



San Diego DJ Trouble-Shoots the “Mitzvah Maniac”

By Scott Aruti

San Diego, Calif. — Eric Sands’ watershed moment occurred in college. He had been playing violin since the fourth grade and even toured with a symphony orchestra, but he also wanted to earn a living when the time came for graduation. “I needed to decide whether I wanted to continue performing music or make a living,” says Sands. “I had found it’s rare when someone can do both. So I decided to explore an engineering degree, and along the way, fell victim to the allure of spinning records.”

Some 20 years later, there might be an electronic bridge-opener project that has gone unrealized, but the bar/bat mitzvah market in San Diego is better off for Sands’ decision to pursue DJing.

In 1982, Sands launched a DJ “business” on Long Island New York’s Stony Brook University campus, taking home \$ 100 for a night of performing at dorm parties for “several hundred drunk kid’s

He recalls: “I was doing campus parties pretty much a couple of times a month, but it was strictly out of fun at the time — a kind of ‘who-had-the-largest-stereo-on-the-floor’ event. After a year of doing these events, I saved up enough to purchase better equipment and began performing at off-campus events, mainly bar mitzvahs and

cheesy weddings at the Hauppauge VFW hall.’

By 1985, Sands had graduated from Stony Brook and, with his newly purchased DJ equipment, he began booking higher caliber weddings and anniversaries. This led to going full steam into the mobile DJ business, with in operation titled Executive Productions — while working a full-time electronic engineering job at Grumman Aerospace.

Sands, still living at home with his parents on Long Island, had a bedroom stuffed with DJ equipment, including Technics 1200s and crates of 12-inch vinyl, from Yaz to Shannon, and even a rare copy of “She Blinded Me With Science.”

By the late 1980’s, Sands tired of Long Island and, with his best friend Ron Michaels (who worked with Sands throughout his New York college DJ days), made the move to San Diego. “We wanted to pick a place that was warm in climate and growing in terms of popularity and populations,” says Sands. “San Diego was an area where I could launch a successful business because it was growing.”

After his arrival in San Diego in 1989, Sands admits to being a “beach bum” of sorts for about a year, although he did land DJ jobs and

performed at weddings. “I did not have a day job,” he says, “because I wasn’t thrilled with the prospect of an engineering career.”

So as Sands began searching for a mobile DJ niche in San Diego, he didn’t need to look far beyond his own personal experience. “Being Jewish myself, understanding the Jewish ‘way of thinking’ when it comes to planning a bar mitzvah, he says, I decided to focus all my energy on bar/bat mitzvahs.”

Sands inspiration for such in undertaking came from David Jay, another former New Yorker, now spinning in Beverly Hills, who was known in the San Diego bar/bat mitzvah community in the late ‘80s. “David had left San Diego, and I wanted to fill his shoes, so to speak,” says Sands. “I knew it wasn’t a going to happen overnight, and so initially, I began running ads in the local area Jewish newspapers and publications, including synagogue newsletters, on a regular basis. As the years passed, I also began gearing my promo material towards bar and bat mitzvahs, while also contacting the San Diego DJ Association and informing them that I was not interested in weddings any longer. As the 1990s rolled on, me and my newly dubbed Sundance Productions reached the point where bar and bat mitzvahs was all that we did.”

Eventually, after two years of working together in California, Sands and Michaels went their separate ways, with Sands growing on the Sundance foundation already built and Michaels moving to Colorado. Today, Sands is a single-system operator, but he works with seven or eight “assistants” and 10 dancers, mostly sisters and brothers of people he has done bar and bat mitzvahs for in the past.

According to Sands, Sundance stands out in this niche with his elaborate use of video screens. “Multimedia has so much potential, and just like the past 50 years, in which technology has perfected sound, in the next 20 years, technology will perfect video. We’ve found it’s not enough just to play music any more at bar or bat mitzvahs, it’s about appealing to more than just one sense. This is what I am trying to push right now, these big screen video parties with live cameras. One very cool aspect we are dealing with now is a wireless video link. When we are doing a live camera feed from the dance floor, and the kids can

see themselves on the big screen, we utilize a three-chip camera with a 2.4 gigahertz transmitter which transmits the video, eliminating the need for a cable all over the floor and people possibly tripping all over it.”

Sands also capitalizes on his “insider” status with the local Jewish community. “When a client calls and say, for example, he or she says, “I am with Temple Beth-Israel,” I know exactly what part of town that is in,” explains Sands. “You can make that immediate connection when you are that familiar with the Jewish community. And if you can go one step further, and name a few of their family friends because you may have just done their bar or bat mitzvah, the connection is solidified even more so.”

“I believe in being ‘pre-sold’ even before coming face-to-face with a potential client,” continues Sands. “By the time we meet, I potential client should know enough about me and Sundance Productions to eliminate the need for trying to convince them there on the couch that we are the right choice for them. Before we even meet, I send a prospective client a packet with my 50 most recent bar mitzvah references, and very often they know a lot of the families on that list. I also send them newspaper profiles that were written about Sundance, and I also send bar mitzvah reception time line planners. So the purpose of the actual appointment is really just to give the client a warm, fuzzy feeling about who they are hiring.” From a home office Sands shows clients a viewing of a demo DVD to showcase his skills, “It’s a 15-minute collection of five or six bar and bat mitzvahs,” says Sands. “It showcases the different routines we do, the different levels of service — me and my dancers are out there in full swing”

Sundance bar/bat mitzvah packages begin with a basic plan, which includes Sands himself as an MC, one assistant and two dancers, which runs approximately \$2,100 for four hours. From there, add-ons to that package include party props (\$2 per guest), glow necklaces, big screen video (\$1,000 for one screen: an additional \$400 for a second screen) and perhaps video montage work (including an eight to 10-minute video showing the bar/bat mitzvah boy/girl growing up, etc., which Sundance produces and displays on the video screen for \$50 a minute).

In the case of an unruly young guest Sands has plenty of experience — and good solutions. “At one of our gigs, a kid came up to the booth, grabbed a CD, threw it on the floor and proceeded to smash and grind it with his foot,” says Sands. “I had one of my assistants approach him and give him a little bit of a scare to prevent him from doing something like that again. I learned that the best way to handle these situations is to incorporate these troublemakers into the party. I appoint them as judges in games. All these kids really want is attention, and it doesn’t really do any good to alienate or intimidate them, and you need to control the situation and set their boundaries for them. This is what I believe the parents are paying you for.”

Ultimately, says Sands, a competent staff is absolutely necessary in order to maintain control at these affairs. Sands believes staff is necessary to manage guests, especially for events with 150-plus people on the roster. “I go as far as refusing gigs if there are over 200 people and they do not want a certain minimum number of dancers,” says Sands. “Typically, the ratio we like to work with is one dancer for every 50 guests: there is only so much I can handle by myself without the assistance of staff to manage 200 people.”

As the MC, Sands calls the moves on the dance floor. “The routines and dances should be simple and easy to follow,” Sands explains. “In my eyes, the MC runs the party: the dancers

are there to facilitate the flow of the event. As a perfect example, we do a six-minute Motown routine, where we have the parents actually leading the skit, and it looks great on the video. What actually happens is I am calling the moves, there are dancers on both sides of the par-ent doing the actual moves right next to them, and it makes it easy to follow the routine.”

Sands also holds lip-sync contests, invention dances, “Weakest Link” elimination contests based on trivia questions, name-that-TV-show contests and scavenger hunts. There is also a dance Sands and staff perform to the new version of “Kung Fu Fighting” as well as an opening routine to KC & The Sunshine Band’s “Get Down Tonight,” performed before the grand entrance and even before the traditional bar/bat mitzvah Hora.

Sands runs a Visiosonic PCDJ rack-mount computer-based system for the heart of the Sundance gear; a laptop system is used as a backup and MP3 disc players are brought to every show as additional stand-by equipment. He says, “I feel it is important, when using computers, to have back up systems at the ready.” Other equipment in Sands’ set up includes a Biamp 7600 mixer, Carver PT 1250 power amp, In Focus 2500 lumens LP650 video projectors, 9-x-12 video screens with stress kits and two TOA speaker stacks with 15-inch subs on each. “I am a fanatic about being prepared,” says Sands. “Being organized and being able to handle emergencies, with a pack of kids running around, is a big part of what we do.”

ERIC SANDS’ QUICK HITS

Least favorite record to play: Garth Brooks—“Friends in Low Places”.mp3

Pet peeve: Incompetence

Last movie seen: Matrix Reloaded (not my choice)

Worse gift you ever received: Striped Tube socks

Worst toast ever heard: Man imitating Bob Dylan singing

Strangest request: To do a stage-diving moshpit style grand entrance

Your spouse’s biggest complaint about you: Not married — I have some good leads though.

Dream vacation: Anywhere that’s hot and has a lot of history

Favorite song to play: Darude’s “Sandstorm”

Favorite food: Sushi, dim sum, and more sushi.