

review the music

this week's essential reading

'The internet took the album away and now it's giving it back' by Micah Singleton, www.theverge.com

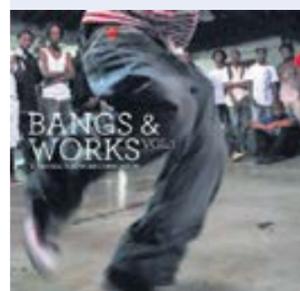
'Beyoncé's surprise release changed the music industry more than any other album in the last 10 years, but not in the way you may think'



Chicago footworkers showing their moves in Joliet, just outside Chicago, in 2011, when the scene was in its infancy. Courtesy lukehartley.com

▶ the playlist

Compilations and artist albums to give you a footwork foothold



Bangs & Works Vol. 1
Various Artists
(Planet Mu, 2010)

The first compilation to get attention outside Chicago remains a touchstone, with 25 tracks of blazing footwork weirdness. Of special note is *Jungle Juke*, a delirious visitation to *The Lion Sleeps Tonight*.



Legacy
RP Boo
(Planet Mu, 2013)

This collection of hallmarks by the mastermind known as RP Boo swoops through all sorts of sounds, with a mind for classical music as well as bizarre surrealist pop. It's called *Legacy* for a reason.



The Space Zone
Young Smoke
(Planet Mu, 2012)

Young Smoke takes footwork on a sci-fi fantasy spin, with evocations of zany robots and a sound palette that enlists ghosts of old 80s/90s electro. Tracks like *Futuristic Musick* are all that and more.



Double Cup
DJ Rashad
(Hyperdub, 2013)

The late DJ Rashad suffused footwork with a sense of style and soul that made a nascent genre sound timeless from the start. His last album alludes to the 70s, 80s, 90s, 00s – and decades yet to come.

Thrills and skills

Footwork, a dissonant soundtrack to Chicago dance battles, is a reminder of how strange and compelling abstract sounds can be, writes Andy Battaglia

Abstraction in music can be hard to parse. For starters, all music, even the most conventional kind, is abstract. Unlike painting or film or other stuff catered to the senses, music is less a representation of something else than an ephemeral, ineffable thing in itself. It's invisible, intangible and strange even in its simplest, plainest state. Add abstraction on top of that and you wind up with a whacked equation.

All of which is worth keeping in mind when accounting for the intense thrills that attend the abstract style of music known as Chicago footwork. It's dance music, of a kind, but everything about it is fashioned to jam the signals. The sounds in it stutter, repeat, zig and zag; beats stumble over themselves and break apart while running at wild speeds or in slow-motion. The moment a footwork track seems to demur and become coherent and comprehensible is the moment it ceases to be a footwork track altogether.

Jlin, a young woman from Gary, Indiana, is one of the most exciting new practitioners of the form, which got its start as the soundtrack to tiny local dance battles in Chicago and has since moved into clubs all over the globe. Gary is not Chicago but is close, less than an hour's drive south along the massive Lake Michigan. It's an old "Rust Belt" town known for its former glory in the steel industry and its status as the birthplace of Michael Jackson. Now, it's another city trying to make its way in a post-industrial economy.

There, Jlin started making music in the style fomented by the likes of RP Boo, DJ Rashad, DJ Spinn, DJ Diamond and Traxman, all of whom featured on an epochal 2010 anthology titled *Bangs & Works Vol. 1: A Chicago Footwork Compilation*. It focused on producers in Chicago but came out on the London-based label Planet Mu, with pictures and biographies of a slew of artists all but entirely unknown outside the hometown scene. The liner notes presented them as stalwarts of something more important than a fleeting style: "Footwork, Chicago's underground music and dance, took three decades to mature into what it is today," the first sentence read.

The sound was disjointed and concussive and peculiar. Even in an electronic-music realm that privileges experiments and swerves, footwork remains a notably unsettled and unsettling sound, with a higher likelihood than most of eliciting from listeners a querulous state of mind fixed on a fundamental question: "What in the world was that?!"

Compounding the wildness of it was the startling fact that footwork was made expressly and explicitly for dancing, with home-spun choreography invented at local clubs and passed around at good-spirited battles that would pit dancers against each other. Videos of jaw-dropping moves shot online, with loose-limbed enthusiasts jerking and juking so fast as to seem to be a blur.

Jlin was introduced to the world on *Bangs & Works Vol. 2*, a sequel released in 2011 with some of the same names and some new ones too. Her track on that, *Erotic Heat*, reappears now



Dark Energy
Jlin
Planet Mu
Dh50

on her debut album *Dark Energy*, and it's one of 11 feisty offerings that cast Jlin among the most distinguished producers of the evolving footwork sound. Her style is moody and always with at least a subtle sense of menace, but she's fleet and agile too, able to balance the weightiest conniptions of beats and bass so that they seem to float.



Jlin is a rising star of the footwork scene. Courtesy William Glasspiegel

Black Ballet opens *Dark Energy* with a portentous mix of sounds – lone piano notes, synthesised strings sawing like mad, a ghostly operatic coo – that add to a rhythm that is heavy and heaving from the start. The drum sounds, seemingly dozens of different ones working altogether, skitter and fall into what sound at first like random patterns but reveal themselves to be part of a grand pattern indeed. Footwork, as a habit, makes a game of sounding jarringly arrhythmic and impossibly funky at once, and Jlin is as good at that aspect of it as anyone.

Unknown Tongues shifts into a more stuttering, skittering mode, with bits of vocal sounds triggered to repeat like Tourettic tics. Even more drum sounds race and crawl into crannies between them, until a sense of mania takes hold. In *Guantanamo*, the tone turns unmistakably dark when a voice intones: "You don't want to hurt anyone," and then another voice, that of a little girl, says: "But I do." It's surprising and creepy, and shocking when the full effect of it hits.

Jlin works best "from a state of unhappiness", she told the British website Fact. "Happiness is already a state, it's established. I can't work from there. I like to work from a place that's more realistic because that is where my impact is."

She continued: "I'm taking the dark sense of what I feel in my experiences and I'm creating these splashes of colour all over. I'll splash the colours exactly where I intend them to be. So I'll say that I create from a place that is the belly of the beast. That might freak some people out, but others might get it."

There's a lot to get, and part of the whole of Jlin's sound is the freakiness at the core. As she said in another interview with *The Quietus*: "If I can, say, make the hair on the back of your neck stand up, then I've really done something right."

Footwork's ability to strike at a range of emotions expanded, sadly, with the untimely death last year of one its figureheads, DJ Rashad. He was a distinctive producer, in his prime as one of the genre's worldwide ambassadors when a drug overdose took him at the age of 34. *Double Cup*, his excellent album from 2013, was fated to be DJ Rashad's last

major statement of his own. But then, a few months ago, came *Next Life*, a memorial compilation of other artists in the scene who banded together for a release whose proceeds go to the benefit of Rashad's young son.

Glorious weirdness abounds on *Next Life*, which is airier and more playful than the work of Jlin (though she could appear on it without too much of a change of flavour). *Godz House*, by DJ Phil, introduces a quasi-religious fervour to the flaying and spraying of beats, and the great Traxman takes a mournful, elegiac turn with *Sit Ya Self Down*.

A wildly abstract track comes courtesy of RP Boo, a pioneer of footwork who also has a new release, *Classics Vol. 1*, with some of the earliest examples of footwork taking form. *Baby Come On*, cited often as the genre's starting point, was recorded in 1997 and features an aggressively looped vocal sample whose vertiginous repetition places it in the company of *Come Out*, the radical "phase pattern" tape piece from 1966 by the influential classical composer Steve Reich. For his offering, RP Boo took a short, clipped vocal sample – "baby, come on" – and set it on repeat until, after hundreds of reiterations, it starts to slip between unmistakable meaning and pure, abstract sound.

The oddly titled *02-52-03* derives a booming bass-driven anthem from, of all things, the theme from the movie *Godzilla*. *Night & Day* takes on more modern subject matter with a sample from a song championed by the 70s disco DJ Larry Levan, who worked to invent the original dance music sound that would evolve and change into the altered form of footwork. *Party Motion* brings the lineage into sharp relief, with a hyper-speed blast of beats and effects that would have flattened dancers decades ago.

It still can, actually, as anyone who has attempted to twitch and tap to footwork's eccentric timing can attest. It's abstraction on top of abstraction, and the sum of it all is as wondrously strange as music gets.

Andy Battaglia is a New York-based writer whose work appears in *The Wall Street Journal*, *Frieze*, *The Paris Review* and more.