

# ***Secrets to Hiring a Wedding Reception Disc Jockey!***

## **THE INSIDE SECRETS TO HIRING A WEDDING RECEPTION DJ The Simple How-To Guide for Hiring the Right DJ for Your Special Day.**

DJs have come a long way in the past 20 years, with a lot to choose from. Today there are very capable and exceptional women in the DJ business, also. However, for easier reading, I will refer to "the DJ" as he.

You **may** have these pre-conceived notions about DJs:

1. Pretty much all DJs are the same, all they do is press buttons and play music.
2. DJs are cheaper than bands.
3. After I get my church, my reception hall, my caterer, my cake, my photographer, my videographer, then I'll get my DJ.
4. All DJs have goofy routines and blow-up balloon guitars, crazy hats, and nutty props.
5. I can give a list of songs to my DJ and he can play them in order, according to my preference.
6. If my family and friends don't dance, the DJ stinks.
7. I should go watch a live performance or a video of a DJ in action to see if I like him.
8. I know someone in a nightclub who DJs every night. He will be perfect for my wedding!

Hopefully, after you read this, you will be the "super-educated" bride (or groom!) with an expertise in Disc Jockeys. Get ready to be "wowed" with all the secrets you'll need right here!

### ***TYPES OF DJs***

#### **What's the Difference?**

When you begin your search for DJs, you will find just about anything you can imagine out there. There are two things for you to remember- *Multi-Op* and *Single Operator*. Almost all DJs will fit into one of those categories.

#### **Multi-Ops**

A former DJ who wanted to expand his business usually owns these companies. He may employ OR sub-contract three to fifteen DJs on an "as-needed" basis. Many Multi-Ops will have large Yellow Pages ads or a huge internet presence. Multi-Ops rely on volume, so you *may* be pressured to book immediately. You may not know who your DJ will be until just before the wedding.

#### **Single Operator**

The Single Operator is just that, a DJ who works on his own. He may have working relationships with other companies to send referrals to if he is booked for a particular day. Single Operators usually start their career working for a Multi-Op to gain valuable experience. Single Operators can focus all of their attention on you. You will be the only event they have planned for that day. You will most likely speak to the DJ who will perform at your wedding the first time you call.

**SECRET- Most all DJs *perform* a part-time schedule. Until there are weddings on weekday afternoons, it is unlikely any wedding DJ works 40 hours a week *performing weddings*. It's true, there are full-time DJs where their DJ business is**

**the only way they make a living. Being "onstage" is only a small percentage of what they do- many hours are spent "offstage" preparing for the event.**

### **Nightclub DJs**

There are many club DJs who perform weddings on the side. If you decide to use one, make sure they adhere to the guidelines above. You should be wary of hiring a club DJ who has *never* hosted a wedding. Their beat-mixing skills will be excellent, but a club is an entirely different story than a reception. A club DJ may have no idea how to MC your particular event, and may only be familiar with certain types of music (he may specialize in Hip-Hop if he works regularly at a Hip-Hop club, for example.)

## ***BUSINESS STUFF***

### **Here's the Legal Stuff**

Ah yes, here is the boring stuff. Well, *not really*, but it is important you consider these issues when hiring a DJ.

### **Written Contracts**

You definitely want one. It does not have to be fifty pages long, but it should contain:

1. Your reception date, time, and rate.
2. Any deposits/retainer fees paid.
3. What the DJ needs for the performance (i.e.- a table, electrical outlets, access to facility, etc.)
4. What the cancellation policy is.
5. Your signature and his signature, agreeing to everything stated on the contract.

## ***WAYS TO DECIDE ON A DJ***

### **Start at the Beginning.**

First and foremost... if you have attended a wedding with a DJ you liked, that's it, you're done! Believe it or not, that is how most of my personal business happens. Word-of-Mouth is the single most important thing a DJ can have. It translates to: tons of satisfied clients.

Unfortunately, many people have not attending a wedding recently, or maybe they have experienced a DJ that wasn't so great. Now what?

### **Watching a Performance**

Many Bridal Magazines, Websites, and well-meaning friends will give this advice: *"You better go see the DJ at a wedding reception so you can see him live, in action!"*

Believe it or not, I am not going to recommend this, either. Why? Think about it. Would you want potential clients of the DJ that is hosting *your* wedding hanging around *your* reception?

### **Two Main Points about Watching a Performance**

Number one, the DJ will not have time to personally speak with you. Number two, the reception you drop in on may be one where the bride has a completely different idea (than you) of what a perfect wedding reception is. For example, you may absolutely *hate* involvement dances like *The Chicken Dance*, *The Macarena*, *YMCA*, or others similar to that

style. What if you drop in, and that is exactly what is happening? What if the dance floor is hopping, the DJ is into it, and people are "YMCAing" away?

You may have trouble envisioning this DJ having great success at your reception without these songs. Understand that great DJs are able to adapt to any style, and great DJs do not do "cookie-cutter" weddings. It may be very difficult to gauge how this DJ will fit with your personality if he is performing for a completely opposite personality type than you.

### **Other Troubles and Such**

Sometimes receptions run late. What if you arrive at a wedding reception, and you hear some great Sinatra tunes as you walk in. To your horror, the dance floor is completely **empty!** No one is dancing! You promptly turn around and leave, not giving another thought to this DJ. Uh-oh. What you didn't know was that dinner was running late, and Sinatra was the dinner music. The couple had not even danced their first dance of the evening! Because the DJ is not able to interrupt his performance to speak with you, you never knew it was only dinner music. Or on the other hand, what if you do successfully "peek in" at the performance, and what you see is great? The DJ is handling the crowd with finesse. Everything looks perfect- so you go home and immediately pop a deposit/retainer check in the mail. Then- *after you book him*- you realize when talking to him about your reception plans, that he is an unpleasant egomaniac? Just looking at his performance cannot "seal the deal."

### **So Then How Can I Hire a DJ?**

The best method: a personal meeting. Many times you can get a feel if your personalities will click simply by speaking on the telephone; if that works, super. Otherwise, meet in his office or at the local Starbucks (Bookstore Cafes are also good) face-to-face.

### **But I Won't See Him Perform!**

Guess what- you don't need too. If he has been doing weddings for many years- it's obvious he can handle it. After you have done all your research, the last thing to decide on is "personality." You can tell what the DJ sounds like (you want a good speaking voice) by telephone, or what he looks like by a photo on a website- or a face-to-face meeting. Do you and your fiancé "click" with the DJ? During your conversations do you feel you have chemistry together? Do you feel like you could invite him out to dinner and it would be a fun evening? It's the intangible part of hiring that right person. It will simply "feel right." Make sure the DJ has personality! :)

## ***DJs AND ADVERTISING***

### **Help Me Through All This Stuff!**

This will help you decide what's real, and what's not. If you have been searching for very long, I bet you can't believe the vast differences in the quality of websites you visit. Remember what we talked about before- DJs are not regulated. Let me help you navigate the DJ advertising world.

### **Calling the DJ**

Now that you've got a few numbers, go ahead and make those calls. No doubt you will get an answering machine 80% of the time. Is that bad? It depends.

When you get an answer you want to first establish if your date is available. Next is- who will your DJ be? Is the person you are speaking with the DJ who will perform at your wedding? If it is, you can almost immediately get a sense of personality. Are you feeling comfortable with the DJ?

Don't get to pricing right away- let some conversation happen first. More than anything, feel comfortable. (Am I starting to sound like a broken record? :)

## The Big Bad Internet

Some things to look for:

1. If there is a link to prices, there should be a price there. Or at least something like: *packages starting at \$595, or this: If your wedding budget is \$10,000. we estimate your cost for entertainment will be between 8-9% of your budget.*
2. If the DJ does not provide prices, do not fear, he must account for all the variables for your reception. After you call him, use the 24-hour rule again.
3. Look for references, and explanations of how the DJ will make your day special.
4. Sometimes emails can go a little longer without being answered, but I would not wait more than 48 hours. You probably want to call, though. That is the best way to get the ball rolling.
5. Don't compare apples and oranges. Do not email a bunch of DJs and ask for a quote on a four-hour reception. It's like emailing all the car dealers in your city and asking for a quote on a 4-wheel car. You do not know what you are getting until you speak to the DJ.

The theme here is obvious: Attractive websites can help you navigate through your choices, but you still need to pick up the phone.

## ***THE GOOD STUFF: PRICES***

### **Why Are There so Many Varied Prices?**

Okay, so why are DJs priced the way they are? Why spend \$895 for one, if you can get another DJ for \$200? Or why spend \$1400 when you can get someone for \$900? Believe it or not, I am not going to tell you that you have to spend a certain amount to get the "perfect" DJ. After all, it's **your** money, and **you** should decide how to spend it. If you want to spend \$1400, \$800, or \$200, and you feel like it's the right thing, by all means, do it. It's your party. It's no use getting sleepless nights, or being so worried over your wedding expenses, that you second-guess yourself.

### **My Advice To You**

I am going to tell you that almost always (but not every time) the old saying still goes: ***"You get what you pay for."*** Unfortunately, in the majority of the weddings planned nowadays, the DJ is the last component to be added to a wedding reception. It may be simply because when you think of weddings, these things come to mind: The beautiful wedding dress, flowers, invitations, the church, and photography. A DJ is just simply not on that list most of the time. Yet, if wedding consumers looked at it logically instead of emotionally (a very difficult thing to do when we're talking weddings), they might see this:

1. If the flowers come on your wedding day and they are the wrong type, you, and your family, may be very upset. But, more than likely it will not ruin your whole wedding day. Most guests did not know what type of flowers you ordered, and probably would not notice.
2. If you paid for steak, and the caterer served chicken, you would be livid, and demand a refund. Again though, your guests more than likely don't know what's on the menu and they won't notice the difference.

See the pattern? Many things (hopefully not at your wedding) could happen without the guests even realizing it. But, if your DJ/Host for your reception is not up to par, everyone notices.

### **Four Basic Types of Rate Structures**

I want to lay it out for you plain and simple. DJs are very competitive, and sometimes it's difficult to be at this profession full-time. The way I see it, DJs are priced four different ways.

#### **Type 1/The Cheapest DJs**

Many part-time operators are excellent DJs. Many have talent, but may have no business savvy. Unfortunately, some stay this way. It is entirely possible for you to spend \$150-\$250 and be totally happy with your DJ. Again, you have to be comfortable with your decision. If this is the route you are taking, it should *be* only on the advice of another bride who has used this DJ, or someone you have already seen at a wedding where you have attended as a guest. Beware of **"I have a friend of a friend who is a DJ."** That DJ may be only a hobbyist and not know much about wedding receptions. Although there are DJs who have talent in this category, the majority are beginners. Be extremely careful and thorough here when making your choice.

#### **Type 2/Cheap to Moderate DJs**

The next group of operators, priced from \$400-\$600, are all over the map. Some are weekend DJs, moving up from the previous category, usually working alone. Multi-Ops, which we have discussed above, can keep a price at this level because of volume, using 5 to 15 DJs per weekend. Again, it doesn't mean that they are not good, they simply rely a quantity of jobs for their profit margin. You'll find many DJs priced this way. If you select a DJ from this category, choose someone with many years of experience. Don't forget, using a Multi-Op, go with a company who can guarantee **which** DJ will host your wedding. Remember, you need to feel comfortable with the whole process. They should impress you.

#### **Type 3/Moderate to Expensive DJs**

Priced from \$600-\$1200, this category is a pretty small group, there just aren't very many of them. Anyone you hire in this category, at the very minimum, should offer:

1. References
2. Years of experience
3. Experience in high profile events
4. Reliability guarantee
5. Easy to reach
6. Professional equipment
7. Back-up emergency equipment
8. Thousands of songs
9. Various packages to choose from

You may ask yourself why DJs (or the really good ones, anyway) are priced the way they are (expensive). Think about it this way: You could go out and rent the equipment yourself. You would need at least two speakers, an amplifier, CD player or laptop, and a mixer. To get this setup in a professional grade would be about a \$350 rental. Add a wireless microphone for another \$50. We haven't even talked about the thousands of songs most DJs bring with them; if you could rent that type of collection, I would guess it would rent for at least \$100. (I can tell you my collection of song titles, from CDs to iTunes, have a total of cost \$7500 to \$9000 throughout the years). Add the various expenses of business (license, telephone, insurance, tuxedo, travel expense, etc.) for another \$100.

Have you added it up yet? It is now at \$600 and we still have not added in the actual hours a talented DJ/MC will get paid for his time. At a four-hour reception, we can figure a one hour consultation, and another hour (minimum) prep from the DJ before the wedding day. Don't forget, the DJ will arrive at least one hour before the reception, and leave about 30 minutes after it ends. That is over 7 hours of work involved in your four-hour event, sometimes more.

You can see now why DJs who truly are professional and take their businesses seriously as a career, charge the prices they do. You will pay even more for a more talented or in-demand DJ.

So then, why do some DJs charge so little? There could be a multitude of reasons, but it boils down to this: They are either brand-new to the business, hobbyists, or they cut back somewhere else. Old equipment, old songs, and little or no planning are all parts of cutting back.

#### **Type 4/Very Expensive DJs**

This category is also a pretty small one. These are the folks who charge \$1500-\$2000 for a reception. These are the DJs and larger companies who regularly perform at conventions or huge weddings and Bar Mitzvahs. These guys and gals are great! Their parties come with full professional stage lighting, props, sometimes two (or three) DJs, and even dancers, plus much, much, more. If you've got the money, and this sounds like fun to you, by all means go for it. You'll have a blast!

#### **Summing Up The Pricing Game**

It all comes down to the old saying- you really do get what you pay for. I hoped I have shed light on why DJs are like airline tickets (all over the map!) This way, you know what to look for, and you can make your way through truths and not-so-truths in the sales pitch.

#### **How Can I Do It?**

*"I really want to spend the money on a great DJ, but I simply don't have the money!"* Let's look at a few things here from a different perspective. Because your wedding is mostly an intangible thing (in other words, it's not product you buy, but an idea of what you think is perfect) it is harder to make price = memorable wedding day. For example, take champagne. If the best man stands up, gives a toast that is insulting to the guests and mortifies the bride and groom, it won't matter a hill of beans if you bought the most expensive champagne in the world. The guests won't remember the money you spent on champagne; they'll remember how insensitive the best man was. On the other hand, if your best man gives a thoughtful, poignant toast that touches everyone in the room, you could have just the existing beverages on the table and it wouldn't make a difference. Not buying champagne could save you \$300-\$600. Remember, the intangibles are what make up the

majority of your day. Will guests remember the little squares of cheese they ate, or might you save \$300-\$400 by not having a cheese tray?

## ***AT THE RECEPTION***

### **Making Your Day Perfect**

So you've hired the perfect DJ and now you are ready for the reception! I'm going to start at the beginning and go through your night... let's take it step-by-step.

### **Before The Reception Starts**

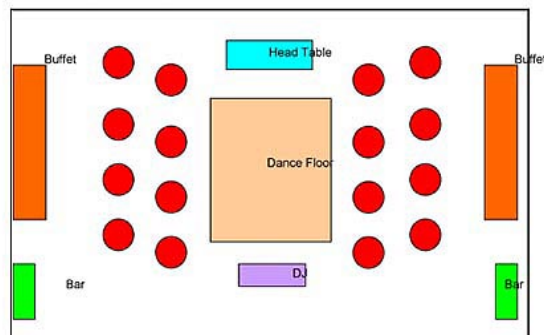
Make sure you have arranged with your hotel/reception hall for the arrival of your vendors, especially the DJ. You'll want to make sure he has free parking for the evening, and can park at a location close to where he will have to unload equipment. If he cannot park close, at least make sure he can get as close as possible to the location for unloading. Another important thing: make sure there is ramped or elevator access to your reception location. Many DJs will charge extra even if they have to go up **one** stair. This is because while most equipment is extremely heavy, the DJ can move it easily if it's on wheels. When he comes to stairs, he will need assistance. A DJ may have to hire extra help to load equipment up stairs, or over curbs. Do not expect "someone from the hotel" or one of your guests to assist- most DJs will politely decline because of liability reasons. If your DJ needs a table, the hall/hotel should have no problem with this. Have your caterer decorate the table with linens to match your guests' tables, ready at least one hour before your start time. If your DJ is using a lighting system or light show, he will need two separate-circuit outlets (not just two outlets, they must be on separate circuits so they will not trip a breaker). More extensive light shows may need special electric requirements, check with your hall to make sure.

### **Reception Room Set-Up**

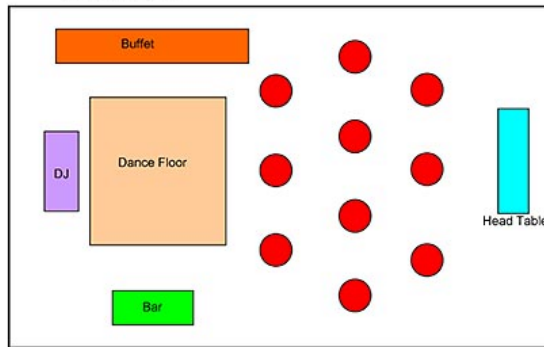
You would be surprised at how many venues I go to, and the hotel staff or reception hall does not know how to properly set up a room. The DJ table should be directly bordering the dance floor, so he has a complete view of the room (preferably not near the bar). I cannot tell you how many times I have gotten to a hall where the hotel staff has put the DJ table in a corner, or worse yet, between guest tables and the dance floor. The DJ is your Host and MC, he should not be tucked away out of sight. If you place the DJ behind guest tables, you will hear from those guests all night about *"how loud the music is."* Check out these examples:



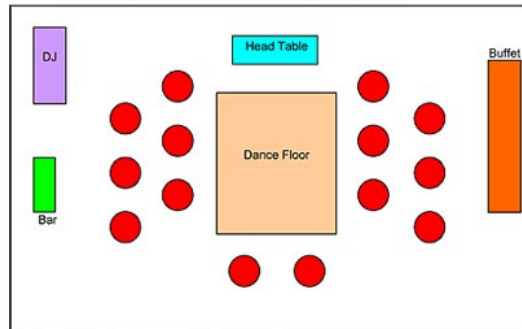
*Good Example #1*



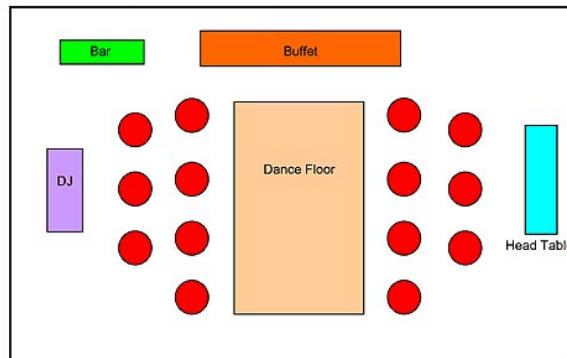
*Good Example #2*



*Bad Example #1 (DJ in corner away from guests)*



*Bad Example #2 (DJ behind guest tables)*



Of course, these are only a few examples, and sometimes the room you have may not be a perfect setup. By using these as a guide you will probably be able to get as close as possible.

## **Music Selection**

No doubt you will want to have some input with your DJ about your music choices for your day. The featured dances (First Dance, Bride/Father Dance, etc are covered under my Wedding Reception Planning Worksheet. I like to understand what type of music the couple really likes. This way, I will know what tastes they have, but it also leaves options open for the DJ to "read" the crowd, take requests, and generally keep the party moving along. I have had brides that have submitted over 100 songs to be played at a reception. This is not feasible- the math doesn't work. For example: A four-hour reception: Arrival and dinner will last approximately 90 minutes. With time out for toasts, featured dances, etc, your typical 4-hour reception will have about two good hours of dancing (maybe two and a half). The average song length is 3.5 minutes, working out to about 17 songs per hour. This equals about 35-45 songs per reception.



## The Human Jukebox

Do not make the mistake of insisting certain songs being played at certain times, or to give the DJ a list of 40 songs to be played "in that order." The problem arises if: the DJ is sticking to you list and no one is dancing or responding. You really would not want the DJ continue with the list- he needs to have the flexibility to do his job. There are also problems with a 40-50 song list where the DJ can play selections "in any order," but cannot deviate from the list. It again restrains the DJ too much for him to successfully do his job. Micromanaging the DJ is the same as being in the kitchen with the caterer telling them how to prepare the food. Relax- this is what you are paying for... the DJ is paid to know his stuff! If you absolutely insist on having total control on what music is played (and in what order), you may be happier hooking up an iPod and letting it play.

## But I Want MY Music!

You and your friends and family may have definite tastes in certain music. Odds are, though, not everyone attending your reception likes the exact same thing. Your wedding is all about you. Your reception is, too, but it's more about your guests celebrating your day. Don't make the mistake of letting your ego get in the way and thinking *"It's my day and I don't care what anyone thinks! I'm going to do it my way!"* If this is the case, and you just can't get past it, you would probably be better off eloping in Las Vegas. To a certain extent, it is about your guests. For example, once in a while the groom does not want to do that "special dance" with their mom (or dads, for the brides). The excuse usually is something like *"I don't dance that well"* or *"I don't feel comfortable"*. Those dances aren't really for the bride or groom, anyway. It's about honoring your parents for being part of your special day. Emotions run high during this very special day of your life. If you really want your guests to attend a wedding they will remember forever, remember them, too.

## Interactive Stuff

Most of the interactive activities such as blow-up guitars, funny glasses, and balloons have been used to death. So much so that I never get requests for them now. Especially at weddings, the interactive DJ nowadays is more subtle and focused.

## Dancing

No one can guarantee your guests will dance. There may be DJs out there who claim they can, but no one can control how someone else feels or acts.

- **SECRET- There are many ways to set the mood if you think have a tough crowd. The three things you want to achieve are: Having a hard-surfaced dance floor, (not carpet); dimming the lights- darker is better; and having the music at a loud, but not uncomfortable, level.**

Why so? Number one, people are reluctant to dance on carpet. The subliminal message is not to dance. *"If there is no dance floor, dancing is not appropriate"* is what the message says.

Number two, having the room as dark as possible makes people less self-conscious. Notice how sometimes folks are reluctant to be first on the dance floor? The same principle applies here. If people feel other guests are not staring or looking at them, they are more apt to "get comfortable" out there. This is why receptions at night already have something going for them in a "party" sense. An afternoon wedding, at a Country Club with beautiful views of the golf course, can be wonderful. But it does not set the mood for dancing. Your DJ will have to work a little harder.

Number three, the music should be loud enough so your guests do not hear their footsteps, or dancing steps, on the floor. That's right, it goes back to the old self-conscious thing. The majority of people do not consider themselves to be professional dancers, and if they can feel the beat of the music, they are less timid to "cut loose"

### **Other Secrets to People Dancing**

What other things help get people on the dance floor? The old hard-and-fast rule applies here as well: an open bar can't hurt. Alcohol simply lets people act sillier.

If the bride and groom remain on the floor, at least for a few songs, you'll be amazed at how many of your guests will stay with you. If you go to sit right down, many of your guests will follow.

### **Food and the DJ**

There is a constant debate among professional DJs about getting fed on the job. Honestly, there is no right answer, but I can give you an informed opinion of my own. It is expected for you to provide a meal to your photographer and videographer. They are spending the majority of their day with you, and they need to eat like everyone else. With the DJ, it's a little different. The DJ is not with you the entire day, so the case can be made not to provide a meal, and that is perfectly fine. However, it is a nice gesture, and every DJ I know would certainly appreciate the thought. Sometimes, the caterer, without asking you, will simply give a meal to the DJ. If you are inclined to provide a meal to your DJ, keep in mind the he will probably not want to eat away from his equipment. Just let your caterer know to provide the utensils and food at their DJ table. Remember, the DJ is still working and playing music during dinner.

## ***YOUR DJ and OTHER VENDORS***

### **Working Well With Others**

You should expect your DJ to be in constant communication with other vendors present at your reception. Since the DJ really is the Host once the reception starts, it is common for him to touch base with the caterer to make sure the toast is ready to go, along with other events like the beginning of dinner and your cake cutting.

### **I Don't Want To Miss a Thing**

More importantly, it is crucial for the DJ to talk to your photographer/videographer. The last thing you want is for the photographer to miss the cake cutting (because he was out of the room) and the DJ proceeds without warning him about what was coming up. Of course, it is ultimately not the DJ's responsibility if the photographer misses something, but working in harmony is the best way to do things.

### **Watch Out For Lights!**

If you are hiring a professional videographer for your day, don't forget to ask: *"How will you make sure there is enough light?"* Remember, one of the things we talked about was having a low light level at your reception to set the correct mood. Most professional video equipment nowadays can film in low light, or they are able to have mini-floodlights mounted to the top of the camera. Be very careful about a videographer who wants to leave on more lights than necessary in the reception hall- it will damper your guests desire to party. Fluorescent lights should especially be avoided; most people associate these with working in the office. (Not a feeling you want on your wedding day!) Also be wary if the videographer wants to use large,

stationary floodlights on tripods to direct light at the dance floor, or your guests. It is even worse if you paid for a light show from the DJ, in which case the floodlights will render it effectively useless (this is the same if you leave more lights on than necessary in the hall). Am I picking on videographers? Maybe. The professional ones understand to be as unobtrusive as possible. Because a huge floodlight can put a foul mood into the guests, it is easy to transfer that feeling into "the DJ isn't doing a good job" and it will reflect on your entire party.

## ***CONCLUSION***

### ***Wrapping it All Up***

Now *you* are the professional. You can consider yourself "armed and dangerous" about the once confusing world of trying to hire a Disc Jockey for your wedding.