



7 PROVEN WAYS YOU CAN IMPROVE YOUR DJING TODAY



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This PDF report is part of the Digital DJ Masterclass training resources produced by Digital DJ Tips. It is written by Phil Morse, founder and editor of Digital DJ Tips.

INTRODUCTION

THE BEST WAY TO GET BETTER at anything is to find someone who's where you want to be, and get them to show you how they did it - and this is completely true for DJing as well. Trouble is, if you are lucky enough to have a successful DJ as a friend, and they've got the time to teach you, they will nearly always (with the best of intentions) fall into one of two traps:

- 1. They'll tell you to do it they way they did it** - with the same gear, following the same path etc. Trouble is, things change all the time and their way might not be the right way for you
- 2. They'll give you very broad advice ("read the crowd", "play good music" etc)** - stuff that's important to do, but that's not actionable. (How, exactly, do you "read the crowd" or "play good music"?)

In many years as CEO of Digital DJ Tips, I've helped tens of thousands of people to become good DJs, and I've learned the things that really trip people up and hold them back - things that with the right training, can be overcome, leapfrogging your DJing hobby or career to where you want to be, cutting out months or years of not getting anywhere. Because truthfully, having a passion for music is essential, but it's not enough - you need to have a pathway of things to be doing to get you to where you're dreaming of. And that's exactly what this PDF is about.

Below, I reveal seven proven ways you can start improving your DJing today. I know you're going to find them useful, because they answer the frustrations shared with me by hundreds of DJs every single week inside our courses, in our comments, on our forum and through our support tickets.

I'd love to hear your results - so please feel free to email me at info@digitaldjtips.com and let me know how you're getting on. Alternatively, come and join in our at <http://www.digitaldjtips.com/forum> - we'd love to have you share your successes with us!

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1. MASTER LOOPING & FILTERS

If you want to lift your mixing to the next level and incorporate two things that practically all pro DJs use, practically all the time, this is how to do it.

Filter is basically a "fancy EQ". Its huge benefits to the DJ are that it is pretty much on all gear nowadays (in software, on many controllers as a dedicated knob or part of the FX section, on most club mixers) and it is used so much by producers that you'd be silly not to be using it in your mixing too. Try listening for its use in tracks and accentuating what's already there by copying the filter sweeps of producers, or using it instead of the EQ (especially the bass EQ) to bring tracks in and out of the mix. Using filters will make your mixing sound smoother and more professional.

Looping first arrived on CDJs, with manual loop in/out points, and quickly became a mainstay of DJ software, where it took a huge leap in usability. How? Because as DJ software "knows" the BPM and beats of a track, it can easily loop a perfect 2, 4, 8, 16 or 32 beats (for instance) without you needing to specify the exact start and end points - and it will more often than not still sound good. Either way, though, looping has revolutionised DJing and specifically mixing, because now, you can loop a section that interests you, and mix over the top of it. CDJs or software, it's there for the taking.

Nine times out of ten, it's simply used to "get from one tune to the next", by looping a nondescript section of the end of the outgoing tunes and mixing tightly and cleanly over the top of it with the incoming tune. In today's pop world where many songs people want to hear in clubs have shorter sections for you to mix over, this tool can help you to make things flow much more easily. True, overusing it can make sets sound boring, but used sparingly and carefully, looping can allow you to perform mixes that otherwise would be impossible. It's a bit of a "secret weapon" of the pros, and again, you'd therefore be silly not to incorporate it into your own DJing.

2. UNDERSTAND LEVELS

If you want to sound good, this is so important. It's one that so often gets overlooked, but that with a bit of practice, you can tick off the list and so improve your DJing hugely. There are two elements to this: Understanding "gain staging" - or how sound moves through a DJ system - and understanding mixing levels.

"Gain staging", audio levels, VU meters and so on all refer to how loud the signal is at given points in its progress from music source to speakers. So first, the signal enters your DJ mixer (hardware mixer or internal software / controller mixer - it's the same principle). There's normally a "gain" or "trim" that lets you adjust the incoming level. This should be set to as high as possible without going in to the red. Next there's the output level from your DJ controller or mixer - the master level. Again, same rule - as high as possible without going into the red. Next, there may be a PA mixer. Here you adjust the volume to where you want the overall room volume to be, again... you can guess.

So the big rule is: Don't go into the red! But the next big rule is, if you want to adjust the volume in the room, do so from the speakers back. In other words, if you're DJing a party and you want to turn it up (or down), head for the PA amp (or ask the sound engineer to do this for you from his desk when DJing in a club) first. Next port of call is the master output from your controller or mixer. Once that's at top level, you're basically as loud as you can go.

Making everything louder by turning the gain and channel volumes and EQs etc up as far as they'll go because you've run out of other options is absolutely the wrong thing to do and can damage ears and equipment - at the very least it's guaranteed to ruin your sound quality. Respecting and understanding this simple fact, though, gives you clean, crisp and danceable audio that even if you don't do much else right, will stand you apart from so many other DJs who simply are too ignorant to understand these basics.

Secondly, let's look at levels within a mix. This one is quite simple really: You need to always know what level is dominating when you're mixing. What is the track the crowd can hear "the most"? Because when it comes down to it, DJing is moving from one tune to the next, over and over again, until the last tune. Being in control of when the crowd is "switched" from the outgoing tune to the incoming one is the essence of DJ beatmixing.

The biggest single tools here are volume between the two decks (of course), and also the volume of the bass (usually the kick drum). That's what DJs are doing when you see them with one hand on each of the bass EQs - they're switching the bass emphasis from one kick drum to the other.

A great way to practise this (and to practise so many other things in DJing - see later) is simply to record your mix. Listening back to recorded mixes will show you where this emphasis switches, and you can then judge whether you did it where you thought you were doing it. "Hope mixing" ("I hope it sounds OK!") isn't going to be good enough here if you're serious about improving your DJing, but luckily, just asking yourself the question every time you mix ("Where do I want to change the emphasis from this song to the next, and how will I achieve that?") will see you making strides rapidly.

3. DON'T BE SCARED TO ENTERTAIN

DJing live - in public, in front of a crowd, on a webcast, even - is as much about performance as it is about mixing and music. You're there to entertain. It's not an exercise in perfectionism, so there's no room for laboriously planned, rigid beatmixing and technically perfect DJ sets, at the expense of the main reason you've got the booking, which is to entertain people. Only when you're entertaining them should you try to "educate" them about the music you love.

Lots of DJs are scared to put this one into practice. They think that if they're not showing how technically perfect they are 24/7, they'll be called out as incompetent DJs. They erroneously - fatally - care more about what the other half dozen DJs in the room think about what they're doing than the 200 people who are actually the only thing that's really important. (All the other half dozen DJs are really thinking is: I want to be DJing!). So they sink into this kind of bland boring routine - no variation in style, no use of the tools available to them to stamp some personality on their sets. Their sets are technically good, but ultimately boring.

See, there are loads of things you can do live that'll make you stand out as a controller of the entertainment, a leader of the party, and not just a DJ. Using the overall volume as a tool (turn things down slowly, then throw the volume back in at the right moment) can work a treat. Overemphasising part of tunes (using filters, loops etc to extend breaks and make the "drop" even bigger) can build tension and confound audience expectations, only delaying the inevitable when you slam in the bit they've all been waiting for, can give them a huge release. Even getting on the microphone (use it sparingly in a club situation, though) can, if timed right, electrify a room. Definitely using your body language to encourage and help punters to let go and enjoy themselves (dancing, smiling, making eye contact - you don't have to throw cakes 'n' stuff!) is an absolute must.

But maybe most importantly of all, playing the right record for right now is almost always more important than playing something that mixes perfectly. If that means throwing some drop-dead brilliant hip hop beats in the middle of a house set, do it! If it means having a huge pop singalong before dropping into some dirty trap, make it happen! If it means deviating from your plan, you shouldn't have had such a tight plan! Your job is not to be perfect or predictable, but to be edgy, fun, risk taking, and memorable. Sure, you'll fail sometimes - but people get that. At least you're having the balls to entertain them. Those folks you're playing to have had a hard, tedious week, and this is their short window for letting go and having fun. Don't be scared to entertain them.

4. MAKE MIXTAPES REGULARLY

If playing live is "yin", this is "yang" - it's the other side of the coin to all that performance stuff. There's no audience to react to, no body language, nobody will see if you throw a cake or do Jesus poses... it's just you, your tunes, and that big record button. It's barebones stuff. This is where you show off your technical skills, where you express your musical passion, where you'll craft a journey, where you'll try and create something that'll stand the test of time. Mixtapes are your business card, your portfolio, your showreel. Show me any pro DJ and I'll show you a pathway of great mixtapes that helped to get them there. Put simply, you absolutely must be making mixtapes regularly.

Not only that, but there's a huge "unadvertised" bonus to making mixtapes, especially in your early days as a DJ when you maybe don't have the level of bookings you envisage for yourself. You see, having something to aim at is a huge motivator. Knowing you've promised to make a mixtape this month focuses your attentions on getting that mixtape done, which is a brilliant way of regularly working on your skills. And as if all of this isn't reason enough, as we pointed out in point 2 about mixing levels, if you don't record yourself and listen back to your efforts, you'll never hear your mixing how the rest of the world hears it. You'll have no way of knowing what you should be working on to improve.

The key things to do when making mixtapes are 1. to plan meticulously and 2. don't accept less than perfection. This is no time to "wing it". Have your set all planned out, decide upon and practise your individual mixes, and keep at it until you have a really strong, good recording. I want you to be able to listen back to your mix in 10 years' time and feel as proud of it as I do when I listen back to my mixes from 10 or even 20 years ago. So don't accept less than perfection - unlike live performance, this is where perfection really does matter. Oh, and finally - do make sure you keep the recordings safe. For me, Mixcloud is a great place to store mixes, as it's free and legal, but there's lots of ways and choices. Just don't lose your best work by being careless after the event.

5. EXPLORE KEYMIXING

Of all the things digital DJing has made easy that once were difficult - way beyond sync, looping, FX, library management, and all the other digital marvels - keymixing rules supreme. It used to involve musical theory training, the requirement to be in possession of some kind of piano keyboard, laboriously "keying" all your tracks, then being able to factor in that altering tracks up or down in pitch also altered their key. Once you'd cracked all that, you could experiment with keymixing (on vinyl, and later on CDs). Many of us did; few of us made it a natural, frequent part of our workflow. It was just too laborious.

But nowadays, your DJ software (or Mixed In Key if your software doesn't do this) can analyse the key for you and tag your tracks using simple systems that means knowing what mixes into what musically is easy for anyone to get started in. You can even set up your smart search playlists or folders to automatically group together tunes that will likely work together musically. Now, you can begin to experiment with keymixing without any further effort, and potentially find great DJ mixes that otherwise would have eluded you. Wanna come up with awesome sounding mixes, mashups and re-edits with songs that fit together so well they sound like they're meant to be together? This is the first thing you should be doing.

Of course, like all such "short cuts", to move past dabbling and to do it well take a lot of theory, practice and experience; a whole training course would be needed to do the subject real justice. But to get going? Well, that's simple. Analyse your songs for key, make sure "key lock" (or "master tempo" on your CDJs) is switched on, learn the easy rules to decide what's compatible with what else (see the instructions for your DJ software or keymixing software - will take you all of five minutes) and start experimenting. Just be sure to remember that this is a "tool not a rule", and that point number 7 in this PDF applies, as it does with all DJ mixes. You're going to make the ultimate call as to whether what you've done sounds good or not.

6. KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE

The slightly longer version of this one is: "The DJ who only plays for himself, often only plays TO himself."

Of course, if you simply want to DJ in order to satisfy your own musical passion, and you genuinely don't care if anyone else is coming along for the ride, then this one doesn't apply to you. If you're a top producer who's had loads of hits, and you're booked to DJ, you can probably do what you damned well like. But everyone else? Well, as soon as you're expecting to fill dancefloors, or get people loving what you do, or get listens, follows and likes on your podcasts or online mixes, or get paid for your DJing, there's one vital element that you ignore at your peril: The audience.

It's the "sweet spot" where your tastes overlap with your audience's tastes and expectations that you want to be hitting at least 80% of the time when you DJ. Part of the joy and challenge of being a DJ is finding those tunes that excite you that also excite your audience. A really well-chosen collection helps, with lots of contrast (old/new, known/unknown, vocal/instrumental, floorfiller/filler etc), and knowledge and experience count here too, but really it's just a case of watching and learning every time you DJ as to what works and doesn't.

You'll notice I said "80% of the time". There will be tunes that you want to play that your audience doesn't yet care for, maybe because you've found a great mix with something you are pretty sure they won't like, or you've got an excellent new tune they don't know yet, or you want to try something new - whatever. That's what the 20% is for. Clearing the dancefloor once in a while is OK (some might say you're not doing your job well enough if you don't) and actually - bizarrely, you might think - the club or venue manager might thank you for it! (Bar take will go up for a song or two...). As long as the 80% is there, it doesn't massively matter.

But also, it works both ways; there will be songs your audience likes and wants that you don't have or care for. These are the requests you would rather not play, and - especially if you're holding down a DJ residency - you need to be ready to listen to these suggestions and find mixes or version you like of them that you can weave into your set.

You'll enrich your musical taste by doing so and learn to be the kind of DJ who is both intimately in touch with what his or her audience wants, while at the same time satisfying your own musical passions. There definitely is a sweet spot between pleasing yourself on the one hand and being a human jukebox on the other, and pro DJs find this, and work on it as a central part of what they do.

7. LEARN TO TRUST YOUR EARS

Something weird can happen when lifelong music fans start to DJ. They can lose all confidence in their own tastes and feelings about the music they're playing, how good their mix sounds, what goes with what and so on. They can listen way over-intently to what others are saying, and treat those opinions as more valid than their own. In short, they can start to doubt their own tastes and convictions, and ultimately doubt that they've got what it takes to be a good DJ.

So what happens to their DJ sets? They become predictable, boring, mediocre, "DJing-by committee". The personality and passion, and love for the music that got these poor DJs into this in the first place, drains out. They rely on the tools rather than their instincts. If this is you - if you end up doing this - you move away from the most important single thing you can bring to your DJing: Yourself.

But here's the good news. If you're the kind of person who has a song for every moment, who feels music expresses you better than words, who is the first to spot a bad mix on the dancefloor, is the one who notices a skipping CD in a public place before anyone else, is put in charge of preparing the music for a holiday or car journey, is the one who always jumps on the stereo first when you all pile back to someone's house, who sets up their speakers before unpacking their toothbrush in a new house (this is you - right?) then trust me - you've got what it takes. You are already a good DJ. You just need to do the right things to turn what's inside you into the finished product.

Learning to trust your ears means having the balls to call it how it is. If a mix sounds great, it is. If it sounds bad to you, it is. If keymixing says something should work and it doesn't, it doesn't. If a file says "top quality WAV" and it sounds muddy and bad, it is muddy and bad. If a DJ sounds boring to you and you'd do it differently, you're right: Your way would be better. Have the cojones to do it differently when you get your chance and you'll shine.

So what about "doing the right things to turn what's inside you into the finished product", then? Well, getting decent training to help you polish your rough talent can literally shave years off succeeding, which is the reason this PDF, Digital DJ Tips and all of its DJ courses exist in the first place. The good news is that the very fact that you're reading this means you already know so much more than I did when I started out. Use our resources as much or little as you like, enjoy the journey, play out lots, and you'll get there: Just don't let self-doubt hold you back or slow you down. Trust your instincts. Trust your ears.

Thanks for reading this PDF, and I wish you the very best with your DJing.

To your success!

Phil Morse

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