



GRAMMY Magazine - March 1, 2004

Turntable Class Teaches Art of Scratch

Deejaying becomes a part of Berklee College's curriculum, marking a new milestone in hip-hop culture



Associated Press
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DJ Chi bobs his head to the hip-hop rhythm, one hand skipping over the vinyl record, the other on the mixer. Possum, Raydar, Moses and the other DJs in the room listen to his beat.

This is a "turntable technique" class at Berklee College of Music, perhaps the first of its kind in the country. DJ Chi is Yoon J. Suh, 21, one of eight students at the prestigious institution who spend two hours every Thursday manipulating old-fashioned records to scratch out "scribbles" and "stabs."

"I can't even do what you're doing, man!" says Needlejuice, a.k.a. Professor Scratch, a.k.a. instructor Stephen Webber, as he tries to recreate Chi's staccato scratch on his own turntable.

The DJ is the foundation of hip-hop, the urban music and culture that exploded out of New York City after someone decided to say a few words over the sound combinations of a Bronx DJ named Kool Herc.

Scratching, or moving a record rhythmically forward and backward with the needle still in the groove, is the core skill of turntable artists.

"Hip-hop has been around for, what, 25 years now?" Webber said. "Deejaying is one of the main core expressions of hip-hop. Part of our mission is to represent the major musical movements of the day, and one could certainly argue that hip-hop is one of the most influential cultures in the history of the world."

Berklee claims to be the first music school in the country to offer such a class as part of its general curriculum. Samuel Hope, executive director of the National Association of Schools of Music, said he had not heard of another such class.

"Doing something of this kind is certainly within the grand tradition of innovation, which is part of the arts," Hope said.

Berklee's decision to add the class to its curriculum in January is yet another milestone in the evolution of hip-hop music and culture, which has become a multibillion-dollar segment of the music and entertainment industry.

Webber, 45, a musician and a producer who's been teaching at Berklee since 1994, became interested in turntabling in 1997, when a student showed him a videotape of a top DJ competition.

"I went out and I bought two turntables and a mixer, and I set 'em up in my basement, and I started scratching, and my wife and kids thought I had lost my marbles," he said.

He finished a book, *Turntable Technique: The Art Of The DJ*, in 1999, which has since become the best-selling book of Berklee Press, and turned in a new course proposal.

The university administrators had to be convinced that it was a valid course of study.

Eventually the administrators followed a path blazed by other music forms that moved from the margins to the mainstream, said Gary Burton, Berklee's executive vice president, who led the study group for Webber's class proposal.

"We're dealing with popular music, jazz music, contemporary music of today, and we're constantly looking to young artists and our students to see where it's going," he said.

"When our students show an interest in something, it usually means that something is catching on."

During a recent class, the students — four women and four men — lined up in two rows, facing each other across their turntables.

They began with "beat matching," making the rhythms from their turntables correspond exactly to Webber's — a necessary skill for DJs, who carefully weave music from one record into another.

After that, the students practiced different techniques of scratching, such as scribbles, stabs and lasers, using tracks of white noise and Cajún music from Webber's practice album. The tracks include samples of Richard Nixon proclaiming "I am not a crook!"

DJ Raydar, a.k.a. 21-year-old Brian W. Ellis of Weston, Conn., said he first began learning to DJ on his family stereo, when his father wasn't playing Earth, Wind and Fire and Kool and the Gang.

Raydar said the class is part of music's evolution, much as his parent's music tastes were once considered fringe.

"Even when jazz came out in the '20s, '30s, '40s, our parents' parents were looking at it like a racket and all that kind of stuff, and it would never be a form of music," he said. "It's only natural that a musical form gets shunned first, then accepted, then embraced, then studied, then taught."