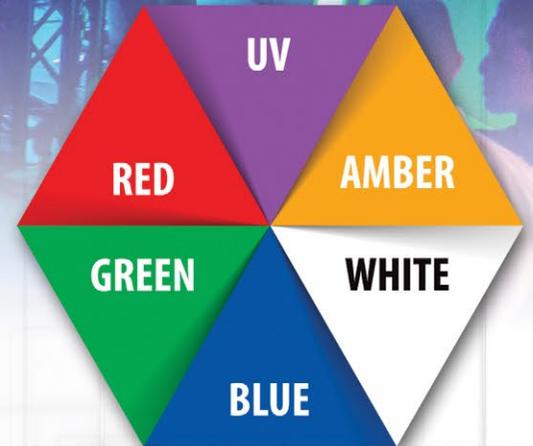


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Winning Set: J. Espinosa in the mix.



Trickmaster: Dynamix dazzles at the qualifier.

A BATTLE DIARY



Philly Style: Reed Streets taps out a beat.



Miami Mixer: DJ Obscene wows 'em early.

As 12 DJs Vied for the USA Title, We Had Front-Row Seats for the Entire, Dazzling Show

By Jim Tremayne

Photos by Red Bull Content Pool

Phoenix, Ariz. — This past May 1-4, *DJ Times* ventured out to the desert to catch the Red Bull Thre3style USA finals and its two preceding qualifying rounds—all held in three Phoenix-area venues.

In addition to connecting with most of the jocks and event staffers, *DJ Times* kept notes the whole week, including every set from every DJ. It all went like this:

Day 1

I arrive in Phoenix and, yes, I'm a long way from the sub-freezing temps I just left in NYC—the weather's terrific, a very dry 88 degrees. Nice.

With my driver on the way to the hotel, however, I have an odd conversation that seems like a parody from *The Daily Show* with Jon Stewart. Let's just say that, between the pleasant weather talk, he somehow manages to shoehorn the topic of

handguns and general weaponry. Welcome to Arizona.

At the Talking Stick Resort, I connect with the Red Bull people and their indie PR staff, plus the dozen Thre3style contestants. We all commiserate at a nearby venue that's part wet bar, part driving range. We hit golf balls, have a beverage or two, and talk tunes. As usual, most of the DJs go deeply into the geek-zone, discussing music, gear and trends. Everyone feels at home.

Day 2

In the afternoon, we venture to Scottsdale Community College, where we meet Rob Wegner, who heads up SCC's DJ Program, and Candyman, who teaches the "MC Skills" class. Here, students can actually get a degree in DJing—it's the first such program in American academia, I'm told.

We also enjoy a Q&A in the auditorium with Z-Trip, aka Zach Sciacca, a longtime Arizona resident who happens to be one of the world's greatest turntablists and a Red Bull Thre3style judge.

In addition to detailing career highlights—like popularizing the mash-up—Z-Trip also offers advice for up-and-coming jocks. He especially emphasizes the importance of hustle, self-motivation and, once you're confident enough in your skills, never underselling your talent. After the talk, I catch an on-mic minute with Z-Trip:

DJ Times: As a judge and someone who's competed in more than few DJ battles, what are you looking for in this competition?

Z-Trip: I'm always looking for someone who's pushing the boundaries of music selection. That's always the first line of defense for anything. If your selection is on-point, you al-

ready have people's attention. If you select the wrong tunes, it's more of an uphill battle because you're forcing yourself to do amazing stuff with it. That's not to say that if you didn't pick the right tunes, you wouldn't win, but I always feel like if you can stand apart from everybody else, that's best. And after awhile, there are probably some "do-not-play" songs that you can take out of the mix.

DJ Times: This competition requires that DJs play at least three genres. As a judge, does the level of a genre's obscurity—something like be-bop, for example—impress you more than playing, say, another AC/DC tune?

Z-Trip: Most definitely. To me, and this is something that I've been trying to get [the competition] to really emphasize, it's about the diversity of the styles. Having a house mix of a rock tune, then a pop tune, then a hip-hop tune that's got four-on-the-floor on it, then you're really not departing from a style—you're just sort of interweaving them. But yeah, playing a be-bop tune or a free jazz tune or a marching-band thing, playing any of those things can be interesting because the listener isn't fatigued by hearing the same style over and over.

DJ Times: But you're probably going to be the only one in the club that knows that it's a tune by, say, Ornette Coleman, right?

Z-Trip: Yeah, well... [laughs] there's something to be said about that, too! *Game recognize game!* If you put in the work and you're digging, I'm going to find that as a favorite because I know what you went through to get that.

Duly noted, Zach.

Later, everyone hops on the outrageously tricked-out Red Bull Tour Bus—DJ rig, plasma screens, righteous sound system—and ventures downtown to the Monarch Theatre for the Qualifying Round No. 1. At least two DJs will be picked to compete in Saturday night's final.

The Competition: Tonight, the order is: DJ B-Stee from Kansas City, Mo., (local regional champ); Boi Jeanius from Chicago (local regional champ); DJ Akshen from Phoenix (local regional champ); DJ Obscene from Miami (Tampa regional champ); DJ Trayze from Mount Rainier, Md., (Washington, D.C., regional champ); and Spare Change from Dayton, Ohio, (Indianapolis regional champ).

B-Stee goes from Kurtis Blow to "99 Luftballons," ending with Fatboy Slim. Boi Jeanius, a Traktor driver in a sea of Serato, kicks off with "1901" from Phoenix, rocks thru The Hives and ends with "If I Ruled the World." Obscene drops some intense tone-scratching, then eases through Devo, Bob Marley, Robin S, Jackson 5—tight and effective. Some of the other jocks believe he'll get the nod. Spare Change kicks it old-



Above: D.C. DJ: Trayze takes his turn on the decks. Below: Quickness: Z-Trip cuts it up at the Final.



Four Color Zack
& Z-Trip rock
The Pressroom.

Local Hero:
Phoenix's
Akshen
gets busy.



heavy set with a dis to the competition, then impresses with Public Enemy's "By the Time I Get to Arizona."

But the judges go for the local, Akshen, who opens with a dazzling drum-n-bass scratchfest and tosses logo'd towels to the crowd. They also pick Trayze, who begins with a campy LeBron-like chalk-clap, then eases through a set that includes the "Andy Griffith Show" TV theme, "Ring of Fire," some G-n-R hard rock and a touch of reggae. See you guys Saturday!

Day 3

It's back on the Red Bull Tour Bus and we're headed to Club Red in suburban Mesa for Qualifying Round No. 2. I'm getting to know some of the DJs a little bit and I've become impressed by the general camaraderie among most of the competitors, even the quieter ones. They happily discuss their past routines, their local scenes, their unique career paths and, as always, gear and music... lotsa gear and music. My people...

The Competition: Tonight, the lineup is: Reed Streets from Wenonah, N.J., (Philadelphia regional champ); J. Espinosa from San Bruno, Calif., (Eugene, Ore., regional champ); Jaycee from Atlanta (Charlotte regional champ); DJ Bonics from Philadelphia (Pittsburgh regional champ); Buck Rodgers from Austin, Tex., (New Orleans regional champ); and DJ Dynamix from Los Angeles (San Diego regional champ).

Jaycee throws down the gauntlet with the James Brown "Star Time" intro, rocks some Hendrix and Nir-

vana, drops some Jack Ü/2 Chainz with "Febreze" and ends with Kenny Rogers' "The Gambler." DJ Bonics goes with The Verve's "Bitter Sweet Symphony," then scratches through plenty of DJ/hip-hop classics, like "The 900 Number," and rocks AC/DC. Buck Rodgers opens with Ludacris, pad taps some sound effects before dropping Stevie Wonder.

The judges? They go for Dynamix and J. Espinosa as qualifiers and toss in a wild card, Reed Streets, whose set was easily the most diverse of all qualifiers.

Streets' rock-leaning set includes: C+C Music Factory, Black Box, Manfred Mann, Starship over a trap-beat, Zep, Heatwave, Oasis, tone-scratching, Billy Idol, Ramones, White Stripes, Gary Glitter, Depeche Mode, "The Roof Is On Fire," David Bowie. Whew.

The other two offer more standard battle fare, but execute plenty of jack-flash deck-scratching. Dynamix's blazing, trick-filled set hits on some classics ("The Breaks") and a few other bona fide party-starters ("Get Ur Freak On"), before ending with the famous warning from "Breaking Bad" TV character Walter White: "I am the one who knocks!"

J. Espinosa's ultra-tight routine opens with a dizzying scratchfest, then punches up a bit of trap and dubstep, then house ("100% Pure Love"), before finishing with a manic "Turn Down for What."

With the five competitors determined for tomorrow night's final at The Pressroom, I grab one of the judges, Four Color Zack, himself an amazing DJ, to offer his judging approach.

DJ Times: As a judge, what are you looking for?

Four Color Zack: We all agree that original selections stand out, but I also like to look at the details. I like creativity. I like the conceptual approach. It's not just things like using pads, but if it's a good thought behind it, if the mix is in key or some instruments go together, or even if it comes down to basic stuff like wordplay or toneplay, I can respect it. There's always that fine line between what's corny and what's not. If you can walk within something that enriches the soul and you're still playing good music, it's game over.

Day 4

With seven of the 12 jocks sitting out tonight's event, a few of them have no qualms getting loose and lifting a few beverages. Though they're certainly disappointed not to be playing tonight, more than one admit that they've already learned a thing or two from the experience. A DJ, apparently, can never be too battle-tested. See what works, remember what doesn't. Watch, listen and learn, and load up for the next opportunity.

The Competition: The finalists order: Reed Streets; Trayze; Akshen; J. Espinosa; and Dynamix.

Once again, Streets goes deep into the crates—Diplo, Avicii, Chuck Brown, Mark Ronson, Lionel Richie, Stevie, Aretha, some jock jams, then Neil Diamond and a-ha.

Trayze opens his relatively varied set with Glen Campbell's "By the Time I Get to Phoenix," then "1901," Rick Ross, C+C Music Factory, Nirvana and Chili Peppers. Akshen gets busy with The Fugees, Black Sabbath, Kool and the Gang, Jimmy Castor Bunch, "The Peanuts Theme" and Public Enemy.

Dynamix dazzles again with a routine that includes De La Soul, DJ Shadow and Jacksons before finishing with a furious scratch flurry. J. Espinosa starts strong with scratching skills, then drops into a groove—Lil Jon over metal riffs, Armand Van Helden's "Funk Phenomena," then "The 900 Number." By the time he drops Ludacris' "Move Bitch," the audience is bobbing, moving as one. He ends with some funky beats and Gwen Stefani's "Hollaback Girl!"

After the competition, but before the winner's announced, Z-Trip wows the crowd with a memorable and varied set that includes Diplo's mix of Marlena Shaw's "California Soul" and Luniz's "I Got 5 on It." Then, fellow judge Four Color Zack cuts up some hip-hop classics and relative obscurities, like indie-rock fave "Feel the Pain" by Dinosaur, Jr.

Before long, however, all the judges and competitors hit the stage. And the runner-up is... Reed Streets. The diverse approach, as hinted by Z-Trip, almost takes the title.

And the winner is... J. Espinosa. Not only did the Bay Area battle jock impress with his lightning-quick deck skills, he offered plenty of flow to match his selections, plus the crowd loved him.

Congrats, J. Espinosa—we'll see you on Tokyo time! ■



Tokyo Bound: J. Espinosa & his prize.