

LIMITED EDITION

deckkades

30 YEARS OF THE PIONEER DJ CDJ





TIMELINE OF THE **CDJ**

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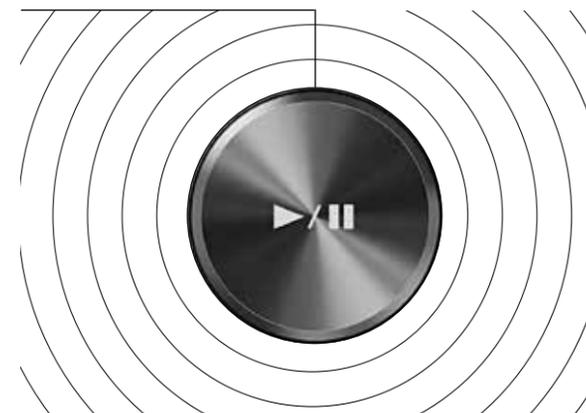
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INTRO

DJing has been around for ages—100 years or so, if you count the tunes played in the first-ever radio transmission. It was in the early '90s, though, that it fully achieved lift-off as a widespread, international, pop culture phenomenon. By the turn of the decade, hip-hop had gone global, putting scratch DJs in the spotlight. House and techno had vaulted out of their original homes in Chicago and Detroit and into clubs and festivals across Europe and the UK. Every weekend, all around the world, punters stood spellbound on dance floors. Many looked at the silhouetted figure in the booth and thought: "I want to do that."

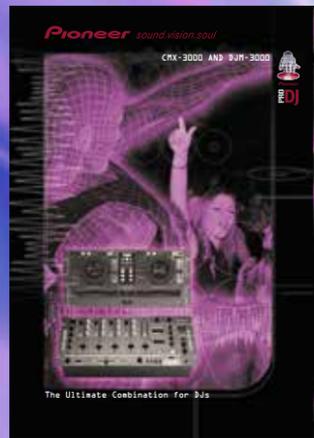
People were, as LCD Soundsystem later sang, selling their guitars and buying turntables. The DJ had emerged as the new musical hero.

As interest in DJing hit unprecedented levels, a newcomer entered the hardware game: Pioneer DJ. They brought with them the first CDJ, a device that created countless new ways to rock a party. The ability to mix with CDs was radical in itself. But there was more. You could scratch with them, make loops on the fly, do drum rolls with the Cue button, speed tracks up or slow them down without changing key. It was more than most DJs at the time could even wrap their heads around.

This was only the beginning. Over the next 30 years, Pioneer DJ would completely revolutionize DJing. With their mixers, FX units, all-in-one controllers, rekordbox software, and ever-more sophisticated generations of CDJs, the Japanese electronics company ushered in a completely new era. Their products gave pros an ever-expanding set of tools with which to express themselves. And they gave beginners a smoother entry point into the craft.

In 2024, Pioneer DJ is absolutely central to DJ culture. Their devices are a fixture of booths, bedrooms, and big stages across the globe. Their technological innovations, combined with their insights of how DJing works now but how it could work in the future, have elevated the artform and reshaped the culture surrounding it.

And so, 30 years since they first slipped into the party, let's have a look at some of the ways Pioneer DJ changed the art of DJing.



1994-2004

THE BIG BANG



← TOP RIGHT: CDJ-500

By 1994, DJing was no longer a matter of playing one record after another. From scratch DJs cutting up new compositions on the fly, to club DJs doing long blends over many hours to create epic musical journeys, DJs weren't just playing other people's music—they were performing. And yet, there were limitations to what they could do. You couldn't play anything you didn't have on vinyl. You could add FX or create loops on the fly, but only with additional outboard equipment, much of it expensive and fiddly to use. Unless you mastered the art of playing doubles—that is, buying two copies of the same record and mixing back and forth to rearrange the track on the fly—you were pretty much stuck with the composition of the track as it was on the record.

For sure, there were visionaries and technical virtuosos who did incredible things with this technology, playing their records in a way no one else could. But for most DJs back then, the art form was more about curating and presenting other people's music than it was about delivering your own ideas.

From 1994 to 2004, Pioneer DJ rolled out a series of products that changed all of that. The key milestones on this path were the CDJ-500 and its successor, the CDJ-1000, and the DJM-500 mixer. (The DMP-555, though a commercial flop, marks an important chapter in this story as well.)

But how did Pioneer, a Japanese electronics company founded 50 years earlier as a radio and TV repair shop, end up in the DJ game?

It all has to do with an in-house innovation that gave them an edge: anti-skip technology. Pioneer specialized in all things disc-related. They developed LaserDisc, a digital movie format that preceded DVD. More importantly, they made the first CD player for cars. Anti-skip technology was crucial here. Without it, it would be impossible, or at least extremely annoying, to play a CD in a moving car, as even the slightest bump would make the music skip.

As Pioneer's car-mounted CD players became a hit, an interesting question arose: At what other times and places would CDs be played, if only they didn't skip? One big one was the DJ booth.

By the dawn of the '90s, CDs were by far the most common way people bought and listened to music, edging out cassettes and leaving vinyl with less than 2% of the market. Among DJs, though, vinyl was still king, and not just because turntables were easier to ground than CD players (for instance, by placing them on cinder blocks). The DJ's ability to touch the record, rock it back and forth under the needle, find the downbeat they wanted to use as the cue point, gave them hands-on functionality that, until then, no CD player had. And, of course, you couldn't scratch with CDs. At least, not yet.

ARMED WITH PIONEER'S ANTI-SKIP TECHNOLOGY, YOU COULD COUNT ON THEM TO PLAY STEADILY, EVEN WITH BOOMING SPEAKERS

The CDJ-500 changed all of that in one go. Armed with Pioneer's anti-skip technology, you could count on them to play steadily, even with booming speakers and subs nearby. And with jog wheels and cue buttons, they emulated the functionality that had, until then, given 12-inches the edge over CDs. Before the CDJ-500, your repertoire as a DJ was limited to your vinyl collection (or, quaint as this may sound today, your reel-to-reel tapes). With the CDJ-500, your whole CD collection was suddenly part of your crate.



IN THIS DECADE

- 1995 - The term MP3 is coined
- 1995 - "Whats the story morning glory" by Oasis is released and becomes the best selling album of the 90s
- 2001 - The release of the first iPod

1994-2004 MIXTAPE



This technology didn't catch on right away. Old habits die hard, and the mystique of vinyl and analog technology is still going strong today. Laidback Luke, an early adopter of the CDJ-500, remembers crowds walking away as they saw him plugging his in. In their eyes, he says, someone using digital technology "wasn't a real DJ." But he had no doubt about the device's potential.

"I remember broadcasting to the whole country: 'These things will be the future. Mark my words,'" he says.

Luke was just as impressed by what came next: Pioneer DJ's first mixer. "The DJM-500 for me was the ultimate tool to add a lot more creativity to my sets," he said. "With the funky flange, the amazing reverb—it was like, wow. I remember the days when we would do delays by hand. And now, with just the press of a button, you could do the same effects."

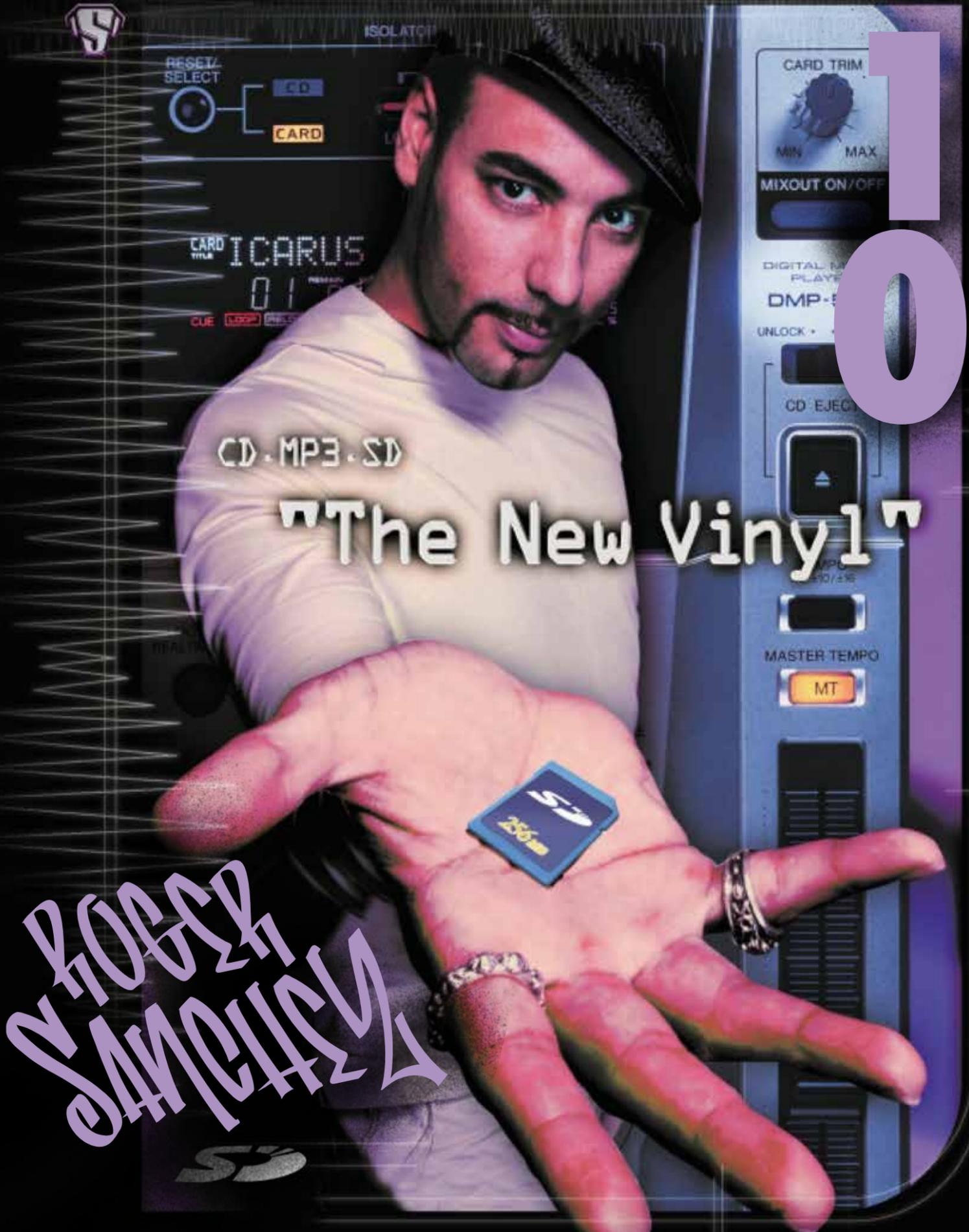
With four channels, four vertical faders, a cross-fader and BPM-synced inboard FX, the DJM-500 catered to the wants and needs of the DJ more than any mixer ever had, giving them way more control over the tunes they were playing. It radically expanded what was possible in a DJ set.

"When I started DJing, it was all about the seamless flow of music and bringing people on a journey," says James Zabiela. "The great thing about the Pioneer DJ equipment, especially the FX stuff, is that it enables you to be a performer as well."

Looking beyond the bells and whistles that made DJs ooh and ah over it, the DJM-500 was a hit because it reimagined the DJ mixer not just as a way to effectively blend together two (or more) pieces of music, but as a tool for original, personal, artistic expression. The same could be said of the CDJ, which took a huge leap forward in 2001 with the CDJ-1000.

"The CDJ-1000 dramatically changed the DJing game for me," says Roger Sanchez. "I remember it looking kinda alien and familiar at the same time. And then the engineer said, 'OK, this is what it can do.' He took the wheel and he started scratching with it. And I was like, 'Whoa, wait a minute. How are you doing that? This became the CD player to have at every club all over the world. And it happened in the space of barely a year.'"

Developed through thorough research and close communication with DJs, the CDJ-1000 dramatically expanded the innovations of the CDJ-500, creating a digital DJ device that maintained the benefits of vinyl DJing in a way no one had ever seen before, or even thought possible. The jog wheels were now touch-sensitive platters, giving DJs the same hands-on connection with their tunes as they had with vinyl. Other features let them experiment on the fly, at home, in the studio or on stage, in ways that went way beyond what had been possible with vinyl.



Roger Sanchez

"THIS BECAME THE CD PLAYER TO HAVE AT EVERY CLUB ALL OVER THE WORLD. AND IT HAPPENED IN THE SPACE OF BARELY A YEAR."
Roger Sanchez on the CDJ-1000

The impact of the CDJ-1000 was helped along by the advent of another product: the first (affordable) CD burner. Suddenly, you could burn any digital audio file onto a CD, then unleash upon it all the creative possibilities the CDJ afforded. Digital retailers like Beatport, TraxSource and Juno Download meant you were no longer limited to your CD collection—you could download individual tracks and make your own compilations to DJ with. Crucially for many producers, you could burn your own unreleased tracks or works in progress and DJ with them right way.

"I was amazed," says hip-hop DJ Jazzy Jeff. "I think every DJ, especially a scratch DJ, always wanted to be able to scratch or manipulate their own material."

Analog DJing would remain in vogue for decades. Many DJs still lug crates of vinyl around the world today, even as fewer and fewer clubs can be relied on to set up their turntables properly. Well into the 2010s, DJs would argue about the merits of digital DJing versus analog. For some DJs, though, it was perfectly clear by the turn of the millennium where DJing was headed.

"The turntables were going in the back cupboard," techno icon Carl Cox says. "The rise of the CD player was becoming more and more apparent."

Some were thinking even further ahead. "If you had to download all your tracks," Roger Sanchez muses, "did you really need to burn them onto CD?"



→ RIGHT: ROGER SANCHEZ
→ BOTTOM RIGHT: CDJ-1000



FATBOY SLIM

WE TALK TECH WITH
THE BIGBEAT ICON



Do you remember when you first encountered a CDJ? When was it and where were you? What did you think? Were you excited? Curious? Skeptical? Frightened? All of the above?

I was initially most scared of CDJ's, a very late adopter. (In fact I only switched over when it was becoming increasingly difficult for promoters round the world to provide 1200s that were set up and clean.) I was using Serato with control vinyl for ages because my whole life I had learned to mix on decks and I thought you can't teach an old dog new tricks. The nuances of dabbing the turntable and winding the spindle to keep the mix in were so different on a CDJ, and they were impossible to scratch on.

You were a vinyl DJ well into the 2000s. Do you remember a moment where you saw someone using a CDJ, or maybe tried one out yourself, and thought, "Oh wow, there's a lot I could do with these that I can't do with vinyl"? Was there a specific moment when you thought: "I should give these things a try"?

Like I said the change was born out of necessity, I was encountering shocking old 1200's that didn't work properly at so many shows. The turning point was a night where I was playing on a lorry at Carnival in Salvador, Brazil for five hours back to back with David Guetta. He was whupping my ass because his CDJs were louder and didn't jump every-time we went over a pothole.... He absolutely blew me off stage that night and it hurt!



What made you introduce CDJs into your setup? What did you like about them? What kind of thing did you do with them that you couldn't do with vinyl?

At first I was just knocked out because I realised you didn't need to keep nudging the turntable to keep the mix in. If the BPM was right the mix just stayed in time! That was a revelation after 25 years of nudging vinyl. Also I realised that I could finally dance up and down in the booth without the decks jumping. Major game changer.

Do you have a particular mixing trick that's only possible with Pioneer DJ gear? If so, tell us about it. Walk us through how it works.

My favourite knob exclusive to Pioneer DJ is the dub echo. If you push it clockwise subtly on a build it just makes everything more intense and sizzly. To get out of a track throw it hard left with the parameter knob on full and you get an infinite dubwise spinout delay worthy of Prince Tubby.

You've always had a special flair for blending different genres, bringing pop, soul, R&B and even rock and roll into a club context—something you hear in many of your sets and productions from over the years, maybe best embodied by your signature mashup of the Stones' "Satisfaction" and your own "Rockefeller Skank." You're also very much a stage performer—dancing, singing along, donning the occasional mask and so on. Would you say Pioneer DJ gear makes it easier to deliver not just a DJ set but a proper performance?

I am an old skool DJ so I really don't use most of the new features on today's mixers and CDJ's but I love how Pioneer DJ have kept the important stuff intact and in the same place (so I can play in the dark and know where my favourite knobs are). I don't use hot cues and loops because I pre-tweak all my tunes at home.

I love how younger DJ's like my son embrace the creativity with the new technology but for my style the most important thing is to play the right tunes in the right order and connect with the crowd rather than always be looking at the console. Pioneer DJ has the build and sound quality that makes it the industry standard, giving the basics for us OG's whilst innovating for the young folks!

What's your tech rider for gigs today?

2 x CDJ-2000NXS and a DJM-900NXS (...but I am looking forward to the DJM-A9, it has booth EQ!).

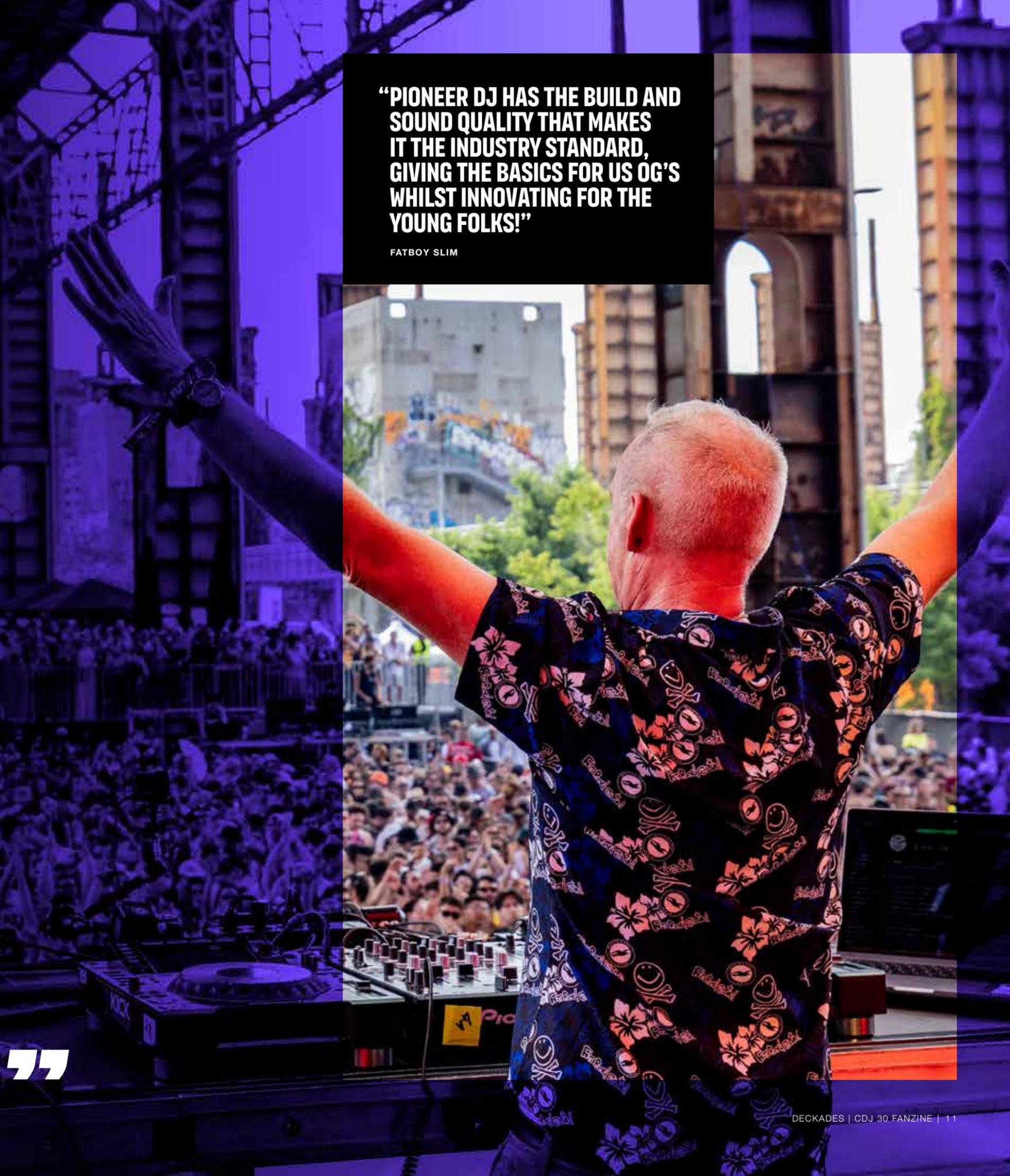
How did you get there from your 2000s-era all-vinyl setup?

Slowly and painfully, the luddite that I am!



"PIONEER DJ HAS THE BUILD AND SOUND QUALITY THAT MAKES IT THE INDUSTRY STANDARD, GIVING THE BASICS FOR US OG'S WHILST INNOVATING FOR THE YOUNG FOLKS!"

FATBOY SLIM





MEET THE MAKERS: KOU ATSUMI

WE SIT DOWN WITH THE CREATOR OF THE CDJ-500

Can you tell us the origin story of the CDJ-500?
At the time, Pioneer Corporation was mainly focusing on the karaoke business in Japan and was also trying to expand it overseas. However, as we conducted market research, we realised that dance music, like DJing, was more popular overseas than karaoke. It became clear that expanding karaoke internationally would be difficult. Therefore, we decided to create a business targeting discos. Since we already had karaoke equipment, we thought about adapting it to create DJ equipment.

This happened in 1991, and I was originally involved in planning karaoke products.

Back then, our karaoke equipment included a CD changer that could switch between 300 CDs. It was a machine that could store 300 CDs and automatically switch between them. Since DJs often switch between tracks, we wondered if we could use this changer for DJing.

We conducted market research, but we didn't have any artist relations at the time. So, we gathered DJs through various connections and held brainstorming sessions. These sessions included members from engineering, design, sales, and a few DJs from Japan.

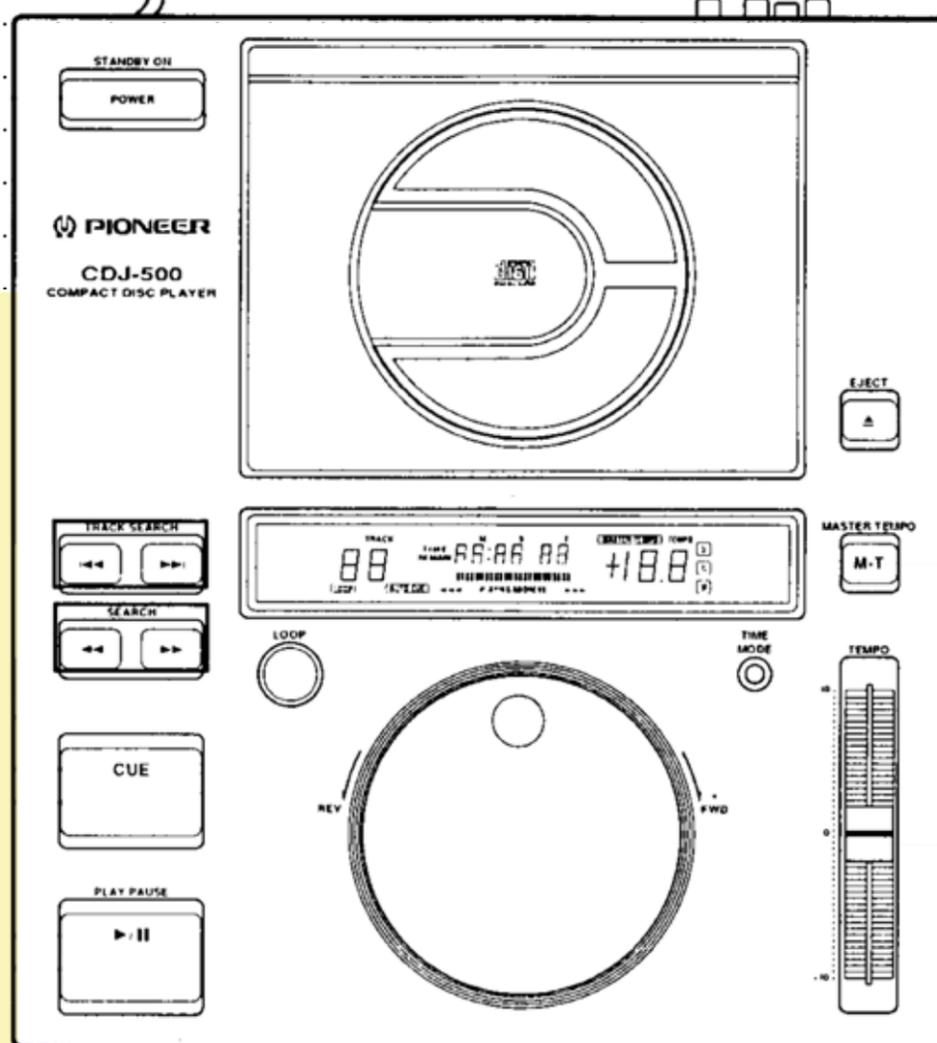
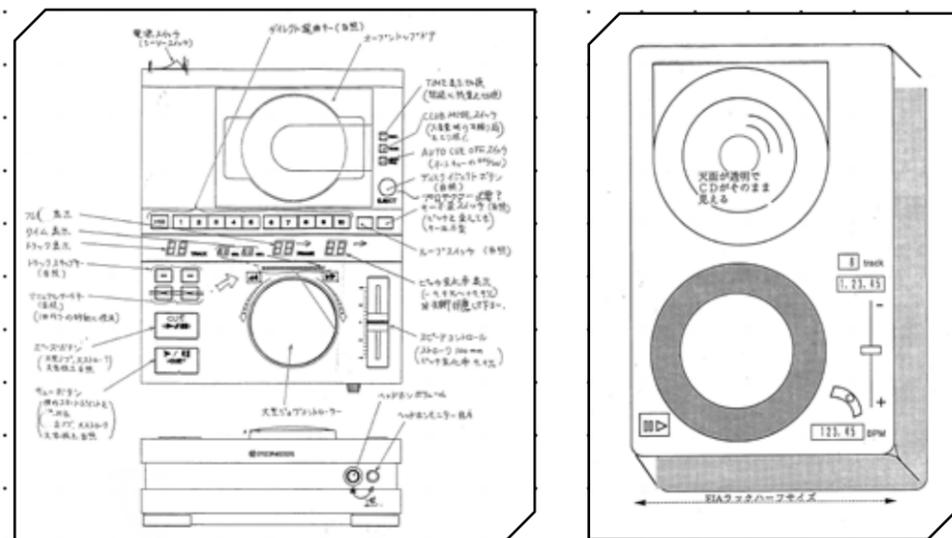
During these sessions, it became clear that a CD changer was not suitable for DJing. If we were to use CDs, the DJs wanted a player that allowed them to quickly insert CDs from the top, similar to a turntable, instead of the CD trays that came out from players, which were popular at that time.

This led us to realise that it wasn't enough to just change the medium from vinyl to CD. We needed to incorporate unique digital features. This is how we came to include features like LOOP function.

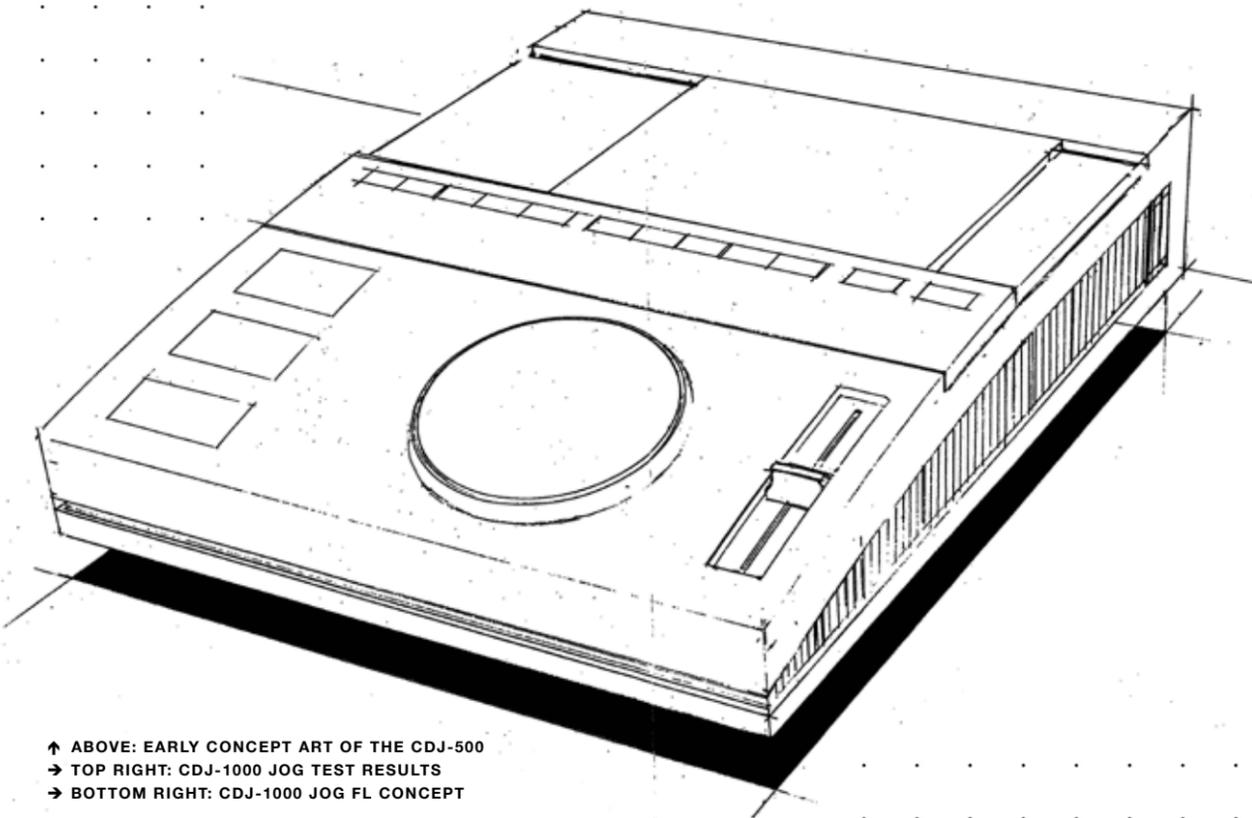
Anti-skip technology is a bit of a mystery to the average person. What can you tell me about how this technology works?

Anti-skip technology has been included since the CDJ-700. The CDJ-500 had a simple CD drive that would skip. When playing loud music in a club, the vibrations would cause the CDJ to shake, leading to skipping.

Pioneer had a CD player for car audio with anti-skip functionality, which prevented skipping even with some vibrations. This was achieved through mechanical pickup development and using memory. Even if the CD skipped, the memory would play the stored sound so it wouldn't be noticeable to the audience.



↑ TOP RIGHT: CDJ-500 II
← LEFT: TECHNICAL DRAWINGS OF THE CDJ-500



↑ ABOVE: EARLY CONCEPT ART OF THE CDJ-500
 → TOP RIGHT: CDJ-1000 JOG TEST RESULTS
 → BOTTOM RIGHT: CDJ-1000 JOG FL CONCEPT

The CDJ500 included some technological innovations that remain standard today, including Master Tempo, the Cue button and the Jog Wheel. What made these features feel important at the time? What were the challenges of developing and implementing them?

I was thrilled when we first achieved a seamless A-B loop. At the time, samplers from companies like Roland also had looping features, but the CDJ-500's loop could exit and reloop after looping. Unlike other samplers, it allowed us to switch measures freely, which was highly appreciated.

Master Tempo was another significant feature. With turntables, the pitch changes, so you could only use a range of about $\pm 4\%$. By maintaining the pitch, you could change the speed as much as you wanted, broadening the range of track selection. I consulted with the engineers, and they developed it.

As for developing the JOG, I really wanted to scratch with a CD. However, scratching required a huge amount of RAM, and at that time, RAM was very expensive, even a few megabytes. It wasn't impossible technically, but the material costs would be very high. I definitely wanted to have pitch bending, so we made it possible with the JOG. We also made fast forward and rewind functions available with the JOG.

Regarding the size, we wanted the depth to match the horizontal placement of a turntable but made the width smaller. We decided on the vertical and horizontal design based on the golden ratio.

An even subtler innovation: the CDJ-500 had a tabletop design, as opposed to the rack-mount design more common at the time. Why was this important for this particular product?

Before the CDJ-500 came out, there were a few rack-mount players for DJs. Denon's models were quite good and used by mobile DJs, but the process of inserting a CD into a tray, loading it, and then closing the tray was tedious for DJs. This operation was different from using turntables, and it didn't give the audience the feeling that the DJ was actively performing. Rack-mount players were not highly regarded in terms of performance.

For DJs, the quickness of putting on a record and immediately getting sound is crucial. We made a top-loading system that could produce sound instantly. The action of opening a tray was also bothersome, so we adopted the slot-in system used in later CDJs.

“WE WANTED THE DEPTH TO MATCH THE HORIZONTAL PLACEMENT OF A TURNTABLE BUT MADE THE WIDTH SMALLER. WE DECIDED ON THE VERTICAL AND HORIZONTAL DESIGN BASED ON THE GOLDEN RATIO.”

KOU ATSUMI

30 years later, most of these design decisions have stood the test of time. How did your design team understand the needs of DJs so well?

In Japan, we used every possible method to book DJs, but since there was no social media, we had to rely on word of mouth, making phone calls to set up appointments and get introductions. The research process was slow and challenging, with limited numbers. We didn't have a network at that time, nor were we familiar with clubs and discos. I had to visit each place personally to conduct interviews. In Japanese clubs, this included places like Yellow and Shibaura GOLD.

It was only after we launched the CDJ overseas that we were able to gather feedback from top DJs through our distributors.

What made Pioneer DJ interested in making a mixer? What made this a good idea for Pioneer DJ at that time?

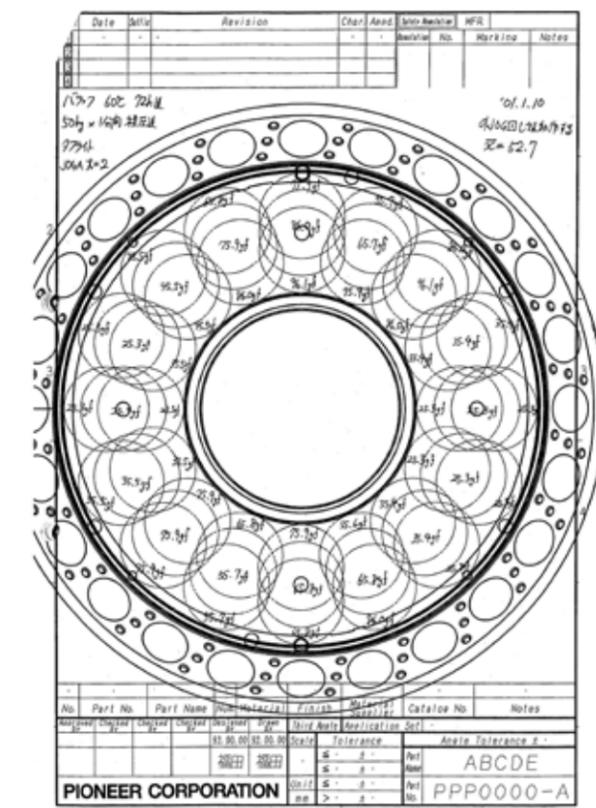
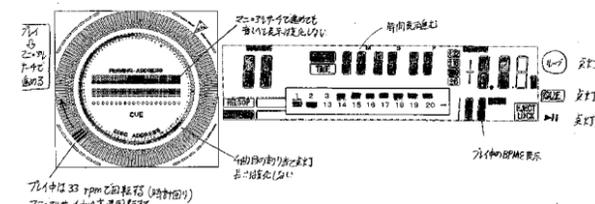
When we did demos of the CDJ, we always used a Vestax mixer. This made us realise that we definitely needed our own mixer. While introducing the CDJ-500, we recorded the sessions and sent them to the technical team, who then watched them and came up with the specifications. For a year after the release in 1994, I was handling sales and marketing alone. I didn't have time to plan, so the technical department came up with the specifications for the DJM-500. We didn't want to make just an ordinary mixer like other companies, so we added a BPM counter and effects to enhance its performance capabilities. It's impressive that the DJM-900NXS2 has retained almost the same design as the DJM-500. The signal flow and usability are all very logical.

In terms of features and technology, what were the most important differences between the CDJ-500 and the CDJ-1000?

It was in 2001 that we finally achieved satisfactory scratching on a CDJ. This became possible because large-capacity memory became affordable. It was the result of combining all our knowledge in electronics, mechanics, and software.

How did these features accommodate DJs in the mix? From a performance perspective, what did the CDJ-1000 make possible for DJs that hadn't been possible before?

We made it possible to scratch on a CDJ. Ideally, we wanted to include motor rotation, but that was difficult. Instead, we developed the FL rotation display in the centre of the CDJ's JOG to represent rotation.



Some of CDJ-1000s innovations were to bring analog functionality to digital DJing—for instance, by enhancing the jog wheel to make scratching and rewinds possible, or simply pausing playback by resting your fingers on the surface. There was even a new feature called “vinyl mode.” In a way, this feels a bit retro—using new technology to imitate old technology. What can you tell me about this design approach? Rather than simply moving forward, why was it important to recreate the functionality of vinyl records?

Rather than just adding VINYL MODE, it was more like with the CDJ-1000, we enabled scratching, so we kept the CDJ MODE. We wanted to convert almost 100% of the analogue turntable market to CDJs worldwide. We believed that DJs wouldn't use it unless it could do everything a turntable could.

Even if we created something identical to a turntable, we wouldn't surpass the legendary SL-1200. If we made the same thing, DJs would say, “We'll just keep using turntables.” So, we added features that turntables couldn't offer. We decided to compete in a different direction.

Personally, the CDJ-1000 holds a special place in my heart. It was the model that finally gained acceptance among scratch DJs and started being adopted in clubs worldwide. The CDJ-2000 was also significant, as was the CDJ-500. From a company perspective, the CDJ-500, which was initially an unknown venture, became the start of a successful business, and for that reason, I have the strongest attachment to it.



2004-2014

THE DIGITAL WILDERNESS

Sometime in the mid-2000s, the drum and bass godfather Fabio had what he later described as a “sliding doors” moment. He was playing a club in Brazil with Pete Tong, and was stunned to see Tong had arrived with nothing but headphones and a USB stick.

“I still didn’t think that it seemed real,” he told Resident Advisor. “As a DJ, I still felt like you had to walk in with something... you’ve got to look like you’re going to work.”

The promoter was confused as well. “He’s saying, ‘Where’s your music?’ And Pete would be like, ‘It’s in here.’ And he’d have it off. ‘I paid you X thousands of pounds to come and you come in here with a flash drive?!’”

The ability to DJ off a USB stick, which Pioneer DJ introduced in 2007 with the CDJ-400, was indeed a radical change. Fabio, though, was quickly converted. “It was so easy,” he said. “[Tong] showed me how to link to the other deck, and I had to learn it all in an hour. I took to it like a duck to water. It just felt right, I got it straight away, felt like it was my next move.”

By 2004, digital technology was fundamentally changing how people DJ’d, giving artists new ways to up their game and be creative in their sets. But not everyone realized that. At least not right away.

“A lot of DJs transitioned very slowly,” Laidback Luke remembers.

To be fair, a lot of the upheaval was, to use a tech buzzword, “disruptive,” especially when it came to selling music. Napster, which debuted a few years earlier, was essentially the death knell for the record industry as we then knew it. Most fans got music online, legally or illegally.

“One by one, distribution companies are going down,” Carl Cox said of the time. “But what was really great, was that the music was becoming accessible, people were searching and finding, they wanna know more about what’s goin’ on. So, brilliant.”

Dutch DJ Sander Kleinenberg remembers how digital music made DJing go global. In the ‘90s, he said, “You had to live in London or Berlin or Chicago to get the hot records at the hottest record stores, and that would set a DJ apart. It would give a DJ a unique selling point just because he would have a record no one else had... all of a sudden, it was possible for someone way on the outskirts to get a hot record. Where it used to be based around the cities, really.”



Tensnake had a similar experience. “I grew up in the countryside, a little bit outside of Hamburg,” he says. “It was really a mission to get new music. There was one store that was selling vinyl, but also TVs and radios.” It’s not such a stretch to think that, had artists like him remained cut off from cultural hubs like London, Berlin and New York, we might not have been blessed with timeless bangers like “Coma Cat.”

All of this, of course, enhanced the craft of DJing immeasurably. It just took a while for the DJ community to figure out exactly how. In the mid-2000s, DJs and product designers dreamed up a lot of new ways to DJ in a short period of time. Some DJ’d

with DAWs, rocking a laptop and a small controller in the club. Some went for digital / turntable hybrids like Traktor or Serato, playing digital files while beatmatching on control records. Many, of course, stayed loyal to good ol’ 12-inches.

NAPSTER, WHICH DEBUTED A FEW YEARS EARLIER, WAS ESSENTIALLY THE DEATH KNELL FOR THE RECORD INDUSTRY AS WE THEN KNEW IT. MOST FANS GOT MUSIC ONLINE, LEGALLY OR ILLEGALLY.

Pioneer DJ, meanwhile, rolled out one of its biggest flops: the XDJ-AERO, a device that was both the first all-in-one DJ solution, with two decks and a mixer, and also the first device that used Bluetooth® technology to mix music streamed wirelessly—one of a few moments where the company’s product designers were maybe a bit too forward-thinking. But this period also saw the release of one of their most widely used products: the DJM-800, a mixer whose elevated sound quality and suite of on-board FX gave DJs yet another new dimension of creative possibility and control.



← LEFT: CARL COX @ SPACE
→ TOP RIGHT: REKORDBOX USB | RIGHT: XDJ-AERO

It was a time as chaotic as it was promising, signaling an era of unprecedented possibilities in the DJ booth. “The advent of digital music, digital technology has really started to open up people’s minds,” said Mark Settle of DJWORX. “It changed the way people started to mix. The mixing techniques evolved, because you could trigger that sample there, you could trigger that loop there. Or do it all from a controller, or running DVS. It’s much more of a construction thing, not purely playing one track to another track. One thing is pushing the other. The producers are pushing the DJs to do new things. DJs do new things, then the producers are picking up on it. They’re all bouncing off each other.”

In other words, these new ways of DJing were exciting not just because they let DJs play more music—that is, anything they could find online as well as anything they could find in record stores—but also because of the control they gave DJs over that music. Some DJs took this to an extreme. Artists like Richie Hawtin and Joris Voorn began mixing on such a granular level that they essentially blurred the lines between DJing, production, and live performance. Others held truer to DJing as a way of presenting other people’s music, albeit while using new tools to do that better than they ever had before.

rekordbox was essential in this regard. DJs who used even the software’s simplest components

— cleaning up their tracks’ beat grids, presetting loops and hot cues—were given a radical new level of control over their music.

“For me, it mainly makes it a lot more creative,” the U.K. pirate radio veteran Colin Dale told Resident Advisor. “When I was using vinyl, I was always concentrating on doing these perfect, on-point mixes, but with the CDJs I have the visual cues, the BPM, and so on. I’d been waiting for this technology for 20 years, thinking what it’s going to be like. It’s even further forward than I imagined. You can get really creative, especially using rekordbox to plan your sets with cues at the parts you want to mix. It’s almost like remixing records on the fly.”

If the XDJ-AERO embodied the fractured experimentation of the era, the CDJ-2000 and its followup, the CDJ-2000 Nexus, signaled the smooth consensus that was to come. For anyone who still felt jittery about digital DJing, the CDJ-2000 was pretty hard to argue with. The vinyl emulation technology first seen on the CDJ-1000 continued apace here, allowing DJs to play digital files with the same tactility as records, but even more freedom and control. Audiences saw a hands-on, laptop-free performance not so different from that of the all-vinyl DJ. And DJs could see their audiences, their view unimpeded by the laptop screen (though, for any diehard holdouts, the CDJ-2000s were compatible with Serato and Traktor). A touch-sensitive LCD screen, with detailed, color-coded waveforms, gave DJs even more command over their tunes and their performances.

The CDJ-2000 took a while to catch on, partly because many DJs were still hooked on its predecessor, the CDJ-1000. By the mid-2010s, though, artists had begun using them to do things with them that simply weren’t possible with any other kind of deck. DJs who used the 2000s to their full potential—scratching with Slip-Mode on, doing drum rolls with the cue button, using the groundbreaking sync technology to change the tempo of multiple tracks at once—weren’t just playing music with a new device. They were playing a new instrument.

Many traveling DJs remained committed to records. But CDJ-2000s had become an industry standard at clubs and festivals around the world. By 2014, thousands of people had had some version of Fabio’s sliding doors moment. DJs everywhere were rolling into clubs armed with nothing more than a pair of headphones and a well-prepared USB, then stepping up to the decks and mixing in a way scarcely imaginable ten years earlier.



↑ ABOVE: CDJ-2000
← LEFT: LAIDBACK LUKE © AMNESIA



IN THIS DECADE:

This decade saw the release of the first iPhone (2007) and the launch of the major social media networks. Leaving MySpace in their wake; Facebook launched in 2004, Twitter in 2006 and Instagram in 2010.



FABIO



THE JUNGLE AND DRUM & BASS INNOVATOR TELLS US HOW PIONEER DJ CHANGED THE GAME FOR HIM AND A WHOLE GENERATION

INTERVIEW

What's your tech rider for gigs today?

I haven't got a big rider. Only thing on there is a bottle of brandy, a can of coke, and Pioneer DJ decks. Two CDJs— 2000, or 3000s. I actually really like the 2's. Gotta be Pioneer DJ though. I don't think any DJ would wanna DJ anything else but Pioneer DJ. That's the reference for all DJs really. That's just standard procedure.

The thing with Pioneer DJ, their technology is so geared for DJs, that for DJs it becomes like muscle memory. We're so used to using them, I feel alien using anything else. I can't even tell you the last time I DJ'd anything else but pioneer. And if they don't have them, I'm going home.

Do you remember when you first encountered a CDJ? When was it and where were you? What did you think? Were you excited? Curious? Skeptical? Frightened? All of the above?

I remember reading about CDJs in DJ Mag. It must have been about 2004, so about 20 years ago. There was a dj called Paul Enson. He had a prototype of a CDJ. I was like, What the fuck is this? And they were like, 'This is the future.'

I wasn't havin' any of it. I'm a vinyl guy. I'm thinking, 'There's no way I'm doing this anytime soon.'

Then, five years later, I went over to CDJs and I never looked back.

What makes them such a good fit for you?

There's a few things. One: I used to cut dubplates. You'd get a dubplate track on a DAT or a CD, then you go to a pressing plant and get it cut on an acetate. That costs 60 pounds per dubplate, and that was just standard procedure. If you wanted the most upfront tunes, tunes before everyone else, you get DJs to send you a CD or a DAT, go to the pressing plant and get it cut.

I remember this vividly. I got a DAT, and went and got it cut. I used to go to a pressing plant and cut maybe six or seven plates in one go. I used to do it every week. So in a month I'd spend maybe £1,500. I mean, I needed new music, I was on Radio 1. I always wanted to play the latest stuff.

CDJs had just started to come in, and I was like, 'No way, I'm a vinyl aficionado, it's all vinyl for me.' I had my residency at The End, I remember once I got a track on DAT, and I thought, I need this before tonight, I need to get this cut. I went all the way to Southeast London, £20-cabride, got the track cut to acetate, that's £60, so the whole thing cost £90, to play this one track. I got into the club really excited about this special track, this track no one else has... and then the warm up DJ's playing it.

I was like, There's no way. How the hell did she get the track? And then I see she's playing CDJs. I remember asking, how much do those CDRs cost? She said £3.50, and there's 60 cds in there. And I thought, I can't do this anymore.

I remember my accountant saying, 'You coulda bought a house with what you're spending on dubplates.'

Was the transition difficult?

At the time, you had a lot of the vinyl guys being a bit pissed off, saying, 'Vinyl forever' and things like that. There was a real backlash against it. Now every single one of those guys that were moaning, they're all using them.

They're so advanced now. Let's go back to the whole vinyl thing. Vinyl was putting a track on a set of decks and playing it. There was no rekordbox, there was no syncing. Everything is a lot easier now.

← LEFT: FABIO (PHOTO BY KITCHISME)

How did CDJs change the way you played?

I mean, all the things you can do—they've advanced so much even in the past five, six years. It's incredible what you can do now.

Now you can be a showman. And you couldn't do that before, because you really had to concentrate on vinyl. Now, you know what you're doing, you got all your cue points, everything organized and ready to go—that's a revelation, basically.

With CDJs, you mix tighter as well. And there were lots of simple benefits, like, tracks not jumping. With vinyl, you'd have people jumpin' around, tracks jumping, needles wearing out, people need to bring your own needles, bringing records, bringing acetates, which are basically made of metal. You got 30 in your DJ box, that weighs a lot. People don't really understand the struggle. It was hard work. I'd walk into a club, sit down and hope that they got proper needles, hope the decks are set up properly so they don't jump. You just don't need to think about these things anymore. Now you literally walk in with a USB and you're ready to go. I don't think the younger generation how much more difficult it was. I think 50% of today's DJs wouldn't be doing it if it was still decks.

One more story: that same week that I walked in and saw a DJ playin' the track I'd paid £60 for, I took my daughter to the history museum. She was eight, nine years old. They had a pair of Technics in the exhibit. The caption said something like, 'This is what DJs used in the 70s.' She was like Dad... I said, 'Don't pay no attention to that.' But I was thinking, 'This is a sign.'

You think it's better for the younger generation who grew up with digital DJing?

I mean, one thing, you can learn to mix really quickly now. My daughter, I taught her to mix, so she can do a mix seamlessly, in two months. It took me, on vinyl, a year or so, and I still hadn't perfected it. If you wanted to be a dj in the '90s, it would take you at least a year to learn.

Now, with tutorials, it's accessible. Back in the day, if you didn't have Technics, you just couldn't DJ. They used to cost a lot of money. Now you can get a set of CDJs, a controller, and, I'd say, two weeks of goin' at it hard, you could learn to DJ. Like I said, my daughter learned in two months. That's why you got so many lockdown DJs. In lockdown, you get decks, or you go to pirate studios. You could go there and rinse it for a month and you basically learn to DJ.

There are so many things younger DJs know that I don't have great knowledge of. My daughter hooked up with some of her gen to tell her all the tricks, all the bits you can do. I don't use the tricks of the trade, the inside stuff. My daughter now is more technically proficient than I am. Seriously! Last time I saw her mix she was showing me things I didn't even know you could do. After five, six months, she knows more than I do.

What kind of stuff was she doing?

Oh, loads of things. Cue points for a start. Looping, all the tags, It's just a little box of magic tricks. I remember going to Pioneer DJ when the 3000s came out, and the amount of things you can do is just insane. At first it's even a little daunting. When I first got my daughter set up, she looked at the decks, and I could tell she thought, 'This is gonna be impossible.' I said, 'Look, you don't need to use everything, at least not right now.'

It was like saying, 'Fly this aircraft,' and they've never been in a cockpit, and all they see is buttons. And I was like, 'Look, don't worry about it.' Now she knows what everything is, which is amazing, 'cause I don't. I keep it simple. I'm more of a musical DJ.

Maybe so, but over the years you did use technology in some really innovative ways. For instance, the way you used pitch...

That's how we created jungle. We used to pitch up tracks, hip-hop breaks and things like that, that were pressed at 33 up to 45. We were fucking with things and made a new genre. No one was pitching stuff like that and saying 'Wow that sounds great.' That's how we kinda formed the whole aesthetic of jungle, just from fuckin' around with the decks! One day we just pitched a track up and it sounded good.

To be fair, those decks did change the way we perceive music, the way you could segue from track to another. Before Technics, there was belt drives, which were impossible, you couldn't mix on them. Even starting a track, it would slur, it would take two seconds to get going. Mixing was completely outta the question. So, then when we could mix on decks... I don't think everyone knows the giant leap that was.

That's how club DJing was really born. What you hear today is all down to that leap in technology, to having these decks that would start immediately. I remember a friend of mine going, 'Look how quick this starts!' I thought, 'This is unreal, it's never gonna get better than this.'

It's like thinking back to your first smartphone. You thought, how can tech get better than this? And you had a five-megapixel camera and 'Snake.'

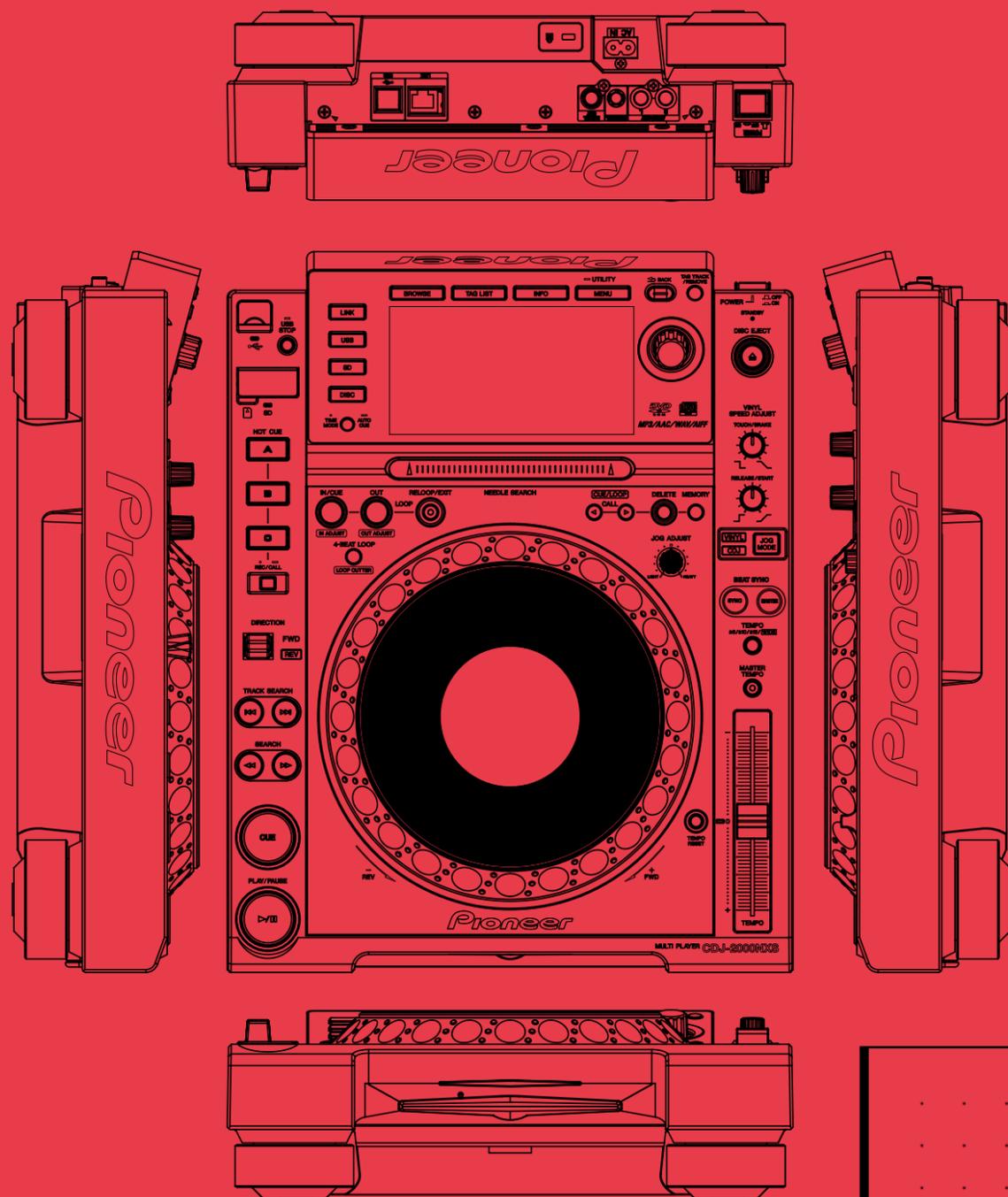
The controllers you can use now, it's endless the amount of things you can do. Basically people are remixing now when they're DJing, it's just insane. And it's happened so quickly. The leap from 2000 to 3000 in terms of technology is huge. And I think everyone looks at Pioneer DJ, like, what are you gonna do next? What happens next? And it's exciting, especially if you're a young DJ starting out. It's a world of endless possibilities. My daughter, all her generation, they try to outdo each other in what you can do, all the tricks you can use, they're so technically proficient. They're really embracing it.

→ RIGHT: FABIO & GROOVERIDER
(PHOTO BY KITCHISME)



MEET THE MAKERS: NAOTO TAKASE

A KEY CREATIVE FORCE BEHIND THE CDJS EXPLAINS ESSENTIAL FEATURES OF THE CDJ-2000 AND CDJ-3000



The CDJ-2000NXS had an essential feature some people found controversial at the time: the Sync button. How was the idea born? How did you intend for DJs to use it?

Looking back, after the release of the CDJ-2000, DVS and DJ apps started to gain acceptance in the market. More people were DJing with PCs, and one of the reasons for this was Sync. Using digital technology to enhance performances was becoming popular.

There were mixed opinions about Sync at the time. Some thought it was for those who wanted to take it easy or didn't have beat-matching skills. However, we included it so professional DJs could focus on more creative aspects. By automating tempo-matching, DJs could spend more time on effects and creative performances.

The majority opinion within the company was that Sync would become a standard feature in the future.

The CDJ-2000NXS came with a range of new features, including Quantise on/off and Slip-Mode. Which new features of this CDJ would you highlight as most creatively promising for DJs?

Quantise was important. Where manual looping was unstable, it made creating accurate loops easy, which expanded the range of play using loops. This contributed to DJs using not just two CDJs, but three or four. The Sync mode also played a role in this.

Additionally, the enlarged waveforms were significant. It became possible to play without headphones, and cueing tracks became much faster.

The CDJ-2000NXS felt like a turning point for Pioneer DJ's place in DJ culture. What do you think made it such a hit?

The CDJ-2000NXS incorporated digital technology that transformed the ease of DJing. Features like enlarged waveforms, Sync, and Quantise improved the quality of performances.

Until the CDJ-2000, file-based music was supported, but in terms of functionality, it lagged behind DJ software, often being used alongside Serato's DVS. There was a sense of urgency about DJ apps, which led to the release of the CDJ-2000NXS about three years after the CDJ-2000.

During its development, we collaborated with a planning manager from the UK who was in close contact with DJs in the field. This process of refining specifications and planning was memorable. I personally assessed overseas feedback, traveling two or three times.

A notable aspect was incorporating the Slip feature, thanks to Kutski. He used the Slip feature on the CDJ-900 for creative performances. I showed a video of his Slip performance to our planning manager, which led to its inclusion. We also appreciated the detailed feedback from James Zabiela, who pointed out specifics like the duration for holding the tag track button.

There were also remarks about the Quantise loop on the CDJ-2000NXS being off. These DJs manage loops down to one frame or millisecond, so we needed to improve Quantise precision. If the beat shifts, it can sound like flange. By listening to the requirements of professional DJs, we enhanced the accuracy of DJ performances.

Another feature we included based on feedback from DJs was "Rating on the go." This allows DJs to rate tracks they play live. It was a unique request from top DJs who wanted to rate their own tracks based on audience reactions in real time. We eventually gathered input from about 30-40 DJs to develop the CDJ-2000NXS.

As an upgrade to an already beloved product (that is, the CDJ 2000), what sets the 3000 apart? If you had to sell a CDJ-3000 to a club or a DJ who already owned a pair of 2000s, what would you say?

The biggest improvement in the CDJ-3000 is the ease of selecting tracks. Everyone felt strongly about the series, so bringing it all together was challenging. Some wanted features specialised for niche performances, but there were many discussions about whether such features were necessary for professional equipment.

For example, there was a request to include Gate Hot Cue, but we didn't want to add features that could lead to accidents. There was also debate about the position of the Hot Cue pads. Those focused on performance wanted the Hot Cue pads at the front, like on controllers, but those using it in the field felt it wasn't necessary to have them so close at hand.

← LEFT: ORTHOGRAPHIC DRAWING OF THE CDJ-2000NXS

2014 POWER TO THE PEOPLE 2024

In November of 2022, Aurora Halal taught a DJ workshop at the Brooklyn club Nowadays. Standing before a rack of four glowing CDJs, she explained how her craft was defined by digital technology, especially gear from Pioneer DJ.

“It wasn’t until I messed around with some older CDJs that I fell in love with DJing,” she told her audience. “I enjoy the possibilities of CDJs to the point where I feel vinyl would hold me back, because I do so much looping, and I make edits and prepare intensely in rekordbox, using playlists, cues and saved loops... It’s honestly pretty amazing technology.”

Speaking into the mic while she mixed, Halal blended four tracks at once, something made possible by preset loops, hot cues, playlists and the key-detection technology.

“You have a lot of power,” Halal said. “You’re in control of what’s happening in these songs. You’re basically live remixing them.”

Thirty years since the release of the CDJ-500, this kind of hands-on creativity has elevated the craft of DJing. DJs have seemingly infinite ways to hone their technique, to mix in a way that’s totally unique to them. Central to this shift are the features and functionalities of CDJs and rekordbox.

Consider this quote from Avalon Emerson: “I loop stuff. I use the track tag and parameter filters, and I use hot cues to break up a track’s linear structure. I can say I want something that is within six beats per minute of 130; I want things that are tagged ‘techno’ and ‘breaks’ and ‘wave.’ And then, boom: The CDJ filters all of my songs to these 18 tracks that satisfy those requirements.... The other functions I use most are beat jump, which makes the playhead skip a certain amount of beats ahead or backwards. I also use slip mode a bit, which lets you scratch or loop or do a goofy vinyl break without losing your place in the song.”

How did we get here? By 2014, two essential forces were reshaping DJ culture: possibility, and accessibility. In the ‘90s, DJs were restricted to playing music they owned on vinyl. Save the relatively few artists who brought along drum machines and samplers, DJs’ creative influence over their tracks had been mostly limited to how and when they transitioned from one to the next.

It also needs to be said that, as a culture and a craft, DJing was a hard nut to crack. A bare-bones setup—two decks, a mixer, and a stack of vinyl—could set you back a few grand. With no internet tutorials or online forums, information on technique and how to get started was hard to come by. Living outside a major city, especially one with well-stocked record stores and good nightclubs, made it hard to stay connected to the scene. And, for far too long, the industry had been a boys’ club, with only a fraction of club and festival lineups featuring even a single woman artist, despite the countless women DJs who’d been central since the beginning to scenes across the globe, from Kemistry & Storm in London through K-Hand in Detroit, and Electric Indigo in Berlin, to name just a few.

In the 2010s, a kind of renaissance started within DJing. Though club culture began as a haven for marginalized communities, especially LBGTQIA+ and people of color, it became more commercial and mainstream over the decades, which meant it also became whiter, straighter, and more male-dominated. As if heeding the advice of Sharvette in the Chicago acid house classic “Don’t Take It,” a new wave of artists and fans began demanding change, especially in the form of diversity within DJ culture and greater recognition and respect for the culture’s Black and queer roots.

There is still much progress to be made. But DJ culture today is a more equal place than it was ten years ago. For proof, look at the lineup for basically any festival from 2014, then look at the same event’s lineup for last year.

Coincidentally or not, this all happened while DJing itself became radically democratized, thanks in part to digital technology. By the mid-2010s, social media had reshaped every aspect of our lives, including what, until then, had felt like the quintessential IRL experience: clubs and DJ culture. SoundCloud and MixCloud became key ways for DJs to show off their sets, as well as to discover new music and connect with other artists. Instagram and TikTok became key points of contact between DJs and their fans. Podcasts and video streams replaced mix CDs and magazine covers as the media spotlight for DJs.



↑ ABOVE: LAYLA BENITEZ @ ADE

This helped dissolve the barriers to entry around DJing, as technology became cheaper, self-promotion became easier, and guidance on DJ technique became much more accessible (Pioneer DJ's Start From Scratch workshops, which upskill women, nonbinary, LGBTQIA+, and POC artists, are just one example of the many initiatives around the world empowering artists from marginalized groups).

In terms of new products in this era, Pioneer DJ played to both ends of the spectrum. CDJs had secured their place as the mainstay of DJ booths the world over: a tenure ensured by the CDJ-3000, which brought the possibilities of digital DJing to ever-greater heights. In 2020, Pioneer DJ released the DJM-V10, a mixer equipped with, among many other unique features, a compressor to better blend vinyl records with digital tracks. This was Pioneer DJ's best-sounding mixer so far, and quickly became a holy grail for audiophiles and old-school heads. "It's a game changer," Carl Cox said.

Crucially, though, Pioneer DJ took just as good care of the bedroom DJs as they did the pros. One example of this would be the DDJ-1000 controller. Released in 2018, this was the slam-dunk version of an idea Pioneer DJ had been chipping away at for years: a standalone mixer with two digital decks, plus multicolored performance pads to trigger hot cues, rolls, samples, and more. Becoming even a beginner DJ used to take months of practice and a massive financial investment. Suddenly, you could get a fully functional DJ setup right out of the box for less than the cost of a single deck, master the basics in an afternoon, and be DJing that night. Small wonder it's one of Pioneer DJ's best-selling products ever.



DJing, once a rarefied craft only available to a privileged few, was now something anyone could have a go at and a style of performance with ever-more limitless creative possibilities. Many factors contributed to this evolution, including the kind of global changes in culture and technology that happen naturally over such a long period of time. But few would deny that a key force pushing it along was the visionary company making many of the era's most popular tools for DJs.

"You could tell that Pioneer DJ is paying attention to the needs of the DJ," Jazzy Jeff once said. "And not just one DJ. They're paying attention to the needs of all DJs."

"YOU COULD TELL THAT PIONEER DJ IS PAYING ATTENTION TO THE NEEDS OF THE DJ"

Jazzy Jeff

↓ BELOW: JAZZY JEFF @ KAPPA FUTUR



↑ TOP: SYREETA @ CREAMFIELDS
 ↑ ABOVE: DDJ-1000 CONTROLLER
 ↓ BELOW: SETUP FEATURING DJS-1000, CDJ-3000, DJM-V10 & PLX-1000

START FROM SCRATCH



ANNA TUR

WE CATCH UP WITH ONE OF IBIZA'S FINEST

“

INTERVIEW

What's your tech rider for gigs today?

I ask for 4 CDJ-3000 + Mixer a DJM-V10 or a DJM-A9. For sure, I also accept CDJ-2000 NXS2 and DJM-900NXS2 if it's not possible to have my main request.

How did you learn to mix? What was your first setup?

I learned to mix with vinyl. That helped me to understand more easily how CDJ's work. It was around the year 2000, and I remember that it was a pair of CDJ-1000s (they still didn't have USB and only read audio files via CD) with the DJM-600 mixer. To tell you the truth, I think I still have them in my storage at home. I refused to get rid of them. They are a part of me.

You play plenty of clubs and festivals, but radio has always been central to what you do. From a DJing perspective, what's special about radio as a format? What can you do on the air that you can't do in front of an audience?

The magic of radio is sensing feedback from listeners. You can't see them or analyze their behavior on the track. It makes you creative and imaginative. You have a very big responsibility because the audience of the station or channel depends on you. It also makes you learn what is the appropriate music for each moment and each hour or state. It's like a blindfolded warm up where only your intuition and charisma give you the success or rejection. I learned a lot on the radio.



→ BELOW: ANNA TUR
(PHOTO BY MARIO PINTA)

Tell me about the first time you encountered a CDJ. When was it and where were you? What did you think? Were you excited? Curious? Skeptical? Frightened? All of the above?

I was impressed at the technological and logistical breakthrough of what that meant for a DJ. Apart from the possibilities of playing, looping, advancing and delaying a track. Something much easier than doing it with vinyl. Also of course, carrying all your music in 1 or 2 cases that fit in a suitcase was a big step forward. Being able to have more music in each session without carrying dozens of kilos to a club. Anyway, I'm from the CDJ generation although I learned with vinyl, so I've been lucky not to have to carry several suitcases of vinyls on tour and thanks to that, my back is healthy, hehe.

How did you start using CDJs? Did someone teach you or did you learn on your own?

I do have to say that I have been terrified once in my life with CDJs. It was in 2021 at Creamfields, the second summer of pandemic, which coincided with the release of the CDJ-3000. I remember I was on stage a few hours before my performance when they said, "Anna, you're going to play with

CDJ-3000s" and I said.... "Oh shit, I've never tried them before and I'm playing in front of thousands of people and on the Carl Cox Invites Stage... and I have to try them today." Fortunately, James Dutton from the Pioneer DJ Artist Relations Team was there with a set up backstage to give us all the necessary tips and news. With him, it was very easy to go on stage with confidence. I just found in my WhatsApp his message, which said: "Hi Anna, it's James from Pioneer DJ. I contact you in case you had any questions with the CDJ-3000s and I'll be on hand for your set anyway." That was August, the 28th. 2021. He was so so kind :)

Can you remember a specific time when you saw someone mixing on CDJs and thought, "OK wow there's really a lot you can do with these things"?

Yes. Absolutely. Roger Sanchez and Carl Cox in the radio studios. I've seen them both doing magic with them.

What's your favorite mixer? Why?

For sure, the Pioneer DJM-V10. I also tested the "Euphonia" and I really loved it. I'm quite sure I will get it soon. Also the DJM-A9 is so good.

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"I'M FROM THE CDJ GENERATION ALTHOUGH I LEARNED WITH VINYL, SO I'VE BEEN LUCKY NOT TO HAVE TO CARRY SEVERAL SUITCASES OF VINYL ON TOUR"

ANNA TUR

KIKELOMO

THE ECLECTIC BERLIN-BASED DJ ON HER FAVORITE TOOLS OF THE TRADE

INTERVIEW

As a DJ you've got a particular gift for tying together different sounds—house, techno, breaks, juke, hip-hop, grime, baile funk, amapiano, you name it. Can you tell me a bit about how you arrived at that style?

I think my affinity to mix different genres came from the fact that I have a pretty eclectic music taste in general. I had my emo phase, my jazz phase, my hip-hop phase—they're all threads in a tapestry of what makes me, what informs me as a musician. When I started DJing, I was unsure what direction to go in. People told me, "You have to focus on what you play so people know how to book you," but that didn't feel like an accurate reflection of me, so I said, I'm just going to keep mixing it up and see what happens. Instead of being ashamed of it, I kind of made it my own.

What's that like from a mixing perspective? I guess you need to cover a broad range of tempos, do the occasional quick mix, that sort of thing.

Mixing different genres draws out different mixing styles. I started with grime, so there were a lot of lyrics, which taught me to mix quickly, choppily, less fluid. When I explored house and techno, they responded better to slower mixing styles, so I'd have to gauge based on each track what kind of mix suits the dynamic. I think what I've learned from mixing all these genres together is that different skills are required for each type of blend. I've learned to appreciate everything. And also I'm not afraid of a wheel-up! If it's not working out or needs a change, I'll go for a wheel-up, bring out the Brit in me.

How did you learn to mix? Was it on CDJs right off the bat?

I had one-off DJ workshops in university. I got a controller and taught myself to do my own radio show. Then I applied for this mentoring program to learn on CDJs. I was part of a collective, No shade, for women and nonbinary people that taught us how to mix on CDJs and bolster our careers. It was like, OK, you wanna learn how to mix on club standard equipment? And they gave us access to that equipment. The rest I learned from back-to-backs, watching DJ streams, and basic trial and error.

Do you remember when you first encountered a CDJ? When was it and where were you? Where were you? What was the situation? What was your first impression?

I was definitely a bit overwhelmed, because I was transitioning from a controller to CDJs, but after an hour or so, I was like, "Oh, OK it's not that different!" Once I learned how to translate my skills to this new equipment—I loved it. One of the things I love about them is they really facilitate mixing with other people, going back-to-back, having this space to bring people in. I'm a back-to-back evangelist, I love what mixing with other people brings to the table.

Are CDJs essential to the way you mix?

As a DJ I want to master all the tools of the trade—vinyl, controller, etc. But where I've arrived at, things like throwing it in reverse, using Slip-Mode, all these functionalities to filter my tracks—it's just not possible to do that on anything else other than CDJs. Mixing on vinyl evokes something. But the way CDJs remix on the fly, with loops, hot cues, that's just not possible anywhere else. They're like an instrument. I'm sure there are a lot of instrumentalists who would object to that! But it feels like you're using a device to bring something new to the table. CDJs make me think of innovation. You can give two DJs the same USB, with the same tunes, and they'll play them in a totally different style. That's only possible with the CDJ.

Can you remember a time when you saw someone mixing on CDJs and thought, "OK wow there's really a lot you can do with these things"?

I do have a core memory. One of my friends, Nena, is also a dope producer. When he put the CDJ in reverse, it just blew my mind, like "Whooooo, I'm taking that! I'm putting that in my toolkit!" Just changed my perspective on how to put songs together. Also, seeing the grimey-type styles, with chops and changes. Neffiti, he's every DJ's favorite DJ, because he takes the mixing and equipment to the next level. He did a 6-deck CDJ mix and it was crazy, just showing off really, but in a good way! Seeing people do things I just did not know were possible, and not just specific features, but like, you know, sometimes you put yourself in a box, or people in the industry put you in a box, set expectations on how to mix, so it helps to see these totally different ways of mixing. I do workshops and I say, "Never let anyone tell you how to mix, even me."

What's your favorite mixer?

I'm a DJM-V10 babe. I'm fully converted, it's on my rider. I used to be a DJM-900NXS2 mixer, because I love the FX, the way I would mix, slamming it around. But yeah now it's all about the DJM-V10. I love the compression, bringing together old school analog tracks with the digital tracks, and the 4-band EQ, the smoothness of the faders. I love the isolators. It feels very robust, very grown up. Still has all those FX I love, but gets into the nitty gritty, the fine-tuning that wasn't possible on other mixers I used. Also the two ports for b2b'ing, even though I like handing over the headphones. Overall it just really facilitates creation.

TSHA

THE LONDON HOUSE SENSATION TELLS US ABOUT HER JOURNEY WITH CDJS

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When did you first discover your love for music?

When I was about 21, I discovered that I wanted to try DJing. My older brother used to DJ when I was younger. I was just playing around and learning. Had some lessons. That got me into DJing. Then after I started DJing is when I got into the idea of making music.

Do you remember the first time you attempted to mix two records together?

I do, actually. I used to have a blog. I have the post saved from ages ago, where I talk about when I first beatmatched. It was a really great feeling. I was actually feeling really low at that time. DJing was an outlet for me. So when I mixed there was kind of a sense of achievement, because I wasn't doing much else in my life at the time.

When you started using CDJs, what was your first impression when you saw them?

Do you know what, I'd tried the 2000s, but only because I turned up to the club and that's what they had and I'd never used them before, so I just winged it. But I was like, I really need the gear at home. I couldn't afford the 2000s. The MK2s were the next best option because they were a little bit cheaper. When I got them, I was really excited. They had the loop feature, Beat Jump, a touch screen... it was pretty cool.

To dive into some of those features: what's so great about having the ability to loop a record?

Well obviously it makes mixing a lot easier, and you can make the transitions a lot smoother. You can loop one great part, you can make a mash-up, you can bring bits in and out. And the fact that it has Quantise as well, so, it's like, you can get the loop dead-on without stressing too much.

When was the first time you used the 2000s?

When I decided to move to just bringing a USB to a gig, the CDJ 2000s were the standard at the time. This was before the NXS came in. Seeing one at first was a bit scary. It looked like a spaceship. Once I got used to them, I was like, this is the best way to DJ. I don't want a laptop, I don't want anything else, I just wanna plug my USB in and DJ. This has got everything I need.

Do you think the way CDJs have evolved over the years has made DJing more accessible?

Yeah! They've definitely made DJing much more accessible. The introduction of the sync button, quantizing, all those features, have made the entry level easier, skill-wise at least. But you can't get good taste from CDJs. [laughs] Still need that! But yeah, you've got people like James Hype who are always doing tricks, mixing multiple decks, people are exploring the creative, live aspect of DJing. So yeah, they've pushed it forward in that way, finding new ways to DJ, ways to do more things on the fly.

How have rekordbox and USBs affected your sets?

It's amazing, to be honest, because you can organize your library so well, categorize everything, use tags, and obviously load everything onto a USB and bring so much music with you. It's quick, it's easy, I love the fact that I can carry so much in a little stick.

→ RIGHT: TSHA
(PHOTO BY NICOLE NGAI, AMELIA STUDIOS)



“I DON'T WANT A LAPTOP, I DON'T WANT ANYTHING ELSE, I JUST WANNA PLUG MY USB IN AND DJ.”

TSHA



→ ABOVE & RIGHT: TSHA @ IMS IBIZA

Do you think Pioneer DJ caters to the needs of the DJ when they're designing their products?

They're always looking for new ways to make DJing interesting, or new ways to create live moments, you know? Things you can do on the fly. Pushing it forward, changing how DJing is. Mixing two tracks together is cool, but, you know, gotta move on from that at some point!

Do you think it's important to keep evolving?

I think so, yeah, definitely important to keep evolving. I'm getting a bit older now, I'm a bit set in my ways, but I think it's great that things are changing and they're always adding new features and stuff like that, I think it's really important.



MEET THE MAKERS:

YOSHINORI KATAOKA

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ALPHATHETA'S CEO* REFLECTS ON THE LEGACY AND THE FUTURE OF THE CDJ

What do you think it is about the CDJ and its development that established its place as the market leader? What has helped it stand the test of time for so long?

It is because we have continuously listened to the market and made efforts to realize our customers' dreams. We have focused on high-quality standards, specifications, and usability, especially for performances in clubs and live venues. Creating products that our customers support and engaging with them in ways that resonate with local cultures were also key factors. Additionally, when we introduced new challenges, like DJing with CDs, there was a lot of criticism, as some people considered it "fake" compared to DJing with vinyl. It took time for the market to understand and accept this change.

What was the main objective of the first CDJ unit 30 years ago?

We felt a sense of mission to address the shift from vinyl to CDs during that transformative period for content and media. We also saw it as an opportunity to provide new performance capabilities unique to digital technology.

What would you say is the main objective of CDJ units now?

We aim to be the best partner in supporting and developing DJ and club culture alongside our customers. While DJ and club culture is not as popular in Japan and Asia as it is in the West, we hope it will be widely embraced in these regions.

How has that story changed over the last 30 years?

One noticeable change is the way we handle content: from CDs to USBs, and now to cloud and streaming services. Those who have used our products for a long time understand that sound quality, durability, and the JOG mechanism have been upgraded with each new model.

How did the introduction of rekordbox impact the story of the CDJ?

The combination concept of rekordbox and CDJ at the time was designed around a preparation/play/review cycle. It was the first application compatible with the internet era and file-based music, working with our flagship CDJ. This combination had a significant impact on subsequent products.

Were you involved with the r&d of rekordbox? If so, do you remember the development meetings and any conversations or anecdotes that stand out?

To be honest, at that time, Pioneer Corporation (our previous parent company) was primarily a hardware manufacturer of audio equipment, so we had little experience or knowledge in developing application software. The development process was a trial-and-error journey. However, we were confident that implementing the preparation/play/review lifecycle for DJs would enhance their creativity. With this belief, we persistently worked towards achieving this vision, and that determination has brought us to where we are today.

What kind of process do you work through when approaching the design and development of a CDJ new unit?

We aim to embrace new challenges without preconceived notions, but since the model has been around for 30 years, we make sure not to lose the "CDJ essence" that our customers expect.

How much do current CDJ users and artists shape that journey of development of a new CDJ?

We receive and consider feedback from DJs right from the planning stage.

What are the main challenges in creating a new unit that will follow in the footsteps of such successful predecessors?

The main challenge is meeting our customers' expectations of what makes a CDJ special while also surprising them with new advancements. This involves balancing these somewhat opposing themes.

How do you feel the CDJ changed DJing with the introduction of Pioneer DJ's early units?

Being the world's first digital flat-top DJ CD player was significant. It allowed us to offer the convenience of digital technology without changing our customers' play styles. I believe this was a major contribution.

Do you feel it is still changing the way people DJ with the introduction of new CDJ units now?

Of course yes!

Are there any examples that stand out to you where DJs have used technology implemented on a CDJ in a way that wasn't initially intended when it was designed?

There are many such cases. For instance, the CUE function was originally meant for checking the starting point of a track, not for use as a sampler. DJs have also used CDJs in ways we didn't anticipate, such as using them upside down. Sometimes, we get nervous because we hadn't tested those use cases.

What do you see as the future of the CDJ?

While it's wonderful that the CDJ has been around for so long, there will eventually come a time when it will be succeeded by the next generation of club standards. We would be most delighted if our company could propose that new standard, surpassing the CDJ.

Is there anything you can reveal about developments for a new unit?

I'm afraid I can't disclose any details, but I can say that you should look forward to it!

*AlphaTheta Corporation former company name: Pioneer DJ Corporation.



OUTRO

Look at a DJ setup from 1994. Now look at a DJ setup today. It's like a wizard waved his wand and—poof! A bulky record bag shrinks to about 1% of its size and becomes a USB. A rack-mounted rotary mixer morphs into a box of blinking lights and gliding faders. A turntable gets squished into a more rectangular shape and sprouts a glowing LCD screen. As for the actual music—well, it leaves the physical realm altogether, existing no longer in the grooves of vinyl records, but in minuscule electrical currents on circuits in hard drives, and flowing through the air via Wi-Fi and Bluetooth® (which, let's face it, almost none of us actually understands).

Where is it all heading? How might we imagine the DJ booth of 2054? Maybe “decks” and “mixers” will exist as apps on some VR-enhanced contact lens, controlled by the DJ's stream of consciousness via a sensor affixed to their skull—“straight from the top of the dome,” as Bomfonk MC's once rapped.

“Throughout our journey DJ's involvement has been essential to our product development process” says Mark Grotefeld of AlphaTheta EMEA. “It's always been part of our mission to bring innovative music experiences through our products and this won't change with our AlphaTheta and Pioneer DJ brands.”

Naturally, as with just about every area of technology today, AI will play a role. “Our digital- and information-driven world is here to stay,” says Grotefeld, “so I would expect DJ technology to continue evolving down an AI-software-driven path as well as VR and AR experiences becoming more widely available. But we'll remain focused on ensuring it empowers DJs to deliver the human experiences we'll always crave. Of course, I'm only one person in our company of many passionate and more talented people shaping its future. Perhaps that future will be a perfect marriage of AI-driven dependable software with hardware that innovates and synergises in new and unexpected ways.”

One thing we can be sure of, though, is that, as time goes on, music, and the tools that let us use music to connect with ourselves and others—that is, to DJ—will be more accessible, more dynamic, more creative, and more fun to use than ever before.

“Who knows where we're going to be in 20 years,” progressive house icon Paul Oakenfold once mused. “But what I do know, and what I've seen, is that Pioneer DJ are not scared to embrace it. They lead every step of the way.”

A NEW DIMENSION

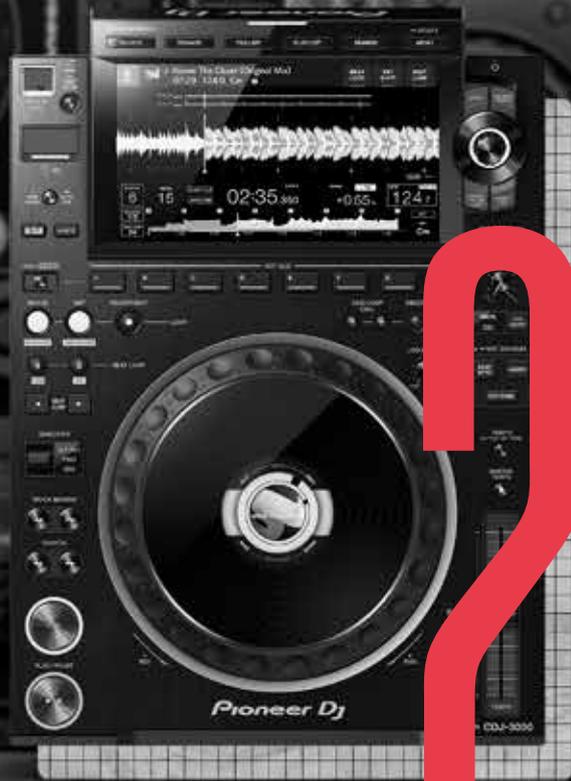


Pioneer DJ

deckades

A BIG THANK YOU TO THE DJ
COMMUNITY FOR KEEPING THE PARTY
GOING FOR THE LAST 30 YEARS.
ONE THROUGH MUSIC

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