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Berklee Turns Tables on Music Education

Mass. music college offers its mixmasters degree

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By Ivy Okoniewski

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Bridging the gap between academia and the club scene, Boston's Berklee College of Music has become the world's first college to offer a course in the art of turntablism.

Berklee, which was also the first college to provide instruction in jazz and the electric guitar, discussed at length whether turntablism was worthy of academic attention. It was only after Berklee professor Stephen Webber devised a method for notating turntable techniques that the college decided to go ahead with the semester long course. Webber was the first to develop any method of turntable notation that could be used to teach the instrument to others, according to the college's press release.

Turntablism developed in the late 1970's and was at first confined to hip-hop music. In recent years turntablism has infiltrated other genres like pop and even jazz. But, due to the very recent introduction of any teaching notation, it remains far from mainstream in music education.

"I wouldn't say it is esteemed yet," UW-Madison music Professor Todd Welbourne said. He added the future of turntablism may be similar to that of jazz, which was originally dismissed but now is universally accepted.

Acceptance of turntablism at UW-Madison's School of Music is unlikely in the near future, according to Welbourne. The school offers Bachelor's degrees in performance, music education, composition, and music theory, but has no degree directed specifically towards contemporary music.

"If people think of contemporary music like the Billboard Top 50, then in no way do we offer that," said Joseph Koykkar, a UW-Madison professor who works extensively with music software and technology. He went on to explain that the contemporary music courses on campus are actually centered upon concert and symphony music.

Professor Welbourne shared a similar perception of the School of Music.

"This school is sort of conservative. There's not a whole lot of things here with pop appeal," he said.

However, while the UW-Madison School of Music may propose a more established curriculum, widespread demand for anything as modern as turntablism has yet to surface.

UW-Madison freshman and music student Jordan Bader said the majority of music students he knows are interested in classical training and focus on playing in symphonies and musical ensembles.

It might also be difficult to find any professor as knowledgeable about turntablism as Berklee's maverick Stephen Webber.

"None of the faculty I know do that," said Welbourne. "They might be interested in it, but they definitely could not teach it."