



## ***Should a DJ Learn The Piano?***

article by Michael Smolens ©2021

This is a valuable question for any DJ to ask, and yet there's more here than meets the eye. On the one hand, a DJ could be thinking about the trajectory of their career and looking at avenues to take them to success the fastest. However, what is noteworthy about this question is the fact that the word "piano" is specifically used vs. "keyboard" or "synthesizer". Implied in this choice of word is the question of whether the DJ feels less musically creative because they didn't take *piano lessons in their youth*. Let's face it, part of our modus operandi as developing artists is to be aware of our assumptions (and possible regrets) about our musical upbringing. So, this article will address our DJ *looking forward* into their professional future.

Playing the piano is just one option for a DJ to build a more solid musical foundation. But there are others: studying theory and composition, taking classes in particular genres or artists' styles, or learning basic percussion. To assume that playing the piano will further your career as a DJ is only barely true because learning the basic mechanics will take you a minimum of 1–2 years. If you were to take lessons from someone who gives you a background in theory and composition, helps you to identify why you like certain artists, and teaches you how to use the *piano as a tool*, you'll develop much quicker as a DJ vs. hoping that piano/piano lessons alone will get you there.

Having a good grasp of the basics of music are critical because you'll be able to quickly search out the right track to play at the right time (in terms of BPM, style, key, tone color, etc.) when you're DJing, assuming you've got a big playlist. This is true of other music industry professionals, as well. Personally, I would never hire an engineer for a live or studio project who didn't have their musical basics down — same with a manager, booking agent, or publicist, because I know that they can ask me **specific questions using real musical vocabulary**.

"We need something brighter," a client of yours might ask in the middle of an event you're DJing, and chances are good that you'll probably feel a bit lost and maybe even embarrassed. Knowing the basics of music will allow you to sort out very quickly what your client *actually wants*. "Something brighter" could mean so many different things: something faster, or in a more major tonality, or more rhythmically dense, or simply more stylistically familiar to the demographic of the event (e.g. I played a gig a long time ago when the crowd wanted "something with a beat" . . . eventually I found out that they wanted mostly Beatles songs!).

Granted, you will get some clients who really know what kind of music they want at their event, and maybe even provide you a playlist in advance. But you will also need to be prepared to sort out what music they want (*and very quickly*) when they can't put their desires into clear musical language. Nowadays, this preparation can be easily acquired through a plethora of teachers, institutions, and online resources. It's never too late . . .