

The Golden Age of Singapore Disco

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First generation disco, radio DJ, and sports commentator Brian Richmond describes a largely undocumented part of Singapore's early social life.

It was in the early 1970s. One of the thriving local clubs, the Barbarella at the old Ming Court Hotel, was allegedly a distribution point for drugs. In those days, the authorities were battling the drug problem, and it was decided that this club and others should be shut down by official decree.

Imagine that. A total shutdown, no nightlife at all, the only thing you could do at night was to watch a movie. It was bad – tourists began to give Singapore a miss. I mean, what kind of country was this, where there was no nightlife? About a year later, the decision was reversed, and along with it came the rules about minors needing to show their IDs, not being served alcohol, and so on.

That amazing “detour” aside, the ‘70s and ‘80s saw a thriving disco scene in Singapore. In those days, there were more discos with DJs spinning, than clubs with live bands, as is the case now. There were discos like The Lost Horizon at Shangri-la, The Boiler Room at the Mandarin, and the West End Club at the Goodwood Park Hotel, which was one of the first “members-only” clubs in Singapore. I was a DJ at a number of those discos. I know that many people, especially the young, think that the movie *Saturday Night Fever* started disco fever in Singapore, but disco fever was alive and kicking here long before that.

It is hard to describe the magic of those days. DJs were entertainers. For instance, I used to play the *congas*, sometimes we would rap between songs; the onus was on us to get the crowd warmed up, and their feet and bodies moving. We would sing the chorus, play the favourite songs of regulars, and greet people we recognised. These were the tricks of the trade – to make someone feel good welcoming them by name; also to know when to keep mum because someone was there and not wanting to be seen!

We would do the fast music, then at some point, dim the lights and do the lovey-dovey music for people to smooch to...then we would bring up the tempo again. The DJ was king, and he dictated the scene.

In my opinion, Studio M at The Plaza Hotel was the hottest disco at the time. It was internationally recognised. Tourists would come in search of it, even though it was not in the middle of town, and we had people lining up to get in. David Bowie visited it at one time.

When disco was in its heyday, new trends emerged. One of the trends was the “live” band phenomenon. When I was spinning at The Lost Horizon, my sets alternated with sets by Joe

Chandran and the Xperiments. Soon all the clubs had live bands. Then there were the private members-only clubs which proliferated – The Club, The Library, My Place, and the famous Chinoiserie, the hangout of airline crews and children from wealthy families.

Those were magical days, with the best places fulfilling the promise of the X-factor that drew the crowds like a magnet, and introducing those crowds to Singapore bands in a never-seen-before setting.