

# 25 DJ TIMES

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# STAR STRUCK

BY JEFF STILES

When DJs  
Play for  
Celebrities,  
It's Not  
Always  
Fun & Games

DJ Rob Nadigal can now cross one huge item off his bucket list. Nadigal, who grew up in Montreal, Canada, clearly remembers DJing his sixth-grade school dance in 1983, when Michael Jackson's song "Thriller" was the hottest party tune in North America. That particular single was the teenage jock's first-ever vinyl purchase, though he never even dreamed he would someday meet up with the entire Jackson clan. "The Jacksons recently were playing in Las Vegas, and I was there recruiting DJs for the Princess and Carnival cruise lines," explains Nadigal, who today spends most of his time DJing and recruiting for other entertainers on cruise ships. "I had been told there would be 25 people meeting the Jacksons backstage that night, but, for whatever reason, it was just me. That changed everything, and suddenly made me really nervous.

"At 8 p.m., the Jacksons' manager brought me backstage and after a few minutes I got to meet them. It was a very surreal situation, but a very exciting situation. We stood around did some small talk, and then I thanked the Jacksons for everything they've contributed to the music business."

We recently polled DJs from throughout the country about run-ins they've had with celebrities. We asked: Have you ever performed for (or around) a well-known actor or musician or athlete or politician? Has a famous person ever used one of their microphones or even given them a testimonial?

When it comes to being entertained, are "famous" people any different from the rest of us? And has it helped business?

Some examples: Joe Martin of All Star DJs in Texas once rubbed elbows by opening a show for Weird Al Yankovic and Dr. Demento in Wichita Falls in 1981; Scott Goldoor of Signature Sounds in Pennsylvania was once able to shake hands with Chubby Checker while working with a third-hand entertainment company; Mark Haggerty of Denon & Doyle Entertainment in the San Francisco Bay Area is quick to rattle off dozens of celebrities he's worked around.

"Let's see," recalls Haggerty, "Robin Williams, George Lucas, MC Hammer, quarterback Alex Smith, John Madden, both of Mike Singletary's daughters' weddings, Ann Hathaway, three Halloween parties for Sammy Hagar, and the son of a well-known U.S. Senator—I can't name him, as I signed a waiver not to use it in any publication.

"We also supplied a DJ and a photo booth for Robin Williams' third wedding in Napa, where his guests included Whoopi Goldberg, Billy Crystal and Bobcat Goldthwait, his best man. By the way, Mr. Williams

met his wife while shopping at the local Apple store."

Haggerty says Denon & Doyle has actually done numerous events for the family of filmmaker George Lucas.

"We've performed for his son and daughter's birthday parties, his daughter's going-away-to-college party and for several school auctions," he says. "I also did a wrap-up karaoke party for the first season of his TV series cartoon, 'Clone Wars.' George gave a speech as to how this was his first adventure into television, which at the time was uncharted territory for them. We've also done a few weddings for his Industrial Light & Magic staff."

Denon & Doyle personnel also performed a birthday party for the pastor of Christian Jubilee Church, where MC Hammer was the featured guest (and also in attendance were several San Francisco 49ers players, including Jerry Rice and Merton Hanks).

While Mark Haggerty working in the Bay Area definitely has its perks when it comes to the celebrity scene, in the end he's learned that these folks are just regular people with very interesting jobs.

"John Madden lives in our area and his son threw a birthday party for himself and we were there to play music," he recalls. "No one made the connection when the file contained the last name of 'Madden,' but when our DJ [William 'Bink' Feathers] saw John Madden he could barely contain himself.

"We all try to give respect and professionalism with all of our clients, but 'Bink' was very excited since he grew up a Raiders fan. There was a pay-per-view prize fight on TV that night and it cleared the dancefloor as people went inside to watch. They invited the DJ inside to watch it with them, so he got to hear John Madden's play-by-play commentary in-person."

Do these high-profile gigs lead to increased bookings?

"I know that many of those gigs did lead to repeat business, as do many non-celebrity events," he says. "But it does all come down to networking, whether it's a famous person or not. We have some pictures in our hallway at the studio where prospective clients can see them.

"I suppose that may sway some people to decide to go with us. It's just that one extra reason they may pick us, and it certainly wouldn't hurt."

Even down in Rock Hill, S.C., Kevin Porter of Elite Entertainment says he's occasionally had well-known clients. He once did a Halloween party for Mel Gibson and the cast of "The Patriot" while they were filming the movie, for example, and he also performed for a conference where North Carolina Governor Pat McCrory spoke.

"For the last five years," he says, "I've continued to do a Celebrity Pro-Am golf tournament attended by several NFL players, NBA players, NASCAR Drivers, comedians and even former wrestler Nikita Koloff. I also regularly DJ for the Thomas Davis Casino Night, and there are several former and current Carolina Panthers and other NFL players who attend that event."

As a result of working together, Porter says he's actually become good friends with Davis, a Panther linebacker.

"It's funny how most celebrities kind of sit back and wonder why you're wanting to be a part of their event or charity," he says. "They kind of wait to see if you're in it for tickets, autographs, etc. For me, I don't ask and if I receive one, then I'm good with that. And I've actually become more involved with Thomas Davis' charity as a result."

Back up in Seattle, Wash., Adam Tiegs of Adam's DJ Service says that he hasn't had too many opportunities to work around celebrities, but from his limited experiences with them he's learned a lot. So far, Tiegs has worked with or spun for events featuring former MLB pitcher Jeff Nelson, former NBA player Doug Christie, UFC fighter Ivan Salaverry, musician Dave Matthews, actor Sean Penn and NFL player Earl Thomas.

"For the most part, working with celebrity clients can be difficult," says Tiegs. "First, most of them have a public relations person you have to work with, so there's a barrier between you and the client. Because of this, the relationship isn't what it can or should be, as it is with most regular clients.

"Second, I've found that while these are one-time events with unique situations, I haven't got much repeat business as a result of these events—even though it appeared the clients were happy with the job I did for them.

"Third, we need to remember that celebrities are people, too."

The one irritating thing Tiegs has noticed from working with famous folks is that they sometimes expect a financial break. "Knowing some of these celebs have a lot of money in the bank and they have the nerve to ask for a discount?" he chuckles.

Over in New York City, DJ Carl Williams says many of his high-profile clients tend to be athletes or musicians, and he definitely takes advantage of these events by listing them on his website at DJCarl.com.

"My first break into this exclusive vertical," he recalls, "was performing with Justin Timberlake and the 'N SYNC boys down in Orlando, when MTV hired me to play music in the background while the boy band engaged with five tweens from Rhode Island who had won an online contest. That was an exciting and great opportunity.

"A couple of years ago, I was hired by the CEO of NBA China [David Shoemaker] to perform at his wedding. Being that he is such an eloquent speaker, he used my microphone to speak with his diverse guests from all over the world. His wedding story is on my website, and if anyone would like to read about it they can contact me."

Williams says that, although they do appreciate his skills and his professionalism, many of his high-profile or high-spending clients would rather not write testimonials.

"These folks have a certain expectation when they hire me," he says. "I remember so vividly when Kevin Martin of the NBA Minnesota Timberwolves said to me, 'You really know how to run a wedding, DJ Carl!' He tipped me, and I just wished he made that comment on the microphone with his room full of NBA VIPs. In any event, his colleagues still call me for their events and I'm happy to still be relevant."

Williams says there are both positives and negatives that come with performing for celebrities. "First, celeb clients know that I have the experience to manage and entertain at their events with confidence, and they know that they can trust me," he says. "I tell people all the time that celebrities are people, too, who have had their identity publicized through the media. They have the same emotions as everyone else. If you do your homework, then you should be successful at executing their events.

"Secondly, playing for celebrities can intimidate non-famous people. Many potential clients look at my website's content and my past clients and feel they won't be able to afford me. My response to that perception is to nonetheless invite them to contact me.

"Performing at cool events, like I did for an MLB Detroit Tigers' gala fund-raiser, is a benefit for me, too, and it's not always about making the most money possible. Sometimes, we just have to give back for the less fortunate." ■



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