

# Living | Arts

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GLOBE PHOTO/CHARLES GAUTHIER

Stephen Webber, with Vanessa Parr, teaches students how to scratch and loop in his new Turntable Technique class at Berklee College of Music.

## Berklee professor takes DJ class out for a spin

By Christopher Muther

From the back of the room, Stephen Webber instructs students to “baby scratch” a series of quarter notes before launching into a round of “scribbles.” Although the results sound like little more than syncopated white noise, the eight students hunched over the sparkling turntables in this tiny subterranean Massachusetts Avenue classroom are making history.

After becoming the first college in the country to teach jazz in the 1940s and rock in the 1960s, the Berklee College of Music is once again breaking ground by offering the first course in DJing at a music college in the

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United States. The class, called Turntable Technique, offers students an opportunity to learn to play the turntables as they would learn any other musical instrument.

It is undoubtedly one of the coolest, most desired classes at Berklee at the moment. There’s a waiting list of more than 50 students eager to learn such techniques as looping, crabbing, and flaring – methods for creating sound and texture using the fingertips, and turntable and a mixer. The course is so popular that the Berklee bookstore can’t keep the textbook on the shelves. Students who are not enrolled in the class snatch up copies every time they’re in stock.

By all rights, the man who championed and teaches this class (and wrote the book) should be someone equally trendy. A club survivor with friends named Junior and an “I’m too cool for you” scowl permanently etched on his face.

Yet it quickly becomes abundantly clear that Webber is none of these things. A big, gregarious bear of a man wearing a fleece pullover and a friendly smile, Webber, 45, has a master’s degree in classical guitar, was musical director of a Harry Chapin show called “Cotton Patch Gospel” and “nerded out” on the Beatles for most of his adult life. Press him on the issue, and he’ll confess that he was one of those folks who despised disco in the 1970’s.

So why is he now consorting with people named Qbert, Swamp, and Kuttin Kandi?

“I was ready for something new, it’s that simple,” Webber explains after class. “It seemed like everything we were doing in the studio in terms of record production was based on what the Beatles were doing 40 years ago. It’s great that kids are on fire about making records with drums and guitar, but I knew there had to be something new.”

And in 1997, Webber found something new when two of his students brought turntables to a music production class. They also brought something that captivated the professor: a videotape of DMC world DJ battle, an annual competition in which the world’s top scratch DJs duke it out for global supremacy.

“It totally blew me away,” he says. “I said, ‘That’s it. It’s totally new.’ I had never seen anything like that before.”

So the professor who was best known for winning an Emmy award for scoring a PBS documentary purchased two turntables and a mixing board and set them up in the basement of his home and proceeded to teach himself how to DJ.

“My wife and kids thought I had lost my marbles,” he says.

What Webber’s family didn’t realize was that he had tapped into a cultural phenomenon. DJing, and more specifically, turntablism, first emerged in the Bronx in the late 1970s and has evolved over the past 25 years to the point where DJs are integral members of hip-hop groups, hard rock bands, and even jazz ensembles. In short, DJs are the rock gods (and goddesses) of the 21st century.

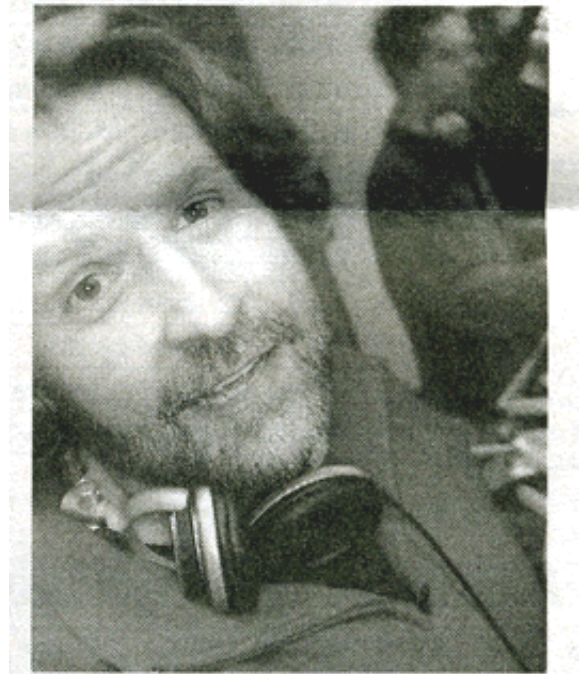
Webber wasn’t looking to become a superstar. He just wanted to understand how to manipulate the turntable. His area of concentration is scratch DJing, a genre that typically falls under the hip-hop umbrella. At its simplest, turntablists use their finger to push a record back and forth across the turntable, causing the needle to create a scratching sound against the vinyl. Essentially, the turntable is played like a percussion instrument. It’s a difficult pursuit that requires musical aptitude, coordination, and endless hours of practice.

But Webber what discovered as he attempted to teach himself this technique was that there were few educational materials on the subject. So he started writing his own book and began spending time with some of the country’s top scratch DJs.

“In a way it was a whole new world for me,” he says. “I had to take naps so I could stay up late, because most of these shows don’t start until midnight or so.”

In 1999, a year after he completed the first draft of his book “Turntable Technique: the Art of the DJ,” a book that teaches the turntable as an instrument, complete with a musical notation system, Webber proposed a DJing class at Berklee. He submitted the proposal three times before a prototype for the class was accepted.

“There were complications attached to it,” explains Gary Burton, executive vice president at Berklee. “Any time a course needs special equipment and special space, there’s usually more scrutiny involved.”



GLOBE PHOTO/CHARLES GAUTHIER

**With Stephen Webber’s class, Berklee has become the first music college in the United States to teach DJing.**

Burton formed a stuffy group that met four times and watched a documentary on the subject called “Scratch.” Meanwhile, Webber’s book (which includes two records to get budding DJs started at the decks) was released through Berklee Press and became one of the top-selling publications.

“This was something that had become widely popular,” Burton says. “And we had a lot of interest from students. They are actually a pretty good bellwether as to what trends are in the making. Whenever they start showing an interest in something, we take it pretty seriously.”

## **Teaching a DJ Class from Scratch**

Webber’s idea for a course was finally approved last year, and last month the first class began with donated equipment. Burton is expecting some grumbling from more traditional staff and alumni who disapprove of the idea, much the way there were complaints when Berklee began offering classes in rock and synthesizers. Reaction to the class has been positive from the DJ and electronic-music community.

“I think it’s incredibly significant that Berklee is recognizing turntablism as a legitimate performance medium,” says electronic musician and Berklee alum BT. “And Dr. Webber comes to it from a unique perspective. It’s much more genuine that he was a classical guitarist, but can see the validity of the turntable as tool for making music.”

In addition to being the envy of their friends, the students who were chosen for the class say they are thrilled to have an opportunity to study a genre of music that factors prominently in their lives.

“I was ridiculously psyched when this class was first offered,” says Brian Ellis, who’s majoring in music business and music synthesis. “I rap, and I was seriously hoping that Berklee would open up and become more hip-hop.”

“It’s really an exciting time right now for DJ education,” Webber continues. “It’s kind of where the guitar was 30 or 40 years ago in that more and more kids are buying turntables now. Like the guitar, it will take time, but eventually people will see that this is also an important instrument.”