

The New York Times

The Arts - February 11, 2003

Turntable U? In D.J.'s Hands Professor Sees An Instrument

By MICHAEL ENDELMAN

BOSTON — In the 1950's music conservatories debated whether to teach jazz. In the 60's and 70's they argued over the inevitable introduction of rock and pop into the classroom. Today at the Berklee College of Music here, students, faculty members and administrators are grappling with this question: Does hip-hop turntablism, a highly virtuosic style of hip-hop D.J.-ing, deserve to be taught alongside harmony, melody and improvisation? Can DJ Shadow and Mixmaster Mike keep company with Schubert and Mingus?

For several years Stephen Webber, a professor of music production and engineering, has been trying to introduce a course on hip-hop turntable techniques into the Berklee curriculum. He designed a program of study that would teach students the technical and musical basics of turntablism, which involves manipulating a record back and forth against the needle to create percussive scratches, jagged beats and abstract sounds. But the college turned down the idea of a turntable class in 2000 because the provost disapproved, and in 2001 the idea was rejected by the executive vice president because of budget constraints, despite support from the college's deans.

Meanwhile Mr. Webber wrote "Turntable Technique: The Art of the D.J.," the first musical method book for aspiring hip-hop D.J.'s. For his book Mr. Webber used interviews, photographs and traditional music notation to translate the turntablists' approach into a series of lessons and exercises that an aspiring D.J. could practice. These include basic back-spinning and beat-matching and more advanced techniques like the four-finger crab scratch.

"I tried to write it like you would for any instrument," Mr. Webber said, "including everything from hand position to how hard you should push down on the platter." The book became one of Berklee Press's best-



selling titles, and now the college's administrators are willing to reconsider the course.

Mr. Webber said he was certain that the turntable belonged as one of Berklee's offerings. "It has very unlikely beginnings as a music playback device, but it has become a musical instrument," he said. "Once I saw DJ Q-Bert and Mixmaster Mike, guys who elevate this to a virtuosic level, I realized this could be around for a long time."

Mr. Webber is not alone in this assertion. Hankus Netsky, an instructor at the New England Conservatory of Music, said he could see the possibilities of the turntable being used at his institution. "The way I hear it, it's a contemporary percussion instrument," Mr. Netsky said. "If it's an instrument that's out there, and if a talented student with an artistic mission came along, I would welcome that student."

Courses on hip-hop music and culture have become commonplace across college campuses in the past 10 years. For example, Stanford University has a course titled "The Language of Hip-Hop Culture," and Harvard University offers "Hip-Hop America: Power, Politics and the Word" in its Afro-American studies department. Both courses take a cultural or analytical approach, not an instructional or practical one.

In addition there are several places where aspiring D.J.'s can learn how to scratch and spin in a more informal setting. In 1998 two students at the University of California at Berkeley introduced a pass-fail course titled "Introductory Turntablism" in the university's student-led democratic education program. There are also several for-profit music programs that cater to aspiring D.J.'s, including Scratch DJ Academy in New York, which uses a combination of master classes and informal instruction. If Berklee decides to approve a turntable class, however, it will be the first hip-hop performance class at a conservatory, applying Western notation and theory to an oral tradition. Mr. Webber said he knew of no other conservatories that were considering such a class. Its acceptance at Berklee is far from certain. Though hip-hop has artistic validity in popular culture, the turntable has yet to achieve legitimacy in music theory classes and performance studies. And many within Berklee's faculty are uncertain whether the course is appropriate for a serious music college.

Gary Burton, executive vice president of the college, said, "There's still some controversy over whether it's an instrument, in the conventional sense of the word, meaning with established systems of technique and notation that relates it to Western harmony and melody."

Mr. Webber obviously disagrees.

"The fact that people are taking beats and snippets of other records bothers a lot of people," he said. But, he added, it is not very different from modern classical composers like Karlheinz Stockhausen and John Cage, "except it actually grooves, and you can dance to it."

It's fitting that this debate is occurring at Berklee. Since its inception in 1945, this private music college has been considered one of the most progressive in the country. The school touts itself as the first music school to incorporate jazz and to accept electric guitar majors, and it is one of the few institutions where students can study Jimi Hendrix and John Lennon as well as traditional subjects like ear training and composition.

For Mr. Burton, the debate over the turntable reminds him of an earlier era. "We went through a similar experience 30 years ago," he said. "Rock became a lot more sophisticated in the 60's, and suddenly we were talking about having an ensemble that played Beatles music. But the older, established faculty reacted very strongly. They felt that the Berklee tradition would be harmed and that rockers do not care about reading music, they just want to scream and play two chords."

Then acting as the dean of curriculum, Mr. Burton arranged for a monthly faculty seminar, complete with visits from established rock musicians, to explore the topic. Mr. Burton and Mr. Webber now have decided to

take a similar tack: they are arranging a series of master classes and discussions to familiarize faculty members with the specifics of the debate. But even if the Berklee faculty accepts the turntable as an instrument, Mr. Burton said there was still the question of whether the hip-hop art form lends itself to the classroom.

In addition the school would have to find instructors, purchase equipment, decide on a core repertory and most important see if students were interested in the class, he said.

Mr. Webber seems certain that there are enough interested students to fill a course, though students are apparently divided on the subject. Matias Vellutini, 21, a bassist at Berklee, said: "I think that turntables in general are just a party trick. It's a total gimmick. I'm not even sure if it's music." But others seem excited at the prospect of scratching for credit. "Yeah, I'd take the class," said Jason Downs, 19, a vocal major. "I'd be the first to sign up. It's the future of music."