



Dreaming in Yellow

The Story of the DiY Sound System

Harry
Harrison

Foreword by Matthew Collin: author of *Altered State*



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Steven Leech

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Nottingham's Lace Market is an ancient cluster of thoroughfares, which, according to the city's website, was once home to troglodyte settlers many millennia ago. It has retained its labyrinthine jumble of small, narrow streets, which for decades contained factories involved in the production of lace. It now hosts many boutique shops, bars and small businesses. And nightclubs.

Located at 41–43 St Mary's Gate and opened in 1983, the Garage was the most renowned. Formerly the Ad-Lib club, this dark, confined rabbit warren of a space was arranged over three floors, black-walled and claustrophobic. There was a dancefloor in the cellar, a café on the top floor and a courtyard outside where the clubbers could cool off and talk. Located on the middle floor was a split area, with a bar at the top of the winding stairs and a sweatbox of a dancefloor – high-walled, black, windowless, sticky.

At some point during 1986, Graeme Park played house music in this room, probably becoming the first person to do so publicly anywhere in the United Kingdom. This statement might be contested, however, and there are some who would claim that DJs at venues in Manchester or London were playing house just as early. But whatever the chronology, Nottingham could count itself lucky. Within these dark walls, Graeme would continue to play to a small but prescient dancefloor every week for the next three years, establishing himself and the club as the first epicentre of this new music in the Midlands.

By 1989, among those who had begun to congregate every Saturday during those halcyon days at what would later become the Kool Kat were a dissolute group, noticeably different to the fashion-orientated regulars. Although equally as seduced by the twin synthetic temptations of house music and ecstasy, this loosely organised and growing gang had emerged

from different cultural origins. This grouping of punks, squatters, ex-students, anarchists, vegans and other nonconformists, with a smattering of football lads and wannabe fashionistas thrown in, celebrated shared values coming not from fashion but from politics. Their politics, however, were based on hedonism as much as protest, dancing as much as discussion.

For several months in 1989, after a summer drenched in the music of Soul II Soul, Happy Mondays and the Stone Roses, these friends had been organising parties amid the large Victorian houses and squats around Forest Fields, Hyson Green and Mapperley Park in Nottingham's NG7 postcode. Based on the blues parties so prevalent in those areas back then, these events were ramshackle, with music usually provided by cassettes and small rented sound systems or loud stereos, combined with smoke machines and strobes. Drawing increasing numbers of partygoers to their all-night sessions, and the first stirrings of interest from the local police force, these could unquestionably be labelled acid house parties. Do-it-yourself acid house parties, suffused with the music of Detroit, Chicago and London, of Phuture, Renegade Soundwave, MESH, Mr Fingers, Rhythm is Rhythm. House music, ecstasy, friends, flashing lights, smoke machines, lack of sleep, chaos, the police. The basics.

Later that year, the time came to experiment with these ingredients in a proper venue. On a bitterly cold Thursday night, 23rd November 1989, something unforeseen was happening within the confines of that legendary nightclub. Outside, the streets were empty and quiet; inside, an eclectic mix of those drawn from the fringes of the city's alternative crowd was dancing to house music. As the biggest revolution in musical culture since punk was beginning to sweep all before it, it was no longer considered the private preserve of hip Londoners and clubbers; this was, in hindsight, a very early genesis of the counterculture adopting house as its soundtrack. This dynamic, unbeknown to all that time, would lead to the near-complete domination of youth culture by electronic dance music, and eventually to the insurrection at Castlemorton and beyond.

But back in the inky black box of the Garage, no one knew or cared about

the future. This was still just some friends having fun. That a temporary autonomous zone had been created in a public place and the ingredients mixed together effortlessly that night was not the immediate concern; right now, there was a large vegan birthday cake to be eaten. In the DJ booth was one of the music obsessives within this nascent crew, Simon Smith. Wrestling with the Technics 1200 record decks, which were new to us all, he played one of his epic sets that were to become ubiquitous over the next few years, and although the mixing was occasionally off, the musical choices were transcendent. Simon had arrived at house musically via punk and its antecedents, just one of the myriad roots that would collide and synthesise into the early acid house movement.

One of these roots would come from the On-U Sound label, through the genius production of Adrian Sherwood, arriving via the electronic warpings of Tackhead, Gary Clail and Mark Stewart. Another was through the punk-influenced twelve-inch singles of World Domination Enterprises and Renegade Soundwave, and another, the purer house and techno, imported from the States and available in one small section of Nottingham's Selectadisc and Arcade Records. Simon managed to weave all these disparate elements together that night, topped only by a new track, representing another piece in the house jigsaw, 808 State's 'Pacific State' – this was a new creature, sophisticated house music, relaxed and made in Manchester.

As the dancing continued, with constant sprayings of the smoke machine and people face to face with the strobe, in the bar there were other conversations taking place. It was my twenty-third birthday and we were intoxicated on many different levels, not just the obvious intoxication of drugs and alcohol but also the intoxication of possibility presented by all these different types of people, this variety of youth cults and subcults dancing together to this new music. At the dread hour of two, as we spilt out raucously into the deserted streets of St Mary's Gate, and in the days and weeks to come, this night would be discussed endlessly. What had worked and what hadn't? Did we need a regular venue? Did we need more DJs and lights, more records and a more reliable source of pills?

And, with greater imperative, we needed a name to unite behind to proclaim ourselves as an actual entity. As we threw more house parties around Nottingham's less salubrious quarters, obtained decks and bought records, someone must have commented that, as an outfit, we were very 'do it yourself'. This reflected not only the punk ethos of our approach to parties but also our opposition to the commercialisation that had already begun to creep into the pay party scene and our determination to proceed as a collective with no individuals making a quick buck from the hard work of others. A few weeks before, we had driven back from a big Biology pay party down south, which had spectacularly failed to materialise, and we reflected that we could do better ourselves. Over many drinks in the Golden Fleece pub on Mansfield Road in the following days, we agreed that 'diy' would be our name.

It stuck well, and I can honestly say that, although over the last thirty years we have many regrets as an organisation, the name is not one of them. This book is my attempt to document the story of that organisation and of the simultaneous origins of the free party movement. Writing this with the advantage of thirty years' hindsight, some things have become clearer, others more opaque. At some point, 'diy' became 'DiY'. At another, we had a functioning crew of fourteen DJs, two record labels, recorded an album for Warp, set up a recording studio and became, according to *i-D* magazine in 1997, 'The world's most famous sound system'. We also threw some fairly blinding parties. Inevitably, much detail and clarity has been lost to history; my recall is gratuitously subjective and may provoke howls of protest. For this, I can only apologise in advance, my main excuse being the considerable level of drug consumption involved in these adventures and the three decades that lie between these events and their recording. To misquote the comedian Charlie Fleischer: 'If you can remember the nineties, then you weren't really there.'

It is of little surprise that the three pivotal meetings which would eventually lead to the creation of DiY occurred in the context of a public house, a nightclub and a drug deal. That they all also involved music is perhaps even

more predictable. Peter Birch and I both grew up in Bolton, a post-industrial mill town on the northern edge of Manchester, meeting one night in December 1983 in a pub called the Victoria, but known to all as 'Fannies', so named after all the dicks that went there. It did possess one redeeming feature, however, which was that it would serve beer to anyone who looked over fourteen. Our initial conversation was sparked by my wearing an Echo and the Bunnymen badge and their upcoming gig at the Manchester Apollo.

'Oi, mate, you off to see the Bunnymen?'

'Yeah.'

'Any chance of a lift?'

'Dunno, I'll ask my mum.'

Upon such sparkling repartees are lifelong friendships born. With a square jaw, piercing stare and a sharp dress sense, Pete was small in stature but great of heart, and he already had the most encyclopaedic knowledge of music of anyone I had ever met. I was sixteen and he was seventeen, being born eighteen months to the day before me, on the twenty-third of the month. For any William Burroughs aficionados, Discordians, KLF enthusiasts or ex-members of Spiral Tribe reading this, more about all that twenty-three stuff later.

Cemented by our shared passion for music, William Blake, anarchist politics and heavy drinking, we soon became firm friends. We also shared a love of football, both being Manchester United supporters, which in Bolton is only marginally less disapproved of than being a sex offender. Pete later denied his support for the Red Devils and switched to Bolton Wanderers, although I distinctly remember him possessing a MUFC pillowcase.

Many endless afternoons were idled away listening to music in his bedroom while we got very stoned and surreptitiously necked the cans of Special Brew that his dad hid badly in a cupboard. Pete played me music from genres I didn't even know existed: Fela Kuti, Kraftwerk, Carmen McRae, John Coltrane, Hawkwind and Planet Gong, Crass and Flux, Led Zeppelin, Nina Simone, Pharaoh Sanders, Gil Scott-Heron, On-U Sound. A truly eclectic baptism into the wondrous world of music that was out there, taking us way

beyond the confines of a suburban bedroom in Bolton; it was life-affirming, challenging, angry, beautiful, vital, strange.

Where we really met musically was our shared devotion to Factory Records. Devotion is a strong word, but the religious connotation accurately describes the strength of feeling we and many others had for the Manchester-based label that had brought the world Joy Division, New Order, A Certain Ratio, The Durutti Column, and so much more. Beyond the music, everything about Factory – the attitude, the design, the inherently anarchistic approach to business, the contracts signed in blood – became the benchmark for Pete and I on many fronts, and remained so for decades.

At the house parties we frequented, the Human League's 1981 album *Dare* had been the staple musical fare, and many adolescent fumbblings had taken place on piles of coats in a spare bedroom as the proto-house electronica of 'Love Action' and 'Open Your Heart' had spun on a single turntable downstairs. In March 1983, however, New Order's 'Blue Monday' was released and nothing was ever the same again. From the haunting, glacial and sombre songs of Joy Division, which still remain some of the greatest music ever made, via the grief-laden electronic experimentation of New Order's first album, *Movement*, the band had arrived at this.

Still the biggest-selling twelve-inch single of all time, and co-produced by New York electro pioneer Arthur Baker, 'Blue Monday' was huge in every way, from the enormous kick drum and the ruthless four-four beat, the production was in your face, the beats and syncopation relentless, the vocals cryptic yet somehow profound. I first heard this monster at the glamorous setting of Bolton's Cinderellas Rockerfellas nightclub. Having over-indulged in a rather dodgy combination of magic mushrooms and tequila slammers at a mate's flat up the road, I had just left the club to vomit over the edge of the fire escape as vivid hallucinations warped the sky into some kind of living Turner landscape. When I staggered back inside, those vast sparse bass kicks were so intense and demanding that I was simply halted in my tracks and stood motionless for the entire seven minutes and twenty-nine seconds. It would have been beyond me to explain precisely why this piece of music

created by a band twelve miles down the road sounded so revolutionary. Within five or six years, I would have the innate understanding that this was a very early version of what would become known, via electro and Chicago, Detroit and New York, as house music, and that this music would take over my soul and provide the soundtrack and driving force of my adult life.

Over the next couple of years, and expanding from that initial meeting with Pete, our circle of friends grew. This was my first experience of being in a gang – not a gang in the sense of violence and money, but in a like-minded group where somehow the whole had a separate existence greater than the sum of its individuals. Ours was a mixed crew with both male and female members, attending various local schools including Smithills, Bolton School, Dean High School, Thornleigh, and a crew from Turton school who turned up at my first proper party. My family lived in a modern, red-brick, four-bedroom house off Chorley New Road in Bolton. My mum worked for Salford Social Services and my dad was by that point the chief executive of Greater Manchester Council, later responsible for the renovation of Manchester Central Station into G-Mex and a frequent guest on BBC's Look North and ITV's Granada Reports, where a certain Tony Wilson was the anchor, with whom he had a friendship going back to the seventies.

It was in their house, having somehow persuaded my parents to go out for the night, that I held my seventeenth birthday party. Contrary to the prevailing wisdom of the time, I just invited everyone I knew and told them to bring everyone they knew. Even in that pre-Facebook era, this proved to be a foolish move. Several hundred teenagers turned up, many from the sixth form college I attended but many more from the other schools of the new friends I had made. People rolled in, filled the house, trashed it. Echo and the Bunnymen, The Jam, Teardrop Explodes, Stiff Little Fingers, The Damned and the Human League were played very loud on my dad's stereo, his whisky was drunk, there was much vomiting, and all my mum's confidential paper records from social services were thrown out of the window and sent fluttering down the stairs. All fairly standard teenage fare,

but two things made that night noteworthy. Firstly, the fact that I had never felt so satisfied in my life at this wonderful chaos, and the thought that I had organised it. Incredibly, my parents let me do the same thing a year later for my eighteenth birthday, when even more people turned up, including some of the Bolton punks who ripped the front door off its hinges and stole my dad's car.

The second noteworthy event was meeting a remarkable young man called Whitey. At the height of the teen madness, having just asked some random person not to set fire to the curtains, I looked up to see a tall guy in a raincoat, black drainpipe trousers and brothel creepers descending the stairs. With his blond floppy fringe, he was the embodiment of the post-punk alternative look. Although I have never told him this, my immediate thought was that he was Bolton's coolest teenager, cemented in my estimation when I discovered that he had a car. He later divulged (thirty-three years later, Boltonians not being noted for their fulsome use of praise) that he thought I was alright, as he'd just been through the records in my bedroom and found some Killing Joke.

Whitey, Pete and I became firm friends, and this became the nucleus of our gang, certainly the musical nucleus. Just as obsessed by music as Pete, and a highly competent drummer, Whitey would go on to join many bands, including the Electro Hippies. These two individuals were the first people I would meet for whom music was not just a background soundtrack to life but front and centre in terms of importance. To them, music was life. Whitey was a great admirer of Crass, had been to stay on their commune in Epping Forest and was the first person I had met who would have called themselves an anarchist. We were to meet many more. Although greatly influenced by the politics of Crass and Flux of Pink Indians, and the whole anarcho-punk scene, in all honesty I was never a big fan of the music, although their rejectionist politics became increasingly influential. I understood that their almost shouted, relentlessly polemical lyrics and jagged music reflected their inherent anger at the world, which we intuitively shared.

Along with two of Whitey's friends, Dave Hayes and Coupey, and a genuinely committed punk from Edgeworth called Miles who introduced me to the music of the Mob, we began to frequent alternative discos in Bolton, Wigan and Manchester. There we would dance, or more likely sit and drink, to Southern Death Cult, Bauhaus, the Birthday Party, Theatre of Hate, Joy Division, plus, of course, classics by The Clash, The Stranglers and other punk greats. On a Monday night, up to fifteen of us would pile into Dave's decrepit transit van and scream down the A666 to the alternative night at the Ritz in Manchester. Dave was a mechanic and prided himself on his reckless driving abilities, each week timing how fast he could get from the Golden Lion in Bolton to the door of the Ritz in Manchester, a journey of around twelve miles. His record was nine minutes.

If this was a time of musical discovery, then it was equally a time of sexual and chemical discovery. Part of our rapidly expanding gang, Sarah was a pupil at a different school but lived nearby and together we mutually discovered the delights of sex and drugs, initially in the form of cannabis. She and her best friend Sheila became obsessed with David Bowie, particularly the *Hunky Dory* and *Ziggy Stardust* albums. She had very tolerant parents, and often we would gather, my mate Chris from school in attendance too, and get very stoned in her parentless house and listen to Bowie endlessly. Compared to the remorseless and debauched chemical consumption that the nineties would bring, there seems now a touching naivety to our exploits, but at the time it felt pleasingly deviant. As in the Howard Marks biopic *Mr Nice*, the first time I got stoned the world seemed to change colour; no longer was I marooned in a dull, monochrome northern mill town but now possessed the means of instant, dreamy escape.

Looking back with the bonus of hindsight there have been several pivotal nights in my life that have changed everything, shifted the parameters of my thoughts and attitude. One such night occurred at this time, at some point in 1983, at my friend Chris' house in Adlington. While our gang had all been smoking draw, as it was then known in the north-west, for a while none of us had actually done a trip yet. We had begun to hang out with the

polydrug-using Bolton punks, who would frequent the moors surrounding Bolton and Rivington in the autumn months to look for magic mushrooms and who could obtain microdots and small blotters of acid.

As a group, we had many stoned discussions around whether we were ready to take a trip, in between giggling and going to the garage for munchies. I wish I had taped those conversations, as they would be comical to listen to now: four or five stoned but earnest seventeen-year-olds worrying about the kid who jumped off the bridge thinking they could fly and the guy who took too much and never came back. So eventually, we thought fuck it, let's do it. Around six or seven of us gathered at Chris' mum's house and, with some trepidation, all stuck a little serrated blotter on our tongues.

There was then the waiting phase, familiar to anyone who's ever done acid or mushrooms, where nothing happens. Someone had heard that it was important to be comfortable and so we sat on the bed, on cushions, on a beanbag. And then, slowly and imperceptibly, that feeling diffused from my stomach, my guts and into my throat, my mouth and my brain. And it grew and removed me to a very different place.

Many years later, in a farmhouse near Exeter and following a particularly spectacular night of indulgence, our friend 'Dangerous' Dave would crystallise this as 'acid is spiritual, ecstasy is emotional and ketamine is just plain surreal'. Perfect summary. As the trip and the night wore on, my mind opened up to places I didn't know existed. Everything seemed fresh and painted in new colours. A drab semi in Lancashire became a palace of earthly delights. We were doing William Blake at school and I somehow knew that his lines about holding 'Infinity in the palm of your hand, and Eternity in an hour' was not just a metaphor but somehow a fundamental truth. I felt linked to these young friends, who incidentally looked equally as overwhelmed as I felt, not just as casual acquaintances but as microcosmic parts of a cosmic whole. We spent some hours bewitched by a poster from The Clash's *Combat Rock* album. There are several hanging baskets in the back of the café where the band members are sitting around drinking. In our collective brain, these baskets turned into beehives, into great dangling

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