



Photo for the Tribune by Yvette Marie Dostani

**"When something isn't working, I'll never throw in the towel," says Brad Blumenthal, working the bar mitzvah of Benji Patzik (top left) at Gallerie Marchetti. "I'll keep trying until I find a way to reach them."**

# King of the jr.-high circuit

In the charged world of bar and bat mitzvahs and graduations, deejay **Brad Blumenthal** commands as much as \$10,000 a gig — and he's booked into 2004

**By Bonnie Miller Rubin**  
Tribune staff reporter

It is a Saturday night in the West Loop and the joint is jumping with rock and rap, non-stop dancers and plenty of svelte girls in little black dresses.

A rave party at Riviera, Metro or Aragon, perhaps? Hardly. It's a bar mitzvah — and presiding over this four-hour show is Brad Blumenthal.

On the junior-high circuit, Blumenthal is king. Sure, there are other deejays in town, but the 33-year-old Skokie native has been clutching the mike since 1985, making him the grand old man of this business and giving him a ringside seat to everything from music trends to puberty.

But it's not just his survival in a high-burnout, notoriously fickle business that garners respect. Rather, it's the fact that Blumenthal pioneered

many elements of the successful early adolescent shindig. Even competitors acknowledge that he is the guy who changed the job description of a deejay from mere record-spinner to the consummate entertainer.

In exchange for a slick production, which may include everything from disco cubes to cannons that shoot confetti, he can command as much as \$10,000 a night, twice the price of many popular local bands. Even so, he's already booked into 2004.

Moreover, because he's cloned the formula, something he calls "energy" — an amalgam of music, special effects, dancers and an emcee who pulls it together — his franchise can appear at multiple parties on the same night. A peak occurred April 28, with 32 separate soirees, from Buffalo Grove to Cincinnati to Paris (as in France). Of

PLEASE SEE **DEEJAY**, PAGE 5

# DEEJAY: Junior high and mighty spinning CDs

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

his 550 annual gigs, 80 percent are for the 16-and-under set.

"The key? Identifying with your audience ... and a willingness to try anything," says Blumenthal, who talks shop with the fervor of an evangelist. "An inexperienced deejay will attempt to get the party moving and when it doesn't happen, he gets scared. ... like the guy who asks the girl to dance, gets rejected and then doesn't ask anyone else. When something isn't working, I'll never throw in the towel. I'll keep trying until I find a way to reach them."

## Busy social calendars

Such tenacity is crucial when your niche market is jaded 7th and 8th graders. On the North Shore, it is not unusual for classmates to receive 60 or more invitations a year to bar mitzvahs and bat mitzvahs — the Jewish coming-of-age ceremony. Add graduation parties and all the other events that fill the calendar of today's busy preteen and it's clear that it requires more than a chicken breast and a crooning vocalist to keep them engaged.

"The kids who really have it tough are the ones whose birthdays are in May or June," says Blumenthal, from his Northbrook office, near his home. "By this time of the year, everyone has seen and done it all."

Indeed, whole industries have sprung up to meet the needs of this particular clientele. Artists create plexiglass sign-in boards — a staple of bar mitzvahs and bat mitzvahs, where guests pen their congratulations. Set designers erect elaborate centerpieces to carry out the party's theme, be it "Alice in Wonderland" or "Austin Powers." Security firms provide chaperones to ride the buses to the party (and discreetly monitor behavior). Purveyors of "prefunction" diversions — laser-tag, karaoke, illusionists and digital imagery, which can superimpose a photo on items from mouse pads to T-shirts — occupy young guests during the adult cocktail hour.

## A variety of venues

And then, of course, there are the venues, which can be as intimate as the Fairmont's Moulin Rouge lounge or as expansive as Comiskey Park (although it costs extra to turn on the lights); as formal as The Four Seasons or as laid-back as North Beach, with beach volleyball on real sand. Even in a sluggish economy, the six-figure extravaganza is not uncommon, according to event planners.

While graduation parties rarely match the budgets of many bar mitzvahs, they are still lavish compared to previous generations'. Today, commencement may be celebrated at a country club or with a big backyard tent.

In this entire complex party puzzle, though, the most crucial piece is the deejay, responsible for setting the mood and, more important, keeping kids from getting bored and, say, disman-



Photo for the Tribune by Yvette Marie Dostatni

**Deejay Brad Blumenthal gets a group of preteen girls to sing along to the music at Benji Patzik's bar mitzvah party at Galleria Marchetti.**

ting the centerpieces or congregating in the bathrooms.

"We don't worry with Brad," says Bob Coniglio, an Arlington Heights police officer and president of Mazel Scheduling Services, hired by the hosts to keep an eye on the kids at bar mitzvahs and bat mitzvahs (a precaution required by many downtown hotels). "He has a way of keeping the children occupied."

When Blumenthal started at age 18, he had no intention of making this anything more than a sideline. While he was an accounting student at the University of Illinois at Chicago, he found that the gigs were a great way to pick up extra cash on weekends.

## Decision time

But after he graduated, and was considering law school, the phones kept on ringing. "Basically, I had to make a decision ... so I gave myself a year to see if I could succeed as an entrepreneur."

In 1990, he booked 75 dates; the following year, 200. Today, he employs about 80 assorted emcees, deejays and dancers and the only bar he passes is the one en route to the dance floor.

In the early days, Blumenthal needed to distinguish himself from the competition, so he hired a few teens to help him work the party and "act as a catalyst" with the guests. A few years

later, he separated the traditional deejay job into two separate functions: one who plays the music and handles the technical responsibilities and another — the emcee — who is out front and is the personality.

The basic package is \$2,375 for a three-hour stint, and the costs rise from there as the gimmicks are added, such as a disco dance floor, just like the one used by John Travolta. (So far, the only bust has been a wind machine called "The Tornado," which wreaked havoc with hairstyles.)

"There are 300 deejays in the Yellow Pages, and only a half-dozen do what we do," says Howard Wallach, owner of A to Z Entertainment, which vies for the same customer base as "Energy." "The mutual respect we have for each other pre-empts any jealousy or competition. A lot of people have left him over the years, and he has still managed to stay in the game, which is no small accomplishment."

Inez Rose has hired Blumenthal twice — once four years ago for her older son, and again May 19. "Everyone had such a good time that the phone hasn't stopped ringing," she crows. "You can't help but dance. I told my mother-in-law that I've never seen her have so much fun in the 20 years I've known her."

Knowing the latest music or dance steps is only half the equation. Blumenthal — as well

other emcees on the circuit, such as Bizar, Personalities (both started by former employees), A to Z, Hype — must be equally adept at running the party. There are the toasts. The candle-lighting ceremony (a tradition that honors special guests who've played an important role in the child's life). The first dance between mother and son — and any other lump-in-the-throat moments.

But the attention span of the average preteen is mercilessly short and too many lulls — an overly-indulgent video tribute to the honoree, long-winded speeches — and the mood deflates faster than a balloon.

## More sentimental nowadays

Still, Blumenthal is more apt to find a place for sentiment these days — a shift that coincided with the birth of his own two children and the death of his father four years ago.

"When a grandfather would come up to the mike, I used to hate it. They'd ramble on forever about nonsense and totally slow down everything. Now, I feel differently. I'm capitalizing on this three- or four-hour period to create something memorable. After all, we're not going to be here forever ... and when someone is gone, the material things don't mean a thing. It's these special occasions — these milestones — that people remember."