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Mobile Beat

THE MOBILE ENTERTAINER'S MAGAZINE

ISSUE 108 JULY 2007

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MBFEATURE



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Wedding Toasts Made Easy
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THE COMPLETE GUIDE
TOM HAIBECK

By Tom Haibeck

A few years ago, I had the privilege of watching one of the world's top wedding disc jockeys work his magic at a wedding in Long Beach, California. Having been in the wedding industry for the past 25+ years, I've seen my share of great weddings—along with a whole lot of bad ones. This one ranks right at the top.

The reception was held outside, at the Long Beach Museum of Art (visit www.lbma.org for a look at the venue). It's a magnificent facility, with a grass patio overlooking the Pacific Ocean. The weather was California-perfect that day, with neither a breath of wind nor a single cloud overhead. And as the sun melted into the horizon and night fell upon us, the evening came alive with candle-lit tables and twinkling lights all around.

Adding to that night of perfection was the presence of a great group of guests. The marriage enjoyed a firefighter with a police officer, so the audience was mainly comprised of their colleagues. And while the mixing of the police department with the fire department can sometimes spark fireworks, in this case there was just a friendly rivalry that spawned some hilarious toasts and evolved into some hard-core partying (the hosts even chartered a bus to drive everyone home afterward).

But the key factor in the success of that particular event was the masterful work of the man at the podium. He was like a seasoned conductor who used all his tools to quite literally "play" his audience, bringing them from a comfortable mellow to a glorious high, then back

Once everyone was seated, the wedding DJ (now serving as event MC) offered a formal welcome (on behalf of the bride and groom) and then immediately oriented them as to how the event would unfold. He was gracious with his approach—upbeat, sincere, and genial—but slightly low key and self-effacing. His focus was on the bride and groom; they were the stars, not him. His goal was to honor them and to lead their guests through an evening that would celebrate their marriage (rather than showcase his talents).

He took immediate command of the event with the kind of confidence and professionalism that is the hallmark of all great MCs. While he had great presence and a deep, melodious voice, I think the main reason he was able to so effectively engage his audience was the fact that he was so thoroughly prepared.

Doing Your Homework

He rolled into his intro like a kid entering a classroom on the day of an exam, totally confident in the knowledge that he had done his homework and would ace the exam. This was his event—he was the guy who had helped the bride and groom plan it from start to finish—and he could hardly wait for it to get underway.

He had met with the couple well in advance of the wedding to map out a detailed agenda (in this case, he had filled out five pages of notes that accounted for every element of the event, from the manner of welcome to the eventual wind-down and bidding goodnight). In his words, it was the "script" he would use to direct the wedding (in the same way that a movie director would use a script to guide the production of a film).

He had made sure to get final approval of that agenda from the bridal couple so as to avoid any misunderstandings. And he had shared copies of that agenda with each of the other vendors involved (photographer, videographer, caterer, wedding planner) to help ensure everyone was quite literally on the same page throughout the night.

He had also reviewed a detailed checklist with the bridal couple that covered everything from the availability of power for his gear to the selection of music throughout the event. He knew precisely where the event was to be held, when it should start, when it should end, and what it should "look like" through the eyes of the host (in this case, it was decidedly laid back, informal, and designed for lots of dancing and frivolity).

The Grandest Entrance Yet

He orchestrated a grand entrance like none other I had seen. Again, he had done his homework by asking the bride and groom to provide background on each member of their wedding party; then, with the couple's permission, he had contacted each one to conduct a brief interview designed to draw out a bit of "color" for their introduction (e.g., "How did you meet the bride and groom?" "What words of advice would you offer the bride about living with the groom?" "What's the best thing that's ever happened to you?" "If you could have dinner with anyone in the world, who would that be?").

He then used that information to assemble some insightful—and often hilarious—introductions that were accompanied by a particular song to match the personality of each person being introduced. He even added sound effects and prerecorded music to each intro. The guests loved it, the members of the bridal party each felt recognized, and with the audience now primed and ready to party, the bride and groom made their grand entrance to an absolute roar of cheers,

laughter, and applause. Believe me, this wedding was off to a great start.

The energy from that opening had everyone sky high, and the only thing I can liken it to is the experience of being "warmed up" by a comedian prior to the star's big entrance (if you've ever attended a taping of *The Tonight Show* or *The David Letterman Show*, you'll know what I'm talking about). And that buzz carried right through the entire event.

A formal dinner followed, and our MC recognized a few special guests and read some congratulatory notes and e-mails from guests unable to attend. He also entertained everyone with a little "game show" routine that tested guests' knowledge of the wedding couple's history together...and that, too, resulted in some truly hilarious moments.

Again, music set the mood. In this case, it was comprised mainly of jazzy little numbers that were never overwhelming but which nevertheless got the audience tapping their feet and primed for the dance that was to come.

Wedding Toasts Made Easy

Dinner was followed by a round of toasts—and again, the MC truly impressed me with his professionalism and attention to detail. Each of the "toasters" had been briefed in advance about the approximate time they would be expected to speak, the suggested length of their toast (no longer than three to five minutes, max) and their particular spot in the order of toasts.

They had also been given a quick lesson on the use of the microphone and offered the opportunity to experiment with it prior to the start of the reception. And finally, the MC made sure to offer a brief but classy introduction for each of the people chosen to speak ("And now I'd like to welcome the bride's brother, James O'Brien, to offer a toast to the bride!").

The toasts were excellent—no drunken diatribes, no horribly unprepared ramblers, and no material that could be considered Restricted Adult (and pardon the plug, but that's because each of the speakers had been provided with a copy of my book, *Wedding Toasts Made Easy* six weeks prior to the wedding, along with a personalized note from the bride and groom to thank them for their time in preparing the toast and to offer the book as a gift to guide them in their efforts).

The traditional cake cutting and round of first dances followed—again, seamlessly coordinated by our master of ceremonies (who had also "blocked out" the best locations for the photographer/videographer to setup and capture the moment).

Dancing under the Stars

But it was the dance that proved to be the highlight of the event. And again, I credit the DJ for making that happen.

Like the event itself, the playlist was carefully designed to offer a steady "build" in intensity, followed by a gradual return to the more mellow "good night" numbers. The guests had a rollicking good time; the dance floor was pretty much full the entire night. And our party host shared a couple of secrets with me that I think helped make that possible.

First of all, with the agreement of the facility manager and wedding planner, he had recommended a slight reduction to the size of the dance floor. Through his trained eye, he had immediately determined that the relationship between size of guest list vs. size of dance floor was disproportionate. There simply weren't enough guests to keep the dance floor full (as was originally configured).

But through the magic of downsizing (in this case, simply moving some tables closer to the dance floor), just a handful of dancers could provide the illusion that the floor was active and the party was nonstop. That, in turn, seemed to encourage a steady influx of dancers throughout the night. (Of course, another theory was based on the vast amount of booze consumed by the off-duty fire and police officers, knowing that a bus was waiting to drive them home.)

Factor #2, however, was perhaps the key reason for a flooded dance floor. And it's an incredibly simple concept that's often overlooked by wedding disc jockeys. Our "spinner" in this case had presented the bride and groom with a suggested song list that was pretty much entirely based on "dance-ability." He also got permission from the bride and groom to refuse to play any request that wasn't similarly "dance-able." The

result: No sudden transition to the kind of heavy metal or country classic that can clear a dance floor faster than a cowboy with his boots off.

The evening concluded with a heartfelt "farewell" for the couple. The reception was a huge success, and everyone seemed genuinely happy for the new couple.

I also noticed a steady stream of guests asking the disc jockey for his card. That's apparently the primary source of new business for him—guests who see him perform and referrals from satisfied clients. There is no better way to build a service business—focus on providing exceptional value and the phone will continue to ring.

So who was this mysterious master of wedding entertainment? You might know him. His name is Peter Merry—DJ, author, seminar speaker, and past president of the American Disc Jockey Association. And on a near perfect night beneath the stars of Southern California, he was about as perfect as you can get (unless, of course, I had been the MC).

Tom Haibeck is the author of *The Wedding MC handbook and Wedding Toasts Made Easy*, both of which can be purchased from his website at WeddingToasts.com or at major bookstores throughout North America.

MBFEATURE

I could write a book...

Peter Merry's quest: Banish McWeddings and build unique reception experiences



By Anthony B. Barthel

A t the Mobile Beat Conference in February, many DJs planned their seminar attendance around one in particular: Peter Merry's. And why not? He's been a popular speaker in the past, having first stepped on the stage in 2001 as part of Mark Ferrell's introduction to "Getting What You're Worth." Merry had helped generate interest in his 2007 appearance with buttons, buzz on Web sites and more. So when the room was filled to capacity, it wasn't much of a surprise.

What's the Big Idea?

This time the presentation centered on Merry's new book, *The Best Wedding Reception Ever*. The self-published work promises readers ideas to plan their wedding celebration in unique and creative ways, and offers tips, ideas and suggestions that range from common sense to uncommonly great. Merry also revealed a new trade association called the Wedding Entertainment Directors' Guild™ (WEDGuld) which he has trademarked.

You would think that planning a successful wedding reception wouldn't generate any controversy, but some of the ideas presented in the book have created a storm of protests from DJs around the country. While there are certainly plenty of DJs who love the ideas, many sit in front of their computers directing ire at Merry on chat boards. He confidently responds with his ideal that a professional DJ is someone who treats the business with a professional attitude, which, according to him, includes charging a "professional fee." By his own definition, this means charging customers enough to provide a decent living for the DJ.

Whether one ascribes to the ideals in the book, there are a lot of points that can help a bride generate a fun wedding reception by her own definition. The book is quickly getting into the hands of brides, as well as those on the business end of weddings, and the reviews are starting to come in.

"From wedding professionals who aren't DJs, I've had very, very positive reactions. I've had very positive remarks and requests to see bonus materials" (Those bonus materials are available for registered users at www.thebestweddingreceptionever.com). It's part of a plan to educate brides on how to plan a very successful wedding but not with fancy flowers or intricate linens. It's with entertaining ideas that involve all the guests and thrill the participants and planners alike.

Merry has also pitched DJs on the idea that they could offer the books as gifts at bridal shows. DJs ran with the idea, buying cases to take home as gifts or to sell on their own. The result was that Merry went home with empty boxes after bringing 500 books to the conference.

Growing a Book

The idea for the book came back in July 1999. In those days, Peter Merry would have a booth at bridal shows and he noticed that at the shows, or in book stores, there were plenty of resources for brides but all of them focused on the appearance of the wedding.

"I saw it as a big gaping hole of information in the wedding industry and I said to myself that someone should write a book about it—and that I should be that somebody. Nobody covered how to make a wedding entertaining from A to Z." So he started writing. The book started as a booklet, which he would pass out at two-hour workshops that he conducted in Southern California; but soon chapters started forming for the present book.

"The thing I've come to realize over the years is that the wedding magazines and books have been selling the image of a wedding, but not the experience. They show them how to make it look but not how to make it move from one moment to the next."

The first printing blew out the door in record time, so there was a second and then a third printing, each in groups of 500. Finally, Merry went for it big time, and ran 10,000 books. Now the challenge begins.

The author has already been on TV for three interviews with local morning shows, had a radio interview, and even one on a podcast. The publicity machine is starting to hum.

"...THE WEDDING MAGAZINES AND BOOKS HAVE BEEN SELLING THE IMAGE OF A WEDDING, BUT NOT THE EXPERIENCE." —PETER MERRY

But it's not easy getting yourself on TV. The first interview came with the help of fellow Mobile Beat presenter and DJ, Randy Bartlett. Bartlett was involved with a local bridal show whose organizers had contacts at a local TV station. When they found out what Merry was talking about, he was booked on the morning show.

From that one interview, others followed. "It's like a snowball. Once you do a little more people recognize that you're doing it and they're more than willing to open the door. It helps getting a TV interview when you already have one."

Controversy, McWeddings

So what about this business of saying that many part-time DJs are not professional? "The vast majority of people doing this part-time make up the majority of our industry—and the vast majority of the people doing this part-time suck." Those are strong words, to be sure, but Merry insists that many DJs do not take the profession seriously. Even many multi-op owners offer their DJs little or no training in wedding entertainment.

Merry's own career as a DJ was proof of this. In 1992, he worked in the field of high-speed culinary arts (fast food). Like many in that business, he thought his job was terrible so he started looking elsewhere. One of the ways he sought employment was through the Yellow Pages, just seeing what professions appealed to him. When he got to the DJ section, he knew he had found an answer.

He called a few companies and eventually went to work for one who put him on a karaoke job the week after the interview. No training, no background, just a job. Fortunately, that first job went well, with Merry having the guests dancing despite not having the ability to truly mix music.

With the success of one performance under his belt, Merry was assigned to a wedding the following weekend. Unfortunately, the company gave him their worst equipment and the event went very poorly, with technical glitches of all sorts including skipping songs. Merry felt his own excellent performance was obscured by the unreliable gear. However, the caterer complained to the DJ company that Merry didn't know what

he was doing, so he was pulled off weddings and got to roadie for the company's owner for six months.

During that time he watched the DJ owner of the company conduct the exact same performance week in and week out. Did he learn anything? Yes. "I learned that it was okay to roll up your sleeves after the formalities were done. I learned that it was okay to do the same thing week in and week out. I learned that it was okay to be bored with the routine of the same performance and put that face on toward the guests." He describes the experience as "McWeddings."

He also learned that no training and education meant little value as a performer, meaning he was up at 4:00 in the morning throwing papers for the Orange County Register to make ends meet.

Peter Merry started his own DJ company and also had his own wedding celebration in December 1994. He figured things would be great at \$400 per performance and that he could sell enough weddings to support him and his new wife, Lisa. He was wrong, and by June 1995 they no longer had a place to live.

To support himself, he took all sorts of jobs that he hated and got back on his feet. He still never lost the passion for performing in front of an audience and it was during one of those performances that a photographer mentioned a DJ he had worked with who caused the guests to laugh and cry while he told their story. That DJ was Mark Ferrell. Peter became determined to speak with him.

After some searching, he found Ferrell but the DJ had a gatekeeper—his wife, Rebecca—who wouldn't let a competitor poke him for information. Despite multiple phone calls, Merry didn't get to speak with Mark Ferrell for six months. Still, he learned a lot from Rebecca. In fact, it was she who convinced him to raise his prices and eventually even sent him a lead with the promise that he would charge \$800 for the performance. He booked the performance.

September or October, but the demand for his being on there won't come from DJs pitching Oprah. It will come from brides who share with her stories about how Merry's ideas changed their lives.

He also has a forthcoming DVD project done in collaboration with Randy Bartlett that will be a visual version of the book, of sorts.

By creating controversy, Peter Merry is creating interest and interest breeds demand. But his ultimate desire is that his ideas and vision help brides have what to each of them is best wedding reception...ever. ■

The Best Wedding Reception Ever (\$24.95, 208 pages) is available at Amazon.com or through www.thebestweddingreceptionever.com.

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