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The Observer Clubbing

Forty years of sheer Heaven at the London superclub

The venue that first brought London's gay culture into the mainstream is still going strong today after four decades of glamour, glitz and perspiration



Days of Heaven, clockwise from top left: Spandau Ballet in concert, 1981; new romantic goths in 1984; acid house in 1988; Miley Cyrus at G-A-Y in 2010; Tasty Tim, doyenne of the Heaven DJs in 1984; the dancefloor at Spectrum in 1988. Composite: Rex/Getty

When Heaven opened its doors to the disco-hungry gay hedonists of London 40 years ago this month, it was declared the hippest place in Europe. The reviewer in London's *Evening Standard* was right when he guessed the huge nightclub's appeal would soon make it popular with dancers of all sexual preferences. "Heaven's biggest headache could be in deterring London's non-gay discophiles who could end up trying to pass for gay to get past the elegant bouncers at the disco's equivalent of the Pearly Gates," he predicted.

Those not born in 1979 may know the club's fabled history as the early home of house music and have seen it featured in videos and documentaries. Or perhaps watched the opening credits of Tony Scott's 1983 vampire film, *The Hunger*, as

Bauhaus sings the hit Bela Lugosi's Dead while David Bowie and Catherine Deneuve skulk around the club in sunglasses. But back then, for members of London's burgeoning gay scene, the arrival of Heaven was the moment when a rich hidden culture became part of mainstream nightlife. It was also quickly established as a key venue for bands.

"The first time I went, I saw New Order play. It was just post-Joy Division in 1981," says Mark Ellicott, who has been running the club in Charing Cross for 11 years. "There aren't too many venues in London that have had a more seismic influence on the club scene." Ellicott adds that, to mark the big birthday, the club has won permission to operate as a marriage venue, with the first ceremony to take place on 15 December, almost exactly 40 years after the opening night.

While Heaven's arrival had an impact, it drew on strands of alternative disco culture already threading through the city in the 12 years since homosexuality had been decriminalised. Customers at established gay dancefloors and discreet venues, such as Bang, Napoleons, Scandals and Catacombs, had initially moved on to a club on Old Bond Street called the Embassy, opened in 1978 by Jeremy Norman. Norman aimed to provide Londoners with the kind of experience the avant garde and creative elite were already enjoying at Studio 54 in New York.



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Cher at Heaven in 2008. Photograph: Dave Benett/Getty Images

By the time Margaret Thatcher had been in power for six months, Norman, who was also chairman of the posh publisher Burke's Peerage, had made a fresh move. He took over the a vast disused roller disco under the arches near Charing Cross Station and set up Europe's biggest club venue: Heaven.

"Prior to that, gay clubs were only found underground in pub cellars," recalls Ellicott. "Heaven was the only venue of its scale in the last few years before the arrival of the Aids epidemic. Inevitably, young people now don't realise the importance of a

single institution, but there is an appreciation among those in the know.”

That institution is now to be celebrated in a reunion night, Return to Rage, at the club on Sunday 8 December. (Rage, featuring the DJs Fabio and Grooverider, was the original regular jungle and drum 'n' bass night run from the late 1980s into the 1990s.) A documentary – made by On The Bus Productions – about the club is also due out next year, followed by another anniversary club night, Return to Heaven, being staged in early spring next year.

“I was DJ-ing there in the late 80s and early 90s, and the visual effects were amazing,” says Steve Whyte. “There were often people in amazing costumes, and it all had a massive visual presence. We all felt comfortable in that environment. Until then, it would have been difficult for people to tell people you had been to a gay club.”

Whyte and his business partner, Simon Needham, are behind next year’s anniversary club night, and Whyte will be interviewed by the documentary-makers, along with Heaven regular Boy George and its former owner, Richard Branson.

“When it started it was still difficult for gay people to be accepted. But Heaven was a place that changed perspectives and brought the two communities, gay and straight, together,” says Whyte. “When they opened the club to other people on different nights, that broke down the barriers. It was incredible.”

Social liberation did not stop tabloid newspapers producing a string of critical headlines. In 1981, *The News of the World* condemned the place as “more like hell”, and eight years later the *Sun* came down hard on drug use.



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Mariah Carey at GAY in 2003.

Photograph: Jo Hale/Getty Images

The club's first resident DJ was Ian Levine, frequently cited as the father of the Original Heaven Sound. Big names such as DJ Paul Oakenfold and club host Philip Sallon followed.

Among the bands closely associated with the venue are Throbbing Gristle, who played there in 1980 and returned 29 years later for a last London show, and Nick Cave's original band, the Birthday Party, who played the club in 1982.

Branson's Virgin Group bought Heaven from Norman that year, as the "pink pound" started to count, but Branson sold the club

in 2003 to a consortium known as Pure Group. Five years later, the game of pass-the-parcel continued when Mama Group, in partnership with Jeremy Joseph, founder of the influential G-A-Y night at the Astoria, bought Heaven and moved G-A-Y to the venue. This group was bought in turn by HMV and then, when the music retailer went into administration in 2013, Joseph got it all back by acquiring the outstanding shares in G-A-Y Ltd.

And so the Heaven tradition continues. Doors swing open on themed club nights each week, ranging from Popcorn on Monday to Camp Attack on Friday. In a fortnight, two men from Wales will be the venue's first wedding couple. "If you had said in 1981, when that *News Of The World* piece came out, that one day we would host LGBT weddings, nobody would have believed you," says Ellicott.