



Relm of Possibility

Mike Relm doubles up with The Current to keep JazzFest hoppin' and hoppin'



Jazz! Smooth styles create smiles as sweating horns squeal mad blurps and blaps to the crazy backbone, an immaculate drummer with wild hair and an impassive bassist, a cigarette drooped from the corner of his mouth, sad like the singer's face. Claps and cheers from the sweaty crowd see them off stage and, as the punters mingle and mill, cables and wires and other electric accessories snake their way onto the stage. Then, with black-rimmed glasses, smooth hair and a black suit, San Francisco DJ Mike Relm takes his place behind his instruments of choice—Serato, a laptop-based live DJ system, Pioneer DVJ's, a system for hands-on manipulation of DVDs, and various other gidgets and gadgets—to play, scratch and jangle his version of jazz tunes.

Now there will be those jazz purists out there who say, "That's not jazz! That's not an instrument!" but, well . . . yes, it is. And here's why. One, the underlying principles of jazz as a form of music is improvisation, and scratching is practically the essence of improv. As Relm says, there isn't even any way to notate it. "Miles Davis would play these crazy solos—wow—and people will sit down now and analyze every note, write it all down," he says. "I think that part of the charm [of turntablism] is that you can't do that—you can't write down the notation of scratching." Besides, hip hop is all about freestyle. Or, it was at one time anyway. "I think hip hop especially ties in to jazz because it's based a lot on freestyle, freeflow . . . the improvisation."

Just B (aka Justin Bangay) of The Current, the local hip hop group opening up for Relm's Jazzfest performance on Friday night, agrees. "A lot of MCs have a scat-style of freestyling, which is obviously rooted in jazz," he says. He agrees too that hip hop and jazz have common roots and beyond that, hip hop—especially the earlier stuff—sampled old jazz records frequently. "We're heavily influenced by early '90s hip hop, which was influenced by jazz." He even mentions some other of this year's JazzFest acts, Sonny Rollins for one, as having been sampled by DJ Murge (The Current's backbone) or by other producers in their circle.

Relm empathizes with musicians who don't give credibility to the turntables as an instrument, and puts it this way: "[Turntables] can be used as an instrument. Just like an upturned garbage can can be an instrument—and a beautiful instrument if it's done right—but if you use it to throw your trash away, then it's still just a garbage can."

It's just a different way of looking at music, and at jazz. Artists like Herbie Hancock or Tom Waits (also a jazzman in his own weird way), experiment with everything and anything to create soundscapes. Jazz works that way. It's not just a 3/4 rhythm and a three-piece band. Creativity reigns in a forum where the creative mind is king—the medium is, hopefully, accessory. And Relm is definitely creative. His shows are an impressive array of visuals and sounds—he uses DVDs

(like *Office Space* or a Bjork music video) for the combined effect of "scratching" the image and the sound at the same time—that entertain and even amaze.

Bebop on down to check out Relm and The Current's freeflowin' hip hop jazz stylings, or any number of other acts at any of the JazzFest venues this week. Only then can the debates begin.

—Matt J. Simmons