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"You Better Work": Underground Dance Music in New York City by Kai Fikentscher

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“You Better Work”: Underground Dance Music in New York City. Kai Fikentscher. 2000. Hanover and London: University Press of New England. xv, 160 pp., illustrations, appendix, notes, glossary, index. Cloth, \$45.00; paper \$19.95.

You Better Work!: Underground Dance Music in New York City is arguably the first ethnography of electronic dance music culture; it is also one of the first ethnomusicologically-influenced monographs on mediated dance music. Kai Fikentscher deftly avoids the wealth of music industry genre tags (such as “deep house” or “two step garage”) that plague many writings on electronic dance music, instead focusing on a specific dance community in New York City which began its social dance practice in the days of disco and continued the practice well into the 1990s. His study took place over the course of thirteen years, during which period he had contact with club promoters, record labels, and DJs (as well as developing his own DJ chops). The work is not entirely ethnographic, however, as he connects the practices with African American church contexts, gay pride and the Civil Rights movement, and most notably the disco era, ultimately using these connections to theorize the “disco experience” and the play between “autonomy and interdependence” in music and dance.

Though Underground Dance Music (UDM) is a practice specific to New York, it features characteristics that can be applied to other mediated musics. In this work, “underground” is both a local term, referring to “a socio-cultural avant-garde that, since the 1950s has included beat poets, performance artists, painters, and musicians” (10), and a general term, defined “in reaction (and often opposition) to this so-called mainstream” (6). Underground, thus, is synonymous with marginality, conceived as “one culturally defined dominant system of values and beliefs, by one or several so-called subcultures that rank lower in terms of cultural power” (8). This analysis, which characterizes UDM as a celebration and expression of marginality, departs from the often-pessimistic subcultural critiques of dance and youth culture (e.g., Thornton 1996; Malbon 1999; and McLeod 2001).

Fikentscher devotes much of the book to defining the practices of DJs and dancers, and how the two intersect. His expertly executed consideration of the mechanics of deejaying draws a crucial distinction between technical skills (“mixing”) and the art of programming, which “recognizes the dynamic interaction between two different energy levels, one sonic, the other kinetic, and understands both as constantly changing entities” (41). One specific technique of programming is known as “peaking” the dance floor, a major topic of discussion amongst DJs and dancers since it is “the ultimate manifestation of the communication linking the booth with the floor” (41). According to veteran DJ Frankie Knuckles, “peaking the floor makes the club feel ‘like church’” (42), an analogy Fikentscher uses in Chapter Five to theorize the DJ-dancer interdependence.

Throughout this book, it is unclear who exactly participates in UDM. Though the introduction states that “African American culture . . . provides the context for UDM” (6), later on, “UDM is essentially a post-1970s, post-disco phenomenon, based in New York, and primarily shaped by . . . predominantly gay African American and Latino men who view who they are and what they do in relation and response to dominant moral and aesthetic codes and values of late twentieth-century U.S. American society.” They appear to be joined by a “smattering of Latinos, Caucasians, and Asians” (14), and occasionally, “straight and gay women many of whom were musicians, poets or visual artists” (100). Despite the variety of participants that surface, in conclusion “underground dance culture is historically the result of an overlap of African American expressive culture and gay culture” (108).

There are several problems with this reduction. First of all, it doesn't reflect the included informants' quotations. In one of the few quotations from a non-DJ participant, Kevin Hedge describes the constituency of the Paradise Garage: “blacks, Anglos, Jews, Spanish, gays, straights, everybody in one situation with a peaceful thing on their mind” (61). (A recent book by Mark Anthony Neal [2003:110] describes the influence the Garage had on Little Louie Vega [of Masters at Work fame] and the emergence of the Nuyorican Soul movement.) Secondly, this essentialization is maintained in a history of social dance in the United States, which sees a continuum “ranging from the Charleston to the latest forms of underground club dancing . . . disco is part of this continuum, and its basic cultural imprint is African American” (23). Amongst the absences in this succinct history are the myriad forms of “Latin dance,” which have had a sizeable impact on American social dance (especially in New York). Third, the participation of women in UDM seems to be quite overlooked. Though women appear in all of the crowd photos, particularly on page 104 where the dancers are emulating and saluting club manager Nell Campbell, from *reading* this work one would be inclined to think women had no creative role in shaping UDM performance spaces save their disembodied gospel-style voices on house records.

The ethnohistorical analytic used throughout this book, rather than cementing the history of UDM, left a number of unanswered questions for me. How could female, Latino, Asian, and Jewish participants possibly be performing male African American and gay expressive culture? How are racialized, gendered, and sexualized identities defined, maintained, and contested on the dance floor? Is the dance floor actually a space for the celebration of (a culturally delimited) marginality, or is it perhaps a space for the celebration of individuality, a place where the categories that bind people in day-to-day life are temporarily suspended?

These questions aside, this book covers a lot of new (under)ground, from a particularly informed analysis of DJ and dance practices to a concise and well-considered history of disco. It is a must-read for scholars of mediated

music traditions and popular music studies in general, offering a useful set of tools to analyze interaction, the art of deejaying, and spaces of significance (such as the booth and floor) in dance venues. It also offers a compelling presentation of disco's historical significance in American popular culture, and its sudden transformation into a multiplicity of underground electronic dance musics.

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Jefe de jefes: Corridos y narcocultura en México. José Manuel Valenzuela. 2002. México: Plaza & Janés. 346 pp., notes, glossary, bibliography. Paper, \$23.95.

Jefe de jefes: Corridos y narcocultura en México. José Manuel Valenzuela. 2003. La Habana: Casa de las Américas. 388 pp., notes, annex, glossary, bibliography. Paper, \$8.00.

In 2001, *Jefe de jefes: Corridos y narcocultura en México* (Boss of Bosses: Ballads and Drug Culture in Mexico) by José Manuel Valenzuela won the prestigious Premio de Musicología Casa de las Américas. A year later, the Mexican house Plaza & Janés published a version of the book slightly different from the one that won the award. Finally, in 2003, Casa de las Américas, the Cuban institution that sponsors the biennial musicology prize, published the book as it had been read by the jury two years earlier. In this review I summarize the main ideas of the book, call attention to its accomplishments and shortcomings, and indicate the differences between the Mexican and Cuban editions.

Narcocorridos (drug ballads) branch out of a very specific Mexican *corrido* tradition, the so-called *corrido norteño*, a tradition from the north of Mexico that, unsurprisingly, engages the specific, often contradictory economic, cultural, personal, and social relations that arise at the U.S.-Mexico border. *Narcocorridos* chronicle the incorporation of subaltern, dispossessed sectors of the population (both in Mexico and the U.S.) into the world of