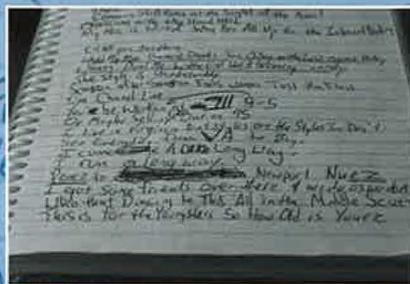


JOURNAL OF THE SOCIETY FOR AMERICAN MUSIC

VOLUME 8 • NUMBER 1 • FEBRUARY 2014

Sight of the Anvil
You All Up on the Cultural History
Son Coby with last name Dobby
I'll be coming up
Wama Test the Flow

You be working
Or Maybe Selling Out on
I live in Virginia but style
See Everyday from VA
I come from a long way
I run a long way
Peace to ~~the~~ Newport Nue Z
I got some friends over here & we do as we do
Who that Dancing to This All in the Middle Sea
This is for the Youngsters So How Old is Younger



“What Happens in the Cabin . . .”: An Arts-Based Autoethnography of Underground Hip Hop Song Making

ANTHONY KWAME HARRISON

Abstract

Taking an autoethnographic perspective that foregrounds the interplay between the author’s artist-self and researcher-self, this article explores the relationship between agency and structure in the activities surrounding underground hip hop music making within a home studio recording space. It aims to demystify the aura of in-studio music creation by focusing on the nexus of oral/written, pre-composed/improvised, and pre-recorded/live creative practices as experienced within the context of performance. Utilizing Harris Berger’s notion of stance, I discuss how hip hop recording artists transcend performative self-consciousness in the pursuit of creativity. Ultimately, this article presents hip hop home recording studios as spaces that facilitate particular kinds of musical innovation through a mix of collective and individual pursuits, as well as routinized and spontaneous activities.

Introduction

In April 2000, when I arrived in the San Francisco Bay Area to research its underground hip hop scene, I never imagined that the following year I would be releasing a CD. In fact, entering fieldwork, I would have considered myself fortunate to be permitted to “hang around” during recording sessions. Yet through serendipitous circumstances, I became a key player in the activities surrounding the creation of several music recordings and releases.¹ Such participation had obvious benefits for me as an ethnographer, including increasing levels of trust and rapport, opening new windows of inquiry, and nurturing an experiential understanding of many of the social dynamics I was investigating. Moreover, as I began learning the techniques, aesthetic sensibilities, and performative dispositions of a hip hop recording artist, the aura of the studio gradually became demystified.

Drawing on several years of what ethnomusicologist Kay Kaufman Shelemay calls “truly participatory participant-observation,” this article examines the relationship between agency and structure in underground hip hop music making within a home studio recording space.² Through a series of autoethnographic episodes detailing the in-studio creative processes of a community of artists, I explore the interplay of the pre-composed and the improvised, the pre-recorded and the live in generating an aura or “natural force” through which listeners perceive meaning

Special thanks to Tim Cohen, Jacob Buehler, Simone Paterson, Justin Burton, and to the three anonymous JSAM reviewers for their helpful comments and suggestions.

¹ See Anthony Kwame Harrison, “Reconciling Geppetto: Collaboration, (Re)Creation, and Deception in the Practice of Hip Hop Music Ethnography,” *Collaborative Anthropologies* 6 (2013): 38–72.

² Kay Kaufman Shelemay, “The Ethnomusicologist, Ethnographic Method, and the Transmission of Tradition,” in *Shadows in the Field: New Perspectives for Fieldwork in Ethnomusicology*, ed. Gregory F. Barz and Timothy J. Cooley (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 191.

in music recordings.³ Although “underground” is a debated term within hip hop, here I am defining it as a stratum of the music-making industry marked by a Do-it-Yourself ethos that includes recording songs in people’s homes (i.e., home studios); underground hip hop is, accordingly, perceived as less commercial and more authentic than that recorded in mainstream or major label studios.⁴ Recording studios, Louise Meintjes observes, provide musicians with “creative and political power.”⁵ To unpack the everyday practices that facilitate hip hop’s movement from bedroom studios to national airwaves, therefore, is to illuminate a progression that links young people’s resourceful efforts to make particular kinds of sounds with the production of cultural ideologies.⁶

Although this article discusses several instances of music composition and recording, it is primarily organized along the creational timeline of a single song: moving from a detailed description of beat making to considerations of how emcees, through lyric writing and then recording, respond to beats.⁷ Drawing on Harris Berger’s notion of *stance*—that is, the affective, stylistic, and valual quality with which a person “grapples with a text, performance, practice, or item of expressive culture to bring it into lived experience”—I outline multiple activities associated with crafting and inscribing hip hop oral texts onto hip hop instrumentals.⁸ Of course, any such practices are to some degree context specific—particularly in the less formalized environments of home studios where musicians are not subject to the dictates of studio costs or hired producers and engineers. These practices also spotlight the dynamic relationship between structure and agency that permeates the creation of music within social contexts. Before contextualizing the particular recording studio and community of artists who use it, however, I provide a brief overview of both ethnographies of music practice and autoethnography, as a prelude to a more integrated discussion of my research methodology.

An Arts-Based Autoethnography of Musical Practice

There has been a growing number of ethnographic studies of popular musical practice over the past fifteen years.⁹ Among them, Berger’s study of four music

³ Louise Meintjes refers to this “natural force” as “magic” or “fetish,” which she compares to Walter Benjamin’s “aura of the original.” See Meintjes, *Sound of Africa: Making Music Zulu in a South African Studio* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 73.

⁴ See Harrison, *Hip Hop Underground: The Integrity and Ethics of Racial Identification* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2009), 9–11; and Geoff Harkness, “True School: Situational Authenticity in Chicago’s Hip-hop Underground,” *Cultural Sociology* 6/3 (2012): 283–98.

⁵ Meintjes, *Sound of Africa*, 73.

⁶ Deborah Wong, *Speak it Louder: Asian Americans Making Music* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 247.

⁷ “Emcee,” also spelled MC, is the preferred term through which hip hop insiders refer to practitioners who rap (i.e., recite rhymes in the hip hop idiom).

⁸ Harris M. Berger, *Stance: Ideas about Emotion, Style, and Meaning for the Study of Expressive Culture* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2009), 21. Berger explains that the word *valual* “is the adjectival form of value. In everyday life, we experience things not only as having factual properties (size, shape, weight, etc.) but also as having qualities that involve their value for us.” Berger, *Stance*, 137n2.

⁹ The seminal call for more ethnography in popular music studies came from Sara Cohen, “Ethnography and Popular Music Studies,” *Popular Music* 12/2 (1993): 123–38. Yet twenty years later,

scenes in northeastern Ohio, *Metal, Rock, and Jazz*, is notable for utilizing what he describes as a phenomenological ethnographic approach, which presupposes the researcher as “a contingent and responsible moral agent sharing not only the experiences but the very world of the ethnographic subjects.”¹⁰ Thomas Porcello and Louise Meintjes have each targeted recording studios as distinct spaces in which social actors negotiate their roles and statuses, the former through his work as a sound engineer in Austin, Texas, the latter by examining the micro-politics of relationships among South African musicians, producers, and engineers as they collectively strove to create an “African” sound.¹¹ More specific to hip hop, Joseph Schloss’s ethnographic study of hip hop producers outlines the principles and practices of the beat-making craft, and Mark Katz’s participant-observational forays into DJing provide a richer appreciation and understanding for his comprehensive study of hip hop deejay culture.¹² Finally, Deborah Wong’s *Speak it Louder* includes a chapter discussing the home studio recording activities of the Chinese American hip hop group the Mountain Brothers.¹³

The approach I take in this article complements these various strands of scholarship. Like Schloss, Katz, and Wong, I focus on the musical practices of non-mainstream hip hop artists; like Porcello, I was very much an integral participant in the studio sessions I describe. Notwithstanding our differences in genres and levels of studio professionalism, my approach in many ways parallels Porcello and Meintjes in that I describe the rich micro-dynamics involved in studio activities. However, with less attention to technological dictates (Porcello) and identity-politics (Meintjes), I am theoretically most in step with Berger, who seeks to understand the role of intentional engagement—or “structurally embedded agency”—in the experience of performance.¹⁴ Ultimately, I aim to show how a given studio space and the habituated practices of its artists foster effective and efficient processes of individual and collective hip hop musical innovation. Using Timothy D. Taylor’s practice theory of technology, I examine technologies of music making as special kinds of structures

the dearth of popular music ethnographies is still evident: see Eliot Bates, “Popular Music Studies and the Problems of Sound, Society and Method,” *IASPM@Journal* 3/2 (2013): 15–32.

¹⁰ Berger, *Metal, Rock, and Jazz: Perception and the Phenomenology of Musical Experience* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1999), 255.

¹¹ See Thomas G. Porcello, “Tails Out: Social Phenomenology and the Ethnographic Representation of Technology in Music Making,” in *Music and Technoculture*, ed. René T. A. Lysloff and Leslie C. Gay Jr., 264–89 (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2003); Porcello, “Music Mediated as Live in Austin: Sound, Technology, and Recording Practice,” in *Wired for Sound: Engineering and Technologies of Sonic Cultures*, ed. Paul D. Greene and Porcello, 103–17 (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2005); Meintjes, *Sound of Africa!*; and Meintjes, “The Politics of the Recording Studio: A Case Study from South Africa,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Recorded Music*, ed. Nicholas Cook, Eric Clarke, Daniel Leech-Wilkinson, and John Rink, 84–97 (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

¹² See Joseph G. Schloss, *Making Beats: The Art of Sample-Based Hip-Hop* (Middletown CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2004); Mark Katz, *Groove Music: The Art and Culture of the Hip-Hop DJ* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

¹³ Wong, *Speak it Louder*, 245–53.

¹⁴ Sherry B. Ortner, *Making Gender: The Politics and Erotics of Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 12.

that both make and are made by the agents who operate within them.¹⁵ Following Taylor, I understand agency as “an individual actor’s or collective capacity to move within a structure [and] even alter it to some extent”; consequently, both Taylor and I emphasize the ways in which structure and agency presuppose one another.¹⁶

The arts-based perspective I take here is a broadly defined approach to social inquiry located at the intersection of social science and art. Its adherents emphasize the similarities and overlap between researchers and artists, and typically focus on the creative practices of artistic production. Inherently interdisciplinary, arts-based scholars seek to advance traditional qualitative research paradigms by foregrounding the subjectivities, ingenuities, and intuitions of both researchers and research subjects. As a product of the poststructuralist/postmodern turn in qualitative inquiry, arts-based ethnographers appreciate collaborative artistic and intellectual engagements with the people they work among as well as the virtues of autoethnographic insights.¹⁷ Because creative inclinations and practices often issue from the interior zones of social actors’ minds and bodies, and are thus inaccessible to (non-participant) researchers, a participatory autoethnographic perspective can be especially illuminating.¹⁸ Through *thick participation*—that is, the embodied experience of learning how to perform a specific act or skill—an ethnographer can better grasp the transient, yet deeply meaningful forms of cultural activity that surround music creation.¹⁹

The Cabin and Its Community of Record(ing)

The Cabin is a home recording studio space located on the top-floor apartment of a Victorian house in the Alamo Square district of San Francisco.²⁰ The Cabin has three main creative spaces: two bedroom recording studios and a large kitchen with a round table and sofa.²¹ Although creative spaces within the Cabin are for the most

¹⁵ Timothy D. Taylor, *Strange Sounds: Music, Technology and Culture* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 204.

¹⁶ Taylor, *Strange Sounds*, 35.

¹⁷ See Patricia Leavy, *Method Meets Art: Arts-Based Research Practice* (New York: Guilford Press, 2009); Susan Finley, “Arts Based Inquiry: Performing Revolutionary Pedagogy,” in *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 3rd. ed., ed. Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln, 681–94 (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2005).

¹⁸ For discussions of researchers’ lack of access to the cognitive compositional practices taking place in studios, see Meintjes, *Sound of Africa!*, 93–94 and 97–98.

¹⁹ For an overview of *thick participation*, see Jaida Kim Samudra, “Memory in Our Body: Thick Participation and the Translation of Kinesthetic Experience,” *American Ethnologist* 35/4 (2008): 665–81. For a discussion of the virtues of such involvement within the recording studio context see Porcello, “Tails Out.”

²⁰ The studio has also been referred to as the “Treehouse” and the “Belfry.” I chose to use the “Cabin” over these other options primarily because this is how it was designated in the professionally manufactured CDs that I have participated in recording there. The apartment was initially designed by an architect who, planning to live there, cut a series of uniquely shaped windows into its walls and vaulted ceilings. Justin Moyer, “Iceland: Subject #12: Tim Cohen,” *Washington City Paper*, 20 December 2007, <http://www.washingtoncitypaper.com/blogs/iceland/2007/12/20/subject-12-tim-cohen/>.

²¹ Both Meintjes and Eliot Bates discuss the importance of musicians-only areas in facilitating sound isolation within music studios. Meintjes, *Sound of Africa!*, 80; Eliot Bates, “What Studios Do,” *Journal on the Art of Record Production* 7/1 (2012), <http://arpjournal.com/2199/what-studios-do/>.

part communal, the kitchen tends to be the hub of non-performance activity. To a less defined extent, there are times when a degree of privacy is granted for recording sessions—yet this seems intended to avoid disruptions rather than to regulate who is (and who is not) allowed to be present. For most of the dozen years I have recorded there, the primary performance/recording space has been a belfry-like bedroom that forms the “crows nest” of the house. Described as a “square with a triangle on top,” the room has a twelve-foot peaked ceiling and stands above most surrounding rooftops, thus offering “breathtaking views” of the city and a distinctive acoustic environment.²²

The Cabin has featured an evolving array of studio technologies, but the principal workstation I encountered was a Digidesign recording system with Pro Tools software, run through a Mac G4 computer. Pro Tools, a digital audio recording, editing, and mixing application, has become the standard in both high-end professional studios and, through the introduction of affordable computer-based interfaces, home studios. Noted for its seamless integration with other technologies, Pro Tools has effectively transformed the personal computer into a full-functioning recording studio, and is thus heavily implicated in the democratization of recorded music production.²³ Although the Cabin has fostered multiple in-house music projects—ranging from folk rock to death metal—the recording sessions I have been privy to, and describe here, involve an independent hip hop group I co-founded known as the Forest Fires Collective (FFC).

The origins of the FFC date to summer 2000, when one of the Cabin’s residents, an aspiring musician who called himself Feller Quentin, and I both worked at Amoeba Music’s San Francisco store.²⁴ At that time, I was involved in dissertation research, which, with regards to what happens in the Cabin, included writing detailed fieldnotes about the group’s formation, songwriting activities, and early recording sessions. Since leaving the Bay Area in May 2001, I have returned annually for two-week visits. Following Rebecka Lennartsson’s methodology of “applying and combining a variety of sources and information . . . to [re]build a complete picture of context,” I draw on videos of Cabin recording sessions, lyric writing books (i.e., rhyme books), and various artifacts of the recording process, including the recordings themselves.²⁵ I own copies of almost every FFC recording (approximately 150 songs total), and, like Nicholas Cook, treat these artifacts as “untapped resources” for analyzing the “effect of music as experienced in performance,” in this case the

²² Moyer, “Iceland: Subject #12: Tim Cohen;” Jon Bernson, “Studio Apartment #3: Tim Cohen,” *Decoder Magazine*, 10 September 2012, <http://decoderdecoderdecoder.blogspot.com/2012/09/studio-apartment-3-tim-cohen.html>.

²³ Mike Collins, *Pro Tools for Music Production: Recording, Editing and Mixing*, 2nd ed. (Burlington, MA: Focal Press, 2004), 6. See also John Ryan and Michael Hughes, “Breaking the Decision Chain: The Fate of Creativity in the Age of Self-Production,” in *Cybersounds: Essays on Virtual Music Culture*, ed. Michael D. Ayers, 239–53 (New York: Peter Lang, 2006).

²⁴ Since 2009, Feller Quentin has been making music under his given name, Tim Cohen. He is currently best known for his work with the bands the Fresh & Onlys and Magic Trick.

²⁵ Rebecka Lennartsson, “Notes on ‘Not Being There’: Ethnographic Excursions in Eighteenth-Century Stockholm,” *Ethnologia Europaea* 41/1 (2011): 112–13. I have also interviewed six FFC members—although none of these interviews focused on recording practices.

experience of in-studio performances at the Cabin.²⁶ Furthermore, since 2007 I have collected the data files from each recording session (seventy-one songs), an audio archeology that makes it possible to isolate specific tracks and exhume muted outtakes. These audible traces can be used to reconstruct performance practices and studio production processes.²⁷

The Origins of the Forest Fires Collective²⁸

The overarching concept of the Forest Fires Collective was prompted by my decision to rhyme under the emcee moniker “Mad Squirrel.” This name choice, which was quite simply connected to a passing statement I once made, empowered me to incorporate into my hip hop narratives the African diasporic (and in my case, specifically Ashanti) tradition of using animal stories as a metaphor for interpersonal relationships.²⁹ When I initially met Feller Quentin, he was involved in a hip hop group called “The Latter” with his housemate, Edison Victrola; Feller Quentin was the emcee, “Eddie Vic” was the deejay, and both made beats. At that time, the two other eventual FFC emcees—“Prego with Zest” and “Simile”—were both affiliated with The Latter. For the FFC project, Feller Quentin decided to match my forest-based, animal story predilection by fashioning an emcee persona called “Smif Carnivorous.” Simile similarly changed his name to “Sim the Drunken Owl.”

Although Feller Quentin and Eddie Vic’s decision to structure an entire community of Cabin recording artists around a forest-based concept still perplexes me, functionally the FFC served as a trope around which any Cabin hip hop recording artist could be incorporated. Whereas Feller Quentin and Eddie Vic selectively recorded songs as The Latter, the FFC could, and did, include just about any hip hop artist who happened to come through the door for a not-already-specified hip hop recording session. Tellingly, on the FFC’s initial self-titled 2001 CD six members are listed, plus the qualification “& friends.” The sixth original member of the FFC, Dr. Lester, was a deejay and college friend of Feller Quentin and Eddie Vic’s who happened to be sleeping on their couch at the time of the group’s formation. Although I have often explained Dr. Lester’s involvement in the group as peripheral, his membership illustrates an anything (and anyone) goes disposition that matched the experimental nature of many of the forest-themed songs we were authoring.³⁰ By the 2002 release of the second FFC CD, *You Can’t See . . .*, the group’s numbers

²⁶ Nicholas Cook, “Methods of Analysing Recordings,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Recorded Music*, 221.

²⁷ Cook, “Methods,” 244.

²⁸ I have written about the beginnings of the Forest Fires Collective at length in Harrison, “Reconciling Geppetto.” In this section, rather than offer a comprehensive account of the origins of the group, I outline fundamental dynamics of the FFC’s formation as they relate to in-studio creative practices and processes.

²⁹ See Harrison, *Hip Hop Underground*, 6. For a discussion of the social function of Ashanti animal stories, see Peggy Appiah, “Akan Symbolism,” *African Arts* 13 (1979): 64–67. For further discussion of my use of animal stories in constructing hip hop narratives, see Harrison, “Reconciling Geppetto.”

³⁰ The tangible output of Dr. Lester’s creative contribution to the group is limited to one instrumental track.

had grown to include four additional emcees: Smoke Bear, Spook, Hey Hey, and B-Bird.

During my first year and a half recording in the Cabin, Eddie Vic was the sole owner and most knowledgeable operator of the recording equipment we used, making him indispensable to the recording/mixing process. Porcello points out that within the studio, technical knowledge equates with power.³¹ Even in situations where vocalists are thought to have aesthetic license through the ownership of their voices, the studio's role in capturing and controlling "uncontrollable" sound can give the sound engineer—the person with the technical know-how—the most authority.³² Nevertheless, I may have overestimated Eddie Vic's authority and influence as the owner and chief operator of the means of production and, likewise, underappreciated his support of the ideas and direct requests that came from Feller Quentin and me. Despite his characterization of what happens in the Cabin—"we just make a lot of songs"—and his good faith assurances that he was committed to the FFC project, I imagined a zero-sum tension between the time and creative energies dedicated to The Latter and the FFC—that is, any time spent on one project directly took away from the other.³³ However, Feller Quentin and Eddie Vic's decision to pool their resources and manufacture a thousand copies of the debut FFC album—the first such professional endeavor for either of them—confirmed Eddie Vic's commitment to the project.³⁴ Although different personalities, musical ambitions, and, to some extent, competing interests were involved, we collectively came together around the FFC project and, more specifically, a faithfulness to the nascent music-making practices of the Cabin.

Forest Fires Collective Beat Making

Although instrumental and a cappella hip hop tracks both exist, most hip hop songs feature a fundamental division of labor between composing/recording vocals and making beats.³⁵ Schloss outlines two processes by which hip hop vocals (i.e., rhymes) and beats are commonly paired, the first by auditioning beats to match an already written rhyme, the second by composing a rhyme to a pre-made beat.³⁶

³¹ Porcello, "Tails Out," 284.

³² Meintjes, *Sound of Africa*, 90–93.

³³ The Eddie Vic quote comes from the author's fieldnotes, 29 May 2000.

³⁴ At the time this decision was made, I was out of town for thirty-five days acting as an assistant manager for a national hip hop tour.

³⁵ In fact, many aspiring hip hop artists will pay for professional studio time exclusively to record vocals—benefiting from state-of-the-art microphones and vocal engineering technology—over their pre-made, home-produced beats. Based on interviews with over one hundred prominent emcees, Paul Edwards separates the lyric writing process into writing "with the beat," "without the beat," and "to a different beat." He finds that different emcees have preferences for each approach. See Paul Edwards, *How to Rap: The Art And Science of the Hip-hop Emcee* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2009), 168–74.

³⁶ Schloss, *Making Beats*, 171–72. The practice of sampling has been well documented and debated within popular music scholarship. See for example: S. H. Fernando Jr., *The New Beats: Exploring the Music, Culture, and Attitudes of Hip Hop* (New York: Anchor Books, 1994); Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1994); Thomas G. Schumacher, "'This is a Sampling Sport': Digital Sampling, Rap Music and the Law of Cultural Production," *Media, Culture, and Society* 17/2 (1995): 253–73; and Kembrew McLeod

Sampling, one of the primary ways in which hip hop beats are created, involves capturing sound as digital information, customarily from 1960s and 1970s soul and funk records, which can in turn be endlessly manipulated and layered into musical collages. This manipulation of recorded sound, as Katz points out, is foundational to hip hop; and the signature characteristic of the most prized source material is the funky percussive drum solo known as the “break.” Katz elaborates:

most of the breaks beloved by old-school hip-hop DJs exhibit a rhythmic, textural, and timbral profile characteristic of funk. Rhythmically speaking, they are usually anchored by a heavy downbeat emphasized by the bass (or kick) drum—“the one,” as it’s often called—but dominated by forward syncopations that seem to propel themselves back to “the one.” Over the course of just a few seconds—usually two to four bars—a sense of stability is constantly being undermined, reestablished, and undermined once again.³⁷

The practice of using old records to create sonic collages has become so quintessential to classic hip hop production that, to some listeners, its absence “just doesn’t sound authentic.”³⁸

I frame my discussion of Forest Fires Collective beat-making practices within Schloss’s instructive treatment of the ethics of hip hop sampling.³⁹ Schloss observes six distinct ethical guidelines, which, despite the aforementioned claim regarding authentic sound, prioritize the practices of hip hop beat making over the final product. In listing these, Schloss is careful to clarify that: (a) they are rarely openly discussed unless an overt transgression warrants it; (b) these rules, though of little significance within the wider hip hop community, are of particular importance to hip hop producers, and, thus, their violation can affect one’s reputation within that community; and (c) a strict adherence to them represents a purist ideal—in practice they are highly contested and fraught with underlying complexities.⁴⁰ In the years since Schloss conducted most of his interviews (1998–99), which saw the emergence and widespread acceptance of beat-making programs such as Fruity Loops and Serato Scratch Live, “transgressions” of these codes have become more commonplace and, even, generally accepted.⁴¹ Nevertheless, the six ethical principles Schloss identifies are useful points of reference from which to gauge the heterodoxy of FFC beat-making practices:

1. One should not sample material that has been recently used by someone else.
2. One should not sample records one respects.
3. Records are the only legitimate source of sampled material.

and Peter Dicola, *Creative License: The Law and Culture of Digital Sampling* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

³⁷ Katz, *Groove Music*, 24.

³⁸ Schloss, *Making Beats*, 67. By “classic hip hop” I am referring to a period many enthusiasts refer to as hip hop’s golden era, which can be defined as broadly as 1986–95.

³⁹ Schloss, *Making Beats*, 101–34.

⁴⁰ Schloss, *Making Beats*, 101–5.

⁴¹ Fruity Loops is a digital audio workstation, featuring a pattern-based music sequencer, which allows for the creation of complex, rhythm-based, instrumental tracks (i.e., beats) without the use of record samples. Serato Scratch Live is a vinyl-emulation software that uses digital audio files, thus reducing deejays’ (not necessarily producers’) reliance on actual records.

4. One should not sample from other hip-hop records.
5. One should not sample from reissues or compilation recordings of songs with good beats.
6. One should not sample more than one part of a given record.⁴²

Of the two primary FFC beat makers, Eddie Vic and Feller Quentin, the former considered himself more of a classic hip hop producer, whereas the latter was a dexterous musician who wrote and recorded songs in several genres, many featuring live instrumentation. Thus, Feller Quentin, who seemed to care far less about what the community of hip hop producers thought of him, was more likely to deviate from Schloss's ethical codes—first and foremost because he was not opposed to using live instruments.

The beat-making practices common within the FFC can be separated into three categories, which are not mutually exclusive: (1) *pre-made beats*, including beats made by producers outside the Cabin, which were offered to FFC emcees for use in Cabin recording sessions; (2) *custom-made sampled beats*, produced on the spot—either by Eddie Vic or Feller Quentin—with a specific recording session in mind, which were typically looped, sometimes layered and further embellished; and (3) *custom-made jam-session beats*, also produced for a specific recording session, featuring a single looped jam-session track that was occasionally enhanced with other instruments/sounds.⁴³

As individual actors operating within a malleable structure of hip hop sampling principles, Eddie Vic and Feller Quentin's differing musical inclinations can be mapped onto these specific beat-making categories. Notably, Eddie Vic specialized in *pre-made beats*, which customarily were presented to emcees in the form of a beat tape/beat CD for personal listening or were auditioned in real time over the Cabin studio monitors. Many of Schloss's sampling ethics (especially principles 1–4) appear to hold true for most FFC *pre-made beats*.⁴⁴ Given my autoethnographic approach, I focus here on the two *custom-made* categories of beats, the creation of which I was able to observe. Such practices were almost exclusively part of Feller Quentin's production process and were typical during my two-week visits to San Francisco, which began in 2002 and reached regular annual intervals between 2007 and 2012. *Custom-made sampled beats* were usually preceded by a trip to Amoeba Music specifically for the purpose of finding sample-worthy records. As a store

⁴² See Schloss, *Making Beats*, 101–33. I have paraphrased and reordered Schloss's list to simplify my discussion.

⁴³ The practice of looping (which is fundamental to hip hop's instrumental aesthetic), as the name suggests, involves "sampling . . . one or more measures . . . and repeating it with little to no alteration." See Schloss, *Making Beats*, 106. Adam Krims explains layering as "the practice of building up the musical tracks via the assemblage of disparate musical sources (or 'layers'), creating polyrhythmic (and polytimbral) textures." Adam Krims, *Rap Music and the Poetics of Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 53; see also Rose, *Black Noise*.

⁴⁴ On one occasion when I showed Schloss's book to Eddie Vic, after spending a few minutes looking through it, he made a couple of statements about its general accuracy and then, holding up the picture of compilation/breakbeat records—which principle number five says "one can't sample from"—made a disapproving remark about Schloss not needing to go so far as to pictorially divulge these tricks of the trade. See Schloss, *Making Beats*, 125.

employee from 2000 through 2011, Feller Quentin accumulated a great deal of knowledge about what records were good for sampling; I surmise that he saw these two-week recording sessions as a reason to put such knowledge to practice.⁴⁵ Whereas other producers may hunt for the perfect sample, Feller Quentin recognized sampleable potential in a wide variety of songs. Although on one occasion he spent a large sum of money buying a few expensive records, which he knew would supply good material, he more commonly bought several inexpensive records at a time and managed to make use of whatever he found on them.

Appreciating the warmer and fuller timbral qualities that the vinyl supplies, Feller Quentin typically sampled from records. (For at least one recording session, however, he mined drum tracks from a collection of late 1980s hip hop cassette tapes; in a single act he thus violated two of Schloss's principles, numbers three and four.) Sometimes his drum samples were creatively "chopped" and recombined rather than simply looped along the standard four-measure rhythmic phrase. Hip hop, like many forms of popular music, is rhythmically organized around four four-measure units totaling a sixteen-measure fundamental music structure.⁴⁶ My explanation of Feller Quentin's frequent deviations from the four-measure standard does not mean that he regularly made beats outside the "four-four" beat structure (he only occasionally did), but rather that he might start a sample with the second beat of a four-beat measure and extend it to the first beat of the next, i.e., 2–3–4–1 rather than 1–2–3–4. The looped sample or combination of samples would either be immediately adorned with layers of instrumentation and/or sampled sounds—making it a more-or-less complete beat—or temporarily shelved as a fundamental looped beat that would be further enhanced in the post-recording process.

Jam-session beats are by far the most dynamic of the three categories I have cited because they more explicitly form part of a communal music-making process. Bates notes that the different physical layouts of studios can make different social/musical interactions possible.⁴⁷ Although the Cabin's belfry-like studio space is not especially large, its vaulted ceiling, abundance of natural light, and towering position as one of the highest rooms in the neighborhood combine to create a somewhat mystical, semi-secluded yet inclusive ethos where Feller Quentin's Amoebic network of musician friends periodically come together to jam.⁴⁸ Whereas varying factors might lead to a Cabin jam session—something as simple as one or two musicians deciding to "come through"—over the years these creative moments became ritualized. Typically, the process began when a few friends gathered for lunch at a notorious San Francisco biker bar. Following lunch, the group would migrate to the Cabin, often inviting additional musicians to come over. Back in Alamo Square, drinking and merriment continued and before long most, if not all, of those gathered would be in the studio space with various instruments in hand. The

⁴⁵ Since approximately 2004, most of his calendar year was dedicated to non-hip hop music endeavors.

⁴⁶ See Krims, *Rap Music and the Poetics of Identity*, 52–53.

⁴⁷ Bates, "What Studios Do."

⁴⁸ See Moyer, "Iceland: Subject #12: Tim Cohen." At its height, Amoeba Music, San Francisco had over 130 employees, most of whom were musicians or in some other way involved in music.

primary beat-making instruments were reserved for more accomplished musicians: a drummer who recently returned from touring Europe might sit behind the drum kit; a bassist and current housemate might accompany; the keyboard was usually managed by someone well acquainted with the eighty-eights; and Feller Quentin, if not on the keyboard, might add jangly-guitar flourishes. Less accomplished musicians (including the author) were customarily given auxiliary instruments such as shakers, slide whistles, triangles, and thumb pianos, with the general understanding that they would contribute without getting in the way.

All of this—perhaps ninety minutes of improvisational, collaborative music making—would be recorded on Pro Tools through a centrally positioned condenser microphone. At some point following the jam session, Feller Quentin would go over the entire recording—perhaps skipping through five-minute intervals as a producer might needle drop through a potentially sampleable record—searching for one to four consecutive measures funky enough to loop.⁴⁹ Katz associates the funkiness of classic hip hop “breaks” with penetrating timbral qualities and sharp percussive attacks.⁵⁰ A key component of this is what Amiri Baraka referred to as “the hegemony of polyrhythms”; thus, the selection of a good drummer is paramount.⁵¹ Through this process of remediating live instrumentation, Feller Quentin engages in an assembly line beat production practice reminiscent of the creative process followed by the Bomb Squad, Public Enemy’s production team.⁵² The key difference is that rather than jamming with live instruments, the Bomb Squad employed a method of “jam[ming] with samples.”⁵³ Bomb Squad producers Hank Shocklee and Chuck D explained the process with their 1988 track, “Don’t Believe the Hype”:

HS: [“Don’t Believe the Hype” was] one of the strangest ways we made a record. We were looking for blends in particular records; so I might be on one turntable, Keith [Shocklee] on another, and Chuck on another turntable at the same time.

CD: We would go through a session of just playing records, and beats, and getting snatches, and what Hank would do is record that whole session. You know, 95 percent of the time it sounded like a *mess*. But there was 5 percent of magic that would happen. . . You would listen to sixty minutes of this mess on tape, and then out of that you would be like “Whoa! What happened right here?”⁵⁴

The looped samples from these jam sessions, similar to the *custom-made samples*, formed the fundamental elements of beats to be embellished before or after recording.

⁴⁹ Needle dropping is the process of reading the grooves of a record in order to identify changes in the fundamental music and then, selectively dropping the turntable stylus on different parts in order to hear what’s there. It’s a standard shortcut through which producers check a record for potentially sampleable material without listening to the entire album. See Katz, *Groove Music*, 16.

⁵⁰ Katz, *Groove Music*, 25.

⁵¹ Amiri Baraka (LeRoi Jones), *Blues People: Negro Music in White America* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1963), 194.

⁵² For a discussion of remediation, see Philip Auslander, *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 7.

⁵³ McLeod and Dicola, *Creative License*, 24.

⁵⁴ McLeod and Dicola, *Creative License*, 24–25.

In his study of hip hop's musical poetics, Adam Krims introduced the notion of the *hip-hop sublime*, as a product of "incompatible layers of sound [being] selectively and dramatically brought into conflict with each other."⁵⁵ Such discordant musical amalgamations, the result of combining samples from various sources in polyrhythmic layers, are by no means central to all hip hop music. Yet, according to Krims, they are key to generating potent soundscapes, which simultaneously convey a sense of fear, pleasure, "hardness," and "realness."⁵⁶ Some of the best moments in FFC music production have come out of such combinations: a classic Isaac Hayes bass line and strings, sampled from vinyl, paired with a "chopped" late-1980s hip hop cassette-tape drum-loop; a compressed electronic tabla percussion track introduced on top of a vintage Squier bass line (played by Feller Quentin) and accentuated through a simple two-note keyboard riff fortified through a medium-delay; the running commentary of an NBA basketball telecast—complete with crowd noise and break-to-commercial music—placed behind an already-recorded song.⁵⁷ In each of these examples, and numerous others, the combination of disjunct audio planes works to punctuate hip hop's subliminal polyrhythmic force.

In advancing a structural reading of technologies of music, Taylor employs an anthropological definition of technology as not only tools but also "techniques and kinds of knowledge."⁵⁸ Thus Feller Quentin, like other hip hop producers, draws on both his familiarity with sampleable records and ability to recognize a funky rhythm when swiftly making *custom-made beats*. Yet through the intervention of using live instrumentation, he is able to manufacture foundational rhythms—"breaks"—by hosting collaborative jam sessions and to adorn even the most basic percussive track, whether sampled or jammed, with funk-infused instrumentation. All of this is further facilitated through the aesthetic of a *hip-hop sublime* that tends to value "dissonant harmonic combinations" over seamless musical blends.⁵⁹

A communal, spontaneous, seemingly chaotic but purposeful and sufficiently principled approach to beat making characterized the Forest Fires Collective work at the Cabin. The practices of rhyme writing and recording further illustrate how a particular relationship to hip hop conventions—involving transcendence of, transgression from, and conformity to orthodox methods of production—generates a structure of collective creative activity that fosters individual expressive agency.

Cabin Rhyme Writing and Recording

The emcee's contributions to collective music making generally fall into two categories: lyric composition and vocal recording. Of the two, the latter is more explicitly (and observably) performative. Yet both involve intentional behaviors, which, in the context of the Cabin, become routinized into structured activities. Within the

⁵⁵ Krims, *Rap Music and the Poetics of Identity*, 54.

⁵⁶ Krims, *Rap Music and the Poetics of Identity*, 74.

⁵⁷ Chopping, which according to Schloss is valued among hip hop beat makers, "refers to the practice of dividing a long sample into smaller pieces and then rearranging those pieces in a different order to create a new melody." Schloss, *Making Beats*, 151.

⁵⁸ Taylor, *Strange Sounds*, 36.

⁵⁹ Krims, *Rap Music and the Poetics of Identity*, 73.

course of these writing and recording routines, improvisation and what Berger describes as “interpretive variability between actors” are valued markers of artistic creativity.⁶⁰

In his fascinating ethnography on becoming a boxer, Loïc Wacquant, building on Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of *habitus*, describes a “cultivated instinct”—nurtured by training the body to becoming a “spontaneous strategist”—that is essential to the development of a “pugilistic sensitivity.”⁶¹ Indeed, the acquired “corporeal mechanisms and mental schemata” necessary to successfully compete as a boxer resemble those fundamental to the real-time performance of hip hop lyrics.⁶² Both rely on timing, rhythm, and being present in the moment, all of which can be compromised by the “intervention of conscious thought into the coordination of gestures and movements.”⁶³ Arguably, more is at stake in boxing where a failure to apply the “sweet science” through habitual and reactive practice can result in getting one’s head bashed in. However, the results of being too self-conscious and intentional can be just as disastrous, if less physically consequential, to efforts to record music in a genre and Afrodiasporic tradition prioritizing polyrhythmic textures and the impression of spontaneity.⁶⁴

The Essentialness of Flow

Shortly after I made the decision to participate in the Bay Area underground hip hop scene as an emcee, one of the regular freestylers at a weekly open microphone event I frequented relayed an important philosophy of hip hop performance to me: *always move forward*. Thinking about what one is doing or has just done constitutes standing still or moving backwards, respectively, and should thus be avoided. Such an approach, which demands mental discipline comparable to an athlete getting in “a zone,” is applicable to the activities of improvisational rhyming.⁶⁵ Yet it also has implications for other arenas of hip hop vocal performance, most notably studio recording and, I argue, the performance of lyric writing. This directive, neither expressed explicitly as advice nor offered to me as constructive criticism, exemplifies a conversational and mimetic hip hop pedagogy that characterized my acquisition of effective emcee techniques and sensibilities.⁶⁶

This principle of perpetual forward movement prioritizes a quality of emceeing that hip hop enthusiasts refer to as *flow*. Adam Bradley defines flow as an emcee’s

⁶⁰ Berger, *Stance*, 24.

⁶¹ Loïc Wacquant, *Body & Soul: Notebooks of an Apprentice Boxer* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 97 and 98.

⁶² Wacquant, *Body & Soul*, 17.

⁶³ Wacquant, *Body & Soul*, 97.

⁶⁴ See Ali Colleen Neff, *Let the World Listen Right: The Mississippi Delta Hip-Hop Story* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2009); and Baraka, *Blues People*.

⁶⁵ Some freestylers use a more intentional couplet approach in which the first line in a rhyme is deliberately intended to set up a punch line. This practice often yields success in more institutionalized emcee competitions, or battles, where effective punch lines and a positive audience response are highly valued. Yet certain freestyle purists criticize this approach as altogether too premeditated.

⁶⁶ This philosophy was even repeated, by this same individual, as a valediction on a “good-bye” video recording made for me.

“distinctive lyrical cadence, usually in relation to a beat;” Krims points out how differences in flow can signal historical and geographic particularities.⁶⁷ The notion of flow is in many ways synonymous with *rhyme style*, which I believe is one of the only terms more commonly used to reference an emcee’s vocal proficiency. Whereas *rhyme style* tends to emphasize a fixed quality intrinsic to a given emcee’s lyrical repertoire, *flow* foregrounds the temporal dimensions of performance, in which each speech event is unique and “no item in the environment of performance can be discounted as irrelevant to its impact.”⁶⁸

The intervention of conscious assessment into my vocal performance was readily apparent in my earliest recording outings. The following excerpt, taken from my fieldnotes, recounts my first experience recording in the Cabin. It was a Sunday evening. Feller Quentin and I had just completed a long workday at Amoeba, throughout which I had been anticipating my first recording session. On our walk back to the Cabin we had stopped by Prego’s apartment to get him, since he was also interested in recording something. In the excerpt, note my self-awareness, awareness of others, and recognition of my own voice as a disembodied entity capable of being captured through the recording process. Berger describes stance as involving “grappling with an entity that is independent from [oneself] and bringing that entity into experience.”⁶⁹ He goes on to explain that such “grappling often looks back and forward across the production process to anticipate or recover the grappling of others.”⁷⁰ In this particular case, my highly self-conscious interest in managing my impression before an anticipated listening audience ultimately compromised my performative flow.⁷¹

Episode 1: First Time Recording (August 2000)

Last night was my first night recording. Everything didn’t go off as wonderfully as I had hoped but it was without a doubt an experience. When we entered Eddie Vic’s room [the studio] there was a crowd of people . . . Feller Quentin was upset—“pissed off”—I think about all the people hanging out when we arrived. Prego made a joke as several people exited about the nightshift replacing the dayshift. Because [Prego] was waiting to [record something after me], I decided it would be best for me to record “Tea Time” since it is short and well memorized. Our pre-recording routine included shots of alcohol (I had Captain Morgan’s). Feller Quentin said that this helped him deal with the fact that he was pissed off. I also had some beer in a small glass. . . . [DJ] Dr. Lester was quick to endorse the idea of doing a minimalist “Tea Time” track that was just him scratching over a soft, playful, two-minute instrumental from the *Benji* soundtrack. The idea was absolutely insane—all the more reason to go with it. . . .

Slightly nervous but also excited and ready to go for it, I took my place in front of the microphone and put the headphones on. . . . The headphones suddenly showered my ears with an echoed amplification of my every word. Both Feller [Quentin] and Prego exited the room to give me space and to work on their lyrics. . . . Earlier, while practicing “Tea Time,” on

⁶⁷ Adam Bradley, *Book of Rhymes: The Poetics of Hip Hop* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2009), 6; Krims, *Rap Music and the Poetics of Identity*, 44.

⁶⁸ Baz Kershaw, *The Politics of Performance: Radical Theatre as Cultural Intervention* (London: Routledge, 1992), 22.

⁶⁹ Berger, *Stance*, 15.

⁷⁰ Berger, *Stance*, 16.

⁷¹ Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Doubleday, 1959).

two occasions I stumbled through my words . . . Feller Quentin just looked at me and made some comment about how this wasn't going to work out. . . . Soon after, I got beyond being anxious and more into the mode of going for it. But still hearing my amplified voice made it all again unsettling. Another unsettling thing was how they recorded my mic[rophone] level checks and insisted on saving a few random remarks, like when I sheepishly asked "how did that sound?"

During my first take, the biggest issue was the consistency of my levels. There was some point in the short verse where I suddenly got completely more comfortable and my levels got noticeably higher. So the second take was mostly about trying to keep my levels consistent. My most problematic point was the word "Smack" from the line "Smack away that cheesy smirk up on ya!" I didn't want to hold back too much. As I explained to those guys, it was my favorite line and I actually had a hard time saying it without acting out the smacking behavior.⁷² But we did a couple more takes and Eddie Vic played with the levels and to my ears it sounded good. I don't think the others were happy. . . .

Feller Quentin thought I should do it again sounding more alive. I was reluctant to do this partly because I noticed Eddie Vic looking at his watch and making jokes about doing twenty takes. I also knew Prego was sitting in the other room, primed to drop his verse, so I didn't want to leave him waiting too long. Dr. Lester went so far as to [point out differences between the vocal performance he just witnessed and the first time he saw Mad Squirrel perform at an open mic]. While Eddie Vic, although clearly the studio engineer (the one who knew what he was doing), kept looking at us and saying "this is *your guys'* project"—as if to say he didn't want his name associated with it. Feller Quentin's final words on the matter were, "everything sounds better after you've been drinking; but if you have one chance for people to hear your voice do you want it to be anything less than the best it can be?" Dr. Lester just shrugged and said, "it could be better."⁷³

Porcello suggests that participant ethnographers of music must find the right mix of subject positions during the course of music/research performance.⁷⁴ Some of my self-consciousness was certainly a consequence of my ethnographically mandated observant participation. In order to write about what was taking place, I needed to be ultra-aware of myself and others. However, it was also a product of my oversensitivity to the dynamics of time and power—that is, feeling guilty about the demands on Eddie Vic's time and energy as well as delaying Prego's primed recording moment—and, more importantly, having not yet acquired the physical and mental dispositions of a competent emcee.⁷⁵ As I gained more experience in the practices of Cabin recording, my focus gradually shifted from a conscious assessment of how I was doing to an embodied feeling where my voice was experienced as at one with the beat. Yet flowing to the beat (in the context of recording) represents just one dimension of an emcee's performative repertoire. In the context of Cabin song making it is equally important to be capable of "going with the flow," of rapidly authoring lyrics within the time demands of the creative moment(um). As I became increasingly acclimated to the standards of Cabin song writing and recording, both ways of flowing became prominent in my ethnographic experiences.

⁷² Bates argues that "everyone involved in the recording process is a form of mixing console user," explaining that seasoned studio musicians can adjust their playing style or position in relation to the microphone in order to achieve "dynamic consistency." Bates, "What Studios Do."

⁷³ Author's fieldnotes, 28 August 2000.

⁷⁴ Porcello, "Tails Out," 269.

⁷⁵ See Harrison, "Reconciling Geppetto," for a more detailed methodological discussion.

Lyric Writing as Flowing

The time it takes to compose lyrics can vary from just a few minutes to a few years.⁷⁶ All emcees have some conception of what a good song, verse, or even rhyme should sound like, especially when writing within the framework of a particular theme or narrative. In this sense, compositions, or more accurately imagined compositions, have, in Berger's words, "a limited and partial autonomy."⁷⁷ Berger refers to the relationship artists have towards a piece of music as *compositional stance*. As he explains, "Composing a verse or visualizing a figure I want to draw, I experience the imagined words or figure as a thing; I experience it as something in 'my imagination' and perhaps as mine. I do not, however, experience it as 'me' or as possessing a total flexibility."⁷⁸ In the performance of rhyme writing, the emcee must match, or at least come close to matching, his or her imagined understanding of good lyrics in general and, more specifically, suitable lyrics for an imagined song. When this doesn't happen the consequences include writer's block, a page full of scratched out lyrics, or a waste paper basket filled with thrown away lyric sheets.⁷⁹

The practices of Cabin rhyme writing unequivocally cultivate a stance of minimal self-consciousness. A lack of self-consciousness, as Roger Abrahams wrote of play, "is not registered as a failure of control so much as getting into the rhythm of the activity so fully that it feels as there is no necessity to question."⁸⁰ This sensibility is fueled by a communal FFC approach to music that allows for a healthy dose of classic braggadocio rhymes and anything-goes experimentation. When in this kind of creative zone, the same poetic devices that give hip hop vocals their polyrhythmic momentum in performance—including rhyme, repetition, alliteration, and metaphor—fuel the composition of lyrics. In other words, whether beginning a *rhyme complex* or bringing it to a close, a writer experiences the previous line as naturally giving way to the oncoming one.⁸¹ This "psychological momentum," as Marcel Mauss calls it, is central to the FFC creative process.⁸²

Episode 2: Composing "Styles Like You Never Met" (June 2010)

Around midday on a weekday afternoon that Feller Quentin and I had reserved for lyric writing (and possibly recording), I was showering and listening to the Penthouse Players Clique in anticipation of our impending creative session.⁸³ As the song "They Don't Know"

⁷⁶ Edwards, *How to Rap*, 157–61.

⁷⁷ Berger, *Stance*, 10.

⁷⁸ Berger, *Stance*, 11.

⁷⁹ Each of these represents a different compositional stage during which one might experience writer's block: from conceiving a rhyme, to putting a line on a page, to writing an entire verse/song.

⁸⁰ Roger D. Abrahams, *Everyday Life: A Poetics of Vernacular Practices* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), 109.

⁸¹ Krims defines "rhyme complex" as a section of a song in which one rhyme predominates. See Krims, *Rap Music and the Poetics of Identity*, 43. These can be as brief as a two-measure couplet or as expansive as an entire verse.

⁸² Marcel Mauss, "Techniques of the Body," in *Incorporations*, ed. Jonathan Crary and Sanford Kwinter (New York: Zone Books, 1992), 461.

⁸³ Listening to the Penthouse Players Clique's 1992 album *Paid the Cost* had at this point become a regular part of our collaborative tradition. See Harrison, "'We're Talking About Practice'(-Based

was blaring from the bathroom boombox, the following line, in dialog with the song's title-chorus, came into my head: "You don't even want to know, the styles I made a while ago." With hardly an instant to admire this fifteen-syllable line, a seamlessly compatible fourteen-syllable one suddenly came to me: "This one is too new to you, whatchu think you're going to do?"⁸⁴ The braggadocio nature of these lyrics was not an issue, in fact they're quite in line with many FFC songs which tend to stress aesthetics as much as content; however, I immediately recognized their limitation to expand into an entire verse and, in acknowledging their rhythmic symmetry, thought them better suited to a chorus or "hook." In order to complete it as a four-measure chorus—which had more to do with intuitively *feeling right* than consciously thinking I needed to write two more lines—I asked myself, what would someone do if a rhyme style was too new for them? The natural answer for me in that moment was "jock" and "sweat"—two vernacular terms meaning extreme and possibly overbearing admiration. I repeated each word six times in rhythmic succession as a metered and punctuated answer to my question and, thus, completed the hook in less than a minute, never once questioning its luster. Fifteen minutes later I was sitting in the sunlit kitchen working on a verse when Feller Quentin walked in.

"Listen to this rhyme I just wrote:

*You don't even want to know the styles I made a while ago;
This one is too new to you, whatchu think you're gonna do?
Jock jock-jock jock-jock jock
Sweat sweat-sweat sweat-sweat sweat.*"

As I finished reciting it, I had a big smile on my face knowing Feller Quentin would like it. And, of course, he was smiling back—no necessity to question. This became the chorus to the song "Styles Like You Never Met."

Competitive Compositional Flows

The aforementioned comparison between *perpetual-forward-movement* and an athlete's mental/physical zone is apt considering the competitive spirit permeating hip hop in general and many FFC music-making activities in particular.⁸⁵ If emcee battles are equated with boxing matches, classic "posse cuts" from hip hop's Golden Era are comparable to track-and-field relay-race teams.⁸⁶ Specifically, all members of the team are moving towards the same finish line, yet as each individual takes the baton (or microphone) the audience has a chance to admire his or her individual

Research)': Serious Play and Serious Performance in the Practice of Popular Music Ethnography," *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 23/2 (2011): 224.

⁸⁴ Counting syllables is not a part of most emcees' creative process and, if anything, an irregularity in line syllable length is viewed as a sign of innovative creativity. My recognition of this fifteen/fourteen syllable parallelism was retrospective. I include it here to show a "rhythm of activity" in step with the music I was listening to that enabled these lyrics to, in essence, "find [their] own way." See Abrahams, *Everyday Life*, 110. The symmetry of the two lines can be further broken down into six syllables preceding each anchoring word: "know," "ago," "you," and "do."

⁸⁵ For a discussion of hip hop's competitive spirit, see Katz, *Groove Music*, 44.

⁸⁶ A "posse cut" generally refers to a hip hop song featuring successive verses by four or more rappers. Classic posse cuts include A Tribe Called Quest's "Scenario" (featuring Phife Dawg, Charlie Brown, Dinco D, Q-Tip, and Busta Rhymes), the GZA's "4th Chamber" (featuring Ghostface Killah, Killah Priest, and RZA) and Marley Marl's "The Symphony" (featuring Masta Ace, Craig G, Kool G. Rap, and Big Daddy Kane).

attributes; furthermore, having a strong anchor is important.⁸⁷ FFC songwriting values both the speed of composing—which can imply something about the rhyme writer’s compositional stance—and, obviously, the (assessed) quality of the rhymes. The fleeting conditions that help foster the most spirited songwriting rivalries are evident on occasions when guest emcees—likely to be around only once or twice during a recording session—“come through” with the expectation of recording a song. The presence of additional emcees also usually results in a song in which all the emcees in the Cabin—typically anywhere from three to six rappers—contribute a verse. In these moments, routine song-creation activities include making or auditioning beats (see above), deciding on a topic, and writing verses. The chosen beat is continuously looped as the focus of emcees turns to getting lyrics on paper.

Once the lyric writing commences, there is little social interaction. Occasionally, someone might ask a question related to a line they are working on (for instance, “what was the name of Eddie Murphy’s character in the movie *Trading Places*?”) or announce a good rhyme. I introduce this notion of *announcing* to describe a self-congratulatory speech act that disrupts the otherwise individually focused songwriting atmosphere. *Announcing* celebrates the particular emcee’s achievement—of composing a great line or verse—yet, in prodding the other lyric writers to match the announcer’s quality, it is also intended as a form of communal uplift.⁸⁸ In this way Cabin songwriting sessions are both competitive and collaborative.

During a session featuring a guest emcee, Gavin, I announced a line—“Now that you’re famous your name is mud and I’m the new improved Gain [laundry detergent] in the washer sud”—that drew immediate praise from several emcees in the room and, simultaneously, alerted Gavin to the fact that he needed to avoid sounding bad by comparison.⁸⁹ Similarly, in 2008, when we were beginning to compose lyrics for what became the “Style Czar” recording session, Feller Quentin announced the following rhyme complex, which would become the opening verse of the song “The Lament”:

*In a world of snow and ice, eternally glowing lights;
Internally frozen toes and noses glow in rose and white;
The frozen does and bucks, foxes, ducks, bears and such;
They’re wearing layers of ice and all their lairs are closed and shut;
There is a lair there that a fair sheriff he could open up;
But there’s no heat there and there’s nowhere there where it’s showing up;
The reign of terror there is the only rain not frozen up;
The red scare’s there and there’s a red seer there with a red chair holding him up.⁹⁰*

⁸⁷ Many Golden Era West Coast (underground) groups—including Souls of Mischief, Freestyle Fellowship, and the Pharcyde—conformed to this analogy by featuring four emcees.

⁸⁸ This concept of *announcing* fits within Henry Louis Gates Jr.’s comprehensive understanding of the black vernacular practice of Signifyin(g)—most notably his explanation of it as “show[ing] off with language use.” See Gates, *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 70.

⁸⁹ For more on this interaction, see Harrison, “Cheaper Than a CD, Plus We Really Mean It”: Bay Area Underground Hip Hop Tapes as Subcultural Artefacts,” *Popular Music* 25/2 (2006): 284.

⁹⁰ I refer to “Style Czar” as a recording session since the resulting collection of recordings has yet to be released as an official album. The lyric transcription was made from the recorded version of

Upon hearing this verse (and assessing it as great), I knew that I needed to raise the bar on my own lyric writing.

While engaged in a communal songwriting session, the first emcee to complete his or her verse typically announces it, with the intention of recording soon thereafter—while the moment(um) is still hot. “I’m finished,” I might say as I abruptly stand up and begin walking towards the microphone, all the while beginning to recite my lyrics aloud. This gesture indicates to the studio engineer that I’m ready to record. Even on occasions when the engineer/emcee (Feller Quentin) is still in the process of completing his verse, in recognizing the importance of the moment, he will typically soon break from writing to allow me to record. Ultimately, if I believe in the caliber of my lyrics, the opportunity to record first is also an occasion to challenge the other songwriters in the room to equal the quality of what I’ve composed.

The symbiotic relation between structure and agency, and collaboration and individuality, is reflected in these routinized creative activities. Collective songwriting is organized around habitual social practices that are intended to achieve optimal compositional flow. Yet the emcees taking part in these sessions experience them as shaped by individual agents who compose, announce, and eventually record remarkable rhymes for the benefit of everyone involved.

The Flow of Recording

Hip hop lyric writing and performing represent what Elaine J. Lawless refers to as a “fluid tradition.” Although there are pre-existing structures to rap lyrics—making them recognizable as raps—emcees, as creative agents, are capable of maneuvering within and occasionally outside of these frameworks.⁹¹ The writing-as-flow practices of the FFC inspire high levels of rhyme density and irregularity—both of which Krims regards as important characteristics distinguishing newer, innovative rhyme styles from “old school” ones.⁹² From an emcee’s standpoint, one way of achieving such innovation involves transcending the traditional structure of rhyming in two-measure couplets and moving towards four-measure or even eight-measure complex units. In other words, it has become not only acceptable but also virtuous to ignore the “old school” importance of consistent end rhymes for each music measure. However, much like Katz’s aforementioned statement about funky beats continually undermining and reestablishing a sense of rhythmic stability, at some point in a verse (typically four or eight measures) the rhyme structure must come

“The Lament.” Noting a point that I will make below regarding written versus performed versions of songs, it’s quite possible that what Feller Quentin read to me was slightly different. (Unreleased recording session. Used by permission of Tim Cohen.)

⁹¹ See Elaine J. Lawless, “Oral ‘Character’ and ‘Literary’ Art: A Call for a New Reciprocity Between Oral Literature and Folklore,” *Western Folklore* 44/2 (1985): 83.

⁹² Krims, *Rap Music and the Poetics of Identity*, 43.

back “on-beat” in order to avoid the polyrhythmic mess deejays refer to as “train wrecks.”⁹³

The majority of Forest Fires Collective vocal recordings are *read* directly off the page.⁹⁴ The practice of reciting these frequently dense and irregular rhyme transcriptions, which often include increased rhythmic acceleration, demands a *performative stance*—that is, an orientation towards performing the composed lyrics—that anticipates doing more than merely keep time with the beat.⁹⁵ This is particularly true when recording lyrics that, perhaps because they were just written (see above) or for some other reason, an emcee is relatively unfamiliar with. Porcello intimates that the significance of music lies not solely in the text but rather in the “processes of musical encounter.”⁹⁶ In the context of recording hip hop lyrics, musical encounters—as distinct from texts alone—are actualized through the practice of allowing words on a page (or in other instances a memorized composition) to guide the experience of an emcee creating a vocal recording. Assuming a performative disposition that only loosely adheres to the written-rhyme transcript empowers emcees to negotiate extended sequences in which the patterns of syllables, rhymes, assonance, and alliteration deviate from the four-four beat structure. Enjambment (i.e., run-on or carry-over lines), as an outcome of *perpetually-moving-forward* composition practices, helps regulate the flow of vocal deliveries in accordance with the unrelenting demands of a beat’s meter.

Berger observes that whether text takes precedence over performative stance or vice versa is dependent on the cultural context of the expressive tradition.⁹⁷ Hip hop lyricism is well recognized as belonging to an African diasporic oral tradition that emphasizes improvisational practices over a rigid conformity to fixed texts.⁹⁸ A comparison of the written texts in three of my rhyme books and the vocal recordings they facilitated reveals an oscillating relationship between structure and strategic improvisation. Clearly the fact that recorded rhymes are *read* from the page indicates that texts play a role in structuring vocal performances. However, there are very few cases in which the written lyrics and recorded vocals completely match. Rather than the written transcript—as the presumed *correct* version—dominating the recited vocals, the two modes coexist. Through this “reorientation of the relationship between notation and performance” the rhyme book acts as a “script” for the real-time choreography of the emcee’s vocal delivery with the requirements of the

⁹³ Hans Bakker and Theo Bakker define deejay “train wrecks” as instances of “bad beat-matching,” describing the sound as comparable to “shoes in a clothes dryer.” See J. I. Bakker and T. R. A. Bakker, “The Club DJ: A Semiotic and Interactionist Analysis,” *Symbolic Interaction* 29/1 (2006): 79.

⁹⁴ Here I use a generous definition of the verb “read” that goes beyond word-for-word enunciation. A number of celebrity emcees—most notably Jay-Z—claims to never write their lyrics down. In my experience, I find this to be more of a celebrated exception (of emcee bravado) than a widely practiced tradition.

⁹⁵ Berger, *Stance*, 8.

⁹⁶ Porcello, “Tails Out,” 265.

⁹⁷ Berger, *Stance*, 21–22.

⁹⁸ See Harrison, *Hip Hop Underground*; Neff, *Let the World Listen Right*; and Baraka, *Blues People*.

moment and, specifically, the meter of the beat.⁹⁹ Although it's certainly possible for an emcee to "mess up" during the course of a recorded performance, digressions from the words on the page, which are usually more spontaneous than deliberate, are not automatically indicative of mistakes.¹⁰⁰

The pairing of lyrics with beats is naturally an important factor in assessing whether a particular vocal digression does or does not work. Beats are not always pre-selected. In fact, it is not uncommon to have a beat suddenly marshaled from a storehouse of available instrumentals just minutes prior to recording. Thus, even if an emcee is quite familiar with his or her rhymes and has (independently) heard a beat several times already, the pairing of the two can create an unanticipated musical encounter that introduces a sense of immediacy to the moment and may at times facilitate creative vocal digressions. Furthermore, the context of hearing both a beat and (particularly) one's voice through studio headphones is always distinct from other contexts of listening to or imagining this pairing. Feller Quentin, like many studio engineers, adds various time-based effects—typically reverb and/or delay—to a vocalist's headphone monitors while recording which, as the account of my first recording experience illustrates, can turn hearing one's own voice into a mystical experience.

Episode 3: Recording "Newport New As" (June 2007)

One afternoon, while in the midst of the "kids' album" recording session, Feller Quentin and I had just completed our third song recording of the day when he looked up at me and asked "what's next?" Standing at the microphone with the headphones still on, I flipped through my rhyme book and selected a verse. Within a minute or two of making my decision, which included rehearsing most, if not all, of the lines out loud, Feller Quentin had a five-minute looped beat cued up. "Do it over this," he said as he hit the record button and got up to go get something to drink.

Although the week before I had been with Feller Quentin when he (custom-)made roughly fifteen beats for this session, only a few of these were conscious in my memory. I had essentially forgotten about this particular one. Now reintroduced to it, I was pleasantly startled by how dynamic it sounded through my headphones. As I began doing some pre-verse talking into the microphone, I was again surprised by the slight delay effect Feller Quentin had added to my vocals, which produced the euphoric sensation of my voice floating through the room.¹⁰¹ Furthermore, the menacing undertones of the beat put me in a distinct frame of mind—or performative stance—detectable in my voice, which convinced me that this was going to be one of my favorite songs of the entire recording session. After about a minute of admiring how my voice sounded over the beat—knowing my verse was only sixteen measures (less than a minute), I felt no rush to begin—I began from the first lines on the page in my rhyme book.

⁹⁹ Cook, "Music as Performance," in *The Cultural Study of Music: A Critical Introduction*, 2nd ed., ed. Martin Clayton, Trevor Herbert, and Richard Middleton (New York: Routledge, 2012), 186.

¹⁰⁰ Most FFC recording sessions do not involve a high number of (re)takes. In my experience, it's far more common for a song's vocals to be successfully recorded in two (or fewer) takes than more than five. This can be attributed to the studio engineer's role in framing and leading the deliberations over what is (and what is not) a successful take—again, the sound technician has the most authority. Eddie Vic and, particularly, Feller Quentin appreciate levels of artistic sincerity, which make a virtue of peculiarity and do not automatically insist on masking human imperfections.

¹⁰¹ Pre-verse talking is a common technique used by most recording artists in order to get a sense of how one's voice sounds over the music prior to the start of the actual song recital.

Reminiscent of Luke Eric Lassiter's epiphanic encounter with the power of Kiowa song, the "experiential phenomenon" of this recording in many respects transcended my consciousness.¹⁰² My entire two-minute vocal performance involved an out-of-body experience, of sorts, that required neither intention nor effort. It was as if I had no other choice. The combination of re-experiencing the beat in harmony with my delayed and slightly reverberated voice—which had the distinct effect of making it sound like I was rhyming in concert with an already-recorded version of my own voice—created the sensation of a gravitational pull in which the words simply fell out of my open mouth and slid down an instrumental incline. A seamless first take—there was nothing to question.

Examining the recorded song in relation to the rhyme book transcript, there are several minute deviations—for example, twice I say "we" instead of (the written) "I"—along with one significant departure. This occurs on a line that overlaps the beat's fifth and sixth music measure and, more importantly, appears at the start (mid-fifth measure) of a six-measure off-beat rhyme sequence that does not return to the four-four structure until the start of the eleventh measure.¹⁰³ Below are the two versions of the line:

Written: *When my man Diamond Dave's Son Ooby with the last name Dooby*
 Performed: *When my man Dave* Diamond D's son comes with the Dooby.*¹⁰⁴

The performed version, spontaneously (re)composed to the beat, is notable for its propulsive meter—resulting from triple (D) alliteration followed by an instance of assonance ("son comes")—which initiates the momentum necessary to carry out the six-measure off-beat sequence. It also has two fewer syllables. Despite the fact that I was *reading* from a rhyme book, the whole verse felt like an off-the-top-of-the-head freestyle. Subconsciously, I presume, my intuitive recognition of the syllabic density of the written text, in relation to its crucial positioning in the structure of the verse, compelled me to make my improvisational revision.

This recording of the song "Newport New As" represents a powerful instance of a sensation I often experience. It would be wrong to presume such subjective experiences with recording also represent the experiences of other Cabin emcees. Yet they follow from a collection of practices and dispositions shared among a rotating assemblage of FFC emcees, with outcomes—especially with regards to the imperfect correspondences between texts and recordings—that appear similar.

As with boxing, emceeing involves a "gearing of the body and the mind" that enables the emcee to successfully negotiate treacherous terrain.¹⁰⁵ The competitive and fleeting context of Cabin composing and recording, paced through the real-time demands of performing in the moment and engaging unrelenting beats, oblige FFC emcees to embrace these "sedimented products of . . . past [recording] experiences"

¹⁰² Eric Luke Lassiter, *The Chicago Guide to Collaborative Ethnography* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 112–13.

¹⁰³ All mentions of music measures are relative to the sixteen-measure verse.

¹⁰⁴ The asterisk marks the end of the fifth music measure in the recorded song. Diamond Dave (a.k.a. Diamond D) is an extraordinary individual we had met a few days earlier, who *did* have a son named "Ooby." For an image of this page from the author's rhyme book, see the cover of this issue.

¹⁰⁵ Wacquant, *Body & Soul*, 1.

as a means to asserting creative agency.¹⁰⁶ According to Abrahams, “we ‘get into the zone’ and give ourselves over to experience . . . go with the flow . . . and give up self-awareness.”¹⁰⁷

In addition to what has been discussed here, there are several other chain-of-production steps involved in completing a hip hop song—such as adding voice-overs to punctuate vocals, as well as post-production mixing and muting—all of which can introduce textures that impact the quality and character of the final product. This article, however, is more concerned with the means of song making than with the songs themselves. In many respects, I prioritize an ethics of creative practice ahead of aesthetics. Schloss similarly observes how hip hop producers often define what beats *are* or *are not* “hip hop” more by the way they are made than by how they sound.¹⁰⁸ In some fields—including those surrounding the practices of composing and recording underground hip hop songs—the process outweighs the product.

Conclusion

Among Forest Fires Collective recording artists, the Cabin exists as a physical space that facilitates special kinds of musical performances and interactions. In the specific practices of beat making and lyric composition and recording, the Cabin provides an inclusive space where an extended community of emcees and other musicians “come through” to engage in and update established routines of hip hop song making. Through these structured acts, artistic creativity—defined both by the innovative terms of underground hip hop conventions and the FFC’s experimental ethos—is nurtured and expressions of individual style are encouraged. This creativity demands the cultivation of a distinct relationship, or stance, between musicians’ performances (in making music, writing lyrics, and recording lyrics) and real or imagined musical texts. The micro-social dynamics of Cabin music making foster a competitive freedom that allows artists to transcend their performative self-consciousness and inspires them to perpetually move forward, to go with the flow of the moment(um). Within these ephemeral spaces of unselfconscious performance, distinctions between pre-recorded and live or written and oral music-making practices are often less than clear.

My ability to recognize the significance and intricacies of what happens in the Cabin was predicated on my gradually acquiring the “ensemble of techniques” necessary for effective underground hip hop music making.¹⁰⁹ In using an arts-based approach to examine FFC song creation, this article provides a rich case study in how practice generates knowledge. The autoethnographic interplay of my artist-self and researcher-self further allows me to illustrate the ways in which an emcee’s body acts as a “vector of knowledge” for negotiating the irregularities and rhythmic densities that signal hip hop lyrical creativity.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁶ Wacquant, “Habitus as Topic and Tool: Reflections on Becoming a Prizefighter,” *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 8 (2011): 82.

¹⁰⁷ Abrahams, *Everyday Life*, 104.

¹⁰⁸ Schloss, *Making Beats*, 63–78.

¹⁰⁹ Wacquant, *Body & Soul*, 59.

¹¹⁰ Wacquant, “Habitus as Topic and Tool,” 90.

Ultimately this article is intended to represent the studio as more than a passive environment in which recording takes place. Joining a chorus of recent scholarship on studio practices, my aim has been to reframe studios as dynamic spaces in which moments of creativity are generated through a balance of structured and unstructured social interaction, as well as to extend the current ethnographic focus on studios to include the interior spaces of hip hop home studios.¹¹¹ In these spaces, compositional conventions and principles that pattern musical activities mix with spontaneity and intentional momentum to animate the experience of hip hop song making.

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¹¹¹ The chorus I am joining includes: Bates, "What Studios Do;" Meintjes, *Sound of Africa!*; Mientjes, "The Politics of the Recording Studio;" Porcello, "Tails Out;" Porcello, "Music Mediated as Live in Austin."

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