

The DJ Aesthetic:

A Look into the Philosophy and Technology that Enable the Disc Jockey

Zachary F. Hellman

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*The DJ Aesthetic:
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INTRODUCTION

The Renegade Master

Unbeknown to most, the life of a DJ is quite similar to that of a major league pitcher. One gains his stripes by shutting out crowds of fans throughout the region, and earns their praise with his tricks and unexpected maneuvers. At the same time, the road takes its toll on his personal life, leaving little time for family and loved ones. But the DJ pushes on, for like pitching for such a ballplayer, music is his true passion and motivation. Eventually, with a good record of course, he earns the respect of his fans, and people rush to the dancehalls or ballparks just to catch a glimpse. On the mound or behind the decks, he is almighty. A slump can lead people to question his talents, but a shutout will quickly silence unbelievers, giving him the godlike persona that he earns and deserves.

Many have approached the concept of the disc jockey with lofty ideas that pertain to socialism and art, detouring from the true DJ persona. This is easily understandable, for the DJ is one of the simplest figures in our society, but the role he fills is much greater and complex. For philosophers, the DJ is ideal for defining an omnipresent artist in the postmodern world. He is the creator that uses predefined art as his medium, promotes it tirelessly, and retreats to a realm of silence with little to say about his own work or accomplishments. But this conception is short lived. For we are all consumers that make use of popular art and culture, not only to redefine us, but also to expand our own place in the world. DJs have simply found a way to capitalize on this cultural dynamic in our society, and this has made them such relatable figures. Despite their intentionality, their impact has remained quite notable at the social level, perplexing sociologists with their

significance. Have the DJ's feats been truly important, or do they show a lack of understanding about our own tastes and consumption? It is probably somewhere between, with too much emphasis on the DJ as an individual, with little emphasis on his craft; the defining art behind his persona.

The elaborate examination of the DJ as a social figure has left much of the study behind his technician status neglected. Too much time has been spent attempting to find the DJ's place in the social world, that his place in reality has become trivialized. Even while technology spreads the DJ's methods far beyond the turntables, his status seems to be more given than deserved, and society looks upon jocks as the lackeys of the musical trade rather than the maestros. Too primitive to be knowledgeable, the disc jockey should respond to people like a machine, despite his deep involvement in craft. Much like the traveling troubadours of the French countryside, the DJ is expected to play any tune on command, and his skills are only considered revered when he is able to present music in an impressive manner, likely unknown to his audience. With this popular attitude prevalent among the masses, DJ technology has sought to remove this mechanic from the figurehead of his musical movement and replace him with a sensible machine, despite any knighthood granted on to him by society's nod. This approach is understandable due to the strides made in instrumental music technology, but removing the DJ's craft altogether presents even greater questions about who we are as consumers of the music we love, and the respect that we have toward the arts.

The day of perfected music technology and information retrieval is in the distance, but it is not out of sight. Eventually the impossible will be possible, and our current inabilities with music will become obtainable. Moore's Law has guided

technologists to understand that their processing capabilities can be achieved, and we must now question how we are to deal with the arts in this inevitable future. To abandon craft in search of perfect technologies would be a disservice to our taste for virtuosity. It would say a great deal about our quest for technology, but it would question our artistic values even greater. To lose man's moralistic importance over technological goals would be dishonorable, and should be unacceptable to musicians. With these facts in mind, we must proceed with caution, for our results in automata and other technologies should only be as good as those we were able to achieve ourselves. As children of instrumental musicianship, craft should be held with the utmost importance, and this should be the essence of our quest through music technology.

While I do not seek to abandon technological advancements in order to protect organic artistry, I do believe that technology should benefit artists rather than replace them. With this acknowledged, it is clear that further progression in DJ technology will involve the development of DJ automata. Such machinery could benefit DJs not only in their work, but it could teach us about the cognitive information DJs readily obtain in the service of their craft. In particular, direct crowd response and information feedback could teach us a great deal about the art of DJing and provide DJs with interesting new data for determining their own musical performances. To do so would be to quantify the questionable insecurities that DJs have in their work and provide data to help satisfy these questions. Researchers in music technology find these ideas to be far more promising than those in commercial fields, however, both can and will benefit just the same. While many large companies have scrambled to monopolize on these technological sects, the DJ's trusted brands have stood by their representative; the selector.

This technological allegiance in the field is not coincidental, but it is the basis of the DJ's culture. DJs are not further extensions of large corporate empires, but are rather independent artists who judge technology based upon functionality, far more objectively than their industry counterparts. At the National Association of Music Merchants (NAMM) Convention in 2000, an executive from the Vestax Corporation stated,

“In England in the last few years, turntables are outselling guitars. There is no doubt about it that the DJ industry has doubled in size in the last year alone and has captured the American youth in the same style that the youth were playing guitars and drums back in the 1960s...hip hop has been wonderful to us as a company.” (*Scratch*, 2001)

Better technology is not solely responsible for the rise in DJ culture, but it has responded promptly and effectively. However, if this is to continue, companies must work with DJs to develop their products appropriately. DJs approach technology similar to the way they judge the music they play. Their loyalty to a brand is much like their loyalty to a favorite artist. At times it can be unquestionably accepted, but art, like any product, is always susceptible to evaluation. Hence, DJ technology is judged at its most fundamental level, and this makes it one of the most productive fields in music technology. For developers, DJs are ideal subjects, for their work in music is both demanding and constant. They require products that are both durable and dependable. Although this could also be said for most musicians, a DJ is not part of a band or ensemble; he is the orchestra. His virtuoso ability and soloist performance may have made his role appealing to many, but his tools and culture define his essence even greater.

The promise of automata is not only part of music and DJ technology, but it represents the future of greater technology as a whole. In a great respect, automation is the principle goal for most technologists. It represents a world where our machines have

been perfected so we may pursue life's greater questions and conquests. While I do not foresee a philosophical surge with the advent of automated technology, I do believe it is important to pose such questions in its absence. Automation signifies technology working on its own to produce desirable results, and this has always been a goal in the engineering of new things. The phonograph and jukebox, pioneering tools of the DJ, have all been automated to some degree. This is hardly coincidental, for just as the DJ represents the postmodern artist, he represents the link between man and machine, the missing link in automata. Much has occurred since these primitive devices, but the most intricate and promising DJ technology has resulted in the last several years. We are fortunate enough to view current DJ technology with a greater understanding of his tools, history, and culture.

The recent development and popularization of digital DJ systems shows that the musicianship of DJs is highly viable. Additionally, it demonstrates that DJs embrace technology when it is presented effectively, but are unlikely to let go of their favorite staples. The Technics SL-1200 has remained the DJ's turntable of choice for over thirty years, but experimentation remains highly prevalent among other emerging DJ technologies. While digital technology is inevitable in every field, the DJ seems defiant about the elimination of the analog turntable. The DJ has always been one to experiment, but he relies on the tools that helped to build his status, and the turntable seems impossible to be removed from this picture. Hence, the turntable seems to be irreplaceable in DJ automata as well. Nearly all of the new DJ technology is analogous in some way to the DJ's traditional equipment. It is then unlikely that an effective automated system would neglect a sense of the DJ's traditions.

Automated DJ systems require an understanding of the way people think and interact. Additionally, an effective system should be able to identify the elements we appreciate in music through some form of sensibility. These requirements may be difficult to achieve, but the possibilities would reveal a greater understanding of music and human cognition as a whole. Artistry and sensibility have never been prominent qualities in technology. Replicating musicianship in its purest form presents the most difficult task for musical automation. Further, it would mean that the human cognition involved in music is completely quantifiable, and this removes any sense of mystery in the artistic and creative process.

While the promise of DJ automation is enticing to both DJs and music researchers, it is important to remember the character that is being automated. DJs have personalities and values that define them, and this is hardly transferable to automata. Therefore, it is important to define the purpose of DJ automation along with its development. Just as technology companies must work in conjunction with DJs to better serve them, DJs must decide what they require from automated systems and how they could be used in order for an effective automated DJ to be developed. In a sense, DJs must communicate what it is that they do in their art, for as users of technology, the DJ is the analog controller that must become digitized in automation. Their position is the missing link in DJ automata.

Now comes the question of aesthetics. What are the beautiful and the sublime aspects of the DJ performance? Do DJ's have principles that guide them in their work, or do they perform like a randomized machine of automata? Some of the aesthetic elements expressed in music include lyricism, harmony, hypnotism, emotiveness, temporal

dynamics, volume dynamics, resonance, playfulness, color, subtlety, elatedness, depth, and mood. Despite these notions, history has shown us that DJs are individuals, whose personalities define their art more so than the music they play. The aesthetic specifics lie within the basic technology of the DJ's kit. His turntables, mixer, and the sounds that emerge from them compose the foundations of the DJ aesthetic. His skill set has become defined over the past generations, who have since given nomenclature to his techniques and created notation to replicate his work. Therefore, the modern DJ has negligible differences to the performing musician, for he is a performing musician. While his origins may not indicate a unique form of musical originality, his status of today clearly does so. Such a sustainable rise indicates that DJs hold a musical dominance not for their unique approach, but for their ingenuity in musical performance. The contributions of DJs are clearly notable. While technology may have enticed many to enter the field, the true art lies in the principles of the DJ; the DJ aesthetic.

While Hogarth's early aesthetic treatise, *The Analysis of Beauty* greatly ignored music, aesthetics have been important in musical philosophy since William James. In his *Principles of Psychology* he wrote that,

“Complex suggestiveness, the awakening of vistas of memory and association, and the stirring of our flesh with picturesque mystery and gloom, make a work of art romantic...classic taste brands these effects as coarse and tawdry, and prefers the naked beauty of the optical and auditory sensations, unadorned with frippery or foliage.” (James, 1983 ed.)

Modernists grappled with the questions of musical aesthetics throughout the Twentieth Century, while at the same time rushed to the dancehalls to hear their favorite jocks spin. The commercialization of music provided even more problematic issues for modernist philosophers. The music critic and philosopher Theodor Adorno suggested that culture

industries churn out a debased mass of unsophisticated, sentimental products, which have replaced the more “difficult” and critical art forms, leading people to actually question social life. “False needs are cultivated in people by the culture industries. These are needs which can be both created and satisfied by the capitalist system, and which replace people’s ‘true’ needs - freedom, full expression of human potential and creativity, and genuine creative happiness.” (Adorno, 2001) Thus, those who are trapped in the false notions of beauty according to a capitalist mode of thought are only capable of hearing beauty in dishonest terms. While this might dishearten the likes of DJs, it does provide the environment in which postmodern art could thrive.

Simon Frith argues that, “‘bad music’ is a necessary concept for musical pleasure, for musical aesthetics.” In his essay he distinguishes between two common kinds of bad music; the Worst Records Ever Made type, which include “Tracks which are clearly incompetent musically; made by singers who can’t sing, players who can’t play, producers who can’t produce,” and “Tracks involving genre confusion. The most common examples are actors or TV stars recording in the latest style.” Frith gives three common qualities attributed to bad music: inauthentic, in bad taste, and stupid. “The marking off of some tracks and genres and artists as ‘bad’ is a necessary part of popular music pleasure; it is a way we establish our place in various music worlds. And ‘bad’ is a key word here because it suggests that aesthetic and ethical judgments are tied together: not to like a record is not just a matter of taste; it is also a matter of argument, and argument that matters.” (Frith, 2004)

In an unintentional manner, DJs have closely followed the discussion of music aesthetics. These arguments have helped to form the basis on which DJs judge music,

however, they have obtained a much more flexible position through this experience. DJs are responsible for making people dance, therefore, their aesthetics lie not in the judgment of music, but in how music affects its listeners. Furthermore, the technology used by DJs has helped to determine the manner in which they deem an appropriate presentation of music to an audience. The DJ aesthetic lies in the craft of the DJ more than it lies in the quality of the music they play. This philosophy has been formed through the manner by which DJs present music, and through their tools and technology. Music is a discrete form of artistic expression, but the presentation of a DJ is even more concise. (Bucknell, 2002) Therefore, the DJ aesthetic is conceived through an acceptance of DJ technology and the sheer popularity (or rareness) of the tunes DJs play.

With such a great deal of attention given to DJs, it is clear that they have become significant contributors to the arts and our own consumption of music. In the past, “the DJ was a low life, the musicians hated you because they reckoned you were doing them out of work, you were not deemed to have any skill and the pay wasn’t that good. (Slaney, 2006) Since then, DJs have overcome these prejudices and assumptions of the public and music communities, and some have even risen to superstardom. However, this progress has only been possible through the DJ’s sense of self, history, and culture. The inventor of the scratch, Grand Wizard Theodore said, “I feel that people today are realizing that what they are doing now came from somewhere, and in order for it to go any further it has to go around in a 360. I always say you have to know where hip hop has been to know where it’s going. You have to.” (*Scratch*, 2001) We will have to do the same if we are to go any further in the development of DJ technology, and we owe this to ourselves and to the renegade masters.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT: *I'm The King Of Rock!*

I. The Origins of Fundamental DJ Technology

The DJ's story is a long and greatly neglected tale. While little has been acknowledged or written about these influential tastemakers, their contribution to music and popular culture has been extensive and continues to dominate the way in which music is heard and consumed. The DJ has most notably made his impact through his presence on radio stations and nightclub performances. However, these outlets have become steppingstones that DJs have used to leap into the mainstream stratosphere, with many now recognized as cultural icons. While the perception and understanding of the DJ has experienced a continental divide to a certain extent, this is slowly eroding revealing the DJ's true influential power. Although many of the originating technicians have fallen into obscurity, their devotion to craft has led to both cultural and technological innovations that have impacted the entire world.

These developments have coincided with one another in the creation of a technologically savvy culture filled with amateur DJs. "A manifestation of this is the 'playlist' of mp3 files. With free programs such as 'iTunes' and 'Windows Media Player', pupils can rip, play, order and share their musical choices." (Crow, 2006) This freedom was largely restricted in the past, controlled mostly by record companies' presentation of albums and compilations. This control has since been lost, as DJs have assumed the role of musical presenter, in a more stylish and independent fashion.

"The DJ has been with us for 94 years. In that time he has completely transformed the way music is conceived, created and consumed. By adapting music to suit his dancers he brought about dramatic stylistic changes and revolutionized the use of recording technology...He also greatly advanced the status of recorded music—a record is no longer a

representation of some distant ‘live’ event, it is now the thing itself, the primary incarnation of the song.” (Brewster, 2000)

The recording studio may have first implemented the technology and produced the recordings that we have grown to love, but DJs brought these recordings on the road and put the technology to an even more innovative use. However, this process has been a slow transition and has hardly been an intentional one.

The DJ's story holds little value without an understanding of the technology that has enabled him. There are the obvious examples, many of which lie in the history of radio broadcasting. Thomas Edison invented the cylinder phonograph in 1877, but it had no musical significance for another decade. In 1887, Emil Berliner developed the first flat-disc gramophone. Despite these notable devices, the DJ would not be conceived until Guglielmo Marconi perfected his radiotelegraph system that transmitted electromagnetic waves. It was then that radio was born, and the first platform for the DJ was established. These initial developments created the tools and the trade in which the DJ would flourish, but they have had little impact on our modern perception of DJs. Yet many figures would arise throughout the century that would help to formulate this perception through their actions and innovations.

Radio broadcasting became commonplace following World War II, and through this format, one DJ would create the nomenclature for the most influential genre of the century. When another radio jock challenged the name of Alan Freed's show *Moondog Party*, he changed the name to the *Rock'n'Roll Party*. Initially based out of Cleveland, Freed used the term “Rock'n'Roll” to describe predominantly black rhythm and blues records. As the white mainstream began to grasp black music and Rock'n'Roll became colloquial terminology in the United States, Freed's show became nationally syndicated

and the disc jockey became a household name. Freed was not a technological innovator, but his cultural impact gave credence to DJs and gave them an image to emulate.

Record companies saw the promotional power behind radio DJs and quickly answered their beck and call to get their records played. Lou Rawls recalls, “It was nothing for the promotion men to keep the disc jockeys in cars and deep freezes and televisions, and fur coats for the little lady...That was the way business was done, and all of them did it until the Man stepped in and busted Alan Freed.” (Brewster, 2000) Despite the youth’s acceptance of black music, the public at large sought to silence people like Freed, and did so through an intensive government investigation into the “payola” practice.

BMI had largely capitalized on black music, and in turn ASCAP alerted the government into the financial workings of the music business. Congressional hearings would go on to villanize Freed and inevitably destroyed his career. Freed’s equally influential television counterpart, Dick Clark, host of ABC’s *American Bandstand*, escaped scrutiny of the investigation. Although Clark had a financial interest in many of the songs that he played on his show, the records had a predominantly “white” appeal, unlike the black influence in the music on Freed’s show. *American Bandstand* would be unsurpassed as a promotional medium until the rise of MTV in the 1980s. While Freed was victimized by the payola scandal and radio formats would soon become corporatized, he championed the renegade attitude and flamboyant style that would become the epitome of DJ culture.

The restrictions and limitations posed by the radio format led the DJ to find his true home in the nightclub. In this setting, the playing of recorded music becomes a live

event, and is in itself a living entity. The rapport between the performer and his audience is communicative and selections are based on this interaction. The great grandfather of the record selector was Jimmy Savile, a coalminer from Leeds, England. “In 1943, [Savile] hit upon the bright idea of playing records live, armed only with brittle piles of 78s and a makeshift disco unit...To cut down on the gaps between records, he had the idea of using two turntables. This, the fundamental technical advance on which modern club DJing is based, Savile did in 1946.” (Brewster, 2000) Despite resistance from several musician unions, Savile pushed on and held the world’s first disco nights at the Belle Vue Road branch of the Loyal Order of Ancient Shepherds. Savile went on to broadcast on Radio Luxembourg and became Britain’s first superstar DJ as the host of *Top of the Pops*. However, it was Savile’s technological contributions to DJing that made him most notable to the trade. The tools were now in place for the DJ to become a musical performer, and Savile had conceptualized their instrument.

Long before musical programming would be viewed as an art form, operated by a human performer, technologists sought to make this a completely automated event. Jukeboxes had existed since 1889, but did not become common until amplification systems improved in the 1920s.

“Jukeboxes were perfect for Depression-era America. Bar owners found the jukebox far cheaper than a band, and the mood was perfect for the nickel-priced escapism they provided. In fact, as the Depression dramatically eroded record sales, the jukebox did much to prevent the music industry from reaching bankruptcy. In 1939, keeping jukeboxes stocked with tunes accounted for about sixty percent of total record sales.” (Brewster, p. 2000)

The jukeboxes’ ability to tabulate record plays made it a critical marketing tool for the recording industry. This led to the creation of the chart system, for the Top 40 gets its

name from the standard jukebox capacity. While the music business would use these mechanical DJs for market research, the popularization of jukeboxes played a critical role in expanding dance music to include a youthful audience. In combination with the radio and other new forms of recorded media, the jukebox would “erode the reliance on live music and laid the ground for the DJ to take over.” (Brewster, 2000)

The DJ was forced to develop his personality beyond the confines of the studio, and become a musical performer in his role as human jukebox. Across the United States, the first live DJ events known as “platter parties” or “sock hops” were held in the 1950s. However, the Europeans took a far less commercial approach to their dance events, perceiving music as an organic experience. The gymnasium as a dancehall would be surpassed in favor of the French *discotheque* or record library.

“The origins of the discotheque lie in the Mediterranean port of Marseilles, where sailors would leave their record collections in the stockrooms of cafes while they were away at sea. When shore leave arrived, they would return to their favorite bar and listen to records on the phonogram in the corner.” (Brewster, 2000)

The French used the discotheque as both a musical and social platform. Parisians would congregate in discos to play jazz records, as a symbolic means of resistance during World War II. However, this perception quickly changed as discos not only played the latest musical selections, but also became trendy places to be seen. While discos became homes to the French existentialists, New York and London nightclubs became homes to drugs and interracial socialization.

The post-war era saw the emergence of the first important club DJs. *The Lyceum* in London produced “LONDON’S NUMBER ONE DJ” Ian “Sammy” Samwell while the trendy modernists preferred DJ Guy Stevens over at *The Scene*. These avid record

collectors pioneered American rhythm and blues records to British audiences. However, it would be a dance known as “the twist” that would create the world’s first global dance phenomenon. In the past, dances had been regional sensations, but the twist took a trans-continental journey thanks to the efforts of DJs.

In New York, the DJ took his first musical steps with his instrument. At *Arthur*, DJ Terry Noel became the first DJ to mix records. This was the first major artistic innovation to occur with the technology. When Sybil Burton hired Noel as her resident DJ, he quickly took control to produce an environment in which he could properly perform.

“Within six months of Arthur’s debut he [Noel] had redesigned the speaker system and taken charge of the lights. The sound engineer, Chip Monk, was asked to create speakers which operated independently of each other, with separate frequency controls. That way, Noel could move the songs around the room like a churning mess of controlled sound. Noel gave them a *show*.” (Brewster, 2000)

Noel’s primitive setup is one that can easily be encountered in present day clubs, with nothing but volume potentiometers for each turntable. However, Noel’s revolutionary mixes awakened crowd’s who had never heard elements of various pop records combined in such a fashion. While mixing technique would greatly improve, the public would never lose its taste for hearing various combinations of their favorite songs. The DJ was now an entity separate from a studio producer or songwriter. He was an outsider, who had re-taken control of the music, obtaining it through a hunt, and re-performing the segments that played to his tastes and those of his audience. “From dance floor to studio and back again, the DJ [brought] a unique ability to recombine and re-contextualize sound, amplifying the impact of other people’s music.” (Herman, 2006) The founding principles

were now in place for DJs to make their own creations, and the era of modern DJing had begun.

II. The DJ As Musical Author

The DJ became the chief author of the popular music genres that would spawn for the rest of the century including disco, hip hop, and house music. This musical artistry combined with the commercialization of the DJ and the emergence of a global club culture created the idea of the “superstar DJ.” Bill D. Herman observes that, “the DJ is [now] presented as the culmination of creative musical technology, a musical author-god who carries on a long tradition of patriarchal authorship.” (Herman, 2006) This has produced a radical shift in the way people consider musical artistry, considering that the DJ uses other people’s musical creations to make his own artistic statement. Positioning the DJ as the authorial figure in dance music has solved many of the dilemmas posed in its various genres. The traditional sense of authorship has proven difficult for dance music producers since the disco era. This has been,

“one of dance music’s unending problems—that of granting distinctiveness to performances and performers within an unbroken sequence of musical tracks. Between the dancers’ relative uninterest in distinguishing musical selections and the disc jockies’ [*sic*] concealment of professional knowledge, the identity of recordings and their performers often went unmentioned.” (Straw, 1999)

As the unlikely hero, the DJ has managed to obtain a humbled sense of stardom, using his outsider status to elevate his value and influence. This marks an important historical shift, as the theoretical non-musician becomes a valuable force in marketing music technology to the mass public.

The perception of the DJ as a “master of technology” has caused commercial music technology companies to paint the DJ as the premiere user and consumer of this technology. In the hope of recruiting a generation of new musical experimenters, the DJ is the ideal personification of the amateur musician turned successful superstar.

“Technologies of musical production such as samplers, synthesizers, and sequences are associated with the art of the vinyl record DJ, inviting the DJ to acquire the means to be a producer and vice-versa. Constructed as sitting on top of these new musical technologies, abreast of the gap between the precision of the studio and the thrill of live performance, big-name DJs...represent the fusion of technology and creativity, a fusion that becomes an integral part of the DJ’s authorship.” (Herman, 2006)

Hence, the DJ is the principle force that furthers the development, production, and commercialization of music technology. His authority is defined by his professional experience and identifiable with the general consumer. Foucault (Foucault, 1984) makes the point that the function of authorship comes not from what an author does, but from the way that a society responds. This public’s response to the DJ’s popularization is only further qualified by the discursive mechanisms used by marketing and record companies. Advertising and CD packaging aims to “highlight that the authorship instilled in a given art form is due to social forces rather than the nature of that craft.” (Herman, 2006) Large record companies failed to capitalize on the dance music of the disco era, leaving much of it to be released by independent labels in the form of singles. Disco lacked the kind of superstar performers that had defined rock music, but investing in the DJ’s authorship paid off in a way that had never worked for the authorship of producers.

While economics played an important role in forming the perception of the modern DJ, the technology used by the DJ made an even greater impact in the concept of authorship. While the fundamental technology used by DJs has existed since the era of

disco, advancements along with skilled training helped to define the DJ as authorial producers.

“The increasingly sophisticated mixing deck and variable speed turntable, and the corresponding practice of sustained, complicated mixes, are pieces of the authorship puzzle in that they give the mixing DJ a task at which to excel or flounder and to be judged (and promoted) accordingly. Likewise, the advancement of turntables and styli (needles) has empowered the practices of ‘turntablism’ such as cutting, scratching, and beat juggling, again empowering the ambitious DJ to do more than *play* records—both ‘in fact’ and in the discourse of music communities.” (Herman, 2006)

The technology that made DJ mixing possible also helped to remove the significance of individual record producers, as their music only contributes to the overall narrative constructed by the DJ. Dance records, samples, and musical segments are but pieces of the DJ’s composition, of which he is the supreme authority. It is no longer important to know who produced these segments, but rather who has put these segments together.

In this sense, the DJ is the quintessential postmodern artist. The essence of postmodernism lies in one’s ability to lift forms and ideas from preexisting objects to be combined in a creative fashion. The DJ’s reliance on the musical compositions of others in order to make his own art, makes him at home in a postmodern world. Dom Phillips writes,

“The DJ is not an artist, but he is an artist. He’s not a promoter, but he is a promoter. He’s not a record company man, but he is. And he’s also part of the crowd. He’s an instigator who brings all of these things together.” (Brewster, 2000)

Socially, the DJ is producing music, while at the same time he is also playing the role of consumer. His consumption of music aligns him with the entire consumer market, yet his performances generate a product of its own. The DJ’s ability to filter the information of music consumption defines his ability and worth as an artist. The social and philosophical

implications of these ideas may complicate general artistic theories, but they are at the essence of what it means to be a DJ.

Examining the history of the DJ and understanding the social and philosophical ideas that lead to his existence is important in understanding his role in music. However, the common trend between these stories is that the DJ is the principle innovator, expert, and consumer of music technology. This is not only evident in his contributions and commercial uses of technology, but it will likely be present in the future development of such technologies. These ideas are essential in defining the DJ aesthetic, and should provide some clues into the future of the DJ's story. His tools may have defined his art, but his position will define who he is as a musician, a craftsman, and a critic.