

Downloaded and Ready to Rock

iPod Nights Turn Amateurs Into Digital DJs at D.C. Club

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The DJ who calls himself P.Vo is very pleased with himself. Two dozen or so clubgoers at Gate 54, the basement lounge at Cafe Saint-Ex in Northwest Washington, are stumped. They're wondering what P.Vo is playing.

Is that Nine Inch Nails *and* the Bee Gees? "Closer" on top of "Staying Alive"?

P.Vo, taking a sip of rum and Coke, asks: "Where else can you hear this?"

It's 9:20 p.m. on a recent Wednesday. P.Vo, known by day as Paul Vodra, is the first of 21 DJs -- ahead of Seeking Irony and Weird Curves -- who will play at this city's version of an iPod DJ party. On this night, the most popular MP3 player, the iPod, serves as the lounge's source of music, roughly three songs at a time. No turntables. No vinyl. Bring an iPod. Be the DJ. Please sign your DJ name on the white board in the front.

P.Vo downloaded the Nine Inch Nails and Bee Gees song -- a mashup, two songs mixed into one -- from a peer-to-peer software program called SoulSeek. He's blasting it from his iPod, which is hooked up to six speakers: two in the front, near the bar; two in the middle, where clubgoers are dancing; the remaining two in the back, in front of a poster for the film "La Dolce Vita." Here, amid the industrial look of the lounge -- with Christmas lights for an added touch -- Vodra, a 29-year-old software programmer from Arlington, transforms into P.Vo, an iPod impresario who mixes Missy Elliott with George Michael to come up with a song he calls "Get Your Faith On."

The iPod Jukebox night, held at Cafe Saint-Ex every second Wednesday of the month, attracts mostly white-collar types in their twenties and thirties who heard about it from a friend of a friend, or read about it in a link to a blog. It's perhaps the most public manifestation of how the iPod -- with 8.2 million units sold in 2004, more than 5 million during the holiday season alone -- has gone mainstream, spawning an entire iPod culture that goes far beyond wearing those distinctive white earphones.

There are professional "iPod loaders" who will fill your iPod with music; "iPod jacking" sessions where owners swap iPods to check out one another's playlists; "podcasts" where you, as a wine connoisseur, for example, can upload a 17-minute rumination on the glories of a 1953 Chateau Petrus so other wine connoisseurs can download it to their iPods; and sites such as iPodlounge.com, not at all affiliated with Apple Computer, to keep you updated on what's new in the iPod universe.

If your iPod allows you to keep your whole CD collection in your jacket pocket, then the iPod DJ night allows you to show off your music, karaoke-style.

"In the next year, more and more clubs are going to have a night like this," says Kathryn Wildt, 28, taking a breather from her evening's responsibilities. The Bollywood version of "Don't Stop 'Til You Get Enough" --

titled "Don't Stop 'Til You Get to Bollywood" -- plays in the background.

Wildt, a researcher at the National Institutes of Health, co-founded iPod Jukebox in April 2004 and keeps it moving along, one DJ at a time. (Fritz Hahn, who covers nightlife for [washingtonpost.com](http://www.washingtonpost.com), is the other founder.) Wildt bought her iPod "a year and five months ago," she says, and calls it "Gayle." ("I just thought it looked like a Gayle. My computer doesn't have a name, but for some reason this one has a name." She's not the only one in the lounge to give her iPod a name. Holly Tegeler, 24, calls her iPod Karl, with a K. "I knew he was a boy," says Tegeler, a Web developer. "I don't know why, I just know he is.")

Cafe Saint-Ex doesn't host the only iPod DJ night -- add the Hi Hat Lounge & Garage on the East Side of Milwaukee, APT in New York City's meatpacking district and Tonic Room in Chicago's Lincoln Park area, among others, to the growing list.

You can catch this kind of party across the Atlantic, too. Charlie Gower, an event promoter, has so far helped organize more than 25 iPod DJ nights in London since July 2003. Over there they're called "noWax" (meaning "no vinyl") nights.

"It's a democratic thing, really," Gower, via phone from London, says of noWax nights. The 28-year-old co-founded noWax.co.uk and works as a recruiter for Sense Worldwide, a research company. "What's true in every case of the iPod DJ party or noWax night -- different clubs do it different ways -- is that everybody who comes to the club loves to play to the crowd," continues Gower, who checked out the iPod DJ night at New York's APT last year. "Just like what Andy Warhol said, they love their 15 minutes of fame."

Or, more specifically, 12 minutes of fame, which is what you're given at iPod Jukebox. It's currently so busy that no repeats, meaning DJs going for a second showcase, are allowed.

Natalya Minkovsky (aka Seeking Irony) and Melissa Gilmore (aka Weird Curves) are iPod Jukebox regulars. They've been coming since October, usually staying until 12:30 a.m. "We've got 9-to-5 jobs," they say. "We can't stay until last call." Minkovsky, a 25-year-old marketing writer, got her iPod as a birthday present. (Tonya, her mom, knitted her an iPod cozy.) Gilmore, a 29-year-old grants manager, got her iPod in April 2004. It's 10:45 p.m. and they're waiting for their turns, drinking greyhounds (vodka and grapefruit juice).

Minkovsky likes to play indie pop. Gilmore, too. "But it's electronica tonight," says Gilmore. "I think it's great that individuals represent themselves for 12 minutes," she continues. "I picked my playlist before I left. Something silly. One night I played a song about cheese."

Why?

"Because I'm addicted to cheese." (The song, Gilmore says later, is "Addicted to Cheese" by the Evaporators.)

Michael Benson, the owner of Cafe Saint-Ex, has an iPod with close to 7,000 songs in it. "If you're a big music fan, you're limited to satellite radio and the Internet to find out what's new out there, what's cutting-edge music," says Benson, 38. The playlists from previous Jukebox nights are nothing like the top 100 Billboard singles or the top 100 downloads on iTunes.

"In a night like tonight, someone could be playing something and someone could come in and say, 'Hey, where'd you get that from?' There's an incredible diversity, from twang country to trip-hop" -- psychedelic hip-hop -- "and one of the things you notice about iPod night is a lot of people take notes of the music that's being played."

Jeff Wotowiec, standing at the other end of the bar, is taking notes.

Wotowiec is visibly nervous -- he isn't sure if his type of music would fit in. "So far, it's all been dance music," says the 26-year-old graphic designer from Arlington. He wants to play "some country," "some movie quotes" -- dialogue from "Tommy Boy" or "So I Married an Axe Murderer." But, he asks, "what if no one likes it?"

Sure, there's an intimate feel to the lounge, a friendly, down-to-earth vibe. Still, there's always someone like Paul Straka who sneers upon hearing "Pieces of Me," not Ashlee Simpson's, but the cut from the local go-go band Rare Essence.

"Listen to this awful, awful music," says the 28-year-old computer programmer from Manhattan who's in town visiting friends. Just because it's iPod night doesn't mean the music is going to be any good, he says.

Wotowiec decides tonight is not the night for his iPod debut. So a few hours after arriving at the lounge, fresh from evening Mass, Wotowiec makes two vows: to come back next month, and to come back with "better stuff."

"Next time, I'm gonna come back with more edgy stuff: You know, one hard-core country song, one hard-core metal song, one really, really, really dark techno song. Maybe a movie clip. Next time, when I come back, I'll be prepared, I'll be myself."

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