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RAVE ON

Global Adventures in Electronic Dance Music

First published in Great Britain in 2018 by
Profile Books Ltd
3 Holford Yard
Bevin Way
London
WC1X 9HD

www.profilebooks.com

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Typeset in Dante by MacGuru Ltd
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays, St Ives plc

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978 1 78125 425 7
eISBN 978 1 78283 145 7

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Introduction

Let the Music Use You

THEY CAME IN THEIR HUNDREDS that night to the Progressive Baptist Church on South Wentworth Avenue in Chicago. They drove there from all across the city and they flew in from as far away as New York and London – not to sing or to celebrate, although they did that too, in the end, but because it was the right thing to do. They queued down the block, lining up to fill the pews and pay their last respects to a man whose music had helped to define a generation and, in its own way, made our world a more beautiful place.

There were speeches and there were tears as they remembered the life of Francis Nicholls – Frankie Knuckles – who had died after suffering complications from diabetes in March 2014, at the age of 59. Frankie Knuckles, the DJ whose sessions at Chicago's Warehouse club had given house music its name, whose innovative approach to playing that music had shaped its form, and whose recordings had revealed some of its richness and depth. 'House music was a particular type of spiritual music,' the Reverend Roderick Norton told the mourners as he reached for a phrase that would illuminate what had been achieved by this black, gay DJ who had managed to unite celestial yearnings and secular desires.[1]

Others recalled how Frankie Knuckles had conjured a sense of unity and togetherness from nightlife's perennial darkness. 'From midnight to 6am, he was our therapist,' one said.[2] Robert Owens sang 'Tears', the bittersweet lament that the two men had fashioned together, and as Ann Nesby of Sounds of Blackness led a gospel choir into the swelling chords of the song that Knuckles had turned into one of his most emotionally cathartic remixes, 'The Pressure', people started to rise to their feet, clapping, singing and weeping with joy and grief as they commemorated not only the man he was and the music he had given us but the freedom it had made us feel.

The memorial service that night in Chicago was held just a few minutes' walk away from where dance music was once declared to be dead, more than three decades earlier. During a baseball game at Comiskey Park in 1979, a white radio DJ called Steve Dahl symbolically blew up a funeral pyre of disco records in what has since looked more and more like a homophobic, racist attempt to destroy the iconography of a culture of liberation – an attempt that failed, of course, as history has since decided.

The church was also about 20 minutes' drive from the old Power Plant club where Frankie Knuckles, who had already started to re-edit disco classics for a new generation at The Warehouse, began to run a Roland TR-909 drum machine under some of the records he was playing in the early eighties to give them more percussive power and electronic energy, pointing a way forward to what would become house music, the sound that he described as 'disco's revenge'.

I first heard him play several years after that, at the Delirium club in London in early 1988, when house was still little more than an obscure cult in Britain and the rave explosion was months away. He played one of his greatest productions that night, 'Let the Music Use You' by The Nightwriters, a song that still encapsulates some of the fragile wonder of all that is best about house music, with its brightly optimistic chords that surge towards the heavens as the singer beseeches us to join hands with him and allow this sonic spirit to gather us up and take us higher, ever higher.

It would have been impossible to imagine, that night in London, that one day, reverential obituaries to Frankie Knuckles would be broadcast on the BBC and CNN, and that even the president of the United States would be offering up his respect to this wise and decent gentleman who brought such happiness. But so it was: 'Frankie's work helped open minds and bring people together, blending genres to capture our attention and ignite our imaginations,' wrote Barack and Michelle Obama in an unexpectedly heartfelt letter from the White House after Knuckles' death. 'While he will be dearly missed, we trust Frankie's spirit will remain a guiding force.'

The passing of Frankie Knuckles caused an outpouring of collective anguish that, for the first time in years, brought dance music's disparate clans together in mourning and remembrance. It showed how much passion and belief had endured in a pop culture that was already more than three decades old, but also how far we had come since he had helped to transform disco into house in the black and gay clubs of the United States.

At the high end, the culture had turned into a feeding frenzy of gargantuan proportions, an orgy of capitalistic exploitation. By the end of 2015, a market analyst at research company Danceonomics estimated, electronic dance music was taking in revenues of $7.1 billion a year worldwide – and as is customary in a global capitalist market, the biggest purses went to the few at the top. According to a report entitled 'Electronic Cash Kings' that was published by business magazine *Forbes*, the highest-earning DJ that year, a man called Adam Richard Wiles from Dumfries in Scotland, made an estimated total of $63 million from live shows, recordings, merchandise sales, endorsements and other commercial activities conducted under his stage name, Calvin Harris.

Electronic cash kings… back in the mid-nineties, there was a lot of talk about 'superstar DJs' with their top-of-the-range sports cars and costly drug habits, but they were Lilliputian figures compared to the hulking leviathans who followed them. All the top showmen – these 'cash kings' were almost always men, of course – had become perennial globetrotters, jetting from gig to gig and cutting new tracks on their laptops in VIP departure lounges and five-star hotel rooms as they sipped the complimentary champagne and racked up the air miles.

Even those who specialised in less populist forms of electronic music were constantly on the road or in the air, shuttling back and forth between the disparate nodes of their international cult followings. Just to take one example, during the course of a single month – May 2016 – Berlin techno DJ Ellen Allien was billed to play at parties in 11 different countries: Germany, France, Italy, Spain, Austria, Turkey, Israel, India, Colombia, Ecuador and the US. These were punishing schedules that showed little forgiveness to the weak-hearted or mentally unfit.

The same year, Swedish trance DJ Avicii announced that he was retiring from touring at the age of just 26 after reportedly suffering from alcoholism and exhaustion exacerbated by the pressures of his itinerant lifestyle. For the winners, the spoils were lavish indeed, but there were toxic perils along the wayside too.

The unexpected longevity and commercial advancement of the scene meant that DJing had become a lifetime career for some of those who started out as little more than ardent enthusiasts. It wasn't unusual to see DJs in their fifties playing records to adulatory clubbers who were young enough to be their children (indeed, the children of veterans like Pete Tong and Kevin Saunderson also became DJs). And the DJs weren't just the vinyl junkies anymore – at a festival, you might see a septuagenarian disco producer like Giorgio Moroder playing a set, or a rap star like Snoop Dogg, an alternative rock hero like Radiohead singer Thom Yorke or New Order/Joy Division bassist Peter Hook, or even a wealthy socialite like Paris Hilton. 'You can book *anyone* now – if the price is right,' suggested Detroit techno icon Derrick May.

There was now, as Hunter S. Thompson once wrote about California in the sixties, madness in any direction, at any hour. As electronic dance music culture became increasingly globalised from the nineties onwards, it became possible to find DJs playing almost any style in any major city – dubstep in Istanbul, psytrance in Shanghai, footwork in Belgrade. It would have been virtually impossible to set out a comprehensive guide to these global scenes and their many musical variations, unless it had come in a series of constantly updated encyclopaedic volumes, or was perhaps auto-generated by some astutely programmed online aggregator.

The global expansion of internet access helped to propagate trends that might previously have remained localised for much longer, and allowed new borderless networks to coalesce around any kind of sound that one might hope to invent. Electronic dance music culture grew up at the same time as the internet and took advantage of its possibilities instinctively; this was a digital culture for digital times.

The bounteous attractions of dance music festivals and the

extravagant audio-visual spectaculars of the American 'EDM' circuit also changed perceptions about what the culture could be. What, exactly, made a good club? Was all you needed, as the veteran British house DJ Terry Farley once suggested, 'a basement, a flashing light… and some good pills'?[3] Or was it a lavish bespoke video-mapping display and an arsenal of pyrotechnics synched up to fire when the bass dropped? Did you need bottle service and VIP tables by the DJ booth? Scantily clad showgirls or depilated muscle boys? A pristine Funktion One sound system and a line-up full of the most exalted techno specialists from Berlin? Or just a field or a forest or a far-flung beach or some dirty old warehouse that you could occupy for one night of madness and then do a runner before the law moved in?

Back in the early nineties, when I first started work on *Altered State*, a book that explored the origins of the acid house and rave scene in Britain, there was already a lot of talk about how the culture had become too big, too commercial, too fractured, how it had started to lose its renegade spirit. But with hindsight, those were still times of innocence.

The 'house nation' or the 'techno community', whatever you might want to call it, was still relatively small and insular back then, and its essence was still Terry Farley's ideal of a dark room with some banging tunes, pulsing strobes and mind-altering chemicals. Even the promoters who we thought were high-rollers were really just small-time operators compared to the corporate giants that sought to turn a profit from the culture in later years.

These new party moguls were the serious players who spoke of something they called the 'dance music industry', of professionalism and production values, of branding and sponsorship deals and digital reach and media synergies. In the US in particular, the rise of the raucous Americanised version of dance music known as EDM attracted entertainment corporations which had little invested in terms of personal experience in all of this; for them, it was just another form of show business. They even rebranded raves as 'festivals' in a bid to obscure the role played by of one of the scene's most powerful motivational forces: drugs.

They weren't really fooling anyone though, except perhaps the most naïve of licensing authorities. While the culture itself was no longer defined by Ecstasy, as it had been during the early years of the rave scene, and the music had a vivid life of its own outside the nightclub environment, getting loved-up on illicit narcotics remained a crucial part of the experience for many people. In the mid-eighties, only small circles of adepts and psychedelic explorers knew anything about Ecstasy, but by 2013, there might have been as many as 28 million users worldwide, according to a United Nations estimate, as canny manufacturers and distributors responded to nocturnal market forces. MDMA plus electronic dance music equals rapture was the formula that had worked back in 1988, and sometimes it seemed that nothing better had come along since.

Looking back again through some of the old press clippings, flyers and fanzines that I drew on while writing *Altered State*, what strikes me is their charming utopian naïvety – a sense of pure belief that this was the best of all possible worlds, a culture of racial, sexual and social tolerance with a hazily ill-defined but essentially liberal and progressive politics. Old-school American ravers even had an acronym for it, PLUR – 'peace, love, unity and respect'. Obviously a lot of this was inspired by Ecstasy, but it was none the less genuinely felt.

In a photocopied zine produced for the inner circle at Danny and Jenni Rampling's Shoom club in the early months of 1988, when London's acid house devotees could probably have been numbered in the hundreds, the affectionate tributes are touchingly innocent: 'The greatest thing that Shoom creates is the freedom in which we can be ourselves,' says one. 'Shoom has never been a club, it's just like one happy family, who care about each other,' offers another.[4] The same kind of blissed-out rhetoric can be seen in bulletin-board messages from the early days of the US rave scene, in German zines published around the same time, and probably in many other places too.

The initial mass media coverage of the British rave scene, although mostly critical, was similarly naïve. There was sheer amazement at the emergence of this 'sinister "hug drug" craze', as Britain's *Daily Express*

newspaper called it in 1989.[5] 'Acid house is the most bizarre phenomenon of the decade,' the tabloid *Daily Mirror* declared.[6] A frenzied moral panic took hold as reporters tried to find what *The Sun* newspaper called the 'Acid House Mr Big', the kingpin who was responsible for staging the latest 'evil night of Ecstasy' where 'sweating bodies gyrate to the mind-bending beat'.[7]

When British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher was personally informed about the rave menace in a letter from one of her MPs in 1989, she demanded to know what powers the police had to stamp it out. 'If this is a new "fashion" we must be prepared for it and preferably prevent such things from starting,' Thatcher scribbled in response to the letter, which was among a batch of classified British government documents on acid house that was released to the public almost three decades later.[8]

It all sounds rather quaint now, and most of these reactions were ludicrously ill-informed; this was something created out of desires for communal transcendence and elation, not some nefarious scheme dreamed up by a criminal mastermind – and very few of the many attempts to 'prevent' it over the years that followed would succeed.

The early rave scene was also widely seen as an ephemeral novelty, a fleeting moment of youthful eccentricity that would pass with the changing of the seasons. When I approached various British publishers with the proposal for *Altered State* in the early nineties, several of them insisted that rave was already dead, supplanted in people's affections by Nirvana and grunge. That seems preposterous now, when all eras and styles of music are simultaneously alive, churning in an endless loop on the internet – and when electronic dance music has long since gone beyond its subterranean origins to become a genuinely global movement, as influential as rock 'n' roll and hip-hop have been in shaping the sound and form of popular music. Much of the music made in the early twenty-first century, from alternative rock to glossy pop, from Radiohead to Rihanna, was touched in some way by the techniques that Frankie Knuckles and people like him were investigating in the eighties.

At the same time, several decades on, it had amassed this vast back catalogue – a rich musicological hinterland to be revered, revived, reinterpreted or rejected at will. Ancient house and techno records from obscure labels became almost cultic artefacts, sometimes worth many times what they originally cost in their hastily pressed editions of 500 or so that were never released with any thought to their potential historical significance (not that they ever should have been). Vintage acid house club flyers and posters also became collector's items to be cherished or traded for cash, while middle-aged veterans wistfully recounted their wild clubbing years in comments on old-school dance tracks on internet video sites – annotations that were exquisitely poignant because the emotions expressed were so raw. As one man wrote on a comment thread below an all-but-forgotten rave tune from 1989: 'We had it all… I'm still struggling to understand where it all went…'

Rave nostalgia became a lucrative concern – and not only the 'back to '88', 'back to '91' or 'back to '95' revival parties that started in Britain not so long after the years themselves had passed. Producers like Jeff Mills and Derrick May began to perform their vintage classics with symphony orchestras in concert halls – about as far from a filthy warehouse as an entertainment venue can get – while British clubs like the Haçienda and Cream followed suit by staging events featuring orchestrated rearrangements of eighties and nineties dancefloor hits. That acid house peak experience – so powerfully felt, but like our youth, so ephemeral – was clearly something that many people were unwilling or unable to let go, because it was so full of meaning and wonder.

But the most significant development was the transformation from a series of localised scenes to a genuinely global culture. When I first heard a DJ called Graeme Park playing those early house, techno and garage tracks from Chicago, Detroit and New York at a black-walled little sweatbox of a nightclub called The Garage in my hometown, Nottingham, in the mid-eighties, it would have seemed highly improbable that similar records could have been played at exactly the same time in similar clubs in Moscow, Johannesburg, Dubai or Rio de Janeiro. Thirty years later, it was just the way things were.

As the culture began to spread across the world in the years before internet access became commonplace, it was – in its initial stages at least – very much a DIY movement. This was something that was nurtured by enthusiastic independents, maverick impresarios and musical obsessives simply because they adored it, although this endearingly anarchic approach was destined to change as the years passed and the music's popularity continued to grow.

In an attempt to understand how all this happened, three decades after the first house and techno records emerged, I decided to go on a journey across continents and time zones to take a look at how the culture had mutated and thrived in the environments in which it had developed outside my home country – how it had taken on its own idiosyncratic character, created its own heroes, enjoyed its own peak moments and suffered its own tribulations.

I wanted to find out how the culture's values changed when its location shifted, how its sound developed differently in new circumstances, and whether something as fragile and nebulous as its 'spirit' – whatever that was – could be preserved in an unforgivingly materialist world, under constant siege from the predatory robber-barons of the digital age, as well as from officialdom and increasingly, in the West at least, from the forces of gentrification. I wanted to talk to some of the iconoclasts, misfits, fanatics and hustlers who inhabited these scenes, to ask them how they saw their own history and to find out why they had chosen to dedicate their lives to this peculiar hedonistic world.

The road took me to some of the world's established party capitals (Berlin, New York, Ibiza, Las Vegas) as well as to the frontier outposts of the culture, where everything still seemed to be up for grabs – places like China, which at the time was seen as the last great unexploited market for electronic dance music, and the United Arab Emirates, where techno hedonism had somehow managed to find a place amid the repressive regimes and political turmoil of the Middle East. It also took me to parts of Europe where piratical rave tribes still roamed the byways in search of an outlaw paradise. I sought out curious localised subcults like Israeli psytrance and South African gqom – phenomena

shaped by very specific social and political environments, and which could not have developed in the same way anywhere else.

Nightlife has long been a vital cultural motivator, an incubator for new sonic art forms which can inspire creative innovations, foster alternative cultures and help to regenerate urban environments. But what struck me on my journeys was how so many people in so many different places explained their stories as a search for free space. For some, this was space to create temporary havens for musical, cultural, sexual or even spiritual expression; for others, it was space in which to build empires or exploit business opportunities; for a few, it was space in which to celebrate social resistance. But for the majority perhaps, it was simply space for a bit of weekend lunacy and a release from the strictures of everyday 'normality', to let loose until the dawn broke, the music stopped or the drugs ran out.

What had endured since the acid house era of the late eighties was the perpetual ideological struggle between art and commerce, between romantic visions and mercantile impulses. Even in the early days of rave, it was as much an entrepreneurial culture as it was utopian; in *Altered State*, I suggested that acid house expressed deeply felt desires for communal experiences, but it was also an open-access scene that offered people the chance to get involved in whatever way they chose, to participate rather than to simply observe or consume – 'to *do something*, whether it was recording a techno track in a bedroom studio, organising a warehouse party or selling a bag of pills'.[9] There also seemed to be an essential difference between those who sought to create and sustain small but committed communities of like minds, and those who sought perpetual growth, to make it all as big as it could be – not just one nation under a groove, but the entire free-market world dancing to the same beat.

Everywhere I went, I found dreamers and pragmatists, believers and cynics, locked in this perennial conflict about what electronic dance music should be and why. The fact that people *cared* about all this stuff so deeply – and argued about it so passionately – was a constant reminder of how many people saw it not just as a branch of the entertainment

business that could offer them material benefits, but as a culture in which they had invested huge amounts of commitment, emotion and belief, something that they felt must be cherished and defended.

'When you create something out of nothing it's the most thrilling thing,' Frankie Knuckles once said.[10] The music and the culture that he helped to create had reshaped the soundtrack to our world and influenced so many lives in so many places in so many ways, mine included. This book is an attempt to find out if it was still worth believing in, so many years down the line – and if it still had the power, as Barack Obama put it, to ignite our imaginations and open our minds.