



Harold Heath

LONG RELATIONSHIPS

MY INCREDIBLE JOURNEY FROM
UNKNOWN DJ TO SMALL-TIME DJ

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1: PASSION

'HORIZONT', VARNA, BULGARIA, 2008

It's nearly 3 am. I am purposefully taking a mental Polaroid of everything around me, as I want to remember this moment always. I am DJing, the main guest for the evening. I am having a moment of pure indulgence, playing one of my own productions, on a beautiful high-end hand-carved artisan sound system which was forged in the embers of a dying sun. We are at an open-air bar in Varna, Bulgaria, on a hill overlooking the Black Sea, on a magical summer evening. The ocean seems completely still from up here, and looks almost entirely black, apart from the silent reflection of the silver moon. Someone comes up to me and begins a conversation, but as I drop in the next song, she exclaims "Oh I fucking love this tune" and is gone, back to the dance floor.

Every tune I play seems to be the perfect piece of music, out of all the available pieces of music in my CD wallet, for that particular moment. Each tweak of the EQ and cross-fader adjustment seems to increase the energy and magic in the air. About 45 minutes ago, I began to realise that this might just be one of those nights that lives up to or even surpasses the early evening anticipation. Where we will actually feel, as we dance to our favourite music, with our loved ones under the stars, something special: synergy, connection. This venue is pretty isolated; no one is going anywhere else, we're a closed group, here for the duration. This has become more than a bunch of people drinking and dancing together; the whole is greater than the sum of its parts; we are all part of a single mass now.

Something semi-sacred happens at a really good party. It's not caused by the DJ or the venue, or the sound system; it's not any one single thing, it's a new thing created out of all the individual elements. It's a shared experience, a group emotion that can be a genuine power for good. Some people return to the 'real' world and their normal lives tired but happy, improved; and the intense weekend experience can positively affect how they see the world and how they interact with

those around them. Of course, some others return to the real world tired and a bit depressed, have a bath and lie on the sofa for two days eating Pringles and main-lining skunk; not everyone receives a transcendent experience every time they go out.

The sound system here is superb. It's owned by a local DJ who spent a long time obsessively setting up and tweaking it. At one point, he firmly tells me not to play any Mp3s on it and to only play vinyl or wav. files, as though a largely indiscernible difference in audio quality might somehow infect his amp and speakers. The rig is loud, clear and full, with not a hint of distortion. There are no rattling monitors; nothing's going into the red, there's just the irresistible pulse of the best in house music, drawing all to the dance floor.

For a lower-mid-tier working club DJ like me, this might be as good as it gets. I am completely confident that what I will play here will go down well. Everyone here is a seasoned clubber, the scene here is really healthy: they love to party, and they love their house music. No one will make requests; they know that they're going to get exactly what they want and there's no air of hoping this will get better or wondering if this is just somewhere to be before going on elsewhere.

It may sound obvious, but if you're getting your flight and hotel paid for and you're getting a nice fee too, and all you are expected to do is turn up to a party and play some music for a few hours, then you had better make a good job of it. You have to have some very good music on you, really, it had better be the very best in your genre. And you better be connected enough to have a few secret weapons, a few unreleased bits that no one else has got. And you need to be strong in the mix, you need to be able to handle the decks and the mixer like a pro, and put it all together cohesively, excitingly. No mistakes, no fuck-ups, no inappropriate selections, no fear, no weakness, just be the best.

They'll expect you to present brilliant music seamlessly, perfectly. They'll expect you to ride the EQ and effects but not to overdo it; they want to know that they can completely relax into the groove, knowing that you won't suddenly haul them out of their trance by making a gauche programming decision. Most of all, you need to somehow work out what they want, even if they don't know themselves, then serve it up to them until the lights come up at the end of the night.

I had got this gig because I made house records that were briefly popular with a tiny demographic across Europe. When I DJed, I usually played house music: tech house, deep house, underground house, techno and disco if you want to get into genre definitions.

This next section is important as it details the emergence of tech house, a genre that I worked in for most of my DJ career. Genre distinctions are the absolute heart and soul of DJing and dance music, so forgive me whilst I painstakingly explain exactly which brand of 4/4 doof-doof music I DJed and made.

Tech house has been going since the early 90s in some form or another, and that's a long time in dance music, though it has changed so much during that period that to many of its former adherents it's now unrecognisable. It's important to our tale because I was really into it in the mid and late 90s, enough to build a home studio and start making it. It was these productions that allowed me access to the next couple of tiers of the DJ hierarchy, so tech house came to dominate my life for the next few years.

It was originally a DJing style, not a strict genre. As the name implies, tech house is a techno and house hybrid. But it began with DJs like 'Evil' Eddie Richards, Terry Francis and Nathan Coles from the Wiggle parties in London, Mr C, Layo & Bushwacka! at The End and some others too wanting to recreate the acid house vibe from a few years previously.¹ Tech house was a reaction against commercial 'handbag' house along with the descent of UK rave into hardcore. At the beginning, it was very much defined by what it wasn't as much as what it was: it wasn't hardcore, it wasn't trance, it wasn't hard techno, it wasn't uplifting house. It emerged from the gaps between the genres. DJs picked music which contained the abstract musicality or raw intensity of techno but also the shuffle and swing of Chicago house. So techno records might get pitched down, and US garage dubs sped up, certain electro and progressive house tunes – if they contained the right amount of funk – might also get worked in. Tracks were given a new identity simply by their placement with other pieces of music in the context of a DJ set. It was irresistible: a genre comprised of some of the best elements of other genres, wide open to interpretation, interesting, exciting, and absolutely killer on late night dance floors.

Tech house was also brilliant as its birth coincided with the

appearance of internet newsletters, groups and chat rooms, thus providing virtual spaces in which to argue about tech house. You could join a group that would CC you all day long on email conversations from DJs and producers all over the world, all arguing about what tech house was or wasn't. In fact, apart from its subtle melding of some of the best elements of house and techno, tech house was defined by constant arguing about what tech house was.

Still, the music was superb. The whole nuanced mood that a lot of late 90s tech house records had, teetering between seedy, scary and sublime, really appealed to something in me and set me off on my DJ and production career in a direction that would eventually win me the respect of my peers with very little financial reward. I knew this and entered the pact happily. This was underground music that was specifically made to work on certain dance floors, in certain types of venues for certain types of clubbers and there was something in it that I found irresistible.

Artists and labels began to make music that sat somewhere between house and techno, specifically 'for' the tech house scene and I became one of those artists. My productions were released on some labels in the scene, some of the DJs played and charted my stuff, and I was certainly very influenced by this particular genre, so I became a minor member of the UK tech house scene.

Tech house has since grown into something of a clubland monster, becoming phenomenally successful worldwide but for lots of DJs at my level gigs outside of the UK were often in Eastern Europe. A friend running a DJ agency brought me up to speed. For her (bigger, more successful) DJs, the higher fees they could command for playing closer to home meant they often didn't take the Central or Eastern European gigs. However, me and my tech house compatriots were more than happy to fly out to Bulgaria or the Czech Republic because the crowds were made up of genuine party soldiers who truly loved what we did.

I'd been DJing since the late 80s – in pub back rooms, student unions, in nightclub second or third rooms, in restaurant basements and at house parties – when, in a short serendipitous period in 2001 I lost a marketing job I detested, negotiated myself a good pay-off, updated my home studio and began to make house music for release. Within a few months, I had signed a few tracks to a well-respected

label from Canada, Stickman Records and was pushed up a couple of tiers in the DJ pyramid.

Producing dance music is often seen as a logical next step for a DJ, as the two disciplines, although fundamentally different, do share certain elements. For me, DJing and producing are two entirely different skill sets. It could be strongly argued for example, that auditioning snares on your Mac in your bedroom will not equip you with the necessary social skills, composure and confidence to provide several hours of audio entertainment for a dark room full of a thousand people in various stages of intoxication. Certainly, a decent DJ should have some idea of what will work on the dance floor and therefore have some idea of what might work in a dance tune. But being a good producer is no guarantee that you'll also be a great DJ and too often the opposite is true. I was lucky in that by the time better gigs started for me as a result of my heightened profile, I had been DJing in some form for years and was at least competent.

However, my music industry success was never mainstream. I had underground kudos, lots of it. But I didn't end up playing at the Ministry of Sound, or Space in Ibiza. I never played in Berlin, Chicago, Detroit or New York. I once DJed in Dartford in a disused carpet warehouse which smelt like old ham. I rocked flat-roofed pubs called things like The Dockers Fist. I played at some decent clubs and parties, and for a memorable mid to late 2000s purple patch, a few clubs abroad too.

There was always a hierarchy of DJs, and although I was successful in comparison to the local amateur DJ I had been previously, I wasn't very successful. I wasn't residency-at-Cream, or guest-at-fabric successful. That was where an awful lot of other semi-pro/semi-amateur DJs and I were aiming, but that was not where I ended up. As the role of DJ became easier and more popular, larger DJing success inevitably became about luck, contacts, networking and timing in addition to talent. No matter; the underground house scene promised and delivered countless nights of unmissable fun.

I select another tune, change my mind and select something different. A gig like this is a joy for many reasons. The people, the setting, the equipment, and obviously the pay, but perhaps the very best thing is that my particular specialism, the type of music that I play, is loved by

this crew. That's why they're here: to hear the very best of my music collection, put together as perfectly as possible. They know that I'll play some of their favourite tracks and that they'll fall in love with some new music as well. I'm excited in the way a parent is before Christmas morning when they know their kid is going to be beside themselves with joy when they open up their presents.

Any DJs who worked before digital music became the norm will know that there were dry spells when there weren't many good new releases about. When you might listen to a stack of vinyl as high as a pint of lager and only find one B2 dub that you thought you might be able to use. When you go to every record shop in Soho and leave with nothing except a US double pack and an acapella compilation, both of which you're starting to have doubts about. And so you head out to the suburbs.

I lived in different parts of east and south-east London for years so got to know where outside of the West End you might get a few decent records being sold. Cruisin' Records in Welling, the back of that weird furniture shop in Plumstead, Sounds Right in Stratford. Or it might be a dedicated dance music record shop like Bluebird in Bromley, Paul for Music in Whitechapel, Music Power in Ilford. There was a shop on Lee High Road in Lewisham that specialised in jungle and hip hop, where they played everything at nightclub volume making anything more than the simplest conversation virtually impossible. I always found it a little intimidating in there, even when they were selling my Harold Heath 12" productions in their tiny house section.

And then there are times when it seems that every week there's a bunch of brilliant new tunes to play, and then the following week, the next batch just blows away last week's stuff, as though the producers are all collectively going through some kind of accelerated-creativity phase. This gig is one of those times, and I'm in full-on DJ Santa mode, itching to deliver the new profane medicine to the acolytes, my bag packed full of musical spells to beguile and weapons to slay the dance floor.

I realise now that often in my clubbing and partying years, we thought that we were just going out, just having a laugh, but in fact we were actually having experiences and creating friendships that

would live with us for the rest of our lives, and which would shape, at least to some extent, the kind of people we were. House music and partying might seem, from the outside, to be superficial activities, low-level mindless hobbies and blind hedonism, and obviously, at some level they are. But for us it meant more. We were dedicated and committed to the scene, I think because we all knew how good it could be. If you needed a cure for your working week blues, then this was where it's at. Looking for a sense of community in an atmosphere of outrageous enjoyment? Step right up. People have been gathering at night to dance together for longer than there has been house music, we just were lucky enough to be doing it in an age where the music and sound system technology had caught up enough to seriously increase the intensity of the enjoyment and pleasure.

I was booked for this particular Varna gig by a much-loved disco sprite and force of nature who is no longer with us. Ivan Boiadjiev was always smaller in real life than I remembered, his personality looming large in my memory. Even as we sat eating seafood and drinking vodka together that afternoon before the gig, whenever he got up from the table, I was always surprised at how small he was; his character always seemed much bigger. Gently mocking my cheap sunglasses, telling his long stories, smoking endless cigarettes; if you suggested a caper, he'd be up for it but would probably already have done it and have a superb story to tell involving schemes, predicaments, a third entirely bizarre and random element and much hilarity.

I work the EQ; I hear the chink of glasses near me, the sound of people shouting to each other in Bulgarian (and, occasionally the incongruous sound of someone Bulgarian speaking English with a very distinct home counties twang. Later I found out that he had been to school in Surrey in the 90s). The dance floor is now packed and has achieved its own momentum, becoming a single, churning organism. Like starlings performing a murmuration, different parts split off and re-join, but the main space in front of me will now remain packed until we finish. The bass drops in, and everyone shifts up a gear. We share the moment, just one of many over a time-stretched dream of an evening. The beats and low-end wash over the crowd, the steady 4/4 pulse the only constant, anchoring the dance floor into a sublime state

of now, time stretching out behind us and in front of us as we all lock into the present moment.

A young man comes up to me; he's simultaneously rubbing his belly and shifting his weight from one foot to the other. He nods vigorously, and grinning, says something in Bulgarian, nods again, grabs my hand and enthusiastically shakes it for what seems like a minute, then jogs the five steps back to the dance floor as the next tune drops. I completed the mix – EQ and volume tweaks and all – all one-handed whilst shaking his hand, no one noticed, and I'm secretly pleased.

The tune I've just dropped is going down way better than I expected, always a nice bonus when it happens. Moments like this are the only times DJing when my hands shake. Because the floor is already heaving and whooping and I know that if they like this, then they're going to love the tune I'm about to drop. Just when everyone thought we'd peaked, everything is going to become bigger, badder, more intense. A delightfully sweet sense of anticipation takes over me, and the adrenalin manifests as a clenching in the gut and a slight tremor in my hands. It's nerves too, no doubt born from the vinyl days when one tiny slip or error could completely ruin a moment like this, and you'd have to start building the atmosphere up again almost from scratch. No more, though. The tune is cued up on the ever-reliable Pioneer CDJs, the DJs-digital-dream-deck. The faders are correctly positioned, the crowd is supremely primed, they're like an arrow in a pulled bow, just waiting for me to let go. Now, I wait. I have perhaps two minutes before I'm going to start to mix the next track in.

By the time I played this gig, CDs had pretty much replaced vinyl as the standard DJ format, and would soon be superseded by USB drives. There was still vinyl about and most venues still had Technics 1200s or 1210s record players, but many of them functioned purely as stands for CD decks and laptops. Previously, DJs had never discussed formats because there weren't really formats, plural, there was just vinyl and cassette, and no one DJed off cassette. Format was utterly irrelevant, never mattered. Still doesn't really, it's the music that possesses the magic, not the delivery system. Hasn't stopped DJs arguing about formats ALL THE TIME FOREVER INTO AN ENDLESS ETERNITY though.

For the DJ, playing a set with CDs is remarkably straightforward

compared to vinyl. You still need a sense of rhythm and timing and to understand the concept of bars and beats, and you still need the ability to listen to separate pieces of music at the same time and make judgements about their relative pitch and so on. But the actual physical act of getting those two pieces of music to play in sync is much easier using CDs than vinyl.

You don't have to physically move the needle back to the start of the record; there's a button for that. You don't have to interact with the platter as though it were made of fragile glass crystal because you can't jog a CD the way you can the needle on a record. There won't be a build-up of fluff on the needle that causes the stylus to slide across the record to its paper centre where the sound of the needle scraping the label will be amplified through the pristine 12K club sound system to the abject terror of everyone in the place.

The introduction of digital technology removed much of the stress of DJing, as messing up a mix in front of a crowd can be a humbling experience, and it pretty much eliminated the possibility of losing it the way you could with vinyl. People could use digital technology and still DJ very badly indeed, but, in terms of the tunes going out of time in the mix, that kind of mistake at least was pretty much eliminated. If your tunes still went out of sync when you were DJing on a pair of CDJs then you might need to go home and have a bit of a practice before attempting to DJ in public.

By reducing the amount of time needed to beatmatch, the introduction of CD decks slowed the pace of DJing down and opened up more creative potential. DJs now had more time to loop a section of a track, drop in an acapella or work the FX. Some of the things that had always been tricky to pull off on vinyl – particularly looping, but also anything involving cueing up different parts of a track – suddenly became much easier too, opening up all sorts of possibilities for live remixing. And in a final strange irony, despite the role becoming demonstrably easier with the advent of CDs and laptop DJing, many DJs chose this point in dance music history to start teaming up in twos and threes, at the exact point when the technology made such a thing entirely un-needed.

On this night, I spend the extra couple of minutes afforded me by the digital revolution watching and waiting, savouring the anticipation,

basking in the moment. I catch a couple of eyes on the dance floor, take a sip or two of my drink, and needlessly adjust my headphone volume. Finally, it's time. I hit the play button and gently nudge the jog wheel to get the next track playing in time with the current. I can hear them both in my ears, while the crowd can still only hear one song. This is the secret world of the DJ: we always hear that bit at the start of the record that punters never get to hear.

The beat is locked in, so it's time to blend it in with the current tune. I'm tense with excitement, trying not to frown as my wife has told me I can look a bit angry when I'm really concentrating. I've EQed out the low end and mid-range, and I'm just dropping the hi-hat in and out. Then I leave it in and drop in the mids. Just this tweak causes a ripple of excitement, and an already active crowd becomes more – more everything – they move, whoop, shout, laugh, and dance more. I've not yet dropped the bass in; I'm stretching the moment to rinse every last drop of anticipatory emotion out of it. I'm adjusting the volume levels, easing out the low end on the other track; I switch the filter in, slam the crossfade across and back again whilst giving the filter a tweak – essentially creating a funky, squelchy on the spot percussion-fill – then in an instant, I slam the crossfader back across whilst simultaneously snapping the bass EQ up.

The tune drops in perfect time, its impact on the dance floor is instant and intense, and it's as though everyone has had exactly the same thought at exactly the same time, as though they are no longer individuals, and the entire crowd suddenly go at it with even more urgency, cheers and shouts than before. It's exhilarating and even now, the memory of the shivery rapture of a group moment on the dance floor can cause goose-bumps on my arms and a leap in my gut.

This is where you can really see the power of DJing. Get it right and you become a cog in a magnificent human machine, your musical choices and programming decisions seeming to create pace and energy. You can almost ride on some kind of unseen wave from the room, controlling its torque with the EQ, the FX, feeling that sonic power as you drop a kick drum in and out and it makes the room shudder, keeping that essential pulse going, supplying audio-electricity to the mass consciousness that is emerging in front of you.

Each tweak has a target, the bodies on the dance floor and each sonic

adjustment aims to further connect the audio to the physical. To not only make them dance but to constantly involve them in the current moment, the now of the mix, so that they forget about last week and next week: to create an immersive, ever-mutating luminescent cloud of sound in which dancers can truly lose themselves.

Get it wrong however, and you may quickly become the subject of a room full of high, twisted and drunk people's ire. That ever-mutating luminescent cloud of nonsense I just mentioned can dissipate in the blink of an eye.

It's just past 3 am and I am having a near-perfect DJ gig. I am relishing the moment, treasuring it, locking it away for future reference, to prove to myself that I was here, that this happened, and it was worth remembering. I glance at the moon's reflection on the Black Sea and then back to my happy dance floor, then breathe in deeply, metaphorically rubbing my hands.

There were plenty of other folk – DJs, producers, record shops, promoters, journos etc. – who were also involved or who influenced what went on too, so if you feel that I've missed out an important name in this section, you can rest easy that I'm probably aware of that person, I just haven't included them in this very brief history of tech house, mainly because I'm keeping it short in an attempt to avoid alienating my readers, not all of whom are tech house purists :o)

2: VALLEY OF THE SHADOWS

LOS LOCOS, COVENT GARDEN, LONDON, 2003

Anton is on the Los Locos dance floor, dancing by himself, very badly. He's enthusiastic and spirited and what he lacks in self awareness he seems to make up for in elbows. A strange and ungainly young man, he would strut and smoke his way around the club as though he were a modern-day James Dean, sometimes offering me a no-look fist bump as he passed the DJ booth on his way to the toilets. Imagining himself detached, cool, edgy, a silent king of the dance floor, he in fact was an awkward, wiry bean of late-adolescent tension. Always first on the dance floor, he would dispatch his suite of weird angular movements, looking like a collection of arms and legs disagreeing with each other. A wisp of a moustache graced his upper lip, a cardigan draped louchely over both shoulders, his perfectly shined penny loafers glinting in the strobe light.

It's 10:40, Tuesday night, in a small basement club called Los Locos, just off Covent Garden in central London, a tourist plughole surrounded by similar bars and clubs where tourists accidentally ended up if they weren't swept away to the West End proper. There were three universities and countless language colleges within walking distance meaning that usually at least half my audience were students, and sometimes it was essentially a student night. The other half were a broad mix of disparate groups: tourist, local, mistake, office-party, don't-get-out-much, Megan's birthday etc. Much like a wedding reception, from a DJing point of view, my audience was a near-impossible demographic.

This evening, I have the Anton issue to attend to. When Anton was on the floor by himself, no one else would come and dance, as though sharing the space with him would incur some kind of guilt by association. As the DJ for the night, this was a genuine problem for me. The only way to avoid a difficult evening where the punters become disgruntled was to get the room moving. I don't need Anton performing the role of a dance-floor-clearer, I've got a huge deep house

collection thanks. When the floor is full he's welcome back and he can come and do his weird kung fu/jazz hands as much as he likes. And on their night bus or cab ride home, non-regulars will talk about 'crazy moustache guy'; but no one will get on the floor when the only other occupant could qualify as entertainment. He has to go.

Anton's a regular here and I've developed a straightforward technique to get him off the floor. A deliberately jarring change of musical mood would usually do the job and he would grimace as I purposely car crashed Ja Rule into Girls Aloud, upping the tempo by 20 or 30 beats per minute in a couple of seconds and completely ruining his flow. He would ruefully shake his head, just slightly, as though he wasn't so much annoyed, as disappointed. Then he would sashay off to smoke another cigarette, one eye on the mirrors around the wall, cardigan perfectly in place over his shoulders.

This is DJing but it's not the DJing that I wanted to do – this isn't about rare grooves, taking the listener on a journey, working the EQ and playing upfront promos. This is musical crowd control; it's audio fodder for the masses, the sonic equivalent of Harry Ramsden's fish and chips or Saturday evening ITV: solid, reliable, dependable light-entertainment, unchallenging, simple and undemanding. This is DJing but not how I wanted it.

A punter, about five pints into his evening, props himself up against the DJ booth and surveys the gradually filling room. His breath smells of stale lager, cigarettes and some kind of fast food grease. He's down with his mates tonight: "Firm-handed bro, we're kind of running things here yeah?" he says, only half-joking. He suggests I play the three biggest tunes of the last 12 months, tunes that I play every week here without exception, sometimes twice in a night if pressed: 'In Da Club', 'Crazy in Love', and 'Toxic' by 50 Cent, Beyonce and Britney Spears respectively.

By far the best tactic for dealing with this kind of input is to agree and get on with looking for the next tune, although whilst doing this, there is still a tiny part of me that bristles with resentment. The 'true' DJ inside me who thinks of DJing as, if not an art form then at least a craft, where the gigs involve technical skills, encyclopaedic knowledge of obscure, underground music, communion with the audience, integrity, and commitment... that DJ is secretly resentful that drunk

man-in-bad-shirt thinks he's given me some quality advice. And worse, later on when I drop Beyonce's 'Crazy in Love' to rapturous reaction, with perfect timing, having spent two and a half hours artfully building the atmosphere and tension, drunk-shirt will catch my eye and give me the gun-fingers as though to say "See mate, see, I told you if you played this they'd love it. You're welcome".

To point out to kebab-breath that his suggestions are akin to telling a footballer that they might want to attempt kicking the ball into the opposing teams net should they wish the match to go well would be unwise. Anything other than "Sweet bruv" or some similar shouted exhortation would break the spell – because this period, from 11ish to 12ish in a commercial UK nightclub – is the magic time. It's the time when the number one rule is, don't break the spell.

It's the time when the club fills up, pre-peak time which here wavers between about half 12 and 2. It's before the post 2 am thinning, before the nights' winners and losers can be starkly differentiated from each other. Young people, high on sugary alcoholic confections and raging hormones can look across the dance floor through the smoke and ultraviolet lights and for a time, it's almost as though we're all on MTV, in one of those videos where everyone isn't at the club, they're 'in da club', and they're all beautiful, attractive, popping corks, dancing and flirting as the DJ plays their favourite songs.

For a moment they ignore that their feet stick to the carpet, or that the smell of disinfectant and stale beer is still discernible behind the fog of Lynx body spray and cigarettes. The Tex-Mex paraphernalia on the walls showing the venue's daytime role as a theme restaurant fades into the background. The punters are transported somewhere they imagine to be better. This is the best time of the evening, whilst the alcohol is still bringing people up, creating excitement, when a DJ can build anticipation, even a DJ bound by unbreakable laws to always play 'In Da Club', 'Crazy in Love', and 'Toxic', every night, without exception. Even a DJ so restricted gets to know what tunes work best to build a room up, how to programme them, to tease the crowd, to seduce them before letting them have it. That skill is still relevant here, away from Ku and Amnesia, fabric or the Sub Club, no matter how far removed from authentic club culture I may have drifted.

And for a while, I can create a con, a mass deception in which

everyone in the room takes part. Even I buy into it sometimes; the atmosphere is somehow light and giddy, potential hangs in the air, mingling with the smoke and perfume. There's something about loud music in a dark room with coloured lights which triggers some kind of synaptic activity in my brain, reviving old memories of raves and nightclubs, and perhaps earlier memories of parties and discos as a kid, triggering a rush of adrenalin. And there it is, that exquisite sense of anticipation you get at the beginning of a night out: anything could happen this evening.

US mainstream r'n'b and hip hop: Jay Z, Justin Timberlake, Destiny's Child, J-Lo etc. was a large part of the music 'policy' at Locos. I had tried to introduce a more challenging/interesting music policy to no avail and following a constructive conversation with the management ("Stop dicking around with that doof-doof shit and play them what they fucking want") had accepted that a diet of hip hop-lite and pop/indie/dance that would work equally well at weddings and student nights up and down the country was what was required. The money was good, the drinks were free, there are worse ways to earn, so I acquiesced. I figured the money would help me support my "actual DJ career". It wasn't like I was getting regular gigs playing the music I loved every weekend anyway. If I was lucky, at this point, I was probably playing somewhere decent maybe once or twice a month, but some months went by when Los Locos was the only place where I wore headphones professionally.

"My actual DJ career." It's funny looking back, how I had a regular paying DJ gig, two nights a week which I didn't regard as my DJ career, and then I had intermittent bookings over the year playing underground house in cool clubs which I somehow instead regarded as my actual DJ career.

Outside of Los Locos, I had a truly tiny but dedicated following. But no one at Locos knew or cared about who I was. No more than if the bartender were a decent photographer, or the doorman a well-respected journalist, it would be irrelevant to the role we play in the club. On Mondays and Tuesday evenings at Los Locos, you won't hear any underground house or rare disco re-edits. No obscure one-sided white-labels, no acetates, no promos, and there's no mixing really. I rarely touched the EQ or the effects on the mixer, although I

occasionally beatmatched to relieve the boredom.

When I DJed outside of Locos – ‘proper gigs’ – I generally played house, or funk and disco. I was a fully paid-up member of the underground club scene, and so I always viewed the music at Locos as a necessary evil, one that I would interact with as little as possible. I kept it at arm’s length, rarely properly listening before downloading, never hearing in the club as I wore insomnia earplugs, as though too much contact with it might corrupt my underground sensibility. There was always a slight scent of bad faith about working at Locos, as though I was betraying ‘true’ DJing. To use my skills for the good of the dark side, to bring the programming excellence, sense of flow and fastidious attention to detail that had contributed to me becoming a competent club DJ to the masses, whilst playing the worst kind of commercial, sell-out music. However, it turned out that I had my price, and I went into it fully aware of what was involved.

I originally got the job following one of the most misleading job interviews ever carried out in the history of recruitment. My old friend Snake Eyes was managing Locos at the time. Snake eventually moved on to manage various venues south of the river, but had been very clear about what music I should play when offering me the Mondays and Tuesdays DJing slot at Locos, and it’s one of those conversations that has stuck in my mind through the years:

Snake: “It’s a student night, they’ll love your tunes – bit of funk and soul, all that, they love it.”

Me: “Really, that sounds brilliant – what about contemporary stuff?”

S: “Oh yeah, they love all that, house, hip hop, you can play anything really.”

Me: *thinks: this almost sounds too good to be true* “OK, I’m in. Six hours, 9 to 3, Mondays and Tuesdays – funk, rare groove, soul, hip hop, house, breaks, disco, and jazz, right?”

S: “Yeah brilliant. Totally. Umm.”

Me: “What?”

S: “What?”

Me: ”You said ‘Umm’.”

S: “No. No, brilliant. All good. You might need to play you know, a Blondie track or something like that occasionally but you know what you’re doing right?”

Me: *thinks: Oooh I can do that mix I do with Grandmaster Flash's 'Adventures on the Wheels of Steel' and Blondie's 'Rapture...*' "Sure no problem mate, of course."

S: "Excellent. Drink?"

Snake and I had hung out together for years, united by a love of clubbing and music. He was one of the few people I've ever met in my life who seemed genuinely happy pretty much all the time. A red-haired Liverpudlian bursting with the joys and possibilities of life, who steadfastly refused to ever dwell on anything bad that happened, or indeed to ever consider the consequences of his actions.

Consequently, he was terribly good fun, and you could either stand at the sidelines tutting or join in. I remember he borrowed my new red coat once when we went to a Spiral Tribe warehouse rave. The next day, he told me that he had carefully left my coat in the corner of the warehouse for eight hours and couldn't understand where it had gone at the end of the night. He was once seeing a friend of mine whilst simultaneously having an affair with a member of his bar staff. Whilst I was admonishing him about his conduct, Snake looked me in the eye and said with complete seriousness: "It's alright Harold, I've got a plan. I'm going to carry on until I get found out, and then I'm going to apologise."

Bearing all this in mind, I perhaps should not have been surprised when I played my first Monday night the following week and found that the music policy we had carefully worked out was complete and utter nonsense. They wanted hip hop and r'n'b but not the kind of hip hop I liked, no Mike Ladd, no De La Soul or Jurassic 5. I wrote down everything they asked for as I realised that this gig was not the dream gig I thought it was going to be. I went home and thought about not doing it. Then I thought about the money and got some music piracy tips from my flatmate Long Tall Jim. Next week, I arrived tooled up.

Aside from J-Lo, Jay-Z, J-Kwon and such, the Locos crowd also loved a bit of pop trance. For many in the underground house/techno DJing fraternity, slightly bizarro Dutch 90s pop trance act Alice DJ were the epitome of everything that was wrong with cross-over commercial dance music, a pale, mocking shadow of acid house culture, a beige bastardisation of something pure and raw. I completely agreed with this analysis, but I went ahead anyway: I did

it. I wore the earplugs and I played Alice DJ. And at what I also considered a particularly low point in my DJing career, I used to play Bon Jovi's 'Livin' On A Prayer' every Monday and Tuesday night for two years (perhaps not so much a low point as a low period). Usually, around 2 am, and to my shame, when it got to the chorus, I would pull down the volume at the second 'Woah', ensuring the entire, drunken, shameless room would holler together "Woah, Living on a pray-er". Indeed. My prayer was usually: please God, make them all leave soon so we can knock off half an hour early.

Tonight the pop requests mount up quickly, so I move into Britney territory, unselfconscious pop music, at which point a girl comes up to the booth and asks for hip hop and r'n'b. "I've been playing hip hop and r'n'b for the last hour," I say. "I was sitting down then," she says. I tell her I'll play some in a bit and before she can say anything else a group of very drunk young men on a stag night, dressed as World War One flying aces, start shouting at me to play "something from World War One".

I write down the requests on a growing list, which I will curse later as I can only read the first two or three that I wrote down. The legibility of my writing quickly deteriorates as the list progresses until I appear to have taken a request to play 'shitcunny Hitler' which I'm pretty sure I don't have with me.

Many of the tourists here have made a terrible mistake. They wanted to be at fabric or another of London's 'proper' nightclubs but had somehow ended up in front of my booth, scowling at how their holiday in one of the world's clubbing capitals had gone so wrong. Sometimes they would pull themselves out of their funk just enough to ask if I had any M.A.N.D.Y., or was I going to play anything from John Tejada, referring to the early 2000s club trend for restrained, sophisticated and stripped back 'minimal' techno tracks, knowing full well that even if I did have any of this kind of music with me, a dance floor heaving to the strains of Usher, the Black Eyed Peas and Liberty X really aren't going to be interested.

There's something particularly saddening for a DJ to see a very good record clear a floor, and I could guarantee that a slice of classy European minimal-tech house would clear this particular dance floor in the time it took for the hi-hat to come in. Or worse, they'd stay on

the dance floor but refuse to dance, eyeballing me until I played something 'everybody knows' or something 'everybody can dance to'. You pick your battles. You wouldn't try to force the main room at Ministry to dance to S Club 7 any more than you'd get Los Locos to move to Ricardo Villalobos.

Every week, me and thousands of other resident DJs went off to work, in clubs, pubs and bars, comedy venues, village halls and bingo halls. Others played weddings, birthdays, anniversaries. This wasn't about underground music, fashion or genres; this was what DJing was like before DJing was cool. This is DJing with no pretensions to art or technique, although it definitely involves the same processes of empathy and communication as any other DJing. Because it turns out, and here's a little DJ secret for you, that even people who like music you don't, really love to dance together. It's not just us clubbers with our dub mixes, rare acetates and exclusive remixes, it's everyone.² We all work hard every week and everyone deserves a few hours in the dark getting down with their mates.

Every night is different, yet somehow the same: you go to work. You stand in a greasy wooden and perspex booth, tucked at the back of the club, the bar on the right, toilets on the left, dance floor directly in front, in a building with poor ventilation and the lingering odours of stale beer, bleach and, back then, cigarette smoke. You play music for the drunk, the happy and the lonely, and for those who couldn't care less what you play, using a mixer that has seen better days and a pair of off-brand CD players that are embarrassingly low spec. There's a pair of Technics 1210s, the industry standard for playing vinyl records, plugged into the mixer too, but they function purely as plinths for the CD players.

Sometimes the CD players stick, disks refuse to play or to eject, and you make sure you bring cleaning disks and that you clean the decks every night before you start. You'd better have an Mp3 player plugged into the mixer for when things go wrong too because any DJ will tell you a complete sound failure to a full room is a humbling experience. Momentarily, the only sound is the hum of the air con and the whirr of the spotlights, the clink of glasses and bottles behind the bar and the tramp of feet on the dance floor, but after a second the calm turns to a full-on crowd verbal assault. Better gigs, in better clubs, you

might have a sound engineer to help you out or just to frown at as though it were their fault to divert attention – but then again, in a better club, in a better gig, the CD decks wouldn't be Sainsbury's own brand and prone to sticking.

The sound equipment is well past its best and beset with problems, from crackling connections to unexplainable volume variations. You learn quickly to bring basic tools and gaffer tape for all eventualities. There's also a laptop in the booth, but it has no sound card or internet connection and is good only for semi-controlling the lights and for playing solitaire between 9 and 10. Occasionally a particular nerdy punter will attempt a conversation about what operating system is running. (I wear headphones and earplugs all the time, smile and shout "Great, bottle of Becks please!").

You keep up to date with new releases, burning a CD or two a week. You bring two or three CD wallets packed full of disks, in an attempt to have most things that most people might ask for. There will always be occasions when someone requests something like 'Old Shep', and you have to admit to not having that particular tune in the bag this evening but essentially, you get to know your punters, what they want, what they need, and what they didn't realise they wanted ('Long Train Running' by The Doobie Brothers: never requested, always killed when I played it). You prepare all your music, gather your headphones, cleaning equipment, torch, gaffer tape, earplugs, pen and paper, spare cables, kiss your loved ones goodnight and head off into the evening.

You go to work and attempt to successfully soundtrack the peaks and troughs of a couple of hundred mostly-drunk people in a tiny, disorientating space on a night out. If you've done your research properly and if you play it correctly, if you observe the room and react to it, if all the stars align, you might have an OK night, a night where you get pleasantly low-level drunk, have a few shouted conversations with half-cut strangers, play some music, make some people happy, keep the place rammed so that the bar makes a decent take, and get out of there by ten past three with your soul intact.

A dub mix is an alternative version of a song, a practise taken straight from Jamaican sound system culture. In house music terms, you can think of a dub mix like a remix, but one where they've taken a lot of the music and vocals out and replaced them with weird noises and far-out studio effects, or, sometimes, with just lots of beats. When it comes to DJing, there are

certain types of DJs, myself included, who always head straight to the dub mix if there is one.

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