

Northern Soul Scene Project

Paul Donnelly (PD) interviewed by Jason Mitchell (JM) on 1st April 2020

JM: First of all, I've sent you some bits and pieces ahead of time. Did you get a chance just to have a little look at those?

PD: Um, was that the documents I need to sign?

JM: Yeah. And we kind of just want to make sure that you've read them, and it's kind of like almost an email signature. So if you're saying that you've looked at them and you kind of agree in principle...

PD: Fine. I've read them and I'm quite happy. So I shall send an email back tomorrow saying read, um, fine, okay. It's just I couldn't sign them and send them back to you, that's all.

JM: No, no, that's great. That's fine.

PD: Okay.

JM: And it's the...it's the First of April today, 2020. My name's Jason Mitchell, I'm interviewing you. And first of all, if I could ask you for your first name.

PD: Paul.

JM: And could you spell that for me?

PD: P A U L.

JM: Lovely. And your surname?

PD: Donnelly.

JM: And could you spell that for me please?

PD: D O N N E L L Y.

JM: Perfect. And obviously it's a telephone interview as opposed to a one to one due to the current situation. It's for the Northern Soul Project, er, which is run by Jumped Up Theatre Company. Where were you born?

PD: I was actually born in Norwich.

JM: Okay. And when were you born, if you don't mind?

PD: 1956.

JM: Perfect. That just obviously allows us to give us context for anything you say. And, er, have you been known by any, obviously within reason, any other names?

PD: No.

JM: No, okay. On the Northern Soul scene did you ever have a nickname?

PD: No.

JM: Okay, great. Um, okay, that's brilliant. So, erm, first of all, just as a kind of, like, general sort of open question to you, could you just give me a sort of broad sort of...er, just tell me a bit about your experience with Northern Soul as broadly as you want to.

PD: Okay, well, I think the best place to start is the beginning.

JM: Yep.

PD: Erm, and give you a bit of background to sort of how I, erm, got involved in the strange world of Northern Soul. Um, I guess I had to go back to my fifth year at Eastholm School in Peterborough, um, where in 1971, um, we...we were advised that the City Council were running [*faint speech*] Tuesday night discotheques at the Wirrina Stadium, erm, and we used to go there. And predominantly it was a soul music discotheque playing all sorts of different soul music, but it was predominantly soul music. I would have been 15, 16 at the time. Um, doors opened at half past seven, went on 'til half past 10. If you weren't in by eight o'clock you wouldn't get in because the place was rammed. Um, and the first hour...we always tried to get in for the first hour because there was some older lads there that used to play their records that were completely different to anything we've ever heard before. And I guess that was my introduction to what later became the Northern Soul sound for me. Um, I guess what happened then was that I left school, got a job and got some money in my pocket and carried on trying to follow this music and looked into the past with regards to the underground soul scene in the local area and was amazed to find out that, um, you know, the city had, you know, quite a lot of heritage with regards to attending some...some massive underground venues in London, Nottingham, Sheffield, Manchester in the mid to late '60s, so there was always a sort of footing there for, um, '60s soul music that carried on with the older lads playing at the Tuesday night discos in...in...at the Wirrina. Um, a few bob in me pocket, met some fellas that were my age and also enjoyed the sort of music and we discovered a place that was playing this music that went on all night in a little village just outside Bedford called Bletsoe, and we used to travel over there and that was sort of a nine o'clock start, eight o'clock finish in the morning. And from there, erm, we were told about these super clubs if you like, one of them being the Golden Torch Ballroom in Stoke...Tunstall, Stoke-on-Trent, and we went up there in early 1973, er, and was absolutely blown away by the place. It was like you'd just joined the best gang in the world.

[5:05.4]

So you know that...that gives you a little bit of background to how I became involved in the Northern Soul scene on a national basis, but there's a lot more to it that put Peterborough on the map, certainly from the mid '70s onwards.

JM: Okay, so that's brilliant. When you say at the Wirrina, you kind of...you named it as a...sorry, could you just...I didn't quite get the thing you said right at the beginning, you gave it a title, you said it was a...you named it as a discotheque in the Wirrina?

PD: Yeah, the City Council who ran the Wirrina opened up a discotheque, er, in the small room at the Wirrina that had a name of the Tower Soul Room and had a large sort of revolving ball in the middle, and it was a...it was a proper ballroom - if people have never been into the Wirrina. Erm, and it was called the Carousel Club and it was a discotheque that the City Council started to basically give somewhere for 15, 16 year olds to go and, you know, have a dance and listen to music because they couldn't get into the pubs and clubs.

JM: Was that...was there...was there a more underlying reason? I mean, it's a very generous offer of the City Council for 15, 16 year olds, but was there more of a underlying reason than that? Why at this point?

PD: No, I just think, you know, they...they...they had a policy at the time of trying to put something on every night. There was five-a-side football, there was roller skating, er, there was wrestling, professional wrestling, and...and...and the Tuesday nights the ballroom was empty so it was an ideal thing for the Council to try, and it was a roaring success.

JM: So just for my mind, because I think you're the first person I've spoke to that - and if I'm right in saying this - this is pre...pre all-nighters at the Wirrina.

PD: Absolutely. This would have been, er, 1971.

JM: No-one's...I don't think...in all the interviews I've done I don't think anyone's really mentioned this. It's really brilliant. Erm, and so then, erm, and then...so you attended that - I'm just trying to get the sense of it in my head - you liked it, you sought more, you went to Bedford.

PD: Yeah.

JM: Where...could you just spell the place that you went?

PD: Yeah, the...the...it's a little village just outside Bedford called Bletsoe, which is B L E T S O E and it was actually in, um, it was on a farm yard, and it was an old wooden barn. I mean, it was a fair old, a fair old place to say the least. But people from hundreds of miles used to converge on the place to listen and dance to the records that the DJs were playing at the time and, you know, people were collecting records and there was lots of guys selling records that they'd just acquired from America, you know, it was...it was a big step up from the Wirrina for sure.

JM: And...and...and in terms of music, at the Wirrina was it...was it Northern Soul music or...?

PD: No, no, at the Wirrina on the Tuesday night youth discos it was predominantly soul music but it would have been a bit of James Brown, funky music, it would have been some new releases, but the first hour was predominantly what we later learned was...was the Northern Soul sound and...and that was predominantly played by Ian Freeman, who later became resident DJ at Nottingham Palais, er, and Pete Edwards, and they would play these Northern Soul records and, you know, we sort of, first...was first introduced to it then.

JM: What did you...when you got to Bedford, and obviously you were...there was the...it was like the introduction to the Northern Soul sound, what was that like for you?

PD: I mean, it...it just wasn't the music, Jason, it was...it was the whole thing, it was, you know, the fashion. It seemed to me like the most gorgeous girls in the world were there. Um, it was...it was listening to records that you've never heard before that at the time were only sort of eight or nine years old, but they were obscure things from America that just had this incredible '60s dance beat that was similar to Tamla Motown but different in a big, big way, so that's what we went for, erm, and a few other bits and pieces as well.

JM: So, we'll get to that. How was the Paul who went there different from the Paul who left that...that time? I mean, that's...I realise it's a while ago but how were you a different person?

[10:09.9]

PD: I don't quite understand the question.

JM: So the Paul who arrived there, having been to the Wirrina and listening to a bit of disco music, turned up at Bedford to what was essentially, as I'm right in thinking, a full Northern Soul event...

PD: Yeah.

JM: What...what was different about...what happened to you?

PD: It...it just blew me away. It was everything that I thought this Northern Soul thing could be. It was the rareness of the records, it was a fact...I mean, there was even situations where you would go...a record would come on you'd never heard before you...you'd go across to where the DJs were playing to have a look, and they would...they would cover the record label up so they...nobody knew what record it was. And that's where the term Northern Soul cover ups came from, so, you know, they'd spent, like, many, many hours tracing down these obscure records. Um, I mean, and...and...and some of them were just fantastic pieces of music.

JM: Yeah. Wow. Um, um.

PD: It was a bit like...I put it...I give you a...it was a bit like listening to, um, Bohemian Rhapsody by the Queen from a CD.

JM: Yeah.

PD: And then the next day going out into your back garden and the group is there playing live.

JM: Huh!

PD: It was that...it was that much of a jump.

JM: Huh. That's just brilliant. I think you've just...you've just done that, because...so it's not really a telephone interview technique, but who cares? It's , huh, I'm supposed to keep slightly impartial but that...

PD: Oh no, no, no, no,no.

JM: ...that's such a brilliant description because one of the things, um, that I...that in doing these interviews is that...it's really difficult because obviously we're going to try and make a piece about something like this, and it's this...it's the thing that you've just mentioned that everyone's mentioned about this kind of what seemingly seems to me a little bit, like, a sort of...sort of... like an epiphany...it's a weird, you know, people just, "I can't describe it," is generally what I hear, um, "I can't describe it," it just...it...and...and, you know, that description of, like...it's just, you know, fantastic. So...so, um, so then...so then you were kind of hooked. What...what about friends and friendships around this? How...were they with you? How...how was that?

PD: Well, I'd sort of had a group of friends that were school orientated, erm, when we went to the Carousel Club on the Tuesday nights at the Wirrina, with a few quid in my pocket, erm, and, sort of, growing some sideburns. Erm, we...we, sort of, allowed us to, sort of, mix in city centre pubs and we met fellas from different estates that we'd never met before. Erm, and I

seem to be accepted by a group of fellas that were a couple year older than me, erm, who were the guys that said, "Right, we're off to Bletsoe on Saturday night, do you wanna come along?" Er, and I tagged along and that's...that's, and those guys have remained friends of mine for 45, 48 years, erm, you know, it was...it was an incredible bond of friendship that, because, you know, there were some good times and there was some bad times.

JM: Oh, I'm just...I'm gonna come back to that. Um, when you say accepted, it...is it your experience that some people weren't?

PD: Sorry, say that again.

JM: When you say you were accepted and you got into the scene, it...it...would you...was everyone accepted into it?

PD: No, no, you weren't. You...you 'ad to be a certain person to be accepted by the, inverted commas, older lads. You 'ad to 'ave a dress sense. I always used to carry a box of records round with me and I put a mobile record player called a discotron, and that seemed to, um, they wanted me to play the records in my box and they... and I was just accepted and, you know, they said, "Right, you're with us now," and I've stayed with them for many, many years.

JM: And if...and if you weren't...if you weren't a person, 'cause I've had a couple of people and I, you know, as the more I do these interviews, I think it's more useful actually to talk about what I have heard, I had a couple of people use the term, "It took me a long time to be accepted."

PD: Er, It took me about five minutes.

JM: Yeah.

PD: And I think...I think it's because I'm...a lot of people think I'm quite an arrogant guy, um, but I'm not, I'm just a very confident fella and 'ave been since...since I was a teenager, and I think...I think these guys that were doing it before I were doing it, you know, they just appreciated that and said, "Yep, you're with us now."

[15:18.6]

JM: Yeah. Okay, brilliant. So then...so then we've got...we've got Bedford and then we went out to... you then started...you talked about your moving out to the Torch etc. Tell me a bit about the experiences as we move out of Peterborough and out locally.

PD: Okay, well some of the lads that used to go to Bletsoe were from the Midlands. And in 1972, um, we were told about this club in a back street in Tunstall, north of Stoke-on-Trent, one of the five towns of Stoke-on-Trent, it's Tunstall and Burslem but it was north Stoke-on-Trent. Um, and we went up there in early 1973 to have a look 'cause we'd been told it was something very, very special. And it was actually in a street, and it was an old converted cinema, um, and we arrived and the queue from the front doors was probably a hundred metres long, um, the venue had a capacity, allegedly, of about 700 and there was well over a thousand people in there, and it was...the first time I went I didn't move all night. It was just...it is a very hard thing to describe – you 'ad to be there - but it was like...it was like a religious moment, I guess, um, you know, I was, you know, I was at the biggest church in the world listening to the greatest hymns ever made, and seeing the greatest dancers that I'd ever seen and the greatest DJs, and the night just went. We got there, I think, probably 10

o'clock on the first night and within a matter of minutes it was eight o'clock in the morning, um, and we went a couple of times after that, and then unfortunately due to police restrictions on the licence it closed in March 1973, so we didn't...we didn't go as many times, but that without question is the best Northern Soul venue I've ever, ever been to.

JM: How did you get there.

PD: Car.

JM: Describe it a bit, your journey, did you start at services?

PD: We...I think the first time we went in my old Morris 1000. I can't remember who it was. There were six of us went, two in the front and four in the back, and I think it was...took us about three hours to get there and then half an hour to find the place because it was in the most bizarre street ever, it was...it was just like a...it was just like a nightclub in the middle of Gladstone Street, it was bizarre.

JM: And when you say you didn't move at all, you mean you didn't dance?

PD: No, no, no, I mean the whole place just took me over, you know, you...you...I just...I just stood there on the balcony just taking it all in.

JM: Were you...what was your field of...dancer, record seller, record seller and dancer, or...?

PD: Who me?

JM: Yeah.

PD: I was always a dancer and a record buyer. I didn't do a lot of selling but I did an awful lot of buying, which became bigger and bigger and bigger during the mid '70s, but we'll go on to that a bit later when we talk about the Wirrina all-nighters, but certainly I used to enjoy dance, enjoy talking to somebody either side of me for half an hour that I'd never met before and probably never ever met 'im again after that. But no, it was mainly dancing. But it was taking in the whole atmosphere of the place, and some nights if you could've...you could've bottled the atmosphere in the Torch and sold it now you would probably be looking at 10,000 pound a bottle, it was incredible.

JM: Your best moves as the dance? What was your speciality? What did you hit people with?

PD: Well, really? I mean, I always think Northern Soul dancing is about expression. It's not about following a particular dance code, which seems to happen nowadays, um, you know, you get on the floor and you...you express yourself to this wonderful music, and if you were unique I could...I would never ever attempt to spin or backdrop or anything like that, which was quite prevalent in the...back in the day, but I, you know, I would just dance the way I wanted to dance. I didn't copy anybody, I had my own unique style.

[20:22.6]

JM: And of the Torch, I'm gonna bring you back to this comment that you've made 'cause I gotta...I'm gonna insist that you tell me one. One little story - good time, one little story - bad time, please.

PD: Erm, the good time story was hearing one of the DJs play a record that he announced was a record that he was playing for the first time and it was one that I had actually got at home in

my record box, which made me feel about ten foot tall. The bad time was we went there once and one of our gang had a pocket full of pills and was stopped by a gentleman with a coat on, who opened up his coat and showed him a shotgun and said, "Hand me over what you've got in your coat or you're gonna get this."

JM: Hoohoo! Wow! Was there much of that?

PD: Yes.

JM: There was a lot of it?

PD: There was a lot more...I mean this, you know, the general...the general sort of thing about Northern Soul being one big happy family, it's like that nowadays but in those early days it was a...you needed to watch your back.

JM: Was that exciting?

PD: In a way yes 'cause the guys that I was hanging about with were scallywags, bordering on being psychopaths, so, you know, you had...you had to be looking out for each other, which is why we always...why we became good mates, I guess.

JM: Hmm. I take it that you were...you were a friend of what your friend had in his pockets?

PD: Yes.

JM: And was that...on reflection was that a major part...a big contrib...you know?

PD: Oh, without question.

JM: Yeah, yeah.

PD: You know, I think...I think in the early days, sort of, going back to the Flamingo Club and the Sin Club in London in the mid '60s, you know, I think...I think these venues were actually started to accommodate people wanting to stay up all night because they were taking amphetamines, so, you know...and some...some people used to use it as a recreational drug and didn't abuse it, but some people took it to the next extreme.

JM: How do you...what was the detail of getting...I mean, you know, because...can you just talk me through, if you don't mind, the actual detail of how you would go about acquiring that?

PD: Two ways. We had a contact in Cambridge, um, that phone calls were made during the week, a quantity was ordered and a collection was made normally on a Thursday or Friday, or access illegally into a pharmacy.

JM: Um, and, um, oh I had a good question there and I've forgotten it. And, I mean, was it expensive?

PD: No, no, not at all. I mean in those days, sort of, 10 pills were 10 a quid.

JM: Was your...was your...your work...what did you...d'you mind my asking what you did as a day job?

PD: I was a plumber.

JM: Was it...was it...I mean, were they just two different worlds?

PD: Erm, I...the job I did was something that I had to do to make the money to live the weekend. If that makes sense.

JM: Yeah, yeah.

PD: Um, I hated Monday mornings and couldn't wait 'til Friday afternoon.

JM: And how...

PD: And then I would...

JM: Sorry.

PD: And then I would say goodbye to my mum and used to drop back home again on Sunday.

JM: For how long did that...that was a nice side...?

PD: That happened with the fellas for about two years.

JM: Bet you were knackered after that, weren't you?

PD: [Chuckles] It took its toll, yeah.

JM: Yeah.

PD: And then...and then I met my now wife at a soul music venue and she sort of kicked me up the arse and put me on the straight and narrow, so...

[25:07.3]

JM: Was it...mainly... 'cause I know...I know that from previous interviews I've had people have talked about it being very separate in terms of, if you went there with a partner, I've had two people talk to me, you know, they went there with a partner but they would actually dance separately, as in, not physically together, but also separately. But was the...was the amphetamine predominantly male, was it male and female or predominantly male?

PD: Male and female.

JM: Yeah.

PD: Male and female.

JM: Okay, that's...yeah.

PD: I mean, if Kay and I would go...would've gone to an all-nighter somewhere, um, we would probably spend the first 15 minutes, sort of, finding a place where we were gonna meet up during the course of the evening, leave our holdalls and things like that near a table with friends that we knew, and it would not be unreasonable for me to not see my girlfriend, wife now, for four or five hours.

JM: It's quite an independent thing, wasn't it, it wasn't...?

PD: Yeah, I mean you went there to do your own thing. You didn't go there....well I didn't go there to socialise and make friends and try and find birds and things like that, mainly 'cause I wanted to listen to records I'd never heard before, and dance.

JM: So the Torch...and then after the...after...after the Torch you then sampled...?

PD: When the Torch closed there was another venue that sprung up which was very popular called Va Va's in Great Moor Street in Bolton, which we never went to – it's a bit too far for us, Bolton's a long, long way away. And then a friend of ours told us that he'd been to a new venue called the Casino in Wigan. We...we didn't really take much notice of it. And then on September the 21st 1974, my wife's brother and two other guys, we went up there, and we went to the Blackpool Mecca Club first and then we went to the first anniversary at the Wigan Casino. And that was a hell of a place. Musically not as good as other venues but, you know, you're talking about 2,000 people there.

JM: Sorry, I'm just making some notes. You've got that date etched. How do you know that date so specifically?

PD: Because the opening night was September the 20th 1973 and that was my wedding anniversary, so I know the date.

JM: Hoohoo. Musically not as good, you say?

PD: No, musically not as good as previous venues. There was just something, you know, it seemed to me as if anything that was fast, 'ad a beat to it, was fair game but, you know, I 'ad a...I used to like soul music that, you know, moved me in lots of ways and pop music didn't do it to me, so...you know, it was a nice place to go to and nice to, sort of, meet people that we'd become friends with over the previous three or four years, but musically it wasn't the best of places.

JM: Good and bad from Wigan, please.

PD: Good atmosphere. Incredible atmosphere sometimes. You've only got to listen to the YouTube live stuff from Wigan Casino in the early days to realise the atmosphere, you can still smell it. The bad things was, you know, the music they played, it was...it just wasn't...it didn't float my boat.

JM: No, but also a good and a bad personal memory. Good time, bad time.

PD: Really...I can't really give you a good time, bad time. It was mundane really. I mean, a lot of people think it was the best thing in the world, but to me it was...it was somewhere that you went to, but it wasn't brilliant brilliant.

JM: So, Wigan and then...and then where did you get...what...where in terms of...what happened next?

[29:41.3]

PD: Well, musically the stuff that was being played didn't float my boat. The stuff that was...I was enjoying at the time was the stuff that was being released in New York, in Chicago and Detroit in the, sort of, 1974. But that's, sort of, still a '60s beat to it but with synthesisers...synthesisers and a different sort of sound to it which was being predominantly played at Blackpool Mecca. And that's where my life changed regarding Northern Soul because I came back to Peterborough after vowing never ever to go back to Wigan Casino and put an advert in the what was then called the Peterborough Standard, asking if there's anybody else in the area enjoys listening to this sort of music, and I listed a few titles that I'd got, and to my amazement we had a number of people, sort of, contact me who I didn't know, one of them being a guy called David Minden who was a bit older than me at the

time. I was 19 and David was in his 20s and he was the...the owner of a mobile discotheque called Rock Hopper Promotions.

JM: Just say that again slowly.

PD: Rock Hopper Promotions. So he 'ad all the equipment. He 'ad a bit of a business head on him as well. And he knocked on my door one night and we sat down and had a chat and he had this idea of opening a local all-night venue playing Northern Soul. He suggested that he'd been in contact with Andrew Giles, who was the manager at the Wirrina, who we knew...we'd known from the Carousel Tuesday night functions many years before that. An approach was made, and the rest is history. The first all-nighter start...I think it was sometime in March 1974, and it was in the old Carousel Club room which was the ballroom with a really nice dance floor, and it...and the venue just was a Friday night, all night, it was 10 o'clock 'til eight o'clock on Saturday morning. A pound to get in. And it went from strength to strength.

JM: So you were kind of instrumental in that?

PD: I...I..., you know, I...Dave and I started the Wirrina all-nighter. I was a resident DJ there. Indeed the first...first all-nighter was only three of us DJ'd the whole night because we weren't expecting that many people to come, but what happened that night was unbelievable.

JM: Why? Tell me.

PD: Numbers. Numbers. Andy Giles had asked me how many people we were expecting. And I said probably no more than 300. And by 12 o'clock that night there was 900 people in there.

JM: Were you surprised by that, bearing in mind that you...just...in terms of...?

PD: I was very surprised. Very surprised, and there's a great story attached to that, which I often tell people about.

JM: Tell me now.

PD: It was...my wife at the time lived in Whittlesey and I lived at Fletton Avenue, and she used to come in...she used to come in on the bus from Whittlesey and I used to get on the bus with her at Fletton Avenue and then we would drop off at the old bus depot which is where the courts are near the swimming pool. And we were walking towards the Wirrina, and it would have been about nine o'clock, and I remember seeing these long queues and I remember saying to Kay, "Somebody..." 'cause they used to have the wrestling on on the Friday nights as well with people like Mick McManus and Giant Haystacks and all those, and I remember saying, "There must be somebody really famous on the wrestling bill tonight because look at that queue." And when we got closer, we realise that they were queuing to get into the all-nighter, not for the wrestling. And Andrew Giles was at the door and he was 'aving...he said, "I 'aven't got enough staff on to deal with all this lot," and 'e was 'aving kittens, but we got everybody in and we had a hell of a night.

JM: Wow. That's brilliant. Whereabouts in Fletton Avenue did you live?

PD: I lived at 30 Fletton Avenue near the Peacock.

JM: Oh, right, yeah, 'cause I live in Fletton...I...before I moved here I lived in Fletton Avenue. Um, wow, um, so...what...did you have...did you...having experienced the Torch etc. did you...did

you do anything to try and make it the experience that you had, if you see what I mean?
Slightly quirky asking you that.

[35:05.0]

PD: In a nutshell, no. Um, we wanted to do our own thing, and we encouraged the DJs that we eventually had onboard as residents and guests to come along and do their own thing. We didn't want them to copy anybody and we tried to coerce them, if you like, into playing stuff that they would not normally play at other venues in the north of England. Sometimes it worked, sometimes it didn't, but certain records that were first played at the Wirrina all-nighter as a new discovery later on became what they call Wigan Casino classics and, you know, they were played in Peterborough first.

JM: And...and when you were there did you, kind of, witness...how old were you when this was happening?

PD: 19.

JM: Jees Louise. I'm breaking the rules here, but that's just...that...that's quite a thing, isn't it, for a 19 year old to have....?

PD: Well, I...I...I'd been collecting records for four years, erm, and amassed, you know, quite a nice collection of '60s soul music. And then I, again, I mean, you've got to remember I was quite a confident kid and I approached a guy called John Anderson, who was a Scottish fella who had a record import business in King's Lynn called Solo Records, and we used to go over there on the bus on a Saturday morning and he would have, like, a pile of records ready for me that he hadn't played, or shown to anybody else, that were predominantly '70s new releases, which was what I wanted to play at the Wirrina. And I used to go in there with a tenner and come back with, like, 15 records that nobody had ever heard before and couldn't wait to play them and share them with, you know, these...these fellas that were travelling from the north of England to Peterborough on a Friday night to listen to what we were playing.

JM: How was the...the Paul at 19 set, you know, with this, you know, event that's just burst into Peterborough, how is he different from the Paul that went to Bedford?

PD: Er, I would say no different at all, no different at all. I was there...I was there for different reasons, I was there to share the music that was in my collection predominantly, but I used to dance as well and I used to mix with people that I'd never seen before and say, "Hello, where are you from?" and, you know, they were from all over the country, so it was no different. It was no different.

JM: But if no different why did you set it up then? Why did you...why did you go...?

PD: 'Cause it was the muse...the music...the biggest...the biggest venue at the time was the Wigan Casino, and the music that was being played just didn't float my boat and I...I took the opportunity, with David Minden, to start a venue that we thought would be acceptable locally. But in a matter of months it became an iconic national venue where people will travel miles and miles and miles to come and listen to records that myself and Steve Jones and Gary Spencer from Stanground would play, and Andy Smith would play, even...even so much, Jason, that the big DJs who were D-Jing at Wigan and Blackpool and places like that,

were actually ringing us up and saying, "Can we come down and do a guest DJ spot at the Wirrina?"

JM: But why was it important to you?

PD: Um, I wouldn't say it was important. It was just a way of sharing the music that I enjoyed at the time with other people, and, you know, as...as, you know, to actually play a record for the first time that nobody's never heard in the UK, as a record collector that's a big, big buzz.

JM: In terms of...because my question where I was going to is from...is, though, you're visiting the clubs, you're dancing, you're...you're having a fantastic time, the experience is...is fantastic, and then...and then there's the move to the DJ-ing. And I know that, say, you'd still danced as well, but was it different? Was it a different experience for you?

[39:57.8]

PD: No, no. You know, I still danced, I still heard records I'd never heard before. I guess if, to put it in a nutshell Jay, if...if...if what was being played at the Wirrina didn't float my boat, I wouldn't've DJ'd there, I wouldn't've gone there. Even though I was instrumental in setting the whole thing up back in 1974. It's all...with me it's all been about the music first and then people...people later and I...I'd sort of go into a bit of a cocoon, really, because the music was important to me where lots of other people used to look for other things as well.

JM: Cocoon as in?

PD: Erm, on my own I will...I will just, you know, some nights I will sit on the stage for three or four hours just listening to what the DJs were playing and if...if there was something that was really good that I hadn't heard before I'd make a note of it and then try and obtain that record through foul means, if necessary, to get the record so I've got it.

JM: Okay. Sorry I'm just writing a little something here because you've given me an idea of something which I must write otherwise I'll forget it. Apologies.

PD: No worries.

JM: Okay. Ha! Brilliant. I must say, Paul, this is brilliant. This is...

PD: The previous people that you've spoken to that obviously are a bit younger than me, or they would have known about the...the early days at the Carousel, but has anybody ever mentioned to you a guy called Danny Daniels?

JM: Yes.

PD: Yeah. Well Danny was a hell of a kid. Very small, low centre of gravity and when you talk about dancers...

JM: Yeah.

PD: ...that kid could dance.

JM: Yeah, yeah. Where...

PD: He won...he won the big dancing competition at Wigan in 1975.

JM: Yeah, I've heard this. Is he...you've mentioned it, now you'll forgive me, is he still alive, or is he...where...?

PD: No, he passed away about four or five years ago.

JM: Yeah, yeah. So, um, you're 19, Wirrina, that happens and then...and then, move forward. You're then...where...where do we go next?

PD: Okay, well, everything is hunky dory, I was...I was playing records from my own collection every Friday, once a month on a Friday night, um, David had been approached by various organizations in London about putting on live acts from America, which we did very successfully. Um, we had live acts like Major Lance from Chicago, we had Billy Butler from Chicago, James and Bobby Purify, a sort of classic '60s duet, um, we had The Exciters which had one of the biggest attendances ever in a Northern Soul venue ever, which was over 2,000 people, and we 'ad both rooms open up that night. And then something happened which sort of put the lid on it all for me, um, we booked Betty Wright, who was an American soul singer who at the time was 'aving a lot of success on the Northern Soul scene in the UK and we...couple of weeks before the gig, um, the City Council pulled the plug on the licence for all-night venues at the Wirrina, predominantly because of thieving and some drug issues, but they said no more all-nighters. And what happened then was Betty Wright's, um, not lawyer, I'm trying to think of the right word, but she insisted on a full payment that had been agreed for the gig, which we had to pay. And it left a sour taste in my mouth and I walked away from the UK Northern Soul scene for near on, I guess it would be 25 years.

JM: Gosh. Um...

PD: I never had anything to do with it at all.

JM: I'm going to unpack that a bit. Um, um, let me just go...where do I go? So, the agent, I take it, for Betty Wright insisted on that because...

[44:56.9]

PD: We'd signed a contract saying that we would agree to pay her X, Y, Z and we couldn't put the venue on which meant that she still wanted...she was only...she was over from America for two gigs – us on the Friday night in Peterborough and Saturday night at Wigan Casino and then she was flying black...flying back to Detroit on the...the following Monday. So we 'ad to pay 'er, um, and it took a bit of strain to sort it out, but we sorted it out and we moved on but I...after that I, sort of, decided I'd concentrate on being a proper boyfriend and hopefully a husband.

JM: Can I just delve into this, and obviously feel...you...you stop me when, um, but a sour taste because you had...I take it that's not about the financial payment? I take it that's something...?

PD: Yeah, it...it, you know, I just...it just really just blew me away and, um, I just said, "I can't be 'aving with this."

JM: Because you felt...?

PD: Um, I dunno. I...in a strange sort of way I'd put a lot into doing this and in one 10 minute conversation the whole thing had to close with financial implications.

JM: And the Council, why...was there...was there a discussion about pulling the plug? What...?

PD: No, no, I think...I think what 'appened was there was some issues with some of the local yobbos, er, picking on fellas and their girlfriends who were coming down from the north of

England in the city before the all-nighters and there was, you know, violence and all that sort of stuff. There was quite a large, sort of, drug issue at the...and I think some dealers got busted, um, and there was also some theft issues from milk off people's doorstep, and the whole thing they just said, "No, we can't," so they stopped it all. And looking back they didn't really have any alternative, really.

JM: So it came to an end?

PD: It came to a very, very abrupt end.

JM: Mmmm. And did you still...did you still listen to the music?

PD: Er, no, I just turned my whole back on it. Something that had been special to me for several, several years I just turned my back on it. In actual fact my records that I used to DJ from were put in the loft they didn't see light of day for 20 odd years.

JM: Gosh.

PD: And it was a vis...it was a phone call from an old mate of mine that, sort of, resurrected it all for me where I realised just how much I'd missed it 25 years later, in a strange, bizarre way.

JM: So, I've got two little columns here that I'm going down. The first is, your friends around you at that time, they...they carried on?

PD: No, they...when...when the Torch closed they all stopped running.

JM: And, if I can ask you just...you may not've...the Northern Soul scene in Peterborough after the Wirrina closed went to where? To...?

PD: Er, it went from strength to strength. I mean, one of the things I'm very, very proud of is actually, sort of, setting the foundation of something that is still going now, um, and, um, I think...the story goes that the City Council wouldn't give any venue in Peterborough an all-night dancing licence, but because Fletton, or Fletton Aven...Fletton High Street, was in somewhere else – whether it be Fenland or...or wherever – but they got a licence for The Fleet, and The Fleet took up the baton and carried on. So the story goes, anyway.

JM: How did you...I mean, I've got two questions. First of all, how...what did you do with that gap in your life, and basically did you...?

PD: Wife, kids and a business.

JM: And did you just simply stop taking the...the other stuff?

PD: Yep.

JM: Without difficulty?

PD: Without no difficulty whatsoever. I mean, I'd already, sort of, stopped doing all that sort of stuff a year previous in...in the amounts that we were doing '72 and '73, so no, not a problem at all.

JM: And you stopped because, I mean you stopped taking the amounts because...?

[50:00.4]

PD: I just didn't need to.

JM: So Fletton set off with the Fenland thing. And you watched from afar?

PD: No, no, wasn't interested one bit. And then, as I say, I had a phone call from an old mate of mine from the '70s 25 years later and asked me a specific question, which opened up the door and...to...to something that I realised that I had missed it, you know.

JM: Sorry, and you may have said, what was the specific question?

PD: Um, I 'ad a phone from a guy who said, "I know you've probably not got it, but you used to play a record at the Wurrina," um, and he told me what it was, he said, "Have you still got it?" And I said, "I'm not sure." He said, "Well, could you check 'cause if you do I'm quite happy to give you five hundred pounds for it."

JM: Ha!

PD: So, um, I sort of took the next 10 minutes getting up in the loft, brought it down and there was the record, erm, and I said, "Yep, come round," and he said...he came round, he said, "Do you mind if I have a look through all your other records that you've got?" and I said, "No." And he...he didn't take the five hundred pound record because there was other records in the collection that he wanted better, and he said, "You do realise you've got a lot of very, very rare records here that in today's market are worth a fortune?" And I didn't believe him, but I did...after he went I checked it out and to my amazement he was spot on. It was records that I'd paid a quid for that were worth a hundred quid, and one thing lead to another and this guy that had come round to have a look at my records, he'd actually told a lot of people that I'd got all these records and I got a guy rang me up and said, "Paul, we're doing a...we're thinking of organising a Wurrina reunion. Would you like to come back and play all the records from your collection, if you've still got it, at this Wurrina reunion?" And I did, thoroughly enjoyed it and it started me, um, on the next sort of stage really, and became very heavily in collecting super rare records from America and DJ-ing at some of the big, big venues in the UK like the Hundred Club in Oxford Street, London on several occasions, erm, the big Kiel University evenings, Blackburn, all sorts of places I DJ'd at, and over a matter of 10 years, along with the records that I'd already got and with what I traded and sold and brought in myself, I started building up my record collection again.

JM: So, um, where was...tell me more about this reunion.

PD: The reunion was in a small pub down Lincoln Road, there was about 60 people there, and we had a great night. And it was people that used to go to the Wurrina in the mid '70s. And that carried on for several years, actually, sort of...and it still does. They still have a reunion once a year in Whittlesey at the Ivy Leaf Club, and I pop along and show me face, play a few records and thoroughly enjoy it.

JM: And was it...was it...oh God, I'm gonna backtrack here. So obviously the Betty Wright thing happened. I take it you were still friends with your friends that were...that'd been with you on this journey?

PD: Yes.

JM: Yeah. And when you...with the reunion, I mean, were you...when you walked in were there people that hadn't seen you for years, or how was that?

PD: Yeah, literally for...for 25 years, and I s'ppose that's what the reunion's all about. And I very quickly noticed that...in 1975 I was doing what I was doing and enjoying it because it was all

about the music. 25 years later I was still doing it because of the music, but then all of a sudden you start to realise that we are of an age now where the social side is...has become probably quite important, if more important than the music – the music is just a catalyst to get people together and remind them of music and records they used to dance to when they were kids.

JM: Gosh. Um, and what has it...what has it...what has it all meant to you? I mean, that's such a broad question but in terms of, like, it's almost like a full circle.

[55:01.3]

PD: It's a difficult question to answer, really. Um, I could...I could be quite arrogant and say it hasn't really meant a lot to me. It's rather like a guy that spends all 'is lifetime restoring an old 1930s car. It's something that I've enjoyed for half of my life, um, I still get...I still get a lot of satisfaction out of listening to records that people send me over the internet that were released in 1960s that I've never heard of before, and up until about 12 months ago I was very, very heavily into buying and collecting very, very, very rare records.

JM: And what's that world like, just a bit of...is that...?

PD: That's...that's...you've got to know your stuff or you can very quickly lose a lot of money, you know, it's bordering on being rare stamp collections, rare wine collections, you...you need to know what you're doing and, you know, I've made some mistakes where I've sold records too cheap, but I've also had a couple of results – one record I brought 20 years ago I sold 18 months ago for five and a half thousand pounds, so...

JM: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Gosh. Yeah, yeah. And when...and the DJ-ing in the Hundred Club and stuff like that, is it...is it a different feeling for you now, or...?

PD: No, it's exactly the same feeling. I go there to share with the people that have paid good money to come through the door records from my collection which I think they might like. And that's...that's how I've always been.

JM: And if you were to close your eyes and just, like, think about you at Bedford, you at the Torch, you at the Worrina, what would the...what would the words be that describe those abiding memories?

PD: [Long pause] Happy days.

JM: Happy days, yeah.

PD: Happy days, yeah they were happy, happy days.

JM: Yeah. Happy days, that's great. Wow. That's just...that's just...that's fantastic. I'm going to sort of bring it to an end, not because there's not more I want to ask you, it's just we've recorded for nearly an hour and I think there's just so much stuff here that I've sort of said that you're a person that we would probably want to, sort of, ring up and say, "In the interview you said this," you know, there might be things that we want to unpack a bit more.

PD: I'm quite happy with that. I mean, I dunno whether you're gonna, sort of, splice it together and, sort of, leave a bit on the floor and cut it together.

JM: No, no, I've just...we've got a full nearly hour of...and, you know, on a personal level it's just fascinating. I mean it's...it's, you know, I didn't think you were gonna say, when you talked

about the Betty thing, I was just quite surprised by the fact that you just left the whole thing. That was just, you know...

PD: I just got fed up with it all, I really, really did.

JM: The scene, or just...I mean, literally...okay...

PD: I just...I just...I mean, I think...I think you...it's a difficult thing to explain to somebody that's not experienced it, but when you were heavily involved in the sort of things that we were doing for Friday nights, Saturday nights and sometimes Thursday nights, every week for several years, it does take a toll on you and I think, you know, to use a phrase, you know, you burn yourself out is probably quite apt. So, you know, I guess if I'd've carried on doing what I was doing with my mates I probably wouldn't be 'ere now.

JM: Mmmm, yeah. Yeah. Okay, that's brilliant. That's really, really...

PD: So I hope that gives you a little bit of background to, um, the other side of the Northern Soul scene in Peterborough 'cause some of the guys that, sort of, suggested I should talk to you I...I...I didn't really wanna do it, but they said it was important that if you guys were gonna do it justice that you got, sort of, the other side of it, if that makes sense.

[59:58.5]

JM: How do you mean by that, in terms of...?

PD: Well, I...I...I would...I mean, I don't know who else you've spoken to and I don't know...don't really wanna know, but the sort of guys that were around – I mean I'm 64 years old – and I was hanging about with guys that were 65, 66, 67, who are now 67 at the time. A lot of people that say they experienced the whole Northern Soul thing are probably late 50s.

JM: As in they...and you mean by that they missed it, or...?

PD: Well, no they didn't miss it, they enjoyed their particular period in time. I mean, one of my...one of my regrets is I'm of an age where I missed the Twisted Wheel Club in Manchester. I would've loved to have gone there, but I didn't, you know.

JM: What do you think of the Northern Soul scene now?

PD: Um, I think it's up its own arse, if you don't mind me swearing.

JM: No, no, go for it. Because...?

PD: I think...I think that it's up its own arse. There's a lot...the whole...the whole concept of what it meant to me on two different occasions in my life where it was all about the music, it's not about the music any more, it's all about the social side and if you're a promoter you get DJs in because you're hoping that that promoter will book you for it, so it's up its arse a bit.

JM: Yeah. Because the Americans, I mean, it's a...the cultural re-emergence of it is an interesting avenue.

PD: Yeah, no, I mean I think that's down to the social side of it, I mean if you go to...if you go to, sort of, these big, big events at Blackpool Tower and places like that, which I just couldn't, and wouldn't, wanna do, and these long weekenders at places like Skegness and Hunstanton and various other seaside resorts just doesn't do anything for me. But if you said...if...if a good mate of mine was saying, "We're going down the Hundred Club on Saturday, we're

gonna spend three hours there and come home again," you know, I'd be up for that if...if...if...if I was allowed to do so.

JM: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

PD: 'Cause it's all about the music.

JM: Yeah. Okay, that's great. Okay.

PD: Alright?

JM: Yeah, no, that's been...that's been brilliant.

PD: So what's gonna happen once you've put all this together, then?

JM: So, um, I'm just gonna just switch the recording off, 'cause obviously we've got great stuff there.

[1:02:34.4]

END