

HOW TO BE A GREAT DJ--LESSON #1

I've played hundreds of "gigs" over the years, and I've watched as a guest while other poor, fair, good, or sometimes great DJ's ply their trade, and I believe that not all of them knew how to improve their DJ skills. Most of them were probably self-taught, maybe had tried getting together in a dance band that didn't work out, maybe had some extra equipment, a friend asks them to play music for a birthday party, and VOILA!--they're a DJ!--they make a hundred bucks at the birthday party, and it occurs to them that people will pay for them to play music (*WHAT A CONCEPT!*)

DJ's who evolve from beginner to experienced to "Great" go through several phases of development--or not, as the case may be--some stay mediocre because they don't realize how to improve. Improving your skills as a DJ is not rocket science, but it does take ambition, an ability either to analyze oneself or accept criticism from others, and a considerable amount of integrity--you will need to put the needs of your clients ahead of your need to (1) make money, and (2) have fun, not necessarily in that order.

. . .And that brings me to the first thing a DJ needs to do to evolve from beginner to great--**you need to know your client**. This is not a revelation for a lender, a doctor or a car salesman--in these occupations, there is a training and skill-building phase that takes from several months to many years, and during this period, the worker learns that, if (s)he is to succeed, (s)he must know the client. This is also logical in the music business, but frequently the DJ learns by just getting to the place and playing music as best (s)he can--there is no transfer of the profession's knowledge by a mentor--the DJ gets paid, and no one complains, *per se*, but as he continues, he might become aware that he isn't called back to play again--all of his clients are first-timers; there is no repeat business. This may be happening because the DJ didn't take the time to learn about ("know") his client. What does he need to know?—certainly more than just what event they are planning—he needs to know (1) their age, and the range of ages of their guests, (2) who is the decision-maker--if there are two or three clients, such as a husband-wife pair, who is it to whom the event's music REALLY matters, (3) most importantly, what not only is their general taste in music but, specifically, what types of music are desired?—Hip Hop, Country, Romantic--and, specifically, what artists are their favorites?—(press them! courteously on this until they give you at least two preferences--also, specifically, what artists and songs are really disliked. Frequently, clients will be very non-committal about these questions, but the DJ has to be patient and persuasive enough to extract the information, because it is vital.

If the client begins by saying, "Oh, you know, we like everything" (and he says it with a twinkle in his eye, and with enthusiasm, so frequently the DJ believes it. . .DON'T BELIEVE IT! EVERY LAST PERSON who cares enough about music to pay good money to hire a DJ to play at his or her event HAS SOME LIKES AND DISLIKES, at least the surface of which the DJ MUST uncover. If the client says he likes all artists, mention some polarizing types of music--Should we play some Rap?--some Latino?--Trance?--how about some Country , Oldies? The DJ will likely start getting a feel, in no uncertain terms, that *some* types of music are preferred over others. If the topic of general music types doesn't separate out the favorites from the hated ☺, mention some polarizing artists: Eminem, Frank Sinatra, Elvis, Britney Spears, Aerosmith, Celine Dion, Willie Nelson--you get the idea. If your client is still adamant that he likes "everything," try a few polarizing tunes; some people absolutely hate one of the most popular songs of all times: "YMCA." If you play it, you will never be invited back to that venue. How about "Love Shack"?--very popular, but some clients can't stand it.

DJ's must have a good selection of music (more about that in Lesson #2), if they are to play to general audiences, but being a GREAT DJ is more than having thousands of songs--it's about knowing your client and his expectations. What is the desired volume level? How should the DJ dress? Is the DJ expected to perform as an emcee?—and if so, how much humor and agenda direction are desired? This is key: If you KNOW your client, you have surmounted one of the biggest obstacles on the road to becoming a great DJ. In the meantime, as I tell my clients whether they are 18 or 80, Stay Young, Keep on Dancing.

--Dave Crosby, Fresno, CA