

The Hustle

by Amy J. West

I didn't set out to become a wedding DJ. Does anyone? No one wakes up in the morning and thinks, "Golly, I'd really love to play mediocre music for well-dressed strangers who are more interested in taking full advantage of an open bar." Yet nearly 20 years later, here I am.

As wedding DJs go, I'm pretty good. I'm a solid emcee, and I know how to read a crowd well enough to keep the dance floor going. Unless, of course, someone demands I play a clunker of a song that sends everyone running for the dessert buffet. I've made a few minor missteps along the way, though. Forgetting things. Getting lost. Equipment failure. Saying the best man's name instead of the groom's. Making the bride ugly-cry by playing her recently deceased father's favorite song. You know, little stuff. Barely noticeable!

When I first started, I worked for a "talent" company that was essentially a wedding factory. I was part of a stable of DJs, photographers, and videographers. They paid us very little while they raked in the cash. Sure, they booked the gigs and provided the equipment, but we were the ones sweating it out if the dance floor didn't fill up for the Electric Slide.

Before each gig, I'd travel to the company office to pick up whatever I needed that day. Sometimes, they'd "forget" to put stuff in my pile of gear. Other times, I'd accidentally leave things behind. These moments always resulted in the hilarity and ingenuity that can only come from sheer panic.

You Spin Me Round

For my very first New Year's Eve gig, I was sent to a bar/restaurant, part of a chain. They'd requested a disco ball in addition to the usual DJ package. Driving there in my girlfriend's tiny sport wagon, I spent the trip with an enormous mirrored ball on my lap. It felt festive.

We arrived, unloaded the car, and began setting up the equipment.

"And what are we supposed to do with this?" my girlfriend asked, standing in the middle of the dance floor with the disco ball in her arms.

"Hang it up!" I said, annoyed. I mean, duh. Obviously we're not going to roll it around on the floor.

"Um. With what?" she asked.

You see, I'd remembered to bring all of the accoutrements that accompany the disco ball EXCEPT for the motor you hang it from to make it spin. And a disco ball that doesn't spin is really more like a giant Christmas ornament.

We rooted through my gear bag, looking for something – anything – that would make this ball turn. Extra speaker cable? No. Twist-tie? No. Paper clip? Maybe, but not ideal. I sighed and turned to the bag with my clothes.

Eureka! Surely a knee-high nylon would do the trick. My girlfriend was skeptical.

“You want to use your pantyhose? That seems unsanitary.”

We strung up the disco ball with my stocking, tied it tightly (wouldn't want that to come crashing down on a reveler's head, now, would we?), and wound it around and around, and around. And around. And around. Then we shone the spotlight on it, and let it go.

It spun, alright. Incredibly fast at first, a tornado of mirrors and light. Then gradually slower and slower. Once the stocking was fully unwound, the ball swayed gently back and forth.

“Guess that will have to do!” said my girlfriend. “Foot cooties and all.”

Throughout the evening, we'd periodically re-wind the stocking for a little extra spin. No one questioned it. Things would have gone off without any further mishaps if not for my pushing the wrong button at midnight. Instead of New Year's Day by U2, I blasted Mexican Radio by Wall of Voodoo. Everyone cheering and dancing stopped, turned, and looked at us.

“Happy New Year!” we shouted, and I pushed the correct button. 1998 was off to an interesting start.

Fashion

Setting up for a gig is sweaty work. Carrying heavy speakers from the car to the venue (sometimes up a flight of stairs) and crawling under tables to plug in cables and secure wires is best done in comfortable, rumple-able clothes. I typically don't change into my fancy DJ duds until shortly before guests are scheduled to arrive.

When it comes to changing clothes, the wheelchair-accessible restroom stall is the DJ's best friend. It's roomy, tends to be unoccupied, and there are railings to hold our hangers. When I worked at the “talent” company, there was a movement among the DJs to somehow mark the inside of these stalls to let our fellow emcees know we'd been there: a sticker, a nick in the

paint, or maybe the inconspicuous use of a Sharpie. Management put the kibosh on that operation before it really got going, but I still look around for tell-tale signs when I change clothes before an event.

On an especially hot summer day, I drove two hours to DJ a wedding at a country club. Since these were the days before GPS, I'd printed instructions from MapQuest and got turned around a few dozen times before I found the place. As you may remember, MapQuest sucked. So when I arrived, I was behind schedule and feeling frazzled.

I loaded in and set up with no problems. With just a little time to spare before the reception, I grabbed my DJ uniform (usually a tuxedo or dark suit) and headed for the restroom. I took off my t-shirt and put on my tux shirt. Then I took off my cargo shorts and ... where are my pants?

How could this be? Did they fall off the hanger on the way into the building? I put my t-shirt and shorts back on and speed-walked out to the car. No pants on the ground. No pants in the back seat. I had no pants other than the shorts I was wearing.

Frantic, I grabbed my trusty flip phone and called home.

"Have you seen my DJ pants?" I asked my girlfriend.

"Do you not have them?"

"WHY WOULD I BE CALLING YOU IF I HAD THEM," I said.

"Fine, fine," she said. "Let me check."

She came back a moment later. "Yep, they're here, on a hanger, near the door."

Well, at least I hadn't lost them.

"Do you want me to bring them to you?"

"There isn't time!" I said. "The wedding starts in 20 minutes."

"Well, you're at a country club. Go find the pro shop."

The pro shop! Of course. Golfers wear pants. Hopefully they have some that aren't plaid. I went racing through the building and burst through the door of the pro shop, just minutes before they were scheduled to close.

"Can I help you?" the clerk asked, eyeing me (and my t-shirt and cargo shorts) suspiciously.

“Black pants?” I said, out of breath, “Size 31?”

He pointed toward a rack in the back of the room. I spun around. Blank pants. Thank heavens. I flicked through the hangers. Size 52. Size 48. Size 44. Size 40. Who are these golfers with the expansive waists? Maybe they should golf more. Or try jogging. I reached the end of the rack, and the smallest size was a 38.

“Is this the smallest you have?” I asked.

“Whatever’s there is what we have.”

I checked the price tag. \$50. I was about to pay half of what I was making on this gig for pants almost roomy enough for two of me. It was the \$50 pants, or the cargo shorts. An unenviable fashion choice.

I bought the pants, ran back to the restroom, and put them on. I tucked in my tux shirt and cinched my belt as tight as it would go. I looked like a very pale MC Hammer. Too legit to quit, indeed.

Rattle and Hum

Years after I’d left the “talent” company to strike out on my own, I decided it would be fun to celebrate our fifth wedding anniversary by dragging my wife (formerly my girlfriend) to help me DJ an October wedding. I’m still not sure how I talked her into that, but let’s just say my wife is very tolerant of my bad ideas.

The wedding was at a large event complex, the kind of place where three weddings, a bat mitzvah, a high school reunion, and a kiddie beauty pageant could all happen at the same time. We arrived early, found our room, and leisurely loaded in my gear.

As soon as I turned on my sound system and turned up the faders, I knew something was wrong. Instead of my usual upbeat “tidy up the cables” music, what we heard was:

MUNNNGGG MRRRRUNNNNGG MMMMMM BRNNNNNNNNNNNGGGGGGGG.

It was a tooth-shaking, bowel-loosening noise. Something akin to the combination of microphone feedback, a bug zapper, and a helicopter landing in the middle of the room.

Maybe it was a speaker cable? I turned everything off, swapped out the cables, tried again.

MUNNNGGG MRRRRUNNNNGG MMMMMM BRNNNNNNNNNNNGGGGGGGG.

Nope, that wasn't it. Maybe something's wrong with one of the speakers? I tried the left.

MUNNNGGG MRRRRUNNNNGG MMMMMM BRNNNNNNNNNNNGGGGGGGG.

And then the right.

MUNNNGGG MRRRRUNNNNGG MMMMMM BRNNNNNNNNNNNGGGGGGGG.

The chances of both speakers going simultaneously seemed VERY slim.

Could it be the power outlet? Or the power strip?

MUNNNGGG MRRRRUNNNNGG MMMMMM BRNNNNNNNNNNNGGGGGGGG.

Dammit. Okay then, it must be the amplifier. That should be good and expensive. No matter, we still had plenty of time.

My wife went running off to find a phone book (imagine that! A phone book) and found a music store nearby. I sent her off with my credit card to buy a new amp, while I headed to the wheelchair-accessible restroom stall to change.

I emerged in uniform (no sign of the DJ hobo code in the stall, sadly) and returned to my equipment. It HAS to be the amp, right? I plugged in my headphones and tested the CD players. They seemed fine. I swapped out more cables, to no avail. Something between the mixer and the speakers was making that awful noise, therefore it must be the amp. The new amp would fix everything.

Finally, my wife's car pulled into the parking lot. I ran out to greet her.

"I got it!" she said. "It was \$500, but I got it, brand new."

She popped the trunk, and there sat a sealed brown box. I picked it up carefully (amps are surprisingly heavy) and brought it inside.

We tore open the box, pulled out the Styrofoam, and freed this pristine piece of equipment that cost the exact amount I would earn from this gig. I placed it on the table, plugged it in, and connected the cables. Turned all of the switches on. Muttered a little prayer to any deity who might be listening.

MUNNNGGG MRRRRUNNNNGG MMMMMM BRNNNNNNNNNNNGGGGGGGG.

You have got to be kidding me.

“NOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOOO!” I said, head in hands.

“I don’t understand,” said my wife. “Is that the new amp?”

“Must be it wasn’t the amp,” I said. “So that was a fun \$500 experiment.”

I hear tires crunching on the gravel outside, and look up to see the wedding party’s limo arriving. Fantastic.

“Will you do me a favor?” I asked my ever-patient wife. “Will you go out there and ask them to hang out for a few minutes while I try to magic something up in here?”

“I’ll try!” she said.

At this point, I realize there’s background music playing over the house sound system. All hope is not lost.

“Excuse me,” I asked the bartender. “Do you have a CD player back there?”

“Yes,” he said, “it’s a full sound system.”

“GREAT. Can I come take a look?”

I used the house sound system to introduce the wedding party, announce the bride and groom’s first dance, and play CDs for cocktail hour and dinner. This bought me a couple of hours to continue to assess my equipment, and to move it downstairs for dancing.

At one point, a crotchety manager-type person came over.

“After they finish eating, we need you to stop using the house sound system,” he said. “That’s really not allowed, especially at this volume.”

“Sorry about that,” I said. “I’m hoping to figure out how to fix this by then.”

“What’s the issue?” he asked. I turn up the master fader.

MUNNNGGG MRRRRUNNNNGG MMMMMM BRNNNNNNNNNNGGGGGGGG.

“Well,” he sputtered, exasperated, “that’s your speakers.”

“I really don’t think it is,” I said.

“Of course it is. I have some speakers you can use instead.”

“Okay,” I said, “Thanks?”

Crotchety guy went lumbering off.

“But ... it’s not the speakers,” said my wife.

“Right. But he thinks he knows better than we do, so what’s the harm?”

He returned carrying two small, dusty speakers.

“Here you go,” he said, “plug ‘em in.”

“Alrighty,” I said.

I made a show of unplugging the cables from my speakers, and plugging them into these new magical speakers he’d hauled out of a closet somewhere.

“Ready?” I said. He nodded, looking smug.

MUNNNGGG MRRRRUNNNNGG MMMMMM BRNNNNNNNNNNNGGGGGGGG.

“Hunh,” I said. “Guess it wasn’t the speakers.”

“You know, you should really test your equipment before you bring it to a wedding,” he said, taking his speakers and storming off.

I again turned to my incredibly patient wife. “Can I ask you to do me another favor?”

“Maybe,” she said.

“There are a bunch of DJs with gigs in this place. Can you find one to take a look at this stuff and help us fix it?”

“I suppose,” she sighed. “What would you like me to tell them?”

“Just say that we’re in the middle of a wedding and we’re having an equipment problem we can’t fix. Then look especially cute and ask them to help us.”

She made a growly noise and left.

At this point, I’m starting to lose my cool. I can hear the scrape and clang of plates being cleared upstairs, so time is officially running out. What am I going to do if I can’t play dance music for these people? Whistle a jolly tune? Tap dance? Run?

My wife appeared in the doorway, looking jubilant. Thank goodness. Then, five steps behind her, is a guy in a clown costume. A CLOWN COSTUME. Orange curly wig, big red nose, baggy striped pants. His enormous shoes slapped against the dance floor as he approached.

Leave it to my beloved to find help at a Halloween party.

“I hear you clowns are having some trouble!” he said, with a tweak of his nose. “How can I help?”

I demonstrate the noise that will haunt me forever in my dreams.

MUNNNGGG MRRRRUNNNNGG MMMMMM BRNNNNNNNNNNNGGGGGGGG.

“We know for sure it’s not the amp, and it’s not the speakers,” I said.

“Well, then it must be your mixer.” He opens up the back of the console, starts unplugging and re-plugging cables, his orange curls bouncing.

“Ummm?” said my wife.

I look up and there’s the groom, who was clearly not expecting to see a clown at his wedding.

“Oh hi!” I said.

“Hi. Uh. Everything okay?”

“Oh yes,” I said. “Just getting a quick fix on a little equipment problem.”

He looks at the clown, looks back at me. “Well ... will we be ready for dancing soon? We’re all set with dinner.”

“Sure!” I said brightly. “We’ll be ready in just a couple of minutes.”

“Okay,” he said uncertainly, and slowly backed away.

“Let’s stop clowning around and get this party started!” said the clown. “The trouble is your master output. Seems like you may have a short there.”

“That doesn’t sound good.”

“We can bypass it, but you won’t be able to use your faders,” he said.

“And ... how will I mix the music, then?”

“It will be a little bit tricky, but you’ll have to use the gains on your amplifier.”

He demonstrated the process. Push play on the CD player, hurry and turn up the two gain knobs on the amp. At the end of the song, turn down the gain knobs, stop the CD that's playing, push play on the other CD player, turn up the gains. Cue up another song, and repeat. No cross-fading. Definitely a two-person operation.

"Are you up for this?" I asked my wife.

"Do I have a choice?" she replied.

"Doesn't sound like it." said the clown. "Good luck!"

My wife and I worked out a system. Her job was to handle the gains on the amp, which she'd turn up or down each time I hissed "GO!" at her. She also took requests while I frantically cued CDs and announced things like the father-daughter dance and the bouquet toss.

Together, we survived those two hours of dancing. Afterward, I promised to never DJ on our anniversary ever again.

The couple who got married that day, though? They're divorced. I hope it wasn't because of the clown.