GIVING UP HIP-HOP'S FIRSTBORN
A Quest for the Real after the Death of Sampling

by Wayne Marshall

In a December 2000 post to an online forum at Okayplayer.com, the Roots' website, producer and drummer Ahmir "?uestlove" Thompson (pronounced "Questlove") responded to fellow posters' queries about the state of sampling—the use of elements from other performers' recordings, for example, funk records, to make hip-hop beats.[1] The discussion centered on sampling's status as essential to the production of *real*, or *authentic*, hip-hop.[2] Titled "we all gave our firstborn up," ?uestlove's reply began on a sober, sincere note:

> not saying this is the primary reason why we [the Roots] did original material but you don't know the pain it is to give up mid 5 figures to a group of people (record label/publishing company) who ain't even the artist. the pain.[3]

Thompson thus attempted to explain his own group's alternative approach and to communicate the woes of a hip-hop artist in the age of copyright commerce. He agonizes over the often-illogical system of usage fees and publishing credits. Such strictures not only impinge on hip-hop artists' creative options, he notes, they frequently fail to benefit the performers whose music is sampled. Most significantly, he mourns the loss of what many consider to be hip-hop's central and essential musical practice. The art of sampling, especially for artists like ?uest who care deeply about hip-hop's history and aesthetics, is akin to a firstborn child—one that such artists have loved dearly, nurtured, and watched grow over the last quarter century. Because of copyright-infringement litigation, some of these artists, with deep regret, have had to give up their firstborn.

With hip-hop's late '90s ascension to global cultural prominence and a lucrative position in international markets, the costs of sampling have risen as well. A number of high-profile copyright lawsuits in the late '80s and early '90s sent a chill through the hip-hop world and a buzz through the business world. De La Soul's unauthorized use of twelve seconds from the Turtles' 1969 single, "You Showed Me," ended in a $1.7 million settlement in 1989. A couple years later, Biz Markie's unauthorized use of twenty seconds from Gilbert O'Sullivan's 1972 ballad, "Alone Again (Naturally)," was ruled a criminal theft and his label, Warner Brothers, forced to recall and discontinue sales of his 1991 album *I Need a Haircut*. In the years since, purchasing the rights to sample-heavy music catalogues and licensing these rights to hip-hop producers has become an entrepreneurial activity. Publishing companies such as Bridgeport Music have instigated hundreds of suits against

hip-hop labels, many of them retroactive. Some go so far as to hire what are referred to pejoratively as "sample police" to sniff out unauthorized samples.[4]

Nevertheless, and despite a rise in synthesizer-based production concomitant with the decline in sampling, many hip-hop producers have continued to make beats using samples. Some, such as Kanye West, Just Blaze, P. Diddy, and other producers working for large record labels, enjoy production budgets that permit them to license any sample they like, including the biggest pop hits of previous decades, hence affirming the legal status quo. Some producers and acts, especially independent and largely local artists, operate well enough under the radar to evade scrutiny or harassment and continue to sample with impunity. And some—in particular, acts with a sizeable national, if not international, following but who lack the resources of a "major label"—find themselves in a tight spot: to sample or not, to be real or not, to be sued or not? Among those who choose to continue sampling, some manipulate their samples to disguise their sources (but not their sampled-ness), while others make brazen musical allusions. Both approaches, in letting the seams show, advance an audibly militant position with regard to copyright law. Arguing with words and beats that their manipulation of other musicians' performances renders them new and makes them their own, such producers assail copyright as fundamentally unfair. They recite narratives of hip-hop's origins and history in order to justify and defend sampling as an essential practice. Adamantly "underground" producers such as DJ Premier base their very style and voice on a commitment to keeping hip-hop's firstborn alive and well. Others, such as ?uestlove and the Roots, who play "traditional" musical instruments and sample only minimally, express deep ambivalence over questions of abandonment and adoption, musical freedom and resistance, practicality and authenticity.

Although ?uestlove clearly holds sampling in high regard, certain tensions around the relationship of sampling to hip-hop history and authenticity consistently emerge in his writings and music. Thompson admires producers who resist copyright law and subvert it by adopting new sampling practices. At the same time, he suggests that for "traditional" musicians like himself, sampling is not worth the trouble when "original" material, performed within certain stylistic bounds and properly recorded, can be just as authentic. Beyond questions of authenticity, though, Thompson also argues that sampling in the age of sample sniffers is inherently limiting from a musical standpoint. Producers who employ samples but lack funds for licensing are too often restricted to the techniques of chopping-and-stabbing, filtering, and otherwise masking their samples.[5] Such techniques provide a rich, powerful palette but can limit one's creative possibilities. For an accomplished drummer such as ?uest, playing instruments affords one greater freedom and versatility. In December 2000, at a time when his above-the-radar colleagues and co-producers were facing increasingly crippling lawsuits and creative strictures, sampling seemed no longer to represent a feasible approach to making music, even if many considered it to be hip-hop's essential beat-making procedure and crucial to the production of "authentic" hip-hop.

?uestlove does not give up on authenticity that easily. He makes an effort to assert his own practices as valid and essential even as he explicitly evokes the particular aesthetic qualities that make sample-based hip-hop such a distinctive and powerful approach. Loop-based structures and "dirty" timbres have marked the Roots' music long before they began subtly incorporating actual samples into their productions.[6] Without a doubt, ?uest acknowledges sampling as central to hip-hop and affirms this conviction in his music and

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writings. But he also carefully revises hip-hop's popular narrative to advance his own music-making approaches as equally authentic. Through public discourse, historical criticism, and the production of non-sample-based yet "real" hip-hop, Thompson creates space for himself, his colleagues, and his audience. Examining ?uestlove's discursive interventions and his and the Roots' musically embodied arguments, I hope to show how they negotiate the tensions between prevailing notions of the "real" and their own, so-called alternative production and performance practices.

?uestlove, the Roots, and Authentic Hip-hop

Ahmir "?uestlove" Thompson is the Afro-sporting, breakbeat-recycling drummer for the Roots, a Philadelphia-based hip-hop band that has been making music together in some capacity and in various configurations for well over a decade. In addition to Thompson on drums, the core group also features a bassist, keyboardist, and several vocalists. Though the Roots' membership has routinely changed since their inception, ?uestlove has always been the drummer and Tariq Trotter, or Black Thought, the MC. Thompson and Trotter met in the late '80s while attending the Philadelphia High School for the Creative and Performing Arts, where Thompson refined his chops alongside such peers as jazz bassist Christian McBride. Prior to this, Thompson's musical training consisted of regular, intense "woodshedding" as well as the practical experience he gained while gigging with his father's doo-wop band, Lee Andrews and the Hearts. Beginning as a tambourine and percussion player as early as age five, by twelve he was leading the band on drums.[7] The Roots held a somewhat marginal position in the hip-hop world during the first half of their career, often labeled as "jazz rap," "alterna-rap," or "college rap." But they steadily built a fan base through constant touring and word of mouth. With their fourth album, *Things Fall Apart* (1999), the Roots' record sales and critical acclaim finally appeared to approach their reputation with audiences worldwide.[8]

Not coincidentally, *Things Fall Apart* is several hip-hop worlds away from the Roots' first album, *Organix* (1993). As suggested by the title, the Roots' first album represented an explicit positioning of the group as having an "organic" approach to their music, employing live instrumentation and improvisation rather than electronically based or preprogrammed beats. During their early years they sometimes referred to their sound as "organic hip-hop jazz," a phrase which would seem to downplay the degree of hip-hop's influence in their music, relegating it to an adjectival, if crucial, position.[9] Advancing such a style represented a significant move in the early '90s, as the group's sound, although deeply informed by hip-hop, departed markedly from most of the hip-hop being produced at that time, especially by mainstream acts. Even among other hip-hop groups tagged with the "jazz rap" label—for example, Digable Planets, Gang Starr, A Tribe Called Quest—the Roots audibly set themselves apart through their music's conspicuous absence of sampled vinyl's "dirty" grain and dusty timbres. Originally, the group played acoustic instruments almost exclusively. Since, they have added a Fender Rhodes electric piano and more often employ an electric bass than an upright; they also occasionally feature electric guitars, various other instruments, and, increasingly (especially since the late '90s), samples.[10]

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Despite their idiosyncratic approach, the Roots' music at this early stage in their career embodies many of hip-hop's distinctive sonic features. Most of the songs on *Organix* are built around the same two-to four-bar funk riffs and jazz progressions that hip-hop producers were sampling at this time.[11] The drum patterns that ?uest plays evoke the characteristic sound and style of '70s-era breakbeats. Perhaps most obviously, the band's music serves to underpin rap vocals. The Roots' second album, *Do You Want More?!!!??!* (1994), continues in this style. The only difference is a marked advance in studio techniques (e.g., layered vocal tracks, various effects). For all the sonic markers of hip-hop, however, the Roots' basic configuration as a live band, often without the audible presence of a DJ or samples, still compromises—according to commonplace, if purist, notions of authenticity—their ability to produce "real" hip-hop.[12] Whereas a group such as Gang Starr automatically gains credibility by virtue of being a DJ/MC duo (i.e., a classic hip-hop combo), the Roots' lack of a DJ, and the sounds associated with DJ practice and vinyl sources, represents an inherent obstacle to their authenticity.

As they do in other contested realms of the "real," ?uestlove and the Roots attempt to negotiate the tension produced by their lack of DJ via both verbal and sonic interventions. Thompson explicitly recognizes this tension in his liner notes to *Things Fall Apart*. For example, he characterizes the presence of DJ Jazzy Jeff on a track as "knock[ing] down another barrier for us (the exclusion of the DJ) [. . .] with his perfect polyrhythmic scratching patterns."[13] Significantly, ?uestlove thus describes Jazzy Jeff's contribution in rather glorified and explicitly musical terms, thus positioning the DJ as yet another musician in the group. Through this inclusionary move, Thompson affirms the musicianship of the hip-hop DJ, challenging the commonplace denial of "musicality" to such a nontraditional instrumentalist. By defining the DJ as a musician, he attempts to reduce the distance imposed between so-called "real" musicians like the Roots and "authentic" hip-hop performers, best symbolized by the self-taught DJ. Ironically, the Roots' formal training qualify them for one kind of realness, if a Eurocentric one, while disqualifying them from another. So even as they celebrate the aesthetic values and emulate the sonic markers associated with hip-hop traditions established by DJs and producers, the Roots also struggle against prevailing ideas about "hip-hop musicianship" which exclude formally trained instrumentalists from the realm of the "real."[14]

?uestlove and the Roots clearly reject monolithic, marginalizing ideas about authentic hip-hop musicianship, and they construct a compelling and coherent counterargument in performance and discourse. For the Roots, the presence of a DJ as a core member would contradict an important underlying aesthetic. Indeed, not to overlook the strengths of their songs (which feature countless musical and textual allusions to the history of hip-hop), the Roots' music owes a good deal of its resonance to the rare spectacle offered by their expert performance of hip-hop tradition in such a "nontraditional" manner. (Though Thompson, as I will discuss, would disagree that instrumental performance in hip-hop is anything but utterly traditional.) It is no coincidence that the Roots' "Hip-hop 101" segments—a series of reverent, uncannily accurate cover versions of classic hip-hop songs, and a staple of their live shows—are beloved by their fans, many of whom approach hip-hop as connoisseurs. Virtuosic displays of each member's indisputably serious engagement with hip-hop history, "Hip-hop 101" embodies the group's aesthetic orientation. That the group pulls off such a stunt, complete with verbatim cuts and scratches, without a DJ makes their unique approach all the more convincing, not to mention credible.

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For certain fans, however, the omission of the DJ still represents a conspicuous absence. Frequently, such objections stem from particularly purist notions of what hip-hop is and can be. The definition of "real" hip-hop as a compound of the "four elements"—DJing, MCing, breakdancing, and graffiti—is a popular model for many hip-hop devotees and practitioners, underground *heads*, and self-appointed spokesmen of "the culture," but one that ?uestlove and the Roots reject. Whether the Roots' lack of a DJ compromises their authenticity is, apparently, a question asked commonly enough that ?uest addressed it several years ago on the "Frequently Asked Questions" section of his homepage:

> *Deejaying is one of the four elements of hiphop. How can you be hiphop without a deejay?*

> Funny, but grandmaster flash walked up to me and said "y'know if I had parents who had the money to buy me the instruments to play what I wanted, then flash and the five would've been the roots." That to me was a high complement that i'll appreciate, because it is the same cats that cry foul about us, that don't even know who Flash is. being "true to hip-hop" is not based on who's following the 4 elements.[15]

It is, of course, neither coincidental nor insignificant that ?uestlove counters the popular conception with a story that employs a seminal figure for validation. Those who rehearse narratives elevating the DJ to a symbol of supreme authenticity employ the same storytelling strategies, with similar appeals to origins and founding fathers.

Further complicating the Roots' DJ-less "in/authenticity" (especially before they broadened their recording palette, more recently, to include prominent samples) is the actual sound of their music, which increasingly has featured the unmistakable sounds of scratching and cutting. Such effects are frequently produced, however, not by an actual DJ, but by two vocalists and members of the group, Scratch and Rahzel. Each is accomplished in the art of beatboxing, a style of vocal percussion with deep roots in hip-hop history, associated with such "old school" innovators as Doug E. Fresh and Buffy, "The Human Beat Box," of Fat Boys fame. Moreover, each is adept at reproducing a wide range of sonic signifiers, including the distinctive sounds of manipulated vinyl and other classic hip-hop technologies (e.g., a vintage, muffled microphone with heavy echo). Scratch's and Rahzel's vocal virtuosity is astounding, and without reading the credits in the liner notes or, better, seeing such feats performed live, one can easily mistake their "scratching" for that of an actual DJ and their beatboxing for an entire band or prerecorded production. Vocal imitations of classic hip-hop sounds thus represent another way that the Roots reconcile the tension between ideas about authentic-sounding hip-hop and their "nontraditional" ensemble.

The increasing salience of Scratch and Rahzel in the Roots' recordings and live shows beginning in the mid-'90s is part and parcel of a broader, significant shift in the group's style and approach. On studio recordings since *Illadelph Halflife* (1996), one hears not only a marked presence of such classic hip-hop signifiers as scratching and beatboxing but also a general, if subtle, change in their overall sound. The transformation is most audible

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at the level of timbre and of texture, ultimately lending the group a more sample-based (and thus "authentic") sound. While remaining based around the same core instruments, the Roots subtly incorporated actual samples into their music.[16] More profoundly, they make a pointed effort to record their instruments, especially ?uestlove's drums, in such a way as to produce the illusion of sounding sampled. In this way, the group puts forward a sound that foregrounds their musicianship and uniqueness yet gets closer, in its sonic significations, to the timbres and textures that many hip-hop *heads*, especially of the purist camp, would identify with "real" hip-hop.

Sampling Recast: ?uestlove's Historical Criticism

Aside from drumming for the Roots, ?uestlove wears a number of other hats. He has worked as an A&R representative, scouting new talent for various record labels. He also works as both a producer and executive producer for the Roots and other acts.[17] Thompson has also become more active as a freelance producer for various hip-hop, R&B, and pop artists, both on his own as well as in tandem with various members of the production collective known as the "Soulquarians."[18] In addition to these musical endeavors, ?uest is also active as a critic and columnist. He has written articles and columns for *The Source*, *Rap Pages*, *Vibe*, and *Wax Poetics*, and he has used Okayplayer.com, as well such sites as myspace.com/questlove, to post record reviews and other musings, together with tour updates and comments from the road.[19] ?uestlove has also been a regular poster on the Okayplayer boards, where he engages directly with Roots fans and other interlocutors in heated, candid discussions about the state of hip-hop, the place (and future) of sampling, current projects, and other topics of interest.

In discussions about hip-hop production, especially with regard to sampling, ?uestlove's remarks often critically reconstruct hip-hop's established storyline, debunking too circumscribed an idea of hip-hop's boundaries and recovering significant, overlooked practices. While affirming the centrality of sampling, ?uestlove challenges the dominant narrative by emphasizing the role that "traditional" instrumentalists have played throughout hip-hop's history. He opens up the discussion further by asserting his own eclectic musical interests, which often fall outside of narrow ideas about the boundaries of hip-hop and "black music." Prior to the release of Common's genre-busting *Electric Circus* (2002), for example, ?uestlove appeared to take pleasure in announcing that the album, on which he served as an executive producer, would be "closer to that of air, stereolab, and [Radiohead's] 'kid a' . . . full of experiments, time changes, weirdo shit, and freedom."[20] By making reference to no hip-hop influences and, moreover, no putatively "black" musical forebears—instead citing three European bands more associated with rock, retro/lounge, and electronic music—and, further, tying this alignment to "freedom," ?uestlove issued a provocative challenge to popular but limiting notions of hip-hop authenticity. For Thompson, "real" or "true" hip-hop is more bound up with artistic integrity and community engagement than it is bounded by some set of prepackaged attitudes and reified practices: "As far as i'm concerned as long as i provide the hip-hop nation with drum breaks, as long as we continue to make stellar material, and for every hour that i'm logged on to this computer educating folks, then i'm 'true' to hip-hop."[21]

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When confronted by purists who denounce "traditional" instrumentalists (i.e., neither DJs nor sample-based producers) as inauthentic practitioners, ?uestlove's rejoinders are sometimes quite passionate and, unsurprisingly, defensive:

> for those who speak out against live instruments in hip-hop is plain ignorant to me. that spits in the face of the work that i've put in for the last decade. not to mention that must mean that [Doctor] dre's work is underestimated and unappreciated (you think dre is using samples? nope) not to mention discounting the history of hip-hop for it's [sic] first 8 years on wax. sugarhill? instruments. africa bambatta [sic]? instruments. "the show"? live instruments. "children's story" "mona lisa" instruments. whodini, instruments. i could go on, but the first 8 years and the last 5 years have been instrument heavy [. . . .] damn y'all. . . . when y'all gonna learn?[22]

?uest thus reframes hip-hop's "traditional" production practices by recovering a genealogy of live instrumentation in hip-hop. Afrika Bambaataa, frequently held up as the archetypal sample-based producer for his use of Kraftwerk's "Trans-Europe Express" (1977) on the hugely influential "Planet Rock" (1982), becomes refigured here as an instrumentalist. (And, indeed, the Kraftwerk melody was replayed rather than sampled—*interpolated*, to use the current legalese—by studio hand and producer Arthur Baker, though other elements in the song, particularly some percussion loops, are samples.) Thompson's recasting of hip-hop history, through the recovery of seminal productions and major figures, situates the Roots' prevailingly sample-free approach within a downright foundational tradition of hip-hop production.

At other times, ?uestlove's revisions are more subtle, though no more profound. In a three-part series published in *Rap Pages* in 1997 and 1998, Thompson attempted no less than to rewrite the aesthetic history of hip-hop; significantly, he did so by using sampling as his narrative thread. Such an approach not only seems like a rather self-conscious exercise for an instrumentalist, it also appears to uphold the traditional privileging of sampling as hip-hop's essential beat-making procedure. But Thompson also undercuts this implication, dispelling any notions of an uninterrupted line between foundational DJs-in-the-park and contemporary sample-based producers. By interjecting instrumentalists at various, often pivotal points, ?uest offers a particular perspective, and some key evidence, and thus destabilizes the centrality of sampling as he asserts the historically important role of live instrumentation.

Although Thompson affirms the DJ's place as hip-hop's musical progenitor, he also notes that it was not until "The Adventures of Grandmaster Flash on the Wheels of Steel" in 1981 that a hip-hop DJ's turntable-based performance—in a sense, a predigital, real-time sampling technique (or, as ?uest labels it, in contrast to the Sugar Hill label's house-band productions, the first example of "authentic nonsession musician breaks")—was recorded and released to a mass audience. [23] Prior to that, songs such as "Rapper's Delight" (1979), hip-hop's first commercial hit, were created by studio musicians who replayed the popular disco and funk riffs of the day. Unlike more commonly rehearsed narratives, ?uestlove begins his history, somewhat iconoclastically, with this non-DJ-based production-approach:

> **1979** Because of the poor sonic quality of turntables in the studio analog system (digital hasn't arrive [sic] yet), producers had to come up with plan B . . . Thus, the arrival of the session musician as sampler . . . [24]

Again familiar tensions emerge: studio musicians, one might infer, were only employed because "real" hip-hop music could not yet be adequately recorded. Anachronistically affirming the central role of the sample, ?uest appears to reduce musicians to little more than historical accidents, temporary stand-ins for sampling technologies. And yet, there is no contradiction here for Thompson, who acknowledges hip-hop's roots in DJ practice (though also, if somewhat indirectly, funk drumming). Along these lines, ?uest has re-ferred to himself, with no sense of shame, as a "beat recycler," taking pride in his ability to perform a vast catalogue of classic breakbeats which would simply not be so classic without hip-hop DJs to play and loop them. Regardless of the ambivalence in the entry above, however, ?uestlove unambiguously positions session musicians as crucial players in the formation of hip-hop's early aesthetics. He elevates these early instrumentalists to foundational status even as he reduces them to stand-ins for hip-hop's original and quintessential accompanist: "Hip-hop music on wax [i.e., pressed to vinyl] started with the live band as the DJ."[25]

Throughout Thompson's three-part history, traditional instrumentalists and "live instruments" appear again and again, presenting a more diverse, interwoven sense of hip-hop's sonic fabric than other versions of the story. Thus one encounters subversive side comments in certain entries:

> **1987** Pumpkin (RIP the bandleader of Enjoy Records—the man who chimed on Spoonie Gee's "Love Rap") passes his sticks and batons to Bobby Simmons of "stetsasonic" fame, whose classic album "On Fire" debuts this year—*marking the return of live instruments to hip-hop*.[26]

Or, in another example:

> **1989** Dre's West Coast take on the Bomb Squad becomes the audio version of "ClockWork Orange" and *occasionally you can hear traces of live instrumentation over the samples*.[27]

It is clear that ?uestlove introduces a significant subplot to the larger narrative—a storyline that otherwise, with its lovingly-detailed description of seminal moments in the "evolu-tion of sampling," conforms closely to prevailing conceptions of hip-hop's history, canon, and essential practices.[28]

?uestlove's narrative also disrupts by bringing to light details more often omitted or glossed over. Although the innovative use of samplers, especially in the sampling of breakbeats, is typically associated with hip-hop, Thompson's history complicates this equation by pointing out that the first group to sample a "break" on a recording was not a hip-hop group at all:

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> **1984** . . . someone finally utilizes a sampler for something else other than sound effects (!!! like duh!). So, the first authentic "break" sampled on was from . . . a rock band. Yes took five seconds of Funk Inc.'s classic cover of Kool and the Gang's classic "Kool is Back" for "Owner of a Lonely Heart."[29]

?uest's use of the term *authentic* here thus takes on a richly ironic tone. He considers the drum sample employed by Yes to be "the first authentic" example of such both because it was sampled directly and digitally from another recording (as opposed to being replayed, as on early hip-hop recordings)—and a "classic" funk recording at that!—and because the group used a sampler, rather than a turntable, to do so. That the pioneering use of a sampler to do something as hip-hop-centric as looping a funk break was accomplished by such putative outsiders offers a simple but profound challenge to narratives that set up too simple and exclusive a relationship between "authentic" hip-hop and sampling.

?uestlove's Critique: Sampling and Authenticity in the Year 2000

Around the turn of the millennium, production-based discussions at Okayplayer.com regularly speculated about the "death" of sampling—and often, it followed, of "real" hip-hop. The specific context for ?uestlove's comment about giving up hip-hop's firstborn, with which I began this essay, was a thread called "Common's Sample Trouble." The thread was prompted by news that an uncleared sample had been discovered in a song on Common's *Like Water for Chocolate* (2000) and that royalties, rumored to be exorbitant, had to be paid to the copyright holders. Ironically, Common made a major production switch on *Like Water for Chocolate*, moving from No I.D., the sample-based producer of his first three albums, to the more hybrid approach of the Soulquarians. Although the album enjoyed critical acclaim, some dissenters on the Okayplayer message boards argued that the switch from a heavily sample-based style to one that incorporated more live instrumentation signaled a shift away from "authentic" hip-hop. Such an argument, of course, made Common's sample trouble all the more ironic.

Responding to allegations of producing inauthentic hip-hop and questions about the predicament of sample-based production, ?uestlove offered his insider perspective as the album's executive producer. In an alternately sarcastic and exasperated post, Thompson illustrated how profoundly frustrating and illogical the system of sample clearance can be. As an example, he wryly enumerated the individual samples, their costs, and the accompanying publishing demands for a single, recent production, "I Don't Know" (2000), produced for a Slum Village album by fellow Soulquarian, Jay Dee. In a virtuosic but pricey piece of production, Jay Dee intricately interjects a number of vocal samples from James Brown into the song's verses, all over a sample-based beat. As ?uestlove spells out, each of these samples—no matter how small—would carry a heavy price:

> [sampling's] not dead. but expensive as fuck. so if you have a record budget of $500,000 and you are slum village making "i don't know"

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you would have to clear. . . .
- the emotions "blind alley" ($6000 plus publishing)
- "make it funky" james ($8000 no matter what, a grunt, a break, he will take it. his motto is FUCK YOU PAY ME!) {"what" "you gonna play now" "bobby" "i don't know"]
- "hot pants" james ($8000)
- "funky president" ($8000)
- "if you don't get it the first time, back up and try again" james ($8000)
- "sex machine" ($8000)
- "my thang" ($8000)
- "say it loud (i'm black and i'm proud) ($8000)
- "funky drummer" ($8000)
- "superbad" ($8000) ("i got" "watch me")
tired yet? now if david porter and isac hayes [sic] ask for %20 publishing (and that is nice) (20 from 100%) for "blind alley".
and polygram asks for 20% PER SONG used that 180%.
just one problem
WE ONLY HAVE 80% TO WORK WITH!!!!!!!!![30]

The impossible equation ?uest offers here exposes the frustrating logic of the current system. Between paying the record labels, who typically own the mechanical rights to sound recordings, and the writers and/or companies who own the publishing rights—none of which, of course, necessarily goes to the samplee—most hip-hop artists with limited (if not nonexistent) budgets could never hope to afford such a pricey but prized production technique. Considering that a single song could cost up to $78,000 in licensing fees, Jay Dee has few choices. He can risk sampling without clearing his samples—a dangerous option in the age of sample police. He can mask his samples via various techniques, which would, of course, profoundly change the sound of the song. Or he can produce using live instruments and newly recorded vocals—an option that Jay Dee, as a proficient multi-instrumentalist with access to skilled engineers, can also pursue, but at the risk of losing the "authentic" and distinctive sound of certain samples, especially such well-worn and richly allusive ones.

Sample-based hip-hop's received and perceived authenticity is a multilayered product, accruing resonance through connections to hip-hop's origins and essence (e.g., "our first-born") as well as the practice's compelling challenges to notions of musical ownership. The authenticity that accrues to sample-based hip-hop is, moreover, grounded in sound. Sampled sounds, especially from vinyl sources, carry distinct timbral characteristics. Often referred to as "dirtiness," this telltale quality is at once an effect of the snaps-and-pops of old, dusty vinyl and of the unique, nostalgic, and often fetishized recording quality of recordings made in a predigital age—a product of different microphones and amplifiers, of analog tape and other technologies of the day, etc. For many producers, vinyl-derived sampled sounds, especially dating to the '70s, possess an aura that simply cannot be reproduced in a modern studio. Tellingly, Edward "Eddie F" Ferrell, who primarily produces hip-hop-informed R&B acts, affirms this sense that samples have a special ability to evoke, "authentically" at that, a particular mood, atmosphere, or "feel": "Sometimes, we want the authentic feel of where a song sample came from that may otherwise be hard

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to recreate."[31] In many cases then, to give up sampling is to give up on certain sense of "authenticity" in one's productions.

Despite his resistance to certain narratives about instrumentalists in hip-hop, ?uestlove concedes that authenticity accrues to sample-based music and that sampling is central to hip-hop's aesthetics. He acknowledges the power and uniqueness of the approach and often stands on the side of sample-based producers. Although he's quick to point out the costs and limitations of sample-based production and refuses to have his own music labeled as inauthentic in cases where it lacks an explicitly sampled sound, ?uest nevertheless defends the approach and often expresses the gravity of the situation for his colleagues: "anti sampling laws is killing hip-hop folks. you can say what you want. i live it everyday."[32] In another post, while attempting to illustrate the fundamental loss he sees in the currently restrictive, anti-sampling climate, he challenged fellow posters—since "in 2000 most joints released before 1993 are ILLEGAL"—to "imagine our world without saturdays [a sample-heavy song by De La Soul]. . . . ok actually without 3 feet high, dead, and buhloone [De La Soul's first three albums]."[33] The picture Thompson paints of a world without the humorous, thoughtful, and undeniably original music on De La Soul's albums is a bleak one indeed and, in a rather direct and elegant manner, makes a persuasive argument for fairer sampling laws.

An outspoken and frequent champion of sample-based production, ?uestlove consistently critiques copyright law and antisampling litigation, often with a sharp sense of humor. At the end of *The Roots Come Alive* (1999), for example, he once again evokes the dismal picture of a world without sample-heavy masterpieces.[34] The final track is an "old school"-style jam, featuring the Roots' main MCs, Black Thought and Malik B, with fellow Philadelphian DJ Cash Money providing an improvised accompaniment by scratching rhythmic variations on a breakbeat, especially around every fourth measure (i.e., the turnaround). As the MCs' verbal exchange comes to a climax and a close, the stage is set for Cash Money to put on his own show, presumably a virtuosic manipulation of recognizable phrases and sounds from two decades of hip-hop records—not to mention classic breakbeats and any other record that fit the mood. But instead of such a technical and artistic display, the sound cuts out, immediately followed by ?uestlove's voice. Speaking quickly, in a sober tone, expressing both the sad reality of the situation (i.e., we cannot hear Cash Money's turntable wizardry because it would cost too much) and mimicking the cold, bureaucratic voice of censorship, ?uestlove explains to the jolted listener why the music has stopped:

> We regret to inform you that due to the asinine, leech-like, Wall-Streetified sampling-publishing laws that plague hip-hop music, you'll be unable to witness the miracles that Cash Money creates on the one-and-twos. Unfortunately, we have to leave you with this . . .

And just as suddenly and dramatically as Cash Money cut out, the CD ends. The humor here is further underscored by the song's title, "For the Love of Money," a pun on the DJ's name and a reminder of the reason we cannot hear him perform. The explicitly anti-corporate stance taken in this jab is also significant because it is consistent with "underground"

hip-hop's anti-commercial orientation and overriding concern with artistic integrity—and therefore would likely bolster the Roots' authenticity among listeners and practitioners concerned with such notions.

Similarly sarcastic, in his "thank you" section of the liner notes to *Things Fall Apart* (1999), ?uest mocks the typical sample-clearance language one finds in the credits for sample-based hip-hop recordings. Inserting footnotes where he has "sampled" from other hip-hop artists' "thank you" sections, ?uest later gives the proper "credit" for such sampling:

> [1]?uestlove's thanks contains a sample of Phife's thank you's from Beat, Rhyme, & Life [2]?uestlove's thanks contains a sample of Andre Benjamin's thank you's from Aquemini [3]?uestlove's thanks contains an interpretation of Big Boi . . . from Aquemini [4]?uestlove's thanks contains a sample of Busta Rhymes thanks from ELE—The Final World Front [5]?uestlove's thanks contains a sample of the GZA's thanks from Wu-Tang Forever [6]?uestlove's thanks contains a sample of Q-Tip's thanks from The Low End Theory [7]?uestlove's thanks contains a sample of Hanson's thanks off their smash debut (?!!!) From Middle of Nowhere[35]

Such self-conscious and somewhat trivial referentiality parodies the overpolicing of copyright infringement that ?uestlove witnesses "killing" the "hip-hop folks" around him. The gratuitously tongue-in-cheek ("?!!!") inclusion of a reference to Hanson—a short-lived teen-pop group—is additionally significant in its heightening of the gesture's already explicit parodic tone, especially given that parody remains one of the rare, consistently successful "fair use" defenses in copyright infringement cases (not that ?uestlove had to worry about this "derivative work"). Thompson's funny footnotes thus call attention to the profoundly debilitating effect copyright litigation has had on the practice of sample-based production, to the point where even the most insignificant, reverent, or parodic allusion must be "cleared."

"Concerto of the Desperado": A Musical Manifesto

Through his (re)constructions of hip-hop history and persuasive, performative arguments against copyright law, ?uestlove upholds the centrality of sampling to hip-hop music while revising the dominant narrative that marginalizes musicians like himself. Perhaps most compellingly, though, ?uest also makes his case through music. Having watched certain producers be coerced into manipulating samples to such a degree that the requirements of concealing one's sources increasingly determined and limited the sound of one's music—as with DJ Premier's chop-and-stab productions, for example—?uestlove has remained adamant about the possibility of producing "real" hip-hop without sampling. And he has done so even as the Roots' music has remained consciously and audibly indebted to the particular aesthetics of sample-based beats. ?uest and his cohorts maintain claims to authenticity by working within familiar and cherished sonic realms,

and the degree to which the Roots' music indexes hip-hop's sample-based aesthetic serves as a crucial determinant of the group's "realness" to many listeners. At the same time, the Roots' instrumental facility affords them a certain flexibility and freedom and allows them to advance a unique, if markedly experimental, voice within the creative constraints of "traditional" hip-hop's somewhat conservative conventions. In the analysis that follows, I employ a close reading of a Roots song, "Concerto of the Desperado" from *Illadelph Halflife* (1996), in order to examine the specific musical poetics through which the group attempts to project their own authentic voice.

Strikingly, the first sounds to reach the listener's ears in "Concerto"—a series of orchestral "hits"—are audibly "samples" of a sort. The liner notes identify the moody, opening strains as "replayed elements" from the theme to the James Bond film, *From Russia with Love* (1963), attributed to composer Lionel Bart. Over these "hits" one also hears a cello line played by the Roots' classically trained bassist, Leonard Hubbard, and the resonant ringing of a gong, which recurs every two measures throughout the track. Shortly thereafter, the haunting soprano of Amel Larrieux enters, followed two bars later by ?uest's drums. Although by no means exceptional, the somewhat exotic arrangement on "Concerto" is certainly not representative of the Roots' usual, spare ensemble. The incorporation of different voices and instruments thus allows the group to demonstrate their versatility and their ability to evoke the same diversity of musical "atmospheres" that sample-based producers relish. Slight variations in the cello part and in the drum patterns and constant improvisation by the soprano add a subtle suppleness to the otherwise sampled-sounding beat. And significantly, the Roots foreground their musicianship by alluding to a classical form in the title of the song itself. Just as a concerto allows a virtuoso instrumentalist to demonstrate his or her prowess, the Roots' "Concerto of the Desperado" serves as a showpiece for Black Thought. The MC's virtuosic performance, enabled by and intimately related to the song's beat, represents as it reflects the group's skill and power.

Black Thought's flow—his combination of rhythmic delivery and rhyme placement—serves as a metonymic symbol of the Roots' dexterity and realness. Such a stance is rather clearly stated in the chorus: "The Concerto of the Desperado / R-double-O-T-S / check the flow / if you know like I know, then you know the motto, / that's: 'all the fraud shit gots to go (you know the fake shit gots to go).'" In demanding that the listener "check the flow," the Roots confidently advance a skill-based and sound-grounded argument for their authenticity as hip-hop artists, a commitment to the "real" explicitly based on an opposition to inauthentic hip-hop, or as Black Thought puts it, "fraud / fake shit." Mere explication of Black Thought's lyrics, however, cannot sufficiently account for the musical poetics through which the Roots position themselves as authentic. The MC's semantic content here is crucial, but without the flow to project these words in rhythmic form, such braggadocio would be nothing but empty, albeit clever, rhetoric.

Listening more closely to Thought's delivery in the first verse of "Concerto," one will notice a number of features that contribute to the character of his unimpeachable flow. Many of these features are markers of underground, "new school," and East Coast style—all of which may serve as loci of authenticity for particular audiences. Generally, Black Thought's flow exhibits a number of characteristics that music theorist Adam Krims identifies with recent rap styles: "In particular," notes Krims, "rhymes since the 'old school' days have increased in density (with more internal rhymes), have become more irregular (with many

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lines having no end-rhymes at all, and rhyming syllables on offbeats), and increased in quantity (with more than four or five rhyming syllables often occurring within a rhyme complex)."[36] All these stylistic traits are present in the first verse of "Concerto," as transcribed below in Figure 1. Krims's concept of the "rhyme complex" is especially useful in explicating a flow such as Black Thought's on "Concerto." Krims defines a rhyme complex as "a section of a song in which any one rhyme predominates."[37] After Krims, I employ the term *beat-class* (hereafter abbreviated "BC") to express the rhythmic placement of certain words (and, later, drum beats). Throughout my analysis, each measure of music will be divided at the level of the sixteenth note (or, into 16 BCs) as follows: 1xyz2xyz3xyz4xyz. In an attempt to illustrate the subtleties and complexities of Black Thought's flow, I have lined up the accented syllables with the beats in each measure, emphasizing the rhyming words in each complex with boldface type and the internal rhymes with italics.[38]

For one, the number of rhyme complexes Black Thought uses is quite small, which means that he is required to come up with more words, fragments of words, and combinations of words that rhyme with each other—a demonstration of both creativity and expansive vocabulary made all the more impressive by the verse's semantic and thematic coherence. One could argue that Black Thought essentially uses but two rhyme complexes for the entire verse: the first beginning with "metro" (ln. 1) and the second with "killer" (ln. 5).[39] By subtly shifting the phonemic character of the rhyme complex (e.g., filler→hither→picture→banister→manager), he produces the aural illusion of an incredibly long string of rhymes. Other creative devices that Thought employs to extend such rhyme complexes are the "mispronunciation" of certain words (e.g., making "Delilah" [ln. 7] rhyme with "gorilla") and the placing of stress on unusual syllables (e.g., "min-IS-ter," ln. 13). The denizens of hip-hop's underground place a high premium on such mastery of language, and, accordingly, Black Thought explicitly positions himself as a poet (ln. 2, 16).[40]

Black Thought is more than a poet, however. He is an MC, a performer, a musician, and hence he equally foregrounds the musical dimensions of his performance. Formal distinctions between Black Thought's poetry and his musicianship are problematic. It is the musical performance that makes his poetry work. The use of long, developed rhyme complexes allows Black Thought to show off not just his vocabulary, but his flow—the quality that ultimately demonstrates his skill as an MC. Through the constant repetition of the same rhyme, he creates a sense of expectation for the listener, who awaits the next permutation in the rhyme complex. Black Thought then plays with these expectations, placing his rhymes not simply at the end of each line (BC 4) as one might expect, but on and occasionally in between other beats.

This manipulation and syncopation of rhyme placement can be heard as a kind of hypermetrical, polyrhythmic approach to composition. In this virtuosic style of rapping, the rhyme serves as the MC's point of accent—as a kind of temporally salient *motive*, if you will, with which one can create flexible, large-scale rhythmic structures. Although one can see from the boldface that Black Thought places the majority of his rhymes on BCs 4 and, to a lesser extent, 2, he also regularly subverts this steady flow with rhymes on BCs 1 and 3 and various places in between. In lines 12–15, for example, the rhyme-motive progressively shifts to earlier moments of each measure: from the conventional placement of "worsh**iper**" (ln. 12, BC 4) to "min**ister**" (ln. 13, BC 3) to "sw**ifter**" (ln. 14, BC 2y) to "**hits ya**" (ln. 15, BC 1y) and back to BC 4 with "mil**itia**" (ln. 15). In order to purposely place

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        1   x   y   z   2   x   y   z   3   x   y   z   4   x   y   z

1   In the glow    of the        moon, over the      melancholy          metro,
2      my poetry is            set like a         U.F.O.              The maestro,
3       deliver this        concerto.        My physical play        the role of a
4        vessel.          The level of my          lyrics:          law manifesto.
5           My  thoughts  wrestle     and        attack with      the killer
6      instincts       of a gorilla stronger       than            Samson without
7      Delilah.        My soliloquy:         profess           my ability       to
8        just           stimulate you like the    best         sinsemilla.
9    The  halflife of          Illadel-    L      -      P—no        filler, proceed
10      hither       is        my     death       flower blow your tower   to smithe-
11               -reens to fiends     catch      another  rhyme -  riffer.      Deeper
12       than           the meditations of a       Hindu          worshiper.
13    Unorthodox            hip-hop          minister.        Than a
14  Serenget[i]  cheetah, my  thought's    swifter.        You lose your balance when the
15       sound        hits ya,              So check for the   fifth        militia.
16    A poet's  under      pressure     stressing that  you  get the picture,
17   even if it  mean  you     gotta       hang     over     the    banister.
18    I pull    a      microphone    on    any   pistol            brandisher,
19    and take           advantage of ya    crew   'cause   you      amateur.
20      Styles    gunning    down your  sound    man     and     manager.
21    What?   This how  we do it  in     the   year   of      nine-six  with   this
22      deliberate            attack    on   pointless   rap      shit.        Breakin'
23      MCs            down    to   fraction.                   Tell   your
24  squadron:    It's time to go to war.          Respond,       react once
          more.
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Figure 1. Schematic of Black Thought's first verse in "Concerto of the Desperado"

such offbeat accents, Black Thought takes liberties with conventional syntax, reversing the order of the clauses in one sentence: "Than a Serenget[i] cheetah, my thought's swifter." Employing such a consciously musical approach, it is fitting that Black Thought refers to himself as a "rhyme-riffer" (ln. 11).

Black Thought's self-conscious positioning of his virtuosity as a form of authentic hip-hop performance becomes more explicit at a significant moment during the second verse (which, in general, employs the same rhythmic and rhetorical devices as the first verse). In the only extended "break" of the entire song—the point where the beat entirely drops out, foregrounding the vocals—Black Thought differentiates his, and the Roots', brand of hip-hop from inauthentic "fraud shit" (figured here in classic incarnation as a third-person, anonymous opponent) in terms of flow: "They use the simple back and forth / the same, old rhythm is plain / I'd rather Ultramagnetize your brain."[41] In contrast to formulaic, calculated commercial confections, Black Thought exalts innovation, complexity, and virtuosity as true markers of the "real." He shores up his position not merely by demonstrating his own ability to depart from "the simple back and forth" but through

an allusion to a classic recording—i.e., the Ultramagnetic MCs' 1986 debut single, "Ego Trippin'," a scathing critique of Run DMC—thus reinforcing his aesthetic alignment with a longstanding, explicitly "underground" tradition in hip-hop.[42]

Although Black Thought serves as the major mouthpiece for the Roots on "Concerto," representing the group's authenticity with his virtuosic exposition of "authentic" flow, his performance is only one component of the song's greater sonic negotiation. Notwithstanding the popular tendency to use *rap* as a metonym for hip-hop music, hip-hop's beats are crucial to the musical experience. Hence, alongside Black Thought's verbal wizardry, perhaps most integral to the group's projection of authenticity here is ?uestlove's contribution: the rhythmic and timbral dimensions of the drums. The other voices in the arrangement (i.e., the cello, soprano, orchestral hits, and gong) are also important, but the breakbeat has always been hip-hop's defining sonic characteristic—the "boom bap" framework against which almost anything can be made to sound like hip-hop. On first listen, the drumming on "Concerto" sounds much like that on any other hip-hop song (with subtle connotations of East Coast, mid-'90s, underground style). A closer examination of ?uestlove's drumming, however, reveals a subtle play between the demands of hip-hop convention and the Roots' attempts to express a unique voice.

Particular rhythmic and timbral characteristics immediately mark ?uest's drumming as consistent with "authentic" hip-hop style, but he also resists sounding too much like a computer or a drum machine. Instead, while fulfilling certain expectations about a "proper" hip-hop beat, ?uest's drumming suggests possibilities beyond looped breakbeats. The subtle variations in his drum patterns introduce a degree of fluidity not typically found in the unwavering, one- or two-bar patterns characteristic of sample-based producers' programmed beats. Employing a more flexible, anti-quantized approach to the beat and resolving to leave "mistakes" in the final mix, ?uest consciously produces—in his opinion—a more "human" sounding product, which revels in a sense of "sloppiness."[43] Further, his careful attention to timbral considerations and the great lengths he goes to achieve them represent a less easily quantifiable but immediately palpable and absolutely crucial aspect of his distinctive sound. By emulating the "authentic" timbres of vintage, sampled breakbeats *and* maintaining a degree of freedom for rhythmic embellishment, ?uest has his cake and eats it too.

Having memorized as a young man the funk-derived breaks that have long served as hip-hop's rhythmic bedrock, ?uestlove internalized, on an aesthetic and kinesthetic level, the science of the break. Though they are fluid forms and allow a great deal of variation, breakbeats generally have a fairly standardized rhythmic framework. Indeed, such conventions enable breaks to be instantly recognizable and deeply felt by the initiated listener. Typically, breaks are one to two measures long. Their common features tend to include a kick drum on the downbeats, for example, BCs 1 and 3 (with the frequently exercised option of adding a kick on 1y, 2y, 3y, and/or 4y); snares on the off beats, for example, BCs 2 and 4; and a hi-hat dividing each measure at the level of the eighth or sixteenth note. Finally, a tempo of anywhere between 80 and 110 beats per minute will evoke the recognizable feel of a hip-hop beat. Playing within these fairly loose limits, Thompson can produce music that immediately signifies hip-hop. As in most hip-hop productions, he usually chooses a pattern that fits the mood of the song or the rest of the arrangement and plays it (remarkably) consistently throughout the entire track. In the case of the Roots'

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"Concerto," ?uestlove's construction of an appropriate drum pattern includes occasional syncopated accents that correspond with the underlying pattern of orchestral hits. At the same time, ?uest adds subtle variations to the pattern without subverting the character of a song's particular rhythmic framework, adding a flexibility and spontaneity not often found in hip-hop beats. A closer look at ?uest's drumming on the song can thus illuminate his particular musical poetics of hip-hop authenticity.

The beat pattern in "Concerto" essentially consists of four one-measure phrases, already making it somewhat more complex than the common one- or two-measure configurations of most hip-hop beats. For the purposes of illustration, I have labeled these phrases A, B, C, D.[44] As one can see in the transcription below, ?uest's breakbeat configuration follows many of the conventions described above: a hi-hat on every eighth-note; a steady snare hit on BCs 2 and 4; a steady kick pattern on BCs 1, 2y, 3x, and 3y; and occasional kick-drum accents on various off-beats (e.g., BC 4z in A, 1x and 1y in C, etc.):
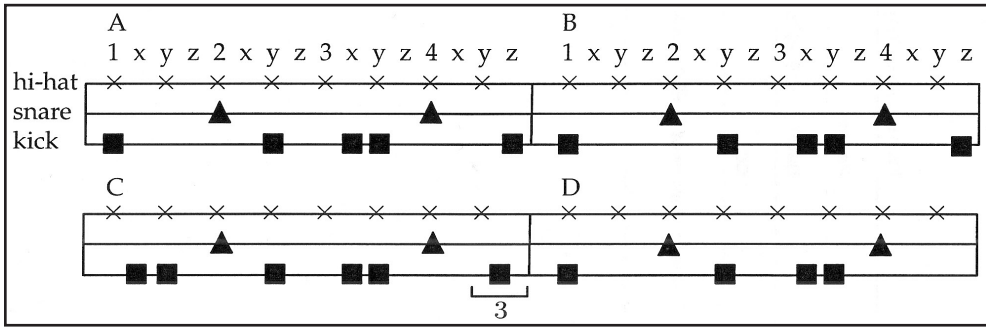

Figure 2. ?uestlove's four-measure breakbeat for "Concerto of the Desperado"

Rarely, however, does ?uestlove play this four-measure configuration without alteration of at least one of the component-patterns. He performs these variations by adding new accents with the kick or snare and leaving out accents where one expects to hear them. The body of the song comprises eighteen of these four-measure configurations. Here I have indicated schematically where ?uestlove performs variations on any of the four-pattern phrases throughout the course of "Concerto," followed by transcriptions of these alterations with the new or missing accents circled:

Figure 3. ?uestlove's breakbeat variations in "Concerto of the Desperado"

What is perhaps most significant about ?uest's style of variation is the degree of subtlety. Keeping with the minimal, steady aesthetic cultivated by loop-oriented sampling practices, ?uest never strays far from the particular character of the original pattern. In this manner, he upholds the sample-based aesthetic that many feel is essential to the production of "authentic" hip-hop. Yet, at the same time, he clearly asserts the musical freedom that plays a major role in the projection of his own distinctive voice and notion of "real" hip-hop. One example of such freedom can be heard in the increasing density of attacks as the song progresses, enhancing the unfolding musical drama. The preponderance of variations on the D phrase is also significant in this regard, for as the turnaround measure (leading back to another four-measure phrase), it exerts no small power on the listener. ?uestlove's many variations on D infuse the phrase with great weight, setting it off and setting up stronger expectations for the following downbeat than an unwavering pattern would.

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Just as deliberately as ?uestlove employs certain rhythmic signifiers in his breakbeat configurations, he also carefully crafts the timbres of his drums. Much like a sample-based producer's store of digital kicks and snares and hi-hats, ?uest's drums can differ substantially from song to song. By reproducing the cherished timbres of breakbeats sampled from '60s and '70s recordings, ?uestlove savvily produces the "real" without having to sample a particular record for its "aura." Seeking to explain hip-hop's timbral predilections, Tricia Rose notes, "These soul and funk drummers, recorded under very different circumstances, carry performative resonances that cannot be easily recreated."[45] Indeed, evoking such resonances without employing samples requires a detailed knowledge and creative use of studio technology. Several times in the liner notes to *Things Fall Apart*, Thompson recounts the meticulous and painstaking work required to produce the vintage or "dirty" sounds he seeks. Describing the process for a track called "Dynamite," he enumerates the various factors contributing to a successful live reproduction of a sampled, programmed breakbeat:

> The biggest surprise however came when Jay-Dee [the producer of the original, sample-based beat that the Roots were trying to reproduce] heard the final version and I broke the news to him that it was indeed me drumming (courtesy of the genius of David Ivory [a recording assistant] . . . and a few blankets . . . and a photo of James Brown at a control board in the 60s giving us a visual of how he shaped his sound and what type of stuff he used) . . . and not the drums he programmed.[46]

The kind of engineering "genius," creativity, and alchemy required to produce such desired timbres speaks volumes about the profound extent to which a sample-based aesthetic has influenced ?uest's music-making practices, especially since *Illadelph Halflife* (1996).[47]

?uestlove foregrounds timbral considerations when writing about his sound and the recording process. One final example should suffice to communicate the importance of timbre to Thompson's production of "authentic" hip-hop:

> On a side note, I must add that of all the songs I drummed on, this ["Double Trouble," CD track 10] is my proudest moment. For the longest I've been trying to achieve some sonic dirt sounds on these drums since the pre-Organix days. I had the style down, the right room, mics, et al. There was one thing missing, and this time I founded what I needed to sound more like an old school Marley Marl joint. . . . as opposed to a Brand New Heavy joint.[48]

Here ?uestlove traces his quest for "sonic dirt sounds" to a period in his career that predates the Roots' recordings, indicating that his goal to make live drums sound sampled is a longstanding one. He also notes that producing an "authentic" drum timbre is not simply a matter of conditions ("the right room, mics") but of execution as well ("I had the style down"), thus tying his engineering achievement to his musicianship. Though he does not elaborate on the secret missing ingredient (and adds in a footnote, "like you thought I

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was gonna reveal that one!!!!!!"), Thompson ultimately traces his desired sound to Marley Marl—the revered "Golden Age" producer, who, as legend goes, was the first hip-hop producer to discover that the sampler could be used to chop up breakbeats.[49] ?uestlove cites the grainy timbres cultivated by Marley Marl's sampling practices as an aesthetic considerably more preferable than that of, say, the Brand New Heavies—a hip-hop band from England who rarely achieve the distinctive, "sonic dirt" that many associate with authentic hip-hop, and whose recordings thus provide a significant contrast to the Roots' musical evocations of the real.

It is important to recognize, however, that Thompson's quest for sample-based hip-hop's treasured timbres is not unambivalent. His re-creation of, say, Clyde Stubblefield's sound (or of Marley Marl's remix of Clyde Stubblefield's sound) directly and audibly connects his music to the realm of classic hip-hop, but his attempts to achieve such timbres without the use of samples represents a significant departure in practice, a countermovement consistent with his critical perspectives on hip-hop history.[50] In spite of Thompson's obvious love and respect for sample-based hip-hop, his public discourse and carefully crafted productions together constitute an important intervention with regard to hegemonic notions of hip-hop authenticity. Not only will many artists find an exclusively sample-based approach to be financially impractical and legally worrisome, ?uest has argued, they may find that such an approach, tied too closely to a narrow notion of the "real," limits their cultivation of an idiosyncratic but authentic voice. While Thompson continues his own sample-based experiments, he remains an iconoclast and an active drummer. His stance on sample-based production is, in the end, complex. At once he expresses defiance of those who charge that "real" hip-hop can only be made with samples, pride to be able to make sample-free hip-hop that he and many others consider authentic, and disappointment that it so often has to be an either/or situation.

Conclusion

Returning to ?uest's post, "we all gave our firstborn up," one can see how the producer and drummer matter-of-factly, but with a mixed sense of regret and purpose, positions his own approach to hip-hop production as imperative at this historical moment:

> so in the end what happens?
> i'll get blamed for taking com [i.e., Common] away from his [and, one might add, hip-hop's] original essence, [and] more and more producers of hip hop will fall in the cracks and make mediocre re-cords to hide the fact that they can't make up for not having a stable alternative to sampling. . . . as for me i will one day devote my life to establishing fairer sampling laws.[51]

Here Thompson challenges the commonplace, putative connection between sampling and hip-hop's "essence," contends that the quality of contemporary sample-based hip-hop suffers due to the strictures of copyright law, puts forward his own approach as a "stable

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alternative," and yet ultimately sides with sample-based producers, pledging to one day challenge and remove some of the constraints strangling hip-hop's firstborn. Through his steady, heady mix of affirmation and critique, ?uestlove opens up space for "alternative" or "nontraditional"—but by no means "inauthentic"—production practices.

By affirming the sonic markers of hip-hop authenticity without sampling per se, ?uestlove has managed to invest his productions and performances with the signifiers of history and politics so soundly embodied by hip-hop's homegrown, sample-based style. Throughout their careers, ?uest and the Roots have consistently foregrounded such an aesthetic while departing from well-worn notions of how "real" hip-hop should be produced. The group thus advances its own ideas about hip-hop through some of the same authenticating gestures one finds in the words and music of such torchbearers of the "real" as DJ Premier or KRS-One: they connect their sound to hip-hop's origins, essence, and underground. By so strongly centering their own ideas about hip-hop authenticity in a tradition with which they are deeply familiar, the Roots resist marginalization: "[W]e loathe the term 'Alternative Hip-Hop' (Lauren Hill says that in ghetto terms that means no skills)."[52] Instead, the Roots position themselves, in their unique but irrefutable engagement with tradition, as absolutely crucial to the essence of hip-hop, present and future.

Ultimately, ?uestlove's and the Roots' projection of a new "real" via so-called "alternative" practices has initiated a broader interpretation of what constitutes "authentic" hip-hop. The group's consistent, compelling, and downright audible and palpable challenges to dominant notions of the "real" have encouraged audiences and practitioners alike to re-examine their ideas about authenticity, underscoring the fluidity and contingency of such seemingly stable, self-evident notions. Although they have more recently embraced the explicit use of recognizable samples, ?uestlove and the Roots labored for many years to make a hip-hop world with room for themselves *and* for their traditionalist peers. Through their savvy, subtle negotiation of hip-hop's boundaries, of historically mediated and culturally charged sounds and ideas, they appear to have found a way to let hip-hop's firstborn go without abandoning its memory, legacy, or power.

NOTES

1. The message boards at Okayplayer.com—Internet home of the Roots, Common, Reflection Eternal, D'Angelo, Jill Scott, and other associated artists—host ongoing discussions about Okayplayer artists and projects, as well as about hip-hop or music in general, politics, sports, and just about anything that generates conversation. Some boards, such as "The Lesson," a forum for "in-depth music discussion," are reserved for specific topics. Those who post represent a diverse cross-section of hip-hop listeners and practitioners, at least within the segment of the population with access to such technology and with somewhat "connoisseur" taste in hip-hop. According to one site administrator, "It would be safe to say that okayplayers represent a microcosm of the hip-hop world—ethnically diverse, majority teens and young adults. We've got board posters from all over the world, representing the reach and appeal of hip-hop" (via email, 2 April 2001). In addition to these participants, the site's featured artists post comments as well. ?uestlove is the most frequent artist-participant in these discussions, usually contributing at least a comment or two on a weekly basis. This article is based on discussions on the board from 1999–2001.
2. When I use the terms *real* or *authentic* here, I do not mean to imply that there is, so to speak, a *there* there. Rather, I refer to a consensual real, if you will—but a contested one, too. I mean to describe the collective conferral of authenticity upon an artist by an audience, a peer group, a community, a discourse. Allow me to be clear: although in some sense inherently imaginary, the notion of authenticity resonates as real.

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3. Posted by ?uestlove to <http://www.okayplayer.com/dcforum/lesson/9123.html> on 7 December 2000 (accessed same day). Throughout this essay I transcribe Thompson's (mis)spellings, syntax, and visual styles as originally typed. His writing style is idiosyncratic to say the least, and, as with much Internet discourse, fairly loose about rules of grammar and capitalization. Rather than riddle these quotations with [sic]s, I offer this disclaimer. In many cases it is unclear what is a typo and what is intentional. Instead of distorting the style or imposing my own ideas on these texts, I reproduce them here as I first encountered them.

4. ?uestlove has described this particular menace to sample-based producers on the Okayplayer boards: "publishing firms now have cats like me that are paid to listen for every nilc [nook] and crannie. believe me. i was gonna work for a firm during the organix [the Roots' first album, 1993] period for cash flow." (7 December 2000, <http://www.okayplayer.com/dcforum/lesson/9123.html> [accessed same day].)

5. The "chop-and-stab" is a technique associated with DJ Premier, whose productions for Gang Starr and other "hardcore," "underground" acts during the 1990s employed increasingly fragmentary, but always audibly sampled, portions from other recordings. Cutting his samples into small, split-second pieces and splicing them into new arrangements, Premier's beats often embody a sly but explicit approach to sample-based production.

6. Indeed, in the years since I wrote the bulk of this essay, not only have the Roots significantly shifted in status, with their recent signing to Def Jam records marking a major arrival of sorts (not to mention greater resources for licensing and the like), but their attitudes toward sampling have shifted too. Increasingly, the Roots studio productions employ samples of all sorts, including some rather recognizable references, such as the Incredible Bongo Band's "Apache" (1973) on "Thought @ Work" (from *Phrenology* [2002]) to their latest single at the time of publication, "Don't Feel Right" (from *Game Theory* [2006]), which employs, "by permission" of the publishing and mechanical rights holders, an unmistakable fragment from Kool & the Gang's "Jungle Boogie" (1973).

7. Jazzbo, "Natural Elements," *Rap Pages*, Jan. 1997: 35.

8. For many, including members of the Roots (as celebrated on their website), the group's achievement of critical and popular success was epitomized by their Grammy Award in 2000 for the song, "You Got Me," from *Things Fall Apart*. The album was also certified platinum (i.e., it sold over one million units).

9. Black Thought describes the group with this phrase on "Intro/There's Something Going On" (from *Do You Want More?!!!??!* [1994]).

10. The group's original keyboardist, Scott Storch—who has recently risen into the ranks of hip-hop's super-producers—was replaced in 1994 by Kamal Gray. The group's longtime bassist, Leonard Hubbard, plays both upright bass and bass guitar, not to mention cello.

11. In fact, several of the riffs and progressions on *Organix* are recognizably derived from a number of fairly popular jazz and funk songs, which I will here refrain from identifying. In cases where I am not aware that a sample—or even an "interpolation" (i.e., re-played elements)—has been explicitly "cleared," it is my policy not to divulge the identity of the source. Much as this may go against the grain of citation and transparency in scholarship, I cannot in good conscience make the work of the "sample police" any easier.

12. See Joe Schloss's *Making Beats: The Art of Sample-Based Hip-Hop* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2004) for an ethnographically-informed examination of commonly and collectively held notions about authentic approaches to hip-hop production.

13. ?uestlove, liner notes, *Things Fall Apart* (1999).

14. Robert Walser's "Rhythm, Rhyme, and Rhetoric in the Music of Public Enemy" (1995) is typical in this respect, reproducing common notions about "hip-hop musicianship." Walser asserts, for example, that "sampling is a strategy for producing music outside the logic of 'trained' musicians" (198). Such statements reinforce the false dichotomy between sample-based producers and more "traditional" or "trained" musicians. Indeed, many hip-hop producers over the course of the genre's history have undergone at least some formal musical training. The dichotomy thus works as double-edged sword: it simultaneously limits hip-hop producers as it seeks to validate them and it denies "trained" musicians the ability to be "authentic" hip-hop producers.

15. "FAQ," <http://www.okayplayer.com/theroots/questfaq.htm> December 2000 (accessed 27 March 2001).

16. Although the group employs some subtle, largely timbral samples on *Do You Want More?!!!??!* (1994)—for example, the "dirty" vinyl sound on "Distortion to Static" and a similar bit of noise added to the kick drum on "Do You Want More?!!!??!"—I would argue that it is not until *Illadelph Halflife* (1996) that the presence of samples (or simulations of samples) significantly alters the group's sound.

17. For example, ?uest served as the executive producer, and part-time producer, on Common's *Like Water for Chocolate* (2000). It is important to differentiate here the roles of producer and executive producer in hip-hop. A *producer* is typically the one who creates the musical tracks, the beats, over which MCs rap. An *executive producer* will also have input in this realm (but not necessarily hands-on input), and additionally manages the project as a whole, overseeing such issues as song selection, sequencing, mastering, presentation, overall concept, etc.

18. Although no longer so actively working together, and diminished by the untimely death of Jay Dee in February 2006, it is noteworthy that the Soulquarians' core members—?uestlove, D'Angelo, James Poyser, and Jay Dee—all played "traditional" instruments as well as worked with samples. As a team and as individual producers, they have worked with hip-hop artists such as the Roots and Common, but they also transcend genre boundaries in their work, producing R&B singers such as Erykah Badu, Bilal, and Jill Scott, among others.

19. See, for example, "?uest/corner," <http://www.okayplayer.com/theroots/questmenu.htm> December 2000 (accessed 27 March 2001). See also, <http://www.myspace.com/questlove>, especially the blog (accessed 12 July 2006).

20. Posted to <http://www.okayplayer.com/dcforum/general1/9619.html> on 27 January 2001 (accessed 31 January).

21. "FAQ," <http://www.okayplayer.com/theroots/questfaq.htm> December 2000 (accessed 27 March 2001).

22. Posted to <http://www.okayplayer.com/dcforum/general1/9619.html> on 27 January 2001 (accessed 31 January); first ellipsis mine, second ellipsis in original.

23. Ahmir "?uestlove" Thompson, "For an Ex(Sample)," *Rap Pages*, Sep. 1997: 16.

24. Thompson, "For an Ex(Sample)," 16.

25. Thompson, "For an Ex(Sample) pt. III," *Rap Pages*, Jan. 1998: 18. {AU: Ibid. means the source is identical. This is a different article in a different issue.}

26. Thompson, "For an Ex(Sample) Part Deux, 1986–'87," *Rap Pages*, Oct. 1997: 16 (italics mine). It is interesting, however, that ?uest neglects to include in his history the predominantly session-musician-produced works of Def Jam's mid-'80s catalog. Albums by groups such as Run DMC and the Beastie Boys often incorporated live electric guitar, for example, into the sampled and synthesized mix. Presumably, the omission results from ?uest's explicit focus on sampling—a stated emphasis that makes entries like this one all the more significant.

27. Thompson, "For an Ex(Sample) pt. III," 18 (italics mine).

28. Thompson, "For an Ex(Sample) Part Deux, 1986–'87," 16.

29. Thompson, "For an Ex(Sample)," 16.

30. Posted by ?uestlove, a.k.a. "qoolquest," to <http://www.okayplayer.com/dcforum/lesson/9123.html> on 7 December 2000 (accessed same day). First set of brackets ("[sampling's]") mine; all else in original.

31. Mitchell 56.

32. Mitchell 56.

33. Posted to <http://www.okayplayer.com/dcforum/lesson/9123.html> on 7 December 2000 (accessed same day). The De La Soul albums in question are *3 Feet High and Rising* (1989), *De La Soul Is Dead* (1991), and *Buhloone Mind State* (1993), three classic works of sample-based production by Prince Paul.

34. The track can be found at the end of the second CD of the "limited edition" version of the album.

35. Ahmir "?uestlove" Thompson, liner notes, *Things Fall Apart*. As with ?uest's Internet discourse, I have left the punctuation unchanged. Also, note that not only is this "sampling" an ironic move, but it once again allows ?uest to align himself with a hip-hop canon of sorts. Such name-dropping and recitation of minutiae lend additional credibility to the Roots' alignment with "authentic" hip-hop.

36. Adam Krims, *Rap Music and the Poetics of Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000) 43.

37. Krims 43.

38. This transcription, intended primarily as a listening aid, does not attempt complete precision in notation of rhythmic relationships. Instead, it primarily illustrates the hyper-metrical placement of rhymes. The precise moments in the timeline where Black Thought's non-rhyming words fall are not important for this discussion.

39. The final four lines of the verse depart from the second major rhyme complex, but they can be heard more as a transition to the chorus than as part of the main body of the verse.

40. Another noteworthy and authenticating aspect of Thought's performance is its rhetorical style—its braggadocio, its put-downs of anonymous opponents, and its metaphorical violence (the microphone as a superior weapon to a gun [ln. 18], "styles gunning down" opponents and their crews [ln. 20]).

Such posturing fits rather neatly into the battle-rap category, which is perhaps the most common song genre in underground hip-hop.

41. The line that follows this declaration of difference in terms of flow (and concomitant "realness") further connects such an assertion of musical skill to an MC's (in this case, Black Thought's) authenticity: "It's the hip-hop purist / that leaves you lost like a tourist / inside the chorus."

42. Ultramagnetic MCs are frequently cited—with reference to their seminal album, *Critical Beatdown* (1988)—as innovators of a variety of stylistic traits, including James Brown-heavy, sample-based beats and speedy, "offbeat," complex flows, which informed a great deal of "underground" hip-hop, especially in the 1990s. As I have attempted to show throughout this essay connecting oneself and one's style to influential, especially canonical, figures in hip-hop's history serves as a common authenticating gesture.

43. In the liner notes to *The Roots Come Alive* (1999), ?uest writes: "When listening to the final tapes, we found out that the best songs were actually the ones with flaws in 'em." Further, in describing an old, forgotten hip-hop song (i.e., The Alliance's "Kibbles and Bits") which inspired the sonic texture of the opener on *Things Fall Apart* (1999), "Table of Contents (Part 1)," he expounds on the beauty, essentiality, and subversiveness of "sloppy" hip-hop:

> The structure was chaotic, sloppy, and all over the place. It was pure perfection. We attempted to redo this piece about 3 or 4 times. It just wasn't time yet. BlackThought and I decided that a song in that vein would kick off the album. It would have to reflect that raw Hip-hop we missed. Somewhere between Marley Marl's juice crew period (hence, the sloppy tambourine) peak Bomb Squad /Cube/ Amerikkkan Music (the violent cymbals) and *Straight-Out the Jungle* (the horrible mixing).

Note ?uest's discussion of the particular sonic characteristics of such sample-based, "Golden Age" classics. For many, the sound of that period offers a template for authentic hip-hop, and producers as different as ?uest and Premier attempt to carry on that legacy in their post-copyright-chill productions.

44. Though D is often the same pattern as B, as the turnaround measure it more frequently calls for, and receives, some variation; therefore, in the interest of clarity, I label them differently.

45. Rose 78.

46. Thompson, liner notes, *Things Fall Apart*.

47. Again, I would argue that ?uest's and the Roots' emulation of sample-based hip-hop aesthetics becomes significantly more marked beginning with *Illadelph Halflife* and continuing, if not increasing, through the present day with their forthcoming release, *Game Theory* (2006). The change is related both to the group's evolving negotiation of ideas about authentic hip-hop and, more practically, to advances in studio technology and their experimentation with and mastery of recording techniques—not to mention, in recent years, the accrual of status and resources, for example, via their signing to Def Jam, which make sampling a more feasible, and less legally and philosophically fraught, approach for the band.

48. Thompson, liner notes, *Things Fall Apart*.

49. Tricia Rose, for example, relates this tale of origins in *Black Noise* (79).

50. Clyde Stubblefield was one of James Brown's "funky drummers." Indeed, he is the drummer on "Funky Drummer" (1970), which contains what may be the most sampled breakbeat of all time.

51. Posted by ?uestlove to <http://www.okayplayer.com/dcforum/lesson/9123.html> on 7 December 2000 (accessed same day); brackets mine.

52. Thompson, liner notes, *Things Fall Apart*.

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