



DANIEL JP

(From left) The three beatboxers Leo Chiu Pok-ho, Anton Cheung Ho-yu and So Tsz-lun share their story of getting into beatbox.

# Beat out without instrument

by Chelsea Yu

Three young men equipped with microphones marched up onto the stage. Suddenly, one of them gave off the sound of “boom chak buh-buh boom boom chak”. As the sound went faster, two other “beatboxers” jammed amid the cheers. Soon the whole area was pulsating with high-spirited beats and the crowd were rocking for all they were worth.

The three beatboxers, Leo Chiu Pok-ho, Anton Cheung Ho-yu and So Tsz-lun, who are all under 20, were invited to perform at the “feast-for-a-thousand”, an anniversary celebration for United College of the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK) last October.

Beatbox is a form of vocal percussion in which the artists imitate drum beats with their lips, tongue, mouth, throat, and voice.

“It’s crazy! He (the beatboxer) makes different sounds at the same time,” said Helen Miu Sau-

lai, a fourth-year hotel and tourism management student at the CUHK.

Miu was experiencing an auditory illusion. While beatboxers hum with their noses, their mouths can also make alternative sounds simultaneously, tricking the listeners into believing that they are making lots of different sounds at the same time.

After witnessing their striking talents, students of Chung Chi, another college at the university, also invited them to perform at their own college celebration.

Yu Ka-hang, a 22-year-old university student who studies sports science and physical education at the CUHK, said: “It’s quite interesting and I would like to learn it (beatboxing). But I have no idea where I can do this.”

Surprisingly, the beatboxers said getting into beatbox was just a coincidence, instead of supposedly learning it from a teacher. A few years

ago, they happened to watch a video posted by an American beatboxer, DJ (disc jockey) Effex. This led to their interest in this new form of music.

“I watched his video three years ago and it was amazing! At the beginning, I didn’t believe he made all the sounds on his own,” said Chiu.

Though Chiu said he thought it was sort of a gimmick for people to post videos online, he found beatboxing so cool that he wanted to learn how DJ Effex does all the wonderful vocals. Driven by curiosity, Chiu began searching for more information about beatbox on the internet.

His research led him into a website set up by beatboxers Mark Splinter and Gavin Tyte. At the website, there are a series of video lessons to teach beatbox beginners the essential techniques. With the video lessons at the website, Chiu was able to access the secrets behind the amazing sounds.

However, the 19-year-old's busy schedule as a student at the Institute of Vocational Education (IVE) makes it hard for him to pick up beatboxing. Therefore, he downloaded the tutorial clips from the website onto his handheld game console to allow him to learn the essential techniques in his spare time.

He now makes use of the time commuting to watch the clips. He would look for a seat away from others on the bus to practice quietly.

According to Chiu, the sounds he made at the beginning were so terrible that he did not want anybody to hear them. He would hide himself away and practise beatboxing alone, until he received his mother's comment.

"I was practising beatbox with a microphone in my bedroom. Suddenly my mum knocked the door and told me to turn down the volume of my hi-fi," said Chiu with a confident smile, as the sounds he made was so real that his mother thought it was really the hi-fi playing.

He continued: "I now keep my door open, and have never closed it again (when practising) ever since."

Chiu said the encouragement from his mother has strengthened his confidence in performing beatbox. It pushed him to practise harder in order to master the skills. Gradually he established his own style of hip hop beatboxing, acting as a steady beat for the rappers.

"Working hard is the only way out. There are no cheats as there is no gain when there is no pain," said 19-year-old Anton Cheung Ho-yu, one of the trio, who started learning beatbox three years ago.

Besides performing, this summer, Cheung also started to teach as a part-time instructor at Warehouse Teenage Club Limited, a non-profit organisation set up in 1992 to provide teenagers with a safe place to explore their creativity.

He explained that beatbox relies strongly on students' motivation to learn. Teachers' instructions may help at the beginner level, but for those

who wish to sharpen their skills will need to practise over and over again as some skills cannot possibly be taught by oral instructions.

Therefore, he does not recommend beginners to learn beatbox from any teacher because they may become too dependent on them.

Cheung said many beginners give up learning when they find the three basic sounds difficult. Learning beatbox can be difficult at the beginning, but it is very rewarding to see the improvements finally, he added.

So Tse-lun, also one of the trio, said beatbox almost becomes part of his life. He practises beatbox on his way home and to school, before dinner, while taking a shower and so on. Whenever his mouth is idle, he practises beatbox.

"I don't find it a painful process. Instead, I think it is more like an enjoyment," said So, who is known as Heartgrey in beatbox circles. After mastering all the basic skills, he takes one step further to develop a unique style of his own. "Beatboxing is imitating instrumental sounds. Everybody would be the same without a style," he said.

So is enthusiastic in developing new skills such as lip scratching. Lip scratch imitates the sounds of scratching on a DJ turntable, but with a higher tone. So said mixing lip scratching into the beat would give a very special effect.

The three young men used to be of a beatbox group, Juz Kidding, which held regular practices. They said group practising is inspiring because skills are polished when they share them with others.

However, their team disbanded last September since members have other goals to achieve. Some need to focus on work, others need to focus on studies.

Like So, who is going to sit for the Advanced Level Examination this year, has to devote more time to his study now. He wishes to major

in engineering at university. To him, music is still a hobby.

However, three of them shared the same thought that the music industry in Hong Kong can hardly accommodate alternative music styles like beatbox, which makes the path of professional beatboxers really tough to walk.

Although some mainstream music adds beatbox elements occasionally, the trio reckon it is only a gimmick introduced by the producers. The trend is likely to fade away very soon like any other fad.

Chiu, Cheung and so said they hope beatbox can gain popularity gradually and develop steadily with stable support from the community.

From time to time, the three beatboxers deliver performances at functions jointly hosted by different secondary schools and universities, and run street shows in Mong Kok.

But they said it is difficult for them to earn a living from it. They only consider a public performance as a way of promoting the art. Yet, at least one person in Hong Kong is actually trying to turn his interest into a career.



Kevin Chan Kam-ho tells his life as a full-time musician.

COURTESY OF BARON SCHOOL OF MUSIC



1&2: Greg Pattillo (left) demonstrates beatbox flute techniques at the workshop.

Kevin Chan Kam-ho teaches beatbox at the Baron School of Music, which was established by Ronald Ng Lok-shing, a renowned Hong Kong musician. The fresh graduate from the School of Design of Hong Kong Polytechnic University is now a full time musician with a monthly income of about HK\$20,000.

He also performs on request. However, the start of his beatbox journey is a completely different story from the trio.

He first made acquaintance with the human-made sounds when he watched the movie *Police Academy* in which actor Michael Winslow produces numerous sound effects and causes an embarrassing scene in a restaurant. However, this close-to-beatbox element seems to be just a tool used by comedians.

Later another movie allowed him to take a closer look at beatbox and it was *Men In Black II*. In the movie, Will Smith communicates with aliens in a post office using beatboxing language. Again, beatbox element is intended to be part of a joke, yet, it gave beatbox a world audience.

Since the 25-year-old music lover composes songs from time to time, it is a lot less convenient when there is

not a piano or a computer by his side. So he tried to imitate instrumental sounds like beatboxers.

“Now I can compose everywhere, even in the streets,” said Chan, whose talents gained more recognition after performing in a concert with local singer Leo Ku Kui-kei.

At the beginning, he was very keen on learning all the beatbox skills as soon as possible. He could not help practising during lectures at the university. His annoyed classmates would ask him to keep quiet.

Since people might regard him strange to practise in public spaces, Chan sought out the best place to practise. “I prefer practising in the bathroom because the echo enhances the sound a lot. The bedroom is my favourite (practicing place) as well,” he said.

He found among his students, the women are shyer than men. Chan supposed it is because beatbox resembles spitting so girls are reluctant to “spit”.

Though Chan is a beatbox instructor, he pointed out that the best that a teacher can do is to share their experience. A large part of the learning process remains with the students.

“In Hong Kong, it seems only what the teacher teaches is correct,” the self-learner of beatbox said.

To him, beatbox and music are inseparable. He added: “Beatbox is a language. It is able to communicate with other musical instruments.”

“Therefore it is the musical and rhythmic sense that matters the most, though beatbox skills cannot be overlooked,” said Chan. As a design graduate, he sees the similarity between beatbox and design arts both command creativity. “You just need to remain creative all the time,” he said.

To the audience’s delight, creative efforts made by beatboxers around the world have successfully inspired talents across the music industry. Greg Pattillo, a United States-based flute player, is an example. The musician made his name adapting beatboxing to flute playing.

Beatbox flute sounds as if there is a drum beat backing up the flute’s tune when the player does beatbox and plays the flute at the same time.

After watching Pattillo’s beatboxing flute videos on YouTube, which have been viewed over 12 million times, Nigel Ng Wai-hung, music director of Synchron Hong Kong



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## What is beatbox?

Flute Workshop invited Pattillo and his band, named Project, to perform in Tsuen Wan Town Hall Auditorium last October.

Ng said: “Beatbox flute requires highly sensitive lips and advanced skills. It is very tricky to do.” In addition to the main concert, Ng also arranged a workshop for the beatbox flute player to share his knowledge with music lovers.

A 37-year-old flute player, Ng learned beatbox flute skills in a workshop. To him, beatbox flute is different from traditional flute playing. Beatbox flute is very much linked to jazz flute, as both are powerful expression of one’s own personality. It is a tune with such strong rhythm that people cannot help moving their bodies with.

Although only 30 to 40 per cent of the seats were occupied during the performance, the audience were passionate. “The clapping was so loud that it was almost like we had a full house,” said Ng.

Ng believes that beatbox has the potential to become more popular in the future. ▽

The term “beatboxing” comes from the sound of the first generation of drum machines, electronic devices which simulate the sound of percussion instruments.

The art of beatbox can be traced back to the 1980s in the US. At that time African Americans could hardly afford musical instruments for parties. So they started to mimic the sounds of different instruments, including drums, in street corners to create their own music.

Beatbox is thus closely associated with hip hop, which belongs to the urban music genre, and is often referred to as the fifth element of hip hop alongside DJ-ing (playing as a disc jockey), rapping, break dancing and graffiti art.

There are three basic sounds in beatbox, namely kick drum ([b]), hi-hat ([t]) and snare ([p]). They represent three basic components of a drum set.

Kick drum refers to the base drum. Its sound is made by completely closing the lips and then releasing them by a burst of air. The simplest way to make a classic kick drum sound is to say the letter “B”.

Hi-hat is the two cymbals that clash together when the foot pedal is pressed. To mimic a basic closed hi-hat sound is to make a simple “T” sound with your teeth lightly closed.

Snare is a drum with wires called snares underneath. The simplest way to imitate the classic snare sound is to say the letter “P” louder than usual. To produce a more snare-like sound, most beatboxers add a second fricative sound to the initial “P” sound, blowing out [pf], [ps] or [psh].

Source: Kevin Chan Kam-ho and Leo Chiu Pok-ho