

MUSIC

Return of the Boom Bap

The new hip-hop sounds of Kevin Gift are indeed a little irrational, but only in the best way



SAM HOLDEN

Kevin Gift, aka Wendel Patrick

Educated in music at Northwestern University in Illinois, he teaches at Loyola University. He has perfect pitch. He also has a pseudonym, Wendel Patrick. Patrick is a hip-hop producer, a wide-eared beatsmith with two records to his name, most recently *Forthcoming* last fall.

Gift's explanation of hip-hop and classical music comes after being asked where those two personas, Wendel Patrick and Kevin Gift, the classical piano player, meet and where they diverge. They don't really. Playing a solo classical piano set and producing a complicated electronic beat in a digital audio workstation are extensions of the same thing. Wendel Patrick is less an alter-ego than it is a way not to confuse people about what sort of music they can expect to hear in a given performance.

When Gift first started doing hip-hop performances, "I felt like I had to spend the first 30 seconds explaining why it didn't sound like they expected it to sound like," he remembers. Meanwhile, the name Wendel Patrick itself actually comes from Wendel Patrick Gift, a passed-away twin brother that the surviving Gift never met. A tribute of sorts: "It's the closest thing to me that's not me. It feels good to have a name that is so meaningful rather than DJ this. . . ."

Gift the beatsmith arose circa 2002, as piano compositions evolved into relatively simple compositions of beats and Rhodes keyboard. After moving to Baltimore from Chicago in late 1998, "I didn't interact with anyone for a long time," Gift says. "I was so focused and trained as a solo musician. I spent a lot of time just alone practicing, even initially with Wendel Patrick. I never had a need to meet a lot of people. I learned how to scratch records myself."

By [Michael Byrne](#)

PUBLISHED: MARCH 7, 2012

The Boom Bap Society

[March 7](#) at the Windup Space

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At a Johns Hopkins University-area restaurant on yet another eerily balmy winter night, Kevin Gift explains the difference between classical music and hip-hop. The explanation isn't very complicated, actually: There is no fundamental difference. In either music, there are people creating sounds out of pitch and rhythm. From there, it is all addition and history, "just the outcome[s]," he says. This explanation will frustrate some: The intervening tools, shapes, and cultural/social experiences of the music count for something, right? But Gift happens to be in a unique place in music, one where an honest answer can come stripped of all that.

Gift is a classically trained pianist and a successful one, enjoying a career that's taken him around the country and world, from the Smithsonian Institution to South America.

Bassist and fellow musical freethinker Adam Hopkins was also teaching at Loyola at the time—spring 2009—when he and others began the Out of Your Head series at the Windup Space, a still running weekly new-music/improv performance representing the city’s radical new-music supercollider. Gift was invited to perform. “That’s when I started reaching out to other instrumentalists,” he says. His band now consists of a batch of folks from that night’s intersection, including drummer Ethan Snyder and guitarist Jon Lipscomb, both also of the excellent no-wave/free-rock outfit Whoarfrost, and bassist Brian Brunzman. (If you’re keeping score, we’re now at live-band instrumental hip-hop derived from electronic compositions born from the brain of a classical pianist.)

Last fall, Patrick got together with Erik Spangler, a Harvard University doctor of music composition, an adjunct professor at Maryland Institute College of Art, and one of the founders of Baltimore’s Mobtown Modern concert series. Spangler had an idea for the series that would become the Boom Bap Society, now in its third month. That idea is something like the Out of Your Head nights, a forum for experimentation and improvisation, but with beats. This month’s edition, for example, finds two guest MCs, Femi the Dri Fish and Black Root, along with a nine-piece chamber ensemble doing, among other things to-be-determined-via-improv, arrangements for Prefuse 73 and J Dilla instrumentals.

“We did the first two [Boom Bap Society events with] just Erik and myself to kind of establish it musically,” Gift says, “as opposed to just something where people can come up and rhyme over beats. The general format is that we all get together a week before and not really rehearse, just play for like an hour and talk about what we heard. [The goal is] to keep the essence of it the same, while having it grow.

“One of the things that’s been really nice is that during the sets,” Gift continues, “when I wasn’t playing, being able to see a lot of the folks in the audience, and it’s a lot of MCs. And they’re coming to us saying, ‘How can we get on this? How can we get involved?’ As long as somebody is good at what they do and there’s a certain understanding of what [the series] is, we’re open to having anyone.”

Later this year, Gift will release a record of solo piano compositions as Kevin Gift. It might be a bit of a surprise at that point. Gift notes that the number of people actually aware of Kevin Gift (the musician) is shrinking. The album will, however, feature Wendel Patrick cameos of sorts; it won’t be stripped of Gift’s new life in hip-hop. They are, after all, still one and the same for the composer. He notes, “When I first started to make [hip-hop], I didn’t really call it anything.”

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