

Pop Talk: Gillis celebrates the source material

by *George_Varga*

Considering how tech-savvy he is, it's not surprising Gregg Gillis thrived in his job as a biomedical engineer in the experimental division of a Pennsylvania sleep-research company. It's also not surprising that he has such a knack for blending the music of the more than 160 artists - from Notorious B.I.G. and Nirvana to The Strokes and, um, Phil Collins - that he sampled and combined on his latest album, "Night Ripper."

GIRL TALK - 'I know a lot of kids at my shows have never seen anyone perform on a laptop,' says Gregg Gillis, otherwise known as Girl Talk, 'So I feel I have to push the entertainment value up.' CNS Photo. But balancing his day gig with his weekend performances as a one-man, laptop-manipulating, mash-up artist and sonic provocateur known as Girl Talk was a challenge. "For a while I didn't have a day I could sleep in because it was work, Monday through Friday, do shows out of town Friday and Saturday, then fly back Sunday for work. It was cool, but it became pretty draining," said Gillis, 25.

His sleep-depriving dilemma ended not long after Girl Talk's packed April performance at the Coachella Valley Music & Arts Festival. Gillis decided to ditch his day job and focus, at least for now, solely on making music. He's already done remixes, at their request, for Beck, Of Montreal and Sweden's Peter Bjorn and John. His future seems bright indeed.

The bad news is that his rising popularity means this underground sensation is now more visible - and more likely to attract scrutiny from major record labels and music publishers, if not financially crippling lawsuits. Earlier this year both iTunes and eMusic pulled all of his songs after a record label complained he hadn't obtained legal clearances to use music by their artists.

"I try to not have that be the focus," Gillis said. "I've always been a pop music fan and enjoy the music I'm sampling, so I try to have my music be more a celebration of the source material. Questions are raised automatically about copyright law, but I don't try to force it down people's throats. I grew up listening to Public Enemy and I wasn't concerned with whether they (legally) cleared the beats they sampled."

None of the 16 songs on "Night Ripper" feature a single vocal or instrumental part by Gillis. But he's unusually adept at combining unlikely songs by other performers, past and present, to create a constantly

shifting aural collage that picks up where mash-up pioneer Danger Mouse left off.

The results, which mix song snippets by everyone from 50 Cent, Gwen Stefani and M.I.A. to Neutral Milk Hotel, Tears for Fears and Hall & Oates, seems perfectly tailored for young music fans in this ADD-fueled era of fleeting attention spans and instant (but constantly changing) aural gratification.

"Most of my work is not too intuitive; ideas don't really pop up. It's like a trial-and-error process for me," Gillis noted. "But the one pivotal thing that got me started is when I heard Elton John's 'Tiny Dancer' on the radio and started rapping Biggie Small's 'Juicy' over it. That was an idea that just hit me: I put the two songs together and it sounded exactly as I imagined it. But, normally, it's a matter of sitting down for hours and slowly things develop and I try different combinations."

Gillis considers his Girl Talk performances a failure if the stage doesn't quickly fill with gyrating audience members. They become a vital part of his uproarious, party-hearty shows.

"I consider myself an electronic music producer, a sound collage artist, really. I've never considered myself a DJ," Gillis said. "I do work with pre-existing media and I'm not offended by the term. But a DJ can mix (vinyl) records together and I've never even tried to do that."

"And even if a DJ does their own remixes, their skill live is cuing someone else's records. When I perform live, it's 100 percent my own remixes. I never play anything in an unaltered form."

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