The Art Of Turntablism

The humble turntable has put music in a spin over the last 50 years - giving rise to a whole new genre of sound, artistic skill and culture.

The turntable has been used as a musical instrument since the 1940s and 1950s when experimental composers began sampling and creating music entirely produced by the turntable.

However, it wasn’t until the 1990s that the term ‘turntablism’ was coined. This definition marked a significant transformation in the role of the disk jockey (DJ), which had been evolving since the 1970s. Traditionally the role of the DJ was to play records on the turntable, mixing in one track after the other. The emergence of a new music genre, hip hop, produced DJs who were significantly more skilled. These DJs – or turntablists, as they came to be known – were performers and musical artists in their own right who moved records whilst playing on the turntable to manipulate the sound and create original compositions.

For many hip hop connoisseurs, DJs Kool Herc, Grandmaster Flash and Afrika Bambaataa are turntablism’s forefathers. Through practice they developed extremely high levels of hand eye co-ordination and an uncanny ability to find precise points in a song by dropping the needle on a record.

Kool Herc is widely credited with developing the ‘break-beat’ technique which extends the break – the song’s climax – indefinitely. Two copies of the same record are put on the decks, and the mixer switches between them, creating a rhythmic beat by looping the breaks.

Inspired by Herc, Bambaataa expanded awareness of break-beat deejaying through his famous street parties.

It was a protégé of Grandmaster Flash, the Grand Wizard Theodore, who created ‘scratching’ - the sound made when the record is rubbed back and forth. He discovered the technique by accident as he stopped the record with his hand to hear what his mother was shouting out to him. In the 1980s scratching was one of the main features of the emerging turntablism artform and a staple of hip hop music. Herbie Hancock’s 1983 single “Rockit” is perhaps the most influential record of the period because its use of scratching established the DJ as one of the key pillars of the song.
The 1990s saw an increase in the invention of new, more sophisticated turntable techniques. DJs began to push the boundaries of what they could achieve and a range of new scratches were created.

DJ’s Spinbad, Cash Money and Jazzy Jeff transformed turntablism by inventing the ‘Transformer scratch’ - so named for the sound it created which echoed the popular 1980s cartoon. This technique of flicking the cross fader back and forth on the mixer whilst simultaneously scratching gave a greater tonal range and allowed DJs to experiment with the rhythmic qualities.

The Crab, named because the DJ’s fingers move back and forth from side to side like a crab whilst flicking the cross fader, also came out of turntablists innovating to establish their own signature styles.

However, it is Beat Juggling which is perhaps the most important development of the decade. A DJ uses the mixer, in combination with the turntables, to switch between two identical records at lightning fast speed, looping or re-combining individual sounds to produce an entirely new beat. This technique effectively evolved turntablism from reworking existing tracks to composing music.

With the rise of hip hop the DJ had undergone a dramatic transformation – from a player of records, to a composer of new, exciting music and a chain in the creation of an entirely new artform.

Turntablism continues to evolve, with artists innovating to be the fastest, most creative players of their instrument – the once humble turntable.

(Taken from http://www.pbs.org/opb/historydetectives/feature/the-art-of-turntablism/)