particular notions about the

‘‘value’’ of vinyl records.

‘‘value’’ is

understood to be constituted by meanings and feelings attached not only

to the material 1200 objects, but also by attitudes about the vinyl record as

a social phenomenon, medium, and cultural text.

advances in digital

music technology threaten the existing order of E/DM DJ culture

It includes ‘‘specially manufactured

vinyl records’’ (http://www.finalscratch.com) that can be placed on any set

of turntables. The records are connected to a computer and function as a

converting interface for mp3s, while the pitch and position of the records

are controlled via signals the records send to the computer

Of course, certain technologies, new or otherwise, are often at the

center of debates in particular music communities, and often the term ‘‘authenticity’’

functions as a concept that creates a sense of what certain group insiders

deem to be ‘‘real’’ or valuable to their practices

creation of a

hierarchy within technology

Same reason why I refuse to play any CDs applies here as well.

Pushing buttons has nothing to do with DJ’ing as far as I amconcerned. Imagine the joy of finally finding that record you’ve

been after for several years, and then compare it to downloading

that track from the internet …

work is invoked to refer

to the actual activities that constitute DJing in a club environment: cueing

music, mixing, and so on. Second, also alluded to in this quote, work is

used to describe DJ practices carried out as part of the preparation for inclub

performance: locating and listening to records, nurturing a social

network, and so on.

record

collections can be understood as a display of power/knowledge

Collecting is thus a way of claiming expertise; it initiates a

particular subject position, allowing collectors to both see themselves as

experts and demonstrate their mastery to others

The introduction of easily downloadable and

swappable mp3s challenges the value of the traditional collecting practices

of E/DM DJs.

The physical labor and economic

capital spent by the DJ who goes in search of that ‘‘perfect record’’ loses

value.

it is often through the labor of listening that the DJ

finds new tracks, artists, and labels

sound imperfections such as ‘‘surface noise, scratch, hum, and hiss’’ are considered to be defects because surface

noise tends to draw ‘‘attention to the record’s blackness, its roundness, its

materiality’’

while noise on a record is not interpreted as music, it functions as a

sign of authenticity.

MP3’s really don’t sound as good

For many of the latter, digital technologies are another marker in

what some fear is the elimination of human agency, including certain

kinds of work, from the production of dance music.

In this section, we describe how what is characterized as wasted labor,

desire, and time by the promoters of Final Scratch is seen by some

members of the E/DM community as the essential work of the DJ \*conclusion

It seems

we’re getting too comfy with this laptop thing – as in the same

vein with live PAs. I think it will be the demise of DJing the day

that it becomes a machine-led thing.

And while one list participant sarcastically noted, ‘‘the only ‘stage

presence’ you’re losing if you use that system is the turnaround and dig in

your record box part,’’ others saw this labor and related work as central to

DJ performance.

You

see a DJ stretched across a pair of decks and their very presence

helps control and rock the crowd.

Sounds horrible, but going through the box is part of the artform. It

would make it too calculated, you can’t flick through your box,

land on something else and think hmmm, now maybe I can play

that instead \* not true!

Corbett describes how analog turntables leave the record in plain

view of spectators, foregrounding the spatiality inherent in the technology

of the record. Digital music in play, however, is largely or totally invisible:

CDs are absorbed into the playback machines (1990: 90); mp3s are

not. A number of 313 list participants argue that visible recognition of the

playback process is vital to the art of DJing.

trainspotters, dancers, and the crowd

in general, want to be in view of the DJs as they demonstrate their skills

through the manipulation of records.

For me, what counts is the end product… how it SOUNDS. As long

as you’re doing something creative on the fly … something that can

complement themood of the crowd, isn’t that what really counts for a

DJ?

issues of value and evaluation around shifting definitions of

what constitutes the work of the DJ in an increasingly digital age

But for

those without much capital, gate-keeping practices such as those we

have described are a primary means by which they establish their expertise,

the boundaries between themselves and others.

Pac man DJing

The physical

movement required to mix vinyl records has meant that the associated skills of DJing have become

bound up in notions of physical and visible manipulation of technology, and so the use of technology

that does not require and afford such physical expression has raised questions around the fundamental

skills of DJing. As such, it would seem that there needs to be a redefinition of the concept of DJing, and a

reframing of the skills and abilities seen as being essential to DJ practice.

debates around

authenticity that are ingrained within dance music culture have resulted in ‘moments

of resistance’ arising in response to certain technological developments

Such developments include the declining use of

vinyl and turntables, the increasing use of mp3s and laptop computers, and the resultant

lessening in importance of the record store and the increasing centrality of the

Internet as the source from which DJs obtain their music. These developments

have subsequently generated shifts in the understandings and perceptions of DJ

skills and DJ work, essentially redefining the art and craft of the DJ. They conclude that the Internet debate they analysed was not

simply about new technologies, but rather ‘about issues of value and evaluation

around shifting definitions of what constitutes the work of the DJ in an increasingly

digital age’ (Farrugia and Swiss 2005, p. 40).

complete shift away from the use of vinyl

divergent and contrasting opinions that exist within dance culture

with regard to these technologies, addressing areas such as changes to notions of

DJ work, the increased accessibility of music, and shifts in understanding of DJ performance

and skill.

it is the turntable that has become the central

‘tool’ of the DJ and that has achieved a wide degree of cultural recognition, in

much the same way as the electric guitar is perceived as being integral to rock

music culture. Technics

SL-1200

dominance of the turntable, and the level of authenticity that is ascribed to its use

(Farrugia and Swiss 2005, p. 33)

continuous progression and development of technology

shapes and defines the dance scene, with new technologies affecting and

informing the production of music and the practice of the DJ

One common theme seemed to be

the eventual demise of vinyl

potential negative impact of the Internet on the continued existence

of record stores

work for DJs also involves the preparation necessary to be able to conduct these activities. Such preparation involves ‘locating and listening to records, nurturing

a social network, and so on’

widening the scope for DJs when it comes

to sourcing new music, shifting this essential part of DJ culture from locally based

record buying to globally centred music purchasing

As Farrugia and Swiss (2005, p. 35)

observe, the ease with which anyone can access the Internet and download mp3s

means that ‘the physical labour and economic capital spent by the DJ who goes in

search of that “perfect record” loses value’.

Certainly the idea of Australian dance music culture being behind the times

(Park and Northwood 1996, p. 2; Connell and Gibson 2003, p. 268) has less relevance

for contemporary DJs who can obtain music from anywhere in the world in a split

second.

the ritual of the

‘night out

the decisions of record

store owners and DJs in selecting this music have a direct impact upon the music that

participants in the scene are exposed to.

contemporary dance music culture has been subject to an increasing

degree of globalisation and we can see this as, in part, the result of new production

and distribution technologies that have facilitated increased global

interaction between dance music DJs and producers.

As DJs rely less on the physical

commodity of vinyl, and make increasing use of digital media, the international

interconnectedness of dance culture will become even more developed.

different operational skills are required

you’re going to be able to have so

much influence on the music you’re playing, so I think that the genres will become more

stylised in that way.

This suggestion draws attention to the way the development of technology has continually

affected the stylistic development of dance music, with the 12-inch single

changing the length and sonic quality of disco music in the 1970s, and samplers

and drum machines giving rise to Detroit techno music in the 1980s. Indeed, the

links between technology and style development can be seen on a much broader

scale in popular music, with rock ’n’ roll and the electric guitar, and psychedelic

music and studio trickery, as just two examples.

DJs will often, having purchased a particular track, record it on to their computer,

and re-edit and reshape it to their liking or to make it more appropriate for the

style of music they play, perhaps taking out vocal lines or adding drum patterns.

This also allows the DJ to indulge in a certain degree of artistic expression.

While not all DJs involve themselves

in music production, it is clear how wider access to digital technologies, such

as computer software packages, has made it easier for DJs to take on the role of producer.

Previously, remixing or modifying a particular track to be played in a club

would have required this track to be pressed on to vinyl, a laborious process in comparison

to burning a CD

These machines have such a wide variety of features

(pitch control and tempo control, looping facilities, reverse play, scratching facilities)

that can be initiated at the flick of a switch, that there becomes less of an emphasis on

skill, and more of an emphasis on being able to operate the machines properly. In

contrast to this, there is the argument that such machines extend the boundaries of

mixing and DJing, in that there are greater opportunities to manipulate and alter

sounds.

potential for a set to be generated

that has a greater diversity and variety than a performance based solely on the playing

of vinyl.

you don’t have records jumping, you don’t have

records warping, you don’t have the wear and tear, you don’t have the weight to carry

‘performance aesthetics’

This involves the assumption that part of the process of DJing incorporates an

element of performance, and that this performance is validated by the handling of

particular tools or formats. In this regard, DJing becomes as much about visual perception

as it is about sound creation.

that it’s just too much

The flair of it is a bit nicer, and the spinning it round, and it

looks nicer than just sort of pushing a button.

the degree to which this spinning is

successfully handled and manipulated becomes one marker of DJ skill. Again, for

many within dance culture, to gauge the degree of success the act needs to be witnessed

visually and so, while tracks can be mixed together on CD players and laptops,

the use of vinyl has come to represent the authentic visual format of DJ

culture. Thus, anything that negates the need for spinning is seen as stripping

away one of the perceived essential skills of being a DJ. In this sense, the visual performance

associated with DJing is intrinsically linked to the skills associated with

DJing. Therefore, alterations and adjustments to this visual aspect result in similar

alterations to the perceptions of DJ skill and how this skill is demonstrated.

This quote provides an example of what Farrugia and Swiss (2005, p. 33) refer to as

‘moments of resistance’. Here, the lack of people engaging with the technology

served to render it as ‘inauthentic’, so that Murphy was subject to negative attitudes,

no doubt grounded in a perception that, by using CDs, he appeared to lack the skills

necessary to DJ with vinyl, and therefore could not be seen as an ‘authentic’ DJ

International DJs become the

bearers of authentic dance culture, and as a part of that, what they do establishes the

boundaries for perceptions of DJ skill.

Seeking out and buying records, playing vinyl as a way of

demonstrating skill, accumulating knowledge and record collections, and forming

networks, are all part of the process local DJs (or ‘grass roots’ DJs) go through to

establish themselves in a local scene, and thus there is more at stake for these DJs

in the shift towards the use of digital technology.

Superstar DJs have less to lose because they have already proven themselves to others in dance

music culture – they have a certain amount of subcultural capital, and their positions no longer

rely entirely on their knowledge, networks, and record collections. (Farrugia and Swiss 2005, p. 40)

It is this subcultural capital, or rather a perception of subcultural capital, that determines

the way international DJs are seen as instigators of new sounds and new

skill sets in DJ culture.

perceptions of authenticity have been generated around

the use of vinyl.

some participants in DJ culture see the

labour and work associated with using vinyl as central to DJ performance

The changes to DJ practice that the use of CDs and computers have brought

about have necessitated a shift in the understanding of this practice, and essentially

have altered the skills of DJing.

So therefore, isn’t that you’re getting paid to do nothing?

The use of computers to carry out the act of DJing has thus been defined by

some DJs in comparative terms, so that vinyl and the use of turntables are established

as authenticating DJ practice, while computers, for the apparent lack of skill that is

required to operate them in comparison to using vinyl, are dismissed as nonrepresentative

of authentic DJ culture.

Yet taking such a view denies the possibility that computers actually enhance

the DJing profession and allow for greater creative expression, while also ignoring

the fact that, in some respects, using computers requires the DJ to be just as skilful

and thoughtful as when they are using turntables. Simply because the skills change,

it does not necessarily follow that the act of DJing is made any easier.

to

a large extent using vinyl serves to validate the skills of a particular DJ with a clubbing

crowd,

come up, they could take it in turns from the dancefloor . . . press a button and

it’s playing. . . . I like to see my groove, I don’t want to see LCD lights going up and down,

I want to see a groove in the record . . . Obviously, for other people it doesn’t matter what

platform it is, but for me, I don’t want to be having a screen in front of me, and pressing

buttons. That’s not DJing to me. . . . I don’t think that people on the dancefloor know any

different.

An interesting point in Thompson’s quote is his description of interaction with

the music, and his suggestion that an over-reliance on technology prevents such

interaction from occurring. This again raises the issue of performance in DJing, or

rather the notion of physicality in the act of DJing. The movements and actions

required to mix and play vinyl records take on a particular significance here, feeding

into the DJ’s engagement with the music.

despite the authenticity issues that surround the use of

vinyl in dance culture, one has to question the extent to which a DJ’s choice of format

is actually relevant, for DJing is ultimately about the selection and sequencing of

music rather than the use of specific technology.

Indeed, for a culture grounded so much in a constant

The digital future of DJ culture 409

search for new and fresh music, it seems peculiar that it should have such an

ingrained attachment to what is for most of the world an obsolete format

lack of involvement and interaction that

such technology seems to require and produce makes the act of DJing itself less interesting.

How do you know he’s not playing a pre-recorded set? How do you know he’s not playing

Pac-Man while he’s supposed to be DJing? I want to see the DJ doing something. I don’t

want to see him stood pressing buttons on a laptop

It’s almost like the art of

DJing has changed to engineering

Again, this reflects an association of DJing with certain visual characteristics.

For Devecchis, the DJ must be seen to be actually DJing, which is demonstrated

through handling particular physical formats like vinyl and CDs. In contrast, using

a mouse or laptop keyboard strips away the sense of performance that is established

through a DJ playing, mixing and spinning records on a set of turntables.

The

very invisibility of mp3s is perhaps, therefore, one of the reasons why they are currently

treated with a certain degree of scepticism by some DJs and dance music participants,

having an impact upon how skill and performance are perceived.

He looked like he was checking

his emails for God’s sake!

It would seem that the use of technology in DJing is implicitly aligned with understandings

of skill and notions of performance. While dance club DJing is primarily

about selecting, sequencing and mixing music, the visibility of performance is also

a key factor.

some technologies afford visible manipulation of music better than others.

Technology therefore has an impact not only upon the practice of DJing, but

also upon the perceptions of the practice of DJing.

the perception of the skill of a particular DJ is dependent not just on the

DJ themselves, but also on the technology they use.

The use

of vinyl and turntables, in requiring obvious physical movement,meant that the associated

skills of DJing became bound up in notions of physicality. In this regard, technology

has shaped the practice of DJing.

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.

recent technological developments within DJ culture have presented DJs with a

choice about how they can play their music in a club. When the only option was turntables,

they might not have had this freedom of choice, but at the same time, DJs were

not subject to the critique of skill level that occurs today with the use of other technologies

Technological development has therefore pushed DJs to actively

make a choice about how they perform their job, and to accept the consequences

that come with this choice.

Ultimately, despite all these changes in technology and the issues raised, the

main concern for any DJ should be with affecting the mood of a crowd through

the music played, regardless of format, for, as Klasco and Michael note, ‘no matter

how sophisticated the setup, a deejay must be most concerned with building energy

and changing the mood on the dance floor’

Although DJs may become more like engineers, they will always need the ability to

be able to read and gauge a crowd’s reactions, and to respond to these reactions in

the appropriate manner. The constant factor that will always remain at the very

core of DJing is the ability to entertain through a selection and the sequencing of

tracks, regardless of the technology used to generate this. Good DJs are not defined

solely by their ability to use particular technology or to mix two records together

seamlessly but also, and perhaps more importantly, by the order in which they

sequence and play these records.

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.

deal with certain tensions, ideologies and authenticities that are imposed upon their

work by clubbing audiences

The problem for local DJs is that their educational status is placed secondary

to that of the international DJs, thus making it more difficult for the local DJs to

play unfamiliar sounds and to use unfamiliar technology.

thus DJ culture, as

with the dance scene, needs to be understood as a fluid and evolving element of

club culture.

there exists a contradictory attachment to

vinyl. Using an old and dated format seems to go against the progressive principles

that underpin the creation of contemporary dance music.

the continued use of vinyl demonstrates the way

technology can be bound up with perceptions of skill, aesthetics and authenticity

as clubbers witness

more and more DJs employing technology other than vinyl and turntables, then their

understandings and perceptions of what it means to be a DJ will change, and this

may require a redefinition of the concept ofDJing, and a reframing of the skills and abilities

seen as being essential to DJ practice. As more and more DJs move away from

using turntables, the ability to seamlessly mix with vinyl becomes less important.

Farrugia, R., and Swiss, T. 2005. ‘Tracking the DJs: vinyl records, work, and the debate over new technologies’,

Journal of Popular Music Studies, 17/1, pp. 30–44