"Urgency. […] It's so much more than just interest or passion!"

On Learning and Teaching in Hip-Hop

Samy Deluxe in conversation with Oliver Kautny[1]

Ich wurd' süchtig nach Ausdrucksformen (I got hooked on ways to express myself)
Samy Deluxe feat. morten (2023): "Mikro-Dose," LP Hochkultur 2.

Bin Bildungsreformer, vertick' Lehrstoff an der Corner (I'm an education reformer, slinging knowledge on the corner)
Samy Deluxe (2023): "Masterclass," LP Hochkultur 2.

Oliver Kautny (OK): It was back in the early '90s that you wrote your first rap song. How did that happen?

Samy Deluxe (SD): The first thing I wrote was in English. We were hanging out in youth centers, doing some rap sessions here and there. But I had never recorded anything in a Hamburg youth center or gotten any input from the

1 This text came about through the following process: On 20 September 2021, the conversation between Samy Deluxe and Oliver Kautny took place near Hamburg. On 21 September, they had a short follow-up phone call. Oliver Kautny then shortened and edited the transcripts of these chats. This version was reviewed and approved by Samy Deluxe. Finally, the text was translated.

social workers. […] In 1993 I met Dynamite and we decided to start a band.[2] I remember that in that first year we just worked on our first song. […] Then another year passed, and we had three or four songs ready. I sent them as a demo to the Battle of the Year organizer and that's how we got our first gig in 1995.[3] I don't remember exactly how that song came about. But I do remember feeling this urgency, a need to do something, to be something, to embody something. And that urgency was where it all started for me. It's so much more than just interest or passion. You see or hear something for the first time, and it resonates with you, feels truer than anything you've felt before. And you think: this journey of finding yourself just can't continue without moving in *this* direction.

OK: Let's go back to '92, '93. You'd seen Hip-Hop movies like *Wild Style*, listened to US rap like Public Enemy, and even UK rap from HiJack. Did you rap along or even memorize these songs?

SD: Yeah, exactly. I was a Michael Jackson fan before, too, and listened to all sorts of good pop music. I might've even rapped along to Falco once.[4] But the first time I felt I had to do it myself was during these Public-Enemy and Run-D.M.C. moments. I played around with my voice and realized: I've got this power, and I can imitate what I'm hearing—even what I'm seeing, standing in front of the mirror, thinking it looked cool.

OK: Learning through imitation!

SD: Yep, there's no other way.

OK: How long does it take you to learn tracks?

SD: I memorize things pretty fast. After listening once, I might know the key punchlines and the three or four rhyme pairs I like best. That's why memorizing rap songs is easy for me. I can't remember a joke to save my life. But with rap,

2 Dynamite is a DJ and one of the producers of the band Dynamite Deluxe founded later with Samy Deluxe.

3 BOTY, an international breaking contest held since 1990.

4 An Austrian pop musician. His song "Der Kommissar" (The police commissioner, 1981) is rapped in the verses.

it's the rhymes, rhythm, melody, intonation, and voice tone that help me to remember everything.

OK: Do you learn just by listening, or by reading lyrics too?

SD: Whenever I had the chance, time, and inclination to follow along with the lyrics, I did. I remember exactly when I was 18 or 19, sitting in my childhood bedroom, on my bed, with the lyric sheet from Nas's LP *It Was Written* [1996]. I was already blown away by *Illmatic*, but with this one, it felt like everything rhymed. It was like this crazy linguistic complexity, layer upon layer, like spaces opening up in all directions, something that can't happen in reality—kind of like in the movie *Inception*. […] I also read along to a lot of Eminem's lyrics because they're so complex.

OK: How analytically do you listen to tracks?

SD: If you want to rap at a high technical level, you've got to be able to recognize how rap songs are structured and what makes them complex. […] I think that's what makes the really good artists stand out: they figure out the rules early, learn them, but still give themselves the freedom to do it cooler than the rules would normally allow.

OK: Can you describe a time when you imitated a track?

SD: I'm lucky that I can use my voice in a lot of different ways—from a deep bass to a high register. And so it was easy for me to analyze and imitate a lot of MCs. Take the "Method Man style," for example: he raps from the throat [points to his neck], also a bit through the teeth [demonstrates], sucks in saliva after each line instead of just breathing. That's how I think I became a rapper, why I'm stylistically versatile today. Unlike with Kool Savas.[5] There, you think of *one* flow, *one* style. In my song "Stumm" [Mute] you find dancehall styles, in "Poesiealbum" [Poetry album] doubletime flows. And in the new tracks with Morlockko, there are different cadences,[6] while in the new album *Hochkultur 2* [High culture 2], I use totally different flow patterns.

5 A German MC.

6 A German MC (Morlockk Dilemma) and producer (Morlockko).

OK: So you're describing a process of analyzing and imitating other MCs to eventually create your own style. Has that process ever stopped for you?

SD: No, never. Some songs on the new album, like "Don Quixote" and "Antidepressiva" [2023], are rapped that way because I'm a huge fan of Ab-Soul and listened to his last album a lot.[7] Ab-Soul raps in a high register, which I haven't used in a long time [demonstrates]: Dah-da-dah-da-da / Dah-de-dah […]

OK: What role does freestyle play for you in songwriting?

SD: The cliché says that good freestylers, who first become known primarily as freestylers before they perform with songs, never make good songs. I find that to be true in a very high percentage of cases. Of course, there are always exceptions to this rule. For me, freestyling helped me think quickly and not be scared to just say something out loud in the room. That's an important "school." It helped me in songwriting, for example, with feature parts early in my career. In November 1992, I heard MC Rene freestyling at a party,[8] and I told my boys, "I don't think you can learn this, but if you can, then I'm going to do it!" I remember I was still super bad at freestyling for a long time. I think my high standards for rhymes initially prevented me from becoming a really good freestyler. That was still a shortcoming later, but by then my repertoire of rhymes and my speed of thought had developed so much that I still reached a good level and became known as a freestyler. But actually, I often get stuck because I'm looking for a rhyme I've never used before. I want to thrill myself in that moment, instead of thinking about thrilling the audience. For the audience, you can keep using super simple rhyme schemes over and over. For instance, I've freestyled a lot with Blumentopf.[9] They often knew the rhymes already and had freestyled some parts before. At the second session, I knew they were going to say *Basketball* and I'd call back with *Gaspedal*,[10] because I knew which rhyme was coming. That's an original way to freestyle too, but different from what I was looking for. I want people to witness how I find a new rhyme. And that ambition is often a hindrance.

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7 An MC from the United States.

8 A German MC, considered one of the best freestylers in German rap.

9 A German rap band from Munich (1992–2016), known as one of the best freestyle collectives.

10 SD is referring here to a call and response technique with multiple MCs on stage.

OK: You often talk about being alone when you imitate raps or songwrite. What about when you freestyle?

SD: In the early days—when my first freestyle tapes were made [1998][11]—I mostly freestyled with Bo.[12] He's more creative on the spot, has more of a storytelling comedy mind. It's important to understand the different types of rappers. Some people have such a personality that they don't need the most complicated rhyme, flow, or delivery. Take Biz Markie from the US or Bo here in Germany. […] Knowing I couldn't be that creatively quick, I focused more on rhymes, flow, and voice. And if an Onyx beat was playing, I'd [now he uses a voice that is rough and deep] automatically be in that Onyx voice range, more versatile with flow patterns. And that's part of this competitive rap culture for me: I was never just cool with what I can do. You always want to do what someone else does and be even better.

OK: Were those "small" ciphers with Bo a safe space for you? Or did you not care who and how many were freestyling with you, like at a jam?

SD: That's a good point. I never really used freestyling as an interactive, social tool. I did it when recording, if the setting was cool. And if it was a good run, you'd hear it on a tape, if not, then not. Or at a show, when I built freestyle blocks into it, it was easy because I was already the MC. But just being in the room as a person, I usually don't want to switch into MC mode. […] But I do use it in writing. When working on the album *Männlich* [Masculine, 2014], like many back then, I was influenced by Lil Wayne and Jay-Z when they said, "I don't write."[13] I did that for a few years and that's how songs like "Fantasie" [2014] came about, which contains the craziest flow patterns and rhymes, and I hadn't planned it in the strict sense or "written" it, but freestyled it. […]

OK: Today you write your songs on the iPad. How was it before?

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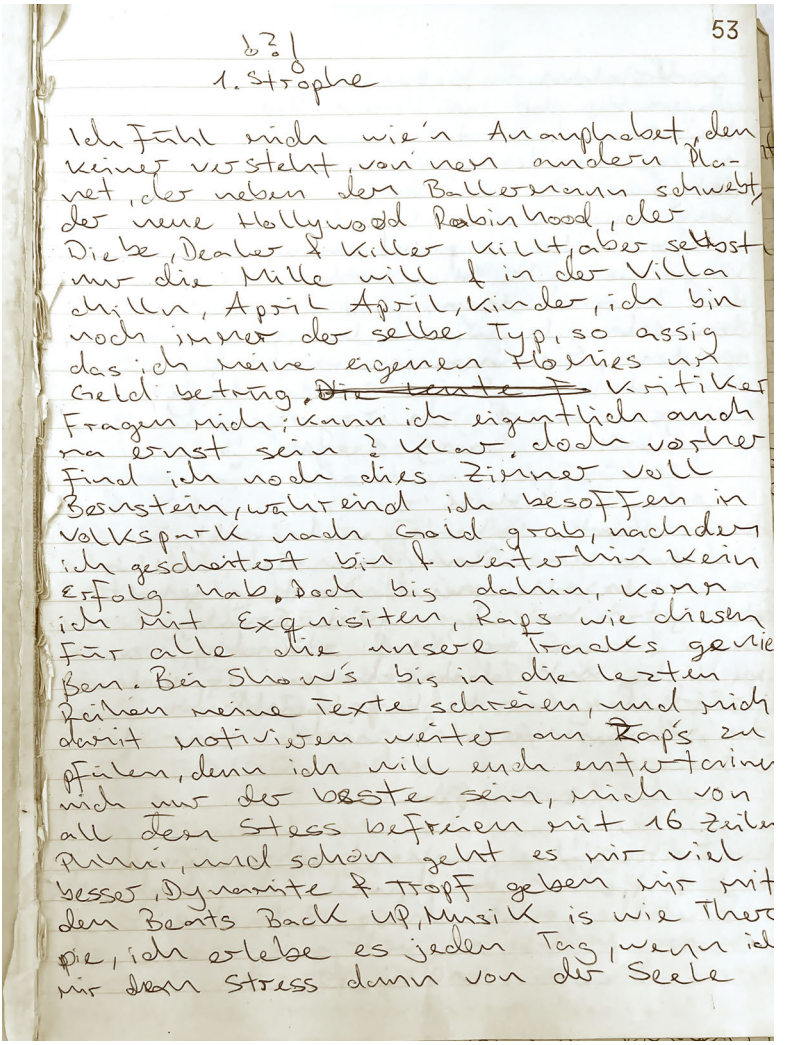
11 *Eimsbush Tapes Vol. 3 – The Ultimate Freestyle Tape*, 1998 (Samy Deluxe, Das Bo, Jan Eißfeldt aka Jan Delay, and other MCs).

12 Das Bo: a German MC from Hamburg, successful in the late '90s and early 2000s with the rap crew Fünf Sterne Deluxe.

13 "When I heard that, the moment I heard it, I stopped [writing down lyrics]," Wayne replied. "I was like, 'I heard Jay-Z don't write, I won't write no more,'" https://americansongwriter.com/lil-wayne-stopped-writing-down-lyrics-because-of-jay-z/.


53

1. Strophe

Ich fühl mich wie'n Analphabet, den
keiner versteht, von nem anderen Pla-
net, der neben dem Ballermann schwebt,
der neue Hollywood Robin Hood, der
Diebe, Dealer & Killer killt, aber selbst
nur die Mille will & in der Villa
chillt, April April, Kinder, ich bin
noch immer der selbe Typ, so assig
das ich meine eigenen Flossies um
Geld betrüg. ~~Die Texte~~ Kritiker
Fragen mich: kann ich eigentlich auch
mal ernst sein? Klar, doch vorher
find ich noch dies Zimmer voll
Bernstein, während ich besoffen in
Volkspark nach Gold grab, nachdem
ich geschaltet bin & weiterhin kein
Erfolg hab. Doch bis dahin, komm
ich mit Exquisiten, Raps wie diesen
für alle die unsere Tracks genie
ßen. Bei Shows bis in die letzten
Reihen meine Texte schreien, und mich
damit motivieren weiter am Raps zu
pfeilen, denn ich will euch entertainn
mich nur der Beste sein, mich von
all dem Stress befreien mit 16 Zeile
Punch, und schon geht es mir viel
besser, Dynamite & Tropf geben mir mit
den Beats Back Up, Musik is wie Thera
pie, ich erlebe es jeden Tag, wenn ich
mir den Stress dann von der Seele

Fig. 1: "Samy Deluxe – !?!" (2000), on Grüne Brille EP (handwritten text from Samy Deluxe's rhyme book).

SD: Earlier, I wrote with paper and pen, like on "Wie jetzt?" or "Grüne Brille" [Now what, Green glasses; both 2000]. […] In my rhyme books, I filled all the

lines because you don't want to waste too much space on the page. On my iPad, I do it differently: if I know basketball is the end rhyme, I move to the next line right after.

OK: And then you know the beginning of the new line is also the start of a new bar?

SD: Yes. […]

OK: Do you still collect rhyme words?

SD: Not much anymore. When I have rhyme words, I mostly also write the lines. Between creative phases over the last few years, I haven't constantly engaged with rap.

OK: Can you recall leaps in your creative development?

SD: That's interesting. I can't remember exactly. I know that in *Von Eimsbush bis 0711* [From Eimsbush to 0711; 1999, Freundeskreis feat. Samy Deluxe] we performed triple flows and continuous rhyming words of three to four syllables for the first time.[14] For me, it was no big deal to rap like that. It was miles ahead compared to other MCs in Germany. But I never had to think, "Oh God, I have to rap this a hundred times." You should imagine it like this: for normal people, the text and flow are these crazy, attractive things. But when you've created something like that, you see it like a matrix, a blueprint, where all the gears mesh together. You can work up to that point. Probably that's where talent plays a role, because the perspective is so much more nuanced than an outsider can see. And even if there are all these experts today who come up with good analyses, they aren't the ones who created it. That's a huge difference.

14 "Eimsbush" refers to Eimsbüttel, a district in Hamburg, Germany; the area is notably associated with the Hip-Hop label Eimsbush Entertainment, which played a crucial role in the development and popularization of Hip-Hop culture in Germany during the late 1990s and early 2000. "0711" is the dialing code for Stuttgart, which also played a vital role in Germany's Hip-Hop culture. Freundeskreis is a famous Stuttgart-based rap crew (with Max Herre as MC).

OK: In biographical research on top athletes or successful classical musicians, it's often emphasized how many thousands of hours of hardcore practice came before their achievements. Did you learn more through this kind of practicing or was it more of a playful process?

SD: Both. I smoked a lot of weed and "played." But the amount of time I invested was still massive. I would rap for a few hours a day in my room or with Tropf in the studio with a mic[15] […] I remember when Onyx released the album *Shut 'Em Down* [1998]. There were flow passages, especially by Sticky Fingaz, that were so intense that I really rapped them a lot. So, learning through imitation, but at such a high level that my version was very close to the original. It's about micro nuances. When does he breathe, where does he get the air from even when there's no gap? A lot of analysis went into it, but at the same time, it was also playful and high.

OK: Have you also adapted songs stylistically, for example, in the style of Onyx or combined with a new melody?

SD: Yes, exactly. My interest in composing melodies was probably influenced by my childhood exposure to pop music. Dancehall was also a big influence for me. I remember the first time I heard The Roots with the album *Illadelph Halflife* [1996] live. I noticed that Black Thought raps everything tonally very straight, on one note on the record, but live he performed the whole time in this typical dancehall melody [demonstrates: "The Concerto of The Desperado/R-double-O-T-S, check the flow"]. I realized that when I rap like that, it's as if the space is stretched, as if the line is bigger. I have much more air, you breathe differently. Or it's psychological, because you're more connected with Jah [laughs].

OK: Can I suggest something I suspect here?[16]

SD: I'm listening!

OK: Maybe it's like this: Normally, your flow often switches between the musical, clear metric of the beat and the irregular, super complex, constantly chang-

15 One of Dynamite Deluxe's two producers.

16 The following passage on the perception of time is from the abovementioned telephone call on 21 September 2023, see also footnote 1.

ing, but rhyme-anchored metric of speech.[17] But the dancehall style gives you a kind of rest for a certain time, where you can precisely determine what will be coming, where the tempo and the number of syllables are relatively stable, and the patterns are not as complex as usual for you. If that's the case, then these patterns are perhaps like small contemplative minioases, where your breath gets more time, and your mind has to do comparatively less.

SD: That's exactly what I meant. […] If you think about how future MCs will get their musical training,[18] you have to think about these kinds of processes. Things they should practice should obviously include imitation. The next level would be to switch on the beat: "Rap on the Onyx beat like Method Man and on the Method Man beat like Onyx!" "Do it all again in a boom-bap, dancehall, trap, or drill flow!" This can give you versatility in your skill palette—and this versatility in style is also something you find in my music over the last twenty-five years; I'm someone who still wants to keep changing. I now see this as an advantage for myself. However, this versatility isn't always easy during creation phases. Sometimes I wished to be less talented so I could know right away how to approach it: in what voice tone, with which flow, etc. […] The people who are awesome are those who stay interested, who not only have the urgency to "broadcast" something, but also to get excited and inspired themselves. They're the ones who can keep improving.

OK: I get the impression that in your new album, you express more about the aesthetic and artistic processes of learning and teaching. There are two songs about it: "Masterclass" and "MicroDose" [2023]. Is this educational aspect more important to you now?

SD: With "Roter Velour," for example, after the album version, we released a vinyl single where you can hear the finished mixed demo version. The first two

17 Kautny, Oliver. 2015. "Lyrics and Flow in Rap Music." In Justin A. Williams (ed.). *The Cambridge Companion to Hip-Hop*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 101–117.

18 SD is referring to the new musical curriculum for teacher training at the University of Cologne in Germany. The students are free to choose any possible musical subject, in which they receive individual instruction. This also includes the musical elements of Hip-Hop, such as MCing/Rap, DJing, or producing/beatmaking (see also Kattenbeck and Kautny, Kattenbeck, and Oddekalv in this volume). However, the aim of this course is not to train future MCs, but to familiarize future teachers with a wide variety of musical practices.

verses have a crazy good flow and good punchlines, but they don't connect in terms of content as much to the hook as on the album. This is the first time I've shown this intermediate step between two versions of a song; I found it interesting in terms of educational learning value: I hope that a few people will listen, analyze it properly, compare it and think: "Okay, those were already two good verses, good flow patterns, awesome rhymes, and punchlines, but he still rewrote them […]" This is a form of rewriting that I didn't like so much earlier. For *Hochkultur 2* [2023], I sometimes spent weeks on just one song. […]

OK: So, your songs are the next seminars in the Deluxe masterclass, the ones you invite us to learn in "Masterclass"? By which I mean that others can enjoy, study, and practice them just like you did with the songs of other artists you take seriously?

SD: Exactly!