

The Boston Globe

STARTING FROM SCRATCH

Author(s): Emily Sweeney, Globe Staff

Date: July 4, 2003

Page: E12

Section: Arts

Rare is the classroom that boasts gleaming, top-notch stereo equipment, techno music blaring from speakers, a mini refrigerator full of bottled water and Red Bull, and teachers wearing hockey jerseys and baseball caps. But then, the DJ Mix Academy in Winchester is an unusual educational facility.

Launched in January by veteran Boston DJs Peter Souhleris and Manny Ferreiros, the DJ Mix Academy, located beside the Noisefloor recording studio in a nondescript office building, teaches wannabe DJs the fundamentals of operating the turntables, spinning vinyl, and making beat-driven music flow. Classes range from a one-hour seminar that introduces novices to the turntables, to advanced courses that focus on studio production and more sophisticated skills such as scratching. Still, for all the background and technique offered, the courses won't transform novices into slick club DJs overnight, cautions Ferreiros, who is better known to local clubgoers as DJ Manolo. It takes plenty of time - and practice - to master the art of spinning.

"We're not making DJs," Ferreiros says. "You're not going to leave here after four weeks and be [DJing] at Avalon, just like after taking a CPR course you're not going to go [to work at] Mass. General. But the stuff you learn [at DJ Mix Academy] is important, it's the basics. Then it's up to the individual, because this is an art form."

The long road to turntable dexterity isn't deterring potential spinners. On a recent Wednesday evening, six aspiring disc jockeys sat on translucent plastic stools inspecting the shiny knobs and chrome tonearms of the Numark TT200 turntables in front them.

Colleen Mootrey, 16, pressed the button to start and stop the turntable. Mootrey, dressed in black and wearing a leather bracelet, DJs for the radio station at Masconomet Regional High School in Boxford, WBMT-FM 88.3. A fan of hard rock bands such as Disturbed and Flaw, she says she signed up for the class to learn the basics of DJing.

"I'm not planning on being a DJ for a job - mostly just for fun and help with the radio," Mootrey said. Instructor Paul Dailey, sporting a cleanly shaven head and goatee, jots down facts on a white board and delves into the history of DJing. He starts with some of the genre's legends: Kool Herc, one of the first hip-hop DJs; house music pioneer Frankie Knuckles; Grandmaster Flash; and Herbie Hancock.

Later, Joshua Carl takes over the teaching duties. He's outfitted in a Red Sox cap, jeans, and a Fork Records T-shirt. He explains another basic concept to the students: the difference between nightclub DJs and "turntablists," that is DJs who create complex music by scratching records and manipulating a crossfader.

"Turntablism is a whole other realm," Carl tells the class, explaining how the way "battle DJs" use scratching is completely different from the routine mixing typically done by nightclub DJs. The six pupils observe quietly as he demonstrates the scratching techniques. Pumping from black speakers that hang in the classroom's corners, the music he makes fills the room.

Out from the booth

Ferreiros held residencies at the Roxy from 1992 to 1994, Avalon from 1994 to 2001, and has performed with internationally known DJs Paul Oakenfold, Danny Tenaglia, and Junior Vasquez.

Souhleris, who has a degree in architectural design, started DJing after graduating high school in 1987, and has spun at Avalon, Karma, Vertigo, and Vision.

Last year the two friends started talking seriously about starting a school.

"Both of us had people asking us how to DJ," said Souhleris. "I've tutored a couple of guys. We were talking about how many approach us and we said it's time we put an institution together."

Their idea was not a new one. In recent years, following an explosion in the popularity of electronic and DJ-based music, DJ schools have begun popping up, including the Scratch DJ Academy in New York City and Groove Riders DJ School in California.

Souhleris and Ferreiros have witnessed firsthand the elevation of DJ culture. During the past two decades, DJs have been transformed from faceless phantoms hidden in booths to spotlighted artists in clubs, concerts, and advertisements. Drum 'n' bass diva DJ Rap has been featured in Twix candy bar commercials. DJ Skribble appeared in Britney Spears's "I'm A Slave 4 U" music video. And Paul Oakenfold's devoted fans have been dubbed "Oakenfolk" by the press.

"DJing as a whole is only 20 years young," said Souhleris. "Nightclub DJs came about in the 1970s, and in the '80s and '90s it came to fruition. It was the late '90s when the DJ became the rock star. It's there to stay. It's not a fad. There's so much interest in it. It's all about the DJs."

And here, in this small classroom, Souhleris and the rest of the DJ Mix Academy faculty aim to teach up-and-coming DJs the skills necessary to pack a dance floor and further the art form.

The costs of classes range from \$25 for the one-hour "Intro to DJ'ing" to \$325 for eight hours of more advanced instruction over four weeks. Students first acquaint themselves with the equipment, learning about the different types of needles and tonearms. Later, they dig into the basics of mixing by counting a song's beats-per-minute (known as BPM) and eventually practice blending the beats of dance hits. Think Madonna's "Die Another Day" morphing into Cher's "A Different Kind of Love Song."

And for their final exam? The DJ 101 course wraps up with each student mixing and recording his or her own demo CD.

Motley crew

Aspiring DJs enroll at the school for different reasons. Some aim to spin professionally at weddings or bar mitzvahs. Others want to learn how to use the equipment they already own and make CDs for friends. Still others hope to perform and land a gig at a nightclub someday. In this introductory class, the motley crew of students includes two teenage girls, a young man sporting tattoos, a middle-aged businessman dressed conservatively in a polo shirt and khakis, and a spunky doctor. All share a common interest: They love music.

Dr. Jolanda Zickmann, 34, an anesthesiologist at Lawrence General Hospital, was taking the "DJ'ing 101" course to learn how to use the Technics 1200 MK turntables, Pioneer CD players, and Numark DM3002X mixer she bought earlier this year. "I got the creme de la creme," she said.

At the hospitals where she has worked, she's often been called the unofficial resident DJ, toting about 50 CDs into the operating room to provide the soundtrack for the medical staffer performing surgeries, something she says is a common practice. In fact, it was while training at Johns Hopkins in Baltimore that Zickmann learned how to please listeners as they labored in an operating room.

"If [the surgeon] says 'You're pissing me off,' you have to turn it off. I had one neurosurgeon who insisted on listening to country music," said Zickmann. "It was painful for me."

Ethan Haslett, a 31-year-old network engineer for Fidelity Investments, signed up because he wanted to get back into DJing. He was into the rave scene in the early 1990s. "I'm interested in it again and hoping that I might be able to DJ professionally in a nightclub, but don't necessarily expect to make a living doing it," Haslett said.

Jay Batson, 48, is interested in DJing as a hobby, a side activity to his day job at Pingtel Corp., a high-tech phone company he founded in Woburn. He listens to Miles Davis, Ministry of Sound, and John Digweed and said he's looking forward to spinning at his own parties, and improving his skills at making mix CDs.

"This is a fun sideline to my serious life at work," said Batson. "I doubt I'll get booked at a nightclub unless I'm a 48-year-old novelty act, but it'd be a blast and I'd do it in an instant."

Emily Sweeney can be reached at esweeney@globe.com.