

# Chapter 1

## Catching DJ Fever

---

### *In This Chapter*

- ▶ Having what it takes to be a DJ
  - ▶ Mechanics and creativity
  - ▶ Reaching the journey's end – the dance floor
- 

**T**he journey you take as a DJ – from the very first record you play when you enter the DJ world to the last record of your first set in front of a club filled with people – is an exciting, creative, and fulfilling one, but you need a lot of patience and practice to get there.

DJ turntables, CD players, and mixers are selling so quickly now that they're in danger of outselling guitars and pianos. Hundreds of DJs over the world are on a quest to entertain and play great music. Everyone needs an advantage when they compete with hundreds of like-minded people. Your advantage is knowledge. I can help you with that.

### *Discovering the Foundations of DJing*



DJing is first and foremost about music. The clothes, the cars, the money, and the fame are all very nice, and I'm sure that DJs who get all the attention aren't complaining, but playing the right music and how a crowd reacts is what moulds a DJ. As the DJ, you are in control of everybody's night. As such, you need to be professional, skilful, and knowledgeable about what the crowd wants to hear, and ready to take charge of how much of a good time they're having.

What kind of DJ you become lies in how you choose, use, and respect your DJ tools and skills. Become a student of DJing as well as someone who loves music and performing to a crowd, and your foundations will be rock solid.

## *Equipping yourself*

The equipment you use as a DJ can define you just as much as the music you play. The basic components you need are:

- ✓ **Two input devices.** You can choose from CD players, MP3 players, a PC with DJing software, or the more traditional vinyl turntables. (Head to Chapters 2, 5, 7, and 15 to find out more.)
- ✓ **A mixer.** This box of tricks lets you change from one tune to the other. Different mixers have better control over how you can treat the sound as you mix from tune to tune. (Chapter 8 tells you everything you need to know about mixers.)
- ✓ **A pair of headphones.** Headphones are essential for listening to your next record while one is already playing. (See Chapter 9 for some good advice.)
- ✓ **Amplification.** You have to be heard, and depending on the music you play, you have to be LOUD! (You can find out more in Chapter 10.)
- ✓ **Records/CDs/MP3s.** What's a DJ without something to play? (Take a look at Chapter 3.)

Providing that your wallet is big enough, making the choice between CD and vinyl is no longer a quandary. The functions on a turntable are equally matched by those on a CD player, so the decision comes down to aesthetics, money, and what kind of person you are. You may like the retro feel of vinyl and find that the music you want to play is available on vinyl, or you may like the modern look of CD players or laptops, and prefer the ready availability of MP3s and CDs – it's your choice. Chapters 3, 5, 7, and 15 can help you with your decision.

## *Making friends with your wallet*

DJing costs money. Whether you shop online, or if you go to the high street, the first thing to do is look at your finances. If you've been saving up money for long enough, you may have a healthy budget to spend on your equipment. Just remember, the expense doesn't stop there. Every month new tunes are released, you'll be yearning for music to play and may start to think of buying other items in terms of how many records can you get, instead. I remember saying once '£50 for a shirt? That's 10 records!'



You don't get the personal touch, but shopping online can be cheaper for equipment and music, and if you can't afford new DJ equipment right now, use PC software to develop your skills, and buy the real thing when you can. Flip through to Chapters 4 and 7 for more information.

## *Knowing your music*

Throughout the years I've been helping people to become DJs, one of the most surprising questions I've been asked is: 'I want to be a DJ. Can you tell me what music I should spin?' This question seems ridiculous to me. Picking the genre (or genres) of your music is really important, as you need to love and feel passionate about playing this music for the rest of your DJ career. (Head to Chapter 3 for more on genre and music formats.)

After you've found your musical elixir, start to listen to as much of it as you can. Buy records and CDs, listen to the radio, search the Internet for information on this genre, and discover as much as you can. This groundwork is of help when choosing the records you want to play, when looking for artist's remixes, and is an aid to developing your mixing style. Doing a tiny bit of research before you leap into DJing goes a long way towards helping you understand the facets and building blocks of the music you love. Become a student of trance, a scholar of jungle, and a professor of pop – just make sure that you start treating your music as a tool, and be sure to use that tool like a real craftsman.

## *Researching and discovering*

You know the music you want to play, you've decided on the format that's right for you, you've been saving up for a while; now you need to wade through the vast range of equipment that's available and be sure that you're buying the best DJ setup for the job at hand.



With technology advancing faster than I can write this book, you can easily get lost in the features that are available to you on CD decks, mixers, and turntables. Take as much time as you can to decide on what you want to buy. Go online and do some research, ask others in DJ forums for their thoughts on the equipment you're thinking about buying, and make sure that you're buying something that does what you want it to do, and that any extra features aren't bumping up the price for something you'll never use.

Here's a brief guide to what to look for on each piece of equipment you may look to buy:

- ✔ Proper DJ turntables need a strong motor, a pitch control to adjust the speed the record plays at, a good needle, and sturdy enough construction to handle the vibrations and abuse that DJing dishes out. A home hi-fi turntable won't do, I'm afraid. Check out Chapter 5 for more information.
- ✔ Mixers ideally have 3-band EQs (equalisers) for each input channel, a cross-fader, headphone cue controls, and a good display to show you the level at which the music is sent out of the mixer so you don't blow any speakers accidentally. Chapter 8 goes into more detail on this and other functions on the mixer.
- ✔ CD decks need to be sturdy enough that they won't skip every time the bass drum booms over the speakers. The controls on a CD deck are more important than on a turntable because you can't physically speed up and slow down the CD with your hands. Jog wheels, easy-to-navigate time and track displays, and a pitch bend along with the pitch control are all important core features of a CD turntable. Chapter 15 is dedicated to everything CD-related.
- ✔ Headphones need to be comfortable, sound clear when played at high volume, and cut out a lot of external noise so that you don't have to play them too loud. Your ears are extremely important, so try not to have your headphones at maximum all the time. Chapter 9 is the place to go for guidance on choosing headphones and protecting ears.
- ✔ Volume and sound control are the watchwords for amplification. You don't need a huge amplifier and bass-bins for your bedroom, but similarly, a home hi-fi isn't going to be much use in a town hall. Chapter 10 helps you find the right balance.

## *Connecting your equipment*

After you have all the pieces of your DJ setup, your final task is to put together the jigsaw. Knowing how to connect your equipment isn't just important, it's totally vital. If you don't know what connects to what, and what the ins and outs of your set-up are, you can't troubleshoot when things go wrong. And things do go wrong, at the worst of times.

Eventually, you'll be showing off your DJ skills and someone will ask you to play at a party with your equipment; equipment that you connected up a year ago, with the help of your 4-year-old brother. Think of the soldier who has to assemble a gun from parts to functional in minutes; that's how comfortable you need to be when connecting together the parts of your DJ setup – except you only need to kill 'em on the dance floor. (Chapter 11 tells you all you need to know about connections.)

## Beatmatching Takes Patience and Practice



DJing is a combination of mechanical and creative skill. *Beatmatching* (adjusting the speed that two tunes play at so that their bass drum beats constantly play at the same time) is the mechanical aspect that's regarded as the core foundation of the club DJ. Given enough time, patience and practice, anyone can learn these basics. Look to Chapters 12 and 15 to find out more.

After the core skill of beatmatching, what sets a good DJ apart from an okay DJ is his or her creativity. You need another set of building blocks to help you develop your creativity. How you stack up these blocks plays a big part in determining how skilled a DJ you can become:

- ✔ Good sound control is the first building block of your skill and creativity. You need a good ear to gauge if one tune is too loud during a mix, or if you have too much bass playing to the dance floor. This skill is something that develops, and can be honed through experience, but a DJ with a good ear for sound quality is already halfway there. Chapter 14 covers sound control to create a great-sounding mix, and Chapters 18 and 19 have information about controlling the overall sound of your mix when playing live or to tape.
- ✔ A knowledge of the structure of a tune is the second essential building block in your quest to becoming a creative DJ. Knowing how many bars and phrases make up larger sections of tunes is important for creating exciting mixes. In time, DJs develop a sixth sense about how a tune has been made, and what happens in it, so they don't have to rely on pieces of paper, and notes to aid them with their mixes. Chapter 13 takes you through this structure step by step.
- ✔ Although scratching is considered more of a stand-alone skill, you can harness this technique to add a boost of excitement and unpredictability to the mix and is the third building block to creative DJing. Instead of letting a CD or record play at normal speed, the scratch DJ stops it with their hand and plays a short section (called a sample) backwards and forwards to create a unique sound. This also helps with the foundation mechanics of DJing. People are taught to be scared of touching their records, or don't have the gentle touch needed to work with vinyl or a CD controller properly. Scratching soon sorts all that out, leaving no room for excuses. Your dexterity working with your tunes increases tenfold by the time you've developed even the most basic of scratch moves as described in Chapter 16.

## It's all about style

Style is the true creative avenue, because it's all down to the music. The order you play your tunes in, changing keys, mixing harmonically, changing genre, increasing the tempo, and creating a roller-coaster ride of power and energy are the reasons that one DJ is better than the other.

Your technique may be a little weak, but if you're playing the right tunes, that can be forgiven. (That's not an excuse to skip the basics though!) The idea is to create a set that tries to elicit emotional and physical reactions from the crowd; in other words, they dance all night, and smile all night.

## Working as a DJ

The hardest bit about performance is actually getting the chance to perform. Every job in the entertainment industry is fought over by hundreds of people and you need to come out on top if you want to succeed.

You need to set yourself apart from the competition and make sure that you have the skills to sell yourself. Convince club owners and promoters that you're going to be an asset to their club, and then perform on the night. Here's what you need to do:

- ✓ Demo tapes (or CDs or MiniDiscs) are your window to the world. They are the first way to let people know what you're like as a DJ. Whether it's your friends, your boss, or someone in the industry, a demo is a reflection of you, and you only. Only release your best work, and don't make excuses if it's not good enough. Chapter 18 has the information you need about demos.
- ✓ Market yourself well. Use all avenues described in Chapter 19 to get even the most basic start in a club or pub.

After you've secured any kind of work, your development from beginner to DJ is only half way through. You've spent time creating a good mix in the bedroom, but now, no matter whether you're playing Cream in Liverpool, or the Jones's wedding at the local town hall, you need to pull off a successful night.



Consider the following (all of which are covered in more detail in Chapters 19 and 20):

- ✓ Like anything new, preparation is the key to a successful night. Leave yourself with no surprises, do as much investigation as possible, research the unknown, settle any money matters, make sure that you and the management (or wedding party) are on the same musical playing field, so that all you have to worry about on the night is entertaining the crowd.

- ✔ Reading the crowd is the most important skill you can develop and you may take weeks, months, even years to master the technique properly. The *tells* you pick up from the body language on the dance floor rival any poker player's. You look at the dance floor and instantly react to how people dance, and what their expressions are, and then compensate for a down-turn in their enjoyment, or build upon it to make it a night to remember.
- ✔ Because you're the main focal point of the night, you also have to be a people person. You are the representative of the club, and so need to act accordingly. One wrong word to the wrong person, one wrong tune played at the wrong time, or even something as simple as appearing as if you're not enjoying yourself, can rub off on the dance floor, and your job as an entertainer is on thin ice.

Above all, always remember from the bedroom to a bar, from a town hall wedding to the main set at a huge night club in Ibiza, you're here because you want to be a DJ. You love the music, you want to put in the time, you want to entertain people, and you want to be recognised for it.

