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Genres, Subgenres, Sub-Subgenres and More: Musical and Social Differentiation Within Electronic/Dance Music Communities

Kembrew McLeod
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> Earl Grey *Back to My Roots*
>
> As the title implies, this is a personal ride through some of Earl Grey's musical influences. Grey takes jazzy, early morning, Detroit techno and filters it through the least amount of drum and bass essentials needed. It may take a little to come down to this pure high after a night of Ed Rush, but it's worth the descent. Techno producer Dave Angel's B-side mix is my favorite because of its uplifting synths and aquatic house feel. When's the last time, you heard those adjectives used to describe jungle?
>
> —Roker
>
> —A record review originally printed in *Urb*, a magazine that covers electronic/dance music

In discussing musical categorization, Simon Frith has argued, "popular music genres are constructed—and must be understood—*within* a commercial/cultural process" (1996, p. 89). Here, I look at how the ongoing, accelerated process of genre naming speaks volumes about group identity formations within communities associated with electronic/dance music, as well as the political–economic institutions of these music scenes.

Within the electronic/dance music communities, the somewhat cryptic adjectives and nouns that appeared in the review reprinted above function as subgenre

names that describe a multitude of musical styles that are invented, quite literally, on a monthly basis. Without lapsing into hyperbole, I can confidently claim that the continuous and rapid introduction of new subgenre names into electronic/dance music communities is equaled by no other type of music. Metagenres like rock and roll may have spawned rock, folk rock, acid rock, garage rock, punk rock, and more recently grunge, alternative rock, post-rock, and other semantic combinations yet to be coined, but electronic/dance music generates that many names in a fraction of the time. To illustrate, a careful scan of electronic/dance-oriented magazines and electronic/dance compilation CDs published or released in 1998 and 1999 yielded a list of more than 300 names.

An edited, but nonetheless bloated, list of names includes abstract beat, abstract drum-n-bass, acid house, acid jazz, acid rave, acid-beats, acid-funk, acid-techno, alchemic house, ambient dance, ambient drum-n-bass, amyl house, analogue electro-funk, aquatic techno-funk, aquatic-house, atomic breaks, avant-techno, bass, big beat, bleep-n-bass, blunted beats, breakbeat, chemical beats, Chicago garage, Chicago house, coldwave, cosmic dance, cyber hardcore, cybertech, dark ambient, dark core, downtempo funk, downtempo future jazz, drill-n-bass, dronecore, drum-n-bass, dub, dub-funk, dub-hop, dub-n-bass, electro, electro-acoustic, electro-breaks, electro-dub, freestyle, future jazz, futuristic breakbeat, futuristic hardbeats, futuristic hardstep, gabber, garage, global house, global trance, goa-trance, happy hardcore, hardcore techno, hard chill ambient, intelligent drum-n-bass, intelligent jungle, intelligent techno, miami bass, minimal techno, minimal trance, morphing, mutant techno, mutated minimal techno, mystic-step, neurofunk, noir-house, nu-dark jungle, old school, organic chill-out, organic electro, organic electronica, progressive house, progressive low frequency, progressive trance, ragga, ragga-jungle, rave, techstep, techxotica, trance, trancecore, trance-dub, tribal, tribal beats, tribal house, tribal soul, trip-hop, tripno, twilight electronica, two-step, UK acid, UK breakbeat, underground, world-dance.

The process of naming new subgenres within electronic/dance music communities is not only directly related to the rapidly evolving nature of the music itself. It is also a function of the marketing strategies of record companies, accelerated consumer culture, and the appropriation of the musics of largely non-White, lower-class people by middle- and upper-middle-class Whites in the United States and Great Britain. Further, the naming process acts as a gate-keeping mechanism that generates a high amount of cultural capital needed to enter electronic/dance communities.

ELECTRONIC/DANCE MUSIC

"Electronic/dance music" is an umbrella term used in this article to label a heterogeneous group of musics made with computers and electronic instruments—often for the purpose of dancing. Electronic/dance is a metagenre name that is vague enough to describe the broad variety of musical styles consumed by a loosely connected network of producers and consumers. A slash is used (rather than a hyphen) as an and/or designation because not all the musics consumed by these communities are necessarily designed for dancing.

In no way is the use of this term an attempt to ignore the very concrete differences between the way these subgenres are consumed and produced (as the term "electronica"—an oft-cited word used by the American music press—does). There is a world of difference between, for instance, "trip-hop" and "ragga-jungle" in both the way the music sounds *and* the demographics of the audiences who consume them.

Trip-hop is a term that often describes a hip-hop influenced music that tends to be slower in tempo, atmospheric, and often instrumental. Ragga-jungle emerged around the same time (in the mid-1990s), and in many ways was a fusion of dancehall reggae and techno that often employed incredibly quick rhythms that resembled hip-hop breakbeats played at hyper-fast speeds. Whereas trip-hop was largely connected with White artists and audiences, ragga-jungle was more associated with Blacks, especially in Great Britain. Despite the fact that many of these subgenres have emerged from distinct evolutionary trajectories, they are nonetheless connected in many ways.

The primary site of my analysis focuses on locations where information is traded within electronic/dance music scenes on a widespread scale (in electronic/dance music magazines and on the Internet) as well as at the localized level (the record store). These are gate-keeping sites where subgenre names emerge and which are central to maintaining the circulation (or limiting the circulation) of these terms. In a study such as this, one obviously cannot ignore the locations where dancing takes place, but established dance clubs and warehouse rave sites are not typically the place where subgenre names are coined and disseminated (although the flyers that advertise these events often do use them).

Drawing from Bourdieu, Kruse (1998, p. 188) pointed out that various fields of practice overlap and structure social, political, and economic relations. For instance, in this case the field of cultural production (music making and consumption) overlaps significantly with the economic field (i.e., how or where electronic/dance music is marketed, merchandised, and sold). Bourdieu's (1993) notion of fields of practice is important because of its careful delineation of how cultural consumption, stratification, and communicative processes are deeply interrelated. Here, these disparate subgenres can be lumped together with an umbrella term like electronic/dance music not only because the consumers of the subgenres often overlap but also because there are deep connections within the social and economic systems that support these various types of music.

For instance, while some music magazines may concentrate their coverage on certain subgenres of music, many of these magazines still attempt to write about a variety of subgenres because readers' tastes are not narrowly fixed, and also because the magazines want to appeal to a wide range of readers. *1000 Words*, for example, has trip-hop, IDM, house, techno, jungle, and trance sections, each of which has an individual editor who works with a few other reviewers in the section. *Urb* deals with numerous kinds of electronic/dance music, but the magazine focuses on hip-hop more than most. *DJ Mag* primarily focuses on progressive house and trance music, and *Mixmag* puts more emphasis on the kinds of house and techno heard at raves, although it covers other subgenres as well.

Specialty record stores that carry electronic/dance music similarly stock a variety of subgenres, although they are often marked by numerous divider cards rather

than filed in one mass in the merchandising racks. So, even though many individual electronic/dance music subgenres have very different histories, they are grouped together by the media and consumer outlets that serve members of the subcultures that consume this music. It is important to pay attention to how the individual fields of practice (at the levels of artistic production, record company distribution, magazine promotion, live event promotion, and consumption) are situated within specific conditions. Specificity should not be ignored, but there are obvious areas of overlap that allow us to think about an electronic/dance music scene in terms of connections, despite their differences.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF ELECTRONIC/DANCE

To make sense of the numerous subgenre names and, more importantly, why they are used, we need a brief history of electronic/dance music. Recorded music has a long history of being played at large social gatherings for the express purpose of dancing—1950s rock 'n' roll sock hops are an example. But by the early 1970s the kinds of popular music associated with rock had been redefined as music to be *listened to* rather than danced to. In its transition from 1950s rock 'n' roll to 1960s rock, it had been repositioned as a cerebral rather than physical music (Brewster and Broughton, 2000). The popularity of the discotheque, a place where people danced to records rather than live bands, faded in the late 1960s as rock concerts became the focal point of youth culture gatherings. In the early 1970s, these discotheques (or discos) reemerged in major American cities playing a new type of music: disco (Ward, Stokes, and Tucker, 1986, p. 524).

The 1970s disco is the most appropriate place to begin drafting a rough history of contemporary electronic/dance music. The synthesizer is the instrument most associated with the genre, and the music has been characterized (often negatively) by its unrelenting, repetitive beat, which often was created with drum machines, synthesizers, and other electronic instruments. As would be true of later styles of electronic/dance music (and the social groups that clustered around those subgenres), 1970s disco emerged from a localized subcultural group, but it soon became absorbed into the mainstream.

In the United States during the 1970s, disco had been established within urban Black and gay cultures (which had been alienated by White rock music), and it was primarily a cult phenomena (Brewster and Broughton, 2000). But by the late 1970s, disco had peaked commercially; eventually it succumbed to a combination of hype (that reduced it to a novelty) and the racism and homophobia of the rock audiences who held it in contempt (Ward, Stokes, & Tucker, 1986, p. 532). At this time, the popular, homophobic "disco sucks" campaign was well under way. "'Disco sucks cock' if you have to have it spelt to you," Richard Smith dryly noted (1995, p. 23).

Throughout the 1980s, it was widely believed that disco was "dead," but it had simply gone back underground to its core Black and gay urban audiences, and it had taken a new name. "House music" was named after Chicago's Warehouse Club, and its sound was shaped in part by resident DJ Frankie Knuckles. Chuck Eddy colorfully described early house music this way:

> House music had as much shock-of-the-new as rap ever did: car-crash percussion breaks, voices in unheard-of keys, ant-farm-maze keyboard improvisations in John Rocca's "I Want to be Real," snares manhandled by billy clubs then torn to pieces and mourned by munchkins in Arrogance's "Crazy." . . . A nonchalant mosaic like T-Coy's "Carino" could progress from *Star Wars* galaxy-swooshes through little salsa-piano arpeggios to some colossally polyrhythmic vibes and congas, and with detours so subtle you barely knew your nerve-endings were being re-routed. (1997, p. 212)

The fact that Knuckles, a DJ, contributed to the sound of this new subgenre of electronic/dance music is important, and it is a result of the legacy of 1970s disco. The discotheques that emerged in the 1970s, Ward, Stokes, and Tucker wrote, "offered the disc jockey as a new species of pop artist. Through skill, timing, and taste, the disc jockey used two turntables to segue between records with compatible beats" (1986, p. 524). Disco—and its accompanying playback format of choice, the 12-inch single—propelled the DJ into the position of producing music (Kopkind, 1979, p. 12). The length of the 12-inch single allowed for extended versions of songs that allowed for sustained dancing—an idea that Thornton claimed "came from American DJs who had been mixing seven-inch copies of the same record for prolonged play" (1996, p. 59). She continued, "Some began recording their mixes, editing them on reel-to-reel tapes, then playing them in clubs. When these recordings were transferred to vinyl, the extended remix was born" (1996, p. 59).

In the early 1980s house music scene, Knuckles moved from playing records to making his own music. At first Knuckles used his own rhythm tracks recorded on a reel-to-reel tape recorder to enhance the music, then he began pressing his own recordings on 12-inch singles (Smith, 1995, p. 95). Beginning with 1970s disco, and particularly with 1980s house, DJs often blurred the line between simply spinning 12-inch singles for crowds and making the music themselves. As was true of 1970s disco, the patrons of clubs that played house music were predominantly Black, working class, urban, and often gay; but by the time house music reached the UK in the late 1980s, the audience demographics changed, and so did the music (Gilbert & Pearson, 1999).

The exact origins of the genre label "acid house" are unclear (although there are a few different theories), but the name became associated with a British cooptation and transformation of Chicago house music. Acid house music and the scenes that surrounded it helped give birth to rave culture in Great Britain. This culture was characterized by raves, where enormous numbers of people—primarily young, White, middle-class kids—danced at all-night parties that were partially fueled by the euphoria-inducing drug ecstasy (Gilbert and Pearson, 1999, pp. 138–139).

Acid house music was characterized by an even faster beat and an instrumental style that emphasized synthesized sounds even more than previous electronic/dance musics. Like 1970s disco, Chicago house music (represented by Larry Heard, Phuture, and Marshall Jefferson, all of whom released 12-inch singles on the Trax label) featured human voices and instruments that at least tried to retain a "natu-

ral" quality. (Disco's synthesized strings and Chicago house's electric piano still were recognizable as instruments, even if they were synthesized.)

Acid house dispensed with such musical conventions and, to a great extent, with human voices. For instance, songs like Fast Eddie's "Acid Thunder" (released on DJ International) featured digitized bass lines, clicking plastic hand claps, and repetitious drum machine hi-hats that hissed and sizzled. Artists such as Phuture and Frankie Knuckles, who were associated with Chicago house, also became identified with acid house because their recordings were released on labels that specialized in acid house music.

Complementing the house sound of Chicago was "techno," a label created in 1988 by a record company to designate a type of music also being created in the mid-1980s in Detroit (by pioneers such as Derrick May and Juan Atkins). As a genre name, techno didn't immediately catch on until it was later appropriated as a term that replaced acid house. Sara Thornton wrote:

> When "acid house" became unserviceable because of tabloid defamation and general overexposure . . . the clubs, record companies and media went through a series of nominal shifts (about twenty different adjectives came to modify the word "house," sometimes in pastiches like "deep techno house") until they finally settled on "techno." The term had at least two advantages: it was free from the overt drug reference of acid house and it sounded like what it described—a high-tech predominantly instrumental music. (1996, p. 75)

As was true of the counterculture of the 1960s, the subcultures of the rave scene (and their music) grew darker and more negative as the initial drug-enhanced utopianism wore off and the drugs and relations between ravers became more harsh. Hardcore, an even faster and more intense type of electronic/dance music that had none of the warmth of house music, began to dominate the British rave scene in the early 1990s.

> Thematically and texturally, hardcore began to be haunted by a collective apprehension that "we've gone too far." . . . Then came "dark side," a style that appeared to reflect long-term effects of ecstasy and marijuana use: depression, paranoia, dissociation, creepy sensations of the uncanny. (Reynolds, 1997, p. 107)

The dark side subgenre was associated with such artists as D'Cruze, Flex, and DJ Hype (all of whom had releases on the British label Suburban Base). Working almost entirely with digital tools, dark side techno producers created dense, polyrhythmic noise occasionally reminiscent of scrap metal being shredded, giving a tense, gloomy feel to the music.

Soon after, a music called jungle developed, which was influenced by Black and African-American urban musics such as hip-hop. Jungle featured extremely fast percussion patterns that were much more complex than the straightforward repetitive beats of house and acid house music. Some jungle artists such as Dead

Dred, Deep Blue, and Hyper-On Experience (who released 12-inch singles on the Moving Shadow label) pushed the tempo of electronic/dance music to speeds approaching 180 to 200 beats per minute.

Woven into the trajectories that led from acid house and techno through to hardcore and jungle were types of music designed expressly *not* for dancing. These subgenres emerged to fit the needs of exhausted dancers who had been up all night, and they are characterized by one important feature: there is little to no beat. In many of these all-night warehouse raves and large clubs, there were places called "chill-out rooms" that played these kinds of music. Although chill-out or ambient music was never intended for people to dance, this does not exclude these subgenres from inclusion in the electronic/dance metagenre, as defined here. This subgenre label was popularized by the British group KLF on their 1990 album *Chill Out*, and other British artists, such as The Orb and Ultramarine, fell into this category (Reynolds, 1998).

Hip-hop also is embedded in the history of electronic/dance music, although in a manner that defies simple chronological categorization. There are certain subgenres that are directly and obviously influenced by hip-hop—such as hip-house (exemplified by the Jungle Brothers' 1988 hit "I'll House You") and big beat (whose poster boy is Norman Cook, a.k.a. Fatboy Slim). "Illbient" is another subgenre fusion that owed its birth to hip-hop, and many of the Illbient scene's participants (DJ Spooky and We, both of whom have released records on Asphodel) came out of New York City, the birthplace of hip-hop.

Hip-hop is a rhythm-driven music, and its influence is imprinted on various kinds of electronic/dance musics, just as they influence hip-hop. Hip-hop's cut-and-paste production practices were pioneered by Kool DJ Herc, a Jamaican-born man who immigrated to the Bronx and began DJing during the 1970s. The practice of rapping simple rhymes over beats evolved from Herc's knowledge of reggae "sound system" DJs who did much the same thing.

Hip-hop's central creative practices came out of reggae sound systems, and by the 1980s it had come full circle, when hip-hop directly shaped a new style of Jamaican popular music—dancehall reggae (which similarly emphasized drum machine rhythms and rapping, or "toasting"). Similarly, jungle emerged during the 1990s in Britain largely from Black West Indies immigrant communities who listened to both Jamaican dancehall reggae and American hip-hop. Big beat was fueled by a recovery of 1980s "old school" hip-hop, and it was typically created and danced to by White, middle-class British teenagers and 20-somethings.

Hip-hop's "sound" can be heard in many other subgenres, but perhaps even more important than its particular, identifiable sonic imprint is the impact of hip-hop's production techniques on electronic/dance music. Hip-hop is, at least partially, a producer's medium. That is, even though the MC (the rapper) typically is at the center of marketing strategies involving selling CDs, the producer is of central importance.

In the late 1970s, when hip-hop was exclusively a live medium, DJs were the stars; but the DJ's role changed as hip-hop became known to a mass audience as primarily a recorded medium. Many DJs became producers, creating the beats and the sampled musical beds over which MCs rapped. Not only did hip-hop's collage-based production practices affect pop music generally, they had a great impact on

the evolution of electronic/dance music. Especially during the early 1990s, many of the songs played at raves sampled and cannibalized one another, epitomizing the prediction that "pop will eat itself" (made by a U.K. band of the same name).

SUBGENRE NAMING AS THE RESPONSE TO GENUINE STYLISTIC EVOLUTION

There is no doubt that some major electronic/dance subgenres—acid-house and jungle, for instance—sound radically different. Therefore, the expanding number of new subgenre names can be understood as a response to the socially recognized stylistic variations within electronic/dance music. To use an oft-mentioned (and inaccurate) pop anthropology cliché, certain northern indigenous tribes have multiple words for snow. Similarly, many different subgenre names are used to describe electronic/dance musics that may sound similar to outsiders but are quite different to insiders. Putting the proliferation of subgenre names into perspective, Simon Reynolds wrote:

> For the newcomer to electronic dance music, the profusion of scenes and subgenres can seem at best bewildering, at worst willful obfuscation. Partly, this is a trick of perspective: kids who've grown up with techno feel it's *rock* that "all sounds the same." The urgent distinctions rock fans take for granted—that Pantera, Pearl Jam, and Pavement operate in separate aesthetic universes—makes sense only if you're already a participant in the ongoing rock discourse. (1998, p. 7)

In a 1981 article for *Popular Music Perspectives*, Italian scholar Franco Fabbri provided a definition of musical genres based on shared social understandings. For Fabbri, a musical genre is "a set of musical events (real or possible) whose course is governed by a definite set of socially accepted rules" (1981, p. 52). That is not to say that these rules aren't contested—particularly in electronic/dance music communities. Simon Reynolds has argued that subgenre categories are useful because "they're also a way of talking about the music, of arguing about what it's for and where it should go" (1998, p. 7).

Since the 1970s, the means of producing electronic/dance music has advanced at a similar pace to electronic and computer technology. From disco through house to jungle, technology has played an instrumental role in transforming the overall sound of electronic/dance music. For instance, the relentless, pulsing sounds associated with Euro-disco—a particular brand of disco popularized by the producer of Donna Summers's records, Giorgio Moroder—heavily employed synthesizers (Ward, Stokes, & Tucker, 1986, p. 527). Further, house's evolution was tied to the development of the drum machine, something that is also true of acid house (which had a particular sound used in numerous 12-inch singles that can only be described as a digitized, distorted "squelch"). This sound was associated with a particular drum machine, the Roland 303, and it is a good example of the interconnected relationship between music-making, music, and recording technologies). The elaborately

layered sound of late 1980s and early 1990s techno music was made possible by digital samplers and computer-controlled sequencers that could be programmed to play many different tracks simultaneously.

When rapidly advancing technology is employed by innovative artists, many new styles of electronic/dance music predictably emerge. The same may be true of rock and jazz, but these two metagenres have not come close to matching the massive number of subgenre names that appear every year within electronic/dance music. Therefore, technology and artistic innovation by themselves are not adequate answers to the question of why new subgenre names appear so frequently.

SUBGENRE NAMING AS A MERCHANDISING STRATEGY

In an attempt to drum up new business, record companies often resort to marketing gimmicks that trumpet "the next big thing." For instance, during 1997 in the United States, "electronica" became one of those media-created next big things. Appearing in consumer music magazines and industry trade journals during this time were headlines such as this: "Rock Is Dead. Long Live . . . ? With Grunge on Life Support and Sales Flatlining, the Music Biz Is Looking to Spark a Rebirth with Electronica" (Willman, 1997).

Throughout 1997 and into 1998, record companies consciously marketed their electronic/dance-related artists under the label of electronica in the United States as a way of creating a new trend within popular music. Unfortunately for the record companies, as a mass money-making genre, electronica fell on its face because the primary music promotional machinery within the U.S. (commercial radio and music television) was not equipped to deal with artists who were relatively "faceless." In fact, the electronic/dance music that succeeded within the U.S. was performed by acts that had marketable images (such as Prodigy, who were signed to Madonna's label, Maverick) or already-established acts such as the Material Girl herself, who brought on noted electronic/dance artist William Orbit to produce her *Ray of Light* album in 1998.

Particularly within electronic/dance music subcultures, record buyers continually search for new subgenres of music. I do not discount the fact that new subgenres *are* collectively recognized by electronic/dance community members and the "sound" of electronic/dance music *does* constantly evolve, but the manufacture of genre names by record companies and music magazines is equally important in this process. Fabbri has observed that a valuable consideration in the study of genres and their relationship with commodity objects like records is the graphics and design of record sleeves:

> For ten years or more these have taken on functions far more complex than simply indicating their contents. It is well known that the record sleeve contributes to determining the meaning not only of the record-object but also of the very music that is found inside (Fabbri, 1982, p. 139).

The sleeve design of electronic/dance compact discs often signals to the con-

sumer what type of music the discs contain, even before the words on the package are read. The bright, day-glo colors and smiley face graphics identify a compilation of acid house music as a long-forgotten, irrelevant consumer object that has no place being spun in a club in the twenty-first century (unless for retro-kitch value). For those within the electronic/dance subcultures who do not necessarily buy the music they dance to, the graphics on flyers that advertise events are similarly important in identifying the types of music that will be played (Brett, 1996).

The music media are highly dependent on the music industry, for obvious reasons. In much the same way that new artists and genres are constantly being thrown against the wall by record companies hoping to make their investment stick, music magazines rely on hot new artists and sounds to sell their wares. The same is true of more underground networks of distribution, where small, independent record companies and fanzines dominate the scene. Whether the music is distributed by multinational corporations or by grassroots indie labels, the importance of selling products is a concrete reality.

New names used to describe previously existing music are constantly being marketed within the mainstream music industry, and musical acts are pushed through the image-making mill to make them seem fresh and new: Black Sabbath–influenced heavy metal is renamed grunge and the classic sound of 1960s and 1970s soul is rechristened, unimaginatively enough, as new soul.

New names are also created when record companies are faced with marketing music genres that are largely unfamiliar to the general public, and music magazines often promote these labels. Conversely, music magazines play a role in generating new subgenre names. Simon Frith provided an example of how record companies and music magazines work together to achieve this:

> *Folk Roots* went on to play a key role (alongside a handful of radio and club deejays and concert promoters) in defining—and putting together the market for—"world music," a genre label . . . which emerged from a 1987 meeting with eleven independent record labels. (Frith, 1996, pp. 84–85)

There are many examples of how record companies create—or at least champion—new genre names for music that already exists in a similar form. For instance, "techno" first came into parlance in the United Kingdom after the release in June 1988 of the Virgin Records compilation, *Techno: The Dance Sound of Detroit.* At the time of the album's release, the term "house" was heavily associated with the dance music coming out of Chicago, which was overexposed. In order to give the music a distinctive identity within the market and these music scenes, as well as to make it appear substantially new, the Virgin Records A&R and marketing departments met with DJs and other music scene contacts to decide what to call the music of the Black DJs who were featured on the album. They chose techno (Thornton, 1996, pp. 74–75).

All this is not to say that when record companies embrace a new subgenre name, those within electronic/dance subcultures immediately embrace it; subgenre names are occasionally contested. In 1988, something called "balearic beat" was highly criticized as being "conjured out of thin air" in the magazine *Soul Under-*

ground. Melody Maker, a British music magazine, claimed it was "merely a scam" (Thornton, 1996, p. 75). Regardless, the press and record companies often work in concert—although not necessarily in an intentionally conspiratorial manner—to help generate a buzz around new electronic/dance subgenres.

SUBGENRE NAMING AS AN EXAMPLE OF ACCELERATED CONSUMER CULTURE

The manner in which electronic/dance music is purchased and then relatively quickly disposed of is an exemplary model of planned obsolescence. In much the same way that steadily changing styles in the car and fashion industries promote the purchase of new consumer goods before their life expectancy has been expended, the electronic/dance music industry relies on rapidly changing tastes. This is crystallized in something a DJ who spins electronic/dance music once said to me, "Yeah, I sometimes pull out records that are two years old, but not often." While this mentality exists within popular music generally, a brief listen to contemporary pop radio demonstrates that songs which are 2, 5, even 10 years old are included on the play lists. But only 5 years after the subgenre's peak, the term "trip-hop" is as quaint a relic as MC Hammer's genie pants.

A caveat is in order: This talk of planned obsolescence does not imply that a top-down model of culture informs my analysis; I do not believe large corporations dictate the trends and styles to a largely passive public. Electronic/dance communities have economies that sustain a number of music- and fashion-related industries run largely by independent entrepreneurs. As Angela McRobbie has noted:

> Subcultures are often ways of creating job opportunities as more traditional careers disappear. . . . In this undocumented, unrecorded and largely "hidden economy" sector, subcultures stand at one end of the culture industry spectrum and the glamorous world of the star system and entertainment business at the other. (1994, p. 162)

This is not to say that stars don't exist in the world of electronic/dance music: Goldie, Armand van Helden, Roni Size, Dimitri from Paris, and Tricky are major stars who command very large fees. But just as with hip-hop, it is possible to live the contradiction of being enormously popular while still connected to "the street"—to the subculture from which one comes. To do so, an artist must carefully navigate his or her status and persona around the important concept of authenticity; in that way, he or she can sell out live events without necessarily "selling out." Successful artists can eschew the mainstream while pulling in sizable crowds and earning lots of money by making certain discursive moves that validate their status as authentic artists. This is difficult terrain to traverse, especially because scene participants tend to be very protective of their turf. Particularly in Europe, where electronic/dance music is very popular, scene participants must deal with these contradictions regularly.

Independent labels have consistently been the hotbeds of innovation in developing cutting-edge artists within electronic/dance music circles (something that is

true of many other genres, including jazz, hip-hop, and rock). Independent labels such as Mo Wax (DJ Shadow, U.N.K.L.E., Attica Blues), ffrr (Orbital, Q-Burn's Abstract Message), Astralwerks (Chemical Brothers, Air) and Metalheadz (Goldie, Dillinja) have been important within these scenes; many of them have entered into distribution or joint ownership deals with major labels. This makes the political–economic distinction between independent labels and major labels blurry (as is the case with hip-hop and indie-rock), but just as important is the *discursive* distinctions about independence that scene participants make.

But even when record labels, clothing shops, and whatnot operate in real independence from the larger, corporate-controlled distribution network, in some ways these subcultural economies function in much the same way that larger entertainment industries do. With regard to the constant need to create demand for new consumer goods, these fringe businesses reflect their larger corporate cousins.

Although Tom Frank has tended to take an overly deterministic view of how culture circulates, he was nonetheless accurate when he observed that the logic of 1960s and post-1960s subcultural rebellion complimented the logic of consumer culture—regardless of the subculture's rhetoric, which says otherwise. Frank argued:

> With leisure-time activities of consuming redefined as "rebellion," two of late capitalism's great problems could easily be met. . . . Obsolescence found a new and more convincing language, and citizens could symbolically resolve the contradiction between their role as consumers and their role as producers. (1997, p. 31)

Expanding on this argument, Frank wrote elsewhere:

> Rebellion for self-definition mandates that product choice reflect your complex personality, which you will of course eventually rebel against, necessitating a new array of deeply personal product choices long before the old ones were worn out. (1993, p. 100)

Typically, if music and clothing styles are discovered by the mainstream media, it is the kiss of death within electronic/dance music scenes. For instance, wearing a Prodigy T-shirt in 1992 carried a very different cultural currency than in 1997, after the band's faces had been seen repeatedly on MTV and magazine covers. In another example, the term techno was widely circulated and came to replace acid house within electronic/dance communities largely because acid house culture had become overexposed by the mainstream media in Great Britain. Additionally, techno producers tend to use a variety of names and logos that are constantly changing once a particular name has become established or popular. In doing so, they avoid charges of selling out by core electronic/dance audiences (Thornton, 1996, p. 74).

Innovation and creativity are among the defining characteristics of electronic/dance culture, and it should be emphasized that I am not suggesting that the impetus for generating new subgenre names and new musical styles comes directly from the demands of the market. Experimentation with new styles is highly val-

ued within these communities, and this is an important motivating factor in artists' desire to produce new sounds and the audience's desire to search them out. However, I do maintain that this cultural urge is compatible with the logic of consumer culture and planned obsolescence.

SUBGENRE NAMING AS CULTURAL APPROPRIATION

Much of the electronic/dance music that became popular among White American and British youths was derived from largely Black, urban, and sometimes gay communities. The act of changing genre names (for instance, from house to techno) can be seen as an act of resignifying the "otherness" of the original name, to give it a meaning that is less associated with Blackness and is rearticulated as a universal, global music. Thornton noted:

> Importantly, the shift from the first to the second kind of techno, from a "black" to a "white" sound, is accompanied by a shift in the discourses about their places of origin. Later techno was said to be a musical Esperanto. It was not considered to be the sound of any definite social group but rather as a celebration of rootlessness. As one producer said, "Electronic music is a kind of world music." (1996, p. 76)

Trip-hop, the name given to a hip-hop-influenced music that became relatively popular in the mid-1990s, is another subgenre name that implicitly strips the Black identity from the music. Many of those whose music was called trip-hop disavowed the label. One artist associated with the subgenre, DJ Shadow, insisted on having his music called ***instrumental hip-hop***.

Jungle, a subgenre that emerged in Great Britain in the early 1990s, was closely associated with Black British, inner-city youth. Although the music was produced within a multicultural environment, with both Black and White DJs and producers, jungle nonetheless spoke to a Black British cultural identity and was considered to be the first truly Black British music by many of the jungle scene's participants (Collin, 1997, p. 255).

Jungle was deemed raw and rough, terms that could be used to describe other forms of electronic/dance music; but as these terms are applied to jungle, they have a cultural rather than aesthetic connotation. Two Fingers and James T Kirk, two Jungle music scenesters, claimed that Jungle is "about giving a voice to the urban generation left to rot in council estates, ghettoized, and neighbourhoods and schools that ain't providing an education for shit. Jungle kickin' ass and taking names" (quoted in Collin, 1997, p. 252).

Jungle was closely linked with crack cocaine, violence, Blacks, and the underclass by many White British electronic/dance community members. Further, it was often characterized in a negative light by White, middle-class-controlled underground electronic/dance music magazines (Collin, 1997, p. 257).

> [B]lack and white may have danced together at raves, but generally on white terms, with whites in the majority, and whites taking the pro-

> ceedings. . . . The panic about jungle commenced when black people ceased to be a minority and were visibly in control of the scene. Institutionalized racism reaches into all corners of British society, and house culture, for all its rhetoric of unity, was no exception. (Collin, 1997, p. 259)

Like most Black music of the twentieth century, jungle was eventually accepted into the mainstream, albeit in a watered-down form (Collin, 1997, p. 261). As jungle became less associated with "Blackness," it took on different subgenre names—such as "drum 'n' bass," a less identity-specific and more universal name. Although "intelligent jungle"—a name to describe a more cerebral and "White" form of jungle—may not have been used intentionally in a racist way, it certainly has disconcerting undertones.

SUBGENRE NAMING AS A SUBCULTURAL GATE-KEEPING DEVICE

The rapid introduction of subgenre names can be seen as a way of creating specialized knowledge and large amounts of cultural capital, to use Bourdieu's (1993) term, which are needed to enter electronic/dance subcultures. More concretely, specialized knowledge is a way of maintaining clear boundaries that define in-group/out-group relations.

I want to focus on the issue of gender, because it is clear that the scene is dominated by men. Charlotte the Baroness, a San Francisco–based DJ, observed that, despite the rhetoric that celebrates a gender-bending or gender-free electronic/dance culture, there is a notable lack of women in important positions of power within these scenes. "I don't think people in an underground want to admit that there's an absence of women. No one wants to cop to being sexist" (Chonin, 1997, p. 63).

The ever-changing subgenre names that become common parlance in electronic/dance music subcultures work in conjunction with slang and fashion to exclude outsiders who are not hip enough to keep up. As Will Straw pointed out in a discussion of record collecting, one of the functions of hipness is to maintain boundaries by requiring for entry into the scene a body of specialized knowledge and, importantly, knowing when that knowledge is *not* to be shared (1997, p. 9).

Anyone who has had the experience of shopping in an unfamiliar record store with an aloof staff knows the anxiety that can be created by simply asking a question of one of those employees. If you have to ask a question, you obviously are not "in."

> If the worlds of club disc jockeys or rock criticism seem characterized by shared knowledges which exclude the would-be entrant . . . this functions not only to preserve the homosocial character of such worlds, but to block females from the social and economic advancement which they may offer. (Straw, 1997, p. 10)

Thornton argued that "the social logic of subcultural capital reveals itself most clearly by what it dislikes and by what it emphatically isn't" (1996, p. 105). The vast majority of electronic/dance community members distinguish themselves against what they often refer to as the mainstream. The mainstream they define themselves in opposition to is typically a feminized and classed-down mainstream. These electronic/dance scenes are largely homosocial, middle-class environments that are constantly policing the scene's boundaries by identifying what is not acceptable behavior. Thornton noted:

> Even among youth cultures, there is a double articulation of the lowly and feminine: disparaged *other* cultures are characterized as feminine, *and* girls' cultures are devalued as imitative and passive. Authentic culture is, by contrast, depicted in gender-free or masculine terms *and* remains the prerogative of boys. (1996, pp. 104–105)

The overwhelming majority of the rave promoters, DJs, and musical artists in the electronic/dance music scenes in the late 1980s and the 1990s were male. In these communities, men have been in important positions at the artistic, production, and promotion levels, all of which are important in controlling the discourse and classification systems that structure these scenes. The constant generation of new jargon—or subgenre names—works to block outsiders from gaining entry into electronic/dance music scenes. Just as an extensive knowledge of composers, conductors, orchestras, soloists, and record companies are prerequisites for the classical music aficionado, knowledge of current subgenres, artists, producers, record companies, and DJs is required of the person who fancies him- or-herself as part of an electronic/dance scene. This makes it much more difficult for those who do not run in the same social circles to penetrate these networks.

People who do not necessarily carry the proper cultural capital or share the same aesthetic values often find themselves outside these gated discursive communities, and these fences are, in part, erected through practices of discourse. Being able to acquire the cultural capital needed to enter into these taste communities requires fluency in a rarefied language, as well as knowledge of particular aesthetic hierarchies. The specifics of what is said (and how it is said) within discourse are connected with the way in which these taste communities (which are largely middle- and upper-middle class and male-dominated) are formed. In turn, all of this is connected to the larger social and economic institutions of the mainstream music industry (an industry that is also male-dominated).

CONCLUSION

The unique nature of electronic/dance music in the 1990s has yielded a metagenre that is constantly breaking apart, recombining, and making obsolete numerous subgenres on a yearly basis. There is no single overriding factor that has given rise to this situation. Instead, the naming of new subgenres can be linked to a variety of influences, such as the rapidly evolving nature of the music, accelerated consumer

culture, and the synergy created by record company marketing strategies and music magazine hype. The appropriation of the musics of minorities by straight, middle- and upper-middle-class Whites in the United States and Great Britain plays a part, and the rapid and ongoing naming process within electronic/dance music subcultures acts as a gate-keeping mechanism, as well. An interesting curiosity at first glance, extensive subgenre naming is, on closer examination, revealed to be deeply bound up in both the political–economy and group identity formations of electronic/dance music communities.

END NOTE

1. Frankie Knuckles released "Tears" and "Your Love" on the ffrr label, which also released the work of acid house–associated artists Ce Ce Rogers and D Mob.

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