

# BRING THE BREAK-BEAT BACK!

AUTHENTICITY AND THE POLITICS OF RHYTHM IN DRUM 'N' BASS

— FEATURE ARTICLE —

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## ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the critical divergences between rhythm and repetition in contemporary drum 'n' bass music in three key ways. First, it shows how the characteristic “chopping” and acceleration of sampled break-beats emphasises continuity with the past, thereby placing the genre in a continuum of Black Atlantic cultural practice that articulates historical recuperation as a political priority, while signifying the discontinuity of time in an accelerated culture. Secondly, it addresses the persistent use of live break-beats as an impulse within the genre to emphasise competing discourses of authenticity in the context of Black Atlantic cultural memory. Thirdly, having examined the embodied performativity valorised in the sampling of live break-beats, the article shows how the critical valuation of rhythmic characteristics can function as a catalyst of genre mutation and sub-genre development in drum 'n' bass and other electronic dance music genres.

KEYWORDS: authenticity; Black Atlantic; break-beat; drum 'n' bass; jungle

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Since the formation of the linked genres of jungle and drum ‘n’ bass from within London’s inner-city regions during the early-1990s, the break-beat has been the focus of critical discussion amongst participants about the cultural value of rhythm in the genre. In particular, it is often argued that the aesthetic and cultural priorities signified by break-beats strongly contrast with the relatively simplified beat structures of most other forms of contemporary electronic dance music (EDM). For example, Ben Murphy of *DJ Mag* argues that “Breakbeat music in all forms is becoming ever more viable for those bored of straight house and techno four-fours, and jungle is its most expressive variant” (2018). This emphasis placed on accelerated break-beats—brief rhythmic segments characterised by speed and rupture, musically translated into feelings of “funkiness”—points, on the one hand, to the genre’s development out of a condition of rapid technological change in a post-industrial society. On the other hand, it points to the dynamic cultural matrix to which Paul Gilroy refers to in the title of his 1993 book as *The Black Atlantic* (1993). Thereby, I want to examine the role of the break-beat in authenticating discourses of membership in drum ‘n’ bass culture, significantly based on the ability to derive pleasure from funkiness as an aesthetic experience and knowledge of the origin of the most widely-used “breaks” on African-American soul and funk records from the 1960s and 1970s, particularly for DJs, producers and music collectors. Such discourses are entwined with the perceived interconnectedness of drum ‘n’ bass—as digitally-driven and largely metropolitan contemporary dance music—to a wider continuum of Black Atlantic culture. The sense in which the post-industrial city is experienced as an unstable and fast-changing milieu is especially articulated in the creative practice of “chopping”, a term used by drum ‘n’ bass participants to convey the intricate process of building and combining multiple break-beat patterns on a single recording. And this sense is also inscribed in the name of one of London’s most well-known dance clubs that foregrounds break-beat-oriented jungle and drum ‘n’ bass: *Rupture*.

While break-beats continue to be a prominent feature of the genre as a whole, the most mainstream drum ‘n’ bass music tends to displace breaks in favour of relatively simplified “two-step” beat structures that are more typical of styles outside the immediate influence of Black Atlantic music.<sup>11</sup> For example, *Hot Right Now*, by DJ Fresh featuring Rita Ora, and the remix by drum ‘n’ bass production duo Sigma of US rap artist Kanye West’s *Nobody to Love*, foreground the familiar characteristics of pop music production.<sup>22</sup> Following Hennion, both display a carefully balanced link between “lyrics, the music and the singer” and rhythmic patterns comprised of a dominant kick drum on the first and third beat of each bar (1983: 164). For Schloss, break-beats articulate “an African-American compositional aesthetic” that balances “cyclic motion, repetition and variation, and ‘groove’” (2002: 33). The beats on *Hot Right Now* and *Nobody to Love* feature a diminished emphasis on groove, variation and cyclic repetition, in favour of sparse and repetitive drum hits that provide space for the inclusion of lyrics, even though most drum ‘n’ bass tracks are instrumental. Thereby, they develop a sense of narrative functionality that is further accompanied by a prominent melodic structure typical of contemporary chart-oriented pop. As such, two-step rhythms are often vilified by some drum ‘n’ bass participants as deviating from the

genre's supposed funky priorities, as demonstrated by the title "All You 2 Step Bastards Leave Our Planet", a 2001 track by Paradox. These examples show how Gilroy's view that musical forms which foreground "processes of cultural mutation and restless (dis)continuity" can be used to illustrate how musical rhythm resists and participates in hegemonic cultural and ethnocentric discourses in post-industrial society. In this way, this rhythmically inscribed divergence in drum 'n' bass illustrates the cultural implications of, as Middleton suggests, "questions of like and dislike, boredom and excitement, tension and relaxation—in short, the dialectics of musical repetition" (2006: 15).

### RHYTHM AS RUPTURE

The development of jungle and drum 'n' bass corresponded with the growing economic and technological accessibility of computer-based digital audio workstations (DAWs) such as Sternberg's Cubase and C-Lab's Creator, a forerunner of the industry-standard Logic Pro. In this sense, the "restless" rhythms integral to the history of Black Atlantic music (Gilroy 1993: 2) intermingle with the highly complex levels of rhythmic reconstruction enabled by digital technology. The foregrounding of breaks as a primary feature of the genre articulates rupture as a key experience of a high-tech, accelerated culture, while affirming *brokenness* as an African diasporic aesthetic response to feelings of cultural disconnectedness shaped by specific experiences of class and ethnicity. To use Gilroy's terminology, it articulates the "processes of cultural mutation and restless (dis)continuity that exceed racial discourse and avoid capture by its agents" (1993: 2). While break-beats cohere with Gilroy's account of mutational cultural processes in Black Atlantic music, suspicion of drum 'n' bass is based on its strongly multi-ethnic and working-class origins, as well as its foregrounding of digitally sampled and accelerated (time-stretched) rhythms. As Kodwo Eshun argued at the time of the genre's emergence, "jungle is the one music everyone agrees is no good", while "the very fact that questions of race and class come up over and over indicates unease with the music's following, who they are and what (its participants are) up to" (1994: 43-44).

The "relentless four quarter beat" (Rietveld 1998: 148) that is a key feature of the most globally popular EDM styles such as house and techno, is often produced using analogue drum machines like the Roland TR-808. In contrast, the break-beats more widely employed in drum 'n' bass are brief, syncopated rhythms that have been sampled from 1960s and 1970s soul and funk records.<sup>33</sup> Since the early-1980s, digital samplers have been used to repeat—or "loop"—break-beats into extended sequences, while a number of largely New York-based DJs released unlicensed compilations containing rare and sought-after break-beat loops specifically for use by producers of the nascent style that would become known as "hip-hop". Waugh distinguishes 4/4 beats from break-beats in the following way:

All dance music is in 4/4 time which means it has four beats to the bar. If you count the beats you'd count 1-2-3-4... those are the main beats, the ones you groove to . . . a break-beat is simply a rhythm which is not in the four-to-the-floor mould. Break-beats are often more rhythmically complex and there are opportunities to create unique, exciting and individual patterns (2000: 6).

Even though break-beats foreground rhythm and syncopation over evenly divided beats, they nevertheless adhere to an overall 4/4 beat pattern. Thereby, it remains in “4/4 time”. In examining the importance of rhythmic characteristics for audiences of different EDM styles, Butler argues that syncopated funk patterns differ from the metronomic beat structures of house and techno by offering specific potential for expressive movement by dancers (2006: 81-9). This potential is often framed in terms of funkiness; a quality defined by Danielsen as appearing “when a layer of potential cross-rhythm is used to create small stretches in time that fall between a dominant basic pulse” (2006: 71). Meanwhile, “funk” is both an African-American musical genre and US slang for “bad smell”, signifying sweat and bodily excess. In other words, the funkiness which Danielsen identifies as synonymous with syncopation develops when strong off-beats appear in between the main four quarter beats (2006: 71). Whereas house and techno tracks largely emphasise the main beat through regular bass or kick drums—thereby inducing what Rietveld describes as “a sense of trance-like bliss” (1998: 148)—break-beats pull at the listener’s sense of time by suggesting the development of new rhythmic lines. For Butler, “break-beat rhythms tend to de-emphasize strong beats, instead placing considerable stress on metrically weak locations” and highlighting “irregularity” as a key characteristic (2006: 78-9). As such, the listener’s search for a “basic pulse” or a strong beat generates brief feelings of tension that are temporarily relieved as she learns to anticipate the off-beats through the break-beat’s repetition at even points in time.

During the late-1980s, house and techno achieved considerable popularity with British audiences at dance club venues like The Hacienda in Manchester and Shoom in London, and at large illegal rave parties held in disused warehouses and fields along the orbital route of the M25 (Rietveld 1998). At such events, early drum ‘n’ bass DJs like Fabio and Grooverider often mixed house and techno tracks with the same beat patterns that African-American hip-hop DJs and producers had been using to produce “Rhythmic complexity, repetition with subtle variations” and “rhythmic tension over stated or implied meter” (Rose 1994: 67).<sup>44</sup> For Rose, such effects provide “important clues in explaining sources of pleasure in black musics” (1994: 67). Similarly, Middleton argues that while “Almost all popular songs, to a greater or lesser extent, fall under the power of repetition”, African diasporic approaches to rhythm are typically inscribed in structures which are “shorter and more insistently repeated” than in the “discursive” approach of the “European art tradition” involving “the repetition of longer units” (2006: 17).

By the early-1990s, a significant proportion of British EDM tracks entirely replaced 4/4 kick and bass drum patterns with sampled break-beats, whose relative speed prompted the use of the appellation “hardcore”. Break-beat-based hardcore records were bought in considerable numbers by both rave audiences and the wider record-buying public in the UK and, as a result, were strongly represented in the national pop charts. However, this combined use of breaks with 4/4 beats polarised rave audiences in the UK. Those in the North of England and Scotland generally preferred the similarly fast, yet bouncier 4/4 rhythms of “happy hardcore”, while those in the Midlands and the South were more drawn to the accelerated funk, soul and hip-hop grooves of “break-beat hardcore”. The preference shown

by such audiences for the funkiness of break-beats points to the workings of environmental habituation, where the musical tastes of audiences living and growing up in such regions have been modulated by exposure to African-American music where break-beats feature widely. Hargreaves and North have examined how the “effects of familiarity on preference seem to occur whether caused explicitly through deliberate repeated presentations of particular songs, or more implicitly through gradual acculturation to musical styles” (1997: 91-2). Such acculturation can also involve the modulation of the arousal evoked by the social environment. According to Konečni, music listeners are “engaged in a constant exchange with the social and non-social environment, of which the acoustic stimuli are a part” (1982: 501). In this context, the preferences for breaks amongst largely metropolitan and working-class rave audiences can be linked to a desire to create a musical framework of predictable cycles out of the unpredictability and complexity associated with urban, post-industrial living.

## FUNKY HARDCORE

“Hardcore jungle”, “ragga techno” and “jungle techno” were among the most prominent names given to records made by the mainly London-based hardcore DJs and producers, many of which included instrumental and vocal elements from Jamaican dub, dancehall (ragga) and reggae. The tempos attained by the accelerated break-beats of hardcore tracks reached twice those of these Jamaican-derived forms, thereby enabling the incorporation of powerful bass-lines running at around 80 BPM alongside the use of other idiosyncratic reggae sounds and samples, such as echoed guitar, powerful subsonic bass frequencies and Jamaican patois toasting by MCs.<sup>55</sup> And tracks like *Funky Hardcore* by QBass emphasised the same funk-derived break-beat samples used in US hip-hop production since the early-1980s. The first record in the lineage referred to by Reynolds as the “hardcore continuum” (2009) to feature the word “jungle” in its title was *Jungle Techno* by Tottenham-based producer Noise Factory. Each Ibiza record featured the word “junglizm” on its inner sticker label. This gave the label a coherent sense of identity while also serving as a memorable term for audiences to categorise similar music that was being played at dance events like Jungle Book and Jungle Fever. By 1993, the tempos of most jungle tracks occupied a range of around 160 BPM, while the name “drum ‘n’ bass”—which had also emerged as an alternative name for Jamaican dub in the 1970s (Veal 2007: 185)—was adopted to describe records in which the drums and the bass were foregrounded as formal elements. Although the terms continue to be used synonymously, “drum ‘n’ bass” has been preferred to “jungle” by some of the music’s practitioners due to the latter term’s ethnocentric connotations.

The formal differences between drum ‘n’ bass and other EDM forms like house and techno points to contrasting rhythmic priorities that converge around distinct forms of cultural practice. Rose highlights how repetition enabled by the looping facility of digital samplers intensifies the inherent funkiness of the break-beat:



Samplers allow rap musicians to expand on one of rap's earliest and most central musical characteristics: the break-beat... These are points of rupture in their former contexts, points at which the thematic elements of a musical piece are suspended and the underlying rhythms are brought centre stage. In the early stages of rap, these break beats formed the core of rap DJs' mixing strategies . . . The effect is a precursor to the way today's rappers use the "looping" capacity on digital samplers (1994: 73-74).

As "points of rupture", break-beats have a syncopated character which can serve as the starting point for the creation of a sense of rhythm out of unevenly divided or distributed beats. Musicians and audiences commonly refer to this characteristic in terms of funkiness. As such, the looping of breaks at regular points generates a sense of a continually re-inscribed difference. A pulling of the listener's motor impulses occurs as the beats appear at initially unpredictable moments, before a resolution in time is achieved when the rhythm returns to the beginning. After persistent listening, the subject learns that this resolution is only temporary, and that it will once again give way to rhythms that are unpredictable. As Chapman describes:

Unlike in hip-hop, where sampled breakbeat grooves are simply looped at a moderate tempo, drum and bass producers dissect and fragment breakbeats into their smallest components, reassemble them into intricate, asymmetrical patterns and then set them at a rapid tempo (2003: 3-4).

It is notable in this regard that the term "funk" is also sometimes used in African American discourse as a synonym for "panic". Although she does not specifically mention the break-beat, Danielsen suggests that feelings of funkiness develop out of the rendering safe or knowable of rhythmic difference:

Rather than repeating a prefabricated figure, one repeats an internal difference. One makes up one part and answers with another in an eternal rhythmic dialogue. Every time the answer is the same . . . a different answer would take the whole process off course, and the entire fabric of rhythm might fall apart (2006: 164).

Danielsen's description of rhythm as an internal conversation is emphasised by the specific use of the looped break-beat in drum 'n' bass. The repetition of fragmented and recombined break-beats in the production of asymmetrical patterns (the chopping to which participants refer) prevents the "falling apart" of the rhythmic conversation. This institutes a dialogue in which the question and answer of the dialogue, to use Danielsen's terms, are simultaneously present. Thereby, rhythmic difference is internalised as an inevitable process and a matter of course. In drum 'n' bass tracks where breaks are emphatically chopped, rupture seems to be deeply woven into the fabric of the track's rhythmic structure.

Since their inception, jungle and drum 'n' bass have been maligned by participants of other EDM genres on the basis of its appeal to a multi-ethnic and largely working-class demographic. It is in this sense that the widely-used tag of "dark" (as in "darkcore" or "dark jungle") evokes two senses: a dystopian discursive framework linked to living and growing up in a socially and economically recessive urban environment; and the darkness of black

people's skin. In a White British context, the latter can subconsciously operate as a signifier for danger, subversion and criminality. This outlook permeates the foreboding ambience of early tracks like "Valley of The Shadows" by Origin Unknown, which places a female voice intoning "I felt that I was in this long dark tunnel" alongside a murmuring bass-line.

In particular, critical reactions to the syncopated character of Black Atlantic music have been informed by racially charged media images of savage and frenetic drumming, thereby shaping the ways in which funk is defined in popular discourse. Danielsen emphasises how the historical link between funk and the body, especially the black body, has been constructed by Eurocentric discourse to articulate the corporeality of the human body as "the dirtiest of the dirty" and "as a euphemism for *fuck* in its sexual meaning" (2006: 3). In this context, "funkiness" is frequently used outside musical discourse as a synonym for body odour, uncultured or uncivilised behaviour and a vulgar compulsion to achieve carnal gratification.

In a visual context, Doane observes how anthropological photography in the early-twentieth century "dictated the incessant visualisation of native eroticism", instituting the "visibility of the dark continent to Europeans", and melding together anxiety and desire into the dominant image of the African dancing body (1991: 213). One example of this visually informed racial bias towards rhythms seeming to emanate from the "dark continent" can be found in a club listings section of *i-D* magazine: "(DJs) Colin Faver and Colin Dale playing guaranteed-no-break-beats progressive electronics . . . at regular Wednesday night Knowledge" (Collin 1992: 54). Mainstream media narratives regarding the "darkness" of jungle and drum 'n' bass were, according to Hesmondhalgh and Melville, "racist responses to a music that was defiantly 'black', whose core market was obviously black, and whose structure reintroduced elements of black musical forms and practice" (2001: 99).

In addition to the racism underpinning the reception of jungle and drum 'n' bass in popular culture, Gilroy's concept of the Black Atlantic can be used to elaborate on the dual articulation of race and class to which the development of the music can be seen as a cultural response. For Gilroy, African diasporic cultural expressions draw on a multiplicity of black histories and politics. While a common experience of powerlessness experienced in White cultures is sufficient to secure a sense of affinity across the Atlantic, a key feature of Black Atlantic cultural practices is openness to participation by others. The traditions of "improvisation, montage, and dramaturgy" are considered responses by Black Atlantic people to racism (Gilroy 1993: 78). Gilroy claims the specific regional and socio-economic contexts in which Black and White young people live and grow up in Britain has led to an emphasis on music as a means by which both ethnocentrism and class exploitation can be challenged. In this respect, the music's speed is arguably the key galvanising experience for its White, working class participants. Lockwood's investigation into the phenomenology of class experience identified fatalism as a structuring trait in the working-class attitude to life. This suggests a tendency to live from day to day and in the here-and-now, while long-term planning is rejected in favour of "present-time orientation" (Lockwood 1982: 363). An emphasis is thereby placed on immediate gratification and "fast living" to ensure that pleasures of the moment are not sacrificed for future rewards. Since these contexts are

shaped by specific local and economic conditions, the sense of feeling disempowered that Black Atlantic musical practices address can also produce meaning and pleasure for non-black listeners in the UK who share similar material circumstances.

## BREAK-BEATS AND AUTHENTICITY

The early development of drum ‘n’ bass was almost exclusively dependent on the use of digital music production technologies, especially the sampler. In this context, break-beats sampled from 1970s soul and funk records that featured live drumming performances enabled a discourse of authenticity to develop around knowledge of the recordings from which these “breaks” were derived. Such a discourse permeates the genre in the form of its identification as a “break-beat culture”, as is indicated in the URL of *Drum & Bass Arena* (an influential website in the digital circulation of the genre, founded in 1996): “breakbeat.co.uk”. As part of a wider cultural lexicology, break-beats are also often assigned names that contain traces of the name of the artist or the title of the original recording from which it was sampled. The most widely used break is Amen, derived from “Amen, My Brother”, the B-side track to *Colour Him Father* by Washington soul and funk group The Winstons. The Amen break is characterised by a sharp snare drum and cymbal sequence, and its widespread presence in drum ‘n’ bass is framed by its initial familiarity among producers by dint of its use on a large number of hip-hop tracks in the 1980s, especially on “King of the Beats”, a B-side track on the 1988 single *Join Me Please . . . (Home Boys – Make Some Noise)* by Mantronix.

On June 7<sup>th</sup> 2019 at the Rupture club, held every three months at the Corsica Studios complex in South London (fig. 1), one of the tracks that received an especially boisterous response from the dancefloor was “Serenity” by J Majik. “Serenity” contains traits that characterise tracks from the ambient jungle sub-genre of drum ‘n’ bass. Initially, the track is comprised of multiple sustained single-note chords, oscillating gently, alongside naturalistic effects such as tidal waves and birdsong softly entering and leaving the mix. This intro sequence continues for almost one minute, until a distorted, rearranged Amen—with the lower frequencies removed via equalisation, giving the break a soft, shimmering quality—appears for four bars, teasing the listener with a sense of anticipation. The break’s middle and low ends are then sharply dropped into the mix, prompting the audience to respond with frenetic dancing. Then, at one minute and thirty-two seconds, a heavy subsonic bassline appears; the soothing chords and low-frequency bass murmurs are in acute contrast to the crashing, snare-heavy timbres of the Amen break. The feeling of sonic completeness that is subsequently produced augments the audience’s pleasure, inciting expressions of approval in the form of noisy whooping, and exclamations of “Bo!” (fig. 2) in imitation of a gunshot sound the raising of and one raised hand in the air in the shape of a pistol.<sup>6</sup>

Almost as popular as Amen is the “Think” break sampled from “Think (About It)” by Lyn Collins, which has a shuffling and spring-like character.<sup>7</sup> An older track that received a particularly strong response from the Rupture crowd is based on both the Amen and Think breaks. “This is L.A.”, by Brixton-based producer Lemon D, opens with a fairly uncomplicated rendering of the Think break, while a looped sample combining a wah wah guitar riff and a Fender Rhodes keyboard melody—a typical feature of 1970s funk tracks—



is introduced as the 16<sup>th</sup> bar begins.<sup>8</sup> This element—recognisable to many drum ‘n’ bass participants as the kind of musical reference one might hear on a gangsta rap record from the early-1990s—is punctuated by an ominous sample of the American National Broadcasting Corporation’s (NBC) broadcaster Tom Brokaw intoning, “this is Los Angeles, gang capital of the nation”. Brokaw’s speech is sampled from televised coverage of the riots that followed the controversial beating of Black motorist Rodney King by a group of white police officers.

A sense of permanence and intractability about the city’s grim situation is connoted by the line’s frequent repetition until, at one minute and forty-five seconds, the melodic layers are unexpectedly removed, leaving an ominous drum roll that builds as the sound of circling police helicopters looms overhead. As the drum roll reaches its peak, Brokaw asks in a paternalistic tone, “let’s see if there is anything that can be done about all of this”. At this point, a powerful bass drop—characterised by a dull, pumping effect—punctuates the music with a startling forcefulness. This signifies both a challenge to the dancer’s sense of the main beat—whose apparent control over the rhythm has been confronted by the sonic violence of the bass and the replacement of the Think break with a series of crashing Amen patterns—and augments the realisation that speed and rupture are inevitable characteristics of post-industrial urban life. The track continues in this vein until its conclusion at six minutes and twelve seconds.

**rupture**

**ROOM 1 - DRUM & BASS**

DIGITAL  
 LEVL (FELIX K, FOREST DRIVE WEST, DB 1)  
 DOUBLE O  
 MANTRA  
 PRESHA  
 MANI FESTO  
 DECIBELLA  
 HOSTED BY BLACK EYE MC

**ROOM 2 - ASTROPHONICA**

FRACTURE  
 NEPTUNE  
 MORESOUNDS (LIVE)  
 SULLY  
 FAUZIA

**THE COLUMBIAN - JUNGLE**

FOUL PLAY  
 COCO BRYCE  
 FFF  
 CHRIS IN PERSPECTIVE  
 HUGHESEE  
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FIGURE 1. RUPTURE FLYER, JUNE 2019.



FIGURE 2. GIRL MAKING THE BO! SIGN, AT KEMISTRY MEMORIAL, MAY 2009. PHOTO BY JAMES BURNS.

Lemon D has channelled the explosive violence unleashed by the sub-bass gesture into the Amen break, cutting and splicing this sampled rhythm in such a way that the loud snare fragments undermine the dancer's internal sense of a steady 4/4 meter. Together with the impact of the bass accents, the scything, unpredictable snares have the effect of temporarily tearing the ground from beneath the dancer's feet. It is only after extended listening that one can hear patterns emerge; the bass notes occur at regular intervals, providing a structure for what seems like the spontaneous disorder of the sampled snare fragments. They signify the presence of a broader, systemic permanence to this chaos. As such, the ground-level chaos of the post-industrial city, apparently encouraged by official powers, has been shockingly articulated.

At Rupture and in its promotional media, an authenticating narrative defined by the use of sampled break-beats strongly resonates. While some drum 'n' bass artists have achieved substantial commercial success in recent years, the relative absence of break-beats in the most popular tracks suggests the persistence of a performative discourse whereby prevalent digital production techniques, especially the theft implied in sampling apparently signifies the absence of competent musicianship. Goodwin suggests that Western audiences still prefer "to *see* their pop musicians *doing* something" but "audiences have grown increasingly accustomed to making an association between synthetic/automated music and the communal

(dance floor) connection to nature (via the body)” (1990: 269).<sup>9</sup> It is this erasure of the live body from the domain of composition that is assumed to be equivalent to the erasure of the composer’s expressive presence within his or her music, reinforcing the suspicion that, as Virilio states, “technology now aspires to occupy the body” (1999: 59). Whereas real-time drumming on soul and funk recordings demonstrates the agility, coordination and expressiveness of human performers, sped-up break-beats are often pejoratively defined as signifying creative passivity that is complicit with the disruptive power of digital technologies, especially computers. For example, an article on *The Independent* news website claimed that “playing drum and bass during operations hampered (surgeons’) communications with nurses (putting) patients at risk” (Harrold 2015). For James, the early dependence on break-beats and other samples allowed drum ‘n’ bass to be seen as “stupid music for stupid people” (1997: 19). In defiance of this apparent stupidity, the legitimacy of sampling as a creative practice is defended by Omni Trio’s view that “jungle is sequenced music . . . . We are not ashamed of that” (James 1997: 90). The music’s programmed character is not a critical issue for its audiences, to the extent that human competence in both musical and wider cultural senses seems to have been irrevocably transformed by the cultural prevalence of digital technology.

This impulse to reclaim the sampled break-beat can also be linked to a desire to sustain the presence of drum ‘n’ bass within a continuum of Black Atlantic cultural practice. In particular, Ferrigno argues that the use of break-beats can be considered a form of digital homage to the human drummers on African American funk recordings.

The drum breaks that drum ‘n’ bass producers rely upon came from 1960s and 1970s funk and soul recordings . . . their utilization is a way in which drum ‘n’ bass producers can send respect to their predecessors (Ferrigno 2011: 100).

Such reverence does not seem to depend on a qualitative difference between music that is performed by human beings in real-time (live) and programmed musical composition, even if the programmer has no musical skill in the performative sense. For example, Paradox (fig. 3), a choppage pioneer and regular performer at Rupture who uses keyboards and computer software to trigger often complex sequences of sampled break-beats, directly situates drum ‘n’ bass within a Black Atlantic continuum of funk-based music by using a microphone to inform his audiences of the original African American soul and funk recordings from which his breaks originate. However, as Perchard highlights in the context of African American hip-hop, the critical identification of sampling as a cultural practice that serves to reinforce membership within a continuum of Black Atlantic music can obfuscate

producers’ efforts to construct their own uncommon musical successes within what could be understood as an autonomous hip-hop tradition; while aspects of cultural memory and memorial were in play, so too were self-interested exploitations of the forgotten and the unknown (Perchard 2011: 290).



In the context of drum ‘n’ bass, the authenticity conferred by the return of the break-beat shows the extent to which authenticating notions informed by historical legacies of Black Atlantic musical practice are also shaped by the economic and creative efficacies offered by sampling technologies. On the one hand, the rapid tempos and relative cost-effectiveness of its sample-based digital base indicate that drum ‘n’ bass developed out of a working class-inflected creative impulse for speed in both its aesthetics and musical production. On the other, its computer-based compositional framework also contains the possibility of lengthening the production process by reassembling break-beats into intricate and lengthy reconfigurations, thereby legitimating drum ‘n’ bass as a form of art music on the basis of particular producers’ virtuosity with computer and sample-based technologies.<sup>10</sup>



FIGURE 3. PARADOX LIVE AT THE SUN AND BASS FESTIVAL, SARDINIA, SEPTEMBER 2014. PHOTO BY JAMES BURNS.

### GOING BACKWARDS: BREAK-BEATS AND SUB-GENRE FORMATION

The recent return to prominence of previously outmoded sampled break-beats in drum ‘n’ bass points to an internal dynamic that Monroe identifies in EDM genres more broadly as the “sheer velocity of technologico-creative development” (1999: 147). Monroe suggests that the intertwining of recent technological developments with creative practices in “electronic music” institutes an inevitable mutational movement of fragmentation into ever-smaller sub-genres.

Any music where electronics are the central or predominant form of instrumentation is a mode of expression explicitly constituted by technological factors, even when . . . the equipment used is deliberately antique or corrupted. As such, the simultaneous potentialities of both establishing and disintegrating new genres are infinitely greater than in other forms (Monroe 1999: 149-50).

Monroe makes two key points concerning the role of technology in EDM genre mutation, both of which can help to illustrate the development of the choppage subgenre as an authentication of the formerly idiosyncratic, but now threatened practice of using sampled break-beats within the drum 'n' bass parent genre. First, Monroe argues that the number of potential subgenres increases exponentially with the creative incorporation of electronic technologies, regardless of whether these technologies are new, used in accordance with the manufacturer's instructions or consciously misused. Secondly, he claims that the increasing rate of technological development and tempos on the one hand, and the proliferation and self-cancellation of electronic music genres on the other hand, has become ever more rapid. Contrary to assumptions by practitioners and some music critics of the inherently progressive trajectory of electronic music on the grounds of its creative intimacy with digital technologies, this speed of mutation is also defined by a continual looking backwards, whereby the formation of "subgenres and consequently the counter-subgenres are driven by a contra-distinctive dynamic" (Monroe 1999: 150). "Contra-distinctive dynamic" refers to the trajectory taken by electronic music genres and subgenres that have been replaced or superseded, only to re-emerge as new subgenres in a reactionary vein. In this respect, the re-introduction of sampled break-beats suggests a conscious re-emphasis on largely discarded genre rules in an impulse to recover a lost authenticity. Such re-enactments or retro-constructions are an effort to bring closer technical or stylistic developments located in the recent or distant past, including specific characteristics that pre-existed the formation of the parent genre, thereby reinforcing the significance of formal idiosyncrasies, such as sampled break-beats. Monroe argues that once later stages of sub-genre development are reached, there is an inevitable movement back to a genre that pre-existed but nevertheless influenced the development of the parent genre from a distant historical point (1999: 151).

In the context of drum 'n' bass, the choppage subgenre appeared in the mid-2000s as an attempt to re-inscribe the funkiness that seemed to have been lost with the decline in the use of formerly live break-beats as jungle transformed into drum 'n' bass in the late-1990s. The titles of influential recordings in the sub-genre, such as Equinox's "Ital Lion Tuff Head" and "Acid Rain VIP (Breakage Remix)"—both of which feature radical reconstructions of the Amen break—also convey a sense of historical indebtedness to past genres in its continuum of electronic music. The patois vernacular of the former affirms the role of 1970s Jamaican sound system culture in the formal development of drum 'n' bass, while the latter pays homage to the UK acid house scene of the late-1980s for establishing the genre's participatory network of underground clubs and raves in the hardcore continuum. Lison describes this continuum as:



A certain lineage of electronic dance music with a shared concern that transcends the formal, stylistic boundaries that demarcate each subgenre and persists through and beyond the limited shelf life that any particular style may have in the popular consciousness (2012: 130).

Thereby, for Lison and Monroe, subgenre development in EDM often signifies both a regressive return to what Monroe refers to as “the ‘true’ spirit of the original” (1999: 151), a point of obsolescence where the genre either dissolves—having been overwhelmed by processes of commercialisation or hybridisation—nor stabilises for long-term survival. In this latter formation, the main formal (usually rhythmic) characteristics of the parent genre are reinforced to withstand potential commodification and prevent stylistic fragmentation into ever-smaller subgenres and micro-genres that excessively deviate from the formal elements of the parent genre.

The formation of the choppage style and club nights like Rupture suggests that the apparent narrowing of stylistic possibilities provides impetus for the development of new subgenres in drum ‘n’ bass, thereby reinforcing Negus’ view that creativity arises “out of a sense of frustration with conventions and a desire to break the codes and genre rules and move across the boundaries of genres” (1999: 181). As such, it is possible to link the rapid and narrowing movement of drum ‘n’ bass subgenre formation to wider aspects of contemporary cultural production. This specialising or “niche-ing” dynamic can be seen as an articulation of similar forces that produce the audience and genre specialisation feature of structurally fragmented cultural markets in a post-industrial context. In other words, a similar impulse to maintain and dissolve specialised niche markets along with their own mass-production infrastructure can be seen to be at work in the rarefied domain of drum ‘n’ bass genre mutation as well as in the most consciously pre-programmed and market-researched mainstream cultural products. Examining the role and impact of record companies in musical creativity and the development of genres, Negus states that,

while the (record) industry does provide a structural context and set of business practices which frame and shape how music and artists are ‘processed’, the industry is also itself constituted out of the available ‘texts’, their potential meanings and the practices through which they have been created. In this way, an everyday (often conservative) social aesthetic connects with and shapes the politics of the industry. This interaction is not easily understood, but is necessary for a fuller understanding of cultural production . . . genre cultures . . . are playing a part in ‘producing’ the industry as much as the industry is ‘producing’ these musics (1999: 178).

Negus claims that there is a complex intertwining between the production of musical genres and the wider patterns and velocities of cultural production involving innovation, technological development, the impulse for short-term profits and the desire to be part of the newest phenomenon. In addition, he claims that cultural production depends on both the appearance and substance of innovation and resistance in order for commodification to work successfully. As such, the fate and formation of both the drum ‘n’ bass parent genre

and its subgenres can be connected to both the speed with which musical creativity can be facilitated through the use of digital technologies—thereby making it a sector of the cultural market that mutates too rapidly to be entirely dominated by the music industry—and the need of post-industrial cultural production to constantly invent and reinvent new niche markets to service.

It is possible for the commodification of drum ‘n’ bass to be economically beneficial to both the genre’s producers and the wider music industry. But it is also notable that a significant membership within the genre is convinced that the continued survival and relevance of drum ‘n’ bass requires avoidance of corporate entanglements with mainstream popular music culture. One means by which such evasion is achieved is through the impulse to continually innovate new styles and subgenres faster than the wider music industry can incorporate them, even if such stylistic expansion involves looking backwards to previous developments in the genre’s continuum. As fast as the mass market can assimilate and commodify underground subgenres, these subgenres can mutate and negate each other just as quickly. This negation ensures the creation of pre-commodified zones that are temporarily outside of the commercial music industry, even if this pursuit is based on a construction of resistance against commodification. Another authenticating practice is articulated by Rupture’s policy of encouraging DJs to play vinyl. Vinyl is perceived as a niche medium in comparison to digital musical formats. Such practices adhere to Shuker’s definition of forms of “active” participation which connote an “aficionado” or “connoisseur” membership. Active participation designates the consumption of and contribution to specialist media, regular attendance of live events and esoteric knowledge of specialist recordings and genres, in contrast to the “passive” fandom associated with the participation in more popular music styles (Shuker 2005: 99).

## CONCLUSION

By addressing the variability of rhythmic structures in electronic dance music, especially those that do not conform to the emphasis placed on the four quarter beat typical of popular styles like house and techno, it is possible to show that the critical value attached to specific genres and sub-genres is stratified according to historical, ethnic and class-inscribed taste cultures. In drum ‘n’ bass, this stratification is illustrated in the division between the relatively simplistic beat structures of the most popular current tracks and the break-beats sampled from 1960s and 1970s soul and funk recordings that formed the basis of the earliest examples of the genre. In the context of drum ‘n’ bass’ location within a hardcore continuum that emphasises cultural resistance against the mass production practices and values of the mainstream music industry, such loss is articulated as surrendering to the pressure of commodification. Pop music structures divert attention away from the genre’s digitally programmed technological base, most vividly articulated in the use of densely layered and edited break-beat patterns. Thereby, the foregrounding of break-beats on particular tracks is a means by which a sense of authenticity—seemingly lost in the pursuit of commercial success in a highly populated and competitive environment for recorded music—can be

recovered. In addition, the emphasis placed on sampled and heavily edited break-beats reinforces the broken aesthetic that Rose and Gilroy ascribe to the priorities Black Atlantic music is argued to place on the cultivation of flow and continuity out of ruptured historical, cultural and socio-economic contexts. Finally, the return to break-beats articulated by much recent drum 'n' bass output signifies an especially regressive dynamic of subgenre mutation, whereby sample-based practices are used to authenticate a genre whose formation is deeply entwined with digital production technologies within a Black Atlantic musical lineage that precedes the digital. In the wider context of electronic music, the enfolding of live human performances from the past within recent technological practices suggest an increasing emphasis on the role of historical continuity as a means by which cultural resistance against the mainstreaming of musical practices with which wholly digital creative logics are often associated.

## NOTES

- 1 "Mainstream" in this context refers to media organisations whose political and ideological bias is determined by corporate ownership and the resolute reinforcing of its commercial interests. In this vein, Williams argues: "There are in fact no masses; there are only ways of seeing people as masses" (1961: 289).
- 2 These are two of only a relatively small number of drum 'n' bass tracks to have entered the UK Top 40 national chart, with both reaching number one in February 2012 and April 2014 respectively.
- 3 Scruton describes a syncopated rhythm as "a single rhythm, in which the accent falls regularly off the beat—often on a note which lies between two beats" (Scruton 1999: 29).
- 4 In electronic dance music, the term "track" refers to records that are largely instrumental, as opposed to songs in which lyrics are prominent.
- 5 In his 1988 study of reggae sound-systems in South London, Les Back designates the term "Mic (microphone) Chanter" to the acronym MC, although "Master of Ceremonies" is more widely applied to a performer who introduces or verbally directs other performers and the audience. In this regard, both definitions are applicable to the practices of the drum 'n' bass MC. It is notable that "MC" also functions as a verb, meaning "to perform as an MC".
- 6 The expression "Bo!" derives from its use at Jamaican reggae sound-system events where local "Yardie" gangs would often meet to settle scores with gun violence. Although its celebratory use in the context of both reggae sound-systems and drum 'n' bass dance events is a sign of approval of the immediate social participatory framework, it can, in terms of its originating context, also be said to connote an ability to survive inclement social circumstances in everyday urban life.
- 7 The popularity of the Think break among producers is supplemented by the novelty of a sped-up James Brown in his role as a backing singer exclaiming "You're bad sister!" across the duration of the break in a theatrical approval of Collins' performance. This can be a useful gimmick in attracting attention to a recording on which the break features.
- 8 Wah wah is a musical effect achieved on an electric guitar by controlling the output from the amplifier with a pedal.

- 9 See Schumacher (1995) and McCutcheon (2007). This critical position is reinforced by existing copyright law, which does not recognise sampling as a form of creative practice. For example, Section 183 of the Copyright Designs and Patents Act 1988 refers to the “Infringement of the performer’s rights by use of recording made without consent”. Similarly, section 187(1) enables the prosecution of a person who “infringes the rights of a person having recording rights in relation to a performance who, without his consent or, in the case of a qualifying performance, that of the performer”.
- 10 For example, Chris Sharp’s article on Photek for *The Wire* focuses on the producer’s idiosyncratic break-beat manipulation, and avoids any discussion of the break-beat as an inscription of Black Atlantic collective memory. “In a rare stroke of formal unity, the emotional depth of Photek’s music is a direct consequence of its technical complexity . . . it’s precisely because (Photek) spends upwards of a month on each track . . . attending to the requirements of each individual sound, eschewing, almost monastically, any easy route through the music-making process” (Sharp 1997: 29).

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