

I Love Everything Rock 'n' Roll (Except the Music)

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Originally commissioned by The National Association of Artists' Organizations and published in NAAO's *Field Guide 1999-2000*

Presented to the National Council on the Arts, Washington D.C.

1999

Much has been made of our generation. If you believe what you hear, we will certainly never be accused of optimism, originality, depth, hope. The nihilism that permeates our culture has undoubtedly affected our aesthetics and artistic strategies of art-making. Our representatives' lineage: James Dean's emotional, humanistic-based angst to Keanu Reeves' one-syllable cyber-cool philosophy ("whoa"). Grandmaster Flash's incredible inventiveness out of the fragments of our past to the paper thin youth anthems of just another boy band in the Top 40. Method acting versus a drum machine.

Don't get me wrong. I am not mourning what we've lost. I will redeem what we've gained from our time. I am setting up a scenario for us, one in which levels of detachment have reached such a point as to make us a generation of artists where no expectations are placed on us. Gen Xers. Slackers. 18 to 36 demographics. I have grown up in this era of postmodern cynicism. What has been offered at this point are various critiques of our impending doom, paranoia, a variety of social ailments, etc. Cynical, ironic, "whatever could be done has been done" attitudes that have served as a great injustice to my generation.

At this stage of our culture it is a given that our world is presented to us in a fragmented, chopped-up way. It's in the air. You can see it in people's eyes. What has not been offered at this

point is a way to creatively maneuver in our world. DJ culture has changed all that. The rich and beautiful legacy of hip-hop/DJ culture and electronic/sample-based music is a flat-out rejection of all pessimistic strains of postmodernism. The worlds of aesthetics and art-making strategy will only benefit from this revolution in thought.

DJ culture/sampling implies one very simple but powerful idea. The idea that even if all we have is the wreckage of the past, so what—we are still going to make something out of it. DJing is about showing how something so plain and forgotten can suddenly be transformed into this strange entity. That there are possibilities within the limitations of everyday life for the things we have looked at as disposable. What if one said no to boredom and demanded romance—not for a moment but as a social formation?

A romance with the world. This is what the aesthetics of sampling offer: a re-enchantment with the world. Sampling is about re-constructing. Sampling is about re-enchanting. Sampling is about having a profound respect for Foucault but only falling to your knees for Patsy Cline and then showing how both histories can be integrated. It is based on gut, on rhythm, on soul.

It is no secret that as soon as you lose your sense of contributing to the construction of history/meaning in your world you have just lost a very important battle over power and liberation. It is very hard not to feel like you are just a viewer, cold and distant in our hyper-mediated world. I cannot think of another contemporary cultural movement, more specifically a youth cultural movement, that implies and even insists on our active participation in creating meaning and history in our world. Being a subject and not an object of history. A youth cultural movement that actually cherishes history. There is no such thing as a good DJ who is historically ignorant.

This is just the aesthetics we need: a system of thought that embraces the chaotic sound byte we live in and implies we are far from powerless against it. DJ culture has offered this from day one. The moment people from Kool Herc and Grandmaster Flash to Aphex Twin and Q-Bert decided all they needed were “two turntables and a microphone” was the beginning of another great day in the ongoing history of liberation and democracy. The punk rock, 3-chord aesthetic has been replaced by the sampler.

It is an often noted fact nowadays that samplers and turntables consistently outsell electronic guitars. And a very significant fact. It signifies a radical shift in how artists and art are going to be made. The age of the protest singer is over (Cock Rock, take stock). We have a new tool for protest. The sampler. A sampler is not just to make music with but a way to understand the world, a way to creatively filter and re-configure it. It is an organizational tool. It is a critical tool. It is a democratic tool. Everyone now has the ability and right to access our recorded history and re-enchant his or her worlds.

DJ culture invites re-readings, implies a shareable world and an endlessly flexible language. Sampling is not passive consumption. It is the creation of new meaning out of shards of the past. An alchemical liberation of the magic trapped inside dead commodities. A voice retrieved from destruction. The ability to both devalue and re-invest the heritage of a dead cultural past. The DJ/artist's strategy of today involves listening for echoes of a new conversation from the past and leading speakers and listeners from unawareness into dialogue. To maintain one's ability to be surprised at how the conversation goes, and to communicate that surprise to others.

If we as a generation have been given nothing but the wreckage of the past, then I say thank God for that. Because what has blossomed is akin to turning shit into gold. DJ culture/sampling has given us the slap in the face we all need. It has reminded us to still feel as though something actually depended on our actions. We are all social archeologists now—mining raw history and actively participating in its critique and re-construction/re-enchantment. Let the digging being.