

EDITORS' NOTE

In "Cut and Slash, Mix and Mash: Behind the Booth with DJ Mikey Lion," Catt Hasbrook introduces us to the world of DJing. How does Hasbrook's use of descriptive language settle us into the DJ's world? By using quotations to create a rhetorical effect that mimics the energy and style of a professional DJ, Hasbrook creates a unique profile essay. For instance, Hasbrook has a keen ear for conversation and seeks to mimic the natural flow of her discussion with Mikey Lion in the profile. What is the effect of this rhetorical choice? Are the quotations effectively placed and integrated with Hasbrook's own writerly voice? How are we invited to discover the ethos created by this author and her unique profile subject?

Cut and Slash, Mix and Mash: Behind the Booth with DJ Mikey Lion

Catt Hasbrook

Loud Dub-Step bass beats vibrate through the walls as Mikey Lion opens the door of his San Luis Obispo residence; headphones still around his neck, he welcomes me in with a huge smile.

"Check this out!" he shouts over the music as he strides over to his booth. Frowning at the laptop screen for a second, he clicks the mouse a few times and then twists some dials on his mixer. Instantly the music changes to a guitar-infused rock backbeat with a rap voice track over it, a seemingly strange combination at first but somehow it just works. I find myself dancing to his practice set right there in his living room. Mikey laughs and turns down the volume.

"That's my favorite thing in the world, seeing people dance when I spin. Also, I like long surf sessions at the beach and I want to live in Berlin," he smiles at me again, "What else would you like to know?"

San Luis Obispo based DJ Mikey "Lion" Leon has been tearing it up on the turntables for only four years. He already spins at Native Lounge almost every Sunday, a Renegade rave or large music event about once a month and frequents weekend parties all over San Luis Obispo, dropping beats that make you move your feet. But if you ask him, he'll say he's not into DJ-ing for the fame or the money, he simply wants everyone he's spinning for to have an amazing night. Mikey Lion's talent as a DJ is what landed him on top of the San Luis Obispo turntablist scene, but his attention to his audiences' preferences and pleasure, eccentric personality and the effort that he puts into his craft are what he is truly respected for.

Mikey Lion was born and raised in Encinitas, North County San Diego. Both of his parents are alumni of Cal Poly San Luis Obispo, so the decision to attend college here was an easy one for him, and an unexpected benefit to the SLO music community. Though he currently spins mostly electro and house music Mikey's musical tastes are very diverse, probably one of the reasons he has such a talent for mixing. All his life Mikey has loved hip-hop music; it is essentially the reason he became a DJ.

"I was really into Wu-Tang Clan, Ghostface Killa and Notorious B.I.G. I used to have tons of old vinyl and back in high school and my friends and I would play them on my record player and scratch them, just messing around pretending we were DJ's."

Although his musical tastes have evolved tremendously, hip-hop is what first sparked Mikey's interest in DJ-ing. He bought a set of turntables and a mixer his senior year of high school and spent most of his free time learning how to use them. There is a distinct difference

between simply backscratching a record and backscratching a record while using the volume slide so that the transitions don't sound sloppy, all while paying attention to the tempo bar so that the beats on the two records match up. The term 'practice makes perfect' only applies in the DJ world when the practice aspect is applied every single day; "Learning how to spin really well is like learning how to play an instrument," Mikey, who is still behind his booth, taps out an electronic beat on the small keyboard next to his tables, "I picked up piano this year. If I don't integrate it into my sets every day I forget how to play it and mess up, If I think my set sounds bad I'm all, 'Why would other people like this?'" Mikey Lion experienced this while spinning publically for the first time at a friend's 19th birthday party.

"I just mashed old hip-hop songs all night, just scratched records classic DJ style, wiki wiki whoop," he laughs, "I'm serious, that's what it sounded like, it was ridiculous, I just thought 'this is so amateur, it's terrible,' But at the end of the night I had so many people come up to me and tell me how awesome my set was and I was just like, 'Maybe I should stick with this,' and I did." Mikey continued to practice mixing and played at numerous small events while still in high school, gaining a fan base in his home town and a better understanding of what our generation wanted to dance to.

But it was Coachella Music and Arts Festival in Indio, California, that secured not only Mikey's love for the turntables but also opened his eyes to the fabulous genres of techno and house music. Coachella is essentially a three day concert with a lineup of about 150 alternative rock, hip-hop and electronica performances on multiple stages that are actually insane works of architectural art, held out on the edge of the Colorado Desert. Not only is Coachella a musical exhibition full of variety that will delight anyone who is lucky enough to attend, it is also the single largest gathering of live DJ performances on the west coast.

"My first time at Coachella was my senior year of high school and it was a musical epiphany. The first night I was just wandering around with my friends and we went to the stage Daft Punk was playing on; it just hit me all at once, the beat, the lights, the energy, I fell in love with techno. The DJ's were Gods and I was converted to their practices. I've been to Coachella every year since then and it's my dream to spin there someday." Mikey's newfound admiration for big name DJ's inspired him to take his performances to another level, one with an actual name and audience.

Mikey Lion moved into a house on Slack Street his second year of college and his career as a DJ blasted off from there. Along with his housemates, Mikey started a weekly techno and house music dance party called "Disturb the Peace" in order to promote his DJ-ing ability and to "introduce people to legit music that wasn't top 40 bullshit." This, however, was an arduous task as Mikey had only recently upgraded to modern DJ equipment and was learning to use it. On top of that, "the techno scene in SLO was dead," and other local Disk Jockeys were more prone to playing music people were familiar with, so he didn't have much of a support network among the established party scene. However, the pressure to generate the "sickest weekday dance party in San Luis Obispo" inspired Mikey to step up his game on the tables.

But how does a college sophomore with no money and only a few connections draw the attention of Cal Poly students who already have an established party plan? How does an amateur DJ from San Diego compete with the exciting pull of downtown or draw people away from the dance parties already going on in places like Cedar Creek and Mustang, so much closer and more convenient to most residences? "I already had my tables and mixer; I'd spent the last two years learning how to beatmash on vinyl records, adding in a computer made everything so much easier. My transitions were smoother and I could mix more than two songs at once," he

says. Mikey is not a fan of pop-music mashups, but had to resort to integrating well-known songs into his sets, so as not to turn people off from his performance because he was only playing music he liked. He recalls, “When I learned how to lay down a backbeat and sync tracks over it, make the bass as loud as I wanted, mix songs so that I could enjoy them too . . . I was seriously the happiest guy alive, I was like, ‘Now I have it, I’m unstoppable.’”

This truly was the case; Mikey’s weekly Slack Street peace disturbance did not go unnoticed. His house was packed every Friday night, first with techno enthusiasts but slowly his suburb spinning attracted a more mainstream college crowd and the news of his talent eventually reached the ears of older, more experienced San Luis Obispo DJ’s. Halfway through his second year, he was approached while he was spinning at a friend’s party by a representative for Mother’s Tavern with a job offer.

“He told me they wanted me. Not, ‘Come in and spin for us, we want to hear what you have,’ it was more like, ‘Are you free this Saturday? There’s a local DJ night and we want you to headline.’ It was unreal.”

As he was nineteen, Mikey actually had to sneak into his own performance. He set up his tables, mixer and computer under a banner declaring “Disturb the Peace,” his officially adopted DJ title, and “just went for it.” The bar was full of over 21 college kids and corporate representatives for DJ equipment companies like Gemini and Numark who often provide turntables and soundboards to aspiring artists. Mikey bumped Techno House music all night.

“He absolutely killed it on the tables,” Mikey’s friend Kevin aka DJ Kevlar, remembers, “still does, pretty much every time.” DJ Kevlar and Mikey Lion have been performing together since sophomore year; he landed Mikey a spot at Native Lounge for the first time, a venue he now spins at weekly.

“I ‘pretty much’ kill it?” Mikey laughs, “Thanks for dropping off my speakers dude, how sick was that club we spun at on Saturday? Almost reminded me of Berlin . . .” Mikey studied abroad in Spain the Fall Quarter of his third year, after a summer of spinning at clubs and raves throughout San Luis Obispo. Once in Spain, Mikey’s first instinct was to check out the European club scene.

“Barcelona is amazing, I loved studying there, I loved partying there . . . clubs are open from 10 at night until 9 in the morning and the music is incredible. Before I went to Europe I was mostly into hard electro music but I stepped into the first club and it was like my musical knowledge exploded. I just started downloading all the new stuff I was hearing and played with it a little, and then one morning when the club was just closing down I stumble up to the house DJ and ask him to let me spin a song, and the people there are so honestly so laid back and just want to party so he says yes and I start spinning. When I’m done he’s standing there just looking at me and says, ‘I like you. You’re different. How long are you here for?’ and I tell him ‘As long as you want me to be.’ I started spinning there once a week for the next three months.”

The club was Razzmatazz, and it was where Mikey recorded his hour long set “Barcelona” as a promo track for the club’s website. The set is infused with Mikey’s signature long transitions and a heavy bass line. Transitions are “like a DJ’s heartbeat. Yeah, you can just spin songs and switch them back and forth with the crossfader, but if you don’t have a heartbeat your song is going to die. I try and create a heartbeat for my sets, and I know it’s successful when it matches up with the heartbeat of my audience, the way they move.” His use of self-created acapella sections in “Barcelona,” along with his use of a style called Tribal Funk, which is essentially digitally edited tribal drum beats, is innovative and gives the set a very Latin sound. American trance and techno relies largely on hard disk scratches and super heavy bass beats with a lot of repetition,

as well as upping the beats per minute to something around 135. Mikey breaks free from this style by varying his bass beats and the tempo of his music throughout the set.

Whilst in Europe, he also spun at various clubs in Girona and Costa Brava, Spain. Mikey also traveled to Berlin, which he calls “the techno party capital of the world.” While there he experienced the top European DJ’s spinning at Berlin’s famous Club Bergheim from “3am to 11am, non-stop. They had to have been on so many drugs,” and witnessed DJ techniques he had never seen before. Mikey is completely self-taught and all his transitions, different types of scratches and ingenious use of the crossfader, the slide on the bottom of the mixer which is used to switch back and forth between records, were learned through “pushing to the front of the crowd and watching the DJ, matching his movements to the sounds I was hearing then going home and spinning all night, trying to imitate them.” By integrating the European DJ style into his American electro sets Mikey was able to fuse not only music but cultures, creating a fresh new style that was unique to him.

Mikey received positive feedback from all the audiences he spun for in Europe and returned to California as DJ Mikey Lion, with a whole new set of skills. He began spinning his new European techno tracks along with American dub-step and hard electro; This innovative new style caught the attention of Cooper Hadaway, the head of the Renegade Rave movement, as well as the music coordinators at Native Lounge. Within the next few weeks Mikey had a two-hour set window every week at Native and has spun at every Renegade rave since their creation in the summer of 2009, and each time he spins the venue is packed.

Mikey’s musical aptitude has opened the minds of many San Luis Obispo college students to techno and house music and through his efforts and the efforts of the people he has inspired, the SLO techno scene has been brought back to life. San Luis Obispo will be losing a great asset to the party and music scene when DJ Mikey Lion takes his tables to Berlin for good in the fall, and even he is hesitant about leaving his lifestyle as an accomplished DJ in California behind. But as he says “It’s better to regret something you did do than wonder forever about something you didn’t, so I’m going. But I know I have to make it, that’s what I did here and it’s what I’m going to accomplish over there.” Mikey’s innovative style and passion for his art have helped inspire a whole new kind of entertainment in San Luis Obispo and continues to introduce hundreds of college students to amazing music that you won’t hear on the radio.

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