

# King of Scratch

## Turntable master innovator, DJ Qbert



Anyone who knows anything about hip-hop knows Qbert.

A two-time Technics DMC DJ world-champion and lifetime achievement award winner in '98, Qbert is widely considered the most technically skilled DJ in existence. He is the co-founder of the innovative Bay Area scratch crew, Invisibl Skratch Pickles. And he's a key player in the acclaimed 2002 hip-hop DJ documentary, *Scratch*.

Qbert has also orchestrated an animated hip-hop movie called *Wave Twister*, a *Do It Yourself* DVD on scratching, gotten his own Playstation 2 "Frequency" video game, he is featured on an Apple commercial, has a CD in a children's book entitled *Turntable Timmy* and is currently designing new DJ technology in Japan.

And he has a car called the Kutmobil, a customized Land Rover that has been hailed as being "The World's Only Skratch Transport System." So it's natural to wonder if he ever engages in a little scratch-and-drive.

"I've never done that in my life," said Qbert rather responsibly. "I park and I practice in my car."

### The act of spinning records

for the public has been around since the 1940s, when the first DJs emerged to entertain the troops overseas. But the practice didn't really start developing until 1969. That was when pioneering DJ Kool Here introduced the "break" by chanting over short percussion portions of a record and extending them using two identical records and an audio mixer.

Six years later, Grand Wizard Theodore discovered the "scratch" by moving the record back and forth against the needle to produce new sounds. By the early 1980s, Grandmaster Flash was one of the first DJs to create "break-beats" by extending grooves and looping the "breaks" of certain songs turntable to turntable.

It was just a few years later that Dance Music Community (DMC) began holding annual battles, testing the scratching and cutting skills of DJs worldwide. By the time Qbert came onto the scene, the idea of a turntablist was defined by the International Turntablist Federation (ITF) as "One who uses the phonograph turntable as a component to make music as well as an instrument to literally play music."

Qbert caught the attention of the industry by bringing a very musical aspect to the turntable, incorporating actual melodies into his style of scratching.

"Qbert has thousands of breaks but with rhythm," said Maui's DJ Twist. "As far as turntablism goes, Qbert is incomparable—no one can even come close!"

Such acclaim for Qbert is pretty typical.

"He's probably one of the most amazing

scratch DJs ever!" said 8-ball, a promoter of hip-hop shows with Mecurial Bull Productions. "I've seen him live and he really gets into the groove and lets go!"

"If you start DJing and getting exposed to the realm of DJing, you're gonna hear about Qbert," said DJ Boomshot. "He is the head cornerstone, the top rock on the pyramid."

"He's a household name," said DJ Sal. "He's infamous in the DJ world."

No kidding—He's even been called the "modern day Picasso of sound waves" by Iris DeLeon of *Access Magazine*.

"My advice—do not show this guy your scratch that you found and developed 'cause he will take that and understand it so much more than you have," said Qbert's business partner, Yogafrog, in *Scratch*. "He's like the Louis Armstrong of scratching!"

### Richard Quitevis has been

spinning records since he was four or five years old with his plastic Fisher Price turntable. He said he got the name "Qbert" not only because of the popular Atari game of the same name but also from being a "short and fat little guy" whose last name started with a Q. However, according to an interview with the Chillsbury Do-Boy from *Vinyl Exchange*, that's not the name Qbert would have chosen for himself.

"I wanted it to be something like... fuckin'... Ripclaw, or fuckin'... I don't know, some space name or some shit," said Qbert. "But then, that was what everybody called me back then all the time and so it stuck."

Qbert was heavily influenced by jazz and easily drew comparisons to its freeform time signatures and diverse styles to scratching. He was also exposed to the varied skills of "beat juggling" with such luminaries as Mix Master Mike, DST from Herbie Hancock and Joe Cooley. From that, Qbert's own style developed strongly into "playing the turntable like a musical instrument."

"With the hip-hop bass, you know, I love hip-hop drums to scratch to, funky drums," he told me. "And I like to drum on the turntables, I like to play guitar on the turntables—scratch all kinds of instruments on the turntable."

His primary motivation? That would be aliens.

"Since earth is kinda like a primitive planet, what about the more advanced civilizations? How does their music sound?" Qbert asked. "So I would imagine whatever they're doing and I guess that's how I come up with my ideas."

As Qbert said in the documentary *Scratch*, "It's kinda like talking, you know, you just speak what you're saying. The more techniques you know—it's like each technique is a word, so the larger your vocabulary, the more articulate you can speak."

### Looking back at all of his

accomplishments, I tried to determine just how many DJ gigs Qbert has performed in his illustrious career. Let's see, he's been DJing since 1985—that's almost 20 years—with at least a couple of gigs a week, so like, wow... that's nearly 1,920 nights out scratching in front of thousands of screaming fans all over the world, right? Right?

"I really, really try to stay home and work and I love being in Hawaii and I love just scratching at the beach," he told me.

Oh, right.

He's also recently invented a new portable turntable and mixer combination that looks like a UFO, so it's called a "QFO," as well as an international turntablist video magazine that can be viewed online at [www.turntabletv.com](http://www.turntabletv.com).

"What's the biggest lesson you've learned about the whole art of DJing?" I asked Qbert over the phone.

"Uh, that there's more to learn forever," he said. "I think the biggest lesson I've learned is to always practice and to always continue to hone your skills. There's a saying—'Those who exalt themselves will be humbled and those who humble themselves will be exalted.' You know, just be the kind of quiet guy that always works on the under and let your work speak for itself, I guess."

And it does.

*Take III and Mercurial Bull Productions present Qbert at Hapa's Nightclub on Friday and at Compadre's Lahaina on Saturday. Opening DJs Twist and Boomshot. Tickets are \$15 in advance or \$20 at the door. For tickets or more information, call 244-9315. MTW*



Rolling in the Kutmobil