

Hiphop Rupture

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In his book *The Imperfect Art: Reflections on Jazz and Modern Culture*, jazz aesthetician and historian Ted Gioia famously states that the conditions and creative pressures jazz artists work under night after night are "ridiculous." They do not have the luxury of composing their works of art over long stretches of time, as painters, poets, and filmmakers do. They must produce their masterpieces on the spot. As a result, jazz can never be perfect because of its preference for the "haphazard [over] the premeditated." "If we hope to elaborate a conceptual framework which will allow us to accept jazz on its own terms and not as the bastard child of composed music," Ted Gioia decides with some desperation, "then we must develop what I would like to call an 'aesthetics of imperfection.'"

The reason I mention this rather rickety proposal is that I want to appropriate the idea of an "aesthetics of imperfection," and apply it to hiphop. As Gioia points out, European art is about perfection, about clarity, about "premeditated design, balance between form and content, an overall symmetry." But jazz also shares many of these values with traditional European art. Until the late '60s, jazz was and under the current dictatorship of jazz purist Wynton Marsalis, has become again a highly structured and formalistic art. Even Duke Ellington's early and brilliant composition "Koko" was a celebration of the pleasures of structure, or what jazz pianist Cecil Taylor called "construction," which is the art of building jazz from clear and formed parts or blocks. And need I mention the perfection and elegance of the Modern Jazz Quartet (from their music down to their threads!) or Nat King Cole's "Penthouse Serenade"? These European codes of perfection and correctness do not exist in the fundamental aesthetic strategies of hiphop music.

Hiphop is the true imperfect art. The music is not indifferent to codes of perfection indeed it often turns to classical music for samples, such as Xzibit's rather lavish sampling of Maurice Ravel's "Pavane" in his song "Paparazzi." But instead of retaining the beauty of a sample, keeping its rigid form intact, hiphop breaks the sample, disrupts it, jams it (literally). It's as if a perfect thing was made only to be broken, fragmented, paused, denied its moment of fulfillment. Hiphop does not avoid errors; it makes them, mimics them. And the most gifted producers are masters of mistakes. Even the language that attempts to capture the pleasures of hiphop expresses this impulse toward errors. You drop a beat, or kick it or make it dope, ill, or phat. In hiphop you "break it up, break it up, break it up!" as Kurtis Blow once put it.

When culture critic Tricia Rose asked Eric (Vietnam) Sadler of the *Bomb Squad*, who produced *Public Enemy* and *Young Black Teenagers*, about the way hip-hop producers make "noise" in their music, he said, "[You] turn it up so it's totally distorted and pan it over to the right so you really can't even hear it. Pan it over to the right means put it only in the right-side speaker, and turn it so you can't barely even hear it — it is just like a noise in the side...." The errors are what matter, what the producer is looking for. They want to "hear the shit crackling...." Hip-hop production is as far away from jazz production as Venus is from Mars. In fact, Nile Rodgers, the super-producer of *Chic* and other soul classics in the '70s and '80s, would be appalled by the "aesthetics of imperfection," because for him, production was defined by the idea of being "tight."⁽¹⁾

But why this love of errors? There are many reasons, but the one I will mention is that hip-hop is the art of waste — not in the decadent sense, meaning it doesn't throw away or waste as the rich do, but the very opposite: It subsists on waste. Hip-hop is like Lazarus in the bible (not the one who was brought back to life by his nephew, Jesus, but the one who was so poor that he would have been glad to satisfy his hunger with the crumbs that fell from the rich man's table); it's formed from the waste that falls from the abundant tables of the prosperous post-modern city. Tricia Rose puts it this way: "Worked out on the rusting core as a playground, hip-hop transforms stray technological parts intended for the cultural and industrial trash heaps into sources of pleasure and power." Hip-hop is made up of discarded bits and pieces (or beats and pieces, as *Coldcut* would have it) and so sees and expresses beauty in small, glimpsed, broken parts.

The Three Mistakes Of Hip-hop

There are three main mistakes (as I will call them) that hip-hop producers relish. One is the rupture of the beat, which is the moment when a song suddenly stops, collapses, or stutters. Another is incidental noise, which is a buzzing or beeping or industrial noise that enters and exits a track suddenly, without warning or reason. Last, is the art of wrecking records, which is the layering of words, phrases, and beats into one chaotic orgasm. (Structurally speaking, wrecking is to hip-hop what a tidy chorus is to a soul or rock song.) Each mistake has its master and also its greatest moment in the history of hip-hop.

The Rupture

I appropriate the word rupture from Tricia Rose, except Rose uses it to describe the "break beat," which is "the best part of a song" looped to infinity, whereas I use it not to describe the loop but the break: the loop's sudden stop. I also call it rupture because

it is close to the word rapture, especially in the erotic way that Debbie Harry utters it in *Blondie's* rap/funk song "Rapture." The rupture is erotic; it is the pause one takes during pleasures of sex, the pause that breaks the rhythm of passion, so that one may gaze at what is happening. Look at the tangled bodies and feel not so much the physical contact between warm flesh, but the aura of sex: its invisible traces, its emanations. The master of the rupture is undoubtedly the great Pete Rock. He knows exactly where to break a song so that we fall into the hole of it, into the blackness with the sensation of descending on a fast elevator. In Nas' masterpiece "The World Is Yours," which was produced by Pete Rock, we have the greatest rupture of all time, which occurs when Nas says, "I keep falling, but never falling six feet deep." Indeed the hole is "le petit mort," as the French, and later the Victorians ("the little death") called an orgasm; it is a sudden release from structure, from the body, from the burden of being, into pure and warm nothingness. But when the beat suddenly returns, we are back in motion, "back to life," as *Soul II Soul* put it.

Incidental Noise

Incidental noise is something you literally "drop" onto a track. It seems to be there for no apparent reason except, like the rupture, to disrupt the flow of the beat, to throw it off-center. And the moment you recognize and want to examine it, it's gone just as suddenly as it arrived. This incidental noise may be an indefinable fragment of a horn, organ, piano, the beep of a computer or cell phone, the buzz of a fax machine, or a sudden sheet of white noise. The master of incidental noise is RZA of the *Wu-Tang Clan*. His irregular and random noises are not only preternatural, but he knows the exact incorrect place to drop them. Where does he find these bizarre noises, each one different? RZA has many tracks with great distorted noises, including his opening for Jim Jarmusch's *Ghost Dog*, "Raise Your Sword Instrumental," which for some crazy reason is not on the soundtrack in its instrumental form. It is a dissertation on the art of dropping great incidental sounds. But my favorite use of incidental noise is on the RZA-produced "Don't U Know," from *Ol' Dirty Bastard's* 1995 CD *Return to the 36 Chambers*. The electronic stutters and vague voices that come in and out of the electric haze are so otherworldly that they give the song a completely abstract and dreamlike feel.

The Wreck

The wreck is, as I said above, the mess and jumble of scratches that usually make up the chorus of a hiphop song. In fact, scratching is a mistake in itself: You are not supposed to stop a record, nor are you supposed to move it back and forth. When I used to do this on my father's expensive hi-fi, he'd almost faint in horror. "Why are you breaking the record player?" he would say. You are supposed to let a record continue, to complete its cycle. The wreck is then a small symphony of mistakes,

mistakes heaped on mistakes, an orgy of mistakes. And the master manipulator of mistakes is none other than DJ Premier of the great hip-hop band *Gang Starr*.

DJ Premier takes words and snatches from jazz horns or jazz and classical piano, and then jumbles them up in a way that leaves one amazed. It's like witnessing a beautiful car crash, in the J.G. Ballard sense. This wreck is all the more impressive when one considers the perfection with which DJ Premier constructs a loop, or the foundation of his song. It is as if he were some perverse billionaire who travels to the most exotic and pristine parts of the world so that he can perform brilliant car collisions against beautiful landscapes. The best wreck he has ever produced is unquestionably in Jeru the Damaja's "Come Clean," which opens with an exclamation of a mistake ("Uh-oh!"), and then explains the error in effect: "Heads up cuz we're droppin' some shit." There are, of course, other distortions and errors that hip-hop regularly drops, such as the skipped record effect of which Pete Rock is especially fond. But the rupture (which is not unlike a deep wound on a beautiful face), the incidental noise (which works like a stroll through a city street with its sudden sounds: the siren of an ambulance in the distance, beats booming from a passing car, some madman screaming in a dark and echoing alley), and the wreck (a technological orgasm, a messy attempt to make machines more erotic, vital, human, or "full of love," as Bjork sang in her sexy robot video) are the best blunders of this "imperfect art."

Notes

1. In his essay, "Repetition as a Figure of Black Culture", James Snead describes at length a close relative of the hip-hop break, that being "the cut." James Brown is the most famous practitioner of the "cut," which, unlike the break, has a clear function within the structure of the song: it "sets of a new pattern" or "directs the music to a new level, where it stays with more 'cookin'... until a repetition of cues then 'cuts' back to the primary tempo." The cut "strengthens" the song's structure, it adds a new level, it contributes, rather than simply interrupting "the flow."

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