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Five Books about DJ Culture

When asked if he had any favorite books about DJ culture, DJ DB, founder of Brooklyn electronic music store Breakbeat Science, answered, "I've been in a couple and never even read those, sorry." Perhaps artists focused on creating culture are too busy to read about it, but his role as a pioneer DJ and promoter in the American rave scene is indeed documented in Simon Reynolds' Generation Ecstasy: Into the World of Techno and Rave Culture, just one of many books that document the rise of the DJ in popular culture.

DJ's are everywhere bands used to be -- school dances, wedding receptions, birthday parties, bar mitzvahs -- and in relatively new exciting places such as the DMC (Disco Mix Club) World DJ Championships where turntablists battle each other with their beat-juggling and mixing skills which often encompass acrobatics. In 2004, for the first time, a DJ, Tiesto, even played the opening ceremony of the Olympics held in Athens.

As sales of DJ equipment (turntables, CDJ's, mixers) have grown to rival those of guitars and drum sets, books chronicling and celebrating the emergence of the DJ as full-fledged musicians have emerged, too.

Here are five of my favorites:

1. Last Night a DJ Saved My Life: The History of the Disc Jockey, by Bill Brewster and Frank Broughton.

The title says it all; inspired by the name of a 1982 r&b song by Indeep, no doubt millions of dance floor habitués have woken up after a magical night of dancing and thought just that thought. "A truly great DJ, just for a moment, can make a whole room fall in love," say the authors in this entertaining biography of the DJ, with club charts from the mid-50s through the end of the '90s. Their How to DJ Right: The Art and Science of Playing Records, is even more fun.

2. DJ Skills: The Essential Guide to Mixing & Scratching, by Stephen Webber.

Dedicated ("Now God Has a DJ") to the late Jam Master Jay, rap group Run-DMC's DJ, Berklee College of Music professor and Emmy Award-winning composer Stephen Webber offers a solid primer on the history, tools and skills of DJ'ing with insightful interviews with respected club, hip-hop and scratch DJ's.



3. Looking for the Perfect Beat: The Art and Culture of the DJ, by Kurt B. Reighley.

An enjoyable read with lots of quotes by popular DJ's. Says the author, "If [my book] spares one neophyte DJ a little frustration, prompts a single pro to examine his or her art from a new angle, or just makes the reader think differently about how [musical] ideas can be presented and combined, then I won't feel like such a jackass when I tell people I'm a DJ."

4. Love Saves the Day: A History of American Dance Music Culture, 1970-1979, by Tim Lawrence.

A valuable historical record of the disco phenomenon describing, from over 300 interviews with influential scene players including legendary DJ's, its transformation from gay and urban subculture to mainstream popular culture, including a fascinating selected discography of the music of the era.

5. The Adventures of Grandmaster Flash: My Life, My Beats, by Grandmaster Flash with David Ritz.

The inspiration for countless DJ dreams, the legendary hip-hop

