Vekat Story

Learn how to become a DJ, and you learn to match your own musical expression with the desires of a given audience. It’s not just matching beats, or scratching over songs. It’s about being observant, empathic, and reactive.

It’s not difficult to start. But it is difficult to stand out, and to be exceptional. There is a lot more to becoming a DJ than knowing how to mix one song into another.

My goal in creating this guide is not to teach every single individual DJ skill, in great detail. Rather, you can use this guide as a resource while establishing yourself as a happy and successful DJ.

I’d also like to invite you to listen to my weekly talk show: The Passionate DJ Podcast. Featuring exclusive interviews, tips, stories, entertainment, and inspiration for DJs… it is the first (and only) show of its kind. We would love for you to join us in our journey to become better DJs through passion and purpose.

How to Become a DJ: Getting Started

Below, I have recommended a 10-step process. However, it’s important to remember that while the steps are simple, they require dedication. Contrary to popular belief, learning to DJ is not an effective route to overnight success. This takes work, and hustle, and time.

There are many different kinds of DJs, and many different reasons for those DJs to exist. In this guide, we will start with getting serious about YOU: what is it that you want to get out of this? From there, you can get a better idea of where to focus your energy.

By the end, my hope is that you will be well on your way to building your career and learning the craft of mixing music.

Let’s get on with it!

Step One: Learn What DJs Actually Do

What kind of DJ are you interested in becoming?

Strictly speaking, a DJ is anyone who plays pre-recorded music for an audience. If someone hires you to advance an iPod playlist at a cookout, you’re DJing.

Since you’ve made it to this guide, let’s assume you’re interested in doing more than that.

So, let’s break it down into a few simple categories. These are not hard and fast definitions, because many people (such as myself) often end up juggling several types of DJ roles.

The Club/Bar DJ (Resident)

This is the DJ that has a recurring gig at the local night club or bar.

Each club has a different feel, reputation, and audience… which also means that clubs vary in what they expect from their musical selection. Typically, the night club DJ’s job is to keep the dance floor moving, uninterrupted… often by doing long blends (transitions) between songs, or some other trickery to keep people’s feet moving.

Ideally, this DJ knows how to ramp the energy up and down to balance between an active floor and a busy bar.

The Performer/Guest DJ

People go to see this DJ because of who they are, their reputation, and what people think they can do behind the decks. This can include anyone who has built up a following that people will come out to see.

The more “exhibitionist” DJs also fit in here, such as turntablists (people good at cutting, scratching, and various record tricks), and other live and semi-live performers.

The Mobile/Wedding DJ

A notably different style of DJing can be required of the mobile DJ. This is usually more of the entrepreneur type, and typically where you will have the best chance for success in making a living.

This kind of DJ often needs to be comfortable with taking requests (and sometimes even entire playlists), speaking into a microphone, and investing in his or her own sound equipment.

The Radio DJ

The concept of the DJ owes it’s origins to radio.

The radio DJ’s job varies greatly, from the person who announces the weather between songs, to full-on music curation. While many corporate radio DJs have lost control over musical selection, this role can now be fulfilled via online radio and podcasts.

What About Producers?

Many people often confuse DJing with producing music. DJing is playing pre-recorded music to an audience; producing is the original creation or recording of music.

In other words, someone produces a techno song, and then a techno DJ plays that song at a festival. Sometimes that is the same person.

This is often hard for people to wrap their heads around, especially in the realm of electronic music, because it’s performers often do some hybrid of the two… whether that is live, or in the studio.

In episode 23 of The Passionate DJ Podcast, we discuss the difference between the two:

All in all, it’s important to realize that there are many different types of performers. Some are strictly DJs, some play a “live PA” (complete with hardware synthesizers or drum machines), and many land somewhere in-between. You can think of it as a spectrum.

What is it that excites you about becoming a DJ? Is it the thought of directing a dance floor in a big dirty warehouse somewhere? Playing big tracks at summer festivals? Starting a wedding DJ business? Building an audience for an online radio show?

The choice is yours, but it’s important to give this some thought, as it will help you know how to pursue your career or hobby.

Step Two: Determine Why You Want to DJ

Why you should learn how to become a DJ

Do you have stars in your eyes? Want to start a business? Just for fun? There are a lot of reasons that you may wish to learn how to become a DJ. The most important thing is to be completely honest about what those reasons are.

And, since we’re being completely honest… I wouldn’t count on success if your sole purpose is to get rich and famous.

That’s not to say that you cannot make money in today’s world as a DJ, nor does it mean that you shouldn’t shoot for the stars. I’m a big fan of the idea that anything worth doing is worth doing with full conviction, passion, and effort.

But, DJing is not a fast path to fame. Many people become DJs, but very few become superstars. You have to hustle, you have to love it, and you have to work on it even when it sucks.

And in today’s world (where “everyone” is a DJ), standing out takes a lot of hard work and a lot of luck.

Many people want to DJ because they love music and the idea of sharing it with a receptive audience. Many will attempt to use it as a tool to get laid. Some want it as a source of income.

Whatever the reason is, identify it so that you can act accordingly.

How does one know if DJing is a good fit for them, and their lifestyle? It’s important to consider whether DJing is “right” for you. If you’re not sure, I go over a list of questions you can ask yourself , in Episode 83 of the podcast:

The Passionate DJ Podcast

Episode 83: How to Know if DJing is For You

It’s not always sunshine and rainbows; there are some important considerations when deciding to actively pursue DJing as a “career”.

Step Three: Test The Waters

Traktor

Let’s get an idea of what a DJ does, by getting your feet wet with some free software.

There are a number of different options here, so I’ll just briefly cover a few of the popular ones. The first two are free, and the last has a free demo.

Virtual DJ Home

Atomix Virtual DJ is an entirely free and fully functional piece of DJ software. It supports as many decks as you want, and includes pretty much all the bells and whistles that you would expect, such as key lock, sync, loops, sampling, recording, and more.

If you want more advanced features, such as timecode control (we’ll get into this later) or video output, you can upgrade to one of their paid products.

Many people choose Virtual DJ because it is fully featured, well supported by the community, and it is free.

Mixxx

This is another popular option, and for good reason. It is entirely cross platform (there’s even a Linux version!), very well-featured, open-source, and even supports timecode control right out of the box. To my knowledge, this is the only free software to do that.

The community has built-in support for many popular library formats and DJ controllers.

Traktor Pro 2

Native Instruments’ Traktor Pro 2 is my personal choice. It is not free, but they do provide a free and fully-functional demo so that you can try it out before making an investment.

Traktor’s syncing, quantization, and effects are some of the best in the industry. They also offer their own hardware, which is fully integrated with (and designed for) Traktor. Upgrading to Traktor Scratch Pro gives you timecode support.

Additonally, a number of third-party controllers come with Traktor LE (the “lite edition”) bundled. This is a very low cost way to start with Traktor if you plan on buying some hardware anyway.

There are many more options outside of this… Numark Cue, Image Line’s Deckadance, PCDJ, Serato DJ (requires approved controller), and more. This will come down to a matter of preference… however, it’s worth noting that Traktor and Serato are considered to be the industry standards.

Choose a software package and start playing around with it. There are plenty of tutorials on YouTube which over the basics of popular DJ software.

One more thing worth mentioning: if your entire goal is to be a scratch/turntablist/exhibitionist DJ, you can do very little with a keyboard and mouse. You will probably need to invest in turntables, or at least a very capable controller, to head down this road.

Step Four: Learn Basic Skills

Beatmatching

There are a number of basic skills to consider when learning how to become a DJ: mixing, EQing, phrasing, beatmatching, and prep. We’re going to cover them briefly, here.

Beatmatching

You’ll quickly learn that this is a major point of contention in the DJ community.

The reason is that technology has, arguably, made this skill obsolete. All the major DJ software packages, and latest industry-standard Pioneer gear, has built-in “sync” functionality.

The purpose of beatmatching is to get the two tracks you’re mixing to play at the same tempo (the speed at which the song is playing) and phase (the beats from both tracks playing in-time with each other).

Think about it like two cars driving next to each other on the highway.

Tempo is the same as the speed, such as 60 MPH.

Phase is having the two cars directly next to each other.

So, why learn beatmatching when there is such a thing as a sync button? Well, firstly it gives you the ability to beat-mix on pretty much anything out there. Turntables and some CDJs require you to do this manually.

But most importantly, it helps to develop and tune your ears so that you know what to listen for (when tracks drift out of time, phase, etc.)

Even when I’m using DJ software and allowing it to sync my tracks, I use my ears to adjust the phase appropriately… since I know how it sounds from beatmatching.

I’m the kind of DJ who doesn’t like spending hours prepping and beat-gridding his tracks, but I’ve never felt the need to because I can do all of these things manually.

The overall point is that learning to beatmatch will make you a better mix DJ, whether you’re digital or not. That being said, many mobile and radio DJs feel no urge to beatmatch at all.

You can always come back to this later, but I think learning to beatmatch early is a great idea.

Beatmatching is accomplished using a pitch fader (to adjust tempo). You use a jog wheel, pitch-bend button, or the physical manipulation of a record to adjust phase.

Phrasing

❗That’s phrasing, with an “r”… not phasing.

This one will make sense to anyone who has ever played a musical instrument. A song’s structure is based on beats and bars (measures), which make up the song’s phrases.

Phrasing simply means to mix your tracks together at points in the songs which make sense.

Almost all music that you will be DJing is in 4/4 time, whether you play electronic dance music, hip-hop, funk, or top 40. What this technically means is that there are four beats in a measure (bar), and that the quarter note gets one beat.

In contrast, 6/8 time means that there are 6 beats in a measure, and the eighth note gets one beat. The takeaway is that you need to learn how to count to four, as most “DJ-able” music is 4/4.

Volume/Gain Control

A typical DJ mixer (as well as mixing software) contains a few types of volume control.

Firstly, each channel should have a gain or trim knob, which allows you to adjust the level of the signal (by watching your meters). Then, each channel has a line fader (unless it’s a rotary mixer, in which case you will have a knob).

The line fader adjusts how much signal you’re sending to your main output, which also has its own overall volume control. Then, of course, there’s the crossfader which allows you to fade between one channel and another.

If you’re just learning how to mix and you don’t have any hardware yet, you can still control these things in software. Some programs, such as Traktor Pro, have an “auto-gain” feature. It gets you in the ballpark of where you want to be so that your levels match up when mixing one song into another.

Volume control is often a subject of debate. Traditionally, while watching meters… green is good, red is bad, yellow is pushing it.

Unfortunately, many companies adjusted the way their mixers work in such a way that it caters to bad habits. Since amateur DJs sometimes tend to slam everything “in the red”, companies adjusted their products to compensate.

In addition, DJ software has its own gain structure. This can make things quite confusing.

Read your manual to better determine where you should be maxing out your signal.

When in doubt, staying in the green is just fine. If you need more volume, boost it on the amp/PA/house end… don’t distort your signal before it even gets there.

EQing

Equalizing (EQing) is the act of boosting or dropping certain frequencies so that two tracks can blend together well. It is is an art in itself.

The majority of your “space” gets consumed by lower frequencies, especially in dance music. So, typically you won’t mix two loud kick drums over one another, since they are simply too loud to combine.

A typical DJ mixer will have a three-band EQ (low, mid, and high…. or bass, midrange, and treble). Some mixers (such as higher-end Allen & Heath offerings) will include four bands: low, low-mid, mid-high, and high.

There is much to be said for proper equalization, both as a tool, and as a means of creative expression.

Equalization will not fix a bad mix, nor will it work miracles. We use it to surgically combine two or more audio signals, and to polish a well-chosen mixture into something worthy of an audience.

Step Five: Break Out of the Box

Pioneer DDJ-SZ

If you’re starting to get an idea of how things work, and you’re enjoying messing around with your DJ software, it’s probably time to invest in some hardware. This will give you an idea of what DJing feels like.

You can start with a keyboard and mouse, but this is quite limiting compared to DJ-specific hardware. You can take a few different routes, here:

The All-in-One Controller Route\*

Undeniably, this is the easiest way to start learning how to become a DJ using hardware. Many modern controllers are good enough to consider “professional grade”.

Most modern all-in-one controllers have everything that you need to mix an entire set, including a built-in sound card (audio interface). Most of them have CDJ-style jog wheels (though, not all of them… for instance, the Kontrol S8 by Native Instruments uses touch strips instead.) This is normally the cheapest and most reasonable route to start DJing, especially if you already have a laptop.

Not sure what to get? Check out my Controller Guide, where I give my thoughts on the best options currently available. This should help you make an informed decision, based on your budget and preferred software.

\* This is the preferred option for most new DJs.

(Pros: everything you need, simple to use, often made to integrate with particular software, great for mobile setups. Cons: it’s hard to fit bulky controllers into crowded booths, often plasticky or toy-like, sometimes shunned by pros, requires laptop.)

The Modular Controller Route

This is often the choice for geeky/gadgety types, or people who have very specific needs for the way they perform.

You can piece together a modular setup from any number of smaller controllers. Some examples are the Kontrol X1 from Native Instruments, and the Xone:K2 from Allen & Heath.

You then need to make sure you have some sort of good sound card (audio interface) to use for handling all these audio signals, cueing with headphones, etc. However, some modular controllers (such as the K2 and Reloop Contour Interface Edition) actually have a sound card built-in.

Pay close attention when going this route, in order to make sure you cover your bases. Modular setups are the most flexible, but usually they are also the most complex.

(Pros: flexibility, can piece together setup over time, unlimited options, satisfies “Gear Acquisition Syndrome”. Cons: setups can get complex, your setup is non-standard, often plasicky or toy-like, sometimes looked down upon by pros, need multiple USB ports or a hub, may require external mixer and sound card, requires laptop.)

The CDJs (CD turntables) + Mixer Route

When compared to a laptop and comprehensive software, CDJs can seem fairly limited. In order to get in the same ballpark as software when it comes to features, you have to splurge on something like the Pioneer CDJ-2000nexus, or at least something like the Denon DN-S3700. Then, you need to add an expensive mixer on top of that.

Suddenly, you’re talking about spending a lot of money. However, some people don’t need all those features. For standard mixing, the Pioneer CDJ-350or a used pair of CDJ 800s or CDJ 1000s are just perfect.

Denon has a pretty nice lineup of CD turntables too, just keep in mind that Pioneer is largely considered to be the industry standard.

This is the main reason that people want to go the CDJ route… any noteworthy club in the world has a set of CDJ 2000’s, or at least 1000’s (now discontinued). People want to know how to play on this kind of gear, so they can just show up with their music and go.

(Pros: It’s what pro club DJs use (familiarity), most modern CDJs are great for scratching, most new ones support USB drives, most clubs have these. Cons: pricey option, especially at the higher end (“Pioneer tax”), limited when compared to software.)

The Vinyl + Mixer Route

Records are harder to mix than any of the other listed options. Vinyl is also the most expensive format to buy music on. So why would anyone want to go this route?

Three reasons: it’s rewarding, it’s sexy, and people love it.

For a lot of people, mixing records is simply fun. Many DJs love that tactile feel of moving the physical record, and many people love watching a “real” DJ playing “real” records. It’s also still the best route for the pure scratch DJ.

This isn’t the route for everyone, but for many, it’s the only way.

(Pros: it’s rewarding, it’s fun, some consider it more fun and rewarding, it’s fun to watch, it will gain you respect. Cons: music is expensive, vinyl is more difficult, it’s the least portable option, and you have little technological assistance.)

Timecode/HID and Hybrid Setups

Many people feel that using a hybrid setup can give you the best of all worlds.

I love the feel of mixing records, and I love the convenience of showing up somewhere and not having to make room for a bulky controller. However, I love some of the functionality that I gain from software… such as perfectly quantized loops and the convenience of a meticulously organized music collection.

If you look up DVS (digital vinyl system) on Wikipedia, you will see a definition like this:

“Vinyl emulation software allows the user to physically manipulate the playback of digital audio files on a computer using the turntables as an interface, thus preserving the hands-on control and feel of DJing with vinyl. This has the added advantage of using turntables to play back audio recordings not available in phonograph form. This method allows DJs to scratch, beatmatch, and perform other turntablism that would be impossible with a conventional keyboard-and-mouse computer interface or less tactile control devices. The technology is also referred to as DVS for either Digital Vinyl System or Digital Vinyl Software.”

Basically, the idea is that you use a special vinyl which contains a special kind of audio signal that your software picks up and uses to manipulate digital files.

You can then add modular controllers to add whatever functionality you feel that you are missing from the traditional “decks-and-mixer” setup.

Many modern players now support MIDI and HID connectivity, which allows you to accomplish the same thing without the use of special timecode media.

In many ways, a DVS setup is a compromise for traditional DJs who don’t want to change their workflow, but want (or need) to take advantage of modern features. It may be a bit convoluted for someone just starting out.

(Pros: best of all worlds, feel like you’re mixing records but using any files you can find/buy, fun to watch. Cons: though it has a small footprint, it can be irritating to set up in a club environment; easy to turn your turntable or CDJ into an expensive “midi controller” unnecessarily.)

Step Six: Record a Mix (Tell a Story)

Record Your Mix

Once you have a basic idea of how to do basic mixing, it’s time to record yourself and analyze it. Use the knowledge you’ve gained thus far, and see what you sound like!

Since software can record everything in-the-box, this is easily accomplished for laptop DJs. If you’re mixing externally using a standalone DJ mixer, you will need to either route the sound back into a computer to record, or use some other kind of recording device.

Many standalone DJ mixers (such as the DN-X1600 or the Pioneer DJM-850) these days contain an internal sound card, so you can record from them digitally even if you’re using external sources such as turntables or CDJs.

Now, recording a “studio” (bedroom) mix is obviously a little bit different than playing in front of a crowd. Some of the skills which are important in a live setting, such as reading a crowd, do not apply when recording a personal mix.

However, you can use this opportunity to think about how to “tell a story” with your set. This doesn’t mean it has to be an all-out concept mix. Just think about how you want to start, where you want to be when you finish, and how you want to get there.

Perhaps you can imagine that you’re in front of a crowd, and play that scenario out in your head.

This is the point at which you teach yourself not to be mediocre. Novice DJs tend to hammer out their “banger” tracks, one after another, for an hour or two. There’s no sense of ebb and flow; no sense of direction.

Most people find this boring and tiresome. Of course, you are the DJ and you have the creative license to play however you wish. But, I suggest learning how to think of a DJ set in the context of the whole instead of its individual parts… this is what separates decent DJs from great ones.

I like to approach a recorded mix like a well-constructed artist album. It’s not entirely flat, but it’s entirely cohesive.

This is the point where you can experiment, try different things, and see what works. Try recording a mix, putting it away for a few days or a week, and then coming back to listen to it. elieve me, it’s much easier to be objective when listening to your mix when you wait a while before listening to it!

If you’re like me, you might be pleasantly surprised that any “mistakes” you make don’t sound nearly as bad as you thought they did during the recording session.

Step Seven: Build a Following (Brand Yourself)

DJ brand

Once you have a mix or two recorded that you’re proud of, you might start getting feedback from others… especially from people you don’t know. Construct your support base, build an online presence, show your worth.

I’ve noticed that, in most cases, people who listen to your mixes because they know you will rarely give you feedback that is useful (unless you are good friends with an experienced DJ).

While it doesn’t hurt to be told that your mix is “nice” or “cool” or that you did a “great job, man!”, it doesn’t help you much, either.

Upload your mix somewhere (such as mixcloud.com), and try to get some feedback. Reach out to people who you know personally, and will give you honest and useful feedback.

Contact them personally, either in-person or with a well-considered message. Tell them that you value their thoughts, and are trying to become a better DJ.

If you’re a genre-specific DJ, perhaps seek out forums, Facebook groups, and other communities based on those styles.

One important thing, though… make sure that you’re not just leeching from these communities. Do what you can to give back!

Eventually, you will want to build an online presence for yourself. I highly recommend having a personal homepage (preferably, with your own domain) and a Facebook fan page, at the very minimum.

Having something to link and refer people to is critical, so that you can show what you can do to potential promoters or customers.

If you’re good, consider making some YouTube videos of short mixes/mashups/whatever your focus is.

Building an online presence is a good route to take these days, but while it will help you develop certain skills, it will not get you gigs. That’s when you need to move on to local promotion.

Step Eight: Hustle (Put In Your Time)

Handing out flyers

This is probably the most crucial step in the whole process. Make yourself valuable to your scene or demographic.

If you’re trying to break in to a particular scene, you need to make yourself valuable to that scene before you expect to start playing shows.

There’s no one specific way to approach this. But, suffice it to say, if nobody knows who you are, you’re not going to get many gigs.

Early in my journey as a small town DJ, I was attempting to break into a desolate scene. Absolutely nothing was going on… crickets!

My approach was to go to a struggling night club and offer to promote my own event series.

I ran a monthly Thursday night for about a year. It wasn’t a raging success. But, it got me used to club DJing, hooking up to a real PA, and small-scale promotion.

In the bar/club world, it’s largely about who you know. That’s just the way that things often work. Befriend some like-minded people in the scene, and make yourself valuable to them.

Find those people out there who think like you, for there’s power in that synergy. It’s amazing what can happen in the name of common interest.

If you do it right, you’ll end up with some great new friends. Start supporting their shows and gigs. Above all, think about how you can make yourself useful to them and your potential audience.

What are you doing that is valuable for your scene of interest? When it comes to the club scene, collaboration is almost always preferable to competition.

**Step Nine: Pursue Your First Gigs**

Getting DJ Gigs

Now is the time to put you in front of some actual people. That’s what it’s all about!

A great way to get some experience under your belt is to throw house parties, if that’s your thing. Book a few local seasoned DJs to play, and warm up for them. Set them up, just as if you were opening up for a headliner in a club.

If you’re getting into the whole mobile DJing thing, try finding special one-off events that you can play (you might not want to start off with your first gig being someone’s wedding).

This can be anything… one of my favorite places to play happens to be a consignment shop. Weird, right?

You may have to do some shows for free (and, be careful here, as it’s easy to get stuck playing for free). In the club scene, throwing your own night is another great way to get some gigs, gain experience, and become known.

Start handing out demos and/or business cards to promoters, DJs, and friends at their events. Show them that you were willing to support them… people will notice.

A few tips in regards to scoring your first few gigs:

Become known by the regulars in your scene or venue before approaching a manager/promoter formally.

If you’ve done a good job with step seven, don’t just sell yourself as a DJ… sell yourself as a brand.

You’re probably going to play your share of empty rooms. Get over it, and keep pressing on.

Quick side note: How many long-time DJs do you know that give off that jaded vibe, after they have “put in their time” for so many years?

The truth of the matter is that the DJ hustle never ends, unless you’ve somehow managed to reach legendary status. Make sure to check your ego, and don’t let experience get to your head.

Staying humble and always having a “how can I provide value” approach will keep you fresh and positive.

Step Ten: Hone Your Craft

Craftsmanship

Great; so you learned some skills, scored some gigs and the DJ bug bit you. Congratulations; you’ve learned the basics on how to become a DJ!

So now you can simply kick back and let the gigs flow in, right? Wrong! Learn to work the floor, and consider some more advanced skills.

This is where you start putting in work so that you can become an expert at your craft. Unfortunately, many man (MANY) DJs skip this step once they’re “good enough”:

The Passionate DJ Podcast

Episode 57: Comfort Zone (Why DJs Should Avoid "Autopilot")

There’s a lot more to DJing than just transitions. You must learn to read the crowd: a skill which allows you to both predict and react to an audience in order to find common musical ground.

You must focus on music curation. Get better at finding music which reflects your unique tastes, yet works with your audience.

You must realize that context is everything in the world of DJing. The same song will have a much, much different effect depending on your time slot, venue, demographic, crowd size, and more.

You must learn to play the right gigs. Decide whether or not a potential booking is actually a good fit for your style, approach, and “resumé”.

There are a number of other things you can do to make yourself stand out as a DJ. A lot of DJs (especially ones who play a lot of melodic content) like to mix in key. Turntablists/scratch DJs can never have enough practice and fine-tuning of their skills. Maybe you’re interested in adding more “live” elements to your set, using drum machines, samplers, remix decks, live musicians… the list is endless.

Just make sure that you are actually doing something worth listening to or watching… gimmicks will only take you so far.

While you should learn how to choose appropriate gigs… you should also be versatile. This doesn’t mean that you have to arrive at every gig with every style of music, and compromise your own sense of style and musical taste in order to water it down for the masses. It simply means that you shouldn’t pigeonhole yourself if you want to provide value.

I know that when I play a fashion show in a night club, I need to play music that is upbeat and bouncy without being too obnoxious or vocal. I know that when I play an underground event at a warehouse somewhere, my crowd is going to be bored to tears if I play 95bpm jazzy trip-hop. Big wobbly dubstep tracks don’t typically belong at a coffee shop at 8 PM.

Some Final Tips

Don’t expect to quit your day job right away. In today’s digitally accessible world, learning how to become a DJ is easy… but making a living DJing is hard. I’m not saying it can’t be done… it can! But it’s important to realize that you need to put in the work, and it doesn’t happen overnight.

Do what makes you happy.

Don’t ever move past step 10 on this list. Always develop yourself as a person and as a DJ. Don’t stagnate!

Learn the value of subtlety. This will help you with your crowd reading and will help you turn your sets into a journey instead of a cyclone.

It doesn’t matter that anyone can DJ these days. What matters is that you do it better.

What To Do Next

The hustle of the DJ never ends, and in order to be successful, he or she must be willing to evolve and mold themselves in order to meet the wants and needs of their audience over time.

There’s a lot to consider when deciding how to become a DJ. It can be intimidating to take all of this in. But, we’re here to help.

At the Passionate DJ Podcast, we strive to become the best DJs we can be. We hope that you will join us as a listener. Because together, we’re becoming better DJs through passion and purpose.

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4 Steps to More Purposeful DJing

DAVID MICHAEL 0 Comments August 26, 2015

Many of us got into DJing because we had a love of music, or we wanted to be in charge of rocking a party, or we were enthralled by the turntable mastery of someone like Q-Bert.

But that starry-eyed excitement only propels us so far. Most DJs will plateau and some point, both in regards to skill and in regards to career advancement.

Even a lot of “bedroom-only” DJs can feel stagnant and empty, watching their turntables collect dust in the corner and wondering if they are simply over that phase in their life.

What’s missing here is a desire to get serious about “purpose”.

Get Analytical

What is your “why”?

Take some time to think about what you actually want to get out of DJing. Do you love sharing new music with a receptive audience? Do you like rocking a party with everyone’s favorite hits? Is it your job? Do you enjoy putting on a performance?

All of these types of questions have implications in regards to how to pursue DJing. Gaining clarity on this early on will help you to proceed from a more informed perspective.

If you already have a pretty active DJing schedule, take some time to get focused and organized. Many DJs assume that they are only “on duty” when they are behind the decks, but some off-hours preparation and promotion can do wonders in regards to advancing (and building a following).

Set Goals

Perhaps a bit too obvious for this type of post, but goal-setting is crucial for anyone wanting to further develop a career, interest, or hobby. Unless you’re completely satisfied with where you are, if you’re not setting goals — real, measurable goals, you’re already doing it wrong.

This is important both on a large and a small scale. If you have only large, pie-in-the-sky goals (e.g. “I want to be a famous superstar DJ!)… you’ll never take the time to figure out how to get there.

In episode 16 of The Passionate DJ Podcast, Joe Pardo explains to us the difference in defining short-term and long-term goals. Your big goals are in a constant state of change… ever-evolving as you advance through life, whereas small goals are constantly added.

(For more on this, you can listen to episode 16 right here.)

One more important point on this subject: it’s important to celebrate the completion of goals, big and small. Claim those small victories, and use them as motivation towards your bigger picture.

Do Work

Some people are great at the “setting goals” part, but not so much when it comes to follow-through.

Advancement requires effort. Actual, legitimate effort. Elbow-grease. The grind.

DJs often whine and complain about a lack of gigs, a lack of Facebook followers, or a lack of interest in their latest mix. Yet, if you ask what steps they are taking to fix it, they can’t give you a good answer.

It may be pretty easy to “become” a DJ, but that doesn’t mean it’s easy to succeed as one.

Want to learn how to scratch? Tried it once or twice and found it too difficult? Then you’re right… but the problem isn’t the level of difficulty, it’s you.

There’s no substitute for learning a craft than to dedicate the time it deserves.

Engage

When you’re invested in building up your community, it tends to give you a sense of focus. If you know what “your community” is (for instance, a local hip-hop scene or couples preparing for marriage), do everything you can to be the best at serving them. Make yourself a resource to others who may be having struggles of their own.

The idea here is positive networking. This leads to good working relationships, and some of them will even lead to real friendships. And that sort of camaraderie can do wonders.

My local dance music scene in Dayton, OH has almost entirely been rebuilt from the ground-up based on this sort of like-minded group effort. And some of that effort has lead to more, better gigs for me. And my skills have come in handy for many local promoters and DJs in my area. I’ve seen first hand that, so long as you get the right heads together, this stuff works.

If you have fans, interact with them. Make them feel special, because they are.

Quick Tips…

Accept criticism, and move on. Drama is only a distraction.

Be professional. Taking charge of your DJ career, and treating it like a business (in other words, a brand) gives you a huge leg up.

Instead of emulating your heroes, ask yourself “What problem am I trying to solve?” or, alternatively, “What audience am I trying to serve?”

Discover the value you offer as a DJ, and find the audience that needs it.

By the way, if you missed it above, check out this episode of the podcast for more:

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The Personality Traits of Great DJs

DAVID MICHAEL 3 Comments July 14, 2015

In a day in age where a budget DJ controller and an iPhone can play a functional gig, DJing is as accessible to the masses as it’s ever been. As the technology continues to develop, it’s become more and more difficult to play a blatantly bad-sounding DJ set.

However, it’s insanely easy to boring. Average. Mediocre.

Push play. Sync. Mix 32 bars.

Let’s face it: there are lots of DJs these days. And that’s great! But, that also makes it harder to stand out. Being “good at beatmatching” is no longer enough.

So what are the personality traits that are shared amongst great DJs?

Empathy vs. Apathy

The job of the DJ is to find a musical common ground; to provide a soundtrack that enhances the existing atmosphere and the vibe of the crowd.

The most bull-headed DJs won’t consider the feelings of their audience. We want to make a connection with the actual humans on the dance floor! And if you can’t relate, you can’t deliver.

A happy crowd leads to a fulfilled DJ. Put yourself in their shoes, and take note of what’s working for them.

It’s easy to impose our musical agenda on a captive audience. But the greatest DJs are able to recognize how their music is affecting others.

In my book, it’s one of the most helpful traits that any DJ could have. The very idea of crowd-reading depends on empathy, and it allows you to pivot if what you’re doing isn’t working.

Helpfulness vs. Greediness

Hate it or love it, modern DJs wear a lot of hats. We often find ourselves operating as our own PR, promoters, booking agents, web designers, event planners, etc.

This can be frustrating, and leads to that “jack of all trades, master of none” feeling. This is why it’s crucial to make yourself a resource to others… and to nurture your own network.

Busy-bee DJs are a prerequisite for building a healthy and vibrant scene. When you do good things for those around you, it doesn’t go unnoticed, and people are more apt to help you out when you’re in a bind. This sort of positive collaboration only serves to push everyone forward.

The DJ that only cares about themselves is rarely satisfied, rarely connects with their audience, and ends up being a caustic element in their local music community.

You’ll quickly find that a “take, take, take” attitude is unsustainable. The most successful and fulfilled DJs realize that a generous and uplifting attitude, whenever possible, gets them much farther than drawing lines.

Persistence vs. Flakiness

Building an audience. Gaining momentum. Scoring better gigs. Connecting with the right people. Developing your sound. Branding yourself. Garnering local support.

These are all things which require consistency. Steady work. Constant delivery.

Without a solid and steady approach to self-promotion, you’re basically hoping to win the lottery.

The smart DJ realizes that they’re not going to win them all. We’re gonna play our share of empty rooms. If you promote shows, sometimes you’re gonna lose your ass due to poor attendance. Be prepared to fail. It’s part of the game.

The DJ with a lot of heart, and willingness to push through the boring parts, has a better chance of winning the numbers game.

Patience

The DJ who knows when to hold back, and understands subtlety, is worth their weight in gold. It’s not always GO-GO-GO… it’s let’s go somewhere together.

Great DJs know when to hold back. They know when to stop building energy, and plateau for a bit. They know when a little holding back will pay off in the big picture.

Banger, after banger, after banger, can be both exhausting and boring. If you want to be a great DJ, you need to learn when to fall back, and when to strike!

Sasha and John Digweed are my go-to examples for patient DJing. We spend some time exploring this in Episode 112 of the podcast, Digging For Bedrock:

Adaptability

There are always times when it’s appropriate to stand your ground, but making everything all about you is a fantastic way for people to stop paying attention.

A stubborn DJ will be plighted by stunted growth.

Nothing is certain: crowds change, venues change, moods change… hell, even entire scenes change. Having a fluid approach allows you to make adjustments towards what’s working… allowing you to be an effective, memorable music selector.

There are a lot of things that can affect the vibe of your dance floor, and the overall climate of the dance music scene. The key is finding how to relate to your audience.

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10 Secrets Of Highly Successful DJs

What are the things that successful DJs tend to know that others maybe struggle to work out? Apart from the skills of doing the job, what makes some DJs last the pace while others burn out or get disillusioned? That's what we're looking at today.

In today’s article, I’m going to step back from the specifics (we’re busy teaching all of those in our DJ courses every day) and look at the big, overarching things that you’ll need to get right if you want real, lasting success in this game. If that’s your aim, I hope these points help you to “fine tune” your approach and get where you want to go a little more easily.

Get some work experience – Want to be a DJ? Then get out there! Nobody ever learned anything in their bedroom. So you can’t get a gig? Then help someone else. Do some flyering. Help set up the gear, or a club night’s decor. Offer to collect email addresses for a local DJ when he or she plays. Offer to do a half-hour warm-up before the club opens. Be inventive – but get out there. That’s where you’ll learn

Be a music fan first – and don’t be in too much of a hurry – Good DJs aren’t born, they’re made. Behind every great DJ is a wealth of clubbing, crate-digging, mix-swapping and general music loving. Don’t forget to develop your taste as you develop your DJ skills. However much you’re itching to get behind those decks, if you’ve got nothing to say when you do, you got there too early. Enjoy the music. Learn everything you can about it. You don’t become a music expert overnight, so enjoy the learning curve. It’ll all aid you when you finally do get your break

Focus hard on your music collection – Individual gigs, club residencies, even whole scenes come and go, but the best DJs have music collections they spend a lifetime slowly, slowly building up. This “behind the scenes” work isn’t glamorous, but great music is the foundations of your career. When you finally surface as a polished, professional DJ with a crate full of magic, only you will know how you collected those tunes over the years – and nobody will be able to reverse engineer your path. You’ll be unique. You’ll have earned it

Work hard and remember nobody is indispensable – Putting the hours in is of the utmost importance. Nobody is so gifted that they can just “wing it”, and if you don’t commit to this and work hard, trust me – somebody else will and they’ll nab your spot every time. People who work hard and make a big effort to go the extra mile do stand out at any stage in their career. It’s always a good thing to remind yourself that you can’t take anything you have for granted, that no one is indispensable, not even you…

Look and act the part – If you turn up late and scruffy, the impression you give is “don’t give a damn”. It’s important to be both reliable and well turned out. By looking and acting like “somebody”, (and I don’t mean being cocky and diva-like, I just mean well dressed, washed, alert and with a sparkle in your eye!) you say: “I’m the person in charge of this party, I’m someone to lead tonight’s fun, trust me – and let’s go!” It’s partly how you dress/appear, but also partly your professionalism. Be the pro. People remember and prefer to work with pros

Disregard your age (young or old) – You’re never too young to “make it” (at least, early 20s is old enough); it’s to an extent a young person’s game. But they again, there’s something weird about DJing. It seems to really not matter so much how old people are. Maybe it’s because age = a good tune collection, but if you can keep up, you’re going to be fine. What’s more important than how old you are is how relevant you are. If you can’t connect with your audience, you can’t expect them to connect with you. If you decided to shut yourself off from the music they love years ago, well they’re not going to give much time to the music YOU love when you play a tired DJ set in front of them. Stay in touch, stay enthusiastic, and age is – to quote the cliche – simply a number

Take time to relax and recharge – You’re in this for the long run, so don’t burn out. Sure you’re passionate, sure you’ve got to put the work in – but if you put so much work in that you lose perspective on the bigger picture (family, rest, rejuvenation, stuff outside of DJing), in the end, you lose. Whether it’s a month a year completely off, every Monday and Tuesday relaxing after a hard weekend working, or just a sacrosanct barbecue every Sunday with the family – pick your relaxation, and enjoy it. Remember, a lot of creative thinking gets done when we take time to kick back

Find a way to unwind after gigs – Getting home at 4am or whatever having just played an electric DJ set can leave you wired and far from ready for sleep! It’s an adrenalin thing and it goes with the territory, but you need tactics for relaxing and unwinding. One good “balancer” for me has always been exercise – just running four or five times a week seems to leave me properly ready for sleep at night even if I’ve been DJing or whatever. If I don’t do it I seem to get lethargic and restless at the same time. Do what works for you – but remember that finding a way to unwind is important in this game

Control your nerves – All DJs get nervous. If you don’t, you’re doing it wrong. The trick is to be professional enough to hide it. Sure, stuff can go wrong, but your job as a DJ is to hide that side of things form the audience as much as you can. They don’t care, it’s not their problem! Good DJs realise that and fix stuff unobtrusively and deftly. Of course, experience gets you better at this, but remember that having nerves is fine. It keeps you on your toes, and that’s actually a good thing

Have confidence in yourself and your abilities – Again it’s a cliche, but often the only thing holding you back is you. Dare to dream. Have a vision for where you want to be. Sure, you might not be the polished, finished article, but it’s in our nature to put our own efforts down and elevate those of others. Be aware of this and compensate for it. Chance are you HAVE “got it”, you ARE “good enough”. A bit more self belief can be all it takes to accelerate your career. Being a bit easier on yourself will make your journey more fun. Ask for the advice and opinion of those who you respect, enjoy the ride, and trust in yourself

What else do you think are qualities all successful DJs share? A business-minded approach? A family background of success? Immense self belief? “Right place, right time”? Let us know your thoughts in the comments.