

**10 COMMON
DJ MISTAKES
(And How to Avoid
Making Them)**

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Introduction

Playing live is nerve-wracking, even for experienced DJs. Indeed, if you lose that fluttery tummy feeling you've probably sadly lost the passion too. The thing is, DJing is performance, and like any performance - be it theatre, or music, or public speaking - it is prone to public errors. The nerves are there to help you do a good job.

Having said that, there are many common errors and if you prepare for them and know how you will handle them if you do commit them, at least your nerves will be about putting in a great performance, not about doing something silly you can't recover from.

So here are ten DJ mistakes and how to deal with them, all learned from more than 20 years of DJing all types of music in all types of situations. Some are unique to digital DJing, some have existed since the very first DJ stood behind two decks and played records to a crowd. (Who, fact finders, was Sir Jimmy Savile, at the Grand Records Ball, Guardbridge Hotel, Leeds, England, in 1947.)

I hope you find them helpful for your digital DJing career.

10 common DJ mistakes

1. Turning off the wrong tune

I did this at my last DJ gig - twice. It's the biggie. You spin round to your controller, and hit "cue" on the wrong deck. Music goes dead. Doh. How to avoid it? Pay more attention!

Once you've done it though, you have to cope with it. If the tune you turned off has nearly finished playing, just hit "play" on the next tune and whack the

crossfader across. Not much else you can do. If it's half way through or less, likewise, hit "play" again on the tune you turned off, and start it again from the beginning. Again, not much choice here. The only alternative is to move the cursor to where you think you left off on the onscreen tune display and click to start there, but this is dependent upon how quickly you can use your software and whether you actually know roughly where you were in the tune in the first place.

There is a better way though: Have cue points set up on your tunes (many DJs do this anyway for creative reasons). So if you have, say, three cue points programmed on a typical track (beginning of drums, start of a break, end of the song/beginning of the outro beats, for instance), you can hit one of those cue buttons instead, so the music comes in again on a recognisable and maybe a popular part of the song. Your crowd is just happy to hear the good bit and doesn't really care that you messed up.

Bear in mind too that if you look like you know what you're doing, you'll sometimes pull off the most ridiculous errors without (at least some) people noticing. It happens, so get over it. (You could always look at the lighting technician and scowl, works for me...)

2. Letting the current tune play out before mixing in a new one

Whether it's because you are chatting too much or just engrossed in searching for the perfect next tune to play, quite often you'll find yourself with the dilemma that the current tune is about to run out... or has started to fade... or has just, actually, stopped. However, the good news is that if you deal with it well, people rarely notice this one.

Firstly, if the tune has stopped or is fading, just start the next one. Nothing more to add here. Tunes have pauses in them. DJs often do this to change musical styles, or when they change DJ, or just for, well, a change. Get over it.

It's no biggie. Look moodily at the crowd and go for that "this is an emotional bit" effect. You may get away with it...

But if the tune has a few seconds left, you have further options. These are:

- **Hit "loop"** - set up a 16, 8, 4, even 2-bar loop (depending how long you have left and the melody underneath the beats) by hitting your controller's loop function. This will give you a clean (if eventually very repetitive) continuous beat to mix the next tune in over. Many DJs do this - lots (it's actually a great way to mix in certain circumstances).
- **Hit a cue point from earlier in the song** - see the previous mistake "Turning off the wrong tune". Do it in time and nobody will notice. It may even sound like you've come up with your own remix - extra kudos. Now you've bought yourself time to mix in the next track.
- **Load the same song onto another channel and mix it into itself** - nobody will really notice, and again you've bought some time. You then have to find a creative way of getting out of the song you just put on again before it plays all the way through, but at least there's music playing while you decide.

If you're half-way over the club because you're in a toilet queue/waiting for a drink, I'm afraid I can't help you. Avoid this by being bolshy (push to the front of that queue, tell the bar staff you're the DJ and need to get back NOW).

Also, before you leave your DJ booth, hit the "time" column to sort your tunes longest-to-shortest. Then, choose the longest tune you have before you depart to relieve/refresh yourself. This will give you a fighting chance of getting back in time

3. Accidentally unplugging your laptop from your controller

Plug it in again! Might be OK. Sometimes, though, this will crash your

software. (So the following is also relevant for when your laptop crashes, for whatever reason.)

I'm sounding like DJ Accident Prone here, but this happened to me at my last gig too. The owner of the venue was fiddling round at the back of the (open) DJ booth, and knocked the USB cable that connects my DJ controller to the laptop. It didn't come right out, but it wiggled enough to crash the software, needing a hard reset and throwing the music off for 90 seconds.

The best way to avoid this kind of unforced error is to set your equipment up so only you are near it. Put the controller somewhere good to play from, and your laptop so that you're always between it and everyone else. As a digital DJ taking your kit with you everywhere with you, setting it up so it functions reliably really is your job and responsibility. (I'm also bound to say: Have a Mac. Easier and faster to reboot, and they don't crash as often as PCs. I'm not taking sides - I have owned both. It's just true.)

If the above happens, you can have an iPod or even your iPhone plugged in to a spare mixer channel ready to hit "play" if the computer goes down for whatever reason. I have to be honest and say I don't normally bother, and I can't remember the last time I had to reboot mid-set... until last night. Just goes to show: If it's important, have up a back-up plan. (Similarly, if there are CD decks in the venue, you can have a CD cued ready to go for the same reason.)

4. Forgetting to bring your headphones

I was booked to DJ at Manchester University Students' Union in, ooh, 1991, at the start of my "club" DJing career, and I turned up without headphones... I didn't even know you were meant to bring your own! Ridiculous but true. (Why would DJs share headphones anyway?) I sent someone home to get some.

If you've forgotten your 'phones, with digital equipment it's not the complete disaster it once was. It's possible (but highly uncomfortable) to use the on-screen BPMs and waveforms to DJ without headphones. I even managed it in a busy club once, when I was DJing with vinyl! I got my head right down and listened to the hi-hat simply from the needle acoustically in the groove of the playing 12! However, I don't recommend it - you really do need some 'phones.

Best to borrow another DJ's, or failing that, ask around - many people carry iPods and you can DJ well enough with iPod 'phones if you have to (if you can only find a pair of Shuffle headphones, God help you - have you seen how short the leads are on those?). Have a 1/4"-to-1/8" headphones adaptor (big plug to small plug) in your bag at all times too, so if you do have to borrow some portable audio headphones for whatever reason, you can plug them in to your DJ controller.

To avoid this problem altogether, have a mental mantra before you leave home (PC - controller - leads - headphones), or if you can afford it, a spare set of 'phones that never leave your gig bag.

5. Forgetting to bring the right audio cables

This is common too. You're going to need at least a good RCA-to-RCA (sometimes called phono-to-phono) cable - the one with two leads and two plugs, one red and one white. You may also need two 1/4 mono jack-to-1/4 mono jack cables if your controller uses these (they look like big headphone leads but only carry one channel of music, left or right, hence the need for two) or even balanced XLRs if you've got high-end equipment or are playing with a quality club setup. You may well need cables with different combinations of connectors on each end too.

The trick is to carry all sorts. You can never be sure what mixer you'll have to plug into when you get to a venue - I've even seen people forced to plug their

equipment into the microphone socket (which really doesn't sound good). So be prepared.

Just recently I was setting off to DJ in a club when the DJ who was on before me, who had already turned up, called me to say the set-up was so badly maintained that they were having to run a lead right across the whole venue to plug the DJ booth into an amp behind the bar, 20 yards away, and could I bring any cabling I could get my hands on! We ended up plugging all kinds of cables together to get the right length. Was thankfully a great night in the end, but obviously this kind of thing is not ideal.

If you turn up at a venue and just lack a cable to plug your DJ controller into their mixer, nine times out of ten it is the aforementioned RCA-to-RCA you need. If the club or bar has cable TV, or a CD player, they probably have one of these linking that item to an amp. As you're DJing, it probably won't be being used. Ask very nicely if you can borrow it. And do remember to give it back at the end.

6. Forgetting to bring your PC power cable and power supply

Let's end this trio of cables-left-at-home with the PC power cable and power supply (ie the transformer - the black or white box).

You may forget the whole lot, or more commonly, you'll forget the lead that goes from the wall socket to the power supply itself, turning up with only the power supply.

You can call anyone you know who is coming down to watch you play and beg them to lend you a lead from their radio/cassette player or laptop. These are generally standard leads so most work with most equipment. Ditto asking the venue owner - if they have a laptop, or other electrical equipment, it may use the same lead too and you can hopefully borrow theirs.

Meanwhile, you can run your laptop off battery. Close down all programs you're not using, put the brightness of your screen down to as low as you can while still being able to see the screen, and turn off WiFi and Bluetooth, to preserve battery power for as long as possible. (My MacBook will actually power my DJ controller and itself for 4 hours like this.)

I find it helps to keep a spare power lead in my DJ bag, so I don't have to worry about the plug-to-power supply cable part of the equation, only packing the power supply itself (ie the expensive part) when I DJ out.

7. Playing too loudly or quietly

I get a bit paranoid about this one, and for good reason if you ask me. Look, you're there to play music, and you want people to hear and enjoy it. At the same time, you're coping with the owner, the staff, even the neighbours, maybe a sound limiter, what type of venue it is, how busy the venue is, how good the sound system is, your perception of how loud things are, even how good the particular record you're playing that second is. No wonder getting the volume right isn't as easy as it sounds.

I actually despise over-loud music, especially rubbish music played through bad sound systems in inappropriate venues. If I am having a meal or a coffee, I don't want to hear a CD on loop played out of distorting plastic speakers, thanks.

What you as a DJ truly, absolutely don't want, though, is the venue owner playing with the volume. This is because they won't come and carefully adjust your EQs and master output, all with your full consideration and consultation. They'll just turn down the amps.

Now if they did so because you were playing a loud, distorted MP3 of a (with hindsight) bad sounding tune, your next tune - sweet-sounding and popular - will also be quieter. Then you turn everything up on the mixer. If this happens

a couple of times, you'll soon run out of headway on the mixer, everything's set badly anyway, and nobody wins.

Much better to have the "volume" conversation with the venue before you start, and ask the manager to speak to you first rather than adjusting the volume themselves throughout the night. Show you're not an "everything up to 11" person and you'll hopefully get this respect paid to you.

Your next job is to check the volume regularly - and this is where I'm paranoid! When playing club sets, I always walk around the venue - including the bar, the corridors, all corners of the dancefloor - with the sound system on, right at the beginning of the night. I want to know how the music sounds everywhere. In bars, I go and stand outside, I stand right by the speakers, I sit in the booths. In both cases, I do this many times a night.

Why is it important to continually leave the DJ booth and check the volume yourself? Apart from the fact that any monitor speakers will cloud your judgement from inside the DJ box, as people flood into venues, they "soak up" the bass. As the volume rises, some speakers may start to scream and sound awful. You simply have to be aware of these things and keep the volume where it should be.

If you win a casual crowd over and they all start completely digging your set, of course tweak it up - if the system can cope. But if they're losing interest, or the venue is naturally emptying (I play a sunset residency that does just that at 10pm), your volume has to be adjusted accordingly.

8. Trying to play every request

You're going to get asked to play certain tunes. Commonly, inexperienced DJs try and play too many of these requests. Don't.

Now don't get me wrong, I believe in listening to your crowd, reading them, giving them what they want, but you should know what they want BEFORE you arrive at the venue, not be swayed by what is (usually) just a vocal minority. "Got any drum and bass mate?" in a beach bar may lead you to thinking "actually, I have some really mellow electronica, good idea!" but if it doesn't, ignore the request (tactfully). You're not a jukebox.

The further temptation with digital DJing (especially if your venue has WiFi) is to download stuff you haven't already got on the fly, to impress people or give them what they want. Again, don't. Apart from the fact that you risk corrupting your music library by adding to it with new downloads while your DJ software is using it, you can't be sure you're downloading the right mix of something, and in my book you should never play a tune in a club unless you've listened to from beginning to end at home first. You may crash your laptop too. Not clever.

Of course, if you are going to play what has been requested anyway, happy days. Just look like you hadn't thought of it, thank the requester, and you win a friend while not altering your plans in the slightest. It's a win-win. But overall, stick to your guns. You're being paid to know better than the crowd - and if you're any good, they'll go away having loved loads of music they hadn't heard before anyway. Which is the point, isn't it?

How to deflect inappropriate requests? I favour the white lie "sorry I left it at home". (Even though you have all of your music tucked there on your hard drive, they can't prove that...)

9. Forgetting to reset your EQ (especially the bass)

A common type of DJ mix simply involves getting two tunes in sync, and at the right moment, killing the bass on one while bringing it up on the other, then letting them ride together for a bit longer. This leaves you with one deck with the bass down low. The problem comes when you mix the next tune in on

that deck using a different technique, and forget to return the bass to normal. Playing a whole tune without the bass is not generally good practice.

To get around this, of course you should try and remember to check. Keep an eye on your EQ LEDs, as songs with the bass knocked out kick them up far less than correctly EQed tracks. If your headphones are decent, you'll hear the difference too. Get used to listening out for it.

And if you do mix a tune in and only realise halfway through that there's no bass, don't despair too much - wait until the next break or appropriate moment, and throw the bass in at the tune's high point when the kick comes back - the dancefloor will hopefully go crazy!

Legendary disco pioneer David Mancuso (who threw his Loft nights in a New York venue that also happened to be his home) actually left whole bass speakers switched off until halfway through his nights sometimes, just to get the crowd completely used to the sound system how it was, then hit them with earth-turning bass half way through the evening! A bit extreme, but you'd love to have been there, wouldn't you?

By the way, religiously setting the EQ back to 12 o'clock across bass, mid and treble is not a good idea - you will be using your EQ more often than not to correct discrepancies in the house PA etc, so you need to respect these tweaks. (For some reason I always end up with the treble at 1 o'clock, my mids at maybe 2 o'clock and the bass completely dependent on the track, but that's just me and where I play.)

Just do the above and try to avoid accidentally mixing a tune in with (any of) the EQs too far off your version of "normal" for your venue and equipment and you'll be fine.

10. Getting drunk while DJing

I know a prominent DJ in Manchester who used to talk about the DJs he knew saying: "There's the drink/drugs way and the straight way." He advocated the "straight" way - but even he liked a bottle of beer or two before DJing.

It's a contentious one, because going out in general, and dance culture in particular, usually involve having a drink or two, but as a professional, you are in charge of everyone else's "good time", and DJing professionally is not easy.

I'd say as you get more experienced, you can cope with the equipment and the job at hand better, but in my experience people don't get any better at coping with alcohol. DJing is about judgement, and that's the first thing to go when you've had one too many.

Get a bit drunk, and you risk faux pas and embarrassment. Dropping hard house at the end of a beach bar set, or getting on the microphone to egg your mate on with a group of girls, may both have felt like great, great fun at the time, but really... you have to go back there and play again next time! (Not that I'd know anything about either of these heinous crimes, of course.)

The other thing about boozing is that it can trigger a succession of the above. Go out for a few before your DJ set and you may forget something. Don't check the venue for sound when you get there and you may play too loud. Accidentally unplug your PC and you'll have to reboot. And so it goes on.

So my advice is: Drink less than you would normally. Eating while you DJ can help to keep a balance too. There's always afterwards to kick back and have some fun if you're in the mood. And DJing is such fun anyway you shouldn't need to drink to enjoy it, should you?

Finally...

We all make mistakes. Learning from them is part of what becoming a good DJ is all about. Just keep having fun and remember, not as many people are paying attention to you as you think. You can "style it out" and get away with things far more often than you might imagine. Keeping smiling and acting like nothing happened will get you through all kinds of situations in DJing. Learn and move on.