

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

The Embassy Club, Old Bond Street

It took me two years to find a suitable site and a business partner and backer for my nightclub venture. Duncan McLaren, a young friend, who was well connected and worked at Sotheby's, initially agreed to be that person, but for whatever reason, he eventually got cold feet. He introduced me to the head of the Sotheby's Old Master picture department, a young genius still in his twenties, Derek Johns.

Derek and I had an instant rapport; with his multi-faceted renaissance mind and entrepreneurial spirit, he related immediately to my vision. He agreed to become my one and only partner - I was in business.

Derek went on to have a stellar career as an art dealer and discoverer of many "sleepers" (works whose attribution and identity remain lost or hidden.) Derek has made a number of such really important discoveries and new attributions. He was also the first man to win the television amateur cooking competition "Master Chef" – a truly renaissance man.

The club site, at 7 Old Bond Street, near the junction with Piccadilly, had been for much of the century the most famous nightclub in London –the Embassy- but was now sad and abandoned. The last tenant had run a topless bar: now the basement was flooded and the place in disrepair. He had gone bust, owing back rent. The Embassy was reputedly the place where Edward, Prince of Wales, first wore black-tie for dinner thus relieving gentlemen of the requirement to change into white-tie every night. My mother had known the club in its heyday. She even remembered exactly where Prince Ali Khan had his regular table.

There were only three years left on the lease: a mad proposition for anyone without my burning vision and crazy youthful confidence. I signed the lease and found a decorator to help me, Mike Crosby Hogan, who had been responsible for the “Way In” boutique at Harrods and had mastered the blend of modern and traditional that I was looking for. I already had a clear vision of what I wanted - a radical departure from the traditional club with its tables round a small dance floor and a DJ who talked between discs. We made the main room upstairs, which was architecturally rather like the ballroom of a 1930’s ocean liner, into all dance-floor with a bar along the wall at one end. The seating was carpet-covered banquette staging that could be moved around to change the scene and the feel of the room. Railings separated the sunken dance floor from the standing area around the bar.

The club had a dramatic double curved staircase leading to a balcony overlooking the ballroom floor, giving the space an elegance and drama that was breathtaking. The whole space was to become a huge dancing area; we laid a sprung wooden floor. We put our speakers into metal towers and created a scaffolding grid to hold the lights in the ceiling. The effect was entirely novel and dramatic, totally in keeping with Disco, which was becoming all the rage.

Downstairs we created a restaurant and a long quiet bar for the serious talkers and drinkers; that was where most of the money was taken. The avant-garde artist, Andrew Logan, of “Alternative Miss World” (a drag send-up of the tacky Mecca Miss World contest) fame, a friend of Michael Fish, was commissioned to make two “Trees of Life” on a Garden of Eden theme. They had large apples and snakes made from broken glass pieces, crude but effective and very striking. I still have a couple of the glass apples at home to remind me of those heady days.

Michael Fish, the well-known 1960’s men’s clothes designer, and the new friend I had made in New York, became our front-of-house “greeter” and

was the other name the public came to associate with the Embassy Club. He knew everyone from that era, from Princess Margaret to Mick Jagger: Ozzie Clark the dress designer was his best friend. If a thousand people made up Swinging London in the Sixties, then he was certainly one of them.

We had three days of opening parties in May 1978; an Ozzie Clark charity fashion show kicked off the proceedings, a glittering affair attended by Margaret Duchess of Argyll, Lady Diana Cooper, Bianca Jagger and a host of other notables. Deriding my passion for disco music, “That thump-thump disco music will never work”, both Michael Fish and James Fisher, the music guru, prophesied its swift demise; but I stuck to my guns and was soon proved right. The club became the haunt of the fashionable and the “in” place for the beautiful of both sexes - especially the best looking gay boys. It was the London equivalent of Studio 54 in New York. Steve Rubell paid a visit on one of his trips to London accompanied by an entourage of heavies and hangers-on. When I paid a visit to New York, I soon realised that, as a club owner, they assumed I had “mob” connections just because they all did.

Other opening nights were dedicated to our long list of founder members and their friends, a heady mix of the “A-list” gay crowd and a mailing list of the glitterati and the fashionable; cafe society meets high society, with sex thrown in to jazz up the cocktail. Saturday Night Fever – the film starring John Travolta- opened in the same week as us. It seemed everything was in our favour, the club was instantly a massive hit and everyone wanted “in”.

We wanted to invite a few older people who had known the Embassy in its former glory days. These included my grand elderly “Aunt” Magda Bouchel. Her friend, Henry Crichton-Stuart, escorted her on the opening night and found the mixture so enticing that he left his wife. From the very first week, the club took off and we were busy every night with lines of limousines and Bentleys outside the club.

We promoted our first party night, in what is now the classic fashion, by means of a glossy flier posted to our membership, "The 4th July, King George 111's biggest loss", as the invitation announced. We were taken completely by surprise to find there were queues round the block.

Our doormen struggled to keep out non-members and aggressive punters whose line was invariably, "Don't you know who I am?" More than one man swore to my face that he was a friend of the owner. There were a few fights and numerous heated altercations. Such was the price of being, for a brief moment, the hottest ticket in town.

I developed, in a small way, a public profile. My new boyfriend, Derek, and I found that we were quite often in the gossip columns or our doings catalogued in the newly emerged gossip magazines such as Ritz and Tatler. Richard Compton-Miller, the gossip columnist, decided to make me one of his characters whose social and business career he chronicled in the Evening News. Richard Young, one of the first London "paparazzi", cut his teeth at the Embassy Club and was one of only two press photographers permitted to take photographs inside the club, (the other was John St.Clair), subject to restrictions to ensure the privacy of our celebrity guests, a privilege he could not resist abusing and on at least one occasion he had to be ejected. But, of course, we needed the oxygen of publicity to promote the club and keep us in the public eye.

The Embassy was full of beautiful boys and model girls dancing and carrying on in a sexually charged environment to ecstatic Disco music and revolutionary lighting effects. The club became a cultural crossroads. Notables from the worlds of music, arts and letters partied alongside beautiful unknowns. To that exotic mix, we added well-known names from the peerage and parliament - a recipe for success. It is my observation that innovative nightclubs are gay run, Le Palace in Paris, owned by the late Fabrice Emaer,

opened in 1978, Studio 54 owned by Steve Rubell in 1977 and of course John Addison's Le Jardin was the earliest of them all.

Steven Hayter, the club manager, was a colourful showman and used many New York tactics to generate hype and excitement. One evening while things were temporarily flagging, he got three of our most provocative and sexy boys to jump up on the bar and dance with spotlights trained on their crotches. The crowd went wild and the bulges in their shorts got noticeably bigger. This was something entirely new and hugely exciting for London. Every hip cool young Londoner was there plus a few older "groovers", who should have been at home in bed but wanted to party and boogie the night away - night after night.

The club held about 600 people and was full, even on Monday nights. Thursday was our most glamorous night, as quite a few of our rich and famous clientele, such as Lord Montagu and the late Earl of Pembroke would leave for their country seats on Friday for the weekend. If you wanted to spot the stars then Thursday was the night. The weekend saw queues down Bond Street long into the night, but the crowd was gayer and more "bridge and tunnel", as New Yorkers say. (A derogatory expression denoting that a person lives in one of the suburban boroughs and has to enter the fashionable city from across the water.)

Every night was party night - and how we partied! People who had never gone to clubs before came to dance with us night after night. A membership card was like gold dust and many were turned away. London saw its first wild dance venue dubbed by one journalist "a tri-sexual club, a place where you could try anything sexual." - hedonism ruled. "There were so many people and so many parties at the Embassy that it is impossible for me to chronicle, "it would be a tome the size of the Bible" commented Ritz Newspaper. Everyone who was allowed in had something to contribute to the

party, whether it was looks, style, fame or fortune, but most of all sex appeal. Come closing time, no one wanted to leave or the party to stop.

Were their drugs at the Club. Well, yes there were, as in any nightclub the world over. The police in those days hardly knew what cocaine was and its use was limited to a select few. It was also horrendously expensive, costing about £50 a gram - a vast amount in the 1970's. The recently issued new £50 note was colloquially termed a "coke voucher". (I am told the substance still costs the same twenty or more years later.) There was also a worrying trend amongst the young straight set for "chasing the dragon", or smoking heroin from silver foil. The tell-tale burnt foil would be found in the loos in the morning by the cleaners. Gay men danced while high to "uppers" and "downers" and would use "poppers" or amyl nitrite for both dancing and sex: the heady rush from "poppers" add to and heighten the transient pleasures of both.

On many nights after the club closed, around 3.30 to 4.00 am, we all wanted the party to continue and the staff would repair to an all-night cafe; we would go on to a private house to continue the fun. Elton John and his then manager, John Reid, were regulars. John had bought the former home of my friends Julian Gibbs and Martin Stephens, the portly gay Tory MP, in Montpelier Square, near Knightsbridge. We had a few late night parties there that often got out of hand. We were young, rich, hot and horny and out to have fun.

The club generated huge amounts of money but the financial controls were rudimentary. These were the days before modern tills and computer stock control. I realise now that we were robbed blind at every level, but even so the club generated considerable profit in the first couple of years before the sudden and dramatic death of Disco in 1981, which saw turnover dive overnight and profits turn into sharp losses.

Edward Wood, a friend and former flat-mate, was employed as our accountant and bookkeeper. Sadly, the relationship turned sour and we parted not the best of friends. It was perhaps all too heady for us young guys unable to cope with the pressure while we were up all night having fun. Edward was the son of the Conservative Minister for Overseas Development, Richard Wood (later Lord Holderness) and the grandson of the Earl of Halifax, Viceroy of India.

One weekend while staying in Yorkshire with the family we went over to visit his delightful old grandmother, Lady Halifax, in her modest country cottage – quite a contrast for a former Vicerene of India used to living in a palace. My life was an intriguing mix between my gay and club life and my friends from Cambridge and traditional London Society.

Among the galaxy of celebrities who partied at the Embassy Club were: Rod Stewart and his manager Billy Gaff; Elton John; Robert Stigwood and Alan Carr (the producers of Saturday Night Fever and Grease) Piers Brosnan (James Bond) and his wife Cassandra; Mick Jagger, Ayesha Rajmata of Jaipur; Jennifer Little (brother of John Aspinall), Earl Jermyn (later The Marquess of Bristol) and his boyfriend Robin Hurlestone (later to become the boyfriend of Joan Collins), Lords Bath, Hertford and Pembroke; the Earl and Countess of Snowden; Catherine Guinness (Andy Warhol's assistant); John Siddeley (Lord Kenilworth); Mark Shand; Lord Burghersh; Rupert Deen; Richard Compton-Miller (the gossip columnist); Lady Diana Cooper; the beautiful sisters Charlotte and Mary-Gaye Curzon; Nicky Haslam (the Boswell of the "B-list"); Lionel Bart ("aunty Li", composer of the musical Oliver); Tony Galliers-Pratt (Decibelle); Viscount Newport (Earl of Bradford); John Schlesinger; Twiggy, (the Sixties muse, model and actress); Claire Hambro; Danny La Rue (the drag queen who ludicrously claimed to be straight); John Bowes-Lyon, ("Bosie", a cousin of the Queen Mother); public-school boys out of bounds and many models of both sexes and none.

Jeremy Fry, the man who was to be Anthony Armstrong-Jones's best man on his marriage to Princess Margaret, until his bisexual past was revealed, was a special friend and supporter. His glamorous and handsome children were regulars. Cosmo, his eldest son, chose the club for his 21st birthday party, the hottest party of that year. Two regulars were the very cute Prince Stefano Massimo, universally fancied by both boys and girls and his pretty wife Atalanta, daughter of Lady Edith Foxwell. The artists Craigie Aitchison and Patrick Procktor were often to be seen, as were many from the worlds of sport, pop and show-biz and all the Sixties crowd who were friends of Mr Fish. Everyone who was anyone wanted at least to come and look and usually wanted to stay long into the night, such was the atmosphere of fun, sex and fashion.

We employed cute young guys as waiters and barmen. Sadly many were later to contract AIDS and die while still in their twenties and thirties. Most but not all of these boys were gay; their uniform was an outrageous pair of nearly sheer, tight, white satin shorts and nothing else. With their taught, hot, smooth young bodies, they drove both boys and girls wild. I think we were perhaps one of the first businesses to flaunt the beauty of the naked male body and use it in an overt way to promote and sell in the same way that girl's bodies have always been used. Now posters frequently depict sexy naked young men - the male body sells. It has always been acceptable to objectify women as sex-objects, now young males suffer the same fate and don't seem to mind in the least.

Amongst our brigade of waiters were four young Peruvian boys of good family, all gay as well as the best of friends. They were dedicated party people and had fun-loving personalities even if their waiting skills left a lot to be desired. One of them was the young Mario Testino, now celebrated as a fashion photographer and Society darling. Together they rented an abandoned ward in the old Charing Cross Hospital - God knows how they came by it. Visitors had to push through the dossers on the ground floor to

arrive at their stylishly dramatic apartment furnished on the cheap in an eclectic mix of over-scaled found furniture and redundant hospital equipment all put together with flair and panache. Mario was one of our most popular waiters when he could be persuaded to desist from socialising with our members and actually serve a drink. It seems that everyone was a waiter once.

The Society PR operator and fixer Liz Brewer, her husband John Rendall, and Roddy Llewellyn (the sometime boyfriend of Princess Margaret), opened a rival club called Bennett in Battersea in the same week as us. This provided the press with a field day; the papers had fun building up the rivalry between the two clubs. I knew Roddy slightly; Liz and I had, unbeknown to her at the time, shared a boyfriend in my Cambridge days. With jealousies long forgotten, she has since become a friend. Bennett, despite these illustrious progenitors, was not a success. It was a thoroughly old-fashioned style of nightclub in a secondary location. Even with the much-publicised piranha fish beneath the glass floor, it could not drum up much interest from anyone but their most loyal friends.

Elaine Paige and cast members of various West End hits were regulars at the Embassy who added glamour and hype - and caught the interest of the press. I was invited to almost every opening in town and was even pictured in the evening papers dancing with Derek Frost, my beautiful young boyfriend, at the opening of Regine's Club at the Roof Gardens in Kensington. Poor Nandkishor Ram, her backer, wept as the bills mounted and the profits failed to materialise. Regine, a Parisian legend, was unable to make her magic formula work in London but this did not ameliorate her endless requests for chauffeur-driven cars to drive her around and other extravagances. Her style of club just did not work in London, its appeal being mainly to young rich Arabs, - not the hi-society crowd that Regine hoped to attract.

“Burgie” (Lord Burghersh, heir to the Earl of Westmoreland) and Dai Llewellyn (Roddy’s elder brother) both ran Wedgies Club in King’s Road, Chelsea; one after the other. This club lacked a hip edge and catered to a certain breed of older “Sloanes”; it eventually turned to the young Arab market then a new feature of the London scene. The older straight patricians and aged rockers still frequented those small fashionable hangouts, Tramp, run by Johnnie Gold and Annabel’s, Mark Birley’s perennial dine-and-dance place for the old grand county set notorious for its staid music policy “Tie a Yellow Ribbon Round the Old Oak Tree” and “Lady in Red”, etc. “Where the middle-aged meets the Middle East”, as we used to say. For two amazing years, the Embassy remained the place for anyone hip to be seen.

It wasn’t until the early 1980’s that any serious rivals to the Embassy came on to the scene. An Asian businessman, Campbell Palmer, an Embassy regular, was always asking if he could buy the club. Eventually he started his own club, Legends, round the corner in Old Burlington Street; it has now ironically been renamed “The Embassy” but it has no connection with my old club. Unfortunately, Legends gradually started to share the cream of our business.

What really impacted on our success were the sudden death of “disco” and the emergence of a new Soho underground scene led by the so-called “New Romantics”, the prime movers of which were Steve Strange, Marilyn, Boy George and Philip Sallon. They became the leaders of a new set of sexually ambivalent, pallid and emaciated night-people. Their new music, bands like Visage, and their use of make-up and theatrical costume inspired both a new look and a new nightlife fashion. They invented a series of one-nighter events in small Soho clubs like “Blitz” to which only their crowd were admitted. Although mostly gay boys, the scene was full of sad anaemic-looking girls with Satanic make-up and other strange night creatures wearing fanciful clothes. Their cultural heirs are the “Goths” of today. It appeared to us to lack excitement and to be profoundly non-sexual, but none the less, it

eventually became mainstream seducing away many of our younger members. The Disco scene rapidly died. It was left to Heaven, my second big dance club, to create a new mainstream gay scene together with a new genre of dance music.

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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.

Then, in late 1977, I meet J, and my world and my place in it grows dramatically larger.

In May 1978, J opens his first nightclub: the Embassy Club, soon celebrated as London's first "Trisexual Discotheque". Night after night there are queues down Bond Street seeking entry. J and his team throw some of the wildest and craziest parties that London has ever seen. It quickly becomes "the place to be" – London's Studio 54. From the press at the time: "Where else do you see Rod Stewart canoodling with his latest girlfriend in one corner, Bianca Jagger doing the Hustle in another and on the dance floor Elton John swirling around the room with Olivia Newton John on his arm?"

The club's members respond to the new energy that J has generated. They arrive in the most extraordinary outfits to worship at the altar of disco, and their frenetic dancing unleashes a wild sexuality. Night after night we all party together, liberal amounts of cocaine and alcohol fuel the fun. We snort lines using what we call a cocaine voucher: a rolled-up £50 note – then a large sum of money and the price of a gram.

The much-loved clothes designer Michael Fish, who originated the Kipper Tie and who famously dressed Mick Jagger in a white leather skirt, is the club's official greeter. The bar staff are dressed in the thinnest and shortest satin shorts and little else. J's design or Michael's, I wonder?

At this time, in society generally, and as reflected in all other clubs, divisions of type are marked. At the Embassy Club this is not the case. All types come here to dance and play together: upper and lower classes, straights and queers, blacks and whites, celebrities of all sorts, beautiful unknowns, people of every age. One of the Embassy Club's greatest legacies is how it ignored class and celebrated and welcomed "the other". It's known as the place "where duchesses dance with rent boys".

For gay men slightly older than us, this is extraordinary. For years, gays had been forced to hide their sexuality in the shadows, scorned by society, considered immoral and criminal. But the Embassy Club changes people's attitudes to those who are "alternative". Here gays can come out of the shadows and are welcomed by their former detractors. J must be credited with this. He earns the accolade "The Dance Music Queen"... and we did – always dancing.

If we had a particular song which launched the Embassy Club, a song to which we most loved to dance, one that was new then and described the zeitgeist of the time, then it was "Stayin' Alive" from Saturday Night Fever by the Bee Gees. Ironical, the title, given the tragedy later to enter our lives.

It becomes known, at the Embassy Club and elsewhere, that J and I are a couple. In consequence I find myself a focus of attention at our "palace of pleasure" and at the centre of all it offers. The widest variety of extraordinary and extraordinarily beautiful people become our regular night-time play mates both on and off the dance floor.

Darling Tom Wilson, whom I haven't seen since our Parisian romance, appears briefly in London in mid-1979, and joins us for a night of dancing at the Embassy Club. It's wonderful to introduce him to my new love and to show him what a crazy world of fun, laughter and love J has inspired.

..... 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.....

..... 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).....

.....In 1982, we sell the Embassy Club to a consortium of investors, including Lady Edith Foxwell, nicknamed the Disco Dowager.....