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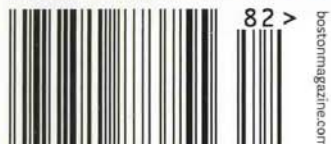
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THE PARTY STARTERS

A DJ and a band do battle over which music option rocks the party harder (with us stuck in between!).

BY BRIGID SWEENEY



SOUND OFF: DJ Michael O'Neill, left, goes head to head with, from left, Stuart Camiel, Rich Kelley, Karen Bell, Aurel D'Agostino, and Jeff Ramsey of Hip Pocket Orchestra.

You've endured endless hours of planning, but let's be honest: No one will remember the multi-tiered centerpieces. They will, however, remember the music that rescued them from a stilted conversation with your great-aunt Gertrude. We recruited a couple of veteran performers to argue the eternal entertainment debate. >>

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The Players:

DJ MICHAEL O'NEILL of Brighton-based **MCO Productions** has played more than 200 weddings. He says his style is "energetic, but not over the top. It's not 'ring announcer' and it's not the teacher in *Ferris Bueller's Day Off*."

Lead singers **Aurel D'Agostino**, **Karen Bell**, **Jeff Ramsey**, trumpeter **Rich Kelley**, and manager **Stuart Camiel** of Somerville's **HIPPOCKET ORCHESTRA** have played at a thousand weddings. Their performances are "dictated by the bride and groom," D'Agostino says. "If it's a Newport mansion and a John Theodore Albert Smith VI, we know that's a slightly different presentation than 'John Smith, everybody!'"

Talk to us about musical variety.

DJ: I have access to everything that's ever been recorded. I'll show up with 1,000 CDs, plus I have about 300 gigs of MP3s on portable hard drives. There really are no limits.

BAND: If someone asks for a song we don't know, the next best thing we can offer is something similar by the same artist or from the same time period. Or we'll play a prerecorded version on one of our breaks.

What do you get from a band that you can't get from a DJ?

BAND: If you do have a choice and if budget isn't involved, live music just has that *je ne sais quoi* and provides a visual element as well as excellent sound. That said, if you can't get a great band—not just a good band, but a really great band—you're better off getting a great DJ.

DJ: I definitely can't compete with the visual aspect. People are watching the band and enjoying it even if they're not dancing. But some people prefer the low-key DJ in the corner who provides lots of brilliant sound and creates energy in the room but also remains in the background.

All right, so forget the whole band-versus-DJ issue for a minute. Why not just rent a sound system and use your iPod?

DJ: I recently got a text message from a guy who works for me: "I'm at a wedding being deejayed by an unmonitored iPod. Not successful. Hard to watch." I know the iPod option is a

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trend, but music is really the most important part of your reception. You need to have someone in charge.

Once a couple make up their mind to hire a band or DJ, what's next?

DJ: Get word-of-mouth referrals from friends and coworkers. My booking is basically one gig at a time, and I focus on creating great impressions on the 200 people attending the wedding, on the photographer, on the venues.

BAND: Ask the venue managers whom they like working with. If a band is messy or a DJ is knocking 'em back at the bar, you can be assured they are not on the venue's preferred list.

How do you ensure everyone's having a good time?

DJ: There's a complete progression: jazz during cocktail hour, then mellow contemporary stuff during dinner, like Jack Johnson and John Mayer. When the dancing portion starts, it's best to get people started with oldies. And then the last hour is when you hear the more current dance music.

BAND: If we begin a song the couple picked out, but for whatever reason we're not getting a response from the audience, we're able to truncate it and segue into another song right away.

What songs should be blacklisted?

BAND: There's a certain cheese factor—"Love Shack," "Hot Hot Hot." Do we know them? Sure. That's our job. But we're not going to inflict them on the client unless they specifically say, "This is what we want."

Finally, the question everyone feels stupid asking: How do you tip the entertainment?

DJ: If they give us 60 bucks so my assistant and I can go grab a beer after the wedding, then it might as well be \$200 to me. I'm just glad they recognized we worked hard for it.

BAND: My stance is that we charge a fair market value and anything beyond that, no matter the amount, is appreciated but not expected. And a referral is as good as cash—it is cash to us.

Michael O'Neill, 617-901-7701, dj michael.com; Hip Pocket Orchestra, 617-625-1991, hipocketorchestra.com.