Dead Simple: Marshall McLuhan and the Art of the Record

You can download the track HERE

Artist Statement:
"During the 1960s, I think, people forgot what emotions were supposed to be. And I don't think they've ever remembered.

~ Andy Warhol

McLuhan wrote his stunningly prescient monumental work, one of twelve books and hundreds of articles, Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man, in 1964. He followed up with "The Medium is the Massage: An Inventory of Effects" in 1967. The record you hear arrived after that, but it embodied the same ideas. The baseline subject that would preoccupy almost all of McLuhan's career was the task of understanding the effects of technology as it contextualized popular culture, and how this in turn affected human beings and their relations with one another in communities. For him, everything was connected. Because he was one of the first to sound the idea that electronic media and pop culture were eerily interconnected, McLuhan gained the status of a cult hero and "high priest of pop-culture.

Acoustic space, pattern recognition: boundless, infinite play of text and thought – that's what you need to think about when you listen to this album. The record version of the "Medium is the Massage: An Inventory of Effects" project was meant to embody some of the issues that the graphic design and radical use of new fonts and images to enhance the text of the book and create a dynamic linkage between how the collision of fonts and graphics would work and how they could be represented in sound. The whole thing is presented as an audio collage focused around McLuhan's own voice reading parts of the book. There are other "character" voices—'the old man', 'the Hippie chick', 'the Irishman', 'Mom', 'the little girl', etc.—who utter McLuhanisms, snatches from Pop culture, and excerpts from Finnegans Wake and The Iliad. Weaving amongst these is a very 1960s selection of jazz, classical, and psychedelic pop musics. This is all topped off with incursions from the recording engineer, backwards tape effects, sped-up and slowed-down voices, ambient recordings, and a whole jungle of other Foley and sound FX. One could argue that the book was as much about the graphics as it was about creating a place where the images could embody the philosophy graphic design that McLuhan advocated – the record was the audio version of the same process. As McLuhan once said: "For tribal man space was the uncontrollable mystery. For technological man it is time that occupies the same role."

The record version of the "Medium is the Massage" presents that as a DJ mix – it
Jerome Agel, Quentin Fiore, McLuhan, and John Simon of CBS present the entire book as a series of samples, just like a mix-tape. Think of this record as a collection of some of McLuhan's spoken texts recorded, collaged, cut-up, spliced, diced, ripped, mixed, and burned. It's a mix tape made in a different era - before the rise of digital media files, but it has the same kind of resonance of a mix of any current sound art project one could care to name.

His thought is frequently reduced to one-liners: he was a philosopher the sound bite, which sums up the more complicated content of his probing and rigorous examination of "the media," a word that he made more popular than almost any other thinker. Concerning the new status of humanity in a technological, and media-dominated society, he wrote:

If the work of the city is the remaking or translating of man into a more suitable form than his nomadic ancestors achieved, then might not our current translation of our entire lives into the spiritual form of information seem to make of the entire globe, and of the human family, a single consciousness?

How would you translate that into an album? It goes without saying that hands down, McLuhan was a master of the freestyle. Think of him in terms of hip hop, wordplay, and above all, how you can create new forms of viewing culture from the intertextual flow of words put at the service of technology. This is no pun. It is a fact. With phrases like

Affluence creates poverty.

or

All media exist to invest our lives with artificial perceptions and arbitrary values.

or even better

Darkness is to space what silence is to sound, i.e. the interval

McLuhan both announces the existence of the "global village" another word he is credited for coining, and predicts the intensification of the world community to its present expression, all with a musical sensibility of quotation and citation. That is what we call a "riff." All of this was done in the early 1960s at a time when television was still in its infancy, and the personal computer was almost twenty years into the future. He was the embodiment of what writers of his era like Samuel Delaney or Philip K. Dick turned into prose, but somehow he always gave us the best way to navigate the uneasy tension between context and content.

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You know McLuhan was onto something deep, like the flow of prose from James Joyce to people like Jonathan Lethem, William Gibson, or a tribal griot in Africa. McLuhan's understanding of the scope of changes being wrought on the collective consciousness of the 1960's is hard to overestimate. What always surprises me is the fact that there was no record of his records. When you hear this group of recordings, you realize that in addition to creating stunning DJ Spooky has participated in two new book projects.

One is Green Patriot Posters. DJ Spooky's Manifesto for a People's Republic of Antarctica graphic design prints are included along with several of his friends like Shep Fairey and others. Make your own poster manifesto for a better world!

greenpatriotposters.org

Edited by Edward Morris and Dmitri Siegel

BUY THE BOOK

DJ Spooky also has participated in renowned photographer Lyle Owerko's new book "The Boombox Project" on the history of boomboxes.

BUY THE BOOK

Copyright Criminals - a Documentary by Ben Frantzen and Kembrew Mcleod

I'm in this movie, and I think that they did an excellent job. They have many friends and peers of mine - Jeff Chang, Chuck D (who appeared on my album "Drums of Death"), Clyde Stubblefield, the drummer for James Brown, and many others. I HIGHLY recommend this film for anyone who is interested in digital culture!
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3/12/2012