

#djlife During the Pandemic
Reflections from DJs Rearranging Relations and Improvising
Continuity

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Article abstract

This piece profiles two DJs who moved online during the pandemic and discusses the restrictions placed by social media companies around certain modes of music making on their platforms. Hip hop DJs in particular have been scrutinized by many social media outlets for playing copyrighted music as part of their DJ sets.

#djlife During the Pandemic: Reflections from DJs Rearranging Relations and Improvising Continuity

Mark V. Campbell and Ayşe Barut

Across multiple social media platforms, the hashtag #djlife has offered a glimpse into what DJs do in both their online and offline lives. Some DJs post their remixes, others post their practice sessions or their latest booking. Globally, as nightclubs closed their doors and festivals cancelled their 2020 editions in response to COVID-19, DJs were forced to reconsider how to maintain their livelihoods. Like most performers in popular culture, the DJ's public visibility is tied to their continued relevance, so with two major arenas—festivals and nightclubs—closed, DJs had to quickly find a way to engage their fans. For many DJs, livestreaming themselves mixing records became a way to continue connecting with their fans. While several DJs were already livestreaming, such as DJ Mel Boogie on her Toronto-based radio show Studio B on Vibe 105 FM, many more delved into streaming for the first time during the pandemic.

Platforms such as Facebook and Instagram became the go-to sites for various kinds of livestream events during the pandemic. Verzuz, a visual webcast series presented, created, and launched by multi-platinum producers Timbaland and Swizz Beatz at the end of March 2020, quickly established viewership records as it went viral. Each Verzuz online event features two prominent recording artists squaring off “against” each other in a friendly competition, each sharing their esteemed catalogues. With high profile artists in events such as Jill Scott vs. Erykah Badu, DJ Premier vs. the RZA, Beenie Man vs. Bounty Killer, and many more, Verzuz gathered millions of livestream viewers for their events.¹ It was not uncommon to have 700,000 Instagram viewers on at one time, and Verzuz wisely multiplied their stream numbers by broadcasting their feed on multiple platforms. Verzuz's use of streaming technologies translated into increased sales and streaming for the artists featured in each “battle.”² Online platforms such as these are ripe and innovative contexts through which DJs have taken to livestreaming during the global pandemic.

In exploring the multifaceted sets of relations that have impacted DJs and the impact DJs have had on various streaming platforms during the COVID-19 crisis, we connected with two very different Canadian DJs, both of whom have taken to livestreaming to maintain connections with their fans. Through interviews and participant observation, we learned how digital media platforms have responded to DJs. What became clear were the multiple directions in which power is exercised by both the DJs and the platforms. DJs experimented with multiple sites and exploited various affordances to continue to connect with their audiences. On Twitch in particular, DJs have engaged the platform's existing gamification features, using an array of subscription features, custom emojis, raids, and “bits” to continue to engage their audiences. Meanwhile, platforms muted parts of DJ mixes, simply ended livestream sessions after a set period of time, and/or served DJs notices around copyright violations. In some of the more blatant exercises of power, Instagram limited most DJs' livestreams to one hour, while allowing other very popular American celebrities—like Grammy award winning producer 9th Wonder and the very popular DJ of celebrity parties in Los Angeles, former Boogie Down Productions member, D-Nice—to stream for hours on end without interruption.

The Digital Landscape of the DJ

[an artist] must work towards an *Umfunktionierung*, as Brecht called it—a transformation of the apparatus—which will result in new fusions and relationships between media,

genres and techniques, new, more collective production processes, and a new, more participative role for audiences.

—Walter Benjamin (qtd. in Bernardo et al.)

Scholars have noted that DJs play a significant role as “cultural mediators”: they are “cultural gatekeeper[s]” and “cultural broker[s],” familiarizing local audiences with local music scenes (de Paris Fontanari 247; Fikentscher 135). As the early days of quarantine rearranged our abilities to experience live music, we at Northside Hip Hop Archive partnered with DJs across several cities in Canada and released an event series on Instagram called *Digging in the [Crates] Archive*.³ Our Instagram Live sessions included live sets by well-known local DJs from different Canadian cities, followed by short interviews focusing on the localities of hip-hop across Canada. Our mission was to highlight and archive the untold histories of Canadian hip-hop through tracks and artists representing different Canadian cities, as exposed in the live performances and through the oral histories told by the participating DJs. *Digging in the [Crates] Archive* allowed us to access and broadcast to a more geographically diverse audience than a local DJ performance could have reached, including listeners in Toronto, Ottawa, Scarborough, Hamilton, Winnipeg, and Montreal. The audiences enjoyed *Digging in the [Crates] Archive*'s rawness and educational content, in spite of the technical limitations that come with a social media platform like Instagram.

We called on Montreal's DJ Blaster, who has been in the music industry for over twenty years,⁴ for a set on our Instagram Live series and a follow-up interview. Moving outside the space of hip-hop DJs, we also called on Toronto DJ/Producer Ticky Ty. She spent years in Japan mastering her craft and has a DIY approach to all of her media including her own visuals: she “sees DJing as a multifaceted art.”⁵ During the first months of the pandemic, DJ Ticky Ty started *Enter from the Tickiverse*, an eight-episode stream of live DJ sets. She shared her Toronto-based experiences as one of the city's top electronic music DJs.

From the cities they live in, to the musics they play and their digital platforms of choice, to their existing family structures, DJ Blaster and DJ Ticky Ty provide us with a glimpse into the realities of DJ life during the COVID-19 pandemic. Both interviews were semi-structured and conducted by telephone (with both authors present) in July 2020, several months into the pandemic.

Reflections on Power, Audiences, and Digital Affordances

If this is the future, this is kind of scary to me, man . . . I don't know what I'm going to do.
—DJ Blaster

Both DJ Blaster and DJ Ticky Ty described power struggles with digital platforms. Both DJs' livestreams were significantly affected by the copyright regulations of social media platforms—the sessions were repeatedly cut short in the middle of the set or deleted afterwards. Ticky Ty explains, “Facebook was a nightmare. We would get kicked off halfway all the time, sometimes three, four times,” and YouTube flagged and blocked their sets in several countries, due to the platform's copyright rules. Both DJs pointed out that more empathy is needed from corporations like YouTube, Instagram, or Facebook, given the power of music and thus the role of DJs in critical times. Says DJ Ticky Ty, “at the beginning of COVID, people started to realize that we're doing a public service.” Livestreams are precious to many audiences right now, because they are spaces where listeners can destress, heal, and temporarily forget what is happening around the world.

DJ Blaster elaborates a similar sentiment to Ticky:

Music is the key. Music, it sets you free, man. I don't wanna sound corny by saying it, we all say it, one thing about music, when it hits, you feel no pain . . . You need, we need it now. [When the] pandemic's over, you can cut me off as much as you want, but right now, for that one person who can't afford to buy groceries, that person, I can't afford this, I can't afford that, and is home and is bopping their head and is completely forgetting what's going on in the world. So, one hour deep [you] forgot what's going on in the world. Just, stop it. You know what? If you want to even erase me, after I go on, I don't mind, but for the two hours throughout that I'm on, leave us alone. Don't kick us off during a mix. That's wrong in so many ways, you know you can't do that.

DJ Ticky Ty continues Blaster's sentiment:

If people didn't have music and shows to watch and all these artists that have been making this content for you, people would be losing their minds . . . You sit around with no music and no art . . . you'd go crazy . . . You are already going crazy *with* that. But you know, to say that people need our products so badly, but for it to be the most undervalued arts or undervalued profession out there . . . It's so wrong.

Social media platforms also restrict musicians and DJs through their sponsorship structures. If artists want their livestreams to be more accessible, they need to pay for visibility. DJ Blaster explains, "Oh, do you want to sponsor it [on Facebook]? Add up a few dollars. Instagram: you want to sponsor it? Add a few dollars. That's the way of life. I got to pay for you to see me. So now I'm coming out of pocket. It makes no sense." In contrast, Twitch allows an income stream and has softer rules when it comes to cutting livestreams short. DJ Blaster streams on Twitch and his preference is clear: "At least [on] Twitch . . . I'm getting people to buy certain things on my page and all like, I appreciate that." Although DJ Blaster says that it is difficult to get audiences on Twitch because it is not as known in the music community (it is primarily a videogame streaming site) and people are so used to Facebook and Instagram, he is finding small streams of revenue through Twitch's ability to sell emoticons to audience members.

YouTube is DJ Ticky Ty's chosen platform. Prior to the pandemic, she hosted her livestream DJ series *Blacklight Beats* on YouTube, which she had chosen for its better production quality, longer length videos, and focus on artists. DJ Ticky Ty explains her preference:

[YouTube] knows how to monetize their artists, and they'll give you a list of all the artists and all the songs that you've played, and they'll give the money to their artists. You're actually supporting the artists that way, which is what I like to do. I don't like to download songs for free . . . I love YouTube more than Facebook for that.

Even after both DJs found their preferred platform for livestreams, they faced additional barriers, including high competition, the extra work required for livestreaming, and an unstable financial situation. As DJ Ticky Ty explains,

. . . right now, it's really hard as a musician or as an artist . . . cause right now you're trying to bid for people's attention, and so many different people have gone online . . . my mental state towards the end of it was just getting so fragile. And . . . especially as an artist, you just want that appreciation . . . and it just wasn't coming to what I was expecting. So, it was the amount of effort and work I was putting into it . . . I think I was getting some love back for sure. But it was just not enough for me . . . I'm literally killing myself to make this happen.

Even though livestreams appear to be the main form of audience engagement during the pandemic, some DJs are still hosting in-person events. This poses a significant risk for DJs—a risk that some don't have any other option but to take, and a risk that some don't pay enough attention to.

DJ Blaster elaborates:

I'm watching these DJs . . . and I don't think that they know the extent of what's going on with this pandemic . . . You guys don't know what you're doing. If you love your parents and grandparents, your friends . . . be careful. I'm not going to say don't DJ. I know some of you have to be, but be careful . . . A lot of my DJ friends have gotten sick. I've had three DJ friends who passed due to COVID-19. This is not a joke man, it is not a joke.

Like Blaster, DJ Ticky Ty takes the health risk seriously, explaining: “I am immunocompromised. I can't work in public. I'm losing my place. I lost my career of over a decade and I'm trying to figure out how to build it all from scratch.”

There were positive, motivating moments in our interviews about the potential of DJs and music during such an extraordinary time. During the Northside Hip Hop Archive live event series, people tuned into our Montreal show from different time zones, including from Vancouver and Winnipeg. Unlike other genres of music, hip-hop often has a hyperlocal focus that nurtures a sense of community (as opposed to an industry), but limits the possibilities of a cohesive national hip-hop scene in a large yet sparsely populated country like Canada. A focus on local DJs and local music allowed us to overcome the ways in which local music can often get lost in the globalizing effects of digital platforms. We were intentional in focusing on local music, as digital platforms bring together audiences who otherwise would have been unable to gather under one roof because of the need for social distancing. DJ Blaster, reflecting on the engagement in his livestream, remarked that the chat room allowed “. . . everybody to gel together in this Twitch group—to me [it] looks beautiful. Black, purple, green, you name it in this chat. And it's family. We call it the family. You call it the family. And I love it, man.”

While a digital platform can bring together disparate audience members, the interactivity offered by streaming platforms allows DJs to remain connected to their audiences in real time. DJ Ticky Ty explains, “especially towards, I think, the seventh episode or something . . . I was trying to really have it as an interactive thing where people could share what they value within themselves and share it to other people. So, you know, just getting it . . . just getting people used to interacting and just trying to get a conversation and a general community help thing, or just making cool things about people that are struggling right now.” Through significant messaging in her DJ set, on the microphone, in the chat, and edited directly into her accompanying video, Ticky Ty sought to stay connected to her audience by sending messages of support and encouragement.

Social media has also made it possible to build relationships during livestreams. Because the audience can use chat functions for real-time conversations while the artist mixes records, people are using livestream sessions to make the social connections they have been craving as a result of the pandemic. DJ Blaster elaborates on his daily interactions with his audience: “If you didn't have any friends before, you have friends now. And this is what you needed during this pandemic. Hence, that's the big positive of my Twitch. And even though it took a while before it grew on me, I love it for that reason.”

DJ Ticky Ty adds: “I have to say, that's what I loved about it. Cause it felt like there was a family

kind of feeling with you and your friends on your site.” For Ticky’s eight-episode livestream on YouTube, she frequently messaged audience members while mixing records.

There is no doubt that COVID-19 will encourage new technological advances, hopefully including a platform that allows musical artists to find a way to continue their careers. However, right now, making a living from livestreaming is not feasible for career DJs. Ticky Ty explains,

It's a great time. Cause you're just having fun and it's a time to have fun and experiment and try to socially distance the best you can. But as a career DJ . . . maybe not the best time . . . I don't think people should expect to make the same kind of money they were before. I think there's going to be a lot of people doing it. You have to, you have to really do it for the passion first.

While both DJs used their digital platforms to connect in real time with audience members, DJ Blaster adamantly lamented the loss of crowd participation, the energy and vibe usually provided by dancing patrons. Blaster explains, “I’m a people person, you know. Not being able to interact with people, it really hurt me, and I wasn’t used to it.” Ticky Ty was critical of livestream sessions that attempted to replicate a live event feeling: “This was a problem that I had with a lot of the livestreams that were going on,” she explains, “is that people are so used to using a crowd as the fuel for the sets, but they don’t realize that you can’t translate a live set from a stage online.”

In *Enter from the Tickiverse*, Ticky Ty’s superior level of visual production did much to augment the viewer experience at home, offering a creative take on audience participation and social interaction online. With multiple camera angles, visual effects, and background transitions, *Enter the Tickiverse* arguably presented one of the best produced visual experiences you could find online, easily matching and surpassing productions from DJ juggernauts like Diplo, DJ Jazzy Jeff, or 9th Wonder—all award-winning DJs and regular livestreamers. At one point in her series, Ticky even hired a dancer, whose movements complemented the dynamic visuals programmed by Ticky.

Conclusion

DJs, whose labour enriched the lives of many people doing their best to stay home, have illuminated one of the central contradictions of digital platforms such as Facebook and Instagram. While connectivity and sociality are often marketed as benefits of these platforms, the social good DJ livestreams provided suffered under those platforms’ watchful eyes. Both DJ Blaster and Ticky Ty elaborated their frustrations with the ways in which Facebook and Instagram used copyright laws to limit their livestreams. Business as usual proceeded with these platforms at a time of clear global crisis. Testing and moving from one platform to another, the DJs interviewed for this article appreciated the lack of limitations placed on their live sets by YouTube and Twitch. As new models of engagement emerge, such as the star-studded Verzuz platform, these Canadian DJs continue to experiment with audience building and audience engagement, while attempting to exploit the affordances of different platforms. While DJs like Ticky Ty continue to produce livestream mixes and improvise new methods of engagement, new relationships are built through real-time messaging, gamified interactions, and custom emojis.

Inhabiting the nexus of technologies and audiences, DJs are optimally equipped to improvise new relationships during the COVID-19 pandemic. As the pandemic continues to unfold in unpredictable ways, DJs continue to adapt. In thinking about what the future may hold, DJ Ticky

Ty optimistically states that “. . . the strongest humans in the world aren't necessarily the most talented or the smartest . . . The ones that actually do survive . . . the people that are gonna get through this and the people that are going to thrive from it are the ones that truly know how to adapt.”

Notes

¹ For media coverage of these battles, see Lambert. For details on battles to date (Spring 2021) see “Every Verzuz Battle So Far.”

² See Peru. See also Associated Press.

³ See <http://www.instagram.com/p/CCebrHSFDNT> for more details.

⁴ For more on DJ Blaster, see: djblaster.com/bio/.

⁵ To experience DJ Ticky Ty's work, visit: <https://soundcloud.com/tickyty>.

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