Book Review

Mashed Up: Music, Technology, and the Rise of Configurable Culture

Aram Sinnreich
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Reviewed by Mark V. Campbell

After almost a decade of innovative musical creations fueled by rapid and expansive technological advancement, Adam Sinnreich's book arrives on the academic scene to make sense of the pop culture explosion of remixing and mash-ups. With the rise of popular artists such as DJ Dangermouse, M.I.A., Girtalk, and DJ Spooky, in addition to the increasing accessibility of music creation software, remixing and mash-ups significantly characterized the popular music scene in the past decade. Sinnreich utilizes the term "configurable culture" to deftly capture the social and technological dimensions of a paradigmatic shift due to recent developments in communication technology (70). Sinnreich's background in the world of journalism makes this book an easy read and a great entry point for anyone interested in remix culture. Encompassing DJ remixes, video mixes, and live and post-production remixes from the techno, mash up, and hip hop worlds, *Mashed Up* takes its reader into the inner workings of a new cultural epoch. In a recent interview with media scholar Henry Jenkins, Sinnreich highlights the main contribution of his book, which poses a difficult yet immensely important question: "Can the old set of metaphors and institutions survive this shift in cultural production, or will we require a new set of operating assumptions? And if the latter is the case, what might these new social structures look like?"¹

Mashed Up is a significant work because it clearly lays out the changing terrain of the music industry in the West by highlighting the rise of configurable culture. For a book on mash-ups, it is ironically but usefully divided into three sections: "When the Mode of the Music Changes," "Drawing Lines in the Sand," and "The Lessons: Configurability and the New Framework." The first section lays out the book's conceptual and theoretical framework, which Sinnreich calls the "modern framework," outlining the limits and complexities that litter popular music's industries and cultures. Part of this landscape includes institutions that reinforce a discursive framework that includes a historical dialectic of music regulation and resistance. Sinnreich highlights the logic underpinning Western musical cultures and industries, illuminating the artist/audience binary, along with other important binaries: original/copy, art/craft, performance/composition, figure/ground, and materials/tools (43). Part of the "modern framework," as Sinnreich suggests, is the Kantian exaltation of the Artist as genius, a distinguished individual whose work stands apart from folk creations. CBC's Glenn Gould studio in Toronto, for example, is a clear part of this intellectual legacy, and of course this romantic ideal is part of the reason why Western art music composers such as Bach, Mozart, and others are household names. Sinnreich demonstrates both the inadequacy of this Kantian notion today, as well as the rejection of this notion of Artist as genius by many configurable artists.

In the second section of the book, Sinnreich surveys a broad cross-section of Americans involved in "configurable culture," and interviews key informants, mash-up DJs, and record label executives such as DJ Earworm, Si Begg, and DJ Paul V. The juxtaposition of the binaries outlined in the first part of the book works beautifully to expose the conceptual weakness of our "modern framework." For example, the idea of the Artist and how one evaluates and defines an Artist is clearly thrown into disarray by configurable culture. Similarly, the audience/author binary is also significantly troubled by the existence of remixes and mash-ups. Several interviewees weigh in on their definitions of authorship and Artist, providing an increasingly muddled picture of these conceptual binaries that plague Western Enlightenment thinking. For the most part, their views are refreshing and realistic, and add to the readability of this book.

It is in his discussion of the performance/composition binary that Sinnreich uncovers what I would contend is a core component of his argument, worthy of deeper reflection. Sinnreich turns to improvisation and mediation to expose the ways in which the performance/composition binary is deeply problematic. He cites African-American jazz and hip hop as musical forms that involve templates or structures that "balance individual liberty and communal responsibility" within which collective improvisation and thus composition can occur (86). One could extend Sinnreich's claim to include other Afro-diasporic musics such as dub, steel pan, or *quelbe*. As *Mashed Up* demonstrates, the "configurable" musics of the African diaspora in particular have seemed to develop outside of Western society's dominant metaphors in unique and compelling ways.

Part three, "The Lessons: Configurability and the New Framework," is the concluding section of the book. Like all good conclusions, it opens up more critical and timely questions. By focusing on the ways in which institutions and corporations have reacted to configurable music, Sinnreich does well to demonstrate resistance, cooperation, and co-optation within the music industry. We are not left with a naïve notion that configurable music has come to save the day and easily democratize the cultural landscape in the face of oligopolistic record labels and media giants. Importantly, Sinnreich uses this section to outline in his final chapter what he calls five "principles" of a possible new discursive framework: "Configurable Collectivism," "the Reunion of Labour," "the Collision of Public and Private," "the Shift from Linearity to Recursion," and "DJ Consciousness." Despite detailing how all five principles might form the basis of a new discursive framework, it is his final principle, DJ consciousness, that Sinnreich rightly points to as a reservoir for the other four principles, encompassing efforts of disempowered, othered, and marginalized individuals who democratically seek to recapture, rearticulate, and redefine culture in ways that again might be beneficial to humankind and not just corporations.

However, in attempting to articulate the critical importance of DJ consciousness by using W.E.B. DuBois' famous theory of double-consciousness, Sinnreich's mix stumbles. Sinnreich cites DuBois' famous formulation that, "It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others," to describe how cultural producers and consumers are othered by acts of surveillance and the commodification of configurable musicians (203). Considering that DuBois' intentions were presumably to illuminate how one's humanity is stripped away due to race and racism, equating "double consciousness" with DJ consciousness may not have been the most tasteful way for Sinnreich to achieve his point. What he does make clear is that there is a public consciousness that has been stimulated by several alienating tendencies of our modern discursive framework. I imagine Sinnreich's gesture towards DuBois was intended to demonstrate that the alienation created by cultural institutions has a lineage in Afro-diasporic life as expressed in musical forms, with jazz and hip hop being the most well-known.

Mashed Up does an excellent job of bringing to the fore and making sense of the epochal shift signaled by configurable music. Beyond the scope of this book, but nevertheless relevant, are all the ways in which configurability—the era of the mash-up—reverberates throughout consumer culture *outside* of music, including novels, athletic shoe designs, and advertising. These different spheres, although only briefly touched on in *Mashed Up*, underscore the importance of Sinnreich's observations and the enormous tidal wave of participatory cultural innovation. For all the claims that have been attributed to jazz and improvised musics, and their legacies of communal sensibilities that might model democratic life, Western musics may *now* finally be arriving at that transitional moment promised generations ago. Although musicians and commentators have, for decades, viewed jazz and other improvised musics as potential harbingers of social change, surprisingly it is the "configurable" culture detailed by Sinnreich that might actually offer the blossoming of a new era of socially integrated musics that induce more democratic, participatory futures.

Notes

¹ Jenkins, Henry. "The Reconfigurable Culture of Contemporary Music: An Interview with Aram Sinnreich (Part One)." *Confessions of an AcaFan: The Official Weblog of Henry Jenkins*. Wordpress, 3 Sept. 2010. Web. 02 Jan 2013. <http://henryjenkins.org/2010/09/an_interview_with_aram_sinnrei.html>.