



22 August 2012

Howard Spooner: The Prince Harry hunters closed down Public

When his club Public closed in May, Howard Spooner lost his marriage and was accused of insulting the disabled. He tells Joshi Herrmann that the girls hounding Harry were to blame

The last time I wrote about Howard Spooner and his recently deceased nightclub Public, a reader tweeted me some feedback: “Your overly sympathetic article on the closing of Public makes me want to never read the ES again. You are an awful person.”

I had written a kind of obituary of the club, describing how it became the most sought-after night spot in west London in the space of months, only to be closed down by the council following a long-running and acrimonious dispute with its neighbours, who complained about vomiting, urinating, outdoor sex and the disturbance caused by “Made in Chelsea types running around with mummy and daddy’s money at night”. If that was the reaction I got, one can imagine what came the way of Spooner and his business partner Guy Pelly — whose close friendship with the princes ensured that the club’s demise was followed with interest. “A terrible reaction,” says Spooner, when we meet at a restaurant on Fulham Road.

The worst reaction was of the 42-year-old Spooner's own making, after he was quoted claiming that a local resident who complained about the club had been given a sympathetic hearing because he was disabled. His words — "If someone with a disability complains, it has 10 times the weight of an able-bodied person's complaint" — have haunted him since. Now he wants to set the record straight but in the course of doing so it becomes immediately clear how he ended up shoving his foot in his mouth so comprehensively in the first place.

"What I said, which I've got to be careful about saying it fully again, was that there was ... am I allowed to say dwarf?" he asks me looking concerned. "Is dwarf an acceptable word?" He continues. "Okay, there was a dwarf in a wheelchair who lives nearby."

"As soon as we wanted to cross-examine him there was a big sigh in the court room from all the residents, who were amazed. Now, why should his — not general people in wheelchairs, his specifically — why should his testimony have more credibility than somebody else's? That's all I was saying. It's got nothing to do with my views about the disabled, which I'm extremely sympathetic to, I'm a big charity contributor. I've got emails galore from people in wheelchairs who have been entertained in all of my clubs, but especially in Public."

Spooner's verbal gaucherie somehow doesn't stop him from being disarmingly likeable in person. As he speaks, his face is by turns earnest and mischievous — chuckling joyfully when I read out some of the things people have said about Public. In his line of business, thick skin is compulsory.

After leaving Gordonstoun — Prince Charles's old school, where Spooner's parents taught — the 18-year-old came to London to start his business career. After a few short-lived ventures he threw himself into the helter-skelter world of nightclubs, floundering between hits and misses with seemingly little middle ground. Embargo (in the same King's Road building as Public would one day inhabit) was a "success". Leopard Lounge on Fulham Broadway an "overnight success". Converting the Clapham Grand theatre into a club another "overnight success".

Doing the same to Hammersmith Palais in 2000 was "a disaster", but one that taught him to stick to his Sloane crowd. "It was busy but it was just ... the demographics were much lower spend per head than in Clapham or Chelsea," he says with uncharacteristic diplomacy. What Spooner does best is create clubs for Chelsea dwellers that make them feel at home. "A bit like a school common room" is how he describes the appeal of Public, where his customers bumped into people they knew.

For Public, overnight success would be an understatement. Spooner brought in Pelly and his partner at Mahiki David Phelps, knowing that the Old Etonian's royal connections would bring the crowds that Public was made for. Was he courting young royals?

"We weren't courting anybody, but obviously with Guy Pelly come young royals and obviously seeing Prince Harry in a club drives a certain amount of crowd down there because he's a big draw wherever he goes."

After a promising start, "the visits from the young royals just made the place busier," he says. "Instead of having 700 people through the doors and turning away 100, we were turning away 1,000 sometimes. It was a ridiculous situation." He claims Public would have thrived without its royal connections, but admits that "there were just girls queuing around the block".

Those queues soon got up the neighbours' noses, leading to complaints and a review of the club's licence. "Looking back, I see why they did it, because we couldn't control the crowds that were out there," he admits, but he hints — if anything Spooner says can be credited with any subtlety — at a culture clash. Was it a class problem, as many suggested at the time?

"There was never a class situation at Public, it just so happened that Public was in a neighbourhood where across the road there was quite a rough element who had parties in the park, drinking cans of Special Brew, you know, and you've got to try and live with each other."