

POP MUSIC

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The new math of mashups.

BY SASHA FRERE-JONES



Jay-Z and Pharrell Williams meet Beck in a software-assisted collage of vocals.

In July of 2003, Jeremy Brown, a.k.a. DJ Reset, took apart a song. Using digital software, Brown isolated instrumental elements of "Debra," a song by Beck from his 1999 album "Midnite Vultures." Brown, who is thirty-three and has studied with Max Roach, adjusted the tempo of "Debra" and added live drums and human beat-box noises that he recorded at his small but tidy house in Long Island City. Then he sifted through countless a-cappella vocals archived on several hard drives. Some a-cappellas are on commercially released singles, specifically intended for d.j. use, while others appear on the Internet, having been leaked by people working in the studio where the song was recorded, or sometimes even by the artist.

After auditioning almost a thousand

vocals, Brown found that an a-cappella of "Frontin'," a collaboration between the rapper Jay-Z and the producer Pharrell Williams, was approximately in the same key as "Debra." The two songs are not close in style—"Debra" is a tongue-in-cheek take on seventies soul music, while "Frontin'" is hard and shimmering computer music—but the vocalists are doing something similar. Brown exploited this commonality, and used his software to put the two singers exactly in tune.

Both Beck and Williams are singing in an impaired but enthusiastic shower-stall falsetto. Williams's goofy come-on—"Don't wanna sound full of myself or rude, but you ain't looking at no other dudes, because you love me"—is both musically and conceptually in sync with

Beck's own daft chorus: "Girl, I wanna get with you, and your sister. I think her name is Debra." Brown's collage sounds not like two songs stitched together but one single theme song for inept Romeos everywhere. After several months of work, he completed the track, called it "Frontin' on Debra," and posted it on his Web site. With an enthusiastic push from Beck, "Frontin' on Debra" was made commercially available in October on iTunes.

"Frontin' on Debra" is an example of a "mashup," in which, generally, the vocal from one song is laid over the music from another. The best-known mashup in the United States is an unauthorized album-length project called "The Grey Album," assembled by Brian Burton, known professionally as Danger Mouse. The vocals are from Jay-Z's "The Black Album," and the musical bed is a highly processed and reorganized version of the Beatles' "White Album." Occasionally compelling, "The Grey Album" is not a great example of a mashup, because the musical bed is processed so radically that its source is sometimes not clear. One of the thrills of the mashup is identifying two well-known artists unwittingly complementing each other's strengths and limitations: bacchanalian rapper Missy Elliott combined with morose English rock band Joy Division, ecstatic Madonna working with furious Sex Pistols. The most celebrated mashups are melodically tuned, positing a harmonic relationship between, say, Madonna's voice and the Sex Pistols' guitars.

Mashups find new uses for current digital technology, a new iteration of the cause-and-effect relationship behind almost every change in pop-music aesthetics: the gear changes, and then the music does. If there is an electric guitar of mashup, it is a software package called Acid Pro, which enables one to put loops of different songs both in time and in tune with each other. Mark Vidler, known professionally as Go Home Productions, explained some other benefits of digital technology to me in London not long ago: "You don't need a distributor, because your distribution is the Internet. You don't need a record label, because it's your bedroom, and you don't need a recording studio, because that's your computer. You do it all yourself."

A legally cleared album of mashups called "Collision Course" is currently in the *Billboard* Top Ten. It is a sort of

"Black Album" footnote, a combination of Jay-Z's work on "The Black Album" and other albums, and the music of Linkin Park, the multiplatinum rock band. "Collision Course" is not a particularly good mashup—Linkin Park's adequate rhyming and bleating vocals only detract from Jay-Z's authority and swing—but it's a good example of why major record labels have taken so long to embrace the form.

As Jennifer Justice, of Carroll, Guido & Groffman, Jay-Z's law firm, explained, "Jay's song '99 Problems' uses two huge samples and has four different credited publishers. That's before you've added anyone else's music to it, which would be yet another publisher or two. Making a mashup with that song means the label issuing the mashup has to convince all the publishers involved to take a reduction in royalty—otherwise, it won't be profitable for the label. The publishers are not going to agree to this if we're not talking about two huge artists. With Jay-Z and Linkin, it's like found money, but less well known artists might not be sexy enough or big enough." This may be true, but lawyers and considerations of profit have little to do with how mashups happen, or why they keep happening.

In April of 2000, an English bass player and MTV v.j. named Eddy Temple-Morris inaugurated a radio show called "The Remix" on London's XFM network. A remix, traditionally, was simply a song taken apart and enhanced by the addition of new elements but not actually combined with another song. Temple-Morris played remixes, many of them rock songs reworked by dance-world producers, and mashups made by friends of his like the producer Garret (Jackknife) Lee. By the end of the year, Temple-Morris was receiving unsolicited CD-Rs from people using aliases like McSleazy and Osmysyo.

In October of 2001, a d.j. named Roy Kerr, calling himself the Freelance Hellraiser, sent Temple-Morris a mashup called "A Stroke of Genius," laying Christina Aguilera's vocal from "Genie in a Bottle," a lubricious pop song, over the music from the Strokes' "Hard to Explain," a brittle, honking guitar song. "Stroke" is a perfect pop song, better than either of its sources. What was harmonically sweet in the original songs becomes huge and complex in the combination. Aguilera's

vocal is an unabashedly expressive ode to her sexuality, and her control over it. (She will unleash the genie from her bottle only if rubbed the right way.) The Strokes' track is compressed and jittery, as if made by hipster robots, but the chord changes are lovely. The original vocal, by Julian Casablancas, is a good rock snarl, but it is a delivery more of attitude than information. Each song targets a demographic that wants nothing to do with the other—teen-agers texting their friends while cruising the mall, and twenty-somethings drinking cheap beer in expensive New York bars—but Hellraiser brokers an amazing musical détente between the two styles. Stripped of "Genie in a Bottle's" electronic beats, Aguilera's sex-kitten pose dissipates, and she becomes vulnerable, even desperate. The opening lines now sound less like strip-club small talk and more like a damsel pining from a tower: "I feel like I've been locked up tight for a century of lonely nights, waiting for someone to release me." After another line, she shifts into a wordless "oh, oh" that lays over the Strokes' chord changes so deliciously you can't imagine why the song didn't always do that. After hearing it twice, you can't remember when it didn't.

In fact, "A Stroke of Genius" is so good that it eventually led Freelance Hellraiser to do official remixes for Aguilera and others, and he has just completed, at Paul McCartney's invitation, an entire album of McCartney remixes. "Stroke" also inspired a fourteen-year-old named Daniel Sheldon to start a Web site called boom-selection.info. "The Remix" remains England's main hub for mashups, but the rest of the world is being served through Sheldon's site and getyourbootlegon.com, a message board started by Grant McSleazy, who recently graduated to doing legitimate remixes of Britney Spears.

I visited Temple-Morris at the XFM studios in Central London in October. He is a tall, rangy man who gestures quickly and smiles almost constantly. His basic mode is deep enthusiasm and his favorite word is "love," which he uses without irony. "We get our wrists slapped by the record companies and publishing companies and whatever," he said. "But these days there's much more love, there's much less paranoia."

Temple-Morris was broadcasting "The Remix" as we talked. He moved briskly behind the console, speaking con-

tinuously to the seven or eight people in the room. In mid-conversation, he smiled, nodded, and leaned toward the microphone. The "on air" light went on without warning, and the track playing in the studio cut off abruptly.

"Love it. Want to take it out to dinner. Wanna marry it. There are some tunes, I don't know what it is, it's the rolling beat, it's that incredible bass line, it's just, there's something really, really sexy about this record. And so I thought, I've got to play you a new really sexy record that I found."

Temple-Morris proceeded to play a record that, under normal circumstances, would have seemed fairly sexy, but, following his salesmanship, sounded like the National Anthem of Sex. This is Temple-Morris's gift: he was born to the job of loving music and persuading others to love it as much as he does.

Also in the room was Mark Vidler, a.k.a. Go Home Productions, one of the more reliable mashup-makers. Once a graphic designer working for a company that made travel pillows, and long before that a guitarist in a rock band called Chicane, Vidler, too, was converted in October of 2001. "I heard 'A Stroke of Genius' on the radio and I thought, That's clever. I could do that," he said. By April of 2002, Vidler was making his own mashups. His first was called "Slim McShady," a combination of Eminem and Wings. "I created it on a Saturday, posted it on the Tuesday, and got played on the radio that Friday, on 'The Remix.'"

Vidler is responsible for several mashups that have the same uncanny brilliance as "Stroke of Genius." "Girl Wants (to Say Goodbye to) Rock and Roll" brings Christina Aguilera back to sing over the Velvet Underground's "Rock and Roll." "Ray of Gob" combines Madonna's "Ray of Light" and the Sex Pistols' "God Save the Queen," and both Madonna and the Pistols admired it.

Mashup artists like Vidler, Kerr, and Brown have found a way of bringing pop music to a formal richness that it only rarely reaches. See mashups as piracy if you insist, but it is more useful, viewing them through the lens of the market, to see them as an expression of consumer dissatisfaction. Armed with free time and the right software, people are rifling through the lesser songs of pop music and, in frustration, choosing to make some of them as good as the great ones. ♦