

The Club DJ: A Semiotic and Interactionist Analysis

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Drawing on observation and reflexive introspection, this article analyzes the practice of club DJing and reggae DJing in an attempt to shed light on the semiotic dynamics of music-making. To understand the historical, semiotic, and interactionist significance of the musical beat in the social world of club reggae DJing, empirical and analytical attention is paid to changes in technology, in aesthetic conventions, and in the meanings of subcultural practices.

For the layperson outside the dance club music scene, a DJ may be someone who plays pop hit songs on the radio, at parties, or at weddings—a human juke box if you will, a mere conduit of pre-recorded performances. DJs also perform at clubs, however, and they do much more than just play songs. This version of the DJ is indeed evolving into an artistry in its own right, and it is on this form of art that we focus in this article (Poschardt 1995). We see this as a continuation of earlier work in what can be called the Interpretive tradition (Bakker 1999, 2005; Dilthey 1985; Vail 1999; Wiley 1994).

We regard the performance accomplished by a club DJ as a situational manifestation of the pervasive human ability to engage in symbolic communication and in meaning-making (i.e., semiosis). In what follows, our analytical strategy is to extend the symbolic interactionist interest in the concept of the situation (Strauss 1978; Thomas 1927) to a semiotic analysis of the frame (Goffman 1974). The semiotic frame is simultaneously both larger than the situation (which is what Goffman tends to emphasize) and smaller. The larger component involves the way in which semiosis is couched within existing historical and cultural processes (Peirce 1960), and the smaller component involves the way, for example, in which musical “beat” can be regarded as a semiotic unit important for interaction.

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There are many varieties of interactionism (Blumer [1988] 2000; Denzin 1995, 1997; Forte 2001; Prus 1996), but they have not all been well integrated theoretically or methodologically. In our article, we attempt to integrate a semiotic version of interactionism and pragmatism (e.g., Peirce 1955; Rochberg-Halton [Halton] 1989) with art/social world theory (Becker 1982; Martin 2006; Strauss 1978). The key to seeing the club DJ through a symbolic interactionist-inspired semiotics lies with being aware of the importance of meaningful signs in the social world of popular music. Two of the most important such signs are the beat and the turntable. The beat is one essential lexical and functional component of the musical grammar of DJs. Playing an equally important role in this mode of communication is the turntable. Many DJs cannot play any musical instrument besides the turntable. Even though many musicians would deny that a turntable is even a musical instrument at all, club DJs' performances show that the turntable is used in practice as a semiotic resource for making meaning. Together, the beat and the turntable are at the center of a structure of signs whose conventions and practice are under constant diachronic evolution.

SEMIOTICS AND SYMBOLIC INTERACTION

Semiotics is the study of signs and sign systems (Nöth 1990). Sign systems constitute languages of different modes (linguistic, visual, sonic, etc.). Members of the social world of the club DJ employ linguistic and sonic signs in highly conventional (i.e., routinized) ways to determine authentic and inauthentic membership into this world (Wiley 1994, 2003). For example, authentic club DJ members would never use the sign vehicle "record" to refer to a musical recording. The sign vehicle that is used instead is the word "vinyl." Similarly, club DJs do not refer to their practices as "playing records." Instead, they engage in "turntablism." This jargon is an important sign system to be understood not only in terms of lexicon (that is, in reference to objects) but in terms of symbolic function, that is, in the ongoing definitions of the situation (Thomas 1923), the frames within which those definitions are nested, and the boundaries drawn around subjects and objects of those definitions (Merton 1995).

Charles Sanders Peirce (1955), a leading pragmatist and semiotician (see Rochberg-Halton [Halton] 1989), developed an epistemological and ontological model—known as the INSOR model (Bakker 2005)—that is quite useful for our analytical goals and obviously congruent with the symbolic interactionist paradigm. Instead of viewing the Cartesian subject as the foundational agent of semiosis, Peirce emphasized the importance of the interpretive network (IN). An interpretive network is a community of social agents engaged in semiosis. Members of an interpretive network use operational representations as signs-in-practice to mediate reality among themselves (Sebeok 1986).

In the social world of the club DJ, there is no way of fully understanding the semiotic role of one club DJ without grasping the meanings of the signs used by the whole interpretive network of people who populate that scene. Take, for exam-

ple, the functioning of “dub” as a sign. Turntablism for the club DJ is but a series of techniques or ways of dubbing. Modern creative turntablist techniques such as scratching and juggling are dub techniques, for instance, and such techniques constitute a grammar of dubbing. Therefore, dub is subject to the operation of an accepted grammar within this social world, a grammar made of representational conventions and practices. Dubbing techniques also function as operationalized representations (ORs). Because interactions among DJs occur on the basis of such ORs, signs such as beats and turntable techniques work as basic aspects of the definition of the situation in establishing social world membership. Therefore, if one cannot speak with the conventional grammar of dubbing, one cannot be an authentic member of the social world and interpretive network of club DJing.

An important sign within the semiotic system of the club DJ is the beat. For many musicians, a beat is a standard measure, like three-quarter time. DJs that play vinyl in clubs put great emphasis on the proper technique of varying the beats between one song and the next. In their definition of the situation, the variation of the beat is “the real thing,” even though many outsiders may detect absolutely no difference between slight variations. Indeed, it takes a great degree of skill to be a club DJ who is respected by other DJs. Club DJs must have a basic sense of rhythm if they are going to be able to count where the first beat drops on a bar or a measure. They must be able to listen to music of one tempo in one ear and then adjust another song until it is the right tempo in the other ear. This process is called “beat-matching” by DJs. Learning to beat-match is similar to learning to ride a bicycle. At first it seems almost impossible to maintain one’s balance. When people first start to beat-match it can make them feel dizzy and even sick. But, after one has mastered it, it is not at all difficult to use it like a native language.

Much like linguistic modes of communication, subcultural semiotic systems of aural communication are undoubtedly real in their consequences. It is indeed important to remind ourselves that even very small semiotic units (such as individual beats) are essential parts of an interaction sequence. For the skilled club DJ, every beat of a song is a part of the definition of the situation (Thomas and Thomas 1928). Every beat has the potential to disrupt the artful practice of dubbing, and therefore every beat can key in members of the present interpretive network to how the situation ought to be framed. Therefore, the various definitions of the situation, taken together on the basis of each interpretive act directed toward its most elementary units, start to “frame” the situation. The semiotic system of dubbing thus works as a frame in Goffman’s sense (Gottdiener 1985).

METHOD AND DATA

Ours is a purely inductive study (Glaser and Strauss 1967). It was not planned ahead of time, and it emerged from mundane symbolic interaction. At the same time, through reflection and analysis we have also attempted to make some broader generalizations (Aunger 2004). Therefore, it is important to attempt to clarify our

methodology. In a sense, the second author's experience of being a DJ allows us to formulate a focused ethnographic and autoethnographic study of the Montreal DJ scene at the turn of the twenty-first century. The type of DJ we mainly have in mind is the Jamaican dub/reggae club DJ who got his start by playing reggae at small clubs, artists like Mikey Dread and Lee Scratch Perry. As an active participant, DJ Krinjah (Theo Bakker) is also an observer. But, in another sense, DJ Krinjah becomes an informant for the sociologist (Hans Bakker) investigating this social world. The resultant dialogue and narrative involve the analytical process advocated by Anselm Strauss (1970), that is, forging constant comparison between the original case and other spatial and temporal contexts and experiences (Manen 1995). Such comparisons have been made possible by gathering evidential information from various locales in North America and Europe, where DJ Krinjah has had extensive discussions with approximately three hundred DJs over a period of six years. Therefore, although our substantive empirical work has Montreal, Canada, as its geographical focus, some if not most of our claims can apply to club DJs throughout the Western world. We report our narratives and interpretations in two separate sections. The first section deals with our diachronic analysis of the changing meanings of reggae club DJing over time. The second section includes semiotic observations made at the synchronic level.

REGGAE CLUB DJS

The Reggae World: Diachronic Considerations

Because there have been enormous changes over time in the content of music and in conventions of performance (Dicaire 2003), it is useful to take a step back and try to see the reggae DJ social world in terms of a wider historical frame. One of those macro levels of historical transformation that has affected the development of reggae is romanticism (Leinsdorf 1986; Richards 2002). The frame of romanticism is alive and well in youth subcultures. Much has been written, for example, about the romanticism of the British reggae scene (Davis and Simon 1977; Hebdige 1979). Indeed, genres of music like reggae, hip-hop, and rap (Hebdige 2004) are to a large extent a continuation of a preoccupation with self-expression and existentially unique identity that goes back to creative urges associated with artists of earlier times and other places. Preoccupations with authenticity, therefore, are common to both contemporary and earlier members of the social world of reggae. In this sense, conventions and practices of reggae DJing may be understood as semiotic resources for the performance of authenticity. Nevertheless, changing historical material conditions structure the variability of the conventions of such performances (Ricoeur 1984; Toop 1984).

Reggae, much like many musical genres, is subject to a process of genesis, decline, extinction, and, at times, rediscovery (e.g., see Renshaw 2006; Vail 1999). In the 1990s, American, British, and Canadian audiences re-discovered 1970s Jamaican

reggae 45-rpm records and re-introduced that “pure” music as a kind of romantic counter to globalization (Nava and O’Shea 1996). At the same time that the music and words of artists like Bob Marley and Lee Scratch Perry were being rediscovered, the poetry of Linton Kwesi Johnson (1974, 1975) and many others underwent a rebirth of sorts.

Earlier reggae records were produced very cheaply and made relatively quickly. Since musical equipment was expensive, reggae musicians made do with what they had. A record player or two was easier to set up than a live band with good musical instruments, given the state of the Jamaican economy. This changed when Chris Blackwell, a white Jamaican entrepreneur, launched the “Island” label. “Reggae was transformed through Blackwell’s investment, taking the music based on the economics of an impoverished island and imbuing it with the more ostentatious values of the global music economy” (Blake 1996:220). Thus, almost overnight some musicians were elevated to the world stage as superstars. The “myth” of the Jamaican dub DJ made waves that circulated widely in distant places like Montreal and London decades later, especially among people who had very little, if any, contact with Jamaica in the 1970s.

Many conventions and practices of the reggae club have changed over the years, but some have remained the same. Today, like they did in the past, DJs engage in dubbing. The art of the reggae DJ has been termed “dub” because, when DJs spin the records (most of which were and are locally produced by small labels), they are not just playing a record; they are dubbing, adding another layer of interpretation, an additional “dub” of meaning. For DJ Kool Herc, the dub was the beat itself. Through dubbing, therefore, a creative element is added, and a unique postmodern pastiche is made. For example, a DJ will often celebrate African heritage by utilizing Rastafari language (Jamaican “nation language” or patois) much like in Johnson’s poem titled “Inglan Is a Bitch” (1980), which recounts the hardships of the Jamaican immigrant whose dreams “get blown to smidahreen.” The patois may be used by a DJ even though he or she may not be a Rastafarian (in the narrow sense). The use of Rastafarian language is thus one case of the DJ’s accomplishment of dubbing and the performance of pastiche and creative hybridity (Johnson 1980, 1991, 2002).

The technology of turntablism has also undergone significant changes. In the past, the standard technology was the Panasonic Technics 1200 turntable, which was first manufactured in the 1970s. In what constitutes a remarkable romantic attachment to the authenticity of the past, that machine still remains among the most popular club DJ turntables today. It was the simplicity of that tool that gave birth to some of the modern creative turntablist techniques, such as beat-matching, scratching, orbits, rips, flares, and juggling. Turntablist techniques such as transforming and strobbing were also developed on the same machine. This standard technology allowed for some changes in technique, such as the invention of more refined scratching, but for many years there have been no qualitative changes of the magnitude that digital technologies are introducing today.

Over the past few decades, DJs who play in clubs have been different from commercial radio DJs because of the technological medium through which they express themselves. Whereas in the 1920s and 1930s the radio DJs recorded black musicians—like Clarence Pinetop Smith, Piano Red, Pete Johnson, and Jelly Roll Morton—to play on local radio stations and not for records destined for mass sale, that situation has long ceased to exist. Since World War II, the commercialization of music has completely changed the role of the DJ and formed a schism between radio DJs and club DJs. Radio DJs generally find their music through readily available resources (in the majority of cases, major recording labels provide them with recordings). Club DJs, instead, have had to spend much time and money searching for records issued in very limited press runs.

Contemporary changes in technology, however, are further differentiating the social world of club DJs. Just as changes in technology in the past influenced what it meant to be a guitarist (i.e., from acoustic to electric), changes in the instruments used by DJs have also changed the nature of turntablism. Among club DJs there is a perception that recent changes in technology have made the traditional performance obsolete. Changes in technology have permitted DJs to access any song they want at very low cost. In the 1970s, the DJ was somewhat of a historian and archivist who painstakingly collected old 45-rpm records and went to great efforts to pull together obscure but powerful early innovations. Today, there are many DJs who have binders full of different genres of music on MP3 and CDs that they download and burn on their home computer with a simple click of the mouse.

Collecting CDs and MP3's is not only easier, but it is also cheaper. Whereas in the past DJs might have had to choose between eating and buying records, now they can simply download for little or no money, copy from friends, and even use devices like "DJ in a Box" that make it possible for relative amateurs to achieve technical feats that would have been very difficult for the earliest DJs in New York and London. Some purists are quick to criticize and dismiss this new technology altogether. They claim that it will not last and that vinyl will be around forever. But that may not necessarily be the case. The new media allow a DJ almost exactly the same manual control as with the older technology, while providing many new and alluring options.

Although some DJs enjoy having access to songs they never had access to before, others say that it takes away the challenges DJs formerly faced in accumulating an exclusive collection in their own way. Interviews with many DJs in Montreal and Toronto clearly showed that the members of the subcultures view the world of the club DJ through lenses that emphasize a certain degree of romantic attachment to earlier ways of doing things. Indeed, veteran DJs do not feel that younger DJs pay sufficient dues to the system in order to become members. For example, DJ-XL laments the fact that "young DJ's of today don't go through that kind of training," with tape decks and turntables that do not indicate pitch (Deep J Max 2004). The club and underground club DJs are very judgmental, almost to the point of discriminating against other DJs who might not have the same level of skill they have.

Ability to manipulate vinyl is a technical skill that is highly respected and that differentiates DJs among themselves. Similarly, a DJ who does not have a very good collection of really rare records is less valued than a DJ who has put in the time and effort to put together a good collection.

In a sense, although some club DJs are becoming more like radio DJs, vinyl club DJs remain almost the exact opposite of the commercial radio DJs for whom the music is already decided by the record industry. Vinyl club DJs have virtually no one to answer to, and this autonomy provides them with great artistic freedom of self-expression. They receive feedback from those who come to the clubs, of course, but even then it is the DJ who makes the final decision. This can be a good thing for self-expression and self-authenticity, but it also has a down side. The negative side is that the lack of access to much music almost forces the club DJ to compensate for the lack of material with skills. A club DJ has to have an open mind to older music that is regarded as classic. For example, a vinyl hip-hop DJ might dig through the crates at a used record shop, looking through old blues, jazz, funk, soul, and reggae records to produce new dubs and thus to reinvent him/herself.

Ways to maintain boundaries by controlling semiotic resources for the performance of authenticity have always existed. For example, when the genre was starting out in New York City, DJs would scratch off the labels from records to keep other DJs from knowing precisely what they were playing. This allowed those who had special vinyl records to be exclusive. Today, there are DMCs (Disco Mixing Competitions) where the focus is on scratching techniques such as "crabbing," "transforming," and "strobbing." Dick Hebdige's (2004) summary puts many innovations from the 1970s into perspective. For example, consider how Kool Herc employed two MCs, Coke-la-Rock and Clark Kent, to do the rapping for him as he switched between record decks. The "cut 'n' mix" contests of the hip-hop DJs of the early 1980s no longer take the same form. In sum, the pervasive historical presence of a romantic frame has been weakened by technological innovations that are changing the conventions and practices of the social world of reggae club DJing.

The Reggae Club DJ: Synchronic Considerations

There is often an intimate atmosphere in a club. The smaller clubs tend to attract regular patrons on specific nights. Within such a club, the audience enters into a common semiotic interpretive community with the club DJ. Regular patrons come to share some of the same representations of reality present in the somewhat more exclusive circle of DJs. In the Peircean semiotic framework (Peirce 1960), everything about the club scene that can be interpreted is part of the sign system, including every beat and every interaction with the turntable. DJs know that sign systems of beats are governed by a precise grammar and that correct mastering of this grammar is a telling indication of status among DJs (Brown [1977] 1989, 1995).

DJing, like occupations such as funeral directing (Cahill 1999), is a "distinctive

and definitive occupational jurisdiction . . . which allows the practitioners to feel that they are set apart from others." Furthermore, "When it comes to occupations, the practitioner's professional view of themselves may be as important a source of jurisdictional power as public prestige" (Cahill 1999:118). The personal and collective sense of distinction and honor is something that funeral directors share with jazz musicians (Becker 1951). Though funeral directors and most jazz musicians have not received the same level of public esteem as lawyers, physicians, or seminarians, they have nevertheless turned their stigma around and constructed a sense of personal worth based on their distinctiveness and expertise. They have a somewhat different definition of the situation than that shared by many people outside their profession. A similar process occurs among club DJs. While it is often assumed that anyone can be a DJ, it turns out that in the DJ world there is a clear pecking order based on skill and expertise. Their frame of the situation involves a clear repertoire of signs (Goffman 1974). Indeed, being a master of the shared sign system (e.g., beats) confers status within the group. But it is a precarious status; hence, there is a strong urgency to protect it, just as in situations of grief (Bakker 1995). Jazz musicians faced the same kind of challenge in the early days (Becker 1951).

Different genres of music have different beats and are in that way almost like different languages. They could be compared to syntax in spoken languages. Hip-hop, for example, is 80–100 beats per minute, which is similar to reggae and R&B. Techno music, on the other hand, is at 100–140 beats per minute, approximately twice the normal heart beat. Drum and bass, on the other hand, is 180 beats per minute. According to DJ legend, Frankie Bones, a famous house DJ, 130 beats per minute is the tempo that people want for dancing all night. A faster tempo tires people out too soon. Half of 130 is about 65 beats per minute, which is close to a pulse at rest (about 60 beats per minute). Thus, it makes sense that house and techno are popular in part because of the synchronicity between a normal heart rate (doubled in speed) and the music. House and techno are also very repetitive and hypnotic, which means that they do not demand attention the way vocal music does. Vocal music can be "in your face," whereas house and techno allow you to get lost in the beat. We make these paradigmatic comparisons because beat is central to the language that club DJs use. It is central to the frame and to the process of symbolic interaction. Just as the ethnographer studying other subcultures must get to know the jargon appropriate to those worlds (Aunger 2004), the symbolic interactionist student of the club DJ scene must pay careful attention to the centrality of different syntaxes of beat (Poschardt 1995).

A lot of vocal music, such as hip-hop and R&B, emphasize two of the four beats in a bar, such as the snare drum on beats two and four or the kick drum on one and three. House music, in contrast, has a four/four emphasis, with the kick drum falling on every beat in the bar (i.e., rather than the sound being "boom ka, boom ka," it is "boom, boom, boom, boom"). A musician who has never attempted to DJ in a club may not be as aware of the centrality of beat. But a club DJ, while talking with

another club DJ, will frequently get into an intricate and involved discussion of nuances of beat. An analogy could be made to those speaking sign language—infrequent signers will miss aspects of signing that those who regularly use sign language will immediately recognize. Thus, although the melody can be important, the performing club DJ is primarily “speaking” through the beat of the music. Since beat is so central to reggae, this fact is especially true for that particular genre. Many different melodies originally composed with a different beat can also be used with a reggae beat. All symbolic interactionist research pays attention to “significant symbols,” but by adding an awareness of semiotics, it is possible to broaden our awareness of what a significant symbol can be (Dilthey 1985; Rochberg-Halton [Halton] 1989; Vannini and Waskul 2006; Wiley 1994).

Beat-matching is a difficult kind of grammar to pick up. The non-cohesion of the two different songs at two different tempos with two different sonic qualities to be matched can be disturbing at first. Basically, any songs that are not live (as in songs that are produced by a drum machine or have some kind of click track tempo throughout) can be “beat-matched.” But, for the songs to remain in time, their tempos must be consistent throughout the whole song. For some live songs, such consistency is not maintained. To beat-match a song from a live band, even when you have synchronized the two tempos, takes constant re-adjustment. If the adjustments are not made, the result can be a “train wreck.”

Bad beat-matching is a sound that can be compared metaphorically to shoes in a clothes dryer. DJs love to make fun of other DJs who slip into a bad mix. The aesthetic conventions of beat-matching are very critical. There is very little room for mistakes. If a mistake is made, the DJ will be “burned” or chastised and will suffer loss of status. Within the social world of club DJing, the frame demands allegiance to a code of “professionalism” unknown to outsiders.

Even though there is a shared agreement over the grammar of DJing, what was clear throughout our observations were the difficulties that club DJs face in managing performances such that they are perceived as authentic members of this social world by their peers. In fact, even after a DJ masters the art of synchronizing tempos, two songs that have been synchronized in terms of rhythm still might not sound good together. That is due to the fact that different songs may be in different keys. Furthermore, when a DJ changes the tempo of a track, the notes are no longer at 440 pitch (the standard pitch for music). On a piano, every note that the musician hits will be in proper pitch in relation to the other notes. A note on a turntable, however, has to be tuned using the speed control function. But whereas genres of dance music that have long blends or mixes (such as techno, house, drum, and bass) tend to be more instrumental and minimal in melody and can therefore combine well, hip-hop, R&B, or reggae are also vocally based and therefore do not always layer well. This results in the presence of a great and constant danger for the DJ. A train wreck between songs can suddenly occur, and immediately the frame and the status of the DJ will need to be realigned with the preferred definition of the situation.

SUMMARY

We have attempted to show the heuristic value of a kind of symbolic interactionism that uses insights from semiotics for the analysis of different symbolic resources for performance and communication. A semiotic interactionism of this kind allows us to focus on the *semiotic work* in which DJs engage to maintain their professional status and their preferred definition of the situation shared with an interpretive network of listeners. We have seen that such semiotic work is difficult and treacherous; even the smaller semiotic units of this social world have to abide by precise conventions.

We have also seen that for a long time the art world of reggae DJing has relied on records (vinyl) and relatively rudimentary turntables as a preferred technology. At first, performance was often based on using the materials at hand and frequently just for limited purposes. As the technology became more refined, the skill level required of the DJ diminished. The cost of that change has been that the art of turntablism decreased in symbolic value and the romantic subcultural appeal of certain styles of music and performance decreased as well.

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