

From Jeremy's 2006 Memoir: 'No Make Up - Straight Tales from a Queer Life'

Heaven

The success of the Embassy Club in the late 1970's inspired me to fulfil my real ambition to create a huge, exclusively gay, dance club. The Embassy provided me with the confidence and funding to fulfil such an ambitious dream. The press eagerly anticipated the new venture. I gave an exclusive interview to Harpers & Queen and they published an article on Heaven with colour photos of the pre-launch interior showing our massive lighting rig. After the opening nights, the Evening Standard published a full-page article with photos. "Heaven Ultradisco", wrote Peter York in Harpers and Queen, "will be for the '80's what the Finsbury Park Astoria was for the 30's – a total mass fantasy." All this publicity was not enough; we experienced a worrying few months during which our new baby was nearly empty on weekday nights. We were unsure what to do.

Fortunately dear, dotty, Kenny Everett put us firmly on the radar screens. He recorded an edition of his immensely popular prime-time TV show, The Kenny Everett Video Show at the club. The vast space looked glamorous and throughout the transmission, our neon logo formed the backdrop to the stage set. We were suddenly hip and cool!

Even before the Embassy, I had had the site for Heaven in mind: 21,000 square feet "underneath the arches" at Charing Cross in Villiers Street. These gloomy brick railway arches had a number of advantages. They were of sufficient size to accommodate more than 1,500 revellers; the space was already licensed until 3.00am, (the latest alcohol licence available in London at the time); and, above all, they were in an amazing location at the epicentre of London, close to all the night buses.

The space was still trading, but only just, as Global Village. Soon it failed financially and the club lease of 21 years was for sale. I realised that a

great deal of money was needed to turn Global Village into my vision of Heaven Ultra Disco.

At this time, gay clubs in London were discrete cellar bars holding a couple of hundred people apologetically hidden from public view. There was a brave “one-nighter” at the Astoria called “Bang” which was drawing a crowd of about 1,000 every Monday - traditionally the hardest night to fill. That gave me confidence that the right gay product would achieve capacity at weekends. Experience had taught me that if you fill a club for two nights you pay the overheads; every other busy night is profit.

Naturally, I turned to Derek Frost, to undertake the design of this somewhat daunting space. We decided to move away entirely from the traditional club design of tables round a dance floor. Heaven was all out being young, sexy, bold and raw. I wanted something startling for a new decade. Derek came up with an outstanding “hi-tech” design, an innovation at the time. All wires, pipes and conduits were exposed and painted silver; walls were painted black and the surfaces hard. The three huge vaulted brick arches were exposed and remained unclad. We hung hard-hats on the walls and the bars were constructed out of industrial materials, there was scaffolding everywhere, supporting the lighting rig and the sound towers. Our patrons could be forgiven for thinking they were entering a factory or a construction site. The ethos he created was of a downtown warehouse space in an American city, totally appropriate and in tune with the style and feel of the new decade.

America was a promised land for gay men at that time, a land of sexual opportunity and where the men were men and the boys beautiful and available. From the perspective of a tired and socially backward London, San Francisco and New York represented a promised land of liberation.

We employed an East-End lad, Dave Bailey (no relation to the photographer), as our builder. Dave gutted the entire space right back to the

brick arches. He made so much money out of the job that he achieved his ambition to buy a Rolls-Royce. I used a jobbing electrician, Wally (Basher) Barrett. He and I had worked together many times before on smaller jobs, but he found this job too much for him. "Blimey, mate" Wally exclaimed, "I've used over four miles of bleeding copper covered pyro on this job, how you going to pay for it?" Pay we did. Everything was paid in full, including the bank loan, in nine months, mostly out of cash flow. But I had woefully underestimated the cost of refurbishing 21,000 square feet of club space, at the time one of the largest club venues in London. It was completed just in time for the succession of opening nights.

There was a last minute, near-fatal mishap. One of the workmen left the fire hose connected but turned off only at the nozzle. The pressure built up over night and the hose flooded the new wood dance floor. With only a few days to go before the opening night, we had to replace the entire floor and had to work all through two nights to achieve it.

Although it seems almost impossible to believe today, Bang, and indeed all other clubs, still had DJs that took record requests and chatted away between records. To me this was an outdated concept that killed the atmosphere on the dance floor. I had proved at the Embassy just how heady and seductive mixing records with a properly trained DJ could be. By using twin variable-speed turntables and the latest mixing techniques the beats per minute could be altered to segue one track seamlessly into the next. I had imported a DJ friend, Greg James, from America to give form to this vision but now he had been seduced away by the success of the Embassy to go freelance.

We eventually found a relative newcomer who shared my vision, Ian Levine, (latterly nicknamed "Miss Piggy"), and together we developed "High Energy" (Hi NRG) music. Ian was soon playing to packed houses with mixed sounds geared to the mood of the dance floor. The trick was to build up

gradually to achieve a crescendo of ecstatic, sweating, sexually charged, humanity before bringing the crowd down by reducing the tempo. Then, by interspersing some chilled tracks, there would be a cool-down period before the next high. This style of music was effectively the start of contemporary dance music and the precursor of Acid House and Rave. I believe that we can claim to have invented “Rave” some six years before it broke out into the mainstream to become the bedrock of youth culture in the late eighties.

For gay men the dance floor was truly a place of liberation: a place where we could feel free to express our sexuality and the unity of our tribe. The dance club was, in a sense, our cathedral; the music our liturgy and Disco our religion - a truly ecstatic and visionary experience. Gay guys have told me how their first visit to Heaven liberated them, making them realise that they were neither alone nor a freak but one with thousands of other like-minded souls who were handsome, fun-loving, well-adjusted and happy. We were not the sad camp queens that the straight world had tried to make us believe we were destined to become. I firmly believe that no single experience is more liberating to a gay man than his first night spent dancing in a large gay club; it gives him the courage to be himself - what a revelation.

The cornerstones of my new concept were exceptional sound quality, total sound immersion coupled with “trip” quality lighting effects and a vast dance floor. Accordingly, Tony Gottelier of the firm Illusion Lighting, who had worked with me at the Embassy, was given a brief to create a lighting experience unique in London. I had spent a lot of time in America going to clubs and studying their sound, lights and decor and we drew from that experience. The lights were linked to the sound pulse so that the two complemented each other, in its day a new idea. We used neon as lighting flashes to create drama. The old standby mirrored balls were given a new twist with high-powered spotlights and lasers directed onto contra-rotating balls of different sizes. We introduced a “Curtain of Light”, a rotating bar of powerful pin spots that swept the floor. Other gimmicks, such as police lights,

strobes and lights that could be raised and lowered in among the dancers, all served to heighten the drama.

These innovations gave the GLC Health and Safety inspectors kittens. They were all for banning everything; this seemed to them the safest policy and the least risk. Luckily their inspectors liked an early night, so many of the effects could be safely used after 12.30 am; anyway I had seen all of these same devices used in America, so I knew that they were safe.

The sound system at Heaven was awesome for its day and capable of delivering a huge wattage. I knew just how much sound massed bodies would absorb. As well as massive bass bins to give a physical thump that could actually be felt by the dancers, we had tweeter arrays in the ceiling to give an overhead sizzle of treble that is electrifying. One of the most exciting moments was the first time we turned on the sound and cranked up the volume. There were just a few of us alone in that vast space, and our spirits were uplifted. We were confident that our target audience of gay men would not fail to respond to the thrill of our creation. We had an entirely new product for a new decade and a mission to liberate the spirit and realise the fantasies of thousands of gay men. We permitted ourselves the fun of playing some Beethoven loud over the mighty sound system to test its resonance and give us courage to persevere with this daunting enterprise.

Once the club had become famous, the people we needed just seemed to turn up. John Hansen was an electronics wizard: short of stature and short on words, but he knew what he was doing. He soon mastered our complex electrical installation and lighting rig and added ever more complex and zany devices to keep the look fresh and exciting. It was an amazing time; there was such camaraderie among the team. People worked all hours often for no extra pay. We just couldn't leave this exciting adventure. John was a video enthusiast. Video was then a new thing, VCRs were just becoming available in the shops, but John was already well into the new technology. He installed

a wall of Television monitors linked to video players - the first-ever “Video Wall”. He spent hours making up tapes of zany clips run together like mixed music; these were a collage of clips from old movies, adverts, pop promo videos and TV outtakes. God knows where he got them from, but they were a visual trip, highly original and mesmerising. The club was just bursting with creative energy and talent.

Again, just when we needed him, a young gay American appeared, Vito Russo. He fell in love with our adventure and helped out at first for no pay until he became full time. He was a great organiser and fixer with a love for the movies. Sadly, he was to be one of the many of our core team to die of AIDS, but not before he had published a seminal book on film, *The Hollywood Closet*.

One thing I had learned from the success of the Embassy Club was that a successful gay club attracts straight women. They, in turn, attract straight men. Once you get too many straight men, gay guys feel uncomfortable; they don't feel able to approach any man they fancy for fear of violent rebuff. In order to avoid losing our core market I decided to institute a “men only” door policy. This led to criticism from the politically correct; they did not understand our reasons and therefore they assumed that our motives were sexist and anti-women. How else, I argued, can you ensure a gay club remains gay. You can't interrogate every man about his sexuality nor could you necessarily believe the answer. It is not enough to simply declare that the club is gay to make it so. If a club is hot enough, it will attract all types. It was this very success that helped to destroy the unique mix at the Embassy and at Studio 54 in New York. In no time, a club can become “bridge and tunnel” (besieged by uncool voyeurs). Straight men usually can't dance; they tend to come to watch and not to participate wholeheartedly. I was certainly not going to have door pickers like Studio 54 that only admitted the beautiful and famous, I wanted a club where all gay guys could have fun and feel this sense of liberation.

For the staff, I took my core team from the Embassy; except Hayter: I had to get him out of my life. I encouraged him to find backers to buy me out of the Embassy, which he did.

My main assistant, apart from Derek, in getting Heaven together was David Inches, my general manager. He had started as a barman at the Embassy and progressed to become a duty manager. I promoted him to be the general manager of Heaven and he flourished away from the overbearing influence of Hayter. He brought with him his closest friend, a talented American actor, Doug Lambert, who became our front of house and PR spokesman - a role he fulfilled admirably, until sadly he became one of the earliest casualties of AIDS.

But Doug did not get on well with Ian Levine. Their lack of proper communication led to a tragic, and potentially fatal, accident. On one of our party nights, Doug had arranged for a confetti cannon to be fired from the DJ booth. It was accidentally detonated just as Doug was looking into it. His injuries were horrific and his screams the worst I have ever heard. I rushed him to hospital with blood all over his blackened face. He could not see and we thought had been blinded permanently. As luck would have it, after some weeks the scabs fell from his face to reveal only superficial scarring and just a slight impediment to the sight in one eye.

Our first New Year's Eve party at Heaven took us all by storm, the club was mobbed, and Derek and I had to roll up our sleeves and help serve from behind the hard-pressed Star Bar. We got to bed at about 6 am thoroughly tired but elated after a memorable night. The club took over £25,000 in cash. We were on our way.

We had no trouble in recruiting a team of hot handsome boys to staff the bars and to act as waiters. Our back office team handled marketing and promotions, a skill still in its infancy in the industry. The idea of the "one nighter" club using an outside promoter had yet to take hold. We were like a

theatre that produced and directed its own plays. In 1981, we conceived the idea of using an outside promoter to build our slack nights and we linked up with a hip young man, Matthew Wilson, who started “The Midnight Club” to promote Heaven to a fashionable straight crowd. He managed to fill Heaven with his trendy young friends on a Monday night, always the slackest night of the week.

Since then, the club world has never looked back. Today clubs are venues for one-nighters promoted by professionals for a share of the door money. The club is like a theatre that provides the infrastructure. The character of the individual night has become more important than that of the venue.

At Heaven, we did everything “in house”, so we made many mistakes. We soon realised we were perceived as too upmarket and pricey. We had to promote beer sales and do deals on weeknights; we became less intimidating and glitzy, more down to earth as we struggled in the first few months to fill the dance floor. The key to success is to fill the club Monday through Thursday. The weekend pays the bills; as the old saying goes, “If you don’t get fucked on Saturday night, you don’t get fucked at all!” We learned fast and by the end of our first year, we had a successful club on our hands showing a handsome profit.

The strange British licensing laws required all late-night licensed premises to provide food “a substantial meal”, in the words of the Act. We put in a small cafe area and decided to franchise the food concession. To my surprise, my close friend, James Fisher, decided that he would like to try his hand at this. Together with a few friends, he started an upmarket hamburger bar. James was running the Tamla Motown record label in Britain at the time, so this left him rather exhausted. Nothing daunted, he persevered. James was a veteran socialite with amazing contacts in the record industry and entertainment generally. Through his introductions, we received visits from

many showbiz and rock stars. One day, a boyish girl tried to gain entry but was refused on the grounds that we were “men only”. Exasperated, she finally revealed her identity: Diane Keaton. We made an exception for her that night.

On one of our opening nights, James Fisher arranged for a live performance by the Motown stars, Billy Preston and Syreeta. Their duet, With you I’m born again, shot straight to No 1 in the charts and stayed there for some weeks. James had proved once again that he was a force in the music industry; he had an uncanny eye for talent. The cafe was fun for him but never made much money. James hadn’t figured that disco bunnies tend to be fuelled by substances other than pure beef hamburgers, so eventually he passed the baton on to someone else. It was sad not to have his friendly face around at night.

We also had big name personal appearances from stars such as Grace Jones. The erratic Grace needed some help to get on stage: she was late as usual, but her performance was electric. Playing to a packed house of disco-crazy men she walked to the top of the stairs and, in full view of the crowd, took a pint of lager from a man’s hand and poured it over his head on to his naked sweaty torso; the crowd went wild.

The notorious dog-shit-eating American trans-sexual Divine (voted “the filthiest person alive”) performed for us. So too did Boy George and his friend Marilyn on a nightly basis, but as paying customers. Heaven played host to live performances by Madonna before she was famous; she was still trying to build her career. Like so many canny pop performers she appreciated that by appealing to the gay market, she could launch her career. Gay men are always at the forefront of taste and trends in entertainment.

The experience of owning two of the hottest nightclubs in London at such a young age was heady and exhilarating. The press courted Derek and me; we were included on every PR guest list in town. Our mantelpiece was

stacked-high with invitations to celebrity functions; art-gallery openings; restaurant launches and fashion promotions. Our social life became, for a brief while, the subject of press coverage. We were photographed for magazines and newspapers. We were essentially private people and, although flattered by the attention, we wanted our private lives to remain our own. It would be untruthful to deny that we enjoyed our moment of fame, but we were conscious of the downside that comes with celebrity. The moment in the sun didn't last long and within a few years, we were thankfully forgotten and slipped back into welcome obscurity. "Today's peacock is tomorrow's feather duster."

Once Heaven really took off, I realised that I had spent five hedonistic years at the pinnacle of the club business and, frankly, I was burned out. I had also my relationship with Derek to consider. He was an interior designer with a career ahead of him. He needed his sleep to do his day job. I had all my money tied up in Heaven. I knew clubs were a risky business.

My business partner, Derek Johns, knew Vanessa Devereux, a picture-dealer who happens to be Richard Branson's sister. Branson expressed an interest in acquiring Heaven for Virgin. The negotiations took place on his hippy houseboat on a canal in Little Venice. Richard suggested that I sign a one-sided option that gave him the right to buy but with no obligation on his part. I quickly disabused him of the notion that I might be an unsophisticated pop entrepreneur. I told him firmly that we had a deal only when he signed a binding contract; he was welcome to do his due diligence beforehand. Once he realised that he was dealing with a savvy businessman we got on famously.

I knew that I had to sell cheaply; I reasoned that not many businessmen would buy a gay club for a large sum of money. If I didn't sell to him, I might wait for years for another opportunity. After much haggling, we agreed a fair figure. In addition, I was to be paid a consultancy fee of £25,000 per annum

for four years; a good deal of money in the early 1980's. Bill Frankel, my wise lawyer, warned me that Virgin were short of cash, the music industry was going through one of its periodic recessions, so we insisted on a bank guarantee for the twelve quarterly instalments. It was time to move on.

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From Derek's 2021 Memoir - 'Living and Loving in the age of Aids'

Living and Loving in the Age of AIDS is dedicated to the memory of our many young gay friends including those who worked at the Embassy Club or Heaven who died from AIDS.

It had always been J's primary ambition to open a dance club that is only for gay men. This hadn't seemed appropriate at the Embassy Club, with its long history as a nightclub frequented by London society. This suggested, quite correctly, that the club didn't entirely reinvent itself, but instead became the place of choice for every kind of free-thinking Londoner to party.

Now there's an opportunity to achieve J's objective when a huge subterranean space comes on the market, formed by three enormous arches that support the railway tracks running out of London's Charing Cross Station. It's a huge leap of faith and courage when he signs the lease to secure the premises. We don't have the money to pay for creating the club and all the work has to be done on credit based on the promise of future success. Heaven, we decide, will be the name of our new palace of dance.

My design skills are put to the test when J entrusts me with the task of converting Heaven's huge volumes into spaces suitable for his purpose. It's a

big responsibility and one which thrills me. I direct the builders to remove a huge area of mezzanine floor in the central arched space, which creates a vast double-height volume where we lay an enormous sprung dance floor, overlooked by a deep balcony. On the upper floor of the first arched space, we build a giant free-standing bar, all electric blue and silver, which stands at the centre of this cavernous room. The remaining third arched space will remain closed until we have the finances and the business to allow for its future use. We paint all Heaven's walls and arches black. Great attention is given to spectacular lighting, lasers and the best sound system. The spaces are purposefully undecorated and hard-edged. The society and style barometer Harpers & Queen reports on Heaven and terms the interior styling "high tech".

We recruit an exclusively gay male team, ensuring that the best-looking boys will be working behind our bars. "Pretty Boy" is out and "Butch Man" is in, and this will be reflected in muscled bodies, ripped shirts, tight torn jeans and cowboy boots. We spread word of our opening through the gay press and the buzz of word of mouth. The scene is set and we're ready to welcome our gay male clientele. It's December 1979.

Heaven is much, much larger than the Embassy Club, with a capacity for up to 2000. It's daunting to open so large a space to an unknown audience, but J's courage and intuition is soon rewarded when increasing numbers of enthusiastic gay men and their icons arrive to party there. Madonna, Grace Jones, Boy George, Divine and others demand to perform to our fast-growing crowd and we're happy when they all do just that. We're "hot" and they know it's important for their fledgling careers to perform to our gay members. Gay men are trendsetters. The temperature goes up and attendance explodes. Thousands come through our doors. Gay men from all over the world hear about Heaven and rush to visit us, to dance with us, to find each other and to celebrate their unique nature. They feel safe and happy enfolded within its dark embrace. There they can be themselves.

Heaven celebrates homosexuality. We extend our invitation to gay women and to all other queer people. More dancing: crazy dancing, smoochy dancing, show-off dancing, trance dancing, us and our tribe. Always the wild, heavy repetitive beat of the music lifting the crowd to ecstatic heights followed by romantic quieter moments. Passion aplenty is there. Love also.

During the early days of Heaven, Kenny Everett films an episode of his Video Show there. Our logo appears repeatedly when the show is aired. This helps put Heaven firmly on the map and into the hearts of Gay London. We will always be grateful to Kenny for this.

J is the chief conductor directing the team of skilled technicians and artists who create the excitement, the drama and the craziness that is Heaven. It's an extraordinary time and an important achievement. At both the Embassy Club and Heaven, J's important role in facilitating gay liberation and celebration helps more queer people than we will ever know to come out, to live lives that are true to their own nature and to find the confidence to be who they are. Now these many queer people will find it possible to celebrate their sexuality. J's contribution to this should not be forgotten.

In 1979, the love that J and I have for each other is barely a year old. We're young and probably as lovely and as lustful as we're ever going to be. Every night, club life spins distractingly and provocatively around us, a sexually charged engine of J's own making. We enjoy a certain celebrity amongst our fast-expanding circle of friends. Many people want to be with us, to know us, to party with us, and amongst those who are gay, to sleep with us. It's a challenge to our newly established status as lovers.

..... J, equally focused, spends his days ensuring that both the Embassy and Heaven run as efficient businesses.

It can only have been the great energy of youth that kept us going during those busy exciting years, when so much was starting and when success was becoming ours; when each night we became hosts at one or other and often at both of our two crazy playgrounds. Somewhere in between I suppose we found time for each other and to sleep.....

.....Many who work with us at both clubs are highly creative but somewhat unstable. Egos abound and the ruffled feathers of queens need constant smoothing. Our MD at the Embassy Club turns out to be a paranoid Satan (I can say this now –he’s dead). On one occasion at Heaven, there’s a technical miscommunication which results in a firework exploding in our Event Director’s face. Thankfully, frightening facial injuries are cured with time, and near blindness is narrowly averted. Then there are all the divas who perform for us and their demands. Most of our star performers expect lavish complimentary “party favours”. A girl must powder her nose.....

..... For my thirtieth birthday in April 1982, J hosts a “Magic Party” at Heaven. Friends join us to make magic together. In the black spaces of Heaven all are invited to come dressed in their brightest colours - many have decorated their faces and hands with luminous paint and look extraordinary. The food we serve is as colourful as our guests. There are performers on stilts, magicians, and of course plenty of dancing – always dancing.....

..... Then, in the summer of 1984, we receive an unsolicited and generous offer to purchase Heaven from Richard Branson and his then

struggling Virgin Music business. We hadn't intended to sell the business so soon, but J decides that the number of people willing to buy a gay business of this size might be limited and accepts his offer. He meets with Richard at his floating office on the Regent's Canal to negotiate and finalise the deal.

Selling both clubs provides us with a certain degree of relief. Both were wild horses in constant need of reining back. J is now free to turn his energy and skills to other ventures.....

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..... Heaven the dance club we created in 1979 remains as popular as ever and in 2019 celebrates 40 years in business. A film has been made to celebrate the anniversary and in this we're thrilled to hear the journalist, Sheryl Garratt, making the extraordinary statement "Places like Heaven mean we now have gay marriage." Wow!