

Heroes of the Night: DJs and electronic dance music in Hong Kong

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My project considers the DJ and the electronic dance music that s/he propagates, using ethnographic material from Hong Kong.

Both the profession and the music are rather esoteric, but their distinctive features highlight broad issues of how technological advance interacts with artistic aspiration and the dynamics of popular culture. That is how I frame the opinions and narratives gleaned from my interviews and my own observations as a professional DJ.

I treat DJs and electronic dance music, not as an aberration in Western musical history, an overdone trope, but as the latest steps in its onward march. The Introduction sets out this thesis in historical and social context, finding evidence beneath the surface differences between 'classical music', performed for the intellectual contemplation of a passive audience, and electronic dance music that provokes bodies into dancing in mindless ecstasy. I argue that the latter music uses mathematics to drive emotion, and thus represents a contemporary resolution of the tension between rationality and emotion that Max Weber identified as driving Western music as a whole. I address two further tensions that today's DJs must confront in considering their own identities as artists and performers.

The tension between art and technology is addressed in the chapter, 'The art of smashing plates'. This traces how the role of DJs has evolved with the advance of technology and how their desire for the smoother integration of musical tracks led them to demand more control over more aspects of the music, which in turn drove further advances in technology. Meanwhile, the overwhelming array of music available online left a role for DJs as arbiters of

taste, although this role is now under challenge, given the low cost of entry by competing arbiters. Some DJs respond to the options that technological advance opens up by looking backward to earlier technologies to construct an identity. Others look forward, embracing each new technology as a more powerful tool for new forms of artistic expression.

The tension between authenticity and commercial success, addressed in the chapter 'Walking the tightrope between soul and market', confronts all artists who have to make a living, but plays out in a more complex fashion in a globalized society, especially for art that is easy to transmit, reproduce and manipulate. This I illustrate with my account, focused on Hong Kong, of the social evolution of electronic dance music and the disco. Both originated in the rebellion of marginalized groups against authority, then were appropriated by segments of the elite, some searching for novelty, others for authenticity, others for profit. Thereby, these new forms were disseminated to new groups, where they took on new meanings and opened up new opportunities, both for artistic expression and for profit.

The Conclusion argues that the tensions analyzed in this project all arise from false dichotomies that are akin to the 'category errors' that have afflicted the Western philosophical tradition, according to Gilbert Ryle. The tensions are nevertheless keenly felt by musical practitioners because they reflect the challenge of maintaining artistic integrity and a coherent identity within a capitalist society in the face of rapid technological change.