



GI'S A JOB

# Hey DJ

A CLUB MAY SEEM A MILLION MILES AWAY FROM A CONCERT HALL, BUT MANY CLASSICALLY TRAINED MUSICIANS HAVE MADE THE LEAP FROM THE PIT TO THE PODIUM. **JILL PARK** FINDS OUT MORE

**W**atching a room full of sweaty clubbers dancing in time to the pulsating beats you've skilfully interwoven is no longer the domain of a select few die-hard DJs. While a passion for dance music and the whole clubbing scene are important, a deeper understanding of music has helped some classically trained musicians to become some of today's most successful DJs.

San Francisco-based drum 'n' bass duo Bachelors of Science's producer Rene is one such example, having made the successful transition from classical pianist to master mixer. He graduated with an honours degree in music from Anglia University before moving to San Francisco, where he continued to work as a solo pianist in the bay area, using his spare time to pursue his interest in the city's thriving electronica scene.

'While I was at college in the UK, the dance music scene really exploded and that's how I got interested in DJ-ing,' says Rene. When he moved to San Francisco he met Chris Doe, a hardcore DJ in the UK during the early 1990s. In exchange for a few lessons on how to compose and produce tunes, Doe taught Rene everything he needed to know about beat matching and mixing.

DJ-ing is a skill that you get better with over time, according to Rene: 'Learning the music, artists and how the scene works takes the most time.' Technically, a classical background provides the perfect foundations for a successful DJ. 'Not only will you be familiar with song structure, so that you instinctively know how a song will progress, but one of the more advanced DJ-ing techniques we use is mixing by key,' says Rene. This technique involves combing through records to work out each track's basic key, and knowing that if a track is in E minor it's not going to work next to one in Bb major.

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A good sense of pitch is something international headliner John B (*pictured above and far right*) values highly from his classical piano training. 'Especially when I'm playing very melodic stuff, trancey tunes with a definite key, a good feel of pitch can really help in the tune selection,' he says. Drum 'n' bass legend Goldie picked this one-time reticent science graduate to become one of the leading stars of his Metalheadz label. He became a major draw on the international club scene, pulling in the crowds across the world. Yet, whether he is playing liquid funk or Latin, John B still admits to drawing on his classical background when attempting to create the perfect set.

'I sometimes get strange eureka moments, probably some sort of DJ perfect pitch, where I can visualise the next track and the keys matching or clashing.' Working in the industry he has even come across some DJs who write down what key a track is in on the record sleeve to help build better sets.

Technical appreciation of the music and skill behind its creation was a driving factor in turning Leeds-based Piers Williamson into the DJ and producer Vivid Prophet. 'I am quite an intellectual musician and want to understand how things hang together,' says Williamson. 'When I heard drum 'n' bass for the first time I



*Ben Westbeeche was headhunted by Radio 1 DJ Gilles Peterson*



*Classically trained. Vivid Prophet*



*Bachelors of Science's producer Rene is also a classical pianist*

thought, "Wow, that is awesome, how do you do that?" For a musician who had written some really complex stuff it really stumped me.'

With a degree in contemporary classical composition under his belt, Williamson went from studying Stravinsky, Penderecki, Ligeti and Lutoslawski to being a drum 'n' bass producer. 'My classical training allows me, in the production areas, to essentially formulate how to do anything that I need to do,' says Piers. 'It gives me the nuts and bolts to do complex arrangements or standard harmonisation when required.'

According to Williamson classical training provides you with all the tools to become a technically capable DJ, yet he is quick to underline the distinction between the two genres. In the case of classical music the focus of the piece is generally the melody, but DJ-ing is driven by rhythm. 'Rhythm is the thing that is going to move someone physically in a club,' says Williamson. 'The melody may move their spirit, but the beat is the thing that is going to move their feet.'

The best DJs are the ones who know what makes a crowd tick, and the best way to learn this is to widen your knowledge of the music you want to DJ. 'You have to be knowledgeable about the music you're playing and have your own style,' says Ben Westbeeche, who was hand-picked by Radio 1 DJ Gilles Peterson as the first signing to his label Brownswood. Based on the use of samples and live performance, including piano and guitar, Westbeeche's tracks are a melting pot of musical genres.

Like a conductor, a DJ fuses different elements to make a cohesive form. Conductors lead an orchestra, while a DJ leads the crowd. The top dogs in both areas execute their role with such passion that they can bring their followers with them wherever they lead. But this passion can only shine through once the technical side has been covered. Westbeeche advises a hand-on approach to learning. 'Buy some turntables and a mixer and work it out,' he says. But ultimately, he says, 'If you can feel a beat, then you can DJ.' ■

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### DJ-ING - HOW TO GET AHEAD

#### THE ROLE

- DJs have an allotted time slot to whip a crowd into a frenzy with their set. While some simply play records, others use the decks to scratch and mix. At the core of good DJ-ing is an understanding of what gets a crowd going

#### THE SALARY

- Don't expect to be paid straight from the word go. DJ-ing is a skill and it will take time before you have reached a level worthy of being paid. Most people play for free for a few years to gain experience. Newcomers can generally expect fees ranging from £50 to £180 per night, but for top DJs the sky's the limit, with some demanding as much as £10,000 for a single gig

#### THE TRAINING

- There are courses that teach basic mixing and scratching, but most DJs develop their skills through years of practice. Remember you are not expected to know everything straight away - you will make mistakes, but over time you will improve

#### THE HIGHS

- Top DJs jet around the world. One week you could be playing Pacha in Ibiza, the next week Miami for the Winter Music Conference. One thing remains the same, however: masters of the decks live for the feeling of carrying a crowd in the palm of their hand

#### THE LOWS

- Just because you are a proficient musician, does not automatically make you a world-class DJ. As with learning any new instrument, it can take years of practice to learn how to use decks well

#### THE KIT

- Beginners should invest in a cheap pair of direct drive turntables (don't waste money on belt-drive decks) and a mixer. Any brand will do, but Technics is the gold standard. A basic set-up should set you back a couple of hundred pounds. Buy a couple of records of a similar genre and practise mixing them back and forth

#### GETTING STARTED

- You know your friend of a friend who is a DJ? Now is the time to become his best friend. He or she can teach you the basics and, once you have a good bank of hours practising in your bedroom under your belt, offer to play at friends' parties. Don't be afraid to mess up - this is your chance to learn how to work a crowd

#### RESOURCES

- [www.bbc.co.uk/radio1/onemusic/dj](http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio1/onemusic/dj)
- [www.djadvantage.com](http://www.djadvantage.com)
- [www.i-dj.co.uk](http://www.i-dj.co.uk)
- [www.roughtrade.com](http://www.roughtrade.com)
- [www.piccadillyrecords.com](http://www.piccadillyrecords.com)
- Bill Brewster and Frank Broughton - *How To DJ (Properly)* (Bantam Press)