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Memories from the Dancefloor podcast is a deep dive into queer history — review

The new series hears from the people at the centre of Britain's gay club scene



Club-goers at Heaven, London, 1985 © Dave Swindells

by Fiona Sturges 6.2.23

When Jeremy Norman launched the gay club Heaven in a disused roller disco in London, another nightclub owner offered him some advice. He said: “If you have drugs in your club you’ll have a big problem with the police and the licensing people. But if you don’t have drugs in your club, you won’t have a business.” It was 1979 and Norman, who then worked in publishing, had no experience running nightclubs. But on a business trip to New York, he had visited a disco called Flamingo and witnessed “a thousand hot gay men dancing with their shirts off, sweat pouring off them. It was just intoxicating.”

Norman is the first guest on the new podcast *Memories from the Dancefloor*, a docu-series about the history of British queer nightlife released to coincide with LGBT+ History Month. Presented by the journalist Damian Kerlin, the series speaks to those at the centre of the 20th-century gay club scene, from club owners and promoters to DJs and patrons. Before the arrival of Heaven, London’s gay scene was largely restricted to overcrowded cellar bars. By contrast, says Norman, Heaven “was gay-owned, gay-run with a gay sensibility . . . most of our bar staff were cute boys who we put in virtually see-through satin shorts. Naughtiness was in the air.”

The club helped launch the career of the DJ Ian Levine, who popularised the hi-NRG sound that became synonymous with gay culture, and hosted performances by Grace Jones and Madonna. But the real turning point came when Kenny Everett, then a popular comedian with his own primetime TV show, decided to film at Heaven with the logo flashing behind him: “From that moment on, we were mobbed,” says Norman.

While the tone of the series is broadly celebratory, this is not a hagiographical history. The gay activist Marc Thompson pulls no punches as he recalls Heaven catering to an overwhelmingly white clientele: “People didn’t care about black queer men or black queer women, so we weren’t welcome in those spaces,” he says.

Elsewhere, *Memories from the Dancefloor* does a good job of evoking the freedom and joy of Heaven's early years, even if it skims rather too lightly over the club's musical legacy. The production can also be rough around the edges: if only someone had thought to interview Norman, whose testimony dominates the opening episode, in a studio rather than over Zoom.

Last year, Marc Thompson launched his own podcast *Black and Gay, Back in the Day*, which unearths LGBT+ stories from the past via a single photograph and pairs queer black elders with their younger counterparts for in-depth conversations about their experiences. Meanwhile, *The Log Books* delves into the handwritten archives of the old London Lesbian and Gay Switchboard, which was launched in 1974, to tell a comprehensive and intimate history of queerness in Britain.



'Memories from the Dancefloor': podcasts.apple.com