



# DIALOGUE WITH THE DON

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A man who needs no introduction - Aqeel Ali, popularly known as DJ Aqeel, is a pioneer when you talk about remixes and dance music. Back in the day when the thought of remixing two songs was an alien concept in our country, Aqeel was already creating masterpieces that would go on to forever change the face of music, parties and clubbing in India. Humungous hits like "Keh Du Tumhe", "Yeh Wada Raha", and so many more have now attained an iconic status - tracks that are sure to get you on to the floor and grooving - age, location, time; unheeded. There's little that this man hasn't achieved when it comes to dance music - be it skill, craft or business - and though illustrious, none of it has come easy.

The following are excerpts of a candid interview with Disc Jockey magazine's Elton Noronha, where the iconic celebrity DJ shares details about his journey, his view on music today, thoughts on technology and the works, the business of clubbing and entertainment, and his plans for the near future.

## **A BIT OF HISTORY**

Recounting the early days of his journey, Aqeel shares, "I started off way back in the year 2000, when DJ'ing was restricted to the one guy in a city who'd be a resident at a club. The concept of a branded DJ was far out of sight at that point in time, but it was always something that fascinated me. It's actually then that I took to DJ'ing. In fact, even internationally the scene was still growing, but with some serious force; and it just amazed me so much and had such



*The crowd enjoying the music and grooving away during a performance by DJ Aqeel*

an impact on me, that I was convinced that I should do something meaningful in this line and try and introduce this culture in India as well. It was about giving the country a flavour they hadn't experienced before. No doubt it was a risk – but definitely one worth taking. It was also the beginning of a new era wherein a new market in the music industry had opened its eyes – the market of electronic and dance music – and I'm so glad that it has finally found the respect it deserves for having provided so many people over the years with a lovely career and amazing memories!"

Talking about the challenges he faced, Aqeel shares "Well actually speaking I did have great support from my loved ones, and that was the best thing about it all. When it comes to the skill part of it, well I learnt the hard way – kept doing stuff, faltered, tried again and again till I got it right – I came from the age of tapes and CDs – so yeah, there was a lot of hard work. But I've enjoyed and cherished every bit of it! First was building a brand. The real challenge actually was in creating a market that recognized the value and importance of DJs. Back then, the concept of branded DJs didn't exist. It was singers and only the top music composers who were considered as musicians. To break that monotony and to establish DJ'ing as a serious craft that was worthy of the respect it truly deserved, was something I really struggled with. To be able to charge even a minimal fee for performance was difficult back then, but it's actually that very journey and struggle that has got me to where I am today. From playing for small parties to now entertaining sold out concerts – it's been an amazing journey. Without a doubt, my parents and my wife Farah have been my pillars of strength – they've supported me and stood by me through it all, and have made this absolutely wonderful. Everything – all of it was totally worth it."

## **ON THE EVOLUTION OF DANCE MUSIC, AND THE SCENE IN INDIA**

Aqeel's music is what's set him apart and helped him stand out from everyone else. And it's quite natural that the man has an innate passion for it, especially when it comes to dance music. Having been around in the thick of things as the music and clubbing scene in our country took its evolutionary course, he points out that with time, a lot has changed, especially the music. Aqeel voices this as he reminisces, "When I started off, it was pure disco tunes. It was all so groovy – I'd say it was possibly the purest form of dance music. Then came in an era with pop music really picking up. Melodies still had a lot of groove in them and song writing at this point was experimental and really interesting. Up next we'd moved into the EDM revolution when the groove was taken out and it was only about raving to the drop, not personally a fan of this though."

He goes on to explain how the evolution of music inspired the evolution

of his very own brand of music, something that gained iconic status in little or no time; "I have come from times when people would dance even between when I'm mixing two songs, but when EDM stepped into the picture, it had become more like the first minute of the song is to take pictures of each other and when the drop comes dance for those few seconds and get back to the phone. To tackle this I started adding bollywood vocals on top of EDM tracks and I noticed that the crowd would sing along till the break down and then dance on the drop. The energy and vibe was exuberant and people didn't stop dancing. It was perfect. Come to think of it, EDM gives a lot of variety to an artist to choose and play from. So many EDM tracks release every day vis-a-vis Bollywood and I feel after a few drinks people do want to listen to something that is different. Even when I started years ago, it was mostly experimenting with the sub genres. If you listen to my music, I have always been playing EDM with Bollywood vocals. And my signature sound would be between 128 and 130 bpm and with a slightly retro touch. I've seen that this retro touch arises nostalgia in people and their energy takes a sizeable push and everything looks just perfect! That's what you want as a DJ really – looking out at your crowd enjoying the music and grooving away!"

Talking about other forms of electronic music and how the evolutionary pace of those sub-genres has impacted the scene globally and in India, Aqeel points out, "I am absolutely LOVING the scene on the whole really. Big room is finally moving out and Bass and Deep are coming up steadily. I also love how some of the top DJs and pop stars are now collaborating, putting DJs in the same frame as a top pop star. The scene in India is flourishing too I believe. I've seen a huge increase in the number of producers. Plus, with more schools and academies for music being set up, I trust it's just going to get better. Bollywood too right now is as open to multi genre music now as it's ever been, and the result of experimenting with this idea is already doing great. So it's all looking HUGE for dance music in India for sure. Personally speaking, I too am now moving into a bit of future bass, bass house (with a little bit of big room) and I'm also pushing a more radio friendly deep/chill vibe as well. The response to this start has been quite encouraging, so I think I'm going to explore this quite seriously moving forward."

On the topic of commercial music vis-à-vis indie music, he goes candid saying, "I feel there's a very thin line between indie and commercial. If your sound is good and is working it ends up being commercial. And that is the honest truth. Take for example Nucleya, he was always regarded as an indie artist but one Laung Gawacha has taken him to every single phones playlist in the country. He has willingly or unwillingly been taken off his indie image and is just as commercial as anyone else right now; which I believe is doing wonders for him! So yes, this whole thing about commercial versus indie has always been a really vague thing, at least for me."

## **ON MUSIC PRODUCTION, GIGS & TECH**

Taking the discussion on music further, Aqeel gives us an insight into the creative process that's worked in his favor in creating amazing works of electronic and dance music art. He says, "It is pretty simple really. I pay a lot of attention to the melodies. I believe that's the essence of any song. The melody, and the vocals of course. Once you get the groove right, it's all then just about adding the right amount of bass and thump to the track. Yes, it does take some time, especially when you want to get things just right. But yes, the eventual outcome always is great – or at least that's what I believe and have noticed personally."

## **BUT HOW DOES HE GET IT DONE?**

Aqeel shares details of the workflow that suits his style of creativity and music production, as he enumerates the technology that's dear to him; "I really can't do without my music production software LogicX. It is simply too good, and I believe you can make anything from a great film score to an original composition to even a remix. It is that versatile! Apart from the LogicX, I use a lot of soft synths for my production. My favourites are Sylenth,



A view of the studio located at DJ Aqeel's office space

Nexus 2, Omnisphere, Trilian and Spire. I use a Mac Pro with state of the art configuration in tandem with a MOTU Ultralite mark 3 interface, and a Novation as my go-to keyboard controller. I have a unique monitoring set up with the Mackie HR824 as the near-fields, and a sub bass unit from Genelec for whenever it's needed. For mastering my tracks, I use a lot of the Logic inbuilt mastering tools and compressors. This is basically the setup that I have at the studio in my office space, which is where quite a lot of the works are finished and polished. Apart from this though, I do have a tiny little setup at home which comprises a Mac with a zoom TAC-2R sound card and a pair of Yamaha HS50M monitors. Not to forget my Akai MPK mini keyboard! Basically this set up helps me note down any great ideas that pop into my head while I'm at home. I also like being in touch with my music while I'm on the go, which is why I use my Macbook pro with same Akai MPK mini keyboard and my V-Moda headphones. I think it is amazing how one can now a days work from anywhere and make great music on the fly. I believe it to really be a blessing for us DJs who are always travelling and have to meet deadlines of other producers and our own productions as well!"

With the amount of attention stressed on gear, Aqeel stresses his thoughts on the importance and relevance of technology as he says, "Technology is important, no doubt. But it isn't the 'be all end all'. You know about the kind of gear that I use in my studios, so I guess it's clear that I am pretty conscious about using good tech. For my live sets as well, I play on a Pioneer DJM2000 Nexus and CDJ2000 Nexus2, with a USB as my source. My rider for club shows is very basic, mainly because I don't like asking for something and then not getting it. For larger format shows though, I have the DJ console as a set thing, and I add on SFX, LED (my visual set is finally ready :D), Performers, etc. I'm currently designing a custom stage for my shows too. So yes, there is emphasis on technology for sure. However, I believe content is king! It's really not so much about the gear. It's the content that makes the difference. In my case, I make and play my own mixes and have a unique sound for my songs that can relate with 5 to 60 years old. When you see the crowd appreciating your content, that's what

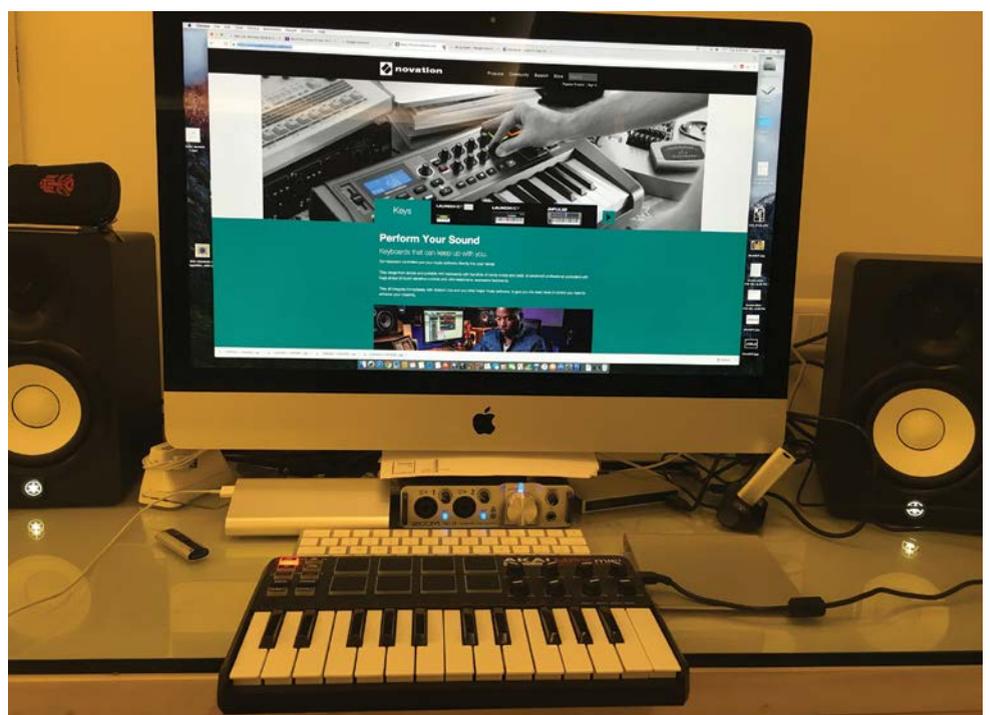
makes it all worthwhile."

## ON THE NIGHTCLUBS SCENE IN INDIA

As the discussion graded into clubbing culture, Aqeel shares his experiential wisdom, both as an artist and as the decision maker of some of the most happening clubs across the country – mainly Mumbai and Delhi – as he comments, "We've never really got clubbing culture perfectly figured out here in India, and that's been the real challenge. For the longest time, people have wanted to go casually dressed in flip-flops to a neighborhood bar or lounge rather than travelling to a club, just because it's convenient. That's the reason why the number of lounges and bars have increased exponentially over the years. Let me tell you a little statistic – in 2012 we had 300 authentic nightclubs in the country, and now in 2016 we have just 33. That's the situation here."

He goes on to state some of the challenges that nightclubs in India are actually laden with. He says, "Currently the biggest problem clubs here face is mostly infrastructure driven. There are venues that invite

DJs to perform and the money is good, but these clubs are not able to put together an International level "SHOW" which we can showcase at smaller capacity venues. Production at a venue is really important and there are very few venues that pay heed to this. In terms of a concert space, India is finally at pace in terms of technicals and gear, as NSCI Dome is probably the only good concert oriented venue in the whole country! In terms of clubs I can only think of 3 or 4 that can support a well-produced DJ show with SFX, LED's, other performing artists etc. Clubs in India definitely need a facelift. We are nowhere close to the clubs abroad. This was one of the main factors that prompted me to go all guns blazing while conceptualizing the design and technical for my latest clubbing venture – SIRKUS – wherein we have state of the art equipment – sound from TURBO SOUND supported by LAB GRUPPEN amps; lights and visuals including 24 state of the art moving heads, 3 lasers / blinders and 4 led screens also haze machines. We have co2



DJ Aqeel's home studio setup

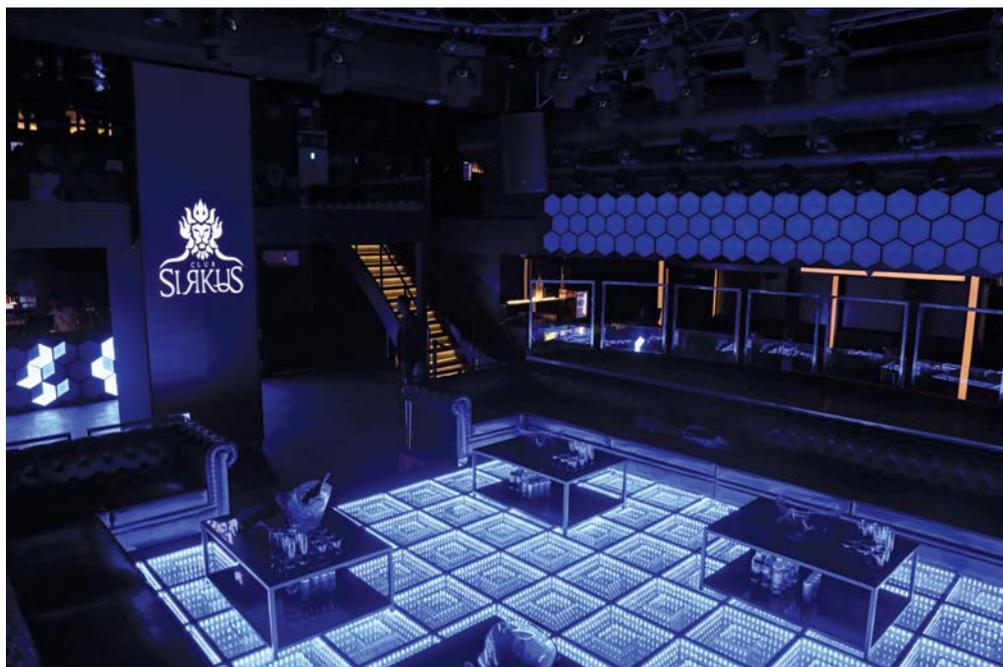
guns too for that extra bit of zing and fun.”

Talking about the possible solution to these issues, Aqeel offers “My solution to this is to somehow educate club owners to spend more on creating an experience based club rather than a simple lounge with a dance floor and a bar. Experiences create memories! In terms of bigger capacity venues, it would be great if local governments would intervene to create top quality performance and convention centers that can host large scale events with the right kind of setup. To have a better idea about it – I urge the readers to come check out my latest venture SIRKUS - that is the kind of production I’m talking about!”

## THE BUSINESS OF DANCE MUSIC IN INDIA

Discussing the dance music scene in India from the overall point of view, Aqeel asserts “We’re in a position better than ever. The fee is much better, outlets for putting out our music are better than before, we can reach out to more people through various medium and the number of gigs have also increased multifold. And what’s ever more endearing is to see how crowds of thousands now come out to support their favourite DJs. Event organizers have become more respectful of the artist and have also started showing willingness to experiment with concepts which is extremely commendable! In terms of artists and our culture and work ethic, it’s definitely good – but it can get better. We aren’t supporting each-others’ music as much as we should be.

That being said, I still believe we’re still a strongly bonded small community, most of us at least! Also, original productions are finally kicking off and I’m glad, the kind of content which will be soon available will help us get onto the International map. Plus, music composition for movies is a new avenue being offered to us now on. The exposure in this is tremendous! So if you look at it from the macro point of view, the pros of it all would entail a faster growing industry with more venues, more opportunities, and more original content. The cons would entail that every DJ would just promote themselves and no one else. It’s a competitive industry, and I guess that’s how it goes. But I love how the dutch support each other all the time, which is why they’re on the top when it comes to DJ’ing. That’s something we should learn!”



*DJ Aqeel’s latest clubbing venture – SIRKUS*

## POSITIVITY AND PEARLS OF WISDOM FOR THE NEXT GEN DJs

With the pros and cons of the business of dance music clearly stated, Aqeel shares his optimism about the next generation of DJs as he says “The young DJs that I know do take DJ’ing very seriously. I guess they’ve realized it’s a job; a profession; its big money to be made. And it’s so good to see that they are focused on every aspect - from production to personal appearance and everything in between. Big ups to them for this. I’d say though, just remember you have the potential to be a star, but always stay grounded. Don’t get into the same rat race. Work on your production simultaneously with your DJ’ing. When you have a unique sound people can associate you with, there’s no stopping you then! There’s no fixed mantra for success though. It’s usually good content + strong marketing that stands out as a common winner!”

On the negativity that audiences throw at DJ’s these days for being ‘push-button DJs’, he shares “Singers are called melodyne and auto tune vocalists, too but it really doesn’t mean they should take offence to any of this. Like I’ve kept saying all this while, all we need is good content. A high energy set and an ability to read the crowd well. Any form of negativity shouldn’t get to you. I’ve been doing this for 16 years, and I’ve heard this the most. Very commonly – {‘I can’t believe you get paid so much to come and press buttons.} It’s at that point that you make it your life mission to get that person to dance to your tunes all night and then wait for them to come upto you and apologize for the statement and thank you for the memories you’ve left them with – all in one night! That’s how you deal with this sort of stuff!”

## FUTURE BECKONING

Having shared his experiences, wealth of knowledge and amazing positivity, the next obvious question that beckoned was, ‘What is next for the Don himself?’

Aqeel responds with fervor and enthusiasm as he discloses, “Oh there’s tonnes and tonnes of work lined-up. Number one on the list is a newly produced live show with top level technicals and a lot of never before seen performers being added to an Indian DJs permanent tour troop! That apart, I’m also working on remixes and mashups as always, but a lot of new original music is what’s really got me going – I’m looking at composing a lot of cool new real and original tracks this year! So yes, it’s going to be busy and fun as always... Stay tuned!”

