*Unlocking the Groove: Rhythm, Meter, and Musical Design in Electronic Dance Music*. By Mark J. Butler. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006, xi + 346 pages.

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In an infamous exchange set up by *The Wire* magazine in 1995, Karlheinz Stockhausen was asked to comment on music produced by several contemporary electronic music makers thought to be, according to well-worn narratives, his techno-musical heirs. Taking the so-called "Technocrats" to task, Stockhausen decried their use of what he called "permanent repetitive language" and recommended that they each listen to various compositions of his own that might lead them away from "ice cream harmonies" and other "kitschy" indulgences. To Richard D. James (a.k.a. Aphex Twin), he offered the following advice:

> I think it would be very helpful if he listens to my work Song of the Youth, which is electronic music, and a young boy's voice singing with himself. Because he would then immediately stop with all these post-African repetitions, and he would look for changing tempi and changing rhythms, and he would not allow to repeat any rhythm if it were [not] varied to some extent and if it did not have a direction in its sequence of variations (Witts 1995, 33).

Yoking his unrepentant elitism and staunchly Eurocentric modernism to Adorno's critique of the culture industry and the fashioning of fascism, Stockhausen raises the specter of corrupting, repetitive "African" rhythm yet again in order to assail a track by Richie Hawtin (a.k.a. Plastikman):

> It starts with 30 or 40—I don't know, I haven't counted them—fifths in parallel, always the same perfect fifths, you see, changing from one to the next, and then comes in hundreds of repetitions of one small section of an African rhythm: duh-duh-dum, etc., and I think it would be helpful if he listened to Cycle for percussion, which is only a 15 minute long

piece of mine for a percussionist, but there he will have a hell to understand the rhythms, and I think he will get a taste for very interesting non-metric and non-periodic rhythms. I know that he wants to have a special effect in dancing bars, or wherever it is, on the public who like to dream away with such repetitions, but he should be very careful, because the public will sell him out immediately for something else, if a new kind of musical drug is on the market (Witts 1995, 33).

Although Stockhausen and the Technocrats seem to talk past each other rather than truly converse ("Do you reckon he can dance?" asks James in a cheeky retort), the exchange is a valuable one at least insofar as it provocatively puts questions of (electronic) musical craft in the context of a broader conversation about the cultural connotations and social implications of quite divergent—if, for many, rather related—musical aesthetics. The value for today's music theorists, perhaps, is that Stockhausen issues a challenge, at least to those whose iPods place Hawtin next to Haydn, to find a new language, a more appropriate poetics to describe, defend, and even to dissent from today's "electronic music." For it would seem clear that Stockhausen demonstrates to anyone who values the kind of music one hears in "dancing bars," or wherever, the utter inadequacy of traditional (or even avant-garde) music theory for understanding the power and, if one must, the complexities of electronic dance music (EDM).

The central position of repetition in the debate, and its dubious racialization as "(post-)African," is not only deeply revealing of the texts and subtexts at hand, it directs us to the vexing question of so much discourse around electronic dance music: how to argue for the aesthetic value of deeply repetitive music—a quality utterly taken for granted and celebrated by EDM devotees—without falling into two common traps: (1) searching for the hidden complexities of seemingly simple sounds; (2) foregoing any sort of music analysis at all, in favor of socio-cultural exegesis, and thus implying that EDM does not need it (but also, perhaps, does not merit it). A great many journalists, cultural critics, ethnomusicologists, practitioners, and aficionados have been involved in the intertwined projects of explicating and celebrating EDM as social phenomenon, as cultural product and practice, and—if, ironically, less commonly—as music. Music theorists may be (fashionably?) late to the party, but I reckon they can dance (if they want to). More important, I reckon that if anyone can convince the Stockhausens of the world (if one could possibly posit such a singular plurality) to attend more closely, and openly, to the forms and contents of EDM, it would be music theorists. The next obvious question, of course, might be: why bother? But let's set that aside for now.

Such a mission—not so much to speak to the Stockhausens of the world but, without a doubt, music theorists—serves both to animate and, ultimately, to complicate Mark Butler's *Unlocking the Groove*. An ambitious effort to bring music theory's toolkit to bear on techno as much as to explore how techno's distinctive, elastic grooves, aesthetics of repetition, and embodied interpretive frames might offer new tools to music theory, Butler's book is a strong and much needed contribution to musical-theoretical discourse as well as EDM studies. Rather than offering his own master key for unlocking techno's grooves, Butler seeks to explicate what producers, DJs, and dancers seem to know intuitively, to feel, and to discuss among themselves, if usually in different language than that of contemporary music theory. Butler's central argument is that the sinuous grooves of EDM support multiple interpretations and flexible interactions. The goal of his analysis—showing how certain musical structures and relationships engender a kind of open-ended, if coherent and shared, phenomenological response—is thus rather distinct from the authoritative boiling-down, the singular readings, of much theorizing about music. On the other hand, Butler's close attention to sound, often at the (micro) level of the musical event, distinguishes his approach from the majority of writings on EDM, which tend to focus on matters of culture and society, identity and subjectivity, and genre and style. As such, the text offers an opening, in both music theory and in EDM scholarship more broadly, for studies concerned at once with musical structure and musical meaning and, in particular, how the two intersect.

Drawing on ethnographic research, including his own ex-perience as a longtime participant-observer, Butler presents an informed, sympathetic, and persuasive account of how techno's musical mechanics make for a meaningful, flexible embodiment of time. In order to do so, however, and pre-sumably to communicate to his principal audience—i.e., other music theorists—Butler frequently employs, if reflex-ively, the analytical and conceptual language (and technolo-gies) of music theory. Although he is careful not to repeat the sort of top-down pop exegesis whereby, say, rock is shown to be as complex as Bach, a recurring tension in the work cen-ters on the question of whether the value system under analy-sis, and the poetics used to elaborate it, are derived from or applied to EDM. For all the implicit and explicit challenges to music theory's central repertory (and rules and tools), Butler seems to find himself in the bind of making constant reference, if perhaps while winking, to the elite canon that still masquerades under the ironically general label "common practice." The author thus appears throughout the text to be dancing, often deftly, across genres, navigating the necessarily odd mix of art music theory and dance music discourse. While contributing a great many insights to an understand-ing of how techno works (on dancers and listeners) and how producers and DJs work techno, Butler's sometimes reluc-tant, sometimes ebullient grounding in traditional (and con-temporary) music theory serves, in the end, to anchor his analysis in such a way as to restrain it, to discipline it in a manner seemingly incommensurate with the flexible, embod-ied grooves he seeks to explicate.

A music theorist conversant with the methods of ethno-musicology, Butler approaches EDM with an explicit, abid-ing concern for connecting the sonic and the social. This commitment, combined with an awareness of what the au-thor calls the "reflexive turn" in musical scholarship (16–17), distinguishes his approach from much of what has been written on EDM to date, whether from a connoisseur's, an ethnomusicologist's, or a music journalist's perspective. In the book's best moments (chapter 6, for example), these

overlapping approaches enable lucid discussions of musical processes identified as meaningful by various participants in EDM. And yet, despite the regular presence of voices other than the author's in *Unlocking the Groove*, the balance fre-quently tilts toward an abstracted concern with musical form and phenomenology, toward the kinds of questions tradi-tionally asked by music theorists, and hence away from the cultural domain in which such experiences, such modes of hearing and embodying, are rooted. Ultimately, this makes for a rich text, especially for certain readers (namely, Butler's expert peers), while also producing a number of missed op-portunities to take the analysis further, to show how the aes-thetic features Butler so compellingly engages open into the kinds of questions with which ethnomusicologists, cultural critics, music journalists, and, most importantly, EDM pro-ducers, DJs, and dancers seem most concerned.

Butler seeks, as a principal goal, to "create a space" (11) where EDM can be discussed as music, as well as to justify such an endeavor—the likes of which might seem suspicious to scenesters who resist any analysis of their "holistic" musical ex-perience. In order to advance his own approach, Butler con-signs, if carefully (that is, without condescending), much previ-ous work on EDM to the realm of identity studies. This is by no means an invalid criticism. To date, the academic literature on EDM—ranging from the media and cultural studies in-formed approach of Sarah Thornton's *Club Cultures: Music, Media, and Subcultural Capital* to Kai Fikentscher's ethno-graphic study and history of the New York dance scene, *"You Better Work!": Underground Dance Music in New York City*—has tended toward cultural analysis, often at the expense of musical analysis. Thornton and Fikentscher both fore-ground the social realm in their research, considering the roles that dance music, dancing, and club culture play in the creation and maintenance of youth, gay, black and Latino communities and subjectivities. The musical processes that draw these communities together on the dance floor are, there-fore, more or less taken for granted or approached only at the macro level (e.g., the arc of a DJ's set and his/her interplay with

dancers). It is never quite clear, for example, what makes this or that genre appeal, musically, to particular DJs or dancers. To their credit, such studies offer sensitive accounts of DJs' and dancers' practices and narratives and, moreover, situate their analyses in specific geographical and historical contexts—a dimension conspicuously missing from some of Butler's close readings. But considerations of actual musical structures and processes are rare in EDM studies to date, if present at all.

The journalistic literature, despite many strong contributions to the emerging histories of EDM, suffers from similar lacunae.[1] Butler critiques journalistic writings for their own paucity of discussion and analysis at the level of sound, making for, as he puts it, a neglect of EDM's "musical qualities" (8). And even in instances where authors attempt close readings of sorts, Butler contends, they tend to envelop their analyses in "contemporary cultural references" (9), condemning their interpretations to the historical dustbin (though we might ask whether our own scholarly discourses, in all their currency, necessarily fall prey to the same pitfalls). More crucially, however, such language seems to fall short in doing justice to the musical features and processes in question. Here, and to some extent throughout the book, the primary foil for Butler is Simon Reynolds, an inescapable figure in EDM (and pop) writing, whose *Generation Ecstasy* remains one of the best references on dance music and rave culture, referential ciphers notwithstanding. Butler finds Reynolds's

prose quite evocative and yet ultimately problematic. He offers an example from *Generation Ecstasy* as evidence:

> On tracks like Hyper-On Experience's "Thunder Grip" and DJ Trax's "We Rock the Most," breakbeats swerve and skid, melody shrapnel whizzes hither and thither, and every cranny of the mix is infested with hiccupping vocal shards and rap chants sped up to sound like pixies. The vibe is sheer Hanna-Barbera zany-mania, but beneath the smiley-faced "hyper-ness" the breaks and bass lines are ruff B-Boy bizness. (Reynolds 1999, 256; quoted in Butler 2006, 9).

This sort of language, rich resonances aside, strikes Butler as woefully imprecise. Such a passage, he explains, "does little to help us understand *how* the music creates these effects (for instance, the reasons why breakbeats seem to 'skid')" (9). This is a reasonable criticism, and it opens up plenty of room for a music theorist such as Butler to contribute to the EDM literature.

Butler's analyses go beyond the taxonomic—a common preoccupation given EDM's endlessly splintering subgenres—in order to examine the music at a greater level of structural and phenomenological depth. Rather than pursuing, say, what makes a genre cohere as such, he asks instead what makes techno's seemingly simple rhythms sound and feel so intricate and full of nuance, so open to interpretation and sensuous engagement. Although eager to explore what makes the music "so rich" in these ways, Butler is wary of "valorizing 'complexity'," and so he centers his analysis on "temporal possibility," or how EDM "shapes time" (5). Writing against such denigrating ways of hearing EDM's "repetitive nature" as voiced by Stockhausen and other detractors, Butler seeks instead to highlight techno's "rhythmic and metrical subtlety":

> I contend that many of the nuances of EDM rely on ambiguity to achieve their effects. The consequences of ambiguity in this music, therefore, are both formal and aesthetic. Moreover, they hail the listener in a way that is also social: metrically ambiguous sections encourage the listener to *construe the meter actively* rather than absorb metrical information passively. On the dance floor, this construction occurs in and between bodies as well as in minds. In so doing, dancers and listeners challenge

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[1]  Moreover, Butler argues, far too many journalists reproduce the same, often apocryphal stories about EDM history. Such "uncritical repetitions" (7), rehearsing various myths of origins and paths of development, do little to illuminate why some DJs and dancers prefer one style over another or how various genres cohere and do their distinctive musical work. Butler provides his own overview of EDM history in chapter 1—no doubt quite useful to readers who can't distinguish techno from house or are unfamiliar with the ontological differences between a "four-on-the-floor" and a breakbeat—and he justifies the exercise, which might otherwise seem perfunctory, as offering a corrective of sorts, debunking commonplace emphases and pointing out other problems with the well established narratives circulating alongside electronic dance music.

> the oft-expressed contention that rhythm in dance music (in general, not just in EDM) must be simple and obvious—a view that hinges upon a conception of the dancers as passive recipients of the rhythms they are given. Rather, EDM is consistently written in a way that promotes active participation in the construction of musical experience, generating interpretations that are both individual and multiple. (137, emphasis in original)

As this passage demonstrates, Butler compellingly connects techno production—itself an understudied dimension of EDM that the author addresses lucidly throughout the book—with the active process of what he elsewhere calls "metering" on the part of dancers and listeners. And yet, despite the sensitivity that such an orientation implies, the oddly inappropriate description of EDM here as something that is "written" belies—fairly symptomatically—the underlying, enduring framework of traditional, mainstream music theory and its deep connections to music composed and analyzed via Western notation.

Anachronisms and symptoms aside (at least for now), one feature that strongly distinguishes *Unlocking the Groove* from mainstream music theory is the conspicuous and central place of ethnography. Even if he did not attend to the fact that techno tracks—as he is careful to call them, using a more appropriate, emic term than *compositions* (and thus making the appearance of "written" that much more conspicuous)—are quite plastic in the hands of DJs and in the context of a set, Butler's concern with processes of production and reception alike, as evidenced in the quotation above, would nevertheless draw him immediately beyond the analysis of, say, a stable work and a static score and into the elusive realm of experience. Bolstering his close readings of techno's built-in ambiguity and nuance, Butler approaches such a slippery subject with an ethnographer's ear, bringing in the voices of DJs, producers, and dancers to inform, enrich, and justify his close readings.[2] For example,

Butler uses an online discussion about techno's metric character as an ethnographically-grounded point of departure for a theoretical exploration of the widespread assumption that "all dance music is in 4/4 time" (77). Developing his notion of "metering," Butler calls into question techno's putative 4/4 with an extended discussion of metric/rhythmic projection and perception, engaging with longstanding and current debates in music theory (not to mention Africanist ethnomusicology) even as he appears to respond to and affirm the values expressed in EDM participants' discourse.

One problem with Butler's ethnographic approach, however, is that much of his consultants' discourse remains implicit, offering a kind of background for the authority of his interpretations but denying the reader ample opportunities to get a sense of the language employed by EDM participants and how these relate to the author's own terms. As Steven Feld (1994) argues in an essay concerned as much with what "speech about music" communicates as with the process of musical communication itself, the language people use to describe music—however vague, synesthetic, or evaluative—represents "an attempt to construct a metaphoric discourse to signify awareness of the more fundamental metaphoric discourse that music communicates in its own right" (93). Without being privy to such speech about music, it is difficult to know, or to be convinced, that the questions Butler poses are the important ones to ask, that the issues he explores are those which animate discussion among EDM devotees. When Butler argues, for example, that "the perceptibility of hypermetrical units diminishes" (191) at a certain point in one of his examples, I cannot help but wonder for whom? Would particular DJs or dancers hear it that way? In this manner, it is not always clear how much an observation is

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2    Notably, many of Butler's principal consultants are women, which serves as a refreshing, if unremarked, counterpoint to the focus on men so typical

of music writing in general and EDM studies in particular. Butler's avoidance of discussing the difference that gender makes is on one hand commendable—implicitly centering women and implying a sameness of experience and expertise—yet, in doing so, he also misses opportunities to discuss the serious problems around gender in EDM/DJ culture.

grounded in Butler's own (certainly informed and attuned) listening practices or whether it builds directly on the responses of his interviewees. The moments when the text truly seems to hit a dialogic and interpretive stride, then, at least for this reader, are when the words and sentiments of Butler's consultants more clearly appear to guide, rather than provide the background for, his own readings of musical structures and processes. In this regard, the book's sixth and final chapter, "From the Record to the Set," is where he seems to achieve the best mix, constantly crossfading between his own voice and those of his interlocutors in a style reminiscent of Paul Berliner's *Thinking in Jazz* (1994). Such an approach allows Butler to examine authoritatively, among other things, the relationship between improvisation and composition in techno. His informed discussion of sequencing techniques here, moreover, stands as the clearest and most robust example of such in the vast and varied EDM literature.

Hence, situating *Unlocking the Groove* in relation to other writings on EDM, Butler's combination of theory and ethnography, if sometimes an uneasy one, distinguishes his study from most previous approaches. With respect to the journalistic literature, Butler's attention to techno's "musical qualities" strongly complements the writings of Simon Reynolds and his ilk—from the sweeping historical overviews provided by the likes of Peter Shapiro (2000), Bill Brewster and Frank Broughton (2000), to the precocious poetics of self-proclaimed "concept engineer" Kodwo Eshun, whose *More Brilliant Than the Sun* (1999), out of print as it may be, still stands as a singular, staggeringly suggestive attempt to meet sound with words that reflect as they refract the music's imperatives and ontologies. Regarding more academic approaches, Butler's use of ethnography brings him into conversation with Thornton, Fikentscher, et al., while his study's grounding in music theory offers new vistas for EDM scholarship.

At the same time, we might ask whether the language of (mainstream) music theory—with as great a tendency for referential ciphers, perhaps, as the work of certain cultural critics—really offers the most appropriate poetics for an examination of EDM as music. This is not to imply that there is but one way to write about EDM, but to ask whether the music suggests its own distinctive discursive approaches. Is there some other language, not so much in between but perhaps orthogonal to all these different idioms, which may yet offer a more evocative and, in some sense, a more precise explication of EDM? Kodwo Eshun's idiosyncratic opacity would seem to be quite appropriate for this sort of project, and yet such an approach would hardly be acceptable but at the fringes of music theory (where, indeed, it might be quite at home). While we can salute Butler's desire to "counterbalance the tendency of particular musical configurations to disappear within accounts of cultural meaning" (18), we might ask whether a better balance might not be achieved in a single work, rather than among a series of studies all skewing in one direction or another. There is, however, no doubt a delicate balancing act on display throughout the book.

Considering disciplinary norms and pressures, we might let Butler off the hook for resorting fairly often to the conventions of mainstream music theory, even if a great many members of the SMT would hardly recognize *Unlocking the Groove* as such. At the same time, perhaps letting Butler off the hook also lets music theory off the hook for its enduring elitism, and I hesitate to do so. Throughout the text, the "common practice" repertory, as Butler sometimes calls it, appears less the elephant in the room than the elephant on which the author, however reluctantly, rides. Butler seems to suggest as much when he expresses reservations about placing "beats into boxes" (77), or using the tools of transcription to describe music that is decidedly not *written* in the same way as "the repertoire on which most music theorists have focused" (192), as he delicately phrases it elsewhere. Butler thus demonstrates no little self-consciousness about the distance between his own subject and the normative, if often unnamed, subject of (most) music theory, and yet as much reflection as he exercises, it appears impossible ultimately for him resist the pull of theory's foundation. The "common practice" repertory remains implicitly centered as that against

which techno is judged. "A striking corollary of techno's rejecting of harmonic patterning," Butler notes at one point, "is its total lack of cadences" (184). The doubly negative definition of techno is striking—it rejects and it lacks—and says a great deal about the nagging, underlying framework here.

At certain moments in the text, this framework might have been successfully transcended had Butler allowed his omnipresent, but often silent, consultants to support his points more explicitly. When he argues, for instance, that the "sense of conflict created by [certain] dissonances remains relatively minor" (156), for whom does it remain so? Would a DJ or dancer hear or feel it this way, or just a music theorist or "classically-trained" musician? Here a little ethnographic evidence and emic discourse would go a long way. Similarly, Butler's discussion of what he calls "multimeasure patterns" (184–201), however lucid and sensitive to emic disctinctions, is typical of the ultimately etic approach inscribed in the book's language and form. Butler invents more terms than he borrows from EDM discourse, placing his analysis again and again in a dubious value frame as it is unclear how his own emphases relate to what is important for those who make, play, dance to and otherwise engage the music.[3] Again it is worth asking whether a better (dare I say more "organic"? or perhaps "synthetic"?) poetics could be sought for EDM—not to mention other forms of transcription (though Butler does innovate along these lines), such as the use of audio waveforms (which would well illustrate some of his points about form, texture, and "linearity" [229]) or graphs inspired by the very sequencing hardware and software used to the produce the music (which, indeed, actually place beats in boxes!).

Butler's project most persuasively justifies its use of music theory to explain techno by, in turn, using techno to expand the purview of music theory and thus to contribute to what the author, perhaps generously, describes as the discipline's contemporary "theoretical diversity" (187). An extended discussion of hypermeter (186–187), for instance, demonstrates how techno might be discussed rather fruitfully using tools derived from analysis of the "common practice" repertory, even as such an endeavor itself offers new ways of using these tools or of thinking about their usefulness. Butler ultimately complicates too simple a reading (or a dismissal) of EDM by explicating its richness and subtlety—if not always on its own terms, then at least according to its own, distinctive aesthetic logic. As a reader I emerge convinced that he indeed "opens a door onto a realm of experiential and interpretive possibility" (257). But given that Butler ultimately emphasizes musical-structural and phenomenological details, the book seems to stop short of taking the logical next step and examining the import of such "experiential and interpretive possibility" for the realm of culture. Cultural analysis need not mean simply rehearsing the signposts of identity studies using the most current jargon. In this case, one could better articulate genre and style to certain community relationships, especially with regard to the examples to which Butler refers: What is the significance of such examples? Are they to be taken as paradigmatic (as he implies) or are they exceptional? Do they tell us only about techno (and EDM) in general, or do they tell us about a particular subgenre of techno tied to a specific time, place, and stylistic genealogy? Producers, DJs, and dancers not only appreciate the music's interpretive flexibility, they invest such sounds and structures and possibilities with a great deal of meaning, and it is in this realm where the book seems to stop short and to miss some great opportunities for articulating the author's sharp musical analysis with social analysis.[4]

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[3] Attempting to advance an ethnographic poetics that relates directly to the emic discourse and musical forms they study, Fox (2004) and Meintjes (2003) might be seen as exemplary in this regard.

[4] Along these lines, Butler's discussion of breakbeats misses a number of opportunities to augment his musical analysis with reference to social and cultural spheres. While his rhythmic comparison of four-on-the-floor genres versus breakbeat driven ones is interesting and lucid, it veers too far from the cultural meanings of these different rhythmic orientations—meanings often debated vigorously by opposing camps in EDM, and which open into uncomfortable but important questions about race, among other things. Similarly, if Butler is to use an expression such as "the funk" to index humanness (3), he would do well to examine and explicate the ideologies that underlie such an ascription.

Overall, then, despite great efforts to counteract certain tendencies, the book's language and underlying framework commits it to a rather circumscribed conversation. There's plenty of room for that sort of thing in this wide world, of course, but perhaps such an approach makes more sense as an elite practice relating to an elite practice. Again, I wonder, for whom? For whom is Butler unlocking the groove? Is he simply adding EDM to the music theorist's repertory—an interesting goal in itself, if hardly different from theorists writing about rock—or is he bringing music theory into EDM's varied and vibrant discourses? For all the innovation and boldness displayed throughout the text, for all the insights it offers to music theory and EDM alike, I'm afraid it leans decidedly toward the former. As such, it will no doubt be useful in music theory classes, but I suspect it will have less impact on the way people think and talk about EDM, and indeed about music itself, than the writings of the cultural critics who, as Butler shows, quite often come up short in their own ways.

*Unlocking the Groove* is ultimately a rich, sensitive study. It should prove valuable not only insofar as it explicates EDM for those of us who like to think about beats in boxes, even while we embody them, but in suggesting ways that music theory might be loosed from its moors—indeed, how it might loosen up even and get into the groove itself. Disciplinary pressures notwithstanding, Butler dances his way closer to a brave new music theory than most of his "poptimist" (or "rockist") peers. But the world of music scholarship not only needs more theorists that dance, it needs more theory that dances.

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