

The first and last days of Crisco

A look back at 90 days that shaped the Montreal house scene

by **PETER LIGHTBURN**

Aria, Stereo, Millennium and Red Lite, as well as the temporarily-on-ice Sona, are the current crop of über-clubs that owe their glitterballs to the city's warehouse scene at the turn of the '90s. In lofts, basements and other clandestine locations throughout Old Montreal and beyond, grandiose throwdowns such as Candy Bar and Sex Garage were holding sway over a new generation of pill-popping rhythmaholics.



Greasy kids' stuff: a Crisco crowd

DJ Tony Desypris dazzled 'em at these infamous bump sessions and, at the same time, his mix show Utopia's Paradise (now in its 12th year on CKUT 90.3 FM) was emerging as a force to be reckoned with. Rising DJ stars Mark Anthony and Robert de la Gauthier had the gay Mekkano-Bronx-K.O.X. axis locked down. Under various pseudonyms, Claudy Philius was responsible for heating up Old Montreal with events at such legendary addresses as the corner of Duke and William, 15 Notre-Dame and the biggest, 64 Prince. "I remember having a snowball fight outside with Boy George," laughs Philius, "as the police circled the block looking for these illegal parties."

In the winter of '92, this scene reached a brief but intense apex with the opening of a club of dubious legality but unquestionable importance - an importance cemented in the mere three months it existed.

"My cousin Greg worked the door at Crisco," says Philius, "and would try getting me through the two-hour line-up. This was in my opinion the best club, aesthetically, in Montreal. The sound, the people, and the music were the most important factors. Funny thing is, it wasn't a club at all."

What it was was a French-language, avant-garde theatre that after the final curtain call was, in a matter of moments, jerked, jimmied and jerry-rigged into the stuff of Montreal nightlife lore.

Enter stage right



Scream of the crop:
Christian Pronovost at Crisco

After a successful party at the Le Sage theatre on Sanguinet Street one night late in '91, a coterie of nightlife heavies embarked on an effort to convert the fabulous space into a warehouse-style bar called Crisco.

There was Pierre Vin, the legendary impresario behind Le Beat, Montreal's premier new-wave dance club of the '80s, and SKY pub. There was Sylvain Martinello, a club kid at the time who went on to launch boîtes such as Shed Café and Cafeteria. There was Chris Farley, resident DJ at Business and later manager of Angels. And there was Christian Pronovost, today the consummate DJ insider, the proprietor of the Inbeat record emporium and navigator behind Go Deep at Exit on Saturdays.

Pronovost was the resident spinner at Crisco. He still ponders how the club even got off the ground. "We basically had no budget," he recalls. "We had to settle for the cheapest sound components, our light show was just a slide projector with a psychedelic-like rotating device, the whole club was set up from a van parked outside."

Pronovost also remembered that time was also not on their side. "After the final theatre production at 9:30 p.m., we had less than an hour and a half to set everything up - the ball, the strobes, we had three guys with drills putting the bar and DJ booth in place. Each week the place looked different."

Eventually, after a lot of tweaking and improvisation, things got more stable. Because of the room's great acoustics even the sound, which had been a source of concern, was surprisingly decent. At first Crisco sparked little interest - there were nights when Chris P simply brought his favourite records and "made a tape." It was at one of those catatonic evenings when a dramatic turnaround was in the offing.

"People were screaming"

"The club had these ecstasy dealers," explains Pronovost, "who weren't affiliated with any organization. They went to New York and Amsterdam and dealt only pure MDMA, not that filtered crap of today. On one dead night, about 20 people who presumably tried ecstasy for the first time lost it to the music I was playing. The drug opened some gate in them."



Best shot: Lisa and Hughes tend bar

It wasn't just the cat that was let out of the bag that night - it was the whole litter. Soon there were absurd line-ups of college kids amped on the hot party favour of the moment. The fashionistas and glitterati were out in full force, the gay contingent represented, all of them quaking to the soulful house strains of classics such as "Coming on Strong" by Desiya, "Still in Love With You" by Melissa Morgan or "Grandpa's House" by Kerri Chandler. It didn't take a genius to deduce that a phenomenon was brewing.

Pronovost describes the dancefloor's frenzied dynamic: "Reynald Gonsalves [of WOW record shop] handed me a white label copy of 'Ran Kan Kan' [a Masters at Work collab with Tito Puente] at the booth, I didn't even listen to it just mixed it in right away. The crowd lost it, the same as with the Todd Terry mix of PM Dawn's 'Watchers Point of View' - people were screaming."

"In that era," says Doctor Love, "house music was the thing to listen and dance to because it was so uplifting. You would go to the record store and out of 10 records, nine would be good."

These days the Doctor offers consultations at Inbeat, but at the time his practice was in Crisco's chill-out lounge. "I would DJ funk and disco classics in the basement of Crisco on Thursdays and Sundays, and made sure my Saturdays were free to go dancing. The club was the ideal club because it put together elements that I considered ideal - cool people, great sound and bouncy music."

Crisco ix-nayed

"The elements of a great party were all there," says JoJo Flores, "a raw, intimate venue, great sound, wicked lights and an eclectic crowd made up of gays, straights, blacks, whites, you name it." These days,

Flores heads up the GotSoul label and directs the Therapy nights at Jello Bar - including tonight's Classic House night, a special tribute to the clubs Business, Steel Monkey, DiSalvio's and of course Crisco.

"I remember promoting and DJing a party called Kaos. We used to move Kaos around different venues in the city, and the best party by far had to be the one at Crisco."

With Crisco's sudden success also came the greed and politics that quickly led to the club's undoing. "Some people who were involved wanted more money," says Pronovost, "and when they didn't get it, we got visits from the fire department. Because we didn't have the permits, there were those at city hall who got bribes so that we could operate. I think there was an agenda by the city to end Crisco."

Eventually the fuzz showed up and opened up a can of shut'-em-down. It was all downhill after that. By late March, '92, Crisco threw its last party.

Now that the after-hour thing has become a cliché for many Montrealers, there has been a proliferation of club nights, like tonight's Therapy, paying homage to Crisco and that naïve warehouse period. Who would have expected otherwise? There will always be, for many locals, a nostalgic longing for those crazy winter nights of 11 years ago, when a little "grease" was added to fire of lost innocence.

Therapy's Classic House night is at Jello Bar tonight, Thursday, April 24, 10pm. Go Deep is at Exit every Saturday

http://www.montrealmirror.com/ARCHIVES/2003/042403/clubland03_2.html