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#### BACKGROUND:

I think the pastor and the DJ have a lot in common. I have been spending time at the LA Scratch Academy, which is a school for aspiring DJs, to study this. The roots of my interest in this context began to grow in the winter of 2008.

A little over a year ago, while taking an Old Testament Theology class, I asked some of my young urban friends to read a part of the Bible and tell me if it reminded them of any rap songs. After a fascinating conversation with my friend Karina about the similarities and differences between Ecclesiastes and Kanye West, I realized that there was energy in our conversation because we both brought something we cared about to the conversation. At the same time, we were intimidated by what we did not know. Music was intimidating to me (at this point I had never purchased a CD), and the Bible was intimidating to Karina (she did not grow up in the church).

Last Spring I chose to enter into the music world by taking the class, "Theology and Pop Music." I figured that doing this would give me a glimpse of what it is like for my urban friends when I ask them to enter into my theology world. As I started to build a framework for understanding music I researched questions like, "What are the genres of music?" and "What developments in music influenced the shape of music today?" For each question I posed about music, I tried to ask similar questions about the Bible.

In making these comparisons I began to think that the role of the pastor is most like the role of the Hip Hop DJ. The DJ is not the Disk Jockey of the 1970s; instead, the DJ is an artist who weaves together songs in order to create a new song for the audience before them. DJs are masters of both material and context.

Last Fall I found out about the LA Scratch Academy. I wanted to learn more about the role of the DJ, so I set up an interview with the Executive Director, DJ Hapa. During the three hour interview Hapa and I easily found ways to connect our experiences together. He invited me to spend some time at the school to see if there was more that we could learn from one another.

For the past four months I have been visiting the school on a weekly basis. I have sat in on various classes and have begun to form relationships with some of the students and instructors. I have come to see the school as a very spiritual place. The students describe their experience of listening to music as something that resonates with them in a soulful place. The professors break down the basics of DJing much like the professors of seminary teach about the Bible. The community that forms has many qualities found within a church community.

#### 152 CLASS OBSERVATIONS:

On May 16, 2009 I went to the LA Scratch Academy and I sat in on the 152 class. The instructor for this course is DJ Denkym. The five students in the class had the assignment of working together to record a mixtape. This meant that most of the class consisted of listening to music as each of the students took turns DJing. Denkym sat next to me and we were able to have an insightful conversation about the religious/spiritual issues he recognizes in DJing.

In class (3.31.09) Dr. Shaw defined spirituality as, "connection with something spiritual." For Denkym this seemed to be the vibrations that music puts out. Denkym described how music affects the environment. He said it's almost a tactile experience because you can feel

the vibes and a good DJ is sensitive to the waves. Denkym recognizes that music is powerful. He referenced some studies that played music to water and trees to study the affects. I looked up some of the studies that Denkym was referring to. I found Dr. Emoto's research on photographing frozen water crystals under the influence of different music and words (<http://www.masaru-emoto.net/> and <http://www.hado.net/index.php>).

In class (3.31.09) Dr. Shaw defined religion as organizing the connections we make with something spiritual. The water research that Denkym referred to also has a whole folk religion associated with it called Hado. According to the Hado website:

“The theory of Hado postulates that, since all phenomena is at heart resonating energy, by changing the vibration we change the substance. Conventional science in general still does not support this notion. Yet quantum physics and in particular the 'observer effect' (of Heisenberg's uncertainty principle) clearly suggests we do alter our environment” (<http://www.hado.net/hado/hadoinaction.php>).

Denkym emphasized that it is the role of the DJ to be responsible for altering the environment. He said that music has the ability to move people. He said that he has an ability to use music waves as a weapon, as a “catalyst for change.” He said I can get people angry or I can encourage them to make babies.

What I found particularly interesting in this discussion is the way that Denkym describes the unseen in a tangible way. According to Heibert's model, he is able to recognize “the world of immediate human experience,” (Hiebert, Shaw, Tienou 1999:47) in this case what people can hear. But Denkym is also able to recognize what is unseen, or the “beings and forces that cannot be directly seen, but are thought to exist *on this earth*,” (Ibid: 48) in this case the vibrations. This seems to shape his understanding of the spiritual. Denkym sees his role as a DJ, the one that plays the vibrations, as having influence and responsibility associated with this task.

I was also looking out for the way that the DJs viewed their identity. Each person takes on a DJ name. I actually don't know most of the DJs given names, instead they go by names like “4tified” or “Verse.” The DJ name often holds a lot of meaning for the DJ and offers a way to let others know something about them.

Before the students started their objective for the class Denkym gave a little speech about what it means to be a DJ. He said it was their responsibility to “put the vibe out there” and to “bring DJing to places others haven't been before.” He said, as a DJ “you are letting people hear the world through your ears, through your speakers.” He told the students that they were on a journey and that it never ends. He encouraged them to follow their thirst for music.

## DJs AS EXPERT LISTNERS

DJs are expert listeners. This week I was at a retreat for training spiritual directors and the focus was on training people how to listen to God and to people at the same time. The DJs are trained to listen to two things at once. In fact, when they perform they keep their headphones on only one ear. This is so they can listen to the music that they are going to play and to the music that is currently playing. Much of a DJ's guidance comes from listening. DJs listen to the drumbeats and to the rhythm. In the 101 class they are coached to “lock in the beat,” which means they are to move their body to the music. Hapa, the instructor tells his students, “Everything you mix is going to come through you. Use your body to help you, the build in rhythm that you have” (Hapa 2009:2/4).

DJs also listen to their audience. In a way the DJs seem to utilize what Hiebert, Shaw, and Tienou describe as presentiments, “some people are believed to have the power to discern the unseen through feelings or presentiments. These practitioners observe body actions, such as sneezing, twitching, and hiccupping, which they interpret as predictions of rainfall, bad luck, drought, or some other coming event” (1999:177). The same awareness that these practitioners need to notice the small details is what the DJs develop through discerning the movements and responses to the crowd.

A practice that gives some insights into how DJs view guidance is “digging” for records. In the 101 class the students were taken on a field trip to a record store in order to discover some more music. They were instructed to judge the records by the picture on the album cover, notice any names they recognize, but also to pay attention if they “get a feeling.” Hapa said, “Don’t just go by what you’re familiar with, you may find something that no one else knows about” (Hapa 2009:2/4).

## SYMBOLS/RITUALS

According to Hiebert, Shaw, and Tienou, “Rituals are powerful enactments or dramas in which members of a community play society formally, and, in doing, express and renew their deep ideas, feelings, and values” (1999:292). In these last few weeks I have observed two of the rituals of the LA Scratch Academy.

On April 26, 2009 I attended the LA Scratch Graduation. Students who participated in the six-week classes were able to perform in front of an audience of friends, family, teachers, and other DJs. This ritual was a rite of transformation. “Transformative rites are performed to order the cycle of the seasons, to mark the transitions in life of individuals and groups, and to revive religious conviction” (Hiebert, Shaw, and Tienou 1999:303). By performing and receiving a certificate this event marked the end of one class and allowed the student DJs to move on to another class. The way that this ritual “revives religious conviction” was in the way that it created community and allowed space for the student DJs to articulate what this experience meant to them.

On April 23, 2009 I attended another ritual, the final exam for the 152 class. This in a way was a rite of crisis. The 152 class is set up to prepare students to play gigs. The ritual is to prepare the students for expected emergencies that will arise when they are out at DJ events. Without this ritual they will not be as prepared for the emergencies as they could be.

The students, teachers, and guests all played roles. The task for this ritual was to pretend as if the DJs were playing at the opening of a Hollywood club. When I arrived at the school I immediately noticed that many of the participants were wearing different clothes. One of the students was wearing a sequined dress, one of the teachers was in a suit, and one of the employees of the school was in a very revealing outfit. The teacher greeted me with a different name and said that he was the owner of this new club. It became clear that he had taken on a role for the ritual. He asked me if I would take on a role in the drama as well. For the teachers, employees, and the guests the objective was to challenge them with as many distractions and unexpected challenges as we could. The point was to see how they would respond, both as individuals and a group. By the end of the ritual some of the students were quite angry. In the debrief afterward the teacher said that the exercise was, “designed for you to fail. We would rather you mess up here so that you can be prepared” (Hapa 2009:4/23). He explained that they

do this ritual because, “The club is not your house.” He wanted them to be prepared for the emergencies that experienced DJs known how to handle.

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