

SO! Reads: Jace Clayton's Uproot

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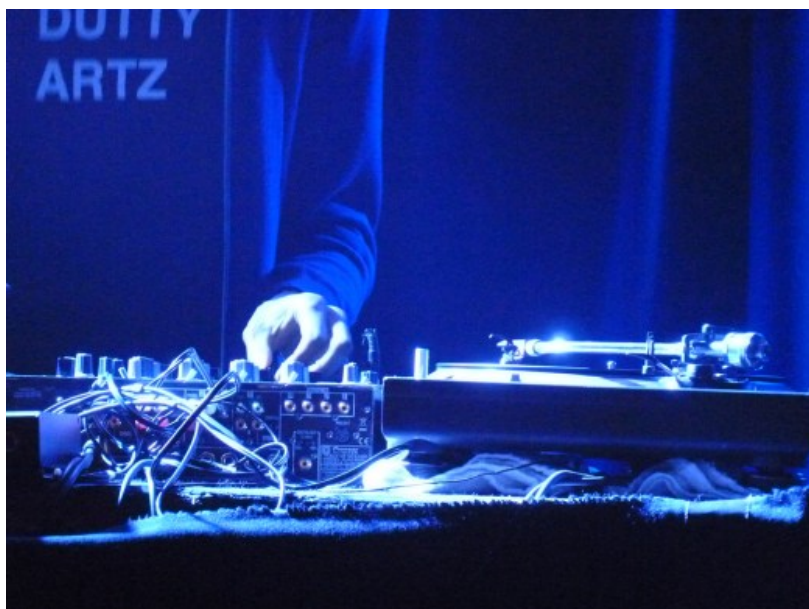
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Abstract

"Music has always confounded value," writes interdisciplinary artist and writer Jace Clayton in *Uproot: Travels in 21st-Century Music and Digital Culture* (FSG Originals, 2016, 22). Recounting his extensive international travels performing as DJ /rupture, Clayton presents a flow of cosmopolitan musical experiences that illustrate complex collisions between music and value around the world.

Keywords

Music (Subfield), Book Review, Diasporic Sound, Digital Media, EDM, Gender



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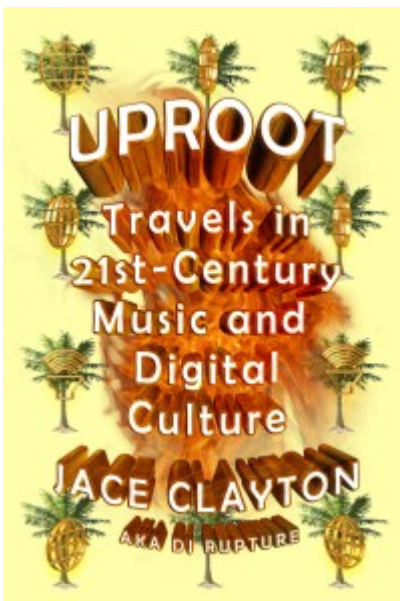
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"Music has always confounded value," writes interdisciplinary artist and writer Jace Clayton in *Uproot: Travels in 21st-Century Music and Digital Culture* (FSG Originals, 2016, 22). Recounting his extensive international travels performing as [DJ /rupture](#), Clayton presents a flow of cosmopolitan musical experiences that illustrate complex collisions between music and value around the world. Whether writing about homemade sound-systems in tropical clubs in Brooklyn, or about shellac preservation at the [Arab Music Archiving and Research Foundation in Beirut](#), Clayton considers the technologies by which we make — and place value on — musical sounds in "a world where worth is created in radically different ways from what the market teaches us" (24).

Uproot is a narrative about the ways working musicians experience globalization. "Our music seems to sound the way global capital is — liquid, international, porous, and sped up," the author writes (16). This homology between sound and economic processes echoes the theories of sociologists like [Anthony Giddens](#) and the late [Zygmunt Bauman](#), both of whom argue that modern life is characterized by fluidity and fragmentation: employment is precarious, experience is mediated, and ethical decisions are full of ambiguity. These ideas clearly inspire Clayton's narrative; that said, *Uproot* is not an academic publication. As Atossa Araxia Abrahamian [writes](#) at the *Nation*, the book evades genre, "at once travelogue and cultural ethnography, pop philosophy and memoir, a guide to contemporary music and a fanzine."



The book begins with a discussion of the history of Auto-Tune. While Clayton's claim that Auto-Tune was the "first truly new sound effect of the internet era" might be overstated, his distinction between "corrective Auto-Tune" and "cosmetic Auto-Tune" is useful, the first of many moments of clarity in parsing the ways we use and mis-use musical media today. "The robot voice signifies differently everywhere you go," he writes, an observation

that becomes central to the book (49). By refusing to take a deterministic stance toward technology, Clayton empowers the musicians he writes about, acknowledging the ways in which artists mold trends to their own regional and local purposes. Of collaboration with a violinist in Morocco, Clayton writes: “We may have thought similarly, yet our ‘default settings’ were so far apart as to be almost incompatible” (185).

Uproot offers intimate insights into a range of tools and techniques of production, such as compression artifacts, “refixes,” and dozens of music-making interfaces, including Clayton’s own “music software-as-art project,” *Sufi Plug Ins*.

<https://vimeo.com/41943354>

Even language itself is conceived as a form of technological mediation, as when Clayton compares Arabizi — a phonetic spelling of colloquial Arabic — to the hybrid sounds of *mahraganat* music that the language is used to describe. Of these “wandering genealogies” that emerge from international conversations, Clayton suggests that any hybrid genre we can imagine likely already exists: “Accordions and African techno? It’s called *funaná*” (102). The book describes at least a dozen other music traditions and microgenres—some very old, some just coalesced—from *dabke* to *zar*, each the product of a unique fusion of vocabularies.



<https://youtu.be/YdeoLJZXodg>

Clayton on Mazaher (182): “Umm Sameh, Umm Hassan, and Nour el Sabah: these three women are some of the only people in Egypt keeping zar alive.”

Clayton’s own prose style, replete with metaphor and fluent in informal language, mirrors the ethos of music production he explores in the book: eclectic, energetic, and bursting with detail. What better way to describe Auto-Tune’s effect than as liquification of sound into a “bright neon stream, as if a dial-up modem and a river have fallen in love” (53)? Clayton’s technological travelogue extends beyond aural sensation alone. This is a story of “sidewalk vendors, radios,

mosque loudspeakers," (106) but it is just as much about "jerk chicken, fish tea, goatskin soup" (73). When Clayton describes his surroundings, we can touch the orange blossoms and smell the cigarettes.



*Dj /rupture performs in Minefield UK, 2010, image by Flickr User Paul Narvaez
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The book's recurrent question is how DJ practices in different locations are both constrained and inspired by financial flows. In any context, Clayton argues, "[m]oney runs to the people with the least imagination" (24). Early on, he establishes this view that musical experience is priceless, more valuable than any profit derived from rhythms of supply and demand, which reward the wrong people. That said, Clayton isn't naive about musicians' inevitable need for income, and throughout the text, readers are asked to inhabit ethical dilemmas that artists encounter throughout the world. At one point, Clayton describes his own moral quandary when asked to perform in front of a giant Red Bull logo, a "glowing lump of techno-fascist DJ furniture." Later, Clayton critiques the hegemony of "Red Bull patronage" and similar systems of support for artists who are desperate for funding (121). He makes clear his disdain for corporate sponsors, companies that "appear generous as they let us know that our music is literally worthless to them" (123).

A tradeoff emerges between pragmatism and idealism. Clayton pokes holes in the empty rhetoric of "authenticity" that marketers encourage and exploit, even as we sense that he hasn't yet relinquished his belief in something essentially good about the human spirit. Listening is a powerful social practice that, in Clayton's view, gives true meaning to music in a global economy that otherwise undervalues it. "The heavier the workaday grind to escape from, the more a party transports us" (73), he writes, suggesting that listeners extract their own surplus value.



<https://youtu.be/iZSBTkepauU>

At times, Clayton's observations could benefit from an engagement with ethnographic methods that can help mitigate fieldwork biases. For example, although the book does involve open discussions of gendered inequalities, they are limited in scope. At one point Clayton calls attention to "macho wrangling over propriety and womanhood" among managers and producers in Agadir, Morocco (52); he describes his own futile attempt to acquire a frank interview with female singers amid the patriarchal structure there. But despite Clayton's awareness of gendered power dynamics, he does not critique the male musicians and producers who propagate such imbalances.

When female figures do appear, they are often treated as side characters. Rihanna, for example, is presented as exemplary of the business model of "singer as mouthpiece" (50), a person for whom others do the work. Clayton isn't wrong to call attention to the large networks of employees that work behind any celebrity brand, but it is risky to do so at the expense of female workers, especially in the midst of a book that elsewhere describes women as decoration for the musical environments in which men perform what are presumably more important tasks. "Naked girls on pedestals [who] got their bodies painted" (19), "photoshopped young women" (49) and "demure girls" (49) all set scenes for tales of male creativity. This is not to critique how some women may choose to participate in music scenes, but rather to point out that women's concerns and perspectives are not Clayton's focus in these passages, nor in much of the book.

On Berber Auto-tune star Saadia Tihit (49-50): "Like Justin Beiber or any child groomed to be a media star, Saadia Tihit occupies a place at least initially defined more by the commercial strategies of those around her than by any desire for artistic autonomy."

Comparably, Clayton's conception of music and global inequality is sometimes uneven. Drawing stark divisions between the "civilized" and otherwise, he resorts to clichéd language when he writes of "backwater Uzbekistan" (31) and "war-torn Africa" (81). When he describes towns and

villages near Casablanca where “ancient rhythms of life still hold sway” (33), he reproduces exoticizing tropes of African music. Elsewhere in the book, Clayton addresses musical accusations of fetishism, stating: “I know that Africans and blacks have been fetishized for centuries now, perhaps millennia. Who cares? You simply exist in all your complexity and let them deal with it. Fetishism is so vague” (84). He also critiques what he calls the “spectacle of a so-called ancient culture” (99) that is often at the heart of “world music” scenes, but then describes Appalachian musical performance as “the old-timey way with banjos and fiddles and washtub percussion” (32), opposing these practices against technological advancement, a false dichotomy that ethnomusicologists work to complicate, if not avoid.

Clayton brings these issues to a head during the book’s extensive discussion of “world music” as a marketing category. His commentary on the conundrums of appropriation surrounding figures such as Paul Simon, M.I.A., and Moby feels familiar, but he surpasses the usual analysis of these common case studies with more personal insights into “world music,” beginning with crate-digging excursions at record shops with deep international selections, such as the now-defunct [RRRecords in Lowell, Massachusetts](#). Clayton contrasts his own on-foot exploration of foreign sounds with what he calls “World Music 2.0,” an internet-driven network of musical discovery based around the commodification of information and attention, in which middlemen reign supreme. His ambivalence is exemplified by this claim: “At its worst, World Music 2.0 offers the clubland equivalent of a package vacation. At its best, it propels some of the most exciting music in the world” (104-105).



<https://youtu.be/GVwEQM2ggyk>

The book’s ideas occasionally undermine themselves, but there is no question that the author ultimately intends to advocate for people on the margins. As Max Pearl has [noted](#) at the *LA Times*, Clayton consistently defends lo-fi, lo-tech, and lo-res sonic expression — that which is “distorted, homespun, libidinous” (80) — as valuable in its own right. Further, Sukhdev Sandhu has [suggested](#) at the *Guardian* that the book’s attention to homologues between “the movement of sounds and of migrant bodies” serves to recognize the struggles of global refugees and affirm their humanity.

Among *Uproot*'s many mentions of transport, readers never receive a clear statement about what, precisely, the relationship between music and motion is, or how exactly value emerges from that pairing. Rather than a weakness of the book, however, maybe such equivocation should be taken as an accurate reflection of the nebulous circumstances in which many of us find ourselves — creators and listeners who are regularly uprooted, usually at the mercy of those whom the money follows. Faced with this precarity, let Clayton's enthusiasm for all sounds ground you.



https://youtu.be/_ZeGd6CB2LQ

Uproot is accompanied by an online Listening Guide that includes audio and visual examples of music from the book: <http://www.uprootbook.com>.

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Featured Image: DJ /rupture performing at the Fórum Eletronika de Mídias Expandidas 2005 by Flickr user [Brayhan Hawryliszyn](#) (Attribution-NonCommercial 2.0 Generic (CC BY-NC 2.0))

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Elizabeth Newton is a doctoral candidate in musicology. She has written for *The New Inquiry*, *Tiny Mix Tapes*, *Real Life Magazine*, *the Quietus*, and *Leonardo Music Journal*. Her research interests include musico-poetics, fidelity and reproduction, and affective histories of musical media. Her dissertation, in progress, is about “affective fidelity” in audio and print culture of the 1990s.

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