

LONDON IS BURNING

THE SOUL DANCERS STORY



FT1



Tommy Mac, hankie in back pocket, ready for the swallow chaps

Glance across most London club DANCEfloors in 2008, and chances are, the most you'll see is a mass of bodies, rocking as one to the endless onslaught of the 4/4 beat. With necks craned, heads nodding in agreeable unison, eyes transfixed on the DJ, an occasional appreciative hand raised, today's London clubgoers out on the so-called DANCEfloor barely break a sweat. Compared to yesteryear all you see on London's dancefloors now is jack!

House music, in all its variants still dominates most London dance floors and essentially has done for the best part of the last 20 years. Minimal, electro, tech, deep, soulful, tough, progressive and even the much derided trance still hold major sway across our floors, but to many, especially the more senior Cockney clubber, the jacking domination has come at a serious dance floor cost... the demise of the London Club DANCER. We're not talking about the prancing peacocks and Vauxhall vogue queens here either, what we're really talking about, are knee dropping, toe tapping, soul spinning, proper, London CLUB DANCERS.

To fully appreciate this loss, we really have to rewind a good 30 years, and then some. Back In 1978 when Bernard Edwards and Nile Rodgers penned "He's The Greatest Dancer" for Sister Sledge it rode on the success and echoed the experience of the mid 70's New York Disco Boom which had peaked the previous year with the mass appeal of John Travolta's Tony Manero. Edwards and Rodgers had finally squeezed past the door at Studio 54 and were now bathing in Chic success, so it was only natural that they reflected life in New York's mainstream Discos. And like everyone else across much of the US they caught a heavy dose of Saturday Night Fever. But their story of "One night in a disco, on the outskirts of Frisco, of a guy dressed in Gucci and Fiorucci, that would shame Adonis" made little sense to those of us dancing in the 70's Soul Clubs and Discos of London. Over on this side of the Atlantic, a completely different dance floor picture had emerged. Londons Greatest Dancers were a far cry from the Brooklyn Boy Manero in both dress sense and dance style, and a White suit, dodgy Cuban heel boots, open neck shirt and the Bee Gees just didn't register. As far as we were concerned, strutting Tony Manero just didn't have a clue...

THE LONDON SOUL DANCER

The London (and South East) Soul Boy sub culture kicked off around the mid to late 70's. For Dancers, it peaked during the long hot Summer of 76 and continued for maybe 2 or 3 more years before developing into Jazz-Funk, Boogie and later on, heavy Jazz Fusion. London's nightclub landscape was pretty sparse back then, with decent clubs few and far between. The Capitals clubs that mattered most during the mid 70's were Chagaramas In Covent Garden (later to become notorious Punk Club The Roxy), Louises, Studios 21 and 77 and the The Global Village In Charing Cross. The big DANCERS favourites, were The 100 Club in Oxford Street (Saturdays with Ronnie L, Wednesdays with Greg Edwards, who also played at The Global Village) and the legendary Crackers at the end of Wardour Street (originally with Mark Roman and later with George Power on Friday Lunchtimes and Sunday evenings). Although everyone who went to Clubs like Crackers knew who the DJs were, their importance was less significant compared to today. What mattered most important of all was DANCING. According to long time club dancer, Seymour Nurse, "Back in the late 70's, early 80's the "Superstar DJ" mentality did not exist among any of us. You knew that you were going to hear some great tunes from certain DJs, but we specifically went out to DANCE." Phil Octave from East London, another young Dancer of the late 70's and a regular at The 100 Club and Crackers, has fond memories of those early years. "There were

loads of great Soul dancers back then but a select few really stood out. Franklin, Basie Walker and Paul Anderson were dancers I remember well, but the main man for me was Trevor Shakes" He Say's. "When Shakesy came into Crackers he had real presence and could dance the arse off all of us!" Other dancers that many a Soul Boy remembers from the mid to late 70's include Peter Francis (who later became an actor, most notably appearing in the film Scum), Jabba from Acton, Horace, Vic from Croydon, Mark White, Maurice Vernon, Ramsey, Dave Lee Sang, Tony and Pinky (Bevis Pink), Danny John Jules (later of TV's Red Dwarf fame), Clive Clarke, Dizzy Heights, Mohammed (The Indian Rubber Man) and a guy who many regard as the first proper white Soul dancer, Tommy McDonald.

Tommy "Mad Mac" McDonald is an all time London Club legend, best known for promoting Rave and Acid House parties in the late 80's and a regular face on the earlier New Romantic and Blitz circuit. However, Tommy remembers the 70's Soul Boy era as probably the best of all his many many notorious Clubbing years.

"I started Soul dancing around 1974, used to go with big brother John to the Byron Hotel and The Birds Nest in South Harrow. There were these two black guys called Greg and Lionel, dressed in safari hats doing these moves that were unbelievable. From that day I got hooked. I used to study them every week, go home and practice my moves. I then started going to a place on the Slough Industrial Estate with Clive Clarke and Jabba. I think it was called The Spiders Web, all the Slough boys went there, Rikki Desouzer, Gary Haiseman and Skindles Soul DJ Alan Sullivan.

After that we started getting the train into London to clubs like Louises, Studio 77, Upstairs at Ronnie Scotts, The 100 Club and the brilliant Shaggeramas. Shags and Louises were my favourites in the very early days both of which were regular haunts of the pre-punk crews such as Phillip Salon and the Bromley contingent. It was all about dressing up and DANCING! Winkle pickers, pink pegs and make up. This was pre punk during The 1975 Bowie "Young American" period. Daytimes we'd go down The Kings Road and shop lift from "Sex" whilst In the evenings we'd be clubbing it seven days a week. Mondays Scamps in Hemel, Tuesday's, Sutton Scamps, Hunters in Barons Court on Thursdays, Americas in Ealing Fridays. Here's a funny story, one night at one of my better dance sessions at The Atlantis in Margate I pulled this gorgeous chick and naturally took her back and shagged the arse of it, you know, like we all did back then (early 75-76). Anyway it turned out to be "Tracey Emin" the artiste. I've still got the love letters from her... ha ha ha, she must have been all of 15 or 16. Weekends it could be anything from Crackers, The Global and Shags to Countdown or the Skindles Hotel where I met Terry Farley. We used to wear cowboy boots, deer stalker hats and hacking jackets and we'd have "Speedo" bags with a change of gear and the famous hanky in the back pocket. I use to throw my hankie on the floor, do my special spin, swallow dive and pick it up with my teeth!" We learnt all our moves ourselves, completely self taught! There was a time in the late 70's when we went through the "lets be trendy" and join Pineapple in Covent Garden and we all went down there in our plastic sandals and leg warmers. I even trained with Arlene Phillips for a while! Later on me Clive and Horace went down for the Hot Gossip auditions as well! But it was the competition out on the club floors that mattered most. We were something else back then and I wanted to rule the floor! It got to a point at Scamps Hemel where mass fights broke out between the London and Luton boys. We didnt like some of the new kids on the block coming on to our floor giving it the biggun, and if they did, we would send someone out to bust some moves as a feeler. Then someone like Clive or myself would go and finish them off! ha ha ha! In terms of the best dancers, I'd have to say Trevor Shakes was top dog, followed by Horace, I was pretty close behind em though!"

The Satellite Suburban Soul Clubs Tommy mentions were an important fixture for the London Club DANCER during the late 70's attracting many away from the West End. West Londoners would venture out to Cheeky Pete's in Richmond at weekends or on a Monday nights as far as Scamps in Hemel Hempstead whilst in North London dancers were beginning to appreciate Froggy at The Royalty in Northgate. East side, Essex was fast becoming a dancing Soul Boy mecca and the significance of Chris Hill's early, pre-pantomime years initially at The Orsett Cock in Grays then later at The Goldmine Canvey Island (73-76) and Lacy Lady Ilford with Tom Holland (76-80) shouldn't go unmentioned, along with Dee Jays in Chelmsford with legendary soul DJ Bob Jones (71-78). The Atlantis in Margate beneath the Dreamland Fun Park was also a popular Soul Boy trek especially on bank holidays and in 1979 an infamous Soul Boy vs. Skinhead battle occurred with 200 or so young Skins from East London getting smashed by a mob of black and white Soulies led by Jabba.

Meanwhile in my birthplace of South London, The Bali Hai in Streatham, Tights in Beckenham, Wimbledon Tiffany's and the Sutton branch of Scamps with Mark Damon and Brian Oconner were big Soul Boy favourites, with Scamps in particular attracting some of the top DANCERS from all over London. One of the very best dancers and first Soul Boys I became aware of during my teens whilst living in Sutton was a young Carl Cox. Carl was in my year at School and his influence, as one of only a handful of black kids, was very significant and he led the way for the Friday bunk-off for Crackers crew. He was the first guy I know to wear Plastic Sandals and Pegs and he use to carry a portable tape player around the playground playing quality Soul and Funk, The Blackbyrd's "Unfinished Business" being a memorable favourite. At Scamps and the Sutton United FC weekly Soul club with DJ Barrie Stone, Carl was one of the very best dancers. In 1977 he won a Sutton best Disco Dancing Competition dancing to Voyage's East To West/Point Zero. Mark Lamaar jokingly referred to this when introducing Coxy on TV's "Never Mind The Buzzcocks" a while back, but its a moment Coxy obviously still treasures. According to Carls sister Pam, his trophy still stands proudly on the shelf of his UK office in Horsham to this day. "I should know" she says, "I still have to polish it!" Sutton Scamps had regular Dance competitions and in 1978 held a heat for the National Disco Dancing Competition, but generally speaking these competitions were frowned upon by the serious soul dancer. Grant Santino, is another London Dancer that 70's Soul Boys remember but to many, for all the wrong reasons. In 1978 Santino, a regular on the London Soul Club circuit, appeared on a Saturday Night TV programme hosted by Bruce Forsythe that featured A Disco Dancing Competition. Many of the moves used on the show, were heavily stolen from his elder London contemporaries and according to some, he instantly commercialised the Soul Boy Dance scene. What mattered more than these official Disco competitions for any self respecting London Soul DANCER were the one on one battles out on the floor. Most clubs like Crackers, had dedicated, wooden, sprung dance floors and absolutely nobody wore trainers, they were just plain old plimsoles back then. In 1978 when KC and his Sunshine Band sang "I wanna put on my Boogie shoes" we knew exactly what he meant. At Scamps in Sutton you arrived at the club via a lift to the top of the Eagle Star Insurance building where inside they had 2 small slightly raised circle dance floors with chrome railed perimeters. Unless you were a top dancer like Vic from Croydon, Ramsey, Coxy or Peter Francis you simply wouldn't dare enter the dance floor, and you practiced at home in your plastic sandals or points twinned with a pair of tight fitting Smiths (a.k.a Carpenters) til you had a few decent moves down pat. Even then, chances

are, Tommy Mac would ruin your debut by sashaying across the floor, in your face all flamboyant, and intimidate the dancing life out you, forcing you to skulk back towards the carpeted bar. Soul Spins were essential. Unlike the fast Northern Soul Spin, with arms tucked in and foot moves aided by Talcum Powder, the Southern version involved sticking a leg out at 90 degrees, arms extended and pirouetting several times, in similar fashion to an Ice Skater. We'd practice soul spins regularly at the bus stop or at home in front of the mirror and would challenge each other as to how many spins you could complete in one go. Other southern Soul Dance moves were very tight and precise with knee drops and fast shuffles, or complicated improvised tap like routines. Really athletic dancers like Peter Francis (quite a stocky fella), would even incorporate gymnastic style back flips and splits into his repertoire. The one on one Dance battles, or "burn-ups" as we called them, were also exclusively male and if you were good enough to create a circle with an audience you were highly respected. Needless to say, It happened to me and my mate Adrian Parker (another good dancer from Sutton), just the once! One Sunday Night around 77/78 at The Cats Whiskers in Streatham, tune: Wilbert Longmire's "Black Is The Colour!"

In sharp contrast to Soul Boy burn-ups, Girls would dance to the more down tempo numbers often in formation like an early version of a Country and Western style line dance. Their dances were more commonly known as the bus stop or the slide and in the very early days they could be seen out on the floor doing the hustle or the bump! Big "Girly" soul tunes I remember include El Coco "Lets Get It Together", Bo Kirkland and Ruth Davis "You're Gonna Get Next To Me" and Ashford and Simpson's "It Seems To Hang On." The early Soul Girl look (around 75) consisted of 1950's style skirts, pony tails and plastic sandals progressing to a more chic look from stores such as Joseph and Fiorucci in the late 70s.

By the end of 1978 most of the white trend setters from the Soul Boy old guard had been lost to Punk and the original dancing legends started going to Billy's in Soho, Munkberry's and The Blitz to pose rather than dance, whilst the younger generation of Crackers dancers began to develop a dance taste for something harder...

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT ISSUE...

(Part 2 looks at the London Boogie and Jazz DANCE scenes of the early 1980s)

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MARK DAMON 10 (SUTTON SCAMPS)

Voyage - From East To West/Point Zero (1977)
T Connection - Do What You Wanna Do (1977)
James Mason -
Your Sweet Power Your Embrace (1977)
Doug Richardson - Salsá Mamma (1977)
Earth Wind & Fire - Runnin (1977)
Celi Bee & The Buzzy Bunch -
One Love (1977)
Eastside Connection -
You're So Right For Me (1977)
Pleasure - Joyous (1977)
Mandrill - Can You Get It (Suzy Caesar) (1977)
Mass Production - Cosmic Lust (1977)

MARK ROMAN 10 (CRACKERS)

Act One - Tom The Peeper (1974)
Brass Construction - Moving (1975)
Isaac Hayes - Joy (1973)
Hamilton Bohannon -
South African Man (1975)
Rueben Wilson - Got To Get Your Own (1975)
Banbarra - Shack Up (1975)
Commodores - Machine Gun (1974)
Lonnie Liston Smith - Expansions (1975)
The Fatback Band - Spanish Hustle (1975)
Crystal Grass - Crystal World (1975)

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