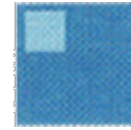




Is the Turntable an Instrument? Professor Stephen Webber Thinks It's Academic & He's Becoming Turntablism's Top Music School Proponent



Boston, Mass. – Stephen Webber prefers not be viewed as a music-school maverick. Although some

of his colleagues may think otherwise, the Berklee College of Music professor says he believes in academia – even if its progression into more modern realms of music may come at a slower pace than he's accustomed.

Nonetheless, Webber – an accomplished producer, teacher, and author, an Emm-winning composer and multi-instrumentalist – prefers to fight the good fight for turntablists at the prestigious Boston-based college, which from an outsider's perspective appears to view the DJ and the turntable with a degree of derision.

SCHOOL DANCE

by
JIM TREMAYNE

Currently at issue is whether or not Berklee will adopt a lab for teaching basic turntable techniques (mixing, cutting, crabbing, etc.) and another for turntable ensemble, which would examine the ideas of such innovators as

the Invisibl Skratch Piklz and the X-ecutioners. Through official school channels, Webber earlier this year gained initial approval for those classes to be added to the fall term. However, Berklee later rescinded the budget for those courses. It seems that the very notion of the turntable being taught as an instrument was up for debate among school hierarchy. At presstime, Webber was revising his initial efforts.

Ultimately, this episode may be a microcosm of what's to come in music academia in the next decade – a fight for legitimacy for a growing legion of misunderstood musicians (i.e. – turntablists). But Webber, while earnestly working within the institution's decision-making framework, remains steadfast in his beliefs that, specifically, the turntable is certainly an instrument and, more generally, hip-hop culture (not unlike jazz before it) will be something that's studied for many years in the future.

DJ Times recently checked in with Professor Stephen Webber to find out how he thinks th DJ, the turntable and those in musical academia can find common ground.

DJ Times: What's your musical background?

Stephen Webber: I was born in Chicago before Mayor Dailey had a "Jr." after his name. I remember seeing The Beatles on Ed Sullivan, but not their first performance. I remember them doing "Hey Jude." My parents and grandparents hated it and I loved it. I wanted an electric guitar so bad it ate me up inside. My folks made me play the piano instead for six years with a teacher who would hit my fingers with a pencil when I made mistakes. I learned a lot form her, though. I played in rock bands throughout school, played my first professional gig when I was 12 or 13. I also played bass in the jazz band and orchestra at school. In college I was gigging constantly, in my own bands and as a hired gun. I also had a gig as staff musician at a recording studio, where I learned a lot. Afterwards I did the road for a while. I was music director for an international tour of a show by Harry Chapin. I made a few records as an artist, but I turned out to be a better producer than an artist, so I moved in that direction. Last count I've produced close to 100 records, including jazz, classical, hip-hop, R&B, Black Gospel, CCM, rock, metal, bluegrass, folk, techno, house – you name it. I'm a big fan of every style of music. I also began writing music for television and film about 14 years ago, which is a job I enjoy a lot. I've had the opportunity to write orchestral scores where I got to combine classical, jazz, rock, techno and hip-hop! Recently I got to produce and conduct one of my soundtracks on the scoring stage at Lucasfilm's Skywalker Ranch. I received an Emmy award for music composition in 1998. One highlight last year was producing the *Vital Vinyl* series, where I hired a great rhythm section to come in and jam, then sculpted the results into totally fresh tools that Djs could use. You can find them at Toolsfordjs.com.



The Professor's All-Time Turntable Tricks

Extending Drum Breaks: Grand Master Flash in the 70s. By combining backspinning, precise timing and o great sense of groove, Flash pushed the art form forward and gave the B-Boys a workout.

Scratching: Grand Wizard Theodore in the 70s. Contrary to the cheesy TV commercial, it was Theodore who pioneered the percussive use of the record manipulation, setting off a revolution that continues to this day.

Transformer: DJ Jazzy Jeff and the illusive Spinbad from Philly. Getting the fader into the forefront gave more control and musical

possibilities.

Crab: QBert is a pioneer and master practitioner of this technique. Getting the individual fingers involved put scratching into hyperdrive - 16th note triplets? With the Crab you can pull it off, no problem.

Flare: Credit goes to the very talented and humble DJ Flare. There are all sorts of variations on the concept of using the change of record direction in conjunction with closing the fader to come up with new rhythmic patterns. This opens up lots of doors, and helps your playing swing a lot harder.

Beat Juggling: Steve Dee pioneered this innovative technique. Beat Juggling is something that is totally unique to the turntablist. Other instruments, even samplers and drum machines aren't suited to pull off beat juggling like a pair of decks and a mixer. Cats like Roc Raida makes it flow like bultah. Many DJs do it poorly - this is one technique that requires a great sense of time and plenty of practice.

DJ Times: What's your educational and teaching background?

Webber: Odd. I just love learning stuff. I started out majoring in Radio/TV/Film at Texas Christian University, but the place was way too conservative and I had to leave. I did take a course in radio production, where I learned how to run the board and edit analog tape. I also had my first DJing experience doing a weekly radio show on the college station. After busking across Europe with a guitar, I did a Bachelor of Music degree in Jazz from University of North Texas. I auditioned for the radio station as a DJ when I first started and got the prime-time show right off the bat, five days a week. I quit when I had people call in to vote on whether they wanted to hear the new Donny and Marie record or a new Sly Stone album - and Donnie and Marie won. I switched to doing a late-night show called "Infinite jazz" and played a lot of Miles, Herbie, Don Cherry, and Mahavishnu Orchestra. I'd play entire album sides and practice guitar along with the records in the control room. I have a Master of Music degree in classical guitar performance. I studied classical guitar with Sharon Isbin, who heads the guitar program at Julliard, as well as David Kelsey and John Johns. I also studied writing for a couple of semesters at Harvard, which has been a great help as I've moved into writing magazine articles and books. I've always had students. I started teaching guitar in high school. In college I had as many as 60 private students at once. I headed the guitar program at Austin Peay State University for seven years and started up classes in electronic music, put together the labs, and directed an electronic music ensemble called the MIDI Committee. I spent a semester as visiting lecturer at the University of Leeds in northern England. Eight years ago I was recruited by Bill Scheniman to come to Berklee and help run the Music Production and Engineering program. I received early promotion to full professor three years ago. Of course, that's before they knew I was practicing turntables in my basement!

DJ Times: What exactly is the proposed program for turntablism at Berklee?

Webber: I've been hearing a lot of rumors about this so let me set the record straight. Berklee Press, which is a division of Berklee College of Music, has published my book. *Turntable Technique: The Art of the Dj*, which is the first book to ever teach the turntable as a musical instrument. Berklee Press has also re-leased the limited-edition *Vital Vinyl* series of five records, which includes *Needle Juice*, *Turntablist's Toolkit*, *Beat Bomb*, *Tech Tools for Djs*, and *Rockin' the House*. I'm currently in pre-production for two more books, as *Turntable Technique* is a beginning book, and there is much more to cover. As for classes, I'm struggling to get things off the ground. When we last spoke everything was approved to begin the first class in the fall. We had worked it through all the appropriate committees, had the budget approved, the Chairs and Deans and Provost had given what we thought was the final approval.

DJ Times: So what happened?

Webber: The class and its budget were squashed by the Executive Vice President's office. They've shared their concerns with me. They're not yet convinced that the turntable has developed enough as an instrument or production tool to warrant college-level study. It'll be my job to try to convince them otherwise. I had the course approved last year, too, only to have the Provost rescind the approval, probably due to pressure from the Performance Division. These are all reasonable men, who are concerned for the reputation of the institution.

DJ Times: So what's next?

Webber: We've got an uphill fight here, but I'm confident we will succeed eventually. Berklee has historically been a progressive, risk-taking institution, open to diversity. As a school of contemporary music, I know it's just a matter of time until the upper administration realizes the importance of the turntable in contemporary music, the excellence, of the musicians who play it, and the value of the culture that created the art form. Best case scenario, by the time you go to press, I will have convinced the upper administration to take this chance, and we'll be moving forward. If not, I'll continue the educational initiative by bringing in visiting artists - like DJ Swamp and DJ Shadow - to help make the case.



DJ Times: How would it break down in terms of classes and what is taught?

Webber: My plan is to start with a Turntable Lab, to get students into basic turntable techniques. I designed a curriculum for Mars Music, and this will be similar - mixing, beat matching, scratching, cutting, switch, up-fader and crossfader technique, stabs, transformers, crabbing, some history and terminology. Since these will be music students, I'll be able to take them farther than the Mars curriculum, as I won't have to teach them to read music or count. Hopefully, we'll get into flares and melodic playing by the end of the semester. The next class I have proposed is a turntable ensemble, which will resemble groups like the X-ecutioners or the Skratch Piklz. This will be much more conducive to experimentation, and will resemble a directed studies course. We've got some great turntablists already at Berklee, and I'd love to give them a more structured outlet for expression. I've been rehearsing with a group that consists of three turntablists and an electric string quartet, and they sound incredible. They play a version of Led Zeppelin's "Kashmir," and DJ Reason is working in "Give Peace a Chance." It's stunning. Further on down the road, I could see classes in beat juggling and other more advanced techniques.

DJ Times: In the future, do you see music students majoring in turntable the way they can major in guitar or drums now?

Webber: I need to answer this carefully. I think part of the resistance I've been getting from my colleagues is from the fear that Berklee will be overrun with kids who have little or no formal music background wanting to be turntable majors. Way in the future, 10 or 20 years from now, I'm personally sure there will be a place where serious turntablists can get a college education and declare the turntable as their major instrument. For that to happen, there needs to be more and better educational opportunities for turntablists before college, and I think that is likely. Look at Skratchcon 2000 [the Skratch Piklz' groundbreaking turntablist seminar in July, 2000]. Most major DJs are more than willing to share their experience with younger, up-and-coming DJs. Look at the seminars that Qbert and Yoga Frog have been doing. Look at the fact that Mars Music is offering turntable classes and lessons.

DJ Times: How would an academic program like that work?

Webber: If there is a turntable major at respected music colleges in the future, students will study turntable vigorously with a private teacher, play the turntable in ensembles, learn how to write for it, arrange for it, play solo recitals, learn the pedagogy and history of the instrument, the works. These students would still need to learn all the music theory, sight singing, arranging, music history, and everything else that goes into earning a music degree. We already have kids at Berklee whose main instrument is the turntable; they just declare another instrument as their main instrument for the purposes of being in music college. These students major in Music Production and Engineering, Music Synthesis, Film Scoring, Songwriting, Music Business, or Professional Music.

DJ Times: You, DJ Radar and others have developed musical notation systems for the turntable. How does yours work and why is notation useful?

Webber-: Radar and I developed our systems independently, although we have discussed notating turntable music and we share the same philosophy. We're both trying to keep things as simple as possible using standard musical notation. The single-line scratch staff I use is similar to a percussion staff. I'm notating the record moves under the staff and the fader moves on top. The idea is to make it as easy to read as possible, while letting turntablists communicate with fellow musicians in the language of 8th notes, 16th notes and triplets. There's no need to reinvent the wheel here, and there are lots of advantages in talking to fellow musicians in terms everyone already understands. Having said all that, I find the notation systems developed by A-Trac and John Carluccio to be very useful as well. Some guitarists read standard notation. Some read tablature. Some read both. We may have a similar situation with the turntable, which is fine with me. Just like an educated person may speak many languages, an educated turntablist should probably be able to at least understand the different systems.

DJ Times: How else does one present the turntable in terms familiar with formal musical education?

Webber: I believe it is an instrument just like the drum set is an instrument, or the synthesizer or the guitar, or even the violin. When learning any instrument, there are issues that you must master: the most efficient use of your hand and body, and the technical possibilities of the instrument itself. There is a body of knowledge developed by the masters of the instrument who have come before you, which can save you time. And the more you can comprehend about music in terms of phrasing, expression, rhythm and harmony, the more interesting you're likely to be as a musician. All this is why I wrote *Turntable Technique: The Art of the Dj*. I noticed early on that my Berklee students who were DJs had big holes in their knowledge of the art form. The response to the book has been overwhelmingly positive. I'm now working on a new book: *The Evolving Dj*, which will take things further and get into more advanced techniques and production concepts.

DJ Times: What was the process for the acceptance of the turntable into academia?

Webber: Acceptance is still a work in progress, and probably will be for the next 50 to 100 years. When I came "out of the closet" as a DJ and my book was released, all of my colleagues at Berklee would wave their hands in the air like they were scratching, make "wicky- wicky" noises and burst out laughing whenever they saw me coming. At first I laughed with them, eventually it got real old. People seem to like to have someone to look down on, and musicians are not immune to this. I know violinists who don't think the saxophone is a "real instrument" because none of the great classical composers wrote concertos for it. Some jazzers look down on drummers because they don't have to grapple with the intricacies of harmony. Horn players look down on guitarists, guitarists look down on bassists. Ultimately, the process of acceptance for any instrument is for its champions to be consummate musicians, making the criticisms irrelevant.

DJ Times: What buttons are you pushing in the administration for its acceptance?

Webber: I try to use the same approach that Ravi Shankar took when introducing the sitar and Indian music to the West – get people to put aside their preconceptions about harmony and form, and open themselves up to something new. I also stress the importance of hip-hop culture, and try to draw parallels to cultures that are traditionally studied on the college level.

Dj Times: In your estimation, what makes the turntable an instrument?

Webber: It is capable of conveying emotion from one human to another when played by an accomplished musician. It's important to point out that most instruments started out as something else. Bows started out as weapons, and all vibrating string instruments probably evolved from bows. Early drumsticks were clubs. It's less of a stretch for the turntable to evolve into a musical instrument, since it started out life as a device intended for musical playback.

DJ Times: Ultimately, what's the upside of turntable being taught in music schools?

Webber: Respect. Jazz musicians get a lot more respect now that more people understand their art form. And while jazz is not as popular as it was in its heyday, Jazz Education has kept it thriving, growing as an art form, and helped develop its audience.

Rock musicians are in the same boat. In 1969 the Beatles were the biggest thing in youth culture, but mainstream America was way too hung up in their long hair, drugs, and anti-war sentiments to give them any respect. When I was in college, my professors regularly made fun of The Beatles. Now they ask questions about The Beatles on college entrance exams! McCartney is considered a historical figure. That took overcoming prejudice, which takes education. And it takes time for people without prejudice to get old enough to become the teachers and the professors. As one of the main expressions of hip-hop culture, DJs deserves respect. Students should have the opportunity to learn about Grand Master Flash, Africa Bambaataa, Grand Wizard Theodore, Kool Herc, and Grand Mixer DXT just like they can learn about Basie, Miles, Robert Johnson, Hendrix and The Beatles.

DJ Times: Are DJs of the mind that "official acceptance" is necessarily a good thing?

Webber: *All* of the successful DJs I've talked to think it is a good thing.

DJ Times: Why does turntablism need to be justified by its presence in formal education?

Webber: It doesn't. I'm of the mind that education is almost always a good thing, as long as it seeks to promote open mindedness and not prejudice. I'm a little uncomfortable with the term "formal education." As you might guess, my classes are not all that formal. Rigorous, yes. Formal, not so much. College education is also a two-way street. I personally think educational institutions will benefit from learning more about turntablism and hip hop. Colleges' curriculums are still extremely Euro-centric, especially music curriculums. Most music professors just don't know anything about hip-hop culture. I shouldn't pick on music professors - most Americans don't realize the richness and depth of hip hop, or how the turntable has evolved to be utilized in jazz, rock, classical, electro-acoustic music, every form of dance music, and practically every commercial on their televisions and radios.

DJ Times: Are there risks in introducing the turntable to academia? For turntablists or academics?

Webber: Sure. When education is done poorly, or when it becomes pompous or arrogant, it has the potential to stifle innovation and creativity. For some reason, everything I've ever majored in or taught or tried to teach at the college level has been controversial. But in every situation that I've seen, the positives of education have far outweighed the negatives. When I majored in Jazz, the older cats I was playing gigs with thought I was nuts. "*You didn't go to college for that!*" You had to learn it on the street like they did. I almost got kicked out of academia as an assistant professor for producing rock concerts in the recital hall at Austin Peay State University. I had my electric-guitar ensemble play every- thing from Chick Corea Electric Band charts to a version of "Bohemian Rhapsody" with 15 electric guitars, one on each of the vocal parts. The students learned a lot, the crowd went nuts, but the rest of the faculty thought it was blasphemous! Most recently, as a professor of Music Production and Engineering here at Berklee, I've seen attitudes in the recording industry change dramatically over the past eight years. The older, established guys in the recording industry who didn't go to school used to say that it was a waste of time. Now practically all of them say that they wish they'd had the chance to study production and engineering when they were younger.



DJ Times: Why the change in attitude?

Webber: They see how much more grounded and mature our graduates are when they hit the streets. Our alumnus have had time to get some of the basics under their belt, but also professors from the industry have hipped them to the fact that they're going to have to pay their dues, be patient, take some hard knocks, and deal with rejection. Getting that heads-up is invaluable, and it helps them focus, hang in there, and avoid some of the more obvious early career mistakes.

DJ Times: What are your turntable skills like?

Webber: I'm best at crabbing. It's a lot like tremolo technique on classical guitar. My beat juggling needs lots of work. I'm very aware that my main talents are as a teacher, producer, composer and guitarist. I learn fast, though, and I'm good at helping other people learn. I'm playing turntable more and more in my live band and in the studio. Stay tuned.

DJ Times: Who would you consider the top scratch DJs and why?

Webber: Mixmaster Mike blows me away consistently. He's a very emotional player. Swamp kills. Craze and Qbert are both extremely inventive. I like the way DJ Logic is taking the turntable into the jazz realm. I also enjoy the esoteric side of DJ Spooky. The X-ecutioners are smokin'. Tony Vegas slays me. Radar certainly is taking the turntable into new areas. I think DJ Flare is an excellent player.

DJ Times: What do you like to see when you watch a DJ?

Webber: For me the most important aspect is the emotional one. DJs have a strange gig. We make speakers vibrate air molecules in such a way that when those air molecules vibrate another human being, hopefully, an emotion is conveyed. Sure, you need good technique, good time, creativity, phrasing, all that stuff, but it's all in the service of transmitting emotion. I also like DJs who tell a story, or have something to say with their music.

DJ Times: How do you see scratch DJing progressing in the future?

Webber: I personally think we've just scratched the surface - no pun intended- of how far the turntable is going to go as an instrument. Take melody playing -still in its infancy, probably because 1200s only gave us plus or minus 8-percent. Grover Knight showed me the new Numark decks that give you 50-percent variable speed! Stay tuned for some amazing melodic work by some innovative players. It will be interesting to see how the whole digital thing pans out, the hybrid systems, the digital turntables. I'm plunging into that whole world now for my next book. This is a great time to be a turntablist.