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Groove Music

The Art and Culture of the Hip-Hop DJ

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Mike, Apollo, Rob Swift, Sinista in one room in a warehouse—everybody hangin' out and cuttin' it up—it was amazing.”⁷² The night after the warehouse summit, they battled to see which crew would leave with bragging rights. As it turns out, none of them did. In one of the great upsets in battle history, DJ Swamp of Cleveland took the crown.

The Beat Junkies, the Invisibl Skratch Piklz, and the X-Men helped legitimize the idea that a group of DJs could be a self-sufficient musical ensemble, and led the way for dozens of crews and turntable bands around the world, a short list of which would include The Allies, Birdy Nam Nam, The Bullet Proof Space Hamsters (a.k.a. The Bullet Proof Space Travelerz), C2C, 5th Platoon, Jeep Beat Collective, Kireek, The Scratch Perverts, and The Trooperz. But all of these groups can, in some way, thank the original three crews for paving the way.

Turntablism was the realization of a long-held goal among many DJs: independence. For DJs, independence meant the ability to create music that did not exist simply to serve the needs of b-boys, b-girls, and MCs, but could be enjoyed on its own merits. Independence meant technology advanced enough to free DJs from any mechanical constraints and the freedom to pursue their musical ideas wherever they might lead. Independence meant a physical space and a particular demographic—the San Francisco Bay Area and Filipino Americans—that allowed turntablism to flourish. Independence for DJs also meant a musical space—the battle—where they could explore the limits of their techniques. All of these factors—musical, technological, demographic, and geographic—were interconnected, and turntablism, perhaps the most profound development in the history of the hip-hop DJ, was the product of these many forces.

The Art of War—The DJ Battle: 1991–1996

So it is said that if you know your enemies and know yourself, you can win a hundred battles without a single loss.

—SUN TZU, *The Art of War*, sixth century BC¹

If I'm going to be in a battle [and] I know that your specialty is scratching, I'm going to practice a scratch routine to take you out, you know? It's almost like you're preparing yourself for combat. You come up with strategies; it's like a war. I want to practice it a certain way and be able to execute it every time the same exact way. If I go up against this DJ, I want to intercept whatever style he may come at me with. And when I go up against this other DJ, he DJs like this, so I need to be prepared for this and that and the third.

—ROB SWIFT, 2001²

By the mid-1990s, battles had spread across the world, inspiring a select segment of DJs to devote countless hours to the art of destroying rivals with vinyl. For these highly driven turntablists, battling was a way of life, occupying their waking hours and haunting what little sleep they managed. Their numbers were small, but their influence enormous, and during this period it was the battle, more than anything else, that pushed the growth and development of turntablism. To speak of an “art of war” here may seem grandiose, yet there is an art to battling, one that reveals itself in the preparation it demands, the techniques it inspires, and the music it creates.

RULES OF ENGAGEMENT, TOOLS OF WAR

Every battle is slightly different, but in general there are two types: head-to-head and showcase. The head-to-head format dates to the earliest days of hip-hop when battles typically involved DJs facing off against each other. In larger, more formalized head-to-head battles, DJs are paired and perform routines in alternation, after which a panel of judges (often several former battlers) selects one DJ to advance to the next round. These elimination rounds continue until one DJ is left standing. The first major battle series, established by the New Music Seminar, was organized around head-to-head elimination rounds, as was its successor, the International Turntablist Federation. By contrast, the DMC World DJ Championship featured the showcase style, in which DJs do not so much perform *against* each other as *for* the judges. (Later, DMC added a head-to-head competition.) Showcase routines tend to be longer (the DMC's are six minutes long), while head-to-head battle routines may be between one and two minutes long. Whether head-to-head or showcase, most battle organizers provide the turntables and mixers; DJs are expected to bring their own needles, slipmats, and headphones.

The first thing to understand about DJ battle routines at this time is that improvisation played almost no role, and this has largely remained the case. Contrast this with MC and b-boy and b-girl battles, where improvisation is common and crucial. Unlike DJs, dancers and rhymer keep all their weapons in their bodies; their armaments are instantly accessible and infinitely manipulable. The DJ's weapons, however, are records, tangible and fixed, a limiting factor that battlers must overcome. Most routines, therefore, are precisely planned compositions, created and memorized by the battler. As Rob Swift points out, however, the battle DJ still needs to be prepared for anything:

You're dealing with a machine, and sometimes it can be faulty. There can be something wrong with it—the needles might skip on you or the sound may be messed up. So if you go to do a routine and you're not able to execute it the way you want you have to be ready to just improv, just do what comes natural while you're on stage, and hope that the crowd will like you, or hope that the crowd won't tell the difference . . . But when you're battling, you rarely improv because when you're battling, you're bringing to the stage set routines.³

All of this is to say that good battlers typically know *exactly* what to do once on the battlefield, even when they don't.

Every battle routine must be unique and original to the DJ performing it. No self-respecting battler would ever perform another DJ's routine or use the same

selection of records, even if the routine itself was different. In DJ battles, originality is the highest virtue, while biting is beneath contempt. Here is how rule #4 of The Gong Battle explained it:

4. BITING, REPEATING ROUTINES AND OUTRIGHT WACKNESS: A DJ will be gonged if the judges think that he/she is biting or wack. It's OK to show influence but outright use of the same records (with the exception of a diss) and doing the same routine will be grounds for being eliminated by way of the gong.⁴

Most DJs know better than to perform someone else's whole routine, so actual instances of biting tend to be less flagrant—for example, using the same beat juggle pattern as another DJ and using the same records to do it. But DJs learn by watching and imitating others, and new techniques or moves are often variations on existing ones; there's a fine line between drawing inspiration from a DJ and biting that DJ's moves. As Shortkut says, "Without influence, there wouldn't be no change."⁵ "Change" is the crucial word—to use someone's move without biting, there must be something new or different about it. Here's DJ Rectangle's advice: "If you're going to take someone's move, I would do it better than that person did it in the first place or slightly change it—put *your* style into it."⁶

Although all routines are, or at least should be, different, they usually share common elements. Most feature some combination of scratching and beat juggling, as well as a verbal element (wordplay), and a physical element (body tricks). We've encountered scratching and beat juggling throughout these pages, so let's focus on two aspects of battling that became more prevalent in the battles of the early and mid-1990s.

WORDPLAY

In battle, the biggest audience response often comes not from what the DJs are *doing*, but from what they're *saying*. But the DJs themselves rarely actually speak—their words come from their records, carefully chosen and juxtaposed to display their wit or intimidate their opponents.

Wordplay, as the verbal component of battling is often called, can appear at any point in a routine, but is often heard at the beginning and end, acting as a framing device. Wordplay can be about anything, but typically DJs use it to boast about their incredible prowess (musical and otherwise) or to diss, or insult, their rivals. The most memorable wordplay tends to be in the form of disses, and it's the disses that DJs and audiences remember years later. For example,

in a single routine in the 1998 DMC U.S. finals, DJ Dummy used his wordplay to insult just about every one of his competitors; more than a decade on, Internet commentators talk about it as one of the best diss routines of all time.⁷

Disses can be mild, like “All you other DJs are a bunch of jerks” (from Marley Marl and MC Shan’s “Marley Marl Scratch”), but they are often extravagantly obscene. DJs and fans of battle culture often cite DJ Noize’s devastating diss as a model of the art, especially his 1993 New Music Seminar routine when he faced 8-Ball. Disses make up nearly every second of his one-minute routine, culminating in a *coup de grace* that plays on 8-Ball’s name. Noize starts with a bit of Gang Starr, “And if ya don’t like it and you wanna step up . . .” (from “Words from the Nutcracker”) and then finishes the sentence with a fragment from N.W.A.’s “She Swallowed It,” which sounds as if it were sampled from an X-rated how-to record: “Gently place the balls into the mouth,” a well-mannered woman’s voice instructs. An amateur video of the battle captures the audience roaring, leaping to its feet as Noize gestures to his crotch, then points to an offscreen 8-Ball.⁸ In a move that mirrors the sexual violence of male prison life, Noize has made his opponent his “bitch,” simultaneously dominating and emasculating him.

“That man was a beast,” marvels DJ Craze, one of the most successful battlers of all time. “I was always scared to go up against him cause I knew he would diss me hard. What made his diss the best was that they made sense. He went in and would diss you on exactly what was wack about you.”⁹ This is exactly what Craze did in his 1998 ITF battle when he dissed England’s First Rate using a record of old Looney Tunes cartoons. “What a dope, what a maroon,” Bugs Bunny sneers, “You’re going too fast . . . you’re c-c-c-crazy!” Daffy Duck sputters. Craze gets high marks because he specifically mocked First Rate’s scratching, which he illustrated by hunching over the records and flailing wildly as Daffy spoke.¹⁰ ●

To outsiders, battle diss is cruel, but insiders accept that it’s just part of the game. DJ Craze had to explain this to his mother, who was in the audience for his battle against First Rate. “I remember after the battle my mom came up to me and kinda told me off for being so rude to him. I explained to her that this was a battle and that anything goes. She just laughed it off and told me I killed it.”¹¹ No doubt diss stings, but most DJs don’t take them personally. It’s easier to shrug them off when they’re delivered via vinyl and other people’s voices rather than directly from the other DJs. Lines can be crossed, however. Former battle champion A-Trak put it this way: “You want your diss to be a little bit personal, meaning that they’re specific to the person that you’re calling out, but you don’t want them to be pointless in the context of a battle. So for example, to me, diss about your opponent being really fat are hard to pull off. It’s stupid.”¹² New York’s DJ Fatfingaz actually thinks DJs should take *all* diss

personally. In a 2007 Internet discussion he wrote: “IF SOMEONE IS DISSING YOU . . . TAKE THAT SHIT PERSONAL!! ALL THAT HAPPY SHIT GOT TO FLY OUT THE DOOR! THIS IS A COMPETITION . . . NOT A FUCKIN’ A.A. MEETING!”¹³ DJs should not laugh off diss so easily, he argues—it dulls the killer instinct.

Wordplay is just one of the battle DJ’s tools, and like all tools—or weapons—it can be used well or abused, and is subject to debate about how best it should be deployed. The same can be said for another important tool that was also widely used and sometimes abused by DJs in the 1990s: body tricks.

BODY TRICKS

Since the very earliest days of hip-hop, DJs have been bringing more than just records to battles. They also brought moves: spinning in place in between beats, moving the fader with their elbows, scratching while reaching under their legs, using their feet instead of their hands—anything to add a bit of flash, a bit of spectacle. Many early DJs were also (or formerly) b-boys or b-girls, and this experience influenced their DJing, and the battle scene in general. Johnny “Juice” Rosado, for a time one of Public Enemy’s DJs and a fierce battler, was a b-boy first. He speaks of some of his body tricks as *power moves*, a term used by dancers to describe their most impressive techniques. One he called the Twin Towers—this was before the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks, of course—where he would stand on the table that held his decks, straddle one of them and reach down between his legs to scratch the record. He would then do a back flip, landing right behind the turntables and resume scratching without missing a beat. Never missing the beat is crucial—body tricks should have no effect on the sound of the routine. They are handicaps imposed expressly for the purpose of heroically overcoming them. It might seem odd that body tricks—seen but never heard—should be so important to a musical art form. But DJing, and battling in particular, is not simply a sonic phenomenon. The sight of the DJ affects our experience of the music, and can make the difference between a champion battler and a runner-up.

Although most DJs recognize the value of body tricks, there’s often debate among DJs about when they become distracting and detract from the music. Consider DJ David’s winning 1991 DMC routine, which included the most notorious body trick in battle history. The setting was London, the DMC World Championships. Germany’s DJ David, the reigning champion, began his final six-minute routine with his turntables cloaked in a large banner. When he unveiled his gear his decks were not sitting side-by-side, but were *stacked*, one resting atop four aluminum soda cans placed at each corner of the lower turntable. It was simply an unusual set-up—which he soon dismantled—but it

clearly communicated his penchant for spectacle and foreshadowed his final trick. For the next four minutes he performed a number of standard body tricks, but he kept getting faster and faster, his motions accelerating to an almost superhuman speed. No one would still be talking about his routine, however, had he stopped there. With about thirty seconds left in his routine he picked up his still-playing right turntable and handed it to someone standing a few feet off to the side. Next he removed the record from the left turntable and placed a round object—about the size and shape of a snuff tin or a hockey puck—over top the spindle. Then in one fluid motion he put his right hand on the now-covered spindle and boosted himself aloft, his elbow tucked into his gut and the rest of his body parallel to the ground. Propped atop the platter and powered by the Technics 1200's beefy motor, he spun eight times while the other turntable accompanied him. He rotated, suspended several feet above the floor, accompanied by 1988 song "I'll House You"—"Here we go, round and round and round and round," the Jungle Brothers chanted. The crowd erupted. The dumbfounded host Tony Prince shouted hoarsely, "Wowww, I've never seen anything like that before that in my life!"¹⁴ DJ David was crowned the first back-to-back champion in the history of the DMC competition, while runner-up Qbert looked on, stunned. "This was the greatest trick ever," Prince told me many years later. "It was absolutely brilliant!"¹⁵ Others say it was simply a gimmick, that Qbert's performance was more musical, more technical, and more worthy of first place. Look at the hundreds of comments accompanying the YouTube videos, and even after twenty years there's no clear consensus.¹⁶

In the 1990s, body tricks started to change. They didn't disappear completely, but they became less outrageous and rarely involved the kind of props some earlier DJs used. The change was directly linked to the increasing complexity of battle routines. If, musically speaking, routines were to become denser, more sophisticated, and taken more seriously, then body tricks had to be minimized, and for some, they fell by the wayside.

BATTLE RECORDS

The growing frequency of wordplay in the 1990s and the relative decline of body tricks at the same time can be connected to a single development in the history of DJ competitions: the introduction and proliferation of the battle record. These are compilation discs created expressly for the needs of turntablists, and battle DJs in particular. Listen to one play for more than a few seconds and you get the impression of rapidly switching among radio stations, and odd ones at that. A looped drum break may be followed by the "ah" and "fresh" samples, followed by dialogue from a martial arts film, succeeded by a string of

obscenities from a rap song. Arriving on the ^{Battle Records} scene in 1992, the battle record was a major labor-saving device, giving DJs ready-made collections of sounds to scratch and beats to juggle as well as enough boasts and disses to populate their routines with wordplay.

The battle record did not appear out of nowhere, and it's worth backspinning in time to consider some precursors. Before the first battle records were released came the twenty-five-volume series called *Ultimate Beats and Breaks (UBB)*, created by Lenny Roberts's Street Beat Records.¹⁷ These were not battle records per se—they didn't extract parts of songs. Rather, Roberts, a record collector and amateur DJ, compiled whole funk, soul, rock, and pop songs that had the breaks beloved by hip-hop DJs; these discs are commonly called breakbeat records or breakbeat compilations. He issued the first volume in 1986, which included The Winstons' "Amen Brother" and its famous break. Other classics, like "Apache," "Big Beat," and "Dance to the Drummer's Beat," arrived in later volumes. The final installment came in 1991.

The *UBB* volumes were a godsend to many DJs as well as beat-making producers, saving them the time, energy, and money required to collect the records individually. They were especially useful for those who came up in the game when the breaks were getting harder to find. Among them was DJ Shadow, who attests that "they were the blueprint for what everybody was sampling from, from '86 to '91" and saw them as something to "absorb, digest, and spit out" in creating his own music.¹⁸

The series, however, didn't sit well with some among the generation of DJs who had discovered all those breaks. "For real collectors and DJs," reports DJ and producer Prince Paul, "it was traumatic. You know, you're there covering up your labels and all that, and those breakbeat records exposed a lot. To me, as far as beat collecting, breakbeat compilations ruined everything."¹⁹ As Grandmixer D.ST puts it, these compilations, and *UBB* founder Lenny Roberts in particular, violated what he calls the "sacred crates":

The sacred crates is what enable the hip-hop DJ to become a hip-hop DJ. [Y]our uniqueness . . . was your particular obscure records which made you different from the person over there. So we have to go to Grandmaster Flash parties because he has these particular beats that only he has. Everybody had records that the other DJs didn't have. That's what got people to come to your party.²⁰

Lenny Roberts also went these parties, where D.ST often encountered him. "After the party, he would go, 'Hey man, what was the name of the record you was just playing? You gimme that one, and I'll give you that record that Bam plays that you don't have.'" To pry information out of tight-lipped DJs, he also

value
of
collection
of
records

offered to replace their favorite vinyl, knowing that, as D.ST explains, “we were wearing out these valuable, valuable records, and we needed to get new ones.” D.ST believes that Roberts was just pursuing a business opportunity, and wasn’t trying to change the culture of the hip-hop DJ. But that’s what happened. “We compromised the whole code of secrecy. Before Lenny, you had to be really into hip-hop to have those records. He consolidated all our records. And that was the end of it.” This was the end of an era in which knowledge—of records—was one of the highest forms of power that a DJ could wield. But it was also the beginning of a new era, one in which the secrets of hip-hop were no longer guarded by a select few DJs, but became available to a new generation.

Shortly after the final *UBB* volume was issued came the first commercially released battle records.²¹ The first two were issued in 1992—*Hamster Breaks* by the Bullet Proof Scratch Hamsters and, a few months later, *Battle Breaks* by the Psychedelic Skratch Bastards (most likely an alias for Apollo, Mix Master Mike, and Qbert, before they became the Invisibl Skratch Piklz).²² There are now hundreds of battle records to choose from. Favorites include Babu’s *Superduckbreaks*, Flare’s *Hee Haw Brayks*, Qbert’s *Superseal Breaks*, Rectangle’s *The Ultimate Battle Weapon*, and Ricci Rucker’s *The Utility Phonograph Record*. A-Trak, Craze, ie.MERG, Swamp, and many other DJs have released battle records as well. Some even specialize: for example, *Hater Breaks*, a 2002 record from the late Roc Raida, is especially strong in disses, while *Bikini Wax*, a 2007 release by Shortee and Step1, is the first battle record created by women and, borrowing a women’s deodorant slogan, claims to be “Strong enough for a man, made for a woman.” Battle records are popular for many reasons. They save DJs time and money, eliminating the need to acquire dozens of records and protecting rare originals they already own. They allow battle DJs to scratch, juggle, and diss rivals without ever removing records from the turntables. DJs can save precious seconds and minimize mishaps, which in turn allows routines to include more scratches and juggles, and a greater variety of songs and sounds. Some battle records are also considered “skipless,” meaning that each sound or phrase is repeated several times and occurs at the same position on the record; this way, the needle can jump a groove or two ahead or back without any noticeable change.

As with *Ultimate Beats and Breaks*, DJs have mixed feelings about battle records. Cash Money, for one, opposes them:

I think it’s cheating. [Battling] is all about finding that break in the record real fast, faster than the next DJ. That’s what made you special, you know? It’s more than just scratching, it’s about finding the record that suits you [and] being able to find that particular part of the record fast. You know, you take what Jazzy Jay and Theodore were doing with the whole needle dropping. That’s actually hard to do.²³

Another problem Cash Money sees is that battle records disconnect DJs from the music that created hip-hop. Battle records may include the famous breaks, but they never contain whole songs and don’t identify the songs themselves; DJs who look no further may have no idea that “ah” and “fresh” come from “Change the Beat” or that the bongo sample on their record began life as “Apache.” Cash recalls with disgust an encounter with an unschooled DJ. “I was playing something so basic as Herman Kelley ‘Dance to the Drummer’s Beat.’ This DJ asked me, ‘Hey is that from [the battle record] *Superduckbreaks*?’” To a veteran DJ this ignorance of music history is appalling.

Moreover, battle records rarely excerpt long sections of popular songs, meaning that they can’t be used to create the type of routine that focuses on a single song and manipulates it. As Rob Swift advises, “When you’re sitting at home creating your battle sets it’s important to use records that your audience is familiar with. This way, when you manipulate these songs, the audience understands what you’re doing to the record. How you’re changing it from its original form into your own masterpiece.”²⁴ Qbert, citing Swift as an example, concurs, and even blames himself for the near-disappearance of this approach.

Rob Swift, he’ll play a Biz Markie song, so it’s like, “Oh, that’s cool,” and he all of a sudden flips it, it’s like “Aw, man that’s genius.” I like that style better in battling. But all these DJs now, they’re using trick records, you know, and I’m partially to blame for that, “cause I made a lot of trick records, but I actually really like the natural style. . . . It’s like jazz—you know the song and then they’re flipping it so that you know how they’re flipping it.”²⁵

DJ Pone has offered an interesting philosophical objection to battle records. From one perspective, he points out, “Battle DJing should be about rearranging your original musical source to something which it wasn’t intended to be. A battle record was intended to be scratched. And because it was made with that intention, it’s doing part of the creative work . . . that the DJ should be doing.”²⁶ So it’s not just that battle records eliminate dues-paying, they eliminate part of the subversive element of DJing. From the beginning, hip-hop DJs have been treating records in ways they were never supposed to be treated, touching and scratching them, extracting and rearranging sounds as they please. Ironically, maybe the only way to subvert a battle record is to play it through without stopping or touching it.

Battle records have had unintended and far-reaching consequences. It’s no coincidence that as they became more popular, collage-like routines built on snippets of sound became more prevalent. At the same time, one-song and two-song routines became less common. And so did body tricks, perhaps because the newer style of routine, dense with samples, left less time for extravagant

physical displays. Although body tricks did not disappear, they tended to be shorter and faster as the 1990s wore on. Disses, on the other hand, proliferated, almost certainly because battle records put so many right in the hands of DJs.

With this introduction to the rules and tools of turntablist warfare, we can now drill deeper into the world of battling in the mid-1990s. We first head to New York for the battle that few DJs and fans can describe without adding the word “legendary.”

THE LEGENDARY 1996 ISP VS. X-MEN BATTLE

In July 1996, the X-Men and the Invisibl Skratch Piklz squared off for the first time. The setting was Manhattan; the occasion was the Battle for World Supremacy, sponsored by the newly formed International Turntablist Federation. Since both crews had officially retired from battling, the event was billed as an exhibition, though no one called it anything other than a battle. According to Rob Swift, Crazy Legs, the pioneering b-boy from the Rock Steady Crew, suggested the idea to the crew over dinner after an X-Men show. At first they were reluctant—they hadn’t battled since 1992—but they quickly relented: “Our egos didn’t allow us to say no. No one wanted to come off as scared. At the time, we were the most respected DJs on the East Coast and they were the most respected DJs on the West Coast. We were known for beat juggling and they were known for scratching, and there was always this debate [about] which style was better.”²⁷

The battle was divided into two parts: the team battle and the individual rounds. First came the team battle, held in the Manhattan Center. Each group performed once, using three sets of turntables, but otherwise there seem not to have been any strict rules in place: the X-Men had five DJs (Diamond J, Mista Sinista, Rob Swift, Roc Raida, and Total Eclipse) and performed for seven minutes, while the Piklz used three DJs (Mix Master Mike, Qbert, and Shortcut) and played almost twice as long.²⁸

The X-Men started, with Sinista, Roc Raida, and Rob Swift first on the turntables. After a bit of wordplay, the three DJs combined short scratch patterns into a slow groove. The energy level stayed fairly low, and the routine only occasionally caught fire, as when Swift and Raida rotated on and off a single turntable in quick succession, keeping the beat rock steady, or during the animated sequence of body tricks toward the end. Overall, the routine was marred by a lack of cohesion and precision. This was not the X-Men at their best. (The routine comes off better in a version called “A Turntable Experience,” which they recorded for the 1997 album *Deep Concentration*.)

The Piklz routine opened with some wordplay directed right at the X-Men. It’s hard to hear exactly, but it sounds like “No body tricks!” referring to the X-Men’s predilection for showy moves. The routine was precise and energetic, filled with tight, complex scratching. The three DJs seemed to become one with their machines, human pistons powering the faders and platters. They ran longer than necessary, and Mix Master Mike’s mugging for the crowd was excessive, but overall it was a musical and crowd-pleasing performance.²⁹ The X-Men were going to have to step things up in the individual rounds, or this was going to be a one-sided battle.

The team competition took place earlier in the day; the individual rounds came later, and were held in the famed club Twilo, not far from the Manhattan Center. The actual ITF battle was won by Total Eclipse of the X-Men, with Babu the runner-up. Cash Money and Cutmaster Swift also performed showcases, so by the time the two crews came on again it was well into the morning. The individual battles went three rounds, the routines about two minutes each. This part of the ISP/X-Men showdown was the more exciting of the two parts, and demonstrated the very different strengths of the two crews.³⁰

Roc Raida was up first, and set the tone by creating some personalized, crowd-pleasing diss. He used Gang Starr’s “Mostly tha Voice” (1994), replacing certain words (struck through in the following excerpt) with the DJs’ names (in brackets), which come from a record on the other turntable:

Then up steps ~~another~~ [Shortcut], he gets smothered
That’s word to mother, or should I say moms
I drop bombs, scorchin niggaz like napalm
~~Sucka boy~~ [Qbert] get off my shit
[Qbert] Get off my dick

The rest of his routine consisted of ever-faster beat juggling, all the more impressive because Raida used his nose and chin instead of his hands at times and threw in a host of other body tricks. Watch the video and you’ll swear that he has more than the usual number of limbs. Qbert was up next and fired right back with the diss, “Roc Raida can’t scratch!” which he put together by reconfiguring lines from LL Cool J’s “I Can’t Live Without My Radio” (1985) and Egyptian Lover’s “What Is a D.J. if He Can’t Scratch?” (1984). He took the line, “Cut Creator, rock the beat with your hands” (Cut Creator was LL Cool J’s DJ), chopped the words “Creator” and “rock” into “Roc Raida,” and then added “can’t scratch” from the Egyptian Lover song.³¹ But other than the personalized diss, the two routines were completely different, with Qbert pitting his high-speed scratching against Raida’s juggling. This battle was also one of the first times that Qbert’s new scratch, the crab, was heard in public. The crowd was impressed.

The next pairing was Rob Swift and Mix Master Mike. Swift was clearly trying to intimidate the Piklz. At one point he worked the record with one hand while gesturing menacingly with the other—actually, he used only the middle finger. The music suddenly stopped as he left his equipment and strode across the stage toward the Piklz. He then pointed back at his turntables, and, as if by magic, the music started again. It was pure bravado, and the crowd loved it.

Mix Master Mike retorted with a masterful diss. Using two copies of Casual's "That's How It Is" (1993), he took these lines . . .

But still I'm taxing, axing the competition,
And any wack men, I stomp and diss 'em,
Easily

. . . and by reconfiguring the words, he transformed it into this:

But still I'm taxing, axing the competition,
And any X-Men, any X-Men, any X-Men . . . I stomp X-Men, X-Men . . .
and diss 'em,
Easily

It's impressive how Mike turned "ax-" into "X" and made the line a diss without introducing another record. He then proceeded to put on a turntablism clinic, even using the same recording that Swift featured in "Rob Gets Busy," a track he released on the *Return of the D.J.* compilation a year earlier. Here we have an exception to the general prohibition against knowingly using the same records as another DJ in a battle routine. Mix Master Mike wasn't trying to copy Swift, he was trying to outdo him. He took straight tones and white noise and manipulated them in every possible way, his long-fingered hands bending and jerking like frenzied, giant spiders. At one point he actually bent one of his records while it was on the turntable and scratched the now-curved disc. Other times he tapped the records, creating staccato zips and zaps like he was firing laser guns. He stared into the middle distance, as if playing a video game in which he no doubt was the hero.

Mista Sinista and Shortkut took the stage next. Sinista's routine featured Steve Dee-like juggling as he slowed the tempo and brought it back to speed again. He threw in some body tricks, but overall, it seemed like a less impressive version of Raida's first routine. Shortkut brought out some old-school funk for the first time in the battle, playing James Brown's "Funky President" from 1974. But then, instead of breaking out a scratch routine as would be expected from a member of the Piklz, he started juggling. Shortkut cites as his main influence none other than one of the original X-Men, Steve Dee, who was

actually standing on stage wearing his blue, red, and yellow Superman T-shirt. As a West Coast juggler, Shortkut was an anomaly. "I was just really, heavily influenced by the New York scene," he says.³² After juggling the word "funky," he threw a curve ball, bringing in some New Wave music with the 1983 song "Beat Box" by The Art of Noise. It was a solid routine, and featured Shortkut's strobe juggle, his original contribution to turntablist technique, but it was not exactly riveting. Looking back on it, Shortkut reflects, "I could have done better. I could have landed my juggles a little cleaner. I could have been a little more charismatic."³³

Two more rounds followed. Some highlights:

Qbert vs. Roc Raida, round 2: Qbert's routine was a tour de force created from a cymbal sound on one record and a kick and a snare on the other. At one point he was scratching two records in different rhythms at the same time—his brainsplitter move. Except for some brief wordplay in the opening, it was a purely abstract musical composition, with no recognizable songs, no lyrics, and no disses or boasts. It's probably his favorite routine, though he admits that "it kind of goes over people's heads."³⁴ Raida responded with a stinging diss of Qbert's musical style. Taking the line "all that tiggedy-tiggedy tongue-twistin' shit don't impress me" from "No Equal" by the Beatnuts, he replaced "tiggedy-tiggedy tongue-twistin'" with a caricature of Qbert's scratching, flailing goofily while using the same kind of squelchy sample that Qbert favors. He even wore his cap sideways like Q. In their next meeting, Qbert offered an updated version of an old-style scratch routine. He scratched "ah" and "fresh" against the electronic beat of "Jive Rhythm Trax 122 bpm," which Cash Money used in his 1987 New Music Seminar face-off with Joe Cooley. Qbert didn't like the routine, calling it "boring" in retrospect.³⁵ Raida also waxed nostalgic, using LL Cool J's "Rock the Bells" (1985), a favorite in routines years earlier. It's full of flashy body tricks, but not as tight as his earlier routines.

Finally, Mix Master Mike vs. Rob Swift: More clean, precise scratching from Mike. As in the first routine, he showed off his incredibly fast twiddle, a tremolo scratch in which the hand's motion is more like a vibration than a back-and-forth action. Swift came on and juggled brief snatches of James Brown, and then went even older-school with the Mohawks' "The Champ" from 1968.

It would have been a challenge to judge these battles. Although some routines were better than others, overall their strengths were so different that they were hard to compare. In terms of dissing and body tricks, and overall crowd appeal, the X-Men dominated. But the Piklz had the edge in the areas of precision and technical originality. The DJs have their own opinions about who won, and I had the opportunity to ask Shortkut, Qbert, and Rob Swift how they would have judged the outcome. (I spoke with them individually and didn't tell them what the others had said.) Surprisingly—or maybe not—they

were unanimous. "You know what?" Shortkut said, "I definitely think that the X-Men got us really good on the individual battles."³⁶ Qbert agreed, saying that in the "one-on-one stuff . . . I think they took it in many ways."³⁷ As Shortkut pointed out—a fact that had surprised me—"Qbert's never been in a one-on-one battle . . . like a [New Music] Seminar-style battle." This could explain his reluctance to incorporate the kind of disses that win battles. But with the X-Men, battling was "their element," Shortkut said. "And they had it down. Down to the disses, to the stare-downs." Swift made the same point. "At the time our focus was battling one on one, which is why I feel the X-Men won the individual solo rounds. We lived for one on one battles. When we got bored we would battle each other, so going up there with the flair and showmanship of a boxer was second nature to us."³⁸

The three DJs also agreed on the outcome of the team battle. Without hesitation, Rob Swift declared, "I can objectively say, they won the team battle. This was an area they mastered. We were new to the idea of creating routines that involved the [whole] crew." But this was nothing new to the Piklz, who had been creating well-tooled team routines since 1992, and had just come back from tour together. As Shortkut modestly explained, "I think we did a good job."

What may have been the most important battle in the history of turntablism ended in a draw. This is fitting, for it symbolizes the equally significant contributions both crews have made to the art of the DJ. They expanded the frontiers of turntablist technique, electrified the battle scene, and inspired a generation of DJs to take to the decks, both as soloists and as part of crews. "At the end of the day, it wasn't about who won or who lost," Rob Swift says of the 1996 battle. "It was about two crews . . . help[ing] the art form grow."³⁹

FROM THE BASEMENT TO THE STAGE: A PORTRAIT OF A BATTLE SEASON

To understand the preparation required of the most dedicated battlers, let's follow an American DJ in the months before a national competition in the mid-1990s. The story is a composite, drawing on and extrapolating from the experiences of a variety of battlers active at the time. I take this approach rather than simply reporting second-hand in order to communicate the visceral intensity of the battler's life, from the months of relentless preparation at home to the mere minutes onstage, where a single routine can shape a DJ's life for years to come.

June, 1994: Our battler is a man in his mid-twenties living in a medium-sized city on the East Coast. DJ X, as we'll call him, has been DJing for nearly a decade and battling for four years.⁴⁰ He works at a local copy shop to make ends meet, but he only works part-time so he can prepare for battles. As battle champion

DJ Slyce has said, "You gotta work constantly on your routine[s], don't think you can win while doing five other jobs. You gotta focus."⁴¹ X has just returned from a national battle, having earned a spot by winning the preliminary regional battle in May. He's not unhappy with his performance—he made it to the second round—but he knows he can do better. May and June were exhausting, so he enjoys some down time in July and just gets on the decks long enough every day to keep from getting stiff.

During this down time, X spends countless hours studying videotapes of battles. He wants to familiarize himself with the strengths and weaknesses of potential competitors, and to draw inspiration for his routines. DJ Swamp did the same, watching eight years' worth of DJ battles in preparation for the 1996 DMC US finals in San Francisco. (Swamp is the Cleveland DJ who surprised everyone by beating heavily-favored battlers from the X-Men and the Beat Junkies.) When he would see a move that impressed him, he would ask himself, "Now, how can I take that to the next level?" For example, he saw Shortkut beat juggle with one turntable going forward and one going backwards: "So that's why [in the 1996 DMC battle] I did both in reverse, so I could one-up it," Swamp says. His "homework," as he called it, paid off. His final routine, a catalog of next-level moves, stunned the crowd and impressed the judges; no one had expected him to win.⁴² ♣ Swamp's success in San Francisco gave a huge boost to his career; among other things, rock musician Beck invited him to be his DJ on tour and for his next album. This is the kind of success story that drives battlers, and it is this kind of success our DJ X dreams about during these long months of study and practice.

August arrives, and DJ X is ready to create some new routines. He likes to have a single song at the core of a routine, and after wading through his vinyl, he decides to use Gang Starr's recent track, "Code of the Streets." ♣ It appeals to him on several levels. Most broadly, X is a huge fan of Premier, Gang Starr's DJ/producer, and with his routine is offering a gesture of respect to one of his heroes. More specifically, the recurring, descending four-note line that runs through the song has a laid-back but slightly ominous feel to it, and he can scratch it and chop it in any number of ways. "Code of the Streets" also has some battle-appropriate lyrics that he can manipulate, like "If a sucker steps up, then I leave him bleeding," and "Nine times out of ten I win, with the skills I be wielding." Finally, "Code" is a hot track, and just the sound of the opening should get the crowd on his side.

By the time X steps onstage, every moment of his routine will be fixed, but at this point improvisation is crucial. Every day he puts a copy of "Code" on each turntable, trying out different scratches, experimenting with various ways of looping and chopping the beats. He does this for hours on end, discarding ideas, refining others, slowly building his routine. After a few weeks, the routine is

taking shape. He'll start with the opening of "Code," letting the four-note pattern play twice unchanged. He knows the crowd will love the song, and he's counting on their cheers to pump him up. Then he'll slowly ratchet up the intensity and difficulty of the routine in a kind of theme-and-variation form. The first variation will be fairly simple—he'll replace the last note of each pattern with a scratch, doing that three times (each with a different scratch) before letting the last note drop. After this, things will get more complicated, and he'll move into some beat juggling—he's worked up one pattern that repeats, "Sucker . . . bleeding." He might incorporate another record or two for contrast or some other disses or boasts, but this is really a one-song routine. He likes to think that it will become known as "X's Code of the Streets routine," just like people refer to "Rob Swift's Nobody Beats the Biz routine" or "Babu's Blind Alley routine." ●

Although X's routine is an original creation—he's careful not to bite other DJs' moves—he's indebted to his idol, Steve Dee, for the shape of the routine and his overall strategy. So let's take a minute to hear directly from Steve Dee. "I would play the song," Steve explains, "get you familiar with the song, double up a couple of times, to let you see where I'm leading it, and then escalate up and up and up. I get you to that head-nod stage, and then I come down." Drilling down a level deeper, he explains further:

I would probably play around with the kick or the snare, or if there's a word that I'm going to use, I would chop that up a little bit, then I would incorporate the beat, you know, the drumplay along with the wordplay and rearrange it and then change the tempo, slow it down. Or, you could change the speed of the record, and put it on 45 [rpm]—that has another effect—it's going real fast, but once you control it again, if you bring it down to a head nod, and everything is clean, you could actually call the authorities after that. 'Cause you just killed everybody.⁴³

This mix of compositional savvy and complete badassery is exactly the one-two combination that X hopes to unleash on his opponents.

After finishing his "Code of the Streets" routine, X creates three others, each based on a single song. Single-song routines were popular in the late 1980s and early '90s, but soon new approaches started to emerge. Some DJs used large stretches of two songs and some composed medley-like routines with fragments of several tracks, while other DJs' routines weren't song-based at all, but more like collages of abstract sounds or effects. As we've seen, the single-song approach became less common as battle records started to proliferate; X does have a collection of battle records, and plans to use bits of two different ones in his routines, but he doesn't want to lean too heavily on them.

Our DJ also plans on seasoning his routines with body tricks. They've become somewhat less common since the backlash that followed DJ David's crazy stunt a few years back, but a few well-chosen moves will impress the crowd. X is on the short side, so some of the tricks favored by his long-limbed friends, like the under-the-leg scratch or behind-the-back, aren't for him. He does have some nice moves involving his elbows and shoulders—easier for him since he doesn't have to reach down very far. Once he has his routines whittled down to the required two minutes, he'll start incorporating his body tricks into his practice sessions.

It's now early 1995, and X is putting together three more routines. He doesn't know yet whom he'll be facing in the first round of this head-to-head battle, so he's crafting routines that should demonstrate his originality, command of technique, and crowd appeal, three areas that the best routines generally excel in. But his routines differ in some significant ways. Two of them are heavier on scratching, while two spotlight his juggling. One of them incorporates "tones," where the DJ fashions a melody out of a long-held note by manipulating the pitch adjuster. (It's a slider that actually changes the record speed, though the effect is heard as a change in pitch.) Battle records started including long, single pitches for this purpose, though originally DJs used actual test-tone records—specially made discs created for testing or calibrating audio equipment. At the time X is competing, tones have been popular for the last few years, the trend led by San Francisco DJ 8-Ball, who has played "Iron Man," "Frère Jacques," "Yankee Doodle," "Nuthin but a G Thang," and other tunes on the way to winning battles.⁴⁴ ● The tunes tend to be fairly basic because the calibrated pitch control on most turntables doesn't allow for a wide range—the standard Technics 1200 allows a plus or minus eight percent adjustment, though changing the platter speed from 33 to 45 rpm extends this range.⁴⁵ Simple they may be, but crowds always enjoy hearing these melodies, and our man plans on using tones in his "Code" routine to imitate the first four notes of the song.

Spring, 1995: battle season is just around the corner. Although X has been practicing regularly since the previous August, he now kicks it into high gear. Depending on his work schedule at the copy shop, he can usually put in four hours a day. This is hardly unusual among battlers. In the 1988 song "King Tech," MC Sway described his DJ (named in the track's title) this way: "Tucked away in his room you never see him for days / takin' skillful steps through a musical maze." Steve Dee often practiced eight or even ten hours a day when he was battling, though exactly how long depended on his mother's mood when she came home from work.⁴⁶ Rob Swift practiced five days a week after work at the house of his mentor, Dr. Butcher, for almost the whole year before the 1992 DMC.⁴⁷ For X, too, the days have become a succession of scratching, working, scratching, sleeping, and scratching. But mostly scratching. His social life blinks

out of existence. This is a common affliction among turntablists, as DJ Beware has noted:

Scratching damages your social life and your ability to function as a normal human being. You spend the whole day at home rubbing records and pushing buttons, while your friends are out there having fun. No matter how hard you try not to, all you end up talking about is scratching this and scratching that. Instead of brushing your teeth, the first thing you do in the morning is to put on records and scratch. . . .⁴⁸

This is not to say that X lives a solitary life. He has a small network of DJ friends he practices with, and at least twice a week he meets with his mentor DJ Velvel, who taught him how to scratch when he was fifteen. Velvel, stopwatch in hand, circles his protégé as he practices, timing his routines while offering a running commentary on his scratches and juggles. Velvel is just what X needs: generous with his time, stingy with his praise.

It's the week before the regional battle—a preliminary step on the way to nationals—and his routines are ready to go. Life is now just about practicing and refining his routines. X is heavily favored to win—and he does. The battle's sponsor is a local sound equipment store, and he wins a gift certificate and a T-shirt. For him, the regionals are simply a steppingstone to the nationals, where his sights have always been set.

Two weeks now remain until nationals, and the list of competitors has just been posted on the Internet. X has his routines ready—as is common, he will recycle them from the regionals—but now it's time to start strategizing about which he will perform first. If he's lucky, he'll start out against a weaker DJ and can use his least impressive routine. But what if he draws one of the stronger DJs? Should he use his best routine to ensure that he'll get to the next round? Or should he gamble and save his best for the final round, hoping that he can dispatch other DJs without it? He also has to consider the particular strengths of each DJ. As Rob Swift explained in the quote that opens this chapter, "If I go up against this DJ, I want to intercept whatever style he may come at me with. And when I go up against this other DJ, he DJs like this, so I need to be prepared for this and that and the third." DJ X knows most of the entrants, and the ones he doesn't are probably new to battling. But he's smart enough not to assume anything, and he'll start asking around about the first-timers. After all, Cash Money was a first-time battler when he won the New Music Seminar in 1987.

There's yet another reason for identifying competitors as soon as possible: disses. X likes a good diss, but he doesn't live for them like some of his opponents do. So he'll keep them brief. He already has some generic disses ready, but the judges and crowd always enjoy hearing DJs insult each other by name.

In the days remaining before the battle he continues to practice, and when he can, he digs through his vinyl for personalized disses, all the while subsisting on little sleep and vast quantities of Mountain Dew.

The day before the battle, X checks into the cheap motel where the other out-of-town competitors are staying. As in most battles, the DJs pay their own way. Although everyone will use the equipment provided by the battle organizers, they all bring turntables and mixers and portable speakers so they can squeeze in a few more hours of practice; thumping bass and rasping scratches leak from each DJ's room into the sickly fluorescence of the motel's hallway. Even though they could practice with headphones, many DJs are there with friends or their crews—there's also a crew category in this battle—so they either want or need others to hear them practice. Despite the fierce competitiveness of most battle DJs, the atmosphere at the motel, and when tomorrow comes, at the battle itself, is surprisingly friendly and open. Enemy combatants even hang out in each other's rooms, and most wish their rivals good luck. Still, there's likely to be some trash talk and gamesmanship behind the scenes. Steve Dee, though friendly and well liked outside of competition, sees psychological warfare as an important part of battling. "I would really just come in there all loud mouth, and causing a ruckus, causing a scene. . . . I would figure out something to get under somebody's skin, throw their game plan off."⁴⁹ Fortunately for X, there are no Steve Dee-like tormentors prowling the motel's halls.

After a mostly sleepless night and some fitful naps the next day, X leaves for the venue, a small club with a tiny backstage. The battle organizer—a detail-minded woman in her late twenties who is liked by all DJs but takes grief from none—has instructed everyone to check in with her at 7:30 p.m. (Although most battle DJs are men, women have run many of the most important battles in the DJ world: prime examples including Christie Z-Pabon in the United States and Sally McLintock and Christine Prince in England.) Before the battle, a few renowned DJs who no longer compete will offer some showcases.

It's now 11:30 p.m., and the MC announces that the battle is to begin. The crowd, about 200 strong, inches toward the stage and starts to cheer. This being a typical American battle of the time, the audience is racially mixed, though with white men in the majority; most are between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five, and most wear T-shirts, baggy pants, and baseball caps. Sprinkled throughout the audience are young women and a handful of older folks, including some of the competitors' parents and a journalist or two.

X watches from the wings as the first two DJs perform, each standing before a set of turntables on opposite sides of the stage. He listens with an expert ear, at times nodding his head in admiration of a difficult and well executed scratch combination, at other times grimacing (or smiling) at a botched transition or unfortunate needle skip. Few in the audience are as knowledgeable, but there is

a high level of connoisseurship here (and quite a few DJs in attendance). Many can identify the strengths and weaknesses of each routine, and even recognize when one DJ is biting someone else's routine. For spectators without this knowledge base, battles can bewilder. A harsh diss might be heard as a random fragment of a song; a complex juggle could pass entirely unappreciated. It might not even be clear how a DJ's motions are connected to the sounds booming from the speakers. A *New Yorker* review of the 1993 New Music Seminar makes this point: "The audience was enthusiastic and intent but highly discriminating. A d.j. whose set seemed spectacular to the uninitiated would receive polite applause, but other d.j.s were able to tap a mysterious current of excitement in the crowd, and hundreds of baseball caps would begin nodding to the beat, uplifted arms would begin waving, and hundreds of people would leap to their feet and cheer."⁵⁰ Although, as the critic points out, the uninitiated can enjoy a battle, the expertise required to fully appreciate a battle is a symptom of turntablism's insularity, an issue that would come to be of great concern and debate among DJs.

It's after midnight and X is up. He and his opponent step onto the hot, cramped stage. Crowded there are the DJs and the judges, the MC, the event organizers, and various hangers-on; several are standing right behind him, some of whom provide a running commentary during his routines. X takes the decks first, and goes with his third-best routine. He's up against DJ Krassen, not a particular threat, but solid overall. Too bad he hadn't gone with his weakest routine—one of Krassen's needles kept skipping, and although it shouldn't have been disastrous, he was thrown off his game. He missed his juggle routine completely and threw together some halfhearted scratch combinations to fill out the two minutes. Apparently, Krassen never got the advice that Velvel drilled into X: always expect equipment problems and *never* broadcast your mistakes. With the look on Krassen's face he might as well have just given up. The next two rounds aren't as easy, but X prevails, not simply because his routines were strong, but because of his relentless preparation. Even a sticky crossfader couldn't derail him.

He's now in the final round against DJ Boddicker, an experienced turntablist who specializes in complex juggle routines and clever wordplay. Fortunately, X has saved his "Code" routine. He'll need it. Although he's confident, this battle could go either way. He's up first, opening his routine with the beginning of "Code of the Streets." He recently tweaked his routine slightly, so instead of letting it play it out right away, he repeats the first note several times, bringing the volume up each time. The sound of the sample is so distinctive that people start to murmur in recognition, and by the time he lets the record continue, the crowd cheers with pleasure. Sweating underneath the spotlights, adrenaline coursing through his body, X performs the rest of his routine almost flawlessly.

The crowd loves his tones, and he coaxes them into a unison head nod during his juggles. However, he doesn't get much of a reaction out of the wordplay during his juggle—"sucker . . . bleeding." They've heard more than an hour's worth of dissing, and by now they need something stronger to stoke their enthusiasm. Still, by any criteria, the routine was a success and he feels good about his performance. There is nothing more for him to do except wait and watch. The moment he had been working toward for nearly a year has now passed.

During X's routine, Boddicker stood not fifteen feet away, slowly shaking his head, pretending to be disappointed at not having a more formidable opponent. Now it's his turn and he smirks as he hits the start button on his right turntable. X knows a nasty diss is coming, and his stomach turns sour in anticipation. It's worse than he thought. Boddicker obviously knows X's given name, a name that has always embarrassed him (and which only his mother is allowed to use). Floating out over the audience is a line of cartoon dialogue in which a woman sweetly calls to a baby with X's real name, cooing, "time to change your diaper." The crowd laughs as they turn toward X. Boddicker then isolates X's name, and then switches over to the other turntable to complete the diss: "I'll fuck your ass up!" booms out, courtesy of the Wu-Tang Clan's 1993 track, "Shame on a Nigga." He repeats the diss several times; worse, he expertly loops the records with one hand, so as to free the other to brandish a middle finger in X's direction. The crowd erupts, scores of young men gleefully jumping up and down. X usually doesn't mind even the nastiest disses, but this one takes him back to some of his least-pleasant childhood memories. He briefly fantasizes about beating Boddicker with a Technics.

Boddicker then continues to work "Shame." He brings the song back to the opening, a bouncy horn call and response sampled from Syl Johnson's 1967 R&B track "Different Strokes," and breaks it down, rebuilding it into a new rhythm. A few brief but inventive scratch patterns and some more choice disses create variety and keep the crowd hooting. All in all, it's a great routine.

The lights come up and the MC congratulates both DJs and tells the crowd not to wander far; the judges will have their decision soon. For what seems like an hour, but is more like ten minutes, X paces backstage, sweaty, jittery, and tense. Finally, he and Boddicker are called back. The spotlights are on them once again as the MC intones, "And the winner of the 1995 Battle for Global Domination is . . . DJ Boddicker!" Hearing this, X feels something collapse inside himself, his shoulders dropping visibly.

As runner-up, X wins a small pile of records, some slipmats, and two needles, which he accepts graciously but unenthusiastically. Some from the audience approach him afterward and say that he should have won the battle, and one of his friends speculates that Boddicker had one of the judges in his pocket.

Sure, X has seen his share of bad calls from battle judges, but he's not sure this is one of them. Boddicker's routine was well crafted and well executed, and the crowd loved it. Who knows, maybe X would have won if not for Boddicker's personalized diss. But where was he going to find "Boddicker" on record? He only later realized that Boddicker was named after Clarence Boddicker, the villain in *Robocop*. Still, he would have had a hard time getting the name from a VHS tape onto vinyl.

After the awards, the DJs go out for drinks. The sting of the loss is dulled by the alcohol and the friendly vibe—a lot of other DJs, Boddicker included, compliment him on his performances. After a late night, X heads back to the motel, where he collapses until the next morning. He can't afford to pay for another day, so he drags himself and his gear out to his car, cracks the windows, and sleeps for three more hours in the parking lot.

On the long drive home X reflects on the battle. He can think of a few places where his routines might have been stronger, and he definitely should have come up with better disses. Overall, though, he can't be too disappointed. He pushed himself and he tested himself, and in the end he was a better DJ for it. The steady march of white highway dashes lulls him into a reverie, and he starts to ponder his future. As he knows, most battle DJs only compete for a few years. The very best may garner lucrative gigs and sponsorships, and some make a decent living by touring and selling battle records. Others go on to make solo albums or become producers. But for those not at the top—and who may still be astoundingly good—battling can be financially ruinous. X spent a few hundred dollars just to compete this weekend, and thousands more on equipment and records over the past year, a period when he had cut back on his hours at work so he could devote more time to battling. For all who battle, the preparation is so intense, so time- and energy-consuming, that it is simply unsustainable for very long. So he has to make a decision. He can borrow some money and keep battling for another year, gambling that a few big wins will pay off. Or he can retire from competition, but still try to make a full-time living as a gigging DJ, spinning at clubs and restaurants and, if he can stomach it, the fraternity and sorority, bar- and bat-mitzvah, and quinceañera circuit. Or maybe he should just move on and recover his financial, physical, and emotional health. Whatever he does, he'll always look back on this period of his life with pride in his accomplishments and astonishment at his dedication to his craft. But for now, his future is uncertain.

For battle DJs—and our DJ is meant to be representative of his kind—complete dedication is necessary, while financial and personal sacrifices are common. And there are no guarantees. Months of preparation lead to just a few minutes in the spotlight, and all but a few walk away from the experience with an empty wallet to show for it. But most have no regrets. Thinking back on his

battle career, Shortcut says, "I'm glad I did it. I'm glad I went through that hardship."⁵¹ Or as Babu explains, "The battle experience was a big part of my development . . . having that tension in my life for like five years."⁵²

WHY BATTLE? ISSUES OF GENDER AND IDENTITY

Why do they do it? Why would anyone willingly put themselves through such hardship and stress? When I put this question to DJs, they often use the same word to describe themselves: *competitive*. Battle DJs—successful ones at least—are at their best in high-stress, adrenaline-fueled competitions, and seek out arenas where they can prove themselves against others. Cash Money entered the New Music Seminar Battle because, as he said, "I'm a very competitive person [and] I wanted to be known as the world's greatest DJ." The adversarial nature of battling, however, was for him only a means to an end—improving his craft. "You know it's never been about beef or anything like that. I mean it's just being competitive. If someone beats you, you just go back to the drawing board and try to do better the next time."⁵³ Steve Dee's answer to the question, "Why battle?" is simple: "I'm a real competitive guy." Before he got into DJing, he was a serious baseball player, but unfortunately he never had the chance to prove himself. "I still feel to this day I would hold the single season home-run record," he told me. "My heart got like broken in the baseball realm, and so I put all my competitiveness into music."⁵⁴ Or consider the example of DJ Immortal from Miami. As a teenager he was inspired to become a turntablist after seeing the 1992 film *Juice*. Here's how he describes his reaction to a scene that depicted a DJ battle: "They were battling, they were throwin' down. I saw them going back and forth, fighting each other with turntables. The crowd was totally eggin' 'em on. It was just this awesome instrument that I was seeing, the turntable. Plus that competitive element, too, where you could just *destroy* someone. It was like a real sport."⁵⁵

Like Steve Dee, Immortal sees a kinship between competitive sports and battling. These responses aren't surprising; after all, anyone who consistently enters battles must have a taste for competition. But there's something else that helps explain the draw of battling. This has to do with the obvious fact that most battle DJs are men. The reason for this, I believe, is that the institution of the DJ battle promotes a heroic model of masculinity that particularly appeals to many young men.⁵⁶

A young man entering a battle does not enter as the unpopular teenager, the debt-laden single father, or even the well-adjusted, high-achieving university student. He enters with a new name and a distinct personality. Often DJs choose *noms de guerre* that hint at menace or extraordinary abilities—Craze, Daredevil,

Enferno, Homicide, Infamous, Lethal, Mista Sinista, Pimp, Ruthless, Troubl. Two early crews, the X-Men and the Supermen, were inspired by comic-book heroes, and Qbert, remember, wanted his name “to be something from a comic book,” like “Ripclaw” or “The Slasher.” Video games have also inspired DJs—British battle DJ Tigerstyle took his name from a character in *Street Fighter II*.⁵⁷ Yet whatever the name, coming armed with a moniker is a requisite part of battling. In fact, virtually no hip-hop DJs, battlers or otherwise, perform under their birth names. “I think it’s corny when DJs use their real name,” says DJ Quest, a turntablist from the Bay Area who battled between 1990 and 1996. “You want to create this other kind of identity. You want to come off as a superhero.”⁵⁸ Or as Johnny “Juice” Rosado puts it, many DJs want “to be superheroes, to rise above their mundane, everyday life.”⁵⁹

Taking on a heroic identity appeals to male DJs because, as they often admit, many fall into a category that is hardly heroic: the nerd. Although they inhabit the world of hip-hop, turntablists are not the bling-wearing, gun-slinging, macho ladies’ men celebrated in gangsta rap lyrics and videos. Some turntablists even embrace the “nerd” label. Two of the most respected battle DJs, Craze and Klever, called their 2002 collaborative album *Scratch Nerds*; DJ Revolution has a track by the same name on his 2008 release *King of the Decks*. And the renowned DJ Qbert proclaims, “I am a nerd. Fuck yeah! Proud of it!”⁶⁰ In Japan, some turntablists jokingly refer to themselves or their colleagues as “scratch otaku,” *otaku* being a general term that describes someone who obsesses over a particular hobby or activity, like comic books or video games.⁶¹ At the same time, these self-proclaimed nerds are drawn to DJing because it allows them, at least for brief periods, to stop being nerds. Kid Koala’s 1995 track “Tricks ‘n’ Treats,” where he plays with dialogue from the beloved 1966 animated special, *It’s the Great Pumpkin, Charlie Brown*, illustrates this perfectly. It’s Halloween, and after visiting each neighbor’s house to gather treats, Charlie Brown and friends peek inside their bags. “I got a chocolate bar!,” “I got a quarter!,” “I got five pieces of candy!,” the other kids exclaim. But poor Charlie Brown, what did he get? “I got a rock,” he moans. Koala takes this line, stutters it a few times and adds a heavy breakbeat beneath it. In the process he transforms a lament, “I got a rock,” into an imperative, “I gotta rock.” Each time the line returns we can almost hear the boy’s voice gain confidence. As Kid Koala demonstrates, given a set of turntables and some dope beats, even the Charlie Browniest of DJs can rock.

This transformation is only possible because of the mediation of technology. It’s no small matter that DJs battle each other not only from behind assumed names and identities, but literally from behind a table full of machinery, which Kid Koala likens to “a suit of armor.”⁶² This technological distancing allows them to be cleverer, and more confident, intimidating, and powerful than their

non-battle selves. Shortcut, one of the great battlers, points this out himself: “I’m a really quiet guy, but when it’s battle time, I want to be, like, awesome, you know what I mean?”⁶³ Peanut Butter Wolf, a fellow DJ from the Bay Area, is even blunter. “Here I was, this little white boy, this funny-looking ugly dude, and I wound up beating a lot of people.”⁶⁴ In battle, these normally quiet guys and awkward dudes can be heroes and even claim global conquest by winning international competitions.

Of course, women can also be battle heroes, but they rarely even enter these competitions. It’s astonishing just how few there are. Among the thousands of DJs who have entered DMC battles, perhaps no more than a dozen have been women, and only one—Kuttin Kandi—has progressed to the U.S. finals.⁶⁵ Even those who follow the scene would be hard-pressed to name more than a few women battlers; in addition to Kuttin Kandi these might include Jazzy Joyce and Pam the Funkstress, representing an earlier generation, and more recent figures such as Killa-Jewel and DJ Sparkles. To put this in a broader perspective, women (at least in United States) are *much* more likely to become construction workers and coal miners than battle DJs.⁶⁶ The reason for this scarcity, however, does not seem to be direct discrimination. “I never saw one incident where a woman was discouraged from battling,” battle organizer Christie Z-Pabon has pointed out. “In fact, the battle DJ scene, though male dominated, is very supportive of women battling.”⁶⁷ There are surely subtler forms of prejudice affecting active or aspiring women battlers, but discrimination itself cannot explain the dearth of women.

There *are* barriers to women in the battle world, but they are erected well before any female DJ considers entering a competition. Even today, in many societies girls are not often encouraged to embrace technology or enter technical fields. Nor are they typically socialized to be aggressively and loudly competitive, and when they do act in this way, they are rarely rewarded or excused for it; there is no “girls will be girls” pass for that kind of behavior. In other words, the defining characteristics of DJ battles have been enough to keep most women out, even if the men truly do want them to be included. There’s nothing to say the battle scene cannot become more female-friendly, however. In fact, there have been women-only DJ competitions, but these are more recent phenomena that we’ll consider in the final chapter. Still, even in 2012, the scarcity of women battlers is striking, just as it was in 1995 and in the two decades before that.

Battling has been central to hip-hop DJ culture since the very beginning, but there was something exceptional about the scene of the early and mid-1990s. The period was unparalleled in the number of battlers and the international scope of battling, in the technical innovations in scratching and beat juggling, and in the artistry and virtuosity of the music making heard at these competitions.

To many, it was a golden age of battling and of turntablism in general. As Los Angeles-based DJ Revolution put it, the battle scene of the mid-1990s “was like the jazz scene in Harlem in the 1920s. Cats would come from all over to see what was going on, hear the new songs, learn the new tricks.”⁶⁸ There has never been, and may never again be, a period in which competition was such a driving force in the world of the hip-hop DJ.

Golden ages rarely last long, however, and often plant the seeds of their own decline. The more turntablist technique advanced and the more intense the competition became, the more insular the battle scene turned. As the 1990s wore on, battle routines became ever more complex, sounding less and less like anything mainstream hip-hop fans could sing along with or dance to. Even to many hip-hop fans it was a closed world.

Some turntablists themselves wondered if things had gone too far. Z-Trip sees the problem in historical terms, tracing the separatist mentality in turntablism to the marginalization of DJs by MCs in the 1980s: “We got so tired of the MCs—‘Fuck you, guys, we’re going to do our own thing’—but now we’re kind of screwing ourselves because we’re doing what the MCs were doing.”⁶⁹ DJ Quest, an active battler in the 1990s, believes that turntablism became too technical and got too far from “the dance element.” He claims that he can only listen to pure scratching for about fifteen minutes at a stretch. “I can only take so much of that shit,” he says in all seriousness.⁷⁰ Apollo, a founding member of the Invisibl Skratch Piklz, laments the split among hip-hop DJs into different camps. “There was a separation at one point. Turntablists just wanted to be turntablists, and party-rocking DJs just wanted to be party-rocking DJs. There wasn’t a mutual respect between them. I think everyone should support each other.” He also thinks overspecialization can be a DJ’s downfall. “DJs should encompass as many different aspects of DJing as they can. It’s only right. It’s only right as a musician.”⁷¹ His own post-ISP career has embodied these sentiments. In 1999, he, Shortkut, and Vinroc formed Triple Threat DJs and promoted themselves as DJs who could fill a dance floor but also perform mind-blowing scratch routines.

To some DJs, the pendulum had swung too far. No one wanted to return to the fallow years of 1989 and 1990, when DATs were threatening the existence of DJs and when crucial advances in mixer technology still lay in the future. The artistic independence that turntablism achieved was inarguably a major accomplishment, but some DJs sought a broader acceptance of their art as well. As we will see, they got their wish, but they could not have foreseen the consequences of this newfound acceptance.

Legitimacy: 1996–2002

Two turntablists face each other from opposite ends of a large room. One launches a flurry of scratches and then points at the other, daring him to do better. The second DJ gestures dismissively and scratches right back. All the while, an attractive woman dances behind a third set of turntables positioned in between the two men, swinging her hips. The music stops and she purrs, “My first love—boys who scratch.”

This should be the point when the DJ wakes up suddenly, a smile on his face. But this is no nocturnal fantasy. The setting is an August 2001 television commercial for the clothing retailer, The Gap.¹ The battlers are the celebrated turntablists Shortkut and Rob Swift, and the woman is Shannyn Sossamon, a former DJ turned actress. The fact that all three are clad in denim is no coincidence: this is a jeans commercial. 🎵

Though only thirty seconds long, the commercial speaks volumes about the state of the hip-hop DJ at the beginning of the new millennium. The Gap spot was just a part of broader changes taking place at the time. Starting in the mid-1990s, DJs were collaborating with pop, rock, jazz, and classical musicians, bringing the sound of scratching to new audiences. As soloists and as crews, DJs were recording albums, collectively demonstrating that they could be composers capable of creating cohesive, long-form works; a handful of DJs even developed notation systems in order to preserve their art and to claim for it a place in high culture. In 2000, DJs from around the world gathered in San Francisco for Skratchcon, an event billed as “The world’s first conference dedicated to the education and development of skratch music literacy.”² Hosted by the Invisibl Skratch Piklz, this one-day program of public seminars revealed a growing consciousness among turntablists of their history and a growing desire to demonstrate the richness of their art. Two well-regarded documentaries, *Battle Sounds* by John Carluccio (1997) and Doug Pray’s *Scratch* (2001), exposed turntablism to those who thought it was little more than ruining