

Nightclub roulette

In a case echoing the jailing ten years ago of homeless project managers Ruth Wyner and John Brock for 'allowing' dealing on their premises, two men behind Plymouth's biggest dance club have been jailed for a total of 14 years – despite having no connection to the drug trade. Jonathan Leggett lifts the lid on a case that threatens every clubber, DJ and promoter in the UK.

It's just after one o'clock and 200 committed clubbers in retina-scorching cyberwear and Saturday night best are huddled into Plymouth's Dance Academy. It's been a fairly quiet night for the south west's superclub, so far. But in ten minutes time, the relaxed atmosphere will be shattered. In the streets surrounding the venue, ten police riot vans have gathered. And despite the officers' ravey fluoro shirts, it's safe to say they aren't here to join the party.

Within seconds, the 140 officers are out of the vehicles and barrelling en masse towards the doors of the venue. The first resident DJ Tommie Quick knew that anything out of the ordinary was happening was when DI Dave Huggett, the officer heading the operation, ordered him to kill the

music. "The crowd cheered at first," remembers Tommie, "I guess because they thought the DJ had cocked up. Then there was this massive stampede and a swarm of police in yellow coats and full riot gear arrived – with helmets and shields, everything. They came in both sides of the club and basically surrounded the dance floor. Then they herded everyone like sheep into a circle in the middle. And that's when it started to kick off a bit."

A megaphone announcement then told the clearly rattled crowd, now under the full glare of the incriminating spotlights, to put any drugs they had on them in amnesty boxes and they'd be allowed to walk away. Eight dealers were caught that night. But after spending six months collecting evidence for this raid and using undercover officers to score

drugs in the club, the police thought they had even bigger fish to fry.

With the clubbers dispersed, Tommie's fellow DJ and promoter Tom Costelloe was cuffed and hauled off to spend the night in a police cell. Now, two testing years and a gruelling eight-week trial later, he's three months into a five year jail sentence. With a nine-year stretch, his cellmate and Dance Academy owner Manouchehr Bahmanzade was even less lucky. Both were found guilty under Section 8 of the Misuse of Drugs Act of 'allowing' the sale of Class A drugs at the club – although there is a huge question mark over whether they actually were, as the prosecutors alleged, turning a blind eye. Both sentences are several years longer than those given to the drug dealers caught on the night of the raid, some of whom got off with community



service. And the really frightening thing is that neither Tom nor his boss sold a single pill.

Within 48 hours of the raid, council workmen were putting corrugated iron shutters up on the Dance Academy's doors. The closure was secured thanks to the Anti-Social Behaviour Act of 2003, which empowers police to close a property taken over by drug users or dealers of Class A drugs. Brought in to close down crack houses, the Dance Academy is now the second club to be closed with the legislation, after Brixton's The Fridge, and the repercussions of its use against dance clubs have sent shockwaves around club land. In a nutshell, it's the most blatant attack on dance music and its culture since the Criminal Justice Act declared war on repetitive beats. And it could pave the

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way for a spate of arrests of DJs simply for the crime of playing records in a place where drugs are being taken.

Until recently all that DJs and promoters had to worry about were the numbers on the door and the bodies on the dancefloor. Not any more. The crack house legislation effectively makes them responsible for drug taking and dealing on the premises, and in the words of DJ Huggett, compels them to 'take reasonable steps' to clamp down on it.

And that's perhaps what's most alarming about the verdicts. In anyone's book, reasonable steps were taken to clamp down on drugs. Over a 15-month period more than 50 dealers were shopped to the police by the management and door staff and a new CCTV system was installed before this was a requirement of the licence.

Moreover, Manouchehr signalled his cast-iron commitment to the cause by offering to pay for policemen to stand outside all night. And even the prosecution admitted he had repeatedly told staff and DJs that the club had a zero tolerance attitude to narcotics. But still the judge threw the book at them.

Part of the problem, according to Carl Eve, crime reporter on the Plymouth Herald, was that the men who were holding the defendants' future in their hands clearly haven't stepped inside a club since Frankie Knuckles was in kneepants. Early on in the proceedings the prosecution bafflingly suggested that Tom could have cut down on drug use by taking to the mic every half an hour and shouting "Hey! Don't take drugs, kids". But even that zinger was later trumped by the judge's own idea.

"At some points in court it got comical," says Carl. "The judge kind of half-laughed and said 'you could have changed the music to Strictly Come Dancing or maybe line dancing – something that isn't associated with drugs to attract a different crowd'. That was kind of how far they were teasingly saying they expected Tom and Manouchehr to go. They implied that they'd have accepted that as doing enough."

Tom, who has been working in clubs for nigh on 20 years, but is now lucky if he leaves his cell in Channings Wood prison for more than a few hours a day, might not see the funny side. Before joining the Dance Academy in 1999, he was already a well-liked fixture in the DJ-ing scene. In a career spanning 20 years, he's played at some of the country's most fondly remembered and important clubs. A stint at techno outpost Club UK in its early nineties pomp begat residencies at Love Ranch and God's Kitchen at Space. Locked up in jail as prisoner number VN7615, he's had plenty of time to reflect on how that life has been snatched away.

"There wasn't a single shred of evidence that I was involved with the dealers that ruined the club and my life, but I've still gone down. It hurts me that I've been found guilty and it hurts me even more that as resident DJ and promoter they could find me responsible."

"I never allowed anyone to sell or pass a tablet at any time. When I was manager I arrested friends who were caught with pills, which is a difficult thing to do, but I had to do it."

On the outside he's left behind a three-year-old daughter Heidi and his girlfriend Kelly Mogford. Since Tom has

been locked up, life has been a struggle for them to say the least. "We've lost everything," Kelly said. "We had to sell Tom's car and I've had to move back in with my parents because I couldn't afford to live in our flat anymore. We also had a holiday booked to Ibiza, where we had a load of bookings that are now all up in the air. But the worst thing is I've since found out that he was planning to propose to me over there. I'm in bits about it."

The closure of the club and the loss of its DJ and promoter's musical nous has left a gaping hole in Plymouth's nightlife too. As the leading dance club in the area, it attracted heavyweights Roni Size, Mr Scruff and Gilles Peterson. And even in its now sad and dilapidated state – weeds are growing out of the windows that aren't already smashed and the wooden frontage is rotting and louse-ridden – the former Victorian theatre's dramatic frescoes of Sir Francis Drake's victories and elegant art nouveau signage mean that it's still one of the grandest buildings in the city.

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The city's clubs now are grim spit and sawdust chain bars with a bloodcurdling tang of ultra-violence in the air. In the few hours spent out and about along the drag of Union Street, we see one broken nose and a set of six young droogs administering a shoeing. And that's before a hair-pulling stand-off between two pocket-sized girls in one bar descends into a WWF-style tag team free for all. Like the cantina scene in *Star Wars*, when Greedo buys it at Han Solo's hands, none of the clientele so much as bats an eyelid.

Now with the crack house legislation in place and likely to be used again, it's almost certain that no promoter will take a chance on opening another dance club to give Plymouth's clubbers somewhere decent to go. Carl concurs, noting that owners and promoters will now see putting on specialist dance nights as more hassle than it's worth

and choose not to bother. "I don't think anyone would set up a club in Plymouth now because they'd have a sense that there'd be a sharp eye on them at all times," he said.

"You're going to have the council, the police and the entire judicial system giving you an absolute roasting before you start. They would scrutinise your history and they would scrutinise your money, they would put the kind of conditions on it that would be almost impossible to carry out."

In fact, the way some locals tell it, the authorities' decision to raid the club wasn't so much down to a vendetta against dance clubs and culture, but a long-held desire to gain control of the Dance Academy building as the centrepiece of a gentrification project. Certainly message boards are awash with speculation about a cloak and dagger conspiracy, which posits that the council planned to turn the club into an arts centre. For their part, the council have denied the rumours, with representatives claiming that the cost of refurbishment is out of their reach.

Kelly, however, is unconvinced: "They're already building two sets of luxury flats behind the club and it's pretty unlikely that the kind of people who can afford them would want to live next to a club." She adds: "Also about two years beforehand the council actually tried to get the building, which a lot of people don't actually know. They actually approached Manouchehr with an offer, but he told them he didn't want to sell his business. Why would he?"

Should his forthcoming appeal against the ruling fail, however, he might just wish he had. Tom has also lodged an appeal, but with this likely to take months to come through, in the meantime he's relying on his friends to get him by and raise awareness of his situation. Onside so far is one-time law student and DJ megastar Judge Jules, who predicts that the ruling will have "appalling implications for all clubs" and dubbed the treatment of its management team as "draconian".

As much as he now wants to clear his name, though, Tom also wants his case to act as a warning to other DJs. "To club owners, promoters and fellow DJs: for God's sake, please be careful. Make sure what happens to me doesn't happen to you."

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