

# Rolling Stone

## Footwork in 2015: Dizzy Dance Music Evolves Past Its Chicago Roots

As the regional sound invades Poland and Japan, Chicago DJs rethink their creation

By **ANDY BATTAGLIA** - July 31, 2015



"It's getting bigger and bigger — it's beautiful," says RP Boo, the producer credited by many as the father of Chicago footwork. From its beginnings in the late Nineties, the genre — marked by dizzying loops, staccato synth stabs, antic polyrhythms and blasts of repetition, repetition, repetition — seemed designed to go everywhere and nowhere at once. Now, a half-decade after garnering global attention through the ear-bending Planet Mu compilation *Bangs & Works Vol. 1*, the sound of footwork is morphing into new forms from Poland to Japan, influencing the fringes of the avant-garde and taking stylistic leaps at home.

"It's open[ed] so much that producers have been making it go from telling a paragraph of a story to becoming a novel," says RP Boo. "It can rub off to a different genre and tell a story with tempos changing, bars changing. It can still be footwork but now with broader spaces and more people coming in."

Since the release of *Bangs & Works* in 2010, new footwork releases have rushed out at a suitably disorienting clip. So far this year, the movement's Chicago center has greeted fresh offerings by scenemakers RP Boo, Traxman, DJ Spinn, Jlin and the sadly departed DJ Rashad, among others. Collaborations have crossed borders to other cities and streamed overseas, where artists are also taking up the template on their own. As that happens, the template is bound to change — especially when the template is shifty and amorphous to begin with.

"We want to broaden the horizons and hope more people hear what we do," says DJ Spinn, the genre's reigning global ambassador, whose *Off That Loud* EP is due in September. "We do one style of music, but it goes so many different ways."

One striking example came by way of the most acclaimed footwork full-length of the year thus far. Released this spring, Jlin's *Dark Energy* made its mark because it is so different than footwork in its most elemental, pared-down form, with original production in place of samples and an expansive sound full of synthesized orchestral flourishes and airs of downcast drama that thicken the typical range of moods.

"People think 'dark energy' is a bad thing," Jlin says. "It's not. You can have euphoric moments and then turn around and be completely depressed and create something that is magnificent. The star comes from darkness, so how can darkness be all bad? The best way I can describe art is that it should be disturbing."

RP Boo is also pushing the formative footwork style forward on *Fingers, Bank Pads & Shoe Prints*, a June release featuring 14 songs of both recent and older vintage. With a mix of lo-fi textures and manic samples that loop and intersect, the album both resurrects and refines the classic RP Boo sound.

"I try to keep some of the origin in it," he says, "and you have to allow it to grow. The sound helps me, and I help the sound."

The wider world is working it out as well. The Chicago contingent holds out praise for U.K. footwork popularizers like Addison Groove and Kode9, whose label Hyperdub does duty alongside fellow label Planet Mu to help footwork spread through vaster international networks. Other outsider favorites include the New

York/Berlin artist Machinedrum, the [Juke Bounce Werk](#) crew from L.A. and Eastern Europeans affiliated with [Polish Juke](#), among many more. Some of the connections come from Chicago directly, with the originators of footwork touring more extensively of late. DJ Spinn, especially, has been active in far-flung locales, including a tour that took him to Mexico, Brazil, Argentina, Chile and Peru.



"I approach Latin America the same way I approach anywhere out of Chicago," Spinn says. "Everywhere was awesome. A few places didn't have any clue, like Brasilia, my first stop. In Buenos Aires, it was a hop-hop night, so we played to a bunch of b-boys. That party turned really real."

Watching newbies work out ways to dance to music so hyperactive and abstract is rich, he says. "You've got people who watch YouTube videos and try to do what they can," says Spinn. "I encourage that. All these kids being themselves and going out there to dance — that's what any music is for, but our music especially."

"It's a back-and-forth exchange of energy," Spinn says. "We go to the U.K. and hear dubstep for the first time and come home and are like, 'OK, let's put a little dub in it, a little drum-and-bass.' That's the nature of what we do as a sample-oriented sound: We can take a little bit from here and there and still make it our own flavor."

However, footwork is evolving on its own and finding new forms. Orange Milk Records, a label based in Columbus, Ohio, has tapped into unique extrapolations from Japan, where producers have long taken a studious and skewed approach to American dance sounds. Foodman, from Yokohama, caught the ear of Orange Milk label head Keith Rankin while he was searching the footwork hashtag on Soundcloud.

"I was immediately into his approach, minimal and often bizarre," Rankin says. "Most publications and fans outside Chicago were only just becoming familiar with what made footwork footwork, but Foodman and other Japanese artists had already adopted it fully and were starting to push boundaries further out. It seems like the Japanese musicians were less resistant to mimicking an American style out of pure admiration. They tried to make faithful reproductions, but the result was a distant fun-house version of the original."

DJ Fulltono, another Japanese artist on Orange Milk, is more resolutely footwork in his style: all rhythm, with a mind for deconstruction — "a decent way to gauge the current boundaries of the genre," Rankin says, while praising the use of such change from afar. "The fact that our interaction was made possible by the Internet is an indication of how movements like footwork begin in settings like Chicago dance battles and then find a second life when they migrate into Internet subcultures. It's like every genre has a perverted net-version doppelganger staring back at itself."

Darren Keen, a Brooklyn-based producer who has a footwork album coming out on Orange Milk next month titled *He's Not Real*, is not from Japan — but not from Chicago either. A serious fan of the form, he says, "a lot of footwork artists keep it really hard and really street, but I'm from Nebraska. I'm not trying to pose or flex. There are a lot of people like me, influenced on a global scale. If the influence makes it out, it's us paying homage to that Chicago sound."

Mark Fell, a veteran U.K. electronic-music artist who has been active in different fashions (experimental sound art, minimal techno, etc.) for decades, has dabbled a bit with footwork of late, with results that are deliciously refracted. *The Neurobiology of Moral Decision Making*, his collaborative album with Gábor Lázár on the label Death of Rave, sets strange tones into rhythms that evoke footwork's frantic stutter and strut.

"[Footwork] has a rhythmic structure that is quite easy to assimilate," says Fell. "It's clearly the result of engaging with pattern-generating procedures that allow you to do things you wouldn't have previously imagined. For me, footwork sounds like someone experimenting with a grid-based pattern entry system in a digital-audio workstation. It sounds like the producers of that music are messing around with

what they can get out of it, like the genre has emerged out of that kind of mechanism."

Footwork's evolution does not appear to be slowing anytime soon. In September, DJ Spinn will release a new EP with a track featuring rapper Danny Brown (after some earlier hip-hop interaction with fellow Chicagoan Chance the Rapper). A new one released just this month finds him in collaboration with Canadian electro-soul artist Jessy Lanza.

"We want to show people that we can do more than just footwork but keep footwork in every element of what we do," Spinn says. "There's more than just one style. We just want to spread the love."