

ANITCH TO SCRATCH

Berklee spins off new course of study: turntablism

By Sarah Rodman

A class ends in a basement studio at the Berklee College of Music. The string players file out, the upright piano is pushed toward the wall, the vibraphone is rolled out the door. And a student lab assistant wheels in eight workstations and shiny new turntables, mixing boards, and headphones.

The wheels of progress – and wheels of steel – are turning at Berklee this semester as Boston’s 59-year-old music school has begun offering a brand-new course, “Turntable Technique.”

The students are a new breed: young people as steeped in the complexities of harmonics and chord progressions as they are in the rhythms and rhymes of hip-hop.

They eagerly pull out their vinyl and await instruction in scratching, cutting, stabbing, and backstabbing, from professor Stephen Webber, who literally wrote the book on teaching “turntablism.”



“I was so surprised when I saw it,” said professional music major Mina LongJohn. “Turntable techniques? Berklee offers turntable techniques?”

“All the students I’ve run into are really envious,” says class member Brian “Raydar” Ellis, “because everyone wants to do hip-hop nowadays, and they look at me and I’ve got vinyl in my hand.”

Since DJ schools have been popping up all over the country in the past few years, it seemed only natural that the progressive music college would begin to heed the call of scratching and flaring. It didn’t hurt that Webber’s 2000 book, “Turntable Technique: The Art of the DJ,” had become the best-selling book in the Berklee Press catalog.

Still, it was almost five years between Webber's initial proposal and the first officially sanctioned student scratch.

"On the one hand, Berklee is probably the only music college in the world that would have even entertained the idea, but on the other hand it was a little surprising it took as long as it did," he said.

That time was necessary, according to Gary Burton, Berklee executive vice president and Grammy-winning vibraphonist. All course proposals go through a rigorous process that examines everything from cost and space issues to content and viability.

"Typically the process is about a year long," said Burton. "Turntable Technique" had a long list of extra questions: Where will we get the equipment? What is the repertoire? What department will it go in? So, said Burton, it took a little longer.

He convened a study group of five disparate faculty members, "because we have 450 faculty here, and, as you can imagine, it runs the gamut from crusty traditionalists who still believe the electric guitar is an abomination to people who are right on the cutting edge."

Webber, a professor in the music production and engineering department, supplied research materials – including the recent feature documentary "Scratch" – and cooled his heels.

"I figured that the last thing I needed to do was to get upset about it," Webber said. "I knew that it was inevitable, because it's so much along the lines of our mission, which is to reflect the major musical movements of the day"

Back in class, Webber is overseeing what could only be called the Tricky Dick Remix. Tumbling out of the PA is a stuttering sample of former President Nixon's famous declaration – "Well, I'm not a crook" – as the students learn "cutting" by chopping up the phrase to different backbeats from Cajun to rock. Clearly, they've been practicing their technique, as they finger their vinyl with dexterous aplomb.

Burton, who remembers when his beloved vibes were not considered a primary instrument at the school, says he's impressed. "With turntablism there's a learning curve that's involved. At first you're very clumsy and awkward. You have to learn the moves and practice the touch, so I have a lot of respect for the people who really are virtuous at it."

As excited as Webber and his students are, Burton expects complaints from a certain stratum of the alumni. "I know I'll get letters from some of just as I did when we started introducing rock into the curriculum."

"Musicians in general are progressive people," said Webber, "but when there's a big paradigm shift, sometimes it takes awhile to get our heads around it."

Joe Brogan, who graduated in 1975, said, "You would hate to think of someone majoring in turntable technique and getting a degree in it but as an elective – sure."

Since part of Berklee's mission is to prepare students to make a living as musicians, the 52-year-old saxophonist and director of fine arts for the Dedham school system sees the sense of it. "It would be easy for an older person like me to down it, but if Berklee's on it then there's something there that has some merit."

There's already a waiting list of 50 students clamoring to get into the class. And this is just the beginning. Webber can envision a time, years down the road, when students could declare a major in turntablism. "I think that it depends on quite a few things, not the least of which is the progression of the instrument itself. ... I want to do it for the right reasons, because there's real musical worth and excellence, which I believe

there is, in it.”