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Weems, Mickey

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The DJ

*People think I do this because it’s cool. No! I am a DJ because I can’t help myself.*

—DJ Tony Moran

The most important professionals in the Circuit are the DJs. In a groundbreaking study of the Gay male party scene in Sydney, Australia, Lynnette Lewis and Michael Ross state that DJs carry the highest status as sacred persons. Party promoters and drug distributors, who likewise occupy positions of power similar to that of religious leaders, are not given the same level of reverence (146–48).

In standard American masculine discourse, one’s status as a man is greatly increased by being a member of elite masculine teams, most of which are military or paramilitary in design. Men who are soldiers, police, firefighters, lifeguards, and contact sports athletes enjoy a heightened sense of masculinity. Each of these teams has its moments of ecstatic expression through exhibition of the *corps*, a performance in which teammates merge into one body, be it during a parade, a victory, a party, or a funeral for a fallen comrade. At these moments, each participant’s identity is writ large, and if they are men, their fellows confirm their masculine identity. If they are women, they may receive honorary masculine status as well.¹

The military/paramilitary/team sports models differ from the Circuit in substantial ways. The social mechanisms for conformity in the Circuit are subtler. For all of the Circuit’s “clone” tendencies, there is no set Circuit uniform, no chain of command, no standard for rules

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¹ Carol Burke concurs with me on the notion that women joining these teams may be granted honorary masculine status. Pilot (a graduate from the United States Air Force Academy who wishes to remain anonymous) disagrees. He finds such a notion insulting to the women officers with which he has served (personal communication, April 2008).
of engagement in the disciplined, no-nonsense fulfillment of one’s duty. Duty, in fact, is not an issue.

There is one striking similarity shared by the soldier and the Circuiteer. In the military, soldiers in formation listen to one voice that calls them to attention, directs them, and sings cadence for them to march together. That lone voice helps them to become one entity. The equivalent of that lone voice in the Circuit is the DJ.

The purpose of marching is to change individuals into a united corps, the French word for “body.” Its unity is recognized as a collective entity called the esprit de corps, the spirit of the communal body. When I was in Marine Corps boot camp, my drill instructors (who sang to us as we marched) used the term esprit de corps for what they wanted to instill in us. Body-mind unity of the sports team (and the fans who adore them) is described as team spirit, somewhat equivalent to the military’s esprit de corps.

Team spirit of whatever team can be spiritual. The spirit of the group is evidence for its members that they are more than just material beings. There is a sense of life after death when one belongs to a team because usually the team survives even when individual members die. These sentiments for esprit de corps are present in secular as well as religious institutions and expressed by atheists as well as true believers.

I am not reducing the spiritual to group solidarity, nor do I subscribe to a neo-Durkheimian view that spirituality can be explained away thus. Group solidarity (especially transcendent solidarity) has the potential to invoke and perform the spiritual, regardless of religious (or anti-religious) context.

Like marching soldiers, the Circuit community generates a spectacle by performers for performers. When they move together, Circuiteers bring their bodies in sync with each other. As go their bodies, so go their minds. The DJ vicariously “sings” Circuit cadence through songs and rhythms by which the group will move.

But a DJ does more than just set the beat. The “one voice” of the DJ is composed of the many voices, instruments, and songs played in the course of an evening. The crowd is not summoned by the actual voice of the DJ, who does not speak directly to the crowd. It is the DJ’s chorus of songs, a whole series of works put together by multiple artists, which transforms individuals into a pulsing group entity. Selection of each song is a strategy, a maneuver by the DJ designed to bring out the desire for performance and help participants overcome their own collective hang-ups and anxieties. The greatest pleasures of the Circuit are only possible when the DJ coaxes the crowd into becoming a single corporate body. When asked about his role in transforming a bunch of strangers into a moving, pulsing unity. DJ Paulo says:
It’s just the magic that happens when all the elements are right; it’s hard to describe. You get a connection with the crowd and they allow you to take them “places.” A lot of DJs will tell you, “I got them in my palm.” That’s the moment when you have grabbed their attention and the crowd as a whole will allow you to take them. Having said that, it’s easy to lose them too, so you have to balance what you do when working with the dance floor. (Weems “Serious Fun” 22)

The most popular metaphor for what DJs say they do is sex. The notion that DJs would be engaged in metaphoric sonic-based sex with a group of horny Gay men is not terribly surprising, considering the context.

But a sizable minority of DJs in the Circuit are Lesbians. In fact, I first heard the sex metaphor from DJ Susan Morabito, who stated that the sex metaphor is just that, only a metaphor. It is the best way she knows to convey the experience of DJing and connecting with the crowd. “Sex is the analogy I use because everybody can relate to it,” she says. “It’s pretty impossible for people to really relate to DJing if they have never done it.” Morabito also sees no difference between the sex and the journey metaphors. “Sex is a journey,” she adds (Weems, “The Circuit” 190).

When we look closely at the quote by DJ Paulo, he explicitly describes DJing at its best as the moment when the crowd allows the DJ to take them places, (i.e., a journey). Later, he says that the crowd will allow the DJ to “take them,” which is a common euphemism for sex. This tacitly confirms that, as Morabito says, sex is indeed a journey.

DJ art is all about creating the moment according to the needs of the moment. Like good lovers, DJs react to the immediate desires of the beloved. Competent DJs are extremely sensitive to the temperament of the crowd and will only pre-plan an evening to a certain extent. Since the places and people change constantly, it is important for the DJs to be flexible in their program of music. What works in one city on a Friday night may not work in another city on a Saturday night. By watching and “feeling” their crowd, DJs fine-tune their selection so that it is specifically designed for that group on that date.

In order to win the crowd and then propel it into a state of communal ecstasy, the DJ must behave like a sensitive lover, gently stripping the participant of awkward self-consciousness. All of this happens without the need for words or physical contact—DJs touch participants through

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2. This includes Susan Morabito (NYC), Wendy Hunt (Ft. Lauderdale), Sharon White (NYC), Lydia Prim (Birmingham, Alabama), Kimberly S (Spalding, Los Angeles), Alyson Calagna (Ft. Lauderdale), Ana Paula (Rio de Janeiro), and DJ Pride (Yvette Fernandez, Miami). All of these women are Lesbians; I cannot think of a single nationally known DJ who is a Straight woman, although Victor Calderone (NYC), Chris Cox (Los Angeles), and Joe Bermudez (Boston) are Straight men.
their musical selection. This creates a *simpatico* between the chooser of the music, the music itself, and the recipient. The greatest ecstasy for both the DJ and the dancer is when the music saturates and penetrates them both, body and soul, and they see this rapture in each other.

Nevertheless, the DJ is always dominant in the “sex act.” According to DJ Ra (Wade Maggert), the DJ “fucks the crowd on a good night” (interview, April 2001). Since the Gay masculine body can be sexually penetrated without losing its masculinity and since the dominant partner in the sex act can be the one who is penetrated, sexual descriptions of the DJ-dancer relationship are remarkably fluid, even when the DJ is a woman or a Straight man. This, in fact, adds to the hilarity when a female DJ is told that “You worked my pussy!” by a male admirer.

This also means that the male DJ is not always gendered as masculine. One of the biggest compliments a DJ can get is if the music (or the DJ) is called “cunty” or if an agitated fan looks the DJ in the eye and screams, “WORK, BITCH!”

Sexual language in Circuit parlance reflects and amplifies the dynamics of playful sonic seduction. According to DJ Susan Morabito, a good evening begins with foreplay, when the DJ stimulates each individual until participants make their way onto the floor. When enough of the crowd has been successfully wooed, the DJ can play a song at just the right time and trigger a rush of energy from the crowd. DJ Don Bishop calls this “tickling the prostate” (interview, November 2002). Bishop lists three requirements for DJing: count to thirty-two, drive a car (adjust the speed), and a thorough understanding of anal sex to place songs in the set that have similar qualities of a sexual orgasm. “If you are a good top or bottom,” he says, “you know just when the feeling is just right. If you get this while DJing, you place your songs to build and build until you pop” (interview, July 2003).

Once the crowd reaches critical mass and most of the dancers take off their shirts, the DJ then shifts musical gears to make them climax, typically marked by shouts, hands in the air, and smiles. Expressing the intensity of climax for the DJ and the dancer, DJ Joe Bermudez compares the pivotal climactic song to ejaculation (literally, “the cum shot”), an interesting choice of words for Bermudez, a Straight DJ, to use when referring to his relationship with a predominantly Gay crowd (interview, July 2003).

At the end of the set, says Morabito, the DJ-as-lover eases the intensity of the rhythms and cuddles with the dancers until it is time for

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3. Bermudez feels that the sex metaphor adroitly conveys the depth of pleasure possible for both sides in the DJ-dancer experience, adding, “When you’re really fucking somebody, you don’t have to ask if they’re having a great time” (interview, July 2003).
them to leave. There has been controversy concerning the cuddling period; some DJs are afraid to let the dancers down gently for fear that those who are not ready to come down will simply leave early. Others deem it necessary so that people are not tempted to party beyond what is good for them.

It may seem a paradox to use sexual language to describe the DJ-participant experience, especially since the DJ is removed from the crowd and does not actually touch the participants. This use of sexual imagery can be seen as a fondness for exaggerated and hyperbolic wordplay in the community’s verbal performance. But the sex metaphor need not be simply a metaphor; some DJs report feeling aroused when connecting with the crowd. In a panel discussion about sex and the DJ, Alyson Calagna reported once having an orgasm while spinning. The sex metaphor reflects the profoundly sublime pleasure felt by the DJ and the participants, and resembles the use of sex/journey metaphors by mystics to describe their own experiences of ecstatic joy.

The journey metaphor is best understood in the context of crowd dynamics. The Circuit gathering is not just a large group. It must literally be a crowd, bodies close to each other for no other reason than the closeness, as if proximity overrides all other considerations. There should be just enough room on the dance floor for the dancers to move or the venue will be considered too large. It is also preferable that the crowd be visible in its entirety, numerous and close-knit. When seen from a few feet up, the crowd should resemble its most popular metaphor: a sea of men.

In this required closeness, the crowd takes on the characteristics of wayfarers who swim in the communal sea and travel together under the guidance of the DJ. The journey is more properly an individual and communal quest. Each traveler may go through any number of adventures, defeats, and triumphs in a constantly changing milieu of interpersonal vignettes. The dance floor is an arena for any number of contests for attention. Guys will flirt, snub, and bond with others outside of their immediate circle of friends. If somebody is found to be sufficiently attractive, he may later be sent on his way as his erstwhile suitor makes a bid to trade up for someone even more desirable; relationships between strangers are in constant flux. For many individuals, a Circuit party is high drama, complete with triumphs, defeats, and glorious moments when such things as winning and losing become trivial in the lived experience of transcendent solidarity.

Since the participants in the Circuit come from a broad range of backgrounds, looks, regions, and musical tastes, it is a challenge for the DJ to bring them together as a team. Circuiteers arrive with their own cliques, inhibitions, and prejudices. A good DJ first generates a communal heartbeat that demands everyone’s participation. As mentioned earlier, the music in a Circuit party is usually within 125–135 beats per minute, about the same rate as a human heartbeat during a brisk walk. Continuous flow is key—there are few times when it is acceptable to noticeably stop, slow down, or speed up the bpm past this narrow range. The DJ will not use speech to encourage the crowd because that would disturb the flow and displace the crowd as the center of attention. Through adroit musical selection, a good DJ progressively raises the level of excitement. The crowd exhibits its own esprit de corps and moves together as a team to reach the common goal of shared rapture.

DJs live for the moment when they lead the crowd through the maze of potentially devastating trials and tribulations to a “place” where all pretensions and hang-ups shatter in the shimmering ecstasy of the living communal pulse. These moments are marked by their irresistibility and hilarity—nobody remains outside of the shared joy—sometimes even the bartenders and other staff dance.

Most DJs that I have interviewed are highly intelligent, and this creates a dilemma for them, especially if they are in demand: how can they play music night after night and not get insanely bored?

In order to keep up with current music, good DJs will spend hours every week going over the latest releases. Some have developed the skills to remix songs (digitally change the original) before presenting them to their fans. Every conscientious DJ wants to be on the cutting edge and earn the reputation for producing a special night of superb music, not the same old songs that every major club across the country plays. As DJ Paulo puts it,

I spend hours searching for new music, editing music, doing mixes, and remixing mixes to get things to sound the way I’d like them.... If I played what the previous weekend’s DJ played, why would anyone go out? (Weems, “Serious Fun”)

It is through individual tastes mixed with crowd expectations that DJs produce the musical ambience of an evening. Alyson Calagna and

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5. DJ Julian Marsh mentioned that the DJ and the crowd feel the pleasure of the Circuit in aspects including its transcendence and solidarity. What many people do not realize is that the journey can be every bit as intense and desirable for the DJ as it is for the dancers. To interrupt a DJ with conversation at the wrong time is to deprive the DJ of pleasure, just as if someone interrupts a person dancing with abandon (Weems, “The Circuit” 204).
Roland Belmares compare the art of balancing all of these factors to cooking. Calagna, who hails from Louisiana, has this to say about the DJ-as-chef:

Any good Cajun chef knows it takes the finest ingredients and just the right balance of spices and flavors to create a kick-ass pot of gumbo. The same principles apply when I play my music. I choose my records delicately and specifically for the crowd (personal communication, May 2007)

The musical selection of the DJ-as-chef can be seasoned with different genres, sound effects, samples from other songs played simultaneously, excerpts from movies or speeches, and lyrics in various languages. Belmares (Austin, Texas) speaks of DJing-as-cooking in much the same language as the journey metaphor:

My recipe for a good night is like boiling a pot of water. You start it off with a nice simmer, and throughout the night, you raise the temperature slowly bringing things to a boil. Then when everyone is “well done,” you bring it back down to simmer to finish things off. (personal communication, May 2007)

On June 28, 2008, I watched DJ Hector Fonseca spin heavy tribal for almost two hours during Boot Camp, Toronto Prism’s military ball. He used multiple CD players at the same time within the same song, adding sounds, beats, and background melodies with such precision that, had I not been watching, I would have assumed that he was only playing one pre-mixed track on one CD player. Not all Circuiteers have witnessed for themselves the skill it takes for a truly gifted DJ to coordinate so many elements (flavors as it were) in the mix within a song, not just between songs.

In addition to the songs that DJs mix together during an evening, there is also the folk technology developed by predominantly Gay DJs to remix the songs and loop the various measures, melodies, hooks, and rhythmic phrases over and over again with computerized precision in the sound studio before the songs reach the DJ booth. DJ Abel said the remixes he does with Ralphi Rosario as the duo Rosabel are created with two things in mind: the original artist and the dance floor. “We think about the dance floor more than ourselves when we build something,” he said. “Both of us are Gay, and both of us love to dance. We understand our people,” referring to the difference in sound that mostly Straight remixers/DJs create for predominantly Straight dancers (interview, January/February 2008). “Gay men want a feel-good message—something that’s fun,” said Ralphi Rosario. Emphasizing the importance
of the body-music connection for Gay men, he added, “You have to feel that shit in your wrist, your chest, your hips” (interview, March 2008).

This difference between Straight and Gay is nowhere more apparent than the spatial orientation of bodies on the dance floor. In a Straight house music venue, as mentioned earlier, the crowd faces the DJ for almost the entire performance. Gay men and their allies are different; their communal self only focuses its attention on the DJ and faces the booth when the music peaks, at the moment of collective climax. For the most part, Gay men are too busy focusing on each other.

Most DJs feel the need to teach as well as entertain. Since they may spend the better part of each day searching for new music that could enrich their repertoire, DJs often get excited when they find something that they think will really work the crowd. There is a sense of professional one-upmanship, the desire to show other DJs in attendance that whoever is in charge of the music really knows the music. There is also instant gratification when a DJ adroitly places a particularly fitting song into the set and the crowd roars its approval.

But the crowd does not always accept what the DJ offers. I can remember being in a club with DJ Joe Gauthreaux spinning that night. The music was rich, soulful, and much of it was brand new. But the crowd was reluctant to dance, so Gauthreaux put on some hard-pounding, mindless tunes to shake them out of their reluctance. Perversely, the crowd then hit the dance floor. When I asked him about it, he said, “I tried to educate them.”

The Great Divide

A pronounced rift in musical tastes among participants has made it even more difficult for DJs to do more than just repetitively play the same hits ad nauseum. Most DJs blame the rift on excessive crystal use; one popular DJ (who wishes to remain anonymous) compares the rise of crystal meth use in the Circuit to the black plague (personal communication, April 2007).

Since about 1999, the Circuit scene has witnessed increasing popularity of two controversial substances: GHB and crystal methamphetamine. Besides the negative impact of increased health risks due to irresponsible use of these drugs compared to other intoxicants, there is a marked effect on musical preference with crystal meth. Popular folk wisdom divides participants into two camps: the ecstasy-ketamine “lovey” group and the crystal “bitchy” group.

The Great Divide is admirably expressed in the Spring 2004 issue of Circuit Noize:

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6. One exception to this rule are those venues that feature deep house DJs.
“This music sucks, this crowd is ugly and I hate this space!”

“Hon, read your ticket. This is section E [ecstasy or MDMA]. You belong over there in section T [Tina or crystal meth].”

Oh, I thought so—way too many fucking smiles over here.” (75)

Those who use MDMA and ketamine tend to favor melodic deep house music sound featuring gospel, Latin, and Afro-pop influences as well as African-Latin tribal tracks in keeping with the emotional and introspective states that are the trademarks of X and K. Crystal meth users tend to respond better to not-so-subtle techno-tribal music with a strong, driving beat as well as techno-oriented remixes of screaming diva music. Beats per minute also tend to be faster for the crystal crowd, reflecting the hyper-alertness and shortened attention spans that come with two to three nights of no-sleep tweaking.

Like most stereotypes, this division is oversimplified. Most people who use illegal substances will mix them up in a variety of ways. Those who use GHB will often use crystal meth to keep from “swirling out” or “falling out” (overdosing and falling into a state of unconsciousness). Oftentimes, both GHB and crystal are often used in conjunction with MDMA. Plenty of MDMA-ketamine Circuitteers love techno house music, and more than a few crystal lovers adore deep house. There is no obvious connection that users of one set of drugs are somehow more spiritual than another group, especially since so many people in the scene utilize three or more substances at the same time.

In general, however, this division seems to hold true in terms of musical preferences. There appears to be a correlation between crystal use and faster, noisier music. Ecstasy, on the other hand, enhances emotional response to music, so melody tends to be more valued by participants who are on MDMA. Since about 1998, the chasm between the two camps has grown worse every year. In 2005–2006, there were signs that the rift was mending as excessive drug use seems to be on the decline. Yet, the healing has been slow.

This has almost put the DJ-as-teacher on the Endangered Species List. DJs are tempted to “play it safe” and give the crowd mediocre music that everyone can accept.

The Great Divide has also made things easier for the DJ poseur—a person who is not qualified in terms of mixing ability or musical sophistication—who plays pre-mixed CDs for the duration of an evening and may even claim superstar status for reasons other than professional skill. Many reputable DJs, who have spent their lives giving their best

7 Rarely, however, is K used in conjunction with GHB. Popular folk wisdom on intoxicants forbids the mixing of GHB with ketamine or alcohol.
to the crowd, are disheartened by the pressure on them to play only mediocre music and the casual acceptance of the DJ-pretender (who might have the ability to mix on the spot but is too lazy to do so consistently) in their midst. These things have affected the scene adversely, turning off former enthusiasts and reducing the numbers of attendees. The more cynical participants no longer consider the DJ to be anything other than a glorified jukebox.

Indeed, it is tough for the older DJs, the ones who learned to mix vinyl records without the help of machines that can match up the beats, to accept the dumbing down and degradation of their craft. The step from vinyl to CD made it possible for a pre-programmed CD to spin for eighty minutes at a time, thus taking the DJ out of the moment and undermining the crucial connection between the DJ, the music, and the dancers. Technology has undermined that connection even further; the move from CDs to computer laptops, which hold all the tunes necessary for a set in their hard drives, allows an unscrupulous DJ to pre-program an entire ten-hour set on a laptop with impunity. Until standards for DJing are codified, universally accepted, and regularly enforced by promoters, we can expect more disillusionment.

The problems arising from “playing it safe” and the faux DJ are not immediate; the cumulative effects most strongly influence the minority of participants who really know the music. In any Circuit crowd, a significant number of participants are simply there to get high and have sex. Others enjoy the gathering of the tribe and take pleasure being around so many Gay men dancing in one place but may not be too concerned about what songs are played. But the core group, the Circuit aficionados as it were, is that minority composed of those who know music, along with those who are not so informed but are moved by quality music of any genre. This combined group is an extremely influential subset that is critical of what goes their way. They also tend to be the professional DJ’s best friends on the dance floor because, when the DJ puts on something different that is particularly danceable, they will be the first to enthusiastically respond to it. Others, more concerned with who is watching them, when their buzz will kick in, or with whom they want to score, may not have the confidence to hit the dance floor with something they have not yet heard on the radio or at their local bar.

The temptation to sacrifice the quality of performance is tough to resist, considering the mindless vindictive reaction of those on either side of the drug/music divide and a sometimes exhausting schedule

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8. Many DJs refuse to read comments about them on the various Circuit listservs precisely because of the spite that some participants express in their reviews of DJ performances.
that can take a popular DJ from coast to coast and back again on a big weekend. Talented DJs with a strong sense of integrity strive, in the words of DJ Wendy Hunt, to “always be honest and always be grateful” (personal communication, May 2007). Most DJs do their jobs very well and resist the temptation to play it safe. They give the crowd their best, and live for the moments when they and the crowd become one.
I am a woman and a DJ in the Circuit who has been in the Circuit as long as it’s been the Circuit [thirty-four years]. I have spun events for the majority of the traditional Circuit parties.

Women have played a significant role in the Circuit, believe it or not. As part of the dance floor tribe, they are there for the exact same reasons as their male counterparts. Women as Circuit DJs are Gay men swathed in women’s bodies.

My sister was in the Navy for a brief period of time. The only thing she really liked about the experience were the times when, as you said, “soldiers in formation listen to one voice that calls them to attention, directs them, and sings cadence for them to march together. That lone voice helps them to become one being.” And then, in regards to your chapter, you then make the analogy of, “The equivalent in the Circuit is the DJ.” That was a smooth segue!

As an avid New England Patriots fan, I can completely relate to your saying, “Body-mind unity of the sports team (and the fans who adore them) is described as team spirit, somewhat equivalent to the military’s esprit de corps.” Even watching a game on TV, with my team playing in another city and state, I feel that team spirit or esprit de corps.

You go on to talk about the spirituality of team spirit “of whatever team.” The music brings spirituality to the party as well. It doesn’t have to be gospel-tinged to feel like you’re in church. When in attendance at the Saint, it was like being at church. The revelers would participate vocally as if in a Baptist church in the South on a Sunday morning. At the very peak moment of the party, the planetarium ceiling would open at the top and a cluster of mirrored balls would lower, the lights would shine on them, and people would worship those balls (notice the sexual connotation there) as though they were God. The music would dictate when that moment would happen.

I completely agree with all of the sexual analogies and have had my share of highly sexual moments while spinning, coming (no pun intended) just short of orgasm. If the DJ is doing her/his job correctly, they should feel a oneness with their crowd, as is the case in a sexual experience. I like Susan Morabito’s reference to the end of the evening (or morning) as “cuddling” with the crowd. I reference those DJs who are “afraid to let the dancers down gently for fear that those who are not ready to come down will simply leave early.” I consider this a lack of
experience and fear of moving outside of their comfort zone. However, I do agree that there are exceptions to that rule, and it’s generally a drug-related thing.

You said, “DJs live for the moment when they lead the crowd through the maze of potentially devastating trials and tribulations to a place where all pretensions and hang-ups shatter in the shimmering ecstasy of the living communal pulse.” When I spin in P-Town [Provincetown, Massachusetts] every summer, it truly is “coming home.” On the night that I spin, it feels like my entire family is present.

Music preparation is a lot more time consuming than anyone could possibly think. If DJs were paid for those hours as well as the live performance hours, most of us would make a lot more money per engagement. I, too, spend hours sifting through some great and some really bad music for public play.

I notice a lot more DJs trying to over-educate their crowds. No one wants to hear all new music for an entire evening. People want to hear their favorite songs. That said, it’s up to the DJ to know how to keep the crowd happy while still being able to sneak some fabulous new stuff in. This is the stuff they’ll be dying over in about four to six months. Don’t try to shove your favorite stuff down their throats. If no one is on the dance floor, the DJ is doing something wrong unless the building is empty. For myself, I only accept gigs where I can musically be myself. I have to have fun or I, admittedly, become very bored.

I really don’t want to get into the whole drug thing that you touched upon. I’ll just say the boys look a little prettier at events when the sun is shining!