

Turning the tables



DJ Paulette

Female DJs have long been overlooked, underpaid, even abused online. But that’s all changing. **Jumi Akinfenwa** talkes to the women who first took the clubs by storm

In 1999, Bill Brewster and Frank Broughton published *Last Night a DJ Saved My Life*. The superstar DJ was still a recent phenomenon, and the book captured this cultural shift and told the oral history of DJing up to that point. An updated edition is out this month, with a new chapter telling the story of a whole group of DJs that even this definitive history had somewhat ignored: women. “In terms of the pioneers, it’s all men, and we can’t escape that,” Broughton says. “But with the new edition, we wanted to make sure there were more women’s voices.” These include the likes of disco-era

star Sharon White, genre-fluid New Yorker Anita Sarko and drum’n’bass duo Kemistry & Storm. Another is DJ and broadcaster Colleen “Cosmo” Murphy, who was initially interviewed in 1999. She says that highlighting female talent “was obviously a concern” for Brewster and Broughton back then, “but people are starting to seek out these women because their stories haven’t necessarily consciously been swept under the carpet - but they have been.”

Murphy began on student radio at WNYU, before becoming a host of New York’s famous Loft parties, finding a mentor in founder David Mancuso. “I didn’t even know there were DJs that went out and did it for a living in clubs,” she says. “It just never occurred to me.”

Before the superstar era, most female DJs entered the industry by chance. Paulette Constable, known as DJ Paulette, had been a regular on the Manchester clubbing scene from the age of 15. She fell into DJing by helping out a friend who couldn’t afford to hire a professional. “I was offered 30 quid to play from 9pm till 2am, which was a lot of money at the time so it seemed like a no-brainer,” she says. Armed with two boxes of vinyl, paid for using her £150 student grant, Paulette threw together an eclectic set including everything from Tom Tom Club to the Three

Degrees. “I just learned on the job, and nobody left!”

Eventually she hosted the second room of *Flesh*, the *Haçienda*’s queer club night, alongside Kath McDermott, who pays tribute to promoter Lucy Scher. “She was really passionate about bringing women through,” McDermott says. “She was embedded in the queer community so could see that representation was important. It’s important to have women in every sphere, because they’re the ones that are going to drag everyone else through with them.”

In recent years, there have been efforts to establish equality through initiatives such as Smirnoff’s Equalising Music campaign. This year the *He.She.They* collective are supplying Ibiza’s only lineup with a 50/50 gender balance.

Despite this, there are still concerns about the gender pay gap. Every *Forbes* list of highest-paid DJs since 2012, which also accounts for endorsements and record sales, consists solely of men. “You have the Blessed Madonna working with artists such as Dua Lipa, but financially she’s not getting a look in, and we have to ask ourselves why,” says Paulette, who longs for a “female equivalent to Carl Cox, Pete Tong and Calvin Harris”.

The assumption that women are still underappreciated, though, is arguably a heteronormative one: in queer scenes, they’re thriving. McDermott thinks this disparity partly comes down to the way women tend to DJ. “Women will often play what they want to dance to, or enjoy, rather than have their heads down and only think about technical stuff,” she says, identifying “an openness about the passion that sometimes doesn’t cut through with [straight] guys.”

In recent years, there has been an increased emphasis on DJs’ technical ability, and women have often been scrutinised and subjected to sexist comments. Murphy recalls worrying about online abuse in the lead-up to her first Boiler Room set, and even DJs who have emerged in the age of social media are similarly wary. DJ



Kath McDermott at the Haçienda in the 1990s

and broadcaster Jamz Supernova, who all three women highlight as someone leading the charge for the next generation, points to a minor mistake she made in a live stream for *DJ Mag*. “I had one clanger and my thought instantly wasn’t on the people who were there vibing and who didn’t seem to notice, but on the comment section,” she says.

There is also the pressure to remain “relevant” to a young audience - but these older DJs refuse to be cowed. “Ten years ago, I was told that no promoter will ever employ a Black female DJ with grey hair,” Paulette says. “I just thought: I’m gonna grow the biggest fucking grey afro and I’m going to work better than I have ever worked in my entire life.” Jamz Supernova says that it’s important to her to be a mother figure to younger artists. “When I was going to raves, [I thought] there were no women,” she says. “Now I’m working my way back historically: it’s not as if they weren’t there, they just weren’t in my periphery.”

Is there yet more work to be done? “We should keep striving forward,” says Supernova. “I’m loving all the amazing south Asian and trans DJs who are appearing more on lineups.” All the women hail the change that has been happening in club culture. “There’s been a lot of advancement in



Jamz Supernova

the last five years,” says Murphy. “People who have been around for decades are starting to get more notice.” McDermott agrees: “The next generation has got it. I think they’ll be all right.”

While representation is important, these women are eager to not be defined by it, and hope to eventually move beyond the term “female DJ”. “I don’t put my records on daintily,” Paulette chuckles. “I scroll and I press play.” *Last Night a DJ Saved My Life* is out now, published by White Rabbit. To buy a copy for £21.75, go to guardianbookshop.com

PAOLO NUTINI

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