



Heaven, The Gay Ultradisco - And The Story Of Terry Higgins

By Dan Glass

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In an extract from his book [Queer Footprints: A Guide to Uncovering London's Fierce History](#), Dan Glass explores one of the capital's best-loved LGBTQ+ clubs — and an era-defining moment that took place here one night.

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Welcome to Heaven, the 'gay ultradisco nightclub' on Villiers Street. Image: iStock/tyannar81

If 'love is as love does ... an act of will — namely, both an intervention and an action' as the great late author bell hooks states, where can the force of love take us? What does the hope, spilling out of trapped emotions after nightmares, unfurlings of hot desire and the pounding thud of expression, no longer encapsulated in a ruffled spare bedroom duvet, look and feel like?

Welcome to Heaven, the 'gay ultradisco nightclub' on Villiers Street, a street so laced with queer seduction it is even named after King James I's lover, George Villiers, the 2nd Duke of Buckingham, in the 17th century. One of the first major queer spaces to open in 1979 after the passing of the Sexual Offences Act of 1967, here many from the sexual liberation movements took a break and danced the night away. Daytimes were spent in continuous back-breaking meetings, protests and the creation of alternative spaces to close the void of the 'partial' aspect of the law – the different age of sexual consent for homosexuals, and the discrepancies of acceptance across the whole LGBTQIA+ community. These non-stop activists deserved a good boogie.

"Disco's equivalent of the Pearly Gates"

Heaven founder Jeremy Norman was not new to the game. The year before he had established the Embassy nightclub in Bond Street, immortalised in the set of Sylvester's [You Make Me Feel Mighty Real video](#). With Heaven, he aimed even higher. At the time of its opening, Heaven was the biggest gay club in Europe. Costing a staggering £300,000 to renovate, it boasted 5000-watt sound, overhead tweeters and bass horns built into the floor, plus a hi-tech light show complete with lasers, lightning-effect and planet-shaped neon spotlights and high-power floodlights. The Evening Standard, reviewing Heaven's opening night, was clearly impressed: "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."

Heaven's arrival coincided with new directions in disco. After the 1960s soul and swing, the beats got faster, mixing became essential and electronics replaced live instruments. Gay disco and hi-energy became the soundtrack to the parallel scenes that took over Heaven and gay Earl's Court. Between the beats, live shows sent ripples of laughter and roars of queer hunger throughout the crowds. In 1982, the visionary American poet Allen Ginsberg bemused punters by getting up on stage at the Amateur Talent Night to read from Please, Master, a deliriously sadomasochistic love poem that still is one of the most sexually explicit poems ever written:

Master push my shoulders away and stare in my eyes, & make me bend over the table, please master grab my thighs and lift my ass to your waist, please master your hand's rough stroke on my neck, your palm down to my backside.

He may have been one of the most famous beat generation poets in the world, but in Heaven, he still came second. Here you have to reach for the stars.

The 1980s at Heaven saw Spandau Ballet and Boy George in concert, new romantic, goth and acid house. Drum and bass launched us into the 1990s with DJs such as Fabio and Grooverider, while pop stars like Cher also rocked the stage. Fast forward to 2022 and the crowds are still going wild as local girl turned superstar Adele turns up unannounced as a surprise guest to judge strippers and dancers at Porn Idol, even taking a turn herself on the stripper pole.

The liberation taking place on the dancefloor, however, didn't stop the tabloid press from producing homophobic headlines, in which the News of the World condemned the place as 'more like hell' in 1981. The level of visibility that Heaven brought was unprecedented. "Prior to the arrival of Heaven, gay clubs were only found underground in pub cellars", recalls Mark Elliott, current general manager, "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."

"What ... the ... Hell ... is ... going ... on?"

Rewind to 1982 and you are dancing your ass off to Donna Summer's Love is Just a Breath Away, your throat hoarse after screaming the lyrics to Culture Club's Do You Really Want to Hurt Me? and dreaming of that hottie across the dancefloor whipping you into their arms and all over your bed at home later. Time to rejuvenate because you really don't want a hangover to stop you coming back again tomorrow. You head to the bar.

"Please can I have a large bottle of water and one for my mate?"

The handsome barman leans over to hear you more clearly.

"Two large waters please darlin'."

A pause ... Maybe he can't hear among the banging tunes?

He walks away and your eyes wander after him and suddenly, a thud and he collapses before your eyes at the side of the bar.

What ... the ... Hell ... is ... going ... on?

Meet Terry Higgins.

Terrence (or Terry) Higgins was born in Pembrokeshire, Wales on 10 June 1945. Alienated as a teen because of his sexuality, he left the small-town life and moved to London, like thousands across the island did and still do. Terry worked as a reporter in the House of Commons by day and as a barman and a DJ by night. His talents led him to perform in New York and Amsterdam throughout the 1970s, but he always loved coming home to his favourite London stomping ground Heaven, until one night when he collapsed.

Ian Johns, another Heaven regular, recalls a conversation he overheard in the cloakroom queue at around that time:

"I was standing in Heaven, talking to some guys talking about herpes and I was going, 'Well, I don't want to get that, it never goes away.' And someone said to me, 'Oh no, there's a new one now. There's a new VD, a venereal disease that is affecting people who are gay men in America, where you just keep getting flu and then you die.' And I'm going 'Ah! You can't die from VD.' And then we slowly started hearing stories. And then suddenly, you heard about a friend of a friend, then a friend, then an ex and it escalated from there really..."

Rupert Whitaker, Terry's partner, was with him in hospital. Rupert was fully aware, and deeply scared of what the few reports were referring to as the 'Gay Cancer' which then became known as 'Gay Related Immune Deficiency' or GRID. Casual homophobia of the time laid bare; there were no 'heterosexuality-related conditions' that affect primarily heterosexuals and there still aren't.



On 4 July 1982, aged 37, Terry died from pneumonia and the related opportunistic infection neural toxoplasmosis, at St Thomas' Hospital on the South Bank. He was one of the first people in the UK to die from an AIDS-related illness. AIDS — Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome — was first recognised as a medical condition in the US in 1981. Later that year Dr Tony Pinching diagnosed the first case in the UK, in a heterosexual woman, at St Mary's Praed Street Clinic in London. DJ and writer Stewart Who? remembers the quick change in the atmosphere over the following years:

"AIDS was the shadow that stalked the creative brilliance of London's scene. Lesbians were nursing gay friends, because as a community we had to come together. We were under siege. So many of my beautiful and spirited disco friends became worries, then memories. They'd be out every night of the week; preening, gurning and laughing... then gone. It wasn't wise to ask questions, as people would be evasive, or worse, tell the truth. 'That one died, dear', they'd whisper, sucking on a Marlboro Light. 'Such a shame. His family were vile. They banned gays from the funeral. You didn't sleep with him did you?'"

"Innocent people were being murdered, as I now realise"

Devastated, Rupert and friends harnessed their grief to create understanding among the confusion and to make sure Terry's life and tragic early death was not lived in vain. That's when, in a flat in central London, the Terrence Higgins Trust (THT) was born.

Out of heartbreak, THT's mission was to personalise and humanise AIDS in a very public way and to prevent others from having to suffer as Terry had. "At first, it was to raise funds for research but then we realised much more was needed, and more immediately", Rupert recalls of these initial, intense months. The alchemy of grief led this small group of committed volunteers to focus all their energies and try to build relationships and work equally with gay men, lesbians, haemophiliacs, sex workers and drug users to raise funds for research and awareness of the still unknown illness. Rupert never forgot about Heaven though. In the subsequent years, it had opened its doors in the daytime to serve the needs of the community as the AIDS epidemic became a turning point for gays and lesbians in Britain. The following year, a public meeting about GRID was co-organised by THT and the London Lesbian and Gay Switchboard (now known as Switchboard LGBT+ Helpline), the biggest LGBTQIA+ telephone helpline at the time to respond to the rising deaths and the simultaneous, deadly Government bigotry and inaction.

As mentioned previously, in 1986 homosexuals were seen as 'swirling in a cesspit of their own making', in the words of Greater Manchester Chief Constable James Anderton, who later claimed God told him to say it. The rise of the 'moral majority' vilified people diagnosed with AIDS, and the wider gay community. Headlines at the time included "Gay — and Wicked" (the Sun), and "Britain Threatened by Gay Virus Plague" (the Mail on Sunday). The combination of misunderstanding of the HIV virus and AIDS, and an influential and homophobic right-wing press helped to create a culture of intolerance, homophobia and fear among the British public at the exact time that thousands of innocent people were becoming HIV+ and were dying unnecessarily — or being murdered, as I now realise.



