

# Back on Track

As the Tokyo brand carves its new niche in Bradford, Tokyo Industries co-founder Aaron Mellor tells Rachel Esson how they bounced back after a brief fling with Utopian Leisure



WORDS: RACHEL ESSON    INTERVIEW: AARON MELLOR

**W**hen you ask Aaron Mellor – director of the northern-grown, dance brand rich, Tokyo Industries – where it all started for him, a telling smile creeps across his face as he begins to talk about the nascent ‘Madchester’ scene of the late 1980s. Growing up in Manchester, Aaron was caught in the wave of musical creativity that saw bands like New Order, Inspiral Carpets and The Stone Roses inspire the birth of new indie and dance communities in the region.

When the city was at this cultural peak in ‘91, Aaron moved north to Newcastle to study architecture and discovered that this new territory, in comparison, was seriously lacking in musical creativity. He channelled

his passion for music, and fuelled his student lifestyle, through DJing at club nights for promoters Mick Rayner and Steve Forster (the latter becoming AMG’s operations director before joining Barfly) at Rank Leisure’s Studio/Ritzy venue (now Liquid), where he went on to establish his own night Bulletproof some 17 years ago. “But I started to get this fear that you can’t DJ forever and thought I’d better buy a club,” laughs Aaron, “although I continue to DJ even now!” With a bit of business acumen behind him from running club nights and developing graphic design company Creative Lobster, Aaron set out with then ex-club manager and building surveyor graduate Rob Cameron, who was also running

Newcastle’s biggest dance night Shindig, to found Newcastle’s first real style bar Stereo. This venue was founded on the two inputs of music indie and dance, an ethos of theatre and drama that was to later translate to its mansion-style Tokyo venues.

Sitting before me today at the new £2 million Tokyo in Bradford, Aaron – along with business partner Rob Cameron - now owns an estate of 11 venues, including four Tokyo branded units, two Digital dance clubs, Newcastle’s The Other Rooms, Tup Tup Palace, Stereo and Bulletproof, and Oldham live music venue The Castle. But it is clear that Aaron’s creative vision and passion for music were not diluted as his brands



expanded. Whilst successive, replica roll-outs of a clearly defined commercial blueprint drive many multiple operators on the high street, Tokyo Industries has always side-stepped the mainstream, in favour of an ethos centred on quality content delivery, in order to grow credible dance brands organically. “If you look at the truly great companies out there, Apple, Nike and Google, they’ve all got creatives running the company,” says Aaron. “Myself, Rob Cameron and Dave Stone (events director) are all very creative people, all very music focused; money is always a bi-product of doing something well. People that go out looking for it just for the pure pound are the ones that fall over the quickest, especially in

this kind of economic climate.”

In terms of the hardware of the Tokyo estate, there are obvious similarities between each venue; all target northern towns with a large student population – Newcastle, Huddersfield, Oldham and Bradford – because, as Aaron says, “selling alcohol to students is about as recession proof as you can be in 2009”, and all occupy historic buildings that lend to the mansion-party theatre of its experience. Whilst there is definite brand identity between the units, Aaron and Rob have always allowed the local territory to dictate the direction of the content for each Tokyo. “In Tokyo Newcastle, cocktails are about 60% of sales and we’ve apparently won

more bartending and mixology awards than any bar outside London, so the drink aspect is the content itself, whilst Tokyo Bradford is more about the branded club nights, and Digital is about world class DJs.”

Tokyo Industries’ steady growth, as opposed to high-velocity roll-out, is also a consequence of Aaron and Rob’s hands-on steer of the business. Aaron errs on the side of caution when it comes to new locations for the Tokyo or Digital brand, executing new projects with an acute eye for demographics and geography. With regards to the Digital brand, which is driven by internationally recognised DJs playing through the best Funktion One and Pioneer kit, Aaron has always wanted ►



**LEFT:** The main bar was fitted by Full Spec Solutions into the architecture of the building. **ABOVE:** a mezzanine balcony allows views over the dancefloor.

► to avoid any inevitable “black book clash” with the London-centric big players Fabric and Matter, Manchester’s The Warehouse Project, or Liverpool’s Chibuku. “There’s only a few sites in the UK where we can drop Digital in without competing with other people and asking DJs to spread their loyalties,” he says. Unlike the northern territories of the Tokyo brand, which Aaron admits are in a “safety zone” in terms of location, Digital Brighton is an asset that he sometimes finds difficult to control geographically. “I don’t know any other operator that personally find the sites,

specialist, and it looked as though the organic 13-year progression of Tokyo Industries was about to move forward in seismic shifts. The partnership began with the formation of group subsidiary, Utopian 3 - which picked up the three freehold Tokyo sites in Huddersfield, Oldham and Newcastle, and the 2,000 capacity Digital in Newcastle - and was heralded ‘an exciting time for the nation’s clubbers’. But it wasn’t meant to be.

Although Bob Senior took a more corporate career path, working with Newcastle-based Lazi Leisure, then as head of AIM-listed

he needed the missing piece of the jigsaw – sophisticated musical minds, which he found in Aaron, Rob and Dave.

“We were trying to roll out content-delivered brands and fast track that by using Bob Senior’s war chest of £100 million. He had seen the light coming at the end of the tunnel with the high street market and realised that the ones that were still generating an increase in turnover were the ones that were content delivered,” says Aaron, whose ambition was to utilise the partnership and its subsequent funds to relieve a burdened back office brought about when they opened the £2 million Tokyo Huddersfield and Digital Newcastle virtually simultaneously and over-extended. He also wanted to develop his well-marketed, intelligently-programmed Tokyo and Digital estates by expanding to the mass market in university towns and cities. Although Bob Senior pledged to have a hands-off approach to Utopian 3 back in September 2006, a conflict of ideas and beliefs soon emerged. The engines that had always driven the Digital brand were its long-standing club nights, like house night Shindig, rock ‘n’ roll session Stonelove, Hed Kandi, mash-up dance night Wax:On and hip hop and R&B night Lovedough, but, says Aaron, the Utopian team could not fathom why they needed to pay so much money for extreme content. “Bob and Allan saw the very high turnover aspect of Digital and felt they could drop that through an Ultimate-style model to produce a bottom-

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designs the sites, project manages the build, launch them, DJs at them, and still have time to design the flyers!” he laughs. In the way that The End’s directors could never imagine another team taking over the running of the late London club, it is hard to picture how Tokyo Industries would exist without Aaron.

However, an 18-month fling with Bob Senior, Tim Wynn and Allan Rankin’s Utopian Leisure, which ended in April 2008, saw the company briefly - and rather surprisingly - flirting with the idea of high-volume, big finance business. When NIGHT last caught up with Aaron in September 2006, he was on the brink of this merger with the high street

Ultimate Leisure Plc, before setting up Utopian Leisure in October 2005, Aaron had known Bob since they promoted nights together and considered him a “mentor” ever since he had invited him down to Sunderland to DJ at Lazi Leisure’s Annabel’s. Bob Senior had fronted £1 million of his own money to launch Utopian Leisure and had also acquired an extra £100 million from Barclays Bank. With a couple of high volume businesses – Sam Jacks at the Gate complex and Bar 55 – they rolled out a blueprint to build the Love Shack brand. But in order to build a brand that kept its head above the fickle, deep discount world of the high street circuit, Bob knew



line equivalent, but that's not fully the case. If you were booking Roger Sanchez for \$15,000, it's that which generates the turnover and fills the club with 2,000 people, so if you take the big DJ fees out of there the model just doesn't work anymore," explains Aaron.

The two partners also had polarised views when it came to the importance of food within venues and the role it will play for the industry in the future. As a company, Utopian Leisure wanted to become a lot more food orientated, and had already set up Utopian 2 under Eddie Fung, a food division beginning with just Zen in Belfast. "Bob felt that food was the way forward and I still felt strongly that content delivery, and being musically and creatively focused, was definitely the way forward. Food can go so badly wrong and has gone wrong for many people, and it's a very difficult thing to roll out," says Aaron. In the end, Aaron, Rob and Dave's proposal for Digital Brighton was up against plans for a food-led Fat Buddha in Durham. When Fat Buddha was chosen, they agreed between them that Aaron and his team would do Digital alone and they reversed the deal they had done 18 months previously. Continues Aaron: "We all learnt from the experience and the break up in the end was amicable. We're all still friends, but we've got different views of which direction the industry is unfolding."

Since the partnership dissolved almost a year ago, Tokyo Industries has successfully launched Digital Brighton, Tokyo Bradford

and acquired the troubled Tup Tup Palace in Newcastle, where operators James Jukes, Matt Smyth and Nigel Holliday were having difficulty recouping their investment in the fit out. "We're actually 15% up year on year across the estate, which in this climate is pretty epic. There's lots of reasons for that – we weren't as focused on the business this time last year because we were still concentrating on the buy back, which gave us the ideal opportunity to get back on board with it and really strip it back."

The new 1,100-capacity Tokyo site in Bradford falls in line with the established formula of the brand; the venue is located in a Grade II listed, 100-year-old building in a northern town that has a large student population and is relatively un-catered for in terms of credible content-driven clubs. The building's historic incarnation as the Royal Windsor Baths means it has vast ceiling heights, which lend perfectly to the theatre and mansion feel that Tokyo aspires to. To reduce the scale of the site and create a twin-room operation, main contractor Full Spec Solutions filled in the mezzanine level of the room to create two floors. There's accessible dance music upstairs and indie/rock 'n' roll downstairs, with facilities for live music and PA's in both rooms - a formula that is echoed throughout the Tokyo estate.

"Bradford has a huge population," continues Aaron, "but the trouble was all the nice people fled to Leeds for their



**ABOVE LEFT:** The iconic DJ booths makes a grand centerpiece. **ABOVE TOP:** (L-R) Nigel Holliday, Aaron Mellor, Anthony Holt (General Manager), Cameron Salm (Assistant Manager); **ABOVE:** where swimmers once entered. **BELOW:** Aaron on the edge of the dancefloor





ABOVE: The downstairs indie/R&B/live room. TOP RIGHT: Teasing peepholes through to the downstairs bar. BOTTOM RIGHT: An effect with mirrors and candles

► clubbing. To counter this we've brought in Leeds-style clubbing to Bradford, keys brands such as KissDaFunk, Retro, Hed Kandi, Ministry of Sound and LoveDough."

Formally an Edwards bar, the unit had been closed for over two years, before Full Spec Solutions came in to carry out the redevelopment. Aaron's background in architecture and project management means he is able to deliver a lot of the fit out and design himself, but he worked once again with trusted designer Julian Taylor on Tokyo Bradford. Says Julian Taylor of Aaron: "He is fantastic to work with, he pushes us hard and he is very, very determined to make the very best of each site. Operationally his insight is vital on every project."

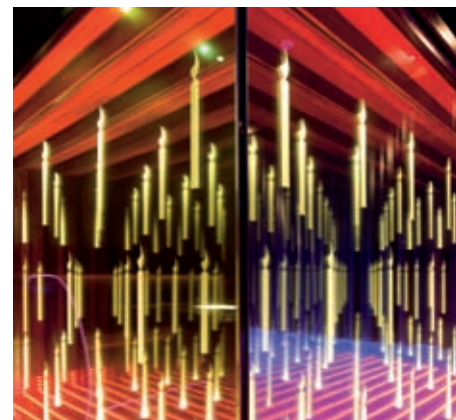
The venue is structurally ambitious with the new floor, and a glass-fronted, VIP mezzanine balcony overlooking the main upstairs room, which leads out onto a rooftop Skybar smoking terrace. Explains Julian: "The sequence of spaces is the highlight for me. The existing building was originally a Victorian swimming pool with cast iron columns and sweeping, decorative vaulting. Working within these great volumes was fantastic and adds a huge amount of drama to the space." This Las Vegas-inspired drama of the main room is heightened by the contrast of a simple underlying design, with impressive, interesting features – most notably the iconic, raised DJ booth with nine metre high, velvet curtains.

The lower floor can be reached by three staircases, allowing a full circle of movement around the two floors. The downstairs room is approached along a long, louvred corridor that allows glimpses of the bar and dance areas as a temptation. The flickering candlelights in the louvres add movement and detail. The design in here is dark, generic and underground in

order to accommodate functions that vary from live bands, indie club and an R&B night.

There is also a licensed basement area of the club, a second phase designed as a pre-bar and afterhours space. Whilst Aaron yearns to build up the Tokyo brand, he has no desire for a mass roll out. He says: "We did dip our toe in the water of high speed roll-outs, but it's just too tricky. I think once you've lost control and you can't personally overview everything, you tend to lose the creativity and credibility side of it, which is seen from a customer level so they don't buy into it as much." With a motto that values creativity above money, Aaron is seemingly unperturbed by the credit crunch and instead excited by the new players that will inevitably come up through the ranks due to cheap rents, empty spaces and a commercial longing for something fresh. "As with every recession, you tend to get the underground being allowed to progress more. The entrepreneurs tend to flourish as the city runs for cover," he comments. For Aaron, progression means waiting for the perfect buildings in which to develop the Tokyo and Digital brands. He also has his sights set on international sites for the Digital brand, but stresses that, in typical Aaron style, rather than relinquishing control to a franchiser, we would still remain heavily involved.

It is this keen eye for business and hands-on perfectionism that has ensured the longevity and credibility of the Tokyo Industries estate. And it is these qualities, along with an astute ability to react to local markets and industry-wide trends, that fills you with the belief that the company will sail through the tougher economic times ahead of us and come out the other side better managed and even more content-driven than before. ■



## VITAL STATISTICS

Tokyo  
The Old Windsor Baths  
Morley Street  
Bradford  
BD7 1AQ  
Tel: 01274 392211  
Owner: Tokyo Industries  
Website: [www.tokyoindustries.com](http://www.tokyoindustries.com)

### Key Contractors

**Interior Designer:** Julian Taylor Design Associates // **Main Contractor:** Full Spec Solutions // **Sound Installation:** Audio Group // **Lighting Installation:** Lenny Dent // **Decorative Lighting:** Chantelle Lighting // **Fixed Seating:** Woodhouse Furnishings // **Flooring:** Alpha Flooring // **EPoS Provider:** Wedderburn - Tony Franklin // **Refrigeration:** IMI Cornelius // **Security:** Industry UK // **Flyers & Promotion:** Target Print // **Uniforms:** Workwear Express

### Drinks

**Pouring brands:** Stolichnaya vodka, Bombay Sapphire gin, Bacardi white rum, JD bourbon, Sauza tequila // **Premium draught lager:** n/a // **Standard draught lager:** n/a // **Lead PPL:** £3.20 (Corona) // **Lead PPS:** £3.20 (Smirnoff Ice) // **Cocktail list:** Yes

### Technology

**Sound system (top floor):** 4 x Ohm TRS 212 mid/hi speakers, 4 x Ohm TRS 218 bass speakers, 2 x ML14 12"/1.4" speakers, 3 x CDJ-1000's, 2 x Technics SL1210's, 1 x Formula Sound Funktion One FF-600 mixer, 1 x Pioneer EFX-1000, 1 x 2.5w YAG Stealth argon laser, 8 x Martin MAC250 Kryptons, Martin Atomic strobe, 1 x Martin PRO 1800 smoke machine // **Lighting (top floor):** 8 x Martin Mac 250 Kryptons, 1 x Martin Atomic strobe, colour-changing LED strips, Martin Light Jockey // **Lighting (bottom floor):** 6 x Martin Acrobats, Pulsar Masterpiece controller