Example Field Notes

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The following are excerpts from my field notes written in 2001 when I was studying the hip-hop scene in San Francisco.

**Excerpt #1: Description of a Night at the Open Mic Night**

Last night there were a lot of emcees out – as everyone said. Quite a few people has heard about the open mic while at The Cell on Friday. Beforehand, as people gathered and discussed topic such as the new Wu-Tang album, everyone was feeling out each other’s responses. It was mostly negative, although ironically at a time when the album was starting to grow on me. To my great fascination, the language that one guy used to describe it was “under-produced” – calling the ODB-Snoop Dog song (Conditioner) a “straight 4-track song” – which connects very well with my theory about changing sensibilities and authenticities of production quality.

Minutes before the open mic was to begin, as a videotaped cypher [rhyming circle] took place outside, a guy appeared asking DA (mostly) and I if all these emcees were unsigned. DA pointed out – to my surprise – that one of the emcees there that I had never seen before was Mic T of (relation to) Hieroglyphics fame. This guy – a white guy, confident and slightly aggressive in what looked like a J.Crew windbreaker and slacks, short brown hair – pointed out that, even though Mic T was on an independent label, he was only interested in unsigned artists. DA’s conversation with him went as far as, “we’re all hungry, are you talking about throwing some money our way?” When that didn’t seem to be going anywhere, his attention turned back to the cypher – as did mine.

But learning that Mic T was there, I suddenly became interested in finding out which guy he was. The cypher revealed nothing but the open mic did. From the moment he got on the mic – both because of his skill and confidence and because somewhere early on he said “I’m Mic T,” I knew exactly who he was. He commanded the mic and awed the crowd for several minutes, having our full attention in a manner rarely seen – often seen with Top R and various others on a good day but this was definitely one of the best freestylers I have seen on the Rockin’ Java stage. He characterized his appearance as an effort to promote his new album.

Mic T followed protocol, who, although not as tight [good] as last week, really has been coming correct lately. Protocol built on the foundation of Destined and this other computer-like rapper, a black guy, who brought a high energy mode. Mic T brought the energy even higher and from there, as I said to someone, it was the rest of the emcees’ to lose. We didn’t.

**Excerpt #2: Analytic Ideas and Inferences on Power**

Who wields the power in this community? How does leadership emerge? SN and PM wield power by making decisions about what they will carry [in their retail outlets] – for instance SN declined to carry The Latter – and how they will present what they carry. SN strongly promotes LG and OR, whether it is the write-ups he gives them in his newsletter or the way he talks about them with potential customers. For instance, he presented that Chaos album – featuring OR – as the “dopest” stuff he had heard. But it’s also obvious that he believed in it because that day in the store he played it for me, right there. Another case of power is how he walked on stage during the LG and OR performance at his show and absolutely did everything in his ability to command the crowd to get hyped. Making a face and continuously throwing his hands in the air as if to say, “come on you guys.”

As a shows promoter his power to decide who plays and in what order is also important. DE and TM were not given the prime time slot other groups had. By design or by accident, in a certain way LG’s middle time slot was ideal – at some point later on in the evening the crowd seemed remarkably burnt out.

To a lesser extent any music store employee has power through the placement of music – FK did not give SN’s compilation CD a prominently featured position in Amoeba Music. And whether it’s mentioning an album in our employee picks or recommending something to someone, we all have some power. I used that power to talk Ayentee into giving me a discount on his CD – saying that if I liked it I would recommend it.

Who else has power? Venue owners and promoters in deciding who gets to put on shows for the public. And even our first show – so small time – but the flurry of networking and CD sales that followed showed me that shows translate into getting your music and your name out there.

Also owners of equipment – recording equipment. For instance, my recent issues with FQ and for that matter some of FQ and EV’s personal dynamics. Even the owning of particular music – as we all reasoned the other night: whenever talking about who produced a track, certain co-production rights or mentions must go to the person who owned the music that was sampled. ‘EV made the beat but it was FQ’s record, because having the music is a crucial step in being able to produce. . . .

**Excerpt #3: Descriptions and Analytic Ideas on Social Class and Music Scenes**

Future Primitive last night – $20 tickets, $5 beers. I was very conscious of the “vibe” – that atmosphere that is created as a mix of the collective conscience of all the people present blending with the other elements vital to the space: sound (or music), lighting, smells, spatial arrangements, visuals, volume of people.

As DE and I freestyled on the car ride there, he said that he had been cyphering with WW for most of the day (how often do you practice?). I spoke about “vibe” and how . . . I was going to aim to seek out like-minded people that I could vibe with.

As we entered the venue – DE, AN (whom we bumped into at the front door) and I – there were two rooms that were virtually empty. The first at the top of the stairs featured reggae music and had an impressive but (within the empty room) quite overwhelming light display. As I glanced towards the dance floor one of several moving spotlights shining down from the ceiling flashed me in the eyes. The next room, which came after walking through a short hallway with restrooms and a “smoke room,” featured a DJ table as opposed to a DJ booth. This room played what I would characterize as soul/funk but what probably gets called “rare groove.” In the last room, the main room below, it was hip hop. A stage area which featured two DJs, video cameras, video screens, live art work by Doze Green, and when we got there several b-boys performing in front of a crowd.

DE quickly said hello to old friends and joined the b-boys. AN and I went to get drinks, which to our surprise were $5 for Coronas. This price would prove significant for later in the evening, as we made our way to a liquor store to get a bottle to smuggle in (a fine idea), AN made the comment that music lovers do not go to venues that charge $5 a drink! Because music lovers – who according to AN tend to work low-end jobs like at record stores – cannot afford it. $5 drinks are for spots in scenes where people go to be seen. Along these lines was also the fact that we snuck in our bottles – NO PROBLEM. My observation on this was that something deemed a BIG HIP HOP event would usually have some sort of security check. The fact that we could have snuck anything in, no problem, says to me that this wasn’t really a typical hip hop crowd but more of an upscale (deemed safer) crowd.

Back to inside the venue – my initial comment (to myself) was “everyone is a spectator.” Because other than the b-boys, everyone seemed to be standing around watching them or just standing – not even head bobbing or swaying. Just standing. On our walk to the liquor store, AN and I concluded that more than hip hop fans or music lovers, these were people that wanted to be seen but once there didn’t know what to do with themselves. At one point the host of the event went up on stage and said that he would be patient with the crowd – realizing that it would take a little while for the drinks to set in, and he reasoned that the people who were already dancing (the few in the front, by this time the b-boys had gone elsewhere, into the rare grooves room) were the people who had been drinking prior to their arrival at the club. But his point was that in about an hour the crowd had better either “move their ass (dance) or mover their ass (get out of the way so people could dance).” Going back to the main room at several points in the night, I saw the crowd get slightly more enthusiastic but I didn’t see much ass-moving of either kind.

The people I could vibe with turned out to be the people I already knew. Like SV and GY – the latter who shared similar feelings about the venue – and Amoeba Music people, who got their tickets from DF for $10, rather than the going rate of $20.

**Excerpt #4: “The Streets Is Watching”: Narrative of a Song**

Yesterday after work – a Sunday – I was making my usual walk out to McAllister and Scott with FQ, only this time recording wasn’t on the agenda. It was more just a good place to hook up with CY and ML for we had made tentative plans to go see Zion I at the Justice League . . .

What was unusual was the FQ was walking with me rather than biking. Carrying his guitar from a day of street performing – him finger picking with a banjo and fiddle player. “Old Timers” as he described them. I guess they made some money.

While on our walk down Haight Street I suddenly heard a “Kwame” called. And turned around to see NT coming up. He was with a friend [SE], we all did the various introductions and then parted. Two pairs, walking in the same direction down Haight Street. When I described him as a “dope emcee” to FQ, suddenly FQ got the idea of inviting him over to the house (right there and then) to do one or some tracks. Not knowing how serious FQ was about the whole thing, I checked to make sure he was serious. For once invited we were committed to this. He said yes.

So calling ahead, I said “hey NT – do you have any writtens?” Answering in the affirmative he produced a single sheet of paper from his pocket with writing on one side. This was something he “had been working on.” So after a quick call home to make sure it was cool with EV – EV has had a number of personal and work stresses lately according to FQ. EV was not home so it was cool – it’s his equipment – so we proceeded . . .

As we got to the house, NT almost seemed more interested in skating down the incline than going in. I had to stand there and wait for him and SE, who was sort of caught in a middle ground between knowing they had come all this way to come in and seeing NT skateboard right by the door and probably 50ft. down the street.

But soon we were all inside and after some awkward getting settled – we had picked up JO along the way – I played host by offering them some tea while FG turned the computer on and used the bathroom. Soon they were playing beats and songs to NT and SE. To ease any nerves, I suggested playing the most extreme (off the wall) example of mine – [a song called] “Tea Time.” I do think this made them somewhat at ease. And after a cigarette out on the catwalk, NT was ready to read lyrics and listen to beats, working with FQ looking for the perfect match. Again, not wanting to make him uncomfortable with an audience, I chilled in the kitchen talking with SE while JO went up to FQs’ room to play video games.

They decided to do NT’s lyrics over a beat that we had freestyled to at our show in Oakland. When I first heard the beat playing I was expecting someone’s voice – probably JO – to come in with lyrics. But soon I recognized where I knew the beat from. Still I was surprised that no one had claimed the beat or had done a song over it. It’s a dope beat. Soon, NT had started [recording]. He stumbled lightly through the first verse which was written on the sheet of paper before him. The second verse, which was older and he had memorized, was quite smooth.

Basically FQ would get the beat going and then exit the room, shutting the door to let NT be by himself. We could all hear him through the speakers in the kitchen. This is pretty much the manner in which I am used to FQ dealing with my recordings. NT’s song had a repeated chorus that went something like, “the streets is watching so we watching the streets” and it had two short verses which were mostly battle rhymes (bragging and boasting and metaphors). I think they did two takes.

It was valuable to watch NT who I assume had relatively little experience recording and was definitely new to this set-up. Admittedly, his takes didn’t sound flawless – but now, as a person not behind the mic, I realize how much voice-overs and word emphases would smooth away most minor flaws. That and FQ’s cut and paste production work. . . .

By 11:30 when we left [to go to the Zion I show] – two and half hours at most, maybe even less than two – a song had been finished. And FQ was in the process of recording NT a tape with his song and a few other Forest Fires Collective songs on it. At 8: 15, earlier that evening, NT had no idea he would have a pretty much completed song before midnight. But here he was sounding quite excited and FQ, although tough to read, did at moments give me an enthusiastic smile as if to say “that’s dope” as we listened to the song. They also exchanged numbers upon leaving. NT looked really thrilled. We’ll see how he feels about his recording in a few weeks. I like it.