More than Pushing Buttons

When Thomas Edison created the first commercially-successful phonograph he envisioned it primarily as a tool for preservation, one that would allow exact records to be captured from the sonic realm. He did not foresee the far-reaching ramifications of his invention that would eventually morph technological developments, social codes, and litigious restrictions that surround the production and distribution of music. In this sense the craft of DJ’ing is the unintentional love child of this recording phenomenon, and a seemingly contradictory amalgamation of composition and performance. While DJ’ing has received a notorious reputation for being the mere pushing of buttons and twisting of knobs, the task is actually a highly technical one that requires a delicate balance of preparation and spontaneity in order to succeed. Traditionally, music is composed beforehand, and then performed live by a group or artist, with respect being paid to the composition half of this binary. Meanwhile, while it is possible for a DJ to construct a set ahead of time, it is far more respectable for a DJ to mix pre-recorded tracks “live”, making a performance *out of* the act of composition. This involves the equalizing of and transitioning between two (or four) songs, and the application of an endless number of effects and samples. Without the recording technologies that make endless repetition possible, the concept of DJ’ing could never exist, as the entire art is built upon the altered “repetition” of pre-existing materials; for this reason, the exploration of the concepts of repetition and the composition/performance binary will define the unique appeal of a live DJ performance, in contrast to that of a traditional musical performance.

While going to see a DJ may entail buying tickets, traveling to the venue, and dealing with sore muscles the day afterward, a live performance offers a return to the “enjoyment of present labors” as opposed to “the consumption of replications” (Attli, 88). Music has become infinitely more available due to (relatively) recent technological developments, including the internet, the mp3 format, and the iPods that makes entire catalogs of music into portable accommodations. Once a prized spectacle to behold, music is now taken for granted, rarely the sole focus of even an afternoon. Instead, music is now an everyday commodity that *accompanies* our existences. In Attali’s words on page 100, “Accessibility replaces the festival”, referring to music as a conduit through which our species channels it’s violent energies that cannot be expressed in a politically correct manner. Certainly, there is a deeply animalistic component of the human that is (somehow) satisfied by gathering in large numbers, and collectively experiencing a synesthesiac phenomenon of light and sound. A live musical performance invites the individual back into the collective, allowing a “unique, exceptional event, heard once by a minority” (Attali, 100), instead of the singular experience that music offers in its commodified form. While music can be stockpiled by the masses for casual use, a live performance introduces variables and unknowns that possess the potential to offer a uniquely surprising or unexpected experience. Osymyso appeals to this very notion when describing an optimal DJ performance - “Ideally, you’re doing something that only happens once.” (Sinnreich, 140) These expectations set the stage for the contemporary DJ performance as a spontaneous re-presentation of existing material, tailored and cut at the DJ’s discretion to provide a fresh take, and leave the audience with a distinct spectacle.

In order to assess the separation of the DJ craft from traditional live performance, one must understand the fundamental differences in the building blocks that make up these artistic forms. While a traditional band incorporates a handful of members playing a variety of instruments, a DJ set is typically a one man act. As such, the DJ becomes responsible for the independent roles that are usually adopted by separate band members. This is made possible by the use of many forms of technology, at the center of which lie the turntable and the record. This technology evolved quickly to allow for greater involvement in the transitioning process; Grandmaster Flash can be credited with the introduction of the second turntable and crossfader, which allowed for improved precision when transitioning between songs, and remains the core element of a DJ set. Instead of having to construct a cohesive whole out of independent instruments, a DJ works backwards, extracting select components from the pre-existing songs that comprise source material. This act is repeated over and over, with the DJ moving back and forth between tracks A and B, mixing basslines, vocals, and drums from separate songs to create an entirely new “song”. Though the DJ does not necessarily “play” the turntables or laptop in the way that a musician plays notes on a guitar, this does not mean that intense preparation is not required to use it well. Like any musician, a DJ must become well acquainted with the technology that allows for his performance. However, in addition to this, a DJ must become incredibly familiar with the musical library from which he will construct the act, in order to possess greater flexibility when performing live. Si Begg suggests this is how DJ’s form their identities, “Which bits you use, and how you arrange them, that’s gonna be personal style.” (Sinnreich 126) This is where DJ’ing stands apart from traditional musical performance; as an art tailored to a live audience, a DJ must spontaneously decide how best to present existing material instead of performing a specified set of musical instructions.

Though DJ’ing is a live act by nature, it is only capable of being so due to the creation and availability of records or sound files, compositions from which their art can be shaped. This intrinsic fact, coupled with the domination of sample usage, favors the DJ’s interpretation over the original material. Attali states that, “reproduction, in a certain sense, is the death of the original, the triumph of the copy, and the forgetting of the represented foundation”, and a DJ performance directly embodies this notion. Though the usage of a recognizable work may entice listeners, capitalizing upon familiarity, it is the mutation of it that delights the audience, allowing for the illumination of peculiar similarities or dark contrasts between works. This effect can be achieved musically, taking advantage of dissonance and consonance between particular musical keys, or complimentary beats. Contrast and similarity can also be imposed in infinitely many ways through sampling, with onomatopoeia and quotations serving as distinct indicators of an artist’s opinion or intent. In this sense, a DJ creates his own expression through the works of others.

While a DJ may independently compose singular tracks of his own, the weaving of pre-existing material fixes his position as a composer of sets, of mixes. Simultaneously the DJ equalizes, beatmatches, analyzes musical keys, and perceives the wants and needs of the crowd, catering the performance to the time and place. A DJ’s ability is directly determined by *how* he spontaneously spins material together, cementing the art of DJ’ing to the live realm. Though the product created can ultimately be traced back to distinct origins, the DJ serves as the mediator between the original and an entirely new experience, with the isolated existence of their sets elevating their appeal, escaping the infinite reproducibility that accompanies modern music via technology. Though the combined subjectivity of composer and performer, the DJ retains a peculiar appeal, allowing audiences to re-experience known works by actively contrasting and comparing them to others. As such, live DJ performance retains exceptional value in the face of the commodification of music, which has reduced music from a spectacle into an extraneous convenience that accompanies our lives, not changes it.