Outtakes

Secondly, it indicates a specific *quality* of an action, a unique and fleeting event-like process. This description certainly applies to most of the things a DJ does, considering his medium is the ever-elusive world of sound.

Despite these developments in the anglophone world, the origin of the disothèque is to be found in continental Europe, where the Nazi regime banned jazz musicians from playing and left rebellious young jazz lovers in Germany and occupied France no choice but to sneak their swing records into cafés and basements to dance to them.[[1]](#footnote-1) The word “discothèque”, which tanslates to “record library”, referred to both a collection of records and the place where it was stored. Although the term only started being used for dance venues after the war, “the first place to employ the word is said to have been La Discothèque, a tiny bar in the rue Hachette in occupied Paris, where you could order your favourite jazz 78 along with your drink.”

In the Post-World War II Era a multitude of discothèques opened up in France - such as the legendary Whiskey-A-Go-Go in Paris - and the UK, where “the first British all-nighters took place” (a party format that later came to be primarily associated with the Northern Soul scene).[[2]](#footnote-2) While New York’s underground was partying heavily in small live music clubs to the new sensation called bebop, it took until 1960 for a DJ-based discothèque to open on the western side of the Atlantic: frenchman Oliver Coquelin’s Le Club. Meanwhile, Jamaican DJs were turning up the bass and battling each other on their cutting-edge sound systems, revolutionizing DJ culture unnoticed by the Western world as they invented the remix before disco did and the MC (Master of Cerermony) before hip-hop did: “[Reggae] laid down the principles of remixing, it made an artist and a star of the producer, it transformed playing records into live performance, and it showed how music could be propelled into whole new genres by the needs of the dancefloor.”[[3]](#footnote-3)

**The nightclub comes of age**

The sixties were a defining decade for DJ and club culture in a number of ways. The symbiosis between American and European dance cultures continued to blossom, with the US usually supplying the content, i.e. music (and often the dance styles), which the European underground, especially in the UK, fed off as it kept raising club culture to new heights: “It was in Britain that club culture was founded, even if the records which filled it were from across the Atlantic.”[[4]](#footnote-4) With its impressive architecture and music connoisseur Ian “Sammy” Samwell on the decks playing American rhythm and blues rarities at lunchtime, the Lyceum in London “was the first place in which all the recognisable elements of a modern club – lights, up-front dance records, disc jockey and dancefloor – came together.”[[5]](#footnote-5) Other clubs like the Scene, the Flamingo, the Roaring Twenties and Tiles made history with phenomenal DJ sets and drug-fueled all-nighters and/or lunchtime dances that partygoers merged into three-day weekends. This British club culture was largely dominated by the "mods", a young, hip working-class subculture defined by their love of black American music, fashion and amphetamines.

Even in the States, a striking number of the initial groundbreaking clubs were owned by Europeans, such as Oliver Coquelin’s aforementioned Le Club in New York and later Cheetah during the acid craze in San Francisco, or British celebrity divorcee Sybil Burton’s illustrious club Arthur in Manhattan, where Terry Noel, “the prototype of the modern DJ”, was the first DJ to mix records and take full control of the lights and sound system, turning the dance night into a spectacle.

Starting at New York’s Peppermint Lounge, the sixties also hit both sides of the Atlantic with a dance revolution. Dancefloors were liberated from step-based couples’ dancing when a certain new solo dance called the twist “dropped an H-bomb on dance conservatism.”[[6]](#footnote-6) A few years later, the new chemical drug LSD spread from San Francisco to New York and London, temporarily saturating club culture with bizarre sensory journeys and increasingly undanceable psychedelic rock music at places like the Electric Circus in New York or UFO in London. It was time for the transition into new territories.

As London and the rest of Southern England got caught up in flower power, the mods proceeded to establish the world’s first real rave culture as they carried on dancing to their beloved sixties soul “stompers” in otherwise unremarkable Northern small towns, unperturbed by the popular music industry and the new developments of funk and disco. The DJ’s quest for rarities was practically built into the nature of the scene as black music in America moved on from the uptempo soul that had defined the Motown sound of the sixties and its unsuccessful imitators. Finding “new” songs could only be achieved by digging deeper and deeper into an ultimately finite pool of music from an era that was already over. Dancers drove for hours to clubs like the Twisted Wheel, the Catacombs, the Torch, the Wigan Casino and the Blackpool Mecca just to hear certain records that literally could not be heard anywhere else in the country or sometimes even in any of the other clubs, because the only available copy was in the hands of a single DJ, such as Blackpool’s Ian Levine, who had rescued it from a scruffy record store in New Orleans. Suddenly, dance music was about more than just “playing the hits of the day”, and connoisseurship was the primary way for a DJ to distinguish himself.

Today, disco is one of the historically most misunderstood genres of all time, still suffering from the lingering echo of the heavy backlash that followed its commercial appropriation triggered by the hit film *Saturday Night Fever*. It was the first time club music conquered the mainstream, as the DJ fully revealed his promotional power and tastemaking influence. The era witnessed the rise of the mix tape, the extended dance remix, the 12-inch single and independent labels. Disco also introduced the repetitive kick drum accentuating the exact individual beats of a bar in four-four time, thereby prefiguring the rhythmic style of house and other future EDM genres, which are essentially all rooted in disco.

To begin with, the “godfather” of the modern DJ, Francis Grasso, “stormed the profession out of servitude and made the DJ the musical head chef.”[[7]](#footnote-7) Taking the throne from Terry Noel at the Salvation club and later perfecting his skills at the Sanctuary, he was the first to put flow in the DJ’s performance, to take the crowd on a musical journey through the night with his unique musical programming: “Before him, people had played records as if they were discrete little performances, Francis treated them like movements in a symphony; continuous elements in a grand whole.”[[8]](#footnote-8) He also claims to be the first DJ who was able to beat-mix, even without being able to adjust the tempo of records or touch them while they were playing: “All you had to do was start at the right moment.”[[9]](#footnote-9)

In the late seventies, disco and most of all funk provided the bulk of the source material for the Bronx DJs that created hip-hop music. In a way it was the first truly postmodern music genre, the first to base its entire creative process on the rearrangement of building blocks from existing recordings. Fueled by dance, it was a purely DJ-driven meta-genre, an “*omnigenre*” that introduced a “genreless concept of music.”[[10]](#footnote-10) The central foundation of hip-hop music was the break, referring to the stripped down drum passages with no or minimal instrumentation that appear frequently in funk songs, but can be found in a lot of different genres, from latin music to rock and others. In his historical portrait of the hip-hop DJ, musicologist Mark Katz elaborates on the notion of “funkiness” as a “rhythmic, textural, and timbral profile characteristic of funk” that hip-hop DJs looked for and discovered in all kinds of music.[[11]](#footnote-11)

DJ Kool Herc was the first to reduce records to the drum breaks that he noticed certain dancers waiting for, although still without the quick cutting and precise beatmatching of his successors. Being from Jamaica, he incorporated elements of reggae culture such as the elaborate sound system and the accompaniment of a “Master of Ceremony” rhyming to entertain the crowd. It was Grandmaster Flash who, inspired by Herc and tutored by beatmixing expert Pete Jones, spent months locked up in his room developing the technique of “manual sampling and looping of a record […] without losing the beat,” only to be disappointed by the public’s initial lack of enthusiasm that preceded the eventual hype.[[12]](#footnote-12) Afrika Bambaata, aside from founding the Zulu Nation, enriched hip-hop parties and surprised the crowd with unusual selections from his vast and infamous record collection.

The style of hip-hop DJs was soon transferred to the level of production, where the sampler enabled DJ-producers to carefully loop and layer pieces of music in a new way. Over time, hip-hop music has expanded its style way beyond breakbeats, but the looped sample has remained the essential structural element of the hip-hop beat. Turntablism became a niche as DJs were no longer needed to create the beats live on stage, so today people speaking of a “hip-hop DJ” usually refer to a DJ who plays hip-hop tracks, not a live recomposition of other genres. The non-live production of hip-hop music has introduced an additional step between the original source music and the hip-hop DJ in the club. This is the perspective I am taking in this project.

In my research I have discovered an elaborate culture of record digging that as a digital DJ, I was not previously aware of to this extent. DJs used to go to great lengths to protect their discoveries: The practice of covering up a record’s label was introduced to the UK club scene in the sixties by Jamaican DJ Count Suckle, popularized by the Northern Soul DJs and quickly established among the early hip-hop DJs as well, who took it even farther. Competition, especially in the form of battles, is central to hip-hop culture because of its roots as an alternative to gang violence, and digging was not exempt from this. The strategies surrounding it were elaborate, as DJs not only tried to shield their treasures’ identities from others, but actually sabotaged each other like Mario Kart players dropping banana peels in front of their opponents: For example, Afrika Bambaata used to buy useless records to lead astray other DJs who followed him into the record store to buy the same records he bought;[[13]](#footnote-13) North Carolina’s T-Ray tore out pages from phonebooks to prevent visiting diggers from locating any record stores.[[14]](#footnote-14) Ruby Jane, one of my interviewees, fondly recalled being “sworn to secrecy” about a special, “dirt cheap” record store in her city. Such practices have dwindled with the circumstances that enabled them in the first place, namely the physical scarcity or records.

Such an idea had never occurred to me until he brought it up. I’m familiar with the concept of spending afternoons in a music store – as a teenager, I used to go to the multimedia department of the local drugstore regularly and listen to CDs for hours, but I wasn’t a DJ then and it was hardly the kind of place where DJs go digging.

Some DJs take additional measures to prepare their tracks for playback, such as running them through an MP3 gain adjustment application to ensure they all play at the same volume.

I bought my first record in 2008, but not in a record store. Funkeeflow, one of the aforementioned Soulfood DJs, had told me about an online store called *hiphopvinyl.de* when I had asked him where he got his “A Tribe Called Quest”-t-shirt. I went on the website looking for the t-shirt, which was unavailable at the time, but ended up spending several hours browsing the site and buying two other t-shirts and a CD. In the process, something came over me, a familiar feeling I usually get from situations like watching the freestyle battles in Eminem’s film *8 Mile*, which I cannot put into words better than the Living Legends do in “Gift Wrap”: It was “that ‘I love hip hop’-feeling.”

Suddenly I was in the mood to buy a record, just to do something that “felt like hip hop”. I didn’t even own a record player. There was an old one in the living room, but I had broken off the stylus one day when I was curiously exploring the mysterious device, mistaking it for a wayward piece of plastic. Nobody in the house ever used the record player anyway; my mother only had a bunch of dusty classical records she never listened to in the corner behind the TV. Eventually, I purchased a new needle at the local electronics store, but not before owning that unplayed record for months. The record was a 12-inch single of Jurassic 5’s “Gotta Understand/Future Sound”, which is also the first record I intuitively picked from my shelf when I first started practicing for this project.

Nowadays, I take advantage of vinyl’s potential to store memories deliberately. When I was traveling through the US, I bought at least one cheap used record – usually jazz or soul - as a souvenir in every major city I visited. For financial reasons I hardly ever buy “new” records in the normal sense, except from the merchandise stand at concerts of artists that are important to me (and if I can, I get it signed). Occasionally I come across one of my all-time favorite albums on vinyl in a store or at a flea market and buy it. I almost never use them to listen to the music, because it’s more convenient to listen to it on my computer, and yet it gives me a strange sense of satisfaction to possess them physically. Sometimes I listen to a record in a particularly melancholy moment and watch it rotate. Other times, when my roommates and I invite a few friends over for a fancy dinner, I put on a jazz record to create a certain ambience.

In a way, it’s not its capacity to store music that draws me to vinyl, it’s its aura. Walter Benjamin famously defined the “aura” as a sort of sublime vibe attached to an original and unique work of art that gets lost in its reproduction. Technically, that makes the vinyl record an artefact *lacking* aura, being, after all, a mechanical reproduction of a live performance. But this is not about the music on the record, this is about the appearance and physical quality of the record itself, which has an aura of its own – one that is lacking in a virtual representation of music. A vinyl record is as beautiful and delicate; it is shiny, black and elegant; the way it rotates so smoothly on the platter has a hypnotizing quality to it. It’s an eye-catcher. Needless to say the cover art contributes to the visual enjoyment of this medium as well.

We’ve already arrived at the first essential characteristic of vinyl records: their status as discrete physical objects and consequentially, their potential to be adored and charged with meaning by humans. This happens on two levels: the vinyl record as a general category and as an individual object. On a large scale, it can be observed in today’s persisting vinyl nostalgia that is not exclusive to DJs; on a small scale, it becomes apparent in a DJ’s relationship to particular records in his collection. That 12-inch will always be my first record; I remember how and when and why I bought it and will probably cherish it for the rest of my life. I do not remember what my first MP3 was, nor do I have warm feelings for any particular file. However, this is not a question of digital vs. analog, it is a question of of physical vs. virtual. The CD is a digital medium, yet because of its objecthood can provide a smililar experience. I attach meaning to certain *songs* (or tracks), remembering when I first heard them or when I heard them in a significant moment or situation, or how they accompanied specific phases of my life.

Digging your way to a respectable record collection takes years, therefore there is little I can contribute to the topic within the scope of my young experiment. It’s not that I don’t collect records, but I’ve never done it with DJing in mind. My record collection amounts to approximately 250 records, some of them “rescued” from the attic of my childhood home, some of them bought in bulk from friends getting rid of them, some of them received as gifts. Some of them are used records from 2€-crates of various record stores and flea markets, the kinds of crates on the floor underneath the tables with the “regular” records. In those situations I just pick records with interesting covers. Sometimes I listen to them, other times I just buy them. It has little to do with finding new music to expand my collection and a lot to do with a peculiar, somewhat childish enjoyment of exploring, looking at and touching things. I’ve never done it regularly, only on lazy afternoons strolling through the city, and I’m doing it less than I used to.

I use records for a number of purposes: as souvenirs to remind me of trips I took or concerts I went to; to enjoy the strange satisfaction of possessing a pretty physical copy of my favorite albums or songs; to create ambience for a nice dinner or a melancholy moment of solitude; even just for the self-serving purpose of simply *collecting*, accumulating objects I like but don’t need, which seems to be a common human trait. In a way, using them to actually play music has been at the bottom of this list most of the time. I purchased my first record in 2008, a 12-inch single of Jurassic 5’s “Gotta Understand/Future Sound”, on a whim when I was buying t-shirts in a hip hop-focused online shop. I didn’t even have a record player at the time, but I intuitively understood the importance of vinyl in hip hop culture and I decided I wanted to be a part of it.

Some records feel lighter than others on the turntable and require different handling. Some records are louder than others. Some records are pressed in lower quality than others

Records require cleaning and sometimes even replacing. The familiar hissing and crackling that so many people associate fondly with vinyl suddenly turned into a disturbance that needed to be fixed. Dust accumulates on the needle in a tiny ball of fluff that eventually causes the needle to lose contact with the groove and go skidding towards the center of the platter. Dirty records can even cause the needle to skip. After extensive online research, I ordered a carbon fibre brush from an online shop and soon found myself running all over town buying distilled water and a polishing cloth at the drug store, ethyl alcohol at the pharmacy, and a small spray flask at the dollar store. The turntable setup likewise has its quirks that require maintenance, such as mysterious buzzing sounds, the cause of which has to first be determined by endless research and then eliminated by trial and error, for instance by replacing a ground wire with copper cable from the hardware store.

Dr. Best has gone through his record collection at regular intervals, usually because of a move, sorting out mispurchases and obsolete club tools and selling over 2000 records over the course of the past eight years. Since 2009, he has been enjoying the practicality of a Traktor DVS. However, in our interview he stressed the value inherent in vinyl because of its physicality, but also because of its quantitative limitations:

I have a stronger connection with it. The farther back it goes, the stronger my connection with a record is. Let’s say I didn’t buy that much stuff in the mid-nineties, and when I pull out those records, it comes to my mind even today in which record store I bought it, whether the sun was shining that day or if the store clerk was wearing a green shirt, or if I chatted with him, or I don’t know, some story relating to the record. You have a real connection with it. It’s really emotional sometimes. Whereas, when I’m browsing through the sound archive on my computer, that’s not emotional. When I look at all those folder and the file names… It’s true. I used to think that was nonsense, but for me it’s really true. I can’t establish such an emotional connection with an MP3 file. And as the amount of music grows, it becomes so insignificant. If I get, I don’t know, 500 new tracks in a month, I can’t even really listen to all of them in one month. I just skip through them and categorize them by whether I can play them or not. A lot of things have been lying dormant on my computer and have never been played anywhere. But the records back then, I’ve held some of them in my hands hundreds of times. And you can still remember how that dog-ear got there.

Incidentally, the aforementioned Jurassic 5 12-inch was the first record I intuitively pulled from my shelf when I first started practicing for this project. It felt right to embark on this endeavor with my first record, which is a way of saying I can relate to Dr. Best’s nostalgic attachment to the individual records. This is less of an “analog vs. digital” issue than it is one of “physical vs. virtual”. The CD is a digital medium, but still a physical one that can obtain memorable dog-ears and similar traces of use. Like records, their status as objects imbues them with the potential to be adored and charged with meaning by humans, both as an abstract category and as individual items. However, vinyl by far outrivals the CD in terms of fetishization due to the sublime elegance of its shiny black appearance and the hypnotic quality of its *visible* smooth rotation on the platter. This is why I buy records at concerts, not CDs, which are less expensive and would technically suffice as a keepsake from that event.

I loved vinyl so much. And I was one of the later bloomers when it came to switching to digital. I really resisted it. And I talked shit about Serato, and I'd say things like "You're playing in your own city, you can bring a crate." But then I realized, that you know, the world is changing, everything's getting digital....

**The non-death of vinyl**

Digging your way to a respectable record collection takes years, therefore there is little I can contribute to the topic within the scope of my young experiment. It’s not that I don’t collect records, but I’ve never done it with DJing in mind. My record collection amounts to approximately 250 records that I either sentimentally “rescued” from people who wanted to get rid of them or accumulated haphazardly from disorganized 2€-crates at record stores or flea markets, usually judging them by the cover and not always listening to them before the purchase. It has little to do with finding new music to expand my collection and a lot to do with a peculiar, somewhat childish enjoyment of exploring, looking at, touching and *collecting* things. Some of my records also serve as souvenirs from trips or concerts. Listening to the music on them is at the bottom of the list of my purposes for vinyl.

The reason for the small size of my collection is primarily that I have lived in an era where vinyl is no longer the standard storage medium for music. Born in 1989, I grew up with CDs and, to some extent, tapes, which I used to record songs off the radio. Professor Groove, a well-known funk DJ from Montreal, Canada, told me in our interview that he only started collecting vinyl when he started DJing, because turntables were often the only available equipment at the private house parties he played in his early years, a time when he didn’t even have turntables at home. I got a similar impression from Dr. Best, who decided to become a DJ when he saw the turntablists at the DMC DJ battle. His love for vinyl stems from his love for the art of DJing. I will go into detail later about the special connection between vinyl and the hip hop DJ, but for now the point I’m trying to make is this: Vinyl records play a different *role* now. They are hardly anyone’s primary music storage medium anymore. Today, they fulfil a variety of purposes beyond that instead. DJing is one of them, but there are people who buy records who aren’t DJs, such as myself back in the day - or even now, considering I don’t generally use vinyl for DJing. Neither does Dr. Best, at least not anymore, so the only records he buys nowadays are collectables and special editions.

The elimination of the physical record store from the digging process has done more than remove a social component for DJs like Dr. Best, it also

1) *Look in a variety of places*: For records, this means exploring beyond the boundaries of the record store – thrift shops, garage sales, relatives’ collections and the like. For digital music, this means searching for suggestions outside of online shops, irrespective of where you end up buying or downloading them in the end: blogs, a friend’s hard drive, soundcloud, podcasts, recommendations based on algorithms (such as iTunes Genius, links on discogs or youtube etc.) to give a few examples.

2) *Know what you want, but stay open-minded*: This is about finding a healthy balance between staying focused and getting distracted. You can find gems in places you wouldn’t normally look, but you always need to keep your basic requirements in mind. According to Brewster and Broughton, a clud DJ always has to ask himself three questions: “Is it great music? Will it work on the dancefloor? Does it fit my style?”

3) *Orientate yourself by basic information*: Clues like year, label, genre, musicians and instrumentation can give you an idea of a release’s style before you listen to it, and help you direct your future digging towards those aspects.

4) *Listen before you buy (or download)*: Some record stores don’t have record players, neither do garage sales and thrift shops. For this reason, it is recommended for diggers to bring a portable record player – nowadays they can also use their smartphone to look up tracks and listen to them online. When you download music from the internet, there is usually an embedded sound file, or you can look up songs on Youtube or other platforms. However, it can also be exciting to buy or download something on a whim and let it surprise you, but don’t take it too far.

5) *Make sure you’re getting good sound quality*: As far as records are concerned, 12-inch singles provide the best sound quality because they have broader grooves than LPs, which means they play louder and have more dynamic range. 7-inch 45s are also okay. You should always check the record’s condition and look for warps or scratches. For digital files, lossless formats such as wav or flac are ideal, but take up more space. MP3s are compressed through an algorithm adapted to the human ear, but they should not be compressed too much. A minimal bitrate of 320 kbps is recommended.

6) *Take the time to listen to and get to know your acquirements*: This completes the digging process. In fact, this is when “the REAL diggin’ begins”[[15]](#footnote-15) and if often takes up more time than the acquisition of the music itself. It is important to know your music and develop your perception of styles, patterns and textures.

He has been hosting the internationally popular radio show Wefunkradio on CKUT 90.3 FM with his partner DJ Static for 15 (?) years, even touring through Europe every one or two years. Additionally, he plays regularly at a dance bar in Montreal, and occasionally has other club gigs. These days, he uses Serato, but he has also used CDs a lot.

It is no coincidence that the figure of the shaman appears prominently in literature on performance theory. Though in different ways, the authors all relate theater to ritual, which in turn overlaps with the realm of cult and celebration, which is where the DJ happens to dwell - and so the circle is complete. What all of these things have in common is their constitution as an event that involves a group of people gathering in a designated place at a an appointed time. Time, place and purpose of this event are situated outside of the domain of the everyday; as opposed to the daily cycle of working, eating and sleeping, it is not a necessity of survival. It is non-productive, meaning its function lies in the process itself instead of a tangible external “result” in a narrow sense.

Ever since the Industrial Revolution, mankind has had an ambiguous relationship with technology. On the one hand, civilization has enjoyed its benefits. Progress is the imperative of the modern world, and technological advancement is in some ways considered the best kind. The economy is driven by the competitive spirit to constantly top each other’s and even your own innovations, which improve people’s lives. On the other hand, there is a deep-seated fear of being dependent on the machines we’ve created, because we are special, we can do whatever we want and we do not need any help doing it, thank you very much. Most of all, we hate being replaced by the machines, which happens all the time, because we cannot stand the idea that they can do something better than we can, because *we’re special* *and we can do anything*.

Ever since the Industrial Revolution, mankind has had an ambiguous relationship with technology. On the one hand, we have enjoyed its benefits. Progress is the imperative of the modern world, and technological advancement is our favorite kind. We are driven by the competitive spirit to constantly top each other’s and even our own innovations. It’s good for the economy, and people’s lives are enhanced. On the other hand, we have a deep-seated fear of being dependent on the machines we’ve created, because we are special, we can do whatever we want and we don’t need any help doing it, thank you very much. Most of all, we hate being replaced by the machines, which happens all the time, because we cannot stand the idea that they can do something better than we can, because *we’re special* *and we can do anything*.

The issue always rotates around the same basic concepts, authenticity and virtuosity. Any technological assistance that helps a DJ bypass learning a specific skill or reduces risk of failure is “cheating”. What’s at stake here is the very humanity of the DJ himself. The more he lets the machine take over, the more he gives up his soul. This is a rather pointless discussion for a number of reasons. Most importantly, the “acceptable” balance between human and machine has never been and can never be found. It is defined arbitrarily by different people and constantly shifts over time because “the notion of pure human soul that is uncontaminated by technology […] is a category error.”[[16]](#footnote-16) The machine is not the DJ’s enemy, on the contrary, and every machine offers different creative possibilities, none of which is more “valuable” than the other. It is understandable that a DJ who spent months learning how to beatmatch with vinyl feels superior to another DJ who presses a button, but this perspective “privileges one particular technical skill, matching tempos, over other skills that have been developed by CD DJs and controllerists. So-called ‘buttonistas’ may not be matching beats by ear, but they have demonstrated an impressive array of new skills and tricks that are simply not possible using traditional DJ gear

My technique was to focus on the snare drum, waiting until it passed, then holding the record, moving it back to the beginning of the snare and letting it go in time with the other snare. At first I held it still for a long time until I felt ready to let it go, until eventually I started moving the record back and forth across the snare out of sheer boredom and impatience as I was getting ready for the transition. For some reason, those are the states of mind which have always been the most effective in driving me to improve and innovate. Scratching the record in time with the beat had the beneficial side effect of helping me get into the rhythm. Since my ears were still too overwhelmed to listen consciously to two things at the same time, I relied on trial and error to figure out the tempo differences, adjusting the pitch faders until the tracks were matched up closely enough and writing down the individual pitch values of my turntable display for each track combination.

It took a long time, at least three to four years overall, for me to consider myself a DJ more comfortably, yet I still felt like a second-rate DJ whenever I was the only one in a line-up not to use the turntables. I freed up a small space for my laptop and controller on the side, and the entire time I was playing I felt dwarfed by the silent, majestic turntables staring at me from the side, subliminally ridiculing this *toy* I was using in their stead. This inferiority complex was my primary motivation to learn using vinyl.

At this time I still did not conceive of myself as a DJ. DJs to me were those cool people with tons of fancy equipment who knew what they were doing; I felt I really didn’t know what I was doing except a little private tinkering and amateur performing.

Now I know why DJs prefer the 12-inch single and why albums are sometimes spread out over two records: The more tracks you put on a record, the narrower the grooves have to be, which not only means less space for information, but also makes it harder to place the needle or even find a track in the first place.

3.3

The sync button is a hotly debated issue in the DJ community for a number of reasons. One of them is prestige: Although the DJ is a popular pop culture figure these days, his art is not necessarily always taken seriously or even recognized as such. Despite all the developments in the twentieth century that continually deconstructed the renaissance notion of the autonomous genius who creates art straight from inside himself,[[17]](#footnote-17) there is a latent pressure on the DJ to justify himself for not generating anything original in a narrow sense, for not making something out of nothing. On some level, all DJs are aware of this, so they never tire of pointing out the hard work and numerous skills it takes to be a DJ. Unfortunately, abstract competences like “listening to a lot of music” or “deciding what to play next” are not automatically perceived as “doing something” by outsiders who want to see some action. They want to see someone executing a difficult *technique* of some kind, and what better flagship skill does the DJ have than beatmatching?

Most people now understand that DJing is more about collecting great music than doing supernatural things with a mixer.[[18]](#footnote-18)

Back then, when there were still live performances in clubs, the stage was the center that everyone homed in on. Disco introduced canned music, but the new hero, the DJ, no longer took up a designated position in the room. As opposed to the pop musicians on stage, equipped with a microphone and animating the crowd with their voices and bodies, the DJ disappears behind his technical equipment acting cool. Not himself, but his sound system is the eyecatcher, and this elaborate apparatus is a constant reminder of the technological expenditure the dancing pleasure is based on.[[19]](#footnote-19)

Despite all the developments in the twentieth century that continually deconstructed the notion of the autonomous genius who creates art straight from inside himself,[[20]](#footnote-20) there is plenty of latent pressure on the DJ to justify himself for not generating anything original in a narrow sense - as in “making something out of nothing”.

Western culture is based on visuality. The DJ’s performance may be centered on music, but in some ways his appearance is just as important to how he is perceived. Seeing is believing, because sound can *lie*.[[21]](#footnote-21) But what is it that needs to be “believed”? The answer is simple: The DJ has to prove that he is not getting “paid to do nothing.”[[22]](#footnote-22) Unfortunately, abstract competences like “listening to a lot of music” and “deciding what to play next” are not automatically perceived as “doing something” by “outsiders” who want to see some action. On some level, all DJs are aware of this, which is clearly a part of the reason the laptop is met with so much resistance. It threatens the hard-won prestige of the DJ because it makes the flagship skill of beatmixing invisible. However, there is a strong possibility that this angst is nothing but paranoia. Scholars have found countless examples of conservative scepticism within the DJ community, where purists speculate about digital DJs “playing pac-man” and “checking their email” while playing pre-recorded sets. But in my research I have not come across any surveys of their actual *audience*, the clubgoers themselves.

Through timecode technology, its basic handling has been transferred convincingly to a digital system, but accepting the computer into the equation is a somewhat emotional step for some. Its role has shifted from “storing music” to being an exchangeable “control device”, but through “losing its distinctiveness […] it gains flexibility, and thus power.”[[23]](#footnote-23) The identity of vinyl has been transposed, and the DJ’s identity has shifted along with it.

All of these complications are only the proverbial tip of the iceberg, the rest is to be found in the “Vinyl Diary”.

Trying to listen to two things at once and perceive them separately is exhausting, and I often got frustrated. But knowing that it would gradually get better with practice helped me cope with it. What irritated me the most was the cumbersome handling of vinyl before I could even start beatmatching. Figuring out which side is which, placing the needle in the right groove and fast forwarding through lengthy intros consumed a lot of time. Tracks are easy to find in any DJ software’s browser by scrolling or typing the title in the search bar. Then you just load it onto the virtual decks and start it at the cue point set to wherever you want the track to begin playing. Useless intros (and outros) are easy to identify and bypass. When I moved on from pairs to mixing a sequence of songs, I also quickly became annoyed with the exercise of flipping through the records in my crate, even after I had assembled them in the order I needed them, as well as taking them out of their sleeves and putting them back in, which rarely went smoothly and effortlessly. In addition to the frustration and strain of my slow learning curve, all of this resulted in my increased disenchantment with this previously fascinating and sublime medium that carries so much historic significance.

A few times I tried adjusting the tempo so the peaks in the waveform lined up, but they would drift apart quickly.

the visual performance associated with DJing is intrinsically linked to the skills associated with DJing.

The fundamental skills of DJing were established through the use of

vinyl, and thus, if there is a change to the use of a format other than vinyl, then there

are also changes to these fundamental skills.

I make a mixture of distilled water and alcohol with a drop of dishwashing fluid and put it in the spray bottle. To avoid the risk of ruining an important record, I want to try it out on a worthless record I never listen to. My victim is a West German “disco hits” compilation, which has some small greasy stains on it (and contains anything but disco music). I spray the cleaning solution on it, distribute it evenly with the brush and wait for a few minutes until I soak it up with the polishing cloth. The stains are still there. I repeat the process with another record, same result. Maybe I mixed the solution wrong. I’m going to have to do some more research and try it out again.

Ruby Jane, one of my interviewees, told me about her method, which mostly overlaps with the instructions I found on the internet.

“Vinyl and turntables have come to represent the ‘authentic’ technology of DJ culture, not only because of their widespread use, but also because of the visible associations with performance that they afford.”

On the other side of the ocean, as the newly liberated blacks and gays were flooding New York’s nightclubs, the burgeoning disco scene changed DJing forever. There’s a long line of legendary DJs that deserve to be named here that passed the torch to each other and shaped the era: Francis Grasso establishing beatmixing and teaching it to his disciples Michael Capello and Steve D’Acquisto; David Mancuso creating an inclusive, emotional atmosphere at his private parties at the Loft; Nicky Siano tranferring Mancuso’s message of love and unity to a more commercial setting at the Gallery; Walter Gibbons creating live remixes at Galaxy 21; Tee Scott overlaying records into long blends at Better Days; David Rodriguez joyously challenging the crowd at the Ginza; Larry Levan championing a unique, versatile sound at the Paradise Garage after disco’s commercial overkill.[[24]](#footnote-24)

The central foundation of hip-hop music was the break, referring to the stripped down drum passages with no or minimal instrumentation that appear frequently in funk songs, but can be found in a lot of different genres, from latin music to rock and others. In his historical portrait of the hip-hop DJ, musicologist Mark Katz elaborates on the notion of “funkiness” as a “rhythmic, textural, and timbral profile characteristic of funk” that hip-hop DJs looked for and discovered in all kinds of music.[[25]](#footnote-25)

DJ Kool Herc was the first to reduce records to the drum breaks that he noticed certain dancers waiting for, although still without the quick cutting and precise beatmatching of his successors. Being from Jamaica, he incorporated elements of reggae culture such as the elaborate sound system and the accompaniment of a “Master of Ceremony” rhyming to entertain the crowd. It was Grandmaster Flash who, inspired by Herc and tutored by beatmixing expert Pete Jones, spent months locked up in his room developing the technique of “manual sampling and looping of a record […] without losing the beat,” only to be disappointed by the public’s initial lack of enthusiasm that preceded the eventual hype.[[26]](#footnote-26) Afrika Bambaata, aside from founding the Zulu Nation, enriched hip-hop parties and surprised the crowd with unusual selections from his vast and infamous record collection.

The style of hip-hop DJs was soon transferred to the level of production, where the sampler enabled DJ-producers to carefully loop and layer pieces of music in a new way. Over time, hip-hop music has expanded its style way beyond breakbeats, but the looped sample has remained the essential structural element of the hip-hop beat. Turntablism became a niche as DJs were no longer needed to create the beats live on stage, so today people speaking of a “hip-hop DJ” often refer to a DJ who plays hip-hop tracks, not a live recomposition of other genres. The non-live production of hip-hop music has introduced an additional step between the original source music and the hip-hop DJ in the club. This is the perspective I am taking in this project.

A helpful, if not indispensable trait for a DJ to complement this compulsive obsession is a sense of order, ideally coupled with some organizational talent for the benefit of thouroughness and efficiency.

As for the listening itself, digital music offers new possibilities besides listening to one track or album after another, such as listening to a folder or playlist full of music - or even your entire collection - in shuffle mode while busying yourself otherwise, waiting for a track to catch your attention. This listening mode introduces a randomness that could yield unexpected discoveries. While it is important to spend time listening to music attentively and without distraction, a deliberate lack of attention can help distinguish outstanding tracks that have that certain “je ne sais quoi”.

The next step after the initial broad categorization is determining which tracks are suitable for DJing and separating them from those one wants to keep for personal enjoyment. Technically, you can access your entire hard drive from any DJ software, but it would be inconvenient and overwhelming to be confronted with your complete music collection during a live set. Therefore you need to take precautions to ensure your on-hand selection is manageable. The layout of DJ software suggests to import tracks and create folders and playlists within the program’s own browser. This is the approach I have taken. Professor Groove has an external hard drive just for DJing, where he only keeps 50 GB of his 650 GB collection. Dr. Best even uses a separate laptop. Thus, digital DJs emulate the process of “packing a record bag” in a way.

An essential advantage of digital files over vinyl in terms of filing is the ability to access a file from various locations without having to create extra copies of it. Adding a track to a playlist merely creates a shortcut to that file, so a DJ can work with a virtually infinite array of playlists (or “crates”, as they are called in Serato). This allows DJs to stay versatile in a very organized way. You can maintain playlists on various levels, such as persistent, more general ones for basic situations or specific playlists for individual gigs. Ruby Jane, who plays a monthly gig, has a Serato crate named “tonight” that she updates every time to make sure she rotates through her collection without repeating the same tracks too much.

Dr. Best has a “gigantic folder system” of about 30 (sub)genres, some of which he made up himself to suit his purposes. By doing this, he makes visible amental technique that Brewster and Broughton suggest in their DJ guide.[[27]](#footnote-27) He switched to a DVS (in his case, Traktor) for a number of reasons, but mostly to avoid having to transport heavy record crates to gigs and to protect his “holy” treasures – after all, records wear out the more often you play them, not to mention the potential risk of damage through spilled beverages and similar threats. In addition, he appreciates the flexibility of having his entire DJ collection with him:

Back in the day you just packed your record bag. And there were definitely moments when I thought: ‘If only I had taken that one record with me, why did I leave that one at home?!’ or when it didn’t go so well and people weren’t getting into the sound I planned, so I had to play B-sides or something to make it through the night.

But he stresses that this advantage comes with a price, namely the time he invests in processing the files by cultivating ID tags[[28]](#footnote-28) as opposed to just buying a record and playing it. Some DJs take additional measures to prepare their tracks for playback, such as running them through an MP3 gain adjustment application to ensure they all play at the same volume.

However, vinyl DJs have preparatory measures of their own, such as putting stickers on their records to mark breaks or indicate BPM. When I started practicing with vinyl, I also encountered a variety of unexpected difficulties that are mostly related to the materiality of the medium and had simply never occurred to me before. There is a lot of tedious maintenance involved with both records and turntables. Records require cleaning and sometimes even replacing; a turntable setup has its own quirks that need to be dealt with. Every DJ is also an engineer – a vinyl DJ is more of a mechatronic technician, whereas a digital DJ is a kind of IT expert who has to deal with software issues

because *we are special, we can do whatever we want and we do not need any help doing it, thank you very much*. Most of all, people hate being replaced by machines - which happens all the time - because they cannot stand the idea that a machine can do something better than they can,

Despite all the rationalization I have strived for in my elaborations, I want to end this thesis on a poetic note, which may or may not undermine my exhibition of imperviousness to vinyl nostalgia.

I remember now how tentative and clumsy I was when I first started practicing with vinyl – when I first sat on the real tractor. My hands were trembling as I pulled a record from its sleeve, placed it on the platter, moved the tonearm, placed the needle at the rim and pressed “play”. I hardly dared touch the record – I wondered which fingers to use and where to place them. I was very tense when I held on to the snare, barely moving the record once I captured it for fear of losing it. Now, after four months, handling the records feels natural. There is a familiarity and intimacy to touching them, spinning them backward and forward, giving them a push or slowing them down. I am not a perfect vinyl DJ by any means, but I have achieved a sufficient degree of control over the medium and equipment in a sterile practice situation. As I expected, mastering this machinery instills a strange sense of satisfaction:

Probably the most important reason for [the turntable’s] success is its physical immediacy. The hand rests comfortably on the grooved, slightly tacky surface of the record. That tactility is enormously important to DJs, who often wax eloquent about the intimable feel of vinyl. Pushing a record underneath a turntable needle, transforming the music held within its grooves, one has a sense of touching sound.[[29]](#footnote-29)

This tactility amplifies the godlike power the controller has given me only a taste of. To merge two grooves into one is to exert power over the music, and there is a very rewarding feedback loop involved when syncing beats with vinyl: When the rhythms are slightly off, you temporarily speed up or slow down a record’s rotation or adjust the pitch fader to hear it subsequently melt into the other one in perfect harmony, a harmony that *you* created with your hands.

When DJing with my controller, I enjoy phases of inactivity as far as handling the music is concerned, because I am free to move my body and engage with the crowd. When I played records at the aforementioned house party, I was constantly busy, which was certainly due to my inexperience and lack of preparation – I had planned on using Traktor, but technical difficulties forced me to pull a spontaneous set from my shelf – but nevertheless,

At first sight, the peak time slots would seem like the most desirable, but while “the energy of a crowd in the middle of the night is so rewarding,”[[30]](#footnote-30) the pressure to keep the crowd going allows for less experimentation than the start and the end of the night do. The DJs I interviewed unanimously voiced their appreciation for those times when there is less traffic on the dancefloor, because it allows them to play beloved tracks that would not be appropriate during peak time.

Nowadays, the task of keeping a crowd entertained throughout the night is usually divided between several DJs as opposed to the traditional residency of a single DJ responsible for the entire night. In combination with the increased availability of music, this development has gradually created an “inverse relationship between available playing time and available music.”[[31]](#footnote-31) This means that most of today’s DJs have to structure their programming differently than their forefathers, who had more control over the overall dramaturgy, but also enables them to condense their individuality more noticeably. Instead of creating a “flow” over the course of several hours, a DJ now has to construct his set to meet the requirements of the time of night he is playing and take into consideration the style of the DJs before and after him.[[32]](#footnote-32)

mostly music with a certain “black” aesthetic, starting with (in retrospect) latently funky teen pop during the nineties and gradually getting into popular hip-hop and R&B in the early 2000s, followed by my discovery of the boombap sound of the nineties and a few years later, the wide world of more current underground hip-hop. My passion for music had been accompanied by a shy small-town enthusiasm for dancing as well, taking lessons in rock’n’roll dancing as a child and coming up with choreographies in the basement with my best friend as a teenager. Around the time I came of age these interests coalesced into an instant fascination with nightlife. I resolutely frequented and soon got organizationally involved in a nearby funk/soul/hip-hop party called *Soulfood* that ran regularly in the next biggest city. Back then it wouldn’t have occurred to me in my wildest dreams to be a DJ myself as I danced through the night and became friends with local hip-hop and funk DJs.

There has rarely been a new technology that did not have to overcome a heavy backlash before it established itself because of this and because people simply tend to be suspicious of unfamiliar things.

This paradoxical love-hate-relationship gets even more complicated within technology-oriented communities such as the audiophile one, which has seen many wars of opinion about storage formats and their sound quality since Edison’s cylinder phonograph was first challenged by Berliner’s gramophone.[[33]](#footnote-33) History has shown a tendency for convenience to win out over what conservative audiophiles tend to call the “soul” of sound.[[34]](#footnote-34) The DJ community could hardly avoid getting caught up in such battles, considering its entire existence is based on recordings. They took the debates to a whole new level since every format comes with a corresponding playback device for the DJ to use. Since the 1990s, the traditional turntables have been joined by a variety of digital equipment - the CDJ, the controller and the DVS – offering various visual aids and automations and thus plenty of room for debate about their “authenticity”.

Both Dr. Best and Ruby Jane, who play hip-hop among various other funky genres, initially refused to switch to a digital system. As Ruby Jane admitted in our interview:

I was very proud- I loved vinyl so much. And I was one of the later bloomers when it came to switching to digital. I really resisted it. And I talked shit about Serato and I'd say things like: 'You're playing in your own city, you can bring a crate!' But then I realized that, you know, the world is changing, everything's getting digital...

There are a lot of “politics” and discussions within the DJ community, fighting to “protect” their craft and scrutinizing other DJs based on sometimes rather arbitrary criteria, or even prejudices, concerning what constitutes a “real” DJ. Ultimately, it is not other DJs, but the dancing crowd that decides whether or not someone is a good DJ. It is possible be a good DJ without digging excessively or being able to beatmatch. As DJ Shadow points out in the documentary *Scratch*, referring to digging: “You don’t have to. It’s not going to make a bad DJ good, but it will make a good DJ better.”[[35]](#footnote-35) Those discussions usually happen on a local, semiprofessional level, where DJs are DJs for fun, not money. Pursuing certain skills only makes sense when one is not doing it to impress other DJs, but to improve for the sake of one’s own enjoyment and that of the crowd, which depend on each other at the end of the day. If someone does not *enjoy* most of the basic work associated with DJing to a certain degree, it’s difficult and perhaps pointless to be a DJ in the first place.

But curiously, in my research I have not come across any surveys of the actual *audience*, the clubgoers themselves, or any indication that the DJs in question are basing their angst on any evidence instead of narrow-minded paranoia. Unfortunately, since I did not have the time or resources to conduct such a study myself, I am limited to my own observations of the crowds I have witnessed being entertained by laptop DJs, including myself.

They had a similar effect on me as an actual tractor has on a child that loves playing with toy tractors.

A lot of toys serve the purpose of emulating “real” things (or people) by reducing them to a few selected superficial properties, replacing machinery with buttons and knobs and usually stripping away their primary function. For instance, DJ controllers are often equipped with so-called jogwheels. They are not necessary, and they do not rotate on their own, but they are tangible round surfaces that can be used for sound manipulation. The primary function that has been removed is that of playback.

When I turned my bedroom into a dancefloor for a recent house party, arriving guests were immediately impressed by the turntables that had not been there during the previous party

Professor Groove is a well-known funk DJ based in Montreal, Canada, who has been hosting the internationally popular radio show Wefunkradio on CKUT 90.3 FM with his partner DJ Static for roughly 15 years, even touring through Europe every one or two years. Additionally, he plays regularly at a dance bar in Montreal, and occasionally other club gigs. These days, he uses Serato, but he has also used CDs a lot.

1. The Nazis also „grudgingly tolerated“ native jazz musicians playing in France. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. (Brewster and Broughton 2006, 61-63) [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. (Brewster and Broughton 2006, 130) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. (Brewster and Broughton 2006, 84) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. (Brewster and Broughton 2006, 69-70) [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. (Brewster and Broughton, Last Night A DJ Saved My Life. The History Of The Disc Jockey 2006) [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. (Brewster and Broughton 2006, 139) [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. (Brewster and Broughton 2006, 141) [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. (Brewster and Broughton 2006, 145) [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. (Katz 2012, 24) [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. (Katz 2012, 24f) [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. (Brewster and Broughton 2006, 235-239) [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Groove music [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Scratch 54:00 [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Internet dude [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Mix 40 [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. (Poschardt 2001, 16) [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. Lastnight 6 [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Spielfiguren 168 [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. (Poschardt 2001, 16) [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Perfecting sound forever [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. pacman [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. Katz 229 [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. Lastnight 134-173, 301-302 [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Katz 2012, 24-25 [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. Brewster and Broughton 2006, 235-239 [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. Htdjr 129 [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Metadata of digital files containing artist, album and similar information. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. Katz 64 [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Prof groove [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Culturemix 128 [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Htdjr 116, 135, 140-143 [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Perfectingsound 36-38 [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. Perfectingsound 137 [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. Scratch [↑](#footnote-ref-35)