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Mashup Poetics as Pedagogical Practice

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Combining the vocals and backing tracks of what are usually rather disparate songs—often cognitively dissonant if sonically consonant—mashups explicitly embody musical collisions. Although many offer simple delights in their whimsical recontextualizations, bringing together unlikely collaborators through some clash of genre, mood, or theme, others seem to suggest a more pointed cultural critique. In doing so, such mashups have inspired me to consider and to explore the mashup aesthetic and procedure as pedagogical tools.

Most mashups truck in irony and nostalgia: the pleasant swirl of memories and associations triggered by the juxtaposition of two well-worn but formerly unassociated songs. Implicit flaunting of copyright or the integrity of a musical work notwithstanding, for many listeners and producers, mashups are quite apolitical. They're just plain fun. Even in seemingly straightforward cases, however, the meanings mashups might make frequently transcend the simply silly or comically consonant. When we hear more pathos in pop songstress Christina Aguilera's vocals if she's singing over the Strokes' garage-rock power chords rather than bubblegum beats or when we fixate on the cartoonish qualities of rapper 50 Cent's macho image as he's rapping over Queen's arena-rock kitsch, we discover correspondences, connotations, and critical readings of performances that we may not have given a second thought—or even a first listen.

It is the mashup's ability to produce such intensely audible and even pleasurable forms of critique, folding musical analysis into musical experience (not to mention embracing contemporary forms and technologies), that I wish to consider in this essay. After a brief discussion of mashup poetics, I will present a couple of examples of my own making.

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In addition to offering what might be taken as an approach for making sense of mashups and other contemporary musical or, more broadly, audio-visual products of their ilk—for video footage, video games, and the like are also being mashed up these days—I hope to demonstrate how the mashup might function as a tool of music theory and of musicological pedagogy more generally, not to mention a kind of playful, provocative, publicly engaged scholarship.

MASHUP POETICS

In the last few years, mashups have exploded in popularity as they have exploded, or perhaps simply exposed, commonplace ideas about popular music and consumption practices, digital technology, and intellectual property and the sanctity of the recorded performance as a "complete" and finished work. Critical interventions masquerading as simple pleasures, mashups emerged precisely at the moment that digital technologies enabled them. As "bedroom producers" suddenly had the tools—and, thanks to peer-to-peer networks, the source materials—to play with pop music and to share their creations with a global audience, they turned consumption into production, conjuring Frankenstein versions from the scrap heap of commodity culture.[2] The example that perhaps brought mashups into public discourse more than any other is Danger Mouse's *Grey Album* (2004), which deftly combined vocals from rapper Jay-Z's *Black Album* (2003) with backing tracks constructed from portions of the Beatles' eponymous album popularly known as the *White Album* (1968). Served a cease-and-desist order by EMI, supported by massive online civil disobedience, and profiled in the *New Yorker* and other prominent publications, Danger Mouse quickly became a poster boy for the genre.[3]

Assembled from fragments of the Beatles' music, Danger Mouse's cut-and-pasted collages on the *Grey Album* depart from a certain kind of mashup orthodoxy, often glossed as "A+B" to describe the large chunks of sound typically put together; nevertheless, the underlying philosophy came through loud and clear, and the cleverness and execution of the concept won over legions of listeners and prospective producers. Around the same time, popular websites, such as Get Your Bootleg On, served as outlets and networking spaces for mashup enthusiasts, and increasing attention in mainstream and Internet media brought the genre wider attention and acclaim.[4] Even major record labels, for all their cease-and-desist orders, embraced the mashup, officially releasing and sometimes commissioning mashup-style remixes of their artists' recordings as well as encouraging the practice as a form of "viral" marketing for new releases through such social networking sites as MySpace. Although the heyday of the mashup in

its most recognizable and orthodox form may already be behind us, the genre's radical recontextualizations have indelibly shaped popular music aesthetics as a generation of producers and consumers, whose roles increasingly blur into each other, have come to hear such unauthorized remixes as quotidian features of the pop landscape.

MASHUP PEDAGOGY

I was initially struck by the mashup's potential to do more than ironically juxtapose disparate musical works or portions thereof when I heard Eminem rapping over a Britney Spears backing track. Appearing to take Eminem up on his sarcastic request to "sit me here next to Britney Spears," the maker of the mashup did just that, overlaying the accompaniment to Spears's "Oops! . . . I Did It Again" with Eminem's a cappella vocals from "The Real Slim Shady"—both released in 2000 and both top 10 radio hits in the US.[5]

To be sure, this particular mashup delights in its ironic collision of two seemingly distant songs and performers, but, as I realized while I listened and grinned and considered it, "Oops! . . . The Real Slim Shady Did It Again" offers more than simple pleasures. The aural equivalence it poses presents a powerfully audible critique of Eminem's self-conscious posturing, especially in "The Real Slim Shady," as an anti-teenybopper. As the rapper appears to follow formulaic bridges running up to big schmaltzy choruses, the alignment underscores the utter lack of distance between Eminem and one of his favorite targets. Drawing attention to the pre-fab pop-ness of Eminem's song craft, the mashup essentially calls him on his bluff: "Slim Shady doth protest too much, methinks," it seems to wink in its deft marriage of the rapper and his pop doppelgänger.

It was while acting as a participant-observer at clubs in Boston and on the musical blogosphere that I began to notice the subtle pedagogical potential, and the parallel poetics, of the mashup. Through direct juxtaposition, mashups seem to have the power to shape, with potent immediacy, one's sense of how musical style articulates ideas about community, tradition, influence, and interaction. Such musical procedures reimagine the world of the social through the evocative, sensual terms of the sonic. As such, mixes and mashups, especially when explicitly conceived as cultural critique, would thus seem to embrace the insight that, as Michael Bull and Les Back argue, "Thinking with our ears offers an opportunity to augment our critical imaginations" (Bull and Back 2003, 2).

To mix in, or mash up, Richard Taruskin's voice as well, I was struck repeatedly while hearing mashups in clubs and through my computer speakers, by how, as he once put it, "good performers can teach receptive

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scholars a great deal" (Taruskin 1983, 63). Appreciating the power of such technologically mediated manipulations of prerecorded music to engender a certain kind of critical reflection and an analytical mode of reception, I began to consider ways that I might bring my ethnomusicological expertise to bear on my productions and performances and vice versa. I started to borrow tricks and techniques from mashup producers in order to advance what I like to call "musically-expressed ideas about music."[6] In some sense, then, what I propose here is not so much an imposition of musicological method on mash culture, but a recognition and embrace of the ways the two can work in dialogue, with music scholars highlighting the cultural work that mashups do as we employ these very forms to share our perspectives on music's social and cultural significance—perhaps even issuing in the process a creative challenge to producers to consider the forms and meanings of their mashups beyond clever or purely pleasurable correspondences in title, theme, tempo, rhythm, or key.

Just as music notation and transcription facilitate the work of music scholars researching traditions that themselves employ notation, today's worldwide web of musical interaction might be fruitfully interpreted and expressed through the very tools that artists and audiences are using to create and engage music. Music technologies in the age of digital production offer unprecedented possibilities, as Christopher Small might say, for us to music about music (1998). We would do well, I contend, to investigate the possibilities. But enough discussion and justification for now—allow me to offer some examples.

"BIG GYPTIAN"

The first "pedagogical mashup" I would like to present for your consideration combines "Khosara," a mid-20th century hit in the Arab world sung by Egyptian singer and icon Abdel Halim Hafez, with Jay-Z's "Big Pimpin'," a globally popular hip-hop track released in 1999 that employs a sample of a recording of "Khosara" as part of its accompaniment.[7] An imagined musical reconciliation of sorts, the mashup poses questions about the two songs' copyright dispute, their ability to highlight and reinterpret each other's features, and, among other things, the connections between pimp fantasies and U.S. foreign policy. That the two possess an inherently musical connection, of course, is what motivated the mashup in the first place. Interestingly enough, it was the process of putting them together that later suggested to me a number of critical correspondences.[8]

Listening to the recordings together in this manner, a variety of interesting effects seems to emerge. In an attempt to share and explicate these, I will employ the first person plural ("we") to encourage readers to listen along

with me.[9] Among other things, we get to hear more of the original than the simple but central two-measure loop that Jay-Z's producer, Timbaland, extracted for "Big Pimpin'." We, thus, get a better sense of how the two-bar motif figures in Baligh Hamdi's composition; moreover, we become better equipped to appreciate the sonic inspiration at work in Timbaland's production. More mundanely, but not unimportantly, hearing the original, at least for the legions of listeners more familiar with the Jay-Z song, helps to foreground its Egyptian and Arabic qualities. This simple fact might serve to mitigate the Orientalist tendency to hear the "exotic" loop as emanating from Bollywood or Bali—two "other" places erroneously cited as sources for the Jay-Z song in journalistic accounts of "Big Pimpin'."[10] At the same time, we are not only prompted to hear the "Big Pimpin'" instrumental in a new light, understanding what Timbaland fastened onto and why, but also we are simultaneously cued to attend to "Khosara" with enhanced appreciation for the recurring but less frequently repeated motif. Further, we come to focus on how Timbaland's production actually departs from the original composition: rather than returning periodically to mark the form, the two-measure antiphonal phrase now undergirds the entire song, shifting the emphasis toward rhythmic repetition and revelation (rather than harmonic motion) and bass frequencies, among other musical dimensions. Hence, listening to the source alongside and against the sample-based treatment offers us new ways of hearing both.

While some of these new ways of hearing "Khosara" and "Big Pimpin'" demand a degree of active listening, some of the other meanings we might make of the mashup result from active, if not activist, production choices I made. For instance, just as Timbaland musically recontextualizes "Khosara" with his savvy sampling, my mashup semantically recontextualizes "Big Pimpin'" so that rather than supporting an endorsement of exploiting women as sex-workers, Timbaland's breezy beat, now thickened by the winds and strings of the original, instead primarily accompanies the mournful, melismatic singing of Abdel Halim Hafez. Sentiments such as "what a shame, what a shame, behind you neighbor, my eyes are crying" take on new significance in this context, especially for Arabic-fluent listeners, many of whom were appalled by the use of a beloved song as a vehicle for braggadocio and vulgar misogyny. Feeling fairly disgusted myself by most of the lyrics in "Big Pimpin'," I excised all but what I could hear (and, hence, willfully misconstrue) as potentially redeemable moments in Jay-Z's performance. Hence, "love em, leave em" becomes simply "love em," repeated for emphasis. Or, refitted to a musical context that is now explicitly Arab, a line about transforming impoverished women into attractive employees—"take em out the hood, keep em looking good"—suggests quite another set of possible interpretations. We could, for instance, now hear Jay-Z critiquing conservative Islam's call for women to wear veils, or,

with a stretch of imagination, we might hear him assailing the interrogation techniques so powerfully symbolized by the hooded prisoners at Abu Ghraib. With a little creative transposition, Jay-Z reemerges, in a duet with Abdel Halim Hafez, as either a liberal (if imperialist) defender of women's rights or as an anti-imperialist, anti-war critic of U.S. conduct. Whether he is any of these things is, of course, immaterial to the open, imaginative exercise animating this mashup in particular and, as I have argued above, mashups more generally.

"THE LION SEEPS TONIGHT"

The other example I will offer here brings together four versions of the same composition. Originally titled "Mbube" as sung by Solomon Linda and His Evening Birds in South Africa in 1939, many listeners know it better as "Wimoweh" or "The Lion Sleeps Tonight." The story of the song and its various versions is a long and complicated one, and it brings to the fore issues of appropriation and exploitation in an age of global circulation, commerce, and asymmetrical power relationships.[11] My desire here, in mashing up three covers by the Weavers (1951), Yma Sumac (1952), and the Tokens (1961) with the Linda original, is to highlight the accumulated resonances across all the versions and to note the song's strikingly resilient features.

Figure 16.1. Screenshot of "The Lion Sleeps Tonight" as assembled using Ableton Live. The numbers at the top refer to measures, at the bottom to seconds. The four recordings, represented by waveforms depicting left and right channels, are layered and edited as shown here.

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As with "Big Gyptian," however, I am also responsible for some rather purposeful musical tampering here. I have altered the keys and tempos of the Weavers', the Tokens', and Yma Sumac's versions in order to "discipline" them to the original—in an act of symbolic musical retribution, if you will—though I also maintain a degree of dissonance in the mashup in order to underscore the conflict of this long, tortuous story of a popular song.[12]

For me, the gradual layering of new versions in this mashup mirrors the accretion of meanings, money, and—depending on where you stand—injustices that have piled up over time and over dozens of repeat performances. This "mirroring," however, better resembles a grossly proportioned (fun?)house of mirrors than a purely reflective surface. The composition seeps through the mix, but in the end, it sounds like quite a musical mess, which seems an appropriate analog to the messy story of circulation and appropriation the mashup is meant to restage.

AUDIBLE ANALYSES

If such mashups as I've discussed here—and "musically-expressed ideas about music" more generally—remain an underdeveloped area of musical analysis, music theory, and ethno/musicological method, it will be, I suspect, due to such resilient impediments as disciplinary orthodoxies, institutional barriers, and publishing norms, as well as the fact that the tools that make such an approach possible have only recently become widely available and accessible to those outside the realm of elite electronic music production. I strongly believe, however, that the benefits of embracing these tools and approaches at this moment far outweigh the potential perils of going against the grain of convention with regard to notions of music scholarship and pedagogy, not to mention musical ownership and fair use. Because such a practice can produce "musical examples" that are at once analytically interesting and aesthetically compelling, the contexts for which they are suitable extend beyond the classroom to the radio, the club, and the Internet, among other nontraditional venues for teaching and thinking about music. In ways I have tried to outline here, mashups possess a special capacity for imparting the theories and concepts of our disciplines through a mode of discourse more accessible to those unfamiliar with our various specialized lexica.

For all these reasons, then, those of us who are committed to sharing our perspectives with the wider world might consider various forms of musically expressed ideas about music in order to advance our fields amid the sea changes of the digital age. Colliding composition and publication, performance and pedagogy, parody and academic privilege, such mashup methods may raise questions, or at least eyebrows, as they challenge

various norms of scholarship and copyright, but their value for hearing, teaching, and theorizing about music is, as I hope I have demonstrated, immediately audible.

NOTES

1. An earlier version of this text was delivered as part of the SMT Committee on Diversity Special Session on November 4, 2006, at the joint annual meeting of the American Musicological Society and the Society for Music Theory in Los Angeles.

2. It is no coincidence that the rise of the mashup coincides with the fall of Napster and the proliferation of similar services that allowed users to share and trade songs, a cappellas, and instrumentals—not to mention the software, such as Sony's Acid Pro, which made it rather easy to combine such recordings (i.e., to mash them up).

3. Despite its contested legality, the *Grey Album* can be downloaded and listened to via bit torrent technology. See the page hosted at http://www.illegal-art.org/audio/grey.html.

4. See http://www.gybo5.com; given the site's various iterations, however, a search for "GYBO" or "Get Your Bootleg On" may be necessary to locate the latest version.

5. Because of the illicit, unauthorized nature of many mashups, it is difficult to point the reader to a stable audio file of "Oops! . . . The Real Slim Shady Did It Again." However, a search for the title on the Internet should turn up several instances for listening. I have also created a page at http://wayneandwax.com/?page_id=2744 where I will attempt to host more permanently the works to which I make reference in this chapter.

6. For an elaboration on what I mean by "musically expressed ideas about music," see http://wayneandwax.blogspot.com/2006/04/musically-expressed-ideas-about-music.html, a blog post that reprints a paper I delivered at the spring 2006 meeting of the New England Chapter of the Society for Ethnomusicology.

7. To read further about the sample in question, see http://wayneandwax.com/?p=180.

8. See http://wayneandwax.com/?p=2731 in order to listen to "Big Gyptian" and to read my initial explication of the track, as well as some of the commentary it generated. Or see http://wayneandwax.com/?page_id=2744 for a collection of stable links to all the music and online content discussed in this essay.

9. Obviously, the listening process is an extraordinarily complex and, in some sense, necessarily idiosyncratic endeavor. So it is something of a conceit to assume that the meanings that reveal themselves to me would be available to others. See Steven Feld's "Communication, Music and Speech about Music" (1984) for a detailed examination of listening and semiotics.

10. See, for example, Tarek Atia's "Pimpin' a Classic" (2000) in the Egyptian newspaper *Al-Ahram Weekly* (http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2000/484/cu2.htm), which cites such cases of mistaken identity with no little contempt for their ignorance. This conflation of Eastern or other sites more generally perceived as exotic is a classic problem of what Edward Said famously dubbed Orientalism (1978).

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11. Rian Malan's exposé in *Rolling Stone* (2000) offers a detailed account of the song and its travels.

12. See http://wayneandwax.com/?p=2716 in order to listen to "The Lion Seeps Tonight" and to read my initial explicatory text. Or, once more, go to http://wayneandwax.com/?page_id=2744 for a collection of stable links to all the music and online content discussed in this essay.

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