SOMETHING REAL: RAP, RESISTANCE, AND

THE MUSIC OF THE SOULQUARIANS

by

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DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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From 1997-2002, a loose collective of hip hop and R&B musicians known as The Soulquarians collaborated to produce numerous award-winning and critically-acclaimed albums. Drawn together by the heady atmosphere of collaboration with creative, like-minded peers, they were driven by a goal to create alternative sounds and representations in black music. This project has two primary goals: to historicize the collaboration of the Soulquarians and to identify and analyze aspects of their music that situated it in opposition to commercially dominant hip hop of its day. To do so, I perform close listening and analysis of recordings, interviews, liner notes, album and concert reviews, and articles on the Soulquarians and their work from contemporary print media, and draw from biographies and autobiographies of Soulquarians artists.

This project contributes to music scholarship in three primary ways. First, I utilize an innovative technique to visually analyze microtiming in the groundbreaking grooves of J Dilla and D'Angelo. Using this technique, I precisely identify distinguishing timing features in drums and bass, and make them visible to the reader. By contextualizing these findings within previous scholarship on rhythm in African American music performance, I fill a gap in scholarship on groove, which has not yet described the variety of these influential rhythms. Second, I compile information from a variety of sources (web, print,

liner notes, interviews) on the Soulquarians into one location. This produces a fuller picture of the collaboration than has previously been available, and facilitates access to a breadth of information on individual Soulquarians artists, and the collective. Third, I identify several musical traits that resulted from the collaborative nature of the Soulquarians' work habits, including specific commonalities between the grooves of J Dilla and D'Angelo, and the use in Badu's music of imitative strategies pioneered by The Roots. This presents a richer picture of artists' working practices than is typically advanced by journalism and scholarship on hip hop. Because cooperative aspects of the Soulquarians' working methods also characterize music communities more broadly, this description of their collaboration may serve as a corrective to popular but misguided notions of sole authorship in popular music.

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To my father, Douglas Peterson, who taught me to take life one day at a time, and my son, Reid Douglas Peterson, who keeps me honest about doing just that.

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"IT'S GOING TO BE A MOVEMENT; IT'S GOING TO BE ALL OF US"

PREFACE

In the late 1990s, a loose collective of hip hop and R&B musicians began an

ongoing collaboration that would last five years, and produce numerous award-winning

and critically-acclaimed albums. Driven by a goal to create alternative sounds and

representations in black music, and drawn together by the heady atmosphere of

collaboration with creative, like-minded peers, they came to be known as The

Soulquarians. This dissertation seeks to identify distinguishing musical features of the

Soulquarians' work that pushed against dominant trends in popular music by suggesting

new ways of sounding hip hop and R&B.[1] Among these approaches are The Roots' use

of live instruments to play hip hop beats, the emphasis on personal and intellectual

freedom in Erykah Badu's music, and Jay Dee and D'Angelo's off-kilter constructions of

funk, R&B, and hip hop grooves.[2] Vocalists who work with the Soulquarians, such as

Badu, Common, and Bilal, also tended to favor lyrical themes that avoided overt

misogyny and stories of black dysfunction, and instead explore varied emotional states,

themes of love and pleasure, and philosophy or politics. In each of these cases, musicians

made specific artistic decisions that affect their respective sounds, placing musical

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[1] Though genre distinctions such as these undoubtedly affected fans' and critics' dialogues about music, there is nevertheless substantial mutual influence between the styles. This is certainly true
[2] Producer Jay Dee (James Yancey) would later assume the name J Dilla (in 2001), as indicated in liner notes and interviews. Mimicking the timing of his conversion, I use the former moniker in chapters one and two, and refer to him as J Dilla (or just Dilla) in chapters three through five.

emphasis on what The Roots' drummer Ahmir "Questlove" Thompson referred to as "humanity," and distinguishing their work from that of other artists.

This project has two primary goals: to historicize the collaboration of the Soulquarians and to identify and analyze aspects of their music that situated it in opposition to commercially dominant hip hop of its day. To do so, I perform close listening and analysis of recordings, look at interviews, liner notes, album and concert reviews, and articles on the Soulquarians and their work from contemporary print media, and draw from biographies and autobiographies of Soulquarians artists. In order to understand how Soulquarians artists saw themselves situated in – and reacting to – the contemporary music industry, I consider music and video examples of their contemporaries as well, especially Sean "Puffy" Combs, the most profitable hip hop musician of the era, and one whose music was explicitly disparaged by Soulquarians artists in both lyrics and print.

This project contributes to music scholarship in three primary ways. First, I utilize an innovative technique to visually analyze microtiming in the groundbreaking grooves of J Dilla and D'Angelo. Using this technique, I precisely identify distinguishing timing features in drums and bass in particular, and make them visible to the reader. By contextualizing these findings within previous scholarship on rhythm in African American music performance, I fill a gap in scholarship on groove, which had not previously described the variety of these influential rhythms. Second, I compile information from a variety of sources (web, print, liner notes, interviews) on the Soulquarians into one location. This produces a fuller picture of the collaboration than has previously been available, and enables fans and researchers to more easily access a

breadth of information on the individual artists, as well as the collective. Third, I identify

several musical traits that resulted from the collaborative nature of the Soulquarians'

work habits, including specific commonalities between the grooves of J Dilla and

D'Angelo, and the use in Badu's music of imitative strategies pioneered by The Roots.

This presents a richer picture of artists' working practices than is typically advanced by

journalism and scholarship on hip hop, which – as in popular music more broadly – too

often remains committed to the idea that a solitary individual is responsible for creating

the music released under their name.[3] Canonizing and memorializing forces (such as the

Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, or the National Recording Registry) rarely acknowledge the

cooperative nature of producing records, and instead credit only the primary author.

Because cooperative aspects of the Soulquarians' working methods also characterize

artistic communities more broadly, this description of their collaboration may serve as a

corrective to popular but misguided notions of sole authorship in popular music.

Moreover, previous scholarship has characterized collaboration in rap music as primarily

between rappers and a solitary producer (or, less often, a team of producers like Public

Enemy's Bomb Squad), and has focused primarily on the influence of a pre-composed

backing track (or "beat") on rappers' composition of lyrics.[4] My account of the

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[3] For example, Joseph G. Schloss, in his excellent ethnography of hip hop producers, primarily describes musicians working in isolation. In addition to descriptions of private studio spaces within private dwellings, Schloss even reports that producer Mr. Supreme (an informant of Schloss's) wrote on his website, "It's the shit to be at home at 4:00 in the morning, in your boxers, in front of your sampler, making some *shit*, you know?" Schloss astutely notes the way such descriptions lend themselves to a mystique around hip hop production as the work of "solitary geniuses." See Joseph G. Schloss, *Making Beats: The Art of Sample-Based Hip Hop* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2014 [2004]), 42.

[4] See Kyle Adams, "Aspects of the Music/Text Relationship in Rap," *Music Theory Online* 14 no. 2 (May 2008): n.p. See also Justin A. Williams, "Beats and Flows: A Response to Kyle Adams, 'Aspects of the Music/Text Relationship in Rap,'" *Music Theory Online* 15, no. 2 (June 2009): n.p.

Soulquarians' story enriches this portrait of rap collaboration by describing one case of mutual influence between instrumentalists, singers, rappers, and sample-based producers.

A major component of this project is my aim to acknowledge the artists' own words about their philosophies, ideologies, and goals for their music. Soulquarians artists were the subjects of numerous interviews, and in some cases, wrote publicly.[5] While black music making has received favorable attention throughout America's history, black ideas have rarely been given the same respect. By making Soulquarians artists' words a crucial part of my analysis and historicization, I hope to increase understanding of not only their art, but the ideas and values from which they worked, and to increase regard for not only African American music, but African American thoughts, philosophies, and feelings as well – in other words, their humanity. In this respect, I am working in the same vein as the scholar Eric Porter, whose book *What Is This Thing Called Jazz?* documents the "intellectual history" of jazz musicians in an attempt to counterbalance the majority of jazz criticism, in which primarily white, male writers have evaluated the importance and quality (or lack thereof) of jazz music.[6] Like Porter, reflecting on the words of the artists themselves enables me to see ways the Soulquarians' work was self-conscious, driven by artists' perceptions of the history of black music, the state of the music industry, and the ways their saw themselves positioned within both. This allows me to better analyze not only *what* the Soulquarians did, but *why* they did so. As the following chapters will reveal, this is an important aspect of their story, since Soulquarians artists spoke (and wrote) often about the ideological underpinnings of their

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[5] For example, Badu wrote her own liner notes, as did Questlove, for The Roots. Questlove also authored numerous articles for hip hop publications including *Vibe* and *The Source.*

[6] Eric Porter, *What Is This Thing Called Jazz?: African American Musicians as Artists, Critics, and Activists* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

work, and the ways in which they saw their music contributing to American society more broadly.

INTRODUCTION

In this introductory chapter, I begin by examining the Soulquarians in the context of 1990s discourses about authenticity in hip hop. Next, I give a summary of chapters, followed by a brief overview of the history of the Soulquarians collaboration, and evidence of their ideological orientation. I then turn my attention to the music of D'Angelo's 2000 album *Voodoo*, which I analyze to reveal some of the qualities of its innovative approach to groove, and their implication within the black musical tradition. Modeling an approach that I adopt throughout this dissertation, my examination of *Voodoo* strives to integrate musical analysis, reception history, and contemporary social critique. The chapter ends with a statement of assumptions and definitions for the study, and an acknowledgment of my own biases.

The different chapters of this dissertation are united by a single question: What does it mean to be perceived as something real? My title for this study comes from Questlove's autobiography, from a passage in which he addresses late 1990s public opinion of The Roots in light of the proliferation of commercial powerhouses in pop music. He writes,

> Puffy's label, Bad Boy, was the leader as a production and cultural force, and Jay-Z was probably the second-most influential artist. In the broader music world, Disney had just broken big, and the pop landscape was dominated by highly calculated acts like Britney Spears, Christina Aguilera, and so forth… Authenticity was in short supply. We were perceived as something real.[7]

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[7] Questlove, and Ben Greenman, *Mo' Meta Blues: The World According to Questlove* (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2013), 171.

In 1990s hip hop and R&B, the term "real" was complicated indeed. For audiences to perceive The Roots as something real meant that their work compared favorably with, or seemed to subvert, dominant constructions of rap identity at the time. In other words, their musical and lyrical choices presented music that seemed outside of the mainstream in multiple aspects, providing an alternative reality for consumers who self-identified through hip hop culture. Perhaps most importantly, realness in1990s hip hop was tethered to the phrase "keeping it real," which stood for a kind of authenticity rooted in African American communities, particularly poor, urban ones.

In an era of corporate co-opting and mainstreaming of black expression, African American entertainers claimed to be keeping it real to reinforce ties to the communities responsible for hip hop's origins. As scholar Imani Perry observes, "the 'real' is also an authenticating device responding to the removal of rap music from the organic relationship with the communities creating it. It demands that artists maintain or use symbols asserting their allegiance to black youth populations, or subgroups within that community."[8] In other words, rappers, singers, producers, and TV personalities all claimed a connection to an authentic black community by professing to keep it real. They did so in an attempt to define the terms of authenticity for black art as portrayals of blackness were increasingly commodified, and increasingly driven by corporate greed, throughout the 1990s.

Rap artists in the 1990s often claimed to be keeping it real by rapping about some version of their own experiences, frequently involving drugs and violence. For some

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[8] Imani Perry, *Prophets of the Hood: Politics and Poetics in Hip Hop* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 87.

artists, such subjects were a shortcut to authenticity, one which took a heavily-mediated route through corporate record labels. In their pursuit of sales following the phenomenal success of so-called gangsta rap in the early 1990s, labels were eager to market images of black criminality, misogyny, and death. Likewise, the corporate recording industry played a crucial role in promoting keeping it real as an "authenticating device." In the words of Tricia Rose,

> By reflecting images of black people as colorful and violent criminals, drug dealers, and sex fiends, [the Just Keeping It Real] defense is intended to protect the profit stream such images have generated; at the same time, however, it crowds out other notions of what it means to be black and reinforces the most powerful racist and sexist images of black people.[9]

Rose excoriates the role of hip hop's keeping it real philosophy for its service to the "profit streams" of rap artists and record labels and argues that this singular and stereotypical way of defining reality is racist because it renders invisible more diverse and vital expressions of blackness.

In his own musings on authenticity in black music, Questlove makes clear that, while particular images of blackness are not in and of themselves problematic, the predominance of a narrow range of images is. He writes, "Puffy or DMX or whoever… were never the problem. The problem was that someone in the corporate chain of command felt that there was a need to play those songs fourteen times a day and to eliminate alternatives."[10] Indeed, during the Soulquarians period, radio stations were programming less variety every year, due in part to restructuring that followed the Telecommunications Act of 1996, which deregulated telecommunications and

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[9] Tricia Rose, *The Hip Hop Wars: What We Talk About When We Talk About Hip Hop and Why It Matters* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2008), 139.

[10] Questlove, *Mo' Meta Blues*, 153.

broadcasting. In response to that legislation, to name one prominent example, the Clear Channel Communications corporation increased its holding of radio stations from 40 to 1,225 (in 2004).[11] According to Ta-Nehisi Coates, "The company's dominance has allowed it to offer standardized formats that differ little from city to city. Very rarely do those formats focus on breaking records that stretch their respective genres."[12] Following a business model that sought to maximize profit while minimizing risk, broadcasters increasingly programmed content that had proven appeal. According to Roc-A-Fella Records co-founder Damon Dash, "you basically have to make your music a certain way to format MTV and BDS spins on the radio."[13] Corporate broadcasters like Clear Channel and MTV had decided that the formula that worked for them was music with lyrics that foregrounded wealth and conspicuous consumption, and videos that included voiceless, dancing women in very little clothing. Such portrayals came to be known as bling rap, or bling-bling. Although the term is a direct reference to the flashy jewelry that artists often wore, it came to stand for a hip hop image and lifestyle associated with material luxury and financial success. According to *Vibe* writer Mimi Valdés, the corporate preference for this formula led to a narrowing of styles in mainstream broadcasting. In 2002 she observed, "Whether it's industry pressure to conform or just a lack of daring, the artists who are getting the airplay, the video exposure, and the big record sales are those who have embraced the bling-bling formula."[14] The consolidation of corporate broadcasting,

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[11] Ta-Nehisi Coates, "Life After Hip Hop," *Vibe*, May 2004, 138.

[12] Coates, "Life After Hip Hop," 138.

[13] Mimi Valdés, "The Big Payback," *Vibe*, February 2002, 78.

[14] Valdés, "The Big Payback," 76.

in tandem with the emergence of hip hop and R&B as mainstream styles, produced an

overwhelming proliferation of images of certain kinds of blackness.

To mainstream white audiences far removed from the black communities making

the music, such portrayals came to stand in for blackness more broadly, and obscured the

diversity of black music and black life. An irony of this dynamic, as Michael Eric Dyson

notes, is that the search for "the real" in black culture is historically rooted in maintaining

a distinction between authentic forms of blackness and white stereotypes. He writes,

> The problem with most debates about authenticity, of course, is that they ignore the bewildering variety of expressions that characterize contemporary black culture. To be sure, the quest for the Real Black Person was initially set in motion by black folk defending themselves against the rigid rule of white stereotype and the suffocating effect of white prejudice.[15]

Dyson notes the blanketing effect that debates over authenticity have on diversity within

the broader black population. Indeed, there was little public argument about the meaning

of keeping it real, opening the phrase up to exploitation by those seeking to advance their

personal visions of black authenticity. As Perry observes, "Keeping it real emerged as a

shared community ethos and any debate over its meaning was minimal."[16] Bolstered by a

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[15] Michael Eric Dyson, *Between God and Gangsta Rap: Bearing Witness to Black Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), *xii*. White American fascination with entertainment based on exaggerated, inauthentic performances of blackness, and specifically black masculinity, dates to at least the 1830s, with the development of the minstrel show. Minstrelsy would remain one of the most popular forms of American entertainment for nearly 100 years. Given the prevalence of these degrading and stylized portrayals of blackness in the public sphere, it is no surprise that authenticity matters greatly in discourses around portrayals of blackness. See Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).

[16] Perry, *Prophets,* 93. By 2004, comedian Dave Chappelle was churning out skits in a series called "When Keeping It Real Goes Wrong." These made-for-TV shorts use situational comedy to exaggerate the liability of over-investment in an ethos which prioritizes confrontation, under the guise of "keeping it real." In various skits, a man loses his job for "keeping it real" for confronting a white colleague who uses black slang, a woman is sent to jail after vandalizing the car of a supposed romantic rival, and a man is hospitalized after confronting a martial arts master who talks to his girlfriend. In all cases, keeping it real is posited as a confrontational overreaction

shared position in opposition to the status quo, The Soulquarians responded by doubling down on creative music that sought to advance hip hop and R&B, and resist shrinking multiformity in mainstream portrayals of black music.

By virtue of their self-conscious commentary about their place within the industry, breadth of their musical aesthetic, and their collective penchant for innovation, the Soulquarians stand as a prominent example of a collective musical response to trends in hip hop and R&B music of the time. The present study will show that such trends included lyrics about wealth and conspicuous consumption, and musical qualities like excessive polish (in composition, performance, editing, and mixing), and non-transformative use of well-known sample sources. These features satisfied the status quo but did not seek to challenge listeners.

Rap music has undergone considerable and constant change throughout its 40-year existence. Historians of the genre frequently talk about late 1980s rap as encompassing numerous styles, including what Adam Krims terms "party rap," "mack rap," "pop rap," "jazz/bohemian rap," and "reality" or "gangsta rap."[17] Loren Kajikawa suggests that this multiplicity of styles marks a unique moment in the history of the genre when an openness towards different possibilities for musical expression reached a high point.[18] In contrast, by the end of the 1990s, many fans and critics wondered aloud whether rap's stylistic diversity had been compromised by the music industry's single-

to a relatively minor (or misperceived) offense. Chappelle and Questlove were associates during this time, and The Roots and other Soulquarians collaborators contributed musical performances (and Questlove served as musical director) for *Dave Chapelle's Block Party*, a 2005 movie directed by Michel Gondry. See chapter five.

[17] Adam Krims, *Rap Music and the Poetics of Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 54-92.

[18] Loren Kajikawa, "Bringin' '88 Back," in *The Cambridge Companion to Hip-Hop*, Justin A. Williams, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 301-313.

minded focus on what Tricia Rose derisively called the "unholy trinity" of the gangsta, pimp, and ho.[19] This narrowing of stylistic breadth in rap music was led by corporate media executives, who sought to maximize profits from the overwhelming commercial success of so-called "gangsta" rap, which emerged in the late 1980s and continued throughout the 1990s.

At the time of the Soulquarians' formation, a gangsta aesthetic that many claimed glorified violence, toughness, and the pursuit of material wealth held sway, occupying the largest share of the rap music market.[20] Scholars including Joan Morgan and bell hooks focused contemporary critiques on the influence of corporate media and the deleterious effects it has had on black communities as well as the way that artists seem to have abandoned positive, unifying messages in exchange for profits. For example, in her 1999 book *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost,* Morgan describes her struggle as a self-identified "hip hop feminist" to come to terms with the misogyny and sexism in rap lyrics, and the complicated gender politics of female listeners' involvement with rap music and artists.[21] Morgan interrogates her own conflicted feelings, acknowledging her love of hip hop's rhythms and swagger, and her concern and love for the people who create it, but compares it to an abusive relationship because of hip hop artists' brazen and harmful portrayals of violence against women. Morgan concludes that while she wants to stay involved with hip hop as much for her own pleasure as to help improve the culture, she must love hip hop "from a distance that's safe."[22] Her consideration of rappers'

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[19] Rose, *The Hip Hop Wars*, 1-5.

[20] Rose, *The Hip Hop Wars*, 1-5.

[21] Joan Morgan, *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost: My Life As a Hip-Hop Feminist* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999), 47-82.

[22] Morgan, *When Chickenheads*, 76.

treatments of gender and misogyny is an oft-cited critique of hip hop culture, and one with which Soulquarians artists were explicitly concerned. Like Morgan, the Soulquarians worked to find (and create) a safe space for themselves in hip hop that resisted misogynistic trends.

Also writing in the 1990s, cultural critic bell hooks lamented the combined effect of rappers' use of pathological subject matter and the mainstream media's willingness to make it the most publicized representation of blackness in America. In an interview from 1997, hooks observed, "the rap that gets in national news is always the rap music that perpetuates misogyny, that is most obscene in its lyrics, and then this comes to stand for what rap is."[23] For hooks as well as many others, millennial media representation of rap music had shifted to exclude work concerned with human emotional complexity and the ongoing struggle for black liberation.[24] It was this current to which the Soulquarians' work often ran counter. Through their music and lyrics, Soulquarians artists critiqued the way the music industry profited from the elevation of certain stereotypical images of blackness at the expense of others. Instead, the music and lyrics of D'Angelo, Common, The Roots, Erykah Badu, and others associated with the Soulquarians depicted black life as varied and complex, providing alternative possibilities for finding meaning in lived black experience.

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[23] *Cultural Criticism & Transformation*, directed by Sut Jhally (Northampton, MA: Media Education Foundation, 1997), DVD.

[24] The stakes associated with these developments were exceedingly high: as the thematic focus of rap music narrowed, foregrounding themes of wealth, drugs, casual sex, and the culture of ghetto survival, prison populations exploded. Though gangsta rap did not produce the war on drugs (which I understand to be characterized by disproportionate incarceration of people of color, largely on the basis of convictions for drug-related offenses) it fed into a discourse that both justified the troubling effects of the policy, and obscured them.

During the mid-1990s artists like Puff Daddy, Jay-Z, and Dr. Dre accumulated great wealth and influence within the industry, while Soulquarians looked on from the outside, lamenting the state of the art. In a 2013 interview, Questlove said, "there was a hip hop apartheid going on between the haves and the have-nots. And between the '97-2000 period... the winner take all mentality was 'I made it and you ain't shit'."[25] Questlove's language here calls attention to the ways that rappers and producers' neoliberal, dog-eat-dog attitude undercut the possibility for collectivism and positivity.[26] For Questlove, the implications were not only social, but musical as well.

In his autobiography, Questlove continued the thread: "my thoughts about Puffy and Biggie on the one hand, and about Mos Def and D'Angelo on the other, started to come into focus in those months after *Illadelph Halflife* came out [fall, 1996]. What was missing from much of the pop culture I saw – and not just hip hop, by any means – was humanity."[27] By critiquing contemporary music for its lack of "humanity," Questlove was referring both to song lyrics glorifying violence and conspicuous consumption as well as to the sounds of backing tracks themselves. He went on to say that he gravitated toward the "woozy" rhythms in D'Angelo and Jay Dee's work, thereby revealing that he saw humanity as a quality of both social interactions and musical aesthetics.[28] "I started

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[25] Red Bull Music & Culture, "An Intimate Lecture w/ ?uestlove - Red Bull Music Academy 2013," *YouTube*, June 12, 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=23e1GbatgtQ, 53:00-55:00.

[26] As the writings of Lester Spence and Eithne Quinn both show, neoliberal social and economic policies of the 1980s and 1990s were reflected in the work of gangsta rappers who used their stories of inner-city life as cultural capital. See Lester K. Spence, *Stare in the Darkness The Limits of Hip-Hop and Black Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 14-54. Eithne Quinn, *Nuthin' But a "G" Thang: The Culture and Commerce of Gangsta Rap* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 41-65.

[27] Questlove, *Mo' Meta Blues*, 153.

[28] It bears mentioning that Questlove's choice of the word "humanity" is problematic for the way it implies that certain artists' choices are somehow inhuman. This, of course, is dangerously close

to enter this alternate world of sound, where human error was perfection, where warmth and organic playing mattered more than precision."[29] Soon after, Questlove, Jay Dee, and D'Angelo would begin working together, along with keyboardist James Poyser, forming the core of the Soulquarians unit. The Soulquarians would react to what Questlove called the "winner take all" mentality of 1990s hip hop by capturing a sense of community in their music through a variety of techniques. Whereas the status quo of the rap industry in the late 1990s was defined by mainstream producers' methods for making beats and lyricists' embrace of themes including their financial wealth and dominance of women, the Soulquarians' music and lyrics emphasized black intelligence, black communities, and black creativity.

In chapter two I examine the pioneering approach of Questlove's band The Roots, who labored to legitimize instrumental hip hop at a time when sampling was held up as the most authentic form of hip hop musical production. By using instruments primarily, The Roots sought to expand notions of what constituted real hip hop. Using transcriptions and close listening, I show that their methods for creating hip hop music with instruments were imitative of musical aesthetics associated with use of turntables and digital samplers. Using contemporary media discourse, I suggest that the resistance they experienced within the hip hop recording industry resulted from the hegemonic grip that sampling had on hip hop music at this time. I argue that their struggle to legitimize

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to ideologies that have sustained oppressive or genocidal systems throughout history, not to mention criticisms of rap as "not music" based on its production using machines like samplers and turntables (for one account, see Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1994), 62-63. When Questlove refers to humanity like this, he seems to be describing a quality that 1) lives in live performance, 2) resists a winner-take-all mentality, and 3) involves expressive rhythm, the likes of which characterized Jay Dee and D'Angelo's grooves.

[29] Questlove, *Mo' Meta Blues*, 154.

instrumentally-produced hip hop was made more difficult by the association of instruments with so-called disco rap recordings, owing to concerns (among the hip hop community and more broadly) about gender and sexuality that attend disco. The Roots are important to understanding the Soulquarians because their sonic strategies for musical borrowing with instruments were used on several Soulquarians projects, including *Voodoo*, *Mama's Gun*, and *Like Water for Chocolate*.

In chapter three I take a close look at the nature of rhythm in sample-based producer J Dilla's (aka Jay Dee) work during this period. Utilizing an innovative visual approach to microtiming analysis, I show that the drums in Dilla's beats combine layers of duple- and triplet-based subdivisions (as well as some notes which fall "in the cracks" between the two) in ways which were previously undesirable or unimagined. I argue that the quality of rhythm Dilla became known for evokes participatory musicking, but in the hands of an individual. Thus, Dilla's music is a site for reevaluating binaries like man/machine, and community/individual. Dilla's approach to rhythm became the founding impetus for the Soulquarians collaboration, and his productions can be found on nearly every Soulquarians project.

Chapter four deals with the work of Erykah Badu during this period, particularly her 2000 album *Mama's Gun*, on which the Soulquarians feature prominently. Using interviews with Badu and analyses of lyrics and music, I argue that *Mama's Gun* presents Badu's reimagining of the meanings of blackness, expanding possibilities for people of color to identify with a breadth of portrayals, and proposing a renewed valuation of individuality within community. I show that, like D'Angelo, Badu was portrayed in media

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as presenting an alternative realness with her combination of self-reflection, self-conscious position within a black musical tradition, and dedication to creative freedom.

In chapter five I analyze critical discourses about rap authenticity that surrounded rapper Common's 2002 album *Electric Circus*, the final album-length project of the Soulquarians collaboration. With attention to instrumentation and arrangements, I argue that the Soulquarians' particularly bold approach to the music on that album, while rooted in many of the same processes and values that had characterized their previous projects, ventured too far afield from the hip hop mainstream to be legible as rap to consumers and critics. I use the case of *Electric Circus* to punctuate my analysis of the tension that exists throughout the Soulquarians' output between commercialism and artistic exploration. Finally, I collect various accounts by Questlove to describe the end of the golden age of the Soulquarians collaboration.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE SOULQUARIANS COLLABORATION

Soulquarians artists began working together as early as 1996, when the rapper Common and the singer D'Angelo each made guest appearances on The Roots' third album, *Illadelph Halflife*. Common's contribution was a verse on "UNIverse at War," a song that takes as its subject the degeneration of hip hop artistry. Common raps, "rappers get on the mic talkin' 'bout cars and clothes, sounding like hoes," after which Roots MC Black Thought delivers a verse which calls attention to his lyrical creativity with metaphoric turns of phrase including "I'm thinking fast like Ramadan."[30] Emphasis on

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[30] Rapping about rapping was a popular alternative to subjects of consumerism and violence during this time, and a gesture to older hip hop, in which boasting about skill on the microphone was common. See Kelefa Sanneh, "Rapping About Rapping," in *This Is Pop: In Search of the Elusive at Experience Music Project*, edited by Eric Weisbard (Cambridge, MA: Harvard

originality and critique of other rappers' concern with wealth were frequent lyrical

themes for both Common and Black Thought, and characterized the urge to resistance

that helped define the Soulquarians' various collaborations. Later, D'Angelo sang on

"The Hypnotic," the final song recorded for the album. D'Angelo's singing on this track

is almost purely extemporaneous. Apart from the single word "driftin'," which

constitutes the chorus, he improvises wordless melismas for the final two minutes of the

song, perhaps signaling the importance that Soulquarians artists would place on

spontaneity in their creative processes. Questlove's connection with D'Angelo proved

foundational to the Soulquarians collaboration, and for this reason I'll explore it in

greater depth.

Questlove was given D'Angelo's first album *Brown Sugar* (1995) at the 1995

Source awards in NYC. Listening later, Questlove was astounded. In his words,

> I hated what contemporary R&B had become. It was trite. It was soulless… and
> then I heard D'Angelo and my head was turned. It changed my life… it was what
> I heard behind the album, the sensibility that powered the songs, the ability to
> locate the heart of the best soul music. It was out of step with the times but in a
> way that made it seem like he was stepping into uncharted territory.[31]

Questlove finally met D'Angelo backstage at a concert The Roots played in Los Angeles

in April, 1996.[32] The two quickly bonded over musical taste and artistic ideology. When

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University Press, 2004), 223-232. Common was relatively early to the Soulquarians party, and
enlisted several of the leading players to play on the song "All Night Long," from his 1997 album
One Day It'll All Make Sense. The song features Questlove and The Roots, James Poyser, and
Erykah Badu, and is the only appearance they make on the album, which is primarily made with
sampling.

[31] Questlove, *Mo' Meta Blues*, 137.

[32] Questlove tells this story frequently, including in *Mo' Meta Blues*, in his own 2005 Red Bull
Music Academy lecture, and (as impromptu guest) in D'Angelo's 2014 RBMA lecture. By his
account, he knew D'Angelo was in the audience and wanted to get his attention so that D'Angelo
would be sure to come backstage to meet him after the show. In order to do so, Questlove
changed his drumming to play in the unique, offbeat style of Jay Dee (James Yancey/J Dilla),

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The Roots returned to the studio in August, D'Angelo joined them to record "The

Hypnotic." According to Questlove, "we only spent 8 hours [working] on the 'Hypnotic'

song for the Roots album, and then the next two days we started working on *Voodoo*."[33]

That session would mark the beginning of nearly four years of collaborative recording

between Questlove and D'Angelo, a process around which the Soulquarians collaboration

would congeal.

Also in late 1996 or early 1997, The Roots collaborated with Dallas native Erykah

Badu on her breakthrough first album, *Baduizm.* Along with fellow Philadelphian James

Poyser, The Roots produced three songs for the album: "Other Side of the Game,"

"Sometimes," and "Sometimes (Mix #9)." In his biography of Badu, Joel McIver

indicates that her manager, Kedar Massenburg, who also managed D'Angelo at this time,

was responsible for recruiting The Roots to be involved with the record, which was

recorded and released in early 1997.[34] The connection established between Questlove,

Poyser, and Badu henceforth extended to several Soulquarians collaborations, including

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much to the confusion and consternation of his bandmates, who repeatedly shot him looks during the performance. The fact that both Questlove and D'Angelo were familiar with Yancey, whose revolutionary production style had only just begun to get commercial distribution (via rap group The Pharcyde's album *Labcabincalifornia*, released late in 1995), is probably due to rapper Q-Tip, who regularly shared Yancey's music with other artists in his capacity as Yancey's manager, and with whom both Questlove and D'Angelo had contact. See Jordan Ferguson, *J Dilla's Donuts* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), 22. See also Red Bull Music Academy, "Lecture: Q-Tip (New York, 2013)," *Vimeo*, May 31, 2013, http://vimeo.com/67440689, 1:04:00.

[33] Red Bull Music Academy, "Questlove from The Roots Lecture (Seattle 2005) Red Bull Music Academy," *YouTube*, May 14, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=acq54q3r96I, 1:30:00.

[34] Joel McIver, *Erykah Badu: The First Lady of Neo-Soul* (London: Sanctuary Publishing Limited, 2002), 76. The album was released on February 11th, so McIver's claim that it was recorded starting in "early 1997" implies an exceptionally quick turnaround, especially considering the number of different producers involved (at least six individuals and groups are named in the liner notes), and the use of at least four separate recording locations (Sigma Sounds and Ivory Studios in Philadelphia, Dallas Sound Lab in Dallas, and Battery Studios in New York City). See *Baduizm* liner notes. This timeline seems very short, and I suspect some of the recording may have been done in 1996, and possibly even earlier.

The Roots' *Things Fall Apart* (1999), Badu's own *Mama's Gun* (2000), and Common's *Like Water For Chocolate* (2000) and *Electric Circus* (2002).

D'Angelo and Questlove had discovered that they were of the same mind, and moved by the same music. They moved forward together with help from Poyser and a handful of others, recording the music that would become D'Angelo's second album, *Voodoo.* D'Angelo recruited engineer Russell "The Dragon" Elevado to run the sessions, which began late in 1996. Familiar as he was with vintage recording equipment and techniques, Elevado was to play a crucial role in achieving the sonic warmth and fullness that characterizes *Voodoo* (and several other Soulquarians records). Even more important to the Soulquarians collaboration as a whole was D'Angelo's choice (following Elevado's suggestion) to use Electric Lady Studios in New York City for his operation.

As the son of a Pentecostal preacher, it is perhaps not surprising that this choice had a spiritual dimension for D'Angelo. According to Questlove, the singer explained his selection by saying that the studio, "has the blessing of the spirits. We have to go there. It's only right."[35] Indeed, Electric Lady Studios may have been home to various spirits, since it was founded and built by Jimi Hendrix shortly before his death, and had been used by numerous prominent artists, including Stevie Wonder and David Bowie. Many of the vintage microphones and instruments used on those recordings were still in the studio, such as the clavinet on which Wonder recorded the iconic riff that begins his hit song "Superstition," from his 1972 album *Talking Book*.

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[35] Chris Williams, "The Soulquarians at Electric Lady: An Oral History," *Red Bull Music Academy Daily*, June 1, 2015, http://daily.redbullmusicacademy.com/2015/06/the-soulquarians-at-electric-lady.

According to Elevado, "at the beginning of 1997, we pretty much booked Studio A for the entire year."[36] Their time was not spent in tracking (recording) exclusively. In addition, Questlove, D'Angelo and Elevado watched innumerable tapes of performances by Prince, James Brown, and other black popular music artists. Questlove said, "We would take what we called the 'Yoda figures,' the wise all-knowing masters of whatever music that we were into – Hendrix, [George] Clinton, James [Brown], Stevie [Wonder], Prince, Nina Simone – and for the next five years we would just go through their discography and if something stuck, then we would start working on a song."[37] In other words, they jammed based on the music they watched and listened to, and when inspiration struck, built songs from there. As Elevado explained, they recorded extensively. "It was just straight jamming and recording for a whole year," he said. "We went through 200 rolls of tape that year."[38] The sessions that produced *Voodoo* proceeded this way, with the unheard of luxury of apparently limitless time and resources.

Meanwhile, word spread about the project, and a steady stream of visitors dropped by the studio to see what was going on. Questlove, who had previously organized regular jams at his own residences in Philadelphia and Brooklyn, invited collaborators from those events, including Common, rapper Mos Def, and singer Bilal. Erykah Badu came by, as did iconic rapper Q-Tip, and Jay Dee. Like-minded as they were, these artists began hanging around regularly, in many cases beginning their own recording projects in one or both of the other two rooms at Electric Lady. According to

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[36] Red Bull Music Academy, "Russell Elevado – D'Angelo collaborator (2007 RBMA Lecture)," *YouTube*, May 13, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dHFTJFLVwFo, 35:30.

[37] Red Bull Music Academy, "Questlove from The Roots," 1:31:00.

[38] Chris Williams, "The Soulquarians at Electric Lady," n.p.

Questlove, "activity at Electric Lady went full throttle in early 1998."[39] At one time "Common [had] the B room, D'Angelo [had] the A room, then in the C room it would be accessory stuff, like Nikka Costa's record, or Bilal's record, or Erykah, her album, Mos [Def] / [Talib] Kweli… so at one point we just had that entire studio on lockdown, and everyone was just going to each other's sessions, doing stuff."[40] The situation was not just collaborative, it was fraternal. Artists slept over, so as not to miss opportunities to participate. Sometimes they worked around the clock, going from one session to another. They watched hours of and hours of concert footage and Soul Train, listened to hundreds of records, jammed, and recorded.

Questlove doesn't say who invented the name "Soulquarians," but claims it was the result of joking around in the studio one day when Jay Dee, D'Angelo, Poyser and he all discovered they shared the astrological sign Aquarius. It was an unofficial affiliation, "not inked," as Jay Dee said, comparing it to the contractual nature of his other collective, "The Ummah," undertaken with members of A Tribe Called Quest.[41] In many cases, group musical efforts – jamming to develop a groove, or collective experimentation with innovative rhythmic feels, for example – were not rewarded with authorial credit (and the royalties that follow) for each individual involved. The fact that the Soulquarians collaboration placed so much emphasis on generating *cultural value* while aspects of authorial credit were overlooked (the influence of Dilla or bassist Pino Palladino on the sound of *Voodoo*, for example) indicates that Soulquarians artists pursued their

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[39] Chris Williams, "The Soulquarians at Electric Lady," n.p.

[40] Red Bull Music, "An Intimate Lecture W/ ?uestlove," 39:00.

[41] Ross Allen, "J Dilla In Conversation With Ross Allen," *Mixcloud*, February 9, 2017, https://www.mixcloud.com/NTSRadio/ross-allen-j-dilla-9th-february-2017/, 37:00.

collaboration in part as an exercise in ideology.[42] In other words, the collaboration united artists whose values were similar inasmuch as they wanted their music to represent cultural progress, not merely achieve commercial success.

Unified by a critical stance toward the state of black music and the music industry, Soulquarians artists individually and collectively pushed back against contemporary trends in hip hop and R&B. Where the Soulquarians were concerned, these trends included emphasis in lyrics and videos on consumerist excess and criminal behavior, and de-emphasis of the struggle for black freedom. They included musical aspects like using long samples with little creative alteration, and excessive rhythmic precision. According to D'Angelo, "the main premise was it's not going to just be one group, it's not going to be one album that does this, it's going to be a movement, it's going to be all of us."[43]

Badu described the collective like this: "If someone needs some vocals, they call Erykah. If they need a drummer, it's Ahmir. If you need some horns, it's Roy Hargrove. Need someone to put a beat together? That's Jay Dee. Some keys? It's James Poyser. We

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[42] Accumulation of monetary capital can itself be a powerful liberatory effort. By putting money in the hands of black entrepreneurs and artists, musicians like Puff Daddy created new opportunities for people and communities of color. However, a critical view like that espoused by some Soulquarians artists might suggest that these works bring value only to Puffy's associates rather than black culture at large. Similarly, Mark Anthony Neal has called Puffy's playa/pimp/baller/high-roller-themed songs "classic black middle-class uplift narratives," noting the way they praise folks who "work hard and 'handle their bizness'." See Mark Anthony Neal, *Soul Babies: Black Popular Culture and the Post-soul Aesthetic* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 189. It bears noting that, along with enriching black artists and entrepreneurs, black music in mainstream music industry channels has nearly always created even greater profits for white record executives, who control the lion's share of the industry.

[43] Red Bull Music Academy, "D'Angelo (2014 RBMA Lecture)," *YouTube*, May 23, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WD1oaBCmZWA, 1:18:45.

all just work together well. That's our little crew, and we love it."[44] Questlove indicates

the situation was not only productive and stimulating, but fun as well. He compared it to

a high school slumber party, saying, "it was a sleepover for five years."[45] "We would just

sit [and] watch soul train all night."[46] Though they were based out of New York City and

centered at Electric Lady Studios, the collective was rather loose in its affiliation, with

members working on various projects at the same time, in various locations. Indeed,

while Questlove was recording *Voodoo* in New York, The Roots recorded their album

Things Fall Apart primarily in Philadelphia (with Questlove and, to a lesser extent, Roots

MC Tariq "Black Thought" Trotter commuting back and forth), and went on tour.[47]

Because the Soulquarians name was tucked away in the credits in liner notes, and

not attached to a single super-project, the media took little notice of the collective. When

Vibe magazine asked Questlove to be the subject of an article, he deferred the individual

attention, and instead directed them to come to Electric Lady to see what was happening.

"In my head it was this utopian paradise I had always envisioned, the Native Tongues

movement recreated," Questlove wrote.[48] Four years and seven albums into the

Soulquarians collaboration, *Vibe* conducted a fashion shoot with several members of the

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[44] McIver, *Erykah Badu*, 224. She goes on to mention D'Angelo for vocals, chords and arranging, and Common for lyrics.

[45] Red Bull Music Academy, "Questlove from The Roots," 1:33:50.

[46] Red Bull Music Academy, "D'Angelo (2014 RBMA Lecture)," 1:18:20.

[47] Members recorded together elsewhere as well, including (but not limited to) Jay Dee's studio in Detroit, Philadelphia studios including Sigma, House of Chaos, and The Studio, and Dallas's Palmyra Studios. Perhaps surprisingly, the album's liner notes do not indicate that any work was done at Electric Lady.

[48] Questlove, *Mo' Meta Blues*, 183. The Native Tongues were a loose collective of hip hop groups in New York in the late 1980s and early 1990s, including a core comprised of The Jungle Brothers, De La Soul, and A Tribe Called Quest, and sometimes extended to Queen Latifah, Leaders of the New School, and others.

collective and published a photo spread and short profile in their September, 2000 issue, effectively introducing the collaboration and the Soulquarians name to the broad public. Questlove began receiving feedback from disgruntled collaborators who felt that the *Vibe* piece implied that they worked for him. "It was at that moment I realized that the paradise I had imagined wasn't headed in a good direction."[49] Just when the group got their most prominent recognition, it seemed poised to fall apart.

Soulquarians artists continued to collaborate at Electric Lady and elsewhere, however, producing work for numerous albums. Besides those I've already mentioned, recordings produced collaboratively by the Soulquarians were released on Slum Village's *Fantastic Vol. 2* (2000), Bilal's *1st Born Second* (2001), and Talib Kweli's *Quality* (2002). To complicate matters of historicization, there is no album produced exclusively by the Soulquarians – one has to find their work credited in the liner notes of the albums of individual members, and affiliates. Moreover, all albums they worked on also include contributions by producers and studio personnel outside of their immediate circle, for example, DJ Premier, Karriem Riggins, or The Neptunes. It may be that the informal nature of the group better suited the members, each of whom, as Questlove suggests in his autobiography, had their individual "brands" to consider.[50] With the contestations around the name itself – not to mention who is or is not included, and whether there is a leader or leadership – it is perhaps not surprising that the group remained noncontractual. In spite (or perhaps because) of the unofficial nature of the collaboration, Soulquarians artists have retained positive relationships, and continue to record and perform together with some regularity to this day. In many ways, though, the period from 1997-2002,

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[49] Questlove*, Mo' Meta Blues*, 184.

[50] Questlove*, Mo' Meta Blues*, 184.

when they set up shop at Electric Lady Studios and lived and breathed the same music on a daily basis, was a golden age of the Soulquarians, a once-in-a-lifetime convergence of young, gifted, motivated artists working with, and for, each other.[51]

AN OVERVIEW OF THE PRESENT STUDY: THE SOULQUARIANS AND THE FORMATION OF RESISTANCE

In the spirit of competition which has characterized hip hop arts since their origins in the 1970s, rappers have aired critical and self-conscious observations of hip hop culture in performances and on records.[52] As scholars including Tricia Rose and Mark Anthony Neal have observed, hip hop musicians have made the music itself the site for critiques of society as a whole, including hip hop culture. In Neal's words, "hip hop artists have reclaimed the critical possibilities of popular culture, by using popular culture and the marketplace as the forum to stimulate a broad discussion and critique about critical issues that most affect their constituencies."[53] Likewise, Soulquarians artists used their mass-mediated music to self-consciously critique dominant musical and lyrical trends in hip hop and R&B of their day.

In his *Vibe* profile of the Soulquarians, writer David Bry quotes Questlove as saying that the core members "all share a love for 'sickness' in our work – offbeat rhythms, unorthodox chords, stacks of harmony, an overall rebellious attitude to the

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[51] See the appendix at the end of this study for a list of albums that include at least one Soulquarians-produced track..

[52] For example, in the mid-1990s, rapper Jeru the Damaja issued the single "Ya' Playin' Yaself" (1996) as a direct criticism of rap group Junior M.A.F.I.A.'s "Player's Anthem" (1995). With lines like "you're a player but only because you be playing yaself," Jeru criticizes rappers who take drug dealing, extreme wealth, and conspicuous consumption as their subjects.

[53] Mark Anthony Neal, *What the Music Said: Black Popular Music and Black Public Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 161.

status quo."[54] Here Questlove refers to the status quo in terms of the commercial hip hop and R&B soundscape, noting particular ways that the Soulquarians artists reacted "rebelliously" to it. Joseph G. Schloss's *Making Beats: The Art of Sample-Based Hip Hop* provides some of the context necessary to clarify what Questlove meant by his description of "sickness." Schloss explains the ethical and aesthetic values that guided hip hop producers' work during the 1990s, when sample-based methods of musical production held sway in hip hop and figured heavily in R&B. These values include the importance of creative transformation of source material, and making listeners move. At the time of the Soulquarians emergence, hip hop producer Sean "Puffy" Combs (aka Puff Daddy or P. Diddy) had made a string of hits based on little-disguised samples taken from well known and already famous sources. Schloss explains that the producer's ethic mandates changing a sample source in some creative way, and Puffy clearly violated this rule by using sources without creative transformation.[55] Though his records sold millions of copies, Puffy drew the ire of critics and musicians alike, and Soulquarians artists including Common, Questlove, Mos Def, and D'Angelo made his lack of creativity, innovation, and community feeling a subject of – and foil for – their own inventions.

As I have indicated, two aspects of contemporary black music that aroused the resistant impulse in Soulquarians artists were the "winner take all" mentality cited by Questlove, and a perceived lack of creativity. A third was the widespread embrace of lyrics and images which emphasized conspicuous wealth. The hip hop landscape of the Soulquarians era was dominated by highly successful artists like Puff Daddy, whose most popular lyrics and videos promoted what cultural critic bell hooks calls "the dominator

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[54] David Bry, "Soulquarians," *Vibe*, September 2000, 170.

[55] See Schloss, *Making Beats*, 119-120.

model of human relationships."[56] Just as Questlove, in his analogy of the apartheid between the haves and have-nots in 1990s hip hop, observed that personal success among musicians was accompanied by outward disdain for those who weren't similarly successful, hooks writes, "hedonistic materialist consumerism with its overemphasis on having money to waste has been a central cause of the demoralization among working men of all races."[57] In other words, the products of the hip hop "haves" were fueling demoralization throughout hip hop culture, by virtue of their massive popularity and worldwide distribution.[58]

Soulquarians artists resisted "dominator culture" by emphasizing instead their mastery of their craft (rapping, for example), loving relationships between men and women, and critiques of imagery and music in bling rap. For Questlove's band The Roots and other Soulquarians collaborators like rappers Mos Def and Talib Kweli, criticism of such representations were a central concern during this time, as evidenced in the lyrics and video to The Roots' song "What They Do," which I will discuss in greater depth in chapter two. Lyrics by Erykah Badu, Common, and Mos Def portrayed women as intellectually complex, autonomous, and individual. For example, at a concert in 2001, writer dream hampton quotes Badu as instructing the audience, "If you out here being you mothafuckin' self, throw one fist in the air, like this here."[59] Hampton interpreted

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[56] bell hooks, *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 66.

[57] hooks, *We Real Cool,* 29.

[58] In an article titled "Why Kids Go Koo-Koo for Cocoa Puff," Sacha Jenkins describes the tremendous popularity of releases by Puffy's Bad Boy Records. He writes, "At the end of the day, [Bad Boy Records] was responsible for roughly 60 percent of 1997's hit pop songs. 'I'll Be Missing You' reached No. 1 in 15 different countries, including Belgium." Sacha Jenkins, "Why Kids Go Koo-Koo for Cocoa Puff," *Vibe* (December 1997-January 1998), 104.

[59] dream hampton, "Lady Sings the Blues," *Vibe*, May 2001, 46.

Badu's gesture as "giving lessons in freedom" to her audience, in stark contrast to the subject positions of women in videos like "Big Poppa," (1994) by The Notorious B.I.G. (Christopher Wallace), which shows a group of women in bikinis whose only action is to move to the music with Puffy as he raps in a hot tub while everybody holds glasses of champagne.

Puffy's output provided a foil for the Soulquarians collaboration not only lyrically and philosophically, but musically as well, by its emphasis on simple reuse of recognizable songs instead of transformation of source material. In a pointed critique of Puffy's musical choices, Soulquarians collaborator Mos Def even wrote a spoof about Puffy based on rapper Slick Rick's "Children's Story."[60] Questlove describes seeing Mos perform the song in Brooklyn, with Puffy in attendance. He writes, "Most flipped the narrative so that it was about a record producer who jacked hits from the eighties, used them as the basis for new songs, and destroyed hip hop in the process. It was clearly about Puffy."[61] In his performance, which led to a confrontation with Puffy and his entourage, Mos censures Puffy's style of sampling, calling it "stealing" and unoriginal.

As Questlove suggested in *Vibe*, the work of Soulquarians artists presented resistance through its musical dimensions as well. Attention to innovation was reflected not only in their lyrical subjects, but in their particular usage of offbeat rhythms, and approaches to harmony. Jay Dee's sample-based productions were the site of innovative, off-kilter approaches to rhythms, as I will describe in chapter three. Many songs on D'Angelo's *Voodoo*, too, reflect an offbeat approach to rhythm, but played live by

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[60] The song, also entitled "Children's Story," appears on Mos Def and Talib Kweli's 1998 album *Mos Def and Talib Kweli Are Black Star*.

[61] Questlove, *Mo' Meta Blues*, 149-150.

instrumentalists. One such song is D'Angelo's "Left and Right," which Anne Danielsen has analyzed in her explanation of how listeners might make sense of such strange rhythms.[62] As Danielsen makes clear, rhythms such as these can be challenging to listeners, disrupting easy interpretation, and begging for new modes of understanding. Such an approach to rhythm requires work on the part of the listener, sacrificing easy digestibility (a characteristic inherent in most popular music) in favor of creative striving. Similarly, Saul Williams' liner notes to *Voodoo* privilege complexity and creativity in their critique of contemporary hip hop, asking "is there any room for artistry in hip hop's decadent mansion?" and reminding listeners that "D could have come out with any ol' follow-up album after *Brown Sugar* dropped… [such as] an album that uses all the same formulas, so that audiences don't have to think." Instead, Jay Dee and D'Angelo create grooves that evince a sonic resistance to the status quo through their introduction off-kilter rhythmic feels. Resistance in Soulquarians' music also comes in the form of reliance on uncommon sources for sonic production, including The Roots' use of traditional instruments, as well as use of samples and instruments to create a prevailing psychedelic rock aesthetic on *Electric Circus*. All of these qualities constitute audible markers of difference between their music and the hip hop which dominated contemporary charts and mass media, setting the Soulquarians' body of work apart.

It bears acknowledging that while I am arguing that the Soulquarians resisted dominant trends in hip hop – with lyrical and televisual critiques of extreme consumerism, for example – their use of commercially distributed media for doing so

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[62] Anne Danielsen, "Here, There and Everywhere: Three Accounts of Pulse in D'Angelo's 'Left and Right'," in *Musical Rhythm in the Age of Digital Reproduction*, edited by Anne Danielsen (Farnham, Surrey, England: Ashgate, 2010), 19-35.

makes such an interpretation at least potentially fraught with the possibility of misrepresenting the nature of Soulquarians artists' engagements with the marketplace. Let me be clear that I am not arguing that the Soulquarians were a part of the hip hop "underground," which I understand to be characterized primarily by existence at the margins of the commercial mainstream.[63] To the contrary, Soulquarians-produced singles and albums were released on major labels almost exclusively. Neither am I arguing that Soulquarians artists had a romantic notion of their art as separate from commercialism, nor that their critique of themes and portrayals in bling rap entailed a rejection of the market. What I am suggesting is that there is a tension in the Soulquarians' taking a market-based approach (commercial recordings) to combating extremes of commercialism.

Indeed, Soulquarians artists were explicitly concerned with achieving a balance between artistic innovation and mainstream popularity, and frequently display sensitivity to the tension between their work *as art* and *as product*, in some cases going so far as to make such tensions a theme of the work itself. Such is the case with The Roots' 1999 album *Things Fall Apart*, which opens with a sampled dialogue from Spike Lee's 1990 film *Mo' Better Blues*.[64] In that dialogue, trumpeter Bleek Gilliam (Denzel Washington) complains to saxophonist Shadow Henderson (Wesley Snipes) about the state of the audiences they perform for, which Gilliam believes reflects a lack of interest in jazz on the part of African Americans.

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[63] Defining an artist or album as "underground" is difficult, owing to the porous boundary that divides the mainstream and underground markets.

[64] The track is titled "Act Won (Things Fall Apart)."

GILLIAM: "If we had to depend upon black people to eat, we would starve to death… It incenses me that our own people don't realize our own heritage, our own culture; this is our music."
HENDERSON: "That's bullshit."
GILLIAM: "Why?"
HENDERSON: "That's bullshit. Everything you just said is bullshit… the people don't come because you grandiose motherfuckers don't play shit that they like. If you play the shit that they like then the people will come. Simple as that."

This sequence illustrates the tension between playing music that is popular, and music that is challenging, or innovative. Presumably, The Roots sampled it because it expresses something of their own struggle or conflict. As a band that had worked very hard for ten years to achieve mainstream popularity with its innovative approach to hip hop music, whose members are open about the value they place on critical and commercial success, The Roots no doubt felt this tension acutely.[65] In fact, Thompson wrote,

> That problem – how to stay true to our idea of our music and also be appropriately inviting to audiences, how to court audiences without compromising the music we were making – was something that had plagued [The Roots] since the beginning… We were making music that mattered to us, but we needed to know that it mattered to anyone else.[66]

Immediately after the *Mo' Better Blues* sequence, another voice, from an audibly different source, invokes hip hop recordings and marketing, saying, "Inevitably, hip hop records are treated as though they are disposable. They're not maximized as product, even, not to mention as art." I would argue that this second sequence provides an answer to the tension between an album's value as product and as art. While the Soulquarians sought to place their albums, their art, inside the same commercial product streams that served to elevate and enrich bling artists, they maintained an investment in making music which had cultural value as well. Soulquarians artists therefore navigated the tension of

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[65] The film has apparently maintained importance for Questlove, as he titled his 2013 autobiography *Mo' Meta Blues*, an obvious reference.

[66] Questlove, *Mo' Meta Blues*, 166-167.

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commercial and resistive aims by proceeding with a belief in hip hop albums as not simply commodities, but as sources of communal and cultural value.

One way to understand the cultural value they sought to bring to their albums might be found in the degree to which the music could be seen as challenging to listeners, in some cases with the result that artists' navigation of market appeal versus innovation resulted in fewer album sales.[67] Examples include the unusual prevalence of psychedelic rock influences on Common's *Electric Circus*, off-kilter rhythms in D'Angelo and Jay Dee's productions, and Badu's promotion of personal reflection as a vehicle to community uplift. We might understand the Soulquarians' inclination toward exploration using musicologist Robert Walser's paradigm of "searching music" versus "finding music." In his comparison of Kenny G and John Coltrane, Walser argues that if Coltrane's music is lauded for its searching quality, Kenny G's popularity (judged in sales, in spite of vehement criticism of him on the basis of musical choices) might be explained because he plays finding music, in which "there's no need to search for something better, because you're already there, in a warm, nuanced, free and secure acoustic space."[68] In the case of Puffy's recordings, millions of consumers were satisfied because their expectations were met by music that fell safely within the status quo, rather than challenging them to accept something new. The searching/finding metaphor is also apt for the way that numerous Soulquarians artists were explicitly spiritually motivated, including Badu, D'Angelo, and Common. By definition, spirituality is driven by faith,

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[67] This was especially the case with Common's *Electric Circus* (2002), which "only" sold about 300,000 units, a disappointment after his previous success with *Like Water For Chocolate* (2000), which was certified Gold by the RIAA (for sales in excess of 500,000 units).

[68] Robert Walser, "Popular Music Analysis: Ten Apothegms and Four Instances," in *Analyzing Popular Music*, edited by Allan F. Moore (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 2003), 36.

longing, and, yes, searching. While this study does not concern itself with the

Soulquarians' spiritual motivations to any great extent, I acknowledge them in order to

give a more thorough accounting of Soulquarians artists' motivations to resistive work.

D'ANGELO'S *VOODOO* AND CONTEMPORARY DISCOURSES OF

AUTHENTICITY

In many ways, *Voodoo* is the perfect place to begin a study of the Soulquarians

collaboration. The album is notable for the innovative approaches to rhythm featured in

many of its songs, a characteristic shared by several Soulquarian productions, and an

audible mark of the difference they sought to create between their music and that of the

status quo. The inclusion on *Voodoo* of short snippets of jams or outtakes between songs

(witness the talking/laughing that begins and ends "Chicken Grease," or the medley of

seemingly unrelated jams at the end of "One Mo' Gin") foregrounds the liveness,

spontaneity, and humor that worked their way into nearly all the projects the

Soulquarians worked on, and audibly distinguished their work from the polished musical

slickness of contemporary R&B by the likes of Janet Jackson or Mary J. Blige. Finally,

Voodoo is explicitly concerned with blackness, and speaking directly to a black lived

experience, closely related to the Afrocentrism and concern with the struggle for black

freedom that presents itself in the work of other Soulquarian vocalists like Erykah Badu,

Common, and Bilal.

This section will use the music of *Voodoo* and the public discourses that

surrounded it to examine issues of authenticity in hip hop and R&B during the 1990s, and

the way that the work of Soulquarians artists engaged with those issues. As the gap (or as

Questlove says, apartheid) between the hip hop haves and have-nots widened, justified by artists' claims to be representing for communities in which the struggle to "get money" was an everyday concern for millions of America's black poor, D'Angelo and other Soulquarians artists appeared to some writers and listeners as an alternate definition of realness. Reflecting on D'Angelo's 1995 debut *Brown Sugar* at the time of *Voodoo*'s release, journalist dream hampton wrote, "He became a symbol for integrity and musicianship and artistry. An ambassador for something so old it was new."[69] In hampton's estimation, D'Angelo's claim to authenticity was due to his continuation of a tradition of soul music by the likes of Curtis Mayfield, and Marvin Gaye, both artists whose own music had drawn attention to the plight of people of color in poor communities.[70] In other words, D'Angelo represented for black populations not by depicting urban crime or getting money, but by reflecting a black musical tradition, drawing audibly on the spirit of soul songwriting and performance in his own work.

D'Angelo and Badu were both known as "neo soul" artists, a term developed by their manager, Kedar Massenburg, in the mid-1990s.[71] Discourse around the neo soul genre as a whole pointed to skill, complexity, and breadth as authenticating characteristics. In a 1996 article in *Vibe* called "The Real Thing," journalist Sacha Jenkins posits D'Angelo's music as a "real" alternative within the contemporary hip hop

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[69] dream hampton, "Soul Man," *Vibe*, April 2000, 104.

[70] See Gaye's 1971 album *What's Going On*, and Mayfield's 1972 soundtrack for the film *Superfly*.

[71] For a history of the genesis of the neo-soul genre, see Phillip L. Cunningham, "'There's Nothing Really New under the Sun': The Fallacy of the Neo-Soul Genre," *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 22, no. 3 (2010), 240-258.

and R&B musical landscape.[72] For Jenkins, a crucial difference of D'Angelo's realness is his craft, including his utilization of traditional instruments, analogue production techniques, and songwriting that challenges listeners. Jenkins wrote, "[D'Angelo's] words invite imagination and assume a high intelligence on the part of the listener."[73] Unlike artists whose claim to represent black constituencies rested on the tenuous premise of keeping it real, which only required that artists recycle certain familiar tropes (including fraught portrayals of blackness) in lyrical subjects and video imagery, hampton and Jenkins attributed D'Angelo's realness to his skillful engagement with a soul tradition.

Later, following the release of *Voodoo* and the introduction of numerous neo-soul artists onto the scene, *Vibe* writer Dimitri Ehrlich generalized about the approaches common to neo soul, writing, "Neo soul artists tend to be more complex musically than their traditional R&B contemporaries… rather than serving as a pleasant escape from reality, neo-soul demands an introspective confrontation with it."[74] It is perhaps no coincidence that Ehrlich chose the word "reality" to describe the confrontation that neo-soul purportedly demands of its listeners. Whereas keeping it real had become associated with such a narrow portion of life (violence, drugs, sexual domination) that it came to stand for a fabricated corporate fantasy, neo-soul artists were authenticated for their very

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[72] hampton's reading of *Brown Sugar* as carrying on a soul tradition was aided by D'Angelo's rather literal cover of Smokey Robinson's "Cruisin'" on *Brown Sugar*, and the debt his vocal timbre owes to iconic performances by Marvin Gaye and Prince. This audible reforming of previous styles of black music is not unlike like hip hop artists had done through their recycling of soul, funk, and jazz, originally with vinyl, then with instrumental arrangements of disco hits played by a studio band, and later with samples. See Wang (2013), Kajikawa (2015), and chapter two in the present study.

[73] Sacha Jenkins, "The Real Thing," *Vibe*, September 1996, 108.

[74] Dimitri Ehrlich, "Young Soul Rebels," *Vibe*, February 2002, 72.

engagement with a broader, more universal realness that could only be fully confronted with a degree of introspection.[75]

And yet, *Voodoo* is a record that is more communally-produced than much contemporary music, owing to the way many of its tracks were produced by musicians jamming together in the studio. In this way, it involved much more collaboration than hip hop or R&B records made with sampling, the music for which was nearly always produced by single artists in seclusion, piecing samples together.

Perhaps owing to the fact that *Voodoo*'s music was so intensely collaborative, one reviewer indicated that attention to inspiration allowed the music to transcend some of the perceived limitations on black music of the day. In a feature for *Rolling Stone*, Touré wrote, "*Voodoo* is an ambitious record that seeks nothing less than to unstick black music from commercial considerations and leave it free to seek its muse."[76] Echoing the trends in R&B and hip hop to which Questlove claims Soulquarians artists reacted, Touré invokes the opposing forces of commercialism and creativity. For his part, D'Angelo was clear that his intention was to present work that was both very personal, and rooted in a

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[75] If introspection is necessary to understanding the version of reality by which Voodoo was authenticated, then it is worth noting that contemporary scholarship has pointed to one possible sonic suggestion of interiority in Voodoo. Considering the overlaying of D'Angelo's vocals, Loren Kajikawa notes that the electronically-produced layering of D'Angelo's vocal performances (a technique used throughout the record, but particularly notable on "The Root") might simulate the experience of spirit possession, albeit in a less communal fashion than in religious practices. Commenting on the album's extensive use of multitrack recording, he writes, "The fragmentation and multiplication of D'Angelo's persona suggest an inward orientation associated less with communal folk practices and more with modern conceptions of interiority and individualism." Building on Judith Becker's concept of deep listening, Kajikawa posits that the music on Voodoo might suggest a religious or ritual immersion to listeners, whose online testimonies emphasize the powerful experience of listening to the music. See Loren Kajikawa, "D'Angelo's Voodoo Technology: African Cultural Memory and the Ritual of Popular Music Consumption," Black Music Research Journal 32, no. 1 (2012), 152.

[76] Touré, "D'Angelo Is Holding Your Hand*,*" *Rolling Stone*, May 11, 2000, https://www.rollingstone.com/music/news/dangelo-is-holding-your-hand-20000511, n.p.

black musical tradition. He told Jenkins, "I don't fully know what my package is. I know it's me. I know it's black."[77]

One way to read *Voodoo's* blackness is in the way the band grooves, or creates a "pocket." The pocket is a rhythmic space created by the interaction of several musical voices, a composite rhythm that creates a danceable groove.[78] Creating such a rhythmic character is an African American musical tradition that stretches at least as far back as New Orleans second line practices, and runs through the funk and soul of James Brown, George Clinton, Prince (all of whom were inspiring "yoda figures" for the Soulquarians during the creation of *Voodoo*), and many others. Due in large part to their use of numerous members of a rhythm section playing simultaneously, those artists created a collaborative rhythmic feel, a crucial musical component of the humanity that Questlove refers to when discussing the Soulquarians' motivation. Musical practices such as these echo afro-diasporic rhythmic practices throughout what Paul Gilroy terms "the black Atlantic," especially in Brazil and Caribbean nations such as Puerto Rico and Cuba, which support drumming traditions derived from those in west Africa.[79] These traditions share west African aesthetic priorities and characteristics, including polyrhythm, metronome sense, and overlapping call-and-response.[80] One result of such cooperative approaches to rhythm are variations in rhythmic precision, as individual members

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[77] Jenkins, "The Real Thing," 107.

[78] See Anne Danielsen, *Presence and Pleasure: The Funk Grooves of James Brown and Parliament* (Middletown, Conn: Wesleyan University Press, 2006).

[79] Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

[80] On African musical processes in the Americas, see Olly Wilson, "The Significance of the Relationship between Afro-American Music and West African Music," *The Black Perspective in Music* 2, no. 1 (1974), 3-22, as well as Richard Waterman, "African Influence on the Music of the Americas," in *Acculturation in the Americas*, edited by Sol Tax (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952), 212.

perform their parts just slightly out of time with each other, whether intentionally or

unintentionally.[81] While most participants are charged with contributing to a stable, little-

changing, polyrhythmic texture, some are given more freedom, such as the lead drummer

in west African drum-dance practice, or the soloist of the moment in a Cuban salsa

ensemble. Those performers often intentionally play "against" the rhythms of the stable

texture (rushing or dragging the tempo, or implying new polyrhythms), creating an

expressive tension.[82]

D'Angelo was clear about his use of African-inspired approaches in creating

Voodoo. In his words, "I realized that everything that exists, all music, comes from

Africa. I started to see all the connections of music pointing back to Africa, and I wanted

to express all those genres. Like what Sly [Stone] was trying to do, like what Prince was

trying to do, and Jimi too."[83] The rhythmic practices on *Voodoo* signify on afro-diasporic

rhythmic histories by deploying expressive counter rhythms (playing against a stable

rhythm) in previously undesirable ways. By "signify," I mean according to Henry Louis

Gates, Jr.'s definition of signifying as "repetition with a signal difference."[84] Examples

might include altering a familiar story with a new twist, or using an expressive form in an

original way. In D'Angelo's case (and also J Dilla's), I'm arguing that musicians signified

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[81] This is akin to what sample-based hip hop producers would call quantization, the mechanic adjustment of individual rhythms in the sampler to produce perfectly coordinated timing, which I discuss further in chapters two and three of the present study.

[82] Not surprisingly, this practice reaches into jazz as well, as when a soloist plays expressively by lagging behind the beat created by the rhythm section. Vijay Iyer provides a compelling analysis of one such case: a passage in Ahmad Jamal's solo on "But Not For Me" (1952). See Vijay Iyer, "Embodied Mind, Situated Cognition, and Expressive Microtiming in African-American Music," *Music Perception* 19, no. 3 (2002), 409-411.

[83] hampton, "D'Angelo: Soul Man," 106.

[84] Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 51.

on the afro-diasporic musical practice of creating an interlocking polyrhythmic fabric by including previously uncommon subdivisions and off-beat rhythms in their grooves. Conventionally in funk, R&B, jazz, and hip hop music, the rhythm section creates a stable texture. In the best cases, this is a feelingful groove, perceptible (and motivating) to musicians and audience alike, created by coordination of rhythmic parts within certain idiomatic tolerances of rhythmic precision, within which certain rhythmic deviations (though few) are appreciated as expressive.[85] Many tracks on *Voodoo* record the members of the rhythm section (drums, bass, keyboards, and guitar) pushing the boundaries of these idiomatic tolerances for rhythmic precision. Jazz pianist and composer Vijay Iyer gives some insight into the ways musicians think about timing variations in music such as this. He writes,

> In groove-based music, this steady pulse is the chief structural element, and it may be articulated in a complex, indirect fashion. In groove contexts, musicians display a heightened, seemingly microscopic sensitivity to musical timing (on the order of a few milliseconds). They are able to evoke a variety of rhythmic qualities, accents, or emotional moods by playing notes slightly late or early relative to a theoretical metric time point.[86]

According to *Voodoo* bassist Pino Palladino, "I attempted to put the bassline where I thought [D'Angelo] wanted it. I would never have thought of putting it so far back behind the beat. But it becomes a different feeling: it stretches in and out of different accents."[87] Palladino, who has been the regular bassist for top tier acts including B.B. King, The

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[85] For an excellent discussion of groove in the context of jazz rhythm section performance, see Ingrid Monson, *Saying Something: Jazz Improvisation and Interaction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 26-72. With regard to groove in funk music, see Danielsen, *Presence and Pleasure*, 43-94.

[86] Iyer, "Embodied Mind," 398.

[87] As told to Jason King, and quoted in King's liner notes to the 2012 *Voodoo* reissue from Light In the Attic Records. Jason King, "The Time Is Out of Joint: Notes on D'Angelo's Voodoo," liner notes to *Voodoo* by D'Angelo, Modern Classics Recordings MCR 902, 2012, vinyl, n.p.

Who, and Elton John, notes that the timing D'Angelo required was unusual for the way it straddled different "accents," which might be understood as musical emphases within a larger gesture. Examples of such an innovative approach to rhythm section timing abound on *Voodoo*, but an easy place to hear it is at the beginning to "Greatdayndamornin'," depicted below in Figure 1. By loading audio files into a software program called Sonic Visualiser, we can look at two types of visual representations of recorded sound: the wave form, and the spectrogram.[88]
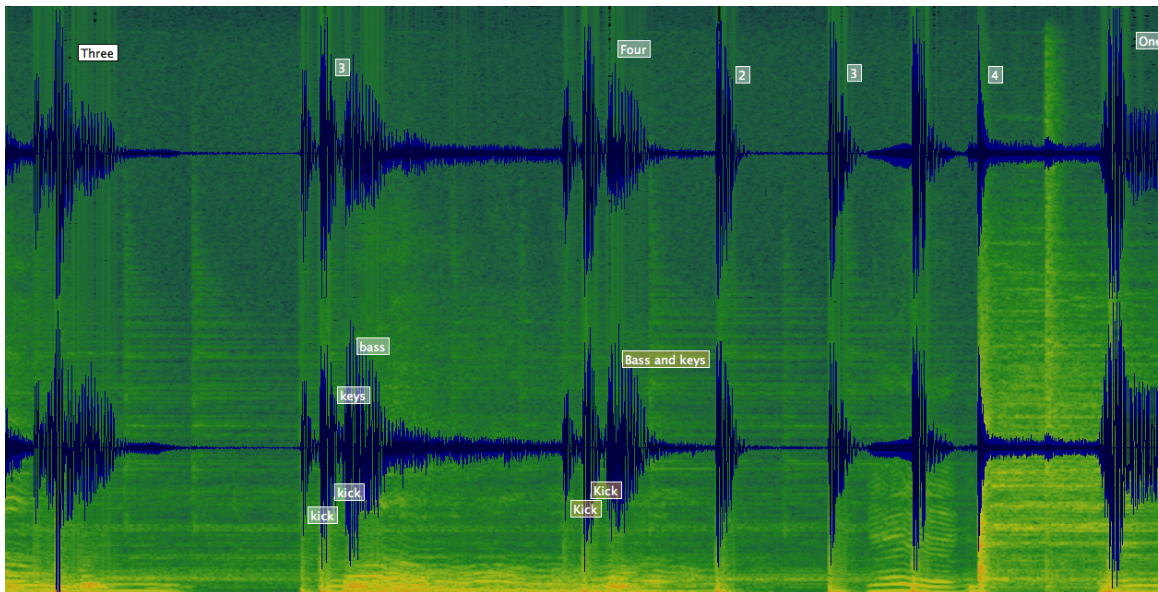
Figure 1. "Greatdayndamornin'," (2000) 0:18-0:24. Stereo wave form with incidences of kick drum, keyboard, and bass guitar notes labeled at two locations.

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[88] I present a more thorough explanation of these images and how I'm using them in chapter three, since they take on increased importance in my analysis of Dilla's work. If the reader finds the explanation here insufficient or confusing, s/he may wish to refer to chapter three, at the first occurrence of similar images. Sonic Visualiser 2.4.1. Copyright © 2005–2013 Chris Cannam and Queen Mary, University of London. http://www.sonicvisualiser.org/.

The image in Figure 1 is a visual representation of a recording, known as a wave form.[89] The horizontal axis is time, proceeding left to right; the width of this image covers some six seconds. Sonic events are depicted by waves, whose amplitude indicates their relative loudness. "Three" and "Four" on the image refer to measures, while the numbers following them (to their right) indicate beats within those measures. Therefore, this image shows measures three and four of the song's introduction, each constituted of four beats. In this picture I have labeled the wave forms of kick drum, keyboard, and bass guitar at two locations (beat three of measure three and beat one of measure four), to show how they do not sound on a particular beat at precisely the same moment. All labels are placed just to the right of the events they indicate. Note that the kick drum comes in groups of two – these two notes are easily understood (idiomatic to this style) as a pickup and the ensuing downbeat. It is important to note that the kick drum has played this figure repeatedly for the first 18 seconds of the song, fairly evenly and in time, so the other instrumentalists could have played their notes more or less at the same time as the kick. In R&B and other groove-based musics of the day, this would have been standard practice. The fact that the keyboard and bass notes arrive so sloppily around the same beat locations – beat three of measure three and beat one of measure four (again, understood idiomatically) – was highly unusual for rhythm section playing in R&B of this era. The effect is most prominent in the intro, from which the selection in Figure 1 is taken. As the song proceeds to the verses and choruses, on which D'Angelo's voice enters, the drunken character lessens; keyboard and bass get closer to locking in with the

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[89] In this case, the stereo wave form (dark blue) is superimposed onto a spectrogram image, which accounts for the yellow, red, and green background. The nature of the spectrogram is less important for my analysis of D'Angelo, but I use it extensively in chapter three, and I explain images like these in greater detail there.

kick drum, making the rhythm section more regulated. This is probably in order to better support D'Angelo's vocal phrasing, which then becomes the freest rhythmic element in the musical texture. To get his musicians to play this way, D'Angelo reportedly instructed them to play "drunk," that is, *as if* they were drunk. Drunkenness entails slowed reaction speeds, which would account for the bass and keyboards arriving late to the beat outlined by the kick drum in Figure 1.

To understand the effect that D'Angelo may have been trying to achieve, I'll turn again to an account from one of the rhythm section players involved in *Voodoo*, 8-string guitarist Charlie Hunter. In an interview, Hunter told Jason King "the reason people like the album so much is because it's human. It's humans playing instruments with each other, and there's a certain kind of magic that you can only achieve when you do that. You can get an interesting sound from programming music, but it's not magic; it's science."[90] Here, Hunter distinguishes between the human sound of people playing instruments with each other and programming, by which he means use of a sampler or drum machine to build up a rhythm track by layering constituent parts.

Hunter's distinction is ironic (though probably not intentionally) since the rhythms on *Voodoo* were inspired by the work of a particular sample-based producer, fellow Soulquarian Jay Dee. According to a 2000 *Rolling Stone* piece on D'Angelo and *Voodoo*,

> A crucial influence was Jay Dee, from the group Slum Village. "He's the zenith of hip-hop to us," ?uestlove says. Jay Dee helped to bring out the album's dirty sound and encouraged the false starts and the non-quantized sound of the record. ("Quantized" is D-bonics for being in perfect rhythm, while "to slum," ?uest

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[90] King, "The Time Is Out," n.p.

explains, "is the art of totally dragging the feel while being totally quantized. So, musically drunk and sober at the same time. Also called 'to Jay that shit.'")[91]

Questlove's account of the rhythm on *Voodoo* describes an approach to ensemble playing that innovatively combined a steady pulse with destabilizing forces, much the way Jay Dee had done with samplers. An important feature of this approach can be gleaned by further interpretation of Questlove's quote: though the beat dragged, it was "totally quantized" at the same time. We must take this with a grain of salt. Questlove does not mean that the musicians' studio performances were put into a sampler the way a hip hop producer would quantize them, or that they were played while listening to a click track (metronome); he means that they intended the tempos to remain the same despite the dragging influence of various instruments playing drunkenly against a prevailing pulse. Whether the pulse *was* actually metronomic was not important, but that it should *feel* so was crucial. This recalls and underscores the importance of the "metronome sense" that characterizes west African music, according to Waterman, and underlies much of African American music and its derivative styles, including jazz, rock, soul, and funk. This approach to musical rhythm – utilizing a stable and pseudo-metronomic ("quantized") rhythmic layer as underpinning for voices or other instruments which could phrase against it expressively – is a shared musical inheritance of afro-diasporic music, which the musicians on *Voodoo* reconceived for the digital age.

The influence of Jay Dee's music on *Voodoo* stands as a prominent example of the importance of collaboration to the sound of the recordings that Soulquarians artists released. Jay Dee's influence on *Voodoo*'s characteristic rhythms, according to

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[91] Touré, "D'Angelo Is Holding Your Hand," *Rolling Stone* (May 11, 2000), n.p. https://www.rollingstone.com/music/news/dangelo-is-holding-your-hand-20000511.

Questlove, was nothing short of definitive, to the point that the approaches themselves were named after him ("to Jay") and the rap group for which he served as producer ("to slum"). Jay Dee's sample-based style influenced Questlove and D'Angelo, who then adapted it for performance by musicians playing instruments together. This approach allowed them to feature the human feel that resulted from instrumentalists playing together, but with an original twist: it was so drunk as to verge on sloppy. As the analyses later in this chapter and in chapter three will show, D'Angelo's and Jay Dee's music display numerous rhythmic traits in common, including 32nd note accents to beat locations, and combination of quantized and non-quantized elements.

Though the rhythms lurched and wobbled ("totally dragging"), the rhythm section instruments retained traditional organization and division of labor, not conceiving of something entirely new, but reconceiving something old. Pursuing a thread similar to Gates' framework of "signifying," Tricia Rose has pointed out how hip hop musicians retool recordings and musical processes in ways that reflect the aesthetic priorities of oral cultures. In 1994, Rose viewed the work of sample-based hip hop through the lens of Walter Ong's conception of post-literate orality: "Sampling technology as used by rap DJs and producers is strikingly similar to Ong's interpretation of narrative originality in oral cultures: 'narrative originality lodges not in making up new stories… [instead] *formulas and themes are reshuffled* rather than supplanted with new materials.'"[92] In similar fashion, Jay Dee and D'Angelo reshuffled "formulas" of afro-diasporic rhythmic

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[92] Rose, *Black Noise*, 88 (emphasis in original). Rose uses Ong's analytic tool 'post-literate orality' to demonstrate the influence of narrative practices from oral cultures on contemporary practices among hip hop producers. Producers' works reuse and reconceive older recordings with referent implications, just as a storyteller's narrative originality lies in her creative reuse of themes and rhetorical moves to suit a particular telling. This analytic lens is useful to the present study as a window into how contemporary hip hop musicians remix, reuse, and signify on previous musical traditions.

practices from funk and soul, including using bass, drum set, piano, and guitar as rhythm section instruments, the performance of a backbeat by the drums, and the performance of root (tonic) notes on downbeats in the bass. In other words, the *Voodoo* rhythm section displayed "narrative originality" not by changing *what* they played, but *how* they played it, allowing *Voodoo* to tell a familiar story in a remarkable new way.

For another example of *Voodoo*'s innovative rhythmic character, we can look to the album's opening track, "Playa Playa," which one reviewer described as having "a wicked stop-start syncopation that makes you want to move in five dimensions."[93] The rhythm section consists of drums (Questlove), bass (Pino Palladino), guitar (Mike Campbell), and keyboards (D'Angelo). The playing is characterized by one steady pulse in the drums, which other instruments alternately phrase expressively against, and lock up with. Figure 2 displays the wave form and spectrogram of three measures of "Playa Playa" which typify one of the song's primary grooves as it leads up to a change to another section of the form. To demonstrate the ways other instruments phrase against the steady pulse in the drums, I have superimposed a grid on the image, creating a visual analogy of a metronomic pulse. This enables us to see where and how certain notes deviate from a strictly regular beat, in other words, the microtiming variations of various components of the groove.

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[93] Greg Tate, "Revolutions," *Vibe* (December 1999-January 2000), 248.
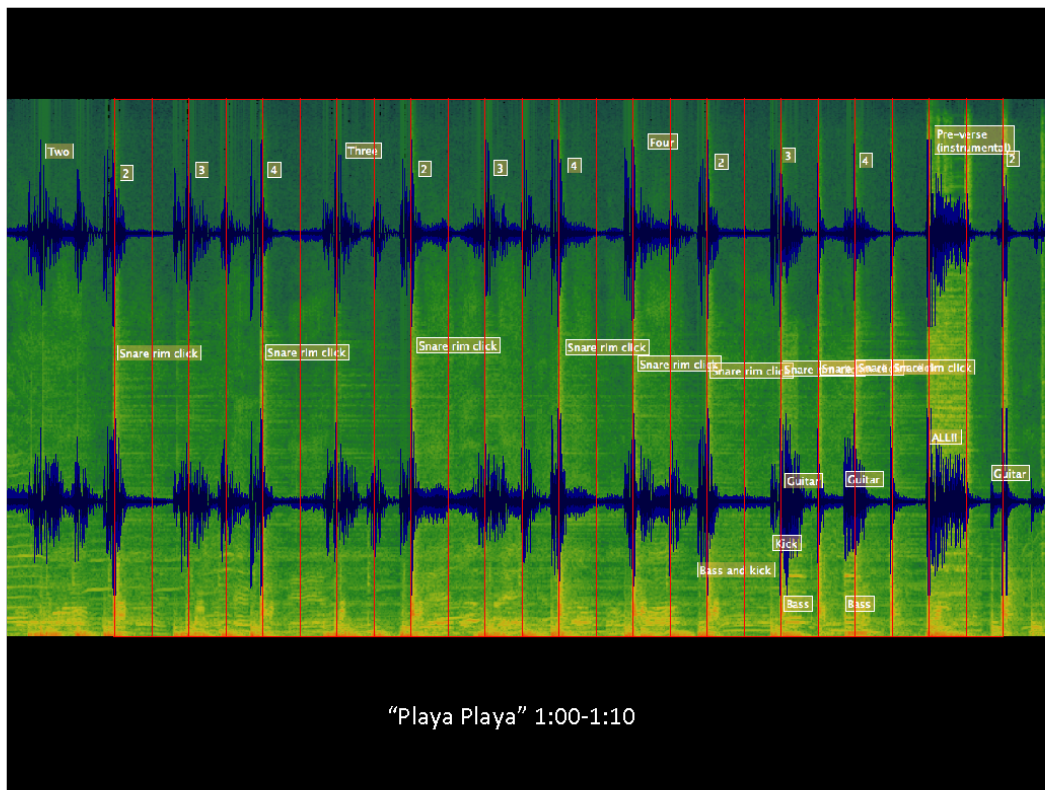
Figure 2. "Playa Playa" (2000) wave form, spectrogram, and timing graph (eighth notes), showing relative consistency of snare rim clicks, which outline the primary beat.

Upon close examination of Figure 2 we see that the snare rim click, which regularly plays on the backbeat (beats two and four) of the groove, is quite regular, aligning consistently with the red lines of the timing graph. This is the "totally quantized" aspect of the beat, as Questlove put it. Other instruments phrase expressively (or drunkenly) against this pulse, as we can see by the wave forms which begin just ahead of the graph lines, which show the regular eighth-note pulse.

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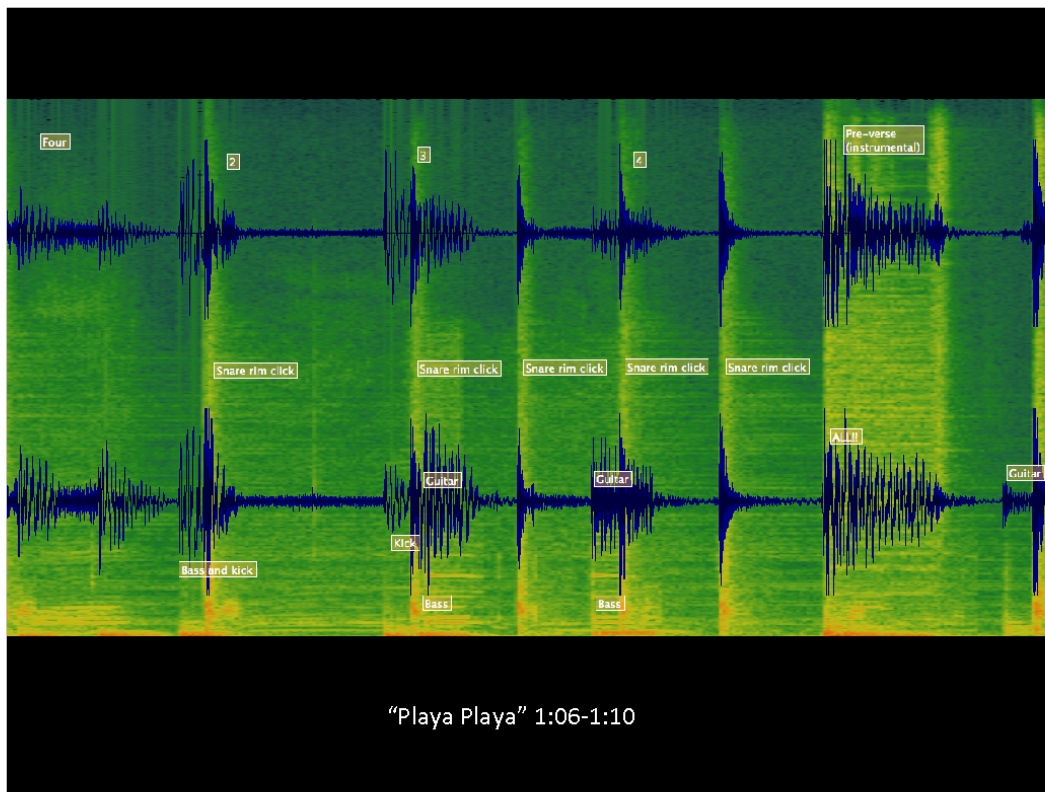
Figure 3. "Playa Playa," 1:06-1:10. This measure (four beats) precedes the formal section change to the Pre-verse, which features a different groove.

Figure 3 zooms in on the last measure from Figure 2, before a change in the groove where the song goes to a section I call the Pre-verse. Keeping in mind that the snare rim clicks outline the basic pulse of the groove, and are quite visible as vertical yellow bands revealed by the spectrogram, we can now clearly see the drunken phrasing of bass, guitar, and kick drum against this pulse. At beat two, bass and kick both anticipate the beat (by about 100 milliseconds), while at beat three, kick again does so but bass and guitar arrive ever-so-slightly later (about 25ms) than the click. At beat four, bass and guitar again phrase together, this time without kick drum, anticipating the beat by 100ms. Significantly, at beat one of the new section, all instruments play precisely together,

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landing directly on beat one. This imparts the moment with tremendous energy, and the instrumentalists' gesture here serves as an acknowledgment of the foundational nature of playing tightly together in a groove like this. Phrasing in time together (as they do at the section change) reveals what Anne Danielsen calls the "virtual structure" of a funk groove, the conceptual backdrop against which sounding events are made meaningful to players and audiences.[94] Therefore, we can read the musicians' highly individual phrasing during most of the groove as working to construct a specific rhythmic feel.

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[94] Danielsen's "virtual structure," which she defines as "the nonsounding schemes that structure sounding events," refers to the pulse and meter of a groove, which she argues is referenced by performed rhythms, but includes non-sounding events as well. It is akin to Waterman's "metronome sense" in that it constitutes a pulse that underlies performers' individual approaches to the groove, and to which the collective performance refers, but which doesn't rely on being made constantly audible for its influence on the performance. See Anne Danielsen, "Introduction," in *Musical Rhythm in the Age of Digital Reproduction*, edited by Anne Danielsen (Farnham, Surrey, England: Ashgate, 2010), 6.
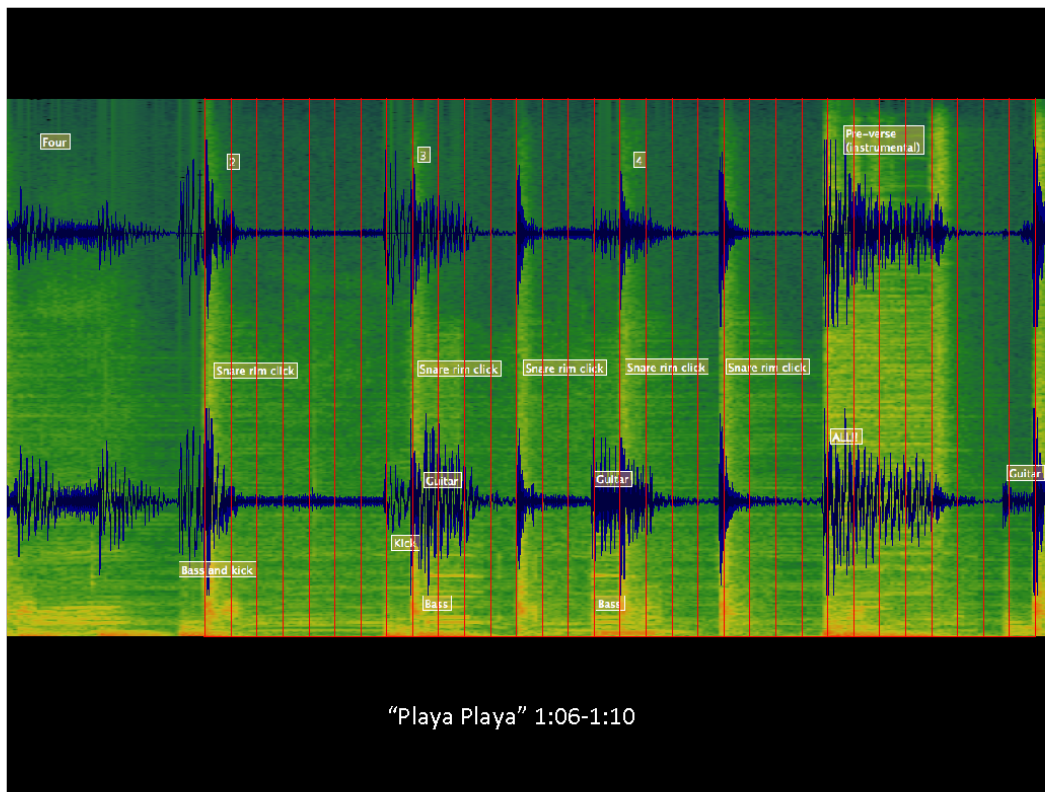
Figure 4. "Playa Playa," measure (four beats) preceding section change to Pre-verse groove, with timing graph (32nd notes) superimposed.

In Figure 4, I have superimposed a timing graph whose red lines show 32nd notes. As you can see, the anticipations to downbeats (by kick at beat two, and guitar and bass at beat three), which I previously described as 100ms, are essentially a 32nd note, a very small subdivision, and one which had previously been used only occasionally as an accent in jazz, funk, and soul grooves at this tempo.[95] By making 32nd note accents to main pulse locations a fundamental part of the fabric of the groove, D'Angelo and his band redefined swing for the 21st century. Here, the work of black music scholar Samuel A. Floyd, Jr. is useful for thinking about swing. Floyd calls swing "an essential element and a most

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[95] This is one approach to groove that D'Angelo and Questlove probably got from Jay Dee, whose work around this time reflects a similar approach, as I will describe in detail in chapter three.

elusive quality of black music," and writes that it is produced, "When sound-events Signify on the time-line, against the flow of the pulse, making the pulse itself lilt freely."[96] In Floyd's terms, notes which sound near to (but "against") the main pulse "signify on the time-line," and give the beat a lilting quality. That this should be valued in black music is derived from its traditional use as dance music, passed down from Africa through the ring shout, to jazz, and later, funk and soul. What D'Angelo's band is doing, I argue, constitutes no less than an original approach to the age-old black musical practice of signifying on the timeline, the underlying pulse or virtual structure of a groove.
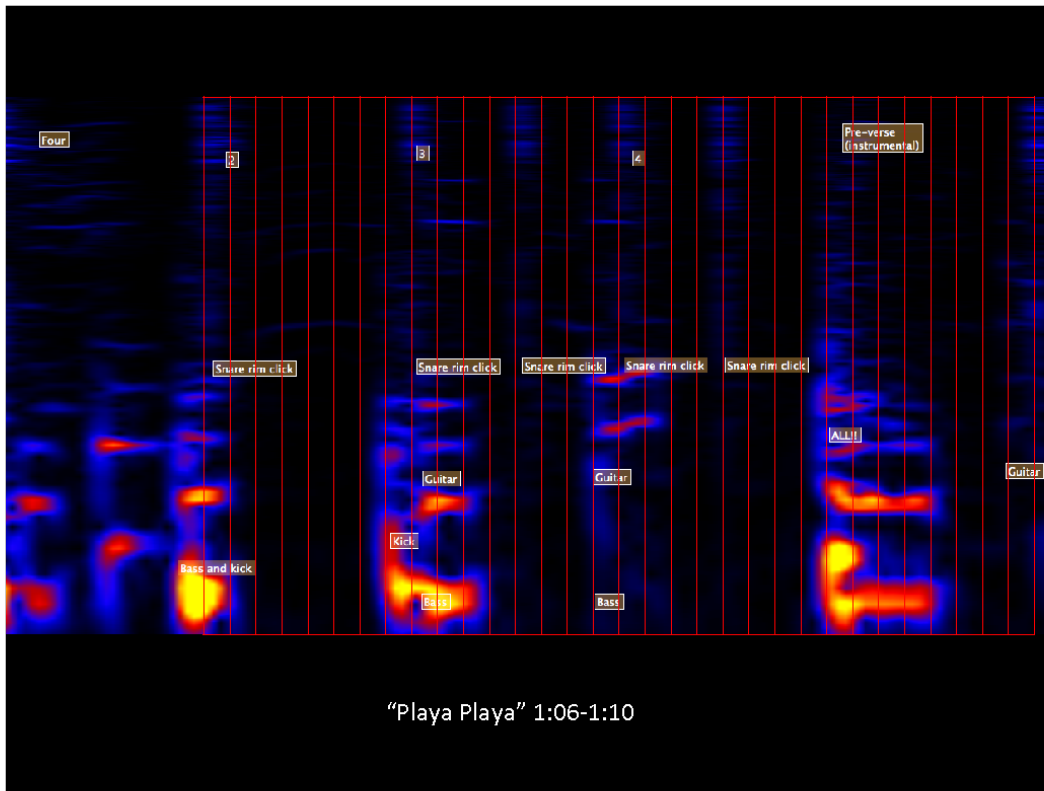
Figure 5. Melodic range spectrogram of "Playa Playa," one measure (four beats) preceding section change to Pre-verse groove, with timing graph (32nd notes) superimposed.

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[96] Samuel A. Floyd Jr., "Ring Shout! Literary Studies, Historical Studies, and Black Music Inquiry" *Black Music Research Journal* 11 (fall 1991): 273.

Figure 5 is simply a different kind of image of the same measure of music, known as a melodic range spectrogram. It reveals primarily low frequencies, displaying them as yellow or red highlights, according to their volume, with yellow representing the loudest. Most of what is visible in this picture is kick drum and bass. We can see, for example, where the kick (the loud, yellow shapes near the bottom) anticipates beats two and three by a 32nd note, avoids playing at beat four entirely, and returns right on beat one of the following section. In this image, look closely at the bass, which can be seen most clearly at beat four, appearing as a pair of wispy, upward-trending, horizontal, red lines. The bass occupies approximately this same vertical space around beats two, three, and one as well, and takes a similar shape (albeit without the upward tendency, which shows that the bass player slid from a lower note to a higher one at beat four). The point I want to make about the bass is how freely Palladino phrases against the beat, and with how much variation. At beats two and one he phrases exactly with the kick drum, first in anticipation of the beat, then right on it with everybody else. At beat three, Palladino plays "drunker," attacking his note in between 32nd note locations (already a very small subdivision), indicating he is playing intentionally very loosely in the groove. Incidentally, the guitarist plays in essentially the same spot at this location, demonstrating the cohesiveness of the rhythm section's approach through these two members' mutual execution at this "drunken" location. Bass and guitar sound together again at beat four, this time without kick, and somewhat closer to the precise 32nd note anticipation of the snare rim click, which is still outlining the pulse. Finally, this spectrogram helps show just how precisely these performers are capable of manipulating time on their instruments, as all the

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disjuncture is followed beautifully by perfect alignment at the change of section. The

point here is that, in addition to making the 32nd note the base subdivision in the feel,

which was innovative unto itself, individual members of the rhythm section are phrasing

within that as well, playing against that particular level of swing with even finer levels of

rhythmic specification. The fact that D'Angelo told his band to play "drunk" implies that

he was shooting for an audible degree of human error, ostensibly in an effort to make the

music sound imperfect – human – in a particular way.[97]

Whereas Questlove and D'Angelo heard a reimagining of qualities of live

performance in the digitally-produced beats of Jay Dee, part of the cultural work that

Voodoo does results from using live musicians to realize this reconceiving of rhythmic

cooperation. In other words, while Jay Dee invented a certain kind of groove using

samplers, D'Angelo's group adapted it for live performance. I would like to suggest that,

by playing slightly "off" from one another as they did, the musicians on *Voodoo*

increased the audibility of *individuality* within the group texture, as opposed to (to take a

suggestion from the imagery of Caribbean music and ritual in the album's liner notes),

say, a Cuban Santeria drumming ensemble. In such an ensemble, while different

instruments have contrasting timbres, the rhythmic lockup is tight by convention.

Musicians use the term "tight" in describing a groove much like we would talk about

woven fabric, in which individual threads are pulled very close together. The analogy

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[97] That D'Angelo used the term "drunk" in his instructions reveals the amount of training, precision, and effort that undoubtedly went into performing this way. The direction to play drunk implied a shift in the musicians' state of consciousness, one which encouraged the kind of "mistakes" musicians work hard to eliminate through practice. Even for world class performers, learning a completely new way of locking up in a rhythmic fabric, with no model to study, would mean essentially reprogramming much of their training. This mixing of 32nd note swing with even finer phrasing is characteristic of Jay Dee's production at this time as well, as I will describe in detail in chapter three.

may be aptly extended to the feeling of community among players in such a groove: we feel tightly bonded, more like a single unit than a group of individuals. The simultaneity of struck notes, the valued tightness, even makes distinguishing between instruments' individual parts difficult. By contrast, the audible individuation of instruments on *Voodoo* is greater, since every instrument is made more distinguishable by occupying its own rhythmic space. This individuation recalls black music scholar Olly Wilson's "heterogeneous sound ideal," which he argues is shared between west African music and African American forms. According to Wilson, in both musical cultures "There tends to be an intensification of the stratification of the musical lines by means of emphasizing the independence of timbre (color) for each voice."[98] Wilson's "stratification of lines" is essentially equivalent to my "individuation of voices." In a tight rhythmic fabric like that of west African or Santeria drumming, the individuation of lines is accomplished through timbral differences. In *Voodoo*'s case, however, stratification is achieved not only through timbral differences between rhythm section instruments, but through rhythmic asynchrony as well. If critics like dream hampton and Sacha Jenkins were keen to place on *Voodoo* the mantle of a different sort of realness from other contemporary music, this may help us understand why: one didn't just hear instruments, one heard people, personalities. Not just the personalities of those traditionally charged with expressing themselves against a stable musical backdrop, like rappers, singers, lead drummers, or jazz soloists, but the *entire group*. In creating cohesive and compelling rhythmic textures

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[98] Wilson, "The Significance of the Relationship," 15. Pianist and scholar Vijay Iyer expanded upon Wilson's idea, arguing that rhythmic asynchrony encourages listeners to hear the individual performers in the music. See Vijay Iyer, "Microstructures of Feel, Macrostructures of Sound: Embodied Cognition in West African and African-American Musics," (Ph.D. dissertation, University of California, Berkeley, 1998), 61.

that foregrounded differentiation and individuality, the musicians on *Voodoo* suggested that increased individuality and a strong group feeling do not have to be mutually exclusive. Drawing this out further, I suggest we can read this aspect of *Voodoo* as a sonic imperative to maintain individual creativity and personality, while still maintaining sight of the community you are helping to create, the fabric in which you are a thread. Such individuality (with a community outlook) was a guiding principle of the Soulquarians, who created highly original music – like *Voodoo* – in the face of increasingly homogenized musical offerings from corporate-controlled popular music supply chains, and broadcasters.

Individuality was not just audible on *Voodoo*, it was visible on tour as well. As Soultronics backup vocalist Shelby Johnson said, "In the beginning we kept asking, 'What should we wear?' And D kept saying, 'Just be you.' It's rare you have an artist who's secure enough to let you be the rare motherfucker you can be."[99] Recall that D'Angelo said of his philosophy for the Soulquarians, "it's not going to be one album that does this, it's going to be a movement." That movement targeted an attitude among artists and corporations that so thoroughly took commercialism as its guiding principle as to stifle musical diversity and creative bravery. D'Angelo told *Rolling Stone*, "I'm lookin' at this like an army of musicians and free spirits and music. It's very much like a war."[100] The interviewer, *Rolling Stone* writer Touré, interpreted that war as "over the future of music," a telling indication of the way critics positioned Soulquarians artists as an

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[99] Beginning with the *Voodoo* tour, D'Angelo's backing band has been known as "The Soultronics." Shelby Johnson quoted in Touré, "D'Angelo is Holding," n.p.

[100] Touré, "D'Angelo is Holding," n.p.

antidote to certain aspects of the contemporary music market, in corroboration of the Soulquarians' own ideological stances.

Just as visual individuation on stage was one part of the way D'Angelo saw himself fighting this war, I propose we can read the video for his song "Untitled (How Does It Feel)" as doing a similar sort of work.[101] In contrast to the profusion of adornments that characterized bling bling videos, D'Angelo is alone and vulnerable as he performs his vocals. He is filmed naked, and the camera exposes as much of his body as it can for the video to still make it onto mainstream outlets. Here, the artist has *no* worldly possessions, no adoring but voiceless female admirers. Instead, his exposed flesh proposes an alternate 'reality,' one which is unmediated by trappings of property, or even place. This is a very direct reality, with nothing (okay, little) to hide, and little or no pretense. In this sense it contrasts with images in 'reality' rap both before and after its turn to bling, not to mention just about every other music video up to that point. D'Angelo and director Paul Hunter instead create a spectacle that cultivated healthy sexual fantasies. As one writer provocatively asked, "How *does* it feel?"[102] Such fantasies speak to our shared humanity because people can relate to them across cultures, value systems, sexual orientations, and socioeconomic status.

Moreover, D'Angelo's performance in the video provides another form of counterpoint to bling imagery by foregrounding tension. Recall Robert Walser's distinction between "finding" and "searching" music. The infusion of tension into a visual performance like D'Angelo's, or into a piece of music, is a quality shared among

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[101] I will describe the artifice of bling bling-style videos in greater detail in chapter two, when I deal with The Roots' video to their 1996 song "What They Do," which spoofs bling conventions quite plainly.

[102] Emil Wilbekin, "Vibe 100," *Vibe* (September 2000), 138.

"searching" art. This tension is not limited to the sexual tension that the video cultivates among viewers, but extends to the music of the song itself, which musicologist Jason King calls a "slowburn [sic] ballad" that "starts off spare and builds to a rousing, uh, climax."[103] D'Angelo and his collaborators build this tension into the music itself by building the seven-plus minute song up from only drums to an apex of multiple keyboards, screaming guitars, and swirling voices, all of which underlay D'Angelo's squalling lead vocal, which several reviewers likened to Prince. D'Angelo himself was famously uncomfortable with the idea of appearing as a sex symbol, and King points out that the concept for the video was meant "to exploit D'Angelo's intrinsic shyness and insecurity" in order to create the mystique necessary for its seduction.[104] By contrast, bling-style videos might convincingly be thought of as displaying a "finding" nature. Surrounded by adoring and little-clothed women, and fine cars, clothes, and consumables, rappers are portrayed without a care in the world, except perhaps how to select from the multitude of pleasures available to them. There is an ease to the portrayal: rapping is not hard work in these videos, but work for which rappers are exceedingly well compensated.

Taking the collaborative experimentalism of *Voodoo* as its starting point, the Soulquarians collective worked to accentuate individuality on numerous levels: with performances like those on "Greatdayndamornin'" and "Playa Playa," which pioneered a completely individual approach to rhythm section playing as it increased individuation of personalities within a groove; within their collective, locally, by their utilization (recalling Erykah Badu's estimation) of each individual for his or her strengths; and

[103] King, "The Time is Out," n.p.

[104] King, "The Time is Out," n.p.

within the contemporary rap and R&B industry, broadly, by their distribution of music that prompted audiences and industry to rethink what "realness" meant in the age of keeping it real.

ASSUMPTIONS, DEFINITIONS, AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF BIASES

This section briefly describes some of my parameters for the present study. I assume that Soulquarians members collaborated on projects in a fashion that is not fully documented by the credits in album liner notes. Thus, I will remain open minded about "who did what" on a given song, and consider other sources when establishing a work's provenance, including interviews. I assume that neither people's recollections in interviews, nor published liner notes represent the truth accurately all of the time, and that attributions must be taken with a grain of salt.

I assume that even among artists who are the most often singled out as promoting conspicuous consumption and Tricia Rose's "gangsta-ho-pimp trinity," such as Biggie Smalls and Puff Daddy, albums may contain a breadth of material. The limited focus of this project will only allow examination a handful of songs by artists such as these and thus risks casting their music as one-dimensional. I acknowledge this risk as much for the sake of accuracy as to avoid falling into step with journalists and commentators who have suggested that rap musicians are the epitome (and/or cause) of black pathological behavior.[105] In fairness, the music of the Soulquarians is not one-dimensional either, and their penchant for progressive lyrics is tempered by, for example, Common's explicit

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[105] C. Dolores Tucker, Rev. Calvin O. Butts III, and Bill O'Reilly are just some of the most infamous voices blaming rap music for declines in "morality."

homophobia on some tracks.[106] Nevertheless, this study proceeds from mainstream

interpretations of these artists, which shaped (and were shaped by) the dialogues about

them in mainstream media, and interpretations of their music and lyrics. In Biggie and

Puffy's cases, such dialogues understood them (as artists) to be part of trends in hip hop

that foregrounded misogyny, criminality, and conspicuous wealth. Meanwhile, Common

(like other Soulquarians collaborators including Mos Def, Talib Kweli, and The Roots'

Black Thought) was understood to represent "conscious" rap, a category characterized by

explication of social conscience and progressive politics, and one into which few if any

listeners would place Biggie and Puffy.

I assume lyrics to represent their authors directly, despite considerations that those

lyrics are mediated by a performance perhaps better attributed to the artist's "persona"

rather than the artist themselves.[107] In any case, what is important to this study is not

whether a given artist actually lived the experiences she describes, but that she tells the

story in a certain way, framing listeners' perceptions of her persona, appreciation of her

world view, and formation of their own.

I assume that artists' words regarding their work and motivations (in interviews,

for example) are, for the most part, truthful. However, I recognize that artists are likely to

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[106] Specifically, on *Like Water for Chocolate*'s (2000) "Dooinit," Common raps derisively, "in a circle of faggots, your name is mentioned." During the course of the Soulquarians collaboration, however, he abandoned on-record homophobia, releasing "Between Me, You, and Forever" on *Electric Circus* (2002). On that track, he rapped about a gay friend, "how could I judge him? Had to accept him if I truly loved him."

[107] Here I am thinking of Allan Moore, who distinguishes between the artist and her "persona," which mediates the actual performance. We cannot say, for example, that the artist has certainly done all that she sings about, only that we are meant to believe that her persona has, as part of the performance. See Allan F. Moore, *Song Means: Analysing and Interpreting Recorded Popular Song* (Farnham, Surrey, England: Ashgate, 2012).

be self-conscious about the image they project with their words, and that their choices may be affected by the personal branding they work to establish and maintain.

I define a given work as "by the Soulquarians" based on how many members collaborated on a particular song. Several factors are at work here. For one thing, there are founding members of the collective (Ahmir Questlove, D'Angelo, Jay Dee and James Poyser) and those whose affiliation was either looser, or begun after the group's initial efforts (Erykah Badu, Common, Q-Tip, Bilal, Mos Def, and Talib Kweli). While some albums include the "Soulquarians" name in production credits, most list contributors individually. Only very rarely are more than three Soulquarians members listed as contributors to a single song. Rather, they seem to have come and gone from each others sessions as whim and convenience dictated. What's more, the mutual influence of the members (both founding and extended) is such that the aesthetics of individual members were deeply affected by the others, even if they did not appear on a given song. Is a song like *Voodoo's* "The Line," on which D'Angelo is credited with playing all instruments except guitar (played by Raphael Saadiq) a Soulquarians production? Judging by accounts of the making of *Voodoo*, several other Soulquarians are certain to have put their ears to the track during editing, and may even have assisted with post production. With all this in mind, I am inclined to err on the side of strictness in defining a Soulquarians collaboration. For the purposes of this study, then, I will consider a Soulquarians track to be any production that names either "the Soulquarians" or at least two of the collective's founding members (D'Angelo, Questlove, Dilla, and Poyser) in the production credits in the CD's liner notes. An appendix of albums that include at least one Soulquarians-produced track appears at the end of this study.

Though the writing of history is always colored by the historian's background and biases, historical studies are rarely presented as anything but objective. All too often, white men like me have owned and exerted the power to construct narratives in the ways that they see fit, excluding or marginalizing other voices and visions on the basis of gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and any number of other qualifiers. As the pioneering black music scholar Portia Maultsby writes,

> Critique of the performance aesthetic often is predicated on the writer's cultural perspective and familiarity (or lack of) with the cultural codes and musical values defined and affirmed among African Americans. The complex history of African American popular music is best understood against the backdrop of the social and cultural contexts for origin and its appropriation by the music industry and dominant mainstream.[108]

Maultsby's observations about writing on black music are cautionary. As one who has had few if any intimate relationships with African Americans, I have sought familiarity with "cultural codes and musical values" in music, interviews with artists, contemporary African American literature, and scholarly writing on black music by the likes of Maultsby, Samuel A. Floyd Jr. (1991, 1995), Rose (1994, 2008), Christopher Small (1998 [1987]), Mark Anthony Neal (1999, 2002, 2003, 2004), Perry (2004), Maureen Mahon (2004), and numerous others. With the knowledge that I have gaps in my cultural competence, I am nonetheless encouraged by Maultsby, who suggests that "Scholarly study that *engages perspectives of the musical creators* can generate counter narratives that reveal the complex intersections of race, culture, and power that have shaped and continue to shape the presentation and representation of African American popular

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[108] Portia K. Maultsby, "Race Erasure in Black Popular Music," in *Issues in African American Music: Power, Gender, Race, Representation,* edited by Portia K. Maultsby and Mellonee V. Burnim (New York: Routledge, 2017), 60-61.

music."[109] To a great extent, I pay so much attention to the words of the Soulquarians themselves in the hope that this study can succeed in revealing dynamics of race, culture, and power.

I was introduced to D'Angelo and The Roots in 2001 by a fellow musician. Together we tried to figure out the funky rhythms we heard coming from *Voodoo* and *Things Fall Apart*, how to coopt some of those approaches to perform a similarly compelling feel in our bar-band rhythm section. Whether because of insufficient experience, or insufficient practice, we never could. In some ways, the origins for this study can be found in that place: my performer's desire to understand the ways the musicians I admire have made their performances come alive by creating music that is catchy, compelling, and funky. My identification as a performer myself is perhaps the foremost reason I think of music as inextricable from the musicians who make it, and always already reflective of their cultural, political, and aesthetic values. This perspective is the source of my desire to treat the music of the Soulquarians as the work of self-conscious individuals – to interpret their music, in part, by using their words to understand what drove them, and how they approached their situation within music (both contemporarily and historically). As a result, I have mined interviews, liner notes, autobiographies, and various print sources for these artists' own words, and used them to understand their work as motivated by personal psychologies, commercial and artistic goals, and sometimes simply the irrepressible desire to create.

The Soulquarians project appears to me as a site of resistance to some of the reprehensible aspects of contemporary commercial music, and American society more

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[109] Maultsby, "Race Erasure," 48. (my emphasis)

broadly: crass commercialism and a willingness to succeed on the backs of others without concomitant dedication to community. But identifying art as "resistance" can be reductive. On the one hand, to view a work of art as resisting something is to define, to some extent, the terms of engagement available to the work, and establish boundaries for understanding it. On the other hand, much art is created with an *expansive* purpose in mind, meant to encourage consumers to make new connections or consider new possibilities, in other words, to think outside their boxes. Because such works are intended to expand rather than contract thinking, analytic frameworks should reflect this by expanding interpretive possibilities for the work, rather than limiting them. It is not difficult to see, then, how looking at works art through the lens of resistance can serve to limit a work's function, and miss the breadth of its impactful possibilities. Moreover, in seeking to explain the impact of the Soulquarians' work, and that of progressive black artists generally, we must take care not to overestimate the value to black communities of certain musical choices (Badu's messages of personal reflection as a cure for social ills, for example), as they may contribute to narratives of personal uplift at the expense of acknowledging the importance of structural change. As gender and sexuality scholar Shoniqua Roach cautions, discourses about black music which privilege progressive lyrics (often referred to as "conscious" rap) can serve to weaponize artists' expressions in service of neoliberal ideologies.[110] In the case of the Soulquarians, leaning too heavily on an interpretation of progressive lyrics by Badu, Common, or Black Thought that posits them as a balm for the misogyny and conspicuous consumption of some mainstream

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[110] Shoniqua Roach, "'I Can't Make It On My Own': Black Women, Neo Soul, and the Politics of Erotic Interdependence" (presentation, MUS 345M class, University of Oregon, Eugene, Oregon, March 13, 2018).

black music can ignore the ways that structural racism continues to work against personal advancement for people of color. In other words, we must work toward an understanding of the Soulquarians' music and lyrics that acknowledges the nuances of its contributions to black communities and the black musical tradition, and does not simply view it as a progressive alternative that works uncomplicatedly toward black liberation.

With that in mind, I proceed cautiously, acknowledging the Soulquarians' own statements about the contexts and purposes for their works, while exercising my own resistance to analysis that portrays as unduly limited the purposes from which artists worked, the nature of their impact, and the scope of their reach.

CHAPTER II

RESISTANCE IS INSTRUMENTAL: THE ROOTS AND

THE LEGITIMIZATION OF LIVE BAND HIP HOP

The Roots is a band of hip hop instrumentalists that has repeatedly tested the

boundaries of what "counts" as hip hop music. Originally from Philadelphia, since 1993 they

have released eleven of their own studio albums and participated in several collaborative

albums. The core group members are drummer Ahmir "Questlove" Thompson and MC Tariq

"Black Thought" Trotter, whose affiliation dates back to their attendance at the Philadelphia

High School for the Creative and Performing Arts in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The Roots

have collaborated with numerous artists in hip hop and beyond, established themselves as a

powerful live act – including, since 2014, as Jimmy Fallon's house band on The Tonight Show

– and won three Grammys. As I described in chapter one, they were the hub of the first several

Soulquarians collaborations (with D'Angelo and Common on *Illadelph Halflife*, and with

Poyser and Badu on *Baduizm*). Questlove was a guiding force behind both The Roots and the

Soulquarians, and has been both groups' most outspoken member, via his 2013 memoir and the

Okayplayer.com website.[111] During the period of the Soulquarians' greatest activity, he

described the tone of resistance in both groups' work in album liner notes, as well as multiple

articles in trade publications. More importantly, The Roots' ethos of embracing alternative

methods of musical production – particularly their own instrumental approach to hip hop, as

well as the innovative sounds of Jay Dee's sample-based productions – was a forerunner to the

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[111] From the website: "Launched in 1999 by ?uestlove of The Roots, Okayplayer is the original
progressive urban music site and maintains its position as the premier digital destination for
music connoisseurs worldwide." http://www.okayplayer.com/about (accessed 3/21/18).

sonic strategies used on Soulquarians productions, and ultimately characterized the output of the collaboration.

This chapter considers The Roots' first five albums, recorded during the years 1993-1999, and analyzes their approach to performing hip hop on traditional instruments. Taken together, these albums (from *Organix* to *The Roots Come Alive*) form a narrative arc as a "first phase" of The Roots' career. During those seven years, The band struggled to find a foothold in the rap industry, eventually realizing commercial and critical success. The music on these albums can be read as a counterpoint to contemporary use of samplers. One goal of this chapter, then, is to identify which parts of the sample-based aesthetic survived the move to instrumental hip hop, and how The Roots adapted them. Doing so sheds new light on the aesthetic properties that marked music as hip hop in the 1990s, regardless of the technology used to achieve it. This allows for a more nuanced understanding of the dynamics of technology versus live instrumentation, and conservatism versus progressivism, than previous studies have made possible. I will argue that their quest for legitimacy was hampered by at least two conditions of the hip hop musical and cultural landscape of the 1990s: their use of traditional instruments in a period when sample-based aesthetics dominated the genre, and the association of instruments in hip hop with the maligned style of disco music, which constituted the backing music for the first rap records. As I will show, the group's ability to secure a place in the rap genre was tied to a sonic strategy of imitating and versioning music made with digital sampling, the dominant method of musical production in rap at the time. However, though motivated by an aesthetics of imitation, this chapter will demonstrate ways that The Roots' strategies nonetheless worked in resistance to dominant musical and lyrical trends in hip hop, rather than in service to them.

By using instruments rather than samplers primarily, and focusing more lyrical attention on their own skills and less on guns, wealth, and misogynist imagery, The Roots creating a niche based on both ideological and sonic differences from contemporary hip hop. These two characteristics of The Roots' music and story – imitation and progressiveness – illustrate a tension that inhabited the Soulquarians collaboration generally: that between looking back to previous models, and looking forward to reformed and expanded possibilities for black music, and its place within the music industry. From this standpoint (and no doubt due in large part to Ahmir Thompson's singular influence in both groups), The Roots' output during this period may be seen as a template for The Soulquarians' music more broadly, which would share many of the same philosophical and sonic characteristics. Perhaps even more importantly, they were driven and inspired – as all Soulquarians artists seem to have been – by several tensions which figure (visibly and audibly) in their work: between creating innovative music and achieving popular appeal, between the conservatism of sounding like samples and the innovation of making critics and audiences believe that instrumental hip hop can be authentic, between looking to the past and looking to the future.

INSTRUMENTS AND SAMPLERS

As a band of instrumentalists and MCs, the Roots stood out from other rap music of the 1990s, which was mostly produced using digital sampling technology and turntables. Scholars including Tricia Rose and Robert Walser have addressed the tension between use of instruments and sample-based production in hip hop. Noting the prevalence of sampling at the time of The Roots' emergence, Rose observes, "In most rap music, the instruments are

samplers that reproduce synthesized versions of traditional instruments."[112] Rose also observes

two of the ways sampling functions for both listeners and producers, writing, "sampling, as

employed by rap producers, is a musical time machine, a machine that keeps time for the body

in motion and a machine that recalls other times."[113] In other words, most hip hop musicians

were sampling, creating pleasure for listeners in ways similar to those of a hip hop DJ spinning

records. Furthermore, Walser points out that hip hop musicians' use of samplers was based on

a set of aesthetic values that differed greatly from those of trained instrumentalists. In

analyzing the work of The Bomb Squad (rap group Public Enemy's production team), Walser

writes, "sampling is a strategy for producing music outside of the logic of 'trained'

musicians."[114] In both scholars' descriptions, then, sampler use involved a logic that was more

closely related to the practice of hip hop DJing than to formal instrumental training.

While these and other writers have approached sample-based composition as a radical

aesthetic choice, I submit that sampling isn't inherently progressive, since both samplers and

instruments may be used conservatively or innovatively. What was truly radical about sampler

use among hip hop musicians in the late 1980s and early 1990s was the way it allowed

musicians to build upon the practices and aesthetic values of DJs who used turntables, enabling

previously impossible developments in hip hop musical aesthetics. Joseph Schloss has

described the authenticity politics of this transition from turntables to sampling in hip hop,

writing, "I would argue that in fact samplers are like turntables *because* hip hop artists use

them… Both are results of the hip hop community's effort to invest a new technology –

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[112] Rose, *Black Noise*, 88.

[113] Rose, *Black Noise*, 96.

[114] Robert Walser, "Rhythm, Rhyme, and Rhetoric in the Music of Public Enemy," *Ethnomusicology* 39, no. 2 (1995), 198.

samplers – with the cultural cachet of an older one – turntables."[115] According to Schloss, hip

hop musicians embraced digital sampling because it allowed the cultural priorities of an earlier

practice to be invested in a new and powerful technology. Musicians' uses of samplers at this

time led to a sea change in how artists and audiences thought of hip hop music, retaining

earlier hip hop musical practices including both looping and musical borrowing, and increasing

the emphasis on collage and layering.[116] However, while I acknowledge the importance of

recognizing sampling's difference as an approach to creating musical textures, these radical

new aesthetics are not in and of themselves a result of use of samplers, nor is pursuit of those

aesthetics limited to musicians who sample. As instrumentalists, The Roots provide one case of

musicians driven by those aesthetics who work outside of sample-based processes. For

evidence that both samplers and instruments might be used progressively or conservatively, we

can look to the very different use of samplers by two of the most successful production outfits

of the 1990s: The Bomb Squad and Sean "Puffy" Combs. While The Bomb Squad worked

innovatively with samplers to create musical structures cobbled together from dozens of

individual samples, Puffy's more conservative use of samplers involved looping long segments

of hit songs with little or no alteration.[117]

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[115] Schloss, *Making Beats*, 52 (emphasis in original).

[116] For a study which locates the roots of sampling aesthetics in DJ practices, see Loren Kajikawa, *Sounding Race in Rap Songs* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2015), especially pp. 49-81. On the topic of musical borrowing in hip hop, see Justin A. Williams, *Rhymin' and Stealin': Musical Borrowing in Hip-Hop Music* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013), especially pp. 1-46 and 140-166.

[117] Lest this come off as an oversimplification of the complex issue of artistry and creativity among sample-based producers, I will provide a counter-example. Camp Lo's song "Luchini AKA This Is It," from their 1997 album *Uptown Saturday Night*, is a prime example of a sample-based track that uses a long, intact loop from a source record, but is still widely considered creative. The difference between this and Puffy's practices is that Ski Beatz, the track's producer, used an obscure sample source, L.A. R&B/funk group Dynasty's 1980 "Adventures in the Land of Music," rather than a well-known or already-used source. As Schloss describes, the producer/DJ's high valuation of "digging in the crates" (searching for rare and previously unused

Similarly, Questlove observed that jazz instrumentalists at the Philadelphia high school he attended were divided into two camps: traditionalists and experimentalists.[118] The Roots stood on some sort of middle ground. They were trained instrumentalists, but were also intimately familiar with hip hop aesthetics and practices, including sampling.[119] In any cultural form, the act of taking a step away from the known roots of the form, and then trying to recapture a convincingly authentic version of the form from a novel angle, can bring about fresh insights into the aesthetic principles and creative methods that underlie the cultural form in question. As this chapter will show, The Roots balanced the conservatism of imitating existing hip hop aesthetics with innovative approaches to using traditional instruments as the basis for hip hop accompaniment.

Contemporary hip hop producers' aesthetics left little room for instrumentalists, finding their work acceptable only insofar as it conformed to an aesthetic based primarily on samples. This ideology defined the sample-based hegemony that defined hip hop music during The Roots' early career. In his ethnography of sample-based hip hop producers in the late 1990s, *Making Beats*, Joseph Schloss writes, "The use of live instrumentation is considered legitimate by producers only when three conditions are met: when the live musician understands (or at least capitulates to) a putative 'hip-hop aesthetic,' when the instruments are used to support musical themes that are already apparent in samples, and when they have the 'right' timbre or

records to sample) led to the acceptability of Ski Beatz use of Dynasty's song because the source was obscure, whereas Puffy's non-transformative use of already-famous sources was considered egregious. I will describe Puffy's sampling practices further in chapter three. See Schloss, *Making Beats*, 79-100. See also Patrick Rivers and Will Fulton, *Uptown Saturday Night* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017), 82-83.

[118] Questlove, *Mo' Meta Blues*, 71.

[119] Questlove makes clear that he was familiar with records and DJing from a young age, and that as a teenager he used both drums and an early Casio sampling keyboard to accompany Tariq Trotter (Roots MC Black Thought) when Tariq battled other rappers at their high school. See Questlove, *Mo' Meta Blues*, 66-70.

ambience."[120] Here Schloss indicates that to be acceptable to hip hop producers, the work of live musicians must accompany samples, and must capitulate to an aesthetic that places the samples themselves in the position of defining the feel and sound of a track.

The Roots, however, resisted the notion that they needed samples from pre-recorded media to make hip hop music. They would pioneer a hip hop way of playing their instruments and producing their albums by arranging their individual parts to conform to a looping aesthetic, equalizing their instruments to imitate sample-based records, using "vocal percussion" to imitate a DJ's use of vinyl records, and using samplers to manipulate their own in-studio performances. In so doing, they carved out a space in which hip hop musicians and audiences alike could acknowledge the advantages of instrumental performance on its own. Only after they realized a degree of success with this strategy did they gradually began adding samples from pre-recorded media to their studio recordings as well.

REPURPOSING BREAKBEATS

As sample-based producers like Marley Marl, Prince Paul, and the Dust Brothers revolutionized the sound of rap musical production in the late 1980s, Ahmir "Questlove" Thompson and Tariq "Black Thought" Trotter absorbed the sample-based aesthetic from radio and records, and began emulating it. Thompson writes that when he and Trotter met, they began to work together because Thompson would provide backing music for Trotter's rhymes in the lunch cafeteria at school. In order to battle other MCs, Trotter would ask Thompson to reproduce the beats from certain sample-based rap songs.[121]

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[120] Schloss, *Making Beats,* 69.

[121] Questlove specifically mentions three: Audio Two's "Top Billin," Busy Bee's "Suicide," and Big Daddy Kane's "Wrath of Kane." See Questlove, *Mo' Meta Blues*, 69.

Thompson would run downstairs to where the school drum kit was kept, bang out the beat while recording on his sampling keyboard, and run back upstairs with the keyboard to play a loop of the sample. Thompson was savvy and knowledgeable enough to recall the different drum beats, and skillful enough to imitate them. A few years later, when The Roots coalesced and began recording, such imitation informed their approach.

Because sampled beats defined the musical market into which The Roots sought to make headway, they influenced the band's aesthetic choices. On their first album, 1993's *Organix*, The Roots played arrangements that imitated beats made with digital sampling, sometimes directly copying their parts from popular breakbeats. Rather than re-perform breaks verbatim, or copy whole beats as assembled by hip hop producers, The Roots signified on classic breaks by deconstructing them into their component parts and recombining them. For example, on the track "Common Dust," guitar and drums each play loops made up of interpolations of famous breaks. Questlove's drum part is essentially a version of the drums from the "Blind Alley" break.[122] See Figure 6.

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[122] Famously sampled in productions for Big Daddy Kane ("Ain't No Half-Steppin'," from 1988's *Long Live the Kane*) and A Tribe Called Quest ("Scenario," from 1991's *The Low End Theory*), The Emotions' "Blind Alley" can be found on their album *Untouched* (Volt VOS-6015, 1972). With regard to their early use of the Blind Alley break, Questlove said in a 2013 interview, "when I was first drumming in The Roots, every song was based on [plays the Blind Alley break]. Tariq could rhyme over that for days." Red Bull Music, "An Intimate Lecture," 29:20.

The Emotions: Blind Alley drums, 0:00-0:09

The Roots: Questlove's drums on Common Dust, 0:55-1:06

Figure 6. Drum break from The Emotions' "Blind Alley" (1972), and Questlove's use of it as the basis for The Roots' "Common Dust."

The other instrumentalists assemble a new beat from pre-existent musical materials in much the same way that a sample-based producer would. For example, starting at 0:33 session guitarist Chuck Treece plays an interpolation of the guitar part from James Brown's "Give It Up Or Turnit A Loose" (1969), but with a difference: he shortens it. The original guitar part is two measures long, but The Roots' guitarist loops only the first measure, with its distinguishing minor-third inflection at the end. See Figure 7.

James Brown: Guitar on "Give It Up Or Turnit A Loose" (1969 studio recording), 0:02-0:06

a)

The Roots: Guitar on "Common Dust," 0:33-0:38 and throughout

b)

Figure 7a and 7b. Guitar parts on James Brown's "Give It Up Or Turnit A Loose" (1969 studio recording) and The Roots' "Common Dust" (1993) (transposed to the key of D, to match Brown's).

Notice that Treece adds a passing note (C#) on the third beat. This alteration imitates a 1970 live version of "Give It Up Or Turnit A Loose" in which guitarist Catfish Collins introduces the tune with four repetitions of the guitar part exactly as Treece plays it (Figure 7b), then changes to the guitar part in Figure 7a for the remainder of the song. We could say, then, that Treece's part interpolates the intro to this particular live version of "Give It Up Or Turnit Loose," creating a longer loop out of the part which only lasted four measures in James Brown's recording.[123]

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[123] James Brown, "Give It Up Or Turnit A Loose," *Roots of Hip Hop (Music Guide Vol. 2)*, Mojo Magazine MOJO 0903 01, 2003. I am unsure which original pressing(s) of this recording Treece and The Roots may have been familiar with, but the song is an essential part of what Schloss calls "the B-boy canon," records used by early hip hop DJs and dancers, which have been "canonized" among those who value breakbeats (DJs and dancers), and whose popularity persists to the present day. Kool Herc testifies to the importance of the live version of this particular song to his early DJ sets at 1520 Sedgwick in the Bronx, specifically mentioning the "clap your hands, stomp your feet" break. Use of material from such a canonical breakbeat may have been a gesture by The Roots to connect themselves to earlier generations of hip hop practitioners. See Joseph Glenn Schloss, *Foundation: B-boys, B-girls, and Hip Hop Culture in New York* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009). See also the Channel Four documentary "The Hip Hop Years": Firehouse SoundLabs, "The Hip Hop Years part 1," YouTube (1/6/2011), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LhrSlOa2bsA, 5:20.

Looping a single measure (as both Thompson and Treece have done here) is a typical device in sample-based productions of this time, but The Roots approach sets them apart by their ability to isolate specific instruments which were accompanied by other instruments in original recordings. In other words, sampling technology is limited in its ability to pick and choose which parts of a recording to take, and is largely unable to separate simultaneous sounds without a trace. In "Blind Alley," for example, the drum part that Questlove used occurs accompanied by keyboard, guitar, and bass, all of which would necessarily be included if recorded with a sampler. Using live instrumentation to reproduce a song's constituent parts means The Roots can sonically treat those isolated parts in ways that musicians who use samplers cannot, for example by adding compression, reverb or equalization.[124]

In tracks like "Common Dust," The Roots' combination of distinct parts from multiple recordings imitated the work of sample-based producers. According to Amanda Sewell, "Most tracks only combine two or three samples, but some groups such as Public Enemy, De La Soul, and the Beastie Boys often produce individual tracks that contain at least five and as many as fifteen different samples."[125] Though Sewell observes that most sample-based productions combine fragments from two or three songs, this is really a baseline number, since many songs from the era of sample-based hegemony combine drums from several songs just to make the drum part, and add multiple textural and

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[124] Similarly, Justin Williams has noted in his study of Dr. Dre's productions for automotive listening that such studio re-recording of constituent parts of records has the additional advantage of enabling a producer to equalize the individual parts of a beat precisely, tailoring them for high-fidelity automotive audio systems. See Williams, *Rhymin' and Stealin',* 82-87.

[125] Amanda Sewell, "A Typology of Sampling in Hip-Hop," Ph.D. dissertation, Indiana University (2013), 58.

melodic samples on top of this. A producer's creativity is evaluated by his or her ability to combine samples in ways that are pleasing.[126]

HISTORICAL AUTHENTICITY

While use of found sound was a matter of course in sample-based production, The Roots intentionally chose that aesthetic from various options available to them. By repurposing constituent parts of old breaks in their arrangements, The Roots changed how breaks were deployed, creating a new version of the break-centered approach conventional in hip hop musical production. By using their instruments to re-purpose specific breakbeats first used by DJs and producers, Thompson and The Roots claim a connection to hip hop tradition. Choosing breakbeats that have previously been used by hip hop DJs and producers allows hip hop musicians to engage with an established web of references to other work, demonstrating familiarity with hip hop traditions and history. Such displays of intracultural expertise are common among hip hop musicians and b-boys as a way to demonstrate what Justin Williams calls "historical authenticity."[127] The Roots seem to have recognized this method as a tool available to them in their play for legitimacy.

In addition to recreating instrumental parts from known breaks, The Roots claimed historical authenticity in their early work in two prominent ways: their lyrics, and their name. In his study of b-boys and b-girls in New York City, Schloss observes that,

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[126] Schloss notes that the ability to achieve musical results by combining samples from multiple sources is directly related to compliance with the sample-based producers' putative code of ethics. He writes, "the value of intellectual effort can be seen in producers' reluctance to indulge [in] such creative shortcuts as sampling records that are already great and sampling more than one part of a particular record." See Schloss, *Making Beats*, 131.

[127] Williams, *Rhymin' and Stealin',* 22. With regard to b-boying, see Schloss, *Foundation*, 17-39.

"all aspects of hip-hop, for example, push their practitioners to choose a performing name that expresses significant aspects of their identity. Striving to live up to that name represents a commitment to live up to the claims that they make about themselves, as well as the expectations of their peers."[128] Schloss's argument suggests that by naming themselves The Roots, the group makes certain claims about themselves. In his autobiography, Questlove confirms that this was the subject of substantial consideration for the group, who used it as an opportunity to draw attention to their claims to historical authenticity. Names, Questlove writes, "are an attempt to make sense of something that's often so chaotic and dynamic that it's hard to capture, let alone label… Most importantly, [the name The Roots] created the impression that we were musical conservators, that we respected the past and kept a stubborn hold on the funk and soul that had come before us."[129] Questlove thus equates musical "conservatism" in hip hop to the use of funk and soul – not just the styles themselves, but also the use of constituent parts of recordings "that had come before," as in sample-based music. However, sample-based music was not the only (nor the earliest) method for hip hop musical production, and The Roots knew it. Though often overlooked, hip hop's first recordings used live bands to create their music, including the Sugarhill Records house band, and the Enjoy Records house band, led by the drummer "Pumpkin." In naming themselves, then, The Roots invoked a past on which sample-based hip hop drew: a past in which live bands had played an underappreciated part.

The Roots reiterated their claim to an authenticity rooted in early hip hop practices in their lyrics as well. Black Thought and other Roots MCs claimed historical

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[128] Schloss, *Foundation*, 92.

[129] Questlove, *Mo' Meta Blues,* 95.

authenticity by using lyrics to associate themselves with early hip hop practices like graffiti and DJing. On "The Lesson, Pt. 1," from The Roots' 1995 album *Do You Want More?!!!??!* Black Thought raps, "I wrote graffiti as a juvenile," invoking the visual art element of hip hop culture, and painting himself as a participant in multiple hip hop practices. Roots MC Dice Raw picks up the subject of graffiti in the second verse, rapping "When I'm taggin my name, upon the train I got so much pride." In the same song, Black Thought refers to hip hop's pre-sampling history with the rhyme "surely real to the core, old school like eighty-four." On the other side of the album, on the track "Datskat," Black Thought gives praise to a prominent, old school Bronx DJ, rapping "I knowledge butter words to propa Afrika Bambaataa." With these lyrics and many more, Roots MCs attempted to associate themselves with old school hip hop practices and practitioners during the years of their emergence into the commercial marketplace. This is one way The Roots sought to mitigate the liability of their sonic differences, claiming a spot in a larger hip hop community and history.

As their career progressed, The Roots continued to employ this strategy. On their 1999 album *Things Fall Apart,* the track "Double Trouble" is a partial recreation of the vocal duet performed by the group Double Trouble in the 1982 film *Wild Style*, a hip hop classic. In The Roots' case, MCs Black Thought and Mos Def perform a version of the verse from the film, then add to it with their original verses. The Roots recorded their interpolation of the lyrics from "Double Trouble" over newly composed music, with the result that their performance gave the familiar lyrics a completely original sonic character. In keeping with the old school homage, Mos Def performs stuttering imitations of a DJ's manipulation of snippets from records, quoting Afrika Bambaataa, Run-

D.M.C., Kurtis Blow, and breakbeat records by the likes of Marvin Gaye and James

Brown. Such historically-aware borrowing allowed The Roots to associate themselves

with hip hop history, and stake their claim to a place within it.

Similarly, The Roots occasionally performed interpolations of entire grooves from

famous recordings, altering arrangement details and performance characteristics to create a

new emotional context. To clarify, I'm referring here to grooves played by an entire band on a

previous record, not individual parts from several records juxtaposed in a single beat, as is the

case with "Common Dust." This is a practice that had an analogue in sample-based production

of the time as well: while some sample-based producers had been hiding their sample sources

to avoid licensing costs and clearance hassles, others had been including recognizable samples.

For example, on Nas's "It Ain't Hard to Tell," from his 1994 debut album *Illmatic*, producer

Large Professor made little attempt to disguise his sample of Michael Jackson's "Human

Nature." The iconic sixteenth note synthesizer melody is intact, as is the bassline, which is

given extra strength through studio techniques. This brings the sampling *process* to the

forefront of the listening experience: only through digital sampling can one hear a Michael

Jackson song conspicuously repurposed as a beat for Nas to rap over.[130] Like Large Professor

and other producers, The Roots occasionally inserted recognizable interpolations of famous

songs into their live repertoire. One example is "The Notic" from their 1999 album *The Roots*

Come Alive. This song uses substantial material from Earth Wind & Fire's "Shining Star" for

the keyboard part, and even includes the lyric and melody of the chorus vocals. As Schloss

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[130] An expert DJ using two turntables can perform a similar feat as well. This is known as "back cueing," or "extending the break." While Puffy was noted (and widely criticized) for his conspicuous samples, a crucial difference with Large Professor's use of "Human Nature" is his transformative treatment of the source material through chopping, and reordering segments to form new melodies. While Puffy's samples (which I will describe in greater detail in chapter three) were also recognizable and sonically augmented, his use of long segments that were little-changed was deemed lacking in creativity by hip hop musicians and critics.

points out, the cachet in using a recognizable beat isn't in the source, but in its use. He writes, "flipping a beat, then, isn't about meaning per se; it is about the practitioner's skill in recasting meaning… value derives less from the sampled material or the structure that is imposed on it by the producer than on the process that links the two."[131] The Roots replayed this musical material in much the same way as a producer would have chopped the original song to make a loop, but repurposed with a dreamy, flowing character that suited the new lyrics. Audience members (and later, CD listeners) heard an Earth Wind & Fire classic conspicuously flipped as a Roots beat. Such musical borrowing was clearly connotative of digital sampling, and made certain Roots songs similar to sampled beats made with recognizable sources.

Like DJs with turntables and beat makers with samplers before them, The Roots used their more traditional instrumental technology in ways that mimic black oral traditions. Tricia Rose first explained hip hop producers' use of samplers in this way, drawing on Walter Ong's concept of "post-literate orality" to explore the technological expression of black oral traditions including versioning, signifying and repetition. According to Rose, "in rap, oral logic informs its technological practices. Redefining the constitution of narrative originality, composition, and collective memory, rap artists challenge institutional apparatuses that define property, technological innovation, and authorship."[132] The lens of post-literate orality allows us to see that musicians' uses of technology expressed black cultural priorities through revision and recombination of previous music during every stage of hip hop music's aesthetic and technological development. In other words, hip hop musicians using turntables, drum machines, and samplers took aesthetic values from black oral traditions, such as versioning and

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[131] Schloss, *Making Beats*, 163.

[132] Rose, *Black Noise*, 85.

signifying, and extended them to hip hop music. In so doing, they developed what Joseph

Schloss calls "a putative hip hop aesthetic," rooted in reuse and borrowing.[133] One way

that The Roots were able to stake a claim as legitimate hip hop musicians was to create

music that borrowed from previous music, engaging with orally-rooted traditions of

versioning. Like sampling producers before them, when the Roots used instruments to re-

version and recombine earlier music, they further demonstrated that the gravitational pull

of this aspect of the hip hop aesthetic was so strong that it defined the terms of

participation, whatever the technology.

IMITATING THE TIMBRE OF SAMPLE-BASED HIP HOP

Just as their arrangements had approximated hip hop producers' compositional

use of breaks, The Roots also sought to make their recordings sound timbrally similar to

sample-based hip hop. Though copying their parts from records was relatively simple,

reproducing the timbre of vinyl recordings proved more difficult. Referring to the track

"Datskat," from The Roots' second album, 1995's *Do You Want More?!!!??!*, Thompson

said "with the music there, I was trying to create the "Easiest Way to Fall" [by Freda

Payne] break."[134] He goes on to say, "I still wish we could have made it sound dirtier,

though." Here Thompson is referring to the actual timbres The Roots got from their

instruments, and the group's inability to satisfactorily imitate the timbres on vinyl records

as used in sample-based productions. Getting the *sound* just right would prove to be a

major undertaking for the group in its first decade.

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[133] Schloss, *Making Beats*, 69.

[134] Brian Coleman, *Check the Technique: Liner Notes for Hip-Hop Junkies* (New York: Villard Books, 2007), 387. Thompson also identifies one sample-based hip hop track that used this break: JVC Force's "Strong Island."

Richard Nichols, The Roots' manager, described what they were up against: "We were at a disadvantage sonically because we didn't sample. When old drums were recorded, they had tons of compression on them, so when you sample them without other instruments [as hip hop producers did] they sound amazingly *loud*."[135] Tricia Rose echoes the importance of particular drum sounds to rap, writing, "rap's sample-heavy sound is digitally reproduced but cannot be digitally created. In other words, the sound of a James Brown or Parliament drum kick or bass line and the equipment that processed it then, as well as the equipment that processes it now, are all central to the way a rap [record] feels; central to rap's sonic force."[136] Schloss's informants confirm the importance of certain drum timbres to sounding authentically hip hop. Schloss writes, "There is a sense of almost epicurean passion when Mr. Supreme describes a good drum sample: 'To me, personally, I just love to hear a cracking snare, you know? A sharp, punchy, cracking snare.'"[137] As Schloss, Rose, and Nichols' descriptions indicate, the timbres of drums in sample-based music were a crucial aspect of a hip hop musical aesthetic in the early 1990s.

Sample based albums demonstrate a broad sonic variety across albums and within individual songs. This timbral variety results from the tremendous diversity of source materials a producer chooses. A single track may use a kick drum sound from one record, a snare from another, and a keyboard from a third, and might use several of each, whether layered on top of

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[135] Coleman, *Check the Technique*, 379-380 (emphasis in original). 'Manager' really doesn't do justice to Nichols' involvement in the group – he served as their road manager, recording and mixing engineer, career planner, agent, producer and more, from the group's inception until his untimely death in July 2015. Okayplayer.com (The Roots' online home) called him "the guiding spirit behind the group." He was a major voice in Questlove's 2013 autobiography as well.

[136] Rose, *Black Noise*, 78.

[137] Schloss, *Making Beats,* 144-145.

one another, or used for dynamic variety. What's more, producers are likely to choose different drums for every individual track on a record, demonstrating mastery of source material by making beats using many different records. By contrast, most albums produced with instruments tend to display more timbral consistency, since musicians often use the same or similar equipment and recording setups from song to song. As Joseph Schloss observes, "Sample-based producers have many options available to express their aesthetic preferences that are not open to musicians who use live instruments. These include the ability to juxtapose the ambient qualities of different recording environments."[138] Combining the sounds of various recording environments (studios) is a sonic aspect of sample-based production that has received little scholarly attention, but one that The Roots recognized. In an effort to mimic the sonic qualities and timbral variety found on sample-based records, The Roots undertook extensive experiments with recording techniques and mixing processes. They sought the expertise of seasoned recording engineer Bob Power with whom they tried out microphone placements, and use of studio effects like compression, EQ, and reverb. By the mid-1990s Power was in demand as a hip hop engineer, having worked with A Tribe Called Quest, De La Soul and others.[139] He engineered nearly all the tracks on *Illadelph Halflife.* The collaboration yielded fruit: the album contained a broad timbral variety, including drum sounds reminiscent of the warm, compressed drums of classic breakbeat records. The three examples that follow

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[138] Schloss, *Making Beats*, 150-151. Similarly, Olly Wilson has observed the importance of a "heterogeneous sound ideal" to many styles of African and African American music, by which he means placing aesthetic value on a variety of sounds which are differentiated by their contrasting timbres. Wilson points out that this heterogeneity exists in Ewe drumming ensembles, as well as the music of James Brown. See Wilson, "The Significance of the Relationship," 15. Brown's records are among the most sampled in hip hop, and the timbres of the instruments (especially drums) on them has substantially influenced hip hop aesthetics.

[139] Power even got shout-outs from A Tribe Called Quest in multiple songs, including "Verses From the Abstract," from *The Low End Theory*, and "8 Million Stories" and "The Chase, Part 2" from 1993's *Midnight Marauders*.

serve to illustrate this broad timbral variety: they are consecutive tracks on the album and each displays distinct approaches to kick and snare drum sounds.

First, the kick drum sound on "Push Up Ya Lighter" is pitched and resonant, and we can hear the natural, acoustic sound of the beater striking the drum head clearly. It has an added sub-bass component (fullness in the low-frequency spectrum), probably accomplished by triggering another kick like that of the Roland 808 drum machine. At 2'10" the acoustic kick cuts out and only the sub-bass component is left. The snare drum sounds like it was played firmly with a brush, and has noticeable reverb, making it sound further away than the kick and hi-hats. The hi-hats move constantly left and right across the stereo field, distinguishing them from the sonic space of the kick or snare, but putting them in the same territory as the ever-present bubbling sounds and intermittent hissing noise, which do likewise. Rather than mixing the drum kit to achieve sonic unity, then, individual drum sounds display distinct sonic approaches.

By contrast, on "? vs. Scratch" the entire drum kit sounds acoustic and natural. The microphone placement and equalization privilege the inherent resonance of the kick drum. The sound of the beater is de-emphasized, perhaps by microphone placement out front of the drum, or maybe through the use of a softer (or padded) beater. The whole kit displays the same medium-dry reverb, unifying the presentation. The snare and hi-hats seem to be mic'ed at the same distance, as if recorded together in a modestly sized room.

Finally, on "What They Do" the kick drum sound is full-bodied and includes the percussive "thup" of the beater striking the drum, indicating a close microphone placement. Its high-frequencies (probably from the beater) are slightly exaggerated and stretched across time. Bob Power might have achieved this by sending the kick drum

signal through a high pass filter (which allows only high frequencies through) and then sending that to an echo or reverb effect with a short duration. Another possibility is that the kick is combined with a second sound, either through Questlove's performance triggering an additional sample (as in "Push Up Ya Lighter" above), or by creating a composite sample which Questlove then uses in the creation of a programmed drum part. By contrast, the snare drum sound is crisp and paper-thin, occupying a very limited band of frequencies. It lacks the natural resonance of the drum's head, often found in the lower midrange but probably EQ'd out somewhere in the studio process. The snare's heavy reverb is not expressed in the kick or hi-hats, implying different recording environments, much like a beat constructed with sampled drums from various source records. The sharp, percussive "click" of each snare note indicates a rim shot, a technique whereby the drummer simultaneously hits both the rim and the head of the drum with his stick. Playing rim shots consistently is difficult even for professional drummers, since two parts of the stick must land on the drum at exactly the same time, and slight variations in attack produce noticeable differences in timbre and balance. However, the snare sound in "What They Do" is perfectly consistent throughout the song. While Questlove is an excellent drummer and particularly adept at playing in styles such as this, the consistency suggests another possible explanation: the snare is a triggered (programmed) sample. The album liner notes are intentionally vague on this point: Questlove is credited with "percussive manipulations," which could indicate use of a sampler or a drum kit, or both. Samples from vinyl are used elsewhere in the beat as well: the string/wind pads used on the intro and choruses are clearly a sample of Barry White's "Your Love – So Good I Can Taste It" from his 1976 album *Is This Whatcha Wont?* The Roots' use of samplers on "What

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They Do" (and several other songs on *Illadelph Halflife*) is important because it illustrates their strategy of using sampling technology as part of their quest to legitimize their instrument-based approach to hip hop. Their approach was unique in that it recognized the importance of the sound of sampler use, even if the sampled material was their own studio performance, rather than a vintage record. In other words, Questlove's "percussive manipulations" indicated that The Roots were exploring new territory with sampling, utilizing sounds of their own (recent) making while taking advantage of the sound of the "cut" that is created by using samplers.

While they had instrumentally imitated sampling styles in the ways I have described, they had not utilized samplers themselves on previous albums. In this case, sampled snare drum (from an unknown source, possibly one case of Questlove sampling himself) and strings/winds from a vinyl record combine with studio performances of bass, guitar, keyboards, and vocals to make a beat that is a hybrid. While the beat is primarily constituted with instrumental performances, the cut in the strings/winds sample clearly marks it as sample-based. But unlike Schloss's imperative that the instruments capitulate to the aesthetic of the samples, in "What They Do," samples and instruments are woven together to create a sound in which neither achieves primacy.

On these three songs and across *Illadelph Halflife,* The Roots demonstrated their increasing mastery of the sonic characteristics of sample-based hip hop through their recording and EQing techniques, and inclusion of samples from their own studio performances and vinyl. The audible combination of several different recording environments here and on sample-based records is an aesthetic that foregrounds a diversity of sonic spaces within individual beats and across entire albums. Whereas much

popular music uses post-production techniques designed to unify disparate sounds, such as adding buss compression or reverb to multiple isolated tracks, hip hop music privileges contrast by making multiple interior recording environments audible together. One possible reading of this aspect of the hip hop musical aesthetic is that sounding authentic in hip hop derives not from one single space or time, but from many. Hip hop aesthetics, then, complicate common notions of authenticity in popular music: rather than legitimacy deriving from one interior space where a band of musicians creates a recording, it derives from many simultaneously. The Roots' endeavors illuminate the multiplicity of approaches necessary to sound hip hop, an aesthetic which derives from DJs and sample-based producers' combining disparate records in ways that sound good to them.

SOUNDS LIKE VINYL

Sounds of a DJ's manipulation of vinyl recordings have been idiomatic to hip hop musical performance since the 1970s, when DJs looped breakbeats using two turntables and created new techniques, such as scratching, that allowed them to transform turntables into musical instruments.[140] Beginning in the early 1980s, hip hop recordings added the sound of a DJ's record scratching to beats crafted with drum machines or, a few years later, sampling, quickly making the sound of vinyl scratching synonymous with the genre. An early example is Run-D.M.C.'s "Sucker M.C.'s," released in 1983. On that recording, DJ Jam Master Jay scratches rhythmically over a programmed drum beat. The approach was groundbreaking, marrying an idiomatically hip hop musical gesture, scratching, with an innovative approach to beat making, programming drums on the Oberheim DMX drum machine.

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[140] For a description of seminal hip hop DJ history and practices, see Mark Katz, *Groove Music: The Art and Culture of the Hip-Hop DJ* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 43-69.

The Roots made a similar gesture, adding record scratching sounds to their instrumentally produced beats, first with vocalists and later with an actual DJ. The Roots had made their reputation as a premier live act by performing using only instruments and vocals. Questlove recalls, "we were the masters of live sonics, so we never had a DJ. We had to work hard to perfect our live sound."[141] This was, no doubt, one major liability for The Roots in their quest to signify as hip hop: DJ/MC ensembles comprised the first instrumentation in hip hop music of the 1970s, and the arrangement continued with the introduction of samplers.[142] In the era of sample-based hegemony, sounds of a DJ's manipulation of vinyl were idiomatic to hip hop, and their introduction to beats made by other means had become widespread (beginning with Run-D.M.C.'s "Sucker M.C.'s" and continuing with scratches added to sample-based tracks. Beginning in 1996, The Roots recorded and toured with "vocal percussionist" Kyle "Scratch" Jones, who vocally reproduced sounds connotative of a hip hop DJ, including imitations of a DJ's stopping and starting of recorded vocal phrases, and rhythmic scratching.[143] Scratch added a DJ's sounds, but without the DJ's tools, and his performances brought The Roots' sound much more in line with that of authentic hip hop of the 1990s.

We can read Scratch's imitation of a hip hop DJ as one case of the mutual influence of technology and orality in hip hop. Recall Tricia Rose's use of "post-literate

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[141] Questlove, *Mo' Meta Blues*, 140.

[142] Wayne Marshall has made a similar observation. He writes, "whereas a group such as Gang Starr automatically gains credibility by virtue of being a DJ/MC duo (i.e., a classic hip-hop combo), the Roots' lack of a DJ, and the sounds associated with DJ practice and vinyl sources, represents an inherent obstacle to their authenticity." See Wayne Marshall, "Giving Up Hip-Hop's Firstborn: A Quest for the Real after the Death of Sampling," *Callaloo* 29, no. 3 (Summer 2006), 871.

[143] Scratch was preceded in The Roots by another vocal sound effects specialist, Rahzel "The Godfather of Noize," who recorded on 1995's *Do You Want More?!!!??!* Rahzel's performances were similar to Scratch's in that he vocally imitated instrumental technology (including bass, drums, horns, and various sound effects), but they were not as explicitly evocative of hip hop DJing practices.

orality" to explain the way African-American oral practices guided hip hop musicians'
use of technology. Like sample-based producers, hip hop DJs who perform live proceed
from a similar set of aesthetic priorities when, for example, they deconstruct and loop
certain parts of a previous recording.[144] As Rose says, "In the age of mechanical
reproduction, these cultural formulas and themes are in the form of recorded sound,
reshuffled, looped, and recontextualized."[145] Because DJs and producers shuffle and
recontextualized cultural themes (in the form of known recordings), Rose argues, their
work extends the legacy of African oral traditions. In the case of vocal percussion like
The Roots employed, however, we might say that the influence between orality and
technology runs in the opposite direction, as DJs' uses of turntable technology has
defined the terms of vocal percussion, which is quite literally an oral practice.

Scratch's style derives from the practice known as beatboxing, hip hop's oldest
form of vocal percussion. In beatboxing, a vocalist produces sounds which mimic drums
for an MC to rap over, imitating a DJ's manipulation of vinyl. An early recorded example
is Doug E. Fresh with Slick Rick on "La-Di-Da-Di," released on Reality Records in
1985, on which the backing music for Rick's rapping is produced exclusively by Doug E.
Fresh's beatboxing. Fresh's vocal performance imitates a rock or funk drum beat, like
that a DJ might construct by looping breakbeat records. At one point he approximates
percussive record scratching, explicitly demonstrating the debt his oral practice owes to
hip hop DJs' technological processes. The addition of scratching in Fresh's performance
makes clear that he is imitating a performer not on a drum kit, but on turntables. Like

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[144] Since sampling's beginnings in hip hop, many sample-based producers have been DJs as well, since there is substantial overlap in the skill sets and technological resources required for both.

[145] Rose, *Black Noise*, 88.

beatboxing, Scratch's vocalizations constitute an oral practice that is expressly imitative of hip hop technological practices. In fact, The Roots go further than this to make explicit the two-way connection between technology and orality: in the hidden track attached to "Return To Innocence Lost," on *Things Fall Apart* (1999), Questlove and Scratch perform a sort of dialogue in which Questlove awakens a sleeping Scratch to ask his advice. Scratch "speaks" only in DJ sounds. In their exchange, Questlove asks Scratch's advice, and interprets his responses. This interaction between a hip hop practitioner and the technology of hip hop as voiced by Scratch suggests the mutual influence between technology, hip hop practitioners, and black expressive traditions.

Though in live settings they continued to use instruments and vocals only, The Roots' 1999 album *Things Fall Apart* included a DJ's performance of actual vinyl scratching: the song "The Next Movement" featured fellow Philadelphian DJ Jazzy Jeff on turntables.[146] Jeff's technique is highly rhythmic and includes a manipulated vocal sound, much like Scratch's imitations. Though DJ practices like Jeff's preceded and constituted the basis for Scratch's style, it is notable that The Roots used them only *after* using vocal percussionists like Scratch. As with their use of sampled drum sounds only after mastering live reproduction of breakbeats, The Roots privileged live, acoustic techniques before the use of typical electronic hip hop technologies. Whether performed by Scratch or an in-studio DJ, inclusion of vinyl sounds helped sonically align The Roots' music with foundational hip hop musical practices.

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[146] The *Things Fall Apart* CD liner notes claim this was the first time The Roots had used a DJ. The Roots did not include a DJ on their 1999 European tour, which was recorded for release as *The Roots Come Alive*, also released in 1999. Instead, the version of "The Next Movement" on that recording includes vocal percussion by Scratch.

TO BLING OR NOT TO BLING?

In addition to being one of the earliest sites for The Roots use of actual sampling

of vinyl, "What They Do" is also their most famous music video. The video illustrates the

resistance to bling rap (which Adam Krims calls 'Big Willy style') that characterizes

other Soulquarians projects as well.[147] In the video, we see The Roots dropped off in a

large BMW, hanging out at a mansion. Scantily clad women gyrate nearby while

everyone in attendance pours from seemingly endless bottles of expensive champagne.

Unlike Krims' characterization of Big Willy style videos, however, the Roots are dressed

in street fashions rather than expensive finery, and their ruse is intentionally paper thin,

with shots of folding tables covered with supplies for the video (champagne bottles and

Bounty paper towels), and a dancer who appears to injure herself from too much booty

shaking, and needs assistance to walk out of the shot. By spoofing videos like those Hype

Williams had directed for Puff Daddy and Biggie Smalls, The Roots create a playful

critique of the fakery that Soulquarians artists associated with bling rap. According to

Questlove, "[director] Charles Stone wanted to throw a thumb at the stuff [director] Hype

Williams was doing, all those rap-video clichés that were prevalent at that time."[148]

Questlove adds that the glitz and glamour in "What They Do" was "done satirically." If

Hype Williams' videos were meant to portray rap artists as rich and powerful, here was

partying and pleasure that was tangibly more mundane, complete with paper towels and

back injuries.

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[147] Krims, *Rap Music*, 64-65. Musically speaking, the track displays the standardized tuning that in Krims's estimation marks the knowledge rap subgenre, as opposed to the dissonant multiplicity of tunings that characterizes gangsta rap, which Krims calls "the hip hop sublime." This keeps the music in line with other Big Willy productions, but The Roots' emphasis on live instrumentation sets the song apart from most hip hop of the time.

[148] Questlove, *Mo' Meta Blues,* 146.

Questlove said of the "What They Do" video, "We wanted to make a humorous video showing that hip hop music was a career, that it was hard work."[149] Questlove's quote illustrates that The Roots sought to intervene in the popular perception that hip hop artists lived a life of ease. Like the video for D'Angelo's "Untitled (How Does It Feel)," the video for "What They Do" sought to depict its subjects in an unusually revealing light, creating a certain tension by exposing that which normally existed out of view in contemporary music videos, and thereby resisting popular televisual portrayals of ease.

BALANCING CLAIMS TO LYRICAL PROWESS WITH MUSICAL INCONSPICUOUSNESS

In the context of 1990s hip hop, The Roots provided many ways for consumers and critics to view them as real. A crucial component in this respect was their lyrics. Their 1996 album *Illadelph Halflife*, which also provided the site for the first Soulquarians collaborations, proved to be something of a pivot point in this regard, as several songs saw The Roots change their lyrical approach from the party atmosphere and references to old school hip hop that characterized *Do You Want More?!!!??!* to darker, more immediate depictions of urban life. The Roots handled these depictions with a characteristic clarity, eschewing the gratuitous theatricality of portrayals of violence that characterized much of the most popular rap of the early and mid-1990s.

For example, the track "Panic!!!!!" is an unsparing depiction of an innocent youth gunned down in the street. Similarly, "It Just Don't Stop" portrays the grim realities of

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[149] Questlove, *Mo' Meta Blues*, 146.

American urban living without the gross exaggeration characteristic of so-called gangsta rap. He raps,

> This world is filled with homicides and rape
> all the crimes and hate just ain't the size and shape
> you can walk down the block and get slumped or knocked

Black Thought also uses violent imagery to express his concern for rap authenticity, such as in "Respond-React," in which he sends a "message to the fake nigga flashing" who will "get dropped and closed like a caption." Likewise, in "Section," Black Thought is "nonchalant from afar," but he will "strike to cut the fake rap star jugular." The aggressiveness of such images of physical violence are in step with contemporary hip hop, but with a difference: they are deployed for ideological ends, intended to police hip hop practitioners themselves in an effort to encourage musical skill, and discourage fakery.

In addition, Black Thought and other MCs with The Roots deepened their investment in what journalist Kelefa Sanneh calls "rapping about rapping," foregrounding yet another lyrical connection to hip hop styles of an earlier era, and further bolstering their claim to historical authenticity. In an essay looking back at lyrical and musical trends in hip hop, Sanneh argues that, during the 1990s, rappers became less concerned with touting their skills on the microphone, and more concerned with portraying themselves as hustlers or businessmen.[150] For example, Jay-Z began his 1996 debut album *Reasonable Doubt* with the song, "Can't Knock the Hustle," on which he raps "I got extensive hoes with expensive clothes / And I sip fine wines and spit vintage flows." Five years later, Jay-Z famously rapped, "I thought I told you characters, I'm not

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[150] Sanneh, "Rapping About Rapping."

a rapper," rejecting the connection to verbal battling that comes with that title.[151] While Jay-Z's skills are beyond reproach – it is not unusual to see him on lists of "Top 5" greatest rappers of all time, for example – his lyrics draw attention to his multi-faceted business interests, which have included fashion, professional sports teams, fine art, and real estate. By 2001, his skill at rapping could be taken for granted, unlike numerous contemporary rappers, who attained success by joining the tide of acts whose lyrics were more concerned with aspects of "dominator culture" than attention to rapping itself.

By contrast, Black Thought claims membership in a tradition of MCs for whom a substantial amount of their subject matter includes pride in one's verbal skill. Unlike their contemporaries' movements to downplay rapping about lyrical prowess, on *Illadelph Halflife* Black Thought and other Roots MCs emphasized their verbal skills as central to their identity. For example, in "Respond-React," Black Thought raps,

> Specialize in science and math and, original black man
> Bustin' thoughts that pierce your mental
> The fierce rippin' your sacks and
> Vocal toe to toe impeccable splittin' your back son
> Simple as addition and subtraction
> Black Thought, the infinite relaxed one.

Similarly, on the album's next song, "Section," he raps,

> The lieutenant from the reservoir, serve the spar
> The injurer, predator of a competitor
> I send MCs where the paramedics are.

In these examples Black Thought uses violent imagery to challenge other MCs, claiming his verbal and intellectual superiority. Such competition has characterized hip hop rhyming since at least 1983, when Run-DMC's "Sucka MCs" shifted the standard for hip

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[151] Jay-Z's line comes from "Heart of the City (Ain't No Love)," released on his 2001 album *The Blueprint*, 1:43.

hop rhyming away from rocking a party, and toward rocking an opponent, an attitude shared with early hip hop dance practice (b-boying).

For the music on *Illadelph Halflife*, The Roots took certain steps to increase their conformity with industry standards at this time. In addition to adding actual use of samplers (described above), *Illadelph Halflife* saw The Roots begin to use click tracks in the recording process. A click track is essentially a metronome that the performer hears in his headphones during recording, providing a mechanically steady pulse against which he regulates the tempo of his performance. In a 2013 interview, Questlove recalled the time he began using a click track in recording, following their second album, 1995's *Do You Want More?!!!??!*:

> I didn't use a click track; like, I had too much ego. And they would always say, like, 'Well, why don't you use a click track?' And I was like, 'Nah, nah, I don't wanna do no click track.' And so a lot of our records would fluctuate. So it might be a... [plays beat that slows down and then speeds up] You know, I might get excited in the studio and start speeding up. But that proved to be nightmarish to DJs. And so when we'd get these feedback reports from DJs, a lot of them would just say, like, 'I can't blend any of the music because the beat fluctuates.' So suddenly I became the bad guy in The Roots.[152]

Questlove's comment illustrates the importance of a steady pulse to getting hip hop music played by DJs performing for crowds of dancers. Though their first two albums had plenty of great songs, personality, and feeling, Questlove felt compelled to make his drumming, as he goes on to describe it, "cold," in order to appeal to DJs. The term "cold" implies a lack of dynamism, a reduction of energy, an expressiveness that turns inward rather than outward. Like the related adjective "cool," it describes a certain imperturbability. Questlove's goal to make his drumming cold was directed at gaining

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[152] Red Bull Music,"An Intimate Lecture," 29:40.

access to a crucial forum where hip hop music was marketed to consumers: the dance floor.[153]

Such a capitulation to industry standards illustrates the tension in The Roots' work between wanting to act as musical innovators and striving to realize popular appeal. However, even as they relented in this way, The Roots stood out from contemporary hip hop not only by their embrace of instruments and their approaches to lyrics, but by the perceptible balance between the two as well. As Sanneh observes "This lyrical evolution [away from rapping about lyrical skills] is closely intertwined with the musical development of hip hop… If P. Diddy could breezily tell listeners, 'Don't worry if I write rhymes,' it was because he figured they cared more about beats and choruses, in any case."[154] Here Sanneh suggests that the perceived importance (to listeners) of the music that accompanied rapping increased as rappers increasingly downplayed the importance of rapping itself in their lyrics, as if the two were balanced against each other on scales. One musical way to understand The Roots' capitulation to mechanical timekeeping is as an effort to make their music less conspicuous, less dynamic, less distinct within the market. The same could be said about their efforts to EQ drums from track to track as if they were sampled from various sources, rather than performed live by the same drummer. Therefore, at the same time that Puffy and his Bad Boy Records companions shifted importance away from lyrics onto music, The Roots de-emphasized some of the

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[153] Questlove explained that this went against his earlier inclination to accept minor variations in tempos, and that he took this approach to appease other members of the band, who sought greater commercial exposure. It is important that this capitulation to strictly mechanical timekeeping directly preceded his exposure to the rhythms of J Dilla, and work with D'Angelo, both of which reveled in exploring grooves that incorporated rhythmic imprecision. See Questlove, *Mo' Meta Blues*, 153.

[154] Sanneh, "Rapping About Rapping," 230.

distinguishing aspects of their music (by using click tracks and samplers), and placed additional emphasis on lyrics (by rapping about rapping). In doing so, they ran counter to trends in contemporary hip hop while still maintaining qualities that distinguished them within the market, illustrating the tension in their music between innovation and commercial aspirations.

OVERCOMING THE LEGACY OF "RAPPER'S DELIGHT"

So far, I have dealt with the technical dimensions of The Roots approach to playing traditional instruments in ways that make an audible connection to the sound of mid-1990s sample-based hip hop. However, the group's decision to bring traditional instruments back into the spotlight presented challenges that were more than purely aesthetic. In fact, one could say that bands of instrumentalists playing hip hop music were looked down upon in the era of sample-based hegemony, in part due to the stigma associated with so-called "disco rap." In rap's first three recorded years, 1979-1981, nearly all rap records were produced using studio bands, and much of the music was based on disco. Disco was the dominant popular music of the late 1970s, pulling a tremendous variety of artists into its orbit in their attempt to cash in. Hip hop DJs were spinning disco records in addition to funk and rock. As such, disco-style accompaniment was a natural choice for music on rap records, and producers like Sugarhill Records' Sylvia Robinson used disco songs as material for studio arrangements.[155] After the Sugarhill Gang's "Rapper's Delight" met with astounding success by combining rapping with disco-style backing music based on Chic's 1979 dance floor hit "Good Times,"

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[155] For example, several early rap hits interpolated Chic's "Good Times," and Cheryl Lynn's "Got To Be Real," among other songs. See Kajikawa, *Sounding Race*, pp. 42 and 36-37.

other record labels followed suit. Rather than employing DJs to play vinyl records for the

backing music, as was common practice at hip hop events, producers and studio

musicians adapted DJ practices to instrumental arrangements. While these arrangements

utilized an approach derived from DJs' looping of breakbeats, they lacked aspects of

musicality that were central to the hip hop musical aesthetic, including call and response

with an audience, and shortening or lengthening the musical segments that comprised the

loop.[156] Though songs like "Rapper's Delight" and The Funky Four Plus One's "That's

the Joint" made hip hop profitable for record companies, they gave no credit (let alone

monetary compensation) to hip hop DJs for their pioneering innovations. The first

commercialization of hip hop culture was accomplished by the recording industry, and

the product they were selling was a fraught imitation of what was actually played by hip

hop DJs and MCs at dances.[157]

In the early 1980s, disco's popularity rapidly declined, and the genre was derided

as commercial and shallow. Listeners and critics' concerns may have had more to do with

disco's cultural associations than the music itself. As disco had originally been popular

primarily with gay and minority audiences, many listeners' dismissal of disco had a

homophobic and racial dimension. According to sexuality scholar Gillian Frank,

> From it's origins, disco music was associated with cultural difference. At the
> beginning of the 1970s many disco artists were Latinos or African Americans,
> and many were African American women. The audiences for this first wave of

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[156] For example, comparing a bootleg recording of Grandmaster Flash's use of the break from Chic's "Good Times" with the "Rapper's Delight" arrangement of the same material, Loren Kajikawa writes, "Flash's Armory performance exemplifies a dynamism and sense of musical spontaneity absent from Sugar Hill's interpolation" See Kajikawa, *Sounding Race*, 39.

[157] See also Jeff Chang, *Can't Stop, Won't Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2005), 127-134. B-boying was subjected to similar exploitation and misrepresentation as the "breakdancing" fad sought to capitalize on hip hop dance through Hollywood movies and instructional videos.

disco were predominantly urban straight and gay African Americans, straight and gay Latinos, and white gay men dancing in African American and gay night clubs.[158]

Frank also finds that, "an acute antigay prejudice was used to stigmatize disco and in turn instigated the genre's rapid decline even as discophobia reflected and furthered antigay prejudice."[159] Perhaps in response to the association of instruments in hip hop with disco rap, certain members of The Roots espoused similar attitudes toward disco. The Roots' producer and manager Richard Nichols, whose voice Questlove chose to include as a sort of counterpoint in his 2013 autobiography, writes that he felt "disco was cute at first, I guess, but it rolled into this very unthinking and unfelt R&B, and what was beautiful in popular music started to become less and less present."[160] Allegations that disco was unfeeling or mechanical often reflected anxieties about disco's giving a voice to gay and minority participants.[161] Use of live bands for musical production on early hip hop records created associations between live musicians and disco rap, and its attendant stigmas. After the first few years of rap recordings, producers rarely looked back to traditional instrumentation, and if they used studio musicians they were sure to do so in ways that prioritized sampled aesthetics and drum machines.[162]

Live bands in hip hop were not only stigmatized by association with disco music, but by early rap's eschewal of hip hop music's foundational practice: DJing. Because

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[158] Gillian Frank, "Discophobia: Antigay Prejudice and the 1979 Backlash Against Disco," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 16, no. 2 (May, 2007), 284.

[159] Frank, "Discophobia," 279.

[160] Questlove, *Mo' Meta Blues*, 37.

[161] See also Hugh Barker and Yuval Taylor, *Faking It: The Quest for Authenticity in Popular Music* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007), 235-240.

[162] Dr. Dre is a prominent example of a producer who used studio musicians, re-recording the constituent parts of beats he composed using samplers or a sampling aesthetic. For a musical discussion of Dr. Dre's production style, see Williams, *Rhymin' and Stealin'*, 80-102.

disco rap exploited DJs by commodifying an approximation of hip hop DJ practices, its legitimacy in hip hop has been considered marginal by hip hop practitioners. Schloss finds that producers' stories of the history of hip hop music "notably exclude the influence of disco music on early hip hop practice."[163] Schloss suggests that disco has practically been written out of the history of hip hop by its dominant musical practitioners. One possible explanation for this is the gulf between authenticity politics in disco and hip hop. Barker and Taylor observe that, "[disco] had deliberately avoided the aesthetics of authenticity" and "black culture and gay culture each had their own reasons for treating authenticity with suspicion."[164] Criticisms that disco was shallow or fake meant very little since disco never tried to portray what was real, providing listeners with escape instead. On the other hand, 1990s rap musicians and audiences made realness the gold standard for hip hop authenticity.

The Roots distanced themselves from the legacy of Rapper's Delight and disco rap by thoroughly imitating the sound of authentic (read: sample-based) hip hop of their day. As if to put a fine point on it, they have never composed an instrumental that sounded like the pre-Run-DMC "old school," ensuring that their work was not mistaken for early hip hop. Whether or not associations with disco rap resulted in active and conscious bias against live bands in hip hop, no band had achieved prominence in hip hop before The Roots, suggesting that they were met with the brunt of anti-band (or pro-sampler/DJ) prejudice. Indeed, Questlove described their struggle in the mid-1990s by saying, "I felt like The Roots were that group that had to show their i.d. every second. Like, 'driving while black.' We were like, 'driving while Roots.' Back then you had to

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[163] Schloss, *Making Beats*, 43.

[164] Barker and Taylor, *Faking It*, 236.

show your hip hop i.d."[165] Whereas disco rap privileged predictability over the creative

dynamism of hip hop DJs' use of disco and funk records, The Roots created instrumental

music that sounded like authentic (i.e. sample-based, masculinized) hip hop. As hip hop

authenticity had grown attached to masculinity and toughness, The Roots masculinized

the use of live instruments in hip hop by juxtaposing their instrumental approximations of

sample-based music with tough, streetwise lyrics. Inclusion of lyrics such as those found

on the tracks "Panic!!!" "It Just Don't Stop," and "Section" helped masculinize The

Roots' presentation, distinguishing its gender politics from those associated with disco

rap. Together with their sonic strategies for imitating the dominant sample-based hip hop

musical style, this ensured that their brand of instrumental hip hop could not be compared

to hip hop from the era of disco.

CONCLUSIONS

This chapter has described several ways the Roots' recorded output during their

first seven years demonstrates their increasing adoption of a sample-based aesthetic.

Their early approach included arranging their parts in loops connotative – and often

explicitly imitative – of a DJ's use of breakbeats. As their proficiency and resources

increased, processes including EQing recordings to imitate the variety found in sample-

based productions, using samplers in tandem with instruments, recording to a click track,

and including sounds of a DJ's record scratching gradually made their music sound more

and more like sample-based hip hop. As The Roots tried to convince hip hop artists and

audiences in a sample-dominated market that their style of play was legitimate, they

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[165] Red Bull Music, "An Intimate Lecture," 32:53.

demonstrated that the sample-based aesthetic was so strong that their approach to performing on traditional instruments was bent toward it. The qualities their music shares with DJ practices and sample-based production indicate that hip hop authenticity comes from borrowing, versioning, and combining other people's work in ways that exemplify post-literate orality in black cultural traditions. Combinations of sounds like those in sample-based hip hop frustrate notions of interior space and autonomy that usually fuel ideas about musical authenticity. Moreover, The Roots' legitimization of instruments indicates that hip hop musicians need not be conservative about the technology they use, as the hip hop community has repeatedly embraced new musical tools, notably by virtue of their demonstrable association with DJ practices.

I have shown examples of musical strategies in The Roots' early recordings that worked toward their acceptance among the hip hop community in the era of sample-based hegemony. Sonic characteristics including loop-based arranging, record scratching, and timbral variety worked to legitimize their style of play as hip hop despite their use of unorthodox technologies. By convincingly incorporating numerous sonic aspects of sample-based hip hop into their performances and arrangements, The Roots staked a claim to being authentic hip hop practitioners of a new sort: instrumentalists. Recall Schloss's argument that, "samplers are like turntables *because* hip hop artists use them… Both are results of the hip hop community's effort to invest a new technology – samplers – with the cultural cachet of an older one – turntables."[166] Similarly, The Roots were able to invest their technology, instruments, with the cultural cachet of samplers because they demonstrated they were *hip hop artists* via their familiarity with and investment in hip

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[166] Schloss, *Making Beats*, 52 (emphasis in original).

hop culture. Gestures to hip hop's history asserted their historical authenticity, while their imitation and adaptation of the sounds of hip hop's *present* ensured they avoided misrepresenting authentic hip hop the way listeners perceived "Rapper's Delight" to have done.

One possible measure of The Roots' attainment of acceptance within the hip hop industry during the 1990s is their subsequent collaboration with influential hip hop artists. In 2001, Jay-Z invited The Roots to be his backing band for his MTV Unplugged appearance (and the resulting album).[167] As one of the most influential artists of the era, Jay Z's enthusiasm for The Roots may be read as an arrival: they had proven they could use instruments such that they were an asset rather than a liability. Questlove and The Roots served as the album's producers, constructing instrumental versions of Jay-Z's backing tracks so that they were recognizable and compelling, in many cases adding new twists. At one point, Questlove gives a roll call of the musicians in the band, who number fourteen. A string quartet, singer, second keyboardist, guitarist, two percussionists, and a flutist augment the Roots' core lineup of drums, bass, keyboards, and vocal percussion. The size of the ensemble is testament to the complexity and variety of beats the Roots must be capable of creating in this context, live creations which emulate those made with digital sampling without the benefit of studio technology like samplers and overdubbing.

By figuring out how to use traditional rock and R&B instruments to make hip hop music, The Roots developed an approach to instrumental musical borrowing that informed the methods used by D'Angelo, Erykah Badu, and Common. Foremost among these was utilizing a

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[167] On Jay-Z's 2001 *Unplugged* album, the backing tracks are produced exclusively by live musicians, a rarity in hip hop, and unprecedented for Jay-Z, who by this time had released six albums which would all go platinum (four of them multi-platinum).

variety of instrumentations and technologies to repurpose previous music in ways that recalled sampling.[168] Without The Roots' approaches, the Soulquarians-era albums of Badu, Common, and D'Angelo would sound very different. This aspect of The Roots' story illustrates a tension that ran through the Soulquarians' work – looking to music of the past in an effort to move music forward – while also exhibiting the importance of collaboration to the sound of individual Soulquarians' albums.

The Roots' style represents a subversive intervention into the hip hop market, as they convinced fans, critics, and industry gatekeepers that their completely original techniques mattered and could be used to make legitimate hip hop music. Moreover, The Roots were explicit about their desire to make recordings that would be regarded as art and not merely products, and would have a community impact beyond commoditization alone. Soulquarians artists made this a defining ideology of much of their work, observable in the liner notes to *Voodoo*, the stories that Erykah Badu told interviewers about *Mama's Gun*, and the bold psychedelia of music and artwork on Common's *Electric Circus*.

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[168] With regard to *Voodoo*, chapter one describes the practice of in-studio composition that D'Angelo commonly relied upon for that album, which was characterized by the musicians' recreating albums by the likes of Prince, Al Green, Sly and the Family Stone, and many more, and tweaking with the results until they hit upon something that D'Angelo found inspiring. As for *Mama's Gun,* chapter four describes collaborative compositional processes on that album, which included the Roots-derived approach to building grooves using instrumental interpolations of isolated parts from breakbeat records.

CHAPTER III

MAKING THE MACHINE "HUMAN": REVOLUTIONARY RHYTHM

IN THE MUSIC OF JAMES "J DILLA" YANCEY

James "Jay Dee" or "J Dilla" Yancey was a hip hop musician from Detroit, Michigan, born February 7, 1974, and deceased February 10, 2006.[169] Renowned for his inventive use of samplers to produce backing tracks for other hip hop and R&B artists, he was also a capable rapper and instrumentalist. The music of his Soulquarians period features innovative constructions of rhythmic feel, and particularly creative reuse of samples. Fans and fellow producers often speak of Dilla as an innovator. This chapter explores the musical reasons for this characterization through a combination of close listening, reception studies, and musical comparisons to other contemporary examples of rap production. I will argue that the rhythmic character of Dilla's beats resulted from the new ways his productions navigate the balance between human and mechanical characteristics inherent in sample-based hip hop production. Dilla's innovations rested on a refusal to accept outside limitations on his processes, and a desire to see beyond established and popular methods of production, both qualities which suited and shaped the nature of the Soulquarians collaboration as a whole. Furthermore, Dilla's influence on the Soulquarians was perhaps second only to Questlove's, as his rhythms inspired the

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[169] Beginning in 2001, Yancey changed his moniker to "J Dilla," to disambiguate from producer Jermaine Dupri, who was sometimes referred to as JD. While earlier Soulquarians albums and interviews credit "Jay Dee," he is credited as "J Dilla" for his work on later Soulquarians productions, including Common's *Electric Circus* (2002). Similarly, though in earlier chapters I refer to him as Jay Dee, henceforth I will use J Dilla, especially since the notoriety he gained for the works under consideration in this chapter came slowly, mostly since his name change. Moreover, using the name by which he is best known now is useful to increase the reach of this work.

approaches on *Voodoo* (described in chapter one), and his distinctly individual beats were included prominently on every Soulquarians-produced album.

Yancey's early life has been described in detail elsewhere.[170] However, a brief description of his involvement with musicians and the music business leading up to the Soulquarians period is important for understanding his personal and aesthetic motivations, as well as his collaborations with other group members. Dilla was mentored by fellow Detroit musician Amp Fiddler, who played keyboards in George Clinton's P-Funk All Stars. In 1995 Fiddler was on tour with rap icons A Tribe Called Quest (ATCQ) as part of the traveling festival known as Lollapalooza. He was able to get the 21-year-old Dilla a brief audience with ATCQ rapper and producer Q-tip, and Dilla gave Tip a cassette tape demo by his band at the time, Slum Village, for which Dilla had created all the backing music. When Tip listened to the cassette, he was astounded. "The way that it was programmed, the feeling of it was the most authentic feeling. He was programming but it just felt live," Q-Tip said in a 2013 interview.[171] Tip was inspired by the rhythmic character of Dilla's beats. The equalization and timbres were similarly powerful for him. In the same interview, Tip went on to say, "he had bass where it needed to be, the kick was where it needed to be, the hi-hat was where… He was just *clean*." Q-Tip recognized an unusual talent in Dilla. Wanting to be involved in spreading his work (and ostensibly to profit from it as well), Q-Tip became the younger Dilla's manager and began sharing his beats with rap groups like The Pharcyde and De La Soul, and R&B singer D'Angelo.

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[170] Ferguson, *J Dilla's Donuts*, 12-23. See also Maureen Yancey-Smith, Diana V. Boardley-Wise, and C.Q. Wilder, *The Life Story of James Dewitt Yancey* (Fort Payne, AL: Mirror Publishing, 2016), an account by his mother, Maureen "Ma Dukes" Yancey-Smith, told in the form of an illustrated children's book.

[171] Red Bull Music Academy, "Lecture: Q-Tip," 1:05:00.

Dilla's beats were first widely heard on The Pharcyde's 1995 album

Labcabincalifornia, for which Dilla (then known as Jay Dee) produced several tracks.

These productions turned heads, and caused some musicians to reevaluate their ideas of

what was possible and worthwhile, at least rhythmically speaking. In a 2013 interview,

Questlove described hearing Dilla's music for the first time as he was leaving a show by

the Pharcyde just after his own band, The Roots, had played the opening set.

> So, as I'm leaving the club, I'm hearing the vibration of the kick drum, and
> it was the most life-changing moment I ever had. Like, I had to get out of
> the car and run back in the club to make sure, like, 'Did I hear that?' … it
> sounded like the kick drum was played by like a drunk three- year-old.
> And I was like, 'Are you allowed to do that?'[172]

Questlove's comment refers to the unusual kick drum performance on the track

"Bullshit." Quite unlike kick drum patterns typically used in hip hop at that time, Dilla's

performance is irregular, displaying no consistent pattern, and comprising many notes

that are far off from a metronomic pulse. In these ways, it also differs from the kinds of

rhythms typically found in sample-based hip hop's common source recordings in jazz,

funk, soul, and R&B styles. Questlove's reaction reveals that he recognized the

performance as unconventional, and found it very affective.

Writing about hearing Slum Village's 1997 album *Fantastic Vol. 1* for the first

time, Questlove effused, "it was a messiah moment, in a way, for people like me and

D'Angelo and Q-Tip. We had been looking for someone to lead us out of the darkness, to

take us across the desert."[173] That darkness was the artistic landscape of commercial hip

hop in 1997, and the messiah was James Yancey. The Soulquarians collaboration resulted

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[172] Red Bull Music, "An Intimate Lecture," 35:15.

[173] Questlove, *Mo' Meta Blues*, 160.

in (and arguably, from) the uptake of Dilla's rhythms by instrumentalists, initially

through D'Angelo and The Soultronics' work on *Voodoo*.

For the remainder of this chapter I will describe musical characteristics that

defined Dilla's work during the Soulquarians period, and distinguished his beats from

those of his contemporaries. I identify two primary distinguishing characteristics of his

work: unusual, "drunk" or "wobbly" rhythms, and virtuosic transformation of source

material for use as hooks, pads, or, to use his own word, "atmosphere."[174] The

importance of his work can be read in testimonies by hip hop musicians, many of whom

proclaim its immediate impact on them. Musicians in R&B, and later, jazz, would also

proudly claim the influence of Dilla's music in interviews, and more tellingly, through

imitation.[175]

FINDING EXPRESSIVENESS IN DILLA'S BEATS WITH REGARD TO PREVIOUS

SCHOLARSHIP ON MICROTIMING

The most often-cited characteristic of Dilla's sound is his creation of rhythms that

sound "drunk," "tipsy," "wobbly," or "woozy."[176] In some cases, this is the first thing

that people notice about a Dilla beat, as in the stories from Q-tip and Questlove cited

above. Such rhythms result from Dilla's original approach to programming drums, which

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[174] Albee One Kenobi, "Erykah Badu & Common on J Dilla," *YouTube*, February 10, 2011, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2gRLCNzzmGc, 0:43.

[175] In addition to his audible musical influence on a generation of jazz and hip hop musicians, Dilla's importance is proudly proclaimed on numerous commercially available clothing products. Of these, the most explicit claim on Dilla's influence is a popular t-shirt which reads "J Dilla Changed My Life." Okayplayer.com, the online home of The Roots, is a major outlet for Dilla merchandise, which is now more popular than ever.

[176] For example, see Hua Hsu, "Lifechanger: A Posthumous Release Complicates J Dilla's Legacy," *The New Yorker Magazine*, April 18, 2016, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/04/18/j-dillas-the-diary, n.p.

involved turning off the "quantize" function on his samplers, thus allowing rhythmic imperfections to remain in his beats.[177] As a result of the ways Dilla used digital samplers to create loops, such imperfections are juxtaposed against a constant, even pulse. Just as a tremendous diversity of styles in afro-diasporic traditions utilize what Richard Waterman calls "metronome sense," nearly all hip hop music includes a constant, even pulse.[178] I will argue that Dilla's beats made use of such a pulse as well, manifested by certain parts of the groove, and contrasted by other, 'out of time' parts. That is to say, Dilla made his beats using a combination of quantized and non-quantized elements.[179] This allowed his beats to emulate characteristics of group performance akin to what Charles Keil has called "participatory discrepancies," the timing differences between various players' performed rhythms in a live setting. In other words, Dilla found new ways to play with time in his beats while maintaining hip hop music's overriding commitment to a metronomic pulse.

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[177] Dilla's primary musical tool was the Akai MPC 3000 sampler. From the device's manual: "The MPC3000 corrects timing errors made as you are recording by moving notes to the nearest perfect timing location. For example, if the timing correct function is set to 1/16-notes, then all notes are moved to the nearest perfect 1/16-note. The result is that all recorded notes play back as perfectly even 1/16-notes." Roger Linn, "MPC3000 MIDI Production Center Software version 3.0 Operator's Manual" (Akai Electric Co., LTD: May, 1994), 49.

[178] From Waterman, "African Influence," 212. Quoted in Wilson, "The Significance of the Relationship," 4. As described in chapter 2, the use of a constant pulse in rap music in the 1990s was necessary for DJs to satisfy dancers, a state of affairs that persuaded The Roots to record with click tracks and samplers.

[179] It is important to note that what I call 'quantized' elements in Dilla's beats may or may not have been performed with the quantize function on. I use the term to refer to elements of his beats whose appearance in wave forms or spectrograms appear exactly in time with a metronomic timing grid (see Figures 9 to 20, below). For the purposes of my argument the point is moot: whether they are quantized through the technology of the sampler or through the accuracy of Dilla's performance, they serve the same normalizing function in the groove.

Keil famously wrote that "music, to be personally involving and socially valuable, must be 'out of time' and 'out of tune.'"[180] In formulating his participatory discrepancies (PDs) framework, Keil sought to explain the power of music as a social phenomenon. In other words, PDs characterize music that is inclusive, and inclusion (or participation) creates much of music's importance to people. Keil initially used examples of jazz musicians, but postulated that the improvisatory and participatory nature of musical traditions the world over probably made the theory more universal. This strong statement about the social value of music has particular resonance with afro-diasporic styles, which, like African music generally, are characterized by their social function, and the participation on some level of everyone present.[181] Because of hip hop music's strong roots in afro-diasporic musical traditions, we can productively use PDs to help explain the power of certain characteristics of hip hop beats.

Since the earliest scholarship on microtiming, microrhythmic relationships have been implicated in the perceived expressiveness of a performance. According to Kristoffer Carlsen and Maria A.G. Witek, "when researchers in music psychology started investigating microtiming in music… variations in microtiming were soon recognized as deliberate gestures conveying musical expressivity and rhythmic structure, rather than accidental inaccuracies."[182] Though Witek and Carlsen are describing studies based on

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[180] Charles Keil, "Participatory Discrepancies and the Power of Music," *Cultural Anthropology* 2, no. 3 (August, 1987), 275.

[181] See also Christopher Small, *Music of the Common Tongue: Survival and Celebration in African American Music* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1998).

[182] Kristoffer Carlsen and Maria A.G. Witek, "Simultaneous Rhythmic Events with Different Schematic Affiliations: Microtiming and Dynamic Attending in Two Contemporary R&B Grooves," in *Musical Rhythm in the Age of Digital Reproduction*, edited by Anne Danielsen (Farnham, Surrey, England: Ashgate, 2010), 52. Carlsen and Witek's use of the term "deviation" is worth noting, since it reproduces long-standing tropes of black deviance and white normalcy.

European concert music, I submit that the effects of European-style expressive timing *on the body* may be similar to the motion that listeners describe hearing in Dilla's beats, which have been described as "lurching," "drunk," and the like. That is, the listener's embodied experience of the slowing and accelerating of tempo in expressive European concert music may have much in common with the embodied experience of "sway" or swing while listening to a Dilla beat.[183] Insofar as perceived expressiveness in European concert music can be understood as reflecting listeners' bodily experiences, Witek and Carlsen's description of microtiming research may provide a productive way to explain the charisma of Dilla's rhythms among fellow musicians and consumers. In other words, I argue that the timing in Dilla's rhythms harnessed the *feeling* of expressiveness common to listeners' experiences of many kinds of music, placing them in the context of loop-based hip hop music.

Dilla's rhythms fit Witek and Carlsen's description in crucial ways: his discrepancies were certainly deliberate – they are common to many of his beats, and display consistencies in application that preclude accidental inclusion. While Dilla may have created his signature rhythms accidentally in the first place, the fact that he left them in the beats (in the drums no less, where they were sure to be noticed) indicates that he intentionally chose them over other qualities of rhythmic feel. As for expressiveness, I

This may call into question the appropriateness of using a European analytical method, microtiming, on afro-diasporic music, given the differences in afro-diasporic and European cultural priorities. Moving ahead in spite (or perhaps because of) such questions, I hope that my microtiming study of Dilla's beats will prove illuminating rather than reductive, and I allow for the possibility that multiple other methods of analysis may be so as well.

[183] It hardly needs mentioning that neither African nor European musical traditions have a monopoly on the expressiveness of rhythm. Rhythm is used expressively by the master drummer when s/he cuts across the pulse woven by the rest of a Ghanaian drumming ensemble, or the pianist taking a solo in an Afro-Cuban salsa ensemble. So too is it used expressively to articulate European cultural priorities in *rubato* passages of symphonies, concerti, or sonatas.

will argue that Dilla's innovative rhythmic irregularities are expressive of black aesthetic priorities centered on rupture, like those Tricia Rose has described. Herein lies the musical collectivism which Questlove said he gravitated toward in the work of Dilla and D'Angelo: their abundance of microtiming variations (or PDs) sounded so original in hip hop and R&B music that it called attention to their distinct personalities, their originality, their mistakes.

The quality of Dilla's beats that critics and musicians have referred to as "human," "woozy," and "off-kilter" originates in their particular ways of being "out of time," which recall characteristics of human performance, and contrast with "in time," (stable, or quantized) elements. Anne Danielsen, in her study of funk music, refers to such stabilizing elements as the "virtual structure" of a groove, "the nonsounding schemes that structure sounding events."[184] Danielsen describes the virtual structure at play in the performance of funk music, including a regular pulse, and an increase of energy leading to beat one. We might productively ask, then, what are the characteristics of the virtual structure in hip hop?

By virtue of its origin as dance music played by DJs using funk, soul, rock, jazz, and disco records, and the heavy use during the "golden age of sampling" of records from these styles, hip hop shares many qualities with funk and other afro-diasporic musics. These include metronomic sense (steady pulse), repetition of structuring rhythmic patterns, and a tolerance for both straight and swung rhythmic characteristics. In the case

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[184] Danielsen, "Introduction," 6. Danielsen's "virtual structure" refers to the pulse and meter of a groove, which she argues is referenced by performed rhythms, but includes non-sounding events as well. It is akin to Waterman's "metronome sense" in that it constitutes a pulse that underlies performers' individual approaches to the groove, and to which the collective performance refers, but which doesn't rely on being made constantly audible for its influence on the performance.

of nearly all hip hop music, this virtual structure is most closely adhered to by the drums, which almost invariably realize some variation of a funk-, soul-, or rock-style pattern that features a backbeat.[185] Playing "both with and against the virtual structure," Dilla innovated his characteristic swing by mixing rhythms that sometimes conformed to and at other times seemed to destabilize the metronomic pulse.[186]

Through this calculated combination of stable and unstable elements, Dilla created rhythms with a tremendous feeling of forward motion, and a unique swing. While the same could be said about the drum performances of Bernard Purdie, Max Roach, Clyde Stubblefield, and many other masters of the modern drum kit, Dilla created a signature rhythmic style from his choices of particular ways of being out of time, while the beat as a whole remained in time. The way he did this, I argue, did not imitate the miniscule rhythmic inconsistencies (PDs) that occur naturally when instrumentalists play together in a concerted group such as a jazz or funk rhythm section. Performers in those and other afro-diasporic styles tend to prefer greater rhythmic precision for creating their "lock-up," and gross deviations from the pulse tend to be viewed as mistakes.[187] Instead, Dilla wove previously undesirable rhythmic inconsistencies into a stable rhythmic

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[185] Some readers will note that, while this was true through the early 2000s, the rise of trap music may be seen as a challenge to the predominance of the backbeat. Many trap beats might be heard to have a single snare on 3 - probably one of the biggest departures from established hip hop conventions in recent memory. However, by counting beats half as fast, this can still be heard as a backbeat. I hear such beats as being in half time with a backbeat, but I acknowledge that interpretations may differ.

[186] Danielsen, *Presence and Pleasure*, 47.

[187] See Danielsen, *Presence and Pleasure*, as well as Ingrid Monson, *Saying Something: Jazz Improvisation and Interaction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 65. Danielsen has argued that the creation of wobbly rhythms like Dilla's is directly tied to technological advances during this time, enabled by what Danielsen calls "the exaggerated rhythmic expressivity of the machine." See Danielsen, "Introduction," 1.

texture, combining early and late, straight and swung, triple and duple in innovative ways, as the analyses that follow will demonstrate.

Broadly speaking, the first group of my analyses ('Rhythm') is concerned with structural samples and their function, and the second ('Creative reuse of sources') with surface and vocal samples. I have adapted the terms "structural," "surface," and "lyrical" samples from Amanda Sewell's terminology in her typology of hip hop samples.[188] Structural samples are typically drums, bass, and other instruments which "form the rhythmic and harmonic foundation of a sample-based track and create a track's groove."[189] Nearly all of Dilla's productions are loop-based and produced with a sampler, giving them a mechanical repetitiveness which brings them in line with the other beats in Sewell's study. Moreover, they usually include a quantized element or group of elements, which provides the stable rhythmic ground on which hip hop and other forms of dance music are nearly always built, and against which 'out of time' elements can serve a destabilizing function. However, unlike the music in Sewell's study, Dilla generally prefers to construct the 'structural' layer of his beats from chops of single drum sounds, rather than looped segments several beats in length.[190] Though the hip hop songs Sewell takes for her subjects differ crucially from Dilla's beats in that they use longer 'chops' as

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[188] Amanda Sewell, "A Typology of Sampling in Hip-Hop," Ph.D. dissertation, Indiana University (2013), 26.

[189] Sewell, "A Typology of Sampling," 26.

[190] By 'structural layer' I mean to adapt Sewell's distinction of structural samples to the beat's completed stage. The structural layer is the result of assembling structural samples: the composite drum, bass, and other rhythm section instrumental tracks which underpin the rest of the beat. Not unlike a soul or funk drummer, Dilla triggered (played on the sampler) kick drum, snare drum, and hi-hat cymbals individually (with the quantize function off), creating microrhythmic relationships between them. While he was not the first to do so (RZA, DJ Premier, and Pete Rock are a few producers who had, by the mid-1990s, done likewise), his use of this method to create beats which foregrounded their own strange microtiming was original, and revolutionary.

structural samples, she (like me) struggles to come to terms with the meaning of "groove" in hip hop beats.[191] She points out that hip hop beats constructed from loops sacrifice some of the timing variations of the original performance, arguing that "a sample-based hip hop producer captures one or two measures of a funk groove, essentially freezing and repeating those measures and thus eliminating any participatory discrepancies." At the same time, however, she hedges this statement by writing, "of course, the participatory discrepancies within that single [looped] measure remain intact."[192] This is a complex question, indeed. What are we to make of a groove that mechanically repeats "the dopest part" of a record, the appeal of which often lies primarily in the strength of its groove?[193] In other words, one challenge posed by hip hop's groove logic is the way it combines the precise regularity inherent in looping samples with the imprecisions that exist within its sampled sources.

Mark Butler's work on electronic dance music (EDM) is instructive in this regard. Working from the premise that nearly all EDM uses quantized rhythms and 4/4 time signatures, Butler asks how artists "create rich temporal experiences within pure duple contexts."[194] In other words, when all the rhythm is straight (quantized) and square (4/4), how do EDM musicians make compelling music for dancers? Butler argues that various techniques for constructing tension and release create the excitement of EDM. One such

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[191] A 'chop' is a segment of a sample source. A producer might chop a source such that the sample includes a full measure of a drum break, or just a single kick drum note. The distinction I draw here is that Dilla's beats are constructed from very short chops (often single drum notes arranged into entirely new beats, whereas the producers of the beats with which Sewell is concerned use longer segments as structural samples, often four to eight beats of a drum break.

[192] Sewell, "A Typology of Sampling," 30.

[193] Questlove quoted in Sewell, "A Typology of Sampling," 38.

[194] Mark Butler, *Unlocking the Groove: Rhythm, Meter, and Musical Design in Electronic Dance Music* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 81.

technique is syncopation, which Butler calls "at a fundamental level, embellishments of the metrical structure." Butler goes on, "I would like to claim that certain types of rhythms are defined by a dynamic tension between our perception of a note's position and our sense of where it *should* be."[195] In the context of quantized music, then, Butler argues that rhythms are made compelling by the tension between where listeners feel certain notes *should* be and where they actually sound. This suggests that part of the dynamism in a beat results from the ways it contrasts against listeners' expectations. Whether this contrast comes from the juxtaposition of mechanical repetition with timing inconsistencies inherent in a sample source, as in Sewell, or a producer's (quantized) exploitation of syncopation and long-range trajectory, as in Butler, the end result is a performance that utilizes the tension between expectations and sounding events to create a compelling listening experience.

Indeed, contradicting expectations has long been implicated in the satisfaction listeners derive from music, as psychologists of musical perception attest. Psychologist William Forde Thompson writes,

> According to Mandler [1984], the arousal generated by unexpected events is basic to human functioning… [music] Listeners prefer a moderate degree of incongruity between expected and actual events. If there is no incongruity (the composer does not violate any expectations), listeners will perceive the music to be simplistic and predictable.[196]

Although they were writing with classical music in mind, Thompson (and Mandler) may provide some direction for our understanding of what is compelling about beats in EDM and loop-based hip hop: listeners take pleasure in certain experiences of unpredictability.

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[195] Butler, *Unlocking*, 87 (emphasis in original).

[196] Thompson, William Forde. *Music, Thought, and Feeling: Understanding the Psychology of Music*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 182.

Just as in loop- and sample-based EDM, rhythmic styles in hip hop, such as Dilla

innovated, take advantage of the effect of contradicting listeners' expectations to create

fascinating textures. Dilla's beats share some features with previous types of music.

However, his particular methods for combining quantized and un-quantized elements are

remarkable for the way they build and dash listeners' expectations.

EXPLANATION AND ILLUSTRATION OF ANALYTICAL METHOD

I will proceed by describing some of the specific devices that Dilla used to create

his beats' peculiar rhythmic characteristics. First, as I have said, his beats often pit stable

groove elements against unstable ones. The clearest example of this can be seen in the

various elements of the drum kit. The most common elements of a drum kit used by hip

hop producers during the 1990s (and Dilla was no exception) were kick drum, snare

drum, and hi-hat cymbal. By loading audio files of Dilla's beats into a software program

called Sonic Visualiser, we can look at two types of visual representations of recorded

sound: the wave form, and the spectrogram.[197] The next four Figures will demonstrate

these types of visual representations, and how I use them in the analyses that follow.

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[197] Sonic Visualiser 2.4.1. Copyright © 2005–2013 Chris Cannam and Queen Mary, University of London. http://www.sonicvisualiser.org/.
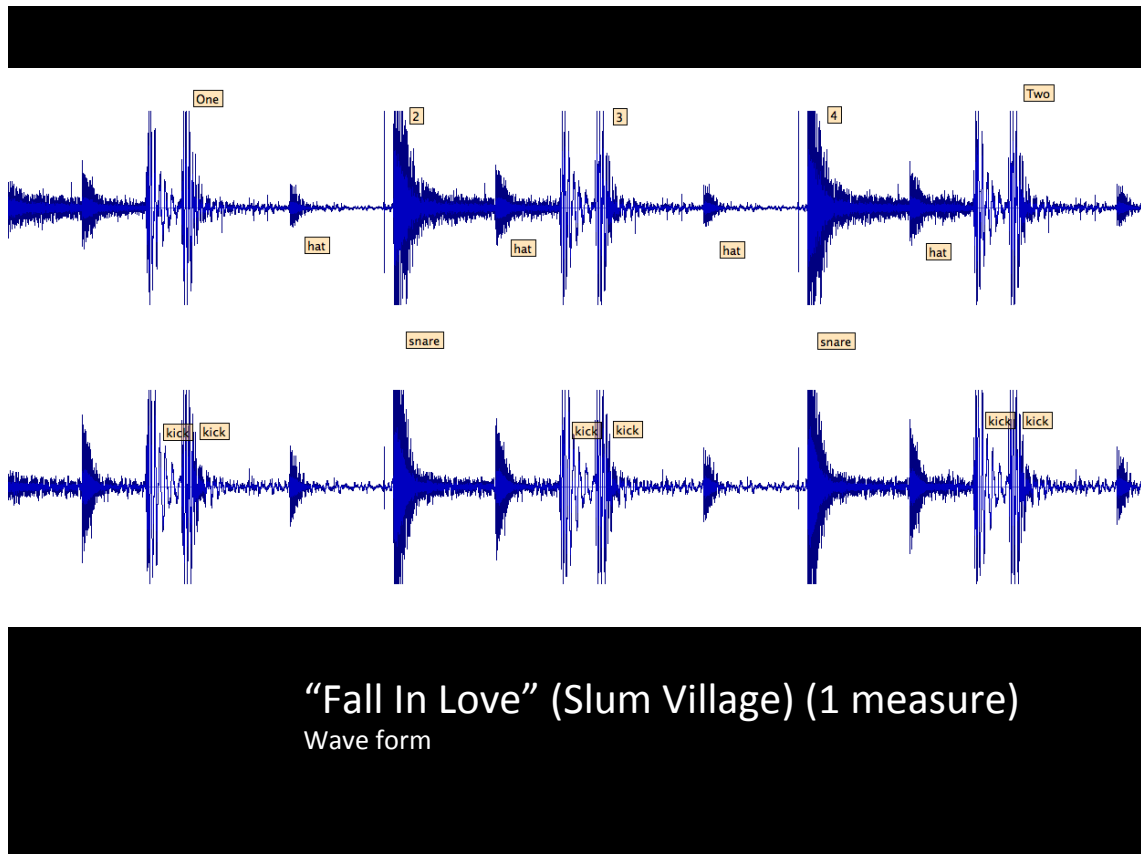
Figure 8. "Fall In Love" (2000) wave form, 0:00-0:02.

Figure 8 is a picture of the stereo wave form of one measure of drums from the Slum

Village song "Fall In Love," released on their 2000 album *Fantastic, Vol. 2*, produced by

J Dilla. The horizontal axis is time. The height of the waves indicates the relative volume

of a sound (taller is louder). There is no information on pitch. The only sounds in this

segment are the three basic drum kit sounds common in hip hop beats – kick drum, snare

drum, and hi-hat cymbals – and I've labeled each of their appearances. These labels are

arranged vertically according to the instrument: kick drum labels are nearer the bottom of

the diagram, snare in the middle, and hi-hats nearer top, in correspondence to each

instrument's frequency range. Horizontally speaking, all labels appear immediately to the right of the wave form to which they refer. At the very top of the image, I have also labeled the measures (spelled, capitalized) and beats (numbers). Therefore, this image includes all four beats of measure 'One,' plus the downbeat (beat one) of a second measure, labeled 'Two.'
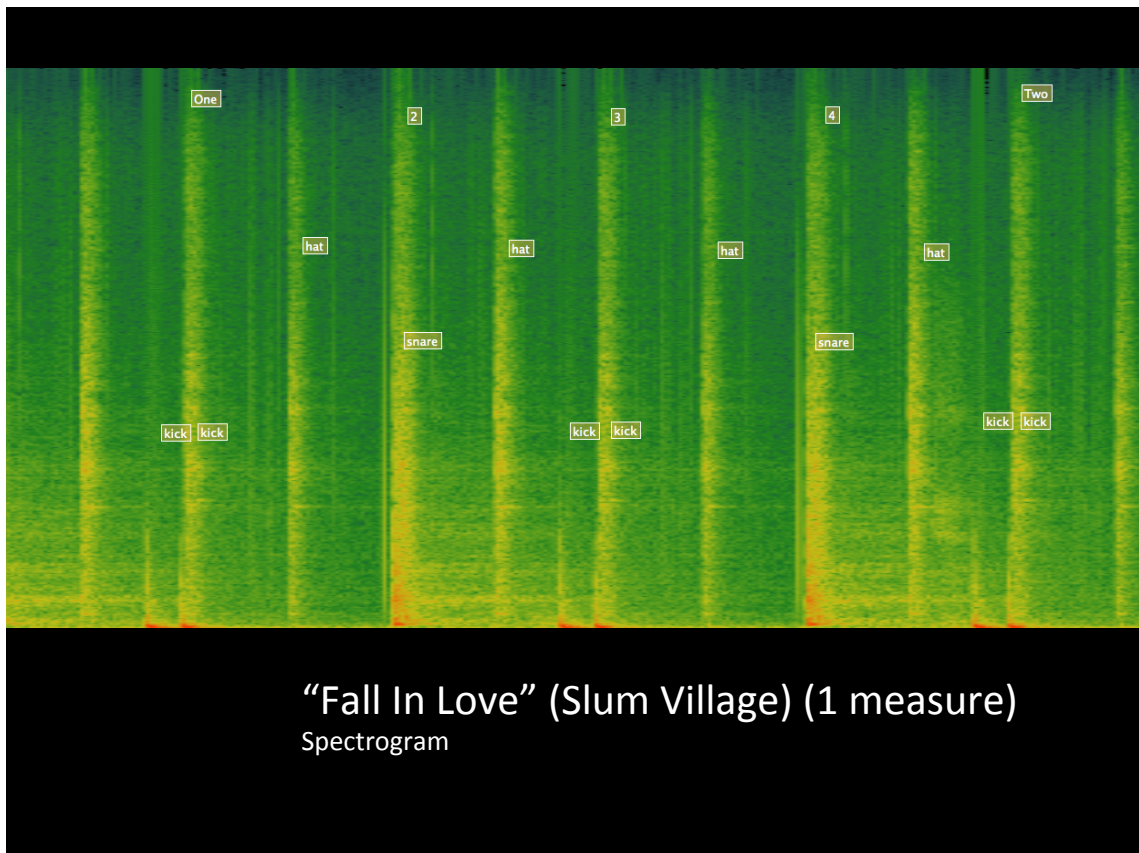
Figure 9. "Fall In Love" spectrogram, 0:00-0:02.

Figure 9 shows the same musical segment in my second type of visual representation, the spectrogram. Again the horizontal axis is time, but the vertical axis is frequency, i.e. pitch. This particular spectrogram displays primarily high frequencies: only the lowest

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10% of the image concerns frequencies in what would be called the "low" (below 400 Hz) to "upper midrange" (below 2000 Hz). The bulk of the image represents frequencies from 5000-20,000 Hz – a range from about the frequency of a very high bird call to the upper limits of human hearing. The colors represent intensity, with red representing the loudest sounds, then orange, then yellow, green, blue, etc. Therefore, the occurrence of red in the lowest region of the image indicates the kick drums are loudest in a lower frequency range (only the second in each pair of kicks has prominent high frequency overtones that constitute the vertical yellow bands above), while the snare and hi-hat tend to occupy mostly middle and higher frequencies.
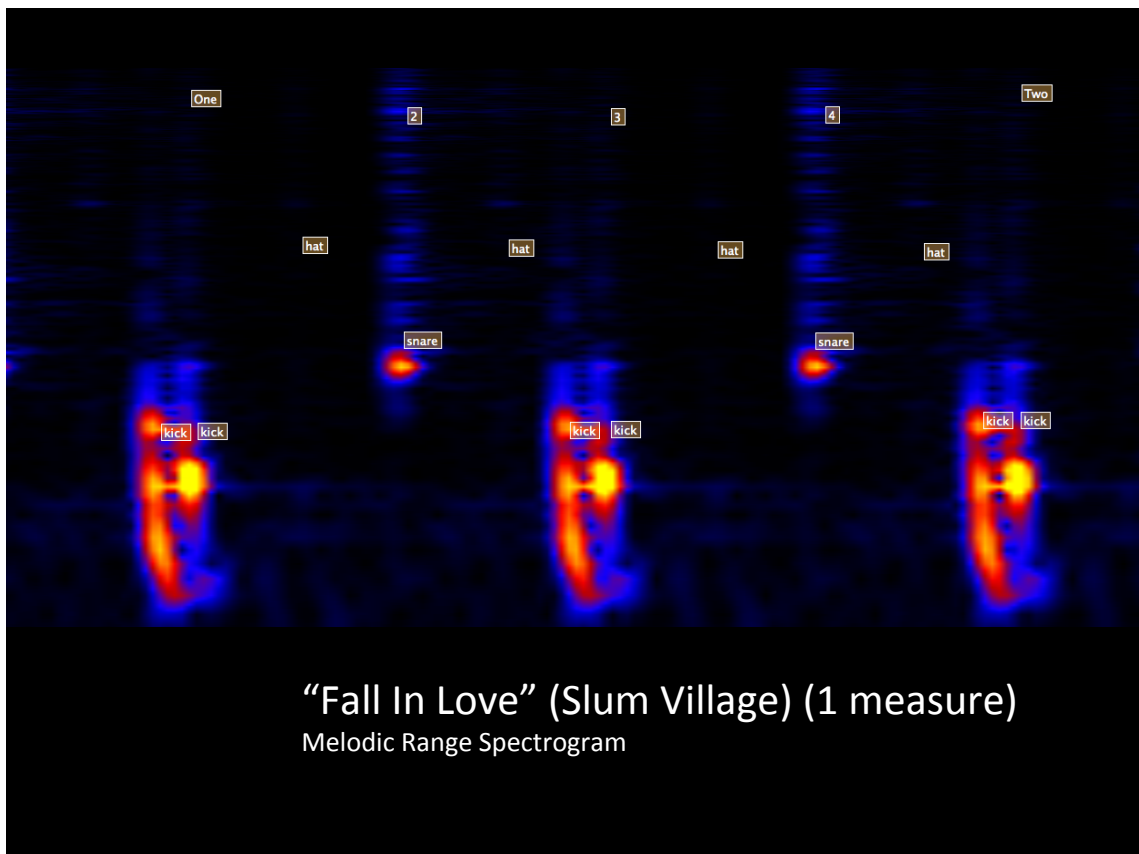
Figure 10. "Fall In Love" melodic range spectrogram, 0:00-0:02.

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The melodic range spectrogram (Figure 10) functions on the same principle as the spectrogram, but reveals a lower range of frequencies. This image makes visible only frequencies between 30 Hz and 1500 Hz – about the frequency range of a large truck being driven – with frequencies below 250 Hz occupying the lower half of the image. By giving a picture of the low and midrange frequencies in a recording, the melodic range spectrogram complements the high frequency picture of the standard spectrogram from Figure 9. The melodic range spectrogram can reveal bass frequencies quite effectively.

"Fall In Love" (Slum Village) (1 measure)
Wave form and spectrogram
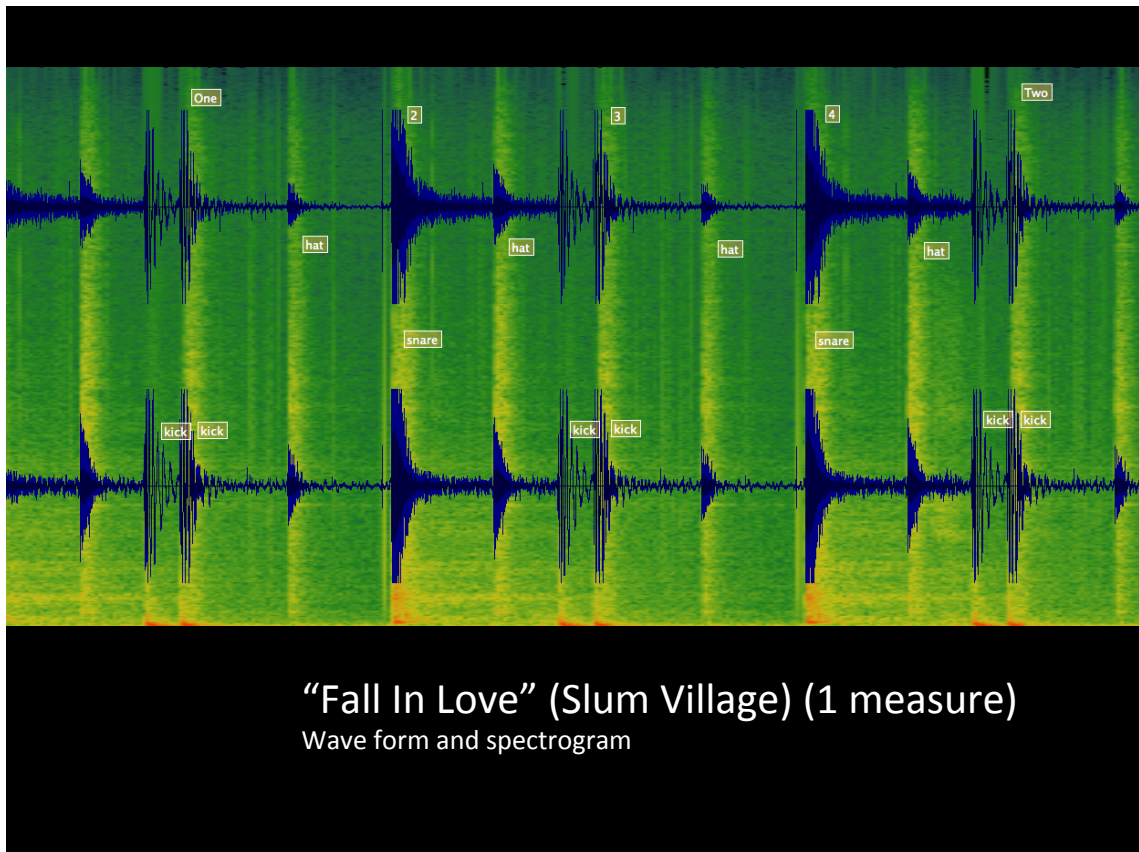
Figure 11. "Fall In Love" wave form superimposed on spectrogram, 0:00-0:02.

Figure 11 shows the wave form superimposed on the spectrogram. The wave forms make loud events like kick and snare easily visible, while the hi-hat (whose smaller wave forms may be obscured by vocals or other elements of a more complex beat than this one) is often revealed in vertical yellow bands on the spectrogram, which reflect its higher frequency spectrum.

"Fall In Love" (Slum Village) (1 measure)
Wave form, spectrogram, and timing graph showing 16th note locations
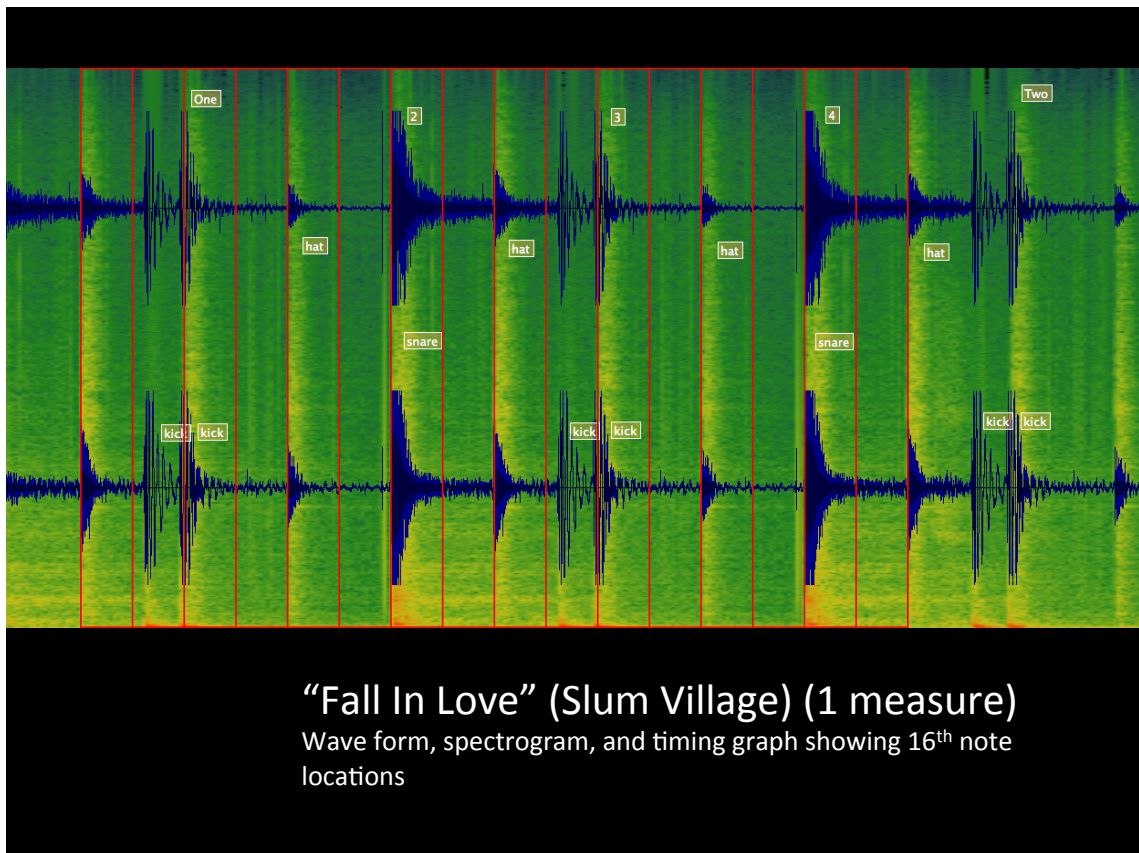
Figure 12. "Fall In Love" wave form, spectrogram, and timing grid, 0:00-0:02.

Figure 12 superimposes a grid on the image, creating a visual analogy of a metronomic pulse. This enables us to see where and how certain notes deviate from a strictly regular beat, or in other words, the beat's "discrepancies." In this way we can actually see

microtiming variations in beats. Since the notes of this particular beat fall directly on the grid locations, we could say it displays little microtiming variation. I will turn now to specific examples that illustrate what I argue are the distinguishing characteristics of Dilla's rhythmic profile.

"RUNNIN"

One method Dilla used to achieve his innovative sense of swing is to pit an irregular kick drum performance against a stable texture created by hi-hat and snare. This is the case in his track "Runnin," produced for The Pharcyde and released on their 1995 album *Labcabincalifornia*. In Figure 13, we can see that the eighth note grid (red lines) aligns perfectly with the snare and hi-hat notes, indicating that they both display an even, regular rhythm. The snare notes, as they are louder, are visible in both the wave form and in the yellow vertical bands of the spectrogram, whereas the wave form of the quieter hi-hat is subsumed by other sounds (in this case textural and vocal). The hi-hat is still visible in the vertical yellow bands on the spectrogram, which, in this alignment, surround the red lines of the graph. Whether Dilla used the quantize function on his sampler to create the snare and hi-hat tracks is not clear, but whatever the case, those parts are *effectively* quantized, as the overlaid graph reveals. The result is a stable, metronomic texture in the beat created by two elements in rhythmic agreement.

"Runnin" (The Pharcyde) (2mm)
Wave form, spectrogram, and timing graph
Graph shows eighth notes, aligned to downbeats of m1 and m3
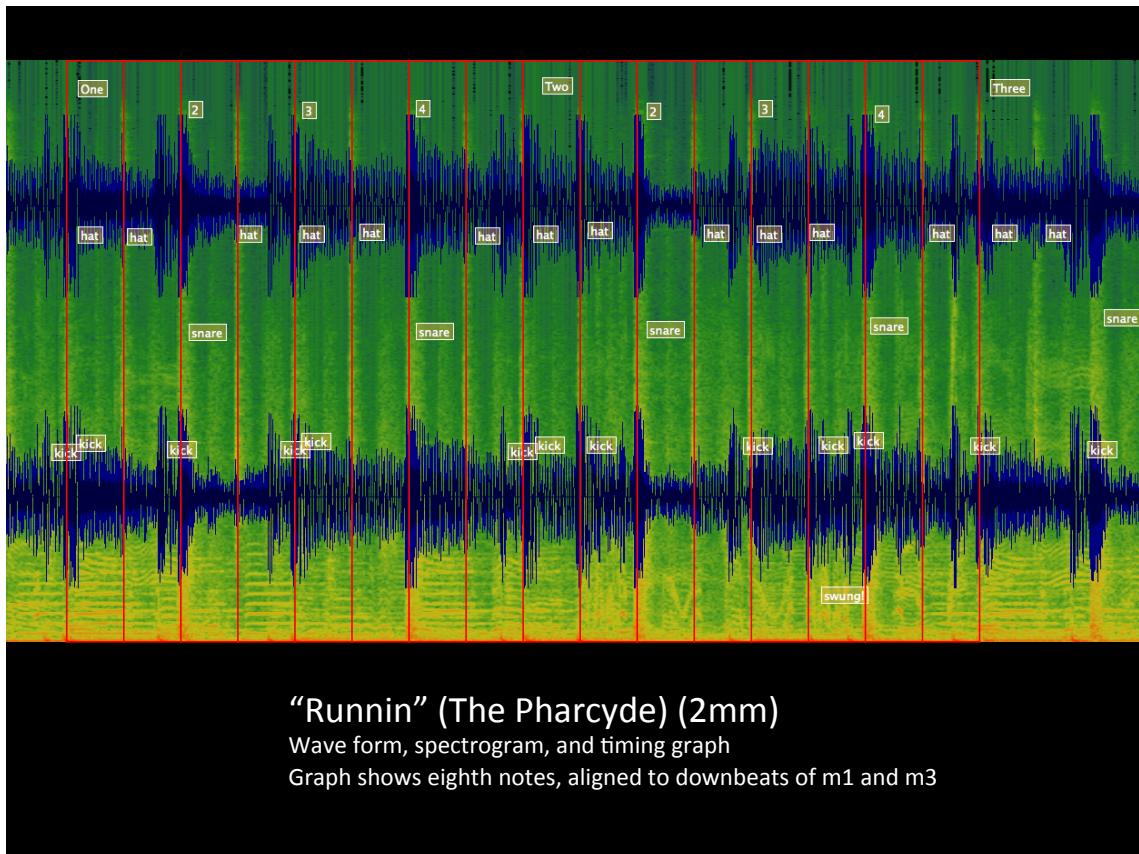
Figure 13. "Runnin," (1995) 4:32 – 4:37, showing snare and hi-hat functioning together in time.

Against this stability Dilla pits the kick drum, which is clearly not quantized, since it lands on many different rhythmic subdivisions, as well as some locations which are erratic and effectively out of time.

"Runnin" (The Pharcyde) (2mm)
Wave form, spectrogram, and timing graph
Graph shows eighth note triplets, aligned to downbeats of m1 and m3
Kick highlights – White: 8th or 16th note locations; Blue: 16th note triplets;
Red: do not fall on any grid
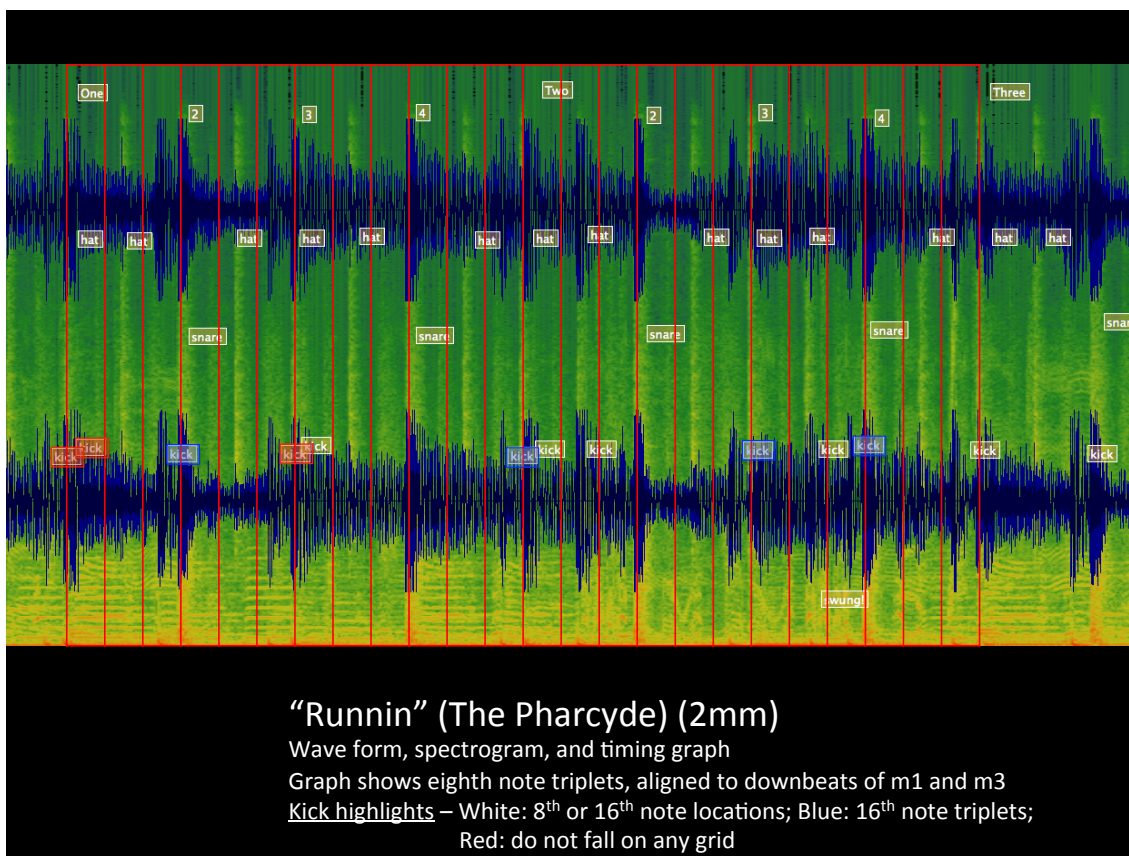
Figure 14. Wave form and spectrogram of "Runnin" (4:32-4:37), showing variety of kick drum locations. This musical segment is the same as Figure 15, only differently represented. Notice that the graph in this Figure is changed: it now displays triplet eighth notes, no longer aligning with the (straight) hi-hats, but revealing additional (swung) associations in the kick performance.

"Runnin" (The Pharcyde) (2mm)
Melodic range spectrogram and timing graph
Graph shows eighth note triplets, aligned to downbeats of m1 and m3
Kick highlights – White: 8th or 16th note locations; Blue: 16th note triplets;
Red: do not fall on any grid
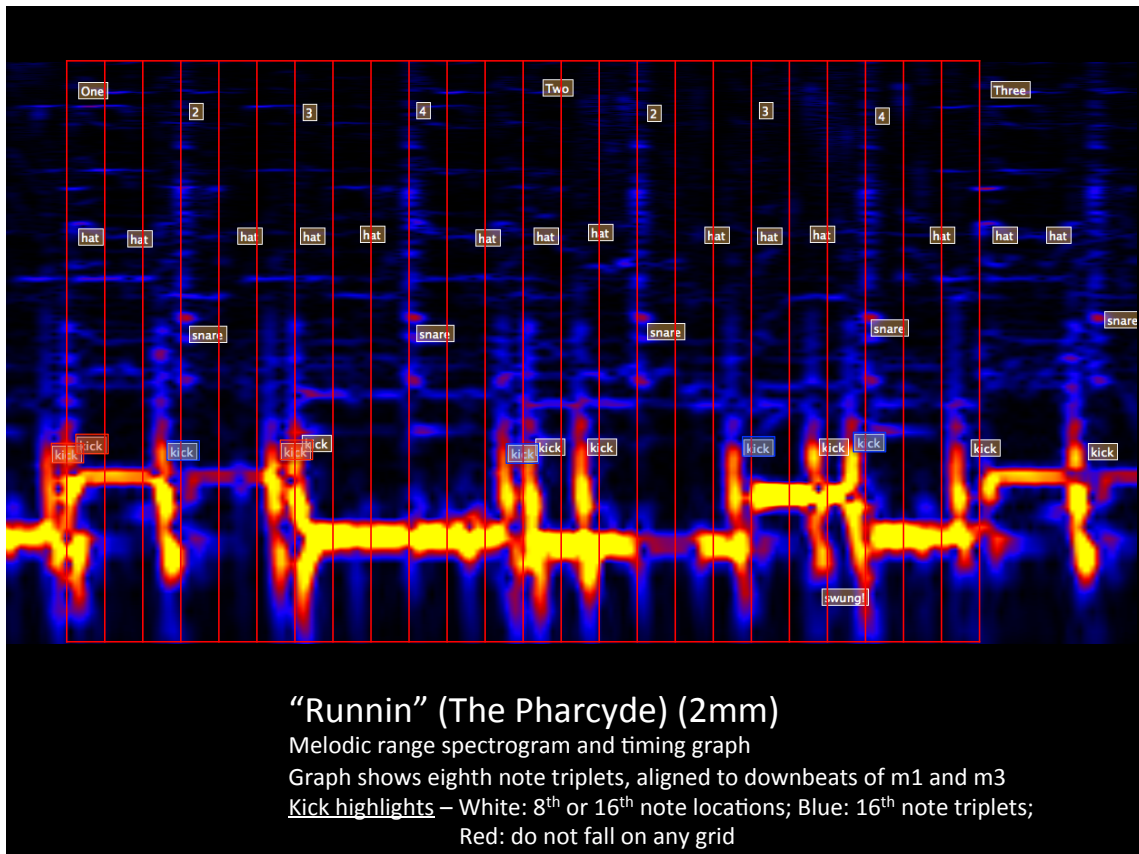
Figure 15. Melodic range spectrogram of "Runnin" (4:32-4:37), showing variety of kick drum locations. This musical segment is the same as Figure 14, only differently represented.

Figures 14 and 15 portray the same musical segment, but in wave/spectrogram and melodic range spectrogram images, respectively. In both, the kick drum notes are now color coded: white kicks fall on straight beat locations: quarter notes, eighth notes, and sixteenth notes. Blue kicks fall on swung beat locations: triplet eighths and triplet sixteenths. Red kicks sound 'off' from any subdivision, making the performance sound as if, in Questlove's words, "it was played by a drunk three year old." In other words, Dilla's kick performance is based on several rhythmic subdivisions – straight sixteenth

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notes, swung sixteenth notes, and something in between – rather than a single subdivision. This rules out the possibility that the kick was quantized, as that would eliminate any variation from a chosen basic subdivision. As most hip hop productions during this time displayed less variety in their basic subdivision (whether because they were quantized or because they were based on looped drum breaks), this is one sonic characteristic that audibly distinguished Dilla's production style.

This is one sonic manifestation of what fans and critics have called a "live" or "human" feel in Dilla's music. This was an aesthetic priority for Dilla, as he revealed in an interview for *Scratch* magazine when he said, "I used to listen to records and actually, I wouldn't say look for mistakes but when I heard mistakes in records it was exciting for me. Like, 'Damn, the drummer missed the beat in that shit. The guitar went off key for a second.' I try to do that in my music a little bit, try to have that live feel a little bit to it."[198] Like instrumentalists who are recognizable by the original nature of their timbre, feel, or other sonic signature, Dilla foregrounded the human practitioner behind the beats by intentionally leaving inconsistencies in his rhythms.

"PLAYERS"

To illustrate another way Dilla used an irregular kick drum, let's look at an early masterpiece that Dilla produced for his own group, Slum Village, from their album *Fantastic, Vol 2*. The track is called "Players," and its drum groove displays a similar character to "Runnin."

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[198] Alvin Blanco, "J Dilla: Still Lives Through," *Scratch Magazine*, May/June 2006, http://www.nodfactor.com/2010/02/07/still-lives-through-j-dillas-last-interview/, n.p.
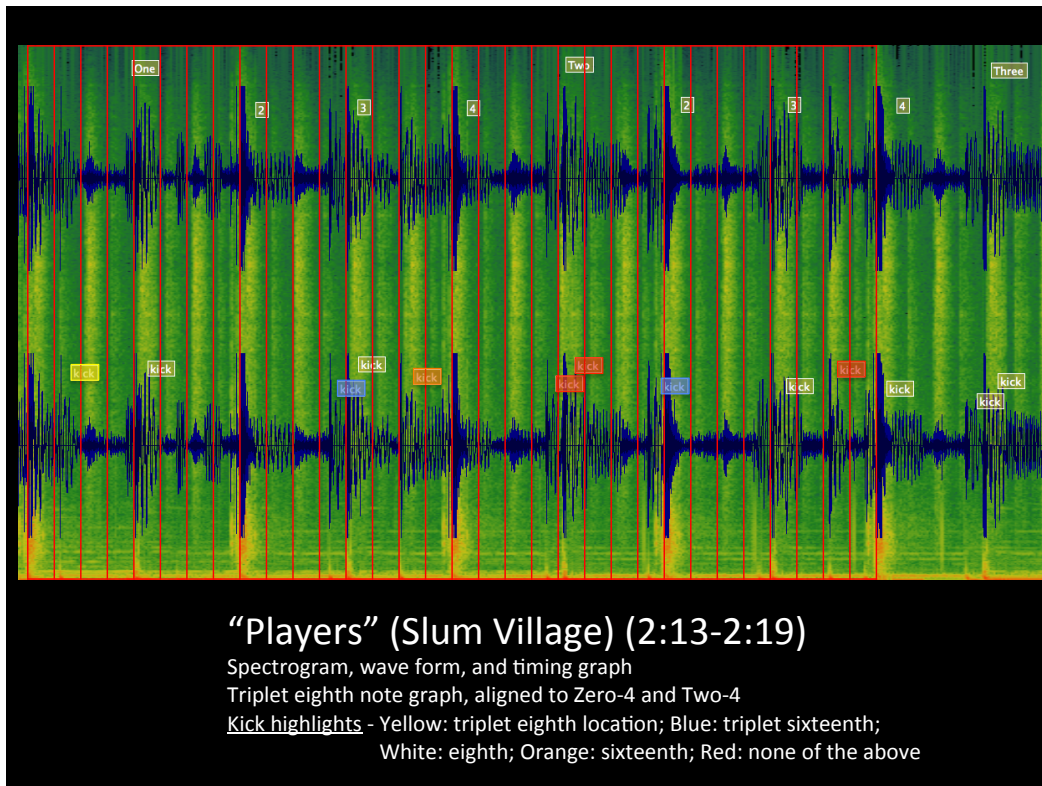
Figure 16. "Players," (2000) 2:13-2:19, kick drum displaying a variety of subdivisions.

"Players" displays a plurality of kick subdivisions similar to "Runnin," as shown in Figure 16. However, unlike "Runnin," "Players" is not a through-composed performance on kick drum, but a four measure loop. This demonstrates one way Dilla reconciled his penchant for "live" rhythms with the common practice of looping. Like "Runnin," Dilla uses a repeating four measure loop of snare, hi-hat and textural samples. However, rather than record the kick drum live over the entire track, Dilla played four measures of kick drum, decided he liked the way it sounded, and looped that as part of the beat.

Though his four measure kick loop is unusual for its multiplicity of rhythmic subdivisions, looping the performance gives it a certain stability compared with the performance on "Runnin." As Tricia Rose observes in her seminal 1994 monograph

Black Noise, "in rap, the 'break beat' itself is looped – repositioned as repetition, as equilibrium inside the rupture. Rap music highlights points of rupture as it equalizes them."[199] Here Rose argues that the music of rap performs two seemingly contradictory kinds of work. Using break beats as primary structural components in rap music highlights rupture, since break beats are themselves ruptures of previous recordings, removed and repurposed. The method in which they are used further foregrounds that rupture by 'cutting' back to the beginning of the loop repeatedly.[200] At the same time, Rose argues, equilibrium is built through the repetition of these smaller units, stabilizing that rupture. Such rupture and repetition brings rap music in line with other afro-diasporic musical practices linked by shared stylistic priorities, including "rhythmic complexity, repetition with subtle variations, [and] the significance of the drum."[201] Joseph Schloss extends this idea in his work on sample-based production, suggesting that looping any segment (even if the original work is not in an African-influenced genre) "serves to 'Africanize' musical material by reorganizing melodic material in accordance with specific African preferences such as cyclic motion, call and response, repetition and variation, and 'groove.'"[202] In this regard, Schloss refers to a "new compositional logic," a previously nonexistent order that is created by looping a musical segment, which in turn establishes a certain stability. Because the listener becomes more accustomed to a beat's

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[199] Rose, *Black Noise,* 70. Break beats are snippets of recordings, often percussion heavy, which serve as the foundational musical material for hip hop DJing and dancing. They are frequently used in sample-based hip hop as building blocks for drum loops. For more on various uses of break beats in hip hop music over time, see Kajikawa, *Sounding Race*.

[200] This echoes Joseph Schloss's "new compositional logic," which describes new musical relationships built by the return from the end of a loop to the beginning. See Schloss, *Making Beats*, 138.

[201] Rose, *Black Noise*, 67.

[202] Schloss, *Making Beats*, 138.

character as it repeats, rhythmic instability in a beat can be mitigated through repetition. Dilla's beats took advantage of this process to present their strange swing in a package digestible to hip hop listeners.

That other hip hop musicians found these unusual rhythms so compelling is a testament to Dilla's ability to make his beats – whether in spite of, or because of, their inconsistencies – align with one particular aesthetic priority of hip hop music: beats should make listeners want to move. We need look no further than rap music's origins as dance music at parties, in clubs, and on radio waves to understand that inducing motion has long been an aesthetic priority for hip hop musicians. Language among rap musicians and fans privileges beats that induce movement, such as Busta Rhymes's 1996 top 10 hit "Woo Hah!! Got You All in Check." The chorus finds Busta rhyming about the movement-inducing nature of his beat, bragging that he's "got that head nod shit that make you break your neck."[203] Addressing the relationship between motion and music in hip hop, scholar Imani Perry observes that "to rock it, to set it off, is to create a holistic experience that engages at least three of four of the senses. Even music not intended as dance music should at least make listeners nod their heads, hence songs like the 'Nod Your Head To This,' or 'The Head-Nodder.'"[204] Perry argues that aesthetic judgments about hip hop music are bound to its ability to induce motion in listeners, whether dancing or simply nodding in time.

In this context, how do listeners take pleasure in (or even make sense of) the unusual microtiming variations in Dilla's beats? One way is through embodied cognition.

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[203] From his album *The Coming*. Dilla was a collaborator of Busta's, and even produced a remix of "Woo Hah!! Got You All in Check," included on the single version of the song.

[204] Perry, *Prophets of the Hood*, 73.

The practice of listening to rap music (and afro-diasporic music generally) is closely associated with movement, whether because of tradition, rappers' lyrical emphasis on various kinds of movement, or both. Listeners frequently bob their heads as part of the listening activity. Historically, rappers have frequently encouraged this behavior, exhorting listeners to "act like you know," in other words to nod your head.[205] Such movement adds an embodied aspect to the listening process, since this requires them to locate a pulse and entrain their movement to it.

One way microscopic timing variations can take on expressiveness is by emphasizing certain beat locations, such as beats 2 and 4, where snares idiomatically are placed. Such emphases may be partly responsible for listeners' inclination toward movement in hip hop. In his work on embodied cognition, pianist and scholar Vijay Iyer argues that performers' adjusting notes from a metronomic pulse can serves to accentuate those notes by postponing an expected 'consequent' within a regular rhythm. Having observed that the backbeat (snare drum on beats two and four in a 4/4 drum set pattern) in practice, "when performed by the most esteemed drummers… frequently displays a microscopic lopsidedness," Iyer posits that microtiming variations function as a kind of accent, by playing against the listener's expectations.[206] Iyer continues, "the optimum snare-drum offset that we call the 'pocket' may well be that precise rhythmic position that maximizes the accentual effect of a delay without upsetting the ongoing sense of pulse. This involves the balance of two opposing forces: the force of regularity that

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[205] Examples from hip hop abound, and the terminology retains its currency today. Two examples are Pete Rock and C.L. Smooth's song "Act Like You Know" from their 1992 album *Mecca and the Soul Brother* and A Tribe Called Quest's "Scenario," from their 1991 album *Low End Theory*.

[206] Iyer, "Embodied Mind," 406.

resists delay, and the backbeat accentuation that demands delay." In this case, Iyer is referring to a snare drum note that is just late to beats two and four, accenting those locations with a slight timing variation. Stated another way, the ongoing sense of pulse creates an expectation of one backbeat location, which the slight snare drum "offset" upsets. That listeners should appreciate such an offset corroborates psychologist William Forde Thompson's suggestion that the most appealing music includes some contradictions of listeners' expectations.

In Dilla's productions we often see an adjustment of snare timing, either before or after the metronomic location of beats two and four. For example, in "Fall In Love" (Figure 12, above) the snare notes are treated with so much reverb that, though they arrive directly 'on' the beat locations, they continue to resonate at full volume for in excess of 30 milliseconds, obscuring a pinpoint locating of their place in the groove. This is visible in their wave form, whose squared-off peaks reveal sustained full volume, rather than a distinct point and decay. Iyer notes the significance of 30 milliseconds as the length of a phoneme, a "rapid flam," or, in the terminology of European concert music, a grace note.[207] In other words, long enough to encompass multiple distinct sonic events, and as such, long enough to muddle pinpoint locating. I am suggesting that, because the snare drum note lasts so long at full volume, it may give the sonic impression that it is closer to the following notes that the preceding notes, making it seem slightly late, thus complicating the evenness revealed by the timing graph in Figure 16. In other beats (which I will examine below) the snare backbeat is slightly early relative to other elements of the beat.

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[207] Iyer, "Embodied Mind," 393.

"KEEP IT ON (THIS BEAT)"

Dilla's beats exhibited a combination of two stable elements and a destabilizing element in multiple ways. In the song titled (perhaps ironically) "Keep It On (This Beat)," from Slum Village's album *Fan-Tas-Tic Vol. 1*, the kick and hi-hat are in time with each other while the snare repeatedly arrives milliseconds early. In contrast to the variety in the kick drum performance on "Runnin," every element of this beat is regular and repetitive. The tension, in this case, results from the snare repeatedly sounding out of time against the kick and hi-hat, as illustrated in Figure 17.
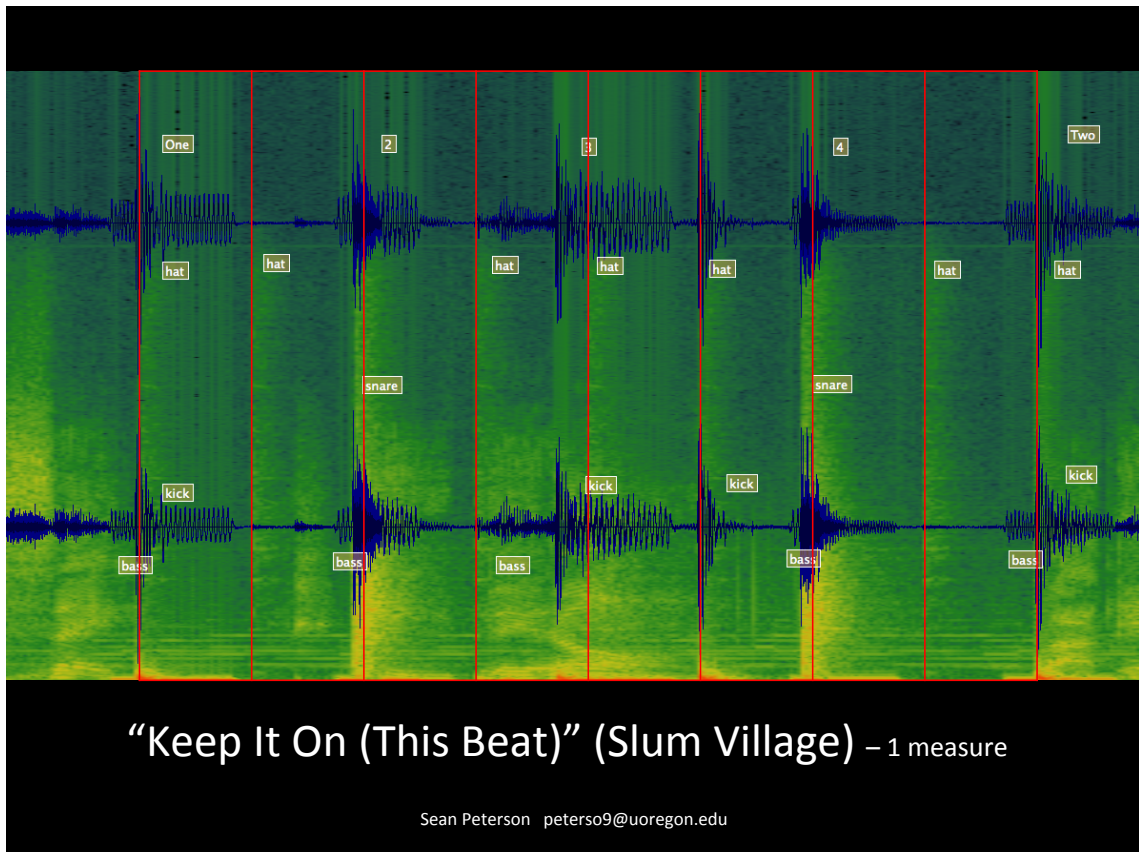
Figure 17. "Keep It On (This Beat)," (2006 [1997]) 0:57 - 1:01. Snare slightly early to beats two and four, while kick drum and hi-hat are aligned. This is the nature of the drum beat throughout the song.

The slightly early snare produces a feeling of forward motion, as elements of the beat seem to rush ahead. The effect is similar to a jazz rhythm section in which one member "pushes" the others. Ingrid Monson, in her study of lockup between bassists and drummers in jazz, notes the tendency of one member to push another, and the effects on the groove. Done properly, the resulting tension can infuse the performance with energy.

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For example, when a bassist pushes forward, playing on the front edge of the tempo relative to the drummer, this can create an excitement and feeling of forward motion.[208]

A major contributor to instability in the groove in "Keep It On (This Beat)" are the synthesizer bass notes, which routinely anticipate drum beats by about 100 milliseconds, the equivalent of a 32nd note at this tempo. Additionally, in every second measure a very short kick drum note precedes the snare on beat two by this same 32nd note, further indicating the importance of that rhythmic value to the swung feeling of this beat. I have identified these elements with circles in Figure 18.

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[208] For a study on the interactions between members of jazz rhythm sections and resulting infusion of energy into jazz grooves, see Monson, *Saying Something*, 56-72. Monson also provides a foundation for my theory about the combination of stable and unstable elements within a groove, as she identifies the ride cymbal in jazz drumming as providing "stability and unity" (67) to a jazz drummer's performance, against which other drums/instruments may push and pull. See also Charles Keil, "Motion and Feeling Through Music," in *Music Grooves: Essays and Dialogues* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 58-74.
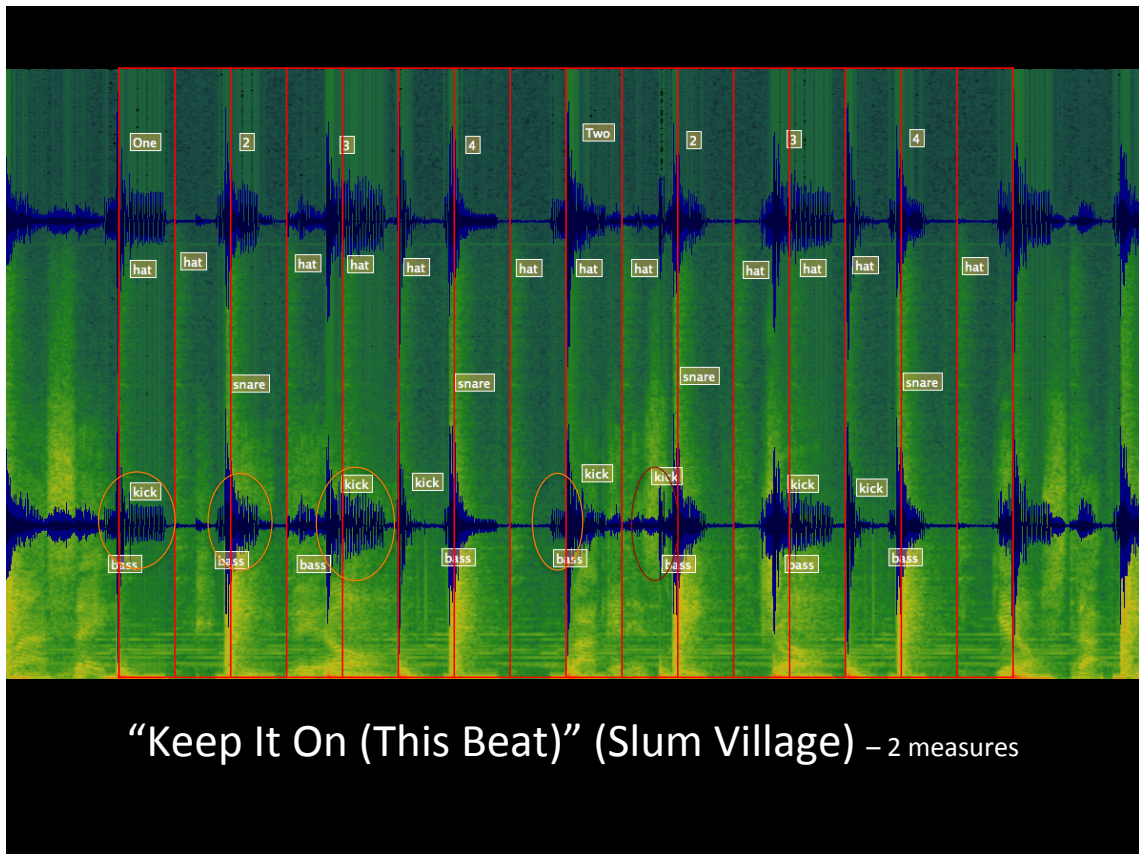
Figure 18. "Keep It On (This Beat)," 0:57 – 1:04. Circles indicate anticipations (of beat locations) by bass or kick notes.

This is a primary site for observing an innovative rhythmic gesture in Dilla's early work that is imitated in the grooves on *Voodoo*: Dilla's use of 32nd note anticipations in this beat are similar to those of D'Angelo's "Playa Playa," depicted in Figures 4 and 5. This reflects the influence Dilla had on *Voodoo*, as Questlove described to *Rolling Stone*, and serves to illustrate the importance of collaboration among Soulquarians musicians.

As original as Dilla's sound was, I am not claiming this was the first time that a creator in a 20th century African American genre had used such small accents to beat locations. On the contrary, Anne Danielsen has described the way that James Brown's

band displayed a "tendency to surround strong beats with small notes," creating what she calls the "downbeat in anticipation," and lending import to beat one in funk grooves.[209] However, Dilla's method for incorporating 32nd note accents to beat locations *throughout* a groove (all four beats of a measure) was highly original, and points to the importance of sampler technology to the conception of this approach to rhythm. Indeed, it was only after the invention of samplers, and their repurposing by hip hop musicians, that a musician created a groove that sounded so destabilized in this way (small accents to every beat), and yet so compelling as to gain popularity among his peers and iconic status among a certain segment of rap listeners.

These near collisions at nearly every beat location result in a feeling the music critic Hua Hsu has called "tipsy," and "woozy," as elements of the beat seem to stumble into one another. In fact, the language often used to describe Dilla's rhythmic feels is revealing of the importance of embodiment to our understanding of such rhythms. Hsu's use of the words "tipsy" and "woozy" invokes particular embodied states. The reader ostensibly understands the critic's language only because of personal experience with tipsiness, and a memory of the physical feeling of being unstable.

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[209] Danielsen, *Presence and Pleasure*, 85.
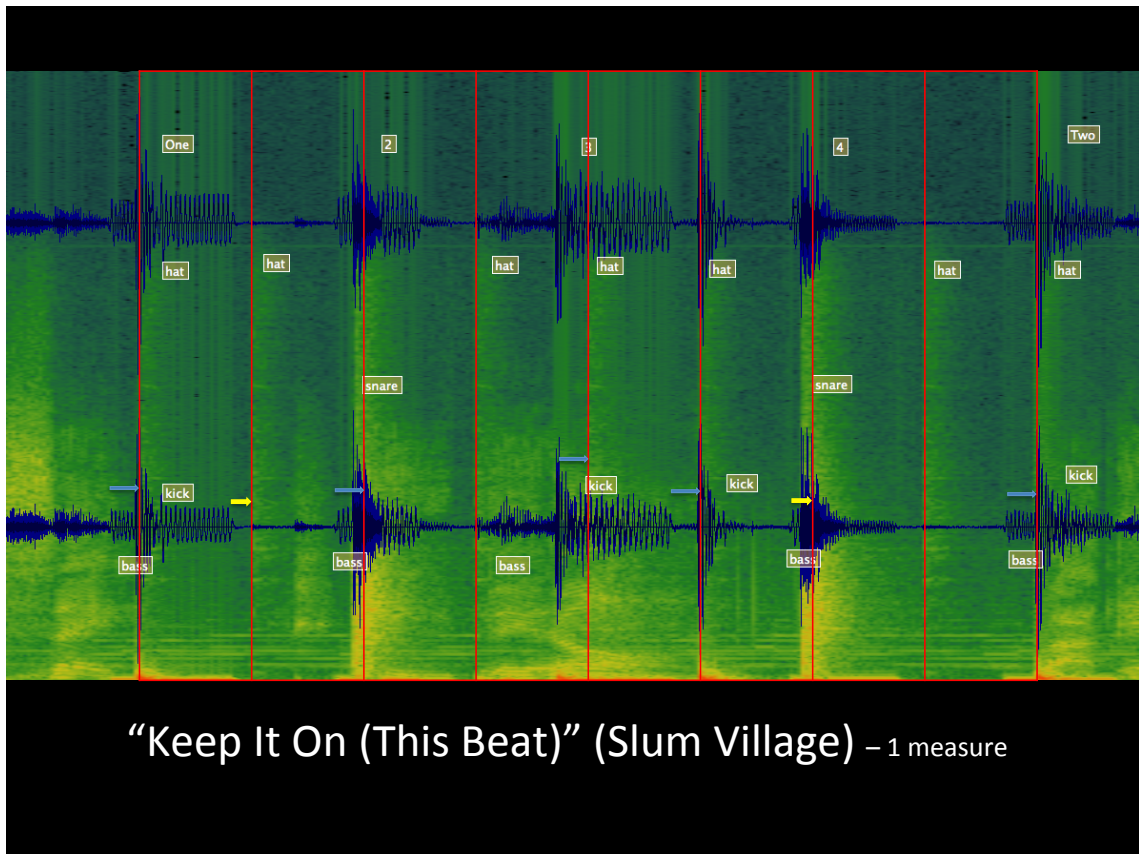
Figure 19. "Keep It On (This Beat)," 0:57 – 1:01. Longer (blue) arrows indicate where components of the structural level anticipate metric locations by a 32nd note. Arrows before beat four the "and" of beat one (yellow) indicate smaller discrepancies, by the synthesizer bass.

Figure 19 reveals ways that Dilla works with some smaller intervals as well, at the end of the bass note before the beat location "1-and," and in the micro-anticipation of synth bass to beat four. These are depicted by the smaller (yellow) arrows. This combination of a variety of small anticipations by bass and snare results in a beat in which structural elements seem to cascade over one another in a rush to the pulse location outlined by kick and hi-hat.

Therefore, "Keep It On (This Beat)" pits anticipatory structural elements (bass and snare) against a stable groove produced by two elements (kick and hat) that are audibly (and visibly) in time with one another. The anticipations function in two ways, generating a sense of forward motion, and serving as a sort of destabilizing rhythmic counterpoint to the primary tactus.[210] Though a clear tactus is outlined by the drums, it is embellished by rhythmic collisions among its structural components, urging listeners to move and figure out the unusual rhythmic combination using embodied cognition. This version of combining stable and unstable is fairly wobbly, as it lurches along, and is a primary cause of Dilla's innovative sound.

"COME GET IT"

Later in The Soulquarians collaboration Dilla released his first solo album, 2001's *Welcome 2 Detroit*. On this album Dilla made changes to his sound which I argue reflected The Soulquarians' influence on him, including greater use of live instruments instead of samples, and explicit references to African musical characteristics. The track "African Rhythms" makes this connection explicit in its title, and by utilizing unusual (for hip hop) percussion including shakers, congas, and rain stick. Dilla's interest in African cultural heritage may have been sparked by Erykah Badu (see chapter 4). While his beats to this point had utilized a revolutionary approach to hip hop rhythms, on *Welcome 2 Detroit* Dilla experiments with what I argue is a reimagining of the tendency to juxtapose duple and triple rhythmic layers in a composite rhythm, common in many types of African music.

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[210] "Tactus" is a centuries-old musical term that essentially means "the primary pulse of a musical performance," which contains smaller rhythmic subdivisions.

The track "Come Get It" is made with an approach to triplet rhythms in the hi-hat. As Figure 20 illustrates, the hi-hat plays eighth notes with a swung triplet feel. That is, the quarter note is divided into eighth notes of unequal length, the most basic illustration of which is a 2:1 ratio. This style of unevenly divided eighth notes is commonly referred to as "swung," and is closely associated with jazz timekeeping, for example, in a jazz drummer's ride cymbal pattern. Dilla introduces this rhythm in the hi-hat, as every on-beat hi-hat note is followed by a swung "echo," visible as both a yellow band on the spectrogram and a small, isolated bump on the wave form.
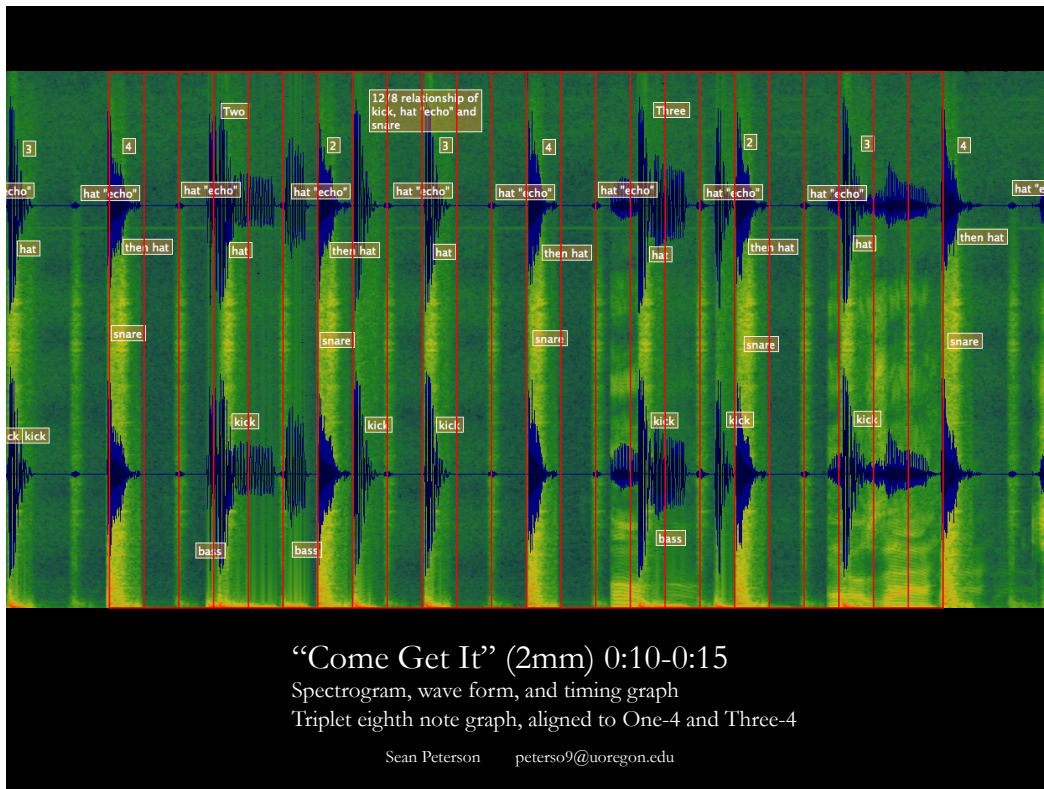
Figure 20. "Come Get It" (2001) (0:10-0:15), spectrogram, wave form, and timing graph.

The graph in Figure 20 clarifies some characteristics of this complicated beat. The way I have oriented the timing graph reveals a correspondence between the hat "echoes," the

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snare, and some of the kicks. The hat echoes seem to be the most quantized element of this beat, as their precise correspondence to the graph at every instance reveals. The snare is fairly steady, but varies slightly at each instance, visible in the alignment of the yellow bands of the spectrogram with the timing graph. The snare aligns very well with the graph at Two-2 and Three-2, but it is a hair early at One-4 and Three-4, and a hair late at Two-4.[211] Despite these inconsistencies, I would argue that the snare works with the hat echoes to define the primary tactus, the variations among snare locations being so small that they do not destabilize the overall tactus of the beat. Their variances simply show that Dilla was able to perform them to his satisfaction with the quantize function turned off. However, destabilization is still a primary part of this beat, as the louder "on-beat" hats frequently follow other structural sounds (snare and kick) slightly, rather than sounding precisely in time with them, as would be idiomatic for a live drummer's performance of such a beat. This is particularly visible at snare locations, where the narrow wave form peaks reveal the snare, but the wide spectrogram band betrays the trailing hats.

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[211] Language like "Two-2" and "Three-3" is my original system for referring to particular beat locations labeled in the Figures/illustrations. The first (spelled) number refers to the measure, the second (numerical) to the beat within that measure.
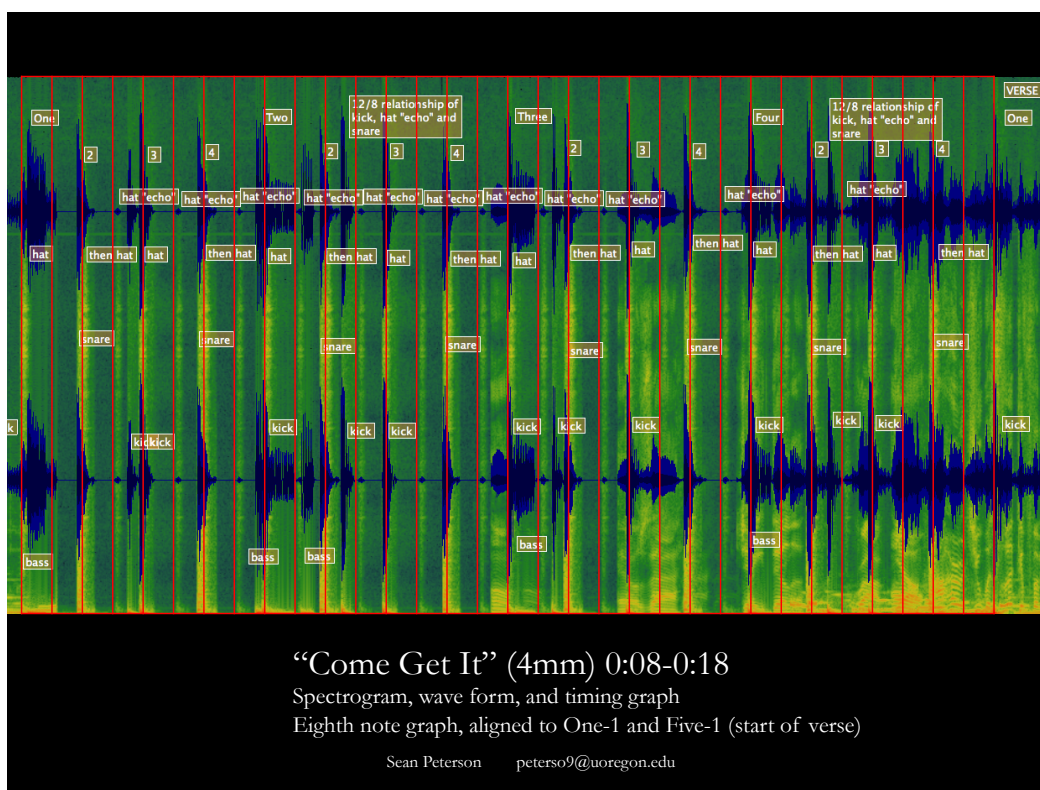
Figure 21. "Come Get It" (0:08 – 0:18). Timing graph showing 8th notes, aligned to hi-hats.

In Figure 21, notice Dilla's use of kick drum as 16th note *anticipations* to beats One-3 and Three-2, and 16th note "*reactions*" after beats Two-2 and Four-2. As in "Keep It On (This Beat)," these kick notes nudge up against primary beat locations, but in this case they contribute to ambiguity in the groove by the contrast of their straight rhythm with the swung hi-hat echoes. This combination of triplet elements which recall 6/8 or 12/8 time signatures (the hi-hat), and elements which fall on straight locations like 16th notes (the kick drum) is quite unusual before Dilla. As in Dilla's other combinations of structural elements, this creates a sort of rhythmic rub, or uneasy relationship between elements, as straight and swung elements compete to define the rhythmic basis of the beat.

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The combination of straight and swung is so important as a distinguishing sonic characteristics of Dilla's rhythms that drummers have noted it in their approach to reproducing his style. In a YouTube tutorial entitled "The Dilla Feel (Part 1)," Arthur Buckner recommends an approach to playing the hi-hat that combines straight and swung in a style he calls "strung" – neither straight nor swung, but somewhere in between.[212] As I noted above, the most basic illustration of a swung rhythm is a 2:1 ratio among eighth notes in the division of a quarter note. A straight eighth note rhythm would divide the quarter note equally, 1:1. Buckner's "strung" concept lands somewhere in the middle, say, 1.5:1. Duple and triple subdivisions like 2:1 and 1:1 are so preponderant through the history of music as to make Dilla's approach to eighth note rhythms distinctly innovative. Indeed, as Buckner's invention of the term strung indicates, it required new language to describe. In "Come Get It," the hi-hat is performed in this strung manner. As I describe above, the early snare precedes the hi-hat on downbeats, lining up with the hat echo in a close approximation of a 2:1 swing relationship, and providing a stable pairing against which to pit other rhythmic tensions.

This flam between the snare and downbeat hi-hat illustrates the second way that Vijay Iyer argues microtiming variation constitutes accentuation: by enabling listeners to distinguish sonic events that would otherwise occur simultaneously. In a typical drum groove in hip hop, rock or funk music and their variations, a drummer would play all structural elements at about the same moment when they overlap, creating a tight lockup. In other words, it is idiomatic in grooves such as these that the snare and hi-hat would be played at the same time, on beat two. In Dilla's beat for "Come Get It," however, they

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[212] McNallySmith, "Behind the Beat w/ Arthur "L.A." Buckner Lesson 1: The Dilla Feel (Part 1)," *YouTube* (4/6/2016). https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-DkM0Zlsmmg

actually sound 70 milliseconds apart, the hi-hat trailing the snare. As a result, the hi-hat is not covered by the snare and both are audible. This, Iyer proposes, fits with Olly Wilson's "heterogeneous sound ideal," in which "musical space is filled up with a variety of contrasting timbres."[213] According to Wilson, in African and Afro-diasporic music "there tends to be an intensification of the stratification of the musical lines by means of emphasizing the independence of timbre (color) for each voice."[214] In this case, the snare has a sort of sharp, slapping sound, whereas the hi-hat Dilla uses recalls a metallic shaker, making a "chuff" sound. This contrast of timbre is audible each time they sound right next to each other.

According to collaborators' reports, Dilla was sensitive to, and intentional about, his creation of microrhythmic irregularities. Dave Cooley, a mixing engineer who worked with Dilla in California, said Dilla "had crazy ears." Dilla would bring Cooley tracks that he had worked on in his home studio. Owing to technology differences between Dilla's software and Cooley's, when songs were loaded into Cooley's system the various tracks (i.e. individual elements of the drums, bass, etc.) didn't align perfectly time-wise. Dilla would instruct Cooley to move each track earlier or later by "baby hairs" until he was satisfied that the composite sounded right. Cooley said, "it felt a little crooked beforehand, before he got his ears on it, but exactly one minute later everything was time-aligned… he could sense timing very, very accurately and zero in on the stuff very

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[213] Iyer, "Embodied Mind," 397.

[214] Wilson, "The Significance of the Relationship," 15.

quickly and fix it."[215] Here Cooley attests to Dilla's sensitivity to lining up

complementary rhythms exactly as he wanted them to sound.

By creating beats with rhythmic rubs, Dilla signifies on rhythmic conventions in

ways that suit black musical aesthetics. In this case, Dilla works with drum machine

technology (samplers) to revise drumming practices in ways that signify on African

American soul, funk, and rock drumming traditions. Following Henry Louis Gates's

definition of signifying as "repetition with a signal difference," Dilla's subject (or

"repetition") is a drum beat whose form resembles those of previous funk and R&B styles

in its metronome sense, utilization of kick, hi-hat and snare, and prominent back beat.[216]

The signal difference, then, is Dilla's particular combinations of stable and unstable

elements, combinations that were never popularized by live drummers, but originated in

sample-based production.

In an in interview with musician Ali Shaheed Muhammad, famed Public Enemy

producer Hank Shocklee explained hip hop musicians' approaches by saying "it's more

about the off, than it is the on."[217] Shocklee was referring to musicians' "misuse" of

technology like the E-mu SP-1200 drum machine (sampler), which he said was meant to

be a "percussion machine," but which he and others had repurposed for sampling horns,

strings, and many other recorded sounds in the production of their beats. Shocklee went

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[215] Soul Daad Entertainment, "J Dilla Documentary (xXxHIPHOP)," *YouTube*, November 3, 2011, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SPZvh4wsBF0, 21:00. All of the comments by Cooley quoted in this paragraph are from this source.

[216] Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 51.

[217] Ali Shaheed Muhammad and Frannie Kelley, "Hank Shocklee: 'We Had Something to Prove'," April 16, 2015, in *Microphone Check,* podcast, https://www.npr.org/sections/microphonecheck/2015/04/16/399817846/hank-shocklee-we-had-something-to-prove, 24:43-26:24.

on to explain the hip hop aesthetics that guided such choices, saying, "hip hop has been made from the distortion of technology… from using it in ways that the manufacturers never intended it to be used."[218] In the same way, Dilla repurposes drum machines to play innovative rhythmic feels. To repurpose Shocklee's words, Dilla's beats occupy more spaces that would be considered "off" than typical drum performances, which are "on" except to the extent that they included intended and unintended discrepancies. With regard to rhythm, Dilla worked more in the realm of the "off" than any previous hip hop producer had.

CREATIVE REUSE OF SOURCES

In this section I will describe the way Dilla creatively deconstructed sample sources and used the constituent parts to fashion original compositions. Specifically, I will look at the way he used Bobby Caldwell's 1978/1980 song "Open Your Eyes" and The Detroit Emeralds' 1973 "You're Getting a Little Too Smart" to make Common's 2000 hit "The Light."[219] Then I will compare this use of sample sources to sample use in two 1997 hits by Sean "Puffy" Combs: Puff Daddy and the Family's "Can't Nobody Hold Me Down," and "I'll Be Missing You." I will argue that Dilla's particularly creative transformation of sources allowed him to transcend some of what Joseph Schloss describes as a producers' code of ethics. At the same time, the lack of creative

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[218] Similarly, Tricia Rose has argued that "rap producers actively and aggressively deploy strategies that revise and manipulate musical technologies so that they will articulate black cultural priorities." Rose provides the example of producers' working "in the red" as evidence. To work "in the red" is to turn up tracks so loud during the mixing process that they begin to distort. This creates a noisiness in the track that subverts values like cleanliness and timbral cohesion that underlie European musical aesthetics. See Rose, *Black Noise*, 74-80.

[219] "Open Your Eyes" was issued as the B-side to the single (45 rpm) version of "Coming Down From Love" in 1978. Both songs were later issued on Caldwell's 1980 LP "Cat In the Hat."

manipulation in Puff Daddy's reuse of his source material caused his reputation to suffer among hip hop producers and aficionados, even as his bank accounts swelled.

The many basic melodic and textural elements of the beat for Common's "The Light" are all sampled from Bobby Caldwell's "Open Your Eyes." Bass guitar, synthesizer, piano, and vocals are each sampled individually, and reused creatively to construct a musical whole that is distinct from its source material. The origins of each of these elements in Caldwell's recording are recognizable, but Dilla has rearranged them into a compelling new architecture.

Dilla's reuse of multiple elements from the same recording stands opposed to what Joseph Schloss characterizes as hip hop producers' "general adherence to a defined set of professional ethics," one maxim of which is "one can't sample more than one part of a given record."[220] Schloss continues, "the association of ethical righteousness with creativity is manifested in this rule." In other words, the perceived creativity of a producer's work is diminished by using multiple parts of a record on the same track, since they have already been engineered to sound good together and may require less sonic manipulation by way of equalization, reverb, and compression to combine into a cohesive texture. However, as Schloss explains, the value that is ultimately at stake is creativity: a producer may not sample from the same recording because it doesn't require creative reimagining and recomposition.

Dilla may have viewed such codes – if he was aware of them – as stifling his creativity, rather than encouraging it. According to Jordan Ferguson, "Few producers seemed to flagrantly violate the established rules of hip hop production like J Dilla.

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[220] Schloss, *Making Beats*, 101 and 130-133.

Those who speak of him often return to not only his almost monastic work ethic, but also the fact that he refused to be limited by anything when it came to how he made his music."[221] Like other Soulquarians, Dilla was not interested in rules placed around what he could and couldn't do, musically.[222] Producers' code of ethics or no, Dilla was going to make music the way he saw fit. Perhaps surprisingly, Schloss observes that such violations did not diminish Dilla's popularity within the producers' community. "What's interesting to me," Schloss writes, "is that the producers I knew at the time still really respected him… I haven't gone back and asked them about it, but my guess would be that they felt that his creativity outweighed any perceived violations."[223] If, as Schloss suggests, his creativity was the cause for his exceptional acceptance among producers, we might productively ask in what original and innovative ways did Dilla use his source materials creatively?

Dilla sampled bass, synth and piano separately, taking them from various locations in "Open Your Eyes," and reordering them constructively. The bass is sampled from 0:40 to 1:00 in Caldwell's song, isolated using a filter.[224] Dilla reorders the original bassline, however.

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[221] Ferguson, *J Dilla's Donuts*, 34.

[222] In particular, Erykah Badu was vocal about resisting limitations placed on her by other people. See chapter four.

[223] Quoted in Ferguson, *J Dilla's Donuts*, 36-37.

[224] A filter is a feature on a sampler which filters out certain frequencies from the sampled piece of music, allowing the user to isolate a certain instrument by cutting out the frequencies of others that might be "covering" it in the original song.

Bass: Bobby Caldwell's "Open Your Eyes"
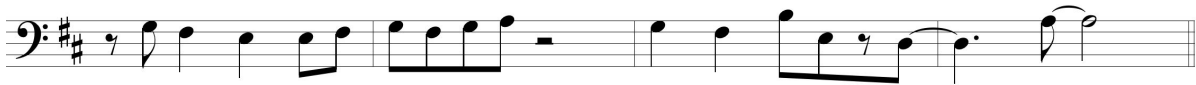
(loop starts here ^)

^--^

Dilla's looped segment

Bass: Common's "The Light"

Figure 22. Bass part in Bobby Caldwell's "Open Your Eyes" (1978) and Dilla's adaptation of it for Common's "The Light" (2000).

As Figure 22 shows, Dilla's iteration is assembled from measures two and three of Caldwell's, measure three first, then two. Dilla splices the two together at the beat "4and," substituting the F# pickup from the end of measure one for the D that ends measure three. The annotation below Figure 22 indicates the eight beats that Dilla loops, as well as where he begins the new loop.

Dilla's new bassline fits well with his drum part, which is constructed from the drum break that opens the Detroit Emeralds' "You're Getting A Little Too Smart." Dilla assembled the drums by looping two beats of kick drum, closed hi-hat, and snare (labeled 'A' in Figure 23, below), then letting it spin out to include the break's characteristic open hi-hat note on beat "2and." (labeled "B" in Figure 23) The coincidence of the end of the bass line and the prominent open hi-hat note at measure two, beat "2and" is further emphasized by the absence of bass drum in the remainder of measure two.

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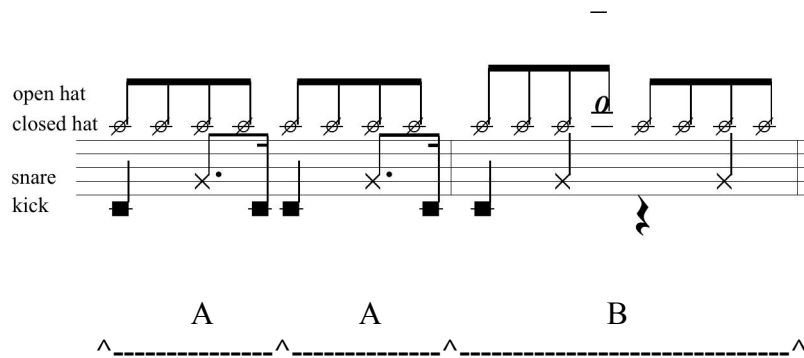
Figure 23. Dilla's drum part for Common's "The Light" (2000).

The absence of kick (a primary part of the sonic texture) in the second half of measure two creates aural space for the rest of the music, emphasizing a synthesizer hook that Dilla placed there, and the ends of Common's rhymed couplets. I would argue that this increased the memorability of Common's lines, many of which land on listeners and stay with them after the song is over. Like a good melodic hook, this may have contributed to the popularity and reach of the song, which peaked at #44 on Billboard's Hot 100 chart on September 9th, 2000, the most popular single for either Dilla or Common up to that time. Placing emphasis on the ends of couplets has a long history in rap, though this is most often accomplished by MCs doubling those rhyme ends, or the producers dropping out elements of the beat sporadically. In the case of "The Light," Dilla builds this end-rhyme emphasis into the texture of the complete beat, a bold decision which takes advantage of *space* to create impact. Moreover, the ways that Dilla constructed the bass and drum parts illustrates a certain imagination in his work: his ability to create new musical phrases from constituent parts, and match them musically to each other and to other elements of the beat.

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Dilla also displays this imagination in his reconstruction of vocal samples for the song's chorus. All of Dilla's vocal samples come from Caldwell's "Open Your Eyes," between 1:02 and 1:42. In Figure 24, I've transcribed Caldwell's vocal through this section, and labeled the segments into which Dilla chopped it.

<div style="color:red">There are times</div> [A]
<div style="color:red">When you'll need someone</div>
<div style="color:red">I will be by your side</div>
<div style="color:purple">I take my chances</div> [B]
<div style="color:purple">Before they pass, pass me by</div>
<div style="color:green">Oh darling</div> [C]
<div style="color:blue">There is a light that shines</div> [D]
<div style="color:blue">Special for you and me</div>
<div style="color:orange">You need a look at the other side</div> [E]
<div style="color:orange">You'll agree</div>

Figure 24. Bobby Caldwell's vocals on "Open Your Eyes" (1:02 – 1:42). Letters in [brackets] indicate Dilla's chops for use on the chorus of "The Light."

Caldwell's song is sung from the perspective of a suitor attempting a seduction of a potential lover who is recently heartbroken. He urges her to "look at the other side," and he indicates his opportunism and willingness to "take my chances." Dilla's reordering of Caldwell's lyrics changes the narrative into a love story that invokes spirituality and purity. See Figure 25.

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| Chorus 1 | "There are times when you need someone / I will be by your side" | [A] |
| [1:03-1:23] | "There is a light that shines / special for you and me" | [D] |

Chorus 2	"There are times when you need someone / I will be by your side"	[A]
[2:07-2:27]	"Oh darlin"	[C]
	"There is a light that shines / special for you and me"	[D]

Chorus 3	"There are times when you need someone / I will be by your side"	[A]
[3:07-3:27]	"Oh darlin [cut up]"	[C]
	"There is a light that shines / special for you and me"	[D]

Outro	"Take my chances" [cut up, echo]	[B]
[3:27-3:51]	"Before they pass" [echo]	[B]
	"Pass me by"	[B]
	"Oh darlin"	[C]
	"You need a look at the other side"	[E]
	"You'll agree" [echo]	[E]

Figure 25. Dilla's reordering of Caldwell's vocals for the choruses of "The Light."

Dilla's close associate Frank Nitt was present for the making of the beat, and marveled at Dilla's ability to effect such a change, saying "even watching it, knowing what song he used, I still couldn't figure out how he would chop it the way he did… you made Bobby Caldwell, he sung what he wanted to sing, but then you made him sing what you wanted him to sing, and it sounds right."[225] By replacing the introspective gambler's sentiment "I take my chances" with the hopeful and reassuring "there is a light that shines, special for you and me," Dilla changes the lyric to portray a special relationship between two people, rather than the hopes and pursuits of one.

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[225] Complex, "Common – 'The Light' – Magnum Opus on Complex," *YouTube*, September 18, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=25&v=bgv6HesJXeg, 6:00.

This mirrors Common's lyrical focus during this time, which had shifted to include genuine appreciation and respect for women, rather than objectification. "The Light" was a love anthem that stood out from other portrayals of women in rap by the lyrics of Common's verses, which included lines like "If relationship is effort I will match your work / I want to be the one to make you happiest / and hurt you the most." In a retrospective interview, Common said, "[there's] no way I felt like I could mess that beat up… it was one of those songs when you're really just pouring out your heart, it's just coming from your soul and not thinking too much."[226] The importance of this idea of "soul" to the track is notable for two reasons. First, Common recalled his attraction to Caldwell's singing, saying "funny part about it I never knew he was white until we sampled him. I was like, wow, this dude got so much soul, so, soul is colorless."[227] Common heard soul in Caldwell's performance, something that connected it to previous generations of black music in America.[228] Second, Common's lyrics invoke an ambiguous spirituality, which figures in the relationship that is the song's subject. Lyrics

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[226] Complex, "Common - 'The Light'," 7:10.

[227] Complex, "Common - 'The Light,'" 6:05.

[228] Soul, an ineffable and contested quality in and outside of music, has been variously described in terms of racial essentialism, and community unification. While Ulf Hannerz (1970) sees it as "that intangible element which differentiates blackness from all other racial categories," (quoted in Jason King, "When Autobiography," 214), Robin Kelley calls it a "discourse through which African Americans at a particular historical moment, claimed ownership of the symbols and practices of their own imagined community," and Jason King claims it functions as a "unifying discourse" (1999, 237) within black communities. I would argue that Common's recognition of soul in Caldwell's performance rests on qualities of his singing that echo black artists of the 1960s and 1970s, including Marvin Gaye, Stevie Wonder, Otis Redding, and James Brown, whose music was embraced within what Mark Anthony Neal calls "the black public sphere" at a time when the label "soul" emerged as a marketing tool for music. Jason King, "When Autobiography Becomes Soul: Erykah Badu and the Cultural Politics of Black Feminism," *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 10, no. 1-2 [19-20] (1999): 214. Robin D. G. Kelley, *Yo' Mama's Disfunktional!: Fighting the Culture Wars in Urban America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1997), 25. See also Richard C. Green and Monique Guillory, eds., *Soul: Black Power, Politics, and Pleasure* (New York: New York University Press, 1998).

like "they say the end is near, it's important that we close / to the most high / regardless of what happen, on Him let's rely" bring love, soul, and spirit into the same orbit, giving listeners a distinctly spiritual way to conceive of their earthly relationships, one which brought love and sex far from the one-sided narratives of power and misogyny found in many rap records and videos of the time.

Such sentiments characterized the work of Soulquarians artists during this time, whose work rarely included misogynistic or objectifying language. There are exceptions, notably the verses by Method Man and Redman on D'Angelo's "Left and Right," (2000). Common himself inserted a skit at the end of the song "The 6th Sense" (2000), in which he signifies on pimp narratives that elevate men and relegate women. Common seems to poke fun at himself for being unable to commit to a feminist stance. The skit depicts a scene in which Common is approached by a woman who is familiar with his progressive lyrics and thanks him for them. Common receives her praise by telling her his concern comes from having a daughter, but then he is interrupted by a second woman with whom he becomes physically violent, talking to her as a pimp might to a prostitute. He sends her away to work for him and resumes polite conversation with the first woman, who sounds rather confused about Common's juxtaposition of sensitivity and abusiveness. While the whole things seems like it is intended to be funny, listeners could hear it as a regression on Common's part, and a conciliatory gesture to listeners who enjoy misogynist portrayals in rap. This is perhaps particularly stinging since rappers who perform alternatives to misogyny (like Common) were at this time vastly outnumbered by those who used misogyny to appeal to listeners. Admittedly, this complicates my portrayal of

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the Soulquarians' music as lyrically progressive. It is worth noting, I think, that just such a complication seems to be Common's intent with this track, whatever his motives.

Unlike the beats described in the first half of this chapter, "The Light" doesn't foreground microtiming variations as part of its sonic character. This is not because such a rhythmic character was not appealing to Common, whose decision it was to use the beat. Indeed, Common writes in his memoir, "Jay Dee's legacy was that he created a sound in music that was so funky, so organic and timeless. His work gives you a feeling of joy, of why we love music… he innovated a sound that had what you'd call a hump to it like nobody else ever did."[229] Common's use of the uncommon term "hump" refers (as he explains elsewhere) to the rhythmic bounce of a track, and it is noteworthy that he credits Dilla with "innovating" a sound with so much of that quality that he was peerless. But "The Light" has a different sort of hook to it, more along the lines of the feeling of joy that Common mentions. In other words, "The Light" was popular and sold well not because of the microtiming qualities that I have pointed out in several examples of Dilla's work (which drew other musicians like Questlove, Q-Tip, and D'Angelo to him), but because of other qualities. For example, there is a brightness to it, the result of its major tonality, the insistence of the piano chords on every eighth note, layers of effected synthesizers playing major-tonality licks and hooks. This is undoubtedly aided by the positivity of the lyrics, both in Dilla's reconstruction of Caldwell's voice in the choruses, and in the love and spirituality of Common's verses. Because of some combination of these elements and more, the song sold well, and spurred *Like Water For Chocolate* to

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[229] Common with Adam Bradley, *One Day It'll All Make Sense: A Memoir* (New York: Atria, 2011), 251.

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"Gold" status, according to the RIAA.[230] In "The Light," Dilla displayed his ability to reuse source materials with exceptional creativity and musicality.

By way of comparison, let's now look at a song by producer Sean "Puffy" Combs (aka Puff Daddy or P. Diddy) who achieved tremendous popular success near the beginning of the Soulquarians collaboration. Whereas Dilla's exceptional creativity enabled him to transcend adherence to the producers' code of ethics, Puffy's tendency to build songs from barely-changed source materials drew the ire of musicians and rap fans. According to Oliver Wang,

> One reason why producer Sean "Puffy" Combs earned the scorn of certain rap consumers in the late 1990s was due to his minimal alterations while reusing samples made popular by previous artists. Critics deemed this an uncreative form of copying, a somewhat ironic critique given how rap songs, generally, were based on samples of other artists' music to begin with.[231]

Two songs from 1997 will serve to make my point. On March 22, 1997, Puffy had his first Billboard #1 with "Can't Nobody Hold Me Down." Puffy and rapper Mase rapped over the beat, which was a barely-changed sample of the beat from Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five's classic 1982 song "The Message." This was legally done, as the sample was acknowledged as "by permission of Rhino Records" in the liner notes, and authorship was credited to the creators of "The Message" as well as Puffy and the track's other producers, Carlos Broady, Nashiem Myrick, and Steven Jordan. However, the wholesale use of such a recognizable and iconic beat from hip hop history had previously

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[230] The album was certified Gold on August 11, 2000, as "The Light" played heavily on radio. The song peaked at #44 on the Billboard Hot 100 chart on September 9, 2000, and spent a total of 19 weeks on the chart. See https://www.riaa.com/gold-platinum/?tab_active=default-award&se=like+water+for+chocolate+common#search_section. See also https://www.billboard.com/music/common/chart-history/hot-100/song/387496.

[231] Oliver Wang, "Beat-making," in *The Grove Dictionary of American Music*, edited by Charles Hiroshi Garrett, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013).

been inexcusable within the culture of hip hop producers. More broadly, artists in all of hip hop's forms (MCing, DJing, graffiti, b-boying, producing) based their judgments of aesthetic quality on a participant's creation of what Tricia Rose calls "a style nobody can deal with," which depends to a great degree on originality, boldness, and creativity.[232] As I've mentioned earlier in this chapter, Joseph Schloss's "code of ethics" among sample based producers provides several guidelines which Puffy's track violates, among them "no biting," "one cannot sample from other hip hop records," and "one can't sample records one respects."[233] Again, creativity and originality are the overarching guidelines. By using the music of "The Message," Puffy displayed very little creativity (though plenty of business acumen), instead utilizing the creative work of other hip hop artists for his own gain. Previously, tracks which had displayed a similar lack of creative transformation in their beats, while tremendously popular on a mainstream level, had been vilified in the hip hop community. Notable examples include MC Hammer's "U Can't Touch This," which took Rick James's "Super Freak" (1981) quite literally as its basis, and Vanilla Ice's "Ice, Ice Baby," which did similarly with Queen's and David Bowie's "Under Pressure" (1982). Nevertheless, Puffy saw the marketability of such strategies, and prioritized profit ahead of artistic acclaim. Additionally, Puffy and Mase interpolated vocals from Matthew Wilder's 1983 hit "Break My Stride" for the song's chorus, and this became the source for the song's title. While such interpolations are common in hip hop (see chapter two in this document on The Roots, and chapter four on Erykah Badu), Puffy and Mase rendered an extremely off key performance, displaying a

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[232] Tricia Rose, "A Style Nobody Can Deal With: Politics, Style and the Postindustrial City in Hip Hop," in *Microphone Fiends: Youth Music, Youth Culture*, ed. by Andrew Ross and Tricia Rose (New York: Routledge, 1994), 71-88.

[233] Schloss, *Making Beats*, 101-133.

lack of regard for improving on the original, or even providing a pleasurable listening experience. This might have been forgiven; after all, rapper Biz Markie had been warbling off key for years. However, the unchanged use of Edward "Duke Bootee" Fletcher's music from "The Message" was a slap in the face of hip hop ethics and aesthetics. As Dan Charnas observes, "for some people in the hip hop nation, Combs's flamboyance was fraudulence. The rise of Bad Boy [Combs's record label] seemed to usher in a new era in which authenticity and credibility were defined less by artistry and more by access to power, whether in the street or the boardroom."[234] While "getting paid" and making the most of a bad situation were aspects of hip hop participation since the advent of hip hop recording, the hip hop community had always vilified practitioners who had sacrificed creativity and used the work of others to the extent displayed here by Puffy.

Hot on the heels of "Can't Nobody Hold Me Down," Puffy released "I'll Be Missing You," a tribute to his close associate, rapper Christopher "Biggie Smalls" Wallace (aka The Notorious B.I.G.), who had been murdered only weeks before. The song featured Wallace's widow, Faith Evans, and was produced by Combs and Steven "Stevie J" Jordan. It was extremely popular, reaching #1 on the Billboard Hot 100 on June 14, 1997, and staying there for 11 weeks, only to be supplanted by another Biggie/Puff song, "Mo Money Mo Problems." This string of hits demonstrates Bad Boy Records' dominance of the record market at the time. Dan Charnas observes as much, writing, "With 'All About the Benjamins' as Combs's follow-up track [to 'I'll Be Missing You'], and continuing singles from The Notorious B.I.G.'s *Life After Death*, Bad

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[234] Dan Charnas, *The Big Payback: The History of the Business of Hip-Hop* (New York: New American Library, 2010), 467.

Boy songs comprised 39 percent of the number one records on the Billboard Hot 100 in 1997."[235] Puffy had achieved his goal, and made "mo' money" not just a song title, but a reality for himself and those close to him. Again, Combs and his team looped a recognizable sample from a well-known song to form the basis for the rhythm track, in this case, The Police's 1983 hit, "Every Breath You Take."[236]

The most identifiable part of the loop is the guitar, which arpeggiates an eight measure chord progression in a style reminiscent of Baroque "alberti bass" techniques. Combs' and Jordan's use of the sample simplifies the form of the Police song by sampling only the chord progression from the chorus, without the pre-chorus ("oh can't you see") or bridge ("since you've gone"), and uses this progression for all of "I'll Be Missing You." Rather than retain Sting's more syncopated bass part underneath the guitar part, Combs and Jordan create a new bass part which, while it still grounds the guitar chords, contains less rhythmic interest than the Police's, and perhaps does less to distract from the guitar hook. A prominent but rather bland kick drum and snare drum are added, interspersed with a mix of sampled and drum machine hi-hats. The beat is simple and unassuming, and doesn't draw attention to itself, except that the guitar sample from The Police's #1 hit song is eminently recognizable. This indicates that the prominent guitar sample and vocals are obviously meant to be the song's centerpiece; the drums simply help get the song "in the sonic ballpark" of hip hop and R&B enough to get it in front of listeners who will buy it. Compared to Dilla's use of samples, then, these two songs use much longer chunks of music, and treat them less transformatively. Puffy uses eight

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[235] Charnas, *The Big Payback*, 501.

[236] This was The Police's only #1 hit, reaching its Billboard chart peak on July 9, 1983. See http://www.billboard.com/music/the-police.

measures of guitar in "I'll Be Missing You" and four measure of the full beat in "Can't Nobody Hold Me Down," whereas Dilla works with two measures of bass and one measure of drums in "The Light," and alters his source material in both cases.

Lyrically, "I'll Be Missing You" focuses on the people left behind. The chorus, sung by Faith Evans, exemplifies this theme, changing the lyrics of the original to fit the sentiment. The Police's "every step you take" becomes "every step I take," and "every move you make" becomes "every move I make." Whereas The Police's lyrics are from the perspective of a lover who longs for his lost beloved, and will go so far as to stalk her, Puffy and Evans' lyrics express longing for the absent Wallace, while remaining focused on themselves. By comparison, while both "I'll Be Missing You" and "The Light" change the lyrics of their source material to fit the new song, Dilla reorders Bobby Caldwell's lyrics in a way that suggests a new narrative that replaces seduction with heartfelt adoration, and adds a spiritual dimension. Puffy changes The Police's "I'll be watching you" to "I'll be missing you," a relatively less creative shift that substitutes one sort of longing for another, retaining an explicit association with the popular source material.

Soulquarians artists reacted to Puffy's productions on wax and in print. For example, Mos Def's song "Children's Story" parodies a Slick Rick song, making as if to tell a bedtime story to eager children.[237] It quickly becomes clear, however, that his story is intended for his peers, as he addresses industry practices like Puffy's at this time. In one line he compares non-transformative sampling to stealing, and pursuit of wealth to a

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[237] I mentioned above a live version Questlove witnessed. A studio version of the song was also released on Mos Def and Talib Kweli's 1998 album *Mos Def and Talib Kweli are Black Star*, which is where I've gotten the lyrics for this example.

medical illness, saying, "they jacked the beats, money came with ease / but son, he couldn't stop, it's like he had a disease." Mos's work not only criticizes Puffy's non-transformative sampling, it presents an alternative: Mos creates a completely new narrative in his reuse of material, creatively transforming the themes in Slick Rick's original. Questlove characterized developments in the record business that created the opportunity for Puffy's success, observing, "something changed when commerce arrived. Good and bad stopped mattering; only effective and ineffective mattered."[238] He goes on to contextualize Puffy's business model within this frame, writing, "we [The Roots] were… capable of delivering great music but totally lost in the image department. And image was starting to become central to the genre, thanks in large part to the way that Puffy had taken *The Chronic*'s vision and magnified it twentyfold for Biggie's *Ready to Die*."[239] Questlove's analytical stance from 2013 is tempered by age and perspective (and material success of his own), perhaps. Contemporary critics didn't appreciate Puffy's work much either, and were occasionally backhanded about it, as a review of Slum Village's *Fantastic Vol. 2* in the Phoenix New Times reveals. The reviewer writes, "there isn't a single gimmick on the entire record – no air-puffed choruses or recognizable riffs sampled from pop tunes," employing a play on Puffy's name to denote a lack of substance.[240] Similarly, in his liner notes to *Voodoo*, Saul Williams explicitly positioned D'Angelo in opposition to profit at the expense of artistry, writing, "we seem to be more preoccupied with cultivating our bank accounts than cultivating our crafts. Nowadays, I

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[238] Questlove, *Mo' Meta Blues*, 112. In this passage Questlove is referring to Dr. Dre's 1992 album *The Chronic*, which he argues had changed the hip hop artistic landscape by taking marketability as its primary concern.

[239] Questlove, *Mo' Meta Blues*, 146.

[240] Darren Keast, "Slum Village," *Phoenix New Times*, July 27, 2000, http://www.phoenixnewtimes.com/music/slum-village-6416593, n.p.

find my peers more inspired by an artist's business tactics than their artistry."[241] Puffy's prioritization of profit above artistry drew the ire of critics and Soulquarians artists, who positioned themselves as artists first, and businesspeople second.

CONCLUSIONS

J Dilla is often spoken of as an innovator, and has been tremendously influential among hip hop producers and instrumentalists alike. Keyboardist Robert Glasper has said, "[Dilla] was the only producer I know that literally changed the way cats play their instruments. Dilla changed the way I play the piano. He changed the way drummers play their beats. People are trying to copy him and not the other way around."[242] Dilla's music inspired such reverence that bands like Glasper's and The Roots played versions of *entire* beats, performing relatively faithful instrumental arrangements of his compositions.[243] The fact that multiple high-profile acts recorded verbatim instrumental reproductions of Dilla's music attests to the regard instrumentalists had for the ways that Dilla combined samples. This is due, no doubt, to Dilla's knack for combining sampled chords into original progressions, and creating memorable melodies, as well as to the innovative rhythms in many of his beats, whose combinations of in-time and out-of-time elements

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[241] Saul Williams, *Voodoo* liner notes, 2000, n.p.

[242] Rest In Beats, "Robert Glasper on What Made Dilla Unique," *YouTube,* July 1, 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jMOYytotvpQ, 1:30-2:08.

[243] The Roots covered a number of Dilla tunes, notably on their mixtape "Dilla Joints," on which they concoct 41 minutes of continuous, spontaneous, and faithful instrumental approximations of Dilla compositions. Physical formats are unavailable (though I have seen rumors of a 2017 vinyl test pressing), but an MP3 version of the recording was released online following a Twitter announcement by Questlove on February 7, 2010. Orchestral versions of Dilla's works have been produced too: Miguel Atwood Ferguson arranged and produced a live DVD recording called *Timeless: Suite for Ma Dukes* in 2010, and the UK "hip hop big band" Abstract Orchestra released an album of arrangements of Dilla beats entitled *Dilla* in 2017.

(the "on" and the "off") are unlike performances of rhythm in previous styles like jazz, funk and R&B.

I have argued that Dilla's rhythmic character is so unlike these other forms that it signifies on previous afro-diasporic rhythmic practices to establish a new kind of swing in popular music. This chapter has shown several traits of his beats that produce this character, including combining both swung and straight rhythmic elements ("Come Get It," "Runnin"), programming a live performance of kick drum that included "out of time" events ("Runnin," "Players"), a snare drum track that rushes slightly ("Keep It On"), and "nudging" up against beat locations with low-frequency elements like kick and synth bass ("Keep It On," "Players"). In all these cases, I have shown that elements of the beat that effect a destabilizing function exist within a stable rhythmic context produced by the rhythmic alignment of two or more quantized elements. These techniques allowed Dilla's beats to emulate characteristics of participatory music making by juxtaposing various points of attack, and comprising contrasting rhythmic subdivisions. Emulating participatory musicking helped Dilla's beats manifest a certain human-performative character to an extent previously unrealized by sample-based producers.

Pushing the limits of desirable discrepancies within cyclic grooves, Dilla's style of using samplers exaggerated expressive rhythm in ways that were legible and compelling to hip hop musicians and audiences. His production style inspired emulation by D'Angelo on *Voodoo*, and contributed directly to every other Soulquarians project. While Dilla was perhaps the Soulquarians' least visible member, owing to his shyness and behind-the-scenes producer's role, his impact on the music of the collaboration cannot be overestimated. The difference in his sound, and the allegiance it inspired

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among other Soulquarians, indicates a crucial aspect of the Soulquarians' ethos: the importance of sounding original.

Recall Questlove's anecdote about hearing Dilla's music for the first time at a Pharcyde concert, with which I began this chapter. Questlove's terminology was significant as he described what happened next. He went on to say, "[the Pharcyde] let me hear a [Dilla] beat tape, and I just never heard someone not give a fuck [that much before]. That to me was the most liberating moment."[244] Questlove's characterization of Dilla's extreme sonic originality mirrors what John L. Jackson, in his 2005 study of black authenticity and sincerity, calls hip hop nihilism, or "its 'don't-give-a-fuck,' sensibility."[245] According to Jackson, "Hip hop is preoccupied with realness, but it also demands each subject's individual ability to determine the contours of the real, regardless of social pressures and norms. If anything, bucking social standards is intrinsically valuable in and of itself, outlawry for self-determination's sake."[246] Jackson argues that such individual definition of "the contours of the real" constitutes what he calls "sincerity," which functions in dialogue with racial authenticity. In the case of hip hop, this dialogue continually creates the real. Dilla's extremely individual approach to timbre, rhythm, and creative reuse of sources, therefore, was an audible refutation to mainstream characterizations of realness. Just as Questlove's reading of Dilla privileged and admired his originality for it's own sake, Dilla's ubiquitous influence on the collaboration helped mold their music into sonic alternatives to hegemonic ideas about keeping it real.

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[244] Red Bull Music, "An Intimate Lecture," 36:30.

[245] John L. Jackson Jr., *Real Black: Adventures in Racial Sincerity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 192.

[246] Jackson, *Real Black,* 192.

CHAPTER IV

"A DIFFERENT EXAMPLE OF WHAT A BLACK WOMAN IS": ERYKAH BADU

AND RE-PRESENTING AFRICAN-AMERICAN

Erykah Badu (born Erica Wright) is a singer and composer from Dallas, Texas, born February 26, 1971. Her first album, 1997's *Baduizm,* was a smash hit, reaching #2 on the Billboard 200 (#1 R&B/Hip-Hop) as it sold in excess of three million copies, earned 2 Grammys (Best Female R&B Vocal Performance, Best R&B Album), and catapulted the 26-year-old onto the national music scene. Badu arrived in the spotlight with a distinct and original persona based on Afrocentric philosophies, sage wisdom in her lyrics, and an original visual style that included headwraps and accessories featuring Kemetic images such as the ankh. As she made clear in the lyrics to songs like "On and On," "Apple Tree," and "Next Lifetime," her songwriting aesthetic was influenced by a philosophical leaning that, unusual for an artist of her tender age, relied on wisdoms from various religious traditions, Afrocentric and Afrofuturist orientations, and advice from her elders. Whether Badu and *Baduizm* were hits because of or in spite of her lyrics' foregrounding teachings and philosophies is difficult to say, but one thing is certain: she stood out among her peers by gesturing to traditions and wisdoms greater than herself, her position, and the present moment.

Her next studio album, 2000's *Mama's Gun*, which involved The Soulquarians extensively, represented a stark departure from the sonic and stylistic profile of *Baduizm*. Whereas *Baduizm* was fairly even, presenting a group of songs whose overall sound and musical sensibility was rooted in R&B and jazz, *Mama's Gun* comprised songs of greater

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variety. Musically, *Mama's Gun* presents stylistic breadth while foregrounding blackness by extensively signifying on previous work (sampling, interpolations, and reprising her own material and that of others), and embracing a diversity of black musical styles. At the same time, Badu retained (from *Baduizm*) and strengthened her emphasis on black community and personal and social responsibility, in contrast to the "I got mine" messaging from bling artists during this time. Throughout the album, sonic choices including instrumentation, arrangements, and transitions between songs served to complement her unique lyrical approach, portraying Badu and her music as expansive, while firmly rooted in African American musical traditions.

This chapter argues that Badu's multifaceted and self-conscious variety represents a form of sonic resistance to the narrow stylistic and marketing possibilities historically allowed to black artists within the music industry. Taking as its starting point Samuel A. Floyd Jr.'s work on the influence of African music on African American music, this chapter seeks to show that her music and persona performed complementary cultural work, providing listeners with alternative ways to think about – and identify with – blackness. I will argue that Badu's gestures to a shared African heritage complemented aspects of her work which recalled 1970s soul, encouraging listeners to identify with eras characterized by community feeling. Badu's community focus was characteristic of the work of Soulquarians artists, but she made it more explicitly a part of her work than some other popular singers did, as this chapter will show. Imani Perry describes one example of the cultural work that black women artists were doing at this time, writing, "Although [Lil Kim and Foxy Brown's] work did not explicitly critique class and race politics, *their mere presence signaled a shifting concept of how black women were imagined* as black

wealth and black celebrity multiplied."[247] Similarly, Erykah Badu's "mere presence"

(albeit in a mass-mediated form) as an artist explicitly concerned with Afrocentric

philosophies, self-reflection, and artistic and personal freedoms, demonstrated

unprecedented ways for mainstream audiences to imagine black womanhood, and

blackness more generally. She was self-confident, but self-effacing, powerful, but also

vulnerable, inward-looking, but focused on community. Part of the cultural work *Mama's*

Gun did was to exhibit the breadth of black lived experience by portraying Badu in these

contradictory, multifaceted lights. She was strong and questioning on "Penitentiary

Philosophy," vulnerable but confident on "Cleva," reflective and spiritual on "… & On."

Cultural critic bell hooks characterized the social context from which Badu stood out in

such sharp relief, writing, "We live in an antirelational, vulnerability-despising

culture."[248] This accusation could accurately be leveled at much of the hip hop being

made in the late 1990s. Music by artists like Dr. Dre, Biggie, Puffy, Foxy Brown, and Lil

Kim portrayed the artists through toughness, violence, or the satisfaction that they drew

from their wealth (or all three).[249]

By foregrounding qualities such as personal reflection, emotional intelligence,

and a philosophy based on a mixture of everyday concerns and esoteric spirituality, Badu

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[247] Perry, *Prophets*, 46. (emphasis added)

[248] hooks, *We Real Cool*, 122.

[249] It is worth noting here (again) that very good albums by Tupac Shakur and Biggie, both
generally thought of as artists whose work embraces wealth and toughness, also included songs
which made for a broader variety of the portrayals on the album as a whole. As I observed in
chapter one, the fault (as Questlove saw it) lay not in any single image portrayed by those artists,
but in the media's laser focus on certain portrayals of blackness, most notably tough, criminal,
and/or wealthy and without concern for others. Nearly all Soulquarians artists, and especially
Badu, limited the breadth of their subjects to exclude these most popular, most widely distributed,
and most insidious few, ensuring that their music, when it reached mainstream outlets and broad
swaths of consumers, would not fall into step with prevailing narratives of black pathology.

resisted portrayals of the black status quo in contemporary hip hop and R&B music.[250]

These values, along with her preference for freedom and collaboration in creative

processes, made her work an integral part of the Soulquarians' spirit of rebelliousness.

CONNECTION TO SHARED BLACK HERITAGE

        Badu explained the source of her songwriting inspiration in a 2001 interview with

New York Times writer John Pareles: "It's pure. I just feel it, *I remember it from*

someplace… I don't know the rules, and I don't want to know them. Don't tell me the

rules. Let me think I'm making them up."[251] Here Badu revealed that she required a

distinct degree of freedom for crafting her songs, even claiming that she tried to keep out

of the way as they emerge from somewhere pre-intellectual ("I just feel it"). Badu's

likening of finding inspiration for her songs to "remembering them from someplace" is

reminiscent of researcher and founder of the Center for Black Music Research Samuel A.

Floyd, Jr.'s concept of "cultural memory." Floyd has argued that African American

music retains qualities of African music through what he calls cultural memory, which he

defines as "nonfactual and nonreferential motivations, actions, and beliefs that members

of a culture seem, without direct knowledge or deliberate training, to 'know' – that feel

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[250] I am thinking here of trends in the most ubiquitous hip hop and R&B of the late 1990s and early 2000s. Artists include Puff Daddy, Mary J. Blige, Dr. Dre, and many more. See chapter one for a more in-depth discussion of the role of the status quo as important context and foil for the Soulquarians project.

[251] John Pareles, "Unwrapping a New Era; Erykah Badu Gets On With the Business of Creating Herself," The New York Times, February 13, 2001, https://www.nytimes.com/2001/02/13/arts/unwrapping-a-new-era-erykah-badu-gets-on-with-the-business-of-creating-herself.html, n.p. (emphasis added).

unequivocally 'true' and 'right' when encountered, experienced, and executed."[252] With

regard to African American music, this encompasses the retention of African musical

qualities, including a tendency to comment on previous works through varied repetition

(the 'changing same'), call and response devices, musical individuality within

collectivity, and a metronomic pulse.[253] When Badu described to John Pareles her

feelings about writing a song by saying, "I remember it from someplace," such a claim

rested on a great concern with her heritage, whether as recent as soul and jazz recordings

she was familiar with, or as distant as African musical practices and aesthetic priorities.

Judging by her music and her outward visual appearance, Badu was obviously very in

tune to both.

Floyd's concept of cultural memory might also give insight into the sources from

which Badu drew inspiration for creating her highly original persona. Badu's interest in

Africa was triggered in her pre-teen years by her attendance at Dallas's annual Harambee

Festival, "where everyone gathers in the park, and there was a community of people who

shared a love of [African] culture and express it every day."[254] Folks who are so

connected to their African cultural ancestry are members of what Floyd calls "core

culture," which he defines as

> that portion of the black population that has remained closest to its mythic and
> ritual roots, whose primary cultural values and interests lie *within* that
> community, and whose concerns for racial integration appear to be secondary to
> its concern for individual and community survival and the perpetuation of
> African-American cultural and social behaviors and institutions.[255]

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[252] Samuel A. Floyd, Jr., *The Power of Black Music: Interpreting Its History from Africa to the United States* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 8.

[253] Floyd, *The Power of Black Music*, 3-13.

[254] Badu quoted in McIver, *Erykah Badu*, 17.

[255] Floyd, *The Power of Black Music*, 10, n.2.

Values and styles such as Badu experienced at Dallas's Harambee festivals, in tandem

with (and in affirmation of) Floyd's cultural memory provided a model for her inclusion

of African elements in her dress, Afrocentrism in her philosophies, and African

performance elements in her shows. In so doing, Badu formed a new and exciting pop

persona, one which stood in stark contrast to the prevalent bling and gangsta styles in hip

hop, and slick modern presentation of R&B acts like Mary J. Blige, TLC, and (beginning

in 1999) Destiny's Child.[256]

During the Soulquarians era, Badu was known for wearing Kemetic jewelry and

flowing, colorfully printed dresses, and she was "always headwrapped."[257] Her

ubiquitous headwraps and rings with Egyptian imagery foregrounded African

associations, while her stationary onstage position (a feature which reviewers regularly

remarked upon) and visionary, sometimes inscrutable lyrics cast her as a sort of oracle.

Afrocentric spirituality infused many of her lyrics, while explicit lyrical concern for

African American people and communities echoed the communal nature of African

music, whose essence, according to Kofi Agawu, "originates in a will to communal truth

that is incorporative, generous, and inviting."[258]

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[256] In 1997, when *Baduizm* was released, this contrast was extreme. By the time of the release of *Mama's Gun*, a wave of "conscious" female singers whose music traversed R&B and hip hop to varying degrees had gained prominence. The most successful of these is Lauryn Hill, whose five Grammys at the 1999 awards constituted a watershed moment for hip hop's acceptance by mainstream music institutions.

[257] Badu said, "I wear my headwrap because a headwrap is a crown, and I am a queen. A headwrap demands a certain amount of respect – it just does, and I am always headwrapped." Quoted in McIver, *Erykah Badu*, 17.

[258] Kofi Agawu, *The African Imagination in Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 15.

In these ways Badu's persona and performances display a distinct (albeit imagined) Africanness. Some part of her massive appeal and resonance with audiences was no doubt due to this embrace of Africanness, and Africanisms. We might think of this through Mark Anthony Neal's interpretive lens of "postindustrial nostalgia," which he posits as a way to understand the investment of contemporary black youth in connecting to previous black communal models.[259] Neal argues that the erosion of what he calls the Black Public Sphere is responsible for a cultural disconnect between the hip hop generation and earlier generations of African Americans. In his words,

> The hip hop generation was denied access to the bevy of communally derived social, aesthetic, cultural, and political sensibilities that undergirded much of black communal struggle throughout the twentieth century, fracturing the hip [hop] generation and the generations that will follow from the real communal history of the African-American diaspora.[260]

Badu's African dress and ancient wisdoms may have served as a unifying principle for hip hop generation listeners who have been challenged to understand themselves as culturally connected to earlier generations of African Americans. By invoking shared African heritage, Badu opened the door for her listeners to identify with "communal models from previous historical eras."[261]

Whereas Badu's image evoked the rather distant black past of African heritage, her music evoked a more recent one: the soul and funk of the 1970s. In doing so, it served as another window to identifying with a shared history in which community was a figure of greater importance. Starting with *Baduizm*, Badu's singing drew numerous comparisons to Billie Holiday. *Mama's Gun* updated Badu's references to the black

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[259] Neal, *What the Music Said*, 153.

[260] Neal, *What the Music Said*, 153-154.

[261] Neal, *What the Music Said*, 153.

musical past through her choices of 1970s styles and instrumentation, including interpolations and direct sampling of soul and funk recordings. The album's reception history indicates the homage was legible to listeners. For example, *Spin* magazine's Sia Michel wrote, "*Mama's Gun* is [a] trip through oblique '70s soul grooves, slinky torch songs, and dirty funk, each song a polished, strange little gem."[262] Similarly, Robert Christgau wrote, "Ms. Badu-to-you could have ridden her photogenic witchy-rootsy ambience/attitude down a flexigroove to iconicity. Instead she determined to rise up, doing for her songcraft what D'Angelo did for his funk."[263] Commenting on the change in Badu's songwriting on *Mama's Gun*, Christgau's comparison to D'Angelo might productively be read as opining that its songs constituted a bold update of previous black styles.

Scholars have associated the soul era of the 1970s with a strong sense of community. In a colloquy convened around the time of Badu's emergence, writer Thulani Davis, black music scholar Portia Maultsby, writer Ishmael Reed, journalist Greg Tate, and film scholar Clyde Taylor each suggested that the idea of *soul* was somehow related to a feeling of community.[264] Likewise, speaking about the idea of *soul* in the 1990s, literature scholar Paul Gilroy expressed the opinion that renewed interest in soul in the 1990s "registers dissatisfaction that what's left of black public culture has been

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[262] Sia Michel, "Erykah Badu: Hip-Hop Soul's Empress of Izm," *Spin,* April 2001, 99.

[263] Robert Christgau, "Erykah Badu Consumer Guide Reviews," n.d., https://www.robertchristgau.com/get_artist.php?name=Badu, n.p.

[264] Greg Tate, Thulani Davis, Portia Maultsby, Ishmael Reed, and Clyde Taylor, "Ain't We Still Got Soul?" in *Soul: Black Power, Politics, and Pleasure*, edited by Monique Guillory and Richard C. Green (New York: New York University Press, 1998), 269-283.

impoverished, debased by the absence of [face-to-face] mutuality."[265] Since her output drew numerous comparisons to soul music of the past, including being marketed as "neo-soul," Gilroy's position would suggest (like Mark Anthony Neal's postindustrial nostalgia) that understanding Badu's music according to the ways it allows listeners to feel their community might help explain its resonance with consumers. Badu's persona and music stood in contrast to other contemporary examples of black music during a period in which bling rap commodified images of conspicuous wealth and consumption, and in which R&B musicians like Mary J. Blige, Teddy Riley, and Jimmy Jam and Terry Lewis made sonic slickness fashionable. Thulani Davis writes that, among other things, soul is "part and parcel of resistance and endurance," but when mass marketed, it "became an exotic product that was divorced from social change."[266] By remaining dedicated to social change in her lyrics and onstage persona, Badu maintained association with that aspect of *soul* from a previous era, ensuring her connection to that realm of the black musical tradition.

On *Mama's Gun*, Badu presented an alternative image for the variety of black people who found representations in gangsta and bling styles insufficient or uncompelling for identifying with themselves. As Badu's own answers to interview questions suggest, speaking directly to the black community was a primary goal of hers. Interviewed in *Jet* in 2001, she said, "I am very interested in the Black community because there are a lot of professional artists and geniuses who dwell in that community

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[265] Richard C. Green and Monique Guillory, "Question of a 'Soulful Style': Interview with Paul Gilroy," in *Soul: Black Power, Politics, and Pleasure*, 257.

[266] Tate et al, "Ain't We Still Got Soul?," 278.

who need to be uplifted in some kind of way. I want to be a different example of what a Black woman is, what a Black person is."[267]

Listeners identified with Badu's evocation of a black past. In the December 1997/January 1998 issue of *Vibe* magazine, for example, one reader's letter to the editor reads, "she lives her life searching for knowledge and a higher truth… Keep on keeping it real, Badu!"[268] The reader's use of the phrase keeping it real situates Badu's in relief to 1990s R&B and hip hop, whose artists frequently professed to keep it real as a claim on black authenticity based on a connection to the urban poor. I would argue that the reader's unusual use of this terminology indicates that Badu's music was understood by many listeners as invoking the real of the past, that which might be called a *soul* feeling.

Certain listeners with a historical perspective (perhaps like the *Vibe* reader) were inclined to prefer *soul* and its attendant community feeling over keeping it real as a measure of black authenticity. Music critic Greg Tate, for example, distinguishes between the signifying powers of soul and keeping it real, writing, "the odious phrase 'keep it real' labors under the burden soul once did, distinguishing the truly Black from those merely passing for blues people."[269] Here Tate deftly invokes writer (and founder of the Black Arts Movement) Amiri Baraka's *Blues People*, as well as the idea of passing (presenting as white though one has black ancestry), staking out dimensions for black authenticity that transcended presentist debates in hip hop and R&B by looking to a fuller tradition of black cultural production.

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[267] Clarence Waldron, "Erykah Badu," *Jet*, January 8, 2001, 63.

[268] Leon Laing, "Mail" *Vibe,* December 1997/January 1998, 58.

[269] Tate et al, "Ain't We Still Got Soul?," 270.

Badu's audible participation in a black musical tradition was important not only for listeners' identification with a larger historical community, but for listeners' personal identification with the music as well. Theorizing the nature of audiences' identifying with music and music scenes, Theodore Gracyk writes, "for both musicians and audience, the construction of a meaningful identity demands a historical perspective on the music as a dialogue with the past, not just with the present scene."[270] Against a backdrop of slickness and keeping it real as marketing, Badu's music reinscribed the values of a bygone era in which to be real was to be soulful, and to be soulful was to be concerned with the black community, and black identity.

Many songs on *Mama's Gun* trope on previous forms and styles of Black music. Such versioning accomplishes community creation by associating her music with that of earlier generations of black musicians, including Betty Davis and Funkadelic. The influence of Soulquarians involvement on *Mama's Gun* is apparent in the instrumental arrangements, several of which take a page from The Roots' playbook by interpolating grooves from older records that might serve as sample sources for sample-based hip hop producers. Examples include "Booty," which interpolates American organist Johnny Hammond's 1974 "Gambler's Life" for the bulk of its primary groove, including drums, keyboards, and full horn section, and "Time's A-Wastin," which interpolates Hammond's "Can't We Smile" for it's chorus and outtro. For "Didn't Cha Know" Badu used an instrumental track produced by J Dilla from a sample of Tarika Blue's 1977 song "Dreamflower." As I described in chapter two, The Roots often used existing musical material like a producer using a sampler might have, constructing their songs from parts

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[270] Theodore Gracyk, *I Wanna Be Me: Rock Music and the Politics of Identity* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2001), 35.

of previously recorded grooves. Badu had employed this strategy only once on *Baduizm*, writing most of the material herself or in conjunction with collaborators.[271] In contrast, *Mama's Gun* exhibits the influences the Soulquarians collaboration by more extensively signifying on previously recorded music, both through such interpolations, and actual sampling. By troping on previous black styles, *Mama's Gun* situated itself within a lineage of black music that foregrounded 1970s styles, reimagined through modern processes derived from hip hop.[272] In so doing, Badu encouraged listeners to identify with the music, and her persona, through a shared cultural heritage, and the value previous black generations placed on community.

"PENITENTIARY PHILOSOPHY" AND RESISTING STYLISTIC CONFINES

One way Badu exercises her own freedom on *Mama's Gun* is in her bold approach to stylistic diversity, which strains against industry forces that would limit the breadth of expressive possibilities available to black artists. This work commences with "Penitentiary Philosophy," the first song on *Mama's Gun*. It serves as the meeting point

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[271] The sole example is "4 Leaf Clover," which interpolates the vocal from Atlantic Starr's "Touch a Four Leaf Clover," albeit over an original groove.

[272] It bears mentioning here that two high profile songs from the album also sampled or interpolated *contemporary* music: "Bag Lady" samples the guitar from "Xxplosive," by Dr. Dre, and "… & On" interpolates a moment from Dr. Dre's 1999 "The Watcher," in addition to lyrical and musical material from Badu's own hit "On and On," from *Baduizm*. Sampling and interpolating contemporary music in such a bare way was anomalous at this time, owing to (among other things) ongoing debates in hip hop about 'biting,' (copying or stealing material from another hip hop practitioner), which had been frowned upon since early MCs stole one another's rhymes, and B-boys stole one another's moves. For a discussion of biting ethics with regard to musical borrowing among producers, see Schloss, *Making Beats*, 105-109. Badu's use of such strategies, I would argue, indicates the extent to which she was invested in a "no-limits" approach to creating *Mama's Gun*. Like Dilla's refusal to recognize "rules" when it came to his sampling, her practice here shows that Badu felt limited only by her own judgments of right or wrong, and considered borrowing from contemporary music legitimate, in contrast to the broader population of hip hop producers Schloss describes. It also has the effect of balancing *Mama's Gun*'s sonic reliance on previous black music with the borrowed sounds of contemporary hip hop.

for several aspects of freedom in Badu's work, including improvisatory songwriting and studio techniques, lyrics about liberation, and opposition to music industry limitations on who is allowed to participate in certain genres.

Sonically, the arrangement of "Penitentiary Philosophy" works to unsettle the listener through its rock aesthetic, and abrupt shifts of texture and dynamics. For starters, its instrumentation and style are clearly those of rock and roll. Multiple overdubbed, distorted electric guitars make the strongest case in this regard. Organ, electric bass, and hard-hitting drums are primary accompaniments as well. Joel McIver characterizes the sound like this: "[*Mama's Gun*] begins with the unexpected rock rush of "Penitentiary Philosophy," the most upbeat song on the album and the one that caused most surprise among listeners expecting a mellow, 'Rimshot'-style jazz opener."[273] McIver is referring to "Rimshot," the song with which Badu opened both *Baduizm* and 1997's *Live*, an easy-swinging groove piece on which Badu and her bandmates (on upright bass, electric keyboard, and drum kit) lay claim to both soul and jazz lineages via performance styles and instrumentation. Following *Baduizm*, critics and writers compared her to jazz vocalists Sarah Vaughan and Ella Fitzgerald, soul singer Chaka Khan, and most often, Billie Holiday, and ran with the title "neo soul" (coined by her manager Kedar Massenburg) to describe her music. The contrast with "Penitentiary Philosophy" could hardly be greater. Badu's vocal performance treads on (for her) unfamiliar ground as she pushes her voice to the point of distorting, rasping, and screaming, techniques reminiscent of Funkadelic, or Prince. While this sort of singing is commonplace in many rock bands, who, as Robert Walser argues, use distortion in vocals and instruments to

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[273] McIver, *Erykah Badu*, 191.

evoke power and force, it is a far cry from the airy timbre and wafting phrasing that drew

Erykah "endless and apt comparisons to Billie Holiday" for her previous efforts.[274] Her

performance is a sonic analog to the song's lyrical imperative: step outside your

perceived limits, forget what you think you can't do, and do it.

Badu's surprising use of rock style cues to open *Mama's Gun* was unsettling, as

McIver notes. The arrangement itself does similar work, exerting disruptive force by

shifting abruptly between loud and soft sections (see Figure 26). As if to shake the

listener out of a torpor, medium-loud verses lead to quiet pre-choruses, followed by loud

choruses that grow louder with each repetition, finally dropping sharply into an extended,

quiet outro. The roller coaster of dynamics seems to work against stasis, creating a sonic

analogue to the lyrical message of resisting entrapment by one's own patterns.

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[274] Robert Walser, *Running with the Devil: Power, Gender, and Madness in Heavy Metal Music* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2014), 41-46. Emily J. Lordi, "'Window Seat': Erykah Badu, Projective Cultural Politics, and the Obama Era," *Post45,* December 4, 2011, http://post45.research.yale.edu/2011/12/window-seat-erykah-badu-projective-cultural-politics-and-the-obama-era/*,* n.p.
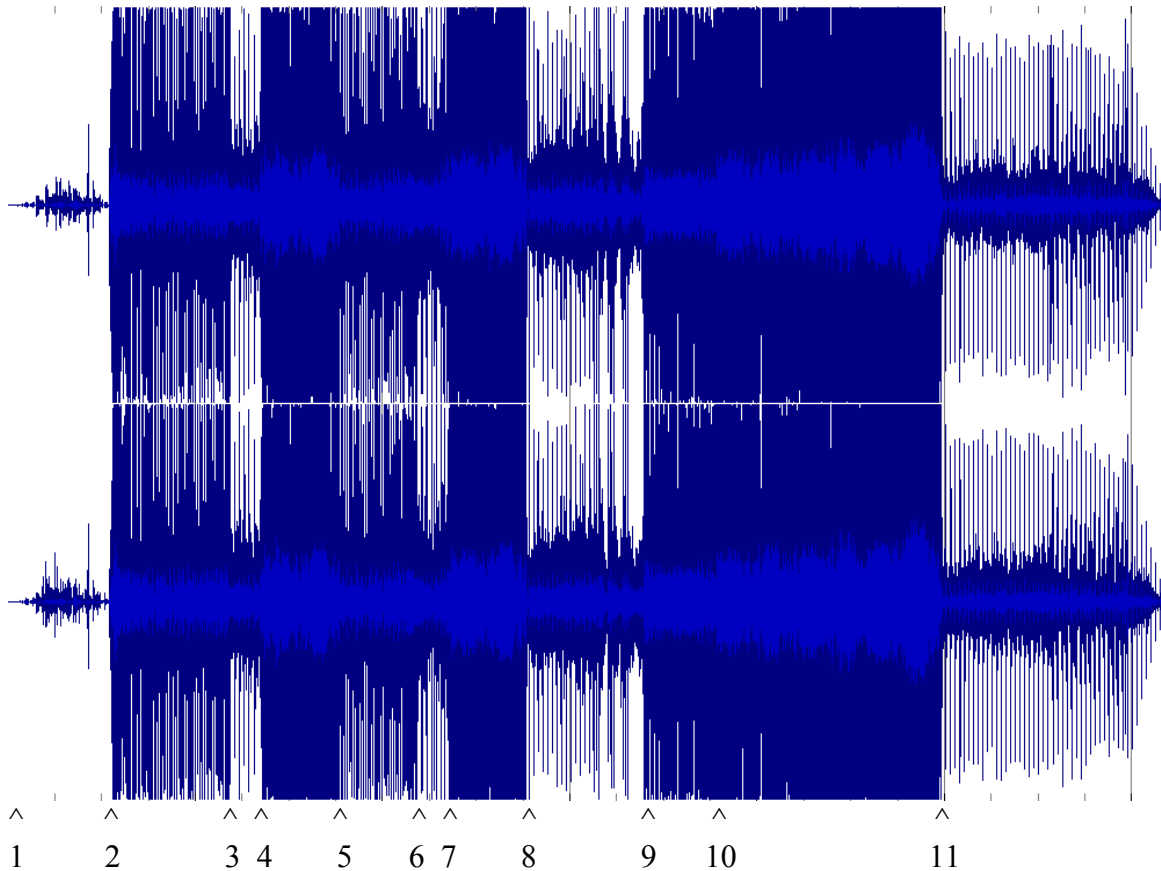
Figure 26. Stereo wave form of "Penitentiary Philosophy" (complete).
Sections: 1-Intro; 2-verse one; 3-pre-chorus; 4-chorus one; 5-verse two; 6-pre-chorus; 7-chorus two; 8-bridge; 9-verse three; 10-chorus three; 11-outro.

This is especially noticeable around the choruses (which begin at numbers 4, 7, and 10 in Figure 26), the loudest parts of the arrangement. Choruses one and two are preceded by rather quiet pre-choruses (numbers 3 and 6). Chorus three follows directly from a verse (number 9), which is of a medium-loud volume. After chorus 3 (number 9) builds to the greatest intensity of the entire song (notice the gradual crescendo in the light blue core of the wave form), the arrangement drops sharply into an extended outro (number 11), the quietest part of the song since the intro (number 1). The effect is rather like slamming on the brakes while riding a roller coaster. The outro reprises material from the pre-choruses,

though now the same instrumental parts are presented in a mix that is noticeably quieter overall, as if to heighten the contrast with the preceding chorus.[275]

According to Badu, "Penitentiary Philosophy" concerns freedom of the mind, specifically from restrictions that are self-imposed. She said, "we lock ourselves into our own philosophies, our own religions, our own walks of life, and if we fail, we condemn ourselves and then we get sick… a lot of people have lost respect for the individual… the person who doesn't conform. It's a jail."[276] Badu freestyled lyrics (improvised them) while jamming with the band in the studio, so the lyrical content was realized through a process whose essence is spontaneity and freedom of expression. In the song, Badu sings that "You can't win when your will is weak / when you're knocked on the ground," and "Evil, you won't test me / Evil, you won't win," encouraging listeners to discard their self-imposed restrictions. A very faint voice repeats "looks like fear then it must be fear," during the pre-chorus, naming the thing that listeners should be wary of in their everyday decision making. Badu would later say, "Fear is the foundation of all the negativity in the world… When you are afraid, love is absent."[277] With these lyrics, Badu advocates for courage in her listeners as individuals, exhorting them to make choices from a place of love.

At the same time, she seems to take aim specifically at perceptions of African Americans when she says "why, world, do you want me to be so mad?" This speaks to

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[275] I acknowledge the severe limitations of looking at music in wave forms: they display nothing about timbre, lyrics, instrumentation, groove, or style, all characteristics that are important to listeners' interpretations of a piece of music. What they do show is volume, and in this case, I am using the wave form to show Badu's choices (as songwriter and producer) about the ways she used volume, and posit one interpretation of their effects.

[276] Quoted in McIver, *Erykah Badu,* 191-192.

[277] Tony Green, "The Learning Curve," *Vibe,* February 2004, 97.

complicated issues in American race relations that accompanied the ascendance of so-called gangsta rap in the marketplace during the 1990s.[278] The popularity of gangsta rappers, who by definition self-portray as angry and criminal, leads directly to Badu's question: why, world, do you want me to be so mad? Answers are plentiful, but never simple. Angry black men are not only popular images for consumption, they are frequent targets for extreme and brutal policing within the white supremacist power structure. In contrast to Badu's metaphorical penitentiary, real imprisonment for millions of black men resulted from the complications of a world that was willing, and indeed eager, to see them as mad, angry, and criminal. But Badu would propose alternative possibilities. "You don't have to be mad," she seemed to say. "You don't have to be anything in particular. You may be whatever you like." Viewed in this light, Badu's quest for freedom in creating "Penitentiary Philosophy," like her wish for freedom of the mind for her listeners, works to counteract forces that would imprison African Americans, and to question passive assumptions of the rightness of the ways of the world, and of the mind.

Why did Badu choose to express a message of personal change and freedom within a rock aesthetic? As she explained, she was speaking against conformity, against being in a box of one's own making, encouraged by societal pressures. While this can be done in any genre, rock has a history of association with nonconformity and resistance. From punk to grunge to so-called shock rock, electric guitars that are loud and in-your-face, and singing styles which audibly push the singers' voice to distortion have been

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[278] The number of gangsta (or "reality") rap artists increased in the market place following the rap group N.W.A.'s astounding success with *Straight Outta Compton* (1988) and *Efil4zaggin* (1991). As Robin D.G. Kelley, Eithne Quinn and numerous other scholars have observed, white consumers were the biggest audience for such recordings. See Robin D. G. Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics, and the Black Working Class* (New York: Free Press, 1994). See also Quinn, *Nuthin' But a "G" Thang*. For example, Kelley writes, "the massive popularity of gangsta rap coincided with a fairly substantial increase in white suburban consumers of rap" (224).

heard as gestures of resistance to societal norms. As Norma Coates observes, "rock has long been represented as a site of opposition to dominant cultural formations."[279] However, as Maureen Mahon has argued, black women have faced industry resistance to their participation in the style. She writes,

> Black women rockers have pursued their vision in a largely White, male-dominated arena. Ironically, for all of rock's obvious miscegenation, self-conscious play with gender roles and sexuality, and countercultural spirit, Black women's race and gender difference often impede their ability to secure an equal place in the form.[280]

In this context, Badu's very utilization of rock styles is a gesture which defies industry forces which would seek to limit the stylistic choices available to her, and work to convince artists that they face limited possibilities.

Artists of all racial identities and in all styles have been so constrained based on the matrix of race and genre that has been constructed within the music industry since at least the early 20th century. For example, Karl Hagstrom Miller has shown that the history of recording and marketing categories in the early 20th century determined which

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[279] Norma Coates, "(R)evolution Now? Rock and the Political Potential of Gender," in *Sexing the Groove: Popular Music and Gender*, edited by Sheila Whiteley (New York: Routledge, 1997), 57.

[280] Maureen Mahon, "African American Women and the Dynamics of Gender, Race, and Genre in Rock 'n' Roll," in *Issues in African American Music: Power, Gender, Race, Representation,* edited by Portia K. Maultsby and Mellonee V. Burnim (New York: Routledge, 2017), 303. Putting a finer point on it, Mahon later writes, "Since the 1950s, Black women in rock 'n' roll have sought to exercise *creative self-determination*, while making a living in a male-dominated field that devalues women and in a White-dominated field that devalues African Americans" (303, italics added). Because the sounds are so unexpected from a woman known as a jazzy R&B singer, Badu's use of rock styles on "Penitentiary," were a strong gesture of creative self determination, like those Mahon notes. She may have felt emboldened by a generation of Black female rockers who emerged in the 1990s, including Me'Shell Ndegéocello, and Toshi Reagon. For further study on African Americans' participation in rock and roll, see Maureen Mahon, *Right to Rock: The Black Rock Coalition and the Cultural Politics of Race* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004).

styles of music were widely associated with white or black performers.[281] As musical

recording and record sales gained currency in the 1920s, record industry publications and

record labels adopted "Race" and "Hillbilly" categories, designed to segregate the work

of black and white artists into racialized catalogues, even when recorded by the same

label. These catalogues were then separately marketed in segregated (whether *de juer* or

de facto) venues like department stores, limiting audiences' exposure to recordings by

performers of races other than their own. Miller's study shows that, while performers

themselves frequently engaged in musical cross pollination, playing casually with

musicians of various races in various styles, when it came time to record, industry

executives forced upon them a racialized stricture that artificially whitened or blackened

artists' particular approaches to style, and limited the breadth of their repertoires.

Similarly, in his survey of the work of soul music pioneer Sam Cooke, musicologist Mark

Burford has shown that Cooke's music was marketed in a way that minimized his efforts

to cross over to mainstream adult audiences, limiting the extent of its reach, and the scope

of its legacy.[282] Likewise, David Brackett has demonstrated how the scope and

nomenclature of various *Billboard* popularity charts have fluctuated over the years in an

ongoing effort to distinguish between black popular music and that of the mainstream

(read as white).[283] However, Brackett also notes that in the early 1980s, chart categories

such as "black" and "album-oriented rock" were renamed (as "urban contemporary" and

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[281] See Karl Hagstrom Miller, *Segregating Sound: Inventing Folk and Pop Music in the Age of Jim Crow* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

[282] Mark Burford, "Sam Cooke as Pop Album Artist – A Reinvention in Three Songs," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 65, no. 1 (Spring 2012), 113-178.

[283] See David Brackett, *Categorizing Sound: Genre and Twentieth-Century Popular Music* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2016).

"adult contemporary," respectively) to reflect race *less* explicitly, while still adhering to stylistic traits. Describing those and other categories' renaming, Brackett writes,

> In the pursuit of greater revenue, a non-musical component (such as racial identity, political connotations, or social idealism) is drained from descriptions of the radio format assemblage. In the process, that assemblage is reduced to its sonic components, or perhaps to an apolitical lifestyle build around consumption choices that render the format more attractive to advertisers.[284]

Though popularity charts appeared, in this case, to take race out of the picture, their attention to sonic components allowed *Billboard* to continue to segregate music based on stylistic traits thought of as black and mainstream/white. At the time of *Mama's Gun*'s release, chart categories included "Rap," "R&B/Hip-hop," Country," "Top 40," and "Mainstream Rock," among others, all subtly raced in both their title and stylistic content (except, perhaps, Top 40, though a survey of that chart reveals its domination by white artists).

Historically, artists have responded to such pressures by separating their involvement in disparate styles. For example, in the 1970s, George Clinton simultaneously recorded, promoted, and toured separate bands, Parliament and Funkadelic, in order to reach beyond the narrow ideas of genre allowed to a single act, especially a black one. In that case, Parliament made its name playing music categorized as funk, while Funkadelic played experimental music styled closer to rock. However, the distinction was limited to recordings, and was designed to market those recordings according to music industry perceptions of listeners' preferences based on race.[285]

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[284] Brackett, *Categorizing Sound*, 297.

[285] Throughout the 1970s, Parliament's records were released primarily on Casablanca, known for its disco catalogue, while Funkadelic's were released on Westbound, a short-lived independent label from Detroit which specialized in funk and R&B, and later Warner Brothers. See also Oscar Bettison, "'I Wanna Take You Higher': The Stylistic Development And Cultural Dissemination Of Post-Psychedelic Funk Music" (Ph.D. dissertation, Princeton University, 2009).

I argue that *Mama's Gun* is the site of Badu's own response to the limitation placed on artists through race-based genre categories. The album foregrounded the breadth of the black musical tradition, but also utilized styles that, by this time, read as white (even if, like rock and roll, they were originally white appropriations of black styles). Songs on the album range from the opening rocker "Penitentiary Philosophy" to the acoustic duet "In Love With You," to the jazz-inflected three-part suite "Green Eyes." As such, *Mama's Gun* presented Badu as "both/and" rather than "either/or," resisting the stylistic confinement that has characterized the recording industry's treatment of African American artists from its beginnings. By representing a black identity that contains multitudes, the album as a whole strained against industry forces that would limit the breadth of expressive possibilities available to black artists.

"… & ON": A PORTRAIT OF THE "REAL" ARTIST AS FREE

Badu demonstrated her willingness to interpolate, re-interpret, and signify on her own work with "… & On," which (beginning with the title) reprises and revises significant portions of her breakout hit "On and On," from *Baduizm.* This is a choice she repeated on subsequent albums. Both begin with a simple one-measure drum intro. Both use samples of the same two piano chords as a prominent part of the backing track. In "On & On" the two chords form a one measure loop, in which each sounds just once (see Figure 27). The sample source is the same in "… & On," (or the piano may have been sampled directly from Badu's earlier record), but its rhythmic iteration is changed. Now the chords appear in reverse order, and on a two measure loop. The first measure iterates the same chord three times, in a tresillo pattern (dotted eighth note, dotted eighth note,

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half note) which begins on the upbeat of beat one. The second measure also utilizes the tresillo figure, but it begins on beat one. The first measure is much quieter, and sounds further off, while the second measure comes in strong and surrounding the stereo field, effectively creating a call-and-response dynamic between the two chords.

"On and On" piano voicings reduced (1 measure loop)
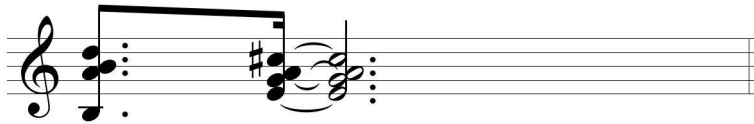
"... & On" piano voicings reduced and transposed (2 measure loop)

Figure 27. Piano voicings from "On and On," (1997) and Badu's sampled repurposing of them in "… & On" (2000).

The overall sonic character of the later song contains much greater sonic diversity, with extensive use of stereo panning, various sound effects which come in and out of audibility, and a greater breadth of instruments used. One specific example is the way Badu changed aspects of the bass and drums to give "… & On" an increased hip hop feel compared to "On and On." The ride cymbal pulse of "On and On," evokes jazz styles. For "… & On" that eight-count pulse is moved to the high hat cymbal, a common characteristic of hip hop production at this time.[286] Likewise, whereas the bass in "On and

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[286] Some diverse examples from the years 1997 to 2000 are Eminem's "The Real Slim Shady," Dilated Peoples' "The Platform," Common's "The Light," Camp Lo's "Luchini AKA This Is It,"

On" sounds rather sluggish, lagging behind the drums just a hair, that of "… & On" is perkier, locking in with the kick drum. Both are probably produced with synthesizers, but while the first is connotative of a jazz string bass, the second has a modern hip hop sound reminiscent of the Moog synthesizer that Dilla favored. Despite their obviously synthesized tonal character (lacking the extensive overtones of an acoustically-played instrument), the "On and On" bass notes display the long bloom characteristic of a string bass, whose notes develop slightly after the finger attack. Along with the drummer's constant pulse on the ride cymbal, this evokes jazz instrumentation, an association supported by the music video to the song, in which Badu appears as a jazz singer fronting an acoustic trio. The bass sluggishness of the first version could be read as fit for that song's laid back jazz feel. On the other hand, and much like the sonic difference between the albums as a whole, Badu and her collaborators have updated her sound for "… & On." Now the bass notes reach their full volume right at the point of attack, the product of a sine-wave synthesizer like the Moog Minimoog that Dilla owned, which was also popular with Dr. Dre (whose work is sampled elsewhere on *Mama's Gun*). In tangible ways, then, Badu has updated the sonic character of the older song to evoke progressive hip hop rather than jazz.

One way to understand this change is as a move away from the music of polite sophistication, toward the sounds of contemporary youth music. Hip hop and jazz scholar Justin Williams writes that "the belief that jazz was a 'serious music' became pervasive in media discourse of the 1980s as jazz became associated with affluence, sophistication,

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Gravediggaz' "Nowhere To Run, Nowhere To Hide," Naughty By Nature's "Hip Hop Hooray," The Notorious B.I.G.'s "Ten Crack Commandments," Gang Starr's "Moment of Truth," Lauryn Hill's "Doo Wop," Outkast's "Aquemini," and Black Star's "Respiration."

and a highbrow aesthetic that resisted being considered a 'popular music.'"[287] Williams

points out that, in the early 1990s, groups like A Tribe Called Quest and Stetsasonic had

used jazz samples to associate their music with the high art of jazz, which served to

legitimize their music among certain audiences. Badu may have been following early

1990s hip hop fashion, then, by using jazz sounds for the music on *Baduizm*. The move to

increase rock, funk and hip hop influences on *Mama's Gun* (through instrumentation,

compositional styles, and arrangements) can therefore be seen as updating Badu's sonic

approach to enable her to stay current and relevant, a status which she has sought

throughout her career. Sonic changes such as these would have helped Badu appeal to a

younger crowd than if she had stayed with the sound of jazz instruments.[288]

Though similar in form, the arrangements of the two songs differ in the ways they

get into and out of the bridge. Whereas the earlier song slips smoothly in and out of the

bridge, in "… & On" the transitions are more abrupt. Moreover, unlike the earlier song,

the updated bridge is built on a groove that is more distinct from those of the verse or

chorus: it's first half is characterized by a very percussive keyboard part, followed by a

brief section of jazz swing played by brushed drums and walking bass. In a re-versioning

of part of Dr. Dre's 1999 "The Watcher," this is cut short by a gunshot, followed by

Badu's cool pronouncement that "things just ain't the same for singers" (Dre's gunshot is

followed by "things just ain't the same for gangstas"), after which the verse groove

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[287] Williams, Justin A. "The Construction of Jazz Rap as High Art in Hip-Hop Music." *The Journal of Musicology* 27, no. 4 (2010): 440.

[288] Singer Norah Jones is one contemporary example of success in the adult contemporary market using jazz instrumentation. Her *Come Away With Me* was a Billboard #1 album in 2002. She primarily appealed to an adult audience. The album's title track peaked at #21 on Billboard's "Adult Pop Songs" chart, but failed to chart on their Hot 100, the measure of popularity with diverse audiences, including youth.

returns.

We might read Badu's versioning of her own material in this case as a critical act, as Samuel A. Floyd Jr. suggests. Positing that a thorough understanding of any black music must involve consideration of how that music tropes on previous works and processes, Floyd writes, "the key to the effective criticism of black music lies in our understanding of its tropings and in our recognition that such tropings are themselves critical acts – expressions of approval and disapproval, validation and invalidation, of past and present tropings and events."[289] In "… & On" Badu extensively tropes, or signifies, on her own song "On and On" through "repetition with a difference." To read Badu's later re-versioning of her earlier song as a "critical act" as Floyd suggests, we might attend to several readily apparent differences. One aspect of Badu's self-criticism in the latter song is its updated sonic character, which I have suggested reflects more of a hip hop sensibility than the original, whose instrumentation evokes jazz styles. Another troping aspect of the latter song is its explicit criticism, and also reuse, of lyrical content from "On and On." "… & On" is critical of Badu's earlier lyrics when a pair of what I call "criticism voices" in the chorus challenges the effectiveness of the messages on *Baduizm*.

The lyrics of "On and On" are full of references to philosophies of the Five Percent Nation, and the esoteric knowledge that characterized Badu's difference from other pop and R&B songwriters of the moment.[290] In "… & On," reuse of such lyrics

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[289] Floyd, *The Power of Black Music*, 233.

[290] The Five Percent Nation is often referred to as a "splinter sect" from the Nation of Islam, a particularly African American sect of Islam. Five Percent philosophies have been present in hip hop by way of numerous New York hip hop acts since the 1980s, but, until Badu, had never held much sway in R&B. See Felicia Miyakawa, *Five Percenter Rap: God Hop's Music, Message,*

including "cause you did not do your math," "my cipher keeps moving like a rolling stone," and "mad props to the God Jah Born" provide clear aural reminders of her previous hit and its spiritual content. But it's the lyrics of the song's chorus that have received the most scholarly attention, and here I want to suggest a new reading. In the chorus, the "criticism voices" sing, "what good do your words do if they can't understand you? / don't go talking that shit, Badu, Badu." Continuing with Floyd's thread of criticism through troping, these lyrics seem to level some sort of criticism against Badu from without. Indeed, nearly every review of her music from this time emphasizes her peculiar spirituality, which Badu foregrounded in the lyrics of many songs on *Baduizm*. Five Percenter philosophies and terminology such as Badu used were little-known outside of New York City, despite their widespread use by popular rap artists, as Felicia Miyakawa and Michael Muhammad Knight have shown.[291] Therefore, "that shit" which "they can't understand" could be understood as Badu's particular combination of spiritual and cultural imagery.

The criticism voices on the chorus of "… & On" are sung by a pair of voices in unison, performed by Badu herself, recorded in separate takes. They are panned very wide left and right in the stereo field, surrounding the listener. Though these parts are obviously performed by Badu, they strike the listener very differently than the rest of Badu's performance by virtue of this wide stereo panning; when we hear Badu in the rest of the song, her voice is placed up front and center, and occupies a much narrower region of the stereo field. Let's call these two stereo profiles "primary" for the position/panning

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and Black Muslim Mission (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005). See also Michael Muhammad Knight, *The Five Percenters* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2007).

[291] Miyakawa, *Five Percenter Rap*. Knight, *The Five Percenters*.

of Badu's voice during most of the song, including verses and bridge, and "secondary"

for the position/panning of the criticism voices that make up most of the chorus. These

two stereo profiles sound so distinct from each other, and are so ideologically opposed,

that we might hear them as separate *characters* within the song. On the one hand we have

the persona of Badu herself, the singer and songwriter, whose voice and agency we feel

we are listening to in the vast majority of the song and album. On the other hand, the

criticism voices, though sung by Badu, seem to come from somebody else, such as an

interviewer, music reviewer, or simply a skeptic of Badu's mission and music.

However, the two criticism voices are not the only ones in the chorus. As they are

singing, a playful and somewhat childlike third voice, in a higher register, arpeggiates a

tonic minor chord on the word "wha(t)" or "why." On the word "Badu," the playful upper

voice (and by extension this persona) joins the criticizing voices, making the lyric pop

with a more colorful harmony. The striking aspect of this voice is that, unlike the

criticism voices, it has the same stereo profile (center and narrow) that I called "primary"

above, and as such, I read this solo voice as representing Badu's primary persona. But

why would this third voice, Badu's persona, joins her critics on the last word of their

line? A slight pronunciation difference suggests one interpretation. Both lyrics that the

third voice sings ('what'/'why' and 'Badu') play on the indeterminacy of 'ah' and 'I'

vowel sounds.[292] To my ear, when the third voice sings the word "Badu" with the

criticism voices, the pronunciation of that voice is actually closer to "B'I do," as in "but I

do." This is more clearly the case in the second chorus than the first. Therefore, 'primary'

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[292] Later in the song she pointedly addresses the matter, singing "gold toothed smile, *split them vowels*," (my emphasis). In this case the *ah* sound of "vowels" is given a distinct *i* sound, such that it sounds like "vials."

Badu sings "B'I do" while the criticism voices sing "Badu." In other words, in the face of accusations that her words "do no good," the criticism voices' imperative to "stop talking that shit" is met with persistence: Badu continues just as before.

Figure 28. Interaction of "Criticism" (upper) and playful/resistant (lower) voices in choruses of "… and On" (0:49-1:00 and 1:58-2:09). These two lines/voices are sounding simultaneously. Note that, after sounding apart for the first three measures, they come together for the last measure.

But the question stands: "what good" do Badu's words do if listeners can't understand them? What are potential reasons for staging this conflict in song, this criticism and resistance? As I stated above, "… & On" is at its core an autobiographical song. Though they have no coherent narrative, the verse lyrics are a string of short descriptions of Badu, and the bridge begins with an intimate memory:

> I remember when I went with momma to the washateria
> remember how I felt the day I first started my period
> remember there in school one day I learned I was inferior
> … water in my cereal.

The lyrics to "… & On," like many of Badu's songs, portray diverse aspects of lived black experience. Badu is "that gypsy flippin' life game from the right brain," she is "the light when they in the dark," she is a "rasta style flower child." These sorts of lyrics, like others that are based in elders' wisdom, spirituality, and Five Percent philosophies,

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portray Badu as embracing aspects of lived experience which are atypical of mainstream media portrayals of African Americans during this time. During in the 1980s and 1990s, news media frequently portrayed black women as so-called welfare queens, in association with contemporary welfare reform debates. As Ange-Marie Hancock describes, the image of the welfare queen played on "long-standing beliefs regarding Black mothers' hyperfertility and laziness."[293] Black men fared little better, as television shows like Fox Network's *Cops* frequently portrayed them as criminals on prime time. Associations of African American with criminality were further strengthened by the blustering portrayals of rappers, who, throughout the 1990s, increasingly made murder, drugs, and hyper-consumption primary subjects for their songs.

Immediately following the first chorus of "… & On" (and as if to assert that she will indeed keep "talking that shit" that people can't understand), Badu begins the second verse with the lyric, "well I'm a pisces zika deka del." In a tweet dated 7/9/2012, a listener asks Badu what these words mean. Badu replies "nothin. Never replaced it." In other words, Badu improvised a scratch lyric during the recording process, and never replaced it with something more intentional. So again, "what good do these words do?" In this case, they are the remnant of improvisation during studio recording, an approach that exemplifies freedom and openness, and on that Badu uses extensively in her creative process.

In a 1997 interview with journalist Greg Tate, Badu said, "I don't like people who say 'no, no, Erykah.' I don't like nobody trying to kill your ideas 'cause they doubt

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[293] Ange-Marie Hancock, *The Politics of Disgust: The Public Identity of the Welfare Queen* (New York: NYU Press, 2004), 21. See also 65-87.

themselves. That's tired to me."[294] Having no rules may well have been the most

important aspect of Badu's creativity during this time. Without paying attention to

"rules," Badu was free to write in whatever ways she pleased, drawing on various styles,

forms, and subjects. Her exceptional feeling of freedom, freedom to be original and

individual, would prove crucial to the formation of Badu's performance persona. That

persona, the Badu that she presented on stage and on record, modeled a combination of

freedom, dignity, and originality that was simultaneously striking and resonant with

consumers. The feeling of freedom that resonated through Badu's creative process found

its way into her onstage portrayal of persona.

With so much importance placed on following inspiration, on *feeling* the songs

come to her, it is no wonder that Badu demonstrated significant concern for studio

ambience. In this sense, Electric Lady Studios in New York, the de facto home of the

Soulquarians and site of tracking and/or mixing for 12 of the 14 songs on *Mama's Gun*,

shone very brightly, as Badu described:

> The walls are covered with painting and collages of Electric Lady-looking stuff.
> The booths are the same ones that Jimi, Stevie Wonder, Roy Ayers, and countless
> other people, a lot of legends, used. D'Angelo had just left the studio… You feel
> it. I don't know exactly how to explain it, but you feel the music, and sometimes,
> when I didn't have an idea, it would come from someplace, and [melodies] would
> just come out the air.[295]

Badu found the space itself inspirational at Electric Lady, and the source was inscrutable,

mysterious, and historical. We might read this as a sort of tension in Badu's process,

between the degree of freedom she claims to need, and influences from the past,

spiritually and musically. But such a reading would ignore the importance to several

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[294] Greg Tate, "Soul Sister Number One," *Vibe*, August 1997, 86.

[295] McIver, *Erykah Badu*, 211.

Soulquarians projects of revisiting music from previous generations. This can be seen in the working process for recording *Voodoo*, which depended on covering" entire albums in the studio as a vehicle to creative exploration through jamming, or The Roots' processes of adapting parts of records to new grooves, the way a sample-based hip hop producer would do. Instead, we might productively characterize the Soulquarians collaboration in general as *dependent* on influences from the past, retooled through an ethos of adapting previous works for contemporary purposes, not the least of which was offering distinct alternatives to the dominant styles of the commercial music marketplace.

In the expression of her artistic concerns, freedom remained an essential component of Badu's dealings with her record label as well. For *Mama's Gun*, that label was Motown Records. An intriguing insight into her working process comes from the liner notes which accompany *Mama's Gun*, which Badu wrote herself. Due to Motown's timeline stipulations, Badu submitted the artwork for *Mama's Gun* before she was forced to submit the finished master tapes. "There was a deadline on the album," she explains, "and since I don't go by deadline, I go by lifeline, it was not completed until it was completed."[296] She resisted Motown's deadline for the music, explaining her dismissal with her deadline/lifeline philosophy, a characteristically thoughtful turn of phrase which realizes double meanings for death and life, and in the process reveals her priorities for her artistic products. Although she knew she wasn't done with the recording and mixing, Motown demanded Badu write notes and album art for the project. She chose to write a direct address to the listener, explaining the situation simply and matter-of-factly. The final two songs completed for the album were "Didn't Cha Know" and "Penitentiary

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[296] Waldron, "Erykah Badu," 64.

Philosophy."[297] In the liner notes for the latter, Badu wrote, "note: (dearest folks, didn't

have these lyrics in time enough to get in the booklet. check for e'm in the next batch. e.

badu". The note for the former reads, "Note: (Peace my beloved people, check website

for the rest of these lyrics-ain't finished yet.) e. badu".[298] Badu was open about the

pressure placed on her by her record label. "I do it when I feel it," she said. "As an artist

you can't just shout on cue."[299]

Badu's freedom onstage was perceived by listeners as a sort of realness, This was

the case in a 2001 concert performance of "Cleva," a song in which Badu is frank about

her physical insecurities but places value on her intellect, during which one audience

member reportedly called out, "Erykah! You're so real!"[300] As with audiences'

perceptions of D'Angelo as real (discussed in chapter one), I would argue that Badu's

realness rested on her portrayal of an alternative to dominant images in hip hop and

R&B.[301] At that same 2001 concert performance, writer dream hampton reported that

Badu addressed the crowd by saying, "If you out here being you mothafuckin' self, throw

one fist in the air, like this here."[302] In an article for *Vibe*, hampton interpreted Badu's

gesture as "giving lessons in freedom" to her audience. Such displays of freedom may

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[297] McIver, *Erykah Badu*, 191.

[298] All punctuation and capitalization is represented here exactly as it appears in CD liner notes. Along with Mickey Whitfield, Badu is credited with Art Direction on the booklet, and makes it clear in interviews that producing her own album art is an artistic priority.

[299] Waldron, "Erykah Badu," 64.

[300] Sia Michel, "Erykah Badu February 14, 2001," *Spin,* May 2001, 64.

[301] Letters from readers printed in *Vibe* indicate that Badu's perceived realness was read in contrast to violent lyrics and overt sexuality in contemporary hip hop and R&B artists. For instance, one reader writes, "Erykah Badu exemplifies what a real sista is all about. Her knowledge of life goes way beyond her superficial counterparts' making it on how phat their asses look in a short skirt." See Hi Priest, "Mail," *Vibe,* October 1997, 47.

[302] hampton, "Lady Sings the Blues," 46.

have signified for audiences on the lived experiences of African Americans, which still lacked (and continues to lack) certain basic freedoms that members of other groups enjoy. In other words, a black woman who feels as completely free as Badu portrays herself to do is a model of the potential for all people to feel free, as they might do in a society without racism. A "different example of a black woman" indeed, and one which audiences appreciated.

By embracing philosophies like those of the Five Percent Nation, preaching self-confidence and freedom of the mind in her lyrics, and adorning herself in Afrocentric clothes and jewelry, Badu pushed against forces that confine and limit conceptions of what is possible within the lived black experience, for both mainstream white audiences and black audiences alike, and instead offered a portrayal of blackness as thoughtful, dignified, brave, and free. Free to be different. Free to be eccentric. Free to be queenly.

"CLEVA"

In "… & On" Badu is frankly autobiographical, letting listeners in on personal details of her life with a dose of braggadocio. In the song "Cleva," which immediately follows "… & On," Badu is similarly reflective, taking an honest look at herself, and encouraging listeners to find value in aspects of themselves that are typically undervalued.

| (verse) | "Got a little pot in my belly,
So now a days my figure ain't so fly.
My dress ain't cost nothin' but seven dollars
but I made it fly, tell ya why. |
| (chorus) | Cause I'm cleva when I bust a rhyme
cleva, always on ya' mind
she's cleva, and I really wanna grow |

but why come, you're the last to know?"

With these lyrics Badu uses self-reflection to disrupt the perceived importance of having a body like a model, or an expensive new dress – qualities commonly depicted in mainstream media as sources of feminine value. Instead, she suggests alternative conceptions of beauty: skill at writing and rapping, the ability to make a lasting impression, and craving personal growth. Badu said of the song, "I want to concentrate more on my inside-pretty than my outside-pretty, because that's gonna go away. But if your inside is beautiful, it never wears away."[303]

Sonically, the song suggests the spread of Badu's ideas through an increase in the number of voices that sing the chorus. Whereas the first chorus is performed by one voice alone, as if Badu were modeling her approach to self-esteem, during the second chorus and the affirmations of the outro, there are multiple voices overdubbed, suggesting that her ideas have caught on and she is now joined by others who share her attitude. The last lyrics we hear Badu sing are "Said I'm alright with me," repeated several times over an extended groove that serves as the song's outro, and as the energy fades, "alright, alright, alright." By foregrounding aspects of herself that might be looked down upon, and finding self-approval despite them, Badu models a "different example of what a black woman is," encouraging and enabling her listeners to do the same.

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[303] Quoted in McIver, *Erykah Badu*, 193.
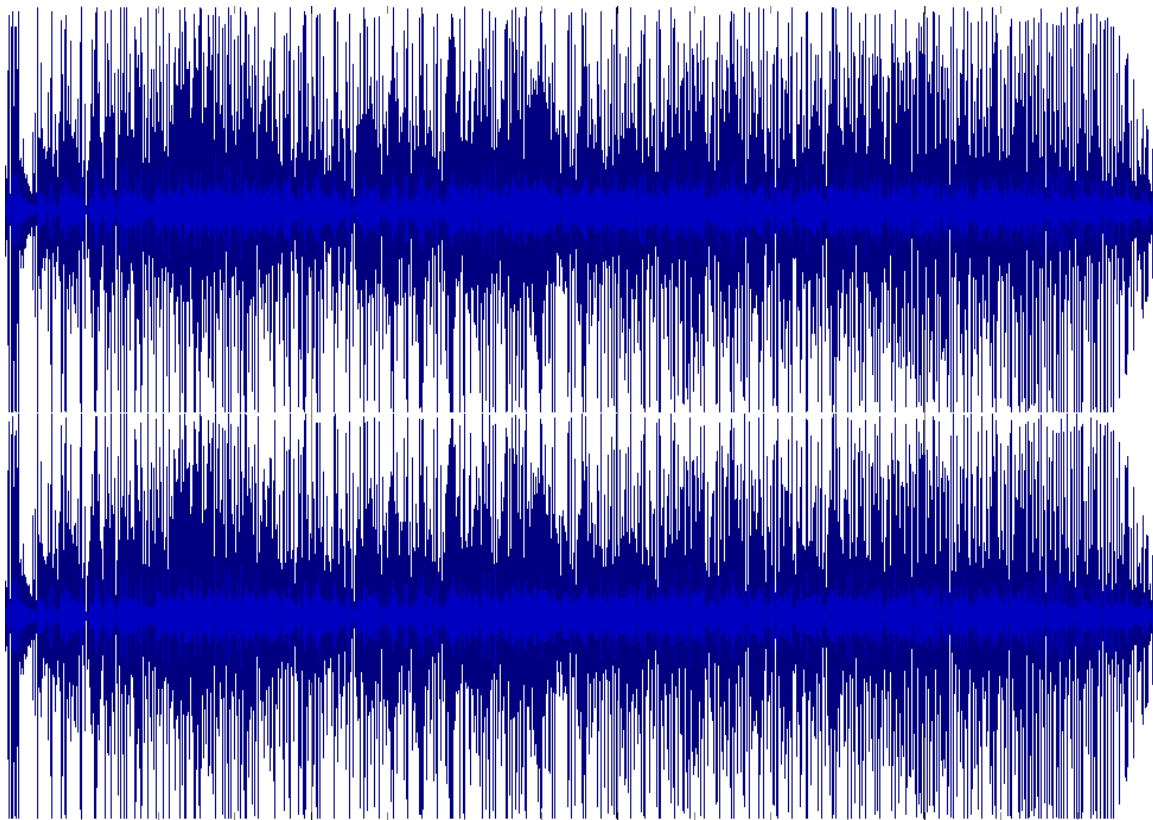
Figure 29. Wave form of "Cleva" (2000) (full song).
1-intro; 2-verse; 3-chorus; 4-verse; 5-chorus; 6-interlude; 7-outro

The wave form of "Cleva" (Figure 29) is notable mainly for its dynamic consistency.

Built on a loping, easy soul groove played by drummer Ahmir Thompson, bassist Pino

Palladino, vibraphonist Roy Ayers, percussionist Leonard "Doc" Gibbs, and keyboardist

James Poyser, the track hardly changes dynamic through the entire song. Unlike the

dynamic character of "Penitentiary Philosophy" (Figure 26), which works to shock the

listener, "Cleva" seems to soothe and reassure. Throughout the song's various sections

the dynamic level exhibits a unflappable steadiness, mirroring the confidence in Badu's

lyrical message. Thus, in "Cleva," lyrics and sonic characteristics work together to

reassure the listener that, despite overwhelming signals to the contrary in print and video media, her "inside-pretty" should be a source of pride regardless of her "outside pretty."

"A.D. 2000," "BOOTY," AND "BAG LADY"

In this section I will use brief examinations of three songs from the second half of *Mama's Gun* to describe aspects of Badu's persona and the album's stylistic diversity that contribute to its resistive work. Complementing Badu's emphases on freedom of the mind in "Penitentiary Philosophy," and freedom of the artist in her creative and collaborative processes, is her direct lyrical treatment of the issue of personal freedom for African Americans. She explicitly engages the subject of Black freedom on the song "A.D. 2000," which Badu wrote as an elegy for Amadou Diallo, the unarmed Guinean man killed by New York Police officers in 1999. Written from Diallo's perspective, the lyrics claim that he will be remembered wrongly, if at all. Like Ellison's *Invisible Man*, Badu's lyrics emphasize Diallo's anonymity within mainstream society. Sonically, the mix takes a highly unusual approach to Badu's lead vocal: it is panned back and forth across the stereo field for the entirety of the song. As she sings lyrics such as, "you won't be naming no buildings after me / my name will be misstated," the constantly shifting source of the voice results in an indeterminacy that analogizes the victim's invisibility. Thus, in "A.D. 2000," lyrics and mixing work together to portray Diallo's life as marginal, the voice quite literally moving from one margin of the sonic field to the other, and back again. Badu's empathic approach registers as a protest against racial profiling, and state-sanctioned violence.

Stylistically, "A.D. 2000" exists somewhere in the realm of acoustic rock. Its most ubiquitous instrumental element is acoustic guitar, which accompanies the vocal alone at the song's beginning and end, and is included throughout, under an augmented texture that includes drums, bass, synthesizer, and electric piano. The song is one of several on the album that use acoustic string instruments such as violins, acoustic guitar, and string bass, adding to the timbral variety of the album.[304] With few exceptions, use of such a variety acoustic instruments was unusual in R&B. While *Mama's Gun* was marketed as R&B, such instrumentation choices – in tandem with stylistic choices in songwriting and arranging – worked to confound easily delineated genre distinctions.

One of the funkiest songs on the album, "Booty" is a vehicle for Badu to brag and play the dozens with an absent opponent. Sonically, Booty is heavy and sharp, with big bass and drums, horn stabs like Quincy Jones might have written for Michael Jackson, and percussive effects which recall 1970s blaxploitation films, including bells, congas, and clavinet, evoking the heyday of soul. By casting these lyrics within a sonic texture that suggests a 1970s Black aesthetic, Badu associates her message with Blackness from an earlier era, and its attendant community feeling. Lyrically, the performer's audacious and funky approach to sexual desire recalls 1970s funk heroine Betty Davis, whose song "Your Man My Man" takes a similarly ambivalent approach to monogamy.[305] Listeners familiar with Davis may have heard echoes of her work not only in Badu's subject matter, but also in the raspy holler with which she begins the chorus of "Booty." The association is all the more fitting because both artists built personas that foregrounded

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[304] Other examples include "Green Eyes," and "Orange Moon, which both use acoustic bass, "Time's A Wastin'," which uses violins, and "In Love With You," an acoustic guitar/vocal duet between Badu and Stephen Marley.

[305] From Davis's 1973 album *Betty Davis*.

their other-ness, and both enacted a sort of radical black feminism based on fierce attachment to their musical and performative convictions.

Using numerous variations on a theme that is essentially "you're this, but he wants me more," Badu casts herself as irresistible but disinterested, as the following verse and chorus demonstrate:

(Verse)   Your booty might be bigga
But I still can pull your nigga
But I don't want him

Ya got sugar on your pita
But ya nigga thinks I'm sweeter
But I don't want him

Ya know the whole enyclopedia
But ya nigga thinks I'm deeper
But I don't want him

(Chorus)   I don't want him
Cause of what he doin' to you
And you don't need him
Cause he ain't ready

See I don't want him
If he ain't made no arrangement with you
I hope you would've done the same thing for me too.[306]

Why doesn't Badu want him? "Because of what he's doin' to you" and because he "ain't made no arrangement with you." Badu's approach to monogamy, based on the nature (and not simply the fact) of her counterpart's relationship with the man in question, is not rooted in conservative morality or so-called family values. In the words of gender and sexuality scholar Greg Thomas, "Booty" "makes [monogamy] strictly circumstantial,

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[306] Lyrics taken from *Mama's Gun* liner notes, written by Badu.

rather than 'moral,' rejecting its conventional descriptions."[307] The man in question barely registers as a prize, or as source of female value. Badu's relationship to her counterpart is not deeply adversarial, but instead based on compassion, and the hope that she "would have done the same thing for me too." Despite the subtext of a contested lover, then, the song is really about the relationship between two women, and the creation and maintenance of a bond based on mutual respect.

With the turn to compassion in "Booty," Badu departs from the confrontation in music by her contemporaries, including Aaliyah, Trina, and Jill Scott.[308] Badu suggests the possibility of compassion between women even though they may find themselves courted by the same man. In doing so, she resists easy binaries like you/me, monogamy/openness, and control/release, suggesting more nuanced understandings of relationships. Badu's navigation of both taunting/teasing her opponent, and ultimately expressing sisterhood, was distinct within the mainstream hip hop and R&B marketplace, and provided an alternative way for listeners to identify with regard to their relationships, and competition.

Finally, I'd like to touch on "Bag Lady," the lead single from the album, which reached #2 on the Billboard "Adult R&B" chart and #6 on the "Hot 100."[309] The song encapsulates several of Badu's strengths and contradictions when it comes to

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[307] Greg Thomas, "Queens of Consciousness and Sex-Radicalism in Hip-Hop: On Erykah Badu and The Notorious K.I.M.," *The Journal of Pan African Studies* 1, no. 7 (2007), 27.

[308] Aaliyah addressed nearly every song on 2001's *Aaliyah* directly at a male lover, reinforcing the normative nature of monogamous heterosexual relationships. Jill Scott, who collaborated with The Roots and is generally thought of as giving voice to a self-aware subject position, approached a similar situation to that in "Booty" with her 2000 song "Gettin' In the Way," in which she physically threatens a woman who she perceives to be getting too close to her man.

[309] "Erykah Badu Chart History, Billboard," *Billboard*, accessed April 18, 2018, http://www.billboard.com/music/erykah-badu/chart-history.

representations of gender. First, the lyrics. Kelefa Sanneh calls the song "a cautionary tale

for women too preoccupied to find love," a characterization which may have come from

Badu's warnings that "when they see you comin' / niggas take off runnin'," and the

song's lyrical advice to "let it go" and "pack light."[310] Badu herself spoke to *Jet*

extensively about the subject of the song, explaining,

> We have a lot of baggage that we have gathered since we were children:
> the education system and the things that we 'mislearned,' things that really
> don't have anything to do with us… Romantic relationships where we
> were actually the ones who needed to change, but we always blamed the
> partner. And we continue to switch partners over and over again
> wondering why they still won't act right. Ultimately, it's because we have
> to let go of our own baggage. There are many kinds of bags that we carry.
> I urge people to pack light.[311]

On the one hand, Badu is turning her own self-reflection into useful advice to her

listeners. She sings, "If you start breathin' / you won't believe it / you feel so much

better," and "love can make it better." On the other, she presents this advice as useful

within the context of attracting (or more accurately, avoiding repelling) a male lover.

Minimizing emotional baggage allows people to feel more confident, a worthy end in its

own right, but Badu contextualizes its value only in terms of heterosexual romance. "One

day he gon' say / you crowdin' my space," she sings, as if displeasing her lover were the

end that a woman should seek to avoid. However, Badu also sings "All you must hold

onto / is you," a lyric which seems to make the woman's own individuality, on her own

terms, the greatest prize in the matter.

Musically, "Bag Lady" is unhurried, but carries a lot of weight. Given the urge to

simplicity in the lyrics, the orchestration is notably thick: guitar, drums, multiple

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[310] Kelefa Sanneh, "Godmother Of Soul," *The New Yorker*, April 25, 2016,
https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/04/25/erykah-badu-the-godmother-of-soul, n.p.

[311] Waldron, "Erykah Badu," 63-64.

keyboards, congas, bass, handclaps, and numerous background vocalists create a full and frequently shifting texture. Even as the arrangement chooses a comfortable pace and route, the shifts in orchestration disrupt stasis by bring certain elements to the fore. For example, the first two times Badu sings the song's imperative, "pack light," bass, drums, keyboards, and sample suddenly drop out, leaving only congas to accompany Badu's voice. This calls attention to the lyric, giving it a sort of weight by virtue of the thinner instrumental texture. This play with weight fits the narrative of the lyric – just as Badu urges listeners to pack light, she herself forgoes the heaviness of the musical arrangement. Her thought-provoking play between the relative weight of orchestration and lyric works in service of a message that encourages listeners to pare down emotional baggage. In this way, Badu characteristically rejects easy binaries like heavy/light, providing the impetus to self-reflection necessary for listeners to decide for themselves what they can let go. Though as a whole the song sacrifices the strength to be gained by female independence from male pleasure, Badu nonetheless creates a space of sisterhood by delivering productive advice in a convincing fashion.

REFLECTION AND COMMUNITY

To demonstrate one aspect of Badu's performance that enabled her unusual messages to land with listeners, I'll turn now to one exchange between Badu and the audience on her 1997 *Live* album. In it, Badu responds to the audience's cues, and lets them respond to hers, cultivating a sense of intimacy, and the mutual participation that characterizes black musical performance. It is a poignant example of Badu's ability to land on a black audience, and demonstrates the way Badu uses intimacy and exchange

with the audience to cultivate a sense of community and identification. The portion of the

exchange I'm interested in is the following:

> I would like to thank the Creator for giving me this gift. And I'd like to thank you for being reflections of this gift. ["We love you!"] Because sometimes you feel like you're by yourself up here. And um, [piano begins] no matter what anybody ever thinks, ["yeah, baby"] what anybody *ever* thinks, I still get cold when it's cold, hungry when I'm hungry, miss my mama when we're away, get tired. I'm a person, ["Badu!"] and I represent you.[312]

Badu begins the exchange with a version of the gratitude that is typical after a song's

performance. Rather than thanking the audience first, she thanks the Creator, bringing a

third object to the artist-audience dynamic. In so doing, she places the credit for her

performance outside of herself, displaying humility. Only then does she thank the

audience, not for their applause, but for being an essential part of the very performance

they appreciate, through their "reflections" of it. While Badu's words are certainly a bit

cryptic, the define a certain philosophy of interrelatedness. Badu is variously related to

the Creator as a manifestation of her "gift," to humanity broadly as somebody with

biological needs, and to the audience members as a representation of them, just as they

figuratively *re-present* her by their mirror-like reflection. As Gena Dagel Caponi writes,

"the central value supporting African-based aesthetics is that of interrelatedness."[313]

Another way to look at such relationships is as analogous to Call-Response, which

Samuel A. Floyd Jr. dubbed the "master trope" of Black music. Each of these

relationships is, in a sense, a dialog between interrelated parties, which is self-reinforcing.

However we choose to interpret Badu's appreciation to the crowd, it leads to the

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[312] This address comes between the songs "Apple Tree" and "Ye Yo." On some versions of the album it is attached to the end of the former; on others, it begins the latter.

[313] Gena Dagel Caponi, ed., *Signifyin(g), Sanctifyin', and Slam Dunking: A Reader in African American Expressive Culture* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999), 135.

first intelligible feedback from the crowd, a male voice shouting, "We love you." Such

shouting may indicate that a listener is so moved by the performance or ambience as to

engage the artist by reflecting the very same appreciation the crowd just received. The

individual fan's motivations aside, Badu's reaction is significant. Her voice grows

quieter, and she says "because sometimes you feel like you're by yourself up here." The

final word is hardly audible, as if she were choking back tears, or lowering her face. This

turn from appreciating to displaying vulnerability allows Badu to establish a distinct

intimacy with the audience, and they quiet to listen to what will follow. Her voice quivers

on the ensuing "And um," as if she will respond to the audience's encouragement by

sharing something very emotional. In response, in the space which follows, pianist

Norman Hurt plays a mezzo-piano B-flat minor chord with added 9th and 11th in a cluster

voicing. His gesture is like a comforting hand on the shoulder of somebody struggling, an

indication that Badu is alone as she prepares to make her revelation. The minor nature of

the chord imbues the moment with weight and sincerity, and a certain drama that comes

from the light dissonance of the tightly-packed extension notes. Displaying renewed

strength, Badu then says "no matter what anybody ever thinks," and during her pause for

effect, one male audience member encourages her by saying "yeah, baby." Engaging the

audience in Call-Response, Badu says even stronger, "What anybody *ever* thinks." Hurt

vamps out of time using the same cluster of notes in the right hand over a bass that

alternates between B-flat and G-flat, juxtaposing the weight of B-flat minor with the

hopefulness of G-flat major seven. But here Badu follows her impassioned setup with a

return to intimacy, even greater than before, as she lists her basic biological and

emotional needs in a voice which cracks, trails off at the end of phrases, sighs, thins, and

generally portrays vulnerability. The audience reacts primarily with silence, and occasional shouts of support. By claiming to represent audience members, Badu invites them to see themselves in her, an essential step from providing an example to others' finding meaning in that example. Badu concludes the exchange with further intimacy, dedicating the following song to her unborn baby, and as the musicians begin the song, her small laugh indicates that she is smiling again.

Badu's intimacy with her live audience is important for a number of reasons. For one thing, she presents a bold and unique persona onstage, both visually and ideologically. Because her headwrap, ankhs, incense, and herbal tea mark her as different, intimacy with her audience serves to bridge the gap between performer and audience members. In this particular address, that is clearly Badu's aim, as she confides her basic biological and emotional needs to the audience, and concludes by saying, "I represent you." Such needs are never in doubt when we watch performers, whether they be musicians, athletes, or charismatic speakers. However, performers rarely remind us of their humanity, and often use the stage and other aspects of presentation to foreground their difference from the audience. They are onstage, and they have skills which the audience has come to see, both of which set the performer apart from those watching. Many performers work to uphold this difference, and use the supposed power it grants them to their advantage in creating a spectacle.[314] Rather than striving to maintain this separation, Badu chooses to bridge it in this sequence. When she thanks the audience, she doesn't thank them for applause, but for being "a reflection of [her] gift." As a reflection,

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[314] When performers fall or fail, this breach of their *in*humanity (or *super*humanity in the case of physical feats) may seem noteworthy to fans or detractors, who might post a video of the incident to a web page.

the audience is implicated in the performance as not merely passive observers, but essential to the event.

By blurring the distinctions between herself and the audience, Badu was consistent with African and African American aesthetic priorities for musical events. Such blurring conforms to what Thomas Turino terms a "participatory performance," and Christopher Small calls "musicking."[315] Olly Wilson notes that "there are no observers in the traditional West African multi-media experience; everyone is a participant. The same thing could be said of most Afro-American musical experiences."[316] Maultsby goes further, stating that "the fundamental concept that governs music performance in African and African-derived cultures is that music-making is a participatory group activity that serves to unite black people into a cohesive group for a common purpose."[317] Here Maultsby singles out the communal aspect of music making, from the perspectives of both performance (participatory) and purpose (unity), as fundamentally similar in African and African American musics. In the exchange above, Badu leveraged the history of participatory music making in Afro-diasporic cultures to create a sense of intimacy with her audience. Utilizing call-response structures and metaphors that encourage the audience to identify with her, her performance cultivated a communal feeling that enabled her unusual but supportive messages to land.

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[315] Thomas Turino, *Music as Social Life: The Politics of Participation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 23-32. Small, *Music of the Common Tongue*, 49-59.

[316] Wilson, "The Significance of the Relationship," 16.

[317] Portia Maultsby, "Africanisms in African American Music," in *Africanisms in African American Culture*, Joseph E. Holloway, ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005), 329.

CONCLUSIONS

In her 2016 book *Mama's Gun: Black Maternal Figures and the Politics of Transgression*, English professor Marlo David analyzes cultural works by African American women, which she argues "recur and revise well-known controlling images through creative self-fashioning, self-definition, and reclaimed subjectivity."[318] David takes the title for her book, and the hermeneutic principle she employs throughout, from Badu's album. David's "mama's gun hermeneutic" depends on the opposition of the feminine, nurturing *mama*, and the masculine, destructive *gun*, which taken together, "resists binaries and exemplifies the flexibility of black cultural expression to reimagine dominant representation."[319] This chapter has demonstrated several ways Badu's music and lyrics have done likewise, challenging listeners and market structures to accept Badu and her work as both/and rather than either/or. Whereas previous black artists had been corralled into a select few stylistic categories, *Mama's Gun* presented a uniquely broad picture of musical blackness. By populating the album with body of songs that ran the gamut of black styles, from funk to rock, soul, and R&B, Badu challenged the limits of convention and market forces that would stifle the breadth of black expression in commercial music. *Mama's Gun* stood out from the slick production and bling aesthetic that ruled the hip hop and R&B marketplace by embracing the funk of earlier black musical aesthetics. This enabled Badu to represent an updated version of *soul*, and call attention to the declining emphasis on community within the status quo of contemporary black music. As reviews and reader responses indicate, Badu was perceived by audiences

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[318] Marlo D. David, *Mama's Gun: Black Maternal Figures and the Politics of Transgression* (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2016), 8.

[319] David, *Mama's Gun,* 7.

as embodying a kind of realness that was completely new in the marketplace. Her reliance on self-reflection in her lyrics resonated with listeners whose ideas of realness were not fully addressed by representations in slick R&B and bling rap styles. Badu managed to convince listeners that her message was real in an era when keeping it real was the de facto standard for black authenticity. She was perceived as real because she was unassailably Black, leaning as she did on black musical styles and social-presentational modes, as well as Afrocentric philosophies and appearance.

By demonstrating an *openness to reevaluation* through her own lyrical self-reflection (in "Penitentiary Philosophy," "Cleva," and "… & On, to name only a few), Badu modeled an approach to knowledge of self that helped her messages land. According to one later writer, Badu's music did have the effect of breaking down listeners' ideas about what was possible or impossible for them. In a reflective 2017 article for *Vibe*, writer Shenequa Golding wrote "Ms. Badu taught black women there's a lot they have to unlearn, while simultaneously giving us the freedom to learn what works for us."[320]

Mama's Gun reflected the methods of D'Angelo and The Roots by Badu's approach to troping on previous black musical styles through interpolation and imitation. This highlights the importance of the Soulquarians collaboration to the sound of compositions and arrangements. Furthermore, the multiplicity of instrumentations across songs, ranging from strings to rock instrumentation to samplers, to acoustic guitar, testifies to the importance of Badu's cooperation with numerous collaborators for writing

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[320] Shenequa Golding, "Erykah Badu's *Baduizm* Is Still Genre Bending and Defining 20 Years Later," *Vibe.com*, February 11, 2017. www.vibe.com/2017/02/erykah-badu-baduizm-20-year-anniversary/, n.p.

and arranging, and this is corroborated by Badu's own descriptions of her compositional methods.

The album's stylistic breadth worked in tandem with Badu's Afrocentric persona and image, and lyrical emphasis on community and self-reflection, to suggest new ways of understanding blackness in commercial music. This multifaceted approach realized the Soulquarians' ethos of resistance to the status quo as robustly as any project they had worked on to date. Through rigorous exercise of freedom and self-criticism in her compositional and studio processes, Badu was able to present an album that included diverse portrayals of lived black experience, and pushed against mainstream representations of African Americans. She not only provided "a different example of what a black woman is," she encouraged her listeners to do the same by her very boldness, community focus, and regal bearing.

CHAPTER V

CULMINATION: "WE TRIED TO GO AS FAR AS POSSIBLE WITH IT"

Speaking about Common's fifth album, 2002's *Electric Circus*, to journalist

Ronnie Reese in 2006, Questlove said,

> If anybody was the reluctant student of that experiment, it was me. The pressure
> on my head was greater because I was listed as the executive producer, and MCA,
> our label, was looking at me like, 'Don't let this motherfucker go off the cuff,'
> and Common's like, 'I'm ready to go off the cuff,' and Dilla's like, 'Yo, let's go
> off the cuff!'[321]

In 2001, the Soulquarians seemed to be moving in different directions, away from the

approaches that had unified them on previous albums. As Questlove describes it, during

the recording of *Electric Circus* Dilla and D'Angelo were each preparing to go in new

directions with their music, while he still wanted to do a "victory lap" with The Roots

based on their success with *Things Fall Apart*. D'Angelo was going to "go dirty." Dilla

was "going Kraftwerk."[322] Common wanted to blow everything up and go way out. "He

was interested in experimentation in a way I had never heard before, from him or from

anyone."[323] With the major Soulquarians players pulled in so many different directions,

things certainly seemed to be falling apart. In the cauldron of this tension and

restlessness, the Soulquarians collaborated on their boldest creation to date.

This closing chapter examines the end of the Soulquarians project by looking at

Common's 2002 album *Electric Circus*, the final album-length project of the

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[321] Ronnie Reese, "Son of Detroit: The Oral History of J Dilla." Articles, *Wax Poetics*, May 19, 2016 [June/July 2006], http://www.waxpoetics.com/features/articles/son-detroit-dilla-remembered/, n.p.

[322] Questlove, *Mo' Meta Blues*, 192. Kraftwerk is a German band whose synth-heavy tunes had been used in hip hop since at least 1982, on Afrika Bambaataa's seminal record "Planet Rock."

[323] Questlove, *Mo' Meta Blues*, 193.

collaboration. Several recurring concerns from the broad arc of the Soulquarians' work appear dramatically in the music and creation story of the album, and play out in its reception as well. Among these are a tension between creative exploration and commercial success, sonic allusions to various points on a long history of black music, and the juxtaposition of creative freedom with themes of liberation for black Americans. I argue that, because of its mixed reception and poor sales, *Electric Circus* illustrated the limits of the Soulquarians efforts to resonate with consumers while pushing stylistic boundaries. I then describe the end of the Soulquarians' most active period, which immediately followed *Electric Circus*. The chapter closes with some concluding thoughts on the Soulquarians, as well as ruminations on the implications of this dissertation as a whole.

"A HAIL MARY PASS THAT'S STILL UP IN THE AIR"

Electric Circus was perhaps the single densest album in terms of Soulquarian participation. While D'Angelo does not appear on it, Questlove served as the album's executive producer, and co-produced eight of the tracks, while James Poyser and J Dilla are credited as "Co-executive producers," and each produced or co-produced nine and seven (respectively) of the thirteen tracks. Dilla's influence on the album may have been even more extensive than that, for according to Questlove, "As quiet as it's kept, the ringleader of that whole period was Dilla."[324] All three were apparently quite active throughout the album's conception and recording. By comparison, *Voodoo* was primarily a collaboration of D'Angelo and Questlove, with Poyser appearing only once, and Dilla

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[324] Ronnie Reese, "Son of Detroit," n.p.

uncredited. *Like Water For Chocolate*, Common's 2000 album, featured production by all four original Soulquarians, but only a handful of collaboratively-produced tracks – the majority were the work of one producer alone.

Common was clear that he wanted the album to be exploratory, groundbreaking, and different. He said, **"**I was inspired to make some music that would break the boundaries of what we think hip hop should be. I really thought hip hop was limiting itself to just one direction and sound."[325] Other Soulquarians involved were ready to go there with him. For his part, James Poyser characterized the project by saying, "Common wanted to go to the next level and be really experimental, and we were going there, doing different things, trying different things… things with different tempos, different time signatures. It was just really creative, extra creative. We tried to go as far as possible with it."[326]

The group was probably emboldened by the commercial success all the other Soulquarians projects had achieved. As much as the Soulquarians had gone against the grain of mainstream rap and R&B, every project had nonetheless achieved excellent sales. *Voodoo* and *Mama's Gun* had both gone platinum (1,000,000+ units sold), while *Things Fall Apart* and *Like Water For Chocolate* had achieved gold status (500,000+ units sold).[327] However, while a penchant for innovation characterized those projects as well, perhaps none was as far out musically as *Electric Circus*.

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[325] Coates, "Life After Hip Hop," 136.

[326] Reese, "Son of Detroit," n.p.

[327] *Things Fall Apart* would later (2013) reach platinum status as well. These categories are constructions of, and administered by, The Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA). See https://www.riaa.com/.

Common's explorations were supported by his label, MCA, to the extent that he could create an album of broad stylistic diversity (unrivaled even by *Mama's Gun*), probably due in large part to the success of *Like Water For Chocolate*, which sold well and earned a Grammy nomination for "The Light." Yet, just as the time came to promote the album's release, MCA's parent company, Universal, began phasing the label out and folding its operations into its sister subsidiary, Geffen Records, laying off the people who had worked with Common, and with The Roots on their 2002 release *Phrenology*. Though the recording of *Electric Circus* was thoroughly funded, its release was underfunded, with a budget for only one video ("Come Close"), and very little press. Though released only two weeks after The Roots' *Phrenology*, *Electric Circus* received much less label support, crippled because the dismantling of MCA began during that interval, in early December, 2002. The result was that, in Questlove's words, Common "had to let the album drown."[328] This was circumstantial; it is unlikely that Common or The Roots could have known the timing of that shakeup, or if they had, that Common would have waited until it was under way to release the album. However, label troubles were not the only difficulty *Electric Circus* encountered – the music itself proved an obstacle to the album's success as well.

The album begins with an intro that shares characteristics with intros on other Soulquarians-produced albums, most notably *Voodoo* and Common's previous album, *Like Water For Chocolate* (2000). In all three cases, the music evokes Caribbean afro-diasporic musicking practices with voices and rhythm. The opening track to *Voodoo*, "Playa Playa," comprises a swirling version of the sounds of Cuban Santeria ritual music,

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[328] This account comes directly from Questlove, in a 2005 interview. See Red Bull Music Academy, "Questlove from the Roots," 44:45.

including a 2+3 clave pattern and male voice.[329] "Time Travelin' (A Tribute to Fela),"
which opens *Like Water For Chocolate,* begins very similarly, as singer Vinia Mojica
intones in what sounds like Spanish, including the name Elegba, a deity of Cuban
Santeria (as well as a primary figure in Haitian *vodun*), whose roots lay in the Yoruba
religion of southwestern Nigeria and surrounding areas. Her singing is out of time and
accompanied by harmonized trumpet, ocean sounds, and later, bongos, suggesting ritual
performance that is syncretic and originates in afro-Caribbean communities. *Electric
Circus* begins with a song called "Ferris Wheel," which evinces a bold update of this
template. Vinia Mojica again sings in what sounds like Spanish, in short, repeated
phrases and uncomplicated melodies. She is accompanied by bass, kick drum and
percussion, distorted electric piano, distorted electric guitar, sound effects including a
crying baby and various electronic manipulations, and what sounds like a wooden flute
with vocalizations through it. The drums and percussion outline a triple meter, but the
piano plays a cross rhythm in duple meter. Though this juxtaposition is rather simple by
comparison, the combination of duple and triple frameworks is a defining characteristic
of African and afro-diasporic musicking practices, like those of Caribbean ritual styles.

While "Ferris Wheel" recalls earlier Soulquarians album intros explicitly, its
difference also points the way to the new directions that characterize the album:
incorporation of live electric guitars and other instruments atypical of rap production,
spacy sound effects, and widespread sonic density. Common's explorations were the
result of his philosophy that artists must remain true to themselves and break new ground,
even if it meant surprising listeners. *Jet* writer Mark Baptiste reports that Common said

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[329] For a fuller description of the sonic aspects of this intro, and its importance to the larger
cultural evocations of the album, see Kajikawa, "D'Angelo's Voodoo Technology."

of the album, "I ain't goin' to do what people expect… I just wanna go where I wanna go."[330] In these and other comments, Common makes clear that freedom and experimentalism were crucial values to his creative process (and that of other Soulquarians) on the album.

As I have argued with regard to *Mama's Gun*, creative freedom (in studio and compositional processes) coexisted with freedom as a subject of lyrics and imagery in the work of the Soulquarians.[331] I have so far failed to mention two notable cases of Soulquarians' visual portrayals that call attention to freedom (or a lack thereof): the cover art of *Things Fall Apart* and *Like Water For Chocolate.* Both albums use black and white photographs from the civil rights era. The former consists of a striking image of two black teenagers fleeing in apparent terror toward the camera, armed police close behind them. The latter depicts a black woman drinking from a water fountain labeled "colored only," directly adjacent to one labeled "white only." By using these images, Soulquarians encouraged listeners to understand their albums in light of the history of the African American struggle for freedom, allowing the music to do cultural work by engaging dimensions greater than entertainment alone.

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[330] Mark Baptiste, "Common: Neo-Soul Rapper Stretches Hip Hop Boundaries with Electric Circus," *Jet*, January 6, 2003, 36.

[331] I have so far failed to mention two notable cases of Soulquarians' visual portrayals that call attention to freedom (or a lack thereof): the cover art of *Things Fall Apart* and *Like Water For Chocolate.* Both albums use black and white photographs from the civil rights era. The former consists of a striking image of two black teenagers fleeing in apparent terror toward the camera, armed police close behind them. The latter depicts a black woman drinking from a water fountain labeled "colored only," directly adjacent to one labeled "white only." By using these images, Soulquarians encouraged listeners to understand their albums in light of the history of the African American struggle for freedom, allowing the music to do cultural work by engaging dimensions greater than entertainment alone.

Common openly embraced both political and creative freedom on *Electric Circus*, telling *Jet* that the album "is an expression of my freedom, and it's probably more [reflective of] who I am than any of my previous albums."[332] Soulquarians collaborators including Common, Mos Def, Talib Kweli, and Erykah Badu had concerned themselves with subjects of political, social, and creative freedom (and continue to do so), often juxtaposing – even conflating – the three.[333] Common's statement (that the album is an expression of his freedom) might therefore be read as an expression of a philosophical value that ran through much of the Soulquarians work, a theme that united individual artists and albums. Just as he expressed his freedom by pushing boundaries of genre and being extra creative with the music on *Electric Circus*, Common rapped lines like "I lay terror in this era like Che Guevera / For the people to make a way that's better," and gave songs titles like "I Got A Right Ta," and "Between Me, You, and Liberation." Moreover, freedom was on the minds of his production team. Early in the process of creating *Electric Circus,* in an online teaser about the in-progress album, Questlove wrote that it was "full of experiments, time changes, weirdo shit, and freedom."[334] In this statement,

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[332] Quoted in Baptiste, "Common: Neo-soul," 36.

[333] For example, Common's "A Song For Assata" (2000) concerns, and is dedicated to, American activist Assata Shakur. Shakur was imprisoned in 1977 on charges of killing a police officer. A political refugee, Shakur fled to Cuba after escaping prison in 1979. Shakur's voice graces the end of the track. Asked about freedom, Shakur replies, "I've never been free," and claims that black people have never been entirely free in America. Her image is one of nearly 90 that appears on the *Sgt. Pepper's*-esque cover art of *Electric Circus*. Also relevant is Mos Def's "Umi Says" (from his 1999 album *Black on Both Sides*), in which Mos sings repeatedly, "I want black people to be free, to be free; all black people to be free, to be free" during the choruses. On the subject of Mos Def's authentication of rappers who sing, in this song and others, see Jackson, *Real Black*, 183-193.

[334] Quoted in Marshall, "Giving Up Hip-Hop's Firstborn," 873. Marshall cites a January 27, 2001 news brief from okayplayer.com, http://www.okayplayer.com/dcforum/general1/9619.html (accessed January 31, 2001). Over the course of the Soulquarians collaboration, Questlove had developed an abiding interest in afrobeat music by the likes of Fela Kuti, and would later claim this was due to the role that music played in African struggles for liberation in 1970s. Fela's son

Questlove reveals the guiding role that themes of freedom played in the project, and puts it on a level with musical experimentation.

Common's freedom was reflected in his willingness and ability to experiment with various sounds uncharacteristic of hip hop albums, challenging generic conventions of rap with instrumentation (like the distorted guitar and keyboards of "Ferris Wheel" and other songs), style cues from other genres (like electric guitar solos and unusual sound effects), and reworking the elements of groove which had underlaid hip hop music since its beginnings. For example, whereas nearly all hip hop drum patterns are based on some reiteration or reorganizing of a funk, rock, or soul drum kit pattern (such as those depicted in Figures 6 and 23 in the current study), several songs on the album take a very experimental approach to drums. One of these is "Soul Power," the second track on the album, the drums from which are transcribed in Figure 30.
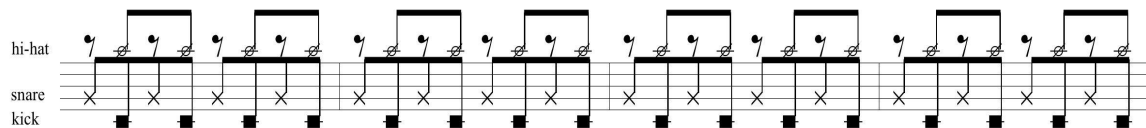
Figure 30. J Dilla's drums on Common's "Soul Power" (2002) (throughout).

The drum pattern on "Soul Power" is very unusual. The kick drum takes a common four on the floor pattern (kicks on every downbeat) and shifts it one eighth note, placing all the kicks on upbeats instead of downbeats.[335] This distorts a very stable, danceable

Femi made a guest appearance on *Like Water For Chocolate*, on the song "Time Travelin' (A Tribute to Fela)."

[335] Four on the floor kick patterns are particularly common in dance music, including disco and electronic dance music (EDM). It is conducive to dancing because the beat is so easy to follow,

pattern into an unstable, even disorienting one. Of the several songs on the album with

innovative drum patterns, this one may read as the strangest, while also explicitly

indebted to one of the most commonplace patterns. Adding to the confusion, the snare

drum is played on every downbeat, and hi hats on every upbeat (with the kicks), a weird

combination reminiscent of the four-count snare pattern that recurred in Motown's 1960s

hits, here grotesquely altered. In his work on sonic racialization in the music of the rapper

Eminem, Loren Kajikawa notes the ability of drum patterns to signify difference in rap

music. According to Kajikawa, "Lack of rhythmic density and absence of syncopation in

the hi-hat, kick drum, and snare portion of the beat [on "My Name Is"] offer a rhythmic

parody of whiteness, toying with the well-known stereotype that white people lack

rhythm."[336] While the beat for "Soul Power" doesn't eschew syncopation in the same

way Eminem's does, its relentless alternation of snare and kick/hi-hat lacks the

periodicity necessary to make syncopation legible as funky in the tradition of James

Brown or Parliament-Funkadelic. In other words, though the beat contains syncopated

elements, it is distinctly un-funky.

On top of this beat Common takes lyrical *soul power* to its extreme, rapping about

numerous iconic black figures (Jesse Jackson, Tupac Shakur, Don Cheadle) and subjects

of interest to black communities (homegrown black economies, African origins, etc). The

title of the song itself is repeatedly chanted antiphonally in the song, a crowd answering a

lone male voice, both of which sound like they are sampled from a recording of the late

1960s or early 1970s. The spirit of Common's performance is progressive, challenging

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the result of a maximally regular pattern played on the drum that, when listening on a sound
system with heavy bass (such as listeners typically find in dance clubs) is easiest to feel in the
body.

[336] Kajikawa, *Sounding Race*, 132.

the legitimacy of copycat rappers, and offering his labor to his audience with the mantra "we keep going so you can rock on," which opens the song.

The album's commitment to experimentation seemed to confuse or alienate listeners more often than it engendered admiration. For example, one *Vibe* reader claimed, "I don't know what *Electric Circus* was, but it wasn't rap music. Music that is experimental and different from the norm does not always equal good. That is a point that I doubt some of these rappers realize when they make self-indulgent, intolerable music and try to pawn it off as rap."[337] The author's claim that *Electric Circus* "was not rap" is due, no doubt, to the ways the album departed from rap music conventions. In this regard, *Electric Circus* might be seen as an outgrowth the experimental approaches of other Soulquarians albums: the variety of its songs is akin to *Mama's Gun*, the boldness in its approaches (*a la* John Jackson's not-giving-a-fuck) is typical of Dilla's music, and the re-take on hip hop history (rock music as more important to hip hop history than is generally acknowledged, for example) is consistent with The Roots' efforts to expand narrow definitions of allowable hip hop technology, and offer more inclusive narratives about the music's history.

However, though Common rapped on every song on the album, fans like the *Vibe* reader felt it all added up to something outside of the bounds of legitimate hip hop. He was not alone. In a 2004 feature on artists who have pushed the boundaries in hip hop, Ta-Nehisi Coates wrote, "Common, in the eyes of some of his staunchest fans, simply lost his mind. In 2002, he released *Electric Circus*, a genre-fuck of an album that

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[337] Allen Francis, "Mail," *Vibe* (July, 2004), 34.

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neglected to invoke the spirit of '88."[338] Like the *Vibe* reader, Coates notes the difficulty

of placing *Electric Circus* in a genre category. His allegation that the album "neglected to

invoke the spirit of '88" is a reference to 1988, which marks the beginning of what is

commonly known as hip hop's "golden age," and which some have called "rap music's

greatest year."[339] These reactions to the album indicate that, while some of the

Soulquarians' efforts at pushing boundaries were received as legitimate in hip hop, their

work on *Electric Circus* was a tougher sell.

The question of whether *Electric Circus* was hip hop or not plagued the album's

reception, and sales were dogged by listeners' inability to satisfactorily answer it. It is a

question that goes to the heart of an issue that I have tackled throughout this dissertation:

the fascination with keeping it real in hip hop. Whereas Soulquarians experiments like

those of J Dilla and The Roots (including on Common's previous album) had been

faithful enough to conventions of hip hop music despite working to expand listeners'

conceptions of the limits of the art, in numerous musical ways *Electric Circus* went too

far afield from hip hop sonics for listeners to accept.

In other words, despite the rapping on every song, and the prevalence of lyrics

which spoke to a variety of issues of concern for black communities, the music itself was

so different from hip hop convention as to call the album's hip hop authenticity into

question. Forever concerned with authenticity, and accustomed to debates about what

constituted real hip hop, listeners and critics lowered the hammer (or the tent?) on

Electric Circus. Ta-Nehisi Coates, for example, called it "a record that dallied

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[338] Coates, "Life After Hip Hop," 136.

[339] Kajikawa, "'Bringin' '88 Back'," 301.

somewhere between rap and electric blues."[340] Music journalist John Caramanica wrote

that the album was "bizzaro" [sic] and "long on ballsy concept, short on cohesion."[341]

Not all opinions held that the album was inauthentic, but most addressed genre

authenticity somehow. Journalist Shanel Odum expressed the opposite opinion, writing,

"His lyrics slice like a machete through the purple haze concocted by producers like

James Poyser, J Dilla, ?uestlove, and The Neptunes, who stir elements of jazz, psych

rock, and soul into an arresting sonic tie-dye. But make no mistake, this is rap, and damn

proud of its colors."[342]

Hip hop authenticity has always involved a racial dimension, as Imani Perry and

others have argued.[343] With that in mind, one cause for listeners' dissent about its

realness may stem from perceived racialization of the styles on which the album's music

draws. Common's genre experiments on *Electric Circus* largely involved including

elements of rock and psychedelia. If rock music was widely associated with whiteness by

this time (as I argued in chapter four), psychedelia was perhaps even further out on that

branch, recalling 1960s experimentalism in both mainstream rock and concert music by

the likes of La Monte Young and Terry Riley. Common's use of such sounds was a nod

to the influence of Jimi Hendrix, whose late 1960s albums constitute a watershed of

musical psychedelia. As American Studies scholar Jack Hamilton describes, Hendrix

presented rock critics of his day (and historians, since) with a conundrum: aspects of his

performances played into racialized stereotypes about black menace and sexuality, while

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[340] Coates, "Life After Hip Hop," 136.

[341] John Caramanica, "Reviews: Common, Electric Circus," *Spin,* February 2003, 100.

[342] Shanel Odum, "Electric Circus," *Vibe*, August 2008, 75.

[343] Perry, *Prophets*. See also Kajikawa, *Sounding Race*.

others challenged expectations of the sound of black performance. While rock discourse sought to whitewash the genre, Hendrix, a black man and one of the genre's biggest stars, "waged audible war against musical possibility and racial confinement."[344] Like other Soulquarians projects, *Electric Circus* sought to push sonic boundaries of what was possible in hip hop music. Common followed Hendrix's lead by drawing on psychedelia, and intentionally contradicting racialized expectations of what his performance (and hip hop performance) should sound like.[345] Though many of Common's stated inspirations behind his approach to the project were black – Jimi Hendrix and Miles Davis's *Bitches Brew* are two – the prevalence of the sounds of psychedelia (and their association with whiteness) may have been too great an obstacle to rap audiences' acceptance of the project as legitimate hip hop.

I have argued that a tension between artistic innovation and commercial success runs through the Soulquarians' work. As the album that succeeded the least with consumers and critics, and was arguably the boldest in its explorative bent, *Electric Circus* is a rich site for examination of this tension. As I have described, Common and J Dilla were inclined toward innovation and exploration during the project, while Questlove, partially owing to the voice of the record label in his ear, describes himself as somewhat more reluctant. Common would match his commitment to musical exploration with lyrical self-characterization as ambivalent about material success. Namely, on the song "I Am Music," he raps, "inside my heart it ain't about climbing charts." Though the

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[344] Jack Hamilton, *Just Around Midnight: Rock and Roll and the Racial Imagination* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016), 214.

[345] This spirit also ran through The Roots' album *Phrenology*, which was recorded concurrently. Questlove writes that with that album, "we wanted to shatter people's myths, not only about what rap groups could do, but also about what black groups could do." See Questlove, *Mo' Meta Blues*, 194.

words are Common's, they may also be interpreted as belonging to *music* itself, which is

the personified protagonist of the song. Indeed, this music *is* unlikely to climb charts,

even with guest vocalist Jill Scott turning in a bewitching performance, since the song is

in a swing style reminiscent of 1920s cabaret numbers, complete with yah-yah trumpets

and percussive acoustic piano, but strangely updated with spacy, swirling sound effects.

In another line, Common/music raps, "Shame I rely on record labels to push me,"

demonstrating the conflict he feels about working within mainstream commercial

channels, perhaps due to the labels' impositions on musicians' creative inclinations.

Despite the musicians' portrayal of the scene as supremely creative and largely

unconcerned about material success, Common revealed that part of their approach to the

album was based on imitating successful acts. Coates quotes Common as saying, "We

were emulating other artists who'd been accepted."[346] In addition to artists who actually

appear on the record (which includes UK band Stereolab, and Prince), artists whose

influence on the record was plain include Jimi Hendrix and Atlanta rap duo Outkast.

While the music is periodically reminiscent of such artists, it relies more heavily on

distorting and amalgamating such influences, creating a new sonic recipes from tried and

true ingredients.

Common's claim to emulating artists who had achieved acceptance reads as

mildly apologetic, since *Electric Circus* did not achieve the success its influences had. In

2005, *Billboard* reported that the album had sold only 65,000 units, a dismal follow up to

the "gold" sales of *Like Water For Chocolate*.[347] Common told *Billboard*'s Gail Mitchell,

"I don't apologize for the record. It was me being true to what I feel as an artist. Like

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[346] Coates, "Life After Hip Hop," 136.

[347] Gail Mitchell, "Common Not A Plain Rapper," *Billboard* (May 28, 2005), 29.

Miles Davis, it's my *Bitches Brew*. It's a part of my musical evolution."[348] Though I take

it for granted that Common sought commercial success for *Circus* (he released it on a

major label, after all, despite the restrictions associated with doing so), his comments

suggest that artistic integrity was foremost in his mind. Despite the poor sales, he and

Questlove have both said publicly that they stand behind the music. Questlove has gone

so far as to say, "Of [*Phrenology* and *Electric Circus*, *Circus*] is my favorite album… If

we're going to judge on strictly creative work I love that album to death."[349] Love it or

hate it, it is an album that generated fierce reactions in listeners, as the albums we

consider great often do. At the end of the day, that may be the measure of *Electric

Circus*'s achievement.

It is tempting to read *Electric Circus* as "ahead of its time," or some other maxim

that privileges the quality of the work and rejects the shortsightedness of its reception. I

prefer Questlove's characterization of the project. Speaking to Ronnie Reese, he said, "I

would like to think that whole *Electric Circus* phase was a Hail Mary throw and the ball

is still up in the air."[350] In other words, the album is a bold statement whose impact is yet

to be felt; a question that is yet to be answered, or a Call that still awaits a Response.

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[348] Gail Mitchell, "Common Not," 29.

[349] Red Bull Music Academy, "Questlove from The Roots," 46:00.

[350] Reese, "Son of Detroit." A 'hail mary' is a long throw in football, against great odds, and
usually the final play of the game, which is the last hope of the losing team to tie or win the game.

"AREN'T WE ALWAYS TOGETHER?": SOULQUARIANS AFTER ELECTRIC

LADY

The period of the Soulquarians' greatest activity began in 1997, with the initiation

of recording music for *Voodoo*, and ended in 2002, following the release of *Electric*

Circus. Questlove referred to this period at Electric Lady Studios as "a sleepover for five

years," noting that at certain times artists practically lived at the studio, and that a feeling

of camaraderie permeated the proceedings. During that time, all the Soulquarians and

their primary collaborators either established or cemented their fame and material

success. According to Questlove,

> We just thought Erykah and D'Angelo are the only two people in the circle to
> have some sort of mass appeal, and we're all just the misfits. Then all of us got
> successful and then we just kinda… everyone just abandoned ship, and not even
> on a disgruntled thing, I just think that, maybe, self-saboteur people are afraid of
> their own shadow, and what you wound up with is… people not being active at
> all… someone has to show up to the studio.[351]

Here Questlove describes a falling out based not on animosity, but on a lack of following

through with plans for future collaborations.

In his autobiography, Questlove describes a moment in September 2004, during

the filming of *Dave Chappelle's Block Party*, in which he realizes that "life as I had

known it from 1996 to 2001… with everyone all around me and music in the air" was

over.[352] That moment was when he saw how Kanye West energized the crowd with his

performance at the front of a marching band during the recording of "Jesus Walks." To

Questlove, it appeared that he and his Soulquarians cohort were watching the moment of

their greatest influence pass, and being supplanted by a younger artist with the ability to

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[351] Red Bull Music, "An Intimate Lecture," 49:00.

[352] Questlove, *Mo' Meta Blues*, 220. See also *Dave Chappelle's Block Party*, directed by Michel
Gondry (2006; Universal City, CA: Universal Studios Home Entertainment, 2006), DVD.

galvanize audiences. More importantly, however, Kanye West's ascension represented a

shift in the terms of engagement for the Soulquarians ideological struggle. Questlove

reflected on the moment in 2013, writing,

> We had spent a decade seeing hip hop as a division between the haves and have-nots," "between artists who didn't play games with cars and fashion and acts that played games with cars and fashion but didn't aspire to making art. Kanye was an artist who took the audacious stance that he could do both, that there was no conflict between them, and audiences just went right along with him.[353]

The ideological stance that had united the Soulquarians had become passé for hip hop

audiences. Poyser, Badu, Common, Questlove and The Roots all shared the stage that

day, but when they walked off, it appeared to some that the strength of their collective

was waning.

Soulquarians collaborators went in different directions, but continued to work

together sporadically in live performances and in recording. Erykah Badu, for example,

used James Poyser extensively on every album after *Mama's Gun*. Questlove and several

other members of D'Angelo's Soultronics band rejoined the singer on his 2014 album

Black Messiah. Dilla moved to California to live with Common in 2004. Only days after

Dilla's passing in 2006, Badu, Questlove, and Poyser got together in the studio to record

a tribute "in memory of our brother," an original composition they titled "Telephone,"

which was released on Badu's 2008 album *New Amerykah Vol. 1*.[354] Asked in 2013

whether there would be a Soulquarians reunion, Questlove answered, "aren't we always

together?"[355] He had a point. While the Soulquarians had not worked on an album length

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[353] Questlove, *Mo' Meta Blues*, 215.

[354] The dedication comes from the album liner notes. Erykah Badu, *New Amerykah Vol. 1*, Universal Motown B0010800-02, released 2/26/2008.

[355] Red Bull Music, "An Intimate Lecture," 47:30.

project in over a decade, they had stayed in touch, on good terms, and continued to work together, albeit irregularly.

CONCLUSIONS

Through their collaborative effort to present sonic alternatives to mainstream rap and R&B of their day, The Soulquarians resisted the boundaries of an increasingly homogenized popular music landscape. The distinct sounds of their music and lyrics provided a sonic alternative to the music of commercially dominant artists of their day, exemplified by Sean "Puffy" Combs, while album liner notes and critical reception posited them as a musical and ideological flipside to such musicians. The Soulquarians' strategies included The Roots' repurposing of instruments for hip hop (and of hip hop for instruments), D'Angelo's and J Dilla's new approaches to off-kilter grooves, and Erykah Badu's promotion of freedom through a combination of lyrical reflection and studio processes. Because listeners conceive identities for themselves and others in no small part through media broadly, and music specifically, staging such a resistance proposed not only new ways of understanding *musical* blackness, but blackness more generally.

In the context of a music (and broader media) industry in which "keeping it real" was code for certain markers of blackness and black communities, Soulquarians artists supplied alternative notions of realness. As critical reception of The Roots, D'Angelo, Badu, and Common during this period clearly indicates, they were, in Questlove's words, "perceived as something real." In the Soulquarians' case, such perceptions rested on portrayals of black bravery, freedom, and communal sentiment (Badu), innovative engagement with a far-reaching soul music lineage (D'Angelo), and upholding traditional

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principles of hip hop creativity while bringing their style of play more in line with hip hop's contemporary sonic character (The Roots). However, poor sales and mixed reception of Common's boldly experimental *Electric Circus* may indicate that, despite the credibility Common may have gained by staying true to himself, listeners' ideas about musical realness in hip hop would not stretch wide enough to include certain sonic characters, like those of psychedelic rock.

The Soulquarians' resistance should be understood as engaged with a lineage of sonic resistance that is an essential part of hip hop tradition. As anthropologist John Jackson points out, gestures of musical opposition have characterized hip hop since its beginnings. In his words, "[Binaries of labor between the 'bling-bling' lyricist and conscious rapper, among others,] mirror hip hop's larger cultural project: constructing and deconstructing the social, cultural, and political boundaries placed around black bodies, boundaries that prop up the very category of blackness itself."[356] Jackson observes that musical opposition in rap has worked within and against constantly shifting understandings of blackness, encouraging an understanding of political freedom that imbricates with hip hop artists' freedom to create. Looked at this way, The Soulquarians' contradiction of prevailing notions of realness in 1990s hip hop was itself a profoundly traditional assertion of what it meant to engage with hip hop authenticity. In other words, by their very difference, Soulquarians artists made an argument about the importance of resistance itself to hip hop authenticity. By placing distinctly original images and sounds of blackness into the marketplace, the Soulquarians altered the terms of debate for black authenticity, as evidenced in reception that observed their realness.

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[356] Jackson, *Real Black*, 182.

One model for understanding the Soulquarians' contributions to black communities might be found in the work of political scientist Richard Iton, whose later work deals with the interface between black popular culture and institutional politics. Iton argues that popular culture can provide a gathering force that acts as an alternative to neoliberal individuation, and furnish a site for what Iton calls "black deliberative activity" outside of black politics.[357] Iton writes, "In choosing to say something, black artists can seek both to influence outcomes and to redefine the terms of debate, within and outside their immediate communities, and to bring attention to – and perhaps confer legitimacy on – the spaces in which they operate (whether those are black-community-specific or not)."[358] Soulquarians artists indeed sought to redefine the terms of hip hop and R&B authenticity, whether lyrically (through the importance Common and Black Thought place on knowledge and lyrical skill, or Badu's eccentric, self-reflexive emphasis on community) or musically (through D'Angelo and Dilla's pioneering approaches to rhythm, or The Roots' use of instruments). Whereas the authenticating mantra of keeping it real had been applied by rap artists, industry, and audiences primarily to work that explicitly reflected the conditions of black poverty, the Soulquarians' efforts expanded the reach of realness to include certain forms of being true to yourself (original; not giving a fuck), and engagement with black musical and communal traditions from many points on a long arc of shared cultural heritage.

In contrast to notions of popular music as centered around a single star figure, the importance of collaboration to the Soulquarians' output paints a fuller picture of the

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[357] Richard Iton, *In Search of the Black Fantastic: Politics and Popular Culture In the Post-Civil Rights Era* (New York: Oxford University Press 2008), 28.

[358] Iton, *In Search*, 23 (emphasis in original).

creative and working processes of hip hop and R&B artists at the turn of the 21st century.

Though canonizing and journalistic forces tend to overlook the importance of

collaboration in musical production, elevating individual performers, composers, or

producers to stand for a song or album that was created through the work of many

contributors, this study of the Soulquarians reveals musical effects of these artists

working behind the scenes to create with and for each other. Though the case of the

Soulquarians is one of exceptionally close and sustained collaboration, cooperative

production is widespread (now and during the time of the Soulquarians), as evidenced by

the multiple authorial credits on many hip hop and R&B songs of this time.[359] Whereas

notions of the so-called solitary genius have permeated music history narratives, common

musical characteristics across Soulquarians projects are evidence of cooperation between

artists. A shift in perspective from individual creators to cooperation is relevant not only

to the Soulquarians project, but to communities of musicians and other artists more

broadly. Thus, this project may serve as a corrective to prevailing but misguided notions

of sole authorship in popular music.

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[359] Including, for example, Puffy's "Can't Nobody Hold Me Down," the liner notes for which credit four producers and eleven authors (including those of "The Message").

APPENDIX

SOULQUARIANS SELECT DISCOGRAPHY (ALBUMS WITH AT LEAST ONE SONG

PRODUCED BY TWO OR MORE ORIGINAL SOULQUARIANS) (U.S. RELEASE

DATES)

The Roots. *Illadelph Halflife*. DGC DGCD-24972. Released 9/24/1996.

Erykah Badu. *Baduizm*. Universal UND 53027. Released 2/11/1997.

Common. *One Day It'll All Make Sense.* Relativity 88561-1535-1. Released 9/30/1997.

The Roots. *Things Fall Apart*. MCA MCAD-11948. Released 2/23/1999.

D'Angelo. *Voodoo.* Virgin 7243 8 48499 2 4. Released 1/25/2000.

Common. *Like Water For Chocolate.* MCA 088 111 970-2. Released 3/28/2000.

Slum Village. *Fantastic Vol. 2*. Goodvibe GVR2025-2. Released 6/13/2000.

Erykah Badu. *Mama's Gun*. Motown 012 153 259-2. Released 11/21/2000.

Nikka Costa. *Everybody Got Their Something.* Virgin 7243 8 10096 2 8. Released 5/22/2001.

Bilal. *1st Born Second*. Interscope 069493009-2. Released 7/31/2001.

Talib Kweli. *Quality*. Rawkus 088 113 048-2. Released 10/19/2002.

The Roots. *Phrenology*. MCA 088 112 996-2. Released 11/25/2002.

Common. *Electric Circus*. MCA 088 113 114-2. Released 12/10/2002.

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