

THE NEW YORKER THE TALK OF THE TOWN

TRACKS

THE MOUSE THAT REMIXED

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Issue of 2004-02-09

Posted 2004-02-02

The d.j. and producer Danger Mouse was born Brian Burton, in White Plains, twenty-six years ago; attended college in the indie-rock hotbed of Athens, Georgia; and then moved to London, where he became part of the underground hip-hop scene. Last year, he teamed up with Jemini, a rapper from Brooklyn, to record the album “Ghetto Pop Life,” which was considered one of the most innovative releases of 2003. But, for his follow-up, Burton decided to work with more prominent artists—much more prominent, though also unwitting. Last December, he made an unauthorized remix of “The Black Album,” the most recent (and reportedly the final) record by the rap superstar Jay-Z. This is a common hip-hop practice: up-and-coming producers take the vocals from a hot record and reattach them to new backing tracks. Burton’s remix sprang from a simple pun: he decided to lay the vocals from “The Black Album” over a musical bed created entirely with samples from the Beatles’ “White Album.” The result, as any finger-painting kindergartner might guess, was “The Grey Album.”

“I had gotten the Jay-Z vocal tracks and wasn’t going to do anything with them,” he said the other day. “A week or so after that, I was at home in Los Angeles, listening to the Beatles and cleaning up my room. Then it hit me: Oh shit, ‘White Album,’ ‘Black Album’ . . . I can probably do this.”

Burton spent the next two and a half weeks in his room. “Those were fifteen-hour days, easily,” he said. “I played ‘The White Album’ through four times, listening for anything that I thought I might be able to use, and then I started pulling tiny bits off the album. I was keeping track of the time, because I knew this was a strange kind of experiment, and at one point I saw that I had logged more than two hundred hours.”

Part of the challenge of “The Grey Album” lay in matching the tempos of Jay-Z’s raps with instrumental passages from the Beatles. “It would have been easy just to slap the vocals over music of the same tempo,” Burton said. “But I wanted to match the feel of the tracks, too.” “The Black Album” opens with a wistful autobiographical track called “December 4th,” which features short speeches by Jay-Z’s mother; Burton, in his version, used the Beatles’ delicate, contemplative “Mother Nature’s Son.” And Jay-Z’s “99 Problems,” a hard-rock track produced by Rick Rubin, was reupholstered with the central riff from “Helter Skelter.” Other Beatles songs have been chopped into pieces so small that they cannot readily be identified: here a bit of “Julia,” there a snatch of “Long, Long, Long.”

Burton finished “The Grey Album” just before Christmas, sent a few copies to friends, and flew East to spend the holidays with his family. By the time he got back, word of the project was everywhere, and he was receiving a steady stream of phone calls and e-mail messages. “There’s a level of hysteria surrounding the album,” said Jeff Antebi, the head of Waxploitation, a hip-hop label and management company that represents Danger Mouse. “More people say they have heard it than can possibly have heard it.”

“After hip-hop fans hear it, they’re like, ‘I gotta get this ‘White Album,’ ’” Burton said. But the enthusiasm for “The Grey Album,” fuelled by online file-sharing services and amateur CD copies, will likely have to remain underground. None of the samples have been legally cleared, and Burton doesn’t think that the album will ever be commercially released. “Hell, no,” he said. “That’s one of the things

struggled with. I told myself, ‘Never will this come out. . . . Must still do . . . must still do.’ ”

He went on, “I’m just worried whether Jay-Z will like it, or whether Paul and Ringo will like it. If they say that they hate it, and that I messed up their music, I think I’ll put my tail between my legs and go.”