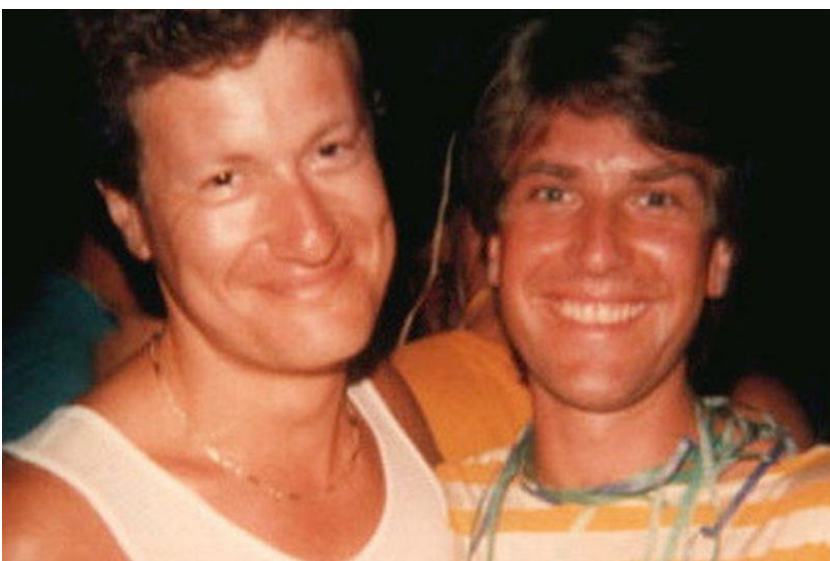


Duchesses and rent boys, the decadence of disco and HIV 'death sentence' that shattered Heaven

Jeremy Norman, founder of gay superclub Heaven, and husband Derek Frost spent the 1980s in living life in London's fast lane

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Jeremy, left, and Derek, right

It was a time when duchesses danced with rent boys, disco reigned supreme and wild days slipped effortlessly into wilder nights.

It was also a time when a dark shadow crept into this glittering, fabulous world and threatened to shatter everything that Derek Frost loved, including Jeremy Norman, the man who is now his husband and remains the centre of his life.

The pair spent the 1980s in London's fast lane and Derek's new book *Living and Loving in the Age of AIDs* brings this hedonist's paradise vividly to life.

It also describes in agonising detail Jeremy's diagnosis with HIV and how the couple defied the odds to bring help thousands around the world.

Derek and Jeremy, both now retired, spoke to me from their beautiful countryside cottage on the South Coast.

They took me straight back to 1978 when Jeremy, now 74, poured everything he owned into taking over the Embassy Club in Old Bond Street.

It soon became one of the most exclusive spots to party in W1. Members of parliament, actors and actresses, sports personalities and musicians were all regulars.

Derek, 69, described the scene as “lots of pretty boys serving drinks with not much clothes on” where “duchesses danced with rent boys.”

“The door policy was if you’re fabulous, extraordinary, beautiful and got something to contribute you’re welcome. If you’re boring, don’t bother,” Jeremy said.

Derek added, “Cocaine was all around the place and sex was being celebrated - it was very hot, very noisy. They were wild nights.”

For years, gay people were forced to hide their sexuality in fear of judgement and hatred from society. But Jeremy believes the Embassy Club fundamentally changed people's attitudes to those who are "alternative".

It was never his intention for the Embassy to be a gay club. That was his next venture and the one he had wanted to create all along.



The super club could hold around 2000 people (Image: BFI)

Heaven, launched in Charing Cross in December 1979, was powered by the financial success of the Embassy. Jeremy and Derek ensured only the "best looking boys" were working in uniforms of ripped shirts, tight torn jeans and cowboy boots.

The opening catapulted off the back of Saturday Night Fever, and disco-mania took hold of everyone who went.

"All of queer London headed to Heaven," said Derek. "This was their dance home. It was safe and welcoming and people really fell in love with

the place. People across the world came to get laid and meet their future lovers.”

The likes of Boy George, Madonna and Grace Jones were desperate to perform at the club. “We created a wild animal,” Jeremy said proudly.

“It speeded up what became a flood of people coming out because gay men were dancing with 2000 other gay men and realising they weren’t alone and what they were doing was fine - it encouraged people to come out.”

Cocaine was the drug of choice for the pair and many at the club, but they also experimented with everything from LSD to Mescaline at their south coast retreat in Needsore.



The couple have been together for 40 years

Although they were together and very much in love, the two slept with other men and a “lot of men” wanted to sleep with them.

They travelled the world together meeting new lovers and partying hard. Jeremy recalls bringing a man called Steven Shortridge back from Mykonos.

Derek said: "I knew that their affection, call it love or lust, was not comparable to the deeper love and commitment J and I have for each other.

"A successful relationship must allow freedom and not force containment. Each person in the relationship must be free to develop and express themselves as they wish."

And that was their mantra until news broke of a mysterious deadly disease among the gay community.

The pair were in Key West in 1981 when they first heard about HIV and AIDs from the New York Times article which revealed 41 people had died

"It crept up on us very insidiously. It wasn't like it happened in a big bang," Derek said. "A slightly uncomfortable voice started to present in the back of our minds which no one wanted to hear. But it was largely ignored and the party continued.

Jeremy added: "We talked about it but we didn't obsess about it. The parallels with Covid resonate. When it broke out in Wuhan people thought 'well it's just them, we don't have to worry.'"



The club is known for Paul Oakenfold's acid house events in the 1980s (Image: BFI)

Then their friends started dying.

“We’re playing the same party games that they’re all playing so when’s it going to be us?” Derek said.

In April 1991 Jeremy was given his death sentence. Doctors told him he had HIV and had a maximum of three years to live.

Jeremy said: “I was devastated. Frightened. I was sad that I was going to lose my life and leave Derek alone. It was a distressing time.”

Derek remarkably tested negative, but that didn’t make it easier for the couple.

Derek recalls: “We hurried from that doctor trying to get away from him and his ghastly news as quickly as possible. We rushed home barely breathing, went wordlessly and immediately to our bedroom, where we drew the curtains and hid in the dark.

“Finally alone, we fell into each other’s arms with animal howls which continue without ceasing through that first long night.”
But the pair were fiercely resilient.



The couple now spend their time living between the South Coast and Malta

“We didn’t allow it to stop us continuing to live life. Jeremy was starting new businesses and we were still going to parties and on holidays thinking f*ck it. We had one New Year's party where everyone took ecstasy.”

Jeremy got thrush in the mouth, herpes, he lost weight and strength and struggled with diarrhoea and night sweats. Above all was the constant fear that his illness could at any point progress into AIDS and kill him within a week.

Then came the breakthrough. In spring 1997, the triple combination antiretroviral therapy (ART) started working on Jeremy’s body and he could once again feel confident of having a future.

The couple felt reborn - and that they'd been given new life. They decided to turn their attention to giving back.

They set up the charity AidsArk, a charity that provides antiretroviral drugs to help people living with HIV in the developing world.

Derek has released his full memoirs in his book *Living and Loving in the Age in AIDS*.