

BASICS

With a Nod to Vinyl, CD's Take Over the Turntable

By MICHAEL GWERTZMAN

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If you really want to prove yourself as a disc jockey, you have to do it with vinyl.

That's been the mindset ever since D.J.'s emerged as musicians in their own right. Spinning vinyl records on analog turntables, manipulating them manually, scratching and doing tricks: a D.J.'s skills and status were determined by his ability to do it with wax on wheels of steel - that is, vinyl on two turntables.

The Technics SL-1200 MK2 Turntable, introduced in 1979, has been the undisputed turntable leader among D.J.'s, with a sturdy feel, adjustable and accurate pitch control and powerful platter torque. But after more than 20 years of turntable dominance, the D.J.'s steadfast allegiance to vinyl appears to be slipping, if not altogether severed. Spinning off CD's instead of vinyl has become the norm among the top tier of touring club D.J.'s, and that preference is starting to filter down to the wider consumer market.

File sharing, the proliferation of affordable CD burners and the high cost of vinyl records have all had a hand in vinyl's fall. But the strongest force has been the development of high-quality CD alternatives to the conventional turntable. Known as CDJ's and digital turntables, these units allow manual control of CD's by use of a record-sized platter that acts as a control mechanism for the CD.

D.J.'s are able to produce the same audio effects possible with vinyl records - including the coveted ability to scratch - by dragging the platter back and forth.

The four leading units, the Technics SL-DZ1200, introduced over the summer, along with the Pioneer CDJ-1000MK2, the Denon DS-5000 and Numark's CDX, feature a similar core design, with each unit adding its own feel and features. All aspire to do the same thing: let D.J.'s spin CD's with the same manual control they were accustomed to from a vinyl turntable.

Pioneer CDJ-1000MK2

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Tony Cenicola/The New York Times
Pioneer CDJ-1000MK2 \$1,300; pitch control slider and vinyl mode.

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Pioneer's first-generation model was a breakthrough when it was released in 2001, offering the closest digital approximation of the vinyl experience. Its current version, the CDJ-1000MK2, has become the market leader in digital decks.

With an eight-inch jog wheel front and center, the CDJ is designed to work like a vinyl deck. D.J.'s grab a corner of the jog wheel to speed up a track or slow it down as they would with a record. And like the classic Technics turntable, the Pioneer (www.pioneerprodj.com) has a pitch control slider that controls a track's beats per minute, offering expanded speed options (up to plus or minus 100 percent).

But it's the "vinyl" mode that has made the Pioneer model attractive to vinyl D.J.'s. With this option engaged, the jog wheel becomes a control pad for a virtually spinning turntable platter. The D.J. can press down on the jog wheel to stop a track while it's playing, rotate the wheel backward and rewind the track to a desired section.

The vinyl-like manual control is a solid foundation for an array of inventive digital features. Loop playback lets D.J.'s choose a few seconds of a track that they want to repeat endlessly. D.J.'s can also set three hot cue pads, which instantly return or forward a track to a set time. And the master tempo mode preserves a track's pitch while letting the D.J. alter its speed. That means no more Chipmunk vocals when a track is sped up.


All these features mean the CDJ-1000 is not for the recreational D.J. At \$1,300, the CDJ-1000MK2 costs as much as two Technics vinyl decks, and far more than the starter D.J. sets on the market. Pioneer offers a lower-priced model, the CDJ-800 (\$600), slightly smaller than the 1000 and offering fewer options for pitch control and hot cues but with the same basic platter controls.

Denon DN-S5000

At \$900, the Denon DN-S5000 takes the concept of vinyl mimicry a step further. Like Pioneer, Denon (www.usa.denon.com) has given its deck a jog wheel prominently placed in the middle, but this one actually spins like a motorized vinyl platter. The wheel can be fitted with an actual 45-r.p.m. record that works as a control surface for the spinning platter.

D.J.'s can manipulate the spinning platter to speed up, slow down, rewind or stop a track, and the platter's movement makes these actions intuitive for any D.J. with vinyl know-how.

The platter's belt-drive motor closely emulates the torque and feel of the Technics vinyl deck, and makes cueing and mixing records a similar process. There's also a pitch control slider with two pitch bend buttons that let D.J.'s digitally bump a track forward or backward, the audio equivalent of nudging a spinning vinyl record with a finger.

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Denon DN-S5000 \$900; jog wheel on the deck spins like a motorized vinyl platter.

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Numark CDX \$800; can play MP3 files stored on CD-R/RW; loop-in function.

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Technics SL-DZ1200 \$900; plays tracks from compact discs and SD Memory Cards; uses a spinning platter as a control mechanism. Four sample pads store up to 32 seconds of audio that can be laid over the main track.

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Scratchers will be satisfied with the DN-S5000. The spinning platter provides something missing on the CDJ-1000: a visual aid. Scratch D.J.'s can use the platter to know exactly how far to spin a record back to return to a particular scratch point.

For digital tricks, there are a number of sample, loop and play modes that expand on the Pioneer model's capabilities, although the DN-S5000's interface can be a bit confusing.

The easiest feature is the set of four sample banks, each capable of 15 seconds of recording time. Once set, these loops can be jumped to at any point.

An innovation is the DN-S5000's alpha mode, which essentially turns one unit into two. Alpha mode lets D.J.'s play two tracks simultaneously from the same CD, with separate audio outs dedicated to the alpha and main sound channels. But because the alpha and main tracks share the same platter interface, it's easy to become confused about which track is assigned to what, creating the potential for performance disasters.

Technics SL-DZ1200

With its SL-DZ1200, Technics has kept things basic. There are no multiple play modes and no confusing control interfaces. D.J.'s schooled in the SL-1200 will be able to get started right away with its digital progeny.

Technics' parent, Panasonic (www.panasonic.com), is marketing the DZ-1200 as a digital turntable, and it plays tracks from both compact discs and SD Memory Cards. Like the Denon unit, the SL-DZ1200 uses a spinning platter as a control mechanism for the selected track, and

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Pioneer CDJ-1000MK2 \$1,300; pitch control slider and vinyl mode.

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the touch is remarkably similar to the SL-1200.

Scratch D.J.'s can give the SL-DZ1200 a workout: the 10-inch platter has a sturdy, rugged feel and plenty of room for hands. The audio sounds clear and punchy.

For digital add-ons, Technics has kept the options limited. Four sample pads, storing up to 32 seconds of audio, are just above and to the left of the platter. Once recorded, the samples can be laid over the main track's audio.

There is also a looping function, along with four cue pads that can jump to and from different points on a disc.

But the Technics' extra features, especially a built-in set of audio effect processors and on-board sample editing, don't add much to the core D.J. experience.

And while the spinning platter emulates the analog SL-1200 well, it's physically much more sensitive. It's easy for a track to spin wildly out of control with the slightest push.

With a price around \$900, the unit doesn't stack up next to the Denon or Pioneer models in terms of extra features. But it is remarkably easy to use right out of the box and flawlessly performs the essential functions that D.J.'s expect from digital turntables.

Numark CDX

Numark's CDX takes the vinyl emulation design full circle. It is a full-size unit with an actual 12-inch record set on top of a spinning platter.

From afar, the \$800 unit looks like a vinyl turntable with its tone arm and cartridge ripped off, and the design is based around Numark's own TTX turntable.

Numark (www.numark.com) has always courted "turntablists" as customers, the hard-core scratch D.J.'s who perform routines and tricks, and the CDX is presented as the most scratch-friendly option on the market.

It synthesizes many of the innovations and features of the other CD decks, but because it has a 12-inch platter, it retains the closest tactile similarity to vinyl.

The platter torque is solid and doesn't suffer from the sensitivity problems of the SL-DZ1200.

The CDX layout is simple and clean, with two easy-to-see Start and Pause buttons just below the platter. On the upper left are the built-in audio effects, and on the upper right is the track navigation and display screen.

There is no sampler, but there is loop-in function that works like the Pioneer and Technics units. The CDX can play MP3 files stored on CD-R/RW.

There are few extra features or bells and whistles on the CDX; Numark has really focused on its vinyl-like feel and control.

The digital audio effects are good and more useful for performance than the ones on the SL-DZ1200, but this is not the CDX's strong suit. It is a heavy-duty digital deck that offers the closest approximation of working with vinyl records.

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Denon DN-S5000 \$900; jog wheel on the deck spins like a motorized vinyl platter.

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