Table Manners

Just This Side
of Legal

Q&A: Mike Truman

Frequency

Table Manners

TUNE IN TO THE MASTER

It is a familiar scenario for beginners: You have the master record rocking out of the main speakers, and you drop the first beat of the cued new record to listen to it in your headphones—but you just cannot tell if the cued record is faster or slower than the master record. Often, this is because you cannot hear the master record clearly enough for one of three reasons.

Reason 1

The monitor is not positioned correctly. This is a common mistake made by both beginning and experienced DJs. First, be sure the monitor speaker (or one of the main speakers if you only have one pair) is directly facing your open ear and is also at the same height as your ear. If you do not have speakers on stands, safely secure your speaker at ear height and pointing toward your open ear.

Reason 2

The master volume is not turned up loud enough. Many beginning DJs express insecurity about their skills by practicing quietly, sometimes even sending each mix back and forth at lower and lower volumes. Be sure your master record is not playing too quietly. It is difficult to beat-match and mix quietly, so switch the master volume from a whisper to a thud.

Reason 3

The headphone-cue volume is drowning out the master volume. This is the most common reason that you may have difficulty beat-matching. When beat-matching, it is easy to become preoccupied with listening to the cue record: turning up the volume on the headphones more and more and listening primarily to the cue record. Reverse your focus by turning down the volume on your headphones in relation to the master record playing in your open ear so that the cue record is slightly quieter than the master. Experiment with the volume ratio to find the combination that works for you.

YOUR TOUCH ON THE TEMPO

The most common technique used to speed up the tempo of a record by hand is to push it faster using a finger on the label, and the most common technique to slow down the tempo of a record by hand is to drag a finger along the side of the platter. While doing either of these during a beat match, many beginning DJs tend to not use enough force to create a change in tempo.

To perfect that force, play just one record out loud and practice speeding it up with your hand until you can hear it play faster but not so fast that you cannot count each beat. Then, practice slowing the record down with your hand until you can hear it play slower, but don't push so hard that you stop the platter. This practice will get you used to the feel of speeding up and slowing down your record by hand.

GET A MENTOR

Sure, maybe you have buddies you spin with, but nothing can top having a seasoned veteran by your side to answer your questions and give you their attention as you practice. You want someone who will serve as your teacher, advisor and counselor: your mentor.

Although beat matching and mixing require dedicated, individual practice, a mentor can provide encouragement and constructive feedback. To find someone you would be comfortable having as a mentor, get active on e-mail lists or Web forums that connect you with someone in your area, or go to events that feature the genre of music that you like spinning best. Keep your eyes open for someone whose style you respect and—this is very important—someone who is not only articulate but also able to describe clearly the finer points of his or mixing style while giving you advice.

Once you find someone you really connect with, then ask if he or she will be your mentor. Choosing a mentor is not a process you should rush, and it is unlikely someone will agree to commit time to you if you just ask out of the blue. If you are not able to connect with a mentor, a handful of cities across the country now offer DJ instruction at schools such as NorCal DJMPA in San Francisco and Scratch DJ Academy in New York and Los Angeles.

If you are serious about your craft, find a mentor. Then, tear out this page and stick it on the wall near your decks. Give these tips a try, and with practice, you will bring the beats under your command.

JUST THIS SIDE OF LEGAL
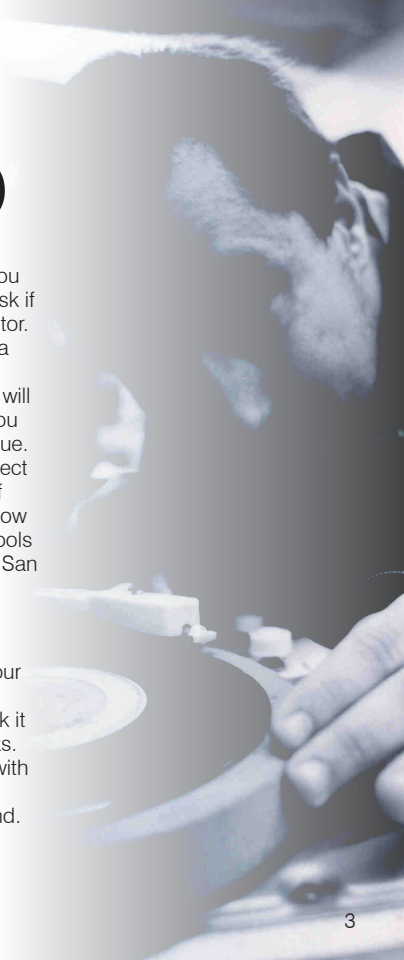
The 1990s were without a doubt the definitive years for modern electronic music and the culture surrounding it. The phenomenon reached global proportions toward the latter part of the decade, with generations embracing it with a wide-eyed innocence and zeal for new forms of music, fashion and experimentation. It was often viewed as a way of life and, in many ways, a socio-political movement in itself. At the heart of this movement was the rave, an event centered around underground music that was often organized and executed without regard to law or regulations. And even though oversized pants and glow sticks may no longer be all the rage, the renegade spirit behind these kind of events—be it dance rock, hip-hop, electro, you name it—is still alive and well.

If you're brave enough to try and plan an event of your own, legal or otherwise, myriad details need to be addressed. Beyond issues such as location or venue, security and vending, if you want to go the legal route, you need to obtain permits and licenses and select the proper sound system or sound reinforcement (SR). So how do you spec out SR or a P.A. for a clandestine event? The obvious answer that first comes to mind is to get as much sound as you can afford or get your hands on, right? For the most part, that holds true, but peel back the layers and do some investigating into areas that aren't so obvious.

ASK THE EXPERTS
To gain some seasoned insight, Remix contacted two people who have made a career out of promoting and supporting the Las Vegas rave scene: Chad Craig of AWOL (A Way of Life) Productions is the most prominent underground-dance-event promoter in town and has been organizing mostly legal raves since the mid-'90s. Scott Fisher owns the Wave Sound Company and was the man to go to for SR and DJ-equipment rentals even before the rave culture hit town. To start, they both have similar things to say concerning how to spec out SR for an event—budget usually drives the decision on what and how much to get.

"I question the promoter about where the event is being held, the size of the venue and how many people you are realistically expecting to attend," Fisher says. "Based upon the answers they give, I will come up with an initial sound system and price. If the promoter has a larger budget and wants more gear, I am certainly not opposed to that. My main concerns are having enough stuff to minimally be able to do the job without having to overdrive the system. It's safer for the equipment and also protects my reputation. I will walk away from a job where the budget does not allow for doing things properly."

That said, the first logical step in the process is to contact a reputable sound company for a consultation. However, because many smaller parties have a DIY mentality, some organizers may choose to use their own sound system or assemble a rag-tag configuration of borrowed equipment. Craig is quick to point out that a major consideration is also finding out how much electrical power is supplied at the venue, and if it's an outdoor event, gas-powered generators come into play. Appropriating a generator big enough to handle your needs factors in at this point, but Craig says that it's better to be safe than sorry and get a generator that's more than enough.

Sometimes, a certain venue won't have enough electricity coming into the building, and a generator has to be used to supplement the existing power. In fact, Craig has run events with three fairly sizable, separate sound systems and lighting rigs with a 70-kilowatt generator.

If you're really cautious, you may even want to consider renting a backup generator. In one instance, Craig remembers someone sitting on the hitch of the generator, and because one of the legs wasn't properly mounted, the whole unit tipped over and stopped working. Thankfully, another generator was on site, and he was back up and running in 15 minutes. Because he's thrown so many events, Craig has taught himself basic electrical knowledge so that instead of using outlets from the wall, he ties in directly to the power coming into the building, and Fisher concurs with this, especially when using larger sound systems that demand more juice. Just make sure you know what you're doing.

ON THE DL

Keeping a low profile is paramount when throwing an event that you don't want the cops or nosy neighbors to know about. Using plain old common sense and street smarts will minimize the chances of getting unwanted attention from John Q. Law. You should pick a location away from residential areas, and keep the size of the party reasonable. Ironically, the very thing that can help make a great event can also be its biggest detractor by drawing unwanted attention: sound. Technically speaking, sound travels at approximately 770 miles per hour at 70 degrees Fahrenheit and is slower at higher altitudes or colder temperatures. Bass frequencies are nondirectional, coming from the source and going in all directions, and they carry farther due to the amount of power needed to create them. High frequencies, on the other hand, only tend to travel in the direction that the speaker is facing.

Lately, Craig has been able to minimize the sound emanating from a venue or location by using his own brand of surround sound. Instead of the traditional wall of sound that faces out from the stage in one direction, he's been using four stacks of speakers arranged in the four corners of a square room. This provides better coverage on the dancefloor and permits the use of lower volumes, thus minimizing the amount of sound that escapes and reducing the risk of noise complaints from surrounding areas.

COVER YOUR ASS

The best advice is to keep things small if you don't want to get busted, and keep in mind some of the precautions and preparations that you'll have to take. But if you're going to go large (ahem, massive), make sure to hire a professional sound company to handle your sound reinforcement; you will have enough to deal with. Realistically speaking, underground parties were much easier to pull off back in the day because the authorities weren't as aware as they are now. All the negative press and publicity as well as a slew of new laws have made it an extremely precarious venture, both legally and financially. However, the bottom line is that if the authorities want to shut down an event, they will usually find a reason, no matter how many hoops you've jumped through to prepare. Good luck.

HYBRID IMPLEMENTATION: MIKE TRUMAN TALKS SHOP

What sonic elements seem to tickle the ears when stuttered or glitched?

Usually drum loops and percussion or anything rhythmical works best. Long pads, vocal washes, et cetera, that are stuttered end up being lost in a mix, unless you want that mid-'90s progressive-house vocal gate effect. The rule of thumb is that if you can't really notice the effect in a track, don't bother doing it. Otherwise, you're wasting loads of time on a programming trick that you'll be very proud of when it's soloed but will make absolutely no difference to the track on a club sound system. Go for big sounds pushed high in the mix to edit if you don't want your valuable time wasted muddying up a mix.

Is it true that the modern stutter concept has left the MIDI space and has nothing to do with retriggering samples anymore?

Not entirely. If you listen to our mix of Jeff Wayne's "War of the Worlds," there are stutters and edits all over the beat programming, and it was all done using an Akai S3000 and MIDI. Loads of producers have been doing similar tricks with Akai MPC drum programmers for ages, but editing in audio onscreen is just so much easier.

What about sound design—do you leave your DAW for specialized processing?

We definitely go outside of Logic to process the sound files. The best technique we've found is to take one loop and process it through loads of programs and then chop sections out of the processed loops to generate the edit in an arrangement. We use Peak for Premiere plug-ins, Metasynth, Thonk, SuperCollider, Reaktor and a ton of little shareware programs that only do one effect well, but you use whatever program suits your idea. SuperCollider, for instance, was used for the granular drum effects in our mix of Sarah McLachlan's "Fear," the really metallic smudges on the snare and kicks.

What's your processing trick du jour for treating stutter elements?

At the moment, we're messing about with specially edited Reaktor delays, feedbacks and granular synthesis. Most techies will have noticed loads of GRM Tools effects in our current tracks, as it's got a less-digital feel to it. We're trying to move away from the very robotic edits and put things through guitar amps and rerecord it to smooth things over a bit. Phase is a good old favorite on tightly looped edits. It just takes away some of the harshness. Also, it's a good idea to toy around with delays and reverbs to give a sense of depth to the chops.

Demand
Performance