

# Sippin' on Syrup

*Swanging and banging to DJ Screw, Texas style*

**Sasha Vliet**

## **Outside Night**

The first time I encountered the music of DJ Screw, I was working on an ethnographic project on the east side of a mid-size city in Texas during the early years of the 2000s. I had been spending time with a group of Mexican-American boys who were members of the Outlawz, a local gang, and who were also graffiti artists and breakdancers. For this particular session we had arranged to meet at Cisco's house so that I could accompany them on one of their graffiti nights.

Cisco, almost twenty-one, was a quiet and unassuming kid when I met him in 1997. I was his high-school English teacher. He was extremely smart but older than most of the kids in his class, and he was already losing interest in high school. Because he had been in attendance for my course, and wrote thoughtfully, he passed; but sadly mine was the only course he passed that year. The following year I only saw him in the halls occasionally. He would stop by my classroom when he had the chance, and I would see him at his home, when I dropped by for visits. After all of our concerned phone calls and exchanges, his mother and I had grown close. Weeks would go by that I wouldn't hear a word from Cisco, and then I stopped seeing him on campus altogether. He later explained to me he just couldn't do it.

"You know, Miss," he had said, "no one graduates from that school."

Early on I had been drawn to his talent. His folder for my class was decorated with colorful words, layered, stretched out, and angled in abstract shapes. I had seen some of the pieces he started in his art class but never had the chance to finish. I had hoped he would hang on to his interest in molding and shaping, design and craft, even outside of school. I thought maybe that art would get him

out of the east side, even though Cisco never claimed to want to be anywhere other than where he was—with his family and friends.

Cisco and I sat on the front steps of the house, waiting for the rest of the crew to arrive. One by one, the boys pulled up in their low riders and parked, making a line of color and chrome that ran the length of the block. They sat in their idling cars with the engines rumbling a bit husky. Heavy bass beats kicked out from the windows, topped by the droning, sliding rap vocals. I asked Cisco what they were listening to. I had heard this type of music coming from the cars in the parking lot of the high school where I had worked, but I had never been close enough to pick up on the distinct style of this particular artist. It had always just sounded like a blur of bass and mumblings—not like other rap.

“That’s screw,” Cisco said, “we be banging that shit all the time.”

Cisco got up and walked towards one of the cars, motioning for me to follow.

“Let’s ride,” he said.

I knew that they did their graffiti work in the quiet of the night, under the careful watch of friends who paid close attention to the headlights of oncoming cars and unfamiliar sounds of the street. The sun was going down. It was time to get started.

Cisco walked over to a group of boys standing around one of the cars and gave each friend a single-armed hug. After each quick embrace the boys put their fists out and Cisco bumped the top of each one with his own. He introduced me to Tony, the driver of one of the cars, and I nodded at the rest of the boys, some of whom I knew from previous meetings. Cisco’s cousin Santos, his brother Fredo, and I were to ride along with Cisco and Tony this night. The other boys hung back as we climbed into the car, standing in Cisco’s yard with their jeans hanging low around their waists, the pant legs covering the tops of their shoes, their white shirts stark and vivid in the twilight. They gave their wave as we pulled away, their forefingers and thumbs curved into an *O*, their other fingers jutting out straight, linked like *Zs*.

In the car, Tony turned the music up loud enough that any attempts at conversation were futile. We drove for a couple of hours before Fredo and Cisco were to paint, stopping every so often in parking lots or in front of homes, the boys exchanging greetings with others at each place. I sat in the back in between Santos and Fredo, who were slouched down low in their seats with their legs opened wide and their knees pushed up against the backs of the front seats. Tony and Cisco were in the front seat, passing a two-liter bottle of purplish drink back and forth. Each of them took small sips from the bottle and held the liquid in their mouths for several seconds before they swallowed. Cisco pulled two Jolly Ranchers from his pocket, unwrapped them, and dropped them into the bottle.

The music, by DJ Screw, was rolling around the inside of the car like a thick molasses, slow, heavy, punctuated with a lazy bass line. It sounded like a record played on the wrong speed—off, warbled, almost morose.

“What’s up with his voice?” I yelled to Fredo early on in the night, referring to the rapper.

Fredo smiled sleepily, reaching toward the front seat for the blunt that Tony offered. He took a long, steady drag and held his breath for a time, making half-sneezing noises from the back of his nose.

“Ahh, shit,” he sighed, letting out his air in a cloud of smoke, “ain’t nothin’ wrong. That shit’s just screwed up.”

### His Own Way

DJ Screw, also known as Robert Earl Davis, Jr., was, according to writer Michael Hall, “one of the most influential musical figures to come out of Texas in the last decade.” DJ Screw was not a musician, exactly, but until his death of a codeine overdose on November 15, 2000, he was an artist—using turntables and samplers to bring together bass lines, melody, hooks, and raps from other artists, to make a slowed down and manipulated new product. He recorded

these songs onto cassette tapes and CDs and sold them himself to thousands of people. Fans would drive hundreds of miles and park outside of his house in Houston just to buy the newest version. And what began as a small basement project turned into a social and musical phenomenon.

If rap and hip-hop are postmodern forms of music, bringing together elements of several genres and eras of musical tradition to create what hip-hop scholar Tricia Rose calls a “tangle of some of the most complex social, cultural and political issues in contemporary American society,” then DJ Screw’s music could be defined as a post-postmodern musical form. It is a running together, a breaking up, a transformation of a music that was built on a commingling collage of black cultural expression, to create a distorted, redefined essence, one that takes away the catchiness and predictability of the original form.

In an article in *Texas Monthly*, Hall describes the way in which Screw’s music derails the “flights of beat fancy” of rap and hip-hop. Screw’s music forces the listener to stop anticipating the movement of the music and to sit back and let the music unwind in its slow and strange way. It is almost as if Screw gives the listener permission to stop thinking, moving, feeling, and allows them simply “to be”—present, in a disengaged kind of way. To DJ Screw’s fans, the opportunity to be in this state seems to be a most desirable one. In this way, a delicate and trusting relationship between the listener and the DJ evolves.

Many of DJ Screw’s fans are young black and Mexican-American males who feel they can relate to his background. They value him for his do-it-yourself mentality and the way he built his own empire and achieved the fame, success, and money they so desire, under his own terms. They recognize in his words some of their own stories and struggles and feel he represents them through his music. And maybe what they liked most of all, according to one Texas fan I spoke with, is that Screw created a way to “slow down time—he had found another world.”

In order to connect with his listeners through methods beyond the words in his music, DJ Screw started a new language in the South, specifically in Texas, that was built on his name and the music he created. There was the proper noun: DJ Screw himself, artist and technician, or screw, his specific music. There was the verb: *to screw*, the process of slowing down and stretching out already popular rap and hip-hop songs. And then there was the adjective: *screwed*, the state of a song that has been slowed down and stretched out. This new language allowed more people to speak the same language and ignited a wave of musicians who adapted the Screw sound. The Screwed Up Click (SUC), a group of artists and rappers who worked with DJ Screw, brought new artists such as Lil’ Troy, Lil’ Flip, UGK, Zero, Ghetto, Lil’ O, and Hawk to the scene.

### Syzurp

The feeling of being inside of warped or slowed time, one of the most remarkable responses activated by DJ Screw’s music, is amplified by sipping codeine syrup, an activity commonly engaged in while listening to DJ Screw, and one that Screw recognizes in song titles such as “Syrup and Soda” and “Purple Sprite.” In much of Screw’s music, the listener hears the glorification of using syrup—or “drank,” “lean” (what the syrup actually causes the body to do), and “barre” (short for the pharmaceutical company and active ingredient in cough syrup, Barre promethazine)—to establish a slower pace. As the lyrics to one of DJ Screw’s songs go: “Who knows the feeling, how it feels to lean? It’s cough syrup or Barre promethazine.”

According to an August 2009 segment on NPR’s *All Things Considered*, with the popularity of DJ Screw and other screwed music, beginning in the late 1990s, the use of codeine syrup skyrocketed in Houston, Austin, and other parts of Texas, spreading across race and class lines. Syrup houses, where one could purchase the codeine for up to five hundred dollars a pint, popped up in several cities. In Houston alone, officials seized one thousand gallons of syrup in

1999. The University of Texas found that in 2004 8.3 percent of secondary-school students in Texas had taken codeine to get high.

Back in the summer of 1993, Jim Hogshire wrote about the syrup trend in his article, “The Electric Cough-Syrup Acid Test”; he called codeine and over-the-counter cough syrup, which could be used as a last resort when listening to DJ Screw, the “poor man’s PCP.” Hogshire described what one experimenter called the “warping and folding of the body” caused by the syrup high, and he explained that he carried out an experiment of his own. While in the peak of his own high, he recalled, “My whole way of thinking and perceiving had changed. I had full control over my motor functions, but I felt ungainly. I was detached from my body, as if I were on laughing gas.... Looking back, I realize that I had already lost all sense of time.”

Hogshire’s experience was not unlike the experiences reported by my former students who drank syrup while listening to screw. There was no pain. No processing of unnecessary information. No fear. No worry. Just a smooth, slow flow from one movement to the next. Time slows down. Life slows down. Moments last.

During multiple interviews I conducted, fans explained that codeine was easy to obtain and users were able make a little bit go a long way by adding it to juice, soda, or wine. And because they both produced similar, time-altering effects, some believed the music and the syrup to be inextricably linked, the experience of one incomplete without the other. Without the music, the listener was lost in a codeine fog, and without the drug the music was simply screwed up, disjointed music rather than music that was screwed up.

### Inside Night

It’s a cold and wet Friday night in November, almost two years since the last time we worked on a project together. We have met at Cisco’s new apartment to listen to DJ Screw under the appropriate conditions. Cisco, Fredo, Santos, and I are in front of the stereo.

The music is loud, the lights turned low, it’s dark outside and we are close and warm inside.

Since last meeting, Cisco has become a father, and his son, Junior, is four months old now, with the diminutive face of his father and a similar demeanor. It seems that he is a child who never fusses or cries and who seems ahead of the game a bit, able to assess a situation easily and find his place in it. He snuggles into the crook of his father’s arm eagerly, lifting his own head often to check who has entered or left the room, noticing how the scene has changed. He already holds his own bottle and moves his hands and arms freely, not in the jerky, stop and start way of some newborns. He doesn’t smile often, but when he does it’s with great gusto, a wash of delight spreading across his face. And his father is beaming and proud, saying more than once in this night, “Maybe he will do a better job than me.”

Cisco and his girlfriend Nini share this place of their own, with the one small front room, the galley kitchen, and the half-size bed and bathroom in the back. When I arrived, Nini came out of the bedroom to show me the baby. Cisco and Nini are easy together like they have already figured out this parenting thing, and joke openly about her mother who had visited earlier in the day, saying she couldn’t come back until she brought their boy some gifts. Then, after I feed the baby and pass him back to her, Nini disappears into the bedroom and I only see her reemerge one other time this night, to heat a bottle for their Cisco, Jr.

The boys, almost grown men now, are taller and broader, more serious and less shaven than the last time I saw them. They are all sporting gold pieces or bracelets and tease me for not showing off the gold myself. They are soft-spoken and patient, in easy moods, down to earth and almost shy. A few friends stop by throughout the night, but for the most part it is just the four of us sitting in a circle wrapped in marijuana smoke and the sounds of DJ Screw.

After a few minutes of catching up, Cisco takes out a tray and begins rolling a group of oversized joints. As he finishes each one, he

sets it on the coffee table, making a neat row along the edge, nodding his head to the music.

"It's been a while since I drank the syrup. These days, it's easier for me to get the herb, you know what I'm saying?" He lights one of the joints, takes a long pull and passes it to his brother. "But yeah," Cisco continues, "when I was younger, me and Freddie be sippin' that stuff all the time. I had more money then too, you know. No Juniors to feed."

"Right?" Fredo says and laughs. "That shit's expensive. The price isn't worth it. Forty dollars for a deuce, a baby jar full? That ain't gonna last you half the night."

I ask what's the appeal then, why so many people have taken to sipping.

"It's the screw," Santos says. "You ain't gonna want to be listening to some fast-ass dance music on that shit. It's the lean." Santos gets up from the couch and walks around the room. "You be feeling like this," he says, walking with his upper body tilted at a diagonal. "And the screw just fits. Makes you go with the lean, want to lean into it more."

Santos had also been a student of mine, in the same class as his cousin, struggling with some of the same issues as Cisco: boredom, frustration with other teachers, failures in several classes, and impatience with the system. It seemed that he, too, wasn't made for the seven-hour school day and got anxious and antsy often, as if he felt boxed in. Loud, full of vigor, and excitable, he kept the class active.

Santos was a dancer. I had seen him practicing in the gym during lunch when the breakdancers would gather and at several B-boy competitions. When he danced he was nothing but energy and motion, and his friends would watch in awe and call out for more, letting him take turn after turn because nobody wanted him to stop. In the spring of 1998, Santos was kicked out of school for possession of marijuana and for excessive absences. Since then, he had been dancing on Tuesday nights at a local recreation center and filling the rest of his days by smoking weed and hanging out with his cousins.

"Weed is a bitch," he had said to me. "It screws you up so you can't breathe as deep and last as long on the floor, but it keeps that style"—freestyle, the most spontaneous and creative element of breakdancing—"alive in your head."

"Does the codeine work the same way," I ask, "or is it more of an escape?"

Cisco replies. "Naw. You wouldn't hear none of us say it that way."

Fredo cuts in. "Yeah, plus, you could say that about any kind of drug use. Syrup's different. It helps you with the shitty part of your life. Makes you just go with the flow more. Slows the shit down."

"It's the wet"—formaldehyde—"that helps you escape shit," Cisco adds.

Santos interrupts, "Yeah. For ten bucks, you're just trippin'. Wet? That shit gets you out of your world. With syrup, you know what's going on, but with wet—you never know what's happening. It hits hard, in about ten seconds, and then it holds for four to five hours. Sometimes, you be wanting to kill yourself on that shit. First time I did it, I knew I couldn't go home. Not until the next day. Screw, he talks about the wet, too."

They go on to explain how for them, now that they are older, the herb high is the better high for "bangin' screw."

Cisco describes the way they are different types of high. "Syrup just makes you feel asleep, but you're awake."

Fredo talks about the way you listen to music differently with each high. He moves his head to the music as he speaks, and bangs his fist on the coffee table to the beat. "With syrup, you're just listening to the screw. Bangin'. With herb, you're listening to the words—you got a mind to pay attention to the detail."

Cisco lights another joint, the third one in an hour and a half. The boys stop talking and lean back in their seats, closing their eyes.

"This is Swisha now," Cisco mumbles. "Sounds pretty much the same." Fredo and Santos are both smiling, their eyes still closed.

They stay this way until one of them passes a joint. The other opens his eyes to take a turn. Even to me, now, the minutes are slower. The music doesn't seem quite so loud and off-sounding, the boys exhale more slowly, as if satisfied. The TV, which is on mute, seems somehow appropriate—the movements of the football players on the screen matching the rhythm of the music. And the outside on the other side of the wall is another world.

There is a knock on the door and Cisco gets up to answer. The baby cries from the other room and I hear Nini shush him, soothing him back to sleep. Two of Cisco's friends walk through the door and find a place for themselves on the couch. They ask what's up and Cisco tells them we're talking about Screw.

"Ah. That the nigga," one of them says.

I ask them if they ever sip the "drank." The entire group laughs and Cisco winks at me, implying that their last "sip" wasn't too long ago.

Chris, to my right, asks me what I want to know about syrup. I ask if many people who own low riders these days sip.

"Yeah. If they be bangin' screw. Anyone bangin' screw got something going on. Either they be on wet, herb, or syrup, I guarantee. Screw, without the mess, you don't really feel it that much. You're not bouncing your head, you know, like you do when you on mess."

Chris leans towards Cisco and passes him a wad of cash. Cisco hands him several bundles of marijuana-filled plastic bags and Chris tucks them into his inside jacket pocket. His friend, sitting on the arm of the couch, bounces his head to the music, looks at me and gives me a slow nod.

"I heard about barre from Screw," he says quietly. "Shit, that's how anyone knows about barre. The Screwed Up Click, they just started their own trend of drugs." He closes his eyes and I think he has finished, but he continues on, "Syrup makes you feel real mellow. You can feel yourself walking. Not each step. Just the feeling of moving along the ground."

Cisco lights another joint to share with the guests. After a few passes, the joint is finished.

Santos gets excited and jumps off the couch, "Right?" He walks around the room as he talks, stretching his legs out into long strides. "You don't feel that way on herb." He leaps circles around the room. "And syrup, you be doing all kinds of crazy shit and not caring. You know, like the old drunk dudes in Mexico who walk up and down the street, all crusty and shouting shit to people, calling people ugly and fat and telling their secrets. It's like no one can mess with you. And you don't worry about shit."

Chris and his friend get up and head towards the door. "Later," Chris says. His friend turns around and holds two fingers in the air, closing the door behind him.

Cisco shakes his head. "Sit the fuck down," he says to Santos. He looks at me and rolls his eyes. "Fuckin' idiot."

I ask if they think people get addicted to syrup and Fredo speaks up.

"I know a lot of people who drink barre daily, but I don't think you can fiend off barre. It's not like you can live your life. You know, get up early and shit, sip some syrup and clean the fucking house. You can't be normal."

Santos adds, "If there's anything to fiend off of, it's the taste. People get down on the taste. The sweet. If you have the money, I can see how that shit turns regular."

Cisco replies to Fredo's remark. "But lemme have the weed and I'll clean all that shit."

They laugh, having found a new energy, and light another joint. I ask them about DJ Screw again, wanting to hear from them what makes him such an idol to so many fans.

Cisco says he wants to answer first because he knows exactly what he wants to say. "He's great. Period. You know, like in the real sense of the word."

"Great." That's all you can say is 'great'?" Santos demands.

Cisco shoots him a look and continues on. "He's great because,

like we said, he started a trend. He united potheads and sippers. Blacks and Mexicans. Gangs who hated each other. Everyone is banging Screw. You want to sip with Screw. Get high with Screw. He got himself a nation of soldiers, the Screwed Up Click, and brought people together through music. You just want to chill with Screw.”

Fredo adds, “He started it. Ain’t no one else screwed it up until Screw came out and chopped it up. He was the originator and everyone else is just biters. Biters—you can tell. The real shit, there’s a stamp. A kind of sound that is only Screw. And he’ll put his pager number on the tape. Then you know it’s his.”

Fredo had been my student the year after Cisco and Santos. Fredo, too, had struck me with his creative nature. A more lyrical and fluid artist than his brother, his graffiti had become so familiar to me that I had begun to identify his work on the walls, canals, benches, and buildings in town. There wasn’t another artist his age, as far as I could tell, who had such an imaginative, progressive, and refined style of his or her own.

Cisco continues. “DJ Screw bought his own damn shit—did it all on his own. That nigga was always out of his trunk, didn’t want to jack nobody. And he told you about all the shit he got from himself. In his songs—explained the way ain’t nobody but him making the shit happen. And he had the gold and shit. And the people. And you just wanted to be like him. Like if he could do it, then maybe so could you. Know what I’m saying?”

“We listen to him whenever, too,” Santos says. “It feels like he know exactly what goes down with all the shit we have to deal with. And it’s like he be sayin’ you can get out of it.”

“Or if not get out of it,” Cisco says, “just cruise along with it, like it ain’t so fucking hard. You know, like maybe, ‘your baby boy’s gonna be a good man,’ or ‘life ain’t crazy like that.’ Like just a reminder that life rolls. It goes along. And you can either cruise with it. Or get all crazy and shit from it.”

Fredo reaches over and punches his brother. “Right?” He nods. “It’s like, really, the herb and wet and syrup and even throwing

choppers and shit’s cool, but really, the only thing you don’t wanna ever do without is the Screw.”

The boys stop talking at this. And lean back again, to give appreciation to the music. Cisco leans over and puts a new cassette into the stereo.

“I just got this from the Screw House this morning. It’s some of his new shit he finished right before he died.”

By now, I had come to almost enjoy the music. I didn’t have the relationship with it, certainly, that the boys had, but the bass lines are familiar and easy and I appreciate that the boys, the herb, and the music are *something*. I feel good. Seeing them look content as they listen could have been the reason for my newfound appreciation of the music, but it is something more than just a vicarious contentment. I find that even I, who had turned down all offers to get “messed up,” am bouncing my head to the music, feeling calm and worry free. The anxiety I often experienced over the boys and their well-being, their safety and future, and now their children and partners, is less pronounced. I let myself just enjoy sharing this moment with them. Certainly, for this night, in this room with the smoke-filled air and the words they had recently spoken lingering overhead, I can’t imagine any music more appropriate. We sat that way for several minutes. Not talking. Not moving. Not watching. And just breathing.

### Back to Outside

As I drive home, the rain pounding the windshield, making a rhythm with the windshield wipers, I think back to that first night when I accompanied the boys on their night journey. Late in the evening, when the streets got quiet enough, we stopped and parked at the edge of an emptied-out canal. There were streetlights every twenty-five feet or so, most of which were burned out, but they made just enough light for Cisco and Fredo to set to work. Tony sat on the hood of his low rider, with the music, DJ Screw, playing just loud

enough to be heard, but not loud enough to disturb the darkened homes in the neighborhood.

Fredo, Cisco, and Santos climbed down into the concrete belly of the canal and I watched from above, sitting on the lip of the shallow bank so that I could see the work as a whole, as it was created. Cisco stood back to eye his stretch of empty space and paused a moment, assessing what wasn't there and thinking, I presumed, of what needed to be there. He shook the spray paint can and began, pressing the nozzle down with an expert finger, to create short and long bursts of paint, stretching and bending his body across the giant letters and designs that appeared. He threw one can down for another, paying no attention to the clatter it made when it hit the concrete. Before our eyes, sudden flashes of color washed onto the surface, contained by darker borders in blue, black and brown. With a nod, Cisco signaled to Fredo, who picked up a can of paint and began adding his own colors and shapes along the edges of Cisco's piece. The two brothers worked this way, side by side, for an hour or so. Pulling their respective designs together with letters and lines, jagged and smooth. Santos, several yards off to the side, was dancing his own type of dance, "pop-locking" and "freezing" to the music. He was building his own piece to DJ Screw, one movement layered on top of another, and another, breaking the music into pieces with his separate moving parts, faster and faster, until there were no separate parts and he was a body in one fluid motion.

And then I remembered watching Tony, sitting on the hood of a car that he had bought in its original state and that was now something new and different—a manipulated version of a previously made product, redesigned with chrome and paint on the outside, leather and wood-grain on the inside, resting closer to the ground now, hovering just inches above the road's surface.