

TOP STORY

## MCC DJ class spins a new future for students

By Josh Ortega, Tribune Staff Writer  
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Ramsey Higgins teaches Turntablism: The Art of the Scratch DJ at Mesa Community College. *(David Minton/Staff Photographer)*

The world's first college-accredited program for disc jockeys at Mesa Community College is putting students on a path to learning the techniques of platter-pushing professionals.

In the rarified world where some DJs have reported seven-figure earnings from their work at clubs, festivals and other gigs, MCC students can earn an associates in applied science in “disc jockey techniques.”

As an alumni, James Gaspar said the program changed his life.

“I didn’t think that music was going to be a viable path,” Gaspar said. “But it turned out that this program changed my life for the better.”

Gaspar graduated from Scottsdale Community College in May and has already started DJing at corporate and private events and said he does more than press play on music.

“You’re a musician and the turntables are your instrument,” Gaspar said. “You’re creating music from other bits and pieces of music.”

That fusion perfectly sums up what instructor Ramsey Higgins said the DJ has done for both hip-hop specifically and music in general.

“Out of all the performance elements in hip hop, the DJ is the foundation of the culture,” Higgins said.

Ramsey Higgins – or DJ Ruthless Ramsey as he’s known onstage – has taught in the Maricopa County Community College District for the last 15 years, primarily at Scottsdale Community College, where the program originated.

Now, Higgins has brought his mixing, scratching and transforming skills to MCC.

He said he started learning how to DJ at age 7 from the “school of hard knocks” that had either no teaching or bad teaching.

Now, with the degree program expanding in the Valley, Higgins said it helps standardize the profession and brings a bargaining chip to help young DJs create a baseline for their career.

“The degree shows that they deserve a standardized pay of what a DJ should get,” Higgins said. “There’s a lot more stuff that we do off the clock than we do on but that degree solidifies that we have the balance of both.”

To earn an associates degree, students must complete more than 60 credits in classes such as “Turntablism: The Art of the Scratch DJ” and “Introduction to Emcee-Rapping Techniques.”

Higgins said while the lessons don't get easier, students skills become sharper and they add to their repertoire week after week.

"If you think everything's cool when you get home – just like my teachers taught me – that bar is up the next week," Higgins said.

Gaspar said Higgins' passion for the music pushes students in a positive way and he makes you believe in yourself.

"His enthusiasm and his belief in you are so infectious that you end up having a better self-esteem after talking with them, after being around him," Gaspar said. "Because he says, 'no, you can do it.'"

In learning the techniques from the instructor, that infectious positivity spreads throughout the class and Gaspar said the classroom becomes a microcosm of collaboration.

"There was always something new to learn. Whether it was from a peer or the professor, you are learning something new," Gaspar said.

After graduation, that learning eventually translates to a starting pay around \$40,000 for mobile DJs playing weddings and corporate functions, according to the MCC website.

But like most professions, with hard work, professionals can sell out stadiums and rake in millions of dollars per year.

No matter what path students take, Higgins said he focuses on also developing the intangibles such as good character, persistence, dedication, discipline but also enjoying the "very therapeutic" response the music brings students.

"Even if they don't do anything professionally, it's still therapeutic," Higgins said.

For Higgins, though, it's not about the money but the lives he's touched and transformed in the classroom that sit at the heart of why he teaches.

"Our job is to always be healers and be in the community," Higgins said. "So that's the way it started...it should always stay that way."

Born in Minnesota, Higgins moved to Arizona in 1985 and has toured across the country playing in NBA Arenas and hundreds of clubs from New York City to Los Angeles.

For that reason, founder and former program director Rob Wegner brought Higgins on as an instructor.

“If you’re learning from Ramsey, you are learning from one of the most talented DJs and instructors on the planet,” Wegner said.

Wegner started the program at Scottsdale Community College in 2001 that eventually evolved into world’s first college accredited associates degree for DJs.

To become accredited requires an advisory committee comprising 30 of the best DJs in the Valley and approval from the U.S. Department of Education, Wegner said.

“If you understand what a DJ does, and their role in music, it makes sense for there to be a DJ promo in a music department,” Wegner said.

Wegner served as the program director until 2015, when his multiple sclerosis became too much for him.

Wegner said the only downside to this program is that more colleges haven’t picked up the concept yet.

“It’s great that it’s at Mesa now because Mesa’s got a very reputable music program,” Wegner said.

Cecilia Satori enrolled in MUC136 Turntablism: The Art of the Scratch DJ this semester as a way to add to her musical repertoire and eventually would like to become one of the trailblazing female DJs in the male-dominated profession.

“Seeing that I have an opportunity to pave the way in the DJ experience, makes me happy,” Satori said.

For now, Satori said she’s enjoyed meeting pioneers like record-scratching inventor Grand Wizzard Theodore, and collaborating in the classroom with other students.

“It’s like a whole new world unraveling before my eyes,” Satori said. “I’m thankful to be able to inspire future DJs.”