Outtakes

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.

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”[[1]](#footnote-1) 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.”[[2]](#footnote-2) 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,[[3]](#footnote-3) 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.[[4]](#footnote-4)

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.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Despite all the developments in the twentieth century that continually deconstructed the notion of the autonomous genius who creates art straight from inside himself,[[6]](#footnote-6) 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*.[[7]](#footnote-7) 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.”[[8]](#footnote-8) 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.

1. Internet dude [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Mix 40 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. (Poschardt 2001, 16) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Lastnight 6 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Spielfiguren 168 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. (Poschardt 2001, 16) [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Perfecting sound forever [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. pacman [↑](#footnote-ref-8)