

THE MOST INFLUENTIAL NIGHTCLUB IN POP CULTURE HISTORY IS?



A. STUDIO 54 X B. CBGB X C. THE HACIENDA X

D. PACHA X E. ER, THE COPACABANA? X F. NONE OF THE ABOVE ✓

THE SHOOM FATHER: DJ Danny Rampling at the club that changed Britain

THIS MONTH A NIGHTCLUB CALLED SHOOM CELEBRATES ITS 25TH BIRTHDAY. WHAT STARTED AT A SOUTH LONDON FITNESS CENTRE IN 1987 — AND ENDED THREE YEARS LATER IN A SHOWER OF CHAMPAGNE AND SMILEY FACES — WENT ON TO TRANSFORM NOT JUST NIGHTLIFE, THE CHARTS, FASHION, DRUGS, DANCING AND DESIGN BUT, SOME ARGUE, EVEN HUMAN RELATIONSHIPS. TALKING TO SHOOM'S FOUNDER AND HIS FOLLOWERS, ALEXIS PETRIDIS REMEMBERS THE CLUB THAT CHANGED BRITAIN, AND THEN THE WORLD

The first time Terry Farley went to Shoom, he thought he'd turned up at the scene of an impending tragedy. From outside the venue — a fitness centre in Bermondsey — he could see a window that led into the club. It was open, and smoke appeared to be belching out of it at an alarming rate.

"We thought there was a fire," he laughs. "Lashings and lashings of smoke coming out. It was obviously dry ice or strawberry-flavoured smoke or whatever they did down there. But at the time, I just thought, 'Oh my God, what the fuck is going on?'"

He hadn't even wanted to go in the first place. He'd been at a club in the West End, listening to rare groove, the old soul and funk records that were the predominant sound of London's clubs and warehouse parties in 1987, when a friend suggested they visited a new night he'd heard about, in south London, still an industrial wasteland at that

time. "I was going, 'I am not fucking going to Bermondsey!' You know, we went out in the West End in those days." His friend reeled off a list of names of people who'd be at Shoom, which only made matters worse. "I knew a lot of these people from the football," frowns Farley. "And I'm like, it's one thing going to football matches with people and another thing going out at night. There's a certain amount of trouble you can get into." But his friend persisted, so off they went.

Having been assured no one was being burnt to death, they made the descent into the tiny function room where the event was taking place. "You walked down the stairs and you couldn't see 12in in front of your face. There were strobe lights on the whole time. They were playing this acid house record, 'The Poke' by Adonis. You walked through this room and suddenly faces would appear and they'd go 'Oi Oi! Yeah! Yeah!' and you'd go 'Fuck me, what was that?'. You were literally feeling your way around the room. And it was like, 'God, this is something else. This is utter madness.'"

Rather than uncovering a fire, or a running battle between football hooligans, Terry Farley had chanced upon the club that to many was the birthplace of acid house, rave culture, dance music as we now think of it. Indeed, some people



RAVING LUNATICS: Clubbers turned up at Shoom wearing their blissed-out Ibiza clobber (and best gurns)

would suggest Terry Farley had just chanced upon the club that changed Britain forever.

Danny Rampling sits in a Mayfair restaurant talking about his plans for the 25th anniversary of the club he and his then-wife Jenny started in 1987. The parties that take place in Clink Street, by the Thames, on 8 and 9 December, he's keen to emphasise, aren't a reunion. "Reunions to me are just like a lot of memories, and people wishing on the past and imagining that it's still that time and moaning about the present. 'It's not as good as it used to be,' and all of that. Going home at 3:30 in the morning because obviously the babysitter's on a time limit. But I thought, 25 years since the birth of acid house, it's a major milestone and it needed to be celebrated. It's about new music as well, it's not just a trip down memory lane. Shoom was always about groundbreaking new music and promoting new talent, new DJs. It's continuing the ethos of what Shoom was originally about."

Since Shoom closed its doors, in early 1990, Rampling has had a checkered career. In the Nineties, at the height of the superstar DJ phenomenon some would say he sparked, he had his own show on Radio 1. By the start of the last decade he had retired disillusioned from DJing, with the notion of becoming a chef.

He dabbled in property development before returning to the clubs: "I've got a right to be back doing what I love," he says.

Twenty five years ago, he was a runner for a soul DJ and club promoter called Nicky

Holloway, albeit one of a slightly spiritual bent: he'd been badly injured in a car crash while in the US, which left him with what he describes as "a renewed enthusiasm for life". This manifested itself in no uncertain terms when, in the summer of 1987, he, Holloway and two other DJs, Paul Oakenfold and Johnnie Walker, went to Ibiza to celebrate Oakenfold's 24th birthday. When the quartet were offered a drug called ecstasy at an open-air club called Amnesia — where the resident DJ Alfredo had developed a reputation for playing the house records coming out of Chicago's black gay club scene alongside an eclectic selection of rock, obscure indie and electronic pop tracks — the others initially demurred, but Rampling quickly said "yes". "And

I had a total epiphany moment on the dancefloor," he says. "It was 7:30am, the sun's coming up, the Ibiza clay in the soil has this kind of red glow at dawn. Alfredo's last record was U2's 'I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For', and I thought to myself, 'I've found everything I'm looking for and more, something I've been looking for for years'. I'd been trying to break into the DJ scene, and this was just a revelation and gave this massive amount of inspiration to say, 'Right, that's it, I know I've got something here, I can go back to London and promote my own night.'"

Shoom wasn't the first British club to play house music — it had been popular at Manchester's Hacienda for a couple of years. But in London, anyone playing it outside of gay clubs did so at their own risk. When DJs at a hip-hop-dominant night called Delirium tried introducing its denizens to house music, the crowd expressed their dissatisfaction at this turn of events by throwing bottles at them. Eventually, management was forced to build a metal cage around the DJ booth for their own safety.

Nor was Shoom the first club to feature ecstasy as a major ingredient. The restaurant in which Rampling and I are sitting was once a venue called Embassy, which hosted something called "The Hug Club", where people who'd taken the drug — smuggled back from the US — lolled around on the floor listening to James Brown. Ecstasy had been lurking around the music scene for years. Exposed to it in New York, Soft Cell released the presciently-titled album *Non-Stop Ecstatic Dancing* in 1982, while the similarly switched-on Stephen "Tin Tin" Duffy released an album in 1985 under the name Dr Calculus MDMA. "It was an attempt to soundtrack the experience," he once told me. "It was a psychedelic record with trombone on it," he added heavily, "which is obviously a recipe for success in any era".

What Shoom did was connect the two elements, and give the scene it spawned an image. The first flyer — announcing the arrival of "the Happy Happy Happy Happy Shoom!!! Club" — featured the kind of smiley faces that had flourished in the US in the early seventies, usually with the phrase "have a nice day" appended to them. "It represented the feeling of Shoom," says Rampling. "It wasn't a dark, moody club, it was a celebration of life. Britain at the time was pretty bleak, the economic landscape was

DANCING TO A DIFFERENT DRUM: Paul Oakenfold, Lisa Lashes, Ian St John and Friends at the Joy Shoom club in London, 1998; The flyer for "the Happy Happy Happy Shoom!!! Club" (below)



dire, it was very divided. Shoom was about a happy state of hedonism.” The smiley faces also, it is perhaps worth noting, looked like pills. Either way, the smiley became the unofficial logo of acid house. The people whom the flyer appealed to were often “grafters”: teenage duckers and divers who drifted around Europe and had encountered the same Ibiza club experience as Rampling. They arrived clad not in the sharply-dressed club uniform of the era, but in the clothes people wore in Ibiza if they were going to spend a night sweating on the dancefloor: dungarees, baggy shirts, Converse trainers, their hair tied back. There were, of course, other London acid house clubs — Paul Oakenfold founded Spectrum, Nicky Holloway started Trip — but none of them have quite the same historical cachet, the mythology that Shoom developed.

“Shoom was like a chemistry set,” suggests Terry Farley, who went on to a successful career as a house DJ. “All the elements on their own weren’t anything particularly new or revolutionary. But when you added the E to the music to the smoke machines to the strobes and the dancing and the clothes that people brought back from Ibiza — it was everything, all at once. Shoom put it all together, and then everyone in the suburbs and everyone up North and all around the country had something to copy, lock stock and barrel.”

Shoom opened in December 1987, in the Southwark Fitness Centre: Rampling had previously played there at an engagement party. Word about it spread, despite his attempts to keep it underground. “We didn’t want to overexpose it, we wanted to keep it special, but there was no way it was going to be kept that special,” Rampling says. “It was a runaway train, it affected many people.”

“Everyone down there went, ‘Don’t tell anyone else,’” laughs Farley. “I remember that first week: ‘Don’t tell anyone else, we don’t want everyone, we’ve got to keep this’. It was almost like a secret that if you told everyone about it, it would die. And everyone agreed not to tell anyone and as soon as they got home they told every one of their mates and told them not to tell anyone. And two weeks later, there were 500 people outside.”

Among them were celebrities — Keith Allen, Patsy Kensit, Boy George, Martin Fry from ABC, Kevin Rowland of Dexy’s Midnight Runners — which caused Rampling to redouble

his efforts not to overexpose the club. He refused to let photographers or film crews inside. Rampling, who never took ecstasy at Shoom — “People thought I had when I was DJing, but I was high on the vibe, I was very responsible” — looks hurt at the idea that’s because it was full of people out of their minds on drugs and he didn’t want to attract police attention. “It wasn’t totally full of...” His voice trails off and he frowns. “There was a percentage of that, but there were also people from the pop music world and their clubbing is their privacy. We wanted to keep it discreet and special and word of mouth, that was our ethos.”

There certainly were some remarkable scenes of drug-fuelled hedonism going on: Terry Farley remembers watching a girl who’d turned up with her twin holding a conversation with herself in the venue’s mirrored wall, convinced she was talking to her sister. But there seemed to be something else happening at Shoom. People who hadn’t been baffled by the apparent change in those who had, not least the football hooligans whose desire to run amok on the terraces had been pacified by ecstasy. A rumour started to spread that the club was a front for some kind of religious cult. Certainly, there was an odd atmosphere on the dancefloor. That was partly down to the drugs and Shoom’s peculiarly mixed clientele. “There was a fashion element in the club and there were street kids, a real melting pot of people,” says Rampling. “It broke down the sexual taboos of gay and straight people in a club. Racial issues weren’t really prominent on the London club scene, but it brought everyone together: black, white, gay, straight, indifferent, successful, not aspiring people, all kinds. The class system was broken down and everyone was put together. It just smashed all that down.”

As DJ and dance music historian Bill Brewster explains, it was heightened by the kind of house music Rampling favoured: born out of a gospel tradition, aimed initially at a gay, black audience, records like Ce Ce Rogers’ “Someday” and Joe Smooth’s “Promised Land” were big on a utopian idealism, their lyrics depicted a mythic future free from violence and prejudice. “The lyrics do lend themselves to the idea that we’re creating a kind of alternative community here.”

On the most prosaic level, Rampling seems to have invented the cult of the superstar DJ: “At the end of the night, people clapped him,” says Terry Farley. “That didn’t really happen, it was the first time I’d ever seen people watch a DJ and a DJ dance as well. That became the norm at all clubs. A lot of things that happened at Shoom became the norm everywhere else.” But some Shoom

clubbers saw Rampling as a messianic figure: much to his horror, one took to waving a Bible at him, pointing out passages that predicted the club’s arrival. “It was that transformational you could really understand why someone would come out the other side and go down that path,” says Jon Marsh of the house-influenced band The Beloved, a Shoom regular. “I don’t have any difficulty imagining that. I used to joke afterwards about the possibility that I could become a born-again Christian, because it felt as though you’d been through this cathartic experience.” He laughs. “But I’m still an atheist. And it was a nightclub, you know?”

“Every week was so intense and people were so intense with each other,” says Farley, who at the time reacted with dismay to his girlfriend’s

“IT WASN’T A DARK, MOODY CLUB. IT WAS A CELEBRATION OF LIFE. BRITAIN AT THE TIME WAS PRETTY BLEAK — IT WAS VERY DIVIDED. SHOOM WAS ABOUT A HAPPY STATE OF HEDONISM”

news that she’d booked them a holiday in Portugal “because it meant I’d miss two Shooms”. “Everyone was on it, everyone was doing stuff. People were like, ‘I used to be a bricklayer, but I’m going to open a trainer shop.’ I’m opening a stall in Kensington Market.’ I’m going to start a record label.’ People were telling me, ‘I’ve just made a record’ and you’d go ‘but you’re a postman. What do you mean you’ve made a record?’ Everyone was just caught up in it.”

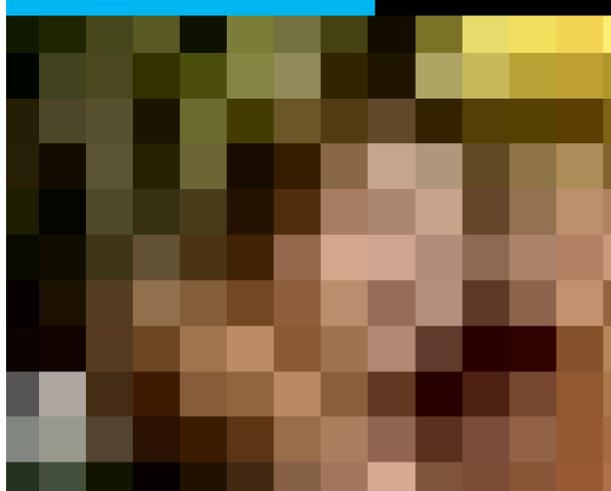
One Shoomer, a gambler and entrepreneur called Tony Colston-Hayter, took what was going on in the club and turned it into huge outdoor events: the man behind the vast raves of 1988’s Summer of Love, he became Acid’s Mr Big, in the parlance of the tabloids who began to take a horrified interest in what was going on. “He was so impressed by what he’d seen and experienced, he said, ‘I’m going to take this to the masses and I’m going to make an absolute fortune doing it. Do you want to come with me?’” says Rampling. “I said, ‘No, I’m quite happy here, I don’t want to commercialize this and capitalize on it.’ Shoom gave him the blueprint for the rave scene. He was driven by money, which the scene wasn’t in its inception. It was £5 to get into Shoom. He was charging £15.



WHERE IT BEGAN: Shoom opened in the Southwark Fitness Centre in December 1987. Word spread fast, despite repeated attempts to keep it underground



BEAT SURRENDER: Sweaty ravers on the dancefloor



Good luck to him, because he took it to a bigger audience, but then he got himself in trouble with the police and MI5, his phone was being tapped, his life became a mess. I didn’t want to get tarred with that brush and have my career destroyed by the tabloid press. We never really had any problems with the authorities at all, really. They were more interested in large-scale raves, where drugs were being sold in large quantities and huge amounts of money were being made from criminal elements. I’m sure MI5 and the police had files on us as well, but we weren’t part of that.”

Shoom itself was getting bigger: it had moved to new venues, first in the West End, then Kensington. Andy Weatherall and Terry Farley now DJed in a second room. Like a censor in reverse, the latter searched his soul collection for any record that might be construed to have a drug reference and played them: “It’s Ecstasy When You Lay Down Next to Me” by Barry White, “I Get the Sweetest Feeling” by Jackie Wilson. Rampling also brought over DJs from the US’s black gay clubs — who were uniformly baffled by the pandemonium their music appeared to be causing thousands of miles away — but he was increasingly beset by misgivings about the club. “The rave scene brought Shoom to an end, through the whole thing with it becoming too druggy. The drugs weren’t enhancing people’s lives, they were actually destroying a lot of people’s lives. It was like the hippy scene when that collapsed. People were taking it to excess. There were many, many casualties.” Shoom closed in early 1990. On the last night, Rampling took the money he’d made on the door, bought the venue’s stock of champagne and handed it out to the clubbers. “Everyone had a great party. It was an amazing night. It was sad as well, it was very poignant. It was the end of an era.”

But if Shoom was over, its aftershocks continued to be felt, right up to the present day. “The legacy of Shoom would be the fact that there was eventually a club in Swindon playing house music for kids who’ve never heard of Shoom or dressed like Shoomers,” says Terry Farley. “And out of that little club in Swindon, maybe half a dozen kids became DJs, got a career out of it, started some more good clubs and made Swindon a better place without ever knowing that it was down to stuff that was going on somewhere else.”

You could argue that we now live in a world that Shoom unwittingly created. The notion of playing dance music alongside rock (pioneered by DJ Alfredo in Ibiza), which felt revolutionary at the time, seems completely normal

in the age of the iTunes playlist, when music tribalism is dead and eclecticism is the order of the day. Meanwhile, the charts are filled with pop and r’n’b singles that — if they don’t sound much like the music that got played at Shoom, certainly couldn’t exist without the music that got played at the raves it provided a blueprint for. Tellingly, today’s biggest superstar DJ, David Guetta, went to Shoom. “He said so in *Forbes* magazine,” laughs Rampling. “He said he was influenced by this DJ who was onstage dancing and waving his records around like a maniac. And that’s what Guetta does today, he’s onstage, he’s dancing, he’s participating with his audience.”

“I don’t think it matters a jot whether people have heard of Shoom as a club,” says Jon Marsh, “but in terms of the whole ecstasy club culture thing that burgeoned off the back of it, of course it had a lasting effect on popular culture. You only have to listen to every single US r’n’b track being made at the moment. It’s quite extraordinary to me that you’ve got contemporary r’n’b influenced by a form of music that was effectively dismissed in the first place.”

Some people think that the scene that it spawned had an influence far beyond music. “You can’t divorce Shoom from the acid house explosion, and that had a huge impact on British society,” says Bill Brewster. “The lasting impact is freer relations between gay and straight. It helped break down barriers between working class and posh and black and white and Asian. It just made up more of a melting pot nation than we had been previously. Straight men often have friendships with gay men now. Another thing I think it really taught us was about men and women learning to get on as mates. It was the first time a lot of people ever had women who were friends, rather than either their sister or someone they were trying to cop off with.”

Back in the restaurant, Danny Rampling is careful not to claim too much credit. “I was one of the pioneers, it was one of the first clubs. But my ego’s in check, I don’t need to stand and shout it from the rooftops.” No, he says, reactivating Shoom isn’t about affirming his place in history. “This is a celebration of our culture, that we’ve created. Shoom was a figurehead of creating the culture that we know today,” he smiles. “I don’t think anyone can raise their hand up and say ‘I made all of this.’”