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SPENDING

Mix, Scratch and Spin: You, Too, Can Become a D.J.

By DAVID KOEPPPEL



Michael Nagle for The New York Times

Lauren Lipsay, 18, a high school student, took several D.J. classes and set up a \$1,200 studio in the basement of her home in Great Neck, N.Y. She got her first gig in April.

AT nightclubs, Bill Blaney long admired the skills and style of hip-hop D.J.'s. He spoke for years about wanting to keep an audience enthralled by scratching records and mixing digital sound to create music.

Last fall, his girlfriend told him to put up or shut up about his disc-jockey dreams. She gave Mr. Blaney, 31, a \$300 gift certificate to the Scratch DJ Academy in Manhattan.

Since January, Mr. Blaney, an information technology software researcher based in Manhattan, has completed two Scratch courses: a

six-week beginner's class and a three-week crash course in digital D.J. work. The two classes cost \$500. He also plans to take private lessons.

Mr. Blaney has set up a mini-studio in his small East Village apartment, with a \$400 audio mixer he bought on Craigslist and two \$500 turntables he found on [eBay](#). He also paid \$500 for Serato Scratch Live, a popular digital software program.

Mr. Blaney says he hopes that his hobby will eventually become a part-time job that could include work in small New York lounges and clubs. By October, he wants to be ready for his first unofficial gig: a friend's open-air wedding in Woodstock, N.Y.

Becoming a club or party D.J. has added a new — and more achievable — dimension to the standard rock 'n' roll dream, and schools have emerged to help make it a reality.

Scratch runs schools in New York, Miami and Los Angeles. Other schools — including the DJ Mix Academy, with three locations in Massachusetts, and the Norcal DJ and Music Production Academy in Berkeley, Calif. — are teaching musical neophytes and fledgling professionals of all ages how to scratch, blend and mix music.

Most of the beginning to advanced classes at Scratch cost \$200 to \$500, while private lessons cost from \$80 to \$110 an hour. The programs run on an academic model, with quizzes, final exams and diplomas awarded to those who successfully complete the coursework.

In addition to offering more traditional classes, the DJ Mix Academy has a self-study curriculum that allows students to learn at their own pace through DVDs and audio recordings, with the assistance, online and by telephone, of a D.J. instructor. The course costs \$275, with students paying for their own equipment. It also has a program that brings the professional D.J.'s and equipment to schools, homes and camps around New England to teach and to play music at parties and other events. Eric Patel, the school's director of operations, said programs like his "shorten the learning curve" for aspiring D.J.'s.

Mark Katz, a musicologist and assistant professor at the [University of North Carolina](#) at Chapel Hill, credits the schools with democratizing the process of becoming a D.J.

“It’s a fairly recent phenomenon that seems to be getting more popular,” said Professor Katz, a fledgling D.J. himself, who is writing a book called “Groove Music: The Art and Culture of the Hip-Hop DJ,” to be published by Oxford University Press.

Last December, Professor Katz attended a five-day, \$300 D.J. “boot camp” at Scratch in Miami. Although he was able to get comfortable with some basic scratches (sounds produced when a record is moved back and forth as it is being played) and beat juggling (manipulating two or more music samples to create a new composition) he still considers his skills to be “poor.”

D.J. schools are “broadening clientele for turntablism and encouraging more girls and women to try it out.” Professor Katz said. “It’s been a traditionally male activity learned in their bedrooms and basements.”

The basement is exactly where Lauren Lipsay set up her own \$1,200 audio studio. Last fall Ms. Lipsay, a high school senior who lives in Great Neck, N.Y., enrolled in DJ 101, a six-week introductory course at the Scratch Academy that teaches basic mixing techniques.

At the same time, she took Beat Making 101, a beginners class in production. She followed that with an intermediate D.J. class in which students are expected to create a six-record club set/mix tape.

The classes excited her enough to convince her parents to help pay for her modest basement studio. She bought Stanton turntables, a mixer, speakers and [headphones](#).

Unexpectedly, Ms. Lipsay got her first gig while on vacation in the Bahamas in April. “It was so exhilarating; I had never performed before,” Ms. Lipsay said about the experience, in which she performed

with a professional D.J. on a crowded Nassau beach. “It wasn’t anything crazy, just some basic mixing.”

She said she hoped to be a D.J. for her own parties when she attends the [University of Pennsylvania](#) in the fall.

Amy Yeh, 23, a graduate student in music education at [Columbia University](#)’s Teachers College in Manhattan, has taken two classes at Scratch. They were a far cry from her undergraduate classical music training at the Eastman School of Music in Rochester, where hip-hop and electronic music were definitely not part of the curriculum. Ms. Yeh would like to buy some of the same D.J. equipment that Ms. Lipsay and Mr. Blaney did. Ms. Yeh plans to become a music teacher, but would eventually like to use her D.J. skills for friends and family, and maybe in clubs once she feels comfortable enough.

As he does research for his book, Professor Katz is immersing himself in the changing face of D.J. culture, with the help of a \$74,000 federal grant from the [National Science Foundation](#). The money has allowed him to buy D.J. equipment for his research.

That includes two Technics 1200 turntables at \$450 each, a Rane TTM 56 audio mixer for \$750 and two Shure M44-7 cartridges (which hold the styluses) at \$75 apiece.

“D.J.’s rarely buy everything at once,” Professor Katz said. “Sometimes they go bit by bit, month to month. There’s a certain barrier to entry, but there are ways to getting into it without spending a lot of money.”

He has slowly built his own record collection with an eclectic mix of rock, hip-hop and funk, and sound and drum-break samples. He has found that vinyl records can be bought cheaply at many garage sales for as little as 50 cents or \$1 each. Mr. Katz said D.J.’s who are vinyl aficionados often had tens of thousands of records.

Some D.J.’s, however, have given up vinyl completely. Instead of dragging hundreds of records to club dates, they use CD players, MP3s

and computers to create beats and sounds. Top-notch CD decks/MP3 players can cost \$700 to \$1,300.

D.J. skills have become so popular that some companies use them as a team-building exercise. Earlier this year, the co-founder of the Norcal DJ school, Thoryn Stephens, left to start Syncopate, a Los Angeles business that caters exclusively to corporations. Syncopate aims to use its D.J. group exercises to improve a company's long-term employee relations and morale.

Syncopate allows corporate employees to use digital mixing equipment to create rudimentary music compositions, with the help of an iMac computer and Serato software that can hold thousands of song samples. Teammates assume the roles of D.J., composer and product manager and are given several hours to assemble their final product.

THE company charges its clients \$2,000 to \$10,000 for half-day events and \$5,000 to \$15,000 for full-day engagements. Mr. Stephens said that this was competitive with other team-building activities.

(Several years ago, Scratch also started corporate team-building programs and events.)

Even the most conservatively dressed executives tend to loosen up when making music, Mr. Stephens said. And participants aren't limited to hip-hop or electronic music. "A pharmaceutical company put together a pretty good folk track," he recalled. "I've seen [M.I.T.](#) graduates leading conga lines."