

Colin Curtis

Interview



HIGHLAND ROOM CHARTS SEVENTIES TOP 10

1. **QUADRAPHONICS** Betcha If You Check It Out
2. **RONNIE WALKER** You've Got To Try Harder
3. **CRYSTAL MOTION** You're My Main Squeeze
4. **PHILLY DEVOTIONS** I Just Cant Say Goodbye
5. **INNERSECTION** Let Me Love You
6. **NORMAN CONNORS** Once I've Been There
7. **JEFF PERRY** Call On Me
8. **MARVIN HOLMES** You Better Keep Her
9. **GIL SCOTT HERON** The Bottle
10. **EDDIE KENDRICKS** Date With The Rain

FINAL HOUR TOP 10

1. **BESSIE BANKS** (Don't You Worry Baby) Best Is Yet To Come
2. **LAST POETS** Its A Trip
3. **DELILAH MOORE** It Takes Love
4. **TRADEWINDS** Strange
5. **JOSIE JO ARMSTEAD** I Got The Vibes
6. **WINDY CITY** Windy City Theme
7. **PLEASURE** Let Me Be The One
8. **WATER & POWER** Mr Weatherman
9. **DIANE JENKINS** Tow-A-Way Zone
10. **JIMMY JONES** Ain't Nothing Wrong (With Making Love The First Night)

Colin Curtis has always been a maverick. With hair half way down his shoulders he was an unlikely-looking Soul DJ in the Seventies. The music he played - especially at Blackpool Mecca's Highland Room and Manchester's Ritz All-Dayers - made him one of the most revered.

When the flood of previously unknown 60s' records became more of a trickle he and Ian Levine - his long time DJ partner at the Mecca - were leaders in the movement to incorporate more contemporary 70s' recordings into the Northern Soul scene. As the decade evolved, Colin moved on with new music and became central to the North West and Midlands Jazz-funk scene that took many former Northern Soul adherents with it - creating a scene similar to, but with its own unique values, the glitzier London and South East jazz-funk bandwagon.

How did you get into Soul music in general and Rare Soul in particular?

I got into Soul music listening to pirate radio stations, such as Caroline and Mike Raven's Soul show. A friend's older sister used to play Motown records whilst she was getting ready to go out, this helped influence me to own vinyl myself and the next stage was to share it with other people in the local village hall, trying to play as much Soul music as possible. This would be around '65-'66. As my knowledge grew through music papers, magazines and radio, I began to search further afield, discovering mail order outlets in Bedford and buying records advertised in magazines. For example Bobby Freeman and The Dynatones, I purchased through the mail from one of the Twisted Wheel DJs. The next step was to make an assault on an array of record shops and warehouses in Manchester, Bradford, London, etc. Because back then, of course, there was no Internet so only by developing wants lists and searching up and down the country could you

extend your collection. In the late 60s my parents moved into a pub in Kidsgrove and during this period I met Keith Minshull, who was a huge influence not only on myself but on the early years of Sixties Soul at The Golden Torch. We used to travel together to record shops such as Ralph's and Piccadilly in Manchester, Sherwin's in Hanley and Bradford Market.

How did you become a DJ at the Torch all-nighters and how old were you at the time? Looking back now do you see The Torch as a bridge between the sub-culture underground of The Twisted Wheel and the hugeness of Wigan Casino?

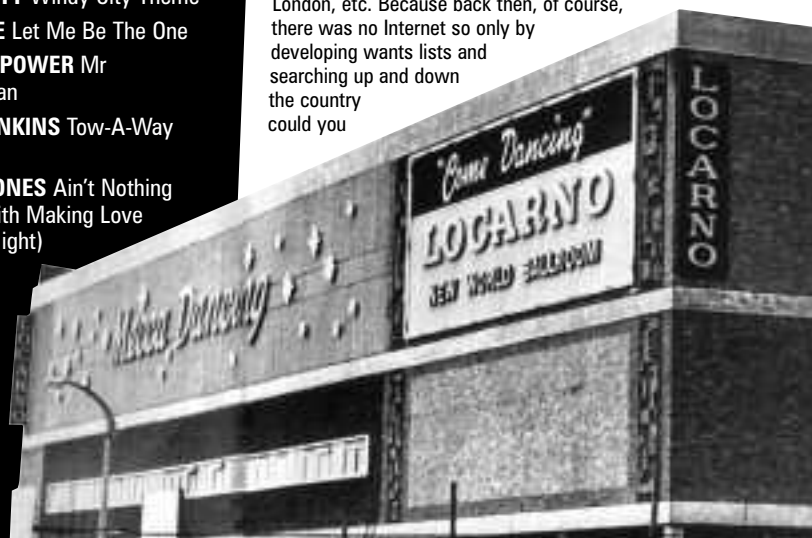
I discovered The Torch inadvertently after spending a night looking for somewhere to go. This was just before I met Keith, I was that inspired by the music I heard that I walked back about five miles the following night to relive the experience only to find that the club was closed. At this time I was also running mobile discos all around the area and DJing on Thursdays and Sundays locally at what was then the Crystal Ballroom and later Tiffany's in Newcastle-Under-Lyme. Through this I assigned to an agency and worked introducing major acts at the local Victoria Hall venue, such as Bowie, Roxy Music, Groundhogs, not a Soul act in sight! But through this I met Chris Burton, the owner of The Torch, and soon after Keith started playing regularly at The Torch on a Friday night and I would join him when commitments allowed. We both built up an excellent working relationship with Chris Burton and, with the demise of The Twisted Wheel all-nighters, people started attending from both Manchester and Wolverhampton to the Friday nights at The Torch (which was already well supported by the local crowd) it was suggested that we try an all-nighter. On the first night the place was packed and Keith and myself DJ'd all night between us for £10 each. The rest is history. Later on other DJs such as Alan Day, Martyn Ellis, Dave Rivers, Ian Levine, Johnny Beggs and Dave Evison were added to the line-up. I was 19 at this time.

Without a doubt The Torch had taken the underworld that was the travelling Soul scene back then from Derby, Manchester,

Wolverhampton, Leeds, etc., taking the all-nighter theme to a new level and undoubtedly served as a stepping stone for Wigan Casino to build on, following The Torch's demise in 1973. The potential for the future of this underground Soul scene was in place, blood, sweat, tears, drugs, drink and of course, records. Those little 7-inch pieces of vinyl that were changing people's lives.

When did you start DJing at The Highland Room at Blackpool Mecca and when did you link up there with Ian Levine? You and Levine became amazingly successful at the Mecca, definitely the most important DJ duo ever in Northern Soul history. Why did the partnership work so well, you are two very different personalities, was that a problem or a bonus? And how did it work - who was discovering the records and who was deciding what should be played?

I was working at Tiffany's following the closure of The Golden Torch which back then was front page news because of the drugs connection unfortunately, not the musical passion. It was during this period that a manager from Blackpool Mecca (Tom Ward) came to work at Tiffany's as a relief manager. I struck up a good relationship with him and at the end of his tenure he suggested on his return to Blackpool he would ask the Mecca area manager Bill Pye, about recommencing the Soul nights which had been championed by Tony Jebb, Ian Levine, Les Cokell and Billy The Kid. Ironically this night had closed originally because of the success of The Golden Torch all-nighters! Shortly after this I received a telephone call to confirm that myself and Keith Minshull could recommence the Soul sessions in the now legendary Highland Room. After an initial successful period Keith was replaced by Ian Levine bringing his wealth of knowledge and huge record collection to the party. I had first met Ian Levine at The Golden Torch and we used to eat breakfast together in the early hours of Sunday morning following the all-nighters. Even at this time, although we were quite obviously two opposite personalities, we struck up a unique relationship based on our love of the music and my ability to keep this huge character in



check. Together we would go through endless hours of listening to records following his major vinyl buying trips to America on his family holidays. Our musical tastes were such that all aspects of Soul music were covered from the raw and fast to the brilliant melodic productions that enhanced this period. We would spend hours going through unknown singles and making various piles indicating which records we thought deserved targeting for success and who would play them. This was also a period of rife bootlegging so eventually we would start covering up some of the records.

Blackpool Mecca has gone down in folklore as the most avant garde venue of the golden era of Seventies Northern Soul - musically and fashion-wise. At the time how conscious were you that the venue was on the cutting edge? Did you go out to push the barriers back every Saturday night or did it just evolve naturally?

As this period at Blackpool Mecca developed we had a huge mixture of people who drove forward the fashion and music mixture. As the music progressed through into the newer mid-70s sounds' and eventually the US disco Soul, the fashions stepped up a level and it became important if you were visiting Blackpool Mecca to look the part as well as dance your ass off! We were aware that a lot of what we were doing was influencing other people and other venues, and constantly discussed various avenues to explore both musically and the style of promoting the events. Every Saturday we would try and present the music by introducing new ideas based on telephone conversations and planning throughout the previous week.



The rivalry between Blackpool Mecca and Wigan Casino was tribal, like two football clubs who hate each other. How did you feel about it at the time?

Obviously when we first saw that Wigan Casino was being advertised as an all-nighter we knew this could be a major problem. It was history repeating itself as previously the success of the Torch all-nighters had caused the demise of the early years at Blackpool. I think that the culture clash between the two scenes, which later surfaced in all its glory at the Manchester Ritz all-dayers, was part of the overall development of black music in the north of England. I don't honestly believe that the original intent was for the two factions to hate each other, it was just that people in either camp were hugely passionate about what they believed was the right path.

The people who came to the Highland Room were fanatically loyal and knowledgeable about Soul music. Was it daunting to play to them?

The core of the local Highland Room crowd - Les Cokell, Pete Haigh, Bryan Wakelin, Steve Naylor, Epic, Johnny Beggs, Brad and all the other regulars - certainly kept us on our toes with their combined knowledge and endless thirst for new records. This allowed us to test-drive tunes early on in the night which would then receive the necessary rubber-stamping. When you have people of this calibre in the venue it just allowed us to express our own ideas and explore avenues that had not previously been touched.

Some people claim that the introduction of so much contemporary music into the Mecca ended up splitting the Northern Soul scene. Do you agree or disagree with that? Why did you want to play so many new releases?

To have ignored the quality of new releases that had started to appear in the States from 1974 onwards would have been remiss and deprived people of some of the greatest productions and arrangements this scene has since thrived on. When it came to Sixties' sounds we felt it was increasingly difficult to maintain the high standards that had previously been set and, as was proven at Wigan Casino when they opened an oldies room, this was an area that we did not wish to explore. Continuing to play the same old tired records, regardless of how good they were was not what we were about. This did in fact cause a rift between the traditional

left: Colin Curtis and Ian Levine

Northern Soul fan and the more open-minded amongst the Mecca faithful. I used to try and balance all the styles in the now infamous last hour at the Mecca by playing huge diversity from sweet mid-tempo Soul through funk to jazz.

What are your favourite memories of the Seventies' Soul scene?

Blackpool Mecca all-dayers, with Junior Walker, JJ Barnes, Crown Heights Affair, Brass Construction, Al Hudson, The Miracles, Sylvester and Two Tons of Fun, Edwin Starr. Manchester Ritz with Tavares, Archie Bell, Lonnie Liston Smith, Side Effect, Ronnie Laws, etc. Being able to go around the country and not only appear with these great artists but to share the diversity at other venues was a fabulous grounding for what was to come. WBLS Radio in New York with Frankie Loveman Crocker and Billy Carrington Kirkland and their fantastic radio shows will always have a place in my heart. Their unique delivery and style pushing forward this fabulous Seventies Soul music will always for me be the epitome of this period.

You have always evolved musically, becoming a jazz funk icon in the Seventies and now playing contemporary Soulful House. Do you have any interest in Northern Soul now or it is something that is just part of your past? Do you ever pull out some of the old Soul classics and play them at home for instance?

I still occasionally do Northern Soul revival spots, and Seventies' Blackpool Mecca sets at venues like Soulvation in Rugeley and I try and deliver these with the respect that I have always had for the music, but essentially I have always been a driven personality when it comes to black music and have an inbuilt need to search out new and future tracks whilst trying to balance this with my own history. I occasionally play Northern Soul at home, much to the dismay of my eldest daughter, Zelda, who asks me why I'm playing this old-fashioned music when normally I am listening to the latest grooves, which is what she knows me for.

There's been an amazing amount of records that were recorded in the Sixties which never got issued, but thanks to detective work from the Northern scene they have now been released. Some of them would have been huge for you at the Mecca. Are you surprised that all this time after its Seventies' heyday there is

above right: Eloise Laws

still the same enthusiasm and energy going into Rare Soul?

With the work that has been done by colossuses such as Butch, Tim Ashibendi, Tim Brown and other top collectors and DJs documenting almost everything that had come out of America in the 60s and 70s, it is of no surprise that with people of this calibre involved, the music rose again like a phoenix, after what everyone thought was its total extinction in the early 80s. Whilst I acknowledge that some of the discoveries that were made after I had moved on would certainly have been given attention at Blackpool Mecca, I do not feel I need to revisit this ground personally. I am in awe at what has been achieved with the continuous success of 60s' and 70s' music driven forward by a unique set of people.

You can have the choice of either scoring the winning goal in a Cup Final for Tottenham Hotspur, the football team you support, or writing and producing an all-time classic Soul masterpiece. Which would you choose?

Here I would just have to be greedy and do both! Maybe scoring a Cup final winner in the last minute against Arsenal would be mind-blowing but I don't think I could do this at the expense of missing recording in the studio with Ashford and Simpson, Lamont Dozier, Lou Courtney, Van McCoy, Sam Dees, etc., so I would have to ask Jim to fix it for me!

I have had a unique and fantastic ride for forty years and it's still going. I wouldn't swap that with anyone. I still get the buzz to play and turn people on to new tunes and new ideas.

