

# Copy-and-Persist: The Logic of Mash-Up Culture

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*This essay traces the logic of mash-up culture, an online music scene in which practitioners use audio-editing software to splice and combine pop songs encoded in MP3 format to produce hybrid or “mashed-up” recordings. The study focuses on the logic that guides the development of works, styles and reputations in mash-up culture. Several fields of practice shape this cultural logic, including “virtual studios,” online message boards, dance clubs, and the market for “underground” and “unofficial” remixes. This cultural logic generates a new kind of amateur musicianship based on pluralistic listening and the reorganization of the relations that constitute musical recordings.*

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Since the closure of the highly publicized Napster case in 2001, copyright owners have used the rhetoric of “piracy” to equate unauthorized copying on the Internet with theft. Although the rhetoric of piracy contradicts legal principles and economic evidence, it has been adopted by policy-makers and jurists around the world (Rice, 2002; Yar, 2005). An army of lawyers, lobbyists, industry consultants, and public relations personnel reinforced the “illegality” of online “piracy” and thus cleared the path for the commercial distribution of music online (McCourt & Burkart, 2003). However, the rhetoric of piracy has not eliminated the use of unsanctioned file-sharing networks or “pirated” MP3s in the everyday activities of music fans and amateur musicians. In some cases, the illegality of piracy contributes to the appeal of unauthorized copies online. As Alistair Riddell (2001, p. 338) observed, MP3 audio files rapidly gained a new “cult following based on a sense of freedom.” The rhetoric of piracy surrounding MP3s transformed a rather mundane process of “accessing data” into an “enticingly risqué” activity (p. 341). Given that MP3 became “a ‘teen

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spirit' thing," Riddell foresaw the potential for a new musical development: "We might anticipate a new music based on reworking MP3 recordings pulled from the Internet . . . . In this respect, the Internet is more than just a means of distribution, it becomes a *raison d'être* for a culture based on audio data" (p. 341).

At precisely the moment Riddell's article was being published, a deluge of unauthorized remixes called "creative bootlegs" or "mash-ups" flooded the web. Using MP3s and audio-editing software, "bedroom disc jockeys" spliced together two or more pop songs to create unlikely combinations, which they distributed through peer-to-peer file-sharing services or posted on websites like Boom Selection. By 2002, mash-up culture furnished its own set of "star remixers." Popular unauthorized mash-ups like Freelance Hellraiser's "A Stroke of Genius" (Christina Aguilera's vocals from "Genie in a Bottle" layered on top of The Stokes' guitars from "Hard to Explain") gained the attention of *Newsweek*, *The New York Times*, and other major news publications. A few mash-up stars, such as Freelance Hellraiser, Danger Mouse, and Go Home Productions, have positions within the official music industry, working as DJs, musicians, and producers. In addition to the many podcasts and webstreams that play mash-ups online, conventional radio and television stations like London's XFM, Re:Mixology on New York City's WFMU, and MTV Europe have given mash-up remixes considerable airplay (Haughey, 2004). Club nights devoted exclusively to mash-up remixes have also emerged, first in Berlin and London, and more recently in Boston, San Francisco, and Los Angeles.

News stories often present mash-up culture as a form of resistance against the official music industry, as a *Newsweek* article illustrates:

The London DJs spinning this stuff delight in coming up with goofy combinations—Missy Elliott with Nirvana, say—but their work is borne out of a serious discomfort with today's pop pap. Record conglomerates "force this music on us, so let's play with it," says Osymyso, whose "Intro-Inspection" melds the intros of 101 songs. "Take something cheesy, and see if you can do something that's listenable." (Consider asking first. Warner/Chappell, which owns the rights to the 'Genius' building blocks, told a London radio station to cease and desist after it aired the song.). (Begun, 2002, p. 12)

In *Newsweek's* depiction of mash-up culture, remixers transform the "cheesy music" forced upon them into "something that's listenable." This study is concerned with the cultural logic according to which mash-up remixers transform pop music into "something that's listenable." What modes of validation are used in mash-up culture to determine "listenability"? How is the taste for "listenable" mash-ups of otherwise "cheesy" music shaped by the dispositions and preferences of other musical communities? How is the struggle for reputation and status in mash-up culture shaped by this disposition towards listening?

My analysis of the way mash-up remixers exchange, discuss, and evaluate their work in online message boards attends not only to the microsociological processes of reputation and career development within the mash-up community but also examines the way in which these processes are shaped by broader technological,

legal, and cultural shifts. Mash-up culture is enabled by an array of digital media, but contrary to the discourse of virtuality in cultural and media studies, participants in mash-up culture continually struggle to materialize artifacts, people, and events, and to treat digital artifacts “as if” they were “real” (Slater, 2002). This materialization occurs in the redistribution of listening capacities via software studios to computers, which automate many of the tedious processes formerly required to produce remixes. A new amateur musicianship emerges from this process, based on the reorganization of the relations that constitute musical recordings. Mash-up remixers develop reputations within the online community by displaying their capacity to discern lyrical and instrumental affinities between disparate songs as well as the capacity and willingness to listen closely to the remixes of others and offer ways of making them more “listenable.”

Rather than using mash-up culture as a window into debates about the corporate and legal control of musical innovation and exchange, I focus on three major sociocultural shifts that shape the sensibilities, techniques, and cultural logic of mash-up remixing: (1) the extension via sound-editing software of what Sterne (2003) calls the *audile technique*, or a set of listening practices that transform sound into a useable “thing,” which in this case shifts the locus of musical expertise, creativity, and skill to listeners of pop music; (2) the changing character and institutional status of remixing in the dance music and hip-hop industries; and (3) the use of illegality as a way of distinguishing and valorizing artifacts, styles, and remixers within the broader field of popular music culture. These three shifts in sociocultural relations underlie the primary characteristics of the online mash-up community, including its intense concern with tactics of materialization; pluralistic listening and sympathetic audition as the basis for membership and ethical sociality; and the struggle to maintain links among names, styles, and works through a pseudonymous and segmented mode of musical production.

### Remixing and the Bravura of Transgression

The cyclical movement of mash-up culture—from appropriation to incorporation and back again—was aptly described in Hebdige’s (1979) study of punks and other British youth cultures. Hebdige demonstrated how subcultural styles are formed and transformed through cycles of appropriation and reincorporation (or commodification). In 2006, the cultural industries have incorporated mash-up techniques into marketing campaigns for existing pop stars, as well as for promoting jeans, shoes, cars, etc. (BrandRepublic, 2006). Given the changing relationship between mash-up culture and the promotional culture of contemporary consumer society over the past 6 or 7 years, Hebdige’s dialectic of appropriation and reincorporation describes at least *some* of the processes involved in the formation and transformation of mash-up culture.

Participants in subcultures often frame their unauthorized copying or “plundering” as resistance against dominant culture. Hebdige observed this tendency in the “self-consciously subversive bricolage” of British youth cultures in the 1970s,

particularly punk culture, but it has appeared more recently in appropriationist pop music acts like the Copyright Liberation Front (“The Bootleggers,” 1998, para. 12) and the self-promotion of mash-up remixers like the San Francisco-based duo Adrian and The Mysterious D (A&D), who present themselves as “rebel DJs” surrounded by pirate flags on their website (*60-Second Bio*, n.d., para. 1). The abundance of news stories about the illegality of unauthorized copying in the U.S., the U.K., Australia, and many other countries provides a backdrop against which unauthorized remixing may be framed as a form of resistance. For example, the *Grey Album*—an album-length unauthorized mash-up that fuses hip-hop producer Jay-Z’s *Black Album* with the Beatles’ *White Album*—became an icon for copyright reform and free speech advocacy groups like the Electronic Freedom Frontier. The producer of the *Grey Album*, Brian Burton (aka DJ Danger Mouse), along with various websites, record stores, and eBay, received cease-and-desist orders after EMI claimed that the *Grey Album* infringed upon its copyright to *The White Album*. Copyright reform and free speech advocacy groups then staged a web-based protest called Grey Tuesday on February 24, 2004. According to Downhill Battle, the group that coordinated Grey Tuesday, this “first-of-its-kind protest signals a refusal to let major label lawyers control what musicians can create and what the public can hear” (*Grey Tuesday*, n.d., para. 5). Using the *Grey Album* as a case in point, Holmes Wilson, cofounder of Downhill Battle, argued, “Artists are being forced to break the law to innovate” (*The grey album mix by Danger Mouse*, para. 3).

Unfortunately, the copying-as-resistance framework says very little about the *logic* of mash-up culture, that is, the manner in which mash-up remixers evaluate their own activities, distribute status symbols, deal with internal fissures, and valorize certain individuals or works. Subcultural theory’s preoccupation with “spectacular,” fully-formed, internally homogenous, and outwardly defiant subcultures does not facilitate analysis of their internal dynamics. However, as Thornton’s (1995) work on club cultures shows, the concept of subculture can be usefully integrated with Pierre Bourdieu’s (1984) theory of taste to study the development of subcultures and the importance of communication media in the emergence of their styles. Subcultural developments can be understood in terms of the circulation of cultural, economic, and social capital. Thornton emphasizes the manner in which these different forms of capital may conflict with one another, while in other instances, as described Bourdieu, they may be converted into different forms (p. 10). Subcultures are distinguished by their preferences for various kinds of media, music, dress, and so forth. In Bourdieu’s framework, these preferences are displays of *taste*, that is, the capacity to classify or interpret cultural practices and works (1984, p. 170). Moreover, subcultural styles are shaped by the *habitus* or the matrix of preferences or classificatory schemes embodied by individuals. Each practice or “move” within a given cultural space is guided by the transposable and relatively stable classifications of the habitus. Thornton demonstrates that different groups accumulate the knowledges, competences, and skills that function as cultural capital within a particular cultural terrain. They also attempt to increase the value of the cultural capital they already possess, sometimes to the point of inflation.

Thornton's concept of subcultural capital highlights the crucial role of media use in youth cultures:

[W]ithin the economy of subcultural capital, media are not simply another symbolic good or marker of distinction (which is the way Bourdieu describes films and newspapers *vis-à-vis* cultural capital), but a network crucial to the definition and distribution of cultural knowledge. In other words, the difference between being *in* or *out* of fashion, high or low in subcultural capital, correlates in complex ways with degrees of media coverage, creation and exposure. (p. 14)

Thornton's revision of subcultural theory via her reading of Bourdieu enables a more detailed analysis of the ways in which shifts in both the status of professional DJs and in the function and status of remixing within the official music industry shape participants' moves within the cultural spaces of mash-up remixing. Rather than imputing a rationale to mash-up remixing (i.e., unauthorized copying as a principled rebellion against the inequalities of copyright ownership), the analyst may instead trace out the logic of individual moves for prestige and social status within complex fields of practices, markets, and institutional contexts (Straw, 1991, pp. 374–375; Hesmondhalgh, 2002, p. 15–17). Concentrating on the matrix of embodied preferences and classificatory schemes of remixers' habitus—which includes but is not limited to the legalistic oppositions between authorized/unauthorized and official/unofficial—also allows me to analyze how cultural capital circulates in the online forums and message boards where mash-up producers post, discuss, and evaluate their work. Finally, focusing on practice and technique rather than on already-formed subcultures or styles draws attention to the manner in which cultural capital generated through an illegal mode of remixing can be converted into other kinds of capital and can lead to creative opportunities within the official music industry.

### **Audile Techniques of Mash-Up Culture**

In the mash-up community, copying is inextricably tied to listening; “save target as . . .” is a necessary step to hear unauthorized mash-ups posted on message boards. The isolation of voices in pop songs to produce acapellas (“pellas”) and their erasure in the production of instrumental versions (“mentals”) involves the production of copies as well as specialized listening techniques and technologies. An analysis of mash-up remixing as a taste culture requires understanding how listening is shaped by the embodied classificatory schemes of amateurs and how technologies and techniques of listening can become symbols of authority, status, and prestige.

The incorporation of sound-engineering and musicological expertise into Sony's Acid, Ableton's Live, Image-Line's Fruit Loops, and other software studios is frequently cited by journalists as the key factor in the emergence of mash-up remixing. According to *The Daily Telegraph* (London):

In this digital era, no expensive studio hardware is required by would-be bootleggers. Tracks are manipulated by easily accessible software programmes, such as Acid, which enable pitch and speed to be adjusted and new beats to be

added, the results then being distributed across the same Internet from which original samples are gleaned. (McCormick, 2002, p. 22)

Since audio-editing software enables amateurs to produce remixes, and since the Internet facilitates the circulation of such remixes outside the control of the organized music industry, these technologies have become emblems of democratization according to journalists (e.g., Katigbak, 2002; McCormick, 2002; Rojas, 2002). The overriding theme in these news stories is that the ease of making and distributing remixes through this new technological assemblage opens up cultural expression to those excluded from the formalized institutions that dominate musical production.

However, as many historians of sound reproduction argue, the development of phonographs, telephone networks, multitrack studios, digital samplers, and digital encoding schemes can be understood as part of a 150-year project in medicine, acoustics, and engineering to objectify sound and transform listening into an expert knowledge practice (Sterne, 2003; Théberge, 1989; Thompson, 2002). Sterne's (2003) concept of the *audile technique* or "virtuoso listening" encapsulates this enduring cultural interface with sound in Western culture. Sterne's analysis of training manuals, diagrams, instruments, instructions, and advertisements demonstrates that professional *and* consumer sound reproduction technologies are extensions of audile technique, that is, "a set of practices of listening that were articulated to science, reason, and instrumentality and that encouraged the coding and rationalization of what was heard" (p. 23). Audile technique is "a distinctly bourgeois form of listening" in the sense that it constituted, legitimated, and distinguished the middle-class professions of medicine, sound-engineering, and telegraphy. It was a *convergence* of six dispositions towards sound shaped by the habitus of the middle-class: (1) listening as a skill that can be learned and a technique directed towards instrumental ends with the potential for virtuosity; (2) listening as a discrete activity; (3) listening as a mode of transforming sound into private acoustic space which "can be segmented, made cellular, cut into little pieces, and reassembled"; (4) listening as a way of acquiring practical knowledge from the broad category of "sound" of which music and voices are merely instances; (5) listening as the mediation of events separated in time or space; and (6) listening as symbolic currency or mark of distinction (pp. 94–95). With the marketing of sound-reproduction technologies to consumers, the audile technique was sold as agency. It was extended through the notion of "high fidelity," "live" recording, broadcasting, etc. In each instance, audile technique promised listeners more control over their auditory field.

Sterne notes that other listening practices developed alongside the audile technique. Nevertheless, summarizing Kenney, Sterne writes, "It takes both a shared cultural sensibility and a standardized, industrial record business to get the same recording to the different people in different places so that they could listen together" (p. 177). The pertinent question is *not* how digital technology impacts musical culture in such a way as to produce mash-up remixing, but what type of sensibilities, practices, institutions and technologies enable remixers to "listen

together.” Therefore, I next examine the degree to which mash-up culture extends or diverges from the dispositions of the audile technique.

Get Your Bootleg On (GYBO), one of the largest mash-up message boards, is full of discussion threads regarding such issues as the proper equipment and techniques needed to attain the sound quality of an official release. However, these debates seem tangential given that people listen to mash-ups in a wide range of material settings, from the pumped up sound systems of clubs to the tinny speakers built into laptops. Most technical debates among mash-up DJs regarding sound quality are not about achieving perfect transparency but about the minimal requirements to make mashed-up MP3s sound “good enough” at a party or club. One GYBO poster underlined the tension between the sound engineer’s disposition towards sonic fidelity and the mash-up remixer’s concern with recordings that sound “decent” in particular contexts: “Although the cd sent to the studio was a.wav [an uncompressed audio file], the sound engineer had a good laugh when he heard the source used was mp3 192kb. Several pros told me the same thing, you can’t do anything pro with mp3s” (Zamali, 2006). Zamali had the mash-up transferred to vinyl anyway, which he found was “decent enough to play in a party.” Another GYBO member, Jools, added, “Plenty of slick club tunes . . . are just polished turds.” While mash-up remixers use terms like “high quality” and “pro” (or professional sound), they are reluctant to accept these standards at the expense of other production values. Moreover, the enculturation of the relatively low-fidelity (and highly compressed) audio format of MP3 into musical production suggests that, for mash-up remixers, one may do something “pro” without adopting the audiophilic taste for transparent recording characteristic of professional sound-engineering.

Reputations in mash-up culture depend to some extent on the capacity to produce “listenable” works, but displaying taste through listening and commenting on remixes made by others is also extremely important. It is a culture based on *audition*, in Peters’ (2005) sense of the term, which he elaborates in his discussion of the listening subject of liberal society: “Audition, ever since the Athenian *ekklesia*, has been the primordial civic act. Those who listen must be ready for assaults on everything they hold dear” (p. 133). Although mash-up remixers disregard the authority of sound-engineers in determining the quality of a sound recording, the listening disposition of mash-up culture extends an older mode of listening derived from liberalism. It is a form of listening that is directed towards the construction and maintenance of mash-up message boards like GYBO as a community of listeners-remixers, rather than as an online storage facility for software, acapellas, and other resources. Status and reputations within the mash-up community hinge upon the capacity to hear affinities between seemingly disparate songs, artists and genres, which requires pluralistic openness to music that has little or no value for professional DJs, music critics, and other individuals who act as intellectuals in popular music cultures. To borrow Peters’ (2005) terms, the listening techniques of mash-up culture are extensions of the liberal regime of “sympathetic” or “cool listening,” which is part of a struggle for prestige, but which is also a mode of listening directed towards a certain model of civility.

The importance of “cool listening” in the online mash-up community can be demonstrated by way of negative example. Strategy (2005), a GYBO member, started a thread entitled “Do Ya’ll Battle Up In Here?” in which he wrote, “Or should I just be nice and post links to stuff? . . . Should I call out this dude mcsleazy who seems to be top dog around here . . . I got some stuff that seems to qualify as what I’ve gathered is now called mashups/bootlegs . . . One of them is so great, I’d rather save it for a contest.” While self-promotion constitutes a considerable amount of GYBO’s content, sudden boastful remarks about one’s mash-up virtuosity or incitements to “battle it out” with other members of the mash-up community are regarded as suspect. This form of exchange does not conform to the “regime of cool listening” in mash-up culture, as dozens of other GYBO members made clear: “There’s no battles by the way . . . maybe a challenge every so often, but definitely no battling . . . if your bootleg’s are ‘so great’ as you say, then put ’em up on the boots board!” Similarly, another member wrote, “Reading the title [of the thread] made me think i was in the wrong place for a minute . . . battle indeed? this isn’t 8 mile dear.” Strategy replied a few hours later: “Yeah, I went and saw 8 Mile and said, ‘wow, this whole battle thing is cool, I bet DJ’s could do it too!’ Excuse me from coming from a hip-hop DJ background, where friendly competition is usually [*sic*] welcome and part of the game.” While mash-up culture borrows many techniques, styles and recordings from hip-hop culture, the two musical cultures, as this thread makes clear, are organized by very different types of exchange that sustain different norms of ethical sociality. “Battling” is out of place in GYBO. The call for such a battle marks Strategy as an outsider. Communication in mash-up culture is instead directed towards serialized posting, listening, and commenting. In a sense, mash-up culture takes the segmented form of peer-review rather than the circular communicative situation of face-to-face hip-hop battling. One’s listening skills can earn “props” in mash-up culture, but virtuosity must be demonstrated through the threaded, serialized exchanges of message boards.

The second characteristic of audile technique in Sterne’s (2003) definition is the separation of listening/sound from the rest of the sensorium. Two aspects of mash-up culture suggest that listening techniques are increasingly intertwined with looking and seeing. First, producing video mash-ups to accompany audio mash-ups is now attracting a great deal of interest. Dean Grey’s mash-up album *American Edit*, for example, was accompanied by video mash-ups and was followed by a “live” rock-opera style performance at the Pirate’s Ball in San Francisco in August 2006. The mash-up technique is being applied to images, video as well as audio, which stitches the sensorium together rather than parcelling it out. Second is the growing concern with *materializing* mash-up culture in the “offline” world of clubs, flyers, magazines, music festivals, etc. Listening is affected by these “mechanisms of materialization,” to borrow Slater’s (2002) phrase, not only through visual imagery posted around the city but increasingly through dancing, since club nights devoted to mash-up culture have proliferated in European, Australian, and U.S. cities. Nevertheless, since mash-ups are made in the private space of “bedroom disc jockeys,” usually on personal

computers, the question remains as to whether or not this practice sustains a sense of sound as a private or commodifiable “thing.”

While a few mash-ups have been officially released by record companies, the vast majority are posted online in order to acquire feedback, recognition, and prestige within the mash-up community. Mash-ups that are posted on message boards are also opportunities for other members to reassemble the mash-up from its components or display their listening skills through commentary about a particular mash-up. A member of another mash-up message board, *acapellas4u.co.uk*, posted a mash-up which he claimed received radio airplay and asked for feedback (Johnnybaby, 2006). The feedback suggests that the validation of remixes/remixers does not necessarily lead to a sense of the “work” as the remixer’s private acoustic space or property. RobertP wrote, “This is a really tight, fun mix—excellent work—it is the only version of eminem that I think I have wanted to play again. In fact I think I’ll burn it to CD to play in the car—thank you!!!” The producer of the mash-up, johnnybaby, replied: “Cheers Robert! . . . Have fun when you’re driving around with it blastin’ out of your motor!” Another member asked for permission to air the mash-up on their homemade radio station, which johnnybaby gave without hesitation.

This thread suggests that listening in mash-up culture is guided by a “file-sharing” sensibility, a disposition towards sound as infinitely replicable. The conventions of validation and techniques of listening do not translate directly into commodifiable works, but they open the possibility of developing a “trademark” style of listening, remixing, and commenting, or a “brand name” that links different artifacts. As Lury (2006) observes, the emergence of the artist as a brand name is part of broader shift in the author-function of the art-culture system: “Increasingly the brand name is not the mark of an originary relationship between producer and products but is rather the mark of the organization of a set of relations between products in time” (p. 95). However, the attempt to promote oneself as a stylized link between multiple works produced by other people exists in tension with the broader corporate and legal scrutiny of unauthorized copying on the web. Pseudonymous identities have thus become the norm in mash-up culture, which makes it difficult to pinpoint legal persons responsible for copyright infringement while at the same time enabling subcultural capital to be accumulated through a name that persists over time in the filenames of mash-ups and in the comments posted on message boards.

Lury’s (2006) discussion of the displacement of origins by organized relations raises the question of technique: *How* are the relations between parts of songs reorganized? Certainly, a mash-up, like any other remix, may be defined as a reorganization of a set of musical relations. But how do musicological or engineering languages, as well as software languages, visual interfaces, and metaphors, affect modes of reorganization in mash-up culture? According to Sterne, the audile technique of sound-engineers and audiophiles tends to emphasize practical listening and technical representations rather than abstract descriptions of sound because sounds lack a metalanguage (p. 94). In this context, music and

voices become meaningful insofar as their sonic characteristics are useful in the project of developing perfect transparency. The metalanguage of sound in mash-up culture is a vernacular form of musicological and sound engineering languages embedded in software like Ableton Live and Sony's Acid. In this branch of software development, an increasing number of listening practices are automated or delegated to digital processing. Early remix software could "time-stretch" or "time-compress," that is, change the tempo of a music clip without affecting its pitch. This language varies from program to program, but the process of developing linguistic descriptors parallels the transformation of listening by computerized analysis.

For years, software studios required users to listen closely to audio clips in order to determine tempo and key. Recent software studios "map" these musical properties, which is to say that the software not only assumes the role of the musically trained listener but translates sound into the topographical language of height, length, depth, waves, grids, textures, contours and so forth. The most recent development in this regard is Acid's "groove mapping" and "groove cloning" processes:

If one of your tracks has a rhythmic feel (a groove) that you want to use on a different track, right-click the first track's track header and choose Add to the Groove Pool from the pop-up menu . . . Use the methods outlined above to add this new groove to any other track in your project. The tracks now share the same groove. (Sony, 2006)

Acid, and countless programs like it, presume that the aural environment consists of a set of *useful* things ("tracks") within a "project." Two tracks gleaned from the aural environment and set side by side in the virtual space of a remix project may already share the same tempo or key, but different "rhythmic feels" may thwart the reorganization (or mashing together) of these otherwise compatible tracks. Sony problematizes sound via these differences to sell a form of audile technique which transforms rhythmic feel into a feature or property that can be described, represented and altered like any other feature of music (key, tempo, etc.). The program extracts "groove" as a set of sonic characteristics that define a particular "region" of the aural landscape, which can then be "mapped" and "cloned." Finally, these rhythmic relations that constitute "groove" can be transferred to another track such that, according to Sony, one track may be used to reorganize the rhythmic feel of another track.

Mash-up culture has developed its own tools that extend these processes of delegating listening and visualizing/mapping sound, but uses them to transfer sonic properties between whole songs. One major preoccupation of mash-up remixers is the search for songs either in the same key or with "compatible" keys, in order to avoid "key clashes." DJ! wrote enthusiastically about Mixed In Key, a program that analyzes, extracts, and saves the key of songs in MP3 files. According to DJ!,

Suprisingly [*sic*] it is pretty accurate and does an amazing job keying any collection of tunes. The program also allows users to save the key information in the name of

the song title field or before the name of the artist, this way if you are using a program like Traktor DJ 3 you can have all of the information you need right in front of you. (DJ!, 2006a)

As an auditive culture, again, mash-up culture not only emphasizes listening for ethical sociality but also valorizes the ability to know what songs sound “right” together. Not surprisingly, then, another remixer wrote:

Usually i love all the new softwares and gadgets . . . but i find this very sad and scary. If you have a list of [f]iles organized by different parameters and only with few clicks you can pair them it kills the fun of mixing, mashing. Kills your motivation and the joy of making and creating. Maybe the 2.0 version will do the mash instead of the user???

Software developers make sound meaningful “in itself” by extracting its sonic characteristics. This may facilitate mash-up remixing, but the ongoing delegation of listening techniques to machines raises the spectre of total automation. Mash-up practitioners thus reserve certain kinds of audition and listening for humans since the production of links is part of the author-function discussed above. The challenge of listening closely to avoid key clashes, as this remixer makes clear, is also part of the pleasure of mash-up remixing.

Despite the panoply of effects at the disposal of Acid users, using them in mash-up culture involves a surprising degree of restraint. The desired effect is not to reveal to audiences the fact that recordings are representations, the conventional interpretations of which can be deconstructed with intensive sound-processing to the point of unrecognizability. Rather, as a GYBO put it, talent in this technological setting is defined as 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: “I differentiate between three classes of mashups that show particular talent—the ‘wow, those two songs *do* sound exactly the same,’ the ‘entirely new song made out of little pieces of a bunch of other songs,’ and the ‘you put *what* together and made it sound good?!” (Neminem, 2006). The intense referentiality of mash-up style depends upon modest use of sound-manipulation tools; attempts to exploit the recording-as-representation in such a way that it no longer refers to something recognizable will be difficult to use as symbolic currency in this remix culture.

While discussions about what constitutes a “listenable” mash-up suggest that “tracks” are traces of acoustic events, spatial and temporal mediation are also problematized in mash-up culture’s remix aesthetic. Mixing up the current Top 40 with past categorizations of “mainstream” and “underground” recordings disrupts what Straw (1995) calls the historical rationality of connoisseurship and of professional DJ culture. Similarly, Sterne (2003) notes that new forms of audile technique can challenge existing sound cultures, that is, to “ask in concrete ways what the long-established fact of sound reproduction can tell people about who they are, where they come from, and where they are going” (p. 351).

### Deflating the Values of DJ Culture

Mash-up culture may be understood as part of a redistribution of the cultural knowledge and skills required for remix production to amateurs after two decades of institutionalization and professionalization. But mash-up culture is also distinguished by its disregard for the aesthetic values and notions of originality that developed around professional remixing during the 1990s. This defection from DJ culture's mode of validating remix work, as I discuss below, is highly suggestive of the extent to which professional DJ culture has become the "subcultural Other" or "the mainstream" against which amateur remix culture defines itself. The emergence of mash-up culture is in this sense a backlash against the cultural authority of professional DJs, who assume what Adorno (1991) called an administrative view, "the task of which, looking down from on high, is to assemble, distribute, evaluate and organise" (p. 93). The mash-up community borrowed resources from DJ culture, but established its own parallel infrastructure, modes of validation, and ways of distributing knowledge, skill and credit; it thus acquired a degree of autonomy from professional DJ culture. Mash-up culture effectively demonstrates the extent to which connoisseurship and knowledge of subgenres has been overvalued in the discussion of "quality" (i.e., originality, canonicity, creativity) in the remix culture of professional DJs.

After moving rapidly through specialty record shops and dance clubs in the late 1990s, "creative bootlegs" encountered a speed bump in British dance music culture during the summer of 1999, when star-DJ Pete Tong criticized them in his column in dance music magazine *Mixmag*. Although Tong admitted that some of these remixes could be "very clever," he told his *Mixmag* readership that creative bootlegs are little more than "musical fast food" (Tong, 1999, p. 7). Tong's ambivalence towards mash-ups is at first puzzling given that he and many other star-DJs played them regularly in their radio and club performances. But mash-up remixers did not comply with the connoisseurist values of DJ culture; nor did they align themselves with increasingly narrow subgenres of dance music. Mixing Top 40 songs in MP3 form seemed unrefined and brash (the analogy to fast-food is quite suggestive here) within the classificatory scheme of DJs whose subcultural capital hinged upon the embodiment and display of connoisseurist knowledge about obscure vinyl recordings.

The style of late 1990s remixing was shaped by the expanding market for "underground" dance music and hip-hop, musical forms that relied upon various practices of unauthorized sampling and remixing. As DJ cultures gained increasing exposure in the press and became significant sources of economic capital for record labels, copyright-infringement lawsuits proliferated (McLeod, 2002, p. 247). With the emergence of what Reynolds (1998) called the DJ god-star phenomenon during the 1990s, DJ-remixers became enmeshed within a system of authorial rights, royalties, and production credits. The ideological disinterest in authorship, which formerly was characteristic of dance music culture, began to wane as producers and remixers acquired an economic interest in the development of unique remix styles, "original" works as defined by copyright law, and well-known DJ names under which these

commodities could be marketed and sold (Hesmondhalgh, 1998). Remixing exemplified this logic as “remixes, performed by DJs and producers renowned in those scenes, became increasingly remote from the original” (Reynolds, 1998, p. 277).

By the late 1990s, DJ culture could no longer present itself in opposition to legal and industrial administration of musical culture. Once the modes of validation for remix work had become indistinguishable from legal and marketing classifications (e.g., originality and subgenre classification), DJ culture became the subject of what Straw (1991) calls a cultural “backlash,” in this case, against the inflated value of DJs’ associations with subgenres and their knowledge of obscure records or the history of underground dance music. Furthermore, the seriousness of DJ culture opened itself up to parody by remixers with little or no investment in the subcultural capital of connoisseur taste publics or dance music culture. David Dewaele of 2 Many DJs thus found it quite strange that his eclectic mash-ups were eventually incorporated back into DJ culture:

It’s funny, for us the mix was a big “fuck you” to dance and DJ culture. We were frustrated. Y’know, what’s up with these guys showing up with three hours of deep house? It’s boring us to death! Then all of a sudden we release this mix album of mash-ups and all these institutions that we kind of rebelled against embraced us. (quoted in Katigbak, 2002)

The distinguishing move of mash-up culture is its disregard for the cultural capital embodied and displayed in DJ culture. Mash-up culture distinguishes itself against the backdrop of DJ culture’s oppositions, hierarchies, and what Thornton (1995) calls its “veiled elitism” (p. 3).

In comparison with professional DJ-remixers, reputations in mash-up culture are less dependent upon associations with genre. Indeed, as Sandywell and Beer (2005) argue in their study of stylistic “morphing” in digital culture, mash-up culture treats genre in a similar manner as traditional musicians treat instruments, pitch, or timbre, that is, as something that can be modulated, mixed, and made to appear and disappear within a given work. This interpretation resonates with mash-up remixer David Dewaele’s view of genre distinctions: “People are streamlined into thinking, oh, I am into new metal so I can’t be into Dolly Parton, but in reality people don’t think like that” (quoted in Katigbak, 2002). For Dewaele, although people may discuss and display their musical tastes in ways that correspond to genre distinctions, “in reality” people *routinely* traverse those distinctions in their listening practices. Adrian and the Mysterious D’s club flyers often incorporate genre transgression into the thrill of mash-up remixing: “Imagine a mind-bending genre-clash of everything you love, thrown into a blender and mixed to perfection. Michael Jackson singing with Nirvana. Madonna fronting the Sex Pistols. Usher as a member of the Bee Gees . . . ” (DJ!, 2006b). For Salon.com critic Charles Taylor (2003), mash-ups represent “the glorious return of format-free radio, the vindication of fandom and an affirmation of the egalitarian spirit of rock.” Mash-up remixers, journalists, and scholars seem to agree that mash-up culture denaturalizes the modes of differentiation that have been institutionalized in music industry marketing.

However, the music industry is neither monolithic nor static. Record companies monitor subcultural developments and adjust their administrative apparatuses to manage changes in the conditions of musical production and in audience preferences. Modes of administration, which are used to market commodities and exploit musical rights, depend upon institutional understandings of the shifting modes of validation in different musical cultures. The *Grey Album* illustrates how various branches of the music industry have quite different modes of administration that, in turn, shape their responses to unauthorized remixing. When the *Grey Album* caught the attention of the news media, and copyright reform activists staged online protests, Capitol (owned by EMI) asserted its intellectual property rights to *The White Album* and issued cease-and-desist orders to its producers, retailers, and websites (BBC News, 2004b). Similarly, SONY/ATV, which owns the rights to the Beatles' compositions, issued a Digital Millennium Copyright Act takedown notice to the Internet service provider of illegal-art.org, along with other activist sites that continued to post the album despite Capitol's cease-and-desist orders (*The Grey Album legal battle summarized*). However, not all record companies react in the same way to unauthorized remixing. The *Grey Album* example suggests that some firms anticipate and even encourage the use of their works in genre-bending and mash-up remixing. Jay-Z's record label implicitly encouraged unauthorized remixing by releasing vocal-only versions of the *Black Album*, which is a common technique in the hip-hop and dance music industry to capture the interest of amateur and professional DJs/remixers. Jay-Z's sound engineer, Young Guru, admits that the release of vocal-only versions of the *Black Album* was intended to allow DJs to "remix the hell out of it" (*Copyright Enters a Gray Area*, 2004).

The diverging responses to the *Grey Album* between EMI and Rocafella, Jay-Z's label, stem from two very different strategies of managing change in audience preferences and musical styles. Put simply, EMI manages innovation through the notion of originality, whereas Rocafella manages innovation as novelty. As Lury (1993) points out, managing innovation through originality depends primarily on the use of copyright law; the management of innovation through novelty relies on an array of legal and marketing techniques known as branding. Many hip-hop and dance music labels try to coordinate official releases of unauthorized remixes if they reach a certain level of popularity in clubs or specialty record shops that cater to DJs, which suggests that they perceive unauthorized remixing as free publicity for the artist or label.<sup>1</sup> Although the head of Rocafella, Damon Dash, told BBC News that Burton should have obtained permission to remix the *Black Album*, he liked the resulting mash-up: "I think it's hot. It's the Beatles. It's two great legends together" (BBC News, 2004a). Thus, the *Grey Album* can be understood as a struggle against the management of innovation through the ideological notion of originality and the assumption that Beatles fans want *The White Album* to remain a discrete and fixed "classic" rock recording. However, the *Grey Album*, and mash-up remixing more generally, does not disrupt and is in fact enabled by the promotional strategies, dividing practices (the "unbundling" of the master recording into

instrumental and vocal versions), and management of innovation as novelty within the hip-hop and dance-music industries.

After the European success of the first 2 Many DJs mash-up album, record companies were eager to offer their back catalogues for mash-up treatment. Dewaele admits, "Apart from one major label, all of the others have contacted us offering their whole back catalogue that we could do with what we want" (Katigbak, 2002). Although 2 Many DJs refused these offers, clearly their subcultural capital could be used to market legitimate mash-ups. Moreover, the mash-up aesthetic draws attention to the capacity of pop music audiences to listen to more than one song at once. The kind of "multitrack" listening demanded by mash-up remixes lends itself to what Willis (1991) calls postmodern advertising: "Rather than fragmenting the broad mass of consumers into discrete and manageable units, postmodern advertising assumes a consuming subject capable of being interpolated from a number of angles at once" (p. 2). Mash-ups permeate cultural boundaries more easily than the remixes of DJ culture, which were aimed at articulating "progress" within particular subgenres of dance music. But the nonlinear seams of mash-up remixes are congruent with contemporary trends in promotional culture and musical consumption. With the recognition that computers and the Internet encourage what Middleton and Beebe (2002) call "neo-eclectic consumption practices," the commodity form of music has shifted towards "enormously popular compilations of contemporary hit music" (p.15).

By overtly rejecting the kinds of subcultural capital valorized by DJ culture (obscure or rarified vinyl remixes or knowledge of the latest trends in the subgenres of dance music), mash-up culture implicates itself in the broader economy of social, economic, and cultural capital. Mash-up culture demonstrates how Top 40 can be listened to in ways that make one appear more hip than those who see the Top 40 as "the kiss of death." Mash-up culture's building blocks are, to borrow Thornton's (1995) terms, the "media-sluts" of the "mainstream": its authenticity derives from the obviousness or conspicuousness of the phoney encounters it arranges between popular song/stars. Its notion of "hipness" is predicated upon pluralistic receptivity to pop formulas and standardized musical forms, whereas DJ culture, according to Thornton, presents itself as an "anti-mass culture" (p. 5). The development of a taste for Top 40 coupled with cynicism towards the legal and industrial use of originality in the administration of musical innovation are investments in subcultural capital that can be converted into other kinds of capital.

### **Illegality, Provocation, and Subcultural Capital**

Mash-up culture's apparently fearless move toward "illegal art" is easily construed as part of a larger political movement for the reform of copyright laws. However, like mash-up culture's other moves—its tendency to remix Top 40 music, rather than obscure recordings, and its preference for MP3s rather than 12-inch vinyl singles—the taste for illegality and its significance within mash-up culture is grounded in a set of existing preferences and classifications. These classifications are appropriated from

the legal system. Websites, club nights, and online personalities indicate their affiliation with mash-up culture by using “piracy” imagery, such as skulls and crossbones. “Piracy” has become an integral part of the mash-up community’s promotional culture and a source of subcultural capital.

An exchange on the GYBO message board about Secret Garden 2006, a dance-music festival that included several DJs playing mash-ups but also featuring other kinds of musicians and DJs, indicates the extent to which “piracy” may be detached from its legal meaning and become a source of distinction within the field of contemporary dance music. The problem identified in the Secret Garden thread was how to assemble the “mash-up crowd.” Zephyr (2006) posted a solution: “I am going quite early tomorrow morning . . . I’ll take some of the pink and black home-tapingiskillingmusic pirate flags and put them up—so come and say hello!” Included in the message was a photo of his flag, featuring a cassette tape above crossbones in pink, which earned Zephyr praise from several others. Mixomatosis (2006), for example, replied, “Put *that* on a t-shirt and I’ll buy it.” The illegality of mash-up remixing in this instance works as a marker of distinction within a particular cultural space rather than as a gesture of resistance regarding the use of copyright law to contain or suppress mash-up remixing. In this case, “piracy” icons function to materialize a community whose interactions generally take place in online forums.

The mash-up community often distinguishes itself from other musical communities by invoking the threat of legal sanctions such as cease-and-desist orders; it is a boundary across which participants acquire recognition and prestige. Adrian and the Mysterious D (A&D) regularly invoke illegality in their self-promotional postings on message boards and websites. To promote the third anniversary of their monthly club night “Bootie” in San Francisco, A&D (2006) highlighted the illegal connotations of “bootie”:

Of course, “bootie” also refers to pirate treasure . . . . And that’s exactly what mash-ups are—copyright-infringing, illegally-released MP3s that are found by searching and scouring the Internet. Practically everything we spin is technically pirated and illegal. Therefore, a pirate theme for Bootie is only natural.

A&D used legal classifications as a theme or motif that distinguishes mash-up remixers, clubs, DJs, and club-goes from outsiders. More importantly, the promotional use of illegality indicates the extent to which A&D perceived various copyright-infringing activities as investments in subcultural capital that can be converted or reinvested in the “offline” world of club promotion. Through the pirate dress code, A&D challenged others to adopt their cheerful attitude towards “piracy” or “copyright infringement” as the litmus of cool.

These invocations, performances, and embodiments of “piracy” in mash-up culture are grounded in the classifications of copyright law (authorized/unauthorized, infringing/noninfringing, etc.). However, these oppositions have been inverted in relation to cultural capital such that an unauthorized remix is preferable and more valuable than an authorized one. Mash-up culture is not the only musical community in which illegality heightens the value of musical recordings. The value of bootleg

recordings for collectors is bound up with the notion that these provide more authentic (or “less mediated”) engagements with the performer than legitimate or official recordings (Marshall, 2004). Vinyl bootlegs have a particularly high value within audiophilic taste cultures: “The illegality of manufacturing and selling these artifacts was considered an intrinsic part of their appeal: the idea that fans were acquiring something they were not meant to have” (Heylin, 2003, p. 195). Until the emergence of mash-up culture, the circulation of unauthorized remixes was limited to the exclusive networks of club DJs, specialty record shops and connoisseurs, where they acquired what Zuberi (2001) describes as “the near mythical anticommodity status of the white-label twelve-inch single and the dub plate—the one-off acetate or vinyl disc of a track exclusive to certain DJs, unavailable in the marketplace” (p. 123). The “aura of illegality” and the “anticommodity” status of unauthorized remixes could in turn be invested into the underground credibility and mystique of clubs, radio shows, and DJ-remixer personas.

Mash-up remixers in some cases gain mass-media exposure when their work is subject to cease-and-desist orders. This was clearly the case for Brian Burton, whose profile as a skilled, knowledgeable, and creative remixer was enhanced by the publicity surrounding the *Grey Album* controversy; Burton is one half of Gnarls Barkley, the duo credited with one of 2006’s most successful pop music singles, “Crazy.” Burton’s involvement with Gnarls Barkely placed him in the realm of the “official” or “legitimate” music industry, and his work predictably became a favorite source of “raw material” for mash-up remixes. A message posted on the Bootie Blog announcing a mash-up album by Sound Advice, entitled *Gnarls Biggie*, underlines the promotional value of the unauthorized: “Already banned from MySpace, you can check it out at: <http://www.gnotorious.com/>” (World Famous Audio Hacker, 2006).

Brian Burton’s career trajectory is exceptional; most unauthorized mash-up remixers remain in the realm of the “unofficial.” Moreover, there is rarely consensus about the value of mash-ups with high degrees of exposure in the music press. In 2005, Ben Gill (aka Party Ben) and Neil Mason (aka Team9) released *American Edit* on the web under the pseudonym “Dean Grey,” the story of which seems to echo the *Grey Album*. The duo mashed up Green Day’s *American Idiot* with recordings by The Bangles, The Sex Pistols, Mariah Carey, The Who, U2, and dozens of other pop, rock, and hip-hop stars. Like the *Grey Album*, *American Edit* seemed to be intended as a tribute to a band whose record label (Warner) promptly responded with a cease-and-desist order, which was then followed by an online protest (Tossell, 2005). *American Edit* was then covered in music magazines like *New Musical Express* (NME) and *Spin*. The sequence of events was strikingly similar to the development of the *Grey Album*. The pattern of provocation through illegal remixing followed by legal orders and press coverage suggests that the logic of mash-up culture can be reduced to a series of calculated moves on the part of amateur remixers to incite legal controversies that enable them to showcase their skills in the news media. But the process is neither as linear nor as consistent as this formula suggests. Cease-and-desist orders are sometimes regarded by mash-up remixers as a sign of merit for having achieved a certain level of notoriety. But these may also result from random searches for

copyright-infringing creative activity by record companies. Moreover, cease-and-desist orders are not always accompanied by public controversy, media exposure, advocacy group support, or critical acclaim.

Unlike the *Grey Album*, *American Edit* did not generate critical consensus in the music press or in the mash-up community. Daft Monkey (2006), writing on the Bootie Blog a few hours before a “rock-opera style” celebration of *American Edit* at the Pirate’s Ball, seemed rather ambivalent about the meaning and value of *American Edit*.

At the time of its release, I was quite confident that *American Edit* had set a new standard for mash-ups and was going to inspire bedroom DJs to produce mind-blowing productions that combined remix and mash-up methodologies together. Quite honestly, it was a foolish expectation.

It was foolish because mash-up culture is an “always refreshing community of newcomers who use the mash-up platform to begin exploring, experimenting and learning their own remix and production techniques. If new producers and fans didn’t enter the mash-up or bootleg community on a regular basis . . . the scene would die.” Nevertheless, Daft Monkey suggested that the year was marked by an increase in the quality of mash-up “productions,” which diverged from the standard “acapella + instrumental = mash-up” formula, and that *American Edit* had something to do with this sense of “raising the bar.” However, Party Ben, coproducer of *American Edit*, disagreed a few days later:

The original idea of an entire *American Idiot* mash-up album struck me as an amusing piss-take on the very concept of the mash-up album; I adore *The Grey Album*, but I also found the whole worshipful attitude it got from critics a little silly, and based on an inherent bias towards the ‘album’ as such as a more ‘legitimate’ artistic medium than the single . . . The idea of *American Edit*, in my mind, was partially to poke fun at this attitude: if people take albums more seriously, well then here’s your album right here. (Daft Monkey, 2006)

The legal/illegal opposition is an important distinction in the habitus of mash-up remixing and functions as a key marker on the boundaries of its cultural space. However, modes of validation and stylistic development in mash-up culture are guided by an increasingly complex set of classifications that cannot be reduced to the legal/illegal opposition. As mash-up culture gains even more media exposure, distinction and subcultural capital will depend upon a broader repertoire of practices capable of being interpreted by “insiders” as parodies of the way its subcultural Others tolerate, incorporate and legitimate the mash-up sensibility.

## Conclusion

The creative opportunities of mash-up culture hinge upon access to various materials, including powerful personal computers, high-speed Internet connections, listening practices and devices, as well as knowledge of postwar popular music. Membership and reputation within mash-up culture also depends upon a mode of

open, pluralistic, and sympathetic listening that is taken to be the basis of ethical sociality in online mash-up forums. Although the development of mash-up culture as a style of remixing is intertwined with the bravura of legal and stylistic transgression, reputations depend upon the display of subcultural capital through “cool listening” to music such as chart pop which, in other subcultures, epitomizes the “mainstream.”

Mash-up culture revives older modes of DJ authorship that were based upon the unauthorized mixing and manipulation of existing recordings. In the 1990s, the incorporation of remixing into the dance music and hip-hop industries led to the displacement of the DJ-remixer as a reorganizer of the components of “finished” songs by a more conventional notion of the author as the creator of original works. Mash-up culture is a response to the inflated value of DJs’ subcultural capital in the hip-hop and dance music industries; the hubris and status of professional DJ-remixers spurred the deployment of remix techniques by amateurs against the values of connoisseurship and the association of subcultural capital with knowledge of specialized subgenres. The dispersal of DJ techniques into a wider social and cultural sphere enabled the emergence of the mash-up sensibility, which is not grounded in professional DJ culture’s connoisseurist values or its historical rationality. Mash-up culture is now struggling with the manner in which it has been tolerated and validated by those institutional authorities against which it previously defined itself.

Acquiring prestige outside the online mash-up community is not the sole objective of this kind of remixing. Indeed, most mash-up practitioners seem content to have their work circulated, understood, and critiqued by fellow mash-up remixers online. The vitality of mash-up culture and its relative autonomy from professional DJ culture depends to a large extent on maintaining a mode of validation and an infrastructure that gives members a sense that they are developing reputations, skills, and roles within a community, rather than investing time in a passing scene. The infrastructure of the mash-up community may exist primarily online, but it provides a relatively durable record of artifacts, interactions, and events, as well as a source of tools and materials for making mash-ups. Reputations are developed through one’s performance in online discussions or debates, by listening to and evaluating mash-ups posted by other members, and by acting as moderators, archivists, and administrators in these online forums. While pseudonymous authorship is the norm in mash-up culture, participants do not want to sever the ties among bodies, works, and words. Indeed, through the relatively stable infrastructure of mash-up culture’s message boards, a new kind of author is emerging—in the persistence of a name across message boards and the reorganized components of popular music.

## Note

- [1] In January 2007, Tyree Simmons (aka DJ Drama), a well-known hip hop mixtape producer, was arrested in Atlanta on felony charges under the Racketeering Influenced Corrupt Organizations Act. *Billboard* suggested that Simmons’ arrest may indicate that the music industry will no longer tolerate unauthorized mixing and remixing (Crosley, 2007). Two points are relevant in light of my arguments about mash-up remixing and the use of piracy

imagery: First, although DJs are rarely arrested for producing unauthorized mix tapes or remixes, and the hip-hop and dance-music industries informally tolerate and encourage unauthorized remixing, major record labels routinely suppress these activities through cease-and-desist orders. Second, while remixers can create new artifacts, styles, and careers through unauthorized remixing, major record labels use legal resources to contain these moves for stylistic innovation, reputation, and prestige. Simmons' arrest demonstrates that copyright owners still can control, manage, or prevent the conversion of subcultural capital into economic capital.

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