Introduction / A Legion of Boom

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/585808/9780822375487-001.pdf by guest on 27 May 2024

I.1 / Various Bay Area mobile crew business cards. Courtesy of Dino Rivera.

What is it about a turntable that invites our touch? Some seem incredulous that they even still exist and they reach toward them as if touching an exotic animal previously thought to be extinct. For others, turntables at a nightclub or bar seem like an invitation for people—often inebriated—to play amateur DJ for a moment, usually to the ire of the actual working DJ. Still others—namely, my then-toddler daughter—like to jab the "Start/Stop" button just to see the platter spin around.

For me—and I suspect many others as well—touch is how we literally and figuratively connect to a record player's purpose and powers. Everything about DJing with turntables is tactile: you pull a vinyl record out of a sleeve, place it on the platter, lift the stylus, and drop it in a groove. In watching the DJ, seeing how she or he grazes the platter or pinches the spindle, we learn how important touch is to the act and art of DJing, how that physical interaction is not incidental but essential. A turntable may be a remarkable conduit for music's pleasures, but it requires human hands to unlock that potential.

My own fascination with turntables began in the summer of 1988, at a garage party thrown by a high school classmate, Sanjeev Ravipudi. Like many an amateur DJ before him, Ravipudi had raided whatever home stereo equipment he found in his parents' living room and assembled a setup

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/585808/9780822375487-001.pdf by guest on 27 May 2024

in their garage. In that space, all cold and concrete, I watched Ravipudi mix records, my first time observing a DJ in action. I have no recollection if he was actually any good or not—he is now a successful cardiovascular surgeon, so apparently he had deft hands—but Ravipudi took the time to explain how "beat-matching" worked, how he would slow down or speed up each turntable to get the tempos to match one another in order to seamlessly mix between them.

Beat-matching, when done right, facilitates an endless flow of music. These days, we take that experience for granted, but imagine what dancing would be like with a not-so seamless flow. What beat-matching, among other techniques, helps achieve is a way to bring people together on a parquet and keep them there, nurturing an ephemeral community of dancers. Ravipudi was the first person to teach me how DJing could influence social bonding; in the years to come, I would understand how those forces could work beyond the dance floor and impact an entire region.

Beginning in the late 1970s and through the mid-1990s, on any given weekend in the San Francisco Bay Area, there were dozens, if not hundreds, of parties jumping off. That included garage and house parties, church hall dances, school gym dances, weddings, debuts, and christening and birthday parties, to say nothing of large-scale performances ("showcases") and competitions ("battles"). Mobile DJs—DJs who provide audio and lighting services—ran these parties, organizing themselves into different groups, aka *crews*.

Mobile crews could range from small and modest, a few friends sharing a mix-and-match sound system and a strobe light, to large and elaborate—an organization of a dozen-plus members, boasting high-end professional speakers, amps, turntables, and concert-quality trussing installed with helicopters, oscillators, and a spotlight trained on a disco ball. The early mobile DJs were "blend-mixers," skilled at overlapping two (or more) records over long, seamless segues. Later, "quick-mixers" came into vogue, capable of whittling through literal stacks of records in rapid order. At the scene's tail end, scratch DJs arose, manipulating vinyl and styli to create new sounds and rhythms.[1] All mobile crews shared one core mission: to keep people dancing, whether through their mixing techniques, song selections, lighting displays, or enthused exhortations from the DJs themselves, urging crowds to get on up, then get on down.

If this was a party being hosted by one of the tens of thousands of Filipino Americans living in Bay Area cities like San Francisco, Daly City,

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/585808/9780822375487-001.pdf by guest on 27 May 2024

Fremont, Vallejo, San Jose, and so on, it was quite likely that the DJ or DJs at this party would be someone you knew from the neighborhood, from school, from church. They may even have been your cousin (or at least your cousin's cousin). These DJs, their crews, their audiences, and the friends, families, and organizations that hired their services all constituted the Bay Area's *Filipino American mobile disc jockey scene*.[2] From the late 1970s through the early to mid-1990s, the scene was a dominant part of the recreational life of Filipino American youth in the Bay Area; even among those who did not actively participate in the parties, most would have known of them and the people involved with them.

The mobile DJ crew phenomenon in the Bay Area was hardly an exclusively Filipino American affair. Other communities, including Latino Americans, African Americans, and Chinese Americans, also boasted mobile crews, and many Filipino American–led crews included non-Filipino members (Cook 1995). However, in terms of size, scope, and longevity, the Filipino American mobile scene was unrivaled, partially thanks to the extensive support given to them by families and community groups.

Moreover, *teenagers*—most of them in high school and overwhelmingly middle-class young men—dominated. Many began so young that they could not yet apply for a driver's license. Yet these same youth could install a performance stage, spin for a crowd of hundreds, earn thousands of dollars, and still be ready for Sunday Mass in the morning, plotting next weekend's party while waiting for Communion.

If you did *not* grow up in or around this scene, chances are you have never heard of it until now. Even at its height, in the mid- to late 1980s, the mobile parties slipped past the attention of local media, to say nothing of regional or national outlets.[3] In addition, unlike other DJ-oriented scenes such as hip-hop, house, techno, and reggae, Filipino American mobile DJs never made a successful jump from record-playing to record-*making*.[4] In other words, they had little physical media to leave behind. The mobile crews may have created a thriving party scene, but even at the best parties, once the house lights go up and everyone leaves, all that remains are the memories.

This was when I discovered the legacy of the mobile scene; after its end. In the mid-1990s, I began to write about arts and music for local Bay Area ethnic press and alternative weeklies. I was also an aspiring DJ. For professional and personal reasons, I was drawn to the rise of the Bay Area's Filipino American scratch DJs and ended up interviewing the likes of Richard "Q-Bert" Quitevis and Jonathan "Shortkut" Cruz, members

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/585808/9780822375487-001.pdf by guest on 27 May 2024

of the renowned turntablist crew the Invisibl Skratch Piklz. A common thread began to emerge in my conversations with them: they all began their careers as members of different mobile crews. Q-Bert was part of Live Style Productions, Shortkut was in Just 2 Hype; Invisibl Skratch Piklz's cofounders, "Mixmaster Mike" Schwartz and "DJ Apollo" Novicio, came from Hi-Tech and Unlimited Sounds, respectively.[5]

The mobile scene was already well past its prime, but these scratch DJs eagerly reminisced about the hall parties they used to attend or spin at, about all the different mobile crews they ran across as kids. As ascendant as turntablism had become in the Bay Area, it was clear that the scratch scene's roots grew in soil first tilled by the mobile crews. As both a journalist and a scholar, I recognized a good story when I heard one. This book is a direct product of the impulse to chase down that story, to learn the history of the mobile scene, to understand how it came to be, and more important, to learn what it meant to those on both sides of the DJ booth.

Broadly speaking, my research into the mobile crews spun off from a larger interest in studying the role of popular music in the lives of ethnic and racialized communities. Previously, I had interviewed everyone from rappers to jazz artists to folk musicians, exploring the motivations and rewards behind musical performance and production. I was especially interested in how music intersected with identity and community formation, how it mediated cross-cultural relations, how it provided people—especially youth of color—with a platform for creative expression.[6]

Those remain guiding research interests, but one important change I underwent concerned my thinking on the relationship between music and identity. I once thought of music as mostly a *reflection* of a community's identities, values, and histories; one of my favorite quotes came from George C. Wolfe (1996), producer of the Broadway musical *Bring In 'da Noise, Bring In 'da Funk*: "If you actively unearth popular culture and look inside it, you can find all kinds of secrets and truths and rhythms of a time period, much more than you find in written history." I still believe in that concept, but I could have been faulted for treating music and culture too much as fixed, static objects, as if I were studying pieces of amber under a jeweler's loupe.

What broadened my thinking was Simon Frith's (1996a: 111) essay "Music and Identity," where he explicitly challenges the "music-as-reflection" model and instead argues that "[social groups] only get to know themselves as *groups* (as a particular organization of individual and social interests, of

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/585808/9780822375487-001.pdf by guest on 27 May 2024

sameness and difference) *through* cultural activity. . . . Making music isn't a way of expressing ideas; it is a way of living them." In other words, the act of performing and listening to music produces, maintains, and transforms relationships that shape group identity, not as some fixed "end" product but as a *process*. Frith's idea that "identity is mobile" has since become conventional wisdom in cultural studies, but at that point in the late 1990s, at least for me, I found these ideas to be revelatory. (I still do.) This was especially true as I began to dig deeper into mobile DJ culture; I saw those ideas playing out within this particular community in powerful ways. The relationships between performers and audience, space and place, and especially identity and community were not as straightforward as I had originally assumed. DJing is an inherently social act, where "building community" is not accidental but deliberate and necessary. The mobile scene may have emerged out of a larger Filipino American community, but in turn the DJ crews also helped produce and define a community of their own in its wake. That process began humbly on the dance floor.

Building the Floor / DJs Mediating Community

There is this moment, a pause really, that hangs in the air when a DJ drops a new song into a set.[7] It is a mix of anticipation, hope, and a healthy dash of fear, since any new song can either enhance or disrupt the delicate chemistry of a dance floor. What you hope for is a spontaneous burst of enthusiasm as people recognize and respond to the song positively, more colloquially known by the cheer "That's my jam!"

"That's my jam!" acknowledges our personal connection to songs—it is a claiming, a way of expressing that these songs somehow "belong" to us individually. However, that ownership can also be collective. When we hear other people proclaim "That's my jam (too)!" that both affirms our tastes and connects us to those fellow fans, even if they are complete strangers.

Frith writes about how "the experience of pop music is an experience of identity: in responding to a song, we are drawn, haphazardly, into emotional alliances with performers and with the performers' other fans" (1996a: 121).[8] The DJ—in clubs, on the radio, at parties—mediates that "emotional alliance," providing the musical lubricant *and* glue to facilitate social contact, interaction, and identification. When "That's *my* jam!" turns into "That's *our jam!*" the dance space becomes more than just an assemblage of random bodies. It goes from being "a floor" to becoming

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/585808/9780822375487-001.pdf by guest on 27 May 2024

"*the* floor," that is, a communal entity with a life of its own, and the DJ is the caretaker.

This is what DJs mean by "building" or "working the floor."[9] Whether in a spartan school gymnasium or a baroquely designed discotheque, the basic interaction between a DJ and an audience is essentially the same. In a delicate and symbiotic relationship, DJs and dancers nurture a "vibe," by which I mean a mix of forces, both tangible and invisible, that can either create a pleasurable, memorable experience or bring down the mood of an entire crowd. Dance music journalist Simon Reynolds describes the concept of a vibe as "a meaningful and *feeling*-full mood" that "materially embodies a certain kind of worldview and life stance" (1999: 372). The vibe, in other words, mediates the emotional qualities of a dance floor experience, which in turn helps create and reinforce shared group identities and values in those moments.

In building a floor, the DJ is nominally in control. As Daly City's Anthony Carrion, founder of Unlimited Sounds, put it, "depending on what kind of music you play, you can hype up the crowd or you can kill the crowd. . . . It is kind of a power thing where you control the crowd and you control the tempo of the party, the way it goes."

However, control is never one-way; the crowd is hardly powerless here. The DJ spins at the crowd's pleasure. If a DJ's decisions please the crowd, they dance, helping maintain the vibe and build the floor. If they disapprove, they withdraw from the floor, destroying the vibe, and thus repudiate the DJ. When a floor dies, no one blames the dancers; we hold the DJ at fault. Every song, therefore, represents a step in an evolving relationship of mutual trust between the DJ and the dancers.[10] Each needs the other to fulfill their respective desires—DJs want to be in control, dancers want to lose control.

The first goal is to get everyone "locked in," that is, enthused and committed. From there, it is a matter of pushing the vibe along a trajectory that eventually attains climax (or several of them). The sexual/spiritual metaphor is deliberately chosen: when the energy of a floor peaks, there can be both a physical and an emotional rush and release, not just individually but *communally*, resembling what Emile Durkheim described as "collective effervescence," by which he meant those moments of emotional intensity when a gathered crowd becomes overtaken by a sense of ecstatic connectivity (Olaveson 2004). Durkheim never lived to make it to a modern discotheque, but it is striking how this passage from him

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/585808/9780822375487-001.pdf by guest on 27 May 2024

sounds almost identical to an ethnographic description of a dance floor at full climax:

> Once the individuals are gathered together, a sort of electricity is generated from their closeness and quickly launches them to an extraordinary height of exaltation. Every emotion expressed resonates without interference in consciousnesses that are wide open to external impressions, each one echoing the others. The initial impulse is thereby amplified each time it is echoed, like an avalanche that grows as it goes along. And since passions so heated and so free from all control cannot help but spill over, from every side there are nothing but wild movements, shouts, downright howls, and deafening noises of all kinds that further intensify the state they are expressing. (Durkheim 2003: 109–10)

Interestingly, Durkheim goes on to say that "probably because a collective emotion cannot be expressed collectively without some order that permits harmony and unison of movement, these gestures and cries tend to fall into rhythm and regularity, and from there into songs and dances" (110). It would seem, in this formulation, that dance music both produces and is a product of a different form of collective effervescence, one that manifests within temples of rhythm.

That transcendent, climactic moment is ephemeral, but the rush of emotion and empathy is one of the compelling forces that beckon people to dance floors on monthly, weekly, even daily occasions; think of it as a pleasure-centered form of devoted pilgrimage. For Durkheim, it was a shaman-like figure who initiated the religious ritual; in the metaphor of nightclub-as-church, that shaman would unquestionably be the DJ.[11]

That notion became part of the cult of the DJ from at least the late 1960s. As Tim Lawrence chronicles of New York City in that era, "what had emerged . . . was a social and egalitarian model of making music in which the DJ played in relation to the crowd, leading and following in roughly equal measure. . . . As a result the relationship between the DJ and the crowd resembled a dynamic conversation between separate agents that, when combined, had a greater total effect than the sum of their individual parts" (2004: 38). To put it another way, Sarah Thornton suggests, "it is as orchestrators of this 'living' communal experience that DJs are most important to music culture" (1996: 65).

Bringing this back to the mobile DJs, what makes them particularly remarkable is their ability to adjust to myriad dance situations, where

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/585808/9780822375487-001.pdf by guest on 27 May 2024

I.2 / Cosmix Sounds (San Jose), c. 1985. The San Jose–South Bay area was one key hub in the larger mobile scene. Left to right: Richard Ignacio, Benjy Santos, Romel Pagaduan, Suzie Racho, Ron Valenzuela, Joey Santos. Photo courtesy of Suzie Racho.

conditions are not always optimal. Expensive discotheques can boast state-of-the-art sound and lighting systems, and their exclusivity can produce a self-selected group of dancers who have gone through considerable time and expense to "have a good time." A mobile DJ, however, has to be prepared to adjust to any number of different spatial and social environments and build the floor accordingly. How one approaches a middle school dance filled with twelve-year-old wallflowers is different from your cousin's three-hundred-person wedding is different from a battle where half the crowd is ostensibly there to back your competitor's crew. In DJing parlance, on those able to effectively work with practically any crowd, in any space, is bestowed the honorific "party rocker." It is a skill set that mobile DJs ideally must master, especially to become an effective mediator of community-building on the dance floor. Within the mobile scene, party-rocking was a responsibility shouldered not just by individual DJs but by the entire crew.

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/585808/9780822375487-001.pdf by guest on 27 May 2024

Back of the Club (My Crew's behind Me) / DJing as Collective Practice

In the summer of 2012, I DJed a wedding alongside a friend, Patrick "Phatrick" Huang. It was about an hour into dancing, the floor was locked in, and I decided to throw on David Bowie and Queen's "Under Pressure." For anyone under the age of forty, "Under Pressure" is a bit of a tease, since its signature opening bass line usually makes people think of Vanilla Ice's massive 1990 rap hit "Ice Ice Baby," which interpolates that bass line.

"Under Pressure" is a fantastic dance song in its own right, with a hard, driving backbeat, not to mention stellar vocals from both Bowie and Queen's Freddie Mercury. However, it is not a particularly long song—less than three minutes—and I was brainstorming what to mix in next when Phatrick tapped me on the shoulder, indicating he had something in mind. Within seconds, he prepped "Ice Ice Baby" on the other turntable and scratched in *that* song's bass line to synch with an isolated bass line passage on "Under Pressure." He created a mix between the two songs that was so seamless that the delighted crowd did not even realize he had dropped in Vanilla Ice until they heard the rapper's voice kick in: "alright stop / collaborate and listen."

It was the perfect song at the perfect time, but on my own that moment would not have happened. Not only did I not have "Ice Ice Baby" with me but I would not have known to "catch the break" where Phatrick did, conceivably the *only* point in the song where his specific mix could have worked.[12] It was only by working as a collective unit that we were able to create that perfect moment for the floor. Collaborate and listen, indeed.

I offer this anecdote because so many contemporary depictions of DJs fixate on them as solitary figures. Flip through popular culture and advertising images of DJs and you will find them standing alone, one hand cupping headphones to an ear, the other hand manipulating a turntable, maybe with a thronging crowd dancing in front of them.[13] That image may invoke a sense of power and play, but the DJ is almost always depicted as a *lone* figure. Nothing about those images suggests that DJing might also be a *collective* or communal activity.[14]

In contrast, I have always found DJing to be an intensely social activity, not just between DJ and audience but *among DJs themselves*. More experienced DJs mentor the beginners, they share record recommendations, they practice and rehearse their craft together in bedrooms and basements. Mobile crews take things a step further, out of practicality if

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/585808/9780822375487-001.pdf by guest on 27 May 2024

not also desire: vinyl records and audio and lighting equipment are heavy and bulky; it helps to have extra people around to divvy up the work of moving and assemblage. However, though division of labor provides a basic raison d'être behind how mobile DJ groups form, that is hardly their only or most important draw.

The best mobile crews worked as a collective unit, where individual abilities operated in concert with those of other members. The crew model does not require the erasure or dilution of individual identity but rather draws on those personal talents (and/or talented personalities) for the betterment of the crew as a collective unit. In other words, mobile crews embody what ethnomusicologist Mark Slobin—writing about musical performance—describes as "both the assertion of pride, even ambition, and the simultaneous disappearance of ego" (1993: 41; though some of my respondents would likely debate to what extent "ego" truly disappears).

For my respondents, mobile outfits served many important communal functions. They became informal families, fraternal organizations, cliques of like-minded peers; these nuances are what separate "groups" from "crews."[15] As graffiti historian Joe Austin put it, crews are "a kind of social hybrid, combining the informal organization of a peer group, the shared-goal orientation of a sports team, and the collective identity and protective functions of a gang" (2001: 64).[16] In other words, all crews are technically groups, but not all groups are crews; the difference lies in the degree of social bonds between members. The fundamental thing that makes a crew "a crew" is that collective all-for-one, one-for-all identity. For that reason, the DJ groups I discuss herein were first and foremost crews, regardless of whether they ever self-described themselves using the term.[17]

The collective nature of crews is important for several reasons. First, as I noted earlier, it challenges the perception of DJing as an individual activity by highlighting the inherently social nature of the craft. Second, it helps explain how crews drew young people (and predominantly men) by offering a sense of camaraderie, a sense of belonging, built around a shared mission. In that sense, working together as DJs gave them a common purpose, but the crew model—as an organizational entity—was a draw unto itself. Third, the collective nature of crews also helps explain their relationship to a larger peer community. They functioned similarly to a school sports team or club, engendering a form of fan-based loyalty or identification that was tied, rather than to any individual, to the col-

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/585808/9780822375487-001.pdf by guest on 27 May 2024

lective unit; that is, "I'm a fan of Ultimate Creations" (a respected San Francisco crew). Finally, I suggest that the collective nature of the mobile crews made it more likely that other members of the wider community—not just friends but relatives, school officials, community leaders and organizations—would be supportive of the activity as they saw its benefits extending across many youth and not just a select few. As I discuss later, that community support proved especially crucial in helping the Filipino American mobile scene flourish. More to the point, though, that interaction is also crucial to understanding the mobile scene *as a "Filipino scene*." In other words, as I suggested earlier, the Filipino American community in the Bay Area certainly shaped and influenced the contours of the mobile scene, but likewise, the scene itself shaped the contours of Filipino American identity in that particular time and place. Yet, despite that, surprisingly few DJs saw the mobile scene as having much to do with ethnicity at all.

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/585808/9780822375487-001.pdf by guest on 27 May 2024

Pleats on Your Pants / Filipino American Identity in the Mobile Scene

If you ever want to get a quick, visual sense of the mobile scene's creative diversity, hop onto Highway 1 from where it snakes off from Interstate 280 in Daly City and head toward the small, fog-shrouded, seaside town of Pacifica. In a few minutes, right off Highway 1, you will find Manor Music, a purveyor of audio and lighting equipment. For many San Francisco and Daly City crews during the 1980s, Manor was *the* store to patronize if you needed to buy or rent DJ gear. Walk up to the store's register and look down to find dozens upon dozens of business cards beneath the glass top. They come from all the different mobile crews—Filipino or otherwise—who have come through Manor over the last quarter century, with such fanciful names as Futuristic Sounds, Music Blasters, Spintronix, and one of my personal (alliterative) favorites: Chilltown Crush Crew.

Business cards were some of the first physical media I came across in my research—respondents kept binders of them, neatly arranged like baseball or Pokémon cards. Scanning across them, I was struck by the incredible diversity of creative expression contained within even something as small as a name and logo fit into a three-and-a-half- by two-inch card. Something as simple as a font or a piece of clip art went a long way—in addition to the crew's name itself—to give a crew character. Ultimate Creations, one of the most lauded crews out of San Francisco, had their cards made in silver and black—the Oakland Raiders' colors—which

made them stand out for their simple elegance. Burt Kong, of South San Francisco's Sound Sequence, would hand-scrawl a picture of himself onto his cards. Daly City's Unique Musique—besides boasting an indelibly memorable name—fashioned their logo after the iconic Dave Bhang–designed logo for the rock band Van Halen.

However, in looking over these cards, I noted something else; an absence really: almost none of the crew names suggested an overt nod to race or ethnicity. Overwhelmingly, mobile crews chose names based around DJing and club nomenclature, but almost none of them seemed to signify anything that would identify them as being Filipino American.

This stood in stark contrast to a similar community of youthful performers I was familiar with: 1990s-era rappers.[18] For MCs, the simple act of naming oneself is a crucial act of signification. The Asian American rap artists and groups of the early 1990s whom I knew all chose ethnicity- or race-inspired names: Fists of Fury, Asiatic Apostles, Yellow Peril, Seoul Brothers (see Wang 2006, 2007).[19] More contemporary MCs, including Filipino American artists such as Bambu and the Pacifics, also chose monikers that signified, on some level, a relationship to Asia. And beyond their noms de plume, racial and ethnic awareness was often front and center in song lyrics (see Harrison 2009: 132–34; Viesca 2012).

This performance of identity via name was not just limited to MCs or hip-hop; in other areas of Filipino American cultural production, I knew of deliberate gestures to highlight or maintain ethnic identity and traditions, most famously via annual collegiate Pilipino Cultural Nights (in which DJing has played an important part since at least the 1990s; Gonzalves 2010). Mobile DJs, by comparison, barely acknowledged ethnicity or ethnic identity as being relevant to their craft or community. It was as if the scene's ethnic composition was so ordinary as to be unworthy of note or reflection, even though it could not be sheer coincidence that so many Filipino American teenagers formed into mobile crews *with one another*.

It was not that respondents lacked an ethnic consciousness *individually*. Some grew up feeling conflicted and confused over being Filipino. Others felt more at home identifying with black or Latino friends. Still others wore their ethnicity as a mark of honor and celebrated it through individual acts—painting the Philippines national flag on their sneakers, for example. These differences reflected a basic heterogeneity of identity among different individuals, but the point here is that these differences were not any more or less pronounced *because they were DJs*. Instead,

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/585808/9780822375487-001.pdf by guest on 27 May 2024

their family and home environment, experiences in school with students of other ethnicities, and other life experiences seemed more important to their ethnic sense of self than anything consciously connected to the mobile scene. For example, during my interview with Ken Anolin of Daly City's Fusion, I asked:

OW: Did you grow up exposed to Filipino culture as a child?

KA: Oh yeah, my parents, aunties, uncles, grandma, grandpa, everybody. The dances that we went to. Traditional dances, dinner dances for my mom's women's club. All of those.

OW: Did you have an identity as a Filipino as a youth?

KA: Oh yeah. The baggy pants were in back then too. But it was baggy dress pants as they would be called now. The Converse All-Stars or the Nikes or whatever. The Members Only jackets, you got to tie those off. Your status was based on the number of pleats you had on your pants. You were really cool if you had the pleats on the back of your pants.

OW: Did you see anything uniquely Filipino about the DJ scene?

KA: Geez, not really.

OW: Even though the scene was so heavily Filipino?

KA: When we started, we didn't see it as that.

Anolin possessed a self-identity as a Pinoy, but when it came to the DJ scene, he did not connect the activity with that identity. Instead, signifying Pinoy-ness came through other gestures, especially in the clothing, even down to whether your pants were pleated or not. But DJing itself, to Anolin and many others, was not a gesture that came laden with those same meanings or significations.

As another example, DJ Apollo, who began his career in mobile crews before transitioning into scratch DJing, stated, "We were just some kids out here doing some DJ stuff and we happened to be Filipino. As I got older, I saw, 'Oh, there's a lot of Filipino DJs. Wow, that's pretty significant.' But we never went about it that way . . . it wasn't a conscious thing." Indeed, none of my respondents described DJing as a self-consciously *ethnic* form of expression. As with Apollo's testimony, the preponderance of Filipinos in the mobile crews was an obvious feature, but beyond that they did not actively perceive ethnicity as being related to their activities in the scene, at least not on the front end. It was only when I deliberately posed questions to them about that relationship that respondents began

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/585808/9780822375487-001.pdf by guest on 27 May 2024

to theorize—seemingly on the spot—about how they thought ethnicity *might* have been a relevant dimension.

The "ethnicity question" held special resonance given the historical—and quite specifically racialized—marginalization of Filipino Americans within U.S. racial discourse. Filipinos constitute one of the largest ethnic groups in the Bay Area as well as the United States as a whole (U.S. Census Bureau 2007). However, their demographic presence has no equivalent in the realms of public media, popular culture, or political representation. As Elizabeth Pisares powerfully argues, "historical legacies of colonialism and the racial ideology of orientalism shut out Filipino Americans from the social processes that produce institutional knowledge about race and define their racial identity as an invisible, social one. Their exclusion from U.S. racial discourse sets the conditions for their social invisibility, and Filipino Americans are misrecognized as everything and anything but Filipino" (2011: 426–27).

Examples of this cropped up in my interviews; 3-Style Attractions' Dave "Dynamix" Refuerzo grew up in the Berryessa neighborhood of San Jose, and he related that when his family first moved there, "nobody knew what a Filipino was. People used to clown us." Likewise, Allyson Tintiangco-Cubales grew up in the Union City–Fremont scene, and she recalled white classmates calling her "bonsai" (presumably a Japanese reference being misapplied cross-ethnically). Clearly, there were those in the scene who possessed an acute awareness around ethnicity and race. As I have stressed, however, that awareness was highly individualized rather than a lens through which respondents read or understood the mobile scene.

As a way to try to unpack this dynamic, I chose a simple but significant inductive approach to my interviews, shifting my line of inquiry from "why?" toward "how?"[20] Rather than try to tackle the question "why did so many Filipino youth become DJs?" I shifted to asking instead "*how* did so many Filipino youth become DJs?" That difference is subtle but significant, as it avoids applying what might be otherwise spurious theories focused on "cultural motivations" (or even worse, pathologies) and instead focuses on the social processes through which the mobile scene came about: How did crews form? How did people learn how to DJ? How did they acquire gigs? How did families and community members play a role? In deploying this approach, I discovered that in addressing "how" I was also able to better explain "why"; the two "answers" were always linked, but it was only through pursuing the former that the latter became better illuminated.

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/585808/9780822375487-001.pdf by guest on 27 May 2024

If ethnicity was a concept "hidden in plain sight" for mobile crew members, my own blind spot, initially, was around gender. Going into the fieldwork, I assumed race/ethnicity would be the most obvious angle of analysis, but the scene's myriad gender dynamics were no less relevant to the story of the scene. Most obviously, the crews themselves were overwhelmingly male in composition. Their very formation as male, homosocial organizations was—if I may borrow from the idioms of the tech world—not a bug but a feature; it was part of their organizational appeal. Likewise, the absence of women from crew ranks was not random but deeply structured, including at the family level. At the same time, I also came to see how the scene as a whole was hardly bereft of women; they wielded tremendous influence as promoters, clients, audience members, objects of desire, and, in rare, exceptional instances, DJs too.[21]

To address all these complexities, I opted against a "dedicated chapter" approach in favor of working in discussions of ethnicity and gender (and class as well) across the book as a whole. I recognize that this decision risks diffusing the potency of any single theme by spreading it across several chapters, but it felt like the intuitive approach to take. Assembling this book was very much like planning a mix: one has to be selective with the content, sequence wisely, and hope the end product is coherent and compelling. And in the end, you can never be certain how well you put it all together until it is out of your hands and left for an audience to render judgment.

The Set List / Chapter Breakdown

As I just noted, one of the biggest challenges I experienced in writing this book was deciding between writing it as a linear, chronological history and focusing on specific issues and themes within that history. It was a classic balancing act between the needs of narrative and the needs of analysis, and there is a graveyard of discarded drafts that suggests how often I experimented with that balance. For me the narrative was always the initial draw, but I did not want to explore this history simply for history's sake; as I have already suggested, all kinds of other provocative issues and questions were raised in the process of exploring that history. In the end, I opted to organize the book in a very loose, chronological order but tackling a different set of themes in each chapter.

In chapter 1, I explore the scene's "social preconditions," in other words, the larger forces and phenomena happening in the 1960s through

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/585808/9780822375487-001.pdf by guest on 27 May 2024

1970s that created a social context in which the mobile scene could take root and grow. That includes both structural forces, such as large-scale immigration and settlement patterns of middle-class Filipino families in the Bay Area, as well as cultural trends, such as the brief but intense discotheque boom following the success of *Saturday Night Fever*. I also use this chapter to lay out class dimensions that become more pronounced as we move into the formal mobile era itself.

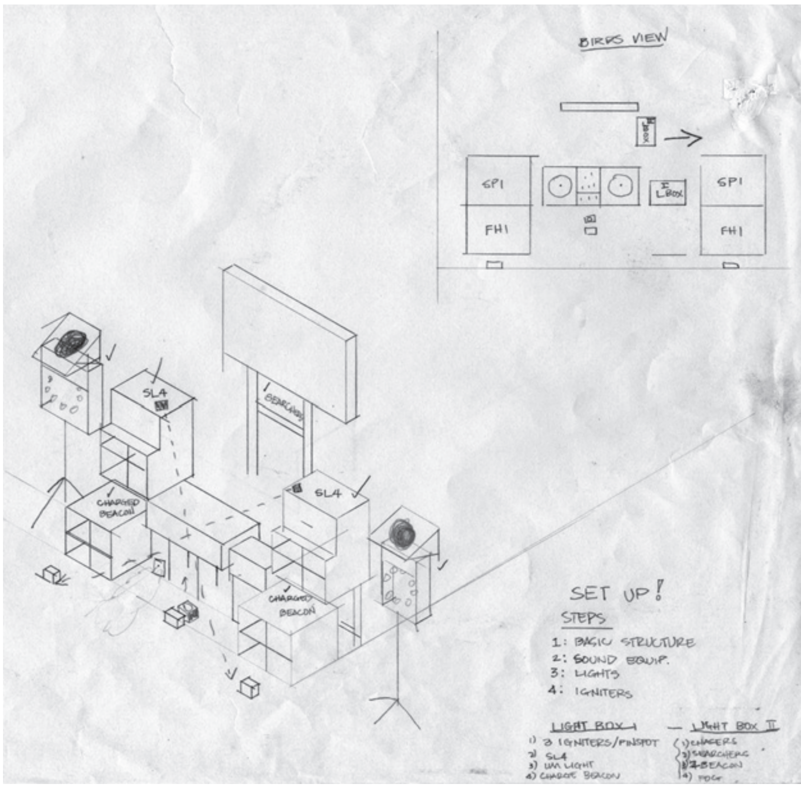
Chapters 2 and 3 delve into the early years of the mobile scene, examining two different sides to its establishment and growth. Chapter 2 focuses on the "internal" factors that drew young men to join or form crews, including the allure of social status, the aura of work as a DJ, and the appeal of homosociality. I also discuss how DJing lent itself to a (re)production of masculinity among the predominantly male participants. In particular, I discuss the metaphor of "mastery" as a DJing value and how this reinforces a particular ideal of masculinity. By that same token, I also discuss the relative absence of female DJs within the scene by examining some of the barriers women face to joining and forming mobile crews of their own.

Chapter 3 turns to the "external" factors that fueled the scene's overall growth, including the intertwined social networks connecting DJ crews, friends, peer-run student and church groups, middle-class parents and relatives, and Filipino community groups. Those networks formed what I describe as the "soft infrastructure" through which crews and clients could find one another, helping to circulate the necessary economic capital to help build the mobile scene over time.

Chapter 4 moves into the mid- to late 1980s with the large-scale mobile events known as "showcases" and the way these became massive magnets for DJs and audiences alike via common spaces for social contact. As a result, not only did these events provide an impetus for community formation by literally bringing people together but also the showcases and similar events became a common cultural experience that proved important to building a collective identity among all these youth. I end with an exploration of the subtle ways the mobile scene created the expectation that DJing and Filipino-ness were so "naturally" connected as to be taken for granted.

Chapter 5 focuses on the decline of the mobile scene by discussing a confluence of several different, discrete forces that gradually weakened the appeal of the crews. As the chapter details, after a decade of dominance, the mobile scene became, in a way, a victim of its own success, and

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/585808/9780822375487-001.pdf by guest on 27 May 2024



I.3 / Blueprint for a DJ stage setup for Unique Musique (Daly City). Elaborate staging designs for mobile events were influenced by both rock concerts and discotheques. Courtesy of Henry Geronimo.

as individual DJs enjoyed personal gains, the collective logic behind crews began to wither. Included in this chapter is a discussion of the rise of scratch DJing, not just an important factor behind the decline of the mobiles but also an important form of DJing performance and community-building itself.

I conclude the book with a brief discussion of how echoes of the 1980s mobile scene continue to reverberate within the contemporary Filipino American community in the Bay Area. I end with suggestions for future directions in scholarship around the mobile scene.

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/585808/9780822375487-001.pdf by guest on 27 May 2024

As I noted earlier, the roots of this research began in the mid-1990s, when I was embarking on a freelance career as a music journalist. By this time, the dominance of Filipino American scratch DJs—not just in the Bay Area but globally—was reaching a zenith. In my conversations with these turntablists, what struck me was the way they treated DJing as a "natural" presence in their adolescence. To them, DJing was an expected cultural fixture in their youth, similar to the way Little League or Boy Scouts might function for other young men.

The scratch scene made them famous, but the mobile scene still held special importance. As successful as some of these turntablists had become, the mobile era was clearly a formative experience. Along with hip-hop, mobile DJing was the other youth culture they came of age in, alongside thousands of other Filipino Americans. However, despite the multitudes of people who lived through the mobile era, there was almost no collective history out there: no newspaper or magazine articles, let alone scholarly essays or books. What media did survive were rarely in the public realm.[22] The sole, and important, exception was Melanie Caganot's groundbreaking exhibit at the San Mateo County History Museum, *Tales of the Turntable*.

Caganot (now Kong) was another veteran of the mobile scene, not as a DJ but as a rapper—her stage name was Lani Luv, and she regularly performed alongside DJ crews in Daly City and San Francisco. In the early 2000s, Caganot was finishing an MA degree in art design and pitched the exhibit partially to fulfill her remaining requirements. Her extensive background in the mobile community gave her access to visual artifacts from the scene—audio and lighting equipment, photos, trophies, video footage, party flyers—and *Tales of the Turntable* constituted one of the only attempts to present the history of the mobile scene to the larger public, then *or* now.

I met Caganot when I wrote a short piece on her exhibit for the *San Francisco Bay Guardian* in the fall of 2001 (Wang 2001b). The following January, she invited me to the History Museum to moderate a panel discussion on the history of the mobile scene. That's where I met the DJs who formed my initial set of interviewees: Kormann Roque and Jay dela Cruz (Spintronix, Daly City), Francisco Pardorla (Images Inc. / AA Productions, Union City–Fremont), "Jazzy" Jim Archer (Skyway Sounds, San Jose), Burton "Burt" Kong (Sound Sequence, South San Francisco), Tra-

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/585808/9780822375487-001.pdf by guest on 27 May 2024

vis "Pone" Rimando (89' Skratch Gangstaz, Fairfield–Oakland), and John Francisco (Expressions Entertainment, San Francisco). Though there was no formal network or directory of Filipino American DJs, most of these DJs were still in touch with other people from the scene, and thus, through them, I began to use snowball sampling to build a list of other potential interviewees.

As with any study limited by time and resources, I made choices that highlighted certain crews and eras while minimizing others. For example, most—though not all—of my respondents came from the San Francisco or Daly City scenes, especially since these two cities were at the center of the overall Bay Area scene. Likewise, though the mobile era spanned from 1978 until roughly the mid-1990s, I leaned toward interviewing crews from the earlier part of that span, especially those who formed within the first five years. I felt these "pioneering" crews did much of the work to define the scene as a whole and thus could contribute to my understanding of how crews formed and functioned.

I did not presume—nor do I want to imply—that these older crews define any kind of "authentic" mobile culture. I take it for granted that the mobile scene was constantly changing throughout its history; that is why I also interviewed newer crews, expressly to see if styles and values changed as the mobile scene evolved. Besides mobile DJs, I also interviewed others who were part of the larger social scene. This included dancers, promoters, club and radio DJs, and ordinary revelers who frequented these parties. Given that part of my mission was to understand how DJing changed the larger community (beyond just the DJs) it was important to engage members of that broader community.

However, there were many more people and crews and subscenes that I was not able to address. At its height, the DJ scene covered over six counties and seven thousand square miles in the Bay Area alone, with potentially over one hundred crews who had come and gone over a fifteen-year period.[23] Even a "local" scene in an area such as San Jose likely involved dozens of crews, some of whom never performed outside Santa Clara County. Pursuing anything approaching a "definitive" history was beyond my capabilities, though I have tried to collect these other (hi)stories through other means, namely, the use of a dedicated website (http://legionsofboom.com) and via social networking sites, especially Facebook. What exists in this book is merely the first step in exploring a vastly rich and dense social world created by the mobile scene (and, as noted, the conclusion discusses some promising areas of future research).

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/585808/9780822375487-001.pdf by guest on 27 May 2024

I.4 / Vinyl sticker for the Legion of Boom, designed by Francisco Pardorla. Courtesy of Francisco Pardorla.

About the Title

This book's title was inspired by the Legion of Boom, an alliance formed in 1986 between five different DJ crews across the Bay Area: South San Francisco's Sound Sequence, Fremont's Images Incorporated, Union City's Creative Madness, and two Daly City crews: Midstar Productions and Styles Beyond Compare. It was Sound Sequence's Burton Kong who coined the name "Legion of Boom," playing off "Legion of Doom," the alliance of evil superheroes drawn from the DC Comics universe (Leva 2008). I elaborate later (chapter 4) on how alliances often addressed logistical needs—the sharing of equipment, for example—but they were also a way to join forces and form a mega-crew for special occasions, where

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/585808/9780822375487-001.pdf by guest on 27 May 2024

the collective could stage a sonic and visual phalanx of massive speakers and lighting.

Alliances like the Legion of Boom embodied some of the best communal values the mobile scene engendered: working together across geography and individual concerns, lending support, seeking to entertain audiences with spectacular performances. Alliances also made for good marketing—"five crews for the price of one!"—but ultimately, it was not business concerns that held alliances together: DJs wanted to assemble the most elaborate sound system possible. As Images Inc.'s Francisco Pardorla explained, "down south, they had the sound, but no lights. SF crews are very flashy. They had all lights, but no sound. [The Legion] were right in the middle. We were the best of both worlds." As Pardorla explained this, it was obvious he took great pleasure in laying claim to such bragging rights, and this reminded me of how integral pleasure and play were within the mobile scene. After all, "having fun" was not a superficial or secondary concern but was very much at the forefront of what motivated these DJ crews. What made alliances so remarkable was that these were crews who were otherwise fiercely competitive with one another, for both business and status. Yet despite sometimes being rivals, these same crews forged alliances as a way to build constructive relationships, ones that rewarded crews for cooperating, not just competing.

In naming this book after the Legion of Boom, I not only nod to the name's cleverness and the visual image it evokes of a field full of subwoofers. It is also a homage to what the original Legion represented—the best of *all* worlds that united people in the pursuit of play, pleasure, and the desire to bring together a community within the reach of their speakers' range.

Downloaded from http://read.dukeupress.edu/books/book/chapter-pdf/585808/9780822375487-001.pdf by guest on 27 May 2024