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From The Ground Up: Cultural and Musical Implications of Live-Instrumental Hip-Hop

Jonah Ullman

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From The Ground Up: Cultural and Musical Implications of Live-Instrumental Hip-Hop

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Jonah Ullman

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ADVISER: Alex Stewart
ABSTRACT

Traditional live instruments have played an important role in hip-hop production in various capacities since the earliest stages of the genre’s development. The dominant historical narrative often omits the frequency with which live instruments have been used in hip-hop. The authenticity of their use has been a point of contention in the discourse of hip-hop producers, consumers, critics and scholars. When used in accordance with hip-hop’s aesthetic sensibilities, however, they become a vehicle for innovative and authentic hip-hop. Tasteful use of live instruments opens up a range of possibilities in the realms of arrangement techniques and compositional freedom. The opportunities and challenges inherent in live-instrumental hip-hop are relevant in both studio and live settings.

Live instruments are an alternative production technology that can coexist with sampling. Through analysis of the work of hip-hop artists (including The Roots, Kendrick Lamar, Kanye West, and Chance the Rapper) who have used live instruments in various capacities, this paper will present the cultural and musical implications of live-instrumental hip-hop. There is a dearth of scholarship on the topic of live-instrumental hip-hop, and the work that exists tends to deal with this method of production as an afterthought compared to sampling techniques. This paper seeks to fill a gap in scholarship by presenting the merits and challenges of live instruments as a discrete topic worthy of academic attention.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction 1

I. A History of Live Instruments and Hip-Hop 3
II. Live Instruments as Supplementation of Samples 8
III. “The Roots” of Hip-Hop 10
IV. Hip-Hop’s Connections to Past Black Musics and Racial Identity 14
V. Musical Implications of Live Instruments 18
VI. Live Band, Live Performance 21

Conclusion 25

Bibliography 27

Discography 30
INTRODUCTION

In the fall of 2013 on *Late Night with Jimmy Fallon*, Kanye West performed “Bound 2” from his 2013 album *Yeezus*. The performance, which featured vocalist Charlie Wilson and a children’s choir, was backed by the legendary hip-hop band The Roots. With its bouncy groove, rich instrumentation and powerful drums, the live rendition was in stark contrast to the song’s studio version. In keeping with the bleak industrial atmosphere of the album, the original recording of “Bound 2” is barren and minimalist. During the verses, Kanye’s vocals are accompanied only by a classic soul sample that has little low-end or percussion. On *Fallon*, The Roots rebuilt the beat from the ground up; their re-performance of the sample was lush and full, comfortably sitting atop a strong low end and drummer Questlove’s foundational breakbeat.

Although it remained true to established hip-hop aesthetic sensibilities, the instrumentation of Kanye’s performance on *Late Night* was a far cry from tradition. Hip-hop is a genre defined by the turntables; according to a common narrative, the first hip-hop DJs flipped the script on culturally-imposed dichotomies of producer vs. consumer, of playback device vs. instrument, and transformed the old and tired into the new and fresh. Retrospective voices from within the hip-hop and academic communities have repeatedly recounted and analyzed the creation myth of hip-hop, painting the artistic decisions of pioneering DJs as primarily subversive and political; the DJ repurposed records to fight back against an exploitative music industry and reaffirm connections to a Black cultural identity.

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1 See Behrens
2 See Demers 2006, Lessig, McLeod and DiCola
3 See Perchard p. 2
In reality such a narrative, however satisfying it may be, does not encapsulate the pragmatic nature of the motivations of hip-hop’s pioneers. Listeners were exposed to the popular music of previous generations through sampling because DJs sampled records they loved, records they heard on their parents’ turntables as children. The idea of the DJ as mindful keeper of a collectivized racial musical identity is appealing, but inaccurate.

The hip-hop “creation myth” does not consider one important technology which was present even in hip-hop’s first mainstream hit: live instruments. Producers used live instruments in various capacities from the advent of recorded hip-hop. To those with purist sensibilities, the choice to leave the turntables behind in favor of other instruments (whether they be digital samplers like the now-ubiquitous Akai MPC, or traditional live instruments) represented an abdication of hip-hop’s ethos; to these hip-hop “heads,” the soul of the music lay in the turntables and to leave them behind was nothing short of blasphemy. This is an understandable viewpoint for those who subscribe to the standard creation myth of hip-hop. However, hip-hop’s early development and embrace of instruments/technologies aside from the turntables is messier than this myth admits. If one acknowledges that traditional instruments have played an important role throughout hip-hop’s development, then what have been the cultural and musical implications of their use?

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4 I use the term “live instruments” to describe instruments other than digital samplers and turntables. In informal discourse, the term “real instruments” is often used; this term delegitimizes the validity of sampling as a musical practice, and of samplers and turntables as instruments, and therefore should be avoided.

5 See Marshall p. 874
I. A HISTORY OF LIVE INSTRUMENTS AND HIP-HOP

It is useful to begin with a brief account of the history of hip-hop which takes into account early uses of live instruments. According to the creation myth of hip-hop, the genre was born at a Bronx rec-room party in the summer of 1973. At this party, eighteen-year-old Clive Campbell, better known as DJ Kool Herc or simply Herc, established himself as a musical force to be reckoned with, and the pioneer of an exciting new musical form.

Herc was born in 1955 in Kingston, Jamaica and spent the first twelve years of his life there before moving to the Bronx in 1967. His father, Keith, was an avid record collector and as a result, Herc was exposed to reggae, jazz, gospel, and country records from a young age. Beginning in 1970, Herc deejayed parties using his neighbor’s sound system. Keith purchased a powerful Shure PA system and began to run sound for a local R&B band. Herc had a knack for sound equipment, and his father took notice, allowing Herc to use his system, so long as he also played records during the R&B band’s set breaks.

Herc established a reputation as a DJ and in 1974, moved his parties from the rec-room to the block. He paid close attention to the reactions of the crowds at his parties. Seeing that the people responded to the instrumental breaks in songs, he developed what he called the “Merry-Go-Round” technique, which entails using two copies of the same record on two turntables to extend the breaks. From this technique, hip-hop was born.

The Bronx had been dominated by a number of rival gangs until the mid-70s, when the gangs began to fragment and be replaced in part by smaller crews, which were

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6 See Chang pp. 67-72
7 See Chang p. 78
often organized around music. Herc and clique-members Coke La Rock and Dickie began to rap along with the records he played, hyping the crowd in a rhythmic fashion. By 1977, Herc’s style of deejaying had blown up, and other DJs with accompanying crews emerged, including Afrika Bambaataa and Grandmaster Flash. This was the era of the “four elements” of hip-hop: DJing, emceeing, breakdancing and graffiti-writing. It is these four elements that provide the basis for the purist mindset.

In October of 1979, hip-hop hit the mainstream with The Sugarhill Gang’s “Rapper’s Delight.” The fifteen-minute-long piece was a major hit, and brought the MC to the foreground of what was typically a DJ-centric medium. Because the technology did not exist to adequately record turntables, the samples in “Rapper’s Delight” were interpolated (a common studio technique which denotes imitative re-performance of a sample source).

The following year, in light of the success of “Rapper’s Delight,” Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five recorded “Superrappin’.” The song was originally a live performance routine which featured unison vocal lines alternating with breaks in which Flash demonstrated his prolific drum machine skills. In the studio version, however, the drum fills are replaced with an unremarkable percussion loop. The sample (drawn from “Seven Minutes of Funk” by The Whole Darn Family) was re-performed in this recording as well. Flash, the artistic visionary of the group, was all but left out of the recording.

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8 See Chang pp. 80-82
9 See Chang p. 130
10 See Schloss p. 34
11 See Chang p. 133
“Superrappin’” is representative of the concerns many hip-hop enthusiasts have raised regarding the use of live instruments. To many, the recording distilled an art form into a popular commodity; studio hip-hop did not yet capture what made the music great, and left the DJs who built it (and their considerable skills) by the wayside. The onset of digital sampling and drum machine technologies further complicated the role of the DJ as the producer took over.

Hip-hop’s initial movement away from the turntables was quite controversial in the producers’ community. Pioneering voices such as DJ Shadow played an important role in integrating hardware samplers into a musical community which had previously been centered around the turntables. Aversion to new technology is to be expected within any community which places value on tradition, and hip-hop is no exception. As Raymond Williams writes, “At first glance, there are simply dire predictions based on easily aroused prejudices against new technologies. Yet there are also phases of settlement in which formerly innovating technologies have been absorbed and only the currently new forms are a threat.”

Shortly after hardware samplers like the MPC underwent this process of aversion and settlement, the cycle repeated as digital audio workstations (DAWs) began to enjoy widespread use. In fact, producer Madlib asserted the authenticity of his work with hardware samplers (in light of his lack of turntable background) by touting his rejection of software-based sampling. The incorporation of live instruments can be thought of as another stage in this developmental cycle.

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12 See Schloss p. 75
13 See D’Errico p. 39
14 See Raymond Williams, cited in D’Errico pp. 1, 61
15 See D’Errico p. 40
With the onset of sampling technologies and the producer as the “fifth element,” hip-hop entered what is often referred to as its “Golden Age,” a term which refers to the period roughly from 1987-1992 in which artists such as LL Cool J, A Tribe Called Quest, NWA and Slick Rick produced music dominated by funk samples and breakbeats. During the Golden Age, a number of copyright cases involving sampling practices, particularly a high profile case challenging Biz Markie’s sampling of Gilbert O’Sullivan’s “Alone Again (Naturally),” set into motion a change in the legal landscape that was to seriously affect the ability of producers to sample with impunity.

Depending on one’s personal position on copyright law as it applies to sampling, these changes represented anything from a victory for an exploited class of musicians whose work was being stolen, to an oppressive stifling of the creative freedom of sampling artists. There is no easy answer; original artists should be compensated for their work, and should be assured that it is used in a manner that aligns with their values. That being said, there is something inherently troubling when legal concerns prevent people from engaging in a beloved and dynamic creative technique. However, that is a topic for another thesis. What is certain is that upon entering this new period of increased litigation, sampling was confronted by a new set of obstacles.

As Questlove demonstrates with a brief case study of the sample clearance process for a Slum Village track, the post-Golden Age legal climate could prove difficult for all sampling artists but for the most successful ones (with the largest production budgets). In response, producers began to develop sampling techniques, such as

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16 See D’errico p. 7, Stewart p. 339
17 See Marshall pp. 876-877
chopping and stabbing or filtering, designed to mask the source of a sample.\textsuperscript{18} These
techniques, however effective, limited the creative options of the artists. Furthermore, the
hip-hop aesthetic dictates that the sound of the sampling process itself is of great
importance.\textsuperscript{19} Some of these contingency measures obscure the quality of “sampledness”
otherwise present in sample-based hip-hop. It’s difficult to determine whether copyright
care directly resulted in increased usage of live instruments; in any case, it is safe to
say that live instruments provide an effective workaround.

\textsuperscript{18} See Marshall p. 869
\textsuperscript{19} See Stewart pp. 342-343
II. LIVE INSTRUMENTS AS SUPPLEMENTATION OF SAMPLES

This section will address uses of live instruments as part of the sampling process. This includes the aforementioned technique of interpolation, which was first used as a substitute for direct sampling due to deficiencies in recording technology (as was the case with “Rapper’s Delight” and “Superrappin’”). Although recording of direct samples is quite common now, interpolation is still a technological necessity in many cases. Unless one has access to the original master tracks, interpolation remains the only effective technique for sampling gestures that aren’t isolated in the original recording. A recent example is “i” by Kendrick Lamar, which samples The Isley Brothers’ “Who’s That Lady” by way of interpolation. The original recording is far too dense to effectively sample, so producer Rahki brought in a live band to record a workable remake. This process also allowed for the main beat to seamlessly transition into a breakdown section, which builds tension and release in an otherwise unchanging instrumental track.

Live instruments are also used to supplement samples. A number of artists use live bass either to fatten up the low end of a sample or to contribute a wholly original bassline. Notable early recordings which incorporate live bass include “The Breaks” by Kurtis Blow, “Bust a Move” by Young MC (which features Flea of the Red Hot Chili Peppers), and “Verses from the Abstract” by A Tribe Called Quest (featuring Ron Carter). Aside from “Verses,” the bassists’ roles are primarily foundational, repeating one bassline throughout. In a sense, this is the most obvious and natural way to incorporate a live instrument, as it aligns with the role of the bass in many other genres.

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20 See Fleischer
21 See Schloss p. 70
22 See Kurtis Blow, Young MC and A Tribe Called Quest
In the late ‘90s and early ‘00s, some recordings began to feature live bass in a
capacity which allowed the individual artistry of the bassist to shine and shape the feel of
a recording. Representative of this trend is the work of Pino Palladino with the
Soulquarians, a loosely-defined production collective including Questlove, D’Angelo,
James Poyser, Common, Erykah Badu, Q-Tip, and J Dilla among others.\(^{23}\) Pino
participated in the production of a number of classic albums at Electric Lady studios,
including the collective’s defining release *Voodoo* by D’Angelo. His signature behind-
the-beat feel palpably shapes the grooves of the recordings on which he is featured.\(^{24}\)

More recently, bassist Thundercat (part of another loose collective of Los Angeles
musicians which includes Robert Glasper and Kamasi Washington) has played a similar
part in the music of Kendrick Lamar. His trademark auto-wah-driven impressionistic
playing on Lamar’s 2015 release *To Pimp A Butterfly* (and accompanying outtakes
album *Untitled Unmastered*) is an important part of the album’s general aesthetic.\(^{25}\)

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\(^{23}\) See Chris Williams

\(^{24}\) “Geto Heaven Part Two” by Common featuring D’Angelo from *Like Water for Chocolate* is particularly
representative of Pino’s rhythmic feel. His dragging of the beat is synonymous with the Soulquarians’
signature grooves. Be advised that while the original release of the album includes the aforementioned
version, recent versions include a remix featuring Macy Gray which is not illustrative of this concept.

\(^{25}\) This is best exemplified on “Wesley’s Theory” from *To Pimp a Butterfly*. 
III. “THE ROOTS” OF HIP-HOP

For many, live instrumental hip-hop is all but synonymous with The Roots. The band’s lineup has included a number of notable members over the years, but at their core have always been drummer Ahmir “Questlove” Thompson and MC Tariq “Black Thought” Trotter, who met while attending Philadelphia High School for the Creative and Performing Arts (incidentally their classmates included modern jazz legends Christian McBride, Kurt Rosenwinkel and Joey DeFrancesco).\(^{26}\)

Their first effort was the 1993 release Organix which served to gain acclaim and major-label attention for the group. At this early stage in The Roots’ development, their aesthetic was quite at odds with their contemporaries in hip-hop. 1993 saw the release of a number of all-time hip-hop classics including Doggystyle by Snoop Dogg, Midnight Marauders by A Tribe Called Quest, and Enter the Wu Tang (36 Chambers) by Wu Tang Clan. Although Tribe’s use of sampled jazz codes and genre synecdoches aligns with the acoustic timbres used by The Roots on Organix, the core aesthetics are radically different.\(^{27}\) The Roots were then branding themselves as “organic hip-hop jazz” and using acoustic instruments. The compositional structure of their music was still quite similar to that of other hip-hop artists, relying on two-to-four bar funk/jazz loops much like those sampled by their contemporaries.

From the beginning, The Roots found an obstacle in authenticity; their music contained unfamiliar timbres and lacked sonic signifiers of hip-hop like the scratch of the DJ and the crunch of vinyl.\(^{28}\) In his seminal work on hip-hop production Making Beats, Joseph Schloss includes a chapter about live instruments, somewhat tellingly titled “It

\(^{26}\) See Marshall p. 870  
\(^{27}\) See Justin Williams pp. 443-444  
\(^{28}\) See Marshall p. 869
Just Doesn’t Sound Authentic." Schloss presents the opinions of a number of hip-hop producers whom he interviewed. The majority of them had no moral problem with the use of live instruments, rather their concerns were aesthetic; when The Roots first came on the scene a large contingent of hip-hop purists needed to hear palpable “sampledness” in order to be satisfied.

The Roots recognized this problem and addressed it in their engineering practices, especially in their treatment of Questlove’s drums. Manager and mentor Rich Nichols said of his experience as executive producer on The Roots’ magnum opus Things Fall Apart, “We spent a huge amount of time trying to make things sound nasty, to get live instruments to bang like they were samples.” Questlove and the production team were meticulous in their reproduction of the sonic qualities of classic breakbeats, even referring to a photo of James Brown in a control room for clues.

Beyond timbre and engineering practices, Questlove has learned and internalized classic breakbeats. His approach entails working within the framework of these classic breakbeats.

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29 See Schloss pp. 63-78
30 Retrospectively, Organix feels less experimental; to the author’s ears it is a fairly successful early instance of hip-hop played by a live band. That being said there are certainly times when live-instrumental hip-hop does not land because it does not sound authentic. A recent example of an unsuccessful attempt is Atmosphere’s 2011 release The Family Sign, which features a live band playing genre-crossing instrumentals behind the vocals. “Who I’ll Never Be” makes use of some hip-hop signifiers; it is set to a breakbeat and has a classic looping structure. That, however, is not enough to make the song sound like hip-hop; the acoustic guitar chords placed firmly on the downbeats would feel more at home in a folk ballad than a hip-hop song.
31 See Marshall p. 886
32 See Schloss p. 72
33 See Thompson, cited in Marshall p. 886
34 See Marshall p. 883

Questlove is not alone in his estimation of the importance of drum timbre to live-instrumental hip-hop artists. In an interview with Complex commenting on his recent use of a live band, Big Daddy Kane said “[W]ith a live band, if you don’t have the right drummer and the right instruments it can be real ugly. We make sure that we go back and get that old Ludwig Black Oyster or Starlight drum set that they used from the songs that we used to sample back in the days.” (See Jenkins)
breaks while adding subtle variations. He makes liberal, expressive use of microtiming; his snare hits often fall ahead of the beat by varying degrees.\textsuperscript{35}

The Roots’ “imitated-sampledness” approach in this stage of their development proved to be particularly fruitful, and its results included their most well-received work \textit{Things Fall Apart}. Apart from the virtuosic instrumental skill and impeccable musicality displayed by the entire group, their creative method demanded a deep knowledge of the aesthetics of sampling and of hip-hop itself. Praise of The Roots is all-too-often representative of a dismissive Eurocentric worldview which lauds their usage of “real instruments,” an outlook which is inherently dismissive of the art of sampling. The Roots, and Questlove in particular, deserve praise for reasons other than their skill and training on traditional musicals instruments. Rather, their approach is noteworthy because it manages to impressively navigate two (largely oppositional) metrics of musical worth.

The Roots’ ability to use live instruments and successfully produce hip-hop that satisfies the ears of casual listeners and purists alike is reliant on an understanding of what makes sampling beautiful. In a sense, this is an advantage; a producer who uses samples needs not expend effort to recreate the timbres familiar in sample-based hip-hop because they are already present in the records. As such, sampling producers may not have so specific a conception of their aesthetic sensibilities.\textsuperscript{36}

In \textit{Making Beats}, Schloss interviews MC/producer Specs who suggests that artists who lack a deep understanding of the DJ-centric aesthetic on which hip-hop was built

\textsuperscript{36} See Marshall p. 17
Questlove discusses how he developed his signature off-kilter, J Dilla inspired rhythmic style in depth in a 2013 lecture at the Red Bull Music Academy.
\textsuperscript{38} That said, this is certainly not an endorsement of the merits of live instrumentation over those of sampling; rather, it is testament to The Roots’ considerable skill. Live-instrumental hip-hop artists who do not have as strong a grasp on the aesthetic codes of hip-hop rarely produce a successful product.
cannot be innovative in a meaningful way.\textsuperscript{37} His position echoes that put forth by Dave Brubeck in a 1964 panel-style interview with \textit{Playboy}.\textsuperscript{38} When commenting on experimental jazz musicians, Brubeck said “It’s also their role to build on the old, on the past; and when you have all these new, wild things going on, there are some of the wild experimenters who aren’t qualified yet. They haven’t the roots to shoot out the new branches. They will die.” The Roots (as is affirmed by their very name) have certainly paid their dues and learned the tradition within which they are innovating, allowing them to enjoy unparalleled success as a hip-hop band.

\textsuperscript{37} See Schloss pp. 76-77
\textsuperscript{38} See Walser p. 242
IV. HIP-HOP’S CONNECTIONS TO PAST BLACK MUSICS AND RACIAL IDENTITY

Within academic discourse, sampling has often been depicted as a way for black artists in the present to connect with and revive the music/culture of previous generations. The narratives range from William Eric Perkins’ assertion that “sampling was and is hip-hop’s ongoing link with history and tradition, including all of the African and African-American musical genres,” to Tricia Rose’s claim that sampling “affirms black musical history and locates these ‘past’ sounds in the ‘present.’ ” While the finer points of these early analyses differ, they share a common thread. Tom Perchard summarizes the dominant discursive narrative in his article “Hip-Hop Samples Jazz,” saying “Whether cultural-nationalist, construc-tivist, or genealogical, much early scholarly writing on hip hop sampling sought to position the practice as one in which the musicians’ relation to a black musical past was of primary importance.” If these positions are taken to be true, then the question ought to be raised: What do hip-hop artists stand to lose culturally by abandoning sampling in favor of live instruments?

However, as Schloss and others have agreed, aesthetics outweigh political and cultural statements in the choice to sample. It is disingenuous to characterize most producers as actively seeking to compile a cultural memory or history through sampling. In fact, many producers (including DJ Kool Herc himself) who find records to sample through crate-digging (a practice which involves flipping through crates of records in a record shop looking for new sample sources) obscure their findings by soaking the labels

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39 See Perchard pp. 277-278
40 See See Perkins p. 9, cited in Perchard p. 277
41 See Rose p. 89, cited in Schloss p. 64
42 See Perchard p. 278
43 See Schloss p. 65, Perchard p. 299
off the records. Rather than promoting an African-American musical history, producers seek to maintain their individuality by protecting their sample sources from being copied by competing producers. Furthermore, a variety of popular breakbeats were sampled from white artists. Afrika Bambaataa even took pleasure in tricking audiences into unknowingly dancing to breaks from The Beatles and The Monkees, to the audience members’ displeasure. While hip-hop certainly finds its roots within a tradition of African and African-American musical practices, the samples themselves aren’t necessarily the prevailing link to these roots.

Hip-hop’s musical structure is rooted in African and African-American tradition. In “Early Jazz,” Gunther Schuller presents a case for jazz’s roots being primarily African. In particular, he cites jazz’ treatment of rhythm, use of call and response, and looping structure. These qualities are all present in later African-American genres including funk, establishing a lineage of musical practices into which hip-hop fits neatly.

Rap vocals have their roots in African cultural practice as well. The terms “rapping” and “capping” have been used to describe an African style of performance in which multiple men display their mastery of spoken verse set to rhythmic accompaniment. The performers are praised for displaying wit, virtuosic command of language and performance skill, often resulting in a winner and a loser. This practice and its metrics of quality are quite similar to rap battles.

44 See Chang p. 79
45 See Schloss p. 64
46 See Schloss p. 32
47 See Schuller pp. 10, 27
48 See Neumann p. 58
Rappers have been positioned as “modern griots” (traveling oral historians, praise-singers, and storytellers) both by scholars and by the rappers themselves. The roles of rappers and griots are not directly analogous, but they do overlap significantly. It has been suggested that griots who were enslaved and brought to the Americas adjusted their cultural practices to fit their new surroundings in an instance of “cultural reversioning.”

Considering that the musical forms, measures of value, and aesthetic sensibilities of hip-hop are deeply rooted in Black musical practices, artists who choose not to sample are not abandoning the cultural context of the genre, or forsaking their roots. In fact, compared to these connections to Black musical tradition, sampling is a problematic link.

Sampling of Blaxploitation film soundtracks was common in the Golden-Age, but often overlooked the context of the sample source. Smoothe Da Hustler’s sampling of “Freddie’s Dead” by Curtis Mayfield (from the Superfly soundtrack), abandoned the song’s original message, a criticism of pimps and drug dealers. The result was “Hustler’s Theme,” a song which glorifies the very people that the Mayfield criticized in “Freddie’s Dead.” Setting aside the potentially problematic evaluation of “black-on-black crime” found in Mayfield’s original lyrics, Smoothe Da Hustler’s song is not an accurate reflection of the values of the older generation.

Hip-hop’s pushing of Black Power philosophies is problematic in much the same way. Artists often oversimplify or combine opposing philosophies (like those of the Nation of Islam and the Black Panthers) to facilitate ease of communication. The

49 See Tang p. 82
50 See Keyes p. 21, cited in Tang p. 82
51 See Demers pp. 49-50
52 See Demers p. 51
political ideologies of these organizations are specific and carefully formed, but their nuances are often lost in rap lyrics.

This extends to the musical content of samples as well as the moral and political messages. A notable example is “Jazz (We’ve Got)” by A Tribe Called Quest, a classic Golden Age track. The song draws its main sample from organist Jimmy McGriff’s version of ubiquitous jazz standard “Green Dolphin Street.” In Tribe’s cut, it is difficult to hear the original harmonic context of the sample, and the original drums are quickly drowned out by a breakbeat. McGriff’s recording is driven by skillful improvisation by saxophonist Lucky Thompson and active, dialogical drumming by Louis Hayes. “Jazz (We’ve Got)” is an infectious and compelling track, but it is certainly not representative of the ethos of its source material.

Kendrick Lamar’s To Pimp A Butterfly is proof that live instruments can be used to celebrate and affirm African-American musical history in a hip-hop context.53 The album shows strong links to funk through the groove on “King Kunta,” and guest artists like George Clinton and Ron Isley. “For Free” features 1980s post-bop jazz elements. The music pairs with lyrical content that revolves around Black history and culture to form a product which affirms a Black cultural and musical past far more comprehensively and thoughtfully than a sample could.

53 See Kendrick Lamar
V. MUSICAL IMPLICATIONS OF LIVE INSTRUMENTS

The use of live instruments in hip-hop allows for a heightened level of reciprocal interaction between the instrumental track and the vocals while preserving compositional freedom. Rappers certainly interact with entirely programmed and sample-derived beats, but in those cases, the interaction is a one-way street. The beat is a constant; a discrete, preformed entity which the rapper works around. This platform has been more than sufficient for artists to create compelling music; however, it does have its limitations.

Composed cohesion between the beat and the vocals is possible, but compositional gestures put forth by the vocalist must conform to those in the beat. When live instruments enter the equation, the compositional process can more easily take the form of a symbiotic entity in which beat and vocals morph around each other to form a cohesive whole through in-studio collaboration between instrumentalists and vocalists.54

Compositional gestures are severely limited by the nature of the sampling process.55 If an artist has a concept for a song, realization of that concept into a fully cohesive piece requires that a recording exists which: 1) includes the compositional/melodic/rhythmic gesture that the producer imagines, 2) is sonically viable as a sample (which requires either relative isolation of the gesture in the original recording or access to the original master tracks), 3) is legally and financially viable as a sample. The fulfillment of all three of these requirements is uncommon.

The compositional freedom granted by the use of live instruments can be heard in Chicago-native Chance the Rapper’s 2015 single “Angels.” The track features Donnie

54 See Deshpande
55 That said, many sampling producers’ compositional methodology relies on the sample source for inspiration; the beat springs forth from the vibe suggested by the original recording (See Schloss 68–69). As such this section is not meant to denigrate this method of composition. Rather, it seeks to present an alternate methodology made possible by the use of live instruments.
Trumpet and the Social Experiment.\textsuperscript{56} The groove-oriented hook leads into a staccato, rhythmic post-hook section. The horns play hits that are mirrored in the vocals (see Fig. A). This transitions into Chance singing the main melody in unison with the horns. The juxtaposition of the smooth, groovy feel of the verses and hook with the rhythmic and melodic unison of the post-hook is quite effective. Such a holistic arrangement could not be achieved through sampling.

\textbf{Fig. A}

“Angels” by Chance the Rapper

The shift in compositional approach is perhaps best exemplified by the collaboration between Kendrick Lamar and jazz pianist Robert Glasper on \textit{To Pimp A Butterfly}. In an interview with Slate Magazine, Glasper recounts his experience recording

\textsuperscript{56} See Chance the Rapper
the album.\textsuperscript{57} His most prominent role was on a track called “For Free.” According to Glasper, producer Terrace Martin asked him to play in the style of “straight up, Kenny Kirkland, Branford [Marsalis], late ’80s” jazz. The song includes a section in which Lamar adopts a distinct rhythmic pattern in his vocals.\textsuperscript{58} Glasper says Lamar asked him to complement the pattern. He says, “I was actually thinking of it like he was a saxophone player, you know what I mean. Not like a singer or an MC, but literally like a saxophone player, it was like some jazz shit.” Glasper plays chordal hits which interact with Lamar’s vocals, echoing the relationship between soloist and accompanist typical of jazz. In this case, the use of live instruments in the recording and compositional processes allowed for a dialogue to occur between the vocals and the beat.

\textsuperscript{57} See Deshpande
\textsuperscript{58} See For Free, 1:43
6. LIVE BAND, LIVE PERFORMANCE

Live instruments have been used extensively to accompany live performance, resulting in a unique set of challenges and rewards. Traditionally, live hip-hop performances consist of an MC (or MCs), hype men, and a DJ; the charisma of the MC drives the performance, while the hype men add variety and excitement. Often the DJ’s movements (aside from head-bobbing) aren’t visible to the audience, and the DJ doesn’t add much visually to the performance. Furthermore, many of the techniques used to produce sample-based hip-hop are nearly impossible to reproduce live, so the original track is simply played through the sound system.\(^{59}\) For these reasons, audience participation and dancing are necessary to retain interest.

To circumvent the problem of a show that isn’t always that engaging, a number of artists replace or supplement the DJ with a band; Kendrick Lamar, Lil Wayne, Chance the Rapper, Kanye West, and Eminem have all done so with varied levels of success. A live band provides the audience with something more interesting to look at than a DJ. This is especially important in television performances due to the visual nature of the medium, and the fact that audience participation doesn’t exist.

Performing with a live band also affords musicians new artistic opportunities. Some audience members go to a concert with the expectation of hearing a reproduction of the studio recordings. Philip Auslander argues in his book *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture* that “live performance now tends to recapitulate mediatized representations.”\(^{60}\) However for others, the appeal of live performance is hearing fresh takes on the songs they love; artists have historically used live performance as an

\(^{59}\) See Schloss p. 42

\(^{60}\) See Auslander p. 75, note 6
opportunity to stretch out and experiment. For jazz musicians, recordings of live performances often include longer (and more) solos, and performances which cleverly build upon studio versions. Artists take advantage of a setting which frees them from being concise and radio-friendly. Led Zeppelin’s live versions of “Dazed and Confused” often stretched to twenty minutes or a half-hour long, including detours into medleys of classic rock-and-roll songs and extended atmospheric guitar solos played by Jimmy Page with a violin-bow.

Chance the Rapper and the Social Experiment have made good use of the experimental and expressive potential of live performance with a band. In a show at Terminal 5 in New York City in 2015 they performed a rendition of “Paranoia,” a song about the effects of violence in Chicago from Chance’s acclaimed mixtape Acid Rap.61 In the live rendition, the repeated line “a lot of black boys dying” was followed by extended sections of impassioned, pained trumpet wails from Donnie Trumpet. The raw emotion of the improvised trumpet lines at crucial moments in the song made the performance transcendental.

While established hip-hop conventions make extended solos and instrumental odysseys unlikely, having the options provided by a live band still yields satisfying results. Artists can react to the moment and take the music in a new direction, with the band responding to and matching their energy. The reviewers at Dead End Hip Hop discuss the potential for spontaneous innovation with a live band in a roundtable discussion about Kendrick Lamar’s performance of “Untitled 2” on The Tonight Show with Jimmy Fallon.62 One reviewer suggests that the energy of the performance was

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62 See Dead End Hip Hop
unplanned, saying: “Who’s to say he was in the zone, and he was supposed to do it one way, and right there on the spot he was like, this would sound better, and he just changed it just like that. And the band the motherfuckers might be like, ‘oh, what the? Okay, okay! Hell yeah!’” Another reviewer replied “That’s what makes it dope!” This last comment is particularly important because it suggests a broader definition of authenticity and merit which includes the opportunities afforded by a live band.

Lamar’s September 2015 performance on The Late Show with Stephen Colbert is a virtual masterclass on the merits of live hip-hop performance with a band.63 The performance consists of a medley of songs from To Pimp A Butterfly. Thundercat is visible behind Lamar, sporting a large hollowbody electric bass. On the other side of Lamar are backing vocalists Anna Wise and a fedora-clad Bilal.

The set opens with a monologue by Lamar which refers to the themes of the album, and leads into a heavily arranged rendition of “Wesley’s Theory.” The beginning of the verse features sparse hits by the band, building tension until finally the groove begins. This transitions into “Momma,” which begins again only with Lamar’s vocals, accentuated by drum hits. Thundercat’s auto-wah bass licks dance around the low end. A brief call-and-response between Lamar and the backup singers introduces the driving G-funk of “King Kunta.” The song continues largely as it was heard on the album, until the final verse which is accompanied by a rich reharmonization, complete with tight rhythmic hits. The final song of the medley is “u,” which includes numerous repetitions of the line “loving you is complicated” with cymbal crashes accenting each “-cated.”

Lamar and his band manage to provide a visually riveting performance which makes liberal use of live-instrument specific arrangements and reharmonization. The new

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63 See Lamar
takes on familiar songs are true to the original recordings, while still offering something fresh and exciting.

All that said, live band performances must be done right in order to be successful. Adjustments in equipment must be made; a traditional kick drum does not have the booming, body-shaking sub-bass power that audience members at a hip-hop show expect. MIDI triggers or a subkick can be used as a solution to this problem. Instrumental tracks (especially particularly well-known or iconic ones) do not always lend themselves to live interpretation. It’s difficult to adapt a sample-based, programmed track to live band, and sometimes it simply doesn’t land.

This can be seen clearly in Eminem’s November 2013 performance on Saturday Night Live, in which he is accompanied by two DJs and a band. The result is a cluttered mess which drowns out Eminem’s vocals. The guitarist plays with little regard for hip-hop’s aesthetic sensibilities of style or timbre.

Live performance with a band can certainly prove to be a powerful creative vehicle for hip-hop artists, but one which requires a different skillset. Like any live-instrumental hip-hop, success depends on strong musicality and a deep knowledge of hip-hop’s aesthetic codes.

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64 A subkick is essentially a reverse-wired speaker positioned by the kick-drum’s resonant head, which acts as a large-diaphragm dynamic microphone and picks up the extreme low-end of the kick.

65 See Behrens
CONCLUSION

I chose to begin this thesis paper with an account of a live performance by Kanye West because it is a unified representation of the concepts discussed in the paper. Kanye and The Roots utilize the advantages of live instruments, navigate aesthetic challenges adeptly, and avoid pitfalls of inauthentic live-instrumental hip-hop. Their choice to re-perform the sample brings to life a track which, in its original form, sounded flat. Watching the band play their instruments adds interest to the performance and captures the viewer’s attention. Most importantly, it has all the hallmarks of authentic, well-crafted hip-hop. Simply put, the performance is illustrative of how I wish to present live instruments: as a legitimate and authentic methodology which can coexist with sampling.

Hip-hop is the unmistakeable quality of sampledness, it is turntables and drum machines, but it is much more than that. “Hip-hop” is a messy umbrella term which encompasses a set of cultures, sonic signifiers, histories, myths, methodologies, and aesthetic sensibilities. The fact that The Roots manage to sound like authentic hip-hop while using live instruments is a testament to the fact that methodology is but one of many metrics of “realness.” The use of live instruments inspires healthy discourse about what defines hip-hop; they’ve prompted some artists (like Questlove) to analyze and codify on a deep level what produces beauty within the genre’s systems of value.

When the obstacle of authenticity is removed, live instruments allow new opportunities in composition and performance without threatening or replacing traditional sampling-based production. While their use bypasses limitations inherent in sampling technology, live instruments come with their own set of challenges and limitations. Rather than viewing the use of live instruments as innovative, or citing them in an
attempt to legitimize hip-hop within a Eurocentric value system, they should be viewed as a vehicle for innovation, as technology which allows for compositional and interactive freedom. They are a means to an end rather than an end themselves. By embracing the use of live instruments as a permissible methodology, authentic in their own right, the hip-hop community stands to gain a valuable tool through which the genre can expand into new creative territory.
Bibliography


Discography


