

Bandcamp, SoundCloud, and the Digital Underground:  
Exploring Curatorial Practice Across Independent Music Platforms

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## Abstract

### **Bandcamp, SoundCloud, and the Digital Underground: Exploring Curatorial Practice Across Independent Music Platforms**

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The modern electronic dance music DJ has become somewhat of a ubiquitous figure in popular culture, though few efforts have been made to better understand the curatorial dimension of their craft. This thesis responds to the question of how exactly digital music platforms have come to define curatorial practice, and in what ways have they shaped the role of the contemporary dance music DJ. I began by conducting platform analyses of Bandcamp and SoundCloud, in which I examined how their user interfaces, social affordances, and approaches to music categorization relate to certain ideas of musical habitus, curating with care, and networked curation. I then conducted interviews with two DJs from the local Montreal electronic music scene. These interviews consisted of a recording session where DJs were asked to perform one hour long mix, and then a discussion period in which they were asked to reflect on their curatorial voice, preparation methods, and mixing techniques. The recorded mixes act as an auditory accompaniment to my thesis and can be accessed digitally alongside this text. Ultimately, I found that though these platforms may steer curators one way or another by nature of their user interface or integrated algorithms, they are not necessarily shaping the innate qualities of curation. DJs still rely on community connections, active knowledge sharing, and affective responses to music to guide their curation. Instead, platforms like Bandcamp and SoundCloud are most valuable when understood as tools that *enhance* our ability to curate with care and expand on our pre-existing musical habitus.

Keywords: curation, habitus, electronic dance music, digital platforms

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## Introduction

*“But all they’re doing is pressing play!”*

Variations of this phrase have been uttered time and time again, by countless party, club, and festival attendees. While witnessing crowds of dozens, hundreds, or even thousands of people dance to the selections of a sole performer on stage, the job of the DJ may seem all too simple. And while the technical side of the performance does involve twisting knobs, sliding volume faders, and indeed, pressing the play button, the most difficult part of DJing is decidedly not the performance itself. It takes years for most DJs to develop their own catalogue (and knowledge) of music. The most difficult part of DJing is in fact this very process of curation. In reality, this is a never-ending pursuit, and hinges on the goal of curating a developed library, a distinct identity, and a unique *sound*.

Almost everything we experience, consume, or engage with has been curated at some level. The clothes we wear, the food we eat, and certainly the music we listen to have all been made available to us as a product of curatorial decisions made by brands, retail spaces, and online platforms. In fact, Emilia Barna contests that “we increasingly define ourselves, and our relations to other people, through acts and choices of consumption,”<sup>1</sup> which rests on the argument that our roles as consumers largely characterize – and inversely, are characterized by – our position and participation in society. Still, there is much to be explored when considering curatorial practice. In that light, “research which identifies the factors that motivate curators and how different imperatives shape curation-related activities is needed to improve our understanding and conceptualization of curation.”<sup>2</sup> As a curatorial-minded DJ myself, I am decidedly interested in exploring these ideas further.

We are now in what I understand to be a *post-mp3* era. Two decades worth of file sharing has undoubtedly altered the way we produce and consume electronic music. Perhaps most vitally, digital file sharing has spread localized music styles around the globe; genre hybridization is progressing at an exponential rate, and even the most obscure musical influences may readily reach the masses. Music production tools from digital synthesizers to large online sample banks, and DJ-focused software like all-in-one mixing and recording programs have made electronic music an accessible hobby to anyone with a computer and internet connection. My aim, however, is not to assess curation as a function of what Attias refers to as formatism (i.e., an analysis of the affordances of format; vinyl record, CD, .mp3, or .aiff),<sup>3</sup> or even in relation to emerging technologies. The effects of digital formats on electronic music have been examined at length. I am instead interested in looking at the digital spaces where curators explore, discover, collect, curate, and obtain these digital music files. The question of *what outcomes do digital formats enable* has been looked at from various angles. Nowak, in 2016, noted that “[...] the evolution of music technologies over time questions the material means through which individuals access music, and therefore, potentially discover content that is new to

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<sup>1</sup> Emilia Barna, “Curators as Taste Entrepreneurs in the Digital Music Industries,” in *Popular Music in the Post-Digital Age* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2018), 5.

<sup>2</sup> Johan Jansson and Brian J Hracs, “Conceptualizing Curation in the Age of Abundance: The Case of Recorded Music,” *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space* 50, no. 8 (November 1, 2018): 1605.

<sup>3</sup> Bernardo Alexander Attias, “Subjectivity in the Groove: Phonography, Digitality, and Fidelity,” in *DJ Culture in the Mix: Power, Technology, and Social Change in Electronic Music* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 17.

them,” and that people now “have the technological means to discover music in line with their aesthetic sensibility while freed from the constraints of their social milieus.”<sup>4</sup>

Ultimately, my research aims to respond to the following question: how do digital music platforms figure into the curatorial practice of the contemporary DJ? Taking this into account, my approach is one that understands curation as a function of sourcing, and several other questions then emerge. How do platforms attempt to make sense of our contemporary musical landscape? Platforms are more than passive intermediaries between music and the consumer; their very design, interface, categorization systems, and social features help situate the content they host in a larger musical sphere. How do curators navigate these digital spaces, and in what ways has the role of the modern curator been shaped by them? Jansson and Hraacs claim that “spaces, including physical shops, temporary events and virtual platforms, not only contain but shape the nature, qualities and outcomes of curation,”<sup>5</sup> and I also believe the inverse is true. Considering this, I ask: what role have curators played in defining the digital spaces in which they work? Curators not only recognize the affordances of different platforms and technologies, but attribute meaning and value to them. These digital spaces develop in ways that respond to the needs and priorities of the music communities they serve. Ultimately, “the diffusion of music is intertwined in the relationship between individuals, music technologies and music content,”<sup>6</sup> and so exploring this relationship is essential when studying music cultures at large.

Curation begins with discovery, and certain questions posed by Nowak still remain unanswered. Notably, questions about how and when discovery occurs remain at large, as it appears as though debates over algorithmically enabled recommendation systems and automated listening functions have eclipsed research into human sense-making processes online. From my perspective, there seems to be gap in the research in this respect. Digital music scholars have jumped on the opportunity to explore emerging AI technology on streaming platforms without taking the time to consider the many dimensions of human-centric curation practices. From the active pursuit of new music discovery all the way to the categorization and organization stages of curation, every curator’s process is deeply personal. Curators employ their own methods and tactics, optimized in a way that makes sense to them. Their distinct background informs their relationship to each piece of music they encounter. How curators decide to order their findings – be it in folders, playlists, or in DJ mixes – is ultimately dependent on their own logics of organization, or more abstract associations between songs.

Next, it is important to consider why curation should be explored in relation to DJs, and more broadly, why the dance music DJ as a cultural figure merits further inspection in any regard. In her book *DJ Culture in the Mix: Power, Technology, and Social Change in Electronic Music*, Hillegonda C. Rietveld describes the broad relevance of DJ performance:

As a creative performance, the DJ set has the potential to communicate new ways of being, of feeling, producing musical discourses that are nevertheless embedded in real-world, material, politics. In this way, DJ practices enable the immediate reconstitution of local cultural identity.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Raphaël Nowak, “When Is a Discovery? The Affective Dimensions of Discovery in Music Consumption,” *Popular Communication* 14, no. 3 (July 2, 2016): 139.

<sup>5</sup> Jansson and Hraacs, “Conceptualizing Curation in the Age of Abundance,” 1605.

<sup>6</sup> Raphaël Nowak, “Investigating the Interactions between Individuals and Music Technologies within Contemporary Modes of Music Consumption,” *First Monday*, October 5, 2014.

<sup>7</sup> Hillegonda C. Rietveld, “Introduction,” in *DJ Culture in the Mix: Power, Technology, and Social Change in Electronic Music* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 7.



Dance music DJs, in particular, play a central role in defining localized cultures. They are the primary curators in nightclubs, DIY party spaces, and afterhours venues – all of which are, traditionally, central locales for the convergence of art scenes, subcultures, and various fringe groups of people. Even for the casual partygoer, the DJ is a conduit to connecting with the essence of a club, event, or wider music community. Dance music DJs are ubiquitous figures in many cities, and oftentimes serve as a readily accessible figures through which people may connect with their local subcultural institutions.

Kai Fikentscher has argued that deciding what music to play (and precisely when to play it) is “the single most essential skill of DJing.”<sup>8</sup> A DJ may achieve full mastery of their equipment or perform mixing techniques with robotic levels of precision and calculation, though will undoubtedly face difficulty holding an audience’s attention if their selections seem off-base. Curation is also the only skill that cannot be learned through tutorials, or even practice, for that matter. It is a deeply personal practice with no standardized method. Consequently, it is also the only skill that truly differentiates one DJ from another, as no two DJs will have the same library of music, or even the same idea of how to string together a similar set of tracks. One constant, however, is that curation methods largely do shift over time. Fikentscher notes that “[...] many DJs categorize or explain the changes in their programming choices in relation to digital technologies, highlighting the non-physicality of digital music [...]”<sup>9</sup> This illustrates how curation is not purely a product of personal taste, but of environment and context, as well. I believe it would be valuable to explore how curation extends beyond displaying personal preference, with particular attention to where it intersects with blurring ideas of locality, music industry decentralization, “cultural hybridisation and the expansion of cultural omnivorosity”<sup>10</sup> – all of which are facilitated by the move towards digital sites of curation.

Not all digital music services or technologies, however, are necessarily valuable or central to the wider DJ community. As Nowak explains, “[audiences] interested in particular music genres are [...] likely to develop modes of music consumption that take into consideration what is deemed as the appropriate music technology to interact with such music.”<sup>11</sup> For that reason, I decided to focus on only two music platforms: Bandcamp and SoundCloud. These two platforms in particular have become arguably the most popular spaces for dance music DJs to engage with music. Additionally, Nowak attests that music technologies are not mutually exclusive, meaning that audiences tend to combine multiple technologies and platforms in their music consuming routines.<sup>12</sup> Bandcamp and SoundCloud are no different, complimenting one another to create a digital music ecosystem, in a sense. With the ability to discover and purchase music on Bandcamp, and then feature this same music in a DJ mix posted to SoundCloud, the combination of the two websites contributes to a cycle of exposure, and (re)discovery as more DJs buy and play the same songs. This two-platform tandem has become a major factor in the

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<sup>8</sup> Kai Fikentscher, “‘It’s Not the Mix, It’s the Selection’: Music Programming in Contemporary DJ Culture,” in *DJ Culture in the Mix: Power, Technology, and Social Change in Electronic Music* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 125.

<sup>9</sup> Fikentscher, 128.

<sup>10</sup> Barna, “Curators as Taste Entrepreneurs in the Digital Music Industries,” 14.

<sup>11</sup> Nowak, “Investigating the Interactions between Individuals and Music Technologies within Contemporary Modes of Music Consumption.”

<sup>12</sup> Nowak.

musical habitus (a term that I will return to in a later chapter) of many contemporary DJs.<sup>13</sup> It is a space in which social and transactional exchanges take place, each one informing what a curator might stumble upon next; what link might get passed on to a friend; and eventually, what a partygoer might hear in a club. Beyond personal musical habitus, these platforms largely determine music industry practice. As we will see later, the Bandcamp Friday initiative shifted record release schedules to favour the first Friday of each month, in turn putting pressure on producers to keep up a more active and regimented output. The rise of the SoundCloud-hosted DJ mix means that DJs, too, are inclined (if not pressured) to put out increasing amounts of material in order to catch the attention of fans and promoters.

As I will explore later in this paper, individuals now have more power than ever to exert influence back on their musical habitus. As new curation sites continue to develop, the malleability of these spaces is becoming entirely apparent. While no longer restricted by the availability of local record shops and venues, music consumers now have an unprecedented ability to explore music in any capacity that they would like. Thus, platform users are constantly developing new ways to navigate and make use of these curation sites, encouraging the platforms themselves to adapt to their userbase.

The overall methodology I used for conducting my research is comprised of three main components. First, I conducted a literature review of contemporary sources that touch on DJ practice and curation. This method is employed in “Chapter 1: Defining the DJ.” Here, I begin by defining the type of curator (and by extension, the type of DJ) that is centered in my work, distinguishing this figure from a multitude of other identities that might be associated both with popular notions of what a curator’s job entails and who the term “DJ” represents. I then use this figure to explore ideas related to curatorial theory: conceptualizations of cultural (sub)fields, tastemaking, curatorial power, and gatekeeping. The chapter then examines DJ performance, with a particular emphasis on set programming, track selection, and the relationship between a DJ and their equipment – a relationship that, I argue, has significant ramifications on a DJ’s curatorial voice and approach to collecting and organizing music.

Next, I perform close analyses of two key platforms used by DJs: Bandcamp and SoundCloud. The following two chapters, “Chapter 2: Bandcamp” and “Chapter 3: SoundCloud,” explore these two significant digital curation sites in depth. Here, I analyze the various facets of each platform: their respective business models, user interfaces, social features, curatorial affordances, and the types of content commonly hosted on each site. By drawing comparisons and highlighting key differences between Bandcamp and SoundCloud, I attempt to illustrate how the two platforms work in tandem to create a digital ecosystem – a musical habitus – home to a multitude of independent electronic music communities, that in turn has played a role in shaping how DJs today curate and perform.

The final component of my methodology involves interviews with two invited DJs from the local Montreal electronic music scene. “Chapter 4: DJ Mixes and Interviews” outlines the defining factors and cultural relevance of the DJ mix, exploring how these longform recorded performances are constructed, shared, and consumed. This chapter also describes my interview process and the objectives I had set for the sessions I conducted with both participants – a process that includes observing the DJs as they record a mix, then asking them to reflect on their curatorial voice, preparation methods, and mixing techniques in the subsequent interview. Next, I offer an analysis of these discussions, forming an image of how DJs and curators conceptualize

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<sup>13</sup> Nick Prior, “Putting a Glitch in the Field: Bourdieu, Actor Network Theory and Contemporary Music,” *Cultural Sociology* 2, no. 3 (November 1, 2008): 301–19.

their role in the multifaceted landscape of digital music spaces. All of the information in this chapter was drawn from the perspectives offered by two local DJs, kiju (Julia Kim) and coldchainlogistics (Robert Rasciauskas). The conclusion to this paper then acts as a space to draw connections between all of the previous sections, fleshing out the relationship between DJs, Bandcamp, and SoundCloud. Here, I will return to my primary research questions, and incorporating insight from my two interviewees, outline precisely how these platforms have come to shape curatorial practice.

# Chapter 1: Defining the DJ

## 1.1 Who am I talking about? Who am I not talking about?

There are several aspects of DJing that I have found useful to consider when delineating the type of the DJ that I centre in my research. Perhaps most evident is the style of music they choose to play, but equally important are the techniques they employ while mixing, and crucially, their *ethos*. In essence, their ethos refers to their outlook on DJing, and how they conceive of their own practice.

*Musical style* - Though genre does not pointedly define what type of DJ I am referencing, I am interested only in DJ's who play electronic dance music. Dance music is undoubtedly a broad term and can surely take on many subjective meanings. For the purposes of my research, dance music refers to what one might hear at a modern dance club, rave, or independently organized dance music event. It is generally produced with electronic instruments, and derivative (though sometimes far-removed) from genres like house, techno, or even disco. I decided to focus solely on dance music because, as I see it, dance music acts as a unifying factor between localized subcultural communities and the wider public. Dance music events are ubiquitous fixtures in a city's nightlife landscape, open to anyone looking for a place to dance. At the same time, however, these events bear significant cultural relevance to active dance music community members like myself.

There is a notable distinction to be made between the genre descriptor of EDM (Electronic Dance Music) and the grouping of dance music genres that are indeed "electronic" in nature. Consequently, there are notable differences between the type of DJing observed at varying types of events. Rietveld explains how "the rich meanings of the term 'EDM' seem to have been narrowed in the popular media to electronic pop-dance, a marketable ubiquitous music format that cannibalizes globally fashionable electronic textures."<sup>14</sup> In essence, much of the popular EDM today draws from diverse musical subcultures, though sits starkly in opposition to them both in economic and cultural terms. While some curatorial-minded DJs may source some music that may be described as EDM, the majority draw music from a vast array of genres and styles that fall outside of this category. EDM-aligned DJs are generally booked to play largely their own music, accompanied by extravagant light shows, to crowds of tens of thousands of people. Curation does not really figure into this sort of DJing in the same way – the sets are usually pre-arranged (and in some cases, pre-recorded), and often repeated at each stop on the DJ's tour. This is not to minimize this style of DJ performance – these DJ sets are designed to provide a major spectacle at any given time slot on a festival lineup, and as Avalon Emerson (a DJ who very much *is* of a more subcultural, curatorial-minded school) admits, "it feels pretty pointless to try and "read" a crowd of a few thousand people."<sup>15</sup> In other words, the notion of live set programming – reactively deciding which musical direction to take next mid-set – is not necessarily viable to extremely large crowds. As I see it, a thorough curation process continues through the performance, and for that reason, the superstar EDM festival DJ is not of great interest to my research. Rarely are these sorts of DJs sourcing music through alternative music platforms, as the music itself is released on major record labels, accompanied by advertising campaigns, and met with listen counts in the multimillions. These DJs are not trying to find an

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<sup>14</sup> Rietveld, "Introduction," 2.

<sup>15</sup> Elissa Stolman, "The Art of DJing: Avalon Emerson," *Resident Advisor*, February 6, 2019, <https://ra.co/features/3392>.

obscure, forgotten dance record that surprises dancers; they are looking to play fan favourites that festivalgoers are looking forward to hearing live. This relates to a second aspect of DJing: a DJ's *ethos*.

*Ethos* - The type of DJ centered in my research can be described as “artists in the construction of musical experience.”<sup>16</sup> Some are music producers, though in general, these DJs separate production from their curation and performance practices. The “musical experiences” they construct are generally intended for dancers in clubs or independent parties and are made up of music that has been carefully selected, ordered, and blended sequentially. There is a certain element of care intrinsic to this type of DJ practice, as well as a notion of intentionality. It necessitates caring about the needs of partygoers, the type of message you hope to convey through the music, and the music itself. Care, in this respect, means being considerate of the music you play – considering its history, how it relates to your own experience, and where it emerged from in your own musical habitus. This level of care is practiced to varying degrees, and most DJs are not so explicit in stating their *ethos*, but in any case, curation is a function of intentionality. For one to curate a library that reflects their identity as a DJ, they need to approach the task with a certain knowledge of where to look, and an intention of what they hope to find.

*Technique* – Not all DJs employ the same techniques while performing. Technique is equally a product of both musical style and ethos. While there are no hard rules about what technique can be used in a given situation (a techno DJ may scratch a record in similar fashion to a hip-hop DJ), there are certain conventions that underpin my research. For example, I am only interested in the curatorial practice of DJs who generally blend their selections in a cohesive, narrative fashion to create long-form performances, or sets. This kind of set is what you would expect to hear in a dance music club, at a rave, or posted on SoundCloud. These DJs are distinct from turntablists, who instead focus on manipulating specific samples on a record to create new sounds altogether. Technique is also tied in with equipment and technology, and seeing as my research is based on digital music platforms, I will not be focusing on any DJ who works purely with vinyl records (though there has been a resurgence of “vinyl only” DJs in recent years), cassette tapes, or other non-digital mediums. Accordingly, because my research is centered on SoundCloud and Bandcamp's (both founded in 2007) continued evolution, I am only interested in DJs who are currently active and utilize both platforms as part of their curatorial practice.

For the purposes of this paper, the term DJ will refer to those who play electronic dance music in long-form, blended sets. Though some may incorporate vinyl records and turntables in their performances, they nonetheless make significant use of Bandcamp and SoundCloud throughout their curatorial processes, and their main source material are digital music files, and practice a certain level of care and intentionality when curating or performing. Additionally, I am mostly interested in amateur DJs – those who likely do not get paid for their performances, though have not yet established themselves as full-time DJs. Whereas a professional DJ would spend a large portion of the year touring and playing at major festivals and clubs, the amateur DJ remains active mostly in their local scene. They perform at small clubs, afterhours parties or “raves.” Even at the professional level, however, it is not uncommon to find DJs who work multiple jobs, often in the music industry as talent agents, record label managers, or venue operators. Due to the ambiguous nature of underground dance music as both a global phenomenon in some respects and subcultural in others, the distinction between amateur and professional is not always quite as clear-cut as in other industries.

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<sup>16</sup> Sarah Thornton, *Club Cultures: Music, Media and Subcultural Capital* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1996), 105.

## 1.2 The DJ and their equipment

It is difficult to negotiate the relationship between DJs and their machines. The equipment a DJ chooses to use – and how they choose to use it – has been a hotly debated topic over the course of several decades. DJs have always posed somewhat of an issue to more conformist understandings of performance; Paul Bell notes how “DJing has dissolved the distinction [between performance and composition] insofar as it involves real-time composition,”<sup>17</sup> despite many still feeling as though playing other people’s music is, by definition, not a performance. He further explains how “the lack of an overt link between cause and effect or between physical gesture and sound, especially in digital forms, continues to generate concern amongst cultural commentators,”<sup>18</sup> even extending to certain levels of hostility among DJs centered around the particular equipment features they choose to make use of. The transition from turntables to CD players, and then once again to media players like the Pioneer CDJ, has had significant ramifications on almost all facets of DJing, from technical ability to accessibility, and indeed, curation. While most discourse has been centered around the former two categories, little writing can be found on how the DJ’s performance equipment itself may impact curation habits, inform decision making both in and outside of the DJ booth, and change how people approach the more taste-centric dimensions of the job.

Various research endeavours do, however, capture the essence of the debate concerning new DJ technologies and tools. Johnathan Yu devotes a portion of his research on new DJ technologies to what some people describe as “cheating”: using specific functions of digital DJ hardware and software to perform tasks vinyl DJs must perform “manually.”<sup>19</sup> Beatmatching (ensuring that two tracks are playing at the same speed, with their beats aligned to one another), for instance, must be done by ear and touch while mixing with vinyl records. In this case, there are no readouts for the current tempo of a record, and the adjustments must be performed on the spot by the DJ. In contrast, software like Traktor, or even more recent versions of the Pioneer CDJ,<sup>20</sup> display the current BPM measurement of a song. They also feature a “sync” button that will automatically match the speed and position of both tracks that are playing to achieve seamless playback when switching between songs.<sup>21</sup>

Farrugia and Swiss examine the notion of authenticity in relation to emerging digital technologies – notably how equipment that supports mp3 playback might detract from the

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<sup>17</sup> Paul Bell, “Interrogating the Live :A DJ Perspective” (Thesis, Newcastle University, 2010), 247.

<sup>18</sup> Bell, 247.

<sup>19</sup> Johnathan Yu, “Electronic Dance Music and Technological Change: Lessons from Actor-Network Theory,” in *DJ Culture in the Mix: Power, Technology and Social Change in Electronic Music* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 151–72.

<sup>20</sup> The Pioneer CDJ is widely known as the industry standard digital music player, or “deck,” used by DJs globally. Originally released in 1998, the CDJ line has evolved over the years, and newer models like the CDJ-3000 have the ability to play music from CDs, USB drives, and microSD cards. The LED screen on newer models of the CDJ allow users to browse through their playlists, jump to specific pre-set cue points in songs, and trigger loops while performing. Making full use of all of these functions requires some preparation beforehand; for example, playlists must be made ahead of time, and setting up cue points in advance can help streamline a DJ’s performance.

<sup>21</sup> The use of the “sync” button is perhaps the most polarizing debate amongst digital DJs. Some argue that using this feature is a telltale sign of a “bad” DJ. Others point out that the sync button has a variety of creative uses. For example, the sync button can be used when increasing or decreasing the speed of two tracks at the same time, allowing DJs to shift the tempo of their set midway through a transition.

experience of witnessing a DJ perform with vinyl records.<sup>22</sup> Interestingly, this piece manages to touch on both the curatorial and technical aspects of DJing, though only to a limited degree. The argument posited by several DJs interviewed for the article is that digital equipment undercuts the effort necessary for both discovering music (in record shops) and developing mixing skills (in the DJ booth).<sup>23</sup> It is true that “the increasing use of mp3s and laptop computers [has resulted in a] lessening in importance of the record store and the increasing centrality of the Internet as the source from which DJs obtain their music,”<sup>24</sup> but this is likely more indicative of a shift in *where* curation occurs and not *how*. Still, this article does not go further than to claim that digital tools make discovering music “easier,” as far as the curation debate is concerned. In essence, prior scholarly research and writing about the DJ’s relationship to technology is focused solely on discourse about the “ease of use” of contemporary DJ equipment – even in so far as music collecting is concerned – as well as the question of “authenticity.” Both of which tie into “[...] issues of value and evaluation around shifting definitions of what constitutes the work of the DJ in an increasingly digital age.”<sup>25</sup> There still exists gaps in the literature about how this equipment informs curation practice (process, creative approach, methods) besides simply facilitating it by rendering music immediately accessible in larger quantities.

The topic of digital curation leading to greater musical diversity has only been touched on tangentially. Over a decade ago, Montano noted that “CDs allow a DJ to take more music to a performance, [so] there exists the potential for a set to be generated that has a greater diversity and variety than a performance based solely on the playing of vinyl.”<sup>26</sup> Since then, CDs have been gradually replaced by USB drives loaded with digital music files, and thus this argument about portability equating to variety is more valid than ever before. Though even Montano’s writing omits consideration about how a shift in format also implies a shift in *how* music is acquired, once again leaving space for exploring curation from the very first few steps in the process: music discovery and acquisition.

### ***1.3 Curating a library for DJ use***

The role of the dance music DJ extends far beyond the DJ booth itself. In fact, the number of hours spent digging for music, tracking down the correct files, organizing a library, preparing tracks to be played on CDJs, or recording promotional mixes far outweighs the time spent actually playing to an audience. All of these elements fall under the practice of curation, and for the DJ archetype of interest to my research, curation is everything. Technical ability can be learned by anyone, but taste is inherently personal, as are people’s outlooks on curation and music discovery processes. It is essential for a successful DJ to have an ear for the tracks that will serve a specific function – songs that can be used at the exact moment needed to build or release tension; to switch up the rhythm and take the set in a new direction; to carry dancers or listeners deeper into a groove when the moment emerges.

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<sup>22</sup> Rebekah Farrugia and Thomas Swiss, “Tracking the DJs: Vinyl Records, Work, and the Debate over New Technologies,” *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 17, no. 1 (2005): 30–44.

<sup>23</sup> Farrugia and Swiss, 33–34.

<sup>24</sup> Ed Montano, “‘How Do You Know He’s Not Playing Pac-Man While He’s Supposed to Be DJing?’: Technology, Formats and the Digital Future of DJ Culture,” *Popular Music* 29, no. 3 (October 2010): 398, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261143010000449>.

<sup>25</sup> Farrugia and Swiss, “Tracking the DJs,” 40.

<sup>26</sup> Montano, “‘How Do You Know He’s Not Playing Pac-Man While He’s Supposed to Be DJing?’” 405.

Furthermore, there is an art to knowing where to look for said music. It takes years of experience and an implicit knowledge of dance music to gauge, for example, what year in a specific genre's production might be worthwhile to explore for a certain sound and energy, or what record label's output might feature music well-suited for an upcoming event. This notion of curation as the paramount skill required by a DJ has remained constant since the advent of the "crate-digging DJ," conceived in a time where record shops were the central sites for the discovery of new music. For the vinyl DJ, record shops have acted as the primary curation site for several decades. The record shop acts as both a site of music discovery and acquisition – a place to explore newly released and unfamiliar records, but also to develop your own personal collection. Though it is rare to find a record shop that deals exclusively in locally produced material, independent stores frequently act as hubs for localized music scenes by stocking domestic products, hosting record release events, and sometimes having their own in-house record label. Submerge Records in Detroit, for example, is frequently cited as a cornerstone for the Detroit techno scene. The shop specializes in stocking sci-fi-tinged techno and electro – a sound intrinsically tied into the city's dance music history because of trailblazing collectives like Underground Resistance and Drexciya.<sup>27</sup> Submerge also operates a record label of the same name, which is widely recognized as one of the best reflections of Detroit techno's sonic history.

Still, record shops source a fair amount of their stock internationally, with shop owners selecting specific new releases from the catalogues of a network of distributors. In this regard, record shops reflect the locality of their city's music scene while also forming liaisons to global music communities. Jansson and Hracs explain that "as independent businesses, many record shops endeavor to contribute to locally embedded cultural scenes and wider trans-local movements."<sup>28</sup> Many shops, too, feature used product sections generally made up of records that were picked out of large collections that had been sold to the shop. Often, these bulk sales are made by vinyl enthusiasts hoping to offload portions of their collections, or DJs looking to trade in old material that no longer aligns with their preferences. Ultimately, record store clerks are curators themselves; each shop features a distinct collection of products that are hand selected to represent their stylistic alignment. Hracs and Jansson assert that "curation [involves] caring for objects and interpreting, translating, and shaping the marketplace through the strategic practice of sorting, organizing, evaluating, and ascribing value(s) to specific products."<sup>29</sup> In turn, the record shop caters to a crowd of customers who appreciate the curatorial decisions made by the store's owner and feel as though their tastes are reflected in the products on offer.

In Montreal, La Rama Records has established itself as somewhat of a hub for the agglomeration of local dance music communities. The shop, operated by Montreal-born Kris Guilty, is home to a wide array of genres and styles. Any records found in La Rama's bins are necessarily the result of a considered curation process that draws from both global music networks and local record producers. Be it obscure jazz recordings, experimental *musique concrète* LPs, or German import techno, each record caters to a specific listener and consumer. Though the record bins are mostly organized by genre, specific "Can-con" bins and wall displays dedicated to new releases from Montreal record labels highlight music that is reflective of local

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<sup>27</sup> Jack Needham, "The World's Best Record Shops #116: Submerge, Detroit," *The Vinyl Factory* (blog), July 21, 2018, <https://thevinylfactory.com/features/the-worlds-best-record-shops-116-submerge-detroit/>.

<sup>28</sup> Jansson and Hracs, "Conceptualizing Curation in the Age of Abundance."

<sup>29</sup> Brian J. Hracs and Johan Jansson, "Death by Streaming or Vinyl Revival? Exploring the Spatial Dynamics and Value-Creating Strategies of Independent Record Shops in Stockholm," *Journal of Consumer Culture* 20, no. 4 (November 1, 2020): 482.



cultures and trends. As one of the only physical locations in Montreal to acquire these records, many enthusiasts gather at La Rama to discover new music, discuss record releases, and find out about underground parties advertised on posters left at the shop by local promoters. It is a space where people are invited to feel comfortable around their peers, while also venturing out of their comfort zone, in a sense, and resigning themselves to exploring unfamiliar artists, labels, and sounds. It is always in a DJ's best interest to find the hidden gems buried within a mass of music – this ability to constantly bring something new to the table, so-to-speak, is ultimately what makes a given DJ singular and exciting.

#### ***1.4 Musical habitus***

Though the ethos of crate digging at record shops like La Rama has not been lost, developing technology means that the sites and methods of curation have shifted over time. A record shop is just one element in a larger network of physical spaces, prior experiences with music, and social structures that coalesce to form one's musical habitus. This idea of the musical habitus hinges on Pierre Bourdieu's original notion of the habitus – a theory which “explains how individuals develop particular attitudes toward, and tastes for, cultural goods and expressions.”<sup>30</sup> Bourdieu suggests that each person is inclined to form their own relationship to a cultural good – be it a painting, song, fashion trend, or style of cuisine – as a result of their past experiences. These may be experiences of place, of prior exposure to other cultural goods, of social stratification, injustice, or privilege, or experiences shared with other people. The notion of habitus, in essence, suggests that personal agency is less impactful on taste than all of these other external factors.

The term habitus is now used by scholars like Mark Rimmer to explore people's relationships to music and taste formation. Each individual possesses their own musical habitus, though people of similar origin, social status, and economic disposition would logically see greater overlap in their habitus from peer to peer. Likewise, DJs who frequent the same record shops and venues – thus being exposed to much of the same music and ethos around music culture – would likely develop more similar tastes than those who do not. This is, in a nutshell, how distinct and definable localized music scenes develop, producing schools of likeminded DJs and artists.

Musical habitus is also tied in with ideas about music discovery – though as Robert Nowak points out, only looking at habitus (and in particular, habitus as a function of social or technological conditions) serves to see musical discovery as a product of access and fails to consider actual interactions with music.<sup>31</sup> Nowak further attests that discoveries are predicated on far more than just access, though what a discovery actually entails is still somewhat ambiguous. In relation to the DJ as curator, this ambiguity inspires deeper inquiry. Is there an art to music discovery? What does it mean to discover, or (re)discover music from past eras? How much of curation is discovering music in the first place, or making sense of a mass of musical discoveries? One of Nowak's conclusions states that a music discovery must be memorable, and so there needs to be some form of affective response to the content at hand. In a DJ context, the affective response can be tapped into at a later time, in moments when a specific prior music discovery is called upon. From my experience as a DJ and curator, moments of music discovery are instantly coupled with an idea of when, or in what situation, the discovered track might be

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<sup>30</sup> Nowak, “When Is a Discovery?” 139.

<sup>31</sup> Nowak, 140.

useful. If I listen to a song that does not immediately resonate with me, it is likely because I was unable to get a firm sense of its mood, energy level, or placement in relation to other tracks in my music library. In these scenarios (which make up the majority of the split-second interactions I have with music online), the moment of discovery never truly occurs. Several hours of surfing Bandcamp, listening to DJ mixes, and sifting through artist discographies may only result in one or two songs purchased and downloaded.

### ***1.5 Preparation as curation***

Jansson and Hracs describe how, in the art world, “the role of curators has expanded beyond preserving and archiving art to include selecting, evaluating, displaying and framing pieces.”<sup>32</sup> Likewise, the role of the DJ as curator has undergone a similar evolution. Music preparation has become an extension of curation, as preparation allows DJs to present and frame their musical findings in various ways. Elissa Stolman’s article, published as part of the industry-leading online music magazine *Resident Advisor’s* “Art of DJing” series, profiles Avalon Emerson, an internationally acclaimed dance music DJ well known for using her unparalleled understanding of mixing and production equipment to perform technically impressive DJ sets. Stolman attests that “a technological and rational approach doesn’t eliminate an artist’s creative juju—one can enhance the other”<sup>33</sup> – a useful idea in framing methodical preparation as an extension of taste. Emerson is also stark example of a DJ who fuses together multiple modalities when curating and sources her music both physically (in record shops) and digital (on Bandcamp and other digital music platforms).

As a touring DJ, Emerson opts to leave her physical vinyl records at home. Like many other DJs, collecting physical records is still an integral part of her curation practice. She notes that buying a record is still “the most straightforward way to get a high-quality version of a track,” but carrying around a crate of records while on tour is incredibly cumbersome.<sup>34</sup> Instead, she travels with a set of USB drives, which feature a combination of files downloaded directly from Bandcamp, and digital recordings of the vinyl records in her collection. Throughout the interview, Emerson describes the process she applies to almost all of her music before uploading it onto her USB key. This process includes “ripping” a vinyl record (transferring the audio from physical to digital form) and then passing the recording through a series of processing tools on Ableton (a commonly used digital audio workstation, or DAW) – first, a tool to decrease the record’s static noise (“crackling”), then several others to emphasize certain frequencies and soften others. Next, Emerson transfers the newly mastered file to her Rekordbox<sup>35</sup> collection, where she sets hot cue points (locations in the track that can be easily called upon with the push of a button on the CDJ), inserts automated loops that trigger when the song reaches a specific timestamp, and marks off sections of each track that can be skipped over (for example, if the breakdown is too long or too erratic).

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<sup>32</sup> Jansson and Hracs, “Conceptualizing Curation in the Age of Abundance,” 1604.

<sup>33</sup> Stolman, “The Art of DJing: Avalon Emerson.”

<sup>34</sup> Stolman.

<sup>35</sup> Rekordbox, another industry standard tool used by most digital DJs, was created by Pioneer in 2009. The computer program, as the name would suggest, acts as a virtual record box – a place for digital DJs to store their music libraries. The program allows users to categorize their music into playlists, attribute specific tags and comments to each song, set cue points, and more. Users can then use Rekordbox to export their collections on to a USB drive for use with digital music players like the CDJ.

Emphasizing particular sonic elements through EQing, repeating specific sections of songs, and choosing when to omit others are all decisions that inform how the DJ is choosing to “frame” their collection. Admittedly, very few DJs are quite as methodical about their pre-set preparation. Emerson’s process demands a significant amount of time and an advanced understanding of both electroacoustics and DJ equipment itself – time and knowledge that only a number of DJs have. Still, every DJ does prepare their music to some extent, even if it means simply organizing songs into playlists to easily find them during a performance.

### ***1.6 Cultural subfields and tastemaking: scale of appeal***

In his 2008 article “Putting a Glitch in the Field: Bourdieu, Actor Network Theory and Contemporary Music,” Nick Prior explores the experimental glitch music scene through a Bourdieusian conceptualization of cultural fields. Glitch is a relatively niche style of electronic music, with songs being composed entirely out of the sounds of malfunctioning audio equipment. It is often abstract and sonically harsh in nature, and while elements of glitch music have been incorporated into some styles of dance music, glitch in and of itself is not considered to be dance music.

Still, Prior’s exploration of cultural fields is applicable to other musical subcultures. In order to best understand the type of DJ I reference throughout my research, it is valuable to follow suit and attempt to locate this DJ among the two proposed sub-fields of production: the delimited and the heteronomous. Referencing Bourdieu’s *In Other Word: Essays Towards a Reflective Sociology*, Prior explains that “the delimited field is defined by its distance from commercial mass markets and its appeal to specialized audiences, the [heteronomous] field is defined by its proximity to the broader field of power and economic determinants.”<sup>36</sup> It would be counterproductive to assume that the boundaries between these two fields are impermeable. As Bourdieu explains, “one must be wary of establishing a clear boundary, since they are merely two poles, defined in and by their antagonistic relationship, of the same space.”<sup>37</sup>

The DJ culture I aim to examine sits somewhere between the two subfields, on the one hand working with independent labels and perhaps niche sounds, though still adhering to some industry standards – like making use of Pioneer’s CDJ digital media players and Rekordbox program. Despite interacting with avant-garde music genres or scenes, the role of the DJ as a curator and performer is not distinctly avant-garde in its own right. Nonetheless, the DJ-as-tastemaker inherently defies the mainstream, constantly embarking on a search for unknown producers, tracks that have yet to be “rinsed” (overplayed, which is more significant in the digital era where there are unlimited copies of each release), and yet-untapped record labels unfamiliar to local audiences. It is a tricky line to straddle, but these tastemakers are both working in the underground while influencing and engaging with the popular. Crucially, Barna puts forth the concept of curators as taste entrepreneurs – simultaneously experts in their domain possessing a high level of (sub)cultural capital, but also artists, in a sense, using their collections as a form of creative output.<sup>38</sup> In line with Bourdieu’s conception of cultural fields, they sit somewhere between producer and consumer, between subculture and culture. In this regard, however, “bigger and wider audiences are less important than the social quality of the audience and the

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<sup>36</sup> Prior, “Putting a Glitch in the Field,” 305.

<sup>37</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art* (Cambridge: Polity, 1996), 120.

<sup>38</sup> Barna, “Curators as Taste Entrepreneurs in the Digital Music Industries,” 17.

production of belief regarding total creative freedom.”<sup>39</sup> For these DJs, expanding their audience is less important than developing a meaningful relationship with a condensed but passionate community.

Assessing the success of a DJ within their subcultural realm is rarely about their influence over an audience that exists outside of the subculture, however. The most beloved DJs within music scenes are often the ones that realistically have little mass appeal to those not *in the know*. According to Barna, “‘good selections’ is a criterion for a good DJ, where ‘good’ refers not only to the perceived quality, novelty, and engagingness of the tracks, but also the extent to which they can be perceived as showcasing a musical personality and individual style with their own unique taste.”<sup>40</sup> Tastemaking in the context of the dance music DJ, then, is less about influencing wider trends and more so about developing a taste that suits a limited group of people in a specific context and moment in time. Even so, developing either a distinct taste or expertise over one genre has become increasingly difficult with time. As explained by Rimmer, “the increased blurring of genres, combined with digital consumption and listening practices, points towards a weakening of claims about the meaning of people’s preferences for multiple genres,”<sup>41</sup> meaning that the once uncommon “genre-defying” DJ is no longer an obscurity. Conversely, a DJ who grounds themselves in one distinct tradition of dance music might find it increasingly difficult to ward off even the most subtle influence from other styles of music. Classic trance synth stabs might find their way onto an otherwise techno-centric record, and the swinging rhythmic structures of reggaeton could easily underpin a UK Garage production. This is by no means a harmful thing, of course, though certainly something that self-identified genre purists should consider. In other words, “broadly defined genres [now] lack adequate specificity.”<sup>42</sup> Almost every major genre category is an assemblage of elements borrowed from elsewhere, and so simple terms like “techno” are no longer viable as standalone descriptors.

### ***1.7 Curatorial power: gatekeeping?***

Regardless of the scale of appeal of a given DJ, every curator does possess a level of what Robert Prey describes as curatorial power: “the capacity to advance one’s interests, and affect the interests of others, through the organizing and programming of content.”<sup>43</sup> Whether it be through the formation of playlists, a recorded mix posted online, or a live DJ set in a club or rave context, the DJ-as-curator is ultimately imposing the music of their liking onto an audience. This process necessitates the valuing of certain products and the exclusion of others. As Onur Sesigür explains, “the decision to keep has connotations of value. [...] Whatever an archivist decides to keep becomes valuable as much because it has been kept as because it was worth keeping.”<sup>44</sup> For that reason, some DJs are protective of their position as tastemakers. If the curatorial decisions made by anyone have the ability to value or devalue, then where is the

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<sup>39</sup> Prior, “Putting a Glitch in the Field,” 309.

<sup>40</sup> Barna, “Curators as Taste Entrepreneurs in the Digital Music Industries,” 16.

<sup>41</sup> Mark Rimmer, “Beyond Omnivores and Univores: The Promise of a Concept of Musical Habitus,” *Cultural Sociology* 6, no. 3 (2012): 304.

<sup>42</sup> Rimmer, 304.

<sup>43</sup> Robert Prey, “Locating Power in Platformization: Music Streaming Playlists and Curatorial Power,” *Social Media + Society* 6, no. 2 (April 1, 2020): 3, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305120933291>.

<sup>44</sup> Onur Sesigür, *Playlisting: Collecting Music, Remediated*, Routledge Focus on Digital Media and Culture (London and New York: Routledge Focus, 2022), 47.

curatorial power held? These DJs, then, turn to subcultural practice, like collecting records, to distinguish themselves from the inexperienced or uninitiated selectors.

Collecting records can be cited as a form of gatekeeping; it is an act of amassing pieces of information that in turn can be displayed as knowledge and power in the field of recorded music. It is “a way of claiming expertise,” as explained by Farrugia and Swiss, and deep collections bear with them significant cultural capital.<sup>45</sup> The advent of widely accessible digital music files poses somewhat of a challenge to the curatorial power held by record collectors. It is often “through the labor of listening that the DJ finds new tracks, artists, and labels,”<sup>46</sup> and this task is made far less tedious when the ease of accessing said music is increased through the use of digital platforms.

Nonetheless, the view of digital music collections as inherently less valuable than those that exist tangibly on records, cassettes, or CDs is perhaps an unfair one. To the contrary, McCourt posits that “the lack of materiality in digital files heightens our sense of “ownership,” as well as our desire to sample, collect, and trade music in new ways. Possessing digital files is a more intense and intimate experience than owning physical recordings [...]”<sup>47</sup> He explains how the malleability of digital file formats encourages a sense of interactivity. This allows DJs to edit, tag, categorize, splice, and denote their music with cue points – in essence altering “the artifact” itself and personalizing their version of the product. McCourt explains, too, how “[t]he popularity of song files indicates that digital value is created through mutability and process, rather than the existence of objects.”<sup>48</sup> If a digital file is deemed valuable, it is not due to scarcity or material worth; rather, it is valuable because a network of individuals has collectively attributed cultural value to the music itself. The value of music is thus less entrenched in its position in global music markets, but rather its relevance to specific music communities engaged in knowledge sharing over digital networks. If the vinyl-only curator can be considered a gatekeeper, then those who deal in digital music collection might naturally seem to be the opposite. Even within the digital realm, however, gatekeeping is prevalent, and some might argue that it is necessary in assuring individual integrity. With digital files being so readily accessible to anyone with an internet connection, protecting the file itself is not nearly as vital (or possible) as protecting the information *about* the file. Some DJs are hesitant to share information about the music they play as a means of protecting their own identity as an artist.

### ***1.8 Set programming***

Each DJ may have their own tastes style, and mixing techniques, but ultimately, set programming comes down to one thing: ensuring a good musical experience for listeners and dancers. In general, a DJ set is comprised of multiple stages, though these stages are flexible and will depend on a variety of factors like set length, event type, and the time slot of the set. A standard DJ performance will consist of a warm-up period (in which the music is slightly more subdued and meant to set the tone and acclimatise dancers); a build-up period (in which the energy escalates); a “peak time,” where the energy is at its highest point; and finally, a cool down period. DJs that are slotted to perform earlier in the night might skew their set towards the warm-up section and entirely omit the peak time and cool-down sections. DJs who are closing out the

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<sup>45</sup> Farrugia and Swiss, “Tracking the DJs,” 34.

<sup>46</sup> Farrugia and Swiss, 35.

<sup>47</sup> Tom McCourt, “Collecting Music in the Digital Realm,” *Popular Music and Society* 28, no. 2 (May 1, 2005): 250.

<sup>48</sup> McCourt, 251.

party will generally begin their set riding the high energy levels of the prior DJ, and gradually de-escalate the energy levels as the party comes to a close. Nonetheless, this set construction arc provides a framework with which DJs can get creative. For example, some DJs choose to have several “peak” moments, with more frequent fluctuations in pace and mood.

Set programming – or *selecting* – is often considered to be an art form in and of itself, dependent on how DJs apply their knowledge of their personal music library to play with the trajectory of their set. In fact, even the question of how intimately a DJ should know their personal music library is not black-and-white. In another of *Resident Advisor*’s “Art of DJing” articles, TJ Hertz – a dance music DJ and producer who performs under the alias Objekt – argues that it is entirely unnecessary to be well-acquainted with the music in your personal music library. Experienced DJs, he claims, “can get as much information out of a [dance music] track by flicking through it [...] and seeing how it progresses over the course of the track” as they can from listening to it in its entirety.<sup>49</sup> While certainly a contentious statement to make, this argument speaks more to Hertz’ personal approach to curation than it does to a universal truth about DJing dance music. In this respect, Hertz constructs sets based on instinct, selecting tracks evaluated on a measure of functionality for a given moment in time. This, in turn, plays into how he organizes playlists and folders on his USB drive – by date added to his collection, tempo, and position in a set (set openers, section transitions, set closers, and so on).<sup>50</sup> In their self-published *Hot N’ Ready DJ Tips, Tricks & Techniques*, DJs Eris Drew and Octo Octa argue just the opposite. They state that “[t]he more you sit with your music and learn it the better you will understand what it can do and the more memories that will attach to it.”<sup>51</sup> This is an outlook on DJing that is concerned less with a track’s functionality (in a sense, the relationship between music and audience), and more so with the affective relationship between music and DJ. Affective relationships to music are central to the aforementioned notions of care and intentionality when DJing, and are indeed largely shaped by a DJ’s habitus. Circling back to my initial research question, how do digital platforms like Bandcamp and SoundCloud figure into these different outlooks on curation? Is a digital marketplace like Bandcamp only valuable to DJs like Objekt, who curate libraries based on functionality? Or can digital platforms indeed be woven into the fabric of a musical habitus, presenting opportunities to develop affective relationships to music?

Curation does not end when the performance begins. If the pre-set preparation is akin to collecting artworks and selecting frames, then the performance is deciding how to display these works to the public. It is asking where the songs fit in relation to one another; which tracks should be brought to the forefront of the mix, and which should be used as filler; when should a song be played in full, or when should it only be brought in only briefly as a bridge between two others? Fikentscher describes these considerations as “conceptually distinct from the technique of mixing or blending, the way a transition is accomplished from one record or track to another.”<sup>52</sup> Orienting music in specific ways is what drives the narrative of a performance and can determine how the energy flows at a given party or club night. A well-programmed set has the potential to keep dancers locked in for hours and create memorable experiences for many on

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<sup>49</sup> Will Lynch, “The Art of DJing: Objekt,” *Resident Advisor*, accessed November 21, 2022, <https://ra.co/features/2786>.

<sup>50</sup> Lynch.

<sup>51</sup> Maya Bouldry-Morrison and Eris Drew, “Octo Octa & Eris Drew’s Hot N’ Ready DJ Tips, Tricks & Techniques,” T4T Luv NRG (n.d.), <https://www.t4tluvnrg.com/guides/hotnreadydjtips.pdf>.

<sup>52</sup> Fikentscher, “‘It’s Not the Mix, It’s the Selection’: Music Programming in Contemporary DJ Culture,” 125.

the dancefloor. A well-executed orientation and framing of songs can induce moments of tension build up and blissful release, periods of rest for dancers to gather themselves, or deep, entrancing sections that invite mindless movement. As Fikentscher puts it, “dance music programming is bound up with the identity or persona of the DJ, with the character of his or her performance over time.”<sup>53</sup> Some DJs are recognized as storytellers, in a sense; their sets evolve as they progress, seemingly following narratives with emotional highs and lows, or unexpected twists. Other DJs might be identified as high-energy and eclectic selectors, with uncompromising sets that follow a more linear trajectory. Ultimately, every DJ may utilize their programming choices to define their own persona.

Kell and Tzanetakis attempt to take an empirical approach to understanding the decision-making that informs track selection and ordering. They claim that “many DJs will say only that two tracks ‘work’ or ‘do not work’ together” without any true reasoning. To evaluate whether there were in fact trends that might inform these claims, the researchers used automatic audio feature extraction technology to monitor timbre, key, loudness, and tempo across 114 different recorded DJ mixes.<sup>54</sup> Their findings show that above all else, DJs select tracks that feature similar timbre, while tempo and loudness are generally controlled by the DJ throughout the mix. In truth, this research tells us very little about what set programming entails, as it does not speak to any aspects of music beyond simple measurable characteristics. Genre is not considered, nor is the perceived quality of production, origins of the artist and label, mood conveyed, relevance of the track to that specific moment in time, and more. Track selection and ordering is a multidimensional process that cannot be reduced to a set of measurements – it is inherently personal to each DJ and relies on unquantifiable factors intertwined with emotions, instinct, and experience. What we do not yet know is why someone might choose two songs of varying styles, produced in entirely different locations and eras, to mix together at a specific moment in the narrative of their performance. What types of moments does this create? How did we get to the point where this is even possible? And once again returning to my initial research inquiry, how have digital music platforms impacted these curatorial choices?

It is also essential to consider the performance environment when examining why a DJ might select one song to play and not another. When DJing in a club – which is distinct from playing at a bar, in an abandoned warehouse, on a festival stage, or in a recording studio – a DJ’s selections are informed by a variety of factors. Some of which are: the size of the crowd (am I playing to 100 people, or 500?); the *type* of crowd (are these dance music enthusiasts who intentionally sought out this specific club?); the size of the room (would it make sense to play a track with high-impact synth stabs in a small room?); the soundsystem (will a song with a lot of sub-bass really shine on a low-quality subwoofer?). Some of these factors may be known in advance, while others may only become apparent in the moment. Either way, a more experienced DJ may be better prepared to handle a variety of situations and cater their performances accordingly. Of course, none of these variables will likely be factors when recording a promotional mix in a home studio. In this scenario, the considerations to be made might only relate to the publication of the mix. It is important, in these instances, to think about what mix platform might be hosting your recording. Do they generally post high-energy mixes, or ambient “chill-out” ones? Are they affiliated with any record label? In that case, it might be wise to cater your mix to suit the sonic aesthetics of that record label. Not all of the aforementioned

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<sup>53</sup> Fikentscher, 125.

<sup>54</sup> Thor Kell and George Tzanetakis, “Empirical Analysis of Track Selection and Ordering in Electronic Dance Music Using Audio Feature Extraction,” *ISMIR* (2013).

considerations apply equally to all situations, and the ones listed represent only a very small fraction of the type of decisions a DJ is forced to make on a regular basis. The intention here is solely to illustrate why it is insufficient to reduce a DJ's track selection process to a question of sonic qualifiers like tempo or timbre. As Hertz explains, "tempo is one axis—like, one axis in the overall multi-dimensional space of music. Energy level is another. There's a lot of different melodic components that factor in as well, like density and sparsity."<sup>55</sup>

Fikentscher attests that in contrast to music production, "when the musical journey becomes the essence of a DJ's set, the impact of the [...] changes in technology on music programming have been less profound."<sup>56</sup> Much has changed since his article was first published, and Bandcamp and SoundCloud have made drastic moves towards the forefront of DJ culture. I argue that these two digital platforms alone have indeed altered music programming in ways that might not have been foreseeable just a decade ago. In the following chapter, I will offer an analysis of the first digital music platform central to my research: Bandcamp. Here, I will explore how Bandcamp operates as a marketplace for independent music, a site for music discovery, and a platform for connection between dance music enthusiasts.

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<sup>55</sup> Lynch, "The Art of DJing."

<sup>56</sup> Fikentscher, "'It's Not the Mix, It's the Selection': Music Programming in Contemporary DJ Culture," 130.



## Chapter 2: Bandcamp

### 2.1 What is Bandcamp?

Bandcamp plays a central role in the globalized electronic dance music scene. Lange and Bürkner explain how “members of contemporary electronic music scenes represent a loose form of thematic sociality around electronic sounds [and make] use of Internet platforms for distinctive taste building; reputation building; evaluating; and consuming.”<sup>57</sup> Along with *Resident Advisor*, Discogs, and online record stores like Juno or Hardwax, Bandcamp has become somewhat of a cornerstone digital space in which these processes operate. It has undoubtedly influenced the way I, and many other DJs, discover and acquire new music, and an artist or label’s success on Bandcamp is often telling of a wider recognition among dance music enthusiasts. If a track sells well on Bandcamp, it is more than likely it will be heard in clubs, DIY parties, and underground music festivals around the globe.

As per their website, “Bandcamp is an online record store and music community where passionate fans discover, connect with, and directly support the artists they love.”<sup>58</sup> Though still mostly catering to underground and independent music scenes, Bandcamp has managed to contend with the likes of Apple Music, Spotify, and TIDAL in the digital music arena, as is made evident by their considerable profit and growth over the course of the last few years. Perhaps even more evident than its economic success is the platform’s popularity within the electronic dance music community. One need only to look towards the public-facing Instagram profiles of some of the scene’s most prominent DJs, or music reviews published by *Resident Advisor*, to notice. Many music producers or record labels promote their new releases by publishing links to their personal Bandcamp pages, and *Resident Advisor* embeds Bandcamp’s streaming widget directly alongside recently reviewed EPs.

### 2.2 Why is Bandcamp so popular?

Bandcamp argues that “[s]ince we only make money when artists make a lot more money, our interests remain aligned with those of the community we serve.”<sup>59</sup> It is apparent that assigning fair value to the labour of artists is a crucial part of Bandcamp’s ethos, and perhaps one reason the platform has seen success thus far. The platform differentiates itself from streaming platforms like Spotify and Apple Music in numerous ways. While streaming is certainly a central aspect of Bandcamp’s functionality, the platform is first and foremost a marketplace for music, both in digital and physical formats. Users may stream an album, EP, or single track several times, though Bandcamp will eventually require them to purchase the music to continue streaming it. Purchasing music through Bandcamp also gives users the ability to download the content in their choice of file format, making it a go-to platform for many DJs, radio show hosts or audiophiles seeking lossless file formats.<sup>60</sup> Bandcamp further facilitates transactions directly

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<sup>57</sup> Bastian Lange and Hans-Joachim Bürkner, “Value Creation in Scene-Based Music Production: The Case of Electronic Club Music in Germany,” *Economic Geography* 89, no. 2 (April 1, 2013): 154.

<sup>58</sup> “About Bandcamp,” accessed February 20, 2022, <https://bandcamp.com/about>.

<sup>59</sup> David Hesmondhalgh et al., “SoundCloud and Bandcamp as Alternative Music Platforms,” *Social Media + Society* 5, no. 4 (October 2019): 9.

<sup>60</sup> “Lossless” refers to file formats like .flac or .aiff, which lose less data during compression as compared to .mp3 files. DJs often prefer these file formats as they sound noticeably clearer on larger soundsystems.

between consumers and artists or labels; the website allows users to purchase cassettes, vinyl records and artist merchandise, processing credit card transactions and shipping information on behalf of the seller. Neither artists nor consumers are required to pay a membership or subscription fee – the only monetized aspect of the website are the transactions between buyers and sellers.

At its core, the Bandcamp marketplace is what enables the platform to achieve its vision of compensating artists “fairly and transparently for their work.”<sup>61</sup> Unlike Spotify, Bandcamp does not operate on a royalty-based system.<sup>62</sup> The platform gives artists and labels the ability to set their own prices for their music, and even allows consumers to decide to pay above the asking price if they desire. Bandcamp then takes a relatively low share of online sales, ranging from 10-15% depending on the format of the product sold.<sup>63</sup> Because Bandcamp generally profits when artists do, the popularity of a given music release is not much of a concern for the Oakland-based start-up. It matters very little *what* is selling, so long as sales are indeed being made. Therefore, there is virtually no incentive for Bandcamp to guide users towards one artist or label over another. Here, however, we see how Terranova’s conception of the “social factory” comes in to play in relation to cultural labour. It is clear that in promoting the value of artist labour, Bandcamp has effectively obscured the distinctions between “production and consumption, labour and culture.”<sup>64</sup> Through a considered use of language (like using the term “supported by” instead of “purchased by,” or referring to users as “fans”), monetary transactions are framed as valuable for uplifting artists and the wider music communities to which they are attached. In essence, payment is connected more so with the labour involved in producing the music than with the product itself.

In March of 2020, the platform launched its Bandcamp Friday initiative; on the first Friday of each month, artists are entitled to 100% of sales made. In turn, Bandcamp’s gross revenue for the final quarter of 2020 totalled at \$61,081,146 USD, with the four Bandcamp Fridays from that period accounting for approximately 26.5% percent of all sales<sup>65</sup> – an encouraging number that suggests consumers are more inclined to pay for music when they can be sure that a larger portion of their payment is directed towards the artist. Consequently, Bandcamp has become a popular option for independent record labels and members of various underground music communities around the globe. While it would take 3,125 streams on Spotify for an artist to make \$10 USD (based on Spotify’s 2020 average payout per stream of \$0.0032 USD),<sup>66</sup> an artist could make as much by pricing their album at \$10 USD and making one single sale. Bandcamp’s basic business model is so enticing for artists and record labels that despite any of the website’s shortcomings, it managed an estimated net revenue of \$21,000,000 USD in 2020 – perhaps surprising to many considering Spotify has yet prove profitable since its inception.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Bandcamp, “Fair Trade Music Policy,” accessed February 18, 2022, [https://bandcamp.com/fair\\_trade\\_music\\_policy](https://bandcamp.com/fair_trade_music_policy).

<sup>62</sup> Damon Krukowski, “A Tale Of Two Ecosystems: On Bandcamp, Spotify And The Wide-Open Future,” *NPR*, August 19, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/2020/08/19/903547253/a-tale-of-two-ecosystems-on-bandcamp-spotify-and-the-wide-open-future>.

<sup>63</sup> Bandcamp, “Fair Trade Music Policy.”

<sup>64</sup> Terranova, “Free Labor: Producing Culture for the Digital Economy,” 35.

<sup>65</sup> Andrew Thompson, “Why Is Bandcamp Profitable and Spotify Not?,” *Medium*, April 23, 2021, <https://towardsdatascience.com/why-is-bandcamp-profitable-and-spotify-isnt-3444ad63e7fb>.

<sup>66</sup> Soundcharts Team, “What Do Music Streaming Services Pay Per Stream (And Why It Actually Doesn’t Matter),” *Soundcharts*, accessed February 19, 2022, <https://soundcharts.com/blog/music-streaming-rates-payouts>.

<sup>67</sup> Thompson, “Why Is Bandcamp Profitable and Spotify Not?”

Bandcamp is an interesting case in a which a lean platform<sup>68</sup> has indeed demonstrated its ability to turn a profit, rather than strictly concern itself with growth as many of these platforms tend to do.<sup>69</sup>

Despite being held in very high regard among a diverse array of independent music scene participants, a growing worry among artists and labels is that the wildly successful Bandcamp Friday initiative is actually fostering unsustainable production and promotion practices. In a recent article published by *Resident Advisor*, UK artist and label owner Dennis Huddleston refers to Bandcamp Friday as a “digital flea market,”<sup>70</sup> where consumers have now come to expect reduced prices and an inflated quantity of releases. Artists are not only forced to contend with one another for visibility on these monthly promotional days, but have also noticed drastically reduced sale numbers on the other days of the month. Consumers are so inclined to purchase music when 100% of the proceeds go to the artists that sales on “normal” days have dropped off considerably. Now, instead of artists periodically (yet consistently) selling a mix of old and new music, the vast majority of sales is comprised of new material released on Bandcamp Fridays. To that end, many artists now rush to finish music in time for a release on the upcoming Bandcamp Friday event, which many producers have noted is both frustrating and unsustainable.<sup>71</sup> Seeing as Bandcamp – the central site for DJs to purchase music files – has more or less monopolized the online independent music market, these changes could very well be telling of new industry dynamics, posing an even greater challenge to emerging artists.

Concerning questions of the value of artist labour, Bandcamp puts forth an interesting approach: let the artists decide what their work is worth, and then leave it to consumers to assess whether or not the asking price is fair. This implies that only the artists and listeners participate in the process of valuing their music, barring external players like major streaming platforms from interfering altogether. If a record’s price is set too low by community standards, listeners will compensate for the undervaluing of the work by offering a higher payment. Conversely, if an asking price is deemed to be too high, it is unlikely that the music will sell. Artists with more temporal and monetary investment in their craft should logically have the grounds to set higher asking prices, though this does not stop emerging artists from asking for fair compensation as well. In fact, this economic approach is why so many DJs turn to Bandcamp to source their music. Even those who choose to search for new music via other means (on Discogs, SoundCloud, YouTube, music blogs, recommendations from peers, etc.) tend to then go on to purchase the digital files on Bandcamp’s marketplace. One such indication of Bandcamp’s popularity is the emergence of parallel platforms that work in conjunction with the digital music marketplace. One example, launched in 2018 by Avalon Emerson, is Buy Music Club – a Bandcamp-adjacent (though not affiliated) website that allows “DJs and dance music fans in particular” to publish lists of their favourite songs currently available to purchase on Bandcamp.<sup>72</sup> Their mission statement attests that “since Bandcamp is currently one of the most equitable music vendors online, discovering and purchasing music there is one of the most effective (not to mention easiest) ways to directly support [the dance music] community.”<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> A lean platform is a platform that does not own the products or services offered on their website – in essence, asset-less platforms, like Airbnb, Uber, and Spotify.

<sup>69</sup> Nick Srnicek, *Platform Capitalism* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017): 80.

<sup>70</sup> Henry Ivry, “‘A Digital Flea Market’: Why Are Some Artists and Labels Experiencing Bandcamp Friday Burnout?” *Resident Advisor*, accessed March 2, 2022, <https://ra.co/news/76829>.

<sup>71</sup> Ivry.

<sup>72</sup> “Buy Music Club,” accessed November 29, 2022, <https://www.buymusic.club/about>.

<sup>73</sup> “Buy Music Club.”

Conceived purely out of appreciation for Bandcamp's artist payment model, Buy Music Club is a testament to the dance music community's approval for both the fair valuation of artist labour and economic transparency offered by the platform. This speaks to the ethos of care championed by many dance music DJs, and is one reason why Bandcamp has become so significant for the community. Parallel websites like Buy Music Club also encourage an expansion of the music habitus; an opportunity for curators to be exposed to a wider network of artists, record labels, and crucially, other curators. Buy Music Club acts as a starting point to steer curators in various directions, following the recommendations of DJs who have already garnered a certain level of authority within the global dance music scene.

Still, while Bandcamp is certainly better at paying artists than most digital music platforms, it is a platform, nonetheless. Platforms work as content intermediaries, offering a space where both producers, consumers and advertisers can converge around the hosted content.<sup>74</sup> This hosted content is entirely produced by users, though Bandcamp nonetheless profits off of sales— a fee they would likely explain as the price an artist needs to pay to have their content hosted and mediated. In theory this seems fair, but it should be noted that the platformization of the music industry now *necessitates* artists having their music hosted on one platform or another – otherwise, how would an artist generate exposure and revenue at all? Though Bandcamp might offer a valuable alternative to Spotify or Apple Music, it still operates on the principle that the labour of artists needs to be mediated by a third party in order to reach consumers. As explained by Robert Prey, music platforms “are not merely neutral conduits through which content flows,”<sup>75</sup> but services that wield the power to alter industry dynamics and shape how both producers and consumers engage with music. It is also essential to consider that while sustaining independent music communities and cultures seems to be of central importance to Bandcamp, they also have an obligation to act in the best interest of their own prosperity as a business.

In March of 2022, it was announced that Bandcamp was acquired by video game giant Epic Games.<sup>76</sup> The move was a surprise to many, and also an immediate source of panic for most Bandcamp faithful, who viewed the platform as the last stronghold for independent music in an industry increasingly dominated by monolithic corporate entities. Bandcamp's CEO Ethan Diamond assured users that Epic Games' involvement would only further aid with international expansion and the development of “album pages, mobile apps, merch tools, payment systems, and search and discovery features.”<sup>77</sup> Nonetheless, many worry that the acquisition by Epic Games – 40% of which is owned by Chinese tech conglomerate Tencent – might imply a switch to a monthly subscription model.<sup>78</sup> This evidently means Bandcamp users will cease to retain the freedom to spend money on the platform at their own discretion, entirely contradicting Bandcamp's current ethos and operation model. Though no major modifications have been implemented thus far, the platform could foreseeably undergo substantial changes in the coming months. As far as functionality is concerned, there is no apparent challenge to the current feature set, meaning Bandcamp will likely remain a valuable curation tool, regardless of any changes to their business model.

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<sup>74</sup> Tarleton Gillespie, “The Politics of ‘Platforms,’” *New Media + Society*, 12, no. 3 (May 2010): 348.

<sup>75</sup> Prey, “Locating Power in Platformization,” 8.

<sup>76</sup> Matthew Ismael Ruiz, “What Bandcamp's Acquisition by Epic Games Means for Music Fans and Artists,” *Pitchfork*, March 3, 2022, <https://pitchfork.com/thepitch/bandcamp-epic-games-acquisition/>.

<sup>77</sup> “Bandcamp Is Joining Epic Games.”

<sup>78</sup> Ismael Ruiz, “What Bandcamp's Acquisition by Epic Games Means for Music Fans and Artists.”

### ***2.3 Bandcamp as a curatorial tool: algorithm vs. human, taxonomy vs. folksonomy***

Notable, too, is Bandcamp's aversion to the algorithmically driven, automated future that many streaming platforms are now prioritizing. Spotify's *modus operandi* revolves around a constant collection of data, in turn allowing the website's algorithms to actively curate playlists to the preferences of listeners with increasing precision. These playlists are dynamic – meaning they frequently undergo updates and revisions – though ultimately funnel listeners towards a select few artists that might be in the midst of an upwards trend. You can choose who to search for and follow on Spotify, though the service that Spotify offers to subscribers is ultimately a recommendation system that steers you towards certain musical ecosystems. This is somewhat reflective of the increasing centrality of metrics to everyday life;<sup>79</sup> Spotify decides what to recommend based on quantitative data like stream counts, only furthering the success of the artists already garnering significant attention from listeners. Bandcamp gives its users greater freedom in choosing both where their money goes and what their personal music collection will look like. The “Discover” feature on Bandcamp's home page lets listeners filter by genre, but also emphasizes sorting functions like “new arrivals” and “artist-recommended,” the latter meaning that metrics are less valuable to the Bandcamp ethos than the positive endorsement by other creators in the community. Users can also choose to search by location, making it easy to find local artists, or explore a region-specific subgenre or musical style.

Bandcamp sits somewhere between what Ramon Lobato and Julian Thomas describe as a formal and informal marketplace. It is predicated on metrical transparency;<sup>80</sup> the website will show you how many people have a given record in their collection, what music is being bought by whom at exactly the moment of purchase, and a slew of other statistics that are readily accessible from the homepage. Almost comically, Bandcamp's aversion to Google-like levels of metric precision is evident immediately upon attempting to perform a search on the website. The search function is widely recognized as imprecise and somewhat clunky, almost never recommending the most obvious (or most popular) choices if one were to begin typing in an artist name or song title.

Bandcamp's genre classification system is heavily reliant on the notion of folksonomy, a term that emerged in the early stages of Web 2.0 and refers to a user generated tag-based system of organizing music.<sup>81</sup> In opposition to taxonomy, folksonomy does not follow the traditional “genre tree” format – one that is becoming increasingly decentralized and complicated to follow, even for algorithmic recommendation tools.<sup>82</sup> Instead, it is more reflective of a human user's sense-making process. Folksonomies are also deemed to be non-hierarchical,<sup>83</sup> meaning from the onset, various genres are treated as their own entities and not sub-categories of others. Artists may assign multiple tags to their work, and new hybrid music styles that might have formerly been absorbed into vague umbrella categories like “techno” or “bass” can now be associated to the various genres that inform it.

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<sup>79</sup> Ramon Lobato and Julian Thomas, “Metrics,” in *The Informal Media Economy* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015): 164.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 165-66.

<sup>81</sup> Amelia Besseney, “Lost in Spotify: Folksonomy and Wayfinding Functions in Spotify's Interface and Companion Apps,” *Popular Communication* 18, no. 1 (January 2, 2020): 2.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>83</sup> Michael Gaffney and Pauline Rafferty, “Making the Long Tail Visible: Social Networking Sites and Independent Music Discovery,” *Program* 43, no. 4 (January 1, 2009): 379.

Centering a folksonomy-based approach is necessitated by allowing the artists or labels to create new genre tags. This again means that instead of being limited by the lack of specificity of Spotify or Beatport's<sup>84</sup> classification system, niche genres like footwork and grime can exist as categories of their own. For a small music community like that behind something like footwork, this means a certain level of recognition that is not afforded by most major streaming services, online record stores, or music publications. This is especially pertinent when we consider that genre tags like "footwork" might intersect with geographic tags like "Chicago," offering a sense of locality and context to the genre. For independent artists and labels dealing in such particular musical styles, this means their music is more likely to be discovered by listeners looking for new music in that style. In turn, favouring folksonomy above taxonomy is a relatively simple way to direct funds towards artists and labels that deal in musical styles further on the fringes of the electronic music ecosystem. Wired magazine editor Chris Anderson found that increased genre diversity and a wider variety of niche products was also beneficial to music retailers in terms of drawing consumers to the service.<sup>85</sup>

Open tagging systems are also crucial in upholding the notion of curation as an act predicated on care and intentionality. Increased specificity allows users to, in a sense, learn more about the music that they are browsing and purchasing. By observing how an artist chose to tag their work, the curator instantly learns something about where said artist drew their inspiration, or what they attempted to achieve in producing that particular piece of music.

Folksonomy-based genre tagging systems simultaneously enable artists to engage with the emerging notion that DJs do not need to be tied down to one specific genre or sound. The ever-present "open format" style of DJing is grounded in the belief that genre is not necessarily indicative of a compatibility between two songs being mixed, and that exciting DJ sets should be comprised of a vast array of rhythmic patterns, textures, geographic influences, or even BPM in many cases. DJs are increasingly favouring terms like "club" or "bass" music over genre descriptors like funk or house to define their sonic aesthetic, sometimes resorting to using the average BPM range of their selections as a catch-all for describing the music they play. It is not uncommon to see music with tags such as "140" or "bass" alongside other tags referring to location or genre, thus catering to curators who might be looking to record a genre-defying mix in a specific tempo range. However, these seemingly vague tags might not be as open-ended as they appear. The nature of folksonomy means that these understandings of genre and style are shaped by those who participate in the development of said folksonomy. Participants in these cultures and communities have come to generate visual aesthetics, song or album title tropes, and subtle cues that would indicate to insiders precisely what to expect when browsing Bandcamp. Coinciding with seemingly vague tags, these indicators facilitate the curation process – that is, once the learning curve of recognizing these subtle signals (and what they imply) is overcome. Pairing visual and subtle textual cues with information offered alongside the song or album – release date, geographic origin, genre tags – allows curators to easily rule out music that might not be worth listening to.

With customizable artist/label pages, space for artists to leave long descriptions of their music, and the aforementioned ability to create new tags, Bandcamp has become a valuable site for independent music communities to develop a language around their work. This suggests an interesting resolution to two of my initial research questions: How do platforms attempt to make

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<sup>84</sup> Beatport is a digital music marketplace that carries a wide array of electronic dance music, though has fallen out of favour amongst the underground/independent dance music community.

<sup>85</sup> Besseny, "Lost in Spotify," 2.

sense of our contemporary musical landscape? And conversely, what role have curators played in defining the digital spaces in which they work? In essence, platforms like Bandcamp that use folksonomy-based categorization systems do not necessarily need to make sense of any musical landscape – they simply let their userbase do it. By giving users the tools and freedom to tag their music and add descriptions as they wish, connections between nodes in the constellation of musical genres and styles will organically form over time. To “make sense” of these connections, the platform needs only to solidify these links through their user interface, for example, by letting users filter their search queries by multiple tags at once. The more that platform users – both artists and curators – engage with the music by commenting, purchasing, and reviewing, the more enriched the platform becomes with information that will help others discover music down the line.

Hesmondhalgh et. al. are astute in pointing out that Bandcamp’s lack of conventional music platform features – like autoplay, for example – is another element of the website that seems to “hold specific value for the indie music practitioners who form its core user-base.”<sup>86</sup> “Releases on Bandcamp,” they attest, “seem more fully “situated” than on streaming services” because they exist as standalone pages and not in continuous streams of content.<sup>87</sup> On Bandcamp’s home page, releases in the “New and Notable” section are accompanied by a brief note about the music, much like how record shop clerks often do the same. Even the music roundups produced by Bandcamp, like their recently published “The Future of Trance is Queer,” take the form of short editorial pieces with credit to the author rather than playlists generated by anonymous in-house curators.<sup>88</sup> On each release page, there is a section that, like Spotify, recommends similar music to the user. In this case, however, it indicates exactly how many people have bought both the primary piece of music and the ones being recommended to the user. In essence, Bandcamp seems to suggest that they are transparent in terms of how they decide to recommend new music to users, though it is not possible to confidently assess whether or not the platform does indeed operate with such levels of objectivity. Regardless, on Bandcamp, music is given the space it needs to accrue a sense of context and meaning as its own entity. Space also affords a sort of staying power; older releases always remain available on their own page, meaning they do not get flooded out of the public eye, so-to-speak, as new releases stream onto the platform. This is beneficial for artists in the long run, as they do not need to upkeep a constant output to earn at least some level of pay for their work. This is similarly beneficial for curators like DJs, who often try to balance their sets with both new and old releases. While Spotify “create[s] an entirely new product [...] by unbundling albums and reassembling them into playlists,”<sup>89</sup> Bandcamp’s product takes the form of whatever the artist intends: physical or digital; EP, LP, or single; vinyl record, or cassette tape.

Lobato and Thomas’ assert that “this expansion of the social is necessarily also an expansion of the communications and media systems that connect people, institutions and industries.”<sup>90</sup> Music on Bandcamp is left to proliferate into wider networks of engagement, producing new folksonomies and cultural relationships between artists and fans. This is key to the proliferation of independent music because you can extract the product from the website;

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<sup>86</sup> Hesmondhalgh et al., “SoundCloud and Bandcamp as Alternative Music Platforms,” 7.

<sup>87</sup> Hesmondhalgh et al., 7.

<sup>88</sup> Ivry, “The Future of Trance Is Queer.”

<sup>89</sup> Prey, “Locating Power in Platformization,” 3.

<sup>90</sup> Ramon Lobato and Julian Thomas, “Metrics,” in *The Informal Media Economy* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015): 165.

unlike Spotify or Apple Music, music files can be moved from the website, and used in other contexts. Buy Music Club perhaps best illustrates this phenomenon in action; high-profile DJs like Avalon Emerson can curate playlists to be displayed on the website, which can then influence a second set of virtual crate diggers to discover new music and form their own playlists. On Bandcamp, music is transferred from the hands of artists to labels, then to curators, DJs, and finally consumers. All the while, it is accruing meaning and value via tags, online discourse, and airtime both on dancefloors and in recorded mixes, with no alteration of the product on the part of the intermediary platform.

During the time of writing, a new Google Chrome extension was created by an anonymous publisher that allows users to change the tempo of a song while listening on Bandcamp.<sup>91</sup> Mimicking the pitch slider on a modern turntable or CDJ, the extension allows users to move a pitch slider up and down, in turn changing the tempo of a song. This is valuable for DJs in particular, as it allows curators to sample the track at various speeds before purchasing. Often times, a track that is adaptable in respect to BPM is an incredibly useful tool, and would likely be a selling point for many prospective buyers looking for versatile music.

#### ***2.4 Bandcamp as a curatorial tool II: “social” features***

Bandcamp’s social features are considerably more limited than those of Spotify, though pointedly geared towards fostering community engagement and encouraging a more human-driven music discovery process. These are not social features in a traditional sense; there is no integrated chat feature on Bandcamp, nor can users direct posts towards one another by sharing or tagging. For the purposes of my research, I use the term social features to describe elements of Bandcamp’s interface that encourage a sense of connection between various forms of users on the website. Bandcamp’s ethos of uplifting artists is perhaps best exemplified through the “supported by” section that accompanies each release. Rather than simply displaying a stream count, this window links to the accounts of various people who purchased the record, each represented on a grid comprised of their profile images. In addition to cleverly giving listeners the opportunity to browse the profiles of other users with potentially similar musical interests (and in turn, discover new music), the “supported by” feature is suggestive of the notion that Bandcamp users are all part of a support network that validates the work of other artists, and provides them with the financial means to continue producing it.

The “supported by” feature might encourage music community development in less apparent ways, as well. Clicking through the profiles of other users who share certain taste commonalities is a subtle way of expanding one’s awareness of adjacent or unfamiliar musical genres, styles, and artists (or in other words, one’s musical habitus). Consequently, the notion of folksonomy once again comes into play; as user engagement occurs, so too does the possibility of cross-pollination between genres. Producers browsing Bandcamp might be inspired to experiment with new sounds (and eventually upload their work to Bandcamp), and from a DJ perspective, this discovery method facilitates the incorporation of a larger variety of styles in their sets. Ultimately, this is a source of connection between different global music scenes, which has the effect of further developing the popular folksonomy of the independent music sphere and diversifying the collections of DJs around the world. This method of discovering new music, however, is looked upon unfavorably by some in the dance music community. One could argue that “raiding” the collections of other DJs requires little effort, undermines the work done to

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<sup>91</sup> “Bandcamp Tempo Adjust.”



amass said collections, and discourages the development of distinguishable styles between DJs. Music curation does generally involve drawing from others, however. Gradually constructing a personal identity as a DJ by combining bits and pieces from various musical influences is an integral part of the job. Browsing the collections of other curators is an invaluable tool in being able to identify current trends among DJs, or even trace down an elusive track recently heard in a specific DJ's performance (assuming their Bandcamp collection is publicly known). Again, this process touches on the notion of curating with care: using the tools and resources available in a conscious manner, taking care to respect the work done by other DJs while developing your own habitus at the same time.

Upon making a purchase on Bandcamp, users are prompted to leave a comment on the release page and select their favourite track from the record. This is another social feature that subtly encourages network expansion and positive discourse. The comments left on release pages function less as consumer reviews and more so as a platform for users to either offer supportive comments to the artist or engage in conversation about the perceived stylistic influences or defining attributes of a given song. There is no rating system, nor is it likely that someone who has listened to the record before deciding to purchase it will leave negative (or at the very least non-constructive) feedback. This feature once again benefits music community development by acting as a locus for the vocal support of artists and possible space for generative commentary.

This comment section can also be used by curators to assess whether or not a given track or album is relevant to their personal practice. It is easy to be overwhelmed by the sheer amount of music available. It is virtually impossible to listen to everything, and this rings especially true for amateur DJs who likely work jobs in a variety of fields and realistically cannot dedicate several hours per week to filtering through thousands of music releases. Thus, an integral part of music curation is knowing when *not* to listen, particularly from an efficiency standpoint. The comment section is a quick and telling means to decipher what may or may not be worth your time.

While Bandcamp certainly provides the tools for a thorough “dig” through the catalogues of numerous labels, the digital music marketplace still leaves space for further exploration into the construction of musical experience as described in Chapter 1. In the following chapter, I will be analyzing a second digital music platform, SoundCloud. As it is designed for hosting long-form DJ mixes, SoundCloud provides an even greater opportunity for contextualizing the music one might have purchased from Bandcamp.<sup>92</sup> Browsing another DJ's music collection might offer insight into what type of music they play, but being able to listen to how they string together songs in a mix is far more important in assessing their identity as a DJ. Though, as I will touch on, this format bears with it some interesting problems concerning copyright law and Fair Use (U.S.)/Fair Dealing (Canada) policy. Unlike Bandcamp, SoundCloud is not a digital music marketplace; there is no way to purchase music directly through the platform. Instead, SoundCloud places an even greater emphasis on social exchanges between users and direct engagement with the audio content hosted on the website.

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<sup>92</sup> DJ mixes hosted on SoundCloud most often feature material produced by multiple different artists. The songs are likely purchased and downloaded from a variety of different sources. SoundCloud's copyright policy indicates that they will only take down content if it is reported for copyright infringement – a process that independent record labels generally do not care to go through with. In fact, amongst independent dance music producers and labels, having your music appear in a DJ mix is entirely favourable, so long as the song was purchased (and not downloaded illegally) by the DJ.

## Chapter 3: SoundCloud

### 3.1 What is SoundCloud?

A second alternative music platform of great relevance to the dance music curator is SoundCloud. Hesmondhalgh et. al. note that “the notion of the musical “alternative” is strongly tied to “independent” or noncorporate and nonstate cultural institutions, especially record labels, distributors, and shops.”<sup>93</sup> SoundCloud, in a sense, strives to defy conventional corporate music industry norms, and operates outside of the structures of labels, distributors, and shops. Though, as we will see later in this chapter, some major industry players do engage with SoundCloud as a strategic marketing tactic, somewhat undercutting the alternative aspirations of the platform. While record labels may have a SoundCloud page and can even offer free downloads of their music, there is no integrated platform for sales. The quantity of music made available for download is relatively limited, so SoundCloud is not widely considered as a central source for *acquiring* music. From a business standpoint, it is purely promotional and social. The social dimension of SoundCloud is central to its function as a platform for music discovery and playlist curation – so much so that Ian Dunham describes it first and foremost as a “social media platform focused on music sharing.”<sup>94</sup> Despite working mostly in independent music spheres, SoundCloud boasts a monthly usership of approximately 130 millions registered users, making it by no means an obscure web service.

As I will illustrate later in this chapter, wide userships is greatly beneficial to SoundCloud, as it relies on userbase interactions to dictate how music on the platform is discovered, shared, and engaged with. Ultimately, SoundCloud’s community-centric model has made it an online hub for electronic dance music communities to connect and proliferate. Users can in turn leverage these social formations as a means to discover and curate. Though as much as it is a place for discovering new music, it is also a useful tool in observing how others curate. DJ mixes posted to the platform offer great insight into how others approach the task of mixing. What mixing techniques are they using? How do they pace their performance, or manage the flow of energy? Where do they draw their selections from? And crucially, what sonic elements do they touch on to form connections between songs?

In light of my research questions, I intend to observe how this mobilization of social interaction as facilitated by SoundCloud has shaped contemporary curation practices. What does SoundCloud do to make sense of our musical landscape? How do curators navigate SoundCloud, and conversely, how does SoundCloud respond to the needs of its users? Finally, is SoundCloud proposing an entirely new outlook on community-centric curation, or instead reflective of the pre-internet era of developing folksonomies in brick-and-mortar music spaces?

### 3.2 SoundCloud’s user interface

Research by Hesmondhalgh et. al. reveals how “certain aspects of [SoundCloud’s] interface appeal to electronic dance music [...] musicians and their audiences because, whether consciously or not, they reflect commonplace practices and values” present throughout the

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<sup>93</sup> Hesmondhalgh et al., “SoundCloud and Bandcamp as Alternative Music Platforms,” 2.

<sup>94</sup> Ian Dunham, “SoundCloud Rap: An Investigation of Community and Consumption Models of Internet Practices,” *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 39, no. 2 (2022): 107.

varying subgenres.<sup>95</sup> The visual waveform accompanying each sound file posted to SoundCloud, for example, replicates what a digital DJ<sup>96</sup> would see on the display of their music player. As a DJ, being able to visualize the waveform is a valuable tool when preparing or performing tracks. It brings the audible into the visual realm, and quite practically enables the DJ to view a track not just as a complete song, but rather as a series of phrases or sections. The breakdown is easily differentiable from the main sections; the “drops” (i.e., the tension-release moments after build-up periods) are quickly distinguishable, and each kick drum, snare, or clap can be pinpointed and cued up with precision. The visual waveform, while not *necessary* for the task, facilitates some DJs in manipulating tracks with utmost precision and, in essence, curating their sets down to the specific beats of each song. SoundCloud, which hosts both individual tracks and longer-form DJ mixes comprised of multiple songs, calls on this same waveform imagery, and integrates it as a core element of its user interface.

Visualizing the complete waveform of a DJ mix highlights the various ups and downs, breaks, and busier sections, thus facilitating the task of isolating individual songs – a valuable tool in the common practice among dance music listeners of hunting down “track IDs” (tracing down an unidentified song heard in a mix or DJ set).<sup>97</sup> Users and listeners may leave timestamped comments along the visual waveform, marking specific moments in a mix that pique their interest. If another user recognizes the unidentified song in question, they can easily reply to the initial comment with the track’s title and artist. Often times, the DJ responsible for posting the mix might include a track list, making this task considerably easier. SoundCloud has therefore become central site for this method of music discovery – though rather than relying on the platform itself to help users identify music, the onus is on SoundCloud’s userbase to share their knowledge of the music directly with one another. In this regard, interaction between users on SoundCloud are a central facet of the platform’s user experience, and a clear example of folksonomy in action. This model allows users to engage in discourse with *each other*, rather than each individual user engaging only with the music itself, as is the case with Bandcamp’s comment section model, thus translating to more transparent knowledge exchanges. As compared to streaming platforms like Spotify or Apple Music, SoundCloud offers a far “greater sense of vernacular interactivity and reciprocity.”<sup>98</sup>

These sort of social interactions work in parallel with the user-based genre tagging systems on both Bandcamp and SoundCloud, and in line with Michael Gaffney and Pauline

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<sup>95</sup> Hesmondhalgh et al., “SoundCloud and Bandcamp as Alternative Music Platforms,” 2.

<sup>96</sup> This refers to a DJ who mixes via a digital medium, be it a laptop bearing software like Traktor or Rekordbox, or Pioneer CDJs which have small screens displaying waveforms. It is important to note that many DJs who play digital files still refrain from relying on the waveform while performing, preferring to cue up and mix in tracks by ear only.

<sup>97</sup> There are several methods of doing so, many of which frowned upon by some sects of dance music fans (see *gatekeeping*). Shazam, an app that can be used to identify music played in public spaces, is one such method. Few things are quite as irritating to some as seeing a phone screen light up with Shazam’s bright blue aura in the middle of an entrancing DJ set, illuminating an otherwise dark corner of the dancefloor and snapping those nearby out of an engrossed, hypnotic state. In truth, Shazam frequently fails at accurately identifying the song in question, and more often than not is unable to detect the more obscure selections heard at underground parties and clubs. A more direct route to tracing down music that other DJs have played is to simply ask them about it; all it takes is a quick conversation after their performance or direct message on social media the following day, and many (though not all!) DJs are happy to share the name of the producer or label behind their selections. Uncovering track IDs is one way of discovering new music and developing an enriched awareness about the origins of the music being played by DJs.

<sup>98</sup> Hesmondhalgh et al., “SoundCloud and Bandcamp as Alternative Music Platforms,” 5.

Rafferty's argument, offer a means to "make the Long Tail more visible."<sup>99</sup> The Long Tail theory, purported by Chris Anderson, refers to the idea that digital marketplaces can benefit from stocking a seemingly limitless amount of product without the need for constant changeover (as is the case with physical storefronts).<sup>100</sup> In digital music spaces, this means shifting the focus away from solely promoting mainstream, major label record releases, and instead offering a diverse array of niche music to be archived, discovered, shared, and collected. Since the earlier days of digital music file sharing, marked by the prominence of Myspace as social networking site for musically inclined internet users and Lastfm as a streaming service for fans of non-mainstream sounds, social media has been crucial for the dispersion and growth of independent music. This works in tandem with the musical Long Tail to ensure that even older releases remain available. SoundCloud draws on elements from both of these progenitive websites to develop musical folksonomies (and in turn, expand on the Long Tail) while strengthening and developing them through direct discourse.

SoundCloud uses a tagging system similar, in some ways, to that of Bandcamp; tags are user-generated, and artists are free to allocate as many tags as they would like to each track posted. Filtering searches by tag is possible, though SoundCloud is distinct from other streaming platforms in that there is no dedicated directory of these tags. It is therefore more difficult to use the platform as a means to take a deep dive into one niche style. The connections between genres are far more subjective, as much of the content hosted on SoundCloud is not a single song, but a DJ mix containing dozens. As Vitos Botond contests, in electronic music, "users rely on verbal labels that aid orientation within the sonic landscape,"<sup>101</sup> though much of the sonic landscape is made up of these DJ mixes which are in and of themselves contained sonic landscapes. In these instances, genre association becomes exponentially more difficult; one song in a mix might represent a collage of several genres, and so accurately tagging a DJ mix with every style represented within is nearly impossible. The folksonomy developed on SoundCloud is consequently quite complex, and sometimes muddled by imprecision. Botond further explains how "these user-generated tags may refer to affective qualities and localities or express free associations,"<sup>102</sup> which supports Giannetti's argument that searching for music by tag on SoundCloud can be a "bewildering experience because of the uncontrolled vocabulary" used to qualify music.<sup>103</sup> As a result, the transparent nature of the interactions between users is all the more essential to solidify divisions between music communities and genre ecosystems on the platform, and to ensure that curation can continue to be practiced with care and intention. A DJ mix may straddle the line between various genres and styles and can circulate amongst several audience groups or music communities. How these communities interpret and qualify the collection of tracks therefore plays a major role in contextualizing and situating the mix as a whole, as well as the music contained within. In turn, these well-situated mixes may play an integral role in shaping the musical habitus of listeners.

DJ mixes also pose an interesting predicament concerning copyright laws. When is a DJ allowed to include other artists' music in their mixes posted on the platform? According to

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<sup>99</sup> Gaffney and Rafferty, "Making the Long Tail Visible," 376.

<sup>100</sup> Gaffney and Rafferty, 375.

<sup>101</sup> Vitos Botond, "Dance Librarian: Sonic Explorations of the Bandcamp Underground," *Dancecult* 13, no. 1 (2021).

<sup>102</sup> Botond.

<sup>103</sup> Giannetti, "SoundCloud (Review)," 500.

SoundCloud’s Help Center, almost never.<sup>104</sup> In theory, anyone posting content created by another artist – even in the case of DJ mixes – would need expressed permission from the content’s owner to do so. In practice, however, this is not quite as clear-cut. SoundCloud uses a proprietary identification system that automatically scans tentative uploads for copyrighted content. The system, however, relies on an internal “database of tracks that rightsholders and digital distributors have asked [SoundCloud] to block.”<sup>105</sup> If the track has not been submitted to the database, it will pass through the system without issue. If a DJ complains of having their mix removed from SoundCloud, it is most likely due to the mix featuring a track released on a major record label that pre-emptively submits all of their music to SoundCloud’s database. This raises a pertinent question: do dance music artists *want* their content to be blocked? In the case of most independent dance artists (and labels), the answer is probably not. Dance music, by nature, is designed to be played by DJs in clubs and mixes. Labels will frequently send out promotional copies of forthcoming releases to DJs for free, specifically so that the tracks receive airtime either on a dancefloors or online. Exposure decidedly does not pay the bills, but as long as DJs continue to buy the digital song files that they include in their sets, it would be counterproductive for dance music producers to bar their music from being included in a mix.

### ***3.3 SoundCloud as a social network***

SoundCloud “has a “highly shareable, highly social” user interface, which easily links to mainstream social media such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram,” and more.<sup>106</sup> A miniature SoundCloud player can even be embedded directly on to external websites, with the ability to customize the size and colour of the player to match the appearance of a given web page. This extends the Long Tail far beyond the bounds of sites strictly dedicated to music. As a promotional tool, this malleability is invaluable; artists and labels can swiftly reach a vast array of audiences, depending on their intentions. In contrast to Bandcamp, SoundCloud offers far more access points for the uninitiated digital curator. Once engaged, less work is required on the part of the average DJ to dive deeper into independent music styles, as the website’s recommendation system offers a variety of “branching out” points from each piece of content posted. The sidebar accompanying a song or mix will offer varying suggestions for further listening: an algorithmically generated collection of “Related Tracks,” a list of user-generated playlists that feature the initial track, or links to the profile of any user who had previously liked or reposted the content. There, users can readily follow a trail that might lead them deeper into a genre, or stylistically aligned music community.

The wide-reaching potential of SoundCloud does, however, introduce external factors to the curation process. Using social media-aligned metrics, SoundCloud promotes a sense of hierarchization among its userbase, which in turn does affect exactly what music is most frequently happened upon by curators. Like the aforementioned social media sites, counts for followers, likes, reposts, and comments are all visible to users. Some users will undoubtedly “perform” better than others, and performance indicators like high follower counts can often be translated into visibility, and thus recognition by record labels and event promoters. Dunham

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<sup>104</sup> “How Do I Upload Content That Contains Work Created by Someone Else?,” SoundCloud Help Center, accessed February 13, 2023, <https://help.SoundCloud.com/hc/en-us/articles/4402637177115-How-do-I-upload-content-that-contains-work-created-by-someone-else->.

<sup>105</sup> “How Do I Upload Content That Contains Work Created by Someone Else?”

<sup>106</sup> Hesmondhalgh et al., “SoundCloud and Bandcamp as Alternative Music Platforms,” 3.

explains that these metrics, combined with a relatively loose categorization of artists on the platform, “exposes power dynamics that favor parties entrenched in traditional industry roles.”<sup>107</sup> Users have a great influence over what artists will ultimately rise through their affective labour, though the relative success of some independent artists on SoundCloud might be greatly overshadowed by the presence of major industry players who use the platform.<sup>108</sup> These more famed artists often adopt the cultural signifiers and aesthetic choices traditionally associated with the musical underground, all the while amassing higher follower counts and stream counts, as they would on most major streaming platforms, due to previously solidified relationships with fans. By nature of allowing anyone to freely upload music, SoundCloud affords independent artist a greater chance at visibility than other major streaming services.<sup>109</sup> Though, at the same time, it reflects many of the practices employed by Spotify and Apple Music that reinforce the current balance of power in the music industry.

Content on SoundCloud is also mediated in a similar fashion to Spotify and Apple Music. Robert Prey explains how “playlists are a key mechanism through which to exert what we can call “curatorial power”: the capacity to advance one’s interests, and affect the interests of others, through the organizing and programming of content,” which is especially valuable for any digital platform that does not own the rights to their own content. Interlaced between playlists based on users’ listening history are SoundCloud’s in-house editorial playlists, ranging from artist spotlights to “Fresh Pressed Tracks,” an 82 song collection of recently released music. It is on these playlists where a larger music industry presence is most apparent, with most of the featured artists being of considerable fame already, and their songs displaying view counts ranging in the hundreds-of-thousands.

Contrasting these editorial selections are user-generated playlists, which can be made private or visible to the general public. Playlisting is distinct from uploading a DJ mix in two significant ways. First, playlists made on SoundCloud may contain only music that is already uploaded to the platform, while DJ mixes are recorded externally and may contain music from a variety of sources. The songs contained in a mix are not represented *individually* as their own entities on SoundCloud, while songs added to a playlist are. The ability to create a playlist is built into the design of SoundCloud, though recording a DJ mix must be done elsewhere, with specialized equipment. Second, when preparing a DJ mix, the DJ will make use of specific mixing techniques to blend together the tracks, forming a continuous flow of music that generally follows some sort of logic, or “narrative arc” (i.e., a progression through various BPMs, genres, or moods). Playlists, while sometimes organized in a specific order, do not exhibit a continuous flow between tracks. Having said that, a playlist may still retain the narrative arc that many DJ mixes strive to put on display when mixing, assuming the playlist is listened to in the order proposed by the playlist curator.

User playlisting is also an integral part of SoundCloud’s design, and perhaps the most apparent way in which musical associations are formed on the platform. Some use the playlisting function solely to categorize their findings for future listening, while others choose to engage with playlisting more so as a cultural practice. From a DJ’s perspective, the ability to create playlists reflects the curatorial aspect of a DJ’s job; reposting songs or adding them to a public-

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<sup>107</sup> Dunham, “SoundCloud Rap,” 108.

<sup>108</sup> McCourt and Zuberi, “Music and Discovery,” 124.

<sup>109</sup> Artists may only upload three hours of content for free, after which they would need to subscribe to SoundCloud Next Plus, their highest of three subscription tiers for artists. For DJs who regularly post mixes, three hours is decidedly limited.

facing playlist is akin to playing a song during a performance. It is, in a sense, a stamp of approval for the music, as well as an assertion of identity. Playlists may be categorical in nature, though every decision made is backed by an assessment of value, aesthetic consideration, and to an extent, an artistic vision. In this regard, SoundCloud proves to be a valuable place for DJs to explore curation routines and develop their musical persona. Through playlisting, users can engage with more public-facing forms of “taste building; reputation building; evaluating; and consuming” – all of which are significant elements of scene building as enabled by digital platforms, as Lange and Bürkner explain.<sup>110</sup> DJs, by nature, are representatives for the identity of their respective scenes; they are most often the medium through which music is transferred from producer to audience, be it in a club setting or via an online mix. In that light, playlisting allows DJs to engage in scene building even when not performing. Tom McCourt, in his work titled “Collecting Music in the Digital Realm,” claims that “[in] cyberspace, collecting becomes based not on the linkage of people to objects, but of the linkage of individuals to others,” which would explain why SoundCloud – with its emphasis on connection and community – has become such a valuable digital locus for music curation.<sup>111</sup>

So far, I have outlined how elements of both Bandcamp and SoundCloud may influence curation. Each platform proposes a different outlook on the formation of networked communities and the musical habitus of their respective userbases, and their feature sets allow for varying approaches to the task of discovering and collecting music in a considered way. In the next chapter, I shift my focus from the platforms themselves to the people who use them. Chapter 4 features the analyses of two interviews I conducted with local DJs. These DJs mobilize both digital platforms to develop their own personal music libraries and translate their findings into live performances and recorded DJ mixes. The accounts they offer of their personal curation methods and respective outlooks on their practice as DJs are crucial in responding to several of my research questions: how do curators navigate digital spaces, and in what ways are their roles as curators shaped by the platforms they frequent?

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<sup>110</sup> Lange and Bürkner, “Value Creation in Scene-Based Music Production,” 154.

<sup>111</sup> Tom McCourt, “Collecting Music in the Digital Realm,” *Popular Music and Society* 28, no. 2 (May 1, 2005): 252.

## Chapter 4: DJ Mixes and Interviews

### 4.1 Interview methodology

This chapter is meant to provide some insight into how DJs understand their own practice as curators and performers. The participants involved with this study were drawn from a small network of people active in the Montreal electronic dance music community. Both are DJs who can be considered amateur, though perform with relative frequency (approximately once or twice each month) at either DIY-type parties or small (sub-300 capacity) clubs around the city. Julia Kim (kiju) and Robert Rasciauskas (coldchainlogistics) are both involved in a music collective and party series called Sandwich District. As the two collective members based in Montreal (the other members currently live in Toronto), they act as resident DJs, organizers, promoters, and a key link between the two cities for Sandwich District events. The Sandwich District collective, and by extension the interview participants who run the collective, do not necessarily affiliate with one genre or style of music. Both DJs share the belief that the musical identity of a party or club night is the single most essential aspect to consider, and the headlining DJs they book for their events are drawn from a variety of musical subcultures, each representing a unique sonic vision and approach to the task of playing music to a dancefloor.

This section of the study is grounded in a hybrid form of performance and interview. These sessions involve two parts, the first being a one hour recorded DJ mix performance, which took place at my home studio in April of 2023. One month prior, the DJs were instructed to prepare for the recording session. It is essential to note that how the DJ decided to prepare was entirely up to them. For example, they could spend several hours over the course of the month collecting new music, or decide to solely use their existing collection; they could source digital files from Bandcamp, or vinyl records from a local shop; they could organize music into structured playlists, or upload all of their new findings to a USB drive in a random, unconsidered sequence. In essence, their curation and preparation process for this recording session was to be reflective of their own personal practice. Similarly, the DJs were given free reign as to what music they selected to include in their performance. The genre, tempo, geographic origin, and format of the music were all decided on by the participant, and there were no set guidelines or limitations on the performance itself, other than the length of the mix (one hour) and the condition that the performance had to be reflective of their practice as a *dance music* DJ. Seeing as the primary research goal and background literature have thus far been centered on dance music, I wanted to ensure that these mix recording/interview sessions would engage cohesively with the larger body of work. The mix recordings are meant to act as an audio component to this thesis and are available to listen to alongside the publication.

Recording a mix in such a scenario is undoubtedly distinct from playing a set in a club. Most notably, the purpose of the mix itself is inherently different – there is no crowd of dancers to play to, and so the primary motive for a club DJ is removed from the equation. The lack of a crowd also means an absence of crowd feedback, and so a DJ's selections become intrinsically more personal and less reactionary to external factors. Ultimately, the mix recording sessions offer participant DJs the opportunity to explore and experiment with their craft – albeit while remaining within the context of dance music. To account for the differences between preparing for a recorded mix and for a dancefloor, in the interview that followed, I asked participants if and how they approach curation differently for either scenario.



The interview, though grounded in the preceding mix, was intended to take a somewhat free-form approach to discussing the participant DJ's curation methods at large. I am interested in exploring how each individual navigates through Bandcamp or SoundCloud, what interface features they find useful, or if they have any creative techniques for finding music that are not inherently obvious in the platform's infrastructure. Furthermore, I inquired about what they look for in the music itself. Are they seeking out specific sonic elements? Songs that fit a particular mood? Or casting a wide net and collecting a variety of tracks, narrowing down their findings later on? These questions all help in understanding how people's decisions are informed by the curation sites they choose to engage with, and overall, how these curation sites are shaping curatorial practice. Working through these interviews gave me points of reflection on my own practices as a music collector and DJ, and I occasionally interject with my personal perspective. In the days following the interviews, I listened to the mix recordings once again in my home studio, taking note of significant moments and underlying themes in each one.

#### ***4.2 Defining the DJ mix***

Initially conceived as a means of replicating a live DJ performance in a readily shareable, consumable format, the recorded DJ mix has become an essential medium in electronic dance music. For dance music audiences, a track list is not a complete and viable representation of a DJ performance. Rather, individual tracks are "raw materials" used to construct a performance,<sup>112</sup> each one contextualized by the tracks played before and after. Thus, in order to fully grasp the ethos of a performance, it is essential to be able to hear how the individual tracks were fused together. Mixes were (and still are) essential archival materials for that purpose – returning to the experience of a live DJ performance. The primary function of DJ mixes has evolved, however, and they are now regarded as an artistic practice on their own. Some mixes might not feature dance music at all; DJs instead might opt for a blend of more traditional music styles centered around a particular theme, or layer spoken-word poetry over beatless soundscapes. Still, dancefloor-oriented mixes remain a valuable promotional tool for DJs, and a means for DJs to connect with their audiences on a consistent basis. A regular output of DJ mixes demonstrates a certain dedication to music discovery, curation, and technique, even when live event booking opportunities are scarce. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, DJ mixes published online were one of the only ways for DJs to connect with audiences and, to a very minor degree, preserve the momentum of their pre-pandemic gig schedules. Mixes can be presented in various ways: as part of a podcast series (usually curated and published by a collective of DJs, record label, or music publication), as a promotional mix for an upcoming event (circulated by the event promoter), played on-air at online radio stations like Montreal-based N10.AS and London-based NTS, or self-released by the DJ and published to their personal SoundCloud page.

In his 2013 work on DJ programming, Fikentsher argues that "the relationship between DJ and listener/dancer is perhaps at its most impersonal" when experienced through the online DJ mix. Outside of the club setting and "divorced from an instantaneously shared framework made up of time, space and culturally grounded conventions," he explains, the DJ and audience are inherently unable to engage with dance music in the same way.<sup>113</sup> In this light, it would seem that DJ mixes are disconnected from many of the spatial and interpersonal dimensions that define

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<sup>112</sup> Sarah Thornton, *Club Cultures: Music, Media, and Subcultural Capital* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1996), 102.

<sup>113</sup> Fikentscher, "'It's Not the Mix, It's the Selection': Music Programming in Contemporary DJ Culture," 131–32.

electronic dance music. However, the relationship between the online DJ mix and the club is likely not as disparate as Fikentsher contended a decade ago, and online DJ mixes have largely informed the evolution of live DJ performance as experienced in nightclubs and DIY parties today.

The online DJ mix is a more suitable way for club DJs to experiment with sounds outside of their usual musical scope, and eventually incorporate them into their live performances. The possibilities at home are less restricted; DJs can experiment with mixing techniques or genre fusions that they would be unlikely to try in a club setting for an audience with more defined expectations. The prospect of receiving negative feedback online is far less daunting than the possibility of clearing a club dancefloor with an out-of-touch selection, thus the direct and precise audience feedback afforded by SoundCloud can help a DJ decide what might ultimately be well-received by dancers. In a sense, more exploratory mixes also work towards conditioning an air of openness among audiences. Having heard more left-field selections in online mixes, dancers will arrive expecting and welcoming a certain level of musical unfamiliarity. The most beloved club DJs are generally those who do take risks and often venture off in unexpected directions at key moments in performances, though there still exist some constraints concerning how much experimentation would be tolerated in a dance party setting (by event organizers and venue owners, as well). Other factors, like room acoustics, soundsystem design, and the size of the club similarly have no impact on how a given track might resonate in a recorded mix, allowing a DJ to consider music from their library in its entirety when recording at home.

### ***4.3 Interview findings***

For this particular mix, Robert aimed to capture a distinct mood – “mean and dark,” in his own words. Another throughline for this mix was a sense of “striking sound design,” a descriptor that is admittedly subjective, but does have an implicit meaning or shared understanding among dance music enthusiasts. This music is usually quite hi-fi, with a prominent attention to the spatiality of the track (meaning the track is mixed in such a way to appear to have a certain depth when played in stereo). Robert made no attempt to highlight any specific genre, region, or era of dance music, though he did note that certain genres – modern dubstep and dancehall – do lend themselves to both the mood and attention to sound design he strived to capture, so both do have a significant presence throughout the mix.

The mix is notable for its non-linearity in terms of tempo. The pacing of Robert’s mix also challenges what would be considered a conventional mix arc: a gradual increase of tempo and energy, followed by a brief comedown period (mimicking the arc of most club performances, which follow a logic of gradually bringing people onto the dancefloor, holding them there for several hours, and then sending dancers home on a more subdued note). Instead, the energy of Robert’s mix fluctuates, shifting between high-impact drums and slow, brooding bass-heavy grooves. Still, Robert attests that it “kind of feels like a set more than a mix, [a little bit] sloppy, but overall fun.” This is in reference to the more sporadic nature of his choices that recall a completely open “crowd reactive” style of mixing, and the sometimes imperfect transitions between tracks that arise when there is no opportunity to record several takes of a mixing session. Taking this approach can be freeing, and thus more “fun,” as it embodies a less self-critical attitude in terms of executing flawless blends.

Despite beginning in the 140 BPM range, Robert creatively makes use of half-time rhythms to play music that is both slower and faster than the initial tempo of the mix. By

gradually increasing the tempo of his selections from 140 to the 160-175 BPM range, he creates the opportunity to seamlessly beat match with tracks as slow as 80 BPM. The result is an hour long mix that seems to naturally flow between slow, chugging dancehall to eclectic drum & bass style rhythmic formations. This unorthodox way of navigating tempo is, in part, enabled by an increased crossover of sound palettes from once disparate genres.

To relate this to earlier comments Robert made, many vastly different genres can be united by a similar sound palette – a throughline such as a “dark” mood or striking sound design – perhaps indicative of wider trends in music production that permeate a myriad of music niches. Dancehall and drum & bass, generally with tempos around 85 BPM and 170 BPM respectively, have always been compatible in regard to tempo. Though as dancehall and drum & bass see increasing inspiration from techno and UK bass music, there exists a prominent overlap in styling between the genres (both of which, in essence, are derived from Jamaican reggae and dub).

#### *4.3.1 Sourcing music*

Collecting music for mixes such as this one that prioritize a given mood or sonic palette above all else is often a challenging task. There is no easy way to filter searches that might lead to music with “striking sound design” or a specific feeling – instead, it requires casting a large net and hoping a few good tracks turn up inside. For Robert and Julia, this is the form of curation that has always appealed to them. Their libraries are an accumulation of Bandcamp and Soulseek<sup>114</sup> downloads that they return to when the opportunity to prepare a forthcoming mix arises. In this sense, neither Robert nor Julia tailor their curation practice for a given moment, but instead develop a catalogue ready for any scenario. Julia, in fact, does not even see this as “curating a library,” but instead “just saving stuff that makes [her] feel anything” and doing more of the curatorial work at a later point. When given the task of preparing a mix, Julia may “dig a little more intentionally,” though still keeps up the practice of saving music to her collection to reference when the right moment arises.

Robert makes use of certain functions inherent to Bandcamp in order to remain in the loop concerning new releases, even when not actively sourcing tracks. When asked about his hottest tip for finding new music, he quickly highlighted the importance of following artist and label pages in order to receive email notifications whenever new music is put out on the platform. This keeps fresh music flowing his way on a daily basis, meaning that all that is left to do is sift through it to see if anything is worth purchasing for later use. Julia noted that her preferred curation site varies, and really depends on her current level of engagement with the task at hand or motivation to discover new music. When she is feeling particularly motivated, Julia uses Discogs to sort through the back-catalogues of old record labels and obscure artists’ side-projects. Though rifling through hundreds of entries at a time on Discogs takes a significant amount of energy and focus, the results are often more rewarding; she is more likely to find a hidden gem, often tucked away on an overlooked EP or long-forgotten record label. When Julia is less inclined to take such a pointed approach, she uses Bandcamp – and several third-party extensions – to allow her to cover more ground musically with less manual labour involved. One such extension, Bandcamp Enhancement Suite, allows the keyboard’s directional keys to be used

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<sup>114</sup> Soulseek is a peer-to-peer file sharing service used by many dance music DJs to exchange music with one another. Users can exchange files for free by peering into the folders of other users and requesting permission to download.

to jump across albums and scrub through tracks – an efficiency boosting add-on that Julia jokingly claims turns her into a music digging “factory machine.” The downside to this, however, is that it makes her feel as though she is listening to each track less and less, in a sense disconnecting her from the music. Still, Julia feels as though sometimes a very quick listen is enough. “I trust my taste now more than in the past,” she notes, “so now it’s like, if it made it to my library, it’s going to be good.” A second extension adds a BPM readout and pitch slider next to each track (mimicking that of a turntable or CDJ), allowing Julia to rule out music outside of her desired tempo range, and also listen to tracks at alternative tempos to test their versatility before making a purchase. Playing songs outside of their standard tempo range can be incredibly rewarding, opening the door for creative uses of one track in many different contexts, and perhaps revealing an unexpected groove or sound effect not heard at the intended tempo.

Robert also spoke to the ability to browse other Bandcamp users’ collections: “There are so many other people like you who have been digging for music and it’s so nice that there are opportunities to peer inside, probably, a ton of work and knowledge that someone put into making some list [...] of records.” Still, Robert is somewhat hesitant to do so too regularly, likening the act of downloading music from other people’s collections as an act of “identity theft,” recalling the point made in Chapter 1 that protecting song information is a form of identity preservation. While he does see the value in browsing other users’ collections as a form of inspiration, he affirms that there is a line to be drawn between appreciating the curatorial efforts of another DJ and making liberal use of it. In this sense, Robert sees the various digital platforms available to him as useful tools but understands that there is the potential of overindulging in their community-oriented affordances. Julia, though still wary about the potential of too closely emulating another DJ’s style, suggests that there are ways to draw from personal collections without the relationship being purely extractive. In the past, Julia has taken to messaging Bandcamp users whose taste she admires, sparking a form of knowledge exchange, and perhaps even a bridge between music tastes, scenes, or communities. By reaching out and acknowledging another curator’s work, Julia feels more comfortable using their collection as a springboard to dive deeper into a particular style of music.

This also ties into the unique way that Julia sees music discovery: as a matter of “primary and secondary sources.” On the question of what it actually means to *find* or *discover* a song, Julia says, “for me, it’s like, you listened to the radio. Like platforms that maybe your peers aren’t tuning into.” She also likens this to going out to a club and using Shazam (an app that can identify music being played out loud in real time), which she attests is “pretty organic, it’s like primary knowledge.” According to her outlook, discovering the song by hearing it on the radio or in a club, for example, is akin to extracting information from a primary source. The alternative would be surfing a compiled source, like a collection on Bandcamp, or reading a track list that was posted alongside a mix. These are entirely useful ways to find new music, though Julia would argue that they do not necessarily qualify as *discovering* something new, and are more comparable to secondary sources in that regard.

### 4.3.2 Taste

Along these lines, Robert touches on a widely held view among electronic music enthusiasts: taste is deeply intertwined with identity, and developing a distinct identity is crucial in terms of standing out as a “good” DJ. Of course, taste is primarily reflected in the music itself, and the ability to sift through endless amounts of music and discover something valuable is an

essential skill. Taste also manifests in several other aspects of a DJ's practice. Technique is generally dependent on the style of music being played – some genres are conducive to quick mixes and fast cuts, while others demand long, drawn-out blends. Likewise, DJs playing mostly techno might rely on the reverb and delay effects offered by a Pioneer DJM mixer to build and release tension, yet a dubstep DJ might omit effects altogether, instead highlighting the buildups and breakdowns of the tracks to sway the energy of the room. Indeed, the type of music a DJ values might have an effect on their methodology when expanding their library. On a simplistic level, this might mean that DJs who tend towards older music released on vinyl use Discogs – an archival platform and used record marketplace – as their primary source for discovering music. Similarly, a DJ who is introduced to Discogs early on in their career might develop a taste for older vinyl releases, and this will in turn be a major factor in defining their identity (a prime example of musical habitus at play).

Stylistic differences could also mean an entirely altered approach to listening. A DJ who plays more functional sounding tracks might not need to listen to as much of their songs (maybe even only one or two bars) before deciding where to place it and how to prepare it. Recalling “The Art of DJing: Objekt,” referenced in Chapter 1, Hertz explains how a lot of dance music tracks “are [not] designed to be listened to from beginning to end, they're designed to be mixed into a set,” and getting a full grasp of a track is primarily a matter of understanding when the primary changes occur.<sup>115</sup> According to this outlook, it is much easier to listen to a high volume of music at a time. People who value more intricate or dynamic music might need to intimately know their tracks before playing them in a club, which translates to far more time spent with each song. Robert's opinion on the matter falls somewhere between the two extremes; in fact, he largely predicates his perception of what makes a “good DJ” on their ability to manipulate both types of music to their advantage.

Though Julia does not necessarily think habitus is the biggest defining factor in identity formation, she does propose several material factors that shape a DJ's identity as a performer. Access to equipment (which may be a function of several geographical, social, and economic variables) can play a major role in determining how (and how fast) someone might develop their identity. The *quality* of equipment available, too, might impact the techniques and stylistic tendencies DJs adopt. Far more than habitus, however, Julia suggests that human qualities have the biggest impact on a DJ's identity.

Julia, who works as a speech language pathologist, highlighted the possibility of a connection between people's communication style, or pragmatics, and their taste in music. She also believes an individual's optimal levels of stimulation are a significant factor in shaping taste. Julia self-describes as “easily overstimulated,” and offered this as a possible explanation for why she has “been gravitating towards more spacious, sparse, slower music” in recent months. This also explains her love for performing in the opening slot of a party or club night – traditionally a role less favourable than being the peak hour, headlining DJ. Here, Julia feels free to explore slower, moodier, and perhaps more experimental music that gradually builds in intensity as the dancefloor begins to fill. Similarly, Julia has embraced being what she calls a “room 2 DJ” (room 2 referring to a secondary dancefloor at some parties, usually dedicated to off-kilter, less conventional forms of dance music). “For me, room 2 is a kind of respite,” she jokes – though she does see how the opportunity for space and creativity offered by room 2, for both dancers and DJs, is naturally compatible with her nature and demeanor.

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<sup>115</sup> Lynch, “The Art of DJing.”

Ultimately Julia's perspective offers an alternate understanding of taste that somewhat devalues the relevance of Bourdieu's theory of habitus, and the initial importance I had placed on platforms in taste formation processes. Though social context, environment, and curation sites certainly do contribute to taste formation, it is likely that in some cases, innate human qualities have a greater impact on musical preferences.

### 4.3.3 Preparation

On the subject of preparation, Robert suggests that the decision to curate a set is an artistic or aesthetic decision in and of itself. When asked about how he goes about the task of collecting and organizing for a given performance, he noted that it "depends on how curated [he's] looking to go." In other words, depending on the circumstances of an upcoming performance, Robert may decide to freely improvise in the moment, go in with a vague idea of what sort of music to play, or prepare a more narrowly focused playlist. Though even a fully improvised set needs to be drawn from a previously constructed library of music, and so curation figures in in some respect. While previously Robert's library was completely "open" – no playlists, just a mass of music on a USB stick to be navigated during a performance – he has since been categorizing his music in playlists loosely based on genre. Though he has made several attempts over the years to think of new ways to categorize, he has yet to settle on one method that is entirely reliable. Categorization, to Robert, is a work in progress, and one that links deeply to an affective relationship he shares with his music, rather than a pragmatic one. His outlook seems to reflect a theory proposed by George Lewis in 1992, which

offers a middle-ground between the structures and pre-existing sets of practices and tastes that mediate individuals' preferences on the one hand, and their agentic possibilities to browse through content and incorporate it in their repertoire of preferences according to their affective responses.<sup>116</sup>

As much as a platform may exert influence over a curator, their own affective inclinations will ultimately guide them one way or another.

Julia notes, as well, how she tries to "veer away from the whole genre thing," because "modern music, really a lot of it, doesn't fall into genre boxes anyways." Her categorization method seems to be a little more systematic than that of Robert, and relies heavily on Rekordbox's integrated tagging system. Julia offered a look into her Rekordbox tag directory, which is organized as follows:

FEEL: gritty - mystical - building - suspense/tension - groovy - feels/deep/journey - psychedelic - cute  
ELEMENTS: chords - pads - drums (hand drums) - acid - vocals - subby  
TEXTURE: minimal / sparse - beatless (ambient) - reverb/noisy - chunky/thumpy - heavy - light  
FUNCTION: transition - opener - closer - peak time

All of these tags were inputted manually by Julia herself, though she drew inspiration from a workshop offered by New York DJ and producer, Sobolik. In this workshop, Sobolik suggests that tags can be used to "deconstruct genre." This approach is very formulaic, relying on combinations of tags from columns like Mood and Energy to lead them in different directions

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<sup>116</sup> Nowak, *Consuming Music in the Digital Age*, 113.

during sets. This approach solves a problem posed by more conventional genre-based folders: where to put a song that is adjacently informed by several different genres? Keeping folders too specific means some songs will not fit anywhere, though folders that are too vague might make it hard to recall specific songs in the moment while DJing. Formulaic tagging means a DJ would only need to recall one or two sonic elements of a song to locate it in their library, or alternatively, input several tags they associate with a genre if they choose to go in a genre-specific direction. For example, a song with the Mood tag “dreamy/deep” and the Energy tag “step” (referring to beats with a strong emphasis on upbeats between quarter notes) might recall songs that can be either directly or adjacently associated with classic breakbeat and UK garage. From here, they can browse the results to find a suitable track to play, or input a third tag to filter their results with more precision (if they wanted to play a UK garage song featuring vocals, for example, they need only to select a third “vocal” tag). To Julia, following such a formulaic system is a much more reliable approach than working purely with her affective responses. “I was doing the whole “feels” thing for a while,” she explains, “[but] I feel like I think I need to be a better DJ to be doing that. It’s a little assertive to be doing that – you can really shake things up and if you’re not doing it effectively and with decent technique, I think it can sound bad.” Likewise, Julia prefers to set cue points within her tracks and align the visual beat grid in Rekordbox (which helps when beatmatching, as well as using the CDJ’s looping function). In her own words, “whatever can save me time on the decks, I can use that time to be more creative. [...] I do two minutes of work on a track, and I have that help, that support, forever.”

Robert’s approach is rather the opposite, though he explains that each track is set up in such a way that will ultimately help him while mixing. To some DJs, the most helpful preparation would be one that enables clean, quick mixing: streamlined playlists that can be swiftly navigated, perfectly aligned beat grids, and pre-set cue points. Instead, Robert aims to prepare in a way that will help him “understand the effect that songs in [each] folder are going to have.” He notes how, often times, with more conventional modes of categorization – like genre or tempo-based sorting methods – “you’ll be staring at some means of categorization [that] doesn’t really mean anything in the context of, like, playing music.” Robert’s playlists are often titled according to an experience or sentiment he associates with the music contained within. For example, Robert has a category called “hype” – a descriptor he attributes to music that has lots of energy or “will make you move.” For all intents and purposes, this is a *functional* category (music to incite dancing). Interestingly, he also has a category called “hype – nod head/cool/hard” which is more so a categorization based on a perception of how people might receive and embody the music. This category can still be considered high energy, but he associates it less with a specific function, and more so with an atmosphere or mood he hopes to convey on the dancefloor. He admits that this likely does not make sense to anyone but himself, but cites examples of songs that would still be considered “hype” by genre aficionados, thus encouraging a sense of excitement in the right context. This affective approach contrasts a more archival one that values categorization based on the metadata of tracks (title, genre, release year, artist, record label, etc.), and so Robert frequently edits this information to suit his needs. Noting how he often forgets the name of songs anyways, Robert often replaces the track titles with brief descriptors speaking to the mood or prominent sonic elements he generally associates with the song. Likewise, he sometimes replaces the original album artwork with blank coloured slates, enabling him to make quick associations while performing (i.e., he may more readily recall a “blue” track with a title that references “floaty pads” and a “woodblock snare” than he would an actual song name and artwork that do not inherently reference any sonic features of the track).

#### *4.3.4 Interview takeaways*

In comparing and contrasting these two interviews, it became apparent that though Julia and Robert take differing (often times directly oppositional) approaches to each task – discovering, curating, preparing, and organizing – their practices on the whole seem to be equally dependent on affective responses, habitus, and functional considerations. In other words, both DJs were intent on striking a balance between these three dimensions. Focusing too much on affective responses to music might not translate well to a dancefloor full of individuals who will, by nature, all have their own affective reactions to different songs. A purely functional approach, on the other hand, can easily feel stale or mechanical to a crowd of dancers. Finally, drawing too heavily on one’s habitus to inform their selections leaves little space for taking risks, or creatively exploring other musical styles. Striking this balance is ultimately a matter of care-taking, and once again speaks to a certain ethos championed by many dance music DJs. Robert and Julia both take care to draw from a variety of sources, never leaning too heavily on one influence, one approach, or one curation site.

Robert, for example, discovers music and curates his library in a rather functional matter; he actively seeks out music that fills gaps in his current collection. When it comes to preparation, organization, and performance, however, his approach is entirely “feelings” based; he organizes his library based on a personal perception of mood and energy, edits his songs’ metadata in a way that alludes to sometimes intangible aspects of the music, and improvises his performances by thinking about what mood he would like to convey in the given moment. Julia searches for music by letting her affective responses guide her; she listens to a vast array of music at once and will choose to keep any song that makes her “feel something,” regardless of its genre, origin, or particular use to her in that moment. Though as far as track preparation and song selection are concerned, Julia will abide by a precise categorization system and make use of many of the CDJ’s functions to select and mix music with more consistency, as she is weary of letting herself be guided purely by her feelings in the moment. In the concluding section of this thesis, I will highlight how the varying practices of DJs like Julia and Robert relate to greater ideas of habitus, intentionality, and care-taking in curation.



## Conclusion

When beginning my research, I set out to use Bandcamp and SoundCloud as the primary sites on which I would explore how DJs discover, collect, and curate the music they choose to perform. I knew from experience how these two websites worked on a fundamental level, and why they were popular among both DJs and listeners. Bandcamp pays artists and producers relatively well, and so it is a reputable place to acquire music; SoundCloud makes it easy to upload mixes, and offers unlimited, free listening with infrequent ads, so it is naturally favoured by listeners. Knowing this, my intention was to better understand the particular elements of these platforms that made them so conducive to DJ practice at large, and why they had become so valuable to the communities they host. I embarked on a form of platform study, in which I looked at salient elements of each website, and thought about the ways that they can be mobilised and leveraged to aid with the process of discovering, compiling, and eventually acquiring digital music files. I also began to understand the ways in which these platforms were related to one another; how, working in tandem, they act as a sort of a musical ecosystem that both reflects and influences cultural shifts in music consumption.

Throughout this process, I found myself reflecting on how these two websites have shaped my own practice as a DJ and curator. How were my own methods impacted by the systems used by the two websites, and in what ways was I making creative (or unconventional) use of the platforms' functions to find more obscure music? Specifically, music which would aid in developing a distinct identity as a performer. At this stage, I decided it would be valuable to tap into the perspectives of other DJs who make use of these websites as principal sources for their practice as curators. I asked two local DJs, Kiju and coldchainlogistics, to each record a DJ mix, all the while reflecting on how they make use of available technologies to aid them in the process of discovering music, deciding what to include, and preparing for the mix. The mix would act as a sonic accompaniment to my work, but also a starting point for discussions with each DJ about their curation practices.

In "Chapter 1: Defining the DJ," I set out to delineate the type of DJ central to my research. Here, I deconstructed the practice of (what I refer to as) an electronic dance music DJ. This section of my work considered the different equipment used by DJs, the techniques they employ while performing, the cultural importance and role of the DJ, and crucially, the curatorial dimension to the task of DJing that ultimately underpins my research interests.

In "Chapter 2: Bandcamp," I looked towards one of the two primary curation sites for contemporary dance music DJs. I performed a platform analysis of Bandcamp, illustrating how the digital music marketplace acts as a space for DJs to gain insight into the collections of their peers, discover music, support independent music producers, and purchase digital files for DJ use. Perhaps the most valuable aspect of Bandcamp's design from a curatorial perspective, which became apparent after examining the platform's open genre tagging system, is its functionality as a space where users can develop musical folksonomies. These folksonomies aid curators in many respects, but most of all, they prove to be more comprehensive than traditional genre trees in making sense of increasingly complex levels of genre hybridization for more directed and informed forms of discovery. Overall, this chapter highlighted why Bandcamp is so central in shaping the contemporary electronic dance music landscape and fostering an ethos of care-taking and intentionality in curation.

"Chapter 3: SoundCloud" takes a similar approach to the previous section, instead focused on a second digital music platform. Rather than offering digital music files for purchase,

SoundCloud is a platform designed to host streamable audio content, namely DJ mixes. This format gives listeners the opportunity to hear how DJs organize, blend, and present their music collections, and SoundCloud's social-network-like interface encourages even further community building between DJs, producers, and fans alike. Again, this portion of my research underlined the importance of musical folksonomies and knowledge sharing amongst music enthusiasts.

"Chapter 4: DJ Mixes and Interviews" showed how these two platforms are used in practice by active dance music DJs in the local Montreal music scene. Though the two interviewees go about curating in different ways, one common thread made apparent (through both digital platform analyses and the interview sessions) is that community and connectivity play a central role in informing and inspiring curation. In fact, it appears as though interactions between SoundCloud and Bandcamp users, whether taking place on the respective platforms or externally, are largely shaping how these platforms come to develop their own language and distinct personalities.

Though these platforms certainly do steer DJs to curate in particular ways as I initially believed, the extent to which electronic music communities actually impact the very nature of the platforms has become more apparent through my research. As the classic musical genre tree grows increasingly intricate, the basis for how independent music platforms categorize and classify music is becoming more reliant on collective sense-making processes. The emphasis on free tagging systems is a response to cultural shifts in how music practitioners conceptualize the relationship between once seemingly disparate sounds. More importantly, however, is that solidifying and cherishing these relationships – relationships between genres, artists, and communities – is at the core of how people curate. Likewise, how people navigate these digital spaces is entirely dependent on their own perspectives on curation. Users on these websites have established their own customs and conventions, from using SoundCloud comment sections to request track IDs, to pre-emptively referencing prolific Bandcamp commenters on newly released records as a form of signposting.<sup>117</sup> This all feeds into the notion of care-taking, and stems from a desire to play music with some sort of significance; personal, cultural, or otherwise.

Furthermore, these tagging systems rely on the communal cultural knowledge of the platform's users to develop, which is why the seemingly stripped-back integrated social features on Bandcamp and SoundCloud have been so crucial in expanding the usefulness and value of these websites to curators and DJs. Being able to browse the collections of other users on Bandcamp may seem like nothing more than a means to gratuitously draw from a selection of music that someone else has done the work to uncover and compile, but as one interviewee alluded to, the opportunity to connect with others who share similar musical tastes and peer into the musical habitus of other DJs is equally present and especially valuable. Here, we can see how musical habitus is expanded far beyond purely geographical considerations. Understanding how other people curate is equally important for broadening your own practice.

Even as a DJ, organizing your library is no longer a matter of simply putting music into defined boxes, mostly because the boundaries between genres are growing increasingly fluid.

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<sup>117</sup> One Bandcamp user, SVEBBE, has become somewhat of an infamous figure on the platform for his commitment to leaving an encouraging comment on every release he purchases. Though his collection does not favour any particular genre, there is an identifiable sonic relationship between most of the music he purchases and comments on – so much so that some other Bandcamp users have begun to playfully reference him in comments left on newly posted material that he has not yet come across or purchased. In a way, these comments act as a testament to his penchant for curating a distinct collection, and to other users "in the know," they may be a subtle indicator of the EP's stylistic leanings.

Consequently, DJ curation practices – from pre-set preparation to track selection during the performance – are now highly individualized and suited to the preferences of each DJ, but often rooted in scene-wide understandings of what it means to creatively display personal taste to an audience. With social features integrated into (and thus global connectivity enabled by) music marketplaces and platforms, there is an ever-present opportunity for discourse surrounding the music to emerge, and a greater emphasis on sharing between DJs. As both interview subjects alluded to, both implicitly and explicitly, connecting with others is central to the development of personal practice, identity, and of course, community.

When beginning my research, I set out to respond to one overarching question: how do digital music platforms figure into the curatorial practice of the contemporary DJ? These platforms may steer curators one way or another by nature of their user interface or integrated algorithms, but ultimately, they are not necessarily shaping the innate qualities of curation. Instead, platforms like Bandcamp and SoundCloud are most valuable when understood as tools that *enhance* our ability to curate with care and expand on our pre-existing habitus. While the tools we are using to collect and curate are veering more towards the digital and technological, the need for human intervention in these processes is not minimized in the slightest. In fact, there are more ways than ever to go about the task of curating, whether it be for DJing or otherwise. If anything, these technologies have only made curation a more participatory practice. Moving forward, it would be useful to explore ideas of networked curation. Even if a music curator is working alone, they are intrinsically tied to a network of other music producers and consumers, and influenced by how others have decided to sort, organize, and categorize the content they have engaged with. These curatorial networks are then what inform the tastes and preferences of localized music scenes, interconnected communities, and eventually, global music trends.

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