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## Turntables Come Out of the Basement and Into Music Class

By KATIE ZEZIMA

BOSTON, March 2 — Richard Nixon was about to get scratched and, if all went well before class was over, crabbed and scribbled, too.

In the world of turntabling — playing the devices a D.J., uses to create electronic music — everything, including political sound bites and operatic concertos, is subject to manipulation achieved by terms that seem to apply more to a preschool than a dance club.

For years, these skills were learned in basements and on street corners and honed at house parties and dimly lighted clubs. Now, the technique is earning more recognition from the academic world.

This semester, the Berklee College of Music here started offering a class on turntabling. It teaches young musicians how to blend, harmonize and distort sounds into a distinctive arrangement.

Turntabling at its most basic is known as scratching: the act of taking a record, putting the needle down, and moving it back and forth with one's fingertips. More advanced techniques include scribbles, a series of fast scratches, and crabs, moving the record while turning the sound on and off.

Gary Burton, Berklee's executive vice president, compared the advent of the turntable to the arrival of jazz — initially dismissed as noise but now an integral part of music.

The turntable, which was first used by hip-hop artists in the late 1970's, is now the underlying element of hip-hop and dance music and can be found in more places than many listeners would expect, said Stephen Webber, the class's instructor and author of



Students at the Berklee College of Music in Boston practice using turntables to create electronic music in class. Turntable artists create sounds and alter songs by manipulating the machine's needle and controls while playing a record.

"Turntable Technique, The Art of the DJ" (Berklee Press, 2003), the first method book on turntabling.

"It's the biggest thing that is bubbling just right underneath the mainstream right now. Once you realize what it sounds like and what it is, you hear it everywhere," from recordings by Outkast and Moby to television commercials, Mr. Webber said. "It's really where the guitar was 30 or 40 years ago. It's totally taking over youth culture. It's considered hipper now to play the turntables than to play the guitar."

Its popularity is evidenced by the waiting list for next semester's class: more than 50 students have applied for the eight slots.

At a recent class, eight students — some dressed in T-shirts, others in baggy sports jerseys and one woman in a flowered button-down shirt — swayed and bobbed their heads as they tried to match their tempos with a backbeat broadcast throughout the tiny classroom.

The students spent a good portion of class listening to white noise on headphones and trying to match the volume of their scratches with that background. To the casual listener, it sounded like nails being dragged down a blackboard en masse, but to the students it was as important as a guitar player learning chords.

"There's musicianship in actually doing it," said Brian Ellis, 21, a voice major who started turntabling because he wanted to get involved in producing rap music. "I never looked at it as 'wow, you can write out notation for this.' And like music is supposed to do, it opens up ideas" that can be easily played with and tested at home.

The students moved on to Mr. Nixon's declaration that he was not a crook. They were to let it play, turn the sound off with the fader, pull the record back to the beginning of the sample, which they marked with a small sticker, and let it play again.

Mr. Webber, a shaggy-haired man in a black blazer who looks as if he would favor Eric Clapton over electronica, started playing the turntables in his basement in 1997, much to the chagrin of his wife and children. Now, he said, his children and his students beg for a chance to spin.

"I'm getting a real kick out of the fact that trained musicians are learning this instrument that until now has not been part of the music college lexicon. It's just a wonderful time to be watching the development of this instrument and how it's all unfolding," Mr. Webber said.

Both Mr. Webber and Mr. Ellis said this class, and the proliferation of mainstream turntable sounds, would help demolish stereotypes of D.J.s, who are often perceived as hard-core rappers or techno clubgoers.

"It's clearly not the case," Mr. Ellis said. "I think the middle line is going to come from things like this class. The message got misconstrued by that negative image, and classes like this cause people to say, 'Hey, it is music and something that you can learn from.' "