HIP HOP SONICS

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While the digital revolution has led to a deluge of immediate access to both new artists and new product, something has become less available: the warmth, community and connection that sound, raw sound, used to deliver. Generation 'I' has led to a prerogative of personal choice, but what good is choice if the very thing you need is no longer available? In the age of information overload, sound has been commoditised to such a degree it is no longer what you feel; it's what you hear. A true hip-hop head would never say "I hear you" if they understood or connected, but "I feel you" - and with good reason.

I was introduced to hip-hop through the UK's beat-driven ragga movement, spending days and nights with DJs endlessly creating symphonies out of beats and samples alone. My whole body came alive. I had no experience of hip-hop until one DJ and fellow graffiti writer, Such Des, started spinning hip-hop tunes and my education began. This was something entirely different to any world I knew, a world where words followed the beat, not the other way around. Reggae sound systems and that sub-bass hum abounded. The vibration came first. I was now part of the tribe, included in the conversation.

The '70s, '80s and '90s were an explosion of sound. Vinyl ruled. Record shops were libraries of life from everywhere. Those turntables enabled sound and, without the drive of relentless commerce, DJs and producers became not just engineers but architects, scientists of a new way of presenting this essential capital. If the philosophy of hip-hop was to move beyond the limitations, this was in the very DNA of its creation. The first hip-hop engineers took the machines and the technology and pushed it beyond the existing boundaries of sound engineering. Driving sound meters into the red and well into the distortion zone created a dark heavy growling sound, the deep and dirty noise that summons urgency and somehow calms us. I can still remember hearing that bass for the first time and falling in love. And producers were committed to that bass: if

the machine had to bust, so be it - sound ruled. Rap producers are not the only ones in musical engineering to do this, but they are the only ones who have built a sound production around cultural priorities in the digital age.

Producers of the '80s loved the Roland TR-808 due to its fat sonic boom and how it processed bass frequencies. It could create a hum to wreck a car and blow house speakers. The goal was to create a bass to defy every limitation. While rock sound engineers incorporate and tone down the drums as a part of the whole, rap producers' focus is to emphasize it: add those effects, EQ, bottom, make it filthy deep. To do this, producers and engineers needed to create new mixing formulas to make room for the rumble. They had to empty the other levels to allow for bass leakage; losing control was a requirement to build the new sound.

With such a rich heritage of sound to draw on, producers in 2017 are expected to go above and beyond (while still paying homage to) the original sound scientists that came before them. In a world where your hours of labour and genius can be dismissed with a click or a swipe, and turnover is in the millions per minute, getting the right vibration is at once everything and nothing. I spoke to a selection of producers not shy of the challenge, from those who came up through the '80s and '90s via the South's trap movement, as well as protégées of Odd Future to try to fathom what made a bomb beat back then and what is the hope for hip-hop's new era.

GO DREAMER A.K.A. PREGNANT BOY

Atlanta is known for its prescience in sound production. More fundamental than trap music was Organized Noise and its legacy. Tracing the disparate routes of emerging producers shows how they are returning to hip-hop's primal structures whilst pushing sound forward. Go Dreamer aka Demond Toney aka Pregnant Boy is one such artist. Having built his own unique sound through bought, borrowed and stolen production equipment, he has gone on to collaborate with other artists from the eastern edge of the city, as well as starting his own Imprint, Weerdo Records, and is in the process of putting together a follow-up to their "Friend Zone" mixtape, released last year.

"When I first was influenced by music as a kid I was in 6th or 7th grade. The whole Virginia movement was kicking off with Missy Elliott and Timbaland. Southern music, but a tad different from what we were accustomed to. I was into Three 6 Mafia and trap, booty shake, southern rap music. However, as I was church-raised, it was forbidden for me to listen. I'd go to Target or Walmart to listen to the clean versions.

When I was in 8th Grade, my Pops bought me a Roland Dr. Rhythm. That machine was my first introduction to creating beats. Then I got a Dr. Rhythm DR-5. The sounds on that thing were beastie, very wicked sounding. I couldn't write music in the traditional sense, so just made a beat based on the sounds feeling it [the machine] was giving me. I'm a visual person who articulates what I see through sound. I came up with the moniker Go Dreamer because I would be technically dreaming when making music. My inspiration and sounds came from my cinematic perception of thoughts and dreams.

FIG. 1. GO DREAMER

I stole a mic from school to start creating music. I was self-taught. I was rapping with friends. Not serious, very innocent… but lit. A lot of folk criticize how simple-minded it was, but I can't even be mad - we had so much fun. 808s, high-hats, snares, heavy tracks, the randomness of the vocals, fun as shit! It kept us from doing other [bad] shit. I started to understand I could make my own sound, but the industry is like a jungle so we were just creating our own wave for the local community.

At Georgia State College, I got hold of an Akai MPC drum machine and a Yamaha Motif synthesizer. I was suddenly able to get the equipment I needed, and the keyboard helped me create a vibe that chiseled into my personality.

I met [Taylor Gang rapper] Tuki Carter, and we became interested in starting a collective. I was working on a spaced-out track and came up with the hook: "Have you ever made love to a Weerdo?", and from there we created Hollyweerd, a collective of artists and producers including Tuki, Jaye Price, Chris Macado and myself. There were two projects, two different vibes I was working on, all under the 'Weerdo' aesthetic.

For me, the ability of folk-telling is the essence of blackness. Trap may be lavishly urban, but it is still folk-telling as far as being able to tell a story from a standpoint. When I go into a studio, the vibe has to be right. Find a communication where the artist is coming from. Meet the artist in the space they are in and then bring the artist from there, chiseling the product out of all that."

When I was working at Stankonia Studios [on "Big Grams", Big Boi and Phantogram's collaborative debut EP], I was staying up twenty-four hours, just working on getting a beat going. Big Boi came in whilst we were working, he liked the hook, he said 'Oh! This is right!' I was working on giving the music more feeling as far as a personal communication between the lyrics and the beat, knowing when to bring in certain sounds. Being around Organized Noise, I learnt how to let sounds breathe."

E.D.I. MEAN

E.D.I. Mean, a.k.a. Malcolm Goodridge, was inspired to forge a career in music by his mother's vinyl collection. Growing up in Brooklyn, he absorbed all the rich heritage of emerging hip-hop as a child. With family roots deeply embedded in the Black Panther movement, music was at once both his escape and his own voice. When his mum relocated to Minnesota, E.D.I. followed and so began his introduction to the wider state of hip-hop – finding inspiration in the work of N.W.A., The Ghetto Boyz, and MC Breed. Finally teaming up with family friends, he began to build a sound of his own, coming out of everywhere, a neighborhood not yet built but one instantly recognizable. When Tupac heard the potential in the young artist's work, he flew E.D.I. out to Oakland, and he became a founding member of the Outlawz.

"For me, it's all built from the drums, of course. Hip-hop has its roots in so many genres. It's a melting pot of all types. Hip-hop takes you back to Africa where we all came from. It brings that out of me. The drums - it's like a call, it's like your heartbeat. A good track comes from a great drum pattern.

I still study music. I've always studied music since a little boy. I studied the greats like Dr. Dre, Prince and Michael Jackson. I study to emulate. I check out their influences, inspirations. I'm relentless in my studying. I produce in the tradition of Quincy Jones, I've not moved over to digital yet. Although Quincy's main instrument was the trumpet, he could arrange the horns, the sax, and the drums without playing them. A producer and a beatmaker are two different people. A beatmaker is concerned with the instrumentals, a true producer knows what each sound should be doing.

My priority is to make you feel something, bring out an emotion you can feel with each track. Within 10-11 seconds, you will feel the track, the emotion. Technology may advance but there are certain things technology cannot emulate. It can never convey an emotion to you. If you can't feel it, the producer didn't do a good enough job.

A real producer knows what each sound should be doing. They don't need to be able to play a particular instrument, but they do know where it should be, and how it should be. The backbone of hip-hop will always be rhythm."

KURT KOBANE

Chicago-born Kurt 'Kobane' Couthold was the creative force behind a myriad of Death Row's sounds in the '90s. He displayed a passion for music from an early age, but he only developed a real interest in production after discovering he couldn't sing during his first time in a recording studio. Turning his attention to "studying producers and getting into production" lead to a series of fruitless meetings with record companies. After another of these "typical bullshit A&R" meetings with Warner, a discouraged Kobane headed to Lakewood Mall to work out a way back home to the Midwest. It was there he ran into Suge Knight and his entourage. Kobane gave Suge a copy of his demo, told him he could compete with Dre, then walked away. The Death Row head honcho obviously liked what he heard, as he was summoned to the studio on that same night. As Kurt explains, "He told me to collect my paperwork and a check and he put me up at the Marriott hotel. From that day on, I was Death Row."

FIG. 2. E.D.I. MEAN

"I worked with all the great Death Row engineers. Tommy D and Rick Clifford were my mentors - and still are to this day. Tommy had worked with Prince and Rick worked with Rick James, and practically everybody from the '70s and '80s so I got a mountain of first hand knowledge on their processes. There were many engineers who taught me Dr. Dre's techniques too, so I learned like a student what those people did to create classic hits.

The secret to the Death Row sound was the Minimoog bass synth, and most recordings were mixed to sound like '70s classic hits, from Steely Dan to Parliament Funkadelic. Listen to Nate Dogg, and then listen to Ray Parker Jr. and Raydio from the '70s - the vocal sound is the same.

The '90s was a very creative time and you really had to be talented to compete. The music was very complex and layered. West Coast music was easy for me [to make], because I had studied George Clinton and funk as they were Prince's influences. Prince was my first model in figuring out how to make music because I was into rock and R&B. There wasn't much out there in terms of urban music but Prince showed me I could be an African American and fuse both styles together, plus he was single handedly making his own music.

Equipment was very expensive when I started. A production keyboard workstation would cost $2000, and there weren't any home studios because back then a home studio would cost close to $10,000. So you had to go to a real studio and pay $30 per hour. Now I have a full studio set up on my iPhone where I can record and make music, today there are no limits. Back then, your limits were financial, and everything was analogue and straight to tape. The quality was terrible unless you had the serious sound processing equipment of major studios. Now that it's possible to download

cheap software to make music in your bedroom and call yourself a beat maker or producer, more horrible production floods the internet. This leads to a less discerning audience as they adapt to hearing those lesser quality sounds.

But the real danger right now is the dilution of sound. Digitizing damaged music The loudness wars. With digital, you can only peak out so far before the sound starts to distort and people have pushed the sound level digitally to the limit. The warmth of analogue is missing, the unique characteristics that were pleasant to the ear. Records and cassettes had that analogue sound and we listened with great systems, either home stereos or big boom boxes. Now those cheap little ear buds sound like a '50s transistor radio - you don't even get the full nuance of the sound. We need to put sound first again."

CLASSROOM 216

Classroom 216 is made up of four twenty-somethings from Los Angeles who are determined to craft an inimitable sound. Consisting of Ian Desdune, a.k.a. Buttercreem, Cody Johnson, a.k.a CoJo, Danny Bakewell and Dominic Bedford, they are forged from families seasoned in the creative arts and the Civil Rights movement. James Bedford, Dominic's grandfather, was a producer and writer who worked extensively with Roy Ayers. His back catalogue includes Sylvia Striplin's "Give Me Your Love", later sampled in Junior M.A.F.I.A.'s "Get Money". The group are 100% L.A., but their musical tastes spread much farther than their geographical roots as they cite punk, indie, funk, hip-hop, pop, rock and house as influences.

Dominic: "I learned a lot from my grandfather about how hard it was to get recognition and credit for the process, and the pioneering architecture of song writing based on a groove. We're called Classroom because we're learning how to do it right. Hip-hop is our education; we didn't turn our back on college, we just chose one with a different structure and philosophy."

Buttercreem: "My dad is a musician, and my mum's main passion is music too, she's such a creative person. Although my focus was sports, when I got into 8th grade I started getting into the Beat Team: Jonwayne, Flying Lotus, Samiyam, Gaslamp Killer and so forth, as well as old school hip-hop. The album that blew me open was Jonwayne's "Bowser". The thump of it is just crazy. I grew up around that, Stones Throw, Brainfeeder. I was fascinated by familiar sounds that could somehow be made different. All my favourite DJs could remix a song from the Top 20 and totally twist it up. They had found a way to create their own unique sound. You could hear their influences but it was a new narrative, it was theirs completely. It's like they're saying: 'You think you know this, but I'm going to open you up.' So much of music is just energy

FIG. 3. KURT KOBANE

House music is based off of hip-hop. You can't ignore the role of that 808 or the depth of the bass. And I'm trying to have one conversation with all of these genres. One conversation, making sure everyone gets their fix, their nutrient. I want the listener to dab and two step in the same song! We use unlimited genres to make our unique sound, like Run-D.M.C. or Q-Tip. We want to mirror our structure off Atlanta's Organized Noise, an outfit that just go to work every day in the studio, making it a normal everyday thing to test each other. We can't afford for each other to have too much pride. We need to be able to take criticism because that's what it's going to take to make that unique sound, and our music is based on our relationships and our connection."

Danny: "I want to perfect the craft and learn it, respecting the history. A lot of artists disrespect the process, and a lot of that respect was lost when the internet caught fire because now all people have a platform. I feel young people need to know their roots and respect that before they start trying to invent. I just want whatever is going to get the deepest groove. The most memorable house track must hit the off note, because that's what brings the groove in. I get the beats real low. Nowadays most producers use a lot of filters so the artist can stand out, but I keep it front and wild so CoJo can bang out. I just use an Ableton DAW and Ableton Push if I have one, or put it through the keyboard, vinyl turntable and a Sonic SQ2 synthesizer. The song should be a testament to the sound sticking to us and how we adapt together, educating and connecting ourselves to the sound"

And the actual sounds so far? Bass heavy with the sub vroom and a drop like metal on glass. It's like a wave of bass and rhythm physically hits you, the sound going through your membranes, muscle and mind. CoJo's electric personality lights it up, building a cadence and echo like a street cathedral with beats that swerve and swing.

As CoJo says on the magnetic debut track "War Stories": "Real OGs go backwards, retracing my steps."

The real architects of our futures, in the age of post-truth and information overload, will be the ones who continue to defy the limitations given them, the ones who keep both the vibe and the beat going. The strongest indicator yet that new hip-hop is about to push open a wild frontier, a spanking filthy dimension of sound.

Holla if ya feel me.