

Curatorial > VARIATIONS

With this section, RWM continues a line of programmes devoted to exploring the complex map of sound art from different points of view organised in curatorial series.

'Variation' is the formal term for a musical composition based on a previous musical work, and many of those traditional methods (changing the key, meter, rhythm, harmonies or tempi of a piece) are used in much the same manner today by sampling musicians. But the practice of sampling is more than a simple modernization or expansion of the number of options available to those who seek their inspiration in the refinement of previous composition. The history of this music traces nearly as far back as the advent of recording, and its emergence and development mirrors the increasingly self-conscious relationship of society to its experience of music. Starting with the precedents achieved by Charles Ives and John Cage, VARIATIONS will present an overview of the major landmarks in Sampling Music, following examples in twentieth century composition, folk art and commercial media through to the meeting of all those threads in the present day.

Curated by Jon Leidecker.

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Jon Leidecker was born in 1970 in Washington D.C. to two physicists. Since 1990 he has performed appropriative collage music under the pseudonym Wobbly, aiming for extended narratives spun from spontaneous yet coherent multi-sample polyphony. Selected recent works are freely available online. <http://detritus.net/wobbly/>

VARIATIONS #7

The composer

In the nineties, sampling technology reached a level of sophistication and control that allowed musicians to truly assert themselves over their materials. While some collagists innovated by confidently stepping into the traditional role of the romantic composer, presenting the resulting music as an expression of self, others continued to explore the intrinsic meanings suggested by the craft itself.

In this episode we trace through examples of the popular music that brought the term 'remix' into the popular lexicon, hear the CD player joining the turntable as a live performance instrument, and connect digital sampling to the history of musical borrowing: written notation's classical equivalent to the editing techniques that modern composers use to transform existing music into new compositions.

01. Transcript

Hello. This is Jon Leidecker, and welcome to the seventh episode of VARIATIONS, tracing the history of appropriative collage in music.

An avalanche of books on the subject of twentieth century music were published in the late sixties, each attempting to define the state of what some called Modern Classical. But the historical narrative for Western art music, consisting of a lineage of innovations made by Great Composers, was coming apart. Critics were faced with a proliferation of specialist composers, each marching to the periphery in search of new musical forms, while the audiences for their music dwindled. It was seemingly unclear who the true leaders were, who as Bach and Beethoven before them would expand the vocabulary of modern music for all to follow. The musical universe described in these books was mostly limited to orchestral music scored with traditional notation, and very few of these books even mention the Beatles, the group who had retired from live performance to concentrate on studio composition, and whose recordings were finally validating the pop album as a high art form. The audiences had made their mind up long ago about the classical music of the twentieth century. We can no longer call that music Modern; after the Medieval, Baroque, Classical and Romantic period comes Popular, the word which neatly captures all of the major characteristics in how people both produced and listened to music.

Over the course of the twentieth century the location of what the audience considered to be a composition gradually migrated from written notation to the sound recording. From jazz onward, the solitary art of transcribing notes onto paper was no longer necessary to carry one's music across cities and centuries. Performers suddenly enjoyed the rights of composers. Recordings not only captured performances beyond the reach of sheet music, but revealed music once again as a social practice, and not just a set of instructions for musicians to obey. (And, exactly as it had happened with sheet music, what began as a way to transcribe existing music slowly became the medium that determined the way in which music was composed.) We will remember the Popular era not by any one dominating figure like Bach, but by a continuum of performers playing their own music. And if there is an equivalent to Bach for the Popular age, it is no accident that it is not an individual but a collective – and the people arguing about which one of the Beatles had the best solo career are having conversations that are much less relevant than the ones discussing the contributions of the many people who have been called the fifth Beatle: the manager who sculpted their image, the producer who arranged their music, their engineers who designed their sounds.

If any one pop song taken alone is still a model of self-expression, an individual voice, the whole of pop culture is increasingly experienced as a collage, a fabric of voices. And this is where collage and sampling come in; it is a way of composing closer to the way most of us now experience music. A composer's



[King Tubby]



[DJ Shadow]

voice that leaves the other voices audible, that brings emulation and innovation back into balance as equally necessary values, that shows us that copying is not just a social but a creative act. Collage music reminds us directly that music is not something that one person can ever own. It is, rather, something that we are allowed to join as it sings itself through.

The word 'remix' is now used to describe creative editing in every field from film to corporate management, but the term began in popular music. In late sixties Jamaica, instrumental b-sides of dancehall tunes called 'versions' became vital tools for MCs to toast new lyrics over at outdoor parties, blurring the line between recordings and live performance. The fuzziness was continued by King Tubby, who began producing multiple mixes of the songs recorded in his studio; using the mixing board as a live instrument, different performances of a song using the same recording. Tubby would strip the music down to low end rhythms and pull brief snippets of vocals and guitars into taffy, creating the language of what would come to know globally as dub music.

The term 'remix' was first meant literally; replaying a multitrack recording with the mixer's faders in new positions to change the balance of sounds. When the Grateful Dead's 1969 album *Aoxomoxoa* was reissued with a note on the back cover saying 'Remixed September 1971', fans encountered a radically different album, with some sounds missing and others uncovered. Soon the term expanded to include any editing, engineering or even re-recording applied to an existing recording. If the first commercially available remix was Walter Gibbons recut of 'Ten Percent' by Double Exposure, the originator of the remix as the term came to be understood from the early seventies forward was Tom Moulton, who rearranged pop songs to three or four times their original length, dropping the vocal to create long instrumental sections that would build to ecstatic peaks. As the tools progressed, remixers took more liberties, and began releasing alternate versions of entire albums, such as Martin Rushent's retool of the Human League's album *Dare* released as *Love and Dancing* in 1981.

[The League Unlimited Orchestra, 'Love Action (I Believe in Love)' (Martin Rushent Remix), 1982]

Labels quickly learned the market value of a remix. Nile Rodgers radically rebuilt, shorter remix of Duran Duran's 'The Reflex' became their first US #1 single, begging the question: who wrote this hit? It became an auteur's game, the presence of names like Francis Kevorkian, Arthur Baker or Shep Pettibone on a 12" selling copies, granting further artistic license. By the late eighties, remixers were tweaking or replacing sounds for productions that frequently bore no resemblance to the original save for the vocal. And by the nineties, sometimes not even the vocal, as Aphex Twin once boasted that a remix of his had neglected to include any sounds whatsoever from the original. The remixer had become the composer.

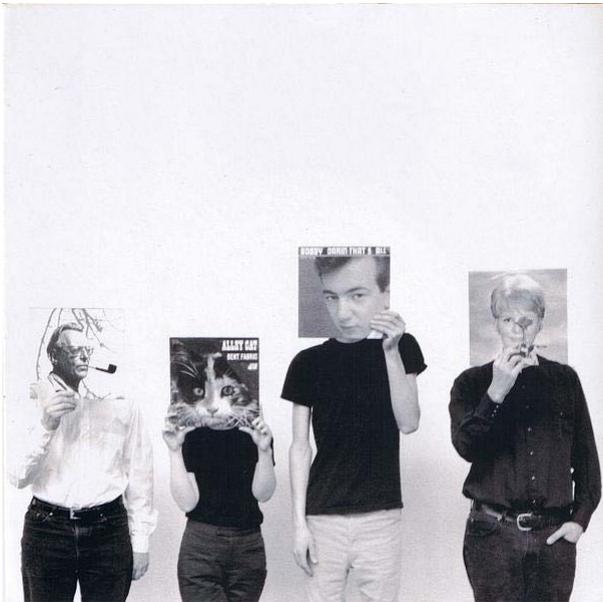
At this moment in the timeline, we see producers and DJs releasing instrumental solo albums, as well as an influx of self-expressive sampling well outside of hip-hop. Mick Jones' next project after The Clash was a band called Big Audio Dynamite, less using samples as a framework for songwriting than as a way to corrupt it.

The folk singer-songwriter Beck saw his career take off after he began collaborating with producers like Karl Stephenson and the Dust Brothers, who augmented his fragmentary subjective lyrics with multi-genre sample collage. It's tough to pull off the trick of seeming both ironic and sincere at once, but collage allows an individual to express both from the heart. If his debut *Mellow Gold* is still his best, the followup *Odelay* has sold over two million copies.

On DJ Shadow's debut album *Endtroducing*, the edits are so polished that you have to listen closely to hear how all the instruments have been sourced from different records. While the idea of a collage record where the seams have been polished out of the mix seemed odd to some sampling fans, a huge new audience heard this album less as a conceptual work than an emotional one. And those seams are still there, and make the difference; the beauty of a track like 'Midnight In A Perfect World' comes from the fact that the vocals almost, but do



[People Like Us]



[Dymaxion, *Sound Recording*, 1998]

not perfectly fit over those chords. A trained vocalist would have corrected the melody to fit; but collage allows us to compose new harmonies after the fact of performance.

[DJ Shadow, 'Midnight in a Perfect World', 1996]

After a series of collage mix tapes connecting ambient music with hip-hop, termed illbient, Paul D. Miller released his first album as DJ Spooky in 1996, *Songs of a Dead Dreamer*. At the moment when hip-hop had become the domain of millionaires, Spooky traded on the connection between early hip-hop and art music practice in a way critics found irresistible. This is 'Grapheme'.

[Ben Neill, 'Grapheme' (remixed by DJ Spooky), 1996]

The legendary duo Coldcut founded the Ninja Tune label in the nineties, signing a roster of sampling artists such as The Irresistible Force, DJ Food and Kid Koala. Perhaps the most influential signing was the Brazilian Amon Tobin, identifying the core aesthetic of drum and bass by titling his 1997 debut *Bricolage*; making something new out of what happens to be available; less subversion than vital modernist recycling.

[Amon Tobin, 'Wires & Snakes', 1997]

Todd Edwards pushed house music further towards microsampling, slicing his sources down to 8th/16th notes and rebuilding them into melodies he could call his own.

[Todd Edwards, 'Perfect Love', 2000]

Londoner John Wall bought a sampler in the early nineties, less concerned with the politics of copyright than the opportunity to compose his own symphonies, using sounds sourced from the vocabulary of modern classical and jazz. But music that at first seems acoustically plausible slowly folds itself into unlikely repetitions and impossible shifts of sonic frame.

[John Wall, 'Stunde Null (I)', 1995]

Less influenced by American pop art than by the industrial surrealism as practiced by Nurse With Wound, British artist Vicki Bennett has been producing audio and video cut-ups as People Like Us since the early nineties. Erasing the thin line between irritation and entertainment, she creates something far more complex than a simple critique of cultural kitsch. You can start to reclaim the fun from a tedious world by listening more closely to the background music you only think you're tuning out. This is 'Medley'.

[People Like Us, 'Medley', 1993]

British trio Stock, Hausen and Walkman collapse the distance between classic electronic music and kitsch and easy listening by using samples and structures from both. Those who were reassured that what sounded like new age flute samples would usually turn out to be something like Varese were joined by a wider audience who simply enjoyed strangely catchy music, as on the albums *Organ Transplants* and *Oh My Bag*.

[Stock, Hausen and Walkman, 'Hoots', 1998]

Drawing from sixties easy listening, garage rock and music concrete, the New York quartet Dymaxion composed things that sounded and behaved like pop songs. But if the sounds are nostalgic, the behavior is modern; welded entirely from samples from the foundation to the details. This is 'Ant'Ird Ally' from 1995.

[Dymaxion, 'Ant'Ird Ally', 1995]

Another sampling band with an indie rock aesthetic, the band Lecture On Nothing focused on found speech edited in musical ways. Setting Emerson's 'Civil Disobedience' to music, this is 'Turk Song' from 1997.



[Otomo Yoshihide]

[Lecture on Nothing, 'Turk Song', 1997]

Hailing from Los Angeles, Tom Recchion's collages of fifties lounge music were recorded in the eighties but found a wider audience in the nineties on the CD *Chaotica*. A jury-rigged assemblage of tape loops and digital processing allows him to improvise his prerecordings into strange little structures.

[Tom Recchion, 'Out of the Dunes', 1986]

Cutting his teeth playing live sampler in large ensembles in Manhattan, David Shea's solo music elide the distinctions between the pop, folk and 'art' music of the east and the west in works that are frequently performed in real time. This is 'Trio For Sampler', from 1992. This is 'Satyricon', live from 1997.

[David Shea, 'Satyricon Solo Excerpts', 1997]

Positing sampling as surveillance, Robin Rimbaud's Scanner project uses private cell phone conversations as source materials, showing us that as the public domain continues to shrink in the face of unlimited corporately owned copyrights, the private domain of our personal lives – that which we are allowed to keep to ourselves – is also shrinking, and faster than most of us care to admit.

[Scanner, 'Scanner² Track 3', 1993]

Beginning as a guitarist, eRikm moved to turntables and CD players in the late nineties, contrasting analog and digital artifacts, using samples too short to retain a strong connection to their parents. This is from his 1997 CD *Zygnosis*.

[eRikm, 'Dust ©', 1999]

Philip Jeck's background in visual arts led him to towards his installation work *Vinyl Requiem* for 180 turntables in 1993. His signature style involves playing back multiple records at half and quarter speeds, which exaggerates the crackles and hisses, and melts traditional expectations about pacing, leaving only pure immersive sound, a historical archive so large that it seems to be slowing down under its own weight. This is 'Vinyl Coda' from 2000.

[Philip Jeck, 'Vinyl Coda III', 2000]

The use of record players as a musical instrument dates back to the early twenties, but it wasn't until the nineties that the term turntablism emerged. The DJ had vanished as a soloist from charting hip-hop, to focus on developing the art in a global underground of conventions and competitions, as documented on Bomb Records' *Return of the DJ* series. The Invisibl Skratch Piklz, a legendary Californian collective featuring DJ Qbert, Mix Master Mike, Yofafrog, D-Styles, Shortcut and DJ Disk were six soloists playing together like any band. On this excerpt from the Shiggar Fraggar Show, every beat and every note is individually scratched – these aren't loops, this is live music.

[Invisibl Skratch Piklz, 'Insect Mind Numb', 1998]

DJ Mixtapes are the most accurate documents of hip-hop history, from the beginning the only way to present music with uncleared samples; music that labels were incapable of releasing. If DJs like Red Alert perfected the blended mix, DJs like Kid Capri went meta on the 1989 tape *52 Beats*, a sequence of the greatest breaks beatmatched and scratched together in one take. In the nineties, they also became big business, forging a massive alternative distribution network. Some of the most radical tapes came from DJ Screw, who created the Chopped 'n' Screwed subgenre by slowing his choices down to swamp like speeds, the psychedelic hiding in the familiar.

[DJ Screw, '3 'N The Mornin'', 1994]

The growing presence of turntablism perhaps prompted artists to investigate the intrinsic qualities of CD players well before they became archaic. Beginning in the late eighties, Nicolas Collins, Yasunao Tone and the Evolution Control Committee were among those to write pieces for malfunctioning digital playback.



[Invisibl Skratch Piklz]



[DJ Screw]

Tone's *Solo For Wounded* CD from 1995 was already less about any form of nostalgia, as Tone learned that nearly all recognizable audio vanishes when you overwhelm a player's built in error correction by covering the disc up with scotch tape.

[Yasunao Tone, 'Solo for Wounded CD Part I', 1997]

The German trio Oval turned CD skipping artifacts into rhythmic pop on their 96 release *Systemisch*, which member Frank Metzger once admitted was created almost entirely from mutilated copies of Aphex Twin's album *Selected Ambient Works II*.

[Oval, "Textuell", 1996]

CDs skip faster than vinyl, roughly at the pace of 8th or 16th notes. A skipping or paused player turns any music into instant drum and bass. In 1995, the collective DISC, aka CD terrorist Lesser and his friends Matmos and Kid 606, releasing improvised music out of the sounds of ruined Compact Discs.

[DISC, 'Transfer04', 1998]

Studying as an ethnomusicologist before moving into music, Otomo Yoshihide's early CD *The Night Before The Death of The Sampling Virus* was less an album than a complete library of his samples collected for live improvisations, a master catalog you can hear deployed across his countless solo and group recordings. The most sprawling project was six member band Ground-Zero, ricocheting from rock to jazz over a blizzard of samples, less concerned with juxtaposition than sheer media overload. The 1997 album *Revolutionary Pekanes Opera version 1.28* reclaims Goebells and Harth's early eighties agit-prop collage 'Peking-Oper', a ravenous portrait of shopping under Communism.

[Ground-Zero, 'Red Mao Book By Sony', 1996]

[Ground-Zero, 'The Story of Hong Kong', 1996]

[Ground-Zero, 'Kabukicho Conference', 1996]

The group Negativland spent the nineties building on their notion of culture jamming; cutting up popular entertainment to expose the very things it aims to soothingly conceal. Their 192 page book *Fair Use* is a document of U2's lawsuit against them for sonic and trademark appropriation, and a manifesto championing the artist's right to compose with mirrors, arguing that sampling anything less than the whole is fair game. For Negativland, sampling remained an inherently political act. This is 'Truth In Advertising'.

[Negativland, 'Truth in Advertising', 1997]

Beck's lawyers threatened to sue the label Illegal Art for their first release *Deconstructing Beck*, which mulched his pop music back into something far more challenging. Negativland responded by picking the CD up for distribution, at which point the lawyers backed down, fearing bad publicity, or perhaps a lawsuit with a defendant ready to argue their right to free speech instead of commerce.

[Steev Hise, 'Stuck Together, Falling Apart', 1998]

That particular Beck remix was by Steev Hise, the founder of detritus.net. In the still early days of the world wide web, Detritus served as a hub to discuss the politics, aesthetics and techniques of sampling and open source culture, as well as offering free downloads of the albums by Negativland, John Oswald and the KLF that had been removed from distribution by major label lawsuits. The archives are still online.

By late eighties, hardware samplers were increasingly being used in conjunction with computer software, a shift from playable interfaces to compositional workstations. By the nineties MIDI Sequencers like Digital Performer were joined by audio recording software like Cubase, Cool Edit 16 and Pro Tools, not sequencers but sample editors which allowed you to directly edit the audio waveforms of your recording. They were designed to replace analog tape recorders, but these programs allowed users to arrange and edit their sounds on a



[Yasunao Tone]



[Heinrich Biber]

visual timeline exactly as earlier composers arranged notes using sheet music. Varese's dream of organized sound became the primary operating aesthetic of all composers. And the line between the sounds one records themselves, and the sounds sampled from others becomes a very thin one under this aesthetic; when the bulk of composition comes down to choices in editing.

It's not surprising that the pioneers, who spent painstaking hours working with primitive equipment, spent more time asking themselves questions about what it means to compose using other people's voices. And you can hear those questions in the resulting music. By the nineties, the technology had made these questions besides the point. The practice of sampling reached its biggest audiences yet through the music of entrepreneurs like Puff Daddy. The practice of sampling now so ingrained that both rock and hip-hop history could be taken for granted, Puff Daddy created apolitical party music about financial success; sampling purely seen as licensing. An artist like Moby could loop gospel and blues vocals out to infinity and put a picture of himself on the cover without irony. The artist Kenny G could overdub a light jazz sax solo on top of a masterpiece by Louis Armstrong and call it a duo without his own brain forcing itself to have an aneurysm. Sampling was not inherently revolutionary after all; appropriation could apparently be practiced as mere self-expression, and nothing more.

The long view is that there was very little that was revolutionary about sampling at all. Creative transformation of preexisting music predates the concept of the composer. The early nineties lawsuits that label any form of musical copying a crime are effectively criminalizing an intrinsic aspect of creative practice. When Biz Markie was sued, one of his defenses was that he was only guilty of something all rap artists were doing. A better defense would have gone back much further; even if they didn't want to get into the first five hundred years of religious music, they could have begun in the early Baroque. Published in 1602, this is the opening of a solo madrigal by Giulio Caccini based on the poem 'Sfogava con le stelle'.

[Caccini, 'Sfogava con le stelle (Maurizia Barazzoni)', composed in 1602]

This piece is mainly known today as the song expanded into a five-part madrigal by Claudio Monteverdi.

[Monteverdi, 'Sfogava con le stelle (Concerto Italiano, Rinaldo Alessandrini)', composed in 1603]

Monteverdi blends the original tune into his polyphony seamlessly, in a way not unlike how modern composers use a sample as a foundation, covering it over with new sounds until the original source is barely audible. Monteverdi's madrigal was published less than a year after Caccini's piece, and it is no crime, it is a masterpiece.

During the baroque age, the rules and techniques of written notation were standardized, giving composers a set of ways to manipulate and transform notes and melodies that were at heart very similar to the digital sampling tools of the late twentieth century; ways to transform and play with compelling source material, to manipulate it beyond recognition. The Baroque period saw a flowering of variation form, including the parlor game of the Simultaneous Quodlibet: two popular tunes played at once, each forming a harmonic counterpoint to the other. Bach wove a Quodlibet out of two bawdy drinking songs about food and love, a hidden joke that forms the climactic moment of his 30 Goldberg Variations.

[Bach, "Goldberg Variation No. 30, Quodlibet", 1742]

An unusually dissonant quodlibet for 1673, the second movement of Franz Heinrich von Biber's 'Battalia' sets eight popular tunes on top of each other to portray the different camps in a soldier's campground, each drunkenly celebrating on the night before the battle.

[Biber, 'Battalia à 10: Die liederliche Gesellschaft von allerley Humor: Allegro' (Le Concert des Nations / Jordi Savall), composed in 1673]



[Handel]

In the eighteenth century, a composer like Handel felt free to use both his own melodies, and his own arrangements of tunes written by his contemporaries when composing his full length operas. But after Beethoven, the idea of the romantic genius took hold, and musical borrowing of most forms was stigmatized. Handel's posthumous reputation came under assault from the musicologists of the nineteenth century as they rediscovered the extent of his borrowing. But much as today's producers or remixers sometimes gain more fame than the artists they produce, careful listeners can hear how Handel added as much as he borrowed. There is a reason why many of his contemporaries are now best remembered as those whom Handel borrowed from.

Even after borrowing from contemporaries became taboo, Western composers continued to borrow extensively from folk traditions. Brahms' 'Hungarian Dances' was essentially a suite of embroidered tunes, and his biggest financial success. And in the twentieth century, the borrowings of Bartók, Stravinsky, and Mahler were all celebrated.

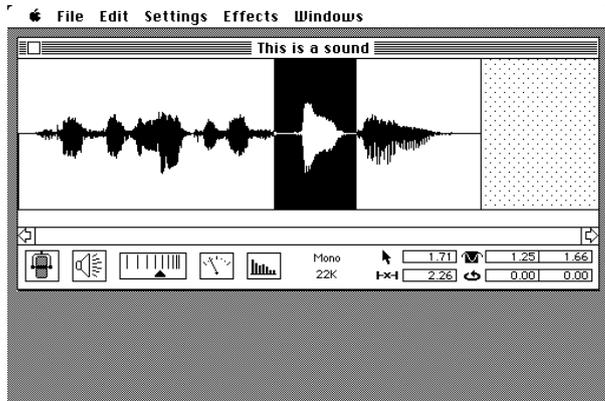
It might seem a stretch to equate Biz Markie's sampled karaoke to the arrangements of Monteverdi and Handel. But court decisions on individual works of art set dangerous precedents for all other artists. And the decisions of the lawsuits of the early nineties, which stated that a musician should never steal, shows a complete failure to understand what it is that the musician does. They understood property, the understood money, but their failure to understand the history of music set the tone for all that has happened since. Those who are passionate about the practice and the enjoyment of music in the modern world are increasingly being forced to do so outside of the law.

But there is a difference between composing with notes and composing with samples. If Bartók, Stravinsky and Mahler were celebrated instead of litigated against for their folk music borrowings, people who compose with samples are leaving more of a trail. A composer who samples can't hide his influences from his audience. When DJ Quik sampled a videotape of an eighties Bollywood film to produce Truth Hurts' song 'Addictive' without bothering to credit or clear the source, the result was a half-billion dollar lawsuit from composer Bappi Lahiri. The sample of the revered Indian singer Lata Mangeshkar runs the length of the song, determining the structure of everything added to it. DJ Quik has said that his work was meant as a compliment, but turning Mangeshkar into a backup singer on a song about the pleasures of dating a pimp was taken more as an insult to the Hindu faith. Lahiri, whose own compositions often border on cover versions of specific Western hits, called 'Addictive' an example not of plagiarism, but rather, he called it an example of cultural imperialism. Which is a fairly accurate call, given the cavalier way that the American artists and the label helped themselves to the tune; they settled out of court, adding Lahiri's names to the credits. But DJ Quik's description of his own intent as tribute can't be fully discounted either, given the international impact of the song, which dramatically spearheaded Bollywood music's stateside popularity. Lata is no longer only a national treasure.

Erick Sermon's 2002 song 'React' perfectly sums up the beauty and the danger of cross-cultural appropriation. In the middle of a rap boasting about his worldwide fame, Sermon drops a Bollywood sample of the song 'Chandi Ka Badan' sung by Meena Kapoor.

[Erick Sermon featuring Redman, 'React', 2002]

Perhaps it was an accident, or simple poetic justice that in translation, the sentence that Sermon seems not to understand is actually a question: 'If a man wants to commit suicide, what is there that you can do?' The degree to which you remain indifferent to the cultural meaning of that which you are sampling is literally the degree to which you risk embarrassing yourself. And at the same time, the resulting song itself often turns out all the more amazing for the collision. It is a layered work of art, an inadvertently profound dialogue that resonates deeper than either of the vocalists could have intended. And collage has a habit of producing the most accurate of any possible coincidences. The poem will resemble you, and it will resemble more than just yourself. Collage makes audible for all to hear much more than the intent of any one composer.



[Graphic User Interface, SoundEdit v1, c. 1988]

Sampling music followed two threads as the nineties came to a close. On the one hand, it was everywhere, practiced in an increasingly lucrative and safe form that thrived in the commercial sphere. On the other hand, it was still a vanguard forced to the margins, hoping not to sell too many copies of their limited editions and surreptitiously practicing collage as an illegal art. The following decade would see the values holding these systems in place simply becoming irrelevant.

This has been the penultimate episode of Variations. My name is Jon Leidecker, and thank you for listening.

02. Acknowledgments

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