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Warm Bitch: The Practice of Bootlegging as a Clash of Club Sound Cultures

La pratique du piratage comme affrontement de cultures sonores nocturnes

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Warm Bitch: The Practice of Bootlegging as a Clash of Club Sound Cultures

by

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Abstract. This text deals with a phenomenon called Bastard Pop, Mash-up or Bootlegging as a subversive political and collective practice. Although sampling techniques (e.g. in R'n'B or House Music) have enabled the mixing of different styles of music for the dancefloor this has never been done in such a radical way before. Copyright protected samples of Whitney Houston and Kraftwerk are entangled on a vinyl record (e.g. GIRLS ON TOP's "I Wanna Dance with Numbers"), and this most famous bastard pop anthem is played in clubs to dance to. The source of this new sound is the internet, where it is digitally produced by anonymous projects. Some of the tracks are then mastered onto vinyl and often released as White Labels. Through their emphasis on projects rather than protagonists, the producers return to the paradigm of the electronic underground: "tracks without stars". But at the same time there is also a difference from the original house music concept that referred to pop artists such as Warhol as "making music like a machine" (eg Juan Atkins' Cybotron). The goal of the house music projects was to initiate "the meeting of people and wavelength" as DJ and producer Blake Baxter once put it.

Keywords. *Bootlegging, Subversion, Clubculture, Collective Practise on the Internet*

Bastard Pop breaks new ground in club music with its new strategy of digitally collaging trashy pop elements within a dance track. Here the bassline departs from the idea of a smooth flow: “Love will Freak us” is one example of a kind of the “battle of the sample” as a new *idée artistique* (the battle principle of course derived from hip hop) that is initiated and performed in events like “King of the Boots” in London. The samples come from a trashy mainstream rather than from the ancestors in black music which a respected musical tradition like hip hop chose.

This new form of digital bootlegging subverts the music industry’s time limits in dealing with small sound units. Bootlegging is located in a broader field of digital subversive strategies because it has a close connection to net – artists and – activists (e.g. the Plunderphonics Movement). Bootlegging is now at the point of becoming recognized and widely commercialized and losing part of its oppositional anarchic power: Soulwax for example now works with legal rather than ‘copyleft’ material.

Flashback: What it is and how it began

A generation of sample-happy tunesmiths has created this new sound strategy. The history of bootlegging begins with Grandmaster Flash’s hardware approach. His cutting and mixing of vinyl is an old school hands-on strategy. Today bootlegging is an immaterial, software-based process carried out on a computer. Its protagonists are Osymoso, Richard X (Girls on Top) Cartel Communique, Kid 606, V/VM, Cassette Boy, Freelance Hellraiser, 2many djs and Soulwax. They present different styles of bootlegging: Osymoso invents a kind of medley, a musical history in mini-samples, an endless chain of sound in which the samples are not organized in layers, but follow a linear arrangement. Others produce loops and combine voice and sound to the point of combining multiple voices, beats or instrumental parts. DJ Errol Alkan even does live bootlegging on his Evening Club Trash show at the London Club The End.

Bastard Pop is a new genre that absorbs all other genres. It represents a clash of musical styles, a mix of opposites. It is a battle of contraries, such as Whitney Houston versus Kraftwerk. It connects

the (former) underground with the pop mainstream. The statement “the more odd the pairing the better”, indicates that this unwanted battle is structured like the celebrity death matches on MTV: Pop Giants and Legends against Pop Tarts and One Hit Wonders. As London XFM radio DJ James Hyman puts it: “It may be the best record she (Houston) never made”. Through reorganisation and recontextualition the sound material evokes a return of unwanted trash, the resurrection of vocal zombies. Bootleggers re-integrate parts of songs that people would prefer to forget. The musical bastard contains chart sounds that we love to hate. But there are also sound samples from people who are especially appreciated because of their distinctive voice and production style, such as Missy Elliott, who has spawned the bootleggers’ expression “doin’ a missy”.

Bastard Pop produces crossbreeds of enemy styles and qualities. It creates an artist’s hybrid of two musicians who would never be seen together in a studio because they are separated by genre and commercial borderlines. Even though two opposites are linked together, bootlegging is a strategy of recycling pop and (white) trash culture that does not disrespect the trivial samples it uses. An odd respect is expressed in demonstrating that some interesting elements exist even in a song that seems unacceptably trashy. A good bootleg sheds new light on these components of the track and gives them a new definition.

Technology and human feedback loops

The collage principle of bootlegging has developed as a quasi-‘natural’ process on the web where the raw material is found. Sound particles, often copyright protected, are picked up, downloaded, their different elements reorganized, transformed and most importantly synchronized, then uploaded again or eventually pressed as a vinyl record for the clubs. A bastard pop piece is created out of two musical worlds and works in a playful manner with the main components of a song: the instrumental and the vocal parts. Although they are from different contexts and therefore have a different character they mesh very well together technically because they are made compatible by software. The technological preferences are cheap and easily available: Success is enabled by tools like the synchronizing software Acid (Soundforge) on the one hand, and Filesharing Systems (Kazaa, Audiogalaxy) on the other, easy general access to raw sound material, and the possibility of distributing it immediately to a large audience over the net.

As a technique, bootlegging consists structurally of the separation of the sonic/instrumental components and the vocal track. In the techno/house movement the vocal sample was unimportant, and the recognition of component parts not necessary, as ecstatic dancing was the goal. Knowing the samples was the preserve of the DJ. Here vocals are the most important element to make because they produce the effect of alienation and re-recognition. The result is a new song, the components of which are often only, and superfluously, recognized by sophisticated listeners belonging to an in-crowd. The artistic effectiveness of these combinations is immediately tested and approved by clubbers. Dancers may only pay attention when they enjoy the effects of recognition of well-known samples.

The mix of musical styles also leads to 'bastard' dance styles within the same DJ set, with dancers changing from R'n'B movements to pogo according to the samples. A 'bastard' crowd also forms, mixing different dress codes in the same DJ Set (e.g. 2 Many DJs in December 2002 in Berlin, *Dorfdico* webzine). In the club a double mixing process becomes apparent. There are no longer any reduced flat tracks which are necessary for a good live mix (e.g. Jeff Mills) through a process of layered synchronisation and systemisation by the DJ. Here each record is already multi-layered. The often trashy commercial components are especially suitable for bastard pop because they are often characterised by reduced elements such as a simple hook and repetition. The tunes seem to point more in the direction of the classical structure of a song, although they sit somewhere between a track and a song.

Bastard Pop is the new club sound and a new strategy of combining trashy pop elements with a bassline that aims to totally harmonize the diverse sounds. The result is a hybrid dancefloor sound with disturbing elements within a continuous harmonic and endless flow. This leads to a new structure in a club evening, since these alien elements stand out from the overall structure without being absorbed.

An Eighties Bootleg Revival?

Despite its name, at first sight this phenomenon seems to have little in common with the bootlegs of the Eighties. There is a distinction between analogue old school bootlegs and the digital new school of bootlegging for the clubs. A bootleg was a collectors' item, very expensive and rare. It was

a 'copyleft' act, an illegal reproduction of a record on tape or vinyl, or the unauthorized recording of a live concert. The bootleg was a monolithic unit in itself. Its reproduction remained relatively close to the original (e.g if it was a taped gig), and it was more or less a copy.

Bootlegging is now done on a digital basis; it is a software phenomenon with the potential of materialization. Bastard pop gets physical in the form of extremely limited vinyl records. White Labels are often 7" singles produced in small quantities so they are once again collectors' items. People hear the track in the club but it is difficult for them to get hold of one of the records. This is a paradox since publicly accessible sounds become a rarity. Their materialisation has haptic qualities which are different from the self-burned CD of MP3 files leeches from the net. If a record is only available to the DJs and eager collectors, it maintains the rarity flavour of eighties bootlegs.

What differentiates bastard pop from the categories of mix and remix, sampling techniques in R'n'B and the (techno/house) dance floor scene? The new practise of bootlegging has a totally different structure that results from the medial differences in digitally archiving and transforming music. Bastard pop does not deal with abstract principles such as modulation and layering. In its structural linearity it is also different from the technique of mix and remix that maintains the basic structure of a track in modulating and varying sound layers: It is a sonic and vocal confrontation.

'Copyleft' Artists and Activists

Bootlegging is of course an illegal activity but because the result is not released on CD, but only distributed on vinyl in small numbers and over the net, it is of little interest to the lawyers of the entertainment corporations. There is only a limited amount of materialisation of a basically immaterial reproduction, so the number of law suits is limited. There are also examples that the music industry appropriates and creates legal forms for, sanctioning bootlegging but only with tracks from their own copyright pool. Sonic Foundry, who provide the Acid software, also stages its own bootlegging competitions.

Bastard pop is a 'copyleft' activity that is based on the internet, as is clearly shown by websites as boomselection. Boomselection is a sophisticated and creative form different from normal filesharing, being an active users' community, where the goal is not simply the blind collecting of files. It focuses on the fun aspect of collecting of sound components, rather than activist

implications. The playful character of their sound work is of primary importance rather than any political statement. Using pseudonyms may be paying tribute to activist strategies but is occasioned by dealing with illegal 'copyleft' materials, and is more of a musical than a political guerrilla tactic.

Predecessors of bastard pop have clearly indulged more in anti-copyright as a statement. Anti-corporation groups like Negativland worked together with net-artists and activists like rtmark (one early project that brought them a lot of legal difficulty was the CD *Deconstructing Beck*) who are now recognized as 'underground' in the art world, and 'sonic outlaws' dealing with the principles of the art movement of the Plagiarists, while also re-arranging sound and cover images.

As an artistic and intellectual activist tactic, bootlegging is connected to artists like Negativland, the Tape Beatles and KLF, who exist in the twilight zone between high art and pop. The official beginning of this artistic approach dates from 1993 when the ECC (Evolution Control Committee) first combined a Public Enemy accapella with a Herb Alpert sample. Marc Gunderson, founder of ECC, now works with amateur audio material, especially home recordings that end up by chance on the internet. Gunderson has said in an interview with the Bavarian Radio Station Zuendfunk that his main goal is irritation: "when you hear things you know very well, you are irritated by hearing a familiar voice in another musical context – this is an important moment, as you know the pieces but the whole arrangement is new. It is all about recognition."

Bootlegging follows the concepts of Open Source and Free Software. It guarantees access to sound sources for everyone: anybody can produce songs but has to give back his or her ideas to the web listeners who show appreciation through downloading or to clubbers who dance to the tracks. This constitutes a double sided form of approval. There are also three possible modes of reception - after downloading stored sounds, they are suitable either for home listening or for software transformation, or they are heard in the club in the context of dancing.

The structural principles of bastard pop are cut-up theory and de-collage. Bastard pop producers concentrate on digital synchronisation, sonic confrontations and recognition. Bootlegging is an interdisciplinary approach that links digital strategies and artistic practices under a general theory of "media use and misuse", as Friedrich Kittler once put it. It may be seen as a general media activist technique, or a form of recycling cultural trash. Digital technology enables the re-evaluation and re-aculturating of the blank spots of mainstream pop music and creates a cultural strategy, a technique of culture jamming.

A structure of difference and happy dissonance is implemented when Missy Elliott and Joy Division clash. It is also a deconstruction of the harmonic aspects of dance floor culture. The main principles of bootlegging bring the soundclash and the battle into the club. The separation of vocal and sonic and rhythmical structures is a celebration of difference which achieves a temporary unity and then disperses again. In the process, a community is formed out of difference in the realm of the electronic. Filesharing becomes lifesharing in the club.

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