



Moonlight Memories DJs

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The History of “Dancing to Recorded Music” and the Birth of the Modern Disc Jockey

Dancing to “recorded music” played by a “disc jockey” at a party is so common today that one could get the impression that this tradition has always existed. However, the “playing of recorded music at parties” along with the “recording of music” itself has had a long evolution beginning with the invention of “sound recording” 140 years ago.

It all started in 1877 when Thomas Edison invented a device that could both record and playback sound. He then marketed this machine, but not for music, but as a dictation device. This crude device could only playback the recording once. Thus, the machine failed to catch on.



Ten years later improvements in the way sound was stored enabled recordings to be played back “over and over”. This set the stage for the first commercial recordings of music in 1889. Without a way to play the songs in the home the public had to listen to these early recordings at “phonograph parlors”. For a coin one could hear a song through a tube that they held to their ear. By 1895 most every city had a “phonograph parlor”.

Also, about that time an affordable phonograph player for the home was first introduced. In the next decade many homes would buy one. The medium that each song was played off of was initially a cylinder. After a few years a flat disc – soon to be called a “record” – was first produced. By 1912 the record would overtake the cylinder as the most popular format. The speed at which these records were played settled in at 78 RPM.

Interest in music and the demand for recorded music would boom in the 1920s as radio exploded into a national phenomenon. The public flocked out to buy the songs they heard on the radio. In 1925 recording technology took a giant leap forward — thus recordings had much more clarity than before. By 1927 record sales hit 140 million in the U.S. . Recorded music was big business. While the public purchased many records and listened to music on the radio daily, at parties and dances music was still provided by live musicians. There were no disc jockeys yet.

The Great Depression, which began in 1929, hit the record industry hard. With little money people settled to listening to songs on the radio for free. In 1933, only 3 million records were sold, but the repeal of prohibition in December of that year brightened things up a bit as the taverns reopened. Most of these taverns had jukeboxes which created a market for record sales.

In 1949, a new thinner higher fidelity record was introduced. It played at 45 RPM. The old style and new style records would come to be known by their speeds, the 45 and the 78. By 1959, the 45 would overtake 78 – relegating it to history.

In the late 1950s “Rock N Roll” exploded throughout the U.S. . Teenagers, passionate about this



new music, purchased records that they wanted to dance to. This led to the creation of the first regular type of event where people danced to recorded music. These “teen dances” that were held in the late fifties and early sixties were sometimes called “Sock Hops”. Some of these dances were simple small events where kids brought their own records and played them on a low powered record player. But other dances were held in the school or church auditorium where the in-house (powerful) sound system amplified the music. These “auditorium” dances were heavily attended and were a big part of the social life in that era. If you were a teenager who was an exceptional dancer, you were popular. At these dances naturally someone – a disc jockey of sorts - was in charge of putting on the records. However, the disc jockey of this era (often a teacher - sometimes even a nun) was usually out of view and did not interact with the crowd.



By the mid-1960s music had changed with the “British Invasion” and the playing of records at parties was out and the bands were back in.

Around the mid-1970s the modern mobile disc jockey emerged as the playing of recorded music had become an acceptable alternative to a band for dances / celebrations. The disc jockey of that era would have two turntables to start one song while the other song was ending. He was now setup in a central location at the party and he interacted with the crowd.

In the mid-1980s a technological marvel of its era - the compact disc - was introduced. The previous mediums for music had several drawbacks. Records had been known for their scratches and cassettes were known for having the tape get tangled in the cassette player. But the CD had none of these issues and much better sound quality. Disc Jockeys embraced the clarity of the CD. But it would take several years after the introduction of the CD for “CD Recorders” to be available and affordable. These recorders allowed disc jockeys to organize themselves by putting one category of party songs on each CD. In the marketplace the CD would easily wipe out the vinyl record and then later the cassette.



Technology moved forward and at the turn of the century “digital music” stored internally on a computer device would challenge the CD and in recent years overtake it. The invention of the iPod exploded the digital music revolution. Online catalogs of inexpensive digital music grew to include almost every song that had ever been a hit or recorded by a popular artist.

Disc jockeys found digital music to be a godsend. The DJ could bring a laptop that contained all his songs. No more carrying in crates of CDs and CD players. Software for disc jockeys was soon invented. Packages with names like “Serato” and “Virtual DJ” hit the market. It allowed the organization of music into endless categories to help the DJ do a better job. And should the DJ want to, he could play the song’s video along with the music.



Much has changed since Thomas Edison invented the first recording device. Who knows what changes are ahead? Disc Jockeys will be sure to take notice.

Till next time,
Bruce Doorly

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