

## MIX MASTER RACE

## Understanding the DJ Phenomena

By Ian Svenonius

Art which attains paradigmatic stature is presented historically in a variety of ways. When posited as representing the inexorable expression of a collective cultural shift, it's the unconscious murmur of the mass. Usually though, it's presented as the triumph of an idiosyncratic personal vision, and/or a rebellious foil to accepted values. A conspiratorial tone is often employed by the historian/salesman when art movements or phenomena are being sold. The pitch usually involves the "status quo" and rejection by conservative establishment philistines before the eventual recognition of the particular artist's genius. The invocation of the "status quo" is instructive here, for though countercultural instincts lead us to assume that this implies a condemnation of the ruling class, the fable of the artist is actually a story about the bourgeois' heroic struggle against proletarian provincialism. The myth of the artist is the myth of culture's leaders.

In fact, popular art always reflects the ideology of the ruling class, and is used by them to reify their position of dominance in the culture. The forms/mediums which attain popularity are determined by the ruling class through their monopolization of the channels of mass proliferation and their control of history. Art is used to posit idealized forms and aesthetics as totems to explain and celebrate class relations. Supposedly rebellious forms of popular art, such as rock & roll, reinforce and romanticize the consumer/producer ethos of capitalism, while Fine Art's postmodern vacuity enforces the regime's anti-ideological stance. Fine Art also serves as a moat between the bourgeois and the proletariat; its inherent and purposeful impenetrability serves its patrons like a gated community and simultaneously explains their superiority through implications of depth and difficulty.

This "twinning" of the artist to his patron has been constant and consistent, from the artist's inception as heroic painter/sculptor during the Renaissance, to his turn as singer/musician, on to his current role as DJ, in which the artist-as-consumer is exalted for his taste. The painter/sculptor was a manufacturer/merchant, while the industrialized era exalted the musician and his factorization of art through mass-produced records. The sudden elevation of the "disc-jockey" (someone who merely plays or manipulates records) from his traditional role as party/club attaché/hireling, into the elite ring of artist/magician is therefore remarkable due to the alienated relationship of this artist to his work, which in fact mirrors the new postindustrial economy of the first world.

Before the ascension of the DJ, the artist was always a producer. Now, as DJ, the artist is a mere amalgam of whatever his purchasing power begets. This development marks the most significant shift in the construction of art since it's start. The DJ-as-artist echoes the new role of the bourgeois as stockbroker/trader; designator of worth and handler of commodities. With the exportation of industrialism to the third world and the new role of imperialist as loan shark/investor, the grooming of the DJ as high priest/star-artist of the culture is a necessary part of ensuring the culture's aggrandization of the broker and the subsequent denigration of the actual manufacturer.

With the utilization of the phonograph as music-box, the musician was suddenly transformed from suspect degenerate entertainer to hero/artist.

Overnight, the recording artist eclipsed the visual artist, who was reduced to a beret-wearing caricature. The musician rose to prominence because the new industrialization of the trade (record manufacturing), along with the mechanized synchronization of the music group, mirrored the factorization from which it's benefactors drew their pay.

Rock Enl roll's main appeal to industry mavens, however, was its supposed youthfulness. This youth angle mirrored industrial capitalism's conspiracy to promote products of planned obsolescence. Every teen star had a built-in time limit.

Rock Enl roll shows heisted theatre's elaborate productions, poetry's words, the printer's designs and the avant pretensions of the painter. It was Wagner's gesamtkunstwerk, which swallowed all art and made it one. Thus, rock Enl roll professed no creed except secularism and desire ? the pillars of capitalism. Rock Enl roll was derived from the southern Afro-American rebel music known as 'blues

In essence, the blues was the progenitor to Lavey's Church of Satan, with its earthly emphasis on acquisition and individualism. Industrial capitalism's boss class chose to rehabilitate this music in an electric version through white musicians.

Just as visual artists during industrialization had clamoured for freedom from stultifying patronage, musicians in the late 1960s and early 1970s vied for better treatment.

Punk was a declaration of war against the virtuosos of rock and the synthesized beats of disco. Its creed was "poetry for everyone" ? that "anyone can do it," so it further defrocked the craftsmen of established genres. Its pretense was authenticity versus the plasticity of the status quo, which translated into a mythology of hard drugs, hard living, and identifying with poverty. The quest for fame was inverted, whereby something was less valuable by virtue of its notoriety, creating a lose/lose situation. The audience was transformed from consumers into competitors, whose conceit was often that they could do just as well as the poseur on stage. The punk label, a petit bourgeois home business run by the enthusiast, was the preferred mode for proliferation of this product. The fanzine, an analogous magazine, the organ for information.

PUNK would remain marginalized throughout its existence because its invention constituted not the demise of the star, but the threat of his execution. Rock Enl roll, looking death in the face, shrank from its demands of autonomy and fair treatment.

Hip hop was praised on appearance by the scribes of the elite for the downsizing which it represented. An offshoot of a form originating in Jamaica, hip hop was commercially revolutionary, allowing for the recycling of records and the renewal of publishing mechanicals from long-forgotten songs. The hip hop star was a personality with no particular craft except his ability to rap, a stance which built on punk's disavowal of musical scholarship. This rapper was a person who essentially spoke about himself and his desires and needs ? the veritable personification of capitalism.

The ruling class in the USA no longer produces, but merely moves money through stocks and speculation; they are the designators of worth. The DJ is their star. A preposterous poseur, once an adjunct to wedding parties, he is now exalted, featured in advertisements and lavished with wealth and fame. Like the rulers on Wall Street, he has no actual talent except to play with other people's labor. His talent is his impeccable taste and his ability to turn junk into gold, like his stockbroking masters.