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Not So Heavenly: Why London Nightclub ‘Heaven’ Is Hellish For Some

By *Mads Brown* on 9 August 2022



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What scores two stars on TripAdvisor, plays an ungodly amount of ABBA, and has the occasional celebrity appearance? Heaven. No, not the one guarded by angels in the sky (although it might as well be, judging by the lack of phone service); the Soho club, manned by less

angelic bouncers. Supposedly an LGBTQ+ safe space, Heaven has recently been under fire for its exclusivist entrance policy.

Heaven Is A Place On Earth

Historically, LGBTQ+ spaces have been integral to London nightlife. As early as the 18th century, Molly houses provided a safe environment where homosexual men could socialise and express themselves. By the 1800s many of these Molly houses had shut down due to raids, the visitors and owners arrested. Instead, Soho's growing entertainment district had begun to spark an increase in sex work. The first gay bar: "Cave of The Golden Calf" emerged in 1895. According to the 'John Bull' periodical, by the 1920's there were six of these notorious 'bogus hotels'. Among them was Hotel de France, where Heaven now stands.

Jeremy Norman opened Heaven in 1979. This was just 12 years after The Sexual Offences Act decriminalised homosexuality in the UK. Due to the overt homophobia of the time, the club was looked down on by authorities, and took the brunt of a lot of prejudice. This didn't stop Heaven hosting live shows from New Order and Joy Division though, and the venue continues to hold club nights that feature anything from musical theatre to RnB.

The Gates Of Heaven

... are shut. Unless, of course, 'you're a gay man'. Olivia was just one woman whom Heaven turned away. She made this conclusion in a TikTok video she filmed while walking home. Why? Olivia and her girlfriend didn't present as queer enough. Bouncers told them that they shouldn't try and enter a club reserved for the gay community. Judging by the answers to the prompt: "Any comments, stories, or opinions on Heaven nightclub" that I posted on social media, Olivia isn't alone in her frustrating experience. Heaven have turned away many women for 'not looking gay enough', not being a member, or 'for no reason'.

Sashay Away

"Heaven reserves the right to refuse admission to those deemed to be wearing unsafe footwear, specifically high heels... Heaven also reserves the right the refuse admission to those who are not G-A-Y members on its club events or who are not recognised as regular customers by staff."

An understandable comment concerning high heels, but **nothing** specifying a dress code. Surely if Heaven's intention in turning away straight presenting individuals was to protect the gay community, they'd state it in their policy? Even if this were the case, who are bouncers to judge which individuals are part of the LGBTQ+ community. It needs to be said that not all gay, lesbian, trans, asexual... individuals are required to dress according to their identity. **Fashion** is entirely unique and subjective. Additionally, Heaven needs to recognise that both straight allies, and LGBTQ+ members who aren't ready to present as visibly 'out' yet, will be visiting the club.

What strikes me as particularly dubious is the nightclub's prioritisation of those recognised as 'regular customers'. Such reliance on staff members' judgement is bound to increase human error and even outright bias. It might be understandable if Heaven solely turned away large groups of straight presenting individuals. However, bouncers appear to exploit this section of the policy. Allegedly, large groups of men, not part of the LGBTQ+ community, have been seen gaining easy entry while their female friends are turned away.

It's Hell In There

If you do manage to get through the gates of Heaven, it's not always angelic hymns and fluffy clouds. More so 70s hits and concrete platforms. In my personal experience, the club can encourage an incredible night and a chance to feel connected with the LGBTQ+ community. However, it has its drawbacks... quite major drawbacks. In response to the same question poll I mentioned earlier, experiences inside Heaven are even more disconcerting:

Granted, though still a major issue, these experiences can happen in every club – everywhere, even. Technically, this isn't Heaven's fault. I can't find any comment from Heaven which explicitly states that it's a LGBTQ+ safe space or that the club's visitors will be protected (though perhaps this is another issue). If such an exclusive entrance policy led to less sexual harassment, homophobia, or racial abuse, then it could be justified. But these awful discriminatory acts are still happening. So... who exactly is Heaven letting in?

Final Thoughts

In conclusion, I don't doubt that Jeremy Norman founded Heaven to ensure members of the LGBTQ+ community in London had a safe and enjoyable night out. I also understand how difficult it must be to facilitate an inclusive community whilst also trying to reserve the space for members of LGBTQ+.

Although some of the fault does lie with e.g. large groups of straight individuals, who aren't there as allies, wanting to access the club, Heaven can do better. The purpose of the entrance policy is clearly not to keep the club exclusive to the LGBTQ+ community. And honestly, the abuse that some individuals receive inside is tearing down centuries of hard earned progress.