

**Black DJ Renaissance: An Oral History of Black Women DJs;
DJing as Storytelling and Art Practice**

By Asha S. Burtin

A thesis submitted to the
faculty of Columbia University
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Degree of Master of Arts in Oral History

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	2
Background.....	5
<i>The Gendered History of DJing.....</i>	<i>5</i>
<i>Focusing on Black Women.....</i>	<i>6</i>
<i>Black Women DJ Pioneers.....</i>	<i>7</i>
Method.....	11
<i>Interview Recording Process.....</i>	<i>16</i>
<i>Limitations and Ethical Concerns.....</i>	<i>16</i>
<i>Beyond the Research.....</i>	<i>18</i>
Findings and Analysis.....	19
<i>Personal and Familial Influence.....</i>	<i>19</i>
<i>DJing as Storytelling.....</i>	<i>21</i>
<i>Community and Safe Spaces.....</i>	<i>26</i>
<i>Cultural Significance and Preservation.....</i>	<i>32</i>
<i>Conclusion.....</i>	<i>35</i>
References.....	38

INTRODUCTION

Mary Dee Dudley was the first Black woman in America to become a disc jockey. Born in Homestead, PA her 15 minute show that eventually turned into an hour long program, titled *Movin' Around*, was launched in 1948 on WHOD in Pittsburgh. While Dudley did cover things pertaining to her community, as well as play music and report news, she also used her show to shine a spotlight on Black voices. She spoke with people like Cab Calloway, Jackie Robinson, and Sarah Vaughn (Dabecco, 2024). However, throughout my years of study as a musician and music production major, I was never taught about Mary Dee Dudley. I only learned about her when I embarked on this project, as I aimed to understand the lineage of Black women who are DJs.

Service95, a weekly newsletter and website based in London, that covers art, culture, food, activism and more, published an article in May of 2024, discussing the “cultural amnesia” that has taken place with the erasure of Black women and their contribution to genres like electronic music, despite the fact that multiple electronic music genres have Black origins. This article discusses the specific contributions from Black women from the United Kingdom, and their contributions to the genre both today and in the past, whether it be that they were producing the music and performing it, or playing it as a DJ. Moreover, the author asserts this erasure has taken place because, “It’s no secret that marketing, whitewashing and rebranding have seen artists who are typically white and male dominate the global mainstream of electronica” (Ochefu, 2024). This erasure of black women from important musical spaces is further evidence that research that highlights their contributions is relevant and necessary.

In recent years on social media, it appears that everyone has become a DJ, at least that's what my algorithm has shown me on apps like TikTok or Instagram. It's presumably easy to do so, as I'm writing this today, a basic PioneerDJ controller on Amazon is \$274.99, and I was even able to find one on Ebay for \$116.99. I even own a PioneerDJ controller, as it was a Christmas gift I received a couple of years ago from my mother, after I told her that I wanted to teach myself how to DJ. As a musician it was something that seemed interesting to me, as it was another way to engage with music while also sharing it with an audience.

During my junior year of undergrad, I took a course titled Digital DJing. In the class we were tasked with making small DJ sets to perform for class, and we performed them on PioneerDJ controllers. For our final grade, each student in the class performed a 15-minute DJ set in one of the school's dining halls. In addition to the performance aspect, the class also focused briefly on the history of DJs, specifically touching on people such as Frankie Knuckles, who is from Chicago and is known as a pioneer in the genre of house music. This knowledge provided some necessary background knowledge for this current project. In addition to this, my experience growing up as a Black American immersed in music culture provided a level of familiarity with the subject.

I was familiar with genres like hip-hop, techno and house, and I could also list the names of some popular DJs, specifically with names like Grandmaster Flash, DJ Kool Herc, as well as Frankie Knuckles. The contributions of Black men who were and are DJs is important, as they are also an integral part of Black history and music history. But the people I named were all men, and I wanted my focus to move beyond our traditional conceptions of DJs. I wanted to find a way to tell the stories of

Black women who are DJs. As one of my narrators from this project, DJ HB put it during my interview with her:

...luckily in New York I feel like we're in this sort of Black DJ renaissance moment especially with Black women. There are so many great DJs like your thesis- I feel like it could be a million pages long (DJ HoneyBun, April 2025).

This research was an attempt to begin a larger project that will someday exist beyond the five women I chose to interview for this project. I wanted to begin sharing the stories and life histories of Black women who are DJs. As I was developing this project, I came to the understanding that DJing is more than just clicking buttons to play music for people to dance to. It is narrative and it is a form of storytelling. All the DJs I interviewed have embedded their own histories and personal taste that has been shaped by their life experiences– into the ways that they approach performing and curating their sets. I elected to speak to DJs from different places, as my goal was to capture regional and cultural sounds that each DJ plays. My narrators were from New York, Detroit, Jamaica, and Texas. One of my narrators, DJ Ayanna Heaven summed this all up so well when she stated:

“But I love there's so many of us– women in particular doing this who are really bringing their full selves forward into the music. Bringing our history, bringing our passion. It's more than just playing music for people on a Friday night and playing whatever hot song is out and doing it for the crowd. I just find there's a lot of people who are doing this as an art practice and I think it's awesome. And yeah, I feel like we're all reflections of each other....” (DJ Ayanna Heaven, March 2025)

Heaven's statement about the current landscape of DJs and dance music put this project into perspective even more for me. Anyone can just play music to a crowd, but to be a good DJ you must

feed off the crowd and you must know what they want to hear. There is an art to understanding what people want and selecting the music that fills that need. I felt that focusing specifically on Black women who are DJs was necessary to tell a more complete story of this practice. I wanted to preserve a history that showed how Black women are currently curating spaces for people, especially Black people, to engage with each other and the music that they know and love, but also to engage with music and sounds they don't know, as DJs have always functioned as people's access to new sounds and cultures outside of their own worlds.

BACKGROUND

The Gendered History of DJing

Many people cannot name a famous woman who is a DJ, let alone a Black woman who is one. Finding a substantial amount of documentation of this history that I wanted to preserve was difficult. I did come across individual memoirs written by women who are DJs, as well as multiple articles surrounding this topic. I was even able to find one specifically written by a Black woman, titled *Welcome to the Club: The Life and Lessons of a Black Woman DJ* by DJ Paulette, published in 2024. I also found sources that helped me to think about women and their relationship to dance music, specifically though Rebekah Farrugia's *Beyond the Dance Floor: Female DJs, Technology and Electronic Dance Music Culture* from 2012. However, I soon discovered that much of DJ history has been passed down through oral history (Broughton, Brewster, 1999). There were no books or documentaries that covered a wide history of this topic. As an oral historian, reading these texts, such as Ray Philp's 2017 *Ghettotech: An Oral History*- allowed me to see the ways oral history could be a useful tool in capturing the histories of the creators of the genres.

Previously, much of the oral history about DJs has been male centered, in which the DJ has been referred to as “he,” (Broughton, Brewster, 1999). I wanted to add to the conversation by uplifting the voices of Black women who are DJs. In the process of doing this, I also wanted to highlight the fact that there is currently a wave of Black women who are DJing, and I used this to choose my narrators. While I wanted to get a range of ages and experiences, it was important for me to highlight women who are on my radar as a young person, to document the people I am currently seeing rising in popularity.

Focusing on Black Women

This project also seeks to highlight the importance of the Black origins from which many genres of dance music originate. The DJs that I spoke to play a wide range of music, spanning from ghettotech, ballroom, reggae, r&b, dancehall and more. Part of my choice to focus on Black women specifically, as opposed to all women, is because so much of dance music history is Black history. Focusing on Black women for this oral history project allowed me to continue the efforts that have already begun to carve out a space in this conversation about women and their contributions to music, specifically in this case dance music. My narrators made it clear to me that DJing is a way for DJs to tell a narrative that coincides with a theme for a night, or some kind of personal journey that they are also on with the audience. Some DJs could even be compared to religious figures in terms of the ways that they have control over a group of people for a point in time (Broughton, Brewster, 1999). Each set is a different story, and each set has a different arc, with no two audiences that are the same.

Black Women DJ Pioneers

It is important to highlight the woman that did pioneer what we see taking place today with so many Black women deciding to become DJs. While Dudley was not what many people would consider

a DJ today, she did lay the groundwork for my interviewees such as Dyana Williams and Ayanna Heaven, who both have had careers in radio.

This shift in what society considers a DJ started to take place with the creation and movement of hip hop in the 1970s. With this came the different kinds of techniques used in this form of performing music, that involved physical vinyl records, as opposed to what many DJs use today, which are electronic controller boards that do not require physical records. These techniques include things like “scratching” created by Grand Wizard Theodore, a DJ and producer from the Bronx. This sound is made when the record is rubbed back and forth (PBS). In addition to this, techniques like the “break-beat” were created during this movement in music. This article by PBS also discusses the break beat, in which the creation of it is “widely credited” to DJ Kool Herc. The article states:

... . the ‘break-beat which extends the break – the song’s climax – indefinitely. Two copies of the same record are put on the decks, and the mixer switches between them, creating a rhythmic beat by looping the breaks (PBS).

I also wanted to include my narrators in this conversation, I asked Dyana Williams when she noticed the transition for the definition of what a dj is in contemporary society. She responded:

ASB: I wanted to circle back to the conversation surrounding your work as a DJ, and I wanted to know when you started to notice the shift in... I guess [what] society knows as a DJ, because you know, before it was popularly known as turntablists– what we consider today, when did you start to notice that shift?

DW: Yeah, it happened, I would say, in the 80s, with the advent of the serious rise of hip hop. Because now what you had, you know, the pillars of hop-hip-right? Graffiti, break dancing, turntablists- there started to be, and it really started– I want to say earlier in the 70s. But by the time the 80s rolled around, turntablists on the ones and twos became known as DJs, more

prominently known as DJs. But when I started, I was a disc jockey or a radio announcer or a broadcaster, those were the terms that we use. We also had to take a test.

ASB: Oh, wow.

DW: The Federal Communications Commission, FCC, licensed with a broadcast endorsement. I failed the test three times. And my chief engineer at my radio station– I had to sign on to his license to run the board and to take measurements. We had to do so much more back in the day. I wish they'd bring that back, because you had to learn no cursing, no profanity. But now with the internet, you've got live streaming services. You got podcasts. People cuss, they do whatever. But there was a time, and it still exists. Radio stations have to get a license by the Federal from the Federal Communications Commission. So back in my day, we were disc jockeys, we were radio announcers, we were broadcasters. That's how we thought–so I'd say 70s, definitely, by the time the 80s came around, DJ had a completely different significance.

In this same conversation, my conversation with HoneyBun also delved into this history of

Black women who are DJs. When I asked her about her connection to drum and bass music, as that is one of the genres she plays she stated:

... I've always loved jungle and drama bass, and I really learned about those genres through Chemistry and Storm, which I'm not sure if you're familiar with them.

ASB: I don't believe so.

Okay, you should definitely look them up, but Kemistry and Storm were this DJ duo from England and they sort of helped run the Metalheadz label, which was the biggest drum n' bass jungle label that was founded by Goldie. So they were these iconic drum and bass DJs, but chemistry– so Storm [is] the white woman. Kemistry is Black Jamaican. And she actually died in a really bad car crash early in her career ... it was so traumatic and they were also two of the only women in this very masculine genre at that time of its peak.

I guess that mixture of that history has made her just this icon. And so as I was learning about DJing, I came across her story and it was just so inspiring to me and her legacy is just really impactful to me. So that's what led me to really learn more about jungle drum and bass. And I

think just knowing that there were these two women who were so dedicated to it and amidst such a masculine environment was inspiring to me.

... there's this DJ series called DJ Kicks which the best DJs get asked to do it and I think they made maybe one of maybe the first drum and bass DJ kicks mix but I would listen to that over and over and I just feel like you can hear what they're thinking and feeling through that mix and I don't know just made it really attractive to me.

Kemistry and Storm were a pioneering duo during the rise of the dance music scene in the 90s, and their 1999 DJ Kicks mix is still seen as one of the genre's most influential mixes, and the duo is revered to this day in the global drum and bass scene. The duo's mutual love for a wide variety of genres influenced their DJing and made their sound distinguishable. In a 2019 *Guardian* article, in which Storm was reflecting on her relationship with Kemistry, she stated, "It's nice all these years later for other young lady DJs who tell me their story, about how we encouraged them," (Martin, Jayne Conneely, AKA Storm, 2019). In addition to names like Kemistry and Storm, and DJ Paulette, and DJ Flight is another Black woman from the UK who is also a DJ worth mentioning. Her bio on Soundcloud reads, "DJ Flight is one of the foundations of Drum & Bass. She is an award-winning DJ, broadcaster, radio producer, and co-founder of EQ50, a collective of women working towards fairer representation in dance music." Flight was also a DJ rising in fame at the same time as Kemistry and Storm, and in an interview with Knowledge Magazine, AKA Kmag, a drum and bass magazine, it reads:

In 1999, Kemistry and Storm were looking for another female DJ to join the 'headz ranks and having bombarded the duo with mixtapes for months, DJ Flight was finally invited to play at the Sunday Sessions at Dingwalls. She'd been attending the night since its inception, (Steve, 2004).

It was important to me to highlight the importance of Black music history, specifically pointing out how Black genres like techno also are, but also genres like house and just a lot of dance music in general. The NPR podcast *Code Switch* from 2017 has an episode titled ‘Give It Up For DJ Blackface’ in which the host Gene Demby has multiple speakers on the show to discuss the issue of, “White dance music producers creating fictional alter egos that read as being brown people,” which is something that has taken place time and time again. There is often a concerted effort from white musicians to distance themselves from the Black origins of the genres of music that they make, while still participating in aspects of Black culture, we see this not only happening with techno, or house, but also with genres like hip-hop as well, where white rappers will take on personas that are inauthentic to who they are, in order to sell a certain image for listeners and viewers. On the topic of techno specifically, scholars, thinkers and activists have all chimed in to this conversation. Weheliye stated:

For instance, white Berlin producer Olaf “O-Jay” Jeglitza hired Black Germans Patricia Peterson and Shampro to front his group, MC Sar & the Real McCoy, even though he himself had performed the male vocal parts on the records. That is, he perceived the performers’ visual Blackness as transcending the “inauthenticity” associated with his white German body performing in a Black musical genre (Weheliye,2023, p.126).

This same conversation also took place in 2019, between Axmed Maxamed and Mathys Rennela. According to theleftberlin.com, Maxameed is a “queer Diasporic Somali activist, organizer and music nerd. Axmed was born in Xamar, Somalia” who lived there until his family had to flee the civil war, in which they ended up in the Netherlands. Rennela was an active user on Twitter, who has “deep knowledge of the ins and outs of dance music history from a fan’s perspective” according to an interview transcript on bandcloud.org. In this discussion titled, *A Conversation on the Bleaching of*

Techno: How Appropriation Is Normalized and Preserved, between the two of them, they discuss the multiple instances of European white dance musicians creating Black personas for their music. In this conversation, Mathys Rennela brings up an example:

In addition to that, there are still ways that adopting Black identity is a selling point. A good example of that in the Netherlands is Beesmunt Soundsystem, who used the name Tanzania Soundsystem for one of their releases, along with Swahili words and phrases for the track titles:

Mischana=Girl

Mdomo=Mouth or lips

Ngono Kijiji= Sex in the village

Upotofu=Immoral or shameful

As I aimed to reposition how we talk about DJs in history, as only being men, while also shedding light on the fact that there is currently a Black DJ renaissance taking place with Black women, it was important that I highlight the fact that dance music in many ways has been rewritten as something that only white people make, and it would be remiss to state that it is not the case.

METHOD

My methodology was designed to capture a diverse range of experiences and perspectives. I sought to highlight the intersectionality of DJ culture and its significance in Black history. A major goal of this project for me was just to learn and preserve a history that I think is worth preserving. As such, I did not go into my interviews expecting the same kinds of answers from my interviewees. In fact, I did not ask the exact same questions to each narrator, but instead elected to have the conversation take a more organic approach. My goal was to capture and elevate the voices of these Black women. DJ

culture has always been male centered, and it has become white male centered as well. This project was a way for me to try and shift the narrative and associations people make with current DJ culture.

An oral history approach allowed me the opportunity to reposition the history that is associated with DJ culture. DJ history is intersectional. It is not just white male history. It is Black history, women's history, as well as queer history. Oral history has been the way in which DJ and dance music history has been preserved for quite some time now. Brewster and Broughton write:

It is probably the fault of Eurocentrism that dance music's importance has been downplayed for so long. Just as copyright laws protect the western ideals of melody and lyric but largely ignore the significance of rhythm and bassline, musical histories have avoided taking dance music seriously for fear of its lack of words, its physical rather than cerebral nature (hip-hop with its verbal emphasis, is the rule-proving exception)....Because of all of this, the narrative you are about to read has long existed only as an oral history, passed down among the protagonists, discussed and mythologised by the participants, but rarely set in type, and never before with this kind of scope and rigour (Brewster, Broughton , 2006, p. 25-26).

While the Brewster and Broughton text is valuable and has been an important part of my research for this project, there are still issues with it, as throughout that book the authors continuously refer to the DJ as "he," as if women were not relevant figures in various music scenes. My goal as an oral historian was to add to this male centered history, while also making it clear that we are in a Black DJ renaissance for women, and that this is something worth discussing.

The research focused on three main areas for me as a researcher and oral historian. Firstly, I wanted to preserve the history that is currently taking place, while simultaneously capturing the history of Black women DJs that pioneered this renaissance. Secondly, I wanted to make it clear that dj history is not just made up of white people. Genres like house music and techno have become linked with whiteness, while their birth places were not white at all. It is impossible to separate dj history from

Black history, regardless of whatever efforts have been made to do so. Finally, I wanted to highlight the fact that DJing is an art practice in which the performer is storytelling. Every time one of my narrators performs, a story and narrative is created. This holds true for many Black women who are DJs, even beyond the ones I interviewed. This project aims to show that DJing is a narrative practice whereby DJs create an arc, and as listeners we can follow the story. These narratives and stories being told lie both in the lyrics of the songs themselves, but they also lie in the DJs themselves, who bring their Black histories to the table.

Oral history is the best method to center my narrators for this project. Centering my narrators is essential because they represent a group whose voice has been ignored or discarded from the larger DJ culture narrative. While searching for material to ground this research, I found multiple oral histories that have been conducted and shared to preserve Black dance music history, further supporting my use of this methodology.

Participants

In preparation for this project, I had to find the narrators I wanted to include and determine the scope of my narrators. I was searching for narrators that would allow my participant group to represent a wide array of ages. This was important in order to capture some form of a lineage being represented in my project. For example, my narrator Dyana Williams has had a career in radio for over 50 years, and while she was never a turntablist, she was a pioneer in the world of radio, and before DJs were known as what most people consider them today, which are people who spin records at parties and events. When she started her career DJs were “disc jockeys” who we heard speaking and playing music on the radio. I wanted there to be some differences in the careers and experiences that my

narrators have had, in order to lay the groundwork for a project that I see becoming bigger than these five women I had the pleasure of speaking to.

My narrators were DJ Amarji King, DJ HoneyBun, DJ ShayQ (pronounced like shake), DJ Ayanna Heaven and Dyana (pronounced Dee-anna) Williams. I found each of my narrators through different methods. I had been following Amarji King and Ayanna Heaven on social media for quite some time. I was really attracted to the ways that their identities and personal histories influenced the ways in which they approached their DJing. I learned about DJ HoneyBun during my interview with Ayanna Heaven, when she was discussing the community that DJing has given her. After doing some research on HoneyBun, I knew that she was also someone I wanted to interview, as her style and sound was different from King and Heaven. Through searches on TikTok and Instagram for DJs that caught my attention, I found DJ ShayQ. Finally, I was put in contact with Dyana Williams through a family friend.

I contacted my narrators via phone calls, texts, emails, and direct messaging on Instagram. My message to each potential interviewee explained who I was, in which I told them that I have a bachelor's in music production with a double minor in African American studies as well as gender and sexuality studies, and that I was currently an oral history masters student who wanted to do a project about Black women who are DJs. These initial points of contact functioned as one of two pre interviews that I had with each of my narrators, and my second pre interview took place right before the interviews in which we were meeting for the first time. During our initial meeting I provided a more in-depth explanation of my project and provided my interviewees an opportunity to ask questions before we engaged in the actual interview.

I interviewed DJs from various backgrounds and regions. They also played different genres of music (though there was some overlap). These choices were deliberate because I wanted to create a project that told a history that was inclusive and that was also a survey of various Black musical sounds. I was interested in preserving a collective history that tells a story that I had never heard told to this extent.

Given this diverse group of DJs, my preparation process required me to learn something new prior to speaking to a new narrator, which honestly helped to keep the project interesting for me. I prepared for each interview by first watching some of the sets that I found on YouTube performed by each DJ. I watched their performances and took notes on their music selections, genre choices, as well as how people were responding to their performances in the comments.

In addition to this, I wanted to try and understand at least a little bit about the histories of each of the genres they choose to play, which then entailed reading oral histories about genres like ghettech and ballroom for example. My preparation process for Dyana Williams, the radio DJ, was different. I did not look for audio of her on air, but instead I watched and read previous interviews that she had done, read and looked through her website, and also read biographical information that I found about her on different websites. She is well known in the music industry, which made it easier to find various pieces of information about her on the internet.

I did not want my preparation to narrow my conversation with each narrator. I was interested in their experiences beyond what I was able to find in my research. I was eager to hear about their experiences as DJs, as opposed to them giving me extensive history lessons about the genres they play. While the histories of their genres are crucial to this project, and will be discussed in this paper, that

was not the primary focus of this project. As stated previously, the goal was to preserve the history and stories of a group of people that I feel have been underrepresented in Black music history, and specifically in dance music history, as it has become increasingly gentrified and whitewashed over time.

Interview Recording Process

I experimented with two different ways of recording the audio from these interviews. I used both the original audio from my Google Meet interviews that I downloaded, but I also recorded the audio separately from the Google Meet audio, with my own microphones. I wanted to determine which audio I prefer and thus the audio quality of the interviews is different. In addition to these interview audio recordings, I also included outside audio recordings from some of my interviewees' dj sets, as well as individual songs from the genres they play accompanied by background information about the songs and where they come from. I wanted this project to serve as a bit of a history lesson for listeners and myself.

Limitations and Ethical Concerns

There were some limitations to the project. Virtual interviews were the best way for me to ensure that I could achieve my goal of interviewing a variety of DJs from different backgrounds and locations. Given that each interview was conducted virtually, this places some limitations on the ability to make a personal connection with the interviewee. At times scheduling became a challenge. Two interviews had to be rescheduled, but the virtual format allowed for a more seamless transition to a new day and time.

There were very few ethical concerns for this project. Primarily, I wanted to ensure that I was not tokenizing people. For example, my narrator Amarji King is a trans woman, I was including her to ensure that this project was inclusive to as many Black dance music histories as possible. From an ethical standpoint I wanted to make sure that I was not just using her, but instead making it clear that I could not have done this project without including an experience like hers, because it is just as valuable, as dance music history is also queer history. I believe my identity as a Black woman did alleviate fears that those who may have approached this research as a complete outsider may have experienced surrounding ethics. I had multiple things in common with my narrators. We are all Black women, with a love for music as well as its history and importance, specifically when it comes to Black music. My identity and background operated as my way into the research.

Fear of exploitation was not present during this process. I was clear about my goals with each of these women, and I had them each sign legal releases to ensure that they were comfortable with me sharing the audio and information from these interviews, and I was met with no conflict in pretty much any point in this process when it came to interviewing them. The clarity that I offered my interviewees in addition to my pre interview process truly allowed this project to go as smoothly as I needed it to. I even told one of my narrators (HoneyBun) some of the questions I planned to ask her ahead of time in order for her to gain a better understanding of the direction of my research, and then even when I met with her virtually, I took the first couple of minutes of our meeting to introduce myself and the project again, which was something I did for all of my interviewees. In the case of my interview with Dyana Williams, she and I even had a phone call prior to even scheduling the interview.

I wanted to make sure that I was as clear as possible about my intentions for including her, as well as why I felt that she would be an important part of the project.

Beyond the Research

Beyond this paper, I wanted to create additional ways for people to engage with the project. I designed an interactive [website](#) that includes individual zines about each of my narrators, a video that I animated and edited, featuring snippets of audio from the interviews mixed with music from the genres they play, and a variety of appropriated footage showing different aspects of each narrator's culture. The footage includes archival videos of Jamaica, jit masters from Detroit dancing, old videos of DJ Screw from Texas, and more. While these videos play, there is a stop-motion animation of my hands on a DJ controller that I created and overlaid on top of the other videos, looping throughout. Additionally, I turned the recorded interviews into individual podcast episodes available on [Soundcloud](#), titled *BLK DJ Renaissance Podcast*. The multimedia aspects of the project allow those who sit outside of my intended audience to engage in meaningful ways with this research.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Each of my narrators were asked a series of similar questions. A few themes emerged across my conversations with these women. These themes included: Community and Safe Spaces, DJing as Black Storytelling, Cultural Significance and Preservation, and Personal and Familial Influence. Each of these themes will be discussed along with relevant excerpts from the interviews.

Personal and Familial Influence

I was curious about the communities that my narrators had become a part of or further immersed in as their career progressed, and as I was listening to their stories, it was interesting to learn how music has always surrounded their life prior to even being DJs. The first question I asked each of my interviewees was what their first introductions to music were, that weren't even necessarily connected to DJing. I started each of my interviews by asking these women what they remembered their first introductions to music being. When I say DJing is a narrative art practice, it is because for all of my narrators their love for music began in their homes or a place they frequented as they were growing up- the music that they like now and are attracted to has somewhat to do with the sounds they were first exposed to. I was interested in where their love for music started, and how it grew over time and eventually developed into their current profession. King stated:

I grew up in the church where I like sang praise and worship every week. I led all that. That was my life for a while. Just growing up in Christian church, you're just always surrounded by different kinds of gospel music, whether it be- there's so many facets of it. And I was always really interested in some of the ideologies they have behind the music and why it was so impactful.

I think beyond my personal beliefs of the actual religion or practice, the music that was ingrained into that moment in my life was just so pivotal for me as far as exploring music and what the power that it holds. It was really transformative for me growing up just to have really really good music around me all the time. Both my parents are pretty avid music listeners and enjoyers. Especially my mom growing up she was really into neo soul so I got into a lot of India Arie and Lauryn Hill and that kind of music and so seeing my mom enjoy that music definitely influenced me a lot and my taste and the kind of people that I'm attracted to musically. So yeah I definitely grew up with a lot of music (Amarji King, Feb 2025).

It was made clear in my interviews that their families gave them their first introductions to music, which is what I honestly assumed many of them would say in response. As a Black American I was also raised in the church like King, and a lot of my appreciation for music started there and then branched outside of it. However, the church was not the only place that my narrators were first introduced to music as Ayanna Heaven stated that she remembers first hearing music while being a child in Jamaica:

So I'm Jamaican and I grew up in a few different places, but I spent a bit of my childhood in Jamaica and then I moved to Atlanta, Georgia when I was seven. And I definitely remember hearing a lot of music just out in Jamaica. I feel like when you're there, it's like music is kind of always playing. You're driving through a town and it's like music is blasting through people's cars or through businesses. I feel like music is omnipresent and so I remember hearing music a lot as a child just kind of being out on the road. And then my dad also was kind of the first person who really played music I guess for us intentionally but a lot of that was in the car. My dad's a big reggae fan. And I don't think he really listened to any other music besides reggae (Ayanna Heaven, March 2025).

My desire to represent a range of ages and backgrounds amongst my narrators is why I also chose to speak to Dyana Williams. She told me in our interview that she too was introduced to music from her family, by both her mother and father, and later in our conversation she also told me that her dad listened to the radio as well. When I initially asked her the question surrounding where she remembers first hearing music she stated:

My mother's womb and my mother's uterus I'm sure. My mother's Puerto Rican and she loves music, so I'm positive that it started there. And later in my childhood. I grew up in the Bronx. My father, who grew up in the South, was a diehard music lover- radio always on from the moment we woke up till we went to bed, in the car, in the house, cleaning the house. I always remember my father blasting the radio. It wasn't just the radio was on. It was loud. So those are my first early memories of music (Dyana Williams, April 2025).

From this initial question, the questions that followed were a mix of what I had prepared in addition to questions that I came up with on the spot that were sparked by the flow of our conversation. Black women deserve space to share their histories and experiences, and it was beautiful to learn the fact that everyone's initial love for music came from familial relationships. As a Black American woman myself who was also raised in church like King, music has always surrounded my life as well, as I started singing there, which led me to pursue singing, performing and writing my own music. I would even go as far to say that music is an integral part of not just my life, but the Black community itself, whether that be dancehall, techno, reggae, ballroom, house, r&b, and soul. All of these genres with Black origins tell so many important stories.

DJing as Storytelling

For many people, and DJs especially, music functions as more than just something one passively listens to, and with this sentiment I felt that DJing is also a form of storytelling, to which my narrator DJ HoneyBun agreed. She stated:

Yeah, totally. I mean, it depends on what's happening that night, but I'm always conscious, especially when you're playing house or whatever, but just really trying to create a narrative with all these women or men, but I like to play a lot of fem vocals, but they're telling these such beautiful stories about heartbreak, love, like partying, family, just pure joy, just a beautiful sunny day outside. And I love to create that arc through the night and connect all of those stories together (HoneyBun, April 2025).

Outside of asking my narrators about the communities that they have become a part of as DJs, as well as how these communities are tied to their own musical and family histories, I was also interested in why they did certain things during their sets. For example, during my interview with Ayanna Heaven, I brought up the fact that during her Lot Radio sets, she talks. This is something that

we do not see that often with the rise of turntablists. While DJing is something that started on radios, also known as disc jockeys, in the contemporary world of what people know as DJing, there is no talking involved, it is often just someone performing for however long their time slot is. I asked Heaven about this:

ASB: So I was curious what makes you choose to talk and is that something you do during most of your sets or is that something specific to the Lot?

AH: So I started doing radio with WKCR, which is 89.9, of course, Columbia. And so I started doing that in March 2020... I'd done a radio show called Power of Reggae. It's like a small independent show out of Flatbush ... doesn't exist anymore but I did Power of Reggae for a few months before COVID hit and then we stopped doing it. But it was just kind of from there into learning kind of how WKCR does a lot of the shows like talking is just kind of a part of that radio tradition.

... I think a lot of my DJ ethos is around learning and around the dance floor and just—dance floor or your listening spaces or radio being a place that multiple things can happen. Let's just say that we can have fun, you can also learn something. I also find myself— I just have a hard time not contextualizing certain things. I tend to have just either a fact or just something that I want to share about music. And yeah, I didn't come into this in a club space, or anything like that. I didn't come in—I would say all kinds of music has different ways that people do it.

So radio is one thing where talking is just kind of a part of it, and okay and I see what you mean The Lot— a lot of people have shows where they don't talk but a lot of radio, talking is just a part of it. And definitely the WKCR tradition is to teach and learn and give context. So I kind of learned from there. And when I started doing WKCR I used to actually do a lot of research on the shows. I would read research and be very intentional and about sharing a lot of information and then as time went on I just kind of didn't have the time to do that as much anymore but yeah so I came out of this radio tradition where I just kind of saw people always talking either on power of reggae even if you weren't giving information about the music there was conversation happening and there was a rapport between the DJs and that type of thing I think—also, I think with Jamaican music too, there is this history of talking on the mic and even in a party setting MCing is a big thing. I'm not the biggest MC and I don't find don't have crazy confidence in that area with reggae and dancehall, but it is a big part of the tradition of

playing Jamaican music– is to MC is to talk... .There's so many ways there's so many mixes you could listen to where a human is not involved. I mean it's endless. YouTube, Spotify, anything– any of your music services will give you talk free music. So if you have a DJ who's playing like I think it's kind of cool to have the human element (Ayanna Heaven, March 2025).

My conversation with Heaven confirmed that speaking to Dyana Willams was important, as I wanted to also gain an understanding of the lineage of Black women who are DJs. Prior to what is known as DJ today, which are people who play the turntables or play on a controller board, there were radio DJs, or “disc jockeys.” When I spoke to Dyana I asked her multiple questions surrounding her long career as a radio and music industry professional. At the start of the interview, I wanted to know more about some of her first positions working in radio. She stated:

ASB:... .when I was researching you, I learned that you were the first Black woman to be a rock DJ at WRQX-FM in D.C., and I would love if you could expand on that a bit more. What was it like-... . you know, yourself in a space like that? I was just curious about a couple things. All of the things. The first one I'm curious about is... .what was that experience like, being like an Afro-Latina woman in a space like that... .being in rock radio.

DW: I'm a high level achiever. So the program director, a gentleman named Phil Damon–And it's interesting because I just was recently searching the internet for him because I wanted to thank him. Because here I am, an Afro-Latina woman. Rock music wasn't what I grew up on where I grew up with James Brown, Aretha Franklin, the Motown sound. That's what I grew up with. However, my father also listened to Wabc, which was like the pop station, and they played Stevie Wonder, but they played mostly white artists. So I did have some familiarity with James Taylor, Carly Simon– soft rock artists. We played a blend of soft rock and heavy, but Phil Demand was the music director and the program director, and when he learned of my background, having come from New York, when you go to New York, once you've worked in New York, your credentials are set. Unless you have done something ruinous or that was a disaster and that was not my case. So he was like New York radio.

If you are a broadcaster, you can do any format. And that was a very pivotal moment for me because he was right and I was right. I was– I am a broadcaster. Put me in a classical station.

Even though I don't know European classical music. I'll execute. I'm a broadcaster. So my first show. Ooh, wow. It was five hours. I had to program my own music. I didn't know what the hell I was doing. And literally, I fell out of the studio. I leaned against the door and— like, exhaustion. Because culturally, it was not where I came from. It's not what I knew. But with time, I learned. And I also took pride in the fact that Phil DeMar hired an Afro-latina woman because I was a broadcaster. So it was a great experience. I came to love parts of rock music, and I integrated it with what I love in my core, in my bone marrow, which is black music (Dyana Williams, April 2025).

In addition to this, I asked Williams about Black Music Month. Dyana Williams, along with the acclaimed songwriter Kenny Gamble, and broadcaster Ed Wright are all the cofounders of this month. When I asked her about this, she stated:

ASB: I'm really happy that you touched on Black Music Appreciation Month, because I wanted to ask about that a bit more. I read about the history, and I read about how you got that to be something that is now, you know, an official month. And I wanted to know if you could just tell me a little bit more about the history... why you felt like this was something that needed to happen. And... just like how you went about this.

Dyana Williams: Credit goes to Kenny Gamble for the establishment of the idea of June, Black Music Month. We were a couple at the time. We had three children. Well, the third child came a little later, but we were- and we are activists. Gamble, myself and Ed Wright, who was a broadcaster as well from Cleveland, we understood the power of black music. And this is 40—I think this is our 46th or seventh anniversary. June, Black Music Month was declared such by President Jimmy Carter on the South Lawn of the White House. June 7, 1979. It is not—you even said it—"appreciation."

Girl, it is not that. It is Black music month, that's what the creators called it. And it took me many, many, many years of emails, calls to get it restored, which I was successful doing with the Biden administration. I went to the first Juneteenth Celebration as established by President Joe Biden, and in his speech, I was with a row of people who were my colleagues and friends. He said, Black Music Month— on Juneteenth. It was Juneteenth, that day, and he says, 'and we're in Black Music Month,' I wanted to fall off my chair. My friends were poking me. They were like, 'Yeah, you finally got it back,' because the Obama administration changed the name to

African American appreciation– I can't even –I don't, yeah. But guess what? Eight years of me working on getting them to restore it, it didn't happen. But I'm a very persistent person, and I didn't stop when President Joe Biden, came into office, and fortunately, you know, we were able to get it changed. So that's that's the story. So Kenny Gamble, successful songwriter, producer, philanthropist, genuinely cares about the treatment of Black music, and I shared that passion with him. And Ed Wright, who transitioned physically from this world a couple of years, maybe two years ago,

ASB:... . on the topic of activism, was that something that you always wanted to include in your career? Even from the beginning– was that something that came later, or is that something you knew you always wanted to be a part of?

Dyana Williams:... .it started with God. God imbued me with the gift to lead. I'm a leader. I can follow, but I'm best served by my community as a leader. I have the energy, the passion, the ability to articulate ideas. More importantly, I'm willing to roll up my sleeves and get the job done. And so it started when I was a child in the Bronx.

I lived at 1461, Sydney place. I organized our games. I legislated when people were out of order, especially the boys. So it started in my youth, and it was cultivated and nurtured by my parents. I'm an only child. I had parents who just poured into me and told me. My father told me, If you're going to be a sanitation worker, be the best sanitation worker, or whatever you choose baby to do, be the best at it. So that's the information that I got as a child. Then I had a mother who became a professor of nursing, a very accomplished woman who was part of the team that wrote the HIPAA laws when we go into the doctor's office. My mother was so she's a historic Puerto Rican woman. So I grew up with those kind of parents who told me, here's here's the mantra, anything the mind can conceive and believe you can achieve. That's how to this moment. I'll be 72 that's where I reside and have I always been successful? No, I've had some things that have not, but I've learned from the failures. So they weren't really failures. They all added and contributed to my Drive and my vision to make things happen (Dyana Williams, April 2025).

Community and Safe Spaces

In the case of my interview with Amarji King, I was also specifically interested in whether or not she felt that she has created some kind of safe space for people when she is performing a set. She stated:

Absolutely. I think that being able to facilitate queer people boldly and confidently and to see it grow is an act of resistance as well 'cause it's like there will be— I know for me as an event curating standpoint when I first started throwing events you'll have to beg and plead a venue to give you a good night, right? They're like, 'we'll give you a Wednesday or we'll give you a Sunday or we'll give you a whatever.' And now that these venues are seeing that these queer events are becoming just as popular as the straight events. They are seeing that there is power in community and— I'm like you see the girls what we can do and how powerful we are. And so yeah, for sure I definitely think that having successful queer events and successful queer DJs is almost in a way like a f*** you to whatever rules you thought were in place here. we are able to have good lives, have good community, have good experiences despite whatever weird little rules you were following (Amarji King, February 2025).

King is a DJ that plays genres like ballroom, Jersey club, Baltimore club, and more. During our interview we talked about her *Boiler Room* set which was posted on YouTube on November 7, 2024.

Boiler Room is a music broadcaster based in London that was started in 2010. Currently, the Boiler Room YouTube channel has 4.71 million subscribers. The ballroom music that King is speaking about is not the same as the genre that many people may be familiar with, the one in which people dance in pairs doing dance styles like the waltz, tango, foxtrot, quickstep, etc. King is talking about ballroom music and culture that started by queer Black and Latino people in Harlem during the 20th century. Popular films like *Paris is Burning* from 1991, which King also mentioned in our interview, have given people insight into this culture in which ballroom music has its origins. When I asked King about how she got this opportunity she stated:

It came across because of my amazing ballroom house, the House of Lepore. My mother Natalie somehow pulled that stunt and got Boiler Room to tag along with us 'cause they were already doing a Texas tour from my understanding. I could be totally f***ing wrong, but from my understanding, they were already doing a Texas tour and my mother pulled some strings and made it all happen to get kind of like this ballroom showcase happening because in Texas there is a really big ballroom scene and it's really really expansive. There's a scene in Dallas,

Houston, Austin, and San Antonio. And then there are pockets of other scenes throughout the state, but those four cities definitely have a solidified scene which is really cool. And I mean historically, Boiler Room should be a showcase of underground talent. And I think that, doing a 5 hour ballroom, Boiler Room, marathon just makes sense to me because that is the most underground culture. and I think it deserves to have its moment.

And so to have that come across my desk was really cool, period. And then to have the privilege of closing it was just such a monumental moment for me. Something that I'll never forget and I will never live that down. I cannot believe that happened. And I feel very fortunate that I was able to represent Texas ballroom culture the way that I did. I feel very fortunate that my mother was able to be there and to have the ballroom and club worlds like collide is something that I've always been very passionate about because to me ballroom music is its own genre of music, right? And it's its own genre of club music.

And I think that merging ballroom with techno, with Jersey club, with Baltimore club, with juke, and all these other styles of club music really solidifies its impact to the sonic landscape of hopefully the world, but for damn sure Texas. I think in Texas now, you go to the club and there was a time where it was just me playing ballroom music in the club, but now that's what the girls want to hear period. So now there are so many other DJs playing ballroom music in the club because that is the music of our people, and if you're hosting these queer nights, you should also be having space for these new and emerging sounds. And I think doing Boiler Room was just such a big moment for the entire Texas ballroom scene. But for me personally, it was a really really big moment. I just couldn't believe it (Amarji King, February 2025).

Ballroom's roots go back to the Antebellum south, where enslaved people would mimic their masters at dances (Criales-Unzueta, 2023). From there was the Hamilton Lodge Ball as well as the Fun-Makers Ball in Harlem, that were spaces “where drag queens, gay folk, and gender nonconforming people—before such a label existed—‘got together for a grand jamboree of dancing, love making, display, rivalry, drinking and advertisement,’ as the playwright Abram Hill put it in 1939,” (Criales-Unzueta, 2023). And with this, the ballroom that we know today started in the 1970s, when Black drag queens and trans women started to form houses. People like Crystal LaBeija formed the House of LaBeija in 1968 in an effort to resist racism and colorism in the drag pageant circuit, while

Hector Valle formed the first Latino house, the House of Extravaganza in 1982

(Criales-Unzueta,2023). The Vogue piece titled, *From Underground Subculture to Global Phenomenon: An Oral History of Ballroom Within Mainstream Culture* written by José Criales-Unzueta offers us a long and crucial in-depth history of this important time for queer Black and Latino people. As mentioned before by Amarji King, she was able to get her Boiler Room set because of her house mother.

In their oral history piece, Criales-Unzueta quotes Michael Roberson, a professor, scholar and writer, who is also the author of the book titled *Ballroom: A History, A Movement, A Celebration*. Roberson states, “The first houses were named after these trans women who were mothering a community that was only for women.” This quote further enforced my point, that King is a part of an important history that is not separate from their DJ practice. The music that she is playing and the people she is surrounded by in her house are a part of such an important history, thus making her art practice much more layered than just music for people to dance to.

Community is a significant part of this art practice clearly, as DJs play to crowds and feed off of the crowds energy as well. When I found DJ ShayQ I was particularly interested in speaking to her because I wanted to know more about the venue that she is a recurring performer at. ShayQ is a recurring dj at The Kitchen by Cooking with Que in Detroit. The Kitchen by Cooking with Que is the only demonstration kitchen in Detroit, and it aims to provide people in Detroit with vegan meal options, while also providing a space for meat eaters as well. The point of the kitchen is to create a

space for people with all kinds of dietary needs to enjoy themselves and music. In our interview ShayQ stated:

The Kitchen by Cooking with Que is an immersive learning environment. So, she pretty much started that business because we needed to learn how to cook healthy food. And Detroit having prominent food deserts, she wanted to bring flexitarian options to the hood. You can't eat bread, okay, You don't eat meat, okay, I got you. And so that was what was happening. And she blew up during COVID. And so every week she would have a Monday industry night where she would like on a Monday.

Monday she'll have the industry night to work with local businesses and then on Fridays it was a wind down. And every Friday was a wind down. So she was just like, 'Hey, let's just have some music.' At the time she didn't have a liquor license. It was BYOB. I'll make you a meal. You can sip your wine and we'll chill. It's kind of like a pregame situation. It's never open past 10 or 11. And it was just somewhere safe to go learn, use the Wi-Fi. It's in a college town, so it's vibrant in that sense. It's multifaceted. It's a multi-purpose space. But we ended up getting into the kitchen because it was an industry night and she had nobody booked. She was like, I need a DJ. I was like I need a gig. So, I went in and my first set I went viral at The Kitchen and it was crazy. And I like how I'm standing next to the stove you can see everything happening. You can see how when I mess up and how I fix it. And the same thing, they burnt the cinnamon rolls and how it's not supposed to be polished. it's supposed to be a learning environment and everybody's supposed to feel comfortable with being-I'm just happy I'm in a place that isn't stuck on perfectionism (ShayQ, March 2025).

It's like the eve of Thanksgiving every week, when all the aunties come over in the kitchen and one on the greens and one on the mac and everybody working, you got to figure out how to slide by somebody washing the dish. That's what it is. We are all packed in there like sardines trying to make it work, but the food is good and the music good and we- ain't nobody complaining (ShayQ, March 2025).

ShayQ's interview proved to me even more that this project is needed. In videos from The Kitchen you see people just having a good time, and there is no focus on perfectionism as she stated. It has become a way for Black people to enjoy each other's company. In many ways The Kitchen is just as much of a safe space for ShayQ, just like the spaces in Texas that Amarj King plays. In my conversation

with ShayQ I was also interested in hearing about her connection to techno and ghettotech, which are two genres that were born in Detroit. I asked ShayQ about her connection to techno music:

So, at the moment right now, my aunt is a Jit Master. So it's an original dance that started I believe in the 60s called the jitterbug and it evolved into jitting so my aunt is in this well-known group in the Jit Masters and they specifically dance to techno music. House dance- I took a lot of dance classes so that's really where it came from. We [do] warm-ups and cheer and all of that stuff. So my relation to house music is purely through those years honey (ShayQ, March 2025).

As I stated before, in the Black community, music is such an integral part of our lives, in our interview ShayQ told me that she began dancing by watching Michael Jackson, and her mom put her in dance after she caught her memorizing the *Men in Black* video at the end of the movie. Clearly, dance and music always surrounded her, as she touched on her aunt's dancing career, which led me to doing research of my own. The jitterbug was a style of swing dancing from the 1930s and 40s that was spearheaded by African Americans in New York. Overtime, this dance evolved into jitting, which is a footwork dance that people in Detroit dance to with genres like techno. Despite its adaptations to other popular styles of techno, specifically like Berlin techno, techno music started in Detroit, and it is a historically Black music genre. I was also interested in hearing ShayQ talk about ghettotech, another genre that was born in Detroit during the mid-90s and 2000s. With the rise of DJ culture, I have also seen more DJs begin to play sets including ghettotech, I was made even more aware of the genre when the dj Zack Fox included it in his Boiler Room set in New York in November 2024. When I spoke to ShayQ about ghettotech she stated:

So ghettotech is Detroit. Ghettotech is straight up from here. And you got to brush up. *[laughs]*....It's just ratchet. You can make it or you can connect it to something familiar like Uncle Luke, So more like that Florida bounce...But yeah, so our ghetto tech night is every

night technically.....And for us, it reminds us of getting out of school at 5:00 [pm] and turning on the radio in the car like that. They start ghettotech at 5:00 p.m. in Detroit. [laughs] And speaking of Zach Fox, he commented on one of my Tik Tok videos (ShayQ, March 2025).

Ghettotech is a genre of music that was born in Detroit during the mid 1990s and early 2000s.

Ray Philp writes, “Ghettotech was a product of DJing. There are few genres in which that relationship is so inseparable,” in a piece titled *Ghettotech: An Oral History* from 2017. There are multiple prominent names from this genre that have made popular songs, one of them being DJ Godfather, who stated:

People just looked at [ghettotech] as a certain thing, just a bunch of dirty records with swearing in it, when it’s not about that. It never was. There are a lot of records that talk about that, but then there’s a lot of records that talk about footworking and jitting and dancing. Doing different dance styles. And a lot of the records don’t even have words in it, (DJ Godfather, 2017).

The interviewees from this piece were questioned about the offensiveness of the genre, as many of the songs contain explicit lyrics about women, to which another prominent person from the genre, DJ Assault responded, “If it’s offensive, you take life too serious.” Keith Tucker, another techno artist from Detroit, spoke on the fact that the genre did so well because women liked it as well. He stated:

You know why the music is so popular and will always be popular? The women like it. Don’t let them tell you otherwise. The women like to feel sexy and dance to that stuff. Whatever women do, men follow (Tucker,2017).

Regardless of how one feels about the genre and its lyrical content, or whether it is something distinctly different from techno, the fact is that ghettotech and techno are Black American genres that tell a story of its home which is Detroit. In addition to this, centering the Black people, Black women

specifically in this case, who are still making and playing the genre for people is important, in order to not lose sight of its origins.

Cultural Significance and Preservation

In many ways this project was a study of the Black diaspora, as all of my DJs told me about Black genres and artists from both the United States and abroad. They are all constantly in conversation with music by Black people that expands outside of the common household names that many of us already know, and while these names are important, it is also interesting to venture outside of what people expect to hear. All of the interviews I conducted with my narrators left me with something new I wanted to explore and learn more about. I was also curious about how the turntablists that I interviewed went about finding new music to play. These answers also proved my previous point about the fact that DJing is a job that requires curation beyond just playing a song, much to Ayanna Heaven's aforementioned point as well. When I asked Amarji King about how she finds new music to play in her sets she stated:

I'm always listening to new music, and I think that for me, I definitely love rabbit holes. So, I'm like, 'Okay, cool. I found this producer that I really like. Who are they friends with? I'm going to go to this producer,' and then follow their stuff as long as I can and then once I feel like I am that well has dried up I'll go back and then go find a different producer that I love and pick other stuff, creating playlists and new radio stations based off of songs that I find interesting, following producers on BandCamp and seeing who supports them and if there are any repeat offenders being... I think I see this person following this genre really heavily, so let me tap in with them and see what they're thinking. Also, becoming friends with producers is also been a really cool thing—having access to exclusive stuff because I am in the DJing world is always really cool.

One of my favorite producers— his name is Big Ace. He's from Texas as well. I literally get giddy whenever I am sent exclusive because I'm wow what a privilege it is to have music that others cannot hear and now I have the privilege of sharing said music with my audience that you wouldn't naturally get a chance to see and so now the web that we have made and music is just been cast even bigger so I think just having the community of other DJs around me to share music with each other has [been] really cool. The internet is always great.

There are so many crazy little sites that I'll go on to find new and exciting things. Tapping in with different countries as what are the girls in f***ing Brazil talking about? You know what I mean? So finding producers in Brazil that you really love or finding people I don't know in Mexico. In Mexico they are really on some s*** in Mexico. I like finding scenes that are thriving and developing and tapping in and showing support to them. Buying their music so that way they can keep creating more music is really important as well, liking their stuff so they feel supported in that way. That's so important and that is ultimately how you get more music by supporting the artists that create the music.

When I spoke to HoneyBun about this topic she stated:

That's interesting you say people have different answers because I feel—[I] mean there's the straightforward answer of go to the record shops, you browse BandCamp, you check out latest playlists, which are all the things that I do. I feel like I go in and out of different interests every month. So recently I've been listening to a lot more radio shows and other DJs mixes, especially people from different parts of the world. Because I'm always just trying to be aware of the different sounds that are popular in different places and trying to incorporate it into— I feel like right now New York is starting to really catch on to the Bouyon sound of Dominica, which is really big in Europe, especially in the Parisian—Black DJs have been playing Bouyon for years and I'm starting to see it trickle into New York now.

So I feel like the black diaspora is always just circulating the trends and you just kind of have to be tapped in and know it's— so I'm always paying attention to that- what all the different black DJs are playing around the world. But recently I've been trying to— honestly I'm kind of in a place where I'm starting over because I'm learning to play on vinyl and mixing just vinyl, which I feel like I'm kind of late to. But it really feels like I'm starting completely over. And it's really exciting 'cause it's just opened my mind up to a whole new thing. And also my respect for the craft has just skyrocketed.

So I find– now I’m at a record store almost every day and I’m just talking to all the dudes at the record shops and that’s honestly the best way to get new music is the guys at the record and unfortunately it’s usually dudes but there are some women that are great and...

I do think that that is a space where more women should be in– but also that job is kind of grimy especially the used record shops. What’s the Zoe Kravitz show?

ASB: *High Fidelity*, I think.

Yeah, I feel like that kind of glamorized it... .but when I leave a used record shop, my fingers are black.

ASB:... . is it intimidating learning how to play– because I got the hang of the basics when I took my DJing class in undergrad, but the thought of approaching actual vinyl records always scared me.

HB: ... I just kind of got over that hump... .But honestly, I was watching all these Grandmaster Flash videos. And the way that he’s just innovated obviously DJing and so watching him play with the records I’m like okay no I need to really just get this fear out of my head and just go for it.

CONCLUSION

There have been DJ collectives in the past that that have worked to make spaces for women in dance music. For example, the Sister SF collective founded in San Francisco was the longest running women-centered DJ collective that ran from 1997 to 2007 (Farrugia, 2012). This collective was birthed from this event titled ‘Your Sister’s House’ that began in 1993 and took place every Thursday and as time progressed it started to gain popularity (Farrugia, 2012). One of the founding members of both Your Sister’s House and the Sister SF collective, known as Polywog, stated:

“It’s about allowing these parties to give these women a chance because at that time, especially trying to break into the rave scene there was no way we would have gotten a gig there. Men would have. It’s about allowing these parties to give these women a chance because at that time,

especially trying to break into the rave scene there was no way we would have gotten a gig there. Men would have just laughed at you because it was a time when people were emerging. DJing was still kinda new, a new career path [that was] hard to break in, so this was an opportunity to play, to get heard and it was really fun.” (Polywog, 16 May 2005 interview) (Farrugia, 2012).

With the DJs I spoke to, I see the same thing taking place with the formation of things like Soul Connection NYC, which was started by DJ HoneyBun and her friend [DJ] Lovie in 2021. Soul Connection is a party series that aims to honor and highlight the Black women who have been overlooked in music history, specifically house music history. This party has also opened the doors for them to spotlight current Black women who are DJs and rising in notoriety, one of those DJs being Ayanna Heaven. In addition to this Lovie and HoneyBun have been able to collaborate with other DJ collectives outside of New York City, such as Mood to Move which has events in Houston, Austin and Atlanta, as well as the Deep South ATL dj collective (Johnson, 2024).

DJing, as Ayanna Heaven put it, is an art practice. It is a labor of love, whether it is finding and digging for the music to play, or practicing your set, while also feeding off the crowd to ensure that you are doing your job well. DJing on turntables is an art form pioneered by Black Americans, and highlighting the current moment we are in, in which so many Black women have decided to take up this practice to share their love for so many historically Black music genres, and even beyond that, is something that I wanted to record and document.

The oral histories of Black women DJs reveal a tapestry of cultural, social, and personal narratives. This research not only preserves these stories but also highlights the power of DJing as an art

practice. Every time someone performs a new set it is not the same as any other set they have played. The people in the room are different each time, the songs flow a different way, the set itself may not turn out to be exactly what the Dj planned. And in today's digital world, where many dj sets are often recorded and posted online for people to watch again, we are watching a moment in time that was captured that can never relive that moment. DJing tells the story of the night, of the day that a certain set was played. DJing also tells the story of the DJ themselves, as they bring their own histories with the genres they choose to play, as many of the genres that the women I spoke to choose to play hold some significance to them in terms of their personal life and familial history. Future research should continue to explore these narratives and expand the scope to include more voices and experiences.

References

- About Us - BOILER ROOM*. (2021). BOILER ROOM. <https://boilerroom.tv/page/about/>
- Aidan. (2022). *Bandcloud (2014-2022)*. Bandcloud (2014-2022).
<https://bandcloud.org/mathys-rennela>
- Alexander Ghedi Weheliye. (2023). *Feenin*. Duke University Press.
- Ambiance. (2020, July 18). *Kemistry & Storm - DJ Kicks (1999)*. YouTube.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XEpT_vt7AX0
- Augustus Pablodub. (2011, July 28). *Augustus Pablo - Stop Them Jah*. YouTube.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hgv9m3w4o6o>
- Axmed Maxamed. (2025). *Axmed Maxamed*. The Left Berlin.
<https://www.theleftberlin.com/author/axmed-maxamed/>
- Becca Inglis. (2019, January 23). *The story of Kemistry and Storm, the unsung pioneers of drum & bass*.
Dazed.
<https://www.dazeddigital.com/music/article/43025/1/kemistry-storm-dj-kicks-drum-and-bass-goldie-metalheadz-history-interview>
- Brewster, B., & Broughton, F. (2014). *Last night a DJ saved my life : the history of the disc jockey*. Grove Press. (Original work published 1999)
- Criales-Unzueta, J. (2023, June 28). *From Underground Subculture to Global Phenomenon: An Oral History of Ballroom Within Mainstream Culture*. Vogue.
<https://www.vogue.com/article/oral-history-ballroom-pride-2023>

Dabecco, F. (2024, February 12). *America's 1st Black Female Disc Jockey Was From Homestead*.

[Ttps://Pittsburgh.citycast.fm](https://Pittsburgh.citycast.fm).

<https://pittsburgh.citycast.fm/history-archive/americas-1st-black-female-disc-jockey-from-homestead>

DJ Assault - Topic. (2015, October 31). *Gel-n-Weave*. YouTube.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vRVR9Ws9x6A>

DJ Screw - Topic. (2015, August 22). *My Mind Went Blank*. YouTube.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uiJcS9hK1sA>

DJ ShayQ. (2025, March 25). *Ep #3 w/ DJ ShayQ (explicit)* (A. S. Burtin, Interviewer) [Interview].

<https://soundcloud.com/beyond-the-music-podcast>

DJ Spinelli. (2021, October 9). *S.O.S. Band - Tell Me If You Still Care (1983)*. YouTube.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hpYZhXif8B0&list=RDEMA0-neuR7e1Fk1taFBajurA>

Donnie Houston TV. (2021, November 4). *[THROWBACK] DJ Screw and The S.U.C. explain their*

history. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zTE9kQVfFEk>

Farrugia, R. (2012). *Beyond the dance floor: female DJs, technology, and electronic dance music culture*.

Intellect.

Gracier, B. (2021, June 9). *Dyana Williams On Why Black Music Month Is Not Just A Celebration,*

But A Call For Respect | GRAMMY.com. Grammy.com.

<https://www.grammy.com/news/dyana-williams-on-why-black-music-month-is-not-just-celebration-but-call-respect-interview>

GREYCOAST. (2023, June 22). *DJ Screw Fat Pat Freestyle (I Wanna Be Free) (Wineberry Over Gold)*

Clip Video. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gBvPJEWfW3U>

Heaven, D. A. (2025, March). *Ep. #2 w/ DJ Ayanna Heaven* (A. . Burtin, Interviewer) [Interview].

<https://soundcloud.com/beyond-the-music-podcast/ep-2-w-ayanna-heaven>

HoneyBun, D. (2025, April). *Ep #4 w/ DJ HoneyBun* (A. Burtin, Interviewer) [Interview].

<https://soundcloud.com/beyond-the-music-podcast>

Jit Masters. (2024, September 2). *Detroit Jit | Jit Masters LLC | Arts Beats and Eats 2024*. YouTube.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AI5fgfjZmYY>

King, D. A. (2025, February 16). *Ep. #1 w/ DJ Amarji King (explicit)* (A. S. Burtin, Interviewer)

[Interview]. <https://soundcloud.com/beyond-the-music-podcast>

Kinolibrary. (2021, October 4). *1970s London, Reggae Dance Hall, Young People Dancing, Black*

British Archive, 16mm. www.youtube.com.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=j0u2WVwoNaA>

Livingston, J. (Director). (1992, February 23). *Paris is Burning* .

Martin, L. (2019, April 4). *Kemistry & Storm – the tragic story of the drum 'n' bass originals*. The

Guardian.

<https://www.theguardian.com/music/2019/apr/04/kemistry-storm-the-tragic-story-of-the-drum-n-bass-originals>

[umnbass-originals](https://www.theguardian.com/music/2019/apr/04/kemistry-storm-the-tragic-story-of-the-drum-n-bass-originals)

Maxamed, A., & Rennela, M. (2019). *A Conversation on the Bleaching of Techno: How Appropriation Is*

Normalized and Preserved. Dwellerforever.blog.

<https://dwellerforever.blog/2020/06/a-conversation-on-the-bleaching-of-techno-how-appropriation-is-normalized-and-preserved>

Neuro Vincenzo. (2013, April 14). *Detroit Techno Partys*. YouTube.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4xVXZS_E8vE

NPR. (2017, June). "Give It Up For DJ Blackface!" NPR.

<https://www.npr.org/2017/05/31/528816138/give-it-up-for-dj-blackface>

Ochefu, C. (2024, May 2). "Cultural Amnesia" Erased Black Women's Contribution To Electronic Music – Now Artists Are Reclaiming The Genre. <https://www.service95.com>.

<https://www.service95.com/black-women-electronic-music>

Paulette, D. (2024). *Welcome to the Club: The Life and Lessons of a Black Woman DJ* Book by DJ Paulette. Manchester University Press.

Philp, R. (2017, May 24). *Ghettotech: An Oral History*. [Daily.redbullmusicacademy.com](http://daily.redbullmusicacademy.com).

<https://daily.redbullmusicacademy.com/2017/05/ghettotech-oral-history>

Staveley-Wadham, R. (2024, January 10). *Exploring the Jitterbug – The Dance That Divided Britain in the 1940s*. The British Newspaper Archive Blog | Amazing Finds and News from over 300 Years of Historical Newspapers.

<https://blog.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/2024/01/10/exploring-the-jitterbug/>

Steven, C. (2004, April). *DJ Flight interview*. Kmag. <https://kmag.co.uk/dj-flight-interview-2004/>

The Art Of Turntablism | History Detectives | PBS. (n.d.). Pbs.org.

<https://www.pbs.org/opb/historydetectives/feature/the-art-of-turntablism/>

The Kitchen by Cooking with Que. (n.d.). The Kitchen by Cooking with Que. Retrieved March 23, 2025, from <https://www.thekitchenbycwq.com/about-1>

TheOJaysVEVO. (2014, May 9). *The O'Jays - Forever Mine (Official HD Video)*. YouTube.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rfRKzouM9lo>

TheOJaysVEVO. (2020, July 1). *The O'Jays - Family Reunion (Official Audio)*. YouTube.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i6zsg2GbLqc>