

it's important to figure out what its limitations are. You do that by checking out where it all came from.

pp22

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Remix THIS!

The New Collage Aesthetic

by Joel Schalit and Charlie Bertsch

Base, How Low Can You Go?

From hip-hop to techno, from mainstream rock to punk, songs appears more the order of the day than it ever has been. Nothing seems really new anymore as much as it seems recycled. Just look at the sudden proliferation of "remix" albums in both underground and mainstream rock. Everyone from The Smashing Pumpkins to The Jon Spencer Blues Explosion is putting out remixes of their own work, as performed by techno, hip hop and indie artists as diverse as Beck, The Beastie Boys, Calvin Johnson, Wu Tang Clan and Moby.

Then there's "digital hardcore." Unlike other forms of traditional rock and roll—including punk—bands like Atari Teenage Riot and EC80R derive a huge part of the marketing value from the fact that they can generate an enormously loud sound using computers, keyboards and samplers instead of guitars and drums. Through the advent of cheap technology, one person can make the kind of noises that it took no less than three to generate in the past. Now everyone can roar like Neurosis or the Melvins.

However, the new popularity of collage aesthetics among contemporary rock bands is not so new. Remixes, for example, have

been a staple of hip hop and disco singles since the mid-seventies. In many instances, the technique is as old as the members of many of the bands employing it right now—if not older. Although there is a long history of musical collage, it was not until the late 1970s and early 1980s that it really rose to mass marketed prominence. Rap made the crucial difference. When the experiments of avant-garde musicians suddenly found themselves mirrored in the improvisations of inner-city youth, the collage aesthetic acquired its first real popular musical base.

Now, as we rapidly approach the millennium, what began as music on the margins has become the music of the mainstream. Declining sales of rock music have led the music industry to promote "electronic," a purposefully vague category—like "alternative" before it—that encompasses all sorts of music made with computers, keyboards and turntables instead of guitars, bass and drums. It isn't just the mainstream that is being flooded with music that deploys collage aesthetics. Indie labels that used to focus almost exclusively on music produced by traditional rock bands are now

starting to break out of the mold. Inspired by the increased media exposure of acts such as Negativland, whose new album *Dispepsi* was recently given a much-coveted *Rolling Stone* review, indies are signing collage outfits such as Men's Recovery Project and The Christal Methodists that would previously have lacked the backing of any label. Hipsters in the independent music scene are finally starting to realize that musical collage provides the perfect complement to the low-fi, cut-and-paste style of graphic design that has dominated punk magazines and posters since the 1970s.

Collage, in both the mainstream and the underground, opens up all sorts of interesting possibilities for cross-cultural exchange. The desire to find good material to sample helps to break down the mental walls that divide one type of music from another. It is unlikely that San Francisco Bay-area rapper E-40 listens to the piano-heavy rock ballads of Bruce Hornsby around the house, but he heard something in Hornsby's famous mid-1980s tune "The Way It Is" that he liked and sampled it on his record. Thanks to the popularity of musical collage, the number of similarly unlikely pairings is expanding rapidly.

Anything that overcomes the tribal separatism that runs rampant in our society is helpful, even if the only tribal separatism it actually overcomes is in the world of music. But there is more to musical collage than that. In the hands of its more radical practitioners, it becomes a lot more than the sort of "sampling" people do when they visit the international food stands at a fair. Their commitment to an aesthetics of collage is more deeply felt. They see it as a means of promoting social change. Yet even though musicians of this latter stamp see the use of collage as a means to a political end, their own investment—both psychological and economic—in it has largely blinded them to the problems implicit in its production.

Where It's At

To understand the importance of collage for the music industry, we need to focus more closely on the production process. It's necessary to consider not only how the music is actually made, but also how the way in which it's made affects its reception. The relative novelty of today's musical collage obscures the fact that the techniques used to make it have long been a standard practice in the music industry. They became a part of "the business" in the 1960s, when multi-track recording studios inspired a new attitude

But upstart rap acts who lack the capital of stars like Dr. Dre or the Wu-Tang Clan are also making more extensive use of studio time. There's a simple reason for this. The money needed to run a nuts-and-bolts recording studio has dropped radically in recent years. Because DAT (Digital Audio Tape) recording equipment, samplers, and computer-based mixing software make it possible to make high-quality multi-track recordings on a relatively low budget, the distinction between bands that can afford studio time and bands that can't is being eroded. With ingenuity and hard work, it is possible to construct a functional recording studio with the money it would take to buy a new car. This helps to explain why small studios are popping up in places where it wouldn't have been economically feasible before.

There are still concrete advantages to making recordings with moneyed corporate backing, but the most significant advantages musicians derive from recording for a major label has to do not with the making of music, but rather its marketing.

Here we run up against an ambiguity in the word "production." The technical production of music is only a part of the production process. The music industry is set up to produce music that sells. The relative quality of recordings is only one piece of the puzzle. In order to produce a profit, music must be reviewed; it must be advertised; it must be distributed to as many stores as possible. It is necessary to do all of these things, even though none of them has to do with the making of the music itself. The trick Malcolm McLaren pulled off with The Sex Pistols was to make their music sound as raw as possible, while refining the production of publicity into an art. He was ahead of his time, anticipating an era in which the "business" of the music industry would be less a matter of producing high-quality sounds than of producing high-quality hype.

Cutting Up The Spectacle

The perverse part about McLaren's understanding of "production" is the fact that his marketing innovations were inspired by a critique of marketing. In the late 1950s and 1960s, a loosely defined coalition of artist-critics known as the Situationists developed a new attitude towards revolutionary politics. Based in France, the Situationists were critical of leftists who were content to practice conventional party politics. They reasoned that power was no longer concentrated in the government, but dispersed throughout the

"society of the spectacle," in which the intangible workings of ideology proved more important than the concrete practice of conventional politics. As far as the Situationists were concerned, the status quo would be upheld so long as the production of the "spectacle" was not disrupted. This conviction led them to advocate a "politics by other means" that would intervene in culture rather than government. It is from their notions of cultural intervention that McLaren drew his inspiration.

The cornerstone of the Situationists' approach was the concept of "detournement." Recognizing that "the society of the spectacle" was sustained by a culture industry infinitely more powerful than its detractors, they decided that the only hope for social change lay in finding subversive uses for the products of the culture industry. The basic principle is analogous to the one on which martial arts like judo are founded: if you must battle a stronger opponent, use his own strength against him. The strategy

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towards the production of popular music. Suddenly, getting a good "take" stopped being the sole end of the recording process. Instead, instead it was possible to construct elaborate studio albums, only marginally based on a reproducible live sound. But because time in these studios was so prohibitively expensive, the first acts to exploit them fully needed to be backed by a lot of corporate money.

Punk rock rebelled against the corporate rock that these multi-track recording studios made possible. In theory, punk was supposed to emphasize performance over production. It was punk that made "over-produced" a synonym for "bad." To the taste-makers of independent rock, production represents an unfortunate, if necessary aspect of the recording process. But it is important to remember the role that producer Malcolm McLaren played in The Sex Pistols' rise to fame. Carefully strategizing their revolt against the musical establishment, he made them sound and look less "professional" than they really were in order to imbue them with the qualities of outsiders. In other words, the rebellion against "over-production" they helped inaugurate was itself "over-produced."

With a few notable exceptions, such as pop impresario Phil Spector and celebrity mastermind Andy Warhol, it wasn't until the advent of rap that production became not only respectable, but sexy. Because rap was first made by people of color on the political margins of American society, it could hardly be dismissed as another example of "over-production." As Beck, the current mainstream standard-bearer for musical collage, reminds us on the first single of his acclaimed album *Odelay*, rap had the capacity to be "where it's at," because it only required "two turntables and a microphone." It was much cheaper to use pre-recorded music as the background for their raps than it would have been to use live musicians. The mixing of different sounds that resulted was not the product of excess—too much time and money being spent in the studio—but of economic necessity. Early rappers used hand-me-down music the way people use hand-me-down clothes, as a way to make the most of limited financial resources.

Those days are past. Even if big-name rappers still lack the sort of major-label support that is provided for a band like U2, many now have the money to make full use of the technology in multi-track recording studios. Like many blockbuster rap albums in recent years, Dr. Dre's *The Chronic* was the product of an extended stay at a well-equipped studio.

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Malcolm McLaren clearly understood the revolutionary impetus behind detournement, but turned it on its head. He deployed detournement not as a means of revolutionizing society, but as a means of exploiting people's desire for revolution. As the rise of "alternative" culture in the early 1990s attests, many people have followed in his footsteps.

Although the concept of detournement may be inspiring for artists who want to promote social change, it can be just as inspiring for artists who only want to promote themselves. The challenge for artists who use detournement for social change is to make it clear to their audience that they are being critical. If listeners do not realize that the sounds they hear have been recontextualized, they are unlikely to appreciate that a point is being made. For this reason, when practitioners of musical collage seek to produce a critique of the status quo, they usually go out of their way to inform their listeners that they are doing so. This explains why most of the more radical examples of musical collage verge on parody. When people recognize that a song could be a parody, their attitude towards it changes completely. They start listening for the point instead of listening to the music.

However, parody presents its own problems. In most cases, the only point of parody is to make people laugh. Musical collage that comes across as parody may distinguish itself from "normal" music without making listeners realize that it is more than mere entertainment. The artists who deploy it for political ends are caught between a rock and a hard place. On the one hand, they don't want their work to be perceived as pure music; on the other, they also don't want it to be perceived as pure comedy. Because this is such a difficult balancing act, few artists have been able to sustain it for any length of time.

Cut Up Against The Historical Remix

Although it is hard to produce collage that performs a clear critical function, it has certainly been done. One of the first acts in popular music to successfully use musical collage as a form of critique was Frank Zappa's band, The Mothers of Invention. In *We're Only in It for the Money*, for example, they satirized The

Beatles' landmark *Sgt. Pepper*. Because both the music and the cover of The Beatles psychedelic "masterwork" are explicit examples of collage, the decision to critique it was deeply significant. It implied that collage could be put to conflicting ends: consolidating the power of the culture industry, as it had done in the case of The Beatles, or critiquing it from the within, as it did in the case of The Mothers of Invention. By choosing to pick on a rock band that was both hugely successful and highly regarded, Zappa's band made it clear that they were declaring war—not on bad music, but on the music business as a whole.

As the music-induced "high" of late-1960s counter-culture started to subside, the example provided by The Mothers of Invention became increasingly influential. Bands like The Residents recognized that musical collage proved a particularly efficient means of critiquing the culture industry. Fully aware that they were operating in the wake of the counter-culture, the Residents showed how seemingly subversive products of the music industry were able to function, not as a means of liberation, but as a means of oppression.

On 1975's *The Residents Present Third Reich and Roll*, their second album, the band attempts to identify rock music with authoritarianism by making medleys out of '60s pop songs, and giving the

compositions outrageous titles such as "Swastikas on Parade" and "Hitler was a Vegetarian." Their purpose was to make Baby Boomers question the music culture in which their generation was so deeply invested, revealing its "revolutionary" aura to be little more than an example of corporate marketing. The Residents were trying to dispel the carefully manufactured illusions of their own generation. Their attitude towards popular music reflected a sense of betrayal, a realization towards popular music reflected a musical liberation can substitute for political liberation.

The Residents critical use of musical collage culminated in their 1980 release *The Residents Commercial Album*, which, by presenting 40 one-minute songs, exposes the advertising jingle lurking pop music. The pop songs of the 1960s and 1970s that The Residents took as their starting point provided punk with its musical template. Punk takes simple melodies and turns them inside out, as if to reveal the chaos lurking beneath their deceptively simple surface.

Until recently, it was highly unusual for punk acts to dabble in more overt forms of musical collage. Like such bands as The Mothers of Invention and The Residents, however, punk music has a parasitic relation to the mainstream music from which it seeks to differentiate itself. One of the best examples from recent years is the album *Punk Side Story*, by the Bay Area band Schlong, which covers the entirety of the famous musical *West Side Story*, transforming it into a demented rock opera. Long before Schlong, however, it was the seminal Dead Kennedys who really offered the best example of the collage aesthetic's influence on punk rock.

Although the Dead Kennedys aren't typically thought of a collagists, their juxtaposition of the surf-inflected sounds of 1960s pop music with the abrasiveness of more straightforward punk rock wasn't too far removed from the technique Frank Zappa employed when he would throw together the experimental electronic music of Edgar Varese with the soul of Gladys Knight and The Pips. Add the vitriol of their biting lyrical commentary on the barely contained violence lurking beneath the facade of post-60s middle class life; their stinging indictment of consumer culture, misogyny, and religious revivalism; and you have the blueprint for a more aggressively political approach to musical collage.

Not long after the Dead Kennedys first released *Fresh Fruit For Rotting Vegetables*, David Byrne and Brian Eno's 1980 album *My Life In The Bush of Ghosts* helped to formalize the cultural left's approach to musical collage with its inventive detournement of found dialogue from Christian talk radio, muezzins calling Muslims to prayer, and sermons within music that combined eclectic musical arrangements played by live musicians with first-generation sampling machines.

Jerry Harrison, like Byrne a member of the seminal New Wave band the Talking Heads, pulled off a similar feat in 1984, recording a dance

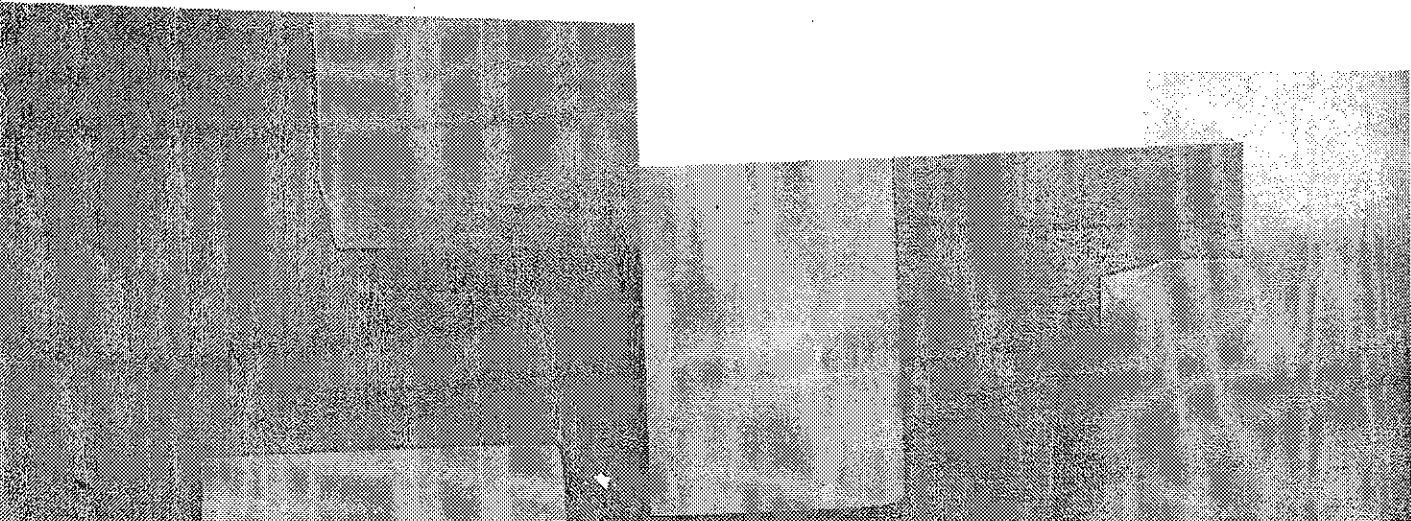
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This critique of culture needs to be part



track that sampled President Reagan's infamous speech in which he declared, "The bombing will begin in five minutes." While the political point in this latter case was obviously more explicit, the strategy was largely the same.

At the same time that white artists like Byrne, Eno and Harrison were combining, danceable percussion with found sounds and cut-up spoken word parts, black artists were refining the collage aesthetics of rap, reaching the peak of its potential with Public Enemy.

PE used recordings of African-American leaders like Malcolm X as a counterpoint to their sample-filled, bass-heavy grooves. On such incendiary tracks as "Fight the Power," Public Enemy attested to the power of musical collage to move both body and mind, producing four-minute songs which were simultaneously ironic, provocative, angry, and funny. Like his punk counterparts from bands like the Dead Kennedys, the band's front man Chuck D sang songs about how mass culture is used to maintain power, bel- lowing out brilliant quotes about how racially exclusive white culture is over DJ Terminator X's historically self-conscious arrangements which quoted liberally from bands as diverse as the MC5 to Slayer and James Brown.

But even though they were popular—particularly with music critics and the people who read them—bands like the Dead Kennedys and Public Enemy never really received their dues for the innovations they made with music that, for all of its experimentation with collage, never forgot to "rock." In this sense, the they had the opposite fate of the far-less-popular Residents, who were acknowledged for their novelty, but not for their music.

Lost in the Mix

The groups which ended up inheriting the legacy of the Residents were Negativland, and, to a lesser extent, John Oswald, and the generation of self-conscious cut-up acts who have followed in their footsteps like The Tape Beatles, Big City Orchestra and, most recently, The Evolution Control Committee.

Negativland bears a strange resemblance to The Sex Pistols—both are better known for their reputation than they are for their music. Slightly younger than the Residents, having formed in the late 1970s during the first stage in the development of West Coast punk culture, Negativland's career didn't take off until the middle of the 1980s thanks to a record that pissed off U2.

There aren't too many acts whose fame rests on a lawsuit, but Negativland is one of them. The band was successfully sued for misrepre-

U2 and Island Records? What about the people who work elsewhere in the music industry? Most of them don't profit that much from the profits of the culture industry. They get "lost in the mix," as it were.

Like other practitioners of musical collage, Negativland ultimately proves more interested in the right to produce autonomous art than they are with liberating the producers of mass culture. This is the danger of collage aesthetics as a political tool. Because collage is parasitic on the culture it critiques, it is difficult to make it target something bigger.

Liberating cultural commodities is important to Negativland because it serves as a metaphor for liberating physical property, not cultural property. In choosing to focus so narrowly on redistributing cultural wealth, Negativland fall into the same trap that their more conventional punk brethren also suffer from: mistaking the symptom for the cure. "It's not the system that's the problem," or so this kind of Baby Boomer ideology contends, "it's how corporations use mass produced art to deny us our right to more informed consumer choices!"

Whether it's done with keyboards, turntables, computers or good old fashioned guitars, the objective ought to be to get rid of culture. Even when more people have the right—and the technology—to appropriate material than they have now, the property relations which give rise to modern culture still remain. That's why we have to push beyond the critique of artistic property rights. Despite how problematic it is to attack mass culture, we have to continue to do so because culture is the primary means by which capitalism legitimates itself. We still need the kind of concentrated criticism of the music industry which collage rock offers but this critique of culture needs to be part of a larger critique of the system as whole. ©

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