

CHANGE THE RECORD

Can DJ lessons for disadvantaged kids deliver real benefits? Andy Buchan investigates

Rory Hoy's autism was so severe it could have held him back in life. But instead, he's enjoying a thriving career as a DJ and producer, with music licensed to Sony, Disney and Audi and gigs alongside Fatboy Slim and Mr Scruff under his belt.

"I was quite a novice when I came to see Jim," Rory tells us from his studio, where he's currently working on a book detailing the rise of the Big Beat era. "Jim was incredibly patient with me, with my autism. I was keen to try and achieve things quickly, rather than take things a step at a time and perfect my skills. I learned how to listen and respond to teaching and advice, how to be patient and believe in myself."

The Jim Rory speaks of is Jim Reiss, a man who's devoted much of his life to teaching kids on the autistic spectrum – and those who have fallen foul of the educational or the justice systems – how to DJ.

Jim set up DJ School UK in Leeds in 2013, and it's now one of the largest non-profit DJ schools for disadvantaged kids. Thousands go through the system each year, learning everything from what makes a good DJ ("playing great music without silence" is what it boils down to, laughs Jim) to getting to grips with Serato and Ableton, computers which donate their kit for free. The school hopes to improve self-esteem, raise the profile of DJing as an art form and supply contemporary music education to kids outside mainstream education, with by-products including teamwork, self-discipline, planning and self-reflection.

With a sideline in private tuition just about paying the bills, they've recently moved into an old church warehouse on the edge of the city centre. Where once signs implored you to praise the Almighty, they now worship at a very different altar. The lesson starts as soon as you walk in. There's a Periodic Matrix of Scratches (Google it – it's a piece of art), inspiring music quotes taped to the walls and Venn diagrams detailing 10 different types of DJs.

And with Jim Reiss, Dan de Lissandt and Tim from Utah Saints on the board, the school has DJs who have delivered their own impressive sermons. Jim has played Glastonbury three times and released an album with his turntable act. Dan was part of Leuce Rhythms supporting the Who's Who of the breaks world and Utah Saints were one of the first stadium dance bands.

"When I worked with young people

in the care or youth justice systems, or who had special educational needs or disabilities, it became clear DJing was a fantastic hook to get these 'in need' kids engaged," says Jim.

How do you define 'disadvantaged'? "We don't!" says Jim. "We just know that this is 'our house' and everyone is welcome in 'our house'. However, our funders use their own criteria to define 'disadvantaged', so to ensure that our sessions are fully inclusive, with kids from all sections of society. We balance the income we receive for funded groups with private fees paid by those who don't fit the funders' criteria. It's not easy, but it does work."

To that end, they take in any and all students, from those at the far end of the autism spectrum to kids from Pupil Referral Units with severe emotional and behavioural difficulties to regular kids looking to find out more about DJing. Across 18 set-ups spanning Newark, Colchester, Croydon and several sets of 1210s with battle-mode scratch mixers, they engage the budding DJs in a natural setting where music is the common language. The music can vary wildly. "We've got tech-house, grime, moth rock, DJ, kids who play J-pop and K-pop, classical DJs, and even one kid who DJ'd with synth film scores from John Carpenter movies!" says Jim.

And DJ School is not alone. In London, Grooveschool, run by Richie Litter, is providing a similar service. "One lad came to us having been designated mute," says Richie. "Within four weeks he wasn't just talking but his vocabulary was huge and his enthusiasm for Grooveschool unrelenting. He's still working with us, and two years later I'm witnessing him grow again. He can converse quite substantially now."

While DJing will never be a cure-all, there's some scientific evidence to back up these stories. Dr Phil Mullan PhD, a music education consultant and inclusive practitioner for nearly 30 years, argues that DJing engages students far quicker than any other form of music. "As DJ skills are things they would be naturally interested in and would recognise within their own youth culture, they are more attractive and motivating, so provide a hook with which to get engaged. The only limit that currently exists is where they can go to study further."

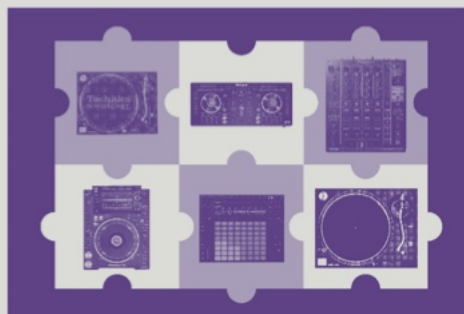
One answer is the advent of GCSE music qualifications involving DJing, targeting kids of all ages and abilities. DJ School UK and Grooveschool have long campaigned for GCSE music to adopt decks and turntables as musical equipment, with exam boards AQA and OCR getting involved in 2015. The Future DJ's program is taking its

expertise across the UK to teach 11 to 16-year-olds DJing and electronic production, hoping that the use of decks will "reduce the sharp decline in music education."

With the BBC reporting that council funding for youth services has fallen by almost a quarter over the past four years – on top of systemic cuts from previous governments – young people have fewer places to spend time off the streets. Getting them involved in DJing in a safe, CCTV-controlled environment with teachers, counsellors and freedom of musical expression can only be a good thing. And the results seem to back that up, with several of Jim's pupils working as full-time DJs and some looking to set up their own DJ schools for hard-to-reach pupils in areas like Bristol and Huddersfield.

None of this will change the world. But opening up kids on the edge of society to DJing can help change their worlds. As Phil Mullan notes, Pupil Referral Unit students who learn to DJ are able to "deconstruct and then reconstruct their sense of self, moving from a negative imposed identity to one that they make themselves".

In essence, they can start again. And put simply, this is why Jim, Richie and many others do it. Visit www.grooveschool.org and djschooluk.org to find out more.



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