they have the foundation of what they're doing. It's not really all that direct. I mean, you can learn how to produce. You can make good stuff. But I think you have a better foundation if you're a DJ. Not only 'cause like the history of it, but just some of the mechanics of it. (DJ Kool Akiem, telephone interview: 1999)

For DJ Kool Akiem, deejaying is an important educational step toward becoming a producer.

DJ Mixx Messiah agrees:

> I think that's a big thing in production, because it's actually the same concept. Because deejaying is pretty much combining sounds and splittin'em and breakin'em down to tracks. And when you hit the [studio] console, for a producer, it's basically just deejaying with more inputs and more outputs, splittin'em, you know, more ways. So if you can execute a perfect mix on the turntables, it's almost like you internin' for the console. (Mixx Messiah, telephone interview: 1999)

In fact, many producers will argue that the entire production process is, at its foundation, simply a more elaborate form of deejaying:

> ...I think that there's that definite connection because, ultimately, what is sampling today, used to be done by the DJ's, live...There's a lot of different styles of producing, but...one of them was... rhyming over breakbeats. Just records. Sample and have it loop. Well, what the DJ's job was, early on - and still is to a lotta people - is to find these breaks and have'em go back to back to extend the beat, before sampling. So, basically, the concept was

> done; it just that it wasn't done with equipment, it was done with a DJ. So they would play this one part of the record, back-and-forth, back-and-forth, and then the MC would rhyme over it. So I think it's basically the same thing, in a sense. But now... with sampling and stuff you can do more with it, of course...
>
> Let's put it like this: what I do with a sampler, if I had like a twenty-four track [mixing] board, I can have a DJ come in and go, "make this beat loop." And they can lay that down on one track. And then I can say, "OK, bring in this horn every fourth." Whatever I would sample. And I could have'em do that....and you would be able to pretty much accomplish the same thing. And so I guess it all depends on your outlook, but it's pretty much the same thing. (Domino, telephone interview: 1998)

In other words, Domino is suggesting that virtually everything that he does as a producer could conceivably be done by a DJ – it would simply take more time and effort. And this is not merely a philosophical conceit; in some (very rare) cases, production is actually done this way:

> I know this cat, before he had a sampler, he did all his production on a four-track.[10] And he cut everything [with turntables] but you couldn't tell. It sounded like he sampled it. 'Cause he would either get back to backs[11], or he would keep goin' back and loopin' it over and over again. And... he made sure it was precise; if it wasn't precise, he went back and re-recorded it. But, nobody knew – including me, until he told me – that he didn't have a sampler. It was like, "What?! You don't have a sampler?!". (DJ Kool Akiem, telephone interview: 1999)

Even though most producers do not use turntables as the primary technology for production, they can still be a valuable secondary tool:

> Another thing that I do...when I'm making a beat, is that I have a beat running, and I make the main foundation part of it. And then when I find something that sounds like it could go, the

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[10] Tape recorder.

[11] Two copies of the same record, so that the section in question could be played on one record while the other was being pulled back.

> first thing I do is I try—and this kind of like goes with the DJ skills—is that I try to line it up. I try to get it on beat, and then try to mix it in with it. So right on the downbeat, I might just cut it in, and just see how it sounds runnin' with it. So I don't have to just go and waste the time of sampling it, and then finding out it's good. Sometimes you can get a gauge of how something might fit by having the beat running with it and then just taking the record and cuttin' it in with it, on beat, and hearing how it sounds. (Domino, telephone interview: 1998)

When we discussed the liabilities of producers who did not also DJ, Vitamin D specifically pointed to this technique as being one of the tools they lacked:

> Joe: But you feel like [not being able to DJ] kinda limits them in certain ways, just at least in terms of the things that you would want to do...
>
> Vitamin D: Nah, I just know it limits them, period. *They* know it limits them. They're like, "Man, if I could DJ, I'd be able to mix in a sample and be able to hear what it sounds like and I could feel it." They can't do that, 'cause they don't know how to mix in the samples. (Vitamin D, personal interview: 1998)

Negus I, who is a producer but not a DJ, supports Vitamin D's claim on a general level:

> It seems like most producers started out as DJ's, but I started out straight producing...I do clearly see the disadvantages. DJ's are more familiar with a lot more records and more music, even though I do listen to a lot of music. But they're more intimate with the actual records and the sound quality of the records. So I kind of had to fight through that without having that experience as a DJ. (Negus I, personal interview: 1998)

Finally, as a result of the close relationship between deejaying and producing, specific deejaying techniques, especially scratching (the rhythmic use

of the sound of a record being pulled back), have become an essential part of the producers' arsenal. As Samson S. puts it, "There's nothing better than some good scratching" (Samson S.1999). While this is not an insurmountable problem for the non-deejaying producer – they can bring in a deejay to do the scratches – a producer will be more respected if they can do their own.

In our discussion of the producer DJ Premier, Mixx Messiah put a high value on his scratching ability:

> He's not like your Roc Raida, Sinister, Q-Bert - you know, "master of scratch" -but he's a precision scratch technician. His scratches and his cuts matter so much to his songs. It's like the icing on a cake. (Mixx Messiah, telephone interview: 1999)

Philosophical connection between Deejaying and Producing

Having experience as a deejay, then, can benefit a producer in many practical ways. From specific technical abilities, such as scratching, to the development of a large record collection, deejaying can lay the groundwork for a successful production career. But the benefits are more than pragmatic. On a more abstract level, the very idea of what a producer should be is deeply beholden to the idea of deejaying. As Strath Shepard puts it, "I think the best producers are DJ's. The best producers, they just love to DJ." (Strath Shepard 1998).

For DJ Kool Akiem, the whole idea of production is more about introducing audiences to rare records that contain exciting rhythmic moments (or "breaks") than creating original music. This is a philosophy that he explicitly derives from his experience as a DJ:

> When you learn as a DJ, you learn what the break is about. That's really like what sampling is about. It's about the break. And it's not really about playin' music. It's more of doing what a DJ does. (DJ Kool Akiem, telephone interview: 1999)

Samson S. takes a more prescriptive approach to the relationship between deejaying and producing:

> ...As far as hip-hop goes, it goes hand in hand. It *can* go hand in hand. 'Cause a good DJ knows what sounds to use. He knows what the people like. He *should* know what the people wanna hear. He *should* know what'll rock the crowd. He *should* have a ear for music....(Samson S., personal interview: 1999)

This sensibility may be manifested in subtle ways. Producer Pete Rock, for instance, is known for putting brief excerpts (five seconds or less) of rare soul songs on his albums between his own songs . This is generally seen as a challenge to other producers to identify and find these records, a competitive approach that goes back to the early days of hip-hop deejaying. Mixx Messiah, however, points out that this practice has an important secondary function that also suggests a DJ-minded approach:

> ...I like his use of interludes in hip-hop. You know, like most hip-hop songs you listen to there's like the high-point, the low point, and in between you're waiting for the next cut to come on. Pete Rock keeps you entertained before the next cut actually comes on...That's definitely a DJ thing. You can tell he digs. (Mixx Messiah, telephone interview: 1999)

In Mix Messiah's view, Pete Rock creates interludes not only to show off his record collection, but also to keep the listener entertained between songs. A true DJ, in other words, could not let five seconds of silence go by on their album without doing something to remedy it.

Role of women

When most producers refer to the abstract ideal of a producer, they tend to see it as masculine. While this attitude is statistically accurate – there *are* very few female hip-hop producers – it may also be self-reinforcing. In other words,

beyond the lack of role models, the abstract masculinization of the role of the producer requires a potential female producer to follow norms of socialization and behavior that assume a male constituency. It was not uncommon, for example, for my consultants to refer to producers who violated an ethical requirement (see chapter six) as "punks" (i.e. effeminate or ineffectual men), an insult that would be nonsensical if applied to a female producer.

This coincides with a larger sense that many of the expectations for social interaction in the producers' community are associated with masculine codes of honor. That is to say, it seemed that following the ethics was part of the responsibilities of manhood, and that to fail to adhere to them was to be somehow "less than a man."[12] While this is a valid, and even honorable, philosophy in a male social world, it may leave women who wish to participate with the choice of being either unfeminine or unethical. To be fair, I have never heard a female producer specifically accused of either of these. But like so many aspects of ideology, such conceptions are manifested in "common sense" notions about what it means to be a producer. The idea of a female producer is not rejected by the hip-hop community; it just rarely arises in the first place.

The Angel, for example, reports that people often make assumptions about her musical role:

> As a woman, I know that, when people see pictures of me, they assume I'm a singer. Even if I'm sitting surrounded by [electronic] gear, it's still like, "oh, she sang on something, right?"...So the stigma's there. There's no question that, as a woman in the industry, people make those obvious - but wrong - assumptions a lot of times. It hasn't really stopped me from doing my thing, but that's probably more down to the fact that I won't be stopped...I make my own space. I don't wait to be invited to something, I just get in there and do it. (The Angel, telephone interview: 1998)

[12] This is my own perception and was not stated to me in this way by any of my consultants.

Kylea, an MC who has done some production, also feels that women may be pressured into more "traditionally" female roles:

> It would be nice to see more females producing...maybe some females feel that that's not a role that they should play. 'Cause if you're around people that say, "you stick to writing," or "you stick to singing", but they might wanna produce. But they could be getting pushed back 'cause "it's too much for you". And if you don't have the self-esteem and someone pushes you back, then those words can keep you from being a producer, when you have all the skills you need to be a producer. So, it definitely just depends on your situation, and who you surround yourself with. (Kylea, personal interview: 1998)

In addition to a general sense that hip-hop production is a male endeavor, Tricia Rose (1994) has cited two more specific factors that may contribute to the lack of female representation in hip-hop production, both of which were supported by my own research. The first is a general societal norm that tends to steer women away from technological pursuits at an early age:

> ...women in general are not encouraged in and often actively discouraged from learning about and using mechanical equipment. This takes place informally in socialization and formally in gender-segregated vocational tracking in public school curriculum. Given rap music's early reliance on stereo equipment, participating in rap muic production requires mechanical and technical skills that women are much less likely to have developed. (Rose 1994: 57).

In our interview, the Angel raised this same issue:

> ...most people have gotten that start through the technology. And I guess it's almost like boys playing with their trucks and girls playing with their dolls. Most women, I think, shy away from electronics, but that's not to say that *all* do. And I think as time has gone on, more and more women are coming to the forefront as being very hands-on. (The Angel, telephone interview: 1998)

The second factor that Rose cites is an educational and mentoring process that is based in one's social circle:

> ...because rap music's approaches to sound reproduction developed informally, the primary means for gathering information is shared local knowledge. As [DJ] Red Alert explained to me, his pre-hip hop interest and familiarity with electronic equipment were sustained by access to his neighbor Otis who owned elaborate stereo equipment configurations. Red Alert says that he spent almost all of his free time at Otis's house, listening, learning, and asking questions. For social, sexual, and cultural reasons young women would be much less likely to be permitted or feel comfortable spending such extended time in a male neighbor's home. (Rose: 57-58)

DJ Karen Dere also reports that social circumstances are a large part of such decisions:

> I think part of it is like it's a natural evolution when you become a producer, because it's usually like everyone that you're hanging around with is also like trying to buy that sampler, trying to make beats, and that just doesn't happen so much for women. I'm trying to think: when I get together with other women, that are even into hip-hop, what do we do? We're more thinking about the marketing end of stuff, or distribution of stuff, instead of the creative part of it. And I think that's probably just because that's the typical role of women, more so in this industry. The street team coordination, or something that's not so creative. (Karen Dere, personal interview: 1998)

This power of one's social environment to open or close creative doors is also attested to by Kylea's statement above, in which she attributes women's development as producers to, "who you surround yourself with."

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have tried to delineate the social and historical factors that have influenced contemporary practices in the hip-hop production

community. Foremost among these is the role of deejaying both as a historical precursor to production, as well as a model for aesthetics and behavior in the producers' community. Moreover, I suggest that material reality, specific social pressures and gender roles have influenced individual innovators more than overarching political concerns.

IV. "It just doesn't sound authentic": Live Instrumentation vs. Hip-Hop Purism

Much has been written about the concept of 'authenticity' within the hip-hop world. But due to both the prominence of the MC (the rapper) in hip-hop music, and the dominance of lyric-oriented hip-hop scholarship, virtually all discussions of authenticity – explicit or implicit - concern the relationships between lyrics and reality, and how the complexities of this relationship might be fruitfully theorized (Allen, 1996, Costello & Wallace 1990, Del Barco 1996, Flores 1996, Gilroy 1991, Jones 1990, Kelley 1996, Perkins 1991, Potter 1995, Rose 1994, Samuels 1991/1995, Shomari 1995, Wheeler 1991). Other definitions of authenticity, and the social structures which may support those definitions, have been less fully explored.

For hip-hop producers, whose contribution (by definition) includes no lyrics--and therefore no explicit claims about their social position--the question of authenticity is more problematic. In this chapter, I suggest that producers have developed an approach to authenticity that is characterized by a sort of 'aesthetic purism'. That is to say, certain musical gestures are valued for aesthetic reasons, and one's adherence to this aesthetic confers authenticity. In the pages that follow, I will use the hip-hop producers' discourse surrounding the use of live instrumentation as an example of how this process operates. [1]

It is also worth reiterating at this point that the approaches and attitudes I will be delineating here are specific to hip-hop producers, and may not be held by other members of the hip-hop community.

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[1] I use the neologism "live instrumentation" in accordance with hip-hop usage: acoustic, electric, or electronic instruments that do not utilize prerecorded sound, which is to say, virtually everything but turntables and samplers. It is interesting to note that, while many in the hip-hop community would argue that both turntables and samplers are, in fact, musical instruments, they implicitly make a distinction by not including them when they refer to "live instruments".

My use of purism as an organizing principle for this chapter derives directly from the fact that many of the producers I spoke with specifically use that term to characterize their own position. The qualifier 'aesthetic', however, is my own addition, and I have included it for two reasons.

First, I want to distinguish the purism of hip-hop producers from other essentialist tendencies that have been attributed to hip-hop culture, particularly those of ethnicity and class. I do not deny that such factors have been important to the development of hip-hop music; I am merely arguing that such concerns are of secondary interest to producers when constructing their idea of authenticity and therefore will not be directly addressed in this chapter. Second, I use the term 'aesthetic' in order to emphasize the decisive role that abstract ideas of beauty play in the hip-hop discourse, a role that – as I noted earlier - is frequently overlooked by scholars.

By focussing on a single aspect of the producers' discourse - concerns about the use of live instrumentation - I will explore the ways in which both aspects of this construct, the aesthetic and the purist, work together to define authenticity for hip-hop producers.

Previous Approaches

Thomas Porcello's ethnographic survey of (non-hip-hop) recording engineers' perspectives on sampling defines four themes that run through their discourse:

> First, all the engineers do feel that there are certain uses of sampling which are undeniably unethical, and that sampling should not be a technological free-for-all. Second, there is debate as to where such an ethical boundary should be drawn in practice; the engineers represented here were not in agreement as to when sampling begins to violate the 'rights' of the musician. ...Next, and closely tied to the second point, is a great deal of pragmatic talk about what the engineer needs to do, or should be required to do, in order to avoid prosecution for copyright infringement... The final

> common thread is a consideration for the fate of the musician. (Porcello 1991: 71)

As Porcello's work demonstrates, the concerns of the non-hip-hop music industry are primarily ethical and pragmatic. By contrast, I would argue that *none* of the themes delineated above is significant to the pro-or-con discourse of hip-hop sampling.[2] The hip-hop discourse is primarily concerned with aesthetics. Simply put, sampling is not valued because it is convenient or justifiable, but because it is beautiful.

Virtually all academic writings that have attempted to discuss the beauty of hip-hop sampling have posited an aesthetic that is a natural result of the cultural logic of late capitalism. The sampling aesthetic is presented as an example of postmodern pastiche, with all its attendant theoretical implications: juxtaposition of disparate aesthetic systems, blank parody, fragmentation, lack of historicity, and so forth:

> If Blues is the 'classical' music of African-American culture, and Jazz is its 'modernism,' then hip-hop has a powerful claim to be regarded as their postmodern successor, not so much on account of chronology as on account of what Bakhtin calls "chronotopes" – the linked prismatic synecdoches of cultural history...Hip-hop's central chronotope is the turntable, which Signifies on its ability to 'turn the tables' on previous black traditions, making a future out of fragments from the archive of the past, turning consumption into production. With this mode of turning and re-turning, hip-hop's appropriative art (born of sonic collage and pastiche, reprocessed via digital technology) is the perfect backdrop for an insistent vernacular poetics that both invokes and alters the history of African-American experiences, as well as black music on a global scale. (Potter 1995: 18).

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[2] It might seem contradictory that I would devote an entire chapter (Ch. 6) to sampling ethics, and then claim that hip-hop producers do not believe that "there are certain uses of sampling which are undeniably unethical". I would argue, however, that the ethics to which hip-hop producers subscribe are not about sampling *itself* being right or wrong, but about particular musical material being used in an appropriate or creative manner. Put another way, I would argue that all of hip-hop sampling's ethics would still obtain, even if the material were played live.

Such defenses of the hip-hop sampling aesthetic along postmodernist lines are valuable for a number of reasons. Even if they had done nothing else, the creation of an atmosphere in which hip-hop is considered an acceptable subject of academic study was no small accomplishment, and it is almost entirely the work of scholars operating within a framework of post-Frankfurt school critical theory. Furthermore, the specific benefits of Marxian critical theory, such as the awareness of various hegemonies, and particularly the significance of reception to the interpretation of works of art, are well in evidence in hip-hop scholarship.

But at the same time, these scholars' reliance on the theoretical terminology and paradigms of critical theory carries with it the implication that the hip-hop community has articulated no aesthetic principles of its own. This is simply not the case.

I believe that the main reason that the indigenous discourse is overlooked is that it is not primarily concerned with the question that most sympathetic researchers are interested in: justifying the use of sampling. By this I mean that most scholars seem concerned with demonstrating ways in which sampling – despite its rejection of live instrumentation - is consistent with more conventional value systems, whether those be social, political, musical or otherwise. Hip-hop producers, by contrast, are rarely interested in such moves because, for them, sampling doesn't require justification on any grounds; it is the foundation of the musical form. If anything, it is the *lack* of samples - the use of live instrumentation - that must be justified.

Purist View of Aesthetic Value of Sampling

When I asked his feelings about the use of live instrumentation, producer Jake One addressed many of these issues:

> I'm for it. I don't see why not. I really just care how it sounds, I mean the final product. I don't care how it's done. I'm not really "It has to be dusty and blah, blah, blah". I've done live instrument stuff, but I use vintage sounds; I don't use just Casio keyboard and whatnot...
>
> But there'll always be *some* sampled element in what I do. I think that's what kinda makes it hip-hop, though, you know? If you're just playing...a bunch of instruments and there's no sampled drums, scratches or something, I don't think it's...I mean, it's Hip-Hop, I guess...I don't know. (Jake One, personal interview: 1998)

At this point, I asked him what it was, exactly, that was "not hip-hop" about using live instruments.

> It just doesn't sound *authentic*...There's something about the way the old records sound when they're put together right. You can't really recapture 'em when you play [live]. (Jake One, personal interview: 1998)

In this brief discussion, Jake One, directly or indirectly, touches on no less than *five* different factors relevant to the producers' discourse on live instrumentation.

1) First of all, like everyone else I spoke with, he understands my question ("What do you think about the use of live instrumentation in hip-hop?") to require a pro- or con- response. But after making a formal statement of support for live instruments, he proceeds to criticize their use in virtually all cases. That is to say, Jake One is making a distinction between a *moral* principle--producers should be free to use live instruments--and an *aesthetic* principle—live instruments don't generally sound as good as samples.

2) Furthermore, in saying "I really just care how it sounds... I don't care how it's done," he suggests that, of the two, the most salient principle is the aesthetic rather than the moral or methodological.

3) Further defining the nature of this aesthetic, Jake One presents himself as someone who does not feel that a sound must be "dusty" (that is, containing overt vinyl record noise) in order to be authentic. This implies that there are those in the hip-hop world who do.

4) By the same token, however, he expresses his preference for "vintage" timbres, referring presumably to an analog/seventies production aesthetic, which he specifically opposes to a digital, "Casio" sound. Again, his discussion focuses on the *aesthetic* value of the sounds, rather than methodological or moral issues.

5) He continues this line of thinking when he characterizes the "sampled element" as the defining—though not sole--factor of the hip-hop sound. And in response to my request that he be more specific about this, he makes a telling assessment of live instrumentation: "it just doesn't sound authentic," which he then develops in two ways.

The first is with another reference to the timbral value of old records. But the second part of his statement is even more significant: "There's something about the way those old records sound when they're put together *right*." This suggests that the sampling aesthetic is seen as being, to some degree, inherent in the records themselves; that the records *want* to be assembled in a particular way, and none other.

My sense is that this is due to the compositional elements that come with even the smallest sample, whether that be a sense of harmonic orientation, a rhythmic feel, or a timbral (or even social) "vibe". The less-constrained nature of live instruments—they could play anything—actually makes them *less* valuable, because there is no sensibility, no musical clue, for the producer to work with. Essentially, what I'm arguing is that a sample of a chord played by jazz guitarist Grant Green, for example, can suggest a feel to a producer, which it is then their task to develop into a song. A guitar itself, by contrast, suggests nothing.

It is for this reason, I believe, that many producers feel that live instruments should be used only in a supporting capacity: a live instrument does not have the volition to carry a song by itself. I would argue that, for those who have been educated in this aesthetic, a beat created with live instrumentation alone can lack a sense of purpose, urgency and direction; it has no center.

At the same time, it also lacks boundaries. Since musical instruments can play anything, the producer is not constrained by the nature of a particular musical performance on a particular old record. While this could conceivably be seen as liberating, producers are more inclined to see it as cheating. This is where the purist sensibility begins to emerge.

Criteria for Use of Live Instrumentation

In response to perceptions of aesthetic cheating through the use of live instrumentation, several general rules have developed. The use of live instrumentation is considered legitimate by producers only when three conditions are met: 1) when the live musician understands (or at least capitulates to) a putative "hip-hop aesthetic", 2) when the instruments are used to support musical themes that are already apparent in samples, and 3) when they have the "right" timbre or ambience. The subjective nature of all three of these criteria means that they all must be negotiated in each case. It is also an open question whether the fulfillment of any one criterion is sufficient, or whether all three must be met for the usage to be legitimate.

Bay Area DJ Karen Dere presents the Roots, a hip-hop group who uses live instruments, as an example of the successful meeting of the first criterion for their acceptable use:

> What I think is cool about [the Roots] is that they all understand the hip-hop aesthetic. And I think, often times, that Jazz musicians, or other musicians, just play to play, and they

> know the standards. Or they're there to totally experiment and do all this crazy improv. It is what hip-hop is about to a certain extent, but you've gotta keep the groove up and keep a certain beat going. And sometimes I think other musicians don't understand that. (Karen Dere, personal interview: 1998)

As Dere points out, musicians who are proficient in another style of music often fail to understand that hip-hop is not aesthetically deficient, but simply operating from a different perspective. As producer Jake One notes, this can create tension in the studio:

> Another problem with that is that is a lot of the players don't have a hip-hop background. They'll play it in a way that's technically right, but that's not the way I wanna hear it. And you just have to be forthright and say, "this is how I want it done". (Jake One, personal interview: 1998)

The second criterion for the acceptable use of live instrumentation, whether they are used in a supportive capacity, is given voice by producer Mr. Supreme:

> I guess it really depends on how you do it. Say you're a real hip-hop producer that samples and uses records. And then you play a bass-line under it, or follow the loop with a bass-line. That's cool, it fattens it up, makes it sound better. It's not really taking away from it, it just adds to it. But if you use like a big horn section, a bunch of guitars and stuff, it's really not hip-hop. It's hip-hop-based, because it samples and that comes from hip-hop. It's not hip-hop, it's the way that it sounds...that's my own opinion. (Mr. Supreme, personal interview: 1998)

Several people I asked about this distinction gave the same example of appropriate use of live instrumentation for support: using a live bass to "fatten up" a sample. In doing so, the producer is using the instrument to emphasize musical figures that are already there, rather than to forge new musical ground.

Also, twice in this short statement, Mr. Supreme explicitly equates "real" hip-hop production with the use of samples, again pointing up the purist nature of the construction.

A certain purism also informs the third criterion for the use of live instruments, which is that they are acceptable when they have the right timbre or ambience. The "right" timbre, as I mentioned, has been defined in many ways: "dusty", "analog", etc. What concerns me here, though, is how the *idea* of a correct sound, particularly one which is based on the characteristics of sampling, functions to limit the use of live instruments.

Domino, producer for the Bay Area collective the Hieroglyphics, articulates those limits as follows:

> It all depends on the sound, for me. I like the right sound, so if I can get that—by any means, no matter where it comes from—I'm happy with it...I'm not gonna put down nobody if it's played [live], as long as it sounds good to me...
>
> [But] I think there's a lot of people out there that play stuff that doesn't sound...like the sounds are either, to me, too new, or just sounds real generic, you know? So the stuff that I did that's live, I kinda want it to sound like it's a sample, in a sense. It may be live, but it's gotta blend in well enough. (Domino, telephone interview: 1998)

Like Jake One, Domino adheres to the principle that there is an objectively "right" sound that must be realized for the work to be of value. His statement that he wouldn't speak ill of someone who used live instrumentation to achieve this sound cuts two ways. Clearly, it supports the idea of the aesthetic taking precedence over the methodology. But at the same time merely by bringing it up, Domino subtly suggests that there may, in fact, be grounds for disapproval. In addition, he asserts that live instruments are acceptable only to the degree that they sound like samples, and that in cases where live instruments *are* used, they must "blend in" with the samples, rather than vice versa. The idea of sampling as

an aesthetic ideal may appear jarring to individuals trained in other musical traditions, but it absolutely exemplifies the approach of most hip-hop producers.

The press materials for the Roots' album *Things Fall Apart*, for instance, highlight the following statement from their manager and executive producer Rich Nichols, concerning their use of live instrumentation: "We spend a huge amount of time trying to make things sound nasty, to get live instruments to bang like they were samples." (Guerasseva 1999)

This effort has not gone unnoticed by sample-based hip-hop artists. Samson S., in praising the Roots, echoes Jake One's measured support for live instrumentation in principle, while at the same time specifically maintaining the sampling aesthetic as the ideal:

> I don't have nothin' against live instruments, if it sounds bomb. If it sounds good. That's not my thing, I don't really get caught up in all that. I know some folk'll tell you, "sample, sample". No. As much as I love sampling, and sample-oriented shit, it don't stop there. That's not the only type of hip-hop I like. And that's not what hip-hop is *all* about necessarily. Yes, the DJ and all that, but, you know...I love the Roots! They don't have a peer, though. There ain't too many other live instrument hip-hop groups that sound as good as them. (Samson S., personal interview: 1999)

A thorough reading of Samson S.'s statement of apparent support for live instrumentation shows it to be highly conditional: "*if* it sounds bomb...*if* it sounds good." This becomes even more apparent as he continues:

> Samson S.: But, man, I ain't heard *nobody* make live drums sound good in hip-hop...And I have no idea why fools ain't micin' their drums properly, or why it don't sound right.
>
> Joe: Is that what it is? It's just, like, the sound of the drum?

> Samson S.: It's the sound. And maybe, because, I think, we've become accustomed to drums sounding one way, because [of] sampling and shit. So if it doesn't have the sound of records from like '73 or '74, a lot of us get turned off, because we've been conditioned. Myself included. (Samson S., personal interview: 1999)

Mr. Supreme, also a producer, feels that this shortcoming is not limited to drum sounds:

> You can take the same sample and have a band re-create it, and it's not gonna be the same thing. It's just not the same. Things were recorded different back then, and they sounded better, to me. You know? They were warmer...everything was analog. [Now] everything's digital and it's a little too crispy sounding. (Mr. Supreme, personal interview: 1998)

While all of the people that I spoke with made this argument along similar lines, most (including Mr. Supreme) felt that, in addition to the timbral characteristics of particular samples, there was something equally valuable about the sampling process itself.

Intrinsic Value of the Sampling Process

A good example of the intrinsic benefits of the sampling aesthetic is the case of experimental hip-hop producer the Angel. While she apparently finds the process of sampling old records to be too restrictive (both artistically and financially), this does not require that she turn uncritically to the traditional use of live instruments. Rather, her approach is to hire live musicians, record them in the studio, and then sample *that*, and work with the resulting samples to create the finished work. This raises an obvious question, though: why go to the trouble of

sampling? Why not just instruct the musicians to play what you want in the first place?

The Angel's response is that there is something intrinsic to the sampling process itself that cannot be duplicated with live instrumentation:

> I work with samples of my own stuff. I create samples. Like, I'll record a whole bunch of stuff and then resample it and mess with it. Either musicians, my playing, my playing keys, my playing other odd instruments, little things that I pick up and mess around with. And program up beats, and just chop up bass drums and snares and bits and pieces and create samples that way...
>
> That's always kinda been my trademark of mixing and matching things; having the live instrumentation, but not using it in a conventional way. Because there's a real value to sampling. The reason why people sample is because you get an instant vibe, and an instant sound, from that original recording that you can't get by recording somebody playing a horn. It's just not the same.
>
> I can't describe to you what that is, but part of it's the ambience, part of it's the atmosphere. Part of it's all the things that are in that sample, that you wanna EQ [equalize] out, that still give it flavor. That's why I go through the painstaking, very long-winded process of creating samples for myself. Because just recording it down straight, it'll just sound too placid; it won't have any vibe. So there's a real value to it. (The Angel, telephone interview: 1998)

For Oakland-based DJ and journalist Oliver Wang, the aesthetic value of a sample also goes beyond such timbral issues record noise or seventies recording techniques:

> In terms of how I feel about live instrumentation, I actually like it a lot. I think the limitations to it, though, are that loops tend to have a complexity that it's difficult, logistically speaking, for hip-hop bands to emulate. For one thing, it's just a matter of getting certain sound effects, like moogs or synthesizers and stuff. Bands may not have access to that kind of technology.

> *It's hard to capture the beauty of a loop when you're playing live*. On the flip side, it's hard to capture the beauty of live, when you're looping. So I can see it going both ways. I don't think hip-hop can afford to have most of its bands playing live instruments. But I certainly consider that to be real hip-hop, though. I don't accept the argument that that's something else. (Oliver Wang, personal interview: 1998)

Like the Angel, Wang speaks of the relative merits of live versus sampled music in an entirely abstract framework. His analysis imparts a value to "looping" that is completely separate from what any particular sample might sound like. Again, this suggests that for hip-hop aesthetes, there is an intrinsic value to sampling that goes beyond either convenience or sound quality.

While Wang notes that he doesn't feel that hip-hop can "afford" to overuse live instruments, he does not say what he thinks will happen if this line is crossed. While the logical assumption is that it will have crossed a definitional boundary of some sort, and therefore no longer be hip-hop, he emphatically rejects this position. This apparent paradox cuts to the heart of the issue. If genre boundaries are informed by a purist sensibility, the non-purist faces a conundrum: if a piece of music can contravene the aesthetic and still be hip-hop, what *isn't* hip-hop?

Is it Hip-Hop?

Definitional questions of this sort tend to be difficult to resolve through scholarship, since (despite their appeals to objectivity) they do not reflect an abstract principle applied to a social conflict, but a social conflict retroactively abstracted to a principle. The problem for the scholar is that, depending on how one positions oneself socially, one can arrive at any number of mutually exclusive principles. Nevertheless, the study of the various principles that individuals appeal to, and the assumptions that underlie those principles, can provide the scholar

with great insights about social relationships in an artistic community (Becker 1997: 158-60).

In this case, the question of whether music that uses live instrumentation falls within the acceptable genre boundaries of hip-hop is something of a red herring. The idea of music that crosses the border away from hip-hop functions primarily as a rhetorical straw man to bolster the position of the most purist elements of the community. Once this construct exists, it can be used to criticize any aspect of hip-hop production as inauthentic. For instance, it may be pressed into service in order to criticize producers who seem to have failed to "dig in the crates" (see chapter 5) or adhere to the producers' ethics (see chapter 6). The value of digging for beats and supporting an ethical system, however, may not be readily apparent in producers' statements about what constitutes "real hip-hop", since, as I will discuss in the relevant chapters, both are encoded in the aesthetic system. Thus one producer may appear to be questioning another's decision to use live instruments on ethical or aesthetic grounds, but what is ultimately registered is a criticism of the individual's failure to educate themselves about the systems of ethics and aesthetics.

As I suggested earlier, many respected individuals in the hip-hop world who are not producers—especially MC's—have a far less stringent standard in this regard. Seattle's MC Kylea, for instance, characterizes the use of live instrumentation as one of a variety of possible options that must be kept open in order for hip-hop to progress:

> I like [live instrumentation]...'cause it just gives it a broader dimension. When you go back to rules, too, certain people feel that it's not hip-hop if it's not two turntables and a microphone. But it's like: hip-hop, you have to be able to continue to create off of it, in order for it to grow. (Kylea, personal interview: 1998)

Seattle DJ and label owner Strath Shepard, by contrast, hews to the purist position:

> Hip-hop is based on a DJ. Some groups that would call themselves hip-hop groups, that use live instruments, I wouldn't call that hip-hop. It's rap. They're rapping. But hip-hop is a DJ and an MC...In general, I think of true Hip-Hop as samples, a DJ, records, beats, digging. I don't think of it as a bass player. I don't care how great they are.
>
> ...I don't know, it's tough to talk about what is or isn't hip-hop. But I think, in general, live instruments, I don't think of that as being the real, *real* hip-hop. I think the focus should be on the DJ.[3] (Strath Shepard, personal interview:1998)

Seattle DJ and hip-hop producer Vitamin D takes a similar approach. In his formulation, the significant aspect is neither the sound nor the method, but the presence or absence of the DJ:

> I got some live instrumentation in some [of the material I'm working on] now. But I don't think live instrumentation is cool without a DJ being the foundation of what you're doing. Because Hip-Hop started with the DJ, so that's Hip-Hop's foundation. So to me its not Hip...I mean, it's still Hip-Hop, but it's not original school style.
>
> I'm not really against'em. [But I'm] definitely not just pro-instruments like, "Yeah that's advancing Hip-Hop," or "that's taking Hip-Hop to another level". (Vitamin D, personal interview: 1998)

Regarding the question of whether or not music with live instruments constitutes "real hip-hop" or not, Vitamin D makes two interesting points. First, he suggests that this is not an either-or proposition: "It's still hip-hop, but it's not original school style". Secondly, after formally professing to not be opposed to their use, he emphasizes that he doesn't believe that the use of live instruments is particularly innovative. This is not an arbitrary comment on Vitamin D's part;

the question of whether or not live instrumentation is innovative strikes a nerve within the production community.

Is it innovative?

As Vitamin D demonstrates, even producers who are not opposed to live instruments in principle resent the notion that the use of live instrumentation constitutes a leap forward in hip-hop production. This is largely due to a sense that most of the individuals who are promoting this view (usually music critics and musicians from other genres) lack an understanding of the aesthetic issues involved. While those who are critical of hip-hop have never been shy about equating a lack of live instrumentation with a lack of musical quality (Consadine 1990/1995, Gold 1990/95), even apparently sympathetic voices seem to have internalized this equation in subtle ways.

Guitar-playing MC and producer Wyclef Jean's *The Carnival*, for instance, is described in a recent issue of *Rolling Stone* magazine as, " A solo album displaying courage, ambition *and as much musical ability as hip-hop had ever seen*...[emphasis added]" (Toure1998: 38). The idea of relative levels of "musical ability" (as opposed to, for example, more specific rhyming or scratching ability) is one that is almost never invoked in hip-hop. Clearly Wyclef's use of the guitar is the decisive factor in *Rolling Stone's* assessment.

Such critics seem to operate from a sense that the use of live instrumentation is self-evidently superior to the use of samples, a view that is often expressed by its corollary, that sampling must be chosen for reasons of expediency. From the perspective of a hip-hop purist, as delineated above, such

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[3] Note that both Kylea and Strath conflate the role of the producer with that of the DJ. See chapter three for a general discussion of the historical significance of this move.

assertions are both uninformed and insulting, in that they overlook the possibility that there may be a legitimate aesthetic reason for preferring samples.

MC, producer, and grafitti-writer Specs, while also not opposed to the use of live instruments, *is* opposed to the characterization of their use as "innovative":

> I don't like when an entire band is used, necessarily. I mean, it's OK. But...a lot of people are doing that, and gettin' pushed up to the forefront as innovators, when they're not. 'Cause they didn't start anything. Like if I saw, like, Ultramagnetic MC's [a well-respected group of long standing] with a band or something, then I would say, "OK, they're innovating something." But not people that are just brand new.
>
> And, another way, they're not really innovating because all they're doing is playing music. People have already played music in a band before. They've already done that, so they're not really innovating. (Specs, personal interview: 1998)

Specs begins by reiterating the distinction between the use of single instruments in a supporting role and songs where the primary material is provided by live instruments—"an entire band". As he continues, he suggests that innovators should be people who have absorbed the tradition for a long time. His position is apparently that only the most traditional practitioners can be innovative, since they have internalized the aesthetic to the degree that their contributions will necessarily help the entire system to develop. Interestingly, this is a philosophy that I've mainly heard expressed in reference to South Indian classical music, in which a great musician may be characterized as an innovator *within* the tradition. In any case, his statement suggests once again that hip-hop producers see their work within the context of a valued aesthetic tradition, one that they are not anxious to uproot.

Conclusions

Based on the forgoing, I believe it is possible to make several generalizations about the nature of the hip-hop producers' discourse with regard to live instrumentation. First, the use of sampling is clearly the aesthetic preference of most producers. Even when live instrumentation *is* used, the ideal that they are trying to achieve is based on the sound of the sample. The fact that criteria even exist for the appropriate use of live instruments means that live are seen as requiring extenuating circumstances, which further establishes them as a second choice. This preference is not for the *act* of sampling, but for the *sound* of sampling: it is a matter of aesthetics.

In a broader sense, the fact that a preference exists at all reflects the purism of the hip-hop producers' community. The creation of rules - the wariness about the use of live instrumentation - suggests that, not only is there an aesthetic at work here, but that it is worth protecting. And it is worth protecting because it is "real", because it is beautiful, and because it sounds authentic.

V. Materials and Inspiration: Digging in the Crates

> I'm not the hottest crate-digger around. I can't remember the names of breaks I used. I'm not like one of them break-kids. But I have so many records in my house I don't even like to move, you know? (DJ Kool Akiem, telephone interview: 1999)

Sampling - the digital recording and manipulation of sound that forms the foundation of hip-hop production - requires source material. In order to sample, there must be something to sample *from*. For sample-based hip-hop producers, the source tends to be vinyl records.

In this chapter, I will describe the process of "digging in the crates" – searching for rare records - and discuss its significance to the hip-hop production community. I argue that in addition to its practical value in providing the "raw material" for sample-based hip-hop, digging serves a number of other purposes for the production community. These may include such functions as: manifesting ties to hip-hop deejaying tradition, "paying dues", educating producers about various forms of music, and serving as a form of socialization between producers.

As Tricia Rose has written, the value of digging for beats is largely a result of hip-hop's roots in DJ culture:

> Samplers allow rap musicians to expand on one of rap's earliest and most central musical characteristics: the break beat. Dubbed the "best part of a great record" by Grandmaster Flash, one of rap's pioneering DJs, the break beat is a section where "the band breaks down, the rhythm section is isolated, basically where the bass guitar and drummer take solos."...These break beats are points of rupture in their former contexts, points at which the thematic elements of a musical piece are suspended and the underlying rhythms are brought center stage. In the early stages of rap, these break beats formed the core of rap DJ's mixing strategies. Playing the turntables like instruments, these DJs extended the most rhythmically compelling elements in a song, creating a new line composed only of the most climactic point in

> the "original." The effect is a precursor to the way today's rappers use the "looping" capacity on digital samplers.[1] (Rose 1994: 74)

These Are the Breaks

Hip-hop sampling grew out of the DJs' practice of repeating the "breaks" until they formed a musical cycle of their own. The segments favored by early hip-hop producers tended toward funk and soul breaks which - even in their original context - were clearly defined. An untrained listener, for example, can easily hear the beginning and end of the break in James Brown's "Funky Drummer" (1969), perhaps the single most exploited sample in hip-hop music history. The break begins when everything but the drums stops playing, and ends eight measures later when the other instruments resume. In the years since sampling began, however, a significant development has taken place: as producers broadened their record searches, the definition of a break became less stringent.

Today, the term "break" refers to any segment of music (usually four measures or less) that could be sampled and repeated. For example, the song "They Reminisce Over You", by Pete Rock and C.L. Smooth (1992) is based on a break from jazz artist Tom Scott's 1968 cover version of the Jefferson Airplane's "Today". The break in this case, however, is not a moment of intense drum activity but a two-measure excerpt from a saxophone solo. Presumably, one who was not already familiar with the hip-hop song would not hear those particular measures as being significant in the context of the original song.

In contemporary terms, then, a break is any expanse of music that is *thought of as a break* by a producer. On a conceptual level, this means that the break in this example was brought into existence retroactively by Pete Rock's use of it. In other words, for the twenty-four years between its release and the day Pete Rock sampled it, Tom Scott's "Today" contained no break. From that day on, it contained the break from "They Reminisce Over You".

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[1] "Looping" refers to the process of taking a linear phrase and repeating it (see chapter 7).

Producers deal with this apparent breaching of the time-space continuum with typically philosophical detachment. Conventionally, they take the position that the break had always been there, it just took a great producer - such as Pete Rock - to hear and exploit it. In other words, record-gathering is approached as if potential breaks have been unlooped and hidden randomly throughout the world's music. It is the producer's job to find them.

DJ Jazzy Jay, for example, suggests that even the original musicians may not have understood the significance of their own work:

> Maybe those records were ahead of their time. Maybe they were made specifically for the rap era; these people didn't even know what they were making at that time. They thought, "Oh, we want to make a jazz record." (Leland & Stein 1987: 26)

It is this philosophy, then, that motivates producers to go to great lengths to "discover" new breaks before others do.

Digging

The process of acquiring rare, usually out-of-print, vinyl records for sampling purposes has become a highly developed skill, and is referred to with the term "digging in the crates" ("digging" for short). Evoking images of a devoted collector spending hours sorting through milk crates full of records in used record stores, garages and thrift stores, the term carries with it a sense of valor, symbolizing an unending quest for the next record. Individuals who give themselves to this quest are held in high esteem, and the phrase "you can tell he digs", is one of the highest compliments that can be given to a hip-hop producer.

The digging mindset is one of the things that sets producers apart from other participants in the hip-hop arts. As DJ Karen Dere explains, it can easily approach the level of an obsession:

> My friend Roman, he's from Switzerland. And he took a road trip through the South and pretty much just knocked on people's doors and asked them if they had old records that they wanted to sell. And...he came back with just ace records. And that's pretty psychotic, if you think about that in terms of "what would normal people do on vacation?" They went on a quest for records, and that was the whole reason for the trip. If people were having a garage sale, they'd be like, "do you have records? Does your neighbor have records?" It's a whole 'nother mind set that people have. (Karen Dere, personal interview: 1998)

Jake One, himself an inveterate digger, describes how he and Mr. Supreme once arrived at a record sale well before dawn, only to find they were not the first ones there:

> Me and [Supreme] in L.A., in February, we went to see Common and the X-Men and there was a swap meet at five in the morning in Pasadena. We went from the club straight there. And there were people out there with flashlights. (Jake One, personal interview: 1998)

The Crates

The "crates" part of the term operates on both literal and figurative levels, not unlike the two senses in which MCs use the term "microphone". As Norfleet writes:

> In addition to being an important piece of equipment to rap artists, the mic has also taken on meaning as a symbolic vehicle to demonstrate one's power in a crowd. One reason why the literal and symbolic mic is central to hip-hop themes is because one's skills (verbal agility) demonstrated "on the microphone" determine whether the performer carries the coveted title of MC, or is merely a "rapper". (Norfleet 1997: 123).

For producers, it is not the sampler, as might be expected, but the crates that carry the symbolic weight.

On the most concrete level, as I said, "crates" refers to the fact that "overflow stock" (inexpensive, odd, or not-yet-priced records) are often stored in milk crates on the floor of used record stores; these are precisely the records that producers are interested in. On a similarly literal level, the term "crates" also refers to producers' habit of storing their own records in such crates at home. This is a particularly useful system for producers who are also DJ's, since they can use the crates to transport records to live shows.

On a more figurative level, the crates become a gloss for a producer's record collection, in both quantitative and qualitative senses. Producers, for instance, commonly count their records by crates rather than individual albums (e.g. "How many records do you have?" "About twenty crates."). Similarly, one describes a producer's collection by the records that are represented in their crates (e.g. "How are his crates?" "Good...a lot of jazz."). Producers, in other words, are often judged on the quality of their crates.

Developing a sensibility about records

The first step for the beginning crate-digger is to develop a sensibility about which records might contain material that is useful for sampling purposes. For many, if not most, producers, this process begins with the selective exploitation of their parents' record collections. This has led to a certain core of well-known records, generally those that were popular with urban African-American listeners in the 1970's, becoming associated by producers with "mom and pop crates".

Once this initial source is exhausted, many producers begin to pursue the original sources of favorite hip-hop songs:

> Most people start out looking for things that they know have been sampled. Basically looking for stuff that other people have used already...Some people don't ever develop past that...But most people, and myself included...get to a point where

> you're not just looking for stuff that people have sampled, but you look for things that *you* might wanna sample.
>
> Essentially what happens is you look at your crates, and there's certain types of records there. And you just develop a feel for what's good. Even though it's true that a lot of the most corny-looking records have stuff on'em. You kind of develop a feel for, like, "OK, these people on the cover," or this design, or this era, or this label: I bet it's good. Then you buy the thing, you check it out...and there's stuff on it and you wanna sample it. I don't make beats, but I have stacks of stuff that I *would* use. (Strath Shepard, personal interview: 1998)

As Shepard points out, since producers are often concerned with the general ambience and production qualities of a record (as opposed to, for example, particular musicians or songs), very general indicators of this "vibe" can be quite useful for the beginning digger:

> I think back then it was mostly just looking at the record and whatever was on the cover or what the names of the songs were. That's how we basically found most of the cool stuff. (King Otto, personal interview: 1998)

When King Otto says "the names of the songs" he doesn't mean that he was interested in the particular songs themselves; rather he is referring to songs that had names that seemed to reflect the aesthetic sensibility he was seeking. Producers may look for song titles that (for example) reflect Black Nationalism (e.g.."To You Beautiful Black Sister", Gary Byrd Experience), that utilize an apparent African language (e.g."Olinga", Milt Jackson), or which contain references to "funk", "funky", "soul", or signs of the zodiac (e.g."Soul Virgo", Cannonball Adderley). In a column on digging written for Grand Royal Magazine, Eric Gladstone is emphatic on this point:

> **Go on names alone**. Joe Quartermans's Free Soul, Sho Nuff, Black Nasty – how can you go wrong? And while the world "funk" in a song is no guarantee of goodness, "freak" or "freaky" almost always is. [emphasis in original] (Gladstone 1995: 32).

After one has devoted oneself to digging for some time, one begins to develop more specific preferences.

> When you're a producer, in the advanced stages, you start getting into, you know, "was that Billy Cobham on drums?"...So, yeah, you start looking at the personnel. And wondering, "Ok, does this person have a solo album out?", "can I get this?" And then it goes on and on. That's the beauty of that thing, for real. Become a little well-versed in music. (Samson S., personal interview:1999)

Beat-digger and producer Phill "Soulman" Stroman sees this development as an organic process:

> You start off just diggin' for beats, tryin' to find beats to sample or DJ with. Next thing you know, you're...a record collector. You know everything about the musicians, their backgrounds. It just starts happenin', you know? (Phill Stroman, telephone interview: 1999)

Another sign of a more advanced digging sense is the ability to find useful material in unexpected places, which is to say records that don't conform to the aforementioned aesthetic sensibility:

> Some of the records I have, I just can't believe I have'em. They're so stupid! But the beats on 'em are just so outrageous! It's crazy. It's like, *what were they thinking*? When they recorded that record, what were they thinking? It could be, like, a senior citizens' band or something, like this little orchestra, and the beat is just crazy—it sounds like hip-hop! I don't get it! (Mr. Supreme, personal interview: 1998)[2]

Developing a sensibility about sounds

At the same time that a producer is learning to distinguish promising cover art from that which is worthless, they are also developing an increasingly sophisticated sensibility about which specific sounds will

[2] One particularly well-known example of this phenomenon is a version of the Mickey Mouse Club theme from the 1970's, which begins with a particularly hard-edged drum break.

work within their overall musical scheme. As journalist and DJ Oliver Wang suggests, the growth of such a sensibility is one of the major tasks set before a producer:

> It's an easy art to learn, just how to work a sampler, how to quantize stuff. But I think it's extremely difficult to actually develop a good ear. For instance, like drums.
>
> If you don't want to use the same drums that everyone else on the planet's used, there's like a science to...looking on a rock record or jazz record to pick up a particular break. You want your snares to sound a certain way. You kind of want your low-end kick to sound a certain way. Your high-hats...
>
> If you listen to beginning demo tapes by producers who have just started, you can always pick up when they're using the same drum samples as everyone else. Or when they're using purely, digitally, like, drum-machine sounds; it just sounds really fake, in a way. Nowadays, when producers are so sophisticated, it just stands out as being amateurish. (Oliver Wang, personal interview: 1998)

The possession of such knowledge is a point of pride among producers and it is not taken lightly:

> There's certain artists that have a certain sound, so, I mean, you'll know, "Oh, that's a Bob James-produced record," or something like that. You can just tell, even without knowing the actual song. You can tell if it's from a certain production company or whatever from the seventies. CTI, or a Blue Note record, or whatever, you know? As far as records, once you get to a certain point where you know a lot of labels, and you can look at a certain record and say, "well, this is gonna have this kind of sound on it". You know your producers, your instruments, you know your musicians. You become really educated just by default...
>
> [Mr. Supreme] will tell you record listings...There was a record I pulled at his house and he knew, like, the catalog listing and everything. I don't know if he was joking around, but he knew it, and I was just kinda staring at him. (Jake One, personal interview: 1998)

In a separate interview, I asked Mr. Supreme about this incident:

> [laughing] I did! Don't even ask me why I knew! I don't know how I knew! He was across the room. He pulled the record out and he said something. And I said, "yeah, that's Groove Merchant #562". And he looked at me, he was like, "you are a nut". (Mr. Supreme, personal interview 2: 1998)

While Mr. Supreme's detailed knowledge of his record collection (he has over 20,000 records), was conveyed to me as a humorous example of the extent of his obsessiveness, he was clearly also proud of that knowledge for its own sake. And there is little question that Jake One, while perhaps considering him "a nut", was also impressed.

Such information is deployed in many ways. For one thing, detailed knowledge of the records that own already has in their possession allows the producer to choose new ones that will dovetail nicely:

> When you search for just breakbeats, and you know beats, and you have a lot of beats in your head, you can hear something like a little bassline, just even a short one, like two notes or something. You can hear it, and then you can imagine a beat over it. And then you can think, "man, I can take this and chop these up and play'em back differently'. But the sound is there, the sound is funky. Just hearing stuff and basically piecing it together in your mind. (Mr. Supreme, personal interview: 1998)

Another valuable dividend of this knowledge is the ability to recognize when another producer uses an original record that one also owns, but in a new way. This can alert the thoughtful producer to new strategies and techniques:

> It depends how well you know these records...There's fools that can chop up something, and I can hear a piece and know what it is...Even a snare, even something as simple as a snare, "Oh, I know where he got that snare; he got that from..." (Domino, telephone interview: 1998)

At the same time, however, record knowledge can lead one to be overly critical of other people's approaches. As Mr. Supreme puts it, "It's kinda like a magician doing a magic trick, and if you know the secret, the trick's not as good." (Mr. Supreme, personal interview: 1998)

Vitamin D feels similarly:

> I know if I didn't have as many records as I have, I would appreciate a lot more people's beats, 'cause I wouldn't know what records they were using. Nowadays, I know what everybody's using. It's like "OK, he's using this. Yeah, I would've did that, too, *but*..." (Vitamin D, personal interview: 1998)

Developing Sources

Among the tricks of the trade that a producer must know is where to dig. Good used records are not found at the major chain record stores, such as Tower Records or Blockbuster. In fact, the most valuable material is often found in the most unlikely places:

> I go everywhere, and you find the best stuff in the weirdest spots. Just places you'd never imagine...Like a furniture store, a curtain shop. I was in Ballard walking by this surplus ...military store. And I don't even know why I went in there. I just happened to go in there and they had like five crates of records on the floor. And some good shit!...I mean, they're everywhere, you know?...(Mr. Supreme, personal interview: 1998)

> A lot of true country places probably have some nice spots. And a lot of cities that wasn't into a lotta urban music, probably has a lotta urban music just sittin'. You know, maybe somewhere like Salt Lake City. Or Vermont. You're probably gon' find some stuff. (Mixx Messiah, telephone interview: 1999)

True digging devotees never miss an opportunity:

> What do I do to get records? Man, I do everything to get a record, man. You name it. A good thing that a lot of people don't

> know about...is you go to like Capitol Hill Mini-Storage. And you ask'em, "do you have anything for sale?" 'Cause people don't pay their rent, and they'll clear the locker out. And they'll be like, "yeah, we have a room back here. Everything's a buck in the room".
>
> ...Family members, aunts, uncles, cousins, friends, girlfriends, even old restaurants that used to have discos, then you go in and talk to them and they still have the records. Just weird places like that.
>
> I guess [that's] what my mom really taught me, 'cause she used to say "just ask; you never know unless you ask." So I just started asking everyone for records. (Mr. Supreme, personal interview: 1998)

> Sometimes it gets out of hand, the stuff we're doing. I mean, being nice to people's moms and stuff to get their records. Befriending, you know, elders. I got my girlfriend doing all kinds of work right now on her co-workers. (Jake One, personal interview: 1998)

To be sure, Jake One and Supreme are considered by their peers to be particularly devoted to the digging process. When I asked Samson S. where he would go to dig for beats, his response was instructive in this regard:

> We hit the normal spots...we're not really fanatical about it, like Supreme or nothin' like that. (Samson S., personal interview:1999)

Techniques of digging

In addition to developing promising sources for records, and the aesthetic sensibilities necessary to evaluate them, producers also develop digging techniques.

It is not unusual for producers to carry children's record players (which, unlike adult turntables, tend to be both portable and impact-resistant) with them, in order to preview potential acquisitions. While it may unnerve record-store owners to see hip-hop producers listening to, for example, Sesame Street records

on a Fisher-Price record player, other crate-diggers instantly recognize this as a sign of a kindred spirit.

Figure 3: Mr. Supreme with portable record player
(Photo courtesy of Conception Records)

Similarly, there is an instantly recognizable style to the way producers preview records. After searching the entire record store, the producer will often assemble a stack of records, each of which they then proceed to set on the portable record player for several seconds before consigning it to the "buy" or "don't buy" pile. Producers tend to look for visual cues of a break (which can be seen in smaller or larger grooves), and drop the needle at that point for a few seconds. This technique is also used at random points on the record's surface to get a general sense of the album. The clinical speed with which this process is undertaken can be unnerving for individuals who may be conversant with more conventional approaches to music listening. But for dedicated beat-diggers, it is essential:

> You can't go out diggin' without your portable, as far as I'm concerned. Back in the days before I had a turntable, I would just go out. Just take chances on stuff. But now, I have a collection of turntables and I'll just take one of them out. And I'll just get a stack of records out at some shop...and just start listenin' through stuff. (Phill Stroman, telephone interview: 1999)

What they hope to find varies from producer to producer, and, in fact, moment to moment. Sometimes, a producer will go out looking for samples of specific instruments:

> [E-Swift] takes on the instruments that are not so obvious in the hip-hop element. 'Cause I remember when he came down here, we went diggin'. It's like every year he accents a different sound, a different instrument: at the time he was looking for tubas. I remember another time, he was looking for harps and violins. And then one time we talked and he was looking for cello in music...he looks for particular instruments. (Mixx Messiah, telephone interview: 1999)

> I like to get records with breaks, naturally. Drum sounds. Maybe like basslines, sometimes you can catch basslines...I like the Fender Rhodes [electric piano] sound. Horns are kind of played out, but I still like a good horn...Like them ill guitar sounds, I like them 007 James Bond guitars...Oh, I like to sample vocals, like singing. I did this one beat where I sampled Janis Joplin wailing on the chorus...(Samson S., personal interview: 1999)

In addition to looking for various sounds, producers will investigate various genres for their potential:

> I think that's what separates people, as far as hip-hop junkies, and just regular consumer music listeners. People that can spend more than an hour in a record store, and still have stuff to look for. "Oh, I gotta go to that section."...(Karen Dere, personal interview: 1998)

> ...When I started, I'd go to a store and I'd go right to the 'soul' section. I wouldn't even look at anything else. And I can only imagine what was sitting in those stores, that I left there. It's like, now, when I go to a store, I gotta go through the whole store. I go through everything. It's crazy. Just to find a beat, just to find something. 'Cause it's all worth it in the end. (Mr. Supreme, personal interview: 1998)

Another common technique that producers use is to buy records that they don't actually want, just to mislead other producers who may be watching, as well as record store owners, who will raise the price of a record once they discover that it has become valuable to hip-hop crate-diggers. This latter practice is viewed with a great deal of distaste by producers, not only because it is seen as exploitative, but also because many of the records only contain short segments (say 2 or 3 seconds) that are useful. In either case, the point is to devalue one's own choices in the eyes of others, by purposely choosing a few bad records:

> Oh yeah. You always do that. Especially if you go to record shows, you get all these kids that know what you do, and they'll start following you. Even record dealers, 'cause they're figuring, "well, if he buys it, it's something. And we can get it and jack the price up." So you just do that--you just grab something stupid, a Kenny Rogers record or something. (Mr. Supreme, personal interview 1998)

Of course hip-hop producers were not the first people to seek rare vinyl; serious record collecting dates back to the beginning of the medium. But many hip-hop producers feel that, because of the way they listen to records (and to some degree, their physical appearance), they are not taken seriously by older record collectors. This can be a source of some friction:

> You have to be able to connect with the other record-dealing population, 'cause they don't respect us at all, I know that. And out

> here [in Seattle], they have no idea what we're doing, still. So I guess that works in our advantage, but it gets on my nerves...'Cause a lot of these stores talk about "don't play that rap in my store"...They don't really like to give the credit very much. They're still stuck on the "Floyd and the Stones syndrome", as [Mr. Supreme] calls it. (Jake One, personal interview: 1998)

Lack of respect notwithstanding, the dealers are still willing to take hip-hop producers' money. In fact, as alluded to earlier, dealers often try to second-guess what the hip-hop buyers are looking for. As Jake One continues, this strategy is rarely successful:

> It used to be, like, "if it had a afro [on the cover], we're gonna charge a bunch of money for it". They just gave up even on that. It's funny, 'cause I'll go into stores around here, and they'll have something for twenty dollars that I see every day. I mean, *every day*. Then, every once in a while, I'll find a record that goes for a lot of money, and it'll be two dollars. Whenever I find something good, it's cheap. Real cheap. Especially out here [in Seattle]. (Jake One, personal interview: 1998)

In addition to purchasing records, producers often trade records with each other. As Vitamin D relates, a producer can develop a high degree of knowledge about what other producers are looking for, and can then use this knowledge to negotiate mutually beneficial trades.

> Jake One comes up to me all the time, 'cause me and him trade records a lot. He be like, "Man, this is a Vitamin D record, man. This is the only thing I can say. I know you want this record. It's just a Vitamin D record, you know?" Sure enough, I'll listen to it, and he's right. (Vitamin D, personal interview: 1998)

This type of public service, however, operates within a fairly strict protocol:

> You have to trade evenly on records. It's weird with records: people will just give you a bunch of records. And if you don't know the rules, you just think, like, "Oh, thanks a lot." But what that really is, is they give you a bunch of records, and if you

> find something that they need, you have to give it to'em...You can't abuse that, because it just makes bad relationships...
>
> You feel a slight panic when you get stuff from people, because you're like "oh my god, I have to...", you know? It's like getting something from Don Corleone or something, you gotta pay the thing back. It's not just free. (Strath Shepard, personal interview: 1998)

If one doesn't abuse the trading relationship, a producer can find themselves part of an international trading network:

> The record circles are really...it's kind of crazy how small the world is. 'Cause everybody knows somebody, a common person. Like, I trade with a couple people out in Toronto, that's mostly who I trade with. And they know the guys in England, and they know so-and-so in Boston, and so-and-so in L.A. Everybody kind of knows of each other. (Jake One, personal interview: 1998)

> Everybody that's up on the beats, as far as records go, we all know each other. It's like "six degrees of separation". Everybody knows everybody through somebody else. I know people all over the world, man. All over the world...It's a small world, when it comes to beats. (Phill Stroman, telephone interview: 1999)

Finally, many producers can find useful music simply by revisiting old records from their own collection:

> I always gotta go back. There's stuff that we got, say, five years ago with something on it, and it was good for that time period in hip-hop. And then you think, "there's nothing else on that record, it's a crappy record." Then we go back and listen, and it blows us away, the stuff that's on there. 'Cause hip-hop direction constantly changes. Constantly. (Mr. Supreme, personal interview: 1998)

> I always go back and I'm like, "Man, why didn't I hear this before?" I'll just find like a whole drum loop on there that I didn't hear before, [or] that I did hear and for some reason didn't want to use it. (King Otto, personal interview: 1998)

> Lotta the records that I got and I thought were junk. That might've been back in the days when I was just lookin' for drum beats. But now, it's like, it could be anything on a record. Times change, sounds change, what people are sampling changes. So that record that was wack a few years ago might be the hottest record now. It's just one of those things, man.
>
> ...The record ain't changed, times just have. Your ear has changed. That's another thing, too. Just from listening to more and more records, your taste just becomes a lot broader. You're more receptive to a lot more sounds. (Phill Stroman, telephone interview: 1999)

Significance of Digging

> If you're a sample-oriented producer, [digging is] very important. Some producers live and die by their samples. i.e. Pete Rock and Diamond D, Supreme and Jake One. If that's your thing, if you're a sample-oriented producer, yes. And even if you like to play shit [live], it's still good to have a lot of music to listen to and get influenced...It's very important, though, in hip-hop, since we take music from everything. (Samson S., personal interview: 1999)

In addition to its most specific value, providing sampling material, digging for vinyl serves numerous other purposes. After all, if getting sound was one's only concern, there are many easier options available, from purchasing a synthesizer to hiring live musicians to collecting compact discs. Sample-based hip-hop producers, however, rarely exercise these options.

In this section I will deal with four major secondary functions of digging: 1) to feel or display a commitment to hip-hop tradition through the conscious or unconscious reinscription of the value of deejaying (through its association with vinyl records); 2) "paying dues" in a general sense; 3) to educate oneself about different forms of music, both for its own sake and to also to spark one's own

creativity; and, 4) as a form of socialization, both through digging with other producers and also through *talking* about digging

1. Abstract commitment to hip-hop tradition

For many producers, the practice of digging in the crates constitutes an almost ritualistic connection to hip-hop history. That is to say, the act of digging itself - apart from any material or social benefits that it may bring - is valued as a central act of hip-hop culture:

> Man, the most times that I just feel a warm gut feeling about hip-hop are like when I'm out in I-don't-know-where. Like, for example, I was in Wyoming in this basement...
>
> My brother, and my Dad and I, we drove for like twelve hours...through the night, got to this place. No sleep...everything was just messed up. So we walk in this bar at nine in the morning, have a beer. 'Cause we were still out from the night before. Then we go in this antique store. I go down in the basement. And it's like: one wall is missing; the whole floor is water. There's just records stacked up on these little pallets. I got this flashlight, and I'm digging through records.
>
> I didn't find anything that incredible. I found some records I wanted. But that is, like, *real* to me. I mean, that's kinda crazy and stuff, but that's part of the culture. Going to far lengths to get records. (Strath Shepard, personal interview: 1998)

King Otto characterizes the importance of digging in terms of its relationship to deejaying:

> I'd say it's important. It's definitely a part of hip-hop. It goes all the way back to the essence of deejaying: to find something new that people haven't heard. And be the first one to play it, and have people not know what it is, but still like the song. That's why, with hip-hop, you could play just about any kind of record, as long as it was upbeat and danceable, at the time. So it's definitely important. (King Otto, personal interview: 1998)

In addition to the historical value of deejaying to hip-hop culture, there is a visceral power to the act of digging, that can be ascribed to more general societal feelings about archaic media:

> I think there's an aura and there's a tradition of it and it's much more exciting to dig through vinyl than it is to flip through CD's...There's an aesthetic of it. You feel like you're doing more work that way... And it has to do with the mystique that vinyl has in our era,[it] maybe seems kind of outdated and archaic, but classy in some ways...Which is, I think, why people like vinyl better. It just feels purer to them. (Oliver Wang, personal interview: 1998)

2. Paying Dues

In addition to the personal enjoyment of digging, it may also serve as a sort of "paying dues" process, when brought to bear in a social setting. One is simultaneously learning through experience, gathering musical material for later use, and undergoing a rite of passage. Digging is a point of pride for many producers.

For example, in 1998 Jake One and Mr. Supreme collaboratively created a mix-tape, entitled "Smooth Criminals on Beatbreaks – Volume 1", a sampler of original funk and soul songs from which hip-hop songs had been sampled.[3] Printed directly on the cassette shell is the legend "All original records – no bootlegs!", disavowing the increasingly common use of breakbeat compilation records by producers and DJ's (see chapter 6). For the purchaser of the tape, however, this guarantee has *no practical significance whatsoever*; a cassette tape of a bootleg sounds exactly the same as a tape of an original record. But for Jake One and Mr. Supreme, it is clearly important that the listener know of their commitment to searching out original records.

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[3] Such tapes are not unheard of; Evil D and Phill Stroman each have a long-running series of similar tapes.

Similarly, the track listing for the song "Holy Calamity (Bear Witness II)" (DJ Shadow's contribution to the *Handsome Boy Modeling School* CD by Prince Paul and Dan the Automator) contains the note, "For all thre [sic] of you that care, DJ Shadow would like to state that all breaks used in this song were taken from the original source vinyl and not bootlegs or reissues. Suckers." (*So How's Your Girl*: 1999).

A similar sentiment is at work when Mixx Messiah complains about the low quality of contemporary commercial hip-hop; his primary complaint is that few contemporary producers take the time to dig:

> The whole difference was when they were creating a lot of stuff, they had time, and they put time into it. Now they thinking more or less about the clubs and the cars, and they not puttin' the time into the track.
>
> ...And they're not digging! The only people digging seems to be the underground or the producers that been putting it down, like Primo[4] and Pete Rock. And RZA. You know, them guys—their whole life is about digging. Digging, and working that console. (Mixx Messiah, telephone interview: 1999)

For this reason, a producer's digging knowledge is often advertised as a sign of authenticity. The underground hip-hop group People Under The Stairs, for example, manifests this knowledge though the design of their record cover, which intentionally evokes CTI, a 1970's jazz fusion label that was home to such musicians as Bob James and Grover Washington, Jr.:

> Their love for yesteryear's wax is evident on PUTS' own vinyl slice of truly underground hip-hop...The 12-inch label is designed to look like a CTI release, the heavily sampled imprint. "We didn't want to be too esoteric with the label association, " says Thes. "We were gonna go with Milestone or Prestige, but we decided to keep it simple. Every beatdigger knows about CTI." (Sour: 76)

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[4] DJ Premier

Moreover, when I asked Mr. Supreme to expound on the difference between himself and more commercially-oriented producers, he specifically refused to belittle the creativity and effort of commercial producers. The difference, he said, is that he digs:

> There's work and thought behind it, 'cause it's basically put together the same way everything else is. What's different is what they use. It's the difference between using a Diana Ross record, that you could go out to any thrift store right now and buy, or using some Filipino Soul band from Switzerland, that no one's heard of, and that's just funky as hell. (Mr. Supreme, personal interview: 1998)

3. Education about music

A third function of digging is to educate the producer about styles of music with which they may not be familiar, as Domino pointed out when I asked him to describe the relative importance of digging to hip-hop production:

> Very important. I think it's not for just beats. I'm really a big fan of different types of music...There's so much good music that never really blew up to the point that it would ever be on CD's today. So I've got turned on to stuff that I normally wouldn't have got turned on to, if it wasn't for trying to dig for samples. Since it's part of making tracks, at least for me, hip-hop wise, it's kind of like an extra bonus. (Domino, telephone interview: 1998)

This benefit can accrue, not only with regard to genres, but also with more specific strategies and approaches to music making. In this light, digging for records is seen as an educational process, as the following exchange with Negus I attests:

> Negus I: I think that [knowing a lot of records] is important, because it's gonna give you a lot more to draw upon, but it's [also] gonna open up your mind to different ideas of what you can do. Even combining different eras of music. And knowing that there's been some different kinds of things going on earlier,

> that you might not have known about. Like even in the bebop era, or the free jazz era. The kinds of things that were going on then are just as experimental, or even more, than any kind of crazy things that people put together now.
> ...Like how Premier puts together sounds in a way that's unique, and it's kind of off-the-wall. But there were people in the free jazz era that were doing things just as off-the-wall as that, with live instrumentation... They were breaking out of a formatted type of musical style, already. And I think he probably got a lot of influence from some of those old records, just in terms of not being formatted in traditional scales and musical progressions.
>
> Joe: ...So just not even in terms of specific musical sounds or samples or anything, but just ideas about music.
>
> Negus I: I think overall ideas and perceptions of music. Things you can do, or can't do, or supposed to do, or not supposed to do. (Negus I, personal interview: 1998)

Samson S. goes even farther, arguing that the knowledge gained from digging is beneficial to the producer not just for its influence on their work, but for its own sake as well:

> Gotta know some music, man. And that's where the crates and shit come in. That helped me out. I mean, I wouldn't have known about...Three Dog Night or some shit if it wasn't for just having records...I didn't grow up on that; I grew up on Al Green and Marvin Gaye and that type of shit. So, I didn't hear Three Dog Night in my home. I started hearing that stuff later, when I started sampling...
>
> That's the good thing about being a sample-oriented producer, because you get that education. Like I said, if it wasn't for this shit, a lot of us wouldn't be able to sit and have intelligent conversations about...Joni Mitchell or jazz and things like that, but because of hip-hop, we've learnt these things. So that's the good thing about it. 'Cause a lot of us, we get these records and we sample'em, and, like, occasionally, we'll actually put the record

> and listen to it. And, believe it or not, some of us actually listen and like these records! (Samson S., personal interview:1999)

4. Digging as socialization

Finally, digging in the crates serves as an important form of socialization for hip-hop producers. Not surprisingly, producers who are friends, such as Jake One and Mr. Supreme, spend a lot of time either digging together or talking about digging.

In addition, when a producer travels to another city, it is common practice for local producers to introduce them to prime digging spots:

> That's cool. 'Cause it's like a exchange of information. 'Cause you're getting to find a record store. They're probably finding out what kind of stuff you're looking for. You're from another place, you probably have a different insight to certain things. (DJ Kool Akiem, telephone interview: 1999)

In addition to its educational benefit for both parties, the practice also reinforces the social bonds between producers in different areas, social bonds which remain in effect after the traveler returns home. The close-knit nature of the production community contributes to an atmosphere of collegiality.

In the following conversation, for instance, Jake One speaks about his lack of buying power and how this requires him to put more effort into digging. In order to make the distinction between his own social circle and "producers with more money", he gives an example of the other style of digging. But, somewhat ironically, his knowledge of how more moneyed producers dig is based on his own experience digging with them. This is not necessarily a contradiction; Jake One's distinction is simply finer than it appears at first glance. Even distinctions between producers from different cities with different styles are based on the assumption that they are ultimately part of the same social circle:

> Jake One: Obviously, the producers with more money run together, 'cause they can go spend all the money.

Then there's like the lower-echelon people like me, and my little cohorts. And we're into dollar shopping.

Joe: There's that story about Mr. Walt [of the Beatminerz] buying a whole record store in Louisiana, or something...

Jake One: Yeah, we're not buying any records stores. I think the most I ever bought in a store was a crate[5]. And I'd like to have bought more, but I couldn't, you know?

... I went to Chicago this summer and I bought a bunch there. We hung out with No I.D., who's Common's producer. This guy was dropping like a thousand dollars in every store! I just couldn't even believe it. I was just in shock. I was like, "I gotta get paid; I wanna do that". (Jake One, personal interview: 1998)

Evolution of Digging

At this writing, hip-hop production is undergoing an evolution with respect to digging. As I mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, the idea of digging is intimately related to the idea of the break: one is digging for breaks. In the late 1990's, though, three factors conspired to make this a less attractive proposition.

The first is a growing sense that sampling a break and repeating it (also known as "looping") does not show enough artistic creativity on the part of a producer. Many producers hunger for a more personal form of expression, which they feel can be found by sampling smaller musical segments and rearranging them (see chapter seven). This practice still requires records, but the sensibility behind their acquisition may be different:

[5] approximately 75 - 100 records

> I used to really try to find the coolest records I could find. That was, say, early-90's and late 80's...But I started realizing that I wasn't really looping too much, so I wasn't really needing the cool records, 'cause I could just use little pieces of other things. So I'll buy whatever kind of record I can find that looks interesting: twenties piano records, or violin training records. "Sesame Street" records...I mean, I still like finding good records. And classic breaks and stuff like that. But I don't put as much time into it as, like, [Supreme] and Jake and those guys. (King Otto, personal interview: 1998)

The second factor is an increasing consciousness on the part of music publishing companies about sample clearance. It is fairly easy to recognize a two-measure section of a popular song, and hip-hop artists can therefore expect to pay the original copyright holders for every break-length sample they use. From a financial standpoint, this rapidly reaches the point of diminishing returns. I will deal with this issue more extensively in chapter eight.

Finally, there is a sense among many producers that the finite supply of old soul and funk music has been fully mined, that "all of the good breaks have been found":

> I think it use to be [important]. Because this is such a young process. Sampling has only been around, really the way it is now, for ten...or fifteen years. So it went through a stage where finding all these old breaks and things was something that was exciting. But now it's kinda got played out. And I think a lot of producers are kind of bored doing it, because it's no fun. It's more fun to make your own. We got past that. So now almost all the old breaks and old songs have been found. So you kinda have to take it somewhere else. (Negus I, personal interview: 1998)

> Now, I don't really feel like [having rare records is] what makes a producer. Maybe that's an extra bonus. But I wouldn't dis anybody 'cause they [didn't]...Now, it's a situation where it's whatever you can do with it. I think that now, it's harder to find a loop, and make a beat out of just a loop. (Domino, telephone interview: 1998)

Mr. Supreme, however, disputes this assertion:

> Like [Jake One] said, there's things that's drying up, 'cause everyone used everything. [But] I can easily pull out a thousand records that no one's touched, that are incredible. And *I* haven't even used'em! And the reason is because I know the record, and it's just that record to me. You know what I mean? And I just put it on the shelf.
>
> And people will come over, and I'll play'em stuff. And they're like, "Are you crazy? Why haven't you used that? Let *me* use it!"...So there is tons of stuff that no one's even touched on. I mean *tons*. (Mr. Supreme, personal interview: 1998)

Even producers who are particularly committed to digging in the crates are careful to emphasize that digging is only one of a number of important skills that a good producer must possess:

> People have this big misconception about, "whoever got the illest crates got the best beats."
>
> ...It's important to me, but I think it gets way overvalued a lot of times, because people forget to listen to the records they have. Or they just don't do anything with the records. Thing is, a lot of my favorite producers use records that I have and they've used them while I still have'em, and *I* didn't think to do it, so...
>
> I think the more records you get, I mean obviously you're gonna have a better chance of making a good beat, but it kind of makes you lose focus...It's your ear, I guess, more than anything. (Jake One, personal interview: 1998)

Samson S. agrees:

> I know some producers out there that got a *grip* of records. *Hella.* And when you listen to their beats, it doesn't matter. [sarcastically] *Their talent does come into play.* I mean, you could have every record ever made in the world, and a sampler. But if that's all you have? (Samson S., personal interview: 1999)

In fact, a week after our first interview, Mr. Supreme asked me to interview him again, specifically to make this point:

> It doesn't matter how many records you have; it's how you flip'em, you know? So what if you have a thousand dope records? If you're not getting' busy with'em...Anybody with money can be a record collector.
>
> I just wanted to make that clear, that there was cats that I know that don't have a whole lot of records, that are *nice* [6]. (Mr. Supreme, personal interview 2: 1998)

Having a substantial record collection is a necessary pre-condition to making good beats, but it is not the only condition. But while the records themselves may provide only the "raw material" for hip-hop production, the *act of searching for records* provides much more.

Digging in the crates provides a material focus for a variety of social interactions among producers. As I have shown, these may include everything from community building to the development of a personal reputation, to aesthetic and ethical education. The substantial amount of effort that producers put toward digging attests to the continued significance of all of these things within the world of hip-hop production. In fact, it is precisely the social, symbolic and aesthetic values of digging in the crates that allows it to remain a central focus for hip-hop producers even as its pragmatic value diminishes.

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[6] extremely talented

VI. Sampling Ethics

Joe: It's one of those things, that there seem to be...I don't know if "rules" is the right word...

Vitamin D: Yeah.

Joe: But there are certain things...

Vitamin D: They're rules! It's all following *rules*. (Vitamin D., personal interview: 1998)

One major influence on the artistic practice of hip-hop producers is their general adherence to a defined set of professional ethics. In this chapter, I will explore the major themes of this ethical system, in order to set the stage for questions regarding the producers' philosophical outlook and aesthetic approach. I will argue that, at base, these ethics tend to conflate creativity with relative moral value. From that axiom, a variety of rules have been derived, disseminated, and enforced within the producers' community.

It is important to note at the outset that what is at issue here is the validity of various *approaches* to sampling; producers' ethics are not concerned with whether sampling *itself* is appropriate or not. As I discussed in chapter four, hip-hop producers, among themselves, feel no need to justify sampling; it is the foundation of the musical system.

Furthermore, it must be said that many of these rules hold little significance for the larger hip-hop community. If one violates, it will often only be apparent to other producers. At the same time, high ethical standards are largely valued only within the production world. But, as will become clear in the following pages, concern for one's reputation among other producers is often enough to enforce a sense of ethical obligation. The community of hip-hop

producers is small enough that the threat of ridicule among one's peers can be a substantial sanction.

Similarly, a sense of ethical obligation serves to demonstrate a producer's concern for their peers' opinions. In a spoken interlude on their 1998 album *Moment of Truth*, for instance, Gang Starr's DJ Premier berates other hip-hop artists for, "... lettin' the industry control the rules of the hip-hop world that *we* made" (Gang Starr, 1998). In doing so, he is implicitly arguing that "the hip-hop world that we made" – the producers community - can be distinguished from the "industry" by its adherence to a set of rules. In other words, the producers' ethics are one of the primary factors that allow hip-hop musicians to see their work as an endeavor that is separate from commerce: as art.

Section headings in this chapter reflect my own attempt to express each ethical principle in its most generally applicable form; the rules were not necessarily stated to me in these terms by any one consultant. Furthermore, I wish to make it clear that by distilling the various ethical issues into a prescriptive form at the beginning of each section, it is not my intention to endorse that particular approach to the ethic in question. I have taken this step merely to delineate the ethics in their most generic terms before discussing the complexities that inevitably underlie them.

While the following pages will clearly demonstrate that these ethics are highly contested, it is essential to their function that they not be seen as the construction of particular individuals. Although the development of an individual producer's ethical approach is often based on his own participant-observation, it is simultaneously founded on the assumption that the ethics have an internal systemicity that exists independently of the observer:

> I guess where the ethics came from, to me, is just because I figured out what other people were doin' and just kinda did what they did. And then found the system in it. (DJ Kool Akiem, telephone interview: 1999)

Ethical debates tend toward the theological, which is to say that, despite many disagreements, the rules themselves are seen as being timeless and unchanging. As Strath Shepard comments:

> ... I don't know how those things come about, exactly. And you just know'em. I mean, I don't know who told me those rules. But everyone just kinda knows...(Strath Shepard, personal interview: 1998)

This is largely due to the fact that the rules exist in the background, and are rarely discussed unless violated:

> If I hear somebody do something that's unethical, I'll just make a note of it. It's not all that often that I do hear that...I've talked to people and heard tracks, and I'm like, "What are you doing? You sampled that offa Lord Finesse. You sampled that beat. That's wack." I've gotten into arguments over stuff like that...[But] the cats that I talk to, mostly, are in my same school of ethics, really. We don't really talk about that all that much. (DJ Kool Akiem, telephone interview: 1999)

Ethical arguments among producers usually make use of one of two strategies. They will either appeal to other rules that supercede the one in question, or argue for specific exceptions to a rule without technically violating it. Such practices, in a backhanded way, demonstrate the general importance of the rules; if the rules were not endowed with symbolic significance, individuals would simply ignore them, rather than develop elaborate philosophical rationalizations. Moreover, even producers who have no intention of actually using the exemptions they've created still enjoy developing these arguments on an abstract level.

Interpretive strategies on ethics

For the purist, the ethics are one of the major tools for preserving the essence of hip-hop, even to the degree that producers in search of greater purity will actually create new rules for themselves.

As producer Vitamin D put it:

> I'm trying to keep it as close to the foundation as I can keep it... And this is just a philosophy that I came up with later on, 'cause before I was using drum machines, break records, and whatever-- I didn't care--just 'cause it was new to me.
>
> But I feel that in order to have growth, your standards have to grow, so I'm kind of raising up my standards. (Vitamin D, personal interview: 1998)

Note that Vitamin D's explicit goal in raising his standards is to "keep it...close to the foundation". In his formulation, increasingly stringent practice, such as rejecting drum machines and break records (also known as 'compilations'—see below), brings him closer to the "foundation" of Hip-Hop. The new rules are seen as implicit in past hip-hop practice.

For those of a less purist bent, the rules are valued almost for their own sake; the more rules a producer can take on without compromising the quality of the finished product, the greater their skill is seen to be. From this perspective, following the rules is seen as a challenge whose rewards come mainly in the social realm. As producer Samson S. describes it:

> Some producers have ethics and some don't. So it's a ethical thing, basically. If you wanna feel like this is your creation, and you hooked it up, and you wanna be proud of your shit, have other producers like: "whoo!"; you're not gonna get that respect without ethics. (Samson S., personal interview: 1999)

For those that hold this philosophy, then, the ethics serve to define the boundaries of originality.

None of these perspectives are in any way exclusive. In fact, more than one approach comes into play in most situations. The common thread that unites them is their sense that the rules themselves can define the essence of hip-hop. But following the rules – demonstrating one's dedication to the form on a philosophical level – does not necessarily mean that one will produce music that will be accepted by the production community; there are other aesthetic and social variables as well.

Vitamin D, for example, is explicit about the distinction between music that he feels violates a "hip-hop principle", and music that he personally does not care for:

> There's some things that are wack[1], and there's some stuff that I'm just not feelin'. But it's not wack. I'm just not feelin' it. There's a difference. A lot of stuff, I'm not feeling. [But] it doesn't go against any of the hip-hop principles that everybody else knows. (Vitamin D, personal interview: 1998)

The ideal song, of course, will be both ethically correct *and* pleasing to listen to.

Such judgements, and the distinctions they entail, are much easier to make in the abstract than in actual practice. In many - if not most - cases, ethics are intertwined with aesthetics or practical concerns. In instances where the two seem reasonably separable, I will address the aesthetic aspect as part of the compositional process (chapter 7). But in some cases, ethical and aesthetic issues are so closely tied together that it would be misleading to separate them; in such cases, both aspects will be explored in this chapter.

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[1] objectively bad

"No biting": One can't sample material that has been recently used by someone else

The most basic ethic is to be original, often expressed in simplest terms as, "no biting." Discussion of this rule requires that I introduce four terms that frequently arise in production-oriented conversations: "biting", "flipping", "chopping" and "looping". My intention here is to present these meanings in their most skeletal form, in hopes that their various connotations will become apparent in the discussion to come.

"Biting" is a term that is used throughout the hip-hop world, and it refers pejoratively to the appropriation of intellectual material from other hip-hop artists.

"Flipping" refers to creatively and substantially altering material in any way. This term tends to be more limited to the producing community, although one can also 'flip' lyrics, by, for instance, taking a common phrase and using it ironically.

"Chopping" is a type of "flipping" that is specific to the production arena. As its name suggests, it refers to altering a sampled phrase by dividing it into smaller segments and reconfiguring them in a different order.

Finally, "looping" refers to sampling a longer phrase (one or more measures) and repeating it with little or no alteration.

DJ Kool Akiem delineates the issue at hand:

> To me [biting] means, one, I'm not gonna just take a loop that somebody else did - if that's all they did, just loop it - I'm not gonna come and do the same thing without doing something to it, to make it better...
>
> Also, I'm not gonna take two elements of something that somebody else took. Like, if somebody samples this James Brown piece and then they put the "Substitution" [break] on top of that? I won't do that. To me, that's biting...(DJ Kool Akiem, telephone interview: 1999)

Samson S. is very straightforward in his explanation of the social repercussions for violating this rule:

> You can't knowingly do that. I mean, you can if you want, but you ain't gonna get no credit. Everybody gonna be like, "Oh, you bit such-and-such". So why even put yourself through that? (Samson S., personal interview: 1999)

There are three generally recognized exceptions to the "no biting" rule: if one flips the sample, if one is specifically parodying the other known usage, or if the bite is unintentional. I will address each of these in succession.[2]

Vitamin D. is in the mainstream of producers when he states that he would not use the same sample as another hip-hop artist, "unless I'm just 100% flippin' it impossibly" (Vitamin D. 1998).[3] Taken in conjunction with DJ Kool Akiem and Samson S.'s earlier comments, it is clear that this is basically a matter of creativity, deployed in a manner similar to other forms of music. To do the same thing as someone else is not creative, but taking a new approach to familiar material is. Strath Shepard is emphatic about the boundaries of the exception:

> Drums can get reused, but samples can't get reused. I don't think they should be reused. That's a rule... Unless you chop it up. But I'm saying: you have to chop it up really good. And do something totally different with it...Samples shouldn't be used more than once unless they are really flipped. (Strath Shepard, personal interview: 1998)

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[2] A fourth possibility, that a usage is a tribute or homage to an earlier hip-hop song, does not apply here, as the "no biting" rule only applies to songs that are released at roughly the same time. Tributes must be several years later to be acceptable.

[3] As alluded to earlier, flipping is also valued for its own sake, which is to say aesthetically, as opposed to as an indicator of an ethical orientation. This aspect will be addressed in the chapter on composition and aesthetics. This is a somewhat arbitrary distinction that I'm making for the sake of clarity and does not necessarily reflect the views of the producers.

As producer Negus I explains, the creativity may either be valued on its own terms, or in relation to another use of the same sample, i.e. as parody, which is the second exception:

> It would have to be an obvious thing that I was doing. Like, "I'm obviously using this sound that is already out right now, or it's just been out, but look how I'm doing it. Look, I'm changing it." So it wouldn't be like a underslide, like "Oh, I'm using a sound that I wonder if people are gonna notice that it's the same sound." No, I would make it obvious that, yeah, that is the same sound, but look what I did with it. Or commenting on the other song, almost. (Negus I, personal interview: 1998)

One frequently cited example of this practice is the DJ Premier-produced track, "Ya Playin' Yaself":

> There was one instance where I really noticed it was a response. The Jr. Mafia, the "Player's Anthem". Premier and Jeru came with a song called "Ya Playin'Yaself". They used the same bass sound, and he flipped it around, and they changed the title. I thought that was quite clever. And he made it into something totally different. But it was the same elements, two totally different songs. (Jake One, personal interview: 1998)

In the following transcription I present the primary melodies from each song. I have numbered each note of "Player's Anthem"sequentially. For "Ya Playin' Yaself," each note has retained its corresponding number, so as to show how DJ Premier chopped and rearranged the riff.

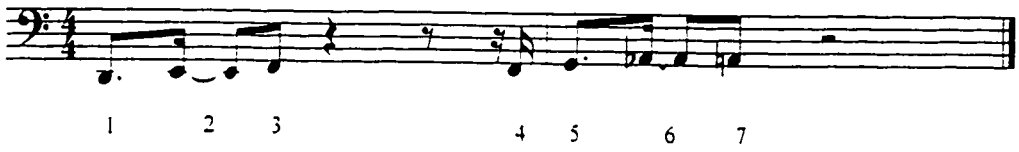

Figure 4: Primary Bass Riff from "Player's Anthem", by Junior Mafia

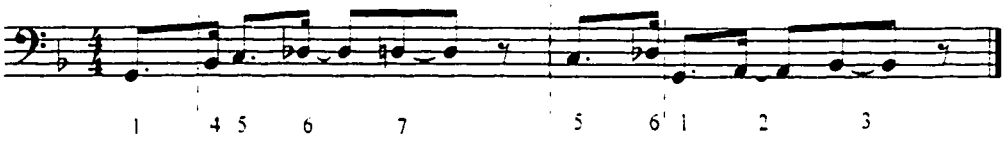

Figure 5: Primary Bass Riff from "Ya Playin' Yaself", by Jeru the Damaja

The lyrics of "Ya Playin' Yaself" support its interpretation as a response to "Players Anthem". The Jr. Mafia song is a celebration of materialism, while the response is a criticism of such attitudes, deconstructing the original lyrics in a manner parallel to the way DJ Premier's beat recasts the original bassline.

"You're a 'player'," Jeru rhymes, "but only because you be playin' yourself." (Jeru the Damaja 1996).

Finally, the same song may be sampled coincidentally, as Seattle MC Wordsayer (who works with Negus I) notes:

> The thing that trips me out is how you can have producers in the same time, but in different places—like thousands of miles apart—taking those same elements from the same song. Using them in different ways, but using that same song, or that same album, around the same time, around the world. That's a trip, and that happens a lot. You hear, somebody has a beat that's out, and you have the same elements that you're working on, or have worked on, at the same time... (Wordsayer, personal interview: 1998)

This raises the question of whether any given instance constitutes a coincidence or a bite, and more to the point, how such a determination would be made within the hip-hop community. To some degree, circumstantial evidence comes into play, such as which song was released first, or how widely circulated each song was (e.g., whether a producer could have even heard the song that they are accused of biting). But in my experience, the decision is largely based on the reputation of the individual being accused. Producers of high repute are virtually never accused of biting, even in circumstances where others might be criticized. A producer who has demonstrated ethics in the past is more likely to be given the benefit of the doubt in a questionable case.

Essentially, then, the prohibition against biting reflects an approach to creativity that is similar to that employed in other forms of popular music, with one difference. Since the music is sampled, originality cannot be the ethical "default category". That is to say, in other forms of music, one is assumed to be creating original work, unless there is evidence to the contrary. In hip-hop, by contrast, one must always be prepared to defend one's creativity, and this requires

standards. The producers' ethics in general, and the "no biting" rule in particular help to promote those standards.

Vinyl records are the only legitimate source for sampled material.

> I don't even have too many CD's. I don't like anything about CD's. I'm definitely a vinyl man. (Phill Stroman, telephone interview: 1999)

There is a sense among many producers that vinyl records are the only legitimate source for sampled material. This sensibility is, in many ways, a point of intersection for several otherwise unrelated concerns. On a philosophical level, the rule is closely tied to the practice of "digging in the crates", as discussed in the previous chapter, and represents an intellectual commitment to the deejaying tradition as the foundation of hip-hop.

Aesthetic issues may also come into play, with the analog sound quality of records being preferred over the digital qualities of Compact Discs. Practical concerns also arise, insofar as records are more convenient to sample from, in certain ways, than other recording formats. Furthermore, the specific musical material that producers are interested in is often available only on vinyl. Finally, a practical connection between deejaying and producing is also a factor: producers who are also DJ's tend to already have records available from their other pursuits. Although, strictly speaking, these are not all ethical factors, each will be dealt with in this section, since they all reinforce what is seen as ethical behavior.

Many aspects of hip-hop deejaying practice, such as digging in the crates, have become central to the ideology of hip-hop generally, even for those who are not DJ's themselves. On some level, most hip-hoppers hold some DJ-oriented philosophical positions, not only because they love deejaying for its own sake, but

also because deejaying positions itself as traditional, and they are committed, on a more abstract level, to the *idea* of tradition.

Oliver Wang is particularly candid about this fact:

> I might critique the kind of overly purist perspective on "vinyl only", but I still agree with it. Like, I've never bought something on CD because it had breaks on it. And if could do it, I'd always find it on vinyl. And the thing is, I've actually thought about it, and I don't know why I do it, except that it's just the tradition I learned. Because, I gotta say, CD's are more convenient. And if it is about the music, I'd rather listen to the music, instead of just isolating a break every time. In which case I'd rather have it on CD, because I can take it with me in the car, etcetera, etcetera. But when I dig, I only dig in vinyl. (Oliver Wang, personal interview: 1998)

Producer MC Specs sees digging for vinyl as a process of paying dues, and expresses some distaste toward those who are spared that process by the increasing availability of CD reissues of classic records:

> It just seems too easy... Because you don't have to go out shopping for CD's. You don't have to dig through CD's because they're remastering everything on 'em. You don't have to search. You have to search for records...So it cuts down the whole searching aspect. Like, most any good DJ or producer is gonna have to do some work. And now you don't...(MC Specs, personal interview: 1998)

Strath Shepard positions digging for vinyl as an expression of a philosophical commitment to hip-hop culture:

> It's like Zorro said in Wild Style: it's like, "painting on canvas: that's not graffiti. You have to go out and rack up; you have to take the flak from everyone." You have to take the flak from the record dealers, you have to wake up in the morning and get your hands dirty. You have to be willing to go through some crazy shit to get your records. And with a CD, it's like you could just go to Blockbuster and buy that thing. Part of the culture is just digging. (Strath Shepard, personal interview: 1998)

Another issue is the sound of the vinyl medium itself. While this was important in principle to many of my consultants, for many others, the value is purely situational. That is to say, they value the sound of records, when they are looking for that particular sound. In this regard, the sound of vinyl becomes like any other aspect of a potential sample. Domino, for example, sees both the pros and cons in the use of vinyl, stating that, " I like grittiness, but a lot of the pops and stuff, I'm not into." (Domino 1998). For Negus I, whether or not to use a record is a decision that must be made on a case-by-case basis:

> A Al Green CD and Al Green record: it's no different to me. If I want some of that character from the vinyl, I'll use it. But if I don't need that, and I just want a clean sound I hear on that, I'll take the CD. (Negus I, personal interview, 1998)

DJ Kool Akiem, who does not sample from compact discs, characterizes this as an issue of aesthetics and practicality, with few ethical underpinnings:

> I don't really sample off of CD's. Unless I have a certain reason, like I wanted something really clear that I have on vinyl, that I found...[but] it's too messed up, or something like that. Actually, I can't really remember sampling offa any CD's. If that's the only format that that comes in, that I could find, I might. But I don't see...ethically, anything wrong with it. I mean, it's a format. [But] I don't sample offa tape, 'cause it sounds crappy. (DJ Kool Akiem, telephone interview: 1999)

Such aesthetic determinations, while they may be left to the tastes of individual producers, are rarely value free, and this one is no exception. The Angel, for instance, characterizes the exclusive emphasis on vinyl as "snobbery":

> I never had a particular snobbery about whether or not I got things from vinyl, because I could get something clean off of a CD and add vinyl noise to it. It's not about how you do it, it's about how you put it together. You know what I mean? It's how much ingenuity do you infuse into the process to get to where you want to be. There's so many different ways of achieving what you need

> in the process, that it's not really a problem. But I know some people [are] very, very, strict about that; I personally think it's ridiculous...There *is* a different sound to vinyl compression. [But] if you need it, you can do that these days. You can process things in that way and you can get it to sound that way. (The Angel, telephone interview: 1998)

Aesthetic issues aside, records may simply be valued for their practicality. Producers are interested in "breaks" - segments of several seconds each that may be located anywhere on a recording. A producer can search a record in mere moments, simply by dropping the needle at various points. This cannot be done with a Compact Disc or cassette:

> I think it's just easier to do it with records. It's just easier to manipulate, you can listen to it a lot faster, go through stuff quicker. You know, you could listen to little niches in the song a lot quicker, as opposed to having to deal with a CD player or a tape player, even worse. To me, there's no connection to those two different things. It just seems hard to even conceive of me sampling from some CD's. (Domino, telephone interview: 1998)

In addition to general convenience, Domino continues, there is another, very specific benefit to the sampling records:

> ...I know for a lot of people that got samplers that don't have as much sampling time, they sample on 45 [r.p.m.], which means you can get more out of your time. And you can't do that if you had a CD player. (Domino, telephone interview: 1998)

That is to say, depending on their memory, samplers have a limited amount of memory, or "sampling time". A producer can maximize this time by speeding up a 33 r.p.m. record to 45 r.p.m, sampling it, and then slowing the sample back down to the original speed. The result may be of slightly lower quality, but it uses far less memory. For Samson S., this - more than aesthetics or tradition - is the reason for using records:

> I don't have anything against [sampling from CD's]. We haven't done it yet; it takes too much sampling time. See, on the vinyl, you can just speed it up and sample it. It's practical reasons. And, plus, most of the stuff you wanna sample is on vinyl anyway. (Samson S., personal interview: 1999)

Another reason for relying on vinyl, as Samson points out, is that it is the only format in which most of the valued music is available. As Domino puts it, "There's not too much on a CD that's appealing to me, the kind of stuff that I look for." (Domino, telephone interview: 1998).

Finally, there are more general issues of practicality as well. Many producers may simply not have CD's available, as my conversation with producer King Otto confirms:

> King Otto: I probably wouldn't sample off a CD. But I've sampled off tape before, only a couple times, because I didn't have the record. But I would pretty much stick with records, as a rule...
>
> Joe: It's interesting, I noticed you said you "probably" wouldn't sample off CD, as if it's just never come up before.
>
> King Otto: Well, I don't have any CD's. [But] I wouldn't sample off CD's, I don't think.
>
> Joe: And that's just for the sound?
>
> King Otto: The sound, and maybe the ethic thing of it. (King Otto, personal interview: 1998)

This is a particular issue for producers who are also DJ's; they use records for their other pursuits. All other things being equal, it still is far more efficient to simply buy the record, which, in addition to being a source of samples, can be played in a club or on the radio in its original form.

> Negus I: That only makes sense. Because why would you spend your money on a CD, when you could spend that money to buy the same thing on a record? And as a DJ you could use it.
>
> Joe: ...especially if it's your *job* to be a DJ.
>
> Negus I: Yeah, 'cause a lot of it come down to economics and finances. (Negus I, personal interview: 1998)

<u>One cannot sample from other hip-hop records</u>

> As far as, like, for your music? Oh *hell* no!
> (Samson S., personal interview: 1999)
>
> Nah. Hell Nah. That's like crazy wrong. And cats be doin' that! That's just ridiculous, man. Totally ridiculous.
> (DJ Kool Akiem, telephone interview: 1999)

The value of "digging in the crates" is again manifested in this rule. One shouldn't sample from another hip-hop record, since one would be exploiting the effort of the original producer who dug for the sound. As King Otto puts it, "It doesn't take any work to sample from a rap record, basically. Because it's already there for you, it can be sampled." (King Otto 1998)

The rationale behind this rule is so self-evident to producers that it only becomes an issue in three rather narrow areas: sampling individual drum hits,

sampling vocal expressions as a tribute to the original MC, and briefly sampling the instrumental track for purposes of parody or homage.

In our conversation, Jake One describes how the first practice, sampling drums, works:

Jake One: ...People...sample drums off of hip-hop records, you know, somebody leaves the kick open or something...

Joe: When you say, "leaves the kick open", you mean there's just the drum sound with nothing on top of it...

Jake One: Yeah. You can take it and put it in your beat, you know?

Joe: So do people [producers] purposely *not* do that [leave drums open], so that people won't...

Jake One: I don't know...Q-Tip used to always leave drums open. I remember the Mobb Deep single, "Give up the Goods", he had a kick and a snare on there. The snare is too recognizable, though. See, you wanna be able to take something that nobody knows... What was that other record? "The World is Yours" remix? He left kicks and snares open with that... "One Love"; people take drums off of "One Love". Premier, I noticed, doesn't leave drums open. Like if you have an instrumental, he'll have a voice echoing through it, so...

Joe: Do you think he does that on purpose?

Jake One: I think so. Cause if the only dropout in the song, he happens to throw an extra delay on it in an instrumental mix, it sounds kind of weird...It's crazy...I think about this stuff way too much. Way too much. (Jake One, personal interview: 1998)

In noting that he thinks about these issues "way too much", Jake One is, at least in part, referring to the fact that he was immediately able to call to mind several examples of hip-hop songs which contained moments where a drum was played in isolation, including one on which there was only a single potentially usable drum hit in the entire song! This is typical of the way hip-hop producers listen to music. In fact, it is perhaps the most significant aspect of this particular prohibition: in order to invoke the rule in the first place, a listener must be able to identify the recorded origins of a *single strike of a drum.*

Later in our conversation, Jake (now joined by Strath Shepard) makes reference to this fact, while noting the sanctions that can expected for a violation:

Jake One: ...You'll get ridiculed! I'll ridicule someone if I hear'em use the "One Love" drums, or something like that.

Strath: He probably did that [left it open] on purpose, actually, because that drum is so...

Jake One: Yeah, it's so distinct.

Strath: And no one knows what it is.

Joe: So do you think he did that just as a challenge to people?

Strath: Yeah. Like, "I'll know if you take my drum." (Jake One, personal interview: 1998)

The use of ridicule as a viable sanction suggests a relatively unified and small community, regardless of the physical distance involved. The idea that someone in New York might be concerned that a producer in Seattle is laughing at them speaks volumes.

Mr. Supreme discusses sampling from hip-hop records in the plaintive tone of one who feels that his own work has been devalued by the lowering of ethical standards:

> I don't think it's appropriate to take the instrumental of a rap record, and use it. But I'm sure people would argue with me. They'll say, "well, what's the difference if we took that or Bobby Azzam from Switzerland?" Well, to me, there *is* a difference, you know? There's a difference. (Mr. Supreme, personal interview: 1998)

The producer Specs has a similarly visceral reaction to this particular rule:

> That's a weird one because I've actually done that before, because I don't have an 808 [Roland TR-808 drum machine]. And there's a certain record, Brooklyn Alliance, that has this 808 kick that I always sampled.
>
> ...But not music, though. I would never sample something that was already sampled from somebody else. That just seems like some weird type of incest or something. Just kind of strange. I would definitely say that was a rule. (Specs, personal interview: 1998)

Specs' reasons for not sampling from other hip-hop records suggest that, as with Mr. Supreme, the practice is actually emotionally uncomfortable: "kind of strange", "like some weird type of incest...".

At the same time, though, he makes an exception for drum sounds, as does DJ Kool Akiem (in fact, they make the same exception: the bass drum sound of the TR-808 drum machine):

> Nah. Possibly if it's like a 808 boom maybe, or something like that. That's just no big deal, but I wouldn't sample something that somebody else sampled. (DJ Kool Akiem, telephone interview: 1999)

Like Specs and DJ Kool Akiem, King Otto exempts drum sounds from the rule, but holds fast when it comes to non-drum sounds:

> I'd say that's a rule. I think everyone has, once or twice. Like a kick [drum]. I've taken a kick off a record before. I took some drums off a Tribe Called Quest record once, when nothing was playing but the drums, so that you couldn't really tell that I got it off there. But, other than that, I wouldn't do it. I wouldn't condone it. (King Otto, personal interview: 1998)

King Otto specifically states that not only would he not do this himself, but he would also not condone it for others. This supports the idea of it being a rule, rather than a personal preference. In addition, like the other producers, he makes a distinction between "music" and "drums". This distinction is significant to the way that producers conceive of the structure of the music, and will be discussed further in the chapter on composition (ch.7). At this point, I just want to stress that the "drums" are viewed as being less characteristic of a particular song, and therefore less "possessible".

The use of vocal samples from other hip-hop songs is more problematic. For some, the resistance to their use exists primarily in the realm of emotion. As Mr. Supreme says, "It just kinda makes me mad...I don't know why, it just does." (Mr. Supreme, personal interview: 1998)

For others, it's a matter of aesthetics more than ethics:

> Yeah. I agree [that it's bad to sample vocals]. But I'm not totally against it. As long as it ain't like, "Punks jump! Puh-Puh-Puh!", you know, like in them drum & bass records...that gets to be corny. But if you strategically place it in a song, it don't matter. To me, at least. (Samson S., personal interview: 1999)

Perhaps the most intriguing take on this rule came from Vitamin D. He argued that it was permissible to use vocals from other hip-hop records, but only if they were placed there in real time by a DJ playing the original record on a turntable. It was not permissible to insert the vocals with a sampler:

> Let's say I wanted to take [a] Greg Nice [vocal] and put that in the chorus...I have to cut it in if its gonna be in the song. I can't sample it in; a lotta people will just sample it in...I have to cut it with the turntables, I can't sample it in...
>
> [When people sample vocals], I be like, "hey, what are you doing, man?! You're taking away, man!" (Vitamin D, personal interview: 1998)

DJ Topspin agrees, at least in principle:

> Yeah. I mean, yeah, you should cut it in. He's a very hardcore DJ, and I believe that, too. I mean, I don't have a *problem* if it's sampled. I have more in my life than to have a problem with what somebody does on a record.
>
> ...[But] If you're doing nothin' but sampling a vocal and just hittin' it, then that says that you have no DJ skills, or desire to showcase them. Really... you should scratch them in if you can. Anybody can learn a machine and load'em into a machine. (DJ Topspin, personal interview: 1999)

When I asked Negus I about this restriction, he theorized that it was based on Vitamin D's dual identity as a producer and a DJ:

> I think...that's because...he may think that using vocal samples is kind of cheesy, unless you actually do it as a DJ...'Cause he's a producer *and* a DJ. And I think he may feel that sampling somebody's vocals and laying it on your track is kind of cheesy, as a producer. *So he does it as a DJ*...But I know D has a lot of those rules. (Negus I, personal interview: 1998)

This again supports the social nature of these rules; the appropriateness of using vocal samples from other hip-hop records depends upon the identity of the individual in question, and the tradition they're claiming to represent. The sampling of rap vocals, in Vitamin D's view, is a violation of the professional ethics of the producer, but not of the DJ. In addition, Negus I's comment that Vitamin D was a particularly rule-oriented producer (a contention supported both

by Vitamin D himself, as well as by other producers who know him), illustrates that it is not uncommon for producers to have rules that only apply to themselves.

DJ Kool Akiem, however, does not accept the distinction:

> Nah. I don't agree with that. I mean, I could see why that rule would exist, but I don't agree with it. Because... Well, put it like this: say you don't want the scratch on it, you just want the cut? How're you gon' know? What's the difference gon' be? If you cut it in, or you sample it in, you ain't gonna know [the difference]. (DJ Kool Akiem, telephone interview: 1999)

DJ Akiem's approach is based on the sound that ultimately emerges, rather than the method with which it was created: if you can't hear the difference in the final product, there's no basis for claiming an ethical violation. This approach to ethics has a practical value, since in most cases, the only evidence one is exposed to is how something sounds on the final record.

The final exception to the rule against sampling other hip-hop records is the use of brief sections for the purposes of parody or reference. When I asked him about sampling from other hip-hop records, DJ Kool Akiem was emphatically opposed to the practice, except in this case:

> You have to have, like, a certain specific reason. And I can't hardly see nothin' except for when Ice Cube did "Jackin' For Beats".[4] That's like the only possible way I could see.... You know what I'm sayin', it's like a novelty thing. (DJ Kool Akiem, telephone interview: 1999)

DJ Topspin agrees:

> Me, personally, DJ Topspin in Seattle, I'm not gonna sample anybody else's record that came out a year ago for any other

[4] This is a song in which Ice Cube rhymed over the instrumentals of various other songs that were popular at that time. The title locates it as self-referential parody – the song is about stealing beats.

> purpose instead of a quick reference. (DJ Topspin, personal interview: 1999)

Not everyone is opposed to sampling from hip-hop records. Domino, for example, feels that recent events may have conspired to make digging-related ethics obsolete. Note, however, that before he delineates his philosophical acceptance of the practice, he is careful to state that he personally doesn't – *ever* - sample from hip-hop records:

> I don't ever...do that. [But] I don't think it's a big deal... I know a lotta people that you could tell they sampled a known sample from, like, a Tribe record, as opposed to getting it from the original. I think that, back a couple of years ago, I woulda been like, "Oh that's wack", 'cause I think to a lot of producers, part of the art was finding the record. But now, with the popularity of these breakbeat records...that put out all the hard to find records, anyway - in abundance...it's the same thing [as sampling from hip-hop records]. (Domino, telephone interview: 1998)

As this example illustrates, producers often construct legalistic exceptions to production ethics that they have no intention of actually utilizing. This was an attitude that I encountered regularly during my research, and it shows the abstract enjoyment that can be derived from working with the ethical system.

<u>One can't sample records that one respects</u>

> Another rule I have: I don't sample records that I respect. I don't know, but that's the only way I can really put it. The reason why I haven't sampled some of the records down here is just 'cause I got too much respect for it, man. The record still bugs me out, to the point where I don't know how I'd flip it, you know? I get that when I listen to Miles Davis...he just trips me out. I be like, "Man!" Can't really mess with that. That's a sacred type thing. (Vitamin D, personal interview: 1998)

> To a large degree it's like: unless you can add something, or flip it in a totally amazing way, leave it alone. Like, there's

> some artists, I just kind of feel like, "don't mess with Stevie Wonder or Marvin Gaye stuff". (Karen Dere, personal interview: 1998)
>
> There are records that are just there. They're fresh already. And you taking it isn't gonna make you a better producer. I mean, there's records I've used, I'm, "I can't sample this. This guy's tight!" You just gotta sit back and listen to this.
>
> 'Cause you can mess up a good record... a nice song, until you loop it and say how fresh you are over it. It's like, there's some records that can be left alone...Something that you can't really mess with, just because it's so pure, it's like putting it into a hip-hop context can be difficult and almost detrimental to the record itself. (DJ Topspin, personal interview: 1999)

This rule rests on three pillars: that sampling may be disrespectful to a great artist, that some music is so good that sampling does not improve it, and that sampling something that was already good is not sufficiently challenging.

The first and second of these are telling, in that sampling is not seen as being disrespectful to artists in general, only to particularly esteemed ones. The third pillar supports the idea that ego gratification and fun are a part of hip-hop in production, in that a "degree of difficulty" assessment is presumed to be made by listeners when they judge the accomplishments of other producers.

Not everyone agrees with this rule, however:

> Nah ...If I respect a record, I'm samplin' the hell out of it! Now, I mean, I ain't gonna force it. If there's a record I like a lot, but I can't find nothin' on it...But, nah, I don't have that rule. (Samson S., personal interview: 1999)
>
> Nah. I don't agree with that. I mean there's some fantastic stuff that I have high praise for. But I'll still sample it. To me, it's the highest praise to sample it. (DJ Kool Akiem, telephone interview: 1999)

While Negus I agrees with Samson S. and DJ Kool Akiem, his take on this issue shows that the underlying concerns of individuals on both sides of the issue are essentially the same: how one can best exercise one's creativity:

> ...I would definitely use a part of a song that I loved, because it has that spirit in it. And I would like to get some of that spirit. But I would have to put as much of my spirit into changing that sound and doing something to it, to make it worthwhile. I wouldn't wanna just use the [melody] and put a beat over it. (Negus I, personal interview: 1998)

<u>One can't sample from compilation recordings of songs with good beats.</u>

Midway through their 1998 album, *Moment of Truth*, Gangstarr's DJ Premier abruptly stops the music, in order to deliver the following rejoinder to unnamed individuals in the hip-hop community that he feels have violated ethical principles:

> To whom it may concern: this goes out to anybody who's doing the bullshit, straight up. Yo, everybody's calling me-- my lawyer, everybody--on this, "Oh, did you scratch such-and-such name, or this that and a third on a record for a hook?" Y'all keep calling me on that shit, man, and ya'll 'posed to be hip-hoppers and all that? And lettin' the industry control the rules of the hip-hop world that *we* made? Y'all need to knock that shit off. That's some greedy-ass, fake bullshit! Knock that shit off, for real. And when that shit come slap you in the face—you know what I'm sayin': that greed—I'ma be right there, laughin' at y'all.
>
> And one other thing: what's the deal with you break record cats that's puttin' out all the original records that we sample from, and *snitchin'* by puttin' us on the back of it, sayin' that we use stuff? You *know* how that go! Stop doing that! Y'all are violatin', straight up and down! Word up, man; I'm sick of this shit. Y'all muhfuckas really don't know what this hip-hop's all about. So while y'all keep on fakin' the funk, we gonna keep on walkin' through the darkness, carryin' our torches. Underground will live forever,

> baby! We just like roaches: never dyin', always livin'. And on that note, let's get back to the program... (Gangstarr: 1998)

The general tone of DJ Premier's polemic is consistent with the conception of professional ethics that I am proposing. Both his use of the term "violating", and his argument that "you *know* how that go" (i.e., ignorance is no excuse), suggest a world in which all who participate are expected to abide by the professional ethics of the producer. In this case, DJ Premier is specifically referring to the use of so-called "breakbeat compilations".

It was not long after sampling began in the mid-1980's, that Lenny Roberts' *Ultimate Breaks and Beats* compilations initiated the practice of DJ's and record collectors assembling rare jazz, funk, and soul singles into anthologies, thus reducing the need for producers and DJ's to dig for original recordings. Since that time, hundreds of such anthologies have been released-- usually unlicensed, often unlabeled, always on vinyl--and they have become something of a sore point for producers who do dig for beats:

> [They] get scorned, 'cause you spent so much time looking for records and you got these fools samplin' off hip-hop records and compilations...Your time isn't well spent, you know? It's like they're just making a mockery of your searches...And it's obvious, you know, sometimes when somebody uses a certain drum sound, and you know they don't have that record. (Jake One, personal interview: 1998)

Other producers agree:

> ...People are putting out breakbeat records and stuff and that's not really cool...'cause it makes it super-easy. All these kids in the suburbs can sound like they're just the greatest producer in the world. They got all these breaks that everyone else has. So it's just weird. I don't think it should be that easy. It's not meant to be easy, you know? (Specs, personal interview: 1998)

> People can be a producer and don't have to really search, and find the good records. Before, it was kinda like you were as good as the records that you found. ...the better records that you found, the better you would be. (Domino, telephone interview: 1998)

Many producers, while acknowledging the annoyance of seeing other producers have easy access to records that they had to invest a great deal of time, money or effort to acquire, still do not feel that this rises to the level of an ethical violation:

> I'm not against compilations, personally. Sometimes it really burns me up, though, when I see stuff that I spent a whole lotta money for, that people didn't really know about; now all of a sudden everybody on the block has it for, like, nine dollars. That kinda burns me up. But I've gotten a lot of stuff that I couldn't find elsewhere on compilations, too. So it's a double-edged sword. Take the good with the bad; that's all there is to it. (Phill Stroman, telephone interview: 1999)

Samson S. sees digging for original records as a function of ethics, which are themselves a function of ego. One holds oneself to a higher ethical standard out of pride:

> I understand [sampling from compilations], but my ethics won't allow me to do it...Only because, like I said, it's all ego and being proud of your shit. Being like "Yeah, I found this." (Samson S., personal interview: 1999)

A similar approach may be at work for Domino:

> In the end of the day, when it comes out, no one's gonna know the difference. I think that's kinda like a producer pet-peeve. That's kind of like part of the fun. Like you can say, "Look, I got all these songs! I got the originals, I got this, I got that!"
>
> It's almost, in a sense, no different than pullin' out the John Coltrane *Blue Trane* original. And then a kid comes and pulls out the reissue, on vinyl. You know what I'm sayin'? If you put on the

> records, you'd hear the same shit. In fact, the new one would probably sound better! But ultimately, when you listen to it, it's the same thing. But...certain people, like collectors, would say, "No. The original's the one." So it all depends on what you're getting out of it, your outlook. (Domino, telephone interview: 1998)

This formulation likely accounts for the apparently paradoxical philosophy espoused by most producers when they explicitly grant legitimacy to compilations, while simultaneously making an emphatic point of their own strict avoidance of them:

> I don't have no rule against it. [But] I don't really do it. I could see were I would, if I just couldn't get something. That's, again, it's "who's gonna know?" It could be like a compilation, or it's a re-pressing, or them breakbeat records. What's the difference? Everybody sampled offa them "Ultimate Breakbeats", back in the eighties. I can't think of no artist that didn't. (DJ Kool Akiem, telephone interview: 1999)

Harkening back to Vitamin D's rule about not sampling vocals from other hip-hop records, some producers make a situational distinction for the use of compilations. DJ Topspin, for example, feels that compilations are acceptable for live deejaying purposes, but should not be used on recordings:

> If you're spinnin'em somewhere, that's cool. You know, you can't have every record. No matter how much searching you do, you can't have every piece of vinyl. So I appreciate compilations that have tight songs, to play'em. But as far as me making a song from it? Nah. 'Cause someone else did the footwork to get it in your possession. And that's half the fun: coming out with something you either made or found or manipulated yourself. (DJ Topspin, personal interview: 1999)

Interestingly, even people who use compilations can still feel like it's wrong:

> I used to buy'em, back in the days. To have records with just drum loops on'em. It would be popular loops, and it would just go for like three minutes, or whatever. And back then, I'd be known to

> sample some of that stuff. I always felt like I was cheating. And I still kinda feel like it's cheating if you sample from a reissued record, or one of those breakbeat records. (King Otto, personal interview: 1998)

It is important to remember that the ethical issue here has nothing to do with the fact that the record is unlicensed and the original artists are being deprived of royalties. The ethical problem for producers is that those who use compilations are not doing the work of digging for their own beats. This is significant, because it is an example of how ethics can run parallel to a legal concept, and yet be based on an entirely different set of concerns.

Oliver Wang's perspective on this issue is an incisive one:

> The interesting thing...is that artists don't get paid off of used records. So, for instance, let's use Bob James, a lot of people sample Bob James. If you find a copy of *Two*, which has "Mardi Gras", which is the break that everyone knows, right? Collectors will sell that [for] upwards of $20, which is actually woefully overpriced for that. But it's not like Bob James makes any profit off of that.
>
> Versus, if someone puts "Mardi Gras" on a legitimate compilation, which are much more frequent nowadays. Most compilations these days, permission has been granted.[5] In theory, the artist is actually getting paid off the compilation. Versus if you're digging in a used record store for stuff, the artist is never gonna see a penny of that....So then the question becomes who's more important: the artist you're sampling from, or the DJ that you're working with?
>
> I mean, that's kind of a side issue; you still shouldn't sample from compilations, 'cause it's lazy. (Oliver Wang, personal interview: 1998)

[5] I disagree with this contention, but I think it's still worth accepting for the sake of Wang's argument.

For most hip-hop producers the answer to Wang's question is simple: without question the DJ[6] is more important. But this is also an example of the kind of legalistic theorizing that I mentioned earlier. After laying out his argument, he essentially declares it moot, since the use of compilations is considered inappropriate regardless of whether or not the original artist is paid, for the reasons cited by the previously quoted producers.

The problematic relationship between producers' ethics and legality is brought to light in another way with compilations, too. On some more recent compilations, the labels contain information not only about the original song, but also about hip-hop songs that have sampled it. This is viewed as an ethical violation for two reasons. The first is because it gives away privileged information that should rightfully be acquired through diligent digging or at least through word of mouth. The second is because it puts the cited hip-hop producer at legal risk: many of the samples have not been legally cleared, particularly if they were, for example, only one or two notes from a saxophone solo. Although such a sample would probably not require the producer to pay publishing rights to the original artist, it would still technically require a payment to the record company for use of the master recording (see chapter 8). This is what DJ Premier refers to as "snitching".

As Domino explains, with regard to DJ Premier's statement that began this section:

> On Biggie's second album, he has a song called "Ten Crack Commandments", that Premier produced. And, basically, it's like a drum and then he's scratching in [imitates two-note pattern], and all he doin' is scratchin', and it's just he's scratching in a little sound. Well, not too long ago, I was looking at these break records...I played the record, and it was like—you hear it—but it was like, "wow", you know what I mean? Someone who found that record *peeped* it. Even though it was such a little piece,

[6] Wang conflates the role of the DJ with that of the producer. This is common practice in the hip-hop world, and is dealt with in chapter 3.

> they put it on the back of a record, and so now everyone knows. And probably the guy who made the song probably wouldn't even have recognized that that was his record, unless he reads...this breakbeat record that someone came out with. And so that's what they were talking about. (Domino, personal interview: 1998)

I have heard three exceptions to the "no compilations" rule, all of which are in dispute: if one only samples drums, if one "knows" the original record, and if one only samples off of the original *Breaks and Beats* compilation.

For Negus I, it's an issue of creativity, analogous to the "no biting" rule:

> I know that's a big no-no. I've taken drum sounds from breakbeat records, but not looped the break, as it is on the record. I've just chopped up the snare and the kick, or take a high-hat off it. And I usually do that when I'm getting frustrated, 'cause drum sounds are hard to find. And when I'm getting frustrated, I'll just take a couple drum sounds off of a breakbeat record, just so I don't get frustrated and turn my machine off and do something else, because I can't find any drum sounds. I'll just do that just to keep the process going...
>
> That's a whole thing too: even if you do use sounds, like drum sounds, from a breakbeat record, if you can flip'em up in a way that nobody's done it before? True, you're using the sounds...but you are doing something that's creative...So if you use it like that, I think you won't be in violation as much. (Negus I, personal interview: 1998)

Strath Shepard agrees:

> I'm kinda undecided about sampling off of bootlegs. I definitely don't think you should sample loops off bootlegs. Your music should not be from bootlegs. Because someone else essentially found it before you, and if they didn't use it, they could have used it. So I don't think you should sample the music part, but drums are a little different. You could sample drums off bootlegs. (Strath Shepard, personal interview: 1998)

Another exception is sometimes made on the basis of the producer's level of knowledge about records. This refers back to the essence of the complaint about compilations in the first place: that one hasn't done the work. Theoretically, producers can posit situations in which the work *was* done, but for some practical reason, one is deprived of the original record. This may be acceptable. The following conversation with Mr. Supreme illustrates how such an argument may be constructed.

Mr. Supreme: I'm kind of mad that the comps come out. It kinda ruins it. We've spent all these years trying to be fresh, and dig, and find all this shit. And then some asshole puts it out for the whole world to use. It kinda hurts you, you know?
...But at the same time, who cares?...If it's good, it's good. Why not? If you can make a good record, why not?

Joe: Yeah, but you're *saying* that, 'cause you're...open-minded. But you don't actually *do* that[7], though. You know what I mean?

Mr. Supreme: [laughs] No, you're right! I don't do that...
[But] we really created this hip-hop shit. Like Premier said, we did create this shit. So for some jackass to try to sell me a beat for $50 that he wouldn't give a fuck about... If it wasn't for us it would be a $1 record! So how's he gonna try to sell it to us for $50?! It's like "so forget you, I'll go buy the bootleg for eight bucks up the street!"
But at the same time, [buying compilations is] kinda wrong, you know? Its gotten out of hand, that's what it's come down to, is that it's gotten out of hand. But, yeah, like you say...I don't do it. There are rules; I try to be open minded, but there's just some things I don't do. (Mr. Supreme, personal interview: 1998)

[7] sample from compilations

Mr. Supreme begins with a strong statement of general opposition to compilations, before suggesting that the value of a good sample may, in some cases, outweigh the 'no compilations' rule. At this point I call to his attention the fact that, despite his theoretical acceptance of that exception, he still regards the rule as binding on himself personally. He responds by developing a different exception to 'no compilations' rule (also referring to DJ Premier's above statement): why should producers be forced to pay inflated record prices, when they were the ones who created the demand in the first place? He presents himself, hypothetically, as someone who has a choice between the original record and a compilation; this implicitly requires that he have done the appropriate digging (otherwise he wouldn't have the option of choosing the original). Thus the exception is drawn: *assuming one has done the work*, it would be acceptable to avoid paying the inflated price to a record collector, by buying the compilation. Again, though, after developing two different rationales for violating the compilations rule, Mr. Supreme ends his statement by saying he still wouldn't do it.

This approach – that compilations are justifiable if one does the work – is not unique to Mr. Supreme; Phill Stroman maintains a similar position:

> Maybe if I was a person who didn't have any records, maybe I'd have a little complex about it. But I got records. I don't have nothin' to prove to anybody...I got credentials, as far as diggin'; I'm not some kid who just picked something up from the store down the corner. I mean, I dig. I put in my work, you know? I paid the dues. So, yeah, I'll take something from a compilation, what the hell? (Phill Stroman, telephone interview: 1999)

Finally, Samson S. articulates an exception that is particularly interesting. He distinguishes between the original series – *Ultimate Breaks and Beats* – and other, more recent compilations. In his formulation, apparently, *Ultimate Breaks*

and Beats has been around long enough that it has, in some sense, become an original recording.

> Joe: Sampling from compilations.
>
> Samson S.: Oh, like them breakbeat records? Man, we've *all* did it! And I don't care what nobody say! People can talk about rules and shit, [but] everybody done sampled offa them *Ultimate Break and Beat* records. I mean, that's why they made'em back in the days—for that. But...you don't wanna do no beat sampling goddamn 'Q-Bert Marshmellow Breaks'[8]or nothin' like that....Just go get the old school *Ultimate Breaks and Beats*...you can use those, that's not really forbidden. But all these new breakbeat records coming out, it's not wise to do that. You should just go out and get your own shit. (Samson S., personal interview: 1999)

DJ Kool Akiem's response to this assertion demonstrates the rhetorical complexity which invariably ensues when these discussions begin. He addresses Samson's exemption from the perspective of one who doesn't agree with the original rule to begin with. In essence, his intent is to demonstrate the hypothetical weakness of the exception (which he, in reality, agrees with) in order to show that the boundaries of the rule itself are untenable:

> I can kinda understand. The reason is because everybody sampled off of them. So that's not a good enough reason, 'cause your rule should still stand fast. Just 'cause everybody else did it, that don't make it OK. Say you take another one of them compilation sets, everybody started sampling it, would it be OK then? When it wasn't before? So that's why I don't have no problems with compilations. (DJ Kool Akiem, telephone interview: 1999)

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[8] a more recent compilation

One can't sample more one part of a given record.

> I have another rule: 'Thou shall not sample two sounds from the same record'. Unless it's a continuous loop, like if you're choppin' something. Let's say it's a bassline, you could [imitates cutting it up and rearranging it]...But don't fuckin' jack a bassline from the record, horns from that same record, Fender Rhodes...We call that cheating. (Samson S., personal interview: 1999)

The association of ethical righteousness with creativity is again manifested in this rule. Essentially, the rule argues that it is not creative to combine things that already go together. This is a point of pride with many producers:

> I wouldn't do that either. One thing that's real wack to me is, in the same cut, using samples from two different cuts on the same [original] album. Or even the same artist, I wouldn't do that. Unless it's maybe just a drum, you know. Something real small, maybe. But I wouldn't do that.
>
> I guess the reason why for that is because it...feels like cheatin' a little bit. Or too easy, because you're blending two sounds that are almost the same...Part of the artistry is to combine elements that wouldn't be combined normally. You know, that's one aspect of the artistry.
>
> I wouldn't put two samples of the same artist on the same cut, at all. Ever. Won't do that at all. And I almost wouldn't sample - like for a album - I wouldn't sample the same artist twice, either. You know, maybe something real small or something, but definitely not two loops, 'cause then you might as well just be makin' *his* album. (DJ Kool Akiem, telephone interview: 1999)

Topspin explicitly characterizes this as a matter of personal pride:

> As far as the producer's ethic is concerned, it's all in what you want to do and what you feel *proud* of doing. I wouldn't feel proud taking more than one thing from the same record and putting it on the same beat. (DJ Topspin, personal interview: 1999)

Conclusions

Since hip-hop producers are working with recordings of other musical performances, the idea of originality is problematic. Therefore, in order for a producer to be proud of his work, it is essential that he be prepared to defend its creativity. Clearly, then, the primary reason for the existence of the hip-hop producers' ethics is to provide a set of standards upon which creativity can be defended (or questioned, as the case may be).

Moreover, as I stated at the outset of this chapter, the very existence of such standards of creativity gives producers a basis upon which to make claims of artistic value that may run counter to market value. For most producers, adherence to the ethics is equivalent to having an artistic vision (or at least believing that such a thing is important), which is equivalent to declaring one's allegiance to an artistic community over commercial interests. This allegiance is taken very seriously, and individuals may even be judged on their ethics more than the sound of their music.

Strath Shepard, for instance, defends the producer DJ Shadow, essentially making the argument that, regardless of how his music *sounds*, it is hip-hop if it follows the ethics of hip-hop:

> A lot of people argue about whether DJ Shadow is hip-hop or not. Because he claims real hip-hop, to the fullest. But then, you get the album, you listen to it, and most people are like, "well, that's not hip-hop." But I consider it hip-hop, because of the way it's made. It's made with records and sampling and a DJ. So...to me, if he wants to call it hip-hop, he can call it hip-hop. (Strath Shepard, personal interview: 1998)

What Shepard is suggesting is that, through his adherence to ethical practice, DJ Shadow has maintained an allegiance to the hip-hop producers' community, and that such dedication carries more weight than the actual sound of the music.

A similar dynamic is at work in other hip-hop arts as well. Castleman relates the case of PRAY, a graffiti writer in New York who was well respected for scratching his name in virtually every public phone in the city (1982:83-83). Rumors abounded as to the writer's identity, until it was discovered that the writer was actually an elderly white woman who apparently undertook this project for reasons entirely unrelated to the culture of graffiti writers. "PRAY" seems to have been a message that she felt compelled to spread, rather than a traditional "tag", or graffiti name. Castleman reports that these revelations *did not reduce her status in the eyes of graffiti writers*, who continued to refer to her as "PRAY". If she abided by the rules of graffiti, even unintentionally, then she was a graffiti writer.

VII. Signifyin' on Beats: An Aesthetic of Hip-Hop Composition

> There's...an art to finding records that harmonize with each other, naturally...Finding stuff...that are from opposite ends of the world, that come together on the same beat and compliment each other.
>
> ...Putting stuff together; it's composition, to me. I may be thinking about this too hard, or making too much of it, but I think it's composition. (DJ Topspin, personal interview: 1999)

In the preceding four chapters, I have discussed the necessary preconditions for a hip-hop beat: developing a general sense of hip-hop aesthetics (chapter three), making the methodological decision to use digital sampling (chapter four), gathering material and ideas through digging in the crates (chapter five), and identifying oneself with the producers' community by adhering to the producer's ethics (chapter six).

In this chapter, I will address some of the aesthetic decisions that producers must make while assembling a hip-hop beat, in order that I might generalize about the larger sensibility at work in hip-hop music. Generally speaking, the aesthetic preferences I will discuss can be distinguished from the ethics of the previous chapter in two related ways: 1) aesthetic choices have no moral overtones, they are merely opinions about what sounds good; and 2) as a result, there are no aesthetic *requirements*, only aesthetic *preferences*. Making a poor aesthetic choice does not call one's legitimacy as a producer into question, only one's taste.

Ambiguity and Collage

A hip-hop beat consists of a number of real-time group performances (original recordings), which are digitally sampled and arranged into a larger cyclic structure (the beat) by a single author (the producer). In order to appreciate the music, a listener must hear both the original interactions as well as how they have been organized into new relationships. Sample-based hip-hop music, therefore, is

simultaneously "live" *and* "not-live". The vision is both communal (that of the original ensembles) *and* individual (that of the hip-hop producer). And the formal structure may reflect both linear development (in the original composition) *and* cyclic structure (in its hip-hop utilization). I argue that the aesthetic goal of a hip-hop producer is not to resolve these ambiguities, but quite the contrary: to preserve, master and celebrate them.

In the pages that follow, I will look at various sites of ambiguity in the hip-hop aesthetic, noting that - in most cases - the producer seeks not resolution, but control. In this regard, hip-hop production is like juggling: the number of pins and the patterns they describe in the air are not significant for their own sake, but as indicators of the juggler's skill in manipulating them. This veneration of processual mastery is deeply embedded in hip-hop's rhythm, melody, and structure; in fact, anywhere ambiguity is to be found. The reason for this, I will argue, is that the aesthetic of sample-based hip-hop production brings traditional African American interpretive strategies to bear on the cultural logic of late capitalism.

Hip-hop music is clearly responsive to postmodernist analysis in the sense that it reflects an approach to aesthetic history that is deeply informed by capitalist imperatives, particularly to the degree that the commodification of aesthetics naturally leads to collage and ambiguity in artistic expression (c.f. Adorno 1938, 1940/1990, Rose 1994i, 1994ii, Gaunt 1995, Potter 1995, 1998, Herman, Sloop & Swiss 1998 etc.). But hip-hop is not *particularly* postmodern. If it appears to be, that is only because certain hallmarks of postmodern art are consistent with pre-existing African American aesthetic norms.

I am not saying that these elements cannot be fruitfully analyzed within a postmodernist framework, only that, as in the case of live instrumentation (chapter four), to do so tends to obscure the aesthetic goals that have been

articulated by the musicians themselves. Moreover, as Cheryl Keyes has pointed out (1996: 224), such analyses tend to sever historical threads in order to focus on contemporary economic forces.

There are many reasons, beyond the cultural logic of late capitalism, why African American culture would foreground collage and ambiguity. These reasons generally fall into three categories: African-derived cultural values, social strategies that reflect the particular needs of African American people, and interpretive approaches that combine the two. All have been discussed extensively elsewhere, and I will only recapitulate them briefly here.

It is important to remember, incidentally, that all of these strategies exist in the minds of individual human beings, and survive only as long as they serve the needs of those individuals. I am not arguing that these ideas define some "authentically" African American approach to life. I am merely suggesting that, for these predispositions to have survived, they must have been useful for large numbers of African American people over long periods of time, and therefore can reasonably be associated with that culture.

The West African cultural predisposition for collage and diverse textures in music (often organized through rhythm) is well documented (c.f. Arom 1985, Chernoff 1979, Jones 1959/1978, Merriam, 1982, Nketia 1974, etc.).

In African American music, Olly Wilson has characterized this tendency as a "heterogeneous sound ideal":

> By this term, I mean that there exists a common approach to music making in which a kaleidoscopic range of dramatically contrasting qualities of sound (timbre) is sought after in both vocal and instrumental music. The desirable musical sound texture is one that contains a combination of diverse timbres. (Wilson 1992: 329)

Wilson's take is significant, in that it treats timbral diversity as an abstract aesthetic preference, rather than simply the natural result of some other factor (such as the mapping of social roles onto music), or happenstance.

Another factor that may contribute to the significance of ambiguity in African American life is so pervasive that it may not be obvious. In order to survive in this society, African American people must be conversant in both African American *and* European American cultures, languages, and symbolic systems. As a result, such individuals would naturally tend to be more attuned to the multiplicity of interpretations that may be drawn from any given interaction (social, musical or otherwise), not to mention the value of being able to control those interpretations.

A more pragmatic reason for the valuing of ambiguity is the idea of code; that certain forms of communication must be shielded from the ears of an oppressive system. Ambiguity is a factor in this process because the best codes are those that do not even appear to be transmitting information at all; they have a secondary meaning that serves to draw attention away from the code's central message. In order to effectively accomplish this, the speaker must be able to control both texts simultaneously: a meaningless or unconvincing cover text is of little value.

When scholars hear "The Signifying Monkey", a traditional toast that epitomizes the use of double-meanings, they tend to focus on the monkey's use of multi-leveled rhetoric to harm the lion; that is, in fact, the primary theme of the poem (cf. Gates 1987). But at the same time, the monkey's power derives specifically from the fact that the lion takes his words completely at face value. If the monkey's ambiguity were obvious, his words would lose much of their effect.

Perhaps the best examples of this principle can be found in the African American spirituals of the antebellum era, many of whose coded meanings are only now becoming apparent to non-African Americans. In order to serve their function, they had to be credible as religious songs; a song that simply told fugitives to "wade in the water" in order to throw pursuing hounds off one's scent would certainly be repressed, were the water not presented as symbolic of a

Christian baptism. More importantly for my purposes, it is likely that, for most enslaved African Americans, the song really *was* about baptism as much as it was about fleeing slavery. The value of such ambiguity was reinforced by the stakes: the loss of either interpretation could cost real human lives.

As Mitchell-Kernan notes, skill at such pursuits is valuable in less dire social contexts as well:

> This brings us to some latent advantages of indirect messages, especially those with negative import for the receiver. Such messages, because of their form – they contain both explicit and implicit content – structure interpretation in such a way that the parties have the option of avoiding a real confrontation. Alternately, they provoke confrontations without at the same time unequivocally exposing the speaker's intent. The advantage in either case is for the speaker, because it gives him control of the situation at the receiver's expense. The speaker, because of the purposeful ambiguity of his original remark, reserves the right to subsequently insist on the harmless interpretation rather than the provocative one. When the situation is such that there is no ambiguity in determining the addressee, the addressee faces the possibility that, if he attempts to confront the speaker, the latter will deny the message or intent imputed, leaving him in the embarrassing predicament of appearing contentious. (Mitchell-Kernan: 316)

Finally, there is a second order factor, which is that engaging in any of these processes trains individuals to think about, and become comfortable with, them. Working in a highly heterogeneous artistic form, whatever it may be, requires the ability to hold many things in one's mind simultaneously. Thus, exposure to music (or any other pursuit) that upholds one of these traditions would help to develop a particular tolerance for ambiguity in others (Gaunt, personal communication 6/17/99).

In hip-hop, these pre-existing cultural values are specifically reinforced through various educational means. A major goal of the producer's training process, as described in chapter three, is to develop such a sense of aesthetic

balance and ease with ambiguity. The aesthetic is transmitted to the young producer through a number of avenues. Most producers cite factors such as deejaying experience (seeing what moves a crowd, and what doesn't) and record collecting (exposing oneself to a wide variety of musical strategies). Other educational experiences may include socializing with more experienced producers by criticizing current songs, and dancing to other producers' music.

In addition to these methods, Kyra Gaunt has characterized a variety of African American recreational pursuits, such as handclapping games and double dutch, as "oral-kinetic etudes":

> Unlike conventional written etudes, oral etudes "teach" ways of hearing and observing how individual elements of song or musical movement function in concert with one another. Instead of learning the specific traits as an exercise, black musicking is conceived of, and thereby learned, as a certain aesthetic mixture, a complex execution of timbres, rhythms, textures, and movements. The "composition" of the voice, the words, and the musicking of the body in girls' games allows girls to hear and play with the possible ways of performing rhythmic interplay, structuring melodic or linear ideas, and expressing musical structures and style with the body. (Gaunt 1997: 31)

While Gaunt is specifically interested in the rhythmic life of African American girls, similar games are at work in the culture of African American boys, such as the tradition of "stepping", and, more recently, hip-hop beatboxing (vocal imitations of drum rhythms) and freestyling (improvisation rapping) in informal social situations. Additionally, while they may not participate in girls games, boys are certainly exposed to them through siblings and neighbors.

Given these factors, it is hardly surprising that people of African descent should exploit the ambiguities of the world in their music; in fact, it would be remarkable if they did not.

Use of Cycles

Virtually all hip-hop music is based on a cyclic form. Regardless of the methodology used, the producer's ideal is to create a repeating figure that can be altered through the addition or subtraction of various elements at various times. This often means taking an old recording of a musical phrase, sampling it, and making it repeat for the length of the song, a technique that is known as "looping". As I discussed in chapter three, this approach derived from the work of early DJ's who repeated the breaks of popular songs. At its most basic level, therefore, the DJ approach takes the end of a linearly conceived musical act and consistently juxtaposes it with its beginning. While this does not change the sound of the music, it changes the entire sensibility within which this sound is interpreted. The significance that hip-hop producers place upon this cyclic sensibility is demonstrated by the fact that, even when looping is *not* the technique of choice, the formal structure is designed specifically to create the impression that it is. In fact, without knowing the original song, it is often impossible to tell whether a sample has been extensively manipulated by the producer, or simply looped.

As James Snead points out, such a sensibility has long been a characteristic of African American music:

> In black culture, repetition means that the thing circulates, there is an equilibrium...In European culture, repetition must be seen to be not just circulation and flow, but accumulation and growth. In black culture, the thing (the ritual, the dance, the beat) is there for you to pick up when you come back to get it. If there is a goal...it is always deferred; it continually "cuts" back to the start in the musical meaning of a "cut" as an abrupt, seemingly unmotivated break (an accidental da capo) with a series already in progress and a willed return to a prior series...Black culture, in the "cut," "builds" accidents into its coverage, almost as if to control their unpredictability. (Snead, quoted in Rose 1994: 69)

As I will argue throughout this chapter, the signifyin(g) aspects of this approach (discussed below) are only reinforced when the music in question is sampled, since this relieves the producer of responsibility for the particular notes; his hand is felt exclusively at the compositional level. In other words, looping is an almost ideal form of signifyin(g), since it allows the producer to use someone else's music to convey their own aesthetic.

Signifyin(g) on Beats

One way in which African American traditions are brought to bear on contemporary ambiguity is, as I am not the first to suggest, the rhetorical strategy of "signifyin(g)".

Signifyin(g) is a complex phenomenon, with many aspects. For my purposes, I wish to emphasize signifyin(g) as a verbal process in which an individual demonstrates a mastery of ambiguity, for an audience that has a particular appreciation of such gestures. In other words, hip-hop signifyin(g) has two important aspects: 1) it is primarily a process, rather than a quality; and 2) it is a social activity; it is meaningless without an audience.

The term signifyin', without the parenthetical 'g', is a traditional one in African American culture. In her groundbreaking work, Talkin and Testifyin, Geneva Smitherman describes signifyin' as a rhetorical strategy that may be used for both education and entertainment:

> ...signification has the following characteristics: indirection, circumlocution; metaphorical-imagistic (but images rooted in the everyday, real world); humorous, ironic; rhythmic fluency and sound; teachy but not preachy; directed at person or persons usually present in the situational context (siggers do not talk behind yo back); punning, play on words; introduction of the semantically or logically unexpected. (Smitherman 1977:121)

Mitchell-Kernan argues that, aside from its social serviceability, there is a distinctly artistic aspect to signifying as well:

> Signifiying...is clearly thought of as a kind of art – a clever way of conveying messages. In fact, it does not lose its artistic merit even when it is malicious. It takes some skill to construct messages with multi-level meanings, and it sometimes takes equal expertise to unravel the puzzle presented in all of its many implications. Just as in certain circles the clever punster derives satisfaction and is rewarded by his hearers for constructing a multi-sided pun, the signifier is also rewarded for his cleverness. (Mitchell-Kernan: 317)

Henry Louis Gates has developed the term "signifyin(g)", with a parenthetical "g", in order to highlight the relationship between the traditional African-American practice of "signifyin'", and the semiotic practice of "signifying". (By playing up this ambiguity, of course, he is signifyin' on signifying.). In Gates's view, signifyin(g) constitutes not only a rhetorical strategy, but a framework within which rhetorical strategies may be evaluated (Gates 1988: x). Not surprisingly, it is a frame which values the aforementioned characteristics, particularly multiple meanings and recontextualization. And again, this idea of evaluation emphasizes the fact that the practice necessarily operates in a social context.

Gates's approach has been applied to hip-hop by several subsequent theorists, beginning apparently with Costello and Wallace (1990), in their book Signifying Rappers. More nuanced attempts have been made in the work of Gilroy (1991), Wheeler (1991), Gaunt (1995), and Potter (1995).

Writing about the verbal aspects of hip-hop, for instance, Russell Potter has argued that:

> ...the practice of *Signifyin(g)*, which [Henry Louis] Gates demonstrates compellingly lies at the heart of much vernacular African-American language and art, is a theorized practice which is fundamentally ironic, fundamentally *postmodern*. Signifyin(g),

> briefly put, is both the trope of pastiche and a pastiche of tropes and its most central trope is that of the sly exchange of the literal for the figurative, and hip-hop is its most profound and lively incarnation. (Potter 1995: 18)

While such practices are relatively easy to find in the verbal aspects of hip-hop music, scholars have stood on somewhat shakier ground when it comes to the instrumental aspects. All too often, hip-hop's readily apparent collage structure leads to simplistic conclusions about the ways in which signifyin(g) functions in hip-hop composition. Primary among my criticisms of the aforementioned writers is that moving Gates' definition of signifyin(g) from text-based literary studies to musical analysis is a much more problematic endeavor than many seem to realize. Specifically, this approach puts the focus more on the *structural relationships* between individual musical elements (and, to a lesser extent, the contexts from which they are drawn) than on the procedure that put them there in the first place.

It is tempting, particularly in view of the conceptual similarities between hip-hop production and the composition of European art music to see the compositional activity as secondary to the work that it produces. I suggest, however, that to do so would be to overlook the most central aspect of the aesthetic system: the process. And signifyin(g) is, first and foremost, a process.

In their defense, all of the above scholars have had social or literary issues as the focus of their inquiries; their analyses of sampling tend to consist of brief generalizations, before the author moves on to the true subject of the study. This, of course, has its own liabilities; these works all downplay the significance of the non-rapping aspects to hip-hop's popularity. As I mentioned earlier, many of these descriptions of hip-hop sampling read more like dismissals than discussions.

In my formulation, by contrast, it is the samples and breakbeats that come first. As I trace the process of hip-hop composition, I will show how a collage

aesthetic that emphasizes the mastery of ambiguity combines postmodernist concerns with traditional approaches that have been used by people of African descent for generations.

The Process of Production

Beginning with percussion, I discuss how aesthetic preferences are brought to bear when choosing the timbres of drum samples, as well as how a mastery of various drum sounds, and their juxtaposition, can be seen as signifyin(g) on timbre. These individual drum samples are then arranged into larger rhythmic sequences. At this level, producers are concerned with the general rhythmic sensibility of the composition. One of the most significant aspects of this sensibility is the way it defines a balance between microrhythmic precision and quasi-improvisational variation. I argue that this process reflects an impulse towards signifyin(g) on the *idea* of precision, in that it intentionally toys with conventional distinctions between precisely composed rhythms and loosely improvised rhythms: hip-hop rhythms are precisely loose.

Moving on to the so-called "musical" elements of hip-hop composition (defined by producers as the non-drum samples), I will argue that signifyin(g) operates in two general ways. The first runs parallel to the choice of drum timbres, and I would characterize it as "signifyin(g) on vibe". In contrast to analyses that posit postmodern irony as the central principle here, I suggest that producers are working with the *general aesthetic sensibility* of a sample, rather than its specific context. In other words, one would sample a television show's theme song in order to comment on the feel of the original musical (e.g. "commercially-oriented Los Angeles studio musicians of 1976") rather than to make reference to that particular show. Additionally, producers are also commenting on the idea of irony itself though ambiguity about their intentions.

The second way that signifyin(g) operates on music concerns the methodology employed by the producers in creating the final melody. I suggest that the significance of such strategies as "chopping" a melody lies in showing the producer's skill in recasting a melody, rather than in the resultant reinterpretation itself. Again, I would characterize this as signifyin(g) on melody. This is supported by the producers' own analyses of the process, which tends to minimize the significance of a given sample's original context.

My strategy for the remainder of this chapter, then, is to draw out the deep and general aesthetic assumptions of hip-hop by looking at the more overt and specific aesthetic preferences. This requires that I further distinguish between these preferences and the ethics which I discussed in the previous chapter.

Manifest aesthetic preferences

The aesthetic preferences to which I will refer, while closely intertwined with the ethics discussed in the previous chapter, are nevertheless separable from them. As I indicated earlier, they have no moral overtones; they are simply shared generalizations about which approaches sound best. For this reason, aesthetic preferences are seen as voluntary, as opposed to the ethics, which are mandatory for participation in the producers' community. In fact, as with verbal signifyin(g), it is the rules, which make the preferences possible in the first place:

> ...Because verbal dueling treads a fine line between play and real aggression, it is a kind of linguistic activity which requires strict adherence to sociolinguistic rules. To correctly decode the message, a hearer must be finely tuned to values which he observes in relation to all other components of the speech act. To do so he must rely on his conscious or unconscious knowledge of the sociolinguistic rules attached to this usage. Meaning, often assumed by linguists to be signaled entirely through code features, is actually dependent upon a consideration of other components of a speech act. A remark taken in the spirit of verbal dueling may, for example, be interpreted as an insult by virtue of what on the

> surface seems to be merely a minor change in personnel or a minor change in topic. Crucially, paralingistic features must be made to appropriately conform o the rules. Changing in posture, speech rate, tone of voice, facial expression, etc., may signal a change in meaning. The audience must also be sensitive to these cues. A change in meaning may signal that members of the audience must shift their responses and that metalinguistic comments may no longer be appropriate.
>
> It is this focus in black culture – the necessity of applying sociolinguistic rules, in addition to the frequent appeal to shared background knowledge for correct semantic interpretation – that accounts for some of the unique character and flavor of black speech. (Mitchell-Kernan: 323)

The distinction becomes apparent in the following conversation with Mr. Supreme, in which I unintentionally shifted the discourse from the ethical rules of hip-hop production to its aesthetic preferences:

> Mr. Supreme: There are no rules in hip-hop. That's what so unique about it. You don't have to have a chorus, you don't have to have a bridge, you know? You don't even have to have a melody if you don't want to. There are no rules, but that's what makes it fresh. It's different.
>
> Joe: But you gotta have a snare...
>
> Mr. Supreme: I know! I could go crazy for those snares! Yeah, you have to have a snare. No! Actually, you could have a bassline, someone freestylin' over it. (Mr. Supreme, personal interview: 1998)

Mr. Supreme is arguing here that there are no morally enforceable requirements as to how a hip-hop composition should be organized, citing the lack of such conventional structural elements as a chorus, bridge or melody. In response, I mention the nearly universal use of "a snare", a term which refers to the practice of placing a snare drum sample on every

second and fourth beat of a hip-hop composition in common time. But Mr. Supreme had not forgotten about snares. As he argues, they are not, in fact, required – they are simply universally preferred.

This is demonstrated by the exception he proposes, in which an MC was "freestying" (a highly informal style of rhyming) over a drumless bassline. In a subsequent conversation, he could only cite a single recorded example of this ever occurring, and the appeal of that song was specifically based on its violation of the listener's expectations: "you're waiting for the beat to kick in, and it never does."(Mr. Supreme, personal interview 1998: 2). Again, while the "snare" is not ethically required, it is so well liked as to be present in virtually all hip-hop songs.[1] It is an aesthetic norm, but not an ethical rule.

Significance of Drums: timbre, rhythm and structure

> Usually you start with the drums. It's like I always say: that's the backbone and the heart of it. If you can have a real nice beat—just the drums—almost anything you put under it's gonna sound good. 'Cause the beat is there, you know? It's flowin' and it's there.[2] (Mr. Supreme, personal interview: 1998)

In this section, I will discuss two aspects of rhythm's aesthetic value to hip-hop production: the sound of individual drum samples, and how these individual percussive moments are organized into a larger cycle.

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[1] The normativity of this element is attested to by MC Lauren Hill's comparison, "Me without a mic is like a beat without a snare,", i.e. it never happens (Fugees "How Many Mics": 1996).
[2] Note that in this case, Mr. Supreme is using the term "beat" to refer only to the drum samples in an instrumental hip-hop composition. As I mentioned previously, the semantic slippage between uses of this term to mean anything from a set of drum samples to an entire composition demonstrates the significance of percussion and rhythm to the compositional process.

As I suggested in chapters four and five, the timbre of potential samples is a particular concern for hip-hop producers. Nowhere is this concern more manifest than in the selection of drum sounds. In fact, hip-hop producers often comment on the apparent lack of concern for drum timbres among musicians in other genres:

> ...When I go to a music store and talk to someone that sells equipment, they'll argue with me. And say, "man, this is the greatest machine".
>
> Of course, they're a salesman.
>
> But they'll tell me, "You can't beat this machine. It has a hundred snare sounds in it. A hundred kick drums." Yeah, but they all sound like shit! They all sound electronic!
>
> And he's like, "you rap guys crack me up. You wanna spend all this money and get top of the line equipment, and then sample a record. A crunchy, dirty record." Well, yeah, of course we do, 'cause those are the dope sounds. They don't really understand that. We do it for a reason, and that's what makes the records fresh. (Mr. Supreme, personal interview: 1998)

The aesthetic delight that producers take in finding a good drum sample is comparable to that of wine collector savoring a fine vintage. There is almost a sense of epicurean passion when Mr. Supreme describes a good drum sample: "To me, personally, I just love to hear a cracking snare, you know? A sharp, punchy, cracking snare."(Mr. Supreme, personal interview 2: 1998)

Such obsessive attention to percussive detail is not lost on other producers, or – in many cases – astute fans. As Oliver Wang noted in chapter five, inattention to the details of drum sounds is often heard by the careful listener as being "amateurish" (Oliver Wang, personal interview: 1998).

In fact, DJ and journalist Karen Dere feels that it is even possible to make genre distinctions based on the quality of the drum samples utilized:

> I think people don't focus enough on hi-hat sounds...or snare sounds...I think that's what kind of draws a huge distinction

> between a lot of - I don't want to characterize it, necessarily, as "gangsta rap" - but people who are more street-oriented...They don't focus on obsessing about a certain snare sound...they'll just use the stock sound, like off some CD or something, and they don't care, because they're just out there to try to push stuff out on the market. (Karen Dere, personal interview: 1998)

As the following conversation with King Otto demonstrates, producers who *are* concerned with their drum sounds are often willing to go to great lengths in order to isolate a single usable percussion sample. After digging in the crates to find the record in the first place, one must still search the record itself for the ideal sound. This process often includes the use of tonal filters to isolate the drum sample from other, unwanted, sounds:

King Otto: You can find a snare in the middle of a song, and it might have a bassline or something behind it. But you can filter out the bassline, and then you've got a snare. Same thing with a kick[3] or a hi-hat. Kicks are the hardest.

Joe: Why is that?

King Otto: If you find a kick in the middle of a song and it's got something with it, it's harder to [isolate] low-end stuff. If there's a horn over the top of it, the horn's gonna stay there. Unless you take all the highs out, and then you don't really have a kick anymore, you just have like a muffled little "boomp".

Joe: I see what you're saying: it's easier to filter out low stuff. And because the kick is low, you can't put a low filter on it...

King Otto: Right. Like if there's a high frequency running over the top of a hi-hat that you find, it's not gonna sound that bad if you leave it in there. It might

[3] bass drum

> actually embellish the song. Which it might do in the kick, but more times than not, it just doesn't sound good. You wanna have a clear kick. In my opinion. (King Otto, personal interview: 1998)

As far as timbre is concerned, then, the producer's first task is to find drum sounds with an acceptable timbre that is not overshadowed by other instruments. Having done this, they must then organize them into a pattern that is not only rhythmically consistent (as I will discuss next), but also *timbrally* consistent. This is a clear example of what DJ Topspin mentioned at the outset of this chapter: the skill involved in taking things "from opposite ends of the world, that...compliment each other." (DJ Topspin, personal interview: 1999)

This is signifyin(g), in that the very lack of noticeable disjuctures in drum timbres shows the producer's skill in finding and juxtaposing these samples. A single measure of a typical hip-hop song, after all, may utilize a snare drum sample from a 1970's rock record, a high-hat sample from a 1950's jazz record, and a kick from a 1980's drum machine. The ability to make such juxtapositions sound normal is the hallmark of a good producer, and is valued by others as an example of processual mastery.

Rhythm and Structure

In addition to the sound of the individual sample, the other important element of hip-hop rhythm is how those samples are organized into a larger structure.

The creation of these percussion sequences is one of the most subtle and important tasks set before a producer. It is significant that many producers refer to this phase of the production process as "locking up a beat", which connotes a

number of different elements coming into a relationship with each other that is both objectively "correct", in some sense, as well as self-maintaining.

This raises a number of theoretical issues, since such rhythmic relationships (often referred to as "grooves") have historically been analyzed as artifacts of live performance interactions (c.f. Keil 1994, 1995; Dudley 1996). In the case of hip-hop however, groove is the work of one individual, the producer, who juxtaposes recordings of other musicians from various genres, and is not working in real time. Is it possible for groove to be the work of a single musician or composer? And, if so, do such grooves have the same social significance as communally created live music? While there are partial musical precedents, such as the interlocking texture created by the two hands of a ragtime pianist, this question has not been substantially addressed on a theoretical level.

The fact that producers refer to this process as "locking up a beat" suggests that the idea of groove is just as real for hip-hop musicians as for live musicians, but that it exist primarily as an abstraction in the mind of an individual, rather than a performative experience. In any case, the value of such ambiguity to the production process is demonstrated by the number of tools that producers consciously utilize to address it, as I will now discuss.

Quantization

One important tool that is built into virtually all electronic sequencing platforms is the "quantize" function, invented by electronic engineer Roger Linn and introduced in his Linn LM-1 drum machine (which did not sample) (Horwitz 1999: 150). Quantization automatically moves samples to the nearest appropriate beat, within a scheme that the producer chooses. For instance, if one chooses a framework of straight 16^{th} notes in a particular tempo, the quantize function will set the beginning of every sample to the nearest 16^{th} note. While this has the

benefit of precision, it could, in fact, make the sequence overly precise, which is to say mechanical sounding.

Furthermore, since one is working with samples of live musicians, the rhythms *within* the samples themselves may not be precise. In such cases, Domino points out, quantization could actually make the drums sound incorrect:

> As far as quantizing goes, I've never really tripped as much on that when I made drums, just because I had a sequencer that was able to move things. So I didn't want to quantize because I wanted to put everything exactly where I want it. And I think quantizing is good at putting things on exactly, but sometimes it gets to the point to where you want a drum to hit somewhat differently. Especially if you're trying to lock up drums with a certain type of sample where it was a live drummer, so it's not exact. The quantize can actually make your drums off. So I wouldn't use the quantize, I would just hit the snare and adjust it if it needed adjusting. (Domino, telephone interview: 1998)

While one might conclude, in light of the above, that the micro-rhythmic precision of quantization is not valued by producers, that would be something of an over-statement. In fact, producers actively seek a balance between sounding mechanistically precise and overly loose. Straying too far in either direction can earn the ire of other producers. For example, many are critical of the production work of RZA, the producer for New York's Wu-Tang Clan, precisely because he *does not* use the quantize function:

> I think it's crazy, 'cause I just don't see why you'd do that. And it sounds sloppy. I mean, some of it's really bad. Really, it sounds like he sat by his sampler and went like that [slaps table]. Just put his hand on some of the keys. And whatever the sounds came out is what came out. But people love it...If I did that? Man, people would think I was crazy. (Mr. Supreme, personal interview: 1998)

Samson S. agrees with this assessment:

> Awww, man, his beats is sloppy...But that was part of his appeal, initially...'cause you like "Oh yeah, he just don't give a fuck."...But after a while, you know, it got tiring. He'll still do a dope beat or two every now and then. But, yeah, he doesn't quantize his beats properly. And he knows that. (Samson S., personal interview: 1999)

In addition to advocating rhythmic precision, both of these quotes also support the image of a producer as a composer of art music, in the sense that they make a distinction between popular acclaim ("people love it") and the expectations of a more knowledgeable elite ("he doesn't quantize his beats properly"). In other words, while both producers criticize RZA's lack of quantization, they are clearly aware that this problem is of little or no concern to the majority of hip-hop fans. In fact, RZA is one of the most popular and well-respected producers in the history of the form.[4]

As a conversation with King Otto demonstrates, however, producers hold themselves (and each other) to what they see as higher aesthetic standards than those of the general public. Again, this suggests that, in the eyes of the producers, a proper appreciation of hip-hop beats requires that one be educated in its aesthetic:

> King Otto: ...I like to make stuff that people can't really name [the sample]. Can't really say, "Oh, that's so-and-so". Sometimes, though. I like to use popular stuff, sometimes, and then make it sound different.
>
> Joe: When you say "stuff that people can't really name", do you mean people in general, or other producers?
>
> King Otto: I mean other producers. That's really the people I think about when I'm making something, is other producers. Or rappers, and so forth. I'm not

[4] It is significant, however, that Razes work is rarely played by nightclub DJ's; it is not generally seen as conducive to dancing. His primary is audience is the home listener (I discuss these distinctions in depth in the next chapter).

> concerned with the general public, I think. (King Otto, personal interview: 1998)

Phil Stroman expresses a similar sense that producers hear hip-hop differently from fans:

> The general listening public don't know nothin' about none of that. All they know is: is your record hot or is your record not hot? That's kinda like one of those little things within the digging community...The average person would have no idea what's going on. They hear the beat and think either "I like that beat", or "I don't". (Phill Stroman, telephone interview: 1999)

Samson S. also makes a distinction between hip-hop production for general audiences and beats that require a some education to appreciate:

> I like to do beats that other producers [appreciate]...'cause there's some beats out there that the average person might like...but you gotta really do beats and know what's going on to *really* understand how Premier chops up certain things, or Pete Rock...For the most part, producers like that are respected among other producers. (Samson S., personal interview: 1999)

These comments reinforce the importance of the audience in the assessment of relative quality in signifyin(g): it is not valuable in the abstract, only when appreciated by knowledgeable individuals.

With regard to rhythmic sequences, then, the producers are playing a complex balancing game, attempting to create a groove within a very narrow window of acceptability. As with live music, the distinctions are often so fine as to be beyond conscious thought: the value of a groove is often felt in the body, through the oft-cited "head-nodding" of listeners, or through dance. As Negus I

reports, being able to *feel* beats is one of the more important skills a producer can possess:

> ...Even though I don't dance so much anymore, I think it also helps to be a dancer, to dance a lot...If you dance a lot, you know what's gonna move you to dance. And so, when you're making a beat, that's gonna help you a lot. As opposed to something that *sounds* good, something that *feels* good is really important. (Negus I, personal interview: 1998)

Again, producers must balance the requirement of precision - which is also a practical necessity for deejaying (see chapter eight) - with the requirement that the rhythm be conducive to dancing (a quality often characterized by hip-hop heads as having "bounce"). The beat must neither be too mechanical nor too "sloppy".

Adding to the rhythmic complexity, as Domino suggested earlier, is the fact that producers are often working with samples that are neither complete rhythmic cycles nor individual percussion noises. Often a single sample will contain a brief (i.e. two or three beat) rhythm. Part of the producer's task then, is to assemble these fragments into a larger rhythmic sequence that has a consistent feel:

> There's lot's of breaks that I appreciate and enjoy, and I have those, too. But all I need is a little one and a half count of anything, and I think of it in "how can I make that into a sixteen count, something that sounds live?"[5] And it's all in how you think of it. How you chop it. You can rearrange anything to make it sound fresh. ...Just changing the structure of a beat...
>
> When you learn how to chop it up, you can think of it in a different time signature, where you say, "that would be good for this one and a half count". You can piece four 1 ½ counts[6] and have a six-count beat. (DJ Topspin, personal interview: 1999)

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[5] "live" in this context means "rhythmically exciting", not "played on live instruments".
[6] 1 ½ beat segments

Moreover, in creating a rhythmic structure, the producer must not only be aware of the horizontal rhythmic variation of a particular drum, but also the vertical inconsistencies that invariable appear when a large ensemble is playing together on the recording to be sampled from:

> In sampled music, there's never just one sound. In a sample, there's all kinds of different sounds, because you're sampling from a record with maybe eight or nine different people playing instrumentation. Even if they're not all playing at the same time, at least three or four of them are gonna be playing. Whether it's a small hi-hat or something else.
>
> I think a lot of times, people who are producers who haven't sampled music, when they first start, they'll put on a record and...might hear a horn and wanna sample that. But won't necessarily realize that there's like a key[board] tone underneath that, and a little hi-hat, and other sounds. They'll just hear the horn. You kinda have to train yourself to hear everything that's going on within that...3-second span. 'Cause there's always a lot of different layers going on, and you have to listen for all that...
>
> For example, I might hear a key tone...or a chord, and wanna use that. But I have to pay attention to whether there's a little hi-hat going on, because, if I sample that, I'm gonna have my own hi-hat, or own drum track. And that hi-hat in that key tone can throw the whole drum track off, because it won't be on time. And I have to pay attention to that. (Negus I, personal interview: 1998)

As far is the rhythm is concerned, the producer needs to find and sequence drum patterns that don't conflict with each other, or the other elements of the beat. Only after avoiding that pitfall, can the producer begin the process of creatively structuring a rhythmic pattern that is aesthetically valuable. From the mastery of timbral ambiguity to the metrical and rhythmic concerns, a producer's rhythmic talent is deeply connected to their mastery of ambiguity: their skill at signifyin(g).

"The Music": Diversity and Collage

Ironically, the somewhat constrained nature of hip-hop's rhythmic preferences actually opens up a large area for experimentation with the other elements, such as melody, harmony, and timbre. As Domino notes:

> ...when you really think about it, what makes it hip-hop is the drums. In the end, that's really what makes a song hip-hop to me. Anything else that you put over it can be...different types of things. But I think that the element that makes it hip-hop, it comes back to the type of beat that's under it. And I think that if you have that, then you got hip-hop. But you shouldn't limit yourself of what you put over that beat. (Domino, telephone interview: 1998)

The identification of the genre by its rhythmic feel is precisely what allows the other elements to be diverse.

The Meaning of Aesthetic Diversity

The diversity of sample sources has implications for my discussion in two major areas: the *significance* of the interaction between diverse musical aesthetics in a single hip-hop composition, and the *nature of the underlying structure* that allows these relationships to exist in the first place. I suggest that both of these are designed to promote useful ambiguity.

Symbolic meaning (as opposed to sound) is overstated by scholars as a motive for sampling (cf. Potter, Rose, Costello & Wallace).[7] Producers value the meaning of a particular sample not primarily for it's own sake (whether straight or ironic), but more as a venue for ambiguity and manipulation. Of course there *is* irony in hip-hop, as there is in all human endeavor. I am merely suggesting that

[7] The overemphasis of this factor can be seen in the vastly disproportionate amount of the scholarly literature on sampling that has focussed on samples of *speech* (which account for a relatively small number of the total samples used in hip-hop music, but which are conducive to literary interpretation) as opposed to samples of *music* (which make up the vast majority of samples, but which tend to resist such interpretations) (see. Potter 1995: 42-45)

there is not a disproportionate amount of it, and that it is not the primary motivating factor behind sampling.

When I asked Samson S. if he would sample a song because of what it represented to him, he was unequivocal in his response:

> Not based on that fact alone. I don't care how much the record meant to me, if it's not poppin'...I go on just straight sound, man. You know, "do I like it?", "does it sound good to me?", that type of deal. I don't really get all up into this mystical shit. (Samson S., personal interview: 1999)

Of course the distinction between sound and meaning is a complex one, and no decision can be made entirely on the basis of one factor to the exclusion of the other. The questions "do I like it?" and "does it sound good to me?" are not matters of objective reality, but are conditioned by a lifetime of music listening in various social settings. And I am not denying that the use of sampling itself is largely based on the significance that the vinyl medium holds for producers. But this is a far more abstract and general sensibility that the one often attributed to hip-hop musicians. In short, I would argue that, while the general aesthetic sensibility, or "vibe", of a particular sample is of great importance to a producer, the specific cultural context from which it emerged is not. Given this preference, it is significant that reinterpreting a general aesthetic sensibility is itself a much more ambiguous endeavor than, for example, making fun of a TV show by sampling its theme. The valuing of the more ambiguous over the less ambiguous option again supports the value of signifyin(g) to hip-hop.

Sampling 'corny' records

A good example of the complexity of the sound/meaning distinction can be found in samples of recordings that are seen as having little intrinsic value in their original form: so-called 'corny' records. Most hip-hop scholars have interpreted producers' embrace of corny records as a straightforward use of irony,

as when Costello and Wallace spend five pages interpreting DJ Jazzy Jeff's sampling of the "I Dream of Jeannie" theme as a wry commentary on the situation comedy's treatment of nineteen-sixties sexual mores and technophilia (Costello & Wallace 1990: 60-65).

Another good example of this tendency can be found in Elizabeth Wheeler's analysis of De La Soul's "Say No Go", which uses a sample of the Hall and Oates pop song "I Can't Go For That":

> The mixes of De La Soul epitomize the art of ironic sampling... "Say No Go" also contains the blank pastiche that links hip-hop most closely with postmodernism. Ultimately, you cannot tell what De La Soul think of Hall and Oates; they use "I Can't Go For That" not only ironically but neutrally. Out of the corny, [De La Soul] salvages the hip: one compelling seven-note riff and one soulful twist of Daryl Hall's voice.[8] (Wheeler, 1991)

Samson S., however, points out that such an approach, if actually adopted by a producer, could have serious repercussions for their reputation:

> I'd sample something wacky, somethin' people wouldn't expect: maybe some Neil Sedaka or something. You know, that's fun. But that can backfire on you, too...Folks be thinkin' you serious, and be like, "man, that shit is *wack*!" (Samson S., personal interview: 1999)

Implicit in this comment is the assumption that ironic intent is *not* presumed by hip-hop listeners ("folks be thinkin' you serious"); if something does not sound good, regardless of the producer's symbolic goals, it will be rejected by listeners.

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[8] It is worth noting that Wheeler assumes that the "corniness" of the Hall and Oates song is self-evident. Given the breadth of producers' musical tastes, this is a fairly significant assumption to present without substantiation. In fact, I have personally heard the original Hall and Oates song played in a hip-hop club.

In other words, while humor and irony do exist in hip-hop production, they are not used to a greater extent than in any other form of music. Irony aside, the reality of producers' intent in sampling corny records falls into two general categories: 1) some records may have sincerely valuable elements, regardless of their overall corniness; and 2) making a good hip-hop beat out of a corny record shows one's skills as a producer (again supporting the processual aspects of signifyin(g)).

For Samson S. the value of corny records is primarily a practical one: no matter how bad the original record is, it may still contain useful sounds and should therefore not be overlooked as a potential source:

> Even on corny records like Neil Sedaka, or [Englebert] Humperdinck, or whatever, I've found, like, little bits and pieces on them records, too. You can use damn near anything, even if it's just a hi-hat [cymbal sound]. (Samson S., personal interview: 1999)

For Specs, the use of such samples is an opportunity to display one's skills as a producer. The ability to make an aesthetically pleasing beat out of aesthetically displeasing samples is seen as one of the hallmarks of an accomplished beat-maker:

> I had to stop sampling [jazz records] for a while, because it was too easy...to get a certain vibe...So I had to stop that for a long time. I started sampling the corniest records that I could possibly find. Anything. Anything that was really wack: Neil Sedaka, anything. That helped me a lot, too. I created all types of beats that I pretty much love and it was just the wackest records around.
>
> And I think that's important to do, too. Because too many kids are just grabbing up something and taking the first lick they hear. Then they get kind of known for it. It's just too easy. Too many artists be able to make careers off the same vibes and stuff. There's a limit to that. There should be. (Specs, personal interview: 1998)

The value of corny records, then, is a combination of the inherent value of their sound, the challenge it provides to the producer, and – to a far lesser degree – humor or irony. It is more about an interpretive process than an ironic product. Again, I feel that overt parody, while present, has been overstated by other scholars, who are committed to a view of hip-hop production as being primarily about ironic recontextualization.

Flipping Samples

One way to mitigate the potential corniness of a sample is to "flip" it: to change in a significant way. This technique is also used in other situations when creativity is necessitated, such as when the sample has already been used by another producer. While I discussed this practice in the previous chapter as an ethical responsibility, I wish to explore its aesthetic value here:

> Negus I: If you're gonna use something that's obviously recognizable, do something to it. To where maybe people can't even figure out how you got that melody out of that sample. How did you take it off the record and get that melody?
>
> Joe: So it's like you're almost working with the fact that it's recognizable.
>
> Negus I: Yeah, exactly. (Negus I, personal interview: 1998)

For Samson S., there is a distinctly social value to the practice:

> Like I said, it goes back to showing off your skills again. The best thing is to take something everybody knows. Like, for instance, this producer Bean-One...Man, he took the beginning of "Off The Wall", the Michael Jackson song, and *flipped* it! I was: "Awww, *man*!"...I knew what it was, but how he did it! So there's nothing more fun...

> I like that a lot, when producers take something real common, everybody know, and flip it. You know, chop it up, do your own little twist to it. So that's a good thing. (Samson S., personal interview: 1999)

In Samson's view, it is actually better to recast something well-known than to produce something totally original. Additionally, as with many of the aesthetic aspects of producing, Samson S. (like most other producers) specifically associates the social value of the practice with "fun" and "showing off your skills". In a sense, the aesthetic expectations are akin to the rules of verbal signifyin(g): part of the enjoyment derives from the challenge of expressing oneself within a variety of self-imposed constraints.

Flipping a beat isn't about meaning *per se*; it is about the practitioner's skill in *recasting* meaning. The appreciation of corny records and flipped melodies suggests an underlying aesthetic in which value derives less from the sampled material or the structure that is imposed on it by the producer, than on the process that links the two. In fact, as Mr. Supreme argues, several producers could conceivably use *identical* samples, and still create very different compositions:

> Everyone has their own signature. I don't care what they do; everyone has their signature, to the way they put it down. So even if you gave someone the same drums, the same loop, and [said], "go put this together," they're all gonna be different... 'Cause they're gonna chop their drums, right? Everyone's pattern's gonna be different, the way they program 'em is gonna be different. It's gonna be different. (Mr. Supreme, personal interview: 1998)

For Specs, the relationship between creativity and the sampled element goes beyond personal satisfaction and becomes almost spiritual. The producer has a responsibility *to the samples* to organize them creatively:

> You're not gonna create something that's totally new on this planet. But at the same time, it's a respect thing. You have to have a little respect for the things that you lift up. Reshape. It's just like clay: you have to be nice to the clay 'cause it's from the Earth, which you're from, too. So it's family and you should just treat it with respect, 'cause karmically it's gonna come back up, sooner or later.
>
> ...It's not necessarily trying to prove that you can be original. Because that's pointless, really. Don't make no sense to prove it to anybody. (Specs, personal interview: 1998)

For many producers, this theology is expressed in the distinction between "chopping" and "looping" samples.

Chopping vs. Looping

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the primary method by which samples are flipped is known as "chopping". In discussions of its creative value, chopping (the deconstruction and reorganization of samples) is usually counterposed to looping (repeating a sample with little or no alteration). For Vitamin D, the distinction between chopping and looping has significant philosophical implications in terms of ownership and creativity:

> I don't wanna take another man's composition... 'cause they wrote that with a feeling and a whole spirit behind it. And their intent when they wrote it wasn't for me to sample it, really. So I understand how a guy that's getting sampled out here, he could be brutal about such a thing. 'Cause he didn't write his music for that. So I'm more taking their *texture* and taking what their producer did with them, and taking their *sound*. As opposed to taking their composition. Which, again, it's a thin line between violating and not. (Vitamin D, personal interview: 1998)

For Domino, by contrast, the reasoning is more pragmatic; chopping is a natural outcome of a limited number of old records being sampled to extinction:

> ...I just think that, now, you're getting to the point where...you're running out of things to find. And so a lot of the best loops have been used already. I mean, there's some stuff out there, I'm sure. There always will be stuff. But now it's like, in order to stop recycling things, you gotta just take pieces and make'em into a whole new thing. It's just hard to find records now. So now...you just need to find drum pieces and you can make different styles of drums, just by like piecing'em, and making'em your own thing. (Domino, telephone interview: 1998)

For Mr. Supreme, chopping is a matter of pride and professional standing:

> I think producers are different. We listen to records different than the average person, or even a rapper. We know. And if we know the [original] record and he just looped it, we're like, "Awww, he didn't do nothin', he just looped that, he's a punk", you know? But if he took something and really flipped it? Be like "*yeah*". (Mr. Supreme, personal interview: 1998)

Wordsayer, who is an MC, sees parallels between producing and rapping in this regard:

> There's just so many different degrees of emceein'. Somebody might move you with their delivery, but they're not really sayin' nothin'. The same thing with producers: somebody might use nice sounds, but they didn't really take it any further. That's the thing, when I think about producing, that moves me the most is when I see that a producer utilized elements of a song and took it further. Not just said, "here's that break", or "here's that drum sound, it's hittin'", and just put it in there, but took that drum sound and built upon it, and made something; not necessarily better, but took it to another degree. (Wordsayer, personal interview: 1998)

Again, in saying that a good producer takes a sample and makes it "not necessarily better, but took it to another degree", Wordsayer suggests that it is not the quality of the final product that is most important, but the quality of the manipulation.

This is an important point, and one that is reinforced throughout the spectrum of hip-hop experience. After all, if the quality of the final product were the most significant aspect, then the best hip-hop song would be one that sampled another hip-hop song that was highly respected. The fact that producers reject this practice on both ethical and aesthetic grounds confirms the significance of process.

While chopping is clearly valued (for both ethical and aesthetic reasons), producers who make a point of chopping records are surprisingly slow (in most cases) to claim moral or artistic superiority on that basis alone. Rather, many producers specifically point to chopping's legal and economic benefits as the major factor in their embrace of it.

> I think the whole chopping phenomenon came about as a direct result of rappers getting sued, or rappers having to pay way too much, or labels not willing to put out records. (Samson S., personal interview: 1999)

In fact, many producers take offense at the suggestion that looping is not creative:

> I like to loop. Just straight loop stuff...I'll chop something up a whole lot and change it around so that you can't hear it. But I'll also just straight loop something. And just use the loop. Especially if it's a loop that's not running through the whole original. And I like that.
>
> But the thing is that we're about to come out with a piece of vinyl on 321 records. And we'll have to clear our samples. So: can't do that. Unless I'ma pay somebody or get sued or whatever. But if I could, I would. Not every cut, because it's certain levels of creativity in it. People will think "Oh, that's just a loop—that's not creative." It is, if you...it's a couple things. One is if that's not playing through the whole [original] cut. It's what loop you select. But then there's also how you apply it, or use it. Or how the MC uses it. That's part of the art right there. (DJ Kool Akiem, telephone interview: 1999)

Phill Stroman also emphatically defends the creativity of looping:

> See the thing about it is that there's different types of loops...I mean, you can get real creative with just a loop, without even chopping it. You know, it depends on that individual. There's a million ways you can loop something. You can take something and it'll be kinda off-beat and you'll put it to the drums in a certain way that - it's a loop - but it doesn't sound anything like the original record, you know? It's just creativity, how you do it.
>
> ...You can take something that's like maybe a 5/4...you know, some crazy jazz song. But if you listen to it as it was played, as the original recording, it's like a 5/4 beat. But then you loop that same thing to a 4/4 drum pattern. And it's a loop, but it's playing in a totally different way. It sounds totally different. (Phill Stroman, telephone interview: 1999)

Moreover, even producers who do take pride in chopping their samples, such as Jake One, may still criticize others when they feel that the means have overwhelmed the ends:

> Like, I think DJ Shadow tries to show off. He doesn't make music, he makes, like, art for art's sake. He doesn't make music. He seems to be more into, "Well, I chopped it fourteen different times," which I don't care about, personally. That's not me. I care about how it sounds, whether he looped it or not. So there's people like that. There's the segment of the producing population that's like, "well, I have to chop it fifteen times and throw some reverse angles in there," and that's production to them...But if still sounds weak, then what's the point? If it doesn't really sound good, it doesn't sound good. (Jake One, personal interview: 1998)

Samson S. who (as seen above) values chopping very highly, also does not see it as an end unto itself. If fact, he even goes so far as to defend Sean "Puffy" Combs, the most prominent practitioner of looping:

> To be honest with you, man, to me, it's like: what's good is good...I'm not the type of hip-hopper that gets in my little elite shell, and just naturally: "Awww, Puffy," this.

> Well, that's fine, whatever. Puffy's not necessarily *for* you! He's for the club. When you out kickin' it, you don't wanna hear no damn Company Flow![9] ...it's different moods.
>
> Like, if you look at my collection, I got all kinds of different hip-hop. I appreciate it all. I can get into the artsy-fartsy shit; I have the little Unkle Science Fiction CD. I got Company Flow. I also have Eightball and MJG. And Spice-1. (Samson S., personal interview: 1999)

Domino agrees:

> ...This may be a little unorthodox of what you might get from most hip-hop producers, but I think that part of being in this industry is knowing and figuring out what has you on top. And finding out what people wanna hear. And that is so hard, in itself. It's easy to say, "Oh, he just took this record, and that's why it happened". But it isn't how it happened, you know what I'm sayin'? So there's a lot that goes along with that, which you gotta respect, in my eyes.
>
> Now, whether or not *I* would do it, is a whole 'nother situation. I feel like I have certain standards of how I do music, and what I wanna do out of music. And I can live with that, and if he can live with *that*, then no one should try to put their own production standards on Puffy. And that's just how I view it. I may not [be] impressed by what he's doing, but I'm not gonna say that he should be doing *anything*. Who am I to say? And who's to say that doin' it the underground way, making something out of scratch, is *the way*. It's just one way, it's one style of doing it. (Domino, telephone interview: 1998)

As with ethics, Domino argues for the artistic validity of looping (Puffy's approach), while emphatically stating that he himself would not do it.

Ultimately, what counts is the level of perceived creativity:

> Personally, I like loops. Certain people really have a gift for chopping. You know, like Premier or somebody. But even after a while that starts getting tired, 'cause people start imitating his style and stuff...like the same old stuff over and over, you know what I mean? So, I mean, it varies. I think it's all about being creative.

---

[9] a self-consciously progressive hip-hop group.

> And sometimes you can be creative with looping, and sometimes you can be creative with chopping. It all depends on the person doing it. (Phill Stroman, telephone interview: 1999)

At the very least, looping automatically recasts any musical material, insofar as the end of a phrase is repeatedly juxtaposed with its beginning in a way that was not intended by the original musician. A linear musical figure is transformed into a cycle, an act that has deep musical and social implications:

> Sometimes, I'll put a loop on and let it play for, like, two or three days. I've done it before. When you do something like that, you get to hear all different parts and pieces and elements of it that you never really heard before...It probably sounds strange to a lotta people, but you get to hear stuff that the musician didn't try to put in there. You know what I mean? It's just in there. It might sound different at night than it do at day time. Same loop. (DJ Kool Akiem, telephone interview, 1999)

Looping – creating a cycle out of linear development - thus has two overarching aesthetic effects. First, it imparts a guiding principal to otherwise random juxtapositions; it "control[s] their unpredictability" ((Snead, quoted in Rose 1994: 69). Second (and particularly in cases where the original recording was not in an African-derived genre), it serves to "Africanize" musical material, by foregrounding cyclic motion. Moreover, even chopped melodies are ultimately beholden to a loop-based aesthetic, insofar as the chopped material is still used to create a new musical cycle. This cycle, with its predisposition toward what Rose has called "repetition and rupture" (1994) is the venue in which signifying takes place.

Conclusions: Process as Aesthetic, Aesthetic as Power

In this chapter, I have tried to show that the hip-hop sampling aesthetic is better analyzed as a social process than as an economic product. The nature of this

process is deeply beholden to the African American tradition of signifyin(g). From the integration of disparate samples into a cyclic whole to the reclamation of corny records to the sampling techniques themselves, all point to an aesthetic of subtle control over a broad pallet of musical source materials.

The contemporary poet Saul Williams - who cites the hip-hop aesthetic as a major influence - exemplifies its approach when, in a single couplet, he draws a connection between abstract worlds of experience, planets, and vinyl records on the grounds that all of them spin, disappear and reappear at the discretion of the powerful African American subject "...And I can fade worlds in and out with my mixing patterns / Letting the Earth spin as I blend in Saturn..." ("Ohm", 1996).

VIII. The Outer Circle: From Samplers to Ears

In this chapter I will address the larger social world in which the hip-hop producer operates: that of individuals who, for artistic, social, and economic reasons, facilitate the music's journey from producer to listener. Although their work usually takes place after a given recording has been completed, their influence is nevertheless strong: their actions affect an artist's reputation and pocketbook, both of which may be taken into account by the producer when creating their next song.[1]

Most producers work in partnership with one or more MC's (rappers), to whom they submit a number of instrumental beats. The MC then chooses the particular beats which they feel best suit their needs at that time. Once the MC's rhymes have been added, the producer and the MC, along with various record company executives and legal professionals, must decide which of these songs can and should be commercially released. And of all commercially released hip-hop music, only a small number of songs are heard by a given listener; this is largely at the discretion of Disc Jockeys, whether on the radio or in nightclubs.

While producers have their own standards as to what constitutes ethical behavior and aesthetic quality (see chapters four, six, and seven), their reputations and potential earnings largely rest in the hands of individuals whose sensibilities lie outside of those standards. As a result, the wishes of individuals outside of the producers' community are also considered when hip-hop music is produced. It is not my intention, however, to suggest that to do so is to compromise one's artistic standards. It would be easy to idealize the process, to speculate about what hip-hop producers might produce if not bound by the needs of others. But, as I will

[1] And it is a song-by-song process; hip-hop is a musical form that is based on the singles format.

show. these apparently 'outside' needs are, in fact, fundamental to the nature of hip-hop production; without them, it would likely not exist at all.

All art, and all evaluative standards for art, exist within a social world, and it is my intention to show how the requirements of that world affect the works produced. In doing so, I draw substantially upon Howard Becker's notion of an "art world" as a community of individuals whose collective activity defines, produces, and appreciates a given art form:

> All artistic work, like all human activity, involves the joint activity of a number, often a large number, of people. Through their cooperation, the art work we eventually see or hear come to be and continues to be. The work always shows signs of that cooperation. The forms of cooperation may be ephemeral, but often become more or less routine, producing patterns of collective activity we can call an art world. The existence of art worlds, as well as the way their existence affects both the production and consumption of art works, suggests a sociological approach to the arts. It is not an approach that produces aesthetic judgements, although that is a task many sociologists of art have set for themselves. It produces, instead, an understanding of the complexity of the cooperative networks through which art happens... (Becker 1982: 1)

In this chapter, I will discuss how a particular group of art works – hip-hop beats – progress through cooperative networks that allow them to be heard, as well as how the values of these networks circle back to influence future beats.

MCs

Although there is a growing market for instrumental hip-hop music, the vast majority of commercially released hip-hop songs feature the rhymes of an MC. As a result, producers tend to make beats that they feel will be conducive to rhyming. Any number of factors may come into play in such assessments, from tempo (neither so fast that the MC can't be understood, nor so slow that the song lacks energy), to number of samples (if there are too many different sounds, the

MC will be lost in the mix) to the personal preferences of a particular MC with whom the producer is working. Of course, a producer is not *required* to take such factors into account, but when MC's consistently choose to rhyme over beats with certain characteristics, a producer must learn to provide those characteristics, or become known as someone who doesn't.

For MC Wordsayer, these needs can vary considerably, depending on the MC's frame of mind:

> You look for something that can support what you've already created, or something where you can say, "OK, this a nice foundation, now I can build on it." And it just depends on how you're feeling. 'Cause you might have something already in your mind, where, "I'm just looking for something to put this over," or you might be in a frame of mind where you don't have any pre-existing concept, and it's like, "now, I'm looking for something to build with." (Wordsayer, personal interview: 1998)

In the former case, when the rhyme is already written, and the MC is simply looking for a beat that works well under it, the MC's relationship with the producer is primarily that of a critic, choosing the beat that is best for their needs. But in the latter case, when the MC is looking for a beat that inspires them to write, the interaction is somewhat more complex; in those circumstances, the MC may focus more on the aesthetic factors discussed in the previous chapter.[2] In fact, aesthetic issues, such as rhythmic feel and general "vibe" can become so significant when an MC makes these determinations, that they verge on the spiritual:

> The music within itself contains already the melodies, and [the MC is] just bringing up the particular sounds that are within the beat, whether it be just embellishments or different rhythms or harmonies. And listening to the sound. For me, it's like the music talks, on its own. You hear certain things and they have their own

[2] The producer's ethics, discussed in chapter six, are distinctly secondary to this process, and only come into play when an MC doesn't want to be associated with an egregious ethical violation. And it must be egregious, since most MC's (in my experience) have only a glancing familiarity with the producers' ethics in the first place, although they do have their own.

> identity within that song. So just finding...prominent rhythms and...coming up with a counter rhythm that's in time or in harmony with your vocal. So using your voice, really, just as another instrument to embellish the track, musically. Not just seeing a beat and just rhyming over it, but sort of feeling [that] each and every beat has a different vibration and feel to it. So just listening to it in that way. (Wordsayer, personal interview: 1998)

MC Kylea supports this analysis, suggesting that the aesthetic "vibe" can affect the process of rhyme composition in specific ways. In the ideal case, music and lyrics will merge into a single organic whole:

> Production is about a vibe...I mean, all the way down from the person who's creatin' it, to when you receive it. It's like, "Now this is your child. Raise it. Raise it and just watch it grow." And that's usually what happens with a beat that I receive. I listen to it and it's like, "Oh, yeah." It's weird how it kinda comes to you, 'cause it really does come from beyond.
>
> You sit down and you listen to it, and I write and get to a part, and then, well, I freestyle[3] the rest. Because you keep freestylin' to be able to hear what you wanna write. And then when you look back at the whole song, it's like, "Wow, I don't even remember really writing that down, or knowing that the song is gonna be this way." I just heard the music, and the music said, "this is the song." You sit down, and the more you listen to the music, the more you'll be able to write this song. If you don't listen to the music, then you're not gonna write the song. But if you get into that vibe of the music, then you gonna slowly see the song come together. And when you listen to it, it's like, "Wow, that song really makes sense". (Kylea, personal interview: 1998)

For Wordsayer, in fact, openness to this type of creative approach is a major factor in his choice of producers to work with:

> The song sort of creates itself. It's not like sitting down and producing with the intent to create so much of a specific sound. But just sitting down and opening yourself up to facilitate whatever particular energy comes through you, creatively. So I feel

[3] improvise

> producers who create in that way. (Wordsayer, personal interview: 1998)

Beyond the general sensibility of the song, MC's may react to different elements within the song. Often, an MC will change the rhythm or tone of their performance to correspond with different samples at various points throughout the song:

> ...The drum pattern could be one thing, and then there's a bassline that's happening that could just be real funky. And it's like, "Oh man, when I get to this one part..." And then the beat might drop out and the bassline's doin' this. And it's like, "Well I wanna rhyme to the bassline when it does that." And when the beat comes back in, you're just changing your tempo to go back with the beat. You're almost playing, like, see-saw. You're going back and forth and back and forth. And, for myself, doing that, it gets complicated, because you gotta really remember: what are you following, and when are you following it? You know? All the way through the song. I know there's a lot of artists that do that, though. You can listen to their cadence and see that, "Oh, OK, I can hear what they're flowing off of," you know? What part that they're following in the song. (Kylea, personal interview: 1998)

When such thoughts are continually relayed back to the producer, it cannot help but influence their work (assuming that the producer is interested in maintaining a relationship with that MC).

> ...The producer that you usually work with, you pretty much have a feel for how they create. Not saying that all their beats are the same, but they're gonna give you a beat that, if they know you, and know how you rhyme, and know what you do, they'll know. They'll make a beat and say, "Here. When I made this beat I was thinking about you." And so then, when you get the beat, it's like "Yeah!" (Kylea, personal interview: 1998)

Wordsayer (whose real name is Jon) agrees:

> There's a personal relationship where it's like, they might be producing some music and just through the nature of our relationship, they're able to be like, "OK, that sounds like Jon," or "that feels like Jon", or "I can hear Jon on that", or "I could see Jon on that." Then when I get one of their beats, it hits me. I be like, "I can see myself on that." (Wordsayer, personal interview: 1998)

In a sense, this idea is related to a social convention that was raised in my discussion of digging in the crates: that each artist has their own characteristic aesthetic (or "vibe"), and that certain musical materials can be almost predestined for a particular musician. As producer Vitamin D spoke of other producers giving him records that fit his vibe, so he directs his own finished beats to the appropriate MC's.

Commercial Release

As a recording-based musical form, there is little room in hip-hop for totally non-commercial music. With the exception of working tapes that are played for other producers or MC's, mix tape exclusives, and so-called "white label" underground releases (which are usually given directly to DJ's), almost all hip-hop is commercially released. Once an MC has chosen which songs to rhyme over, therefore, a final decision must be made as to which of those songs to release commercially. This decision is usually made collectively by the producer, MC, and record executives (in the case of independently released hip-hop, these are often the same individuals). Factors that come into play include the same things as any other form of popular music, such as perceived danceability, ability to fit into preexisting radio formats, and "catchiness", most of which are highly subjective. One somewhat more pragmatic concern that arises at this stage is that of potential copyright violations, generally referred to as "sample clearance".

Sample Clearance

> It's all about money. I mean, there was times when people didn't try to own this piece of land. You know, try to put some kinda boundary on it. And say, "Well, I own this." The way I look at it, how can you really own a piece of land that's gonna be here after you're gone, and was there before you was there? You can't just come along and say, "This belongs to me, 'cause I wrote this piece of paper." You know what I mean? Anybody could come write a piece of paper, then. What if my paper is bigger than yours?
>
> It's really all about money and how many guns you got to back up the laws you write. It really goes in and shows that all the laws are basically just a sham...I don't have respect for any of the laws...
>
> And that fits in with my sampling law. Once a piece of music is out there, it's in the air. How can you really say you own this vibration that's moving through the air in this configuration? You not around to even see what's happenin'. How do you own that? I mean, that's like saying you own a certain wavelength of color...it's ridiculous. (DJ Kool Akiem, telephone interview: 1999)

As I argued in chapter four, sampling is the foundation of hip-hop music, and producers, left to their own devices, are not particularly interested in justifying its use. When forced by circumstance, however, they are more than willing to articulate a point of view. Sample clearance - the process of obtaining permission from copyright holders for the use of their music - is the primary circumstance that forces them to do so.

Sample clearance raises a difficult methodological issue for the researcher: despite many producers' ideological disdain for the sample clearance process, it is illegal to release music that contains uncleared samples. As a result, many producers are understandably hesitant to go on record about their practices in this area. Rather than put them in that position, I chose not to even inquire about this issue in interviews. I have, however, spoken off the record with most of my consultants (and others) about sample clearance, and this section tries to reflect

the general tenor of the hip-hop perspective, rather than the approach of any individual.

In addition, it should go without saying that I am not a lawyer and that anything contained herein should not be taken as legal advice.

In order to clear a sample, the artist (or their agents) must obtain two sets of permissions: publishing rights and master rights (Stim 1999: 66).

"Publishing rights" refers to ownership of the *composition in the abstract*, including music and lyrics (Ashburne 1994: 2-3; Stim 1999: 66). These rights are generally split between the composer, lyricist, and publishing company. "Master rights" refers to the ownership of a *particular recording of the composition*, and may be owned by the performer, but are more often owned by the record company (Ashburne 1994: 2). A hip-hop artist may need to clear either or both of these rights in order to release their song.

For instance, a hip-hop song that samples a measure from an original recording, retaining a recognizable melody from that song, would need both permissions.

A hip-hop song which utilizes the melody from an original song, but does not sample it (if it is played on a synthesizer, for example), need pay only publishing rights.

By the same token, a hip-hop song that uses the lyrics from a copyrighted song would also need to pay publishing, unless they could successfully argue that the lyric was a parody of the original, and thus protected under U.S. fair use doctrine, as specifically defined by the March 7, 1994 Supreme Court decision in the case of Luther R. Campbell AKA Luke Skyywalker, et al v. Acuff-Rose Music, Inc. (Sanjek:1). The decision, as Sanjek points out, requires that the new work be "transformative" of the old for the purpose of commenting upon it. Works that did not sufficiently change the old, or (presumably) did not

sufficiently comment upon the old, would not be protected. What, exactly, constitutes sufficient change or comment is, of course, highly contingent upon cultural norms, and hip-hop producers cannot reasonably be blamed if they suspect that the Supreme Court does not adjudicate from the perspective of hip-hop culture.

The final potential case – a song that samples an original recording, but alters it so that the original composition is unrecognizable - need only pay master rights: they are using the recording, but not the composition. As Domino says:

> ...Ultimately, legally, it doesn't matter. You know, there's all this talk about how you gotta use, like, more than three bars—that's all bullshit. On the publishing side, maybe that's true. But on the master side, if you sample *any* piece from a record, no matter what you get...Legally, if I took this khhhhhh [imitates record static] from this record, they own that master. So anything you sample from their record, no matter what you do with it, legally, they own it...If they find out that that's what it is, then they can pop you, no matter how small a piece you use. (Domino, telephone interview: 1998)

The operative phrase here, for many producers, is "if they find out that that's what it is." In practice, such samples are often not cleared at all, on the assumption that the owner of the master rights would not be able to recognize that their song had been sampled in the first place. This, again, is part of the reason why so many producers resent 'breakbeat compilations' (chapter six); they can alert record companies to samples that they may not have been aware of.

As the epigraph to this section shows, many producers feel that copyright law is more often a matter of money and power than of creativity and artist's rights. Hank Shocklee of the Bomb Squad, for instance, feels that original artists expect an inappropriate share of recording royalties:

> The whole sampling thing has gotten out of proportion anyway because if you use one little lick from somebody, [the sampled

> artist is] claiming like 50% copyright! I tend to think that the laws should protect the entire composition. I understand that. But when you're starting to protect licks, and [musical] phrases, now you're getting to a [dangerous] point. That's like saying, "Let me copyright the note 'C'" And anytime somebody uses it you're like "Oh! You usin' 'C'. I should get some!" No! Because that might be part of what makes the song, but it's not stealing the entire composition. (Chairman Mao 1998: 113-114)

Once the money and power have been factored out, many producers will argue, the situation becomes much more relativistic. And when the new artist and the original copyright holder are of equal moral stature, then one's default position should be in favor of increased artistic freedom, rather than monetary rights:

> DJ Kool Akiem: Regardless of what the [original] artist says, to me, once it's recorded, it's out there... To me, it's 'hip-hop first', you know what I'm sayin'? That means, basically, I'ma take my side over any musician for any reason. Even the most skilled musician, the one that I praise the most, I'm still samplin'.
>
> Joe: 'Cause hip-hop's more important, you're saying.
>
> DJ Kool Akiem: Right. Not to him; to me.
> (DJ Kool Akiem, telephone interview:1999)

DJ Kool Akiem is not claiming an absolute moral right to sample. Rather, he argues, essentially, that old songs are part of the environment ("...once it's recorded, it's out there") and, as such, constitute reasonable material for artistic manipulation. He is *not* saying that the original musician is wrong, only that his own position is of equal moral standing. Note that this approach is quite different

from presenting a new model of artistic ownership: DJ Kool Akiem (along with every other hip-hop artist I have encountered) still copyrights his own music.

This stands in stark contrast to the vision promoted by many scholars:

> ...Hip hop calls into question Western notions of cultural production as property through its evocation, quotation, and outright theft of socially shared musical memories. Yet it also illumines the emancipatory possibities of new technologies and the readiness of marginalized and oppressed populations to employ them for humane ends – for shedding restricting social identities and embracing new possibilities of a life without hierarchy and exploitation. (Lipsitz1994: 37)

While hip-hop *music* may "call into question Western notions of cultural production", hip-hop *musicians* usually do not. In fact, most hip-hop artists do not hesitate to invoke the old models when it suits them. Excerpts from other hip-hop songs (such as vocal hooks) are notoriously expensive to sample; I have heard anecdotally of rap artists charging other rap artists as much as five thousand dollars for a single phrase.

On the whole, hip-hop artists' approach to copyright tends to be more reformist than revolutionary, arguing that the laws simply do not do what they claim to do: protect the original musician. One version of this criticism points out that it is the record company (often a transnational corporation) that makes the lion's share of the profits from sample clearance:

DJ Kool Akiem:	I mean. I understand how it makes sense in a way to where "yeah, I sweated and made this, and I deserve to get paid off it." Yeah, and maybe that's true. But at the same time, somebody that didn't make [the song] is making a whole lot more money than you are off it.
Joe:	Yeah, you mean from the record company...

DJ Kool Akiem: Yeah. Maybe you ain't even makin' none of it and they makin' all of it, 'cause they bought your rights. (DJ Kool Akiem, telephone interview: 1999)

Another line of reasoning questions the idea of non-material art as a transferable commodity. If copyright is about protecting the rights of a creative individual, how then can the moral value of creativity be traded on the open market? DJ Kool Akiem raises this issue with regard to Michael Jackson, who currently owns the publishing rights to the Beatles catalog:

> Why should somebody pay Michael Jackson for sampling the Beatles? How do you *transfer* the ownership of this wave configuration that you only owned because you created it? You can now transfer that to somebody else? It's a lot of ridiculousness. (DJ Kool Akiem, telephone interview: 1999)

A more pragmatic objection to the copyright laws is that, even when a hip-hop artist operates in good faith, they can often be denied clearance out of hand purely for bureaucratic reasons:

> It's too much of a nightmare. People have this mistaken idea that you can go to an artist and say, "Can I use your thing?", and they're like, "Yeah, man. No sweat." But you can't. Even if you're buddies with an artist, and they're like "Sure, man, you can use two bars of this."
>
> It's all down to the publishers and the record company, who own the masters. And they couldn't care less who you are. All they know is if you're using something that they own.
>
> And sometimes they don't even wanna make a deal. It's, like, not even worth their while to do it; they don't want the paperwork. It's below their radar. Other times, they want a lot [of money], and they want so much it's not worth you paying for it either. It's just a lot of work. It's a lot of administrative clearance work. (The Angel, telephone interview: 1998)

One example of this phenomenon that is well known in the hip-hop community is the song "Cabfare" by Souls of Mischief, which samples the theme

from the television show "Taxi". One of the group's producers, Domino, explains what happened:

> Basically, the story behind that was that we tried to put a sample, and Bob James, who wrote it, didn't want us to use it, basically, because it wasn't how he wanted it to sound. So, initially, that was the reason.
>
> And then Jive[4] continuously tried to clear it, and, I guess, change his mind. They got him to change his mind, later on. And then, when it looked like it was gonna go through...Paramount, the company that owned the TV show, was like, "no." He was the sole writer, but the ownership was jointly, both of them. (Domino, telephone interview: 1998)

As of this writing, seven years after the song was recorded, it still has not been commercially released.

In addition to all of the above difficulties, there are some artists who simply will not allow *any* of their music to be sampled for any price.

Nevertheless, sample clearance – in principle – has little effect on how people produce records. Many producers, for example, make beats that they know in advance will be impossible to clear:

> I'll make something, and loop a bunch of stuff from one record, and put it on my tape. And shut the sampler off and erase it...I have a song...where I looped a four-bar loop, which is something I don't do that often. But I just did it 'cause it sounded cool. ...I like the beat, I just didn't wanna save it, 'cause it was a four-bar loop. (King Otto, personal interview: 1998)

While such songs are not released, they are valued precisely as an indicator that a producer's work is unfettered by legal or monetary restrictions. The fact that producers make music which they know they cannot sell shows their lack of concern for the marketplace. It is for this reason, in fact, that Domino

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[4] their record company at the time

suggests that a good knowledge of the music business could actually be detrimental to a producer's output:

> You do what you do, you know? It's kind of weird because you're able to, on all levels, do things a lot easier when you don't know about the business at all. And then once you find out, then you go, like, "Oh, I can't use this Fantasy record 'cause they want a minimum of five G's," or whatever...you know what I mean...there's a lot of reasons: James Brown won't let you cuss. Everyone has a different story.
> (Domino, telephone interview: 1998)

It's to the listener

> You know what parameters you are working with. You know this is not gonna fly. Or this will fly only in a certain space. Like a show, or something like that. It's not gonna be bumping in a jeep that's on the cruise tip. There's a time and place for different types of rhythms, basically. (DJ Topspin, personal interview: 1999)

As DJ Topspin points out, hip-hop can be heard in several discrete listening environments, each of which has its own flavor. Generally speaking, these environments can be grouped into three categories: nightclubs, personal listening (including home and portable stereo formats, as well as radio) and car-stereo systems. Since the particular venues have different – and sometimes mutually exclusive – musical requirements, producers often target any or all of their musical output towards one environment, often to the exclusion of the others. As Samson S. notes:

> There's different forms of producing, as far as hip-hop. Like, either you wanna do beats for the clubs, or to move crowds and make people dance.
>
> *Or*, you wanna show off your little skills and shit, you know, show off how you chopped up this sample here, and how

> you took this and flipped it. I do a little of both. (Samson S., personal interview: 1999)

Nightclub

Most hip-hop is produced for nightclubs. This state of affairs exists for several reasons. Primary among these is hip-hop's continued absence from radio playlists, despite its position as one of the best-selling forms of contemporary music, a situation that has multiple causes.

First, despite its increasing commercial power, much hip-hop does not conform to FCC regulations regarding profanity and, as a result, cannot be played on the radio. Furthermore, even songs that may be appropriate in terms of language, may not be seen as having the broad appeal that advertisers crave. Moreover, even when a song does meet the needs of radio programmers, the increasing consolidation and conservatism of the music industry leaves fewer slots for new music to be played (for an excellent discussion of the causes and implications of this trend see Burnett 1990).

In addition to radio issues, there are other reasons why hip-hop would be most at home in a nightclub setting. One of these is that the experience of hip-hop music remains closely tied to dancing. Another reason is historical: hip-hop began as the soundtrack to social functions and nightclub activity and has remained so (George 1998). There are also aesthetic reasons: the elaborate sound systems found in nightclubs can provide a more powerful listening experience than virtually any home system. Hip-hop producers are keenly aware of all of these factors.

Perhaps the most important factor affecting the way hip-hop functions in nightclub settings, as I discussed in chapter three, is the role of the DJ as aesthetic arbiter. One of the hallmarks of a good DJ is that the audience trusts their

judgement as far as which hip-hop songs are appropriate to play at any given time. In other words, their understanding of how music serves various social needs is the primary reason why fans pay money to hear them. As Becker has noted, generally:

> A relevant feature of organized art worlds is that, however their position is justified, some people are commonly seen by many or most interested parties as more entitled to speak on behalf of the art world than others; the entitlement stems from their being recognized by the other participants in the cooperative activities through which that world's works are produced and consumed as the people entitled to do that. Whether other art world members accept them as capable of deciding what art is because they have more experience, because they have an innate gift for recognizing art, or simply because they are, after all, the people in charge of such things and therefore ought to know – whatever the reason, what lets them make the distinction and make it stick is that the other participants agree that they should be allowed to do it. (Becker 1982: 151)

The DJ's authority, then, rests on a community's willingness to accept their judgement. If the DJ's judgement begins to falter, the people will vote with their feet.

The DJs' relationship to individual hip-hop recordings is a hybrid one; in one sense DJs are presenting a program of completed musical works (12-inch vinyl singles almost exclusively) to an audience—they are essentially anthologists. But at the same time, DJs are also seen as artists in their own right, creating a collage of hip-hop songs. In this sense, the individual songs function as the raw material for the DJ's art, much like the old records are the raw material for producers. For a song to be heard in the club, then, it must fulfill the needs of both of these roles.

When choosing which records to play, the nightclub DJ must take certain factors in to account which may not be at issue in other venues. As DJ B-Mello

points out, primary among these is the song's perceived ability to make people dance:

> In a club, to move a crowd...it's gotta have some kind of bounce to it, you know? I mean, there's a lot of dope records that I like, that I listen to on a walkman, in the car, but in a club it's just not gonna move anybody, you know? Might be some dope production...real eerie or dark – whatever - but it's not gonna do nothin' in the club.
> (DJ B-Mello, personal interview: 1998)

DJ and label owner Strath Shepard also finds the rhythm to be a significant factor in the equation:

> I just think that there are certain types of beats that work well in a club, and certain types that don't. And I like a lot of both...Really hard kick drums work well in a club. Just because, with the loud system, it's just gonna work well. Like, we were talking about Timbaland yesterday, his kicks are so strong. And they're not the kind of kicks that will hit and your speakers will not be able handle'em. Any speakers can handle his kick drum...But they're just really warm. Those work well, and just like really snappy, bouncy drums. (Strath Shepard, personal interview: 1998)

As both B-Mello and Strath Shepard specifically note, they personally enjoy beats that would not be valuable in a nightclub setting. Again, this supports the idea that the value of a hip-hop composition in one venue does not necessarily carry over to others.

Successful DJ's develop a highly sophisticated sense of which records will work and which will not:

> I think I could pretty much tell what'll work for what situation. Like when I preview records, I just drop the needle for like a second, and I can usually tell, you know? (B-Mello, personal interview: 1998)

This "drop the needle" process is closely related to the one which I described in chapter five, in which producers preview records for potential samples. Since many producers are also DJ's, it is not surprising that such similarities would occur.

The value of a DJ's opinion cannot be overstated. In his role as co-owner of the independent label Conception Records, Strath Shepard is emphatic on this point:

> We place an enormous amount of importance on the DJ...If the DJs are not feeling our record, *we will drop the artist*. (Strath Shepard, personal interview: 1998)

The DJ's concerns – which combine practical and aesthetic factors – are quickly and decisively conveyed to the producers, who, for the most part, respond to them. In addition to such negative practical incentives as being released from one's recording contract for lack of DJ appeal, there are also the converse positive reinforcements, such as increased frequency of play in nightclubs. Furthermore, as I've discussed in chapter three, many producers are themselves also club DJ's, so they naturally tend to internalize these factors.

In addition to general aesthetic principles, which tend to fall in line with those of other listeners, most DJ's cite four factors that determine their willingness to play a given song in a nightclub setting: 1) conduciveness to dancing, 2) a song's rhythmic consistency, 3) the ease with which it may be segued into another song, and 4) the relative physical quality of the record itself.

1. Danceability

While conduciveness to dancing is largely a result of general aesthetic associations and what Keil has called participatory discrepancies (1995), tempo also plays a major role for hip-hop artists.

One reason for this is simply because it can be easily controlled through technology. Most sequencers have the ability to set a tempo to a precision of at least a tenth of a beat-per-minute, and most combined sampler-sequencers can alter the tempo of a composition without changing its pitch. As a result, a producer has – for all intents and purposes – total control over the tempo of a song. As Oliver Wang points out, this has led to very specific tempo preferences in a club setting:

> Most people will dance fairly easily to anything that's 100 bpm's [beats per minute] or higher, but contemporary hip-hop, especially in the last, I'd say, five years or so, has all moved to like 88 bpm as a norm, or maybe the low 90's. And most R&B production is in the low 90's to the high 80's range. It's very groovy, but if you think about it, it's not like up-tempo dance stuff. A lot of people who are used to more disco-era speed beats—[which] were like 120, or house beats which crank up to like 130 or so—find it very hard to dance to something that's at 88 bpm. Because it's so slow. You can't really get kinetic with it, you just have to groove to it. (Oliver Wang, personal interview: 1998)

I have witnessed, on several occasions, club DJ's attempting to play songs which had strong reputations among home listeners, but which had very slow tempos (approximately 75 to 85 beats per minute). In each case, the dance floor quickly cleared, and I never heard that DJ play the song again.

2. Rhythmic flow

Another important component of "danceablity" is rhythmic flow. As discussed in the previous chapter, a sense of momentum is key to keeping a crowd dancing. RZA's habit of not quantizing his beats – which results in a lack of rhythmic precision - comes up again among DJs, insofar as it can interfere both with dancing and segues to other songs. By the same token, however, a good DJ is expected to be able to deal with such eventualities:

> I don't mind him not doing that specifically. I mean, in a way I do. But then at the same time, it's another thing where...you have to know your songs better. And if you can mix those songs and make it sound good, then you're a better DJ. So in a way, I kind of like it. And plus, it's just creative, the way he does it. So I don't mind it that much.
>
> Sometimes it's tough, because if people don't know that song, then they'll think *you're* off beat. (Strath Shepard, personal interview: 1998)

While it may be considered bad form to criticize a producer for their rhythmic inconsistency, DJ's will go out of their way to compliment producers who are more rhythmically reliable. In fact, DJ Mixx Messiah specifically lauds producer DJ Premier on this point, and (notably) in terms that are more pragmatic that aesthetic, i.e. Premier is a good producer because his rhythms are easier for a DJ to manipulate (a process known as "beat-juggling"):

Mixx Messiah:	[DJ Premier's] production was created for beat-jugglin'. It's like a beat-juggler's best friend.
Joe:	Really? Why is that?
Mixx Messiah:	Because of the hard, hard kick drum. And the smooth, like, jazzy basslines. And just the loops. He leave'em wide open, so that you can cut. He leaves just enough space for you to cut, bring something in, and bring it back...You can tell the DJ influence on his production, because, if you listen to the instrumental, they're just made to cut up. He's like a DJ's best friend on production. (Mixx Messiah, telephone interview: 1999)

3. Segue Opportunities

Another important aspect of the DJ's job is to keep a continuous flow of music going for people to dance to. Their equipment – two turntables and a crossfader – is specifically designed for unbroken segues between records (Allen 1997: 4-9; George 1998: 5; Hager 1984: 41). In fact, DJs pride themselves on making their transitions so smooth that a listener cannot even tell when one record ends and the other begins, since they actually overlap for several bars. To accomplish this, the DJ requires two things (other than skill): 1) records of roughly the same tempo (minor adjustments can be made by speeding up or slowing down one of the records); and, 2) records which have long enough instrumental passages at the beginning and end that the transition may be accomplished before the vocals begin for the next song.

Oliver Wang (a/k/a DJ O-Dub) has a deep appreciation for producers who provide both of these tools:

> The producers that we love are the ones that give us like 8- or 16-bar intros and 16-bar outros. Like, Premier is fuckin' great about that. Primo thinks like a DJ in a lot of ways, because he may not always set you up with a long intro, but you'll notice on his beats that there'll always be like 8 to 16 bars of outro beat without anything over it, which is basically the segue opportunity. (Oliver Wang, personal interview: 1998)

If such an opportunity is not provided, other arrangements need to be made:

> There are some producers who just launch right into the song, especially ones that have talking in the beginning and then a beat comes in. That totally throws DJ's off; it's very difficult to mix like that. Which is a big reason why you need doubles of a 12-inch, because what you'll end up having to do is you'll basically take the instrumental [version] of one, mix that in, and then once the instrumental is on, then you can go back to the vocal version and find a place where you can cut in the vocals. So it makes it sound a little smoother. (Oliver Wang, personal interview: 1998)

In other words, the DJ must buy two copies of the single (which almost always features both instrumental and vocal versions of the song), and then use the instrumental version as a bridge between the previous song and the vocal version that he or she wishes to play. Strath Shepard suspects that, in certain cases, this may actually be a conscious strategy on the part of certain producers, since it forces the DJ to purchase twice as many records:

> In some ways, I think, maybe people, at times, do that on purpose...I think, like, "yeah, I'm gonna buy two copies of that record." And if it wasn't like that, I wouldn't necessarily buy two copies, unless there was something I wanted to cut up on it. So...I'll spend more money on it. (Strath Shepard, personal interview: 1998)

While most DJ's clearly prefer songs with long introductory and concluding instrumentals, most are hesitant to complain too vigorously if they are not there, since, as above, a good DJ is expected to be able to respond to such eventualities. In other words, as DJ Karen Dere suggests, too much complaining may call one's own skills into question:

> It just depends on how well you listen to your records before you actually play them in a club. I think a lot of people don't spend the time to get to know the song. And I think that's totally vital, because if you don't know exactly what the song sounds like, it could end cold or something like that, and you're screwed. Even Gang Starr did that with "You Know My Steez", and I know there was a lot of silence in a lot of clubs after that, 'cause they [the DJ's] didn't know exactly where it ended. (Karen Dere, personal interview: 1998)

4. Physical Quality of the Record

The relative physical quality of the vinyl record itself may also be a factor in a DJ's willingness to play it in a club:

Strath Shepard: There's also things like just where you get your records pressed up. Because the needles are made so they can go both ways on the record. But there are certain pressing plants, like the one that comes to mind most is Europadisc, in New York. Man, they are pressed so crappy...You just pull the record back, and from then on, that section where you pulled it back will just be kind of staticy. So that's something...I'm gonna be reluctant to play [rapper] O.C. in the club because it's like that. And I want to preserve my record, too.

Joe: So how do you know where certain things are pressed?

Strath Shepard: You don't, really. But you just know labels. Like, for example: Payday, MoWax, everyone at Virgin, basically. They all press their stuff so bad. You can't scratch with it, because it'll just ruin the record. You feel like you're burning a hole, like it's gonna cut through the record. And then there's companies that, of course, press them really well. Like WEA, all the WEA stuff is really good. Warner/Elektra/Atlantic, all that is all really good. Priority is really good. (Strath Shepard, personal interview: 1998)

The significance of this factor to DJ's is demonstrated by Shepard's ability, in response to my question, to specifically characterize different record labels as to the quality of their pressing.

Similarly, DJ B-Mello notes that the amount of material on an album can also affect the quality of the pressing; he prefers Canadian pressings, since Canadian record companies, in his experience, are more likely to press double albums, rather than try to fit a CD-length album on a single record:

B-Mello: I mean, a lot of the Elektra things, you know, they'd just press just single albums and it's a terrible pressing...It's fucked up, really.[5]

Joe: So would...that affect whether you'd play the album a lot or not?

B-Mello: Yeah! Sure! Yeah, if it's just on single vinyl and it's like fifteen tracks or something, you know, it's just not gonna be good. Even if the vinyl's all right, the pressing's not gonna be good. You're not gonna be able to play it at a concert or a club with all the hum in it, you know? So what are you gonna do with it?

That's the good thing about Canada. Epic, Sony...all their little subsidiaries, they press up double vinyl for all their albums.

Joe: That means they're, like, thicker?[6]

B-Mello: Nah. They spread it out.

Joe: Oh, so the grooves are farther apart.

B-Mello: Yeah, like two pieces of vinyl, or four pieces, rather than one...so that spreads out the grooves, and then it's like havin' a couple twelve-inches, really. So it's louder... (B-Mello, personal interview: 1998)

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[5] Interestingly, B-Mello cites Elektra as a particularly poor label in this regard, while Strath Shepard singles them out as exemplary.

[6] I misunderstood what he was saying here.

Clearly, then, it is to a producer's advantage to take these four factors into account if they want their music to be played in a nightclub setting. Furthermore, as I mentioned, many producers are themselves also club DJ's, so they have firsthand experience with these factors:

> Being a club DJ, it makes me think about a record, when I'm making a record. Like "Ok, I should leave the beat ride by itself at the beginning, to make it easy to mix at a club," or something like that. So I do think about it. It does affect it, definitely. (Mr. Supreme, personal interview, 1998: 1)

But in addition to the club environment, there are two other listening environments in which the DJ does not come into play (at least not to the same degree): home listening and car listening. Each of these environments also has needs and requirements for music. It is worth noting also that, while singles are the format of choice for nightclub play, the other two environments tend to favor full-length albums, if only for convenience.

Personal Listening

What I would characterize as "personal listening" refers to musical appreciation by an individual or small group in an informal setting; the music is reproduced either on a home stereo or Walkman. The presumed inferiority of this reproduction technology (relative to the other two settings) is actually liberating to the producer in several specific ways. Free of the need to play to the strengths of a large sound system (particularly the systems' bass response), the producer can afford to work throughout the range of audible sound, rather than focussing on chest-thumping bass. Similarly, individuals do not expect music in this environment to be primarily made for dancing, although that is still important. This allows producers to work with different tempos and rhythmic structures that may be more difficult to dance to. Finally, an individual who is listening to music on headphones is presumed to be more discerning and appreciative of subtlety

than a nightclub audience (particularly one that has been drinking alcohol). In many ways, then, the relationship between club listening and personal listening parallels the relationship between the "Top-40" and "Album-Oriented Rock" formats of the early 1970's. The A.O.R. listener was presumed to have a deeper connection to the artists, and ideas could be played out over the course of an entire album, rather than in a three-minute single.

All of these factors combine to make "personal listening" the environment most conducive to self-consciously "artistic" hip-hop music.

Car-stereo

The significance of elaborately designed car stereo systems to hip-hop production cannot be overstated. LL Cool J's 1991 single, "The Boomin' System", provides a sense of the experience:

> You know it's funky, funky, funky 'cause you heard it from hearsay
> A jam that you love that don't be getting' no airplay
> Strictly for frontin' when you're ridin' around
> Twelve o'clock at night with your windows down
> Headlights blinkin' 'cause your batteries drain
> Armoral on your tires and a big gold chain
> Parkin' outside of all the hip-hop spots
> Push the E-Q and play connect the dots
> Leanin' to the side, people everywhere
> The trunk full of amps, there ain't no room for a spare
> Big beats bumpin' with the bass in back
> All the sophisticated suckers catch a heart attack
> Cause they don't understand why I act this way
> Pumpin up the funky beat until the break of day
> It's because I want attention when I'm ridin' by
> And the girls be on my jock cause my system's fly.
>
> Cars drive by with the boomin' system (4x)
>
> (LL Cool J: 1991/transcription from Original Hip-Hop Lyrics Archive [www.ohhla.com], revised by author)

As LL Cool J points out, the ideal car stereo system has huge subwoofers for increased bass response. The power of the bass to cut through the music and physically affect the listener is celebrated. For this reason, as Mr. Supreme notes, music that is appreciated in a home system may not work at all in this environment:

> It depends, 'cause my favorite producers - like Pete Rock or Large Professor - you play their album in a car with a nice system and it sounds like shit, you know? It's great production, it's a great record, but the recording of it and the quality, it sounds like shit [in a car]. You put, like, a Too $hort record in and it sounds so good.
>
> So it depends on, really, what you're going for, there...But just being sample-based...with nothing else, usually it can sound like crap...in [car stereo] systems...I don't know why. It's just like if you throw an 808 kick under something or a keyboard bassline, it fattens it up tremendously. I don't know why. (Mr. Supreme 1998:1)

In light of my comments about home listening, it is significant that Mr. Supreme feels that sample-based hip-hop may be less valuable in a car system than music that makes use of drum machines (such as the Roland TR-808) or synthesizers, especially considering that Mr. Supreme is himself a sample-based producer).

Mixx Messiah, who in addition to deejaying also works in music retail, characterizes the car listener as one who is less discerning than the home listener:

> I would say people favor more the guys that make the production for the cars...It's almost like their ears are impatient. They want something that's just gonna be the fix for their ears at the time, and then they'll get over it. They don't really look at it from a dissecting point of view. (Mixx Messiah 1999)

Conclusions

From the MC's need for a "rhymable" beat to the DJ's need for a well-pressed record, there are a variety of concerns that affect the passage of music from producer to fan. Rather than presenting these concerns as peripheral to an idealized musical form, I suggest that these specific social forces are as integral to the musical form as abstract aesthetics or oft-cited political issues. They give the music its shape and quality, and are not generally seen as undue constraints by producers. In fact, they are integral to the process of hip-hop production; the music of hip-hop producers cannot be understood outside of this larger social environment.

IX. Conclusions

Hip-hop producers make no apologies for sampling. In fact, as I have tried to demonstrate, they consistently show great pride and commitment to their approach, in myriad ways. This, I argue, is primarily due to the complimentary influences of social and aesthetic forces in the community of sample-based hip-hop producers. As the community preserves the aesthetic, so the aesthetic preserves the community.

At the most basic level, I hope that this study has shown one way in which ethnography may be valuable for the study of popular culture. No matter how significant the pressures applied by base and superstructure, nationalism, capitalism and ethnicity, it is still individual human beings (and their friends) who must navigate this course, and it is therefore the individual who usually has the most incisive story to tell. It is the strategies that they use to assimilate the larger concerns into their lives – concerns of politics, class, race, gender, and morality – that provide the most nuanced picture of how – and why - music works. In this dissertation, I have presented a variety of strategies that hip-hop producers use to hold together both their community and their aesthetic.

The power of history is invoked in hip-hop music through producers' commitment to an aesthetic that was originally developed by deejays using turntables. This dedication operates across a spectrum of specific concerns that ranges from the highly abstract to the thoroughly practical. On the abstract end of the scale, the use of a cyclic structure to isolate and reinterpret the most satisfying moments of popular songs is one of the foundations of hip-hop music. Part of the reason for its significance is its reinscription of hip-hop history in any given moment, through the self-consciously 'traditional' use of deejaying methodology. On the more pragmatic end, the immediate social value of the music is also

beholden to the role of the deejay: the music has to be responsive to the needs of the listeners, dancers, and head-nodders. It has to rock the crowd.

The very use of sampling in the first place is a strategy for preserving the artistic integrity of this approach. If music uses live instruments, many producers feel, it has lost its connection to deejaying, and therefore its essence. As with many such conventions, the social commitment that it necessitates is a major part of its appeal, easily separating the insider from the outsider. For hip-hop producers, purism is its own reward.

In the material realm, the purist's dues are paid through the act of digging in the crates. The elaborate networks, attitudes and strategies that hip-hop record collectors have created reinforce the ties that bind the social to the material to the aesthetic. Digging demonstrates an abstract commitment to the hip-hop tradition, while providing raw material for artistic expression. At the same time, digging provides a broad-based musical education that helps to contextualize hip-hop within larger traditions. Moreover, digging is a social activity that producers can use as a venue for discussion of a variety of issues concerning larger sampling practices – particularly ethics and aesthetics. This social opportunity also provides a counterbalance to the sometimes-isolating practice of making beats by oneself in a home studio.

The creation of a system of "producers' ethics" to guide the hip-hop composer's actions is another strategy that illuminates the connection between the social and artistic realms. The rules represent a community exerting moral pressure to preserve a valued aesthetic. But at the same time, the continued relevance of music that follows these rules shows that the aesthetic also exerts a reciprocal moral pressure to preserve the community. The specific rules (one must sample from vinyl records, one cannot sample from compilations or other hip-hop records, etc.) create parameters within which creativity may be assessed.

And the creativity that is being assessed – and preserved - is not some random collection of gestures and sounds. It is an aesthetic that conflates deejaying and verbal signifying into a complex musical form. By turning samples of single notes and linear musical phrases into cycles, and using virtually all material in an ambiguous or double-voiced way, hip-hop can take material from any source and simultaneously "Africanize" it and hide its African sensibility. At the same time, the producer must be cognizant of the very real economic and social forces that come from outside of their small community (from MC's, fans and others). The balance must be maintained.

The very fact that one can enjoy hip-hop music without knowing that there is a subtext is precisely what makes it signifying; the invisibility of its motives is one of the sources of its power. From the producer's perspective, then, part of being a fan of hip-hop production is a commitment to the decoding process, as well as a commitment to developing the more general contextual knowledge necessary for such undertakings. In other words, hip-hop production carries substantial – and substantially hidden - intellectual activity. It is not difficult to see the political implications for such an artform. But, as I hope I have shown, these implications are more a result of the way that individual human beings engage with larger social forces than of the forces themselves.

The power that is vested in hip-hop is one of the reasons that its practitioners guard it so jealously. Hip-hop's wild and innovative image belies a deep conservatism when it comes to methodology, ethics and aesthetics. The words of Rakim Allah are as true today as they were when he first uttered them:

> ...We don't have a band,
> it's just my voice and his hands.
> That's what hip-hop was - it still stands.
> ("Put Your Hands Together", 1989)

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