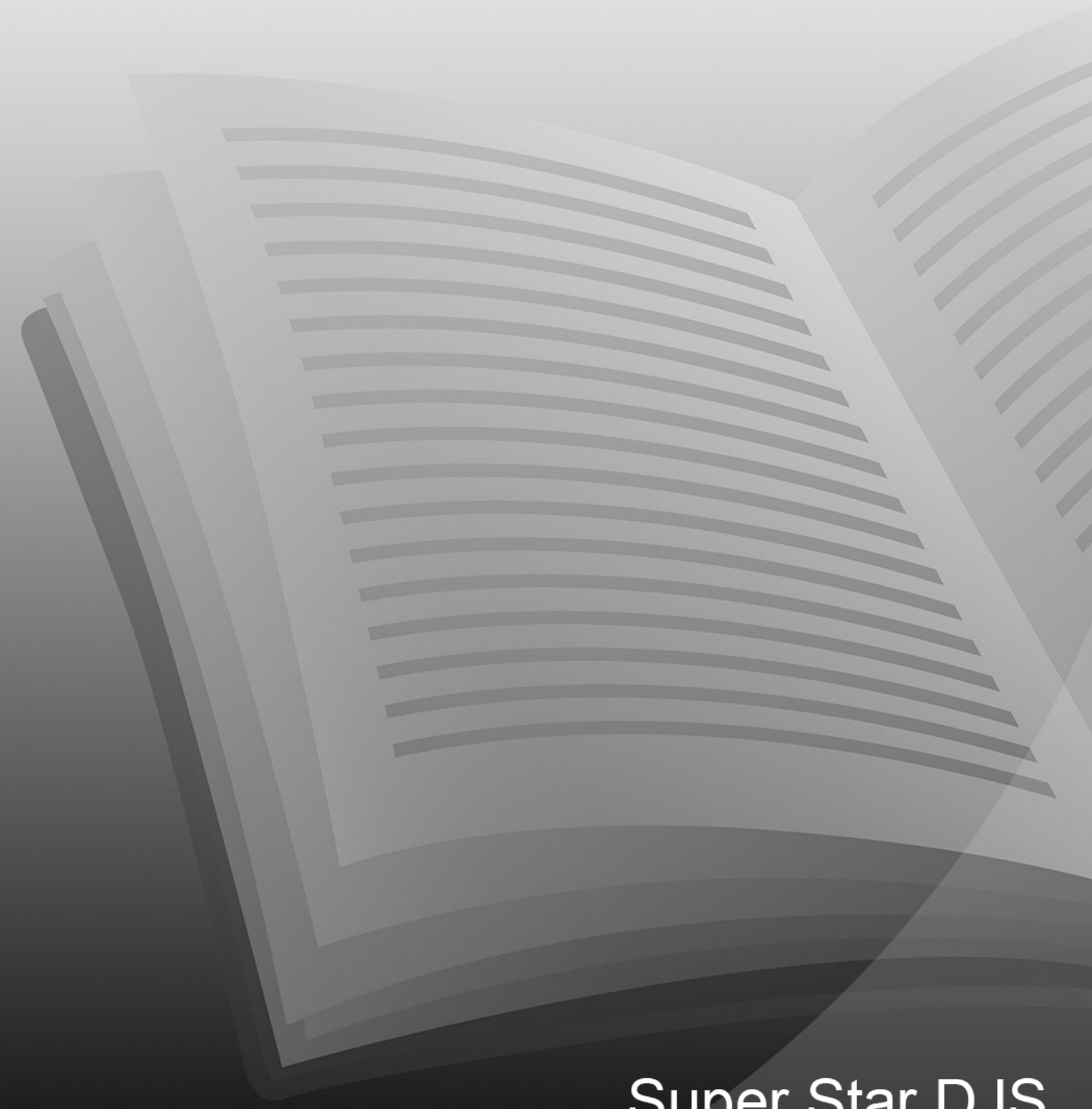
RANDOM HOUSE eBOOKS



Super Star DJS

Dom Phillips

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ABOUT THE BOOK

“It was about larging it. It was about pulling out a wad of 20s when you were buying your champagne at the bar. It was about buying your cocaine in an eight ball. It was about wearing designer clothes. At that top tier of that club scene, it was about giving it loads.”

With a foreword by music journalist, Miranda Sawyer, *Superstar DJs Here We Go!* is the full, unexpurgated story of the biggest pop culture phenomenon of the 1990s: the rise and fall of the superstar DJ.

During the 1990s big names such as Sasha, Jeremy Healy, Fatboy Slim, Dave Seaman, Nicky Holloway, Judge Jules, and Pete Tong exploded out of acid house, becoming international jetsetters, flying all over the world just to play a few hours and commanding up to £140,000 a night. The plush, heavily branded ‘superclubs’ where they performed – clubs like Cream, Ministry, Renaissance and Gatecrasher – were filled with thousands of adoring clubbers, roaring their approval of their DJ gods.

For the DJs and promoters, it was a licence to print money and live like a rock star. For clubbers, it was a hedonistic utopia where anyone and everyone could come together to look fabulous, take drugs, and dance the night away. But underneath the shiny surface lurked a darker side, a world

of cynical moneymaking, rampant egos and cocaine-fuelled self-indulgence that eventually spiralled out of control leaving behind burnt-out DJs, jobless promoters and a host of bittersweet memories.

They went from having the clubbing world at their feet to the world's biggest comedown. Dom Phillips – former editor of clubbers' bible *Mixmag* – reveals an enthralling and at times jaw-dropping account of flawed people, broken dreams and what really happens when it all goes Pete Tong.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dom Phillips has been involved in dance music since 1988. He was editor of clubbers' bible *MixMag* throughout its 1990s heyday, and since worked as a freelance writer for publications as diverse as the *Guardian*, *Observer Life*, *The Face*, *The Big Issue*, *Q*, *Arena* and was for two years style columnist for the *Independent on Sunday*. He has also made a number of documentaries for Channel 4 and for Radio 1.

SUPER STAR DJS HERE WE GO!

DOM PHILLIPS

ADDITIONAL RESEARCH DAN PRINCE

EBURY PRESS

To my late parents,
Gill and Bernard ‘Narse’ Phillips

… HERE WE GO!

Acid house was the last great British youth movement, the final hooray before I'm-worth-it individualism took hold. Its music was revolutionary, and its legacy changed the face of modern Britain. The Government felt forced to legislate, passing a law to ban "repetitive beats", clamping down on outdoor raves, panicking about ecstasy. All because, back in the late 80s, the UK's cities just couldn't provide what young people wanted: all night shenanigans, no holds barred.

Post-rave, Britain has changed. Everyone goes out now, for as long as they want. Twenty four hour drinking has ensured that the nation's legal drug is always on tap, no way would the breweries ever again allow young people to enjoy themselves without alcohol in their hands. Today, fun has been mainstreamed. Everyone's doing it.

But for a time in the late 80s and early 90s, the underground was the only alternative. Why bother with violent, no-trainers, early-doors nightclubs when there was an all-night warehouse party going on? Acid house took the best bits of hippy and punk – the come-together equality of hippiness, the screw-the-system of punk – and melded it with exuberance, futuristic music and, yes, love.

Like punk, it was as much about the crowd as the stars. DJs were at one with their audience; faceless, unphotographed, unstyled. Humans love their heroes, though, and there was no way that DJs could remain underground forever. Within a matter of a few short

months, a select few became, if not famous, then thoroughly notorious. These superstar DJs rolled like international celebrities, jetting between the most beautiful places in the world, partying for days with the most beautiful people in the world. And getting paid for it. And acid house changed. As it grew bigger, as dance music became so all-encompassing that it spawned its own chart, as those dangerously repetitive beats were used to sell everything from make-up to *The Sun*, the scene became very definitely overground. During the mid to late 90s, house music was on top, in all senses. Superclubs pulled in thousands of punters every weekend, dance music CDs squatted in the Top Ten, ecstasy use peaked and some superstar DJs, such as Norman Cook, became bona fide stars. Dance music became so enormous it spiralled off into other areas, becoming both the soundtrack of eco-warrior protests and the victorious New Labour party.

As editor of *Mixmag*, Dom Phillips lived through acid house's big decade, hanging with high-rollers and hangers-on, superstar DJs and those who fell through the loop. From Miami pool parties to a club in a Russian nuclear fallout shelter, wherever dance music took him, Dom was there. And when he wasn't, he's talked to someone who was. In this rollercoaster book, he documents the wild excesses of the house music happy times. He captures the characters and the come-downs. And he also portrays the shift in British consciousness that occurred with house music.

It's easy to dismiss a musical genre that, in the end, became so cheesy, so all-encompassing. But dance music altered the nation's social landscape. Today, the changes brought about by rave are so embedded in the everyday that we forget what life was like before them. Outdoor festivals, cool bars, the idea that everyone is entitled to some form of mad, music-fuelled youth. A youth that stretches on forever. After all, how many superstar DJs

actually retired? The comedown for some can be harsh. But for most of us, acid house made life better.

Miranda Sawyer

INTRODUCTION

Other, more famous DJs might choose more dramatic ways to sum up their superstar DJ lives. Norman Cook DJing in front of 360,000 people on the beach in Rio; Sasha being whisked through rush-hour Manila by a police escort; Jeremy Healy haring around New York in a limousine full of supermodels. For Steve Lee it was a Bank Holiday weekend in 1993 that could have been any weekend in the 1990s. Just as Steve Lee could have been any of a hundred star DJs, charging around the country, playing records, having fun, making cash, losing sleep. Birmingham Friday; Venus in Nottingham, Saturday; a private Primal Scream show Sunday in Aylesbury; somehow passing a breathalyser test after a South London gig on Monday. Home safe with money in his pocket. 'Sweet as a nut,' he said. But it was the football he remembered best, on the Sunday morning that Saturday night had gone into, after Venus. 'We all ended in a car park by the River Trent. I was DJing with Justin Robertson, there was a generator and some record decks. There was no one dancing and Justin's gone to me, "Oh, look at this." Behind us they had a game of football going on. They had no ball, so they was passing a lump of air about, right! Ali from Flying was in goal. Some geezer's taken a shot, they've all gone mad. I would have said, "Oh, it's gone over the bar." And Ali's gone running off down there, picked up a lump of air, come back, kicked it out. Funniest thing.' It is a story that says as much about the superstar DJ era as any wilder tales. A real game, with an imaginary ball…

ARTHUR DENT MADE for the unlikeliest of heroes. Clad in pyjamas and a dressing gown, he was the hapless, bumbling leading man in Douglas Adams's intergalactic comedy *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, which began in 1978 as a comedy series on BBC radio and quickly gravitated to television series and book form. Just as the earth is about to be destroyed to make way for an interplanetary bypass, Dent is rescued by his best friend Ford Prefect, who turns out to be an alien and proceeds to hitchhike around the galaxy in a sequence of increasingly bizarre adventures. The book sold a million copies and even became a movie. But more than a comedy sci-fi series, *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* was the *Gulliver's Travels* of its time, a satire on the absurdity of modern life that struck a chord with its millions of fans.

In it Adams described a planet called Golgafrincham, the inhabitants of which decide to get rid of what they consider the most useless third of their population – the middle managers, telephone sanitisers, hairdressers and environmentalists – with an ingenious ploy. In a Noah's Ark parable, they persuade them that the planet is about to be wiped out and the population has to flee on three giant spaceships. One ship will carry all the leaders: politicians, generals, journalists. Another the workers: mechanics, carpenters, doers, etc. All the hairdressers, telephone sanitisers and middle managers will be on the third ship and it is the only one that actually leaves. This ship crashes into prehistoric earth, wipes out a peaceful, yet primitive population and its passengers become our modern ancestors. The rest of Golgafrincham are wiped out by a disease that begins – oh, the irony – with a dirty telephone.

In 1988 a mother ship did land on Planet UK, full of the same sort of people. It was called Acid House and it was to make quite an impact. Powered by hypnotic electronic grooves and class A drugs, but lacking songs to sing along

to, performers to look at, or any kind of structure to an evening out apart than dancing wildly, acid house still somehow conjured up enough entertainment out of thin air to bewitch a nation for more than a decade. It was all smoke and mirrors. But acid house transformed Britain. From 1992, when acid house moved into legal venues, until 2000, this was the era of superstar DJs and superclubs. A generation gleefully lost itself in a maelstrom of disco euphoria and house music and clubbing became the defining sound and lifestyle of 1990s Britain.

The people who landed on that acid house mother ship, the DJs and promoters who wrought that transformation, were not the usual harbingers of pop culture revolutions. They didn't yearn to get on a stage and be rock stars like Jimi Hendrix or Noel Gallagher. They didn't want to change the face of fashion, to play situationist pranks like Malcolm McLaren and Vivienne Westwood did with punk. They weren't interested in art or the history of pop music and they didn't sit in their bedrooms like Morrissey, furiously writing letters to the music papers and dreaming of pop stardom. Instead, they were misfits and middlemen, chancers, blaggers and hustlers, party animals and lairy lads. Telephone salesmen and ticket touts. Oh and hairdressers, because a disproportionate amount of the major players in 1990s club land were former hairdressers. Ordinary guys drifting along until, one enchanted evening, they stumbled into a place where acid house was happening, took ecstasy and decided they never wanted to do else anything again.

Incredibly enough, they by and large succeeded, in many cases never having to pick up those hairdressing scissors or put on those mechanics' overalls again. They played football with lumps of air and made fortunes out of it. 'There was a load of us, working-class people who liked playing records, taking ecstasy, sniffing cocaine, that ended up having excess money, notoriety, fame within their own

scene,' said Phil Gifford, a Birmingham hairdresser whose club Wobble made him a DJ star. 'You're a bit of a working-class idiot. You've got some cash. You're doing well. You've got a buzz off it and you're going to live a rock 'n' roll lifestyle.'

Unlike *Hitchhiker's* Arthur Dent, who was a traditionally British hero, confused, socially awkward and forever in search of a good cup of tea, the passengers on the acid house spaceship were cool: leaders of the pack, the most charismatic guys on the block, the lads with the charm, the blag, the patter, the girls. Just as George Clinton's funk mothership and John Travolta's spinning disco moves in *Saturday Night Fever* had transformed 1970s America, these acid house DJs sent the UK into a spin. They made Britain funky. They put one nation under a groove.

Dancing wildly in nightclubs, as anybody who spent time doing so in the 1990s knows, is an experience as intense as it is inane, as emotional as it is ephemeral. Yet these spaceship passengers understood something simple, yet profound – that wild parties make people feel good about themselves, at least until the next morning. That God sometimes hides in the tiniest of details, no matter how frivolous and facile those details might be. And that nothing feels quite like a new haircut.

ACID HOUSE HAD exploded in the UK in 1988, spreading from clubs in London and Manchester to giant, illegal outdoor raves during the so-called Summers of Love, immortalised on tabloid front pages and in that smiley face logo. Then it had slipped from view, under the radar, into smaller, dressier, in-the-know clubs in places like Nottingham and Stoke. In 1992, smartened up and now staged in legal venues, it came back. The superclub era began in the North, with clubs like Renaissance and later Cream in Liverpool. Ministry of Sound had already opened the

previous year in London. The superstar DJs became their stars.

Clubs opened across the UK, with names that captured what they were about: Gatecrasher and Love To Be in Sheffield, Slinky in Bournemouth, Colours in Edinburgh, Time Flies in Cardiff, Decadance in Birmingham, Hot To Trot and Goodbye Cruel World in Leicester, Passion in Coalville, Wobble and Fun and Miss Moneypenny's in Birmingham, Pimp in Wolverhampton, Karanga in Bath, Back To Basics, Up Yer Ronson and Vague in Leeds, Hard Times in tiny Todmorden. By the late 1990s, it seemed that every city in the UK had its own club. Including Inverness and little Lerwick, in the Shetland Islands.

An industry grew up around this expanding network of clubs. The DJs who performed in them, the agents who booked the DJs, the promoters who paid the DJs and ran the clubs, the clubbers who partied and danced in them, the drug dealers who supplied them. This wasn't like the 1980s, when only people down South got rich. In the 1990s, suddenly, money was everywhere. Young Britain had cash in its pocket, a new love of designer clothes, a developing taste for drugs and an eye for a party. DJs suddenly found themselves with high-paid careers, hurtling up and down the country playing at three clubs a night, earning thousands of pounds in cash a year, being offered champagne and drugs for free, partying through it all. 'I think to make party music you have to party,' said Norman 'Fatboy Slim' Cook. 'It's unprofessional if you don't, you have to walk the walk.'

DJs like him, Sasha, Paul Oakenfold, Sonique, Pete Tong, Dave Seaman, Judge Jules and Jeremy Healy became rich and famous, living rock-star lives: fans, fame and a life that was a whirlwind of five-star luxury. 'The biggest indulgence is when you spent money on private jets,' observed Pete Tong. The clubs they played in became part of the architecture of British leisure and their owners became

rich, famous in clubland. Superclub albums sold hundreds of thousands of copies – in 1996, just one of them, the Ministry of Sound *Annual II* album, mixed by Pete Tong and Boy George, reached number one in the charts and sold 613,000 copies.*

Acid house bounced into politics. After 20,000 gathered for a free, three-day rave at Castlemorton, the Conservative government legislated against it in the infamous 1994 Criminal Justice Act. Yet three years later, New Labour rode to victory on an ecstasy anthem, D:Ream's 'Things Can Only Get Better'. By the end of the 1990s, brands as diverse as PlayStation, the Halifax and Guinness were using dance music and club-related imagery to sell products. Dance music was everywhere – from Pete Tong's *News of the World* column to daytime radio, from high-street stores to high-street discos. And everyone seemed to be taking drugs. According to NHS statistics, by 1998 31.8 per cent of 16–24-year-olds had used an illegal drug in the last year – more than two million people. These were the boom years of fast living and easy money. Acid house was unstoppable. And then it all went spectacularly wrong.

The millennium was the crux point. It was going to be the biggest party of all time and the superclubs were going to stage it. For DJs, it was a bonanza and they were being paid up to £140,000 for a night's work. But clubbers stayed home. The club industry delivered a bitter night of half-empty raves. The superstar DJ and superclub hierarchy suddenly looked like a rip-off, a nasty, cynical business that had left its client base of clubbers out in the cold. An audience that had suddenly realised they too were playing football with a lump of air.

The comedown was long and bitter. Clubs emptied out and closed. DJs became taxi drivers and computer programmers and club promoters went back to the hairdressing salon. Worst of all, DJs became uncool, a parody of themselves. 'I don't give a fuck what anybody

says,' said James Lavelle, a DJ who lived the 1990s high life before it went wrong. 'I reckon that everybody lost it. That's their stories to tell. But I think there was a massive, massive punch in the face for everybody.'

What happened? How and why did something that had such a momentous impact on UK culture – a massive, decade-long party – come to such a screeching halt? Where did it all go Pete Tong?

I also landed in the UK in 1988 after a period spent travelling. Entranced by what I was hearing on pirate radio and in clubs and raves, I started writing about dance music in 1988, on a small Bristol magazine I set up and in magazines like *Soul Underground* and *i-D*. I joined clubbing magazine *Mixmag* in 1991 and stayed until January 1999, swept up, like many, in the acid house wave. As the magazine's editor from 1993 to 1998, I got to know all the DJs and club promoters of the time.

A decade later, I decided to track down these characters, to interview them and find out where they were at now, to see what they thought looking back. I wanted to tell the story of the superstar DJ era through their stories and make some sense of the biggest British pop cultural phenomenon since the birth of rock 'n' roll itself. To get there I had to go back to the beginning: a nowhere northern town, on a blustery spring night in 1992, the night the game without a ball really began.

Dom Phillips
São Paulo, Brazil
August 2008

[fn1]Figures copyright The Official Charts Company

ONE
THE RESTORATION OF SASHA TO THE NORTH

TUNE: HARDFLOOR – 'HARDTRANCE ACPERIENCE'

Nine minutes of twisting, intoxicating German trance that caused uproar – especially if it wasn't played in its entirety.

JUNE 1999, IBIZA. They called Space the best club in the world. It was certainly the most international, the most glamorously wasted. It didn't even open until noon. Which barely fazed the crowd, winding its way around the car park by 11.30 a.m., waiting expectantly for the doors to open for the first party of the summer. Most of them had already been up all night. None of them looked any the worse for it.

Hours later, out on the terrace, with dusk beginning to fall and jets from the nearby airport thundering just metres overhead, Sasha played his second set, holding the dance floor in the palm of his hand. A German boy in combat trousers roared his approval next to two beaming British club babes. A transvestite so tall s/he looked like s/he was wearing stilts did semaphore. An Argentinian hippie chick danced with an Italian male stripper and a delighted Red Indian chief shoved his tongue in the mouth of his rubber-

clad dominatrix girlfriend. Up in the DJ booth, Sasha brandished a bottle of Jägermeister like a sword in his left hand and played records with his right: swaying to track after track of fiercely uncompromising grooves as the atmosphere on the dance floor climbed higher and higher.

Suddenly, all eyes on him, he froze. With a theatrical slug he drained the bottle and rapidly executed a stop-start on the harsh percussion track he was playing. He paused the music, finger hovering over the record, barely holding it still. The shock of the silence crashed into the crowd like a wave. They began to whistle and cheer and stomp. The power of the DJ, demonstrated by that one finger, holding not just the record, the music, the soundtrack, but the party itself in suspended animation. Seconds passed. Minutes. The crowd's clapping reached a kind of ragged rhythm, the whistles grew louder. With a vicious sneer Sasha lifted his finger, released the bass-line, let the music explode back onto the terrace – and lifted both arms out wide, crucifix-like to acknowledge the congratulatory roar of the crowd. This is what they had come for, the kind of Ibiza moment clubbers get dewy-eyed over in years to come, the famous Sasha magic, the superstar DJ in full flight.

After his set, Sasha was still centre stage, showing off in front of a pool table, surrounded by an audience of smitten club girls. Nearby, trying not to look, was Claire Manumission, the redhead famous for having sex with her boyfriend Mike on the stage of the Ibiza club she'd named herself after. Drunk on Jägermeister, intoxicated by his set, Sasha did a party trick. He put a pool ball in his mouth. The girls giggled in anticipation. He spat the pool ball out, rolled it down his arm into his fist and simultaneously drained another glass of Jägermeister in one theatrical swallow. Then flipped both ball and glass over his shoulder. Crash! A mock-model pose – ta-dah! His audience applauded. Sasha rolled under the pool table, giggling. The

girls reached under the table after him, giggling, prodding him with the pool cues.

After that Sasha disappeared. The next morning, Fritz, the brisk German manager of Space, was on the phone demanding of the party organisers: 'Vere is my DJ?' Shrugs all round. Sasha turned up at 2 p.m. He had woken in a ditch outside DC10, another, even wilder Ibiza club, beside a friend's car. He'd thought, I'll just lie down here. It's dark. No one will see me. All he had on were his Maharashi combat trousers. But his pockets bulged. In one, a fat wad of cash, his fee for the gig. In the other, a cassette of his triumphant set. Beside him in the ditch, one last, half-empty bottle of Jägermeister.

MANSFIELD IS A TOWN noted for what it doesn't have, rather than what it does. That is, if it gets noticed at all. It's the ninth worst place to live in Britain, according to a programme screened on Channel 4 in 2008. 'That once romantic now utterly disheartening colliery town,' sniffed D.H. Lawrence in *Lady Chatterley's Lover*. He was the famous son of Mansfield's domineering big brother Nottingham, just 12 miles south. It's a nondescript, nowhere sort of place that falls between the gaps.

Yet it's here, in 1992, that one of Britain's biggest pop culture revolutions of the past 40 years began, in Venue 44, a ballroom above a grimy working-men's club that had seen better days. On 14 March a new Saturday night called Renaissance opened with Sasha, a rising DJ star, as resident. There were a thousand punters inside the club already when I arrived with a friend from Bristol, where I lived, and colleagues from a small dance music magazine I had just joined called *Mixmag*. It was 2 a.m., but there were another 2,000 people outside, trying to get in. The club's promoter Geoff Oakes was a harassed figure in a

smart black overcoat, bobbing in a sea of desperate clubbers. Rushing on the magic mushrooms I had gobbled down earlier, we squeezed past, up the stairs, through the double doors – and through the looking glass.

Renaissance wasn't like the raves or hip hop shebeens my friend Johnny and I were used to back in the West Country. It was glamorous. The girls were wearing dresses and the boys were wearing shirts. It was heady, delirious and sexy. We dived in.

The mushrooms were exploding in my brain like fireworks on New Year's Eve. The music was a physical force that swept you towards the dancing. There was nowhere else to go, nothing else to do. People were stacked up in layers on the terraced dance floor, there were giant fake Renaissance pillars everywhere. Laser beams sliced through the smoke. A beautiful girl smiled across the room. Out on the dance floor, the atmosphere kept rising. We found ourselves being hugged by strangers. A soul singer called Alison Limerick appeared out of the blue to sing her deliciously uplifting hit of the time, 'Where Love Lives'.

Sasha came on next. Up in the DJ booth, which was high above the stage, he took a second to survey his new empire. 'It was kind of like a pulpit,' he recalled. 'The view from up there was *brilliant*, cause you could see everyone in the club.' Out on the dance floor, everything swirled into a haze of music and smoke and lights. 'Chaos and huge crowds, great atmosphere,' Sasha said.

The local Mansfield beer boys weren't quite so happy. This was their town – but they'd been told they couldn't come in. About 3 a.m. Geoff Oakes, a promoter from Stoke-on-Trent who'd had the temerity to put this night on in their town, was summoned by the head door-man. 'I want a word,' the giant bouncer said, in a tone of voice that indicated this wasn't a request. Oakes followed him down a corridor to the front door – and was brusquely shoved outside. Facing him was a rabble of irate local lads. 'You

come into our town, tell us we can't get into our fucking club! Who do you think you are?' they shouted at him. Geoff laughed at the memory. 'It was like the Frankenstein film where all the villagers are there with the torches.'

Afterwards, when the club finally finished, Sasha and Geoff and all their friends went back to a friend's house, where the party carried on. At five the next afternoon, Oakes decided to go home, in no state to handle the new Porsche he was driving. 'Apparently I fell asleep stood up at the door, twice, before I got into the car,' he said. He got into his car, revved up the engine and shot off at 60 mph – straight into the back of a parked car. Oakes wrote off his Porsche yet walked away unscathed.

Perhaps not the most auspicious start. But that weekend the club, the DJ, the promoter, the punters and the party had all come together in one perfect moment. The Superstar DJ era had begun.

ACID HOUSE WASN'T new: it had been around for four years. Nor were hedonistic, glamorous nightclubs. But acid house was baggy-trousered, androgynous and psychedelic; and glamorous discos a thing of 1970s New York. British high-street discos were scruffy, rather desperate places – exactly what acid house replaced. Renaissance put these two opposites together and created something new. Soon enough, lads like the village idiots clamouring outside the Renaissance door would be dressing up and trying to get into the clubs like this that would copy the model and mushroom across the UK. They would use star DJ names like Sasha to fill their dance floors. And this second wave of acid house would become the pop-culture lifestyle that was to dominate the 1990s. A hedonistic, fabulous world of superstar DJs and 'superclubs' that would turn a drab, famously reserved Britain into one of the world's most

famous party destinations. And it all started in Mansfield, the ninth worst place to live in Britain.

Over the next eight years, Britain went crazy for house music and its associated, exuberant style of partying and disco excess. We would become a nation that lived for the weekend, spending Saturday nights dressed up to the nines, taking ecstasy in one the giant superclubs that had spread throughout the UK. By 1998, 7.1 per cent of adults aged between 16 and 59 would have used an illegal drug in the last month, more than 2,400,000 people. By 1993, marketing analysts at the Henley Centre already estimated British ravers were spending £1.8 million a year on entrance fees, illegal drugs and cigarettes.

Britain would export this culture and the DJs that played it across the world. The working-class lads who created and capitalised on this scene would live it up. DJs would become celebrities jet-setting around the globe. From Milan to Miami, Melbourne to Mexico City – from Mansfield, in short, to the world. For nearly a decade, taking ecstasy and dancing to house music would become what weekends were about. And Saturday night would never be the same again.

But in March 1992, all of that seemed highly unlikely. Acid house was already deemed over. It had enjoyed its moment in the sun, four years previously, during the famous 'Summers Of Love' of 1988 and 1989, when the smiley face and cry of '*aciiieeeed!*' and giant, outdoor raves for thousands had seized the public's imagination and tabloid front pages. And just as quickly, as far as most of the UK was concerned, it had disappeared: yesterday's thing, a quick fad, a novelty.

But it hadn't actually disappeared, just moved into smaller, more fashion-conscious clubs in Nottingham, Manchester and London that had begun to form themselves into a busy little network. Nobody, except for the tiny *Mixmag*, had noticed. Like Mansfield, Britain's pop culture

in 1992 was a no-man's-land, a place between the gaps. Britpop was yet to happen. The Tories were still, endlessly, in power. There was a recession on. These were in-between days. It felt like everybody was waiting for something, that something was about to happen.

Renaissance was to be a big, all-night club playing acid house music. But it wasn't going to be a rave. Its mastermind was Geoff Oakes, a former car mechanic and kung-fu instructor from Stoke-on-Trent. Oakes was typical of the club promoters who would come to dominate this second wave of acid house. He was, as were many, a northern, working-class guy who discovered acid house and decided he wanted to make it his living. Like his contemporaries, he was a man who could handle money and handle himself, who was as good with cold-eyed doormen as he was with flighty club girls. And who could keep a straight head even after days and days of hardcore partying.

I met up with Geoff Oakes in London, where he was lunching and hosting meetings at the private members' club Hospital. He looked exactly the same as he did in 1992 – ageless, good-looking, quietly charming: the consummate superclub survivor. Now, as then, he is both a passionate defender of the British club scene and one of its fiercest critics. At 46, he has finally embraced fatherhood – he and his wife and business partner Joanne, who was his girlfriend in the early Renaissance days, have a young son.

Geoff had a very clear image for Renaissance. He wanted something different. He didn't want pseudo-psychedelic imagery and wide-eyed kids in baggy dungarees and Day-Glo colours gurning like they did at raves. He wanted something beautiful, something more refined. Quietly spoken, with a soft northern burr to his voice, he could switch from friendly to slightly menacing without really altering very much about his face or demeanour. He was a self-confessed 'Jack the Lad' who had never really done

very much with his life apart from go to clubs. But he was a dreamer. And he wanted to transform a working-men's club into a sixteenth-century Italian palace. He wanted clouds, pillars and kings. Renaissance the club would recreate the Italian Renaissance of Leonardo da Vinci, Michelango and Cesare Borgia – in Mansfield, with house music. And in a roundabout, wide-eyed, ecstasy-fuelled kind of way, that's exactly what it was: a northern, working-class, clubbing utopia that would spark a whole new era in British nightlife. 'Clubbing had started to come indoors again. People were dressing a little bit better,' Oakes explained. 'We'd just come through the whole rave culture. I just wanted it to be softer and warmer.'

If raving had been democratic, Renaissance was going to be elitist. Oakes ensured he only let the beautiful people in – sharp northern clubbers who had turned their backs on the baggy, casual fashions of rave in order to smarten up. John Richmond shirts and shiny shoes for the boys, for the girls, heels and slinky, tiny, dresses that looked like nighties. The club – uniquely at a time of 2 a.m. finishes – had a 7 a.m. licence. And unlike the other clubs where acid house had thrived, Renaissance had, in the shape of Geoff Oakes's friend Sasha, a star DJ on the bill. Flyers for Renaissance, glossy, opulent, drenched with distressed sixteenth-century imagery, played on this. 'The Long Awaited Restoration Of Sasha To The North Of England', they proclaimed, as if Sasha was some kind of prophet, rather than a DJ and the North some kind of hallowed turf.

Sasha was already becoming the UK's first DJ star. He attracted hysterical reactions wherever he went and, unlike the faceless figures in the DJ box at, say, Manchester's Haçienda, the spotlight seemed to naturally fall upon him. A slightly shy, good-looking boy with a ponytail and a taste for flowing white shirts, Sasha had bounced off the Haçienda dance floor into a bubbling DJ career. He made his name at a club called Shelley's in Stoke where his

euphoric sets mixed up the harder edge of rave and techno with softer, more soulful sounds. In September 1991, Sasha was the first ever DJ to feature on a national magazine cover, albeit the then small circulation *Mixmag*. His stardom was satirised in another club magazine – London fanzine *Boys Own* who nicknamed him 'DJ Big Up North'. But since then Sasha had been neglecting his northern fan base over the past year to play clubs in London. This only increased the hunger for him, as Oakes was only too aware.

Yet that first night, both Geoff Oakes and Sasha were both nervous as they drove up to the club. Had they taken a huge risk? Would anyone go to Mansfield? They turned the corner to the venue, Oakes fretting, 'Have we done the right thing here? I wonder if it will be busy.' They needn't have worried. 'There was so much hype around the opening, people drove up from all corners of the country,' Sasha noted. That night, Renaissance was the hottest ticket in the country. Mansfield, suddenly, was on the map.

The 'Restoration Of Sasha To The North' had worked. In London, 15 years later, Oakes howled with laughter at the memory. 'Tongue in cheek! Guilty as charged! Funny, eh?'

In the late 1980s at the height of the Thatcher years, illegal acid house raves had hit British youth culture like a tsunami. It was the 'me' decade, a time of selfishness and 'yuppies' and looking out for number one. Yet suddenly thousands had found themselves dancing in fields, hugging each other and taking ecstasy at events drenched with hippie imagery: raves like Sunrise and Energy; at clubs like London's Shoom and Manchester's Haçienda. Clubs like the Haçienda changed people's lives: the intensity of the night, soaked in ecstasy, intensely hot, driven by euphoric house music and squashed into an evening that had to finish by 2 a.m., created an unforgettable experience. People who went there talk about it now in hushed tones. Geoff Oakes is one of them.

In 1988, though, the idea that anyone might make a long-term career out of acid house didn't really exist. 'At that point we had no idea that the scene would last more than a year, or two. Everyone thought it was a passing moment,' said Sasha. The scene was still – as one memorable hit from Chicago producer Joe Smooth had it – a 'Promised Land', one hell of a party, its intensity fuelled by the very temporary nature of its existence. That promised land could be an open-air nightclub in balmy Ibiza; a smoke-filled gym in South London; a grubby warehouse in Blackburn with 10,000 people dancing their hearts out before the police came. Or the dance floor of the Haçienda nightclub in Manchester, a place built like a factory, all yellow and black, steel and brick. On that dance floor the energy was white hot. And on that dance floor were many of the key people who would go on to create the superclub boom.

Geoff Oakes arrived in the summer of 1988, when the club was at its peak. Graeme Park and Mike Pickering were DJing. The queue snaked round the block by 8.30 p.m. Inside, the energy was electric. It took Oakes a while to muster up the courage to try ecstasy. When he did, it all suddenly made sense. 'I was terrified, I didn't know what was happening to me. My brain felt like it was on one of those roller-decks, just flipping really fast – someone took me upstairs into that little bar on the balcony there and sat me down and gave me a brandy and I was okay after that.' The Haçienda in those delirious days was a hothouse. 'You'd feel the whole club come up at once, about eleven o'clock,' Geoff said. 'When you got in the place it was like nowhere else in the world mattered, you were part of something, it was our own best-kept little secret.'

At the same time, another dour northern town had become party central: Blackburn. As illegal raves and warehouse parties sprung up across the North West, clubbers from the Haçienda and Liverpool's the Underground would also travel in convoy to giant

warehouse parties in the city. ‘You’d have 10,000 people in a warehouse, all dancing on dumper trucks,’ said Dave Beer, a Haçienda and Blackburn rave regular who would go on to launch the Leeds club Back To Basics. ‘Solicitors and lawyers and coppers and doctors and everything were all just part of this scene. It was so off the rails, it was amazing, you thought you were changing things.’

Blackburn couldn’t last. Its parties ran from 1989 until February 1992, when a brutal police raid at Nelson near Burnley closed down a warehouse rave with 10,000 people inside. As the rave scene moved indoors, the biggest characters on those dance floors began turning their nightlife into a living. There in one corner was Sasha, with his college friend Piers Sanderson from Bangor where they lived. Bouncing around the place in an orange jumpsuit was Sparrow, later to become Sasha’s best friend and a club promoter in Plymouth. In another was Dave Beer, a former punk and occasional tour manager from Leeds. Geoff Oakes was there, obviously. So was James Barton, a bolshie ginger Scouser, already a major player in the nascent Liverpool dance scene, long before he would go on to create what became perhaps the ultimate superclub, Cream. These people might have looked like wild-eyed ravers, but they were also charismatic, ambitious, driven ravers.

Like many of the people who would go on to dominate super-clubbing in the 1990s, Geoff Oakes had started out with little more than a determination to keep that Haçienda party going. That is how over-whelming acid house, its combination of drugs, music and camaraderie, could prove. Or perhaps Geoff had always been looking for something. He grew up in Stoke with his single mother in a working-class family. His father was a comedian on the northern comedy circuit. ‘We moved from place to place within Staffordshire and I went to lots of different schools and never really settled,’ he explained. ‘So academically that was where it ended for me. I left school and that was it.’ At

15, Oakes used to sneak out of his bedroom window, borrow a car from his grandfather's scrapyard – and drive to the Wigan Casino.

The Wigan Casino club was a mecca for the 1970s working-class cult of northern soul: fuelled on speed, thousands would gather to dance wildly all night to fast, pumping, American soul and R 'n' B, spinning in shiny leather shoes, tight jumpers and giant, flapping flares. It was as blueprint, in many ways, for what would become acid house. 'I vividly remember the first night walking in: 15 years old, stood up on the balcony and looked down, it was an old theatre so it had this stage where the DJs were and this massive space and people dancing and spinning and they'd all clap at the same time,' said Oakes. 'And the Haçienda for me was the same feeling.'

The Haçienda opened on Whitworth Street in Manchester on 21 May 1982 – just months after the Wigan Casino had closed (it shut in December 1981). Now immortalised in pop-culture history – not least by the Michael Winterbottom movie *24 Hour Party People* – the Haçienda was opened by New Order's label Factory as a live venue, but by the time Nude Night arrived in 1985 it had become a more DJ-based club that gradually began to introduce house music. In March 1987, the Chicago House Party Tour with Frankie Knuckles and Marshall Jefferson played. In the same year, friends of the Happy Mondays introduced ecstasy to the club. On13 July1988 a Wednesday night party called Hot, with a swimming pool in the middle of the dance floor and free ice pops, started. Nude Night was on a Friday. For northerners, the Haçienda was where acid house began.

People walked in, not knowing what the fuss was about. They soon found out. 'The first week I saw people off their heads, I saw this group of scallies, it was probably the Happy Mondays,' remembered Piers Sanderson. 'And they were kind of doing this dance –' he demonstrated a windmill-like arm-waving dance – 'and I was looking at