

PUTTIN' A NEW SPIN ON IT – PJ Gray
By Justin Wollenhaupt

When the FBI seized young PJ Gray's computer as part of a hacking investigation, he had no idea the incident would eventually lead him to become one of the premier funk and soul DJs in New England.

More than a decade later, though, he can look back on that incident with a sense of humor and a grateful nod. Gray, a Missouri native, was still in high school at the time, hacking away in the nether-regions of the young internet, planning to matriculate at the University of Missouri at Rolla as a computer science major, and blissfully unaware that the FBI had caught wind of his extracurricular activities. The visit from the feds served as a disturbing wake-up call, however, and forced PJ to find other ways to spend his free time.

A couple of years later at Rolla, PJ found himself in the same old conundrum: he had too much time on his hands, but couldn't spend it on his computer for fear that the FBI was keeping an eye on his online activities. After a chance exposure to the then-young drum n' bass scene, PJ decided to give DJing a shot and got involved with the campus radio station. He started with drum n' bass, but soon switched, figuring that since he was listening to hip hop in his free time, he might as well spin the music he preferred to listen to.

Having found his calling, Gray dove into the music, digging ever deeper to turn up the hottest tracks, while simultaneously exploring the roots of the genre. It was through this process that PJ came to the realization that all hardcore hip hop heads eventually come to: that it all starts with soul.

And that's not a euphemism - it really does start with soul. Hip hop was unique in its infancy as a genre that "samples" other music, meaning that it literally takes a piece of previously recorded work, and through a process of looping, editing, and layering, makes new music out of it. In later years, drum machines, synthesizers and computer programs displaced some of this sampling, and other genres developed that used some of the same techniques, but hip hop was the originator, and in the beginning it was all about samples - specifically soul samples.

For example, a track that just about everyone has heard at some point in their life, hip hop fan or not, is "Rapper's Delight." The source of the beat? "Good Times" by Chic. If you listen, there it is - a straight loop of the beat to "Good Times" (although the folks at Sugarhill Records actually had the piece replayed to avoid a copyright infringement lawsuit).

It was through a love of hip hop that PJ started tracking down those original samples and the records they came from, which were often rare and obscure. Digging through endless boxes of records and making contacts with like-minded collectors, PJ found that he loved the original records as much as he loved the records that sampled them.

But as a DJ, you need to play the music that the audience wants to hear, and the number of funk and soul cognoscenti was small. That is, until DJ Shadow and Cut Chemist released the seminal DJ set, "Brainfreeze." "Brainfreeze" was a master lesson in the roots of hip hop, a furious mix of some of the rarest and funkier tracks ever committed to vinyl, and it turned a whole generation of hip hop fans on to the music that PJ was already into up to his neck.

So the stage was set: PJ had the music, and now there was an audience clamoring to hear it. He had recently moved to the Boston area, and quickly found a gig at Cambridge hot spot The Enormous Room. Meanwhile he was also making moves on the FM dial, garnering a show on the Tuft's University radio station, WMFO.

PJ christened his new show "Galactic Fractures," and, cribbing a term from London soul-digging legend Keb Darge, declared it the local home of "deep, raw funk and soul."

It takes some seriously deep record crates to back up a claim like that - but PJ has that and then some. And those rare 45s don't come cheap or easily. Unlike most genres of music, record companies aren't sending out endless streams of new funk and soul records. While there is a modest scene of modern funk and soul groups, most of PJ's coveted gems are the product of countless hours spent digging through record store basements and backrooms or scouring eBay for the chance at turning up a lost funky burner that for some reason never made the charts.

You can hear the fruits of his labor on his weekly radio show every Sunday from 2 p.m. to 4 p.m., as he spins everything from the rarest of the rare to Motown hits.

But if you go to see him live, expect a different vibe. He understands that the average club-goer doesn't necessarily want to dance to an unfamiliar song after four appetinis, so he gives the people what they want: the most infectious, floor-filling tracks he can muster from his considerable arsenal. He may slip in the occasional deep funk bomb, like "Black Is Beautiful" by Trinikas, but if the floor starts to clear, he'll be right there with the Jackson 5, letting you know "I Want You Back."

PJ Gray's radio show, "Galactic Fractures," can be heard on 91.5 FM, WMFO every Sunday from 2 p.m. to 4 p.m. He spins bi-monthly on Friday nights at the Middlesex Lounge, 315 Massachusetts Ave in Cambridge, and about once a month on Saturday nights as part of the rotating DJ team for Soul-La-Lu-Jah Night at ZuZu, 474 Massachusetts Ave in Cambridge. Archived radio shows, as well as more information on PJ and Galactic Fractures can be found at www.galacticfractures.com.