<u>   BOOK REVIEW   </u>

Book Reviews

Hip Hop DJs and the Evolution of Technology: Cultural Exchange, Innovation, and Democratization

By Sirois, André. New York, NY: Peter Lang, 2016. Pp. xxi, 221. Paperback $33.99

Long before Hip Hop went digital, mixtapes, those floppy discs of the boom box and car stereo, facilitated the spread of choice beats and rhymes. But the rhythms encoded in those messages started as grooves in records. Manually manipulating sampled sounds, DJs hacked the whole of recorded music, datamining dusty crates of vinyl for just the right beats, breaks, and blasts. As Kodwo Eshun puts it in *More Brilliant than the Sun*, "the science of the scratch is massively difficult, demanding intense rehearsal. Far from being something anyone can do, scratching is intimidatingly elitist… As it currently exists, 20th C[entury] art can barely grasp the tonal history of turntablization."[1]

André Sirois, a.k.a. DJ Food Stamp, the man behind the turntables on mixtapes by some of my favorite emcees, including Sean Price, Planet Asia, Common, M.F. Doom, and Atmosphere, grasps that tonal history. In his book Hip Hop DJs and the Evolution of Technology: Cultural Exchange, Innovation, and Democratization, Sirois argues that in its complexity, Hip Hop culture is itself a new media culture. Current so-called "new media" can be traced back from smartphones and the internet to landlines and the telegraph. Following Hip Hop DJs' hacking of recording technology and playback from Grandmaster Flash's mixer toggle-switch and Grand Wizard Theodore's manual scratch to digital sampling and Serato, Sirois historicizes the technical evolution and cultural practices of Hip Hop DJs as new media. Emphasizing the network mentality present from the beginning of Hip Hop, he employs an open source metaphor to characterize the culture. "From my perspective," Sirois writes, "what these South Bronx DJs started was the foundation of the new media ideology present in popular culture today: sample, mix, burn, share, and repeat" (XVII).

Through free exchange and cooperation, the open source software movement has given us the Linux operating system and free software of all sorts, as well as many aspects of the Internet. While Hip Hop is largely a battle-borne culture, the competition has always been tempered by cooperation and collaboration. Where emcees, DJs, breakers, or graffiti writers compete for dominance and braggin' rights, they also share techniques, tools, and work together in crews and teams. Competition fuels creativity, but collaboration fosters and forges it. Writing on innovation, authorship, and intellectual property, Sirois warns against romanticizing this collaboration. "From what I have seen," he writes, "when culture and industry converge, money and credit are given to some and not others, which compromises individual legacies, and then 'viruses'

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[1] Eshun, Kodwo. *More Brilliant Than the Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction*, London: Quartet, 1998, 35.

enter the network and undermine the open source logic that is at the heart of the culture" (78). The industry operates from the top down, manipulating the DJs' "subcultural capital" as brands as intellectual properties. To that end, Sirois also covers how DJs perform sometimes unpaid and unrecognized research and development, from Flash's self-styled innovations to signature models of more modern turntablists, through the "dialectic between Hip Hop DJs and the DJ product industry" (120). His examples offer interesting case studies of bottom-up innovation but also illustrate how branding operates in the larger culture.

"By nature we want to share information," Sirois concludes, "and because of that same nature we are open source… The Hip Hop DJ is an important case study on how we innovate and how we are the technology. We are the story that is designed from scratch" (171). There are lots of excellent books about Hip Hop and DJing (e.g., Making Beats by Joseph Schloss, Groove Music by Mark Katz, and Hip Hop Turntablism, Creativity and Collaboration by Sophy Smith), but none analyze turntablism as a cultural and technical practice from such a fresh and nuanced angle within and without as this book. It might be the only text you need on the subject.

Roy Christopher marshals the middle between Mathers and McLuhan. His research interests include figurative language use and the evolution of technology. He is currently a Visiting Assistant Professor at the University of Illinois-Chicago.