

24 HOUR PARTY PEOPLE

Disillusioned with the modern club scene, promoter Ewan McNaught reinvents the rave with a Rat Pack twist. Now he's bringing Scotland's hottest dance party to merry old England, and plans to show Londoners how to get down in style.

by *Leslie Rosenberg*

A light rain is just starting to fall as a white moving van pulls up in front of Renfrew Ferry. But then again, a light rain is usually falling in Glasgow, and the weather is hardly noted as the driver and two passengers clamber out of the van and get to work. There are boxes to unload, turntables to set up, neon signs to hang, and suits to press. Within two hours, the erstwhile car ferry now permanently moored on the city docks is transformed into a sparkling nightclub, complete with a fully-stocked bar, casino area, raised stage, and spacious dance floor. The regulars soon make their appearance, dressed as chorus girls, lounge lizards, hucksters, and pimps. It's showtime.

This is VEGAS, the brainchild of promoter Ewan McNaught, a ruggedly handsome chap originally from the town of Dumfries, who got tired of the same old music scene and wanted to create something bigger, better, more. In the past several years, McNaught's Rat Pack rave has become one of Scotland's most popular club nights, most recently evidenced by its #1 ranking in *The List 2002 Reader's Poll*. Rotating weekly between Edinburgh, Glasgow and Aberdeen, VEGAS attracts an eclectic mob of swing kids, rockabilies, glamour queens, white collar guys, baby boomers, disco divas, crossdressers, and your run-of-the-mill punters. And then there are the recurring characters, who although not all officially on staff, are very much a part of the event. Among them are Kylos the Jackal, Carlo Gambini, Swedish porn king Sven Svendunnerson, Buggy Seagull and his lovely wife Lashes, DJ Dino Martini, and Captain Hefner.

Leading the whole motley crew is McNaught himself, working the turntables under the alias Frankie Sumatra as he spins a hodgepodge of happenin' tunes ranging from Northern Soul to big band classics, early rock-and-roll, '60s exotica and psychedelic pop, Motown, neo-swing, surf, and lounge. On any given night, the playlist might include legendary artists, like Louis Prima, Tom Jones, Peggy Lee, Elvis, and Frank Sinatra, jumbled together with modern entertainers, like The Fat Cats, Jet Set Six, Big Bad Voodoo Daddy, Sophie Garner, The Flying Neutrinos, and The Goodfellas.

"Clubs have become really predictable. The whole superstar DJ aspect has become a massive industry," says McNaught. "With VEGAS, I wanted to put the emphasis on the crowd. I think a lot of clubs have forgotten how important the customers are."

McNaught's vision was to create an event with less of a central focus, rather than to foster the messianic cult of the DJ. "The event is what it's about. It's about meeting people, dancing with people, drinking," he says. "It incorporates certain elements of style and fashion, but not in an exclusive way."

The style is blackjack table bravado, equal parts couture and camp, as demonstrated by Ewan's own transformation on the night of the Glasgow event. Unloading the van, the 41-year-old Scotsman sports a ribbed turtleneck sweater and dark denim jeans, both of which show off his well-toned physique. But behind the scenes just minutes before the doors open, he slips into a tailored white suit and matching fedora, completing the metamorphosis into his alter ego, Frankie Sumatra. But he doesn't want to be the center of attention. Rather, by dressing the part, McNaught hopes to be a role model for his guests, encouraging them to express themselves creatively.

"For me, there's no difference between the people running the club and the people who come," he says. "The flavor is supplemented by the crowd, and each night is different...A lot of eccentric, extroverted people out there have been looking for something to do. We came along and struck a chord."

McNaught credits his regulars for helping to hone his vision. With input from friends and colleagues who come every Saturday night to be a part of the show, and from his wife Lee-Anne, who helped coin the name, VEGAS has grown from a dance-centric event to an interactive experience. Showgirls in fishnets and feathered headdresses mingle freely with the crowd. Guests can wager "Elvis dollars" to win free cocktails in the casino. And the last one standing in the limbo contest gets a complimentary bottle of champagne. Just try not to have a good time.

STEPPING OUT OF THE MAINSTREAM

In creating VEGAS, McNaught drew on his 15 years of experience in the music scene. He got his start in 1988, promoting

concerts for bands like Nirvana, Hole, Ice T, and Mudhoney. After discovering that the profit margin for booking live music was microscopic, he later branched out into club promotion and began marketing himself as the talent.

"The first club I started DJing was called WAR. It was just before the days of house music—it was electronic dance music, a kind of industrial/new beat/early acid house," he says, proving an intimate familiarity with contemporary sounds. The club later changed its name to PURE and remains one of the longest running dance clubs in the U.K. "PURE became massively successful. It was in the vanguard of the British dance music scene... but I, personally, became very disillusioned with electronic music... As time went on, the genre became diluted and people were just producing more and more formulaic music. It became too predictable."

The regular clientele started expecting nothing but techno, and the club owners were wary of taking risks. The club became pigeonholed, and McNaught got out.

Ironically, the same thing happened with his next venture, a weekly party called Disco Inferno, which he launched in 1992 and which remains successful to this day.

"We played funk, soul, music from the '60s, contemporary music—but when the whole '70s disco boom blew up and became a media thing, there was a glut of compilation albums on the market, and it became stigmatized as afro wigs and flaired trousers. The whole thing became demeaned by the popular culture perception of it," says McNaught. "We used to get 1000 people in Edinburgh every fortnight without fail. It wasn't just a successful club, it was a phenomenon." But as the crowd continued to insist on one type of music, Ewan again grew bored with the status quo. He lets others run the event now, overseeing it from afar while he devotes his energies to keeping VEGAS fresh every week.

"I wanted to go back to what my inspirations were and open it out to all sorts of music from all sorts of eras, but with one common theme," he says of his concept for the new club.

FROM PUNK ROCK TO RAT PACK

Although McNaught's tastes were retro-influenced, he admits to being a huge fan of early punk, too.

"For me, there are only two categories of music: good and bad," he says, matter-of-factly. In choosing the soundtrack for his new weekly party, McNaught wanted to convey a retro sensibility with a contemporary attitude and an edge.

"[Groups like] Big Bad Voodoo Daddy incorporate the best elements of the '40s and '50s...with the whole show business, Rat Pack style and attitude, but with a modern sound," he says. "They sound like a punk band playing jazz music." It was this musical mélange that inspired the idea for a swingin' rave, and VEGAS was born.

But don't label VEGAS a swing night. The last thing McNaught wants to be is formulaic.

"There's such a rich resource of popular music from the 20th Century...we would never stigmatize ourselves as being one specific genre. If you play good music, people will always respond to it," he insists. "The music changes night to night, the people change night to night...I think the crowd knows we put a lot of thought and imagination into the club,



Visionary club promoter Frankie Sumatra (aka, Ewan McNaught), far right, and friends show off appropriate VEGAS attire. Photo by Colin Usher.

and also a lot of passion."

That passion has led Frankie Sumatra and friends to spread the gospel of lounge culture across the Atlantic. Last October, they brought their party to New York City, along with nearly 50 Scottish clubgoers—a welcome boon to the Big Apple's tourism industry. The one-night-only event featured an astonishing line-up of live performers, including Cocktail Angst, Jet Set Six, Seks Bomba, and G-Clef and da Houndz, and was a smashing success.

Bolstered by the response, McNaught and his merry band of regulars are taking the party to England this June to launch a quarterly event in London and Manchester that just so happens to coincide with the release of a VEGAS compilation CD.

"I think VEGAS has the potential to become successful in any market," says the promoter. "It attracts people who are interested in the retro lifestyle, but also people who are just looking for a fun night out."

**"THERE'S SUCH A RICH RESOURCE
of POPULAR MUSIC
from the 20TH CENTURY...
IF YOU PLAY GOOD MUSIC, PEOPLE
will ALWAYS RESPOND to IT."**

Adds McNaught, "The capacity to surprise is something I always want to be able to maintain. To always be capable of playing that song you wouldn't expect to hear in a club, or to have that moment that is unconventional and unexpected. We're always trying to think of another gimmick to make the club unique, whether it be the music or performance-wise or the way we dress the venue. We try to change it everytime—otherwise it becomes boring and predictable."

Ironically, McNaught might be considered a visionary for the future of the dance club scene, tapping into the next big thing by mixing together musical genres from the past. But like its timeless namesake, VEGAS is about more than just music. It's a state of mind. ♦