

THE STANDARD



A history of Heaven nightclub, from cutting edge gay club to controversial 'mainstream' venue

Heaven nightclub awaits its licensing verdict today following a member of the security team being charged with rape. Here, we look back on its storied history as a venue



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6 DECEMBER 2024

Through the AIDS epidemic, the financial crash and even parts of Covid, the gates to Heaven have remained open. Then, last week, one of the nightclub's security guards was charged with the rape of a woman who was turned away from the club.

The doors to Heaven immediately slammed shut, as per the Metropolitan Police's request to Westminster Council. The security guard is currently being remanded in prison and a licensing committee has ruled that Heaven's alcohol licence should be suspended for up to 28 days until a full hearing can take place.

Located in between the arches of Charing Cross railway station, Heaven has been a central figure in the city's queer nightlife scene since the day it opened in December of 1979.

From its buzzy beginnings in the early 80s to its 90s revamp and 2000s pop ubiquity, Heaven has become one of the longest running gay nightclubs in Europe.

Now, its reputation risks being marred by the alleged behaviour of its security staff, leading to the temporary suspension of its licence. At a licensing meeting tomorrow, councillors will decide its fate.

In light of the club's troubled present, we look back at Heaven's past, from fledgling gay club, to London nightlife leader, to "mainstream" pop venue.

The owner of 'London's Studio 54' purchases a club in the Arches

Heaven's story began in 1979, when the venue was purchased by the British entrepreneur Jeremy Norman. Norman had been known for running The Embassy Club in Old Bond Street in 1978, which was widely considered to be the London equivalent of New York's Studio 54.

Heaven positioned itself as the central figure of London's gay nightclub scene which, until then, had been largely made up of (physical and figurative) underground club nights or disco nights in pubs.

This very paper reviewed the club upon opening, and declared: "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."

And we were right. Heaven quickly became the beating heart of the city's gay scene and made a name for itself musically with its crew of resident

DJs. The original manager, David Inches, and independent promotions manager, Kevin Millins, sought out DJs who would become exclusive to the club and had a new, interesting style of club music.

Heaven's original DJ was Ian Levine.

Live performers from the early days of Heaven include New Order and Bronski Beat.

Richard Branson invests in the 'Pink Pound'

By 1982, Heaven had caught the attention of another British entrepreneur. Richard Branson, seeking to invest in the “pink pound” (i.e the LGBTQ+ economy), viewed Heaven as a valuable addition to his Virgin Group portfolio and purchased it from Norman for £500,000.



RICHARD BRANSON ATTENDS VIRGIN MOBILE'S THIRD BIRTHDAY PARTY AT HEAVEN NIGHTCLUB IN 2002

Branson became an even bigger fan of Heaven the longer he owned it - in 1997, he sponsored Pride in London and that Christmas he went to Heaven for the festivities. Back in the day, when people called Heaven “Virgin's Achilles' heel”, Branson would say: "It will be the last place I sell."

A series of reliable nights emerged, including Asylum Thursdays in 1983, with resident DJs Colin Faver and Mark Moore (S'Express) and Pyramid Wednesdays in 1985.

Around this time, Heaven also became one of the first clubs in the country to play a new kind of music emerging from Black and queer communities in Chicago: house. At one point, Heaven hosted American DJ Frankie Knuckles, who would go on to be known as the “godfather of house music”.

The 1980s bring ecstasy and agony to Heaven

The AIDS epidemic hit Britain in late 1981 when John Eadie, a 49-year-old guest house proprietor from Harrogate, died of an AIDS related illness that December, making him the first AIDS-related death in the UK.

It wasn't until 1985, when Heaven was thriving under the ownership of Richard Branson, that AIDS hysteria really swept the UK. By that point, there had been 58 recorded deaths and one arrest of an AIDS patient under the Public Health (Infectious Diseases) Regulations 1985. This was the first and only use of the regulation, but it made the general consensus on AIDS glaringly obvious.

In the book *Queer Footprints: A Guide to Uncovering London's Fierce History* by Dan Glass, former Heaven regular Ian Johns talked about his experiences at Heaven during the AIDS crisis. "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 gay men in America, where you just keep getting flu and then you die.

"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..."

Meanwhile, a new drug was sweeping the club scene. It was called MDMA, and it made everyone unbelievably happy. Everyone except The Sun, who ran headlines like "Fiver For A Drug Trip To Heaven In Branson Club" in 1988.

This was made funnier by the fact that The Sun didn't understand the difference between acid house (the genre of music that soundtracked MDMA's rise) and acid (the drug). "Junkies flaunt their craving by wearing T-shirts sold at the club bearing messages like 'Drop acid not bombs'," read the report, seemingly ignorant to the fact that everyone was doing an entirely different drug.

The Orb, 90s drag nights and a revamp for the millennium

The reliable Heaven house nights of the late 80s gave way to more ambient house in the 90s, including the "seminal" Land of the Oz nights with DJs Jimmy Cauty and Alex Paterson, better known as The Orb. There were more drag nights, too, with the Wednesday night slot filled by Fruit Machine, a drag night hosted by DJ Miss Kimberly. Meanwhile, Fridays were garage focused and Saturdays had an ever-changing theme of different parties.

By 1998, Heaven was accused of being "a bit tatty", as per a 909Originals retrospective, which led then-owner Richard Branson to shut its doors and revamp the club's interior in time for the new millennium. In honour of the closure, Heaven hosted a 'Demolition

Party', with legendary DJ Ian Levine providing the tunes.



CHER PERFORMS AT HEAVEN IN 1998

When Heaven reopened it had a new focus on sober socialising, selling coffees and reserving certain spaces to be well away from the thumping music of the superclub. Angela Reed, head of marketing and promotions for Heaven, told The Independent at the time: “It’s not just a nightclub. A lot of people came here before they came out and as a result they view Heaven as their home. We don’t want just to be a dancing and drinking club. We want the whole experience, where people can mix and meet and socialise with each other.”

Heaven gains star power but gradually loses its cool

Branson may have claimed Heaven would be his final sale back in the 80s, but by 2003 he had bigger fish to fry - like the sky (Virgin Atlantic), the internet (Virgin Mobile), and eventually space (Virgin Galactic).

Heaven was bought by a consortium known as Pure Group, made up of long standing Heaven boss David Inches, along with Jeremy Millins and Paul Savory.

Heaven switched hands again a mere five years later when it was bought by Mama Group, in partnership with current owner Jeremy Joseph, founder of the original G-A-Y night at the Astoria. Joseph bought Heaven and moved G-A-Y to the venue. He was also the owner of sister venue G-A-Y Late until this shuttered in November 2023.

In the 2000s, Heaven started hosting more and more famous faces, including Madonna in 2009. Its star power remains to this day, with Adele having recently made a surprise appearance in the club, and recent acts ranging from Rita Ora to Charli xcx.



OUTSIDE HEAVEN NIGHTCLUB NEAR CHARING CROSS

By the 2010s, Heaven's position as anything remotely original had faded, with smaller, more specific queer nights cropping up across London. Now, in 2024, it is still beloved, but considered by many to be too "mainstream" for their liking.

A rape allegation brings the club's reputation into question

On November 15, Heaven was closed with immediate effect after one of the club's security team was charged with rape.

The closure, which was agreed on public safety grounds, came after the Metropolitan Police applied to Westminster Council to suspend Heaven's licence prior to a full hearing.

In a Westminster Council hearing at the time, the council was told that a woman was allegedly raped in the vicinity of the venue by a member of security staff on November 1. The Met confirmed that a member of Heaven's security staff was arrested and charged with rape, and is on remand in prison.

The hearing was also told that when the victim tried to report the attack, other Heaven security staff allegedly ignored her.

A council spokesperson said: "Following a request from the Metropolitan Police, and considering evidence from both the police and the operator, the council's licensing committee has decided to suspend Heaven's licence for 28 days.

"We recognise this venue's cultural significance but the committee agreed this step is necessary to prevent serious crime and protect the public.

"A full licensing hearing will be held in December where both the police and venue management will have the opportunity to present new evidence.

"This case is currently subject of an ongoing police investigation, and we are unable to comment further at this stage."

Heaven owner Jeremy Joseph has publicly protested the closure. On Instagram, Joseph wrote: "Following an allegation that a security guard sexually assaulted a woman who had been refused entry to Heaven Nightclub, Westminster council has suspended Heaven's premises licence which means we have to close until further notice."

"We are considering our position with regard to an appeal. We are sickened by this allegation but can't comment as it's on going criminal investigation. We can only send our thoughts to the alleged victim. Our priority is to put new procedures in place to make sure nothing like this can happen again & gain the confidence of the Council as we move forward. We cannot comment further at the moment but will update soon."

At a council hearing earlier this month, councillors were told that Heaven has been "noted by the Met as the highest crime generator in the borough".

"There are concerns vulnerable people are at risk," councillors were told. "Turning away 150 to 200 people from the premises for being drunk requires

more staff or a management policy to ensure their safety.”

Police have logged 109 incidents since May - including sex assaults, grievous bodily harm, public order, phone thefts and pickpocketing - among Heaven’s 7,000 revellers a week.

A licensing hearing today will give councillors the opportunity to decide what the future of Heaven will look like — or, indeed, if there is any future at all.