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DJ Schools: Competitive Advantage or a Wasted Spin?

Filed under: [DJ Lab](#) by [Tina M. Courtney](#) on January 9, 2007

DJ Schools are cropping up all across the country, but their worth and legitimacy is a matter of hot debate. Although America has been slow on the uptake compared to nations like Canada, Australia, and the UK, innovative stateside turntablists have realized the immense market potential of passing on their know-how and have started offering classes aimed at assisting wannabe DJs. The majority of DJs are exclusively self-taught, so the idea of a more formal education in this field is ripe with controversy. Is the resistance legitimate, or do these schools really infuse students with the skills and confidence they need to hit superstar status?



Vancouver has the [Rhythm Institute](#), South Africa has the DJ Mix Club School, and Australia has the [United DJ Mixing School](#). Each institution promises to educate students on core DJing skills, and some offer advice on the business side as well. America's top choices include the [DJ Mix Academy](#), based in Boston, and [Scratch DJ Academy](#), which first formed in New York in 2002 and now has branches in Miami and Los Angeles. Scratch is by far the most prestigious, partly because of its Co-founder, the late/great "Jam Master Jay" of *Run DMC* fame.

Michael Cannady, Director of Business Development for *Scratch*, helps to shed light on whether or not such structure and format actually help to improve their students' chances for a successful career, "[Scratch DJ Academy](#) was created to lower the barrier to entry for people interested in the art forms of DJing and music production," he says. This brings up an imperative point—while the club scene is littered with young hopefuls who eye DJs with envy, getting the necessary goods can be expensive and overwhelming. But enroll in just one class at Scratch," says Cannady, "and you've got the keys to the electronic kingdom." That's because at Scratch, you get to use the gear. "[Students] are given unlimited access to our equipment while you're enrolled," Cannady says, "If you don't have the money to invest in turntables or beat-making equipment, Scratch is a great way to learn basics [and at the same time get] access to the necessary equipment."

It's a point well made, as a class here costs far less than the purchase of an entire DJ set-up. Courses run about \$300, including "DJ boot camps" that cater to beginner, intermediate, and advanced levels. They even feature private one-on-one sessions for about \$90 per hour. Compare that to an average of \$1,000 or more to construct a full turntable, mixer, headphones, and speaker set-up, and it represents a substantial discount, provided you're only seeking a minimal amount of training out of the gate. Consider this a much less expensive way to discover whether or not DJing is truly your calling; it sure beats selling your equipment online at a massive loss, if and when you discover it's just not your game.

So what do these courses teach you that your DJ buddies can't? "Our curriculum was designed to help students learn both correctly and quickly. It's true that you can learn a lot of these skills from a friend who DJs or maybe even on your own, but learning from Scratch is quicker and [we] make sure you learn the right way."



One glance at the faculty members legitimizes Cannady's claim—the Los Angeles arm features instructors like "Mr. Choc" (*Beat Junkies* and *Power 106* coordinator), Producer, "DJ Faust" of *Bomb Records*, and "DJ Shortee," the first female to ever release a solo turntablist album, called *The Dreamer*. But will these bona fide experts actually help you land a gig? Not exactly. "We do provide tips and suggestions on how to make a career in DJing," says Cannady, "But we do not provide job placement for our students. We'll give you the tools to be a great DJ but you've got to get your first gigs on your own." So although you might meet a person or two who can give you some pointers on how to take your skills to a commercial level, when it comes

to landing your first gig, you're still flying solo.

If access to top-tier equipment and talented instructors still leave you pondering how worthwhile these outlets are, consider one more important contribution. When asked how the electronica community has responded to Scratch's offerings, Cannady is very encouraged, "The support for our schools and our overall mission has been amazing. The DJ community in particular loves the concept because it helps bring legitimacy to their art form. We treat the turntable as an instrument and give DJs a platform to teach the craft that they love."

Like it or not, offering a formal education in the realm of DJing may, in fact, help give it a more substantial and respectable reputation to those on the outside looking in, and this certainly bodes well for the industry. How many times have you tried to explain to the under-educated masses that DJing is more than just slapping on a couple of records? Perhaps the very presence of these schools will solidify the occupation as a real-deal exploration. Or perhaps it will only further commercialize an already saturated trade.

So what do critics have to say about these new "trade schools" for aspiring turntablists? DJ schools aren't yet embraced universally by the industry, and some future employers may see your participation in them as extraneous and unnecessary. Still, you're not likely to be turned down for gigs just because you pursued "formal" training.

And why is it that some fellow DJs—especially those who are truly self-taught—shun the notion of "schooling?" It may be in part because they didn't have the same opportunities, or because the scene is still viewed as an underground, independent industry, so if you ask them, you may encounter biases against "going to school."

Does Scratch see any drawbacks for those who pass through their doors? Again, Scratch Director of Development, *Michael Cannady* says there aren't many. "The only drawback I can think of is that in a formal setting, some people think it will be easy to learn how to DJ. They don't realize that you really have to put some time into this and practice. You have to remember that just like the guitar or the piano, it takes years to master the turntables. I think some people think they will learn how to be a superstar DJ in just six weeks, which is a bit unrealistic."

It seems that if you keep your expectations in tow, commit to busting your butt, and accept the fact that not everyone will find your efforts worthwhile, then it seems you're good to go. So whether or not you aspire to be a hardcore turntablist or a beat-matching pro, there's something to be said for this new wave of formal training. Advantages like access to equipment, the chance to get tried-and-true advice from professionals, and the opportunity to find out once and for all if you really have the goods and drive to make DJing your career, make it appealing.



Rest assured, too, that, as a DJ student, your musical preference is irrelevant. At places like Scratch, everyone is welcome. And Cannady says, students often benefit from the variety, "It's always nice to see a Rock DJ and Hip-Hop DJ learn together and feed off of each other despite their interests in different types of music."

Consider these schools yet another avenue to pursue your goal. In the end, if these classes are what tip the scales and propel you to achieve your dream career, you won't give a damn if anyone gives you grief. And in the immortal words of *Jam Master Jay*, don't forget why you're doing this to begin with, "DJs make the world go round."