

#ESPspotlight on DJ Dlux

Original Interview by Erica Sharlette

I had the great pleasure of sitting down with a veteran of so many areas of this industry; I don't think I could actually name them all. One of the most humble people I have ever met, DJ Dlux has more than a few accomplishments under his belt but as I soon realised, is reluctantly shy to discuss them. We met when we worked together on Leela James' concert after party. I had originally wanted to interview Dlux about the complexities of urban radio culture; instead I accidentally stumbled onto a lot more than that.

Read a few familiar things about this musical pioneer, but be prepared for a string of revelations along the way...

Dlux, it's an honour to have you Sir, Welcome! I've become a personal fan of yours through our past encounters and really want to showcase the multitude of things that you do. To understand how you got where you are though, I always like to look at the journey, so let's start at the very beginning...

Your career goes 30 years deep - where did you start? What was your first job?

When I first started, I was obviously not old enough to work, so my first job has actually been this. I started at 12 or 13 years old, but I grew up around music. It's very hard to pinpoint the actual start; but I can definitely go back and say, well I was *definitely* a DJ from then, because I was playing on two turntables and mixing tunes. I'll give you an example; my Dad was a Sound Man, so I inherited the Sound System from him. My older brother was also in a Sound System, so I also inherited his influence. My Step-Dad used to work in the pressing plant at Polygram Records, so the house was always stacked full of records. I grew up in a 6-bedroomed house with a massive basement and three different rooms within. Underneath was a recording studio so from an early age, it was inevitable that I would end up doing something within music...

Growing up in the early 80's, it was only when other styles of music started to come out, like Electro, that it became a thing where I thought; "I'm *into* music, I'm *around* music, my family all *do* music". But the first thing I said was, "I'm taking *this* element of music", was when I heard a German band called Kraftwerk. As a youngster, I was really fascinated with their electronic music. By the mid 80's, the sound and style of music had started to branch out into Electro-Rap and HipHop, the breakdance era had arrived and we were in to stuff like Afrika Bambaataa and The Soulsonic Force, Kurtis Blow, Herbie Hancock...That was the start for my generation.

You talk about Kraftwerk's style; how did the introduction of Electro influence the style of the times?

It's the same way that a 12-13 year old nowadays would identify with Grime music; that's their thing now. For us, we had Electro, that went into the Hip Hop, that went into the body popping, 'Wild Style'. Everyone used to go down to the street corners or shopping malls to do it. We all had fat laces, particularly when the Beastie Boys came out with the Mercedes Benz chains, a lot of Volkswagen Golfs got vandalised. We even got told off at school for doing it...

I wasn't relying on what was coming from my older brothers. I was earning money and buying music of *my* choice. So the first genre that I jumped on *myself*, was Electro Hip Hop / Rap.

It bubbled until about 1987/88, when I got to take over the basement. By then, some school friends and I had our own Sound System. And we grew up around Blues parties. From 13 years old, I took it over and we used to do school parties.

By the end of the 80's the music was shifting. Americans were really good at Hip Hop, but in the UK we had Acid House that swept the Nation. Obviously what the UK tend to do is any type of music that comes out, we stick an MC on it...Garage? Stick an MC on it. Jungle? Stick an MC on it. House, Minimal Tech...whatever it is that we're doing today...stick an MC on it! They were doing it back then as well. So Dance music, they stuck an MC on and it became Hip House. If you were around in the late 80s, you could not avoid being involved with the whole Dance takeover.

When did the Production desire kick in and how did that new phase unfold?

By say 1990, that's when as a DJ, I actually started wanting to make music. But with the equipment I had, it wasn't for making music. If you listen to some of my early productions, I used to make music using a tape recorder...I used to record loops of music and piece them together. I wanted to be like Soul II Soul, so how I sought about doing that was obviously through DJ'ing. In the area that we grew up in, there was also another DJ called Bizzy B. There were a few DJs in my school but Bizzy B was the one that stood out as one of the 'Big Boys'.

When I finally met up with him, auditioned and got on the label, I hadn't produced a proper tune. From going to Bizzy's studio a few times in 1991, I had co-produced my first track with his assistance; we basically collaborated and that's how I learned to build a tune using studio equipment. What he told me was, *"Alright so you're on the decks, you can do all that mixing and scratching, but you can't use the equipment that all these Dance tunes are made on, so we're going to have to teach you"*.

The first few tunes that I made in his studio, I saw what he was using, Commodore Amiga's, which was really primitive equipment and so I went on and bought similar equipment. We were making Hardcore Dance Music, that's the first type of music that I remember actually making. That then became Jungle Techno.

In our area at the time, the early 90s, we had Bizzy and Lennie De Ice. Lennie had a *big* Jungle track called 'We Are IE' which, a lot of people point back and say *that* was the beginning of Jungle music. The guys and I put on raves at places like 'Dungeons' of Leabridge Road as well as Acid House parties and we played all these tracks that we were making straight to the crowd...

From DJ to Producer by 1993, through the transitions of music my road went from Electro to Hip Hop, Hip Hop to Hip House, House to Hardcore, Hardcore to Jungle. By 1995, I interpreted it as 'Jungle' was seen as too 'Black', so it became 'Drum'n'Bass'. As soon as that got seen as the same by a certain few, it became 'Intelligence/Liquid' and so on and so on.

My first few releases were all Jungle / Drum'n'Bass and House on a label called Brain Records. Bizzy and I did lots of shows on various radio stations as DJs and as a part of the Brain Records crew. Brain was very big at the time and is now considered one of the pioneering record labels of that scene.

So I did the Brain Records stuff, I was doing radio; Conflict, Impact, Pressure FM, Rinse FM...From 1991 to 1995, I went through so many different radio stations, I wouldn't be able to name them all. In 1995 Bizzy and I opened a record shop called 'Togetherness Records' in Leytonstone. I got exposed to more music, my collection was growing even more, so I was into my Drum'n'Bass, but I could still afford my Hip Hop and House and to that point anything I liked, I was abusing it a bit..

How did having your own record shop impact you, as a DJ ?

On reflection I'd say it was of great benefit but also at times impacted negatively as a quality DJ. I'm very critical of myself and I say that simply because - and this is why I pity some DJs today - all of the music I got was free. People were chucking tunes at me because I owned a shop, so my quality control dropped a little. So when I was doing my sets, it wasn't like before when I *quite* liked a tune, but would I *buy* it? When I was relying on my pocket change, I would make sure that the *only* tunes I was buying were the ones that I really liked. I remember doing a few events in 1996 and I didn't do as good as I could have, because my selection was too wide and I had too much.

In 1995/96, I had released several tunes, I'd done the Mr Bond tune, which had done well, however House'n'Garage started to raise up a bit because Drum'n'Bass producers were holding onto their music and not releasing them and DJs used to hold on to dub plates for as long as possible to build up hype and demand. I personally experienced a decline in good tracks that I knew my customers wanted, so as a record shop, we were getting starved...

So do you think that House'n'Garage got as big as it did because Jungle started pulling back?

I experienced it from a DJ's perspective. Because Jungle music wasn't as accessible to purchase as a record shop customer, I would have to go to Music House to cut exclusive dubplates. If I didn't get there on time, I wouldn't get that dubplate. The dubs were only for a select few DJ's for *far* too long and the record shop customer were made to wait on average twelve months for a release of a big track. Such as Ray Keith's 'Yes Yes' on Dread Recordings. Well the customer wants their music. I mean this wouldn't happen now with the Internet, but back then customers were getting starved, together with the scene reaching fever pitch. A lot of events were getting sabotaged by people that weren't in it for the right reasons.

Trouble started happening and venues didn't want the events anymore; anything that's popular has this issue. It happens, it's gone through all of the UK's urban music - Garage had it, Grime had it, House is having it now...So there was a shift in how Jungle / Drum & Bass handled itself through 1997/98 - it went back underground.

So when all of that phased out, the House'n'Garage scene were making really good tunes and I had them. I was on Rinse FM originally as a Jungle DJ; half of the DJ's were playing Jungle, half were playing House'n'Garage and I would fit between the two.

So even with my questionable maths, we're now in your DejaVu FM era. For someone who had spent time at so many stations, what was it that led you to strip away all the others, leaving only that one?

At the time, I enjoyed Rinse (FM), but I didn't feel that it was my home, simply because I was a little bit older than the average DJ on the station. Someone said: "*You're a pretty good House'n'Garage DJ, have you ever thought about going on DejaVu?*"

The owner of Deja at the time used to come to my record shop regularly to drop off tickets for the events. I spoke to the management at the time, told them who I am, what I do; I was pretty useful to them as a resource...*He's got a studio, he can do the adverts for us, he can do all these different things...Oh and he DJ's as well.* So I was brought on within the first year, I think as just a resource. My radio show time was Friday, 2-4am...

And what kind of 'resource' were you?

I started getting more and more bookings through Deja and I was helping out the management. I was very experienced with equipment; if an amp blew, turntables, mixers, whatever, I was the Sound System guy, so they'd bring them to me. I'm in my element if I'm wiring up stuff...I'd often undo my studio, just to wire it back up. When I do events, other than playing, my favourite thing to do is set up the Sound System. Figuring out logistically, where things are going to go, I love that. I got work through attending events, amps were blowing and the guys were going "*Is Dlux in the house tonight?*" and I'd go "*Yeah I'm here, I'm just raving?!*" I'm a good DJ, but I can admit people were mainly bringing me to things as a resource... Have him on the team because he's a DJ, but if *this* goes wrong, you know that he can handle that. That's been a thing throughout my whole career now.

Are there any standout moments from those times where you can go back and say, I'll never forget *that*?

Within a couple of months of joining DejaVu FM, one of the guys that I used to engineer for - Persian Prince said "*I've got this Garage tune, could you help me engineer it, mix it down?*" He gave me the tune, I said this is NOT Garage; this is something else, slowed-down Jungle...I finished off the tune for him, put it out and it ended up blowing up. That tune was '**Dangerous**' by Same People.

I laughed at this at the time because it carried so many Jungle samples...He asked me to release it for him and I said "*No, thanks!*" I tried to tell him that I was DJ'ing House'n'Garage, I said "*Let me play you some...Grant Nelson, that's House'n'Garage, I don't know what this is?!*" But it blew up! It's really funny because I disagreed with him about the genre of 'Dangerous', that after he left the studio, I reproduced the tune to show him what it should sound like. I forgot I'd done that and I never got to play it to him, so there is still another version of that tune that's not been released yet. I actually found 'The Lost Dats'. I might play it on my radio show one day...

I looked all over the Internet and found some confusing results so I think I'll come straight to you for an answer - What and who are The Dek Collectors and how did they fit into all of this?

After gaining success in the mid 90's within the UK Garage scene as an engineer, DJ & producer, whilst on Déjà vu I teamed up with fellow producer and host Rob D'Riche as the 'Dek Collectors' as a UK garage collective and by 1999 had released Dek Collectors Volume 1. Following Volume 1, The Dek Collectors had several more collaborations featuring UK Garage artist and MC's, such as Lethal Bizzle, (More Fire Crew) God's Gift, MC Vinyl, MC Preshus & Hitman Hyper.

After 2000, UKG was in transition. The scene had split and tracks were featuring more & more MC's. Due to demand the sound of the Dek Collectors had morphed into a much harder UK sound and my protégé Disle (D-Power) was brought in to the collective, to replace Rob who had left to pursue a solo career. This was prior to the naming of the genre as UK Grime, which came a few years later.

2001 was a controversial year for the Dek Collectors as we found the record distributors was reluctant to take on authentic UKG vocal tracks and instead opted to push the more MC based records, following the success of crews such as So Solid, Heartless & Pay As You Go.

I produced several tracks with Lethal Bizzle who had recorded some verses which went on to also feature on the More Fire Crews hit 'Oj'. Lethal actually recorded the verses on Dek Collectors Volume 3, first however in subsequent studio session he also recorded for the More Fire Crew 'Oj' which eventually got released so I deleted our version and put it out as an instrumental.

I can recall a certain phone conversation I had with my record distributor at the time telling me that they won't take on any more tracks unless DJ Slimzee from 'PAYG' is playing it. Although myself and Slimzee were good friends at the time and Slimzee was in fact one of the few DJ's with exclusives of the dub plates, the attitude of the distributors pissed me off so much that I refused to release any more music.

From 2002 onwards, much of my time was spent on engineering & production work for the likes of East Connections ft Kele LeRoc, The Knights, Kano & Hitman, Ruff Squad and Samurai, enabling me to become more of a go-to person for young up and coming artists and producers and which eventually led me to open my studio doors for local talent, management and mentoring working with an endless list of artist and DJ's including the likes of Rafik, DJ Bliss & Jammin..

Whilst in the UK & international underground club scene The Dek Collectors continue as a DJ collective.

**** Coming soon** The Dek Collectors – Lost DATS.****

So is it fair to say that you had developed into a specialist in those genres by that point?

As a DJ I was considered more of a cross-genre DJ, mixing up all the styles. I still kept a show on Deja, but also had a show on an Essex radio station called Renegade.

I hadn't realised how important working with youths and mentoring is with you until now. How did the music side of that come about?

By 2001 I had set up a Music Production Studio and I got asked if I wanted get involved with teaching kids how to do music as a way of positive engagement. I was brought to do some workshops as a favour, I really enjoyed doing it liked it and it felt just like the stuff that I was doing within the music industry anyway as with Disle, Nikki Slim Ting and a few of the younger DJs, MCs & Producers around at the time, so I started to balance what I was doing professionally with what I was putting back into the Community. I got a buzz from teaching, mentoring and setting up projects. I was fortunate that because I had so much life experience this became a bit of a career changer for me personally.

Whether escapism, a love of the art form or purely in a professional regard, how has music and your opinion of it changed since day one?

In recent years I got really frustrated with Hip Hop music. I wanted to play more, but I had a personal view that the Hip Hop being out there just isn't for me as it had lost many of the elements that first attracted my ears.

Whenever this happens, another genre benefits. Let's put my 'trying to educate and talk from past experience' hat on...Music has become throwaway.

I'll give you an example; I have got hundreds of tracks that have never seen the light of day. Sometimes I listen back to them and think: "*Why didn't I release that? That would have been a massive track...*" I will tell you why I didn't. I had the studio equipment to make the tracks but I would go and see Bizzy, Lennie De Ice, to get it mixed & mastered onto DAT. So I had a certain quality control, whereby if the track wasn't ready, they would send me back to my studio to rework it.

When we finished recording, I would go to Music House to cut it on dub plate. When you step into a Music House waiting room, you've got Grooverider sitting in one corner, there's DJ Hype, there's Jumpin Jack Frost, there's Ray Keith...Oh and there's Goldie behind him and so on and so on. I would have to sit in this waiting room, waiting to cut my tune, next to all these legends...Do I really want to play it? Some people would cut their tune in front of them and they'd laugh! So I had so many checks that I had to go through, that I probably released maybe five percent of the music that I've actually made and finished. This together with Brain Records release schedule meant that many tunes produced never got to see the light of day. The ironic thing is nowadays we tend to listen back to some of our older stuff and wonder why we never released them. Nowadays I feel the quality control has gone with most types of electronic music as the process for releasing music has changed with the internet, YouTube and online streaming.

We've gone past that now...people don't even send their tracks to radio stations, now they put it on YouTube and count the amount of views as some kind of recognition, requiring millions of view to earn through monetisation.

So keeping your Teacher's hat on, how would you suggest anyone reading this to go from Free Internet Star to Money-Making Artist?

These days the artists are making potentially good tunes, but they have to give it away for *nothing*, just to get exposure and hype. I liken music today to flyers. You know when you go to a rave, come out and get rave flyers? The real potential now is with endorsements, publishing, concerts and festivals bookings.

As you know from our past discussions, this is an area that I consider a bit of a black void, how would you advise anyone trying to break into the music industry to stand out and get on your radar?

I'm going to show you my phone so you can see exactly where the problem lies...I'm pretty organised, but look at what I have sitting there waiting for me; nearly *fifteen HUNDRED* emails & messages. Now I'm really good on mine, but you get sent so *much*. Because technology has made it easy for people to do, everyone *does*. You are having to compete with a lot more people, so you have to be more than good - my advice to anyone is be *more* than good, become an influence / *resource*. If it means that people have to bring you on for a skill - let them. I'm not being big-headed, I know that I'm still a very good DJ because I've always kept that at the centre of everything I do. But I will happily admit that I know many people don't book me because I'm a good DJ; they book me because they know that there is something that I can *do* for them. People do not book me because of my name, they book me for what I can bring...

So we've talked about how music has changed, how the hungry should go about getting ahead and the way that accessibility has changed the game in a relatively short period. What's the biggest difference between when you first started out and the current day?

The biggest difference for me is that where things have been made so easy to do, it's actually made the real and immediate benefits much harder to achieve. There are many people in this industry that would have nothing to offer of any substance if they did not have a Twitter and Instagram account.

What is We Play Music & how does it differ to other typical live music shows?

My Sunday afternoon radio show entitled 'We Play Music' sticks to the essence of the true and original sounds of the UK. My main focus is around the very best underground music has to offer. In 2011 I took it in a new direction, incorporating live radio and live music 'We Play Music Live'. I became the musical director and curator of the We Play Music Live Show, which showcases fresh UK talent.

We Play Music Live sees a handpicked selection of UK Artists and bands all sharing one stage to perform to a live audience we have featured hundreds of artists over the years such as Daley, Shakka, Omar, Lily McKenzie, Jacob Banks, Ayanna Witter Johnson, Izzy Bizu, Cynthia Erivo, Ruth Koleva, Big Narstie, Terry Walker, Loose Ends, Don-E & the award winning Natasha Watts to name a few. Sharing one stage to performing to a live audience, with all performances broadcasted live directly from venues such as the famous Jazz Café, Queen of Hoxton & The Scala, King Cross and streamed seamlessly via Déjà vu.

So for anyone reading who wants to move from being a DJ into a similar position of far-reaching influence, what guidance would you give them?

In that respect, I don't suppose that everyone can come up in the way that I did. The first thing that I would say is do you. Understand what it is that you *are*, understand what it is that you want to *do*, what You *dream* about, what You *see*. A lot of the things that I'm doing today, I dreamt that I would be; so I was able to visualise. When you visualise, you start putting things into *practice*. As a kid, I would visualise playing at big parties on the green, or on the estate. A few years later, I was playing them. I would visualise making music...A few years later, I was actually making it. Because I was able to, things fell into place and started happening. I don't always necessarily know how they will, but I will think that if it is *meant* to be, then I *will* do it. I think *positively*. I know that if I put my mind to something then most times it will happen.

Be realistic with your vision and put what you *need* into place. Because of how things are, you need to become multi-skilled, have multiple resources and not just be a one-trick pony. A DJ needs to play music, be a blogger, know a bit about social networks, know how to do a bit of video editing, know how to promote...pick up as many skills as possible. You can't just be talented anymore that is not enough. You have to be the full package. I've seen so many talented people who were brilliant; but they have the wrong attitude and that alone, stops them from making it. Have a package, become self-sufficient. Look around, see who else is doing something similar to you and maybe work with them.

I have to say a massive thank you to DJ Dlux for taking the time out to speak with me. It was striking how little recognition he claimed, having been responsible for so much growth and accessibility for so many artists. Personally and professionally, Dlux is a rare man who truly makes a difference.