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# 1. Introduction

This thesis aims to empirically compare analogue and digital DJ technologies with regard to the performativity of the disc jockey. The DJ has been historically underrepresented in academic discourse despite his cultural relevance. The human ritual of collective dancing to music is an ancient pillar of culture and society. The emergence of the DJ in the twentieth century constituted a detachment of this ritual from the performance of live music in favor of recorded music. His peculiar postmodern function as a “meta-musician” has exerted considerable influence on dance culture and the development of numerous music genres.

Traditionally, the craft of DJing has been bound to vinyl records, but recent technological developments have increasingly digitalized the profession, which has facilitated access for aspiring DJs such as myself, but also generated some criticism for “devaluing” the art of DJing. As a digital DJ who has always worked with DJ-software and a MIDI controller instead of turntables, I have attempted to learn to mix songs in the traditional way of using vinyl records over the course of this project. I have also explored Traktor Scratch as a Digital Vinyl System (DVS), the popular hybrid of digital and analogue DJing methods which enables DJs to use turntables to play digital music formats via timecode vinyl. My goal is to examine how the aesthetic and technological options and challenges of these different systems affect the performativity of the DJ as an artist and as a mediator between the world of music and the audience.

The thesis will be divided into a creative and a theoretical part. The project will involve the real-time production of at least one DJ mix with each technology. This is necessary to provide reference points for the theoretical analysis, although the essence of DJing is invariably attached to the live performance in front of an audience, which would lose its unique atmosphere in any recording. Nonetheless, a good live performance does require the DJ to practice beforehand, which is generally, though not necessarily, conducted in solitude at home. Additionally, the recording of mixes to distribute for promotional purposes has been a widespread practice among DJs for decades, whether on tape, CD or online. However, I will also draw on my experience from live gigs.

To ensure a reasonable scope I want to remain within the boundaries of just one genre, and I have chosen to confine myself to hip hop music for a number of reasons: Most of all, because hip hop is my favorite genre next to funk privately as well as in the context of my DJing activities, it makes up the bulk of my music collection. I also want to counterbalance the dominance of EDM (electronic dance music)[[1]](#footnote-1) in most research on DJ culture. It is easy to ignore hip hop as one of the many genres that owe their existence to the DJ. Where it does get mentioned, the focus is usually on the art of turntablism, which originated in hip hop culture but occupies a different niche than what I aim to investigate here. I am also excluding the aspect of production. Instead, I am restricting myself to the domain of the typical club DJ, the DJ in his essential, most basic function, as an archivist and performer, who plays a “collage” of songs or tracks by creating transitions through beatmatching or other methods.

In the theoretical component I will first provide a brief history of the DJ to establish a working definition of the term and illustrate his[[2]](#footnote-2) cultural significance. Following this, I will compare the aforementioned technologies – vinyl on turntables, MIDI controller and DVS - with regard to the three central aspects of DJing: selection, composition, and presentation. The recorded mixes will serve as points of reference, but based on existing research, interviews I conducted with other DJs and my own continuous performing experience I will transfer my observations to the realm of live performance as accurately as possible.

First, I will analyze how the shift from vinyl records to digital music formats impacts the music selection process, both in relation to what is colloquially referred to as “digging” – the constant search for and acquisition of new music – and concerning the preparation of a given DJ mix or live set. Secondly, I will describe the differences in how these technologies are used to produce a mix by arranging songs in a specific order while constructing transitions between songs or even creating mashups through beatmatching, looping and other practices. Thirdly, I will discuss the wider context of the performance: the DJ’s self-image and self-portrayal as well as his interaction with the audience.

Even though objectivity is an illusion, a utopian academic ideal that can never be fully achieved, this study takes on a comparatively subjective perspective since I am simultaneously the observer and the target of observation. While I strive to gain a certain degree of distance through my readings, interviews and elaborate self-reflection, I also ­­­­­­­­want to embrace the individuality of this experience *(why?)*. In order for my observations and conclusions to be more comprehensible and hopefully relevant, I will provide some context concerning my relationship with music and my development as a DJ.

I’ve been obsessed with music since childhood, spending my allowance on CDs, ruining my cheap CD player by rewinding my favorite parts of songs, recording songs from radio onto cassette tapes, watching MTV religiously, fighting over computer time with my brothers so I could download songs and make mix CDs and so on. From the beginning I had an aversion to the snythetic sounds and four-to-the-floor beats of EDM and a tendency to favor music with a certain “black” aesthetic, starting with (in retrospect) latently funky teen pop in the 90s and gradually getting into actual hip hop and R&B in the early 2000s through MTV and the influence of my oldest brother, the first in a series of male impulses that I appropriated to shape my taste, skills and self-image. Non-feminist though it may be, it’s the truth: From the mid-2000s onwards my first boyfriend introduced me to the boombap sound of the 90s; a few years later the second one opened up the wide world of more current underground hip hop for me. 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 made friends with local hip hop and funk DJs.

After I moved far away from my small town to attend university in Potsdam, in my second semester I followed an appeal to bring an external hard drive to the annual media studies summer party. That’s when I first saw and used DJ software (in this case, Virtual DJ). With no prior knowledge about the program or any DJing experience whatosever - and the extent of the girl’s instructions being limited to “press ‘sync’ and slowly move this thing in the middle to the other side” - I jumped in at the deep end. I kept the small crowd dancing with an array of crowd pleasers along the lines of Michael Jackson and MC Hammer despite my blatant deficiencies, such as cluelessly syncing two tracks that were 20 BPM apart with my tech-expert-underground-hip hop boyfriend behind me quickly grasping the basic concept of the software and falling on deaf ears trying to explain it to me. I didn’t even know what BPM was. I got such a kick out of seeing people dance to music I selected that I made sure to get a DJ slot at every subsequent media studies party.

I soon acquired Virtual DJ, which I used with just my mouse and an increasing amount of keyboard shortcuts for two and a half years, mostly making hour-long mixes for campusradio podcasts and delightedly experimenting with mashups late at night in my dorm room (in addition to the semiannual media studies parties), until I finally gave in and bought a humble controller, even though I still didn’t conceive of myself as a DJ. DJs to me were the likes of the Soulfood guys 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 relying on the assumption that well-known songs make people dance (which is true).

The controller opened up a new world to me and over the years I started taking my DJing efforts more seriously, excessively cultivating countless playlists, thinking my selections through more than before, learning about bitrates and similar technicalities, getting small gigs through acquaintances. Eventually I ended up doing warm-up for my heroes, the Soulfood DJs, who were positively surprised by my endeavors and welcomed me to the stage with open arms.

It took a long time, at least three to four years overall, for me to consider myself a DJ more comfortably and not ridicule myself as a presumptuous amateur, though I still felt inferior whenever I was the only one in a DJ line-up not to use the turntables. I teamed up with a like-minded friend and fellow aspiring controller DJ, who also played at the media studies parties and participated in campusradio, to initiate our very own funk-based party in Potsdam, which recently celebrated its relatively successul premiere. So this is the stage I was at when I started working on this project: a young and motivated controller DJ trying to establish herself and to learn how to handle vinyl using her boyfriend’s turntables.

# 2. DJ history

Everybody, get in the groove and let the good times roll  
I'm gon’ stay here till I soothe my soul

If it takes all night long

Yeah, it might be one o'clock and it might be three

Time don't mean that much to me  
I ain’t had this much fun since I don’t know when

And I might not feel this good again

- Aretha Franklin, “Good Times”

In their extensive history of the DJ, Brewster and Broughton dive right in by wittily tracing the role of the DJ all the way back to the ancient shaman who conducted the musical accompaniment for mankind’s nocturnal rituals. Though it may seem a somewhat silly or far-fetched idea at first, on second thought it starts to ring stunningly true. In a *de facto* secularized world, we satisfy our spiritual needs through cultural products of the entertainment industry more than anything else. The target of our worship has shifted from deities towards artists and celebrities, music and works of fiction. Instead of with religion, the notion of “cult” is now associated with films, books, TV series, bands or music genres, even clothing brands; these are the new signifiers that define our identity and divide us into groups.

Our culture is undeniably no longer as deeply permeated by religion, and as a result our celebrations have become detached from their ancient function of worshipping the divine. Yet humanity has retained a deep-seated need for collectivity and transcendence, a desire to unwind after a hard day’s or week’s work, to socialize and perhaps abuse certain substances, to reconnect with one’s body, to forget about the anxieties of existence, to step out of the drudgery of the everyday and feel *alive*. Some people achieve this by exercising, pursuing a hobby, having dinner with their family, watching television on the couch, going to the movies or meeting their friends in a bar. But none of these activities come as close to the sublime exaltation of that ancient ritual of dancing around a bonfire as clubbing does: You put on your “mask” or “costume” as you carefully dress for the night to take on a different role from your everyday self. You make your way to a special place reserved for festivities, where you immerse yourself in the music and perhaps alter your state of mind with alcohol and other drugs. You let your body take over control of your entire being and you lose your sense of time as you dance through the night with your friends, but also form an unspoken ephemeral bond with a crowd of strangers. The figure who makes this entire experience possible is the DJ.

The story of the DJ is inherently tied to the story of recorded music. There was a time when the reception of music was physically bound in time and space to the production of music. If you wanted to hear music, you had to perform it yourself or be within hearing distance of someone performing it. Until, one day in 1877, Thomas Edison recorded himself singing “Mary had a little lamb” onto a wax cylinder as “the first human being to record a sound and reproduce it,” albeit without the intention of using his invention to store music.[[3]](#footnote-3) Around three decades later, Canadian Engineer Reginald Fessenden became the world’s first DJ by transmitting a cylinder recording of “a contralto singing Handel’s ‘Largo’ from *Xerxes*” via radio waves “from Brant Rock near Boston, Massachusetts, to a number of astonished ships’ telegraph operators out in the Atlantic” who he had “equipped […] with the necessary receivers.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

In fact, radio was the realm the DJ first conquered, already raising suspicion among musicians and politicians alike because of the power he held “as the gatekeeper at the point where music met its audience.”[[5]](#footnote-5) I cannot go into detail here concerning the development of the radio DJ,[[6]](#footnote-6) but it is worth noting a few of the central aspects of DJing the radio DJ established: His inherent advantage of being able to play more music more cheaply than any given live musician and his function as a tastemaker and musical ambassador who can provide a platform for all the obscure music that the world’s mainstream outlets are carelessly neglecting or deliberately suppressing.

1. Explain. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Say something about gendered writing [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. (Milner 2010, 4) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. (Brewster and Broughton 2006, 28-29) [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. (Brewster and Broughton 2006, 30) [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See Brewster first chapter [↑](#footnote-ref-6)