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Signifyin(g) Producers: J Dilla and Contemporary Hip-Hop Production

Zachary Diaz

A dissertation submitted to the University of Bristol in accordance with the requirements for award of the degree of Ph. D. in the Faculty of Arts.

78,177 Words

Abstract

This dissertation analyzes the production discography of hip-hop producer James Yancey, known during his lifetime as Jay Dee or J Dilla, through the lens of African diasporic forms of Signifyin(g). This is based on the definitions by scholars such as Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Samuel Floyd, applying the concept of Signifyin(g), or the act of artists obscuring or providing multiple meanings to their audience, as a basis for analysis. The dissertation is presented in two parts. Part one analyzes several hip-hop music production techniques that J Dilla was well known for that make up his "signature sound" as a producer, such as unique rhythmic patterns and digital sampling. Part two then observes these techniques as musical signifiers and considers how they have been reinterpreted and commodified by other producers in both online and live spaces, viewing online hip-hop beat-making communities as what Henry Jenkins calls "participatory cultures." Through these two parts, I will highlight how J Dilla's production discography has influenced hip-hop production since his death in 2006, as well as how the act of Signifyin(g) functions and is crucial to hip-hop production. By observing the function and meanings within acts of Signifyin(g) in this analysis, we will be able to have a better understanding of how hip-hop producers approach the composition of their productions by connecting it with Afrodiasporic cultural forms and practices.

The seven chapters of this dissertation use aspects of music theory, ethnomusicology, and cultural studies to analyze various facets of music production, hip-hop history, internet platforms, and live electronic music performance, all in relation to the music and legacy of J Dilla. Musical details and figures are given and are heavily informed by my own experience as a hip-hop producer. These together make up both a valuable analysis of how J Dilla has influenced hip-hop production after 2006 as well as provide a new framework for future analysis of hip-hop production.

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Tom Garrett, whose explosive and eccentric creativity will be forever an inspiration. He will be dearly missed.

My partner Kelli Gallacher, who put up with my endless ramblings about J Dilla and hip-hop over these years working on the dissertation.

My parents and sister, who would always be a Skype call away whenever I needed some kind words.

Dr. Nathan Fleshner, who set the course of my career by asking me one day after music theory class what kind of music I liked.

My grandfather, whose musical inspirations and influence cannot be understated.

J Dilla, who changed my life.

I declare that the work in this dissertation was carried out in accordance with the requirements of the University's *Regulations and Code of Practice for Research Degree Programmes* and that it has not been submitted for any other academic award. Except where indicated by specific reference in the text, the work is the candidate's own work. Work done in collaboration with, or with the assistance of, others, is indicated as such. Any views expressed in the dissertation are those of the author.

SIGNED: .... DATE:..1/6/2023...........

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Introduction, Part 1

J Dilla and Signifyin(g) in Contemporary Hip-Hop Production

The inspiration for this dissertation is both based on my academic interests and my personal experiences outside of my studies. After receiving my Bachelor of Music in 2015, I discovered an intense creative desire to focus on practicing and developing musical skills outside of my background in music theory and classical saxophone. As I already had an interest in hip-hop and electronic music, I pursued a self-taught education in music production, purchasing the digital audio workstation software Ableton Live 9 and learning the basics through tutorials on YouTube. This resulted in an intense self-taught learning environment in which I attempted and experimented with music production, a topic far outside of what I learned in my undergraduate studies.

Throughout this education, there were a host of names which were mentioned by content creators in the online spaces I frequented that were significant figures within the history and development of popular music production. As my own interests pertained specifically to hip-hop, these names tended to include producers such as Kanye West, Dr. Dre, and J Dilla. It was J Dilla's name, however, that tended to appear the most. Whenever beats produced by him were brought up, heaps of praise and admiration were expressed, along with condolences about his untimely death. After noticing this cult-like following of J Dilla, I began to closely listen to as much of his music as I could find, researching and listening to his solo albums, collaborative production work he did with other artists, and his unreleased instrumental compilations.

Through this saturation of J Dilla's music into my daily music listening, I quickly began to understand why he had such a passionate fanbase, and through this, I too became an avid fan. I read as much as I could on J Dilla's life and career and watched dozens of

interviews with his former musical collaborators. I was astounded with both his talent and his work ethic, as he would produce dozens of instrumental beats on an almost daily basis, leaving hundreds of what could be considered musical sketches and ideas behind him after his passing. What stood out to me the most, however, was how unique his production style was. During this period before I began work on my master's thesis, I noticed that what I listened to most was his instrumental beat compilations, many of which were released posthumously. It dawned on me that, just as I had become a fan of a rapper like Kendrick Lamar for their unique skills relating to their lyrics and flow, I had also become a fan of a producer, albeit for different musical aspects. In this instance, I became a fan due to my acknowledgement of J Dilla's "signature sound" as a producer, admiring the ways in which he constructed and composed rhythmic, melodic, and timbral characteristics of a beat.

As I began my master's program in music theory, both my academic and personal musical interests further crossed over. Through both daily Ableton Live tracks I was working on daily and research into hip-hop production (encouraged by my thesis advisor at the time), I simultaneously began to develop my own signature sound as a producer while also writing and researching various topics on popular music. It became clearer to me that my personal musical creations and my academic research need not be two separate entities, and in fact were extremely beneficial to one another.

This led to the topic of my master's thesis, in which I analyzed various sampling techniques from J Dilla's final album *Donuts*, primarily using Ableton Live 9 as a basis for transcriptions. Though I believe this thesis to be valuable to the development of my own methodology, I believe that I failed to properly convey the context, meanings, and wider influence of J Dilla's production techniques. After my master's thesis was completed, I desired to continue my research into J Dilla, and decided on focusing on other aspects of his signature sound for my doctoral dissertation.

It was clear to me that although the analysis found within my master's thesis was thorough (as is typical of much research within American music theory academia), there were parts of J Dilla's signature sound that I had yet to explore properly. Most importantly, it occurred to me that I had not quite yet answered the question of as to why J Dilla's music is so influential and unique. Other scholars and journalists have written extensively on his unique rhythmic patterns, and as I agree that this is a significant part of his signature sound, I too have included an analysis of his un-quantized rhythms within this very dissertation. My goal for this research, however, is to clearly understand the phenomena that occurs between J Dilla's production techniques and how that is interpreted by listeners. When I say listeners, I refer mainly to those within the wider hip-hop community, whose understandings of hip-hop culture socially construct the meanings and interpretations of J Dilla's work.

This dissertation contributes greatly to the fields of hip-hop studies, music theory, and Afrodiasporic cultural studies. Much of this analysis focuses on how Signifyin(g) relates to and influences the technologies involved in hip-hop production (and vice versa) rather than an all-encompassing cultural exploration of Signifyin(g) within hip-hop. In terms of its audience, this research will appeal most to those who have an interest in gaining a greater understanding of the creative process involved with hip-hop production, as well as those who are fans of J Dilla's music. One important contribution I would like to make with this research, however, is to the history of hip-hop itself. Acting as a "fifth element" of hip-hop culture (along with rapping, DJing, graffiti, and break dancing), knowledge is crucial to the dissemination and evolution of hip-hop culture. This phenomenon of academic research as dissemination of cultural knowledge became most apparent to me after my master's thesis gained a sizable amount of attention, receiving thousands of downloads since 2018. I am happy to say that I have received a great deal of positive comments from emails by hip-hop fans and fellow practitioners, who have stated that my analysis helped them gain better

insight to sampling techniques implemented by J Dilla as well as hip-hop production more generally. I would like to continue this contribution both to academic discourse and to wider hip-hop knowledge and education. The purpose of this dissertation, therefore, is two-fold: to highlight the use of a practice-based method to enable in-depth analysis of J Dilla's music, and to provide a new understanding of hip-hop production as a form of Signifyin(g).

J Dilla's Signifyin(g)

Born as James DeWitt Yancey in 1974 to a family of Detroit musicians, J Dilla was professionally active from approximately 1995 up to his death in 2006, and holds over 800 production credits,[1] collaborating with some of the most influential hip-hop and R&B artists of the late 1990s and early 2000s, such as Erykah Badu, A Tribe Called Quest, and De La Soul. These numerous productions, as well as his solo work, namely his 2001 album *Welcome 2 Detroit* and 2006 instrumental album *Donuts*, and posthumous instrumental releases of compilation albums such as *Dillatronic* and *Motor City*, have had a monumental influence on the art and technique of hip-hop production, from changing how musicians interpret and perform rhythms to leading creations of entire subgenres and "underground" hip-hop communities.[2] My approach to analyzing this influence will be based on the Afrodiasporic concept of Signifyin(g), wherein musical meanings found within his music are obscured to hip-hop audiences and thus create what Henry Louis Gates calls a "hall of mirrors" of interpretations and meanings throughout global hip-hop culture, with J Dilla's music acting as the focal point of these reflections.

[1] Although no official list is available, the current number of production credits attributed to J Dilla on the website WhoSampled.com sits at 810. Whosampled.com, "J Dilla," accessed July 21, 2021, https://www.whosampled.com/J-Dilla/.
[2] Gino Sorcinelli, "Listening Guide: An Intro to the L.A. Beat Scene," *Roland Blog*, accessed January 9, 2021, https://articles.roland.com/listening-guide-la-beat-scene/.

Analyzing J Dilla's production discography through the lens of African diasporic forms of Signifyin(g), as well as how it has shaped forms of Signifyin(g) among contemporary hip-hop producers, have yet to be the sole focus of any major academic work.[3] This dissertation fills this gap in academic research on hip-hop production by taking this approach. As defined and popularized by Gates in his book *The Signifying Monkey,* Signifyin(g) is "a trope, in which are subsumed several other rhetorical tropes, including metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and irony (the master tropes), and also hyperbole, litotes, and metalepsis."[4] Originally referred to as a "troping of tropes" by Gates in relation to African diasporic literature studies, musical tropes can be found within music of the African diaspora as well. Using the production discography of J Dilla as a case study for Signifyin(g) in hip-hop production, I hope to highlight the ways in which a producer can Signify upon tropes of hip-hop production, as well as how that act of Signifyin(g) is crucial to hip-hop production itself.

In the first part of the dissertation, each chapter will highlight a specific musical characteristic of J Dilla's musical style, namely: breaking genre, drum patterns and groove, sampling techniques, and synthesizers.[5] The dissertation's second half will then observe and analyze the various ways in which other music producers used J Dilla's style after his death (after 2006 to present, or what I call the "post-Dilla" era of hip-hop production), looking at several aspects of modern hip-hop beat-making communities and subcultures, such as lo-fi

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[3] Other academic works have discussed J Dilla in relation to the rhythmic grooves of his drum patterns, such as the works of Dan Charnas and Sean Peterson. No major work, however, has discussed beyond this specific topic, and although I will also discuss J Dilla's drum patterns, it will be within the context of Signifyin(g) in African diasporic culture. Dan Charnas, *Dilla Time: The Life and Afterlife of the Hip-Hop Producer Who Reinvented Rhythm* (New York: MacMillan, 2022). Sean Peterson, "Something Real: Rap, Resistance, and the Music of the Soulquarians," PhD Dissertation, University of Oregon, June 2018, accessed September 24, 2018.
[4] Henry Louis Gates Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: a Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988) 35.
[5] These characteristics are based off Simon Reynold's three characteristics highlighted in his article titled "The Cult of J Dilla." Simon Reynolds, "The cult of J Dilla," *The Guardian*, published June 16, 2009, accessed July 5, 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/music/musicblog/2009/jun/16/cult-j-dilla.

hip-hop culture, online resources for music production tools and education, and live instrumental hip-hop performance with the Roland SP-404 sampler. This will show how J Dilla's own acts of Signifyin(g) have been a central influence for hip-hop producers, as well as how these musicians use similar musical signifiers and techniques to Signify upon other tropes of hip-hop production. This analysis differs from others in that it highlights how Signifyin(g) functions beyond just text or lyrics, and shows how this phenomenon can happen through melody, rhythm, and timbre, and created consciously or unconsciously by the producer. Before I start my analysis, however, it is important to establish definitions of and provide information on Signifyin(g) and hip-hop production, as well as clarifying the purposes of the research within the context of previous academic research on the music of J Dilla.

J Dilla in Scholarship

Several major scholarly works exist on the music of J Dilla, though his biography and his music have been predominantly discussed in popular music journalism and criticism, with many of these works exploring how or why J Dilla's beats were so effective in catching the interest of so many others within the hip-hop community. The most authoritative work out of the countless magazine articles and blog posts on J Dilla would be the book *Donuts*, written by journalist Jordan Ferguson on Dilla's final album of the same name, as well as the 2022 biography *Dilla Time* by Dan Charnas.[6] Drummer and producer Questlove (Ahmir Thompson) has also written several books (such as *Mo' Meta Blues* and *Creative Quests*) on his own experiences in the hip-hop industry over the past thirty years, and frequently discusses his experiences working closely with J Dilla on various musical projects. This, along with the most recent book by Dan Charnas, will provide much of the biographical

[6] Charnas, *Dilla Time.* Ferguson, 1-16.

content referred to throughout this dissertation. Though Ferguson's *Donuts* focuses primarily on J Dilla's final instrumental album, to accurately portray the significance of the structure of this album, the author also provides a straightforward biography of J Dilla's life and music career. Throughout this biography, he connects and makes comparisons to Western European composers, from 18th and 19th century composers such as Mozart and Beethoven to 20th century composers such as Karlheinz Stockhausen. Borrowing from the "man and his music" approach of musical biographies in more traditional musicology, Ferguson even compares periods in J Dilla's career to specific stylistic periods within the body of work of classical composers, citing Adorno's "Late Style in Beethoven" and other similar scholarly works that focus on this topic.[7]

Though overall the book provides a substantial amount of useful biographical information on J Dilla which will be cited frequently throughout this dissertation, this approach to interpreting his music and career will be avoided, as I believe this 19th-century romanticization of the struggling artist is reductive to understanding the actual significance of J Dilla's music. When using the "great man theory" of music history that has plagued musicology scholarship for decades in relation to the study of specific composers or artists, it can be quite restricting as it only focuses on individual mastery.[8] This approach is incompatible with the methodology that I have chosen, as the analysis of Signifyin(g) requires a broad viewpoint which connects and observes the relationships between artists, audiences, and musical tropes.

This is certainly not to say that there are not some benefits to analyzing some aspect of his career and eventual death in this manner, which I have discussed in previous

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[7] Ferguson, 101.
[8] Lydia Goehr, *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works: An Essay in the Philosophy of Music* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 37.

scholarship.[9] It is more valuable, however, to look at how his collaborations with other artists influenced his own production discography and vice versa, and how beyond just his final album *Donuts* has influenced future production techniques. In the case of Dan Charnas' *Dilla Time,* Charnas brilliantly compares the European mode of specific quantized rhythms and tones in J Dilla's work to African methods of polyrhythms and granular or microtonal melodies.

In addition to these key books, there are a variety of other scholarly works that also focus on the music and influence of J Dilla. These works have become more common as a topic of musicological research in the past decade, with scholars such as Michael D'Errico and Sean Peterson focusing on J Dilla's production techniques in several journal articles, theses, and dissertations. For instance, other scholars such as Daniel Stadnicki have discussed the influence of J Dilla's rhythmic production techniques specifically on contemporary live drum kit performance.[10] A handful of undergraduate dissertations have also focused on J Dilla, such as David Sciortino and Nello Biasini who,[11] like Stadnicki, discuss J Dilla's influence on contemporary live drumming techniques as well as programmed drum production.

One might notice that, in the scholarship on J Dilla that I have presented so far, there seems to be a focus specifically on the rhythmic techniques J Dilla implemented in productions throughout his career, as well as how that has influenced production and performance in the past decade after his death. The un-quantized drum patterns are, to both

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[9] Zachary Diaz, "Analysis of Sampling Techniques by J Dilla in *Donuts*," master's thesis, Steven F. Austin State University, August 2018, accessed August 15, 2018, https://scholarworks.sfasu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1211&context=etds.
[10] Daniel Akira Stadnicki, "Play like Jay: Pedagogies of drum kit performance after J Dilla," *Journal of Popular Music Education*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (Bristol, UK: Intellect Books, 2017) 253-280.
[11] Nello Biasini, "J Dilla's Influence on Modern Drumming: A research based on groove," Bachelor's thesis, Codarts University for the Arts, Summer 2018, accessed January 27, 2020. Davide Sciortino, "'Why would you quantize all of this?' J Dilla: The Perception of Groove and the Re-Definition of Hip Hop and Electronic Beats," Bachelor's thesis, University of East London, April 2014, accessed July 7, 2020, https://www.academia.edu/6864310/Why_would_you_quantize_all_of_this_-_J_Dilla_the_perception_of_groove_and_the_re-definition_of_hip_hop_and_electronic_beat.

scholars as well as listeners and fans of J Dilla, the most significant and revolutionary musical characteristic of his discography and is the element that is most noticeable and unique. The un-quantized rhythmic quality that can be found throughout the music of J Dilla is not the only unique or influential musical characteristic that he was able to achieve, however. In my previous scholarship as well as several research presentations at various conferences, I have tended to focus on other aspects of J Dilla's production techniques, such as his digital sampling and implementation of low-fidelity (lo-fi) production aesthetics. This has been a focus of my research on J Dilla as I believe a substantial amount of well-researched scholarship has already been done on his un-quantized drum patterns, as discussed earlier. Within the context of this dissertation, I will also be analyzing J Dilla's un-quantization patterns, but more so as a response to how these un-quantized patterns tend to be interpreted by listeners as well as how they are analyzed by fellow scholars, as well as reframing much of that scholarship within the context of Signifyin(g).

What is usually glossed over in many of these texts is a clear explanation as to how or why J Dilla's beats were so effective in catching the interest of so many others within the hip-hop community in terms of their relation to previous musical tropes established.[12] The goal of this dissertation, therefore, is to clearly demonstrate that his music was so effective in influencing others and gaining respect because he was able to uniquely *Signify* his authenticity as a producer to listeners.[13] Acts of Signifyin(g) are nothing new to hip-hop, however, and are crucial to the development and history of hip-hop music and culture.

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[12] Throughout this dissertation, there will be a myriad reference to the "hip-hop community." Though this term seems obtuse, I would define what I refer to as the hip-hop community as a global "imagined community," with both fans and practitioners of hip-hop as members of the "hip-hop nation." This community, like those talked about by Benedict Anderson in his book of the same name, is a socially constructed community, tied together by an affinity for the culture of hip-hop. Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism.* (London: Verso Books, 2006).
[13] Emphasis added.

A Breaking of Breaks: Musical Signifyin(g) in Hip-Hop

Within many African diasporic art forms, the act of Signifyin(g) is a crucial and significant tool that effectively communicates to its audience multiple meanings simultaneously.[14] Gates' influence of this term comes from concepts of semiotics originally coined by Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure in the early twentieth century in his study of words or phrases which represent objects or other meanings found in language.[15] Saussure's original definition was that of the dyadic relationship between the signifier (the word or "sound image" that contains meaning) and signified (the meaning that is created in the mind of the subject who is exposed to the signifier, as represented in Figure 0.1A on page 9).[16] This more general concept of signifying, outside of specifically Afrodiasporic contexts, contains within a wide network of signs (actions, terms, or phrases) that comprise the signifier (the sign) and the signified (idea or concept represented by the sign).

As defined by Gates, the Saussurian form of dyadic semiotics was then applied to the act of Signifyin(g) and was used as a basis for literary analysis in *The Signifying Monkey* in relation to African American language and literature. They can also be applied to other forms of communication and art, especially with more contemporary African diasporic music

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[14] The parenthesized "g" in Signifyin(g) is used by Gates to denote how this term would be pronounced in African American Vernacular English, as Signifyin'. This different spelling is also to differentiate itself from the semiotic term of signifying. Gates, 77.

[15] Music semiotics, or the study of signs and meanings found in music, has been an area of musicology that has gained popularity in the past half-century, with semioticians such as Saussure and Peirce being significant in their influence on this subfield of musicology and music analysis. Musicologists such as Jean-Jacques Nattiez, Thomas Turino, and Philip Tagg have been most influential to my own methods of analysis. Much of Philip Tagg's work focuses on the semiotics of popular music, as well as the concept of "musemes" (deriving from Richard Dawkin's "memes"). Thomas Turino's work deals with a Peircian approach to music semiotics, and uses the triadic relationship of signifier, signified, and object. In the works of Nattiez, specifically in his book *Music and Discourse*, a triadic system (like that of Peircian semiotics) of "poietic, neutral, and esthetic" is established, with these three functioning similarly to signifier, object, and signified respectively. All three of these scholars and their respective works will heavily influence the methodology found in my analysis, along with several other scholars who have written on the field of music semiotics.

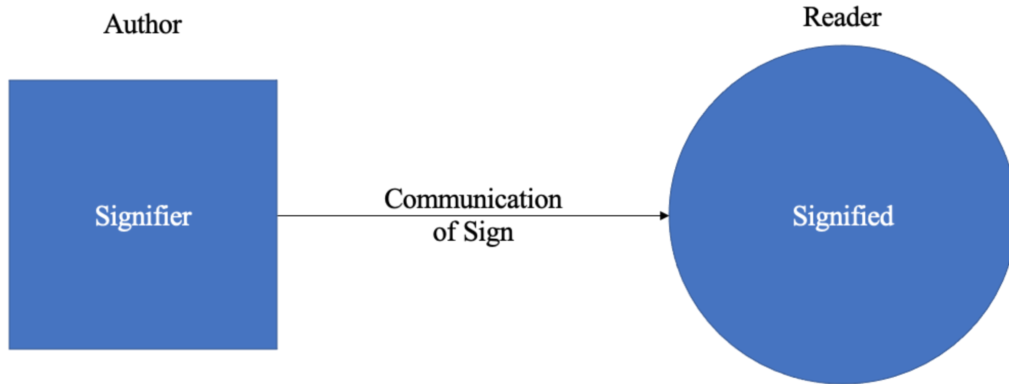
[16] Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics,* (Chicago: Open Court Publishing, 1986).

genres within the African diaspora and have been by several scholars since its publication in 1988, such as Samuel Floyd, Gena Caponi, and Joseph Schloss. [17]

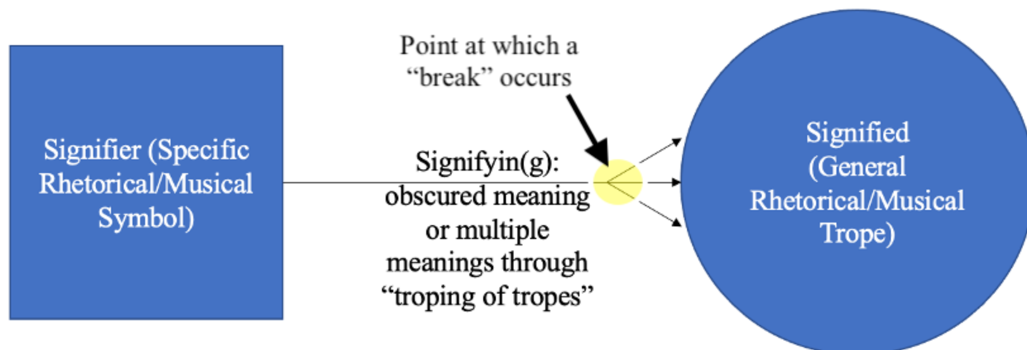
Throughout *The Signifying Monkey*, Gates provides several examples of Signifyin(g) in relation to African American music, referring specifically to jazz and blues of the early-to-mid twentieth century. For example, when discussing the characteristics of Signifyin(g) within the genre of the blues, Gates points out how the average blues musician will create musical phrases that are "elastic in their formal properties" within the typical twelve-bar blues form. He states that "because the form is self-evident to the musician, both he and his well-trained audience are playing and listening with expectation. Signifyin(g) disappoints these expectations; caesuras, or breaks, achieve the same function."[18] Gates' analysis clearly and aptly demonstrates how Signifyin(g) functions within a performance of blues music, with the twelve-bar blues structure acting as a trope or expectation of the listener who is already familiar with certain aspects of the genre. Especially useful is how he highlights how both the musicians and the audience understand the "self-evident" form that is the main structure in which blues music is typically composed. According to this relationship, the goal of the musician is to Signify upon their audience by, as Gates describes it, "playing and listening with expectation,"[19] then Signifyin(g) to break said expectations (as seen in 0.1B on the next page). Though he uses a caesura or break as key examples of Signifyin(g), there are a variety of other ways in which these musicians could play with the expectations of the listener, including the use of "riffing," meaning the repetition of a specific musical phrase, or

[17] Gena Dagel Caponi, *Signifyin(G), Sanctifyin', & Slam Dunking: A Reader in African American Expressive Culture* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999), 141. Joseph G. Schloss, *Making Beats: The Art of Sample-Based Hip-Hop*. (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2014). Samuel A. Floyd, *The Power of Black Music: Interpreting its History from Africa to the United States* (New York: Oxford University Pres, 1997).
[18] Gates, 78.
[19] Ibid, 109.

"quotation," referring to the use of borrowed melodies.[20] Figure 0.1 illustrates these phenomena in full, with both signifying and Signifyin(g) portrayed.



0.1A



0.1B

Figure 0.1A & 0.1B - Basic Act of Saussurian Dyadic Signifying & Afrodiasporic Signifyin(g)

[20] Ibid, 110.

This description of Signifyin(g) in music accords with several definitions provided by other scholars, such as Caponi, Schloss, and Floyd. Caponi defines musical Signifyin(g) as the act of using music:

> through troping, in other words—by trifling with, teasing, or censuring it in some way. Signifyin(g) is also a way of demonstrating respect for, goading, or poking fun at a musical style, process, or practice through parody, pastiche, implication, indirection, humor, tone—or word-play, the illusions of speech, or narration, and other troping mechanisms...Signifyin(g) shows, among other things, either reverence or irreverence toward previously stated musical statements and values.[21]

Key to this definition is that acts of musical Signifyin(g) tend to use borrowed musical material. This is also important to Samuel Floyd's definition of musical Signifyin(g) in his seminal book *The Power of Black Music*, where he states that "musical Signifyin(g) is the rhetorical use of preexisting material as a means of demonstrating respect for or poking fun at a musical style, process, or practice through parody, pastiche, implication, indirection, humor, tone play or word play, the illusion of speech or narration, or other troping mechanisms."[22] One of the significant aspects of Signifyin(g) in African diasporic music is its use of preexisting musical material, which is also characteristic of hip-hop.

Let us observe some examples of Signifyin(g) in hip-hop to clearly understand how meanings created by artists (either rappers or producers) are also obscured or transformed. In the case of rapping, Signifyin(g) through lyrics by using "rhetorical tropes, including metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche,"[23] is crucial to the skill set of any rapper. In UGK and Outkast's 2007 single "International Player's Anthem (I Choose You)," for example, rapper André 3000 (André Benjamin) states in the opening verse of the song that "like a Pip, I'm glad it's night."[24] Here André 3000 creates a play on words which suggests that he has soul in his music like the soul group Gladys Knight and the Pips. The word "pip" is also a play on

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[21] Caponi, 141.
[22] Floyd, 8.
[23] Gates, 35.
[24] "International Player's Anthem (I Choose You)," Spotify, track 2 on UGK, *Underground Kingz,* Zomba Recordings, 2007.

the word “pimp,” which refers to the lyrics’ second meaning as André compares himself to a pimp who is glad it is nighttime, as he can profit off prostitutes who work at night.[25]

Regarding hip-hop production, Signifyin(g) may be enacted by a producer through various production techniques but is most often produced through digital sampling. In Notorious B.I.G.’s (Christopher Wallace) 1994 single “Kick in the Door,” for example, producer DJ Premier uses the introduction from Screamin’ Jay Hawkins “I Put a Spell on You” as the main melodic backdrop for the recording’s instrumental.[26] This Signifies by recontextualizing the original 1950s R&B track and transforming it into a 1990s hip-hop track through its change in time signature from compound 6/8 to simple 4/4.

Expanding on methods of Signifyin(g) in hip-hop production, Schloss considers the form of Signifyin(g) found in the looping of samples as allowing “individuals to demonstrate intellectual power while simultaneously obscuring the nature and extent of their agency...It allows producers to use other people's music to convey their own compositional ideas.”[27] This definition highlights how the digital sampling of preexisting musical recordings, which has been a major characteristic of hip-hop production throughout its history, is itself a form of Signifyin(g). Much of hip-hop production, as discussed by Schloss in *Making Beats*, is based off a loop-based approach, in which two to four-measure loops are used as a basis for an entire hip-hop composition.[28] This is both a characteristic of hip-hop as well as much of

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[25] In relation to rap lyrics, this is also known as “playing the dozens.” Elijah Wald, *The Dozens: A History of Rap's Mama* (Oxford University Press: New York, 2012).
[26] “Kick in the Door,” Spotify, track 4 on Notorious B.I.G., *Life After Death (2014 Remastered Edition),* Bad Boy Records, 1997. “I Put a Spell On You,” Spotify, track 5 on Screamin’ Jay Hawkins, *At Home with Screamin’ Jay Hawkins,* Epic Records, 1958.
[27] Schloss, 52.
[28] Ibid. Oliver Wang in the Oxford Music Dictionary defines hip-hop beat-making as “A colloquial term synonymous with Hip hop production, referring to the creation of musical and rhythmic tracks or ‘beats’ in hip-hop music. Whereas in other musical genres the figure of ‘the producer’ often refers more to an overseer and coordinator of the larger recording process, in hip hop the producer/beat-maker is generally presumed to create, compose, and/or arrange the music for a recording.” Oliver Wang, "Beat-making," *Grove Music Online,* 6 February 2012, accessed 12 Mar. 2020, https://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-1002218626.

African diasporic contemporary popular music. The origins of this loop-based approach began with New York DJs in the 1970s looping "breaks" or heavily percussive sections of recordings on vinyl records. In discussing this loop-based approach to music production, Timothy Hughes in PhD dissertation on the music of Stevie Wonder states that:

> Music itself is always experienced in a sequential, or linear fashion. So when we hear music repeated we hear it move forward to its own beginning. The sensation is one of the beginning directly following the ending without any gap or change of direction at all. With multiple, successive repetitions, the sensation is of a continuous stream of beginning, ending, beginning, ending, and so on. In analyzing how a groove works, it is always important to keep this distinction in mind and to analyze the moment of repetition—the seam between the occurrences—as forward motion from the end to the beginning.[29]

This occurs in almost all hip-hop production, as much of this is loop-based. Equipment such as the MPC or software such as Ableton Live's Session View are based on this loop-based approach. It is the difference between the repetitions where Signifyin(g) occurs, both on a micro level (between loops in an individual composition) and on a macro level (Signifyin(g) in between other beats, artists, genres), like what Tricia Rose states as a state of "repetition" and "rupture," similar to the "breaking of expectations" that was described by Gates.[30] Joseph Schloss also states something similar about looping in hip-hop production, when she explained that:

> Theme and variation, rather than progressive development, become the order of the day [for hip-hop production]. And, although it would be easy to overstate this aspect, there is clearly a political valence to the act of taking a record that was created according to European musical standards and, through the act of deejaying, physically forcing it to conform to an African American compositional aesthetic.[31]

[29] Timothy S. Hughes, "Groove and Flow: Six Analytical Essays on the Music of Stevie Wonder," PhD Dissertation, University of Washington, 2003, accessed August 9, 2021, http://www.steviewonder.org.uk/bio/life-stories/groove&flow/T.Hughes%20-%20Groove%20And%20Flow%20(S.Wonder).pdf.
[30] Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1994), 134.
[31] Ibid.

In this case, the "theme and variation" she refers to is what would be the "theme" or main break that is looped throughout a hip-hop composition and the "variation" which would be any kind of musical interruption (or as Tricia Rose calls it, "rupture") of said composition.[32]

This "theme and variation" method of "compositional aesthetic" is crucial to the structure of the typical hip-hop beat. With much of J Dilla's productions, his approach tends to prominently feature the "theme" as the main looped pattern, with subtle "variations" being shifts in rhythmic or melodic material.[33] In relation to the act of Signifyin(g), both the "theme" and "variation" may contain musical Signifiers. These Signifiers can be as obvious or subtle as the producer wishes them to be and can be as apparent as a complete interruption of the music itself or as basic as a slight shift or change in rhythmic or melodic patterns. The siren sound that J Dilla used at the beginning of several of his later productions (sampled from hip-hop group Mantronix's 1988 recording of "King of the Beats") is a prime example of a more apparent form of Signifyin(g), in comparison to slight changes in the drum pattern of the J Dilla-produced 1995 track "Drop" by The Pharcyde.[34] As shown by figure 0.1 earlier, this act of Signifyin(g) occurs within a hip-hop beat between the producer and their audience or listener, with the Signifyin(g) sounds (through this act of "rupture" as mentioned earlier) between the two.

As I have defined Signifyin(g) using Gates' phrase "troping of tropes" to succinctly describe this phenomenon, I would now like to apply this phrase in relation to hip-hop culture. According to Schloss, the most significant part of any sample-based hip-hop beat is through the discovery of the "break" by the producer. As defined by Schloss, the "break"

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[32] Ibid.
[33] Some exceptions can be found of course, such as Slum Village's 2000 track "Untitled," which features a heavily developed and orchestrated introduction, or his track "African Rhythms" from his 2001 solo album *Welcome 2 Detroit*, which features only "variations" of rhythmic patterns on various percussion instruments.
[34] "King of the Beats – Instrumental," Spotify, track 9 on Mantronix, *The Best of Mantronix 1985-1999,* Capitol Records, 1988. "Drop." Spotify, track 9 on The Pharcyde, *Labcabincalifornia,* Delicious Vinyl, 1995.

would be any musical phrase from a previous recording which the producer would like to sample with. Although this originally referred to the "drum break" section of a recording which was frequently found in funk, soul, and disco recordings of the 1970s, the term "break" may now be used to describe any part of an excerpt of a musical recording that a producer may wish to sample in a new hip-hop beat. In this instance, the break itself functions as a "trope" in that it may contain musical or extramusical features of its respective genre. By using this break and rearranging it into a new hip-hop composition, the producer Signifies upon whatever musical or extramusical tropes may be found in the original recording, thereby "breaking the break." This "breaking of breaks" is an obvious analog to the "troping of tropes" as described by Gates and is a significant part of the hip-hop production process.[35]

Throughout J Dilla's own career, he continually innovated the musical characteristics of his own signature sound by participating in this "breaking of breaks." Though I used the term "break" as a specific reference to samples in hip-hop, I would argue that the term "break" may also be used to describe any trope of hip-hop or wider Afrodiasporic expressive culture, as we will see throughout my analysis of his production discography in this dissertation's first half.

Throughout this dissertation, a consistent theme of "twoness" will be present throughout. This is both due to the nature of Afrodiasporic expression and the phenomena of Signifyin(g) within it. This twoness, originally theorized by W.E.B. Du Bois in *The Souls of Black Folk*, is also present in all African American expressive cultures in that there is a consistent discourse between African and American identities both collectively and

[35] This specific act of breaking in relation to sampling may also be known colloquially in hip-hop production culture as "flipping," in which the same process occurs, and the meanings and musical material found in the original recording are "flipped" into a new hip-hop recording. Though I may use the phrase "breaking of breaks" when discussing its similarities to the "troping of tropes" concept, I will refrain from using the term "breaking" when referring to sampling, as this term is already used in hip-hop culture as a term used for hip-hop dance.

individually.[36] Within collective identities, communities may evolve these identities through artistic expressions such as music or dance. The development of these expressions is then evolved through an individual's own desires for artistic expression. This "collective individuality" is another example of the twoness present in Afrodiasporic expression. Crucial to the diaspora is the constant discourse created by Signifier and Signified. Though the characteristics between the two parties within this discourse may at times be contradictory or oxymoronic, the two parties are always deeply connected with one another, and work together to create the meanings or subversion of meanings created within any Afrodiasporic art form. In this case, the art form of hip-hop production takes centerfold, as this relationship of Signifier and Signified informs the act of Signifyin(g) by both producers and the wider hip-hop community.

This is not to say that other forms of music do not have similar cultural forms, as the study of music semiotics and intertextuality in music genres (such as Western art or popular music) have been well documented and researched in the fields of musicology and ethnomusicology for decades.[37] The specific act of Signifyin(g), however, differs in both its historical background and in its contemporary forms as it is deeply linked to Afrodiasporic expressive cultures.

Through these phenomena of "breaking of breaks," the musical influence when talking about music and music communities specifically refers to the meaning that is created by the Signified from the Signifier, as interpreted by the listeners and fans of J Dilla.[38] The reason why influence occurs is because of the transference of meanings from Signifier to

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[36] W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk,* BEYOND BOOKS HUB, 2021.
[37] See Michael Klein, *Intertextuality in Western Art Music* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005).
[38] Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry,* 2nd Edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997). Ingrid Monson, "Doubleness and Jazz Improvisation: Irony, Parody, and Ethnomusicology," *Critical Inquiry* 20, no. 2 (1994): 283–313, http://www.jstor.org/stable/1343912, John P. Murphy, "Jazz Improvisation: The Joy of Influence," *The Black Perspective in Music* 18, no. 1/2 (1990): 7–19, https://doi.org/10.2307/1214855.

Signified. This then creates a metaphorical line of meanings among the Signified, which then, based on the shared experience of the individuals (such as other hip-hop producers) who interpret various acts of Signifyin(g) become Signified themselves by creating their own meaning based off what was done by the original Signifier. Figure 0.2 on the next page shows this metaphorical line of meaning. Like Charles Sanders Peirce's concept of "infinite interpretants," the transference of meaning between Signifiers and Signified can extend as long as Signifyin(g) is being expressed.[39]

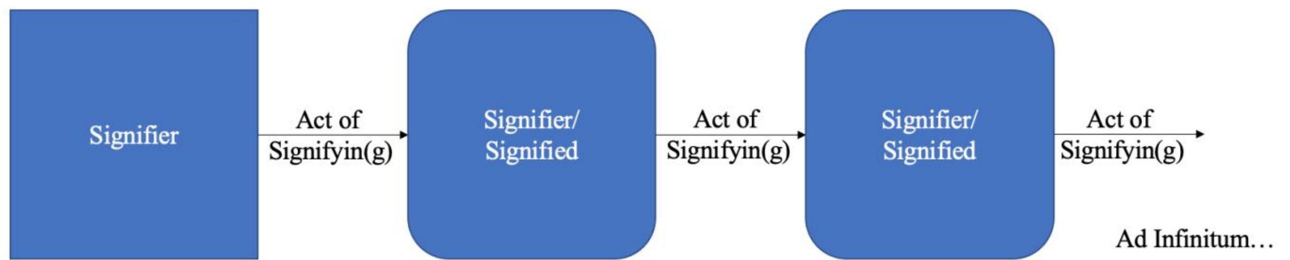

Figure 0.2 - "Infinite Interpretants" of Signifyin(g)

Through these "breaking of breaks" and the musical influence that comes along with this action occurs between individuals, the tropes present in the hip-hop tracks that they produce or perform, and within or between communities that they are a part of. Throughout this dissertation, the musical signifiers we will look at make up the characteristics of J Dilla's acts of Signifyin(g), as well as how these characteristics Signify upon listeners, peers, and other artists or genres. The two major ways in hip-hop production in which Signifyin(g) occurs include:

- Signifyin(g) upon borrowed material: In this instance, the producer is Signifyin(g) upon borrowed musical material, whether it be through sampling

[39] Charles Sanders Peirce, James Hoopes ed. *Peirce on Signs* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 45.

or other methods of musical borrowing. This mainly refers to the act of sampling but may also occur in non-sampled productions. The Signified in this case is the borrowed material itself and may be as specific as an individual artist's recording (through the act of sampling) or through as broad as Signifyin(g) upon an entire music genre.

- Self-Signifyin(g): In this instance, the act of Signifyin(g) occurs with the producer themselves, acting as both the Signifier and Signified.

Both methods may occur during the producer's creative process while working on a production and are used to improve or expand their own musical stylings and characteristics, leading to the creation and establishment of their own signature sound.[40]

The Role of the Music Producer and the Producer-Artist

In the beginnings of record production throughout the first half of the twentieth century, the role of the producer, as described by Zagorski-Thomas in *The Musicology of Record Production*, [41] was in order to facilitate the production of the record itself and aid the recording artist, with many producers having more in common with that of a technician or engineer than any kind of creative input.[42] Originally starting as a "behind the scenes" technician in early recording studios, the skills required to be a music producer today can vary wildly and may include composition, arrangement, or performance of various acoustic or electronic instruments. This was heavily influenced in part to both the advancements in recording technology as well as the changes in mainly Anglophonic popular music culture. The variety of different skills and roles that many music producers had to fill in drastically

[40] This is similar to Leonard B. Meyer's concept of a composer self-borrowing through the "idioms" within their own musical works. Leonard B. Meyer, *Emotion and Meaning in Music,* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956).
[41] Zagorski-Thomas, *The Musicology of Record Production* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 113-130.
[42] Ibid.

changed their function within the music industry, and came to include skillsets such as songwriting, marketing, and session recording.[43]

This role has evolved (among other roles) into what Simon Zagorski-Thomas calls the "producer-artist," in which the individual or individuals in question serve both roles as a producer and recording artist.[44] Many contemporary producers (hip-hop and otherwise) have careers as producer-artists.[45] J Dilla's role throughout his career could primarily be defined as a producer-artist, as he produced instrumental backing tracks for other artists as well as for his own solo material. One main issue with the role of the producer-artist that Zagorski-Thomas points out, however, is that it obscures the difficulties in communicating the collaborative nature of music production. Just like almost all artistic creation, he states, "All music-making – and record production is no exception – is a collaborative activity, even in terms of the legacy of influence that previous musicians and teachers have on subsequent generations."[46] This is true of any producer-artist in almost any genre of popular music, with session musicians and featured artists being a frequent aspect of mainstream music production.[47]

This method of collaboration in Afrodiasporic music creation is what Hughes calls "collective individuality," in which both individual contributions as well as emphasis on one's contributions to the musical collective, is also a significant characteristic of African diasporic music. Timothy Hughes, citing Samuel Floyd, further emphasizes this stating that "while the collective voice is certainly also emphasized in African-American music, it is not emphasized 'over the individual voice' because, in most African-American musical

[43] Ibid, 132-147.
[44] Zagorski-Thomas, 112.
[45] Within hip-hop, producer-artists include Dr. Dre, Madlib, and the RZA. Beyond hip-hop and within wider popular music, this includes producer-artists such as Brian Wilson of the Beach Boys, Kevin Parker of Tame Impala, or electronic duo Daft Punk.
[46] Zagorski-Thomas, 216.
[47] This also frequently occurs in various levels of independent music production, with artists in bedroom studios collaborating with other musicians over the internet.

traditions, the collective voice is made of individual voices."[48] In relation to J Dilla's career and discography, a sizable amount of his productions were collaborations with other artists, from his early productions in the 1990s with rap groups such as De La Soul and A Tribe Called Quest to his various collaborations with neo-soul collective the Soulquarians in the late 1990s and early 2000s. The height of hip-hop supergroup the Soulquarians' success occurred during the late 1990s and early 2000s, in which a string of successful albums (*Things Fall Apart* by The Roots, *Mama's Gun* by Erykah Badu, and *Voodoo* by D'Angelo to name a few) were released and created at Electric Ladyland Studios in New York City. These collaborations were crucial to J Dilla's development as an artist, with the development of his musical style providing him with both financial and cultural capital to pursue the various production techniques he was known for. Much of the discussions (either academic, journalistic, or otherwise) surrounding J Dilla's music tend to underplay the importance of how these collaborations influenced him and allowed his music to shift and evolve throughout the decade of his career, and usually only focus on his influence on his collaborators.[49] Throughout the first half of this dissertation, my analysis focuses on how J Dilla's own musical experiences and collaborations with other artists influenced him, as I believe this will give a clearer understanding of how his production techniques were developed. This is certainly not to downplay the individual contributions he made, as well as his work as a solo artist, but rather to achieve a more detailed view of the origins and developments of his musical styles and production techniques. These musical elements that made up his own musical style, or what Zagorski-Thomas calls the "signature sound."[50]

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[48] Hughes, 19.
[49] The "otherwise" in this case refers to various informal discussions about J Dilla that can be found through various internet forms and social media networks, with his fan base usually focusing on J Dilla's influence on others and rarely vice versa.
[50] Zagorski-Thomas, 112.

J Dilla's Signature Sound

Zagorski-Thomas discusses how many producers evolved to establish their own musical stylings and techniques which create their "signature sound." He further defines this by stating that:

> The use of the term [signature sound] in music has been to describe the character of a particular individual or group's performance style and output…but can also relate to a record company or a producer…the [producers] that are often identified as having a signature sound tend to consistently do something dramatically different from 'common practice' in whatever period and genre they worked.[51]

This last sentence is most important in that it highlights the reason why and how individual artists or groups such as production teams or record companies achieve a signature sound: by creating music which contains aspects that are unique in their production to other recorded music, either from within their genre, time period, or geographical region. Through this act of difference, the possible influence of the musical elements which make up their signature sound may be borrowed, signified, or commodified. The signature sound is made up of musical signs or signifiers, either through signs/symbols in the traditional semiotic sense or through acts of Signifyin(g), especially among African diasporic music genres, respectively.

One of the issues in interpreting the signs or signifiers contained in the signature sound of any artist is the subjectivity that goes along with any individual interpretation of an artist's work. Zagorski-Thomas points this out by emphasizing that: "the categorization of these types of schematic features relies on individual interpretation rather than empirical analysis, and any such analysis should only be measured by how useful it proves to be to our understanding rather than how 'true' it is." Though my analysis is more empirical, I do not deny that the semiotic approach could lead to my own individual interpretations and may be subjective.

[51] Zagorski-Thomas, 112.

What is significant to a signature sound, especially in specific cases, may be up to interpretation. Certain aspects of someone's "signature sound" will be more noticeable or more influential depending on the listener. In J Dilla's case this is true, though there are several aspects that have been broadly agreed upon by fans of his work. The musical characteristics that I observe are also based on what has been discussed and agreed upon as significant parts of his signature sound by producers, journalists, and members of both the J Dilla fanbase and the wider global hip-hop community. The purpose of this analysis is not to map out the distinct and exact number of Signs used by J Dilla. As mentioned by Jean-Jacque Nattiez in *Music and Discourse,* any sort of "universal" sign found in a system will always find exceptions the more one analyzes it.[52] The purpose is to discuss several significant and most prominent aspects of his "signature sound" and how that is representative of how producers can Signify, as well as provide a more effective way of analyzing that is more appropriate to the genre and culture of hip-hop production. In Simon Reynolds' "The Cult of J Dilla," he lays out what he determines to be the three most influential characteristics of J Dilla's sound, that being his use of un-quantized drum patterns, various sampling techniques, and use of synthesizer bass lines.[53] I concur with these and am using these three characteristics of his production discography as a basis for analyzing his forms of Signifyin(g) and how they informed his signature sound. I will add one more unique characteristic as well, that being his embrace of music production beyond hip-hop tropes and experimentation with genres such as Afrobeat, techno, and Latin jazz.

These four elements of his signature sound have been so influential that his legacy (in combination with his prolific nature as a producer as well as his premature death) has

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[52] Jean-Jacques Nattiez, *Music and Discourse: Toward a Semiology of Music,* translated by Carolyn Abbate (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1990), 65.
[53] Simon Reynolds, "The cult of J Dilla," *The Guardian*, published June 16, 2009, accessed July 5, 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/music/musicblog/2009/jun/16/cult-j-dilla.

achieved a cult-like status among various groups within hip-hop culture. Though this veneration of J Dilla's discography may be warranted to many fans of his, the image of J Dilla as an individual master over his music is counter-productive to achieving a clear understanding of his actual artistic process and development of his signature sound, leading fans and fellow collaborators to view the ways in which he Signified as truly authentic to the core tenets of hip-hop aesthetics. What qualifies the signature sound of a producer as being authentic is entirely dependent on time, place, and desired audience.

Signifyin(g) as Authenticity

One primary focus of hip-hop studies literature is on the desire for authenticity among hip-hop communities. From Tricia Rose's seminal *Black Noise* to Anthony Kwame Harrison's *Hip-Hop Underground*,[54] several major studies and ethnographies have been conducted with practitioners and fans exploring as to what being "real" or "authentic" means in hip-hop, how this authenticity is perceived, and how it is appreciated by both audiences and participants in various hip-hop cultural spaces. Because of hip-hop's massive global reach, dissemination into local cultures and spaces, and dense history which (at the time of writing this) spans half a century, it is impossible to claim that hip-hop itself has a single or universal concept of what it means to be truly authentic and "keep it real."

In both editions of *That's the Joint! The Hip-Hop Studies Reader,* an entire section is dedicated to discussing and defining various aspects of authenticity within hip-hop culture, with key figures of hip-hop studies such as Robin Kelley and Michael Eric Dyson chiming in their thoughts on this subject.[55] Part of this desire for authenticity stems from representing

[54] Anthony Kwame Harrison, *Hip-Hop Underground: The Integrity and Ethics of Racial Identification* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2009). Tricia Rose, *Black Noise.*
[55] Murray Forman and Mark Anthony Neal eds. "Part II: No Time for Fake Niggas: Hip-Hop Culture and the Authenticity Debates." *That's The Joint! The Hip-Hop Studies Reader*, 1st ed. (New York and London: Routledge, 2004).

authentic perceptions of Blackness. How this Blackness is portrayed and interpreted, however, is entirely dependent on the artists and their perceived audience. As described by Loren Kajikawa in *Sounding Race in Rap Songs,* groups such as Public Enemy may wish to emphasize aspects of their Blackness using samples from older Black artists such as James Brown or subvert notions of perceived whiteness in cases such as Eminem.[56] Another definition of authenticity within popular music more broadly comes from Allan Moore (paraphrased by Zagorski-Thomas) as "to being true to yourself as a performer, true to your audience and true to a tradition."[57] This ties directly back to notions of authenticity within hip-hop, as Moore states how concepts of either first-person or third person authenticity, as paraphrased by Michail Exarchos acknowledges "that sample-based aesthetics may rely, respectively, on the recognition of specific (artist) utterances or generic (category) signifiers."[58] This ties directly back to the musical signifiers within hip-hop Signifyin(g) with the "breaking of breaks" within hip-hop production being aesthetic subversions of either specific tropes from individual artists or more general tropes from musical subgenres, time periods, or geographic locations.

From the various subgenres of hip-hop music to its spectrum of artists between "mainstream" and "underground" scenes and subcultures, hip-hop rather contains a wide variety of "authenticities" and myriad of ways practitioners "keep it real" among their audiences. How producers Signify depends on the surrounding context in which they create a track, who they create it for, and what technology is available to them.[59]

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[56] Loren Kajikawa, *Sounding Race in Rap Songs* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2015).
[57] Zagorski-Thomas, 124.
[58] Mikhail Exarchos, "*Boom Bap* ex Machina: Hip-Hop Aesthetics and the Akai MPC." *Producing Music: Perspectives on Music Production,* 1st ed. (Abingdon-on-Thames, UK: Routledge, 2019).
[59] Acts of Signifyin(g) may also be dependent upon what musical material artists are able to use legally. In many cases, however, this is achieved without the concern of legality. Kembrew McLeod, *Freedom of Expression®: Resistance and Repression in the Age of Intellectual Property.* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007).

The goal for producers is to express themselves authentically and show their skills by implementing their own original musical ideas based on a previously established standard or trope. J Dilla was well-known for this, as there are many accounts by peers as to the speed, dexterity, and clarity of his creative process while working in studios.[60] The virtuosic nature of these stories has led to his postmortem legacy receiving mythic status among hip-hop fans, and although this praise is certainly warranted, it has also led to approaches of analyzing his creative process which may be problematic. This perceived authenticity is because of his talent and virtouisity, leading to some calling him the Mozart of hip-hop.[61] The purpose of this analysis and methodologies found within this dissertation, however, is to move away from what Philip Ewell calls the "white racial frame" of music theory and analysis and put it more within the Afrodiasporic act of Signifyin(g) and how those acts created his signature sound as a producer.[62] Viewing figures such as J Dilla as "great masters" similar to Western European composers limits our understanding of how music creation and cultures such as that of contemporary hip-hop production actually function. Regardless of how J Dilla is viewed to his fans, these groups of aspiring producers in many instances wish to foster communities in which they can experiment or build off and therefore Signify upon the original signifiers that J Dilla established. This has led to a formation of what I call local "beat scenes" in various and mainly urban areas around the globe.

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[60] Eddie Houghton, "The Story Behind Some of J Dilla's Greatest Productions." *Fader*, published December 1, 2006, accessed July 4, 2019, https://www.stonesthrow.com/news/2006/12/the-story-behind-some-of-j-dilla-s-greatest-productions.

[61] Rob Fitzpatrick, "J Dilla: the Mozart of hip-hop," *The Guardian*, January 27, 2011, accessed May 9, 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/music/2011/jan/27/j-dilla-suite-ma-dukes.

[62] Philip A. Ewell, "Music Theory and the White Racial Frame," *Journal of the Society for Music Theory,* Vol. 26, no. 2 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2020), accessed July 14, 2020, https://mtosmt.org/issues/mto.20.26.2/mto.20.26.2.ewell.html.

Signifyin(g) J Dilla in Local "Beat Scenes"

Defining global and local hip-hop scenes, as well as the relationship between these two categories, will be relevant to the dissertation's second half, which will focus on contemporary instrumental hip-hop producers in online spaces and an analysis the culture of lo-fi hip-hop in music streaming services in chapters five and six, as well as live spaces, such as an analysis of instrumental hip-hop performance by Dibia$e in chapter seven. This second half will use the acts of Signifyin(g) by J Dilla analyzed in the first half to highlight the similarities in contemporary production techniques, showing how J Dilla's ways of Signifyin(g) has had an impact on communities of producer-artists. So far, I have referred to hip-hop culture and community in the broadest sense, in which the whole of the hip-hop community includes hip-hop fans, practitioners, and educators across the world. Though this may seem too broad initially, the ways in which hip-hop culture functions can be seen in both local and global communities, with said communities disseminating their own regional cultures upon both fronts. Scholars such as Sujatha Fernandes and academic journals such as the *Journal of Global Hip-Hop Studies* have focused on this as a topic of research, exploring both the local differences and global connections between communities around the world.[63] This research shows most importantly the interconnectedness of these scenes, especially with the help of the internet and social media.

Groups of individuals which, as defined by John Dewey, live "in virtue of things they have in common."[64] Communities are developed through communication of commonalities, and these commonalities are usually made up of symbols which the community values and

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[63] Sujatha Fernandes, *Close to the Edge: In Search of the Global Hip Hop Generation* (New York: Verso, 2011). Murray Forman, Karim Hammou and Sina Nitzsche eds. *Global Hip-Hop Studies*, 1st ed. (Bristol, UK: Intellect Books, 2020). H. Samy Alim, "Hip Hop Nation Language: Localization and Globalization." *The Oxford Handbook of African American Language,* eds. Jennifer Bloomquist, Lisa J. Green, and Sonja L. Lanehart, Oxford Handbooks Online, 2015, accessed June 5, 2022, https://www.oxfordhandbooks.com/view/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199795390.001.0001/oxfordhb-9780199795390-e-49.

[64] John Dewey, *The Public and its Problems* (New York: Holt Publishing, 1927), 32.

wishes to express by repeating, expanding upon, or transforming. How these are communicated between and outside of the community is what leads to a discourse between community members, which leads to definitions and possible redefinitions of said symbols.

In music communities, the main basic commonality is the performance, composition, or discussion of various genres or subgenres of music. These can exist both in live, person-to-person experiences, such as patrons a music venue or members of a musical group, as well as virtual spaces online, such as internet forums and social media platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube. Due to the quick dissemination from the advent of internet platforms, the global aspect of any form of internet community tends to be implied, as these communities may be accessed by everyone with an internet connection. The two communities I will be referring to throughout this dissertation are: the global hip-hop community, and the global beat-making community.

The global hip-hop community consists of all fans and artists who have common interests in hip-hop music, history, and culture.[65] Although this community may have local sub-communities among certain cities or geographical regions, the global community is connected through various systems of online and live events. From internet forums to international music festivals, the ways in which individuals or groups of individuals interact always involve the dissemination of hip-hop culture, with a consistent dialectic occurring between hip-hop disseminated by mainstream music industry and local hip-hop communities.

The hip-hop beat-making community exists as a subculture within the larger realm of the global hip-hop community. I use the term “beat-making” as opposed to “producing” or “producer” for two key reasons, the first being that it is the term that many musicians within the community tend to use, and the second being that “beat-making” tends to refer to the act of making beats, or composing hip-hop instrumentals using various electronic music

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[65] Fernandes, 15.

equipment, in a less formal setting.[66] The term “producer” tends to have more formal connotations, such as a record producer working in a music studio, whereas “beat-making” contains connotations of a “bedroom producer” that may make music at home in their own makeshift space for music creation.[67] This term also infers that the beat-maker can come from all skill levels, from amateur to professional musicians.

Within the beat-making community, the main shared interest is the creation of hip-hop beats. Within this subculture, although it has evolved substantially over several decades, the Signifyin(g) which takes place within this community have been a major factor in influencing the musical aesthetics of hip-hop production. Much of the scholarship that focuses on authenticity in the production or DJing side of hip-hop music and culture tends to be from the perspective of academics outside of said cultures, and although this research has usually been proven to be valuable within the wider fields of hip-hop studies and popular musicology, this research tends to be limited simply by the fact that the academic may have little to no knowledge of personal experience and understanding as a fellow practitioner. As a hip-hop producer myself whose own musical output is heavily influenced by J Dilla, I am approaching this dissertation as not only an academic whose previous research has focused on his music, but also as a practitioner and fellow member of the global hip-hop production community. This identity as both fan and academic has heavily informed my own knowledge of the culture I am studying, as I consider myself to be a participant.[68]

The transition that one faces when going from fan to scholar is a characteristic that is shared among much of the academic research done on J Dilla, where many musicians who

[66] Wang, “Beat-making.”

[67] For more information on the history and phenomenon of “bedroom producers,” see: Daniel A. Walzer, "Independent music production: how individuality, technology and creative entrepreneurship influence contemporary music industry practices,” *Creative Industries Journal.* Vol. 10 (1): 21–39*,* published October 25, 2016.

[68] Henry Jenkins, *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers: Exploring Participatory Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 14.

were originally casual listeners of his music then become both fans and researchers. This may evolve into a desire to research the music of J Dilla because of their passion for the late producer's music. This balance between fan and academic is what Henry Jenkins calls an "aca-fan" (a portmanteau of academic and fan),[69] and seems to be where many of these scholars lie, myself included. I believe this experience as a producer myself has heavily influenced my approaches to research and analysis, in that it has informed me of the importance of looking at the musical influences of J Dilla from the perspective of those who have been influenced by him. How one implements the techniques originally innovated by J Dilla is entirely dependent on the material conditions that surround them and what sorts of musical equipment or instruments they have access to.

J Dilla's Signifyin(g) as the "Hip-Hop Sublime"

In Adam Krims' *Rap Music and the Poetics of Identity*, he defines the "hip-hop sublime" as a sonic ideal found within much of hip-hop music in which a multitude of "clashing timbral qualities" is heard within the production of the track.[70] To many hip-hop producers (J Dilla included), it is a desire to create a sample-based composition using previous recordings from multiple sources, thus creating a simulated performance within the production that features various sonic textures from different artists, genres, or eras. This concept functions within the wider context of Afrodiasporic expression as a trope which is to be Signified upon by the producer, as the producer themselves wishes to create their own signature sound through their interaction with this "sublime" concept.

Mikhail Exarchos further expands on this concept, stating that the "Kantian-inspired 'hip-hop sublime' extends as far as recognizing 'timbre … as a crucial means of

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[69] Jenkins, 22.
[70] Adam Krims, *Rap Music and the Poetics of Identity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 87.

organization' and a catalyst in the listener's sensemaking sonic experience; but it does not explore how the "combination of incommensurable musical layers … are selectively and dramatically brought into conflict with each other."[71] This quote provided by Exarchos references the Enlightenment-era roots that the term "sublime" has, as well as its expansion of the term in relation to the much more contemporary art of hip-hop production. I would like to expand on this definition of the term "hip-hop sublime" by connecting with my own research and highlighting just how significant this term is to understand why producers Signify.

Tyler Bunzey also updates Krims' definition of "Hip-Hop Sublime" in his article "The Hip-Hop Sublime: On the Phenomenology of Hip-Hop's Sound."[72] He states that the term "hip-hop sublime" refers to "the affective communal registers of sound that are only available in relationship with the musical culture itself."[73] He also places it within the wider framework of what he calls the "Black Sublime," which he describes as the aesthetics of wider Afrodiasporic expressive culture that "pushes beyond what literacy can offer in terms of political subversion," with the term "literacy" referring to what he calls the "ideology of literacy" found in Western culture.[74] In connecting hip-hop's aesthetic roots to other Black expressive traditions, he historicizes both the "Black Sublime" and the "Hip-Hop Sublime" by placing it within the historical roots of slavery and colonialism, and highlights how the cultural phenomena and experience of this sublime notion reflects expressions of "horror or beauty, pain or pleasure" within Black culture.

[71] Michail Exarchos, "Reimagining the 'Phonographic' in Sample-Based Hip-Hop Production: Making Records Within Records," PhD Thesis, University of West London, April 2022, accessed September 4, 2022, http://repository.uwl.ac.uk/id/eprint/8997/1/Exarchos%20-%20PhD%20by%20Practice%20Thesis%20Final%20(April%202022).pdf, 34.
[72] Tyler Bunzey, "The Hip-Hop Sublime: On the Phenomenology of Hip-Hop's Sound," *Journal of Contemporary Rhetoric,* Vol. 12, No. 2, pp. 52-64, 2022, accessed January 4, 2023, http://contemporaryrhetoric.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/Bunzey_12_2_2.pdf, 53.
[73] Ibid.
[74] Ibid.

Just as I discussed the differences between Saussurian signifying and Afrodiasporic Signifyin(g), I would also like to discuss similar differences between the Western concept of the sublime and its use in the term "hip-hop sublime." The clearest way of understanding these differences, however, would be to look at wider concepts beyond hip-hop. I will therefore be using the term "Afrodiasporic sublime" to denote this.

Within Western philosophical understandings of the sublime, writings from philosophers like Edmund Burke or Immanuel Kant tend to serve as the basis for its definition, that being of a transcendental or overwhelming existential experience caused by a piece of art. Though this concept was most heavily influential in artworks of the 19th Century (ranging from paintings to music), I would argue that certain notions of what qualifies as a piece of music as reaching the sublime is still present within Western academic music studies. Especially within the realms of music theory (a field which I am most familiar with in its American context), analysis of musical concepts such as resolving harmonies, consonance, and wider concepts of unity, themes, and even overarching narratives are heavily emphasized, both in Western contemporary art music and popular music studies. To many Western musicians, popular or classical alike, the emphasis to communicate clear musical ideals related to tone, melody, or lyrics is a tendency found frequently, both in formal conservatory settings and more informal music creation and production.

Within the context of Afrodiasporic expressive culture, these notions of the sublime tend to function differently than their Western counterparts. The desire for "clashing timbral qualities" fits well into the "Heterogenous Sound Ideal" theorized by Olly Wilson, in which the characteristics of Afrodiasporic music tend to contain conflicting rhythmic, melodic, or timbral patterns, rather than unified or consonant ones.[75] Because of, the goals of musicians

[75] Olly Wilson, "The Heterogeneous Sound Ideal in African-American Music," In *New Perspectives in Music*, ed. Josephine Wright (Sterling Heights, MI: Harmonie Park Press, 1992).

participating in Afrodiasporic forms of cultural expression may wish to take whichever tropes are present and therefore participate in the act of is directly connected to the act of Signifyin(g). It is clear, then, that the "sublime" concept in relation to its use in the term "hip-hop sublime" is a subversion of Western notions and tendencies of the sublime, and therefore may be interpreted as a cultural act of Signifyin(g) upon tropes of both Western and Afrodiasporic tropes of the sublime.

Hip-Hop Production and the Social Construction of Technology

Much of my analysis will also refer to various forms of music technology that surrounds hip-hop production. The production of hip-hop throughout almost its entire history has revolved around the evolution of electronic music technology in the second half of the twentieth century. As discussed by a variety of scholars including Mark Katz, Michael D'Errico, and Paul Théberge, the implementation of said technologies have shaped how music is both produced and consumed at almost every aspect of music cultures and culture industries.[76]

In much of the research on music technology, an emphasis is made on out just how prevalent music technology is in modern contemporary life. In *Capturing Sound: How Technology Has Changed Music*, for example, Katz explains in each chapter as to how the invention of the musical recording has changed not only how music is consumed, but also how the structures of musical pieces themselves have evolved throughout the twentieth century in order to adapt to the advent of this new technology.[77] In relation to hip-hop, Katz discusses in his chapter how sampling in hip-hop is intrinsically linked to the evolution of

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[76] Michael A. D'Errico, "Interface Aesthetics: Sound, Software, and the Ecology of Digital Audio Production," PhD thesis, University of California Los Angeles, May 2016, accessed March 2, 2020, https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0mv9v64c. Mark Katz, *Capturing Sound: How Technology Has Changed Music,* revised ed. (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2010). Paul Théberge, *Any Sound You Can Imagine: Making Music/Consuming Technology,* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1997).
[77] Katz, 26-28.

hip-hop as a music genre itself, and how DJ scratching further shows how music technologies evolve into outlets for music creation, composition, and reinterpretation. According to Katz, technology is not only just an influence on music and vice versa, music *is* technology,[78] and has been the case for as long as humans have been creating tools.[79] As humans have evolved to create and benefit from tools, so too have they created tools to create and perform music.

J Dilla was able to achieve his "signature sound" and therefore express various acts of Signifyin(g) is through his interactions with various forms of music technology.[80] From various digital sampler workstations such as the Akai Professional MPC3000 to the Moog Voyager Synthesizer, the use of electronic music instruments was crucial to the construction and composition of almost all his production discography. This recognition of the importance of a music producer's (or a musician's in general) relationship to technology has been discussed by various scholars such as Paul Théberge, Simon Zagorski-Thomas, Paul Harkins, Michael D'Errico, and Patrik Wikström, as well as institutions such as Smithsonian Museum of African-American History.[81] The significance of music technology and its relation to the development and evolution of African diasporic music is so vast and far-reaching that it would require another dissertation addressing that topic.[82] Within the context of this dissertation, however, this relationship of human input to various technologies, commonly referred to as the Social Construction of Technology or SCOT, will focus specifically on the music of J Dilla, as it is important to understand how the creation of his productions, whether they be simple instrumentals or full tracks produced for other artists, allowed him to Signify

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[78] Emphasis added.
[79] Zagorski-Thomas, 64.
[80] Ibid, 32.
[81] D'Errico, "Interface Aesthetics." Paul Harkins, "Following the Instruments and Users: The Mutual Shaping of Digital Sampling Technologies," PhD dissertation, The University of Edinburgh, 2016, accessed November 8, 2018, https://www.era.lib.ed.ac.uk/handle/1842/22943?show=full. Théberge, *Any Sound You Can Imagine.* Patrik Wikström, *The Music Industry,* Digital Media and Society Series (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2009). Zagorski-Thomas, *The Musicology of Record Production*.
[82] In fact, J Dilla's equipment that was mentioned earlier can be found in one of the exhibits, highlighting not only the importance of this relationship within African diasporic music, but also using J Dilla as a prime example of this.

acts of musical difference that have heavily influenced how hip-hop producers post-2006 Signify.[83] How producers Signify is dependent and influenced by the various forms of technology available to them, and production techniques such as sampling and drum sequencing are informed by the process of music creation using said technologies. These technologies may also be helpful in aiding how we create visual diagrams and transcriptions for analysis, as software such as digital audio workstations (DAWs) can provide visuals for the construction or composition of beats, and within those beats, musical signifiers, and specific acts of Signifyin(g).

[83] Though there has been a sizable amount of research on the topic of SCOT from various disciplines, I will be mainly referencing it from the works of Paul Théberge, as his research relates SCOT specifically to music technology.

Introduction, Part 2

Decoding Dilla: On Practice-Based Methodology and Transcribing Hip-Hop

Many figures throughout this dissertation will feature visual diagrams of audio transcriptions using the digital audio software Ableton Live. The purpose behind using Ableton Live specifically for my transcriptions mainly has to do with an Occam's razor line of reasoning. I decided that the best approach to analysis was the approach which was the easiest and most accessible to me, and I realized that the best way for me to understand and analyze hip-hop beats (especially sample-based productions) was to simply remake the beats with the equipment I already had. Every digital audio workstation, regardless of its format (hardware such as the Akai Professional MPC or software such as Pro Tools, Logic Pro, or Ableton Live), functions in its most basic form as an audio sequencer in which the user may place and arrange pieces of digital audio into a single composition. One specific advantage to Ableton Live is its "Arrangement View" which clearly shows every piece of audio and where they are specifically placed within an audio project or "live session." Other DAWs usually also share a similar arrangement view, with my preference for Ableton having more to do with personal taste and a greater experience with the software rather than any objective academic justification.

This form of practice-based research does not desire to accurately remake the creative process, but the results of the creative process and the meanings that are found within the production of a track. Other scholars I mentioned earlier such as D'Errico have featured remakes of productions both in their aural re-creation and through using the specific equipment that was used in the original production. I believe this methodology to be invaluable in understanding the specifics of the functions and limitations of music production equipment, especially in relation to the limitations of older production hardware such as the

E-Mu SP-1200. I have chosen not to take this specific approach, however, both because of its substantial financial burden (the purchase of even a single piece of vintage production hardware could cost up to thousands of pounds) and the unnecessary information it would provide in relation to my analysis of Signifyin(g). Although J Dilla himself did not use Ableton Live, many of his productions may be sufficiently remade aurally through the software. The use of specific DAWs as transcription tools may evolve through various academic discourses in the years to come, with scholars who study music production using different DAWs for various reasons and possible advantages. It is not my desire to claim that Ableton Live be used as the standard for music production studies, but rather to show how this specific software may be valuable for transcription and analysis.

My desire for this practice-based approach follows scholars such as Michail Exarchos, Simon Zagorski-Thomas, and Michael D'Errico. This is especially the case for the scholarly work of D'Errico, whose exploration into instrumental hip-hop has been a significant influence on my own approach. Exarchos' PhD work has especially significant in that it both focuses on the creation and process of beat-making and provides insight into how specific timbres are created during the production process.[84] Through this autoethnography, musical characteristics beyond basic Western understandings of melody, harmony, and rhythm are explored. Finally, much of Zagorski-Thomas's research, especially in his books *The Musicology of Record Production* and *Practical Musicology,* have provided significant information on how to approach analyses of music production.[85] My own analyses, however, differs and therefore builds off the research of these scholars (as well as several others I will mention) in several important ways.

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[84] Michail Exarchos, "Reimagining the 'Phonographic' in Sample-Based Hip-Hop Production: Making Records Within Records," PhD Thesis, University of West London, April 2022, accessed September 4, 2022, http://repository.uwl.ac.uk/id/eprint/8997/1/Exarchos%20-%20PhD%20by%20Practice%20Thesis%20Final%20(April%202022).pdf.
[85] Zagorski-Thomas, *Musicology of Record Production*. *Practical Musicology* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022).

One major difference is the fact that I will be looking at the work of a single artist. Though scholars such as D'Errico and Exarchos have mentioned and analyzed works of specific producers, I have chosen to focus solely on J Dilla, as both the mass quantity of productions and unique historical influence he has had on music production provides a strong basis for analyzing how Signifyin(g) occurs within hip-hop production. This research also differs in that hip-hop production's relation to the cultural practice of Signifyin(g), an aspect which I feel has been absent in much of the scholarly analysis on hip-hop production. In works of music theory and history, scholars such as Amanda Sewell and Nate Patrin have shown what is being sampled but have failed to show the cultural processes connected to how or why it's being sampled.[86] Much of this research also fails to show the relationship between the producer, their musical influences (those whom they sample or borrow musically in some way), and their perceived audience (rappers, collaborators, or fans), a circular relationship which is culturally informed by the practice of Signifyin(g). This cultural practice is far older than that of the producer, the hip-hop DJ, and the turntable, and its intrinsically connected to the history and evolution of these roles within wider hip-hop culture. Through this dissertation, I hope to clearly highlight this connection and bring this into the foray of practice-based research on hip-hop production.

One of the other reasons I have chosen to use a practice-based approach in my methodology is because of my connection to the process of Signifyin(g) within hip-hop production. It is something that as a practitioner myself I have first-hand experience with and is the reason I was inspired to explore this topic of Signifyin(g) in the first place. My own methods of beat-making have been heavily informed by the signature sound of J Dilla, and as I have learned how J Dilla Signified through his music from years of research, I too have

[86] Nate Patrin, *Bring That Beat Back: How Sampling Built Hip-Hop* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2020). Amanda Sewell, "A Typology of Sampling in Hip-Hop," PhD dissertation, Indiana University, May 2013, accessed September 6, 2016, http://www.academia.edu/3492661/A_Typology_of_Sampling_in_Hip-Hop.

learned how I Signify and participate in this culture of Afrodiasporic expression. I would argue that part of the reason for Signifyin(g) by Black artists is to express their own Black identity and to place their own unique Blackness among the wider collective of identities within the diaspora. As a non-Black academic researching this topic, the research itself, especially when it comes to my own experiences related to the culture of beat-making, may have certain shortcomings. Though I am not Black myself and cannot comment on such identities myself, I still participate in a culture which is distinctly Black, and that my own experiences within this culture still may provide value as a practitioner. As a white cisgender male my participation has also been informed through the privileges given to me by my identity and position in Western academia, I believe that my experience as a member of the global hip-hop community also has intrinsic value to my research in that it has provided culturally relevant "real world" information and experiences.

Elaborating upon these "real world" experiences, I have found that the act of Signifyin(g) occurs within my own music and through the experiences I have had in collaborations with other artists and within live events. Such events include live hip-hop "open mic" nights at various venues around the Bristol area, as well as several competitive beat-making events or "beat battles" that I have participated in. The several albums I have released with Manchester-based record label Beatsupply, as well as a number of excursions to various vinyl record stores around Europe and the United States in search of samples to use for my own hip-hop productions by "crate digging" have also greatly informed me on the understanding of Signifyin(g) within hip-hop beat making.

My Experiences with Signifyin(g)

In relation to my background as a live performer, I have participated in several "open mic" nights around the Bristol area. Bristol's lively hip-hop scene has been a significant

influence on both my music and how I perform my music, as the opportunities for live performance have been an outlet for both creative expression and understanding the creative process of hip-hop production. I frequented open mic nights at local pubs such as the Grain Barge and the Gallimaufry, both of which are hosted by local rapper Mike Dennis. I usually performed by using my Roland SP-404 and playing back several pre-made musical loops and drum sounds. Afterwards I would usually get feedback from friends, hip-hop fans, and fellow hip-hop creators (either producers or rappers) in the audience upon hearing my performance. This became an informal school of beat-making for me, as my weekly performances would provide feedback, which would lead me to creating new productions, then performing those new productions at an open mic the following week.

One consistent comment I would get during my informal feedback discussions was that my beats were similar to the signature sound of J Dilla. This was intentional on my part, as both my artistic desires for making beats was both creatively and academically interested in creating sounds that were obviously inspired by J Dilla. As I stated in the introduction, the characteristic sounds of J Dilla as described by Reynolds (the un-quantized drum patterns, sampling techniques, and use of synthesizer melodies for bass lines) have been a major influence on my creative output and has manifested itself as a part of my own signature sound as a producer-artist.

One other experience I had that heavily informed my understanding of Signifyin(g) within hip-hop production was my participation in a hip-hop beat competition or “beat battle” at the European Hip-Hop Network Conference at the University of Bristol in 2019. In this competition, a bracket of eight producers competed head-to-head by each playing one minute of a hip-hop instrumental, with the audience deciding whose beat was the best. I had brought my Roland SP-404 sampler with several tracks that I thought would appeal to the audience, with some of these tracks being my attempts at creating an un-quantized drum pattern similar

to that of J Dilla. When I played this track, the response from the crowd was overwhelmingly positive, with many in the crowd shouting “J Dilla!” in recognition of the style of drum pattern that I had implemented within the track. This positive feedback led me to reaching the finals of the beat battle that evening, and with each round, I attempted to play beats that both represented the signature sound of J Dilla while also playing tracks that represented me as an artist and built upon musical characteristics that were collectively understood by the audience. Through this experience, the process of Signifyin(g) became apparent to me, as my attempts at impressing or surprising the audience through musical Signifiers within my beats then resulted in Signifyin(g) upon the audience, perfectly encapsulating both Gates’ and Floyd’s definition of Signifyin(g).

After the beat battle, I thought about my relationship between myself and the audience, and why they responded the way they did. They did so because both individually and collectively, they had understandings and expectations of what to hear in a hip-hop beat. As described by David Fay: “recollection of relevant previous experiences is triggered by the perception of signs, and these are integrated into the webs of meaning, enriching the subject’s understanding of their lived situation.”[87] When those expectations are not only met, but exceeded or subversed in some way, that is when the Signifyin(g) occurs, as this part of the experience is exclusively influenced by the Afrodiasporic cultural practice. This is because it is not just the “perceptions of signs” that occur during this process, but a further experience that goes one step beyond semiotic interpretation.

Finally, my experiences producing and releasing three instrumental hip-hop albums throughout the course of my PhD research provided me a substantial amount of insight into

[87] David Fay, “Faith in Listening: Passion music and the construction of meaning in listening communities,” PhD thesis, University of Bristol, December 2015, accessed March 2, 2023, https://ethos.bl.uk/OrderDetails.do?uin=uk.bl.ethos.702174.

the hip-hop production process and its relation to Signifyin(g). These three albums (*Hard Wax, Atomicus,* and *Gastro*) were created using music production methods I had learned through informal discussions both in person with fellow hip-hop producers and on various online social media websites such as Reddit and Facebook. The purpose of them was not for the sake of research for my PhD, but to fulfill my creative desires and establish myself as a hip-hop producer, both locally within the Bristol music scene and globally within online spaces. One of the byproducts of this creative pursuit, however, was the education I received when creating these tracks, as my understanding of the hip-hop production process and its methods, approaches, and aesthetics were much more well-rounded.

Two major aspects of the hip-hop production process became apparent to me during my time creating these albums. Firstly, that the creative process is heavily determined by the material conditions that the producer finds themselves in. A producer's location, demographic, or income may determine what or how a producer approaches beat-making. This includes both the musical material that a producer creates within their beats and the production equipment that they use to create said beats. During my time living in Bristol during my PhD course, for example, I was heavily influenced by popular subgenres of electronic music that were prevalent within the city, such as trip-hop and drum n' bass. My previous musical knowledge also came into play in relation to the specific characteristics of beats I was hoping to create. Both passion for J Dilla's music and my knowledge of jazz recordings aided in my creative desires to implement both jazz and hip-hop aesthetics within my productions. I also became more aware of my lived experience as a white cisgender male creating music that was shaped by Black experiences, and how my privilege within that position shaped I choose to express myself creatively through making beats.

Secondly, the creative process is also shaped by collective cultural ideas of what is determined to be a good hip-hop beat. Characteristics described by Schloss, such as the use of

samples from vinyl recordings and unique drum breaks, tend to be seen as more culturally authentic to the sounds of a hip-hop instrumental. Though these characteristics may be different within and between subgroups of hip-hop communities (fans of trap music, for example, may prefer drum sounds from the TR-808 drum machine instead of sampled drum breaks, or fans of g-funk may prefer prevalent low and high synthesizer melodies), within instrumental hip-hop producers, the musical characteristics of what determines the ideal hip-hop beat tend to be (but are not limited to): a unique drum pattern, a looped musical sample, and some other aspect of musical material, e.g. added synthesizer melody or bass line, vinyl scratch sounds, and so on. This desire to create an ideal piece of music using these characteristics creates what Krims calls the "hip-hop sublime," and functions as a collective ideal for hip-hop producers.

Through these perspectives based on my own experiences as a practitioner, I have experienced what could be considered a dualist approach to understanding hip-hop production, with both the material and ideal aspects influencing my own approach to beat-making. The way in which I communicate these aspects, however, is through the act of Signifyin(g). These two parts inform producers such as myself of how I should Signify and who I should Signify to, as this may be socially constructed based on place, demographic, where the beat will be posted, how the beat will be commodified, and so on.

Analyzing Hip-Hop Beats: D'Errico and Exarchos

Though there are other scholars who I will mention that have influenced my methodology, the two main scholars that have shaped how I approach my analysis are Mikhail Exarchos and Michael D'Errico. Though I have mentioned them previously, I would like to examine in detail what their methodologies are in their own scholarly work and how it informs my own.

During my initial foray into hip-hop analysis during work on my master's thesis, the scholarly work of Michael D'Errico, in his master's thesis, PhD thesis, and other journal articles had a significant impact on my methodology. In his scholarship he focuses on the creative process between the equipment and the user of various music technologies, with his master's thesis focusing on instrumental hip-hop being of particular interest to me. In this thesis, D'Errico analyzes several tracks by prominent hip-hop producers such as DJ Shadow and Madlib, relating their production process to the Akai Professional MPC sampling workstation. Through this analysis, D'Errico implements what he calls a "Beat Deconstruction," making use of the DAW Ableton Live 9 in several transcriptions of tracks by Madlib to highlight his use of un-quantized drum patterns. The figure below shows this transcription of the drum pattern from Madlib's "The Payback," with the kick drum, snare drum, and hi-hat highlighted in the Arrangement View of Ableton Live 9.[88]

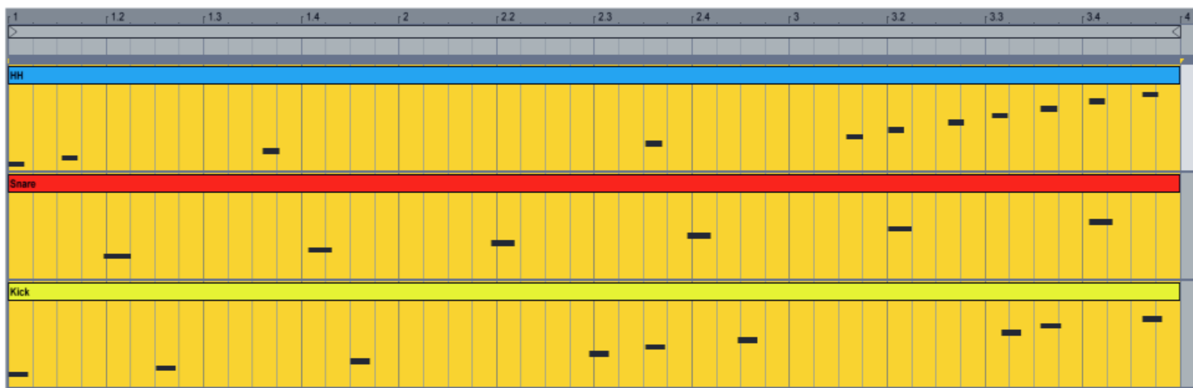

Figure 0.3 – "Beat Deconstruction" of Madlib's "The Payback" created by D'Errico using Ableton Live 9

One major benefit to using Ableton Live as a source for transcriptions is its ability to visually present un-quantized rhythmic patterns clearly. As I discussed in the introduction,

[88] D'Errico, "Behind the Beat," 52.

attempting to transcribe these types of rhythmic patterns accurately using Western notation has been proven to both overcomplicate and misunderstand the process of implementing these rhythms. As hip-hop producers tend to view rhythms in terms of their relation to "the grid" of a MIDI arrangement, this presentation is much more appropriate.

Through this realization of the potential of using Ableton Live as a basis for transcriptions of hip-hop productions, I implemented this method in my own master's thesis, and through this dissertation continued to do so, as I believe that at the time of writing this, this method is most effective at clearly portraying the musical elements of a sample-based hip-hop track visually. Other aspects of D'Errico's research have been influential, such as this PhD thesis in which he analyzes the music production process in relation to DAWs such as Ableton Live, as well as his writings on hip-hop culture.[89]

The other major scholarly influence that has had an impact on my methodology is the writings of Mikhail Exarchos, whose autoethnographic work in his PhD thesis has provided substantial insight into the process of sampled hip-hop beat-making.[90] His understanding of the hip-hop production process is similar to my own, though his focus throughout his PhD project was the remaking of more general "phonographic" aesthetics stemming from sample-based hip-hop in his own productions, as opposed to remaking specific instrumental tracks by other producers. His practice-based approach is crucial to understanding both the aesthetic desires and material conditions that any aspiring hip-hop producer may come across. This scholarship also provides important philosophical insight into the aesthetics of hip-hop production both from the single perspective of the producer and the collective views of authenticity provided by hip-hop communities. Through his creation of instrumental hip-hop

[89] Michael A. D'Errico, "Interface Aesthetics: Sound, Software, and the Ecology of Digital Audio Production," PhD thesis, University of California Los Angeles, May 2016, accessed March 2, 2020. https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0mv9v64c.
[90] Exarchos, "Reimagining the 'Phonographic.'"

tracks, the musical content with each track contains entirely original musical recordings, while also attempting to maintain through various production techniques the aesthetic of a sample-based hip-hop beat. By doing this, Exarchos then provides substantial insight into the musical choices one must make to create a hip-hop beat that may be deemed as culturally authentic to extramusical aesthetics which stem from the use of vinyl records.

Throughout his analysis and autoethnography of several popular music genres and their relation to sampling in hip-hop, he reveals a substantial amount of insight as to the methods and approaches one must consider when producing hip-hop. In quoting Albin Zak III, stating, “recording practice in-and-of-itself remains stubbornly absent from the lion’s share of published research,” Exarchos also points out how a substantial amount of popular music research is weakened by the lack of understanding in relation to experiences of recording practice.[91] Though these scholars and their scholarship are still significant and have value, (such as Sewell, Krims, and Williams, as named by Exarchos), their biggest blindside is that of a lack of perspective from that of a practitioner.[92] This method of practice-based research is one of Exarchos’ biggest contributions to hip-hop musicology. Through my own methodology throughout this dissertation, I hope to expand upon this by providing my own method of practice-based research in relation to the analysis of J Dilla’s signature sound. Though aspects such as practice-based research and the process of contemporary music production are heavily inspired by the works of other scholars such as Exarchos and D’Errico, my own methodology provides a new perspective on how and why J Dilla’s music has been so unique within hip-hop beat-making culture, tying it together with Signifyin(g) and Afrodiasporic cultural practice that is crucial to understanding hip-hop practice. This approach also ties it together with contemporary aspects of beat-making culture, such as lo-fi

[91] Exarchos, “Reimagining the Phonographic,” 12.
[92] Ibid., 14.

hip-hop, sample packs, and live instrumental hip-hop performance, which will be seen in the second half of this dissertation.

Schloss's *Making Beats* and Hip-Hop Aesthetics

The aesthetic desires of a hip-hop producer in what Exarchos calls a "Kantian-inspired" form of ideal remains relevant to the basic approaches of hip-hop production.[93] I myself have attested to this in my own experiences with beat-making as stated earlier, as I tend to approach the production process with what starts with overarching ideals of musical characteristics or qualities that tend to be reminiscent of either other producers or other eras of hip-hop production. At times I wish to create a beat akin to either general stylings of hip-hop subgenres such as boom bap or trap, while at other times I may wish to emulate the signature sounds of producers such as Madlib or J Dilla. I may even wish to emulate the sonic aesthetics of specific recordings (mention my 2019 track Bluebird as an attempt to emulate the lo-fi minimalist aesthetic of Earl Sweatshirt's Some Rap Songs).

Other scholars including Schloss in the 2014 edition of *Making Beats* state how hip-hop beat-making culture has changed in the decade since its original publication in 2004.[94] This is true of much of popular music, as the collective tastes and desires of demographics for various genres will evolve over time. A surprising amount of the "rules" that were discussed by producers that Schloss interviewed remain quite relevant, however. Though rules such as only sampling from vinyl may have fallen to the wayside, the aesthetic of vinyl sampling has remained. The aesthetic qualities that Schloss and his interviewees discussed remain an important aspect of hip-hop production. In relation to J Dilla these aesthetic desires also

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[93] Exarchos, "Reimagining the Phonographic," 22.
[94] Schloss, *Making Beats,* 2.

remain relevant, as both these more general aesthetics and his own specific aesthetic desires were established through the creation of his signature sound through Signifyin(g).

Signifyin(g) as Musicking

Regarded as one of the most influential academic works in the past thirty years, Christopher Small's *Musicking* takes the cultural act of participating or performing music and relates it to its physical and communal processes.[95] Used as a verb, the act of "musicking" is defined by Small as the act of "taking part in any capacity in a musical performance," and clarifies that this includes both the performer and listener. This is also an important aspect of my methodology, as I understand that the characteristics are actively experienced as well as actively created by the producer. Hip-hop music is and has always been a collective active process, and that is reflected in the characteristics of the production of hip-hop. Musical Signifyin(g) is an act of musicking, as it requires an action and relation between the figure who is Signifyin(g), tropes that are being signified upon, or audience who are experiencing or observing the Signifyin(g) acts.

At times the analysis requires me to view it as a noun or object instead of a verb or process. Part of this is the nature of music analysis, as it requires to view a single part or parts of a piece of music, with the process of "musicking" being discussed more abstractly as that relates to the experience of the individuals who are participating in the musicking event. At times, however, discussing music as an object may be more appropriate, as the functions of musical characteristics may function more as an object. Within capitalism, for example, music may function as a commodity, and as a commodity, will contain all of the characteristics of a commodity. This includes its ability to function as commodity capital and

[95] Christopher Small, *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1998).

its circulation from commodity, production, and its exchange value in money.[96] This will be noted when discussing music's function as commodities in chapter six. In all other chapters, however, when discussing any musical characteristics or featured music analysis, and implied understanding of the production or listening process as "musicking" will be present.

Black Narratives and White Academics

As I have stated before, my own experience and race will affect the perspective of both this analysis and how it is viewed by other scholars. My influence and understanding of how best to approach this is through the works of both Alan Rice and Dan Charnas, whose work as non-Black scholars writing on Black cultures have given me insight as to how best to approach my research. Alan Rice's work on slave narratives, for example, has been pivotal, as his goal as a historian is to highlight narratives not yet featured in scholarship. This is the focus of his book *Radical Narratives of the Black Atlantic,* which portrays various perspectives on culture and history of the Black Atlantic (as coined by Paul Gilroy).[97] He emphasizes through this research as to the importance of the influence of the historic triangular slave trade, stating that "the creation of different Black cultures on all sides of the Atlantic seaboard is pivotally dependent on marine rather than land-based exigencies, on cultural exchange rather than national homogeneity and the ideologies that flow from a controlling nation-state."[98] I believe this is pivotal to understanding the wider cultural context and development of both Black cultures such as hip-hop and, more specifically, the legacy of J Dilla. I would argue that when contextualizing my analysis of his music, it is important to understand J Dilla not as just a figure of African American music, but of culture of the Black

[96] Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy. Vol. 1,* translated by Ben Fowdon (London: Penguin, 1990), 33.
[97] Alan Rice, *Radical Narratives of the Black Atlantic* (London: Continuum, 2003).
[98] Ibid., 203.

Atlantic as well, as his acts of Signifyin(g) involved culture which evolved out of both what Paul Gilroy calls 'roots' and 'routes' between Africa, Europe, and the Americas.[99]

Charnas' work in his *Dilla Time* and *The Big Payback* are also influential in that they portray narratives of Black musicians and Black culture by a non-Black scholar. Both his experience as a hip-hop journalist and his desire to stay away from strictly Western musicological viewpoints is crucial to accurately understanding the culture of hip-hop. In *Dilla Time*, for example, Charnas focuses (though not explicitly) on J Dilla's actual musical characteristics and contextualizes historically where and how his methods of Signifyin(g) came to be, as opposed to a basic biography. With these analyses throughout the following chapters, the reader also should keep in mind that Signifyin(g) is not only a process of "troping of tropes" between an individual and the musical tropes they Signify upon, but also a process of Afrodiasporic tropes Signifyin(g) upon wider tropes found throughout the diaspora across the Black Atlantic, Signifyin(g) not only what the tropes are, but where they are from.

Methods of Transcription

Most of the transcriptions of excerpts of tracks found throughout the next seven chapters will use a combination of Western notation and both MIDI (Musical Instrument Digital Interface) and audio waveform transcriptions using the digital audio workstation software Ableton Live 11. Using sheet music transcriptions is an effective way of communicating certain aspects of hip-hop production, especially in relation to melody, harmony, and basic rhythmic patterns, as the instruments and technology used to make and create hip-hop are also partially based on Western instruments, tuning, and other musical parameters, such as MIDI being based on a keyboard layout, loops on devices being based on

[99] Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

time signatures such as 4/4, and so on. The diagrams and transcriptions presented will come from screenshots of my own recreations of the tracks using Ableton Live 11 audio software. Since these tracks do not feature any type of published musical score, the best way to represent these tracks visually is using this software to recreate these tracks to the best of my ability. Though other scholars such as Michael D'Errico have used Ableton Live as a source for transcriptions, the use of this as a source for transcription has yet to be standardized, which calls for further explanation for the reader.[100] Using this software has many benefits when discussing electronically produced or digitally sampled music in that it provides both a source of audio playback as well as a visual aid that can serve as a helpful diagram for observing how samples are manipulated. The figure below is an example of a transcription using Ableton Live 11. This shows measure numbers and subdivisions of each measure on top, the stereo sample that is being played, and the timecodes below the stereo sample.

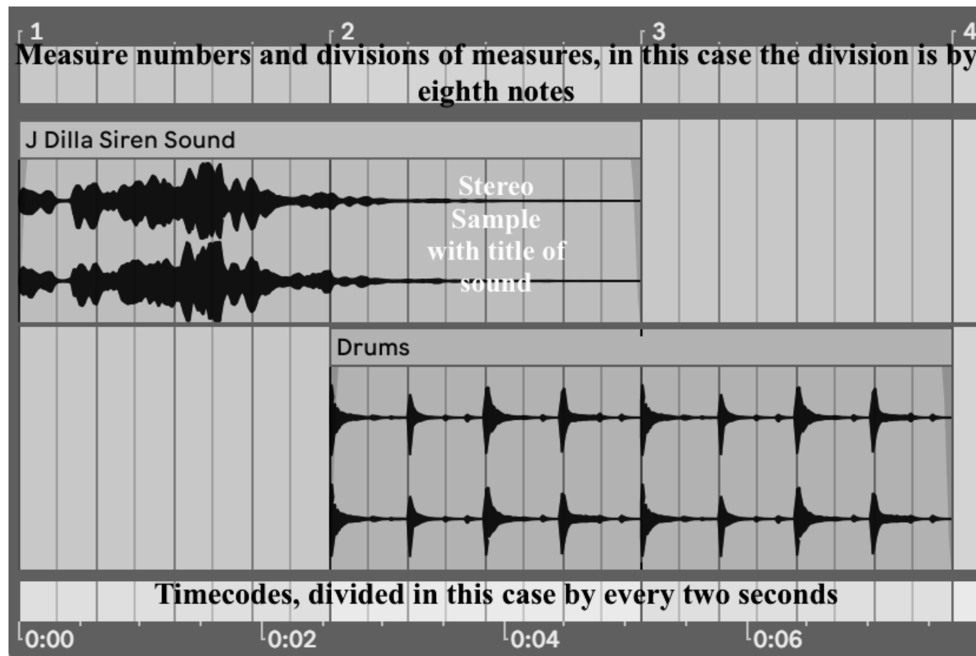
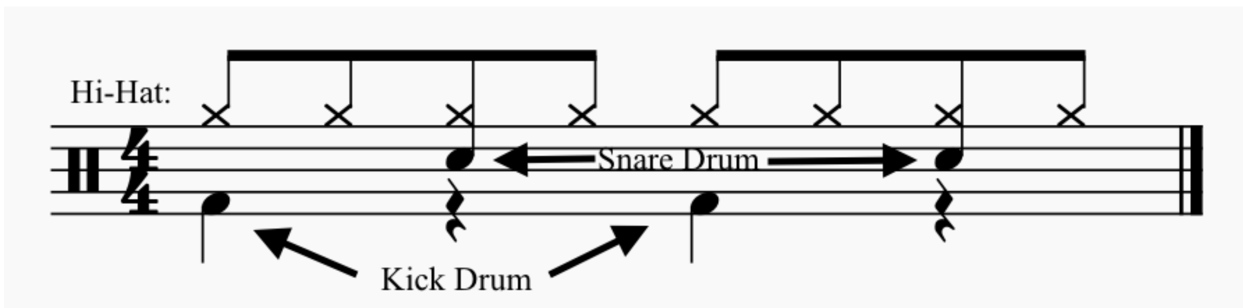


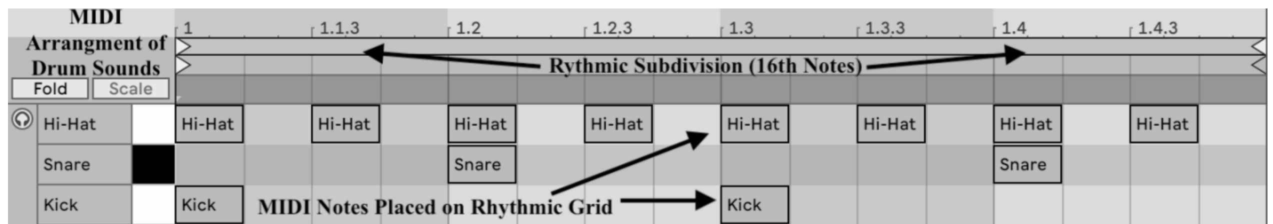
Figure 0.3 - Example of Ableton Live 11 Transcription

[100] D'Errico, "Interface Aesthetics."

When analyzing the rhythms of drum patterns in specific tracks, I will use both Western notation and a transcription using a MIDI grid, also using Ableton Live 11. I will use both methods to highlight the basic drum pattern found in a production as well as more nuanced or detailed rhythmic qualities that would be unclear or difficult to present in Western notation. The diagrams in Figure 0.4 on the next page show how drum pattern transcriptions will be presented throughout this dissertation.



0.4A



0.4B

Figure 0.4A & 0.4B - Basic Drum Pattern in Sheet Music and In MIDI Grid

Further Definitions and Glossary

Other definitions of terms are necessary, as terms like “beat” or “flip” are informal slang terms that are commonly used within hip-hop production culture. It is important to use these terms in an academic setting as they are more appropriate to use rather than more formal terms such as “composition” or “arrangement.” It is also necessary to clarify the

differences between the several terms used for a recording, such as the terms track, song, and production.

Though terms like “track,” “song,” “beat,” and “production,” may seem interchangeable, I will use these terms only in their specific contexts. “Track” will be used when referring to any form of musical recording. When referring to lyrics, vocals, or overarching forms such as choruses and verses, I will use the term “song,” as the discussion pertains to the song form and its structure. “Beat” will be used when discussing a recording of instrumental hip-hop production, as this is the term used most often during the process of beat-making. Finally, “production” will simply be used when talking about the works of a producer.

When referring to certain techniques of hip-hop production I may use more specific terms, such as referencing, sampling, borrowing, or “flipping.” Within the context of this dissertation, when I use these words, they are representations of Signifyin(g). The use of these terms is to both clarify as to how they are used both within the context of hip-hop production and to further expand the lexicon of academic terms related to this area of study. Other terms that may need clarifying definitions for the reader are present in the dissertation’s glossary, located in the endnotes before the bibliography.

Throughout this dissertation, I have also provided citations for every audio track and related sampled audio tracks mentioned both in the footnotes and in the discography. Though I have tried to be as thorough as possible in discovering the source of every sample, some have been left blank due to lack of information on the sample’s original source. In the case of unknown sample sources, I will state this in a corresponding footnote. I have chosen Spotify as the main source for each track, as I believe that the streaming service would be the most accessible source for the reader.

PART I: Analysis of J Dilla's Signature Sound

Chapter 1

"Nothing Like This:" Genre and Signifyin(g) Blackness

Throughout this chapter, references to notions of Blackness and Afrodiasporic culture will be frequent and will be specifically referred to as such. Other terms have been used to refer to Black culture, such as African American culture or culture of the Black Atlantic. These terms are significant in that they refer to both a culture and the geographical location in which the culture has developed. African American culture refers to culture developed mainly by enslaved or descendants of enslaved Africans in the United States, though it may also refer more widely to similar cultures across the Americas.[101] The term "Black Atlantic," originally coined by Paul Gilroy in his book of the same name, refers to Afrodiasporic cultures of both the Americas, Europe, and Africa, as cultures developed through both enslavement and colonization in these continents throughout the past five centuries.[102] Finally, the term "Afrodiasporic" refers to cultures related to the global African diaspora. All three of these terms refer to the location and specificity of the music or culture being discussed. As hip-hop historically evolved out of the United States, it is a distinctly African American art form, and as Schloss explains in *Making Beats*, anyone who participates in this culture is creating or participating in African American hip-hop.[103] Because of hip-hop's global dissemination and rise in popularity across the globe over the past several decades, however, one could argue that although much of the culture has its roots in African American expressive culture, the genre and culture of hip-hop itself has grown into a distinctly global culture in which a plethora of expressions of the Afro diaspora have taken hold. The reason for this dissemination, however, is primarily the result of global corporate influence, as major

[101] In the case of Afrodiasporic cultures within the Americas but outside of the United States, terms tend to refer to the specific country or region, such as Afro-Brazilian or Afro-Cuban.
[102] Gilroy, 2.
[103] Schloss, 5.

record labels and global brands have wished to capitalize on this culture. This transformation of cultural practices into commodities within a global market will be discussed in its relationship to J Dilla's production discography in chapter six.

Through these definitions of Black, African American, and Afrodiasporic, one can see the subtle distinctions between local and global cultural and ethnic identities. This is a significant feature of J Dilla's signature sound, as his continuous interaction with both the local music of his hometown of Detroit and the global music he was exposed to throughout his live tours and vinyl record collecting. Through this "glocal" approach, J Dilla Signified upon tropes of spatial or geographic origin as well as tropes created by artists, genres, and specific recordings both older and more contemporary. This then creates another "twoness" found within the cultural practice of Signifyin(g), as a dichotomy between old new musics and musics of local or global origin are in constant interaction with one another. This further enhances the twoness already present in the expressions of authentic Blackness, in that it interacts with notions of Blackness both from different regions and from different periods of time. This too is a form of Signifyin(g) in that just like the "troping of tropes" characteristic, it creates a "doubling of twoness," creating a discourse of space and time within the discourse of Blackness and whiteness. Beyond J Dilla's use of un-quantized drum patterns, sampling, and synthesizers were his ability to Signify by playing with different popular music genres in many of his productions. According to Charnas, this desire to experiment with different genres stemmed from his exposure to a rich and diverse musical culture from his own upbringing and his surrounding musical communities in Detroit.[104] Although this may involve the production techniques analyzed in the subsequent chapters, this chapter focuses on how these and other techniques were used to borrow characteristics of other music genres

[104] This stemmed specifically from both his parents being trained musicians in jazz and classical music, J Dilla's own record collection which he started at a very young age, and constant exposure to live music of varying genres, such as techno, funk, and hip-hop. Charnas, *Dilla Time,* 46-8.

such as rock, afrobeat, and bossa nova. Through this he was able to challenge and express various musical identities surrounding notions of authentic Blackness within hip-hop culture. This dichotomy of challenging notions of Blackness versus reinforcing notions of Blackness is the crux of how J Dilla Signifies through musical styles beyond strictly electronic-based hip-hop production.

Throughout this chapter I will analyze J Dilla's Signifyin(g) of various genres in several selected tracks from his production discography, heavily borrowing from both Loren Kajikawa's concept of "sounding race" in hip-hop and David Brackett's concept of the "sonic aesthetic" in popular music.[105] The genres and tracks analyzed will be Afrobeat in "African Rhythms" and "Time Travelin' (A Tribute to Fela)," Latin music in "Brazilian Groove" and "Rico Suave Bossa Nova," and psychedelic rock in "Nothing Like This." I must first, however, define the history of "sounding race" in hip-hop and more broadly within popular music.

"Sounding Race" and "Categorizing Sound" in Hip-Hop

Because of the American music industry's history of segregating demographics between white and Black music, certain genres and the communities surrounding those genres have been defined as either Black or white. The definitions of what is considered either white or Black may change over time, such as the genre of blues-rock being considered as a genre that is more appealing to white audiences in the twenty-first century in comparison to its initial growth and development a century prior.[106] Hip-hop itself has been constantly redefining, reinforcing, and challenging notions of Blackness throughout its history, as the artists involved may borrow from both Black and white cultures. Because of hip-hop's

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[105] David Brackett, *Interpreting Popular Music* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000), 76. Kajikawa, *Sounding Race in Rap Songs*.
[106] Brackett, *Interpreting Popular Music*.

history of embracing other genres through sampling or interpolation, this is especially the case. Within the context of the productions of J Dilla, these definitions of expressions of Blackness and its relation to authenticity in hip-hop were especially fluid and heavily debated during the first half of his career and creative output throughout the mid-to-late 1990s.[107] Through his various innovations and development of his own signature sound, however, he was able to challenge notions of Blackness while simultaneously also express authenticity to hip-hop audiences.

Hip-hop itself is an amalgamation of other genres through the lens of Blackness, and those who express themselves through hip-hop and participate in the culture and music do so by Signifyin(g) or appropriating this lens. As stated in the introduction, what is determined as authentic or "real" is determined by the cultural codes that are communicated between members found within said culture, or as Philip Tagg puts it, their "lingua franca."[108] Blackness is defined by both the individual and collective experiences of Black people. From my own perspective it is not something I can comment on or contribute to as a white person. I can, however, highlight and emphasize the importance that this has to both J Dilla's music and how his expressions of Blackness through Signifyin(g) have shaped both his own signature sound and how that has shaped contemporary hip-hop beat-making culture.

As discussed by David Brackett in *Categorizing Sound*, American popular music, as similarly stated by Kajikawa, has been structured in a way that explicitly segregates and implicitly socially constructs between what is determined by both the music industry and its consumers to be white or non-white music genres.[109] Though specific characteristics in certain genres may seem arbitrary or vague, how they are determined to be either white or

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[107] Michael Paul Barnes, "Redefining the Real: Race, Gender and Place in the Construction of Hip-Hop Authenticity," PhD diss., University of California Berkeley, 2007.
[108] Philip Tagg, "High and Low, Cool and Uncool, Music and Knowledge: Conceptual falsifications and the study of popular music," keynote speech, IASPM UK conference, Guildford, United Kingdom, July 2000, accessed July 5, 2021, https://www.tagg.org/articles/iaspmuk2000.html#.
[109] Brackett, *Categorizing Sound,* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2016), 27-30.

non-white is based on the context in which they are presented and how they are perceived socially by both audiences inside and outside of their specific targeted demographics. It is apparent, therefore, that the separation between white music and non-white music is built off a white supremacist system, in which popular music is viewed through a white racial frame in which any music produced by individuals or groups that are deemed as non-white are classified as something outside of the norm, that being music strictly influenced by some aspect of the white European tradition. This evolved drastically over the course of the 20th century, with genres like rock n' roll and jazz being socially perceived and constructed as white music over the course of the genres' respective evolutions. This is due to the musical characteristics found in these genres becoming normalized among primarily white audiences, with instruments like the electric guitar becoming so commonplace among popular music that in a matter of decades it becomes the standard as opposed to a radical new sound.

Within hip-hop, how race is determined or "sounded" is socially constructed, and can be found both in a rapper's performance and lyrics as well as the track's production.[110] In the case of hip-hop producers, what artists they sample, how they Signify using said samples, what types of rhythmic patterns they provide in their drums, and what (if any) musical or extra-musical material they provide in their productions can inform the listener of how they are sounding authentic Blackness. Hip-hop as a genre, however, is firmly defined as Black music, as so much of its evolution and popularity has stemmed from primarily Black artists as well as audiences.[111]

Beyond Brackett and Kajikawa, scholars such as Amanda Sewell have analyzed in her PhD dissertation how rap groups such as Public Enemy and the Beastie Boys inform and express race through their racialized associations with their respective use of various samples.

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[110] In *Sounding Race,* Kajikawa uses examples such as Public Enemy's "Rebel Without a Pause" and Eminem's "My Name Is" to explore acts of Signifyin(g) Blackness and Whiteness from these artists, respectively. Kajikawa, *Sounding Race in Rap Songs*.
[111] Ibid.

In her analysis of both groups and their respective albums *Fear of a Black Planet* and *Paul's Boutique*, she finds a clear dichotomy of Public Enemy (along with their production group The Bomb Squad), a group of primarily Black men, sampling from mainly Black artists, and the Beastie Boys (along with production duo The Dust Brothers), a group of white men, sampling from significantly more white artists.[112] Although this analysis reveals how the culture and race of each group informed the desired aesthetics of their productions, it comes as rather reductive, as the music being analyzed only features the two demographics of white and Black men, with their sample sources mainly from the same demographics. The social construction of race in music is of course much more complex and is not (for lack of a better phrase) simply a "Black or white" issue, and as especially is the case in hip-hop, this social construction can inform or transform the genre or more general aesthetics of the music itself. Because of the American music industry's history with racializing specific genres of music, however, genres as well as musical characteristics which Signify whiteness and Blackness have become a significant part of popular music.[113]

Earlier hip-hop artists like Afrika Bambaataa challenged similar aesthetics of authentic Blackness in productions like his 1982 single "Planet Rock," which featured both characteristics of Black dance music and a heavily interpolated melody from white German electronic group Kraftwerk's "Trans-Europe Express."[114] Throughout many of his DJ sets throughout the 1970s, Bambaataa would also play records from both Black and white groups, playing both funk recordings by James Brown and pop recordings by The Monkees,

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[112] Amanda Sewell, "A Typology of Sampling in Hip-Hop," PhD diss., Indiana University, May 2013, accessed September 6, 2016, http://www.academia.edu/3492661/A_Typology_of_Sampling_in_Hip-Hop, 142.
[113] Music genres like jazz, R&B, and early rock n' roll were categorized as "race" music during the 1940s and 1950s by major record labels as well as the Billboard charts. Even today record labels and playlist algorithms use vague terms like "urban contemporary" to denote music as being Black.
[114] This is similar to the concept of "flipping" a sample in later forms of hip-hop production, in which an older piece of music is "flipped" for a new and different context. "Planet Rock," Spotify, track 1 on Afrika Bambaataa and Soulsonic Force, *Planet Rock: The Album.* Tommy Boy, 1982. "Trans-Europe Express," Spotify, track 4 on Kraftwerk, *Trans-Europe Express,* Kling Klang, 1977.

respectively.[115] Throughout the 1990s, however, hip-hop culture's dissemination into global popular culture became a symbol of American Blackness in the world stage. Through this, the tropes of hip-hop production became more solidified as it evolved into a global commodity and the desire to challenge notions of Blackness through Signifyin(g) upon other genres outside of what was considered to be Black music became less common.

The ways in which J Dilla sounded or expressed race varied throughout his career and challenged what a hip-hop production as a representation of authentic Black music could or should be. This was especially true in the latter half of his career, as his experience with fellow Soulquarian artists and solo album *Welcome 2 Detroit* heavily informed this desire. In producer and drummer Questlove's memoir *Mo' Meta Blues*, he recalls an interaction he had with J Dilla involving the Beach Boys' album *Pet Sounds:*

> So the day that the Pet Sounds 30th anniversary box set came out, we were all in a store, a store called Melodies & Memories… "I said, 'Yo! I gotta have this.' They were like, 'Word? The Beach Boys?' All these cats were clowning me, 'Where's the drum break in this one?' But a year later I heard something on a track — it was the breakdown from 'I know There's An Answer.' Dilla was like, 'Yeah, you're right man, they had some shit on there.'[116]

In this interaction, the "clowning" that Questlove experienced highlights the group's questioning of his authenticity within hip-hop culture, as well as his perceived Blackness (or lack thereof) through his enthusiasm for a white pop group from the 1960s. Especially within hip-hop culture, Blackness is also closely tied to perceptions of masculinity, with any deviation from strict notions of said masculinity as "soft."[117] In his interaction with J Dilla, however, both Questlove and J Dilla acknowledged that the Beach Boys "had some shit" with

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[115] Jeff Chang, *Can't Stop Won't Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2005), 78.
[116] "I Know There's an Answer," Spotify, track 9 on The Beach Boys, *Pet Sounds,* Capitol Records, 1966. Ahmir Thompson, *Mo' Meta Blues: The World According to Questlove* (New York: Grand Central Publishing), 2015.
[117] bell hooks, *The Will to Change: Men, Masculinity, and Love* (New York: Atria Books, 2004), 54. Michael P. Jeffries, *Thug Life: Race, Gender, and the Meaning of Hip-Hop* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

the drum break found on the track "I Know There's An Answer," which fit more in line with the hip-hop breaks and samples that hip-hop production culture sought after.[118] Questlove later pointed out in *Mo' Meta Blues* that J Dilla was one of the few producers he knew at the time to seek out music (either for sampling or for personal enjoyment) regardless of race or genre. There are many stories that several of J Dilla's peers have of this type of interaction, such as DJ and manager of Stones Throw Records Egon (Eothen Alapatt) finding out about J Dilla's enthusiasm for the English pop group Stereolab and sampling their track "Come and Play in the Milky Night" on an alternate version of him and Madlib's "The Message" from their Jaylib collaboration.[119]

This challenging of what is perceived to be white music (e.g. pop, rock, or indie) in a genre which Signifies upon its own authenticity through its expression of Blackness (hip-hop) is nothing new to hip-hop culture, with figures like Afrika Bambaataa doing this within their DJ sets, as mentioned earlier.[120] Schloss states that within the culture of hip-hop production, "all producers regardless of race make African American hip-hop,"[121] meaning that any producer, as well as any recording they choose to sample, will be viewed in its relation perceived notions of Blackness. In the case of J Dilla, his perception as an "underground icon" led many of his peers and fans to see him and his discography as some of the most authentic and therefore expressing Blackness in the most unique and authentic way. Using unorthodox samples or embracing non-Black artists, to some, may have seemed counterintuitive to this image. As we will discuss throughout this chapter, J Dilla was able to use (either through sampling or through other modes of composition) musical stylings outside

[118] Thompson, 134. Schloss, 123.
[119] "The Message," Spotify, track 1 on Jaylib, *The Message/LAX to JFK,* Stones Throw Records, 2002. "Come and Play in the Milky Night," Spotify, track 15 on Stereolab, *Cobra and Phases Group Play Voltage in the Milky Night,* Warp Records, 1999. Y'skid, "J Dilla Interview 2003 part 2 of 4" (video of interview). Hosted by Dust Busters Music, posted March 23, 2008, accessed July 5, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YKGm3wc3qOE.
[120] Kajikawa, 86.
[121] Schloss, 42.

of what could be considered hip-hop to Signify upon the meanings of authenticity and make implicit statements about the perceived Blackness of his music. By doing so, he was also able to Signify upon listeners and fans and obscured the meaning of what authentic hip-hop could be, further challenging and expanding upon what defines a hip-hop production as truly authentic. Hip-hop production itself, after all, is and has always been an amalgamation of music genres from around the world, either through digital sampling or interpolation.

In many instances, the desire to reinforce notions of authentic Blackness is also Signified by the producer in many productions. This is most apparent with sampling, in which many producers may "dig in the crates" for recordings by artists of various Afrodiasporic genres (jazz, R&B, soul, etc.).[122] Signifyin(g) through Afrodiasporic genres, such as recreating drum patterns, looped melodic motifs, or acts such as "call and response" can be a way of presenting this authenticity. Let us look at prime examples of this in the 2001 J Dilla track "African Rhythms" and the 2000 track by Common "Time Travelin' (A Tribute to Fela)."[123]

"African Rhythms" and "Time Travelin' (A Tribute to Fela)"

Although I discussed earlier J Dilla's embrace of genres outside the African diaspora, much of his discography is still greatly influenced by artists within the diaspora, especially those who either emulate or are a part of African music. This influence can be found throughout his solo discography and his collaboration with other artists of the "Soulquarian" collective, such as Common and Erykah Badu.[124] On his 2001 debut solo album *Welcome 2 Detroit,* a variety of genres can be found which J Dilla Signifies upon, either through

[122] Ibid., 35.
[123] "Time Travelin' (A Tribute to Fela)," Spotify, track 1 on Common, *Like Water for Chocolate,* MCA Records, 2000. "African Rhythms," Spotify, track 15 on J Dilla, *Welcome 2 Detroit,* BBE Records, 2001.
[124] Sean Peterson, "Something Real: Rap, Resistance, and the Music of the Soulquarians," PhD Dissertation, University of Oregon, June 2018, accessed September 24, 2018.

sampling or through a recorded cover of a song on acoustic instruments. The penultimate track "African Rhythms" on his 2001 album *Welcome 2 Detroit* features a cover of the 1975 track of the same name by American jazz group Oneness of Juju, with J Dilla himself performing on all instruments in his version.[125]

There are several noticeable differences between the original version and J Dilla's, with the main difference being the significantly shorter track length, with Oneness of Juju's version at over seven minutes and J Dilla's being under two minutes. In J Dilla's version, only the introductory section of the original track is performed, with a variety of different instruments being added throughout the runtime. J Dilla's "African Rhythms" also features a noticeable amount of crowd noise, with what sounds like several individuals talking to each other in the same room, both emulating the crowd noise from the original recording as well as emphasizing the collective nature of African musical performance. Although J Dilla recorded every instrument on this track alone, it is possible that this crowd noise was added to give the track a more live feel and thus creating a simulated live performance. This also is a prime example of a simulation of collective performance "in the ring," which is a significant characteristic of much of West African music.[126]

The instrumentation of J Dilla's version also differs noticeably from the original track. At the beginning a rainstick can be heard before the entrance of the drum set, with further additions of shakers and conga drums at 0:15. At 0:44 piano and xylophone can be heard accompanying the repeating bass line, and at 1:00 a single synthesizer note enters quietly. In the tracks last twenty seconds, all instruments continue to play and repeat, with the background voices cheering and responding to one another. This further emphasizes the live

[125] In this instance, the original artist is not an African group but an African American group that is Signifyin(g) upon tropes of African music, thus creating a chain of Signifyin(g) from J Dilla's version to the original version and from the original version to the broader African musical tropes being portrayed. "African Rhythms," Spotify, track 1 on Oneness of Juju, *African Rhythms,* Black Fire, 1975.
[126] Floyd, 85.

feel of the recording, giving the last twenty seconds an atmosphere like that of a live jam session.

The ways in which J Dilla Signifies in this track can be found in several instances. The track itself can be seen as an act of Signifyin(g) upon the Oneness of Juju's original track, as well as the general concept of showing reverence to the "African rhythms" that so heavily influence not only his own music but so much African diasporic music that both J Dilla and the Oneness of Juju partake in. The track also serves as a way of commenting on the various rhythmic patterns found throughout the other sixteen tracks on *Welcome 2 Detroit*, with its penultimate location serving as an epilogue that highlights this. The wide array of instruments on the brief track also functions as Signifyin(g) on the various instruments used throughout African diasporic music, with percussion instruments such as the rainstick and congas being used in tandem with Western melodic instruments such as the piano and synthesizer. This encapsulates the "heterogeneous sound ideal" originally proposed by scholar Olly Wilson, in which "a high density of musical events within a relatively short musical time frame" occur.[127] In this instance, a form of what Brackett calls "double Signification" occurs, in which the act of Signifyin(g) taking place is both occurring upon the original recording as well as the concept of African rhythmic patterns.[128] Figure 1.1 below shows a reduction of the track in sheet music, highlighting the number of instruments and where they enter throughout the runtime.

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[127] Olly Wilson, "The Heterogeneous Sound Ideal in African American Music," *Signifyin(G), Sanctifyin', & Slam Dunking: A Reader in African American Expressive Culture.* ed. Gena Caponi (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999), 159.

[128] Brackett, "James Brown's 'Superbad' and the double-voiced utterance," *Interpreting Popular Music,* 109-155.

♩= 91

Voice

Electric Bass

Shakers

Bongos

Marimba

Piano

Poly Synthesizer

Drumset

Spoken: "These are African rhythms, passed down to us through ancient spirits

zer

Feel the spirit,

(crowd enters

a unified force.

Come on, move with the spirit.

Stand up, clap your hands with the rhythm.”

Figure 1.1 - Sheet Music Transcription of “African Rhythms” (0:12-0:42) with Instrument Entrances Highlighted

In a 2003 interview, J Dilla stated his admiration for Nigerian artist and Afrobeat pioneer Fela Kuti, and even discussed possible musical collaborations with his son Femi.[129] This further highlights his desire to Signify upon both those artists and their Afrodiasporic lineage. This admiration is most apparently expressed in his co-production on the tribute track "Time Travelin' (A Tribute to Fela)" from Common's 2000 album *Like Water for Chocolate.* The track itself was a collaboration between J Dilla and Soulquarian artists D'Angelo, Questlove, and James Poyser, and functions as an introduction to the Afrocentric themes present throughout the album.[130] "Time Travelin'" features no samples and contains instrumentation that would be featured in a variety of afrobeat recordings, such as electric guitar, organ, and trumpet. The track's embrace of typical afrobeat characteristics, such as repeated melodic patterns or riffs, various rhythmic percussion patterns, and improvised melodies all appear throughout, with the trumpet voice adding several improvised melodic lines throughout the runtime.[131]

Although the percussion throughout features African percussion such as rain sticks and shakers, the main drum pattern throughout is typical of a hip-hop production, with programmed kick, hi-hat, and clap patterns. The drum pattern is characteristic of many of J Dilla's productions, but is noticeably more minimal, with the emphasis of the backbeats only being on the fourth beat of each measure, as opposed to the typical hip-hop backbeat on the second and fourth beat. Although it contains lyrics from Common, a noticeable amount of the track is instrumental, with the first two minutes and last minute of the track featuring the main beat as well as other melodic content. In its last minute, a "jam session" appears in which the producers of the track perform an entirely acoustic afrobeat composition in the

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[129] Y'skid, "J Dilla Interview 2003 part 1 of 4" (video of interview), hosted by Dust Busters Music, posted March 23, 2008, accessed July 5, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YKGm3wc3qOE.
[130] A reprise of the track halfway through the album's runtime also occurs to further emphasize these themes.
[131] Alexander Stewart, "Make It Funky: Fela Kuti, James Brown and the Invention of Afrobeat," *American Studies*, Vol. 52, No. 4, 2013, accessed April 5, 2021, https://muse.jhu.edu/article/528297/pdf, 107.

styling of Fela Kuti, with a noticeable move away from the hip-hop and afrobeat fusion of the main instrumental.

Through all these musical characteristics, J Dilla and his collaborators were able to combine J Dilla's own specific signature sound as a producer with the afrobeat aesthetic present throughout the rest of the production, creating a fusion of Fela Kuti-esque afrobeat and J Dilla-esque hip-hop. This fusion functions as Signifyin(g) upon Fela Kuti's music, not only showing reverence for the late musician and activist but also building upon his musical stylings by transforming it into a hip-hop instrumental typical of the style of this era of J Dilla's production discography. The transcription in Figure 1.2 on the next page shows a sheet music transcription of the drum pattern provided by J Dilla in conjunction with the other instruments throughout the main verses of the track.

Figure 1.2 - Sheet Music Transcription of "Time Travelin' (A Tribute to Fela)" (1:39-1:48) with drums and improvised melodies highlighted

The use of interpolation (re-recording of either specific recordings or general musical tropes) as opposed to sampling is significant to the track and further emphasize the double Signification that can occur between J Dilla, Common, and Fela Kuti. With the interpolation found in "Time Travelin'," more general characteristics of the afrobeat genre occur rather than the musical borrowing of specific melodies from other recordings. These characteristics include a significant portion of the beginning of the track which is instrumental, repeated short melodic or rhythmic fragments from the electric guitar and percussion, and an improvised solo (in this case trumpet) featuring mainly minor pentatonic melodic shapes.

"Rico Suave Bossa Nova" and "Brazilian Groove"[132]

J Dilla's affinity for Brazilian jazz has been well-documented, especially with mid-20th century artists such as guitarist Antonio Carlos Jobim and jazz fusion group Azymuth.[133] The presence of Brazilian music in his productions can be traced as far back as the beginning of his professional career, in his production for 1995's "Runnin'" by The Pharcyde, which samples the 1963 track "Saudade Vem Correndo" by Stan Getz and Luiz Bonfa.[134] During the production of *Welcome 2 Detroit*, his love for Brazilian jazz manifested in different ways beyond sampling and included other methods and techniques such as interpolation and performance on acoustic instruments. Beyond just sampling Latin music, J Dilla wished to create original Latin music, using the musical idioms that he had previously exploited when sampling in productions such as "Runnin'."

During the recording of the track "Rico Suave Bossa Nova," J Dilla states in the liner notes of *Welcome 2 Detroit:* "I fell in love with Brazilian music the day I listened to a Sérgio

[132] "Brazilian Groove (EWF)" and "Rico Suave Bossa Nova," Spotify, track 9 and 12 on J Dilla, *Welcome 2 Detroit.* BBE Records, 2001.
[133] Charnas explains in *Dilla Time* how during his last tour of Brazil in 2005 he desired to see and experience the sounds he was so fond of, performing in São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, and Libanes. Charnas, *Dilla Time*, 175.
[134] "Runnin'," Spotify, track 2 on The Pharcyde, *Labcabincalifornia.* Delicious Vinyl, 1995. "Saudade Vem Correndo," Spotify, track 8 on Stan Getz and Luiz Bonfá, *Jazz Samba Encore!* Verve Records, 1963.

Mendes album. We used to have jam sessions in the studio after work was done, (and) one day my mans [sic] Karriem Riggins came through. I asked him for 'bossa nova.' He gave me exactly what I needed."[135] The track functions as a tribute to Brazilian jazz group Azymuth, and features Karriem Riggins on drums and J Dilla on piano as well as overdubbed vocals and auxiliary percussion instruments.[136] The track's runtime at about one minute and twenty-five seconds is a significantly reduced version of what was most likely a much longer recording of the jam session. The drum pattern performed by Karriem Riggins is that of a typical bossa nova style two-measure drum pattern in 4/4, with the kick drum emphasizing beats one and three and the rim performing a syncopated clave rhythm. The tempo of the track is noticeably faster than that of typical bossa nova music (140 beats per minute) and is performed at approximately 180 beats per minute. Figure 1.3 below demonstrates this and shows a sheet music transcription of a typical bossa nova drum pattern to show what was performed by Karriem Riggins.

Figure 1.3 - Bossa Nova Drum Pattern

The repeated melody in the vocal section of the latter half of the track is reminiscent of the group unison vocals featured in much of bossa nova, such as the chorus of Sergio

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[135] James Yancey, *Welcome 2 Detroit,* liner notes (London: Barely Breaking Even Music, 2001).
[136] The group regularly performs "Rico Suave Bossa Nova" in live performances and was included in the twentieth anniversary release of *Welcome 2 Detroit.* "Rico Suave Bossa Nova," Spotify, track 18 on Azymuth and J Dilla, *Welcome 2 Detroit – the 20th Anniversary Edition,* BBE Records, 2021.

Mendes' 1966 single "Mais Que Nada."[137] The unison vocals also function as a "response" to the "call" of the original piano melody that appears earlier in the track. The figure on the following page shows a sheet music transcription of both the piano melody and melody in the unison vocal section.

[137] "Mais Que Nada," Spotify, track 1 on Sérgio Mendes & Brasil '66, *Herb Alpert Presents Sergio Mendes & Brasil '66,* A&M Records, 1966.

Figure 1.4 - Transcription of Main Melody of "Rico Suave Bossa Nova," (0:38-0:48) both in vocals

Overall, the track represents an act of Signifyin(g) upon Brazilian music as well as Latin music through its borrowing of musical tropes typical to these genres. Much of the music J Dilla refers to, such as artists like Sergio Mendes, were products of a commodification of traditional music that gained popularity throughout the United States and Europe in the 1960s.[138] The embrace of other non-Western or even non-American music was enticing to hip-hop producers such as J Dilla, whose practices of "digging in the crates" for unique records to sample. In this case however, J Dilla would go one step beyond just sampling, and instead interpolate general musical characteristics of the Brazilian music that he was familiar with.[139]

In the case of "Brazilian Groove (EWF)," the interpolation of Brazilian musical elements occurs, albeit in a more obscure fashion. The track itself borrows heavily from the 1977 Earth, Wind, and Fire track "Brazilian Rhyme (Beijo Interlude)," hence the original artist's initials in parentheses in J Dilla's version.[140] In Earth, Wind, and Fire's track, the musical characteristics share more resemblance to a dance or disco song typical to the group's discography, with the title of the track referring to the Brazilian characteristics of the main vocal melody. In J Dilla's version, the tempo is slowed down significantly, from the brisk disco tempo of 120 beats per minute to approximately 90 beats per minute. The chord progression remains similar to Earth, Wind, and Fire's original track throughout "Brazilian Groove," with the original vocal melody barely uttered by J Dilla and only appearing in the first half of the track. In the latter half, a guitar melody enters as well as an acoustic drum

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[138] This commodification of non-Western musical cultures into the general term of "world music" has been written about extensively, with scholars such as K.E. Goldschmitt looking specifically at Brazilian music and Timothy Taylor looking at the concept of world music as a marketing term for capitalist enterprises. K.E. Goldschmitt, *Bossa Mundo: Brazilian Music in Transnational Media Industries* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020). Timothy Taylor, *Music and Capitalism: A History of the Present* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016).
[139] J Dilla's appreciation and knowledge of Brazilian music would most likely evolve in his trips to Sao Paulo in 2003 and 2005, several years after the release of *Welcome 2 Detroit*.
[140] "Brazilian Rhyme (Beijo Interlude)," Spotify, track 6 on Earth, Wind, and Fire, *All 'N All,* Columbia Records, 1977.

pattern typical of J Dilla's un-quantized style, contrasting greatly from the "four-on-the-floor" disco groove of the original version. Figures 1.5A and 1.5B below show transcriptions of excerpts from both "Brazilian Groove (EWF)" and "Brazilian Rhyme (Beijo Interlude)," highlighting the compositional differences between the two.

♩ = 94

Voice

Ah ee ah ah ee ah ah ah ee ah ah ee ah ah uh huh huh huh huh hu - uh

1.5A - "Brazilian Groove"

♩ = 121

Voice

Bah ee ah Bah ee ah Bah eee ah ee ah ee ah ee ah ee ah Bah dup bup bup bow

1.5B - "Brazilian Rhyme"

Figures 1.5A & 1.5B - Transcriptions of Vocals in "Brazilian Groove (EWF)" (0:17-0:27) by J Dilla and "Brazilian Rhyme (Beijo Interlude)" (0:14-0:23) by Earth, Wind, and Fire

In this instance, the act of Signifyin(g) is present in both tracks, with J Dilla's version Signifyin(g) the original Earth, Wind, and Fire song as well as Earth, Wind, and Fire Signifyin(g) using chants and vowel sounds as the lyrics, which was one of the tropes of mid-20th Century Brazilian popular music, as seen in the transcriptions of the melodies above. The presence of the original melody at the beginning of J Dilla's "Brazilian Groove (EWF)" is a form of double Signifyin(g).[141] This Signification then evolves throughout the track's brief runtime, with the added guitar and drums acting as a development of the original vocal melody. This double Signification acts as a game of telephone from the original trope of the Brazilian unison vocals and is strikingly similar to Gates' findings in *The Signifying Monkey,*

[141] Brackett, *Interpreting Popular Music,* 109-155.

in which the layers of Signifyin(g) act as a "hall of mirrors" metaphorically reflecting the original trope through different perspectives.[142] The diagram in Figure 1.6 below shows a diagram of this relationship between the trope being Signified and the artists' relationship and interaction with this sign.

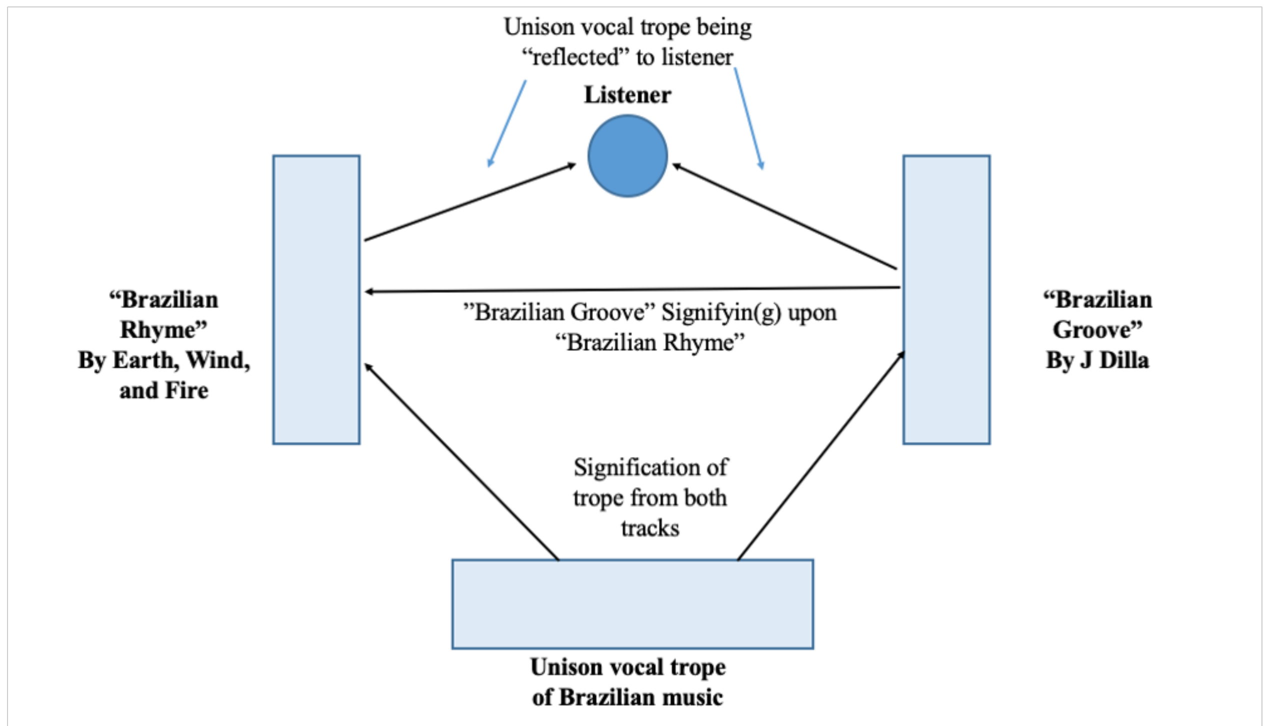


Figure 1.6 – Signifyin(g) of Brazilian Music Represented as a "Hall of Mirrors"

As shown above, the "hall of mirrors" in this case are the artists Signifyin(g) upon either each other or on the original trope, with the trope acting as a sound image bouncing and reflecting from one mirror to the next, distorting and transforming from its original form. In this case, however, the original Signifier (that being the trope of Brazilian vocal melody) is not a specific reference to a track or artist but rather a general musical trope. This is then

[142] Gates, 102.

heard by the listener, which may identify the act of Signifyin(g) through these sonic reflections.

"Nothing Like This" (2003)

Using the idioms of rock music within hip-hop has occurred throughout the genre's history, with groups like Run-DMC releasing songs like "King of Rock" and collaborating with rock groups like Aerosmith.[143] In J Dilla's case, an embrace of rock idioms meant Signifyin(g) upon rock groups and subgenres of the past, as opposed to interpolating idioms that were contemporary at their release like Run-DMC. During the latter half of J Dilla's career (approximately 2000 to 2005), he became more interested in consuming rock music, both as sources for sampling as well as for personal enjoyment.[144] This led to several tracks produced by J Dilla in the early 2000s to include samples from rock groups, more specifically progressive rock groups from the 1970s. This is most present in his production work on the collaborative 2003 album *Champion Sound* with Madlib, where tracks like "Starz" sampling "The Stars are Out Tonight" from American progressive rock group Starcastle.[145]

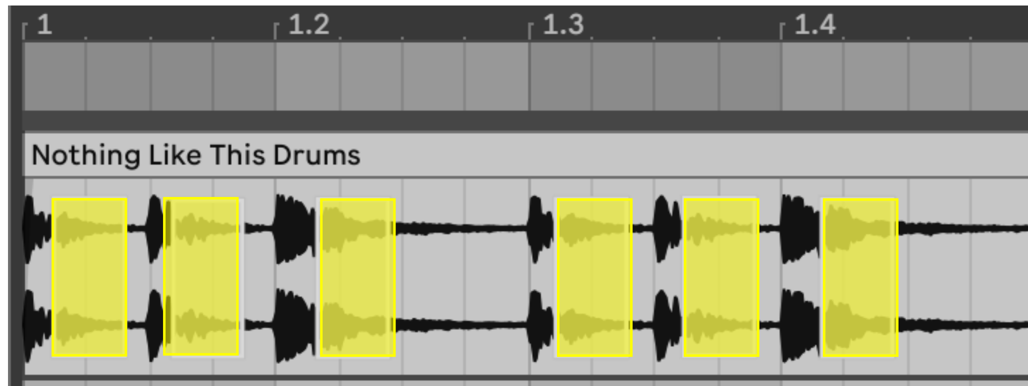
His track "Nothing Like This" from his 2003 EP (Extended Play) *Ruff Draft* is a prime example of both his interest in rock music and how he Signified upon more tropes of rock music during this period.[146] Although the track itself features similar production techniques to his more hip-hop oriented discography, such as sampling and the presence of a looped drum break, his approach to the implementation of this samples is noticeably different. The instrumental features a simplistic looped drum break, played on what sounds

[143] Kajikawa, 36. "King of Rock," Spotify, track 2 on Run-DMC, *King of Rock,* Def Jam Records, 1985.
[144] According to the owner of Detroit-based music store Melodies and Memories, J Dilla, a frequent patron of the store, shifted from music such as jazz and funk to rock because he had looked through the entirety of those sections of the store and wished to expand beyond his typical source for vinyl record purchases. Charnas, *Dilla Time,* 106.
[145] "Starz," Spotify, track 16 on Jaylib, *Champion Sound,* Stones Throw Records, 2003. "The Stars are Out Tonight," YouTube, track 8 on Starcastle, *Real to Reel.* New York: Epic Records, 1978.
[146] "Nothing Like This," Spotify, track 4 on J Dilla, *Ruff Draft,* Stones Throw Records, 2007.

like a low and high tom from an acoustic drum set, with a sizeable amount of delay effect. The main melodic sample is of a guitar sound from Dave Mason's 1974 track "You Can't Take it When You Go," reversed and looped in two-measure units.[147] Finally, the vocals of the track feature J Dilla singing a relatively simple melodic refrain, describing the elation he feels and using terms typical to a standard love song. The vocals themselves are heavily distorted, with timbre like that of the vocals found in the music of classic rock groups such as King Crimson or Led Zeppelin. Figures 1.7A and 1.7B on the next two pages show a transcription of an excerpt of "Nothing Like This," with the added effects highlighted using the track's original waveform taken from Ableton Live 11.

[147] "You Can't Take it When You Go," Spotify, track 9 on Dave Mason, *Dave Mason,* Columbia Records, 1974.

1.7A



1.7B

Figures 1.7A & 1.7B: Transcription of "Nothing Like This," (0:23-0:32) With Implementation of Delay on Drums Highlighted in Ableton Live 11

In Figure 1.7A, the drums are transcribed to only show the basic rhythms being performed. In Figure 1.7B however, one can see within the track's audio waveform the delay implemented onto the drum pattern which produces a noticeable arhythmic repetition of each initial drum hit. This drum pattern combined with the backwards sample and distorted vocals are what creates the musical characteristics of the track. All in all, "Nothing Like This" differs significantly in both sound and form to much of J Dilla's discography and has much more in common with the psychedelic rock of the 1960s and 1970s (such as The Beatles' 1966 track "Tomorrow Never Knows," which also includes a reversed guitar melody) than that of any typical hip-hop track from the early 2000s. Much of *Ruff Draft* features other samples of rock recordings such as the drum break from Queen's 1974 recording "In the Lap of the Gods" on "Make 'em NV" and the vocals from Neil Innes & Son's "Cum on Feel the Noize" in the track "Wild."[148] This variety of musical borrowings from rock recordings show

[148] "Make 'em NV" and "Wild," Spotify, tracks 7 and 12 on J Dilla, *Ruff Draft,* Stones Throw Records, 2007. "Cum on Feel the Noize," YouTube, track 16 on Neil Innes & Son, *Miniatures.* Pipe Records, 1980. "In the Lap of the Gods – Remastered 2011," Spotify, track 7 on Queen, *Sheer Heart Attack (2011 Remaster),* EMI, 1974.

an act of Signifyin(g) upon either the specific artists which were sampled or the general idioms which were emulated in tracks like "Nothing Like This." This type of Signifyin(g) differs from previous examples because of its Signified subjects or tropes being from mainly white artists. As stated in the beginning of the chapter, use of drum breaks from rock recordings has been a part of hip-hop since its rise in the 1970s, with DJs like Afrika Bambaataa playing during live events drum breaks from The Beatles "Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band" or Aerosmith's "Walk This Way."[149] The tropes or artists being Signified upon, however, still contain idioms or musical characteristics that are typical of African diasporic, or more specifically, African American popular music.

Conclusion

Throughout this chapter, I have discussed the ways in which J Dilla Signified upon several different music genres and cultures throughout his career. From African music in "African Rhythms" and "Time Travelin' (A Tribute to Fela)" to Brazilian music in "Rico Suave Bossa Nova" and "Brazilian Groove (EWF)" and finally to rock in "Nothing Like This," the ways in which J Dilla Signified evolved beyond just sampling. This is representative of acts of Signifyin(g) in hip-hop production in ways other than sampling, such as the interpolation of either specific tracks or general musical tropes of certain genres. Although J Dilla was certainly not the only producer to experiment with this, his use of Signifyin(g) through production techniques beyond sampling or drum patterns was significant to the development of his own signature sound while also expanding or challenging American mainstream definitions of Blackness and authenticity in hip-hop.

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[149] This knowledge of the drum break from "Walk This Way" by the members of Run-DMC led to their eventual collaboration with Aerosmith in their cover of the same song in 1985. Kajikawa, 57. "Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band – Reprise," Spotify, track 12 on The Beatles, *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band (Remastered),* Apple Corps, 1967. "Walk This Way," Spotify, track 4 on Aerosmith, *Toys In The Attic,* Aerodisc, 1975.

Chapter 2

Un-Quantized Rhythmic Grooves and Rhythms as Signifyin(g)

As mentioned in the introduction, in Simon Reynolds' 2009 article "The Cult of J Dilla," he lists the late producer's use of swing and un-quantized rhythmic drum patterns as one of the three main characteristics of his signature sound.[150] It is difficult to understate the importance of this aspect of his production style, as it has led many musicians influenced by J Dilla's music to rethink the ways in which they approach rhythm in their own performances or compositions. This is a common sentiment among scholars and musicians who are fans of J Dilla, with jazz pianist Robert Glasper in an interview claiming that his un-quantized rhythms have influenced how both producers as well as performers of acoustic instruments have interpreted rhythmic patterns in live performance.[151] In *Dilla Time*, Charnas also emphasizes a similar viewpoint to Glasper's and centers the focus at which he views J Dilla's life and creative output through his use and experimentation with un-quantized rhythms, further emphasizing the significance of this act.[152] Though he does not frame it specifically through the lens of Signifyin(g), Charnas makes sure to highlight the sphere of influence that this method of rhythmic grooves has had both during and after J Dilla's life. As valuable as that research is, the analysis within this chapter will be more specific as to how and why J Dilla used un-quantized rhythms through musical acts of Signifyin(g) through several selected tracks within his production discography.

In this first analysis of selected J Dilla tracks, I will look at the un-quantized drum patterns of several selected productions throughout his career and analyze how they were

[150] Reynolds, "The cult of J Dilla."
[151] Robert Glasper, "Jazz is the mother of hip-hop" (video of lecture), directed by Alex Ariff, posted April 19, 2017, accessed August 8, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Caxwob1iKX4.
[152] Charnas, 1-10.

developed, how they were rhythmically unique, and how they were used to Signify for listeners. This will expand on the research done by several scholars who have focused on the rhythmic patterns of J Dilla, such as Sean Peterson's PhD dissertation on the late 1990s hip-hop collective known as the "Soulquarians" as well as Nello Biasini's thesis on J Dilla's influence on modern live drumming.[153] In more general scholarship on rhythms in African American music, Anne Danielsen's book *Presence and Pleasure* uses several oxymoronic terms to describe the rhythmic patterns of several funk music pioneers such as James Brown and George Clinton such as "perfectly imperfect" and a "balanced imbalance."[154] In developing his signature sound, J Dilla both Signified upon not only the timeline or rhythmic MIDI grid, but implicitly upon other innovators of Afrodiasporic rhythm, as funk and soul groups and artists such as James Brown and Bootsy Collins implemented live recorded improvisations and subtle "Signifyin(g) on the timeline" in their own productions.

These terms like "balanced imbalance" also accurately describe the un-quantized rhythms found in much of J Dilla's discography, as the rhythmic spaces between each division and subdivision of the beat contains rhythmic discrepancies not only within each instrument, but between each instrument being performed throughout the recording. How these rhythms are shown by other scholars, specifically in their diagrams and transcriptions, will be compared to show how I came to my own method of transcription to clearly portray how these rhythms are implemented, further expanding on ideas related to micro-rhythmic grooves as representations of Signifyin(g) in relation to Samuel Floyd's concept of "Signifyin(g) on the timeline" and Anne Danielsen's concept of "gentle improvisation."[155] It

[153] Biasini, "J Dilla's Influence on Modern Drumming." Peterson, "Something Real."
[154] Anne Danielsen, *Presence and Pleasure: The Funk Grooves of James Brown and Parliament* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2006), 23.
[155] Floyd, 138.

is important, however, to further clarify the term "un-quantization" and how it relates to the production of drum patterns in hip-hop.

Further Defining Un-quantization

A term that will be used heavily throughout this chapter that needs further defining is the term "un-quantized" or "un-quantization." This refers to the option of quantization found among many digital samplers and audio workstations, in which the software can "quantize" or correct any rhythmic inaccuracies when recording or inputting rhythmic patterns into a MIDI grid. Throughout its early development in the 1980s, the quantization tool became useful for electronic musicians and producers to record rhythmically accurate drum patterns or synthesizer melodies onto exact rhythmic divisions or subdivisions and was used frequently as a tool for early hip-hop producers such as Marley Marl and Pete Rock,[156] using early digital samplers like the E-Mu SP-1200. Marley Marl's 1985 single "Marley Marl Scratch" and Pete Rock & CL Smooth's 1992 single "They Reminisce Over You (T.R.O.Y.)" are solid examples of this, with both tracks featuring fully quantized drum patterns in eighth and sixteenth notes.[157] Figures 2.1A and 2.1B on the following two pages show the drum patterns in "Marley Marl Scratch" and "They Reminisce Over You" respectively in both sheet music and a MIDI grid, highlighting the precise rhythmic groove in each pattern due to quantization.

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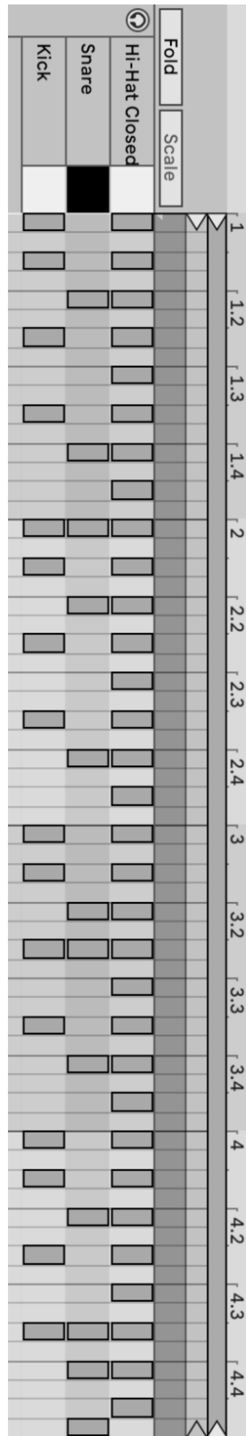
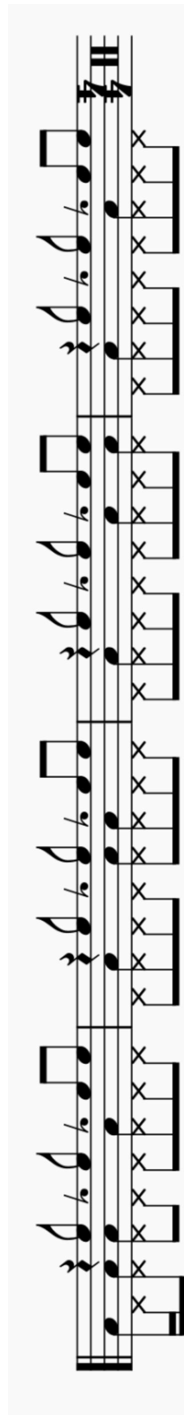
[156] Harkins, "Following the Instruments and Users," 86. "Marley Marl Scratch – Original 12" Version," Spotify, track 16 on MC Shan, *Down by Law (Deluxe),* Cold Chillin' Records, 1987. "They Reminisce Over You (T.R.O.Y)," Spotify, track 10 on Pete Rock & CL Smooth, *Mecca and the Soul Brother,* Elektra Records, 1992.

2.1A - Sheet Music and MIDI Grid of "Marley Marl Scratch"

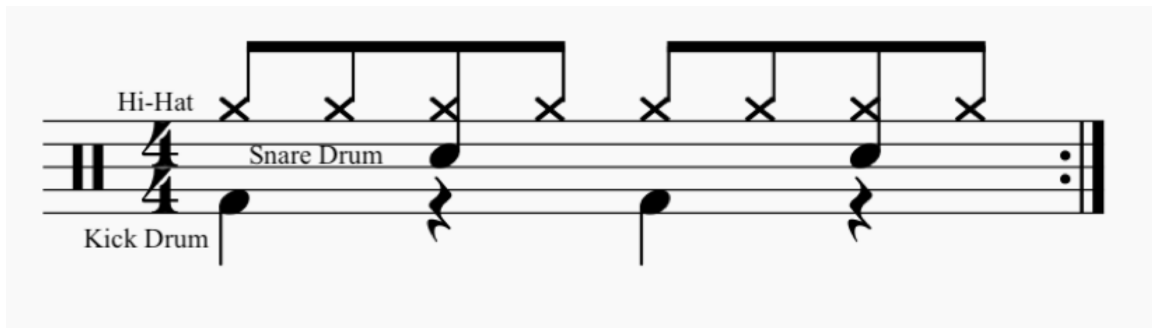




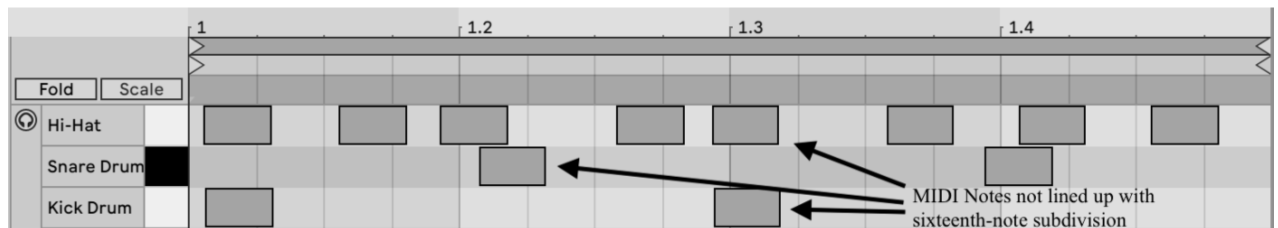
2.1B - Sheet Music and MIDI Grid of "They Reminisce Over You"

Figures 2.1A & 2.1B - Drum Patterns in Marley Marl's "Marley Marl Scratch" 1:25-1:35 and Pete Rock & CL Smooth's "They Reminisce Over You" 0:35-44

This quantization tool, however, was included as a feature in which the user could turn it on or off, allowing for control of which musical elements to quantize to an exact rhythmic grid and when to leave the performed and recorded rhythms as is. Because of the usefulness of this tool, it was and still is included in almost every digital sampler and digital audio workstation. Figure 2.2 on the following pages shows how quantization is implemented in Ableton Live 11, showing an un-quantized drum pattern (using snare, hi-hat, and kick drum sounds), then how that pattern is lined up with the rhythmic grid of sixteenth-note subdivisions using the quantization tool.



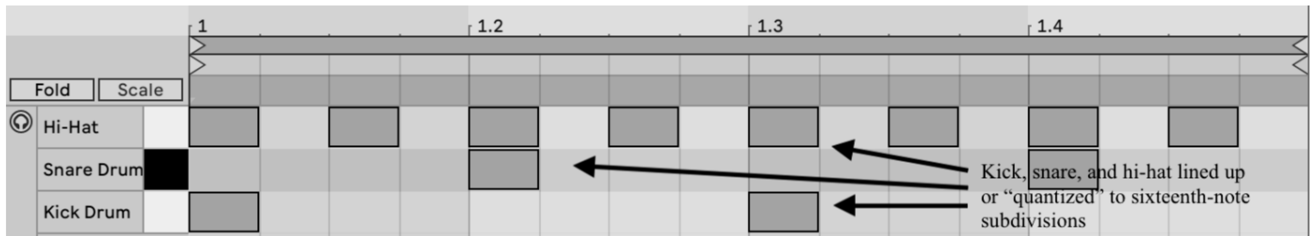
2.2A - Sheet music transcription of basic backbeat (with emphasis on weak beats)



2.2B - Un-quantized backbeat pattern in MIDI on Ableton Live 11 (with 1/16 note subdivision)

Quantize ⌘U
Quantize Settings... ⇧⌘U
Activate/Deactivate Note(s) 0
Extract Groove(s)
Crop Clip
Set 1.1.1 Here
Deactivate Loop ⌘L
Zoom to Clip Selection Z
Zoom Out Clip Completely X
Adaptive Grid:
Widest Wide Medium
Narrow Narrowest
Fixed Grid:
8 Bars 4 Bars 2 Bars 1 Bar 1/2
1/4 1/8 ✓ 1/16 1/32
Off
Triplet Grid ⌘3
Draw Mode (Pitch Lock Off) B
✓ Highlight Scales K

2.2C - Quantize tool implemented by either right-clicking or with Command+U



2.2D: Quantized MIDI notes, lined up with sixteenth-note subdivisions

Figures 2.2A-2.2D - Sheet Music Transcription and MIDI Grid Transcription of Basic Backbeat Pattern and Implementation of Quantization

This quantization tool has been present among digital sampling equipment such as the Akai Professional MPC and E-Mu SP-1200, and though they differed in their respective interface formats (both between each other and in comparison to the quantization tool from DAWS such as Ableton Live), their approach to quantization by the user remained the same. As J Dilla began to produce during his teenage years using equipment such as the MPC and SP-1200, he felt this use of quantization to be restrictive and would often turn off the quantization tool that was found on many of the samplers and digital workstations he used. This desire to create a more natural or "human" feel to his drum patterns became, as stated earlier, a signature aspect of his production. This method in and of itself is Signifyin(g) because of the act of obscuring of meaning and intention, being both described as "drunk" or "sloppy" by listeners while also being precise and specific in terms of implementation by J Dilla. Although other artists moved away from using quantization as mentioned previously, there were times where this was controversial among fellow producers and other musicians, with certain producers seeing un-quantization as uneven or off-tempo.[158] Because of the initial controversy of this, it became a significant part of his signature sound and therefore is important to discuss how we observe and interpret the technique both aurally and visually through transcriptions.

[158] In one case, J Dilla's use of un-quantization led to physical confrontation during his collaboration with Los Angeles hip-hop group The Pharcyde during the production of their 1995 album *Labcabincalifornia,* with Pharcyde member Slim Kid Tre stating that "Fat Lip and I fought physically over the way Jay Dee originally programmed 'Runnin'.' Fat Lip went in and reprogrammed every straight beat because Fat Lip was all about having the beats a certain way. I fought for it to be the way that it was because I was a stickler about people's creative input - that's what we hired him for." Eddie Houghton, "The Story Behind Some of J Dilla's Greatest Productions," *Fader*, published December 1, 2006, accessed July 4, 2019, https://www.stonesthrow.com/news/2006/12/the-story-behind-some-of-j-dilla-s-greatest-productions.

Transcribing Un-Quantized Rhythms

Several scholars have attempted ways to accurately transcribe the un-quantized rhythms of J Dilla. Sean Peterson in his PhD dissertation on the Soulquarians provides a few diagrams of several J Dilla productions, using a combination of both the stereo audio waveform, the spectrogram detecting all the frequencies of the recording, and a rhythmic grid placed on top that shows the exact subdivisions. Figure 2.3 on the next page shows one of Sean Peterson's transcriptions of the 1995 track "Runnin'" by The Pharcyde, with audio waveform, spectrogram, and rhythmic grid included.

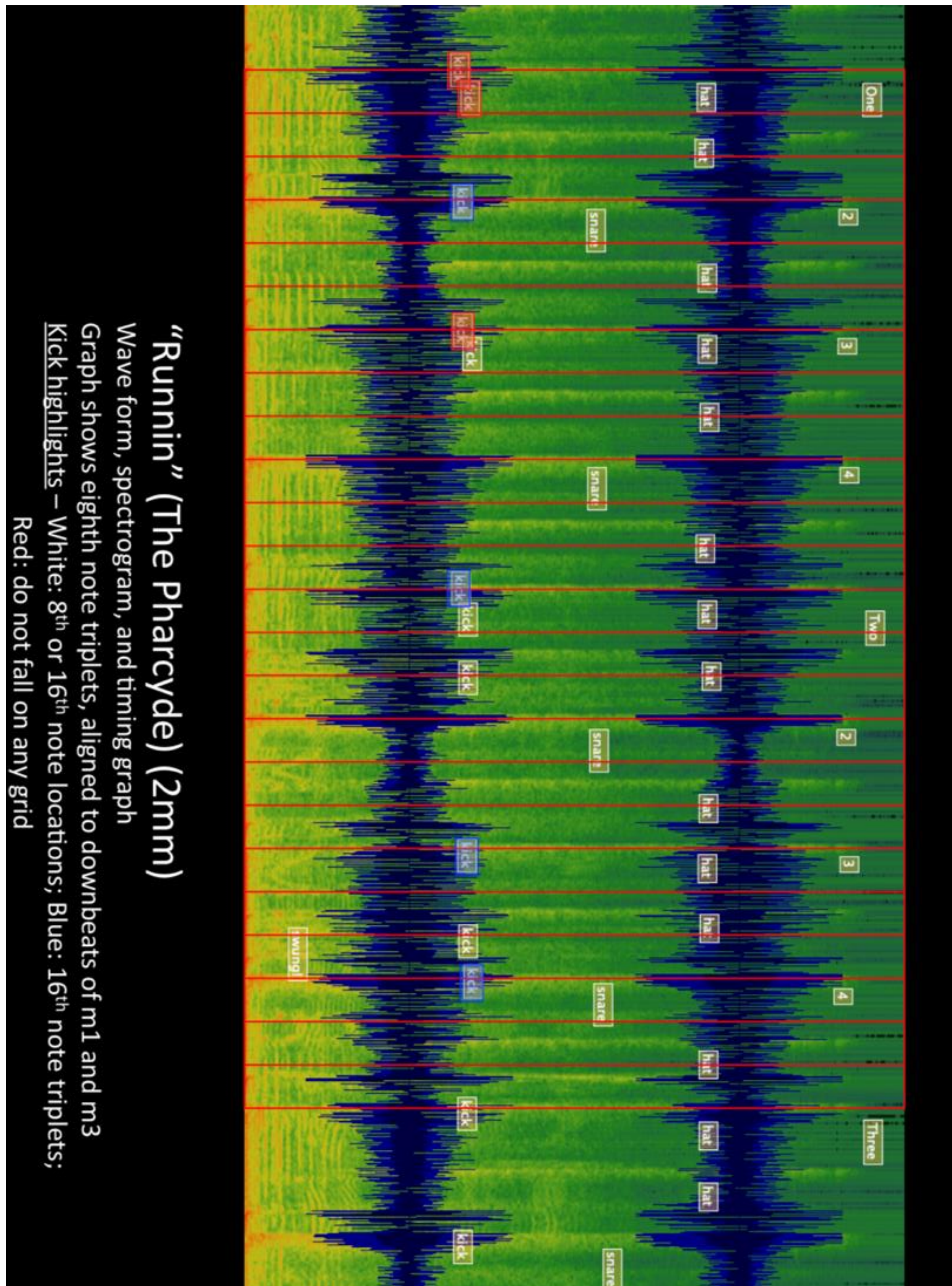


Figure 2.3 - Sean Peterson’s Transcription of “Runnin,’” With Stereo Wave Form and Spectrogram and Rhythmic Grid Placed Over Wave Form[159]

[159] Peterson, 127.

Although this method of transcription has aspects that are useful to a scholar (such as highlighting where each drum hit occurs in the waveform), it creates a disconnect between what is being analyzed in the recording and the ways in which practitioners and performers such as J Dilla implement these rhythms. In Figure 2.3, Peterson's transcription shows how the drum pattern represented by the audio waveform misaligns with the rhythmic grid placed over it but overemphasizes the placement of notes in relation to specific subdivisions, such as the highlighted kick drum pattern. Other aspects such as the color scheme of the diagram make it unclear as to the actual rhythmic qualities of the discrepancies. The specific un-quantized patterns of the hi-hat, for example, are unclear visually in their relationship with the timing graph placed over the audio waveform. This method of transcription also leaves out the tools which many contemporary producers use to create said rhythms, such as Akai Professional's series of MPCs or various DAWs. Many DAWs have spectrogram capabilities but would only be useful for observing frequencies and not rhythms. If one were observing the frequency or amplitude of the waveform than it would be useful, which is measured by spectrogram on the vertical axis. Time and rhythm, however, are usually measured on a horizontal axis. Because of this, it is more valuable to use a transcription that can both accurately represent the rhythms heard in the recording as well as use what is commonly seen in contemporary music production. Other DAWs as well as hardware workstations such as the MPCs mentioned earlier are also valuable, however, due to my own personal experience and preference with Ableton Live, I have chosen to focus on using this software for MIDI transcriptions.

Transcription into Western notation is also valuable in some instances, especially when discussing basic drum patterns. As stated in the introduction, throughout this dissertation Western notation has been provided, simply because they clearly and effectively show the basic rudimentary patterns of the drum set being performed in a specific track. I will

only show the basic pattern and not degrees of un-quantization that can be seen in a MIDI grid. Many discussions of educational spaces surrounding methods of achieving a similar rhythmic feel to J Dilla's productions tend to involve applying rhythmic patterns of various complexities, such as various unique subdivisions within 4/4 time such as septuplets, quintuplets, or various methods of applying metric modulation or combining compound and simple meters.[160] Although the methods presented in these tutorials achieve a similar effect to J Dilla's rhythmic patterns, they fail in understanding the purpose of creating an un-quantized rhythm in order to achieve a more "human" feel in their productions.[161] By adding extra layers of complexity and analysis instead of teaching specific methods of practicing this groove using references from other productions, this method of attempting to subdivide and precisely transcribe un-quantized grooves puts what is a musical concept deeply rooted in the African diaspora through a European diasporic lens.

Swing and Rhythms as Signifyin(g)

As described by Floyd,[162] certain musical characteristics such as swing in jazz are more appropriate to be considered simply as a trope of the genre, as opposed to a "troping of tropes" as described and originally defined by Gates.[163] Although this statement was originally referring to jazz, it seems that one could apply this to other more contemporary genres that use elements of swing, such as R&B and hip-hop.[164] According to Timothy Hughes in his analysis of the music of Stevie Wonder, he states that rhythmic concepts such as syncopation and anticipations of downbeats can be interpreted " as 'Signifyin(g) on the

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[160] Adam Neely, "How to Play music with a 'Drunk' Feel", YouTube Video, posted Dec 18, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9MzKx0fKg5o.
[161] The term "human" refers to how it is used to describe rhythmic patterns that resist the quantized rhythms found using the quantization tool.
[162] Floyd, 105.
[163] Gates, 34.
[164] In hip-hop subgenres like New Jack Swing, a style of hip-hop which became popular in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the use of sixteenth-note or "shuffle" swing was heavily implemented and can be heard on tracks like Bell Biv Devoe's 1990 single "Poison."

timeline,' where 'timeline' refers to the underlying square, steady, and above all else *European* metric pulse."[165] In the case of J Dilla and those who attempt to emulate his style of un-quantized swing, this can become an act of Signifyin(g), in which the trope of swing is being expanded upon, experimented with, or transformed. In this case, the "timeline" would be the rhythmic grid found in many music production equipment such as the Akai Professional MPC or DAW, and the Signifyin(g) would be the micro-rhythmic discrepancies and un-quantized drum patterns J Dilla implemented. In *Dilla Time*, Charnas emphasizes this very intentional implementation, stating:

> [J] Dilla's rhythms were not accidents, they were intentions. Yet even the biggest fans of his style initially heard them as erratic. Why? Their reactions had everything to do with those rhythms defying their expectations. To understand the music of J Dilla, we must examine that process of subversion.[166]

With J Dilla's implementation, his intentional use of un-quantization is Signifyin(g) upon the tropes of hip-hop production that became common up until this time (around the mid-1990s), which impressed his listeners and peers.

"Signifyin(g) on the Timeline" in "Bullshit" (1995)

In Questlove's 2015 memoir *Mo' Meta Blues*, he describes this experience of hearing J Dilla's production on The Pharcyde's "Bullshit" for the first time in 1995 as such:

> …Dilla was just going crazy on the kick pattern. At that moment, I had the same reaction I do to anything truly radical in hip-hop. I was paralyzed, uncertain how to feel. Usually, if I go over the top with my approval for an album or a band, it turns out to be a solid achievement…but like I said, if I'm brought up short by a piece of artwork, if I'm conflicted, confounded, and made uncomfortable, nine times out of ten that thing will change the course of history. That's the feeling I got when I heard Dilla's kick pattern on "Bullshit."[167]

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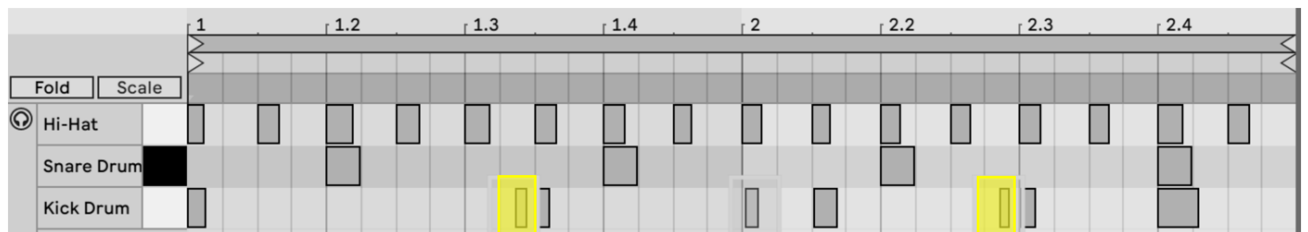
[165] Hughes, 107.
[166] Charnas, 22.
[167] Thompson, 126. "Bullshit," Spotify, track 1 on The Pharcyde, *Labcabincalifornia,* Delicious Vinyl, 1995.

In this instance, Questlove's understanding of typical kick drum pattern rhythms was challenged upon his first listening of "Bullshit." The un-quantized nature of the kick pattern also happens sporadically, keeping the listener guessing as to which kick drum hits will occur directly on downbeats/upbeats and which will occur somewhere in between. Figures 2.4A and 2.4B below shows both sheet music and a MIDI grid of an excerpt of the drum pattern found in "Bullshit," highlighting the kick drum heard by Questlove:

2.4A - Sheet Music of "Bullshit" with kick drum notes that feature un-quantization highlighted



2.4B - MIDI Grid of "Bullshit" drums with un-quantized kick drum notes highlighted

Figures 2.4A and 2.4B - Sheet Music and MIDI transcription of "Bullshit" 0:28-0:34

Through observation of the kick drum pattern in "Bullshit" and its noticeable difference from typical drum patterns, this interaction described by Questlove is a prime example of musical Signifyin(g), specifically the "Signifyin(g) on the timeline" concept

coined by Floyd.[168] In Figure 2.4, the "timeline" is shown by both the sheet music and MIDI transcription, with the kick drum occurring before beat three of each measure functioning as the Signifier. This is shown both in its basic pattern using the sheet music transcription and its more rhythmically accurate pattern in MIDI. The diagram below shows this system of Signifyin(g) observed by Questlove between J Dilla and the kick drum pattern taking place, with the act of Signification itself occurring through J Dilla's implementation of the un-quantized kick drum and being Signified upon the "timeline" or imagined rhythmic grid or subdivision.

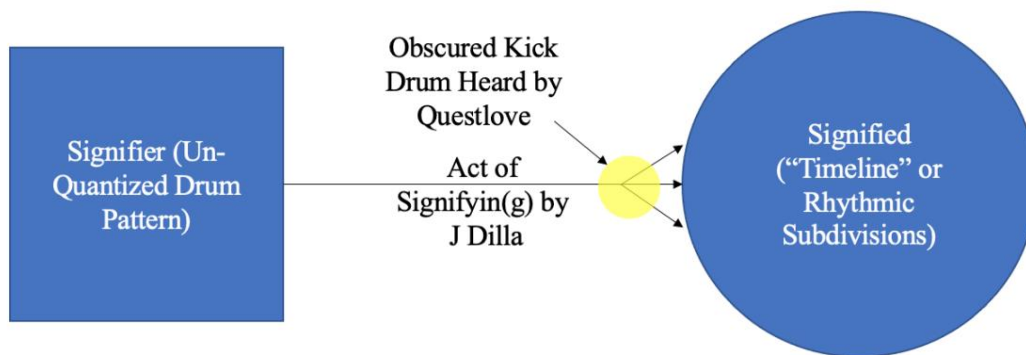


Figure 2.5 - Diagram of Signifyin(g) in "Bullshit"

In this instance, we have the Signifier (the kick pattern) being heard by Questlove from the Signified (The "timeline" or rhythmic subdivisions). This dyadic form of Black Signifyin(g) is occurring between Signifier and Signified, with Questlove observing this act in a more general sense of interpretation. In much recorded music, any act of Signifyin(g) occurs in this way, with the act itself relying upon the listener to be exposed to the recording

[168] Floyd, 56.

in order to be Signified upon.[169] In the instance of "Bullshit" we have an example of a specific anecdote in which Signifyin(g) takes place. This can occur both because of the rhythmic patterns being presented and the sound of the drums themselves.

Drum Sound Design as Signifyin(g) in "Drop" (1995)

The ways in which J Dilla recorded, digitally processed, and mixed drum sounds were a significant part of his "signature sound" as a producer and is arguably just as important and influential as his un-quantized drum patterns. These varying drum timbres further inform and obscure meaning in its process of Signifyin(g), with the use of claps or short snares obscuring placement of the backbeat or varying hi-hat sounds which could influence placement of the eighth notes. As stated by Schloss, many producers tend to use a variety of drum sounds between individual productions, as it adds variety as well as contributes to their own signature sound.[170] What makes J Dilla unique in this, however, is how varied and unique his sounds were in comparison to many of his contemporary producers.[171] Though the onomatopoeia "boom bap" was and still is used to describe much of hip-hop production (specifically to the kick and snare sounds respectively) throughout the 1990s, J Dilla experimented with timbres both in his sampled drums from vinyl recordings and from originally produced drum sounds.[172]

This part of J Dilla's signature sound and its connection to Signifyin(g) is also directly tied to the use of drum timbres in African diasporic music. This is Signifyin(g) in that it

[169] In live settings, the effects of Signifyin(g) function differently and will be discussed in detail in chapter seven.
[170] Schloss, 46.
[171] J Dilla's use of a variety of drum sounds have become so integral to his signature sound, in fact, that several sample packs from music production companies such as Splice feature collections of drum sounds that are similar to or based on the sounds that J Dilla was known for.
[172] In his home basement studio in Detroit, J Dilla had a separate recording booth for drums, in which he would record a variety of percussion sounds and sequence them for playback on his Akai Professional MPC 3000. Frank Bush, "J Dilla In The Studio [R.I.P.]," (documentary footage), published by NONSTOPHIPHOP420, posted March 5, 2010, accessed July 5, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Bv3h9D3v_8&t=149s.

embraces and expands upon the emphasis of the backbeat drum groove that has been present in much of African American popular music for the past century. As discussed by J Dilla himself in a 2003 interview, drummers such as Clyde Stubblefield and Tony Allen were massive influences on his use of drums as well as drum sounds.[173] This creates a connection to the funk and afrobeat drummers (respectively) and an expansion or reverence for past African diasporic genres, thus leading to acts of Signifyin(g), albeit acts that may be more implicit and less apparent to the listener. This relationship functions similarly to Gates's concept of the "hall of mirrors" in Signifyin(g), in which the reverence for previous material (in this case, drum patterns in Afrodiasporic popular music) is "bounced off" one another, creating a connection between older genres and artists in this specific musical field to J Dilla's more contemporary innovations.[174]

One example of this use of drum timbres can be found in one of his earlier productions in The Pharcyde's 1995 track "Drop," with the snare drum sound and kick drum in the drum pattern being one of the loudest and most prevalent aspects within the mix of the track.[175] In "Drop," the kick drum, hi-hat, and snare sounds feature strong attacks and very brief releases in their articulations, with the snare sound having a slightly longer "gated" release.[176] The heavy accents found in these drum sounds further emphasize the moments of un-quantized rhythms, with the unorthodox sound of the snare drum (which through various processing and equalizing sounds more similar to the white noise f than that of an acoustic snare drum) also further emphasizes the weak beats of two and four in each measure, further locking in the groove provided by the drum pattern. Just like in "Bullshit," relatively little un-

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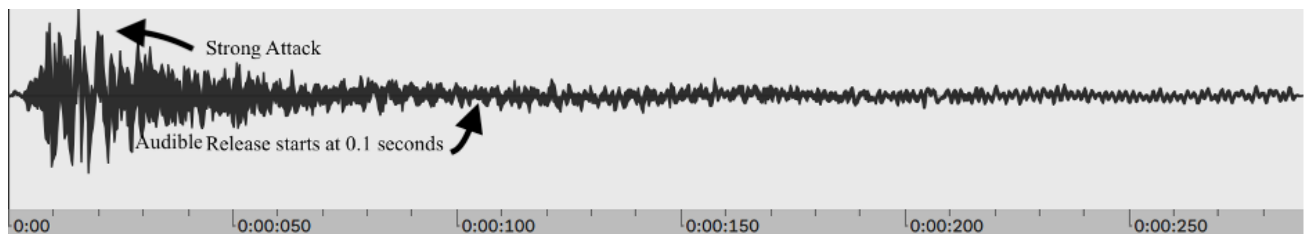
[173] Y'skid, "J Dilla Interview 2003 part 1 of 4."
[174] Gates, 54.
[175] In his chapter on J Dilla's drum patterns, Sean Peterson's PhD dissertation on the Soulquarians explores this aspect of Dilla's production, providing sound graphs of several of his tracks. Peterson, 76-104. "Drop," Spotify, track 9 on The Pharcyde, *Labcabincalifornia,* Delicious Vinyl, 1995.
[176] The term "gated snare" refers to a sharp release of the snare sound using what is called a gate. This device silences sounds that are below a certain threshold, thus cutting off or "gating" the sound that is being processed through it. Robert Fink, Melinda Latour and Zachary Wallmark, *The Relentless Pursuit of Tone: Timbre in Popular Music* (London: Oxford University Press, 2018), 335.

quantization is heard (at least in comparison to his later productions), with the sporadic swing of the kick drum acting as the main Signifier. Also heard is how a slight rush of the tempo is heard at the end of every two measures, with the bassline further emphasizing the second beat of every second measure.[177] By implementing these micro-rhythmic nuances, J Dilla both Signifies upon the timeline of the track's rhythmic subdivisions as well as self Signifies by creating a style of drum pattern that highlights his signature sound as a producer. The figures on the following page show this drum pattern and the bass line's emphasis on the rhythmic groove, as well as the actual shape of the snare sound, highlighting the gated and noisy timbre.

[177] This slight difference or rush of the tempo is representative of micro-timing aspects of the anacrusis, as analyzed by Matthew Butterfield in his "The Power of Anacrusis" article. Matthew Butterfield, "The Power of Anacrusis: Engendered Feeling in Groove-Based Musics," *Music Theory Online*, Vol. 12, No. 4, December 2006, accessed December 5, 2021, https://mtosmt.org/issues/mto.06.12.4/mto.06.12.4.butterfield.html.

2.6A - Sheet Music Transcription of “Drop” 0:42-0:47

2.6B - MIDI Grid Transcription of “Drop” 0:42-0:47 With Un-quantized Notes Highlighted



6C - Snare Sound in “Drop”

Figure 2.6A-C - Transcriptions of Drums and Bass line in “Drop” 0:42-0:47 & Audio Waveform of Snare Sound

Drum Timbres Through Electronic Synthesis in "Electric Wire Hustler Flower" (2002)

Throughout the production of Common's 2002 album *Electric Circus,* J Dilla's contributions to several tracks mainly included the "going Kraftwerk" aesthetic that he became interested during the early 2000s. The fourth track on the album "Electric Wire Hustler Flower" exemplifies this desired aesthetic.[178] Co-produced with fellow Soulquarian member and pianist James Poyser, the production of the track features an un-quantized drum pattern typical of a J Dilla production, but instead of sampled or acoustic drums, the drum sounds featured are of an electronic drum machine, specifically from the Korg Electribe ESX-1. This repeated drum pattern, along with various "white noise" sounds from the Moog Voyager and several improvised melodic lines on a distorted synthesizer sound from Poyser make up the body of the production, emphasizing both the cold electronic and warm soulful themes that Common's lyrics reflect. The following figures on the next page show a sheet music transcription of an excerpt of "Electric Wire Hustler Flower," as well as an approximation of the settings of the drum sounds found on the Korg Electribe ESX-1.

[178] "Electric Wire Hustle Flower," Spotify, track 4 on Common, *Electric Circus,* MCA Records, 2002.

2.7A

2.7B

Figures 2.7A&B - Sheet Music Transcription of "Electric Wire Hustler Flower" and Approximate Settings of the Drum Sounds on the Korg Electribe ESX-1

The electronic timbres of the drum sounds contrast greatly from the sounds usually used by J Dilla in his production discography up until this period and are certainly reminiscent of Kraftwerk's early synthesized drum sounds of the 1970s, such as the track "Radioactivity." This is further emphasized with the addition of the white noise sounds found throughout "Electric Wire," which reflect the electronic nature of the production. As stated previously, however, there is an attempt to combine the "cold" nature of the electronic instruments used with the "warm" soulful sounds that the Soulquarians were known for during this period (as explored by scholars such as Peterson).[179]

By doing this, the Signifyin(g) enacted is an act of subversion, in which J Dilla subverts the expectations of the listener's impressions of the electronic timbres found in older genres and artists of electronic music and combines them with the more contemporary and soulful qualities of the neo-soul aesthetics that J Dilla and the rest of the Soulquarians were known for at this time. The soulful qualities found in the production which work in contrast with the electronic sounds include the improvised keyboard melodies as stated previously, as well as the gospel choir vocals that enter periodically as the track's title is recited during the song's chorus. The title of the track is in and of itself a representation of these two contrasts, with "Electric Wire" representing the electronic nature of the track and "Hustler Flower" representing the more organic sounds such as the choir and improvised keyboard sounds. This also is a prime example of Adam Krims' "hip-hop sublime" concept as well, with two contrasting timbral aesthetic working in tandem with one another throughout the production.[180]

[179] Peterson, 138.
[180] Krims, 187.

Rhythmic Signifyin(g) on Samples in "Get A Hold" (1996)

One other track produced by J Dilla which features an un-quantized kick drum pattern is the 1996 track "Get A Hold" by A Tribe Called Quest.[181] What differentiates the drums in this track with the drums in "Drop" is how it builds upon the rhythms found in the sample of the production. In "Get A Hold," the sample heard comes from American rock band The Cyrkle's 1967 recording of their song "The Visit (She Was Here)."[182] The original track itself features a soft bossa nova-esque drum pattern and tempo, with vocals typical to that of 1960s American pop music. When hearing the original recording, the rhythmic groove between this original and how it is heard in "Get A Hold" is strikingly different, with the heavy backbeat from J Dilla's added drums contrasting greatly from the original recording's soft and minimal drum pattern. In this way, J Dilla is Signifyin(g) upon the original recording by The Cyrkle by expanding upon and transforming its original rhythmic groove to fit that of what is appropriate to both a hip-hop groove and, more specifically, a groove that is unique to his own signature sound. This is both a musical and cultural form of Signifyin(g), as the original recording comes from a white American pop group, and by Signifyin(g) upon this recording, J Dilla was able to take a piece of white American pop music and recontextualize it into Afrocentric musical characteristics. Figure 2.8 on the next page shows this relationship between the sample and added drums in comparison to the original recording, as well as how the un-quantized parts of the drum pattern interact with the sample on a MIDI grid.

[181] During this time, not long after the release of The Pharcyde's sophomore album *Labcabincalifornia* in 1995, he began producing and collaborating with the New York-based rap group, as well as being a member of the production group informally known as "The Ummah," which features members of A Tribe Called Quest as well as De La Soul. Several collections of beat tapes created by J Dilla himself would become several tracks on A Tribe Called Quest's *Beats, Rhymes, and Life.* Ferguson, 56. "Get A Hold," Spotify, track 2 on A Tribe Called Quest, *Beats, Rhymes, and Life,* Jive Records, 1996.

[182] "The Visit (She Was Here)," Spotify, track 2 on The Cyrkle, *Neon,* Columbia Records, 1967.

2.8A - “The Visit” 1:20 & 1:40

2.8B - “Get A Hold” 0:10-0:20

2.8C - “Get A Hold” Drum Pattern in MIDI Grid with un-quantized note highlighted

Figure 2.8A-C - “The Visit (She Was Here)” Sample by The Cyrkle From 1:20 and 1:40 Compared to “Get A Hold” 0:10-0:20 and “Get A Hold” Rhythms in MIDI grid in Ableton Live 11

In a 2012 interview, London-based DJ Benji B describes hearing the original track by The Cyrkle for the first time and making its connection to "Get A Hold" as follows: "the story behind hearing that [original] record is quite interesting because someone once made me a folk mixtape with sort of soulful folk stuff, then suddenly I put two and two together and realized that not only was [The Visit] a good song in its own right…but it was flipped perfectly [by J Dilla in 'Get A Hold']"[183] In this instance, the way in which the sample was "flipped" was not only its repetition throughout the track (as well as other transformative aspects) but its addition of the drums and drum pattern created by J Dilla. As pointed out by Loren Kajikawa in his analysis of Run DMC and Aerosmith's "Walk This Way," hip-hop can contain sonic signifiers of both white and Black music.[184] In the case of sampling, the act of sampling and "flipping" a sample by white artists and adding sonic signifiers can also accomplish a similar effect. The figure below shows this relationship as a form of Signifyin(g), with Benji B noticing the "flipped" sample in "Get A Hold" in comparison to the original recording.

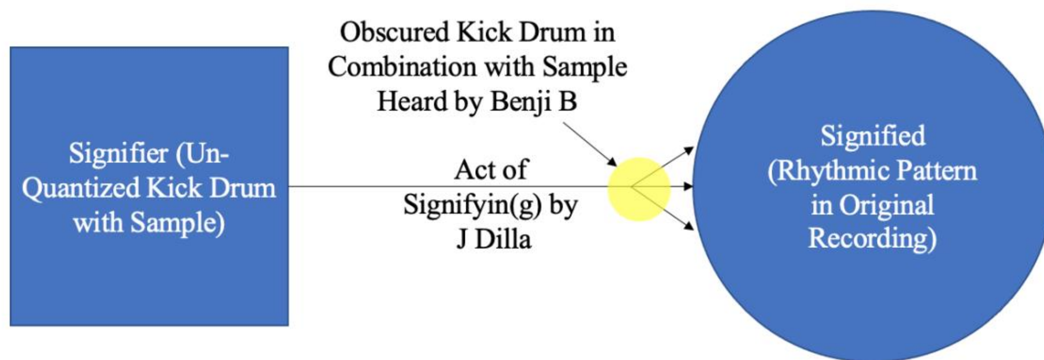


Figure 2.9 - Signifyin(g) between Benji B, "The Visit," and "Get A Hold"

[183] Benjamin Benstead, "BLING 47 BREAKS DILLA EDITION: Benji B – Get A Hold," (video of interview), hosted by Bling47music, posted February 14, 2012, accessed July 7, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8_HmjqwBlW4.
[184] Kajikawa, 110.

In the case of "Get A Hold," the drum groove is Signifyin(g) upon the original sample both in its rhythmic discrepancy from the original as well as its racialized context. This further reflects the subversion and interaction between notions of Blackness and whiteness within J Dilla's music. In this case, however, J Dilla uses the specific technique of "Signifyin(g) on the timeline" with the implementation of an un-quantized rhythm contrasting with a sample, as opposed to more general musical tropes as discussed in the previous chapter.

Un-quantized Rhythms in "2U 4U" (2000)

The J Dilla-produced Slum Village track "2U 4U" from their 2000 album *Fan-Tas-Tic, Vol. 2* features un-quantized rhythmic characteristics not only in its drum pattern, but in every other aspect of the production as well, including the sampled keyboard motif, bassline, and the lyrics from all three members of Slum Village.[185] The main musical aspects of this track we will focus on are the main section that lasts from approximately 0:10 to 2:34 of the recording.[186] In "2U 4U," Dilla continues further pushes playing "off the grid" and "Signifyin(g) on the timeline" by implementing an un-quantized backbeat with a strong emphasis of the snare and kick drum sounds throughout the drum pattern. J Dilla chose to use the sounds of a live acoustic drum set as opposed to sampled and programmed drum sounds and collaborated with hip-hop and jazz drummer Kareem Riggins on the production of this track. It is unknown as to how the drum pattern itself was recorded and whether it was recorded either live in a studio setting or recorded into a digital sampler and programmed on J

[185] "2U 4U," Spotify, track 16 on Slum Village, *Fan-Tas-Tic, Vol. 2.* Barack Records, 2000.
[186] Although the intro and outro sections of the song at 0:00 and 2:34 respectively also feature various rhythmic aspects of un-quantized swing and groove throughout their production, the focus of this analysis will center around the main section of the track, which also features the main verses and chorus in the lyrics. The only musical aspect that is similar between the main section and its intro/outro is the bass line featured in the intro at 0:00, which continues throughout the main section albeit in a different octave and timbre (a synth sub bass sound as opposed to the previously heard electric bass sound).

Dilla's Akai Professional MPC3000. It is apparent, however, that the drum pattern was recorded throughout the entire track as opposed to being looped on the MPC3000, as the un-quantized rhythmic feel evolves throughout the track and several kick or clap sounds are added or removed as the track progresses.[187]

What also adds to the sound and timbre of the snare drum sound in "2U4U" is the addition of the hand clap, as well as the use of the rim shot technique on the playing of the snare drum. Defined as a snare drum technique in which the drum stick simultaneously strikes the rim and drumhead, this technique is mainly used to heavily accent the snare drum as much as possible, providing a powerful and staccato drum sound. This technique is used frequently in live funk and R&B drumming, as it can loudly project the sound of the snare drum on the backbeat of typical funk drum patterns.[188] The additional clap sound further punctuates the backbeat, as well as provides a "gentle improvisation" as defined by Danielsen to the creation and evolution of the drum pattern throughout the recording of the track.

Although clap sounds have been used throughout much of recorded popular music, the way Dilla uses this clap sound is not only to further emphasize the backbeat, but to also add more of an un-quantized groove. The clap occurs just right after the rim shot or snare drum sound, creating what is known in modern drumming techniques as a flam, in which two drum hits are played, like that of a short drum roll. The diagram on the next page shows the clap and snare sound being played in "2U4U", with the clap occurring just after the snare.

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[187] It is possible, due to the high fidelity of digital samplers at this time, that the individual drum sounds were sampled into the MPC and replayed and programmed into the full production of the track. Due to the collaboration with drummer Kareem Riggins, however, it was likely that the drums were recorded on an acoustic drum set in a studio.

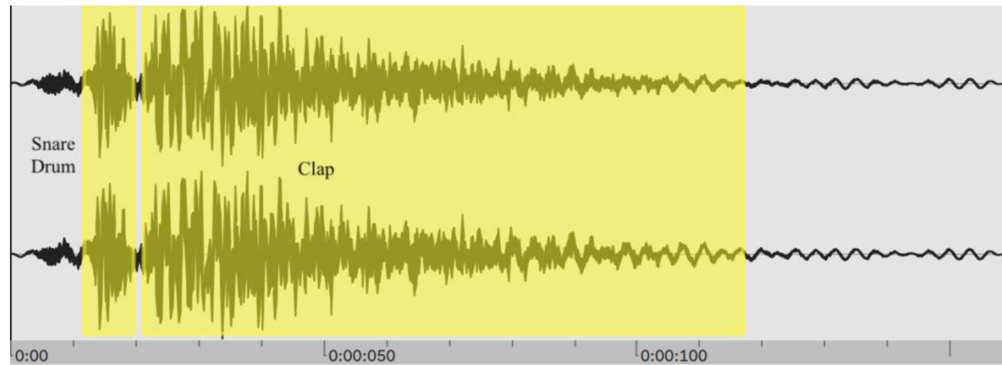


Figure 2.10: Rhythmic Discrepancies Found in the Clap and Snare Sounds

Not only are these two sounds the loudest part of the track according to the decibels shown on an audio workstation, but also provides two simultaneous but distinct backbeats, further emphasizing not only the backbeat itself but the un-quantized groove and feel of the track. The intentional micro-rhythmic discrepancies between the snare and clap sound are a similar technique to what Samuel Floyd calls "apart playing" in many Afrodiasporic music genres, in which specific rhythmic patterns or divisions are obscured by multiple percussive sounds occurring slightly apart from one another.[189]

Un-Quantized Rhythms as "Gentle Improvisation"

Throughout the entirety of "2U4U", the track can be broken down into a basic four-measure loop or repeated pattern, with subtle rhythmic variations that occur throughout. Within this four-measure unit, the musical aspects can be broken down into four main components: drums, guitar melody, filtered guitar countermelody, and bassline.[190] On occasion, a filtered guitar or keyboard melody will appear from time to time to provide a

[189] Floyd, 26.

[190] This guitar melody, according to WhoSampled.com, is a sample of a small guitar riff from the D'Angelo track "Jonz in my Bonz", from his 1995 debut album *Brown Sugar.* Although it is possible that this guitar melody was digitally sampled directly from the original recording on Dilla's Akai Professional MPC3000, it is also possible that the riff was re-recorded during the production of this song, as Dilla and D'Angelo began collaborating as early as 1997.

countermelody to the main guitar riff, such as at around 0:40 and 1:30.[191] The drum pattern provides a fairly basic pattern throughout the recording in terms of the eighth-note pattern of the hi-hats and kick and snare drums firmly focusing on beats one and three and beats two and four, respectively. The guitar melodies also appear to be fairly basic, with almost all of the melodic motifs accenting each downbeat, with a sixteenth-note and eighth-note rhythm appearing in the main guitar melody throughout the entire track. The most rhythmically complex component is the bass line, with a repeated shuffle-swing sixteenth-note motif repeated throughout and further providing a counter melody from the main guitar riff. The transcriptions below show the variations of this four-measure repeated figure that appear throughout the recording, showing the four main musical components: drums, main guitar riff, filtered guitar chords, and bassline. Like many hip-hop productions, the composition itself is loop-based, with the same melodic and harmonic lines repeating throughout, as well as a similar drum pattern playing throughout to provide the backbeat and rhythmic groove. The reason for providing several transcriptions then is to show how Dilla throughout his production provides subtle nuances and changes in the melodic and rhythmic textures, creating further interest for the listener as well as providing different textures that interact with the rapped lyrics of the recording. This use of various added rhythms and melodic variations further emphasizes the "gentle improvisation."[192] The transcriptions on the next two pages show two units found within "2U4U," with the basic melodies and rhythms in sheet music.[193]

[191] The term "filtered" refers to the use of high-pass or low-pass filters to alter the audible frequencies of a specific recording. Filtering was a significant part of one of many of J Dilla's production techniques, as it was able to bring out the low-end frequencies of the samples he would use. In this case, a low-pass filter was used to both the guitar melodies and counter melodies, creating a sort of "warmer" texture to the timbre of the guitar samples.
[192] Danielsen, 54.
[193] These transcriptions are specifically of the version of "2U4U" that is found on the re-mastered version of the track, found on the 2011 re-release of *Fantastic,* titled *Fantastic, Vol. 2.10,* which includes a slightly longer introduction.

Guitar 1

Guitar 2

Synth Bass

Drumset

Bm11/F♯ Bm11 Em7/G Dmaj9 Cm11

2.11A - at 0:15

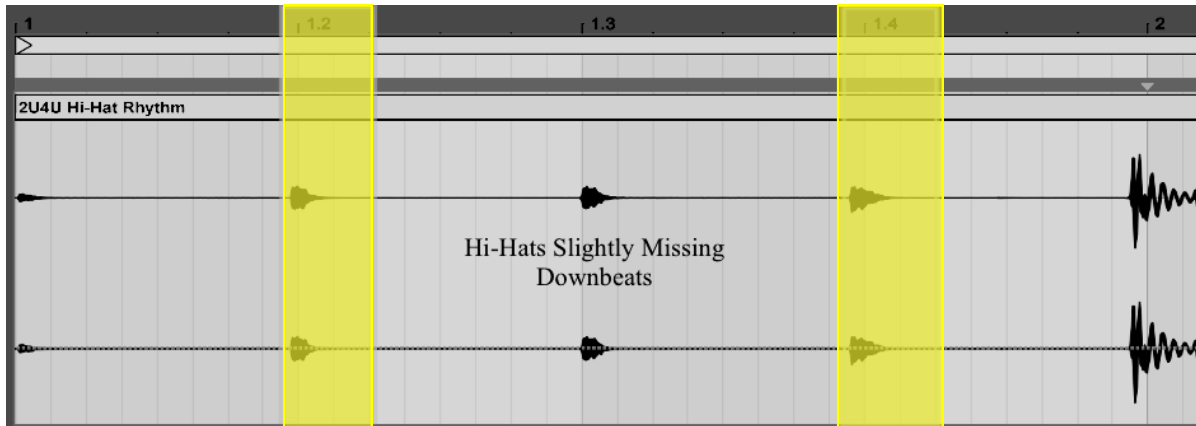
2.11B - at 0:41

Figures 2.11A-C - Sheet Music transcriptions of "2U4U" at 0:15 and 0:41

Further Visualizations of Un-quantized Rhythms

Based on the transcriptions in the figures on the previous pages, although one can observe the basic melodic and rhythmic interactions between each component found within the track, it is difficult to observe the subtle micro-rhythmic or “un-quantized” discrepancies that much of J Dilla’s production is known for. When the audio recording itself is seen through Ableton Live 11, however, we can observe these discrepancies much more clearly, as the transients (loudest or largest points in an audio waveform) are seen as misaligning with the rhythmic grid of the audio software, as shown in Figure 2.12 on the next page. It is possible, due to the misalignment of the recording with the set tempo of the audio software (at ninety-four beats per minute), that the track was recorded without a metronome or “click-track,” further providing an emphasis on the more “human” rhythmic sounds of the drum pattern. After the introduction of the track, four hi-hats played on quarter notes can be heard before the main section of the track occurs, showing not only the un-quantized groove at its most basic component, but also to count off before the actual start of the main section, with the guitar melody and bassline acting as an ensemble that enters after the drummer counts off with the hi-hats.[194]

[194] In this analysis, the version of the recording that is being used is the extended version from the 2006 re-release of Slum Village’s *Fantastic, Vol. 2,* titled *Fantastic, Vol. 2.10.* In this version, the instrumental is extended slightly, and includes the hi-hat count-off from the drums performed by Kareem Riggins.



2.12A

2.12B

Figure 2.12A&B - Un-quantized Quarter Notes of the Hi-Hat Pattern and Sixteenth Notes of the Bassline

The micro-rhythmic discrepancies seen throughout the figures above are also a prime example of a representation of Olly Wilson's concept of the "Heterogenous Sound Ideal" in African diasporic music. Wilson defines one of the characteristics of this concept as "the tendency to approach the organization of rhythm based on the principle of rhythmic and implied metrical contrast – a tendency to create musical events in which rhythmic clash or disagreement of accents is the ideal."[195] He points out how this tendency is expected among much of Afrodiasporic composition and performance. It may seem, therefore, that because of

[195] Wilson, 165.

this expectation of rhythmic disagreement, the phenomenon of Signifyin(g) is difficult or impossible to achieve, as those within the genres or cultures of these music are unable to be Signified upon. What allows Signifyin(g) to occur, however, is *how* these rhythmic disagreements will sound and where they may take place within a given performance or recording. In this case, the un-quantized drum patterns of J Dilla Signify upon the listeners by how and where they occur in any given production, even if or when this may be expected.[196]

Conclusion

After a careful analysis of the different rhythmic gestures and variations presented throughout the songs "Drop", "Get A Hold", and "2U4U", one can see how Dilla uses techniques such as "gentle improvisation" (as defined by Anne Danielsen) and his signature unquantized rhythms to create a unique groove that is able to "Signify upon the timeline" of each track by creating micro-rhythmic discrepancies between the implied rhythmic subdivisions and the drum pattern.[197] In "2U4U," for example, the typical characteristics of hip-hop production, such as loop-based composition and an emphasis on the drum pattern, are present, but are experimented with by J Dilla's innovative rhythmic techniques. Referring back to the "hall of mirrors" metaphor from Gates,[198] what J Dilla did was Signify upon not only the timeline or rhythmic MIDI grid, but upon other innovators of Afrodiasporic rhythm, as funk and soul groups and artists such as James Brown and Bootsy Collins implemented live recorded improvisations and subtle "Signifyin(g) on the timeline" in their own productions decades prior. Within the context of hip-hop production, however, this was a major innovation, as the use of sampling technology and drum machines throughout hip-hop's early years created a sound and style that was considered synthetic and not "human

[196] This is especially the case later in J Dilla's career, as his use of un-quantized drum patterns became an integral part of his signature sound and was expected of him among fans and collaborators.
[197] Danielsen, *Presence and Pleasure*, 54.
[198] Gates, 35.

sounding." J Dilla's Signifyin(g) through rhythms and drum patterns highlighted a shift in a desire for more natural or "humanized" production in both the drum patterns and melodic patterns found in much of hip-hop as well as wider Afrodiasporic music.

Chapter 3

"Jay Dee Flip Another Beat for Me:" "Flipping" as Signifyin(g)

As discussed in the introduction chapter, one of the key musical aspects of hip-hop since its development in the New York boroughs of the 1970s is its use of musical borrowing, from the use of repeated "breaks" (drum grooves from funk and soul recordings) on turntables that provided musical accompaniment for b-boys (break dancers) and MCs (master of ceremonies, which would evolve into rappers) to the implementation and development of digital sampling in the 1980s. I shall reiterate that the cultural phenomenon of musical borrowing is also a key factor of music of the African diaspora, as studied by Henry Louis Gates and Samuel Floyd.[199] This act of musical borrowing is one of the many examples of Signifyin(g) in African American music and culture. As also stated in the introductory chapter, Joseph Schloss reiterates sampling as Signifyin(g) in *Making Beats*, stating that "it allows individuals to demonstrate intellectual power while simultaneously obscuring the nature and extent of their agency...It allows producers to use other people's music to convey their own compositional ideas."[200] In this case, the individuals mentioned are the producers, and the "intellectual power" is the act of "flipping," which can be defined as slang for the process of sampling within a hip-hop beat in order to "convey their own compositional ideas." The analysis presented throughout this chapter will explore how this act of "flipping" is representative of Signifyin(g) in hip-hop production, as well how J Dilla used this act to Signify upon both the listener and the musical recordings he sampled.

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[199] Floyd, *The Power of Black Music.* Gates, *The Signifying Monkey.*
[200] Schloss, 138.

On Flipping: Decontextualization and Recontextualization

The term "flipping a sample" or "flipping a beat" has been used colloquially as a term for sampling by hip-hop producers for decades, with one of the prime examples being rapper and producer Q-Tip (Johnathan Davis) referring to the term in the 2000 Slum Village track "Hold Tight," of which the heading of this chapter is named after.[201] The word "flip" itself is used as a slang term within hip-hop culture (such as the terms like "flip the script" as well as Busta Rhymes' 1996 hip-hop collective Flipmode Squad) and usually refers to a form of Signifyin(g) in which the original meaning of a phrase or concept (either musical or rhetorical) is transformed or "flipped." As mentioned above, the term "flipping" in relation to sampling can be defined as the various ways in which a producer digitally samples and transforms a previous recording into a new composition.[202] Referring back to Schloss, this act of "demonstrating intellectual power" through the desire to musically transform previous recordings vinyl records is present in J Dilla's method of sampling, described by Charnas in *Dilla Time* as such: "[J Dilla] didn't just skip through the records, 'needle-dropping' for interesting parts. He listened to entire songs, listened and listened. His vigilance was almost always rewarded by an element deep within a track."[203] This method of carefully searching through every second of music found in his record collection highlights J Dilla's desire to re-discover samples other producers may not have considered to be musically significant or worthy of "flipping."

A number of "lo-fi effects"[204] or "distortions"[205] may also be added to said samples during the production process in order to create a more "authentic" aesthetic for the listener,

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[201] Johnathan Davis and Slum Village, "Hold Tight," *Fantastic, Vol. 2,* Barak Records, 2000.
[202] The methods and effects that are applied to any given sample can vary greatly between producers, with examples including (but not limited to): looping, chopping, time-stretching, re-pitching, filtering, bit-crushing, and adding a plethora of digital effects, such as echo or reverb.
[203] Charnas, 14.
[204] Adam Harper, "Lo-Fi Aesthetics in Popular Music Discourse," DPhil dissertation, University of Oxford, 2014, accessed November 9, 2020, https://www.academia.edu/14978906/Lo_Fi_Aesthetics_in_Popular_Music_Discourse, 35.
[205] Zagorski-Thomas, 146.

as sampling from analog recordings (e.g. vinyl records or cassette tapes) have been seen as the "purist" approach to hip-hop sampling.[206] The act of transforming a sample in hip-hop beat-making has been written about before by other scholars, such as Exarchos' concept of "sample magic"[207] and my own previous research, which referred to this act as "plunderphonic recontextualization."[208] This act is intrinsically tied to the act of Signifyin(g), in that it inherently obscures meaning by decontextualizing meaning from its original context from the initial recording and recontextualizes meaning through various forms of musical transformation. One instance of this is the use of "a capellas," or isolated rap vocals from a previously recorded hip-hop track.

"Make 'Em NV" (2003)

In the track "Make 'Em NV" from *Ruff Draft,* J Dilla uses a sample of vocals from the 2000 M.O.P. single "Ante Up (Robbin' Hoodz Theory)" as the chorus.[209] This is in conjunction with several other samples which make up the production of the track, with the drums stemming from Queen's 1974 track "In the Lap of the Gods" and the melodic material stemming from John Renbourn's 1970 track "Lamento Di Tristan."[210] The sample used, which features the lyrics "them jewels you rock, make 'em envy" exclaimed by rapper and M.O.P. member Lil' Fame, contrasts greatly in both mood and timbre with the serene melody acoustic guitar and glockenspiel from the John Renbourn sample and the minimal rhythm of

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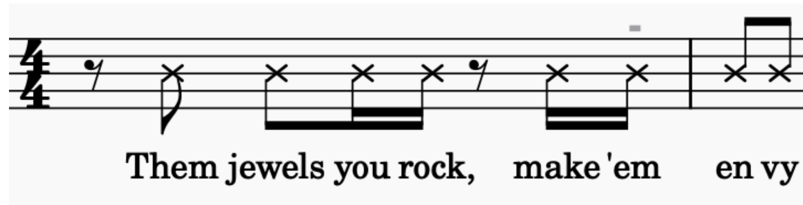
[206] These approaches were established mainly throughout the late 1980s and 1990s, as hip-hop sampling with vinyl records became commonplace. East-coast hip-hop producers such as Pete Rock, Large Professor, and DJ Premier were heavily influential in the establishment of this "purist" approach. Schloss, 143.
[207] Michail Exarchos, "Sample magic: (conjuring) phonographic ghosts and meta-illusions in contemporary hip-hop production," *Popular Music,* vol. 38, (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 33-53.
[208] Diaz, "Analysis of Sampling Techniques by J Dilla in *Donuts*."
[209] "Make 'em NV," Spotify, track 7 on J Dilla, *Ruff Draft,* Stones Throw Records, 2007. "Ante Up (Robbin' Hoodz Theory)," Spotify, track 4 on M.O.P., *Warriorz,* Loud Records, 2000.
[210] "Lamento Di Tristan/La Rotta," Spotify, track 2 on John Renbourn, *The Lady and the Unicorn,* Transatlantic, 1970. "In the Lap of the Gods – Remastered 2011," Spotify, track 7 on Queen, *Sheer Heart Attack (2011 Remaster),* EMI, 1974.

the drum loop from the Queen sample. The use of these samples is typical of this time in J Dilla's production output, as many of the tracks on his *Ruff Draft* EP stemmed from a desire to move away from the neo-soul sound he was heavily affiliated with during his collaboration with the Soulquarians in previous years, focusing more on experimentations with using and combining samples in more minimal and obscure ways. As stated by himself in the EP's liner notes, it was a desire to "get back to [the] basics" of looping and combining samples similar to the method of "pause tapes" much earlier in his career.[211]

In the case of "Make 'Em NV," J Dilla Signifies upon both the listener and the samples themselves through their musical transformation and subsequent recontextualization. The lyrics from "Ante Up," originally in the third verse of the song, is now recontextualized to serve as the chorus, with J Dilla's lyrics expanding on the "bling" concept of acquiring material goods that Lil' Fame referred to when mentioning "them jewels you rock." The rhythmic pattern of the M.O.P. vocals are also transformed, with the word "envy" landing on the downbeat of beat one of the measure instead of beat four. The rhythmic transcription on the next page shows the differences in this transformation from its original incarnation to its transformation through sampling by J Dilla.

[211] Charnas, 125.

3.1A



3.1B

Figure 3.1A&B - Transcription of Lyrics from "Ante Up (Robbin Hoodz Theory)" by M.O.P. 1:29 and "Make 'Em NV" by J Dilla 0:03

This transformation of the lyrics from "Ante Up" is used by J Dilla as an act of Signifyin(g) in that it expands upon the lyrics original meaning as well as recontextualizes it in a production that is drastically different from its original iteration. The bombastic boom bap production of "Ante Up," which features loud drums, blasting horn samples, and crowd noise, contrasts greatly from the minimal nature of "Make 'Em NV."[212] Figure 3.2 illustrates the ways in which J Dilla Signifies using the samples in "Make 'Em NV," using the "hall of

[212] These contrasting timbres are also a prime example of Krims' "hip-hop sublime" concept. Krims, 187.

mirrors" coined by Gates as a visual metaphor.

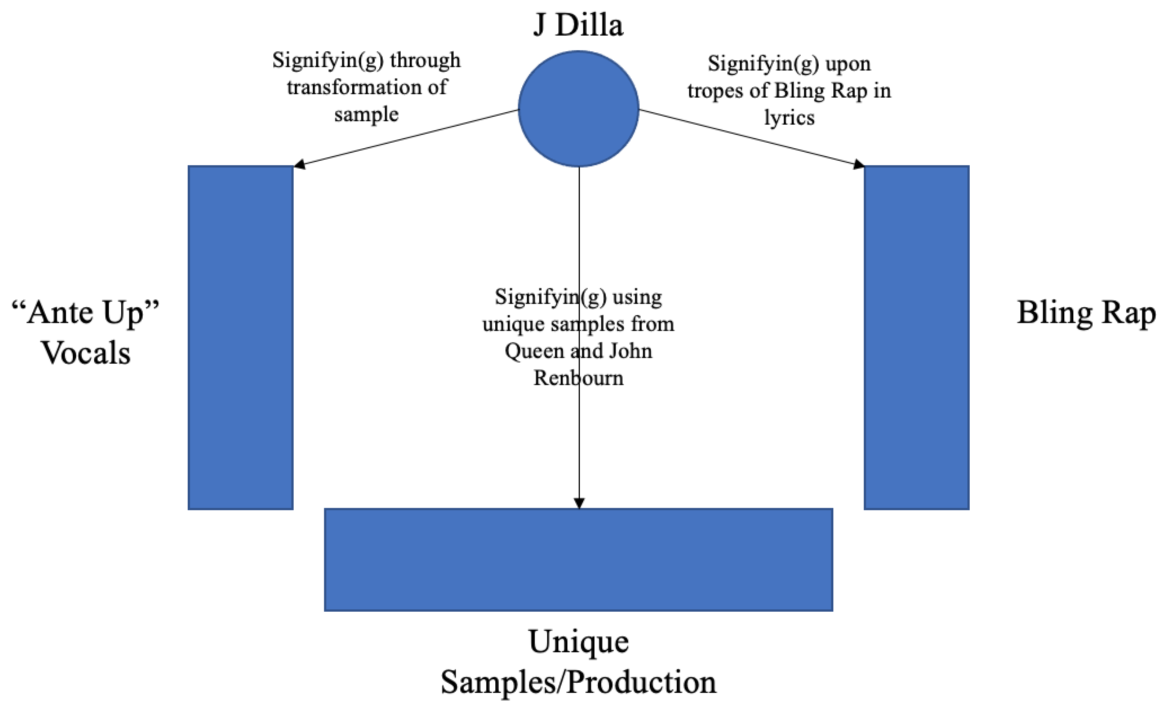


Figure 3.2 - Diagram of J Dilla's Signifyin(g) Using Samples in "Make 'Em NV"

The production of "NV" also contrasts greatly from the more maximal production stylings of other producers during this era, such as Kanye West or Timbaland, further emphasizing J Dilla's own signature sound as unique to other producers of the era. This is while also rapping on similar topics (such as symbols of material wealth) within the song to rappers like Jay-Z or Puff Daddy, thereby also Signifyin(g) upon the "bling rap" trend using his more obscure samples.

As observed earlier, the rhythmic transformation of the vocals from "Ante Up" became an interest of J Dilla throughout his career, as his desire to rhythmically transform a sample from its original context became a part of his signature sound. One early example of this is the De La Soul track "Stakes is High."

“Stakes is High” (1996)

Throughout his career, J Dilla experimented frequently with taking a sample of a musical recording in mixed or compound meter and transforming the new composition (using chopping and micro-chopping techniques) into a 4/4 hip-hop groove. This rhythmic experimentation was implemented as far back as one of his earlier productions in the 1996 De La Soul single “Stakes is High.”[213] In a 2003 interview he talks about his interest in this production technique, acknowledging that the original sample (jazz pianist Ahmad Jamal’s 1974 track “Swahililand”) was, according to him, in 5/8.[214] This is due to the heavy syncopation between the dotted-quarter and eight-note patterns as well as a lack of percussion providing any subdivision as an indication of the meter. Once recognizing this, he decided to challenge himself by arranging a sample from the original track into a three-measure 4/4 loop. The figures below show the rhythmic transformation through sheet music, as well as how the audio itself was arranged and placed into a three-measure loop. As seen in figure 3.3C, the audio itself received minimal manipulations or “chops,” with the main difference being that it was pitched up a semi-tone from the original recording. In the sheet music, one can see how the divisions and subdivisions of the beat were reinterpreted into half of the original tempo, with the lack of a strong downbeat now heavily syncopated against the added drum pattern.

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[213] “Stakes is High,” Spotify, track 1 on De La Soul, *Stakes is High,* Tommy Boy, 1996.
[214] Yancey, “J Dilla Interview 2003 part 1 of 4.” “Swahililand,” Spotify, track 6 on Ahmad Jamal, *Jamal Plays Jamal.* 20th Century Records, 1974.

3.3A - "Swahililand" at 7:31

3.3B - Drums and Sample in "Stakes is High" at 0:16

3.3C - Remake of "Stakes is High" 0:16-0:25, with added drums in MIDI

Figure 3.3A-C - Transformation of "Swahililand" into "Stakes is High" in Sheet Music and in Ableton Live 11

The ways in which this track represents Signifyin(g) through the process of "flipping" a sample presents itself in three parts. This desire to challenge himself as a producer by transforming an unorthodox rhythmic pattern is a form of Signifyin(g) upon himself, upon the original artist, and through his listeners. It is a prime example of highlighting his "intellectual power" as a producer by using a sample that to many would not appear to be a proper "break" for a hip-hop beat.[215] The Signifyin(g) upon Ahmad Jamal is also present in that J Dilla as well as a number of other prominent hip-hop producers at the time revered the pianist and composer.[216] Finally, Signifyin(g) upon the listener is apparent as the introduction is played and repeated without drums, obscuring the internal groove that is supported once the drums enter at 1:01. This is like the "sample magic" concept originally coined by Exarchos,[217] as the "turn" section of the track (in which the sample is played alone) leads to the "prestige" (in which the new arrangement of the sample is revealed to the listener). In this case, however, the arrangement or "chopped" version of the sample present throughout the duration of the track, with the addition of the drum functioning as the "prestige."

One other prime example of this similar technique of rhythmic manipulation and transformation was one of his many experiments from *Ruff Draft*, titled "Intro (Alt)."

"Intro (Alt)" (2003)

The original purpose of the track "Intro (Alt)" was to serve as a possible introductory track for J Dilla's *Ruff Draft*.[218] Originally released on his own label Mummy Records in 2003, the track was not officially released until a reissue of *Ruff Draft* was published by

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[215] Many producers, for example, would try to find a break that already has the presence of a groove that is appropriate for a hip-hop beat and is already present in the original sample. Schloss, 143.
[216] One prime example is producer DJ Premier's use of Ahmad Jamal's "I Love Music" on the 1994 Nas track "The World is Yours."
[217] Exarchos, 43.
[218] "Intro (Alt)," Spotify, track 11 on J Dilla, *Ruff Draft,* Stones Throw Records, 2007.

Stones Throw Records in 2007. As stated before, the original purpose of the project was to release a variety of experimental productions he was working on at the time, many of which featured unorthodox sampling techniques from a variety of genres outside of what J Dilla was normally known for (e.g. jazz, funk, and R&B). In the liner notes, he states that "[the EP] was a quickie. I did it in four or five days, turned it in and had wax [vinyl] in ten days. If I'm not doing beats for somebody, I make stuff for me to drive around and listen to, and that was one of those projects. I was just doing me. That's why it was called the 'Ruff Draft' EP."[219] This statement shows the experimental and unconventional nature of his approaches to production on many of the tracks on *Ruff Draft*, many of which embrace sounds and techniques which build upon and expand his techniques he was known for throughout his career at the time. As was observed in the previous chapter on genre, tracks like "Nothing Like This" and "Wild" feature aspects of psychedelic and classic rock of the 1970s and 1980s, while "The $" and "Take Notice" feature samples from electronic synthesizer recordings from similar eras.

"Intro (Alt)" also features experimental aspects, one of which is an expansion on his rhythmic transformation of samples from their original recordings. "Intro (Alt)" (meaning "alternate intro") features in its entirety a basic backbeat pattern along with a repeated sample loop of guitar chords in eighth notes and an accompanying vocal melody. The structure of the track seems relatively minimal and straightforward, with the four-measure loop repeating as J Dilla provides added vocals, with phrases like "brand new" and "long awaited" introducing the rest of the EP. The rhythmic transformation of the original sample becomes readily apparent however when listening to the original recording. The sample's source comes from electronic dance music producer Chris Brann's 2003 single "Hold You Close," recording under the name P'Taah from the album *Staring at the Sun*.[220] The bright vocal melody and

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[219] James Yancey, liner notes for *Ruff Draft*, by James Yancey (Los Angeles: Stones Throw Records, 2007).
[220] "Hold You Close," Spotify, track 9 on P'Taah, *Staring at the Sun,* Ubiquity Records, 2003.

guitar chords found in the original recording are heavily syncopated from the moderate tempo (about 112 beats per minute) of the drum pattern, with the guitar chords themselves being comprised of almost entirely dotted eighth notes.

J Dilla's implementation of this sample (which occurs at 0:46 of the original recording) takes the dotted eighth-note guitar pattern and transforms them into straight eighth notes. This is possible due to the sample including the section of the original track that features only the guitar and vocals without the four-on-the-floor pattern of the drums, allowing him to reinterpret the rhythmic pattern of the guitar. The sample itself is pitched up a semi-tone in "Intro (Alt)," and the new rhythmic interpretation now has a much slower tempo of approximately 76 beats per minute. The figures below show this rhythmic transformation from the original P'Taah recording to J Dilla's reinterpretation in "Intro (Alt)" in sheet music.

Vocals
E. Guitar

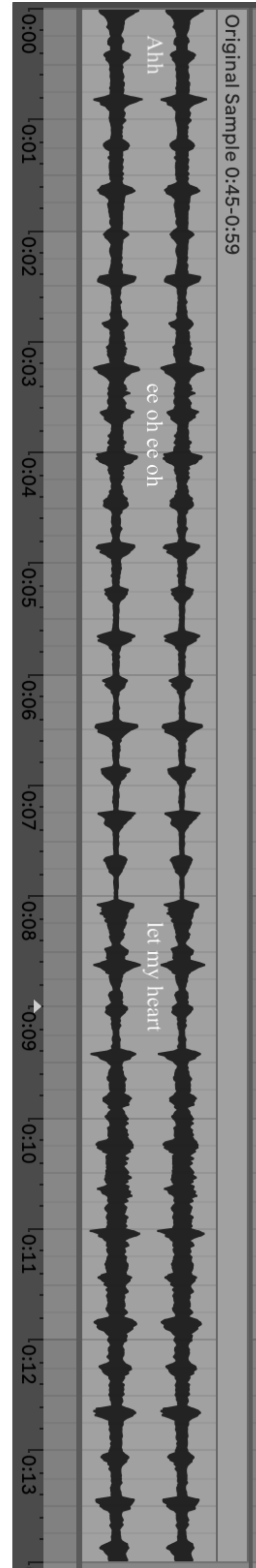
Ahh eh oh ee oh let my heart

3.4A - Transcription of "Hold You Close" 0:45-0:59 (BPM 110)

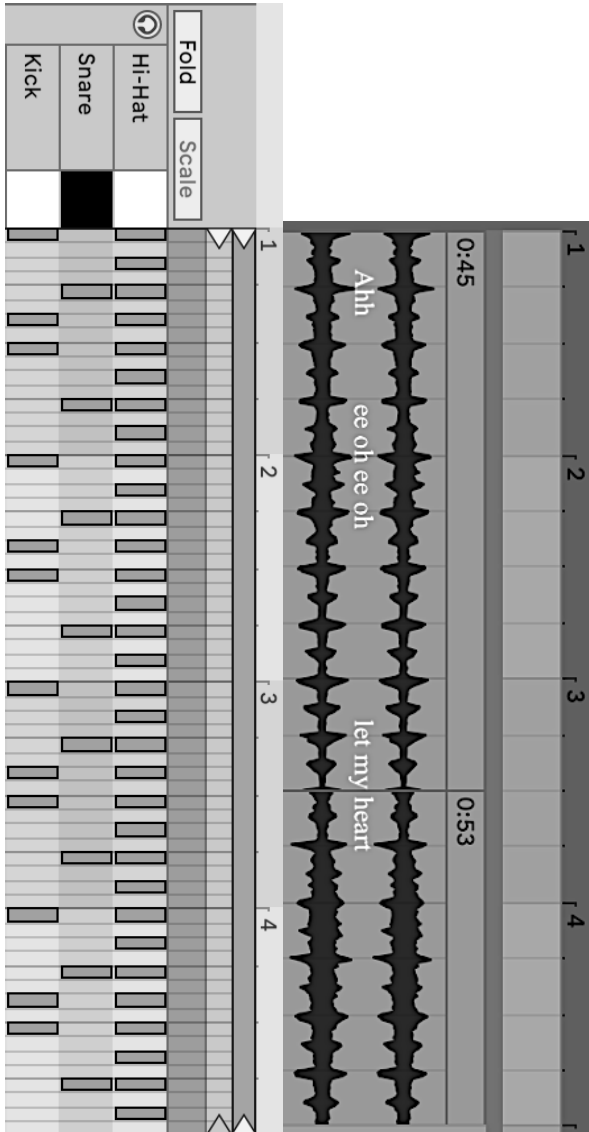
Vocals
E. Guitar
Drums

Ahh ee oh ee oh let my heart

3.4B - Transcription of "Intro (Alt)" 0:24-0:35 (BPM 72)



3.4C - Original Audio of "Hold You Close" 0:45-0:59



3.4D - Remake of "Intro (Alt)" 0:05-0:12, with chopped sample and added drums in MIDI

Figures 3.4A-D: Transcriptions and Rhythmic Transformation of "Hold You Close" and "Intro (Alt)"

“Waves” (2006)

The third track from *Donuts*, titled “Waves,” also features a similar rhythmic transformation to “Intro (Alt),” taking the 6/8 meter of the 1973 track “Johnny Don’t Do It” by British progressive rock group 10cc and rearranging it into 4/4.[221] This was achieved by “chopping” the digital audio sample of the 10cc recording (at around 1:51 to 2:04 of the original track) into eighth-note segments, then rearranging the segments (most likely using the digital audio software Pro Tools) into a 4/4 pattern, from a tempo of dotted-eighth equals 72 beats per minute to quarter-note equals 100 beats per minute. The obscured vocals of the rearrangement found in “Waves” substantially changes the intelligibility of the lyrics, using said vocals for mainly their melodic or timbral qualities and setting aside their original context.[222] Figure 3.5 shows the melodic and rhythmic transformation in sheet music as well as how the audio itself was “chopped” and rearranged into the final track “Waves” using Ableton Live 11 audio software.

[221] Other examples of “chopping” a sample’s original compound meter into a 4/4 simple meter groove can be found in tracks like “Bye” from his 2006 instrumental album *Donuts* or from the unreleased production of the 2005 track “Man’s World” by Detroit rapper Guilty Simpson (Byron Simpson). Said tracks feature samples from The Isley Brothers’ 1980 single “Don’t Say Goodnight (It’s Time for Love)” and James Brown’s 1966 song “It’s a Man’s Man’s Man’s World,” respectively. “Waves,” Spotify, track 3 on J Dilla, *Donuts,* Stones Throw Records, 2006. “Johnny Don’t Do It,” Spotify, track 1 on 10cc, *10cc,* Hipgnosis Songs Fund Limited, 2007.

[222] Some fans have stated that the obscured lyrics of the track sound like the phrase “Johnny Do It,” which not only reverses the original statement of the track but also refers to J Dilla’s brother Illa J (John Yancey). Though some fan theories claim that this is J Dilla encouraging his younger brother to pursue a career in music, said theory has yet to be substantiated. Ferguson, 78.

Vocals
Strings
Electric Guitar
Electric Bass
Drumset

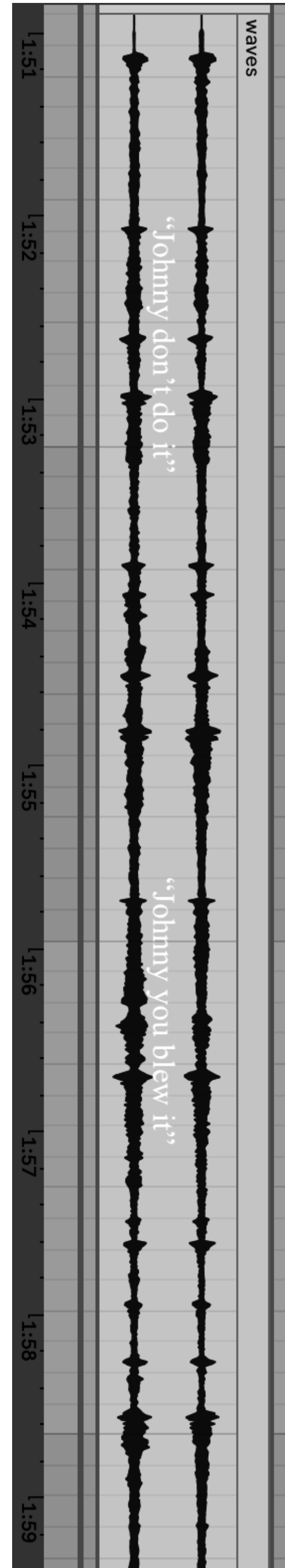
Johnny don't do it
Johnny you blew it

3.5A - Transcription of “Johnny Don’t Do It” 1:51-1:59

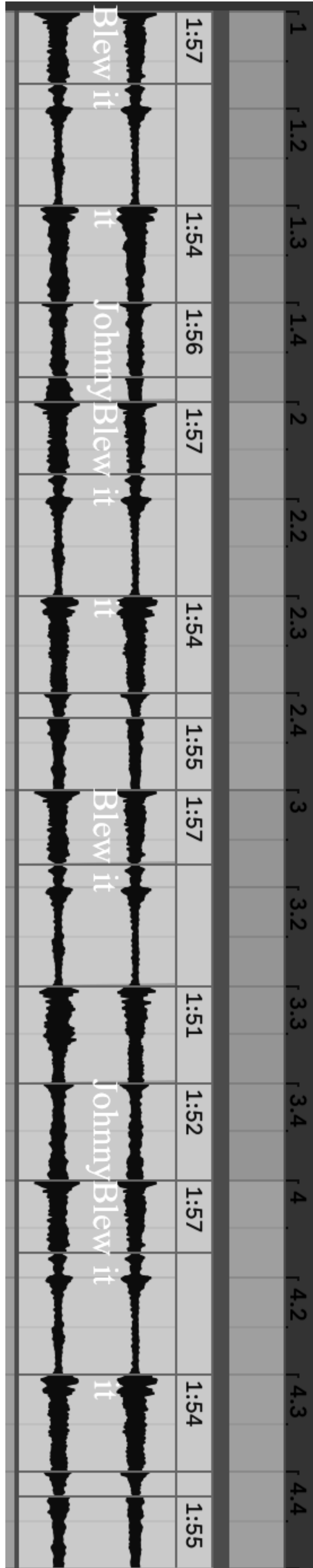
Vocals
Strings
Electric Guitar
Electric Bass
Drumset

blew it it John - ny blew it it blew it John - ny blew it it

3.5B - Transcription of “Waves” 0:02-0:08



3.5C - Original audio waveform of “Johnny Don’t Do It” 1:51-1:59



3.5D - Chops of audio sample in “Waves” 0:02-0:08

Figures 3.5A-D - Sheet Music Transcriptions of “Johnny Don’t Do It” and “Waves” and Remake of “Waves” 0:00-0:06 in Ableton Live 11

This rearrangement of audio segments into a new composition has been dubbed "plunderphonics" by composer John Oswald and has become a significant characteristic of sampling in hip-hop.[223] The concept of Adam Krims' "hip-hop sublime" is also relevant here, in which the "clash of timbral qualities" from the characteristics of one or more samples within a track are desirable.[224] This act of rearranging audio sample in hip-hop production is directly tied to Signifyin(g) in that it is the rearrangement of the sample that Signifies upon the listener by obscuring the sample's original meaning and creating new meanings through the sample's rearrangement. "Waves" also contains significantly smaller pieces of a rearranged sample than previous tracks discussed, highlighting the "micro-chopping" that J Dilla was also known for.

"Little Brother" (1999)

One example of J Dilla's "micro-chopping" is his production on the 1999 track "Little Brother" by New York rap group Black Star.[225] The production itself on its surface is minimal in terms of its combined elements, with the only musical structure being a sample a heavily rearranged and "micro-chopped" version of the 1971 single "Ain't Got Time" by the jazz group Roy Ayers Ubiquity.[226] Hip-hop producer and drummer Questlove (Ahmir Thompson) uses this track as a point of discussion on J Dilla's "micro-chopping" technique in his 2013 lecture at the Red Bull Music Academy, describing seeing J Dilla making the instrumental track for "Little Brother" in his home studio in a matter of minutes as "the

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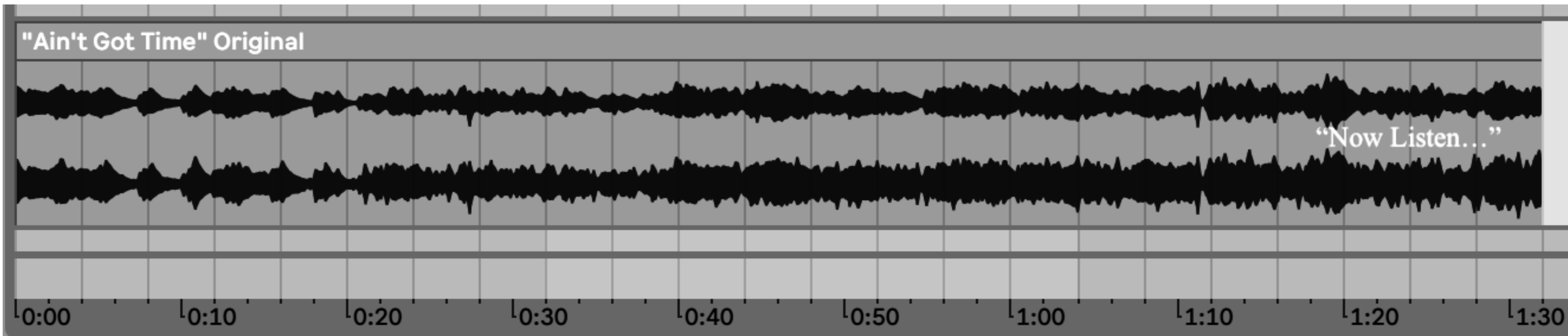
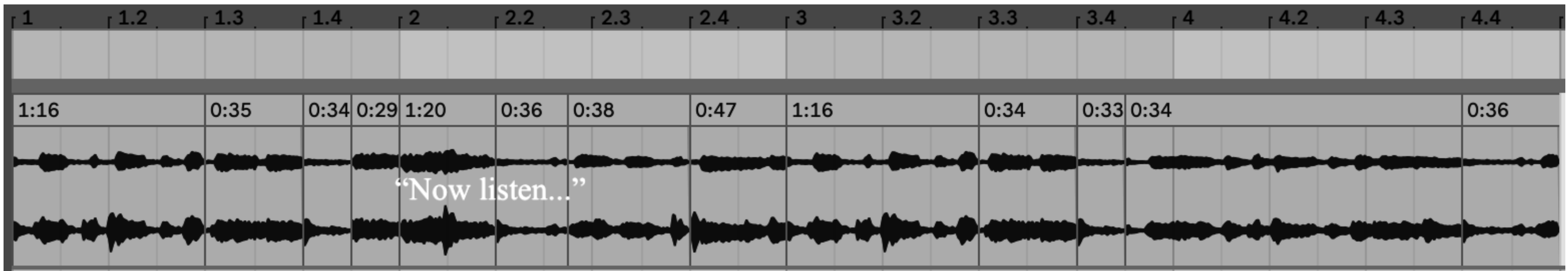
[223] John Oswald, "Plunderphonics, or audio piracy as a compositional prerogative," Musicworks no. 34 (Spring 1986): 5-8.
[224] Krims, 87.
[225] "Little Brother," Spotify, track 2 on Black Star, *The Hurricane (Music From And Inspired By The Motion Picture),* UMG Recordings, 2000.
[226] "Ain't Got Time," Spotify, track 3 on Roy Ayers Ubiquity, *He's Coming,* Polydor, 1972.

equivalent of solving a 10,000-piece puzzle in record time."[227] This statement refers both to the speed in which J Dilla chopped and rearranged the original sample into a new composition as well as the musical complexities involved. According to Questlove, sections of the sample was chopped and placed onto twelve pads on J Dilla's Akai Professional MPC3000 sampler, then sequenced into the instrumental one hears on the final version of "Little Brother." The figures below show the rhythmic and melodic transformation found between "Ain't Got Time" and "Little Brother," as well as how the original sample was chopped into twelve sections and rearranged into the new composition on Ableton Live 11, as well as an approximation of the placement of the twelve sections onto the interface of an Akai Professional MPC3000.

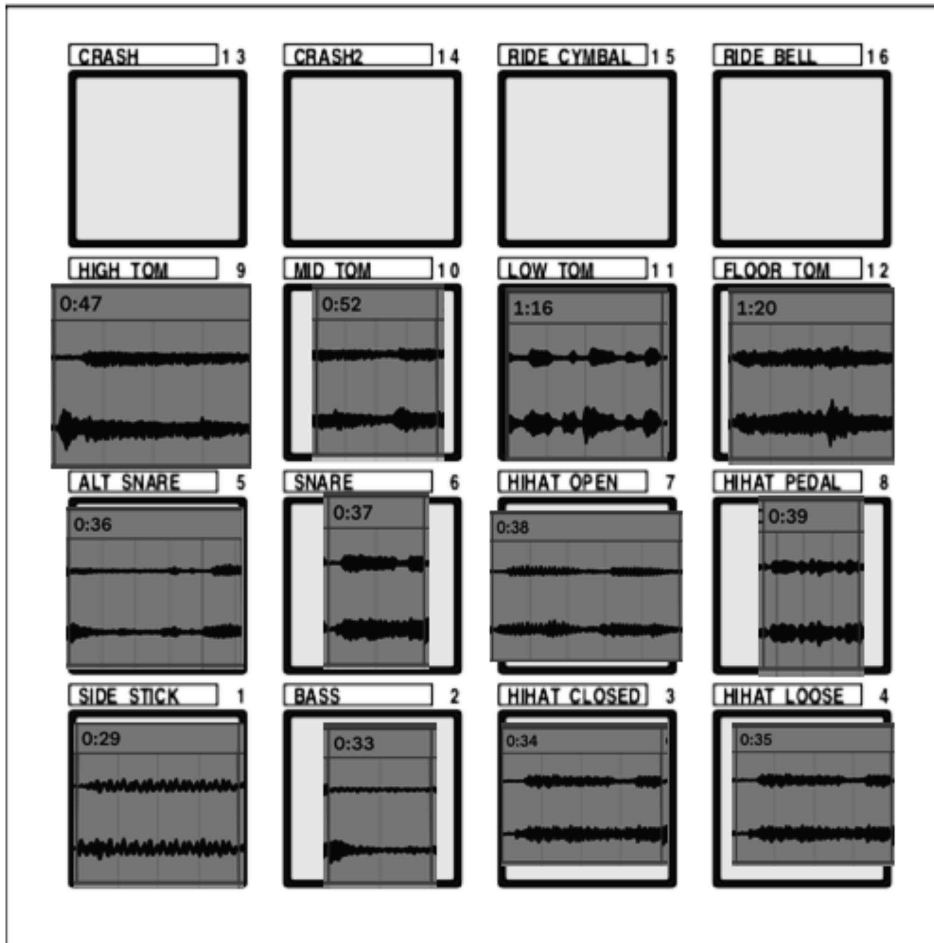
[227] Thompson, "Couch Wisdom: Questlove on J Dilla's Sampling Technique" (video of lecture), hosted by the Red Bull Music Academy, posted February 2, 2014, accessed July 5, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T-h1K34Y468&t=1s.



3.6A - First 90 seconds of "Ain't Got Time"



3.6B - Chopped rearrangement in "Little Brother," with timestamps from the original audio in each chop



3.6C - Possible placement of Chopped audio samples on the MPC3000

Figures 3.6A-C – Audio Excerpt of "Ain't Got Time," Remake of "Little Brother" in Ableton Live 11, and Placement of Chopped Audio Samples on the Akai Professional MPC3000

What is the most striking about the new rearrangement of the sample found in "Little Brother" is its lack of vocals, which was present throughout the original recording, with the only intelligible lyric being Roy Ayers' uttering the phrase "now listen." This was achieved by finding parts of the recording or "chops" of the sample which did not contain any vocals present and then sequencing the chops into a steady 4/4 pattern. The length of each individual chop also varies, which differs from the chops found in other J Dilla productions such as the

previously mentioned "Waves" and "Bye." This act of chopping is once again an act of Signifyin(g) by J Dilla, which includes the listener, the original artist Roy Ayers, and in this case Questlove, who was present in the room as J Dilla was finishing the production of the instrumental. One other instance of a similar act of Signifyin(g) through chopping in which Questlove was also present was J Dilla's production on the track "Dooinit" from the 2000 Common album *Like Water for Chocolate*.[228]

"Dooinit" (2000)

Chicago rapper Common (Lonnie Rashid Lynn) was a frequent collaborator with J Dilla, and along with Questlove and several other hip-hop and R&B artists (such as Erykah Badu and D'Angelo) were known loosely as the musical collective the Soulquarians.[229] The height of the group's success occurred during the late 1990s and early 2000s, in which a string of successful albums (*Things Fall Apart* by The Roots, *Mama's Gun* by Erykah Badu, and *Voodoo* by D'Angelo to name a few) were released and created at Electric Ladyland Studios in New York City. One album produced during the height of the Soulquarians' creative output was Common's *Like Water for Chocolate*, released in 2000. The album features several collaborations between artists of the Soulquarian collective, with one of the most prominent being J Dilla, who either produced or co-produced (along with Questlove and pianist James Poyser) eleven of the sixteen album tracks.

The production on the fourth track "Dooinit" features mainly a typical un-quantized drum groove and rhythmically sparse bassline. The bassline itself is a sample of the opening bass riff from the 1981 single "Give It to Me Baby" by Rick James.[230] The reason for the use of this sample stems from a challenge proposed by Questlove to J Dilla during the studio

[228] "Dooinit," Spotify, track 4 on Common, *Like Water for Chocolate,* MCA Records, 2000.
[229] Peterson, 26.
[230] "Give It to Me Baby," Spotify, track 1 on Rick James*, Street Songs (Deluxe Edition),* Motown Records, 1981.

sessions of *Like Water for Chocolate*. As described in his Red Bull Music Academy lecture,[231] he dared J Dilla to attempt to "chop" a sample and arrange it into a new beat that would be unrecognizable from its original recording. Upon finding a vinyl record of the Rick James album *Street Songs* in the studio, he gave the record to J Dilla for him to sample. In a matter of minutes, J Dilla was able to rearrange the opening four-measure funk bass line into a new bassline for what would become the instrumental to "Dooinit." Figure 3.7 on the following page shows the rhythmic and melodic transformation from "Give it to Me Baby" to "Dooinit," as well as how the audio sample of the bassline was chopped and rearranged in Ableton Live 11.

[231] Thompson, *Mo' Meta Blues,* 32.

Electric Bass

Drumset

3.7A - Sheet Music Transcription of “Give it to Me Baby” 0:00-0:08

Bass Sample

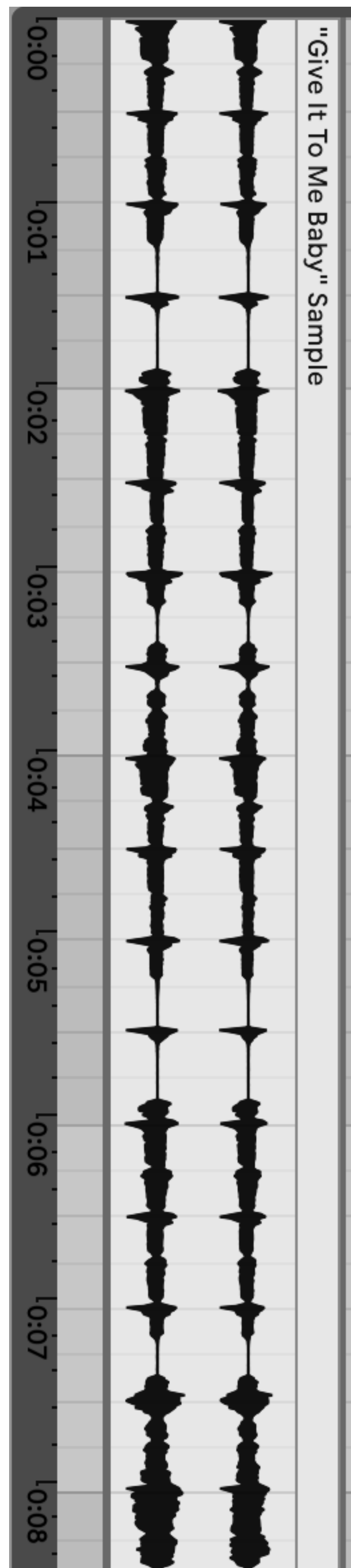
Additional Samples

E. Guitar

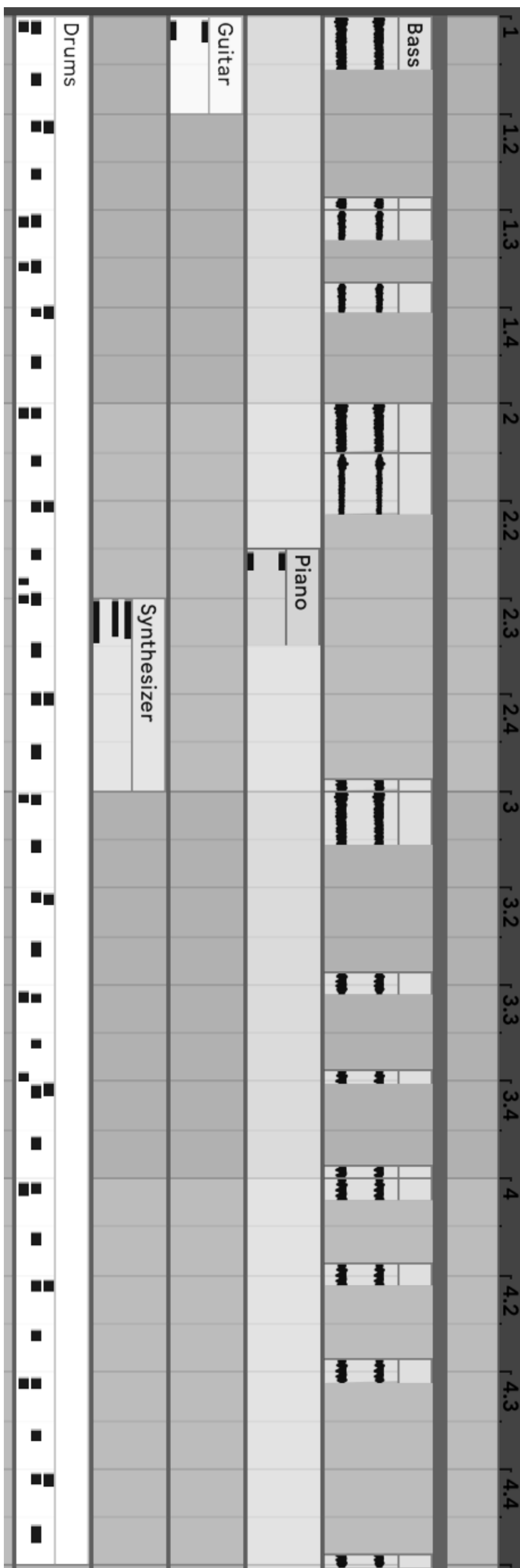
Piano Synthesizer

Drumset

3.7B - Transcription of “Dooinit” 0:00-0:09



3.7C - Original Audio of "Give It To Me Baby" 0:00-0:08



3.7D - Remake of "Dooinit" in Ableton Arrangement View, 0:00-0:09

Figures 3.7A-D - Sheet Music Transcriptions of "Give it to Me Baby" and "Dooinit," and Chopped Rearrangement of Sample in Ableton Live 11

The story provided by Questlove is a quintessential example of Signifyin(g) through sampling in hip-hop production, with J Dilla Signifyin(g) upon Questlove by using and transforming a sample and turning said sample into a new composition that was substantially different from its original recording. In this instance, a sort of trifecta of Signifyin(g) is present, with J Dilla Signifyin(g) upon one of his peers, the original artist of the sample, and the listener in the final production of "Dooinit." The way in which the sample was transformed contrasts greatly from examples like the sample in "Stakes is High," where the sample used was looped instead of chopped heavily. The ways in which the phenomena of Signifyin(g) occurs, however, remain intact and function between the signifier and signified.

Conclusion

Throughout this chapter I have explored the number of ways in which J Dilla Signified through sampling, highlighting the rhythmic and melodic transformations implemented by J Dilla using several digital sampling techniques. Though J Dilla himself used technology and equipment decades older than the technology I have used for the remakes of several of his tracks, the use of more contemporary technology (that being Ableton Live 11) has allowed me to provide a clearer visual aid both in the figures provided and during the remaking of the tracks themselves. The analysis provided has been a significant expansion on my master's thesis research, which only focused on the sampling techniques on one album of J Dilla's discography. In the next chapter I will expand this further by analyzing another aspect of his production techniques, that being the implementation of the synthesizer and use of synthesizer basslines in several tracks throughout his career.

Chapter 4

Dillatronic: "Goin' Kraftwerk" and Synthesizers as Signifyin(g)

At the Smithsonian's Museum of African American Music and Culture in Washington, D.C., on display is both J Dilla's Akai Professional MPC3000 Sampler and Moog Voyager synthesizer. Though it should come as no surprise that his sampler would be featured, as his sample-based productions were the bulk of his discography, his use of the Moog synthesizer (as well as a variety of other synthesizers and electronic instruments) is arguably just as important to the development of his "signature sound." Journalists such as Simon Reynolds and producers such as Erick Sermon have stated that his use of synthesizers, specifically his use of synthesizers for bass line accompaniments, were one of the key musical characteristics of his productions.[232] This was due to the unique melodic content of these synthesizer melodies, as opposed to simple harmonic support and adding a substantial amount of low-end frequencies that were commonplace among much of hip-hop production. This chapter will analyze several J Dilla-produced tracks that feature synthesizers and drum machines, as well as how J Dilla Signified by way of these electronic instruments, building from and subsequently Signifyin(g) upon tropes found within the use of electronic music synthesis.

Synthesizers in Hip-Hop Production

The use of both synthesizers (analog and digital) and drum machines in hip-hop music is, throughout the genre's history, just as significant and intrinsic to the genre as the use of

[232] Reynolds, "The cult of J Dilla." Erick Sermon, interview with Zachary Diaz and Steven Gilbers, *Kick Knowledge Podcast,* podcast audio, February 3, 2018, accessed November 28, 2018, https://www.rapanalysis.com/kickknowledge/2018/02/03/14-you-gots-to-chill-ft-erick-sermon/.

sampled musical material. The histories of both electronic music and hip-hop are so intrinsically tied together, in fact, that one would not exist without the other.[233] Synthesizers such as the Minimoog have been crucial in developing the characteristics of hip-hop subgenres, such as the high whistle-like synthesizer melodies found in G-funk.[234]

Charnas briefly highlights this history of synthesizers and their connections with African American music in chapter four of *Dilla Time*. Throughout the chapter "Machine Time," he constructs a clear lineage of electronic music's evolution from the early twentieth century to the embrace and adoption of synthesizers by Black artists and producers such as Berry Gordy and George Clinton. He also compares the industrial culture of J Dilla's hometown of Detroit to the city's influence on electronic music and stating that "Detroiters had a natural affinity for unnatural sounds."[235] In his uses of the words "natural" and "unnatural" he cleverly emphasizes the "twoness" that is present in much of Afrodiasporic expressive culture.[236] Using electronic synthesizers, musicians who participate in various forms of Afrodiasporic music may Signify upon tropes through the obscuring of what may be interpreted as "natural" (acoustic sounds) and "unnatural" (electronic sounds). Terms like "unnatural" may have negative connotations, similar to the use of descriptions like "sloppy" when discussing un-quantized drum patterns. In the case of Signifyin(g), however, these terms are meant to emphasize how tropes are challenged or built upon using various musical Signifiers.

[233] Tracks such as the 1982 single "Planet Rock" by rap group Afrika Bambaataa and the Soul Sonic Force is a prime example of this, with a heavily prominent drum pattern from the Roland TR-808 drum machine and a borrowed melody from German electronic music group Kraftwerk's "Trans-Europe Express." Laurent Fintoni, *Bedroom Beats & B-sides: Instrumental Hip-Hop and Electronic Music at the Turn of the 21st Century* (London: Velocity Press, 2020), 11.
[234] Los Angeles producer and G-funk pioneer Dr. Dre (Andre Young) frequently used the Minimoog in many of his productions, with tracks such as his 1992 single "Let Me Ride" featuring a high whistle-like melody from the Minimoog and Snoop Dogg's 1993 single "Who Am I? (What's My Name)" featuring a descending synthesizer bass line interpolated from George Clinton's 1982 track "Atomic Dog." Kajikawa, 57.
[235] Charnas, 42.
[236] W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (BEYOND BOOKS HUB, 2021), 67.

One synthesizer that was crucial to J Dilla's production was the Minimoog Monophonic Synthesizer. Originally released in 1971 by engineer Robert Moog, this model of synthesizer, as well as the later Moog Voyager XL model released in 2002,[237] were used as the basis for basslines and other added melodic content throughout much of J Dilla's production discography. Though the keyboard itself is monophonic, the various knobs allow the user to add and subtract various amounts of waves, frequencies, and noise in order to shape the sound of the instrument for single-voice melodic performance. Figure 4.1 on the next page shows the layout of the Moog Voyager XL found in the user manual and the various knobs which allow the user to manipulate the timbre of the instrument in various ways.[238]

[237] Timothy Anne Burnside, "Tell us about J Dilla's instruments" (video of interview), hosted by Smithsonian Music, posted September 22, 2016, accessed November 5, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=thzjynONDxA.
[238] *Moog Voyager XL Monophonic Synthesizer Owner's Manual,* 2002, 8.

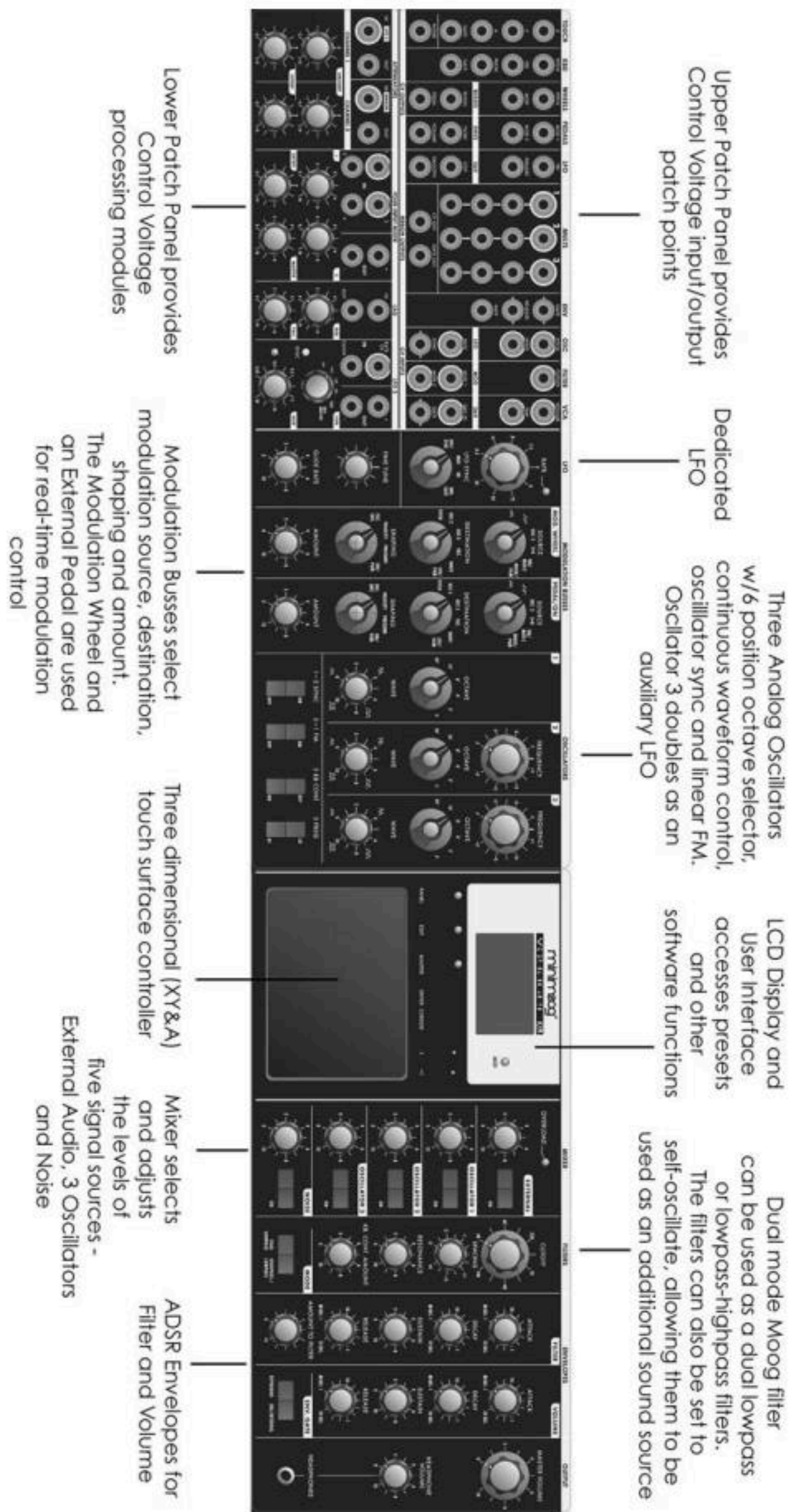


Figure 4.1 - Image of the Moog Voyager XL Monophonic Synthesizer, Front Panel

J Dilla's History with Synthesizers

The use of synthesizers and influence of electronic music was present throughout his career and stemmed from his upbringing in Detroit. During the 1970s and 1980s, Detroit quickly became a bastion of eclectic musical culture that led to the creation of electronic dance music genres like techno, as well as the popularity of international electronic music groups like Kraftwerk and Yellow Magic Orchestra through local radio stations.[239] Both this exposure to electronic music and his access to various electronic instruments from mentor Amp Fiddler as an adolescent allowed him to experiment and implement synthesizers into his productions.

Many of his implementations of electronic instruments are more prevalent throughout the latter half of his career, from approximately 2000 to 2005. This interest in using synthesizers, or as several members of the Soulquarians put it: "going Kraftwerk,"[240] stemmed from both a desire to move away from the typical jazz-oriented sound he was known for during the mid-1990s and to free himself from the great legal and financial difficulties that were common when creating sample-based productions.[241]

In my transcriptions throughout the rest of this chapter, I show my excerpts both in Western notation and the approximate settings that were used on the Moog synthesizer by J Dilla. In this instance I am using the interface from an iOS application called "Minimoog Model D Synthesizer," which is a virtual recreation of the 1975 Minimoog Model D. Although this model may differ slightly from models used by J Dilla, the basic settings found in many Moog synthesizers are present, which is why I found it appropriate to use to show how specific timbres in tracks produced by J Dilla were created.

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[239] Fintoni, "African Rhythms," 111-130.
[240] Thompson, *Mo' Meta Blues,* 106.
[241] Y'skid, "J Dilla Interview 2003 part 1 of 4."

Techno and Kraftwerk in "B.B.E"

In his 2001 track "B.B.E (Big Booty Express)" from *Welcome 2 Detroit*, he prominently embraces the influence of both the electronic sounds of Kraftwerk as well as the more contemporary sounds of Detroit techno, featuring idioms of other genres as mentioned in chapter one.[242] As mentioned before, the popularity of techno in the Detroit area made an impact on J Dilla's own musical interests as both a producer and DJ, and during the early 2000s worked on several collaborations with Detroit techno pioneer Carl Craig.[243]

The influence of Kraftwerk is apparent, with the main chorus of "B.B.E." being a direct reference to the main chorus of Kraftwerk's "Trans-Europe Express."[244] The fusion of both Kraftwerk-esque electronic experimentalism and techno characteristics is present in the overall structure of the track, which features a variety of synthesizer sounds from the Moog Voyager. The lyrics recited by J Dilla, for example, are spoken through a vocoder, which adds a metallic or robot-like quality to the timbre of his voice, like that of Afrika Bambaataa's vocals in "Planet Rock." The drum pattern is more rhythmically strict than many of his other productions, with a simple four-on-the-floor kick drum pattern and sixteenth note hi-hats providing a signature techno-style groove. The synthesizer bassline is one of the most present in the overall mix, with the driving sixteenth-note riff providing most of the melodic content.[245] The timbre of the bass is created by adding a low-pass filter present on the Moog Voyager synthesizer, which removes all higher frequencies in the synthesizer sound.[246] The various added synth melodies add a more electronic aesthetic to the track, possibly as a reference to the high synthesizer melodies in other Kraftwerk tracks such as

[242] "B.B.E (Big Booty Express)," Spotify, track 7 on J Dilla, *Ruff Draft,* Stones Throw Records, 2007.
[243] Y'Skid, 2003.
[244] "Trans-Europe Express," Spotify, track 4 on Kraftwerk, *Trans-Europe Express,* Kling Klang, 1977.
[245] The driving bassline is also strikingly similar to Donna Summer's 1976 track "I Feel Love," produced by synthesizer pioneer Giorgio Moroder. "I Feel Love," Spotify, track 17 on Donna Summer, *Bad Girls (Deluxe Edition),* Mercury Records, 1979.
[246] The timbre of this "lead" synthesizer sound is created using the high-pass filter, which functions opposite of the low-pass filter by removing all lower frequencies of the synthesizer sound.

"Computer Love."[247] The timbre of this "lead" synthesizer sound is created using the high-pass filter, which functions opposite of the low-pass filter by removing all lower frequencies of the synthesizer sound. Finally, the synthesizer bass line at a constant sixteenth-note pulse is a characteristic common among techno music and can be found in tracks such as Carl Craig's "The Climax."[248] Figure 4.2 shows a transcription with sheet music of an excerpt of "B.B.E.," as well as Kraftwerk's "Trans-Europe Express" and Carl Craig's "The Climax," which highlight the interactions between the various synthesizer melodies, an approximation of the settings on the bass and lead synthesizer sounds on the Moog Voyager, and a comparison between the melodies and rhythmic patterns of the three tracks.

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[247] "Computer Love," Spotify, track 5 on Kraftwerk, *Computer World (2009 Remaster),* Parlophone Records, 1981.
[248] "The Climax," Spotify, track 5 on Carl Craig, *The Secret Tapes of Dr. Eich,* Planet E Communications, 2012.

♩ = 96

Lead Synth

Bass Synth

Drums

4.2A

♩ = 120

Lead Synth

Bass Synth

Drumset

4.2B

4.2C

Figure 4.2A-C - Transcription of "B.B.E. (Big Booty Express)" 0:30-0:43, "The Climax" 10:33-10:40, and Moog settings for "B.B.E." bassline 0:30-0:43

The act of Signifyin(g) upon Kraftwerk is the most apparent act of Signifyin(g) in this track, as the reverence of the group can be heard throughout, with the transformation of the borrowed chorus from a European train line ("Trans-Europe Express") to an explicit sexual metaphor ("Big Booty Express") being the most obvious example.[249] In many cases, the musical characteristics of Kraftwerk are treated as a genre unto themselves, as they are considered by both electronic music artists and scholars as electronic music pioneers within the canon of Western popular music. His Signifyin(g) of Detroit techno music and culture is also apparent, as the musical characteristics of this production has noticeably more in common with the dance music genre of techno than any of his hip-hop productions. The characteristics such as the driving synthesizer bass line, "four on the floor" drum pattern,[250] and ethereal synthesizer melody are all characteristics of the genre of techno music during the 1980s and 1990s, with Detroit-based producers such as Carl Craig being major influences on the establishment of these characteristics.[251] A lack of digital sampling and heavily un-quantized drums make this track a rather unorthodox example of his production techniques in comparison to most of his discography. All these characteristics found in "B.B.E." highlight, however, the ways in which J Dilla Signified as well as experimented with production techniques outside of both general hip-hop aesthetics and on his own innovations. This act of Signifyin(g) upon the original Kraftwerk recording is effective by not only recontextualizing the original recording but also by adding a contrasting melody and timbre to the recontextualization.

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[249] This re-working of a popular Kraftwerk single into what J Dilla would call a "strip club joint" is also possibly what inspired him to create an un-released collection of re-works and covers of Kraftwerk tracks, as stated in a 2003 interview. Y'Skid, 2003.

[250] The term "four on the floor" refers to the drum pattern involving the kick drum occurring on the downbeat in a 4/4-time signature. This became popular in the advent of disco music in the 1970s and was later heavily used in later dance music genres such as house and techno.

[251] J Dilla also collaborated on several tracks with Carl Craig in 2002, as mentioned in his 2003 interview, and released a remix of Craig's 1999 track "People Make the World Go Round." Y'Skid, 2003.

Basslines in "Thelonius" and "Feat. Phat Kat"

In many sample-based productions specifically during the Soulquarian era of J Dilla's career, around 1997 to 2002 as established by Peterson,[252] some form of synthesizer bass line accompaniment was implemented. Although the addition of a bass line to hip-hop production was nothing new at the time of his career, the addition of a bass line as an additional melody or countermelody to the rest of a production was unique among his peers. His earlier productions featured minimal bass accompaniment and usually functioned to fill out both the harmonies and low-end frequencies, such as his collaborations with Los Angeles-based rap group The Pharcyde on tracks like "Drop" and "Runnin'" from 1995. As J Dilla became more familiar with his Moog Voyager synthesizer (as well as several other synthesizers) throughout his career, he included more melodic bass line accompaniments, such as the bass line found on the track "Get Dis Money" from the 2000 Slum Village album *Fan-Tas-Tic, Vol. 2*.[253]

In "Thelonius" and "Feat. Phat Kat," the bass lines in these tracks function similarly. In the 2000 track "Thelonius" off of Common's album *Like Water for Chocolate*, the synthesizer bass line accompanies a jazz piano sample from George Duke's "Vulcan Mind Probe" from *The 1976 Solo Keyboard Album*.[254] The ostinato two-chord loop of the piano sample is countered by the ascending bass line, with two melodies acting as a call-and-response between one another. The timbre of the bass sound itself contrasts greatly from the sampled piano sound as well, consisting only of sub-harmonic low frequencies. Figure 4.3 on

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[252] Peterson, 35.
[253] "Get Dis Money," Spotify, track 11 on Slum Village, *Fan-Tas-Tic, Vol. 2,* Barack Records, 2000. As I have discussed in previous research, the synthesizer bass line in "Get Dis Money" acts as a countermelody of the sample of Herbie Hancock's 1977 track "Come Running to Me." "Come Running to Me," Spotify, track 2 on Herbie Hancock, *Sunlight,* Sony BMG, 1977.
[254] "Thelonius," Spotify, track 12 on Common and Slum Village, *Like Water for Chocolate,* MCA Records, 2000. "Vulcan Mind Probe," YouTube, track 6 on George Duke, *The 1976 Solo Keyboard Album*, Epic Records, 1982.

the next page shows a sheet music transcription of an excerpt of "Thelonius" as well as a diagram of the approximate settings found on the Moog Voyager synthesizer.

Figures 4.3A&B - Sheet Music Transcription of "Thelonius" and Approximate Settings of Synthesizer Bass on the Moog Voyager 2:35-2:45

The bassline found in “Feat. Phat Kat” from J Dilla’s 2001 solo album *Welcome 2 Detroit* also functions similarly, with the synthesizer bass line acting as a countermelody to the sample.[255] Most of the track, however, features only the bass line and drums, with the bass line itself acting as the main melody. The sample, a whistle and acoustic guitar melody from Steve Howe’s 1975 track “Will O’ the Wisp,” appears every 30 seconds, acting as a response to the bass line melody.[256] In this instance the roles of the bass line and sample are inverted, with the bass line acting as the main melody and the sample countering or responding to this. The timbral differences between the bass and sample are also comparable to “Thelonius” in that the sub frequencies of the bass line greatly contrast the high-pitched whistles and acoustic guitar chords of the sample. Figure 4.4 shows a sheet music transcription of an excerpt of “Feat. Phat Kat,” as well as a diagram of the approximate settings of the synthesizer bass on the Moog Voyager.

[255] “Feat. Phat Kat,” Spotify, track 13 on J Dilla and Phat Kat, *Welcome 2 Detroit,* BBE Records, 2001.
[256] “Will O’ the Wisp,” Spotify, track 6 on Steve Howe, *Beginnings,* Atlantic Records, 1975.

Figures 4.4A&B: Sheet Music Transcription of "Feat. Phat Kat" and Approximate Settings of Synthesizer Bass on the Moog Voyager 0:34-0:45

Just like his use of Signifyin(g) upon the music of Kraftwerk, these two examples exemplify J Dilla's Signifyin(g) upon the sample of the track by not only recontextualizing the original recording but also by adding a contrasting melody and timbre to the recontextualization. This, like "Big Booty Express," both shows reverence to the original recording while also building upon it, as well as provide a noticeably different or "clashing" timbre with the respective synthesizer bass lines, as described by Adam Krims in his concept of the hip-hop sublime.[257] Though Krims originally was referring to the clashing timbres of different samples implemented in a single hip-hop beat, this aesthetic may also be applied to hip-hop production outside of strictly sampling from vinyl recordings.

Signifyin(g) Aesthetics Through Timbre in "Raw Shit"

In the 2003 track "Raw Shit" from J Dilla and Madlib's collaborative album *Champion Sound*, the instrumental produced by J Dilla is unique in that it features no samples as well as no references to any specific artists, with the composition of the track consisting mainly of a synthesizer bass line, an acoustic drum set, and synthesizer chords.[258] Although tracks such as "B.B.E." featured no samples as well, the analysis discussed earlier shows that the track itself still makes numerous references and emulations of specific artists and genres. The production of "Raw Shit," however, refers only to a broad aesthetic that is desired by both J Dilla and many other (specifically "underground") hip-hop artists, that of authenticity and sounding "raw."[259] As recited by featured rapper Talib Kweli, the chorus "I love, that raw

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[257] Krims, 187.

[258] "Raw Shit," Spotify, Track 7 on Jaylib, *Champion Sound,* Stones Throw Records, 2003.

[259] This may also refer to the aesthetic of being "raw" with realness and authenticity in hip-hop culture. In Ol' Dirty Bastard's 1995 track "Shimmy Shimmy Ya," for example, he states in the opening lyrics "oh baby, I like it raw," which may be interpreted as a double entendre referring to both Ol' Dirty Bastard's desire for unprotected sexual intercourse as well as his desire to express and appreciate authenticity both in his music and the music of other hip-hop artists. "Shimmy Shimmy Ya," Spotify, track 2 on Ol' Dirty Bastard, *Return to the 36 Chambers: The Dirty Version,* Elektra Records, 1995.

shit, I like it, I love it," refers to the "raw sound" that one experiences in a live hip-hop concert, as well as the "raw sound" that one hears in productions by producers such as J Dilla and Madlib. He embodies the live hip-hop concert by reciting the chorus in a call-and-response format with a simulated audience, as well as the "raw sound" heard in the timbres of the instrumental.

J Dilla achieves the "raw sound" described by Talib Kweli by using sounds from his Moog Voyager synthesizer in a variety of ways. The bass line, for example, features a sharp "sawtooth" sound (referring to the shape of the waveform) as well as an un-filtered timber with much of the higher frequencies of the bass sound still present, giving the timbre a "raw" or exposed sonic aesthetic. Just as producers, to appeal to the aesthetic of "rawness," may prefer samples from vinyl records that have a lower fidelity, so too do they wish to achieve similar aesthetics with non-sampled musical material. The synthesizer chords also feature a similar un-filtered sound, albeit in a higher register of the keyboard with significantly lower frequencies. Both the synth bass and chords, featuring a relatively straightforward four-measure chord progression of E-minor and A-minor, are accompanied by a typical J Dilla-style un-quantized drum pattern, further emphasizing the imperfect or "raw" nature of the production. In this, J Dilla therefore uses the timbres of the Moog synthesizer to Signify upon the tropes of "rawness" in hip-hop, emphasizing the aesthetics of distortions that may occur with loudspeakers at a live hip-hop event. The figures below show a transcription of an excerpt of the instrumental track, as well as diagrams showing the approximate settings for the bass synthesizer sound on the Moog Voyager.

Figures 4.5A&B - Sheet Music Transcription of “Raw Shit” and Approximate Settings of Synthesizer Bass on the Moog Voyager 0:47-0:56

The concept of authenticity has been a crucial aspect of many hip-hop artist's performance and aesthetic, and in this case the authenticity being Signified upon by J Dilla through the musical characteristics of the production itself.[260] Madlib comments on this in his own lyrics later in the track when he states that both he and J Dilla are trying "to innovate" and "create [a] new composition" that represents what they believe is real and authentic hip-hop.[261] This relates strongly to Adam Krims' concept of the "hip-hop sublime," as these characteristics of "detuned layers" within the bass line further emphasize the "clashing timbral qualities" that are crucial to achieving the "raw" sound that is present in the track.[262]

Conclusion

Throughout this chapter's analysis, one can see how J Dilla's use of synthesizers Signify upon other electronic music artists and the use of electronic instruments themselves. His use of melody and timbre with instruments like the Moog Voyager Synthesizer were implemented to Signify upon acts of difference and set him apart from other uses of synthesizer melodies, contributing to his own signature sound. Beyond establishing his own signature sound, J Dilla also used synthesizers to Signify upon elements of Blackness and Black music, creating a "hall of mirrors," as well as showing how technology in music production informs how one Signifies in Afrodiasporic music. [263] Just like his Signifyin(g) through sampling, drum patterns, or genre, the use of Signifiers through synthesizer sounds and melodies are ways of troping the musical tropes found both within hip-hop and throughout African diasporic music.

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[260] Forman and Neal eds. "No Time for Fake N*ggas: Hip-Hop Culture and the Authenticity Debates," 2004.

[261] Quotations are from Madlib's lyrics. Otis Jackson Jr. and James Yancey, "Raw Shit," *Champion Sound,* (Los Angeles: Stones Throw Records, 2003).

[262] Krims, 187. "Raw" in quotations in reference to the title track.

[263] The ways in which J Dilla Signified through synthesizers and the subsequent lineage of Signifyin(g) can be heard in current subgenres and subcultures of electronic and hip-hop music, with producers such as Los Angeles-based artists Flying Lotus and the London-based group Ivy Lab, which will be discussed further in chapter six.

PART II: Influences of J Dilla's Signature Sound and Forms of Signifyin(g) in Hip-Hop Production Spaces

Chapter 5

J Dilla's Signifyin(g) and Signature Sound in Lo-Fi Hip-Hop

Since J Dilla's death in 2006, the culture of hip-hop beat-making in similar ways to him and his signature sound has become more of a global phenomenon, due both to the evolution of music production technology and the popularity of J Dilla's instrumental works like *Donuts*. Internet forums and social media have also accelerated the popularity of this exponentially, with both fans and practitioners alike participating in the production, consumption, and analysis of hip-hop beats. Websites like Reddit, SP Forums, and YouTube feature a plethora of discussions related to hip-hop beats, with J Dilla's production being one of the central influences throughout. Journalists like Victoria Vouloumanos and Elijah C. Watson and have highlighted this apparent influence that J Dilla's music has had on what Charnas calls the "lo-fi hip-hop movement," in which hip-hop producers embrace the low-fidelity qualities using older digital samplers from the 1980s and 1990s, vinyl records, or other forms of vintage equipment or recording processes.[264]

Various independent record labels have capitalized on this culture, creating platforms such as livestreams and Spotify playlists that highlight producers who create beats that emulate the style of J Dilla as well as highlight other hip-hop producers such as Pete Rock, Madlib, and Nujabes. Though the genre of these music communities can broadly be described as "instrumental hip-hop,"[265] the terms "lo-fi hip-hop," "chill hop," "jazz hop," and "lo-fi beats" tend to be used frequently and interchangeably. The most common term for this genre,

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[264] Charnas, 190. Victoria Vouloumanos, "An Exploration of Lo-Fi Hip-Hop, Part III: From Nujabes and J Dilla to YouTube Livestreams," *Medium*, December 8, 2019, accessed November 5, 2021, https://medium.com/@victoriavouloumanos/an-exploration-of-lo-fi-hip-hop-part-iii-from-nujabes-and-j-dilla-to-youtube-livestreams-f0a5cc719e50. Elijah C. Watson, "J Dilla's Influence & Legacy Lives On in the World of Lo-Fi Hip-Hop," *Okayplayer, p*ublished February 9, 2019, accessed February 24, 2019, https://www.okayplayer.com/music/j-dilla-lofi-hip-hop-influence.html.

[265] D'Errico, "Behind the Beat: Technical and Practical Aspects of Instrumental Hip-Hop Composition," master's thesis, Tufts University, May 2011, accessed August 2, 2017, http://www.cs.tufts.edu/~jacob/250hcm/MikeDErricoMAthesis.pdf.

however, is lo-fi hip-hop, which can be defined as instrumental hip-hop which features slow tempos (about 70-80 beats per minute), minimal harmonic or melodic material stemming mostly from jazz from the post-bop and hard-bop eras of the 1950s through the 1970s, with heavy influence from the signature sound of J Dilla. Through this process, a "chain of signifiers" is present, from jazz tropes of the hard-bop era, hip-hop tropes of the music of J Dilla, and tropes of J Dilla's signature sound in lo-fi hip-hop.

Throughout this chapter I will be exploring lo-fi hip-hop found in online spaces, mainly in relation to how beats are created and disseminated through online platforms such as Bandcamp and YouTube, while also highlighting how aspects of J Dilla's "signature sound" has had on online lo-fi hip-hop culture. I will also observe the similar signifiers originally implemented by J Dilla within current styles of lo-fi hip-hop by analyzing how these signifiers are further Signified upon by another prominent lo-fi hip-hop artist The Deli (David Pryor) in his 2016 album *Bumps Tape*. Using this album as a case study, I will highlight the similarities in musical Signifyin(g) originally attributed to J Dilla. Before doing this, however, let us look at the cultural and musical roots of lo-fi hip-hop from hip-hop music in previous generations, as well as how lo-fi or "low fidelity" is sonically and aesthetically defined in relation to the quality of audio recordings.

It is apparent that since his death, the musical signifiers originally associated with the signature sound of J Dilla may now function as signifiers separated from their original context and reinterpreted by other producers to serve a similar function in their own productions. Through my own experience with both discussing this in various online spaces as well as participating frequently in these communities myself, I can attest to the fact that not every producer is trying to "get into the game" of producing major hits and receiving millions of plays on streaming services. In many cases, these communities function as described by Henry Jenkins as "participatory cultures," in which individuals frequently

partake in posting and sharing creative work (in this case, lo-fi hip-hop beats) as a form of fan service, either to specific artists like J Dilla or just as general fans of lo-fi hip-hop who wish to participate in these online communities.[266]

The un-quantized rhythms from J Dilla for example, went from a radical departure of rhythmic patterns found in much of hip-hop production at the time. The act of "Signifyin(g) on the timeline" through this use of un-quantized rhythms was noticed by both fans and musical collaborators, further emphasizing the effectiveness of this act of Signifyin(g). In the context of lo-fi hip-hop, however, this act is removed from its original purpose to that of a musical sign representing much of lo-fi hip-hop, beats to study to, and the act of productivity itself, similar to the transformation of jazz from radical expression of Afrodiasporic culture to corporate elevator or lounge music.[267]

Boom Bap and Beat Tapes as Predecessors to Lo-Fi Hip-Hop

As explained in the introduction chapter, one of the key characteristics of hip-hop production is the use of sampled drum sounds from vinyl records. As opposed to the synthetic timbres of earlier drum machines such as the Roland TR-808 or TR-909, the practice of using sampled acoustic drums became preferred by many producers who wished to feature drum sounds with acoustic origins, and was originally pioneered in the early 1980s by producer and New York DJ Marley Marl.[268] This led to a more "live" feel among the grooves created by hip-hop producers, and eventually influenced the namesake of this style of production known as "boom bap," with each onomatopoeia referring to the sampled kick and snare drum sounds, respectively.[269]

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[266] Jenkins, *Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2009).
[267] Simon Jones, "Muzak: On Functional Music and Power." *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, June 1992, 156-69.
[268] Harkins, 77.
[269] Fintoni, 56-57.

Throughout the 1990s, "boom bap" as a subgenre of hip-hop production and culture became increasingly popular, with albums such as KRS-One's 1993 album *Return of the Boom Bap* and Nas' debut 1994 album *Illmatic* being shining examples of this production style.[270] This subgenre was also linked heavily with what was known as the "east coast" sound, as west coast hip-hop producers such as DJ Quik and Dr. Dre embraced a different subgenre of hip-hop known as "g-funk."[271] Another one of the key features of boom bap is a heavy use of jazz samples, specifically jazz vinyl record releases from the 1960s and 1970s. Albums like Mobb Deep's *The Infamous* from 1995 and Nas' *Illmatic*, as mentioned earlier, features samples from a variety of jazz artists, such as jazz pianists Herbie Hancock and Ahmad Jamal, respectively.[272]

The most common method of disseminating instrumental hip-hop beats throughout the genre's history was through the format of the beat tape. The use of cassette tapes as recordings for hip-hop have existed for as long as the genre and culture began in New York City in the 1970s. Many fans and MCs of early hip-hop would record live DJ sets for purposes of archival, dissemination, and personal enjoyment. The original purpose for hip-hop producers (starting in the late 1980s to early 1990s) creating beat tapes, however, was as demo reels to highlight their skills as a producer and to be shown to industry figures and rappers alike to receive a placement by a record label. In a less formal context, these beat tapes would also be used to send to rappers, singers, or other musicians to collaborate on future productions. J Dilla was known by many of his contemporaries to produce an enormous amount of beat tapes throughout his career, which is what originally led to his first

[270] KRS-One, *Return of the Boom Bap,* Zomba Recordings, 1993, and Nas, *Illmatic,* Columbia Records, 1994, Spotify audio.
[271] DJ Quik, *Way 2 Fonky,* Sony BMG, 1992, and Dr. Dre, *The Chronic,* Interscope Records, 1992, Spotify audio.
[272] Other groups such as A Tribe Called Quest also embraced jazz samples and other aesthetics associated with jazz music, eventually leading to what would be coined as the "jazz rap" subgenre. Williams, 89.

major production collaboration with The Pharcyde in 1995.[273] As stated by Zagorski-Thomas, "one of the key requirements for making a living as a producer in the current market is to promote oneself to the record companies."[274] The purposes for making beats have changed significantly in the past twenty to thirty years, and although the use of beat tapes as demo reels to show industry figures certainly remains one function of these musical works, it is just one of many reasons for producers to create.

Though I have mentioned the financial motivations for making beats, there are other creative reasons for doing so, with some having little to do with what is usually the norm of hip-hop production within the wider music industry. Many producers, however, may not always create beats to collaborate with other artists and release their instrumentals as is.[275] Throughout the past decade or so, the dissemination of specifically lo-fi hip-hop has become a subculture of hip-hop throughout various online spaces. Although the sharing of hip-hop beats through various media is nothing new within hip-hop culture, the ways in which hip-hop beats are exchanged between producers and listeners has certainly evolved, from the physical media of cassette tapes or compact discs to the independent digital distribution of social music platforms such as YouTube, Bandcamp, and Soundcloud.[276] Many of these beat tapes contain lo-fi signifiers that were present on original beat tape formats of cassette, and feature both digital and analog lo-fi characteristics that I will explain in brief.

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[273] As told by Ferguson in his *33 1/3* series book on *Donuts*, one of J Dilla's beat tapes was given by J Dilla's mentor Amp Fiddler to A Tribe Called Quest member Q-Tip (Jonathan Davis) during one of their concerts in Detroit in 1995. This led to Q-Tip sharing this beat tape with several other rap groups during this tour, with one of them being Los Angeles-based rap group The Pharcyde. This then led to The Pharcyde contacting J Dilla to work on their album *Labcabincalifornia*, which J Dilla went on to produce the beats of several tracks on the album. Ferguson, 35-37.

[274] Zagorski-Thomas, 232.

[275] The producers that frequently release instrumentals range from aspiring producers and hobbyists to full-time professional hip-hop producers such as Madlib (see his *Beat Konducta* series) and Pete Rock (see his *Petestrumentals* series). Madlib, *Beat Konducta Vol. 1-2: Movie Scenes,* Stones Throw Records, 2006, and Pete Rock, *Petestrumentals,* BBE Records, 2001, Spotify audio.

[276] The creation of instrumental hip-hop mixtapes can be traced as far back as hip-hop's early years in the New York City boroughs of the 1970s, where prominent DJs such as Grandmaster Flash and DJ Kool Herc would record compilations of their DJ mixes to cassette tape.

Lo-Fi Aesthetics and Digital vs. Analog Sound Quality

Within the broad definition of lo-fi, the characteristics of low-fidelity recordings can be divided into two categories: analog and digital. With analog lo-fi, the characteristics found stem from sonic distortions coming from or emulating analog hardware, such as vinyl crackle and tape hiss. With digital lo-fi, lower-fidelity artefacts stem from a decrease in bit rate or sample rate in a digital audio recording. With the "CD quality" standard of digital audio files being defined as 16-bit and 44.1 kHz, any bit rate or sample rate (respectively) lower than this is usually considered to be of a lower fidelity, with many producers colloquially describing the sonic characteristic of these lower bit or sample rates as "bit-crushed."[277] There are also several characteristics which can be found in both analog and digital lo-fi audio, such as a presence of dynamic compression as well as the removal of higher frequencies in the recording.[278]

Within the context of J Dilla's production discography, many of the lo-fi aesthetics present in his work stem from analog lo-fi characteristics. J Dilla was adamant about hearing hip-hop through an analog lens and sought to embrace these characteristics throughout many of his productions.[279] One of the ways in which he did this was by digitally manipulating analog artefacts, either by emphasizing the sound of vinyl crackle using dynamic compression (which can be found in his track "Bye" from *Donuts*) or further adding surface noise by recording his productions to cassette tape. Based on this approach, term "lo-fi" itself

[277] This term would fit under the many forms of "distortions" which may be used within the production of an audio recording. Zagorski-Thomas, 56.

[278] Many hip-hop producers wishing to embrace lo-fi sounds navigate frequently between these two sides of lo-fi characteristics. In the productions of Los Angeles-based producer Madlib (Otis Jackson Jr.) and the late Tokyo-based producer Nujabes (Seba Jun), an emphasis on analog lo-fi characteristics is frequently heard, with vinyl crackle and analog filtering present throughout many of their tracks. In the productions of Tobacco (Tom Fec) and New York-based production group Czarface, digital lo-fi artefacts are mainly embraced, with heavy "bit-crushed" characteristics frequently present. Czarface, *Czarface Meets Ghostface (Instrumentals),* Silver Age, 2019, Spotify audio. Nujabes, *Modal Soul,* Hydeout Productions, 2005, Spotify audio. Tobacco, *Fucked Up Friends,* Rad Cult, 2008, Spotify audio.

[279] Thompson, "Love Music Again: Questlove on J Dilla, Vinyl Snobs & Lo-fi hip-hop: Love Music Again-WIRED," (video of interview), hosted by *WIRED*, posted February 18, 2014, accessed March 21, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vN4hO-xcwgk.

refers to not only a genre but as a more general approach to production, with producers and listeners alike appreciating the imperfections of analog recordings.[280]

J Dilla's Lo-Fi Signifiers

In order to accurately describe the similarities and influences that J Dilla's music has had on the current genre of lo-fi hip-hop, it is important to define what makes Dilla's own music lo-fi. Throughout his career, he experimented with a variety of popular music genres within his own productions (See Chapters 1-4), from sequenced synthesizer melodies stemming from Detroit Techno ("BBE") to acoustic performances of Latin jazz on piano ("Rico Suave Bossa Nova").[281] His influence on lo-fi hip-hop, however, stems mainly from his instrumental discography, much of which was either released posthumously by his estate or released sporadically throughout his career on "beat tapes," or instrumental hip-hop beat compilations usually recorded to cassette tape.

The characteristics of many of these posthumous releases are similar in that they have at least one of three main features: a loop of a jazz sample, un-quantized drums, and some aspect of artefacts from analogue recordings, such as tape hiss, vinyl crackle, or some other form of distortion. Though it is difficult to determine at what time period during his career many of these posthumous releases were produced, it is apparent that these characteristics appeared throughout his career, from his instrumental remix of The Pharcyde track "She

[280] Expanding on this, earlier samplers from the 1980s had significantly smaller spaces for memory, with most samplers such as the E-Mu SP-12 only capable of capturing several seconds of sampled audio. The quality itself of the sampled digital audio was also significantly lower than today's digital audio standards, with most sampling equipment having an 8 or 12-bit rate as opposed to the "CD" or modern qualities of 16 or 24 bits. Early pioneers of hip-hop production such as Pete Rock, DJ Premier, and members of the Public Enemy production group Bomb Squad, however, embraced these limitations, using the low-fidelity characteristics of their production as signature characteristics rather than hindrances to their creative output. Harkins, 35-36.
[281] "B.B.E (Big Booty Express)" and "Rico Suave Bossa Nova," Spotify, tracks 7 and 12 on J Dilla, *Welcome 2 Detroit.* BBE Records, 2001.

Said" from 1996 to one of the latter tracks on his final instrumental album *Donuts*, titled "Bye," in 2006. The track "She Said," for example, contains a sample of a jazz piano riff from Gato Barbieri's "El Arriero" from his 1972 album *El Pampero,* significantly slowed down and with J Dilla's signature un-quantized drum grooves added to add his unique groove to this piano loop.[282] Respectively, in the track "Bye," a heavily chopped and rearranged version of The Isley Brothers' 1980 track "Don't Say Goodnight" is also heard with a substantial amount of vinyl crackle present throughout the track's duration.[283]

These elements are present throughout a sizable amount of J Dilla's discography and is most likely what J Dilla's production techniques are known for within the world of lo-fi hip-hop. These characteristics have become so synonymous with the characteristics of lo-fi hip-hop, that if any of said characteristics are present, many listeners as well as producers will label the music as lo-fi hip-hop, regardless of the actual accuracy of this description. Within my own experiences as a producer, there have been several artists that I have either performed with or collaborated on music who label their music as lo-fi, even if their music does not strictly align with lo-fi characteristics.[284] The addition of vinyl noise or use of low-pass filtering, which removes the higher frequencies of a recording, may be implemented by an artist for specific timbral purposes in order to add aspects of lo-fi aesthetics, while also not necessarily making an explicitly lo-fi production.[285]

It is difficult at times to discern which characteristics were either intentionally implemented by J Dilla himself or if the lo-fi characteristics found in a specific recording,

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[282] "El Arriero," Spotify, track 4 on Gato Barbieri., *El Pampero*, Ace Records, 1972. "She Said," Spotify, track 5 on The Pharcyde, *Labcabincalifornia,* Delicious Vinyl, 1995.
[283] "Don't Say Goodnight," Spotify, track 5 on The Isley Brothers, *Go All the Way,* Sony Music, 1980. "Bye.," Spotify, track 29 on J Dilla, *Donuts,* Stones Throw Records, 2006.
[284] This statement is heavily influenced by my own experiences as a producer and artist myself, collaborating with other Bristol-based lo-fi hip-hop artists over the past four years.
[285] Massive Attack's 1998 song "Teardrop" is an example of this, which features a noticeable amount of vinyl noise in the track's beginning in tandem with the opening drum break. Though this adds a lo-fi aesthetic to the track itself, the genre or general descriptor would not be labeled as lo-fi. "Teardrop," Spotify, track 3 on Massive Attack, *Mezzanine,* Virgin Records, 1998.

such as those found on his various instrumental beat tapes, were simply byproducts of the fact that these recordings were presented on older analog hardware. In J Dilla's posthumous instrumental 2016 release *The King of Beats, Vol. 1*, for example, many of the tracks featured were productions originally created on J Dilla's E-Mu SP-1200 sampler towards the beginning of his professional career, and either saved onto floppy disk or recorded onto cassette tape. Tracks such as "Track 3" contain a sizable amount of white noise within the mix which can be caused from cassette tape playback, and "Track 10" contains a noticeable amount of stuttering and distortion, which can be caused from the general wear and degradation of a cassette tape over several years.[286]

A possible and most likely answer is simply that both may be the case for the source of said lo-fi characteristics, in that these aesthetics were appreciated by J Dilla, and according to Questlove (Ahmir Thompson) in an interview with *Wired* magazine states that while working with J Dilla in the late 1990s and early 2000s, J Dilla would frequently save his MPC productions onto cassette tapes, emphasizing that J Dilla "felt that hip-hop should be experienced the way that he experienced it, which was an amount of imperfection, [and] sort of a lo-fi audio experience."[287] The way "he experienced it," as described by Questlove, was through the low-fidelity quality of cassette tapes as opposed to much higher quality recording media such as compact discs (CDs) or digital audio tapes (DATs).

These characteristics, from the distinct drum sounds to the frequent use of sampled jazz recordings, are what influenced the sound and aesthetic of what makes up lo-fi hip-hop today as its own subculture of hip-hop. One of the reasons for J Dilla being a central influence in contemporary lo-fi hip-hop beat making communities is for his embrace of boom

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[286] "Track 3" and "Track 10," Spotify, tracks 3 and 10 on J Dilla, *The King of Beats, Vol. 1*, Yancey Media Group, 2015.
White noise or "static" is one of the many "distortions" that can be found in lower fidelity recordings. Simon Zagorski-Thomas, 60.
[287] Thompson, "Love Music Again."

bap production as well as his innovations within this production style. Like his influences, J Dilla frequently used sampled drum patterns as well as a variety of jazz samples stemming mainly from the 1950s to the 1970s. This was especially true in the first several years of his professional career as a producer, with his 1995 productions on The Pharcyde's *Labcabincalifornia* and 1996 production of De La Soul's *Stakes is High* as prime examples.[288]

As mentioned in the previous chapter on un-quantized rhythms and grooves on J Dilla's production on *Fantastic*, one of the key characteristics of much of this early production was his use of un-quantized drum patterns, from fellow producers and collaborators like Questlove and Robert Glasper to younger generations of fans and artists like Joey Badass (Jo-Vaughn Virginie Scott), this became a key characteristic of his production.[289] This influence can be heard heavily throughout almost all of current lo-fi hip-hop production, with producers attempting to mimic the un-quantized patterns that J Dilla originally had implemented twenty years prior. This type of drum pattern has become synonymous with current lo-fi hip-hop, which attempts to contrast itself greatly with the more rhythmically strict trap drum patterns that have become exponentially popular throughout the 2010s, which feature heavy 808 drum sounds and rhythmically frantic or "rattling" hi-hats in sixteenth or thirty-second notes.

Another innovation by J Dilla that is prominent throughout much of current lo-fi hip-hop is the embrace of added analog noise such as tape his or vinyl crackle. Tracks such as the opening of Slum Village's "Untitled" or the abrupt pause featured at the beginning of "Airworks" feature these aural imperfections, embracing the "unclean" aesthetics of analog audio playback equipment.[290] This is also frequently featured in many lo-fi hip-hop

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[288] Houghton, "The Story Behind Some of J Dilla's Greatest Productions."
[289] Glasper, "Jazz is the mother of hip-hop."
[290] "Airworks," Spotify, track 12 on J Dilla, *Donuts,* Stones Throw Records, 2006. "Untitled/Fantastic," Spotify, track 9 on Slum Village, *Fan-Tas-Tic, Vol. 2,* Barack Records, 2000.

productions, with producers acquiring samples with added distortions and further emphasizing these distortions with effects such as dynamic compression.[291]

The emulation of vinyl noise is present throughout much of lo-fi hip-hop production, with sonic distortions usually associated with the turntable being used as a signifier for authenticity, similar to how many DJ turntablists prefer to use analog turntables as opposed to CDJs or DJ controllers.[292] This implementation of vinyl noise as signifier fits in with one of the proposed rules laid out by Joseph Schloss in *Making Beats*, where one of the topics of hip-hop beat making discussed in his ethnography emphasized the importance of sampling exclusively from vinyl records.[293] Because of the advances in sampling technology and digital audio software, however, many producers can simulate the extra vinyl crackle or added noise using digital audio plugin software or digital processing effects. These programs include the free digital audio plugin *Vinyl* by audio software company Izotope, as well as the "compression" and "vinyl sim" effects found on the series of samplers by electronic instrument company Roland, such as the SP-303 and SP-404.[294] Because of these tools, producers are able to create a similar aural aesthetic using these effects and plugins without sampling directly from vinyl records, and instead using a variety of online sources such as YouTube and Spotify.

Though an older generation of producers may deem this type of sampling as inauthentic, as discussed in Schloss's interviews with hip-hop producers in *Making Beats*, what matters to many current producers is the sonic aesthetic of vinyl, as opposed to sampling from vinyl itself. Dublin-based lo-fi hip-hop producer JarJar Jr. (Ryan O'Halloran,

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[291] I am using the term "distortions" similarly to Zagorski-Thomas, where he states that "if I can also hear characteristics in the sound that don't match that mental representation – tape compression or noise, the subtle overdrive of a microphone pre-amp, the frequency and transient alteration of a microphone and so forth – these are what I'm labelling as distortion." Within this context, I am specifically referring to tape compression or noise. Zagorski-Thomas, 98.
[292] Katz, *Groove Music: The Art and Culture of the Hip-Hop DJ,* New York: Oxford University Press, 2012, 5.
[293] Schloss, 128.
[294] *Boss SP-303 'Dr. Sample' Owner's Manual*, 2001, 11.

stylized as j a r j a r j r) stated in a 2018 interview with *Dazed* magazine that when it came to either sampling from vinyl or using online sources for samples, he stated that "I think at the beginning [of lo-fi hip-hop's popularity online] it was about adding six different layers of vinyl crackle so that everyone thought you were a seasoned [veteran of hip-hop production]."[295] In stating the desire to add numerous amounts of vinyl crackle, he points out how this timbre is used by producers as Signifyin(g) their own authenticity in order to show that the producer in question is, as he puts it, a "seasoned veteran" of hip-hop beat-making.

Seeing as so many producers look to this implementation of added noise, jazz samples, and un-quantized drums as key signifiers to create lo-fi hip-hop beats, let us look at one prime example within J Dilla's own discography as quintessential in representing these signifiers, such as his production of the Detroit-based rapper Proof's 1997 track "Life."

J Dilla's Signature Sound as Lo-Fi Hip-Hop in "Life"

A somber jazz piano chord progression, a soulful, swinging programmed drum pattern, both repeating in a calming, meditative loop, all with a subtle and low hiss from the playback of a cassette tape. These are the musical elements that make up the track "Life." The instrumental of the track was uploaded to YouTube in 2013 by an online fan under the channel name mt. fujitive and has since gained over fifteen million views since it's posting.[296] The video image featured in the YouTube post is a black-and-white still image of J Dilla in his home studio. Figure 5.1 on the following page shows a screenshot of this YouTube post.

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[295] Kemi Alemoru, "Inside YouTube's calming 'Lofi Hip Hop Radio to Relax/Study to' community," *Dazed,* June 14, 2018, accessed March 15, 2020, https://www.dazeddigital.com/music/article/40366/1/youtube-lo-fi-hip-hop-study-relax-24-7-livestream-scene.
[296] "J Dilla – Life (Instrumental)" (video of audio track), J Dilla, hosted by mt. fujitive, posted July 11, 2013, accessed July 8, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Agl1TgVfls0.

Figure 5.1 - Screenshot of J Dilla's "Life" on YouTube

The track itself, running at four minutes and forty seconds long, is composed mainly of a four-measure loop, with J Dilla using the opening chords from Miles Davis' 1959 recording of "Blue in Green" to create a hip-hop beat that, according to the plethora of comments of YouTube users, creates an atmosphere of vulnerability and introspection.[297] The vulnerability of this track comes from the combination of the minor chord progression featured in Bill Evans' performance from the original recording, and the addition of and un-quantized drum pattern typical to J Dilla's signature sound. The repeated four-bar loop features a jazz piano chord progression performed by Bill Evans, although simple in its

[297] "Funky Cowboys – Life," WhoSampled, accessed November 8, 2019, https://www.whosampled.com/sample/163524/Funky-Cowboys-Life-Miles-Davis-Blue-in-Green/.

cyclical form of iv V i IV, contains several unique chord voicings which are characteristic of both Bill Evans' idiosyncrasies as a jazz pianist as well as the "cool jazz" that artists like Miles Davis popularized.[298] In its essence, the track shows J Dilla Signifyin(g) upon both the original jazz recording by Bill Evans through the sample's tranformation and the troping of tropes of typical boom bap hip-hop production, which usually features both a jazz sample and a substantial drum pattern.

The sample's lowered pitch down a major third from A minor to F minor also adds to the lo-fi characteristics mentioned earlier, due to the digitally manipulated pitch resulting in deeper resonance, lower frequencies, and slower tempo. The tape hiss, present throughout the beat's runtime, also adds to the lo-fi aesthetic of the track. This is also one of the many analog defining characteristics of makes up lo-fi hip-hop.[299] In one of the comments on the "Life" YouTube video, a fan of J Dilla states that Dilla was "making lo-fi [hip-hop] before lo-fi [hip-hop] was popular."[300] Figure 5.2 on the following page shows transcriptions of excerpts of both the original piano performance in "Blue in Green" as well as J Dilla's arrangement in "Life."

[298] "Blue in Green," Spotify, track 3 on Miles Davis, *Kind of Blue (Legacy Edition),* Columbia Records, 1959.
[299] There exist lo-fi subgenres among many genres of popular music, from lo-fi indie folk to lo-fi electronic dance music, all with similar approaches to creating low fidelity recordings with limiting hardware. In this case, however, we will be focusing solely on the subgenre of lo-fi hip-hop, as it pertains more to this research as well as J Dilla's influence among this subgenre.
[300] It is likely that the commenter was referring to the subgenre of hip-hop music that has become incredibly popular in a variety of online spaces known as "lo-fi hip-hop," as opposed to the general concept of lo-fi music.

5.2A - "Blue in Green" 0:09-0:14

5.2B - "Life" 0:22-0:27

Figures 5.2A & 5.2B - Transcription of "Blue in Green" 0:09-0:14 and "Life" 0:22-0:27

One popular lo-fi hip-hop track, titled "5:32PM" by The Deli, features strikingly similar musical characteristics, such as a similar tempo, "loose" un-quantized drums, and a looped jazz sample, stemming from a Bill Evans and Stuart Hall 1962 recording of Jimmy Van Heusen's "Darn That Dream."[301] The similarities can be seen clearly in the transcription below of a small excerpt of both the sample source of "Darn That Dream" and its subsequent

[301] "Darn That Dream," Spotify, track 6 on Bill Evans and Stuart Hall, *Undercurrents,* Blue Note Records, 1962. "5:32PM," Spotify, track 12 on The Deli, *Vibes,* Records DK, 2016.

transformation in "5:32PM," featuring the same minimal composition and emphasis on jazz piano chords like J Dilla's "Life," as shown in Figure 5.3 on the following page.

5.3A – "Darn That Dream" by Bill Evans and Stuart Hall 1:07-1:12

5.3B – "5:32PM" by The Deli 0:00-0:05

5.3A & 5.3B – Transcription of "Darn That Dream" and "5:32PM"

As stated earlier, the influence of J Dilla on current trends relating to lo-fi hip-hop culture has been a popular topic among music journalists, with Elijah C. Watson stating:

> On [internet forums such as] Reddit, countless threads have been made trying to explain lo-fi hip-hop's history and those that are considered the pioneers of it. In most — if not all — threads, Dilla is seen as a veteran alongside Madlib and Nujabes, with some even referring to him as a godfather of lo-fi hip-hop.[302]

How then did the aural aesthetics of J Dilla's instrumental beats from decades prior come to influence an entire generation of hip-hop producers? Let us observe how this is apparent influence by looking at an album or "beat tape" that both represents and expands upon these musical signifiers: The Deli's *Bumps Tape.*

Signifyin(g) like J Dilla in *Bumps Tape*

Released officially on November 15, 2016, *Bumps Tape* was released by The Deli, who describes the album on his Bandcamp page as "a tape compiled of my microwave beats, older beats, b-sides, raw sp 404 beats, and beats I made out of my comfort zone."[303] His description of making beats outside of his "comfort zone" shows his desire to self-Signify, challenging himself to achieve or build upon signifiers and tropes from other producers and artists he enjoys, thereby creating his own signature sound. Based on this description, the album's title, and the album's musical structure and average track lengths, we can interpret a significant amount of information on what the album is attempting to portray and Signify within its own place and understanding of hip-hop culture.

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[302] Watson, "J Dilla's Influence & Legacy Lives On in the World of Lo-Fi Hip-Hop."

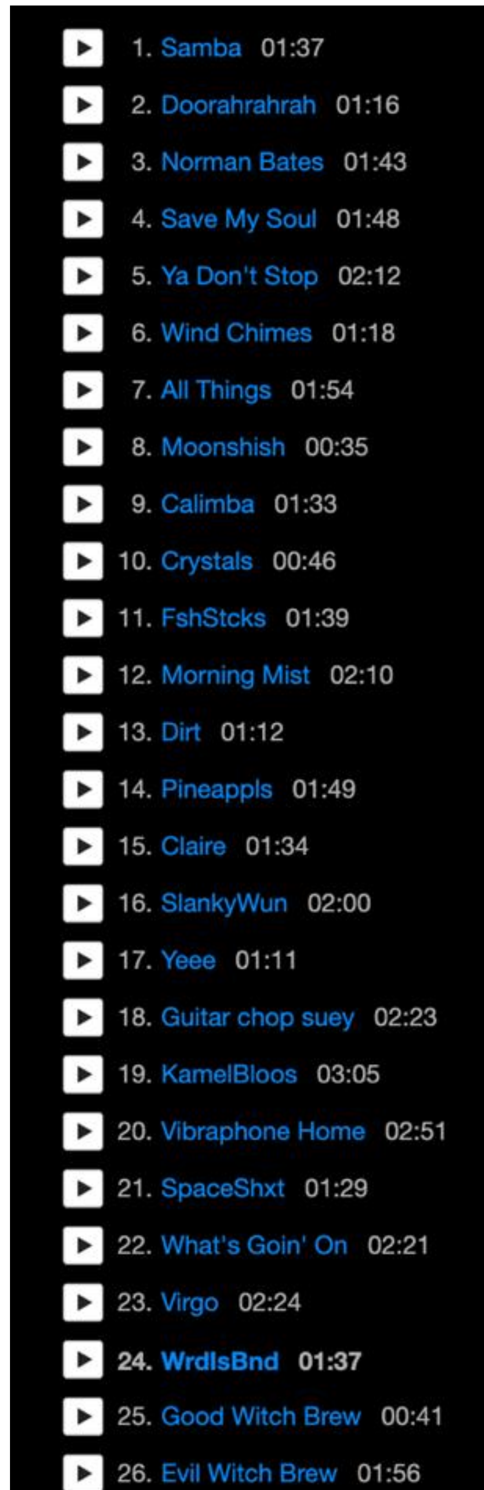
[303] The term "microwave beat" is a common saying among hip-hop producers and refers to a hip-hop beat that was created and finished quickly in the matter of a few minutes, akin to cooking a quick meal in a microwave. Although this term was not originally coined by J Dilla, this term was most likely brought into fruition by hip-hop producers when referring to how J Dilla would produce entire hip-hop beats within a span of just a few minutes, which impressed his fellow producers and other industry professionals. Bandcamp, The Deli, *Bumps Tape,* self-released, 2016.

The name itself contains a combination of two informal hip-hop terms used by many hip-hop producers, with the term “bump” referring to another name for a hip-hop beat and “tape” referring to a collection of beats. In this case, the term “tape” does not literally refer to a literal cassette mixtape but is rather used colloquially to refer to a loose collection of instrumental hip-hop beats.[304] This has become common among many hip-hop producers, referring to any form of instrumental compilation as a “tape,” and although these compilations are sometimes released onto a cassette tape format, this term is usually not used in the literal sense. The trend of naming beat tapes straightforward terms that directly refer to the sketch-like structure of these musical collections have become common and can be seen as early as J Dilla’s own early beat tapes, with names like one of his 1998 beat tapes being simply titled “Another Batch.”[305] The images in Figure 5.4 show the album cover and track list of The Deli’s *Bumps Tape*, found on the artist’s Bandcamp page.

[304] This falls in line with Jonathan Sterne’s “format theory,” in which the format of a recording may influence the “look, feel, experience, and workings of a medium.” In this case, the term tape is used to emphasize the rough analog aesthetic of old cassette tapes, even though the album itself is presented in a digital audio format. Jonathan Sterne, *MP3: The Meaning of a Format* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2012), 3.

[305] Though some of these beat tapes would have names or specific themes, such as his series of Motown-themed beat CDs from 2005, many names of these beat compilations were usually never given names, with names being added afterwards by fans who would spread the popularity of these compilations through either selling bootlegged tapes in person or by posting versions of them in various online platforms. J Dilla, “Jay Dee / Another Batch – 1998” (video of audio tracks), hosted by Pablo Ángel Zárate Pérez, posted April 2, 2017, accessed July 8, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YFQofYyFOSE.

5.4A: Album Cover of *Bumps Tape*



5.4B: Track List for *Bumps Tape*

Figure 5.4 - Album Art and Track List for *Bumps Tape*

The album itself contains twenty-six tracks, with average track lengths of about one to two minutes. This is a typical structure of many beat tapes both in online spaces and other various formats. In the case of *Bumps Tape*, as stated by The Deli, this release functions as a collection of instrumentals in which they may be interpreted as both a finished product and collection of compositions that could be built upon by other artists, similar to one of the original functions of beat tapes that were created by producers like J Dilla. In the comments left by fans who have purchased the album on the Bandcamp page, user Charlie Kedziora states that their favorite track on the album "Guitar Chop Suey," is enjoyed the most by them because this track "is so much fun to rap on." The flexible nature of lo-fi instrumental hip-hop tracks, in this case the tracks on The Deli's *Bumps Tape*, highlights one of the functions that instrumental hip-hop serves within wider hip-hop culture in that it is music that can be expanded upon by other artists as well as be appreciated on its own merit.

This was certainly the case with J Dilla in his original beat tapes, with artists both wishing to collaborate with Dilla by turning instrumental beats into full songs while also appreciating the artistic merit of the original instrumental tracks. This method by producers of releasing beat tapes has certainly continued and even thrived within lo-fi hip-hop communities online, with fans and artists alike listening, discussing, appreciating, and collaborating through lo-fi hip-hop beats.

This dichotomy of both a finished and unfinished musical composition is representative of Signifyin(g) within wider hip-hop music and culture. In Schloss's *Making Beats*, he discusses Signifyin(g) in relation to sampling in hip-hop production, stating that sampling is a form of Signifyin(g) in that it "allows producers to use other people's music to convey their own compositional ideas."[306] As stated in the introduction chapter, Caponi reiterates this idea described by Schloss, stating how musical forms of Signifyin(g) may show

[306] Schloss, 46.

"a way of demonstrating respect for, goading, or poking fun at a musical style, process, or practice through parody, pastische, implication, indirection, humor, tone- or word-play, the illusions of speech, or narration, and other troping mechanisms."[307] Within the context of lo-fi hip-hop communities, producers participate in the act of Signifyin(g) through various acts of sampling, musical borrowing, and other forms of musical reference. This includes musical references that refer to other genres outside of hip-hop (e.g. sampling jazz, funk, and soul) as well as references or other forms of musical borrowing within hip-hop, such as sampling rap "a capellas" or isolated vocals, using terms within titles such as "keeping it real" and "word is bond." In terms of how these Signifiers are expressed and interpreted, the reverence or irreverence expressed entirely depends on what is being signified, as well as who is being signified upon.[308] In *Bumps Tape,* for example, we can observe how signifiers such as rap a capellas are used throughout several tracks on the album and how The Deli similarly signifies upon specific tropes established by J Dilla, using these to Signify upon his reverence for various aspects of hip-hop culture.

Signifyin(g) with Rap A Capellas

Although J Dilla was not the first producer to implement rap vocals from other artists into his productions, he certainly had a significant influence in what is now a common trope among hip-hop production, both within and beyond the instrumental lo-fi subgenre.[309]

[307] Caponi, 141.
[308] Ibid.
[309] The use of rap vocals from other rappers occurred frequently during the "golden age" productions of the late 1980s and early 1990s, from the use of KRS-One's vocals on N.W.A.'s 1988 album *Straight Outta Compton* to various vocals originally by Chuck D on the Beastie Boy's 1989 album *Paul's Boutique.* "Egg Man," Spotify, track 4 on Beastie Boys, *Paul's Boutique,* Capitol Records, 1989. "Gangsta Gangsta," Spotify, track 3 on N.W.A., *Straight Outta Compton,* Priority Records, 1988.

Among hip-hop production communities, rap a capellas are incredibly useful as a tool for Signifyin(g) by building off earlier hip-hop compositions through remixing these a capellas in various ways. A capellas are sometimes used in instrumental hip-hop to Signify upon the listener by showing the producer's instrumental track alongside vocals of a rapper or singer. Although the vocals don't necessarily make it instrumental anymore, the vocals in these instances are being used as a production tool as opposed to the centerpiece of the production.

Within online lo-fi hip-hop beat-making communities, the a capellas used tend to be from artists of classic hip-hop from the 1990s, such as Wu-Tang Clan, A Tribe Called Quest, and Mobb Deep. These a capellas are almost always obtained by producers extralegally, either by receiving them through posts of rap a capellas on YouTube or through extracting the vocals from the original track using specialized audio software.[310] This has been a common technique in hip-hop production for decades. Within the context of J Dilla's discography, he would use specific phrases and lyrics from a variety of rappers, with a prime example of this explored in chapter two in his track "Make 'Em NV," in which a snippet of the vocals from M.O.P.'s "Ante Up" was used as the chorus of the track.[311]

On *Bumps Tape*, one of the most prominent uses of a rap a capella is on the track "Norman Bates," with the track's name referring to the repeated use of the vocals from rapper Ol' Dirty Bastard's 1995 single "Shimmy Shimmy Ya," stating: "I get psycho killer Norman Bates my producer slam, my flow is like bam."[312] The way in which The Deli uses this lyric

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[310] In this instance, I use the term "extralegal" to refer to the fact that although these vocals are almost always used without the permission of the original artist and thus breaking copyright, the creative process of beat-making usually involves using samples before copyright permission is given. In the case of online beat making culture this is especially true, as many aspiring producers desire to "flip" a sample or create beats through using other musical material regardless of legal permission.
[311] "Make 'em NV," Spotify, track 7 on J Dilla, *Ruff Draft,* Stones Throw Records, 2007. "Ante Up (Robbin' Hoodz Theory)," Spotify, track 4 on M.O.P., *Warriorz,* Loud Records, 2000.
[312] "Norman Bates," Bandcamp, track 3 on The Deli, *Bumps Tape,* self-released, 2016.
"Shimmy Shimmy Ya," Spotify, track 2 on Ol' Dirty Bastard, *Return to the 36 Chambers: The Dirty Version,* Elektra Records, 1995.

shows reverence for the late rapper, showing appreciation for the metaphor Ol' Dirty Bastard uses in comparing his own persona to the likes of serial killer Norman Bates from the famous 1960 horror film *Psycho.* In its original context, this phrase can be interpreted as both a metaphor of comparing himself to the horror film protagonist, a reference to the skills of his producer RZA, and the power of his own rapping skills or "flow."

Because of how Signifyin(g) typically functions within hip-hop culture, how this is recontextualized by The Deli can be narrowed down to several likely interpretations. One common interpretation is the significance of having the lyrics of a classic hip-hop artist used within the production. The use of this lyric also expresses a sense of irony and humor, juxtaposing hardcore rap lyrics with a jazz piano melody found within the instrumental part of the production. The second half of the phrase contains the lyric "my producer slam." In the original 1995 recording, this lyric refers to Wu-Tang Clan producer RZA, who produced many beats for almost all members of the rap group. Within the context of "Norman Bates," however, The Deli may be recontextualizing this phrase to refer to himself and his own production skills. This appropriation of lyrics is used as a form of boasting or bragging, an act which occurs frequently amongst rappers and their own lyrics, but can also occur amongst hip-hop producers, as discussed in the introduction chapter. In its essence, this use of Ol' Dirty Bastard's vocals is a form of double Signifyin(g), in which the Signifyin(g) performed by Ol' Dirty Bastard (in the use of metaphor within his lyrics) is then recontextualized and used to Signify by The Deli in "Norman Bates," using the "hall of mirrors" figure from chapter one, as shown in Figure 5.5.

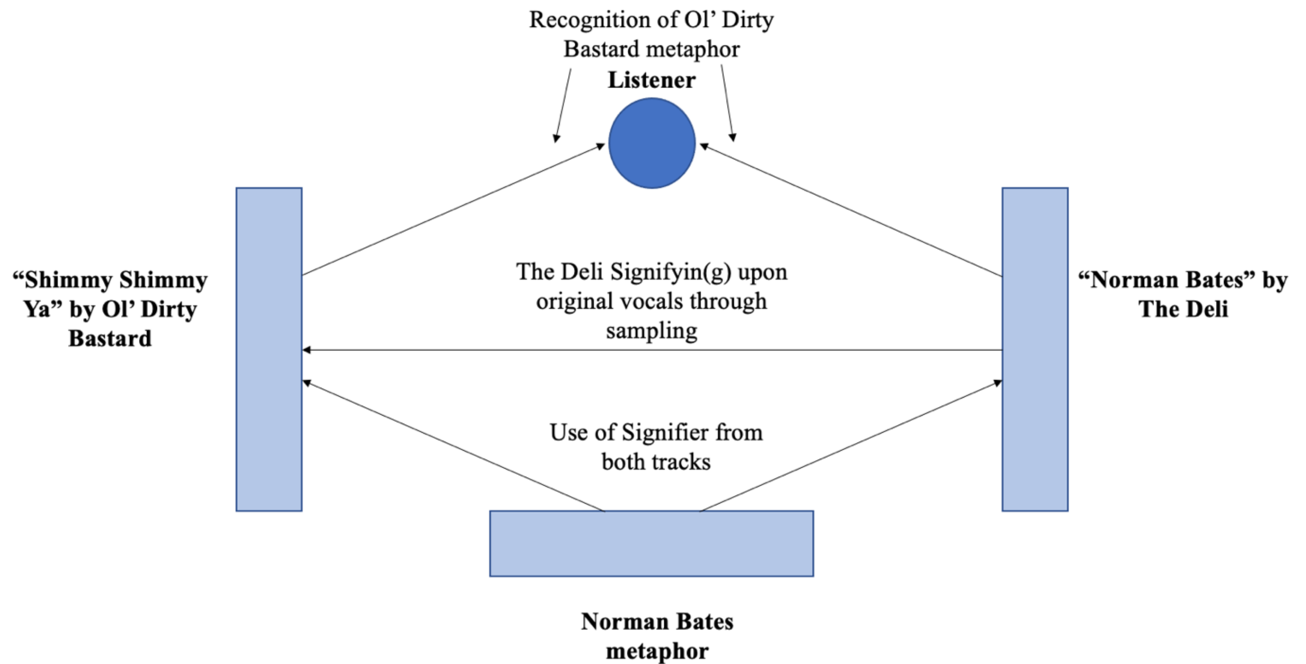

Figure 5.5 - Double Signifyin(g) From Ol' Dirty Bastard's lyrics in "Shimmy Shimmy Ya" to The Deli's "Norman Bates"

As stated earlier, J Dilla would also use specific phrases and lyrics from a variety of rappers. Whether it be the use of small segments of words or phrases such as the use of the beginning of Run-DMC's "Rock Box" in his 1995 production of The Pharcyde's "Runnin'" or the use of Busta Rhymes vocals in "Beat 14" off of his posthumous *King of the Beats* compilation, J Dilla would use these isolated vocals as acts of Signifyin(g) that represent his authenticity in understanding and revering the classic hip-hop canon, as well as using them creatively in new productions.[313] As mentioned in chapter three, J Dilla implemented this

[313] "Rock Box," Spotify, track 2 on Run-DMC, *Run-DMC (Expanded Edition),* Arista Records, 1984. "Runnin'," Spotify, track 2 on The Pharcyde, *Labcabincalifornia,* Delicious Vinyl, 1995. Busta Rhymes, unknown source.

similar technique his track “Make ‘Em NV.” Other examples include “Runnin’,” in which J Dilla simply uses the singular word “run” to add emphasis to the track’s theme and title, and “Beat 14,” in which he uses a recording of a live Busta Rhymes concert and uses the phrase “yo, this joint right here” to refer to the production of the track itself, using the vocal as a sort of boasting to the impressive characteristics of the production and own skills as a producer.

Vinyl Noise and Bit-Crushed Sounds

Another significant musical Signifier within lo-fi hip-hop production is the use of both analog and digital lo-fi sonic characteristics, either through the addition of vinyl noise (either from an actual analog vinyl source or through the implementation of various digital emulators of vinyl equipment) or through bit-crushing (in which the digital audio quality of the track is reduced). The thirteenth track on *Bumps Tape*, titled “Dirt,” is an example of the implementation of both methods, with a gratuitous amount of vinyl noise added throughout the track’s run time as well as a heavy amount of bit-crushed sonic distortions found within the sound quality of the synth sample.[314] The track’s title itself most likely refers to the “dirty” quality, in which its ending emphasizes this use of “dirty” characteristics even further with a massive crescendo of only significantly compressed vinyl noise.

Though the purpose of the implementation of vinyl noise or other distortions by many producers is to add authenticity by emulating analog or early digital audio, in this case The Deli heavily emphasizes these distortions to Signify to the listener either his reverence for these distortions or critique in the obsession that many lo-fi producers have by overemphasizing these sonic characteristics. As stated by producer j a r j a r j r earlier, the

[314] “Dirt,” Bandcamp, track 13 on The Deli, *Bumps Tape,* self-released, 2016.

addition of "six layers of vinyl noise" to some producers has become a cliché within current lo-fi hip-hop production, with The Deli's "Dirt" being a distinct example of this.

The use of heavy distortions, though implemented intentionally by a variety of early hip-hop producers, can be found throughout J Dilla's own discography, and can be seen as one of the many sonic influences his instrumental beats have had on current lo-fi hip-hop producers like The Deli. In this instance, the "troping of tropes" originally enacted by J Dilla in his own Signifyin(g) is interpreted as a trope of his own signature sound by producers like The Deli. Productions such as the opening of the Slum Village track "Untitled," as well as many of the tracks on *Donuts*, are prime examples of this implementation of distortions. The track "Airworks" off of *Donuts* uses distortions in a similar fashion to "Dirt," overemphasizing the crackle found from the original vinyl recording and even including a pause in the track itself, where the movement of the needle from the turntable is heard, revealing to the listener the analog nature of the sonic characteristics of the track's original sources of audio.[315]

Jazz Samples as Signifyin(g)

As stated earlier, the use of samples from jazz recordings have become ubiquitous in their usage and popularity throughout much of hip-hop production's history. This is especially true of instrumental lo-fi hip-hop production, where the implementation of soft jazz chords on a piano or guitar is intrinsic to the subgenre. Within The Deli's own production discography, many of his beats include a significant use of jazz samples, so much so that this has become an integral part of his signature sound.[316] On many of the tracks on *Bumps Tape*, this is especially the case, with samples of jazz recordings heard on almost

[315] "Airworks," Spotify, track 12 on J Dilla, *Donuts,* Stones Throw Records, 2006.
[316] One other example of this is The Deli's 2018 album *Jazz Cats*, in which the jazz aesthetic being embraced is much more explicit.

every track. Figure 5.6 shows a table listing the known jazz samples on selected tracks on *Bumps Tape.*[317]

Track Number and Name	Samples Used (Track, Artist, Album, Year)
8. Moonshish	"Solar Winds" The Oscar Peterson Quartet *Night Child* 1979
22. What's Goin' On	"What's Goin' On" Quincy Jones *Smackwater Jack* 1971 "Living Together Is Keeping Us Apart" Clarence Reid *Running Water* 1973
25. Good Witch Brew 26. Evil Witch Brew	"Magnum (Funk Band)" Witch Doctor's Brew *Fully Loaded* 1974

Figure 5.6 - Table of Known Jazz Samples on *Bumps Tape*[318]

The act of sampling jazz is referred to explicitly on the track "Guitar Chop Suey," with the term "chop suey" referencing the "chops" created by digitally chopping up the audio and rearranging the sample into a new melodic loop which can be used as the basis for a hip-

[317] Only a selected number of tracks are listed due to only a small number of the tracks' sample sources being known publicly. Tracks not listed were intentionally left out in order to avoid what many producers call "sample snitching," which is publicly identifying the sample source of a track which may lead to legal trouble if the original producer did not pursue proper licensing and approval to sample the original track. WhoSampled, "Bumps Tape," accessed February 2, 2022, https://www.whosampled.com/The-Deli/.
[318] "Moonshish," "What's Goin' On," "Good Witch Brew," and "Evil Witch Brew," Bandcamp, tracks 8, 22, 25, and 26 on The Deli, *Bumps Tape*, self-released, 2016. "Solar Winds," Spotify, track 1 on The Oscar Peterson Quartet, *Night Child,* Fantasy, 1979. "What's Goin' On?" Spotify, track 4 on Quincy Jones, *Smackwater Jack.* Verve, 1971. "Living Together Is Keeping Us Apart," Spotify, track 1 on Clarence Reid, *Running Water,* Henry Stone Music USA, 1973. "Witch Doctor's Brew," Spotify, track 5 on Magnum, *Fully Loaded,* Jamie Records, 1974.

hop beat. This production is noticeably similar in structure to the J Dilla-produced Q-Tip track "Let's Ride," which also features a guitar sample (whose source is a Joe Pass recording of John Coltrane's "Giant Steps") in tandem with a looped drum break.[319] Another significant example of The Deli's use of jazz samples is the track "WrdIsBnd."[320] This track infuses musical Signifiers by using both a jazz sample and a short phrase from an a capella vocal stating the common hip-hop phrase "word is bond." In this case, The Deli is Signifyin(g) upon tropes of hip-hop culture in conjunction with emulating jazz aesthetics using the piano sample.[321] Although this aesthetic was popularized by east-coast producers such as Pete Rock and DJ Premier, J Dilla was certainly an innovator in his use of jazz samples as a part of his own signature sound.[322] The use of jazz samples is not only used as a signifier for authenticity within hip-hop culture, but as a signifier of a reverence and appreciation for jazz as well. In his interview with Highlark magazine, The Deli states:

> One of my main influences is jazz. Growing up, my grandpa introduced me to tons of jazz: Herbie Hancock, Miles Davis, Coltrane, and that stuff. And that has really been a huge influence for my beats. As far as hip-hop producers and beatmakers that I look up to, J Dilla is probably my main one. I also like Pete Rock, FlyLo [Flying Lotus], Mndsgn**,** people like that.[323]

Jazz music as a cultural signifier is nothing new within hip-hop production and culture. Its appropriation within contemporary lo-fi hip-hop production, however, shows another side of this influence, with lo-fi hip-hop artists such as The Deli showing reverence for this genre, as

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[319] "Giant Steps," Spotify, track 1 on Joe Pass, *Virtuoso #2,* Pablo Records, 1976. "Let's Ride," Spotify, track 5 on Q-Tip, *Amplified,* Arista Records, 1999.
[320] "WrdIsBnd," Track 24 on The Deli, *Bumps Tape,* self-released, 2016.
[321] Some J Dilla instrumental productions which feature similar use of a jazz piano sample are "966" from the *Ma Dukes Collection* and "DD.007" from *J Dilla's Delights, Vol. 1.* "966," Spotify, track 8 on J Dilla, *Ma Dukes Collection,* Yancey Media Group, 2016. "DD.007," Spotify, track 7 on *J Dilla, J Dilla's Delights, Vol. 1,* Yancey Media Group, 2017.
[322] Several prominent contemporary jazz musicians, such as pianist Robert Glasper and Saxophonist Greg Osby, have made the argument that J Dilla should be considered as a significant figure within the canon of jazz artists and composers, among the likes of Miles Davis and John Coltrane. Giovanni Russonello, "Why J Dilla May Be Jazz's Latest Great Innovator," *NPR Music,* February 7, 2013, accessed May 7, 2020, https://www.npr.org/sections/ablogsupreme/2013/02/07/171349007/why-j-dilla-may-be-jazzs-latest-great-innovator?t=1540219501957.
[323] Peter Maroulis, "The Deli Offers You Unlimited Good Vibes: A Tribe Called Quest Meets Charlie Parker," *Highlark,* July 16, 2017, accessed March 8, 2020, https://highlark.com/the-deli-interview/.

well as the desire to build off these recordings in similar ways to that of J Dilla's methods for sampling jazz recordings. This could be interpreted as a new version of Justin Williams' description of jazz rap from the 1990s, with the appropriation of jazz idioms as a "strive for cultural legitimacy," with J Dilla's signature sound as a catalyst which led to these cultural signifiers to greatly influence the signifiers both within the music of The Deli and lo-fi hip-hop.[324] How these and other signifiers are built upon and shared by producers in online spaces (as online spaces are where lo-fi hip-hop culture is most prevalent) is worthy of discussion.

Lo-Fi Hip-Hop Culture on the Internet

Based on wide array of music genres and cultures that have appeared throughout various online spaces in the past twenty or so years, one could say that lo-fi hip-hop is just another internet music trend that has gained a substantial amount of popularity during the 2010s, overtaking that of internet genres like vaporwave and hypnagogic pop. Though lo-fi hip-hop certainly has aesthetic similarities to internet-based music genres like vaporwave, such as its focus on nostalgia and emulations of older music recordings and recording technologies, it differs from other "natively digital" music genres as discussed by Georgina Born and Christopher Haworth in that the genre has had roots and influences decades prior to the advent of the internet and internet music genres.[325] Although certain aspects of this genre

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[324] Williams, 136.
[325] Adam Harper defines vaporwave as an online music genre that is usually "made up of a single looping sample of smooth adult-contemporary pop or jazz produced in the newly digitized studios of the late twentieth century, or offers a close pastiche of it." It became increasingly popular throughout the 2010s, and according to Georgina Born and Christopher Haworth, "it reanimates a historical period or past; but with considerable irony, the 'past' that it resurrects is that of the late 1990s to the present—the 'digital age'." Georgina Born and Christopher Haworth, "From Microsound to Vaporwave: Internet-Mediated Musics, Online Methods, and Genre," *Music and Letters*, Vol. 98, no. 4, November 2017. 601-647, accessed February 19, 2020, https://doi.org/10.1093/ml/gcx095. Adam Harper, "Personal Take: Vaporwave is Dead, Long Live Vaporwave!" Nicholas Cook, Monique M. Ingalls, and David Trippett, eds. *The Cambridge Companion to Music in Digital Culture*, Cambridge Companions to Music (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 119-23. doi:10.1017/9781316676639.

have definitely had its fair share of both artists and fans alike "jumping on the bandwagon" of this trend, or as music journalist Danny Veekens puts it: "chillwagon,"[326] as well as the vast quantity of online memes both embracing as well as satirizing the culture of "lo-fi beats to relax/study to," the culture itself encompasses a much larger culture of hip-hop beat-making. As stated earlier, the term "lo-fi" itself refers to not only a genre but as a more general approach to production, with producers and listeners alike appreciating the imperfections of analog recordings. In many cases, this genre is also frequently enjoyed outside of the internet and within live music spaces, will be discussed in the final on live hip-hop beat performance using the Roland SP-404 sampler.

One of the appeals of lo-fi hip-hop is to fit into this underground culture as a form of alternative to the mainstream hip-hop of the 2010s, such as the trap production that has also grown exponentially in popularity worldwide. Characteristics such as the un-quantized drums found in much of lo-fi hip-hop production also contrast greatly from the rhythmically frantic and heavily quantized 808 drum sounds found in contemporary trap and mainstream hip-hop production. This appeal of lo-fi hip-hop as a sort of alternative to the heavy booming trap that has saturated much of mainstream hip-hop and popular music in general is like the appeal that "conscious rap" had during the early 2000s. In Jeff Chang's *Can't Stop Won't Stop*, he describes the average stereotypical listener of artists like Talib Kweli and The Roots as "college-educated, iPod-rocking, Northface backpacking, vegan, hip-hop fans."[327] One can see the characteristics of this demographic by how record labels like Chillhop and Inner Ocean Records market their artists and album releases. Inner Ocean's compilation *Bless, Vol. 2* features album art of several young producers in fashionable streetwear, surrounded by potted plants and holding their favorite music production equipment, as shown in the figure

[326] Veekens, Danny. "Coffee-Table Beats: The Worrying Rise of Mood Music." *The Find*, November 25, 2019, accessed March 16, 2020, https://thefindmag.com/music-recommendations/mood-music-instrumental-hip-hop-streaming/.
[327] Chang, 436.

below.[328] Throughout the album's runtime, a plethora of tracks are featured with all the similar lo-fi signifiers discussed previously.

Figure 5.7 – Image of *Bless, Vol. 2* Album Cover

Within the context of online music streaming and dissemination, lo-fi hip-hop in essence functions both as a genre as well as a descriptor that is helpful to producers, listeners, and various social media algorithms which can automatically organize playlists and mixes, as many genres and subgenres do in the political economy of online music streaming. This "genrefication" frequently occurs among popular music in online spaces and platforms, which helps as Timothy Taylor states "purveyors of various commodities to put them in their

[328] Spotify, *Bless, Vol. 2,* Various Artists, Inner Ocean Records, 2018.

place, rendering them easily accessible to potential consumers."[329] Lo-fi hip-hop in its current state on the internet, therefore, is a result of this genrefication and further fragmentation of genres of various musical styles, mainly in electronic music and hip-hop.

How Authenticity is Interpreted

So far, I have discussed "the listener" as an abstract concept without referencing examples of listeners. In this section I will be focusing on comments on YouTube to see what listeners and fans think of the musical signs that The Deli presents throughout the various tracks on *Bumps Tape.* The most popular version of this album found on YouTube is an unofficial posting of the album by user reprodcer.[330] This version, which has amassed over 40,000 views since its posting in 2017, features a lively and enthusiastic comment section with over 50 comments critiquing and discussing the album. Though these numbers pale in comparison to the views and comments gained by artists with larger followings, the questions and comments provided by commenters show insight as to how lo-fi hip-hop production trends and signs are interpreted, appreciated, or criticized by its community.

Some comments show appreciation for the posting of this album, with user Shane Crunk stating "Me, and many other really appreciate the respect you give the artist, thanks a ton for spreading his love and helping him get more attention!"[331] Many of the comments simply state the enjoyment they had from listening to the album, while a few comments express various criticisms. User Chris Olson comments: "Meh. Tired of the disoriented old

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[329] Timothy Taylor, *Music and Capitalism: A History of the Present* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2016), 165.

[330] It is unknown as to whether the posting of this album in full was permitted by its original artist, as well as if The Deli would approve of his music being posted extra-legally with many fans listening to this YouTube version without purchasing the original on Bandcamp. This is quite common among lo-fi hip-hop communities, with fans "bootlegging" instrumental beat compilations to YouTube or Soundcloud in the hopes of sharing music to a wider audience and providing the original artist with more exposure.

[331] Shane Crunk, "The Deli – Bumps Tape [beat tape]" (video of audio tracks), hosted by reproducer, posted January 26, 2017, accessed August 3, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZHxrV-IcG5w.

record sound thing like in the first track. Kinda played out in the whole lo-fi scene."[332] This comment is indicative of much of the criticisms faced by lo-fi hip-hop and its artists, in that many of these production trends and auditory Signifiers have become (to some listeners) overdone and played out, leading to what was originally conceived to be a sign of authenticity as now an example of "biting" and copying the same production style.

Though similar criticisms can be found among both fans and producers alike, from YouTube commenters to professional producers such as 9th Wonder, the lo-fi hip-hop community overall sees these Signifiers as core characteristics of the subgenre, with online forums like r/lofihiphop, the SP Forums subreddit, and a myriad of Facebook groups such as lofi.family all featuring discussion threads with topics pertaining to the skills and tools needed for individuals to produce instrumental hip-hop beats that contain similar sonic aesthetics to popular lo-fi hip-hop artists, such as The Deli, as well as more well-known and influential producers, such as J Dilla.

Conclusion

Throughout this chapter I have used The Deli's *Bumps Tape* as a case study for how contemporary lo-fi hip-hop beat tapes are structured and consumed in online spaces, as well as how J Dilla has influenced the musical Signifiers found within these compilations. This of course is not the only example of current lo-fi hip-hop, as a plethora of "beat tapes" can be found throughout various online music platforms by a myriad of artists and producers around the globe. Dutch producer Eevee's *beat tape* series, Canadian producer Bsd.u's *late night bumps* series, and Texas-based producer Emune's *Raw Flips* series of beat compilations are good examples of producers sharing productions through the informal aesthetic and structure

[332] Chris Olson, "The Deli – Bumps Tape [beat tape]" (video of audio tracks), hosted by reproducer, posted January 26, 2017, accessed August 3, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZHxrV-IcG5w.

that is associated with beat tapes. Based on the names of these compilations, it is apparent that this these straightforward titles are used to fit within this informal aesthetic. This does not, however, lead to the producers' fans or audiences to believe that these compilations are unfinished or incomplete.

Just like the beat tapes of J Dilla's creative output during the late 1990s and early 2000s, these compilations are seen as part of the culture and can be interpreted as both a rough sketch of a future composition as well as a finished production. The "raw" nature of these compilations share the same aesthetic popularized by J Dilla's beat tapes, which share similar names (*Another Batch* or *Beat CD*) and structures. The creation and dissemination of these tapes are all part of either a starting point for a larger composition or a finished composition unto itself. Because of artists like J Dilla, whose instrumental beat tapes were appreciated as their own works of art, the composition of a hip-hop beat is able to stand on its own, with producers making beats not only to receive various levels of capital (e.g. economic, cultural, social) but also due to their desire to participate in this art form.

Chapter 6

J Dilla's Signature Sound in Music Production and Lo-Fi Hip-Hop as a Culture Industry

As shown in the previous chapter, producers like The Deli may gain popularity and earn various forms of capital in online spaces using signifiers originally implemented by J Dilla. One of the ways in which producers can do this is through the placement of the music onto playlists, which are curated by major streaming platforms like Spotify and Apple Music. The parallel between the similar rising popularity of J Dilla's production discography as well as the rise of lo-fi hip-hop artists and labels then begs the question: is the rise in popularity in lo-fi hip-hop simply capitalizing off J Dilla's musical legacy and influence, or embracing J Dilla's production style as a sort of homage or as a source for creative expression?

Musicians have frequently adapted the various ways they market their music to the ever-changing landscape of online audiences of social media and online music platforms. This is especially the case with hip-hop producers, as how and where they share their productions can lead to collaborations with other artists as well as the possibility of a career in music production. In the previous chapter I discussed and analyzed the various musical characteristics found in lo-fi hip-hop and J Dilla's on the genre. In this chapter I will expand further on my analysis of these characteristics, albeit from a slightly different approach. Instead of a musical analysis, I will observe and analyze how these characteristics function as commodities within hip-hop beat-making culture online by looking at the characteristics of sample packs, type beats, and lo-fi hip-hop playlists, showing how the musical signifiers of J Dilla have been borrowed, reinterpreted, and commodified. I will also show how through this commodification, Afrodiasporic signifiers which are crucial to the act of Signifyin(g) are transformed into musical signs and separated from the original chain of Signifiers.

Music as Commodity

As industrial capitalism has shaped the political economy of nations over the past two centuries, so too has the mechanization of musical instruments and the frameworks of both playing and listening, transforming music into a commodity to be consumed. According to Timothy Taylor:

> music is never simply a commodity or, rather, it is never a commodity in a simple way. It is made into a commodity by a variety of processes that are dependent on its social uses, its industrial production, its brokering in the broadest sense, including marketing, advertising, and other practices that are part of the infrastructure of consumer capitalist cultures.[333]

It is through this transformation into commodity that has turned all culture related to music (as well as other forms of mass entertainment and media) into what Adorno calls the "culture industry,"[334] in which mass entertainment like popular music is disseminated and used to manipulate mass society into "passivity." To create this passivity, however, the music industry heavily relies on the borrowing of sounds that may already be familiar to a wide audience. This may be sounds from a genre or artist that is already popular, or, in the case of music producers, from a signature sound that has been proven to be popular.

According to Will Straw: "from the perspective of the consumer, the musical commodity offers the possibility of repeating, at will, a prior experience already judged desirable."[335] The familiarity associated with musical commodities may fade in popularity, however, as repeat listening by consumers may lead them to seek other sounds from other artists.[336] This then creates a contradiction between finding something novel for the music

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[333] Taylor, "The Commodification of Music at the Dawn of the Era of 'Mechanical Music'," *Ethnomusicology* 51, no. 2 (2007): 281-305.
[334] Theodor W. Adorno, *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture* (New York and London: Routledge, 1991), 45.
[335] Will Straw, "Music as Commodity and Material Culture," *Repercussions* 7 & 8, 2000, 162.
[336] This applies both to specific artists and their relevant genres, as their associated genre is usually used as part of the marketing for their music. As stated by Charles Kronengold: "genres are good at making you care," meaning that what genre an artist is associated with may attract or repel listeners from specific backgrounds or demographics. Charles Kronengold, *Living Genres in Late Modernity: American Music of the Long 1970s* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2022), 2.

industry to capitalize on while also finding sounds that are familiar and comfortable to a wide audience.[337] It is also stated by Straw that although "cultural industries seek to establish predictable levels of consumption, long-term loyalty towards specific unique products is meaningless for the cultural industries and a principal cause of the unpredictability they face."[338] This means that for the culture industry to maintain popularity and profit, new artists with unique sounds are introduced, disseminated, and exploited. Within an artist's musical stylings, a producer's signature sound may be further exploited and spread among other producers to appeal to its novelty and growing popularity.

The Musical Borrowing of Signature Sounds

When discussing how one's signature sound may be exploited or commodified, it may be difficult to pinpoint especially what musical or extramusical material is being used and borrowed, especially in relation to the specific timbral qualities that a producer may create. As discussed in the introductory chapter, the "signature sound" is defined by Zagorski-Thomas as all the unique musical characteristics which make up a producer's musical stylings found throughout his productions. These musical characteristics may go beyond only melodic or harmonic qualities, however. According to David Brackett in his book *Categorizing Sound*, as musical recordings became more popular throughout the first half of the twentieth century, an emphasis was put more on what he calls the "sonic aesthetic" as opposed to the Western art idea of the work concept. [339] In this sonic aesthetic, specific timbral qualities are more central to the characteristics of the recording. Other scholars such

[337] This may also be seen as one of the many contradictions created both culturally and economically by capitalism, in that the reification or fetishization of commodities require simultaneously new and familiar forms to maximize perceived use and exchange values. Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy. Vol. 1,* translated by Ben Fowdon (London: Penguin, 1990), 336.
[338] Ibid, 159.
[339] Brackett, *Categorizing Sound,* 134.

as Albin Zak,[340] Theodore Gracyk,[341] and Simon Zagorski-Thomas[342] have stated similar ideas on the aesthetics of musical recordings. The timbral qualities of a recording may be significantly more varied than what could be written into sheet music, with Brackett stating that it "could not communicate subtle timbral differences, let alone the micro-rhythmic nuances responsible for different grooves …or the pitch inflections that enliven melodies with otherwise-limited pitch content."[343] Musical characteristics such as "micro-rhythmic nuances," "pitch inflections," and other aspects specifically related to production such as mixing, filtering, and compression are crucial to the construction of a producer's signature sound.

The transcriptions in the previous chapters, for example, may show similarities in rhythmic, harmonic, and melodic content, but avoid accurately portraying other timbral and micro-rhythmic characteristics, such as the background noise present throughout both recordings, as well as the micro-rhythmic discrepancies found in the un-quantized drum patterns. Though Brackett's statement originally referred to performers, this is also relevant to producers.[344] I would argue, however, that the sonic aesthetics of any musical recording may also be composed of various musical characteristics, or in the case of Afrodiasporic music, the act of Signifyin(g).

In referring to the concept of Signifyin(g), the various musical characteristics, in all their infinite nuances in relation to the possibilities of production of a musical recording, may be used by a producer to Signify. Though I have focused mainly on aspects of Signifyin(g) in relation to melodic or rhythmic characteristics, other aspects of a recording's sonic aesthetic may also be used. Characteristics like dynamic compression, added noise, or other distortions

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[340] Albin Zak, *The Poetics of Rock: Cutting Tracks, Making Records,* Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001.
[341] Theodore Gracyk, *Rhythm and Noise: An Aesthetics of Rock*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996.
[342] Zagorski-Thomas, 35.
[343] Brackett, *Categorizing Sound,* 134.
[344] Zagorski-Thomas, 78.

may be used by a producer. These characteristics therefore may also be used to Signify upon various production tropes by showing their own uniqueness, authenticity, or virtuosity, depending on who and what musical material is being presented. In the case of timbre, identifying Signifiers in relation to a producer's signature sound and their transformation into commodities becomes significantly more complex.

Through the transformation and further commodification of these characteristics, however, the musical signifiers originally present may be distilled and further disseminated, turning the original signifier into a musical sign. As observed and analyzed in the first half of this dissertation as well as the previous chapter on lo-fi hip-hop signifiers, many of which are like J Dilla's sound (un-quantized drum patterns, unique sampling techniques, various implementation of synthesizers, and experimentation with genre) can be found within the culture of contemporary hip-hop production. One of the ways in which these signifiers are transformed into commodities is through the online market of sample packs: pre-made sound packs created by a producer to be sold and purchased by another producer.

Sample Packs as Sources of Influence

A wide variety of sources and material exist online for aspiring producers to get started making beats. Due to massive advancements in sampling and music production technology in the past twenty years, the financial barrier for aspiring producers is significantly lower than it was during the 1980s or 1990s. Now, instead of requiring an Akai Professional MPC or E-Mu SP-1200 for production which can cost up to thousands of dollars, aspiring beat makers can find cheap or free digital audio workstations for use on PC or Macintosh, as well as a variety of smart phone applications. Many of these digital audio workstations and applications are even able to emulate sounds and textures of older sampling hardware, which gives users the ability to create low-fidelity characteristics (such as

compression and vinyl simulation) within their productions. Many fans of J Dilla who admire the unique musical signifiers found within his signature sound may wish to emulate said sounds in their own hip-hop productions, and because of the relative ease and variety of options available for producing beats, many of them are able to do so, with many producers using samples originally used by J Dilla as a starting-off point for learning hip-hop production. As Taylor states in *Music and Capitalism*: "The possibilities of making music digitally are as ubiquitous as the possibilities of hearing it."[345] From simple iPhone applications such as iMPC to much more complex and expensive software like Pro Tools, any user may be able, with enough knowledge, to recreate the un-quantized drum patterns, chopped samples, or melodic basslines that J Dilla was known for.

In the process of recreating these sounds, producers may either attempt to do so through acoustic means (such as performing and recording an un-quantized drum pattern on an acoustic drum set) or using digital sampling, with many producers sampling J Dilla's drum sounds and patterns or attempting to emulate or recreate drum sounds with similar timbres. J Dilla's frequent use of jazz samples may also be either Signified upon in various ways, as seen in the previous chapter in the music of The Deli. In this process, producers will, for example, look to using jazz samples that J Dilla also sampled from, such as Bill Evans, Herbie Hancock, or Ahmad Jamal. How many producers discover and use samples today as opposed to during J Dilla's career years prior differs greatly in that many producers use online resources as opposed to going to brick-and-mortar music stores and "crate digging" for vinyl records. Where producers find sources for sounds has shifted drastically in recent years, however, with many turning to sample packs.

The ease in which producers can find samples online from sources such as YouTube have led many to stick mainly to either acquire samples extra-legally by using music

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[345] Taylor, *Music and Capitalism,* 249.

streaming sites or legally through sample aggregate websites, such as Tracklib, Loopmasters, and Splice. With websites like Splice, for example, users can access a wide variety of royalty-free samples created mainly by professional producers and sound designers through a monthly payment subscription. Users can even download sample packs based on specific producers. The "Fantastic Sounds of Jay Dee AKA J Dilla" sample pack, for example, features several hundred drum sounds and samples originally used by J Dilla throughout his career. This pack has even received official approval by the James DeWitt Yancey Estate and J Dilla's mother Maureen "Ma Dukes" Yancey, with proceeds made by downloads of the sample pack going to the James DeWitt Yancey Foundation.

These sample packs contain sounds that not only reflect the musical characteristics of their respective subgenres, but also the signature sounds of the producers' names. In the J Dilla pack we have short and heavily accented percussion sounds which represent, as advertised by the pack's description, his "original sounds." For only a monthly subscription, instead of attempting to emulate various aspects of the musical characteristics of these producers, users of Splice can legally use these sounds in their own tracks. In this instance, the acts of Signifyin(g) which were originally enacted by these producers in their tracks are commodified and subsequently transformed from a musical signifier in the afrodiasporic sense to a musical sign which represents the original signifier.

In the informational video about the sample pack on Splice's YouTube channel, there are several criticisms by fans, with one comment by user Greg C stating "please don't call me a hater, but come on enough already, [stop] making money off his [J Dilla's] name let the man rest, stop milking it."[346] Though the concern of "making money" from this sample pack

[346] Greg C, "Jay Dee (aka J Dilla)'s sounds explored by mother Ma Dukes & 88-keys" (comment on video), hosted by Splice, posted November 5, 2018, accessed February 19, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R5DWLpWpeag.

may be misguided, a concern for authenticity is also expressed here, with this commenter wishing for the legacy of J Dilla to be respected and for other fans to "stop milking it." This concern by producers or fans for drum sounds as signifiers of their own authenticity has been a topic of debate for decades. In *Making Beats*, for example, Schloss explains how compilation vinyl records which featured a variety of well-known drum breaks, known as the *Ultimate Breaks & Beats* series, have been a popular source for aspiring DJs and producers who wish to own and sample these drum sounds since the late 1980s.[347] These compilation albums have received both praise for their convenience and criticism, with some producers viewing *Ultimate Breaks* as a shortcut that avoids the work of "digging in the crates" and therefore circumvents the skill and labor once required in order to find unique samples and create one's own signature sound. One can see, however, that the commodification of musical signifiers, from the *Ultimate Breaks* vinyl series to the "Fantastic Sounds" sample pack, has been present for almost as long as hip-hop beat-making culture itself, with various markets and modes of capitalist exchange evolving around the creative process of hip-hop production. This both includes the exchange of commodified sounds such as sample packs and the creation of similar-sounding productions created by aspiring hip-hop producers, known as "type beats."

Type Beats

This concern for authenticity has evolved substantially within hip-hop beat-making both on and off the internet, with many producers going as far as not only copying other producer's styles but even explicitly labelling these productions as "type beats" (e.g. "J Dilla Type Beat" or "Madlib Type Beat") in order to maximize chances of their productions being listened to on music platforms such as YouTube and Soundcloud. This has also risen in

[347] Schloss, 85.

popularity among music platforms such as Beat Port and DatPiff, acting as marketplaces for rappers to purchase beats, usually for a flat fee. Because these tracks contain the names of more well-known producers, search engine algorithms will be more likely include them in their top search results, allowing the producer to gain a higher chance of more listens and a possible collaboration with rappers looking for producers to work with. Though these "type beats" tend to be more popular among trap producers, with many of these tracks labeled as "Metro Boomin' Type Beat" or "Zaytoven Type Beat,"[348] J Dilla's name is not immune to this trend, with a plethora of producers labelling their own productions as "J Dilla type beats" to appeal to rappers looking for productions that emulate J Dilla's signature sound. Though this trend of type beats is potentially representative of producers biting the styles of J Dilla by directly and explicitly, other musical characteristics originally popularized by him have become so ubiquitous among lo-fi hip-hop that calling any type of influence as "biting" becomes difficult to justify.

Though the sheer number of J Dilla type beats found on websites mentioned earlier are substantial, let us look at one example: the instrumental track "simpleneeds" by juno.[349] An emulation of the main musical signifiers can be found in the track, with the un-quantized drums, jazz chords, and bassline present. These aspects of his signature sound tend to be present in most of the J Dilla type beats found on searches through websites like YouTube, with many of the productions featuring musical characteristics such as the use of un-quantized drums, consistent use of jazz samples, and melodic basslines. The signifiers found in "simpleneeds" most closely resemble the track "Everytime," produced by J Dilla in

[348] Matthew T. Phillips, "Soundcloud Rap and Alien Creativity: Transforming Rap and Popular Music through Mumble Rap," *Journal of Popular Music Studies* Vol. 33 no. 3, 2021. 125–144, accessed March 14, 2022, https://online.ucpress.edu/jpms/article/33/3/125/118552/Soundcloud-Rap-and-Alien-CreativityTransforming.
[349] juno, "simpleneeds. | J Dilla type beat" (video of audio track), hosted by juno, posted September 25, 2021, accessed June 8, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tZ9_OojFR8I.

1998.[350] The transcriptions in Figure 6.1 on the following page show the melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic similarities.

6.1A

6.1B

Figure 6.1A&B: Transcriptions of "Everytime" 0:24-0:36 and "simpleneeds" 0:00-0:11

Beyond having the same tempo and key signature, the two tracks have other several striking similarities. Both tracks contain a single sustained synthesizer note, with other melodic instruments (the other synthesizer in "Everytime" and the guitar in "simpleneeds,"

[350] "Everytime (Instrumental)," Spotify, track 11 on J Dilla and Illa J, *Yancey Boys (Instrumentals),* Delicious Vinyl, 2009.

and the bass parts in both tracks) acting as countermelodic material against the ostinato. Both bass melodies are performed sporadically with each part of the melodies containing a sizable number of rests between groups of eighth and sixteenth notes. Finally, both the drum patterns contain an emphasis on the weak beats with the snare sounds, as well as support for the bass lines with the syncopated kick drum occurring before beat four of each measure.

Once a track such as this has been created and posted by a producer such as juno, it enters a market which features a web of exchange between producers and rappers who wish to record and perform using the signature sound of producers such as J Dilla. These beats also may be released as instrumentals themselves to receive placement onto streaming platforms such as Spotify, Apple Music, or YouTube.

Sources for Dissemination

For many producers, the importance of placement onto Spotify playlists or YouTube livestreams cannot be understated. For a sizable number of producers, these playlist placements may be a substantial percentage of their income, as popular playlists like the "Lo-Fi Beats" Playlist curated by Spotify staff and lead to tracks receiving millions of listens, giving the producer up to thousands of dollars in revenue. The diagram in Figure 6.2 below shows the relationships between online media platforms, producers, and listeners, and how these three figures generally interact with one another online.

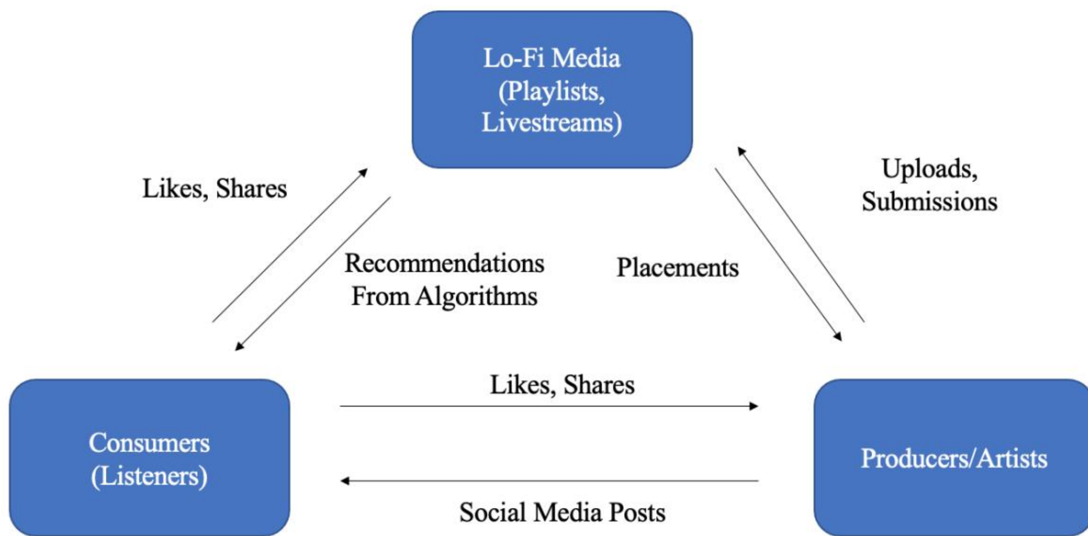

Figure 6.2 - Diagram of Mutual Relationships in Hip-Hop Media Online

Because of this desire to gain placement onto these playlists, many producers design tracks to specifically fit the lo-fi sonic aesthetic with common musical characteristics mentioned earlier, such as added vinyl noise, jazz piano samples, and un-quantized drums. This then creates a need for the producer, if they desire to gain any amount of capital on their music, to produce tracks that specifically fit these characteristics. This pressure to create music that fits a specific genre that is popular amongst a demographic that is then financially beneficial to the artist is discussed by Taylor in *Music and Capitalism*, where he observes the issues that many commercial musicians face of creating music that is both artistically satisfying as well as profitable.[351] Many producers in lo-fi hip-hop spaces online face similar issues, especially ones who are full-time professional producers.[352] How they are able to fit

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[351] Taylor, *Music and Capitalism,* 159.

[352] Based on my own experience as a lo-fi hip-hop producer, as well as the many experiences I have had with other producers both online and in person over the past several years, I am happy to say that many of these artists are able to find a balance between artistic integrity and financial comfort. Many of these producers, after

within these paradigms, however, is heavily dependent on what kinds of sounds they use in their tracks in order to fit the appropriate sonic aesthetics. How hip-hop producers use various sample packs may go beyond just using the original music signifiers in their own productions, however.

In many ways, J Dilla's music, through the commodification of productions from his original discography or lo-fi hip-hop beats with similar musical characteristics, have become a soundtrack for younger generations struggling through various aspects of neoliberal capitalism.[353] From increased working hours to the ever-present social pressures of "hustle culture" that encourages young adults joining the workforce to maintain an almost constant state of productivity, many individuals that are involved in this culture use lo-fi beats as a source for relaxation while they are working or studying.[354] In this instance, a prime example of what would be the ideal listener for lo-fi hip-hop playlists would be most likely a younger adult (late teens or twenties) working either on their studies for university or in a service job.

The lack of lyrics, fairly consonant melodies and harmonies, and consistent tempo (usually around 70 to 80 beats per minute) makes up a lot of what makes this music so appealing to listeners wishing to focus on studying and schoolwork, as it provides the listener with a steady pulse and a lack of any distracting or unorthodox musical characteristics, as discussed by Winston and Saywood with "many listeners certainly appear to use the channel explicitly as a tool for self-regulation to increase productivity" while also expressing in the comments of various live streams an "impersonal compliance in preparation for a continuously intensifying labor market."[355] This use of music as a source of productivity, also

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all, are not completely reliant on music streaming revenue for income and have other various professions while producing either as a hobby or a "side gig."

[353] Laurence Saywood and Emma Winston, "Beats to Relax/Study To: Contradiction and Paradox in Lofi Hip Hop," *IASPM Journal*. Vol. 9, no. 2, www.iaspmjournal.net, 2019, accessed February 20, 2020, https://iaspmjournal.net/index.php/IASPM_Journal/article/view/949/pdf_1,48.

[354] Saywood and Winston, 49.

[355] Saywood and Winston, 49.

discussed by Winston and Saywood, contains several paradoxes in its consumption by listeners. One of these paradoxes include how much of this music functions as a representative of the "erosion of boundaries between work and leisure characteristic of late capitalism." [356] Although the function of many of these playlists is to calm and relax the listener, in many cases the music is used to support the constant productivity of its audience, many of which are university students.[357] Another aspect of this growing trend is, according to Krims in *Music and Geography*, is the increase in urbanization among the post-Fordist, post-industrial workforce, as many members of younger generations are moving to cities for better job opportunities or to study at major universities, experiencing intense working and studying hours.[358]

Because how these playlists function, many listeners may not know the names of producers and artists who create and submit to many of these playlists, and although names of producers and track names are usually included especially in platforms like Spotify and Apple music, many listeners will hear track after track while paying little attention to the artists who produced them in the first place. This then creates another contradiction, with many producers hoping to have their beats featured on these playlists in order to gain some amount of either financial or social capital, while the consumers of said playlists actually paying little attention to the artists themselves.[359] In this case, individual tracks then function as disposable background noise, and because of the substantial amount of tracks being produced and submitted to playlists by artists around the world, a constant wave of new beats will be featured, many of which will be heard only once by listeners, then never to be listened

[356] Ibid.

[357] It should be noted that many listeners do use these playlists solely for relaxation or in combination with other leisure activities, with many of the names of these playlists including "beats for gaming" in their titles, implying the listener may also use playlists while also playing video games.

[358] Krims, *Music and Urban Geography* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 19-27.

[359] Ways in which producers can profit from this online are mainly either from ad revenue from streaming services such as Spotify or Apple music, or through selling music and merchandise through online music stores like Bandcamp.

to by individual listeners again. This is especially the case in the twenty-four-hour live streams on YouTube, where a constant amount of new material and tracks are uploaded and played, with very little if any tracks repeated. The disposability of these tracks, I should clarify, are not necessarily a criticism of the genre or genre playlists, as many consumers and producers alike understand this, based on my own experience participating in these livestreams both as a listener as well as an artist.

Lo-Fi Hip-Hop Labels and Wider Beat-Making Communities

Expanding on the previous chapter focusing on the musical characteristics of lo-fi hip-hop and J Dilla's influences, this section will elaborate on how J Dilla's signifiers are disseminated and further signified upon by other producers. As the subgenre of lo-fi hip-hop has gained popularity in the last decade, a plethora of online labels, collectives, and communities have formed in the past several years, such as the Dutch record label Chillhop Records and Canadian label Inner Ocean. Many of these organizations seek to foster collaboration between producers as well as provide online platforms for aspiring artists who make beats of similar characteristics. Although these groups function similarly to independent labels and communities from other popular music genres and subgenres, it has only been in the past decade that these communities have come to fruition to create and share specifically tracks that reflect the aesthetics and sounds of lo-fi hip-hop. This popularity of lo-fi hip-hop has been supported mainly through the growth of playlists found on major streaming services such as Spotify, Apple Music, and YouTube, with record labels acting as user curators for these playlists.[360] The diagram in Figure 6.3 on the next page shows the

[360] Though YouTube is technically a website for viewing video content, much of the content available is also used for audio streaming as well, with YouTube itself releasing a YouTube Music application specifically for streaming music.

general relationships these labels have with posting and curating playlists on online media platforms, especially since the rise in popularity of online streaming platforms.

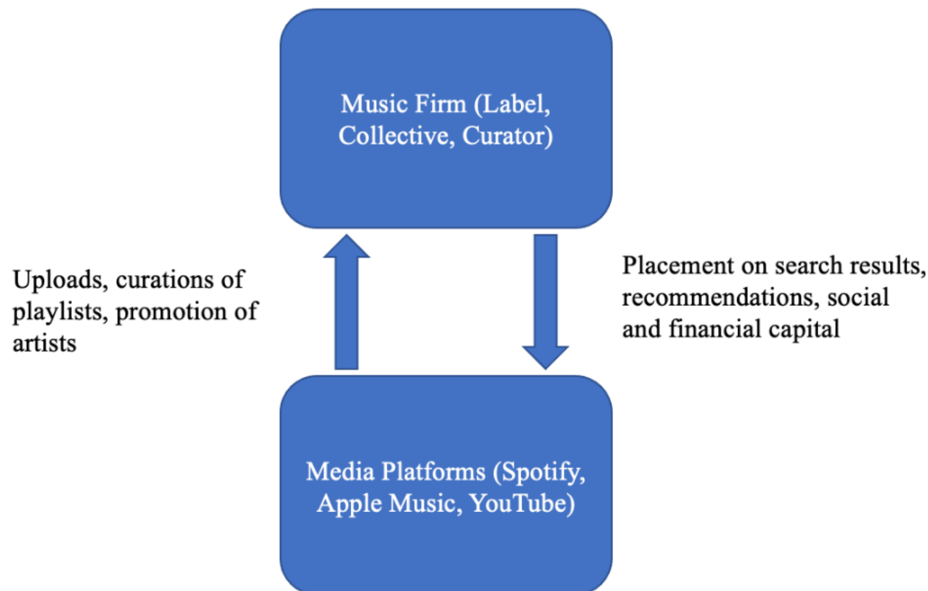


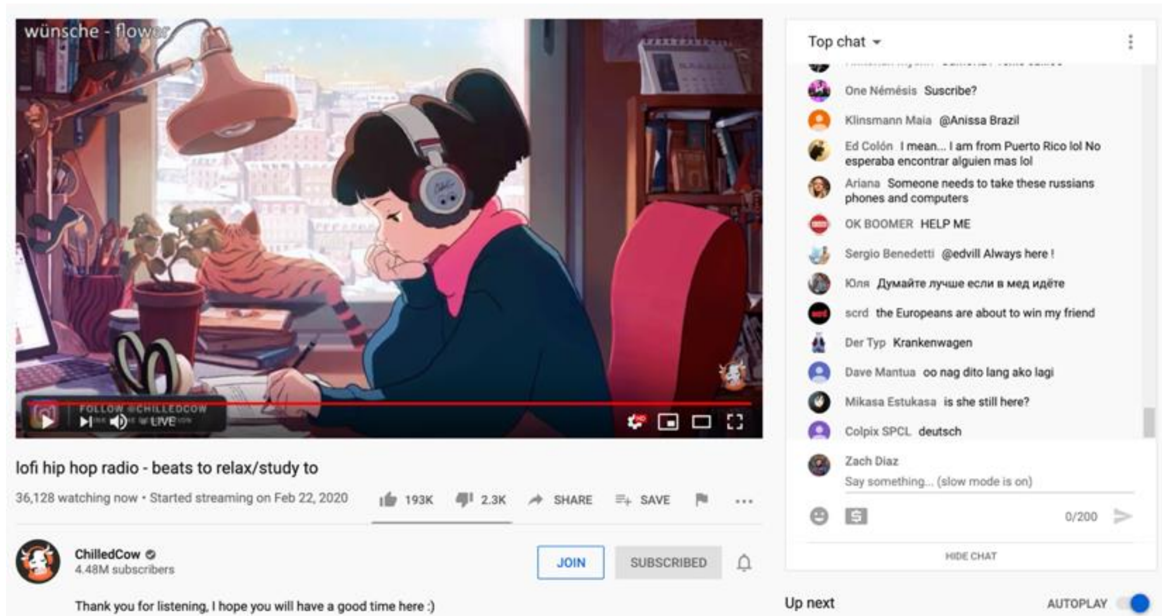
Figure 6.3 - Relationship Between Labels and Media Platforms

What ties the music released by these labels is much of the music's function as "beats to relax/study to." Many of these playlists, whether on Spotify or as livestreams on YouTube, function mostly as background music for listeners to work and focus, as the consistent tempos and soft jazz chords have even been proven in recent studies to help productivity.[361] The images below show the 24-hour livestream from the YouTube channel ChilledCow, as well as the main page for the official Spotify playlist titled "Lo-Fi Beats."[362] These major playlists are created mainly through human creation by Spotify staff. Discussed by

[361] Timothy J. Seppala, "The science behind the 'beats to study to' craze," *Engadget,* published August 23, 2018, accessed July 23, 2018, https://www.engadget.com/2018/07/23/the-science-behind-beats-to-study-to/.
[362] K.E. Goldschmitt and Nick Seaver, "Shaping the Stream: Techniques and Troubles of Algorithmic Recommendation" and Ben Sinclair, "Personal Take: Being a Curator," Cook, Nicholas, Monique M. Ingalls, and David Trippett, eds. *The Cambridge Companion to Music in Digital Culture*. Cambridge Companions to Music (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 63-80, doi:10.1017/9781316676639.

Goldschmitt and Seaver, many of these playlists are created using a hybrid of algorithmic and human interaction.[363] ChilledCow, with approximately four and a half million subscribers, maintains a listenership in the tens of thousands, with plenty of listeners chiming in on their thoughts on the beats being played in the livestream in the “live chat” section to the right. The “Lo-Fi Beats” playlist on Spotify shows 2.6 million followers, with featured artists from the Los Angeles beat scene like Mndsgn and German-based producers Wun Two and goosetaf, as seen in Figure 6.4 on the following page.

[363] Ibid.



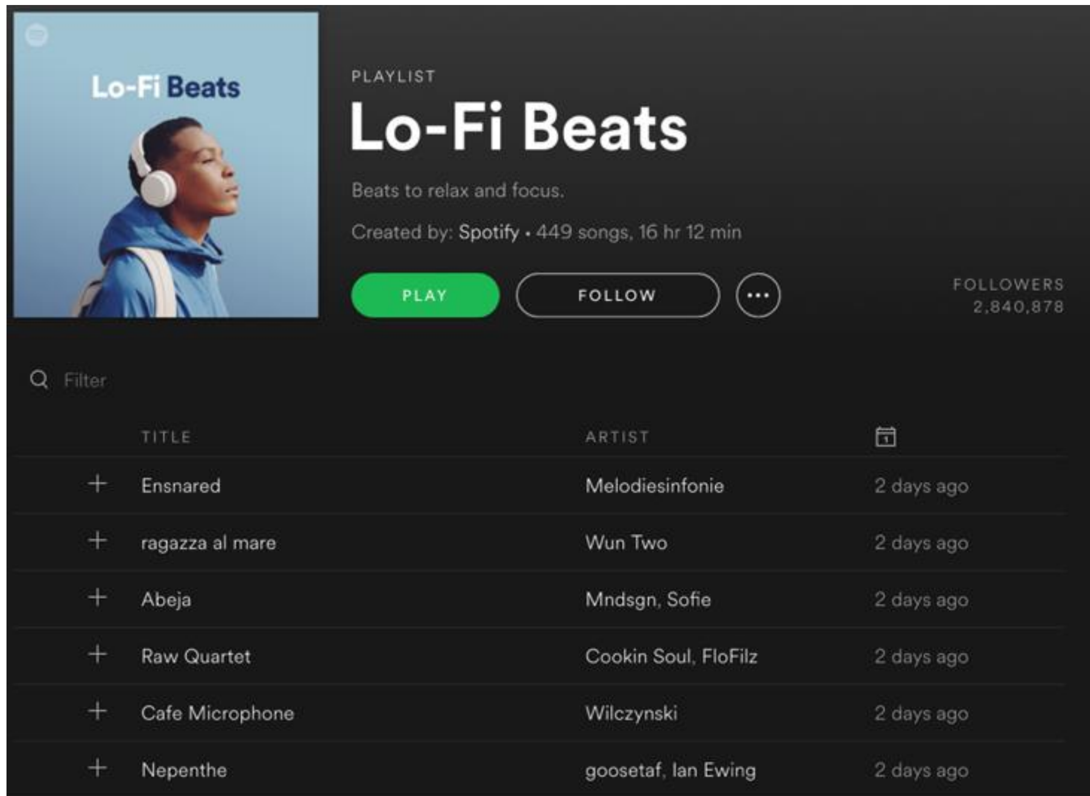


Figure 6.4 - ChilledCow "lo-fi beats to relax/study to" livestream on YouTube and "Lo-Fi Beats" playlist on Spotify[364]

[364] Chilled Cow, "lofi hip hop radio – beats to relax/study to" (video of livestream), hosted by ChilledCow, posted February 22, 2020, accessed July 5, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jfKfPfyJRdk. "Lo-Fi

Another aspect and what is arguably the most important characteristic of this music is the striking similarity it has to J Dilla's productions. As mentioned earlier in the description of the production of "Life," many of these instrumental beats feature similar musical characteristics, such as loose un-quantized drum patterns, heavy noise such as vinyl crackle or rain sounds, and soft jazz chords from a guitar, synthesizer, or piano. Just as east-coast rap groups like Digable Planets and A Tribe Called Quest used sonic signifiers of jazz in order to achieve more "cultural legitimacy," so too do lo-fi hip-hop producers in borrowing the signifiers of J Dilla.[365] It is important to point out that J Dilla's instrumental beats have also simultaneously become popular as "study beats" in recent years, with a sizable amount of his productions appearing on YouTube as "homework edits": hour-long repeated loops of specific excerpts of instrumental versions from J Dilla's discography.[366] The images below show two mixes posted on YouTube, with the first consisting of instrumentals of various productions by J Dilla from across his discography, and the second of an hour-long "homework edit" of his track "Waves" from *Donuts*.

Beats," Spotify, March 8, 2020, accessed March 9, 2021, https://open.spotify.com/playlist/37i9dQZF1DWWQRwui0ExPn?si=572e58b3af034ade.

[365] Williams, 56.

[366] Yancey, "J Dilla – Thought U Wuz Nice [Instrumental] – Homework Edit" (video of audio track), hosted by Darth Dani., posted March 15, 2015, accessed November 19, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q_zxt1dcSzU.

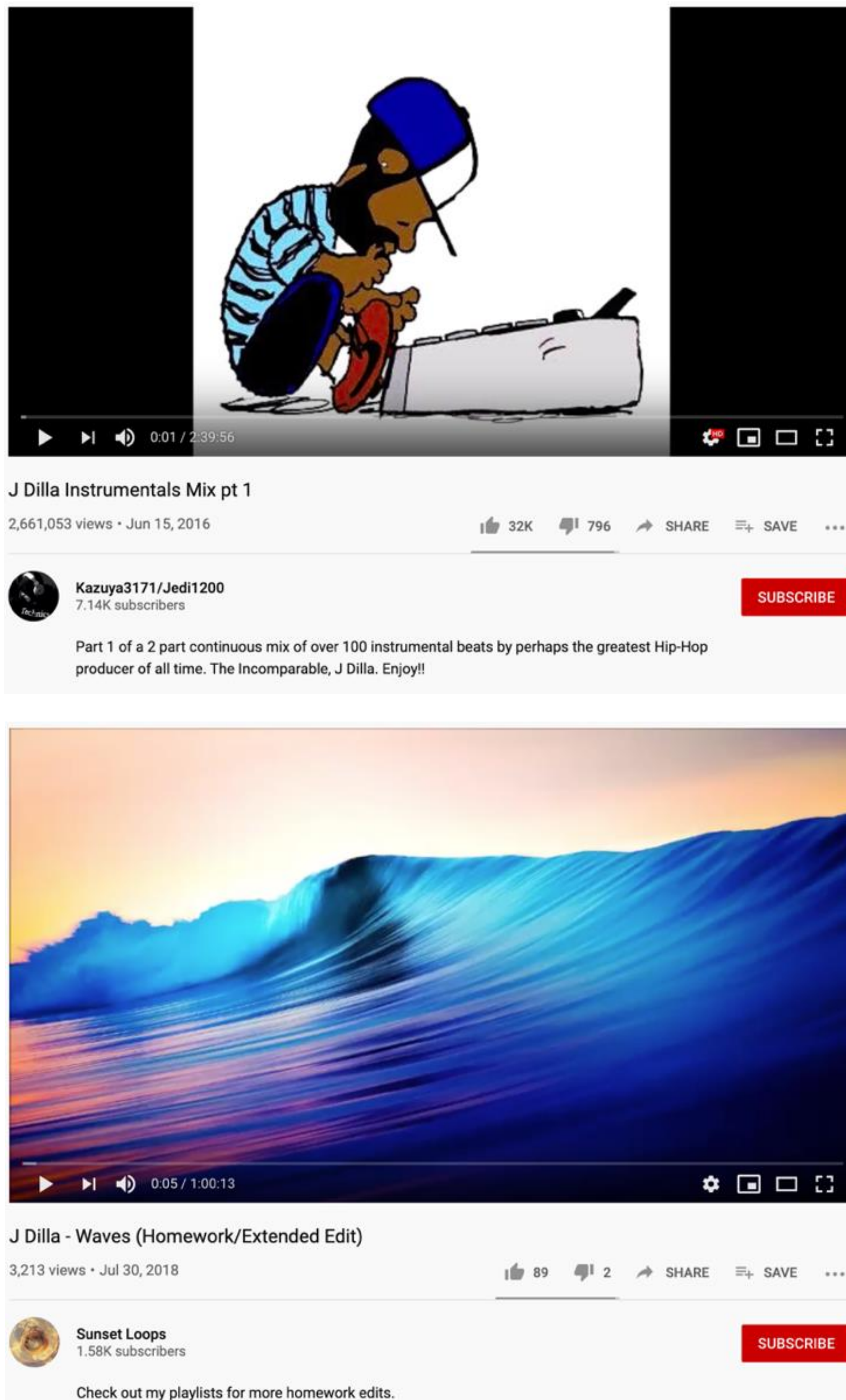


Figure 6.5 - "J Dilla Instrumentals Mix pt 1" posted by user Kazuya3171/Jedi1200 and "J Dilla –Waves (Homework/Extended Edit)" posted by user Sunset Loops on YouTube[367]

[367] Kazuya3171/Jedi1200, "J Dilla Instrumentals Mix pt 1" (video of instrumental mix), hosted by Kazuya3171/Jedi1200, posted June 15, 2016, accessed July 5, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ctHqgoxQ2Mo. Sunset Loops, "J Dilla – Waves (Homework/Extended

One reason for the appeal of lo-fi hip-hop is the aspect of nostalgia, with so much of this subgenre using references to the boom bap subgenre and culture of the 1990s. Countless comments on YouTube videos and Reddit forums claim that this is the reason for the enjoyment of this type of instrumental hip-hop production, as the lower fidelity sounds remind the listeners of a time before digital media and online streaming became omnipresent in the world of music consumerism. It is ironic, then, that so much of this expressed nostalgia by both fans and practitioners are found on contemporary media services such as YouTube and Spotify, as opposed to what this subgenre is trying to emulate through the uses of sounds of cassette tape and vinyl noise.

This expression of nostalgia is also ironic in the fact that much of the demographic that consumes lo-fi hip-hop tend to be from a generation after the popularity of boom bap and underground hip-hop culture in the 1990s, meaning a majority of those who consume and appreciate the nostalgic aspects of this culture were born during the 1990s and may have little to no memory of consuming or participating in said subculture. This is true for both lo-fi hip-hop fans as well as producers, and is what Simon Reynolds refers to in *Retromania* as the "new olds," or younger musicians who embrace "retro" aesthetics without having experienced said aesthetics when they were originally popular.[368] This is also discussed by Saywood and Winston, who observe that this longing for nostalgia by many listeners is of "a vague, abstract longing for a past which the listener is fully aware never existed."[369] What is more likely, however, is nostalgia comes from the more general phenomena of idolizing older media and analog hardware from previous decades, such as VHS and cassette tapes. Many who prefer this media, either literally by purchasing and collecting it or virtually by

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Edit)" (video of extended track), hosted by Sunset Loops, posted July 30, 2018, accessed November 3, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kM93przDEWo.

[368] Reynolds, *Retromania: Pop Culture's Addiction to Its Own Past* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2011), 5.

[369] Saywood and Winston, 41.

experiencing digital media that seeks to emulate or replicate it, see the sonic imperfections as giving the sound and aesthetic more character and thus more authenticity. In describing the characteristics of older audio hardware, Zagorski-Thomas compares it to the visual imperfections of film, stating that "we might think of the aural coloration that analogue tape gives to sound as equivalent to the characteristic coloration of Super 8 film or other forms of pigmentation that stem from the chemistry of film."[370] Where J Dilla's signature sound comes in to play in relation to this phenomenon, therefore, is its similarities and connection to older forms of both the media and content from previous decades. The prominent use of jazz samples, the use of un-quantized drums, and the presence of added noise from analog media are all contributing factors to this.

Criticisms: Signifyin(g) or Biting?

I have discussed in the previous chapter and in this chapter on the influence J Dilla's signature sound has had on lo-fi hip-hop and its exponential rise in popularity through the 2010s. The act of producers "biting" other producer's musical styles was a major point of contention in Joseph Schloss's *Making Beats*, where many producers interviewed by Schloss expressed their disdain for copying each other's beats and seeing it as an act of inauthenticity.[371] The popularity of these methods of hip-hop beat creation and dissemination has led to some backlash among producers, with criticisms having to do with the concern of exploiting the legacies of more well-known producers for profit. Artists and producers such as 9th Wonder and The Alchemist have even publicly dismissed the idea of these trends such as the online culture of lo-fi hip-hop as a new and distinct subgenre, stating that their own productions have embraced lo-fi musical characteristics for decades. This criticism stems

[370] Zagorski-Thomas, 88.
[371] Schloss, 174.

mainly from the concern for "biting", a slang term in of hip-hop culture that refers to a hip-hop artist which may overtly borrow the stylings of another, so much so that it is deemed inauthentic. Even though so much of hip-hop culture stems from borrowing, the "biting" of another individual's style may be received negatively, depending on what is being borrowed and by who. In 2017, when asked about the popularity of lo-fi hip-hop, Grammy-award-winning producer 9th Wonder stated:

> Ima say this one more time, and I want you to LISTEN. There is NOTHING wrong with the sound. Nothing. I come from it. I'm glad the next generation is doing it too. Just MAKE sure, that the ones who look at this as NEW, don't kick Black and Brown folk OUT of it. Get me?[372]

In this instance, 9th Wonder's main concern with the popularity of the musical Signifiers which are significant to the sound of lo-fi hip-hop is that it may erase the history of major influences of that sound, such as the boom bap and jazz rap from decades prior. Another major concern he addresses is the possibility of musical gentrification that may occur, with artists of colour metaphorically "kicked out" of hip-hop spaces to appeal to demographics of more privileged and less marginalized backgrounds.

Criticisms have also been made with type beats, as it has with other aspects of online hip-hop production culture, such as lo-fi hip-hop and sample packs. In 2018 producer alex tumay stated on Twitter that: "making music is more accessible than ever, any sound is available with a keystroke, and people still choose to make type beats."[373] In this instance, alex tumay acknowledges the seemingly limitless opportunities for music creation that exist with the technology of today, and the disappointment from the emulation and distillation of a producer's signature sound through type beats. Through this distillation, signs instead of signifiers become part of the signature sounds, the signature sound itself becomes distilled

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[372] TEKBEATZ, "9th Wonder dissing LoFi beats?" *The Coli,* posted March 28, 2019, accessed November 18, 2019, https://www.thecoli.com/threads/9th-wonder-dissing-lofi-beats.700168/.
[373] Alex Tumay, Twitter, July 6, 2018, accessed June 20, 2020.

into specific musical characteristics become commodified by lesser known or amateur producers. These commodified signs are also used by other producers as well as A&R/artists (rappers, singers) who are looking for specific sounds. The emulation of other artists by producers or A&R (Artist and Repertoire) representatives is not new in the music industry, but how it has evolved, especially over the internet, is a much more recent phenomenon. In the figure below, I have provided a chart that shows the process of transformation from musical signifier from the original producer to a commodified sign. This signifier in its original form acts as a unique musical characteristic(s) from the producer, which then acts as part of the signature sound of a producer and their discography. This popularity and dissemination of signature sound through popularity of a producer and their respective produced tracks then become appropriated and subsequently commodified.

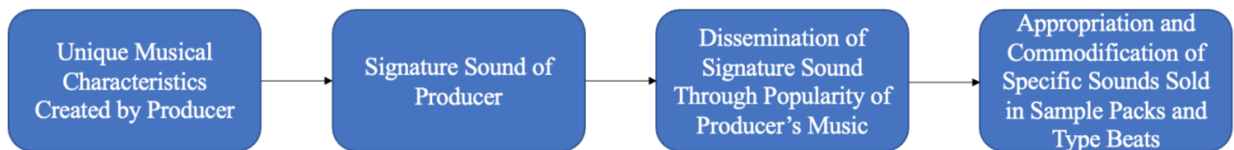

Figure 6.6 - Process of Musical Signifiers to Commodified Signs

Through this transformation of signifiers into signs, musical sounds become commodified in various ways and appeals to the consumer (which in this case would be the music producer) by reifying or fetishizing the musical signifiers originally present in the music they are fond of and familiar with. This does not allow them, however, to Signify through the creation or use of their own signature sound, but to produce a commodity within a hyper-competitive capitalist system. Thus, the metaphorical chain of Signifiers is broken, and the Signifiers become musical signs and are removed from their Afrodiasporic roots.

Through the advent of both type beats and sample packs, the labor required to create sounds to be used within a musical recording is streamlined, and a market for this outsourcing of labor is created. In Taylor's description of the development of the market for player pianos at the turn of the twentieth century, he states that "a great deal of work was required in the forms of marketing, advertising and other kinds of proselytizing to transform these wares into commodities to create use-values or sign-values or other kinds of values for them, promulgating an ideology that buying music was better than making it oneself."[374] This ideology holds true in the market for sample packs and type beats, as the pre-made sounds or productions contain musical Signifiers that are marketed to be better than whatever the consumer (in this case, the music producer or rapper) could create on their own.

Conclusion

What originally started as a loose group of J Dilla fans among various spaces and forums online has now turned into an entire music genre, culture, and industry, with these sonic aesthetics can be directly traced to J Dilla's signature sound. Many producers and fans see these aesthetics simply as a further evolution and expansion of the sounds originally implemented by Dilla, and just as a blues chord progression is to blues musicians or a four-on-the-floor kick drum pattern is to disco, the characteristics of un-quantized drums, jazz samples, and added surface noise have become synonymous with subgenres and subcultures such as lo-fi hip-hop. Through this evolution, what was originally acts of Signifyin(g) by J Dilla are now basic tropes of a specific style of hip-hop production. This has then led to these signifiers being reinterpreted and commodified by other producers who wish to capitalize on the already existing popularity of these specific musical characteristics.

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[374] Taylor, "The Commodification of Music at the Dawn of the Era of 'Mechanical Music'," 281.

Chapter 7

The Roland SP-404 and the Influence of J Dilla in Live Instrumental Hip-Hop Performance

In *Dilla Time,* Charnas mentions that during one of his hospital stays in the last year of his life, friend of J Dilla and Stones Throw Records founder Peanut Butter Wolf (Christopher Manak) visited and "came through with a gift for James: the just-released Roland SP-404, a portable sampler-sequencer that was an update to the one that Madlib had been using for years."[375] The older sampler that Charnas refers to was the SP-303, another portable sampler and sequencer that was used by Los Angeles-based hip-hop producer Madlib (Otis Jackson) for the majority of the production of 2004 album *Madvillainy.*[376] This collaborative album between Madlib and New York-based rapper MF Doom (Daniel Dumile) was both a financial and critical success for the artists and its respective record label Stones Throw, with its heavily compressed and relatively simple looped samples from various unorthodox sources (such as soundtracks to cartoons and television shows) appealing to both a wider audience and to J Dilla.[377]

The use of a portable sampler became J Dilla's primary choice for production during this time, both because of his lack of access to large studio equipment during his hospital stays and because of the device's ability to easily implement the lo-fi aesthetics that he desired. This led to much of his final album *Donuts* being created using the Roland SP-303 and SP-404 samplers in tandem with other equipment such as a laptop with Pro Tools audio software. After J Dilla's death in 2006, electronic music producer and (at the time) Stones Throw intern Flying Lotus (Steven Ellison) began producing and performing with the Roland SP-404, along with fellow Los Angeles-based producer and collaborator Ras G (Gregory

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[375] Charnas, 173.
[376] Spotify, Madvillain, *Madvillainy,* Stones Throw Records, 2004.
[377] A collaboration between all three artists was discussed but was never brought to fruition after the passing of J Dilla in 2006.

Shorter Jr.). Along with several other producers in the Los Angeles area such as Mndsgn (Ringgo Ancheta) and Jonwayne (Johnathan Wayne), the "LA beat scene" was formed and an underground culture of instrumental hip-hop performance in local venues such as Low End Theory.[378] This led to many performances being recorded and posted onto social media, which then exposed the use of the SP-404 to a wider audience and popularized its usage by producers substantially over the next decade.

This connection between the music of J Dilla and the SP-404 is acknowledged by purveyors of this subculture among what has become a phenomenon of local "beat scenes" around many major cities around the world, such as Tokyo, London, and New York. These beat scenes are music scenes which heavily feature the performance of instrumental hip-hop beats using samplers such as the SP-404. Throughout this chapter I will be exploring how the SP-404 came to be associated with live instrumental hip-hop performance, the influence of J Dilla's forms of Signifyin(g) on these scenes, and how producers perform beats and Signify using the SP-404. Through the help of video recordings of a live performance on YouTube posted by music collective Boiler Room, I will also be analyzing a "beat set" by producers Dibia$e, using this as a case study for viewing forms of Signifyin(g) within a physical, live performance.

The main goal of this analysis is to both highlight the ways in which acts of Signifyin(g) are created and performed within the context of live SP-404 performance and highlight their similarities to J Dilla's musical Signifiers. This kind of critical analysis is like that of Freire's method of critical pedagogy, in which, as described by Michael B.

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[378] The Low End Theory, which ran as a weekly producer showcase from 2006 to 2018, was a venue which gave a spotlight for hip-hop producers to perform their productions, and allowed said producers to embrace more experimental sides of their productions. During these shows, rhymes and vocals were rarely heard, and other elements of hip-hop culture were absent. Rappers, taggers, or break dancers were not the focus here, for these nights were to be for the producers only. Randall Roberts, "The end of an era: Low End Theory's bittersweet closing caps a year of soul-searching," *Los Angeles Times,* August 8, 2018, accessed July 8, 2020. https://www.latimes.com/entertainment/music/la-et-ms-low-end-theory-20180807-story.html.

MacDonald, as “to identify the sign and open it up to illustrate how it is socially produced,”[379] with the obvious difference being that I will be looking at acts of Signifyin(g) as opposed to general examples related to semiotic analysis. The musical signifiers I will be highlighting will feature discussions of what they Signify within the context of the performance as well as within the wider culture of hip-hop production. These signifiers revolve around two major aspects of J Dilla’s signature sound: sampling techniques and un-quantized rhythms, which I discussed earlier in the first two chapters.[380] I will also highlight how these musical signifiers are not only socially produced, but also how they are technically produced by the Roland SP-404, and how said artist are able to produce specific musical signifiers using this instrument. Through this, I will then relate these Signifiers to the similarities of acts of Signifyin(g) produced by J Dilla, and how said similarities show the influence J Dilla has had on both beat-making culture as well as live performance.

In the previous chapter on lo-fi hip-hop in online spaces, it was more appropriate to look at the ways in which beats are both consumed and produced by looking at said beats as a form of commodity or object.[381] Within this chapter, however, I will be analyzing the performance of beats as examples of Signifyin(g) as a physical act, with producers “musicking” as based on Christopher Small’s definition of the word.[382]

Although much has been written about hip-hop in live spaces (such as the scholarship of Murray Foreman and Adam Krims), relatively little academic research has been focused on “beat scenes” and the performance of live instrumental hip-hop apart from Michael

[379] Michael B. McDonald, *Remix and Life Hack in Hip Hop: Towards a Critical Pedagogy of Music* (Rotterdam, NL: Sense Publishers, 2016), 189.

[380] Dibia$e’s music also contains similar uses of synthesizers. I chose not to focus on this aspect in terms of Signifyin(g), however, as any use of synthesizer sounds in this performance are implemented during the initial production of the track and not during the performance itself.

[381] I would argue that these online spaces still involve acts of musicking and believe that music does not exist in a binary as either noun or verb. In the case of lo-fi hip-hop culture, the intense commodification of beats treats tracks or collections of tracks function as nouns (music), while the actions and interactions participants of this culture take part in function as verbs (musicking).

[382] Small, Christopher G. *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening.* Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1998.

D'Errico, especially in relation to J Dilla's influence.[383] Charnas briefly mentions live instrumental hip-hop performers like Flying Lotus in the final chapters of *Dilla Time,* but only makes a short statement on J Dilla and his brief participation in the music scene in Los Angeles and the evolution of what would become the "LA (Los Angeles) beat scene" in the late 2000s and early 2010s.[384] Other scholars such as Mark Katz have written extensively on DJ culture and performance, but I would like to clarify the subtle but important differences DJ and beat culture in the next section. Instead, citing much of the scholarly work on live hip-hop performance by D'Errico, part of this chapter will function more as a general survey of how these beat scenes function in live spaces.[385] Though live beat scenes are culturally like the online lo-fi hip-hop culture as discussed in the previous two chapters, such as their preference for lo-fi aesthetics and hip-hop instrumentals, their origins and evolution differ slightly. In many beat scenes, its origins and aesthetics are more rooted in the evolution of hip-hop DJing, which I will explain in the following section.

Live Instrumental Hip-Hop: History and Format

The performance of beats electronically by DJs or producers have existed for as long as hip-hop and electronic dance music have existed. Since the rise of DJs in both hip-hop and dance scenes in the New York City Area in the 1970s, the performance of a looped "breakbeat" has been crucial to hip-hop's evolution. In hip-hop's early stages of development, the DJ was considered to be the center of any hip-hop event, as they provided the music as well as their own interpretations of said music on turntables, as has been

[383] Forman, *The 'Hood Comes First: Race, Space and Place in Rap and Hip-hop* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2002). Krims, *Music and Urban Geography.*
[384] Charnas, *Dilla Time*, 190.
[385] Although an extensive ethnography would be ideal, this chapter was unfortunately written during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic, which significantly inhibited any sort of ethnographic research or travel from taking place.

described by a number of hip-hop scholars and historians.[386] As hip-hop evolved and became exponentially popular across the globe, however, the rapper or MC (master of ceremonies) became the main focus of hip-hop culture, with the role of the DJ shifting more to the background and accompaniment to the rapper in many hip-hop events. The role and definition of a DJ also became more complex, as the role of a producer became more of a significant influence in the sound and accompaniment of many a rapper.[387]

The overarching structure of many live hip-hop shows and concerts have shifted dramatically throughout hip-hop's history, from local community parties to massive corporate-backed events and festivals. This, of course, is mainly true of what can be considered "mainstream" live hip-hop events, with rappers backed by major labels, corporate sponsorships, and performances in massive stadiums and arenas. In many local "underground" shows, a sense of locality and community may be present, as shown in Harrison's ethnographic research on the underground hip-hop scene in the San Francisco Bay Area.[388] In these "underground" scenes, however, the focus of many shows is still on the performance of a rapper or rappers. This is certainly not a negative, as the MC is also a crucial element of hip-hop culture. It has, however, shifted focus away from DJs, as well as the performance of DJ sets, beats, and the DJ or producer as performer. In this sense, the beat set is in some ways a return to the DJ as the main artist and performer in a live hip-hop setting, as opposed to one who accompanies and provides the backing track for the MC.

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[386] Chang, *Can't Stop Won't Stop.* Rose, *Black Noise.* Justin Williams, *Rhymin' and Stealin'.*

[387] This evolution of DJ to producer is explained thoroughly in D'Errico's "Behind the Beat" master's thesis, where he maps out the shift from DJs to producers and the similarities between the two roles. D'Errico, "Behind the Beat."

[388] Harrison, *Hip-Hop Underground.*

The Beat Set

With the rise of newer beat-making communities in the past decade or so, it seems that many audiences and local hip-hop communities have shifted the focus of performances back to the DJ, with some apparent changes. Exarchos states in his PhD thesis that the hip-hop DJ as performer over the course of its evolution "had begun 'jamming' with musicians from the past, reacting to their utterances, interacting with their recorded performances, collaborating (in non-real time) and manipulating their recordings live."[389] This highlights the way in which through manipulating recordings from other artists, DJs and producers continuously Signify upon their audience by how they manipulate the recordings they present. With many of these live beat shows, the performer acts both as DJ and producer, providing instrumentals mostly produced by themselves and presented as "beat sets" or instrumentals by other producers, presented more traditionally as DJ sets. The diagram below in Figure 7.1 shows a flow chart of this evolution from more traditional DJ sets to more contemporary beat sets.

Figure 7.1 – Flow Chart of Evolution of DJ Sets to Beat Sets

Based on this, a "beat set" may be defined as a brief (about twenty minutes to an hour) performance of instrumental tracks, mainly using production equipment such as the

[389] Exarchos, "Reimagining the Phonographic," 52.

Akai or Roland series of samplers. The culture of beat sets may solidify and be easier to define as it continues to evolve in the years to come, with a basic understanding of its features needed to discuss how they have become a global phenomenon and how figures such as J Dilla has come to influence them. With these beat sets, the performance of beats may also involve technology or equipment other than a set of two turntables or CDJs,[390] with many producers performing with either Akai Professional's MPC samplers or Roland's SP series of samplers. The use of MPCs in live hip-hop performance is nothing new, as many artists in both producer and rapper roles have performed with these instruments, such as Kanye West's performance of "Runaway" at the 2010 Video Music Awards and J Dilla performing with Slum Village at St. Andrews Hall in Detroit in 2000.[391] In recent years, however, the use of Roland's SP series of samplers, specifically the Roland SP-404, has become the forerunner for both live hip-hop performance as well as hip-hop production in studio settings.

Because of the rapid evolution of popular cultures, as pointed out by Anthony Kwame Harrison in his study on the underground hip-hop scene in the San Francisco Bay Area, new discussions and information presented in this chapter will be needed as subcultures like hip-hop beat-making evolve over time.[392] I share the sentiment also with Michael B. MacDonald, who in his book *Remix and Life Hack in Hip-Hop* states: "I am self-conscious about participating in the cementing of a fixed historical narrative for a culture. Hiphop Kulture is constantly informed and constantly in flux."[393] In the coming years as both scholars and practitioners who are participating in these scenes gain a more solid grasps on how these scenes function culturally as well as musically, it may be a bit clearer as to what exactly beat

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[390] The term "CDJ" refers to a piece of electronic music equipment which allows the user to perform a DJ set with the use of digital audio media such as digital compact discs or mp3 audio files.
[391] Slum Village, "Slum Village with J Dilla performing LIVE – SUPER RARE CLASSIC" (video of concert), hosted by Jon Moore, posted December 26, 2012, accessed March 7, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3z3VLodhIEk.
[392] Harrison, 8.
[393] McDonald, 47.

scenes are and how they function. What is important to this research, however, is to focus on how these scenes in their current state function in their relation to how they feature acts of Signifyin(g) by performers. Although many throughout both the music industry and academia may struggle with how this culture fits into a specific genre or genres, the culture itself will continue to evolve beyond any modern definition of the term. I believe, therefore, that it is important to look past notions of what defines genre in Western popular music and view how this culture functions, who is involved, and how the music embraced by beat cultures are made.

Live Instrumental Hip-Hop Performance and "Omnigenre"

Though subgenres such as lo-fi hip-hop as discussed in previous chapters share similarities to live beat scenes, there are substantial differences in how each function. Scholars and journalists such as D'Errico and Laurent Fintoni have discussed the difficulty in which to place these scenes into a specific genre.[394] In D'Errico's chapter in *The Cambridge Companion to Hip-Hop* on experimental hip-hop production, he places mainly artists of the Los Angeles Beat Scene in a "Post-Golden Age" era, referring to these artists and their various styles of production as evolving past the hip-hop golden age of the late 1980s and the early 1990s.[395] Though this placement of these scenes and artists into a musical era within hip-hop history does help in having an understanding of how this type of music has evolved and shifted within hip-hop culture overall, the case of placing these scenes into a specific genre remains a difficult task. Even if the music of these artists features musical characteristics well outside of the understanding of hip-hop, however, if they Signify in ways

[394] D'Errico, "Interface Aesthetics," Fintoni, *Bedroom Beats & B-sides.*
[395] D'Errico, "Experimentalism after the golden age."

that pertain to the troping of various hip-hop tropes, they may be well within the hip-hop zeitgeist.

In defining a music scene, it is important not to give off the impression that a scene or subculture was solely created by a sole individual or group of individuals. As described by Jeremy Gilbert:

> The idea of the scene itself as the source and agent of creativity has been famously given expression by Brian Eno's neologism, 'scenius', a term designating the collective creative intelligence of participants in a more-or-less distributed music scene, which punningly subverts the individualistic assumptions inherent in the Romantic theory of individual genius.[396]

Gilbert's reference to Brian Eno's term 'scenius' also better describes how producers among various beat cultures with each other and with their audience function. Although certain figures such as J Dilla have been enormously influential in the scene's overall musical stylings and characteristics, and several Los Angeles-based electronic musicians such as Flying Lotus and Ras G have been influential in popularizing this culture to wider audiences, no one figure could necessarily be considered as inventors of this genre or culture. Just as it would be inappropriate to call J Dilla the inventor of lo-fi hip-hop as discussed in the previous chapter, it would also be inappropriate to call him the inventor of beat scenes. These beat scenes, however, extend beyond just Los Angeles, and as stated previously, can be found both locally in major cities and globally through internet livestreams such as Twitch or YouTube.[397]

Other definitions of genres by other scholars create further complications in defining beat or instrumental hip-hop music. Reiterating on defining genre in chapter five, Georgina Born and Christopher Haworth's article on internet-based music genres highlight how music

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[396] Jeremy Gilbert, "Capitalism, creativity and the crisis in the music industry," *Open Democracy,* September 14, 2012, accessed July 8, 2020, https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/opendemocracyuk/capitalism-creativity-and-crisis-in-music-industry/.

[397] Since the 2020 COVID pandemic, many venues have turned to exclusively streaming performances and festivals online, such as the Lo-Fi Festival, which features a lineup of producers and beat performances from around the world every six months.

genres "are social, discursive, and material formations as much as sonic ones."[398] In their article, they also quote Fabbri's definition of genre, stating it as a "community whose agreement forms the basis for the definition of [the] genre."[399] Although their research was initially based on music genres which formed primarily in spaces and forums on the internet, I believe their statements on how communities decide and define genre is relevant, as the beat scenes discussed have similar goals within their respective communities and how said communities interact with one another.

This definition also proves to be difficult to place onto beat scenes, as the only thing many beat-making communities can agree on in terms of an overarching genre of their music is that they are, simply put, beats, with the term itself implying that their productions heavily feature some instance of a strong repeating rhythmic pattern. In an interview on *Micro-chop*, Los Angeles-based producer Dibia$e (Donell McGary) states his discomfort in labeling his music as just electronic, stating that "a lot of people label me electronic, which is crazy. I feel like I'm a traditional boom bap head."[400] In referring to boom bap (as defined in the previous chapter on lo-fi hip-hop), Dibia$e states his reverence for the hip-hop production of the boom bap subgenre of the 1990s and has stated in other interviews his love for producers from this era and genre such as Pete Rock, DJ Premier, and of course, J Dilla.

The term "instrumental hip-hop" may seem like a simple solution to this problem, but as some artists and fans include productions with vocal artists and other popular music genres, at times their productions may not be instrumental or even considered to be hip-hop. I would argue, however, that because of hip-hop's history with embracing and emulating so many other music genres (mainly by sampling), any musical characteristic that could be

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[398] Born and Haworth, "From Microsound to Vaporwave," 228.
[399] Born and Haworth, 228.
[400] Sorcinelli, "Dibia$e Discusses 303s, 404s, MPCs, and Tape Hiss," *Micro-chop,* published January 15, 2016, accessed January 8, 2020, https://medium.com/micro-chop/dibia-e-discusses-303s-404s-mpcs-and-tape-hiss-48a2f26a5bb1.

considered a deviance from hip-hop could be argued as the exact opposite, in that the genre functions as more of an "omnigenre," according to producer DJ Shadow.[401] Hip-hop itself has always been an amalgamation of different genres and therefore could still be considered within hip-hop culture. I, having been a performer using the Roland SP-404 for the past several years, agree with the sentiment expressed by DJ Shadow, as my own performances tend to feature both instrumental hip-hop beats and other beats in the styles of other electronic music genres, such as house, techno, and jungle.

Whether it is called "downtempo", "lo-fi", "trip-hop", or "instrumental hip-hop", this genre and the culture surrounding it can firmly be placed within hip-hop. The major determining factor in what this kind of live music could be called, however, "SP-404" or simply "SP" music, as this is the one major similarity between all artists, regardless of what genre of music they may perform. I would consider this to be less of a musical genre though and more of a style of live electronic music performance, with the genre of instrumental hip-hop determining the instrument(s) being used, such as the Roland series of SP samplers. Just as one would expect to see instruments such as saxophones, piano, or upright bass in an acoustic jazz performance, one may also expect to see a Roland SP sampler in a live instrumental hip-hop performance.

The Roland SP-404

Originally released by Roland in 2005, the SP-404 (SP as an abbreviation for "signal processor") has become a staple for hip-hop producers as well as a variety of other popular music genres in the past decade since its initial release.[402] The sampler is what Adam Harper calls a "sound-manipulating machine" which can create various distortions known as effects

[401] Joshua Davis, "DJ Shadow on Sampling as a 'Collage of Mistakes,'" *NPR,* November 17, 2012, accessed 4 July 2020. http://www.npr.org/2012/11/17/165145271/dj-shadow-on-sampling-as-a-collage-of-mistakes.
[402] Users include hip-hop beat-makers like Ras G and Flying Lotus and electronic and rock groups like Animal Collective and Beck.

onto recorded audio samples.[403] In Primus Luta's blog posts on live electronic performance, he describes the SP-404 as such:

> The Roland SP-404 is a popular sampling workstation, used by many artists in a live setting. Within this modest box you get twelve voices of sample polyphony, which can be organized with the internal sequencer and processed with onboard effects. However, a performer may choose not to utilize a sequencer at all and as such, it can be performed unsynchronized, just triggering the pads. In fact, in recent years there has been a rise of drum pad players or finger drummers who perform using hardware machines without synchronization. Going back to our three distinctions a performance such as this would be a hybrid of physical manipulation of fixed sources with the physical manipulation of an electronic instrument. From this qualification, we know to look for extensive physical effort in such performances as indicators of the artist's agency on the variable performance.[404]

This quote both clearly highlights the primary ways in which performers may use the SP-404 and the versatility of the instrument itself, allowing the user to playback audio samples and simultaneously sequence them in a performance. Because of this versatility, the SP-404 can function both as a production device as well as a performance device, allowing the user to create sampled compositions while also replaying compositions in a live setting. This holds true to what Joseph Schloss says about sample-based hip-hop producers, stating that:

> Sample-based producers have many options available to express their aesthetic preferences that are not open to musicians who use live instruments. These include the ability to juxtapose the ambient qualities of different recording environments, to repeat individual notes exactly (in terms of dynamics, attack, and so on), and to organize sounds into patterns that would be difficult or impossible to perform live due to the physical demands of an acoustic instrument.[405]

The ways in which producers use the SP-404 in both production and performance settings varies, however, as the device contains several limitations which, depending on the producer, may either be seen as advantageous or disadvantageous.

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[403] Adam Harper, *Infinite Music: Imagining the Next Millennium of Human Music-Making,* Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2011, 65.
[404] Primus Luta, "Musical Objects, Variability and Live Electronic Performance," *Sounding Out!,* August 12, 2013, accessed January 5, 2016, http://soundstudiesblog.com/2013/08/12/musical-objects-variability/.
[405] Schloss, 150-151.

One major factor is the fact that the device is strictly hardware, with no visual aid to view audio samples such as in a DAW or on the user screen of an MPC.[406] When sampling audio from a source through its line or microphone input, the sampling engine simply records the audio and then saves it to one of the sample banks. The saved audio sample can then be manipulated in a variety of ways, either by adding and applying audio effects through the device's various on-board effects buttons, or by sequencing the sample into a rhythmic loop using the SP-404's on-board sequencer. Audio samples can also be preloaded onto the device's SD card through the user's PC or Mac, which allows the user to add loops or samples made on other devices onto their SP-404 to be played and performed however the user wishes. Because of the difficulty in sequencing sampled sounds on the SP-404 and relative ease of uploading sounds by the user onto the device's SD card, many producers use the SP-404 solely for live performance, uploading sounds or loops from their DAWs onto the SP-404 to be replayed and performed in live settings. When I perform with my own SP-404, for example, I organize the sounds on each pad and consciously arrange every sound so each pad contains a small musical loop or "break." I then manipulate each loop with various onboard effects and combine the playback of these loops with specific "one-shot" sounds to Signify upon the samples I am presenting and show my performance skills to my audience. Figure 7.2 on the next page highlights the basic functions of the interface on the SX model of the SP-404.

[406] This is true of older models of the SP-404, but not true of the SP-404 MKII. Released in 2021, this model contains a basic black-and-white LCD screen that can visually display basic audio waveforms.

Knob Controls: Volume & 3 FX Knobs

Basic Pattern Sequencer

Sample Pads/Banks
12 Pads, 10 Banks
Pad has Sample when lit

LCD Displays tempo, FX values

MFX List: 24 different FX

Sampling/Playback Modes

Ext. Recording via line-in, Built-in mic

Figure 7.2 - Interface of the Roland SP-404 (SX Model)

One of the reasons so many producers who are influenced by J Dilla have been attracted to the SP-404 is the device's ability to emulate aspects of J Dilla's production techniques, as discussed in the previous chapter on J Dilla and lo-fi hip-hop. Characteristics such as compression and vinyl simulation allow users to, as Tricia Rose puts it, "work in the red" by adding more loudness and attack to their samples, as well as emulate various lo-fi sonic aesthetics by adding various amounts of noise.[407] Another appealing aspect of the SP-404 to many producers is the resample feature, which allows the user to sample audio already sampled onto one of the SP-404's sample banks into a new bank. This allows users to perform and create samples and loops without the use of a sequencer, meaning that whatever tempo or rhythmic pattern is performed into the bank is solely based on the human performance of the user. This allows the user to completely circumvent the built-in sequencer without any "grid" that is usually present in samplers and audio workstations, as stated in the Primus Luta quote earlier. Because of this, users can step away from any rhythmic "grid" that is usually featured in MIDI-based software, such as DAWs like Ableton Live or Logic Pro, or hardware, such as the Akai Professional MPC. This lack of rhythmic grid allows users to expand upon J Dilla's own desires to create un-quantized rhythmic patterns by being able to create rhythmic patterns without any reliance on a MIDI-based grid.

Finally, what is one of the most appealing features of the SP-404 to many aspiring performers and producers is portability. As opposed to having to transport turntables, mixers, or considerably larger MPCs, users of the SP-404 can travel with the device easily, as its small size is able to fit in a backpack. Now, with the simple set-up of an SP-404 and a set of speakers, a "beat scene" can occur almost anywhere and does not require the need of a large public space. This is most apparent in the various SP-404 sets found on YouTube, with sets from artists like Dibia$e and Mndsgn performing in living rooms, coffee shops, and public

[407] Rose, 89.

parks. This is another prime example of DJs and producers returning to what New York DJs in the 1970s, with more and more beat events occurring in public spaces. Instead of dragging loads of equipment, sound systems, and turntables, and looking for power sources, now producers can carry their battery-powered SP-404 with a portable set of speakers and instantly perform a beat set. As stated by D'Errico, how and why electronic musicians choose the equipment or instruments they use is a process based on the materials available to them, and can be determined by price, portability, and ease of use.[408]

Because of the relative ease and portability of this device, aspiring producers look not only to learning production, but also how to perform their own productions on the SP-404. Due to the lack of any formal education on SP-404 performance, many producers congregate on a variety of online spaces to discuss performance techniques, such as the SP-404 Forums and Facebook group "SP-404 Freaks." "SP-404 Freaks," which currently hosts about 7,600 members at the time of writing this, is a group dedicated to sharing music produced on Roland's series of SP samplers, as well as share knowledge about the device. In the group's "about" section, the purpose of the group states "Everybody with a Roland SP-404 (or other versions like the SP-303, SP-555, SP-202 etc.) is invited to join the group."[409] One of the rules specifically states that any post not related to anything about Roland SP samplers will be removed.

On the SP-404 Forum website, the entire forum is dedicated to talking about production, performance, and other cultural aspects related to the SP series of samplers. The forum contains thousands of posts on various topics, from users posting questions about specific sampling techniques, discussing various techniques by other well-known producers (such as J Dilla), and weekly "beat battles" in which users submit beats produced on their

[408] D'Errico, "Interface Aesthetics," 7.
[409] Jay Ybarra, "SP-404 freaks," accessed November 9, 2019, https://www.facebook.com/groups/1694412214014360/.

SPs.[410] Much of these discussions lead eventually to reminiscing about productions by J Dilla. With 917 mentions on the site, J Dilla is revered by many users on SP-Forums, with many of them wishing to emulate various aspects of J Dilla's production style.[411] This includes topics such as beat reproduction, in which commenters have discussed their attempts at remaking selected J Dilla productions using their SP-404 samplers.[412] Another common topic is during various debates on the current state of beat-making, in which J Dilla is consistently used as the ideal producer in relation to his signature sound and various musical innovations. Many of these forum posts from approximately 2012 to 2014 that surrounded this debate focused on "LA beat scene" figures such as Flying Lotus, Ras G, and Dibia$e.

Analysis of Dibia$e's SP-404 Beat Set

Los Angeles-based producer Dibia$e (Donell McGary) has been a significant figure in the Los Angeles Beat and underground hip-hop scene since the early 2000's. An early adopter SP-404 since its release, he has been an avid proponent of the device and is seen by many to be a virtuoso of the instrument, being given the nickname by many fans as "half man, half SP."[413] On September 3, 2013, he performed a forty-three-minute beat set for promoter and YouTube channel Boiler Room. Taking place in fellow producer Mndsgn's living room in Los Angeles, this set is a prime example of an SP-404 performance in which acts of Signifyin(g) can be clearly observed. The video itself has around 280,000 views since

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[410] Based on my observations through a plethora of posts on this website, it is apparent that the demographic of users on SP-Forums is overwhelmingly male. Certain posts and comments from users on the website can feature, from time to time, negative and toxic interactions, as a certain level of braggadocio can occur when discussing and comparing each other's productions. This occurs especially in competitive environments such as the beat battles, as well as posts discussing user's speculations about other producers, which leads to a sizable amount of gatekeeping and harsh criticism. This gatekeeping usually involves users complaining about certain aspects about hip-hop culture they don't like or disagree with, with the focus of course being on current trends in hip-hop production.

[411] Search topic: "J Dilla," https://sp-forums.com/search.php?sid=dc338443bbaadbe59a8dc1f015c42a0e, accessed March 2, 2022.

[412] "Re: The Look of Love Remake," accessed June 5, 2022, https://sp-forums.com/viewtopic.php?f=5&t=27230&hilit=dilla&sid=215543aebfebeb4ed3859d6a12e554e0.

[413] Sorcinelli. "Dibia$e Discusses 303s, 404s, MPCs, and Tape Hiss."

it's posting and has become popular among aspiring SP-404 performers and fans of instrumental hip-hop. Those who frequently perform live with Roland SP samplers, such as Los Angeles-based producer Sarah, The Illstrumentalist (Sarah Close) will claim its importance among recorded live beat sets.[414] Comments on this video applaud Dibia$e's virtuosity, with one commenter claiming that watching him on the SP-404 is "like watching the Mona Lisa pose for da Vinci. Just raw fucken [sic] beauty."[415] This comparison to Renaissance art shows the sublime impact this performance has had on its many viewers and fans.

As seen throughout the video, the instruments used by Dibia$e in this performance includes a laptop running Ableton Live audio workstation, the Roland SP-404, and an Akai Professional MIDI controller connected to the Ableton Live software. Just like a variety of other samplers and electronic instruments, the SP-404 can be used in conjunction with other devices such as MIDI controllers and external audio. In this case it is being used to route the audio coming from the laptop to the SP-404 to perform with the device's on-board effects.

The setting of the performance is rather intimate and appears to be in the living room of fellow Los Angeles-based producer Mndsgn's apartment. The audience is located behind Dibia$e with what appears to be only five or six people sat on a couch in the living room.[416] Based on this description it seems that this event is taking place in an extremely informal matter in comparison to a much larger hip-hop or electronic music concert. Both audiences in the recording and the viewers on YouTube are not passive to the actions and performance of Dibia$e, however, and are carefully observing his skills with the SP-404. As stated by Adam

[414] Sarah Close, Interview with Zachary Diaz and Steven Gilbers. *Kick Knowledge Podcast,* podcast audio, February 3, 2018, accessed November 28, 2018, https://www.rapanalysis.com/kickknowledge/2018/03/13/17-no-quantize-w-sarah-the-llstrumentalist/.
[415] Donnell McGary, "Dibiase Boiler Room Los Angeles Live Set" (video of performance), hosted by Boiler Room, posted September 3, 2013, accessed March 8, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SqxxtL8rIE0&t=234s.
[416] The reason for the audience being behind the performer is most likely to have the audience members in frame for the video, showing that the event took place in a live social setting.

Harper in *Infinite Music*, the non-sonic variables of a musical performance can be just as important and influential to the audience's perception of the music as the sonic variables, and in this case his setup and equipment, the casual setting of the living room, and the small live audience size greatly influences the sonic variables and aesthetics of Dibia$e's beat set.[417] All of these variables inform his audience as to how he Signifies through both his productions and how he performs them in a physical manner, with one noticeable aspect being his consistent head-nod gesture.

The Head Nod

One key feature of Dibia$e's production style in many of his tracks is his use of un-quantized drum patterns, which were, as is the case for many hip-hop producers that implement similar drum patterns, heavily influenced by J Dilla.[418] As Dibia$e begins to perform with the Roland SP-404, he immediately embraces the "natural swing" in his productions by nodding his head loosely to the tempo of the track. This act of nodding one's head to the beat of the performed track is common among performers as well as audiences of live electronic music, especially that of electronic dance music or EDM, which usually features a steady tempo and rhythmic pulse.[419]

In Dibia$e's case, the un-quantized drum pattern in many tracks found in this performance differ noticeably from the relatively stricter rhythmic patterns found in dance

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[417] Harper, *Infinite Music*, 47.

[418] Dibia$e discusses his embrace and experimentation with un-quantized drum patterns in his interview with Red Bull Music in 2009, stating that "I don't quantize, to me that's like having training wheels on your bike. A natural drummer doesn't use quantization so on a drum machine you shouldn't have to use it. Trust your natural instinct to have that natural swing." McGary, "Legendary underground Myspace producer Dibia$e" (video of interview), hosted by Red Bull, posted January 5, 2009, accessed March 24, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J4EYI0Xc8xI&t=94s.

[419] The steady rhythmic pulse found in much of EDM is usually referred to as a "four on the floor" pattern, named so because of the implementation of a quarter-note kick drum pattern on every downbeat. Although this pattern originated in disco in the 1970s, it is featured frequently throughout a wide variety of EDM subgenres, such as house and techno.

music such as house or techno.[420] Because of this, the head nodding coming from Dibia$e (as well as some of the audience behind him) is noticeably unclear and reflects the un-quantized drum patterns by being a physical expression of un-quantization and unclear rhythmic timing. In comparison to quantized grooves of other electronic music, the relationship between downbeat and upbeat found in this performance is obscured, leading to the physical act of nodding one's head up and down to also be obscured.[421] This act is strikingly similar the centrifugal motion of upbeat and downbeat relationships that I discussed in chapter two on the un-quantized rhythmic patterns of various J Dilla's productions. In fact, J Dilla himself can be seen doing a similar motion in a video of his performance with Slum Village in Detroit in 2000. At around four minutes into the video, J Dilla can be seen behind his Akai Professional MPC3000 while performing their track "Tell Me," enacting a similar head-nodding motion, reflecting the un-quantized groove of the track.[422] The images in Figure 7.3 show both J Dilla and Dibia$e enacting this head-nodding motion. Both examples can be viewed as a physical embodiment of what Samuel Floyd calls "Signifyin(g) on the timeline," in which the "timeline" or tempo and time signature are obscured through this act of loosely nodding one's head.[423]

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[420] This also differs noticeably from a significant amount of mainstream hip-hop, leading many listeners and critics to consider artists such as Dibia$e (as well as other producers from the Los Angeles beat scene) to be of a producer of a more experimental genre.

[421] I have experienced this phenomenon in several performances and beat battles in the Bristol area, in which my un-quantized drum patterns found on tracks performed with my own Roland SP-404 caused both me and my audience to express this physically by nodding our heads and shoulders in a more nonlinear way.

[422] Slum Village, "Slum Village with J Dilla performing LIVE – SUPER RARE CLASSIC" (video of concert), hosted by Jon Moore, posted December 26, 2012, accessed March 7, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3z3VLodhIEk.

[423] Samuel Floyd, *The Power of Black Music,* 97.

7.3A

7.3B

Figures 7.3A&B - Images of J Dilla and Dibia$e Nodding Heads

Rhythmic Improvisation and Expanding Un-Quantized Rhythms

Expanding on examples of Dibia$e's methods of "Signifyin(g) on the timeline," throughout his performance, a substantial amount of what appears to sound like several parts of his beats repeating rapidly occur. This stems primarily from the use of the "DJFX" button

found on the SP-404. When implementing DJFX, the three knobs on top of the interface are used to simulate effects one would be able to do with audio being played on vinyl on a turntable, such as slowing down and reversing audio, hence the name "DJ" FX (short for effects). The far-right knob, however, produces an unorthodox effect that rapidly repeats small segments of the audio, simulating a "broken record" effect. The repeated or stuttering effect is not quantized to any specific rhythmic pattern and increase in frequency as the knob is turned from left to right. This specific stuttering effect is used substantially throughout Dibia$e's set, causing a rupture to the continuous loops and patterns presented. This process of rupture and relaxation then creates a gap in tempo and groove, as the stuttering patterns freeze the tempo and flow of the set.[424] The image on the following page in Figure 7.4 shows an image the parameters of the DJFX settings on the Roland SP-404SX, as explained in the owner's manual.

[424] This act of rupture and stability is like how Tricia Rose describes hip-hop production and DJ sets. Rose, 54.

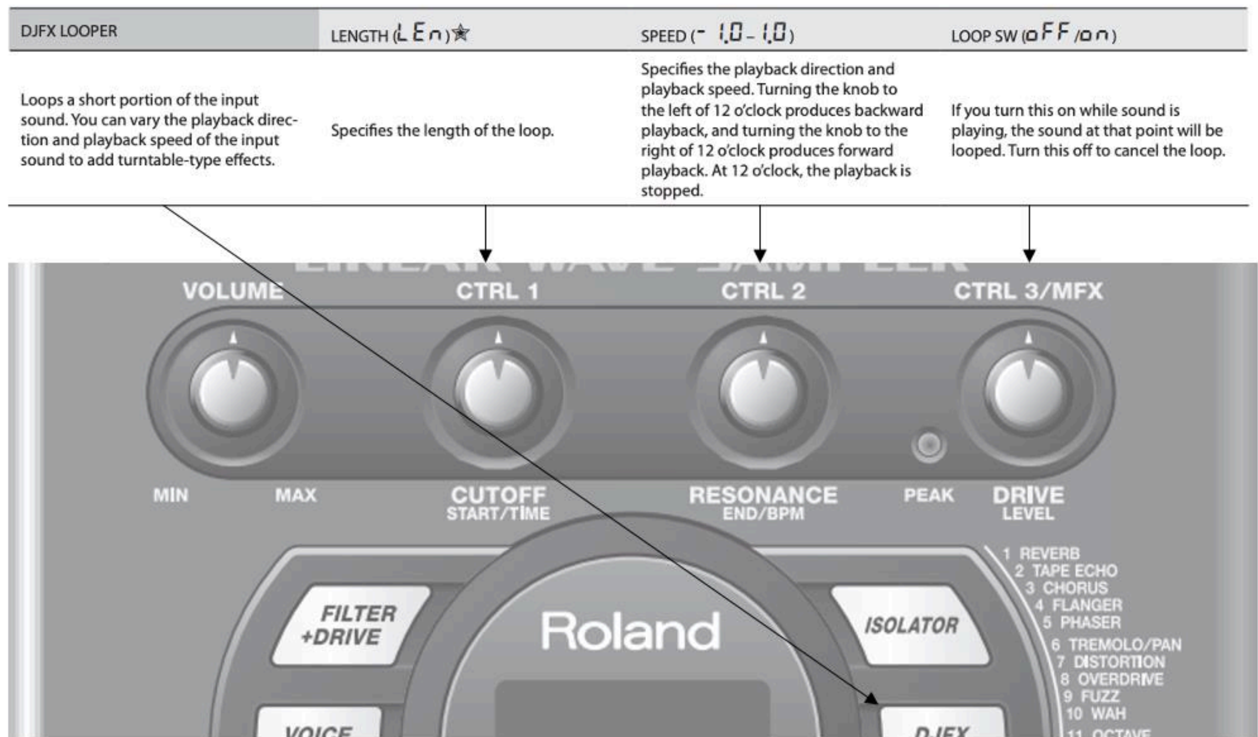

Figure 7.4 - DJFX Knob Settings on the Roland SP-404SX[425]

This breakage of rhythmic grooves, on top of the heavily un-quantized grooves that can be found throughout Dibia$e's productions, further emphasizes J Dilla's influence of un-quantization.[426] In many DJ sets or beat sets, it is important as well as expected for the DJ to maintain a consistent tempo and groove for most of their set, such as disco or house DJs maintaining a "four on the floor" pattern at a consistent tempo. With the use of the DJFX on the SP-404, users can rupture this pattern by breaking this pattern and flow, further expanding upon the experimentation and innovation found within many SP-404 performances. In the past several years, this effect has become increasingly popular among producers who use the

[425] *Roland SP-404SX Owner's Manual*, 2008, 8.
[426] This implementation of breakage can be found in several J Dilla productions, such as the small pauses in Slum Village's 2000 track "Untitled/Fantastic."

SP-404 for both production and performance, with some users in online spaces even complaining of its overuse and abuse in recent years.[427]

Take the track being performed at approximately 7:49, for example. As the track is being played back on the SP-404, Dibia$e proceeds to manipulate the track using the variables provided to him with the DJFX effect. At 7:52, just before the main loop of the track repeats on beat one of every downbeat, he implements what sounds like a stuttering effect right before the downbeat. Then, at 7:56, adds the stuttering effect once again, this time on the entirety of beat one of every loop. Figure 7.5 below shows the audio waveform of this manipulation.

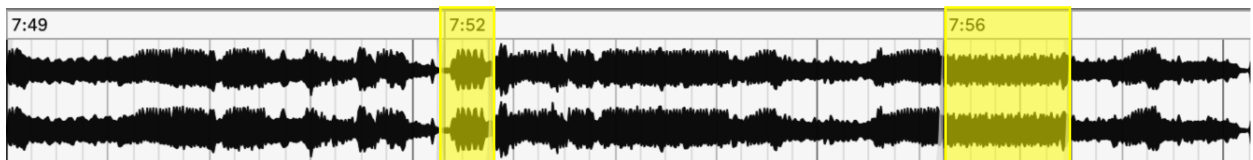

Figure 7.5 - Audio Waveform Excerpt from Dibia$e's Boiler Room Set 7:49-8:00, with DJFX Effect Highlighted

"Sample Magic" with Video Games and Pop Music

Throughout Dibia$e's set, he performs a variety of beats, remixes, and loops which sample a variety of popular music artists as well as a myriad of video game soundtracks. The act of "flipping," or remixing recognizable music from popular culture is a significant part of hip-hop beat-making culture. In the case of both J Dilla and Dibia$e, however, the act of what Mikhail Exarchos calls "sample magic" is frequently implemented,[428] in which an unaltered excerpt of the original sample is played and then the producer's "flip" is heard, like the reveal of a magic trick. This has become part of Dibia$e's signature sound in terms of

[427] SP Forums, "would you rather there be a 303w/djfx looper or 404w/exresam." https://sp-forums.com/viewtopic.php?f=6&t=12828&hilit=djfx, accessed March 1, 2022.
[428] Exarchos, "Sample magic: (conjuring) phonographic ghosts and meta-illusions in contemporary hip-hop production." *Popular Music.* Vol. 38. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2019, 33-53.

both his live performance and his discography, which include "flips" of well-known video game soundtracks and pop songs from the 1970s and 1980s.[429] At around 5:08 into the video for example, a sample of the Dungeon theme from the 1987 video game *The Legend of Zelda*, composed by Koji Kondo. This version is of course noticeably different than the original chiptune version, with additions of heavily compressed and un-quantized drum grooves transforming and adapting this track into Dibia$e's boom bap style of production. The same goes for the track heard at 13:49, with a sample of the "Prelude" track from the 1989 video game *Castlevania III: Dracula's Curse,* composed by Hidenori Maezawa. Once again, the version performed by Dibia$e is his "flipped" version, with heavily un-quantized drum grooves. It is also in a different time signature from the original track, with the original recording in a 3/4-time signature and Dibia$e in a typical hip-hop groove of 4/4 meter. As mentioned earlier, this manipulation and transformation of meter is a similar technique to J Dilla's manipulations of meter of sampled production that can be found throughout his discography, as was discussed in chapter three.

One other aspect in which Dibia$e highlights his ability to "flip" various popular music is by sampling pop and R&B songs from the 1970s and 1980s, further enacting Signifyin(g) through "sample magic."[430] One example of this auditory magic trick is performed by Dibia$e in his Boiler Room set and occurs at approximately 10:49 into the video, where, on one pad of his SP-404, he plays back the opening guitar chord to the 1979 Earth, Wind and Fire single "September."[431] After several seconds of playing this guitar riff to his audience, he then reveals his own "flip" of the Earth, Wind and Fire song, with a substantially different tempo and signature un-quantized groove that much of his production style features. It is apparent that his audience is impressed with this flip, with host Mndsgn

[429] The influence of video game soundtracks is most apparent in his self-released 2019 album *Bonus Levels.*
[430] Exarchos, "Sample magic," 37.
[431] "September," Spotify, track 7 on Earth, Wind, and Fire, *The Best of Earth, Wind, and Fire, Vol. 1,* Columbia Records, 1978.

stating as the beginning of the flip occurs at around 11:03: "Yo, that's what I'm talking about." Dibia$e continues this trend of sampling recognizable melodies at 14:34, where he plays a sample of the introduction to George Clinton's 1982 track "Atomic Dog."[432] The track being performed features a repeated segment of the synthesizer bass line found at 0:06 of the original recording, heavily compressed and time-stretched to be a noticeably slower tempo.[433] Then, at 14:56, the previous track which featured the sampled synthesizer melody from the *Castlevania III* soundtrack is brought back and played on top of the "Atomic Dog" bass line. The two melodies appear to clash in timbre as well as pitch, as they appear to be in different keys. This clashing of timbral qualities in hip-hop production is what is referred to by Adam Krims as the "hip-hop sublime," and is a key feature of musical Signifyin(g) in hip-hop beat-making culture. In this instance the "hip-hop sublime" is being performed in a live setting, with Dibia$e Signifyin(g) to his audience references to video game music, 1980s pop, and a combination of the two.

These three acts: head-nodding, DJFX, and flipping pop and video game music, are just some of the many ways in which an SP-404 performer may Signify. Throughout this analysis, one can see how J Dilla's signifiers within his signature sound have shaped how SP-404 performers such as Dibia$e may shape their performances. Through this use, many users may highlight their skills and authenticity as a producer and performer. How this authenticity is interpreted, however, may be up for debate.

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[432] "Atomic Dog," Spotify, track 5 on George Clinton, *Computer Games,* Capitol Records, 1982.

[433] The term "time-stretched" refers to the method in digital sampling of decreasing the tempo of the sample without decreasing the pitch. Diaz, "Analysis of Sampling Techniques by J Dilla in *Donuts*," 57.

Authenticity in SP-404 Performance

One criticism usually put forth by those who are unfamiliar with electronic music technology is the seeming lack of "real instruments" involved in both electronic music production and performance. Devices such as the laptop or turntable, whose original purposes were not for music performance, have been and are still today chastised by those outside of electronic music culture for their lack of physicality in comparison to that of acoustic instruments.[434] When describing the average performance of a DJ set, for example, Luta states that, "while not *necessarily* an instrument, a performed DJ set is a live musical object comprised of a number of variables."[435] I would like to specify, however, that the phrase "a live musical object comprised of a number of variables" could be considered a definition of an instrument, and that those individuals who interact and create music with objects, whether it be a DJ set with two turntables, an ambient performance with a laptop, or a drum pattern tapped onto a kitchen table, are using said objects as instruments, therefore transforming the object into instruments, regardless of an objects' original purpose. In the case of laptops this is massively misunderstood, as it is (to my knowledge) never the laptops themselves that are being played but rather the software found on laptops that are being used for composition as well as performance, as stated by Luta in his third installment on live electronic music performance, who points out that:

> Unfortunately, quite often it is impossible to know exactly what range of tools are being utilized within a laptop strictly by looking at an artist on stage. This is what leads to probably the biggest misnomer about the performing laptop musician. As common as the musical object may look on the stage, housed inside of it can be the most unique and intricate configurations music (yes all of music) has ever seen. The reductionist thought that laptop performers aren't "doing anything but checking email" is directly tied to the acousmatic nature of the objects as instruments. We can hear the sounds, but determining the sources and understanding the processes required to produce them is often shrouded in mystery.[436]

[434] Luta, "Musical Objects, Variability and Live Electronic Performance," *Sounding Out!* August 12, 2013. Accessed January 5, 2016. http://soundstudiesblog.com/2013/08/12/musical-objects-variability/.
[435] Ibid.
[436] Ibid.

In relation to hardware samplers such as the Roland SP-404, the case for this object as a musical instrument is even stronger, as the entire purpose of the creation of this device is for both musical composition and performance. Due to the SP-404's design and variety of tactile devices (such as knobs and pads) on its interface, it is much more apparent to those less familiar with live electronic music performance that this instrument requires the user to physically interact with an interface to perform with it. Just as a piano may be used as both a tool for composition and performance, so too can an SP-404.

Like with any digital sampler, the ability to replay audio with the use of a set of rubber pads means that the user has an unlimited number of options in terms of how they perform their music live and what sounds they choose to manipulate. In D'Errico's PhD dissertation "Interface Aesthetics," he points out how with the advent of digital sampling technology and performance, producers who perform with these devices "could just as likely trigger a snare drum sample, or an entire multi-movement symphony."[437] This creates a situation in which producers have to decide how they perform their tracks, either by separating their productions into separate samples and reconstituting them through live performance on a variety of pads or by "pressing play" and triggering the entire track, or specific sections of a track. Many users of the SP-404, however, try to keep their sets varied by separating sections of their tracks into either loops or one-shots (samples that only play once when triggered). SP-404 performance (as well as a good majority of live electronic music performances) feature both elements of what Adam Harper calls concrete music and flexible music.[438] In the case of the SP-404, the performer takes pre-recorded and produced loops and sounds (concrete) and manipulates them in a variety of improvisatory ways that are

[437] D'Errico, "Interface Aesthetics," 129.
[438] Harper, *Infinite Music,* 65-70.

usually different from performance to performance (flexible). Through both these variables, users are then able to Signify within a live performance.

Conclusion

In the previous chapter on online spaces and scenes in lo-fi hip-hop, I discussed the commodification taking place by the appropriation of beat-making scenes by a variety of corporations and organizations. It seems that in beat scenes in mainly live spaces, such as the ones discussed and analyzed in this chapter, are experiencing the opposite, and gaining a sort of cultural growth and expansion, with countless aspiring producers around the world using the Roland SP-404 to experiment with the production and performance of electronic beats. In many of these live spaces, the concern of the commodification of the culture, especially in relation to the signifiers tied to J Dilla, is significantly less than that of many beat cultures found online. It is also important to point out, however, that the SP-404 culture found in live performances and that of the lo-fi hip-hop cultures that exist and are shared through playlists and livestreams are not necessarily the same, though many producers participate in both cultures.

One of the desires for scenes surrounding the SP-404, whether explicit or implicit, is the willingness to Signify using methods that have been heavily influenced by J Dilla's signature sound. Due to the nature and influence of sampling and the consistent use of samplers as performing instruments this is especially the case, as producers have been and will continue to challenge themselves and what sounds they can "flip" into a new track that will satisfy themselves as well as impress their audience. This shows one of the primary ways in which aspects of J Dilla's signature sound has evolved beyond his discography and through a new generation of producers. The seed containing J Dilla's distinct musical

signifiers has grown into the beat cultures which now thrive into the 21st century, as shown by my analysis, and have been planted by the music of J Dilla decades prior.

Conclusion: Signifyin(g) Producers and Hip-Hop Production in the "Post-Dilla" Era

Throughout this dissertation, I have analyzed J Dilla's production discography through the lens of African diasporic forms of Signifyin(g), as well as how it has shaped forms of Signifyin(g) among contemporary hip-hop producers. Using this term originally popularized by Henry Louis Gates in his book *The Signifying Monkey* as "a trope, in which are subsumed several other rhetorical tropes,"[439] I have highlighted the ways in which a producer can Signify and how the act of Signifyin(g) is crucial to hip-hop production itself. Several analyses of various aspects of J Dilla's musical style or "signature sound" were featured in Part One, with each chapter highlighting a specific musical characteristic. These characteristics were the breaking of genre, un-quantized drum patterns, sampling techniques, and use of synthesizers in basslines.[440] Part Two of the dissertation then observed the various ways in which producers after the life of J Dilla used his musical signifiers (after 2006 to present, or what I call the "post-Dilla" era of hip-hop production), looking at several aspects of modern hip-hop beat-making communities and subcultures, such as lo-fi hip-hop culture, online resources for music production tools and education, and live instrumental hip-hop performance. This shows how J Dilla's own acts of Signifyin(g) have been a central influence for hip-hop producers and how these musicians use similar musical signifiers to Signify upon their listeners. Through this influence, J Dilla's musical signifiers, as shown by my analysis of beat-making cultures in part two, are transformed from what was originally a "troping of tropes" to a variety of tropes themselves.

One of the major aspects of this dissertation also focused on the concept of the "chain of signifiers" or "hall of mirrors" as coined by Gates. When talking about culture in relation

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[439] Gates, 35.
[440] Reynolds, "The cult of J Dilla."

to Afrodiasporic music communities, concepts such as influence specifically refer to the meanings that are created by the Signified from the Signifier, such as the listeners and fans of J Dilla. Throughout my analysis, I have concluded that the reason why influence occurs is because of the transference of meaning from Signifier to Signified. This then creates a metaphorical line of meaning(s) among the Signified, which then, based on the shared experience of the individuals (such as other hip-hop producers) who interpret various acts of Signifyin(g) become Signified themselves by creating their own meaning based off what was done by the original Signifier. In relation to the music of J Dilla, many of the reasons in which he was able to achieve his "signature sound" and therefore express various acts of Signifyin(g) is through his interactions with various forms of music technology. From various digital sampler workstations such as the Akai Professional MPC3000 to the Moog Voyager Synthesizer, the use of electronic music instruments was crucial to the construction and composition of his production discography.

In chapters five, six, and seven, much of my analysis focused on the culture that surrounds what I call the "post-Dilla" era of hip-hop production after 2006, which has evolved out of electronic music technology in the second half of the twentieth century. These subcultures have evolved into lo-fi hip-hop, hip-hop production industries such as sample packs and type beats, and live "beat sets" with the Roland SP-404 sampler. Through analyzing how J Dilla's musical signifiers have been further signified upon by other producers, we are able to see how said signifiers have been interpreted and commodified. This signature sound has then served as a source for a generation of producers to Signify acts of musical difference through their reverence for J Dilla.

Areas for Further Research

As stated in the introduction, the significance of music technology and its relation to the development and evolution of African diasporic music is so vast and far-reaching that it would require another dissertation addressing that topic. Further research focusing on other hip-hop producers as case studies for how signature sounds function within hip-hop production may also be valuable and may look at the discographies of producers such as DJ Premier, Madlib, or Timbaland. These analyses could look at both how their discographies influenced beat-making communities as well as specific eras of hip-hop production, such as how DJ Premier influenced hip-hop during the 1990s.

Other topics of interest may include the commodification of the signature sound, which I discussed at length in chapter six. Although my focus was originally just on J Dilla in that chapter, I would like to expand that research in order observe how this process of commodification functions within the wider political economy of music production. This concept would relate to concepts of appropriation, "biting" styles, and authenticity, which are major topics of contention among both hip-hop and wider popular music studies.

Finally, an ethnography of the beat-making communities mentioned throughout chapter five would be majorly beneficial, and heavily expand on the work of scholars such as Schloss, Katz, and Harrison. Showing the unique nature of how producers Signify, especially in live spaces as discussed in chapter seven, could prove invaluable as these communities evolve over the coming years. This is especially relevant as the technology for performing live instrumental hip-hop beats will evolve in a variety of ways, influencing both how (in terms of hardware or software) and where (in terms of online or in-person spaces) producers perform.

Signifyin(g) in the "Post-Dilla" Era

Within hip-hop production, the act of Signifyin(g) is central to the creative process, therefore it is always present, whether it be implicit or explicit and consciously or unconsciously implemented by the producer. This then creates meanings for both the producer and their audience and develops into a producer's signature sound. This signature sound, composed of musical signifiers from acts of Signifyin(g), gets disseminated and evolves into new genres or ways of performing and producing, and may also be commodified in various ways through modes of capitalist exchange. Through the signature sound of J Dilla, this process is most apparent, as his unique signifiers have been evolving through several facets of hip-hop production culture. From an un-quantized groove to a "flip" of a jazz sample, the reflections of J Dilla and his music will continue to evolve through the infinite "hall of mirrors" created by both current and future producers.

Glossary

Beat

Recording of a (usually instrumental) hip-hop production, usually composed of several loops. Can serve as the beginnings of a more complex production, such as the backing track for a singer or rapper, or as its own instrumental composition.

Flip

Referring to the act of sampling pre-recorded existing material. The act of "flipping" is in its essence an act of Signifyin(g), as the producer may "flip" a recording and transforming into new musical material through various digital sampling techniques.

MIDI

MIDI, or Musical Instrument Digital Interface, is a standardized digital interface for various music technologies which allows electronic music equipment and instruments to easily communicate with one another through the parameters of pitch, rhythm, and dynamics. This is represented visually within a MIDI grid, in which rhythmic placement of notes are represented horizontally and pitch is represented vertically, usually in a twelve-note keyboard or "piano roll" format.

MPC

Originally developed by Roger Linn and Akai Professional in 1987, the Music Production Center, or MPC, is a model of digital sampling workstation which became popular among hip-hop producers.

Production

Referring to the musical characteristics of a recording in which musical production was involved, such as the mix of the track itself, the drum pattern, the sample(s) used, etc.

Song

Referring to a recording with a song form, usually with lyrics and song structures such as verses and a chorus.

Track

Overarching term for any musical recording.

Un-quantization

In opposition to quantization, un-quantization is the method for placing rhythmic patterns off specified rhythmic subdivisions within a MIDI grid.

Quantization

A method of rhythm correction found in music production technologies which the software can "quantize" or correct any rhythmic inaccuracies when recording or inputting rhythmic patterns into a MIDI grid.

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