

Planning AND Spontaneity: DJ Jess Brings it All

By Mike Cordeiro

The Peavey DJ Takeover has become a signature event at MBLV each year, since its inception as an informal gathering of DJs for the purpose of showing off mixing styles. There are always some really great performances, but usually one or two stand out above the rest. Jessica McKelvey, a.k.a. DJ Jess, from Pittsburgh, PA made her first appearance at the 2017 DJ Takeover and crushed it. Her mixing style and song choices instantly packed the dance floor and got everyone grooving.

After watching her performance I knew Jessica (owner of Blue House Sound & Lighting) would be a great interview choice for Mobile Beat and our continuing series on women who are rocking the DJ industry. Her story is unique and inspiring in this male-dominated field. In our interview Jessica dished on music, gear, kids, and starting her own company.

Mike Cordeiro: *How did you get your start as a DJ?*

Jessica McKelvey: I started DJing in 2003 at Edinboro University. My sorority sister was the DJ at The Hotel Bar, which is where all the over-21 students went to dance. I would always request songs (I specifically remember a whole lot of Obie Trice requests) and she mentioned that I should be a DJ. I give much credit to the owners of The Hotel Bar for hiring female DJs!

MC: *Who were some of your major influences?*

JM: While on spring break in 2004, I went to this club in Miami called Pascha. There was a DJ booth in the ceiling, right above the dance floor. I remember looking up to see who was spinning, and there was this female DJ with long blonde hair, just whipping it around to the music and dancing. The crowd was electric and she was in control. That was the first time I'd ever seen a female DJ in that role. I follow a ton of female DJs on Instagram. I love how DJ Dayna of Columbus (<https://djdayna.com>) is real with her audience. Her content is so captivating and she's not afraid to be herself. I also really admire the exclusive female DJ company in Florida called Our DJ Rocks (<https://ourdjrocks.com>). They are so talented and creative with their marketing. Locally, I'm inspired by all of the professional DJs who are true to themselves and ego-less. It's a competitive industry but we should all support one another.

MC: *Great point! When did you decide to go solo and how did you develop your company?*

JM: I've been doing this part-time for 15 years. After having my first son in 2013, I decided to look for part time work and came across a DJ company that was hiring. I started working for them, doing weddings around the

city. I realized that I loved the flexible schedule. After I had my second son I decided that I wanted to be in complete control of my schedule. I always had the dream to develop an event planning company, but then I realized that I've been planning events musically for most of my adult life. I wanted to use those creative abilities to stand out. I decided it was time to go for it on my own and in February 2016 my company Blue House Sound & Lighting (<https://djess412.com>) was launched.

MC: *Which events do you specialize in?*

JM: I do all private events, from grad parties to birthdays, but specialize in weddings. I originally wanted to be an event planner and did an internship in NYC. My favorite aspect of weddings is the planning. I love the pressure of such an important day on my shoulders.

MC: *Do you DJ full time?*

JM: Yes, I went full time in 2016. I have office hours twice a week when my boys are in preschool. My mind and phone are on 24/7, I really need to work on that!

MC: *The joys of owning a business! What do you feel sets you apart from others in your market?*

JM: Well, there's the obvious: I'm a female in a male-dominated industry. In regards to my style, I've come to learn that I get really personal with the music. I dive deep into genre exploration for cocktail and dinner. Some DJs have the couples create a playlist or put on the same crate of music, but I look at these times as a chance to take risks with tracks. I'll search for an artist that's requested, and look deeper into artists similar to them. I want to find songs and performers that make the crowd go "wow, I forgot about that song" or "who is this, I need to know". Also, with my background in event planning I'm able to create and execute a schedule and communicate fairly naturally with other vendors at an event.

MC: *Do you belong to any groups or organizations?*

JM: No DJ-related groups, but I am part of the Pittsburgh Professional Women network here in Pittsburgh. I also belong to a group called The Rising Tide Society (www.honeybook.com/risingtide).

MC: *What are some of the challenges you've faced as a female DJ?*

JM: In regards to bookings, being a female actually works in my favor. Our society has come a long way with gender roles in the industry. The DJ industry is very different now. Now if you ask my back, hips, and shoulders the same question after a job, they would answer you differently. I'm not naturally strong. I need to work on that. Thank goodness for air pressurized speaker stands.

MC : *What motivated you to sign up for The Peavey DJ Takeover?*

JM : I learned about the DJ Takeover after MBLV21. That was my first year going and I knew I had to get up there and perform for everyone. It was pretty male-dominated so I wanted to show the DJs in our nation what a female DJ from Pittsburgh is capable of. Plus, I love being on stage.

MC : *What were some of the fears or emotions you had leading up to your performance?*

JM : The night I found out I made it was like Christmas times 10. I was so beyond excited! And of course I was nervous, because I'm a perfectionist and I knew I had to bring it. I was anxious about being in a spot between two turntablists. That type of skill is ridiculous and something I'd like to get better at. I had to stop comparing myself to them and hone in on my talents. I was also pretty anxious about my set. I usually work off of the energy of the room when picking songs, but for this I was planning. I wanted the music to reflect my personal style and connect with the crowd. Thankfully, I was able to do both.

MC : *I think you crushed it! What gear do you use to "bring it?"*

JM : Thank you. I use a Mac Book Pro 2017 with Virtual DJ, Western Digital hard drive, Pioneer DDJ SX2, Gator Frameworks case, JBL PRC 800 series speakers, an Audio Technica wireless mic and Skull Candy headphones.

MC : *What are your future plans and goals in the industry?*

JM : I want to do this full time until my back gives out or I'm not cool anymore. I'd love to learn how to perform on 12-inch decks. I'm also excited for more office time when my boys are in

school full time. I have so many creative ideas that I want to bring to life. I've wanted to pick the violin back up and work that into my performance. I'd also like to be financially stable enough to travel and buy a new fridge if I need it. **MB**

Michael Cordeiro is the owner of M.C. Entertainment, a small multi-op in Rhode Island. He has been on TLC's Four Weddings, hosted an episode of Toddlers & Tiaras and has opened for many celebrities. He has a degree in Entertainment and Event Management from Johnson and Wales University.



To learn more about DJ Jess and hear some of her mixes check out these links:

- Web: <https://djjess412.com>
- Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/djJESS412/>
- Mixes on Mixcloud: <https://www.mixcloud.com/DjJESS412/>
- In action on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC9Yq7zY1BusejYac1SmtIEw/videos>