

THE SUPERSTAR NEXT DOOR

MYKE BARTLETT MEETS INTERNATIONAL DJ & HASTINGS LOCAL, CARL COX

British DJ Carl Cox is a bona fide international superstar. A pioneer of Britain's revolutionary house music movement of the late 1980s, he helped bring electronic dance music crashing into the mainstream and was part of a select group who recreated the DJ as pop star – as magnetic and recognisable as any of the music they played.

Some 30 years later, Carl is still touring the world playing massive gigs to sellout crowds, including the occasional return to his spiritual homeland of Ibiza – the Spanish island that's become a byword for the house music scene.

In any given week, superstar Carl might be flitting from Vienna to Croatia to Atlanta to Los Angeles. The one place I didn't expect to find him was just south of Frankston, tucked up in his brand new studio on his farm in Hastings.

It's actually 12 years since Carl decided to buy a house on the peninsula, as an antidote to his jet-setting ways.

"My life outside Australia is hectic," he says. "Here, I come out of the spinning ball of madness. My life makes more sense. A lot of my UK friends decide to live in Berlin or Singapore or Barcelona because there's more work. I don't want to come to Australia for more work. I want to live a little."

The presence of an international legend hasn't gone unnoticed by the locals, Carl says, although they tend to leave him alone. The only downside of his reputation means neighbours think he's responsible for any loud party in earshot.

"One night, these guys came over with a slab of beer, because there was a party on the other side of my house. They thought we were having a party and not letting them in."

Carl's connection to Australia goes back to 1990, when he was brought over from Britain to promote an early hit record. It was his first taste of international stardom and Australia's first taste of the booming house scene.

He soon became something of an ambassador for local dance music, returning every year since to play

warehouse parties and clubs all over the country. There was one Aussie city he connected with more than any other.

"I always felt when I was in Melbourne that I was at home. First and foremost, there were a lot of English here, but it's also very cosmopolitan. The techno and house scene was stronger here than anywhere else. I felt that I fitted in."

Now, he says he enjoys the Peninsula lifestyle – the ease with which he can spend a day fishing on a friend's boat or an afternoon cruising the local wineries on one of his vast collection of motorbikes.

Which brings us to the other reason Carl is in Hastings. The studio we're sitting in was once a storage shed for an apple orchard. Now, it's part-

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music hub, part-man cave and part-garage, hosting an astounding collection of classic American muscle cars and motorbikes (he's been running a motorsport business since 2013).

"I can't do this in England," Carl says. "I don't have the land, the weather. I've always been into cars, just as much as I've been into music. I'm a big part of that society here in Melbourne. I go to the meets all the time. People can't believe it."

We talk a lot about cars. He does, at least. As someone who just bought a car for the first time in 14 years, I try to pretend to understand the key terms and models. But it's hard not to be swept up in his enthusiasm.

In person, Carl is an expansive, relaxed presence. He laughs a lot and leaves you in no doubt that he's living the dream. Which isn't to say he's remotely boastful, more simply realistic.

Born in Manchester to Barbadian immigrants, Carl was raised in South London by his bus driver

dad and midwife mum. School didn't connect, although the school discos gave him a chance to try out his developing DJ skills.

Mum encouraged him to pursue his musical dreams (helping him buy his first turntables), but Dad hoped he'd settle down and find a real job – although it was Dad who first got him into music.

"All the people Dad used to get around to the house were his friends from the West Indies. Whether I liked it or not, I was hearing all this music. One night when I was about seven or eight I came down the stairs and he could see me and I thought I was going to get told off and sent back to bed. But he said: 'If you're here now, you can do one of two things, go to bed or come down here and put the records on.' He got me on DJ duty. I found the selection of music I played went down really well, they were all dancing and having a good time.

"Right from the get-go, I played music that got people dancing."

After school, Carl worked as a scaffolder, doing weddings and discos on the side, before finally starting up his own DJ business in the mid-'80s. Business scraped along, but the options were limited. Back then, the only career path for a DJ was to try to score a well-paid radio gig.

"I didn't have the radio personality. My personality came through how I played the music and the way I chose the music. I keep an eye on the room for the person who's not dancing and make it my mission to find the song that gets them on the floor. If I can get them dancing, I've got the room."

Everything changed with the arrival of house music in 1988. As one of the first DJs to buy into the four-four beat we now think of as "dance music", he initially alienated more people than he won over. But soon he was leaving weddings and birthday parties behind in favour of massive raves.

Mainstream success wasn't far away. But not everyone was impressed. "Dad thought I'd just got lucky. He wanted me to be a hard-working citizen. A bus driver."



PICTURE ● MICHAEL RAYNER

And how did Carl deal with his sudden success? "Most people don't deal with success well, but I didn't let it bother me. I revelled in the music, but not being a pop star DJ. I wasn't interested in playing the media, the people that I'm interested are the ones who paid money to see me play.

"It's why I don't end up in all the magazines, I don't go to premieres, I don't rub shoulders going to fashion shows. It's not important to me at all."

Today, Carl remains a passionate ambassador for dance music. Having resisted the pressure to produce more commercial hits, he moved between labels making music that tried to push dance forwards. He was the resident DJ at Space Ibiza for an incredible 27 years, famous for performing marathon eight-hour sets.

He says he's never tired of the rave scene. "When I see all these people come together and enjoying themselves, I realise that happens because I'm playing music, which attaches us all. My music is telling you this is the best fun we can have together without killing each other. That's what's been so beautiful about the rave scene. It's about understanding other people, no matter what. It's not ageist, it doesn't discriminate, the doors are open."

For many, the rave scene will be forever linked with pill-popping, although Carl says he's always abstained. "I've always said music is my drug. I've always been clean-living. If I had been taking drugs, I wouldn't be here today. I'd be in a mental institution. Or dead. I was lucky enough to say no in my early days and to get enough sleep. I've got a zest for life and that's what makes me who I am."

Still. Eight hours! How exactly do you get through an eight-hour set without chemical stimulants?

"Red Bull! No, I try not to have too much caffeine. I try to rest as much as I can before I do a long set. Even though it seems like a long time, when you're actually DJing, it goes like that. You get six hours in and all the ones who are still going give you the strength to keep going."

He says he never plans a set beforehand, his choices driven instead by the mood of the room. This puts him at odds with the new generation of "push and play" DJs, more concerned with a big pyrotechnical production and have all the music mixed and ready. But he says there's a growing hunger for DJs who know their stuff and can improvise. Carl's label, InTech Music, is dedicated to helping the next generation of DJs get a start.

What advice would he give to a young DJ? "It's all about heart. The heart and spirit of who you are is what makes you a good DJ. People can feel the emotion in the music." ●

SEE CARL \ Babylon Festival, February 23-25, 2018, Carapooee West, in the northern Grampians ● babylon.net.au