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Parody in the Age of Remix

Mashup Creativity vs. the Takedown

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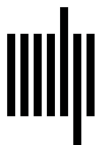
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3 Producing Mashups and the Pleasure of Play

[Mashups] appealed to me because it was incredible to hear a lot of these original songs being reimagined in different ways.

—Anonymous mashup producer (personal interview)

If you're able to take a piece of that composition [that resonates with people], if it still retains that original resonance—whether it's the vocals or the instrumental or a sample or whatever—but maintaining that resonance and then creating something I would argue to be brand new out of it, then it's new and old at the same time. And that's very unique, I think, because people instantly can connect to it through what they knew already, but you're also making something new out of that.

—CFLO (personal interview)

The previous chapter identified the specificity of mashups among the myriad appropriations from a descriptive perspective and further highlighted mashup music's correspondence to the parody concept. This chapter describes what the mashup producers who were interviewed and surveyed for this study regarded as significant to mashup aesthetics and how they realize these aspects in the creative processes of producing mashups. Several of them acknowledged that mashups are frequently dismissed out of hand, for two reasons: people engage with the music at a surface level without ever activating or even realizing its full potential, or they only know poor mashups, which are ubiquitous now given the ready availability of the specialized technological tools with which to make them and the social networks through which to distribute them. Raheem D noted, "The thing is: anyone can really pick up and do a mashup if they wanted to. And especially with social media—now you can post it to anyone that will listen. A

lot of people tend to not know about keys and stuff being offbeat. So, then, someone will be, like, 'Oh, this sounds so messy and out of key and stuff. I don't like this. I prefer the original songs.' And then they just say they don't like mashups, when they've probably not listened to a good one." The insights into what mashup producers emphasize when making mashups is important to gain a better understanding of the mashup aesthetics.

While there are several variants of mashup music, there seem to be certain abiding and fundamental aesthetic guidelines or criteria of the genre among the producers—guidelines that constantly recurred in the interviews and survey responses and are also symptomatic of the mashups themselves.¹ I have here grouped these empirical findings into four "principles" that I have labeled as follows: *crediting*, *matching*, *ironic distancing*, and *repurposing*. *Crediting* here implies that the producers want their mashups to be recognized as acknowledged appropriations; that is, they expose the fact that their music relies heavily on the sampling of existing music recordings. The samples should be from well-known sources, so the listener will recognize them; if not, it must be made obvious in some other way that the mashup's music is not "new" as such. *Matching* refers to the producers' emphasis on making the sources they bring together match in various ways, so that the new track is musically (and potentially visually) coherent in and of itself. To many producers, it is not enough to align the key and the tempo; sound, harmony, rhythm, lyrics, and video represent equally high priorities. With *ironic distancing*, I point to the mashup producers' urge to instigate a conceptual clash, incongruity, or surprise of some sort. This may result from the simple fact that prior tracks from different sources have been juxtaposed, but it may also result from a difference in respective source era, lyrical theme, mood, or genre and associated stereotypes. I here question the assumption (proposed by several scholars and journalists) that the heart of mashup music is the genre clash that it often embraces and argue instead that what is actually crucial is the ironic critical distance that mashup music displays toward its sampled sources (thus my choice of the words *ironic distancing*). Finally, *repurposing* refers to the producers' aspiration to present their sources in a new light, primarily by means of letting the new context transform the listener's impression of them.²

These four aesthetic principles have much in common with parody. As noted in the previous chapter, parody is an acknowledged appropriation that repurposes its sources while retaining an ironic critical distance, and if

several sources are combined, they are made to come together in a coherent whole as well. As such, the producers' underlying aesthetic principles support the notion that much mashup music corresponds to the concept of parody.

In the second part of this chapter, I interpret the producers' perspectives on the aesthetics behind mashups, and their motivations for making them, as a fascination with play, understood both as a particular form of activity and as a mind-set. That is, mashup activity has much in common with play, I observe, in the sense that it is motivated by, as well as premised on, one's mastery of the particular constraints that define it. Mashup producers seem to thrive on making the most out of the possibilities inherent in the frame of constraints set up by the mashup's underlying principles. Play, I believe, functions well as a rubric for the study of mashups as it contributes to illuminating the sociocultural significance of mashups and mashup activity. Moreover, I argue that another reason that mashups are easily dismissed is because their play frame, and its internal rules and logic, is not always recognized as such, or at least not understood properly, so that the activity deriving from it may thus be experienced as trivial.

Principle 1: Crediting

The first aesthetic principle emphasized by the producers is crediting, not only in terms of accreditation but also in terms of exposing the fact that their mashup is a mashup—that is, they seek to tap into the listener's ready understanding of mashup music as a calculated collision of prior musical sources. This principle is reflected in my notion that, contrary to plagiarism, mashup music constitutes an acknowledged form of appropriation, as discussed in the previous chapter. Several mashup producers emphasized the importance of the careful accreditation of their sources in the video or audio file descriptions and said that they even add a more general disclaimer announcing that the purpose of the mashup is purely recreational. Likewise, mashup titles often incorporate the terms *mashup* or *megamix* or the names of the artists or bands responsible for the original tracks (such as "Highasakite vs. Coldplay" or "Highasakite But It's Coldplay"). Alternatively, producers might use the titles of the original tracks to form a referential wordplay, such as titling a mashup of George Michael's "Careless Whisper" and Billy Idol's "Rebel Yell" as "Careless Rebel (George Michael +

Billy Idol Mashup)" (Wax Audio, 2012), or titling a mashup of Chic's "Good Times" and Iron Maiden's "Iron Chic—Rime of the Ancient Mariner" as "Rime of the Good Times" (Bill McClintock, 2020).³

The principle of crediting also transcends such annotations and paratextual information to encompass other means of forging a more immediate recognition of the sources in question. For example, the producers generally select samples from sources with which a broad group of listeners is already well acquainted, including popular contemporary tracks and historical or traditional classics.⁴ In contrast to many hip-hop producers, then, mashup producers generally avoid esotericism. This timeliness can, of course, limit a mashup's longevity, but it seemed to be more important to the producers to enhance listeners' accessibility to the material and in turn broaden and expand the audience. Because the listener's acknowledgment of mashup music as a deliberate juxtaposition of existing music tracks is fundamental to the producers, they favor music samples (and video clips) of a duration that is adequate to enable easy recognition.⁵ Furthermore, they tend to edit these sources only subtly or transparently.⁶ As I expand on later, tempo and key changes are as slight as possible, and editing and mixing of tracks are done solely to make their juxtaposition successful while still keeping them as close to the originals as possible.

To some of the mashup producers, it was vital that listeners instantly recognize the mashed sources. Kap Slap said, "You can't mash up things that people don't know, 'cause what's the point?" and PhilRetroSpector concurred: "That's why mashups work. There is that familiarity with them." To others, it was more important that their listeners categorize what they hear as a mixture of existing music. Adriana A emphasized this point: "Well, I think the recognizability is what makes a mashup interesting and fun. . . . If it's manipulated too much . . . what's the point? I call those 'what's-the-point-mashups.' . . . Ideally you want to be able to recognize it. Or, if you don't necessarily recognize one of the songs, you'll at least recognize that it's mashed up, because it's so radically different from the original." If the tracks are very different in style or sound already, this will help listeners acknowledge and appreciate the mashup *as mashup*, even when they do not know the sources, said Adriana A: "Say you take a hip-hop song, but then you mash it up with some heavy metal band—I don't necessarily need to know what that heavy metal band is, but it sounds crazy with this hip-hop artist over loud guitars." Adriana A's point here echoes hip-hop

scholar Justin Williams's (2014) notion that a musical quotation can draw attention to itself as a quotation even if the listener is not familiar with the source; the quotation's sonic or stylistic contrast with the rest of the music can be just as revealing and valuable as its referential function (or even more so).⁷ As Adriana A pointed out, the stylistic differences between hip-hop and metal are often ingrained in the listener as divergent, so that even if one does not know a mashup's sources as such, one understands it to be a juxtaposition of incongruent styles.

As Jeanette Bicknell points out, so long as unfamiliar quotations are comprehended as quotations, they need not be permanently exclusionary: "It can also be an invitation to noncomprehending listeners to discover the original context of the quoted phrase and join the group of those who do recognize it without further clues" (2001, 188). Once listeners acknowledge the mashup as appropriation, they can explore its original sources as they see fit, regardless of their familiarity beforehand. Listeners may even find this comparison between the mashup and its origins—which are readily available in our age of "ubiquitous music" (Kassabian 2013)—to be particularly diverting. Some of the interviewed producers described themselves as a type of curator who introduces legendary but neglected music to younger generations or reintroduces familiar music with a twist, so that those who once found it stale might experience it anew. DJ Paul V. explained: "To me, the greatest gift of a good mashup is that it's hopefully going to take a fan of only one part of that song and turn them into a fan of the second or third or fourth part that's also used." Adriana A agreed: "I hated hip-hop. Hated it! Didn't understand it . . . until mashups. And then I would hear songs that I liked, but there's a rap on top of it. And, all of a sudden, I'm hearing the rap and I'm noticing the artistry of the rap. And it's because it offers an entry point for me. . . . I was basically tricked into listening with a more open mind and not being immediately prejudiced toward [it]. And now I totally have an appreciation for hip-hop that I never would have had before, if it wasn't for hearing hip-hop mashups fifteen years ago." She added that she sometimes tries to broaden musical horizons by introducing listeners at pop parties to indie, alternative, and goth music by "wrapping pop vocals on top," combining, for example, an instrumental track by My Chemical Romance with the vocals of Katy Perry's "Fireworks." As I discuss in chapter 4, mashup music thus represents a means of bridging the gap between divergent fan bases, opening ears to various genres, or animating

those genres' differences. Yet most of the producers preferred to use recognizable sources, since the crux of the mashup aesthetic is the making of something new out of something "old." While the mashup can function as such even when the sources are not so obvious, thanks to the many ways in which producers expose its nature, instantly recognizable samples can trigger the listener's *immediate* response.

Obstacles Related to Crediting

Given that the principle of crediting involves mashup producers' prioritization of recognizable samples from existing and preferably well-known recordings, a sample library such as Splice or a sample database that provides authorized short musical sequences will not work for them because the samples are too short. Nor will a creative-commons sample database or a sample database such as Tracklib help. While such databases feature entire songs, including songs that may be familiar to some listeners, they do not have the really famous music that mashup producers seek. And whereas the re-creation of a whole track is an option in some forms of music appropriation, mashup producers shun this alternative because part of the joy of both making and experiencing mashups is that the mashed music sounds exactly the same yet completely different (see chapter 2 for a discussion of the importance of medium specificity).

As I discuss in depth in chapter 5, mashup producers find the process of seeking permission to use samples from famous songs to be confusing, and they also assume it to be time-consuming and unfeasibly expensive. The samples they use, then, are typically unauthorized and retrieved in alternative ways. Raheem D pointed out that it was easier to acquire official instrumental and a cappella tracks—so-called stems—some years ago, when promotional CDs that often included these versions were still available. Yet some contemporary recordings still make such stripped audio files available, or they are leaked by the artists, record companies, or radio stations, for example. Colatron recalled that in the early phase of the mashup scene, "there was always this race to get the most obscure source files to make stuff with, so some of the a cappellas, you know, people would pay hundreds of pounds for, behind the scenes, to get their hands on, like, the most exclusive vocal that no one else had used" (here, "obscure" describes the original file source of the track, not the sort of music one might turn

up while crate digging, for example). He then added that because these official versions were quite rare, producers often ended up extracting the vocal or instrumental parts themselves: “We would hand cut vocal stems, instrumentals—we would do it by hand, you know. I did a 30-channel cut-and-paste of the ‘Bohemian Rhapsody’ a cappella, all 27 channels of vocals of it, and it took me four to five months. And it was insane, but it was rewarding to do that.” The process he describes is made easier if one has the instrumental-only version already and can then use phase cancellation to extract the vocal from a full mix.

While official instrumental versions may be rarer than they once were, the digital library of recordings from which to extract them is considerably vaster today than it was in the early 2000s, when producers had to either buy the tracks they wanted or download them illegally from peer-to-peer file-sharing sites such as Napster. There are also software programs that make such inversions or extractions more straightforward, and they have advanced considerably over the past twenty years in terms of both scope and availability.⁸ Some of the interviewed mashup producers considered such techniques to generate less than pristine results, even after their attempts to clean things up with an equalizer and other processing effects (thanks to certain persistent middle frequencies, for example). They preferred to make them manually or acquire them from websites dedicated to providing stems. The sound quality of the manipulated stems (and music catalogs) varies significantly among these websites, and while certain sites offer stems for free, most require a pay-by-the-month arrangement that can be quite expensive. Some producers therefore share stems within Facebook groups or forums, but most feel obliged to pay for them, including Happy Cat Disco: “[I want to] support the people who support us.” There are also community websites on which one earns credit when one posts stems; this credit can be used in turn to acquire other stems. Stems can also be found in YouTube or Google searches, but the producers noted that there are fewer stems on the internet than there used to be, mainly due to copyright regulations. Dedicated stem websites have decreased in number as well due to copyright regulations. Still, producers strive to overcome the hassle of finding sources and the legal challenges associated with using unauthorized samples because the alternative of employing nothing but unfamiliar samples would mean that the mashup would be almost dead on arrival.

Principle 2: Matching

The second aesthetic principle that the producers emphasized is the *matching* of sources. John Shiga, who wrote an article (2007) on the mashup in its early phase, quotes an anonymous contributor to the mashup website GYBO who wrote that talent in the context of a mashup is “the capacity to recognize shared properties between different songs, or the capacity to reorganize the musical and aural relations of recordings so that they sound like they are components of the same song” (Shiga’s paraphrasing of the quote; Shiga 2007, 103). This statement rings true for the current mashup scene as well, wherein one of the primary aesthetic goals remains to juxtapose samples in a way that makes the disparate tracks sound musically coherent—that is, they are made to match. The producers make the mashed tracks share the same tempo and pitch, they align their rhythm and harmony, they make them fit together structurally (in terms of either vertical or horizontal alignment), and they sometimes also relate the tracks’ lyrical themes in some way. If the mashup consists of a video as well, the footage is usually edited to match the new audio track and shaped into a coherent montage of clips in and of itself. In this section, I first expand on the mashup producers’ alignment of source keys and tempos by also focusing on the ways in which they try to align the tracks’ harmonies and rhythms. I then address the parameter of sound, a clear priority of the producers, before discussing how the producers approach lyrics and video in the mashup.

Key, Tempo, Harmony, and Rhythm

According to the producers, matching the tempos and keys is crucial to making mashed tracks sound coherent, as though they belong together. Experienced producers described this process as much more time-consuming when they had to manipulate those elements manually; today, software does it automatically, though it can be a tricky affair. Poolboy noted that mashing music whose recorded performance does not keep perfect time (which is especially true for older music) can entail stretching certain passages in a track while tempo-compressing other passages. Other producers also indicated that tempo and key manipulation should be kept to a minimum in order to preserve the original tracks’ sound quality and keep the samples as true to their sources as possible. To some, this meant pitching the tracks by two semitones at most and altering the tempo by no more

than ten beats per minute; to others, it meant making the tracks meet half-way in terms of both tempo and pitch rather than placing an excessive burden on one track rather than the other. Some said that they developed an idea for a mashup, then found and matched the sources (for example, they heard a song that they associated with another song and decided to try out the combination)—a method requiring a good ear in terms of anticipating what might fit together. Others said that they worked more systematically, extracting the vocals and instrumentals from popular songs, duplicating the tracks, and manipulating the keys and tempos variously on each version to produce the same a cappella track in different pitches and tempos. After executing this process on multiple songs, they organized their tracks in a mashup “database” consisting of a cappella and instrumental folders for every key and tempo. This time-consuming work allowed them to experiment more freely with different track combinations in the sequencer program.

Less present than key and tempo manipulation in academic discussions of mashups is the producers’ imperative to make the tracks’ harmony and rhythm compatible. Some of the interviewees were not particularly concerned about this, but many insisted that the mashup had to be harmonically perfect. Several, including Tom Boates *Everybody*, admitted that they were frustrated with people who posted mashups with little regard for harmony:

I’m a production-minded person—like, a music-minded person—so I like having things in the same key or having a rhythm play off the vocals of a different song, like, all that stuff kind of matters to me. And I started to get really frustrated with some other DJ friends who would make mashups but not care about those things. . . . So, there is a level of artistry to it, because there are definitely mashup artists out there who are just, like, “Oh, this bpm and this bpm, and it says it’s in the same key, so let’s just put them together.” Like, it’s hard for me to call that art. That’s luck—I don’t know what it is.

According to the producers’ standards, harmonic “perfection” does not require the mashed songs to share a tonality and harmonic progression (though this does happen). In fact, mashing tracks that differ in these areas will often heighten the listener’s surprise at the (potential) success of their combination.

The latter can be exemplified by the Reborn Identity’s “Portishead vs Blondie vs Kanye West—*Sour Glass* (mashup)” (2009), which mashes the music of Portishead’s “*Sour Times*” (1994) with the vocals of Blondie’s

“Heart of Glass” (1978) and, toward the end, a twenty-second vocal phrase from Kanye West’s “Love Lockdown” (2008). Here, a familiar vocal line is set to a new harmonic progression. Portishead’s “Sour Times” is in a minor key, staying on C#m with a descending bassline in the verses, then repeating the descending harmonic progression F#m–C#m/E–D#– in the choruses. Blondie’s “Heart of Glass” is, in contrast, in a major key, using the chords E–C#–C#m–E– in the verses and A–E–A–E (or F#–B, depending on the round) in the choruses. The Portishead song is therefore in the relative minor key to Blondie’s song, meaning that the two tracks share the same scale and, in the mashup, retain their original keys (though the Blondie vocals are slowed from 114 to 110 beats per minute). Blondie vocalist Debbie Harry starts singing on the sixth tone relative to the E major chord, but in the mashup, it is the tonic center of C#m. She descends in the original to the fifth tone of the C# major chord (which then turns into C#m), then to the third, second, and first tones of the major chord E, which in the mashup becomes the fifth tone of the *minor* chord C#m, then remains in that chord for the fifth, fourth, and third tones. Here, then, Harry’s original major melody becomes a minor melody with an emphasized minor third that strengthens the impression of a minor tonality. An originally “optimistic” melodic line (despite its lyrical content) now sounds rather dejected (although also somewhat detached), given the way in which minor chords are often experienced as sadder, more emotionally freighted, and less energetic than major chords (Moore 2016, 69–76). Even more striking is that when the characteristic second chord of Blondie’s original version, the C#, goes away, so does much of the melody’s characteristic expressiveness, which contributes to its general deflation in the mashup. This shift is sharpened by Portishead’s lo-fi, jazz-inflected film noir sound, drawing on a sample from Lalo Schifrin’s “The Danube Incident” from 1969 (from the TV show *Mission: Impossible*) that is characterized by the sound of a jangly cimbalom and features a prominent descending bassline. Even the mashup’s footage contributes to turning Harry’s nonchalance into misery, combining close-ups of Harry’s face with clips from the “Sour Times” video (which is based on Portishead’s 1994 short film *To Kill a Dead Man*), all converted to black and white for consistency. With this example, we see clearly how the alteration of harmony, together with other elements (such as the video content), can produce a harmonically coherent mashup while reinventing an existing vocal track in the context of a mashup.⁹

DJ Prince has doubled down on the idea that if you do not get the harmony right, you will not achieve legitimacy within the mashup community, by developing a tool called “harmonic mixing” to assist those with limited musical competence or music-listening skills. This tool, which is available at a tutorial website, presents the circle of fifths as the “Camelot Wheel,” in which the names of the twelve tones’ key signatures and associated major and minor keys are switched out with letters and numbers for ease of navigation (A is minor and B is major, and 1A and 1B are parallel keys, so that “Heart of Glass,” discussed above, would be 12B, whereas “Sour Times” would be 12A).¹⁰ This tool is used in the software program *Mixed in Key* to analyze songs’ tonality and harmonies and then translate the chords into the codes of the Camelot Wheel.¹¹ Though such tools did not come up in the other interviews, I suspect that some of the producers would have welcomed such help, while others would have rejected it as ruining the spirit, challenge, and fun of making mashups.

Some producers also transposed individual tones in a given vocal melody in order to make it fit with a new harmonic progression. For example, DJ Cumberbund recalled a mashup in which he made every major third into a minor one in order to better suit the harmony. Many of the other producers, including DJ Schmolli, were purists:

[If an instrumental] has a certain chord structure, four bars, and the last chord in the fourth bar is not going well with the vocals, I would usually just kick this idea and not re-pitch just the certain notes or certain phrases from the last chord where it doesn’t fit. I don’t do re-pitching at all. I have done it a couple of times, but I usually don’t re-pitch. If I hear a mashup, I wanna sing along with the original vocal melody, and I get distracted if there’s like only the last word that is pitched up or pitched down a semi-tone. . . . I mean, it’s not that bad, but I wanna keep the vocals as original as possible, so everybody instantly knows these are the vocals, and they’re not being altered or pitched or things like that.

He does alter tracks in other ways—for example, pitching up the whole track by a semitone or slowing or speeding it up by a couple of beats per minute—but people usually miss such subtle changes. “The thing is,” he explained, “if it sounds forced, then I would not do it. Simple as that.”

The various means of mixing the tracks’ harmony often challenge the producers in terms of musical skills and creativity. Accordingly, producers including PhilRetroSpector regarded the mashing of a rap a cappella with an instrumental track as a lazy solution: “If somebody had a rap—say

if your a cappella was a rap track—there was always the snobbery there, that that was easier to cut. . . . Because, you know, I mean, you're not harmonically mixing anything." Happy Cat Disco disagreed, insisting that a rap vocal can be just as challenging because of its rhythmic complexity: "There's something about the polyrhythm stuff—they need to work. And specifically with hip-hop, because a lot of people say hip-hop isn't a mashup art because it's too easy, because there's no harmonic content. And I'm like, no, but there's rhythmic, there's polyrhythmic content, and a lot of people who say that can't make rap mashups, because they think it's easy. It's not. You gotta get that. It's why Eminem is good, because he knows how to play off the rhythms of the backbeat."

Happy Cat Disco here touches on another alignment priority for several of the producers—the tracks' rhythmic profiles—in the interests of forming a coherent groove.¹² DJ Schmolti noted that this rhythmic alignment is important to the mashing of pop vocals as well: "There's a flow in vocal tracks that fits to the original music, but if you take the vocal track, which has a certain flow on it, and put it on another instrumental that has a different flow on it, even if it's in time . . . you don't feel the flow of the lyrics and the vocals. It's not good." His purist approach prohibits him from "groove-correcting" tracks (using specialized software) to force the vocals to fit the instrumental track(s); he would rather find a different track instead.

Sometimes, however, the mashing of tracks that have completely different types of flow can generate an interesting and reinvigorating result, which is the case, for example, with oneboredjeu's "Flo Good Inc.—Gorillaz feat. De La Soul vs. Flo Rida feat. T-Pain (mashup)" (2019), which blends the music of "Feel Good Inc." (2005) by Gorillaz featuring De La Soul with the vocals of "Low" (2007) by Flo Rida featuring T-Pain. The original version of "Low" has a tempo of 128 beats per minute; in the mashup, however, the vocals are sped up to match the faster tempo of the instrumental track at 139 beats per minute, which alters the perceived vocal performance significantly. This altered impression of the vocals is made even more profound with the replacement of their instrumental accompaniment. In the original version of "Low," the vocals of Flo Rida and T-Pain sound a bit pushed forward relative to the beat in their performance style, whereas the instrumental accompaniment is more laidback; the groove is quite minimalistic and leans toward the house end of the hip-hop spectrum, with prominent synthesizers and house claps and a less prominent syncopated

kick drum. In the original version of “Feel Good Inc.,” it is the vocals that are laidback, whereas the instrumental accompaniment is more pushed forward. The instrumental of “Feel Good Inc.” can be described as a vigorous, rock-inspired groove involving a straight but intense lo-fi drum beat with punchy snare and bass drum sounds and an insistent, regular hi-hat. Moreover, an energetic and melodic syncopated bassline supplies the song’s centerpiece. Via the mashup, this music groove by Gorillaz reenergizes T-Pain and Flo Rida’s vocals even more than their changed tempo, making them funkier and more energetic, while these replaced vocals also highlight the effectiveness of Gorillaz’s groovy bassline.

As demonstrated, several mashup producers are concerned not only with key and tempo alignment but also with harmony and rhythm, including the potential that lies in combining tracks in which the harmonic progression and rhythmic flow diverge. The replacement of these parameters can transform the familiar elements significantly, with a surprising effect on the listener—one sometimes accompanied by humor or even awe.

Sound

The interviews and survey suggest that different mashup producers devote different amounts of time and energy to the mixing process. Some are concerned mostly with making sure the volume levels across the tracks are consistent throughout the song, or they send the mashed version through a mastering plugin to create stronger uniformity and consistency between the tracks. MsMiep further explained that some producers, including herself, value imperfect stems (a vocal track, for example, in which one can hear the bleed of the instrumental accompaniment in the background), probably to introduce a DIY vibe. Danny Neyman privileged track availability over sound quality: “If there’s a song that I really, really want to incorporate, and I just can’t find a high quality a cappella but I can find a low quality [version] that might work, I’ll do that.” Purist producers including DJ Faroff even eschew processing effects altogether: “So I was kind of, in a way, proud of using some shitty software, that, you know—I didn’t really have any effects or anything.” Other producers, though, are obsessed with sound quality in terms of obtaining or making stems with the best quality possible and mixing their mashed tracks to achieve superior sonic coherence.

“I think what happens in the general public is that they think that all we do in mashups is that we just take an a cappella and throw it over

an instrumental and call it a day,” one of the anonymous interviewees explained. “But no, we don’t do that, right? We do a lot more than that. We add reverb, we add delay, we do all the things that an audio engineer would do. We have to make them sound good. And that’s how your general public will appreciate them at the end of the day. If they sound like originals.” Indeed, “sounding like an original” was a mantra for many of the interviewed mashup producers, and Happy Cat Disco elaborated on it: “When we say it ‘sounds like an original,’ [we] mean it sounds like it was always intended to be like that. That means you got the rhythm right, you got the harmonics right, you got the engineering right, and the personality’s there. When somebody says that to you, that’s a good thing. That’s a really good thing. . . . So yeah, we do need to try and make it sound like it was meant to be of a recording.” Simon Iddol agreed that mashups are often underrated in terms of their engineering but lamented the reason:

Since it’s easy to do, there are so many bad mashups, and so many bad remixes and everything out there. So that’s why we have kind of a bad reputation now for mashups and also for remixes. . . . To make a good mashup is not easy because of the basic fact that those songs were not made for each other. We have a saying in the mashup community that “these songs were made for each other—this is a match made in heaven,” blah blah. But it’s not true. I mean, those songs were made in a different period of time, different mindset, different continent, different artist—so many differences. *You* are the bridge. *You’re* the connection, the artist.

This ideal of “sounding like an original” demands much more than simply matching the respective tracks’ keys and tempos, the producers insisted, though they felt that too many mashups suffer from doing only those things.

Several of these producers had backgrounds as audio engineers, and Happy Cat Disco pointed out that mixing tracks from prior recordings to sound coherent is often more challenging than mixing a new track: “I do sound effects for a living, I do recordings, I do editing, I do mixing. But the best engineering skill I’ve gotten, by EQ [a sound engineering tool used to adjust the volume of different audio frequencies] or settling the mix—I mean everything—has come from mashups. I’ve learned more from doing that than I ever have from sound effects, so . . . EQing, trying to get things to sit in the mix, using multiband compressors, using sidechains—every single mashup that anybody does has a unique problem. And this is sort of

where the art comes in. So, if you're gonna ask me, 'Where is the art?' it's coming from an engineering aspect, I think. Engineering is an art form." Among the challenges in this regard, as introduced above, is improving the quality of the stems that are not already studio versions. Another is making mashed tracks that were never intended to cohere share the mix in terms of sound. Happy Cat Disco said, "Trying to get my Michael Jackson vocal, [which was] recorded back in 1984, on top of something that's recorded nowadays, it's an engineering feat trying to get that to work. It takes a great deal of, like, compression and EQing and effects and things like that to kind of get things to sit in the mix professionally."¹³ A "dry" a cappella track might need more reverb or sonic aggression to succeed; the volume of a frequency area of an instrumental track might need to be modified by a few decibels (using a sound equalizer [EQ]) to make space for the vocal; an overall reverb or multiband compression might help the mashup's discrete tracks come together better, they explained. To Happy Cat Disco, the engineering was so important that if the sound was not good, he would not post it; he felt that his mashup name, and his engineering reputation, was at stake.¹⁴

Several of the other producers who prioritized the mixing of mashup tracks described in detail their use of reverb, delay, EQ, compression, leveling and panning, and other sound-processing effects. Given his general reluctance to alter his source tracks, DJ Schmolli described himself as "really picky" when it came to mixing them with equalizer, compressor, reverb, and so on. The sonic result of his considerable effort is still subtle in terms of its relationship to the original; he did not want to make audible changes to particular sounds but instead sought to integrate the sources as best he could.¹⁵ As mentioned, there was a consensus among the mashup producers that while the tracks should sound as though they belong together, it should also be obvious that they are independent as well. As one of the survey respondents put it, "You must believe that it's a whole new song but one that you've already heard." This discrepancy enhances the experience of "same yet different" or "old yet new" that defines the mashup as a work of art.

At least one of the current dedicated mashup forums is centered on sound and engineering, and several of the interviewed producers were part of that forum. They likened it to a peer-reviewing system through which a producer posts a mashup "draft" on the site and others provide constructive

feedback on its engineering that can be worked into the mashup ahead of its reposting to the site. This back-and-forth process—which can, they said, be quite lengthy—exemplifies a form of social authorship that has become common on the internet.¹⁶ McSlzy described one of the earliest mashup forums, GYBO, as functioning as a quality control system as well, but also as “a self-regulating community” in the sense that producers would not post their mashups if their peers did not approve.

To most of the interviewed and surveyed mashup producers, the art of the mashup resided in the bridging of tracks in such a way that the combination sounds “like an original” even as it remains obvious that the tracks are from different (often very different) sources already. But the ways in which producers achieved this varied, with some focusing on sound and others on key and tempo, and potentially also harmony and rhythm. Still others focused on the lyrical themes in their respective sources, or on creating a coherent audiovisual experience by merging footage associated with the mashed tracks or using independent footage to which the mashup functioned as a soundtrack.

Structure, Lyrics, and Video

Although the structure of mashups adheres to the montage form in that several prior sources are merged, as discussed in the previous chapter, mashup producers structure their samples quite differently within this format. In the most basic A+B mashup, an a cappella track is aligned horizontally with an instrumental track. As producers mash the two sources, some retain the structures of both samples in their entirety (or close to it), whereas others retain the structure of one of the samples (the a cappella track, for example) while rearranging the structure of the other, often so as to make the harmonies work together. However, A+B mashups are often more complex than this, consisting of more than two tracks that are aligned along both axes. And whereas it is often either the vocals or the instrumentals of a given source track that are used, bits of the other are often used as well, to spice up the mix. When several sources have been mashed into a megamix mashup, the samples’ duration and frequency of appearance vary considerably. This mosaic form of making mashups allows for more structural experimentation than a typical A+B mashup, which often aims to make the mashed tracks appear to be as close to their original versions as possible. In megamix mashups, the producers use a combination of instrumentals,

a cappella tracks, and complete (unmanipulated) samples that are aligned both vertically and horizontally.

Jeffrey S. Yunek, Benjamin K. Wadsworth, and Simon Needle (2020) point out that when producers structure their mashup samples, they often align the sections' new placements with their placements in the original tracks. For example, if two samples stemming from a chorus are used within a mashup chorus, they serve to boost the sense of the section as a chorus. That way, the listener benefits from associations not only to the sources as such but also to the formal function of the selected sequences (as a verse or a chorus, for example). These scholars further refer to DJ Earworm, who states that he bears the samples' formal functions in mind when he structures them (3). In an interview, DJ Earworm revealed his preference for the verse-chorus form in megamixes: "I decided the initial combination of hooks would be my chorus, and then I set about filling in the rest. A normal pop song will have a verse/chorus/bridge structure, with the choruses being identical, the verse being fairly similar, and the bridge standing out as different . . . the whole thing will sound like a single song. . . . My goal is to make the perfect pop song rather than a DJ mix. My mashups have a beginning, a middle and an end, they all happens [sic] in four minutes. Verse, bridge, chorus, intro, outro, enough repetition but not too much, parts that repeats, parts that mimic each other—pop, basically" (quoted in Yunek et al. 2020; for the original interview, see Morse 2011). Although megamix mashups, as well as A+B mashups, often do use the typical pop form of alternating verses and choruses (Boone 2013, 146–150), the arrangements of mashups are otherwise quite diverse. After demonstrating the complexity and sophistication of mashup arrangements in his study, Liam McGranahan concludes, "It would be impossible to create rules, or generalize, about the specific editing and rearranging strategies that mashup artists use because they vary so significantly from mashup to mashup and are so reliant on the particular sources and number of sources that are sampled" (2010, 51–52).

In his *Audio Mashup Construction Kit*, DJ Earworm (who authored the book under his proper name Jordan Roseman) points out that when structuring the samples, it is not only form or melody that is relevant but also the lyrics and an overarching narrative (Roseman 2007, 80). That is, his samples are also selected and arranged in order to create new lyrics. He writes: "The words of the songs can inspire the particular combination. If you are using vocal elements from more than one song and if the words

relate to each other, it can be wonderful. Songs may share key words or simply relate to each other thematically. One song may twist the meaning of the other, altering the context. Another song may ask a question that the other song answers. A worthwhile goal is to somehow tell one continuous story from the lyrics of several songs" (Roseman 2007, 80). He then discusses what he calls the call-and-response technique, in which phrases from different sources alternate in a dialogue, and the "cut-up" technique, in which the words (or even the syllables and phonemes) of vocal tracks are spliced together into new sentences (231–232).¹⁷ When interviewed by McGranahan, he gave an example of this procedure:

For instance, I was listening to that Beyoncé song "If I Were a Boy," and all of a sudden it was like, "oh, that sounds just like 'Free Fallin' [by Tom Petty]." . . . And you know you find out what words do relate. I was like, "oh, it ['If I Were a Boy'] is kind of about a girl complaining about this guy who is taking her for granted. And then he [Tom Petty] is really singing about, in a way, being free." Then I was thinking, well for her his freedom is just really annoying. So I said, this could be kind of a conflict, the male version and the female version. So you just, you can take almost two random songs and you just see what in them relates to each other. (DJ Earworm as quoted in McGranahan 2010, 68)¹⁸

Several of the other producers interviewed for this study also emphasized the relevance of the lyrics for the structural arrangement of mashups. They explained that mashups might expose a coherent linear narrative across the songs, a repetitive emphasis on certain words, a new conversation between the artists, or a gesture of wordplay when initially opposed narratives come together in unexpected ways. CFLO provided an example of the latter approach: "I had Kanye West's 'Jesus Walks' versus Jay-Z's 'Lucifer,' right? So they're opposite, and . . . there's some sort of string between them that you connect as an artist and put them together. And if they sound good, it's even better." Raheem D favored mashups that sounded as though the mashed artists were singing together in the studio, so he generally took the a cappella version of the tracks he was mashing and cut them so that they make sense lyrically.¹⁹ Isosine also gravitated toward exposing a common lyrical theme between the mashed tracks: "I just like it, because, I mean, what makes a song—like, a non-mashup, like, a normal song—good is that, on top of it having catchy lyrics or good song structure or whatever, I think that the theme is very important, and how well the singer or the producer can tie together the theme. And so, I kind of like to extend that

concept into the mashup. And it gets interesting with mashups because now you have the opportunity to use as many samples as you want. . . . There's gonna be lots of songs falling within the same themes, and I kinda like the synergy of combining all of that, just to reinforce the idea of a certain theme."

More often than not, a mashup features a video, leading many producers to use YouTube as their preferred distribution channel (although there are other reasons as well that contribute to its alignment with mashup producers, including its large and active audience). There are even dedicated mashup-video producers—some make only videos and collaborate with another producer who makes the music; others do both. Mashup videos tend to use footage involving their source songs—either the actual music videos from the sampled songs or related concert footage or a combination of the two. The video footage of the sampled sources has the added benefit of associating the source songs with their artists, even when the songs in question are not recognized as such, which may heighten the experience of mashups as something old but also new. In megamix mashups, the footage and the audio that belong together are usually displayed simultaneously, whereas in the basic A+B mashups, the footage of the mashed tracks is often intermingled in various ways, since both tracks are present simultaneously (for examples, see chapter 4). Sometimes the intermingling of footage and its alignment with the audio is done quite artistically.²⁰ For example, in AnDyWuMUSICLAND's "Beyoncé—Sorry, Single Ladies (feat. Justin Bieber) [Remix]" (2015), which mashes the vocals of Beyoncé's "Single Ladies (Put a Ring on It)" (2009) with the instrumental version of Bieber's "Sorry" (2015), the screen is divided in two, with alternating clips from the two videos on each half and occasionally the same clip mirrored across both halves. Both tracks' music videos consist of women dancing against a white background. Though Beyoncé's video is black and white while Bieber's is in color, the mashup converts Bieber's video into black and white to match Beyoncé's and create a seamless "original" out of the two disparate sources—one that comments on the similarities between them. In some mashups, other footage is added as well. In chapter 4, for example, I analyze DJ Cumberbund's "Blurry in the USA" (2020), in which the combined footage of the mashed songs is complemented by audiovisual news report clips of the Black Lives Matter protests, which serve to underline the mashup's overall theme of a nation in decline.

Other mashup producers rely on footage that is independent of the mashed tracks, so that the mashup serves as the soundtrack to a new or altered third-party video. Alternative footage might include cartoons—for example, Happy Cat Disco’s “Bruno Mars vs. Caravan Palace(24K Digger)—Mashup” (2016) uses segments from Fleischer Studio’s “color classic” cartoon titled “Hold It” from 1938, and his “The Weeknd vs. 2Pac & Eazy-E ft. Lucien Hughes & Memeguy1997 (I Feel The 90’s Coming)” (2017) uses selected segments from the animated sitcom *The Simpsons*. The latter video was made by Lucien Hughes, who was described by *Pitchfork* in 2016 as “the most visible Simpsonwave artist working right now” and as “the internet denizen who gave the [Simpsonwave] genre its name” (Lozano 2016). Simpsonwave is a subgenre, or perhaps a feature, of vaporwave that is characterized by YouTube montage videos of edited clips from “The Simpsons.”²¹ In the *Pitchfork* interview, Hughes explains that the Simpsonwave videos are very much about nostalgia: “‘The Simpsons’ is pretty unique in that it’s something that almost everyone born between the late ’80s and early ’00s grew up watching. Vaporwave is very much about creating an atmosphere of nostalgia, so I feel ‘The Simpsons’ just perfectly fits the whole aesthetic” (Lozano 2016). The nostalgic 1990s tinge to the Simpsons video for the mashup certainly also fits the theme of the mashup itself, as revealed by both the selection of samples (which are mostly from the 1990s or early 2000s)²² and in the title of the mashup (“I Feel the 90’s Coming”). The collaboration between Happy Cat Disco and Simpsonwave artist Lucien Hughes also reminds us that mashups are part of a larger internet scene that relies on the visual to capture attention and inform its dominant aesthetic forms.

Danny Neyman’s main reason for making mashup videos was to hold the audience’s attention on the mashup: “I’m sure you’ve noticed [that] plenty of people are talking about how, especially in younger generations, the attention span of everyone has kinda decreased a little. So, if you’re just listening to the audio and looking at one picture on the screen just consistently, it gets a little boring.” MsMiep linked mashup videos to contemporary society’s general orientation toward the audiovisual: “I think that that’s how mashups have been consumed. That’s how I feel, like, that’s where I see mashups sort of being shared around different groups on social media. If it’s got a video, it’ll do the rounds. If it doesn’t have a video along with it, then it just kind of drops off pretty quickly. People aren’t necessarily

interested. I think it needs to be that full audiovisual package these days.” While some producers persist in accompanying their mashups with a still image, others consider the video to be an integral part of the mashup and an artwork in itself. Still, the interviewees were more interested in talking about mashup music than mashup video footage, although the questions may have led them in that direction.

As demonstrated thus far, a commonly emphasized aesthetic principle of the mashup producers was to make the mashed tracks sound like an original (the *matching*) while clearly delineating, through various acts of signaling, that the result is nevertheless a mashup—that is, a combination of disparate tracks (the *crediting*). This act of doubled utterance was part of the challenge and fun of making mashups, the producers explained, and it inspired a range of solutions. Given the ongoing development of tools that assist with the mixing process, one might think that the old-school mashup producers would dedicate more time to the mixing process than the younger generation would, but this quality was instead clearly person specific regardless of generation. A given producer’s approach to mashups might also vary according to what type of mashup was being made; they might devote more time to lyrical coherence in megamixes and to “harmonic mixing” in A+B mashups, for example—but this particular distinction did not arise in the interviews, perhaps because the line between these two formats is often blurred. Despite their individual idiosyncrasies, however, all the producers adhered to the transparent mediation paradigm.²³ That is, their manipulation of the original sources was discreet and usually transparent; the tempos and keys were altered but only slightly, for example, and processing effects were used primarily to refine the sound of the sampled audio files and integrate them more completely. As one survey respondent put it, a good mashup must reflect a “lack of audible technical tricks.” While the structure of the source songs might be significantly rearranged in a megamix mashup, a basic A+B mashup usually features only the structural edits that are absolutely necessary to integrating its sources. In keeping with this rather purist and minimalist production paradigm, most mashups also consist of samples alone, with no additional self-produced musical material. In general, the interviewed mashup producers wanted to give the impression that the blended tracks fit together perfectly *as they are*, since this apparent effortlessness enhances the intended audience response (“these sources shouldn’t go together but they do!”).

Principle 3: Ironic Distancing

After extolling the perfect blend between source tracks, DJ Surda cautioned that it only got you halfway there: “[The blend] is one thing . . . and the other thing for me is that the good mashups are a clash. . . . So, for me, the good mashups are . . . the clash ones, and the ones that, when you’re listening, it totally works.” In addition to establishing a musical dialogue between the mashed tracks, that is, mashup producers use these sources to instigate a conceptual clash, incongruity or surprise of some sort.²⁴ I have labeled this specific aspiration the aesthetic principle of *ironic distancing*. As we shall see, this quality can arise from a profound disparity in its sources’ genres, stereotypes, or eras, for example, but also from the obviousness of the juxtaposition itself (that is, from the simple fact that prior tracks from different sources have been juxtaposed).

The Clashing of Genres and Disparate Tracks

A common feature of the more fundamental aesthetic principle of ironic distancing is the genre clash. Scholars and journalists concerned with mashup music have long remarked on the fact that mashups often combine sources associated with contrasting genres, such as pop and rock or hip-hop and metal.²⁵ So in 2003, *Salon* journalist Roberta Cruger wrote, “The more disparate the genre-blending is, the better; the best mash-ups blend punk with funk or Top 40 with heavy metal, boosting the tension between slick and raw” (Cruger 2003). This blending of disparate genres was particularly pronounced during mashup’s early phase, when the A+B form dominated the scene. DJ Paul V., a cofounder of the Bootie mashup organization in Los Angeles and a prominent mashup radio host, recalled that he always sought out mashups with prominent genre clashes to play on his radio show. Those were his favorites, he said, thanks to their “surprise element” that “will really blow people away.” He pointed to the early British mashup classics, such as Freelance Hellraiser’s “A Stroke of Genius” (2001) (combining the Strokes’ “Hard to Explain” [2001] and Christina Aguilera’s “Genie in a Bottle” [1999]) and Go Home Productions’ “Ray of Gob (Madonna vs Sex Pistols mashup)” (2003) (combining Madonna’s “Ray of Light” [1998] and the Sex Pistols’ “God Save the Queen” and “Pretty Vacant” [both 1977]):

Taking like, again, Christina Aguilera with the Strokes. You’d never think of it. So, I sought out the people—you know, like Go Home Productions, [who] was

the king at the time. And he would do amazing stuff like Madonna with the Sex Pistols, or ABBA with Echo and the Bunnymen, or you know, you fill in the blank. He did so many great ones and he made them work. . . . If you didn't know the original sources and you just heard that track, like if you heard Madonna singing "Ray of Light" over "Pretty Vacant" and "God Save the Queen," you would be, like, "Wow, that girl has a really hot punk band that she just record[ed with]."

Today, genre-clashing mashups remain relevant, whether they involve rock versus pop or other genre combinations. For example, InanimateMashups's "We Are Extraterrestrial—Robbie Rotten vs Katy Perry (Mashup)" (2016) blends the pop vocals of Katy Perry's "E.T." (2010) with a soundtrack from a children's TV series—the music of "We Are Number One" (2014) from the Icelandic (but English-speaking) children's TV series *LazyTown*.²⁶ William Maranci is another mashup producer who takes the concept of blending ostensibly antithetical music styles to the limit. In his mashup "The Black Eyed Peas—My Humps (feat. Mozart)" (2020), for example, he mashes the vocals of "My Humps" (2004) by the hip-hop band Black Eyed Peas with the music of the "Turkish Rondo" by Mozart (the third movement of Piano Sonata No. 11 in A major, K. 331, late 1700s). "My Humps" sparked much controversy because of its objectification of women and the materialistic focus of the lyrics and music video, and it has been parodied by several artists, including Alanis Morissette. The result of this particular mashup is thus not only a clash of genres and (very disparate) eras but also a clash between high and low within the firmly established Western music hierarchy. As one viewer commented ironically: "This is frankly disturbing, why would you ruin a song with as much artistic value as 'My Humps'?" In another mashup, "Eminem—Lose Yourself But It's 4'33" by John Cage" (2020), William Maranci combines the (silent) music of Cage's "4'33"" with the vocals of Eminem's "Lose Yourself," where Eminem's lyrics about giving yourself over to "this opportunity that comes once in a lifetime" become a kind of sports announcer commentary on the video performance of Cage's piece.²⁷ Here, the mashup's humor arises from the listener's notion that the respective works are far apart in every way yet are made to fit so perfectly together.

Still, the taste for genre clashes seems to vary among producers and sometimes depends on the type of mashup in question (that is, A+B or megamix).²⁸ Adriana A insisted that while nonclashing mashups do flourish on the internet, the clashing ones are more popular: "I've noticed that the mashups in, you know, this day and age—the ones that go viral are the

ones that have that classic early-mashup-scene genre clash. 'Cause that's really what resonates. That's what made me fall in love with mashup culture." CFLO agreed, saying that his favorite mashups "are the ones where, if you write it down on paper and you're like 'This shouldn't go together,' but then you hear it and it does go together. . . . Like it doesn't make sense, but it does. That's, I think, the best." NodaMixMusic even regarded the induced collaboration of artists who would never make anything together as the whole point of the mashup. Some of those producers who leaned toward genre-clashing mashups, such as DJ Cumberbund, found non-clashing mashups to be lacking in ambition: "It was just EDM tracks mixed with EDM tracks, and that was just boring. It's like, what was the point?" DJ Faroff added that while a blend of genre-aligned contemporary music might work perfectly well at the club, in that it makes people dance, it is less interesting artistically and intellectually. The group of producers known as the Crumplbangers came about as a statement against boring mashups, as member pomDeter explained: "Basically, it's a reaction to the swath of bland mashups that were around at the time. Mostly current pop versus current pop that, if you didn't know any source, you might think it was an original track. They're technically good but they just lack some of the early bootleg spirit. So, we just made a small community to try and inject the fun back into it. Have a laugh and make silly music."²⁹

Other producers saw a time and place for nonclashing mashups depending on whether the work was mainly meant to be humorous (for which a genre clash would be preferable) or aesthetically pleasing or made for the dance floor (for which a genre clash would not be necessary as such). And while the interviewees acknowledged a generational shift away from genre-clashing mashups, there were plenty of exceptions to it, including several old-school producers who embraced the complexities of megamix mashups over the clash of genres above all else, and vice versa.

As I discuss further in chapter 4, the clashing of genres is not only about musical style but also about those genres' strong cultural connotations and implications for identity. As such, genre-clashing mashups serve as sociocultural commentaries on habitual conventions and expectations, and some producers and listeners seem to value this ironic critical play. Moreover, mashup music's blending of genres often produces a humorous effect because radically antithetical musical and attitudinal norms are somehow made to match. And humor, understood in its broadest sense

and as stemming from the combination of incongruity and congruity, is an important aspect of the mashup aesthetic and approach, although not all mashup producers intend their work to be humorous (see chapter 4).

Explicit Juxtaposition of Distinct Tracks

Whereas A+B genre-clash mashups dominated the early phase of this art form, megamixes have grown in popularity in recent years. The concept of megamix mashups is to blend several or many sources, regardless of whether the clashing of genres occurs. Year-end megamixes, for example, blend the greatest hits from annual charts such as *Billboard's* Hot 100 Songs, and they are often from very similar genres. Other megamixes emphasize an existing or imposed common theme across the sampled sources. Isosine explained that sometimes what matters here is how many samples one can use, not what genre they represent: “And, you know, three years ago I thought having forty samples was a massive amount. And I think last year someone came out, and there was like 120 different songs in one year-end mix. And every year it grows.” But the quantity of samples is, of course, not important to all forms of megamix. Instead, the point may be to make a musically coherent and pleasant result out of the juxtaposition of several or many distinct tracks. Although it is perhaps more obvious in the genre-clashing A+B mashups, megamixes also signal an ironic critical distance from their sampled sources in terms of exposing the concepts behind them—that is, they are meant to be understood as juxtapositions of distinct sources. This is part of the intriguing challenge and pleasure of both creating and listening to megamixes. Various forms of signaling—including the choice of sources and the sampled sequences within them, the length and treatment of the samples, the mention of the sources under the video/music files, and the mashup titles, which often include the word *megamix*—together make it obvious that these tracks are not made from scratch or from independent samples from a database. Instead, they are clearly indicated to derive from selected samples from publicly available tracks by other artists that were initially made for a different musical and sociocultural context.

This form of ironic distancing—one that is less about genre clash than about the explicit juxtaposition of disparate sources—can also be present in A+B mashups that are pushed in directions other than the genre clash. For example, Raheem D said that, rather than combining genre “opposites,” he devised dream collaborations, including artists who were no longer with us:

“So that’s one thing that’s magical, I think, is those star collaborations that people have always wanted but never had the chance to happen.” While several of the interviewed mashup producers were interested in mashing clashing sources who were unlikely to collaborate in real life, Raheem D flipped this script by mashing sources who probably *could* have collaborated or who would be great to hear together (for example, Justin Bieber and Justin Timberlake). He pointed out that he actually started making mashups to perpetuate the cultural relevance of the urban pop artist Aaliyah, who died in a plane crash in 2001 at just twenty-two years old, by making post-humorous songs featuring her vocal performances. This work obviously lacks the humorous aspect of the genre-clash mashup, but its combination can generate a similar feeling of surprise, and, for some, surprise was the most important aspect of all.

As we have seen, mashup producers exploit an ironic distancing toward the sources they mash, whether the tracks in question are strange bedfellows or not, because they explicitly play on the fact that what is heard is something that initially belonged to a different context. Whether the sources represent a clash of associated conventional genre categories or not, the mashup itself represents a clash between the listener’s existing understanding of its sources and their presentation in a new context. The oscillation between the sources’ initial and new contexts may, in turn, serve to repurpose existing material to the edification (and pleasure) of the listener.

Principle 4: Repurposing

A mashup that satisfies only the first three principles—crediting, matching, and ironic distancing—can still be considered a bad or boring mashup by one’s fellow producers. A good mashup must also say something on its own or add some synergy to its sources, and, most important, it must shed new light on the mashed tracks. To various extents, mashups bring something new out of something familiar by transforming the samples via recontextualization (or, more specifically, “transcontextualization” [Hutcheon 2000, 12]; see chapter 4). CFLO echoed the notion that while the sampled tracks are relatively unaltered, they are nevertheless extrinsically transformed by their new musical context: “For me, one of the things I think makes a really good mashup is when, all of a sudden, the context of the song has changed while still retaining the original elements.” And it is this repurposing of the

tracks—the way in which mashups enable people to understand them from a different perspective from what was initially intended—that engages the producers and fans of mashup music. “It’s quite hard to make something new,” NodaMixMusic admitted: “That’s why we need to dig deeper, like make this kind of stuff. Give these old tracks, or tracks that already exist, give it a new sound, new meaning.” This combination of familiarity and unpredictability, of repetition and change, was considered fundamental to the mashup aesthetics by the producers, including PhilRetroSpector: “If you’re not shining a new light on it, I don’t see the point of doing it. I think it gets tired very, very quick.”

MsMiep appreciated how the juxtaposition of tracks can completely change the vibe of the song: “It’s just about changing the scenery, really. . . . It’s like in a green screen, you got this one piece in here, and depending on what you put in the background it can totally change the atmosphere. And I think that is fun. It’s a good challenge.” Such a challenge can also emerge from mashups that try to blend tracks with different moods; for example, an energetic recording can become lounge music, or a melancholic or aggressive track can become a feel-good song, or a frivolous ditty can become a serious statement. For example, the Reborn Identity’s mashup of Portishead and Blondie, discussed above, reshapes the ennui and insouciance of the latter’s vocals into utter misery via the music (and footage) of Portishead and Kanye West. Two disparate mashups of Miley Cyrus’s “Wrecking Ball” (2013) prove this point as well. The initial version of “Wrecking Ball” is a power ballad of sorts; its gentle, almost delicate verse gives way to a powerful, weighty, soaring chorus with a tormented vocal delivery. In “Wrecking People (Village People vs Miley Cyrus)” (2014), DeeM blends Cyrus’s vocal with the instrumental track of the disco classic “Y.M.C.A.” (1978). By slowing the music and speeding up the vocals, the latter becomes positively punchy atop the ebullient, energetic, and upbeat 1970s disco song. Owen Gallagher’s (aka ragaman7) mashup “Miley/O’Connor Mashup—Nothing Compares to a Wrecking Ball” (2013) goes in the opposite direction, mashing Cyrus’s vocals with an instrumental track that is even more dejected than “Wrecking Ball”: Sinéad O’Connor’s 1990 hit “Nothing Compares 2 U.” While the tracks are already in the same tempo, the mashup’s replacement of the pulsing beat of Cyrus’s music with the immersive synth strings and reverb that were typical of early 1990s pop adds another layer of sorrow and affliction to the vocal line.³⁰ While the mashup’s

combination of sources is not necessarily any better than the sources were on their own, it adds value by being something different. Its sources meld together but never completely abandon their initial forms and meanings, existing in the mashup alongside the listener's intact memory of what they were.

It is the unexpected outcomes of particular combinations of tracks that producers were most passionate about, as Deep End explained: "Just the realization that combinations of two or more pop and other genres of songs can make something potentially amazing got my attention and [has] kept it ever since." And McSlzy described a happy DJ experience when "people [at the club] turn around and nod and smile at you, and it's not just because they know the tune, it's, 'Ah, I see what you did there.'" BringMeTheMashup pointed out that their infectious sense of surprise at their discovery of something new in the already familiar may sometimes be particularly pertinent: "It's more of a shock value, I'd say, in the sense that 'I didn't know that these songs would work together.'" dicksoak agreed: "I think, for a lot of people, the reason they find it entertaining is probably because, like I said, something unexpected—the shock factor, right?" Maya Jacobson noted that this surprise aspect emerges directly from the thrill of discovery in the production process: "From the production point of view . . . it's like this chemical explosion, a tiny explosion in your mind, when you say, 'Oh, this would work with this.' That's the fun about it." dicksoak stated that the easiest way to surprise the listener was to overcome the inherent disparateness of one's sources and pull off what Adriana A calls the "OMG-WTF mashup." But sources that are not that different from one another can impart a feeling of surprise as well, in their very defamiliarization—that is, in the revelation of hearing them from a new perspective, not the familiar ones.³¹

In chapter 4, I will explore the ways in which mashups are able to repurpose their sources via the processes and priorities of humor, critical commentary, and artistic or emotional appeal. There, I frame these impacts as part of what makes mashup music attractive to both producers and listeners, in turn shaping its sociocultural significance. In chapter 5, I discuss how this repurposing of sources, which is in a legal context referred to as *transformativeness*, is relevant when one is considering copyright exceptions. For now, I simply say that to many listeners, mashups' impact transcends their shock

value in their articulation of a completely different take on existing songs—people find great pleasure in recognizing *how* (not only *that*) the sampled tracks have been transformed and in the meanings that emerge from this repurposing of sources.

It bears repeating that mashups have much in common with parody, and this notion can also be gleaned from the aesthetic principles to which the mashup producers adhere. As I explained in the previous chapter, parody is an acknowledged form of appropriation that displays both autonomy, in terms of functioning as a work on its own, and dependence, in terms of fundamentally relying on one or more prior text(s). By presenting an ironic critical distance toward the parodied text(s), it transforms that text by providing it with new meaning. In his lengthy study of parody, Robert Chambers summarizes the essential work of parody: “Parodists bang, bind, and blend the material they target into multiple kinds of contrasted pairings” (2010, 5). Banging refers to the incongruent and disruptive shock that parodists produce in their transformation of the familiar by means of instigated contrasts, which creates, in turn, “an oddly surreal landscape [coexisting] alongside the world of the familiar” (2010, 75). Binding and blending refer to the parodist’s means of maintaining the coherence of the parody’s “seemingly inappropriate pairings” (2010, 84) by making them seem as though they belong together. This description is strikingly evocative of the producers’ accounts of mashups’ underlying principles, including their emphasis on the combined clashing and matching of the sources. This very combination instigates a critical, ironic distance in relation to the reused material that separates mashup music from pastiche, which is more about imitation than difference (see chapter 2).

Mashup as Play

The producers’ perspectives on the underlying aesthetic principles and creative processes of making mashups suggest to me that the making of mashups has much in common with play (which is a much broader notion, in fact, than “game,” with which it is most often associated). I do not mean that play is yet another aesthetic principle to which they adhere but rather that underpinning their descriptions of these principles seems to be a fascination with play (even though they do not identify it as such). More precisely, part of their attraction to making this music is the challenge of

mastering the constraints set up by the framework of mashups and plumbing the potential that resides within those constraints.

Play and game scholars agree that play is premised on the mastery of the particular constraints that define a given activity. Although not all forms of play are fun, the fun of play resides in making the most out of the possibilities inherent in the framework of its accepted constraints. The Dutch historian and cultural theorist Johan Huizinga has had a major influence on play theory and game studies through his *Homo Ludens: The Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (1955). Huizinga insists that play is not only about games or fun but also about an entire mind-set that we bring to our surroundings when we deliberately manipulate them: “[Play is] a free activity standing quite consciously outside ‘ordinary’ life as being ‘not serious,’ but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly. It is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it. It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner” (1955, 13). The French sociologist Roger Caillois similarly characterizes play as inherently free, separate (in time and space), unproductive, and governed by locally defined laws. He also adds that play is typically uncertain in terms of its course and result, as it depends on the players’ agency and innovation (2001, 9–10), and that it is “accompanied by a special awareness of a second reality or of a free unreality, as against real life” (10). Other scholars of play agree that it boils down to a mastery of constraints that is generally enacted freely and that it involves rules differing from those that apply outside the play situation. In what follows, I link these characteristics to the work involved in mashups.

The Pleasure of Mastering and Overcoming Constraints

The influential philosopher Bernard Suits, who bases his definition of play on a critical review of the large body of literature on the nature of game-playing, states, “To play a game is to engage in activity directed toward bringing about a specific state of affairs, using only means permitted by specific rules, where the means permitted by the rules are more limited in scope than they would be in the absence of the rules, and where the sole reason for accepting such limitation is to make possible such activity” (1967, 148). The constraints or rules are what enable the play activity in the first place; a game of soccer, for example, would be meaningless if not for the rules that define it.

If we frame the making of mashup music as play, its basic rules or constraints would be the fashioning of an aesthetically successful whole out of disparate, already existing parts. Moreover, they would correspond to the widely recognized aesthetic principles of the genre, including crediting (exposing the mashup as a mashup), matching (aligning the samples), ironic distancing (instigating a clash or surprise of some sort), and repurposing (rendering something new from something existing). While all music genres operate within certain constraints and expectations, mashup producers use them as motivation above and beyond the simple alignment with stylistic norms.³² The art of mashup music derives not only from satisfying these identified principles but also from making the most out of the least in terms of seeking the most forceful sample-blending effect using the fewest (audible) means possible. For example, producers generally use nothing but samples (save for processing effects) while trying to stay as close to the samples' original presentations as possible. For the same reason, they usually alter the tracks only subtly or transparently, as opposed to manipulating them in a way that will attract the listener's attention. To DJ Faroff, working within these constraints involved in the mashup can be challenging but is also part of what defines the genre: "I think mashup is a form of art. . . . Mashups at their best are sometimes brilliant and can be seen as a form of songwriting; you're just writing music with other people's music. That's how I think about it. As I said, when you impose yourself some constraints, it's kinda hard, actually."

Technological development has eased some of the challenges of making mashups. For example, certain producers told us that mashups used to be cleverer than they are now, because new digital tools have made it so much easier to match tracks in terms of tempo and key, for example, or to extract stems. They lamented that those challenges were part of the fun and of the artistry. Still, while software can assist in making a perfect blend, it cannot make a perfect mashup; there is much more to it.

Another indication that mashup producers enjoy plumbing the potential within the explicitly and implicitly articulated constraints of mashup music is that they often layer further challenges atop them, such as the conceit of the concept mashup, for example. Motivating concepts include mashing clashing genres, patching together lyrics that say something new, or making end-of-year mashups out of whatever the hits were. Some producers also define a niche and then stick to it; for example, Kap Slap usually

blends pop and dance music; DJ Paul V. prefers to make rock mashups; NodaMixMusic specializes in making mashups of 2Pac's music; Raheem D makes "dream collaborations"; Colatron, DJ Schmolli, and PhilRetroSpector create "emotional mashups"; and Simon Iddol usually mashes mainstream music with less familiar tracks. The way in which many producers also mash topical tracks (often with classics) and post them as close to those tracks' initial release as possible also represents a form of constraint that goes beyond the underlying principles mentioned above.

The embrace of theme-based challenges started early on in mashup culture. McSlzy, who ran one of the first internet mashup forums, GetYour-BootlegOn (GYBO), recalled that he put out challenges every couple of weeks revolving around topics such as "girls and guitars" or "punk." The latter, in fact, gave rise to the mashup classic "Ray of Gob (Madonna vs Sex Pistols mashup)" (2003) by Go Home Productions. Such concept challenges have been central to the mashup scene ever since; MsMiep explained that, on the Crumplbangers forum, there are monthly challenges in which the winner gets to choose the challenge for the next month: "And Rudec this month has chosen 'make it sad.' Basically, by the end of the song, any genre, anything you want, mash it up, and by the end it's gotta be a sad song. And that's quite a good challenge, because . . . it kind of makes you start thinking about, actually, 'how can I take this piece of music and completely flip it on its head, and make it something really, really different?'" Such collective and time-specific challenges suggest that play is not only about individual creativity, including the desire to overcome "unnecessary" demands; it also has a social dimension to it, in that shared challenges can produce group solidarity and a feeling of togetherness, as well as playful and energizing competition (and perhaps less playful competition too).

The mashup collective associated with the Bootie clubs and website also develops mashup concept challenges. For example, Bootie regularly launches theme parties through which producers send in mashups based on the theme ahead of time, and they are all played at the party and later released as a compilation album. Sometimes compilation albums are also based on the curation of existing mashups (usually by Adriana A), such as the *A Very Bootie Christmas* albums, the *Halloween Bootie* albums, and *Bootie: Gay Pride!* (2013). Other concept albums are based on genres (such as *Bootie Goes Goth* [2018]) or artists (such as Fleetwood *Mashed* [2020]) or

Queen—Mash Aid [2019]). Bootie has also released several tribute mashup compilations, including *Bootie Loves Prince* (2016), *Bootie Loves Bowie—Mashup Tribute to David Bowie* (2016), *Bootie Loves Whitney: Mashup Tribute to Whitney Houston* (2012), and *Bootie Mashes Michael Jackson* (2009).³³ Another category involves film—*Disney Mashed* (2020) features mashups at least partly based on music from Disney films, while *Bootie: Beyond Thunderdome* (2019) sets up a mashup soundtrack for the film *Mad Max beyond Thunderdome* (1985). Adriana A, who compiled the latter, wrote the following on the Bootie website: “The mashups chosen for this set are meant to fit the Death Guild aesthetic of dark, angry energy, while also having some of that cheeky Bootie Mashup vibe, often with pop vocals meant to troll the fighters in the dome!” For example, the album starts with the DJs From Mars mashup “Catalyst Carmina Burana (Linkin Park vs. Carl Orff),” which mixes Linkin Park’s “The Catalyst” (2010) with Carl Orff’s famous *Cantata Carmina Burana* (1937) and revels in the source tracks’ metrical differences (Orff’s uneven meter is straightened out to fit Linkin Park’s music) but also their shared majestic grandeur and rhythmic pace.

A rather different form of extra mashup challenge is what the producers referred to as “72”: in this time-restricted and collaborative challenge, participants have seventy-two hours to complete a three-minute mix before passing it on to the next person, who makes another three-minute mix by building on and transforming the previous version by adding new elements before passing it on again. At the end, the total time of the mashups must be seventy-two minutes, or the approximate length of a compact disc (listen to *72* [2009], *72 mix 2* [2010], *72 mix 3* [2012], and *72 rebooted 2* [2019]). MsMiep noted that this challenge was popular ten years ago and has now been taken up again due to its tenth anniversary:

So that’s what’s going on at the moment. So, we’ve signed up and are kind of going through, and every seventy-two hours it gets passed to the next person. And you’ve got no idea what you’re gonna be given, or what time of the morning it’s gonna be when your seventy-two hours start, or if you’re at work or anything. And then you gotta kinda carry it on. And there’s some of the old guard that are joining . . . and it’s really diverse: some of the newer people like me, and you know, all the different genres, and [it’s diverse in terms of] what people like to listen to, and what they like to mash up, and what they put together. It’s really cool. . . . And luckily it kinda caught me in the weekend, so I was able to spend a bit of time. But you have to try and mix into something that, you know, a producer that I really respect [would be] thinking, “Oh gosh! How do I follow

that?" . . . You know, without kind of letting the whole team down. Yeah, it was fun. It was a good challenge.

It is not only rising to such challenges but reaping the rewards, in terms of the aesthetic result, that motivates mashup producers. And, as ToToM has experienced, more restrictions sometimes make things easier: "I noticed [that] answering to this kind of challenge sometimes . . . some of my best work came from this." ToToM's notion echoes the Russian-born composer Igor Stravinsky, who once stated, "My freedom will be so much the greater and more meaningful the more narrowly I limit my field of action and the more I surround myself with obstacles. Whatever diminishes constraint diminishes strength. The more constraints one imposes, the more one frees one's self of the chains that shackle the spirit" (2003 [1947], 51).

Mashup's inherent exercise of creative agency within an intentionally limited aesthetic framework resonates with the perspective of game designer and scholar Ian Bogost, who sees play as "working a system of interacting with the bits of logic within it" (2016, 114). The pleasure of limits, Bogost points out, resides not in the limits themselves but in the exploration of the "possibility space" that those limits both enable and restrict: "Minecraft asks you to survive in a world made of inhospitable cubes you can use as resources. Candy Crush asks you to solve a puzzle given a limited supply of powers. Golf asks you to get a tiny ball into a slightly larger hole many hundreds of yards away by striking it with a stick" (2016, 93). Another example of the creative embrace of limitations is Oulipo, a French collective of writers and mathematicians who explore the potential of constrained writing techniques such as the lipogram (which avoids particular letters) and the palindrome (a phrase that reads the same in both directions). Similarly, the "Dogme 95 Manifesto" and "Vows of Chastity," both written in 1995 by the Danish filmmakers Lars von Trier and Thomas Vinterberg, are self-imposed rules that, among other things, eschew special effects, added sounds, optical work and filters, and static (nonhandheld) cameras—the goal being to purify filmmaking in order to emphasize narrative and acting above all else. In the context of music, the twelve-tone composition often associated with Josef Matthias Hauer and Arnold Schoenberg requires that all twelve tones of the chromatic scale are given equal importance throughout the composition. In all of these examples, it is not enough to follow the rules; one must make the most out of the possibilities that lie within the framework of the given constraints. This is where the true challenge lies and also where the

art, and fun, is to be found. Mashups cannot be reduced to the mashing and clashing of their sources, as DJ Poulpi pointed out: “Even with the same combination or idea, there is still some decision process. And I think it’s not a technical decision process—I think it’s an artistic decision process.”

The fascination with play, in which specific aims and rules apply, also derives from the accompanying feeling of being somewhat detached from ordinary life, play theorists point out, or of being within a separate time and space.³⁴ Huizinga compares this isolated, bounded space with a playground or “magic circle” (that is, a ritual space) while clarifying that it can be an ideal or conceptual space as well as a material space (1955, 10). The rules that constitute the playframe within that space differ from the rules outside it; they only apply within the playframe and to those who participate in it at a specific point in time. Since this playframe exists in its own space and time and has its own rules and logic, it can be experienced as both meaningful and nonsensical, depending on whether one is inside or outside the frame. Regarding the mashup’s playframe, Kap Slap stated:

It’s art that people don’t really realize the value of, the possibilities of. You know, like, it seems so easy to just throw a vocal over something else and whatnot, but you can really get. . . . You can make something really powerful just by using the voices of others. And that’s kind of the way I look at mashups. But it’s just, again, it’s so hard to do. . . . I would feel like a sellout if I only just did the basics. And it would be good—like, obviously, I do do that. And, like, [the mashup of] “Call Me Maybe” and “Greyhound”³⁵ [is] literally one of the biggest releases I’ve done. People loved that, and I still play it to this date. People still go crazy for it, [but] I still don’t really get it. [It] seemed very easy to me. It was, like, “Okay, sure.” But [when making mashups beyond the basics], in my head I would say, like, I really hope that like one person listens to it and says, “Wow! I see that now the way he saw that.” Like, “Holy shit!” you know. ‘Cause those people are the ones that become, like, the really hardcore fans.

From an outside perspective, that is, mashups might be reduced to their underlying principles and thus seem creatively and artistically limited, but for those who have explored or experienced their playframe, the mashup format may be seen to offer countless challenges and opportunities.

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, the late Hungarian American psychologist best known for his theory of flow, argued that the times when people strive to overcome challenges are the most enjoyable of their lives, assuming that the challenges align with their skills or capabilities (that is, they are neither too hard nor too easy). “Enjoyment,” he argued, “appears at the boundary

between boredom and anxiety, when the challenges are just balanced with the person's capacity to act" (2008, 52). Whereas passive activities may feel pleurably relaxing, Csikszentmihalyi linked the best moments in life with active involvement in terms of either mental or physical effort (such as reading or playing a sport) or the work of production or manipulation (such as creating or performing art), especially when people are pushed to their limits or accomplish something new (3, 45–46). Whereas several producers continued to make mashups twenty years later and still found new challenges, others got bored and either stopped making music altogether or started making other forms of music instead. The constricted rules of mashups thus may also limit the creative process. What I am suggesting is less that the play aspect of mashups is particularly beneficial compared to other ways of making music than that it explains some of the motivations behind people's involvement with this art form.

A Free and Intrinsically Motivated Activity

Another motivation for participating in an activity framed as play is that it can be experienced as both escapist and empowering. The restrictions inherent to the playframe can affect people differently from many other forms of restrictions. Huizinga and Caillois both point out that play is free and voluntary—one can choose to participate or not.³⁶ Suits agrees that play is essentially a "*voluntary attempt to overcome unnecessary obstacles*" (Suits 2005 [1978], 55, my emphasis). Instead of enforcing external rules or goals imposed by others, the rules of the playframe are voluntarily accepted by players as a condition of participation. This feeling of taking control over rules, in the sense that one has voluntarily entered the playframe, rather than being controlled by them can be quite empowering. Of course, in mashup music, losing a bit of the autonomy of controlling the result is part of the fun, but entering into the mashup playframe is still a way to take control over the rules that dictate the art form. Within the playframe, if one does not master the rules or decides to break them rather than follow them, the consequences are limited to the frame, and one can always leave. As such, play momentarily frees the player from the mandatory activities of the real world and thus imparts a sense of escapism, as Deep End points out: "Listening to pop music to me is a form of escapism, as is making mashups."

Huizinga's definition of play foregrounds intrinsic motivation as a key characteristic as well: "It is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it" (1955, 13). The notion of intrinsically motivated activity arises in numerous and diverse scholarly contexts, including discussions of leisure, emotions, recreation, play, and gaming. It is often related to a particular mind-set that is centered on the activity rather than any potentially related external goal. Such a mind-set is often referred to as "autotelic" (Csikszentmihalyi 2008; Klinger 1971) or "paratelic" (Apter 1982), as opposed to "telic"—*telic* is Greek for end or goal, *para* is Greek for beside or alongside, and *auto* is Greek for self.³⁷ Of course, the notion that an activity is intrinsically motivated—that is, that its primary motivation is not the achievement of an external goal—does not imply that external goals are altogether irrelevant. Motivation, as I see it, will always be somewhat socially contingent and constructed. Although most of the mashup-interviewed producers insisted that they were making mashups for the pleasure of doing so, they also lamented that platforms other than the major ones had smaller audiences and that they experienced the blocking and takedowns of their mashups as truly demotivating, which points to their desire to achieve some recognition or at least share what they do with others. Still, the material conditions of real life do not mean that activities cannot be inherently motivated as well. For example, the clichéd argument among musicians across genres that they make music out of passion and not for the money is not entirely convincing, since the "not for money" part does not tie in with either their practice or life's requirements. Still, the commercial aspects of the work allow for the passion as well; obviously, these producers' motivation can be twofold. Sometimes, however, one aspect does dominate the other. If an external goal is accomplished in an autotelic/paratelic activity, it is seen as a bonus—conversely, with telic activities, it is the pleasurable sensation of the activity that is seen as a bonus (Apter 1982, 47). And with mashup producers, who rarely make any money from mashups and rarely aspire to a career in the activity, the intrinsic motivation of making the music usually seems to dominate the extrinsic ones. While the making of a mashup might also satisfy external goals, such as gaining recognition, popularity, and viewer clicks, this was, according to the producers, not the main point (see chapter 5 for more). Instead, most of them described mashup making as a hobby and said that they primarily

did it for fun. Maya Jacobson recalled that the first thing she learned about making mashup music was that she would never get paid for it, to which she quickly added: “Not that I ever thought about that. I mean, my point was only about the fun and creation.” DJ Surda agreed: “The motivation is enjoyment and not money: You do something that you love, you know. . . . There’s no money that could pay that.” Although intrinsically motivated activities may not serve a higher purpose, they can give life meaning and inspire great commitment in terms of dedication, time, and energy.

Building on Huizinga’s playground metaphor, Bogost describes play as “a practice of manipulating the things you happen to find in a playground” (2016, 22). This deliberate reworking of things we encounter into something new and personal can produce the feeling of making the world one’s own. As mentioned in chapter 1, *participatory culture* became a buzzword in the mid-2000s (popularized by media scholar Henry Jenkins, among others), but the notion is much older than that. For example, in his examination of the practices of everyday life (reading, talking, dwelling, cooking, and so on), Michel de Certeau argues that consumers are active agents who make “everyday life invent itself by poaching in countless ways on the property of others” (1984, xii). This particular mode of production, often described in terms of consumption, is characterized by its fragmentation, poaching, and quasi-invisibility, since it manifests itself only through the art of using the products imposed upon it (31). Certeau also famously distinguishes between strategies and tactics, whereby the former are used by those with institutional power and defined as “proper” (a city’s streets represent a “strategic” grid), and the latter are used by ordinary people as they navigate, negotiate, and appropriate these “proper” measures (shortcuts across town represent a tactical appropriation of the grid of streets). Strategies produce, tabulate, and impose spaces, and tactics use, manipulate, and divert these spaces (30). Whereas Certeau is interested in “the multitude of ‘tactics’ articulated in the details of everyday life” (xiv) that are of a clandestine nature (such as reading what one wants or walking where one wants in the city), his description of them also recalls mashups and other user-generated remixes.³⁸ Both, for example, draw on “the vocabularies of established languages . . . in order to trace out the ruses of other interests and desires that are neither determined nor captured by the systems in which they develop” (xviii). Certeau’s notion of consumption and participation also suggests that this drive to manipulate what we consume and otherwise

make do with what we have is an expression of an innate capacity: “The child still scrawls and daubs on his schoolbooks; even if he is punished for this crime, he has made a space for himself and signs his existence as an author on it” (31).

The difference between the strategies and tactics that Certeau describes and those of mashups is, of course, that the mashup activity is not necessarily oppositional to the same degree as tactics, since the constraints are, unlike strategies, primarily self-imposed.³⁹ Yet mashups and remixes reflect this same drive to sign one’s existence onto something—that is, to appropriate. Ultimately, according to Certeau, tactics inform one’s identity because “being is measured by doing” and development is characterized by detachment (1984, 137). Moreover, they represent an important source of pleasure: “There is a certain art of placing one’s blows, a pleasure in getting around the rules of a constraining space” (18). As a form of play, mashup creation is not only about making the most out of the agreed-on constraints but also about creating something meaningful by renewing the sources and extending their reach (the repurposing principle). Kap Slap described the mashup approach as taking a pop song with impact and saying, “Let’s flip that on its head. What if it was like that?” Thanks to the mashup producer’s reengagement with the source tracks, something new appears, and a mark has been made on the world.

Signing one’s existence onto something further compels profound attentiveness to that something. In *Playing Along: Digital Games, YouTube, and Virtual Performances* (2012), Kiri Miller examines the experience of playing *Guitar Hero* and *Rock Band*, interactive video games in which players accompany famous songs on “instruments” by triggering the correct buttons on the controller at the exact moments demanded by the scrolling notation on the screen. Joining Csikszentmihalyi, Huizinga, and several other play theorists discussed in this chapter, Miller notes that the participants’ experience of playing along and “exploring the boundaries of one’s potential” implies both intense engagement and focused attention (2012, 222), particularly with the music itself, thanks to the heightened listening required to compete. This intimate attentiveness offers players a new way of hearing music with which they are otherwise very familiar (112–113). She then recalls Simon Frith’s description of the musical engagement of dancers, who “have a heightened, more intense, above all more concentrated sense of the music. Dancing (if not watching dancing), is, in this respect, a form of

enhanced listening” (Frith 1998, 223, emphasis in original; see also Miller 2012, 113). Mashup producers also perform a close auditory inspection and analysis of the music they mash, which in turn allows them to experience it very differently. This depth of engagement transfers its benefits directly to mashup listeners as well via the work of defamiliarization.

Such active involvement and participation in the activity, and the challenge of making the most out of the particular constraints of the genre, may provide feelings of accomplishment, proficiency, empowerment, liberation, escapism, and, not least, fun.⁴⁰ While some continue to see play as trivial, frivolous, or a waste of time, Bogost disagrees and paraphrases Huizinga: “Man is not primarily a knower (*Homo sapiens*) nor a creator (*Homo faber*), but a player—*Homo ludens*” (2016, 99). For producers, mashup music functions as a conceptual playframe within which they manipulate the things they find and explore the potential amid the constraints. Even when a mashup fails, it is still a meaningful activity. As such, play seems to be one of several factors that contributes to shaping the sociocultural significance of mashup music.

This chapter has focused on the production side of mashups, describing what mashup producers regard as significant to the art form and identifying play as central to their motivation. The next chapter focuses on the experience of listening to the music and watching the videos. Of course, these two perspectives are intrinsically related; it is, for example, not only the process but the product, and its reception, that motivates producers. In the following chapter, I discuss how mashups (as products) can trigger different experiential responses, including humor, critical awareness, and aesthetic pleasure. As will be clear from the following discussions, play is a relevant aspect of the listening experience too. An awareness of the constraints relevant to a given mashup is also what heightens the experience of the listener/viewer: they invite the listener into the playframe by revealing the concept behind it, and they challenge the listener’s memory and musical knowledge in terms of the recognition of the sources, as well as the ways in which they have been (textually and contextually) altered. In short, the listener has to “play” to discover the hidden surprises of this particular playground—a form of participation that also includes filling in the gaps.

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