

Why Ipods Suck

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This begins, like all good stories, with a confession. For the past few weeks, I should have been behaving like a good academic: preparing papers, chasing book contracts, marking, admin, etc. etc. I should really have been writing this paper much sooner than I was. But whilst none of these activities has been entirely escapable, they haven't been the main focus of my energy just lately. What I've actually been doing for most of the past few weeks, is – I'm ashamed to say it - getting ready for a party. The party was one of a series that I've helped to organise in London over the past couple of years with the celebrated New York DJ David Mancuso, who is one of the main subjects of Tim Lawrence's highly-acclaimed recent study of New York dance history, *Love Saves the Day*. It's a process which, amongst other things, has resulted in me learning more than I ever had any desire to about the world of analogue audio reproduction, and it's this process which has prompted the reflections which I'm presenting here today.

Mancuso is a fascinating figure. He's been organising, promoting, hosting and DJ-ing regular dance parties since the end of the 1960s and was arguably the key figure in the emergence of the DJ-led dance party (disco, rave, call it what you will) as one of the dominant leisure forms of the late 20th century. On the other hand, he manifests very few of the clichés which have come to be associated with the techniques and priorities of the DJ as cultural practitioner. The most widely disseminated and currently popular notion of what it is that DJs do is that DJs construct a performance by manipulating a number (usually 1 or 2) of original sound sources – usually vinyl records, but

potentially CD tracks or MP3 files – containing complete pieces of music which the DJ transforms in a number of possible ways. It's worth noting here that the widely disseminated image of scratch-DJ technique – whereby the DJ effectively produces an entirely new piece of music by rapidly and rhythmically playing assorted fragments of unconnected records – is actually only practised by a tiny minority of working DJs in any genre (even many hip-hop club DJs practice relatively little of this). The dominant technical paradigm amongst working club DJs is the much more mundane procedure of the beatmix, whereby two records with already relatively similar rhythmic properties are played at matched speeds so as to create a rhythmically continuous segue between tracks. As you can probably tell from my tone, neither scratch-artists – 'turntablists' as they are sometimes known – nor the many working DJs who simply play records, tend to regard the extremely high cultural value currently placed on this really rather simple procedure as valid or tenable, but that's another story.

What's interesting about Mancuso is that his complete lack of any such technique is bound up with a quite different set of aesthetic priorities to that informing the aggressive postmodernism of turntablist cut'n'paste or the trance-inducing continuity of the beat-mix. On the one hand, Mancuso shares with other members of the New York club culture tradition an emphasis on the overriding importance of programming to the Dj-set. Programming is quite simply the art of selecting the right records to play and playing them in the right order. This sounds simple enough, but carried out at a high level it's a skill which requires an exhaustive knowledge of recorded music and an ability to form a dialogic relationship with a dancing crowd quickly, intensively,

and over a sustained period. Within dance micro-cultures which place a very high value on programming, the historical scope and cross-generic range of a DJ's record collection and their imagination and flair in presenting its contents are treated as far more important issues than the DJ's knowledge of the latest records or their skill at deploying any kind of technique.

This isn't what distinguishes Mancuso from other DJs, however. What really marks out his approach is his singular emphasis on quality of sound at his events. Using exotic hi-fi components rather than the industrial amplification equipment typical of dance clubs and sound systems, Mancuso's parties are characterised by a quality of sound which is impossible to obtain by other means: the tactile clarity of high-quality analogue reproduction is preferred to an emphasis on sheer volume, and the effect is to produce - from often familiar musical materials - a startling soundscape, and one which is frequently accessible and delightful to those normally intimidated by the sheer brute noise of a normal club pa (a very wide range of ages typifies his crowds, especially at his NYC event).

Now, being a good post-punk post-modern rave-generation deconstructionist I really should have had no truck with this nonsense. As we all know, the cheapness and flexibility of digital music technology has revolutionised its production, consumption and dissemination, democratising every aspect of music culture. The MP3 file format is the latest weapon in the sonic war against the state and the corporations - look how wildly they flail their tentacles, struggling to contain its deterritorialising power with copyright, court orders and federal rulings. Vinyl is useful only for the ease with

which it can be manipulated, and with the rise of laptop programming and digital DJ-equipment, it is rapidly becoming the exclusive preserve of pathetic nostalgists and retro-mongers. ‘Analogue’ is the name for a defunct species of synthesiser which can be easily simulated by any mass-market music software package. This is pretty much how I thought about these issues until I got involved with organising parties with Mancuso in London, and what follows is really the product of this experience.

It’s interesting to note here that this set of ideas – often justified in academic or quasi-academic contexts by recourse to a casually-deployed postmodernist or Deleuzian vocabulary – is pretty much that reproduced in most popular and journalistic commentary. Vinyl records are assumed to be preferred by those who prefer them *either* because they are easy to manipulate for scratch or beatmix DJs *or* because they have a classical appeal, signifiers of the lost authenticity of a bygone (always already bygone) time. MP3s, we are consistently told, offer ‘CD quality’ sound: a double mis-categorisation. On the one hand, MP3s certainly do NOT match anything like the sound quality of CDs: it has never actually been claimed by any technician that they do. On the other hand, CDs do not actually reproduce sound particularly well, being widely understood by technicians and enthusiasts to offer inferior sound quality to high-quality analogue formats (vinyl, quarter-inch tape) or to the 24-bit digital formats used by the recording industry and music software packages.

And this is where (finally), I think this starts to get interesting. The simple reason that many people – and most of dance music culture – still prefer to use vinyl records to digital formats is that they do actually sound better. Nor just different: better.

According to any available measure a vinyl LP track simply contains more and more detailed sonic information than the equivalent track in any known digital format. And yet this issue is simply not raised at all, in either journalistic or academic contexts, when discussing the reasons for the mysterious survival, and recent revival, of the vinyl format. Instead, such discussions assume that the issue is entirely one of what vinyl symbolises, of what it *means*. This may well be important, but it entirely occludes the fundamental question of how it is that vinyl *sounds*, and how listening to it *feels*: not emotionally, but at the level of the tactile sensations that are the means by which we experience sound in the world. In other words, it is the affective dimension of sound which is entirely occluded from ordinary discussions of this issue, much as it has been from most cultural studies discussions of music culture, wherein the experiential specificity of music is almost always reduced to an irrelevance in favour of an emphasis on the symbolic features and qualities of music culture.

Of course, these provocative remarks only raise more questions. What is the difference between analogue and digital audio formats? What does it mean to say that one 'sounds better' than the other? Why, if vinyl sounds so great, do most people believe that CDs sound better and MP3s sound pretty much the same? I'll try to deal with these one at a time.

I'm not an audio technician, so I can't offer authoritative scientific answers, although I know enough to know that any such answers would be in themselves more-or-less controversial. Put very simply, the difference between analogue and digital formats is that analogue information is relayed in continuously varying curves while digital

information is broken down and codified into units of information (whose most basic function is to switch electrical currents on and off in particular sequences). At the level of *recording* technologies specifically, it has been argued persuasively that digitisation breaks the indexicality regarded as typical of analogue recording media. Or rather, this argument has been made with regards to photography and film. When I last did a Google search to see if I could find anything else written on this issue with regard to audio formats, the only thing I found was the abstract for my own paper on this conference's web-site, which wasn't actually (or even virtually) much help.

The argument over the indexicality (or not) of the digital is a complex one which I don't really want to get into here. What I do want to do is to think about what might be at stake in the marginalisation of this very particular form of indexical reproduction by considering what the aesthetic and social specifics of its situation are. But it is worth reflecting on the extent to which the vinyl record, even more than the photograph (the usual example proffered to students of semiotics) is the perfect illustration of the principle of indexicality. There is no resemblance between a black plastic disk and a song, whereas there is quite a lot of resemblance (if you squint) between a photograph of a sunset and its referent. Vinyl only functions because in some sense it inhabits the same material continuum as the original recording situation: sounds are transmitted into the movements of a cutting needle whose movements are transmitted by the record to the cartridge. Putting your ear near the surface of an unamplified turntable as it spins and hearing the sound come straight from the surface of the disk is enough to demonstrate that the sound is always already there, in the

groove. It's the points of the needles that matter: the rest of the process is just amplification.

So what are the sonic qualities of vinyl, the experiential manifestations of this curved materiality? The adjectives normally used to describe the differences between the sound of vinyl and the sound of CDs are telling: vinyl is considered to produce a sound which is 'warmer', more 'tangible' more '3-dimensional'. These can all be written off as the tell-tale symptoms of a residual humanism, but perhaps we shouldn't be so hasty. They also bespeak an understanding of sound as an irreducibly material element of the world and of our experience of that world as inevitably corporeal in nature. The mysterious dimensions of music – the low frequencies, the micro harmonics, the timbral details – which digital formats are notoriously bad at reproducing – are precisely those elements which seem to be 'felt' rather than 'heard', but to acknowledge their existence is not necessarily to succumb to romantic obfuscation. It might be rather to acknowledge that hearing – a process restricted to the ear and the brain – does not exhaust our experience of sound and the material continuum (the machinic phylum, as D&G would have it) which we, and arguably all phenomena, share with it. It might also be to question the priority which Western music culture has, at least for several centuries, accorded to hearing (or more specifically, *listening*) over feeling, or dancing. Sit still in the concert hall. Remove all timbral ambiguity from the design and usage of instruments. Play in key. Push the percussion to the back of the room, or all the way outside if you can manage it. Other musics – Black, Celtic, Indian, etc. – are all - need I say it? – characterised by their markedly different sets of priorities.

Closer to home, it's dance music culture which was the incubator for the vinyl revival of recent years. Again, it's normally assumed that it's the simple ease with which it can be manipulated which is the reason for this, but almost any DJ will tell you that there's more to it than that. The sonic presence of vinyl reproduction – a direct function of its indexicality - is superior to that of digital formats even when played on low-grade equipment. The most common description of this difference is simply the statement that vinyl 'has more bass' (which it does: vinyl simply reproduces the lower frequency format better than CD), and this seems simple enough. But consider why this is important and what is at stake. The bass is the most obviously *felt* part of the musical spectrum, the part that visibly makes matter shake, and the part which brings home the materiality of the space shared by an audience. The sonic presence of analogue reproduction is part of what creates a shared experience of physical space for the dancers in a club. That collectivity just couldn't be there if the sound was all in your head.

It isn't just about the bass. The superiority of vinyl reproduction extends all the way up the frequency spectrum, but the further up we go, the more we need relatively expensive playback equipment to be able to hear the differences. Which brings us to the problem of why people think CDs are better and MP3s are just as good. There is a basic socio-economic fact that most people have never actually heard a decent vinyl audio playback system, and their cost is relatively prohibitive, although not to the degree that might be expected (give me three hundred pounds and a couple of days on ebay and I'll fix you up nicely), so most people have only been able to compare

digital formats to analogue formats played back on very poor equipment. Of course, the issue of what technologies become affordable when is never simple or apolitical, and the prioritisation of some over others is always in part a function of cultural preferences and power imbalances. Unless we really believe (as many of the Bergsonian cyberkids seem to, it has to be said), that we live in the best of all possible worlds, then we have to assume that the music industry haven't just been selling us digitised music for 20 years out of the goodness of their hearts.

What they've been selling us, in fact, is not just a set of audio formats, but a whole way of experiencing music that goes with them. Music has moved out of the living room and the dancehall into the TV music-video station and the walkman and now, finally, to the ipod, and at each stage its capacity to constitute a space of shareable sonic materiality has been erased. Put very simply – if you're used to hearing music mainly on the TV or an a portable personal CD-player, then an MP3 on an ipod is going to sound just fine. If that's all that music is for, then digitisation is unproblematic. If we want it to be for anything else then we've got trouble.

I hardly need to spell it out. The already-iconic advertising campaign for the ipod says it all. Featureless two-dimensional figures dance in isolation from each other: disembodied shadows in worlds of their own. Surely this is the logical destination of certain tendencies in Western listening habits that have been in place since early modernity, habits that we might designate (clumsily, I know, I apologise) as Cartesian listening: listening with the mind, with the ear conceived as the channel to the soul,

with as little of the body or the bodies of others as possible involved in any part of the process.

So is that it then? Western culture is biased against the pleasures of the body. This bias is tied up with its intrinsic and currently-intensifying processes by which capitalism and commodity-culture individualises every aspect of social experience. The digitisation of music media is bound up with this process. Big news. No surprises there.

Of course that isn't all there is. For one thing, it is true that the digitisation of music has enabled a massive democratisation of access to the means of its production, distribution and exchange. It may not have been the only possible means by which that democratisation could be enabled, and if we don't live in the best of all possible worlds then it probably wasn't, but it was one means and it has, to an extent, worked. More than this, the MP3 file format has become a means by which the logic of commodity exchange could be subverted radically and dramatically, enabling new forms of networked communality through the establishment of peer-to-peer file-sharing networks. That this phenomenon appears to be drawing to nearing the end of its life, leaving the commercial MP3 download as potentially by the far the most profitable audio distribution format the industry has yet exploited, does not entirely alter the facts of the case either. It seems unlikely that the endemic spread of CD piracy in the developing world will be limited with any success at all, and the damage to the industry's profit margins done by this aspect of digitisation will almost certainly prove permanent.

Indeed, let's get one thing clear. All of the audiophiles I know, myself included, actually love MP3s and ipods. They're terrific devices. The question is not whether these things are good or bad in and of themselves, but the uses to which they are put. It's worth considering the fact that the original MP3.com web-site, before it transformed itself into an ordinary commercial download site, did not offer MP3s as a playback medium, but as an advertising / information medium. The idea was that the downloader listened to the MP3 and if they liked what they heard they ordered the cut-price, just-in-time produced CD. This illustrates nicely the differences between the digital and analogue formats from an audiophile perspective. Digital formats don't actually present you with the music as such but with an informational approximation thereof : they tell you about the music, rather than being the music. They access music's virtuality only by means of a rigid binary codification of the analogue which alters its status. In this sense, we might say that they are not indexical but iconic. They signify, but they do not affect: or rather they affect only at the level of the interiority of the individualised subject, foreclosing the possibility of music being experienced in its tactile sociality. That's fine, if that's all that you want music to do. It's fantastic if it's part of a process which has other results and other effects: for example, the DJ who buys all her vinyl records online, listening to the tracks as MP3 files before deciding what to buy, presenting music from around the world to her weekend crowd of corporeal communitarians. But if that's all there is: we might all end up as mere shadows, dancing alone.

There's still more to this story, however. Analogue audio technology has not stood still during the past 20 years, and various advances have both increased the quality of analogue playback components and in many cases reduced their real cost (for example, there probably never has been a cheaper high quality turntable than the Rega P2, released last year). Astonishingly, one of the biggest growth areas of the past 5 years has been in the field of valve amplification, with technologies considered redundant in the 1960s, and in some cases the 1930s, being revived for their supposedly unique sonic qualities and redeveloped for contemporary audiophile ears. It's easy to read this as merely a nostalgic rejection of postmodernity, until you actually listen to this stuff and realise that, in some cases, technologies rejected 60 years ago are being revived not just for what they signify but for their specific, unique and very real affective qualities. Rather than see this as nothing more than old men and young fogies tinkering away pointlessly, we might understand this as a good example of what D&G would call a minor science. Rejecting the research agenda which has produced only ever-more Cartesian modes of listening these guys are plotting a completely different line, and in their own small way resisting the aesthetic hegemony of a Eurocentric sonic culture.

If that sounds far-fetched then reflect on this. The key vinyl formats: the 7" record, the 12" single and the LP, are all historically associated in their emergence and popularisation with particular audiences, genres and uses of music. The 7" pop single – Northern Soul fans notwithstanding – was always primarily the provenance of young women and girls. The 12", as most people know, emerged directly from the NYC club world of the 1970s, a tool for the DJs at events whose crowds were

overwhelmingly black, Hispanic, and gay. The LP emerged during the heroic era of jazz. In each case the typical lengths of track and side enabled by the format in question more-or-less suited formal musical requirements of the genre and audience in question, or else was limited by the technology itself. The standard Compact Disc, on the other hand, could have been set at any number of possible lengths, but was set specifically to match the length of that definitive statement of hegemonic Western musicality: Beethoven's Ninth symphony. Or consider this little nugget: the finest record cartridges in the world are made by a Japanese family who used to make swords, transferring their skills in metallurgy and molecular fine tuning from the world of war to that of sound. The nomadic blacksmith is D&G's ideal figure of the minor scientist, but how many of those do you meet in Tesco's? Today's heir to the nomad metallurgist might be not the hacker or the virus writer, those darlings of the corporate avant-garde, but the patiently tinkering analogue audio innovator.

Whether digitisation is a means by which Western European bourgeois culture reasserts its notion of how to listen, after a century of musical insurgence from the Black Atlantic, or whether it is a means for the further deterritorialisation of all sedimented forms of musical power, is not a question that can be answered by reference to the technology alone, in and of itself. What does seem clear is that the matter cannot be taken for granted. It also seems clear that any way of understanding music which reduces it to signification, symbolisation, representation, identity-marker, meaning, lyrics – as most academic commentary continues to do, and as the current preference for ring-tones over records also does – will in fact collude with the project of marginalising that affective corporeality which is the basis of music's capacity to

create experiences of communality. At the same time any understanding of digitisation as necessarily liberatory can only make sense in the context of a politics wholly committed to that deep individualism which is, in fact, the hegemonic norm of neoliberal culture. From a Deleuzian perspective, the CD may look like the smoother space, but that's only because it's striations, its zeros and ones, are too deep and too pervasive to be seen. It's the smooth groove of the vinyl which has the power to connect bodies in a configuration of mutual empowerment, linked across time and space, the deterritorialising power of the musical commodity making connections in the machinic phylum of sound, accessing the social potentiality of music's virtuality without succumbing entirely to the commodity's code.