

a journal of politics, society, culture, and other stuff

down

volume 01 issue 02

summer 2011



living a
hip-hop life

searching
for new music

kids and
video games

the electronic
boom-bap

reactions and responses

I was pleasantly surprised by the positive reactions I got from the first issue of this new incarnation of **down**. Most of this came from folks at the school where I teach, but I got some good feedback from folks online as well.

I'm humbled to admit that I goofed in my analysis of the Tea Party's economic perspectives. Apparently Ron Paul *has* criticized the World Bank and IMF. Indeed, Dennis Kucinich once said he would choose Mr. Paul as a running mate, since some of their views are so similar. That said, I must still disagree with the free-

market fundamentalism advocated by Paul and others, which fails to acknowledge the suffering that free markets so often leave in their wake.

Many people were also amused by my slapdash Photo-shopping* of Sarah Palin's face on Chris McCandless's body. To this I will simply say: If you have not read Jon Krakauer's book *Into the Wild*, please do so. Few books have intrigued and fascinated me so vividly. — esp

* How interesting that "Photoshop" has become a verb.

on the cover

The cover of our previous issue featured a newspaper with the headline "Prince Not Dead". This was intended as a play on words, to be read: "Print's Not Dead", a commentary on the continuing relevance of print media.

Alas, many readers believed that the gentleman pictured on the phony newspaper (a royal figure I pulled at random from Wikimedia Commons) was of import, or we had suddenly (and inexplicably) begun concerning ourselves with royalist news. We apologize for the confusion, and we hope the clever iconography on the cover of issue two will be more obvious to the average reader. (Hint: It's a sub-genre of electronic party music.) — esp

f i n e p r i n t

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lovemusicluvmusic

Tahara Mattis

‘Music is enough for a lifetime, but a lifetime is not enough for music’ — Sergei Rachmaninoff

I’ve been listening to a particular radio show a lot lately — so much, in fact, that I finally turned off the radio and put a CD on. I listen to music a lot and I do enjoy the radio, but this particular show got me thinking about people whose love of music begins and ends with the Top40/Billboards.

Are there people who rely only on this show to get their daily or weekly music fix? Are they truly satisfied with the repetitive, commercial sound you hear everywhere for the next 10 weeks, on television, in nightclubs, from the delightful vocals of friends or family? Is it really the be all and end all of music for some people?

I love music more than shoes. (Believe me, that is a huge amount of love.) And I do enjoy listening to these bands that dominate our stations — there’s some extremely good music (and some extremely not), but if that were the limit for my musical fulfillment I would quickly go mad. There is a whole universe of music

out there that I still haven’t heard and aside from reading and breathing, it is what takes up the majority of my time.

There is so much music out there and to think of what I would have missed out on had I relied only on commercial radio and TV makes me feel sad.

One DJ in particular changed my life: Zane Lowe. As I listen to his show during the day, I keep a pen and pad ready nearby to note down the name of the artist/band I’ve just heard. The variety is immense and the passion this guy has for music puts mine and most definitely others’ to shame. After less than a week of listening to this show you will find new music and wonder: ‘How did I ever do without?’

I had the time of my life at the Isle Of Wight Festival earlier this summer and saw some amazing artists. Roachford was one them — as I danced, supped my beer and joined in on the ‘When I say hey, you say ho’ bit, I thought to myself: *What a lovely band, I hope they do well and have more gigs lined up because they are really, really cool.*

When I got home I did some research and to my surprise found

out they have been going since the late 80's. The frontman Andrew Roachford was signed to Columbia Records, the first ever to receive a seven-album deal. As well as being asked by the late Michael Jackson and Chaka Khan to write songs, he has achieved a substantial amount.

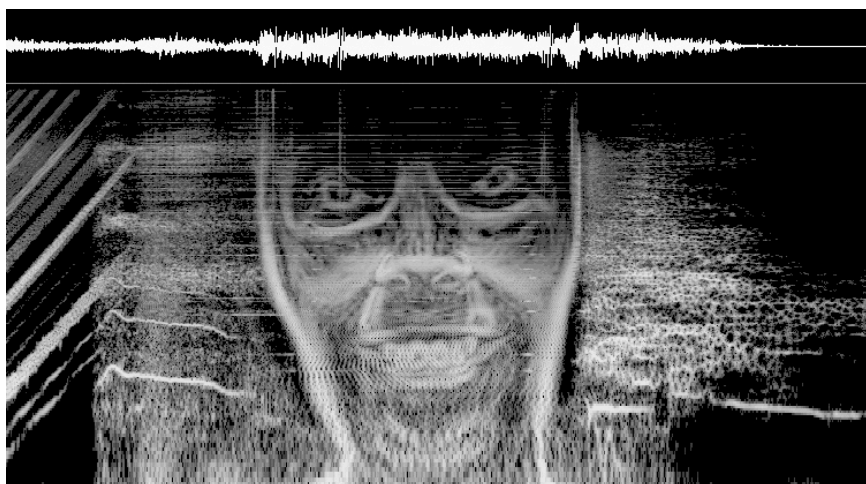
Guy Page Trio were another new band I experienced, but unlike Roachford they were just starting out and I am eagerly anticipating more.

I am constantly in search. I could never rely solely on the charts to provide me with music fix. I've fallen in love with many songs on film and television too. Songs in films are listed in the credits and easy to find, but songs on TV — especially adverts — are not always easy. I typed 'This is the life' into the search engine after hearing those words sung

over and over on an advert and eventually found one of my now favourite bands, Two Door Cinema Club. The new Amazon Kindle advert introduced me to Bibio with their track 'Lover's Carvings'. My search for that song was made easier due to fellow music obsessives, also on the hunt.

I'm obviously speaking personally and, as you've gathered, finding music I've not heard before makes me happy.

A lot of people are reluctant to find new music or research classic artists. Maybe it just doesn't interest them and they are comfortable with what the radio chart shows provide, stuck within one genre — maybe two if they're feeling a bit wild. But extending your music library beyond the commercial station is so worth while. There is an infinity of sound to be heard. ▼



In 1999 the electronic musician Aphex Twin released a song entitled "ΔMT¹=αΣDi[n][ΣFij [n-1]+Fexti[n̄¹]]". (Yes, that's the actual title.) A logarithmic-scale spectrogram analysis of the song reveals an embedded image of the artist's face. You can hear the audio at <http://vimeo.com/1668222>.

Living a Hip-Hop Life

Eric S. Piotrowski

In a 1981 interview, poet Maya Angelou described the intersection of poetry and existence: "Leading a poetic life," she said, "means being existential, to the extent that any human can be responsible. By this, I mean being immediate ... to take responsibility for *each* moment. To accept no man-made or human-made barriers between human beings is poetic, to absolutely refuse to accept barriers because of history's tragedies or assaults, because of differences in languages or customs, age or race." In a similar vein, Princeton philosophy professor Cornel West describes himself as "a *bluesman* in the life of the mind, a *jazzman* in the world of ideas".

Lately I've been confronting these notions as I try to figure out how they come together in the central metaphor of my own existence: What does it mean to live a hip-hop life?

Obviously there are deep parallels to Angelou's analysis, since hip-hop *is* poetry. An MC must be immediate and existential. A hip-hop DJ must take responsibility for each moment, or else the beat falls apart. Hip-hop at its best has always been about destroying artificial barriers of

race, history, and language. But there's more.

Hip-hop is about collage and reappropriation. Hip-hop is about devotion to reality, and rejection of artificiality (but not theatre). Hip-hop is about knowledge of self and contextualization of identity. Hip-hop is about the breakbeat and linguistic improvisation. Hip-hop is, as Mos Def says, about the people. Hip-hop is about freedom of speech and resistance to illegitimate authority, with a recognition of the concurrent responsibility.

Let's take these one at a time.

I Bayonet Cassettes and Chop Beats

Before the MC, there was the DJ. Kool Herc spins at NYC block parties, juicing the speakers from electro-patches in the streetlights. Grand Wizard Theodore accidentally runs the turntable belt back and forth so he can hear his mom in the next room. The DJ grabs the sample, rewinds and loops it. EPMD sits at the computer, slicing data chunks out of Steve Miller and Kool & The Gang, then mixes it all together.

Living a hip-hop life means I take from my environment what is needed, and making of it something more. I know my

environment and I am aware of the world around me. I am immediate, but do not close my eyes to the importance of history. I combine and juxtapose.

Some say sampling in hip-hop demonstrates lack of creativity (or at least lack of skill with instruments). But there can be artistry in sampling as in other methods of sound manipulation. Vanilla Ice was (rightly) lambasted for his blatant uncreative "borrowing" of the Queen/Bowie track "Under Pressure". Thus we see that a skillful use of samples must be innovative. If done correctly, sampling is the most sincere form of imitation.

Are Your Tales of Reality Worth Their Sonic-Laced Discussions?

No maxim is more central to hip-hop (especially in the second decade of the new millennium) than "keep it real". Without ignoring the directive power of music



to continue cycles of negativity (and positivity), hip-hop is grounded in a desire to reflect the artist's world with the same veracity as Balzac and Dickens. Flash and the Five delivered "The Message" and Run-DMC said simply "It's Like That". Chuck and Flav took it to a new level with "I", while Cube gave an ironic twist on the standard school essay "My Summer Vacation". A methodical mimetic metronome.

Living a hip-hop life means that I stay grounded in the truth. I do not run from my reality, and I use theatre as a way to reflect larger truths that cannot sustain straight narrative. I am honest about who I am and where I come from. I do not pretend, defraud, front, or perpetrate. If what I am is not enough, I do not fake it; I become something greater.

Alas, the videos and online personas have deluded so many fans into thinking that the front is the truth. Half-naked ladies, foaming champagne bottles, and rainstorms of money cover up economic realities in the ghetto that haven't changed since Reagan first took office. Many young people think it's just about the clothes, and the guns, and the cars. But of course as M1 put it: "Is it the bandana, the hat, the loafers or the gatt / I tell you off the bat hell nah it ain't none of that / it ain't the smell of the chronic, the broken ebonics / they be the main ones poppin' that s*** but they don't want it".

I Might As Well Tell You Who I Am

Zadie Smith once described the best rappers as “having the world inside their mouths”. But before we can speak the world, we must speak ourselves. Serch and Pete Nice never pretended not to be white (unlike some candy-name MCs I could mention). When Run-DMC shouted “Proud to Be Black” it brought back the James Brown spirit and we all said it loud. Kid Frost, B-Real, and Angie Martinez bring in the Latin flavor; Krush and Honda do the same for Japan. We represent where we’re from, because that matters.

Living a hip-hop life means I am eager to learn the history of my people, whoever my people may be. I am conscious of how others see me, and how I see myself. I listen to Donna Haraway describe “situated knowledges” and I restrain myself from pretending to know things I do not. I draw from my experience; I am not limited by it; I seek constantly to expand it.

The hip-hop self is neither static nor simplistic. No artist remains the same, and those who do not know themselves are quickly reminded of this fact. “Temet Nosce”, as The Oracle told Neo. Naturally, ego and confidence are locked in a mortal struggle. We must be patient as we wait for others to mature (or finish bragging about themselves), because as Lifesavas said: “That kid was our past and the friend could be our future”.



Return of the Boom-Bap

The break — and specifically the boom-bap — brings life to hip-hop. Skilled MCs don’t need the 4/4, but most of us wouldn’t recognize rap music without it. JMJ and The RZA swirl these bars together in a stereophonic alchemy, providing a steady foundation for the words up above, which must show architectural integrity of imaginative multidefinition and transcendent purpose.

Living a hip-hop life means I am comfortable with both bass and treble. I am not afraid of the space between the boom and the bap, the deep drum and the harsh snare. My head nods almost autonomously when the beat starts up, even if I have no idea where (or who) it’s coming from. A beat is a beat is a beat, and the musical rest is complement. I embrace words to lather the beat, aware of tools like onomatopoeia, metonymy, and metaphor. My words have meaning.

Our current freestyling fetish risks a denigration of thoughtful

written lyrics. Obviously off-the-top versatility is impressive, especially if it produces something worthwhile. (I personally doubt any freestyle will ever surpass Rakim's "Lyrics of Fury".) But linguistic improvisation takes many forms. I worry about the evaporation of written words in this age of disposable status updates, vulgar battle lyrics, and silly just-for-the-heck-of-it party rhymes.

Funk Is Our Neighbor So We Paid Her A Visit

There is no hip-hop without community. Bambaataa called together the Zulu Nation to provide a breathing alternative to gang death. The block party is the stable manger where the messiah children of the music were born, graf tags across the walls, inside and out. As violent and chaotic as *Do the Right Thing* is, we see a vibrant community trying to cope with its own tensions, and PE is more than fitting as the ubiquitous soundtrack.

Living a hip-hop life means I am not isolated. I do not sacrifice my individual identity, but neither am I removed from the nurturing

soil of community. (Nor do I hesitate to provide soil for others.) I respect my neighbors and do for others as I would want them to do for me. I use the power of the music to transcend artificial boundaries between human beings.

Paradoxically (or perhaps with intentional irony) Public Enemy's track "I" is more about the dissolution of community and absurd community contradictions than it is a meditation of individual identity. With the megastardom of a lucky select few, it's easy to think that hip-hop is only about Me, not Us. But as with jazz, individual limelight must forever be balanced with the dynamic of the group. There is no Method Man without the rest of the Wu-Tang.

Let's Get Free (Fight the Power)

Bob Moses and The Cross-Bronx Expressway are central to understanding the birth of hip-hop. Like Arthur Dent, hip-hoppers lay down in front of the bulldozers on cardboard and began to break. It is a resistance music, what Thoreau called "a counter friction

The Boondocks



Aaron McGruder



to stop the machine". Hip-hop is *not* okay with the way things are. Hip-hop stands up to police brutality (with vulgar lyrics from NWA and more comprehensive analysis from BDP). Hip-hop resists illegitimate economic structures (Paris and The Coup blaze the trail here). The best traditions of hip-hop even challenge sexism and homophobia (Conscious Daughters and Disposable Heroes come to mind).

Living a hip-hop life means developing my political consciousness. I take the red pill; I do not hide from the real world, and I do not shy away from uncomfortable complexities. I am willing to explore things that are confusing, and I try to understand the world

around me. I take a stand for what is important, and I understand myself as part of a tradition of struggle, greater than myself.

This, perhaps, is the more important aspect of all. It *is* bigger than hip-hop, as dead prez said, and just as I didn't go into teaching for the sake of summers off or fat paychecks, I don't drink from the waters of hip-hop just for funky beats or clever wordplay. (In all of these situations, they are nice fringe benefits rather than essential core elements.)

Hip-hop is about transformation and (defined broadly) revolution. Thus when it's all said and done, I hope people will say that my life has been transformative and revolutionary. ▼

Grand Theft Childhood

The Surprising Truth About Violent Video Games

Review by Eric S. Piotrowski

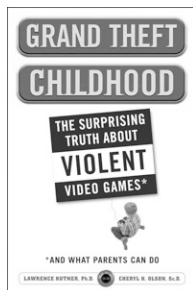
So there I was in the school library, waiting for a student to arrive. Never one to waste an opportunity to start a new book, I wandered to the shelf and snagged this book. "Oh boy," I thought as I read the back cover. "Here's another alarmist rant about how horrible video games are for kids, and how they should be banned or criminalized."

After only a few pages, however, I realized how wrong I was — the authors have, in fact, given us one of the

most important books about video games ever written.

Lawrence Kutner and Cheryl K. Olson do a remarkable job cutting through the hysteria over violent video games; examine precisely the dubious connections between such games and real-life violence; and conduct sound, level-headed research of their own.

After Seung-Hui Cho went on his murderous rampage at Virginia Tech (killing Liviú Librescu, one of the most remarkable people I've ever learned about and someone with whom every teacher



should be familiar), pundits (including Dr. Phil) were quick to point fingers at video games. But in fact, Cho was known for *not* playing video games in college. As Kutner and Olson point out, this may have prevented him from developing friendships with his peers, something which could have been beneficial. This shows up in the authors' research too.

There's no doubt that young children should not have access to hyperviolent games. But the honest scientific exploration and information in this book are superb examples of rational discussions

we need to have as a society so that we base our policy and attitudes on reality, rather than fear, rumor, and political posturing.

Another interesting fact from the book: Did you know Rod Blagojevich once redirected a million dollars from the budgets of state agencies (including public health and the welfare agency), in an attempt to outlaw violent video game sales to minors? As the authors write: "These are, of course, departments whose activities are well known to have a direct and significant effect on real-world violence." ▼

DISILLUSION OVERLOAD

ERIC S. PIOTROWSKI



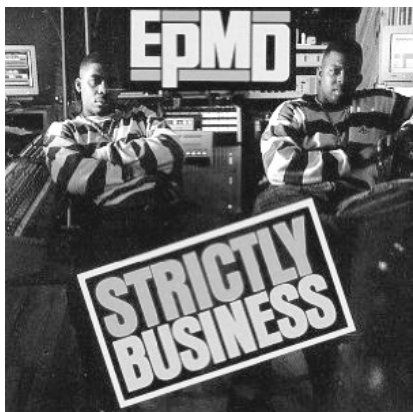
True story. There *has* to be a connection between sleep deprivation and finding the bookmark.

Ode on a Digital Boom-Bap

Eric S. Piotrowski

How do I love electronic music? Let me count the ways. Ever since I first heard Paul Hardcastle's track "19", I've been captivated by the possibilities for computer-made block-rockin' beats.

Twenty years later, I'm in deeper than ever. I'd say that at least 80% of my music collection is composed of music that is created mostly on computers. (I'm including most hip-hop here, since the backbeats are frequently digital.) Classical, jazz, and my sparse country selections are exceptions to the rule — and they're in the minority.



Remember the cover of *Strictly Business*? They put themselves in the studio, in front of some computers. Run-DMC were in old burnt-out buildings; Eric B. and Rakim were lounging before money and cars; and LL Cool J was b-boying in front of "his" mansion. Erick and Parrish, though, were just hanging out in

the studio. Unpretentious and honest, that cover speaks volumes about how hip-hop *really* gets made. Idiotic Steve-Martin-dance song notwithstanding, it is a solid record and it stands the test of time as it sings the praises of electronic's influence on rap.

Indeed, the two worlds seem to have an intriguing symbiotic relationship — plenty of hip-hop DJs these days talk about how Kraftwerk influenced them; and many electronic artists affirm a lifelong love of Public Enemy.

One of the things I love about electronic music is that it (usually) can't be performed by humans. I'm not talking here about precision — I mean the tempos, the intricacy of the constructions, the samples. Drum 'n' bass has exploded the possibilities of arranging traditional instrument sounds; Omni Trio's *Music for the Next Millenium* stunned me and stayed locked in my system for months.

In recent years we've seen some intriguing blends of the hip-hop and electronic music worlds. The *Blade II* soundtrack, for example, paired assorted rappers with electronic artists (not unlike the rock/rap combos on the *Judgment Night* soundtrack). Some tracks were magical (Mos Def + Massive Attack = Win!), but many were lackluster.

I hope artists from these two genres will continue to explore the connections and evolve through the benefits of digital beats and electronic rhythms. ▼

after words

Do **not** play the *Fallout New Vegas* DLC “Dead Money” • It is the *worst DLC ever* • Last time I only put half the PDF on the website but to heck with it, this time I'll post everything in HTML • I hope people remember that issue of *The Final Analysis* we did Back in the Day™ where we parodied the NC course catalogue • That was perhaps my finest moment of design awesomeness ever • I seriously doubt any students will read this • Actually, one student will come up to me now that I said that and be like “Oo in your face, Mister P” just to prove me wrong • I heard once that the fastest way to cut down on calories is to drink only water, so now I'm trying to drink water instead of soda • Still, Jarritos is some goooooood soda • Also Thai iced tea • Riding my bike is the only exercise that doesn't instantly bore me to tears • Someday I want Sony or Microsoft to create a stationary-bike controller for a games console • The faster you pedal, the faster you go in the game • And there will be buttons on the handlebar so you can fire missiles or whatever • I really did intend to put this thing out four times a year, but what was I thinking? • Man, you must be really bored right now • What's up with Facebook these days? I go to post a comment and the cursor goes away • How am I supposed to know which word I'm on? • I guess the thinking is that this communication is supposed to be so instant and immediate so who cares about editing or moving the cursor around • Just type what you wanna type and be done with it • I could make a list of all the stuff I've listened to while making this, but I seriously doubt anyone is interested • If you are, let me know and I'll do it again next time • Aaron McGruder, please don't sue me • You're so awesome • Oh and BTW everyone, I know Em's done some vaguely political tracks since that cartoon came out, but most of his stuff is still mindless hyperviolent tripe • Just like many of the video games I play, heh • I should probably be in my classroom right now, sorting files and putting up posters • *Revolver* is an interesting movie but in the end I think it's more pretentious pseudo-deep piddling about than creative metaphysical exploration • Someday I'mma have a student who gets every one of my *Simpsons* references • That would be so cool • I remember when I decided I was only going to use public-domain images for this thing • That sure didn't last long • When I went to buy handkerchiefs yesterday, the only option was to buy thirteen of them • So now I have thirteen new handkerchiefs • Just thought you should know • Yeah, okay, I'm just looking around my office now • Bart: “But if you quit, it'd be like an expert knot tier quitting a knot-tying contest right in the middle of tying a knot.” Lisa: “Why'd you say that?” Bart: “I dunno, I was just looking at my shoelaces.” • GameFly is a great way to fill yourself with a constant fear that you're not getting your money's worth • I thought it might help me save money on video games but instead I just have one more expense and two unplayed games sitting on my shelf all the time • I hope you weren't expect this to contain inspirational messages about life, like in those ads from that yoga pants company • Neil Hamburger is the funniest person on Twitter no contest • Be careful, tho, because some of his jokes are vulgar with adult situations • “Could you write my name on the toilet?” • I bet no one with bad eyesight reads this • Ha ha people with bad eyesight are *losers* • Breathing is important • Yeah everyone knows it, but I mean really stop and take a deep breath • Do it now • Thinking too • So many people only spend like two seconds thinking about something but usually it takes a long deep think to come up with a solution • Look at Portal! • Made it.