

DJs look to future by spinning a whole new kind of disk

By Charles Arthur
Technology Editor

A new wave of DJ is experimenting with spinning a different kind of disc: not a vinyl record on a turntable, but a hard disk holding thousands of songs – using Apple's best-selling gadget, the iPod.

The biggest advantage DJs have already discovered is the iPod's size. "Vinyl" DJs have to lug heavy boxes containing hundreds of albums. But many are taking up the iPod music player, which can hold 1,000 digitised albums in a package smaller than a cigarette packet.

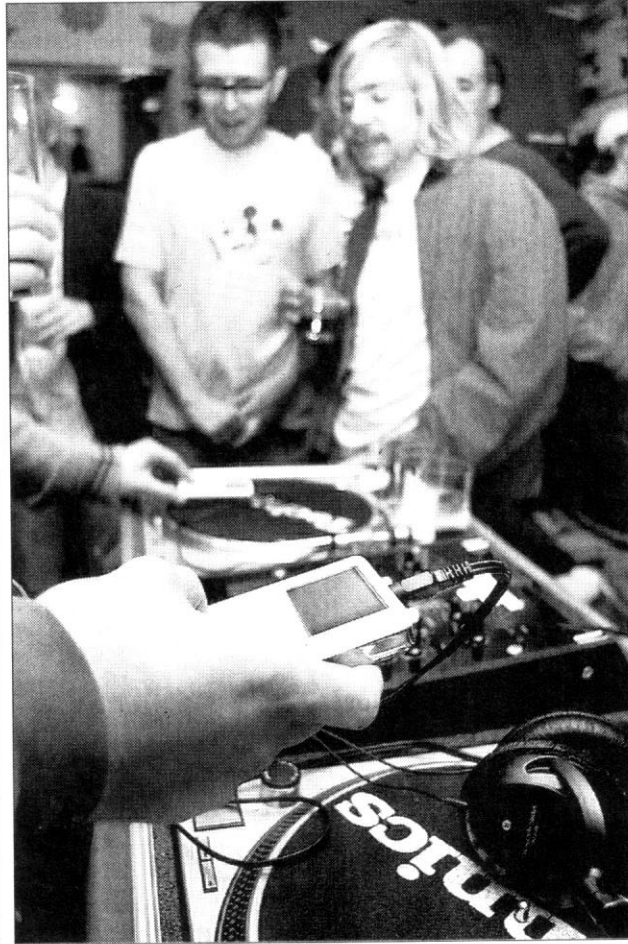
The iPod, which was a runaway sales success this Christmas, will get a further boost this week when Steve Jobs, chief executive of Apple, is expected to unveil a smaller, cheaper version selling for about £100.

Already DJs are beginning to experiment by replacing the bulky double turntables that have held sway for years with a pair of the top-selling digital music players and mixing between them.

The lead exponents can be heard at a club in London's Shoreditch, where every month iPod owners are challenged to take part in a DJing contest called No Wax. It takes place in a bar called Dreambagsjaguarshoes and is the brainchild of Charlie Gower and Raj Pantwani, two researchers from the trend-tracking company Sense Worldwide.

As a part-time DJ, Mr Gower says: "When you're DJing with records then you're searching through for another record all the time. With the iPod it's much easier – you have a wheel that you turn and it shows you the tracks right there."

At No Wax, every participant is given the chance to play two tracks. The challenge is to make



The iPod offers DJs a number of advantages over vinyl, though as yet it is unable to 'scratch' tracks JAMES EMMETT

them fit with those that have just been played, requiring a keen ear for genre and a wide choice on one's iPod.

The idea is also catching on in the US. In New York, the APT nightclub has been running "iPod DJ" nights since June, giving anyone who wants to try the chance to play their own seven-minute "set" using two of the machines, with about 3,000 tracks to choose from.

One thing that would bring DJs flocking to use the iPod as their main machine, though, would be proper mixing software. That would allow them to "scratch" tracks (as vinyl-playing DJs do by pulling a record back

and forth under the stylus). It would also require an iPod that enabled DJs to see the "beats per minute" rating of a track (to know its dance pulse) and to change the speed of tracks, so that they can create mixes with a consistent speed.

Some DJs reckon they have found a stop-gap "scratching" technique – stabbing the button at the centre of the iPod twice, which makes the track rewind a fraction.

Though the internet is rife with rumours that Apple is about to introduce such software – or that there are "hidden settings" in the iPod that allow those features

already – the company declined to comment on whether it has any plans to offer such functions.

The iPod was introduced just over two years ago by Apple, which described it as a "breakthrough digital device". The music is stored in MP3 or other formats on a hard disk just 1.8 inches across, with a small screen to show names of tracks and artists, and a central wheel that lets the user scroll through details about the music, such as the artist or album name, as well as changing the volume and the track playing.

After a slow start, its use has expanded rapidly, so that it now makes up more than half the sales by value and number of all digital music players. Despite the growing number of rivals, Apple has sold more than one million.

It does require the owner to digitise their music on a computer – but once that is done, the tracks can be played in any order.

"Given the opportunity to go DJing around the world, and if the alternatives were to carry a big box of 100 or 200 albums through customs or an iPod, it's pretty easy to choose," said Mr Gower.

But does the iPod embody the future of DJing, given that unlike vinyl, it is supremely portable yet unshowy? Mr Gower is circumspect. "It's an alternative – both this and vinyl can exist simultaneously," he said. "A few years ago people said vinyl was dead, but we're actually seeing more being pressed today than then."

But with the number of iPods and other digital players doing nothing but rise, it could be that at future raves, the man or woman at the front will be waving a white gadget in the air as it plays. And you could never have done that with a record.