

Groove in trip-hop music

By Ragnhild Brøvig Andersen

Rhythm in the age of digital reproduction

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Introduction

I have recently begun studying a two-year Master's course in music. During the course my main area of study will be groove and sound in trip-hop music. Groove and sound are two very important aspects of music that often have been ignored, and I will spend these two years of my Master's course to try to illuminate the importance of these aspects by studying trip-hop. The reason why I have chosen trip-hop music is that I have a theory that the term 'trip-hop' is built upon clear identifiable common features in the groove and the sound.

By analyzing the groove and the sound in trip-hop, I will try to clarify the much disputed question if 'trip-hop' does belong to a genre of its own, or if it is just a generic name given to downbeat music that does not fit in any other genre. On the one hand there are many people that are into trip-hop music, people who say they listen to trip-hop, artists who call their own music trip-hop, websites and books that describe trip-hop as a genre of its own. On the other hand there has not been much interest in trying to identify the common features of the genre, and many artists placed in this genre will flatly deny that they produce this particular style of music and say that there is no such a thing as 'trip-hop'. Defining trip-hop for musical analysis is difficult because music classified as trip-hop differs so vastly. Trip-hop can be narcotic with mellow strings and pads, combined with a gentle brush beat on the drums and spacey bass lines echoing in the background with the sullen female vocal at low volume. Alternatively trip-hop can be loud and intense with scratching turntables, bass driven hip-hop beats, thumping bass lines and rapping. However, I believe it is clear that trip-hop does belong to a genre of its own, with its own birth and identity. I think one of the reasons why the term 'trip-hop' has been so much discussed is because one is looking for characteristic features in the drum patterns and the riffs and so on, and these differs so vastly that many conclude that the music spreads across a too wide range to be put in one category. My Master's thesis will rather discuss the similarities of the sound and groove elements in trip-hop to help define the genre. However, since this is a seminar on groove, this essay will mainly focus on the groove in trip-hop. You should be aware of that I have only been working with this project for a month, and even as I speak I have more questions than answers.

First I will talk about the different styles from which the trip-hop groove has got its impulses. Secondly I will say a little about the tempo used in trip-hop, and finally I will touch upon trip-hop rhythm at a micro level.

Different styles

To understand where the trip-hop groove has got its impulses; we have to know a little about the *time* trip-hop emerged and *where* it was conceived. Trip-hop became a trend in England in the beginning of the 90's. At this time a rave-culture was sweeping across Britain. Rave culture was a complex lifestyle; combining sensations and fascinations when it came to parties, music, dancing and drugs¹. Rave-parties were held in empty warehouses where thousands of youth were dancing to a broad range of music styles played by DJs². Just as this was happening in Britain, hip-hop flourished in America. In Britain, hip-hop never assumed the political, counter cultural role it had in America, but was just one of many imports like soul, jazz-funk, dub, Chicago-house and Detroit-techno³. British hip-hop was largely instrumental in contrast to American hip-hop where rap was an important element. Simon Reynolds, who has written the book *Generation Ecstasy- into the world of techno and rave culture*, assumes that one of the reasons for the lack of words in British hip-hop could be because hip-hop in Britain did not have the American political aspects⁴. Reynolds writes that in America, race was the crucial determinant of unity, while in Britain it was rather a shared openness among the young people to technology and to drugs⁵. However, this perception must be investigated to determine the level of its accuracy. Trip-hop is often described as a junction of hip-hop and rave, retaining the same musical essence of hip-hop, like break beat-based rhythms, looped samples, and scratching, but developing this further by combining it with other genres such as rave.

Trip-hop emerged in Bristol, a small town on the west coast of England. In past years Bristol had been used as a port in the slave trade, due to this Bristol has a large, long-established black population of African and Caribbean descent⁶. It is a cheap place to live and this attracts bohemians, students, and people from many different cultures. This multi-ethnic society has made the town a fertile environment for genre-blending musical activity where hip-hop, reggae, soul, house, acid-jazz, punk and techno have been available, and for the people who lived there it was natural to mix these different styles. All these factors fostered a distinctive Bristol sound that is often called 'trip-hop'⁷.

¹ Reynolds, 1999: 9

² Blokhus, Molde, 2004: 464

³ Reynolds, 1999: 324

⁴ Ibid: 319

⁵ Ibid: 324

⁶ Johnson: 33

⁷ Ibid: 320

As in hip-hop and rave, the principal element behind the construction of trip-hop is sampling of old records⁸. Generally it's the break beat of a record that is sampled and then cut up, rearranged, manipulated, and, if required, the tempo is reduced. It seems as if trip-hop samples loops and other elements from many different genres. I will now show you some examples:

First we'll hear an example of a dub-inspired drum rhythm: Dub is a sub-genre of reggae where the rhythm is in shuffle and the beats often feature intense percussion⁹ and has lots of rhythm dropouts. There are many examples of dub rhythms in trip-hop, one of them is 'Karmacoma' by Massive Attack.

Other trip-hop drum-loops are sampled from old jazz-records where the brush snare is much used. The electric piano usually tends to play jazzy chords and riffs, as we can hear in 'Only You' by Portishead.

Like dub music, the basslines in trip-hop remain relatively simple both rhythmically and melodically, and they only act as a basic underpinning for the beat and the other elements. The sound of the bass is also dubwise, which is moody and dark, and exhibits plenty of low-end presence. There is also clear influence from dub-music when it comes to the effects used in trip-hop, such as overdriven use of echoes and reverb. We will hear an example of these dub effects and a dub-inspired bassline in Massive Attack's 'Five Man Army'.

As already mentioned, there is also clear influence from hip-hop in trip-hop music. As in hip-hop, the drum-loops are generally heavily compressed, so that the loops sound very heavy, and the trip-hop tracks often feature rap. We will hear an example of a rap, and you should also notice the atmospheric soundscape that is typical for trip-hop, and which is probably inspired by ambient music and possibly film-noire. This is a song by Tricky that is called 'Hell is Around the Corner'. The bass and the string section are sampled from the song 'Ike's Rap II' by the soul pioneer Isaac Hayes.

⁸ Blokhus, Molde, 2004: 449

⁹ Poschardt, 1995: 156

As you can see, trip-hop involves many different genres. One could ask how it is possible to use elements from such different genres and call all of it trip-hop. With my current knowledge I understand trip-hop to be defined rather by the right atmosphere with the sounds than it is about having the 'right' patterns. In other words I understand sound to be an important shaper of the groove, and I believe this is in deed the case when it comes to trip-hop. After listening to a lot of trip-hop music it occurs to me that even though the patterns of the groove elements of a trip-hop song differ so vastly, the sound of the groove elements unite them and make them trip-hop.

Take the drums for instance: It is difficult to find some common features in the drum-patterns, but it is not so hard to find some common features when it comes to how the drum-patterns sound: The trip-hop kick is usually deep and boomy and it sounds as if the equalizer has cut the top and the middle frequencies. The snares vary a lot, but they either tend to be quite bright and crusty, or they are dirty and pitched down, and sometimes, as mentioned, there are used brush snares. Snares are not always used in trip-hop, any 'clicky' percussive timbre can be used in its place, such as ethnic instruments, toms or unusual sounds. Ride cymbals are used more than hi hats in trip-hop because of their thin, sharp sound, and it seems as if these are often pitched up for an even more 'toppy' sound. If hi hats are used, they are often made dirtier by being pitched down or run through a fuzz box. The other alternative is hi hats with a ticking timbre. There will be many exceptions, of course, cause as we all know there is no *one* definitive way to describe any genre.

What also strikes me is that the most fundamental aspect of trip-hop is the dirty and gritty character that the whole mix exhibits. As I mentioned many of the elements are commonly sampled from old records. These samples are often left dirty, even to the point that the vinyl crackle is left evident in the background of the music. If the elements are *not* sampled, they nevertheless sound as though they are, because the sounds are made dirty by using effects, or they are recorded to old analogue tapes, and sometimes the vinyl crackle from a record is sampled and applied over the top of the mix. Trip-hop went retro with new samplers by reducing the bit rate to 12-bit or 8-bit. Sampling at this low sound quality grits up the sounds, and make them filthy and grainy¹⁰. In addition to low recording gear, there are also used vintage effects, old analogue synthesizers, and other noisy and crackling instruments, effects

¹⁰ Snoman: 296

and recording techniques. As I see it, this dirty soundscape has a large impact on the groove. We will hear an example of Lo-Fi elements that makes the soundscape dirty and gritty. I have chosen a song by Portishead called 'Cowboys'.

Tempo

Tempo is a very important element when we are talking about groove. While a hip-hop beat usually has a tempo somewhere between 85 and 110bpm, a trip-hop beat lies between 65 and 95bpm. Trip-hop often manipulates samples to a slower tempo. When a sample is changed to a slower tempo its pitch will also automatically change¹¹. Along with the sampled element there will always remain some other sounds from the original music, and these will also change pitch when the tempo is slowed down. The result is an atmosphere of strange sounds with dominative activity in the low-frequency region. You can achieve the same effect with programmed loops by first speeding up the tempo without changing its pitch, and then sample it on a low bit rate and reduce the tempo and thus the pitch. In this way programmed loops sound as if they are sampled. I will play an example where Portishead has used a sample from Johnny Ray's 'I'll Never Fall In Love Again' in their song 'Biscuit'. We will first hear the original music by Johnny Ray and then we will hear how Portishead has manipulated the sample to a slower tempo, and thus also changed its pitch.

As I mentioned there was a huge fascination and openness to drugs in Britain in the beginning of the 90's, which the title of Reynolds book on rave-music, 'Generation Ecstasy', implicates¹². In trip-hop's case, the drug is marijuana rather than ecstasy¹³. Rave music is made to make people dance, and they use ecstasy because the drug sharpens the body's sensibility and emphasizes emotions as happiness, empathy, intimacy and ecstasy, and this makes the users able to dance longer and in a more hectic manner than others¹⁴.

Trip-hop, with its slow tempo and drowsy grooves, is more head nodding music than dance-music and then the sophisticated, bohemian drug marijuana was more suitable¹⁵. Marijuana slows down time and expands the present moment, it sharpens the senses and intensify both texture and timbre. This is of relevance because some claim that trip-hop is explicitly designed to imitate the effects of marijuana, as the word *trip* in trip-hop implicates. If this is

¹¹ Poschardt, 1995: 275

¹² Reynolds, 1999

¹³ Moshuus, Rossow, Vestel, 2002: 41

¹⁴ Böpple, Knüfer, 1996: 176

true or not, I will have to look into, but it's an interesting thought anyway and I think it has a reasonable theoretic basis: The slowed-down-loops suit the way marijuana slows down time, and as marijuana makes the perception of texture and timbre intensified, trip-hop makes the rustle and glisten of a hi-hat endlessly absorbing¹⁶. When the trip-hop artist DJ Shadow talked about his debut 'In Flux' he said: "I don't take drugs...people told me the music took you somewhere that may be similar. It's the track I'd always wanted to do..."¹⁷. Dust Brother Tom has described DJ Shadows music like this: "I really like DJ Shadow. It's a really weird way of approaching hip-hop. I like records that make you feel like you're on drugs but you're really not." In my master thesis I will discuss whether trip-hop music is constructed for listeners who are on drugs, or if the music is constructed to be a drug in itself, by imitating the effects of drugs. We will now hear "In Flux" by DJ Shadow.

Rhythm at a micro level.

I find the groove in trip-hop very interesting because though the music is mainly electronic and based on studio techniques such as sampling and sequencing, they also use real instruments and mix these textures¹⁸.

When it comes to music that is played in real-time, musicians will naturally perform an articulation of the pattern. In other words one has to distinguish between figure and gesture when it comes to played music¹⁹. When the music is programmed on a sequencer it works in a different way. You can either arrange the sounds so that the rhythm is exactly the same as the pattern, or you can program the rhythm with micro rhythmical shifts so that it sounds as if it is played. This leads to my first question: Is the programmed rhythm in trip-hop made with micro rhythmical shifts, and in that case- do these micro rhythmical shifts repeat themselves? The trip-hop grooves usually have a laid back feel and a well-known trick to make a groove laidback is to let the kick sit just before the beat while the snares are moved back in time. In my Master's thesis I will try to find out if this is the case in trip-hop.

My other question is; if the programmed rhythm is mixed with played instruments or samples, has the programmed rhythm been programmed so that it fits the played instruments or is it the

¹⁵ Reynolds, 1999: 320

¹⁶ Reynolds, 1999: 326

¹⁷ URL: <http://www.techno.de/mixmag/interviewa/TripHop.html> [25.10.99]

¹⁸ Reynolds, 1999: 324

¹⁹ Danielsen, 2001: 53

other way around? To answer this question I will have to distinguish the different textures, however in a mixed texture it might be difficult to find out if the rhythms are programmed, sampled or played by real instruments. I don't have any solutions on how to do this yet, but after all I do have two years...

As already mentioned, I have barely started working with this project, so if you have any suggestions on how to approach my thesis I will be glad to listen to you.

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Johnny Ray: “I’ll Never Fall In Love Again” (0.00-0.15)

Massive Attack (1991): “Five Man Army” (2.57-3.27), *Blue Lines*, Virgin

Massive Attack (1994): “Karmacoma” (3.24-3.52), *Protection*, Virgin

Portishead (1994): “Buiscuit” (3.48-4.53), *Dummy*, Go! Dics/London

Portishead (1997): “Only You” (3.43-4.08), *Portishead*, Go! Dics/London

Portishead (1997): “Cowboys” (0.13-0.50), *Portishead*, Go! Dics/London

Tricky (1995): “Hell is Around the Corner” (0.00-0.34), *Maxinquaye*, Island