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**Alex
Cohen**

Interview by Staci
Morgan
Photos courtesy of
The Cherry Fund



There is no shortage of great DJs in Washington, DC.

Mirroring the rest of the country, it seems everybody wants to be a DJ, with

vinyl even making a comeback at mainstream record shops across the country. But before the onslaught of "wannabe DJs", there were patient DJs, addicted to vinyl and the art of making music their own creation. Even with the guidance of a legend, and a collection of original tracks, a DJ needs a break—a moment to catch people's attention and bring him from the easily obscure in to the light of "the next big thing". For Alex Cohen, it was a Sunday night this past March. Spinning for Cherry 9's Host Party at Dream. It would become an impromptu coming out party for one of Washington, DC's best kept secrets.

As a regular club girl, I pride myself on knowing the scene fairly well, so I was befuddled that there was this amazing local DJ operating pretty much under radar. And as Alex prepares to heat Washington, DC up this summer, it's time to finally answer "Who is that DJ?". Don't let the dimples and boyish good looks fool you. He's gracious but direct and quick to let me know that he's no new kid on the block. But it does not take long to figure out that he's right!

Staci: Alex, to the rest of Washington, it may seem like your name is popping up more and more that you are suddenly breaking out, but you have been a DJ and producer for years now. Is it frustrating to have people just now notice you?

I have been spinning for years. The production end is newer to me. I have to say that the DC scene was difficult to break in to. I don't think of it as frustrating, it's more like a relief. People are not noticing, enjoying and dance to my music. It's amazing to have people finally know who I am, asking when I'm going to spin again. It's a welcome change. My residency at PURE in Philly has gotten my name spread there also....It's awesome.



Every DJ has a unique path to the booth. When did you decide that DJing was the perfect fit for you?

My older brother was a bartender. One day, I asked him if he could get me in the bar to hang out with him (laughs) though I was a bit young. Well, he did. It was the first time for me to be in a club with people dancing, loving the music. Instead of dancing with everyone else, I spent the whole night watching the DJ booth. I was amazed at how the DJ moved the crowd. I knew right there, that I was meant to be a DJ. Later on in the night, my brother introduced me to the DJ. I ask him how I could do what he did- you know "how could I be a DJ?" He gave me some tapes, told me to listen to the mixes and how beats fell together. We actually became very good friends. He taught me how to not just listen, but to feel the beats. After months of learning, my friend called me. He wanted me to fill in for his friend. So there I was, 16, spinning at my first club. It was the best experience of my life.

WOW- he gave you tapes to listen to. It's hard to imagine now days. But you have a deep respect for the "art" of spinning vinyl. With technology making it easier for anyone to splice and spin from any computer, do you feel like it has taken away from the craft?

There is nothing like the feel of vinyl. Yet, for the amount of music there is out there, and all the unreleased productions including mine, CDs are beneficial to the DJ community. To be honest, I don't think it's taken away from the art of DJing. A computer can't spin the way I do. I adjust what I spin to how the crowd reacts. A computer can't sense the crowd's energy.

Technically speaking, how difficult was it for you to learn how to spin? Did you have a background in music? And how hard do you have to concentrate when spinning a majority vinyl set?

When I learned how to spin, I never had any background in music; everything I did till this day is from my ear. There are things I feel, but I don't know where the source of them is. I use my own imagination to reach my goals in the sound. When I started spinning I played only vinyl, I don't remember any DJ that span CDs back then, the technology we have right now didn't exist. Sometimes, I used to get kind of hectic when it skipped, but now most of the clubs have any sock trays installed in the booth, which makes it so convenient for us to still play it.

Many people will be hearing you for the first time this summer. Can you describe your style for those who haven't had the pleasure of hearing you spin?

I usually start my set with Deep house, making my way up to tribal and anthems, at peak hour you'd hear some more progressive and Black divas laid over very aggressive beats. I also do remix of the fly at times; I like to also sample acapella, beats. I try to come up with new tricks while being in the booth, more stuff that could be done live to show my skills.

Do you feel



that you are sometimes pressured in to playing a certain way or changing your style for an evening to counteract the sometimes stagnant state of clubland? In other words, when people don't come out to eh

club for whatever reason, is that forcing DJs to stray from their own creative blend and play for more of the mainstream/Top 40 crowds?

Well, it's a fact of being a DJ. When the floor is empty, you have to do your best to fill it. Usually, the people at the club earlier will respond to more top 40 mainstream music. If the night improves, you'll be able to put yourself out there and if it's a good crowd, they will get it. If it's an awesome crowd from the beginning, I stick to what makes the crowd roar. When people go see a big name DJ, they go because they know what the music will be like. Until I'm a household name, I have to bend to the desires of the crowd.

Who has been the biggest influence on you with regard to your DJ career? When you're frustrated, what is the best advice and the worst advice you've been given?

I like lots of DJs such as Victor Calderone, Billy Carroll, Tony Moran and Ralphie Rosario. The best advice and worst advice I've been given is to be patient. (laughs) It was the best because it was right...I was patient and things are finally moving in my direction. Yet, it was the worst because patience is hard work! Another piece of good advice: do things the right way.

You have family in Europe and actually played a few parties in France and Spain before settling here in Washington. Since you were just starting out then, did you take those opportunities to prime yourself for your return to the states

I totally considered spinning overseas an experience that would help be build a strong background in the industry, specially the places in Madrid in Spain. I used to go visit my family in France regularly. I got into this bar where I spun a few times. The atmosphere was kind of different- especially the vibe, I played mostly classics. Even now, my

memory still goes back to those days, and it feels like it was just last week or so. Those were my first days. (giggles)

You have played raver clubs, gay parties, circuit events, bars, after-hours and just about everything in between. Where do you find the best energy and what do you think makes you a good fit for those parties?

That's easy. I find the energy from the crowd. I think I can be a good fit for most parties because I pay attention to the people. If the crowd is not feeling what I'm doing, I switch it up for them. You gotta give the crowd what they want and need to have a good time. Although, I am a much better fit for the circuit crowd!

As a DJ, what accomplishment are you most proud of? Was there a point where you almost threw in the records and said "I QUIT"?

I am really proud of the successful events I've spun. For example, turning a host party for Cherry in to a dance event and my residency at Pure. I have never thought of quitting. I am thankful to the people that have supported me to this day. In the past, when I was frustrated, I would focus on the support I had and on having patience.

You caught the attention of the Cherry Host Committee earlier this year, almost by accident. Even those of us who think we KNOW everyone in the business locally at least by name, were totally caught off guard by you. Did you understand the significance of playing for Cherry at Dream when you were offered the chance? Were you shocked with the crescendo of the crowd all evening that kept you spinning well after close?

Of course, I understood the significance. It was a great opportunity for me to play and have a new crowd to enjoy my music. It gave me exposure in the DC circuit community. Shocked wouldn't be the right word. I was excited. The crescendo was the best part! The crowd's energy invigorated me.

Almost immediately, your name was on everybody's lips. Realizing you were just doing what you always do, how did that feel?

You know, I did expect some response. It was the first time people were given a chance to hear me spin. Yet, the actual response was more than I had anticipated. It's amazing. I loved it!

Are you nervous about all the attention you're getting? Prior to Cherry, you played virtually without any expectations. Now, people are coming out to hear if you are really as good as people say you are.

Not really nervous, I mean I've been waiting for this to happen for a while, perhaps I am finally getting satisfied after all the hard work throughout the years. I concentrate now more about how many are coming to see me, I do everything in my possible to bring success to my events.



You are my favorite type of DJ. You're constantly moving around in the booth, giving energy back to the crowd, and making it look effortless. At what point in a night do you feel content and think "wow...this is a perfect moment"?

Perfect moment is the peak hour. When the crowd is at it's highest energy...that is the moment I enjoy the most.

Does your music reflect your personality? Is music your escape? When producing your own tracks, do you sometimes draw from your own emotions?

Sometimes it does, it is demanding a lot my time, at times that happens. Music is my escape, but not all the times, I do have other things too, like hobbies..... While producing music, I express feelings and things I want to feed to the audience with, Also it depends if it is a remix or a full production, as you can't take it far when it's a remix, you have to stay in that direction.

As you mentioned, you play regularly at Pure in Philadelphia, where you have higher name recognition, at least until recently, than here. Is there a difference in the crowds or the clubs, in Philly from DC?

Crowds are different every night, no matter where you are playing. Each crowd has its unique feel and energy. As a DJ, I just try and tap in to what the crowd feels. The feel of the club also influence the crowd. I prefer a club where the emphasis is on the music and on dancing, not necessarily just the decorations. If I get to spin at a beautiful club that has people with amazing energy, then...I am in heaven.

What are you most excited about this summer? Now that people in Washington are taking notice, you'll face higher expectations.

I am launching a web site pretty soon and I'm also currently scheduling summer gigs. This summer is filled with new opportunities. It seems like doors are opening everywhere. I am most excited for making new crowds feel my music and energy and taking them on a journey.

(Since this interview was finished, Alex Cohen has been booked to play during Pride Weekend on

Sunday at Dream, Apex on June 25th, and Velvet Nation in the main hall at July 31st)

Are you currently working on any production projects that we should be on the look out for?

On the production front, I just finished a couple of originals- WORK and THE MUSIC. The exciting news is I just finalized a track featuring two of Cherry Committee members! It's a fierce mix. I, actually, played it at my last appearance at Pure. Boy, that song rocked the house!

Where do you draw your inspiration from when either producing or spinning at a club?

I get really inspired at the club watching the crowd, especially if I'm receiving a good response. While producing, my inspiration lies in doing my best to create music that turns the whole dance-floor out. I get inspired from so many things. I don't know where it comes from. I just know that I feel it!

In the next five years, what do you hope to accomplish that will keep you motivated to stay in this business?

Currently, I am working on opening up a bigger production space with two other DJs. The new space will continue my motivation in creating new music. I hope to continue to build my name and have people come out to hear me spin. What else can keep me motivated? ...being able to turn it out!

Clubland is a high stress environment. When you're not working, or spinning...how do you relax?

It is stressful... When I'm off, I know there is always a relaxing style of music which is Jazz and lots of old Funk in my case. I enjoy reading, playing pool, cooking a variety of dishes from all over the world, learning about cultures and languages, different lifestyles.

Finally, not as a DJ, but as Alex Cohen. What's your favorite song of all time? And why?

That's gonna be "Havana Club", Rosabel did great mixes of it as well. It reminds of Spain and the good times.

More information about Cherry can be found at their web site, www.cherryfund.org.

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