I Plagiarized This Entire Paper

As a middle child, I was blessed with the luxurious toy collection that my older brother had spent years accumulating. Tubs of action figures, legos, lincoln logs, and transformers would inevitably spill into a chaotic mess on the floor, leaving my imagination to decide how best to combine these different worlds of pleasure. My youthful brain had no trouble imagining: Batman, with Optimus Prime at his side, driving his lego-clad battleship into combat against a treacherous horde of velociraptors, only to realize that they had allied themselves with the infantrymen of the US army. Though my actions can hardly be likened to those of The Kleptones, I was fulfilling a desire to tear down walls, to broaden the experience by combining my favorite components of each realm, to create collage. This desire is an innate one that accompanies humanity; my unique set of experiences, perceptions, and opinions craft the assessment of what is laid before me, beginning a process of deconstruction and re-assembly, rearranging elements to suit personal taste. Unfortunately this methodology is less acceptable once adulthood has been reached, especially for those who wish to alter pre-recorded bits of sound. A certain controversy exists within the recording industry when it comes to musical collage, stemming from desires to “protect” the “originality” of works, especially when this protection is in line with the generation and retention of profit.

Whatever term is is given - sampling, stealing, borrowing, versioning - appropriation has been present in artistic realms for centuries. Certain cultures and communities respect this technique more than others, with African-American and Brazilian cultures perceiving the artistic sphere as a communal one that should be added-to and taken-from as needed. Despite this history, artists and their labels still fight tooth and nail against those who would make use of their work, claiming this endeavor is a lazy, talentless one. Those who would dare sample must contend with copyright laws, red tape, and potential legal repercussions if they dream of their work being sanctioned, or even, not-being-sued. The belief that an artist or record label can be entitled to a song comes down to a matter of “ownership”, according to Wark. He claims that, “ownership and non-ownership of private property abstracts and simplifies the grounds of conflict, in the form of contention between owning and non-owning classes.” (paragraph 179). It is this contention that makes the employment of sampling a troubled one; the appearance of appropriation as plagiarism is just that, an identity that has been imposed by the “owning classes”, who have a vested interest, and jealously defend their sources of revenue. As mentioned in *Creative License*, the notion of appropriation is one that requires a specific paradigm of ownership in order to exist. Traditional folk singers could not even perceive “originality” as a concept, given that the melodies and lyrics that they shared were open to personal interpretation, re-interpretation, and outright transformation. No framework existed to support “original” works. The artistic movement of Dadaism, which advocates a change in the audience’s perspective by framing that which is not typically considered “art” as art, underscores the importance of retaining a malleable perspective. It is perspective, after all, that draws the lines between what is “original”, what is plagiarized, and what is culturally acceptable when it comes to appropriation. While Mtume perceives songs as individual pieces of property, and those would sample him as thieves, Francis Grasso, a disco DJ who perceived songs not “as self-contained entities, but parts of a blended, nightlong mix” might have countered that it was Aristotle who said, “the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.” Whether the subject matter is samples, songs, riffs, quotes, or garbled onomatopoeic noises, it is the perception of ownership and of art itself that determines how socially and legally acceptable it is to create audio collage.

Despite the endless conflict that comes from sampling and collage, artists make use of it regardless. Some employ parody as a bulwark against legal prosecution, some boldly taunt record labels into pursuing them in order to make a sort of political statement, and some forget to ask the original artist for permission, hoping that they won’t realize what has happened. This is especially true for those who have no “in” in the music industry, with little financial resources to wage litigious battles, and lessened (though increasing) access to methods of production. This sampling has the potential to add several new “layers” to a work, with A Night at the Hip-hopera serving as an excellent example of how collage can incorporate not only two distinctly different genres of music, but a host of pop culture references, quotes, and noises (vomiting) in order to add a specific “message’ to the piece. For these reasons, one should assess the fragility of the imposed “rules” (or the appearance thereof) that would deny collage a place in the domain of musical production.