

The art of djing and transgression to digital media



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Generally speaking, a DJ's job is to present a series of records for the enjoyment of the audience. That applies to the radio DJ as well - they play music intermingling it with chat or some sort of comedic performance. The club DJ, on the other hand, does something much more musically creative - s/he presents records by performing them to produce a cohesive musical atmosphere.

Songs are carefully chosen, strung together in an improvised story to make a continuous and flowing set. Whether the DJ chooses to dramatically juxtapose songs or unnoticeably overlay and mix them together, he creates new unique music that cannot be found anywhere else. To a large extent, it is possible thanks to the amazing advances in technology that DJs also have taken advantage of. I think it is safe to say that the modern DJ is a true performer and, more importantly, a talented musician who does much more than simply presenting records for the entertainment of an audience. From the technical perspective, the craft of the DJ is demanding and requires a certain level of skill.

In order to seamlessly mix two separate songs, he needs to know their structure, be able to determine whether they are in matching keys and have a reliable sense of rhythm. In addition, the DJ needs to understand the song's construction and have a good musical memory. Finally, there is the pretty complex equipment that he definitely should get to know very closely: the turntables, digital CD players, the mixer, an amplifier, speakers and whatever other sound processing devices might be necessary. Skillful DJs can drastically alter the song's danceability and emphasize its dynamics by adjusting the volume, EQ (frequency balance), treble and bass, playing with

the crossovers. In fact, the whole sound system is like one big instrument that the DJ plays.

And of course, there is the music – no matter what kind of hardware and software is going to be used, a DJ needs plenty of songs to play on that “instrument”. Digital music has made it significantly easier, old school DJs still spend hours in music stores literally digging for those obscure, original, unique vinyl records. Although it may seem fairly easy (all you need to do is successfully program a list of songs to be played), DJing is an art form that is much more demanding and difficult than it seems. To be good at this job, not only does DJ need to be partly a collector, technician and selector, he should also be a musician. Smooth transitions between songs, mixing with multiple decks, impressively fast changes, smart EQing or connecting and using a fancy sampling equipment – it all adds to this artistry. Most importantly, a DJ needs to be able to make an intimate connection with the audience, respond to its feelings, make people dance and create a special atmosphere and a live performance.

The key to any successful club DJ is flexibility and adaptability. Music can change at any given moment based on crowd feedback, your mood as a DJ and being able to anticipate tempo change. Having the right equipment surely makes these transitions easier. Moreover, with the rise of club culture as a commercial force, the DJ has acquired an image of a nonconformist, eccentric artist and has been turned into a marketing tool to help record labels sell compilation CDs (Brewster 17). Being also a promoter, it is the DJs who were responsible for popularization of unknown at the time music genres such as reggae, disco, hip-hop, house or garage. Record companies

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were not eager to release obscure artists playing unknown music until DJs introduced the various music styles to the audience and popularized it among their fans.

Next, I would like to briefly outline the history of the DJ to help understand how playing records has evolved over time into an art form with a cult-like following we can observe today. The term “night club” began to be used during the prohibition era of the 1920s (Reighley 23). It usually referred to a speakeasy or a place where illegal liquor was served. In the 1950s, the first club known to provide entertainment by playing records was La Discotheque in France. In America, it is reputed that the first discotheque, named Le Club, opened on New Year’s Eve in New York in 1960 (Reighley 26). Terry Noel was the first DJ known to purposefully “program” a playlist, namely play a set of records in a particular order to best create and maintain the energy level of the party.

Francis Grasso is the earliest known DJ to introduce the concept of “mixing” to the art of record programming. He began “slip cueing” which refers to slamming in a new record on beat with the fading record without interrupting the flow of the program. When Thoren company came out with turntables that had variable speed, called “pitch control”, the concept of blending was born. Francis Grasso quickly picked up on the possibilities offered by the new invention and is credited with the ability to keep two records on beat and in sync for over two minutes. In the meantime, new 12-inch records replaced the traditional 7-inch record and offered the chance to record more music onto the vinyl.

In 1975, New York City was the hot spot in the world for dance music and to a large extent, it still is. Clubs started to achieve icon-like status and we can trace the roots of today's prevailing dance music styles back to the early clubs and DJs, many of whom influenced the way music was to be made, recorded and played in the years to come. Frankie Knuckles and Larry Levan were two other DJs and remixers who greatly contributed to the evolution of dance music around the world. They were particularly famous for their studio remix work as well as edits of songs. They would completely restructure songs by recording them on reel-to-reel tape and then splicing the tape together as they wanted to hear the song.

The DJ duo recorded the best parts of a song several times and pieced the parts together into once seamless mega-version. The legendary Larry Levan is often regarded the greatest DJ in history - not for his technical abilities on the decks and amazing song selections, but mainly because he understood his audience, what they were looking for at a club and knew how to establish a special, unique connection with the people dancing around him (Brewster 156-158). Today, Djing has become a multi-billion dollar industry and a successful and talented DJ can be even compared to the guitar heroes of the 1960s. Some of his devoted fans, even call Lerry Levan Jimmy Hendricks of modern day DJ craftsmanship (Souvignier 67). That is why it is important for a DJ not only to be a record collector who can seamlessly mix songs using clever tricks.

He also needs to be a good selector of tracks, a showman and have a musical ear and a sense of rhythm. Hip-hop djing, often referred to as turntablism, even to a greater extent emphasizes the use of the equipment

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as a musical instrument. DJ Grand Mixer DXT first introduced rhythmic scratching of a record on the turntable. By altering the pitch of the song's note, he was able to turn the turntable into a fully improvisational and performable instrument (Souvignier 120-122) Today, more than ever, albums are treated as tools that help create various music styles by cutting, scratching or blending songs together. Traditionally, a DJ uses two turntables concurrently which are plugged into a mixer, speakers, amplifier, receiver and possibly an array of other pieces of electronic music equipment modern technology has to offer. By performing different tricks, the DJ creates a distinctive and inimitable sound.

It should, however, be noted that present-day DJs owe a special debt to the early, old-school DJs as they originally formed the techniques and concepts which with time evolved into modern DJ craftsmanship. Due to the fact that the music scene has changed dramatically since the 1970s, DJing today can be performed in practically any kind of music and has rightly become and appreciated and esteemed form of music making. As time went by, dance music continued to evolve and permeate into other genres creating several hip hop styles, trance, jungle, house, drum and bass, dancehall, two step, break beat and many others. Since the introduction of the CD format in 1980s, the art of DJing has increasingly been shifting toward the digital domain. The new frontier brought along new opportunities, increased mobility and facilitated access to music and so today, most DJs are using digital music and equipment to mix songs, beat match and perform amazing turntable tricks. Due to the widespread popularity of digital music, the DJ

switched from a conventional, vinyl-based equipment to a software-based system with a full-sized PC or a laptop.

Generally, a decent laptop or PC with a freshly installed operating system, quality hard drive and sufficient amount of memory is definitely better than any computer running multiple applications simultaneously, most likely infiltrated with spyware and viruses, not to mention a vast number of corrupted or partly uninstalled files. To ensure a successfully running software-based DJ system, you need to allow it to run on a computer used specifically for DJing, where only the operating system and the DJ software would be installed and run as well as no Internet connection would be established. Unfortunately, that is how bugs, unwanted applications and corrupted files penetrate into the computer, and ultimately slow down, distort and damage your files and precious music you have so far collected. Undeniably, the greatest advantage of switching to digital music and converting all your tracks to music files is its comfort and accessibility as well as all the space and time you save when looking for something. There is no longer the need to carry heavy crates with big vinyl records or boxes of CD collections.

By converting the music to MP3 files and storing it on a 80GB - 200 GB hard drive, the DJ saves all that time he would otherwise have to waste looking for a particular, elusive song going through several hundred music compilations. With most DJ software, you can simply type in the name of the track or artist and find it within seconds. Additionally, DJ software allows the user to create playlists from all musical styles, which means that you could have one for frequently used tracks, another one for each decade like the 1970s or 1980s

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and one with background music. Another particularly useful feature lets DJs group songs according to their BPMs (beats per minute) which comes especially handy when it comes to beat matching. Of course, there are an array of brands and types of software for DJs on the market and generally, it is a matter of personal preference which one you decide to choose and best responds to your needs.

Many of them come with a free trial period allowing DJs to install the software and try it out for free for some period. The number of features included usually depends on the cost of the software. Basically, all DJ systems enable you to cue up tracks and play them on two CD players. The more advanced (and costly) softwares contain more comprehensive attributes such as fading between songs, changing the pitch and tempo controls similarly to traditional vinyl turntables or even mixing songs for you. Moreover, some of the advanced DJ systems allow the users to connect a USB controller that looks and works as a twin CD controller.

It needs to be noted at this point that a feature is worth only as much as the DJ has a use for it, which is why it is important to carefully think about the traits the user actually needs and is going to use in his work. If you do not have to beat match, purchasing the latest expensive equipment that does it for you would be a waste of money. As far as computer hardware is concerned, it is recommended that the following aspects are taken into consideration when deciding upon the right kind of PC or laptop. Contrary to popular belief, a DJ does not have to buy a CPU processor to successfully run DJ software from.

Generally, it is enough to have a Pentium 3 processor with at least 600mhz speed, although the faster 1. 2 ghz + processors perform better and flawlessly. When it comes to the RAM memory, it is advised to have at least 256 MB with most applications, although 512 MB or higher will definitely work faster. Another crucial consideration is the size of the hard drive. Undeniably, the bigger it is, the more songs it will be able for the DJ to store on it. On average, MP3s ripped at the speed of 192 kbps take up around 5 MB in size, thus a 100GB hard drive will fit up to 20, 000 tracks.

However, should the user decide to increase the quality of the song in MP3 format, its size will enlarge as well taking up more space on the hard drive. To illustrate, a track ripped at the speed of 320 kbps could have even 11 MB in size, therefore the above-mentioned 100GB drive would fit “ only” 9000 songs. When trying to calculate the appropriate capacity of the hard drive, one also needs to remember to allow enough space for the operating software, DJ software as well as drivers. If there is not enough storage space, the DJ can also connect an external hard disc to a USB port as these have proved to be reliable sources of additional storage capacity. A good quality soundcard from a reputable manufacturer is absolutely crucial for software-based DJ systems.

Due to the fact that computers are not usually designed with high quality audio playback in mind, a better soundcard often ought to be installed. When running the software from a laptop, investing in an external USB soundcard usually solves the problem. 2 channel soundcards are usually enough in majority of DJ applications where the audio is mixed between the players on the laptop, next the single output is fed through a pair of “ R” and “ L”

connectors on the soundcard and finally into the mixer or amplifier (Williams 246-250). Nevertheless, if the DJ plans to be more creative and utilize the crossfader between channels on a traditional mixer, then a 5 channel sound card is required to meet the needs of the user. Thus, one pair of " R" and " L" outputs can be used for " Player 1" on the soundcard and then fed directly into an individual channel on the mixer and the same for " Player 2".

Such as solution enables each software player to have its own fader on the mixer or amplifier, similarly to a traditional twin CD player. Majority of DJ software include the feature to " rip" a CD. That means placing the original CD in the computer's CD ROM and next converting the music from the disc to MP3 files. The data is stored on the hard drive in the form of MP3 files. The feature allows the user to select the speed/quality of ripping which is expressed in " kbps" and ranges from 32 kbps to 320 kbps.

The lower ranges should definitely not be used as they are not designed to be used on a professional PA system and will produce distorted sound. Preferably, to obtain the best quality of sound, DJs ought to rip their CDs at 192kbps or higher. On smaller audio systems, 192kbps is regarded to have a decent quality and meets the DJ's needs, but on larger sound systems, the 320 kbps ripping speed works out better because the quality of the sound is almost as clear as CD quality. Probably the biggest disadvantage of making the transition from old school vinyl DJing to digital music is its initial cost. It is significantly more expensive to acquire a large enough hard drive, a good quality soundcard and of course the DJ software than investing in a traditional CD player or vinyl turntables.

Additionally, it takes more time to rip an extensive CD collection to MP3 format and store it on the hard drive. Sometimes, it is actually illegal to convert original music to the digital files without the license which can be quite costly. Presently, the DJ is required to obtain a license to play music from a computer in the United States. Sometimes, even a further permit and royalty fees are necessary to converse the music and DJ from a computer. It is, thus, a matter of personal taste and convenience, what kind of DJing alternative the user decides to choose. To sum up, with the advances in technology and basically an unlimited access to both legal and illegal music downloads, the popularization of the digital DJ is not surprising at all.

More and more people decide to become digital DJs nowadays, although often they do not possess the skill and talent that a true and creative DJ should have. One should never disregard the need to master conventional DJing, such as mixing, coordinating music and entertaining before switching to the digital domain DJ artistry. Digital technology is bound to continue developing and we are going to have more, better quality high resolution decks, mixers and power amps that can all be digitally linked together. Hopefully, vinyl will not go away completely and become obsolescent. DVD audio will probably soon overtake the CD's place, providing even higher resolution audio, surround sound and a greater number of other digital extras. Bibliography: 1.

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