

# The Apolitical Irony of Generation Mash-Up: A Cultural Case Study in Popular Music

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*The mash-up remix rose to prominence in the early 2000s, spawning fans, amateur participants, and a small social movement. This paper culturally analyzes the influences on and implications of the mash-up phenomenon. By conducting a close reading of press articles and several interviews and textually analyzing some of the most popular and critically acclaimed tracks, I argue that the mash-up is a response to larger technological, institutional, and social contexts. Through themes of irony, empowerment, and re-appropriation, the mash-up serves as a fitting expression of today's youth media experience.*

## Introduction

As [Walter] Benjamin's "age of reproduction" is replaced by our "age of electronic reproduction," the trends which he discerned are further extended. Reproduction, pastiche and quotation, instead of being forms of textual parasitism, become constitutive of textuality. (Wollen 169)

Twenty years after Peter Wollen scanned the music video landscape and returned with this assessment, pop's trajectory remains no less self-referential. Hybridization, recycling, and irony—the holy trinity of pop culture today—seem entrenched in the entertainment industry and entwined in the material it puts out. It is within this cultural milieu that the music mash-up emerges—a product and symbol of a pop period not so much bankrupt of new ideas as set on bankrupting old ones through semiotic piracy. If the popularity and proliferation of the recent mash-up movement express a larger cultural urge, it would seem to be a celebration of that re-appropriation—an indication that, in today's supersaturated media environment, originality is open to larceny; it can be seen as a sign of too many signs.

In its most basic form, a mash-up (also called "bootleg" or "bastard pop") is simply two samples from different songs blended together to create a new track. This typically

entails capturing one track's instrumental or rhythm section and fusing it with another track's vocals. The concept has roots in both the hip-hop world, which since its infancy has sampled aggressively in building beats, and also the disco and subsequent electronica scenes, which require a continuous flow of sound piped onto the dance floor and feature seamless segues built upon songs bleeding into one another. Some consider rock group Aerosmith's 1986 "Walk This Way" collaboration with rap trio Run-D.M.C. to be the "proto-mash-up" of the mid-1980s (Cruger). Others point to a 1994 track by Evolution Control Committee ("Rebel Without a Pause") that married Herb Alpert's light, Latin brass sound to the scorching rap vocals of Public Enemy MC Chuck D (Battenberg 8E). This seminal recording was among several early mash-ups that suggested the basic template of not merely combining two songs, but combining two vastly different songs—melting down the meaning of each and melding it together like a mad pop alchemist. Throughout much of the late 1990s, particularly in Britain, the mash-up scene remained small and underground for legal reasons which will be analyzed in a later section. During this period, Belgian brothers Stephen and David Dewaele of 2 Many DJs created an acclaimed full-length mash-up CD that could not be released in its entirety sans copyright clearance (Emma Johnson 2). By the turn of the century, the mash-up began garnering major media attention with singles like "A Stroke of Genius" by DJ-producer Freelance Hellraiser in 2001 (Norris 102). "Stroke" matches the cloying vocals of pop star Christina Aguilera with the guitar work of indie rock group the Strokes.

"Stroke" rose to notability not simply because of Hellraiser's deft punk; it was also because, by 2002, the trend had spread widely, with reports of countless bedroom producers mashing away. A combination of MP3 source material stockpiling on Internet sites like Napster and DJ remix software becoming more affordable for the average consumer meant that, in essence, anyone could have had "A Stroke of Genius." In 2003, *Time* magazine offered a step-by-step guide to "cutting and pasting together pop hits" with platforms like Acid Music 3.0, which offers the user the ability to manipulate pitch, tempo, and volume of source tracks until they synchronize appropriately—all without the necessity of any "real" musical training (Taylor 78). Hellraiser, it seems, may not have been such genius after all, but the mash-up aesthetic and movement represent more than a mere blip on the ever-ephemeral pop culture radar.

In this paper, I conduct a case study in pop music, culturally analyzing the influences on and implications of the mash-up phenomenon. I suggest that it is a response to larger technological, institutional, and social contexts and I argue that the mash-up represents a clever and fitting expression of today's youth media experience. Similar to Simon Frith and Andrew Goodwin's approach in *On Record: Rock, Pop and the Written Word*, this research will emphasize the "arguments about music and its meaning, rather than factual or descriptive material, or judgments of personal taste" (x, emphasis in original).

My approach will utilize several methods. I conducted a close reading of 75 articles concerning the mash-up culled from both the popular and industry press. Many were

obtained through the Factiva news database using the search terms “mash-up” and “DJ” for all dates; others, including pieces from *Rolling Stone*, *Spin*, *Remix*, and *Billboard*, were obtained from the respective websites’ search engines. I also interviewed by e-mail four prominent figures in the mash-up scene: Art Wickson (a.k.a. Dr. a-dub), who runs [www.mashuptown.com](http://www.mashuptown.com); Mark Gunderson (a.k.a. Trademark G), a producer and artist with the Evolution Control Committee; Ben Hayes (a.k.a. Soundhog), a mash-up DJ and producer; and Ben Gill (a.k.a. Party Ben), another mash-up DJ and producer. Lastly, I textually analyzed several of the most popular and critically acclaimed mash-up works, including Danger Mouse’s *The Grey Album*; Evolution Control Committee’s “Rebel Without a Pause,” Freelance Hellraiser’s “A Stroke of Genius,” 2 Many DJs’ “Smells Like Teen Booty,” Negativland’s “I Still Haven’t Found What I’m Looking For,” and Party Ben’s “Boulevard of Broken Songs.” While this sample is naturally not statistically representative of some broader whole—the mash-up and its place in today’s popular culture—I hope it can serve as a starting point for valid and illuminating inquiry about that whole. From these texts, an intriguing picture emerges of a pop landscape constituted not only by Wollen’s “reproduction, pastiche and quotation,” but also by issues and themes like irony, empowerment, and, most importantly, re-appropriation.

### Text versus Technology

Technology has long rocked the music industry in myriad ways that force significant reorganization. Andrew Goodwin notes:

Pop production and consumption should be interpreted as building *resistance* to corporate control and rationalization. Here technologies are seen as facilitating the *democratization* of music, perhaps through disseminating music-making technology more widely. (“Rationalization” 148, emphasis in original)

Technology plays out in this reading as the tool by which audience-creators fend off and produce contentious counterpoints to the corporate and institutional power of today’s culture factories. In that, pop music has followed a similar theoretical arc to that of cultural studies as a whole—vacillating between pessimistic determinism and optimistic romanticism in its theories and conclusions about audience and media text (Negus 24–42).

For the mash-up to proliferate, two key technological developments were necessary: an abundance of available source material, which, by the late 1990s, had amassed on the Internet, and cheaper music software that facilitated the deconstruction and reconstruction of songs. My interviewees indicate these were critical factors. “[That’s] blown the possibilities wide open,” writes Ben Hayes. “In theory, there’s nothing you can’t do [and] there’s no way I could do what I do now without the tools/material available.” “[The technologies] have made the processes far easier and far more widespread than they could have in the analog days,” Art Wickson adds. “They have basically rewritten the rules because the game has changed so drastically....It really makes it possible for anyone with time and creativity to do so.”

Indeed, much is made of the belief that virtually any consumer can now play the role of producer thanks to digital music technology. Feasibility does not, however, guarantee participation. For the democratic ideal of a new music technology to be embraced, a participatory mentality needs to exist among the fandom populace. Signs indicate that that mentality is thriving. Antoine Hennon (par. 2) places the mash-up impetus within the context of a larger generational tendency, noting that almost twice as many adolescents today have “done music” compared with those born prior to 1960. That engagement—and some would say “empowerment”—registers when scores of schoolchildren send in their bootleg remixes to a mash-up radio show in London hoping to get them played (Phillips 11). A music critic for *The New York Times* writes:

As utopian as they may sound in today’s fragmented, niche-marketed pop landscape, mash-ups—thus far the province of clubland pranksters—are too marginal to break contemporary pop out of its rut. But they do promise a new and meaningful kind of empowerment. (Norris 102)

The fact that even “harmonically challenged pop wannabes”—the same hordes of young and talentless dreamers on display in today’s *American Idol* soundscape—could, in theory, follow the mash-up blueprint to success touts the kind of “democratization of the medium” that Ben Hayes claims (Taylor 78). In cities like San Francisco, London, and New York, amateur pop alchemists can even exhibit their mash-up work at certain bars that have open iPod nights for our “era of the all-empowering personal MP3 player” (Parvaz E1).

In DIY culture, consumer becomes producer and formerly rigid lines demarcating more strict roles along the traditional culture continuum blur as reader re-authors digital music text. “Now there’s a whole generation of music fans creating a new role for themselves in the interactive marketplace—consumer-creators,” claims one music writer (Maurostad E01). “We’re seeing the mass embodiment of the DJ culture, where people are taking control of the music,” writes Mark Gunderson. “The audience is taking on a DIY spirit, each masher becoming a mini-Burroughs, cutting the music and pasting it on a blank sheet of MP3.” He emphasizes the optimistic upshot: “I think this will be a great thing for culture though—people are participating, they’re being part of the music instead of letting someone else feed it to them.” Wickson, too, posits that the rise of the mash-up “gives more power to consumers [and] the power of the label weakens even more.”

The myth of the amateur and the reification of folk culture have been at the forefront of much cultural analysis since the 1950s. The mash-up would seem to comport with that line of thinking, particularly with its capacity to flatten borders and metamorphose power roles in the musical and cultural marketplace. “What is important here,” writes Sam Howard-Spink, “is the acknowledgment that those who download music, as much as those who produce the music, are part of the same matrix.” He adds, “[The mash-up] is another step on the path towards the democratization of creativity, towards the dismantling of the myth of a special class of creators isolated from the rest of us consumers.”

This perceived democratization can be no less disconcerting to industry powers (a point considered in the next section) than to the “original” authors of a song. Artists seem to have varying reactions to the fact that, as Kembrew McLeod notes, “An author has little control over how his music is received and understood—that he literally does not have the final word, as Roland Barthes would say—no matter how hard he tries” (84). DJ-producer Moby, for one, embraces that ambiguity: “When you put a record out into the world, it has its own life that you can’t control and you can’t predict. It’s going to be used by all sorts of people in all sorts of ways” (Maurstad E01). David Bowie even organized a contest to reward the best amateur mash-up of his work: “Mash-ups were a great appropriation idea just waiting to happen....Being a hybridmaker off and on over the years, I’m very comfortable with the idea” (Sherwin 3).

Others, however, have not taken so kindly to the mash-up project. Dave Grohl of Nirvana, as one example, reportedly found the hit mash-up “Smells Like Teen Booty” “wretched” (Kevin Johnson F03). This, I would argue, is the mash-up’s less idyllic side. “Smells Like Teen Booty” takes the instrumental foundation of Nirvana’s 1991 “Smells Like Teen Spirit” and peels off Kurt Cobain’s iconic, angstful lyrics, replacing them with the vocals from Destiny’s Child and their decidedly less brooding “Bootylicious.” The irony of it (its widely cited greatest strength) subverts what had been Cobain’s genuine lament; it undermines author intent and erases originally coded meanings and readings. Instead of a growling “I feel stupid and contagious,” the listener hears, “Is my body too bootylicious for you, baby?” What perhaps irks Grohl is that “Teen Spirit” has been stripped of its suicidal self-seriousness and Nirvana’s sound is now enmeshed with precisely the sort of glossy pop that the band so despised. This, many argue, is precisely the point: to deconstruct (and mock) the arbitrarily divided and cherished pop canon.

In that, the mash-up seems an exercise in irreverence. Technology makes that irreverence possible. When textual music material went digital and became so widely disseminated on the Internet, its cultural status changed as well. What a song may have gained in terms of audience size, it lost in terms of “aura,” as Benjamin might suggest. Unlike pop music incarnations of 50 years ago—a time when the vinyl record was more tangible, permanent, and, I would venture to say, sacred—MP3s, being virtually disposable, give way to a reduction in reverence. Amateurs tinker because they can; there is no “aura” to give them pause and, if one mash-up effort results in failure, the source material can be re-downloaded again within minutes. The original source is stripped of its sacredness and the music text goes from being etched in stone to being written on a dry-erase board. Infinite collage work is possible because infinitely available (and disposable) source material makes that experimentation possible. “For a lot of people, though, mp3s and other digital formats have devalued the medium of music quite a lot,” notes Ben Hayes. Adds Mark Gunderson, “It’s definitely reducing [reverence toward original sources], and that’s part of the reason why people are making mash-ups....The original tracks are no longer sacred or untouchable. Now, anything is fair game for mashing.” While some see virtue in this

slaughtering of pop's sacred cows, the act of mashing may not be in pure jest—at least in the minds of some DJs. Art Wickson, for example, sketches out two sides to the issue of textual reverence:

On the one side you've got, "I can have my way with you mate [referring to source tracks] and do whatever the hell I want with you" and the other, "I pay respect by spending my time and energy to take you to a level that you would not have seen otherwise."

And, yet, was the point of Marcel Duchamp's moustache to take Mona Lisa to a higher level of *respect* or to expose the contrived nature of the lofty status she'd been granted?

The problem with the high-mindedness of Wickson's latter argument is that few would reasonably argue that "Teen Booty" takes Nirvana to a level inviting greater reverence. Few would claim "Teen Booty" reveals something deeper in the source track that had not been sonically or culturally unearthed before. "Teen Booty" works because it plays upon the irony of the disparate sources—because, rather than going deep (what Nirvana desires), it stays shallow and takes pop at its face value. Its popular and critical acclaim stems not from 2 Many DJs' careful consideration of Nirvana's intent, but rather from their deliberate subverting and undermining of that grunge ethos. Cobain played the rebel through dark brooding; 2 Many DJs play the rebel by splashing carefree pop dreck upon his dark brooding. The wit and value of "Teen Booty" can be located in its wink-wink destabilizing of the original textual meaning. Its content exists in its ironic reference.

Moreover, the ease of creating a mash-up and the astonishing "perfect fit" of wildly different songs also exposes pop's underlying "part-interchangeability," upon which Goodwin ("Rationalization") echoed Theodor Adorno. This notion contends that mass-produced cultural parts from a product line are assembled to create a "different" product. Because, as Goodwin notes, "pop songs often utilize the same or very similar drum patterns, chord progressions, song structures, and lyrics while being distinguished by marketing techniques," the mash-up can exist—it can highlight that sameness and parody the "pseudo-individualization" of artists and their multi-million dollar marketing machines (148). It can show that, however culturally distant they may seem—in advertising and subculture—Kurt Cobain and Beyoncé are not so impossibly irreconcilable. This seems especially true of a mash-up track like "Boulevard of Broken Songs," which staples together Green Day, Travis, and Oasis source materials "which were absolutely identical to start with," as Ben Hayes complains.

If abundance and disposability of digital material reduce textual reverence and encourage destabilizing tinkering, the text, in mash-up culture, is not only incomplete but potentially in flux indefinitely. Finality turns out to be more temporary than previously assumed, post-mash-up; a song, once thought to be a completed project upon delivery to the consumer, is now for ever unfinished—putty in the hands of a potential Acid Pro alchemist. Mark Gunderson notes how this now makes it "nebulous as to when to be really *finished* with a track." He sees this

loosening of production boundaries contributing to a rethinking about the general structure of pop music:

In the beginning of the DJ/remix culture (say, late 70's and 80's), notes gave way to samples—it's like the transition from letters to words. Now with the rise of mash-ups, we're seeing a beautiful growth where whole new songs—sentences of samples, paragraphs of notes—are once again becoming the building blocks of new songs. The songs themselves are becoming notes anew. It's *metamusic*—music that describes music.

The idealistic frame of empowerment—that the listener is now emboldened to play along—colors much of the mash-up discourse, in both press articles and my interviews with DJs. Its rhetorical twin—“resistance”—shows up when considering mashing in light of the music industry's institutional context, and this is the subject of the following section. While these optimistic conclusions may ultimately be subject to debate (I hope to eventually probe the question “empowerment towards what?”), what seems clear is that technology plays a significant role in changing our relationship to the music text. It is no doubt premature to hail the dawn of digital democracy in the realm of pop music semiotics; a more modest (and hopefully defensible) claim might be to say that the technological context that hatched the mash-up moment offers the *possibility* of greater consumer participation. That, in itself, is a modest accomplishment.

“In the past, the only way a song could ever be reborn was thru someone doing a cover version—and that had to be sanctioned by the labels. Now a song can be reborn infinitely and sound different anytime/anyplace,” Art Wickson writes. “This is something the labels continue to ignore. Back catalog rebirth is good for everyone.” And, yet, institutional powers have not always agreed.

### **Whither Big Music?**

The industrial and institutional context for the mash-up aesthetic and movement can perhaps best be understood through the story of DJ Danger Mouse and his groundbreaking *Grey Album*. Using Acid Pro software, Danger Mouse, born Brian Burton, sliced apart the Beatles' 1968 *White Album*, reconstructed hip-hop beats and laid down Jay-Z's vocals taken from an a cappella version of *The Black Album* from 2003. Only 3,000 copies were originally pressed of Danger Mouse's mash-up creation, but upon Internet dissemination in 2004, the release “sent shockwaves through the record industry” (Sherwin 3). Critics swooned at the clever and well-executed endeavor. *Rolling Stone* called it “an ingenious hip-hop record that sounds oddly ahead of its time”; other pop critics gushed that it was “audaciously compelling” and “the most-buzzed about album of the year”; *Entertainment Weekly* called it “the most talked-about, and probably listened-to, underground recording of all time... a startling, shockingly wonderful piece of pop art” (Lauren Gitlin; Vrabell 67; Kot 48; Browne 64).

What catapulted *Grey Album* from laurelled art to inspiring a social movement was the music industry's swift and, many argued, draconian reaction. Danger Mouse had

produced *Grey Album* without clearing any copyright permission from EMI, which owns the Beatles' recordings. This made the project wholly illicit and resulted in a cease-and-desist order demanding the DJ-producer stop distribution. Downhill Battle, a non-profit music activist organization dedicated to supporting "participatory culture and building a fairer music industry," took up the cause of the *Grey Album* and organized Grey Tuesday on 24 February 2004—spinning it as a "day of digital civil disobedience against a copyright regime that routinely suppresses musical innovation" (Downhill Battle). Nearly 200 websites hosted a copy of *The Grey Album*—many receiving cease-and-desist letters from EMI as well—and nearly 1,000,000 tracks from it were downloaded, making it, according to *Billboard*, "one of the most downloaded recordings of the early file-sharing era" (Caulfield and Paoletta 3). If the legality of Danger Mouse's work remained a grey area, the popular response among fans to threatened industry litigation sent a message of black-and-white clarity.

Under the current US copyright laws, it is illegal to sample without permission, and scholars Kembrew McLeod and Sam Howard-Spink have provided excellent analyses placing Grey Tuesday activism within the larger context of free culture and intellectual and artistic property battles in America today. Howard-Spink highlights salient recent examples of the "political power" of music and its "capacity to involve a wide range of people, and youth in particular, in a new engagement with the political process." Grey Tuesday, then, offers a useful case study in popular music's political dialectic of control and resistance. For the countless participants engaged in flouting copyright law, the movement was, at best, an explicitly political statement or, at the least, a show of disdain or apathy toward music's legal, material dimension.

Robin Ballinger, in a piece charting the function of "music and noise as social forces, fully involved in the 'dialogic process' of social life and, as such, an important site of control—and resistance," argues that "oppositional music practices not only act as a form of resistance against domination, but generate social relationships and experience which can form the basis of a new cultural sensibility" (13, 14). (The mash-up constitutes its own contribution to a cultural sensibility, the topic of my concluding section.) Ballinger cites Peter Manuel's *Cassette Culture* argument that "the accessibility of music technology since the mid-1980s has decentered control in the music industry," moving "musical and political expression away from monopoly and towards pluralism in cultural production" (19). In assessing the oligopoly that has dominated the global production and distribution of pop (UMG, BMG, EMI, Sony, and Warner), Ballinger returns to the technological optimism evidenced in my preceding section: "Decreasing costs of music technology have facilitated subaltern cultural production and have effectively challenged the hegemony of mass cultural products and ideologies" (17).

Yet, the question must be asked, how resistant and empowering is the mash-up, when it remains, at this point in time, an illegal art product? How much will this really topple "old-world notions of control and ownership" as Maustad claims (E01)? How much is this a false promise? EMI's iron-fisted reaction to *The Grey Album* was hardly uncommon. In 1991, U2's label sued Negativland over a comical collage of the band's hit "I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For" (Wilson R4).



Evolution Control Committee had to pull their record from stores in the 1990s after CBS threatened action on a Dan Rather-AC/DC mash-up called "Rocked by Rape" (Battenberg 8E). More recently, the XFM London radio show dedicated to the mash-up got its own cease-and-desist letter for playing "A Stroke of Genius" (Phillips 11). And the Record Industry Association of America helped shut down Art Wickson's [www.mashuptownradio.com](http://www.mashuptownradio.com) in 2005.

Big Music could hardly be clearer in their opinion of this cottage industry folk culture: "When you buy a CD you buy the rights to listen to it, not to change it in any way," a British Phonographic Institute spokesperson tells the *Guardian* in an article on the mash-up trend (Phillips 11). "There's no legal justification for what these people are doing," adds one copyright lawyer for the Beatles (Maurstad E01). Interestingly, amateur mashers do not seem to be profiting widely from their collage creations; the threat to the industry and its clients is not, in fact, explicitly financial, but rather cultural and "auratic."

"The bigger risk is to the original artists' persona or 'brand,'" one former music company executive confides (Waldmeir 11). "Copyright is about control: the right to control the way your work is used." The industry is fighting a battle over image in an era when mashers target sources precisely because of their image: what Nirvana signifies; what Destiny's Child signifies; and how apparently hilarious it is to bundle them together. The mash-up's real function as a subversive force is in its rebellion through juxtaposition (placing Nirvana in a Destiny's Child context); its rebellion against industry market segmentation and, hence, arbitrary aesthetic borders. Most FM radio patterns have, over the years, prevented a juxtaposition of Jay-Z and the Beatles from occurring; stations, channels, and shelves at the music store help keep the genres separate. A mash-up combining the two can be read in some sense as liberation from the cultural power structure that endlessly carves up those micro-niche fan bases. Ben Gill concurs, wondering whether the mash-up's popularity couldn't be linked to "pent-up frustration on the extreme segregation of genres in Western culture." Art Wickson adds:

I think it's a cry for something beyond the ordinary. It tells me that people don't want what the media/record labels are pushing. It tells me that people want an experience that is their own and different than what is available...that people are bored with the mass produced, mass publicized information.

He adds that mash-ups have the "potential to obliterate genres." Transcending borders and formats as a means of resisting narrowly imposed cultural parameters was part of the impetus behind 2 Many DJs' early mash-up work. Member David Dewaele claims that their approach was a response to most DJs "playing from only one genre of music" and that mash-up was a kind of sarcastic insult to dance culture segmentation: "It's kind of funny now that we were rebelling against the whole mainstream music thing and now what we do has become the mainstream" (Kevin Johnson 3).

Here we find a critical counterpoint to reading the mash-up as resistance: the fact that the music culture hegemony has been able quickly to absorb and adapt to the mash-up phenomenon. Indeed, Big Music has now effectively re-appropriated the

underground art of re-appropriation. The (once offended) co-opted are doing the co-opting as the mash-up has, in street terms, “sold out.”

Dick Hebdige writes of a parallel process of transition in the realm of fashion and style. He highlights a cycle “leading from opposition to defusion, from resistance to incorporation that encloses each successive subculture” (100). In later work, Simon During notes, “Hebdige (1988) was to rework his method, admitting that he had underestimated the power of commercial culture to appropriate, and indeed, to produce counter-hegemonic styles” (441). Appropriation of the mash-up by the institutions of commercial music culture came swiftly. Major record labels began producing their own “officially sanctioned” mash-ups and signing DJs who would’ve been punished for their otherwise illegal mixes because, as Wickson states, “They finally see that money can be made”: No small issue for an industry that’s seen sales plummet by 26% since 1999 (Cruger).

Most prominent among the “above-ground” mash-ups was a 2004 Warner label collaboration between Jay-Z himself and hard rock group Linkin Park called *Collision Course* (Baca F01). Critically panned, *Collision* nonetheless debuted at number 1 on the *Billboard* 200 chart and moved nearly 400,000 units in its first week. EMI signed Richard X, a popular British mash-up DJ, to steer him toward producing “legitimate” hits. Danger Mouse was rewarded with a Grammy nomination for his production of Gorillaz’ 2005 *Demon Days* on a label that’s owned by the same EMI corporation that had been earlier serving him with cease-and-desist letters for *The Grey Album* (Sherwin 3). More irony can be found in the fact that, after Christina Aguilera’s label served XFM with a cease-and-desist for playing “A Stroke of Genius,” they commissioned the song’s producer, Freelance Hellraiser to remix her next single. Paul McCartney, no small player on the Beatles’ *White Album*, also enlisted Freelance Hellraiser’s efforts to create pre-show mash-ups for his concerts. (Presumably, no Beatles’ tracks were harmed in the making of such pre-show mash-ups.) There’s David Bowie’s aforementioned official mash-up contest in collaboration with Apple iTunes and sponsored by Audi (Blay F01). New York DJ Reset mashed Beck with Neptunes material to create the single “Frontin’ on Debra” and, when Beck heard it on the radio, Reset received a call from the pop star, resulting in its “official” release on Interscope as the first major-label mash-up in 2004. Signaling perhaps the ultimate demise of the mash-up’s underground and resistant ethos and credibility, Heineken sponsored the first concert festival dedicated to live mash-up collaboration in summer 2005 (Aquilante 81).

In this, the mash-up follows a familiar pattern of industry incorporating underground music genres. Cutting and pasting pop pastiche, once unambiguously fringelike, subversive, and empowering, now seems to ascend to the same canon of regulated taste that absorbed jazz, rock, rap, and punk before it. Regarding an “Ultimate Mash-Ups” show on MTV, one MTV executive told *The New York Post*: “We took it from the indie underground and are trying a mainstream approach” (Huhn 23). Rarely does an affirmation of Hebdige’s “cycle of incorporation” come so nakedly exposed; rarer still is such a succinct summation of the music industry’s strategy and logic on cultural manufacturing.

“I found it exciting when I got into all this, it was a genuine thrill to be a part of a ‘movement’ that back then (2000) was quite small and very spread out,” writes Ben Hayes. “These days it’s too omnipresent to be subversive.” Ubiquity dulls the edge of any innovative cultural blade; once commercialized, hopes for rebelliousness seem largely an exercise in illusion.

Furthermore, the growth of the mash-up actually serves to undermine the traditional cultural power role of the DJ herself. For many years, the DJ had sought and evolved toward a credible standing in the music world, fighting for recognition among those who would claim the DJ is not a real musician. As charted by Bill Herman, “In an era of semiotic excess, the work of choosing and combining music for consumers had been elevated from a mere job to a highly coveted skill” (22). To purist critics, the DJ had never really created anything of his own; now, with democratizing platforms like Acid Pro that enable anyone to create mash-ups, it can be argued that even less talent is needed. Motor skill dexterity and technical know-how—the basics of the DJ—are rendered obsolete (or at least extraneous) when the production interface to create “DJ music” plays out with the simplicity of a Microsoft Office program. The cultural cachet of being a DJ is also undermined by the popular pandering that the mash-up requires. For in both the hip-hop and the electronica scenes, there remains a pervasive sense that the DJ should function as a taste demigod—the archaeologist of music esoterica the listener hasn’t heard before. Part of the DJ’s credibility was linked to an elitist position that looked down upon playing pop hits as “jukebox DJ-ing.” The mash-up, however, requires recognizable original samples—it requires the DJ to play what’s familiar to the crowd so that it can be subverted ironically. Thus, knowledge and possession of obscure vinyl records is worthless in light of this new Top 40 demand; the mash-up, in effect, actually handicaps the DJ’s own power role as cultural arbiter and musical taste-monger.

Still, one must admit the mash-up does partly validate the empowering hope of music stardom for bedroom producers. Danger Mouse, Freelance Hellraiser, and DJ Reset *were* unknown prior to their pop alchemy gaining popularity in the Internet underground. Grey Tuesday *was* an act of social resistance against industry power. But what seems clear from this institutional analysis of the mash-up is the surprising agility of an often-monolithic cultural hegemon—major record labels—to absorb an underground trend. The mash-up, in its illegal original form, may not have had a place in the political economy of music. Industry powers were, however, quick to open up space for it and capitalize on its cash-making potential.

### **Generation Irony and the Empty Politics of Culture Jamming**

Todd Gitlin describes the “supersaturation” of today’s unlimited media world thus:

The swarming enormity of American popular culture ought to be obvious, for never have so many communicated so much, on so many screens, through so many channels, absorbing so many hours of irreplaceable human attention, about communications. (Todd Gitlin 4)

He argues that the imperceptible truth is that living with media is one of the main things people now do—that “an accompaniment *to* life...has become the central experience *of* life” (17, emphasis in original). If this torrent has swept up America whole, as Gitlin argues, such a structure of feeling would seem to resonate even more deeply for young people—those who grow up amid the deluge of popular images and sounds. What, then, makes the mash-up such a fitting expression of the Generation X/Y<sup>1</sup> experience in this *Media Unlimited* world? I believe a hint of the answer can be found in comments by mash-up visual artist Cory Arcangel to *The Globe and Mail* that *age* is the major factor in his “FrankenArt”:

I’m 25 and I have no experience with anything except media, so it’s like, I can’t make anything... The language I understand is media, so when I make something, as a raw material it’s the only thing I’m comfortable with. It’s not a conscious effort, being a hacker or making a political statement...It doesn’t make sense for me to make work out of anything else. It doesn’t make sense for me to just draw stuff. I think with a lot of artists my age, it’s all just mashing stuff together, and it’s all about connotation and it’s all about how things fit together, and it’s all about cultural references. (Houpt R1)

Explaining how environment conditions their artistic sensibilities and provides them with the raw material and tools from which to build, mash-up pioneers Negativland add:

We are now all immersed in an ever-growing media environment—an environment just as real and just as affecting as the natural one from which it somehow sprang. Today we are surrounded by canned ideas, images, music and text....The act of appropriating from this kind of media assault represents a kind of liberation from our status as helpless sponges which is so desired by the advertisers who pay for it all. (Negativland 92)

John Pomara, a painter and art professor, likens mash-up producers to inheritors of the Picasso and Braque collagist aesthetic: “They’re creating a sound that reflects the world they live in” (Maurstad E01). If media have become nature for young people, then, somewhat naturally, mashing up entails crisscrossing media borders. DJ Z-Trip—another important masher—explains why the mash-up is culturally logical: “It made sense ’cause I grew up listening to all that music; I didn’t separate it” (Micallef).

As Gary Burns (130) points out, the music of one’s adolescence becomes the music of one’s life. For Baby Boomers in particular, music *is* history—it represents the narrative template for both personal and public experiences. To date, I would argue, that Generation X/Y pop narrative—the collective memory based upon shared experiences moving through music history—has been utterly fragmented if not balkanized and schizophrenic. This potentially explains the appeal and resonance of the mash-up; it both identifies the scattered pieces of pop detritus that litter the media-soaked landscape (and, with it, identity) and manages to make them coherent at the same time. It reconciles the arbitrarily divided niches. “Kids today like many kinds of music,” notes an MTV executive (Paoletta 3). “One kid will like rock, rap, hip-hop and electronic. So it’s natural for them to take different-sounding records and merge them together.”

Yet, as politically defining pop goes, I believe the mash-up movement is surprisingly vapid. Certainly it does serve a limited political function. Mashers rewrite the pop canon in a way that critics and musicians wouldn't prefer and subvert taste hierarchies that dominate pop music. Their deconstructionist, re-appropriationist mentality—whereby texts are stripped of original meaning and soldered to others—also blurs the high-low culture divide. That's the subversive, satirical (and ironic) delight in a track like "Teen Booty," which marries a rarefied music snob text like Nirvana to the vulgar, vacuous *TRL* pleasures of Destiny's Child. The title alone gives away the ironic, smart-aleck allegiances of the musical masher: How seriously can one take a track called "Smells Like Teen Booty"? And the more absurd the combination, the greater the approval from fans in the mash-up community (Cruger). Hybridizing disparate source tracks boosts the implicit tension between the two texts; just as Hebdige's *bricoleur* fuses "two apparently incompatible realities" (106), the mash-up DJ shows that diverse music texts are compatible.

"It subverts not only the labels that own the copyrights to the music, but also the original musicians performing it by [re-]using it in ways they didn't intend," writes Mark Gunderson. "Mixing rap with more rap is obvious (and something the rap artists themselves might do). Mashing it with easy listening just feels sneaky." In Gunderson's collagist arithmetic, Jay-Z plus B.I.G. equals nothing terribly special; Jay-Z plus Kenny G is the kind of "semiotic guerrilla warfare" that Umberto Eco wrote of (Hebdige 105). Richard X proclaimed his mash-up work to be no less than "reappropriating pop culture from the corporate world" (Phillips 11), a point echoed above in *Negativland's* commentary on their own work. The question remains, however: To what end is such culture jamming useful, other than its own self-indulgent referentiality? In this "ultimate expression of remix culture," this "highest form of recontextualization," does the mash-up aesthetic and movement amount to anything more than "in-jokes for music geeks" (Cruger)? Is there a real cause here, beyond irony—a genuine call to arms toward *something* rather than a simple wink-wink, tongue-in-cheek prank about *nothing*? I would argue that the mash-up is *bricolage* for its own sake; as a definitive generational statement, it hesitates to espouse anything more than detached, wry commentary, which actually may be apropos. The mash-up can be considered the audio complement to reading *The Onion's* farcical news stories or sporting a pseudo-thrift-store T-shirt slogan à la Urban Outfitters' "Jesus is my homeboy."

Todd Gitlin sketches several archetypes of style and politics that can be used in response to the glut and intensity of today's media world. One such response that is relevant to this project is that of "the jammer": "The culture jammer...believes that images are power, but goes farther. He thinks that he can change them and thus, in some small way, redistribute power" (153). The mash-up has precipitated a rise in hopeful rhetoric about redistributing music industry power through DJ folk culture crafting. I share Gitlin's hesitancy about whether this really produces anything more than superficial, ironic combat: "It may boost his side's morale, though whether [the jammer] contributes to lasting change is another question" (156).

“Often the most effective ways to parody something is to pull some defensive kung fu—use the attacker’s strength against him,” writes Mark Gunderson. “I often feel offended that so many corporations litter my soundspace with some [*sic*] much crap, and I feel entitled to use it against them.” Yet in that semiotic jujitsu, he also acknowledges the mash-up is a platform for delivering irony “wholesale.” Indeed, of the popular mash-up tracks I analyzed textually, many resonate with a deeply cynical irony. Herb Alpert’s chirpy brass section blunts Chuck D’s intensity, not to mention his embedded political message; Destiny’s Child’s poppy falsetto similarly strips Nirvana’s instrumental track of the grunge angst popularly associated with it. It’s catchy and clever—and little more than that. It exposes the arbitrariness of styles and signs, which is an apolitical way of making a political statement. For young people coming of age in Gitlin’s *Media Unlimited* world, the recourse to playing the role of Generation Irony may seem necessary. Irony implies precociousness; it also serves as a defense mechanism. The defense is necessary growing up in a media-saturated environment and that environment plants the seeds of such precociousness.

Has any previous generation necessarily identified so much with Cory Arcangel’s sentiment—that the principal experience *is* media itself? From earliest days, young people are bathed in media—inundated by a supply of form and content that is both lightning-fast and omnipresent. Media occupy and even dominate conversations; attention; identity. Swimming upstream against the current of useless media images—the pop culture torrent Gitlin examines—everything can be reduced to, and parodied at, face value. That is, after all, what the mash-up does best.

Ben Gill considers the mash-up’s rise in the context of larger theorizing about a nostalgia culture factory set to an accelerated cycle time speed: “Some post-modern theorists might ascribe what’s happening to a certain sense of the ‘end of history,’ i.e. as culture winds down, it ends up recycling itself, with a faster and faster turnaround, rather than innovating and progressing.” In the spirit of recycling, however, this philosophical lament is nothing terribly new itself. Concurrent with Peter Wollen’s pop diagnosis that opened this paper, Andrew Goodwin was, in 1990, taking stock of how “pop has plundered its archives with truly postmodern relish, in an orgy of pastiche”—adding that “so much of contemporary pop seems to be caught in a stasis of theft (as in ‘free samples’) and reissues” (“Sample” 260). Pop, it seems, has been mashing itself up for a while. Twenty years from now, we can perhaps expect more of the same.

I would concur with Angelica Madeira that “music is empowering not only because of the explicit political ends it is able to serve, but also because it formulates the yearnings and values for an entire generation” (Balliger 17). I remain uncertain what exactly, in the end, the mash-up really has to say.

## Notes

- [1] I use Generation X and Y concurrently here to contrast with preceding American generational narratives like the Baby Boomers and the Second World War generation and to avoid a complicated digression on the cultural and value differences *between* X and

Y—typically considered to be those born, respectively, between 1965 and 1979 and 1980 and 1995. My intent is simply to emphasize the identity and culture of those young people who came of age in Gitlin's digital electronic media environment.

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