

## 'Feel the Beat Come Down: House Music As Rhetoric' in 'Analyzing Popular Music', ed. Allan F. Moore, Cambridge U...

Stan Hawkins

*Analyzing Popular Music*

### Cite this paper

Downloaded from [Academia.edu](#) 

[Get the citation in MLA, APA, or Chicago styles](#)

### Related papers

[Download a PDF Pack](#) of the best related papers 



["Waiting for the Bass to Drop": Correlations Between Intense Emotional Experiences and Pro...](#)  
Ragnhild T Solberg

[The "PoumTchak" Pattern: Correspondances Between Rhythm, Sound, and Movement in Electronic D...](#)  
Hans Zeiner-Henriksen

[The "PoumTchak" Pattern](#)  
Hans Zeiner-Henriksen

## 5 Feel the beat come down: house music as rhetoric

STAN HAWKINS

It's 4 a.m. and you're speeding. On the crowded dance space, jagged flashes of strobe lighting fuse with the booming sound of the sub-bass to create a kaleidoscope of sensations. The sonic roar is driven by the fast pace of the 125 bpm beat, transporting you to a destination far removed from the grim realities of everyday life. Blood pressure rises as the temperature in the room intensifies and the beat takes control; all inhibitions are abandoned for euphoria. Lost in the music, you are aware of your feelings for all sharing the dancefloor as the serotonin in your body creates waves of depthless bliss. Suddenly the break section is upon us and the regular  $\frac{4}{4}$  beat becomes layered with the amorous moans of a female vocalist lifting our emotions to a higher plateau. Next the rhythm and bass drop out leaving the voice on its own, raw, exposed, orgasmic. Flanged into the mix, pleasurable groans fill the air as the strobes dissipate into a flood of purple haze. You want to swoon, fall, float, as suspense in waiting for the return of the beat becomes an excruciating eternity. Caught in time, the crowd appears in a trance swaying with arms raised in response to the ecstatic moans of the female vocalist. Starting up again, then, slowly, the beat begins to pound through: the throb of the kick drum punctuated with stabs of metal-edged brass sounds on the off-beats. No longer are you listening, but feeling the overpowering beat as everyone starts jacking to the energy with a fluency that locks into the beat.

### Musicological considerations

My approach in this chapter is to suggest ways for evaluating the track described above by identifying some of the organizing structures

I would like to express my gratitude to Bjarne Kvinnsland of NoTAM (Norwegian Network for Technology, Acoustics and Music) for generously affording his time to assist with sonographic readings of 'French Kiss', as well as discussing with me technological-related issues relevant to the development of popular music analysis.

and processes that are relevant to understanding its aesthetic.<sup>1</sup> Central to this analysis is a concern for examining style through a range of compositional features which systematize it.<sup>2</sup> Part of my study draws on reductive techniques to expose the details of structure and processing through which various parameters of rhythmic construction are presented as a basis for framing questions relating to musical composition and its communicative scope for expression. The main contention here is predicated upon a premise that many scholars of popular musicology have been anxious to emphasize: that the analysis of music only becomes meaningful when positioned in relation to the social space it is received in.

Accepting that house music is culture-specific, my argument proposes that its organization *musically* is a critical premise for working out its effect *musicologically*.<sup>3</sup> My purpose here is to discover and determine how some of the *internal mechanisms* of a house track function. Underpinning this investigation is a concern for how processes of composition can be identified in direct proximity to the technologies that produce them. In this respect, the DJ's task is to organize musical material through the imaginative application of technology. House music is generally based around simple rhythmic patterns which, when technologically manipulated, develop into complex sound-structures; variations on basic patterns of rhythmic, melodic

- 1 Throughout I have elected to employ the word track rather than piece or song as this is the term DJs commonly use. Note that Reynolds (1998) has suggested that track derives from the early stages of house where the music consisted of little more than a drum track and reel-to-reel tape and cassette.
- 2 Clearly, in undertaking any analysis of this kind, there is always the question of musical source. Turning to a recording of a dance track immediately separates the musical text from the context of its social space: the club setting, the sound-system, the mood of the crowd. In this sense, the recording is only representative of the sounds and processes the DJ has produced. However, in the case of the track, 'French Kiss', to be analyzed in this chapter, the rather unusual exception of this being a hit (in commercially recorded form) needs to be taken into consideration.
- 3 Also see Tagg (1994) who provides numerous important reasons for taking rave music seriously from a musicological position. Tagg's concern is that questions of musical structures in dance music should be recognized as different from 'rockology' in order to effectively and accurately assess their socialization strategies. Perhaps most significant is his claim that techno-rave ends nearly 400 years of 'the great European bourgeois individual' which begins with Peri and Monteverdi and ends with 'Whitney Houston and the TV spot for Bodyform sanitary towels' (Tagg 1994: 219).

and harmonic ideas is central to the compositional character of a track. As all the DJ's skills in mixing and editing are thrown together, the sound-object becomes the focal attention for response through dance. Importantly, the openness of house arrangements affords the DJ time and space to measure the dynamics of participation at the social event; the potential for social involvement is where the purpose of musical performance in house music is located through the unlimited mechanisms of sound reproduction.

There is little doubt then that house music refers to a complex set of social circumstances linked to specific practices and developments in musical production. Any musicological consideration of this genre, therefore, should not overlook the connection between the sounds emanating from studio-based production and their social reception. On this, Paul Théberge has insisted that in no other field has the 'link between "sound" and musical genre been so intensely formed' as in dance styles since the 1980s (Théberge 1997: 196). The relationship between sound and DJ<sup>4</sup> can be considered an act of ritual which discloses what is at the core of music production and consumption. In this sense, understanding dance as a response to house music is about the recognition and utilization of evolving technologies and cultures.

### 'French Kiss': on the wave of the Chicago phenomenon

Historically, house music, an immediate descendant of disco, originated in the clubs of the US in the late seventies.<sup>5</sup> Deeper and rawer than disco, it attracted large crowds who flocked in their droves to venues like the Warehouse Club in Chicago, often as a gesture of solidarity and cultural protest. Simon Reynolds explains:

4 A detailed and useful account of the role of DJs in the music industry has been provided by Tony Langlois who emphasizes the system of marketing house music. In order to keep in touch with the recent developments in house, DJs are often employed in other areas of the music industry, such as in record shops, journalism, event organizing, and studio-based work. DJs are constantly trying out new tracks in their clubs through the promotional channels of 'white label' singles. See Langlois (1992: 232–3).

5 Traces of house are found as far back in the New York underground scene before disco. New York DJs such as Francis Grosso, Steve D'Aquisto, and Michael Capello in the early seventies were already joining up tracks to create non-stop grooves which focus on the rhythmic track.

Chicago house music was born of a double exclusion, then: not just black, but gay and black. Its refusal, its cultural dissidence, took the form of embracing a music that the majority culture deemed dead and buried. House didn't just resurrect disco, it mutated the form, intensifying the very aspects of the music that most offended white rockers and black funkateers: the machinic repetition, the synthetic and electronic textures, the rootlessness, the 'depraved' hypersexuality and 'decadent' druggy hedonism. (Reynolds 1998: 15)

Reputed by some to have derived its name from the Warehouse,<sup>6</sup> house started off as a culture with DJs at the helm competing with one another for the most exciting effects and mixing tricks in production. It was during this period that DJ Lil' Louis started up a club called Horizon West which became famous for its punk-type Sunday events.<sup>7</sup>

By 1983, the radio had assumed an important role by airing the various styles and grooves that clubbers wanted.<sup>8</sup> Notwithstanding the sheer diversity of stylistic tendencies and influences, a house style gradually emerged. And it was through the first house records that the style initially caught on as fierce competition soon fired up between the labels, Trax and DJ International in their efforts to release the best records.

While by 1989, a number of cities in the UK<sup>9</sup> and other parts of Europe had become centres for the rave and techno scene, having imported

- 6 In terms of coming up with a definition of 'house' I'm inclined to turn to the Detroit DJ, Juan Atkins, who claimed that house was derived from the record one would hear in a particular club. Carefully selected, the DJ would play a record, often an import, which was as unique as possible to his/her club, and this would become known as a 'house' record. As a result this led to the concept of DJs creating their own records which would then be completely exclusive. In a more general sense the term 'house', at least up to 1989, was used to include rave music. More recently, the proliferation of sub-genres in house has resulted in countless labels to describe its stylistic orientation. Also see Hawkins (1993); Thornton (1995); Kempster (1996); Rietveld (1997, 1998); and Reynolds (1998).
- 7 By 1983, numerous venues had sprung up in and around Chicago, not least, Ron Hardy's club, The Music Box. Hardy soon became a central person to whom other DJs would take their tracks to for testing out the public's reaction.
- 8 As a result of this the Imports Etc. record store in Chicago was inundated with requests for records to be played on radio. It was out of this context that the first major house hit by Farley 'Jackmaster' Funk, 'Love Can't Turn Around', was released in August 1986.
- 9 For example, London and the northern cities of Manchester, Liverpool, Blackpool, Sheffield and Leeds.

and transformed many ideas from the States, house music in the USA had developed into four distinct styles: deep New York and Chicago house; Detroit techno; sample-based hip house, minimal jack tracks and acid house.<sup>10</sup> And, by the end of the eighties, a deeper kind of sound was typifying Chicago house which eventually led to a more hardcore scene. On the wave of this, a 'sex track' phenomenon emerged resulting in hits such as 'French Kiss' by Lil' Louis, the track I will focus on in this chapter. When Lil' Louis introduced the first mix of this track at one of his parties (attracting between 5,000 and 8,000 people a night), little did he realize that it was going to be a commercial hit. Finally released two years later in 1989, this became house music's first million seller on both sides of the Atlantic. Banned by the BBC and a number of New York clubs, its tumultuous popularity was almost assured as it 'stole into the nation's collective consciousness during the strange not-quite summer, before the 1980s metamorphosed into the 1990s' (in Kempster 1996: 27). But, perhaps most compelling and memorable was its complete slowing down to a halt in the middle, exposing a series of orgasmic utterances. According to Tim Barr, this track pulled dance music 'into an interior world of jacked-up eroticism and sensual, hip-tugging grooves' (Kempster 1996: 27) encapsulating the sexual explicitness of Chicago house music in the late eighties.<sup>11</sup>

### Editing and mechanizing the 'beat'

As already intimated, the evolution of house music can be traced through the music technology that has produced it. In the beginning, house tracks, basic in their conception, consisted of a drum track, a straightforward bass line, synthesizer keyboards, and occasional vocals. Gradually the development of new, flexible technologies resulted in the hybridization of house

10 Interestingly, Reynolds emphasizes that it was Black America that had generated these four full-formed styles. On being exported to Europe these sounds would then mutate 'through a kind of creative misrecognition on the part of the British and Europeans' (Reynolds 1998: 33).

11 Rietveld provides the following account of this trend: 'In night clubs which catered to dancers who enjoyed experimenting with their sense of sexuality, these often melancholic tracks, driven by deep rolling bass sounds and filled with sentiments of desire and lust, fitted perfectly' (Rietveld 1997: 128).

and other dance styles.<sup>12</sup> In particular, the programming of drum sounds and rhythms on state-of-the-art drum machines, MIDI, and sampling tools, would rapidly establish a range of stylistic norms which concentrated on the 'mechanization' of the 'beat' (see Goodwin 1998: 126).

In terms of musical editing, drum programming would have far-reaching implications in the formation of dance trends. As Goodwin has emphasized, the advantage of a new type of flexibility through the application of technology greatly enhanced this mode of performance. Indeed, it was the creative application of music technology that spelt out the aesthetic of house. Despite what 'technophobes' might perceive as the rigidity and machine-like senselessness of repetition, improvisation is an important part of the DJ's intentions. In club music, at least, how the feel and meaning are generated is best understood as a process of continual improvisation rather than 'progressive' development (also see Keil and Feld 1994: Chapter 3). As Lil' Louis has emphasized, there is far more to editing and production than the pushing of pre-set buttons: 'A lot of people look at editing as a mechanical process but it isn't. It's definitely a *feel* thing' (in Kempster 1996: 29, emphasis added).

Inevitably, Louis's above comment not only raises questions concerning the processes of music-making and the claims made by DJs concerning their selection of equipment, but also how music is received and evaluated. Notably, Chicago and Detroit DJs have tended to prioritize the creative manipulation of low-level equipment above the latest, up-to-date gear. The interesting point here is that aspirations to musical innovation and 'authenticity' are often located in the imaginative control of obsolete equipment and an interest for its sonic possibilities; analogue synthesizers, for example, are preferred to digital machines because of their 'warmth' in sound. On this, Lil' Louis has claimed: 'Generally I concentrate on sounds rather than particular instruments. . . . Music should be wide open. I try to display the fact that it doesn't have to be this instrument or that instrument,

12 See Andrew Goodwin (1998) for a useful study into issues concerning the programming of machines in relation to drumming. Also see Rietveld (1998) for a detailed discussion of music technologies used in house. Notably she emphasizes the economic consequences of the rise of a DIY market based on affordable recording technology, all of which made home production possible. The production of 'white label' could also be used by DIY producers as a marketing tool to try out the market.

or all live instruments or all synthesized. It can be anything' (in Kempster 1996: 29). For the purpose of the following musicological critique then, Louis's statement serves as a fitting point of departure for evaluating the properties of compositional processing found in a house track.

### Stripping it down! Beats, hypermetric units, CGPs, and processes in 'French Kiss'

Producing musical ideas in house is contingent on the DJ's sensibility for processing patterns that convincingly spell out the stylistic idiom. In numerous ways, the DJ's role might be likened to that of the 'master drummer' in certain African cultures where the individual's responsibility for producing the grooves determines the social success of the event (Chernoff 1979). Through moulding together diverse layers of rhythmic textures and timbres, the musical outcome is ultimately measured by its ability to 'move' the community. And, as Christopher Small has stated: 'At the convergence of essence and form stands the master drummer, not creating new rhythms but giving order and organization to those already there' (Small 1987: 295). House's *intensional* quality is thus located within similar processes of inflection, repetition and development that are intrinsic to African music. In particular, its sensations are felt through the looping of grooves into polyrhythmic patterns which stretch time into one continuous plane.

A good deal of the appeal in 'French Kiss' lies in the creative processing of rhythmic regulation which forms an important point of consideration when evaluating this house track's compositional content.<sup>13</sup> In addition,

13 Mounting a most contentious argument around the question of 'musicianship', Langlois (1992) insists that this, at least in its 'generally accepted sense' is 'virtually non-existent' in house music. By this he implies that digital production and processing, involving the use of software tools, samplers, MIDI and computers, makes the job easier for composers with a DJ background. As I understand Langlois, his position on the creative evaluation of house music rests on the premise that technological processing 'eases' the process of composition, and, thus, as some might deduce from this assertion, reduces the degree of 'musicianship' required. While Langlois quite clearly recognizes the 'value' of such creative processing, he fails to make a case for 'musicianship' on the terms of the genre he analyses. As a result, his critique easily panders to the general suspicion surrounding the question of expertise or skills in the 'popular' composer and the general problematics of assessing musical value.

the control of the filtering and phasing of sounds, through editing functions, provides the music with its energetic charge. By connecting everything to the beat, DJ Louis produces different feelings from each machine to 'bounce' off the other. For Lil' Louis, the creative application of technology is more important than the type of latest technology one might use. This might explain his preference for multi-track recording over computer-based sequencing. As he claims:

Music happens because of ideas – they're the important part of the process. I can take any piece of equipment and make something beautiful happen with it. There are a lot of times when I'll be in a music shop and I hear something from a keyboard and I just know it's going to be magic, but I'm not so much a stickler for that kind of thing. I do prefer older equipment – I like analogue stuff a lot better than the newer stuff. With analogue, you can't really miss. There's just no way of beating that pure sound and most of the digital stuff is just imitating that.

(Tim Barr's interview with Lil' Louis in Kempster 1996: 32)

Such sentiments highlight the DJ's approach to the track's production and his processing of musical ideas in 'French Kiss'. But, for the purpose of this study, I want to concentrate primarily on the features that relate to rhythmic processing and metric structure. My commitment to music analysis here is located in the approaches and methods employed to explore the characteristic traits of the beat and its musical organization.

The beat, in its most identifiable form, is the basic unit of temporal measurement, which, in its regularity, is associated with a certain release in energy; in effect, the force of the beat shapes the energy flow. While beats occur in all types of intervals and permutations, they are essentially felt on the four-in-the-bar accents – usually on the kick drum – with their *predictability* expressing a principal aesthetic of house. There is, however, as I will argue, more to the beat than just the properties attached to its quantitative value. As my analysis emphasizes, any consideration of the beat needs to take into account its qualitative implications as well. Thus, the extension of the beat towards other structural levels of understanding, in terms of effect, is necessary in determining the overall rhythmic character of a track.

Constructed around highly repetitive structures, house tracks are usually divided into polyrhythmic loops which sculpture the groove. Responsible for the kinetic flow of material, the groove functions as a unifying unit,

transporting with it a sense of regularity crossed with syncopation. In particular, its 'hypermetricity' forms the basis of what Tony Langlois has described as the 'internal logic' of house tracks. Importantly, as Langlois insists, house music is not intended for repeated listenings:

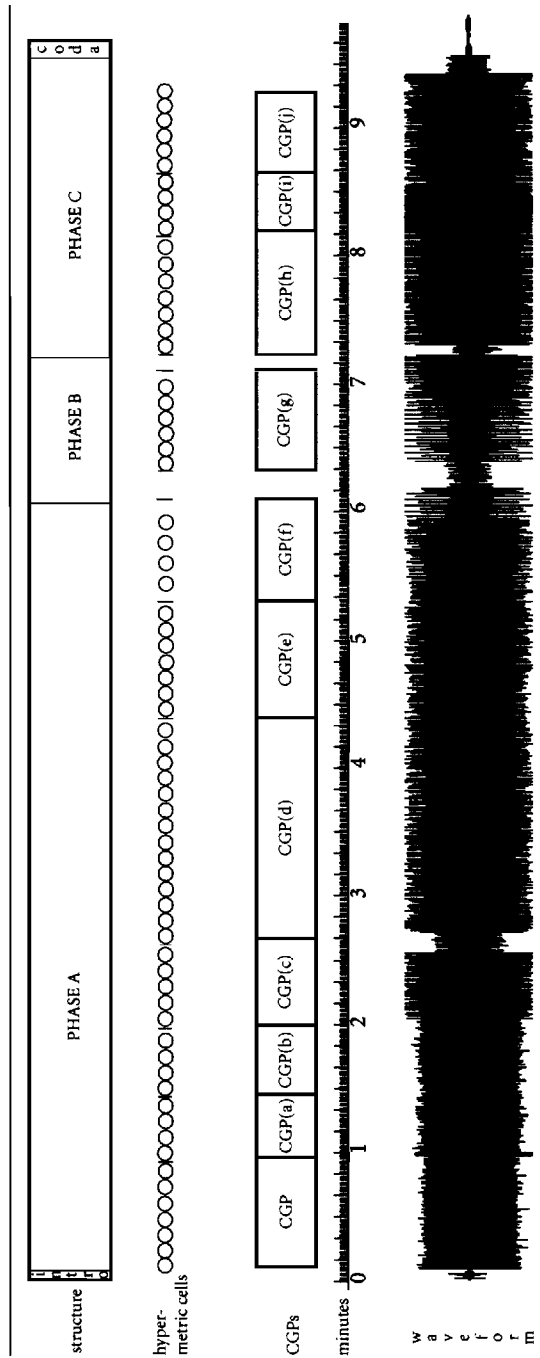
On first hearing, the lack of predictable connection between musical elements is both confusing and exciting – the steady beat provides a solid background against which to appreciate them. On second or third hearings the internal logic of the piece becomes apparent, it no longer shocks and the meanings are clearer. By the sixth or seventh hearing, most records have already become stale and their meanings exhausted. Because of various re-mixes and performance techniques, however, one is quite unlikely to hear the same record being played the same way twice (Langlois 1992: 235).

From this it would seem that working out the 'internal logic' of a track depends on considering the function of repetition which, in turn, raises the question: repetition from what perspective? As the music analyst Nicolas Ruwet (1987) has emphasized, repetition needs to be comprehended through the many assumptions that define it (also see Keil and Feld 1994).<sup>14</sup> If we accept this premise, determining how repetition works in house is about verifying procedures of repetition in order to illuminate their different functions. To address this I have displayed numerous structural processes of repetition in 'French Kiss' in Table 5.1. As recourse to designating structures of segmentation, the representations of sound in the wave form snapshot of the entire track in the lower section of Table 5.1 serves to verify the rhythmic structures and their overall energy curves in the track.

With reference to Table 5.1, the structural outline of the track consists of a short intro and coda flanking three main divisions: Phase A (beginning at 5''), Phase B (6'10'') and Phase C (7'18''). The term 'phase' is employed

14 Cf. Nicolas Ruwet's application of methods (1987) of analysis to procedures of division based on the principle of repetition. Another perspective on 'reading' repetition is made by David Brackett in his study of James Brown's 'Superbad' in which he emphasizes the need for competence when responding to 'grooves': 'a groove exists because musicians know how to create one and audiences know how to respond to one. Something can only be recognized as a groove by a listener who has internalized the rhythmic syntax of a given musical idiom' (Brackett 1995: 144).

Table 5.1 Processes of repetition in 'French Kiss'



to denote the distinct periods in the unfolding of the musical material.<sup>15</sup> Lasting just under ten minutes (9'53'') in total duration, the track consists of approximately seventy units of repetition (excluding the non-rhythmic, ad lib, rubato passages) referred to as hypermetric units, designated in the next section of Table 5.1. Comprising sixteen crotchet beats (four bars), these units are also experienced as part of larger cellular groove patterns (CGPs) which regulate different scale proportions through constantly changing patterns of repetition. Altogether I have identified eleven CGPs (see Table 5.1) which are determined by a range of musical features (see Table 5.2) that signal their transformations. The application of my procedure for identifying these CGP grooves and their structures in Table 5.1 is twofold: (1) to confirm the processes of repetition at work; and (2) to provide structural evidence of the music's symmetrical and asymmetrical properties.

In the shifts between all the phases, CGPs, hypermetric units, single bars, it is essentially the beat, the hypermetric units, and CGPs that regulate the track's musical logic. As a result, the 'beat' is experienced as part of a single bar as well as of a larger hypermetric unit. While there is much room for debate on how one might define grooves and riffs, for the sake of this study I have chosen to categorize them by their groupings according to the musical data that determines their transformations. Generally, while we might easily perceive one main groove running throughout the track, there are also grooves within grooves; it is this aspect of musical organization that ultimately provides the alternating levels of intensity that define the track's syntax.

Given that the characteristics of grooves and beats are central to any taxonomic conception of rhythmic structures in house music, let us consider in more detail the rhythmic procedures employed in 'French Kiss'. From Table 5.1, we can see that the first seven cellular grooves, CGP, CGP(a), CGP(b), CGP(c), CGP(d), CGP(e) and CGP(f) in Phase A constitute the longest section (6'6'') in which each CGP undergoes transformations due to various compositional procedures: entries of musical ideas, effects processing, tempo regulation, textural manipulation. With the arrival of the break section (Phase B), there is a disruption to the CGP series

15 Responses I have measured suggest that there is a clear awareness of three distinct phases, as my analysis points out. The Norwegian dancer and choreographer, Odd Johan Fritzøe, interpreted Phase A as the warming up section, Phase B as the revving up period, and Phase C as the hi-energy, jacking-to-the-beat phase.

Table 5.2 Features determining CGPs

Time Duration	Hypermetric units	Groove	Form	Dominant Musical Features
0-4''			<b>Intro</b>	strings/space sounds
5'-59''	1-7	CGP	<b>Phase A</b>	synth/kick drum/hi-hats
1'00'-1'30''	8-11	CGP (a)		synth/k.drum/hi-hat/shakers
1'31''-2'02''	12-15	CGP (b)		brass stabs (panned and filtered)
2'03''-2'42''	16-20	CGP (c)		reverbed hand claps on two & four
2'43''-4'26''	21-34	CGP (d)		four-pitch melodic synth motif
4'27''-5'28''	35-41	CGP (e)		modulation down a maj. second/ long sustained string note
5'21''-6'09''	42-45	CGP (f)		slowing down of tempo/entry of female vocal moans and grunts
6'10''-6'22''	46-47	none	<b>Phase B</b>	no drum sounds/vocal utterances accompanied by slowed down brass motif (panned with heavy effects)
6'23''-7'09''	48-53	CGP (g)		entry of groove (synth + kit) - gradual speeding up
7'10''-7'17''	54	fermata		no kit - filtered brass sounds and vocal utterances
7'18''-8'13''	55-61	CGP (h)	<b>Phase C</b>	return of main 'beat'; motif/ further increase in tempo/ vocal moans layered/pitch modulation in brass motif
8'14''-8'41''	62-65	CGP (i)		snare drum rolls mixed in
8'42''-9'19''	66-71''	CGP (j)		full arrangement of all parts/ entry of long string note
9'27''-9'53''		none	<b>Coda</b>	no rhythm/string note exposed/ entry of ring modulated phasing effects in fade out.

(hypermetric units 46-7). Upon its return, the groove's (CGP(g)) tempo is considerably slowed down exposing the metric details of the rhythmic organization in 'slow-motion'. Then, following the free-floating fermata moment (hypermetric unit 54), Phase C starts up again with the first of three more variants of the cellular groove - CGP(h), CGP(i) and CGP(j) consisting of the hypermetric units, 55-61, 62-5 (see Ex. 5.2, below) and 66-71. As the musical ideas transported by each CGP are never identical, a certain sense

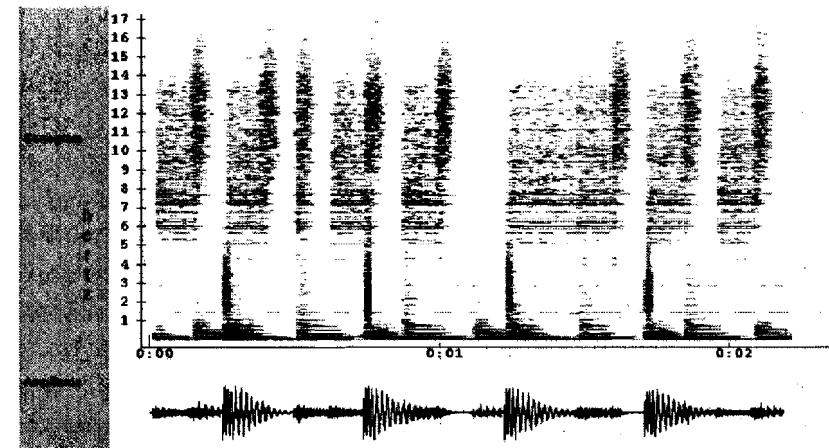
of expectancy results through the anticipation of changing effects in the CGPs' progression. Put differently, the compositional techniques of regulating repetition through the organization of the CGPs invoke a complementary sense of contrast versus constancy, which, on closer inspection, increases our understanding of rhythmic articulation through metric organization.

In most music, metre has a direct bearing upon how we interpret features of rhythm and beat duration, while the relationship between adjacent and non-adjacent rhythmic events is integral to the procedures of structural transformation determined by metric organization. Prevalent in 'French Kiss' are different strata of rhythmic motif that exist in the hypermetric articulation and beat configurations. Perhaps it is worth stressing here that metre is an abstract temporal construct for determining types of rhythmic movement. In this sense, metre might be best understood as conceptual in its function (see Coker 1972: Chapter 6). On this same point, Blom and Kvifte (1986) have argued that experiencing metre is based on inferential processes in the minds of the respondent. This would imply that metre is more in the mind than the music, as Kvifte insists:

one and the same sound can be perceived in more than one meter by different persons, or by the same person at different times. That is: *meter is something one uses; a way of ordering sounds in a musically meaningful fashion...* (This is) also obvious from the fact that metrical signs in written music – time signatures and barlines – are not represented by distinctly audible features in the music... barlines can only be inferred, not directly perceived.  
(Blom and Kvifte 1986: 495)

From my perspective, the metric organization of beats in house is situated in the articulation of recurrent patterns of motion as much as in the individual units of accentual stress. Indeed, the units denoting the beats determine their quality of movement through their schematic groupings into metrical measurements. Main beat-types in the groove appear on and off the beat. While the kick drum pounds out regular beats, four to the bar, the superimposed organ synth accents strong and weak beats with a syncopated couplet pattern that captures the stereotype idiom of house music – the melodic feature described by Philip Tagg as the 'almost obligatory syncopated keyboard chordal rhythm figure' (Tagg 1994: 214). Mapped against the regularity of the beat, the cross-rhythmic metric tension between the steady kick drum

Example 5.1: Sonogram



pulse and this melodic cliché ultimately spells out house music's aesthetic (See Ex. 5.2).

Inasmuch as we might be able to instantly recognize the succession of metronomic pulses, there are nevertheless many different ways to rationalize the beat. Above all, the impact of rhythmic articulation through the process of production, together with the relative amplitude of the beats,<sup>16</sup> considerably affects the ways we feel the rhythm. In stark contrast to many other forms of music, the beat in house music is tightly regulated to create a sensation of machination. Yet, as the sonogram of one of the first single bars of 'French Kiss' suggests (Ex. 5.1), the distribution of energy through rhythm, texture and timbre, perceived on a microstructural level, is complex. The energy in the kick drum and organ riff, concentrated in the lower part of the graph, often drops below 1,000Hz. Between 1,400–5,000Hz the overtone spectrum of the high string pitch which arches over the introduction into the first CGP is visible in the sparseness of texture displayed in this mid-region. The density of the hi-hat's energy, like the bass, spans most of the sonogram with its concentration occurring between 6,000–17,000Hz. Closer scrutiny of this sonogram also discloses the gaps in the sonic texture and the intricate spatiality of rhythmic punctuation. Between 150–500Hz the synth organ

16 Dirk Moelants (1997) refers to the relative duration and amplitude of beats as microstructures, claiming that this is necessary to clarify the differences in metric movement in music of contrasting styles.



sound is sparse in comparison to the bass, while the hi-hats foregrounding in the mix, like the bass's range, occupy the upper region, in concentrated levels between 6,000–17,000Hz. From the sonogram and the wave form representations of Example 5.1, it is clear that the overall effect of each of the four kick drum beats in the mix, together with the inflections of other timbres and textures, comprise the most dominant feature. Additionally, the sonogram displays how tension is regulated through the control of the strong and weak components of the metre. Most of all, the rhythmic traits of organization are clearly perceivable in the vertical layers of sonic representation, which, in effect, hold the clue to the chemistry of the groove. Significantly, the sonogram suggests that metric organization in the track is never *absolute*<sup>17</sup> as a result of the variable qualities of the beat.

As first listening of 'French Kiss' betrays, the gradual manipulation of tempo to a virtual standstill in Phase B occurs at the point of entry of the vocal utterance. Gradually, with the working up of the textures after the breakpoint, the track's moment of transcendence occurs during Phase C's outburst of blissful charge (7'18"). Here, the continuous repetition of the pounding bass beats and the fresh juxtapositioning of ideas in the tightly controlled levels in the production produce the most concentrated spurts of energy. Programmed on a TR-808 drum machine,<sup>18</sup> the drum sounds are tightly controlled through their positionings in the mix. Moreover, the compositing of musical layers enhances the hypermetric details of tension and release, focusing our attention on the intricacies of the production; such as the subtle differences in the organ attack, the vivid timbral contrast between the deep bass sounds and the high-pitched splash of open and closed hi-hats, all of which shade in the dynamics of the groove. From this it is evident that the transformations of CGPs within all three phases instil in the track a sense of primary musical charge. With the introduction of

17 This point is also raised by Coker (1972) in his conceptualization of the pulse as a unit of temporal measurement.

18 The Roland TR-808 drum machine signified a breakthrough for producers of dance music as it enabled them to program rhythms and process drum sounds separately. In other words, it became a serious compositional tool which could store up to thirty-two patterns on two banks, as well as providing space for over 700 bars for use. Also see Théberge (1997) for a useful discussion of the capabilities of drum machines, such as the TR-808, and their influence on the emergence of musical styles in dance culture.

each CGP, new features are introduced which affirm meaning. As illustrated in Table 5.2, it is the entry of percussion sounds, melodic ideas, and studio effects (filtering) that produce alterations in the CGPs' syntax. In addition, while creating a sense of progression, each change in the CGPs constantly transforms the rhythmic syntax of the track.<sup>19</sup>

Notably the extreme alterations in tempo in Phase B underline the prominence of the beat. While the beat remains mostly constant during the tempo-changes, additional qualities of metric manipulation induce variation.<sup>20</sup> These are most discernible in the tempo fluctuations, the fermatas, the break section (Phase B (hypermetric units 46–7)), the different cross-rhythmic pulsations (see CGP(i) in Ex. 5.2), all of which allow for an extensive range of emotive possibilities on the part of the dancer/listener. As we can see in Table 5.1, the effect of the complete alteration of the musical material at 6'10" is verified by the amplitude readings of the wave-forms which indicate an acute lapse in energy level, with the focus on the mid-range intensity of the vocal utterances.

The intricate elements of rhythm, metre and repetition thus reveal interesting traits which mould the musical material into an organic unity.<sup>21</sup> Furthermore, the organization of all the CGPs bears directly upon the signification of beat structures and their metric construction. And, it is the impact of all the musical events entering and exiting the mix at specific points that determines the fluctuating currency of the beat; the result being that while the beat maintains a sense of regularity throughout, it is never stable. Continuously transformed through editing processes and metrical distribution, the beat controls how the energy in the track is compositionally

19 For a useful discussion of this, see Headlam (1997), who raises questions concerning perception of metre in his analysis of blues transformations in Cream. He emphasizes how the analysis of rhythm in country blues becomes problematic through a confusion of perspective in terms of deciding whether metre is regular or irregular.

20 This observation has also been made in a useful study conducted by Dirk Moelants (1997) into the subsymbolic aspects of metre.

21 Here it could be argued that the structural properties and 'banality' in repetition that define house are not that dissimilar to those of minimalism in 'high' art and contemporary music. Not only can parallels be found in the developmental techniques employed, but also through the music's disembodiment from many of the traditional procedures commonly associated with rhythmic, harmonic and melodic control in Western musical practice.

**Example 5.2:** Transcription of first and last bars in CGP(i)

expanded. When we fix on the regularity of bass beats per bar, we are not only aware of how the tempo controls the energy flow, but also how the multi-dimensionality of the beat is always a fluid structural feature (see Ex. 5.2). Shorter and faster durations signal a more rapid flow and greater force in rhythmic energy as the full throttle of rhythmic propensity releases the power of musical momentum in the final lap of Phase C. It is at this point in 'French Kiss' that the functionalism of repetition triggers off all those physical reflexes which create the sensations of an imaginary space and an urgency to dance.

From Example 5.2, it is clear through transcription how the distribution of metre in 'French Kiss' is manifested in a rhythmicization of events. In this instance, transformation of the rhythmic material hitherto is derived from the brass stabs (Cm 11) in the last bar of CGP(i) on weak and strong semiquaver beats. Such a gesture has its origins in funk and certain jazz styles and can imply a familiar reference point for the dancer. Here, the regularity of the kick-drum, handclaps and hi-hats (open and closed) are heard differently due to the total effect of this brass idiom. In this context it should also be noted that the effects used on the brass stab further accentuate its

edge in terms of rhythmic and timbral flavour. In this way, through studio production, a greater emphasis is placed on the beat as it defines the musical characteristics of the hypermetric unit and ultimately the structure of the CGP. From this example, we can see that while repetition proceeds on one level (in the kick drum, organ continuum and hi-hats), variation is an omnipresent element through the introduction of other musical features (brass stabs, vocal moans, new percussion lines, synth fragments). Gesturally, then, the function of repetition could be understood as *oppositional* in that it results from the relationships between gradations of linear and vertical principles of rhythmic development. At the same time, though, the rhythmic organization is goal-orientated in its linearity due to the constant confirmation of CGP alteration. In broad terms, this seems to tie up with the ideological imagination of a musical aesthetic that relates directly to new modes in dance experience, an issue I will address in the next section.

In sum, so far, the total effect of the processes of rhythmic organization around the beat is what results in pent-up action on the dancefloor. Moreover, the arrangement of the sounds in a meaningful fashion is what makes musical sense for persons 'into' house. Feeling the full weight of the beat, clubbers lock into house music's rhetoric, which, as Sarah Thornton has pointed out, always 'resides in a rich, full, emotive and embodied sound' (Thornton 1995: 73). With this in mind, let us now turn to considering the implications of these musical structures and processes and how they are encoded within the social context of dance.

### 'Jacking', desire and house aesthetics

House culture possesses its own aesthetics, which, from many vantage points, can be problematic for the traditional musicologist to grasp, especially given that this music might *seem* to lack 'materiality', offering 'no food for thought' (Reynolds 1998: 376). Importantly, its interpretation possibilities lie in the interface between respondent and DJ; clubbers know this is central to how house functions. How one dances to music *is* about interpretation. Moreover, basic sensory experiences originating from a kinaesthetic awareness of musical exertion, exhilaration and abandonment are manifested in individual responses to the beat and groove patterns (CGPs). The symbolic exchange of the beat always equates with the cyclical flow of erogenous

material. And here, it seems as if our personal notions of time are dependent on instinctive responses to the dispersion of rhythmic pulsations.

Lest we forget, trends in dancing, when 'French Kiss' was first played in 1987, had changed quite considerably since the courtship style of disco. Pleasure in the intense sexual explicitness of much house music had a resonance in a freestyle form of dance known as 'jacking' where the entire body replaced the thrusting movements of the pelvis in a type of delirium. Interpreting the etymology of this term, Simon Reynolds explains:

'jack' seems to be a corruption of 'jerk', but also may have some link to 'jacking off'. The house dancefloor suggests the circle jerk, a spectacle of collective auto-eroticism, sterile *jouissance*. 'Jacking' also makes me think of jacking into an electrical circuit. Plugged into the sound-system, the jacker looks a bit like a robot with epilepsy (itself an electrical disorder of the nervous system). (Reynolds 1998: 21)

In hyper-sexual tracks, 'jacking' would ensue during the build-up of energy in passages, such as in Phase C of 'French Kiss'.<sup>22</sup> Relentless yet exhilarating, the stomping of the beat is the sexualized trademark of the track, its intention being to 'jack' the crowd into a state of excitement. Almost as if depersonalized in its aesthetic intention, the sublime effect of the beat is to mechanize the dancer into a collective entity which often involves the reconstruction of identities through carnivalesque display. In this sense, the idiomatic gestures of house convey a religious and political sense of purpose for its congregations. Hence, a notion of togetherness is mediated through the vitality of musical style which becomes an embodiment of dancefloor aesthetics.

Musically, the skills (on the part of the DJ) invested in controlling the beat and the crowd are what frames the aesthetic of house. Indeed, the grooves provide the prime stimulus for the DJ realizing music in 'real time', as if insisting that clubbers should party to the point of complete immersion in the beat (see Rietveld 1998: 148). Importantly, it is the unfolding of all the musical events – drum loops, beats, vamps, sound textures, special effects,

22 Although by the time this track was released two years later, dance styles had transformed. Rave was enormous in the UK and crossover was increasingly popular. Yet, 'French Kiss' was still able to 'move' fans on both sides of the Atlantic.

bass lines, melodies – that thrills, excites and drugs the dancer.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, physically responding to the beat builds up a sense of anticipation for what sounds and musical events will be superimposed over the pulse next.<sup>24</sup> In many ways, it would seem that the disciplinarity of the beat, located within a pool of changing timbres and textures, is what spells out house's rhetoric. Reading the beat in dance then empties out a wealth of gestures and inner details that expose its syntax.

In studying the effects of house music and its sub-genres, the combination of dance with drug intake cannot be ignored. The mood-enhancing influence of the drug 'Ecstasy', as research has indicated, is central to the hedonistic-based club experience. Its impact on the body results in a sense of euphoria which accentuates the sexual feelings of the clubbers. Losing one's inhibitions within the social context of the club is an important part of the escapist nature of dance, and, not surprisingly, Ecstasy's effect on the reactions to musical sound has led to it being celebrated as the 'flow drug'. According to Reynolds:

it melts bodily and psychological rigidities, enabling the dancer to move with greater fluency and 'lock' into the groove. The energy currents that MDMA releases in a flood through the nervous system could be compared to the notion of a life-force promulgated by various 'vitalist' philosophers, mystics, poets and physicians from the eighteenth century to the present: Mesmer's 'magnetic fluid'; Whitman's 'body electric'; Reich's *orgone*.

(Reynolds 1998: 410–11)

Turning to the issue of gendered identity in house music, it is interesting that while Ecstasy is often experienced as a type of aphrodisiac, it somewhat ironically causes impotence in males by focusing attention on 'sentimentality rather than secretions'. And, as Reynolds continues, 'it also gets rid of the thinks-with-his-dick mentality, turning raves into a space where girls can feel free to be friendly with strange men, even kiss them, without fear of sexual consequences' (Reynolds 1998: 411). Controlled by this drug and the music, the crowd becomes united through a utopian form of ritualistic

23 The important elements of timbre and texture are the least transcribable in music analysis and therefore, as many studies have indicated, the easiest to gloss over.

24 See Walter Hughes's (1994) discussion of disco music and his discourse on the 'troping' and 'inversion' of the beat.

display of erotic response that discards the restrictions of everyday 'fixed' identity.<sup>25</sup>

Perhaps the main point here is that dance is about *socially* interpreting musical styles. In Simon Frith's words, dance 'is an ideological way of listening; it draws our attention (not least in its use of space and spaces) to arguments about its own meaning... to dance to music is not just to move to it but to say something about it...' (Frith 1996: 224). Building on Frith's idea further, the meaning of house music is located in the ways that clubbers respond to it. In other words, modes of dancing mirror an array of shared values which always articulate a social function. To submit to the beat is to become part of an egalitarian community entrenched in a type of religious mysticism. Stylized trends of address in club culture relate directly to the ways in which body movements interpret music in specific social spaces without any recourse to clarification through words. So, while dancers are able to focus on their own individuality, their physical motions function to establish a 'communal ethos' which, in turn, define the event, genre and context. In this respect, the house event 'generates a "liminal" existence, ritually separating, by various means, the ordinary world from the dance environment' (Langlois 1992: 236). Moreover, while bodily gestures are controlled by the groove, they are also about blissful escapism, about letting go, about becoming 'one' with the music, about reshaping communities.<sup>26</sup> And, in this sense, every house event presents a different experience based on its own unique set

25 During the period in which I have researched the effects of dance music, starting in Manchester in 1989 and continuing in Scandinavia at the time of writing this chapter, my discussions with numerous people involved in club culture, as well as my own personal experiences of house music, have revealed that the individual's sexuality and gendered identity fades into insignificance within the context of the event. While the implications of a 'genderless' crowd are clearly far reaching and problematic, the idea of abandoning the restrictions of traditional and patriarchal 'states of being' is one of the most compelling features of house.

26 Emphasizing this quality of dance in relation to subjectivity, Rietveld (1998) problematizes the notion of identification by referring to comparable metaphors. Experiences of dancing, she explains, are frequently likened to religion, theatre, aspects of Shamanism and the carnivalesque, in which there is an 'ephemeral sense of community' which is not realized only through dancing: 'technologies of consumption and of space pull a crowd together through procedures of (physical) exclusion and inclusion' (Rietveld 1998: 204).

of qualities where the musical thrill becomes *tangible* through the interaction of the human body with its sonic-rhythmic surrounds.

As a regulating stimulus then, the beat in house music functions as a vital clue to the gestures and attitudes embraced by trends in socialization. In this respect, the whole question of bodily display, like music, is genre-specific and linked to modes of communication that are culturally disseminated. In the perceptual process of response, clubbers evoke in themselves a 'rhythm of feelings'. So when they 'feel the beat' they are aware of the control of their feelings by the immanence of musical events with the realization that there is always organization in the transience of affective conditions emanating from musical sound. As the felt qualities of volume, mix, timbre, sound-system and groove produce the stimuli for dance, so the affective force of energy flows through the beat into the body, eliciting powerful emotional responses. Ideologically, house music advocates an aesthetic that is both hedonistic and provocative in terms of the signification of musical stimulation. This much said, the onset of dance is primarily a spontaneous response to rhythmic gestures, based upon an intrinsic awareness of structure and processing, wherein we experience those valuable moments to feel the bliss through the force of musical energy.

### Conclusion: deep meanings or just 'cheesy' clichés?

House tracks musically encode the dynamics of club culture where the blend of identities create the impulse for expressing a wealth of shared sentiments. Feeling the beat is thus linked to a sensibility towards cultural context as much as style; if the chemistry of the groove is right, it will succeed in arousing pleasures and passions that ritualize reality. What is at stake when responding to house is the simultaneous mapping of one's erotic identity onto the beat. As a determining factor of stylistic syntax, the intricate structures and processes of the beat become the guiding principles for evaluating how music feels. Importantly, understanding how organizational principles of sound work puts into place mechanisms of identification, which, at least for the discerning musicologist, should test all those ideological predispositions our discipline has historically had towards the essentialization of the body.

Finally, by returning once more to 'French Kiss', I should make reference to the more humorous dimension of the track. Any reading of this track cannot avoid the *inclusive* semantic weight of the parody found in a chain of banal, or cheesy (as some might have it), musical clichés. While the obvious message of sleaze teases out the erotic aesthetics of this track, it seems to me that it also does a lot of other things with compelling ironic intent. In the light of the ever-present opposition of the Establishment towards lewd expressions of sexuality in forms of pop, especially in tracks such as 'French Kiss', the enforcement of moral values continues to uphold dominant ideology and challenge pop culture. Whereas, diametrically opposed to this, the graphic, expressive nature of 'French Kiss' serves as a powerful reminder of how musical *jouissance* functions to build new emotional, erotic and political bridges between diverse groups of people. Effectively, an impression of erotic intimacy constitutes the ironic edge of 'French Kiss', situated very much at the centre of its fun-like, deviant musical rhetoric. Ending on a somewhat utopian upbeat, I am most keen to emphasize that it is through its vitality and reconfigurative nature that house music's survival in the twenty-first century seems assured.

## 6 The determining role of performance in the articulation of meaning: the case of 'Try a Little Tenderness'

ROB BOWMAN

### The early history of 'Try a Little Tenderness'

Although folklorists for several decades have been interested in trying to understand variations of a given text over different performances, this is a much understudied phenomenon within popular music scholarship. This chapter presents a case study which explores the range of variation in four different versions of the Tin Pan Alley standard 'Try a Little Tenderness', recorded over a span of thirty-three years. Ultimately, such an exploration forces one: (a) to question how and in what parameters musical meaning is articulated; and (b) to grapple with the collision between written and oral culture and private ownership in the form of intellectual property.

The genesis of this chapter goes back about fifteen years to the point when I first found out that one of the all-time classic soul recordings, Otis Redding's 'Try a Little Tenderness', was in fact a cover version of a Tin Pan Alley standard. This was a revelation for me on a number of levels, as the Tin Pan Alley and soul traditions seemed light years apart temporally, geographically and socially. I had first bought the Redding recording in 1966 when I was ten years old. At the time I implicitly assumed that the song was an original composition and, in later years when I began to actively wonder about such things, I explicitly assumed that the writers listed on the record's label, Connelly, Woods and Campbell, were obscure soul writers that I had not encountered, most likely black and from the Southern United States. I could not have been more incorrect.

Reg Connelly and James Campbell were English songwriters who had a number of hits in the United States in the 1920s and early 1930s. Examples