

Festival Baby meets Norman Jay

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I look out the window to find that what had started as a muggy, overcast day has descended into a full-blown thunderstorm. I enjoy interviews at the best of times, but on this occasion, I hope Norman Jay will speak to me for as long as it takes for the rain to pass. Not that I wouldn't have wanted to talk to him for a prolonged period of time, anyway, but it really is raining cats and dogs outside. Not literally cats and dogs. If that were the case, I'd be outside either petting them or cleaning up a very messy forecourt. Anyway, as I get through, the voice I hear at the other end of the line is far softer than I would expect from a DJ who has got the MBE treatment for his contribution to music, and overseen the dawn of every genre that has graced the London music scene since he started out.

"I'm busy, mad busy," he says when I ask what he's up to. His tone suggests he likes it this way, even if it does make for a frantic life. "I'm trying to get stuff done before my gig tonight."

The gig, it transpires, is in the Old Queen's Head in Islington. If you can find a venue where Jay hasn't deejayed at some point in his illustrious career, more power to you. He's covered more of London than a cabbie, and kept his humility to boot. Where is he based, though?

"I'm a Westy," he says, confirming what I'd thought. Though his work has taken him far and wide, Jay has stayed in the part of Town he grew up in. Since making a name for himself on the underground scene in the 1980s – where he was an early progenitor of then-illegal warehouse parties – he has been working non-stop. You might expect 'legality' to have ruined his credibility somewhat, but the opposite is true. As one of the UK's DJ veterans, Jay stands shoulder-to-shoulder among his peers, not least because of his tireless dedication to both musical discovery and giving his punters what they want.

Although he has become a nationally recognised DJ, he still encounters a very modern problem in finding a home for his almost invariably sold-out shows. London rent, residence complaints, the lot. Myriad reasons have forced Jay to move his Good Times show to Hackney. Is he bitter? Not in the slightest. It is, he believes, all part and parcel of the cyclical nature of London – something that makes the Big Smoke great.

WHEN I FIRST WENT THERE IT WAS A POSTCODE WHERE ANGELS FEARED TO TREAD

"It's a new one for us," he says of the upcoming gig at St John at Hackney. "The venue is amazing. Good Times is putting a market down in the centre of club culture in the world. In

my day, it used to be Soho. But the regeneration of Soho, the expensive rents and the closing of venues means it's no longer feasible to go there. It's changed a great deal. It started with Shoreditch about ten years ago and it's mushroomed into a huge and significant part of the London nightclub."

We've all noticed the changing faces of London, the shifting of scenes, the rising prices. But how has this affected him?

"It hasn't all," he says. "It's the cycle of things. Nothing was happening in the east for an awful long time. Since Shoreditch took off it's spiralled up through E5, E8. At the time, rents were affordable. Young creatives could move there, do stuff there. When I first went there it was a postcode where angels feared to tread. It's changed for the better."

I suggest it was better five years ago, though as I soon learn, that's merely the dreamer in me speaking.

"One would always say that with rose-tinted glasses. If there wasn't so many people going to these places they'd be crap. There's a reason they're popular. That's how these things start. They begin small then spiral until it becomes the mainstream. But by then, the creators and creatives have moved on and started the whole process somewhere else. It's happening now in Brixton and Peckham."

LONDON IS CHANGING AT A RATE OF KNOTS. YOU CAN'T BLINK FOR CRANES GOING UP

So is it a good thing, overall? "Of course it's a good thing!" he says. "When I was growing up everything was in the west."

I ask about my hometown, Harrow, which to my mind consists of a few Wetherspoons, a Vue cinema and one of the best Sam's Chicken outlets in North London.

"Let me tell you," he says confidently. "In the 1970s, Harrow was on the map for clubbing. Everything is cyclical – in a few years' time it might come back to Harrow. I used to go clubbing in Harrow, Wembley, Middlesex Country Club."

The theme of cycles re-emerges several times throughout our conversation, which shouldn't be surprising from a DJ who has worked with everything from Northern Soul to modern hip-hop. He is comfortable with change. But I wonder what influence his roots in West London had.

"It [the Notting Hill/Ladbroke Grove area] was a slum when I was growing up, full of old bomb-sites. Those huge buildings that now cost millions were empty and dilapidated. It was a posh area to begin with, then it went through a cycle of decay in the 1950s and 60s when my parents were there, and now it's come back. Anywhere you find Victorian and Edwardian stock, that's where you see the trendies flock to."

IF YOU'RE BORED IN LONDON, YOU'VE HAD A HAPPINESS BYPASS.

Given that he's travelled up and down the country deejaying over the years, I imagine he'd have a good insight into whether this trend is mirrored in other UK cities.

"Well, we're seeing it in Manchester," he tells me. "You wouldn't recognise Mosside now. Anfield's always great when I go there now – it's completely unrecognisable."

"London is changing at a rate of knots. You can't blink for cranes going up. London is the best place to come to if you're young and creative and enjoy nightlife. I defy anybody to be bored here. If you're bored here, you've had a happiness bypass. I'm not saying London's the best place, but it offers the most choice. Whatever music you're into, if you're discerning enough you can find it somewhere in London any night of the week."

Paradoxically, talking about the London scene reminds me that we have a mutual acquaintance. Jay has often performed at The Clarendon, a Midlands pub where I poured pints, smashed glasses and once tipped gravy into a woman's bag by mistake.

"You tell him Norman wants to come back," he says. "I love those small provincial towns. The people think you'd never come to play for them, but that's the heartland of my support. The scene is very eclectic in those areas. Personally, I think they're the best because you can be yourself and express yourself."

It's almost a surprise to hear from a man who, just minutes ago, was proclaiming London the best city in the world for music and creativity. But, thinking about it more closely, it makes sense – Jay clearly loves discovering new music and playing it to people, hoping to open their ears to new styles. Still, though, is there a genre or style he favours?

"The audiences I play to dictate the styles," he says, "from straight-up house music to Good Times and mod classics. I've enjoyed everything that's come since. I like to be able to play the best examples of all genres. I play drum and bass, though I'm not a drum and bass DJ. I

play hip-hop and jazz because I'm into all those things. People enjoy that. I'm like the original disco eyewitness – I was there at the beginning. I was there at the beginning of hip-hop, I was there when acid-house began. I've lived and enjoyed all of that. A great many people out there have lived those scenes as well."

So it gives people a chance to relive the past, I ask. "And to discover," he replies. "Plenty of people discover new music through DJs. It's an entry level. If you're discerning, you begin to explore more. There's a whole world to discover. But it's a personal experience – to each his own. I like a lot of different music most of the time, but I don't like all music all of the time – everything has a time and a place. In my car, after I've done a banging house night, or drum and bass with the crowd uproarious, I get into my car and I'll have classical music on."

THIERRY HENRY WAS GREAT, BUT HE DIDN'T GET A FAMILY-AND-FRIENDS RATE FROM ME

The rain continues to pour, reminding me of misery and, by default, Tottenham Hotspur – the Premier League outfit both of us adore, for our sins. What was it like, as a die-hard supporter, to deejay at Thierry Henry's wedding?

"Well, I'll give you a little rundown," he says. "My manager told me "Some A-lister wants you to do the wedding." I asked him to find out because I'd done A-lister things before and absolutely hated it – that whole new-money, new-footballer thing. There was no style, no taste. 'The price of everything and the value of nothing,' as I'd put it. My manager came back saying they wouldn't reveal the name, so I said no, even when they doubled the fee. I've got good management though," he says, with a laugh. "Everyone has their price. It's a job. I didn't find out until a few days before who it was. I'd been a fan of Henry for a while, if I'm honest. At least before he cheated and punched that ball into the net."

As an Irishman, I can fully appreciate this. Even with his habit of scoring against Spurs, Henry was impressive beyond belief. The Paris episode – Henry didn't actually punch the ball into the net but 'passed' it to William Gallas, whose goal put France through to the World Cup at Ireland's expense – was the final nail in a Clio-shaped coffin. Va-Va-Voom. Did he enjoy the experience, I wonder, my simmering resentment from 2010 in danger of resurfacing.

"It was a fabulous wedding. They were serving breakfast and tea on the dance floor at two in the morning. It was really nice. Patrick Vieira was a laugh. He came up and asked for a couple of songs, good tunes as well. That's when he spotted the badge on my lapel. It was a cockerel [the Spurs' emblem]. He rolled back laughing and pointed it out to everyone there. I

grabbed his hand and made him stroke the badge. Everyone was laughing. A few weeks later I was at the derby at the old Highbury and he scored against us. It got out that he'd done the wedding on the Arsenal fan-site and I became a hate figure for both sets of fans. But people saw the funny side of it once they'd heard the story. Thierry was great but he didn't get a family-and-friends rate from me. I said the wedding was great and I ruined it! It was good though. I wish he'd had me back to do his divorce!"

PEOPLE GET ENOUGH THINGS FOR FREE. THERE'S NO AIR OF MYSTERY ANYMORE, PEOPLE KNOW ALL ABOUT YOU BEFORE YOU'RE EVEN OUT THERE

Getting back on track, unlike Spurs, I move things back to the music. What does Jay have on in the coming months? "I've got the Good Times coming," he tells me, "and then I'm appearing at [Bestival](#) for the first time. I also have a Good Times compilation coming out – my first in about three or four years. It's called Good Times Skank and Boogie on Vinyl Two. It'll be out at the beginning of October. It's about fourteen or sixteen tracks – I prefer to do double-albums but there wasn't time."

This strikes me as emblematic of Jay's releases: large, double-sized LPs suited to a live audience rather than solitary enjoyment. Another thing that occurred to me while researching for the interview is that Jay doesn't have a great deal of his work on streaming websites.

"That's deliberate," he says, almost defiantly. "That's what my gigs are for. It works for some people and not for others. If I was just starting out today, it'd be a necessary evil. I have this discussion with my sons and nephews all the time. People get enough things for free. There's no air of mystery anymore – people know all about you before you're even out there."

Saccharine as it is, I say it's sad the way young people won't discover records by picking them up in a shop anymore. While I was from the HMV generation, it was still a way of finding music – a way that seems to be dying out fast.

I'M NO LUDDITE. THE BOTTOM LINE FOR ME IS THAT THE CROWDS ENJOY THE MUSIC THAT I ENJOY

"People just disseminate their music in a different way, but they might be the ones who stumble on your tent at a festival and they can take out their phone and then look up your whole catalogue online. You can't fight the way things are changing. I'm no Luddite – the bottom line for me is that the crowds enjoy the music that I enjoy."

And with that, our chat is nearly at an end. But I wonder, what is it like, having gone from an underground artist doing illegal gigs in warehouses to something of, dare I say it, an institution?

"I'm not into the fame game," he says contentedly, taking it all in his stride. "Bankers are successful but no one knows who they are. I like to be quietly successful but I don't need the trappings that go with it. So long as you have the mutual respect of your peers and the people who watch you. You have a duty of care to give them what they want too. I have the credentials. If you can be bothered to Google it, I was there."

And with that, I wish him good luck with his gig tonight. But as always, it's the man who was always there that has the last word: "Oh, and tell your mate I want to go back to The Clarendon."