

Le Beat Route

Of the many clubs that have come and gone in the West End over the past decade or so few have been as culturally important as Friday nights at Le Beat Route between 1981 and '83. Situated just a stone's throw away from Groove Records in Soho's Greek Street Le Beat Route was for two years the perfect underground dance dive at a time when the whole of club culture was up for grabs. Originally run by faces-about-town Ollie O'Donnell and Steve Mahney Le Beat Route's Friday nights quickly became a melting pot of the various tribes and youth cults that existed at the beginning of the eighties. New romantics, punks, soul boys, rockabilies, fashion models and political activists all packed into the club's less than salubrious confines to receive an eye-opening musical education from D.J. Steve Lewis. Spinning a heavy-duty mix of seminal upfront rap, raw 70's funk, jazz and the occasional rockabilly tune Lewis managed to offer a tough, viable alternative to the other clubs around at the time with their endless playlists of either jazz, funk or new romantic dance. A lot of people who had previously just been into



Heaven 17, The Clash or Gene Vincent were, thanks to Lewis, introduced to the sounds of Grandmaster Flash, James Brown and Gil Scott-Heron and the seeds of the black dance music revolution in clubland were well and truly sown.

Style too was an important part of the Beat Route scene with the 1950's rocking look making the biggest impact on the club's clientele although zoot suits and the cool jazz-bohemian thing also had their day. In fact the '80s warehouse look of ripped 501's, leather jackets and flat-tops was the Beat Route's very own fashion style long before it was adopted by today's club-goers, while many of the early '80s fashionable club bands like Sade, Animal Nightlife and Blue Rondo A La Turk were all Friday night regulars.

But Le Beat Route wasn't only a place to be seen in, to dance in, or even to get laid or score speed in, it was one of the few clubs where you could just as likely spend two hours arguing about Communism as you could talking about the latest 12" on Sugarhill Records. It wasn't unusual to find yourself discussing religion,

sex or politics until 3.30 in the morning with complete strangers and almost everyone seemed to have an opinion on what was happening in the world, unlike today when few people want to discuss anything other than the price of E or what comes after Acid House. The political edge to the evening's entertainment was also emphasised by D.J. Lewis who went out of his way to play lyrically-positive black music as well as the out-and-out dance tackle, not for nothing was the Young Communist League Choir's version of "The Red Flag" always Lewis's last record of the night (a glimmer of red hope in the Thatcherite gloom). Looking back from today's perspective when so much has happened on the club circuit it's hard to appreciate just how fresh and radical those Friday nights were, sex and sweat, the Fearless Four and Fatback, booze and politics, dressing up and getting down, the Beat Route had everything. It may be long gone but it's impact helped shape the whole club scene that came after it in more ways than one.

Jay Strongman

LEBEATROROUTE 10

- 1 **WAS NOT WAS** Wheel Me Out
- 2 **JIMMY CASTOR BUNCH** Hey Leroy
- 3 **VALENTINE BROTHERS** Money's Too Tight To Mention
- 4 **PRINCE** Head
- 5 **BOBBY BYRD** Back From The Dead
- 6 **BROTHER 'D'** How We Gonna Make The Black Nation Rise
- 7 **DINOSAUR L** Go Bang
- 8 **TROUBLE FUNK** Drop The Bomb
- 9 **KING MONKEY** Bad Man Dan
- 10 **T-SKI VALLEY** Catch The Beat

compiled by Steve 'The Godfather' Lewis