THE MUSICAL PERSONHOOD OF THREE CANADIAN TURNTABLISTS: IMPLICATIONS FOR TRANSFORMATIVE COLLABORATIVE PRACTICE

Karen Snell,

The Eastman School of Music

karensnell@rogers.ecom

Why turntablism?

- Need for more community-school music connections.
- Integration of 'informal'/'non-institutional' music learning into school music.
- Relatively new/unexplored area for music teaching and learning.
- Popular music genres help youth to shape and define their identities and thus should be explored more in music education research (and used more in teaching!).

Project:

- In-depth, qualitative interviews with 3, currently practicing Canadian DJ/turntablists (grounded in community music making) : Sara Simms (DJ Ychuck), Eric San (Kid Koala), and Oscar Betancourt (DJ Grouch) all done in spring/early summer of 2010
- Open-ended, life-story: participants talked about music and its meaning throughout their lives (early childhood years → through school → current day/professional lives as musicians)

- Analysis of interview transcripts revealed 3 primary themes common to all 3 participants:

  1. They all had *difficulty connecting to formal music making* in either school or private music lessons.

  (As a result of this . . .)

  2. They each *sought out a form of musical performance* which they believed provided them with more *freedom to explore and experiment*.

  3. They each discussed the importance of the *collective community of DJ/turntablists* in helping them throughout their musical careers.

Difficultly Connecting to Formal Music Making:

"It was really a pretty strict experience. It wasn't about expression; it was really always preparation and practice for exams. . . . There was no room for interpreting Mozart. I would start improvising and playing in a different time signature or make it swing (laughs), just sort of goofing off I guess. I guess it was at that point when I grew out of it. There wasn't much room for improvisation." (E. San)

- "I didn't really enjoy playing music at all until I got a guitar when I was 13 . . . . That's when I got really into music." (S. Simms)

- "Now, if I'm working on scales, it's always just for fun; it's not because someone told me to or [because] I have an exam I have to do (laughs)." (E. San)

"It was all, you know, the classical stuff, or playing Beethoven's Fifth or whatever; it was a whole different world. You know, especially because I was into hip-hop, which is more of a rebellious type of music, it was just a total contrast [outside music with school music]." (O. Betancourt)

Personal Expression: The Freedom to Actively Experiment

- "I started buying old turntables. I didn't even know there were real DJ turntables (laughs.) So, I put them all [the turntables] in my room together and my Dad bought … me this old DJ mixer from a pawn shop. And I remember having a portable CD player and two old turntables and I used to try and mix the four records that I had and a CD. And I probably didn't sound great, but . . . I was trying." (S. Simms)

"My Dad had a little set up in the corner in the living room with a turntable and a mixer. It wasn't like a DJ turntable, just a regular turntable, but I basically started teaching myself. I ruined a lot of his records doing that (laughs)." (O. Betancourt)

- "Scratching, in its simplest terms, is melodies and rhythms made through rubbing a record back and forth whilst cutting the sound on and off. This is what the mixer does: it allows the DJ to cut the sound in and out. [This process, then, of using the radio setting on my parents' stereo as the 'off' position and the phono as the 'on' position] was my only way to cut the sound on and off on that machine, and by figuring that out, I could teach myself the fundamentals of cutting and scratching." (E. San)

▫ "The weirder and the freakier the noise you could make, the more cacophonous, the more stirring, that was sort of the goal: making these sounds that no one had ever heard before." (E. San)

- "Once you learn all that stuff, you become your own creative, you know, (pause) 'output'. You know what I mean? [It becomes all about] what 'you' can do with it. There's so much to be learned from it. And you know, what's great is [that] you can still keep learning, you know? There's no end. It's almost limitless." (O. Betancourt)

- "When I perform, I really want people to see a show; I want them to see a DJ doing lots of different things. So that's something that I'm conscious of. I want to do something that people can watch and really enjoy. My next big challenge is I'm going to be combining turntablism with electronic music and using digital technology to control different DJing platforms." (S. Simms)

- "The central theme to the whole scene – the turntable scene – is the idea of freshness, the idea of putting in your own personality. Trying to, whatever happens that night, if you are playing a concert, you are just trying to play things people have never heard. You are always trying to push the limits and put your own personality into what you are doing. It depends on what records you have access to, but at the same time, it is all just sort of experimenting with what you can do that pushes things further, trying to do things that are new. So, when I started, it seemed a lot more open musically to me, you know? A lot more exciting."(E. San)

Community

- "You're part of a culture. . . . I've been doing it 20 years, but I'm by no means among the first wave of people. I understand historically where I come from. But, at the same time, you can still connect with that idea that you are part of something." (E. San)

- "Whenever I perform, the other DJs are just happy to be playing with me. We have respect for each other and some of them I have a friendship with too. There's a real comradeship between the DJs, you know? It's about sharing and about knowledge . . . We're kind of like a global family; we like to help each other out and willingly pass along information, records, and even equipment." (S. Simms)

- "When you click with a bunch of like-minded individuals, when you put out something, it really shows. . . We'd work on the stuff for our competitions, for our shows. And it was just crazy what we would come up with, you know what I mean? Definitely, there was this bonding of ideas." (O. Betancourt)

Implications/Interpretations:

- Stetsenko's (2009) ideas about personhood.
  - "Persons are agentive beings who develop through embeddedness in sociocultural contexts and within relations to others." (p. 3)
  - "Individuals never start from scratch and never completely vanish; instead they enter and join in with social practices as participants who build upon previous accomplishments and also inevitably and forever change the social matrix of these practices (if only in modest ways), leaving their own indelible traces in history." (p. 7)

- Jenkin's (2009) concept of "participatory cultures"
  - "strong support for creating and sharing creations, and some type of informal mentorship whereby experienced participants pass along knowledge to novices. In a participatory culture, members also believe that their contributions matter and feel some degree of social connection with one another (at the least, members care about others' opinions of what they have created)." (p. xi)

- Gee's (2004) concept of "affinity spaces"
  - "people learn best when their learning is part of a highly motivated engagement with social practices which they value." (p. 77)
  - Affinity spaces → creativity, exploration, and productive informal learning

▫ Move to DJ/turntablism in early teen years can be compared to Stetensko's description of "human development as an activist project" (2009, p. 4). "It is the realization of this [activist] stance," explained Stetensko, "that forms the path to personhood" (p. 3).

- Sense of community/part of a continuum of DJ/turntablist-musicians → Stetsenko (2009) explained how important it is for our sense of personhood to understand where we fit in as part of our history and culture:
  - "Persons are agents not only for whom 'things matter' but who themselves matter in history, culture, and society and, moreover, who come into Being as unique individuals through and to the extent that they matter in these processes and make a contribution to them." (p. 8)

What does this mean for music educators?

- Valuing musical genres from students' lives outside the school walls = more contemporary and meaningful music education programmes.

- Contemporary music practices like DJ/turntablism present ideal learning environments.

- Insights of real-world musicians can inform music educators *how* to teach this music (e.g., early exploration/experimentation with different media, sounds, performance technique).

- Guide students in locating musical genres and practices on a continuum of real musicians:
  - development of own musical voice/contributions
  - connections to other musical genres/practices
- Benefits of including collaborative, praxial learning situations: promotes engaged, active, experimental, and meaningful informal learning and the development of individual musical personhood.

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http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uJ8enrYfUx8&feature=related

Karen Snell, The Eastman School of Music
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