

## Bittles' Magazine | Interview

**Kevin McKay** might not know this, but he was partly responsible for instilling my love of deep house. In the early to mid 90s a string of record labels such as *Soma*, *Junior Boys Own*, *Guerilla* and *Stress* brought out a stream of music that sounded like the best thing you had ever heard. At the very forefront of this house renaissance was Kevin's *Muzique Tropique* and later *Glasgow Underground* labels which, between them, released numerous tracks which sent shivers up and down the spine. By **JOHN BITTLES**



As a young lad unable to identify with the urban onslaught of drum n' bass, or the overly retro stylings of Britpop this was exactly what I needed. Instrumental electronic music overflowing with passion, depth and soul.

Since then Kevin has been responsible for some of the finest house music known to man. His label *Glasgow Underground* has released spell-binding songs and albums by the likes of **RomAnthony**, **Mateo & Matos**, **DJ Q**, **Small Pyramids**, **PBR Streetgang** and more. He co-produced and mixed **Mylo's** mega-selling album *Destroy Rock n' Roll*, he released killer tracks on his own labels, *Off Recordings*, *Noir*, *Under The Counter* to name but a few, and he remains a DJ who is held in the highest esteem by anyone with taste, or who likes a bit of depth with their beats.

This month brings *Glasgow Underground 97:07*, a lush four-disc retrospective which takes a loving look at the label's first ten years of existence. With each disc mixed to perfection by **Kevin McKay** himself, this is as good a representation of house music as you are likely to hear. Highlights are aplenty, but special mention must go to the **Larry Heard** mix of *Are We Thru* by **Neon Heights**, the **Two Lone Swordsmen** mix of *Kingston* by **Muzique Tropique**, *Release The Rhythm* by **Mateo & Matos**, *Floorpiece* by **RomAnthony** and the glorious strings of *Stella Sunday* by **Muzique Tropique**. Seriously, this album is so good that they should be giving it out free to those without enough wonder in their lives. ([Full review here.](#))

In the following interview Kevin discusses the album in depth. We also find time to talk about Glasgow's legendary *Sub Club*, working with **Andy Carrick**, **RomAnthony**, the perils of running a record label, what the future holds for both *Glasgow Underground* and himself, and lots more. So, put on your reading glasses, curl up on the sofa, and let us begin...

**By way of introduction can you tell us a bit about who you are and what you do?**

My name is **Kevin McKay** and I'm a DJ, producer and label owner, originally from Glasgow but now living in London. I produce on my own *Glasgow Underground* label and have released on other labels like *Exploited*, *Noir*, *OFF Recordings* and remixed the likes of **Larry Heard** and **Andy Weatherall**. In addition to *Glasgow*

*Underground*, I also discovered **Mylo**, founded and ran the *Breastfed* label that has released all of his music to date.

[This February sees the release of a bumper four-CD retrospective of some of the highlights from the Glasgow Underground label. What made you decide that the time was right?](#)

I've wanted to make all the catalogue available digitally since 2006 but at that time house music was very much in the background of the electronic music scene. I didn't see the point in making a big splash and re-issuing all the music that we released from 1997 onwards when the majority of dance music fans were into electro house. When I eventually re-launched the label in 2011, the label still had a strong name with older house DJs but a lot of the younger DJs and producers weren't aware of us. I wanted to rebuild the label to the point that all house DJs were aware of us. I thought once I had done that, it would be worth re-issuing all the back catalogue. So hopefully now when house music fans are reading about this compilation from *Glasgow Underground*, they are aware of who we are and what we do.

[The release is divided into four separate mixes: Deep, House, Disco and Eclectic. How easy or difficult was it to work out where each song belonged?](#)

It was pretty easy. Some songs could fit into a few categories so I just picked the one that suited the mix I was doing best!

[You mixed all four discs. What was it like delving into all that history?](#)

It was like re-reading a diary! All the songs are tied in to my memories of the time, the people I worked with and the places I used to DJ. That meant that for a few weeks there at the end of 2014 I was transported back to the late 90s. Memories of nights out in Glasgow with the likes of **DJ Q**, **Marc McCabe** (who ran *Under The Counter*), **David Mustard** (who label managed *Glasgow Underground*); studio sessions with **Andy Carrick**, **Romanthony** and **16b** and hanging out and clubs like *Skansen* in Oslo, *Propaganda* in Moscow or my West Coast tour with the **Idjut Boys** in 1999 came flooding back.

[If you had to chose one song to epitomise the entire release which would it be and why?](#)

Arrgh!! I don't think I can do it in one. I want to pick one for each mix so:

Deep: **Neon Heights featuring Zoe Johnston** *Are We Thru (Larry Heard's Underground Vibe Mix)*

Disco: **DJ Q** *The Original Porn King*

House: **Mateo & Matos** *Release The Rhythm*

Eclectic: **Napoleon Solo** *Running Around*

[I was pleased to see Stella Sunday on the Deep mix as it is one of my favourite tracks ever. Can you tell us a bit about how this track came about?](#)

Ah cheers! That's great to hear. One of the tracks I loved at the time we made this was "*Northern Lights*" by **Caucasian Boy (Crispin Glover)**. At the start of our studio sessions Andy always asked to hear the kind of music I was playing at the time and I had brought this track up to the studio and put it on. We set off with this in mind and got the beats and bass down pretty quick. We added a simple acid style hook and then got working on the chords. Andy is a brilliant composer and the first two chords came to him really quickly but for some reason we couldn't get a 3rd or 4th in the sequence. I was really set on having this big 4 chord sequence and pushed and pushed to get something that looped well. It took us a few days to do and by that point we were sick to death of listening to our simple acid line and sacked it off. The track that had started sounding quite like *Northern Lights* now sounded nothing like it and nothing like anything else I knew at the time either so we were both really happy with it. **Terry Farley** was a big fan of what we were doing and picked the track up straight away for release on *Jus' Trax*. The title came about because me and my mates used to always meet

up at Marc's Dad's pub down in Largs on a Sunday afternoon and ease away our Saturday night hangovers with some cold imported Stella.

Stella Sunday was recorded by yourself and Andy Carrick and released on the record label and under the moniker Muzique Tropicque. Do you have any plans to use this alias again?

I would love to. The main reason it hasn't happened is that I'm now living in London and Andy is still in Glasgow. We stopped releasing music because at the time we had exhausted our love of instrumental dance music. We both really wanted to do some vocal tracks but we didn't ever manage to produce any. We have a couple of unreleased things that I could finish on my own but it doesn't feel right. If I'm ever back up in Scotland for an extended time, we'll definitely get some new music done though as my appetite for producing is back stronger than ever!

The House Mix is mostly made up of productions by the legendary **Mateo & Matos**. How did the relationship with the duo come about?

When I first set up *Muzique Tropicque*, the label wasn't making any money and so I was DJ-ing and doing some freelance journalism to pay the bills. One of the magazines I did a lot of writing for (under the pseudonym of **Kevin Lewis**) was *Muzik Magazine*. I was a big fan of the **Mateo & Matos** releases on the likes of *Henry Street* and *Nitegrooves* and pitched them to **Ben Turner** the editor. He was into the idea and while I was in New York interviewing **Frankie Knuckles** as part of the promo he was doing for his *Ministry of Sound Sessions* album I managed to hook up with the guys. After that we kept in touch and when I set up *Glasgow Underground* I asked them for some music and the first two sets of demos they sent were basically their *New York Rhythms* LP.

Do you think Glasgow Underground has a signature sound?

I'm not sure. The thing that links all the releases is me so if it does have a sound, its the sound of music I like!

The label has had a pretty stellar history over the years. What release or releases are you most proud of?

Thanks! In terms of artist releases, **RomAnthony's** album is pretty dear to me. It took me a long time to convince him to do it and I worked on it so closely with him and its/his impact on electronic music was so big at the time that I'm really proud to have worked on it. Since then, I'm very happy to have *Toolroom* releasing our Various Artists compilations. They are such a solid label and have such a great team that it means a lot to have them working alongside us on these releases.



›Glasgow Underground‹ is widely acknowledged for bringing **RomAnthony** to a wider audience with *The Wanderer*, *Bring U Up* and the wonderful *Floorpiece* all coming out on the label. There are rumours of a retrospective due in 2015. Is this true?

Yes, I'm hopeful this will come out around May this year. When I started working with Roman again in 2008 I had an idea that the best way to re-introduce him to the dance music world was to get the best modern producers to make re-interpretations of his best work. He really hated the idea so I spent a good few years trying to get his new, original work signed to modern hype labels. It just wasn't happening. So I started with the original plan in 2011. I went through his catalogue, picked the strongest releases and paired them with the best producers of today. I then planned out a series of remix singles that would - hopefully - re-ignite interest in his work. I could have stopped the series when he died but I didn't think it would do him justice. The last in the series of remix releases are some re-works of a version of *Too Long* (the song he first recorded with **Daft Punk**) by **Detroit Swindle**, **Doctor Dru**, **Nice7** and **DeMarzo**. At that point I always planned to release an album that shows the best in what he did and the best of the remixes we have done and hopefully that will happen around May.

[The label is about a lot more than revisiting past glories, as the recently released Glasgow Underground 2014 compilation perfectly illustrates. What does the year 2015 have in store?](#)

Cheers! We are doing a few more compilations (like *GU 2014*) with *Toolroom*. The first is the one we discussed earlier. After that I've curated a Miami influenced selection with tracks from my favourite producers right now. In terms of singles we have some cracking productions coming from **Stefano Ritteri**, **Christian Nielsen**, **Mosca**, **Oxia**, **Mia Dora**, **Vince Watson**, **Jimspter**...

[Are you planning on releasing any of your own productions this year \(I loved your Club World EP\)?](#)

Ah, cheers (again!). I've had a few since then, just on other labels: *Club Trax* on *OFF*, *Handz Clapping'* on *Noir Music*, *Check it* on *Toolroom* & *Everything's A Dream* on *Exploited*. There was also *Baby Come To Me* on a *Glasgow Underground* mini-comp. I love spending time in the studio but I'm not sure I could do it every day. I like variety and really enjoy running the label, DJ-ing and managing **Illyus & Barrientos** so I'm not sure I'll ever be a prolific artist! That said, I've been collaborating with **Rob Etherson** from **Mia Dora** and a brilliant engineer/producer called **Andy MacDougall** who's behind a few well known DJs tunes so there will definitely be more from me in 2015.

[What's the main differences in running a record label today from when you first set up Glasgow Underground in 1996?](#)

Wow, nice question. Half of me wants to say, »everything« and the other half says, »not much«. Musically speaking the job is the same: you get music from artists and either release it as is or work with them until its ready for release. And business wise you still need to sell enough music to pay your costs and your artists and leave you enough for wages and an income.

In terms of products, it's also very similar. We still release vinyl & CD (although not for every release) so parts of what do are very similar to what we did in the 90s. That said, on the vinyl side we sell a lot less for a lot more money than we did back then (a big tune in the 90s would sell 10,000-50,000 units whereas if you're doing 1,000+ just now, that's amazing and there aren't many single releases selling over 2,000 units). Breakeven for us is around 200 units so unless something will create that demand, we tend not to do it. Because people buy records for £8-9 now breakeven is a lot less than it was (the costs haven't really changed, just demand). In the 90s you had to sell around 700-800 otherwise it was pointless.

What has changed is how the digital market has affected ›record label‹ behaviour (by ›record label‹ I mean anyone putting digital music out - and that is a lot more than it used to be when you had to pay £500 plus to get your music on vinyl). In the 90s there was a maximum amount of music one label could release into the marketplace. Shops just couldn't stock more than 1 record every 2-6 weeks (depending on the popularity of the

releases) without them having to send back your current releases to be able to buy your new ones (kinda self defeating!) Nowadays your record is alive in the digital stores for a week. When I say alive I mean it has a chance of getting some visibility (banners and other marketing). After that, unless you've garnered some decent DJ support and you get tastemakers charting your release and driving sales to it, it's pretty much dead. You will get some label fans and artist fans checking it out but the drop-off in sales is pretty sharp. This has meant that some labels are on a 52 releases a year schedule. Some - who specialise in more than one genre and have the clout to command respect in each genre - can do more. It has meant that a lot of labels opt for higher frequency of releases and - of course - what suffers is the care and attention you can give to each release. It's a really tricky balance and one that has led to even more disposability in a genre like dance music that was already disposable!

That said, I'm not one of these people who bang on about the past like it was some glorious time for music. I love the business as much as I did in the 90s and I love putting music out now. It feels just as exhilarating as it ever did.

#### What was it that first got you into house music?

A friend from university called **Cris Biguzzi** (who became a very well respected Glasgow DJ) took me to the *Sub Club* and **Harri** and **Slam** did the rest.



#### And what is it about house music that keeps you excited/interested?

I love the possibilities. There's something about a beat at 124bpm (or thereabouts) that just resonates with me and the fact that within that there's a zillion different grooves just makes me happy. New things make me really happy too so there's nothing I love more than getting up in the morning with my son and sticking on a new track that Rob from **Mia Dora**, or **Illyus and Barrientos** have sent me and dancing round the kitchen like a maniac to it while I make his breakfast.

I do feel very lucky though. I think the music you are introduced to in your teenage years pretty much defines your taste going forward. I guess I'm lucky that I got into electronic music, then house music and these things have stayed current. I know for a fact that if house was dead and everyone listened to rock music, I'd be a lawyer/accountant/etc who listened to and made dance music in my spare time.

#### You used to go to one of my favourite clubs, the Sub Club back in the early 90s. What is it that makes the Sub Club so special?

The *Subby* is just one of those spaces that feels great to dance in. Like people that are undeniably sexy, some club spaces just have »it«. The same way you can't really pinpoint what makes that person more sexy than someone else equally beautiful, it's hard to say what makes the *Sub Club* a great space. What I loved about it when I first went there was: the low ceiling; the camouflage netting around the lighting rig; the fact there were four bassbins around the dance floor and you could sit on them and feel the rhythm; the **Keith Haring**

art rips on the wall that went nuts in the UV light; the fact that 400 people in there made the most amazing atmosphere but also meant it was VERY difficult to find a space to dance (emergency exits worked!) and, last but not least, the sound of *Last Rhythm* one night in 1990 (Glasgow City of Culture and its 5AM licenses - woohoo!) on my first ever half a pill (when MDMA was served inside a contact 400 capsule so making half was a real juggle!).

Do you have any final words for our readers?

Thanks a lot for being interested enough to read until now :) I hope you liked what you read.

*Glasgow Underground 97:07* should be in all good download stores now. For more information about the album [head here](#). And to check out new releases from the Glasgow Underground camp [try here](#).

| [JOHN BITTLES](#)