

DJ Kool Akiem to explain the art of making beats, his answer was simple: "It's about playing records."<sup>75</sup> While beat making is its own musical practice, it bears the distinct influence of the hip-hop DJ, and the two draw on shared aesthetics, repertory, and history.

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The birth of hip-hop production was only one of the ways in which DJing expanded its reach in the decade of the 1980s. DJing expanded geographically, as Philadelphia became a hotbed for the cultivation of vinyl manipulation, fostering champion turntablists and bringing influential new techniques into the world. Indeed, turntable technique was one of the decade's growth areas. Transforming and beat juggling, created between about 1985 and 1987, were foundational developments in the world of DJing. Their importance can be gauged by the contestations they generated, both in terms of disputes about who deserves credit for them and in terms of the countless battle routines in which they were deployed. The New Music Seminar's Battle for World Supremacy, and its English-born counterpart, the DMC World Championships, represented yet another expansion of the art of the DJ. Just a few years earlier, DJs sought to rule neighborhoods in the Bronx. Now they were seeking to command the planet. Ironically, these expansions did not bring most DJs great fame, power, or wealth. The world over which the best DJs reigned supreme was a small and shrinking one, a world that increasingly separated itself from the other elements of hip-hop and from mainstream hip-hop fans. But as we'll see, over the first half of the 1990s this near-hermetic world produced some of the most creative DJs and astonishing feats of turntable virtuosity that the larger world had, or has, ever seen.

## Turntablism: 1989–1996

In 1995, Chris Oroc was a gas station attendant and a talented amateur DJ living in Southern California. One day as he was labeling homemade CDs, he unwittingly gave a name to an emerging musical movement. When he performed, Oroc was known as Babu, and on each CD he wrote "Babu the Turntablist"; later he called one of his tracks "Turntablism."<sup>1</sup> As a member of the Beat Junkies, a DJ crew that specialized in scratching and beat juggling, he had recently come to the realization that their whole approach to music had little in common with the work of traditional DJs. "I was telling my crew, 'You know, we can't even really call ourselves DJs anymore. There's guitarists, there's pianists, why not turntablists?'"<sup>2</sup> *Turntablist* came to designate a distinctive type of DJ, an instrumentalist who does not simply reproduce existing music but creates entirely new music out of records; *turntablism* is their art.<sup>3</sup> D-Styles, a fellow member of the Junkies, defined the art with a simple equation: "Records + Turntable + Scratching = Music."<sup>4</sup>

The "-ism" in turntablism was more than a simple suffix—it was a crucial signifier. *Turntablism* lent a sense of seriousness and cohesion to the art and even suggested something of a philosophy. To many, turntablism was a separatist movement, independent from dancers and MCs. The music of these DJs was meant for listening, not dancing, for head-nodding, not rump-shaking. The ideas behind turntablism, we know, were not actually new. The seeds were planted with "The Adventures of Grandmaster Flash on the Wheels of Steel" (1981), "Rockit" (1983), and the increasingly complex battle routines of the late 1980s. But it was not until the early and mid-1990s that a form of DJing, self-sufficient and largely independent from MCs, really flourished. Several crucial factors were at work: the rise of DJ crews, the growth of the battle scene, the simultaneous expansion of turntablism into California and the Filipino American community, and advancements in DJ technology. Taken together,

these developments led to what many would consider to be the creative high point of the art and culture of the hip-hop DJ. Yet at the same time, this high point was the point of furthest remove from mainstream hip-hop and popular culture.

SCRATCH NEEDLES, THE HAMSTER SWITCH,  
AND THE CROSSFADER CURVE: DJ EQUIPMENT  
AND THE EVOLUTION OF TURNTABLISM

Try this experiment at home, or better yet, at someone else's home. Find an old turntable and a record. Turn the player on, set the needle on the record, and try to scratch. More likely than not, as soon as you start pushing the record back and forth, the stylus will jump the groove and skitter across the vinyl. Non-DJs often think of scratching as something anyone can do. But they're wrong, not only because it requires more skill than they realize, but because it requires the right—or properly modified—equipment. For most of the history of the record player, needles were made to track in one direction only, forward, and at a constant speed; in other words, they were not designed for scratching. But in the very earliest days of hip-hop these were the needles that DJs had at their disposal, and the state of their equipment affected how they worked their vinyl. DJ Disco Wiz remembers those days well:

Not a lot of backspinning in those days, it was a lot of needle dropping. You have to understand that the equipment you had was nothing compared to what we have now. The needles had no tension on them, so you would tape pennies [to the cartridge] to give more weight. In the park [the tone arms] would just fly right off the record. There was really no traction.<sup>5</sup>

Many DJs simply used the cheapest needles they could find, often the Radio Shack brand, Realistic. The more expensive ones were sometimes the worst for mixing and scratching since the highest fidelity came from the lightest styli. Unlike audiophiles, hip-hop DJs weren't primarily concerned with "cleaner highs [and] more lucid texture," which is how a 1981 *Popular Mechanics* article described the virtues of a new Audio Technica cartridge. "I was originally using some HiFi Audio Technica stylus," British DJ Cutmaster Swift recalls of his early career in the mid-1980s; "they sucked but I made them work."<sup>6</sup> *I made them work*—phrases like this come up all the time in DJ discourse, especially about the early years of hip-hop. Rarely did the equipment do exactly what DJs wanted, but rarely was that a problem.

Occasionally, as in the example of the Technics 1200 series turntable, DJs happened upon equipment that seemed as if it had been tailor-made for them. This was also the case with two stylus models, both of which were introduced before the birth of hip-hop, but only became popular among turntablists in the 1980s and 1990s. One was Stanton's 500AL, originally designed for radio DJs who would have occasion to backspin (or back cue) a record while segueing between songs. "Meet the Stanton 500AL," opens an ad from 1970, "the cartridge that's tougher than disc jockeys. We designed the entire stylus assembly to withstand the rugged demands of back cueing and the kind of handling that would quickly ruin ordinary pick-ups."<sup>7</sup> It's not clear which hip-hop DJ or DJs "discovered" the 500AL, but it became popular among battlers and party-rockers alike in the late 1980s and early 1990s. "They were my favorites," DJ Craze says. "I used to put a dime on them and they wouldn't jump for anything!"<sup>8</sup> Stanton responded warmly to Craze's enthusiasm, and in 2000 they introduced the Stanton 520-SK Craze. As Craze explains, "Stanton had approached me about sponsoring me and having my own needles. I told them that I loved the 500s and that I didn't wanna change a thing, I just wanted my name on it."<sup>9</sup> A glance at Stanton's website today reveals several different cartridges designated for turntablist use.<sup>10</sup>

In the mid-1990s, an even older needle came to the attention of turntablists, and it quickly became the needle of choice, favored even above the Stanton 500AL. This was the Shure M44-7, introduced back in 1963. The M44-7 was not especially popular, at least for its first thirty-three years. It was expensive, costing \$44.50 when it was introduced, and didn't have an impressive frequency range: 20 to 17,000 Hz, compared to 10 to 25,000 Hz for more high-fidelity needles.<sup>11</sup> It had one singular virtue, crucial to turntablists but to few others: a high tracking force (the force exerted by the stylus on the sides of the v-shaped groove), three to four times higher than that of its hi-fi cousins. In other words, it was perfect for scratching because it stuck so resolutely in its rut.<sup>12</sup> Ironically, the famed scratch needle was originally touted by Shure in 1963 as "a no-scratch" stylus, but here they were proclaiming its resistance to jumping the groove and scratching *across* the vinyl.<sup>13</sup> For years, the M44-7 was difficult to find, and was even discontinued in the United States, Shure's home. But in 1995 or 1996, the Beat Junkies started traveling to Japan, and it was there that they happened across it. They quickly realized that they had found a needle that suited them even better than their Stantons. As Beat Junkie veteran DJ Rhettmatic told me, "When we started going to Japan we started buying [the M44-7] needles and bringing them back here," introducing them to the turntablist community at large. "We pretty much opened their eyes to it," he recalls.<sup>14</sup> The Beat Junkies also opened Shure's eyes. Shure recognized the potential of their near-dormant product, and in the late 1990s, they started marketing this "no-scratch" stylus

directly to DJs, even featuring the Beat Junkies in full-page magazine ads. The Shure website now describes the M44-7 as a “turntablist record needle,” one that is “engineered for scratch DJ’s”<sup>15</sup> (see Appendix 1 for a close-up illustration of an M44-7 style cartridge and needle).

Shure and Stanton weren’t the only companies to jump on the scratch needle bandwagon; Gemini, Numark, Ortofon, and others have as well. Ortofon, with its distinctive “Concorde” line of long, narrow cartridges, became especially prominent, in part because of DJ Qbert’s endorsement and DMC’s controversial “Ortofon Rule,” which for a time (2005–2008), mandated the use of the Danish company’s cartridges in its battles.

The relationship between DJs and needles reveals a common pattern. DJs at first either adapted equipment or found the equipment that suited them. It was only when DJs gained mainstream attention in the mid-1990s that the manufacturers took notice and started catering to DJs. At first, the DJs’ approach to equipment was “to make them work,” and only later did the equipment makers start to work for them. This pattern becomes even clearer, we’ll see, in the case of the mixer.

The crab scratch is an impressive sight to behold. The DJ’s mixer hand seems possessed, the fingers tapping the crossfader so quickly that one sees only a blur of swarming digits. Developed by Qbert in 1995, the crab is performed by essentially snapping each of the fingers against the thumb from the pinkie (or ring finger) to the index. This snapping is done with the crossfader in between the fingers, so that it’s bouncing back and forth, cutting the sound off and on in quick succession as the DJ slowly moves the record back and forth with the other hand. The effect is hard to describe precisely, but if you’ve heard Porky Pig’s stuttering send-off from the old Warner Brothers cartoons, “That’s all folks!” then you have the idea. The crab, visually impressive and sonically distinctive, quickly caught on after Qbert deployed it in his battle routines, and it soon became a staple of turntablist technique across the world.<sup>16</sup>

Why did the crab skitter into existence when it did? Part of the reason is that in 1995 Qbert saw the Welsh DJ Excel perform a new scratch he called the twiddle, in which the middle and index fingers bounce the fader off the thumb; Qbert tried it himself and then created a variation using all the fingers (which he actually found easier to execute).<sup>17</sup> But why hadn’t someone else come up with the scratch earlier? Conceptually, it’s not that different from the transformer, which had been around for nearly a decade. Qbert remembers the reaction of other DJs when he first crabbed in a battle: “Whoa, that’s pretty damn fast transforming!” they said.<sup>18</sup> But there’s a reason DJs didn’t twiddle or crab in the 1980s: these new moves were nearly impossible to execute with the mixers available at the time. The roadblock was the crossfader.

Crossfaders, which didn’t become common until the late 1970s, were originally used by radio DJs as an efficient way to segue from one song to the next.<sup>19</sup> Simply two faders coupled into one control, the crossfader simultaneously fades one channel out while fading the other channel in. The device made life easier for the DJ—whether on the radio or in the dance club—who could now use one hand to do what would otherwise require two hands operating separate controls. These early crossfaders were also designed to cut the sound in or out gradually, and the controls themselves offered a decent amount of resistance. Having a fairly stiff, gently graduated crossfader was perfect for DJs who put a premium on creating seamless segues and avoiding dead air.<sup>20</sup>

Yet what helped traditional DJs handicapped scratch DJs. Even into the late 1980s, DJ mixers were not made with scratching or even quick mixing in mind. With its wooden sides and VU (volume units) meters, the Gemini MX 2200 mixer popular in the late 1980s looks positively antique, and its wide profile and stiff fader were hardly conducive to performing virtuosic battle routines (see Figure 5.1). But comparatively speaking, the machine was a dream. Cash Money used it when he won the 1988 DMC World Championship battle, and actually brought his own Gemini to London, rather than use the even larger mixers DMC supplied.<sup>21</sup> Whatever equipment they used, scratch DJs of the time had to fight against their machines to create the sounds they wanted. As Shortcut put it, “Those faders—you’ve got to have muscles to scratch on those things, you know what I mean?”<sup>22</sup> Moreover, early faders were not designed to take the kind of abuse turntablists dispense. A radio or club DJ would use a crossfader maybe



Figure 5.1 Gemini MX-2200 Mixer. (Photograph by Zane Ritt/Courtesy of DJpedia. Creative Commons license CC BY-SA 2.0.)

once every few minutes; a turntablist, on the other hand, might use the cross-fader *hundreds* of times in the same span. When they didn't simply break, over-used faders generated crackling or static (sometimes called "travel noise") and led to "bleeding," when both channels could be heard even when the fader was at one extreme or the other.

Without better mixers, turntablists of the late 1980s and early 1990s were reaching the technical limits of their art. But DJs have never waited for others to give them the features they sought, so they addressed the problems themselves through a variety of workarounds and hacks. This attitude dates back to the very earliest days of hip-hop. Grandmaster Flash rigged his own cueing system; Bambaataa, Breakout, Disco Wiz, Grandmaster Caz, Kool Herc, and others found ways to mix records without even having a mixer. Some DJs avoided the crossfader altogether for certain scratches, such as the transformer, using the on-off line switch instead. Others liberated their crossfaders of the heavy grease they were packed in, using lighter, less frictional gun oil; Jazzy Jeff, remember, carried WD-40 with him to battles.<sup>23</sup>

One of the most interesting mixer fixes of the time was the so-called hamster switch. In the early 1990s, some DJs found that certain new scratches, like the crab and the twiddle, were easier to perform if the direction of the crossfader were reversed. This is known as "hamster style," the name coined by San Francisco's DJ Quest, a member (with DJ Eddie Def and DJ Cue) of a crew called the Bullet Proof Scratch Hamsters (later known as the Bullet Proof Space Travelerz). Quest stumbled upon the hamster style of DJing accidentally: when he got his first mixer (a Pyramid 4700) he wired it to his turntables incorrectly, connecting the right turntable to the left turntable input on the mixer and vice versa. He liked the configuration and never changed back.<sup>24</sup> But not all scratches were best performed with the crossfader reversed, so ideally mixers would have a control that let the DJ change the fader direction on the fly. This is exactly what the hamster switch does, and enterprising DJs figured out how to install it themselves. Quest cites DJ Focus, "an electronics wizard" from Phoenix, as one of the first to create a hamster switch, which he attached to a small box connected to his turntables and mixer.<sup>25</sup>

Eventually the equipment manufacturers started paying more attention to turntablists, and responded by gradually adding the features DJs clamored for. Probably the first mixer specifically marketed as a scratch/battle mixer was the PMX-2, introduced in 1989 by the Japanese outfit Melos. It was used for a time as the official DMC battle mixer and even sported a decal with the DMC logo. Its uncluttered layout and smooth faceplate without jutting screws were designed to facilitate quick and efficient scratching and mixing, though it didn't have all the features battle DJs needed. Other mixers provided looser, smoother sliders as well as field-replaceable crossfader controls, so DJs could buy extra

faders and swap them out on their own, which active DJs might have to do multiple times a year. And with Vestax's 1998 PMC-06 Pro, mixers started coming with hamster switches.<sup>26</sup> (On most mixers it is simply a button labeled "reverse.") That Vestax mixer, and a few others following it, were also narrower in width, meaning that DJs wouldn't have to reach as far when switching between turntables. Later machines, such as the Rane TTM-56 (introduced in 2001), were equipped with magnetic faders, which, as the manufacturer claims, eliminated bleeding and extraneous noise, and had a lifetime of over ten million operations.<sup>27</sup> (The mixer in Appendix 1 is drawn from a Rane TTM-56 model.) All these features directly addressed the needs of turntablists.

The most important change to mixers, however, and one that DJs couldn't easily implement themselves, was related to the crossfader curve, which refers to the distance the fader needs to travel before switching the sound from one turntable to the other. Traditional mixers had gentle crossfader curves for smooth, gradual transitions; practically speaking, this required that the slider be moved a relatively long distance, perhaps up to two inches, to effect a full fade. But turntablists wanted to be able to cut sound on and off quickly and with a minimum of motion. Mixer makers responded by creating a steeper curve, meaning that, in some cases, only a tenth of an inch, or 2.5 millimeters, separated full on and full off. In other words, the manufacturers turned the fader into a highly responsive on-off switch, effectively removing the fade from the fader. Realizing, however, that sometimes DJs wanted longer fades, manufacturers also started offering multiple curve settings, so that DJs could change the shape of the curve at will. For example, the Vestax PMC-06 Pro, pictured in Figure 5.2, has a knob on the front called "C.F. Curve," which allows a variety of settings.

The Vestax PMC-06-Pro was designed with input from DJ Qbert, and built upon the PMC-05-Pro, which itself benefited from the suggestions of DJ Shortcut and DJ Rhettmatic. I spoke with each of them about their work with equipment manufacturers, and Vestax in particular, and what emerged was a fascinating picture of a new era in DJ technology, one in which turntablists came to play an ever-increasing role in the design stage.

In 1993, Shortcut was working as a convention DJ for a turntable and mixer manufacturer; it was his job to show off one of its mixers at the various equipment shows. The problem was, according to Shortcut, "it sucked."<sup>28</sup> "No disrespect to [the manufacturer] but I wasn't feelin' it. It had a small fader . . . so I couldn't really do beat juggles or mix or anything like that. So in the hotel room, I made a sketch on a napkin of a mixer that I thought would be nice. 'Cause, at the time—the best DJ mixer at the time was the DMC PMX-2, the official DMC mixer that you used in the battles. I was thinking something along those lines, but, you know, like a step up. A couple of features that that mixer

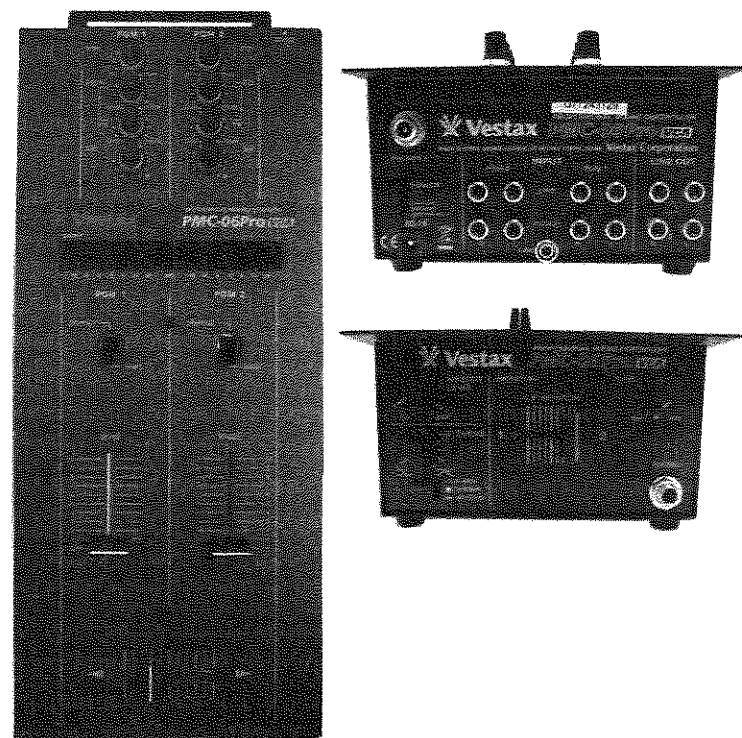


Figure 5.2 The Vestax PMC-06 Pro mixer. Its slim profile, variable crossfader curve settings, and reverse (“hamster”) switch are all intended to facilitate advanced scratching. When first released, it came in a gold finish; the black finish came only with later models. (Images courtesy of Turntable Lab, [www.turntablelab.com](http://www.turntablelab.com).)

didn't have.” Most importantly, Shortcut wanted a hamster switch and a loose fader, and he wanted a simple design without any distracting, unnecessary features. When he showed his napkin to a company representative, the response was dispiriting. “He was like, ‘Aw man, that ain't gonna sell. There's no features.’ You know, that was during a time where all the mixer companies wanted to add some outrageous feature. I'm like, ‘Simplicity is the best. As long as you have a solid fader, it doesn't [matter].’ That was during the time where all faders bled. I was trying to tell them, ‘I'm a scratch DJ and I would want to use this mixer.’”

While working at the annual NAMM convention, the enormous trade show for music products in Los Angeles, Shortcut and his friend DJ Rhettmatic visited the Vestax booth, and fell in love with their mixers. “My god, your faders are butter!” Shortcut exclaimed. “Oh, wow!” was Rhettmatic's response.<sup>29</sup>

The Vestax reps, seeing that they had virtuoso turntablists and gear “geeks” (Rhettmatic's word) at their booth, asked them what they looked for in a mixer. Not long after this encounter, Shortcut was touring with Qbert in Japan, and had a chance to meet with representatives from the Osaka-based company. Vestax was responsive, and some of their people later met with him and DJ Rhettmatic back in California to discuss a new mixer, one that the DJs hoped would have all the best features of the Gemini, GLI, and Numark mixers combined into a slim machine that was, as Rhettmatic describes it, “basic, straight to the point, no bells and whistles.” Vestax came out with a prototype and invited the two of them to Japan to showcase the new mixer. They were thrilled—“I was, like, ‘Oh man this is it,’” says Shortcut. In 1995, the mixer was released as the Vestax PMC-05-Pro; it had a superior crossfader and a simple layout with the controls spaced far enough apart so a DJ would be unlikely to bump anything accidentally in the heat of battle. The only disappointment was that it did not have a hamster switch, at least at first. The two DJs had no formal business arrangement with Vestax, and were not paid for their work. Looking back, however, they have no regrets. “At the time we weren't thinking about money,” explains Rhettmatic. “We wanted something for ourselves to use.” Shortcut puts it this way: “I was like, what, 18 at the time. And I was more hyped that the company would actually listen to me. It was all good.”

Qbert also worked with Vestax, and pushed them to add a hamster switch to the 05-Pro, which they included on a version they dubbed the Q-Bert Limited Edition I. Qbert had more input with the next line, the 06-Pro. “I drew a design, I gave it to Vestax, and they came out with [it]. When you see the 06, keep in mind that I drew that thing exactly to a tee.”<sup>30</sup> Like Shortcut, he was not paid for his contributions and received no explicit credit from Vestax. “You motherfucker, that's my design!” was his immediate response when he first saw the finished product, “but [then] I was like, ‘Ah, fuck it, whatever.’” He was unhappy about not receiving credit or payment, but like Shortcut he harbors no bitterness. “I mean, it's cool to have credit, but it's not really a big thing, it's like, whatever, as long as it makes the world a better place, then I'm happy, you know?”

Several years later, Akihiro Kaneko, chief design engineer at Vestax, explained the company's relationship with hip-hop DJs. Although Kaneko recognized their influence on Vestax's products, he seemed to view hip-hop DJs more as customers than as potential partners.

[F]or some reason, the hip-hop people are the ones who seem to be especially enthusiastic about our products. It may be partly because hip-hop DJs treat turntables more like musical instruments. They change a lot of things, and they complain a lot, too: “This does not work,” and so forth.

House and techno people do not seem to complain as much. They are more concerned about choice of songs and mixing, but hip-hop DJs have, well, interesting personalities, stronger passion, and characters, and they tend to speak out to us "This is bad" and "That does not work," so we will know what was not good in our products. . . . We did not [at] first intend to make things for hip-hop, but since they voiced a lot of opinions to us . . . we have more products for hip-hop DJs.<sup>31</sup>

Note that he singles out hip-hop DJs among all others as being particularly outspoken and proactive when it comes to equipment, and that Vestax only started adding turntablist-friendly features at the prompting of this "most enthusiastic group."

Although we can criticize Vestax for exploiting young DJs who had no business experience or lawyers to represent their interests, it has long been sensitive to the needs of DJs, producing beloved scratch mixers for more than fifteen years. Whatever the details of the business relationships between Vestax and DJs might have been, a larger point emerges. We can see these stories as emblematic of a significant change in the world of the hip-hop DJ. In the 1970s and well into the 1980s, equipment manufacturers paid little heed to hip-hop DJs who, after all, didn't use the machines as intended and often positively abused them. These machines were not designed with the techniques and aesthetics of their most enthusiastic users in mind. But these users bent these machines to their wills and made them serve their needs. And then, after years of this tweaking and jury-rigging, the manufacturers finally began to make the machines the DJs had dreamed of. We can see this as the triumph of vernacular technological creativity, the crucial but oft-ignored innovativeness of marginalized communities.<sup>32</sup> In this case, the creative contributions of working-class African Americans, Latinos, and Filipino Americans led to nothing less than the reconception and redesign of a tool central to the work of the modern DJ.

This is not to say that DJs in the 1990s rested easy once they had the attention of the industry. The best DJs continued to fight with their machines, refusing to accept their limitations, and dreamed up new technological possibilities for their instruments. Kid Koala put it this way:

It's always about how the DJ can outthink the machine. Like after they developed a mixer in the '90s, with a short cut [i.e., steep fader curve] that made transforming a lot easier—well, then what happened? People said, now it's just second nature to do that, what else can we do with this new mixer? Then came the crab and things like that, you know? So it's really always that John Henry, man versus machine kind of thing at the root of a lot of scratch DJing.<sup>33</sup>

Whatever we call this—vernacular technological creativity, resistance to authority, or sheer stubbornness—it is the way of the hip-hop DJ.

#### BAY AREA TURNTABLISM AND THE "FILIPINO FACTOR"

In September 1972, Philippine president Ferdinand Marcos declared martial law. With Proclamation No. 1081, newspapers were shut down, tens of thousands of citizens were rounded up into military compounds, and the Congress was dissolved. Large numbers of Filipino families fled the country, seeking refuge across the world, many of them in the United States (which had recently opened the door to more immigrants with the 1965 Immigration Act). Marcos could not have realized it, but with the stroke of his pen he set into motion the flowering of DJ culture in a Filipino community that had settled in the San Francisco Bay Area, nearly 7,000 miles away.

Anyone with more than a passing interest in turntablism knows that Filipinos, especially Filipino Americans, are richly represented in the highest ranks of the art. The most famous are Qbert and Mix Master Mike, known well beyond the world of scratch DJs, but there are many others as well. These include Apollo, Babu, Celskiii, Deeandroid, Dexta, 8-Ball, Icy Ice, Jester, Kuttin Kandi, Neil Armstrong, Pone, P-Trix, Rhettmatic, Rocky Rock, Roli Rho, Shortkut, Sonny, Symphony, Vinroc, and Yogafrog; moreover, some of the most renowned DJ crews—the Beat Junkies, the 5th Platoon, and the Invisibl Skratch Piklz—are Filipino-dominated.<sup>34</sup> Not all of these DJs hail from around San Francisco—the Beat Junkies formed in Southern California, the 5th Platoon is a largely New York crew, Jester is a Texan, Dexta is an Aussie, and the Mega Team was actually based in the Philippines (more on them in a moment). But the Bay Area is unparalleled for its concentration of accomplished DJs, and the rise of a Filipino American turntablist scene there must be recognized as one of the key developments in the history of the hip-hop DJ, for it was the Bay Area Filipino American DJ community that, more than any other, spurred the rise and spread of turntablism.

The Filipino American turntablism explosion was a phenomenon of the 1990s, but to understand it we need some backstory first. A DJ scene emerged in the Bay Area in the late 1970s and early 1980s in the form of mobile DJ crews that hosted parties throughout the area. Although the scene encompassed the whole Bay Area, two pockets of activity are noteworthy for our story: Balboa High School, in the southern part of San Francisco, and Daly City, just a few exits down Interstate 280 in San Mateo County. Balboa can boast the first Filipino American DJ crew (Sound Explosion), as well as four of the other earliest crews and the first all-Filipina crew (the Go-Go's); Qbert was one of the

school's graduates.<sup>35</sup> Daly City can claim Apollo, Mix Master Mike, Shortkut, and a host of popular crews. It was not long before the scene expanded. Sociologist and journalist Oliver Wang explains, "At its height, the DJ scene covered six counties and 7,000 square miles in the Bay Area alone, with well over 200 crews who had come and gone over a fifteen-year period."<sup>36</sup>

The first few generations of Bay Area crews, those active until the late 1980s, had little in common with the scratch-centric, breakbeat-loving turntablists who later made Filipino American DJs famous. In fact, hip-hop was for the most part not in the crates of these early DJs, who were more inclined toward soul or Hi-NRG, a fast, disco-influenced form of electronic dance music. Some DJs, like Qbert and Mix Master Mike, tried their hand at scratching at home after "Rockit" came out in 1983, but at parties it was rarely heard, and often drew glares rather than cheers from the dancers. Qbert, who started out with the Live Style crew, remembers, "When I first did it, people'd just be sitting down and they'd be like 'what the hell are you doing?' or, you know, 'just let the record play!'"<sup>37</sup> Shortkut and DJ Derrick D, both of the Daly City crew Just 2 Hype, also irritated partygoers with their hip-hop and their scratching. As Derrick says, "Me and Short would cut shit up . . . and people would be so mad at us but we didn't care."<sup>38</sup>

A turning point for the Filipino mobile DJ scene came in 1989, when Qbert faced Jazzy Jim in a high-profile battle held in Hayward. Jazzy Jim opened with a seamless segue of short song fragments in a demonstration of "quick-mixing," a traditional test of skills among DJs in the scene. Qbert went next, and stunned the crowd with a scratch routine based on the 1988 hip-hop hit "It Takes Two," by Rob Base and DJ E-Z Rock. John Francisco, one of the promoters of the battle, later described his impressions: "I was walking from one side of the hall to the other. I stopped dead in my tracks. I was like 'Jesus Christ, who the hell is this guy?' I mean, he was doing things to a record that I never heard before in my life. I mean I heard people scratching before, but not like that. He was like a damn madman up there."<sup>39</sup>

The judges faced a dilemma—how to compare two routines that demonstrated fundamentally different approaches to the turntables. In a hotly contested decision, they awarded first place to Jazzy Jim. Qbert may have lost, but his scratching portended the future of DJing in the Bay Area.

Scratching at Qbert's level does not emerge overnight; indeed, he had been developing his craft largely out of the public eye for years. As he admitted to me, when he started he had no idea what he was doing.<sup>40</sup> He actually thought that scratching involved dragging the needle *across* the grooves; when he realized that he was supposed to move the record, not the needle, he initially did it by rotating the label, like he was turning a knob or juicing an orange. His first "sound system" was a component stereo with a turntable, radio, and tape deck,

and a lid that propped open, piano-style, with a small stick. He practiced by scratching along with the radio, and although he didn't have a mixer, he could use the volume knob to create a variety of scratches. Incidentally, Quitevis *hated* his DJ name, which originated as a childhood taunt inspired by the 1982 video game Q\*bert, which featured an orange, roly-poly figure with a tubular nose. "I was short and fat, my last name [Quitevis] starts with a Q. It's like a really, really childish, immature nickname," he recalls ruefully. "When I became a DJ, I didn't want that to be my name. Then everybody was like, 'Hey that Qbert guy was pretty good,' and I was like, 'No! that's not my name!' I wanted to be something from a comic book, you know, Ripclaw or The Slasher."

A crucial point in Qbert's development came when Apollo introduced him to a kid of half-Filipino, half-German ancestry who later became known as Mix Master Mike. In their first encounter, Qbert showed Mike what he could do, and then, as Qbert tells it:

Mike comes up and he's like, "let me try that," and Mike does a really fast, military scratch. I'm like "Aw, what the hell is that?" Mike had started like a month before I had, and he was doing all the "Rockit" scratches and everything. That was my first experience of what a real DJ is supposed to do. Mike was pretty much my mentor, but he didn't know that he was my mentor. I was just following him around, seeing, studying every show he did, every party he did.

The two became fast friends, schooling each other, but also learning from bootlegged videotapes of DMC and New Music Seminar battles, dissecting the routines of East Coast DJs like Cash Money, Jazzy Jeff, and Steve Dee.

Around the time of Qbert's 1989 battle against Jazzy Jim, the Bay Area DJ scene started to change. Crews had typically formed from groups of friends who lived in the same neighborhood or city, and the majority had just one DJ who could scratch, if that. But then likeminded scratchers from different crews across the Bay Area started to get together. In 1991, Qbert, after winning the U.S. finals of the DMC battle, joined Apollo, Mix Master Mike, and two MCs (FMD and H2) to form FM 2.0 (Furious Minds to Observe). This was perhaps the first group in the area to have multiple scratch DJs, and the three acted like a traditional band, with each member performing distinct roles. They soon left their MCs behind and, as the Rock Steady DJs, entered the 1992 DMC competition, which that year started allowing crews to enter. They made it all the way to the World Championships—and won.

Their winning routine was (after a slightly rough start) a well-oiled six-minute marvel.<sup>41</sup> It had its roots in a "Peter Piper" routine Apollo and Mix Master Mike had worked out several years earlier, but according to Apollo it was fully

“composed” for this battle, and intended to show that three DJs could play together as a band.<sup>42</sup> As Mike explained, “We just had aspirations of playing like a band on the turntables instead of guitars and drums and stuff. We wanted to actually play all those instruments on the turntables together.”<sup>43</sup> In the routine they perform distinct roles as drummer (Apollo), bass scratcher (Mike), and lead scratcher (Qbert).<sup>44</sup> Occasionally they scratch in unison, like a string quartet bowing together; they even take a dramatic grand pause for four beats before reentering. They dispense almost entirely with the antics common in battles of the time, as in the final routine that the 1992 Philippines DMC Champions The Mega Team (DJ M.O.D., DJ Sonny, DJ Ouch) brought to the battle that year. Their wigs, miming, and props made for an entertaining show, one that emphasized spectacle as much as sound.

The next year, 1993, Qbert and Mike competed at the DMC World Championships, this time without Apollo. (Apollo had joined Branford Marsalis’s group, Buckshot LeFonque, and was unavailable.) They called themselves the Dream Team, the nickname for the American Olympic basketball team that had won the gold medal in Barcelona in 1992. The Michael Jordan and Scottie Pippen of the turntables dominated, now with an even more virtuosic routine that used only three turntables. Their technique had continued to develop since their last triumph in London. The routine features two-handed scratching with the fingers tapping the record like a bongo, and the furious use of the transformer switch; the two end with a crazed unison tremolo, an accelerated baby scratch called the scribble. With just a few recognizable words, the routine is almost abstract, largely a showcase of incredibly fast scratching on their trademark robotic bleeps. But they can’t help closing with a recorded taunt taken from the popular 1991 video game *Street Fighter II*: “You Lose!”<sup>45</sup>

These years—1992 and 1993—were the only years that a crew won the DMC World Championships. The organizers apparently thought better of having teams compete against individuals, and it was not until 1999 that the DMC offered a separate competition for teams. But this wasn’t the end for these Bay Area DJs; in fact, it was more of a prelude. In 1995, Qbert, Mike, and Apollo formed the Invisibl Skratch Piklz—the personnel changed over the years, with Shortkut, D-Styles, and Disk joining at various times; Yogafrog was a non-performing member who acted as the group’s manager (see Figure 5.3). Until they disbanded in 2000, they were the best-known and perhaps the best group altogether, performing across the world and doing as much to bring attention to the art of the turntable as anyone since D.ST scratched on “Rockit” more than a decade earlier.

While the Piklz were becoming known as one of the premier scratch crews in the early 1990s, a distinctive turntablist culture was growing around them in the Bay Area. Turntablists were cutting it up in battles, clubs, basements, and



Figure 5.3. Members of the Invisibl Skratch Piklz. From left to right: Mix Master Mike, Shortkut, Qbert, D-Styles, Yogafrog. (Photograph by B+, courtesy of B+ and Raymond Roker.)

bedrooms, on the radio and TV—anywhere a DJ could lug two turntables and a mixer. The scene did not simply grow spontaneously out of all this DJ activity, however. Key venues and individuals played crucial role in establishing and promoting the scene: in particular, Billy Jam, Dave Paul, Alex Aquino, Cleo Fishman’s Club Deco, and the home of DJ Qbert.

Billy Jam, born Billy Kiernan in Dublin, arrived in New York in 1979, quickly becoming an early champion of hip-hop as a radio DJ. In 1981, he left for San Francisco, and fell in love with the turntablist scene. Jam remembers when he first started hearing the virtuosic scratch routines from area turntablists. “I would literally get goose bumps. I was just so excited about it I just wanted more people to hear it and appreciate it.”<sup>46</sup> Jam promoted local turntablism on a number of stations, but he often found himself in hot water for, among other things, violating FCC rules by playing obscenity-laced hip-hop songs on the air. So he became his own boss, setting up a pirate radio station (also in violation of FCC rules) in his house. There he started a series with the nose-thumbing name

Pirate Fuckin' Radio, which ran to more than 100 episodes and included the Shiggar Fraggar Show. Recorded between late 1994 and mid-1996, the five live all-turntablist shows featured members of the Invisibl Skratch Piklz and other important area DJs improvising routines. At about the same time he started filming other informal DJ jams in his house, calling the series *Hip Hop Slam* TV. Hip Hop Slam then became the name of Jam's record label, which released a variety of turntablist compilations, most featuring local artists, such as *Turntables by the Bay* and *Scratch Attack*.<sup>47</sup> Through his ardent advocacy as a DJ, a label owner, and a journalist, Billy Jam was a catalytic force in the Bay Area scene. More likely than not, if a DJ was scratching somewhere in northern California in the 1990s, Jam was probably there, recording it, filming it, broadcasting it, or writing about it, sharing the goose-bump-inducing experience with the world. The British journal *The Wire* aptly described his contributions in this way: "One gets the feeling that Billy Jam may one day be regarded as a sort of turntablist Alan Lomax (RIP), a field recording general who left no rockers unturned in his pursuit of the perfect scratch."<sup>48</sup>

Dave Paul, another important scratch impresario, started out as a mobile DJ in the mid-1980s, before he became a club and radio DJ and later founded the underground magazine *Bomb Hip-Hop*.<sup>49</sup> The magazine, whose first issues were made using a typewriter, glue, scissors, and a photocopier, was one of the few regional publications that focused on hip-hop, and featured articles, reviews, and interviews connected to the Bay Area scene. In 1992, he included in his magazine flexidisks with music by producer Dan the Automator, DJ Peanut Butter Wolf, and MC Charizma; from this modest beginning the record label Bomb Hip-Hop was born. In 1995, Bomb Hip-Hop released *Return of the DJ*, the first all-turntablist album. Paul was motivated by what he saw as the disappearance of the DJ from the hip-hop scene. "When I came up with the concept of the first *Return of the DJ* in 1994," Paul explains, "I was disappointed with rap albums no longer featuring DJs scratching on them." He fondly remembered how DJs like Cash Money, Jazzy Jeff, Joe Cooley, and Mr. Mixx all had tracks spotlighting their talents when they spun for rappers (in these cases, MC Marvelous, The Fresh Prince, Rodney O, and 2 Live Crew, respectively). The idea behind the release, and the title, was to bring the DJ back into the spotlight. "So I decided to contact DJs that I knew and make a whole album of scratching music. I just told the DJs [to] make their tracks however they could, and try to keep it under five minutes." The idea was simple but unprecedented, and it made an unmistakable statement. On DJ Z-Trip's contribution, "U Can Get With Discs or U Can Get With D.A.T.," a voice proclaims: "Ignoring the disc jockey in hip-hop is like ignoring the guitar in rock and roll. You're either a D.A.T. jockey or a disc jockey." At the time, Z-Trip was a relative unknown, but he later became hugely popular—*DJ Times* declared him America's Best DJ in 2009.

The album features a number of up-and-coming turntablists, including Bay Area DJs (The Invisibl Skratch Piklz, Peanut Butter Wolf), but also Southern California tablists (Aladdin, Cut Chemist, the Beat Junkies), as well as DJs from New York (Rob Swift); Phoenix, Arizona (Z-Trip); England (Jeep Beat Collective); and Japan (Yutaka and Honda). David Paul's long-lived *Return of the DJ* series became a galvanizing force for turntablism, helping form and then enlarge the turntablist community, not only in Northern California, but throughout the world.<sup>50</sup>

Unlike Billy Jam and Dave Paul, Alex Aquino was not a DJ, though for many years he managed Bay Area turntablists, including Apollo, Mix Master Mike, Qbert, and Shortkut. His most important contribution to the world of the DJ, however, was his founding of the International Turntablist Federation in 1996. The idea behind the ITF was in part to fill the void left in 1994 by the discontinuation of the New Music Seminar Battle. The NMS featured head-to-head battles, favored by many turntablists over the showcase style used by the DMC, in which DJs performed for the judges but did not directly face other DJs. The ITF was also more focused on pushing turntable technique and less on reaching out to broad audiences than the DMC. Aquino explained the contrast this way: "The DMC thinks DJs doing handstands on turntables is the shit. And sometimes the crowd falls for it, because it's entertaining. Me, I'd rather hear a new scratching pattern. Some people just hear noise when these guys play. To us, it's music. It's percussion on a turntable."<sup>51</sup> The ITF also sponsored a team battle, something that DMC had flirted with but did not initiate formally until 1999. The first ITF competition crowned Total Eclipse of the X-Men (later X-Ecutioners) champion, after defeating Mr. Turntablism himself, Babu, in the final round. The next year the ITF introduced "Category Battles," specialized competitions that focused on either beat juggling or scratching, held in addition to the general "Advancement" battles, which were open to all types of "beat/noise manipulation."<sup>52</sup> That year Babu returned, defeating British DJ Tony Vegas in the scratching category battle. Some say that Vegas, the Brit with the American name, never stood a chance battling against a Californian and being judged by mostly American DJs. In subsequent years, the ITF battles became more internationalized with competitions held throughout the world, a development that addressed charges of bias.

With its focus on technique, the ITF helped advance the art of turntablism worldwide. At the same time, some felt that this specialization further isolated turntablism from mainstream DJing and hip-hop in general. DJ Pone (Travis Rimando), active in the Bay Area scene during the ITF's heyday, has mixed feelings about the category battles. "In a way," he suggests, "it encouraged the development of over-technical styles you see in abundance at DJ battles today."<sup>53</sup> The ITF sponsored battles for nearly a decade and was superseded by the

IDA: the International DJ Association. In its time, the ITF sponsored hundreds of battles throughout the world, acting as another global disseminator of turntablism while representing the hotbed of the art, the San Francisco Bay Area.

Arguably, ground zero of Bay Area turntablism during this time was a small club in San Francisco's seedy Tenderloin district. "Don't scan the tourist guides for Club Deco," advised the *San Jose Metro* in 1996, two years after founder Cleo Fishman opened it. "If it were any further underground, it would scratch the earth's core."<sup>54</sup> The club had two floors—those who patronized the upstairs came to dance; those who ventured down into "the dungeon," as some called it, came to scratch or watch others scratch. "Downstairs, the new breed of DJs gathers to jam," explained the *Metro* article. "Hip-hop culture looms large within this converted basement. Graffiti artists sketch tags in ringed notebooks. B-boys lean against I-beams, sucking on skinny joints. Humidity and weed smoke combine to give the scene a queasy, underwater feel."<sup>55</sup> Tuesday nights were for the turntablists—Apollo started the weekly gathering, first calling it Many Styles, then Beat Lounge. Lasting from 1995 to 1999, it served as a turntablism incubator where DJs would come to jam, to share, and to learn. It was remarkable for its openness—anyone could come in and sit just a foot or two away from some of the greatest DJs of the day, studying their technique at close range. And this was exactly Apollo's goal. "Our vision was to have a place where all the turntablists could just come in and do their thing—to sit in and play, like a jazz venue."<sup>56</sup> Qbert compared it to Minton's Playhouse, the legendary Harlem club where Dizzy Gillespie, Thelonious Monk, Charlie Parker, and others helped create a new form of jazz in the 1940s that came to be known as bebop.<sup>57</sup> The comparison isn't off the mark—both bebop and turntablism had roots in popular dance music, but became more complex and hermetic, appealing more to connoisseurs than to those who simply wanted to get their groove on.

The Beat Lounge had a smaller, even more underground counterpart—the home of DJ Qbert, which for years he regularly opened up for jam sessions. Gathering around a large table ringed with eight turntables—it's called the Lair of the Octagon, or just the Octagon—the musicians often "trade fours," to use a jazz term, with each DJ soloing for four bars; the music circles the table as each DJ responds to his or her neighbor, continuing and expanding the conversation. Even rank beginners and non-DJs are encouraged to get on the decks; few people who visit Qbert's home leave without making some noise.

I experienced this myself when I visited Qbert in March 2008. At the time, he lived in a handsome, well-appointed house in upper-middle-class Burlingame, California; a shiny black Range Rover with SQRATCH license plates sat out front. (He grew up in much more modest surroundings in the Excelsior district of San Francisco, living with his mother well into his twenties.) After talking for

a while, we moved into the Octagon so he could practice for an upcoming gig. Qbert narrated his practice session, explaining that he was currently trying to incorporate drumming techniques in his music. He played some paradiddles and then more complex patterns in 5 and 7 in which both hands scratched simultaneously, each in a different rhythm. (He calls this the "brains-plitter.") At one point he paused and asked me if I scratched. A little, and poorly, I answered. So he gave me an impromptu lesson, at the end of which I was transforming and stabbing better than I had ever done before. Qbert was curious about my musical background, and we chatted about the similarities between violin playing and scratching, and how certain bowings might be translated into scratches. In one sense, there was nothing unusual about my experience—he had shared his time similarly with countless others before me. But my encounter with Qbert is extremely unusual in another sense. I can't think of another equally accomplished musician, whether DJ, rock guitarist, or concert violinist, whose home, techniques, and practice sessions are so freely open to others.

Qbert was not the only Bay Area DJ with such an open attitude, as Apollo's Tuesday nights at Club Deco demonstrate. But Qbert has always been the one who set the tone. As Billy Jam has said, "Everybody looks to him with awe and respect. He's truly an inspiration on all levels, as a human being and an artist." Fellow Filipinos (and especially Filipino Americans) look at him with a



Figure 5.4 DJ Qbert stands before the Octagon in his home in Burlingame, California, March 27, 2008. (Photograph by Mark Katz.)

particular sense of pride; he inspired them not just because he was good, but because he was one of them. As Rhettmatic told me, "He looks the same as I do, he's doing the same thing I want to do. [Maybe] he was just a dope DJ who happened to be Filipino. But from a Filipino point of view. . . ." Here, he went silent for a moment, and thumped his heart with his fist. "He was our Michael Jordan. He opened the door for us."<sup>58</sup>

Although I've been focusing here on the Filipino American turntablists in the Bay Area, they were not, of course, the only DJs active in the area at the time or since. A short list of other artists would have to include Dan the Automator, DJ Disk, Doc Rice, DJ Flare, Pam the Funkstress, Peanut Butter Wolf, DJ Quest, Mike Relm, DJ Shadow, Snayk Eyez, DJ Swift Rock, Tyra from Saigon, and the crews the Bulletproof Scratch Hamsters and the Supernatural Turntable Artists (some of whose members I've named here). These DJs are black, white, Latino, and (non-Filipino) Asian American, making the San Francisco DJ community perhaps the most racially and ethnically diverse anywhere. Yet it is impossible to ignore what Oliver Wang, in his study of the Bay Area DJ scene, calls the "Filipino Factor."<sup>59</sup> The phenomenal success of Filipino American DJs prompts a simple question: Why so many? What is it that has led a disproportionate number of Filipinos to the highest reaches of the turntablist world? Is there something, well, *Filipino*, about DJing?

Actually, no. There is no genetic predisposition toward scratching among any ethnic group, Filipino or otherwise. And there's nothing about the Philippines, its water, air, or food that makes Filipinos particularly good at the crab scratch. So what is it? Scholar Elizabeth Pisares suggests that Filipino Americans are driven by their near-invisibility in mainstream American culture. They are, she explains, "alienated from whites (for being nonwhite), blacks and Latinos (for being Asian), and Asian Americans (for being insufficiently Asian)—and resist invisibility by demanding they be acknowledged as Filipino American."<sup>60</sup> This is an important point that helps explain the cohesiveness of the Filipino American DJ community in the Bay Area. But why did the community cohere specifically around DJing? The answer, Oliver Wang suggests, may be rooted in "a very particular social structure that made it easier for DJ crews to get started, find gigs, and thus sustain themselves." Wang describes the Filipino American community as "deeply socially inter-networked," a community that supports "a preponderance of social events and festivities in which music plays an important role." These activities provided regular opportunities and great demand for DJs. "What made DJing so popular amongst Filipino Americans," Wang concludes, was "a special kind of social capital that these crews could draw upon in order to get started and stay DJing."<sup>61</sup>

In other words, the "Filipino Factor" is not a product of biology or nationality, but of space, place, time, and community. In this sense, the Bay Area DJ

scene of the 1990s, dominated by Filipino Americans, was not so different from the African American- and Latino-dominated New York DJ scene of the 1970s. In both cases, a mobile DJ scene developed from the activities of self-taught DJs from working class minority communities. In both cases, as the scene developed it started spotlighting DJs as *musicians*, spawning skill-based battles and new techniques. And in both cases the scene flourished because of the industriousness, ingenuity, and entrepreneurial spirit of the DJs. When we consider two strikingly similar statements made by pioneers of both scenes, we realize that it is a spirit of resourcefulness and creativity that defines both, above and beyond their racial, ethnic, and economic particulars. The way GrandWizzard Theodore explains it, "Hip-hop came from nothing. The people that created hip-hop *had* nothing. And what they did was, they created *something* from *nothing*."<sup>62</sup> Now listen to words of Shortkut, a fellow DJ from a different generation, ethnic background, and coast. "That creativity of trying to make something out of nothing. That's just what the whole DJ essence is about."<sup>63</sup>

#### THE RISE OF TURNTABLISM CREWS

Hip-hop crews had existed since the 1970s. Crews might be populated with multiple MCs, "hook-up men," and various helpers—but most had a single DJ. There were some exceptions. The L Brothers had the three disc-spinning Livingston siblings—Cordio, Mean Gene, and GrandWizzard Theodore. The Mighty Force had Disco Wiz, Grandmaster Caz, Pambaataa (a woman DJ named after Bambaataa), and later DJ Mighty Mike and Starski. But their DJs always performed alone. Having more than one DJ simply allowed the crew to cover more parties or helped expand their equipment reserves. On the other side of the country, there were also crews of mobile DJs operating in the San Francisco Bay Area all through the 1980s, but there, too, DJs performed alone. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, whether in New York, California, or elsewhere, the idea of having multiple DJs performing at the same time would have been a foreign concept. For the most part, a DJ's job was to get dancers moving or to provide the instrumental tracks for MCs. For this, only a single DJ was necessary.

The concept of the DJ crew as a performing ensemble, as the equivalent of a band, only made sense when the DJ could be accepted as self-sufficient, no longer understood primarily as a supplier of music to MCs or dancers. In other words, turntablism was a necessary precondition for the existence of turntable bands. At the same time, the success of these crews validated the whole idea of turntablism, proving that two, three, or four DJs performing together could create a rich new musical repertoire. Crews and turntablism existed in a symbiotic, mutually reinforcing relationship.

Two of the earliest and most important turntablist crews—I'll use this term to differentiate from the early DJ crews—were New York's X-Men and the Bay Area's Invisibl Skratch Piklz. They both had their origins at the turn of the 1990s, and came into prominence by mid-decade. Following not long after was the Beat Junkies (more formally known as the World Famous Beat Junkies), founded in Orange County, California, in 1992. Dozens of crews followed, but these were the three most prominent crews of the 1990s, and their stories are central to the history of turntablism.

The X-Men began as a group of DJs in Harlem, New York, in 1989. The crew, originally comprising Johnny Cash, Roc Raida, Sean Cee, and Steve Dee, took its name from the team of comic-book superheroes; the name was also something of a challenge to a rival group in Brooklyn known as the Supermen Crew, led by DJ Clark Kent. Rob Swift and his mentor Dr. Butcher, both from Queens, joined in 1991.<sup>64</sup> Steve Dee drifted away after going on tour as DJ for the hip-hop/R&B group Guy, and Dr. Butcher, Johnny Cash, and Sean Cee left as well. In 1992, the group was a trio—Roc Raida (the only remaining original member), Rob Swift, and Mista Sinista—and in 1996 Total Eclipse joined. This quartet remained stable for several years, and it was in this lineup that the X-Men became known as one of the premier turntablist crews in the world.<sup>65</sup> Each member was not only an experienced and successful battler, but they all worked with important hip-hop artists and groups. They were



Figure 5.5 Members of the X-Ecutioners (originally the X-Men). From left to right: Precision, Roc Raida, Rob Swift, Total Eclipse. (Photograph by Robert Adam Mayer.)

celebrated for their intricate juggling routines and charismatic performances, replete with body tricks, boasts, and disses.

In 1997, the group began recording albums, starting with *X-pressions*, and their move into the studio coincided with a new name: the X-Ecutioners. As Rob Swift explains it, the change was prompted by a lawyer who suggested that if they started selling CDs as the X-Men, Marvel Comics, owner of the name and the brand, would unleash their superhero attorneys on them.<sup>66</sup> As the X-Ecutioners, their fame increased as they released more albums and began to enjoy mainstream popularity. After their 2004 album *Revolutions*, however, Swift and then Eclipse left the group and eventually formed a trio, Ill Insanity, with DJ Precision. In 2007, the group reunited at Roc Raida's Gong Battle and toured on and off briefly afterward. Sadly, tragedy struck the group—and the DJ community as a whole—in September 2009, when thirty-seven-year-old Roc Raida died from injuries sustained while training in Krav Maga, the Israeli hand-to-hand combat system. He lived and died a battler.<sup>67</sup>

In 1991, the earliest incarnation of what came to be known as the Invisibl Skratch Piklz formed three thousand miles to the west. The original Piklz—Apollo, Mix Master Mike, and Qbert—were first known as the Rock Steady DJs; it wasn't until 1995 that they started calling themselves (for no good reason, apparently) the Invisibl Skratch Piklz. The personnel changed over the years, with Shortkut, D-Styles, Disk, and Babu joining and departing at various times. (In 1999, two former Piklz, Apollo and Shortkut, joined Vinroc to create Triple Threat DJs, and were still going strong a dozen years later.) The ISP style stood in stark contrast to their East Coast rivals'. The Northern Californians were famed for their complex scratching and tended to use more abstract sounds and noises than recognizable songs in their routines. They also looked and acted different. The West Coast Piklz were Filipino American, their onstage demeanor more lighthearted and their offstage interests tending toward the extraterrestrial—Qbert and Mix Master Mike speak often and to all appearances seriously about alien life forms.<sup>68</sup> By contrast, the Xs were African American (with some Latin roots—Swift, I've mentioned, considers himself "100 percent Colombian"), and presented a more menacing, streetwise personality. Their rivalry, which culminated in the legendary showdown at the 1996 ITF competition was purely an onstage one, however. Offstage, the two groups were friends, always quick to praise each other.

We'll get back to the friendly rivalry between these two crews, but first let's travel to Southern California, where the Beat Junkies took root. In the world of turntablism, Los Angeles has long been a second city to San Francisco, and its contributions to the art form unfortunately get less attention than they should. Simply the list of important L.A. hip-hop DJs who came up in the 1980s is impressive: battlers Aladdin and Joe Cooley; DJs-turned-MCs Egyptian Lover,

Dr. Dre, and Ice-T; renowned mobile DJs Rodger Clayton and DJ Bobcat (of the crew Uncle Jamm's Army); influential radio DJs Julio G. and Tony G. Other notable L.A. DJs of then and now include Cut Chemist, DJ Hapa, DJ M.Walk, DJ Muggs, DJ Nu-Mark, DJ Quik, P-Trix, DJ Pooh, DJ Revolution, Chris "The Glove" Taylor, Alonzo Williams, and DJ Yella.

Two forces in particular shaped the hip-hop DJ scene of greater Los Angeles: KDAY AM 1580 and the flourishing network of mobile DJ crews. KDAY was the world's first 24-hour hip-hop station, and with its team of popular DJs, the Mixmasters, it directly and indirectly launched the careers of many of the area's mixers and scratchers in 1980s. Aladdin, for example, became a battler just so he could get a show on KDAY. "I got into the battle scene by being a KDAY Mixmaster. You had to battle the radio DJs order to become a mix show DJ." From battling at local skating rinks, he later moved up to battling in DMC competitions, which required him to travel to what he calls "the Cold Hearted City of New York."<sup>69</sup> KDAY had a broader, more indirect influence on DJing as well. It was the station where most Angelenos got their first taste of hip-hop and first heard the sound of scratching. Rhettmatic grew up listening to KDAY, which turned him on to "The Adventures of Grandmaster Flash on the Wheels of Steel" and "Rockit" and other now-classic DJ tracks. "It's hard not to be influenced by that," he explains. "Any DJ coming from LA," he adds, "one way or another, was influenced by KDAY Mixmasters and KDAY in general."<sup>70</sup> And in trying to do what he heard on the radio, Rhettmatic—like many aspiring DJs of the area—discovered that there was an active mobile DJ scene full of crews waiting to be discovered, and to discover him.

It was out of this mobile DJ scene that the Beat Junkies emerged. The future Junkies were essentially the stars of their respective groups, and though many of the members had known each other in the 1980s, it was not until 1992 that J. Rocc, an Orange County DJ, founded the crew. Its original members also included Curse, Icy Ice, Melo-D, Rhettmatic, Symphony, and What?!. (Symphony was the only woman in the group.) Babu became part of the group in 1993, and several others came and went over the years, including Choc, D-Styles, Havik, Red-Jay, Shortkut, and Tommy Gun. (Both D-Styles and Shortkut also performed with the Piklz at various times.) Many of the Junkies were accomplished battlers—as a group they won the 1997 ITF team battle—and several also toured and recorded with MCs, including Dilated Peoples (Babu) and the Visionaries (Rhettmatic). In the late 1990s, the Junkies released three albums, *The World Famous Beat Junkies*, volumes 1, 2, and 3. In many ways the Beat Junkies can be thought of as a hybrid of the X-Men and the Invisibl Skratch Piklz. Their routines focused equally on scratching and beat juggling, and were influenced by both groups. The Junkies even *looked* like a combination of the X-Men and the Piklz. Several were Filipino, but J. Rocc is African American, and Melo-D is



Figure 5.6 Members of the Beat Junkies. Babu, foreground; others, left to right, J.Rocc, Rhettmatic, Shortkut, Melo-D. (Photograph by B+.)

Latino. Although they largely stopped battling and performing as a turntablist crew in 1998, they were intact more than a decade later, now focusing more on spinning at parties and clubs.

By the mid-1990s, the three crews were everywhere, traveling the world as they won battles and electrified audiences. During this period there was only one time that these DJs performed together. The event wasn't advertised, nor was it open to the public; few people today even know about it. The gathering took place in San Francisco on March 2, 1996, the night before the U.S. finals of the DMC. The Piklz were locals, and the other crews were represented in the battle—Babu and Melo-D from the Junkies, and Mista Sinista from the X-Men. In 24 hours these DJs would do battle, but until then there was no beef. As Rhettmatic puts it, "We got egos, but when it comes down to it, it's all about the music. That's why all us DJs get along for the most part."<sup>71</sup> So they gathered in a warehouse, set up several sound systems, and jammed. Andrew Bernal, the Junkies' manager, still marvels at the experience. "Just to see Qbert, Mix Master

Mike, Apollo, Rob Swift, Sinista in one room in a warehouse—everybody hangin' out and cuttin' it up—it was amazing.<sup>72</sup> The night after the warehouse summit, they battled to see which crew would leave with bragging rights. As it turns out, none of them did. In one of the great upsets in battle history, DJ Swamp of Cleveland took the crown.

The Beat Junkies, the Invisibl Skratch Piklz, and the X-Men helped legitimize the idea that a group of DJs could be a self-sufficient musical ensemble, and led the way for dozens of crews and turntable bands around the world, a short list of which would include The Allies, Birdy Nam Nam, The Bullet Proof Space Hamsters (a.k.a. The Bullet Proof Space Travelerz), C2C, 5th Platoon, Jeep Beat Collective, Kireek, The Scratch Perverts, and The Trooperz. But all of these groups can, in some way, thank the original three crews for paving the way.

Turntablism was the realization of a long-held goal among many DJs: independence. For DJs, independence meant the ability to create music that did not exist simply to serve the needs of b-boys, b-girls, and MCs, but could be enjoyed on its own merits. Independence meant technology advanced enough to free DJs from any mechanical constraints and the freedom to pursue their musical ideas wherever they might lead. Independence meant a physical space and a particular demographic—the San Francisco Bay Area and Filipino Americans—that allowed turntablism to flourish. Independence for DJs also meant a musical space—the battle—where they could explore the limits of their techniques. All of these factors—musical, technological, demographic, and geographic—were interconnected, and turntablism, perhaps the most profound development in the history of the hip-hop DJ, was the product of these many forces.

## The Art of War—The DJ Battle: 1991–1996

So it is said that if you know your enemies and know yourself, you can win a hundred battles without a single loss.

—SUN TZU, *The Art of War*, sixth century BC<sup>1</sup>

If I'm going to be in a battle [and] I know that your specialty is scratching, I'm going to practice a scratch routine to take you out, you know? It's almost like you're preparing yourself for combat. You come up with strategies; it's like a war. I want to practice it a certain way and be able to execute it every time the same exact way. If I go up against this DJ, I want to intercept whatever style he may come at me with. And when I go up against this other DJ, he DJs like this, so I need to be prepared for this and that and the third.

—ROB SWIFT, 2001<sup>2</sup>

By the mid-1990s, battles had spread across the world, inspiring a select segment of DJs to devote countless hours to the art of destroying rivals with vinyl. For these highly driven turntablists, battling was a way of life, occupying their waking hours and haunting what little sleep they managed. Their numbers were small, but their influence enormous, and during this period it was the battle, more than anything else, that pushed the growth and development of turntablism. To speak of an “art of war” here may seem grandiose, yet there *is* an art to battling, one that reveals itself in the preparation it demands, the techniques it inspires, and the music it creates.