Playing by the Rules?
Genre Conventions in Contemporary DJ Performance

Feature Article

Manoli Moriaty and Nina Kehagia
Liverpool Hope University (UK) and University of Liverpool (UK)

Abstract

Genre conventions play a central role in shaping contemporary DJ performance, influencing how techniques and technologies are applied across styles such as techno, house and drum 'n' bass. While scholarship has examined questions of authenticity, automation and the shift from analogue to digital technologies, less attention has been given to how DJs adapt their practices in response to genre-specific expectations. Using a mixed-method approach that combined an anonymised online survey with five semi-structured interviews, this study explores how performers negotiate issues of skill, legitimacy and audience perception. Findings reveal that drum 'n' bass DJs emphasise abrupt transitions and rewinds, techno performers favour multilayered mixing and live processing, while house DJs prioritise smooth transitions and curation. Across genres, debates about automation remain, yet most participants framed DJing as a balance of technical ability and artistic judgement. We conclude that genre conventions continue to structure performance practice, though increasingly navigated with flexibility.

Keywords: DJ performance, digital technology, genre and practice, club culture, mixed methods

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Manoli Moriaty is a music producer, performer and scholar. Active since the early 2000s, he began DJing with mobile sound systems and later promoted Manchester events such as Hit & Run, Illuminaughty and Metanast. His compositions draw on niche offshoots of popular genres and avant-garde sonorities. He has published research on human–computer interaction, poly-disciplinary collaboration and DJ and turntablist communities. Manoli holds a PhD from the University of Salford and is a lecturer in music production at Liverpool Hope University. manolimoriaty.com

Nina Kehagia is a music and culture curator, strategist and PGR researcher at the University of Liverpool. Her research explores cultural heritage, music cities and dance music history. She is Head of Content at shesaid.so, a board member of the Liverpool City Region Music Board and broadcaster on Resonance 104.4 FM. ninakeh.com

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Introduction

The performance practices of electronic music and dance culture (EMDC) DJs have been the subject of substantial debate among practitioners, scholars and the general public. A prominent focus has been the transition from analogue to digital technologies, which has reshaped the role of the DJ, introduced new technical possibilities and provoked debates around authenticity, labour and virtuosity. As will be discussed, scholarly contributions have been influential in challenging reductive assumptions about digital performance and in highlighting how audience expectations have shifted with evolving tools and interfaces. Yet, while valuable, much of this research either treats DJing as a unified practice or focuses narrowly on particular subgenres. The ways in which DJs adapt their techniques and technological apparatus in relation to genre-specific conventions remain comparatively underexplored.

This article addresses that gap by investigating how DJs working within different genres belonging to the wider field of EMDC engage with performance technologies, media formats and audience interaction, and how their choices are shaped by both public discourse and internal scene norms. The specific subgenres we have focused on are techno, house and drum 'n' bass. In this context, we understand *genre* not simply as a category of music, but as a set of expectations and conventions that inform both the DJs' stylistic decisions and the audiences' interpretive framework. *Technique* refers to the embodied practices through which DJs manipulate sound, while *technology* encompasses both the hardware and software used to enact those techniques. Our study is guided by the following research questions:

- How do DJs utilise technology within their performances?
- How have recent developments in music technology affected DJs' performances?
- Are there significant differences between the techniques and technologies employed among DJs of a different (sub)genre?

The article begins with a literature review addressing five areas: audience perception of DJ technique; development of DJ instruments; preconceptions surrounding DJ practice and established conventions of EMDC genres. This is followed by an outline of our methodology, which combines an anonymised online survey with semi-structured interviews. The survey results are then presented, providing quantitative data on performance strategies and attitudes across EMDC genres, while the interviews offer qualitative insights into individual perspectives from DJs with different levels of experience. Together, these methods enable us to cross-reference self-reported practices with circulating discourses—both public and internal to DJ communities—and to reflect critically on our own assumptions as practitioner-researchers. The article concludes with our reflections on genre as a defining influence in contemporary DJ performance.

Technique and Audience Perception

DJ performance has developed over more than seventy years, gaining scholarly and cultural attention alike. The practice achieved broader legitimacy in the early 1980s alongside the rise of hip hop culture, notwithstanding the initial resistance of audiences. The typical DJ instrument—two turntables and a mixer—distanced itself from traditional notions of musical performance, as did the performer's new stage role as both creator and audience of the music, what Mark Butler describes as "listener orientation" (2014: 106). Hip-hop DJs' role in legitimising DJ performance cannot be understated, as the exaggerated gesturality of early scratch DJs made technical skill visible in ways comparable to that of traditional instrumentalists (Katz 2012). By contrast, in the preceding disco era, DJs were celebrated mainly for their curatorial expertise, while their technical abilities often remained opaque to general audiences (Lawrence 2013). By the mid-1990s, the term turntablist superseded that of scratch DJ, aimed to distinguish those performers who engaged with records as sound sources rather than simply as playback media, marking a broader shift toward recognising DJing as a form of musicianship (Katz 2019; de Llera Blanes 2017).

This wider recognition by audiences proved short-lived, however, with the emergence of digital DJ systems in the early 2000s complicating the legibility of performance. Systems such as Final Scratch and CDJs sparked debates over authenticity and automation (van Veen and Attias 2011 and 2012), noting how these tools divided communities: some saw them as "enhancing", while others feared they diminished human agency (Farrugia and Swiss 2005: 37). At the same time, the core skills demanded by vinyl DJing–tactility, reliance on visual cues, and particularly the central technique of manual beatmatching–remained crucial to how audiences perceived skill (Montano 2010; Butler 2006: 325). Other studies posit that while concerns over automation have indeed lessened, newer tools introduced other challenges. Butler (2014) and D'Errico (2022) argue that digital automation has increased the opacity between action and result, reducing audiences' ability to assess performer input. Rietveld (2016) similarly observes that the value placed on beatmatching has diminished, and while contemporary tools afford looping, cueing and real-time processing, they also obscure visible effort, fuelling debates about authenticity. Butler adds that DJs must now balance sonic quality with performative clarity, a view supported by our own experience of DJing, recognising that many advanced techniques go unnoticed by audiences lacking specific performance literacy.

A similar phenomenon occurs within the context of classical music, where trained performers use subtle cues for timing and phrasing (Lisboa, Demos and Chaffin 2018), which remain largely invisible to general listeners. Henderson and Gabora further note that audiences often conflate authenticity with technicality, while expert listeners are better able to distinguish the two, and they define authenticity as what feels "natural" or "true to an essence" (2013: 2524), reinforcing Rietveld's point that DJs today must convey presence through gestures and stage positioning, partly shaped by marketing and visual culture (2016). Rietveld suggests that DJs increasingly resemble "digital music performers", using

dramatic movements that may not directly affect sound but fulfil audience expectations. The importance of visible engagement is further supported by Rudnicki, Murrath and Poels (2025), who show that perceived performance quality rises when DJs exhibit gestural involvement. Gates, Subramanian and Gutwin (2006) similarly describe crowd monitoring as a form of embodied knowledge. Parallels with orchestral conducting can also be drawn: DJs, like conductors, often use theatrical gestures to convey intention. Such gestures, though non-sonic, shape audience perception (Vines et al. 2005; Luck and Toiviainen 2006; Kumar and Morrison 2016), echoing Zander's (2000) and Epstein's (2009) framing of gesture as psychological influence or "projected intention". Yet, unlike conductors, DJs receive immediate audience feedback. Clubgoers "vote with their feet" (Rietveld 2013: 3) and as Farrugia (2012) notes, DJs treat crowd movement as a live cue. In this way, DJ gestures are both expressive and responsive, anchored in a dynamic, affective exchange between performer and audience.

Contemporary DJ Instruments

The instruments used in DJ performance have undergone a significant transformation over the past fifteen years. Shaped by changes in media formats, software and audience expectations, the traditional setup of two turntables and a mixer has been extended, hybridised or replaced as new tools emerged. Earlier innovations emphasised compatibility and durability; recent ones prioritise creative manipulation, shifting the DJ's role from selector to live arranger and audio sculptor, closer to the notion of live music performance (van Veen and Attias 2011).

A key turning point in the design of playback devices came with the rise of CD players for DJs, particularly Pioneer's CDJ-1000. Unlike earlier players such as the CDJ-500, these units introduced vinyl-style jog wheels and cue-point memory, enabling DJs to mark, recall and manipulate playback speed and direction akin to analogue turntables. This offered new precision and responsiveness, supporting creative remixing and real-time restructuring of pre-recorded music in ways that were previously inaccessible to vinyl DJing. The format also marked a shift from tactile cueing via headphones and needle drops toward greater visualisation of waveform data on integrated screens, setting a new standard for club performance equipment. Later models added support for digital files and external storage, completing the transition from CD decks to media players, and subsequent generations incorporated looping, auto-sync and quantisation. Though controversial at first, these features soon became integral: looping in particular allowed performers to isolate and repeat elements, transforming linear recordings into modular live resources, in line with broader electronic production practices built on repetition and variation.

Changes in mixer design were also responsible for a shift in DJ performance. Earlier DJs' audio processing was restricted to rudimentary equaliser spectral manipulation, with many performers also incorporating external effect units for a wider range of processing. By contrast, many contemporary DJ mixers include effects that afford a greater degree of signal manipulation, via both traditional tonal and time-based processors—filters, delays,

phasers, reverbs—as well as more modern transformative effects, such as beat repeaters, rhythm gates and waveshapers, as well as synthesiser tones, like those found in Rane's Seventy A-Track Signature Edition mixer. Moreover, these integrated units benefit from networking, with the media players able to communicate information about each track's tempo and grid position to the mixer, thereby allowing for the effects' modulation rate to be synchronized to the music. These tools support both aesthetic enhancement and structural functions, such as signalling transitions or building breakdowns. Additionally, the rise of DJ software like Traktor, Serato and Rekordbox included metadata libraries and detailed waveform displays. While some critics argue that these tools deskill performers and turn DJing from aural to visual, many performers today exploit their affordances to develop more sophisticated performance strategies.

More recent developments are seen in hybrid controllers. Systems such as Native Instruments' S4 and Roland's DJ-808, not only combine playback and mixing interfaces within a single unit, but also integrate elements of production and performance equipment, including samplers, sequencers and drum machines. Largely inspired by earlier approaches which exploited such studio devices for stage performance, hybrid systems further blur the line between DJing and live electronic performance, inviting comparisons with hardware setups previously used in live techno, electro and hip-hop performance.

Despite these innovations, many DJs still favour minimal setups (Morse 2023), valuing tactile immediacy and reduced complexity. Some deliberately avoid advanced features to maintain clarity, restrain the use of effects, and focus on musicality, phrasing and audience connection. Rather than replacing earlier practices, modern instruments have expanded the DJ's expressive toolkit. From cue points to hybrid controllers, each development has reshaped the relationship between music, technology and audience, going on to redefine what it means to perform with pre-recorded sound in a live context.

Preconceptions on DJ practice

Contemporary DJ practice remains shaped by entrenched assumptions about effort, creativity and the legitimacy of new technologies. These preconceptions reflect contrasting views of skill and artistry among practitioners and audiences alike. The advent of digital systems such as Final Scratch catalysed debates over the loss of "human agency" in DJing (Farrugia and Swiss 2005). For many, such tools threatened the embodied labour of vinyl, particularly beatmatching, long regarded as the "fundamental skill of EDM mixing" (Butler 2006: 325). As van Veen and Attias note, automating key processes alters not only performance but also the ritual and risk once integral to mixing (2012). The use of automatic tempo synchronisation ("sync") is, for some, emblematic of this shift, equated with a loss of craft.

Negative portrayals in popular media reinforce such views. Films like *Kevin & Perry Go Large* (Bye 2000) and comedies such as *People Just Do Nothing* (Clough 2014) present DJs as incompetent or delusional, while even more informed depictions, such as *We Are Your Friends* (Joseph 2015), reduce performance to a few gestures. Such representations

contribute to the perception of DJing as effortless or gimmick-driven, echoing anxieties that technological mediation dilutes creativity.

These tensions also persist within DJ communities. While some performers embrace tools like sync to reallocate attention toward layering, looping or effects, others view them as shortcuts incompatible with authentic practice. Van Veen, for instance, likens sync to "plagiarism", whereas Attias argues that avoiding such tools limits creative potential (see van Veen and Attias 2011). Crucially, these debates are often driven by audience perceptions. DJs may adapt their approaches—choosing particular instruments or emphasising gestures with little sonic function—to maintain performance legibility for diverse audiences. Carl Cox, for example, avoids certain controllers because audiences "better comprehend the DJ's inputs" when jog wheels are used (PLAYdifferently 2017).

Online forums and social media amplify these gatekeeping discourses. As Weatherill-Hunt notes, criticism of digital tools often rests on "superficial value judgements" and "outdated notions of musical creation" (2023: 2). DJs sometimes conform to these expectations rather than challenge them, reinforcing the very preconceptions they privately reject. Taken together, these dynamics show that DJing remains a contested practice, validated by accessibility yet undermined by persistent doubts about effort, skill and authenticity. Rather than resolving these contradictions, many DJs negotiate them in performance, adapting technique and presentation to the expectations of audiences, peers and the wider cultural landscape.

Genre Conventions

In discussing preconceptions and some of the negative connotations these carry insofar DJ practice is concerned, it is important to note that genres within EMDC serve as powerful cultural signifiers. Emerging from distinct historical trajectories, geographic origins and social contexts, we understand genres not only as stylistic categories restricted to sonic elements, but also as frameworks that shape audience expectations and inform how DJs construct and deliver performances. As Rietveld argues, genre is "socially constructed through specific technologies, rituals and practices" (1998: 5), impacting both musical form and performance technique. Montano similarly notes that each genre develops its own codes of behaviour—aural, visual and technical—that frame what is considered authentic or skilled (2009). These conventions are reinforced through community discourse and practice, influencing everything from track selection and mixing style to the structure of a set. As a result, what might be seen as virtuosic or technically adept in one genre may be considered banal or unskilled in another. This section outlines genre-specific mixing approaches, highlighting how performance conventions reflect broader aesthetic and cultural norms.

Perceptions of skill and virtuosity in DJ performance are not only shaped by what is heard, but also by what is seen or imagined. In digital contexts, where gesture and sound are often decoupled, traditional markers of musical labour become less legible. Dennis Smalley's

concept of *technological listening* (1997), developed in electroacoustic music, refers to a listening mode attuned to the sonic affordances and manipulations made possible through technology. In compositions where sound sources are obscured or transformed, listeners may interpret subtle sonic cues as evidence of creative agency. As a result, electroacoustic composers tend to avoid making their sound design processes transparent. Applied to DJing, technologically literate listeners may detect signs of virtuosic control even in the absence of visible gesture, while less informed observers may perceive this as passivity or lacking effort. Virtuosity in DJing thus often operates beneath the surface, intelligible only through shared cultural knowledge of tools, techniques and genre aesthetics. This dynamic becomes especially relevant when considering genre-specific expectations.

To illustrate genre-specific DJ conventions, we discuss examples from techno and drum 'n' bass, two genres cited by interview participants and survey responders. It should be noted, however, that these constitute broad generalisations for each genre, and covering the wider specificities of their constituent subgenres would require a much more extensive study. Instead, we are providing these as examples to support the arguments we are discussing here.

Drum 'n' bass DJ sets are often marked by pronounced techniques, two of the most distinctive being rewinds and double drops. A rewind involves returning a track to its beginning after a climax, often with the audible reversing of the record, heightening tension and reinforcing appreciation among performers and audiences. In jungle, the precursor to drum 'n' bass, this practice symbolised shared energy rooted in Jamaican sound system tradition. Christodoulou (quoted in Fraser 2004) notes that MCs would call for a "rewind", signalling the DJ to replay a massive tune from its opening bars so the crowd could relive peak moments. This convention is also common in genres with similar cultural roots, such as UK garage and dubstep (Fintoni 2015). Comparable cultural weight in drum 'n' bass is carried by the double drop, which requires aligning two tracks so both peak sections coincide (Frankland 2016), while using equalisation to avoid frequency clashes. Like the rewind, the double drop is not unique to drum 'n' bass, but it is widely regarded as a demonstration of technical command, particularly among genre-literate audiences.

Techno also carries strong DJing conventions, with performers traditionally expected to mix multiple tracks simultaneously (Van Veen and Attias 2011), often incorporating external sound-generating and processing devices. In a feature for Resident Advisor (Lynch 2019), Jeff Mills emphasises this layered method: "advanced DJs" frequently use three or more playback devices to blend track fragments, effects, and percussion into a continuous soundscape, treating records as modular building blocks rather than self-contained compositions. Techno tracks are often referred to as tools, with stripped-down versions carrying this distinction, such as "Arrp (Tool Edit)" by Drumcell and Thomas Hoffknecht (2022), which preserves only rhythm elements of the original track.

This multi-layered approach in mixing is further evident in the performance *Contakt*, created by Richie Hawtin and other artists from the Minus record label roster, as well as becoming the focus of the film *Making Contakt* (Demirel, Hawtin and Guckian 2010). The performance involves a total of eleven audio sources: four music tracks from Traktor,

three external synthesisers and drum machines, plus four effect channels. In describing his technical approach, Hawtin explains that using sync allows him to concentrate on other aspects, such as looping and mixing stripped track elements, to "delve into a different area of creativity and hopefully come up with something that wasn't possible before" (Koch 2008). This approach embraces technological innovation beyond the norms of analogue practice, recontextualising recorded music through the processing, generation and mixing capacities of modern DJ instruments, whose ability to keep performance elements precisely synchronised makes such experimentation possible.

Nevertheless, many techno DJs still prefer to neither use the sync function nor perform multilayered mixes, without however being critical of technology. Dave Clarke states that he is not interested in the debate between manually beatmatching versus using sync and "with talented people that use sync, I'm not gonna have a go at them at all, I think that would be a really lame, flat-earth approach" (Keeling 2017). He also adds that the lack of automated synchronisation instils liveness in the performance, and "working" his sets is a matter of "work ethic" for him, while suggesting that the sync function is often used by "tech house people, and... EDM people" (that is, the subgenre that has in recent time appropriated the collective term of EMDC), questioning whether the latter actually perform mixes while on stage. This statement reinforced our earlier assertion on DJs performance approaches being influenced not only by audience perceptions, but also through their own sensitivities on authenticity.

Genre conventions often function as stabilising frameworks that guide DJ technique and audience expectations, yet adherence to them is not necessarily restrictive. For many performers, aligning with genre norms is a deliberate way of honouring the histories and communities that shape a music's identity, while also fostering affective continuity with audiences through recognisable stylistic cues. Deviation from these norms can be both risky and transformative: DJs who subvert expectations by introducing unfamiliar techniques, blending outside styles, or re-purposing technology may be perceived as either innovative or transgressive. As Smalley's (1997) concept of technological listening suggests, audiences attuned to digital manipulation may interpret such gestures as virtuosic, while less technologically literate observers may find them disjointed or unskilled. DJs who challenge genre expectations thus navigate between innovation and alienation, their reception hinging on whether departures are read as creative evolution or as violations of core musical values. These dynamics are further explored in the following section through insights from interview participants and survey respondents.

Methodology

Our study uses a mixed-method design informed by grounded theory, combining an anonymised online survey with five semi-structured interviews. Grounded theory was selected to minimise early theoretical bias and allow patterns to emerge from participant responses (Glaser and Strauss 1967). While our experience as DJs shaped initial assumptions,

we allowed the data to guide interpretation and refine research questions. The survey was conducted in two rounds: the first included open-ended responses; the second, informed by themes from round one, used multiple-choice and scaled questions to enable clearer cross-comparison.

The first survey was designed using language familiar to DJs and club contexts, drawing from our experience. It was trialled among professional and social contacts, yielding 46 responses. Findings from this phase informed vocabulary, genre categories and technique descriptors used in the second round.

The second survey, shared via DJ-oriented forums and social media, targeted a wide range of genres and experience levels. It consisted of four sections:

- Section 1 gathered demographic and contextual data—years of experience, typical performance settings, equipment preferences and format choices—to explore correlations between tools, experience and performance context.
- Section 2 focused on genre orientation, asking whether DJs performed one or multiple genres and which genre informed their style. To ensure accurate data, respondents were invited to submit multiple entries if their approach varied significantly by genre, format, or setting.
- Section 3 addressed performance techniques and equipment use: number of tracks mixed simultaneously, EQ preferences, use of volume faders, crossfaders, effects, looping, tempo matching (manual versus automated) and set preparation. These questions captured both functional choices and stylistic tendencies.
- Section 4 explored attitudes toward DJing, drawing from practitioner discourse and peer-reviewed literature. Topics included the balance between art and technique, the role of virtuosity, audience engagement and whether DJs consider themselves musicians. Respondents also shared views on the impact of technology: whether it simplifies DJing, and whether that's seen as a positive.

In addition, we conducted five semi-structured interviews with DJs. The selection criteria for the interview participants focused on electing a representative sample of diverse genre affiliations and levels of professional experience. Our interviews explored perceptions of skill, innovation, legitimacy, and how performers interpret audience feedback and genre norms. Fourteen open-ended questions guided the conversations, covering themes such as personal style, stage presence, conformity or resistance to genre expectations, and comparisons between DJing and traditional musicianship. These interviews were shaped by earlier survey findings, as well as experience gained through our own practice, offering deeper insight into how DJs understand and navigate their role. All procedures complied with Liverpool Hope University ethics guidelines; survey responses were anonymised, interview participation was voluntary with informed consent, and interviewees able to withdraw or request anonymity up to 30 days before publication.

Survey Results

Between the two survey rounds, we amassed a total of 158 responses that addressed a wide range of EMDC genres, as well as some responses from DJs of other types of music, such as reggae, hip-hop and disco (see fig. 1). Almost three quarters of the responses concentrated on the genres of techno, house and drum 'n' bass. As this poses a limit in deducting useful conclusions in the other genres, our analysis will mainly focus on the three genres that provided sufficient data.

The first datasets (figs. 2–4) show responses on music formats, playback instruments and approaches to curation and set preparation. Clear genre-based trends emerge. Drum 'n' bass and house DJs more often blend multiple styles, while techno DJs typically remain within one genre. Techno is most associated with music events; house with casual settings and drum 'n' bass with broadcasting and corporate contexts. Across all genres, improvisation is favoured over predefined playlists, though drum 'n' bass leans toward full-library improvisation; techno toward curated subsets and house toward a balance of both. Set planning follows similar lines: drum 'n' bass and techno DJs favour improvisation, while house DJs mix planning with spontaneity. Digital formats dominate, particularly in house; vinyl is rare, though some DJs use multiple formats. CDJs/media players are most common in techno, controllers appear more in house and techno and drum 'n' bass shows greater use of turntables, hybrids and MIDI controllers.

Two clarifications are worth noting for this dataset: first, the question regarding genre variety was included to allow DJs who blend multiple genres within a set to reflect on that practice directly, rather than imply a fixed genre allegiance. Second, the survey deliberately separated questions on playlist preparation from those addressing live performance strategies, to prevent respondents from conflating the act of curating a playlist with rigidly following one during a set. This strategy is also evident in the next set of questions (figs. 5-10), presenting the responses to questions around using performance instruments and their affordances.

Most responders cue tracks using headphones, with minimal reliance on visual aids or monitor speakers, indicating continued adherence to traditional methods. House DJs predominantly mix two tracks at a time, while techno and drum 'n' bass DJs more often report mixing three or more, suggesting genre-based expectations around layering and complexity. Equaliser and volume adjustments are generally smooth across all genres, with house and techno favouring gradual blending. Drum 'n' bass, however, shows a slightly greater use of pronounced EQ changes, aligning with its dynamic mixing style. Crossfader use varies, as house DJs favour smooth transitions, while techno and drum 'n' bass participants more often report rarely using it or opting for quick cuts. Key matching is not a priority for many respondents, though selection-based matching is still widely practised. Manual key adjustments remain rare. Effects are used occasionally by most, with house and drum 'n' bass DJs favouring onboard mixer effects, and techno DJs showing greater engagement with external units.

Manual tempo matching remains dominant across all genres, despite available automation tools. Drum 'n' bass sets tend to maintain consistent tempo, while techno and house DJs are more open to small or significant tempo variations. Finally, most DJs retain track

recognisability during performance, though techno shows a stronger tendency toward transformation, echoing some of the sentiments expressed by the previously discussed techno performers. Similarly, looping and sampling are used most frequently by techno DJs, with house and drum 'n' bass reporting more moderate engagement with this particular technique.

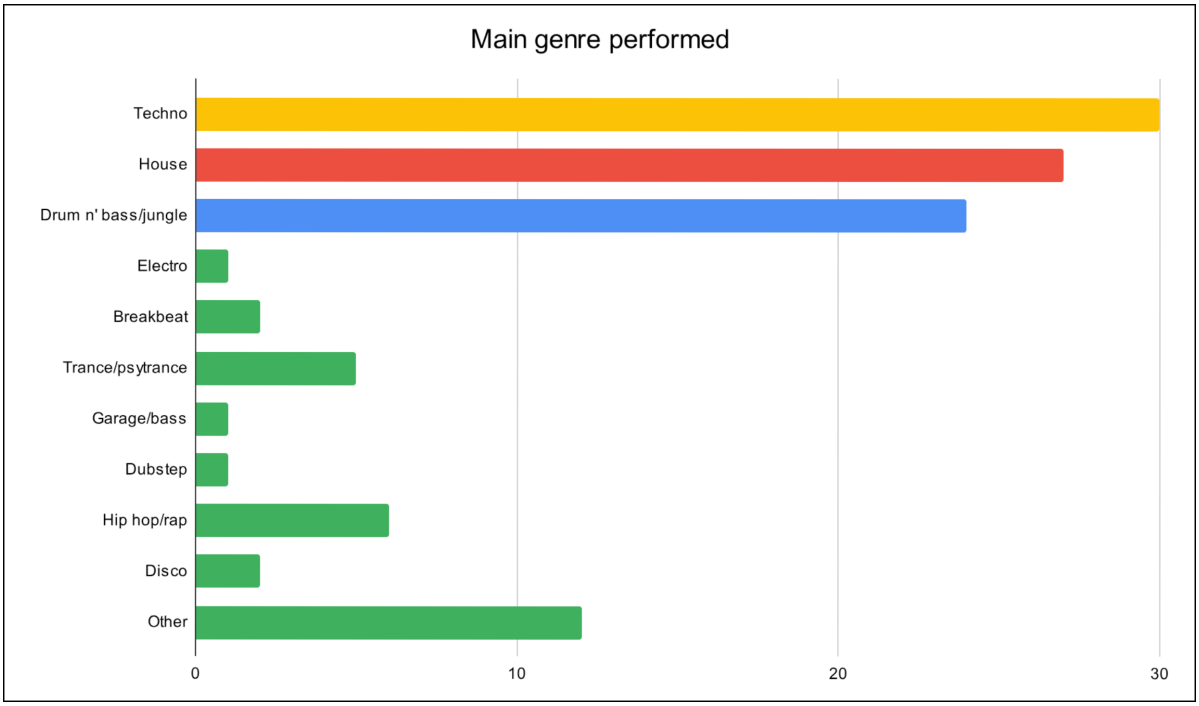

Figure 1. Survey question 2-1b: "Which genre(s) you mainly perform in your sets?"

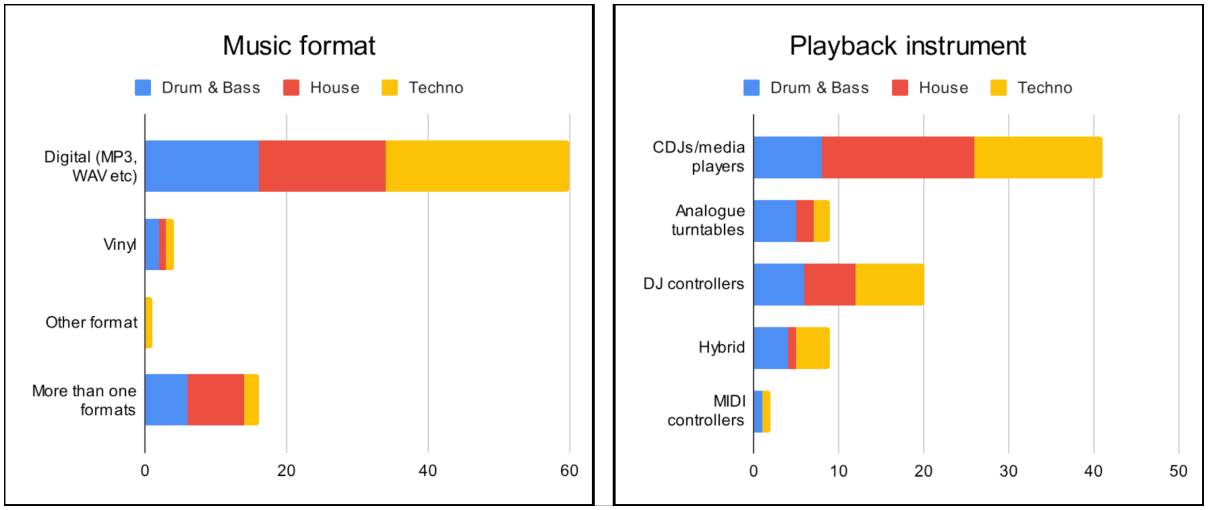

Figure 2. (left) Survey question 1-3: "What is your preferred music format?"
(right) Survey question 1-4: "What if your preferred type of playback instrument?"

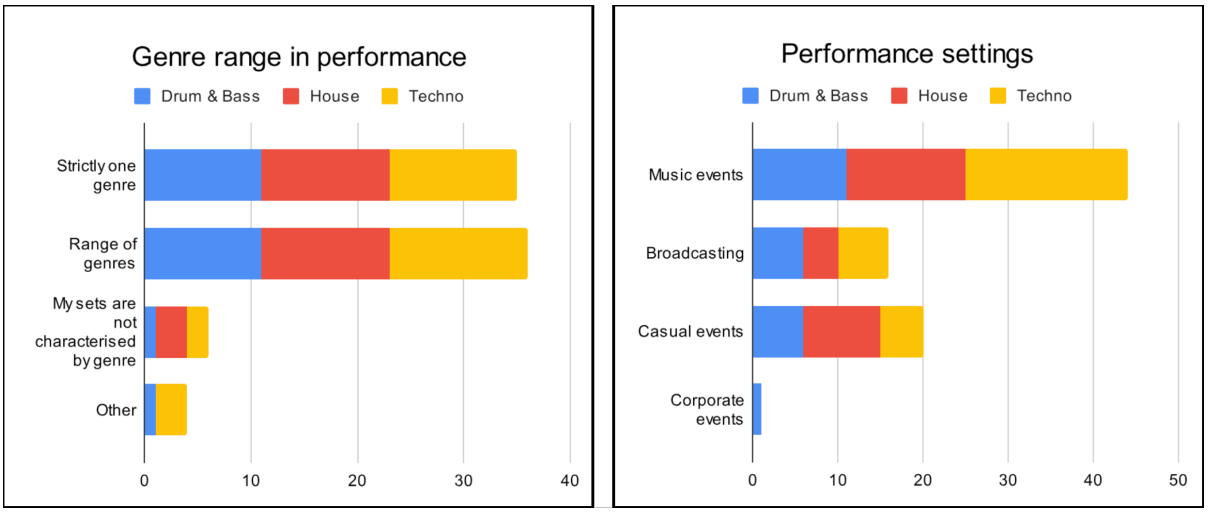

FIGURE 3. (LEFT) SURVEY QUESTION 2-1A: "DO YOU TYPICALLY PERFORM ONE GENRE (INCLUDING ITS SUBGENRES), OR DO YOU COMBINE A RANGE OF DIFFERENT GENRES?" (RIGHT) SURVEY QUESTION 1-2: "IN WHICH SETTINGS DO YOU MAINLY PERFORM?"

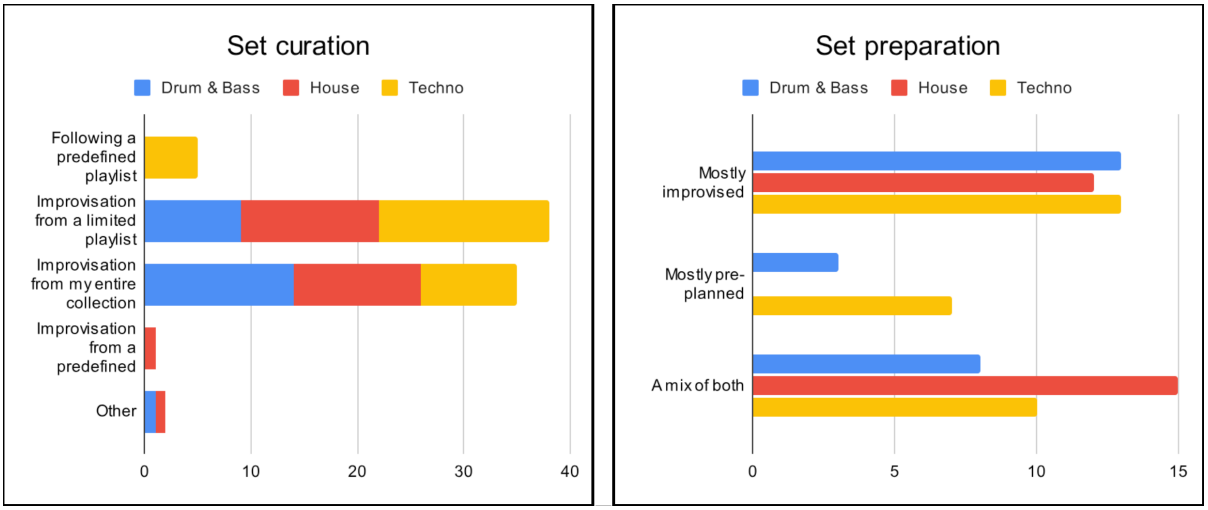

FIGURE 4. (LEFT) SURVEY QUESTION 2-1A: "HOW DO YOU APPROACH CURATING A SET?" (RIGHT) SURVEY QUESTION 3-12: "DO YOU PREPARE YOUR SETS?"

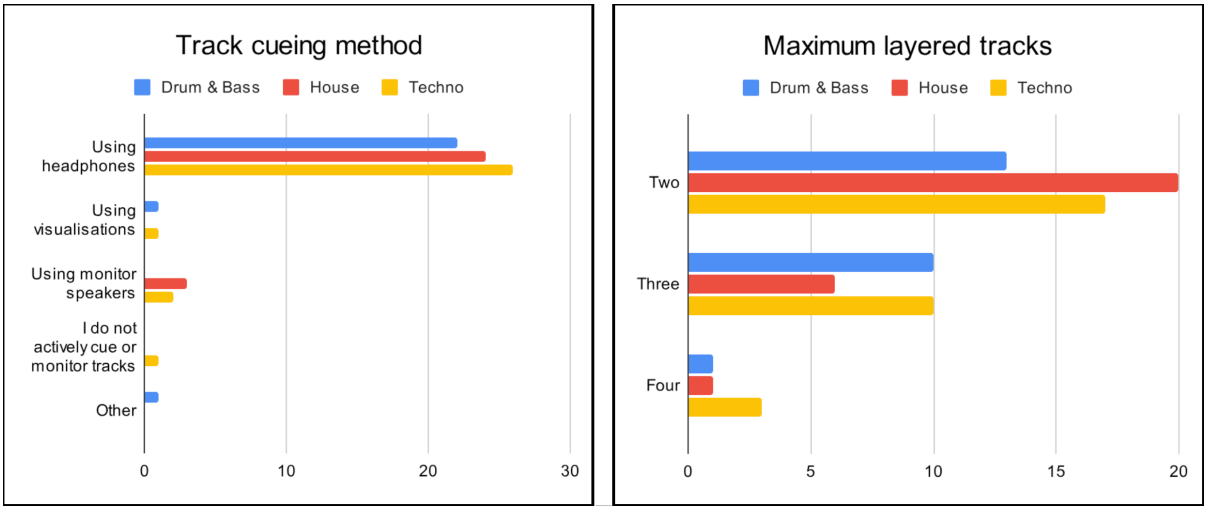

FIGURE 5. (LEFT) SURVEY QUESTION 3-7: "HOW DO YOU CUE TRACKS?" (RIGHT) SURVEY QUESTION 3-1: "UP TO HOW MANY TRACKS WILL YOU MIX SIMULTANEOUSLY?"

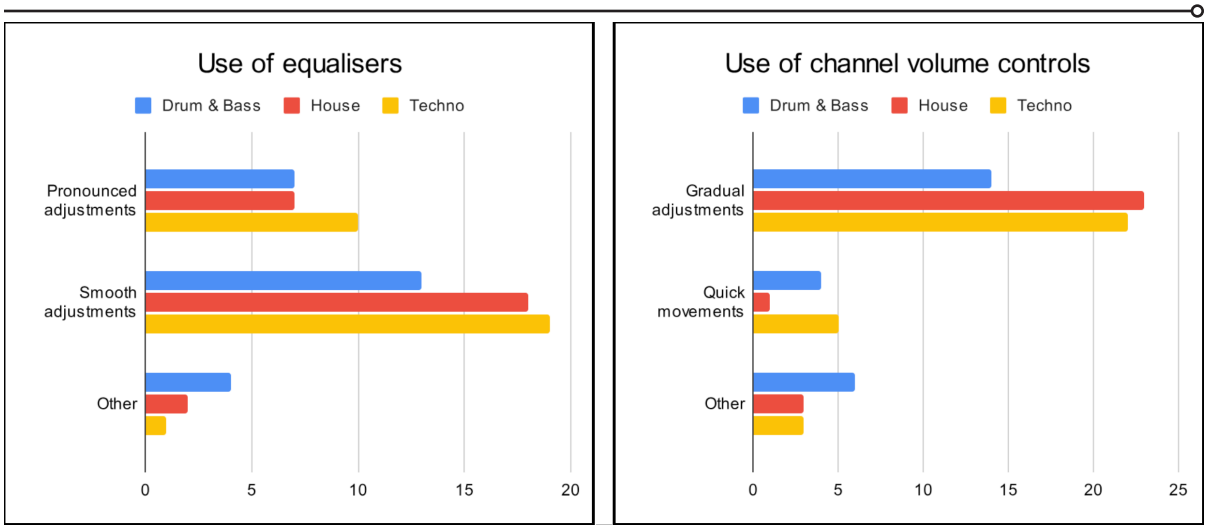

Figure 6. (left) Survey question 3-2: "How do you use equaliser controls?" (right) Survey question 3-3: "How do you use channel volume controls?"

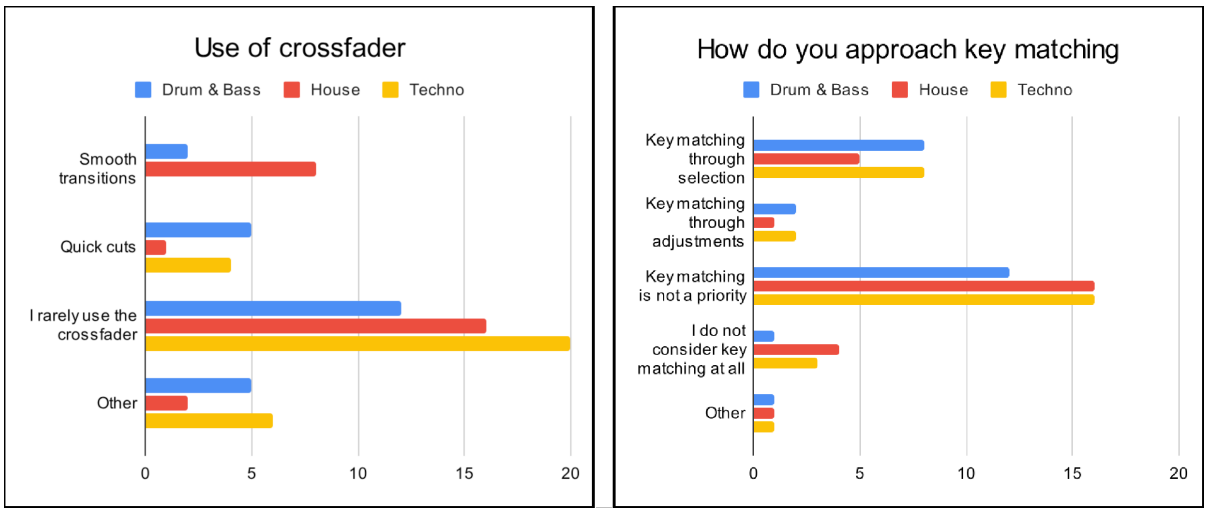

Figure 7. (left) Survey question 3-6: "How do you use the crossfader?" (right) Survey question 3-10: "Do you use consider key matching?"

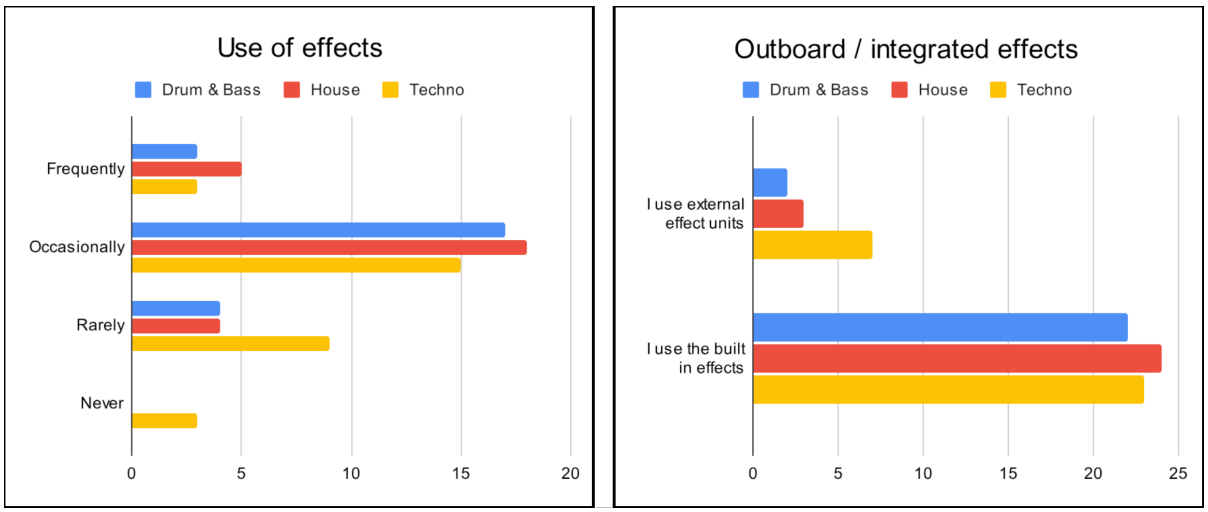

Figure 8. (left) Survey question 3-4: "How often do you use effects?" (right) Survey question 3-5: "If using effects, do you use an external unit or the mixer's built-in system?"

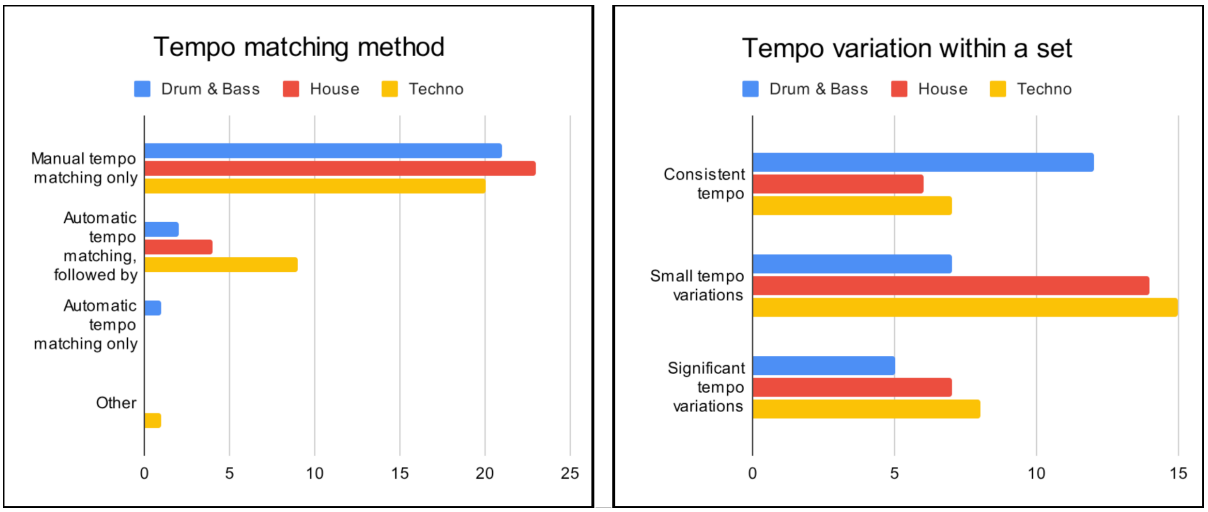

FIGURE 9. (LEFT) RESPONSES TO QUESTION 3-9: "HOW DO YOU APPROACH TEMPO MATCHING?" (RIGHT) RESPONSES TO QUESTION 3-11: "HOW DO YOU APPROACH TEMPO OVER THE DURATION OF A SET?"

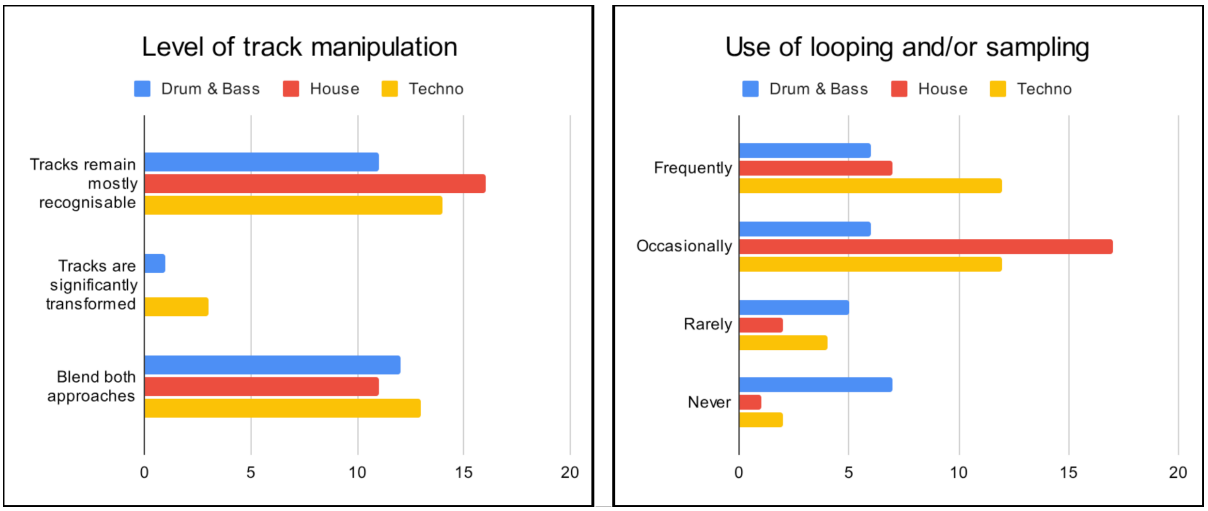

FIGURE 10. (LEFT) SURVEY QUESTION 3-13: "HOW DO YOU APPROACH TRACK MANIPULATION?" (RIGHT) SURVEY QUESTION 3-9: "HOW OFTEN YOU USE LOOPING AND/OR SAMPLING?"

The last set of data (figures 11-18) concerns wider questions around DJ performances, specifically the preconceptions around use of technology, audience engagement, and the role of the DJ among other musical practices. Across all three genres, there is a strong consensus that DJing incorporates both artistic and technical elements, with "both equally" selected most frequently. Similarly, most DJs prioritise a balance of creativity and technical skill in their performances. Techno DJs slightly lean toward technical skill, while drum 'n' bass DJs show a small skew toward creativity. A strong plurality in all genres prefers a blend of traditional and contemporary approaches, though techno performers appear more inclined toward innovation. Virtuosity is largely seen as important but not central: most respondents selected

"neutral", suggesting ambivalence or context-dependent interpretations. Responses to crowd engagement show that house DJs most strongly prioritise audience interaction, while techno DJs demonstrate a wider spread of answers, including some who deem it unimportant. This may reflect the differing performance environments and aesthetic values among genres. The question of whether DJs are musicians received mixed reactions. While many techno DJs agreed or strongly agreed, responses in drum 'n' bass and house were more evenly distributed, with significant neutrality and some disagreement. This indicates ongoing tension in how DJing is framed relative to traditional musicianship. On the topic of technology, most respondents agreed that DJing has become "easier", particularly in the techno group. However, opinions were more divided regarding whether this ease is positive. While many respondents across genres held a neutral stance, house DJs appeared slightly more favourable, suggesting a nuanced relationship between perceived accessibility and authenticity.

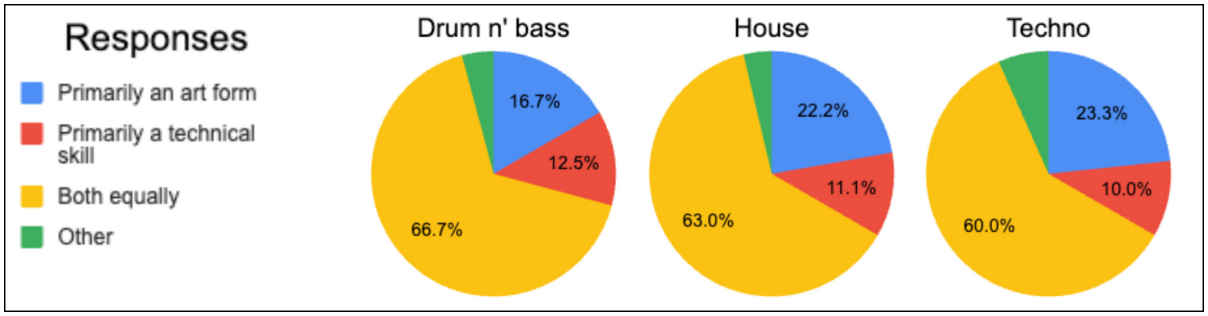

Figure 11. Survey question 4-1: "Do you view DJing more as an art form, a technical skill, or both?"

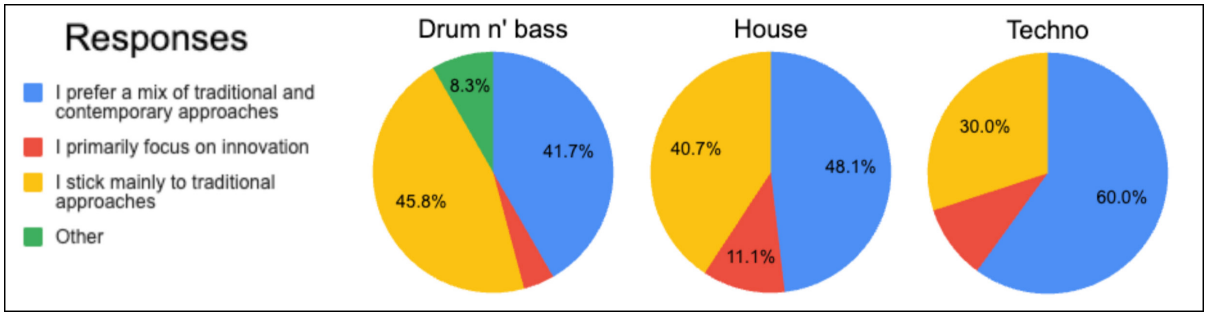

Figure 12. Survey question 4-2: "Do you focus on contemporary or innovative approaches that challenge or evolve DJing norms?"

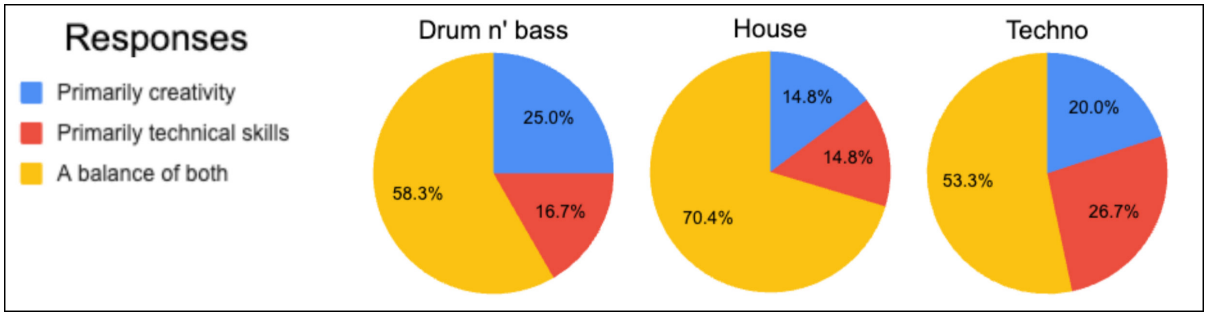

Figure 13. Survey question 4-3: "Do you prioritise creativity or technical skills in your performances?"

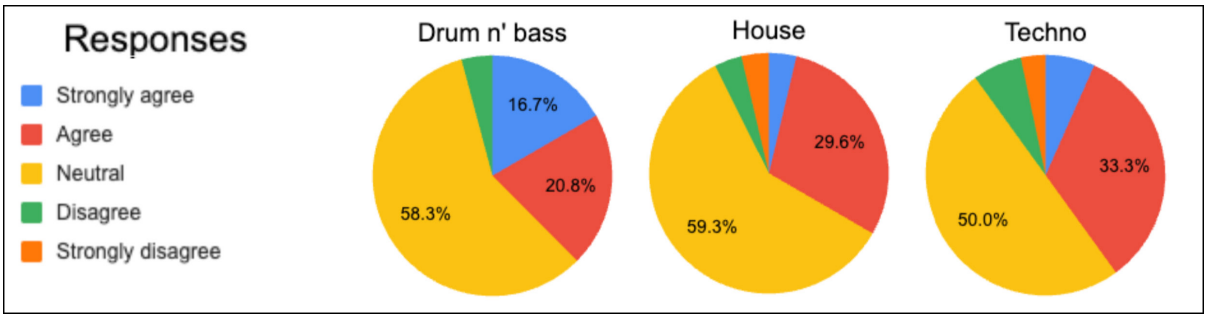

FIGURE 14. SURVEY QUESTION 4-4: "IS VIRTUOSITY CENTRAL TO YOUR PERFORMANCES?"

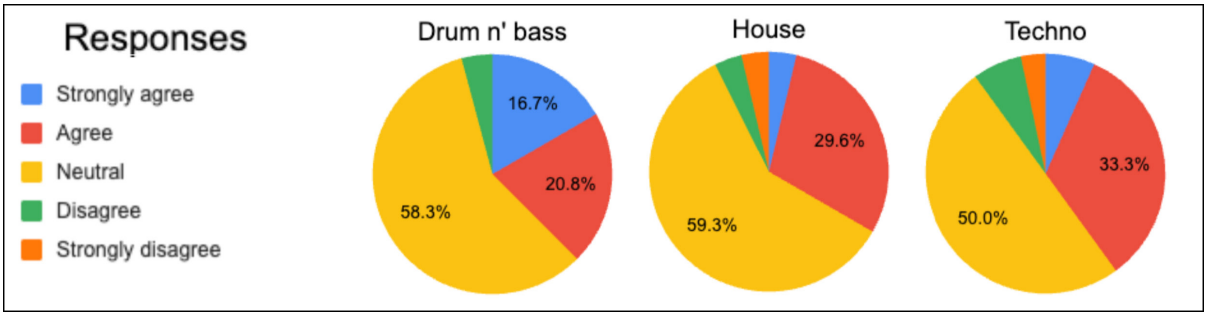

FIGURE 15. SURVEY QUESTION 4-5: "HOW IMPORTANT IS CROWD ENGAGEMENT TO YOUR PERFORMANCE?"

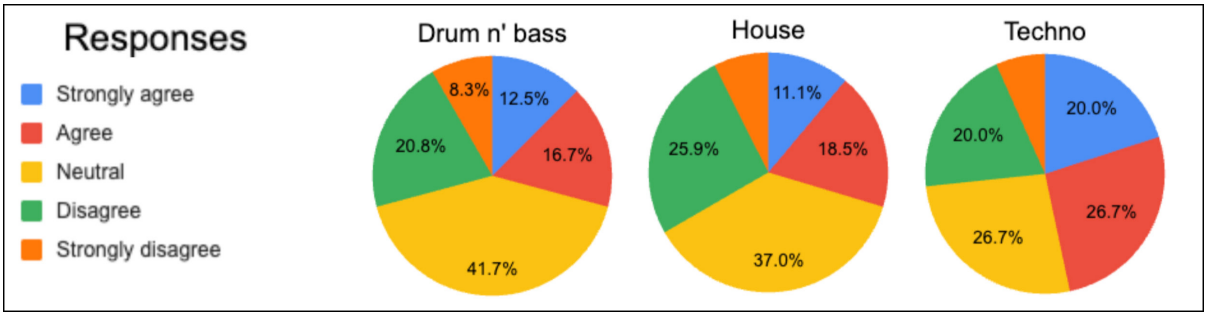

FIGURE 16. RESPONSES TO QUESTION 4-6: "DO YOU AGREE WITH THE STATEMENT THAT DJS ARE MUSICIANS?"

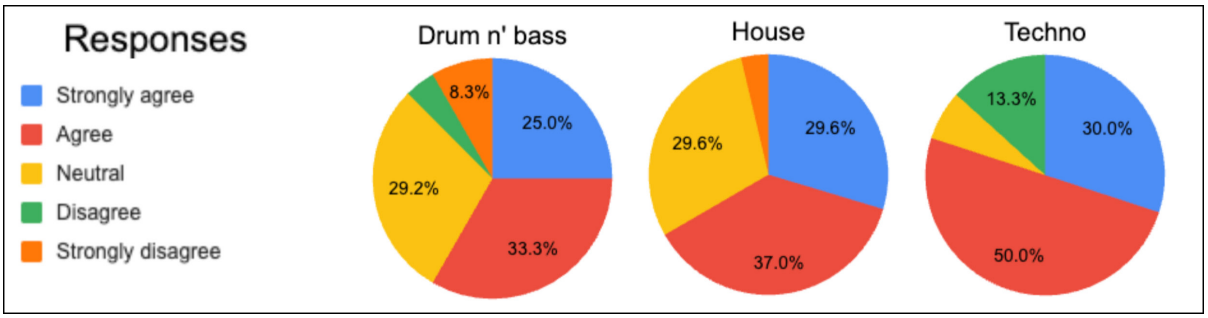

FIGURE 17. SURVEY QUESTION 4-7: "DO YOU AGREE WITH THE STATEMENT THAT TECHNOLOGY HAS MADE DJING "EASY"?"

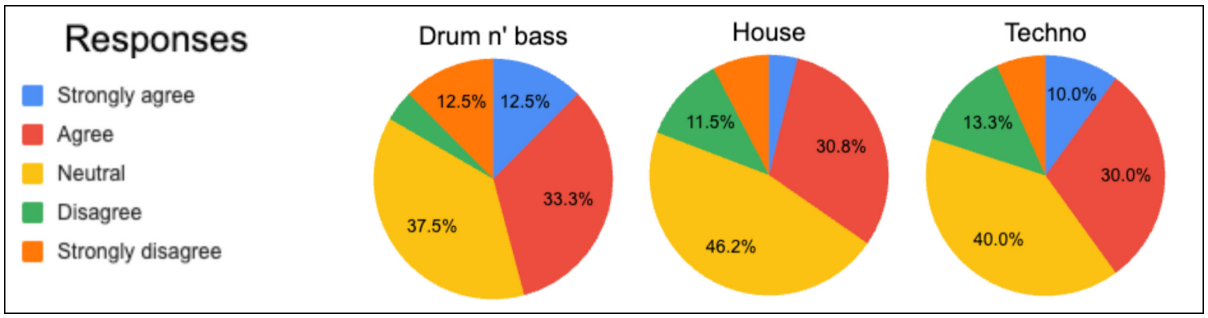

Figure 18. Survey question 4-8: "If you feel that modern equipment makes DJing "easy", do you agree that this is a positive thing?"

Interviews

In our survey, we also included the option for responders to state whether they are willing to further express their opinions surrounding DJ practice by participating in interviews with the authors. From those responding to our call for interviews, five participants were selected, as to represent a range genre affiliations and levels of professional experience. Our interviewees were Raj Pannu, Thomas Node, Ray Arkaei and Dan Bean, as well as MF who preferred to remain anonymous, all of whom we acknowledge for their insightful contributions to our research. This summary will aim to highlight how some of the answers the interviewees provided correlate with our survey results, as well as some divergent insights that emerged during our conversations.

One of the contested topics that concerned our inquiry is whether DJs are deemed musicians. We posed this question to our interviewees, who provided diverging opinions which however points towards a particular aspect:

> **Raj Pannu:** I would say absolutely, yes. But obviously, it depends on the DJ.... There's that kind of impression or attitude where people say, 'well, you're just playing other people's music, and there's none of your own input in there'... maybe the people who dismiss DJs as not proper musicians need to see the proper DJs, the ones who actually do it well. Because maybe they're just not exposed to the ones who are the true artists.[1]

> **Ray Arkaei:** If you're a pure DJ who is selecting music, you're not a musician. You're a selector, you're a curator.... But a lot of people eventually transition into making music based on their vast experience listening to so much. So, DJs have the potential to become musicians. Let's just say that. Not everybody uses that potential, but by default, someone who picks a sequence of songs to be played in a specific order, whether they do it live, pre-arrange it at home, or even play back a recorded set, if that's all they do, they're not a musician... on an abstract level, if you're a DJ, you're not a musician. But you have the capability to be a musician. You have the technology to become a musician.[2]

Thomas Node: You've got to have an ear for music. You don't have to learn how to read sheet music, but you do have to understand how music works–how it flows, how people respond to it. That's all part of musicianship. And if you're producing music as well, how can you not be considered a musician? DJing and production usually go hand in hand. If you've been DJing for a long time, you have to understand music to a certain degree. That's enough for me to say you're a musician: you're playing music, curating it, and presenting it to an audience. I mean, it's different from playing an instrument, but I'd still consider DJs musicians.[3]

MF: Not really, no. I say that as someone who has played guitar for about 35 years.... I don't really see DJing as the same thing as playing a musical instrument. You don't need to know any theory at all. I mean, it's helpful if you're playing melodic music, it helps to have an ear for what tracks could go well together.... But I don't see DJing as quite the same field as playing a musical instrument.[4]

Dan Bean: If you'll permit me to say, I don't actually think it's that interesting a question. I think the much more interesting question is 'is it good? Does it move me? Does it speak to me?' [5]

Our responders allude that DJs are in fact not musicians purely on the virtue of selecting and mixing music, with that role being often described as a curator of music. Despite three responders, RA, RP and TN, being initially positive on that question, they went on to explain that only a good DJ can be considered a musician—something which is of course highly subjective—but at the same time highlight that DJs can potentially be elevated to the same status of musicianship with the condition that they are able to produce compelling musical experiences. This sentiment was further reflected in DB's laconic response, who is disinterested in titular signifiers, and instead judges DJs on the quality of experience they can produce through their work. MF entirely dismisses this potential, without however suggesting a hierarchy between traditional musicianship and DJing, but rather that the two practices require significantly different skillsets as to not belong on the same field.

The next question concerned the topic of virtuosity, an element that many of the scholarly accounts examined have discerned within DJ practice. In asking whether DJing displays virtuosity, our interviewees responded:

RP: [in the context of turntablism] I think it's important to be able to do that. To show off your skills, essentially. And outside of the normal DJ realm, club DJs and all that, you can show that in various ways. Maybe the audience has to be a little bit educated to understand what those ways are. But that shouldn't be the focus. I mean, you have to entertain people as well as educate them and inform them. So yeah, it's a balance of all of those things. But the showing off part, or the showing your skills part, that's not so important. It's more important on the turntablism side of things.

RA: That's a difficult one. Because we are biased as DJs answering this question. We have an analytical ear. When I'm playing, someone might ask, 'What remix is this?' while I have three and a half faders up, and I'm like 'this is not a remix! It's me mashing stuff up now!' As a consumer, you don't really know this. The person on the dancefloor, I don't think that is important for them, unless they are specifically a nerdy crowd that wants this.... With scratching, it's apparent. But with layering four songs over one another? You can't tell.... Sometimes I would come up with a really cool blend in the middle of a set, and I had a button setup where I could flip the camera and zoom in on the mixer to show people 'look, this is four tracks playing at once'. But nobody really cared. I would read the chat at the same time, and my DJ friends would say, 'You're crazy'. But the general audience was just like, "Yeah, whatever. Nice music". So again, it's a matter of perspective, where do you come from, and is it important to exhibit skill? I think it's nice to show something, but we have to work on people's ability to appreciate what's happening. Otherwise, it's just a monkey pushing buttons.

TN: There have been plenty of online debates about this, usually from older DJs who say, 'The DJ should be in the corner, invisible'. And, to a degree, that's valid. But at the same time, what they're doing still needs to be good and executed with skill and technique. So, I don't necessarily need to see the DJ, but if they are visible, it's fine, as long as they're not throwing a cake in my face.... At that point, I don't even know if you'd still call it DJing, but if people are paying good money to see it, then why not? But it's not that important for me, the music is still the main thing.

MF: I think the virtuosity comes from the producers of the music first and foremost. The way it's presented by the DJ is secondary to that. I think it's good to be able to put across an emotion or a feeling from the DJ's perspective and have some kind of impact on the crowd. But the idea of virtuosity in DJing? It's really only in, as I said before, in the likes of hip-hop. I'm not really seeing it so much in most other genres.

DB: I don't think it's central to my performances. I think I kind of just do the minimum to be able to present the music in the way that I want to. I think there are lots of obvious examples in many genres where people are doing really advanced things in the way that they manipulate sound, that requires some dexterity (and) skill. And I think those things count. When done well, they're very beautiful. Whether it's kind of turntablism in hip-hop or Jeff Mills or Stingray, they're virtuoso operators of their equipment.

These responses were particularly interesting, insofar their divergence with written discourse surrounding DJing. All interviewees point out that out that while virtuosity is evident in turntablism, it is not only rarely displayed in club DJing, but also undesirable, as it can often be perceived as ostentatious and performative from general audiences. The responses further point that although the techniques of club DJs can indeed display a high level of skill and creativity, this is only perceivable by those who are well versed in the same art. This latter

point offers a useful conclusion on why scholars—many of whom fully grasp that work that goes in a DJ set—can identify virtuosity through their analytical skills, something which of course can also be identified (and missed) when encountering any type of performance without sufficient context.

The final responses concern the question regarding whether new DJ instruments have made DJing easier, and the impact of this among newcomers:

RP: [A] good DJ is a good DJ, no matter what the equipment is. It's the same as being a producer. You don't have to use Logic or FL Studio to be a good producer. You just have to have good ideas. I guess you just have to be into what you're doing. And that passion shines through. Mainly, I guess, technology has made mixing a bit easier. Obviously, cue points and that kind of stuff, yeah, that helps. You know, looping and onboard effects are all nice to have. But again, they can be used in a very gimmicky way. They don't really add to—going back to this painting the picture idea—they should only be used towards the furthering of the artform rather than just as a way to escape actually being creative musically.

RA: I think democratization of any art form is good.... But the more people have access to something, of course, it increases the amount of mediocrity that gets pushed out. Anybody can release an infinite amount of garbage music, and it makes it very hard for me as a curator to find music that I think is worth playing: not just today, but 10 years from now. But on a moral level, I think it's a great thing that this stuff is so easy. And on a creative level, sure, there's a point to be made: okay, all these things we learned, like putting needles on records, you can now replace them with a button. But it's great because when we push this button, we can do 20 other new things. So should I really waste time explaining to someone, 'Look, this is how a pitch fader works?' Sure, it's an important skill to have in an emergency if the automatic beat gridding in your software messes up. But is it an essential skill I would hammer into people? No. It's cool that you can drag any song into DJ Pro and it's automatically beat gridded to perfection. There's nothing wrong with that. Nothing at all, because when you asked me if selection trumps technique, my answer was selection. And then technology enables you to improve technique. And then you can focus on selection. There's nothing wrong with that. Every time someone complains that technology is 'taking away' from DJing, I think it's an expression of their dissatisfaction, whether it's over lack of recognition, fame, or whatever validation they expected but never got.

TN: It depends on the genre. I don't think you can just throw together an IDM set easily; it's all about track selection. But for house or techno, definitely. I tried putting some house tracks into Virtual DJ's auto-mix just to see what it would do. It's gotten better. A computer can sequence house tracks together pretty well, so a human should be able to do it easily. It's definitely lowered the bar. And producers are making tunes specifically designed to be easy to mix, so DJs don't have to think as much. That definitely lowers the skill requirement.

MF: It's definitely easier than it was. You don't have to learn the craft the same way–like you mentioned before about belt drives. That was a challenge for me. Back then, I had just gotten my first job, and I bought these second-hand Technics turntables with tiny little pitch knobs on them. And there was no YouTube in the '90s to tell you how to do it. You just had to learn it yourself. Whereas now, even the internet makes it easier; anything you want to know, you can just look up and watch a tutorial video. Also, it doesn't take long to get your head around Rekordbox and CDJs.... But it's good that it opens up to more people. You know, it's a fun thing to do...it's the same in any field, technology always evolves to make things easier. But it's down to the individual whether they want to make it easier for themselves or challenge themselves in any way.

DB: I think generally art should be as accessible as possible, or the ability to create should be as accessible as possible. Music making equipment [for example], the cheaper it is, and more people can get involved, that's good for people. I think that the more people that are creating in the world, the better. That's the main thing. There's a lot of debate about all this kind of stuff, and I think a lot of those discussions completely miss the point. What people are actually talking about [is] what they're actually bothered about. I think what actually matters, really again, coming back to what I said before about that sense of community in the dance. And the presence or the lack of that is actually what bothers people.

Here the responses, although articulated in wildly diverging manners, converge towards the same conclusions; modern technologies do lower the entry point in regard to training before one can operate a DJ instrument, and that is a positive thing as it attracts more people into joining the community. At the same time, the bar is raised for anyone wishing to distinguish themselves, as many of the skills previously perceived as virtuosic are now obsolete, and DJs need to exploit the creative potential of new instruments if they are to generate truly compelling experiences on the dancefloor.

Conclusion

This study set out to explore how genre conventions influence DJ performance practices, particularly in relation to the integration of technology, use of performance techniques and broader attitudes toward musicianship and creativity. Focusing on drum 'n' bass, house and techno, the three most represented genres in our survey, we found clear patterns that point to genre-specific expectations which continue to shape the way DJs prepare, perform and reflect on their practice.

The quantitative data indicates that genre does, to a significant extent, inform performance approaches. Drum 'n' bass DJs, for instance, are more likely to perform with multiple formats; use rewinds or abrupt transitions and maintain consistent tempos throughout their sets, techniques that align with published accounts of DJ active in that genre. Techno DJs, by contrast, tend to use multiple playback sources and looping to construct evolving soundscapes. House DJs showed the strongest preference for smooth transitions, key-

aligned mixing and a more curated approach to set preparation, consistent with the genre's aesthetic.

These findings are broadly corroborated by the interviews. Performers often described their genre not only as a musical style, but as a cultural framework with its own norms and performative expectations. Several techno and house DJs spoke about the value placed on subtlety, pacing and modulation, whereas drum 'n' bass DJs highlighted the importance of energy shifts, impactful transitions and real-time crowd engagement. The interviews also revealed that while many performers acknowledge genre conventions, they do not necessarily view them as fixed, but rather, as a set of traditions that can be adhered to or challenged via innovation.

Crucially, the tension between traditional markers of skill (such as manual beatmatching) and newer forms of expression (like processing or live remixing) was not resolved along technological lines, but along aesthetic and cultural ones. While automation features were commonly used, most DJs still described their work as a balance of technical and artistic judgment, particularly in how they respond to audiences and shape a set's emotional arc. Future research will expand this work by developing a taxonomy of contemporary DJ approaches, situating them within both historical and current contexts. Analysing and comparing seminal and modern DJ sets with sufficient documentation will provide insights into how performers have developed and continue to refine their craft.

Taken together, the data suggests that genre continues to play a vital role in shaping how DJs perform and how they are perceived, but that performers navigate these conventions with increasing flexibility. Rather than eroding the craft, digital technologies have made space for new forms of virtuosity, ones that are often less visible, but no less deliberate.

Notes

1 Raj Pannu, interview with the authors (on Zoom), 20 November 2024.
2 Ray Arkaei, interview with the authors (on Zoom), 16 January 2025.
3 Thomas Node, interview with the authors (on Zoom), 15 January 2025.
4 MF, interview with the authors (on Zoom), 10 November 2024.
5 Dan Bean, interview with the authors (on Zoom), 5 November 2024.

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