

Interview with DJ Sir-Vere

Interview by Barnaby Weir

Tell us about your first experience of smoking...

I guess when I was young a lot of parents did it. Back then it was quite prevalent you know, think back to the classic movies, they're all smoking, which is a shocking portrayal of what cool is, because it is not. I was really into movies when I was young and also one of my parents smoked. When I got to high school there was a lot of it going on behind the bike shed, that kind of thing.

Did you ever get pressured to smoke by those around you?

I felt an extreme amount of pressure when I was a teenager. Where I'm from in deep dark South Auckland it's not all bad but with a high Maori and Polynesian population you were expected to. It was almost impossible to escape that peer pressure, so it was very difficult man, very difficult.

Do you remember being offered a cigarette for the first time?

Yeah I can, it was just after intermediate. I was at the bus stop and I was offered it. I guess I succumbed because I had to you know. Like there were thirty people sitting there watching me, you know, I remember being a bit ashamed that I had given in. At the time I was like, 'I'm gonna do this because it's expected'. I guess it's quite difficult at that age as well to grasp the fact that you have choices. I didn't realise till later that I could have done whatever I wanted to.

So why don't you smoke?

I've always been quite entrepreneurial, that comes from my parents, and I thought it was such a ridiculous waste of money that I just wouldn't buy into it. I can actually remember the moment. I was in Newmarket thinking, 'I'm never going to do that because if I didn't smoke I could add up and go yeah that's three hundred and something dollars.' I'm a sneaker freak from way back and I was comparing it going, 'If I didn't smoke I can do this so I'm not going to smoke.' That was one part of it.

Another part of it was a very good friend of mine smoked religiously and it used to annoy me no end. I was like, 'Dude, I just don't necessarily think you need to smoke.' If we were watching a movie and he was smoking I wasn't into the fact that he would be inflicting it on me. It was in one day that all of this came together and I was like, 'That's it, this is not happening, I'm not putting up with this', and I told him off and I made that decision that day to not smoke. That's not my absolute reason for doing it cos there's health reasons of course and kids and blah, blah, blah. I'm just saying that at that point in time it was pivotal for me to try and make the best I can, to try and make my future a bit better.

Do you think smoking is still perceived as cool?

I think there has been quite a big shift, however I think that the same pressures apply. I do think there are a lot of initiatives out there, not just against smoking but for things that would suggest that issues like alcoholism etc. aren't that cool. I think there has been a positive change but it always harks back to that peer pressure thing. What's cool, what is actually cool? Because back when I was a kid, smoking was definitely cool, but now it's definitely probably not. That is quite a significant shift because kids are kids and so impressionable. I think a lot of kids now have learnt that they have choices and this has a lot to do with parenting of course.

I'm from the music community and I spend a large part of my working life in clubs, I know for a fact there is a large proportion of people now who look at people and go, 'She looks really hot but she's smoking, that's not actually cool anymore'. I'm really happy about that. And I think that you can ruin a look real quick with a smoke in your hand, because it's kinda like you're clean, you look good and you've got a filthy dirty stinking cigarette in your hand. I think that is significantly different from 15 years ago, definitely.

Do you think smoking affects your performance onstage?

I have an MC that I tour with and I actually chose him - one major part was that he was a good performer of course - but also because he doesn't smoke. When you're a vocalist, smokers are notorious for getting out of breath. I just can't have that. I DJ for a solid two hour set, it's full on, this guy's on the go for the whole time and I'm just not ready to deal with somebody who is going to run out of breath. That's not discrimination, that's just saying, 'Dude, if you want to be my sidekick you don't have a choice, if you're a smoker that's just not going to happen'. I can't have that. I think a lot of people, especially MC's in the hip hop world have had to make a decision about that because with the genres like rock, you get to take breaks, with hip hop you don't, you're the centerpiece, it's continuous delivery, to rap on a mic you have to throw your voice really hard and if you're a smoker that's not going to happen dude. I've seen several MC's that do smoke and I could play you a song right now, one, two, three songs and say, 'You tell me the smoker' and you will pick it because his delivery is not punchy, it's not very fluent. You can disguise things in a studio to a certain amount, but I know of one guy in particular, you listen to it, and you go, 'That guy is a smoker because he doesn't punch his words out.' What are you going to do? You want to be in this game? You want to do what I do? It's not going to happen man, like his career is over before it started, until he makes either a conscious effort to change his style or to get his lungs working. That's all you have, you only have your lungs and your voice and your vocal chords, and you're willing to put that at risk because of smoking? That doesn't add up to me.

I don't think that smoking stops people from doing these things but it certainly stunts their growth in the industry. We do a lot of showcases to radio and media people, and like it's really stripped back, it's just you, your voice and a backing tape. Now if you don't have that delivery you're at an automatic bad place real quick. It's a definite

disadvantage, I'm telling you I won't hire you because you can't do your job, it's pretty serious.

What about in the TV industry?

Yeah for sure, there's a conscious effort where I work in television that we just don't do it. It's just not a good look aye, guys sitting on TV smoking. For a start you've got something in your mouth, that's rule number one, no gum, no toothpicks, no nothing in your mouth. And two, I mean from a vain situation you get wrinkles real fast from smoking. If you are going to smoke non-stop and get a thousand wrinkles, your TV time is over before it's even started. I mean it is what it is, if they choose to smoke that's their decision, but if it's gonna be like that just don't do it around me, I don't like that kind of thing. I just know that aging is a real thing, I know it is cos my uncles and aunties are in their forties and they are covered in wrinkles, you know what I mean? And if you're going to be in the TV realm you don't have a choice, you've got to look after yourself.

What are your thoughts on young people who experiment with smoking?

I actually have a problem with the whole thing. This is just me right? I don't think that a 15-year-old boy is going, 'Mmm I'm interested in smoking.' I think it's other people saying, 'You should be smoking'. They start to think that it looks cool. I'm just saying I don't think it looks cool, I think it looks really stupid. It's bad for your health. For instance I do workshops with kids in South Auckland teaching them about music, once again it's like, there's so much else in the world to do, and you want to narrow your chances of doing anything you want by smoking, it just doesn't make any sense.

I meet heaps of kids that are in a pretty bad socio-economic situation, they live in a real bad part of town, their parents aren't doing so well, and they want to make a run of it, they want to play for The Warriors, they want to rhyme like Scribe, they want to DJ like DJ Sir-Vere. I'm just saying in order to do these things the last thing you should be doing is smoking. You should be thinking, 'How can I get better at managing my money, or how can I get better at projecting my image to get on TV, or how do I get better at writing rhymes so I can become an MC or scratching records?' So if a kid was saying to me, 'I'm thinking about smoking', I'd be like, 'So what else are you thinking about? Let's just stop the smoking thing, there must be so many other thoughts that you have prior to thinking about smoking.'

Do you think smoking is still considered normal behaviour?

There's no doubt that smoking is abnormal behaviour, that's not really even an issue. If you inhale smoke in a fire situation it's gonna kill you, no doubt about it, that in itself is solid evidence that inhaling smoke is probably going to kill you, so why would you do it? There's no logic to it to start with, sure it becomes a habit for some people later on and it turns into an actual physical problem, but you have to get to that point in order to let that get away on you. We weren't born with a cigarette in our hand. At no point in time were we ever selected by some heavenly person to stick a cigarette in our mouths and start

smoking. I mean I can give you a list, we could go on for an hour, reasons why it's abnormal, and I couldn't honestly give you a reason to smoke cigarettes. It's a choice, there is nothing normal about it.

What would be your main message about smoking?

It would be that you have every reason to not smoke. It's real simple, don't smoke because it's bad for your health, don't smoke because some of your friends are not going to like you, don't smoke because it is bad to do it around other people cos of secondhand smoking. I can give you every reason to not smoke, I can give you none to start.

Do you think young people are worried about not being accepted amongst their peers if they don't smoke?

I can think of a thousand other ways to be cool. For instance, a lot of schools have radio stations so get on the radio station and become the voice of a show and all of a sudden you're cool. Say for instance you were a girl going to Auckland Grammar, just around the corner from Mai FM, you might motivate yourself to go to Mai FM and say, 'I'm gonna do a deal, let's have a Mai FM concert at my school'. You could be the organizer and all of a sudden you are a cool person.

You could go to The Warriors headquarters if you went to Otahuhu High School, and say, 'I've got a great idea, let's have The Warriors at school for a day', you know what I am saying? There are so many things, I could reel off a million things to you right now depending on where you lived or who you are. If you lived in Mount Roskill and you saw me in the street, come up to me and go, 'Hey Sir-Vere, I'm from this local community what can we do?' Do you know what I am saying?