

## HOW TO BE A GREAT DJ--LESSON #2

### The Music

In Lesson #1, I covered several general but critical concepts a DJ must master if (s)he is to become a ***GREAT*** DJ: I indicated that a great DJ must have integrity--(s)he must put his or her client's needs ahead of his own needs to make money and have fun; he must have ambition to do well, ability to analyze himself or accept criticism from others, but the most important thing that distinguishes a poor or average DJ from a great DJ is his knowledge of his client. A fair DJ may know little more than what the event is, may show up with his suitcase full of music, and play for hours oblivious of the background, age, family, and music tastes of his client.

I know this is true, because I was somewhat a victim of this very kind of DJ. When my daughter was married, we had two receptions, one near our home, the other in another state, near the home of the groom. My daughter asked me to play the music for her reception, and it was a happy occasion. When I asked about the music at the reception for the groom's family & friends, the couple said that the groom had a friend who was a DJ, and who had volunteered to play the reception for nothing. This seemed great to me, since I would not have to concern myself with all the music details, equipment, volume, emcee-ing, etc.--I could just enjoy the occasion. As the reception started, I noticed that there was no music, so I asked where the DJ was. My son-in-law said that his friend was running late, but would be there as soon as possible. An hour after the reception began, the DJ bustled in and quickly set up his equipment, and I was impressed that he got the first song on the air within 10 minutes of his arrival, an electronica, or techno, piece that was interesting, but it really wasn't great for dancing. The next song was the same, and the next, and the next; after about 30-40 minutes of house, trance, and electronica music, I began feeling bad for the young man, and spoke to him to see if he had any more danceable kinds of music. He had a suitcase full of CD's, but he told me that this Dance, or House, music was all that he had--it was his entire collection. Here was a DJ who did not know his client in the least; the reception was full of people who love music and dancing, and who could have listened to anything from Gene Autry to Aerosmith to Luciano Pavarotti, and been happy. As it was, we listened to the sometimes interesting but eventually catastrophically boring pulsation all night long. It depressed the reception, in spite of great hors d' oeuvres, beautiful setting, and wonderful company.

Several lessons can be learned from this event: (1) the word of the DJ is his bond--if you agree to play music at a certain time, BE THERE ON TIME, (2) as I indicated in Lesson #1, KNOW YOUR CLIENT--I have had a client who wanted to give her boyfriend a birthday party with nothing by heavy metal (and I mean nothing but heavy metal--all night long), and another who wanted their reception to have NO MUSIC except classical waltzes. I played both venues with equal enthusiasm, and both were unqualified successes because I KNEW MY CLIENTS and their wishes, and (3) after you know your client, have integrity and, if you don't have their preferred selection of music, tell them so, and tell them you are not the right DJ for the job. Then, if you ever want to attain the rank of "***GREAT***" DJ, go out and expand your selection of music to include the type they desired.

This issue of handling the music becomes the most important issue of Lesson #2. It includes (1) the DJ's SELECTION of music, (2) the EQUIPMENT through which it is played, (3) the reading of the listeners & dancers, and (4) the VOLUME at which the music is played. These items, altogether or each one by itself, will make or break the DJ and a successful music event. Selection is very important because, how can you play an entire night of classical waltz, or heavy metal, or salsa, or *any type of music* if you don't have the music? Simple, you can't. The problem with selection is that, in order to have a good one, it takes either LOTS of money, or LOTS of time, or both to develop the professional-size repertoire of music.

Equipment can also be very expensive; gone are the days when you could bring in a \$200 boombox, and play a successful event. Nowadays, if you have less than \$10K in equipment, you should keep only to the small venues like the backyard birthday parties and community center-size facilities for anniversary parties; trying to play a high school dance or a night club with inadequate equipment will not result well. Please see Lesson #4 for greater detail on the pieces of equipment you might choose, and the ones you must have.

Reading your crowd is an artful skill that takes years to develop, and will never be developed unless you have a desire to be a **great** DJ, the best DJ possible--it starts by observing the age and dress of your audience, and the formula is simple: if the people are older, play older music. Most music-lovers go through a period of life when romance is in the air, and music is in their hearts more than at other times in their lives--this period is usually between the ages of about 16 and 30 or so, and the music becomes "their music." If you are playing for a group of teenagers, they will respond better to current music; if your audience is 50's and 60's, count back 3 and 4 decades (which, if you are playing in 2014, is about 1970 to 1980), and play music from that period, for example, "Raindrops Keep Falling on My Head," (#1 song of 1970), "Joy to the World" (#1 in 1971), and "My Sharona" (#1 in 1979). Of course, reading the crowd includes knowing your environment and listening carefully to what the listeners and dancers request--if you are experiencing a heat wave, the "Raindrops" song may not go over (or it might, as a joke, if you have a lighthearted group)--if a teenager says that there is a large group of his peers that really like "retro" music, ask him what he means (name a couple of artists), and try a couple of tunes from that period or those artists, and note the reaction of the group.

I've saved the toughest for last: VOLUME is the toughest, no question about it, because you can never please ALL the people ALL the time. In fact, you may enter the ranks of great DJ's if you can please SOME of the people ALL of the time, or ALL of the people SOME of the time. I think, at bottom, the ability to choose the "right" volume goes back to the DJ's desire to please--to do his level-headed best to accommodate absolutely everyone, even the teenage youth who wants you to basically disintegrate him with refrigerator-size speakers, as well as the little old man with trousers rolled up and hearing aids in both ears. I will tell you one thing: If you are a DJ who gets upset when one person asks for the music to be turned up, the next down, and the next back up--I say, if you get upset at people expressing what would make them pleased with your music volume, then you will likely never attain the rank of *GREAT* DJ; in fact, you will probably NOT last for very long, since this precisely is your job and your responsibility--no one else in the room knows how to control the maze of meters, buttons and knobs you have brought to the party. If you find yourself upset over so natural a thing as people having different opinions about the volume of the music, you should find another avocation or occupation, because you will be upset all the time.

In Lesson #3, we will focus on the skills that allow a great DJ to play a great wedding. We'll detail the interview, discuss emcee-ing skills, dress, and several other factors which beginning or average DJ's seem to miss. In the meantime, as I tell my clients whether they are 18 or 80, Stay Young, Keep on Dancing.

--Dave Crosby, Fresno, CA