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*Please reference the original article: Payling, Dave. 2016. 'The DiY Free Party Collective.' Dancecult: Journal of Electronic Dance Music Culture 8 (1). <https://dj.dancecult.net/index.php/dancecult/article/view/897>.*

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# THE DIY FREE PARTY COLLECTIVE

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## INTRODUCTION

The DiY free party collective was founded in Nottingham, UK, in 1990 and were among the originators of the Nottingham house music sound. They had many releases on their own Strictly for Groovers label, part of DiY discs, and supported and influenced other producers such as Inland Knights, Nail, the Littlemen and many others. They were also at the forefront of the free party scene in the UK and inspired other local sound systems such as Smokescreen and Pulse to take up the mantle in providing unlicensed all night parties in outdoor locations throughout the Midlands. With the passing of anti-rave legislation, mounting external pressures from police and authorities and internal problems caused by drug abuse, hedonistic lifestyles and the logistics of maintaining businesses, fractures were inevitable. Despite their past problems DiY have amassed a great deal of love and respect for their selfless attitude and contribution to dance music culture and this resurfaced when they held their 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary party in 2014.

## FORMATION AND EARLY HISTORY

DiY were formed when a group of friends started DJing and holding club nights in Nottingham. Harry had moved from Bolton as a student where he met Rick 'Digs' Down, Simon 'DK' and other people around the city. Pete 'Woosh' was a regular visitor to Nottingham and also later moved down from Bolton. In 1989 Simon had just started DJing and Harry had a birthday party at a place called The Garage. Although DiY did not exist at this point this could be thought of as the first DiY club night. After this party, momentum gathered and they started doing house parties and the occasional club night. The major turning point in DiY's trajectory came at the Glastonbury festival of 1990. It was there they met with the traveller community with whom they started holding free parties. As well as providing sites and friendship the travellers had connections with Nik Turner (Hawkwind) and this allowed DiY to use their well established pyramid stage. Hawkwind's philosophy of freedom, peace and psychedelia were also fused into DiY's melting pot of ideas borrowed from other movements such as punk, indie and dance and this helped shape their free thinking attitude. Initially DiY would take their own decks onto various traveller sites and use

their sound systems, but this meant sharing the bill with other DJs and musical styles. Eventually this became problematic, as DiY were trying to promote their own particular sound, made up of American house, B-sides and American dubs with snippets of vocals, and not all the party goers could relate. This led to them commissioning and buying their own bespoke sound system, enabling them to do their own parties with complete control of their own sound. For DiY it was all about the bass. The sound system was dominated by bass bins that had a particular warm sound, and produced a very bass heavy sound.<sup>1</sup> At this point Harry, Rick and Pete were living together and running the operation. They started doing paid club nights to bring in money to help finance the free parties and set up two record labels. This involved looking after finances, promotional activities and everything else involved with managing the collective. For them, it became all consuming with nothing else for twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week for several years. Although enjoying the lifestyle, putting out music releases, running club nights and taking copious quantities of drugs week in, week out they had little time for partners and family and relationships inevitably suffered. The hedonistic lifestyle was difficult to juggle with running a business and maintaining professionalism. This ultimately led to an implosion and they eventually dissolved into a haze of heroin abuse.

Another early pressure on the activities of DiY was the passing of the UK Criminal Justice and Public Order Act in 1994 (often abbreviated to the Criminal Justice Act or CJA). This much reviled piece of legislation had a specific section titled 'Power Related to Raves' (HMSO 1994, 60). This helped police restrict the activities of ravers, sound systems and traveller communities and allowed them to stop gatherings and seize equipment. Various protests were organised including Reclaim The Streets and the Anti Criminal Justice Bill marches in London, but they were ultimately unsuccessful in forcing a rethink of the new legislation. One catalyst in the government's crackdown was the Castlemorton<sup>2</sup> gathering in 1992. DiY had a significant presence there but with an awareness of the possible consequences and an eye on the future were assisted by the travellers to smuggle out their sound system in various vehicles. After this many of the travellers moved to Derbyshire where the police force was underfunded and less able to prevent raves and traveller movement. It became logistically easier for DiY to hold parties here, where open countryside and disused quarries formed the backdrop for many large parties. There was, however, continued and increased police focus on parties, sound systems and their organisers and paranoia began to set in amongst the contributors. Worried their communications were being monitored, DiY went to such lengths as discussing business in the back of articulated lorries on Exodus<sup>3</sup> farm by candlelight so they were certain no one could listen in. This situation could not continue and resulted in DiY concentrating more on DJing, running their record label and club nights. They spent many productive years travelling the world DJing, putting out records, working in the studio and occasionally risking a free party.

## 25<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY PARTY 2014

In August 2014 DiY reignited the love they had nurtured during their formative years by holding their 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary party. Using their original sound system, vinyl turntables and a large marquee, the all-nighter was always going to be a special event and was attended by several hundred people. The intention was for this to be a farewell party. They put all the remaining DiY and personal monies into the event and it effectively bankrupted them. Some money was raised by the traditional method of sending round a collection bucket but this raised negligible funds

relative to the cost of holding the event, as is usually the case. People travelled from throughout the UK and abroad especially to attend.

While Simon DK was still playing the party was closed down around 10.30 on the Sunday morning as police arrived and gradually coaxed people away from the site. There was no trouble, but it took a while as people were reluctant to leave such a vibrant atmosphere. When everyone had finally dispersed, some records, collection buckets and other equipment were left in the hire van for collection the following day. Sorting everything out was a job for another time. On arriving back, Pete and Harry found a hole punched in the back of the van and everything had been stolen. It seemed like a professional job and, in disbelief and desperation, they called a friend to let them know what had happened. Without their knowledge, and even before getting back to Nottingham, a PayPal account had been set up to help raise money to pay for the losses and damages to the van. This triggered an up swell of love and support individually and via social media and there was an outpouring of generosity from friends of DiY and those attending the party. Other DJs auctioned off their own personal, rare records and art prints and other items were sold to help contribute to the fund. The account raised several thousands of pounds, made DiY solvent again and will be used to fund future events with plans including a benefit club night and further birthday celebrations. Although DiY did not consider it ethical to set up the collection personally, the somewhat fortuitous turn of events proved how much respect they still command and how willing people are to contribute to the sustainability of free parties when given an opportunity to do so.

#### PRESENT DAY AND GLASTONBURY

Digs and Woosh continue to DJ and Glastonbury is an annual fixture in their schedule. They still owe them a big debt as it is where they first hooked up with the traveller community. Pete and friends first climbed the fence in 1981 and continued to do so as its height increased until it became physically impossible to get over. Ironically as soon as this happened DiY began to be booked! The first year Glastonbury had a dance field it was housed in a big marquee and was scheduled to finish at midnight. DiY managed to get their hands on a vehicle pass and smuggled in their PA. They drove into the dance field and set up the PA in the same field a short way from the official marquee. As soon as they had kicked everyone out DiY fired up the generator and all the kids coming out of the marquee came straight over to the DiY rig. All expectations were that they would be closed down by Michael Eavis but they were allowed to continue and were still there on Monday afternoon. Obviously, they were fulfilling a need and the dance area has continued to grow ever since. Pete and Rick now perform in NYC Downlow (part of Block 9) or Genesis and can be found there enjoying their annual pilgrimage.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many thanks to Pete Woosh for spending time to chat about his experiences with DiY and to discuss this article.

## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Dave teaches music technology at Staffordshire University. He is a video music composer and holds a PhD in visual music composition. His more recent work focuses on composition for video music with an emphasis on electroacoustic composition and how this can be combined with abstract animation and video concrete. Dave also produces more mainstream electronic music under the pseudonym PAYL and is integrating this more closely with his academic research. Website: <https://davepayl.wordpress.com/>

## REFERENCES

HMSO. 1994. *Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994*.  
<<http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/1994/33>> (accessed 29 June 2016).

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> They later sold the sound system to friends but still have access to it and it was used at their 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary party.

<sup>2</sup> Castlemorton free festival in 1992 was attended by around 25,000 people and many sound systems including DiY, Spiral Tribe and others. A good overview can be found in DJ Mag <https://djmag.com/content/free-party-politics-castle-morton>.

<sup>3</sup> The Exodus Collective, another free party sound system with similar DiY philosophies based in Luton.