

The Telegraph

It's A Sin captures it perfectly: Heaven nightclub gave Eighties London its beating heart

Once frequented by Freddie Mercury, Boy George and Divine, the groundbreaking gay club now features in the new Channel 4 drama

By

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Divine performing at Heaven in 1981 CREDIT: David Corio/Redferns

It's A Sin, which begins tonight on Channel 4, follows a group of gay men in Eighties London as the HIV/Aids crisis comes to define their lives. The vibrant and profoundly moving series begins in 1981, two years after entrepreneur Jeremy Norman opened groundbreaking gay nightclub Heaven in the arches beneath Charing Cross station. For the show's writer-creator Russell T Davies, it was a no-brainer to include a few scenes set in this fabulously cavernous space that was once frequented by Freddie Mercury and Boy George. "How could I not? This is gay London in the Eighties. Heaven was compulsory," says Davies, a former Doctor Who showrunner who also created the seminal series Queer as Folk.

Though It's A Sin didn't film in the actual Heaven space, production designer Luana Hanson has recreated its sweaty, neon-lit dance floor impeccably. "When I first saw the trailer, I thought, 'This series is about our lives,'" says Scarlett Cannon,

who ran a night called Cha Cha Club at Heaven in the early Eighties. In one scene, we see lead character Ritchie Tozer (Olly Alexander) dancing to Divine's Hi-NRG hit You Think You're a Man on the Heaven dance floor. It's an impeccable piece of soundtracking because Divine, the provocative drag queen known for John Waters films such as Hairspray, gave a legendary performance at Heaven during this heady period.

Divine wasn't the only cult icon attracted to Heaven during the early years. DJ and writer Princess Julia, a Heaven regular who attended the club's opening night in 1979, remembers passing Grace Jones on the staircase one night in the early Eighties. "She was just wandering around the club seeing what was going on and soaking up the atmosphere," Julia says. "That was the thing to do if you were new in town and wanted to see what was happening creatively in London." On another occasion, Julia watched on as Beat writer William S Burroughs recited poetry live on stage. Sharing the bill that night were poets Heathcote Williams and John Giorno, experimental filmmaker Derek Jarman and Soft Cell singer Marc Almond. "You really got the sense that you could walk into Heaven and see absolutely anyone," Julia says.

In 2021, Heaven is such an integral part of London's LGBT scene that it's almost taken for granted. Like all institutions, it provokes gripes as well as glowing endorsements. But when original owner Jeremy Norman first opened its doors in 1979, Heaven felt like a genuinely revolutionary proposition. Its vast network of interconnected rooms, stylish interior design courtesy of Norman's partner Derek Frost, and uninterrupted thumping music from DJ Ian Levine was like nothing London had seen before.

Norman, then a publisher, says he modelled Heaven on the "cutting-edge" nightlife he sampled in New York during a 1976 work trip he took to promote an American edition of society

bible Burke's Peerage. The Saint, a gay superclub in Manhattan's East Village, was a definite touchstone. "I was already out as a gay man to most people in my life – though not to the very conventional family friends I was staying with on the Upper East Side – and what I saw in the New York clubs was just so incredibly exciting and energising," he recalls.

In comparison, London's pubs and clubs seemed humdrum. "In New York, when you walked into a bar and ordered a gin and tonic, the barman would face you as he free-poured the gin, shot tonic water from a gun and heaped in a huge amount of ice," Norman recalls. "He'd be chatting and flirting with you the whole time. I couldn't help but compare that to a London pub, where the barman would turn his back on you as he dispensed a miserable little bit of gin from an optic, then opened a small bottle of tonic water with a rather dour face. You were lucky if you even got a dried-up slice of lemon."

Norman returned to London bitten by the nightlife bug and channelled what he'd seen into The Embassy, a Mayfair nightclub he calls "the Studio 54 of London". It attracted "endless press coverage and all the stars", including David Bowie, Mick Jagger and Pierce Brosnan, but after about two years Norman realised "it wasn't really what I wanted to be doing". He sold The Embassy to its manager, Steven Hayter, then ploughed the proceeds and his Burke's Peerage money into Heaven. "I envisioned it as a mega-club for gay men," he says proudly.

It opened in December 1979 and built an instant buzz. "It was just this massive space and the light show was amazing," says Princess Julia. Tasty Tim, a DJ who worked at Heaven in the early Eighties, says he was "blown away" when he first walked in. "I'd never been to a club of that size before and I'll always remember the neon lightning flashes," he recalls. "They're probably pretty tame by today's standards, but to my 18-year-

old self the lights really were mind-blowing. And the sound system was so loud and bass-heavy it made your ribcage shake.”

Tasty Tim says the club’s music matched its top-notch sound system; he credits DJ Ian Levine with creating “the sound of Heaven”. After cutting his teeth on the Seventies Northern Soul circuit, Blackpool-born Levine helped to develop a harder, faster form of disco music called Hi-NRG that became popular on the gay scene. “Not only was he sourcing all the latest Hi-NRG records; he was also making them and premiering them at Heaven,” Tim recalls.

In 1983, Canadian singer Miquel Brown scored a huge US club hit with So Many Men – So Little Time, a camp anthem produced by Levine with the Heaven dance floor in mind. The following year, Chicago singer Evelyn Thomas cracked the UK top 10 with another Levine production, the aptly titled High Energy. Later in the decade, the Stock Aitken Waterman songwriting team used Hi-NRG as the sonic bedrock for countless Kylie Minogue, Dead or Alive and Bananarama hits.

Norman says Heaven was packed on weekends right from the start, but struggled to attract weeknight punters until Kenny Everett shone “the power of primetime television” on his venue. “He basically did an entire episode of [ITV’s] The Kenny Everett Video Show with the neon Heaven logo flashing behind him. From that moment on we were a huge success. I think initially a lot of gay men were apprehensive about Heaven. They thought: ‘Is this some rich capitalist trying to rip off the gays?’ It took them a bit time to get it, but Kenny really accelerated that process.”



Two New Romantics at Heaven in 1984 CREDIT: Paul Hartnett/PYMCA/Universal Images Group/Getty

Once Heaven really took off, Norman believes it became a place that “celebrated masculinity”. “Up until this point, the gay scene had been very nelly and effeminate,” he says. “But then suddenly the Gay Clone look came in and you had all these guys with moustaches wearing torn jeans and checked shirts. For whatever reason, these were the men who gravitated to Heaven. You very rarely saw a man on the dance floor without a moustache, which I hated, but it was the fashion at the time.” The Gay Clone look was so de rigueur by 1983 that Freddie Mercury could almost pass unnoticed among the leather crowd who flocked to Heaven’s Cellar Bar. “The Clone look of the moustache, the leather Muir cap and jacket, added to him

looking nondescript,” barman Mark Langthorne wrote in his 2016 biography of the Queen frontman.

Still, the Gay Clone crowd never had Heaven all to themselves. Different nights attracted different gay tribes, and because Heaven had so many interconnected rooms, several parties could rage simultaneously. “If you were a gay man looking for a bit of ‘What d’you call it’, you’d head to the back bar,” Scarlett Cannon says with a wink. Norman recalls seeing Boy George and his drag queen friend Marilyn partying at Heaven “almost every night”, adding: “They were just two cross-dressing young kids. Boy George wasn’t famous yet.” Princess Julia says that though Heaven operated a “men only” door policy on weekends, she always managed to get in when she arrived with her gay male friends. “As a woman, I always felt completely safe in Heaven,” Cannon adds.

When Cannon, Michael Hardy and fashion designer Judy Blame launched the Cha Cha Club in Heaven’s back bar in 1981, the clientele became even more mixed. Suddenly, Heaven was attracting the fashion-conscious New Romantics who’d previously congregated at Covent Garden’s famous Blitz club. “We started Cha Cha because the Blitz had closed the previous October and there was nowhere for us to go on Tuesday nights,” Cannon recalls. Because the back bar had its own entrance, Cannon could make sure it wasn’t just the “standard male-heavy Heaven crowd” who got in. Cha Cha Club duly became a place where “gay people and allies” rubbed shoulders with club kids who loved to dress up. “I always remember Judy saying to me in the second or third week of the Cha Cha Club: ‘If a bomb went off now, half of creative London would be wiped out.’ And we laughed because it was true. But then a few years later, that bomb did go off: it was Aids.”

Aids was first recognised in the US in 1981. The following year, 37-year-old Heaven barman and DJ Terrence Higgins collapsed

during his shift and was taken to St Thomas's Hospital. He became one of the first people in the UK to die of an Aids-related illness, and an HIV and sexual-health charity set up in his memory, the Terrence Higgins Trust, still operates today.

It's A Sin offers an incredibly poignant reminder of how HIV-Aids decimated the LGBT community. As the series tracks its tragic progress through the 1980s, we see how it was initially misunderstood as a "gay cancer", then dismissed by some as a "conspiracy", before ultimately becoming a death knell for thousands. "It was completely devastating," says Tasty Tim. "I remember first hearing about Aids in 1982 when someone who'd visited New York came back and told us a killer plague was coming. We were so young and just thought, 'No, that can't be true.' But of course it was."



An Acid House party at Heaven in 1988 CREDIT: Rick Colls/Shutterstock

Cannon describes Aids as a "black cloud" that loomed over London's LGBT scene. "I stopped going out as much because I felt all this sadness was just too much," she says. "There was a period between 1988 and 1992 where you'd be going to a funeral every few weeks. I think a lot of my generation have

PTSD from that time without even realising it.” Others coped by looking to the dance floor for escapism. “People in their twenties shouldn’t be losing all their friends, and I think that’s part of what made the Eighties so hedonistic,” Tasty Tim says. “It became a ‘live for today’ ethos because we didn’t know what was going to happen next.”

Heaven itself also changed during this tumultuous decade. S’Express DJ-producer Mark Moore helped to introduce house music to the UK at the mid-Eighties nights Asylum and Pyramid. As the Nineties approached, Heaven embraced the rave movement by hosting seminal nights Rage and Spectrum. By this point, original owner Jeremy Norman was long gone: he sold Heaven to Richard Branson in 1982 for a steal. “My partner Derek and I were completely exhausted, and I thought who else but Richard Branson would want to buy a large gay club?” Norman recalls. “I got half a million for it, which isn’t a lot when you consider that we were making £150,000 a year.”

Branson held onto Heaven until 2003, but it’s now owned by Jeremy Joseph, who has reinvented the club for a new generation by incorporating his long-running G-A-Y nights into the weekly programme. Over the past decade, Joseph has booked superstars including Lady Gaga, Miley Cyrus and Kylie Minogue to perform on Heaven’s stage. “I do feel like I have a duty to the club,” Joseph says. “It’s been a real struggle to survive in this pandemic because the overheads are just astronomical. There are moments where I might feel like I want to walk out, but obviously I can’t. Heaven isn’t just a venue, it’s a piece of LGBT history, which is why it’s so important to fight for its survival.”

Joseph has even offered to turn the dance floor into a Covid vaccination hub. “We’re a large empty venue, so why not do something good with it? And it would add another chapter to

Heaven's amazing history if we could play our part in helping to resolve the pandemic."

It's a Sin begins tonight on Channel 4 at 9pm