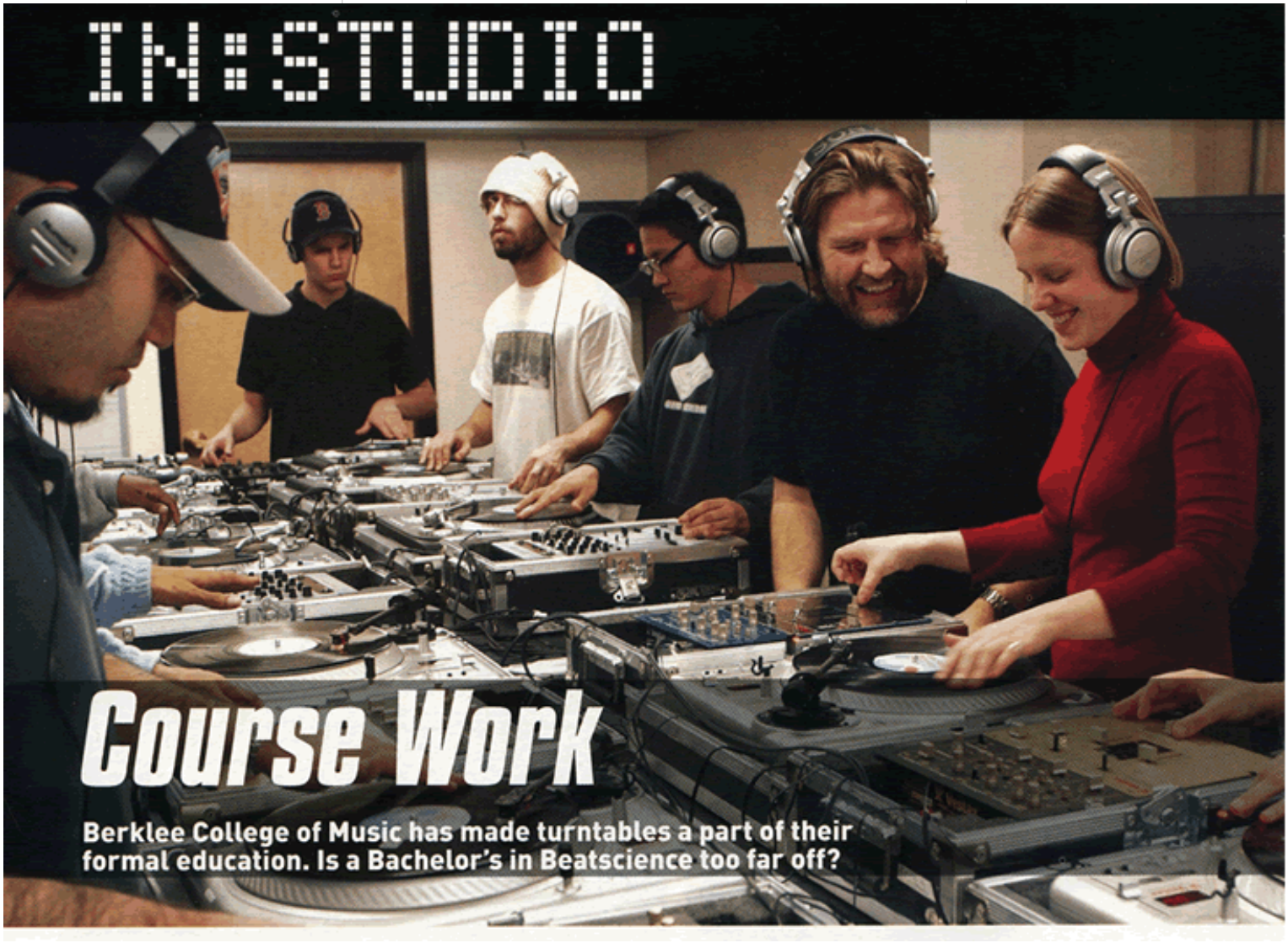

This past May, while college students crammed for economics and English finals, eight students at Boston's Berklee College of Music prepped for the first-ever exam at an accredited university testing skills in scratching, mixing and creating a DJ set that, in the words of professor Stephen Webber, "Expressed something about who they are." Berklee is the first music conservatory in the country to offer the level-one course, Turntable Technique. And while this may not have disturbed a deck in clubland, it certainly caused a brouhaha at the 59-year-old institution.

Webber, a jazz guitarist, Emmy-winning composer and professor of production and engineering, spent four years lobbying for the course's approval amid questions surrounding the turntable as an instrument and the electronic genre as an art.

Professor Scratch, as students call him, first witnessed DJing while watching a DMC turntablist competition video. "I just thought, 'Whoa! I want to do that,'" he says. "The result was [the book] *Turntable Techniques: The Art of the DJ* – a sort of *DJing for Dummies*" covering technique, style and history.

While both Harvard and Stanford Universities have offered courses examining the cultural significance of hip-hop, no academic institution has formally offered practical instruction. Part of the course requirement is to understand the history of the turntable. "It's an urban folk instrument," Webber says, discussing the origins of the turntable in Jamaica and the Bronx. "With our class, it's now starting down that perilous road of formal study," he says, laughing. "We're in an art form where the pioneers haven't hit 50, so they're now getting into the idea that this needs to be preserved. If it never gets to academia, there's a chance of it being lost."

The course has weathered its first year, but the examination of its merits and place at Berklee and beyond continue. "People in academia pay lip service to increasing diversity and [exploring] indigenous culture," Webber says. "But there's a lot of inherent tension in taking something off the street and putting it into a different setting."

Tension was nothing new for Berklee, the first college in the country to teach jazz in the late '40s and the first to allow the electric guitar as a student's primary instrument in the '60s. To this day, Berklee is on of the few conservatories to teach popular music at all. The radicalism of their approach is inseparable rock and jazz's dubious origins. But more than 50 years later, the two forms are riding into their golden years. Meanwhile, hip-hop, dance and the surrounding cultures are under social and political scrutiny. Declaring the genre an emerging art and the turntable an instrument was, and still is, risky. Among the concerns is that the DJs cannot read music and don't use any system of notation, something that has particularly troubled Berklee's Executive Vice President, Gary Burton, a jazz vibraphonist and five-time Grammy winner who benefited from Berklee's progressive nature when he arrived in 1960.

"As the music becomes more complex, it's important to pass it on to others and to develop it," Burton says. "Most DJs aren't reading music; they're using ear. And while that was true of jazz in its infancy, it's unheard of today."

Webber agrees and sees it as part of the form's evolution. "We're where we were with the electric guitar in the '60s," he says. "Hendrix, Dylan, McCartney – they didn't read music. But Berklee's mission is to teach musicality through the contemporary music of the day and to study and reflect the major musical movements of our time as, obviously, turntablism and hip-hop are."

Celebrated electronic producer BT, who attended Berklee as a vocal major and has conducted seminars on DJing, celebrates Berklee for being "forward-thinking enough to acknowledge that turntablism and electronics are tools of the trade now. It encourages students to embrace electronics as a legitimate means of contemporary music and sound design."

Webber's students obviously agree. Only two of the eight in his spring course have any experience DJing and consisted of vocal, saxophone, engineering and piano majors. Marc Alvarado, a music synthesis major and violinist, was looking for a way to fuse classical music with other genres. "I was worried I wouldn't be able to make expressive music through electronics, something human with feeling and passion. SO the main reason I got into the class was that I didn't know how to use the turntable and found out that I could make music with the turntables that was soulful."

Convincing traditional musicians like Alvarado will make a strong impression on those who dismiss the form as ripping off the work of others. "It's a collage medium, like what's been going on in the visual art world since Matisse," he adds. "DJing is taking control of your music collection. It's a huge paradigm shift in the way people want to experience music."

Up next is the development of a level-two course and Webber's second book, *The Evolving DJ*, featuring interviews with the late Jam Master Jay, Paul Oakenfold, Herbie Hancock and DJ Shadow. Down the road is the challenge of offering the turntable as a primary instrument, academically defined and cozily categorized.