

Exploring Careers in MUSIC



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What Do DJs Do?

DJs are party people—that is, they know how to get a roomful of people onto the dance floor, whether at a club or a private event like a wedding or birthday party. Once known as disc jockeys and exclusively employed by radio stations—an area of work that is shrinking—

DJs do more than just play other people’s songs. In this job they are free to let their personalities filter into the music. They use their ability to “read” an audience to keep the party going and rely on technology to make what they do seem easy to the untrained eye. Most DJs specialize in a particular genre of music: electronic dance music, hip hop, pop, or indie music, for example.

Disc jockeys get their name from the vinyl records they used to play at radio stations and high school dances before the days of digital music. Today, they supply the set list, or music that they put together in advance of a performance. They also customize the way songs meld into each other, sometimes adding sound effects

A Few Facts

Number of Jobs

About 51,800

Pay

Median hourly pay of \$21.34

Educational Requirements

Bachelor of arts for radio; otherwise, none

Personal Qualities

Outgoing, punctual, analytical, tech-savvy

Work Settings

Radio stations, dance clubs, bars, private parties

Future Job Outlook

Expected 4 percent decline

like scratching, whereby they rotate vinyl records back and forth on turntables to create a rhythmic sound.

A Typical Workday

A DJ's workday varies from one day to the next, as can be seen in a post on Reddit by DJ Soo of Vancouver, British Columbia. When he does not have a gig, he's trying to find more gigs. He posts on social media and creates ads to generate business. He also checks out new music to keep current. He may talk to clients with upcoming parties to discuss their music preferences so that he can begin building playlists for the events.

If he has a party or other gig, his duties change. The day before an event, he gathers the hundreds of pounds of equipment he will need and decides whether he needs to rent equipment he does not have. If he does, he picks it up at a rental store. He loads the equipment—amplifiers, turntables, speakers, cables, a laptop containing his music and special DJ software, headset, microphone, and DJ controller—into his truck. The controller is a device that lets him select the volume, bass, and treble; fade between songs; make scratching sounds; and use other special effects that elevate the music. The day of the event, he has to set up his equipment at the venue and then break everything down and put it back in the truck when he is done.

Education and Training

Little in the way of formal education is involved in being a DJ unless one wants to be in radio, in which case having a bachelor's degree in journalism or broadcasting is an asset. Only about 3 percent of DJs earn an undergraduate degree in sound engineering. Most DJs get their start as Josephine Cruz did. She's a DJ in Calgary, Canada, who works under the name Jayemkayem. She has been a DJ for about a decade, getting her start after learning

Rocking the Boat

“Since I am the only DJ here in the bar, I have prepared compilation mixes that can be played when I need to use the bathroom, get food or have a little break. My work ‘day’ starts around 11:00 pm—depending on the other entertainment activities on board and the type of crowd. Of course I prepare the music in advance, plan theme evenings and activities and get a good feel for what will get the people going. While we want the people to have a good time dancing and moving, we also want them to consume beverages to generate revenue.”

—Jonas Weber, German cruise ship DJ

Jonas Weber, “A Day in the Life of a DJ,” *Cruise Jobs Guide*, October 7, 2016. <https://cruise.jobs>.

the craft from a boyfriend. When the couple broke up, he gave her his old equipment, which she supplemented with some new tech. Working out of her bedroom, she produced and posted some mixes on SoundCloud—a streaming service that enables users to upload, share, and promote audio files. Her work attracted clients. “It just kind of snowballed really organically,” she says. “Someone heard a mix that I made and was like, ‘Hey, I’m doing an event, we would love to have you play at.’ And then it took off from there.”¹⁴

As with other careers in music, learning from more experienced professionals is a fantastic way to build skills and business contacts. Placing oneself in social situations in which DJs are present and striking up conversations with them or volunteering to work with them are other ways to accomplish that goal.

High school students may want to take electives that can help them decide whether being a DJ is for them. Computer science,

DJs know how to get a roomful of people onto the dance floor, whether at a club or private event. Most DJs do more than just play other people's songs. Using a variety of techniques, they also mix and customize the songs.



business and marketing, performing arts classes, and AP music theory could provide some good background information for aspiring DJs. Music theory provides an awareness of chords, melody, and scales, while audio engineering can provide an introduction to recording, mixing, and mastering. Although DJs often purchase software designed for them, understanding how software is created by studying computer science may be helpful. A class in marketing or general business can provide lessons on ways to promote a creative business and understand the basics of reading

SOURCE NOTES

Introduction:

Careers That Reach High Notes

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Background Singer

4. Quoted in AirGigs, “Interview with Top-Rated Vocalist Andrea Tyler,” March 5, 2023. <https://blog.airgigs.com>.
5. Sophie Carpenter, “First Year Experience Being a Vocal Performance Major,” *The Tartan*, April 30, 2018. <http://thetartan.org>.
6. Quoted in Betsy Calderon, “Former Reagan High School Student Lives Out Her Wildest Dream with Taylor Swift,” *News4 San Antonio*, April 22, 2023. <https://news4sanantonio.com>.
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Booking Agent

8. Quoted in Dave Roberts, “I Find Acts That Play to Nobody . . . and I Convince People to Book Them,” *Music Business Worldwide*, August 12, 2018. www.musicbusinessworldwide.com.
9. Quoted in *Careers in Music*, “Booking Agent,” January 5, 2022. www.careersinmusic.com.
10. Quoted in MusiCounts, *TRACK: Career Profiles—a Day in the Life of a Booking Agent with Stefanie Purificati*, YouTube, 2021. www.youtube.com/watch?v=jaUFBptd1RY.

INTERVIEW WITH A BOOKING AGENT

Geoff McGovern is a booking agent for a New York City–based music booking agency. He works remotely in Philadelphia about 90 miles (145 km) away from his company’s headquarters. He has been an agent for ten years and represents twenty-five bands. He answered questions during an in-person interview.

Q: Why did you become a booking agent?

A: I became a booking agent because I was interested in being involved in music as a high school student and teenager and it was a way to utilize my experiences during that time into a career. As a teenager, I used money from my first job to buy a Willy Wonka–type lifetime pass for a local booking promoter’s shows. This pass allowed me to go to any of their shows for free. So even if I just wanted to see one band in the lineup I could just see it without worrying that I was wasting my money. I kept track of the cost of each show, and the pass paid for itself in about eight months. I became a booking agent because I never learned how to play music, and it was a way to be involved and pay my love of music forward by discovering new bands.

Q: Can you describe your typical workday?

A: It’s generally never the same. It’s full of surprises; it has the same sort of blueprint, but it never goes to plan most of the time. My typical workday is from 10 a.m. to 7 p.m. Most of the job is checking email and making sure there are no fires to put out with clients. Sometimes it’s picking up the pieces from West Coast people at the end of your day; sometimes you’re working with people internationally, like in Asia or Australia, that are sometimes

OTHER JOBS IN MUSIC

Album reviewer	Mix engineer
Artist manager	Music arranger
Bassist	Music critic
Choir director	Music director
Church organist	Music historian
Composer	Music librarian
Concert hall manager	Music photographer
Conductor	Music promoter
Dancer	Music publicist
Dance therapist	Recording studio manager
Drummer	Record producer
Guitar technician	Roadie
Licensing representative	Sound technician
Lighting technician	Synagogue cantor
Lyricist	Tour manager

Editor's note: The online *Occupational Outlook Handbook* of the US Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics is an excellent source of information on jobs in hundreds of career fields, including many of those listed here. The *Occupational Outlook Handbook* may be accessed online at www.bls.gov/ooh.

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