

JM: Perfect, great stuff. So and the date is where are we the 20th? Yep, 20th of July. And my name is Jason Mitchell, I'm the interviewer. And could I ask you for your first name, please?

SA: My first name is Steve.

JM: Could you spell that for us?

SA: STEVE.

JM: And your surname?

SA: Allen, ALLEN.

JM: That's perfect. And this is a telephone interview for the northern soul project. Could I ask you where you were born?

SA: I was born in Peterborough, Thorpe Hall to be exact.

JM: Right, that's perfect. And would you mind telling us roughly when you were born?

SA: When? 1948.

JM: That's perfect, thank you very much. And were have you been known by any other previous names, say nicknames or any other names that someone else might have referred to you in these interviews as long as they were polite?

SA: I'm sure there's lots of names, but no I have no other nicknames, pseudonyms, or stage names other than Steve Allen.

JM: Perfect, that's great stuff. Okay, so the first thing I'm going to sort of do, just ask you a very broad question, and then we're kind of from there, I'll pick out bits to manoeuvre us down. Could you just tell us sort of about your introduction to northern soul and ... and sort of the feel and how that was for you?

SA: Okay, right. Well, we were playing northern soul before it was northern soul. I knew the background, I was an apprentice printer and I was a mod. And that was the definitely the precursor to the ... the generation termed the northern soul generation. So we were going to London clubs, like the Flamingo Club, La Discotheque, The Marquee and British bands at the time were performing soul material and Rhythm & Blues material live on stage. So some fabulous names Geno Washington, The Ram Jam Band, Jimmy James and The Vagabonds, Georgie Fame of course. Many others that don't spring to mind and even bands that became rock bands were playing R & B at the time like the Yardbirds and The Who and they introduced my generation to Rhythm and Blues. Rhythm & Blues morphed into soul with the advent of hits from people like Wilson Pickett, Otis Redding, Sam and Dave and the Motown acts, Isley Brothers, Four Tops, Marvin Gaye and such like, so that was my base musically. And I shall carry on talking or do you want to interject?

JM: No, no. As you say, you just keep going.

SA: Okay, fantastic. So as a young apprentice printer with his Vespa scooter and his mod instincts, going to London to great clubs, going to the seaside resorts at bank holidays and having a modern rocker weekend, which were publicised nationally as riots. I don't think they

were riots but there was certainly some friendly rivalry between the mods and rockers. All that was great, part of my musical scene. However, we were going to London to clubs like La Discotheque and finding that at some clubs, there were not bands playing that we could find down the road at, say The Marquee, but it was purely records, a very French kind of thing La Discotheque. A club playing just records. They would play R & B and soul records. Took that idea back to Peterborough and thought we should do it in Peterborough. But I was perhaps the idea was further stimulated by a gentleman called Gerrard Holman who was an R & B soul collector who opened a little record session at a pub called The Crown on Westgate. And the music he was playing was a revelation, some really excellent left field soul releases, many on import only. As a young 16 year old mod this impressed me greatly. We then thought let's do it ourselves so found a pub down the road that had a similar upstairs room and opened a Sunday night disco called The Discotheque, a soul discotheque to be honest, Soul Diskotek. So is that right? Anyway, I'm sure you've got the spelling haven't you?

JM: Yeah, yeah.

SA: And we opened that on a Sunday night and there was no entertainment in Peterborough on Sunday other than going to the movies so we were coming along, all of my peers listening to us playing those great songs. Those great instrumentals, those great soul and R & B tracks. So at that club, Soul Diskotek, we were playing numbers that perhaps later were embraced by the northern soul scene and without being over specific, some of the Motown hits that weren't mainstream chart hits, hits by acts such as Darrell Banks with "Open the Door to your Heart", "Seven Days are Too Long". And the one that everybody in the northern soul scene in the end hated because it became too popular, "The Snake". These were played before northern soul was even thought of.

5:21

JM: Hmm. Okay, wow, that's brilliant. And how about when you talk about going to London etc on your Vespa? How old were you then?

SA: Sixteen.

JM: Hmm, okay.

SA: I had a scooter and it seems like it was a long period of my life. But reality is, you probably had a scooter and it's a great thing, it gets you about because it's like, you know, first of all, as a kid, you have your estate, then you have the town, then you have the area around you then you have a wider world so the Vespa was great. But it was wet and cold.

JM: Yeah.

SA: And so a car quickly became the mode of transport together as to all the clubs to the all-nighters like the MoJo, the night out in Leicester and the clubs in Nottingham like The Dungeon so, yes, I went to initially to those locations on the Vespa but after a couple of years the car was by far the better way to keep my mohair suit smart clean and tidy to arrive at the club looking good.

JM: And, okay, that's perfect. So you went to these clubs, you said this is kind of complete, it's a kind of obviously turnaround isn't it because you know when I think of now for me, you know, if I went to a club, you know, not playing records but they're playing, you know, CDs etc, so it's a kind of reversal in the fact that for you what was new was actual people were

playing these, these, these records. You say you came back to Peterborough, Gerrard Holman and was it called The Crown, was that the actual record shop?

SA: It was The Crown so someone must have mentioned that to you previously. Gerrard opened it because he was a record collector, of wanting to share his musical preferences with others so it wasn't really very commercial. And he ran it for a little while, and I think then got fed up with it because a couple of the guys that were regulars were saying to him, let's do a spot on the decks and things like that. So in the end, the club got taken over by a couple of guys called Bunny and Nobby. They may have been mentioned to you. They then ran it for a period of time. So running parallel with their sessions on Fridays at The Crown was my sessions at the club down the road above a pub called The Falcon, which then became The Alderman and is now known to people in Peterborough as Pretzo Italian restaurant.

JM: I know, yeah, that's perfect. So what was it like going to this place? I mean, could you describe it a bit, the feel of it in terms of

SA: You mean Gerrard's club?

JM: Yeah.

SA: Oh, yeah. It was ... it was just a little pub top room. I knew it before many of my peers because I was a member of the CND Youth Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. And we used to go to folk club sessions and jazz club sessions which used that same room, so the room was known to me but with Gerrard's use of it playing soul was a revelation in comparison to the duffle coated folkies and jazz musicians. This is where us young mods could assemble, so climbing up the stairs of The Crown, I can still remember to this day a track by Billy Preston playing called "Billy's Bag", and it was pounding out of the speakers, probably in those days with lots of distortion because they didn't have big sound systems. But that sound still rings in my ears to this day.

JM: Yeah, yeah. Oh, okay.

SA: And we have now friendly rivalry. Bunny and Nobby at The Crown and Steve Allen and his partner, Michael Kay, running the Soul Diskotek.

JM: Yeah.

SA: Michael, who was my partner, was going to be the DJ. And I was going to be ... because I worked in the printing industry, I was going to be the PR man and I was going to run the door and all that stuff, which I did. I'd get all the posters from my printing connections and Mick was going to be the DJ. And he was, but halfway through, I think, the first or second session, he said to me "Steve, can you take over on the decks because I just want to take this young lady home". I had no intention of being a DJ, but I was quite happy to step into the breach. And at the end of the session, I thought, yeah, I can do this as well.

JM: Yeah.

SA: I then became a promoter and a DJ and Michael, my good friend at the time, went off to a military career, no falling out, we just parted our ways and I then started my life as a club promoter and DJ.

JM: Yeah, yeah. Okay, I'm gonna get, I'm gonna get to that, I just want to nip back to this sort of small dungey dingy place at The Crown. So was it sort of ... how many people could you get in there? Was a hot, was it sweaty? Was it

10:03

SA: It was hot and sweaty. How many could you get in? Because the memory plays havoc with you over the years. It was always packed. Now whether there was 50 of us in there or a hundred, I wouldn't guarantee.

JM: Yeah, yeah.

SA: It was a busy, lively place with a packed dance floor.

JM: Yeah, yeah. And ... and a mixture of male, female, what was the ...?

SA: Oh, yeah, yeah.

JM: Yeah, yeah. Okay, cool.

SA: Young mods and young mod ladies.

JM: Yeah, yeah. Okay. So

SA: Clean boys with sharp haircuts, I think they called us.

JM: Okay, that's great. So, um, we ... you went there, and so you decided to set up your ... your own thing. Could you just ... could you just go over that in some ... a bit of detail, but also, what I'm kind of also interested into is ... is obviously your relationship with what was it Mike you said?

SA: Mike? Yeah. Michael Kay?

JM: Yeah, Michael Kay. And just like, you know, where you knew him from ... a bit so we're not only interested in kind of northern soul, we're also really interested in the friendships and the dynamics between people and the sort of feel of places. You know, that is the sort of thing that you can't get if you read it in a book.

SA: Sure.

JM: Yeah.

SA: Sure. Well, there was obviously a mod fraternity and as one of the guys who had a scooter. Then I was running with that gang going to various clubs around the fairly local area. Stamford was popular, had a club called the Lansbury Club. I say we used to go to the Dungeon Club in Nottingham, and the boat clubs in Nottingham and the Nite Owl in Leicester. Because I had a scooter, a set of wheels you always have a friend if you had a pair of ... a set of wheels.

JM: Yeah, yeah.

SA: Someone would, you know blag a lift. But it wasn't just based on that, it was based on the fact we had shared interests and shared passion for mod clothes, and mod music, of girls and everything mod. So we found it locally and we travelled further afield to find it. The guy who was my partner in the discotheque business was one of my buddies who used to go to clubs with me. And as well as locally, but, you know, locally because we went to The Crown together, perhaps and thought we can do as good as this. But it wasn't just down to beating someone else from Peterborough. It was about kind of sharing our passion or what we found on our travels to Nottingham and Leicester and London.

JM: Had you been to school together?

SA: No, we hadn't, no. Mike came from the other side of the river.

JM: Right.

SA: He was a south of the river boy and I was a north of the river boy living in ... on the Dogsthorpe estate.

JM: Okay. So, so you decided to get together. Can you remember the first night, the first sort of instigation?

SA: I can remember the first night, it was heaving. There was people queuing all the way around the corner because there was no one had done this before in Peterborough on a Sunday. You could go out on Friday and Saturday. Very few people went out in the middle of week at that time, but you could certainly have a good time and a busy time at lots of venues in the city on a Friday and Saturday night, but no one did Sunday. On a Sunday you went to the movies, and you went to the coffee bar.

JM: Did you meet ... you must have met with some resistance?

SA: I was just coming to that, yes, I did meet with some resistance because I formed the idea, spoke to the landlord along with my partner set about promoting it. Posters appeared and the police went to the pub and said, sorry, you can't operate this on Sundays. There's no singing and dancing licence or music licence on Sundays. I don't like to be beaten though and if I find someone challenges something that I think is fair and reasonable, I do make moves to either prove myself right or investigate a way around the hazard. So, what made me knock on a solicitor's door in Priestgate, I don't know. And why it was the door of [unclear] Buckle & Co I don't know, it could have been any of those solicitors and why I got speaking to a solicitor called John Dale, I don't know. But the intervention of John Dale set me off on my career, because he wrote a letter having studied the books, he wrote a letter to the Licensing Department of the police saying that this young man can open a club providing its members only.

JM: Aah.

SA: And so that is what we had to do. It had to be sign in. Fortunately, at that stage because it was a private member's club unlike a licenced member's club, you didn't have to have a 28 day or 14 day cooling off period, you just turned up and signed in providing your name and address was recorded in the club books. Archaic laws we think now with everything open all the hours and every day of the week but then to open on a Sunday was revolutionary, really.

JM: Absolutely.

SA: Indeed, when I said to him, how much is that please? He said, Steve, I'm sure you will be a good customer going forward. And indeed when I bought properties and wanted conveyancing and all that kind of stuff and contracts formulating he was the solicitor I went to. See that people are fundamental in your pathway through life. Gerrard Holman set me off on the idea of running a pub disco playing rhythm and blues and soul. John Dale told me that he could help me make it happen by looking at the ways the licencing laws prevented it happening. And there are many other people in my life, I'm sure that have been that instrumental in where you end up, you know.

15:58

JM: Could you just spell his name for us, Gerrard Holman. Could just spell it so we get right?

SA: GERRARD Gerrard Holman, HOLMAN.

JM: That's perfect. That's brilliant.

SA: He recently passed actually, a very successful man. I think his family were in the potato business. And latterly, he was still involved in that kind of business prior to his passing.

JM: So did John Dale ever go to your club?

SA: No, John Dale was ancient. At the time I thought he was very ancient to me, as a 16 year old, 17 year old maybe, I don't know. He was probably only 30.

JM: So you were, you were how old when you went into this solicitors and what were you dressed in?

SA: I was 16 or 17.

JM: Gosh.

SA: And I was probably straight from my work as an apprentice printer. So I don't think I would be in a suit. I wouldn't be suited and booted to make the appointment. I would be in a young working man's ... young working teenager's clothes, probably Levi's and a pakamac or something.

JM: That's a bold move, isn't it for ... I mean, you know, for any 16, 17 year old, that's a bold move for

SA: Absolutely, yeah.

JM: Okay, so can you tell me a bit about what you felt like on your first ... the first night? You know, can you ... can you think back, were you nervous?

SA: Oh, absolutely. I was nervous because I wanted to be successful because I was the man that had designed the posters and put in the press advertisements and written to the press for a little bit of a mention and stuck the posters around town with the help of my partner, but I was responsible for the publicity and promotion of the event. So of course I was really nervous, wanted to be successful. I got a guy who worked with me as another apprentice to man the door and we spoke to a young lady we knew to do the cloakroom and Mick, my partner, Michael Kay, was the man who took care of playing the music on very rudimentary gear. It's

probably a Dansette record player put through a very basic loudspeaker. It was exciting and I was excited because it was full, because we'd done so well and then I had the situation with my partner asking me if I could fill in on the decks, something I really hadn't prepared myself for. It was never really my intention to be a DJ. But at 9.30 or 10, or whenever he wanted me to take over, it's something I had to grab the baton, step up to the plate and do and I was really nervous. Sweaty armpits doesn't, doesn't tell the whole story.

JM: Can you remember ... can you remember.....

SA: But I succeeded and I enjoyed it. And so therefore, off on another pathway.

JM: Can you remember the first song you played?

SA: I couldn't tell you that, no.

JM: Can you remember the first song that was played at the club?

SA: I couldn't tell you that. I mean, I can tell you a fib and guess but I'm not going to do that.

JM: No, no, no.

SA: It was probably ... if it was me, I would imagine I probably played and this is only a guess, so it's not gospel, but I think it would be highly likely to be true. It would be one of my favourite records at that time and to this day, "You Don't Know Like I Know" by Sam and Dave.

JM: Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah.

SA: So the club's going, people are there, people are talking about it. What's the sort of ... describe the ... if I'm ... if I'm ... if I'm walking into your ... your ... your place, you've been going for a week describe it to me.

19:39

SA: It was tall and had a high ceiling. It was tall windows. The room had been used, I believe, by the Masons for Masonic meetings.

JM: Ha ha!

SA: Because a lot of Masonic halls were indeed above pubs at that time. And if it wasn't the Masons, and I apologise to the Masons, but it could have been the Rotary Club or you know, one of those organisations or the Buffs of the time. And so it was quite austere in there and we had just a very small bar in the corner and all it sold was Coca Cola and Fanta, that was it. The windows at the time, we realised when it came to the Springtime, we opened in September 19.., no October 1966. By the time it came to about March we realised we've got problem afoot because the nights were drawing out and it was blooming light in there until eight or 8.30. So we set about then blacking out the windows which was a challenge. So the club developed from just being a room which we took over to a room which we hung flashing lights on the ceiling and we blacked out the windows and very much with the pub landlord on side.

JM: Okay. And ... and if I looked at it now having done this project, would I ... would I recognise it more as a disco rather than a northern soul event?

SA: Yeah, it wasn't. At this stage, though we were playing tracks that became known as northern soul tracks, northern soul hadn't been invented. Northern soul, the term northern soul, was ... was devised, wrong word but you know what I'm saying, was come off from a guy called Dave Godin and he was a journalist for Blues and Soul magazine.

JM: Yeah.

SA: As the soul that we knew, it was a combination of Atlantic Stax, Tamla Motown and other labels bringing stuff across from the ... from the States and bringing it back and issuing them in the UK. So it was never really mainstream music. It was a cult scene driven by the mod scene and then by the soul aficionados, but some crossed over to the national charts. You know, The Supremes and The Four Tops actually got small, not big, but small chart hits on the back of their soul releases in this country. As we move from '66 to '67 to '68, Motown became more commercial. The more dance round your handbag stuff that people perhaps associate with, with soul nights and discos. It wasn't really how it started. It was much rawer than that but as it moved on, then it became more commercial. And to my advantage, really, because more and more people came to the nights because the stuff was out there rather than being of a limited appeal.

JM: Yeah. Okay. And so I'm going to just sort of ... I'm going to go down the two avenues in a minute that you suggest, the DJ and the promoter, but just talk a bit so your club ... what was the history of it? How long did it go on for?

SA: Well, there is some controversy with that so I can infill.

JM: Yeah.

SA: The Diskotek was very popular. And the landlord of the pub realised there was money in having a pub, which had a discotheque in it because it brought all the young business. He then acquired another pub down the road, The Bull & Dolphin, which may well have been mentioned to you and asked us to open up the back room of the Bull & Dolphin. It was then a new landlord came in at The Falcon who for some reason decided to, what can we say, challenge our activity there and get another promoter to come in and take over the venue so a bit of conflict, which meant that by 1968, we were out of The Falcon and someone else, a guy from Coventry, had take ... taken over activity there.

JM: Oh right.

SA: We opened up at the Bull & Dolphin, but again that landlord and the nature of landlords at that time, they were commercial but not always honourable.

JM: Yeah.

SA: So we opened up at the Bull & Dolphin and after a couple of months, we were then turfed out by the new landlord that had originally been the landlord of The Falcon. So we were without a home. Fortunately, I did have again someone who was fundamental to my success, a gentleman called Michael Padley, who was the director of Payton Brewery, who owned The Falcon and the Bull & Dolphin at the time. He recognised that I had commercial acumen, I think, offered me a little bar at the back of the Bull Hotel called the Market Bar, which I opened as the Phonograph Disco, and that was my own place, no bar in it, no licenced bar, but again sold Coca Cola and Fanta and bits and bobs. That I ran on several times during the

week. We had all-nighters there because it was unlicensed, we could do with it what we wanted. And he then offered me, because of the success of that, the ballroom of the Grand Hotel, which is now demolished and turned into Marks and Spencer's and now the back end of B & M I believe on Wentworth Street. Cloud Nine, was a huge step for me as an 18 year old. And what I know by then, years past, so probably 20 by then, it was a huge step to me because it was a big place holding upwards of 300 people. And until then I ran a small pub top room kind of venues, but I made the decision to have a go at it. I opened it up in September 1969 with a reggae group called The Skatalites, but we also had interestingly, though probably not of interest to your soul listeners, Sunday night progressive rock nights.

26:07

JM: Oh wow!

SA: Well, we had Free, Juicy Lucy and Genesis and Atomic Rooster and so many fans of that era on the progressive rock scene. But that's another story for another day. Saturday nights was a latter-day mod skinhead crowd that came in there, stay-pressed, and Brutus shirts and actually probably fought each other with those from out of town as much as they spent their time dancing.

JM: Oh right, okay.

SA: It was a challenging time, the skinhead era was not a good time. Musically, I found it fairly interesting because I like ska but it was fairly brutalist and not as cool as what we'd had before.

JM: Yeah, yeah. So this is a tricky question, so I'm gonna ask you, what can you ... one memorable event that happened at the bar, your ... your ... your ... that you can just think of.

SA: Sorry, at the bar of which club? We're talking about four clubs now aren't we?

JM: You're first bar, the Diskotek.

SA: The Soul Diskotek?

JM: Yeah.

SA: A memorable occasion?

JM: Yeah.

SA: A memorable occasion was when I became a DJ without actually thinking I was ever going to be a DJ. That's probably the most memorable occasion I ever had.

JM: And the memorable event where something happens sort of, you know, like something that you have to cope with or something like that.

SA: At the Soul Diskotek there's nothing that springs to mind that you know, for instance, we ran it well.

JM: Yeah.

SA: It didn't have drug raids. We didn't have those kinds of issues. I ran a good ship there.

JM: Yeah, yeah.

SA: It was a pukka place which the police didn't have to visit. And it really was not a venue where we had too many issues. What I would say that is memorable of it, is the people who would have been to the Mojo all-nighter in Sheffield always finished off their weekend at the Soul Diskotek.

JM: Aah.

SA: Now they would have been enjoying themselves in the way that people enjoy all-nighter sessions.

JM: Yeah.

SA: With no alcohol. So they came back to Peterborough somewhat wide eyed.

JM: Yeah.

SA: I think that ... is that a fairly good euphemism without being too specific?

JM: Yeah, I get ... yeah, yeah.

SA: So that is memorable. The Soul Diskotek had the returnees from the Mojo all-nighters.

JM: Oh, that's quite good, yeah.

SA: With a lot of music in their ears, and they were just great customers because they wanted to complete the weekend dancing the night away.

JM: Yeah, yeah.

SA: We had to close at 11 or whatever.

JM: Okay, so I'm going to move on in this sort of order. And just so we're gonna, let's move to your ... your life ... your DJ activities, then we'll ... we'll move on to and then we'll cross over I know but just as an order, promoter, which obviously, is probably ... we've probably spent hours doing that, and then we'll, we'll hit on lastly, Cloud Nine.

SA: Okay.

JM: So your first experience was a DJ in your club. Just talk a bit more about your DJ life.

SA: The DJ life was initially as someone playing tracks at a club, which I ran, but then you see you have your customers, your peers. So as someone who was in my teenage years at the time, up and coming would be 18th birthday parties and weddings of the customers. And so they liked what they heard at the club and asked if I would come to said venue somewhere around Peterborough and play music at their 18th birthday party or their wedding. And so that's how I became a mobile DJ or saw the potential in mobile discos. Clearly, the gear for the club was at the club. And to take something out that was fairly basic because the clubs didn't have lots of flashing lights. It was just about you know, playing the tunes on the decks.

30:34

JM: Yeah, yeah.

SA: You know, so what I did, I came up with someone who had run Big Band dances in Peterborough before my era, and he had a set of decks which were two decks, two turntables in one unit, whereas we were using Dansettes and wiring them together.

JM: Yeah, yeah.

SA: I hired that from the guy and a set of speakers and did a wedding or two or did an 18th or two and then realised that the bookings were continually coming in. So I then had, because you couldn't buy it commercially, I had a twin deck unit made, and then purchased speakers and amps and all the stuff and that was my mobile disco unit. And that over the years, as you can imagine, grew with its quality and standards. So that became more and more presentational over the years. I mean a little aside now, I don't think the customers really know what's behind the screen because the DJs pretty fire everything up so much. It's all about people dancing to lights now rather than good music.

JM: Yeah.

SA: That's an old man saying though, isn't it? But the fact is that this job became much more presentational. But before they're all about the right music at the right time.

JM: Yeah. And did the ... did the... did the DJ, move it into northern soul? Was it specific? I mean, did you obviously there's your commercial side as a DJ but is there ... is there ... was there life in the northern soul DJing or did you?

SA: So I'm going to reverse that question. So the kids who booked me to do their 18th or 21st, or indeed their weddings, booked me because they liked the soul that I was playing and reggae, sorry, not reggae, ska then.

JM: Yeah.

SA: And I was playing at the clubs, but of course at these events would be their mum and dad and their elder brothers and their cousins so much to my initial annoyance, but I do believe in being commercial, if you're going to run a business, you've got to run it commercially, I had to go and buy a lot of pop records and middle of the road records to make sure that the gig was serviced correctly, because it's okay playing for the 18 year old wanting to hear great Tamla Motown and great Stax Atlantic, but their mum and dad probably want to hear Tom Jones or Jim Reeves or whatever. So we had to buy that and that is how the versatile element of my business kicked off. You service a need, don't you?

JM: Yeah, absolutely.

SA: So the mobile discos would be playing music, primarily soul discoy but covering everything else and, keep trying to find the northern soul connection, I'm saying categorically that by 1970, the word northern soul had never been used. But post 1970 and I think about '72 when Dave Godin had termed, had used that term, I got the feel that something was afoot. And so as a mobile DJ, I also was resident at the Ramsey Gaiety Club supporting The Who and the visiting American attractions. Will skip over the fact that then I was working my own Cloud

Nine Club, but we also went out much further afield. At the gig when northern soul really sort of rang a bell was when we did The Bowl at Corby. And there was a lot of people asking for tracks that they were actually specifically saying, can you play some northern soul?

JM: Ah, okay.

SA: And that I think would be about '72. Now, some of the tracks they were asking for, "Queen of Fools", "Love on a Mountain Top", "Cracking up Over You", "Sliced Tomatoes", all known to the northern soul fraternity, were not stuff that we had played before in the '60s.

JM: Umm.

SA: But some of the stuff we played that fitted that genre had been played in the '60s, like "The Snake", like "Seven Days is Too Long", like "Open the Door to your Heart" and like some of the Motown tracks.

JM: Yeah, yeah.

SA: So northern soul for me kicked off at about '72. At the time it became popularised by not the genre, the genre was created because northern DJs didn't like the way Motown had gone, became too floppy, too Las Vegas, too popular and I alluded to that earlier how Motown became too commercialised.

35:16

JM: Yeah.

SA: So the DJs in the north of the country started to delve further back to the sounds of the '60s, the soul sounds of the '60s that hadn't actually been played in the '60s.

JM: Yeah.

SA: And that was exacerbated by their dislike of the new thing from the States, which I always embraced, which was funk.

JM: Yeah.

SA: James Brown, Sister Big Stuff, Clean Up Woman. Things of that nature, the King Floyd Groove Me, these sounds were coming out in the States and I was always happy to play them because I liked to play new music, new soul music, but it was getting funkier and funkier. The DJs in the north of England didn't take that on board. They wanted to hang on to that, you know, that Motownesque style of music.

JM: Yeah, yeah. Okay, so then we move to your ... your ... your life as a promoter and tell us a bit about that.

SA: My life as a promoter, so kick off Soul Diskotek.

JM: Yeah.

SA: At a pub, the Phonograph Club, a bar in the car park of the Bull Hotel, the Bull & Dolphin with a place called Moody's Place, that was short lived as I alluded to earlier.

JM: Yeah.

SA: Then Cloud Nine which was a whopper, very successful to a lot of people in Peterborough of a certain age. It was the club that they met their partner, where they actually saw some names, rock names and soul names that they will remember for the rest of their lives. We had Jimmy Ruffin playing there, Lee Dorsey playing there, J J Jackson, Root and Jenny Jackson, Mike Cotton Sound, these are all soul names by the way. We had reggae names playing there like Dandy Livingston and the Skatalites and of course we had the prog rock names which some people who would be there on a Saturday in their stay-pressed, would don a Kaftan and come on Sunday so they would straddle both scenes.

JM: And describe it to me, describe because obviously

SA: That was a big club that was an old ballroom, which probably my mother and father had ballroom danced on when they were courting.

JM: But the entrance

SA: But it was also turned into a steak house for a period of time. But that kind of steak housy thing wasn't working. The large hotel ballrooms weren't working anymore. So it was laying redundant, and the gentleman from Peyton Brewery saw an asset earning him no money. So this young teenager who was clearly making money out of entertaining teenagers in Peterborough, give him a chance. He gave me a chance. We put a stage in there. In fairness, he decorated it the dark blue, which we wanted it to be not a horrible light ballroomy colour but dark blue clubby kind of stuff. We put in there a light show, you know, trendy of the day, not flashing lights but liquid light wheels, projecting images on the walls, very Middle Earth. There was a bar in there, we put seating, just enough seating so that you didn't sit down too often. But you could sit down should you wish. We put a bit of carpet near the bar. So it's quite, you know, a guy who wanted to put on a smart suit and bring out his attractively dressed young lady didn't feel as though it was just an old room. It was somewhere that was their place and stylish.

JM: So what

SA: It would hold over 300, which was a big plus to make money from.

JM: Yeah, so walk me through it. Just take me through it, you go through the door and literally walk me through

SA: The doors, proper doors to a proper ballroom opened up, you go up the stairs. To the left hand side is a small cash desk. To the right is a hatch where you check your coat, on the door would be two experienced bouncers, guys that actually had let me into the Palais when I went there as a young customer. When the Palais closed, because what you want is experienced staff, I approached them and said would you work for me? And so these guys who'd been bouncing at the Corn Exchange back in the day, and the Palais were now my bouncers, great team of four guys who were superb with the young crowd, and I think many of the people who attended my club will remember them to this day.

JM: What were their names?

SA: Malcolm, Brendon, Tom. And what was the other one? I can't remember. I remember three of them. Whoever I forgot my apologies.

40:02

JM: Quirky characters?

SA: Tom, Brendon Noble, that's two of them. What was the other one I said? Malcolm, Malcolm, can't remember and one other. Anyway, they were great guys. Respect.

JM: Yeah. So

SA: And there were no problems at the club initially, it was very, very well-managed, no issues, Saturday nights were a dream. It was a smart night out which smart young modesque youngsters of Peterborough attended.

JM: So you go to the door, the bouncers are there. You open the door. Where's the stage in relation to the door?

SA: Straight into the club, to the left is the bar, to the right is the stage and behind the stage, cut out in polystyrene letters was the name Cloud Nine screaming out at you from behind the stage.

JM: And the floor wooden or

SA: Sprung dancefloor, perfect for dancing.

JM: What's the smell?

SA: What was the smell?

JM: Umm.

SA: The smell on Sunday nights was josticks.

JM: Yeah?

SA: The smell on Saturday nights was probably Embassy or Silk, not Silk Cut, not that smart, Number Six.

JM: Yeah, of course, you had smoking, didn't you? Everyone smoked inside.

SA: Yeah. And maybe a little bit of draught bitter in the background and even the aroma of a Cherry B or two for the ladies.

JM: Yeah. Brilliant. And so Cloud Nine ... how long ... what was the life of it?

SA: September 1969 until Easter, March I think or maybe first weekend of April 1971 and the reason it closed was not from lack of success, although I will grant you that Saturday nights were a challenge, we had to employ increasingly hardnut bouncers to control the skinhead scene that had taken over from the latter-day mods.

JM: Umm.

SA: And that was about aggression and, you know, something I could never respect. We really had to fight hard to keep people safe from the antics of the skinheads.

JM: Umm.

SA: But anyway, the club only closed because the brewery sold it, the whole hotel, indeed the hotel was in the process of being refurbished, including some refurbishment in favour of Cloud Nine, when I received a telephone call to go and meet the MD because they were selling it for redevelopment because Marks and Spencer's, who had a store on the High Street, which backed onto Cloud Nine wanted to expand their premises.

JM: Yeah.

SA: So the whole hotel was demolished and Marks and Spencer's expanded. And so now I am 21, 22ish and without a living because I'd left my job as a junior printer, in fact my boss had said to me "You spend too much of your time running your business, Steve, you'd be better off doing that and not working for me because you don't turn up on time and you leave too early". Ironic, as when I employed people later in my life and expected them to adhere to hours, so what was I going to do? I had to become a promoter so we used the Town Hall in Peterborough, we used the Drill Hall in Peterborough and further afield venues in Bourne and in Boston and in Norwich and in Kettering and ran events of all kinds there. Soul nights, soul names should I say, pop names, big success with The Sweet, big success with Thin Lizzy, big success with Heatwave, that's a soul name you probably know. And so we were doing very well and we then had the opportunity to do a Cloud Nine Mk II at the old Trinity Church Hall which was used by Western Star youth club. They were looking to put the place to use on a Saturday night and we were invited to take it over on a Saturday night so using the Cloud Nine brand we would be foolish not to, we ran Saturday nights there. And those really were where most of the northern soul connection with Cloud Nine came into play. Cloud Nine Mk II because we were playing ska, we were playing reggae on the Trojan record label and we were playing lots of the northern soul that was coming in and really effectively taking over the soul scene.

JM: Umm.

SA: Like names as well, as I say Johnny Wild, the Chicago Heatwave, with a young Rod Temperton who wrote for Michael Jackson on keyboards, Doris Troy appearing there for me, a big name on the northern scene, Lee Dorsey, a soul name from the '60s that was still happening into the '70s and I won't go into the Bay City Rollers story but if you insist I will!

JM: Yeah, go on.

44:59

SA: I had a good agent who got me the names I needed to keep the roster working well on the Saturday nights and we had something booked that let me down and he said well, I'll put The Bay City Rollers in. I said you're joking, they're a pop group. No, he said their hit "Keep on Dancing" is fairly souly and disco. I needed something so I put them on. Now when I drove to the club on that Saturday night, I couldn't believe the sort of culture of much younger girls standing outside with Tartan scarves around their necks.

JM: Yeah, yeah.

SA: And I'm thinking what's this all about, they're not my punters, they're not skinheads, they're not skinhead girls, they're not, you know, guys in suits out for a Saturday night dance. Anyway, we let them in and on came the Bay City Rollers and this group of probably 12, maybe 20 girls ran to the front of the stage with the usual sort of teenybopper screams to these guys and I'm thinking well, this is a new thing for Cloud Nine Mk II. This is not soul, this is pop in the screamer sort of vein. You could call it opportunist, I booked them again straightaway so the first night where we had 20 girls there purposely for the Bay City Rollers and the rest my normal customers at the back scratching their heads and wondering what it was all about. The next time they appeared about six months later there was a queue all the way down Priestgate to Bridge Street.

JM: Oh really, yeah.

SA: You could not move in the club, it was packed to the gunnels and the Bay City Rollers were in the charts with whatever their first hit was. Not their first hit because that was "Keep on Dancing" but their first hit under their new regime with Tam Paton on the Bell record label.

JM: What were they like?

SA: I got on really like with the guys.

JM: No, musically, what was the gig like?

SA: Too much screaming to really know what the music was like. It kept the crowd happy and there was not a lot of dancing going on. There was a lot of guys there because there were a lot of girls there and we then used the Bay City Rollers at a couple of other locations up at the King's Lynn Corn Exchange and I put them in, where else, Kettering Central Hall. By then, when I tried to book them for another concert, gig, I was told by their management they were only doing theatres and subsequently they then appeared at the ABC Theatre in Peterborough.

JM: Oh, right.

SA: They'd got too big for small promoters like myself to use them.

JM: So onward from Cloud Nine Mk II?

SA: Sorry?

JM: So moving forwards from Cloud Nine Mk II

SA: Yeah.

JM: Into ... did you have connections with the Worrina and sort of like the link between what you were doing and moving on?

SA: I promoted at the Worrina but there was a Tuesday night disco called Carousel and that was shortly after our club Cloud Nine Mk II probably came to an end and that carried on the baton with the Motown northern soul kind of fraternity. There were some youth clubs in Peterborough that I used to play with my mobile disco such as Stanground youth club and

Orton youth club where northern soul was very much in demand so I was taking that northern soul message out with my mobile disco to various venues locally.

JM: Yeah, yeah.

SA: And indeed, out to March we used to promote at the Marcam Hall in March, northern soul was quite popular there. So the northern soul thing by then was entrenched in the scene and is something I was always happy to play.

JM: Yeah, yeah.

SA: But I would not always bring to the attention of people who talk about the northern soul starting in Peterborough at a said date. A lot of tunes that the DJs, and respect to them they've kept the scene going, and I've got to say the northern soul became a real passion for a whole generation and they still carry that with them whereas a lot of people who danced to soul music in the '60s danced to it because it was the vogue of the day, they didn't carry it with them.

JM: Yeah, yeah.

SA: They didn't carry it with them as a lifelong passion as the northern soul fraternity have.

JM: So what did you do ... what then when after ... after Cloud Nine Mk II? How long did that last and what happened after that?

SA: That lasted a couple of years and by then I was promoting at the venues all around the area.

JM: Yeah.

SA: We did Bourne Corn Exchange, that went on for many years and Marcam Hall in March. That went on for many years. Ultimately I suppose as the '70s turned into the '80s my promotions per se drew to a close. We did run nights in Peterborough at various clubs called Shindig which was like an all-nighter, wrong word, all-dayer kind of thing.

JM: Yeah.

SA: And I also ran a club in Peterborough at The Cresset called Slickers which was for another generation, that was a scene that was majoring in jazz, funk and soul.

50:05

JM: Yeah, yeah.

SA: And that was very successful, voted Club of the Midlands year after year and that ran I suppose from about '78, '79 for about eight or nine years at The Cresset. We started off with Sunday night sessions and then moved into all-dayers.

JM: Yeah.

SA: Which were enormously popular so my promotions with live bands had diminished by then although we put live bands on occasionally at the Slickers events but my major promotion activity had dwindled other than Slickers and the Shindigs and by then I was running a very,

very successful mobile discotheque operation with 20 DJs on the road on a regular basis and managing bands that were doing functions and balls and charity events and as such.

JM: And is that ... is that what you've gone on to do?

SA: An agent I guess.

JM: And is that what you went on to do or did you, I mean

SA: I still run that business although with Covid I don't think there's much business out there for anyone booking any kind of live music.

JM: Yeah, yeah.

SA: It's greatly regrettable and I hope that the live music scene recovers out the other end of Covid.

JM: And did you have other strings to your bow? This is just outside of the ... did you do other things apart from that?

SA: No, the strings to my bow were a young printer, that bow broke when I started to be a DJ or a promoter and agent and being a DJ, promoter and agent has seen me through to where you find me now.

JM: Wow, that's ... that's ... that's a long career.

SA: It is.

JM: Because most people do it, don't they ... you know because I've got friends in the music business etc and most people have a sort of fruitful seven to eight years because either they've found a genre they connect with or a band that they connect with and not many people that manage to carve a full-time, lifelong career out of it.

SA: Indeed, I did 12 years on Hereward Radio running a soul show and a night-time clubbing show so that was another interesting period of my life.

JM: My wife worked for Hereward Radio years ago.

SA: Oh really?

JM: Read the news, Erin Mitchell.

SA: Oh, indeed, I remember, yeah, yeah. I mean I was at Bridge Street, the original station, the original location and I was at Queensgate for a number of years and I was part of the launch of what they called the World's Greatest Music Station on medium wave so 12 years of radio I really enjoyed but I still, to my mind, the best kick, the best kick apart from one or two things in life, is to be an entertainer and from my point, a DJ on a stage with a big crowd putting the right records on. I'm using the word records, old fashioned, tracks, and motivating them and seeing how happy that makes people. Now being a radio DJ is fine, you get someone ring you up, oh, that was a great track you played, or can you play something for my whatever, and that gives you a buzz, but there's no buzz like putting the right tracks on and filling a dance floor and keeping it full for a period of time. Fantastic.

JM: Yeah. The feeling of it.

SA: Absolutely.

JM: Yeah. To finish off, that's been brilliant. The best night, gig, band from Cloud Nine.

SA: The best nights with bands from Cloud Nine?

JM: No, from you, the band that you saw, that was there that was really memorable.

SA: Ha, ha, ha. Oh, what a challenge! I thought that the opening night of Cloud Nine with the Skatalites was particularly memorable and some of the prog rock groups that I didn't realise how important the musicians in the bands were going to become.

JM: Yeah.

SA: Were also memorable but memorable in a bad way and I hopefully this will fit into your construction, is that we had the Radha Krsna Temple appear at Cloud Nine. Now they had the Hari Krishna track which went to number one in the charts for many weeks. It was on the Apple record label, George Harrison was there, promoter and clearly get them on. When I was offered them, I snapped them up. Well, as you can imagine there was about 20 of them, all dressed in their Eastern gear with their little bells and shaven heads and drums and tablas and the club was packed. Again, it was probably the biggest attendance we ever had, queuing all the way on to the main street. Everybody came in and we used to throw cushions on the floor on Sunday nights because you didn't dance, you might have freaked out a bit but you sat on the floor and you lit your jostick. Anyway, the club was packed, everyone was sitting down, rammed and on came the band. They weren't a band, they were people jingling bells and chanting Hari Krishna, Hari Krishna, Krishna, Krishna ad infinitum. Now a club that was packed to the gunnels, after about half an hour of continuous chanting the same chant I think, they became restless. The bar did a lot more business than it should do when a live band was on the stage and then after 45 minutes of continuous chanting, people were getting up and getting even more restless. By the time an hour had passed

55:44

JM: Whoa!

SA: The club was virtually empty because it was just so ... unless you were into the Hari Krishna movement, to hear it for an hour was not that entertaining.

JM: Ha, ha, ha. That, um, so music's obviously been a massive thing in your life, a big, big ... what do you think you'd ... without music

SA: Oh, music is everything and that's why I don't want to knock the current generation of DJs who do their functions, they're fantastic, high tech lighting and screens, backdrops and all the stuff but to me it's all about the colour of uplighting that they have when the brides and grooms are choosing them to do their wedding and I understand that's a very special time for any couple but when we were providing music on our discos back in the day, it was all about the right tune for the right moment and I'm sure music is still relevant to people running wedding reception discos but often it's pre-ordained. The customers give you a list of 20 or 30 or 40, 50 records, sometimes they have to be played in order and again I get why people

want that because people are very much into control now. They all have their iPods and they all have their MP3s and they want to curate their own wedding. That's great but again, when we were doing the wedding scene back in the '60s, '70s and even early '80s they left it to the DJ to play the right music at the right time and I put, I think, that made for better DJs.

JM: Umm.

SA: If you were just someone who was going to tick records off a list presented to you by the person who's booked you for the function, and I get why it happens, don't get me wrong, but for the DJ, it's somewhat soul destroying.

JM: Yeah, I get it.

SA: But there you go, mobile discos will continue because it's a good way for people to get great music without having live entertainment but I've got to say, as an agent for live entertainers, the best night is always the combination of a disco and a band. You get the light and shade of the live music and then you get the substantial backing of the DJ who is always able to pick the right tune to fill the gap.

JM: That is brilliant. And it's a great end ... that's a great ... we might grab that little ... we might adjust it slightly but that's a great section.

SA: I'm sure we probably didn't delve into the northern soul thing perhaps as much as you would have liked and we can come back to that if you want but I think my intimation is that a lot of the tracks that became popular on the northern soul scene were very much played in the '60s to the delight of '60s dancefloor occupants but there was a northern soul scene that kicked off with Dave Godin's identification of that name then set it off on its trajectory.

JM: Yeah.

The End