



rw



CULTURE

LONG LIVE **QUEER** **CLUBBING**

by [Alex Brzezicka](#)

For the 50th anniversary of the first UK Pride, we immerse into the London queer utopias and celebrate their founders.

Queer, originally meaning strange or peculiar, was an 18th-century slur for non-hetero relationships. Since the 1980s activists reclaimed it as purposely provoking and politically radical, the word has already a long history of shame, pain and beauty behind it. Queer challenges the assumed binary of gender and sexuality. Queer celebrates the other, often banished on the societal peripheries by common sense and constructs. Queer means proposing an alternative to the mainstream expressions of love and identity. Queer is a revolution fought with joy and tear, the transgressive power of the LGBTQIA+ community. Queer is pride.

Meaning so much, sometimes it's too much. Almost as if eaten alive by self-conscious thoughts and intimidated by the social media putting pressure to be fierce, fab and serve, it's close to impossible to meet the standards for something that ironically is supposed to set us free. In the place of the original initiation question of, am I not straight, and after an affirmative response, the new one appeared, sabotaging my sanity from inside out, am I queer enough? In the current capitalistic climate and its hunger to assimilate anything not-normative, screams of the various London scenes and general identity struggle in post-pandemic digitalised society, it's easy to get lost.

Then, the second I step into the gates of a queer venue, everything seems just right. Among the laughs of humans from every walk of life and forward-pacing music defying the rights of sound, I belong. Today, it's time to pay back and praise the people who make it possible and continue to push boundaries of what queer clubbing is and can be for the next generation of London kids.

Meet our queer club heroes this year: Josh Caffé, Ryan Lanji, Jeanie Crystal, Parma Ham and misery...





JOSH CAFFÉ

We fell for Josh Caffé as the flamboyant frontman of Paranoid London and stayed for everything else. A queer London icon and a free spirit, from fiercely performing, DJing around the world, and founding a queer club night/record label Lovechild, Caffé engrained himself into London's scene's DNA. "God, it's going back to like the 1800s... I probably started going out around the early 2000s. Around that time, in London, there was an electroclash revival, which is quite cool," he says on his early clubbing days. Back then, Soho was beaming with energy, "What you see now it's basically the meatpacking district in New York. It's so gentrified". From ambisexual Nag Nag Nag venue, parties like The Cock, Return to New York, Trailer Trash and secret warehouse events in still developing East London. "It was like one cash-point in a whole of Shoreditch," Josh laughs. In the roughness of the area, the underground blossomed.

"You went out and you had the queer goths, you had queer R&B crew, you had the electric kids, you had the bears, you had lesbians. Everyone was all together. It was a great way for you to feel accepted and comfortable," he says. As niches became more and more in fashion, it was easier to feel excluded: "You can imagine, a skinny, black queer guy going to a bear bar. Sometimes I'd get stared at quite a lot or maybe people wouldn't speak to me so much versus being in a place where everyone from every walk of life was around. You never felt intimidated".



Josh grew up on straight-leaning jungle and garage, so entering the queer world and finding his tribe was an eye-opening experience. Today, he chases for that high, found either in a pre-pandemic afterparty in Budapest in a gay sauna where for one night, everyone was allowed in, "It was a really beautiful environment to be in because normally a gay sauna you'd associate purely with sex and just men...I've never experienced something like that in London in all the years". Though recently London has levelled up, from HTBX, Pxssy Palace to a daytime rave, Unfold. "[Unfold] Really restored my faith in London's venues. I did the gig sober as well. Seeing it from a different angle, to be in such a high-energy techno party sober, I was really worried about it at first but I had so much fun," he praises.

London's queer club scene sees its heyday again but that can attract spectators. "They just want to see this show, which is really not cool and it's very intrusive," Josh says. He finds it important to address the safety issue either through the door policy or a discourse. Still, as an advocate for the community, he's against the cliques and wants to bring in everyone truly interested and looking for a space to belong to. "One of the things I've really appreciated from my clubbing days back then was that all the types mixed together," he says, "We should all be together as much as we can and remember why people who stood before us in the 60 and 70s marched together in New York. What I mean, those marches had everyone in them, rather than just a certain section of our community".

RYAN LANJI, founder of Hungama

"I remember walking past Dalton Superstore. I was terrified to go inside because I felt like if I went in, I would be shunned or I get in trouble," says Ryan Lanji about being paralysed before entering East London's iconic venue 12 years ago. At first, loving the experience, but eventually, he started to question the given description of queerness. "I felt like because I was there, I had to like everything around me. I had to like the music and the people. One time, I realised that I was actually being subjected to generalisation and discrimination based on the way I looked or the way someone felt about me".

"I realised that there was no safe space for people like myself, people who identify as queer other or queer of colour,

or queer South Asian,” Ryan says. That, and his love for Bollywood, inspired him to found Hungama. “I wanted to create a space that allowed people to listen to music and eradicate the notion of cool or hierarchy of success in a subculture”.

Hungama became an intersectional, forward-thinking event and a centre for the Southern Asian creative community. “It’s very contemporary. It’s public-facing. It’s unapologetic. It’s crazy and it’s creative. It’s hugely inspired by Studio54. It was a really amazing moment where everyone in New York came together to celebrate their success, meet each other, party, be a bit hedonistic, and also create culture. I think Hungama has managed to do that,” Ryan admits, “It’s now way bigger than me. It’s way bigger than our community.”



“It was super powerful to create a space for the South Asian community to come together and feel, argue and un-learn, and relearn. It was difficult, but it was important for the development of our voice,” Ryan shares. Leaden by empathy and compassion, he’s excited to participate in wider conversation as a talking-head for the queer counter-culture. “Everything always needs to start as queer of colour or trans first, and then it should be centred towards more white people,” he says, hinting at the Stonewall riots.

“How do you grow the community, but keep the meaning, the message and the mindsets? That’s a powerful one for me. Anyone who comes in regardless of what they look like, or how they dress or how they identify, they all have the same morals and core values,” he says about the vision for his club night. Celebrating queer club spaces, he gives special mention to Nadine Noor, founder of Pxssy Palace. “It would be really disrespectful to not acknowledge the work that they put in to create safety and spaces and intersectionality and intentional spaces in a way that we’ve never seen before”. Attending their parties, made him realise how much power a queer POC community has to make a difference.

In love with the unforgettable and hedonistic, Ryan Lanji believes in finding a happy medium between mainstream and alternative. “I think it’s possible to take the chaos of Berghain, Fold or raves that you get all over East London and apply them in a bit more of a commercial way,” he says, “There’s something wonderful about making things slightly more accessible. You don’t have to be underground”.





JEANIE CRYSTAL, co-founder of Harpies and Faboo

Jeanie Crystal, co-founder of Harpies, a strip club celebrating queer and trans+ bodies, and Faboo TV, a platform to showcase high and low culture affair, shines a special light on London's nighttime scene. A multidisciplinary, bold artist, always empowers the community that inspired her.

"I was born into nightclubs. I have always been part of that space," Jeanie says on her initiation. Going through her siblings' record collections and listening to early Prodigy, or the XL recordings in the heyday of 90s rave made her curious and prepared to move to London as a teenager. There she discovered the queer venues dimension. "These places were super gay. Loads of men with their tops off, sweating. I've never had an experience in a club space where I felt so safe in a way from patriarchy. That really changed my understanding of things". From there, she joined a black queer art collective that let her understand herself even more. "I've never really experienced clubbing in a way where I will be having these really honest and open conversations about my race identity within those groups, which really informed me about how I carry myself, how I feel about myself," she says.

Working as a stripper and putting live art events in places like VF Dalston, she realised that usually it's just cis het men's desires that are being satisfied. From there arose Harpies. "It always was quite obvious that we should try and make space for all desires. The mission was to try and make that space a safe space. A lot of trans and queer people do sex work but because of the taboo around loving and desiring trans bodies, it can be really unsafe. The mission was to keep the structure of the strip club but open up desiring subjects". That's a ground-break for this and future generations.



A side hustle, FABOO TV, is her and Josh Quinton's online platform went club night extravaganza. Meshing high and low culture, they've birthed a fabulous hybrid, queer to the bones. "We wanted to put everything in one space but also at the same time, we were very keen to elevate the underground space so that you might see someone from the National Opera, and then you might see a stripper," she says, "There is no hierarchy of arts".

Jeanie Crystal made the London scene a more conscious and safe space yet, in the world where homophobia still exists, the young, queer people will continue to subvert and create their own spaces on the way to freedom. "We've seen a lot of like corruption of queerness for capitalism, but that's the world we live in. I truly believe that in the future, we will still see people coming up with great nights and concepts and connecting with each other because they are cathartic places," she says. It goes beyond the club space and acts as a mediator in the inner healing process.

London has a reputation for welcoming outcasts with open arms, and will as long as the living costs won't keep on endlessly rising.

"The reason why queer spaces are so important is that a lot of my interests and work is around how to find emancipation or how to be free outside of structures that exist in patriarchy, or white supremacy, or heteronormativity. All of these kinds of structures that we're born into. Queer spaces are very much dedicated to highlighting and subverting all of these oppressive structures that are around us. Nightlife in general definitely has the capacity for people to forget these structures, to forget about capitalism, to forget about work, to connect to their bodies, to dance, to talk to people freely in a space that allows that", she says.

PARMA HAM, founder of Wraith

Sometimes genius reveals itself by accident. When in 2019, a multidisciplinary artist, Parma Ham, wanted to produce a fashion show with Salvia. Lacking resources and platforms, Parma created their own night. From there grew the most exciting phenomenon that London has seen in a while: transgressive beyond the limitations of old subcultures, it proposed a new world. Wraith rose on the goth-blessed soil fertilized with a hunger for connection in the community.

"I wanted to be able to provide a platform and a space for subversive art. If you look at the attainable alternatives, there aren't any," Parma says, "If you go to a club, it's very dominated by music, which I love. But as a community space, there's a lot more to us than music. When I go to a club, I'm not going just for the music, I'm going for the people, and with that I want to celebrate more than just DJs and Musicians". Wraith recently released Inertia zine which pays tribute to the whole community, including usually left-out creatives like poets, authors, and philosophers, while engaging in a club-oriented academic discourse.

Wraith proposed a new structure for the night event, a sensual feast filled with fashion, art and noise. "Providing the space, which is by the community, for all of the community, really makes a big difference". Coming from a working-class estate, Parma Ham knows the value of finding your true family. Before moving to London, they were fed illusions of Soho's club life utopia and were confused on arrival: "Soho has rich club history from the '70s, '80s and '90s. But turning up seven years ago, it really wasn't that interesting. In hindsight it's kind of awful. It's not remotely queer or representative", they say. Out of the binary boredom of Soho, they found solace in a few clubs like Slimelight and Kaos and through alternative subculture, "By its very nature, goth is queer because of its flamboyance, it's extremity, it's gender-blending, it's openness to sex and fetish. That was where I found solace".



Wraith is a reflection of their persistence and respect for otherness. With sober people coming to view art and performance, as well as many foreign students who are not in tune with the Western culture of alcohol and debauchery, the space needs to be aware of everyone's needs. "A queer club that can go beyond catering to just hard raves is really important. It doesn't need to be sober, but it needs to be a place where you can comfortably exist without alcohol and drugs, and still live your life and fantasy. We enjoy dressing up and immersing ourselves in a community, as well as celebrating the incredible line-up where you never know what will happen" Parma says.

In an era where the mainstream is ready to swallow anything alternative, Wraith protects its inhabitants. "The queer space must be a safe space. It needs to be a place where you feel comfortable. There's nothing wrong with people wearing jeans and t-shirts, but if I'm in an environment wearing a jockstrap and PVC, totally outnumbered by people dressed for a long-haul flight, I suddenly feel like I'm being watched, a spectacle or part of the show, when I came to the club to avoid the feeling of feeling otherness." Parma shares. The increasing number of people coming excites them, but as long as their intentions are pure and they want to immerse themselves.

With sex and dating apps, as well as younger generations prioritising health and work, club culture is generally in decline. Yet, the queerest generation who grew up with discourse surrounding non-binary and gender non-conformity still crave a place to congregate and still wish to search out the community. "This is why I really push for celebrating everyone. Social media no longer serves us and would rather bury us, and this is why clublands relevance is only increasing and getting better," Parma Ham says. Wraith offers people the chance to express, exist freely, and flourish. A rite of passage into a utopia, Wraith has provided a platform for so many creatives "Giving someone their first oppor-

tunity sparks something inside them, it makes them feel seen, it reinforces that their output is valuable and that they do have a place in the world. Being able to offer that is the most rewarding thing, and something I didn't anticipate when I started this project". Art inspiring more art is the most beautiful side effect, and it has the power to permanently change the cultural landscape that our community inhabits.



misery, mental health collective and sober club night centring healing for QTIBPOC

misery is a shimmering hope and a breath of fresh air for the QTIBPOC community. Created in late 2018 by Aisha Mirza and babetheory following the frustration of how little support is accessible: "We had dealt with the suicide of friends and other QTIBPOC, our own suicidality and chronic mental health struggles, and the addiction issues that famously taunt the QTIBPOC community were feeling all too close to home," they say.

"We love to party but were feeling increasingly disillusioned and out of place in the hot, heavy, hedonistic and extroverted queer nightlife scene. We wanted to create some kind of mental health intervention, but didn't want to leave the club behind," and that's how misery was born. A place to continue the legacy for any "othered" people and a chance to bring every part of themselves to the dance floor, from slutty to sad, "in which people can meet, chat, dance, cry, learn and experience together, shielded, just for those moments, from an imperial gaze." The community deserves better mediums to heal in freedom than dissociating substances like alcohol or drugs.

As a brilliant interpretation of the 'just take a walk outside' advice given to many seeking mental health support, they created a monthly event where the misery community is taking walks together. "misery medicine: plant magic, our herbalism & foraging programme, started off as a dream of Aisha's throughout their personal journey with London's herbs, greens and community gardens," they say, looking to expose the relationship between nature and mental health.





"The more we thought about it, the clearer it became that if we were trying to make some kind of real mental health intervention, we'd need people to be present for it," they say about the start of their sober raves, "Sober spaces aren't just a health asset, but an anti-capitalist one too, which, call us dated or whatever, feels important". misery in its core is built as a non-judgemental space, they don't question anyone's relationship to substances but give a choice. "We understand people's trepidations about sober spaces. Addiction rhetoric has historically been chock-full of judgement, moralism, unhelpful and unrealistic goal setting, and inherently shaming language like "getting clean". We're careful not to replicate these sometimes well-meaning but ultimately damaging frameworks and are looking instead to use our understanding of radical mental health practices which centre the voices of people in need, to create opportunities for marginalised people to have fun in alcohol-free spaces," they explain.

misery has already proven that sky is a limit if there's a will for change. "We are dreaming of, and working to create worlds where every queer, trans, intersex black, brown and indigenous person has access to a choice of knowledge, resources, communities and health care services that they need to sustain their wellbeing," they say. With no pressure that's often put on them to be all the things fierce, misery whispers that it's ok to experience all range of emotions. They're here to support no matter what. "misery plays in the space of sorrow and cheekiness, trauma and utopia, and it feels hard and it feels magical, and there is no peace until everyone has a piece of it," they say.

RELATED



AN AESTHETIC HOLIDAY
GIFT GUIDE: **THE
CYBERCORE EDITION**



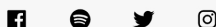
AN AESTHETIC HOLIDAY
GIFT GUIDE: **THE
NIGHTLUXE EDITION**



AN AESTHETIC HOLIDAY
GIFT GUIDE: **THE
COQUETTE EDITION**



AN AESTHETIC HOLIDAY
GIFT GUIDE: **THE BARBIE
EDITION**



Today was so yesterday.

You don't want to miss a thing.

SUBSCRIBE