

Jeffrey Hinton

Taboo. Cha Cha. Scratch Video. Hydraulic Disco. John Maybury. Bloolips.

Words Andy Thomas Portrait Owen Harvey

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WHEN HE WAS once asked for a defining club experience, Jeffrey Hinton replied: “I used to love lying flat out on the dance floor with my friend Space at the Heaven club. They used to have the most amazing disco lighting rig and we would just look up and bathe in music and lights, while people danced and stepped over us.” The London DJ and video artist has been working in the intersection of music and visuals for nearly 40 years now, and his passion for lighting has culminated in a new film, *Hydraulic Disco*.

Hinton earned his legendary status as DJ at Taboo, Leigh Bowery’s famously decadent London club of the mid-1980s. In an interview with writer Bill Brewster, DJ Mark Moore described Hinton’s innovations. “I think what made it so great was Jeffrey would do his own edits where he would elongate the best bits with these mad sound effects over the top.” To accompany his heady mix of music at Taboo (heavy on Italian disco and trashy pop) and bewildering edits, Hinton created his own video collages projected above the dance floor. These films chopped up TV shows and pop videos with horror films and gay porn, mixing pop and underground sources to create darkly playful montages. His mix of music and videos were deliberately unsettling. “It was very disorientating, but in that kind of place it really worked,” Hinton told writer Tim Burrows. “It reflected the chaos. If you went down there feeling normal, it would mess you up. But most people arrived messed already, so it suited them.”

Before Taboo he was a DJ at Cha Cha, held in the back bar of Heaven.

Opening in 1981 after the closure of the Blitz, Cha Cha was fronted by Scarlett Cannon, with Judy Blame and Michael Hardy (aka Maria Malipasta). Like them, Hinton had experienced the creative energy of punk, and its intersection with London’s gay scene. Clubs such as El Sombrero (also known as Yours or Mine) on Kensington High Street provided the teenage Hinton with ideas of his own. As did the Blitz a few years later, where he received another education through DJ Rusty Egan. Although he was inspired by the electronic futurism of the Blitz, the soundtrack he would go on to create was far more deviant and playful. “Very trippy and some of it was completely out of beat, but it didn’t matter. Totally suited Taboo,” wrote Moore.

With fellow Blitz kids including filmmaker John Maybury, milliner Stephen Jones, David Holah of fashion label Bodymap, stylist Kim Bowen, and long time friends Jeremy Healy and Princess Julia, he joined the creative community at the famous Warren Street Squat. Barriers between artistic forms were being broken down and Hinton began to experiment further with film, becoming a pioneer of scratch video, alongside the Duvet Brothers, Gorilla Tapes and George Barber.

Throughout the 1980s right up to now, Hinton has also used video to document the creativity of London’s gay counterculture – from Taboo to Kinky Gerlinky. His recent films include a collection from his archive that documents the drag scene and its importance to gay club culture. Along with his *Taboo Scratch Video*, this was one of the highlights of the ICA Off-Site exhibition of 2013, ‘A Journey

Through London Subculture: 1980s to Now’. Also at the exhibition were Hinton’s videos of Bodymap’s 1980s catwalk shows (such as ‘The Cat In the Hat Takes a Rumble With the Techno Fish’) that he soundtracked.

While these mid-1980s works provide a defining snapshot of London subculture at its creative peak, Hinton does not believe in living in the past. And he continues to take inspiration from late night London – whether spinning at Old Street’s East Bloc or creating the soundtrack for fashion duo Meadham Kirchhoff’s Taboo-inspired collections. We catch up with him as he takes a break from production for his new film.

Growing up, your brother was an important figure to you.

Yes, my brother Stephen was a really early member of the Gay Liberation Front and used to bring loads of literature home; *International Times*, *Oz* and all this other stuff about countercultures from around the world. At the time I had all these health problems and I was really bullied at school. I would look at people at school and think I didn’t want to be like them. I’d had all this knowledge passed on from my brother and I knew there was another world out there.

At what age did you start soaking all that up?

Oh my god, from forever. I was really fascinated by all of it. And then I used to hang around the streets a lot with him and I met all these different people. We used to go to this squat in Powis Square, which was like the first kind of gender fuck squat. It was where >





Film still from *Alternative Miss World*. Peter Hammond, aka Space Princess, backstage, 1989

all the [gay cabaret troupe] Bloodlips lot lived so I met Bette Bourne and all of them. I then went to see their show *The Ugly Duckling* at the Tabernacle near their squat.

Were they a bit like San Francisco's Cockettes?

Yes very much – but in a very English way. Bette Bourne had been in the New York-based gay cabaret group Hot Peaches, who I had seen perform at the ICA. When he got back from New York he set up the Bloodlips. *The Ugly Duckling* was the most amazing thing that this 12-year-old boy could have seen. It was just about the beauty of being you, no matter how different you are. The message of that to me was incredible. It was visually stunning and so playful, and that is something that has always interested me. I remember they finished with T-Connection's 'Do What You Wanna Do' and everyone was dancing, and I was jumping all around. It really was a total liberation and a language I could understand.

What was your introduction to clubs?

It had always been around me. I didn't make a distinction between where I heard music. I just danced wherever I was – and I was obsessed with dancing for as long as I can remember. You really couldn't keep me still. But the first big club I went to in London was Global Village, which eventually became Heaven. I was about 13 or 14 and I remember being in this space and feeling the reverbs of the sound system, soaking in the music and thinking, wow.

Were there any records that stand out?

I remember one track that was playing and it's called 'Pipeline' by Bruce Johnston. There is this breakdown in it where it's very percussive and rhythmic; so that would have been the first break I

ever heard. I was fascinated by the way the song would suddenly deconstruct.

You'd been experimenting with your own tape deconstructions from a very early age.

My dad gave me a reel-to-reel tape recorder when I was about five or six. I had this tiny little round microphone and I would tape everything; the TV, people in the street, just everything, I loved sounds. And then I instinctively found a way of wiring it into the back of the hi-fi where the speakers go, and feeding it back through the speakers then playing a record over the top. And I did that at the age of about six, just to mush and mix things together.

Did anyone influence that?

Kenny Everett had his radio show where he used to make these mad jingles, and I loved the way he mixed his talking over the music. His whole

'I HAVE A HUGE ROMANTIC PASSION FOR HYDRAULIC DISCO LIGHTING'

concept of jingles was so energised and playful. And I was always attracted to playfulness. He always had a great rhythm and the way he would deliver words and weave in the music was great. He was a master of all that and really influenced me. Everyone is doing those kinds of mash ups now, but he was doing that quite instinctively way back then.

Who was the first DJ to have an impact on you?

The first DJ I was properly aware of was this guy called Rudy, who used to play at the Sombrero on High Street Ken. He was really interesting. That club and his music – I honestly thought I had died and gone to heaven. Rudy played this incredible mix of early Italian disco, so very landscape. And

he would always play the whole side of a record. So 16 minutes of Amanda Lear's 'Follow Me' or Dee D Jackson and all these other concept albums that were coming out by the likes of Love & Kisses. Although he didn't mix as such and was very relaxed, he was a great DJ in the way he provided the whole dancing experience.

How did the Sombrero differ from other places you had been?

It was very sexually charged so that was different. It had a round, lit-up dance floor and alcoves all around it. You can sort of see it in Adam & the Ants' 'Antmusic' video. There were these very camp Spanish waiters and it was just the most fun, social playground you could imagine. That's also where I met my first boyfriend. They didn't really have a licence so you had to have a plate of cheap spam and coleslaw. Being quite poor at the time I would eat it and everyone else would throw it away.

Who did you go there with?

I originally went there with these queens who were trolley dollies and also Princess Julia, who I have known since forever. And I just met a lot of interesting people there. It was a very underground club and you were theoretically meant to be a member, as with most of the clubs in the 1970s like the Embassy, Copacabana and Bangs.

What was the crowd like?

You had a great mix of people – an unforced high life meets low life. I always think to be a great club you have to have a big mixture. So multicultural outcasts, gay, bi and straight, but especially sexually confused, trannies, old money rich people, prostitutes, rent boys, drug dealers, actors/singer types, and a few confused fillers that are there by mistake. And then at the Sombrero you had all the more gay experimental end of punk, which was what I was involved in.

When did you start making the tapes you became known for?

I always made tapes for myself and other people and these were a real mash up of loads of things. So I was pause editing and adding feedback and stuff. Any piece of equipment I got I would always use it to the max. I was always very mechanically minded because my dad was a plumber. He would show me

these machines and how to take them apart and put them together. And I was fascinated by that and would spend hours in the cellar at home taking apart radios and that. So I always loved how things worked.

What equipment did you use?

For editing I had this amazing portable Sony tape recorder specifically for sound effects. It had this massive microphone and was huge and weighed a ton. And it had this really precise little pause button. I am quite specific as to what I am listening to and where points are, so I would do these real funny edits, chopping up sounds and music and then re-editing and also overlaying odd tracks.

You said before that you've always had a very visual mind. When did you become aware of that?

We went travelling across Europe on camping holidays as a kid. I remember it really well, the roads in France and all the trees and I had this filmic impression of everything. And I've always had that, even with music, it's very visual. When people are telling me stories I'm always visualising everything. But those trips really were a feast and totally influenced me and again I knew there was another world out there.

That whole visual thing links into your love of disco lighting and your first time at Heaven.

I went there soon after it opened and it really was an incredible place. I have a huge romantic passion for hydraulic disco lighting and Heaven was the first place I had seen that. That was the start of me seeing all this mechanical, heated, motorised lighting that was timed to the music. They were buying all these pieces of equipment all the time and there would always be something new to wow you. It was all part of the excitement – new visuals and music.

Why did disco become so important for you at this time?

I immediately latched onto it because it was a musical movement that spread so quickly across the world and had such a strong simple message – and that was liberation. Disco was so energised and spoke of freedoms – it was letting you be whatever you were. And it all comes from gay and black struggles from the



Film still from Bodymap catwalk show. Nick and Barry Kamen modelling, 1984



Film still from Bodymap catwalk show. Dancers Michael Clark and Les Child modelling, 1986

late 1960s. And here I was hearing this amazing music in Heaven and I had a friend who had been to New York. At the time Laker Airways were doing £55 one-way fares. That was the only time I'd sold any records in my life but I had to get there.

How long did you spend in New York?

I was there for a year and thought I was going to stay forever. There was this real, strong and liberated gay scene that was so right for me. I went to all these places like Anvil and other really extreme places. And I was just like, wow this is incredible. I loved the energy and again the visual aspect. The clones [gay American style movement] over there were always very detailed and accessorised. They always worked on their look. It was beautiful. Then I met

this guy at some party and he lived in this place on Bleecker Street and he knew William Burroughs. So I ended up staying with William Burroughs in his apartment called the Bunker on the Bowery. Then I was introduced into the CBGB and the Mudd, so all that punk thing, and then of course Studio 54. So I'd met this poetry lot, this punk lot, then the gay disco lot. That experience was really influential.

When you returned to London it was the time of Warren Street Squat.

I guess what I had seen with the Bloodlips in the early 1970s was kind of like a blueprint to what happened at Warren Street. So I felt very at home when I first walked through the door there. I had just got back from New York and I had no home so I stayed >



Jeremy Healy and Jeffrey Hinton, 1978



Jeffrey Hinton and Kate Garner of Haysi Fantayzee backstage at *Top of the Pops*, 1982



Tasty Tim's Birthday Disco Hospital at Planets, London, 1985 Photograph Fiona Cartledge

with Jeremy [Healy]. I visited, then basically never left.

Can you describe the squat?

The front part of the building was all fashion, film, music and design people, and then at the back it was a bit more of a punky druggy vibe. There was this great constant energy, similar to what I had experienced in New York. There was no morning, noon or night. It really was just constant and I was naturally attracted to that. That house was alive with everything going on. It had this osmosis of energy and everyone was equal, because no one had any money. And that is where you find the most creativity, when everyone is on the same page. It was a great mix and everyone was involved in everyone else's creativity. So I naturally dived in. Then we were all going to the same clubs. There were just so many creative people around at the time. Space Princess [Peter Hammond] also has to be mentioned because he was a huge person in my life. He was so very creative and gave me a lot of confidence in what I wanted to do.

You've spoken before about how the styles at Billy's and the Blitz were very spontaneous. How much of that came from the creative, communal living?

My favourite thing about Warren Street was we all wore each other's clothes. Everyone thinks we made these amazing looks and I guess we kind of did, but really a lot of that had to do

with smell. There wasn't a washing machine so you would pick up what smelt the least and then made it work or made something new. I also attribute some of what became known as the New Romantic look to this theatrical shop that was closing down. It was part of Charles Fox near Covent Garden and we would take all these clothes from there and adapt them. We also helped ourselves to the make up. The important thing with all these clubs was that we were doing them for ourselves;

'THERE WAS NO MORNING, NOON OR NIGHT. IT WAS JUST CONSTANT'

it was to entertain us rather than for publicity. Nobody did anything for anyone else's appreciation.

When did you start making videos?

I was always obsessed with videos. My brother took me to see these avant-garde films all the time, so I was going to film clubs very young, places like the Paris Pullman in Earls Court. I'd seen all the Warhol films, Kenneth Anger

and John Waters. I was always interested in that side of DIY filmmaking. And of course John Maybury and Cerith [Wyn Evans], they were all into their Super 8 films, and so I helped them with their set ups and that. I think John influenced me a lot in terms of just doing it. But the whole of Warren Street was like that and it cemented the thing I had always had. And that was, don't think about doing something, just do it. Everything I have ever done, whether filming, editing or DJing, has come from that. I have never studied it as such. The minute I got a video, I began pause editing instinctively. It was the same shit I was doing with the music tapes, mixing things up, and juxtaposing things that don't necessarily go together

When did you start playing your videos at clubs?

The first film things I did specifically for an environment was at Circus [Jeremy Healy's club]. I did these four or five hour-long tapes all made by pause editing. These things took fucking weeks to do. And then the next time was Taboo, when I was really given carte blanche to do anything. That was great because they had a big screen above the dance floor, so I could control the sound, visuals and lighting. I was basically mixing everything. I was taking the sound from the videos, along with my cassettes of sound effects, plus the records, and mixing it all together. I've no idea how anyone managed to

dance at all. That's when I famously played the slip mat while tripping off my head and people just danced anyway, because that grinding noise was not that different to some of the things I was doing. Taboo was great.

How important was Leigh Bowery?

Leigh was just such an amazing strong presence in my life. He was just this incredibly energised child. I would see these amazing outfits he wore, but I would also always see Leigh coming out of them. He had such a sharp wit, no matter what drugs he was on. He was so clever at situations. Some people thought he was quite bitchy or catty, but he never was. He was just really playful and loved getting a reaction. So if you are really uptight he is going to look for a reaction from you. But not so different to a lot of people who went to Taboo. It was not like, here's this really extreme person. He was also a great person to work with.

You'd previously played at Cha Cha. How important was your time there?

That was the first club I had really DJ'd at, so it was very important. It gave me the opportunity to experiment, so I did lots of chop-up tapes. Lots of long mixes, stuff that let me jump down on the dance floor and roll around with my mates. But Cha Cha was definitely me being given the freedom to experiment.

When did you start documenting the scene with video and how did you do that without being intrusive?

I was always taking pictures and videos and it's hugely important now that we have that as a record. I've collected things for my whole life and was always known as a hoarder. Now it's called an archive because it holds a lot of stuff that wasn't documented at the time. I wish I'd had a camera in New York, as there were so many things I saw there. But then in some situations, like at the Anvil and the more extreme environments, it isn't appropriate to film. And I know the difference. Also most of the people I have filmed know me and they are not conscious of me filming them, it's just a natural thing because we are in each other's world all the time. I tend to capture things as just fragments of what is around me.

Why do you think your film Hydraulic Disco is needed?

All the industry behind the hydraulic disco lighting has gone. There was a huge industry around this, it was operators, mechanics, maintenance, inventors, and it doesn't exist any more. There was a big lighting invention curve between the 1970s and early 1990s. The hydraulic disco lighting industry were making bespoke, and ever more dynamic, mechanical machines and rigs. This came to an abrupt end mainly because of operational and

maintenance cost. But tragically all this stuff was completely ripped out of clubs worldwide and replaced by the same generic Gobo projectors. Now everywhere has flat, cold, LED-lit patterns projected from the same point all night long and not even timed to the music. This cannot compare with the overwhelming drama, noise and thrill of the original hydraulic lighting.

I haven't seen anyone else really cover this subject, but when you do speak to people who experience it they get really passionate. So I just want to celebrate what was lost because for me it is such an emotional memory. Why I wanted to create a homage to that was to give people a sense of what it felt like. The way all these massive lighting machines above you were kind of woven into the music, and woven into the energy, and the smell and sexuality of the environment. The way the lights would move to the music was basically like having another dance partner. And if you have a great sound system, all this noise and light and energy, when that is all merged into one it is so intoxicating. It would just draw you into the dance floor and you would totally lose yourself. And the whole idea of being lost on a dance floor is one of the biggest highs I have ever experienced. ■

Jeffrey Hinton's film Hydraulic Disco is currently in production
jeffreymbinton.co.uk