WOOFERS ON BLAST UP THE JAM BLOCK ROCK:

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Thesis

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CHAPTER

A SLAPDASH HISTORY OF THE HIP-HOP MEGAMIX

Consider the following musical scenario.

The beat from BDP's "My Philosophy" (which is a beefed-up loop of Stanley Turrentine's "Sister Sanctified") and De La Soul's "Plug Tunin'" (Manziel's "Midnight Theme") morph together like two perfectly-laid bricks on a brownstone, the overlapping drums cemented by a smooth plane of mortar. Posdnuos brings it all down in ruin with his vocal flow while Turrentine's alto sax cries over the Invitations' tenor and some dude's spoken-word snippet gets cut up in the left channel. Easy E's pubescent-sounding voice is scratched amongst a barrage of samples before he's freed to rap the opening lines of "8-Ball" with the drums doubled-up on the BDP beat. After Easy explains he has the police on his drawls and a chilly forty-ouncer resting between his legs, the horns from "Second That Emotion" slot over the bumps with grainy analog bliss, and Smokey sings about the sweet kisses of a one-night stand, his voice dripping honey-sweet pathos while Syl Johnson moans and a woman giggles, call-and-response style, on the libido-satisfying opening break to "Different Strokes."

The year is probably 1988. The place is undoubtedly Compton, California. In a studio, maybe even a bedroom or living room, DJ Tony A "The Wizard" (N.W.A.'s forgotten member, their "fifth Beatle"), is catching wreck on two turntables, recording his auditory concoctions into a multi-track tape recorder. Is he aware he's in the process of creating one of the greatest music collages in human history?

"Yo, hold up, money grip! Get off that bullshucks…"

Nah, just cool it and listen here.

From hip-hop's infancy, cool summer evenings in New York City parks where DJs mixed everything from *Sesame Street* records to James Brown so long as there was a hot drum break pressed into the grooves, the genre was rooted in eclectic taste. *Rolling Stone* can re-rank the 100 greatest hip-hop songs of all-time till Snoop's final mic-drop blows a fissure through the earth and triggers armageddon, but they're misleading the unknowing masses into thinking these are the best and most representative recorded moments of the genre's history. The essence of hip-hop, not only as music but as a culture, is embedded in its most important art form: the multi-track megamix.

The megamix is a variegated mural, flashes of color – neon pink, chartreuse, head-gash red – popping off chipped concrete, an amalgamation of flavor so fresh it strains the vision, so vivid it glows. Don't touch the paint, it's radioactive.

A megamix isn't monochromatic artwork. The late-night bomber responsible for this mural is not packing a color scheme and working with variations of tone. He's grabbing every color he can fit in the over-the-shoulder sling bag. His style is somewhere between artfully selective and haphazard. The result is stimulus overload, too much to take in. So much style that it's wasted, to quote Stephen Malkmus. Except style is never wasted. It forces the audience to look closer, listen closer.

I won't try to pinpoint where it all started. I wasn't there way back when. I'm just a fan, a white suburban kid who took to turntablism in the 21st Century at age fourteen. Most of my knowledge of DJing came from watching Youtube videos. Expansion of my

record collection was limited to whatever recently-abandoned rap twelve-inches the local record store within biking distance stocked in the used bin that week. But hip-hop is about mythology, and suburban kids who fall in love with the culture have really fallen in love with its myths and legends. All we have out here is a notion that the world transmitting these fresh sounds to our Cape Cods might actually exist somewhere out there.

So I'll start with the most legendary megamix of all-time, "The Adventures of Grandmaster Flash on the Wheels of Steel," which was at least the first popular recorded blueprint for how to get busy on the ones and twos.

"You say one for the trouble / Two for the time / C'mon, girls / Let's rock that…" But where'd Spoonie Gee go? Instead we get Debbie Harry rapping with her suave, natter-in-your-ear-at-a-party delivery that "Flash is back / Flash is cool" before Spoonie gives the countdown one more time and the break to Chic's "Good Times" explodes in. That's four jams dropped in thirty seconds using three turntables.

As a teenager stuck off the realness of early-90's jazz-inflected boom-bap rap, who stupidly thought owning a Sugar Hill record was wack, I used to get home after cross country practice and slide my dad's colossal, dusted-up, Jurassic-era tape recorder on the floor in front of my speakers, plug mics into both the left and right channels, and record myself cutting records live. An offbeat chirp scratch, sluggish drums dragging overlapping beats into rhythmic disarray, a badly-pressed joint's volume too low in the mix; I was always fucking something up, rewinding the cassette, starting again. Until you reach that moment when you lose track of the pressure of recording a flawless mix, spinning straight-to-tape without an audience can be more stressful than spinning for a

mass of dumbfounded onlookers. At a party, you can direct the energy in the room. Alone in a basement, your mistake does not belong to a unique moment in time, but is a blip you can erase forever by simply taping over it, something that never happened if nobody heard or ever will hear it, and the pressure to eliminate each of these imperfections forces the DJ into an airtight space, a constraining force on creativity, the same reason some bands' first records sound tepid compared to live shows where they're loose and taking risks that could break into unforeseen moments of musical enlightenment (or, as Bob Ross would say, "We don't make mistakes, we have happy accidents").

Flash recorded "Adventures," a seven-minute display of finesse, close-listening, musical knowledge, and all-around turntable mastery, live in 1981 using equipment more primitive than my dad's tape recorder. He essentially invented the megamix in real time. No happy accidents. Listening to "Adventures" in 2018 can be a practice in pejorism. How can push-button DJs nowadays be so wack with such advanced technology? We replaced oversized tape decks and clunky mixers yet reverted to troglodytes without rhythm and in-the-moment confidence.

But I'm sounding like a cranky Luddite.

DJs started scooping up four-track recorders, adding overdubs to their mixes. Loaded tracks mostly clocking under ten minutes were pressed to twelve-inch singles, many of which weren't attributed to famous DJs. Check out Shadow 1's scratch-assault A.D.D. cut-and-paste masterpiece on Megga Records. Or the "Scratch Party Pyramid Mix" of drum-machine-laden early 80's classics from Yazoo to Herbie Hancock. Or the party-rockin "James Brown Mix" by Double Dee and Steinski. Or the New York Scratchmasters' glossy jams that melded bouncy, key-soaked r'n'b and pop tunes with

electro and nascent hip-hop. Hard to cop on vinyl today, these records serve as artifacts suggesting that in the early 80's the idea of a song belonging exclusively to a genre was a nonsensical notion.

In a 2010 Red Bull interview, Detroit house music maestro Moodymann (whose hair was being braided while he was giving the interview) said one of the most offhandedly profound statements I've ever heard regarding what hip-hop music is about: "We had two categories. We had that good shit and we had that other shit." One reason why the megamix is the quintessential hip-hop artwork is cause it's an exhaustive celebration of the variety of music that generated the genre.

A hip-hop record is a collage of sounds pilfered from old records, whether they be soul, funk, rock, krautrock, disco, new-wave, tribal percussion, sfx, comedy, calypso, reggae, jazz, blues. The megamix takes the songs created from samples and layers them together, along with other music, sometimes the original samples themselves, creating an effect kaleidoscopically multifaceted and meta. Let's put an acapella of Easy E, from his days of wearing the white horror-flick hockey mask and rapping cartoonishly about murdering innocent people in his neighborhood, over Buju Banton's reggae riddims and the dub of Just Ice's "Going Way Back." Or pitch down Big L's squeaky battle-rap delivery to a death-by-purple-drank chopped'n'screwed drawl and lace it on a sexy r'n'b groove worthy of a Sunday morning top-down cruise in church clothes.

Hell, let's stuff the rappers in the car (we'll make it the crimson Cadillac Escalade with butterfly doors that 50 Cent whips in the "How We Do" video – although word is it belongs to Shaq?) and see what happens. Dr. Dre rides passenger, banging out beats on his battery-powered MPC Renaissance. Kurtis Blow is jabbering to Mike D. of the

Beastie Boys about how to pick up fly girls at the roller rink, although Mike D. is already confident in his ability to do this and is just waiting to insult the man's mustache. Lauryn Hill tells MC Hammer he should reconsider the parachute pants. Nas is trying to read a paperback of Baldwin, but Lil Wayne keeps bowing him in the guts while polishing his pistol. Snoop is swigging a bottle of Remy at the wheel and swerving over the double yellow, hitting the three-wheel motion on the way to where exactly?

Critics might say the megamix goes nowhere. What's the destination? How do all these disparate sounds and voices amount to anything more than a colorful gimmick?

The answer is in how the pieces interact to form a collage displaying the breadth of the human musical soundscape. This is, of course, an unattainable goal. But the planet spins, styles shift, sounds evolve, trends flourish and die. As time progresses, the megamix inherits new possibilities. It can draw from so many disparate sources to prove everything is new under the sun, that there are infinite ways to rework the golden plates and detritus our junk-filled culture squeezes out of pressing plants, and that, regardless of the range of musical styles, it can all be enjoyed. That the only genre that matters really is the good shit, and can't everything be good shit?

Think of the megamix like the concept of the collective unconscious. We have all this music to choose from, mountains of vinyl records and thousands of hard-drives worth of Soundcloud and Bandcamp uploads, some of which can stand on their own and some of which need to be tweaked or presented in a different context to be appreciated. I have kept almost every shitty record I've ever picked up on a whim in a record store or in someone's trash left out on the curb. Why? Because a bad record is just a record that has yet to be mixed the right way, presented in a sonic context that works. Maybe it's as

simple as looping the bassline, scratching the kick drum, and layering it under the instrumental of a Bootsy Collins interplanetary funk jam. Maybe there's just three notes of ghostly piano melody worthy of saving the record from the scrap heap. But imagine the possibilities existent in our endless world of sound for those three notes.

DJ Shadow's *Entroducing*, the album that had people christening Shadow the Mozart of hip-hop, was a direct descendant of the megamix. Thousands of forgotten records culled from lord only knows what caverns of vinyl gloom were reworked through Josh Davis' sampler to create gorgeous compositions devoid of any regulating genre tag (the term "trip-hop" was wrongly thrown around, perhaps as a way to turn Portishead fans onto the record?), one of the select few LPs that is almost inherently "timeless."

On the b-side, you have Beck's *Odelay*, a masterwork of genre-bending, occasionally genre-smashing slacker anthems, an album that sounds like the product of an alternate universe of 1996. The record is pop art trash that would have made Warhol grin, an homage to the anything-goes aesthetic of hip-hop DJs, the tastemakers of a genre Beck found far more forward-thinking than the staid canon of rock n roll.

If you were to take Bradbury's time-travel machine back to 1981 and burn the studio that housed the recording of "The Adventures of Grandmaster Flash on the Wheels of Steel" to rubble, *Odelay* and *Entroducing* never come into existence.

Back to our scheduled program…

In the early 80's, hip-hop and disco had already begun to split. In gay clubs, disco would eventually transform into house and techno, while hip-hop exchanged the kangol for the beanie and got paid mad loot for turning up strapped to the studio in baggy sweats.

A complete divergence was never possible, but you'd be deemed wack for dropping a disco or electro-tinged rap joint after Run D.M.C.'s "Sucker M.C.'s" changed the game in 1984. The early 80's had great disco-themed megamixes, some highlights being the Big Apple Production mixes (Vol.1 features Bambaataa's "Planet Rock," The Clash's "Magnificent Seven," Madonna's "Everybody," and the Steve Miller Band's "Abracadabra" – *that* is hip-hop), the cheekily titled and unabashedly gay "Sportswear for the Flasher," and every mastermix the Latin rascals spliced together for 98.7 Kiss FM.

As boom-bap took over hip-hop in the 90's, long, drawn-out flow mixes overran the market, and megamixes were mostly relegated to the first five minutes of each side of a tape as initial attention-grabbers. Of course, it shouldn't surprise that perhaps the best longform multi-track mixes of the 90's came from none other than a teenage DJ Shadow, spinning for the Bay Area's hip-hop and r'n'b station, 106.1 KMEL, before he even owned a sampler. He had the stacks of raw hip-hop and obscure heat, the painstakingly honed turntable prowess, and the creativity to churn out overloaded mixes that came out hard, head-boppable, and mind-expanding all at once. The megamix as storytelling.

How can a mix tell a story? By offering an immersive study of the musical landscape of a specific time and place, allowing sounds and voices to blend and contrast each other in a way that (like the Shadow mixes, steeped in tape hiss and repping forgotten crankers of hip-hop yesteryear) essentially forms a period piece. The KMEL megamixes are dated like one of those time capsules you bury in the backyard and forget about for fifteen years before taking up the shovel and unearthing it in hopes you'll discover something profound about a world, and perhaps a self, you have in many ways forgotten. Why were Puma track suits so dope, and why did you stop rocking them?

Were folks really hip to Downtown Science in 1991? Well, Shadow was, and he thought you should be too. The story a megamix tells is colored not just by an era and place, but by the DJ twisting the knobs, flicking the faders, caressing the holy schallplatten. Shadow's four-track workouts present the listener with hip-hop circa '91 as directed by a nineteen-year-old white kid who probably didn't do much besides sit in his room and immerse himself in classic funk and soul tunes and golden-era rap bangers.

Which backspins us to Tony A in '88, breaking down and building back up the hottest sounds of his day for what would become the most flavor-crammed multi-track megamix of all time: *88 Boom 'N' Bass*.

If you had to beam up a sampler disc to outer space so that bug-eyed Martians could get down with exactly what this hip-hop stuff they keep picking up in rogue signals is all about, a worn copy of *88 Boom 'N' Bass* is all you'd have to send. Let it be hip-hop's Voyager selection.

Peep a sample. Less than five minutes in Tony drops MC Lyte's "10% Diss," a verbal onslaught against style-biters, then a snippet of Sweet Tee's cutesy flow, followed by Jazzy Jeff and the Fresh Prince's suburban crossover "Parents Just Don't Understand," Ice T's gangster-rap classic "Colors," and hip-hop's then-foremost poet Rakim. In terms of musical and lyrical content, *88 Boom 'N' Bass* is a jungle of contradictions. But so was hip-hop in 1988. Gangster-rap was beginning to take over the west coast, but the sounds of NYC were still hot in L.A., electro had yet to bleed out, and goofballs like Dana Dane and Biz Markie were getting props in the same world supporting radical voices like Public Enemy, KRS-One, and N.W.A. Hip-hop was in a transitional stage, somewhere between death-stare rep flaunting and Peace, Love, Unity, and Having Fun! Battery

Brain's *Action Pack Rap Attack*, another west-coast megamix from '88 that would have been sold at roadium swapmeets alongside Tony's tape, colors much of the same material from a more lighthearted, comedic lens than Tony's tougher take on the era. We have the music, but what matters is the presentation. The aural world of late-80's South-Central Los Angeles as presented through multi-track mixes offers the most thorough study of hip-hop's depths.

True mixmasters are few and far between today, but don't believe for a second that turntablists have given up on assembling globs of auditory tang into lush sound collages grounded in rhythm. Check out Pipomixes' *Beats, Headphones, & Coffee*, which blends laidback, low-end heavy future beats with classic rap flavors in a surprisingly melodic amalgamation. Or DJ Revolution's *Ultimate Revolution* mixes, which manage to sound reminiscent of old-school multi-track tapes while moving through trap beats and mainstream glitz rap. Or DJ Yoda's *How to Cut and Paste: 80's Edition*, representative of the genre of megamix that presents nostalgia the same way bros at a frat party present a guileless freshman with a never-ending bong session of especially potent jungle juice. Or even "mash-up artists" like Girl Talk, who disavows the label of DJ when that's exactly what he is. Software-to-control-vinyl programs like Traktor and Serato, along with mixers like the Rane Sixty-Eight and Pioneer DJM-900NXS2, have opened capabilities for DJs to produce multi-track mixes live, as J. Rocc demonstrated with his four-turntable set at the 2011 NAMM conference.

In other words, don't call it a comeback. We've been here for years. Shit just went underground.

But it'll come back around. Cause all mixes aspire to be megamixes. No one (except for maybe raver kids tripped-out on blotters and strobe juice, who should reevaluate their life decisions) wants to sit around and listen to a five-hour techno set where the DJ drops maybe twenty tracks and stands around sipping martinis and fiddling with volume knobs when he wants to look cool. Nah, son. People want to hear a DJ get busy, mixing the crowd's favorite joints in combinations they never thought possible. When I'm playing out, elevated in the booth above a horde of hoodie-rockin heads (or, as usually happens, a couple of my dweeby friends in button-down tees and narrow-cut jeans sipping Pabst Blue Ribbon on a desolate dancefloor), do you know what I wish for? I wish I had eight arms, like that red octopus on the front jacket cover of *Ultimate Breaks and Beats Vol. 14*, rocking the cyclops sunshades, cutting slabs on both decks, working the boxy throwback mixing unit and shouting over the mic. Give me a hot mess over a flawless set any day.

And if it doesn't come back around? If lazy push-button DJs win the day and jam-packed flavor shots sink to the nether regions in a sea of banality and all-around wackness? We erect museums. Cause what other form of popular music produces collage-style works on par with what modernists of the visual art world began experimenting with in the early 20th Century? Music is still catching up, and the megamix has been at the forefront for decades. Picasso and Rauschenberg would dig it. Emerson would dig it. The megamix is an auditory embodiment of the oversoul, years of human progress compiled and reworked to perfection, the zenith of what we have to offer.

But I'm rambling here.

I've been typing away at this shit for too long. The die-cast aluminum platters on my turntables are starting to rust. I can feel my wrists weakening. Time to hop back in the mix. If anyone has a Tascam Portastudio they're planning on throwing out, send it my way. I'll be up in my lab assembling.

APPROXIMATION OF URBAN HEAT

What we're gonna do right here is go back, way back, back into time when I was a squirrelly dweeb with moppy blonde hair, age fourteen, on my first-ever trip to the record store. There I was studying a twelve-inch cover jacket, a colorful urban panorama drawn in wildstyle graffiti depicting cartoon figures resembling nimble breakdancers contorted between navy-blue skyscrapers and the words "Zero One" in beefy white bubble letters, all set against a buttery yellow backdrop like the flare of a thousand headlights. A face wearing oversized lenses glinting in the city lights looked up at me, urging me to buy this record. And I did.

Next morning, holed up in my unfinished basement, I slid the record out of the sleeve, placed it on the slipmat, and carefully set the needle down. For the first time, I heard the preemptive crackle of dead wax on the vinyl's outer rim. Slabs of sunlight shone through the glass block windows onto piles of junk cluttering the outskirts of the concrete floor. The stylus dipped into the first groove. Propulsive electronic drums pumped out the miniature speakerboxes I'd borrowed from a neighborhood friend. The fast-paced rhythms, whining synthesizers, and primitive scratches from Mastermind Herbie colored a world where b-boy crews got down over electro jams spun by technical wizards catching wreck on the wheels of steel. My imagination exploded. Paul Hardcastle and Universal Funk's *Zero One* exemplified the energy of hip-hop culture I was drawn to.

I reached out and stopped the record with my hand while the platter continued to spin. I moved it back and forth, creating basic baby scratches. I didn't focus on a certain snare or kick or sound effect, just clumsily slid the record back and forth, enthralled by the sounds I was making. In that moment, I might as well have been Grandwizzard Theodore poised in front of his turntables thirty years prior, scratching for a crowd of party-goers sweating out a hot summer night in the Bronx. This mysterious force called hip-hop was now an obsession. I was doused in the essence of it all.

What's the essence? For me, it's Kool DJ Herc cruising the South Bronx in his white Cadillac, top down, mammoth rectangular speakers popping up to the polluted sky. It's Run's friend asking him to say some MC rhymes, which leads to Run scrunched in a classroom chair-desk, taking the test to become an MC, eventually under-handing the scribbled-to-all-hell paper into the aluminum trash can and spitting a freestyle to the proctor, Larry Smith, who, upon Run catching his breath, looks back at the members of Orange Krush, who're chilling against the blackboard, and says, "D, for Def." It's Fab Five Freddy, rocking the fedora again, dragging on a cigarette on the set of *TV Party*, the technicolor splendor of *Yo MTV Raps!* suspended half a decade into the future, not even a fly in his perpetual sunshades. It's those girls in Charlie Ahearn's *Wildstyle* chatting behind the chain-link fence of the court where the Fantastic Freaks and Cold Crush Brothers are about to start a rap-battle-cum-basketball throwdown: "Here they come!" "See, I told ya'll." "Oh, that dude look too mean…"

It's James Brown.

The thing about fandom is you don't have to be definitive. I aim to be distinctive, representing only my perspective. Not a historian, but a disciple of the boom-boom-bap.

Unless all historians are fans and all fans are historians in their own right, which is to say it's impossible for myself or even the most unbiased, blisteringly factual academic-style archivist, to delineate between the essence of hip-hop from a panned-out textbook perspective and what it means, personally, to each of us.

You collect all these sounds and styles that fad and fade into the burnt-out crabgrass and break back up through the pavement and filter them through an MPC and boof! Everything is hip-hop. Just change out the lens, is all. I learned of so much disparate music through hip-hop, as hip-hop. The multiplicity of the genre invites this, a sound (a movement, really) that mutates, reshapes itself into new flavors formed from old cells and continues to go by the same name, stretching its means and meaning, an alternative formed without the stone tablet term, label, tag, all-encompassing (see: definitive; see: limiting or misleading) word-for-the-new-thing that invariably attempts to remain something impossible to pigeonhole with a hyphenated, loaded designation, as if to say, "I choose to remain 'other' and retain myself." And yet, hip-hop exists as a term, and it defines, for many (including my grandma, Millie), a youth subculture spawning overproduced pop spittle obsessed with violence, drugs, misogyny, and electronic sixteenth-note trap drums. And that's not wrong, even for a movement that once boasted the motto of Peace, Love, Unity, and Having Fun. But it's a misdirection, a lie through omission, a microscopic close-up of a splotch of paint splintering off a mural splashed on concrete in the midsummer heat sold as an establishing shot. Which I suppose is all we can do, each of us, to get at the truth of anything we love. Why we love it.

What's the essence (to me)?

Before my parents bought me the Numark Battle-Pak for Christmas, a Happy Meal-quality starter DJ package consisting of two motor-drive turntables, a mixer, and a pair of headphones, my knowledge of hip-hop was limited to the soundtrack of NBA Street Vol. 2, a CD of A Tribe Called Quest's greatest hits that a friend's older brother never returned to the public library, and "Where It's At" by Beck. If that doesn't spell out WHITE BOY, I'm not sure what does. I lived in the burbs, and still do. Harlem brownstones were fantasies to me, like that night I dreamt I was walking through my neighborhood under the tangerine smolder of twilight and realized Dominic Drive had transformed from spacious, well-trimmed lawns and cream-sided, two-story Colonials into a jumble of tenements and brick highrises bombed in graffiti, a real-world manifestation of the cover drawing of *People's Instinctive Travels and Paths of Rhythm* overtaking Woodhaven.

My buds around the way played N.W.A., preferring c-notes and shootouts to the blue-note jostle and Afrocentrism of A Tribe Called Quest. As pubescent boys on a warpath only against the boredom that resulted from the comforts of our environment, their lite fandom for pulp-mag raps made more sense than me devoting hours to subterranean scratch sessions and saturating my ears in music made by and for someone else. Except this wasn't a phase. I felt that the slap, crackle, and snap of the snare drum, the rhymes about ill Adidas, beatbox prowess, and raising the roof, were meant for me, just maybe a part of me I hadn't discovered yet. Culturally, place-and-time speaking, hip-hop was foreign. Spiritually, it felt like home.

For years I immersed myself in rap, electro, funk, and soul twelve-inches from used bins, branching out to techno, disco, and house. I had no experience with the culture

beyond my basement. The music colored my vision of the hip-hop world in a way similar to what Lord Finesse describes in an episode of Crate Diggers: “I just feel like I was here before. The groove just takes me there. You ever just hear a record and you can just picture the ghetto, you can picture all the things from that era by hearing the music. And that’s what music does for me sometimes.”

I was certain that to explore hip-hop music was to discover a world outside of suburbia in which art and life were inseparable.

I worked on scratch techniques, hunched over a sturdy wooden table splashed with polychromatic swirls of dried paint. I strengthened my wrists practicing scribbles, flares, chirps, and stabs. Sometimes friends would sit around and breathe in the particulate-charged basement air, watching as I practiced my cuts and became immersed beyond the point of holding conversation.

I ignored the urge to give myself a fly DJ moniker, rightfully believing a DJ should be christened by his posse. Then, during my sophomore year of high school, a group of us went to Laser Quest for a friend’s birthday and I couldn’t think up with a cool battle tag on the spot, so I made the mistake of letting the teenagers behind the front desk choose. They smiled at each other like, “Yes, finally.” Since that day, I am forever known as DJ Disco Pony. I’ve since shortened it to Disco P, to retain some semblance of imaginary street-cred, but the posse is ruthlessly consistent in reminding me of my origins.

I started mixing once I collected a few more records, learning to match bpms and backspin smoothly. Youtube videos helped me study Roc Raida’s flashy battle routines, Q-Bert’s deft scratch moves, and J. Rocc’s buttery trick-mixing. I copped doubles and

marked the labels with stickers for backspinning cues. I'd cut up instrumentals, moving my hands furiously, struggling to drop the needle on the exact groove I wanted. I made futile attempts at beat juggling and even practiced some behind-the-back moves. I scratched twelve-inch singles until my crossfader snapped off. From there, I had to start cutting with the phono/line switch, not yet realizing this was a method of "transformer scratching" (yes, named after the sounds made by violent robot soldier cars in the televised cartoon series I grew up watching) that countless DJs had already utilized.

The essence expanded.

It was Tribe's pitched-down, thinned-out sample of those keys from the twelve-inch version of "Pull Up to the Bumper" reworked into the sound of peppermint fluorescence glowing over the quietest late-night hour in the city, after all the clubs have closed and it's just you and the crew riding around, passing a spliff mid-lethargic cipher. It was Melvin Bliss crooning to the moon over a graveyard shift piano and those spanking drums I'd heard on so many joints, the most gorgeous soul ballad about the imminent takeover of artificial intelligence. Lauryn Hill harmonies. Footwork and headspins. Gold chains and grills. The doodle of a melting skyline on the center label of an *Ultimate Breaks and Beats* slab. Debbie Harry rapping about eating Cadillacs, Lincolns too / Mercurys and Subarus / nonstop, to the punk-rock. Eazy E on the Arsenio Hall Show in a straitjacket, Raiders beanie, and hockey mask, twirling a blade in his gloved hands and answering all of Arsenio's questions through whispers into MC Ren's ear. The producer of "Good Times" walking by a house party emanating the freshly-released "Rapper's Delight," thinking, What the hell? The sawdust-like aroma of a yellowing inner-sleeve. Queen Latifah berating a wack DJ in *Juice*. Jean-Michel

Basquiat, Lynn Collins, Gil Scott-Heron. A scuffed copy of The JB's "Monaurail," the song that would be playing through my headphones if I was dropped in a Philadelphia train yard under moonlight with a bulging sling bag of Rust-Oleum cans, tagging a masterpiece.

As I entered my twenties, I started uncovering more of hip-hop's mysteries, setting out on my bike for a record store over ten miles from the crib. I'd hang out for hours with the owner, a guy named Forrest who was old enough to be my dad but was at least five times cooler than me because he had a respectable, crew-dubbed nickname: Forrest Getemgump. Forrest grew up in New York in the 80's and was a member of the Rocksteady Crew, possibly the most well-respected b-boy posse of all time. He spun on his head all around the world, for cash. He was also a DJ and record fanatic, turning me on to all kinds of breakbeats hidden in records I might otherwise have never picked up. He was the first person I'd ever met whose life had been enmeshed in hip-hop culture the way I hoped mine might one day be. I picked his brain for hours, slowly flipping through every crate in the store, prodding him to share stories of the New York City I'd been trying to shade into focus all these years by mixing through my record collection.

One day I showed up to the shop with a travel bag of vinyl strapped across my shoulder. Could I maybe spin some records on his gorgeous Technics 1200 turntables? I'd never even touched a pair before. He said sure, then did a double-take as I gashed apart the opening groove to "Hollywood Swinging," my best routine. By the time I blended into Central Line's "Walking into Sunshine," he was impressed enough to invite me to his next gig.

I stood on an elevated stage above a checkered floor enclosed by a wrap-around mirror and red pleather bench seating. The backstage rooms were undeniably renovated from private stripper booths. The Vortex concert club was located in Akron's dissipating strip club district and wasn't even trying to hide its past life. The sign out front read that, tonight only, Sadat X of Brand Nubian and Psycho Les from the Beatnuts, both premier 90's hardcore rap groups, were performing. I was the opener before the opener, one of three DJs, only there because Forrest convinced the well-dressed guy running the gig that I could catch wreck. And probably because barely anyone was showing up three hours before the show anyway.

When I cued up doubles of "My World Premier" for some beat-juggling and acapella blending, there was one guy on the dancefloor. He was dressed straight from an episode of *Yo MTV Raps!* He rocked baggy sweats and a beanie and head-nodded so hard his upper back muscles must have felt it. I do not think I am misremembering the detail that he was wearing a backpack. My fingers trembled as I set the needle on "Award Tour." A few couples started to mosey in. They were dressed for a nice evening out and sat calmly on the benches, offering subtle head bops. I blended Tribe in with the smooveness, and Beanie Guy went apeshit.

I don't aim to be definitive when I babble on about this rap stuff, though I'd like to be immersive.

But immersion has its limits.

I'm beginning to feel like the narrator in Donald Barthelme's short story "The Film," a man who wants the movie he's making to somehow be about everything ("The

wild ass is in danger in Ethiopia – we've got nothing on that. We've got nothing on intellectual elitism funded out of public money, an important subject…."). When am I going to drop an authoritative quote from Jeff Chang's *Can't Stop Won't Stop*? How do I explain the way Q-Bert's "Razorblade Alcohol Slide" frayed my brain wires and left a plume of smoke fuming from my skull? And where do I put it? At what point do I let the Rocksteady Crew break out the cardboard and get on down? What about the Stretch and Bobbito show? That's got to go in here somewhere. Will my omissions refine the focus or leave readers baffled?

This essay is a misdirection, but I knew that all along.

What matters more than trying to pinpoint what I believe to be the essence of hip-hop are the ways in which I've given myself up to it.

As a teen, I used to mow Grandma Millie's yard for twenty bucks a job (She overpaid, sweetheart she is). I'd stuff the cash in my shorts, jump on mom's bicycle, and pedal four-and-a-half miles to Square Records, hopping off to trudge up the massive hill on Memorial Parkway. I'm talking *massive,* with broken bottles and shit littering the grass on the side of the road, cars flying by, the passengers probably glancing over and thinking, "That kid might pass out."

In my memory, it's always midday, bare skies, scorching sun. I'd sweat through my kicks. My calf muscles burned. One time I got lost on the way home and had to carry the roadbike through a series of wooded trails. Didn't matter. All was right with the planet when I came back with a twelve-inch single stashed under my armpit.

The essence of it all is in that moment when I brought home doubles of "Monaurail." I was so stoked. In the basement, I gave each record a quick swipe with my

pink microfiber cloth and set one on each platter. I wrapped the crossfader in my fingers, letting it glide smoothly from side to side. I spun each copy backwards, lining up the downbeat before scratching it in. James and his bandmates shouted over the drums, rhythm guitars, bubble-pop organs, haunting horns. So much soul. My hands shifted back and forth with finesse under the dim glow of bare lightbulbs. I let all thoughts disappear and became locked into the groove, alone in my basement, concentrating only on breaking it down on the ones and twos.

SNOOP

He creeps through the smog. He teaches us to spell and advocates the usage of unconventional suffixes. Women braid his hair on stoops in Compton or in wicker chairs overlooking the coast of Rio de Janeiro. He pours cognac in his mashed potatoes when he cooks with Martha Stewart. He rides on the handlebars of his homeboys' bicycles. He could actually buy my entire city bicycles. His music career has spanned over twenty years in a genre that spits you out in seven, if you're *great*.[1] The Doggfather is great, but I will not pay money to watch him perform, because I don't have to.

We walk through parking lots, watching couples stumble back to their cars crying and bitching at each other. An ambulance blares past on its route to the entrance. I'm with neighborhood friends J-Dizzle and B-Rizzle.[2] J wears glasses with shade lenses clipped over his prescription ones, even though the sun set an hour ago. B is sipping from a flask of Jack. Muffled percussive blasts can be heard through the trees. We are searching for a dumpster in Lot A.

It's the end of summer and the D-O-G-G is in town with Wiz Khalifa. They're playing an outdoor concert venue about three miles from my house in the suburbs of

[1] In an interview with The Source, hip-hop golden-era rap virtuoso Rakim compared the career of a rapper to that of an NFL halfback: "You got about seven years, then it's a wrap."
[2] These may not be birth names.

northeast Ohio.[3] Less than an hour ago, our posse decided there is nowhere else we can be tonight other than the Snoop concert. This is an easy last-minute choice when you know about the hole in the fence. I haven't paid for a Blossom show since seventh grade, and I'm twenty-three.

We spot the dumpster, which signifies where to start our hike through the venue's surrounding woods. We dart into a ravine. The burnt-orange glow from parking lot lightpoles fades to near-darkness, a foggy half-light, almost grey, then black. At the bottom of the ravine is a creek. I soak my feet trying to cross and bend over to mourn my kicks.

Looking back up, my eyes adjust, and I spot B-Rizzle pushing through weeds that are damn-near ten feet high.

But what happened to J?

"J-Dizzle? Where'd you go, J-Dizzle?"

My first encounter with Snoop was listening to Wicked Mix 30, one of those twelve-inch records that collects urban club/mixtape-worthy hits from various artists on a single vinyl slab with extended intros and outros for squeaky-clean mixability. At the time, I was a shaggy-haired white boy who loved hip-hop and spun records in my basement.[4] This record included "Who Am I? (What's My Name?)" with a labeled bpm[5] of ninety-six. The joint samples George Clinton and animatronic gangsters who can

[3] Blossom Music Center has a covered pavilion that seats 5,700 and a lawn that can pack in another 13,500. By this late into the season the lawn is mostly unsittable, with crowds circling mudcake smears that, if your sneakers or boots or bare feet step in one, it's impossible to not flop on your ass.
[4] Nothing has changed, except now I have to shave my neck hair.
[5] "Beats per minute."

morph into dogs. That second part is true; watch the music video. Snoop transforms into a Doberman Pinscher in what should be the opening segment of the most gangstafied *X-Files* episode ever.[6]

The video, which was probably many Americans' introduction to a G who's become omnipresent in pop culture, is an accurate metaphor for Snoop's career. Snoop changes his image – from man to beast – but remains himself. He's always the Dogg. He doesn't loathe his transformation like Dr. Jekyll bursting into Mr. Hyde. He just becomes an alternate physical manifestation of the same gangster.

Snoop's evolved from Snoop Doggy Dogg to the abridged Snoop Dogg, to a short stint as Snoop Lion, then Snoopzilla, then went back to Snoop Dogg, although we all knew him as that anyways. He rapped over Dr. Dre's densely-concocted, slow-cruise G-Funk grooves, heavy on whining keyboard melodies and bass-boosted funk breaks, and the minimal Neptunes-produced "Drop It Like It's Hot," all 21st Century electronic pops and snaps melded with tongue clicks for drums.

His videos tell it too. Have you watched the one for "Sensual Seduction?" It opens with a barely-visible Snoop sporting a white tuxedo and playing keytar on an excessively smoky stage. Oh, the graininess! Then he flies through retro-space with beautiful women on floating beds and UFOs. The whole thing is endearingly cheeky and may have been filmed on a Super-8. Compare this to the crispy-clear video for "Beautiful," in which Snoop falls for a famous supermodel on the cobbled streets of Brazil in Michael Bay-like hyper-quality. It's all the same Dogg.

[6] "Mulder, your theory that local distributors of Bud Ice, Colt 45, and Mad Dog 20/20 are receiving beverages spiked with some sort of alien shape-shifting potion released by a covert government agency is beyond implausible."

We lost J-Dizzle. Like within thirty seconds of entering the woods. Maybe he sprinted in still wearing those stupid sunglass clip-ons.

B-Rizzle and I trek through the bramble, guided by dim cell-phone beacons and mechanized drum beats from afar. The woods are pitch black, darker than the black on a Raiders jersey.[7]

"I'm too drunk for this right now," B-Rizzle says.

Reverberating off the walls of the parabola-shaped amphitheater somewhere in the distance is the familiar opening bassline of "Gin & Juice," blasting its way to B-Rizzle and I as we stumble through the national-park-grade flora.

Channeling Indiana Jones, I leap across a chasm and land on a sharply slanted hillside formed entirely of moist lawnmower clippings, sinking down past my ankles. There's a wooden security post maybe fifteen feet up the hill. We crouch, creep, and I feel like a burglar. Snoop starts rapping over the instrumental to "Juicy."[8] He says, "If ya'll like that, you gonna love this," and the DJ drops "Gangsta Party."

After spinning "Who Am I? (What's My Name?)" for months in my unfinished basement, memorizing the chorus drops, lining up the drums with other boom-bap classics of similar tempo, I became infatuated with Snoop Dogg in the same odd way many white, suburban, middle-class teenage males become infatuated with brash,

[7] In the 1980's and early 90's, when the Raiders football franchise was based in Los Angeles, their black and grey uniforms were popular streetwear for gang-affiliates and anyone who wanted to look hard in the capital of gangster-rap, G-Funk, Bloods, Crips, and drive-thru funeral homes.
[8] If you don't know, you'd better ask somebody.

machoistic raps stars who inhabit worlds far different from their own in terms of socioeconomic status, cultural norms, and geography.

Bakari Kitwana, in his book *Why White Kids Love Hip Hop*, traces the roots of the gangster-rap adoration of suburbanites like me to how hip-hop was presented in the mid-80's and early 90's as both an alternative music choice and political statement, much like punk-rock, that appealed to kids who felt alienated by mainstream American culture. I can get down with that, but I think it goes deeper. Overstated debonair is a quality ingrained in hip-hop's lifeblood, a consequence of the genre's competitive foundation. As a fifteen-year-old practicing to become a 21st Century turntablist, I spent hours in my basement perfecting baby scratches and flicking the crossfader on my cheapo Numark mixer till it snapped. I couldn't just be good. I had to be *fresh*. By trying to teach myself flashy tricks on the decks, I embraced hip-hop's obsession with flaunting one's style in a world that equates style with identity. Gangster rappers take this attitude to its outer-limits, willing to kill to keep their rep, modern-day outlaws (or so fifteen-year-old Kyle would like to think; nobody try to tell him these guys are playing composite characters on their records), possible cultural descendants of American cowboys, for all I knew. What early-adolescent boy doesn't find that cool?

We find the homie J-Dizzle. He found a new homie in the forest. The new homie is a nondescript dude in a hoodie who doesn't speak. The gang approaches the hole in the fence, which is conveniently located in a shaded corner behind some buildings, a popular spot for people who need to piss. The move is to unzip the fly and pretend-urinate as soon as you land on the other side.

Not tonight. The hole has been looped shut with metal wire. We yank it. No dice.

A spotlight appears.

My friends hop into the woods and I duck behind a tree. The light is approaching now, closing in. I see a figure straight ahead, closer than the light, dashing towards me. I try to slide down the hill, but dried leaves rustle under my feet. So loud. So fucking *loud*. I can't move. The figure is almost here, arms flailing, sort of stumbling now.

It's a drunk girl. She stops a few feet from my tree, strips her pants, and squats to pee. I wince and turn away. The spotlight stops short, backs off.

Snoop resembles a dog. This is axiom. It's the slender face, and maybe something with the cheekbones. You say Doberman, I say Greyhound.

The voice is liquid Parkay. He deserves to narrate the greatest blaxploitation film not yet made. Whoever cannot appreciate Snoop Dogg's voice is likely also ignorant to the appreciation of natural beauty, how some humans are born gorgeous, with faces deserving of stone sculptures and museum floor-space. Snoop was given a dope voice. We can preserve it, but we cannot replicate it. We certainly can't imitate it, or endeavor to attain Dogg-esque inflections the way we sculpt our bodies through hard work and repetition into fitter, rippled versions of ourselves. We can lean back and adore, is all. Snoop would prefer we lean back with some Henny, or maybe a joint.

The clique makes a rendezvous. We walk along the fence, spotting multiple gaps that have been sneak-proofed. Snoop is dropping knowledge and promoting marijuana consumption less than a quarter mile away. No one suggests going home.

I fail to slide through a locked gate. I try crawling under the fence through a shallow gap, the skin on my neck almost pressing barbed wire. I try digging a hole with my bare claws. I clamber up the fence but slip back down.

More spotlights. A shout in our direction. A security guard in yellow uniform runs at us. Shit! Five-O!

Back down the hill. I lose my footing, fall on my chest, grip a twig. The twig gives. I grip a root. The root gives. I slide down lubricant mud, forehead scraping leaves, weeds, undergrowth, hoping I don't bash my head on a rock and pass out in a creek and wake up with a bloody scalp and a purple goose egg protruding from my hairline in a dizzy flash of whirling trees all kaleidoscopic like some shit from a psychedelic rock video.

I once partook in a heated discussion on the merits of hip-hop with my eighty-five-year-old grandmother. She denounced the violence and misogyny of the genre. I explained that, although this baggage is now ingrained in the international phenomenon, it isn't all like that. Her main beef was with gangster rap. I said that gangster rap can be great too, and that greatness within this sub-genre is achieved because of, and not despite, the raw, unrestrained delivery and atrocious subject matter of the music.[9] She demurred. However, there was one rapper she really liked, but she couldn't remember his name.

"He smokes weed a lot," she said. "Smoking weed is his thing."

[9] In one of the gazillion hip-hop documentaries/interview sessions vaulted in Youtube, Chuck D from Public Enemy compares a successful gangster rap album to a pulp narrative. He's right. They both explore sordid worlds, aim for shock-effect, etc. Chuck D should call up Grandma Millie.

This is possibly the most shocking and nonspecific thing I have ever heard my grandma say. Who raps and smokes weed? *Everybody*. Even the ones who say they don't smoke weed.[10]

"Oh, I know!" she finally said. "Snoop Dogg!"

Grandma Millie had caught Snoop on Martha Stewart's cooking show, and probably one of those talk-show programs she loves. She found him funny, sort of charming. She is not alone. The other day, a friend told me how much she loves Snoop because, well, he's just Snoop! Snoop is himself and, therefore, he is loveable. That's the equation.

But then what do you do with Snoop the murder-hungry gangster? Snoop's debut rap, "Deep Cover," is about killing police officers. What about Snoop the pimp? In a 2006 *Rolling Stone* profile, Snoop discussed his two-year career as a professional pimp. He said this to a journalist: "If you really a pimp, you should be able to get two bitches to walk on a leash with you down the red carpet and be yo hoes for the night." He starred as a pimp in a pornographic film. His first album was *Doggystyle*, a title so blatantly provocative that my grandma can't fathom its meaning.[11] Would Millie still adore Snoop after learning this? Something tells me she would.

As our gangster rappers approach middle-age, the American entertainment industry has begun offering them roles that color them as sentient human beings. Ice Cube rapped about killing cops back in 1988 and went on to star in *Are We There Yet?* in 2001. By 2014 he was hugging Elmo in an episode of *Sesame Street*. Cube is probably a

[10] I'm thinking of a certain producer/rapper who said, "Yo, I don't smoke weed or sess," and then went on to title an album *The Chronic*.
[11] Or at least I'd like to think so.

great dude, even if he looks pissed all the time and raps about beating people up in jail. Snoop also seems like a down-to-earth G. Watch the interviews. He's friendly and laid-back. It's easy to love him, and other ex-malefactors, when they are placed on the big screen as celebrities known for provocation and end up presenting themselves as perfectly congenial people.

I am caked in slop. My shoes are water-logged. My face is grimy and I've sweat through my mud-smeared *Abbey Road* t-shirt. I have ascended the hill with the help of B-Rizzle, who reached a hand down to my struggling ass and pulled me up and then somehow disappeared, almost instantly, it seems.

My friends are gone. Spirits are low. It's close to ten. Blossom shows end at eleven. It's some stipulation only Jimmy Buffet has been known to break. Wiz is rapping and I don't want to hear him. I don't even want to hear Snoop all that much. I'd rather meet him and promptly leave to dream about the moment over and over again in my whitewashed, Colonial Revival home.

Who am I kidding? I'd burst into tears if "Drop It like It's Hot" came on right now. No way I get in before he plays it. No way I'll even get in.

Then it's at my feet: a groove in the earth channeled under the fence. No barbed wire. A heaven-send from some medallion-wearing, syrup-sipping, Timberland-repping angel above.

I yell for the homies, drop to my chest, and do the army thing.

In middle school, my friends and I used to trick-out each other's Myspace profiles. For awhile, one kid had an ultra-fresh, Snoop-themed homepage, anchored by a blown-up image of Snoop leaning against a yellow-painted lowrider.[12] He is rocking a doo-rag and holding two pit bulls on a leash. This is the same man who would later rap on "California Girls" by Katy Perry. You could not have convinced me of it then.

But Snoop's no sellout. That's not what I'm getting at. *Coolaid* and *Neva Left*, his albums from the past few years, prove his skills on the mic are as unique to him as they were in 94, though today he's rapping over glossy software beats.[13] He's the same old Snoop over these new kids' beats. Versatile, but dousing his unique malt-beverage-thick flavor on every track. From this vantage, Snoop is similar to Beck, that pop-art chameleon who stamps is signature sound on everything from Prince-esque funk to beige acoustic folk to rap-rock, but leaves it all sounding like music only he could solder together. I've always adored this quality in musicians, how an audible personality stays intact while navigating the musical spectrum. Snoop doesn't bop too far from the rap world, but he's executing the same idea in a tighter gamut. Tally this up as another reason why I dig Snoop, and then chisel it down to this: he's timeless.

We all sneak inside.[14]

Snoop raps "Drop It like It's Hot."

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[12] You don't even have to ask about the rims.

[13] "Super Crip," the single to 2016's *Coolaid*, glides over a synth melody nearly identical to the keys on Iggy Azalea's pop anthem "Fancy," the one about being a bad bitch in pricey clothes and getting drunk at the mini-bar. I can't help but think of the Iggy song when I'm listening to "Super Crip." The production inhabits the same sonic palette as all of today's KISS-FM bubble-pop.

[14] Except for hoodie kid. Not sure what happened to him. It also took half an hour for J-Dizzle to crawl out from the woods. He ended up at the bottom of the ravine and became captivated by the tranquil atmosphere down there, so he sat on a log and smoked *an entire joint* by himself and had a little nature moment before coming up to look for us.

I cry.[15]

There's too much Snoop to dissect. I've tried. He did the Rasta thing, a reincarnation we'd all like to forget, at least when viewed alongside the music subsequently released. People overlooked the *7 Days of Funk* album produced by Dam Funk, a throwback to the old-school Clinton-flavored funk Snoop grew up with. He wore flannel PJs in the "Gin & Juice" video and rocked an afro that rivaled that of Baby Huey.[16] He's also rocked cornrows, the double pig-tail, the pony-tail, the straightened shoulder-length flow, and always managed to look like a playa. He made a flop of a holiday record titled "Snoop Dogg Presents Christmas in tha Dogg House." He was acquitted on a murder charge with MTV taping in the court room. He is a dedicated father. He founded, and coached in, the Snoop Youth Football League. He had a reality show. He recreated himself, changed up his style, and somehow stayed the same. When he's finished rapping, he wants to open an ice cream parlor and call himself "Scoop Dog."

The show is over. Throngs of scrubby frat-boys with pronounced facial stubble, middle-school girls coated in mud up to their waists, and the occasional parental duo, here to provide rides and thwart any noticeable attempts at recreational drug use, coalesce into a big, loud mob that rides itself back to the parking nightmare. I lose my friends. I lose myself. I am nudged into a deserted lot I've never seen before. A few feet away, poorly concealed behind a tree, is a long, purple bus with hydraulics, oversized Dayton

[15] Psyche! This part is false.
[16] The late singer, not the cartoon duck.

rims, and a sparkling, crystal-like nugget of weed etched into the paint job. Entranced, I walk over and stare. The door opens and an outpouring of blueberry scented smoke reveals the Legend himself.

"Sup with yo' clothes, homie? Did you roll around in some doggy shizzle?"

I sort of cough.

"Here, take a swig of some yak-yak."

I oblige.

"So, how'd you like to come kick it with Tha Dogg Pound in the tour bus?"

Alright, this didn't happen. I left the show with J-Dizzle and B-Rizzle and trudged the half hour back to the parking lot. Then we waited in traffic for an hour-and-a-half before driving off. We leaned out the windows and discussed the possibility of introducing ourselves to the girls who kept pulling up next to us with their windows also rolled down. We didn't talk to any of them.

We are not playas.

Do you become smooth? Is it a process, something that *happens*? Was Snoop born with a playa's attitude, or did he develop his laid-back confidence over years spent sipping purple drank alone under blacklights in hazy, housing-project living rooms? You can grow up in poverty and become rich and glamorous. Countless rappers have taught us this. But can you achieve coolness, an inimitable flavor of self, or is it bestowed upon you from the moment of conception by that omnipresent OG up in the sky? I'd like to believe the Doggfather was once a pup getting noogies and serving gin & juice in party cups to the Crips and fur-cloaked pimps he aspired to be, who he would eventually

surpass in status and respect. I'm probably kidding myself, but it's satisfying to fabricate an origin story. Let's imagine Cordozar Calvin Broadus Jr. on his childhood couch, glass of non-alcoholic orange juice in hand, listening to the *Hustler's Convention* LP blaring through a spotty speaker system wired to a second-hand turntable. Something transpires in that room.

BOOMBOX = LIFE

"In the future, Mr. Johnson, you will leave your ghettoblaster at home." – Mrs. Sherwood, *Fame*

The thing about not having your license till age twenty-four is you have to accept rides wherever you can get them. On morning drives to high school, my buddy Steve would cruise seventy in a forty-five, on a sluggish day, his laptop strapped with bungie cord to the front console and the system's treble cranked to "Ear Pop." Just thinking back on it makes me want to reach for my Hearos ear plugs. (All you speaker-freaks should invest in some, too.) The Ford Exploder would roll through the lot bumping dated Ministry of Sound techno compilations, or Basement Jaxx bangers, a sparkly, Saturday-night club ambience combating dreary Monday morning anti-vibes. Steve'd click down the windows and crank the system louder, to "Apeshit," so all the listless teens sagging under their backpacks could hear. He was showing off, and though nobody seemed to notice, the grand entrance was exhilarating. We were cool, or at least we felt cool. But why?

I suppose the answer starts with 1950s Jamaican soundclash culture, a phenomenon diffused and evolved over decades, oceans, and social strata to affect suburban teenage white boys like us.

In 1950s Kingston (while letter sweater-clad American teens of my lineage were congesting local soda fountains after snowball dancing at the hop to suited rock-and-rollers covering Haley and Holly), competing DJs would erect speaker blocks, impressive Lego-like stacks of woofers and tweeters, in the muggy streets near enough each other to play American rhythm n' blues and jazz records and battle via decibels to win over the largest crowd.

Soundclash Kingston happened to be the birthplace of Clive Campbell, a.k.a. Kool DJ Herc, who emigrated with his family to the South Bronx and purportedly birthed the genre of hip-hop in the 1970s on a similar premise. Herc started DJing indoors. His first gig was in the recreation room of the 1520 Sedgewick Avenue highrise apartment building where he lived with his family (the occasion was his sister's back-to-school party, the first-ever "hip-hop" jam). He later transitioned to spinning records outdoors at neighborhood parks. Others imitated his parties, and so came about, for a period before hip-hop moved into the clubs and roller-skating rinks, urban America's version of the soundclash, an American progeny of the Jamaican OGs. Light poles became outlets for park-jam soundsystems. The winner of primitive hip-hop DJ battles was decided by who had the loudest speakers, not the most skill, just like in the early Kingston battles before the days of toasting, etc.

The most notorious mythological tale of park-jam soundclash beef was between Kool Herc and Afrika Bambaataa, in which Bam tried playing over Herc's system till Herc went full-kill and drowned him out completely. That was considered a diss, an embarrassment. Herc had showed superiority, domination, despite Bam's lauded collection of eclectic records. The taller your speaker tower, the more power you held. It

gets pretty easy, if you're into this, to analyze the phallic symbolism of rising speaker-towers and the "bigger is better" principle of soundclashes, which spills into the masculine stature hip-hop quickly developed, leading to the sexual prowess raps, emcees rhyming about stealing the girl of the presumed male audience listening to their record, and crowds at 90s DMC competitions and other technical DJ battles being pretty much entirely hoodie-wearing bros and an occasional girlfriend.

Early hip-hop jams could be considered reactions to the din of the Cross Bronx Expressway, which ran overtop and throughout the impoverished neighborhoods of the genre's origin. Hip-hop was generated in a struggle against, and was surely inspired by, the ever-present thundering of busy-city traffic and train whistles, a music deemed mere "noise" by critics, combating and assimilating itself into the clamor of the atmosphere that spawned it. The symbiosis of music and environment.

Then shit went portable. Hip-hop shows may have moved between walls, but the bombastic virtues of outdoor jams were carried into the 1980s by those who lugged around hunks of transistorized metal, blasting pre-recorded mixes from ghetto to ghetto / to backyard to yard. The boombox was a tool of expression, coloring of the concrete cityscape with rhythm the same way graffiti writers bombed out subway cars and disused buildings, the vibrancy of hip-hop reverberating off brick walls painted over with wildstyle tags, another pillar of the culture asserting art into its habitat.

The quintessential ghettoblaster was the JVC RC-M90, displayed on the cover of LL Cool J's *Radio* and the Beastie Boys' *Solid Gold Hits*. A silver rectangular block, sleek but sizeable, it looks as if the Beastie's scrawny asses would have had to pass it around whilst tromping the sidewalks, rubbing their sore biceps in between turns.

Kangol-rocking rapper LL Cool J wrote a love song to his radio, or really an anthem of dependence. Boombox = Life. This is how it was for Radio Raheem, Spike Lee's fictional boombox-toting character in *Do the Right Thing*. When Sal the pissed-off pizza shop owner kills Raheem's fucking radio, Raheem looks upon the shattered remains with a face of baffled despair, as if he'd come home to find grandma dead in her favorite chair and couldn't quite process the situation, in a state precursory to mourning. His rage, the subsequent beating he gives Sal, and the ensuing riot gets the cops called, and Raheem is killed in a nightstick chokehold, the death of his boombox quickly spelling his own death.

The boombox's first appearance in film, from what I could find, is a scene from *Fame* in which a peeved teacher berates some poor student in class for listening to his "ghettoblaster" (my all-time favorite slang term) through headphones. The most famous appearance is from *Say Anything*, in which John Cusack hoists his not-so-ghetto blaster to the sky and blares Peter Gabriel's "In Your Eyes" into his high-school love's window to wake her up and win her back. The box had come full circle, from urban artistic expression to the romantic gestures of suburban love bugs in a mainstream flick aimed at white audiences.

Portable musical expression is still present today, despite the waning of boomboxes. I catch people on my college campus bumping Beats pills on the way to class. Even some of those hoverboards (a technological disappointment when pitted against the *Back to the Future: Part 2* gadgets of the same name) have speakers that transmit mumble-rap and KISS-FM glitz-pop into the world. This past winter, Stones Throw label signee Koreatown Oddity heaved his ghettoblaster around random Los

Angeles locales to promote his album *Finna Be Past Tense*. One video posted on Stones Throw's Facebook page shows Koreatown, wearing his customary werewolf Halloween mask – nothing weird here – walking into a fast food establishment, setting his box down, and rapping into a mic over instrumentals while families munch uncomfortably on their food and ignore him. In another video, he's ushered out of a thrift store for the same shenanigans ("Spit a freestyle on the way out the thrift store / You want me to get out, but I want more / I wanna keep rapping, and I don't wanna stop / Security gone come up and maybe call the cops"), and another one shows him rhyming on a train car to mostly disinterested passengers. Similarly, Russian pop artist NV directed her video for "KATA" inside a train car. She brings a portable keyboard and monitor and sings into a headset mic to some highly-annoyed-looking elderly women, a guy reading, someone sleeping. Most people ignore her, don't even seem to notice, but she keeps singing. Shout-out to the sidewalk bongo drummers, riverfront accordion players, and front-stoop strummers out there: keep bringing it.

Of course, street performers are a whole different category from Kingston's soundclash descendants. I digress. The boombox wane really brought about vehicle blasters. Q-Tip got down with it ("Boom it in your, boom it in your, boom it in your Jeep / Or your Honda or your Beemer or your Legend or your Benz / The rave of the town to your foes and your friends"), as did Rodney O and Joe Cooley ("Got the street beat I know ya been waiting for / So just be careful cause it might crack your window / So when you're rolling, G, in your funky-fresh car /
Don't forget to play the humps for the boulevard"), all the way to J Dilla ("We bounce in them trucks with the beat in the back / Four big wheels with the TVs to match / And all

through my system, tweeters that knock / My truck set off alarms when it beat up yo block").

Speaker battles are alive and well in automobiles today. I worked two summers at an inner-city car wash, scrubbing rims and caking on tire shine to help pay for college. The vacuum lot got to sounding like a rap concert some days. Cats would pop the trunk and dial the speakers to "Apeshit," attempting to 1-up the SUV parked three feet away, the whole scene creating this menacing cacophony of ugly, home-recorded gangster rap. Too $hort, "Planet Rock," E40, Zapp and Roger, Rich Homie Kwon, "Cutie Pie"; we'd hear the jams, old-and-new school, pumping out trunks, rattling windows, devouring eardrums. Subwoofers vomited from bass overdose. Real tinnitus-triggering stuff. My friend Will would park his sedan around back, spread the doors, and bump Notorious B.I.G. classics while we wiped down cars. I'd turned him onto "Juicy" one day, and he returned to the wash in awe: "I was playing that shit at the gas station, and this girl pointed to me like, 'that's my shit!' and started dancing!" A regular popped his trunk and displayed to us his cabinet speaker with the exposed cone, which transmitted blasts so thick I'd swear the Jeep was nodding to the beat as it glided up the block. A friend of mine from the burbs once hooked a home-entertainment system into his ride and "bumped like a house party," but it produced toddler squeaks compared to these set-ups.

Now I can finally drive, and although I'm not into auditory-overload-induced nausea, I sometimes get the urge to twist the bass in my Toyota Camry up to Level Five (!) and bump at "Reasonably Disruptive," which is quite a few planes from "Apeshit," but still. The liberation of cruising, windows down, vulgar rap exploding through the blasé landscape of middle-class monotony, is invigorating, if not at times a bit out-of-

place and embarrassing. I'll turn it down when a soccer mom stops beside me. I sweat over the possibility of cops pulling me over for some bullshit noise violation. I disparage all the teens in Ray Bans whipping mommy's car and booming wishy-washy, RnB-infused, let-Rhianna-sing-the-chorus rap to look disobedient, but I'll simultaneously notice a shade of myself in them. I yearn for a lowrider with the top down, two massive stacks with 18-inch cones rumbling the pavement, paying respects to Kool Herc, LL Cool J, Radio Raheem, the dreadlocked soundclashers of Jamaican lore. I'd like to imagine I'm continuing their legacy, participating in a cultural practice worth preserving.

TALES FROM AN INNER-CITY CAR WASH

And so there I was, squatting on shiny, chemical-slicked pavement under the Sunday morning sun, painting globs of clear tire shine smelling something like sunblock-infused motor oil on the fat wheels of a massive white truck cleaner than a fresh-from-the-launderette undershirt, when the infraction caught my eye. This dude, a regular customer – short with chiseled arms, a shaved head, light blue jeans, caramel boots, skintight wife-beater – was hunched over, wiping his rims with one of our towels.

I stood over him. “Hey, man. You can’t use the towel on your rims.”

“Ah, well I already started, so you might as well let me.”

“Sorry, man.”

I reached down and grabbed the towel out of his hand.

Bad call.

He stood up, chest out, head about level with my own chest. His eyes! In my memory, they’re cartoonishly white, whiter than the truck (one of several cars he’d bring through, most of which had out-of-state plates, which, the crew later explained, meant he was a drug dealer). Snaky red lines squiggled like lightning bolts into each iris. They were extra red – think police cruiser flash mixed with horror film bloodbath.

“Did you really just snatch that towel out my hand?” he said.

"Um, yeah." Voice trembling. "You can't use our towels on your…"

"Did you *really* just snatch that *motherfucking* towel out my *motherfucking* hand?" He was breathing hard through his nose and shaking as if he was about to sputter and vomit his words all over my glossy, charcoal-grey uniform. The bile of anger unleashed from his knotted stomach might have scorched through my skin like wheel-scrub acid. His arms were flexed, hands clenched by his sides.

Don't you fucking cry, Kyle.

"Yeah, motherfucker," I screamed back. "I fucking *did*!"

Now the heat was coming over me. This was going down. Maybe I should have apologized, but there was something in his tone when he said, "You might as well let me" that really seemed to imply, "What are you going to do about it, you scrawny, baby-faced kid?" After an entire summer calibrating how to work here without getting pushed around, maybe I was being overly defensive. Or maybe this guy was just an asshole.

I stared into those psycho eyes, squishing my face into the meanest-ass grimace I had on deck to squash the impulse to tear-up. And why did I feel like crying, anyway? For a few seconds, I thought of how the moisture welling in my eyelids was proof that I didn't belong here, that I wasn't cut out to work in a place where customer service slip-ups might lead to fistfights.

The dude's mouth opened wide in disbelief. He looked both ways down the deserted street and threw his arms up, as if to say, "Can you all believe this guy? You're with me on this, right?" He turned back to me.

"Do you know who I *am*? I'm a motherfucking *gangster*!"

"I don't fucking *care*!"

But I did wonder how I got here.

My first day working at Fischer's Car Wash ("The Finest in Car Washing," according to the uniform bossman Adam pulled off his back and threw at me) was a speaker battle. I sat on a plastic lawn chair in the muggy office where we clocked into a dented metal cash register slathered in chipped cerulean paint. The light poles in the vacuum lot were painted the same color: a dark, cakey shade closer to the ground and a watery, pathetic shade up top, since Jared, bossman number two, loved to paint but was supposedly afraid of heights. I peered out at the lot through smudged plexiglass. Cory had punched through the office window awhile back. When I asked about it, everyone waved it off. Oh, that? Cory just got a little excited. Plexiglass is cheaper and harder to break when someone decides to start punching shit for the hell of it.

A row of hoopty sedans and domineering SUVs lined the vacuum lot, doors outspread, bass-heavy rap music blaring in overlap. The cacophony was nauseating. There were guys my age draped in basketball shorts, congregating for handshakes, and I'm not sure how they could hear each other talk. A woman vacuumed her car with a long tubular hose stretching from a yellow pole stuck into the concrete. Her kids played in the grass yard littered with a color-wheel assortment of plastic wrappers just beyond the blacktop bustle. It sounded like a concert. At least a block-party jam. Every parking spot was filled.

"It be like the club out here," Chris said one day. Pretty much.

My previous summer job to help pay for college was bagging corn on a farm surrounded by a national park. This summer was an inner-city car wash crunched between the New Hope Baptist Church and a Valero gas station that advertised the "Cheapest Cigars in Akron." I was twenty-one years old, with dirty-blonde, sun-bleached flow that had people rolling through the wash thinking I was a high-schooler, or a California transplant, or probably a high-school-age California transplant. Some days I was the only white kid around, a clear-cut outlier in an almost all-black neighborhood.

The office wreaked of cigarettes. Some days it smelled like burgers from Rally's around the block. The air was grainy, all that ash and dust wafting through while Steve stared at women bending over to clean their cars.

She got a *dumb* fat ass," he'd say. The rest of the room would nod in silent unison. The wash was a total guys' club, and I was still figuring out how to dupe everyone into thinking I fit in.

I was trained by a guy named Ray, who was my age but fawned over the middle-aged women who drove through. He kept his unicycle in the hallway and was happy to give on-the-job lessons, which was about the only time he could be caught smiling. He warned me that customers would flash pistols from their waistbands to try and cop free tire shine, which might account for why he appeared permanently pissed-off, a look that rubbed off on me either as an instinctual defense mechanism or because I was fed-up with having to spend hours attached to this guy. He taught me to wipe down windows and leave the bottom half of shitty cars to air-dry, cause they probably wouldn't tip anyway, so fuck them! He swore he could tell which customers were about to tip us as

soon as they pulled out of the tunnel. If he spotted a non-tipper gliding down the pavement towards us, he'd holler out his secret bird call: "Cacaw, cacaw!" Sometimes he'd flap his arms up and down like a crow's wings to help get the point across if I seemed to be exerting too much effort. Within weeks he was out of there.

Salim, one of the managers, would gulp down two Red Bulls per shift, purchased with our next-door neighbor discount from the nice Muslim family who owned the Valero. He'd drop stories about his days as a boxer, a boxing coach, a baker. His side gig was breeding and selling these monstrously large pit-bulls called blue bullies. He was in his early forties, lean, with a shaved head and a teardrop tattoo under one eye. Both eyes were the color of squashed grapes, making me wonder what he was chasing down with all that Red Bull. Two of his sons, Jr. and Malik, worked the wash, and it was Malik who replaced Ray and became my fellow towel-dryer.

Malik was a stocky dude with a stubbed fro, which made us quite the mismatched-looking pair when we wiped down cars around back together, which was most days. We'd have full-day conversations during which we'd attempt to uncover the mystery of how to understand girls. (At eighteen, Malik was far ahead of me on that one.) He tried teaching me how to box. During lulls, he'd have me get into that squared-up boxing stance and would re-position my scrawny arms, teaching me to always cover my face and nod down, hiding the skull so all the punches landed on the shoulders and back. Cars would pull out of the tunnel and we'd still be fake-sparring, throwing no-blow punches. He showed me how to do upside-down push-ups in the laundry room. I leaned against the wall, bent my chin to sludged concrete, and pushed up maybe an inch before

my arms gave in and my sneakers pulled away from the wall and banged into the washer. Malik made it look easy.

Around some of the other guys, and especially grim-faced customers who glared at me through billows of weed smoke, I kept up the constant scowl that faintly suggested, "Don't fuck with me." With Malik, I felt I could relax a bit.

"You know why they always put us back here?" he said. "Cause they trust us with the tip box. Everyone else be stealing, especially Steve and Sleep."

Malik thought everyone but us stole from the wooden tip box, which was fastened with a bolt lock to discourage sneaky fingers. It sat atop the plastic grey cart where we kept the bin of blue microfiber towels for hand-drying and the tub of tire shine and paint brushes. I'm pretty sure everyone else, including his brother Jr., assumed Malik stole too. No one ever got called out at the wash, at least not since, shortly before I arrived, one big guy bashed another big guy's face in and left him bleeding on the tunnel floor, which led to the face-bashing guy getting fired and the bashed-face guy taking a landscaping job. No one even pointed fingers the evening everybody helped split the tip box while I was still sweeping the vacuum lot and, somehow, my handful of tips disappeared, causing us all to stand around in a circle, peering around suspiciously, till everybody chipped in a few bucks for my stack.

Still, I was cool with everyone, including Steve and Sleep, probably the two oldest guys who worked there.

One day I caught Steve, in his knee-length white tee and ankle-low jean shorts, standing maybe a foot away from a woman in tights bending over to vacuum her

passenger seat. He just stared at her, open-mouthed and dumbfounded. Then he reached out and squeezed her ass.

"Welp, here comes the slap," I thought. She bounced up and started flirting with him instead.

Another day, he went around to sweep the vacuum lot for a few minutes and returned to tell me he'd sold four tabs of ecstasy. The lot was a popular haven for drug deals, hence all the cop cars creeping by real slow. It looked to me like he was just sweeping up cigarillo wrappers and chatting with the clientele. I gave him props for being discrete.

And then one day Steve did get canned for stealing.

Sleep's real name was Antoine, but everyone who knew him called him Sleep, a nickname that seemed to have followed him through life due to his one droopy eye. Most days Sleep disregarded uniform. One time he showed up in a shirt featuring the ubiquitous video-game-rating logo that had been altered to read: "Your Mom, Rated E for Everyone." I let him borrow my flip phone another day so that he could argue with his mother over how he wasn't slinging crack. Occasionally, Sleep dragged ass a bit when I wiped cars with him. Malik and the other guys complained to me about this, but they didn't call him out on it, so I did.

"You better watch yourself, little man," he said, tramping around with his towels in hand as the next car pulled out of the tunnel, separating us by a windshield. I let him fume a little. After that, we were cool. Sleep was a good guy, I decided. In fact, these were all good guys. I didn't want to have beef with anyone here. I was just trying to fit in.

I learned about whitewalls and grew to appreciate the beauty of immaculately clean Dayton rims. I spotted the long-lost cousin of Snoop Dogg. I watched a driver, dressed in hustler garb, swig from a bottle of 1738 before driving off in the middle of the afternoon. I was given a lecture on how a butt implant is indeed a real-life surgical procedure. I saw a man walking to church in his Sunday's best rocking a Flava-Flav-worthy gold chain with a cross on it. I watched two full-grown women scream senselessly at each other in the vacuum lot for ten minutes, neither mouths stopping for air. I met a fine young woman in an SUV with plates that read "O She Fine." As she drove off, Malik's body leaned towards the car like he was attached by wire and was about to be pulled down the slip'n'slide pavement.

The busiest days were Saturdays and whatever day the first of the month fell on. We'd be mobbed-out five cars deep around back, pushed all the way back to where the drive met the street. The pavement smoldered. I'd glissade from car to car on the slick surface, feeling like a 50's carhop on roller skates. Vehicles would wrap around the vacuum lot, all the way back to the street, and on days like this the only thing that'd kill the hype was a visit from the cops.

"Pull up!" Salim yelled hundreds of times a day. He'd wear a towel around his neck and lean in car windows, sweet-talking the ladies and playing it cool with the guys. He'd flick through the wad of cash while two of us power-washed the paint and scrubbed the rims. SUVs worthy of a P. Diddy music video would roll in on colossal tires, the chrome stained black and piss-yellow with brakedust. I'd grit my teeth and force the green-bristled brush soaked in acid through the rims' crevices. The chemical was slippery, like excessively soft water, and a splosh could singe your skin red.

The cars moved through the wash, a cave of whirring machinery, enormous blue mops, and transparent tendrils that squirted out all kinds of different colored juices. At the end of the day, a river of bright pink hydropel wax flowed under the steel slots and metal grates we walked over. Sleep stepped through a grate one afternoon, scraping his leg on the rusting metal before falling into the caustic river. He turned giddy over the possibility of worker's compensation.

The hallway, separated from the splashy gadgets by a wall of filthy windows, was lined on one side with translucent tubs filled with chemicals colored red, yellow, and a bright green, which smelled like green-apple candy. Around back, we'd pick up two microfiber towels from the cart, wait for the vehicle to pull out of the wash, and dry it down with Mr. Miyagi's wax-on/wax-off technique. One of us caked a layer of tire shine on the wheels with a paint brush. "Put it on thick," the driver would say, placing a crumpled dollar in my palm. We checked receipts, in case a customer tried to hustle us by pulling that stunt with McDonald's receipts. Cars would peel out gleaming, primed to cruise the streets with sparkling chrome rims and a cool ice glaze to their wheels.

The first time I worked with Will, he pulled out a deck of cards and performed magic tricks for customers.

"Now, if I do this," he'd say, sweat beads dotting his face, "you have to tip us." He'd astound people, then laugh as they passed the cash through the window. He'd wear this beige jungle-safari hat every day to cover his bald head, though he was just a few years older than me. He flirted with every woman who came through.

“Baby, I been out here all day,” he’d say. “It’s so hot, I’m seeing two of you. So, which one of ya’ll is single?”

He worked security for the Cavaliers in the evenings during their championship-winning season. I came to work one day to find out Will had tackled a fan who ran on the court with “Trump Sucks” scribbled in marker across his hairless torso. Next day, people were posting pictures online of Will sprawled across the shirtless offender, staring into the distance with a lion’s content.

“Will Shep… The Real MVP” read one meme. He didn’t let it go to his head.

One day Will and I were drying around back when this SUV, glossed in aqua-tint candy paint, missile-launched out of the tunnel straight towards me. Through the window, I could tell in a split second that the couple seemed to be having a “How do you steer this crazy thing?” moment.

“Damn, this is how it’s going to end, huh?” I thought to myself just as the driver slapped down on the breaks, the hood inches from crashing through my chest.

I let out a sigh.

Will stomped over to the driver side more pissed than I’d ever seen him. “Hey, you almost killed my white boy!” he screamed. “You almost killed my white boy!”

“I’m sorry!” the guy said, hands raised, still terrified.

“It’s okay,” Will said. “We got another one up front.”

This was Cory, our resident outdoorsman with a thing for bushcrafting, a primitive form of survivalist camping. His Converse were eaten away from years of sliding over acid. He could rip the midsole in half, forming a mouth from the wet slabs of shredded canvas and rubber. One day he pointed out a sprout of grass around back and

told me to put it in my mouth and chew it: an onion! How did he know that? Cause he'd read these plant-identification books up front so that on one of his weekends off, when he had time to explore the wildernesses of Ohio, he wouldn't accidentally munch on a supper's worth of poisonous berries. We all loved those rare days when he busted out the rope and kindle and built a miniature campfire on the concrete floor.

I got pretty good at bullshitting. I even developed two little molehills of bicep muscle from our chin-up sessions on the grey metal pipe stretching through the hallway near the office. Despite Malik being the biggest guy there, Salim held the record. No one found it strange that, during lulls, I'd kick my legs up on the tractor near the washing machine and read Joan Didion, Donald Barthelme, *Infinite Jest*. Sleep and Salim looked forward to crashing my grad party. These guys were fun as hell. Why had I worried so much about fitting in?

It helped that I could carry on conversations about black music, which was all around us. At the end of the day, when an ochre glow settled over the neighborhood and Cowboy would roll through to empty out the coins clogging the vacuum pipes for fishing bait, I'd walk around the lot and sweep homemade mixtapes burned to blank CDs into the dustpan. The sounds booming out systems coming through the wash were some of the same styles I was spinning in my basement: pop-lock synth-funk, 90's West Coast gangster rap, electro pulsars blotched in vocoder dye. Sunday mornings brought the gospel and r'n'b, which I could get down with. When we hired Jaimon from Jamaica Queens, I was the only one able to make sense of his ramblings about reggae and dancehall records, the only one who shared his affinity for Barrington Levy.

Some days, Will pulled his car around back, popped open all the doors, and blared the same four Biggie songs for us to break it on down to while drying cars. We'd dance to "Big Poppa" and "Hypnotize" and "Ten Crack Commandments" and especially "Juicy," which was the best because Sleep would pitch his voice way up and sing the girl's part: "I've had a few, but not too many / Cause you're the only one, I'll give you good n' plenty." The tips flowed in, and the guys pointed and laughed when I did whatever the hell it was I did in time to the beat.

"Guys, Kyle almost fought a gangster!"

Everyone was standing around up front, bullshitting in the midday sun before the cars started packing in, rehashing the story of my finest hour, how I heroically stood nose-to-nose with a self-proclaimed gangster, who probably had a pistol stashed under his car seat, and spat a tirade of thoughtless insults and fuck-you's back at his face, which at one point was mere inches away. The situation was diffused when Rusty, the burly morning manager who was still half-asleep, sort of yawned and told him the same shit I had been telling him before my rage flared up, that the brakedust on rims permanently stains the towel. The guy finally huffed back into his truck, slammed the door, pulled off, and drove into the vacuum lot, where he actually *pulled out his own towel that he had the whole time* and started wiping down his rims.

So, I didn't exactly scare him away. Sure, had we fought, I might have gotten my scrawny ass pounded all over the pavement. Probably. Still, I'd been doing those chin-ups, you know? For about an hour I couldn't let it go, wishing the dude had swung at me. I stared him down through the office window until my body cooled.

Hey, I'd actually held my ground. I did not cry. Come to think of it, no way had I even been close to crying. Nope. Not this guy. Sure, I was the car-wash dweeb, but at least I was a dweeb with some spine, and spine was better than a perpetual frown.

The grimace lifted. Dusty spun the epic yarn over and over again, mimicking the psycho gangster, who everyone decided was probably still coked-out from the night before. Malik was impressed, and though as my boxing trainer he knew better than anyone how that scuffle would have ended, he didn't mention it. I shrugged the whole thing off and let the guys talk me up until, by the time I went back to school a few weeks later, I was solidified in car-wash legend as Kool Kyle, the nerdy white boy who became a hero for righteously protecting our spotless towels from getting all splotched and greasy.

THE GUILTY PLEASURES COLLECTION VOL. 1

The music I enjoy (or, in the case of vomit-inducing noise from auditory sadists like Merzbow, more like subject myself to) will compact into a big messy heap as time passes, with albums sliding out and spilling over the sides, hopefully for me to rediscover years later before I die from choking on toast smothered in a quarter-inch thick coating of peanut butter (which has nearly happened at least three times). That's how I like to envision the aggregate of my music taste, not neatly-columned and alphabetized in endless rows of Ikea shelves, but like the mountain of smashed-up cars, discarded refrigerators, and unidentifiable rusting metal thingamajigs in this junkyard I sometimes jog past. There are no clear-cut partitions for my imaginary record heap, just a haphazard pile that fumes and smells bad, and some days it smells a lot like gasoline and other days it smells more like rat feces and some days it's a combination of both, but maybe it smells faintly of grape Koolaid and Febreze somewhere on the pile, where there's a bulge of synthpop records, cause this thing is massive and intricate, with hundreds of scents, both potent and subtle, combating and meshing. In other words, I'm not a purist.

I am interested in purists, though. People like Lux Interior and Poison Ivy of the spooked-up, novelty rockabilly band The Cramps. Lux (who died in 2009) and his wife, were obsessed with 1950's rock-and-roll of the sloppy, primitive, howl-at-the-moon grade. They unearthed the genre's rare records, wore all-black outfits, and dedicated their

lives, or at least their collective public image, to a highly specific niche of Americana (one they re-imagined through a classic B-Movie horror film lens) and its music.

Imagining that every day is Halloween and that America never aged past 1967 is probably a fun way to live. What's more fun is imagining the creepy couple in their leather, undead-greaser jackets, slinking through a shopping mall, all buffed marble and massage chairs and denim retailers, and clenching their ears as Usher's "Yeah" plays from the tinny overhead speakers. Or them chilling circa 1991 on a dilapidated loveseat covered in cobwebs, staring into their Sylvania Dualette television box with a thick glass screen like a protruding soap bubble, and catching Fab Five Freddy in his dark sunglasses and beret offering a puffy microphone to Digital Underground's Humpty Hump, who's rocking some sort of red fishing hat and a fake, prominent, aquiline nose two shades darker than his face and a glinting gold chain as he chuckles like Count Von Count from *Sesame Street* before chomping down on a footlong cigar, his posse standing behind him, including a not-yet-superfamous Tupac, everyone in baggy jackets and ballcaps or beanies. *Yo! MTV Raps* is not of the same world The Cramps chose to model their lives on. However, I like to imagine Poison Ivy smiling when, on certain nights, she kicks back and listens to Queen Latifah on her iPod.

Purists are essentially idealists, and idealists are cool. They have this aura of living an elevated existence because we assume it's as difficult to adhere to an unorthodox and possibly retrograde lifestyle in this world as it is for people to follow the Jenny Craig diet. The downside is that idealists can be snobs. There is almost always a stuffy ideological basis behind someone holing themselves up in a fourteenth-story loft, lounging on a slim mid-century sofa illuminated under pulsing violet ceiling fixtures, and

refusing to ever listen to anything that's not jazz-fusion. I respect the dedication, but at some point, this kind of lifestyle can sour into hard-headedness. If we all consumed culture with such dogged selectivity, the contradictions that spike art into fresh variants would be ignored and creativity would stall, all in the inflexible name of preservation.

Some of the most stubborn purists guilty of this attitude are hip-hop heads. That might seem unlikely, since hip-hop is a deviant cacophony of styles, but it's true.

The other day I was chatting with a DJ from my city who goes by B-Nyce (No relation to 90's hip-hop icon D-Nice, probably the only rapper to repeatedly claim he's a TR-808 drum machine; androids walk among us!). B-Nyce grew up listening to the blues, r'n'b, and Prince, and he puts on a monthly hip-hop party where the menu is mostly old-school rap classics. He is surprisingly a Drake fan, calling him a genius who will probably keep shifting his signature sound just enough to where he'll still be dancing in poofy jackets for packed audiences of screaming, barely-dressed twenty-something year-old girls when he's approaching middle age. It's not his thing, but he concedes. He also admitted that a dope song is a dope song, regardless of genre, which is what almost all hip-hop DJs, who make up some of the most eclectic music fans out there, would agree upon. But he also said that the new shit, derisively termed "mumble rap," isn't hip-hop, that it's trash for the lunkhead masses, whom he compares to the zombies tottering around post-apocalyptic earth in *The Walking Dead* television series.

"Us DJs are like the X-Men," B-Nyce said. "We're like Professor X getting into Cerebro, trying to find people who otherwise wouldn't ever come out 'cause they don't think other people get down with what they like to get down to."

I agree with this assertion. It's rewarding for someone like myself, having spent my teenagerdom practicing what some might consider an archaic art form, to occasionally surrender to the delusion that dropping a cold Joe Cooley scratch over one of Egyptian Lover's 808 freak-romps is sort of the same thing as taking out killer robots as tall as skyscrapers with a metal bō staff and a deck of exploding playing cards. This is the same type of myth that has evolved in DJ lore since the park-jam days – the DJ as hero – my favorite example being an interlude in DJ Rectangle's *Rollin' Deep* mixtape, in which he utilizes his maniacal turntable skillz to defeat an alien DJ in one-on-one battle for the right of earthlings to colonize Mars.

"We give up," says the pissed-off alien representative with the animatronic larynx, who didn't even bother stepping to the decks after witnessing Rectangle's ability to transform-scratch at the speed of an assault rifle magazine discharge. "You can have the fucking planet!"

When our gorgeous blue marble fries into a rutilant sphere, turntablists will be called upon to save the human race.

So, yeah. I guess you could say I'm superhero material. But that doesn't mean everyone who doesn't take the time to listen through an entire mediocre Bob James record in hopes of discovering five seconds of untainted drumbreak is a twit. It doesn't mean someone who refuses to listen to what's on the radio is any smarter than someone who doesn't give a shit. It doesn't mean that mumble rap – which *did* spawn from the same lineage as Posdnuos, Kool Moe Dee and Grandmaster Melle Mel – cannot be considered serious art.

Here's where a lot of hip-hop heads, probably the most musically open-minded people I know, start showing their purist side. Mumble rap, to old-school heads, is an abomination of the culture.

"From the little I heard, the beats are horrible, and it is so hard to listen to when you lived through an era of gifted wordsmiths," says my friend Forrest, a b-boy, break DJ, and renowned record collector who's been enmeshed in hip-hop culture since his childhood in New York City during the early 80's.

I feel him on that. Mumble Rap can't be graded with the same standards as classic hip-hop, which, to a lot of heads, means it can't be enjoyed at all. But any genre viewed as an abomination of something pure is of automatic interest to me. So, for the same reason why many of my fellow hip-hop nerds either loathe or disregard the stuff, I must admit to my first and most glaring guilty pleasure.

Guilty Pleasure #1: A Lil Bit of Mumble Rap

Of course, there should be no guilty pleasures. Everyone should be open and genuine about what they enjoy. But that's not how our brains work.

Sometimes when I'm cruising the streets of Akron, Ohio in my scratched-up Toyota Camry, windows down, music blaring, I become cognizant of the fact that people in the cars around me might be watching as I'm singing (screeching?) and fist-pumping to Corona's 1993 Euro-House hit "Rhythm of the Night." There I am, caught in a passionate pop-diva frenzy. I look around, shooting suspicious glances at the other people in their nondescript sedans who are somehow not freaking out to whatever is playing in their cars. I'm embarrassed, hesitant to continue waving my hand in front of my face, but

then I become embarrassed at having cared whether the lady next to me, looking anxious and smoking cigarettes in her Honda Civic, thinks I go home and squeeze on full-body lycra and dance in front of the bathroom mirror. So I'm compelled to go nuts again, just to spite these boring drivers, while simultaneously feeling uncomfortable about it.

So, my definition of guilty pleasure music is anything I would feel embarrassed to be caught playing at high volume and singing and dancing to while waiting in traffic at a red light.

Mumble rap is ubiquitous, or at least it is on the radio stations transmitting where I live. I understand it might not seem worthy to qualify as something to feel embarrassed about listening to, but you have to understand that the genre is basically considered an insult to purebred hip-hop, music I love. I feel as if anyone who catches me bumping whatever Lil Uzi Vert song is playing on the local mutant rap station is imagining this as my daily cruising soundtrack and getting the wrong impression. Truth is, I can stand the stuff in small doses.

That's because it's so potent. Take Future's phosphorescent anthems strictly about getting fucked up. The delivery fits the content: he slurs through entire songs like "How It Was" with a gossamer autotuned drawl, which, blended with DJ Esco's lite-brite beats, fizzles with more flavor than you can fill in a two-liter Styrofoam cup of Sprite and Codeine.

I used to argue over Future with a guy I worked with at a car wash. He was all like, "Future can't rap!" Sure, maybe he can't rap, but that's beside the point. He doesn't care to. Future isn't flustered about pulling off anything more than the most basic ABAB

rhyme scheme. Instead, he's sloshing around in synthesized melodies, creating an auditory simulacrum of the dizziness caused by drowning in Jolly-Rancher-suffused cough syrup while popping Percocets. He wants you inside his mind, which seems to be churning in ways he can't control. If listening to Future makes you feel dumber, well, so does battering your brain around with drink and drugs. Future succeeds in replicating the sensation.

The same could be said for Chief Keef. I remember my first time hearing "Love Sosa." My buddy Mac, who usually stuck to listening to psychedelic garage rock, was like, "Listen to this! I found someone even worse than Lil B."

I was all like, "No way, man!"

He played me the "Love Sosa" video on his iPhone. A group of dudes in hoodies bounced around and popped the camera with their finger guns while the leader, a shirtless Keef with dreads dangling over his eyes, rapped about his apparent idol, big-league slugger Sammy Sosa. I did not comprehend that the line "You can meet my llama" was Keef threatening to shoot detractors with his pistol. For all I knew, this guy worked at a petting zoo. Lines like this are what make Keef's lyrics brilliant. At the time, I agreed with Mac: this was the worst, most ignorant rap song I had ever heard. It wasn't until maybe a year later when a trip to *Genius.com* taught me that "Love Sosa" is loaded with arcane references to Keef's gang affiliations and the Chicago neighborhoods they ran around.

My younger brother became a Chief Keef fan, going as far as buying most of his full-length album, *Finally Rich,* on iTunes. (This was a big deal. The last album I

remember him owning was Lou Bega's *A Little Bit of Mamba* on CD in 1999, which my mom bought him when he was two years old because the radio hit "Mambo No. 5" was becoming the anthem of his curly-haired toddler years.) Keef's album title overtook reality. He pulled in enough ducats to fund a large-scale petting zoo.

I knew this was coming when, months earlier, I watched a bunch of white college kids dance to "I Don't Like" in the living room of a shitty off-campus house during a birthday rager. The room was packed, everyone moshing under purple blacklights to Keef's paean to ignorance. Keef didn't hate anything – he apparently doesn't have the energy for such vitriol – but he did dislike pretty much everything that wasn't him and his clique, and anything he disliked was reason enough to kill someone. I doubt anyone in the room had ever handled, let alone fired off, a llama or a cobra. The guys renting the house, friends of friends, were from one of the cushiest suburbs surrounding Akron, and their parents were paying for them to fail through their first few years of college.

The beat crawled, the bass sharp enough to clip even when listened to quietly through high-quality headphones. The song is splotched with keyboard tones resembling pleasant doorbell chimes. I stood on the sidelines, watching my peers slow-motion mosh, a mix between full-body head-banging and ceremonious witch-dancing around a cauldron, but with a whole lot of unsteady hip thrusting. A realization dawned: "This is Now." Not long afterwards, the party emptied onto the brick road out front and erupted into a massive brawl.

The other day, Lil Yachty tried selling me Chef Boyardee by singing into the blunt end of a fork almost as tall as him while dancing around a kitchen with Donny Osmond. I hope Maruchan gets Lil Pump to babble about how microwaveable Ramen

noodles help get him through a long night in the trap house. Mumble rap has come a long way. The sub-genre's tendency to trigger earworm makes it perfect for major corporate advertising. I want to hear this shit every time I turn on the television. Most of it's not good for much else.

Some of these mumble rappers today, like Juice WRLD and Lil Uzi Vert, are going all gooey sentimental. When the emo shit works, though, I must admit it wrecks. I wouldn't be surprised if I listened to "Congratulations" and "White Iverson" by Post Malone more than any other two songs in 2018. Somewhere in the world, Ghostface Killah just spit out his Mad Dog. But I'm for real! The way Post Malone, umm, sings about saucing, swagging, and balling in his Jordans over a choir of angels makes big-pimping sound so damn sad. He's found a niche no one in mumble rap has come close to pulling off: rapping the same old "get money" braggadocio in a way that brings on melancholy. It's a similar formula to what The Smiths pulled off in the 80's by putting depressive, angst-filled lyrics over sunny, 60's-style jangle-pop songs, or how the hipsters in Passion Pit wailed about their confusion and loathing over candy-coated synthpop. With the amount of plays I've racked up on Spotify, Post Malone should buy a razor and lose the goat-man chin scruff.

You know what else gets me all up in my feels?

Guilty Pleasure #2: Rick James – "Make Love to Me"

Just kidding! No one's ever been able to get through this whole song, and I'm not going to try, lest I spaz into a catatonic veggie and have to be spoon-fed rank pea mush for the rest of my life between bouts of crooning the song's most affecting lines: "Do me!

Do me! Do meeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee! Just do me, do me, do me, do me good, babayyyyyyy!" It takes a madman to sit beside the turntable and restrain himself from picking up the needle and plopping it back on "Give It to Me Baby."

Some songs are too inherently corny to ever be taken seriously. The same cannot be said for entire genres, though, which is why I get peeved when people diss on:

Guilty Pleasure #3: Smooove Jazz

I live in Akron, Ohio, the illustrious big-brother city to Cleveland, or so we'd like to think. Cleveland is home to lots of stained brick office buildings, heartbreakingly bad football, and one of the country's great smooth jazz radio stations: 107.3 FM, The Wave.

The Wave transmits to my bedside alarm clock radio in crackling tones of blue, mauve and black. For years I've fallen asleep to the hushed voices of the station's late-night DJs whispering between songs. Smooth jazz captures both the essence of breezy, carless beach days and the speckled lights of a metropolis skyline by nightfall. Most of the stuff is lovingly overproduced, glazed in digital lacquer, as high-definition as an establishing shot of Manhattan in a big-budget Hollywood flick. The saxophones never honk but slide over the drum machines with the same lubricated composure as the keyboards.

In middle school, my band instructor, Mr. K, informed me that smooth jazz was "fake jazz." In most circumstances, this would have been reason to shun the genre entirely, since as a teen I was beginning to align myself with anything I thought might be considered authentic and cool, with scarcely any hints of what that might have been. One hint was the moonlight melancholy of Miles Davis' "My Ship," which I discovered on a

LateNightTales CD compiled by The Flaming Lips, a band my neighborhood buds and I loved. This was apparently enough to consider myself a Miles Davis fan, and I suspected that Miles, surely a supercool cat in his day, would have loathed my smooth jazz sleepytime jams. But Mr. K loathed them too, and that mattered more to me. I enjoyed annoying Mr. K almost every day in band class by chatting up my fellow trumpeters while other sections played and by refusing to learn how to read sheet music, winging it every practice by peaking at the finger movements of whoever sat next me. Mr. K was a nice guy and, in every other class, I was an agreeable (but lazy) student. I have no idea why I was bent on tormenting him every day. Kids are mean at that age, and I guess I was no exception. I defied, however subtly, almost everything Mr. K said. His disavowal of smooth jazz wasn't getting me to switch the dial before I nodded off at night. Maybe my taste for smooth jazz developed, on some buried level, from a misguided rebellion against authority. I was dumb like that.

Smooth jazz is the second-most uncool genre I can think of, bastardizing jazz's free-form abandon beyond recognition. It's unabashedly pop, as calculated as a Madonna megahit. Besides Mr. K, no one I know who considers themselves a music aficionado has ever mentioned smooth jazz in conversation. It has yet to be ironically adored by mass quantities of hipsters. (Possible exception: certain styles of vaporwave, which allow closet smooth-jazz fans to jokingly admire the stuff without having to deem themselves fans.) When it comes to uncool, smooth jazz is as pure as it gets.

For personal reasons having nothing to do with aesthetic judgement, I also enjoy listening to the most uncool genre I can think of:

Guilty Pleasure #4: The Polka

In kindergarten, my grandparents drove me to school, since my mom was asleep after working nights as a nurse and my dad was at the office before the school day started. My grandpa, who I dubbed Papa, drove the maroon SUV while Amma (a.k.a. Grandma Millie), sat in the passenger seat, since she never learned to drive. My younger brother Nick sat in the back beside me, his hair still curly and blonde in his toddler years. Papa had an affinity for the polka, and every morning he had the dial set to the polka hour on a local AM station, 1590 WAKR, which played the exact same songs in the exact same order, day after day.

Papa died a few years later. This was the first death I ever experienced outside of some unfortunate characters in *Star Wars* and *Jurassic Park*, my favorite movies back then. I used to practically root for the dinos in *Jurassic Park* to eat the Hollywood actors in their safari getup. My mom was maybe too lax with letting me watch PG-13 films at such a young age, and I was unperturbed by the high body counts in my favorite films. Papa's death was the first time I realized that the unique things the people we love do over and over again, the habits and actions that ripen in the mind over time into memories that define them, will one day be cut off and can't be experienced again.

These memories of my grandpa are of him sitting in *his* chair, the same maroon shade as his SUV, the same chair he died in. He sat all day, it seemed, watching westerns and action films. He could sit for hours without talking, but when he did speak, his voice was a loud, deep grumble. His laugh was a gritty roar. He had bright red hair, so of course the family called him Red. He was stern in the way men of his generation were, having been especially hard on my dad growing up. When I was proud of owning yet another stuffed cat, he would tell me to bring it to him, saying he wanted to pet the cute

kitty, and then when I handed it to him he would launch it across the room and laugh. He hated cats ever since one attacked him as a child. I would act upset and eventually come right back to do the same thing all over again. It was our game. At the end of the day when I'd get picked up, instead of a hug goodbye Papa would pull on my earlobe, hard, moving my entire head down with his arm. The ear (or ears, since some days he latched onto both) throbbed in pain all the way home. This was how he showed affection. When he died, I thought about how my ears would never throb like that again.

That, and our polka drives were over.

On the way to school, when the polka was blaring, Papa was all smiles. His deep-throated baritone (or was he a bass?) rumbled through the car. He had a great singing voice, but no one got to hear it unless they caught him singing hymnals at one of his occasional appearances at church. As the SUV squiggled through the wooded valley just five minutes from my school, our favorite song would come on: "Oh, I don't want her! You can have her! She's too fat for me!" This was the shining number, the apex of the drive, and, at least in my memory, every day singing this was as exciting as the last.

This much polka, the same songs playing in the same order every goddamn morning, is someone's idea of living hell. When I mentioned these polka drives to my dad, he'd make jokes equating them to torture strategies, and I'm not sure why. The polka, with all its flatulent tuba squonks and cheery trumpet harmonies and accordions for an authentic dash of old-world spice (Millie still refers to Germany and Austria, her family's place of origin, as "the Old Country") is an optimistic jaunt to a nineteenth-century world filled with pork pie hats, stiff brown clogs, knee-high socks, suspenders wrapped around white, button-down, long-sleeved shirts, and rowdy ballroom escapades.

The “Old Country” ballrooms I imagine when listening to polka are a fiction, chilly auditoriums smelling of sauerkraut, crammed with conservatively dressed townsfolk catching the ghost to accordion solos the way leathered-out scum with fluorescent mohawks do at punk-rock shows. Eventually, indie musicians will run out of genres to mine and mash and reconfigure in original ways, and when they do, I plan on forming a ghastly polka band, complete with an acclaimed accordionist plugged into a fuzz pedal and vocals shouted through a megaphone. We’ll settle on a name like Tizzy Lederhosen or The Polka Blades. Peep the scuzzy old-world anarchy. My grandpa loved the polka but would detest my band’s punk-rock image. This would be my way of honoring him, a tribute in line with the way he expressed love: in irreverent, teasing acts.

So, yeah. I enjoy the polka. Now that I’ve embarrassed myself to this extent, having lost all taste credibility in the eyes of music snobs everywhere, it’s time to drop my deepest, darkest guilty pleasure.

Guilty Pleasure #5: The Eagles

Psyche! Hotel California can burn to the desert floor.

Funny how a guilty pleasure is often something tons of people enjoy, people who are wired differently than you, with brain cords connecting to different pleasures centers, ultimately deciding whether you love or loathe “Life in the Fast Lane.” Some of us are wired into way more pleasure centers, a spaghetti mess of cords like an overloaded electrical outlet, rendering us capable of equally enjoying the tuneless, meandering vocals of Mark E. Smith and the refreshing kiwi splash of a Demi Lovato song. Some of us

weirdos are surprisingly not being pretentious when we claim to enjoy music that sounds like jackhammers dancing over sheet metal, or

Guilty Pleasure #6: What the Record Store Near My House Labels "Experimental/Noise"

One night a year ago, I picked up my girlfriend in my car while listening to Ryoji Ikeda's *Supercodex*, an album of avant-garde electronic sound experiments that is basically an hour of aggressive bleeps and bloops exploding like lines of unintelligible computer code, blocks of data transferred into auditory stimuli for a glitchy attack on the cochlea. I turned it off when I sensed her thinking, "What the hell is this noise?" The relationship fizzled out not long afterwards, and I can't think of a much better reason why besides this. Imagine pulling up to a stoplight and the guy in the car next you with his windows rolled down is enjoying an assault of auditory clicks and pinpricks with no discernible rhythm or melody. I am that weirdo. I enjoy the crunchiness of the sound, the search for meaning in a sea of scattered data, like searching for transcendence awash in millions of zeros and ones on a computer screen. Ikeda's sounds are often paired with visual exhibitions. There is highbrow art value to this cluster of intricate white noise, as there is with most music like this, but I have not taken the time to investigate any of that. I simply indulge in the sound as a sensory experience. I can't discuss this stuff in any meaningful way with art critics (nor would I care to) and I can't casually listen to this, or any similarly haphazard music like Merzbow or Black Dice, and not be prepared to come off like a low-level masochist around normal human beings who expect music to carry melodies, harmonies, and rhythm. It's not a guilty pleasure because I enjoy it, but because of *how* I enjoy it. I have a different girlfriend now, but I'll wait to play this

record around her until I'm sure it won't make her wonder if I'm a speedfreak or something.

I have one last guilty pleasure:

Guilty Pleasure #7: Sugar Ray

As everyone already knows, liking Sugar Ray means you dig a combination of four songs, or all of them, but no more: "Fly," "Every Morning," "Someday," and "When It's Over." This band did not age well. They didn't age at all, actually, forever playing to crowds of tourists gulping down beers on a splintered wooden boardwalk over the ocean sometime in the 90's, the orange-peel glimmer of sunrise reflecting off the waves while a bunch of drunk bros in boardshorts fall in. Artistically important music is generally acclaimed for its inability to get stuck in a moment in time. It is expected to outlive its immediate cultural context, to be timeless, eternal. (For example, there are few discernible traces of popular music trends that set Neil Young's *Harvest*, recorded in 1972, apart from *Harvest Moon*, recorded in 1992; both albums inhabit the same folky rural American soundscape removed from the larger pop-sphere.) Sugar Ray is beach volleyball with the buds circa 1999. Its value is in nostalgia for a pre-9/11 America. Mark McGrath, the band's frontman, gladly admitted to this in an interview with the *Chicago Tribune* in 2015, calling nostalgia "a beautiful word. It means at one time my songs meant a lot to you."

I used to share an office at the university I work at with another English teacher, a guy named Michael. Michael was writing a Don DeLillo-inspired novel for his graduate thesis, read Saul Bellow and Michel Houellebecq just for kicks, and was a big Tom Petty

fan. One day we were sharing dreams, the kind of conversation we'd stoop to when we were both in a state of deep procrastination.

"One time I dreamt I was at a Sugar Ray show and was heckling the band," he said. "I was screaming, 'You suck!' and stuff like that, because who likes Sugar Ray? They're so mediocre."

This is the point when Sugar Ray became a guilty pleasure. Have people always thought Sugar Ray sucks? Enough to heckle them while sleeping? Sure, they only have four good songs and McGrath's hair is a little too frosty to the point where it's creepy. Yes, they played in a shitty live-action *Scooby Doo* movie, which, depressingly enough, was the band's last scrape with fame. But these guys wrote some seriously melancholy party music. "When It's Over" is probably my all-time favorite breakup song. Few songs explore the pangs of heartbreak and emotional complexity inherent in wild, unfaithful relationships as well as "Every Morning," and none of those other songs are as catchy. These guys came off like frat bros, but frat bros with feelings. "Someday" is the sound of a mega-popular band commenting on their music's inherent transience, mulling over what it will be like to think back on the good old days even while they're living out the good old days as the song plays. It's all overproduced, but that makes it more tragic; songs this "average," commercial pop-rock made by good-looking dudes headed for trivial obscurity, shouldn't be this self-aware and resigned.

Another thing about Sugar Ray: they recorded a song with the rapper KRS-One, possibly the most outspoken spokesperson for no-bullshit hip-hop. His started rapping when he was homeless. He arguably invented gangster rap. He wrote "South Bronx," both a diss track and a lesson on the culture's origins. KRS-One is an undisputed symbol

of hip-hop idealism, a guy all the heads can agree on, yet he recorded a mediocre rock song about going out on the weekend with Sugar Ray. And he doesn't contribute anything besides babbling in the background.

Is this selling out? A shunning of values? I'm not sure. What matters is that the world is a more interesting place because it exists.

CATCH IT IN A FREEZE

New York City was a different world.

The year was 1980, and Forrest Webb, a skinny, ten-year-old black kid with a fro and big-frame glasses, was riding a bus with his mother, Ramona, to their new home: 790 Riverside, the Riviera building. They pulled out of the Lincoln Tunnel and into a bright New York afternoon with the hue dialed to Fresh. The city was blasted in graffiti. Bubble-letters, throw-ups, end-to-end burners plastered in a kaleidoscopic cacophony of wildstyle tags. Even the insides of subway cars, soon to fascinate Forrest, were splattered over, spraypaint and dri-mark pen ink scribbled on seats and windows and walls. There were thousands of people outside on the streets. Back then, they were rocking blue jeans: Jordache, Sergio Valente, Tale Lord, Lees. They were rocking Pro-Keds 69ers and Converse. Wifebeaters. Chicken hats, ski hats, and kangols. Some guy munched on a huge slice of pizza. The Hebrew Israelites were dressed in their shepherds' robes, clutching wooden staffs and heckling passerby.

Forrest was moving from the shrinking city of Akron, Ohio to an apartment in the big apple, where his mother had gotten a teaching job at a local college. Forrest had grown up in his grandmother's house on Fess Avenue on Akron's west side, with a garage and a front yard and trees and kids running around the neighborhood and a family to help make up for the fact that he was being raised by a single parent. In New York,

there were no trees, no grass yards, just community gardens wrapped in concrete and brick and noise and spasms of color.

He stared out of that bus window and was absorbed.

Forrest was sure he could beat anyone in basketball. He'd shoot around with one of his mom's students, and some days he stood on the sidelines of an outdoor court near the college, watching the big kids.

"Y'all can't play!" he'd shout. He tried boasting his way into games, letting these college kids know he'd take them all to school, but they never let him.

One day, watching a pick-up game, Forrest noticed a guy sitting in the bleachers. He had a pick sticking out from the black poof of his afro, and next to him, propped on the bench, was a boombox blaring hip-hop songs. Now, Forrest was familiar with hip-hop. He'd grown up immersed in music. Back in Akron, his grandfather owned a record shop and would drive him in his 1969 Cadillac Coupe Deville to stock 45s in the jukeboxes of the city's bars. He spent days combing through his mother's record collection in his grandmother's attic. He shopped at a joint near his grandmother's house called Heat Records and bought some of the rap that made its way to northeast Ohio: "Rapper's Delight," "The Adventures of Grandmaster Flash on the Wheels of Steel," Sugar Daddy's "Another One Bites the Dust (Rap)." In New York, the airwaves were transmitting breakbeat-laden funk grooves like Gino Soccio's "Try It Out" and Gwen Mccrae's "Funky Sensation," block party jams like "Funkin' For Jamaica," and feel-good disco-boogie like "On the Beat" by the Brooklyn, Bronx and Queens Band.

But this guy on the park bench was playing flavors Forrest had never heard back in Akron or on the radio in his mom's car.

He became enamored with boomboxes. He loved watching the guys with their afros and Converse sneakers walking through the bombed-out subway, from car to car, blasting rap beats from boxes hiked up on their shoulders.

Eventually his grandfather sent him a birthday present from Akron: his very own Panasonic radio, small enough to fit in his backpack. He discovered hip-hop on the dial. At night, he taped episodes of the World Famous Supreme Team show on WBLS 107.5. When the Jazzy 5 blew up with "Jazzy Sensation," he sat beside the box and readied himself for it to come back on the air so he could press "record" and add it to his tape collection.

His mother would hold dinner get-togethers in their apartment for students in the university club she headed called Third World Caucus. One student, a Greek girl named Gigi, noticed how fascinated Forrest was by hip-hop. She said, "Take a seat," handed him a cassette, and broke the whole culture down.

There were four pillars: DJing, b-boying, graffiti-writing, and MCing. She explained Grandmaster Flash's turntable prowess. She taught him about the first female rappers, The Winley Sisters. She discussed the controversy over the first recorded hip-hop song, which was either "Rapper's Delight" or "King Tim III." Forrest took it all in, then went off to play the tape, an essential supplement to his hip-hop education, stuffed with joints like Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five's "Supperappin," the Funky Four

Plus One More's "Rappin and Rocking the House," the Winley Sisters' "Rhymin' and Rappin,'" and his favorite, the Force of the Five MCs' "High Power Rap." It always made him feel good when Gee-Man hopped on the end of the track and harmonized over the beat to Freedom's "Get Up and Dance," rapping about "walking down the street with your box in your hand" and "snapping your fingers to the sure-shot beat."

"I'm gonna tape this show and rock the whole neighborhood!" Gee-man sang.

Forrest did just that.

"Leave the radio at home," Ramona would say to him every morning before he left for school. He would relent, then secretly stuff the box in his backpack. Once he was out in the street, he'd pull it out, turn up the volume and blast through the neighborhood on his walk to school. The kooky old woman next door was horrified. People gave him weird glances. He didn't care. He was cool.

During the five-minute recess between classes, he'd invite friends to his locker. A crowd would gather around as he set the boombox inside the locker, playing Gigi's cassette and all the fresh new sounds he taped off the radio.

"Yo, you got some cool music!" the kids would say.

He played the mess out of Gigi's tape till it was all worn-out and eaten up. His cat finished it off.

Forrest was on the telephone, talking with a girl he liked, when she said, "Have you heard of this new dance called breaking?"

"Nah?"

"It's this dance where you run around on the floor and spin on your back."

After hanging up the phone, Forrest thought about what she'd said. He knew that breaking was another word for "b-boying," one of the culture's foundational pillars, but he had never actually seen anyone do it. He put one hand to the ground and ran in circles around his bedroom. Was this what breaking looked like?

One day at school, a crowd formed around some kid dancing in the hallway, kicking his sneakers in quick, staccato steps, his legs bending and twisting at sharp angles as he spun around.

"Yo, look at him break!" somebody said.

So this was breaking.

Another kid, Joe Torres, flipped upside down and, with his hands pressed to the ground, spun on his head in a whirlwind motion. Damn! Forrest was more than impressed. This marked the beginning of his life-long passion for b-boying.

Afterwards, he ran up to Joe.

"Yo, can you show me how to do that?"

Joe explained the headspin.

Forrest went home and tried all night to get the move down pat. He bruised his spine, a blue streak running up his back.

"Yo, my back is killing me," Forrest told Joe the next day.

“Don’t stop doing it,” Joe said, “or else you’ll get soft.”

Forrest practiced for weeks until he finally caught the technique, realizing he’d been spinning on the wrong part of his back. Joe showed him a footwork pattern. Then he learned the handglide. He placed one hand on the ground, pushed off the floor with the other, stretched his legs out straight, his whole body revolving in geometric glee like a scrap of wreckage partying on down in a cyclone.

Night after night of the dizzies.

Every summer, Forrest stayed with his grandmother back in Akron. When he came to town, all the kids would ask about what styles they were rocking in the Big Apple. By 1982, hip-hop culture had dripped down to what was left of the nation’s foremost rubber-producing city, which was dwindling in population and importance. The clouds of industry were disappearing, gradually giving way to the region’s natural, non-pollutant grey and silver skies.

When Kurtis Blow showed out to play the Akron Civic Theater with The Clash that year, the marquee over Main St. spelled out “Curtis Blow,” Exhibit A for how the city had yet to fully grasp the whole hip-hop thing.

Trends from New York and L.A. crashed into something resembling a unique cultural flavor. People wore baggy dress pants, wing-tip shirts, and rocked jerry curls, which would get you laughed at back in New York. Guys walked around with rollers in their hair and wore see-through shower caps. Chuck Taylors beat out Pro-Keds. The P-Dawgs gang were repping pillbox-style Pittsburgh Pirates hats with the top layer of

stripes folded down. When criss-crossed fat laces took over in New York, Akronites were rocking different-colored laces and overlapping them into parallel checkerboard patterns. In New York, the move was to rock a belt with your name spelled out on the buckle in big chrome letters. Akron bastardized this trend into the Cadillac Belt. Here, the move was to yank the chrome Cadillac emblem off the hoods of two cars and loop one on each side of your belt.

West coast dances like the pop-lock made it to Akron before breaking, and roller skating was king. At the Hawkins skating rink, DJ Birdman spun east-coast rap joints like Flash and the Furious Five's "Freedom" and the Treacherous Three's "Body Rock" along with funk jams like "Atomic Dog," "Give It to Me Baby," and Sweatband's "Freak to Freak" for hundreds of skaters gliding on the concrete floor, blanketed under the glimmer of the disco ball. When he wasn't freeing his feet the disco way, Forrest punched time on Pac-Man, Space Invaders, and Asteroids. He wasn't allowed to stay all night till the lights came on, though. Ramona had heard the stories about how when everyone squeezed out of the rink and into the night air people were liable to square up in the parking lot and squash beef the fisticuffs way.

One day, Forrest was walking on Diagonal Road with his Akron crew, including a serious big-mouth named Duanne, when some kid stepped to them in the street and introduced himself as Froggy.

"Do any of you guys DJ?" Froggy asked.

"I do," said Duanne, who'd never touched the decks in his life.

"You wanna come get smoked by my boy KC?"

Duanne spat off about his skills.

The crew trailed Froggy into a nearby house, down to the basement, where this guy KC was perched behind the ones and twos, blending and cutting records into the mix. Duanne didn't even bother approaching the turntables.

Later that year, Forrest copped his own DJ equipment: two cheap, belt-driven turntables and a Realistic microphone mixer with four upfaders and no crossfader, purchased from Radio Shack. He tried emulating the DJs in the film *Wildstyle* – Grandwizzard Theodore, Charlie Chase, Grandmixer DST, Flash – and recorded his turntable experiments by pressing "record" on his boombox and shoving it against the speaker.

One day, his cousin Shannon watched him working the faders, switching from record to record.

"Damn, Forrest. You can mix!"

He didn't know what he was doing, but suddenly, he was actually *doing it*.

In 1982, Ramona took a job teaching upstate in Syracuse. Forrest stayed with a neighbor in the city until school was out while she settled into their new place. They had moved out of the apartment on Riverside, but Forrest still had a key.

Night Flight had been playing the video for Malcolm McLaren and the World Famous Supreme Team's square-dance satire joint "Buffalo Gals." The song featured analog drum machines and aubergine-colored synth stabs in the left channel and crude

record scratching and dosey-doe directing in the right. Whenever the video came on television, Forrest studied the split-second scenes when a graffiti writer, wearing full-body, creased, slate-blue scrubs and a flimsy facemask, bombed a clean white wall with the word “BUFFALO” in squiggly letters, sundown orange and creamy yellow against a blue comic-book explosion for a backdrop.

Forrest thought graffiti was beautiful. He tried analyzing the snatches of jump-cut footage for clues on how he could paint like that.

He copped ten spraypaint cans – black, blue, red, green, orange, etc. – a pretty solid turnout for the color wheel, and brought them to the old apartment.

The walls were a fresh re-sell white, just like in the video. Every room was a blank canvas.

He got to work.

For the first time, Forrest experienced the concentrated *whizzz* sound an aersosol makes when you squeeze your finger down on the little circular button on top. He tried painting “BUFFALO,” the letters taller than him, rising to the ceiling. He tried throwing up his name. He tried creating a cartoon character: a black kid with an afro and sunglasses with a star reflected in the corner of one of the lenses. He was clumsy, holding the can too close to the walls. The paint squirted out thick and splotchy. Colors blended into indistinct blobs. Lines trickled all over the floor. The chemical smell, a brain-popping spike to the nostrils, overtook the room. He nearly passed out. He’d forgotten to buy a facemask.

Once he was finished, and light-headed, he went into the kitchen, found some abandoned milk and cereal, and made a bowl of cornflakes. He munched away, admiring his work.

By the time Ramona got the call from the landlord, Forrest was off visiting his uncle in Orlando for the first stretch of summer. He wasn't a troublemaker by nature, and there was no way he could have lied past his mother if he was face-to-face with her back in New York. She had a talent for reading people, an eye you couldn't slip bullshit past. He fibbed over the long-distance line and she chalked it up to neighborhood vandals. Relieved that he'd gotten off clean with his first graffiti exhibit, Forrest spent his summer getting paid by Champion TV Stereo and Rental to break on a long strip of cardboard on the sidewalk in front of their stores with his buddy Tony Touch.

Forrest moved to Syracuse and started ninth grade at Liverpool High School. Breaking was coming up big after the Rock Steady Crew danced to "It's Just Begun," Forrest's favorite b-boy funk anthem, in *Flashdance*. He was refining his style: mostly flashy power moves, and only a few of them, which he worked on executing faster and faster for maximum wig-flippage. He stopped in at a school dance, and when the night's dance-off competition started, he spun around to whatever wack electro-pop garbage the fake DJ from Club Beat was playing. A breaker from another school tried coming at him. Forrest won unanimously.

The next day, he was out with Ramona and saw the kid walking down the street.

"Wassup?" the kid called out.

"You're getting around quick," Ramona said.

It was true. People around the neighborhood were recognizing him. He was getting a reputation for being "the new kid who can break." He was perfecting his moves, trying to impress girls. He was sure that nobody at school could beat him. He'd take out anyone.

"You gotta battle this guy Ray," everyone kept telling him. Ray was a short, stocky, crazy-looking white kid who hung around Syracuse and was a year or two older. Word was he was a bad dude. Word was he'd bombed the whole city, his claim to fame being that his tag – block letters that read "SKYLO" – was scrawled on the Syracuse Carrier Dome. Word was he was one of the best b-boys around. Forrest kept missing him every time he went out to battle at Sports-O-Rama.

Sports-O-Rama was half dancefloor, half roller-skating rink. The dancefloor, where all the b-boys and b-girls convened, smelled a little moldy, while the rink held in a faint scent of leather. The rooms were split by a hallway where people rented skates and sat on plastic benches while they shoved their feet inside.

Forrest showed up one night in time to catch Crazy T rapping to the kids in the hallway. Crazy T hailed from Hollis Queens and was the oldest person in the room. He had a mustache. He walked with a cramped swagger and had no front teeth. He rocked a combed-back fro, the comb stashed in the back pocket of his Lees, which sagged since he didn't wear a belt. He wore a white t-shirt and Adidas with no laces.

"Do me a beat," he said.

Someone banged out a rhythm on a bench with their palms. Others joined in. Crazy T started rhyming. Forrest was dumbfounded. The guy just kept going. On and on and on on and on, as if he wouldn't stop till the break of dawn!

"I wanna battle Run DMC!" Crazy T announced to the crowd. Forrest didn't realize the guy was biting Kool Moe Dee's flow. He was too mesmerized by the energy of the on-the-spot performance.

"Man, you ain't from Hollis Queens," someone called out.

Beef ensued, but Forrest paid no mind; he was hyped and ready to break. He walked into the dancefloor and stood amongst the horde of dancers at the edge of the room, watching battles go down on the floor to the DJ cutting up breakbeats.

Finally, Ray walked through the door. The battle started immediately.

Forrest came at him with everything he had, including his latest move, the No-Handed Windmill. He laid across the floor and spun his body like an off-center screw refusing to pierce wood, legs spread and spinning like helicopter blades, his head repeatedly crashing into the concrete. Ray came back with a crich-style windmill, throwing down combo after combo with moves Forrest had never seen before, rock-shocking the place to be one funky-fresh acrobatic feat after another.

Forrest went home defeated.

"Man, do I really wanna do this?" he thought.

Back at school on Monday, everybody dissed him, including his own crew. "Forrest got served!" they all said.

He decided he would never get served again.

Six months passed. He holed up in his room, practicing footwork. He taught himself how to do moves in combination and end clean. Enough headspins to kill a man with an ear-infection. He started taking gymnastics classes. He wrote out his moves like a band penning their set list, saying to himself, "This is what I'm gonna do to him next time." He dropped his old crew and got down with the R.O.C. (Rockers Only Crew). Him and the Baegan brothers would break while Bruce, a fat dude dressed in all denim, carried around a three-feet-long JVC boombox with a huge cone in the center and smaller cones on each side. Having a designated boombox-carrier in the posse was no oddity. Kids had started wiring boomboxes to their bicycles. Some were pushing boxes on wheels, grocery-cart style.

By now, there was a new spot where all the down-by-law b-boys, b-girls, and serious hip-hop heads came together under the DJ's groove, the new hub of rapping, cutting, and break battling, a spot that, every Saturday night, became the hangout for the roughest crowd in Syracuse, even bringing in city kids, an atmosphere that made suburbanites steer clear.

The spot was Chuck E. Cheeses.

Chuck E. Cheeses put on a teen night every Saturday. When the pipsqueaks cleared out, the fat laces strolled in. The black kids came from the south and east sides. The Puerto Ricans came from the west side. The white kids (who, since they could break

with the best, weren't a touch out of place showing out with mullets and dressing like the members of AC/DC) came from the north side.

No other club packed the same energy. When Forrest was kicked out one night for tagging a bench with his fat-tip pilot marker, the crew skeddadled to Sports-O-Rama to find the scene wack. Nobody was breaking at Sports-O-Rama anymore. Forrest lost the prescription glasses, tossed on the ballcap with his name ironed on the front, switched out his burgundy Puma jacket with Bruce's massive blue and grey one, and walked back into Chuck E. Cheeses, unrecognized in his new outfit by the bouncers at the door collecting the two-dollar entrance fee.

Teen Night was where R.O.C. usually battled their rival crew, the Playboy Rockers, one of whom claimed they could take out the famous New York City Breakers.

One night, Forrest went in against one of their members, a guy named Warren. He matched Warren's moves, going just a bit faster. Warren came at him with a turtle. With his hands pressed to the floor, knees bent, and feet swooshing through the air, Warren's arms held his body up as he spun around in circles. Forrest smoked his turtle, spinning even faster, then busted out his new move, the Thomas Flare. Like a pummel-horse swing-around without the horse. His arms held his torso in midair while he spread his legs apart and twirled them like a pair of open scissors careening from a mountain drop.

"What's this, a gymnastics class?" Warren said. It was obvious who'd won.

Another night at Chuck E. Cheeses, Forrest spotted Ray in the crowd.

This was it. The showdown he'd been throwing down in preparation for every night. He stepped to Ray and called him to the floor.

"I quit breaking," Ray said.

Forrest couldn't believe it. How could Ray just quit? He wanted this victory to his name. Wanted it so bad.

Forrest went in on a session, trying to bring Ray out, but Ray just shook his head.

The year is 1987 and Forrest is a junior in high school. He's taller now, but his face is still hairless. His traps and biceps are hardened from years of breaking. Chuck E. Cheeses has closed down, but rap music is flourishing across the nation. Close-ups of the girls in JJ Fad are transmitting in cathode rays to teenagers sipping beers on living room couches in rural towns where, just a few years back, a person spotted beatboxing into closed palms outside a gas station was probably reason to phone the mental ward. Two of Forrest's favorite songs to break to now are Whodini's "Five Minutes of Funk" (which is studded with vocoder interruptions, the song's robot overseer announcing how many minutes remain until Jalil's rapping and Larry Smith's deep bass-guitar gurgle will be terminated) and DST's "Why Is It Fresh?" megamix (an exercise in carving the voice of Kurtis Blow – peep the "K" – into an auditory switch-blade). Forrest is at his best, having honed his moves through years of competition. But b-boying is dying out, a cultural pillar cracking under the weight of braggadocious MCs. Gone are the days when he could wander into any neighborhood and pick out someone wanting to battle.

Catch him tonight at Studio 15. He's in the crowd while Grace Jones, that slender disco goddess with the flattest of all flat-tops, performs live. Forrest's karate teacher is dating her, so she's cool with the guy standing onstage and busting out karate poses to the

music. Some friends from out of town drove up for this. He's sure that at least one girl in the club has a crush on him. And Grace is rocking it up there.

The show ends and everyone's bugging out. Forrest feels like breaking. Someone throws the music back on through the club's system. Anything with drums will do. He starts going in, doing backflips. People give him room. The usual circle forms. A scraggily Puerto Rican dude with a goatee and mustache steps in. He's b-boyed out: red Lees, white pullover with the sleeves cut off, fat laces in his Adidas, black hair with a bleached-blonde tail in the back.

They break for four rounds. At the apex of the showdown, Forrest tries something he's never done in battle: a headtrack. It's like a corkscrew windmill. He keeps his waist high, kicks his legs up and, without touching his back to the ground, guides his body in circles with his hands, his skull in constant butter-smooth rotation against the floor. He hits five of them, fast – *boom boom boom booom booooom!* – then stops, catching it in a freeze, his hands and head supporting the weight of his contorted body, suspending the action of a flash-frame pose.

"Oh, shit!" The whole place goes up. He's got the battle on wrap. The Puerto Rican dude walks over and shakes his hand.

"Where you from?" the kid asks in fractured English. "I'm from the Bronx."

"I'm from Akron, Ohio," Forrest says.

"Where's that?"

GIVE UP THE GLOW STICK

In an alternate universe scored by slimy Roland TB-303 acid squelches, I am a raver kid.

I stumble out of a crumbling warehouse into the morning heat amongst a flock of zombified youth in fluorescent phat pants and skintight leatherette halter tops. My hair is a greasy fuchsia blast, I'm rocking a snapback visor, and there's a flashing binkie stuffed between my lips. When's The Prodigy coming to town?

I pass out for awhile on the hood of a Camry parked in the street before crawling up to the fourteenth floor of the concrete highrise where I'm squatting with my cat, Teefer, whose collar is a burnt-out neon green glowstick necklace. I sleep on the floor, still in Cons and drenched tie-dye threads, till Teefer licks my sweaty face around twilight and says, "Party Time, Yo!" I inhale a bottle of vitamin B-12 capsules and change my knee-high socks. Beads, whistle, scuba goggles, pocket-sized air horn, stained t-shirt featuring that sinister yellow smiley face: check!

This one time, in real life, I went to a rave. It was going to be my first, except I didn't get in, was turned away at the door cause my I.D. had expired. I'd even brought the perishable food item, a can of Chunky-brand New England clam chowder that assured a ticket price deduction of ten dollars. Was this guy sure he couldn't cut me a break?

"You can join the other dumbasses with expired I.D.s," said the jerk at the door.

I turned towards the group. They were huddled in a circle. Some looked pissed, others despondent. That wouldn't be me!

My friends and I walked towards the lights of the heart of the city, looking for a hip bar to leave me at so they could go back and freak to auditory convulsion stimulants (see: Skrillex, et al.). My buddy Mac wore a sleeveless tee of Einstein's face over a kaleidoscopic galaxy. I was rocking knee-high soccer socks, a backwards, bright yellow ballcap advertising a defunct local semi-pro basketball team, matching b-ball droops, and an eye-popping midday-blue tee, the gameplan being Max Pastel.

The hip bars were quite a ways off. This was inner-city Cleveland, and the neighborhood around the Agora looks a bit spooky after dark, like the stylish Death Specter from Bone Thugs' "Crossroads" video might step out from that littered alleyway to our left, all business in tinted shades and a cloak of an oversized brown leather jacket, and claim some souls. A whole lot of concrete and aged brickwork smeared in shadow separated us from the far-off glow of Terminal Tower.

A massive silhouette leaned against a building beside us, then followed as we passed. The figure moved in closer, now appearing under the streetlamps. This dude was huge, like way taller and thicker than us gangly college dweebs. He wore a Nick Swisher jersey and his ballcap pointed straight.

"Do one of you have any change?"

We said no. Told him I had to find a bar to drown my sorrows in, ASAP.

"I'll show you around," he offered.

Mac glanced at me like, “Bad idea, dude.”

I shot back a look that said, “Well, if he tries to rob me, I’ll just run away.”

Fuck it.

Think of all the people you could be.

I do it all the time. I imagine having grown up on a sunny coastline instead of in northeast Ohio, having naturally developed the ability to surf (in real life, I’m limited to boogie-boarding during my one week a year in paradise) and flirt with chicks at the nearby boardwalk. In high school, I thought about going through a goth phase. How I might die my hair black, learn to skateboard, and convince everyone in school, solely through a fashion statement, that I was way cooler than I really was. I thought high school would be the ideal time to do this, to make a statement that said nothing about who I really was just so I could understand what consciously choosing to become an outcast was all about. The closest I ever got was listening to my mom’s worn cassette of *Japanese Whispers* through the boombox in my bedroom. And, of course, I’ve daydreamed about being various types of rock stars, everything from the moody, downtrodden poet to the guy who loses his shirt and rolls around on a stage covered in broken bottle shards (which, I admit, is a way of saying that some days I want to be Iggy Pop). Can I just be them all?

Instead, I’m twenty-five years old and still live with my dad in the suburbs. I consider myself a hip-hop DJ, which I suppose gives me some license to have strong opinions based on the (albeit strange) lifestyle I choose to follow.

For example, like almost all turntablists (and almost all hip-hop heads, I assume) I hate trance music on principal. No soul to the stuff. And all that wild ravewear is the antithesis of fresh, the exotic colors of fruit in advanced stages of rotting. There's something almost infantile about the fashion. Plus the body is a temple, MDMA is ostensibly bad for you, all that noise…

But I believe that, in another life with slightly skewed circumstances, I would kill it in the club scene. I get down with house, electro, and techno, although I can't speak on behalf of very many techno DJs on the subject of turntable skillz. (My favorite battle record, the Psychedelic Skratch Bastards' *Battle Breaks,* is one-third credited to "Zodiak Tweaker: Killer of 20 TecNo DJs.") But some are technically sound and have mastered the art of driving a floor absolute batshit.

Which is another thing I have going for me: batshit dance moves. Remember all those nights I flailed around at my favorite college bar, smashing into patrons and clearing out the floor till one time the bouncer had to subdue me in a half-nelson and throw my ass out? They couldn't handle me, or so I was told the next morning.

But you know where they could handle me? Anywhere in Ibiza. Drop me in Amnesia or DC-10 and they'd be like, "Aw, that's cute! Someone slip this guy some blotters and show him how to really throw it up."

Yes, I can imagine it well. Giving myself up to The Scene. Sporting glimmering nylon. Coming to in a room slathered in globs of dirty foam, a few unconscious bodies lying on the bubble-wrap floor, clumps of luminous vomit spilling from their mouths.

James was the guy's name. We sat across from each other at a table inside the Ontario St. Café, at least a two-mile walk to downtown from the rave at the Agora, guzzling down Budweisers and shots of bourbon. I looked pretty stupid. It seemed like everyone in the room was dressed in colors that suited the dim, jazz-club-like ambience: brown, black, beige. My outfit was so bright I felt like a lit flare stick that'd been chucked in the bar. It didn't help that the Cavs were midway through an NBA championship series against the Golden State Warriors and I was decked out entirely in yellow, white, and turquoise blue. The can of soup rested by my side. What a night.

James had pleaded skint, so I kept rolling down my socks and grabbing wads of cash to pay for all the alcohol. I didn't mind so much after a few drinks. He hadn't tried to stick me up yet, and he kept saying, "This is *your* night," trying to make me to feel better about not getting into the show and pushing to get us both drunk. I started loosening up and asked for his life story.

James was born in Mobile, Alabama and moved to Cleveland with his mother and sister when he was six. Now he was thirty-five and both his mother and sister were dead. He was a fan of the blues and reggae, had at least three tattoos (the names of his mother and sister in cursive, an ankh with the word "love" under it, and his zodiac sign: Gemini), two felonies, and was staying in a homeless shelter near the Agora, which had closed its doors for the night, hence him kicking around the block.

Not one for small talk, James. Before long we staggered into tipsy meaning-of-life prattle.

One reason I'd started warming up to James was that, under the dim whiskey-tinted lights, he looked just plain sad. Naturally sad, like he couldn't help it. Especially those eyes: murky, dull, drained of white. This man just wanted someone to hang with.

He shushed up when "The Thrill Is Gone" by B.B. King played through the bar. He bobbed his head off rhythm, as if nodding away.

"You hear this song?" he asked. It was one of his favorites.

"Just listen to the lyrics," he said.

We sat silent till it was over. You could say we had a moment. Then he schooled me on the importance of understanding your zodiac sign.

I want to dedicate this section of the essay to the late Ian Loveday, a.k.a. Eon. No, I didn't know the guy, but I grabbed two of his records in the used dance bin when I was a teenager. The "Spice" and "Fear" mixes were some of the first techno joints I ever spun on wax.

"Spice" samples the Human League's "Love Action," dialogue snippets from David Lynch's *Dune*, and a 1982 record of *Doctor Who* sound effects. Throw in some hot-white hellfire synth stabs with the attack cranked to full and the release cranked to zilch, jagged spikes of melody bopping between the two channels like strobe blasts burning your retinas, the next flash disappearing before your drug-addled brain can perceive the one that came before it. Let the breakbeat rhythm guide you through this sci-fi headtrip. Zip open your fanny pack, untie the translucent orange plastic baggie of E

tabs, pop a handful, then wait an hour. The resultant experience must be something close to the feeling that comes over me when those blocks of chopped-apart melody are laid underneath all the intergalactic chaos precisely three minutes and ten seconds into the track. “The spice must flow.”

What does it all mean? That by 1990, a small portion of the planet’s population had gotten into some very strange shit. Or that some dude hunched alone in a studio splashed in red neon haze had concocted a sound half-a-step off from what was being played in the depraved late-nite spots dotting the cityscape outside. Maybe both answers are sort of right? I was dumbfounded listening to it for the first time over a decade later, alone in my basement, completely sober and removed from any contextual basis for the sounds pumping out my speakers.

In the introduction to his book *Generation Ecstasy*, Simon Reynolds describes how he discovered the contextual basis for how to understand (and properly consume?) rave music:

> It was some revelation to experience this music in its proper context – as a component in a system. It was an entirely different and un-rock way of using music: the anthemic track rather than the album, the total flow of the DJ’s mix, the alternative media of pirate radio and specialist record stores, music as synergistic partner with drugs, and the whole magic/tragic cycle of living for the weekend and paying for it with the midweek comedown.

As a basement DJ, I was at least aware as a teenager of the “component in a system” design for how dance music is consumed and banged out. Hip-hop (at one time

intertwined with disco, which spawned house, which eventually mutated into the aggressive circuit board pornography that is EDM) works the same way, a music derived from the DJ as focal point and the club-friendly twelve-inch single as superior to the intricately stitched full-length LP. Beginning around the early 90's, hip-hop LPs blended closer to the arrangement of the cohesive rock album (and Nas's *Illmatic* can probably be pointed to as the best example of this), but pretty much all styles of dance music (save IDM, which stands for "Intelligent Dance Music" and is generally about as easy to dance to as a symphony of high-spin washing machines dueling off-the-hook-telephone tones and sputtering coffee grinders) stuck to the extended mixes, remixes, reworks, edits, and megamixes. You say classic techno album, I say a couple watered-down bangers interspersed with filler. Go listen to a Fabric set, homie.

I've come close to listening to rave music in its proper context, in a large room stuffed with loud speakers and lots of people fucked up on drugs and wearing glow gear, the missing factor being that I wasn't fucked up on drugs but juiced solely on a can of Red Bull. All that vicious EDM didn't do much more for me then than it did in headphones, and it apparently didn't do much at all for ninety-five percent of the ravers there. The peeps spinning technicolor pulse-and-twinkle hula-hoops were *going in*, but almost everyone else just stared at the lightshow and drooled on their Halloween costumes.

I once had a student I taught in an English composition course state in a paper that the only way to fully enjoy Wiz Khalifa's *Kush & Orange Juice* mixtape was to be stoned on herb, the same dictum I've heard countless times from people who always turn out to be full-time wall-starers and very part-time Bob Marley fans passing as hardcore

Bob Marley fans. As if I'm about to let the same kid who used the phrase "melodic melody" in a college essay tell me how to enjoy music. Context is overrated.

I'm glad I listened to "Spice," and all of my techno education records, alone in my basement, out of context, in a neutral environment that made them sound weirder, harder to pin down to a movement or the image of shirtless skater bros in overcrowded bunkers fist-pumping in spasmodic fits to wrought-iron beats pounding at skin-blistering bpm rates that would have caused even a coked-out James Brown to keel over on cold tile.

Freshman year of college, some buddies and I threw a rave in my friend's house while his parents were out of town. We stocked the spacious suburban home with community liquor bottles and beer cases. We cut the basement lights, plugged in one of those cheap plastic disco balls, installed blacklights, and hung glow-in-the-dark shit on the walls. An orgy of dollar-store glow sticks. I brought the turntables and mixer, a bag of techno vinyl, plus two twelve-inch Gemini blasters, and set up shop on a plastic table. One frat bro described it as the best party he'd ever been to. We were only freshman, remember. But then a clique of sorority girls requested "The Best of My Love" by The Emotions. This wasn't a disco! The theme we were going for, or that I imagined we were going for, was closer to a deep-naughties, get-off-your-face throw-down. What did they think this was?

I thought I knew: a bastardized approximation of rave culture by a bunch of suburban teens, sort of like throwing an "old-school" rap party where everyone dresses

up in parachute pants, Coogi sweaters, and puma track suits and “Ice Ice Baby” plays more than once. I brought my laptop to satisfy more modern, non-techno requests and ended up playing Big Sean’s “DANCE (A$$)” to all the fly girls’ delight. As much fun as it was, it didn’t feel authentic, and that was important to me.

I guess my obsession with authenticity probably stems from being your beyond-average suburban white kid who loves DJ culture. It feels as if everything that interests me is of another place and – let’s face it – time. Which is probably why I imagine alternative Kyles, like Raver Kyle and his sidekick Teefer, who somehow trots around with ginormous headphones over his little kitty ears and once dragged a Roland TR-808 back to the dilapidated abode by its severed power cord and placed it on the front stoop as if it was a dead bird.

“Look what I found, yo! Now you can impress all the chicks by re-programming the beat to ‘Brass Monkey!’”

Good boy, Teefer.

Raver Kyle is authentic, or as authentic as my mind can imagine a raver kid to be, whereas back in the burbs, my fascination with any subculture felt like a watered-down version of someone else’s authentic life experience.

When I exhaust my thinking cap on the subject of people doing shit I consider “authentic” or “real,” it breaks down to people who live in and react to extreme circumstances. Being a surfer dude is way more extreme than living in northeast Ohio. What if I grew up without ever seeing snow? Here we get all the seasons, sometimes within a week, but you can’t eat freeze pops in board shorts year-round and make

bumming around town look like an attractive lifestyle choice. Similarly, being a goth is another way of saying "I'm not the poindexter" or "I'm not the jock." I guess I thought about doing the goth thing as a teenager cause at least it removed me from the indifference of being average. I could have consciously decided to slot into any rung on the vapid American high school social ladder. Instead, I didn't stand for anything, and I put just a little too much effort into grades and athletics to consciously stand for nothing.

One of the things that drew me to hip-hop culture was that it was a lifestyle spawned from an extreme environment: the bombed-out housing projects of the South Bronx circa the 1970's. "Spawned" is the key word here, because hip-hop really did come about as a natural response to its environment. In the suburbs, loving hip-hop is completely unnatural. It isn't viewed as a lifestyle, but a hobby. My godfather calls me DJ Jazzy Jeff and laughs. Grandma Millie asks me every year or so if I still do that thing with the turntables, as if it's a phase I should have grown out of by now. My dad doesn't know what the hell I do in the basement. I could be running a meth lab down there, for all he knows, and that would actually *make more sense* where I live, which is one of those inconspicuous parts of the country where meth labs flourish.

What's natural for kids living in the burbs besides doing wheelies on mountain bikes and playing too many video games? Our environment urged us towards activities of leisurely enjoyment instead of forcing us to cling to an extreme way of life that defined us. And I wanted to be defined by something.

But I've started moving away from this line of thinking. I can choose to define myself, a more natural way of becoming, one of those all-too-obvious realizations you're blind to as a teenager. I am beginning to acknowledge that my experience holds its own

authenticity. I did not grow up in the South Bronx circa ‘79. I grew up in a suburb of Akron, Ohio. And in this suburban land, my friends and I threw a goddamn banger of a rave party. I’m proud of that.

Forty crumpled sock bills will get you a long way at the Ontario St. Café.

James and I stumbled back towards the Agora after the bar closed. We laughed at shit that probably wasn’t funny and pissed in some bushes near an overpass. We patted each other on the back, like, “You know what? You’re alright, man!”

“What you gonna do with that soup?” he asked.

I stopped, studied the can of clam chowder still clasped in my hand, looked over towards the parking deck to our right. I gave the wind-up, arced the can behind my head, and launched it into the night air with an outfield lob that would have made Nick Swisher proud, if he was as drunk as us, maybe. It exploded against a wall. White chowder streams sprayed in all sorts of directions and splash-landed in thin streaks across the pavement.

We cheered.

KEEP DISCO GAY

They say there are no guilty pleasures, but they probably have never checked out a disco CD from the local library, one with the archetypal silver ball coruscating on the cover image and featuring hits like “Celebration” (after Kool & The Gang tired of releasing unprocessed funk butters and turned to low-grade take-out), "Que Será Mi Vida" (possibly the cheeriest anthem for Studio 54 nose-candy connoisseurs), and “YMCA” (I cringe thinking about all those tipsy grandmothers who’ve tumbled on wedding reception floors trying to spell it out).

The previous paragraph was difficult to write because: 1. There are so many fun slang terms for “cocaine” to choose from! and 2. I actually like disco music.

Of course, the problem with disco is universal to all genres mainstreamed and diluted for profit by corporate labels (you’ve caught this same lecture from aged flower-children, hiply-dressed teens who rock Ray-Bans, Nirvana fans, etc.): disco became a bad parody of itself. *Saturday Night Fever* hurt, as did Disco Demolition Night at Comiskey Park. Add that disco was inherently a music of homosexual expression perverted into something vapid through heterosexualization and compounded layers of decaying cheese. Imagine the catharsis experienced by every man and woman who shouted the lyrics to “I’m Coming Out” by Diana Ross on packed dancefloors. Now imagine granny breaking

it down to “Shake Your Groove Thing” in the VFW hall rented for the wedding reception. Note the disconnect?

DJs were already cutting out the kitsch before disco’s “death” in the 1980’s. Re-edits –alternate versions of disco songs spliced from reel-to-reel tape that emphasized the funky parts (bass, drum breaks) over the glitzy parts (string flourishes, lyrics) – were made by DJs like Danny Krivit, Frankie Knuckles, and Larry Levan and spun in nightclubs like NYC’s revered Paradise Garage. These have evolved into the sleek, animatronic disco edits and “nu-disco” of the twenty-first century.

For a good sense of the stuff, check out Late Nite Tuff Guy, the Razor N Tape label, and the still-unclaimed New York Edits series with the skull imprint on the label of every record. Punchy basslines lifted from techno, Lysol-clean digital sound quality, vocal snippets splashed like aural graffiti in place of lyrics communicating actual human emotions – these characteristics form a glossy sub-genre ideal for loft parties sponsored by Smirnoff and attended by hip twenty-somethings.

It’s not that I don’t like disco edits. Most of them are heat. Restyling dated music for modern dancefloors and listening standards is practical and generates creative perspectives on worn notes, maybe even getting closer to the “perfect” song. My beef will never be with the act of sampling; it’s with the quality of the music. There’s nothing wrong with stripping the frills. But what happens when you carve out the heart in the process?

Example: The Baron Von Luxxury (note the unnecessary double *x*, a sure sign of coolness) edit of the Bee Gees’ “Night Fever.” Luxxury slowed the tempo, nixed the key

changes, and reduced the Gibb brothers' vocals to stabs of echoed melody weaving amongst those nightdrive keyboards. The track is a series of loops with subtle variation, a flawless exercise in music-as-atmosphere. But imagine yourself at a loft party dancing to an entire set of these unblemished reworks. Where's the catharsis?

I'm down with house music, disco's loopy, drum-and-synth-programmed offspring. I even attended an EDM show once. (An admission: people at EDM shows apparently don't go apeshit like you'd expect; almost everyone crammed inside that photosensitive-epilepsy-inducing playground preferred staring at strobe lights to moving their bodies in rhythmic fashion.) I'm not implying that disco is somehow more authentic than electronic, 4-to-the-floor styles of dance music. It's just that disco is defined by its flamboyance and gay overtones; that's what it has going for it. Stripping away the defining characteristics and referring to the songs as disco edits seems wrong. Top-forty radio stations play hyper-masculine, violent, misogynistic rap on the regular. These motifs are embedded into the genre's mass-marketed model, and America seems to accept that cutting them out would leave sterilized slush in place of art. N.W.A. gets a box office flick for making music that was "honest" and "real." Why can't we feel the same way about disco?

In an XLR8R interview, John MacLean, a.k.a. The Juan Maclean, an electronic dance music producer, shared his opinions on modern disco edits and the hipster audience they're directed at:

> In this crossover of, like, indie people into the dance music scene, I still feel like there's this weird undercurrent of homophobia, where it's a group of people who would consider themselves the most sort of like open-minded and liberal people

> and whatnot, but when things get too overtly gay it makes them uncomfortable…. In the indie, sort of hipster world, you can't be direct like [original disco]. Like, you have to either employ irony or be really clever.

MacLean seems to imply that disco edits are created and enjoyed by the same demographic: the hipster, whereas I bet a lot of these edits are made by DJs who sincerely love disco in its purest form but are utilizing a section of the market they would otherwise never touch with classic disco: the hipster. I have non-hipster friends, though, who avoid gay clubs but enjoy a hint of disco flavor in their uptempo electronic dance jams to keep things from becoming staid. But not too much disco flair. Don't change the keys or pick up a violin or bust out the falsetto for some lines about "coming out," cause then shit gets weird.

In Grant Tyler Peterson's essay "Clubbing Masculinities: Gender Shifts in Gay Men's Dance Floor Choreographies," he calls disco a "secularization and appropriation of Black church music by gay men" and "a popular church of the orgasm." If we accept this interpretation, it's clear that disco was, at its purest, aimed at dancefloor/sexual liberation and that gay disco clubs were meant to be spaces where this release was socially acceptable. Despite straight couples catching on to disco as a "sophisticated" trend, the genre was not meant to be hip, similar to how church is not meant to be hip (although church can be very hip if the congregation does backflips to funkified gospel songs). Disco was meant to have soul, which transcends coolness.

Although the "gay parts" of disco songs, as MacLean refers to them, are decidedly unhip, they are what give the music its soul.

DC Larue's "Indiscreet" is the perfect example of an absolute banger with its soul ingrained in its gayness. The only non-gay part of the song is the b-boy-friendly drum break that made it popular among hip-hop heads. You've got celebratory horns, lush strings, the auditory equivalent of twinkling stars, and the chorus chant of "all I need is love!" The song is a fucking spectacle, an exemplification of the power disco wields through its flamboyance. Do I need to point out the title? Any attempt to make a sleek, Smirnoff-sponsored-club edit of "Indiscreet" would fail. From what I can tell, no one has tried.

But maybe hipsters secretly want a little gayness, a little seemingly superfluous cheese, in their dance anthems? EDM has moments of catharsis through decibel amplification, bass drops, and auditory disorientation/mind-fucking. But it has no soul. It has no feelings. Or politics. EDM would benefit from a potent intravenous Appletini injection of gayness. Techno could use some gayness, too; no amount of MDMA will cause someone to burst into tears at a DJ Tiesto concert. Perhaps hipsters everywhere know deep down, somewhere underneath their flannel button-downs, that the release of pent-up human emotion is what dance music – not always "respectable" or "hip" or even "good" dance music, but meaningful dance music – is all about. And then maybe deep down they fear that meaningful music, regardless of taste, is the only kind that matters.

Of course, there are plenty of straight people in twenty-first century America who can wholeheartedly embrace disco, especially shitty disco.

I recently attended a disco party in the basement of a local dive bar. The idea of a disco party in this particular bar is a fascinating subject itself. The walls are covered with

promotional stickers for rock bands with names like Wallcreeper, Ellen Degenerate, and Supercorrupter. The bathroom has a trough in place of urinals, cup holders attached to the wall, and the fluorescent light is always flickering. I would be disappointed to learn that fist fights aren't an accepted form of conflict resolution in this establishment. At a friend's punk show there, a guy busted his head open and laid bleeding on the floor. The owner was upset someone called the paramedics.

Anyway, for the disco party, the stage, which is really just a corner of the basement, was bordered with silver tinsel. A miniature disco ball hung in front of the DJ booth, and those plastic, rotating orbs that shine different-colored spotlights around the room were somehow attached to the walls, probably with industrial tape. The walls sparkled. This must have been what prom looked like in 1978, aside from the pool table and Pabst Blue Ribbon posters.

One middle-aged couple – an attractive blonde woman in a sequin, skintight, bell-bottomed jumpsuit, and her mate, wearing a fake white suit that outlined his gut, white sweatpants, and an afro wig – kept on doing this thing where she would get on her knees and crawl underneath his outstretched legs. Then he'd pick her up and hold her in mid-air while she straddled him. Pre-game cocaine ingestion appeared likely.

Then I watched the crowd rhythmically point their fingers to the ceiling during "Disco Inferno."

I had expected this, though. The show's flyer was a picture of John Travolta in his real white suit, pointing his finger to the ceiling of a glimmering Hollywood nightclub set. The crowd that night was there to revel in stereotypical, heterosexualized, *Saturday*

Night Fever disco. This must be the popular perception of what disco was about, which explains the widespread disdain for the genre.

At least the dancing was more stylish than what I've seen from EDM trippers and college kids grinding to gloomy trap music. And, despite the self-aware cheesiness of the occasion, some of these people were truly enjoying themselves. There was a faint sense of release in the atmosphere, although it was probably just a release from work week stress, something they would have done at any bar, no disco necessary. This wasn't the essence of disco.

Of course, in a world that treats disco as a ridiculous bygone trend or digitizes it into muscular electro defused of any gay overtones that once embodied the music, it's hard to come to an understanding of what the true essence of disco was, especially for a straight, twenty-four-year-old kid who grew up two decades removed from its heyday. The closest I can get is this quote from DJ David Depino describing Larry Levan spinning records one night at the Paradise Garage: "We went onto the dancefloor. I heard these tweeters playing a song that sounded familiar to me, and suddenly the bass popped in, and my heart almost exploded through my mouth, and I felt like I saw God. I said, 'I belong here.'"

That was disco. And doesn't that sound like all you've ever wanted? It does to me.

So bring back the divas. Liberate your Chic records from the storage closet. Work on hitting those high notes in "Rock Your Baby" during the morning commute. Keep disco's collective unconscious alive and unspoiled. We must celebrate the unabashedly

emotive juices of our most underappreciated and over-abused genre before the world forgets what it was meant to be.

BLOCK-ROCKIN' CUTZ AND SURESHOT BREAKS

Let's get all hypothetical.

It's 1992 and some flabby nineteen-year-old in an Iron Maiden t-shirt reeking of dry beer sweat bumbles into his local record store, still woozy from last night's binge on Old Milwaukee. He flicks through the usuals, attracted to the lurid cartoon drawings marking the covers of metal records: Metallica, Megadeth, Slayer. He's got them all. Another shitty Morrissey album? Oh, great: more Lionel Richie. The bins are especially stale today.

His fingers pause on a record he's never seen before. The cover is a black and white cartoon of a lanky dude biting on a cigar and rocking a ballcap with the words "Rocksteady" etched on it. His Puma sneakers are untied and massive. His arms and legs are all noodley, curling around an electronic box plugged into what appears to be two turntables, which the dude has his fingers pressed into, warping the wax on one platter. He's balancing the whole setup with just his tangled-up legs and arms. A microphone held by an arched mic-stand hangs over his face. Above it, letters are melting (or are they frozen, with icicles poking down from the bottom edges?), an illegible mass of curved, bent, twisted-up, and blown-out angular squiggles that our metal-head assumes is the title of the record.

On the back, in thick, uneven black marker scribble: “This record is designed strictly for DJ tricks and scratching use only. To wreck s… use 2 copies ξ f_ _ k it up!”

He burps and tastes aluminum. He has no idea what this message means, has no contextual backlog in his frazzled mind to make sense of it. He stares at the cover, grinding his teeth, bewildered, his throbbing hangover-brain trying to unscramble a transmission from another world. The cover drawing is pretty fucking cool, though. He slides the record under his armpit, against a mint copy of *Appetite for Destruction,* and dashes outside.

Back in his lair, his Iron Maiden t-shirt now rank with fresh sweat, he slips the mysterious vinyl out of its sleeve and slaps it on his belt-drive turntable. Something unbelievable happens. Did he grab the wrong record? No way!

The record opens with searing guitar feedback, then some fuzzy metal riffs. Oh, shit! This is going to kick ass!

Then drums.

Just drums.

More drums. No changeups. The same drumbeat, over and over and over.

Our metalhead is livid. He grabs a half-unwrapped McDonald’s cheeseburger off the grimy carpet and bites into a greasy pickle. “What a waste of plastic,” he thinks. He tosses the burger and goes into the kitchen to get a hammer, preparing to smash the inferior disc. When he comes back, something even wilder happens.

The drumbeat cuts to the prolonged axe yowl that closes Slayer's "South of Heaven."

Our metalhead stands unsteadily, hammer in hand, grinding his teeth. How long does Old Milwaukee splash around the brain? Is this some shit-beer induced hallucination?

Now the guitar ends and it's drums again. Just drums.

He manages to crank out a thought bubble: "I've been duped!"

He smashes the record to brittle.

The record is *Battle Breaks*, the first DJ-designed battle wax to graduate from secret-stash crates to record stores. I was twenty years old when I went straight to the heart of it all and mail-ordered two used copies from Brooklyn.

A battle record is a wigged-out ruckus of samples detached from their original source material – rap disses, horn stabs, looped drum breaks, synth tones, movie dialogue snippets, isolated instruments – mashed around, blended up, and regurgitated into a discombobulating collage of flâvas for hip-hop DJs to mix and scratch and all-around fuck it up with in head-to-head, live-action showdowns.

This was the problem: I had no one to battle. As a twenty-year-old turntablist in the suburbs of Akron, Ohio, I was just a tier removed from, say, a competitive dog groomer in the scope of peculiar hobbies. But just in case a challenger made his way into Woodhaven, I was catching wreck with *Battle Breaks* in preparation.

Side A contains gobs of beatboxing (complete with that *slurrrrp* sound people make when they're holding in saliva) over drums with the concussive force of a face-smash to warm pavement. There's a shrill scream like a cheese grater to the cochlea. Flava Flav shoutout fragments. Beats in reverse. Sliced-apart reworkings of "Marley Marl Scratch" ("All you other DJs are a bunch of jerks… Give em an example how a DJ works"), the Z-3 MCs' "Triple Threat" ("We are the three gees with a funky-fresh beat") and Run DMC's "Here We Go" ("Cause I just made the motherfuckers up last night!"). The drums change almost thirty times in nine and a half minutes. I used to stare dumbfounded at the rotating wax, wondering what kind of trick I was expected to pull off with a noise stab bleeding into R2-D2 beep-talking.

The B side, as our metalhead discovered, is a pretty boring listen straight through, strictly drum loops for beat-juggling and scratching over. "Garbage!" holler out the crooks from *De La Soul Is Dead*. What they don't get is the beats are essentially a block of marble, and the DJ getting busy on the turntables does the chiseling, creates art from the vinyl's sound materials.

When I pulled my copies out from their thin cardboard shipping mailers, I could tell a down-for-real tablist had once rocked with them. The *ahhhh* sample that opens Side A was murky, as if the needle was sorting through microscopic grit to uncover that most ubiquitous scratch sample of them all, Roger Trilling's searing exhalation at the end of "Change the Beat." I knew this came from hours of back-and-forth scratching. You find your favorite audio slice and spend hours shaving off milliseconds of unwanted drag in a chirp scratch and getting all mathematical on where to click the phono/line switch in a

transformer pattern until the sound eventually wears out to a crackle, buried by the stylus. Turntablism teaches you that love and erasure are the same thing.

A circular yellow cue-point sticker protruded from the center label onto the dead wax of both records. I set the needle to the *ahhhh* sample on both plates, pressed both square "play" buttons, and watched the beefy yellow circles revolve perfectly in sync while a deranged punk who sounded like he had a runny nose and thick globs of spit sloshing around his mouth did a combination of beatboxing and scatting over a drum machine in a thick double-track wad.

I was learning Beat Junkie-style trick-mixing then, replaying videos of Melo-D and J. Rocc flicking their faders with butter-smooth flair with one hand while using the other to baby-scratch the beat, setting it back a bar or two or three, forming new patterns with the same drums. I'd flip to Side B and practice this on the galvanized "Synthetic Substitution" break, feeling like a one-man SP-12.

Battle Breaks was released in 1992 (the year before I was born and twenty-one years before I purchased my copies) by Dirt Style Records. It's credited to The Psychedelic Skratch Bastards: DJ Twirlz, Darth Fader, and the Zodiak Tweaker. These were aliases for the Rock Steady DJs, later known as the Invisibl Skratch Piklz, a turntablist crew consisting then of DJ Q-Bert, Mix Master Mike, and DJ Apollo. (There are few things as quintessentially hip-hop as settling on slick DJ monikers and then releasing a record under new, even more cartoonish names.)

In their world championship-winning set at the 1992 DMC battles, the Rock Steady DJs, all three in baggy white tees and sporting stupid-looking mustaches, went

hyperkinetic and cut *Battle Breaks* into a scalding puree of elephant wails, drippy-wet synths, and rejiggered drums from the Honey Drippers' "Impeach the President." After listening, you have to de-scramble your knotted brainwaves.

I've been DJing for ten years. Since the age of fourteen, I've spent plenty late nights practicing transform-scratching with the fader in my left hand, honing beat-juggle patterns, and scribbling bpm estimates on scrap paper for possible live routines and mixtape blends. I'd say I approach turntablism the same way Q-Tip approaches making music: "I take what I do seriously, but it's a lighthearted seriousness." Still, when I watch this footage of the Skratch Piklz' '92 DMC routine, I feel like one of those Sucker DJs that Dimples D. dissed over explosions and cowbells back in '83. The Piklz attained a level of mastery where mishaps become transcendent moments, where you're no longer sloppy, just plain raw.

I needed to be raw.

The summer before I started high school, back when I had shaggy, sun-bleached hair like a dude in a Reef surfboard advert, I walked my mom's road bike over a primitive hiking trail while clutching a brown paper bag with a twelve-inch single stashed inside. I tripped on a tree root and fell splat in the dirt. Whoosh! The record hadn't broken.

Dad was at work, and mom was sleeping through the day since she worked nights as a nurse. With nothing else to do but play Gamecube or read Stephen King (always the short stories, never the novels) I'd hop on her bike and ride to my favorite record store in search of whatever hip-hop I could add to my collection, which was approximately

twenty records in a cardboard box originally designed for holding bags of Domino confectioners powdered sugar. No doubles. I barely had the basics of blending down. For the most part, the extent of my DJing involved standing on the dusty concrete basement floor in my cotton socks, throwing on a plate, and baby-scratching my favorite parts. I was still discovering how to make defiling a record sound cool. I'd scavenged the 45s in my parents' long-abandoned record collection for heat, or just for anything that might sound good thrown into a mix, but there wasn't much. "Theme from S.W.A.T." was about it. No James Brown. My parents' records were rock and pop music sans groove and didn't align with the hip-hop sounds I was saving up for.

As I grew older, I enmeshed myself in the world of black American funk and soul music that feeds hip-hop, chiseling a rift between the music I grew up hearing. Driving in the car with my dad one day, I flicked on the r'n'b station while "Everybody Loves the Sunshine" was playing. He'd never heard it before, and he looked at me funny when I told him it was a classic. Everyone digs Roy Ayers, right? That wasn't the case in the sonic world my parents were raised in, locked into radio stations rehashing the history of popular white music and largely ignoring the sounds played in the households of black, inner-city neighborhoods, sounds that often directed the progressions of popular music.

I studied the record back at mom's apartment. It had a generic, all-black cover marked at two dollars. The center label was a cream off-white with the word "DJ" printed in huge pink font and a tracklist in tiny, deeper-pink font. Side A had 100 tracks ("Dynamite Soul," "Get Wicked," "Mixx Master on the Fader") and Side B had 103 tracks ("Takin' It Underground," "Turn This Mutha Out," "My Style is Da Best"). There was no artist listed, just "DJ-04" printed on the label.

This record was pressed just for me. Amongst all the dollar-bin gunk I'd found something designed specially for the hip-hop DJ. When I played it, I discovered each "track" was a short snippet of audio. Some were from golden-era joints like "Criminal Minded" and "You Gots to Chill," others from funk classics like "The Champ." There were sounds from film clips ("Over? Did you say over? Nothing is over until we decide it is!"), cartoons (Wily Coyote yelping in pain), and popular television (the intro to the Johnny Carson show, which could be reworked into a DJ's grand entrance theme). It felt cool owning a record that the average buyer would have no use for, proof that there were others like me out there in the world, people who could get down with a record of two-hundred disparate audio slices etched into the grooves. Where were these DJs? Were they holed up in their basements too? Show yourselves!

I used to have a soccer coach who'd tell us to go outside for at least five minutes every day and "just get some touches on the ball." That's how I went about turntablism in high school. Just practicing baby scratching with my left hand for a few minutes was at least some time spent sharpening my skills. I eventually took to training on the turntables like I would train for cross country races, with occasional long bouts of intense mixing offset by shorter, laidback cut sessions.

Except there was no equivalent to race day.

For years, I was a basement DJ in the most hermetic sense of the term (and things haven't changed much now that I can drive). It isn't strange that I trained so hard to never battle anyone; it was strange to eventually learn that there are a lot of people who do the same thing. In the world of turntablism, being regarded as a basement DJ holds idealistic merit. Scratching the word "fresh" into impossible specks of alien sound is an unlikely

talent, one that is understood best by people who do it. The champions of turntablism are turntablists, so a respect for the Emily Dickinson-esque recluses of the community comes naturally. We're artists for the sake of art.

"There are so many DJs out there who are not recognized yet," Q-Bert once said in an interview with *AV Club*. "People think I'm real good, but there are a lot of DJs I've seen that are totally mind-blowing already. I'm just lucky enough to have my little spotlight. But there are a lot of DJs who haven't even competed. They're called bedroom DJs, and they just stay home and practice all day. Those guys are really, really good. There are tons of good DJs that you might never know."

There are others like me, scratching alone in their hip-hop bunkers against imaginary mixmasters and juggling instrumentals for imaginary MCs. Which is funny, cause DJs are supposed to rock the party.

There's a black-and-white photograph of Biz Markie (taken by Charles Dubose and used as a t-shirt design for Cold Chillin' Records) that's spot-on representative of the life of a serious hip-hop DJ. Biz is sitting in a cramped room, propped sideways with his knees bent, crammed to a sliver of uncluttered floor, surrounded by a disarray of record sleeves, audio equipment, and a turntable setup on the desk behind him. So much stuff. Everywhere. His gut bulges out his tee. The look on his face is one of exhaustion, as if the mess around him is crowding just as much of his psyche.

Every time I see the photograph I'm moved by how alone Biz looks. Not necessarily lonely, but entrenched inside this tiny private space, the artifacts of his obsession overbearing his physical presence. Of course, Dubose was in the room,

documenting hip-hop's most prominent goofball in his natural habitat. But why didn't Biz contrive a showboatey pose, assume the b-boy stance? Stand up, arms crossed, make another iconic funny face? Portraits of rappers almost always capture the combination of apparel, posture, and gesture that forms a persona, one that matches their persona on record. What's off about the Dubose photograph is how it's flat-out unaffected, devoid of flaunt and debonair. LL Cool J looking fly in his kangol and leather jacket while hoisting a boombox over his shoulder represents hip-hop's flare, but the photo of home-ridden Biz presents the lifestyle of a true head, moments spent holed up in studios and record shops and overstuffed bedrooms.

No figure in hip-hop is more accustomed to this solitude than the DJ, the culture's fundamental root and backbone.

The words of Grandmaster Flash: "I mean, if you're going to really be serious about this, you know, you got to cut out all your fun activity… go to school, go straight from school in the bedroom, close the door, lock it up and just do it, you know? And people were wondering why I wasn't going to play basketball or hanging out. I couldn't do it. I was thinking about something, and I wanted to make it a reality."

That was from a 1997 MTV interview in which an unlikely twenty-four-year-old turntablism darling, DJ Shadow, got to meet Flash, his hero. When the interviewer commented that Shadow "must have spent a lot of time in his bedroom" practicing the techniques he was explaining to her, Flash interrupted to drop knowledge, as if he'd been waiting years to let the world in on those solitary hours spent rearranging "Take Me to the Mardi Gras" on his kitchen counter.

Over the years I collected more battle wax. In the swamps of Jacksonville, I discovered a spot crammed with cassette-tape skyscrapers where I uncovered *Beats for Jugglers 3*, concocted by arguably the best battle DJ of all-time, Roc Raida. (RIP. May you be freaking doubles of "Nobody Beats the Biz" and pushing faders with your nose up in the sky.) Big ups to mom for buying me *Cached*, which mashes Machinedrum's moist synth tones with aggressive scratch sentences compiled by two-time DMC champion IE.merg, a tablist whose style is best described as violent. I culled copies of DJ Rectangle's goofy *Ultimate Battle Weapon* series from various crates. One has a boom-bap mix of the *Halloween* theme (Michael Myers might look stiff, but he's got mad headspins) and another is stuffed with audio snippets from old kung-fu flicks. For Christmas, I asked for *Super Duck Breaks*, having spent a decade watching smoky footage of Rob Swift performing surgery with it. Grandma Millie came through and nabbed doubles, though they could use a trip to the de-warping machine to steady all that wobble.

I've still never found a rival DJ to battle. An adversary in baggy sweats never rolled through Woodhaven with his decks packed on a flatbed à la Tribe's "Oh My God" video and challenged me over a megaphone while b-boys threw down windmills in my soggy front yard. I'm currently taking applicants.

Preferred qualifications:

1. Must rock all vinyl, dishing out equal props for electro, dusty breaks, and backpacker hip-hop.

2. Must sport a utility belt from which you can pull replacements needles.

3. Must be willing and able to commence battles by setting fire to your own aluminum turntable platters (don't touch my shit) in the style of hibachi chefs preparing to dice up stir fry.

4. Must be capable, under duress, of sprouting a third arm from your torso, or at least be able to scratch a record with the soles of your sneakers.

In the meantime, while I wait on contenders to line up on my doorstep with Rane mixers tucked under their arms, I've made one up. My nemesis was created for a spoof tape by shit-talking myself through a microphone drunk on guitar-pedal fuzz.

"Yo, this is DJ Wonderbread, and I'm calling you out, Disco P. Word on the block is you think you can scratch. I don't believe that shit. Come correct or get dissed, son. Let's see what you got."

So I grabbed the battle wax and unloaded an overdubbed panoply of cuts sharp enough to dismember a whole crew of wick-wack techno DJs, those soulless androids posing as humans.

"The joke's on you, Jack!" cries out LL Cool J from the final grooves of *Bigger and Deffer,* laughing at the spaghetti mess of electrical wires spilling from Wonderbread's shredded metal carcass. "We did it again! Take that!"

Word up, LL. I don't mean to get violent over here, but surely you know the struggle of the real DJ. You always championed the cut creators. You understood that your voice would live on for decades through the vinyl record, and so you immortalized yourself in countless turntablist brawls with "Rock the Bells." You understood how a noise detonation in "Get Down," all that chaos squeezed into one downbeat, would

soundtrack the competitive blaze of DJs executing breakneck beat-juggles. By giving us props, you solidified your spot in the history books, because now we will never stop spinning your jams.

We're lashing out at the fakers, our backs pressed against graffiti-speckled walls. Battle DJs have always thrived on aggression, but we need even more of it now that Walmart mp3 mixers are turning wannabes, who in an earlier age would be naturally driven towards dopeness by all the true-school talent around them, into patty-cake button-pushers. We are a diminishing species that is growing fiercer. Like tigers whose jungles are continually pushed against expanding villages, sometimes we have to drag off casualties, cast a perpetrator down the wastebasket. Most DJs these days are wedding selectors who act like they're of a more rugged sect just cause they downloaded the latest trap joint. Believe me, son.

Or call me a hater. Fine. Us battle DJs have always tended towards the snobbishness of artists who consider themselves both misunderstood and underappreciated. You start double-slicing the break to "Rock Creek Park" and get blue-screen expressions instead of the bugged eyes and lax jaws you imagined when you laid down the routine at home. That's how shit goes. It has taken years of playing out at local bars where audiences just want to dance to music they've heard countless times for me to come to the big realization that most people don't give a damn about skill, artistry, flipping wigs, etc. They'd rather you were a wedding DJ. Or at least that's how it feels most of the time.

The culture of battle DJing is evolving (and, in some cases, de-volving) through elaborate technology, thanks to mixers that make cueing a record as easy as pressing a

blinking button and that have turned live, multi-track mixes that would have taken four turntables and months of practice just ten years ago into something you can do with two decks and a mixer plugged into a laptop. (I'm still rocking vinyl, except to use the word "still" is to imply I'm a step behind, when really I feel as though I'm a cultural cultivator, true to the roots of the artform, as snobbish artists are always wont to believe.) As DJs become more entranced by the glow of their MacBook screens, the artform seems to be thinning out, headed for disintegration. My favorite DJ blogger, Pipomixes, has given his own state-of-the-turntablist address: "This thing of ours is dying. I see it every day as I continue to try to bring all of you fresh mixes and videos. There is simply less material to weed through… There really isn't a generation behind us to pass the torch to. Mix until the lights go out."

I held fragments of this same thought in my domepiece during all those shows when I fucked around on some overly-technical get-busy shit, mistakes be damned. I understand a dancefloor's desire for catharsis through uninterrupted groove; it's one of a DJ's magical purposes. But I'll always have the urge get a little too crazy on the decks, striving for perfect ambidexterity and failing with that rough, rugged, and raw flavor, a way of announcing to the world, "We're still here."

ICE

I imagine that, on the evening of 25 August 2018, Rakim, The God MC, was holed up in the recording studio of his stroboscopic Mothership, bowed over an MPC sampler, about to bless the stuffy airspace with a rhyme over a horn-splashed midtempo beat when, suddenly, his Perpetrator Senses began to tingle. Somewhere in the world, a massive eruption of wackness was, once again, transmitting in the name of true-school hip-hop.

There I was, six-dollar bottle of Bud Light in hand, standing under the lavender swell of nightfall in the bleachers of a half-empty college football stadium in Akron, Ohio for the "I Love The 90's! Tour." I was covering the event for a local magazine and brought my buddy Skunk along. We were both clear outliers in the crowd, two dudes in their mid-twenties, both five Natural Lights deep, encircled by hundreds of tipsy, forty-something year-old white women in New Kids on The Block, Vanilla Ice, and *Saved by the Bell* t-shirts.

Skunk was surely the only one wearing a tattered Tool shirt and a bandana. I've witnessed my scruffy backwoods comrade dance a cartoonish bastardization of the Irish jig in a dive bar to the housey pulse-pop of Kiesza and then, at the song's climax, roar and clutch his buttoned-up shirt by the collar, ripping it apart and sending buttons pelleting in all directions, some of them hitting the cute girls sitting behind us who somehow, up to this point, had ignored Skunk's buffoonery. Skunk buffoons it up, man.

Unless he gets to thinking about his ex-wife, a girl he was infatuated with when I met him a few years back. He married at twenty-two and was divorced by twenty-four, just a few months earlier. I hadn't seen my man all summer, so I figured I'd invite him to the show, which was a short walk from his off-campus apartment.

I was stoked for this. Sure, the lineup wasn't the rawest representation of hip-hop's second golden age: Coolio, Young MC, Rob Base, Naughty by Nature, Salt-N-Pepa, and Vanilla Ice. But still, I'm one of those hip-hop heads who's convinced there's value in the pap and cheese acts the hardcore heads disregard. Imagine if all rappers were socially-conscious, acutely political, roughneck backpacker types. Imagine a world without "Push It." No way. Once you've fought for your right to party, you have to exercise that right. And let's face it, no one shows out to the club so they can dance to Common.

I pondered my wardrobe before leaving my crib. "Straight Outta Akron" tee purchased from a street vendor on the corner near the car wash I worked at? Nah. Wrong era, plus those N.W.A. undertones are too fierce for a feel-good time. Honey-golden Lebron throwback jersey, stunner shades, and backwards ballcap? Ridiculous. Why don't I own a Coogi sweater? Where were my parachute pants? I swore I owned some!

Fuck it. Jeans and a polo.

Naughty by Nature slurred their words through a strictly-hits set: "O.P.P.," "Hip-Hop Hooray," "Everything's Gonna Be Alright," that other one nobody knew. I strained to make out the lyrics to "Hip-Hop Hooray" and failed, and I've heard that song probably

a hundred times. It's kind of impressive to botch a fan favorite beyond recognition. Bud Light must have been free and plenty backstage.

"I don't think they remember the old school!" one of the MCs taunted. They tried hyping the audience to rap along to a long-forgotten song and failed (though it's likely most of the crowd had never listened to it back in the day either). After a few minutes they gave up, and when he repeated this same sentence, it wasn't a challenge but a resignation, as if what he meant to say was, "Damn, they really don't remember us."

Rob Base had just played. His set peaked when everyone in the stadium sang along to Neil Diamond's "Sweet Caroline," complete with scatted "Bah Bah Bahs!"

This was supposed to be a throwback rap concert.

Rakim would have scowled.

Rob's DJ (not his original DJ, E-Z Rock; R.I.P.) played the Backstreet Boys' "I Want It That Way" (one of my jams as a six-year-old with a bowlcut, along with "Genie in a Bottle" and "Livin' La Vida Loca") and the theme to *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*. There'd already been about three Serato-rocking, laptop-consulting DJs on stage in the span of an hour, and none of them knew how to operate a crossfader. When no one was rapping, the tour's sorry excuse for hip-hop's foundational pillar would play a song for thirty seconds, stop, spit some hype-man bullshit into the mic, then play another long-repressed American top-forty, no transitions necessary. As a turntablist dweeb, I felt personally offended. The DJing at this concert functioned no differently than at the back-to-school parties that reckless freshman, clawing and snatching and wrist-grabbing to

plug their smartphones into the auxiliary audio cable, were probably throwing in the sorority houses across the street.

I looked to Skunk.

"Let's leave after Salt-N-Pepa play 'Push It,'" he said.

I agreed. Sorry, Vanilla Ice. No way were we going to stick around for your closing set. Despite the positive vibes emanating from a woman rocking sneakers with pulsing technicolor lights for midsoles and busting moves on the turf field below us, I was beginning to feel oddly depressed. Which I realize is an outrageous way to react to a massive concert headlined by rappers dropping celebrated lyrics such as, "Can I get some fries with that shake-shake booty?" It wasn't that Skunk and I waited half an hour in line and missed Coolio (who only played his hit "Gangsta's Paradise") and Young MC when we could have been sitting in a bar and downing another five beers before the show. Although I did regret that.

Maybe it's because I believed that music I loved was being debased on a huge scale. All these Gen X-ers approaching middle age paid sixty dollars, plus outrageous beer prices (or eight dollars for alcoholic seltzer water, possibly the most acute antithesis of the term "gangster" that has ever existed), to stand around and get drunk to songs that weren't much more than background noise potent enough to spark memories of their wayward youth. That made me sad, for some reason. I was being pushed in a stroller and singing along to *Barney* jingles during hip-hop's second golden age. The good stuff never popped into my cozy suburban childhood, or at least not into our Camry's station pre-sets. Yet I sincerely love old-school hip-hop. Right now. In 2018. Attending a concert

advertised as a time-machine to one of my favorite eras of music and finding it all so damn stale was something I could barely handle. Maybe this is how meaningful music dies, with a suit from 98.1 WKDD taking five minutes to plug their upcoming, weeklong all-90's playlist. Ok, fine.

As a fan, I felt worthless and jilted. What does that say about me?

Vanilla Ice sits hunched on a charcoal-tinted cushion, dabbing his forehead with a scrunched-up white gym towel. His pompadour resembles a fresh scoop of frozen custard protruding from the cone, a milky blond streak blended into the sheeny hazel crest. It could melt off his head any minute. He has a sharp-edged sine wave shaved into his low fade and his left eyebrow has three prominent slits shaved into it, a precursor to Windows 95 downloading bars. He's dressed in baggy, full-body nylon, a shimmering silver/green/black outfit he definitely ganked from the Power Rangers' command center closet. Whole appearance considered, he looks like a glam-rock space invader beamed in from the set of a no-budget sci-fi film.

The year is 1991. Ice is twenty-three years-old, arguably the most widely recognized voice and image in the world and is noticeably anxious sitting beside Arsenio Hall. He's nodding his head, taking quick, stunted breaths and making a face like, "Whew, this is a lot." Arsenio gestures towards Ice and tries for an opening remark. He stops, smiles, overwhelmed by the girl-freakout shrieks of the live-air audience. These chicks are going nuts. Ice beams into the stage lights. His hairdo glistens and refuses to thaw. The jitters dissipate, and you can feel his confidence welling up as the space

invader image disintegrates and all that's left is a cheesing kid from Dallas, Texas with the guts to disregard talk-show etiquette and invite his homeboy Flava Flav on stage.

I watched this interview on my laptop a week after the "I Love the 90's" show and realized that, damn, the 90's weren't what I thought they were. I can't believe this was the same year as *The Low End Theory*, *Breakin' Atoms, All Souled Out*, and *We Can't Be Stopped*, rap classics that, to me, stamp that transitional year for the genre as Certified Gold (whereas 92 to 94 were Certified Platinum). Discovering hip-hop a decade later, spinning records alone in my basement, I misconstrued the early 90's as the era for conscious raps over downtempo, jazz-sampling boom-bap. Which I guess it was, but that's not the hip-hop most people remember. There are days I forget "Ice Ice Baby" exists (and, most days, I wish it didn't), yet it was still one of the biggest songs in the world that year, despite having been released in 1989. Part of why Vanilla Ice appears alien to me while watching this interview is because it feels like I'm uncovering an alternative pop-scape of 1991, one in which shit went very wrong. This is not my 90's, but I guess this is how it really went down.

A *New York Times* article published ten days before Vanilla Ice's appearance on *The Arsenio Hall Show* solidifies my ignorance of the decade: "Critics say that less challenging rappers like M.C. Hammer and Vanilla Ice are monopolizing air time; indeed, their music may be the only rap heard by the mainstream, making them more novel and marketable." And here I assumed more people were down with the realness. That same year, Dan Charnas of *The Source* wrote that, "To those folks who think of themselves as guardians of 'real' hip-hop culture, that [Vanilla Ice record] sounded like rap's death knell." It seems like Arsenio would have agreed; he spends the whole

interview, right up to the awkward parting handshake, skirting a line between passive aggression and outward ridicule, at one point asking Ice if inviting Flava Flav onstage was a stunt to "show that [he had] a black supporter," a question that triggered booing from the audience. Arsenio represented hip-hop's reactionary force in the battle against the dilution of the culture caused by its miscegenation and dissemination away from urban hotspots and into the mainstream. A losing battle.

Salt-N-Pepa made all the fly mothers of the greater Akron area get on out there and dance. Their attitudes were saucy, their delivery was bossy, every word enunciated in bold so that the people could get down with the message: female empowerment.

Skunk smiled and nodded to the beat. This was the group he came to see, but he wasn't buck-wiling like I thought he would. He'd been unusually calm tonight, having only purchased one more beer and drinking it at a respectable speed. I've seen this guy break it down on 80's night at a bar across the street while holding a Budweiser in each hand at all times. Something was up. Maybe the show was bumming him out too.

I wondered how uncomfortable the girl sitting beside me – who looked barely old enough to be in high school and had come with her bench-glued, presumably un-fly mother – was feeling when Salt-N-Pepa kept sprinkling on the between-song sex banter. During one of the songs, they invited all the ladies from the pit onstage, and afterwards it took a few minutes to shoo them off.

"Damn, these Akron girls are *aggressive*," one of the two rappers said. (I clearly still don't know who reps which condiment, and though I understand that's

journalistically irresponsible, is it that much better to attribute dialogue to ubiquitous dinner table seasonings?)

Charlene, a tipsy forty-three-year-old fan who came "to get together with her girlfriends and have a good time" saw me jotting down notes and asked me to interview her.

"What's your favorite song from the 90's, Charlene?"

"Atomic Dog!"

I should have expected that. But maybe there's no value in defining a decade by its pop culture output. Maybe Charlene's 90's were defined by slugging down strawberry Cisco to "Atomic Dog" (which was released in 1982) in her dorm room, surrounded by posters of David Duchovny in his dorky *X-Files* getup and the same homegirls who were sitting beside her tonight. I sort of felt like an asshole explaining to her that she didn't have her years straight.

"You look like a real dork sitting there writing shit down," she said.

But I *am* a dork, Charlene. Who else at this show was peeved because, after Salt-N-Pepa left the stage, yet another DJ got up there with a laptop connected to his turntable setup and still couldn't blend? That's like putting training wheels on your bicycle and then walking it down the street.

In a righteous universe, Rakim would soar into Akron on the Mothership and hover over the stage. With a blinding flash of light, a table holding two Technics 1200's and a Rane 56 mixer would appear.

A voice in my head: “Go forth and catch wreck.” It’s Rakim, urging me towards the decks.

I’d take the stage, and with every scribble scratch, the sucker DJ across from me would melt, Wicked Witch-style, from the feet on up, till he’s just a reeking puddle that the janitorial crew has to mop into a bucket.

At least Salt-N-Pepa’s DJ Spinderella pulled off a decent transformer scratch for a second or two, enough to prove she might have touched the decks once or twice since the 90’s. Give me a bag of vinyl and I’ll battle any of them. They can use their computer software, if they know how to. Someone needed to get onstage and come correct, to show these uninhibited suburban moms that DJing is an art form and that what they’d witnessed so far that night was a travesty.

I bet no one else in the stadium thought (or cared) about this. I can list maybe five people I know personally who understand what a transformer scratch is.

Not only was this not my 90’s, this was not my hip-hop. Something in the tone of Charlene’s voice when she called me a dork made me feel disappointed for even finding it worth caring about. The wack shall inherit the planet. As long as there’s alcoholic seltzer water, who gives a shit.

In his 2015 *Grantland* article “Follow the Leaders,” Thomas Galanopoulos chronicles how Big Daddy Kane and Rakim, plausibly golden-era hip-hop’s two best MC’s, have fared in the culture during the 21st Century. Kane has opted for playing throwback shows similar in concept to the “I Love the 90’s Tour.” Golianopoulos claims

that Kane "was comfortable with his place in history, and so around the turn of the century, he retreated from New York, settling in North Carolina" without the impulse to create new music in a vastly different soundscape.

"Rakim is not going quietly," Golianopoulos writes. "He still burns with a desire to regain his throne."

On the week of the "I Love the 90's" concert at the University of Akron's Infocision stadium, the number one rap song on the Billboard charts was Drake's "In My Feelings," the video for which opens with Drake tossing a rock at some girl named Kiki's bedroom window, schoolboy crush-style, and admitting his love for her, a scene that would have ended your career as a streetwise rapper in 1992. Drake always sings while he raps, and, if you were to isolate some of the lyrics from his music, you wouldn't be wrong to think you were reading the diary of a moody sixteen-year-old who just happens to have precocious taste for expensive liquors and lots of international girlfriends.

This is rap today. When my younger brother, who's an avid Drake fan, hops in my car as I'm playing old-school, underground tapes, he's turned off by the battle raps and untreated voices and complete lack of singing, and, if I don't bat his hand away quickly, he flips on the local hip-hop station, Cleveland's 107.9, which is either playing "In My Feelings" or sing-the-chorus autotune rap.

Rakim can never expect renewed mainstream success in a world like this. He is, in my mind, the go-to representative for what makes pure hip-hop, the kind of guy who'd rather sit at home and keep it real than scamper after new trends he's not down with so he can keep getting paid in full. He might be the best rapper there ever was, and, in terms of

lyrical complexity, he has my vote for the best there is today, should he decide to grace the mic once again. But the airwaves don't care about lyrical complexity anymore, just like they don't care about turntablism. Splitting wigs is no longer relevant. Hip-hop now is about ectoplasmic synthesizer melodies, simple rhyme schemes, lines resembling mantras, repetition, lagging behind the beat, and drowsy delivery. Hip-hop culture has always been aggressively infatuated with trends to the point where "best" simply means "latest." What Rakim stands for, what I believe to be the definition of keeping it real, has been long forgotten. If he makes a comeback, it will be appreciated by a select few dorks such as myself. For everyone else, like Charlene from the 90's show, the value of old-school-style hip-hop and anyone associated with it is solely in nostalgia.

Vanilla Ice has accepted this.

In a different interview, this one from the winter of 2018, Ice sits across from a reporter from Valuetainment, both of them in cushiony poolside chairs on a spotless patio outside Ice's Palm Beach mansion, which is being renovated off camera for his fixer-upper/design show, *The Vanilla Ice Project*, by a crew of dudes who, for the few seconds the camera flits on them, look like well-off fraternity bros who grew up worshipping Tony Hawk. Rap fame is strange like that. Ice has transformed over the past twenty-seven years from twinkling spaceman to having a laidback, "coolest dad in the neighborhood" look, what with the lime green snapback the exact shade of a Monster energy drink can and the matching hoodie, ripped blue jeans and cream-colored work boots. Ice does not appear the least bit distraught over his entire life of fame and leisure stemming from an obscure combination of having released the first hip-hop song to top the Billboard charts and shortly thereafter making a cameo appearance in the sequel to a children's film about

stocky, human-sized turtles who've perfected the roundhouse kick. He is proud of it, actually.

"I think the song ['Ice Ice Baby'] is more than a song," he says. "I think it became an anthem, almost to the point where it surpasses a number one hit song and it just takes on a life of [its] own and becomes an anthem when people listen to the song and remember, like, a photographic memory: who they dated in high school, what kind of clothes they wore, maybe they ripped out their backseat and put in sub-woofers. And they can play this song and it all comes back, without going through a photo album."

Ice is so hyper-attuned to the value nostalgia adds to entertainment that he has developed his own theory (the only theory, really) that defends "Ice Ice Baby" as an important piece of art and not just a sub-par, conventionally structured, and adequately executed pop song. Every time I hear the opening notes to the *Rugrats* theme, I get nostalgic, as do all 90's babies whose households had cable television. That does not mean every time I hear the *Rugrats* theme I am further convinced it is Mark Mothersbaugh's masterpiece. Ice has confused artistic significance with cultural relevancy. His song sucks, but it's the one that got lodged in people's domes. That does not mean it surpasses, in quality, a forgotten banger like Adina Howard's "Freak Like Me."

The question I'm having trouble answering: Why do I care so much? I mean, who wastes their time considering the artistic merits of a song that includes the line, "I'm cooking MCs like a pound of bacon," when to almost everyone else it's just something funny and fun to dance to? Nothing more. Hip-hop as a culture was originally based around who could throw the best parties, and all the DJs steering the dancefloors back in

the day were spinning records over a decade old. MCs were yapping about making people break it down to the break of dawn before the genre morphed into politically conscious social realism. Maybe, in spirit, this pathetic 90's throwback concert was closer to the "just have fun!" spirit of primitive hip-hop. Maybe I think too much.

I'm also just a white kid from the suburbs. And, I'll admit: I once got drunk on alcoholic seltzer water. It's no Natural Light, but the stuff is pretty damn good. Who am I to make fun of all these moms?

After the show ended, Skunk and I walked back to his basement-level drag of a living situation. We sat there until nearly three in the morning and, as the night progressed, he shared with me some harrowing stories about his divorce. It was clear to me that, if I didn't force myself to get up and leave at some point, he was never going to run out of easily retrievable heartbreak. The stories kept coming. I'm sure there are songs Skunk can't listen to anymore, songs embedded with whatever dark energy is the opposite of what has kept Vanilla Ice in the public consciousness all these years. I sat and listened and felt stupid for having a notebook resting on my lap that contained notes criticizing the moves of the super-fit dancers with six packs who did backflips onstage while Salt-N-Pepa turned it out.

HANIF CAN GET DOWN

As I type this review, I'm listening to "Award Tour" and nodding my head like I'm front row for A Tribe Called Quest's 1993 Arsenio Hall performance under lavender stage lights. I discovered Tribe in a different world than Hanif Abdurraqib: not in Columbus, Ohio, but Akron; not on cassette tape, but a Greatest Hits CD stolen from the public library; not as a black teenager realizing that Tribe's jazz-imbued hip-hop was acceptable to play in the house, but as a white fifteen-year-old suddenly on a mission to become a true-school turntablist in an environment where such a dream was laughable.

Fandom aside, this book is on point. In *Go Ahead in the Rain: Notes to A Tribe Called Quest*, Abdurraqib blends his talents as both culture critic and personal essayist for a meditation on perhaps the most influential hip-hop group from the genre's sample-laden boom-bap era in the early to mid-90's.

The book opens with the music of African slaves who “would use drums to communicate with each other, sending rhythmic messages that could not be decoded by Europeans” and then offers a short history of jazz starting with New Orleans cornet player Buddy Bolden. Abdurraqib’s wide-panned establishing shot, tracing the lineage of black music as far back as the 1600’s, is ambitious, but appropriate since Tribe were outspoken advocates of Afrocentrism, constructed their brand of hip-hop from classic

jazz samples, and perfected the most popular genre of black American music around during their short-lived heyday in the 90's.

Abdurraqib follows the chronology of Tribe's career (also touching on Tip and Phife Dawg's solo albums, Phife's passing, and the unexpected reunion album in 2016), but isn't interested in writing straightforward history. Instead, he opts to muse on subjects as far-ranging as the New York City blackout of 1977, *Jet* magazine publishing the photograph of a drowned and frozen Otis Redding, the squandered talent of Tribe's fellow Native Tongues crew member Chi-Ali, and the dense turmoil of Bomb Squad productions. *You Want It Darker,* the album Leonard Cohen released weeks before his death, is linked with Phife's rhyming on Tribe's last record, *We Got It from Here… Thank You 4 Your Service,* which was released after his passing. The tenuous connection inspires Abdurraqib to write on the "verses of the dead" and how a recorded ghost "echoes long after the music ends." Interweaved with these tangents are scenes from Abdurraqib's own life, such as failing to play the trumpet in middle school and losing his wallet on a road-trip in a setting similar to Tribe's "El Segundo."

The most moving sections, though, are Abdurraqib's letters to Q-Tip, Phife, Ali Shaheed Muhammad, and Phife's mother, renowned poet Cheryl Boyce-Taylor. He admits to Q-Tip that for years he wrongly blamed him alone for Tribe's breakup. In another letter to Q-Tip, he discusses the beating of Rodney King and Tribe's subsequent album *The Low End Theory,* thanking Tip for "knowing the type of political album that the world needed at the time: one that wrapped its politics in ideas of a type of freedom" and fashioning the rage of black Americans "into a hunt for empathy." He reaches out to Cheryl Boyce-Taylor about the death of her son, sharing his own story of losing his

mother as a child. He tells Ali Shaheed Muhammad – the group's DJ, whose presence in the book is lacking – how he danced to Muhammad's post-Tribe group Lucy Pearl "underneath the fluorescent lights of Beechcroft High School's gym during a lunch period sock hop that had no business taking place in an afternoon when some of us had to get back to class right after." Abdurraqib describes how he kissed a girl to their song "Dance Tonight," then "retreated to a classroom that afternoon, baptized in sweat and whatever a teenager imagines as love" and "let the song rattle around in [his] head for hours, tied to the end of countless possibilities." It's during these moments, when Abdurrabiq's inner critic concedes to his inner fan, that the prose radiates with his unrestrained love for the music.

Go Ahead in The Rain is constructed like a Tribe album. In the same manner that Q-Tip found ways to make a stack of disparate samples congeal as if they were always meant to fit together, Abdurraqib melds the group's backstory with heartfelt letters, bits of memoir, and an experienced critic's scrutiny to form an unexpectedly cohesive read. However, Abdurraqib doesn't aim to mirror Tribe's musical and verbal ebullience, opting instead for a tone that's often elegiac.

Go Ahead in the Rain is in many ways a tribute to the late Phife Dawg. His levity, underdog attitude, sports fandom, and knack for punchlines is stamped throughout, and his death looms from the early pages, when Abdurraqib drops this line: "It can be said that the entire story of jazz is actually a story about what can urgently be passed down to someone else before a person expires." Phife died at age forty-five from complications from diabetes. The man was known to love his sugar. Abdurraqib's ode to the rapper, a way to keep him from "being reduced to a cautionary tale," is touching:

> Today, on the day you are gone, I hope every bodega and every corner store gave away Kool-Aid by the cup. I hope kids went to stores with their parents' money and walked out with pocketfuls of candy. I want candy thrown from the cliffs. I want candy to rattle off of my roof now instead of the water from the sky while your verses play. I want my people to take better care of themselves, but I wanted a day for us to revel in what you loved, if only for a moment.

The book ends in the present day, specifically with Tribe's 2017 Grammy Awards performance, during which the group (sans Phife, and joined onstage by Busta Rhymes and Anderson .Paak) protested Donald Trump's presidency, with Tip closing out the set by chanting, "Resist!" The jump in chronology doesn't feel abrupt, despite this being a book set mostly in the decade of bib overalls and Coogi sweaters, because Abdurraqib isn't preoccupied with selling nostalgia. The vantage from which he dissects Tribe's legacy is rooted in the heritage of black music and delivered from the present cultural moment, making *Go Ahead in the Rain*, much like Tribe's music, capable of remaining relevant for decades to come.

DROP THAT AESTHETIC

Vaporwave is your knobby 1980's television spraying you with a refreshing technicolor drizzle; garishly-decorated corporate reception rooms, all deep reds, greens and blues clashing in geometric repose; the pulpy taste of plastic office plants (microwaved, of course); a bath in fruit-flavored nail polish; the Tokyo skyline sparkle viewed through lean goggles; the on-hold jingle that wants you laid.

To be less ambiguous, vaporwave is a genre of sample-based electronic music made from 1980's and 90's television adverts, dated synth-laden pop and r'n'b, smooth jazz, sticky-fingered funk and other cheeky sound sources that are edited, sedated to DJ Screw-like tempos and looped for maximum earworm. Vaporwave thrives online, with few artists putting out physical CD or vinyl releases. The monikers for popular projects – 18 Carat Affair, Macintosh Plus, Luxury Elite, Windows96 – convey the genre's obsession with decadence and turn-of-the-century technology. There's lots of fun ways to describe the stuff, like this quote from *a DIY Magazine* review: "Imagine for a moment if you will, a parallel universe in which Tom Cruise's 1988 hit *Cocktail* were actually a gritty noir, full of smoke-filled scenes of low-lit bars and brutalist executive suites." Careful, you spilled some glow-in-the-dark Belvedere on your suit jacket.

Vaporwave is about altering memory. These artists burrow deep into dated pop-culture debris for nostalgia-triggering samples and skew period-flavor details until they fabricate a space outside linear time.

For example, the quintessential vaporwave track, “Lisa Frank 420 / Modern Computing” by Macintosh Plus, is over seven minutes of the Diana Ross synth-popper “It’s Your Move” (a record that’s familiar dollar-bin clutter, the kind of stuff hip-hop producers have been thumbing through and disregarding for years, like most vaporwave samples) spliced and then slowed to a sail over clear blue pixelated calm. Throw in a few echo effects and that’s it. Yet “Lisa Frank” offers an entirely different (forgive me) vibe than Ross’s original. Who would have known how blunt-toke-worthy the sounds on peppy 80’s synth-pop records could be? Macintosh Plus is a genius in the same sense that Jace Clayton once called DJ Screw “one of the great, lazy American geniuses” for creating chopped ‘n’ screwed rap. Screw’s zombified, lag-tempo mixtapes, featuring rhymes delivered by either red-eyed swamp creatures in reverse ballcaps or faceless government informants with Darth Vader voice modulators, were the unlikely forerunner to vaporwave.

Most vaporwave is sampled from or imitating music originally recorded for major-corporation advertising, easy listening, or to cash out on the comfortable glitz of then-trendy pop music, the obvious subtext being a critique of shopping-mall sheen. In an article for *Esquire*, Scott Beauchamp focuses almost entirely on the genre’s politics, highlighting “the little tiny ghosts of the failed promises of consumerism” and how vaporwave artists are “bound up in resisting commercial success, in mocking it.” This is all true, but for listeners like me, it’s all about the drool-inducing enjoyment. Vaporwave

isn't trying to sell you anything besides the idea that the experience of someone trying to sell you something can be pleasant, cathartic even. Imagine an infomercial edited to accentuate not the sales message, but the color palette. It's no wonder vaporwave enthusiasts bombard the comment sections of Youtube videos with the word A E S T H E T I C in full-car caps.

For me at least, listening to vaporwave is about as intellectually stimulating as watching one of those ASMR (Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response) videos where people tap on cardboard boxes, lotion bottles and lipstick cases or pretend to brush your hair through the camera while clicking their tongues or whispering positive-thinking mantras into a microphone. The hairs on my neck prick up and my brain liquefys. It makes me feel good, and the enjoyment isn't necessarily dependent on close-listening for subtle details or a cultivated understanding of context. For the most part, people either watch ASMR videos or think they're uncomfortably New-Agey and never worth clicking on again. The same goes for vaporwave: you either dig listening to the musical equivalent of 90's motion-graphic screensavers or you think it's stale or artless or both. You can develop a sense of what makes the stuff good, but it really comes down to whether it makes you feel good. The enjoyment of vaporwave is more a reaction than a refined taste.

Sometimes this reaction triggers a memory you've only experienced through television, as happens to my girlfriend, Addie. Despite never having visited LA, Saint Pepsi's spotless fizz-funk jam "Cherry Pepsi" "makes [her] feel like [she's] partying at a supremely 1990's Hollywood Hills Mansion (we're talking that beautiful Getty Center architecture), watching the sunset over the skyline, wondering what everyone else is up to

on this summery Saturday night and how it couldn't possibly be better than this." She's being sold her own re-heated cathode visions glazed in high-fructose shellac. I get a similar feeling watching Saint Pepsi's video for "Enjoy Yourself," which was stitched from footage of 1980's McDonalds adverts featuring Mac Tonight, a crescent moon sporting a black leather jacket and dark stunner shades who plays piano for a sleepytime Metropolis from atop a rotating Big Mac burger. This is set to Saint Pepsi's narcotized edit of Michael Jackson's "Off the Wall," which takes maybe fifteen seconds of audio and transmogrifies it into unrecognizable bliss. I have been here before, looking down on the amber squares of skyrise apartment windows stippled against dusty blue twilight. And surely Michael's mutant baritone croon was made for this. But these ads aired years before I was born, and the king of pop wasn't mulling over the taste of double-decker fast-food cheeseburgers when he phoned up Quincy Jones to produce bubbly disco anthems.

"Why does vaporwave make us nostalgic for a time most of us were not alive for?" asks Youtube user cmphenom21 in the comments to Saint Pepsi's song "Private Caller." The web hollers back.

"Bro that's so true**.**"

"Curiosity+feelings+thoughts= nostalgia…"

"Cuz it reminds you of your past life."

Further down the comments, iankasley submits a quote from media theorist Marshall McLuhan: "Ads are the cave art of the twentieth century."

Those who discredit the music for being nothing more than kitschy appropriation are missing the point; the substance lies in the unsettling potency of the nostalgia it triggers. It's background scoring for visuals wafting through the subconscious minds of people who can recall fragments of cosmopolitan culture in the 80's and 90's through the sounds that were associated with it.

Check out the cover for 18 Carat Affair's 2016 EP (if you can even call it that, since the four tracks in total clock in at just over four minutes) *N. Cruise Blvd*: paused VHS tape footage of sleek glass skyscrapers overlooking a concrete highway bridge adorned with purple lights, all set against the backdrop of a cloudless, late-evening, periwinkle sky. The snippets making up *N. Cruise Blvd* sound as if they were spliced together from crumbling cassette tapes. The music reflects the blurriness of the cover image. One track is a slowed-down, couple-second loop of Roy Ayers' "Everybody Loves the Sunshine," morphed just barely beyond recognizability into a minute-long auditory snack perfect for cruising the scene adorning the cover. The title track is a warped nightmare of reverb-drenched drum machine splashes and detuned synthesized bell-chimes, like a jolly kaleidoscopic Christmastime jingle with a dissonant color palette, the reds oozing to pinks and the greens blending to pappy yellow smoosh.

Some might find this trite. Why would a producer in the year 2016 spend his time making (or, rather, re-making) music recalling cheeseball images of the not-so-distant past? How is this much different than, say, the purpose of cover bands?

The significance of vaporwave lies in its ability to recontextualize memory by manipulating the sounds of a bygone world that many of us can still recollect in glimpses as hazy as the music itself. Yes, it's kitschy appropriation, but the best of these records

offer surprisingly vivid sound worlds fashioned from various sample sources that, in some cases, have undergone only about ten minutes of rudimentary editing.

Imagine the big-picture perspective of someone 500 years into the future looking back on the original source material for vaporwave and vaporwave music as essentially the same thing, unable to discern predecessor from imitator. Pop will have eaten itself, spit the chunks back up, and consumed them again so many times over that four-disc compilations consisting entirely of reworkings of the same song can be made, with liner notes written by historians obsessed with each respective "genre" (since maybe the idea of genre will have shifted from what we consider styles of music based on well-worn patterns and themes to the breadth of remixes of the same song) guessing at when each piece was recorded in relation to the others based off analyses of perceivable loop splices, reverb, tape hiss, electronic glitches, etc. Future Pop Historian will wonder why primitive, carbonated-soda-addicted man was infatuated with relentlessly reshaping the same sounds instead of creating new ones. What was it these people were trying to perfect in this music? Did they believe they could find bliss through tweaking a five second loop until it mirrored some image buried in the collective consciousness of a generation?

Vaporwave is the most extreme example of the backwards-looking tendencies of 21st Century pop music. Culture critic Simon Reynolds wrote an entire book on this trend with *Retromania*, concluding that we are in an age of "hyper-stasis," a term that "describes situations in which potent musical intellects engage in a restless shuttling back and forth within a grid-space of influences and sources, striving frenetically to locate exit routes to the beyond." He believes this trend in music parallels our hyper-active, internet-

crazed culture, which causes “rapid movement within a network of knowledge, as opposed to the outward-bound drive that propelled an entire system into the unknown.” There’s seemingly no limit to the music we can consume with a quick search, scroll and click, so why (or how do we) create anything “new” when we’re already swimming in sounds? Or more like bobbing and just barely staying afloat in a whirlpool, since immersing yourself in a deluge of past styles and influences takes on a cyclical motion, trapping musicians in a funnel of retro instead of breaking the tide and pushing into new forms that make up “the beyond.”

It could be assumed that vaporwave artists aren’t concerned with “the beyond” as Reynolds would define it, as avant-garde art that splinters from or disregards previous forms, art that is entirely new and in no way derivative. The music of the future. However, vaporwave is actually almost as forward-chugging as hip-hop in its mid to late-80’s golden age of unrestrained sampling, a genre created almost entirely from funk and soul records that would mostly have been recognizable to the audience, a young generation of black Americans whose parents’ vinyl was being transformed into something mutant, loud, and aggressive. It presents an alternate musical sphere from the shards of an already existing one.

Listen to how vaporwave artists Luxury Elite, 猫 シ Corp, and Bl00dwave altered “I Can’t Let You Go” by U.K. jazz-funksters 52nd Street from a glinting midtempo love song into, respectively, a smoke break atop Miami Tower (“S.W.A.K.”), a hallucinatory endeavor at communicating with the inner-spirit of a palm tree (“[Twin Palms]”) and a stumble on a polluted beach after having sipped enough purple drank from a 44-ounce styrofoam cup to discern the after-image blur of every slug-paced tourist strolling at a

pace as slow as your pulse (“Grace”). Each track is a unique mood achieved through similarly minimal editing techniques. Compile enough of these into a playlist and you have the aural equivalent of Warhol silkscreen variations of a single image. And then you can imagine the tousle-haired iconoclast futzing around on GarageBand, overtaken with rapture as he desecrates the synthesized jingle for a Japanese deodorant commercial.

“What does it all mean?” queries Fiorello La Guardia, mayor of New York City circa World War II and the voice behind perhaps the most widely-sampled question of all time.

It means the resuscitation of the art of audio theft, which accounted for the most creative music of the 20th Century before being stifled by salty musicians (all of them guilty of appropriation from the moment they tinkered with a melody!) and nervous record labels by the start of the millennium. In the coming years, may the vaporwave sound A E S T H E T I C continue to rise from the crags of Bandcamp, Youtube, and Reddit and influence whatever shreds of monocultural radio will have endured the internet’s conquest against oppressive Creative Commons licensing. May irreverent keytar samples spray forth from our laptops and permeate the air all around us with the soft pink tones of a half-remembered sales pitch.

ARE WE NOT RUNNERS?

I awoke, as I had countless times before, on a sunken couch in a destroyed room. I was an island in a sea of Genesee cans (the Official Beer of the University of Akron Men's Cross-Country Team) and drained longnecks of sorority-blitz vodka. Terrance the Baby Doll, naked and armless, smiled down on the disarray from his spot on the wall, above the five-foot speaker tower and to the right of the American flag intricately fashioned from beer cans by a guy who stayed in college for six years.

I stood up, stripped, slipped on the split shorts with just enough tangerine-colored mesh to conceal my groin. I changed into my evergreen Nike singlet. My New Balance racing flats were a shade or two brighter than the red, four-tiered energy dome I'd be wearing within the hour.

It's not often anymore that I wake up wondering which slight movement will set my brain sloshing around and bumping against the hard casing of my skull. This was one of those mornings. Graduate school and failed stabs at maturity had kept me from partying much with my college running buddies since my NCAA eligibility expired with a fourteenth-place Great Lakes Regional finish in the mid-November murk of Madison, Wisconsin over two-and-a-half years ago. But now here I was, the morning after my return to dumb shit. A hangover was imminent.

Except it never arrived. I walked into the blue July morning and set out on my warm-up jog downtown. I descended through campus, feeling refreshed. The lush grass plots, used mostly for ad-hoc games of Ultimate Frisbee, were unperturbed, an optimistic green. I neared King James Way, the stretch of Main St. renamed two years earlier, just after Lebron smushed Iguodala's textbook layup against plexiglass and won the region its first professional sports title in fifty-two years. I listened closely for (yes, there it was!) the music of Akron's own DEVO, perky synths bouncing between multistory brick. No, they don't get their own street. They do get a dedicated 5K, though. One that brings hordes of spuds out from their crevices, most in complimentary red t-shirts with "Devo" popping across the chest, one letter per vibrant cartoon explosion. Some wore rubber Booji Boy masks, the band's baby-faced mascot who's even creepier than Terrance.

Time to defend my title.

As a toddler, fifteen years after Devo performed "Whip It" in black muscle shirts and their energy domes (which resemble an exoskeletal torpedo sprouting from the brain) for a group of beer-drinking farmhands at a dude ranch, I could run a mile. I graduated fast from the purple aerodynamic baby jogger my mom would push me around in while I daydreamed that bikers cruising past on the crushed limestone trail were stormtroopers on *Star Wars* speeder bikes decked with laser blasters. I'd shuffle alongside my mom for one mile, from a parking lot beside the Cuyahoga River to a round, aluminum encased tunnel dug under a bridge surrounded by woods. Inside, I'd curl my lips into an "O" and hum loudly, getting a kick out of reverberation.

The tunnel is where my dad would pass us, same time every day, our family trio of runners in near-perfect sync. He'd be in short shorts, shirtless and hairy, doused in sweat. My dad is the sweatiest person I know (except maybe Dr. P., who we'll get to soon). He couldn't have been wetter had he jumped into the nearby river. I'd be so excited to wave to him, cheer him on for a few seconds as he ran by, a scene that flipped in middle school when I would be the one dashing out from the woods on a cross-country course, trailed by a cluster of other gawky teens, and pass him shouting over the rest of the parental mob.

My family weren't hardcore Devo fans, though living in the suburbs of Akron, Ohio automatically bestowed upon us an almost inherent appreciation for their small-time celebrity status and obscure cult following.

Akronites are proud of Devo, even if they don't understand them. Devo's 1978 debut record, *Q: Are We Not Men? A: We Are Devo!* was dissonant art rock grounded by their theory that humans were "de-volving," as explained in the song "Jocko Homo": "They tell us that / We lost our tails / Evolving up / From little snails / I say it's all / Just wind in sails / Are we not men? / We are Devo." Rock critic Robert Christgau said that "in small doses" the record was "as good as novelty music ever gets." Moving through the early 80's, the band welcomed more and more the futurist squelch of synthesizers and electronic drums. Outside of Akron, I assume they are probably remembered by the masses as a one-hit wonder, courtesy of the MTV airing of "Whip It" solidifying into a staple of 80's new-wave music video nostalgia, but I can't accurately report from the inside. (I only recently learned that Lebron James is apparently scorned outside the state of Ohio to a Tom Brady-like extent. Who knew!)

Packet and t-shirt pickup for "5K Devo" was at a booth inside the running shop where I sell shoes to the folks of Akron's flourishing running scene. You best believe I rolled through their discography on the store iPod, awarding multiple plays to "Through Being Cool," the nerds' battle cry against ninnies, twits, evil spuds, and some fellow named Mr. Hinky-Dink. Some of the sign-ups were Devotees, people in town for the annual Devo convention in Cleveland who decided to sign up for the 5K the following day in Akron, despite never before attempting one. Most of them, though, were the same people who run all the local races. General opinion I gleaned: all of them Devo supporters who might not be able to recognize more than a song or two besides "Whip It," but who admire Devo as a cultural force, a band that to them is clearly not a one-hit-wonder (despite them only knowing the one hit), but an idiosyncratic cult phenomenon deserving of local pride.

In an unlikely turn of events, I became friends in college with a curly-haired 800-meter dash specialist, Sean "Dr. P." Poholski, who ran for my high school's rival track and cross-country team. (The shining day of his high school cross-country career was when his team won a big-time meet due to my friends and I getting suspended for vandalism in what has followed me through the years as The Soccer Goal Incident). Between bouts of oxygen deprivation and lung-burn, Dr. P. and I discovered that we shared an affinity for certain bands Robert Christgau had been celebrating in his *Village Voice* Consumer Guides since the 1970's. Among them was Devo, though what was an unfulfilled curiosity for me was a childhood fascination for Sean. He was reared on De-Evolution.

At age eight, the precocious boy who would one day be labeled "doctor" for the same reasons as Dr. Dre (for being fresh-to-death in the eyes of his cohorts) was sketching energy domes and the radioactive chemical drum he'd caught in the "It Takes a Worried Man" video. His father took him and his brother on a field trip to the very same staircase that Booji Boy sprinted up (bad form, dude!) to deliver papers detailing the concept of De-Evolution to his own father, General Boy, in the group's first video, "In the Beginning was the End: The Truth about De-Evolution." The staircase is attached to a building on Front St. in Cuyahoga Falls, the Akron suburb where I sat on the carpet watching *Rugrats*, my favorite cartoon, the theme song to which was created by Devo frontman Mark Mothersbaugh. For years, Devo's sounds flitted over my barely-developing mongoloid brain, whereas Sean's brother would eventually get a Booji Boy tattoo and Sean would grow up to be offended when I innocently posited, via text message, that Devo was "a gimmick band."

"Don't you fucking dare," was his reply.

I redeemed this faux-pas by enlisting for the first-ever 5K Devo in 2017 in hopes of winning an energy dome. Well, the top-three finishers in each age group won a dome, but I'm an ambitious spudboy. I've come to realize that each local road-race is a chance for me to chip away at the constant disappointment I feel for having just barely missing an individual qualification for the national cross country meet during my final semester of college. This happens to a lot of runners, no matter how successful. All of us have unwillingly abandoned scraps of ourselves on race courses. For me, it's the frigid, hardened dirt of Madison, Wisconsin on a day when every aspect of running felt natural but somehow still wasn't enough to reach the Big One, the pinnacle collegiate meet. In an alternate

universe, maybe I am satisfied, capable of finally letting go of competitive running. But in this mortal coil I am, in some small but gnawing way, unresolved.

Every race still brings pre-race jitters, even when I step to the starting line in the same cardboard glasses with long, flimsy black lenses that Devo wore for a photo shoot with nothing else but fake plastic breasts and boxer briefs (is Mark in split shorts?) while topless women caressed their groins. In the last half mile of the first-ever 5K Devo, the lead biker directing me pedaled off to the side of the course, leaving me by my lonesome. I was a minute ahead of second place, and a bit disoriented wearing those tinted shades, which absorbed my temple sweat and felt as if they were melting off my face. I missed a turn, flew right past it, revving up to my finishing kick speed toward where I thought the race might end, till a regular customer from the running store popped out from the crowd and pointed in the other direction.

"That way, Kyle!" he screamed.

Good looking out, Ray.

Devo's Gerald Casale, looking dapper in a black suit and energy dome, shook my hand and awarded me my very own funky red exoskeletal torpedo headwear. I stood on the elevated stage and saluted the crowd of sticky, barely-dressed spudboys and spudgirls. Grandma Millie was proud, announcing over Facebook that I had placed first overall in the "Devo 5K half marathon." Never a runner, Millie, but I love her so.

The following year, I stepped to the line more confident in myself than I had ever felt before a race. My brain was still remarkably clear despite the previous night's celebratory booze assault against its neurotransmitters. With possible front-page photos for

tomorrow's news spooling through my head, I shouted over to Jim, the race director, telling him to let me wear his energy dome. He handed it over, announcing to the crowd of racers in matching t-shirts behind me that, should they get lost, "just look for the guy in the energy dome." He'd apparently forgotten the short-circuit that had occurred in my alcohol-free brain during last year's race, but no worries. I was already imagining quotes to nonchalantly offer journalists who'd be waiting anxiously for me to cross the finish line, as if anyone gave a rotten potato about who would win this 5K. Before Casale declared to the mass of runners that "We are all Devo" and fired the starting pistol, I had settled on my line.

"It's really no big deal," I'd say. "You see, I'm only a spudboy, looking for that real tomato."

I bolted from the throng at the familiar crack of blank pistol fire, opting for the uncomplicated racing tactic I developed in college: lead from the gun and mentally batter the competition until either they submit or I physically break apart.

Of course, I understood how ridiculous and non-serious this race was, hence the part where I crushed cans of Genesee to ACDC's "Thunderstruck" the night before. But the five minutes leading up to any race bring an intoxicating level of focus, and I at least become convinced every time that this is the most important moment of my life, no matter what the stakes. In college, this pre-race tunnel-vision was the apex of a day's worth of slow-drip anxiety. Before races, I used to sit for hours on locker room benches, alone, staring at the floor. Or I'd lie on my back, eyes fixed to industrial fluorescent light fixtures dangling from fieldhouse ceilings. Waiting in hotel rooms for the bus to leave was the worst. In preparation for the 5K at the Mount San Antonio Relays, I sat in bed from nine

in the morning till seven at night, getting up to pee every fifteen minutes, leaving only for a Subway footlong and a two-mile shakeout jog. The shades were drawn, hiding me from the energy-zapping sunshine of gorgeous Pomona, California. I persuaded myself that this self-inflicted bedridden state would keep my muscles "fresh" and hone focus through what was essentially sensory deprivation, hours spent alone so I could visualize the big moves in the race, dreaming up different scenarios and plotting how I'd react to each one. Right before a race, the anxiety converts to fear, a source of energy.

Probably the best moment of my college career was racing the 3K at the indoor MAC meet on the home track of our rivals down the road, the Golden Flashes of "Can't Read, Can't Write, Kent State." Coach Labadie, a croaky-voiced sexagenarian prone to bragging about breaking the four-minute-mile and his ability to feel the globe revolve during meditation, walked over minutes before the race with his head down. This was the second-to-last event, and I knew Kent was up on us, that we might not have a chance to win.

"You have to win the 3K," Labadie said in a flat, matter-of-fact tone, something like a mechanic reminding you to clean the carburetor. 'That's the only way we can win the meet."

I went through my embarrassing skip drills, which really hadn't changed much since middle school, when my team lined up and practiced the same routine every day beside a boombox blaring a CD that has since caused me to loathe hearing "Funkytown" and the theme from "Ghostbusters." I ran a few stride-outs. I probably pissed my pants and left a puddle on the track, covering it with my Adidas racing spikes, a habit that would become worse through each season. I led from the gun, allowing an Easter Michigan kid

to pass me halfway through the race and pace out a few laps before I swallowed him on the backstretch. My high school coach used to encourage us to find opportunities during races to break people's spirits, a strategy I fashioned into my modus operandi in college.

During the final laps, looping around Kent's track (the circumference of which measures 292 meters instead of the universally standard 300, an apparent computation boo-boo that's no surprise because "Can't Read, Can't Write," etc…), the collective roar of gristle-throated screams was as loud as an arena-sized rock concert with the band cranking their guitars into the red with aspirations of filling every inch of audio space in the room. Teammates I barely talked to were leaning into the lane and screaming hot muddles of noise into my left ear. The atmosphere at the after-MAC party would be decided by this race. I pumped my scrawny arms at waist-height and sprinted in my damp gold uniform top and probably piss-soaked, navy-blue split shorts from a fading pack of other lanky dudes while hundreds of fans forged the constructive roar. Devo knew how to make a room whoop like this, whereas I was just trying to transfigure panic into a kind of confidence. Or maybe there is no transfiguration. Maybe all these years I've been bullshitting myself.

My dad was somewhere in the crowd.

I run because I love it, and I race because I'm competitive, but I'd be lying if I didn't admit that sometimes I'm still that mop-topped toddler enamored with dad as he comes chugging along through the shadow of that cool metal tunnel on the towpath trail. After I won the 3K and hauled off the MAC MVP trophy and sent the Golden Flashes knuckle-dragging back to their caves defeated, he met me on the track.

Now, I know how proud he is of me. It shows all the time, was always easy to discern when he'd drive me to school and share anecdotes about how someone he knows wanted to congratulate me on some such race. But he's never been one for ecstatics, rarely loses control and abandons his cool (unless, of course, you turn the thermostat above sixty-five or forget to do the dishes, which triggers a nasty scowl worthy of a WWF pre-match staredown). I handed him the trophy, offered some post-race chit-chat, tried to act nonplussed, as if I wasn't exploding all over inside. He gave me a "good job," returned the small talk, waved goodbye when I jogged off for a cool-down. He offered to take the trophy home so I didn't break it on the bus, which my dumb ass was apt to do. I realize he was probably exploding all over inside too, but was holding it together, and it was like we were getting coffee after a run on a Sunday morning instead of living out the denouement of the greatest race of my life in a sport I grew to love because of the years I spent wanting to be like him.

Maybe I keep racing to keep alive the unlikely hope that one day I'll do something that will shatter his cool, that I'll have a moment to roll my eyes as he hugs me with both arms, to act all embarrassed over my pops getting gushy.

For now, I'd have to settle for an energy dome.

Clankety-clank! Clankety-clank! I do not feel guilty about essentially cheating by racing in the dome and letting its power spread from my head down to my taut calf muscles, because the sound of hard plastic snapping against my skull nearly drives me to madness. It's a trade-off. Plus it's a hit with the diehard spuds who are still walking the first mile when I pass them in the opposite direction, headed for the finish, holding up my fist in solidarity.

We are here to go!

YULETIDE FLAVORS FOR BASS HEADS

This year I celebrated Christmas by watching a gang of street-tuff mice people in b-boy attire get knocked on their asses by the gale force headspin of a roadside nut vendor. Everybody clapped.

"When are they going to talk?" I kept thinking as late as ten minutes into *The Nutcracker*. I discovered later that Marlo, who was sitting next to me, was thinking the same thing.

This wasn't any old Tchaikovsky enactment, though. This was *The Hip Hop Nutcracker*, a national tour that ran through the end of January. An onstage DJ (who rocks a vile scribble scratch, I'm glad to note), a violinist, and dancers perform a hybrid breakdance-ballet to US cities as wide-ranging as Rochester, Oakland, Kansas City, and Durham. I watched the show in an auditorium at Playhouse Square in the heart of downtown Cleveland. The ratio of little kids to adult chaperons was all awry. Maybe there was some kind of after-school program responsible for bringing these noisy runts? I sat with my friend Forrest, a b-boy who used to break on hip-hop theater tours just like this one, and his wife Marlo.

The show's big selling point was an opening rendition of "Christmas Rappin'" by the man who's breathed in more white powder than Santa himself (unless, of course,

Chris Kringle has a hush-hush habit that zaps him the energy to loop around the planet in a single night).

After watching a fifty-nine-year-old Kurtis Blow bop around stage wearing a pristine all-white suit and matching ballcap, I thought about the absurdity of someone's rap career launching with the release of a Christmas song. That's what happened for Blow, one of hip-hop's most respected father figures. I mean, what if Snoop Dogg broke into the mainstream with "Santa Claus Goes Straight to the Ghetto?" Okay, so things were different in 1979. Recorded rap was a novelty, so I guess it makes sense one of the genre's first transmissions told the story of Santa boogie oogie-oogie-ing down for all the fly young ladies at a yuletide shindig. But did Blow ever regret that his first artistic statement to the world was a retelling of "Santa Claus is Coming to Town?"

Just think: one the genre's bonafide classics, one of the first singles pressed to vinyl, an early juncture on the trajectory that'd later give the world *Ready to Die*, describes the "whiskers on [Santa's] chinny chin chin."

A few winters back I became fascinated with Christmas music. Mostly with the sheer amount of it. Why does so much of this shit exist, and what is the aggregate effect of it all piling up in our minds like mountains of shiny gift boxes overtaking a Douglas Fir?

Naturally, I did what any wannabe music critic would do: I wrote a zine titled *Yuletide Bangers!* in which a debauched, foul-mouthed, possibly alcoholic Hermey the Elf (you know, the rebel dentist from *Rudolph*?) discusses the artistic merit of Freddie King's distorted blues downer "Christmas Tears" and the sexiest Christmas music for the

bedroom (the obvious answer: Paul McCartney's "Wonderful Christmastime," the song Hermey witnessed cause an orgy at a New Year's party in a Berlin nightclub teeming with sweaty leather). The best part was Hermey's account of club-hopping round the world on the big night with Rudolph and a party-crazed Santa during the Disco Christmas of 77, shirking all gift-delivery duties and inspiring the script that would eventually become *The Year Without a Santa Claus*.

Don't ask how much money I spent on printing at Kinko's.

The zine was meant as a celebration of the genre, though it mostly just denigrated loveable claymation characters. I love how a Christmas song promises that initial wiggle towards originality while simultaneously mining a rich pool of cultural associations. Skint for ideas? You've got a knee-deep scarlet red bag of tropes to snag from. Slap some jingle bells on the drum set. Doctor a melody from a yuletide standard. Bust out that godawful keyboard chime and play Mad-Lib games with "The Night Before Christmas."

"T'was the night before Christmas, and up in the spot / Disco P was cutting records at the speed of buckshot / when from the dancefloor there arose such a clatter / a sucker DJ's brain busted out and went splatter!"

Unwrap an SP-1200 and I've got a cold-rocking Christmas cranker.

Hip-hop is sort of that messy, myopia-inducing collage you made as a first-grader daubed in crusted glue patties, except with a whole lot of disjoined James Brown faces cheesing up at you. Inherently meta music makes for the best Christmas music. Well, not in any ecclesiastical way (though there is something spiritual, I am convinced, about The Honeydrippers' "Impeach the President" break restitched by an MPC and blasting out a

JVC boombox). “Hark the Herald Angels Sing” might well up a tear every few years, but when I’m talking about Christmas music you know that’s not what I mean. I’m talking about what you imagine, what has been scorched into your brain from years spent scanning FM radio between Thanksgiving and New Years, the shit that gets piped from pathetic mall speakers resembling cheese graters fastened into monochromatic walls. What you probably loathe, or play incessantly but secretly loathe, which is, you know, the stuff that lands somewhere between “Santa Baby” and Mariah Carey. Pop music that corrupts the holy affair into a Crayola-scribbled cartoon.

With few exceptions (go search out James Chance’s “Christmas with Satan”) hip-hop has the most fun transmogrifying into the Christmas Spirit. Go listen to Harry Belafonte’s “Twelve Days of Christmas” and follow it up with the 69 Boyz and Quad City DJs’ booty-bass knockoff “What You Want for Christmas,” in which the boyz request, among other things, eleven philly blunts, eight gold teeth, five fresh gold chains, and a Cadillac to put it all in. Or check out Super Jay’s primitive rap twelve-inch “Santa’s Party Rap” featuring the big man himself smooth-rhyming about his penchant for diamond rings, fine wine, Cadillacs, Mercedes, and young ladies over dense block-party percussion and rhythm guitar. And then of course there’s the Ying Yang Twins’ ultra-lounge clobber-crunk jam “Deck Da Club,” which goes down like a seven-eighths mix of Patron to eggnog.

And so the yuletide classics are unendingly whisked and swizzled into holiday party parodies. Having immersed myself in Christmas music, I am here to report that, in case you haven’t noticed, this trend shows no signs of stopping. The satire is metastasizing. “O Tannenbaum” has mutated into Lady Gaga’s twinkle-light-adorned

strip ditty “Christmas Tree.” By 2030, there will exist the intricate subgenre of Festivus music. Soon our youth will be unable to hear “Deck the Halls” without imagining the Ying Yang Twins popping bottles while wearing sunglasses and red poof-ball hats.

By this moment in history, Christmas music has been so tyrannically overplayed that it’s reaching a point at which the only way to enjoy it or even just put up with it is through laughing along with the absurdity. Big-name pop stars will keep one-upping each other, churning out more and more spoofy Christmas songs. They will continue to succumb to the gimmick so they can scrounge up some side cash, while understanding that the majority of the world is sick of hearing the shit from the first step they taking into a convenience store to purchase peppermint schnapps. They wink at us through their music, saying, “I know you hate this stuff as much as I do. Isn’t it funny how I’m crooning about flirting with a thick-bearded nonagenarian covered in chimney smudge who just broke into my home?” And we will laugh, accepting that the only worth Christmas music has is that it acknowledges how nerve-grating and ridiculous it has become, therefore deepening the black well of irony. Our willingness to put up with listening to this shit hitches on our willingness to never take it seriously. I’m not sure if that’s depressing to you, but it might be to Kurtis Blow.

I imagine Kurtis Blow thinks a lot about Christmas music. Aside from “The Breaks,” being the OG Christmas rapper is the main talking point of his career. It’s currently sustaining his life as a performer.

During *The Hip Hop Nutcracker*, Blow was ecstatic onstage, panting a little in between lines and bending to pull off some rigid b-boy footwork to the applause of hundreds of parents and their fidgety first-graders. Afterwards, he appeared in the

hallway wearing a shimmering suit of gold sequins, ushered by a hyper-looking woman with a clipboard. Maybe I'm misremembering the clipboard detail, but in my mind she's clutching one, white-knuckled, unmistakably of the near-frantic, constantly busy PR sort. She advised him on how he was to greet a clump of pipsqueaks waiting in the other room. On his way there, he stopped to shake hands with my friend Forrest, who once danced on the same tour as him and Lovebug Starski (R.I.P.) in a hip-hop theater show long enough ago that Blow probably didn't know who the hell he was, or at least it seemed that way by how aloof the man looked when Forrest reminded him. He nodded, said something like "Oh, okay," and looked as if he might ask a question before he was promptly pulled away by the woman on his arm, who instructed him to keep moving along towards the kiddies, who cheered when he was tugged around the corner and approached them.

How unlikely would this scene have looked to a coke-addled Kurtis circa the mid-70's if he was capable of streaking through time via subway tunnel, like the characters in *The Hip Hop Nutcracker*, to sneak a peek at his Christmas future. There he was, having just picked up the mic at a park jam under shadow of crumbling multi-story brick complexes stained black from rampant structure fires, and now here he is, aged and gaunt, decked out in holly-jolly player's ball attire, still pulling off that bushy stash, having just schooled a packed crowd on the meaning of Christmas and the importance of Jesus in their lives before visiting with a group of kids who smile up at him like he's Santa Claus. Would this make him proud, knowing he'd eventually settle into a role as The Christmas Rapper? Would he still have written "Christmas Rappin'" after glimpsing this future?

Regardless, “Christmas Rappin’” remains an all-time favorite of mine, a Christmas song I forget is a Christmas song, a flat-out funky-on-down foundation for probably the most culturally influential music of the second half of the twentieth century.

I tried to act cool, man. I tried to play calm and collected, like I wasn’t all jittery inside when I was standing less than a foot away from thee Kurtis Blow himself, the man who until now had only looked at me from his picture on the bright yellow cover sleeve of my stylus-scuffed twelve-inch single of “The Breaks.” Here he was, in three dimensions, wearing the most obnoxious getup I’ve ever seen on a live performer. I tried to act like I wasn’t already sending out “Guess what?” texts to my friends in my brain.

He looked at me, man. Glanced up at me after shaking Forrest’s hand, shot me a puzzled face like, “Am I supposed to know you too?” We shared a moment, a baffling moment, a split-second staredown during which I internally debated shaking his hand but fought the urge, not wanting to act like it was all that big a deal that I was face-to-face with (and people overuse the word, but it’s deserved in this instance) a hip-hop Legend, wanting to give off the façade that I was used to meeting celebrities, or that this kind of situation was (as it undoubtedly was) extremely uncommon but that I would not stoop to quivering fanboy antics, a façade that I simultaneously hoped (all of this happening in a second or so, my brain sputtering) would win over the respect of the impeccably cool, sparkling man standing across from me who, lore has it, danced in his socks to the taste of bass with the jolly, white-bearded fella himself one speaker-blown night in the analog jamboree of Christmas past.