

The Grin Factor

Happy, happy, HAPPY!
Acid house music is causing scenes of blissed-out Bacchanalia and furthering the revolution in low-tech recording. Have A Nice Day with David Roberts.



Chris Clunn

AT 11pm on a drizzly English summer's evening, an extraordinary scene is taking place. Apparently oblivious to the weather and the incredulous passers-by—indeed to everything—are hundreds upon hundreds of garishly dressed persons looking like nothing so much as a disembarking planeload of Gatwick holidaymakers. They are queuing, four or five thick, outside the door of Heaven nightclub underneath the arches at Charing Cross.

Inside the club, a little later, the plot thickens. The chanting, partying, grinning inmates are gleefully bouncing their way through some unique and untutored choreography. Others, no less delirious, are slumped against walls, quietly absorbing the mesmeric beat. A curiously large proportion are wearing T-shirts emblazoned with that little smiley face that says Have A Nice Day, or Ecstasy or the faintly familiar Turn On Tune In Drop Out. A tattered banner on one wall has been inexpertly daubed with the legend The Summer Of Love.



David Swindells

A NEW MUSICAL SCENE has turned London clubland on its head, bringing a flood of new records and artists and leaving the industry, record buyers and daytime national radio DJs with a new phenomenon to grapple with — acid house. Acid house clubs have sprung up all over the capital at an incredible rate over the last few months, going by names like Joy, The Trip, Spectrum, Shoom, Hedonism and The Future. Jostling for space inside them you will have found interested parties such as Boy George, Martin Fry, Arthur Baker, George Clinton, Herbie Hancock, Run-DMC, Mica Paris and Derek B. And much of the music being played is currently in the Singles Chart. Flip over a copy of Yaz's recent Number 1 single *The Only Way Is Up* and you'll discover the acid house remix. Check out the latest 12-inch versions of hit singles like *Hustle!* by the Sheffield club-based Funky Worm, or *Heat It Up* from West London's Wee Papa Girl Rappers or *S'Express's Superfly Guy*, or even records like *The Race* by Swiss experimentalists Yello or *Ye Ke Ye Ke* by the Guinean singer Mory Kante and everyone, it seems, is eager for a piece of the action.

House music was born in the nightclubs of Chicago, and first found a home in the UK two summers ago when Farley Jackmaster Funk broke into the charts with *Love Can't Turn Around*. That record was an example of the so-called 'Philly' house sound, deriving from the '70s disco records of artists like Harold Melvin & The Blue Notes and Archie Bell & The Drells. All house follows the basic 4/4 beat format of disco but since the early days, when Chicago club DJ Frankie Knuckles mixed in records with the sound of a drum machine and more obscure elements like the noise of a speeding train, house has built on its foundations in different directions. In 1988 the soulful flavour of 'deep house' remains the closest to early Chicago house, 'techno' is the futuristic, synthesizer-based sound of Detroit — the kind of music a late '80s black Kraftwerk might make — and now acid house is the latest and most fantastic edifice.

Again originating in Chicago, there's still some dispute as to how acid house got its name: one school of thought claims it derives from the record called *Acid Trax* by Phuture; another from the Chicago slang phrase "acid burning", meaning stealing — or, in this case, sampling other records. Rejecting established songwriting formats, acid house pares vocal and melody to a minimum — substituting a mesmeric, repetitive beat as the central element in a swirling and disoriented collage of sampled aural debris, often including a wandering, gurgling bass line. One of the reasons



"Acid" and the smiley face have become password and symbol, respectively, for this summer's definitive dance sound.

for its rapid proliferation is that its manufacture requires few of the traditional elements associated with writing and recording and only a fraction of the cost.

"It's like getting back to the punk days," says Peter "Baby" Ford, the 23-year-old Mancunian who made *Oochy Coochy* (F.U. Baby Yeh Yeh), one of this summer's hottest acid tracks, on an 8-track console in a garage in Mitcham in January when he "didn't even have a sniff of a record deal" and simply felt inspired by house music he heard on pirate radio. "Back in '77 when you had a guitar and a few geezers in the band you could just bash something out. You don't need a record company advance or a studio in your house, you just need ideas and a few quid."

Even now Ford's requirements are still unusually low-budget: two synthesizers (one of which he bought for £8), a £2,000 sampler, a £2,000 sequencer and an £1,800 mixing desk. And this how he works: "First I get a bass drum sample, boost the bottom and tickle the top and put it through some tone changes. Then I add — manually, 'cos I used to be a drummer — the snares, hi-hats and rim shots. Then maybe an idea for a string pad (an orchestral chord sample played like a melody line). Then a fluctuating bass line, played on a keyboard and accented in places. Then you start thinking about hooklines — little keyboard riffs, catchy bits and rhythmically mixed words. Then I sometimes sample myself singing. Then I add spontaneous lyrics that I get from a book that I carry around full of titles and words and little lines that I write down because they might be useful later."

In England imported house music took hold in the clubs in the North, with their Northern Soul heritage, long before it managed to shirk its trashy gay-disco image and oust the apparently hipper sounds of rap and rare groove in London and the South. Now the capital vibrates to acid house seven nights a week.

Much of this change of attitude towards the acid invasion is directly related to a small posse of London club DJs who, over the last six years, had begun spending all their holidays in Ibiza. There the nightclubs have a different approach. Paul Oakenfold, the 25-year-old DJ behind some of this year's most successful London clubs (Spectrum, The Future, Miami, Project), takes up the story: "Most places you go to in the world you have all these different clubs — rap clubs, rock clubs, R&B — and all these clubs play separate kinds of music. But in Ibiza they play all different kinds of music in one club." In Ibiza Peter Gabriel



Acid house devotees re-create the heady ambience of Mediterranean holiday nights down the disco (main picture) and weird out the *Summer of Love* way (below) at Spectrum club nights in London.

"Great! Brilliant! Let's create a new psychedelic dance music — excessive use of new technology plus humour and weirdness — and push it to the limit within a contemporary format."



David Swindells

David Swindells





Peter "Baby" Ford recording in a converted garage in Mitcham: "It's like getting back to punk days, when you had a guitar and a few geezers in the band and you could just bash something out. You don't need a record company advance or a studio in your house, you just need ideas and a few quid."

mixes happily into Public Enemy into an acid house track into Simple Minds into Donna Summer, and people don't go out to listen to a certain type of music but just to dance.

Although Oakenfold initially attempted a club along Ibiza lines a few years ago, it was only last year, when one of his regular after-hours Ibiza get-togethers in his South London one nighter became sufficiently popular to attract police attention, that he realised the time was ripe. Starting by hiring a small West End club on a Thursday night Oakenfold and his fellow Balearic Islands revellers, now found the demand for their new "Balearic Beat" nights insatiable.

By interspersing acid tracks with the records they'd heard in Ibiza — "anything that had an urgency to it, that could sustain the same kind of feeling" like Thrashing Doves, Peter Gabriel and Yello, or "anything with high tack value" like Cyndi Lauper and Mandy Smith — they managed to import the flavour of a blissed-out non-stop Mediterranean holiday to the rain-sodden backwaters of Central London.

Paul Oakenfold: "I think there's always been a lot of people who've wanted to go out and have a good time. But you couldn't really do it, either because the music being played was preaching violence and aggression, or if you went out, ran around and jumped up and down, people would say, 'What's wrong with him? But now everybody's doing it.'"

Other factors helped complete the picture. Clubbers would turn up wearing exceptionally "high tack" smiley-faced T-shirts and luminous glow bands they'd acquired at shoddy beach stalls on the Costa Del Sol. Suitably assisted by the relentless trance beats and strobe lighting effects, they began disporting themselves with a lack of self-consciousness that only tends to afflict British people when abroad, and dressing in studiously "uncool" attire such as flares, beads, cut-off shorts, velvet capes and sundry other psychedelic haberdashery.

To further assist feelings of euphoria and gay abandon, some punters conveniently assumed there was a link between acid house and the ingesting of LSD. The '88 Summer Of Love has appeared all the more authentic via the arrival of the modern acid substitute, Ecstasy — sometimes

more slickly known as "E". A synthetic drug, Ecstasy, is valued for its supposedly inhibition-lowering properties, promoting sociability and a dreamy fug of good will. Already, though, warnings have been sounded about the substance's long term drawbacks, with emotional and nervous instability being cited as the major risks.

One team particularly pushing the psychedelic connection is DJ Richard "Noise" Norris (also of the St Albans-based psychedelic re-issue label Bam Caruso) and Psychic TV leader Genesis P. Orridge. They've jointly put out a collection of "Techno Acid Beats" under the title Jack The Tab — much of which sounds like old '70s O'Jays bass lines and loud machine-generated drums mixed in with samples of class psychedelic records by bands like The Electric Prunes. In the main, Bam Caruso have concentrated on re-issues of dependably mind-expanding material by such as The Seeds, The Left Bank, Nirvana, The Koobas, The Eyes, John's Children, The Gants and Hearts And Flowers. For Norris, acid house was something to get excited about.

"I heard the term acid house long before I heard the music," he says. "I thought great, a brilliant idea, let's try and create a new psychedelic dance music using the same aspects that I like about psychedelia — ie excessive use of new technology plus humour and weirdness and pushing it to the limit within a contemporary format. I found the hypnotic elements, the trance elements, very reminiscent of certain psychedelic things. I can probably imagine Pink Floyd live 20 years ago using the same kind of repetition, the same kind of light shows and techniques."



Mark Moore, the club DJ behind the recent S'Express hits Theme From S'Express and Superfly Guy: "It's the same reaction the old fogies had when rock'n'roll first started — what is all this mindless moronic noise and why is Elvis shaking his hips like that?"



Paul Oakenfold, the DJ behind the London clubs Spectrum, The Future, Miami and Project: "There's always been a lot of people who wanted to go out and have a good time but the music being played was preaching violence and aggression."



Farley "Jackmaster" Funk, whose Love Can't Turn Around was the first UK house hit, reaching Number 10 in September 1986.

Disappointed with the Chicago acid sound when he actually first heard it, Norris believes that the best of the new sounds are going to be produced on this side of the Atlantic. "I think the whole idea of having British mutated versions of American black music is obviously nothing new. That's where the interesting thing is going to happen — when we export it back to them. It's just like re-exporting Bo Diddley and the blues through the Stones and the British beat invasion."

Where is it heading? Not far, if one is to believe the Radio One dance trend arbiter and roadshow veteran Peter Powell. "It's the closest thing to mass organised zombiedom. I really don't think that it should go any further."

Mark Moore, the club DJ behind the recent S'Express hits Theme From S'Express and Superfly Guy, is a little aggravated that the backlash has already started. "I think it's the same reaction the old fogies had when rock'n'roll first started — what is all this mindless moronic noise and why is Elvis shaking his hips like that?"

"There's bound to be people sitting in studios, people working in record companies, and they suddenly want to do acid house because the record company wants to market it," says Peter Ford. "But I think if they're under the impression that it's just a technical sort of music, that you can just say the high-hat does 16ths, the snare skips on a certain beat etc, then it's going to turn out crap."

What makes the difference between a good and bad acid house record?

"Some stuff is just contrived. It's got all the elements people think ought to make up acid house but with none of the feeling. A record is just an emotion that's committed to tape. If it moves you, it's a good record. It's got to have the grin factor. But it could be a burn-out situation if the music doesn't progress. It could just be, Do you remember 1988? But this is not American '60s and '70s revival music — it's '90s generation music. It's something that can be developed and moved forward."

"There'll be a definite move away from spoken word samples towards music samples," reckons Richard Norris. "A move — especially in British music — towards dance music that is more than purely functional, that you can enjoy on the dance floor but also listen to in your living-room. In the backrooms there'll be people working on albums and CDs for multi-national labels utilising what they've learnt through acid house."