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Year of the mashup

Stereotypes don't always rule after dark, even in the same old New South

Published 04.23.2008

http://atlanta.creativeloafing.com/gyrobase/year_of_the_mashup/Content?oid=469990

Talk about overkill.

The last thing you want to do if you're trying to unite blacks and whites in the club is to shout it out from the DJ booth.

That's, like, so 40 years ago.

But even Martin Luther King Jr. knew there was a time and place for everything. So it was surreal to hear the last two minutes of his classic "I Have a Dream" speech blasting over the dance floor, sans music, at 1:57 a.m. on a Saturday night.

As the climactic ending "Free at last! Free at last!" echoed in the Masquerade, the 18-and-up crowd of mostly Caucasian suburbanites began to cheer with abandon. Finally, DJ Treasure Fingers punched in the beat, and the nonstop electro-rave mix was back on track.

In the city too hip to hate, color lines still demarcate an overwhelming number of Atlanta's dance floors. It's especially true in megaclubs such as Compound, which catered to blacks and whites on separate nights before closing to the general public. As passive as it may sound, most people like to party without a purpose – unless it involves PBR tallboys and Trojans.

So instead of playing the race card, the DJs, promoters and club owners successfully bridging Atlanta's cultural gap are doing so by playing the right mix of crunk-punk/electro mashups in underground havens such as MJQ, El Bar, Halo and even the Masquerade.

If Preston Craig was trying to narrow the racial divide when he played the snippet of King's speech between DJ sets at his Afterlife dance party April 12, he needed to have more African-Americans in the crowd. You could count the number of blacks at the Masquerade on two hands.

Dell Harris was one of them. The rapper for the Atlanta-based hip-pop group Thunderkatz was filling in for Andre "D.R.E.S. tha Beatnik" Lett, Afterlife's resident hype man/host, whom Craig recruited in January.

It seemed like an odd pairing at the time: the ambassador of Atlanta's underground hip-hop scene and the mostly white-bred crowd of postpubescent ravers. But D.R.E.S., for one, was ready to make a fine mess of things.

"We've been separate but equal for too long," D.R.E.S. says, when asked why he jumped at the chance. "Music is supposed to be the great uniter. It's supposed to be the one thing that binds us together."

Quick to dispel any myth that he's out to diversify his Afterlife crowd, Craig says he "didn't bring in Dres to bring in a new demographic." Rather than frame what he does in racial terms, the promoter says

he prefers to remain as "unpredictable" as possible. And what could be less predictable than having D.R.E.S. host his parties?

"I always try to switch things up and keep people guessing, and it threw people for a pretty big loop when I brought in D.R.E.S. Not so much on my side [but] on the more hip-hop side of things, people were like, 'Really, D.R.E.S. is working with Preston?'"

D.R.E.S, however, describes his motive in more heartfelt terms. "The thing about the people that are trying to turn 2008 into the year of the mashup is they're all trying to approach it with love," he says.

Around the same time D.R.E.S. was gearing up for his first Afterlife party, *Time* magazine, in partnership with CNN, ran the online story "MLK's Dream Doesn't Reach his Hometown's Dance Floors." On the eve of King's birthday in 2007, urban station V-103 (103.3-FM) and the pop top 40 Q100 (100.5-FM) tried and failed to bring black and white audiences together under one groove. Chandra R. Thomas reported that Frank Ski and Bert Weiss, the stations' respective on-air personalities, were disappointed with the lopsided majority black turnout.

Both the event's failure and the subsequent story prove how few in Atlanta are in tune with the cross-cultural club scene thriving just beneath the city's surface. "Skin color don't mean shit," DJ Rob Wonder says point blank, when asked how he fosters such a culturally diverse environment at his Ponce de Leon Avenue hipster hideout El Bar. Wonder became sole owner of "Atlanta's best-kept secret" in February.

"I try to keep a specific genre out of everything I do, because to me a good song is a good song," says the white Atlanta native who grew up with a black stepfather. "If one minute I feel like listening to techno, I'ma listen to techno. One minute I feel like listening to rap music, I'ma listen to rap music."

Similar to a crop of the city's club DJs/producers (Klever, Prince Presto, Cristo, Scooter, etc.), Wonder is known for producing genre-bending mixes. His "Hustlin' Moogly" mashup sandwiches samples of "Up on Cripple Creek" by Bob Dylan collaborators the Band between Miami-based rapper Rick Ross' "Hustlin" anthem and Project Pat's ghetto delight "Good Googly Moogly."

When Caleb "Gauge" Hinson and the original F*in Socialites crew – Ian Ford, Megan "Ree de la Vega" Rebain and Gregory "Greg Mike" Mensching – threw their first Sloppy Seconds party at the Royal nearly two years ago, they weren't simply looking for black kids and white kids; they were looking for cool kids.

Brooklyn native and Morehouse alum Ford attracted a street-credible set that collided with de la Vega's MJQ club kids and Greg Mike's fashionistas, creating an alchemy Gauge describes as "pure."

"I never totally looked at it as just a racial thing," says Gauge, an Alabama transplant who went from breakdancer to bartender before getting involved in party promotions. "They kind of like were in areas that I wasn't. I wanted to make sure that the crowd, when they came, it was a little 'smoke and mirrors' how they all came together. But once they did, I knew that they would appreciate it."

Though the crew eventually split, Gauge has since relocated Sloppy Seconds to MJQ, the mothership of the subterranean scene, where patrons must literally walk underground to enter. It's still one of the few spots in the city where breakdance ciphers can spontaneously erupt and neither women nor men are judged by the color of their skin but by the execution of their backspin.

"Now ain't that crazy," Aqil Sanders, a 32-year-old black guy who's been coming to MJQ for years, says

while watching a couple of breakers face off. "A white girl battling a black man. That's what I like about this place. They're probably a bunch of Obama supporters, I guarantee you."

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