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record breakin'

EVER WONDER WHERE PRIMO FINDS HIS SOUNDS; PETE ROCK GETS HIS HORNS OR TRIBE HEARS ISTS VIBES? LOOK NO FURTHER…IT'S ALL IN THE BREAKS. READ AND LEARN.

DIGGIN' BY RIGGS MORALES

It's slightly above 80 degrees on this beautiful Saturday afternoon. While many scatter throughout the NYC metro area for airconditioned shelter or surrender to the sun's hazardous beams, DJs Kon & Amir are steadily diggin' in the vinyi-infested bins of New York's A-1 Records. Like data processors at a firm, they flip through each aisle of records searching for something, anything that will feed their craving for beats, breaks that is.

"I'm looking for a Lee Moses record," says a determined Amir Abdullah. "it's a very rare soul record from the early '70s. Positive K used it on 'Night Shift'." A week prior to this session at A-1, Amir found himself on a plane heading towards Denver in search of that same Lee Moses record. "If it's not here, it'll be somewhere else..." Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to the world of breakbeats.

Collectors call them o!d records. DJs call them breaks. To the outside ear they're known simply as "the originals", a generation's worth of obscure records that are revived via hip-hop's sound-breaking producers. Let the needle spin on Seals and Croft's "Sweet Green Fields" and, within the first few seconds, you'll instantly recognize Busta Rhymes's "Put Cha Hands Where My Eyes Can See". Eight minutes into David Porter's "The Masquerade Is Over" and you're likely to find the sinister piano loop used for The Notorious B.I.G.'s "Who Shot Cha". But where do these records come from? Who discovers them?

And who are the creators behind some of hip-hop's most recognizable loops? That's the question this journalist posed to various DJs, producers and record collectors during this indepth look at the elements that have taken hip-hop towards unlimited heights.

"Bambaataa said it best-digging is all about looking for the perfect beat," begins DJ Cut Chemist of Jurassic Five. "That's what it was, that's what it is and will always be about. It's about that high. The high you got when you found your first dope beat."

The digging drive in DJs like Chemist, Kon & Amir Ken Sport, Jeff Mao and DJ Shadow is matched by the joys some of hip-hop's best producers find in discovering that old, hot record. Folks like Pete Rock, DJ Premier Diamond D and Large Professor have consciously introduced hiphop to sounds that never seemed to have found their place in music history.

Supplying both the producer and DJ are the record dealers. Their stores serve as the fountain from which the other two parts of this breakbeat trinity sip and live from. Stores like A-1 and Sound Library in New York, Broadway Records in VA or Bob Gibson's in Boston, are all meeting grounds where the sound of the past meets the audience of today.

The synergy that exists between these three elements is the reason hip-hop is at the creative level it is today. Like no other form of contemporary music, hip-hop can be seen as a library of the best in sound. And it started more than 20 years ago.

Before word one was ever put over a beat, before platinum dreams had found the ghetto, old school DJs like Afrika Bambaataa, Grand Wizard Theodore, DJ Smokey, Kool DJ Herc and Grandmaster Flash were spinning with breaks. Scouring disco and funk classics like "Dance to the Drummers Beat," "Yellow Sunshine" or "Rockin' in the Pocket" for that one drum break or vocal bridge, these block party kings knew that one 30-second break could set the party off.

"Breaks was the key to everything," remembers the All-Mighty Kay Gee of the legendary Cold Crush Brothers. "If it wasn't for those little breaks in all these records that people used to find, it wouldn't be hiphop as we know it today."
Since it was forbidden for the DJ to let the chorus or extended verse play, the beat master had to make the break sound like an actual record in and of itself.
"You had to keep that little beat going until the next record came up," continues Kay Gee. "So actually back then, a DJ in a club would probably spin close to two, three or four hundred records a night! Just those little beats."

As the demand increased for these breaks, competition among DJs for the prized pieces of vinyl became intense. And often, the original song or the origin of the looped break was kept secret. In fact, beatjunkies like Flash, Theodore and Bam were known to put the record in the bathtub to wipe the labels off.

"Yeah, everybody would try to go to spots like Downstairs Records or Music Factory on 42nd Street at different times," Kay Gee agrees. "DJs would scratch out the titles and shit. It was very private for years."

Twenty years later collectors still scatter in search of unknown spots to cop those beat jewels. From thrift shops to flea markets to garage sales, records can be found in the most unlikely of places. But the art of digging is no easy task. To dig is an art. It takes time, patience, a keen eye and knowledge of the artist you seek to achieve collecting status. The naive collector will find himself buying and spending a sum of money on an album that not only has no value, but also has no breaks.

"It's gotten deeper over the years," says DJ Shame of the Vinyl Re-animators, producer of Traveling Through Sample Land, one of hip-hop's first comprehensive sample mixtapes. "Now all music has been included under the hip-hop umbrella, and diggin' has gotten me into many different forms of music."

Or taken him to many different places. To find the right cut, out-of-state trips are mandatory for the obsessive collector. According to DJ Amir who just came back from diggin' in Denver part of the reason for the extensive traveling is that the break game has seen a bit of a price hike since hip-hop heads got involved.

"You'll see records you've seen universally throughout your travels that are normally under $10. Then you go to a record show and you'll see them for $70! And it's only because of hip-hop. People need to sample records and dealers are like, 'Well this is my ticket. I'm gonna make money off this.' But they're leeching off the music."

But while Amir and other DJs claim record hikes are due to hip-hop's fascination with sampling, dealers disagree. They say it's more about the foreign consumers- eager bright-eyed kids who come from Europe and Japan and drop loads of cash on records that are usually worth three times less than what they are paying. Dealers say, it's the market that determines the price. "It's the English people who make this wave," confesses Aldo Rosati, owner of A-Records. "When English people say this is the record; everybody's got to have it. Then the Japanese start looking for it everywhere. It's like with the Japanese [kids], they need to buy, buy, buy. They're good collectors."

French-born storeowners Aldo and partner Roman Dalmasso know about international supplying. Over the past few years, their store has become a gold mine for breaks. And while foreign collectors are often a topic of discussion, Kajiwara, A-1's resident hip-hop expert, feels the reason the Japanese collectors pay such exorbitant prices is because they are simply more into music than the beat-stricken Collectors of the States.

"Here in New York, there are a lot of heads just playing hip-hop and, like, really popular disco jams. But in Japan, there are more eclectic styles [of music]. People play funk, soul, jazz, all mixed up. In Japan, there's real interest in the music, so [the DJs want to learn everything there is to know about the music."

Aldo agrees: "Record collecting is biggear overseas because people enjoy the music more. We are big collectors here, but producers are just gonna buy it for like beats and sounds and stuff like that. In Europe, they're gonna buy the record for the music."

Back in New York, the high prices have a damper on what are usually bargain-based record conventions. Almost twice a month; dealers, collectors, DJs and producers will gather at a convention hall to ostensibly pick up on the latest findings in old music. But what was once a Shangri-La of beats and prices has turned into a less than beneficial occasion.

"If you get there before 10 a.M., it's $25 to get in," Amir informs. "If you are there after that, it's only $5. So if you're a guy can't spend a lot of money on records, you have to go in late. But all the producers and stuff go first. Not only do they usually hold the records anyway, they still get the first crack at them! You just got to use your head and find the other records they don't know about that are hot."

That kind of get-or-get-got atmosphere has 'caused many a new producer to give up on this art of beat seeking.

"I don't go to them shits anymore," says Jao, a promising NYC beatmaker. "Why am I gonna wake up mad early to go to a convention, only to watch a wellknown producer walk by with all the good shit?"

Meet T Ray. He's a sound-breaking producer, professional beat finder and convention attendees' worst nightmare all rolled into one. Stories about T Ray's fetish for beats are legendary among breakbeat producers like Lord Finesse, The Beatnuts and The Mighty V I.C. "Most niggas would get [to the convention] early just to be up on the new shit. But T Ray would help the collectors load their records...at five in the morning!" recalls Vic, a diggin' buddy of Ray whose intricate use of loops has earned him a reputation in the underground. But while notorious in his world, T Ray is actually rather reclusive. The ultra-obsessive collector spoke fast while driving slowly down Santa Monica Blvd. in Los Angeles.

"That's nothing," he says. "Once other dudes caught on to my trick I switched it. What I would do next is call up the collector five weeks before the convention and ask them what they were bringing. They'd say, 'Well there's too much for me to tell you over the phone.' I'd say, 'Just read them all to me.' When the convention came around I would go to all the table dealers and collect a box from each. On my way out, I'd see Finesse and them like, 'Aaaaww man! I'm leaving."'

T Ray's diggin' determination has paid off in more ways that one. He's actually produced memorable jams like Double X Posse's "Not Gonna Be Able to Do It," Lord Finesse's "Yes, You May" (remix), a song that introduced the late Big-L, .MC Serch's "Back To The Grill Again" and The Artifacts' "Wrong Side Of The Track." Having just signed a label deal for his Beat Down Recordings through Warner Brothers Records, T Ray is an example of the successful breakbeat collector turned producer, the sound-hungry kid who keeps the breakbeat world on its toes.

"Finding something that no one has is a rush," says Diamond D, co-founder of New York's Diggin' In The Crates crew. "Finding a loop is like, 'Cool, now I got the shit, now I could turn the world on to it."'

Diamond should know-his debut album, Stunts, Blunts & Hip-Hop, broke ground in 1994 for its collection of memorable·loops and breaks. And though it never acquired the platinum status most of today's generation has been spoiled with, Stunts is a hip-hop classic synonymous for capturing a producer s "dig-pertise" at full capacity.

"[It's] like the Beatnuts with 'Off The Books,"' Diamond continues. "Psycho Les put that together and that was his way of hav ing something and showing the world how creative he could,be with it. He didn't just loop it, he sent people looking for the record." The record Diamond is complimenting Psycho Les for is a rare song on an album filled with children's cartoon melodies. Three years ago, the beat-up piece of vinyl just happened to be laying out in Les's extensive record collection.

"The whole thing had mad little sounds on it, but it was just mad kiddy shit," recalls Les. "I was like, 'Damn let me just keep listening to it.' And then in the middle, thät shit just broke down and boom there it was."

The "Off The Books" loop showcased this breakbeat producer's uncanny ability to turn a two-second sound into a hip-hop classic. It's a "chop-shop" technique that can identify what hip-hop producers (DJ Premier and RZA are other examples) are able to succeed with a minimal use of sampling. But it also demands an almost maniacal desire to dig and listen-to everything.

Recently, however life for the uninspired has gotten a little easier. Over the past five years, a flurry of albums filled with nothing but the break-beats or classic instrumentals hip-hop songs have used has emerged to do the diggin' for you. With titles like Tribe's Vibe (the original recordings behind the music of A Tribe Called Quest) and Pete's Treats (the original joints flipped by producer Pete Rock), these collections reveal the mysteries behind the sounds of some of hip-hop's most famed producers.

"Back in the day there was always a quest to find the original," says a concerned Extra-P. "No reprint, find the original. In fact, only a few people knew if that was a record at all. But now, everybody knows about sampling and the mystery of diggin' no longer stands."

' Though they may serve as a helpful guide to the new jack collector, these breakbeat compilations put many producers in jeopardy when their names are used to sell the compilations. It's a serious problem when "chopped" samples have often never been cleared.

"A lot of people who collect beats thought I was putting out those Dusty Fingers compilation albums," says a frustrated Diamond D, whose publishing company is also named Dusty Fingers. "I know these [compilation producers] gotta eat, but I don't like that shit at all.

"A lot of groups wanna sample, but now everybody's so afraid of giving up part of their publishing. We're talking about millions of dollars if you get a platinum record, so I could understand it."

Those strict publishing rights have managed to turn the once sample-happy hip-hop game into a virtually sample-free world. (And have taken Pete's Treats off the shelves.) But while labels wish for an album they don't have to spend a fortune clearing, surprisingly, some production purists now feel that not using a sample can take away the substance of a better hip-hop beat. Samples allow producers to experiment with many musical elements (bass lines, rhythm sections, drum patterns) that give, and have always given, hip-hop its essence, the core feeling that makes the music what it is.

Back at A-1 Records; DJ Kon has spent another day diggin'.

"Music to me just transcends everything," he says. "You don't have to speak English or understand the language if you feel the music. That's why I love music. If I went deaf or like, lost all my records, I'd probably bug the fuck out."

The world of breakbeats has been overlooked for years, but it existed before the music even began. The dealers, DJs and producers who are responsible for finding a record from, say, 1968, and making a hit for the ninety-now, are keeping the culture alive. For every sample that Primo loops, Jay-Z rocks over and Amir ' finds the original for, an unknown artist of the past will be given his/her due as a contributor to the art form known as hip-hop. And with music becoming less of a concern to today's soundbyte audience, it's' mandatory that this uncharted world of sound be pushed to the next generation. The music of the past is the only thing that can be used to build future pioneers.

And that, ladies and gentlemen, is a break.