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HEY HO DEPT. KRAZY



Grand Wizard Theodore was a guy up in the Bronx who was in his bedroom in 1975, playing around on his turntable, when his mother came in. Instead of hitting the start/stop button, he stopped it with his hand. He didn't want to hear what she had to say so he just kind of rubbed the record back and forth and created this scratching sound that drowned out whatever she was saying. And that was the invention of scratching."

Grandmaster Lester was a guy down in Lower Manhattan, who was playing around on his turntable the other day while listening to this lecture on the history of hip-hop. Lester and seventeen other members of his crew—the Krazy Klub, from Wantagh, Long Island—were gathered at the Scratch DJ Academy, the "world's only fully functioning DJ school with a copyrighted curriculum," for a lesson in scratching records. They ranged in age from sixty-nine to eighty-six, and in hair color from dyed-red to white.

Scratch Academy, which was founded last year by a group that included the late Jam Master Jay, of Run-DMC, and Reg E. Gaines, the author of "Bring In 'Da Noise, Bring In 'Da Funk," offers courses such as DJ101, DJ151, DJ303, and DJ Intensive; among its faculty are Mista Sinista, DJ Evil Dee, and Daddy Dog. Lester's class—call it DJ101 (Geezer Edition)—was taught by I. Emerge, or Merge, the reigning ITF World Scratch champion.

At the beginning of the class, the school's director of operations said, "We promise we'll keep the volume up or down as you need it."

"What did he say?" Lester asked, from the back of the room.

"We're not deaf," a woman shouted.

First came a brief lesson in hip-hop history—from spoken-word "toasting" in Jamaica during the nineteen-fifties and sixties ("At a party or a special occasion, someone would make a toast and the music would still be playing in the background"), to Grand Wizard's Bronx bedroom, and on through Funkmaster Flex and Chuck Chillout.

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41

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“What about William B. Williams?” a wiseacre called out.

“You ever hear of Jonathan Schwartz?” said another. “How about QXR?”

The Krazy Klub, now in its forty-second year of existence, was formed by thirty friends who originally belonged to the Suburban Temple, in Wantagh, and who shared an interest in getting together several times a year for peculiar group activities (treasure hunt on the South Shore, private party on the 7 train, naked body painting). Attrition via death and moving has dwindled their ranks to eighteen. Scratch lessons were the idea of a member, Dave, who could no longer remember how he'd heard of them.

Merge introduced the aspiring d.j.s to their instruments—turntables and a mixer. He identified the cross fader, two “up faders,” and the pitch slide. “If one record is slower than the other, we use the pitch slide to speed up that record so they both match,” he said. “You don't want to stop the party—you want to go right into the next song, so you queue up the other record until it sounds exactly like the first record, the same beat. And then the people just keep dancing.”

One student—it was Dave—groaned. “That's when you want to sit down and they won't stop playing music,” he said. “It's endless.”

“Can I use that pitch slide to understand someone talking hip-hop?” Lester asked. “They talk so fast. Can I use it to slow them down?”

Merge moved the lesson along quickly. He queued up a beat and set the turntables spinning—loud bass line, heavy snare drum. Several of the women covered their ears. He proceeded to demonstrate three types of scratches—the baby, the drag, and the scribble—and circled the room to conduct private tutorials, stopping occasionally to remind everyone that the proper scratching motion originates in the arm, not the hand.

“Now we're going to take it one step further: fader incorporation,” Merge said. He described the proper technique: place one hand on the cross fader, one on the record; move the fader toward the turntable while scratching, and back away again.

Lester embraced the challenge. He bent close over the turntable, as though straining to hear. He began moving his hands—slowly at first, then faster—and as he did so he opened and closed his mouth, mimicking the scratching sound. He kept pace, more or less, with the beat. When he finished, Merge threw his hands over his head. “We have officially dubbed Lester a Grandmaster!” Merge said. “He is now Grandmaster Lester.”

The senior scratchers threw their arms in the air and began raising the roof.

—Ben McGrath