



LA NIGHTS

LESSONS IN US CLUB COURTSHIP ARE A DIME A DOZEN, BUT FEW ARE AS INSIGHTFUL AS THOSE TAUGHT BY **GRUM**, ONE OF THE UK'S MOST UNASSUMING DISCO DARLINGS... **Words: Alex Gwilliam**

The modern world is a place obsessed with understanding, a place where many of life's deepest mysteries lie unravelled like an old woollen jumper caught on a rusty nail. Here we scoff at the ignorance of generations past, laughing at their childish naivety while pausing only to congratulate ourselves on our own intellectual enlightenment. 'Aren't we awesome?' we say, with a smug smile and a pat on the back...

And, for the most part, yes we are. Every now and then, however, we stumble upon something that confounds all logic, something that obeys neither rhyme nor reason nor the infinite wisdom of Stephen Fry (praise be upon him), and at that point our ivory tower of cerebral superiority comes crashing down like a castle made of cornflakes. 'Oh bugger,' we say. 'That wasn't supposed to happen...'

Sometimes these phenomena are so elusive and seemingly arbitrary that they become elevated to near-mythical status, passed down from generation to generation as each new wave of minds struggles to crack the code. Such is the case within the UK music industry, and the one concept that has evaded them since the dawn of time. That concept is 'breaking America', and it has been a thorn in their side for as long as the industry itself.

Time and time again record companies think they've nailed it, certain that their latest UK chart success will be bigger than Jesus Christ times Ronald McDonald when they make that long trip across the pond. Then, time and time again, they are proven wrong as that slippery US audience refuses to

bite on the musical morsels fed to them from these shores. Teeth are gnashed, curses are said, but then every so often something clicks, and on those rare occasions an artist can find themselves propelled into the kind of legendary reaches of superstardom talked about so reverentially back home. How or why this happens we don't know, but maybe we should ask a young Leeds-based Scot by the name of Grum, for right now he is living that dream.

"I remember the first time I played in the US," Grum, real name Graeme Shepherd tells **iDJ**. "It was October 2008, and it was just some guys who had gotten in touch because they liked my music and wanted to get me to play. It was a really good gig, and it was in a converted rehearsal space rather than a proper club. It was a great feeling to have been booked by someone who just really liked what I was doing, rather than someone feeding off any existing popularity."

What's this? No multi-million dollar promotional campaign? No MTV playlist? No sponsorship from Coca-Cola? This is most unorthodox. How on earth are we supposed to get to the bottom of the US conundrum if people are simply breaking through over there under their own volition?

"I think it was a combination of things that helped kick it all off," he continues. "The whole blog thing has helped a lot, and I think blogs have quite a strong standing over in the US. A lot of kids into dance music in the UK get their fix from the specialist shows on Radio 1, whereas in the US there's nothing like that. In a way I guess the blogs take the place of Radio in the tastemaker's role."



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Aha, now we seem to be getting somewhere. So it would seem the blogmaker's seal of approval is key to tapping into the awareness of the dance music-loving quarters of America, but that doesn't explain the discrepancy between those artists that fly... And those that flop. We have blogs in the UK, so why aren't all our artists big in the States? Perhaps there is a fundamental difference in our respective audiences that we are not taking into consideration?

“Part of what seems to be exciting with the scene in America right now is that, for many people, dance music is something completely new,” explains Graeme. “When I first started playing in the US it was more the cool crowd or the switched-on music crowd who would come and see me. Now what I find, the more and more I go back, is that it's the more mainstream crowd coming to shows, so it's obvious that more and more people are waking up to dance music in the US.”

It seems ironic that a country with probably more dance music heritage than anywhere else in the world should only just be switching on to the genre in a widespread fashion. However, what many might not realise is that, while house and techno may owe their very existence to cities like Chicago and Detroit, dance music as a whole has always been a fringe interest in America, and it's only recently that this has begun to change.

“In America I'm still meeting people who are out for their first ever night of clubbing, which is a really nice feeling,” Graeme goes on. “When people go out over here it feels like everyone is just out to have a good time, no matter what. There's no issues with genre politics or sticking to a particular scene, and I definitely feel I can get away with playing music that isn't just house-based without it impacting on whether people are dancing or not.”

It's this freedom to deviate from the rigidity of the club template that suits Grum's style of music so well. His melody-laden, synth-soaked, often vocal-orientated tracks flirt with filtered disco and conventional pop music just as much as they do with big room house. It's a sound that has become exceedingly popular of late, on both sides of the Atlantic, but don't be thinking Grum cut his teeth on the wheels of the bandwagon.

“I've been making music as Grum for a little over three years now, and when I started out the only thing in my mind was that I wanted to do something different to a lot of the electro and house music of the time by taking the tempo down and experimenting with pop-style melodies,”

explains Graeme. “It's purely coincidence that that kind of sound has ended up becoming popular, although I don't necessarily see it as a bad thing. I'd rather have that than go back to the austerity of minimal!”

It's this attitude that has won Graeme such a devoted fanbase Stateside, and has contributed to his overall success story. His debut album, ‘Heartbeats’, sold countless thousands of copies, leading him to tour the country twice (once with band The Twelves, then once again solo several months later). He has played at such colossal events as LA's Electric Daisy Carnival, and was just last month voted iTunes' Best New Dance Act for 2010 in the US territory. With such a heady resumé, you'd think standing in the limelight comes naturally to one such as he, but not so...

“Out here it seems I can play without necessarily having to be the centre of attention all the time, which suits me perfectly,” he confesses. “I'm not really into the whole ‘Hey, look at me I'm a DJ’ thing; I'm much more comfortable just playing music and having people enjoy themselves, which seems to come far more readily in the US.”

“The last time I played at Avalon in LA it was amazing. It's a massive club, and it's a proper big-room vibe, but it was really reassuring that I could still get away with playing stuff that is more pop or disco inspired and didn't just have to play big house anthems all night. That's something I couldn't even imagine getting away with in the UK. I think in some way the UK needs to learn how to let go a little bit and take itself less seriously. You see videos of raves from back in the '80s, and people are just there to have a good time and get lost in the music. People here in the US don't really care about mixing up genres or the whole purism thing – everything just feels a little bit more fun.”

And perhaps that's where the UK music industry has been going wrong all these years when trying to break artists in the US. Instead of thinking ‘Hey, this artist is massive here in the fertile dance music pastures of Blighty, surely they'll be a hit over in that fresh-faced and know-nothing land of America too’, maybe it's worth considering that the US is an entirely different kettle of fish. American tastes in dance music are altogether different, but no less discerning, than those in the UK, which is why it takes an altogether different artist – an artist like Grum who refuses to kowtow to the pressures of house music dominance – to succeed there. And in the Land of the Free it's fitting that someone courageous enough to carve their own path through dance music should find the liberty to do so within its borders. ■