

LENNY FONTANA: CLUBBING ON THE FRONTLINE

After his storming New York-themed set at Faith's New Year's Day party, and given his front row seat for the golden era in the Big Apple's storied clubbing history we spotlight in this issue, we had to talk to longtime Friend of Faith Lenny Fontana about his wonderful HOUSE history

PHOTOS: Courtesy of Lenny Fontana



PRESSING 'RECORD': TERRY FARLEY

STARTING OUT...

TELL US HOW YOU STARTED OUT - LOCAL HEROES, NEIGHBOURHOOD CLUBS, EARLY DJING EXPERIENCES...

My local hero was my cousin Michael Prestia, who showed me how to edit with the pause button and turntable, producing the bits and pieces type of mixes on cassette to pass around to all your friends. Radio had another big impact on me with Shep Pettibone and Tony Humphries 98.7 Kiss FM Mastermixes. Hearing Tee Scott, John Morales and Larry Levan on WBLS and emulating their mixes. Playing at school events for all your friends with my belt driven turntables and mixer was very important. It was my first step of being able to play for a real crowd and my mixing would develop from there.

Later Tony Humphries, Merlin Bob, Marley Marl and Timmy Regisford on New York radio really changed the game with their long overlays of playing Disco classics over current dance music. Shep's mixes, with his edits and overlays of 3 and 4 records at a time really set a new standard and everyone was trying to duplicate this. You can imagine all this was new and exciting, and we all wanted a piece of it between all the brand-new music coming out and all the new techniques being unveiled.

THE ROAD TO PARADISE...

WE WANT YOUR 'FIRST TIME YOU WERE TAKEN TO THE PARADISE GARAGE' STORY...

I have to thank DJ David Lozada (RIP), he was my close friend and without his friendship, I would never have gone to the Garage and experienced what came after. David and I met in the record shops around Downtown NYC and became fast friends with as he introduced me to all his friends from Washington Heights. I was a kid from Ozone Park Queens, looked at as a white boy. Everyone used to come to my mother's house to hang with me. They found out my mother was Puerto Rican, making me half Italian and half PR which made me cool.

In my neighbourhood was a group of guys of Italian descent who called themselves Cuigines, which in English means cousins. They dressed in cut t-shirts, track suits, white deck shoes - the guys had Duck's Ass (aka DA) haircuts and the girls teased their hair with loads of hairspray to be styled high. They all hung out on the main street in front of Carvel Ice Cream Shop and called themselves The Corner Boys. They used to frequent the Funhouse week in and week out and talked about how great Jellybean was as a DJ.

Their theme songs were Afrika Bambaataa's 'Planet Rock' and Jimmy Castor Bunch 'It's Just Begun'. In the Funhouse you had different neighborhoods rivaling, The Canarsie Boys battling The OZ Boys in a dance called uprocking and hearing everyone scream "OZ Rocks The House," "Brooklyn Rocks the House" and so forth. My cousin Mike P would enlighten me on all the new records that John Jellybean Benitez was playing. I spoke about how great the sound was and of course I heard the Electro music that Jellybean was playing, and I had shared my experience with David Lozada. David said, "Lenny, you have not lived till you went to the Garage." What the hell does that exactly mean? Well, I was soon to find out.

Meanwhile my close friend Vinny from my area, whose cousins were going Friday nights to the Garage, told me you need to go. So, David brings me on a hot summer Saturday night in July. I went to a place called Playland in Times Square to have a fake ID made. All my friends were older than me so I couldn't wait to be older because clubbing was everything. David met me at West 4th Street in the Village by the A Train Line and as soon as I saw him my heart was already double beating from nerves. David said to relax as he knew the door staff and he had a card from Larry Levan, so he was able to get me in as his personal guest. I remember Noel saying this clearly, if it was not for you David, there is no way I would let that cute blando boy in the room.

Nothing in my life has ever happened like this up to this point. Soon as you travel up that ramp it's like being baptised by fire stepping onto the Garage dancefloor. Larry was playing Martin Circus with the echoes and the place was jumping up and down. This was the first time I was in a Latino and gay black night club. The energy coming from the dance floor was electrifying. I never heard sound like this, it was loud and bass heavy. David took me into the dance floor and said, "Bitch are you scared?" and my answer was 'nooooo'... hell yeah, I totally was. The whole experience was overwhelming in every way. I was hot in the room like a locker room, I can smell marijuana, crack and tobacco in the air from people smoking.

When Larry dropped South Shore Commission 'Free Man', at the break of the record the room erupted like a typhoon hit, and then 'bam!' he changes everything with Eddy's Grant 'Living on The Frontline', and the dance floor went completely dark. I thought my chest was going to cave in from the bass of that record. He ran the police sirens over the sound system to hype the place up. Eventually, David brought me up to the booth and this is where I saw Thorens Turntables for the first time, as I was used to seeing Technics 1200s. I remember being glued to the wall, sponging it all in. Once you seen an operation like this working, nothing else will ever compare again. I thought I was a DJ up to this point, well after experiencing Levan live and hearing him snap cue records, playing acappellas over instrumentals and using the tape machine as a delay, I knew I wanted to be like him.

I even drank some of the punch which stupid David, knowing how green I was, didn't tell me was spiked. I saw people openly doing drugs, snorting coke and dropping acid pills which later I found out was called Peach - I was not ready to experience all of this, but it was the 1980s and this was all part of the experience. We stood till 9am or 10 am Sunday morning and I remem-

ber having to take the A train towards home all screwed up from the night and totally blown away. So, I ended up at Beach 108 (The Disco Beach) in the Rockaways and didn't tell my family of my movements. We didn't have cell phones in those days, we always found each other because we had meeting spots. When I finally returned home, I was so busted from all this partying, but I will say this to this day 'til I am no longer here - it was all worth it, as I would never have ended up being in house music and becoming an international DJ and producer.



SYSTEM ADDICT

WAS IT HERE THAT YOUR LOVE FOR / OBSESSION WITH CLUB SOUND SYSTEMS STARTED?

Well, my old friend DJ Carlos Cordova gets huge credit. He would speak about his days working for Alex Rosner of Rosner Custom Sound and working on sound system installs at Max's Kansas City, Nicky Siano's The Gallery and David Mancuso's Loft. He was older than all of us, and mentored us, giving the behind-the-scenes history of all the clubs as he started playing in 1970-1971. Remember, there was nothing written about any of this nor any internet to research anything back then. He was really a great DJ. For example, he had the pamphlets to Richard Long and Associates explaining about the speaker boxes that Richard used in the installs and all the different sound systems at the clubs.

He showed a bunch of us the technical end of splicing tape, soldering wires and the use of Tweeter Arrays. I remember his favourite mix was using Chic 'Good Times' to show us long overlaying and echo tricks. As we were all the younger generation coming up, he wanted to make sure this art was not going to be lost. I used to go his apartment in Park Slope Brooklyn, and I became friends with a lot of the guys from that area. Tony Lee (of 'Reach Up' fame) lived in his building, I remember going to a private party as his apartment. Carlos saw something in me very early as he said I had the drive and the passion to follow all this - and believe it or not I still have that same passion as I did when I was younger.

WHAT WAS THE BEST SYSTEM YOU PLAYED ON IN NY BACK IN THE 90S?

I used to have a residency at System on 14th Street, it was not a Steve Dash Sound system, but it was a Gary Stewart System, and it had the Bertha stacks. For me, playing at The Underground was my chance to play on a real Richard Long Soundsystem. Compared to the Garage it was never at that level, but by today's standards, it would be greater than anything else I ever played on.



JUST COME ON DOWN TO THE 54

TELL US ABOUT PLAYING AT STUDIO 54...

I played at Studio 54 the later part of the 1980s - Freddy Bastone, Louie Vega and Larry Levan were playing there as well. I was resident DJ at the time for promoter Baird Jones and his parties. He did his events at all the hot spots, it was not DJ-driven like it is today, it was more about the party. He had a Yuppy / mixed after work Wall Street style crowd with bridge and tunnel, and that brings money to the bar.

This was my way into the big New York City night clubs. He promoted at The Underground, where I played for him, and because he could move his party around the city on different nights of the week, he would bring his wonderful drinking crowd to Studio 54 on a Wednesday or Thursday night. When I got in there, I was totally excited as this was the most famous club in the world, but the famed RLA sound system was gone, and they brought in a Soundsystem from the Clair Brothers. It sounded terrible but I was happy to be playing for Baird and at a reputable NYC club.

At this time Palladium on the East Side was the talk of town. I played for him for a while 'til he became tired of me programming black dance music and eventually fired me, but in those days that's how things rolled, the promoters had the power, and I was still let's say in apprentice mode even though I could hold down a full night. I will not forget how amazing it was to be part of all those clubs and being able to catch the back end of the disco era with the mixture of house music, B-boy sounds, new wave and electronic dance music.

THE GOLDEN 90S

DO YOU STILL MAKE MUSIC WITH CERTAIN CLUB SYSTEMS OR EVEN CERTAIN CLUBS IN MIND?

Every time I make something this goes through my mind, "I wish Larry Levan was alive and Paradise Garage was still open." I would bring this new song on Saturday to test out. I was very lucky though that I had Timmy Regisford playing my music at Shelter, Tony Humphries at Zanzibar and all the DJs. I was able to experience being a producer in the early part of house music and handing tapes to all the guys. I even remember hearing Junior Vasquez playing my dub mix of Tony Moss 'I Got You' over that Sound Factory system and the crowd losing it. That's the golden 1990s for you.