

Mark Alsop: Celebrating 30 years of DJ service



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MARK ALSOP: CELEBRATING 30 YEARS OF DJ SERVICE

CREATED ON // MONDAY, 15 DECEMBER 2014

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An unwavering passion for the scene, the community and, above all, music has sustained Mark Alsop's enduring 30-year DJ career. And he's only just begun. By Reg Domingo.

Hanging on the wall, in Mark Alsop's terrace in St Peters, are three framed posters of previous Sydney dance parties he has performed in: Pride 1989, Pride circa early 2000s, and Inquisition 2006. Spanning three decades, they are a small visual archive to Gay Sydney's hedonistic heyday, but more so, they are prominent signposts to Alsop's robust and long-running career. Now in his 30th year behind the decks, Alsop is one of the longest-continuous working DJs in the country and his longevity is testament to his popularity, versatility and, of course, his unwavering passion for music.

"I enjoy the excitement of hearing new music," Alsop tells SX. "And the editing and playing the music, of course. And sharing the love – that's what sustains me."

Indeed, being able to adapt has been key to Alsop's success. Since he started in the early 1980s, he has kept his finger firmly on the dance

floor's pulse.

“Part of surviving is the ability to change your music,” he says. “If I hadn't changed my music from 1984, I wouldn't be in business still.

But it's more than just a business. For Alsop, DJing – and all of its trimmings, extras, accompaniments, garnishes, frills and yes, even off-cuts – is a way of life.

“You know in your life you're doing the right thing and I've never gone left or right of that, no matter what one individual might tell me in the club. I know I'm on the right path and I'm going with what I have passion for.”



Above: 'Sharing the love - that's what sustains me' ... Mark Alsop. Photo: Cec Busby

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Born in 1963, Mark Alsop grew up in Adelaide's west before his family moved to the seaside suburb of West Beach. There, just a stone's throw away from the shore, his father ran a deli.

"That was my first job," Alsop says. "I have fond memories of being there, in 38 degree heat, just 200 metres away from the beach."

Though it was a casual job, the role gave Alsop his first taste of the workings of the service industry, a career path he would later pursue. While his parents were open-minded in many respects, there were also somewhat conservative, especially when it came to matters of sexual orientation.

"I was brought up to believe that homosexuality was not right. So I chose never to say anything," he says. Until, that is, his parents found out.



Above: Mark Alsop in 1989

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One night, at a party at their house, an inebriated female family friend said, nonchalantly, to Alsop parents: "Well, I have a gay son as well and I don't know why you would be worried".

"Needless to say, that was the end of the party and everyone was ordered out," Alsop recalls.

"My mum said they kind of wondered but never thought it would be the case. But as shocked as their reaction was, their words to me were, 'We love you no matter what'. So that meant a lot."

Straight after high school, Alsop gained a traineeship with a major hotel and restaurant chain in Adelaide.

“Hospitality was the plan,” he says. “I started doing cocktail waiting and then did table service. My whole idea was to stick with that and maybe move into hotel management. I was young, so I thought, let’s start here and see what happens.”

What happened next was an opportunity for Alsop to do a short stint in one of the company’s hotel restaurants in Sydney. And fleeting as it was, everything changed from there.

“My whole two weeks in Sydney was enough to make me say, ‘See ya’. I was 19 and just seeing Sydney compared to what was in Adelaide was amazing. That’s where every gay boy wanted to be so that’s where I headed.”



Above: Mark at Zoo Party in 1988

Also arrived in Sydney in 1982. He got a unit in Paddington and started

working at one of the hotel chain's properties in Camperdown. It was an exciting time, Alsop recalls, full of colour, energy and movement. Oxford Street, in particular, captivated Alsop, who was taken by its nightlife and its characters.

"The strip was so vibrant and alive," he recalls. "And that's what I think off – all the buzz, the different clubs, the atmosphere, the drag shows. And definitely the music."

At the time, disco was on its way out and new wave was on its way in and for Alsop, this was music to his ears. "I just loved new wave with Duran Duran and Human League," he says.

Soon enough, he began buying records. And it was in this pursuit that he would chance upon a DJ, who would help steer him on a path to the decks.

"I found myself at Disco City in York Street talking to a gentleman that turned out to be David Hiscock," Alsop recalls. "And I said to him I love music and he said, 'What do you like?' and then ran around and grabbed me some records." The two immediately struck a rapport; later, Hiscock gave Alsop a DJ remix service.

"So I listened to that and I thought, subliminally, 'Why are they not playing this stuff in the clubs?' So this just sat in the back of mind as to why this was not being promoted out there. Then one day, I made a snap decision to give up waiting and look more into the music."



Above: Mark at an ACT UP Benefit in 1990. Photo: Jamie Dunbar

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But as well as being a time of excitement and promise, Sydney in the early 1980s was also a period marked with fear and uncertainty with the arrival of HIV. And for Alsop, it was a stark and brutal reality.

“I was diagnosed in 1984,” he says. “I had one partner and that was my experience. It was a hard luck story.

“In 1984, it was a death sentence. I was told, ‘You have two years to live, enjoy yourself as much as you can’. It was a very dark time.

“But that was the period that I decided to become a DJ. I wanted to do something differently with my life. I was happy being a waiter but somehow, mysteriously, visiting the clubs and seeing David, then finding out about my HIV status, that all happened in the same year.

Coincidence? I don’t know. But it may have been enough to push me into another direction.”

So he resigned from his hotel job and started mixing.

His first gig was Friday nights at Club 45. Then Saturdays and Sundays too.

“And that’s the three nights the club was open,” Alsop says.

“And then I got a job at the Midnight Shift a few years later and then all the other clubs started opening from there.”

And he hasn’t stopped since.

As for his wellbeing, while there was a close call in 1992 – he deteriorated rapidly before getting life-saving treatment – today he is in top form, excellent health and, well, damn fine shape.



Above: Mark collecting for BGF in 1993

In the past 30 years, Alsop has played at venues and parties all over Sydney and across Australia. He has headlined numerous major dance events as well as fronted countless charity functions and benefits.

Indeed, his service to the community was recently recognised with an Honour Award, an accolade Alsop keeps close to his heart.

“It was important because it was to do with my DJing so that was

fantastic,” he says of receiving the award. “But it’s also my involvement with the community. It was a monumental thank you and that means a lot.”

Now 51, Alsop is as prolific as ever, playing various gigs and events each week. So what are the secrets to his longevity?

“First off is a positive attitude,” he says. “No matter what comes at you at the clubs, you can generally deal with it.

“There’s the music too, of course, and being able to share that with followers is important.

“But it’s also the people,” he says. “The characters I meet out there – they make my work fun. You get the colourful people, and then the gorgeous people and then you have the trashbags. Put it all together and that’s a nightclub – I love it.”



Above: Mark in 2012. Photo: Anthony Smith

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There’s also the sense of fellowship with audiences and colleagues.

“The camaraderie of the whole experience with not only the clubbers but also my fellow DJs – and there is a lot of us as well,” he says. “We don’t come from an era where we backstab each other, we come from an era of embracing what each one of us does.”

On top of all this, Alsop says his work is informed and sustained by “the dialogue that I have with the punters, promoters, photographers and community groups and the inspiration that they give me”.

“I find that there’s a high degree of versatility in music within these

groups, which I find quite exciting to explore and this inspires me to be receptive to different genres and better able to adapt to diverse audiences,” he says.

“The bears are friendly and not judgmental, the leather community embraces the spirit of adventure and pushing boundaries, the drag entertainers add colour and spectacle to my nights, and the younger members of our community always remind me of the energy and exuberance of youth and the excitement of going out and living new experiences.

“All these community groups teach me something about the world.”



Above: "There's the music too, of course, and being able to share that with followers is important" ... Mark Alsop

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That said, however, the scene is not without its challenges with economic and cultural issues changing the face of clubbing and Oxford Street.

“But even if the politics and the climate changes, it's the music that still drives me,” Alsop says.

So where will he be in ten year's time?

“Possibly on a walker going up Oxford Street,” Alsop says. “I often joke

about being 90 and still trying to wheel myself into the clubs.”

But all jokes aside, Alsop could very well be still at the place he loves: behind the decks.

“The big thing that I put out there to myself is it doesn’t matter what number people say your age is, that is irrelevant to what passion you have inside you. Never let that number quash your passion. A lot of people said, ‘God, you don’t want to be a 50-year-old DJ when I was 21, and I thought, ‘Why not?’ And here I am, past that point, and enjoying it as ever.”

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