

BIG ISSUES IN ELECTRONIC MUSIC by **DANIEL WANG**

== For the Environ website, Faith Magazine online, Discotopia, and whomever else might want it==

Actually, this article (blog) was going to be a discussion about "the various elements of a DJ set". A bit pedantic, really. A tribute to my dance mentor Muhammad Omni, a handsome, idealistic black guy who still lives in Brooklyn, and with whom I spent countless hours between 1993 and 1997 on the disco dance floors of Manhattan. I can hear his thick southern twang, telling me that it was never about "black music" alone -- his steps were sometimes robotic, sometimes Latin, graceful like pages of a 1950s fashion magazine, or rough and energetic like a Maasai ceremonial stomp. So these ought to be the kaleidoscope of sounds we blend, which are now available to us all on vinyl... if only we spend enough time on eBay and Gemm! ... blah blah blah...But you've all heard that before, and it got sidelined by a couple of emails in my mailbox yesterday.

So instead, the topic shall be vaguely.... serious. BASICALLY, HERE'S HOW IT STARTED: I went and DJ'd in Israel a few months ago, and the promoters there wanted to invite a certain well-known producer of electronic music, whom is a close friend of a close friend of mine. So, I sent an email to him with the contacts, but his response surprised me: he wouldn't go because he felt uneasy about "entertaining an occupying power". It really got me upset somehow. There was a certain righteousness about his tone, but it was something more than that which bothered me -- this absolutist, simplified view of the situation. First, I responded, if it's out of fear for personal safety, I can understand; but you're not going there to DJ as a court jester for Ariel Sharon -- you're going to share your music with young people like yourself, who might (in fact, mostly) agree with your position on Sharon's policies, and who, moreover, hope that your performance brings some inspiration into their lives. So we ended up in an e-mail discussion (our first in years) -- in which this fellow producer also discussed a boycott of America by European artists, since America was now also occupying Iraq. (Japan, Germany, Central America, Cuba, Vietnam... when, since World War II, has America NOT been an occupying power somewhere, or been meddling in other countries' affairs?) There was a similar boycott of South Africa due to apartheid in the early 1980s, with that dreadful single "I ain't gonna play Sun City" as its anthem. I will confess that I never quite understood this boycott. If it was about black artists not going to play as minstrels for rich segregated white audiences, fine. But could the reality ever have been so simple? Any nation is a complex mixture of people who might agree or disagree with its dominant national policies; I wonder if one can simply "boycott a nation", wholesale, by refusing to play there. If, in the 1980's, I were a black American musician, or of any color really, I'd at least like to have gone there and seen the truth of apartheid with my own eyes. Moreover, I think I'd like to have found a chance to play for black audiences, and to look around for more than just apartheid -- it would have been a chance to learn something about African traditions in general, and build a bridge, no matter how ephemeral, with people who very much needed music and contact from the outside world. Well, that's all very dreamy and idealistic! The reality of DJ'ing in Tel Aviv was in fact much more banal. It wasn't exactly the Gaza strip or Jerusalem. (For more on this, go to Mike Kelley Polar's link on playing in Ramallah -- <http://www.applehill.org> It seems Environ artists are prone to touring the Middle East, aren't they?) I had a posh hotel room for 3 nights; I strolled along the beach front at dawn. The only hint of the risk of terrorism was a lone security guard in front of a shopping center, who scanned everyone with a metal detector before they entered. Did I achieve any political objective by DJ'ing in Tel Aviv? I don't think so. Did I entertain the complacent citizens of Zion, and thereby lull them into believing that life in Israel is fine and hip and fashionable, and it is okay oppress the Palestinians who also rightfully belong there? I rather doubt it. (The Marxist in me contemplates the 10% of truth in that proposition, but really now...) It wasn't an unusually brilliant night, either. Some of the audience didn't go for my campy, funky, rock and roll electronic disco. For most people in the club, it was just another night out. And for me, like at most of my gigs, the nice thing was meeting the few "music heads" in Tel Aviv who care deeply about music, and exchanging views with them. Simply put, I'm glad I had a chance to go. Tel Aviv is a racially diverse and energetic city, and although it might not have the glitter of Paris or London, it is interesting in its own way. I learned a bit more about the region, even if only geographically, and want to go back and see more. If I get a chance to share what I do with Palestinians or other Arabs, I will gladly go there as well. But I doubt I'd achieve that by sitting afar and waving a disapproving finger at Israeli clubgoers. What bothered me about the exchange with this fellow producer was that he couldn't seem to separate his "music" from a list of lofty, mostly "liberal" political and intellectual catchphrases which inform many of his stage shows. Rants against Nike, McDonald's, transnational corporations, industrial waste... Experimenting with modern sampling and sequencing technology in his productions... (We rant about the environment, yet we all continue to press tunes on vinyl, a petroleum by-product, and fly on fuel-consuming jets to gigs every week, don't we? But he protested -- AT LEAST he is trying to do away with those PLASTIC INNER SLEEVES.) The modern world is terribly complex. In fact, my personal political beliefs are almost identical to his, and I'm probably just as

dogmatic about them. (I actually separate my garbage happily into 5 categories -- in Germany, they are so damn serious about the environment!) It came down to a very basic, simple question about what we do as musicians, as "artists". WHAT one plays or creates is purely a matter of taste. There are many works of art with political content which remain moving and important. But when one exploits political gestures, or certain sampling techniques, as the principle feature of one's shows, it somehow troubles me. And this exchange about whether one should play a gig in Tel Aviv highlighted this disagreement. I found myself writing back in the next email: you know, you should go to Tel Aviv as long as you believe that there's something in your music which transcends political boundaries. In other words, go, if you feel that what you do offers people something of emotional and spiritual value (which includes "having fun"), and only if that is more important to you than the "public gesture" of boycotting Israel. And if you can't separate the individual human beings who live there from the policy which happens to dominate their present regime, then don't go, and that would be your personal choice, which I can also respect. It begs another question. Can we choose our audiences, and should we? As this DJ thing becomes ever more international, many of us have the chance to travel to ever further and more exotic places. Yes, we are sometimes merely entertaining corrupt gangsters in suits in Moscow, or jaded, drunk fashionistas at a runway afterparty in Paris, or throngs at another open-air summer festival somewhere in Middle Europe, or tacky, unappreciative businessmen and tourists in Ibiza or Southeast Asia. It is often just a money-earning job, and more of a convention, than actual performance or entertainment. There are some places where we might not feel comfortable playing -- like Tel Aviv, or Moscow. But you know? It's also a chance for us, as musicians, to widen our own views. Many DJs (especially a certain few from Detroit, dare I say) see it merely as "bringing our sound to the locals" and earning a handsome fee along the way. (Is this not also a sort of Ugly American syndrome, even if one is a black American DJ, and not a white American tourist?) Earn your money -- but there's something else to bring back home besides the shampoo from the five-star hotel specified on your contract. Simply, you are there to make common ground with people of another culture, so rather than preach behind a curtain, get out there and SHARE. I've decided that it's okay to be a traveling DJ for now, because I still want to see distant corners of the world, and if a promoter pays me to share some lovely tunes with his audiences, that's wonderful. But I'm not going to play hard beats all night just to pump adrenaline into people and get the job done. I don't want them shaking their fists in the air at whatever slogan I shout out. I hope I have the chance to play, on a clean, well-balanced sound system, some beautiful song -- a Viola Wills 12", or Pat Metheny's "Offramp" album come to mind, or a melody like Rachmaninoff's "Vocalise" -- which brings feelings of love, regret, joy, even transcendence. The best kind of DJ set is not about the DJ. It's about mixing so many sounds together, from so many different places, that people feel how rich and varied the world is, and how we're all just a tiny moving part of it. Back to the producer with whom I exchanged emails: in the end, maybe it's just one of those gentlemanly "we agree to disagree" situations. Different strokes for different folks. If we all thought exactly the same way, we'd all end up sounding the same too, and that would be a bore, wouldn't it? But let's not forget to laugh at ourselves! And let us not confuse what we CALL the thing with the reality of the thing itself. Few of us in this dance/ electronic music world are anything close to Duke Ellington or Mozart (in spite of having the budget to HIRE a big band -- which is not the same as having the musicality to CONDUCT one). Even if all our names eventually go into some history book describing "Electronic Music in the Early 21st Century", because a certain artist was the first to do this or that -- record sales and critical histories may tell half the story, but putting your heart into inventing a good set of chords and basslines is a pact purely between the artist and God, and I DON'T mean that in a religious sense at all. To conclude on a personal note: I don't think I could ever exploit political issues to charge my shows with a supposed purpose or righteousness, and that's just my own opinion. Because for me, "Music" (capital M, aahrumpph) is not about being right or wrong. G.W. Bush, fundamentalist Muslim clerics, lack of democracy in China, indifference toward Africa, depletion of natural resources, killing marine life, political torture, ALL of these actually trouble me endlessly...Of course I hope that people THINK about big issues. But honestly, when I'm DJ'ing or performing, I don't want people to THINK ABOUT BIG ISSUES at all. I hope that, momentarily, they're utterly lost in a world of motion and feeling, of fascination. The only thinking is being done in the DJ booth - - and mostly, that's limited to, "Argh, what record could I possibly play next?" Making people forget their egos, worries and differences in a concert hall or a disco is serious work. And if, by feeling free, and feeling more connected to others and to ourselves while dancing, we go out and do our best afterwards -- in big ways or small -- that feels more like the way I want to do something with this Music.

(Daniel Wang - From Berlin, May 2004)