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(Re)Engineering the Cultural Object: Sonic Pasts in Hip-Hop's Future

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Introduction

Hip-hop music has largely depended upon the phonographic past for its function and sonic aesthetic. Borne out of the prolongation and manipulation of funk breaks, and originally performed on turntables, the practice gradually evolved through the deployment and refinement of sample-based practices that took advantage of increasingly affordable sampling technologies (Chang 2007; Katz 2012). A genealogy of sample-based producers solidified Hip-Hop's *Golden Era* aesthetic, characterized as “a sublime 10-year period from 1988 to 1998 ... in which sampling hit a dizzying new depth of layered complexity and innovation” (Kulkarni 2015: 78). The period was “defined by a solid “boombap” sound that was shaped by the interactions between emerging sampling technologies and traditional turntable practice” (D’Errico 2015: 281). This “dizzying” creative explosion was powered by an initially unregulated legal landscape with respect to the use of phonographic samples, but the moment this changed, practitioners had to revise their approach and come face to face with a number of aesthetic conundrums. The subsequent creative reactions have given way to a rich spectrum of stylistic variations (subgenres) within the wider hip-hop umbrella, bringing

to the fore a set of important questions. These concern the—present and—future of the sample-based aesthetic (in rap music and beyond); the reign of highly synthesized hybrids (such as Trap) making up the lion share's of rap releases in recent years; and the tireless pursuit by contemporary hip-hop practitioners for alternative sources, innovative methods to facilitate a sample-based process and effective methods to render new recordings aesthetically worthy of inclusion into a sample-based *modus operandi*.

The pursuit of sonic impact and an 'authentic' hip-hop aesthetic bring into focus the unquantifiable 'magic' of phonographic samples, the unique "sonic signatures" (Zagorski-Thomas 2014) resulting from past production practices, their effect on contemporary sample-based composition, but—also—the sonic limitations that characterize new recordings when these are utilized within a sampling context. From Hip-Hop's birth and performative tradition prior to the availability of sampling technology, to Dr. Dre's 'interpolation' practices in the 1990's, and to The Roots' live-performed Hip-Hop, practitioners have continued to create, navigating their way through the minefield of ethics, pragmatics and the legal context surrounding sampling. Some have even resorted to using license-free content sourced from mass-produced sample libraries, a practice that although frowned upon by purists (Schloss 2014), can increasingly be heard in contemporary productions—such as Kendrick Lamar's recent Pulitzer-winning album *DAMN.* (2017)ⁱ. This article, however, focuses on the alternative practices deployed in pursuit of a *phonographic* sample-based aesthetic. Although the use of commercial sample libraries is acknowledged as one of the contemporary alternatives to using copyrighted samples, it is the function of the

(phonographic) past that will be investigated in current practices (an investigation of the stylistic ‘legitimacy’ of sample libraries in hip-hop production is indeed worthwhile, but beyond the scope of this article). The limitations imposed on the practice by copyright implications have, thus, inspired a variety of responses, simultaneously dictating a power-dependent dynamic. The current landscape—ever since the infamous case involving Biz Markie’s *Alone Again* in 1991ⁱⁱ—can be summarized as one where only major producers have been able to afford the high sample-clearance premiums enabling sampling practice, underground producers have continued to sample operating under the mainstream radar, while all other practitioners have been starved from access to (and legitimate use of) phonographic material in their work (Marshall 2006).

Furthermore, there is growing concern amongst hip-hop producers regarding the shrinking pool of worthwhile phonographic sampling content and the increasing re-use of previously featured sampling material. Cited in Schloss (2014: 164), producer Domino claims: “I just think that, now, you’re getting to the point where ... you’re running out of things to find. And so a lot of the best loops have been used already.” Producer No I.D. (cited in Leight 2017) notes his own heavy-handed use of Nina Simone samples in his recent collaboration with Jay-Z for album *4:44* (2017): “We can’t use two Nina Simones! We can’t use Stevie Wonder!” Conversely, legendary groups such as De La Soul find their back catalogue stuck in “Digital Limbo,” due to retrospective licensing complications affecting streaming (Cohen 2016), resorting to making *And the Anonymous Nobody* (2016), their “first album in 11 years ... [out] of 300 hours of live material” (De La Soul 2017).

But if artists are resorting to these means, it is worth examining the variables that enable an effective interaction between the creation of new source content and the sample-based hip-hop process. This forms one of two major quests in this chapter. The second one relates to the significance of the ‘past’ in facilitating a hip-hop aesthetic. In other words, it is worth questioning how the past manifests itself in the sample-based process, how past sonic signatures interact with sampling techniques, and how these findings inform the construction of feasible (i.e. aesthetically and referentially useable) new material. The sonic materiality and cultural referentiality of samples may lead to a philosophical dead-end if one attempts to separate them from each other, but this very spectrum of possibilities is frequently wrestled with in practice, and records containing these tensions *do* get released as a result (for example, the aforementioned De La Soul release, and productions by J.U.S.T.I.C.E. League and Frank Dukes, which will be discussed in more detail below). This investigation, therefore, first reviews the literary and practice-based context surrounding these questions, before exploring the function of nostalgia in Hip-Hop (and pop production at large), and the level of historicity and stylization required to facilitate it. As such, the research aims to develop a preliminary theoretical framework aiding practitioners in their future work, whilst examining the essential tension between historicity and what is regarded as ‘phonographic’ at the heart of sample-based Hip-Hop.

Literature | Practice

Much has been written in the literature about sampling as composition (Demers 2003; Harkins 2008, 2010; Moorefield 2005; Morey and McIntyre 2014; Rodgers 2003; Swiboda 2014), the legality and ethics of sampling (Collins 2008; Goodwin 1988; McLeod 2004) and sampling as a driver of stylistic authenticity in Hip-Hop (Marshall 2006; Rose 1994; Schloss 2014; Williams 2010). A number of scholars have also dealt with the historicity of samples from a number of perspectives. In her book *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*, Tricia Rose (1994: 79) effectively demonstrates how hip-hop producers consciously quote from a musical past they resonate with as a form of cultural association: “For the most part, sampling, not unlike versioning practices in Caribbean musics, is about paying homage, an invocation of another’s voice to help you say what you want to say.”

In his vast ethnographic study, *Making Beats: The Art of Sampled-Based Hip-Hop*, Joseph G. Schloss (2014) reveals a complex ethical code shared by 1990’s Boom-bap (Golden era) hip-hop practitioners, with strict rules about the époques, records and particular content that may or may not be sampled. It is worth stating that sampling ethics in Hip-Hop have much more to do with adherence to (sub)cultural codes of practice than copyright law.

On the other hand, Simon Reynolds states in *Retromania: Pop Culture’s Addiction to its Own Past* that:

It’s curious that almost all the intellectual effort expended on the subject of sampling has been in its defence ... A Marxist analysis of sampling

might conceivably see it as the purest form of exploiting the labour of others. (Reynolds 2012: 314-315)

Despite taking a critical stance towards the politics, ethics and economics of sampling, Reynolds here highlights a number of important problems. From the perspective of a critic who does not enjoy sample-based artefacts—and therefore self-admittedly fails to understand the popularity of musics such as Hip-Hop—Reynolds, however, focuses our attention on the multi-dimensionality inherent in the complex phenomenon of ‘recordings within recordings:’

Recording is pretty freaky, then, if you think about it. But sampling doubles its inherent supernaturalism. Woven out of looped moments that are like portals to far-flung times and places, the sample collage creates a musical event that never happened; ... Sampling involves using recordings to make new recordings; it’s the musical art of ghost co-ordination and ghost arrangement. (Reynolds 2012: 313-314)

With this observation, the author provides an eloquent description of the sample-based phonographic *condition*. As such, the associated problems become key considerations for any practice attempting a process of reverse-engineering: how could an awareness of this exponential or ‘supernatural’ multi-dimensionality inform alternative practices that pursue a sample-based aesthetic? Morey and McIntyre (2014) criticize Reynolds for ignoring the contribution of the sampling composer in this position, thus adding to the complexity of this creative equation. The tension between their position and Reynolds’s is perhaps a symptom of a larger philosophical problem:

in attempting to serve a sample-based aesthetic through re-construction, a practitioner may become aware of the irony between materiality and cultural referencing. Does a short sound contain history, ‘style,’ a unique sonic signature? When is this historicity motivic, i.e. relating to melody, rhythm and performance? Conversely—when not—what are the inherent sonic manifestations that infuse phonographic ‘resonance’ to a minute sonic segment? Can these be recreated? Albin J. Zak III concludes in his book, *The Poetics of Rock: Cutting Tracks, Making Records*:

The overall resonant frame amplifies, as it were, the smallest nuances with which records are filled... [Record collections] represent historical documents and instruments of instruction that provide both ground and atmosphere ... Collectively, records present an image of a cultural practice whose conceptual coherence is assured ... by the shared perception that its works possess the power of resonance. (Zak 2001: 195-197)

The author here supports the idea that cultural resonance can be embedded within the sonic grain of a record and consequently hints at a matrix of inter-relationships situated between phonographic artifacts of different eras. A related aspect informing this investigation is that of inter-stylization. It can be argued that Hip-Hop is inherently inter-stylistic, its process resulting in new musical forms out of the manipulation of past ones, while at the same time morphing into numerous sub-genres, due to the speed and power of the dissemination and interaction afforded by digital

technology. Sandywell and Beer theorize convincingly on this phenomenon in their article ‘Stylistic Morphing: Notes on the Digitisation of Contemporary Music Culture:’

It seems that there is no such thing as genre ... Under further scrutiny canons prove to be complex configured collections of stylistic signifiers traversing cultural fields and interwoven with cultural objects. Against this paradoxical conclusion we suggest that genre is more than a technical or theoretical term. It is also a practitioner’s term invoked in the recognition, consumption, and production of musical performances.

(Sandywell and Beer 2001: 119)

This is a useful description of the creative flux facilitated by digital tools from the perspective of practitioners and it has the potential to inform the theoretical framework behind a reverse-engineering process. Although the majority of rap practitioners may be *reacting* creatively to the cultural and legal context surrounding them—rather than first theorizing about it—a number of telling positions towards sampling, characteristic of different rap eras, shed light onto the spectrum of creative possibility. The performative tradition of isolating, repeating, elongating and juxtaposing sections from phonographic records on turntables by DJ pioneers such as Kool Herc, Grandmaster Flash and Afrika Bambaataa signifies the DNA of the art form, long before it could actually be committed phonographically; conversely, the first hip-hop releases utilized live disco, funk and soul session musicians in order to provide the instrumental backing under proto-rap vocal performances. Kulkarni (2015: 37) informs us that: “In late 1982 and

early 1983, hip-hop records didn't sound like hip-hop. They were essentially R'n'B records with rapping on them, created by bands, session players and producers.”

Grandmaster Flash was the first of the DJ pioneers to provide a phonographic ‘exception’ in the form of *The Adventures of Grandmaster Flash On The Wheels Of Steel* (1981), when he committed the performative tradition of ‘turntablism’ to record. The importance of the release is that it carries an early manifestation of what Reynolds (2012: 313-314) describes as the process of “using recordings to make new recordings”. At this point in hip-hop history though, it had only been through turntable performance that the ‘citation’ and manipulation of previously released records could be committed phonographically, which explains why the majority of non-live Old-School rap releases utilized synthesizers and drum-machines to provide the electro-rap instrumentals that functioned as an alternative to live performance.

Fast-forwarding to the mid-to-late 1980s—and the availability of affordable sampling technology—a number of seminal releases leveraged sample-based composition and arrangement, taking advantage of the record industry’s initial inertia in (legally) reacting to the creative manifestations afforded by sampling. Records such as *It Takes A Nation of Million to Hold us Back* (1988), *Fear of a Black Planet* (1990) by Public Enemy, and *Paul’s Boutique* by Beastie Boys (1989), are rumored to contain hundreds of samples of previously released phonographic content, signifying maximal masterpieces of the sample-based art form that are often compared to a kind of rap musique concrète (LeRoy 2006; Sewell 2013; Weingarten 2010). And yet, by 1991, the

shift in the legal landscape kick-started a case of legal necessity becoming the driver of sonic innovation.

A notable reaction can be observed in Dr. Dre's process of 'interpolation.' Dre's initial success with N.W.A. afforded him access to an era of musicians he revered – musicians that he could invite into the studio to (re)play elements of their own records, facilitating his sampling endeavors. Using the original players, instruments and technology enabled the acquisition of authentic sonics from a different era, but without the need to pay high sampling premiums to record companies (who were holding the mechanical copyright). His heavy dependence on P-funk sonics was so impactful that it birthed a geographical divergence in Hip-Hop known as West-Coast Rap (or G-funk); one that was diametrically opposed to New York's East Coast aesthetic, remaining synthesizer-heavy (and often sample-averse in the mechanical sense). Further reactions to the legal landscape, and the decreasing creative opportunities for phonographic sampling, can be summarized in three overarching approaches:

1. Live performed Hip-Hop;
2. The construction of content replacing samples referenced/used in hip-hop production; and
3. The creation of original but era-referential content that can act as new sampling material.

A number of practitioner case studies are discussed below, exemplifying these practices.

Case Studies

Live Hip-Hop

The Roots are perhaps the most famous case in point for a predominantly live-performing (and recording) hip-hop band, but the distinction of their outputs to proto-rap, live-based instrumentals are a result of exhaustive research on sample-based utterances and sonics, manifested in their performance practices, choice of instruments and studio approaches. In ‘Giving up Hip-Hop’s Firstborn: A Quest for the Real after the Death of Sampling,’ Wayne Marshall delineates their approach in the following way:

the degree to which the Roots’ music indexes hip-hop’s sample-based aesthetic serves as a crucial determinant of the group’s “realness” to many listeners. At the same time, the Roots’ instrumental facility affords them a certain flexibility and freedom and allows them to advance a unique, if markedly experimental, voice within the creative constraints of “traditional” hip-hop’s somewhat conservative conventions. (Marshall 2006: 880)

And yet what sparks stylistic criticisms directed at The Roots by the hip-hop community at large is the fact that their live sonics and musicality do not interact sufficiently with sampling processes and their resulting artifacts.

Creating sample-replacement content

J.U.S.T.I.C.E. League on the other hand are a production duo responsible for a plethora of contemporary rap hits (for artists such as Rick Ross, Gucci Mane, Drake and Lil Wayne) who deploy methods that lie somewhere between interpolation and a convincing re-interpretation (and then manipulation) of referenced samples. In an interview with Hotnewhiphop.com they shed light on the specifics of their process:

Ok, we have a guitar – what kind of guitar was it? What was the pre-amp? What was the amp? What was the board that it was being recorded to? What kind of tape was it being recorded to? What kind of room was it in? (Law 2016)

Interviewer Carver Law (2016) asserts that once they have “all the information available about the original sample, they begin ... recreating every aspect ... down to the kind of room it was recorded in.” J.U.S.T.I.C.E. League’s process reveals the importance of the sonic variables that lend a sample its particular ‘aura’. Their meticulous re-engineering attempts to infuse convincing (vintage) sonics onto their referential, yet newly recorded, source content.

Creating new content for sampling

There are also increasing contemporary cases where practitioners create content infused with referential—stylistic and historical—attributes, but without direct semblances to previously released compositions. Producer Frank Dukes meticulously records sonically referential, but musically original, vintage-sounding material, to

facilitate his sample-based production process. When this level of reverse-engineering is applied to completely original creations, the potential exists for musical innovation that, nevertheless, adheres to the sonic requirements of the sample-based aesthetic.

Interviewed in Fader magazine, Adam Feeney a.k.a. Frank Dukes explains in his own words: “I’m still using that traditional approach, but trying to create music that’s completely forward-thinking and pushing some sort of boundary” (cited in Whalen 2016). Extrapolating on this approach in relation to Feeney’s production *Real Friends* (Kanye West 2016), interviewer Eamon Whalen explains:

... the song’s “sample,” a delicate piano loop that sounds like it’s lifted from a dusty jazz record, but that Dukes found without having to dig for anything, because he made it himself ... Manipulating his own compositions like they were somebody else’s is a technique that has brought Feeney—an avowed crate-digger turned self-taught multi-instrumentalist—from relative obscurity to a go-to producer for the industry’s elite. (Whalen 2016)

Theorizing

The function of nostalgia (*Aesthetic problem #1*)

In all the practitioner approaches described above lies a conscious approach to navigate the legal landscape safely, whilst establishing links with the past, either through motivic referencing (Dre’s interpolation) or via sonic referencing (The Roots in their instrumental/studio choices—Frank Dukes and J.U.S.T.I.C.E. League in their meticulous recreation of vintage sonic signatures). Hip-Hop celebrates 44 years at the

time of writing (Google.com 2017), so could its obsession with the past be regarded as a metaphor for approaching a stylistic middle-life crisis? Or is this form of sonic nostalgia a wider symptom in popular music, as Reynolds claims, which becomes exponential in a form of music that owes its very inception, architecture and DNA to previous music forms? The website Metamodernism.com has published the following criticism on Reynolds' position:

Simon Reynolds states that popular (music) culture is suffering from retromania, an incurable addiction to its own past ...his analysis is based on a nineteenth century—and therefore very modern—notion of 'authenticity'. It makes himself a symptom of that which he criticizes: retromania. (Van Poecke 2014)

Perhaps a metamodern predisposition is not essential for the criticism to stand: the problem with a mono-dimensional diagnosis of an aesthetic 'fault' (in this case, solely attributed to nostalgia) is that it is using the symptom as both diagnosis *and* condition. From antique hunters to fashion designers to phonographic 'crate-diggers,' it appears that a certain distance from the past allows the human mind the benefit of retrospective appreciation. But to avoid oversimplification, Hip-Hop is a complex phenomenon that deserves more thorough analysis. Socio-economic and technological factors are entangled in its history, development and sonic genetics, so nostalgia alone appears an easy escape notion, distracting from a meaningful investigation of the conditions shaping this more complex sub-cultural phenomenon. In *Can't Stop Won't Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation*, Jeff Chang (2007: 13) aptly summarizes that: "if

blues culture had developed under the conditions of oppressive, forced labor, hip-hop culture would arise from the conditions of no work.”

Chang goes on to explain that social engineering, Kool Herc’s Jamaican-derived sound-system mentality, the withdrawal of funding for instrumental musicianship in New York schools, and a technically-trained but unemployed young generation, became the conditions for Hip-Hop’s ‘big bang.’ As a result, sample-based Hip-Hop was borne out of improbable factors colliding and, as a result, old funk breaks became the instrumental bed for a generation that needed to dance, rap, come together, party or rebel. From this point onwards, the DJ-as-performer 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 (just like King Tubby had previously done with Dub multitracks in the recording studio environment); a trait that has been reproduced by sampling producers ever since via their interaction with (affordable) sampling technology.

It is not a stretch to consider that performing with turntables became a solitary alternative to improvising with a band—only, one recorded in the past—for a generation that was largely deprived of instrumental tuition and opportunity. Fast-forwarding to the condition of the current bedroom producer, one can observe a parallel in the solitary state of collaboration with the past: a plethora of historic audio segments residing in the hard disks, memory banks and sampler pads of a contemporary hip-hop studio setup—providing the ‘live-musician’ resonances for a solitary performer/writer/producer to interact with. As a result, the sample-based hip-hop process could be described as a *jam*

across time with pre-recorded musicians from the past, afforded by digital sampling technology (and initially turntables): in other words, a ‘hip-hop time-machine’. This can be represented schematically with the following ‘equation’ (see Figure 1 below).

HIP-HOP = (improvised performance + digital sampling technology) x (pre-recorded musicians + time)

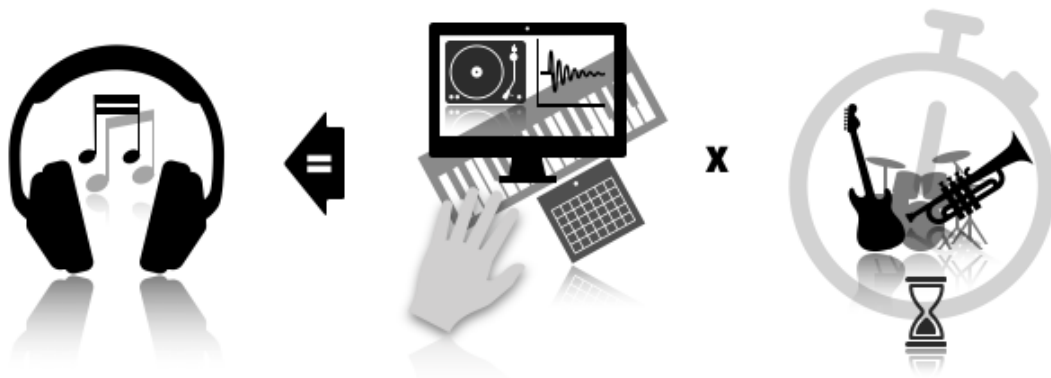


Figure 1.

The end result may sound nostalgic because of its obsession with the past, but it is really a manifestation of an inherent genetic trait that defines its very function and aesthetic. The sample-based condition has occupied such a large ratio of hip-hop outputs in its 44-year-long lifetime that it has elevated and celebrated the morphing, synthesis and interaction of old and new music to the forefront of its *modus operandi*. Of course, Hip-Hop has had an undeniable effect on other popular musics too, so perhaps ‘nostalgia’ is an afterthought or post-scriptum on a rhizome with a very real history, birth and *raison d’être*. Furthermore, the techniques Hip-Hop adopted—for a while unilaterally—have by now been inherited by mainstream pop producers, so

Reynold's nostalgic generalization may be suffering from a misunderstanding of the phenomenon in its wider cross-genre implications.

Does a consideration of nostalgia, then, have any significance for the current rap practitioner? It could be argued that facing it critically brings to the forefront the *past-present* binary inherent in the sample-based aesthetic. Additionally, understanding the problematic may be helpful in drawing a line with nostalgia (i.e. the past), isolating it as a variable, so that the process of creating new sample content to serve future hip-hop development can focus on further factors.

How much historicity is needed? (*Aesthetic Problem #2*)

This brings about the question of how much historicity needs to be 'embedded' within a sample for the hip-hop aesthetic to function. It is a question that can drive a retrospective investigation of sample-based content, but also one that can inform future (re)construction. As such, it becomes theoretically important, and practically essential, should future sample-based Hip-Hop continue to utilize newly constructed source content. Consequently also, defining the necessity and degree of source-content historicity will help inform the practice in a more scholastic fashion.

But what are the facets of sonic historicity that can be observed in a sample-based context? The case studies discussed above highlight a number of sonic/musical examples that help define the manifestations of this historicity in a systematic manner. There have been detailed previous attempts to provide sampling typologies (Ratcliffe 2014; Sewell 2013), but the focus here is somewhat different. On the one hand, the purpose of the investigation is to inform future practice, so the focus is on observing

traits that are reproducible; on the other hand, this is not an attempt to account for every type of sample-use, but to do so from the perspective of what qualities infuse ‘historicity’ in a sample.

In the first instance, sample duration becomes an important parameter in this exploration. The longer a phonographic sample is, the more motivic information it contains. It could be argued that, conversely, a short sample—often described as a single ‘shot’, ‘hit’ or ‘stab’ in hip-hop practice—focuses our attention to the sonic, granular or layered phonographic instance. Philosophically, this binary allows for a theoretical delineation between the sample as sonic instance and the sample as obvious musical or phonographic ‘citation’.

Samplists may be able to ‘chop’ (i.e. truncate) individual instrumental sounds from records (should they appear in isolation in the mono or stereo master) or opt for layered instances (such as a momentary combination of kick drum, bass note, harmonic chord and horn stab). Access to the original multi-track data of previously released recordings has become more commonplace recently (with artists openly inviting remixers to interact with their content) and there are a number of hip-hop producers that source their samples in this fashion. In all of these cases, the sample contains sonic information that—to the trained ear, crate-digger, or avid hip-hop fan—may point to specific sources (single or layered instrumentation), real or artificial ambience captured during recording or applied in post-production, and unique sonic artefacts resulting from the recording signal flow, media used, and mixing, mastering and manufacturing processes. Multiple sub-variables can be associated with these top-level sonic

characteristics and Figure 2 below provides a schematic representation of essential qualities (with variables in parentheses applicable to longer segments).

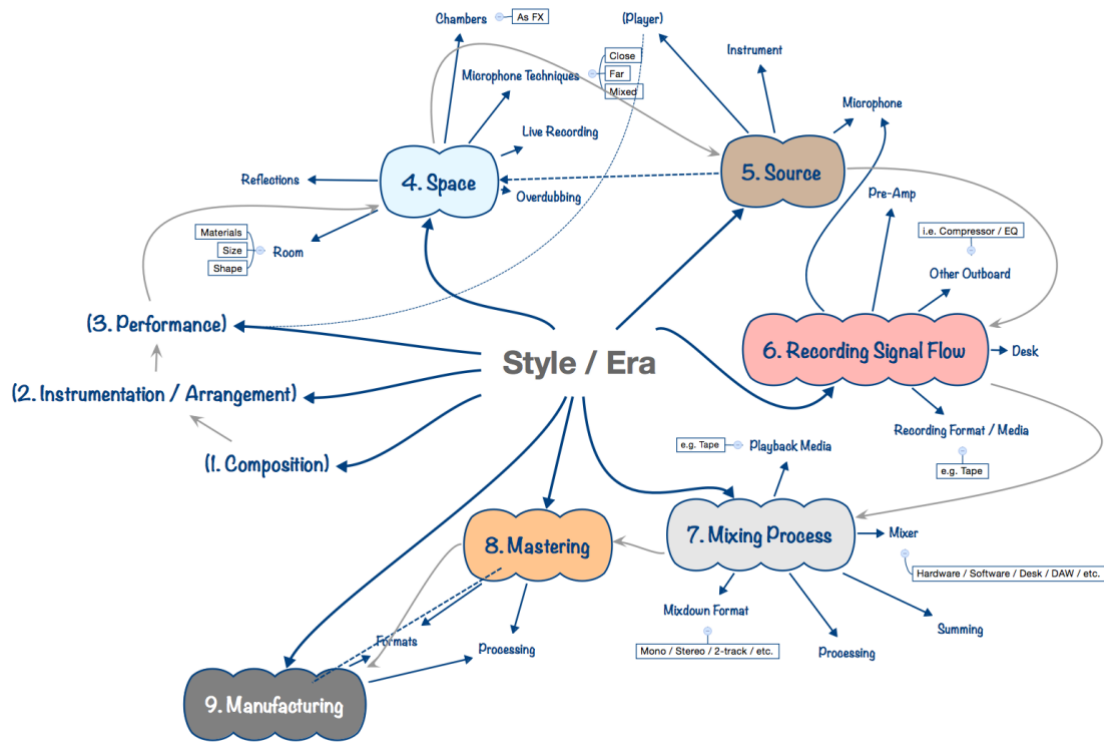


Figure 2: A schematic representation of essential phonographic sonic characteristics and related variables

Therefore the period that the phonographic sample was captured in becomes ‘communicated’ even for short excerpts, because of the type of sources, spaces, equipment and media used, but also the engineering and production processes applied that were typical of particular studios, production teams, record labels and eras. Longer samples, on the other hand, may reveal all of the above, but also contain musical, rhythmical, performed and composed utterances, which also become audible in the new context of the subsequent hip-hop production process. These add further layers of

historicity to a sample, such as stylization expressed by the compositional and arrangement choices, but also the performing idioms and musicianship carrying additional era signifiers.

How are these observations useful to the practitioner creating new sample content that is meant to serve a sample-based aesthetic? Before even tackling the practical implications, the very process of purposely infusing historicity into—new—samples has to be analyzed. Undoubtedly, there is an inherent irony in this proposition but, at the same time, from Frank Dukes to De La Soul, the notion *is* indeed practiced, which necessitates a theoretical investigation.

On phonographic “magic” (*Aesthetic Problem #3*)

The process of digital sampling can, of course, be applied to any recording, old or new, phonographic or directly recorded from an instrumental source into a digital sampler. Tellef Kvifte (2007) provides four definitions for sampling as it has been used in literature: from analogue-to-digital conversion; to the emulation of instruments by samplers; to the ‘citation’ of an earlier recording within a new composition; and, finally, to corrective splicing and pasting of recorded segments on analogue tape or digital formats. For a hip-hop producer, the third definition best describes the sample-based method, particularly because a phonographic sample carries more meaning than simply a digitized acoustic vibration (and the rationale behind the process is predominantly creative rather than emulative or corrective). The distinction, though, is useful in delineating differences in workflow, as a hip-hop production built around a phonographic sample follows a very different creative trajectory to that of a production

built independently of a source sample (with live instrumentation later overdubbed on top). So, a new problem that arises is that of how live instrumentation interacts with sampling.

Newly-constructed sampling content can range from recordings produced to facilitate a particular project, to ready-made content provided by sample libraries for a multitude of potential applications. There are a plethora of sample-library companies that provide wide-ranging content, from drum loops suitable for different subgenres, to live instrumentation that may fit particular styles, often accurately replicating vintage sonic characteristics mapped to very specific eras, studios and labels. Furthermore, today's DAWs come pre-packaged with an abundance of neatly catalogued single-shot, looped or motivic samples and, as such, software manufacturers at least partly assume a sample-library function. Although libraries are not explicitly disregarded by hip-hop practitioners, Schloss's (2014) work observes that sample-based producers demonstrate a preference for phonographic content, showing little interest for ready-made content solutions.

Practitioners may be partly adhering to the unwritten code of sampling discussed above, but there are other pragmatic and aesthetic considerations to take into account. For this part of the investigation, an autoethnographic approach has been undertaken to shed further light onto these considerations. The methodology has consisted of both composing, performing and engineering source content to be subsequently used in a sample-based process, but also researching the historical spaces, tools and practices behind the source references (phonographic records) pursued. In these practice-based

pursuits, I have found the indefinable ‘magic’ of phonographic samples difficult to recreate with new recordings. As part of the historical research conducted, I have visited a number of classic studios related to the eras and records that have previously attracted me as a samplist (Chess Records in Chicago, Stax and Sun in Memphis, J&M studio in New Orleans, RCA B and Columbia in Nashville), attempting to ascertain the conditions of this ‘magic:’ noting the spaces, microphones, signal flows, media and equipment used, but also deciphering clues about the techniques, recording approaches and production philosophies practiced by the teams behind the recordings.

At Columbia in Nashville, staff relayed to me how Toontrack—a well-known sample-library company—utilized the facility to recreate authentic country samples for their *Traditional Country EZX* release (Rekkerd.org 2016). This highlighted the oxymoron with great clarity: if there are specialists ensuring all sonic variables are adhered to in the creation of legally-usable sample content, then why do hip-hop producers opt for phonographic sources, despite the inherent copyright complications. Is the (historicity and) phonographic ‘magic’ more than the sum of perfectly recreated sonic—and musical—parts? Practitioners and analysts struggle to define the missing link, attributing it to a certain ‘je ne sais quoi.’ Citing Bill Stephney of S.O.U.L. Records, Tricia Rose exemplifies this phonographic lure in producers’ sampling rationale:

(Rap producers have) ... tried recording with live drums. But you really can’t replicate those sounds. Maybe it’s the way engineers mike, maybe

it's the lack of baffles in the room. Who knows? But that's why these kids have to go back to the old records. (Rose 1994: 40)

In Zak's *Poetics of Rock*, there is another telling account of how the phonographic process can result in such unique sonic 'ephemera,' responsible for drawing the samplist in:

The guitar's sound was bleeding into other instruments' microphones, but it had no focused presence of its own. Spector, however, insisted: this was to be the sound of "Zip-A-Dee-Doo-Dah". For it was at this moment that the complex of relationships among all the layers and aspects of the sonic texture came together to bring the desired image into focus. (Zak 2001: 82-83)

This demonstrates contextual 'happy accidents,' which are difficult to imagine outside of an actual record-making engagement. If there is a philosophical lesson to be acknowledged here that can then inform (re)construction, it is that of phonographic *context*. This is where sample libraries and new recordings fall short in facilitating the sample-based art form, process and aesthetic.

The irony of reconstruction: a metamodern 'structure-of-feeling'
(*Aesthetic Problem #4*)

Phonographic context therefore appears as an essential condition in rendering samples useful to the (sample-based) hip-hop aesthetic. It could be argued that Hip-Hop is borne out of the interaction between sampling processes and past phonographic content (see Figure 3 below).

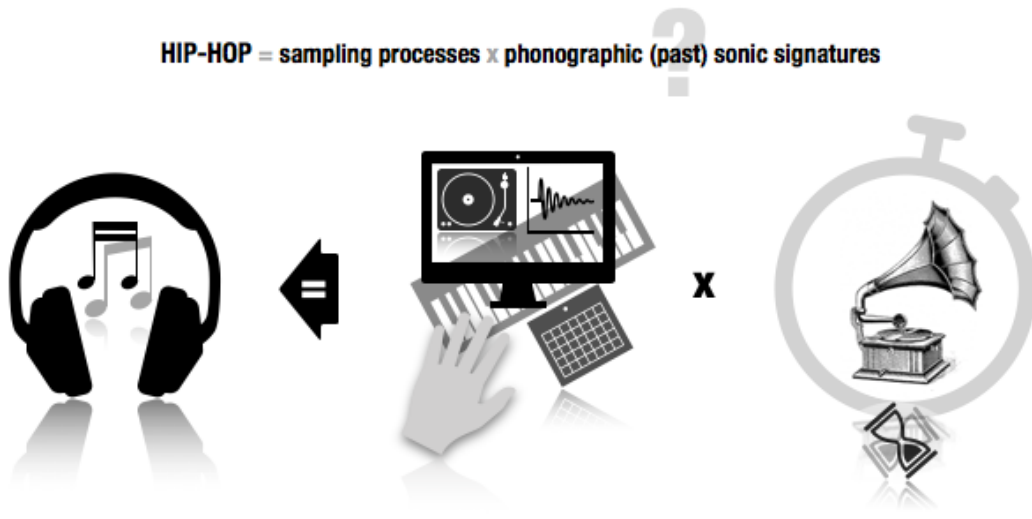


Figure 3.

But is the past—manifested as nostalgia and historicity—essential in this ‘equation’? Or could convincing phonographic context—i.e. a newly constructed record—suffice as useable content? Some contemporary Hip-Hop has indeed started quoting from more recent phonography, but the lion’s share of sample-based releases focus on a more distant past. This is no surprise, as the 44-year lifespan of the style has had such a disproportionately long dependence on the sonic past that it continues to project this (past-present) temporal juxtaposition on the majority of its outputs, almost as stylistic dogma. As Hip-Hop evolves, the past may become less essential as an aesthetic qualifier, and phonographic context may become prioritized as the driver behind (the creation of) suitable sampling content. But for now, it appears that most practitioners resort to stylization and sonics referential to past eras, in order to infuse their raw sonic materials with substantial potential for forthcoming sample-based processes.

The obvious irony observed here is that this reconstructive proposition sees the practitioner pursuing new musical content—which is (mechanically) copyright-free—whilst artificially infusing it with vintage sonic characteristics. This is both forward-thinking and pragmatic, but also nostalgic and ‘retro-manic’. Hip-Hop producers who practice this conscious duality are sonically oscillating between analogue nostalgia and digital futurism. As such, they demonstrate an awareness of Hip-Hop’s addiction to the phonographic past—they adhere to its nostalgic romanticism and honor this naivety—while both constructing and re-constructing: constructing new music, but *re-*constructing vintage sonic signatures. This is both naive and cynical; it puts faith in future development whilst paying homage to the dogma of historicity; and it simultaneously represents multiple dualities in a mixed, juxtaposed and synthesized fashion, consisting of all of these polarities at once. Vermeulen and Akker (2010: 56) have described such a “discourse, oscillating between a modern enthusiasm and a postmodern irony, (as) metamodernism.” And while the retrospective necessity in the aesthetic condition of sample-based Hip-Hop is to a certain degree explained by its own historic development, technical processes and phonographic dependences, Vermeulen and Akker’s (2010) observation of a new ‘structure of feeling’ across architecture, art and film, (even politics) puts this (re)constructive proposition within a wider, contemporary multi-arts context.

Consequently, the notion does not simply provide a legitimization for the conscious practice of ‘irony’ in this context; it rather appreciates the process as an artistic invention—or creative solution—borne out of pragmatic necessity, as *part* of an

interdisciplinary movement, universal condition or ‘structure of feeling’. It could therefore be argued that, if sample-based Hip-Hop was postmodern, *reconstructive* sample-based Hip-Hop is metamodern. The methodological paradigms discussed in the case studies above embrace further manifestations of metamodernism, such as: exercising multiple practitioner ‘personalities’ as part of the process (composer and engineer, performer of past styles and contemporary mixer); expressing romantic compositional freedom within an Afrological, cyclic sensibility; synthesizing technical precision with—and towards—the poetics of an envisioned sonic; collapsing ‘time’ through the juxtaposition of multiple sonic époques; removing the historical ‘distance’ afforded by samples, and creating cross-genre work that offers synchronous opportunities for inter-stylistic morphing.

Conclusions

The discussion commenced from a hypothesis that the sample-based hip-hop aesthetic is borne out of the interaction of sampling processes with past phonographic signatures, before questioning the nature and degree of the manifestation of the past as a variable in this creative equation. Acknowledging a number of contemporary approaches where hip-hop practitioners create new content in order to facilitate sample-based processes, the investigation has consequently examined the variables that enable an effective interaction between newly created content and the sample-based process. The aim has been to theorize on this dynamic, arming future practitioners with a better understanding of the aesthetic implications of dealing with both phonographic and

newly created sampling content, so that referential sonic ‘objects’ (Moylan 2014) can be (re)constructed, aiding the future evolution of the (sub)genre.

Looking at representative practitioners deploying a number of alternative contemporary approaches as a way to innovate and negotiate the pool of available sampling material, the examination has theorized on four areas of aesthetic concern: the function of sonic/musical nostalgia; the infusion of ‘historicity’ onto source content; the notion of phonographic ‘magic’; and the identification of this reconstructive proposition as metamodern practice. In comparing phonographic samples to newly recorded source material or sample-library content, a number of differences have become apparent, which point to the techno-artistic processes deployed in the construction of vintage sonic material. These, nevertheless, can arguably be re-constructed to close proximity as exemplified by the meticulous reverse-engineering of both sample-library companies and practitioners alike.

Therefore, the missing link in explaining sample-based producers’ preference for phonographic content, and the unquantifiable ‘draw’ towards it, may be located in the ephemeral manifestations of cultural resonance that result from the complex interactions and chaotic dynamic of the record-making process: sounds and utterances resulting from phonographic *context*. Perhaps the most promising potential for the future of a sample-based approach (in Hip-Hop and beyond) lies in the exponential promise of ‘making records within records,’ consciously putting phonographic context to the square, and synthesizing the paradigm with that of a metamodern ‘structure of feeling.’ Far from simply adopting a fitting reconstructive perspective, the

empowerment for the practitioner in this synthesis stems from the realization that the simultaneous irony of (postmodern) reconstruction merged with the enthusiasm of (modern) creation represents indeed a universal and interdisciplinary cultural paradigm. As a result, a subset of contemporary rap artists and producers may just be engineering new or future cultural objects, whilst consciously *and* naively entertaining their nostalgic predisposition toward stylizations resulting from the interaction of sampling processes with phonographic ephemera. This way, the oscillation between sonic pasts and hip-hop futures may result in a collapse of time and historical ‘distance’ via the very synthesis of vintage production techniques and sample-based processes. As Whalen (2016) identifies in the work of Frank Dukes: “By reverse-engineering the art of flipping samples, Feeney is looking at the past, present, and future simultaneously.”

Biographical note

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Discography

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ⁱ For example, track *FEEL.* (2017) makes use of two license-free samples (*COF_125_Am_LaidOut_Underwater* and *COF_134_B_Changed_Dopey*) taken from Loopmasters' *organic future hip hop* (2016) library, as well as a phonographic (copyrighted) sample taken from track *Stormy* (1968) by O.C. Smith (Whosampled 2018).

ⁱⁱ The lawsuit involving Biz Markie's *Alone Again* resulted in the complete banning of the record and its withdrawal from retail; as a result, the ruling resonated loudly within the hip-hop community, inadvertently affecting producers' future practices and styles in response (Collins 2008; McLeod 2004; Sewell 2013).