



ROCK THE DANCE FLOOR!

**The proven five-step
formula for total
DJing success**

PHIL MORSE

Praise

"Phil Morse is on a lifelong mission not only to get more people into the world of DJing, but to make sure they do so in the right way. I've read and watched his work over many years, and have always found his approach to be both accessible *and* comprehensive - a rare quality indeed. With this new book he breaks down the process of learning to DJ into simple steps any music fan could take."

Mojaxx, DJ City

"Phil just delivers the goods when it comes to DJ education - and he does it in a way that's very comprehensible, not pretentious or preachy. There are many ways of succeeding as a DJ nowadays, but the competition is fierce, so you gotta be versatile and always stay on top of your game. This is where the advice of such an experienced DJ tutor with a background in journalism and club promoting becomes invaluable."

Karsten Hainmueller, Traktor

"An extremely thorough and comprehensive look at the art of DJing. If you can't rock a party after reading this book and using the classic techniques and cool tricks it presents, you should probably try something else!"

Baptiste Grange, Serato

"Rock The Dancefloor! is a great asset for any DJ looking at how to get ahead in the DJing industry. The book contains a wealth of knowledge and practical information, that will help boost any DJ's career. Phil has amassed a veritable fount of knowledge from his time as a DJ and also as founder of Digital DJ Tips. His five-step system is an easy to follow guide for both beginners and experienced DJs. A great read whilst taking five from the day to day, or travelling from gig to gig."

Mick Wilson, DJ Mag

"There aren't many experienced, intelligent and sober people in this game, so when one of them commits to writing a full no-stone-unturned guide to DJing, you know it's an essential purchase!"

Rik Parkinson, Pioneer DJ

"If you are starting out as a DJ then this book is a no-brainer. If you've been a DJ for years then this book is a no-brainer! A 360° insight into the world of a DJ from instruction to getting yourself gigs and everything in-between."

Mark Walsh, Marked Events (BPM Pro Show Organisers)

"Phil from Digital DJ Tips has just created *the* one-stop resource for DJs that taps into thousands of hours of real life, real industry and real time DJ experience. From choice of equipment, music preparation and mixing techniques, right through to playing out in different scenarios and how to best promote yourself, securing a long-term career path

in this most aspiring and creative of industries, this guide has it all and more. This is your fast-track solution to removing all the hurdles that beset any DJ starting their journey – just add your creativity, imagination and dreams and Phil will provide the rest!”

Paul “Tinman” Dakeyne, producer/remixer

“I wish there had been a book like this when I started DJing. It’s the essential How-To guide for any new DJ starting out, and has a lot to teach old dogs like me, too!”

**David Dunne, club DJ, radio presenter and former head
of music at MTV**

“Phil really knows his stuff. His experience as a DJ, his success with Digital DJ Tips and, most importantly, his compassion in helping DJs of any level makes this a must-read for anyone interested in playing music for others.”

Constantin Koehncke, Native Instruments

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For Tony

Introduction

This book will teach you how to be a great DJ. Whether you want to land a dream gig in your favourite nightclub, play at that cool lounge bar in your town, set up as a mobile DJ, or just provide the music at parties for friends and family, everything you need to know is within these pages.

You wouldn't be alone in wanting to learn this. In an age where DJs are just as important as rock stars, it's not surprising that more people than ever are getting interested in the art and science of spinning tunes. Nobody ever forgets their first big dancefloor experience, or the DJ who provided it. Who wouldn't want to be in his or her shoes, at one with the crowd, gratefully receiving all that adoration and praise from a packed dancefloor?

As with so many things, DJing has been utterly transformed by the arrival of the digital age. Record shops largely no longer exist, having been replaced by online download stores and streaming music websites. For minimal outlay, you can buy DJ gear small enough to fit in your desk drawer that – working in tandem with your laptop – does so much more than the old-fashioned turntables and mixers of only a generation ago, and at a fraction of the cost. This has radically altered how today's DJs learn the craft, and given them a much wider choice of venues to play in – beach bars, cafes, and other smaller establishments, which could never fit traditional gear into their premises, happily welcome the

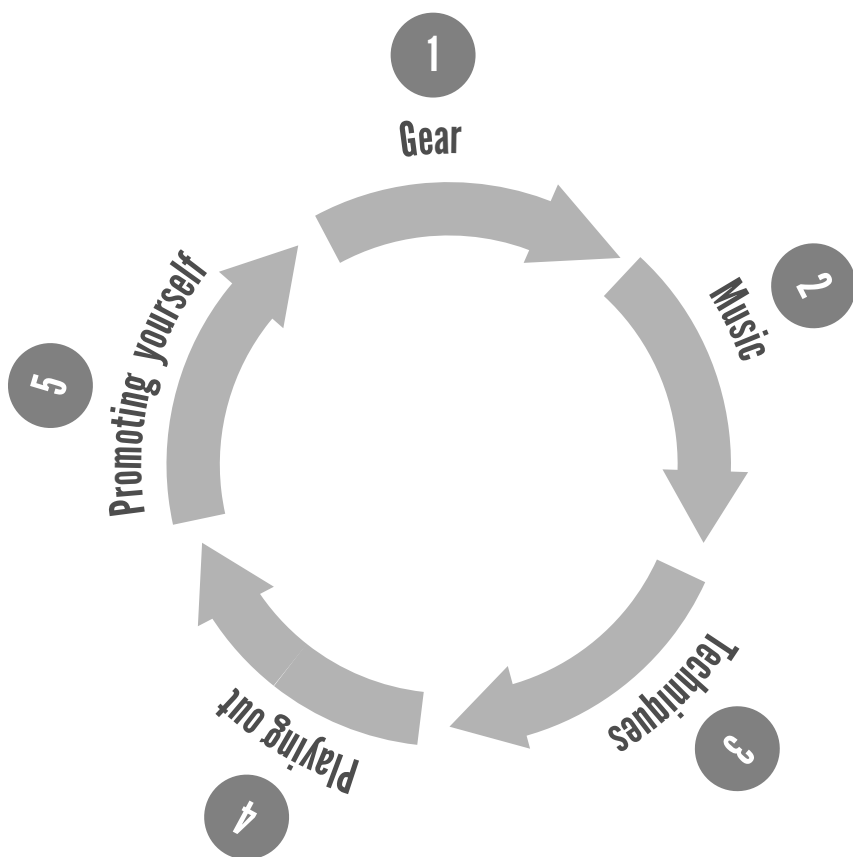
new breed of 'digital DJs'. The ways DJs share their work, gather a fan base and promote themselves have also completely changed in just a few short years.

Yet as the barriers to entry have lowered, making it sometimes feel like everyone is (or says they are) a DJ, paradoxically, the path to becoming a great DJ has become less clear. While learning the technical skills of DJing on old-fashioned equipment could be tricky, at least the route was clear. Nowadays, there is a hugely confusing choice of equipment, software, music file formats, and features that, at the same time as making digital DJing hugely exciting, has made it at best, puzzling, and at worse, a potentially expensive minefield for inexperienced DJs. What skills are you meant to be learning? What shortcuts is it OK to take? How will you know when you're good enough to play in public? How exactly are you meant to stand out and get ahead when everyone is a DJ?

That's why I wrote this book. As a DJ myself for over a quarter of a century, with a career that's taken me from the bars and clubs of my native Manchester to no lesser a venue than Privilege in Ibiza, the biggest club in the world, I've learned a thing or two about what it takes to achieve DJing success. As a self-proclaimed geek, too, I was one of the first to adopt digital DJing, back in 2004. The magazine I wrote for, *iDJ*, started passing the very earliest digital DJ controllers to me to review, because I was the only person who knew how they worked. I immediately saw the potential of these new devices to revolutionise the world of DJing, which over the

next five years they duly did, just as I'd predicted. Taking my skills from learning to DJ 'the old way' and applying them to the problems I could see the new generation of DJs having with this type of equipment and software, I founded Digital DJ Tips, which has gone on to become the world's biggest online DJ school, training tens of thousands of DJs in more than fifty countries. This book is the result of my experiences both as a DJ and in training others.

THE FIVE STEPS OF DJING SUCCESS



The book is divided into five core steps: Gear, Music, Techniques, Playing Out, and Promoting Yourself. It takes you logically, clearly and practically through the minefield, helping you to find the best tunes, master your equipment, practise effectively, smash it when you play your first gig, and then do all the things you need to do to keep the bookings rolling in. Whether you're a complete beginner, a bedroom DJ, a semi-pro, an experienced DJ returning to the game and curious about all this new technology, or even a musician or music producer wanting to add DJing to your skills and further your career, this book has been designed for you.

Whatever your type of music and wherever in the world you are, the truth is that, as a modern DJ, your skills need to be universal and transferrable. A mobile DJ might get the chance to play a club gig, and have to change their music radically as a result; a bedroom DJ may aspire to play a local festival, and need to know how to use the equipment provided instead of their own set-up; an underground DJ may be cajoled into playing a family member's wedding, and need to learn a whole new way of filling dancefloors.

In these modern times, the best DJs can not only play on any type of gear, but can put their minds to playing any type of DJ set too. Yet so much remains the same. Every night, in every big town and city in the world, countless DJs are stepping up to fill dancefloors and help people dance the night away. All have the chance to find great new music and be the first to play it to their audiences. When you

reduce it to its core, DJing is still about playing the right music for the people in front of you, right now. This book will help you to become the type of DJ who's fit and able to do that in these exciting times.

Step One: Gear

In this first step of the process, we'll cover all things 'gear'. I'll start by showing you the various parts that all DJ set-ups share in common, so you can see past the marketing hype and 'shiny new thing' syndrome and be sure about what you really need. You'll learn why nowadays it's almost always necessary to have a DJ laptop (even if you want to DJ on the one hand with old-fashioned turntables, or on the other using just a tablet), and we'll look at what software you'll need to have for your laptop. With your head aligned to what's really important and the computer side of it taken care of, I'll talk you through your hardware choices - not only the DJ gear itself, but all the accessories and extras you'll need to complete your set-up. And finally, I'll show you how to set everything up properly for smooth, trouble-free DJing.

Digital DJ Tips produces two free annually updated guides, covering all the latest DJ gear and software. Download your copies of each today from:

<http://www.digitaldjtips.com/gearguide>

Understanding DJ Gear

Introduction

Before you can have any confidence at all about making the right choices when it comes to spending the (sometimes large) sums of money needed to buy a DJ set-up, you need a good understanding of what DJ gear does. While just a few years ago, buying the gear was easy, albeit rather expensive (you bought two specialist turntables and a 'mixer' - the bit that sat between them and allowed you to blend the music the turntables were playing - plus some speakers and headphones, and you were done), today the choice out there is mind-boggling.

From everything-in-one-box systems to club-style DJ CD decks and mixers, to DJ software that runs on your laptop (and can work with or without various extra gadgets plugged in), to digital vinyl systems ('DVS'), to DJ apps for your tablet (or even your phone)...spend a cursory half hour browsing 'DJ set-up' online and you'd be forgiven for walking away twice as confused as when you started.

But if you're to start your new DJing hobby or career off on the right foot, and avoid a potentially expensive mistake or series of mistakes, you need to think like a pro. Luckily, I'm here to show you what the pros see when they assess *any* DJ set-up to help you cut through the marketing speak and avoid the shiny new thing trap that can lead to expensive, frustrating errors.

Ah, that shiny new thing syndrome. You know what I mean: being seduced by the latest and the greatest, this year's 'must have' this or that. We see people fall into this trap all the time at Digital DJ Tips, where we train thousands of people a year to DJ. It is always beginners, never pros, who suffer from this, and we usually diagnose it when we receive something like this in our inbox:

Hi! I've been DJing for a bit, but I'm struggling to get any better. Can you help? I've realised that my current set-up is a bit limited and I probably made a mistake when I bought it. I really should have bought something better first time around. Should I upgrade? In fact, there's something coming out next year that actually seems to have everything I need on it, and also has some stuff I hadn't thought of but that looks great. Truth is, I don't know what to do! Do I trade in my gear for something else, or wait a year and then buy the amazing new gear that's just around the corner? Either way I've got to do something, as my DJing is stalling right now...

Whenever I get a letter, email or forum comment like that, I patiently explain two things. Firstly, you can do more DJing on a cheap or free DJ app on your mobile phone today than the very best DJ systems could achieve just a decade or so ago, so unless you're a very advanced DJ, there's little to be gained from putting a hole in your wallet to chop and change your set-up. And secondly, if your DJing is stalling, the issue is never – listen to me – never your gear. It is *always* what you're doing (or not doing) with that gear.

We'll get on to the second point a little later, but the first point is important for now. Whatever you choose to DJ on (and by the end of this step you'll know for sure what you'll need), it's going to be OK. As long as you follow the advice here, I guarantee that you'll be confident in your first DJ gear purchase, and be certain that you're equipping yourself with everything you need to learn to DJ quickly and effectively.

How pros see DJ set-ups

So to begin to understand what's really going on in a DJ system - *any* DJ system - let's pretend we're in the shoes of a pro DJ. Not any pro DJ, but a pro DJ who has just been asked whether he can play a DJ set on a completely unfamiliar set-up in ten minutes' time. Our hero has clearly got no time to worry about the amazing must have features of this fantastic but totally alien DJ system. After all, he has got just a few minutes to get ready and then he's expected to perform.

So what does he look for in order to say yes or no to this request? What parts does he have to identify in order to decide if this strange DJ set-up has got what it takes for him to deliver the goods? There are just four things. Here they are:

Two independent music sources. In order for a DJ to play music continuously, he needs two music sources, so when he is playing a piece of music to his audience using one of those

sources, he can prepare the next piece of music using the other. This is so he can make a gapless transition between the two tracks when the time is right. A DJ's music sources are commonly called his or her 'decks'. Our DJ is going to want to know whether the format he has his music in can be played on whatever decks are available (for instance, it'd be pointless trying to play digital music files if all he's got for decks are a pair of old record players...).

A way of switching between the decks. There's not much point having two ways of playing music without being able to switch between them, and preferably do a bit more than that, such as 'fading' the music sources together (which is why the controls used to do this are typically called 'faders'). Otherwise, our DJ would need a separate amplifier and speaker system for each source, which would be crazy. So clearly a 'mixer' (to give this part of any DJ set-up its proper title) is a must-have.

A way of getting the music to the audience. Once our hero has his music sources identified and a way of blending them together, he needs to get that output from the mixer to the audience. So the next step in the equation is to identify the loudspeakers and the amplification system necessary to make the music loud enough, so that whether there are ten or 10,000 people ready to enjoy the DJ set, they can all hear it well. Our DJ is going to want to know that the speaker system is fit for purpose and how to control it.

A way of listening to stuff the audience isn't hearing. Typically via a pair of headphones, our pro DJ definitely needs a way of listening to the music source or sources that the audience *isn't* currently hearing. DJs need this function for several reasons: for instance, in order to preview the next track to see if it's suitable, to 'cue' the track up (to get it to the right point to start it playing when the time is right), or to adjust its levels so that when it's time to play it through the loudspeakers, it sounds just as good as the track currently playing. That's why the ability to monitor something different from what the audience is hearing is essential.

And that's it. At its heart, a DJ system simply needs to have these four things. Once our pro has worked this through, he will know whether it's possible to play on the gear in front of him or not. Indeed, a typical pro DJ faced with any unfamiliar set-up will work out the above in minutes, if not seconds. The internal dialogue will go something like this:

OK, let's turn everything down first so we don't have any loud surprises. Right, now how do I get my music playing? Ah right, here. Where do I plug my headphones in? Right, there! Let's hit play...I can see the meters working, it's coming through. The other deck? Yup, that's playing too. Now, where are my headphones' volume and selector? Great. Master volume? Are the amps on? Let's turn it up a bit. There we go! Yup, that sounds good, I reckon this will be loud enough when we crank things up. OK, all set! Now, where's the audience? I'll work everything else out as I go along...

As you work through the following chapters in this section of the book, I'll be explaining your options in terms of these four parts, because it will help you to understand perfectly well the otherwise bewildering range of choices out there. By the end of the section, you'll have all the information you need to make a good choice when it comes to equipping yourself with a DJ set-up of your own.

Keep your choice of gear in context

Before we get stuck in, I want to return to the second point that I make to any DJ who writes to me frustrated, blaming their gear for their lack of progress. While a good DJ will be able to play on every DJ set-up (as long as it has the four basic elements), a bad DJ will struggle to play on any DJ set-up.

The truth is that DJing isn't about the gear, any more than photography is about the camera or writing is about the pen you hold. These things are all just tools of the trade, and while of course they have an influence on what is and isn't possible, at the end of the day it's what you do with them that counts. Later on in this book you'll learn about all the various things you need to be a great DJ, but past a pretty early point, the gear isn't one of them.

Read this step well, choose wisely, then forget about your gear. We'll have more important things to concern ourselves with from step two onwards, I promise you. Indeed, my students tell me that the beauty of the way I

teach DJing is that by the end of one of our courses they feel confident that they'll be able to pick up the skills on *any* DJ gear, not just the particular DJ set-up they have bought for themselves.

However, one thing is certain: even the best DJs can't play with *nothing*. So let's start at a place you may be surprised by, but which actually, as you'll see, makes perfect sense: your computer.

How To Choose Your DJ Laptop

Introduction

'Why do I need a DJ laptop anyway?'

It's a good question, because while 'laptop DJing' (having a laptop right there with you when you DJ) is pretty common nowadays, it's by no means the only way of DJing. Maybe you just want to use CDs, which is another common way of DJing. Or maybe you're fancying DJing from your iPad. Or maybe you've spotted a 'no computer required' DJ system, using USB pens or drives to hold your music that you plug into it, and you fancy DJing in a manner similar to that.

You still need a laptop.

Or, to be more accurate, you still need a computer. And let's face it, for most people nowadays, 'computer' means 'laptop'. (If you're adamant that, come what may, you are never, ever going to take your laptop DJing with you, then by all means use a desktop computer instead, but for the rest of this chapter, I'm going to say 'laptop'.)

So why do you need one? In short, in order to prepare your music for DJing with. Because unless you intend only to play vinyl, using old-fashioned record decks, your music is going to be digital, and that means you need a laptop to deal with it. Even if you want to play CDs and just CDs, you're going to need to obtain music digitally in order to burn your own, which means you'll need a computer (and

one with a CD burner, too - something that's not standard nowadays).

At the very least, you'll be using your laptop for logging in to online music stores to purchase tracks, which you'll then download, organise, and prepare for DJing with, even if you then transfer that music to CD or USB drive to insert into your DJ gear or export it to your iOS or Android device to DJ from thereafter. And if this is genuinely all you think you're going to be doing with your laptop, the good news is just about any old one will do as the work you're going to have it doing isn't 'mission critical' (i.e. if it lets you down, you won't have 500 people on a dancefloor to answer to).

But if, like many DJs, you choose to do your actual DJing using DJ software, your laptop will stay with you all the way, running that software as you do your thing. In this instance, depending on the kind of DJ gear you're using (if any; it is possible to DJ from a laptop on its own), your laptop acts as your decks and sometimes your mixer too (and your music library, to boot). Sure, you may have DJ hardware plugged in to offer you something more ergonomic than the computer keyboard, but make no mistake, it's the laptop that's doing all the work. So you're going to have to pay a bit more attention to this vital part of your set-up.

Should I buy a new laptop or use the one I've got?

The good news is that if you already own a laptop and you bought it within the last five years, it will almost certainly be

good enough to get going with. All modern laptops can run the software needed for anything a DJ is likely to want to do, so in reality it's likely any laptop you own will be able to be pressed right into service as you learn to DJ. If in doubt, every DJ software manufacturer has a page on their website listing the minimum specifications needed for their software to work, so check before you buy.

When it's time to buy a laptop for DJing with, though, there are a number of considerations, some of which might not be what you expect. Here they are:

Get something sturdy. DJ laptops tend to have rough lives. They can get knocked and bumped, stuff spilled on them, hot and damp in sweaty clubs and cold and damp in the boots of cars. And they really need to keep going, because a failed laptop mid-gig is not fun. So something sturdy and well-built is important.

Get something with a big, clear screen. Depending on your eyesight, buying anything with a screen smaller than thirteen inches is likely to be an error. DJ software is notoriously busy, and trying to keep an eye on it on a smaller screen is difficult. Don't just consider the screen size, but consider the resolution, too. If you have bad eyesight, you may find a large screen set to a relatively low resolution suits you better than a smaller screen with a high resolution. And consider the brightness of the screen, especially if you plan to do any daytime DJing, where the sun can quickly turn a dim screen into a practically invisible one.

Get something with enough USB sockets. DJs tend to want to plug things into their laptops, like DJ controllers, audio interfaces, mobile phones (to charge them while gigging), or USB drives. Some DJ set-ups may need you to have two or even three USB sockets just to get up to speed. And you never know how your needs are going to change. Two USB sockets is an absolute minimum; three is better. It is possible to buy USB hubs (go for a powered one) which can expand the number of USB sockets you have while keeping everything reliable as you plug more and more gear in, but it's best to have at least the number you think you'll need in the first place.

Make sure you have enough memory and hard disk space, and go for SSD if you can. Memory will make your DJ software zip along, with faster loading and processing times and smoother running when you're DJing. As far as your hard drive goes, not only are solid state drives, or SSDs, significantly faster than traditional hard disk drives (HDDs), but, since they have no moving parts, they are also more reliable – an important consideration in the DJ booth (see 'Get something sturdy' above). If you're looking for numbers, 8GB of memory and 256GB of hard disk space as a minimum would be a good start; some professional mobile DJs, who need huge music collections in order to fulfil all types of weird and wonderful audience requests, have much bigger hard disks.

Mac or Windows?

This is a debate that rumbles on and on and will probably never be definitively won by either side. The truth is that both platforms can do the job well, and both can let you down. Because DJing is such a mission critical application, and because Macs have a great track record of reliability, DJs have taken to Macs in their droves, knowing they are likely to do the job without a grumble. But even so, among 10,000 readers of Digital DJ Tips who took part in a recent survey, users were still divided right down the middle on this one.

If you can afford it, you may choose to go for a Mac, but if you want to use a Windows computer for whatever reason (can't afford a Mac, already own a Windows device, prefer Windows to Mac OS), don't be put off. A good Windows laptop will serve you just as well, and you'll get the same spec for slightly less money. But what is true is that there are many cheap Windows laptops available which are awful, not because they're running Windows, but simply because they're made of cheap parts. They break down easily, have poor screens, and are too delicate for a life on the road. There's no such thing as a cheap Mac, something that Apple detractors will gleefully point out to those whom they see as paying a premium for the name.

But to go back to where we started, while you're learning to DJ in your bedroom, who cares? If it runs the software, use whatever you've got. There's plenty of time to worry

about Mac vs Windows when it's time to buy something new. Actually, what's far more important than the laptop brand is the type of DJ software you choose to run on it. That's what we'll cover in the next chapter.

Choosing Your DJ Software

Introduction

Always consider what DJ software you want to use before you choose your DJ hardware. When you buy a piece of DJ hardware, it comes with the software you need to make it work, so there will typically be a download link for you to go to online and get the software. There will also be instructions for any other pieces of software you may need to get your DJ hardware working (such as 'drivers', which are often necessary if you're using a Windows laptop).

But just as you may replace your laptop many times throughout your lifetime yet you'll probably stick to one platform (i.e. Mac or Windows) due to the learning curve of changing from one to the other, the same is true of DJ software. While you may graduate from a cheap beginner's DJ controller when you start your hobby to using pro gear once you get good at it, you'll be better off sticking to one brand of DJ software throughout. As well as the unnecessary learning curve should you switch programs with DJ software, you also end up doing an awful lot of work on your music over the years and it is hard to bring that with you from one type to the next. That's why we're talking about the software before we talk about the hardware. Get this decision right early on and you won't regret your choice.

But how do you choose?

The big names in DJ software

The main DJ software titles are Serato DJ, Traktor Pro, Virtual DJ and Rekordbox DJ. These programs have lots in common, but they also have differences, some of which are vital. What they've got in common is that they all give you virtual decks (to play your music on), a virtual mixer (to blend your music with), and integration with DJ hardware.

Now let's look at what differentiates them:

Traktor Pro

Traktor Pro comes from a company called Native Instruments, which also makes DJ hardware as well as being big in the music production hardware and software market. That makes Traktor a strong contender if you already produce, or intend to produce, electronic music yourself, because you'll find some interesting producer-friendly features and integrations. It is heavily biased towards electronic music in the way that it works, though, so not the best choice if you intend to play a broader selection of music in your DJ sets.

Serato DJ

While Native Instruments, which makes Traktor, also manufactures hardware, Serato doesn't. Instead, the company tightly integrates its software with a wide range of licensed hardware from third-party companies. Serato DJ is a mature and stable platform, and works well with all

types of music, although it's always been particularly loved by scratch DJs. Serato DJ is a good choice if you want to use music videos or visuals in your performances, as it has a good video plug-in that can be purchased in-app.

Virtual DJ

Beloved of mobile DJs for its versatility (it works with just about any hardware, whether officially approved or not), Virtual DJ isn't quite as polished as Serato, but offers much the same feature set, including video - only this time the video facility is built-in. Virtual DJ has been around a long time and picked up a lot of fans, though it has (perhaps unfairly) never quite garnered the same respect as its competitors, possibly due to nothing more than its 'virtual' name wrongly implying it is somehow apart from 'real' DJing.

Rekordbox DJ (and Rekordbox)

Rekordbox DJ comes from Pioneer DJ, one of the biggest names in DJ hardware and the name you're most likely to see in DJ booths across the world. Much newer than the three programs above, Rekordbox DJ is in fact a paid-for plug-in for the (free) Rekordbox program. Rekordbox is used by DJs to prepare their music in order to transfer it to USB drive to play using compatible Pioneer pro DJ booth gear without a laptop. Rekordbox DJ extends Rekordbox so the program can be used as a fully fledged DJ program for laptop DJing, like the three other DJ apps listed above. Like Serato DJ and Virtual DJ, it also has a video option.

How to choose your DJ software

In order to decide which platform is right for you, I suggest you do at least two of the following things:

Ask your DJ friends what they use. If you know anyone who DJs, get their advice. They'll know much more about what's used in your area than I possibly can, and may even be able to show you their software so you can get a feel for it.

Find out what DJs are using in your local venues – especially those you feel you may want to play in as you progress with your DJing. If you turn up early enough you may be able to ask the resident DJ, or try peeking into the DJ booth to see their laptop screen. Alternatively, hit them up on social media and ask.

Browse around the company websites. Many let you download a trial version of the software to get a feel for it, and they also have demo videos of features, pages showing you the hardware that works with their software, and other content to help you make your mind up.

While you should start to think about your DJ software before your hardware, to an extent you need to decide both at the same time. So once you've done the above and are starting to get a feel for software you like and don't like, read the next chapter on DJ gear to understand a bit more about your choices there too. Then, armed with that knowledge, take another look at your software shortlist alongside hardware that you're interested in and see if one particular system jumps out at you – it should by that point.

A word about 'cut-down' DJ software

Often, bundled with DJ hardware, you'll see versions of some of the above programs labelled 'Intro', 'Home', 'Lite', 'Limited Edition', or 'LE'. All of these things mean the same thing: the version you're getting isn't the real deal.

Such software is a little bit like the cheap batteries you sometimes get when you buy electrical gear: designed to get you going, but you'll want to get the real thing pretty quickly. You may find that these cut-down versions won't let you record your DJ sets, or won't work with other hardware, or have some other essential features frustratingly disabled. That's not to say you can't get by on these versions for a while; just factor in the cost of upgrading to the real deal at some point down the line.

So once you have your laptop and you've decided what software route you want to go down, the next step is to decide what DJ hardware you need. We'll look at that in the next chapter.

How To Choose Your DJ Gear

Introduction

The DJ gear you choose is going to depend largely on your budget, and on how seriously you think you're going to take your new hobby (or career). The good news is that nowadays pretty much everything, from cheap smartphone DJ apps to DJ controllers (all-in-one boxes, just add laptop...) to pro set-ups costing many thousands, has got what it takes for you to learn to DJ on it.

In a way, though, that's also the bad news. Whereas in the past, choosing your DJ gear was easy (two record decks and a mixer, of which the choice was severely limited, even when compared to just that single category today), nowadays there are half a dozen different ways of DJing and scores of manufacturers and models to wade through to make your choice.

In this chapter, I'm going to talk through the main types of system. When read alongside the software chapter that preceded it, this chapter will help you decide what to go for.

Types of DJ gear

DJ controllers



The Pioneer DDJ-SX2, a modern DJ controller that, in this case, controls Serato DJ software.

Nowadays, DJ controllers (sometimes referred to as 'Midi controllers') are by far the most popular way for new DJs to get started. A DJ controller is a single box that contains controls for two or more decks, a mixer, various other periphery functions, plus usually an audio interface which sends audio to both your headphones and your amplifier and speakers.

Plug your DJ controller into the laptop on which your DJ software is running and your digital music files are stored, and *voila!* You've got a full DJ system. (Note that such DJ controllers sometimes work with tablets and even smartphones, although laptops are still the preferred computer choice among DJs.)

DJ controllers are great value for money, generally much more portable than traditional DJ gear and thus practical, and are limited only by the sophistication of the software they control, making them exciting to use. On the downside, they are not universally accepted in DJ booths, from both a practical point of view (there's often little room for extra equipment) and because of what seems to be a logical objection of venue owners and managers ('We've got perfectly good DJ gear fitted here already, so why don't you just use that?').

While most DJ controllers still require you to take your laptop along with you for the software to run on, some models work slightly differently, letting you prepare your music using a laptop at home, export the finished set list or library to a USB drive, and plug that directly in when it's time to perform. This alleviates the need to take your computer along with you and mimics the way much more expensive pro DJ gear works.

Digital vinyl systems (DVS)



Traktor Scratch Pro 2, an example of a DVS system that converts existing DJ set-ups into digital DJ set-ups able to control DJ software.

DVS systems also require a laptop and DJ software, but this time they ingeniously let the DJ use any existing gear to DJ from. So let's say a DJ already owns a traditional pair of turntables and mixer. By plugging a special DVS device (sometimes called a 'breakout box' or 'DVS audio interface') between the mixer and the record decks, and plugging a lead from the same device into a laptop running the DJ program, the DJ can then use special 'control vinyl' or 'timecode vinyl' (records that, instead of containing music, contain computer code) to control the DJ software.

It's important to note here that despite the 'V' of DVS standing for vinyl, actually all DVS systems come with control/timecode CDs too. As most DJ booths in the 21st century contain at least a pair of DJ CD decks (and hardly any contain turntables any more), this means that, armed with a pair of these special CDs, a laptop and a DVS box, a DVS DJ can play just about anywhere. One beauty of DVS systems is they don't rely on the equipment in the venue being particularly modern or digital-friendly; as long as the CD players can play CDs and the mixer can mix, a DVS set-up will allow the modern DJ to play. Venue owners tend to be much more accepting of DVS than controllers for some reason too.

If you want a DVS system at home, then you'll have to invest in the 'original' gear to tack it on to as well, so this kind of set-up usually appeals to people who already own DJ gear and are trying to drag it into the modern age.

Modular Midi DJ systems



The Akai Pro AFX, an example of a modular DJ controller that can be added to a DJ system to do a specific task.

This way, DJs can mix and match to build a system that achieves their desired specification.

It is possible to mix and match specialised DJ or Midi controllers to create custom DJ systems, in the same way audiophiles assemble hi-fi systems from separates. For instance, you can buy the mixer section of a DJ controller, a couple of specialised deck controllers, and other types of button boxes, and plug them all into the laptop running your DJ software to create a control surface that recreates whatever's on your mind. There's a whole subculture around such boxes and gadgets and the mapping thereof ('mapping' refers to programming your DJ software so the controls on your controllers do whatever you wish).

From a more practical standpoint than bedroom tinkering, though, modular controllers can be useful if you want to add a few extra controls to a DVS set-up, or don't want to hulk an all-in-one DJ controller around with you everywhere. You can distil your DJing style into something you can perform on one or two small devices that, for instance, could fit more easily into cramped DJ booths.

The most important thing to remember when choosing parts for a modular DJ set-up is that, unless you're adding to a DVS system, you'll need one of those modular parts to contain an audio interface or you'll need to buy one separately. An audio interface is an important part of any digital DJ set-up, because without it, you'll not have the outputs you need for your headphones and speakers. You may also need a powered USB hub to extend the number of USB sockets on your computer in order to plug everything in.

Pro DJ gear



A Pioneer DJ pro system of the type that is installed in the best clubs worldwide.

Watch any festival DJ set or get a peek into the DJ booth of any self-respecting super-club, and the gear the DJ will be using is what we're talking about here. Pro DJ gear is the modern incarnation of the old-fashioned 'two record decks/CD players and a mixer' set-up. A modern DJ set-up of this type typically contains two or more media players and a digital DJ mixer, and is both expensive and highly capable. The most modern set-ups from the likes of Pioneer DJ (easily the industry leader) and others are basically huge modular DJ controllers, having big colour touch screens showing waveform and library information similar to your computer screen, and rivalling DJ controllers in features having played many years of catch up.

While these systems work best with music prepared on USB drives using their respective manufacturers' custom software (in exactly the same way as the subset of DJ controllers that don't need a laptop for performing from do), depending on model and manufacturer they also plug directly in to laptops running their own or other brands of DJ software via a protocol called 'HID' (human interface device). They can be used with DVS timecode software, often without the need for DVS boxes or even CDs, as the capabilities are all built in: the computer plugs directly into the mixer, and if the DJ set-up is all networked together (the best will be), one lead is all it takes to get set up and going.

These systems are fantastic and the learning curve from bedroom to booth will be very short if you invest in one of them, but they take up a lot of room and cost an awful lot

of money compared to an equivalent DJ controller that can do similar things function-wise. Hence they're not the best choice for most DJs when they start out.

Legacy DJ gear (old-style turntables/CD players and mixers)



A Technics turntable, the original DJ deck. A pair of these and an analogue audio mixer was the pinnacle of DJ gear right up until the digital revolution began with CD players and then DJ controllers and software.

If you're a new DJ, you may be harbouring some romantic notion of 'going purist'. Or you may already own, or be offered cheap, an old DJ system of this type, and be wondering whether it'll be up to the job.

If you want to DJ with turntables and vinyl because you think that's how DJing should be done, it's a noble sentiment, but think hard before committing. The downsides of this decision are that very little music is available on vinyl as compared to digitally, and you'll find

yourself spending much more than digital DJs to acquire this music. Plus, very few venues have turntables any more. For these reasons, I'd never recommend anyone starting out like this - or if you do, add a DVS system so you can DJ digitally as well.

If you're considering investing in basic DJ CD decks (that maybe don't have slots for USB drives, which will tie you to playing CDs), the case isn't so clear cut. One of the joys of modern DJing is that you can assemble a great music collection from digital downloads, but you can still do that with a CD-only system: you can burn your music to CDs yourself then play it in your CD DJ set-up, or you can add on a DVS system. As even very cheap DJ CD players tend to have USB slots nowadays, you could put your music files on to USB drives and DJ using those too.

Compared to DJ controllers and modern pro DJ gear, such systems are severely limited in what you can do with them, and so ultimately less fun to DJ on. But the leap from such a system to the pro DJ booth isn't huge (which is an advantage if you want gear at home that feels similar to DJ booth gear), and systems like this are still popular in large areas of the world, including many smaller clubs and bar-type venues. Such a system at home would make a good practice set-up for the DJ who will be playing out a lot using the club's gear, especially when bought with a DVS system.

How to choose your DJ set-up

So now you know about the types of gear out there, what should you go for? For most DJs, the answer is definitely a modern DJ controller. If you're a new DJ, simply work out what you can spend, find a few DJ controllers around your price range that are designed to work with the software brand you prefer, and buy one that you like the look of. (You're going to be standing in front of it for many hours, hopefully lots of those in public, so it has to be something that doesn't make you feel silly.) Try and get a sense as to whether it's used by other DJs like you, for which comments under online reviews are a good place to do some scouting, such as on my website: www.digitaldjtips.com

If you really don't want to join the vast majority of DJs happily playing from modern DJ controllers both at home and out and about, and instead you want to invest in one of the other types of system, again, find one that works with the software you prefer. You'll find fewer choices (for instance, if you want to DJ in pro DJ booths 'natively', you'll usually find that means buying a system from market leader Pioneer DJ), and you'll find your choices become less straightforward (assembling a modular set-up can be mind-numbing for a beginner because you don't really know enough about your own style of DJing to recognise what options are going to work best for you, plus technically they are harder to set up).

If you are hell-bent on buying a DJ set-up of two basic CD players and a mixer, but can't afford to spend much, seriously consider adding a DVS system to broaden your options. DVS is also a good move if you own DJ gear from years gone by and want to start playing the modern way. And as I said above, commit to vinyl-only DJing at your peril; pretty much the whole of the pro DJing world moved away from this way of DJing for a reason. Despite its undeniable appeal as the purist way of doing things, it has too many disadvantages for today's DJ.

If you're still stuck, review my suggestions at the end of the software chapter about checking what your friends and DJs in your local venues are using, and remember that a small, cheap, simple DJ controller really is all you need to learn the skills in this book. If in doubt, buy such a device now and upgrade later when you know what you're doing; it can always double up as your back-up system when you are ready to go a little more pro.

Your DJ gear really isn't all that important in the long run. Not only will you likely change it more regularly than you might want to acknowledge now, but ultimately, a good DJ sees any DJ set-up as a tool to get the end result.

So go off and get yourself a DJ system. In the next chapter, we're going to look at some of the other stuff you'll need.

Other Items You'll Need

Introduction

As with most hobbies, there are a handful of essential things that may not be immediately obvious to you when you think about your initial gear purchases, and others that are optional but you may be considering buying. Even if you put some of these purchases off until later, it's worth thinking about them now, if only to start the fun process of researching your future world-conquering set-up.



A pair of DJ headphones, in this instance, the Sennheiser HD8 model. Note the moving ear cups, and the closed heavily padded design.

Probably the first thing that needs to be on your gear list is a decent pair of headphones. They are important for DJs because you need to be able to listen clearly to stuff your audience *isn't* hearing, and the usual way to do that is through using headphones.

DJ headphones need to be, in order of importance: isolating (i.e. they are well padded to effectively cut off outside sound), loud, durable, adjustable (not for a comfortable fit, but so you can wear them with one ear cup on and one off your ears), and foldable (for easy transport). Many DJs, myself included, prefer a coiled cable so it doesn't get under your feet when you're standing next to your gear, but at the same time lets you walk away from your gear with the headphones still on. Some models offer detachable cables with an extra style of cable too, so you may get a short straight cable for use with your phone as well as the longer DJ cable. Finally, while over ear models dominate, smaller on ear designs are preferred by some, and the latter definitely work better if you're buying one set for both DJing and when you're out and about. Go for closed back rather than open back designs.

For just learning, frankly any kind of headphones that have a headband will do (sorry, your phone earbuds are definitely out), so it's worth digging around at home to see if you have some. That said, you can get workable DJ models for as little as £20, although of course you can easily go up to many times that.

Speakers/PA system



A range of modern DJ monitor speakers, designed for home or studio use. These are from one of the leading brands, KRK.

Already got a TV sound bar, or a hi-fi, or even just a loud portable speaker? As long as your existing speaker set-up sounds good and goes loud enough for you to be able to truly fill the room with music, it will probably do fine for DJ practice. All that's necessary is to be able to set it up near to your DJ system (see next chapter), and for it to have a socket so you can plug in your DJ controller using a cable (i.e. not Bluetooth, AirPlay, or any other wireless system).

If you want to invest in something better or something specially for DJing with, then you have two choices: studio monitor-style speakers or a small PA system. Studio monitors are dedicated speakers meant for DJ/producer types. They are usually sold individually (i.e. you buy two), and each has its own amplifier or amplifiers built in as well

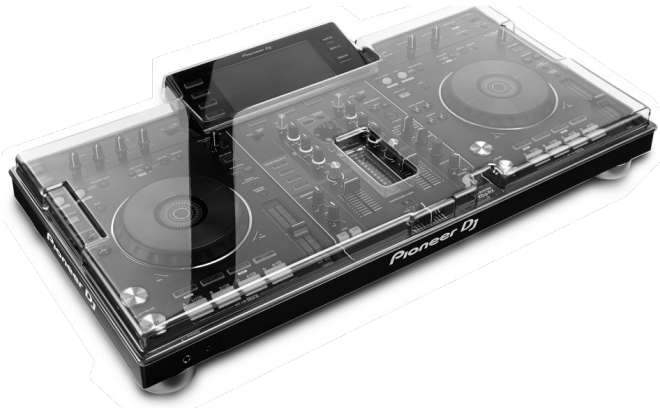
as its own power supply and music inputs. As they're separate, you run the left-hand output of your DJ system to the left-hand speaker, and the right-hand output to the right speaker. In price, good ones range from around £200 per speaker upwards.

Such speakers are great if you want the very best sound quality and you never (and I repeat, *never*) want to use them in a party situation. Studio monitors can and probably will end up broken if you use them at parties as they're not physically or electrically designed for the kind of stress you'll put them under in a party situation. If you want to buy a speaker system that you can use at parties, a small PA system is better. Many such systems have the beauty of being small enough to use for practising at home, too, so you only need buy one system. Get one with tripods for your speakers and long cables, and you'll have all you need for both practice and parties.

If you can afford it, buying a subwoofer as well (a big floor-standing speaker designed only to pump out bass) will make your system sound better when you're in a full room of people; you can always leave this in your car boot or garage rather than humping it up the stairs to your bedroom studio as your PA will work fine without it for home use.

Miscellaneous things

If you're planning on DJing from USB drives rather than a laptop, obviously you're going to need a USB stick or two to keep your music on. Buy a durable design with the biggest capacity you can afford.



A moulded cover to protect the delicate controls of your DJ gear is a good idea. This is one of a range from a company called Decksaver.

Protecting your gear is a smart move. A decent case, backpack, or trolley will help keep your controller or other gear looking new, and you could invest in a dustcover too (an old towel thrown over your gear will do the job, but moulded made-to-fit acrylic covers are available, and are a better choice). Raising your laptop higher than your DJ controller using a laptop stand will help you to see the screen properly (go for something easily foldable and sturdy). Make yourself heard with a microphone (wired are cheapest, make sure your choice will plug in to whatever

microphone socket is available to you on your DJ gear, and go for a dynamic mic).

Finally, make sure you figure out the leads you need and get them all, plus spares – and don't forget a decent power extension cable, heavy duty and with a high amp fuse if you're going to be running a PA system through it too.

Setting Everything Up

Introduction

If you're serious about learning to DJ, you're going to be spending a lot of time behind the decks, whether those decks are a simple iPad app or the exact same sprawling set-up sported by your local super-club. Setting your equipment up properly in a workspace that's conducive to creativity (and kind on your back) is therefore an essential first step. Likewise, having a reliable back-up routine in place for your music and DJ program data is also something you ought to set up right at the start. 'Set and forget' goes the saying, so let's cover these things right now before we move on to the second section of this book, which is all about the music.

Setting up your home DJ workspace

Not everyone has a studio space or room they can dedicate to their DJing, far away from distractions and moaning neighbours. Whichever nook and cranny of your home you decide to set up your practice area in, and whatever gear you have, a few ground rules will help you to make a success of it:

Make sure your table is at the right height. Nothing spells 'back pain' quicker than DJing standing at a table you're meant to be sitting at. Most DJs prefer to practise standing up, so make

sure your gear is at about the height of a standard kitchen work surface. If all you have is a sitting-height table, try perching your DJ controller on the box it came in as a temporary measure, or use a beer crate or similar to raise it up.

Have the speakers as close to you as possible. Speaker positioning is crucial for DJing. Speakers that are to your left and right, at head height (or angled up at your head if they're on the same surface as your DJ gear), and no more than two or three feet from you will sound better, and make it easier when it comes to learning skills like manual beatmixing. Believe it or not, your brain starts to notice the small delay it takes the sound to reach you when speakers are only, say, ten feet or so from your head, and that makes DJing harder and so less fun. Plus, the closer the speakers are to you, the quieter you can have them for sufficient DJing volume.

Try not to face the wall. This one isn't always possible, but you'll gain from facing out into a room. Not only is this going to make it easier to have impromptu house parties, but it'll help you visualise playing to a real audience, which in turn will help you to think right from the off about body language and how you'll perform when you do get out in public – skills you can't start to learn too early.

Make it somewhere you only go to DJ. Not necessarily a room on its own, but a corner that is reserved for your DJ practice sessions. It's good for motivation to dedicate a space, however small, to your hobby. If you can leave your gear

set up there, all the better, because it'll make it easier to get going when it comes to practice time.

Getting your laptop and hardware working smoothly

As long as you did the due diligence on your laptop outlined earlier, you shouldn't encounter problems with getting it all working OK. Follow the instructions that came with your DJ hardware with regards to software downloading and installation, and if the audio isn't doing what you expect it to (the most common issue), look under 'Audio Configuration' or 'Audio Settings' in the manual to find the necessary tweaks.

While DJ software isn't hugely demanding on the resources of your computer, this is a performance game, and so any glitches or hiccoughs are potentially going to be more annoying than if your computer were just being used as an office PC. So it does pay to follow a few steps to make mishaps less likely.

(I remember forgetting to silence unnecessary system sounds on a Windows PC I was DJing from in a nightclub once, and when I turned it off, the Windows closing down motif blasted over a 10K sound system to a couple of hundred startled late-night clubbers. Cue sheepish blushing from the DJ booth...)

So when you're preparing your computer for DJing, consider making the following adjustments:

Switch off any internet, network, and wireless connectivity. While there is sometimes a case for having internet on (some DJ software can stream from music online as you play nowadays), having your computer connected to Bluetooth, Wi-Fi, Ethernet, or any other unnecessary networks is asking for trouble.

Disable auto-updating of software. You *do not* want your computer announcing to you that it has downloaded some critical updates and is going to reboot in fifteen minutes. That's an alert box to breathe fear into the heart of any performing DJ...

Close down all programs you're not using. Programs running in the background that you don't want or need are usually fine when surfing or working at your PC, but not so fine when you're DJing from it. They take system resources and can cause performance issues, which can lead to glitches in the audio or more sluggish overall performance (songs loading slowly and so on). Best to pare right down to your DJ software.

Turn off all notifications, banners, popups, and windows. Again, common sense really, but you don't want these popping up and sounding off as you practise DJing. While you're at it, why not go to your sound settings and turn off all unnecessary system sounds? It'd avoid embarrassing situations like my story above...

What to do if your laptop gives you problems

By far the most common issue when DJing using laptops is the DJ software momentarily finding it doesn't have enough system resources to do its thing (this is such an important variable that many programs actually have a 'CPU load' or similar indicator so you can keep an eye on it). This usually shows itself through glitchy or momentarily freezing graphics and crackly sound or, again, momentary dropouts in audio.

While alarming, the graphic freezing usually rights itself, but can sometimes be fixed by looking for settings that let you alter the graphics performance of your software (look for 'refresh rate' settings). Audio is obviously much bigger an issue, and the culprit here is usually the 'latency' or 'audio buffer' setting being too low. This governs the length of time between you doing something (starting a tune, stopping it, and so on) and that action coming out of the audio interface to head off to the speakers. Too high, and there's a perceptible delay. Too low, and the computer can't cope. Find the setting, and adjust it so it is as low as possible without any glitches when you do your stuff. Many DJs then like to increase that setting by one notch to err a little on the safe side.

Getting your back-up routine into place

Stories abounded in DJ circles back in the vinyl days about Great Lost Record Tragedies. We used to have to put our record cases into the hold luggage when flying to gigs, never knowing if we'd see them again. Sometimes, when girlfriends fell out with DJ boyfriends and kicked them out (here's a DJ joke for you: what do you call a DJ without a girlfriend? Homeless), their collections would follow, sometimes from a first floor window. In all of these circumstances, DJs spoke of a vacuous feeling like nothing else.

The moral for modern DJs is really simple: back up your hard drive. Your music is the tool of your trade, and in this book you're going to learn how to grow your music collection so it's an extension of how you think and feel - don't ever let there be any chance of you losing that collection. Before moving on to the next step, when we're going to start gathering the music that'll make you the DJ you are going to be, I'd recommend you nail this one.

It honestly doesn't matter how you do it. Your choices are things like a network storage device in your home, a detachable hard drive you keep in the top of a wardrobe, a cloud service such as Dropbox, or just a big USB drive you copy everything over to. The golden rules are do it regularly (I suggest weekly) and put it in your calendar so you don't ever forget, and always back up to two separate places that aren't physically the same - so if you back up to

a spare hard drive at home, keep a USB copy at work, or have a second copy in the cloud. Whatever works for you. Just do it.

By the way, if you choose not to back up your whole computer (and if you're backing up to USB pen drive, you won't be able to as its capacity isn't big enough) and instead just want to back up your music, at the very minimum make sure you back up the folder or folders you keep your music files in as well as the folder your DJ software keeps its information in. Check your DJ software documentation for details of where the latter folder will be. It is where important DJ performance data is kept about your music files, and while losing it wouldn't be as catastrophic as losing the files themselves, it could potentially make an awful lot of work for you once your collection grows a bit and you start to customise the data you hold on your songs.

OK, so with our foundations all laid and our system built, it's time to move on to the reason you probably got into this whole thing in the first place: the music. That's what the whole of the next step is about.

Get your copy of the full book today:

digitaldjtips.com/book