

DJ app looks to lend professional spin to party dance mixes

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James Jones had the problem that every college student wants: too many paid gigs.

While studying engineering and economics at the University of Notre Dame, he DJed three to four parties each weekend and picked up opening slots for big-name acts like Big Sean. But he started stretching himself too thin, so he built a program that mixed music and took requests. He offered it to customers at a discounted price.

"I played it at a club that I was supposed to be DJing at and I walked around and asked people, 'Hey, what do you think of the DJ?' and they were like, 'He's good,'" Jones said. "I was like, OK, this works."

After moving to Minneapolis to work as a data analyst for Target, he DJed as a side job and met fellow table turner John Boss, who eventually joined his quest to make the program an app. In January, the duo started testing it out at events. Earlier this month, they made a limited version of the app, dubbed Spark DJ, available in Apple's App Store.

After gaining support from investors, Jones and Boss ditched their day jobs so they could drop the beat. With proper licensing, the two add songs to the app's library daily, scrutinizing each one to fit it into algorithms meant to simulate what a live DJ would do.

Once users download the app for free, they pay \$5 to \$10 each time they use it for a party. Event hosts can give the app guidelines by selecting

artists, songs or genres they like, and the app curates a personalized mix. Users can also pick themes to fit specific atmospheres, such as barbecues or children's parties.

Like a live DJ, the app adjusts its mix based on the crowd's requests. Partygoers can download the app for free and "join" the host's party, which lets them request songs. In addition, attendees can "thumbs up" or down each other's requests, preventing the app from playing songs similar to unpopular ones.

Mark McGuire, a veteran entrepreneur who mentors the team among other startups, said the app provided a background mix fit for cocktails and chatting before an event for his startup accelerator, Gener8tor.

"It's really simple to set up, and the transitions between songs were super cool. It felt like there was a real DJ there," McGuire said.

The two also have a solid growth strategy, McGuire said. By inviting attendees to request songs, they ensure more downloads and potential customers.

"It has an inherent viral nature to it," McGuire said.

Dave Mao, managing partner of venture capital firm Come Up Capital, said the app made an impression at the 2016 Minnesota Cup, where it placed as a semifinalist.

"This was really, very different from the experience you'd get at home, or if you were throwing a house party or a party in your dorm room, because you would not get that quality of music experience," said Mao, who judged the competition.

Intrigued by the app and impressed with the duo's work ethic, Mao

offered the team a space in Come Up Capital's office and became an investor.

Among other startup obstacles like marketing and finding capital, the app's biggest challenge will be living up to its goal of simulating a real DJ, Mao said.

"It's an aesthetic challenge. ... The DJ isn't sitting there just cutting from one track to another. That's what a bad DJ probably does. But a good one makes really smart choices about when they make the cut," he said. "To get to even 90 percent of the quality of a live DJ, that is the challenge."

While Mao considers streaming services like Pandora or Spotify as the app's main competitors, Jones and Boss say they are up against live DJs.

Through collected data and artificial intelligence, the app accounts for song aspects like tempo and key to create seamless transitions, Jones said.

"We look at songs in the way a DJ would ... instead of a sit-down session with Spotify or iTunes," Boss said. "What parts of the song make people excited? Is it the chorus, the intro, a minute of the song or seven minutes of the [song](#)? All those dynamics we constantly are looking at from a DJ angle."

The app's live music vibe keeps it from getting lost in a sea of similar music streaming services, Jones said.

"We're not meant to be listened to in your headphones. We're meant to be hooked up to speakers and get the party going," he said.

The app's ability to transition between songs and its low cost give it a competitive edge against live DJs, Jones and Boss said. Still, the avid DJs

say their app isn't meant to completely replace the profession.

"For the people who are out there and really approaching DJing as an art form, being unique about their craft, Spark DJ isn't going to beat those guys," Jones said.

Instead, the duo aims to attract customers who can't afford to pay a live DJ.

"What we're trying to do is fill a void that actually exists. We're not undercutting or doing anything to DJs," Boss said.

Because the app is meant to accompany parties, Jones and Boss are targeting college students as a customer base.

"Not only is it easier for (students) to understand the app and the concept, college students also love good music," Boss said. "And the market size is huge."

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