
Music as a Cultural System: Sensibility and Interpretation

Ian Maxwell

On Interpretation

My favourite Borges fable is that of Pierre Menard, the man who wanted to rewrite *Don Quixote*.¹ Menard's ambition, Borges recounts in his dry parody of literary criticism, was not merely to reproduce Cervantes's work, but to do so spontaneously: to (re)write the *Quixote* not by a labour of research, nor by somehow mystically channeling the original author, but as an act of original creativity. By the end of the story Menard has succeeded, in part, producing several word-perfect passages. In the final pages of the story, Borges subjects two identical passages, one written in seventeenth-century Spain, and the other in early twentieth-century France, to a comparative analysis. Breathtakingly, Borges is able to produce compelling, and utterly discordant, interpretations of the two works. His argument—one that anticipates those of the post-structuralists by decades—is, of course, that context is everything. Texts are unstable, polysemic potentials for meaning, rather than the bearers of extractable truths.

In this essay I want to do something similar. I will be writing of those listeners constituting a 'hip hop community' in Sydney in the mid-1990s. I will take two recordings that are, for all intents and purposes, identical in terms of instrumentation, structure and stylistic conventions. Each was recorded around the same time, and each circulated in the same milieu. One was the subject of acclaim, the other of disdain. One was considered to be 'hip hop,' the other not. My interest is not in aesthetic judgements about the relative worth of each of these recordings. For insiders—those for whom hip hop was an organising principle for their social and aesthetic identities—it was quite easy to point to the superiority of one over the other, in terms of the relative quality and content of the raps, for example.² Rather, my concern is with the judgement

¹ Jorge Luis Borges, 'Pierre Menard: The Man who Wrote *Don Quixote*' [1941], *Collected Fictions*, transl. Andrew Hurley (London: The Penguin Press, 1998) 88–95.

² See my 'Phat Beats, Dope Rhymes': *Hip Hop Down Under Comin' Upper* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 2003).

that one of the albums, despite its apparent musical similarity to the other, was hip hop, while the other was not.

My argument is that an analysis of the musicological features of each recording cannot suffice to account for the diametrically opposed responses they provoked. Any musicological project, therefore, purporting to account for the meaningfulness of any music must, necessarily, move beyond analysis of the music itself to the context not only of that music's original creation, but to the multiple contexts in which that music circulates. In the process, I want to think about how it is that music comes to not just 'mean,' but how it becomes meaningful.

True to the Music

Among the pieces of writing I came across as I researched Sydney's hip hop demimonde in the mid-1990s was an article, printed in *Vapours*, one of the scene's fanzines, explaining the concept of 'the Hip Hop Nation.'³ This Hip Hop Nation, the piece explained, was less a material entity than a state of being: a set of ideals and practices constituting the possibility of hip hop existing here, Down Under, in the bodies and practices of white boys living in the suburbs of Sydney, far from originary contexts of hip hop—The Bronx, South Central or Philadelphia.

At the end of this article—an extended meditation on hip hop transnationalism, troped through a spectrum of communalities, from village to imperial power—and having pushed the geographic metaphor to the limit, the writer offers a final set of 'directions to[wards]' the Hip Hop Nation. 'So,' he writes, 'how do you get there? Put the needle on the record and "it'll take you there". And if it doesn't, then you never will.'⁴

This, then, is the insider's rationale for the meaningfulness of hip hop music: you either get it—viscerally, as a matter of the embodied experience of the amplified effects of a stylus in a vinyl groove—in which case you are already there; or you don't, in which case, don't even bother. The tautological self-evidence of this formulation is that to which Žižek refers in his writings on nationalism: there is a thing, he explains, which binds a people—any people—together. It doesn't matter what the thing is; it doesn't even matter if you cannot describe or name it: all that matters is that we, the nation, the people, know ourselves as sharing it.⁵

Hard Core Means True to the Music

The hip hop thing is whatever it is that you get when you get it. And the royal road to getting it is the vibration of a stylus in a vinyl groove, the amplification of that vibration to beats, sub-sonic, gut shaking, 'phat' beats (this play on 'fat' itself a resonant, corporeal image), grounding the snap of a high-hat, the fuzz of a scratchy, second-hand sample, and the growl of a rapper. Such music, Def Wish Cast, one of the leading Sydney hip hop crews of the 1990s, rapped, was 'hard core.' To be 'hard core,' they explained, once again, with a self-confident circularity borne of absolute certitude, was to be 'true to the music.'⁶ For hip hop aficionados,

³ Fibular, 'Address to the Hip Hop Nation,' *Vapours* 8 (1992): 9. Note the capitalisation of 'Hip Hop' in Fibular's text.

⁴ Fibular, 'Address to the Hip Hop Nation' 9.

⁵ Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying With the Negative: Kant, Hegel, and the Critique of Ideology* (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1993).

⁶ This is a lyric from Def Wish Cast's anthemic track 'AUST,' from the 1992 album *Knights of the Underground Table*, Random Records 001.

then, music—or a particular kind of music—was capable of embodying a ‘truth’; a cultural truth: the truth of hip hop.⁷

The meaning of this music, then, is at least in part this materiality yielded by the needle on the record. A musicology of this music must account for the assurance, this sense of belonging experienced as a bodily state. And it is a sense: the meaning of the music is at least partially—and I would argue substantially and most significantly—a question of sense and sensation; of bodies and movement, experienced collectively: of practice and sociality.

For many, the truth of the music of hip hop could be defined by a specific instrumentation, or, rather, lack of instrumentation: for the ‘Old School enthusiasts’ I researched in Sydney in the 1990s, true hip hop was composed using only two turntables and a microphone. The turntables were to be used by a DJ (disc jockey), or, later, a ‘turntable instrumentalist,’ to sample existing recordings to create backing tracks, and to create rhythmic scratches, accompanying the rapped delivery of the MC (master of ceremonies). Ideally, hip hop music was a form of composition in performance—a quasi-improvisational practice, sustainable for extended periods and characterised, indeed defined, by the absence of ‘live’ instrumentation. To rap over the frenzied extemporised turntable manipulations of an accomplished DJ was to respond the muse of authentic, ordinary hip hop.⁸

Over time, such purist aspirations were able to accommodate technological innovations: the use of mixing decks, drum machines, primitive synthesizers (mainly used for creating big bass sounds) and early generations of computers to record backing tracks on DAT (Digital Audio Tape) decks. The guiding principle of ‘no live instruments,’ however, was consistent throughout the 1980s and into the 1990s. Technology which preserved the feeling of live sampling, such as low-tech four track mixers, which DJs/producers would use to ‘ping-pong,’ or mix down multiple layers of samples and drum machine beats, was allowable. The resulting tracks were, characteristically, rough-edged, with samples retaining the audible markers of their sources: hisses and crackle, ambient sound and so on. DAT was a reliable, high-quality medium capable of reproducing the broad, almost sub-sonic bass tones generated—the phat beats—in live performance. However, until the 1990s, being ‘hard core’ meant no live instruments.

In the early 1990s, however, things changed. Two American recordings, released within months of each other, introduced live musicians to hip hop. I will return to these recordings below. First, however, I want to develop some theoretical perspectives with which to understand how these musics were meaningful for their listeners in the world of Sydney hip hop.

⁷ I have written extensively about Def Wish Cast, and the ideas of ‘hard core’ and ‘true to the music.’ See ‘True to the Music: Authenticity, Articulation and Authorship in Sydney Hip Hop Culture,’ *Social Semiotics* 4.1–2 (1994): 117–37; ‘Hip Hop Aesthetics and the Will to Culture,’ *Australian Journal of Anthropology* 8.1 (1997): 50–70; ‘On the Flow—Dancefloor Grooves, Rapping “Freestyle” and the Real Thing,’ *Perfect Beat: The Pacific Journal of Research into Contemporary Music and Popular Culture* 3.3 (1997): 15–27; ‘Sydney Style: Hip Hop Down Under Comin’ Up,’ *Global Noise: Rap and Hip Hop Outside the USA*, ed. Tony Mitchell (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan UP, 2001) 259–79; ‘The Curse of Fandom,’ *Popular Music Studies: International Perspectives*, ed. David Hesmondhalgh and Keith Negus (London: Arnold, 2002) 103–16; ‘Phat Beats, Dope Rhymes’; ‘When Worlds Collide: A Subculture Writes Back,’ *Perfect Beat* 7.2 (2005): 3–19; and (with Nikki Bambrick) ‘Discourses of Culture and Nationalism in Sydney Hip Hop,’ *Perfect Beat* 2.1 (1994): 1–19.

⁸ For a better than useful account of the origins of hip hop, see David Toop’s *Rap Attack 2: African Rap to Global Hip Hop* (London and New York: Serpent’s Tail, 1994).

How Music Means

No music means anything in and of itself.

Music is meaningful for somebody, some group of people. Only through an active process of interpretation does the assemblage of sounds constituting music—their pitches, durations, relations to each other, their qualities—become meaningful.

Here I want to draw upon approaches developed within my own discipline, performance studies, to argue that, first, musical meaning is always meaning for somebody, and second, that meaning itself is a category that extends well beyond a set of propositional knowledges: the ways in which people ‘know’ music exceeds that which we are able to assert about music in theoretical, or formalist, terms.

The first argument is, indeed, against musicological formalism, rejecting the proposition that there is an inherent meaning held within any given music, retrievable in its entirety by means of a(ny) sufficiently sophisticated musicological analysis. Such modes of analysis are necessarily reductive, abstracting music from context: not just the context of composition, for this argument also involves a rejection of any appeal to authorial intention as a grounds for meaningfulness, but the multiple contexts of reception. Indeed, the notion of ‘reception’ is itself somewhat problematic, implying a passivity on the part of the listener. The disciplines of performance and theatre studies, in theorising the processes by which spectators make sense of theatrical presentations, have come to understand audiences as active makers of meaning, rather than simply retrievers of a meaning intrinsic to the work being performed.⁹ Such an understanding is grounded in a critique of the conduit-metaphor for understanding complex semiotic processes—in which sign systems are understood as simply transparent media for the encoding, transmission and subsequent reception of intended meanings. In developing an alternative account of the ways in which cultural artifacts are meaningful—and for the purposes of this article, the ways in which music is meaningful—I will prefer the idea of listeners (to any form of music) as the co-creators of the meanings of that music, just as developments in the semiotics of theatre and performance understand spectators as the co-creators of theatrical meaning. Thus, the meaning of a piece of music is simply not there to be found in the formal construction of the music itself: musical meaning is the accomplishment of a listener, or collective of listeners responding to what it is to which they are listening, in a particular context of listening, and with the particular competencies for listening which they bring to the event of listening.

The second argument is related. If the meaning of music is co-created in contexts—that is, in actual places, by actual people—we need to understand the creation of the meaning of music as a material practice. In a very real sense, music is felt, both as corporeal sensation—the tangible resonance and material impact of sound upon (and within) flesh: the tidal surges of the sub-bass woofer echoing in my gut hours after the hip hop jam—and as affect: the tears that I cry in the second movement of Mozart’s Jupiter Symphony.

⁹ There is a substantial literature on this area. For an accessible overview, see Jacqueline Martin and Willmar Sauter, *Understanding Theatre: Performance Analysis in Theory and Practice* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1995); Gay McAuley, *Space in Performance: Making Meaning in the Theatre* (Ann Arbor, MI: U of Michigan Press, 1999).

The Limits of Formalism

One of the most compelling critiques of formalist thinking is that made by the anthropologist Clifford Geertz. 'In the modern age and in the West,' he wrote in 1983,

some ... people have managed to convince themselves that technical talk about art ... is sufficient to a complete understanding of it; that the whole secret of aesthetic power is located in the formal relations among sounds, images, volumes, themes or gestures.¹⁰

Geertz is taking aim at the structuralist project: that particular mode of formalism that holds that the meaning of an art object is inherent in the relations between the elements constituting the object itself. Geertz's critique turns on the question of feelingfulness, and an apprehension, contra the tenets of structuralism, that art objects derive their significance from the thick attachments which people forge with them; attachments which seem to be stripped of their power when analysed in purely formal terms.

To some degree art is everywhere talked about in what may be called craft terms—in terms of tonal progressions, color relations, or prosodic shapes. This is especially true in the West where subjects like harmony or pictorial composition have been developed to the point of minor sciences, and the modern move toward aesthetic formalism, best represented right now by structuralism, and by those varieties of semiotics which seek to follow its lead, is but an attempt to generalize this approach into a comprehensive one, to create a technical language capable of representing the internal relations of myths, poems, dances, or melodies in abstract, transposable terms.¹¹

However, Geertz continues, 'the definition of art in any society is never wholly intra-aesthetic.'¹² That is, art is not isolated from the warp and weft of life at large; nor, on the other hand, is art a singular, universal 'pan-human' thing: 'the giving to art objects a cultural significance,' Geertz argues, 'is always a *local* matter,'¹³ and a matter of feeling:

the means of an art and the feeling for life that animates it are inseparable, and one can no more understand aesthetic objects as concatenations of pure form than one can understand speech as a parade of syntactic variations, or myth as a set of structural transformations.¹⁴

For Geertz, 'to study an art form is to explore a sensibility . . . such a sensibility is essentially a collective formation [the foundations of which] are as wide as social existence and as deep.'¹⁵ This is perhaps the key term in Geertz's argument: 'sensibility,' glossed, following Matisse's observation of his own art, as 'a feeling for life,' and understood as comprising a 'matrix,'¹⁶ a metaphor intended to move beyond the determinism of 'structure,' and which captures some of the messiness of life as experienced: a matrix layers up, may accommodate contradiction, inconsistency and individual differences, while retaining a certain collective identity.

¹⁰ Clifford Geertz, 'Art as a Cultural System,' *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology* (New York: Fontana Press, 1983) 94–120 at 96.

¹¹ Geertz, *Local Knowledge* 95.

¹² Geertz, *Local Knowledge* 97.

¹³ Geertz, *Local Knowledge* 97; emphasis added.

¹⁴ Geertz, *Local Knowledge* 97.

¹⁵ Geertz, *Local Knowledge* 99.

¹⁶ Geertz, *Local Knowledge* 102.

Art objects, then, 'materialize a way of experiencing, bring a particular cast of mind out into the world of objects, where men can look at it.'¹⁷ At stake, always, in the making of art, is the question of a 'feeling for life': art objects are not 'mere concatenations of form'; nor are they (merely) functional: Geertz points out that societies would not necessarily collapse for want of art. Rather, art objects are fundamentally matters of feelingfulness: of a sense of being, a feeling for life. And, importantly, a feeling for life that is not simply a matter of individual preference, but a complex, material, collective matter, played out across the breadth of a society, and experienced in the immediacy of flesh. 'It is out of participation in the general system of symbolic forms we call culture,' Geertz writes, 'that participation in the particular we call art, which is in fact but a sector of it, is possible. A theory of art is thus at the same time a theory of culture, not an autonomous enterprise.'¹⁸

'Sensibility,' then, mediates the all-too-familiar distinction we tend to make between the 'objective' (the formal; the demonstrable) and the 'subjective' (the idiosyncratic; the elusive), suggesting that each is, in fact, imbricated in the other.

Meaning as Embodiment/Embodiment as Meaning

The meaning of a music, in other words, is, in addition to being a social phenomenon, a phenomenon of bodily practice. I construe 'meaning' here broadly, following the lead of the foundational semeiotician, Charles Saunders Peirce, for whom 'meaning' is defined as the effects signs have, or could have, on interpreters.¹⁹ The constellation of meanings to which musicology must attend, then, includes, for example, a tapping toe, or, the smiles exchanged between two people sharing that music, the tears shed by a solitary listener, as well as a set of formal qualities to which these meanings are articulated.

Peirce identified three orders of the sign: first, icons, which signify by virtue of resemblance (the icons on your desktop, but also the immediate nature of sound); second, indexes, signifying by causal relation (smoke signifying fire, for example); and symbols, which signify by convention (language). On Peirce's view, explains Lowell Lewis, in any interpretational process there is

a hierarchy of effects, starting with more or less inchoate feelings, and evolving into more or less coherent ideas and words. Thus, primarily iconic and indexical signs (as found in sound [music], movement [dance], and visual patterns [plastic arts, costume]) may become (partially) expressible in primarily symbolic signs (language).²⁰

For Lewis, Peirce's writings open up the possibility of a rigorous semiotics with the capacity to include the bodily, phenomenological registers of our engagement with the world, including those aspects of 'the experience of participation in an event which may include singing, dancing, special costume, and the like,' which

¹⁷ Geertz, *Local Knowledge* 99.

¹⁸ Geertz, *Local Knowledge* 109.

¹⁹ Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss, eds, *Collected Papers of Charles Saunders Peirce* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard U, 1960) vol. 5, para. 402.

²⁰ J. Lowell Lewis, 'Toward a Unified Theory of Cultural Performance: A "Reconstructive Introduction" to Victor Turner,' *Victor Turner and Cultural Performance*, ed. Graeme St John (New York: Berghaus, forthcoming).

can never be fully captured in discourse: in other words, such participation is something of an end in itself. One enjoys, or endures, such events and one may or may not be able to put those experiences clearly into words. Conceptual and linguistic interpretations, as reflections primarily after the fact, are meaningful effects that may or may not be directly linked to the experiences they are meant to 'explain.'²¹

Steven Feld traces his own journey, as ethnographer, in the reverse direction: moving from linguistic interpretation towards what he calls, after Robert Plant Armstrong, the 'affecting presence' of music:

for me it was the physical sensations of vocalizing and drumming that brought me closer to the performance aesthetic and brought some Kaluli closer to talking with me about its inner dimensions. At that point, too, they began to disappear from my mind and notes as 'functionally beautiful art forms' and to take hold as 'affecting presences' that I could experience in a meaningful way.²²

'Getting into the groove,' he explains, 'describes a feelingful participation, a positive physical and emotional attachment, a move from being "hip to it" to "getting down" and being "into it".'²³ Feld understands this experiential basis for meaningfulness in terms of 'iconicity': 'works of affecting presence are not only physically identical to what they immediately present but metaphorically identical to the emotions transferred through their witnessing.'²⁴

The important word here is 'metaphorically': although iconic relations between, for example, sounds and sentiment, may be experienced as being irreducible, there is still a moment of interpretation: an icon, for Peirce, still involves a labour of making meaning.

As I have elsewhere explained, this apparent irreducibility of bodily experience ('it is what it is') can be understood as involving the assumption of iconic relationships between those states and a(n unspecified) meaning.²⁵ The 'feeling' of a hip hop track—the thump of the bass in one's belly—is understood (by those for whom the music is meaningful) as being iconically representative of the essence of, the truth of, hip hop.²⁶ This involves interpretation, although, as Lewis suggests, an inchoate, prelinguistic order of interpretation: perhaps the corporeal sharing of a vibe in a crowded club, or the spontaneous ejaculations of the jazz enthusiast as a solo reaches its climax. Of course, any explication of that assumed iconicity—the identification of a given 'feeling' as significant—involves placing those experiences into discourse: the realm, for Peirce, of conventionalised, arbitrary signification: symbolic signs; language.²⁷

The process of putting 'those experiences clearly into words,' then, also involves interpretation; I understand this process, following Homi Bhabha, as being one of 'articulation':

²¹ J. Lowell Lewis, 'Toward a Unified Theory.'

²² Steven Feld, *Sound and Sentiment: Birds, Weeping, Poetics, and Song in Kaluli Expression*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania Press, 1990) 237.

²³ Feld, *Sound and Sentiment* 111.

²⁴ Feld, *Sound and Sentiment* 145.

²⁵ Maxwell, 'Hip Hop Aesthetics.'

²⁶ Bruce Johnson has made similar observations about the vernacular language of jazz, with its references to 'funky' and 'cooking.' See 'Directions in Popular Music Studies,' *Perfect Beat* 2.4 (1996): 98–105.

²⁷ Maxwell, 'Phat Beats, Dope Rhymes.'

the linking of propositional knowledges to embodied experiences.²⁸ For Bhabha, nationalisms are sustained by the articulation of subjective experience to historical narrative: rather than emerging unproblematically as the result of an unfolding historical necessity, Bhabha suggests that specific embodied states are interpreted as being identical with a supposedly objective structure: the nation. This interpretation is supported—or, in more extreme instances, actively inculcated—by those historical forces that are able to produce the most compelling narrative. The subject comes to understand their own experiences as being consistent with the historical narrative, and thereby as necessary. The process, of course, masks its own contingency.

By emphasising the articulatory nature of the process of making sense of music, I intend to draw attention to this contingency of linguistic accounts of embodied experience: language does not so much represent experience as it offers a set of analogies for experience. Importantly, the model of articulation allows the experiences in question to remain as experiences, acknowledging their irreducibility, and, critically, following Peirce, not merely antecedents of and conditions for ‘meaning,’ but as ‘one aspect of the meaning of events.’²⁹ Additionally, the experiential states, articulated to (and in) language, must be understood as, in turn, articulated to material phenomena: in the case of music, to the music itself. To produce a compelling account of the ways in which music is meaningful, then, we need to articulate three dimensions of the transaction: bodily experience, language about that experience, and the music itself.

Signs in their Natural Habitat

For Geertz, the critique of formalism did not necessarily mean a rejection of formalist analyses *tout court*. His dispute was with the claim that formalist (or semiotic—as I have suggested, Geertz understands structuralist semiotics as one particular kind of formalism) analysis could be ‘sufficient to a complete understanding of’ any artform.³⁰ Indeed, Geertz advocates a semiotic analysis, but only when that analysis seeks to ‘trace the life of signs in society, not in an invented world of dualities, transformations, parallels and equivalences.’³¹ ‘If we are to have a semiotics of art,’ he suggests,

we are going to have to engage in a kind of natural history of signs and symbols, an ethnography of the vehicles of meaning . . . meaning is use, or more carefully, arises from use . . . an investigation of signs in their natural habitat.³²

Thus, any formalism must answer to, and find its test in, the context of use of the object under analysis. Meaning is use—the practice of working with a symbolic system, involving not mere participation in an extant, complete formal system, but an active manipulation of a system that is never complete, never entirely coherent, closed or autonomous. For Peirce, of course, this is the essence of signification: an open system for which the process of selection, interpretation and the labour of effecting communication are the *sine qua non*: Peirce’s semeiotics, in its rejection of abstract structure or systematicity, always implies an investigation of signs in their

²⁸ Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994).

²⁹ Lewis, ‘Toward a Unified Theory.’

³⁰ Geertz, *Local Knowledge* 96.

³¹ Geertz, *Local Knowledge* 109.

³² Geertz *Local Knowledge* 118–19.

habitat.³³ For Peirce, the habitat involved is that of what he calls ‘a community of interpreters’: a collective involved in the pursuit of the same object of interpretation.

Geertz was not a Peircian. His formulations, however, often resonate with Peirce’s thinking. ‘The artist,’ writes Geertz,

works with his audience’s capacities—capacities to see, to hear, to touch, sometimes even to taste and smell, with understanding. And although elements of these capacities are innate . . . they are brought into actual existence by the experience of living in the midst of certain sorts of things to look at, listen to, handle, think about, cope with, and react to . . . Art and the equipment to grasp it are made in the same shop.³⁴

Here Geertz construes artists, their audiences, their artworks, the material culture and the corresponding sensibility as a workshop for creating the possibility of meaning; a workshop—or habitat—in which the fundamental material being worked is the experience of living in a particular milieu.

Similarly, then, musicology must furnish the formal qualities of any given music with a ‘natural history,’ which accounts for the meaningfulness of those features to experiencing bodies existing in a lifeworld. Note that this ‘natural history’ is not to be confused with a psychophysiology: Geertz is less interested in arguments about the mechanical, biophysical processes by which cultural artifacts come into perception, than by the processes through that which is perceived becomes significant, is brought into significance. These processes are, fundamentally, interpretative. Rather than recovering, with a greater or lesser degree of efficacy, an meaning inherent in the music itself, such processes are complex, synthetic operations creating meaning. Musicology, acknowledging this, needs to proceed less by an exclusive attention to the abstracted formal components of music than by means of a phenomenological hermeneutics: an attempt to understand the place of music within a complex lifeworld.

None of this should be interpreted as an advocacy of a radical semiotic relativism; it is not the case that music can mean anything to anybody. Rather, the potential for music to mean, in the extended sense in which I am using the word ‘mean,’ is always constrained by both the context and, of course, the materiality of the music itself. And of course, since no music is composed in a cultural vacuum, the context of composition, including the historico-cultural legacy of that context, will tend to function as a powerful constraint upon potential meanings made for the music. In developing his model for thinking through the ways in which audiences are able to negotiate the proliferation of theatrical genres and styles, Colin Counsell uses the term ‘law of the text’ to describe those guidelines operating within and around theatrical performances to help audiences to make particular kinds of meanings.³⁵ An ‘absurdist’ law of the text, for example, allows audiences to accommodate non-naturalistic logics in the meanings that they make when viewing a Beckett play; the application of a naturalistic ‘law of the

³³ Peirce’s formulation of a ‘semeiotic’ theory predated the foundational work of Ferdinand de Saussure in structural semiotics by several decades. I have preserved Peirce’s spelling to distinguish each from the other. In very simple terms, as I am suggesting, Peirce’s model of signification involves an active process of interpretation, where Saussure’s semiotics is predicated upon an autonomous systematicity: for Saussure, an individual simply participates in an extant structure of signification, rather than being involved in a process of interpretation.

³⁴ Geertz, ‘Art as a Cultural System’ 118.

³⁵ Colin Counsell, *Signs of Performance: An Introduction to Twentieth-Century Theatre* (New York: Routledge, 1996).

text' would, in such a circumstance, still generate meanings of that same performance, albeit meanings perhaps at odds with either the author's intention (insofar as, in a post-Freudian, post-Barthesian context) such a thing may be discerned, or at odds with the kinds of meanings made by the majority of spectators.

Counsell's 'law of the text' is a useful idea, although it perhaps warrants some refinement. It is certainly the case that in some contexts, there are explicit 'rules' for the making of meaning of given cultural artifacts. Such rules may be codified, and audiences schooled in their application. In other cases, the law of the text may operate as a set of conventions or guidelines, enforced through the mechanisms of social practice: clap at the end of the first movement, and you will suffer not so much a formal notification of breach and the ensuing sanction, as the subtle admonition of your fellow concert-goers. Further, in some circumstances, the law of the text may, as I have already suggested, be thematised, either by the 'text' itself, which may operate pedagogically (as I will demonstrate with an example below), or in the extra-musical framing of that text: the matter of how to make sense of a given piece of music may itself be the central concern of the music, or of the various discourses, practices and framings surrounding that music.³⁶

Ideally, any such pedagogy will present itself in naturalised terms: as self-evident necessity; as I noted above, in the labour of attaching discourse about music to feelings about music tends to mask the arbitrariness of the link that is being made. Recall the tautological structure of the meaning of music in the world of hip hop in contemporary Australia: the tautology expressed in the formula 'to get it—hip hop—put the needle on the record, and it will take you there; and if it doesn't, then you'll never get there.' The meaning of hip hop, in such a logic, is that you either 'get it,' in which case you are one of us, or you don't, in which case you are not.

The Music

In the early 1990s two hip hop producers released albums which transgressed the most fundamental law of hip hop music: both used live musicians in the studio. The first, released in 1992, was *Doo-Bop*, a collaboration between rapper Easy Mo Bee—a producer who had worked with, and continues to work with, a who's who of the hip hop world, including Busta Rhymes, Notorious BIG, Tupac Shakur, LL Cool J and Big Daddy Kane³⁷—and Miles Davis. *Doo-Bop* was, in fact, the project on which Davis had been working at the time of his death.³⁸

Mo Bee's résumé reads impressively: influenced by his father's record collection—Count Basie, Billie Holiday, Aretha Franklin and, of course, Davis—Mo Bee was caught up in the

³⁶ The word 'text' is somewhat difficult: the term is generally associated with written discourse, and the reduction of all forms of cultural systems and practices to species of language characteristic of structuralist thinking. Often referred to as the 'linguistic turn' in the social sciences, this process of 'textualisation' has the advantage of uniting all cultural phenomena under a single law. On the other hand, in its logocentrism—its very orientation towards a single law—such a process all too readily allows us to ignore the aspects of experience and interpretation that are not reducible to language-like structures. My use here is informed by the etymology of the term in the Latin *textura*, meaning 'weaving' (from whence, of course, 'textile') to indicate the complex materiality of interpretation as a lived, corporeal—indeed *inter*-corporeal—practice, weaving together object, context and that mass of experience and foreknowledge which the interpreter brings to the process.

³⁷ More recently he has produced albums by popular artists Jennifer Lopez and Alicia Keys.

³⁸ See George Cole's magisterial *The Last Miles: The Music of Miles Davis 1980–1991* (Ann Arbor, MI: U of Michigan Press, 2005), which includes a substantial section to the *Doo-Bop* project. My thanks to an anonymous reviewer for this reference.

mid-80s enthusiasm for the emerging hip hop sound, attending project jams in his Bedford-Stuyvesant neighbourhood in Brooklyn, New York. Subsequently, he formed the crew Rapping Is Fundamental (RIF), signed to A&M Records releasing his own material, and set about carving a niche for himself by bringing together the legacy of doo-wop with 'the new urban sound of Hip Hop.'³⁹ The collaboration with Davis, on this account, stands as a key moment in hip hop history, inaugurating a renewed interest in the jazz tradition and its cultural links to hip hop, and spawning a catalogue of similar recordings while winning the 'Best R&B Instrumental Performance' Grammy for Davis in 1992.

The record makes for fairly 'easy' listening. Languid beats, drums mixed high in the foreground of the soundscape, plenty of keyboards in the middle range, and unmistakable Miles Davis licks woven across the top. Mo Bee's raps are pleasantly mellifluous, marked by a characteristic East Coast delivery: plenty of stressed plosives, a generally mono-tonal baritone delivery with a warm timbre, occasionally shifting up the register, a steady emphasis on the back-beat. In a sense, there is nothing remarkable about the recording, particularly from the perspective of the first decade of the twenty-first century, where the sound is clearly that which was to become recognised as the genre of 'acid jazz,' and the related sub-genres of chill-out music. Perhaps the most significant aspect of the recording is the absolute prominence accorded Davis' trumpet: each track is constructed around his playing. In all cases, Davis' contributions are not samples, but 'live' takes of Davis playing to the backing track.

The 'title' track, 'The Doo Bop Song' is typical: smooth, with keyboard, synthesized strings and a live recorded guitar filling out the drum and bass beat in a laid-back mid-tempo common time. After a long intro (about one minute, or 24 measures), there is a repeated refrain:

Just kicking that doo-bop sound ...

leading to the first rap:

Let's kick a verse for my man called Miles
 'cos certainly he's gonna be round for a long while
 'cos he's a multi-talented and gifted musician ...
 ... who can play any position
 There's no mystery but you're no risk to me
 'cos I'm the lover and tell your girl to throw a kiss to me
 And hop in bed and have a fight with the pillow
 Turn off the lights and let the J give it to y'all
 And let the trumpet blow as I kick this
 'cos rap is fundamental and Miles sounds so wicked
 A little taste of the bee bop sound
 In the backdrop of doo hop and this is why we call it
 The doo bop ...⁴⁰

³⁹ Easy Mo Bee at <www.easymobee.com>, 'Official website of the legendary hip-hop producer, Easy Mo Bee' (accessed 15 November 2005).

⁴⁰ The transcriptions of these raps are my own, and may not be entirely accurate; my intention is to give a sense of the textual strategies employed by the rappers, for which purpose the extracts as cited here are more than adequate.

Then follows a short break-down section: four measures of drum and base with Davis' trumpet figures played over the top (the trumpet part is sustained throughout the five minutes of the track), before a return to the refrain, this time capped by a specific reference to Davis

Just kicking that doo bop sound ...

... with Miles ...

[here, a layered anticipatory build to the whole name]

(Miles Miles Miles)

... Miles Da-vis

Another (particularly unremarkable) rapped verse follows, seguing into a third:

Miles Davis' style is different

You could describe it as specific

He rip rage and roar

No time for watching Andy Griffith

You can [whistle] you can [whistle] all you want

Go ahead

While he take the doo hop and mix it with bee bop

Just like the maker in the shoe shop

Easy Mo Bee will cream you like the nougat [?]

And usually we do [indecipherable]

You can do that Miles:

blow the trumpet show the people just what it's to do ...

And from here, into a fade-out.

The raps I have transcribed here clearly attempt to position Miles Davis with respect to the relatively new urban sound of hip hop, albeit somewhat clumsily. The first verse frames Davis' playing as a satisfactorily 'wicked' accompaniment to seduction, while the subsequent rap asserts the unique quality of Davis' 'style,' a key category of hip hop aesthetics. Both verses reproduced here make an effort to affirm the recording itself as an 'authentic' synthesis of the values of jazz ('style,' 'originality,' a notion of social critique) and those of hip hop. Easy Mo Bee is attempting to cue a particular listening practice—I read these raps as explicit 'laws of the text'—reassuring listeners that, notwithstanding the threat to hip hop authenticity constituted by the presence of a live instrument in the studio, the resulting track is consistent with a (perhaps more fundamental) hip hop sensibility.

At the time of *Doo-Bop's* release, I was deep in fieldwork for what would later become my book about hip hop in Sydney in the early 1990s.⁴¹ For the boys with whom I was spending my time, *Doo-Bop* was not the critical success it was for the Recording Academy voters for the Grammy Awards. The presence of a live musician—and in particular an old trumpeter—was met with something approaching disdain. The album, I was assured, was not bad hip hop: it was simply not hip hop at all. Hip hop, it was again and again explained to me—authentic, preferably 'old school,' hip hop—eschewed instrumentation beyond the 'original' set up: two

⁴¹ Maxwell, 'Phat Beats, Dope Rhymes.'

turntables and a microphone.⁴² Frustratingly for the researcher, when pressed, the ‘wackness’ (bad-ness) of *Doo-Bop* was explained in terms of shrugs, dismissive gestures and appeals to self-evidence: you either get it or you don’t. You are with us (in hip hop) or you are not.

As is often the case with diasporic cultures, in the context of the perpetual struggle of hip hop aficionados to sustain their claim to the ‘truth’ of their antipodean version of hip hop, conformity to old school ideals of practice was carefully monitored. It appeared that the efforts of Easy Mo Bee to assert the authenticity of his fusion of bee bop and hip hop had foundered, at least amongst the local, Sydney hip hop community. I should also note that the quality of the rapping throughout the album was considered sub-standard, and that its success at the Grammy’s was also registered as evidence of ‘selling out.’

Less than a year later, however, a second recording appeared, titled *Jazzmatazz*, once again featuring a synthesis of hip hop beats and cool jazz instrumentation. The producer in this instance went by the name of Guru. In musical terms alone, it is very hard to distinguish this album from *Doo-Bop*. Each involves very similarly constructed tracks, sharing instrumentation, structure, texture, length and overall ‘feel.’ Tracks such as ‘Loungin’ would not have been out of place on the Davis/Mo Bee recording. Both albums anticipate the soon to explode acid jazz/chill out genres of the late 1990s. The Guru album, however was rapidly accepted as being admissible as hip hop.

The opening track of the album is an ‘Introduction,’ delivered in Guru’s own speaking voice over a looped trumpet figure contributed by Donald Byrd.

Peace y’all, and welcome to Jazzmatazz, an experimental fusion of hip hop and live jazz. I’m your host The Guru. That stands for Gifted Unlimited Rhymes Universal. Now, I’ve always thought of doing something like this, but I didn’t want to do it unless it was done right, know what I’m sayin’? ‘cos hip hop, rap music, it’s real, it’s musical cultural expression based on reality, and at the same time, jazz is real, and based on reality. So I want you to know that it was indeed a blessing and of course a pleasure to work on such a project with so many amazing people. For instance, I got Donald Byrd, Roy Ayers, Lonnie Liston Smith, Branford Marsalis, Ronny Jordan, N’Dea Davenport, Courtney Pine and MC Solaar, all in the house. Plus I got Gary Barnacle, Carleen Anderson, DC. Lee, Simon Law, Zachery Breaux and doin’ much work. So without further delay, I say to you, listen and enjoy. And check it out.

Five tracks later, at the halfway point of the album, there is another short, spoken passage. Over a sampled Roy Ayers vibraphone riff, Guru makes some more ‘Respectful Dedications’:

Yes, so like I was saying, it was real smooth working with this squad of people. These great musicians and vocalists: real, real, real smooth. It was like a connection, a vibe, whatever you want to call it. So y’all, here’s some more.

On the album liner notes, Guru offers an extended historical narrative (almost 800 words), written by hip hop writer Bill Adler to make the argument that, effectively, hip hop is jazz; or, that at the very least, there is a radical continuity between the forms: noting that the “hip hop

⁴² Around this time, the borders of the ‘Hip Hop Nation’ were being protected with particular vigilance. Pretenders, from Vanilla Ice to Betty Boo were the targets of disdain. See Maxwell, ‘*Phat Beats, Dope Rhymes.*’

is the child of be-bop" theory has been endorsed by no less an authority than [jazz man] Max Roach.' The liner notes conclude with an observation of Guru's approach to the project:

'I was leery. It had to be done right,' he [Guru] says. 'My main concern was to maintain my street credibility and to represent the hardcore rap crowd because they've got me to where I am now.' As it turned out, making the album was 'a very spiritual thing. It was so easy, as if it was meant to be.' Already familiar with the music of all of the artists, [Guru] followed the same basic method with everyone. He'd record the basic rhythm track, choose a title, have the jazzman come in and solo, and write his lyrics in the studio as the instrumentalist played. 'Doin' the tracks with the older guys was like a doin' a track with my father: They accepted me and I accepted them.'

Guru's strategy is, indeed, extremely 'leery,' carefully using his own credibility to authorise his 'experiment,' and invoking, explicitly, an identity between jazz and hip hop sensibilities: 'hip hop, rap music, it's real, it's musical cultural expression based on reality, and at the same time, jazz is real, and based on reality.'

This, then, constitutes an explicit law of the text: Guru reassures his listeners that it is OK to enjoy the live musicians he has recorded, and that in the process of recording the live musicians, a vibe was present; the primary affectiveness of the music was not disrupted: you could feel it. Significantly, too, the Donald Byrd sample on the first track is very obviously that: a sample, retaining the ambient noise/hiss of the studio in the texture of the sound, which is then repeated. This is perhaps the key identifiable musical difference between this recording and *Doo-Bop*, which emphasises the virtuosity of Davis's improvised accompaniment to the tracks.

The transparency of Guru's appeal to his audience is remarkable and contrasts with Mo Bee's attempts to effect the same argument within the body of his raps. Guru is explicitly pedagogic, in the sense in which Bhabha uses the term, articulating to a moment of performance an authoritative, explicatory narrative.⁴³ In this case, the performativity being enjoined is that of the listener, as they are drawn into the overarching narrative within which Guru frames the project. In effect, the narrative bookending the recording (and cropping up again at its midpoint of the album) interpolates the listener, endowing them with a feelingful, active role in the narrative of hip hop itself. At the same time, Guru offers an authoritative permission to enjoy the music: his warm, close-miked, resonant voice reassures the listener that it is OK to do so.⁴⁴ Guru enlists his listeners to the project, attracting their attention to the project as a whole, and perhaps away from an interrogation of the individual tracks.⁴⁵ By contrast, *Doo-Bop's* 'alien' sounds were not mediated by such an authority; nor was Davis' celebrity sufficiently significant in the hip hop milieu to carry the project.

Guru's strategies were successful, at least amongst the community of interpreters with which I was engaged. Subsequent to *Jazzmatazz's* release, I more frequently heard reference,

⁴³ See Bhabha, 'Location of Culture' 157–59.

⁴⁴ The tension between being true and enjoyment was illustrated to me one night in a club in 1995, when an erstwhile empty dancefloor came to life when the DJ spun Arrested Development's 'Tennessee' from their 1992 album *3 Years, 5 Months & 2 Days in the Life Of ...* (EMI). Arrested Development was an Atlanta-based crew that made bluesy and soul-inspired, deeply groovy music. Their Afrocentric orientation and slightly preachy style won them few fans amongst the hard core aficionados. Even as the dancefloor surged and throbbed to the deep drum and base of 'Tennessee' my informant grumbled: 'it's not hip hop, man.'

⁴⁵ My thanks to an anonymous reviewer of an earlier draft of this article for suggesting this analysis.

in the local scene, to the continuity of jazz with hip hop. As Ser Reck of Def Wish Cast, one of the most respected rappers and graffiti artists from Sydney told me in 1996: 'Hip Hop is Jazz, man.'⁴⁶ Indeed, throughout the mid to late 1990s, crews such as Sydney's Ute and Brisbane's Resin Dogs took advantage of the increasingly popular 'acid jazz' and related genres to combine live instruments with hip hop beats. To this extent, the 'Old School' commitment to 'two turntables and a microphone' became understood less as a formal definition as a shorthand for a hip hop sensibility: as long as the music retains a 'feeling,' and that feeling is articulated to a particular narrative, it has the potential to be 'hard core,' to be 'true.' Perhaps, too, the discourse of self-evident simplicity inherent in the 'two-turntables and a microphone' functions, somewhat nostalgically, if not mythopaically, to limit the potential proliferation of sub-genres—'doo-bop,' 'acid rap,' 'trip hop' and so on—that might threaten the coherence of a predicated 'hip hop nation,' such as that to which Fibular directed his readers, above.

Without that articulation, however, effected by a sufficiently authoritative voice, the 'feeling' alone does not suffice: this is the lesson to be learnt from the failure of the Miles Davis project to resonate with the community of interpreters. What are effectively the same musics—the same beats, structures, compositional practices and, correspondingly, the same materiality of reception—framed differently produce different orders of meaningfulness. It might be argued, of course, that the interpretive community was responding to very specific aesthetic criteria upon which judgements of inclusion or exclusion were made. Mo Bee's raps themselves, for example, are not a patch on those of, say, Chuck D of Public Enemy, either in terms of poetic construction or delivery. On the other hand, Guru's rhymes on *Jazzmatazz* are skillfully crafted—they include fewer unfortunate, repetitive and clumsy rhymes, for example—and are better performed. Guru's flow is resonant, mellifluous and smooth—all desirable aesthetic qualities.

There is a case, then, that a distinction between the two albums could be made on those grounds. However, my argument is that the grounds of distinction were based upon broader criteria than those of relative aesthetic merit, based upon an attention to musical detail. Rather, the musics' relative belongingness encompassed the totality of a sensibility: a shared feeling for life that is, simply, put, more than the sum of its parts.

More, this feeling for life is, tautologically, *felt*, existing in the shared experiences of life as it is lived, collectively and performatively. As such, this sensibility—and arguably any sensibility—is both hermetic, knowable and known only to those who partake in it, and infinitely malleable, this constituting at once a strength and vulnerability. Such a conclusion presents a particular challenge to those who wish to understand music, suggesting that nothing short of a sustained, embodied immersion within a sensibility is mandatory. At the very least, analysis needs to proceed upon a nuanced attention to the often unspoken, non-propositional, feelingful relations to specific musics. Even more confusingly, sensibilities can themselves offer irreconcilable contradictions: Arrested Development is not hip hop, but hip hoppers still get down to it. It is within the tension between, on one hand, the unfolding performativity of feelingful bodies, and, on the other, attempts to bring those experiences into discourse, that the meaningfulness of music emerges.

⁴⁶ Maxwell, 'Phat Beats, Dope Rhymes' 208.