

L. Beth Yockey
SOCY2112, Phil Rutledge
Sociology Department, UNC-Charlotte
April 20, 1998

It's all *Bricolage*: Excorporation and Electronica

"[le] *Bricolage*: do-it-yourself, patched-up; *bricoleur*, *-euse*: handyman/woman, do-it-yourself-er.¹"

John Fiske discusses popular productivity in the reading of texts by saying: "popular productivity is a constant process of recombining and reusing the cultural products of capitalism in a form of *Bricolage*..." He uses similar terms to define excorporation: "[it is] an assertion of one's right to make one's own culture out of the resources provided by the commodity system." I argue that what today is termed "electronica," a broad umbrella for music made with computer-aided technology and without traditional musicians, is an example of these concepts *par excellence*.

Electronica is necessarily a productive rather than evasive form of reaction to the popular. The language with which one must talk about it is quite indicative of this. One speaks of the "components (Toop 60)," "source material (125)," and the creators of the sounds as "operators (49)." The role of the *bricoleur*² is necessarily one of reconstruction and re-assemblage of that which is presented by the dominant culture³.

I personally delineate current electronica into four broad categories: Jungle, Experimental, Trip-Hop, and the catch-all of Ambient. In this paper and the accompanying CD, I focus on the

¹College Edition of Harper Collins French Dictionary. Collins, Harper and Row, London and Glasgow, New York. 1990. page 49.

²I use the masculine intentionally here, as electronica production is sadly almost entirely a male profession.

³See track 5: Coldcut's "More Beats ~n~ Pieces."

Jungle and Experimental aspects. For many different reasons, these two sub-genres draw more upon the resources and commodities provided by the dominant culture than do Ambient or Trip-Hop. The scope of this paper isn't broad enough to address that issue, however, so instead I will focus on the usages themselves. Before that can be explored, Jungle and Experimental both need more definition.

Jungle differs from Experimental music largely in its performance space. Whereas Experimental is generally music to be listened to at home, Jungle is for parties and clubs. It developed in early-1990's inner-city London, but quickly spread all over England and to America. Jungle is defined as: "the generic term for all versions of the sound: a combination of timestretched breakbeats playing at approximately 160BPM with bass lines lifted from reggae and jazz-funk sounds, running at 80BPM with the metronomic 4/4 bass drum removed (James ii)." Jungle as an umbrella category can be broken down into umpteen different genres, such as Tekstep, Ragga or Dark. The number of these that you may be given at any particular time depends largely upon whom you might ask and the mood they might be in that day. Here I will focus on the two usually termed "Drum'n'Bass" (D'n'B) and "Jazzy Jungle."

A popular misconception is that Drum 'n' Bass and Jungle are simultaneous terms. While "jungle" has been misconstrued as a racist label, it definitely is not. Jungle is the preferred label for what a particular sound is, which originated among the Black inner-city youths of London, and it is very different from its child, Drum'n'Bass. In this country, critics, retailers and listeners alike use the two fairly interchangeably, sometimes using the modifier "intelligent" before Drum'n'Bass, inaccurately signifying that straight Jungle is somehow inferior. D'n'B just revolves around a more melodic and oceanic, as opposed to dark and nihilistic, sound. Drum'n'Bass is defined more accurately as "the term used to describe a more musically and technologically complex strain of Jungle (James ii)." It is variously described by those who see themselves as "true" Junglists as

"suburban," "New Age-y" or "an indulgent mess of head music (85)."

Jazzy Jungle has not suffered from the same elitism that has marked the other strains of Jungle. Perhaps this is because it is made entirely by people from outside of "the scene," as if there were only one Jungle community. Jazzy Jungle produces its own record labels and its own culture, using commercials and breakbeats. This sound is defined as "ambient Drum 'n' Bass with jazzy refrains added; usually derived from 1980's jazz-funk records (James ii)." I would say that this definition is only somewhat accurate. Most Jazzy Jungle today has tended to focus more on the collagist aspect of Electronica production, so that it is no longer limited to such a narrow time span from which to sample. I think that the definition needs to be broadened a bit to include lounge-jazz, spazz-jazz, trad-jazz and acid jazz, at the very least.

Experimental musics, by definition, do not have a definition. Certainly, most everything that is eventually "mainstreamed" started out as experimentation, so "experimental" has more to do with the processes of creation than the end result which they create. As Goldie, who was once considered to be "experimental," says, "We're joyriding technology, pushing it to the edge (James 53)." It is that ethos which defines Experimental: the feeling that the producer may be breaking something, but if it sounds good, what else could possibly matter?⁴

The entire genre of Electronica has been consumed with labeling, but this labeling comes from the outside in. The creators of the musics, whatever an outsider chooses to call them, don't necessarily define themselves in terms of what has gone before, or what they see coming in the future. Pop culture theorists love to discourse about the "potential media of the masses (Schirmacher 76)," however, I believe that they by and large fail to grasp the essence of the music, which is "All about moving forward...Definitive history [I would add theory] just isn't as

⁴On the enclosed CD, I would group most of these artists somewhere between these categories. Plug is primarily D'n'B. Amon Tobin is mainly Jazzy Jungle, Funki Porcini definitely is. Alec Empire is Experimental, on a jazzy note. Coldcut is Experimental, with the other DJ's sampling habits in mind, M-ziq and Aphex and Autechre are **purely** Experimental. Third Eye is primarily Experimental with a keen sense of D'n'B traditions. Bukem is pure D'n'B. Who knows what Squarepusher are considered to be except for Good.

important as what's immediately ahead.' (Coxon qtd. in James xiii)⁵."

The labels which come from within the "community"⁶ of *bricoleurs* are quite interesting, however. Tom Jenkinson, who records under the name Squarepusher, calls his music "Difficult Listening." Photek (Rupert Parkes) thinks D'n'B is the logical child of Jazz Fusion. z-q's album Urmur Bile Trax was widely called "Drill'n'Bass." Richard D. James (Aphex Twin), in talking about the music made by artists such as Plug, z-q and himself, said that it was music made by "bedroom bores" to be listened to at home, rather than the dance club.

The theme of the bedroom as opposed to the dance club is quite interesting. The bedroom, on the one hand, works as the space in which the artist and the machines construct the music. Because of the "increasing affordability of compact, user-friendly sequencing software and digital audio recorders during the late 1980's (Toop 213)," people were able to spend more time reorganizing sounds that were available to them without having to first create the sound, then manipulate it. This has created a plethora of "mad inventors," sitting in their bedrooms all day long, using timestretching devices, Atari PCs and an 808 and making 3 or 4 songs a day. Some artists **are** actual inventors, creating the programs and sometimes even the hardware to make their sounds.

The dance club, however, works as the performance space for the music. How the performance is received depends on the DJ, who also has a role as *Bricoleur*, in charge of putting together collages into a new and less permanent collage. The DJ works with the crowd to create the performance: the crowd enacts the music as the DJ remixes and makes it his own. Granted, neither Experimental nor Jazzy Jungle is often played in "dance" clubs as it were, but the artists

⁵ John Coxon, member of the "commercial" D'n'B collective Spring Heel Jack, speaking about why the music changes faster than even the people in the scene can keep up with.

⁶ I use the quotations here to point to the fact that electronica is not even as organized as Hip Hop as far as affiliation or community goes. The only exception is within record labels, whose artist rosters may have fewer than five names on them.

do tour and play live. The definition of "play" is problematic, however. Both the audience and the artists are "passive witness to the computer's blind need to work through a program from start to cut-off. The only...danger is that the machine may crash (Toop 49)."

Most electronica is made on store-bought equipment, though it is often altered, or "misused," or purposely crashed. For example, Cubase was released to the market with promotional materials touting it for use in Karaoke situations, or instead of studio musicians. Cubase is a down-loadable sequencer which loops the data from a sampler. It is the most frequently used in D'n'B, because it has the most versatile functions, and it is easiest to make go fast. The use of the Atari PC is also prominent in all forms of Electronica, and it is interesting, because it points to the D.i.Y attitude of electronic musicians. There is a feeling that "post-computer" is the goal of the technology, and the reason to "misuse" and "joyride" it. Electronica promotes a refusal to blindly accept consumer commodities as the best option, although brand loyalties are ironically strong.

Also somewhat ironic is the coexistence of the feeling of revolution evident in the music and its dependence upon technology. The technology is consumer-based and produced by huge multi-national corporations, yet it becomes a part of the advocacy of its own overthrow because of its intrinsic nature to the artworks. The technology ironically provides for its own derision, with the opportunity to sample "electro-quotations," which by nature have the commentary built-in⁷. This is a tremendous step away from traditional journalism, as it turns commercial culture and newsbites into art in the form of sound, as pop-art did to visual images.

Because nothing that is used in the production of Electronica is created from traditional "raw" materials, it is undeniably a form of productive, excorporative reading of popular culture. *Bricoleurs* use pre-programmed drum sounds and bits of sound sampled from the dominant,

⁷ for a good example of this, see anything that Negativland has ever recorded.

presented culture to create works of aural-art in which the *organization* of sound becomes almost more important than the sounds themselves. Electronica is the culmination of numerous artistic movements which have preceded it, and at the same time it is a "sudden reorganization of all the pieces into new formations (Toop 53)." This music is a *fin-de-millennium* enactment of past, present and future visions.

Works Cited

- Bidaye, Prasad. "LTJ Bukem." <http://www.junglecult.com/bukem>.
- Fiske, John. Reading the Popular. London and New York: Routledge, 1989.
- . Understanding Popular Culture. Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989.
- James, Martin. State of Bass- Jungle: The Story So Far. London: Boxtree Publishers, 1997.
- Kliver, Billy. "Artists, Engineers, and Collaboration." Culture on the Brink: Ideologies of Technology. Eds. Gretchen Bender & Timothy Druckrey. Seattle: Bay Press, 1994.
- Rose, Tricia. "Give Me a (Break) Beat! Sampling and Repetition in Rap Production." Eds. Bender & Druckrey, 1994.
- Schirmacher, Wolfgang. "Homo Generator: Media and Postmodern Technology." Eds. Bender & Druckrey, 1994.
- Toop, David. Ocean of Sound: Aether Talk, Ambient Sound and Imaginary Worlds. London: Serpent's Tail, 1995.
- Tweney, Chris. "Drum 'n' Bassmasters: The commercial Jungle of Roni Size, Spring Heel Jack, and Plug." Drum 'N' Bass Forum (Listserv). 9 February, 1998.
- Wiedenbaum, Marc. "Cornish for Jungle." Interview with Luke Vibert (Plug) in Crazy Luke's Nitetime Hotspot.