

Labels upset after DJ splices Jay-Z, Beatles classics

The DJ claims more than 100,000 copies of the mix were downloaded despite the record label uproar

By Greg Kot
Chicago Tribune (KRT)

The most buzzed-about album of the year isn't on the Billboard charts and it can't be found in record stores. But even as Danger Mouse's "The Grey Album" has restoked the decades-old debate about sampling, it further demonstrates that record companies and copyright law are being left in the dust by Internet-savvy musical innovators and the technology that stokes them.

"The Grey Album" conflates two revered albums: The Beatles' self-titled 1968 double-album, better known as the White Album, and Jay Z's 2003 swan song, "The Black Album." But it's more than a simple "mash-up," in which a disc jockey syncs up the beats of two vastly different pop songs to create a hybrid track for playing at dance clubs.

Danger Mouse, aka Los Angeles DJ Brian Burton, spent countless hours splicing musical bars and looping beats off The Beatles' masterwork, then laying them underneath an a cappella version of Jay Z's chart-topping disc.

Danger Mouse circulated 3,000 copies of "The Grey Album" last month, giving most of them away. Some of the records turned up in record stores, others were being sold on eBay and MP3 files of the 12-track album began circulating on peer-to-peer file-sharing sites such as Kazaa and Soulseek. That's when EMI, which owns the publishing rights to the White Album, jumped in and sent cease-and-desist letters to Danger Mouse, Web Sites and stores demanding that the record be destroyed. In response, more than 150 Web sites staged "a day of coordinated civil disobedience" Feb. 24 and offered the album for download.

"We are certain that 'The Grey Album' was the No. 1 album in the country (Feb. 24)," the greytuesday.org Web site announced. "Danger Mouse moved more 'units' than Norah Jones and Kanye West ... with

well over 100,000 copies downloaded. That's more than 1 million digital tracks."

Lawyers and the record industry saw the "Grey Tuesday" protest as copyright infringement run amok, a low blow directed against one of the central pillars of the recording industry. The Web sites and Danger Mouse, arguing that they weren't profiting from the downloads, saw the cease-and-desist orders as an affront to creativity and new technology, an attempt by the multinational corporations that dominate the music business to maintain complete control over the creative process at any cost.

At the heart of the current debate is the long-running battle over sampling. In 1991, rapper Biz Markie was sued by Gilbert Sullivan for using an unauthorized sample of Sullivan's 1972 hit "Alone Again (Naturally)" on his album "I Need a Haircut" and a judge ruled in the singer's favor. "I Need a Haircut" was pulled from stores and quickly went out of print. Ever since, record labels have been more diligent about clearing permission for using copyrighted material, sometimes paying copyright-holders tens of thousands of dollars to use even a four-bar snippet of a recording.

Danger Mouse didn't seek EMI's or Jay Z's permission to sample The Beatles, asserting that his request would have been denied anyway because he didn't have the financial means or major-label connections. Instead, he refers to the album as an experiment and has declined to make money off it.

Purists contend that music can be created only on "real" instruments, and look askance at the mixing desks, turntables, samplers and computers that are the remixers' tools. But remixers are paid hundreds of thousands of dollars to do what an entire orchestra can sometimes not do: turn a song into a hit record, often by replacing all the backing instruments with countless bytes of electronic data culled from original and pre-recorded sources.

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Tuesday

Human Resources Workshop entitled "Preventing and Dealing with Sexual Harassment on Campus," Alsea and Coquille Rooms, EMU, 9 a.m.-noon. Pre-registration required.

Candidate interview drop-in session with Matthew O'Laughlin, one of two remaining candidates for the director of faculty development position, Century Room E, EMU, 10:30-11 a.m.

Officers of Administration Brown Bag Lunch with Greg Vincent, new vice provost for institutional equity and diversity, Umpqua Room EMU, noon-1 p.m.

The Center for the Study of Women in Society Teaching and Tea entitled "Into Our Own Hands: Women's Health Activism in the U.S.," Room 330, Hendricks Hall, 4:15-5:30 p.m.

Scandinavian film series featuring "The Prompter," International Resource Center, EMU, 7 p.m.

UO Ensembles Concert featuring the Oregon Jazz Ensemble, Beall Concert Hall, 8 p.m.

"Señorita Extraviada, Missing Young Women," a documentary of the disappearances, murders and violence against women in Mexico presented by Amnesty International, Willamette 100, 7 p.m.



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