

Endangered Nightlife

by Silvia Bombardini



Charles Jeffrey LOVERBOY, SS17 – via i-D

Over the last decade, nearly half of British nightclubs have called it quits: The Night Time Industries Association reports that there were 3144 of them in 2005, and only 1733 still stood in 2015. On September 6 this year, London's illustrious Fabric forever shut its doors, in the wake of Passing Clouds, and Studio 338 that in August went up in flames. Madame Jojo's and The Black Cap, storied burlesque venues with over half a century of parties each under their roofs, had danced before them to their swan songs – along with Power Lunches, Crucifix Lane, Dance Tunnel and Plastic People, Cable, The Fridge, Turnmills, and The End. London's nightlife, it seems, is a species in dire need of protection, and major cities across the UK appear to suffer of a similar plague: when Glasgow's The Arches lost its licence last year, countless mourned its loss. Yet just across the Channel, clublands prosper. Not a week had passed since Fabric's closure that its German cousin, Berlin's Berghain, was to be officially recognised as a cultural or *high art* institution, and will thus be allowed to pay less taxes. There's more to it than Kapital, too: lifted in the eyes of the authorities to the same category of concert halls, Berghain's legal case validates that techno is as quintessential as classical music to Berlin's cultural scene. But if Berlin's nighttime crown shan't be questioned yet, it's the newfound international

relevance of venues like Nordstern in Basel, or festivals such as KaZantip in the Crimean town of Popivka that marks a shift of perspective. Blooming nightlives draw visitors to places that were never on our maps before – with clubs like Bassiani, Mtkvarze, or Vitamin Cubes, Tbilisi in Georgia vaunts one of the richest after-hours scenes to have taken roots in recent times. *“While clubbing in London has been entering its death throes, it’s been coming of age in eastern Europe”* writes deputy editor Arthur House for [The Calvert Journal](#), whilst singing the praises of spots in Warsaw, Belgrade and Kiev. History tells us, however, that it’s always easier for the scene to come of age than for it to remain young once it’s under the spotlight, for it’s volatile by nature, and flourishes in the shadows.

Still, any established nightlife needs to be nurtured, pampered perhaps by the powers that be without being all too obvious about it. For its contribution to the national economy if for nothing else, which is by no means limited to tourism. Even in its dire state, for example, the UK night time industry accounts for almost the 8% of the country’s employment, and for one out of eight jobs in the British capital. Certain nightly metropolises appoint a special office for this purpose only – chief custodians, from the likes of Paris, San Francisco and Zurich, who’ve gathered in Amsterdam earlier this year for the first ever global Night Mayor’s Summit. They weren’t there by chance: though an article in [The Economist](#) recently argued that in the Netherlands as well the number of *discotheken* fell by 38% between 2001 and 2011, it should be noted that the Dutch capital was the first to nominate Mirik Milan to look after its nightlife in 2012, and as a result, there still are nightclubs like Air, Sugarfactory and NDSM Docklands to keep Amsterdam’s reputation fresh. London is expected to join them for the 2017 roundup, having finally named its first *Night Czar* on the 4th of November – an unusual title likely due to the inauspicious assonance of *night mayor* and *nightmare* in the English language. She’s Amy Lamé, a broadcaster, performer, and the author of *From Prejudice to Pride*, a LGBT+ history book for children due to be published next June. Lamé co-founded RVT Future, a community group campaigning to protect London’s precious Royal Vauxhall Tavern, where she’s been hosting her club night *Duckie* every Saturday for 21 years. She sounds promising to be sure, but taking care of London by night won’t be easy. Sadiq Khan for instance, who’s been the capital’s daytime mayor since May, already set up the all-night Tube London had long been waiting for, and promised to introduce a so-called *agent of change* principle, that will protect pre-existing music venues from the costs of soundproofing when new residential blocks are built nearby – but despite his commitment, there was nothing London’s City Hall could do to #savefabric. The club’s license was revoked by its local council, allegedly due to the drug-related deaths of two teenagers at the venue over the summer. Though protesters argue that shutting down clubs won’t stop people from taking drugs, as they will just take them somewhere else, [national statistics](#) note that around 1 in 5 young adults aged 16 to 24 has taken a drug in the last year, and this equates to around 1.1 million people in the UK. While the percentage is still significantly lower than a decade ago, the number of deaths caused by drug poisoning was last year the highest since records began in 1993, meaning that those who use are more likely to abuse, and that drugs are stronger now than they ever were before, all issues Britain urgently needs to address somehow. The United Kingdom also remains, along with Italy and Spain, one of the largest European markets for cocaine, a drug whose great diffusion in the 1920s some

scholars choose as a starting point in the history of clubbing. Still, what causes the most outrage among London's youth is the widespread belief that drugs are just a pretext – that like all those other clubs before it, Fabric was shut down to make way for gentrification and redevelopment.

For those stuck in town, some nifty nightclub alternatives are still gaining ground: churches, for instance. The deconsecrated premises of a Welsh Presbyterian church on Shaftesbury Avenue hosted London's popular Limelight nightclub for a couple of decades until it went out of business in the early 2000s, but activities and interests so seemingly at odds have since learnt to coexist on a 24-hours schedule. The Church of St John-at-Hackney still serves daily as the seat of the local parish with sermons and chants, but welcomes live music once the sun has set, and international house DJs as well. But whereas nightlife tends to be indigenous to a city's underbelly, that's not to say that if the milieu is no longer welcoming it won't migrate. Presently, it's looking toward suburbs and countryside. *"The tent cities and makeshift communities that will grow up on the outskirts of cities, like in the developing world, will be the places to go for a proper party"*, author Irvine Welsh tells [The Guardian](#). Welsh, whose novel *Trainspotting* had been variously accused of glamorising drugs when it was made into a film in 1996, was incidentally also an outspoken supporter of the #savethearches campaign, albeit in vain. This prophecy of his, partially at least, has already come true: boredom and social media, claims VICE, fuelled Britain's *illegal rave renaissance*, which Clive Martin delves into with the latest documentary of their *Big Night Out* series, *Locked Off*. They call it a renaissance because the brightest days of British raves are well behind us – in the late eighties and early nineties, when the superclubs whose fate seems so uncertain today had yet to open, the country experienced a golden age of free outdoor parties that arguably met its end with the week-long Castlemorton rave of 1992: believed to have inspired the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act that is now sometimes used to shut down birthday barbecues and the like. In the film Martin notably describes Denbigh in North Wales as *"the promised land of the rave scene"*, as he meets the masked organisers behind the ScumTek collective and Diztorshon Crew, along with partygoers who freely admit that the illegal nature of these outings makes for a great part of their charm. Their closest legal counterparts, however, would have to be music festivals, and the multitudes who gather there every year too, as soon as the weather warms, certainly seem to find them charming enough. Millennials go *glamping* there: a portmanteau word of *glamour* and *camping* that suggests an attention to aesthetics if nothing else more openly acknowledged than it is at raves, hinting to just how in vogue these events have come to be over the past few years. More festival than ever before are popping up across the British grasslands, from the grandiose to the bucolic – from Glastonbury, which counted 135,000 visitors in 2016, to Creamfields, BoomTown Fair or The Great Escape. In July this year, Secret Garden Party in Cambridgeshire was the first festival in the UK to offer attendees the opportunity to test their drugs on site, in collaboration with the local police, so that they would know exactly what they were about to ingest: many found out that the substances in their possession were not at all what they had believed them to be, but rather say, anti-malaria tablets, and threw them away. While a zero-tolerance approach, in spite of proving not very effective so far, seems more likely to remain the norm in Britain for the time being, similar services have long been in use in countries like Austria, Switzerland and the Netherlands.

The profusion of festivals and suburban raves goes to show that most city clubbers with few options left opt to go with the flow rather than struggle against it – but this shouldn't be mistaken for inertia, nor is it compliance. Rather, it's proof that whilst nightlife can be courted it cannot be tamed, never will be caged. *"Knowing that things cannot and will not always be the same. Therein lies the thrill. Raving is about a moment, it's about a present"* writes Thomas Gorton for Dazed, *"what we're in love with today, we will not love tomorrow. This evolution of clubland relies on the preservation of the same juncture: the now"*. It's a bittersweet thought: that London is just naturally reaching the end of its lifecycle as a night-time hub. The city hasn't killed its nightlife, it's simply moving on, onto more fertile fields. Some even believe this might be because clubbing, in the downtown sense, as such is in decline. That it would never have been as much a rite of passage for young Brits today as it used to be for previous generations, regardless of the closures. In that same age group of 16 to 24 years old, more national statistics have noted the 27% didn't drink alcohol at all in 2013. Higher tuition fees for students, along with higher entrance fees so that venues can make up for those cocktails they no longer sell, turned club nights into more of a special occasion rather than a regular occurrence, which may be another reason why free raves and yearly festival are so well-liked now. The rise of broadcasting projects like Boiler Room, a website that streams live music sessions tailored to suit and challenge the tastes of its listeners, contributes too. As do hook-up apps. Three major selling points of old-school nightclubs – booze, good music, conquests – have either lost their appeal or are now just more easily found elsewhere.



House of Holland, Molly Goddard, SS17

Millennials, however, have proved to be by all accounts the most nostalgic of all demographics, and London's youth look back to times of careless hedonism by way of the wisdom that has befallen them. They may not participate the way they did before, might never have had the chance to experience first-hand the halcyon days

of British club culture – but they assimilate, by consumption, the memories of previous generations who did. It's not simply a matter of humming along to the same old beats, there's a voracity to it: something of a visual legacy is established, and along with it, inevitably, a trend. Fashion brands from all the four capitals extol the virtues of the acid house movement, of that 90s rave scene that was over all too soon, webbing belts, glo-sticks and rainbows. A fluorescent nostalgia rolls in and takes hold.

MSGM's SS17 menswear collection rumbles with echoes of the scene: snap-hooks, a stonewashed bum bag, dizzy argyles, blurry photo-prints. "*Hazy, like memories*" Massimo Giorgetti tells Vogue "*it's not a chemical vision!*". Born in Rimini in 1977, he would recall steamy nights out at the famed nightclubs on the Italian Riviera, Cocoricò, or Echoes that, so says the legend, was the first place where house music was heard in Italy, back in '86. Tim Coppens in New York ventures the same theme, though his angle is somewhat more contemplative: for spring, he remembers the aftermath, the misty dawns he's witnessed after never-ending parties. When the city is silent and pale but ears still ring, and one walks home half-unbuttoned, hi-vis clothing lighting the way. By far the most uninhibited homage to rave culture, however, comes this season from Marc Jacobs, no surprise here. On a neon-lit catwalk, his models sway on towering platforms to the thumps of a hard trance mix led by *Born Slippy*, the '95 classic by Brit group Underworld. If they look a bit crusty in comparison to the club kids we find in most menswear shows, it may be due to the now infamous woollen dreadlocks, or the cluster of surreal appliques – a stove, a cactus, a blue-eyed lemon, a traffic cone – on crispy, tinfoil metallics. All donned up with a high-gloss finish are also the pastel-hued ravers of Miu Miu's *croisière* collection, each with her staple bucket hat to boot. Marc Jacobs was there when the season launched at Hotel de la Paiva in Paris, DJed by Kate Moss, and showcased not only on models but on fiberglass dummies too, customised with rhinestones, clay bits and melted plastic by young British graduate Matty Bovan – we'll get back to him later. Riccardo Tisci, meanwhile, gives his own take on the theme with Givenchy's resort 2017 collection, inspired by the 90s techno scene in Naples. The designer knows it well from his teenage years, reports WWD, when he used to attend local parties of international fame like those organised by Angels of Love. Études' Aurélien Arbet and Jérémie Egry were already looking at the iconography of underground raves when working on the collective's FW16 season. Camo patterns and distressed knits in a luminous orange shade come alongside preter-digital black-and-white prints that could have been lifted from vintage flyers. A *Unity Rave* t-shirt features a tongue-lolling smiley on the back and an alien's head on the front, while a lambswool soccer scarf spells *HALLUCINATION GENERATION*. Logos from retro flyers, that Carol Lim and Humberto Leon had made sure to secure the rights for, also appear all over Kenzo's spring collection for men, and resort for women, both of them presented at once in June. "*Our Romeo and Juliet of the night*" is how the duo describe them on the brand's website. "*Nightlife is the soul of any city*" the press notes continue, "*this collection pays homage to club lore that narrates our past and paves the way for tomorrow. Long live the venues and parties that will create and incubate the legends to come*". A full list of these follows: Save the Robots, Berliniamsburg, Café Con Leche, Meow Mix and Black Blanc Beur are among them, even Limelight, though it would be the one in Manhattan that they remember. Like its London twin, the club stood on the site of a former Episcopal Church of the Holy Communion, and gained notoriety in 1996 for its link

to the murder of Angel Melendez by fellow Club Kid Michael Alig – Macaulay Culkin played him in the 2003 cult flick *Party Monster*.

All of them nostalgic to various degrees, yet when it comes to London, context is key. Although the party theme can't help but remain lighthearted, the very archetype of fun, a palpable uncertainty with regards to the future of the capital's nightlife wills one to read an extra layer into the particular brand of rave nostalgia that affects London-based designers and their collections. A sense of finality perhaps, of urgency, the shadow of heartfelt longing. Many of the British Fashion Council's youngest protégés are not older than their customers – they indulge Millennials' desire for times long gone, which is their own too, less with memory and more with fantasy. Among the wiser and more experienced, some do remember those days: Martine Rose's FW16 collection is inspired, among other throwbacks, by Steve Terry's [Wild Life Archive](#), a rich collection of "*ephemera and related artefacts documenting dance music culture from its early origins*". She'd first visited it for FW14, picking up leaflets from the most memorable nights she attended in the 80s and 90s to sew on her clothes as patches. Topshop's Kate Phelan moved to London in 1984, so it's likely enough she may have real memories of the Camden Palace nightclub, the New Wave scene her spring show sums up in a series of black vinyl pencil skirts. Others though, most of them perhaps, can only wish they'd been there. Isa Arfen's FW16 collection is also released in loving memory of the fabled Blitz nightclub in London's Covent Garden, where the New Romantics danced the night away – but the memory couldn't be her own, as designer Serafina Sama wasn't yet born when the movement peaked. Henri Holland, as well, was only in his early teens when The Hacienda closed down in 1997, yet his SS17 men's collection is a earnest tribute to Manchester's most legendary nightclub. Some House of Holland t-shirts read slogans like *VIBE*, *Ravers* and *ALL NITE*, others are printed with archive photographs of Hacienda clubbers. Similar ones are found in Molly Goddard's collection, hers featuring a wishful series of portraits of the underground party scene in New York by British photographer Nick Waplinton. At Molly's show the tees are worn over her trademark tulle smocks, coming for the occasion in day-glo shades, by girls with often ginger or strawberry blonde hair, like the designer's own. It's a subtle touch to cast herself in her own fantasy – Matty Bovan does too, less subtly, by panting his slender models in the Kabuki-like make-up he himself favours, for his LFW debut with Fashion East this season. Showing a couple of months after the Miu Miu gig, Matty's spring 2017 collection is a glittering wardrobe of DIY party outfits, that pointedly excludes anything anyone but him could consider wearable in the daytime. There are lamé and lurex, nets and mesh in a kaleidoscope of colours at once, oversize fishnets and plasticine jewellery. There's a liberating quality in the over-the-top nature of it all, that resonates in particular with local likeminded audiences. More young designers seem to take on the role of cultural anthropologists, more or less consciously, to document some of those urban nightlife rituals that may one day disappear. London-based Sebastiaan Pieter looks for FW16 at gay culture and the practice of cruising, the pre-Grindr way of looking for a night stand by loitering around purposefully. Perfectly tailored menswear, if of a slightly tighter fit than usual, is spiced up with leather accents and dating-app lingo, such as *HH* on a t-shirt, as in High and Horny, or the word *CRUISE* on a knit, that when taken out of context will only register as vaguely ambiguous. Then there's Caitlin Price, who contemplates each season a different nighttime tradition.

Her fall collection is all about the end of the night, when it's time to walk home – the womenswear match to Tim Coppens' menswear of the following season. For SS17, it's the rite of passage of trips to Ibiza, Marbella or Ayia Napa – all offshore destinations – for dancing around the clock. Cue in glossy “*chemical brights*” and white on white house music lyrics, head-to-toe.

Still, price tags that are understandable for small brands trying to get by in one of the most expensive cities on earth, are ultimately what set these collections apart from the often penniless club kids who inspire them. As the capital's venues continue to vanish, designers' tributes are just that: tributes, a requiem for the nightclub rather than a viable effort to save it. They seem to sympathise, if anything, with the nightlife that leaves – for New York, for Ibiza. The one exception perhaps, is Charles Jeffrey, a recent addition to the BoF 500 list, and nominee, along with Molly Goddard, in the Emerging Talent category for the 2016 British Fashion Awards. On sale at Dover Street Market, his clothes aren't any cheaper than those of his peers. Not without reason – often exquisitely realised, they convey chaos via savoir-faire. The *drunk tailoring* of his FW16 collection, for example, gives way for spring to two distinct silhouettes, the *Bitch*, with full skirted coats and a curved fastening line, and the *Bastard* with his cinched waistline. But the young talent from Glasgow doesn't just reference London's local party scene, with his LOVERBOY night at the still-standing VFD club, he contributes to it hands-on. Charles set it up a few years ago, to help fund his MA degree: if all aspiring designers were to do the same, nightlife in Britain could be in a much better state.