



# Pen Tapping: Forbidden Folklore

by Anna Beresin

While setting up a filmmaking elective in an afterschool program in the Point Breeze section of South Philadelphia, our University of the Arts students noticed the ten-year-olds pen tapping. They were not just tapping their pens. They had full drum sets at the ends of their writing implements—scraping, touching the tip of their Bics like drum sticks. What emerged was an unveiling of a full-fledged children’s folklore phenomenon, complete with stylistics and folk origins. It became evident that not only was this something that many of the children loved to do, but also that it was illicit, not permitted in school.

*In music class?  
You can’t do pen tapping in music class. Music class is boring. We just listen to stuff.*

*In the cafeteria?  
At lunch? You would be suspended for pen tapping at lunch.*

*Why?  
Teachers don’t like it. They say it’s noise.*

The children were experts in pop music and knew words and moves, and clearly the rhythms, to almost every major hip-hop artist. But pen tapping emerged only on the sly, often in competition. I asked if one particularly skilled pen tapper ever considered taking drum lessons.



UARTS student Perry Melat with young friends.



## Making the Film *Making Beats*

*Making Beats* was filmed by children under the direction of undergraduate art students at the University of the Arts. Each week 18 college students walked to the afterschool program in a K-8 public elementary school and created elective curricula in media, design, and art and performance, based on the subjects chosen by the school children. As the college students reflected, gathered materials, and designed the courses, they soon recognized the youths' skill and the absurdity of its invisibility.

In addition to learning about pen tapping as a subject, the filming project led to questioning our usual research procedures. It seems that pen tapping is all over YouTube, no surprise, with tips on how to do it and celebrations of great skill.<sup>1</sup> The only type of material found in an academic search was about how to stop children from tapping their pens, and its connection to ADHD (Sida-Nicholls, 2012). Even the children were surprised that we considered what they were doing to be a music tradition. This all suggests the need for a multimedia approach to folklore study, particularly with newer performance genres.

Although we have permission to film, we cannot name the children's names here.<sup>2</sup> Thanks go to the participants of the inaugural class of Neighborhood Engagement at the University of the Arts: Emily Anthony-Craig, Nathalia Avila, Tiffany Bunch, Jason Corbett, Mawiyah Dowd, Spencer Faulk, Isaiah Freeman, Jihyun Lee, Anne Marie Levy, Patrick Luong, Zoe McCarthy, Perry Melat, Sarah Moyer, Marianne Murphy, Melanie Rosenthal, Catherine Snyder, Elizabeth Tong, Jayda Turner, and especially Photography Senior Lecturer Lindsay Sparagana.

They did not expect to uncover an undocumented folk tradition in a school setting, but they recognized art when they saw it.

The Clef Club of Jazz was a mere few blocks away, where the drum faculty have played with greats; some of the old timers in jazz had played with Count Basie, Duke Ellington, and John Coltrane. Never heard of them. The Clef Club, a historic landmark of performance created when Black musicians were excluded from the white musicians' union, also was unrecognized. The idea that pen tapping might be connected to a larger field of music was interesting, yet puzzling, to the children.

Pen tapping seems to emerge from the great rhythm game traditions, with its syncopations rooted in Africa. Its genre cousins appear to include tap dancing, body slapping, step dancing, hand clapping, and its recent relative, the cup tapping game. How ironic in this age of the disappearing pen, that it emerges as an instrument. Children have often played with trivialized materials, the discarded fabrics and bits of wood not in use by adults (Dargan and Zeitlin, 1990; Rossie, 2005; Schwartzman, 1978; Sutton-Smith, 1986). Pen tapping is also clearly related to beat boxing, the imitative percussion of the mouth popular in rap and Brazilian music, and to the improvisation of jazz (Euell and Alexander, 2009; Gunn, 1999). In these traditions, the mouth or body imitates the drum, which is often imitating the body or speech. You can see the students' own connection of pen tapping with break dancing in the spontaneous acrobatics of the film.

Ironically, as the children got to know our students and our art materials, the pen tapping subsided. Like many children's folklore traditions, it seemed to serve the purpose of

transition making. Once they began to make films and record songs, our time was spent sharing technical skills. Much like handclapping in between activities, pen tapping only then emerged as a filler. Yet, it was a powerful way for our students to meet these younger ones as equals.

*Bo Diddley, Bo Diddley, where you been?*



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Photo: Anna Beresin and Lindsay Sparagana

#### URL

*Making Beats* is accessible on the *Journal of Folklore and Education* YouTube channel <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KODQ6La0kPA>.

#### Notes

1. Two videos depicting pen tapping online can be found at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=P6HyjBEFulol](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P6HyjBEFulol) and [www.youtube.com/watch?v=mFDvtacIjVY](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mFDvtacIjVY).
2. We are in a lucky position to photograph and video the children, as their families gave permission when they signed up for this afterschool program. It seems proper to not name names as a way to partially mask their identities and to acknowledge their group's collaborative effort.

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