

CHOPPED AND SCREWED: THE IMPACT OF DJ SCREW

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ABSTRACT

Chopped and Screwed is style of music producing created by Robert Earl Davis Jr., known as “DJ Screw”, that refers to taking a track and altering it to produce a new sound that is slowed down, warped and/or played back again. This style would give birth to the unique sound of southern rap music in the early nineties showcased by many different artists. This article compares and analyzes the sound of nineties rap music rooted from Houston, Texas and explores how those elements are incorporated in the present rap scene. Ultimately, this article suggests that the impact of DJ Screw has diverged to influence modern artists and created a style of music producing that would be heard by the world known as chopped and screwed.

I. INTRODUCTION

“Like any artform, music is at its best when it refuses to stand still; rather extending branches from its foundations in perpetual exploration for something as yet undefined” (Watts, 2019). Rap music has relentlessly changed over many decades catering to the latest cultural trends. From the eighties, now called “old school” hip-hop, with major names such as Salt-N-Pepa, Slick Rick, MC Hammer, and The Sugarhill Gang. During the rise of “gangster rap” in the nineties, individuals such as Ice Cube, Snoop Dogg, Nas, and Scarface were competing for the rise of fame. The early 2000s brought a new era of rap with pioneers such as Lil’ Wayne, Kanye West, Eminem and Jay-Z. With each decade bringing a new generation of music producers, musical elements are often passed down to the next and blended to create the new sound of rap and hip-hop.

Southern rap music made a name for itself with its unique music styles ranging from “gangster rap”, “crunk rap” to even “country rap”. Cities such as Atlanta, Memphis, New Orleans and Houston gave birth to the booming hip-hop community that would bring musical talent that could only be found in these southern states, nicknamed “The Dirty South”. In Houston, Texas, the era of “chopped and screwed” was popularized by “DJ Screw”. Houston quickly gained popularity in the rap game and became a trend that was not understood at first. Nevertheless, the impact that Screw’s mixtapes would bring flair that many modern artists use today.

To add to Houston’s rich culture of slowed down hip-hop, other components such as substance abuse and car culture were often highlighted by rappers of the Screw era. It gave the city a signature lifestyle like none other. Houston became the “City of Syrup”,

named after the drug of choice for these rappers, codeine cough syrup mixed with a soda and fruit-flavored candy poured over a glass of ice in a Styrofoam cup. Although this substance abuse became the cause of death for many Houston rappers, it did not stop the city from adopting the “purple drank” into its culture. Car culture also became extremely popular in Houston, referred to as “slabs”. This helped give the flourishing city such a large sense of community.

Screw’s music would continue to serve as roots to many new hometown heroes such as Travis Scott, Beyonce and Don Toliver. The trend to pay respect to the late deejay continues today with mentions made by icons such as Drake, Kanye West, and Frank Ocean. Like many legends, Screw’s career was cut short by his death in 2000. However, his impression remains strong in Houston and continues to be fundamentally recognized by the city’s rap scene.

II. ROBERT EARL DAVIS JR.

Robert Earl Davis Jr., better known as “DJ Screw”, was born on July 20, 1971 in Smithville, Texas. Due to his parents’ divorce, he moved between Los Angeles and Smithville. During his teenager years, he lived with his father who noticed his desire to make music and moved the pair to Houston, Texas where the music scene was thriving with opportunities. The Texan legend obtained his nickname from his habit of scratching through the grooves of records he didn’t like with a screw so no one could play those songs. Screw’s love for music would lead him to becoming serious about producing music.

At a young age, Screw made his first mixtapes by setting a cassette recorder in front of speakers while records played. In Houston, Screw dropped out of school to concentrate on music and started his DJ career by getting a job at the Almeda Skating Rink in 1989. As a DJ, he refined his skills at the turntable. Screw was well-known for his detail in “juggling the beats of two different records, scratching, repeating phrases, improvising, watching the dancers' reactions to certain songs, riffs, and rappers” while producing mixtapes (Hall, 2001). He found his signature sound on accident by hitting the pitch button on the turntable resulting in slowing down the music. His iconic strategy was slowing down tracks from 45 rpm to 33rpm to recreate an eerie hallucinogenic effect to the ear. A friend had offered him ten dollars to produce an all slowed-down mixtape and thus the era of chopped and screwed was born.

Screw used this method of slowing down a record and warping the piece with his own style of production, putting it on tape and then selling it. The slow-paced playback of the track attracted many listeners and soon enough, people were lining up at his door to get their own screwed up mixtape. Clients would bring Screw a list of desired songs

and Screw would personally make a mixtape for that customer. Many of his customers gifted these “Screw Tapes” for birthday, graduation or party celebrations. Due to his popular success, Screw had to move out of his father’s apartment and into a house in South Houston in order to keep up with his city’s demand for “screwed up mixtapes”. The sound of Screw’s skill was traveling far and wide and customers were attracted to the mellow sound of the new era.

DJ Screw’s popularity was spreading through regions and attracted customers and local rappers from all around. Nearly everyone wanted a personalized Screw mixtape that served as a Houston token from the skilled deejay. Screw formed the “Screwed Up Click” in early 1990s by inviting his friends and customers to shout out their neighborhoods on his mixtapes. The collective of customers and friends would pay Screw to be featured on his mixtape and flaunt their freestyle skills. Screw formed the group to accompany his flow of creative production and ultimately create masterpieces.

Screw was often known for his relaxed, mellow vibes that he expressed through his music. Some even considered him a mediator in the Southside community. Many friends recall an unspoken rule of truce when entering Screw’s workplace. Screw opened up his home and the “musical activity that he facilitated within his home allowed territorially fueled competition to be negotiated without the specter of the violence that often springs from street interactions” (Wilkins, 2017). Screw had a special way of keeping peace in his city.

At the peak of his production, Screw opened up his music store, Screwed-up Records and Tapes store in 1998. The store served as a business front while his deejay proficiency was high in demand. However, unlike typical music stores, Screw’s store

only sold one product: Screw tapes. These “clear-plastic cassettes” became iconic symbols and were “sold from behind bulletproof glass” (Hall, 2001). Unfortunately, Screw knew little about the business world and allowed for competitors to easily duplicate his work and create their own screwed CDs and tapes. Bootleggers were common to come across as a result of Screw’s little interest to take his business to the next level. Today, his shop still stands and is ran by Screw’s family members still selling tapes and CDs as well as Screw merchandise.

Like many rappers at the time, Screw frequently abused drugs such as Codeine and marijuana. This caused Screw to live in a very unhealthy routine with no activity, a poor diet and harmful substances to his body. He was known for his habitual drug usage that would sometimes result in him passing out for several days. DJ Screw was found dead in his recording studio on November 22, 2000. An autopsy report revealed that the rap star had died of an overdose with mixed drug intoxication. Like many prodigies, the upcoming star faced a quick death, leaving the music industry anticipating what the legend could be today.

III. SCREWED UP CLICK

The Screwed Up Click (S.U.C) is a rap group that features about a dozen of local Houston rappers, with a variety of different rapping styles, founded by DJ Screw. Members of the group would soon start appearing on Screw's tapes and would be heard by all of Screw's many fans. The hip-hop crew served as a posse to DJ Screw and appeared on albums that Screw would produce. These recordings would often showcase the local rappers, each bringing their own flavor, and complementing the melodic beats of DJ Screw.

One prominent figure of the Screwed Up Click was Kenneth Doniell Moore, otherwise known as Big Moe. Best known for his harmonious "rap singing" to the crew and often sang instead of rapping on Screw's tapes. His style of melodic bouncing beats showed success on his hit single, *Purple Stuff*. Much like Screw, Big Moe also frequently abused codeine and led a very unhealthy lifestyle. The musical titan took part in giving Houston's its spontaneous melodic bounce on the tracks. He died on October 14, 2007 of health complications.

Screw experimented with different creative flows provided by members in the crew. Rapper Joseph Wayne McVey IV, otherwise known as Z-Ro, emerged with his own genre of rap, branded as "Pain Rap". His flow reflected on the hurt and pain the rapper has dealt with in a heavy harsh tone that attracted listeners. Z-Ro serves as a huge influence and mastered the storytelling component of his music. His success in his self-made genre was evident and opened doors for other rappers with their own style.

Frazier Othel Thompson III, known as Trae tha Truth, or Trae is a well-known figure in the city of Houston. Trae came about his fame when he appeared on Z-Ro's album in 1998. Not only did he lead a very successful rap career, including being a

member of other rap groups such as ABN and Guerilla Maab, but Trae also became an imperative figure for his work done within the community. Trae often hosted food drives and volunteer events to give back to his home. His charity was officially recognized in 2008 when the Mayor of Houston granted July 22nd to be celebrated as Trae Day. The annual Trae Day festival was short-lived after a shooting incident occurred one year at the festival. Though it brought controversy, Trae carries on his effort to emphasize the importance of a city-wide community.

Like many Houston rappers, the music appeal didn't get farther than the range of the city itself. Other local rappers rose to fame on their own terms after the Screwed Up Click era. Although not a part of the S.U.C, rapper Paul Wall made a name for himself on the charts. Paul Wall soared to popularity in 2004 when his album appeared on the Billboard charts and he then went on to appear on Kanye West's sophomore album, "Late Registration". On the song, *Drive Slow*, Wall represents his southern roots and makes references to his hometown. The end of the track uses Screw's signature slowed tempo and heavy bass. This was just a mere example of chopped and screwed being adopted into music outside of Houston. Keeping Screw's foundation led Paul Wall to become part of Houston's newest sound, the next generation.

IV. HOUSTON'S SOUNDTRACK

Screw's impact on Houston's hip-hop scene in 1990s would later be adopted into being known as the "chopped and screwed" style. This method was named after its two components that make up the native sound. Chopping refers to repeating certain words and phrases in a percussive outcome, a technique commonly used by deejays. For the screwed effect, the tempo of the record is slowed down between 30 and 50 percent to generate a hefty bass sound. The combination set the tone for the Houston lifestyle. To understand how his music sent a message to fans, it's evident that "Screw lyrics are hyperlocal, as artists make explicit references to the people, places, and activities that comprise the Houston landscape" (Wilkins, 2017). It's the pride for the city they call home.

Screw's lyrics presented Houston with an unspoken sense of community, especially in South Houston. A temporary truce for all rivalries across the city. His tapes gave pride to Houston citizens, with different songs shouting out nearly every hood in the city. Houston rap music was perceived differently for Houston listeners because of its personalization. Rappers talked about events and people from the town and listeners were drawn to it. Screw's mixtapes "functioned as a type of documentation and communication medium for Southside street life", almost like a radio (Wilkins, 2017). Screw's reach for Houston listeners was phenomenal.

Another component of Screw's lyrics included the strong presence of car culture in Houston. Geographically, Houston is a wide city and many residents used cars to express themselves and even represent their neighborhoods as they travel from one side of the city to the other. It was common to see Northside residents in blue colors and the Southside residents in red colors. Rappers boast about their "slabs" and flaunt their sweet

rides on album covers functioning as an initiation into the rap scene. Slabs are defined by cars modified by the owner flaunting candy vibrant colors, loud stereo systems and shiny outgoing rims, personalized to show off to the rest of the city.

*“I'mma swang, I'mma swing my slab lean to the left
Pop my trunk and show what I'm about so Houston Texas got to be fit, I'm a vet
So it's automatic when I'm swinging my wide frame
4 4,s to 24's I'm subject to glide man”*
- **Trae tha Truth** (2006) “Swang”

The car scene in Houston grew stronger than it ever was and soon everyone set out to show off their custom cars. Car culture is still highly present today, with the countless car clubs and common locations in Houston for car meets.

The factors of the culture were faced with many challenges, especially with law enforcement. Screw dealt with the law often, especially in the beginning of his career. When Screw had overflowing customers coming to his home in the Southside, the house was raided by cops in suspicion of drug dealing. It became clear that Screw needed to open his own shop to do business. Many encounters with territorial gang violence, drug busts, and carjacking did not stop Screw from working with his passion.

Lastly, like most rap music at the time, lyrical content was influenced by money and drug usage. The Screw era embraced the “Purple Drank” as a popular drug, especially while listening to Screw’s mixtapes. This reference to the mixture of a cough syrup called Promethazine with Codeine was often accompanied by marijuana and is believed to have enhanced the experience of listening to Screw’s music. The illegal substance is a sedative and takes the user into a relaxed state whereas Screw’s music acted as the perfect companion for. However, Screw never intended that the listener needed to be under the influence of drugs to appreciate the artform. Sadly, some rappers

abused the drug more than other that usually led to bad health complications. The deaths of great Houstonian rappers such as DJ Screw, Pimp C and Big Moe provided a wakeup call to other rappers to take care of their health.

V. FROM TAPES TO HITS

Today, Screw's legacy lives on. The signature chopped and screwed style would soon become an element of many modern artists, not just the new generation of Houston rappers but also across the nation. The psychedelic sound originated from Houston has many other artists seeking for a taste of the distinctive culture. As the torch is passed down to younger generations, the traditional sound maintains its role in the hip hop world.

Many present artists in the hip-hop community far from Texas continue to pay tribute to the unique sound of Screw's music. Drake's most notable tribute, his song *November 18th*, expressed similar slow tempo beats and made several references to the chopped and screwed style. The song was released in 2009, nearly a decade after Screw's death. The Canadian rapper is known for paying homage to Houston in his lyrics:

*“Like H-Town in the summertime, I keep it one hundred
Met a lot of girls in my times there
Word to Paul Wall, not one fronted
I was birthed there in my first year
Man, I know that place like I come from it”*

- **Drake** “Too Much” (2013)

Artist Frank Ocean connects with the Houston theme in his song, “Close to You” released in 2016. The song featured similar elements from Screw's style. The musician isn't shy to shout out other Houston rappers in the lyrics of other songs.

Screw's fundamentals have inspired many modern Houston artists such as Kirko Bangz and Travis Scott in their music. In 2011, Kirko Bangz made it to the Billboards with song, “Drank in My Cup”. The title referring to the city's well-known cough syrup drink. Many similar elements such as the repeating certain phrases and slowed tempo influenced from Screw's music. The rapper's lyrics in the song evidently tribute the city's

signature lifestyle.

I done came down, came up
Slow pitch, change up
Same hood, same style, same drink, same cup
- **Kirko Bangz** “Drank in My Cup” (2011)

Eleven years after Screw’s death, Kirko Bangz released a song so heavily influenced by the sound of his city. The latest prophecy from Houston, Travis Scott, is currently dominating the rap scene. Scott skyrocketed to fame after appearing on albums made by musical titans such as Kanye West and Kid Cudi. His album, *Astroworld*, received an Album of the Year award and was completely influence by his hometown. On Spotify, the global superstar is the 16th top artist listened to in the world. Travis Scott, excelled at bringing the Houston sound to the worldwide stage.

Beyonce took the Houston legacy to a global platform with her live album, *Homecoming*, made from her 2018 Coachella performance. Her live album was produced, mixing performance with a style that stayed true to Houston. One song in particular, “*I Been On*”, the megastar uses the distinguished chopped and screwed sound to pay tribute to her home and the influencers within the city’s rich past. Beyonce is well-known for mentioning her deep southern roots in many of her songs. The star does not shy away from her Texan roots in her music.

VI. CONCLUSION

Although it took years to be recognized, DJ Screw's chopped and screwed method has a huge role in Houston's culture. The late DJ is still memorialized decades after his death in 2000. Many could agree that Screw's "tunes were not just an artistic statement, but a cultural one" (Westhoff, 2011). He is easily recognized as a critical figure in the Houston hip hop culture. DJ Screwed created a one of kind atmospheric ambiance with his music. His influence set the foundation for Houston culture and created a path to success for many other rappers.

The legend of DJ Screw is critically memorialized today in Houston. All around the city, wall murals with Screw's face and other S.U.C members can be found. His music blasting on car stereos and local rappers still referencing him in lyrics. In modern pop culture, references to Screw appear more than ever. An episode in the Netflix original docuseries, *Hip-Hop Evolution*, features a brief history overview emphasizing Screw's influence on southern rap.

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